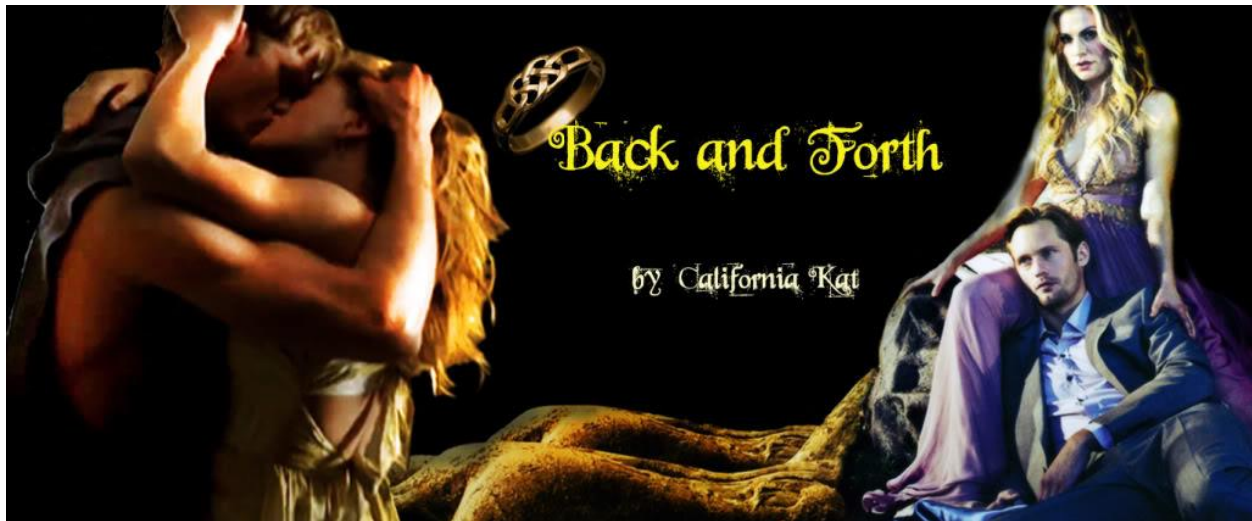




by *California Rat*

Story Synopsis:

When Sookie realizes that her feelings for both Bill and Eric might have been caused just by their blood, she takes drastic steps that will change her life—and the lives of Eric and Bill—forever.



story banner by nwalman

A/N:

I'm picking up after the second to the last episode of Season 4. In my story, Marnie is killed for good (and forever) when Bill shoots her, and there will be no Halloween resurrections.

Therefore, Marnie isn't going to possess Lafayette—because she's already toast. Jesus grew on me, so he's not going anywhere either, at least not for the moment. [After all, Lafayette needs him some lovin'!] I'm picking up after Bill has killed Marnie. Sookie is looking at Eric and Bill, as the two vampires talk and plan what I assume to be the clean-up. Her looking back and forth from one vampire to the other was the inspiration for the title of this story.

Disclaimer:

The characters and events in this entire story have been inspired by *True Blood* and *The Southern Vampire Mystery* series. Both Alan Ball and Charlaine Harris are responsible for the people and

places that I play with in my story. Even the characterizations and characters that I create in my pieces would not be possible without the originals to play off of, so I claim no ownership over them. However, if I ruled the texts, this is how the story would go.

Cast.

Sephrenia designed many character banners for the *B&F Series*, and (except for the three main characters) I'll be sharing them as each character is introduced. If Seph didn't do a banner for a particular person, I'll put in a character "plate" I made. All the character plates can be found at the end of the work (they include actor names too).

The main characters are on the next page!

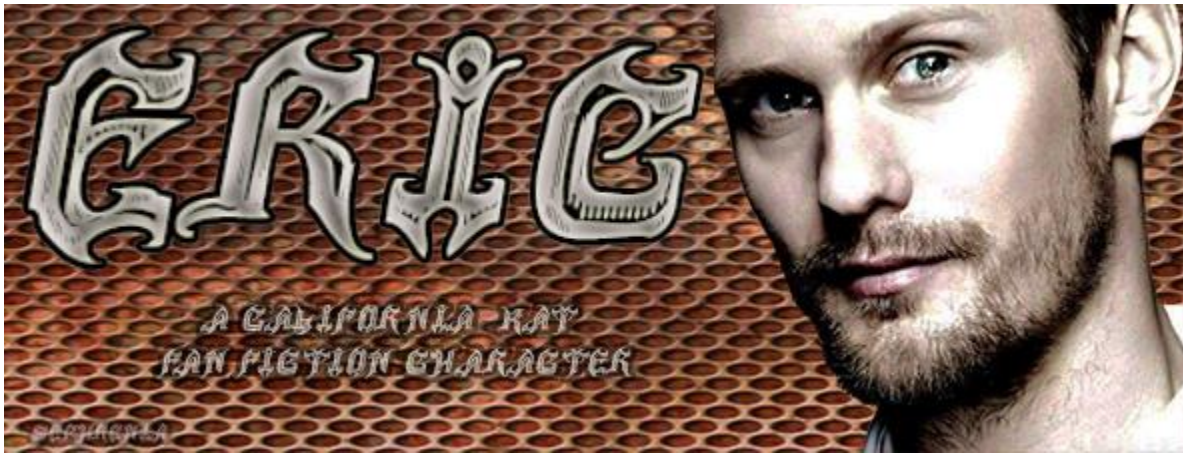


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Chapter 01: *Surprise Me*

Sookie looked back and forth between the two men—the two vampires—who had dominated her thoughts as of late.

Bill. Every time she saw him, her heart couldn't help but flutter. He'd been the first man that she had ever loved. Brooding and dark—even more now than he'd been before her time in the fairy realm—Bill was obviously frustrated by the pressures of being the vampire king of Louisiana. He looked at her, his eyes immediately going from hard to soft as a slight smile raised his lips. It was a smile that assured that he'd always protect her, always be there for her no matter what. Always love her. Her heart warmed even more toward him because of the reassurance he seemed to bring to her every time she looked at him.

She loved him.

Eric. Her heart jumped when Bill turned from her and she shifted her eyes to the blond vampire talking to Bill. Eric towered over his king, and she noticed the curved bend in his upper back as he leaned down to talk to him. Once Bill's attention went to the door, probably to something said by Jessica, Eric's head turned slightly toward Sookie, his sharp light blue eyes capturing her brown eyes with his for a moment. Those eyes screamed so many things at Sookie, too many things. They held the vampire that she'd met at Fangtasia, the hard, cold, in-charge being that had frustrated and used Sookie for his own benefit more than once. But they also held the sweet, loving, honest vampire who had stayed in Sookie's home and then her bed for the last week.

She loved him too.

With seeming reluctance, Eric turned his eyes toward Bill as the shorter vampire began to speak to him. Once again, Eric seemed to hunch a bit. Sookie wondered if he did this to show deference in his posture. Surely a man—well a vampire—as tall as he was would need to find a way to at least *seem* to defer to his sovereign when it suited him.



But when she thought about it, she realized that he'd always bent down to speak to her too and then, later, to capture her lips with his. She quickly shook herself from this thought, however, tabling it for later contemplation.

Sookie's eyes went back and forth between the two vampires that she loved, hoping that something would lead her more to one than the other. But that didn't happen. Under her breath, she couldn't help but mutter, "What a clusterfuck!"

Both vampires, their keen hearing picking up on Sookie's cursing, turned their attention from their conversation to look at her, and she couldn't help the blush that their gazes inspired. Their reactions to that blush, however, were completely idiosyncratic—and completely expected.

Bill's dark eyes warmed as he gave her a sincere, almost pitying smile. "Of course," Sookie thought, "Bill is always looking out for me."

Eric’s blue eyes brightened more—if that was possible—but he didn’t follow this up with a smile for her. “Of course not,” Sookie thought. Only one corner of his mouth turned up—into a smirk.

With difficulty, Sookie pulled her gaze from the two vampires to Lafayette, Tara, and Jesus, who all looked stricken and in shock over the events of the last several days. She slowly walked over to greet them as the cousins embraced. “Y’all okay?” she asked them, studying the exhausted expression on Jesus’s face and the defeated slump of his shoulders.





Sookie hadn't had a chance to talk to Jesus much, but she had liked him instinctually. After all, he made Lafayette happy, and that was what was most important in Sookie's book. And, of course, he had just saved her life from the witch Marnie, despite the fact that he had obviously cared about the older woman—at least before she went bat-shit crazy.

Sookie walked up to Jesus, putting her hand on his arm. She said in a low voice, “Jesus, I know that what you did was hard for you, but thank you. You saved my life. You saved everyone here.”

Jesus took in the young woman in front of him. He'd heard a lot about Sookie Stackhouse from Lafayette during the previous year when everyone had thought that she was dead. She was an important part of Lafayette's life, too—someone who always accepted him as he was. Jesus knew that Lafayette would need friends like her even more now since he'd just found out that he was a medium and since he'd just seen him in his demon form.

He answered Sookie softly as Lafayette and Tara disentangled from each other's embrace and talked quietly to each other. “You too, Sookie. You saved lives here too.”

As Jesus gestured toward the two vampires at the front of the store, he and Sookie shared a look of understanding, in silent commiseration about all the fucked up things that had happened

during the last week or two. Sookie was also happy to see that Jesus did not share Marnie's obsessive hatred for vampires.

Tara broke their moment. "What about them?" she asked bitterly, gesturing in the direction of, but refusing to look at, the vampires across the room.

"What do you mean?" Sookie asked, glancing in Bill and Eric's direction, just long enough to see that they were both looking at her again.

"Fuck, Sook. I'm so fucking tired of all this bullshit. One was bad enough, but now you are looking at the *both* of them like some teenaged girl with a crush! We could have all died here today—because of them and their fucked up kind!" Tara's voice grew louder and angrier with each word.

Lafayette tried to jump in, "Listen, Tara. This isn't the time. What we needs to do is get the fuck up outta here, 'kay Hooker?"

"No. Listen, Sook. This is the end. I love you, but you need to make a decision right now! I ain't gonna be around you if you're around them." Tara had her stubborn look placed solidly on her face. Her relief that Sookie had escaped from the witch's circle of fire was apparently spent.

Sookie's own temper rose. "Tara, it's not their fault that we're here! Marnie is the one who held you captive. She's the one that tried to kill me, not them. Heck, she killed one of her own people!"

"Oh great!" Tara exclaimed. "Sook, you have such fucking rose-colored glasses on when it comes to those undead motherfuckers. You'd better take those the fuck off right now, or you are gonna be even deader than they are!"

By this point, Eric and Bill had made their way toward the group, Eric growling low in his throat and Bill looking at the older vampire menacingly as if to tell Eric to back down.

Sookie saw them approach and knew that the situation was about to escalate. She looked pleadingly at Lafayette and Jesus, silently begging for back-up—silently hoping that her best friend for her whole life wasn't about to be killed by one of the two vampires she loved. Turning to look at Bill and Eric, she posited that it would be Eric who would most likely be fueled into rage by Tara's anger since he was already growling.

As soon as Sookie caught Eric's eye with hers, however, he did something that surprised her. He turned for a millisecond into *her* Eric, the one who was not a big, bad Viking vampire sheriff. He turned into the man who looked at her guiltily when he dragged mud onto her rug.

Sookie tilted her head almost imperceptibly as she looked at Eric, and they shared a look of understanding that she almost didn't believe she could share with the restored Eric. He nodded to her slightly, a gesture missed by everyone else in the room. Then, he abruptly stopped his progress about eight feet from Sookie and Tara, became silent, and pushed his hands into his pockets forcefully. His posture, so straight and ready for attack mere moments before, slumped a bit.

Sookie nodded gratefully back to him, knowing in her gut somehow that he'd just agreed to try to stop himself from killing her friend. It was something, at least.

For his part, Bill stopped a few steps closer to the group and nodded at Sookie in a much more perceptible way than Eric had. He too seemed to be agreeing not to harm Tara.

Tara, seeing Sookie looking over her shoulder, turned to face the vampire pair.

“Well lookie here!” she exclaimed, anger and sarcasm competing in her tone. “If it ain’t dead and deader? Marnie was a fucked up bitch at the end, but I do wish that she’d managed to kill you two!”

This time it was Bill who let a growl escape from his throat as his fangs descended. Sookie looked at Eric, expecting to see the same or worse, but he looked completely unconcerned, even bored by Tara’s words.

“Tut, tut. We’re not *all* bad,” Eric drawled. “After all, just earlier tonight, I told my progeny that she was not allowed to kill you even though you were there when the witch put a spell on her.” He winked at Sookie who did a double take at his playful manner. Sookie was even more surprised when she realized that Eric was trying to deflate the situation, even as Bill continued growling at her friend.

“‘Bout that magic thing,” Lafayette said, looking briefly at Eric before pleadingly turning his gaze toward Sookie. “We’s was just there with Marnie. In fact, we were hopin’ she was gonna reverse the spell on tall, blond, and scary.” He gestured to Eric. “We didn’t think she was gonna do nothing to that crazy vampire bitch.”

“Ah Lafayette,” Eric continued to drawl. He gestured his hand airily. “All water under the bridge.”

Sookie was surprised when Eric’s playful tone turned to one of seriousness—to sincerity—when he continued talking to Lafayette, even though his gaze was directed more toward herself. “For the services you and your boyfriend have rendered in dismissing the witch, you have my assurance that neither Pamela nor I will seek retribution for . . .” he paused for a moment, looking meaningfully into Sookie’s eyes, “. . . past mistakes.”

Tara turned to Eric venomously, “You undead fuck, don’t think you can just wave your hand and everyone here is gonna get down on their knees and say fucking thank you.”

“Tara!” Sookie yelled. “Shut up! Or you are gonna get yourself killed!”

“Right!” Tara yelled and moved aggressively toward Sookie, causing Jesus and both vampires to tense. “You even *know* that they are killers, yet here you are, on their fucking side! That one,” she yelled, pointing toward Bill who had resumed his growl, “used you and lied to you the whole time you were together. He almost fucking killed you in the back of that van! I should never have wasted my time with you again after you took him back after that!”

She continued, now pointing at Eric, “And that psycho motherfucker just ripped out a guy’s heart and turned it into a fucking sippy cup. *And* he held Lafayette in a fucking dungeon for weeks! They are all manipulative bastards, and they all deserve to fucking fry!”

Sookie knew that Tara’s anger was out of control, just as she knew that her friend’s life was spinning out of control, but given the clusterfuck of her own life, she didn’t know how to help Tara at the moment, except to try to keep her alive.

“I should have fucking stayed in New Orleans, stayed away from all your shit!” Tara continued.

Sookie sighed, trying to reign in her own temper. “Tara, why don’t you just go home right now. We’ll talk about this later.”

“You know what, Sookie? For once, you are right! I’m getting the fuck out of here though; this fucked up place is never gonna be my home again. I’m glad that you are alive, and I hope that you get your shit together, but I’m out!” Tara turned toward her cousin. “Y’all leaving? ‘Cause I’m ready to get the fuck away from all this shit!”

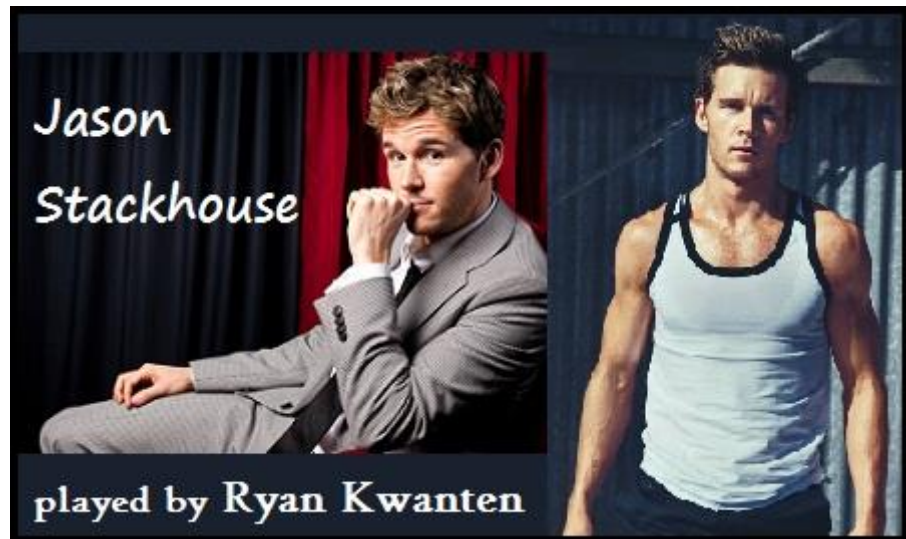
Lafayette looked at Sookie sympathetically before addressing his cousin, knowing that leaving was the best thing right then. “Yeah bitch,” he gave Sookie an apologetic look and kissed her cheek, “let’s get out of this twisted up place.”

As Tara turned and stormed off, trailed by Lafayette, Jesus reached out and touched Sookie’s hand. “It’ll be okay,” he said in a low voice. “You know her better than I do. She just needs some time to simmer down.”

Sookie shook her head sadly. “I don’t think so, Jesus. But I’ll be fine,” she tried to reassure him. “I’ll call you guys tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Jesus turned and walked toward the door, nodding slightly to both vampires as he passed them.

Tara slammed the door loudly on her way out, disturbing Jason and Jessica, who had been in a side room. They peaked out of the door and then entered the main room



where Sookie and the two vampires were standing, looking at each other rather awkwardly.

Eric spoke first, “Sookie, do you and your brother need a ride back to your homes?”

“Naw,” Jason answered crossing the room and putting an arm around Sookie’s shoulder. “I have my truck outside.”

“Even so,” Bill said, looking at Sookie like a vampire who was trying to glamour someone, “I would feel better if *I* saw you home safely.” His voice seemed full of affection and care.

And possession.

Sookie resisted the sudden urge she felt to go with Bill. “No thank you,” Sookie answered, looking back and forth between the two again. “It’ll be dawn pretty soon, and y’all need to get to—well—wherever it is you need to get.” She smiled a genuine smile for the first time in a few days—ever since Eric had been taken by Marnie. “At least you won’t have to silver yourselves again. You’ll get some real rest today.”



Bill nodded, though still seemingly hesitant to leave. “Eric,” he said looking at the taller vampire who was still several steps further away from Sookie than he was.

“Hmmm?” Eric’s eyes were still on Sookie as he answered his king.

“Let us take our leave,” Bill suggested, his Southern accent and manners in full swing as he turned back to give Sookie a small bow before beginning towards the door.

Eric stood in place for a moment before walking slowly toward Sookie.

As he approached, Jason’s hold on her shoulder seemed to get a bit stronger, but Sookie couldn’t break her stare from Eric, who had lifted his hand slowly up to the level of her cheek as

he strode the few steps it took his long body to reach her. He placed his cool hand against her cheek softly. It was the same hand that he'd pierced with his fangs just a few days before, the hand that she'd drunk from. Sookie couldn't help but to lean slightly into his touch.

Eric's eyes sparkled as he sensed her movement. "Miss Stackhouse," he said, the twinkle now more obvious in his mischievous eyes, "I should very much like to pick up the conversation that we were having the other day at the king's residence. May I call on you at the house this evening when I rise?"

Sookie couldn't help but notice that Eric had said "the house" and not "your house," and her temper would have probably flared yet again if she were not so exhausted. Thus, she decided not to confront him about *her* house right then.

"I want a few days to myself, okay?" Sookie asked, her eyes pleading at Eric. "There's been too much stuff lately, and I need some time."

Eric lowered his hand from her cheek and looked a bit saddened by her words before he recovered his calm demeanor. He said in a low voice, "Then you shall have your days, Sookie." He bowed a bit, keeping his eyes trained on her.

"Eric!" Bill's voice was loud from across the room and enabled Sookie to break Eric's gaze and look at Bill. Bill's jealousy was clear from his tone, "Eric, it is time to go. Now!" he added when Eric did not move immediately.

"Well," Eric said, still unmoving, as he looked at Sookie, "until I see you again, then." He smirked, turned around, and sped out the door faster than Sookie's eyes could see.

Bill took the opportunity of Eric's departure to give Sookie a final, love-filled look before his face clouded with concern. "Sookie, despite Eric's cooperation this evening, I still believe

him to be a danger to you, especially since he has recovered his memories. You should guard yourself from him.”

Sookie acknowledged Bill’s concern with a nod even as she noticed that his eye twitched a bit as he delivered his warning. She’d seen that kind of movement from him before and had always dismissed it as something he just did sometimes. She pushed the tic aside in her mind yet again as soon as she recognized it.

After one last look, Bill too sped from the building, leaving Jason and Sookie behind. Sookie took in the room a final time as five men dressed in black uniforms came in. Sookie and Jason recognized them as Bill’s guards.

“Well, let’s get out of here so that they can clean up the place,” Sookie said, knowing that all traces of the deaths that had occurred there would soon be covered up.

As a sheriff’s deputy, Jason had a momentary thought that the police should be informed about what had happened. But then he shook his head. “Yeah, let’s let the vamps take this one.”

With their arms linked, the siblings walked out of the door and into the cool night air, both glad to leave the craziness that was Marnie behind.

Chapter Two: Thinking in the Dark

Sookie got into the passenger side of Jason’s truck, never so grateful to sit down in her life. The last month had been very trying for her. And when she tried to reconcile the fact that—for everyone she knew—much of what had happened to her in that month had actually occurred a year before, that knowledge made her even more exhausted. Therefore, bone-weary, she sank into the seat of the truck.

In Sookie’s mind, Godric had met the sun, the Maenad had destroyed Gran’s home, Bill had proposed and been kidnapped by Russell, Eric had killed and then hidden the body of a Were to protect her, she’d met Alcide and gone to Jackson, she had killed Lorena, Bill had attacked her in the van, Eric had chained her up in his basement, she had been fed upon by both Russell and Eric, she had found out that she was a fairy, and then fairies had tried to kidnap her—all a few weeks before! She could have really used that extra year just to get over all of that! When she added the events of the last two weeks to the others, she felt even more tired.



“Clusterfuck indeed,” Sookie said quietly, almost to herself, but still breaking the silence that had settled between Jason and herself.

“You ain’t kiddin’, Sook.” Jason agreed, looking briefly at his sister before turning his eyes back to the dark road. “I need to figure out a way to tell my best friend in the world that I’ve had sex with his girl—well, not his girl anymore, but still . . .”

“Wait! You slept with Jessica?” Sookie asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said contritely. “But it was *after* she and Hoyt had broken up—least I think it was. And—uh—we didn’t exactly sleep.”

There were a few minutes of silence as Sookie gathered her thoughts.

“Do you love Jessica?” Sookie couldn’t help but ask.

“I don’t rightly know,” Jason said, looking frustrated. “But I feel real drawn to her.”

The siblings sat in silence for a few more minutes, letting the miles between Shreveport and Bon Temps lull them into their own thoughts as the dark sky began to lighten slightly and day approached.

Jason broke the silence this time, “What about you, Sook? Do you love Bill? The blond one—Eric is it? I can’t believe both of them vamps was gonna kill themselves for you tonight.”

Sookie looked contemplatively out of the window of the truck, hoping to find the answer to Jason’s questions in the darkened trees they were rapidly passing.

“I think I love them both,” Sookie said quietly before looking back at her brother.

“Well whatcha gonna do? I don’t see either of them vamps anxious to be sharing you.”

“I don’t know. I just wish that there was some way to go back to when I didn’t have either of their blood in me. I can’t help but wonder how much of what I feel for either of them is chemical and how much is my own feelings.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know about vampire blood, right?” Sookie questioned Jason.

“What about it? It makes you feel high or it heals you, right?”

Sookie nodded her head before adding, “Yeah, V will make you high. And if you take vampire blood from the source, it can heal you, but it also does other things too.”

Her brother looked again at Sookie, questions clear in his expression.

Sookie continued, “Well, I’m still not sure I know everything it does, but the first time Bill gave me his blood, he told me that it would sharpen my senses and . . .” Sookie paused, embarrassment creeping into her tone, “. . . and increase my libido.”

“What does that mean?” Jason asked, looking perplexed.

Sookie’s embarrassment rose as she tried to think of a way to explain the meaning of *libido* to her brother. “Well, the blood makes you think about sex more,” she finally settled on.

Jason still looked confused, “But I think about sex all the time anyway.”

Sookie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well at first, I thought that their blood just made people feel like they wanted to have—you know—,” she paused again, “sex a lot more, but then after I drank a couple of drops of Eric’s blood in Dallas, Bill told me that it would make me feel more attracted to Eric specifically.”

“Wait, did you get them crazy dreams, too?” Jason asked. “Them crazy sex dreams?”

“Yeah,” Sookie answered quietly, completely mortified to admit this to her brother.

“And Jessica also told me that she can track me and know when something’s wrong with me. She found me the night that I thought I was turnin’ into a panther, and she helped me calm down.”

“Wait,” Sookie said loudly, startling her brother. “You’ve had Jessica’s blood? I thought you two had just had sex or that maybe she’d drunk yours!”

“Yeah, she has given me hers,” Jason admitted, realizing that there were a lot of things that he and Sookie hadn’t talked about since she’d been back. “Twice now. There was once when she and Hoyt found me by the side of the road after all that Hot Shot shit.” Jason paused for a minute, disturbed by the memories of his time with Crystal’s crazy people. “Then there was tonight. After the rocket thing went off, I was burned pretty bad, and she healed me.”

“And after the first time—that’s when you started to be attracted to her? And then you slept with her after that?” Sookie asked, trying to get the timeline straight.

“Well,” Jason looked at her sheepishly, “to be honest, I thought she was hot before. I mean, who wouldn’t? But I wasn’t gonna do anything ‘cause of Hoyt.”

Sookie nodded, encouraging Jason to continue, “But after I got her blood in me, it was almost like I couldn’t control it. I was thinking about her all the time. And there were the dreams. And then I saved her that day the witch was tryin’ to make all the vamps fry in the sun, and then we kissed, and then—well—you know the rest.”

“You’ve had dreams about her?”

“Yep, after the blood, but I don’t wanna talk about them.” Jason looked very uncomfortable as he tried to shut down the topic.

“Why not?” Sookie asked curiously.

Jason looked a little yellow even in the darkness of the car. “It’s just that in the dreams, I was all doin’ Jess—you know, havin’ sex with her—and then Hoyt was there.” He stopped. “I just *don’t* wanna talk about it,” he restated firmly.

Sookie nodded, not wanting her brother to feel like he had to tell her something he didn’t want to. “Okay, Jase. And then you felt drawn to her?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed quietly. “I know I shouldn’t have done anything, but when I thought she might die, I just had to go to her, and after that, I just couldn’t stay away even though I tried.” Jason turned all his attention back to the road, obviously wanting to be quiet again. This was fine with Sookie as she wanted to explore her own thoughts.

Sookie tried to remember how she felt about Bill before he gave her his blood for the first time. She had been drawn to his silence and had been curious about him. She’d also been attracted to him physically, at least to some extent. After all, she had been a virgin at the time, and he seemed to like her. Yes—she knew that she was definitely *interested* in Bill before the blood, but after he fed her his blood, that interest seemed to turn immediately into an almost obsessive urge to be with him and to love him. This was exactly what had happened with Jason and Jessica, from what she could gather, except that Jessica hadn’t set up the situation that led to her giving him her blood.

Bill had.

Sighing, Sookie tried to remember how she had felt about Eric before being tricked into taking his blood. She couldn’t help but to smile slightly at the way Eric had played on her sympathy and manipulated her into drinking a few drops from him. But she put that amusement to the side. Certainly, Sookie had been physically attracted to the Viking vampire at first glance. It would have been hard not to be! She remembered how he was slouching in his throne, his hair longer at the time. She remembered the flattering black suit that he’d been wearing and the way that it had hugged his butt just right; admittedly, she’d snuck a peek at it when they were leaving out of the back of the building to avoid the police raid. She also remembered his piercing blue eyes, which seemed to be able to capture her brown orbs even without glamour.

Sookie realized that her memories of seeing Eric for the first time were causing her to become aroused as she felt the dampness in her panties. Embarrassed to have such thoughts in front of her brother—even in the dark truck—she immediately stopped that line of thinking.

She carried on with her thoughts more logically. Yes, she'd obviously felt attraction for Eric and she'd been curious about him, but she'd also found him to be rude, and she'd been a bit afraid of him. Then when she had found Lafayette in Eric's basement dungeon after she'd been attacked by the Maenad, all of her curiosity about him turned to rage. She remembered slapping his face before making the deal to go to Dallas to save Lafayette's life.

Dallas confused her feelings for Eric even more—even before she'd taken his blood. She remembered how Godric had saved her in the basement of the Fellowship of the Sun church and how Eric had come racing in moments after; he'd looked like some kind of Viking war god to her. Then, he had offered himself to save Godric and her. He'd asked her to trust him that night, and she had—at least before he'd later broken that trust by tricking her into taking his blood.

Still, she'd spent a lot more time with Eric than she had with Bill before she'd taken his blood, so her feelings for Eric seemed a lot more jumbled in her head. Of course, after she'd taken Eric's blood, she'd begun dreaming about him and had certainly become even more drawn to him. But her feelings had stayed jumbled up.

Again, the complicated web of her feelings for both vampires threatened to overwhelm her, and she felt even more drained than before—if that was even possible. She sank back against the seat of her brother's truck even more heavily as a sign indicating that Bon Temps was 15 miles away came into sight, just as the dark sky began to grey. She glanced down at her watch; it was 6:32 a.m. She knew it was about another hour until the sun officially rose.

She wondered when exactly she'd become an expert at sunset and sunrise times, and then she remembered that she'd checked for the first time the day after Bill had saved her life from the Rattrays. She smiled at the memory of him holding her after he'd rescued her from Mack and Denise. He'd saved her life with his own blood, and that thought warmed her.

"No, scratch that," she thought to herself, wincing in her seat noticeably; "that was the night he *set me up* to get attacked." She flinched again, causing Jason to look at her; she smiled at him sheepishly and then went back to her thinking. She shook her head. How could she have forgotten about Bill's duplicity even for a moment? She would never have needed to be saved if he hadn't set her up. "I must be more tired than I thought I was," she thought to herself. No matter how sorry Bill was that he'd followed the orders of his queen and how much she still loved him, she needed to remind herself to be cautious with him.

Sookie readjusted so that she was more comfortable again. For about the hundredth time during the last few days, she wondered how she could be in love with both Bill and Eric at the same time. She'd been falling more and more in love with Eric and had been putting Bill behind her until Eric had been taken by Marnie and turned into some kind of zombie. Maybe her almost dying and then waking up to see Bill worrying over her had warmed her heart to him again. Maybe seeing Eric almost kill Bill had forced her love for Bill back to the surface; after all, what she'd told Eric was true. She didn't want to imagine a world without Bill in it.

But then again, she hadn't wanted to hurt Eric when she shot him with her light. She'd wanted to stop him from hurting Bill, certainly, but there was something different about the magic that came out of her hands when she struck Eric. She just couldn't put her finger on it right then.

Did she even love Eric? How could she possibly love someone whom she'd seen kill people with his bare hands? But *her* Eric had been so wonderful to her—so gentle and loving. But she'd fallen for him *so* quickly and in the middle of a crazy situation. Was it possible that the love she felt might have just been brought on by her grief over losing Bill or even just the craziness of those days? Was he just a “rebound” man? On the other hand, when she really thought about *why* she'd fallen so hard for Eric, she thought back to when she'd been washing his feet and had accidentally tickled him. His smile had lit him up. And it had lit her up, too—seemingly from the inside out; it had broken through her heartache, like a sledgehammer through thin ice. And then every time they'd been together after that, she'd always felt a delightful mix of excitement and comfort with him.

She sighed. Her life was so different than it had been 6 months before—no, actually a year and a half before. Everyone else had had a whole year without her in it. Bill was a king for goodness sakes! And Eric—well—he'd seemed to be exactly the same as he always was before, at least until his memories were taken from him. He'd told her that he'd been the only one who'd never given up on her. She wondered if that was true and what it even meant. He'd bought her house and asked her to be his, telling her that it was for her protection. Did he only want to protect her because he wanted her blood and maybe her body? He'd told her, after all, that she was like “sunshine in a pretty blond bottle.” But he had *asked* her to be his. He was right; he could have just taken what he wanted from her if it had been only about sex and blood.

As the “Welcome to Bon Temps” sign came into view, Sookie wondered what would have happened if Eric hadn't lost his memories. She didn't think she'd have ended up in bed with him—that's for sure! “What a clusterfuck,” she thought again to herself.

Sookie decided that she had to start thinking of a plan for dealing with her feelings, and even though sleep seemed to promise only more disturbing dreams of threesomes with Bill and Eric, she knew that she needed rest now more than anything else if she expected to have clear thoughts the next time she saw one of the vampires she loved.

So when Jason dropped her off at her home—actually Eric’s home—she immediately went into Gran’s old bedroom, where she’d spent her last evening with Eric, and lay down on the bed without even changing clothes or brushing her teeth. She was out within moments.

Chapter 03: Dreaming in the Light

Sookie stretched lazily in her lounge chair, happy to finally be soaking up some sun after the toil of the last several days—no make that months. Not for the first time, Sookie was grateful that she lived in Louisiana where even on one of the last days of October, the weather could be warm enough for her to enjoy the sun in a bikini.

Today was especially warm, and her skin was soaking in the hot rays like a sponge. She closed her eyes blissfully, dozing a bit.

Her rest was interrupted when she suddenly felt cooler. She opened her eyes to see if a cloud was passing over, but instead, she found Bill leaning over her, taking in her bikini-clad body.

“I have always wanted to see you like this,” he drawled, his accent very prominent.

“What are you doing here?” she cried out, immediately worried that the sun would burn him.

“Don’t fear, my little fairy. Your light will always shelter me.”

Sookie relaxed immediately, not doubting the truth of his words in the least.

“This is a dream, isn’t it?” she asked lazily.

Bill didn’t answer as suddenly, he was on top of her, hovering over her body and kissing her neck and shoulders. Quickly, he pushed down her top and licked and bit into her breast. She arched into him, in both pleasure and pain.

She gazed at what Bill was doing before another shadow engulfed both of them. She looked up to see Eric and greeted him sluggishly, “Hi Eric. Are you shielded by my light too?”

Eric’s face looked solemn. “I am Sookie. I thought that I would never again see the sun, but it appears you have opened up the realm of daylight to me, min kára.”

“Mmmm,” Sookie purred, still arching into Bill’s ministrations and loving the feeling of his lips and hands on her breasts. He licked the bite he’d made on her right breast and then bit into her left one. It hurt a little, but soon the pleasure outweighed the pain.

Wondering why Eric wasn’t joining them, Sookie again looked up at him. His beautiful blue eyes were taking her in with an almost defeated look. She asked, “Min kära? That sounds pretty. What does it mean? Is it your Viking language?”

“It’s close,” Eric said, now looking away from Bill and Sookie and toward the light of the sun. “It is Swedish. The language I grew up with, Old Norse, is the parent of modern Swedish.”

“Mmmmm,” Sookie sighed as Bill licked the second wound. His hands moved down to slip into her bikini bottoms. Usually, she would have been mortified at the thought of having an audience as Bill made love to her with his hands and mouth, but Eric’s presence didn’t seem to affect her pleasure at Bill’s ministrations. “What does it mean?” she grunted in Eric’s direction.

“Min kära means ‘my love’ in English—‘my beloved one’,” Eric answered softly, still not looking down at the couple. In fact, Sookie realized that his voice sounded farther away than before.

She pulled her gaze from Bill’s head, which was slowly descending toward her thighs and looked up at Eric. His profile was beautiful as the planes and curves of his face soaked in the sun for one of the first times in a thousand years. He looked toward the light with both longing and sadness in his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Eric?” Sookie managed to say, as Bill worked a finger into her bikini bottoms and then into her hot center. She moaned at the touch.

Eric didn't turn to look at Sookie; instead, his gaze fell toward the ground slowly as he seemed to catalogue the way the world looked bathed in sunlight. It took him a few moments to answer. "I have been in the light two times since I met you, min kära. The first time, you did not give me this gift willingly. The second time, I killed your kinswoman. And now, I am punished."

"Hmmm?" Sookie questioned inattentively as Bill slipped her bottoms down and then added a second finger to join the other inside of her. Her hips raised and she cried out—again in both pleasure and pain—as Bill bit into her thigh, even as his fingers continued to pump into her.

Eric's gaze finally returned to Sookie's eyes, which were now clouded with hazy lust. "My punishment is to be without you, to watch as another has your love. This has been my fate since I have met you, Sookie, at least until this last week when I got a taste of what it was like to have your love. Now my punishment is even greater."

"Even greater?" Sookie asked, too wrapped up in the pleasure Bill was causing her to really be listening to Eric's words carefully.

Eric looked away again. "Yes, min kära. Now that I have had your love for a moment, it is even more difficult to be without you, to be the one always looking in from the outside as he," Eric gestured toward Bill, "has your heart."

"But you have my love too now," Sookie grunted as her climax drew nearer and nearer, before finally exploding around Bill's fingers.

Eric didn't answer as Sookie returned to awareness following her orgasm. Bill, who had remained silent since Eric's arrival, began to undress. He turned slightly toward Eric. "She will never love you as she loves me. You never really had her; she loved you only when you were not yourself. Now that you are back to what you were, she will also go back—to hating you."

“That’s not true,” Sookie protested weakly as Bill positioned his now naked body over her and thrust into her roughly.

Sookie moaned into Bill’s mouth as he kissed her lips and continued moaning as his lips moved toward her neck, licking and tasting her as his fangs scraped her skin.

Sookie managed to look at Eric again. This time, she saw bloody tears gathered in his eyes. At that moment, he reminded her of what he’d looked like on the morning he had begged Godric not to leave him, and she wanted to reach out and comfort him, but she couldn’t stop the passion that Bill was stirring again in her, and she raised her hips to meet Bill’s thrusts.

Torn between her pleasure and her desire to stop Eric’s tears, Sookie managed to whisper, “What’s wrong, Eric?”

“I already feel you leaving me just as Godric did,” Eric looked like the weight of his thousand plus years was being put onto his shoulders in that moment.

Sookie couldn’t answer him as Bill’s fangs pierced her neck almost violently, drawing her orgasm from her body along with her blood. She felt Bill stiffen and then pour his own release into her. Only then did she open her eyes and realize that Eric was no longer there anymore. Bill still hovered above her, but instead of love or even lust in his eyes, there was a look of victory in them.

Sookie woke up with a start, her body aroused but her mind disturbed by the dream she’d been having. She looked out her window and saw sunlight streaming in and then at her clock and saw that it was only 9:30 in the morning. She tried to go back to sleep, but the image of Bill’s triumphant eyes contrasted to Eric’s defeated ones wouldn’t leave her. Fifteen minutes later when her stomach growled, she gave up and rolled herself out of the bed, which still

smelled a bit like Eric from the night they had spent there after their blood exchange. She looked at the old fire place and thought about Eric starting a fire for them to hold out the cool air of the October night. She remembered his naked silhouette in the light of that fire as he'd risen to return to bed. She couldn't believe that had been only a few nights before.

As she moved around her kitchen, making coffee and toast, she let her mind drift to her dream. Bill's presence had felt somewhat off to her as he made love to her, and she was upset by Eric's role in the dream.

The day before, she'd dreamed that both of them had kissed and bitten into her at the same time, a truly erotic sensation from the dream. She had expected a similar scenario to take place in her next dream starring the two vampires.

Certainly her most-recent dream had contained an element of the erotic, but the bites this time had been tinged with pain. And Eric had seemed so heartbroken. And she'd done nothing to comfort him. Perhaps dream Bill was right. Perhaps Sookie's feelings had changed now that Eric was himself again. However, now that she was awake, Sookie felt guilty for not stopping Bill and comforting Eric. She shook off her thoughts as her phone rang.

"Hey Sook," Lafayette said after Sookie greeted her caller with a hello.

"Lala! You okay?"

"Sure. Just still a bit freaked over everything, but Jesus is here and called off from work. And you's is joinin' us to play hooky today! I don't care what Sam says 'bout that either."

"And Tara?"

On the other end of the phone, Lafayette sighed loudly enough for Sookie to hear. “She left last night. Packed up her bag and was gone an hour after we got here. I think she’s goin’ to go find that woman she was with in NOLA.”

“Oh,” was all Sookie could say as the



tears began to gather into her eyes at the loss of her best friend. She sensed that Tara had both literally and figuratively cut ties between them the night before, and she felt heavy as she mourned the loss of her best friend. So much had happened to and between them during the last year and a half. Sookie wondered if she’d ever see her friend again.

“Sook, Jesus and I insist that you’s come over here and hang today. You’s needs a break as much as we do, and we’s gonna sit on the couch, eat, and watch mindless T.V. all day. Springer’s on now, and the batshit craziness on that show’s makin’ me feel almost like a normal person again—not someone who can channel fuckin’ dead people and who’s shackin’ up with some kind of demon thing.

“Hey!” Sookie heard Jesus’s voice from the background, chiding his boyfriend.

“Well you is!” Lafayette said, obviously talking to Jesus.

“Yeah,” Sookie said as she took in the lack of contents in her refrigerator. “I have the day off anyway. I’ll be over as soon as I grab a quick shower and throw on some clothes.”

She hung up and immediately felt a little better. “This is no time for being alone,” she said to herself. She quickly showered and put on some comfortable, well-broken-in jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt. She was ready for a day of just chilling out.

On a whim, she also packed an overnight bag, wondering if Jesus and Lafayette would let her stay over. Maybe they could all get drunk on the wicked Margaritas that were a specialty of Lafayette’s. Just in case, she grabbed the full bottle of tequila that someone—read a high-handed, blond vampire or one of his minions—had put into her fully restored liquor cabinet, a piece of furniture that she would have been loath to lose considering Grandpa Earl had made it. She’d been heartbroken after she’d seen the damage to it following Maryann’s little “visit,” but now it looked beautiful again. For good measure, she grabbed the gin and vodka bottles, too.

In truth, she also didn’t want to be home that night. She was not ready to deal with either vampire in her life, and even though she knew that they could find her if they wanted to after nightfall, she hoped that they’d both respect her enough to let her initiate their next contact. She just needed some time and space from everything, and as she glanced around the rooms that now held so many memories of both Eric and Bill, she felt that she needed to do her thinking somewhere else.

She quickly called Jason to tell him where she’d be, and he promised to come by Lafayette’s house after his shift ended at 6:00 p.m. Then she hopped into her car and took off for a day—and hopefully night—of relaxation.

Chapter 04: The Ties that Bind

A/N: I wanted to let you know that my own vision of vampire-human bonds and blood swapping is going to go off-book and off-show. I have something a little different in mind, and I hope that you will indulge me. So this is simply my interpretation of what I've seen on the show, mixed in with a whole lot of creative license. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but as I said at the beginning, this story represents how things would go if I had my way. I hope you enjoy!

As Sookie got out of her old, yellow car, she was greeted by both Jesus and Lafayette, who were relaxing on the porch and obviously already a bit tipsy.

“It’s not even 10:30 a.m. yet!” Sookie scolded playfully. “And you two are already gettin’ lit up!” She smiled at them as she put her bag down on a chair. “I was wondering if I could stay the night tonight, and I’ve brought a bribe.” She pulled out the bottles of liquor she’d brought.

“Of course, baby girl,” Lafayette said. “We was gonna suggest that you stayed anyway, and now that you have supplied more hooch—and some very good shit at that—we’s insist on it! Here, you’s can start with a glass of this wicked brew that Jesus cooked up,” he added as Jesus poured her a drink.

Sookie laughed, “Please, Lala, don’t call it a brew. No offense to you two, but I don’t wanna think about witches’ spells right now.”

Lafayette and Jesus both joined her in a chuckle as Sookie took a glass of something that looked like sangria from Jesus. She sipped it, and finding it delicious, took a bigger drink.

“Ready to get shit-faced, doll?” Lafayette asked.

Sookie nodded as she took another long drink. She sat down to join the two men on the porch, propping up her feet on the railing and leaning back in her seat.

After a few minutes of silence that was spent doing nothing more exciting than enjoying the quiet of the day, Jesus asked Sookie, “How are you today, Sookie? You get any sleep at all?”

“A little,” she answered, “but my dream woke me up, and I don’t feel that rested, to tell you the truth.”

Lafayette frowned, “Fucking vampire dreams. I remember those fucked up things a little too vividly. I know you’s kinda have somethin’ goin’ on with Eric now, but—shit—his blood was fuckin’ potent, and I still gets me some fucked up dreams every now and again. I’m just glad that big, blonde and toothy ain’t in ‘em no more.”

Jesus patted Lafayette comfortingly, “You know what we learned, Laf. It’ll just take some time, and then you’ll stop having the dreams altogether, especially since we decided that the *other* thing would be too much of a risk for you,” he added significantly.

Sookie’s curiosity was peaked. “You learned something about vampire dreams or blood? And what *other thing* are you talking about?”

Jesus sighed. “Actually, Lafayette’s dreams are one of the reasons why I went to meet Marnie for the first time. A little more than a year ago, probably around the time you disappeared, me and Lafayette . . .” Jesus paused, looking at Sookie and ready to gauge her reaction to what he said next. “Well, we did some V, and . . .”

Sookie interrupted and looked at Lafayette accusingly, “Lala, you can’t do that. What if Eric found out? What. The. Hell?”

Lafayette put up his hands as if in surrender, “I knows, Sook. But it was shit that I had left over from when Eric was havin’ me sell it! And he told me to get rid of it. He said he didn’t care how as long as I didn’t sell it from then on.”

Sookie again interrupted, this time almost spilling her drink. “He did what! Fuck! After he kept you in his fucking dungeon, he had you selling V! I’m gonna stake him myself! Fucking hypocrite!”

“Listen, Sookie,” Jesus said, trying to calm her down. “He came here a few days after you had disappeared to make sure we’d gotten rid of it; by then, we’d destroyed the rest of it ourselves. But I think he came mainly to ask us if we’d seen you.”

“He seemed a little—um—out of sorts. He didn’t make no threats or nothin’,” Lafayette added.

Jesus continued, “He sat right in that chair you’re sitting in for at least an hour. He told us that some vampire queen had ordered him to sell the V and that he regretted having to get Laf involved.”

“It was almost a fuckin’ apology, Sook,” Lafayette added.

Jesus nodded, “He seemed real torn up about you being gone too—kept asking us if we’d heard from you. He told Laf to keep all the money he’d made from the V-sales, and then he left, asking us to phone him if we heard anything, even if it was just to tell him that you were alive.”

Lafayette finished quietly, “He *did* seem real shaken up.”

“I don’t get him,” Sookie said, with frustration. “One minute he can seem almost kind, and the next he’s got someone I love locked up in his dungeon, or he’s locking me up in his dungeon!”

Lafayette raised his eyebrow in question at the last part of her statement.

“Long story,” Sookie said, not wanting to open that can of worms. “You know what Eric told me the night I came back? He said that everyone stopped looking for me—gave me up for dead. But he said that he never did. How screwed up is that? I mean—*him*—of all people!”

Lafayette looked a bit ashamed. “Listen, Sook. No one wanted to give up, but we searched and searched for months. There was searches through the woods and the marsh, and the police investigated both Eric and Bill. Then six months after you was gone, the police closed the case even though Jason didn’t want to.”

Jesus added, “Yeah, that’s why Jason finally made a huge effort to pass his exams and become a cop, I think. But there was just no trace of you. Bill was asking questions for the first week or so that you were gone, but he seemed occupied with other things after that. He told Sam that he could no longer feel your presence and that he was certain that you were dead.”

Sookie shook her head, “It’s crazy to think how everyone suffered like that when, to me, I was gone for only a few minutes.”

“Where was you?” Lafayette asked. “I mean, I knows you told everyone that you was workin’ for Bill, but you’s know I ain’t buyin’ that sorry ass story.”

Sookie chuckled and took a deep breath; she knew that she could trust the men in front of her, and she needed them to know the whole story so that they wouldn’t think she’d just made them suffer without a word like that. “Well—to start off—I’m part fairy.”

“Huh?” Lafayette asked.

“Fairy—as in the species, but they’re *a lot* scarier than Tinker Bell—let me tell you! I found out after Bill almost drained me; it’s why I don’t have a blood type, I guess. I met this woman named Claudine, who turned out to be kinda like my fairy godmother. Anyway, after I broke things off with Bill for the last time, I was real upset, and I went with her to the fairy

world, which is in a different realm or something. Anyway, time works a lot different there, and what felt like ten minutes to me was more than a year to you! They tried to keep me there too, but I managed to escape.” Sookie’s voice got quiet, “I saw my Grandpa Earl there too.”

“The one who disappeared when you’s and Jason was young?” Lafayette asked, enthralled by Sookie’s story.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “He had thought he’d been there only for hours, but it had been decades. He was like me, you know, with the telepathy thing. He helped me get away, but he died when we got back to this world because he’d eaten some of this fruit thing they have there.” Sookie had to work hard to stifle the tears working their way into her eyes.

Lafayette was shaking his head, “Jeez, Hooker. Every time I think you’s as fucked up as you can get, you goes and adds something else to the heap of shit that is yo’ screwed up life!” He poured himself and her new glasses of Jesus’s very potent drink.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Sookie sighed. “So I didn’t even know I was gone that long until I got back and saw Jason dressed in a cop uniform. Talk about a culture shock!”

The three friends laughed at this and then settled into quiet as Lafayette and Jesus absorbed what Sookie had told them.

“Listen, Sook,” Lafayette said after a few minutes. “You’s know that I’m not the biggest fan of Eric Northman, but he didn’t seem like his big, bad vampire self at all after you went missin’. You needs to know that what Eric said was true. Even after everyone else had pretty much resigned themselves to the idea that you was dead, Eric kept on lookin’. I’d see him ‘round Merlotte’s a few times a week, and he would call us at least that often to see if we’d heard anything.”

Sookie sighed. She didn't really know what to think about her new-found knowledge about Eric and decided to move it to the back of her mind for the moment. Instead, she elected to go back to their previous topic—vampire blood and dreams.

She took another sip of her drink and then asked Jesus to continue his earlier story about Marnie.

“Well,” Jesus said, picking up where he had left off, “we had done some V, and the side-effects of it were really hard on Laf. He started to sort of hallucinate even when he wasn't on it, and we figured out it was because the V had opened up some of his latent magical power. I figured that this was at least in part because he also had Eric's blood in him, and that blood was continuing to make him have dreams, which were increasingly scary for Laf since they also contained dead humans at that point. Well, I finally did a bit of research and found out about Marnie's coven.”

Sookie nodded and took a big gulp of her drink, waiting for Jesus to go on.

“Well, I met Marnie, and I sensed some magic in her right away. She was also so open to helping people then.” Jesus looked forlorn at this memory, and Lafayette reached out to squeeze his boyfriend's shoulder.

Jesus continued, “I explained the problem, and Marnie and I began to look through some of her spell books, hoping to find something that could get rid of or at least lessen the effects of the vampire blood.

We found out that the drug V doesn't create any kind of connection between a vampire and a human because the blood has to be given freely by the vampire to create what they call a *tie*, which is basically a kind of magical connection. They literally use their blood to infiltrate the body of the human—to tie the human to them in some way.”

Sookie stiffened a bit as Jesus continued, “There can also be different kinds of ties, depending on the vampires’ motives for creating them. But most vampires create a tie to at least partially control the human they give their blood to.

“A magical blood tie, created purposefully by a vampire, is powerful. This is how Eric tied Laf to himself when he healed Lafayette’s leg with his blood. A tie allows the vampire to locate the human and sense the human’s emotions. It also seems to allow the vampire to influence the human’s feelings and behavior to a certain extent, especially through the use of dreams but also subtly through a kind of glamour within the blood itself. And obviously it causes sexual attraction for that vampire, though this attraction will be tinged with the human’s true feelings about the vampire. So since Laf was frightened of Eric, the dreams were both disturbing and—uh—arousing for him, at least at first.”

Lafayette blushed a little and shifted uncomfortably.

Jesus continued, “Us doing the V seems to have just been a catalyst for the dreams to start up again.”

“We’s not even sure it was Eric’s blood that was causin’ all the dreams after that, to tell you the truth,” Lafayette said. “The last one that I had that he was in was over a year ago, but I still dreams me some bat-shit crazy stuff sometimes!”

“Are your dreams anything like Lafayette’s?” Jesus asked Sookie.

She shook her head, trying to absorb what Jesus and Lafayette had told her. After a few moments, she gave a more complete answer. “After taking Bill’s blood for the first time, my dreams were a little scary, but mostly—uh—erotic, and my dreams about Eric were always . . .”

Sookie paused, not knowing exactly how to phrase what she wanted to say.

She took another drink and then set her once-again empty glass down. A bit floored that she had drunk so much so quickly, she promised that her very next piece of business after hearing the rest of Jesus's story had to be getting some food. She sighed as the two men looked at her expectantly, seeing if she would continue.

Finally, she did. "My dreams about Eric were always more—oh, I don't know—romantic maybe? Tender? I mean, we *did it*, but . . ." Sookie paused, blushing. "We did it, but we also talked a lot and joked sometimes. Other times, he'd just be there talking to me, trying to warn me about Bill or something. In the last one, he was just kinda sad because I was with Bill." She had finished almost in a whisper.

Jesus and Lafayette both looked at her a bit surprised at this revelation. "Well," Jesus finally continued, "it's a cliché, but when it comes to this kind of blood magic, dreams *are* the windows to the soul, and they reflect but also amplify your feelings."

"Can a vampire control the dreams?" Sookie asked anxiously.

"To some extent," Jesus continued. "According to the book I read, the content of the dreams comes from the human's subconscious, but that can be pushed along by the vampire's motives regarding the human. In other words, vampires cannot completely create brand new feelings from the human, but they can take what the human does feel and make it about a hundred times stronger. Vampires can also influence the human to have the dreams in the first place by essentially *sending* them."

Sookie said contemplatively, "I hadn't had any since I got home until I . . ." She paused for a few long moments. "Until Bill healed me after I was shot. Then, they started up again." She finished quietly, "But I'd also had Eric's blood earlier that night too, so that might have started them back up as well."

Lafayette and Jesus shared a significant look, and then Jesus continued, “The dreams are also much more vivid than normal dreams, as I’m sure you know. The vampire can make the magic tie last longer by giving the human more blood, and that blood can act as a catalyst for stronger dreams. However, if blood isn’t given again, the overall effect of the blood and the dreams will diminish and eventually disappear.”

“Oh,” Sookie answered, feeling a little nervous about her most recent ingestion from both the vampires in her life. “What else did you find out?”

“Well,” Jesus answered, leaning forward a bit. “Here’s where the magic books get a bit vague; vampires are very secretive about their blood magic and the ties that they can create—for obvious reasons. But the books suggest that there can be different kinds of ties created, as I indicated before. Lafayette’s experience is indicative of the kind that the books know most about. This is when the human drinks the vampire’s blood, and the vampire retains *all* control over the tie. This kind of tie can be made even stronger if the vampire also drinks the human’s blood.

But there seems to be another kind of tie, one where the vampire gives blood in order to protect the human and, therefore, seems to forfeit his or her control. And then, there’s another kind where the human and the vampire exchange blood; this one is called a bond.”

“Both Bill and Eric have had my blood too,” Sookie said musingly. “Does that mean I have this bond thing with them both?”

“That’s not enough to make this different kind of magic,” Jesus said shaking his head. The exchange has to be a true exchange—with the blood swap happening within a few moments. And the vampire blood must be given with the *intent* on the vampire’s part to create a stronger bond with the human. This way, humans could never force such a bond.”

Sookie nodded, remembering when Eric and she had exchanged blood in his cubby. It had been different from anything she'd ever done with Bill, and the surreal experience they had following the exchange seemed to indicate that something major had happened to them. After all, they'd both basically experienced the same kind of high.

She'd asked *her* Eric about it after they'd both "sobered" up, but since he had lost his memories, he didn't know if it was common for vampires to experience a 'high' like that every time. She made a mental note to ask him again the next time they talked now that he was the old Eric again.

"How is a bond different from a tie? I mean, are there different effects?" she asked.

Jesus answered, "This is where the book got really sketchy. There was no concrete information on that. It just said that the human seems to have some kind of influence over the vampire too if there's a bond rather than a tie, but again, vampires are very secretive about anything that their blood can do.

Sookie nodded and exhaled. "Did you find out anything to help Lafayette? Something that could get rid of the magic—the tie to Eric?"

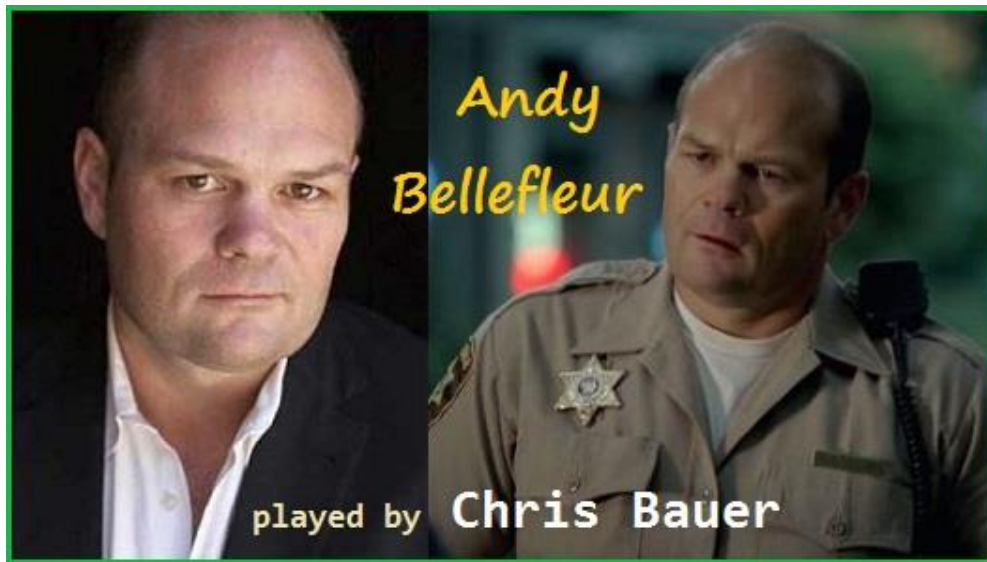
Jesus nodded slowly, looking at Lafayette through the corner of his eye.

Just then, Sookie heard a car come up Lafayette's drive. It was Jason's cruiser. She glanced at her watch, which said only 12:22 p.m.

"Hey," she said to Jason as he got out of his car, "I thought you said you'd be here after 6:00 p.m."

"Well," Jason said, "Andy is all gung-ho today, and he sent me home early when I told him that I hadn't gotten any sleep last night, so here I am. He also gave me tomorrow off. I

don't know what's up with him, but I'm so tired, I took him up on his offer before he could change his mind!"



"Then you's can get toasty with us!" Lafayette enthused.

"And . . ." Jason added, reaching into the back seat of his car, "I brought some chicken."
He grabbed a couple of buckets from the back seat.

"Thank gosh!" Sookie exclaimed suddenly feeling very hungry and knowing that she needed to add something to her stomach before she got too drunk on Jesus's fantastic "brew," especially if she'd be doing some marathon drinking later that day. She giggled a bit to herself as Jason joined them on the porch and then greedily grabbed a drumstick from one of the buckets as Jesus and Lafayette began picking through the other one.

"What all's been goin' on?" Jason asked as he too grabbed a piece of chicken and fell into a chair. He took off his gun belt and laid it on the table.

"We's decompressing from all that witch shit," Lafayette answered. "Speaking of which, you's *both* need a full glass of some decompressing liquid." He reached for the pitcher and refilled Sookie's glass as Jesus got up to bring a new glass from the kitchen for Jason.

After they all had settled in again and had eaten a few pieces of chicken in relative silence, Sookie turned to Jason. “Jesus was telling me about some things he learned about vampire blood. Apparently, when you drank Jessica’s blood, a kind of magical tie was created between you two. From what Jesus has been saying, your dreams about Jessica—since she gave you her blood—are pretty normal, and since you were both attracted to her and also felt guilty about that attraction because of Hoyt, that kinda explains why you’re dreaming what you are.” Sookie patted Jason’s hand.

She continued hopefully, “And Jesus was about to tell me what he learned about making the blood magic go away or at least not seem so strong—right?” Both Sookie and Jason turned to Jesus, very interested in what he was going to say.

“Yeah,” Jesus said, “but it’s not so simple. There’s a way to do it, but we thought it might be worse than just waiting it out.”

“Why’s that?” Sookie and Jason asked at the same time.

“Well, first, it’s real painful for the person getting it done. The spell isn’t that hard to do, but the magic literally burns the blood out of the human, and this has actually been known to kill the human at times. And then there is the fact that the vampire will be able to feel the magic tie dissolve too, and we didn’t want to risk Eric becoming angry at Laf, and Laf and I didn’t wanna have to run or go into hiding.” Jesus paused. “After a while, we didn’t think Eric would get angry, but since the dreams no longer contained him much anyway, the risk just seemed unnecessary.”

Lafayette nodded, “And—truth be told—after Eric came over once you went missin’, I wasn’t really that scared of him anymore.”

Jesus continued, “And then the dreams became less and less frequent. We didn’t think it would be worth *any* danger then.”

Sookie nodded and took a long drink of her alcohol.

“I wanna do it!” Jason yelled out abruptly.

Jesus and Lafayette both looked at him surprised. Lafayette asked, “Do what?”

“Well,” Jason said, “I wanna do that break the magic vampire tie thing. If I am only into Jess because of that, I need to get rid of it. Hoyt is too important to me, and if it’s her blood makin’ all this happen, then maybe he’ll see that it’s not my fault that I—well—had sex with her.”

“But Jason,” Jesus said with concern, “it’s dangerous.”

“Me too,” piped in Sookie. “I want it too!”

Now all three men turned their attention to her. Lafayette said, “Hell no, girl! It’s too dangerous. You could die. That ain’t worth it!”

Sookie looked at each of the men sitting with her in turn, finally landing her eyes on Jesus. “Listen—I understand the risks here. But since I have been involved with vampires, I have been beaten up more than once, nearly drained—again—more than once, and nearly killed lots of times. I have two vampires that want me to be theirs in a kind of property way that I don’t even understand, and worst of all, I think I love both of them, but I cannot be sure if I really love them or if I just feel all this because of some kind of chemical thing about their blood. I get that their blood cannot exactly make me have feelings, but it sure as hell took everything I felt for them and knocked it out of whack. If I’m just attracted to them—if the love I feel isn’t real—I *have* to know before I really do get killed.”

She continued, almost ranting by this time even as tears began to gather in the corners of her eyes, “I was attacked by the Rattrays only one day after I met Bill”

“What?” Jason interrupted.

“Let me finish!” Sookie said, tears now rolling freely down her face. “I was attacked because Bill wanted to feed me his blood. He had been ordered by the vampire queen of Louisiana at that time to find out if I really was a telepath, and then he was eventually supposed to get me under control and bring me to her.”

“I’m gonna kill that bastard,” Jason said, interrupting again and jumping from his seat.

“Sit down!” Sookie exclaimed. “I said to let me finish!”

Jason grunted and retook his seat.

Sookie wiped her eyes and kept going, “Bill says that he fell in love with me after that and that he was tryin’ to find a way to keep me safe, and I think I believe him, but I don’t know if that’s just his blood making me think that or if that’s what I really think. I do know that both he and Eric have tried to glamour me in the past, and when they couldn’t do that, they both found ways to trick me into drinking their blood. I just don’t know what’s real, and I really need to know so that I can either move on with my life away from them or figure out which one of them I really love because I’m not the kind of person who is in love with two men at once or who dreams about threesomes!”

After this big finish, all three men were looking, mouths gaped, at Sookie, who was now weeping. She continued speaking between sobs, “And I’m even more screwed up than that. The fucking ‘extra libido part’ . . .” Sookie made air quotes around the words that she remembered Bill saying, “. . . has made me think I’m attracted to Alcide too, but who knows if that’s even

real! *Three* men? I didn't even have *one* until I met Bill! And I'm tired of walking around horny all the damned time!"

At this, Jason rose again, this time because he was so uncomfortable.

Lafayette started to laugh, "Jeez, hooker, you *is* in a spot, ain't ya! Hell, if I was you's, I'd take some time to really hit all of those fine male specimens for a while. Maybe even more than one at a time. Then you's can make your informed decision."

Sookie looked up through her tears and then started to laugh hysterically along with her friend.

Jason's voice was serious as he interrupted their laughter, "Hey, don't be talkin' about my sister like that. And Sook, don't be talkin' about no three-way things around me!"

At this, Jesus joined Lafayette and Sookie, who had again broken into belly-aching laughter.

Jason stalked inside, causing the three to laugh even louder.

Finally, after a few minutes, they settled down again, Sookie's face returning to a serious expression. Jason rejoined them once the noise had stopped.

"I mean it, guys," Sookie said. "I want to—no I *need* to do this. I have to know."

"Me too," Jason said as both siblings looked at the couple in front of them.

"Could you two perform the spell?" Sookie asked, looking back and forth between Lafayette and Jesus.

"Yeah," Jesus nodded, suddenly looking a few years older. "But like I said, it could be dangerous." He looked directly at Sookie, "It would be especially difficult for you since you seem to have had a lot of their blood. And you have had it from more than one vampire."

"I know, but I *have* to do this," Sookie said, her voice pleading with him.

Jesus and Lafayette looked at each other, and then Jesus spoke, “Listen, Sook. I can see why you want this.” He looked at Jason then, “I can see why you both want this, but Sookie, you are already a bit drunk, and I want you both to take some time thinking this over.”

Lafayette nodded, “Listen bitches. I understand why you’d want to get yo’selves free of vamp blood—believe me, I gets it! But you’s needs to really fuckin’ thinks ‘bout this. According to the book that Jesus read the spell from, people have *died* before from this spell!”

Sookie looked at them with resolve in her brown eyes. “I understand that, but I need this.”

Jesus relented a bit, “Listen, if you still feel this way tomorrow, we’ll do it, but I’ll need the book from the Moon Goddess Emporium if we’re going to attempt this.”

Sookie took Jesus’s hand, “Thank you. Let’s go get the book now, and then you can have it overnight to study if you need.”

“And then tomorrow, we can get rid of some vamp blood!” Jason exclaimed.

“Fine,” Jesus said.

“All right, bitches,” Lafayette said. “If we’s goin’ to go to Shreveport, we needs to get before we drink more of this shit and while one of us can still drive.” He looked at Jason significantly as Sookie hiccupped. “I say we go get this motha fuckin’ book and then get back here and do some proper drinkin’ with this fine ass Don Julio tequila little miss thang brought.”

“Is that a good kind?” Sookie asked.

“Fifty bucks a shot at the bars in Shreveport!” Lafayette exclaimed.

“Shit,” Sookie laughed. “Stupid high-handed vampire,” she muttered.

“What?” Jason asked her.

“Nothing,” Sookie said. “It’s just Eric being Eric.”

Lafayette laughed, “We’ll pick up limes on the way home. This shit be too good for Margaritas.”

“Well, let’s get hoppin’,” Jason said. “We’ll go by my house too so I can grab some clothes. It’ll probably be better if I’m in uniform for our recon mission, but I should probably be out of uniform when we get shit-faced later.”

Everyone laughed as they piled into Jason’s police cruiser.

Chapter 05: We Could Begin Again

None of the four friends really spoke much once they were on the road to Shreveport.

Sookie spent the drive worried that Bill's men may have already completely cleaned out the Moon Goddess Emporium.

As he drove, Jason went back and forth between wanting his attraction to Jessica to be real and wanting to do whatever was possible to keep his friendship with Hoyt.

Jesus and Lafayette spoke in hushed tones from the back seat.

Sookie looked back at the couple on occasion and saw that they were holding hands. She was so happy for Lafayette that he had found such a good partner, one who obviously loved him for who he was. She couldn't help but wonder *why* Bill and Eric loved her.

Sookie's insecure part wondered if their love for her was simply the effect of the taste of her blood—in other words, just something chemical, and not the good kind of “chemistry” her Gran told her that she and Grandpa Earl had shared.

Sookie smiled when she remembered the “sex talk” Gran had had with her when she was fourteen. Gran had looked Sookie in the eye and said, “You already probably know more than I do about sex, just from having to look into people's heads, so unless you have any questions, we're just going to skip that part. Do you have any questions?”

Sookie had shaken her head, “No.”

“Good!” Gran had said. “Anyway, the actual process of physical joinin' is pretty much common sense. ‘Pole into hole—repeat’.”

“Gran!” Sookie had cried out, horrified to hear her Gran saying that kind of thing.

Gran had just smiled indulgently. “So we don’t need to talk about the sex act. You’re a smart girl, and you have seen in people’s heads what happens if they get pregnant when they don’t want to or if they end up with some kind of disease, right?”

Sookie had cringed and nodded.

“Good!” Gran had said again. “I wanna talk about somethin’ you might not hear much of from people’s head—what *real* love truly means. Sure, it’s important to have chemistry with someone; your pheromones need to attract his and vice versa.” Gran had stopped there. “You do prefer boys, right, Sookie? It’s okay if you like girls better, but I’ve picked up that you prefer boys from all the posters on your walls. Am I right?”

Sookie had blushed and nodded.

Gran had continued, “So like I said, you need to be attracted to him and vice versa. And chemistry will make your sex much better; trust me on that one, child.”

“Gran!” Sookie had said, horrified again.

“Oh honey, don’t fret,” Gran had said. “Like I was saying, chemistry is wonderful, but it often fades over time. No—true love, or what I like to think of as *lasting* chemistry, percolates over a long time. If anything, the feelings and attraction you had at the start get greater and greater. Sure, everything stays real excitin’, but things get secure too; your love gets all nice and shored up, just like you shore up a house before a hurricane. ‘Cause Sookie, there are hurricanes in life that’ll come right outta nowhere, and without that shorin’,” Gran had paused here, obviously a little choked up, “you’ll lose that love for good.”

Gran had patted Sookie’s cheek. “I had a true love with your Grandpa Earl, you know. That man made me wanna break out in song every time he touched me—or was even just in the same room with me.”

Sookie had been torn between being uncomfortable at the insinuation that her grandparents had had a lot of sex and happy that her Gran had had a great love like that. As an adult looking back, Sookie was just happy for Gran.

Gran had continued. It had been the only time she'd really ever discussed Grandpa Earl's disappearance with her granddaughter. "Some people 'round here try to tell me that your Grandpa Earl died or was murdered, but I never believed them 'cause that chemistry that drew us together and then kept us that way for so long would have told me if he were gone for good. And then others wanted me to believe that he'd run off with someone else." She had scoffed at this notion. "When two people seem to have magnets in their bodies meant just for one other person like your Grandpa Earl and I do, well it's not even possible to think about someone else. Maxine Fortenberry tried to get me to start dating about fifteen years ago, but I told her that I wasn't about to settle for somethin' mediocre when my sweetheart was still out there. And I never have."

Sookie had smiled at her Gran and taken her hand.

"So, Sookie, don't you ever let yourself settle for something that is less than what you deserve. And you deserve that *big* kind of love that'll tuck you in every night nice and warm, whether the person you love is in the room with you or whether you haven't seen him in more than twenty years."

At this, Gran had risen and gone to her room. From her thoughts the rest of the night, Sookie had known that her matriarch had been remembering her husband. Shamelessly, Sookie had indulged in listening to those thoughts for a while, warmed by the love that the two had shared. But when her Gran's thoughts had started to turn toward the R-rated, Sookie had turned

on her then fledgling shields full blast and had gone for a nice, long walk, despite the fact that it'd been only 40 degrees that day.

Sookie smiled at her memory. She wondered if Bill or Eric might be her “true love,” someone that she could have that “big kind of love” with. She wasn't sure because any kind of chemistry that might have been real between her and either of them—that might have been the kind that would percolate and not just disappear—was tinged by the literal chemical make-up of her own blood. Sookie also believed both from her Gran's story and from her own instincts that if she were truly in love, she wouldn't love someone else too—unless, of course, she was being fooled by the influence of the vampire blood itself—which was again something merely chemical.

Not real “chemistry.”

Sookie shook her head and made the only comparison she could think of. Her own favorite food was dark chocolate, specifically Swiss dark chocolate. Whenever she got it, she luxuriated in its creaminess and the way its flavor seemed to touch every part of her tongue all at the same time, its bitterness and sweetness coming together in the perfect balance. She loved it! But in the end, it was just food, no matter how she looked at it. Was she Bill's dark chocolate? Was she Eric's?

She had sexual chemistry with both vampires. Bill had been her first sexual partner, and she'd been pretty insatiable after waiting for so many years for sex, or maybe that was just her heightened libido affecting her—again, something caused by a kind of false chemistry placed into her blood by Bill's own blood. And sex with Eric had been—well, Sookie really didn't have a word that did it justice. So sexual chemistry was definitely there too. Sookie just wondered if

the few drops of blood she'd had from Eric in Dallas—not to mention what she'd later had from him in the cubby—had influenced that experience as well.

Either way, how could she possibly have something like her Gran had had if she doubted the very foundation of her attraction and love? And how could she possibly feel that way about two men at once? She knew the answers to both of those questions: she couldn't. She needed the spell to be done.

Perhaps severing the blood magic between them would give each of her vampire suitors more clarity too. They both seemed to think that her fairy blood made her delicious, and she knew that with vampires, things were always related to blood. Did they love her, or did they simply love her taste? Without the ties between them, they might be able to see the difference too. And then—at the very least—they *could* be honest with her about why they wanted her. Whether they *chose* to be honest or not was another story.

Hell, she'd rather bottle her blood and give it to them as treats—just like dark chocolate was for her—than be stuck in a relationship where she was not loved for herself. What scared her the most was that she might become stuck—trapped— without even knowing it due to the vampire blood being able to influence her emotions; to her that was hardly better than when Eric had been like a zombie under Marnie/Antonia's spell.

Bill had tasted her *before* he had given her his own blood, of that she was certain. He had been licking her wounds after the Rattrays beat her up. She'd caught him doing this when she had regained consciousness right before he opened his wrist for her to drink from.

Eric, on the other hand, had *not* drunk from her before giving her his blood. She wondered if any of this made a difference, but she felt certain that if she could understand the

timeline of events in her life for the last six months—actually a year and a half—she might figure things out. However, she wanted all of this to happen with a “blood-free” head.

Finally, Jason pulled the cruiser up to the Moon Goddess. There seemed to be a moving crew outside, and the four friends looked at each other warily.

“Stay here. Let me handle this,” Jason drawled in his “deputy” voice.

He got out of the car, straightened himself up to his full height, took on the swagger of his deputy position, and strutted toward the obvious leader of the crew.

“What the hell are y’all doin’?” he asked the man, who had just loaded a box into a large white van.

Upon seeing Jason’s uniform, the man looked at him with a bit of concern.

“We had an order placed this morning to move this stuff out today,” the man said, fumbling with some paperwork in his pocket.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” Jason returned. “This here is the site of a police investigation, and you’ll need to put those boxes back in there and come back when you have been authorized.”

The man looked around nervously before noticing that Jason’s cruiser said Bon Temps and not Shreveport. “What does a police officer from Bon Temps want here? This ain’t even your jurisdiction,” the man challenged.

Sookie decided it was time to try to listen into the man’s thoughts to see if she could help her brother. From them, she heard that the man had twenty unpaid parking tickets, that there was a bench warrant out for him, and that one of his workers inside was an illegal alien.

“Jase,” Sookie said, as she got out of the car.

“Just one sec.,” Jason said to the man before adding forcefully, “and don’t move anything else!”

Sookie whispered to her brother what she had “heard,” and he went back to the cruiser, pretending to look something up and to make a radio call.

When he returned to the man’s side, he said in an authoritative but conciliatory voice, “Listen, man. I know that you are only tryin’ to do your job here. I’m here because of a multi-jurisdiction investigation of drugs bein’ sold out of this place.”

Sookie noted that the man’s thoughts betrayed his belief that some of the contents of the business had seemed very odd to him, but he had dismissed it as “fruity new-aged shit.”

Jason continued, “Also, I have run your plates, and it seems there are parking violations outstanding on this vehicle.”

Sookie heard the man trying to remember if any of his parking tickets had been gotten while he was driving this work van. He didn’t think so, but he also didn’t want to take any chances.

“I think that I can just overlook those things if your men put the contents of the building back into place. We’ll take your number and let you know when the investigation is over if you still need to move the items later,” Jason said in a folksy tone.

The man, whom Sookie had found out was named Hank, looked Jason up and down before deciding to do as he asked. Thankfully, Jesus and Lafayette had stayed in the car, so the man wasn’t suspicious about why Jason was accompanied by three people in street clothes. Lafayette’s flamboyant leopard print pants and purple shirt may have caused Hank more than a momentary doubt about their intentions.

Within ten minutes, the moving crew of four had left after unloading the few boxes that had already been put into the two vans that they'd been using.

Jesus quickly began scanning the bookcases, which hadn't yet been packed up, looking for the book with the blood-tie severing spell. Finding it, he read the spell so that he could collect the ingredients he would need. It was actually a relatively simple spell, and soon, Sookie, Jason, and Lafayette were opening boxes as Jesus collected the things he needed. Sookie then carefully packed up the materials into an unused box, and the four were on their way. It was just after 3:30 p.m., about three hours until sunset.

Sookie looked over her shoulder at Jesus, who seemed to be reading *her* mind for a change. "It's too late to try it today, anyway," he said. "We'll want them asleep when we do it."

Sookie nodded and then looked back at the road in front of them.

She wondered what nightfall would bring. Would either or both of "her" vampires seek her out? At that moment, she was glad that she was staying at Lafayette's where invitations could be given and rescinded.

Part of her wanted to see them more than anything else. Bill—her first love, her first everything—was back in her life. Sure he'd mislead her about his initial intentions, but Sookie felt that they were past that now; she felt like she could forgive him—*had* forgiven him. Even thinking about him made her warm.

And if Bill warmed her, the thought of Eric set her body aflame. But that was *her* Eric. She was so confused about who the real him was now that she just needed some time by herself.

She hoped that, for once, both vampires would understand her need to have some "me" time.

After making a quick stop at the grocery store for limes and more food for the evening, Jason stopped at his house for his change of clothes.

Once back at Lafayette and Jesus's home, the four talked and laughed about everything that could be imagined—everything except blood magic and witches' spells, that is.

As shot after shot of expensive tequila was shared between them, they all relaxed and enjoyed the evening. They giggled as they all tallied up how many fifty dollar shots they were putting away. Suffice it to say, they lost count many times and squabbled about the final tally.

And when the tequila was gone, they cracked open the bottle of gin that Lafayette said was worth at least \$100 and made martinis.

“Fucking high-handed vampire,” Sookie thought to herself in her now inebriated state, as she chewed on an olive flavored with the most delicious gin she'd ever tasted. She glanced at the clock above Lafayette's television. It read 5:58 p.m. She smiled a little smile as she felt a jolt of energy within her, a jolt that seemed to warm her from the inside out like one of Eric's smiles. She dismissed that thought immediately and ate another olive, certain that her alcohol buzz had caused the other “buzz” in her body as well.

Chapter 06: The North Star

Eric woke up at 5:58 p.m., precisely 28 minutes before sunset. His advanced age had been allowing him to awaken a bit before sunset for a few hundred years now, but he had been feeling more alert well before sunset on the last few evenings, despite the fact that he'd spent one of those evenings tied up in silver and one of them under a witch's curse. This evening, as he'd awoken, he felt like he could immediately take on an army by himself.

It didn't escape the notice of the thousand-year-old vampire that this phenomenon had begun after he'd drunk Sookie's blood again—more specifically, after they'd completed the first step of a blood bond.

Eric got up and walked to the mini-fridge in the corner and grabbed a bottle of blood before putting it into the small microwave on top of the fridge. While he sat down on his bed and waited for the blood to heat, he couldn't help but to reach out to their fledgling bond and find Sookie. It had taken everything in him to wait the two minutes and fourteen seconds since he'd first woken up to reach out to her.

He also couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped his lips as he found her well. She was happy and clearly enjoying herself. Eric ignored the ding of the microwave as he basked in the feeling coming from her and into him. He wanted nothing more than to be with her in that moment. He'd never felt pulled so strongly to another being before, not even Pam.

Not even Godric.

Eric shook himself out of his thoughts and took the artificial blood from the microwave. After a year of drinking it almost exclusively, it had become almost tolerable to him, at least until he'd tasted Sookie again.

Eric downed the drink quickly while it was still warm. He still had twenty three minutes until sunset, so he was stuck in his cubby for the time being. The particular safe house that he had spent the night in, though quite secure and one of his most secret residences, had no other light-tight spaces than the room he was in. He glanced at the picture on his nightstand and sighed unnecessarily again, even as he reached for the bond a second time. She was still happy; he found that he was jealous that he was not the one currently causing that emotion in her.

He put these thoughts aside and texted Pam, telling her to meet him at Fangtasia after first dark. He knew that he would need to make up with his child as soon as possible, but he didn't want her to think that she could ever question his actions toward Sookie, his beloved one.

Eric thought about how he had felt when Sookie had returned after being in what he assumed must have been the fairy realm for more than a year. He'd felt like a part of himself had returned with her.

"Of course, I had to behave like a dick to her right after she got back," Eric berated himself out loud, with only the walls to hear him. He shook his head as he scolded himself. He *had* asked her to be his, just as he'd planned to do for months and months, but the way he'd gone about it had been all wrong. "I blame your beautiful fucking body, you know," he said glancing over at the picture. "You distracted me! How could I be expected to behave rationally after seeing you like that? And Bill's being there even before me that first night didn't fucking help matters either!" Eric felt like punching a hole into the wall of his sleeping space.

"You're a fucking thousand-year-old vampire," Eric once again spoke out loud to himself. "Why can't you learn to talk to your fucking woman right?"

Eric sighed and lay back onto the bed. He needed to begin to resign himself to the fact that Sookie was not really *his* woman, no matter how much he wished it were otherwise. She

was her own woman first—a fact that he could not only accept but also embrace. He actually quite loved her independence.

But she'd told him that she loved Bill too, even as he'd told her of his love for her. He'd never told anyone that he loved them like that—not ever. He'd never felt it before her. A thousand years of waiting, and he loved a woman who loved another. If it weren't so fucking ironic, it would have been pathetic.

Still, as he felt the bond he'd started with Sookie warm his cold, dead heart, he could not regret a single moment he'd been with her. “Not fucking one,” he added out loud. The memories of the last several days were especially precious to him even though he'd not been “himself” when he'd first experienced them. But now he remembered all of their moments together; he'd simply been a more open and relaxed version of himself when he'd experienced them.

It was the simplest moments of those days that he now treasured most. It was the sensation he'd felt while being tickled by her, a sensation he'd not experienced in over a thousand years. It was the feel of warm, sun-lit water in his hands as he looked at the light in her hair. It was having someone to talk to about his vision of Godric. It was the way *she* seemed to hold *him* and not the other way around. It was the way her eyes looked when she made the decision to take his blood when they were in the cubby. It was all these things plus the thousand other redemptive moments he'd spent with her that both warmed him and caused his dead heart to want to break inside his dead body.

She was in love with *both* Bill and himself. Eric's logical mind could hardly fathom loving one person, and two at the same time was quite beyond him. Was it Bill's blood? Bill *had* once again saved her life when he himself was not there to do it.

Eric berated himself for giving into bloodlust during the fight with the witches and for leaving the side of his bonded.

“My bonded,” he said quietly to himself. In a thousand years, he’d never even considered forming a blood bond with another. But as he sat on his bed, he couldn’t find it within himself to regret—in even the slightest way—the bond that the *other* Eric had started. He’d entered into it without his memories, but that didn’t matter to him. The feelings that drew him to her were the same whether he was his whole self or just the shell that the memory loss had left behind. Either way, for him, she was like the North Star that his people had always navigated toward on their way home.

His only consolation was that he knew his own blood could not have caused her love for him. The few drops she’d had of his blood in Dallas had given them a much stronger and longer-lasting tie than he’d thought possible for such a small amount. However, he’d never been able to use the magic in his blood to influence her in any way; God knows, he’d wanted to try. And when she’d chosen to take his blood in the cubby—the exchange that had transformed their tie into a bond—he was quite sure that she already loved him, at least the *him* that had no memories and that acted nothing like he normally did.

He lay back and groaned in frustration. So if she still felt love for him, even now that he was back to being himself—and that was a very big “if”—then at least that love was coming all from her.

He could not be certain about her love for Bill; that love had seemed to come back only after Bill had made the tie between them stronger with the new infusion of his blood. Eric almost shuddered at the amount of blood Bill must have given Sookie over the year and a half they’d known one another—which was actually only six months of real contact. From what he

could gather, the attack by the Rattrays had been a brutal one, and she'd needed a lot of Bill's blood to survive it. Since he'd found out about it, he'd wanted to end Bill's undead life for manipulating Sookie like that. And then he'd seen how much blood Bill had given Sookie after the Maenad attack, and it was more than Bill had needed to.

From Lafayette, he'd learned about the attack by Bill on Sookie after they escaped from Russell's mansion; Bill, in a bloodlust, had almost drained her, so he must have given her a lot of blood then too. Eric's fists tightened and his wall did receive a hard punch as he thought about what he'd like to do to Bill for that episode.

Moreover, he'd seen the surveillance tapes after he and Russell had fed from Sookie. He had taken as little blood as he could, but Russell was a greedy bastard. Though Sookie had fainted, she would have lived; he had made sure of that before he even walked out the door of Fangtasia that morning. Her pulse had been steady, and her blood was already replenishing itself. But Bill had given her his blood then too—again more than he needed to. And, of course, there was the latest incident. She'd been shot because of Eric's own lack of control. He gave himself no leniency because of his amnesia either.

“Your fucking instincts should have kicked in and kept you next to your bonded one!” he criticized himself. “And the result was that Compton could once again be using his blood to try to control the woman you love!” The wall received a second punch at that thought.

Eric also knew there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. If he tried to tell Sookie about his theory, she would only think that he was trying to influence and manipulate her too.

Then, of course, there was the worst-case scenario in his view. What if Sookie's love for Bill had originated only from her own feelings? What if it was *never* her blood tie to Bill that

had created that love? What if she'd realized that she loved Bill again—and loved Bill more than she loved him—when she saw him ready to stake Bill at the Festival of Tolerance?

Eric sighed. He wanted nothing more than to go to Sookie as soon as the sun dropped, now in 4 minutes, but he had determined to let her make the first move, no matter how much that went against his nature—both as vampire and as Viking.

And as soon as he did see her, he knew that he'd have to tell her about the bond and how it was different from a normal blood tie.

He worried that she would hate him for it, blame him for not telling her the implications before he asked her to take his blood. Even if she did not blame him due to the amnesia, she might be able to use her side of the bond to tell that he was happy about the bond, and she might resent him for that.

With Sookie, he knew that so many things could go wrong, but he was also certain that he didn't deserve her. And in a thousand years, he'd always thought that he'd deserved the very best of everything. But memories or not, Eric had been truthful when he'd told Sookie that he couldn't bear it if he snuffed out the light in her. What if being with him would do just that?

Therefore, for the first time in a thousand years, he would not just take what he wanted. It had to be *her* choice. He had made his desire for her clearly known. He had told her that he loved her. And now, he would have to wait to see if she wanted him too. And if he really did love her as he professed, he would have to accept it if she chose Bill—even if he suspected that Bill's motives in wanting her had less to do with love and more to do with Sookie's blood.

At sunset, Eric climbed the steps of his resting place—something that he'd probably always think of as a cubby now since he'd heard Sookie use the term for the one at her

house—and took a quick shower. He arrived at Fangtasia an hour before opening, but the line was already quite long, and everyone was in costume. Eric then remembered—at midnight it would be October 31, the day humans called Halloween.

He smiled at the oddity of the human holiday but was thankful for the tie they'd made between it and vampires. That meant that both tonight and tomorrow evening would be very profitable, even more so because both nights were weekend nights. Eric's smile grew a bit wider. He'd always loved a good business.

Eric entered the back door of his club for the first time in more than a week. As he walked into his office, he was struck by two things: first, the neatness of his desk and second, the contriteness of his child, who was on her knees and bowing before him as soon as he walked in the door.

From her appearance, Eric could tell that she hadn't changed clothing from the night before. She also had red tear streaks on her cheeks. He'd have to do some quick damage control.

“Pamela,” he said in a strong voice. “Rise immediately.”





She did, her blue eyes looking into his as if begging for forgiveness.

Eric spoke. “You will remember your place from now on, and you *will* obey me. I know you felt that what you were doing was right, but I cannot have you risk my bonded one.”

“Bonded one?” Pam whispered.

“Yes, Pamela. Sookie and I began a bond while I was staying with her.”

“But how many exchanges? You can still break it, right? You weren’t even ‘you’ when you did it! Surely, she will agree to break it!”

“Pamela!” Eric’s voice boomed. “Listen carefully, and remember what I’m about to tell you. I do not want to break the bond with Sookie. I *want* it. I will consider breaking it only at her behest. You are to do nothing to upset her or to try to influence her regarding the bond—is that understood?”

Pam nodded before Eric added coldly. “And you will never—never—disobey me. If you do so again, I will expel you from my sight. Is *that* understood?”

“Yes, master,” Pam said quietly.

Eric nodded to his child. To her credit, she had not begged for forgiveness or tried to justify her actions.

He touched her cheek lightly and spoke to her in a softer tone. “Pamela, I know that you do not care for Sookie, or any human for that matter, but I care for her—I love her—and would not have her endangered by anyone. If you cannot learn to accept that, you will have to go out on your own.”

“I can learn,” Pam said with certainty.

“Very well,” he said. “Now go home and get yourself cleaned up and be back here as soon as you can. This human holiday tends to be a bit rowdy, and I will need you here.”

Pam brightened. “Yes master,” she said as she zipped through the door.

Eric also brightened. He did not like fighting with his child. He enjoyed her presence and dry humor too much to want to be separated from her for any length of time.

He looked at the Fangtasia clock and noticed that it was almost 8:00 p.m., almost opening time. He once again talked himself out of going to Sookie.

Instead, he dived into the neat pile of paperwork that had been building up in his absence. On top of the pile was the deed of sale for Sookie’s house that he’d initiated the night of her return, right after he’d done that insipid television spot for Nan Flanagan. He quickly signed it and faxed it to his attorney, whom he instructed to file the paperwork to complete the sale immediately, preferably the next day, despite the fact that it was Saturday.

Almost immediately, his attorney emailed back to say that he normally wouldn’t be able to file until Monday, but he had a friend willing to do it right away and back-date the paperwork so that the sale would officially take place as of earlier that afternoon.

Eric gave the okay for that, and his lawyer replied that he’d have a copy of the official deed of sale messengered to him as soon as it was notarized; the sale would be official as soon as Sookie signed that paperwork.

He had mixed feelings about returning Sookie's home to her. He'd always intended to do it, but now that he had his memories back, he was unsure if he'd even be invited back inside.

Eric sat down to begin his other work but stopped short as he checked the bond; Sookie was frustrated about something—very frustrated. He fought the urge to go to her immediately and then fought the urge to call. Instead he sent a text. There was immediate anger from her, followed by calm. Then there was a one-word response to him, "Thanks."

He smiled, not so much because of the text he'd received but because of the fact that his words to her had somehow calmed her. He resolved to keep the promise he'd just made to her, but he also knew that she needed to know about the bond immediately; otherwise, she'd hate him for keeping secrets from her.

He once again put aside his work and wrote her a short letter, which he'd have Bobby deliver to her the next day.

Finally, after completing that task, he began his paperwork.

Chapter 07: To Know Her

Sookie was what one would definitely call shit-faced drunk, and she was having a great time with Jason and “the boys”—the term that she’d taken to calling Lafayette and Jesus in her current state of inebriation. She found that the term was funnier with each use too. In fact, everything was quite funny at that point, and Sookie had long since given up trying to block out the thoughts of the others given her state. Luckily for her, the drunken thoughts of Jesus, Jason, and Lafayette were generally even more funny to her than the words they spoke.

And the others laughed right along when she answered a thought or made a seemingly random comment out of thin air as she responded to one of their thoughts. In fact, it became a kind of game to guess who Sookie was responding to. So far, Jesus was the best at bluffing when it’d actually been his thought. But Lafayette was definitely the funniest when he tried to use his own special kind of logic—actually the drunk version of that logic—to figure out the thinker. And they’d all fallen into hysterics when they realized that Jason’s thoughts were always about one of two things: sex or sex with Jessica. They really had doubled over when Jason actually guessed that one of his own thoughts was coming from Lafayette’s mind even after Sookie had told him it was his own.

More than half way through the gin now, the four sat around the coffee table on the living room floor and were taking turns making each other laugh with the kind of stories only drunk people would probably find funny. Sookie had regaled them with how she’d used her light to send the queen of the fairies to her ass. She’d made Jason help her demonstrate the whole thing, taking on the role of the bitch queen herself as Jason mimed shooting her with his hands.

She'd also laughed all the way through telling them how Eric had killed her fairy godmother, and every time the words "fairy godmother" were spoken, all four of them doubled over in frenzied laughing.

Normally, of course, Sookie wouldn't laugh about almost being killed or someone else dying, but after the rest of the 'brew', several tequila shots, and now martinis, the only logical reaction had seemed to be laughter.

After Sookie told the others that fairies had pointed ears, everyone had to examine both her ears and Jason's, and then the four almost wet their pants with laughter as it was discovered that Jason did indeed have slightly pointy ears. When he tried to do the Spock hand motion for "live long and prosper," but couldn't remember it because of his drunkenness, Sookie did have to run to the bathroom to avoid wetting herself.

At about 8:15, Sookie's phone rang, and she stumbled over her own feet to answer it, causing Jason and the boys to break into a new fit of laughter.

"Hooker, you's can't even walk no more!" Lafayette laughed, tears gathering in his eyes.

"Shut the F up!" Sookie cried as she tried to right herself and find her phone with some exaggerated dignity. When she finally pulled her phone from her purse, she tried to take on a serious demeanor. She signaled for the others to hush, but everyone thought that Sookie's attempt to pretend to be sober was hilarious, and they laughed even harder.

She giggled herself as she answered without checking the caller I.D. "Hello?"

"Sookie," Bill's voice came on the other end of the phone.

"Oh, hey Bill," Sookie hiccupped.

"You are not at home, darling," Bill drawled. "Are you all right?"

“I’m fine Bill,” Sookie said rolling her eyes in the direction of the boys, “just hanging out with friends tonight. Listen, I’ll call you soon okay?” she went to hang up.

“Sookie, wait,” Bill’s voice implored. “I was hoping that we could talk this evening, and I would like to make sure myself that you are fine.”

Sookie sighed; she was frustrated that her lovely drunken high was being disturbed. She was even more frustrated that the problems she’d successfully been drinking into oblivion for the last several hours had returned to the front of her brain, causing her to have an immediate headache. “Listen Bill, I appreciate your checking on me and all, but I’m really just fine. I’m hanging out with my brother, Lafayette and Jesus.”

“May I call on you when you return home later?” Bill asked.

“I’m spending the night here tonight, Bill,” Sookie responded. “Listen, we are just letting off some steam here. I’ll call you soon okay?” Unfortunately, at that moment, Sookie lost her balance again and tripped over her purse, which she’d left on the floor after pulling her phone out of it. This act of anti-gracefulness caused her to stub her toe on the coffee table. “Fuck!” she exclaimed. The others in the room, who’d been listening to her conversation, broke into fits of loud laughter.

“Sookie are you injured?” Bill asked on the other end of the phone, a mixture of frustration and concern clear in his voice.

“No,” Sookie said once she’d recovered enough to answer. “I just stubbed my toe. Listen, Bill, to tell you the truth, we are all getting drunk over here. I just really want time to think about things for a few days. I promise that I will call you soon.”

“Sookie,” Bill said forcefully. “I must insist that you allow me to see you.” His voice softened, “Just to see that you are okay. I promise I will only drop by for a few minutes, and then you may get back to your friends.”

Sookie sighed, even more frustrated now that both her head and her big toe hurt. “It’s really not necessary, Bill,” Sookie said.

“But *I* will feel better knowing you are uninjured, and from the sounds of those who are with you, none of them are capable of seeing to any injury you may have sustained in your fall. I ask for only a couple of minutes.”

Sookie sighed, the exasperation and frustration now clear in her voice, “Fine Bill. If you feel like you have to, then come over, but you can only stay for a couple of minutes, okay? And I didn’t fall; it’s a stubbed toe for goodness sakes! In fact, I wish that you’d just believe me when I say that I’m fine and let me call you in a couple of day, okay?”

Bill, not seeming to have really heard her, replied, “Thank you, Sookie. I shall see you in a few minutes, and I swear I will not stay long.”

Sookie hung up the phone and sank down onto the couch. “Fuck,” she said. “Bill’s coming over.” She did an impression of his voice, “. . . to access the severity of my stubbed toe.”

The others laughed hard at Sookie’s impression.

But Sookie was not laughing. “Why can’t he just listen to me for this once!”

Just then, she got the signal that a text had arrived. This time, she looked at the sender I.D. before opening the message; it was Eric! “Fuck, can’t they just give me some fucking peace for one fucking night!” she raged as she pushed the button to access the text much harder than

she needed to. Her anger and frustration were causing her to sober up for real now, and she didn't like it.

She looked down at her phone with a deep sigh. The message read, "You said last evening that you wished to have time and space to think on your own. Should that desire change or should you need me for anything, please call. I miss you and will be waiting if you wish to see me."

Sookie did a double take and then re-read Eric's text. How was it that he seemed to know what she needed when Bill didn't in this case?

She quickly texted back the only word that came to mind, "Thanks."

She suddenly felt even more sober as she thought back to her dream that morning. But then she pushed thoughts of Eric's sad eyes out of her mind for the moment. She said with resolve, "It looks like I have to get rid of a pushy vampire tonight, and I'm gonna need some liquid help doin' it." She picked up her drink and drained it quickly, refueling both her buzz and her liquid resolve.

Bill was at the door five minutes later. Jesus had suggested that she invite him in so that she wouldn't have to see him alone, but Sookie had brushed off the idea. She knew that Bill wouldn't hurt her. He was probably just trying to be gallant with his checking in on her, and once that was done, he'd be on his way. Still, even though she'd calmed down after her last drink and after Eric's thoughtful text, she was still annoyed at her first love.

Sookie answered the door and stepped outside, anxious to get the visit done with and get to the fresh drink Lafayette was mixing for her at that very moment.

“Hey Bill,” Sookie said, trying to keep her mind clear despite the drunken fog that had resettled around the edges of her brain.

“Sookie,” Bill smiled. “You are inebriated, it seems.”

“That’s what I said on the phone,” Sookie returned before slightly raising the toe she’d stubbed. In her state, he had to grab hold of Bill’s shoulder for balance. “See the toe’s just fine,” Sookie said, trying to hurry Bill along.

However, Bill took advantage of Sookie’s closeness and lack of balance to draw her to him, and her drunken body responded to him as he kissed her. After a few moments, Sookie got a bit of sense back and pulled away. “Bill, please, not now, okay?” she managed.

“Sookie,” Bill said, his voice edged with passion. “I have missed you, and I thought I had lost you to the witch last night.” He pulled her to him again, and this time, she noticed his erection against her leg as he tried to kiss her. When she turned her head to the side to avoid his lips, he merely kissed her neck.

Despite the pleasure her traitorous body was registering, she pulled out of his embrace yet again. “Bill!” she exclaimed. “You have seen that I’m okay, all right. Listen, I will tell you one more time that I need a little time to process everything that has happened, and I will call you when I’m ready to talk. I don’t even know what to think about my feelings for either you or Eric right now. Please respect that, and just go for now, okay?”

Bill tried one last time, “Sookie, I just wish to talk to you—to help you process those things you are talking about.”

“I get that, Bill,” Sookie tried. “I really do, but I need to do this on my own for now.”

Bill bowed slightly, finally relenting. “Very well. May I at least call you tomorrow to make sure you are well.”

“Fine,” Sookie said, just wanting Bill to go at that moment.

With a smile, Bill turned and left the porch, speeding to the limo that was awaiting his return.

Sookie sat down on the porch for a minute. She was so confused. On the one hand, her body had clearly wanted to respond to Bill’s touches, just like she had done in her dream. But she wanted some time to herself, and she was angry at Bill for not really respecting that. It was nice that he was concerned about her and wanted to help her, but the way he was trying to do it wasn’t actually what was best for her at that moment. She scolded herself for almost losing herself in his kiss just then.

And then, of course, there was Eric. She would have expected the Viking to be the pushy one, but he seemed to understand what she needed even before she told him. Or maybe he was just trying to manipulate her by seeming to understand.

Sookie’s head was swirling from her confusion and the liquor she’d ingested. She managed to get back inside the house, but as soon as she sat on the couch, she immediately passed out. Her last thought was that her life would be so much less complicated if she’d never had a drop vampire blood.

Chapter 08: Blood Will Tell

Bill was surprised by Sookie's resistance to his overtures that evening. He'd sensed her conflict, but he'd also sensed her arousal at his presence. He was certain she was feeling love for him again, and now that the old Eric was back, Bill was sure that her feelings for the sheriff would soon shift to what they'd been before.

Plus, he'd been sending her dreams for the last two days so that she would come to him again. The day before last, he'd been somewhat distracted by Nan and Eric's presence, but he'd managed to compel her to dream of him just the same.

His effort the previous morning had been particularly strong. He'd forced himself to stay up until he felt her go to sleep, and then he'd fed on a particularly strong male in his employ before focusing his energy to initiate his magical blood inside of her body. He'd been able to sustain the dream for quite a while too—until he'd felt her sexual release in her sleep. In fact, he had been certain that she would be waiting for him at his home when he rose that evening, but somehow she managed to resist his pull on her.

Bill was frustrated. He blamed Eric Northman and his one thousand year old blood for any delays he was facing, as he was certain that the Viking was also sending Sookie dreams to try to compel her. If he could have told Sookie about Eric's ability to cause dreams and try to manipulate her feelings without making her suspicious of the dreams he sent as well, he would have done it long ago. As it was, he would just have to bide his time. Now that the old Eric was back, Bill was certain that Sookie's infatuation—what humans called a rebound—would end soon, and he was already waiting to pick up their relationship when she realized they were meant to be together.

That was the one thing that Bill was certain of. He and his fairy were meant to be together.

He'd had to endure many years of Lorena and then Nan Flanagan and then Sophie-Anne and now Nan again. Sookie was his reward for all that. Bill loved Sookie too; he'd seen the light in her when they'd first met. He had wanted that light from the start, and then later, he was even willing to defy Sophie-Anne for her, and he'd accomplished killing the queen with Nan's help. Sookie's blood drew him to her like no other before her. He was very anxious for them to be back together soon so that he could once again taste her.

As the limo pulled up to his newly restored mansion, Bill got out of the car quickly and zoomed over to Sookie's old home, now owned by Northman. He had to admit that the improvements were nice, but he also secretly celebrated that Eric's ownership of the house would cause Sookie to come to him sooner, just to be away from Eric's control.

He was already putting into place a plan to get rid of Northman. It would take time so that he would face no repercussions for it, but it would be worth it in the end if he could take Eric completely out of the picture. He was becoming more and more of a nuisance, especially now that Sookie was back. Bill wanted absolutely no competition for *his* little fairy.

As Bill walked through the yard of Sookie's ancestral home, he wondered why the influence of his blood wasn't working on Sookie as it had in the past. His magic should have been especially potent in her at that moment since he'd given her blood—a lot of blood—just a few nights before.

Perhaps Eric's blood was somehow affecting the dreams he was sending. That was the only logical conclusion Bill could make. Plus, since Sookie had taken Eric's blood in Dallas, she'd been more resilient against his influence. She'd failed to answer 'yes' immediately to his

marriage proposal even though Bill was using his blood in her to try to compel her to accept at the time. Later, Eric had almost ruined everything by telling Sookie of Bill's relationship with the queen. That night, she had managed to rescind his invitation to her home despite his giving her blood that very morning.

Still, Bill felt that his current influence on Sookie should have been stronger than ever, despite Eric's blood. He sighed unnecessarily, wishing for the days before Eric had tricked Sookie into taking his blood, the days when his own blood and influence were able to work uninhibited.

In those days, he'd been able to influence her to tell the secret of her telepathy as soon as his blood was first in her. He'd been able to use his influence to get her to tell him other things he wished to know too. She'd been somewhat inhibited during their first sexual encounter, for instance, and he'd used a bit of blood to influence her to tell him why. It had turned out to be because of childhood abuse by her great-uncle. He'd also used the blood to send her dreams right after they'd met. The process of dream-sending was quite draining for a vampire as young as he was, but the dreams had been useful, getting Sookie to become more attracted to him and influencing her to overlook the concern that Malcolm and his nest mates had stirred in her. After the Maenad attack on Sookie, he had used a dream to re-attach her to him, especially useful given all the fighting they'd been doing about Jessica before that.

However, Bill was still confident in the potency of his influence over Sookie. Even after he'd almost killed her in the van, he'd been able to use his blood to both heal her and to draw her to him again after the Lorena episode. She had temporarily broken up with him at the hospital—probably another instance to be blamed on Eric's blood; however, that break-up had been short-lived, just like all their others. They'd made up quickly after that and had shared the

most satisfying sex they'd had to date—at least in Bill's eyes. Unfortunately, that had turned out to be the last sex they'd had. And the last blood he'd taken from her too. He was very anxious for more.

Cleverly, he'd managed to feed her after Russell and Eric had drunk from her, even though she could have survived without his blood, despite the protests he'd made to Pam. Still, Sookie had insisted upon saving Eric after that.

Bill seethed when thinking about Sookie running out to save the Viking from the sun; he cringed even more at the memory of Sookie feeding Eric her wonderful blood voluntarily after she'd brought him back inside.

“Fucking Eric Northman,” Bill said aloud. He wished that the witch would have just killed him, or better yet, that Sookie's light would have done the job. Instead, the only remaining sheriff in his state seemed to want to become a permanent fixture in his fairy's life, and Bill would not allow that.

Bill was certain that he was the best option for Sookie. As king, he could protect her. He would also love her; everything he had done to bring Sookie to him had been in her best interests, whether she could see that or not. And now, after more than a year of thinking she was dead, Bill rejoiced that she was back and within his grasp.

Bill shook his head. He'd used Sookie's blood in him to journey to the fairy realm again after her disappearance, but he had not felt her there. That is why he'd been certain she was dead. He still wondered if that was where she'd gone.

Regardless, he took her return as a sign that she would also come back to him. He needed only to be patient. He'd give her some of the time that she craved so much if he had to. After all, he was certain that Eric would do something stupid to alienate Sookie in the meantime.

Bill would just stay patient—in both his plans to kill Eric and his plans to begin afresh with Sookie.

The king smiled. Through the tie he'd made with Sookie, he could tell that she was sleeping, most likely passed out after her heavy drinking. He quickly zipped back to his home and ordered that two donors be brought to him, both blondes he'd selected because they favored Sookie in some way. He'd drink from them, and then, while at his full strength, he'd send Sookie another dream. He was, however, sorry that he couldn't see *what* she dreamed. He could only serve as a catalyst for her dreams, and, of course, his blood also amplified the feelings that he was certain she already had for him.

“It will be a good night, after all,” Bill assured himself. He would enjoy the blood of his two lovely donors. Then, he would cause Sookie to have another dream, which would undoubtedly pull her more to him. And finally, he would use the donors for his own pleasure. Certainly, their blood was a poor substitute for Sookie's, but their abilities in the bedroom would almost make up for it.

He climbed the stairs to his bedroom, anxious to get his evening started.

Chapter 09: A Light in the Dark

A/N: This chapter begins with another dream. Remember, *extended italics* = dream.

Sookie woke up in the dark; it was unimaginably dark. She was scared initially and then worked to calm herself and assess her surroundings. She felt around with her hands. She was sitting on the ground outside. She felt dirt and patches of brittle grass beneath her fingers.

She tried to blink a few times to get her eyes adjusted to the night around her, but she was unable to see anything no matter what she tried to do. It was like a dark curtain had been drawn all the way around her.

She'd been sitting, but now she began to crawl forward, feeling her way along. Ahead of her, she saw a faint object, something a bit lighter than the rest of her surroundings, and she began to crawl toward it. She reached out to put her hands on it. It was stone, cool and smooth to the touch. Her hands felt along the edges, and she realized that it was a gravestone. She brought her fingers to the front of the stone to try to feel engraved letters that might at least tell her whose grave it was, but she felt none, so she crawled to the other side of the stone to see if that was actually the front. It was. Her fingers hit the indentations on the gravestone. She found the first word and started to trace, closing her eyes to concentrate. She felt a "W" and then an "i." By the time she'd reached the second "l," she knew that she was sitting on William Compton's empty grave.

She shook in both fear and arousal as she remembered the last time she'd been there. She had thought that Bill was dead, burned along with Malcolm and his other creepy nest mates. Sookie shuttered as she remembered them.

She had come to the grave to mourn Bill, and he'd literally come out of the ground. They'd had sex right on this spot. Sookie remembered it as both passionate and a bit rough for her tastes. Bill had seemed out of control that night. He'd apologized after it was over, but she'd told him that she'd liked it. She shook her head, wondering why she'd told him that, why she hadn't said what she really felt to the man she loved at the time. In truth, she had liked it a bit—the joy of finding him alive and the intensity of his desire for her—but he'd also scared her that night. A particular look on his face right after his climax had been something she couldn't quite place, but it had disturbed her a bit. It was a look that seemed to crave possession of her very soul, a romantic notion in a way, but also a troubling one to Sookie. At the time, she'd chosen to disregard that look, thinking it was just a moment when his vampire nature was coming through. Now, thinking about that whole night again frightened her.

She pushed herself to her feet, using the grave as support. She looked around, hoping to use other markers as a kind of guide to lead her home, but she saw no others in the suffocating blackness. Suddenly, she heard a noise behind her. Then she felt a pair of cold hands on her shoulders. She cringed into them.

“Darling,” came Bill’s smooth voice from the dark, “relax. I am here now.”

Bill’s voice, even though it did arouse Sookie a bit, did little to relax her. She shivered as he began to stroke her arms—both afraid and stimulated by his touch.

She closed her eyes tightly. Truth be told, it seemed less dark with her eyes closed than it did with her eyes opened at the moment. She felt so out of control, as if she could not escape

from the overwhelming dark around her. She tried to settle back into Bill, to enjoy his presence and his touch, but she couldn't. There was no comfort in it for her.

She moved away from him a bit, craving something that would take away all the anxiety she was currently feeling. She thought about Gran's final resting spot nearby. Then she tried to concentrate on a comforting memory that she had of waking up one morning and hearing Gran pattering in the kitchen. Sookie opened her eyes. She was able to make out some other nearby grayish markers now. She closed her eyes again, trying to latch on to another reassuring thought. In her mind's eye, she saw Eric making a fire for her when the night had become chilly. He'd done it without her asking him to do it. Again, she opened her eyes, and again her surroundings were more defined as she was able to make out the shapes of other grave markers even better, along with the trees in the old cemetery.

"Sookie," Bill said seductively, "come to me."

Sookie took a step toward Bill and then stopped. Part of her wanted to go to him, and the other part wanted to run like hell. She froze in her confusion for a few moments. She just wanted time and space to figure out her feelings. She tried to tell Bill this, but for some reason, she felt powerless to speak. He took a step toward her.

Suddenly, her need to run overwhelmed her, and she took off in the direction of Gran's farmhouse, where she somehow knew she'd be safe. Before Bill could even react, she was sprinting through the dark away from him.

Her bare feet scratched on twigs and rocks on the ground, but she felt she had to keep running, so she ran even harder. Compelled by something from deep inside her body, she finally found her voice and yelled, "Eric! Eric! Help me! Find me!"

Eric was sitting on his throne. It was just past 11:00 p.m., and the throng of Fangtasia patrons had grown so that the bar was near capacity for the first time since Russell Edgington's television debut.

As another fangbanger approached him, he growled menacingly. It had been more than a year since he'd had one, yet they still attempted to entice him. Of course, he'd had human blood during that time, often bagged or from donors that he'd paid. He'd even given into his carnal desires a few times, but he had found thoughts of anyone but Sookie to be foul for quite a while, and now that he'd been with her, he could not imagine either having sex or taking blood from another.

In the previous year, Pam had often teased him about his lack of desire to grab a quick feed and fuck as he had done in the past, and she had also tried to entice him several times by hiring particularly beautiful dancers. She'd even offered to track down Yvetta once but had never brought up that subjects again when he'd threatened to take away her credit cards if she did.

Tonight, however, Pam was on her best behavior, and Eric was able to handle being on display with relative tolerance since he was continually tapping into his link with Sookie and enjoying the strength of her presence in him. For the last hour and four minutes, he'd simply been enjoying the feeling of Sookie sleeping. He'd not had much of a chance to feel her sleep since they'd formed the bond, simply because the action of the last few days had kept her up throughout the nights and most of the days.

The only time he'd really *felt* her sleep was after her gunshot wound, but the bond had been muted by Marnie's magic over him. Now, he was enjoying the gentle rhythms of her mind as she rested. He wondered if she would be able to feel him through the bond, and the thought

warmed him to the point that he almost couldn't hold in his smile. When he looked up at the fangbanger in his eye line, he was very glad that he'd contained his contentment, however. She looked too hopeful as it was, so he gave her a threatening growl, which caused her to flee to the other side of the bar.

Suddenly, Eric felt distress from Sookie, and he quickly went back to his office. He pulled out his phone to call her, but then he stopped himself. He felt the bond again. Sookie was still asleep. She must have been having a nightmare, and from the feel of it, she was anxious. He thought again about calling, but he stopped himself yet again. Then he thought about calling Lafayette so that he could check on Sookie. But with every thought, he stopped himself.

For the first time since Dallas, Eric wished that he could send Sookie a dream, send her one that would transport her from the nightmare that was apparently gripping her. He sat at his desk and waited for the nightmare to end for her. She experienced a mixture of fear, anxiety, and arousal, and Eric threw his fist into his desk, knowing that, with this mixture of emotions, the nightmare was probably the result of Bill's influence.

At that moment, Eric felt a strong pull from Sookie, almost like a vampire sire calling his or her child. Eric felt through the bond; Sookie was definitely still asleep, but she seemed to be calling him into her dream. He shook his head. "This isn't possible," he said out loud. "She cannot call you to her dream."

But then he opened his desk drawer and looked at the picture there. "Anything is possible with Sookie Stackhouse," he reminded himself out loud. He closed his eyes and touched the bond that was between them. It shouldn't have been strong enough for him to transmit his feelings yet, but he visualized the cord that connected them. It was infused with his magic and their combined blood as well as some kind of white light. He focused his magic on

that light and tried to literally push himself—his comfort—to her through the fledgling bond. He pushed the love that he felt for her. He tried to convey that she was not alone, that he would always be with her if she wanted him to be. He focused all of his power into these things until he felt the tiniest bit of ease coming from her end.

And then he redoubled his efforts. If all he could ever do for her was to protect her in her dreams, then by all the gods that he had ever learned about, he would do it! He'd defy all laws of science, logic, and magic to do it. If only he could feel Sookie's peaceful sleeping again, he'd do anything.

Sookie continued to yell into the dark, "Eric!" She'd been running for what felt like miles, but she felt no closer to home. If only she could get to Eric, she thought, she would be safe.

"I'm here," a voice came from in front of her.

Sookie stopped. She saw Eric in front of her, the glow from his vampire body illuminating the night at last. She ran to him and threw herself into his arms.

"Sookie," he said as he held her tightly, comfortingly, "you are safe. I swear it. Please, tell me what is the matter. I will destroy anything that threatens you."

"You will kill all the sea monsters," she stated quietly, marveling at the passion and sincerity she'd just heard in Eric's voice.

"Yes," Eric declared just as sincerely.

She held him closer. "It's nothing. It was just so dark, and then Bill was there."

"Compton," Eric said the name angrily. "Did he hurt you?"

Sookie thought for a moment, “No. I just—well, I just didn’t feel safe with him in the graveyard, and I just wanted to be home, and I knew you would take me there, so I called for you.”

“And I am here, Sookie.” He picked Sookie up bridal style and took her at vampire speed into her home. “Revoke his invitation,” he said as he set her on the couch and turned on a lamp next to her.

Sookie shook her head, “But I don’t own the house; you do.”

Eric winked. “It will work. Trust me.”

Sookie shook her head again, “I can’t believe that I believe you after everything, but,” she took a long breath. “Bill Compton, I rescind your invitation.”

Sookie felt better immediately. “How did that work?” she asked.

Eric looked mischievous. “It is a surprise, one that you will find out about soon enough. Meanwhile, you can think of it as the magic in this dream.”

“So I can revoke your invitation too?” she asked playfully.

“Yes,” Eric answered suddenly serious. “But if you wish me to leave, I assure you that I will go freely.”

Sookie watched as Eric’s eyes lightened as they had in her previous dream. “What’s wrong, Eric?” she asked him, echoing a question from that dream too.

“It is just that,” he paused, “I do not want you to order me away from your side, yet I fear that you will.”

“I don’t want to,” Sookie said quietly.

“I am glad of that, Sookie,” he answered. However, he started for the door anyway.

“Wait,” Sookie said. “Where are you going?”

“You are safe now—safe here to rest. Stay here, and the house will be a barrier from any danger that your dreams could bring. I know it.”

“But,” Sookie said weakly, “I don’t want you to go yet. Please, stay for a little while, at least until I fall asleep.”

“Sookie,” Eric whispered playfully, drawing near to her again, “you are already asleep.”

She glared at him just as playfully, “None of that teasing, Viking. I know I’m asleep. And you know what I mean. Please stay until the dream is over, okay? Maybe it’ll end if I can go to sleep here.”

Eric smiled. “Of course. I will stay as long as I can, Sookie. He looked around the room. Would you like me to make a fire.”

“Oh yes!” Sookie exclaimed. “I’d like the light. It was just so dark outside.”

Eric smiled even wider at her exuberance and then silently began to build the fire. As soon as it was going, he zipped into the kitchen. A minute later, he returned with a large bowl filled with warm water, a washcloth, and a towel.

“I believe it is my turn to do this,” he said, looking down at her scratched feet.

He put the bowl down in front of her and gently folded up her pant legs a few inches. Then, he pulled her feet into the water. He bathed them with a light touch and then grinned up at her, “Not ticklish here?”

Sookie shook her head and then spoke, “You know, you don’t have to do that. My feet are just fine in real life—well except for my big toe.”

Eric looked at Sookie solemnly, “When you did this for me, it was a great comfort.”

“It is to me too,” Sookie said quietly.

Eric smiled, "I'm glad. Now, what did you do to your big toe?"

Sookie smiled back, "I got drunk as a skunk tonight, tripped over my own feet, and stubbed my toe on Lafayette's coffee table."

Eric chuckled and then dramatically added with mock seriousness, "Oh the blight of the stubbed toe! I see it in my bar all the time. It is especially prevalent among those whose dance partners are also inebriated! Should I, perhaps, arrange for an orthopedic specialist to come by to see to your affliction tomorrow?"

Sookie punched his arm, causing the water to slosh a bit. "Hey, mister, it hurt!" She couldn't help but laugh, and Eric joined her.

"I should like to see you drunk one day, Sookie. I imagine you are quite funny."

"Well, I don't get that way often," she said, "and never when I'm in a public place or around too many people."

"Why not?" he began, before answering his own question. "Oh, I imagine it becomes difficult to control your telepathy if you are inebriated."

Sookie nodded as Eric used the towel to dry her feet.

After he took the used water and linens back to the kitchen, he sat down on the couch opposite her, and they looked at the flames together in silence for a while.

"Why does your presence comfort me?" Sookie asked suddenly. "Is it the bond?"

Eric looked at her surprised. "You know of the bond? How?"

"Jesus and some of Marnie's magic books."

"Oh," Eric said. "You will learn what I know tomorrow as well. I have already written you a note explaining what I have learned of them. Someone is bringing it here in the day tomorrow."

“Oh, or you could just tell me now,” Sookie observed as she moved to the floor in front of the fire.

Eric chuckled. “Of course. If that is what you want.” He got up and took an afghan from the back of the couch and wrapped it around Sookie’s body, careful not to spook her.

Noticing his reticence, Sookie chided, “I won’t break, you know. It’s just that I was scared out in the dark, and something was off about the way Bill was acting. And your presence does comfort me for some odd reason.” Sookie patted the floor beside her, and Eric sat down.

She held a hand out for his, and he took it gratefully. Then she laid her head onto his shoulder.

“Is it bad? The stuff about the bond?” she asked.

“I won’t lie to you,” Eric said. “I do not think it is bad, but you might. I’m afraid you may hate me for it.”

“Why? What does it mean?”

Eric took an unnecessary breath. “It means that we are connected more fully than just by a tie, which is what we had before. A bond is made by a free exchange of blood, like what we did the other night. If we were to exchange three times, you would be able to feel me as much as I can feel you. If you tried hard enough, you could probably feel me a bit now, though I may be too far away from you for that.”

“Feel your emotions?”

“Yes,” Eric said quietly. “And my location.”

“You can’t influence me more, can you?” Sookie asked.

Eric chuckled, “No more than you can influence me, Sookie. And for the record, I cannot influence you now.”

“But you are here in my dream.”

“It is true. You somehow called me to you tonight. I have never heard of this kind of thing being possible before, even with people who have exchanged blood three times, but here I am.”

“But you have caused my dreams before.”

“I tried once in Dallas,” he confirmed cautiously.

“Yes—wait, you said you ‘tried’? But I had a dream about you in Dallas and then you’ve been in other dreams I’ve had too.”

Eric looked at her surprised and then smiled at her. “Well, those are on you, Miss Stackhouse. I never tried to inhabit your dreams after that first night. Perhaps I will tell you why one day.” There was a sparkle in his eyes and she rolled hers.

“Fine—what else should I know about this bond.”

“Well, other than the fact that the power works both ways and that if we were to exchange three times it would become permanent, there’s not much about it that’s different than a blood tie.

“But I must tell you that I feel a connection to you now that is much stronger than the small tie that we had before. I could feel your emotions as you dreamed earlier, and I wanted to come to you, but I had promised to stay away. And then you called me to your dream, and I had to answer you as if I were compelled. It was almost what it felt like to get a call from Godric when he was still alive.” Eric grew silent for a moment as he thought about his maker.

“Where are you now?” Sookie asked after letting Eric alone with his thoughts for a few minutes.

“Fangtasia—in my office.”

They were silent for a few more moments, and then Sookie asked abruptly, "What did you mean that you would stay for as long as you could? Am I keeping you from work?"

"No. Pam is handling things in the club, but connecting through the bond like this is," he paused, "challenging. I have to concentrate my magic on the bond and extend much energy."

"Is it hurting you?" Sookie asked suddenly concerned.

"I don't feel pain," Eric said, "but I can feel myself tiring. Like I said though. I will stay as long as I can. And then I have some bagged blood at Fangtasia, so I will be able to replenish myself. Do not worry. Trust me; I will be fine."

Sookie yawned and then answered. "It's funny, but I do—trust you, that is. It's probably dumb, but my Gran always told me to trust my instincts."

"It is probably dumb," Eric chuckled.

"Have you really never sent me any other dreams?" Sookie asked.

"I sent one the night you took my blood for the first time, but no others."

"Do you think you will remember this one?"

Eric shrugged, though he was careful not to disturb Sookie on his shoulder. "I have never heard of another vampire having this kind of experience, nor have I ever had one. But I think that I will remember."

Sookie yawned again and sunk into Eric's shoulder even more as he put an arm around her to tuck her into him. "Will you tell me if you remember?"

"I will," he answered. Within minutes she was asleep. He picked her up gently and laid her on the couch, covering her with the afghan. He stoked the fire and added another log to it.

He could feel himself weakening and knew that he'd soon lose his hold on the dream, so he quickly finished his work with the fire and turned to his beloved for one last look. "Do not

fear, min kára,” he said. “The fire is strong, and the light will last throughout your dreams. Whatever was out in the dark that made you afraid will not harm you here. I would light the whole world on fire to keep you safe.”

Eric felt his head hit his desk at Fangtasia as he lost hold of Sookie’s dream. He was weak, even weaker than after he’d spent a day in silver. He called Pam to him through their maker-child bond.

She was there in moments, and taking in her master, she went on full alert.

Eric whispered. “Bring me a bag of blood, Pam.”

She was gone and back quickly, a bag of warmed blood in her hands. She gave it to her master, who began drinking it greedily.

“What happened?” Pam asked.

Eric didn’t answer for a few moments. Instead, he reached out to his bond with Sookie. She was sleeping peacefully again; feeling her peacefulness was one of the most beautiful experiences of his long life.

Recovered from the drain on his energy, Eric smiled as he continued to feel the tranquil emotions of his bonded. “My bonded has given me more new experiences this evening,” he said enigmatically before dismissing Pam.

He sent Sookie a text, and then, feeling recovered and content, went back into the bar.

In her dream, Sookie had awoken slightly to find Eric gone. She had registered a moment of disappointment before she realized that he must have placed her on the couch and wrapped the blanket around her to keep her warm. She had glanced through sleepy eyes to see

that the fire was burning strong and bright. “A light in the dark,” she had whispered as she fell back to sleep in the dream.

Lafayette had just decided to leave Sookie to sleep on his couch and was covering her up with his old afghan when he heard her words. He shook his head and tucked her in.

“All right, Sook,” he said. “I’ll leave the hall light on so you’s can see.” He stepped over Jason, who’d passed out on the floor, and chuckled about the lack of tolerance for hard liquor by both Stackhouses. He couldn’t help but hope that when they woke up, they wouldn’t want to go through with the spell. He didn’t want either of them hurt.

Bill was sated and content. After sending the dream to Sookie, he’d asked for a third donor. With such petite women, he didn’t want to too take much from any one of them, and sending the dream was tiring. He hoped that this was the last one he’d need to send, for a while at least.

Of course, three human women was a better fit sexually for one vampire anyway, and he’d just finished enjoying the last of his donors. Bill reached out to feel Sookie’s emotions through the tie. She was in a deep sleep and no longer dreaming as far as he could tell. He’d been very pleased by the effect of the dream on her emotions earlier. It had begun with the perfect mix of lust and fear, the epitome of what he’d learned such dreams should produce in a human. Then, Sookie had grown very content in the dream, no doubt due to being sated herself in it.

Now he needed to get back to the problem of finding replacement sheriffs. The difficulty was that his years with Lorena and then mainstreaming had left him with few close allies in the vampire community. No one in Sophie-Anne’s old court would be appropriate since most of

them blamed him for her death. And, ironically, many who were not fans of Sophie-Anne's still didn't care for him because he'd been a procurer, which is not a particularly well-liked profession among vampires.

In fact, the only vampire that he knew he could trust would be occupied soon with another task he had for her. He'd thought briefly of appointing Pam as sheriff of Area 1, just to separate her and Eric, but he didn't want those two to potentially have more power. Already, most vampires left in the state looked more to Eric than Bill for leadership. Once again, Northman was proving to be a thorn in his side.

Perhaps, a call to Nan was in order. He hated the bitch, but she could still help him fill the vacancies left around him. He decided to wait a few days, however, to see if he could come up with anything else. He'd look through the vampire database he'd been secretly putting together to see if anyone there would be good for the task.

Chapter 10: *If You Love Her, Let Her Go*

Sookie woke up with a hangover the size of a Mack truck, and it felt like she was being run over by one too. Her throat was dry and her breath was foul. She also needed to pee like a racehorse. She decided that the bathroom would be her best bet in seeing to all her needs right away.

Once there, she found that there was no glass by the sink, so she had to drink straight from the faucet, but the water still tasted better than any she could remember. Not having her toothbrush in the room and not motivated to walk the ten feet into the living room to get it from her bag, she put some toothpaste on her finger and worked it back and forth in her mouth. She cringed to think of what Gran would think, but at least her breath felt less disgusting when she was done. After she took care of her human needs, as the vampires always called it, she decided she felt up to moving to the kitchen and getting a real glass of water and maybe about 12 aspirins.

She almost tripped over a still-sleeping Jason as she made her way through the living room. She wondered how she'd missed that he was there on her way to the bathroom and briefly speculated about whether she'd stepped on him without even knowing it in the haze of her hangover.

She shrugged and finished moving to the kitchen. Once there, the acidic smell of coffee made her want to find the nearest toilet.

Lafayette and Jesus were chatting quietly at the table. Once Lafayette saw Sookie, he chuckled a bit. "Now I know's why all the undead like you, Sook. You look like death on a stick."

“Thanks,” Sookie deadpanned. Only Gran’s voice in her head kept her from flipping Lafayette the bird.

“Here, drink this,” Jesus said kindly, giving her a glass of a deep-green liquid.

Sookie looked at Jesus skeptically. After all, her current condition had started the morning before when she had taken her first sip of his other ‘brew’.

Jesus laughed as if reading her mind, “Go ahead; it’ll help the hangover. It’s a miracle.”

Still a little unsure, Sookie decided that she was the actual mind reader in the room, and she put her talent to use, confirming that both Jesus and Lafayette had had a glass of the liquid and that they both felt much better. Since *much better* was what she needed right then, Sookie picked up the offered glass and drank it down as fast as she could. She was still really thirsty even after her time spent at the bathroom faucet, and the liquid was actually quite tasty.

“Thanks,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand in another move Gran would have tanned her hide for. She walked to the sink, rinsed out her glass, and refilled it with water before joining the boys at the table. She’d decided to stick with that nickname for them. Moments later, however, she thought about changing it to the “miracle” boys because as soon as she sat down, she realized that she felt a lot better already and that the jackhammer beating into her brain had turned into just a dull throb. She looked up at Lafayette in surprise.

“It’s good shit, right?” Lafayette laughed.

“Yeah,” Sookie sighed, feeling even better. The coffee had even started to smell good, and she looked at it longingly across the room. But she didn’t want to get back up.

Jesus laughed when he followed her eyes. “I have to refill mine anyway,” he said as he picked up his cup.

When he returned with a fresh, steaming cup of caffeinated goodness for Sookie, she smiled broadly. “Thanks again.”

After she was through half a cup, she grabbed a biscuit from a pan on the table and ate it greedily. By the time she was done with cup number one and was up herself to get a second, she felt perfectly normal.

“Wow,” she said, sitting back down. “That stuff is amazing! Is it some witch spell?”

Jesus laughed, “It’s an old family recipe, so yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised if something witchy has worked its way in, but it’s mostly just different herbs and vegetables.”

“Oh,” Sookie said, taking another drink of coffee.

After a few minutes of talking about the lack of news in the local paper, Lafayette slid Sookie’s phone to her from across the table. “Found this outside on the porch table this mornin’,” he said gesturing to the phone.

“I must have put it down after Bill left,” Sookie mused, starting to remember the night before. Her kiss with Bill threatened to bring her headache back, so she picked up the phone to check to see if she had any messages. There was one new text—from Eric. Holding her breath, Sookie opened it. The message said, “Should you ever need more fires built in your dreams, do not hesitate to summon.” She gasped and set down the phone.

“Shit, it was real,” she muttered as her dream came back to her in full force.

“What is it?” Lafayette asked, a bit concerned by the shocked look on Sookie’s face. He picked up the phone and read the text. “What’s this? Is Tall, Blonde and Toothy botherin’ you, Sook?”

Lafayette handed the phone to Jesus, who looked at it with confusion. “Did you have a dream about him, Sookie? Is this him trying to—uh—flirt or something?”

Sookie blushed.

“From the sounds of that there text and the blush on your face, it sounds like a sexy dream to me,” Lafayette said, intrigued. “Do tell. Did he ‘light your fire’?”

Sookie shook her head again, finding her voice. “No. I mean, I had a dream, but it wasn’t *that* kind. It was really odd though.”

Just then, Jason stumbled into the room. A similar operation was done to cure him of his hangover, and within fifteen minutes, all the remaining biscuits on the table had been eaten—all by Jason—and he was up making everyone scrambled eggs while Sookie just sat contemplating her dream.

Finally Jesus’s curiosity got the better of him, “What happened in your dream, Sookie?”

Jason spoke up from the kitchen, “If you had one of those vampire sex dreams, can I leave the room before you start to talkin’?”

Sookie laughed, “It wasn’t like that, Jase, but it was real strange.”

Jesus looked at Sookie, “Do you think Eric sent it—since he sent you the text about it?”

Sookie shook her head. “No, I think Bill may have sent it to start with, but I’m not sure. It started off with more Bill anyway.” She shivered at her memory of the beginning of the dream.

Jason joined them at the table with a big bowl full of fluffy eggs, and they all dug in while they were warm.

“Why do you’s think Bill sent it?” Lafayette asked after a while. “And if he did, then how could Eric send you a text ‘bout it?”

Sookie swallowed a bite and said, “Well, it started off kinda scary. It was pitch black outside—so dark that I literally couldn’t see my own hand. Then I realized I was sitting on Bill’s grave.”

“Creepy,” Jason exclaimed, putting a bite into his mouth.

“It was,” Sookie confirmed. “And then I heard a noise, and it turned out to be Bill, but there was just something off about the whole thing. He was trying to,” she blushed and looked at Jason, “to—um —seduce me, but I was scared, and I just felt the need to get home, so I started running toward the house.”

“Did he chase you?” Jason asked.

Sookie shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. But I couldn’t find my way in the dark. The funny thing was that when I thought about Eric, I felt like he could make me safe. And I was calling out to him in my dream.”

“Shit,” Jesus said, looking back down at the text. “Sookie?” he looked up asking her to confirm the supposition he’d just made.

The others missed the significance of Jesus’s reaction. “What?” Jason demanded.

Sookie confirmed Jesus’s guess at what had happened and explained for the others, “It’s just that when I called Eric, I guess I literally *called* him into my dream. He showed up and took me to Gran’s. And then he built a fire and we talked. I wasn’t scared anymore at all after he got there, and he stayed with me until I fell asleep.”

“And he remembered being in your dream.” Jesus stated, looking again at the text.

Sookie reached for her phone and read the text again, “Based on what this says, he did. He told me that he was at Fangtasia last night when he felt my anxiety, and then he said I kind of

called him to me. He compared it to when a maker calls his child to him. He said that he was able to somehow use the magic in his blood to draw himself through our bond to me.”

“Bond,” Jesus said quietly. “Not tie?”

“Bond,” Sookie confirmed as Jesus and Lafayette looked at each other significantly.

“Wow, Sook,” Jesus said after a while. “Nothing in the books indicated anything about a human having the ability to pull a vampire into her dreams! A vampire can’t even put himself into them directly. He or she can only initiate or activate a dream, and the human does the rest.”

“Maybe it’s different because I’m part fairy? Or because it’s a bond and not a tie?”

Sookie put her face into her hands. “It’s just all so damned confusing!”

“So let me get this straight,” Jason said, finally catching up. “You dreamed of Bill first, probably because he sent you the dream . . .”

“Maybe,” Sookie interrupted. “I was a bit frustrated at him after he left because he wasn’t really respecting what I was saying about needing time and space. So maybe my subconscious was just trying to work all that out, and he didn’t do anything at all.”

“But the dream was vivid, right?” Jesus asked.

“Yeah,” Sookie admitted.

Jason continued, “So whether Bill was the cause or not, in the dream you got scared and ran from one vamp and then called another vamp to come and help you? That seems real screwed up to me, Sook!”

“I know,” Sookie said frustrated.

Jesus added, “And it seems clear that whether Bill started your dream or not, you were the one that initiated the contact with Eric right?”

“Yep, at least that’s what it seemed like. It really felt like I was calling him to me, like I could bring him to me if I wanted, and then he was there. And he remembers it, so it must have really happened.”

“Did he know that he was in your dream at that time too?” Jesus asked to clarify.

“Yeah, he definitely knew I was dreaming, and he knew that I’d called him. But he didn’t know exactly how he’d gotten to me. He’d never heard of anything like that happening to any vampire before, not even the ones that had made permanent bonds with people.”

Sookie took a drink of coffee and then continued, “He did confirm to me that we have a bond and not a tie like I have with Bill. He also told me some things about it.”

“Fuck, Sook,” Lafayette exclaimed, breaking his silence. “It’s crazy to be thinkin’ y’all had a real conversation in a dream and that you’s both remember it.”

“No doubt,” Sookie agreed.

“Well, what did you learn about bonds?” Jesus asked, looking very interested. “The books I have looked at don’t say much, as I said before. I don’t think they are common at all.”

“They seem to do a lot of the same things that ties do, except the connection made is stronger. Also, it seems that the human will be able to feel the vampire just like he can feel her, especially if the bond is repeated three times, which makes it permanent. I also asked if he could control me more with it, but he said that he couldn’t control me any more than I could control him, whatever that means. In fact, he told me straight up that he wasn’t able to control me at all, and the funny thing is that I believed him at the time. But now I’m wondering how that could be true if a bond is stronger than a tie, and a tie lets a vampire manipulate the human’s dreams if he wants.”

Sookie took a deep breath and continued, “Then he told me that he hadn’t sent me a dream since the first one he said he ‘tried’ to send in Dallas.” Sookie used air quotes around the word “tried.” But I *did* dream about him while I was there, and I also had other dreams with him too. It’s just so confusing. My instincts are telling me to trust him when he says that he hasn’t been compelling me to have dreams, but that could just be his blood influencing me. Every time I think I know something, I just feel like I’m going around in circles.”

Jason said quietly, “I had another dream last night too—‘bout Jess. You said vamps could influence us to dream, right?” he asked, looking at Jesus.

“Yeah,” Jesus confirmed.

“Well, in this one, Jess seemed to be calling me to her, and we—uh—did it. She told me that I should forget about Hoyt, and in the dream, I did. I just got caught up in her. I felt so bad about it all when I woke up a little while ago,” he finished forlornly.

Sookie put a hand on Jason’s arm in comfort and then looked squarely at Jesus. “I know you have concerns about doing the spell to get rid of the vampire blood, but I still want it done—now more than ever. If I am ever going to know what’s real and be confident in who I am or who I love again, I have to.”

“Me too,” Jason said quietly.

Jesus looked at the siblings. He understood more than anyone how much you could want to move away from your past and make a new start. With a deep sigh and an answering nod from Lafayette, he said, “Okay, but before we do this, I need a few hours. I want to make sure, Sookie, that it would even work for you since you have a bond with Eric. From what I’ve read, it’s not a complicated spell, but if it’s not done exactly right, then the people going through it could die. And like I said before, it is very painful. Those are the reasons Laf didn’t do it.” He

paused, “If we’re going to do this, though, I want to make sure we know the spell backwards and forwards.”

Sookie glanced at her watch. They’d slept late due to all the liquor intake, and it was already a little after noon.

“Okay,” Sookie resolved. “It’s 12:10, and sunset tonight is a little before 6:30. I assume this would be better to do when they are *not* awake, right?”

Jesus nodded, knowing immediately who the “they” referred to.

Sookie continued, “Then, if we start the spell at about 4:00, that will give you time, right?”

Jesus nodded, “The longest it’s ever taken to break a tie has been about ten minutes, so even if yours is stronger than usual, two and a half hours before sunset should be plenty. You’ll both also need to plan to stay here again at least for tonight, if not for a few more days. The spell can make you a little sick and will definitely make you tired.”

Sookie nodded. “Okay, then, while you are studying, we can go get some more food and some clothes.”

Jesus nodded. “That sounds good. Just be back at 3:00 so that we can talk through any problems and I can explain what’s going to happen.”

Sookie looked at Lafayette and Jesus. She reached out both her hands to take theirs. “Thank you for doing this.”

An hour later, Sookie pulled into her driveway; she was still getting used to the fact that a smooth even layer of nice gravel was there instead of the ratty, muddy drive that had been there before. She thought about how many times Gran had wanted to fix the driveway but had had to

prioritize other things with her meager budget. Gran would have loved everything Eric had done to the place, from the paint color to the new mailbox to the flower boxes. Sookie shook her head and went inside.

She had grabbed a quick bite with Jason, and now she needed a shower and some more clothes if she was going to be at Lafayette and Jesus's house for at least one more night. For the first time, she was actually a bit glad that Sam had fired her. At least, she wouldn't have to ask for more time off like Lafayette had earlier.

Sookie got out of her car and grabbed her bag of dirty clothes from the front seat. As she approached the door, she saw an envelope with "Sookie Stackhouse" written on it stuck to the glass. "Eric's letter," she said to herself as she pulled it down. She unlocked the door and noticed how well the key worked. Before, the lock had been a bit worn or rusty, but now the key turned like the lock was brand new. "High-handed, anal vampire," Sookie smiled to herself.

She went inside and set her bag by the stairs before going to pour herself a glass of water. She sat down at the table and opened the manila envelope. Inside was a smaller envelope made out of thick ivory paper. In what looked like perfectly slanted and formed letters, her first name was written on the ivory envelope.

She opened it and read.

Sookie,

I have promised to stay away, but I find that I must tell you about the effects of the blood exchange we made several days ago—the night that we went into battle together to fight the witches.

But first, in case I never get another chance, I must convey my pride in your actions that evening. I had wanted to run away with you—certainly an attractive prospect—but you were right. Running was not the suitable or noble thing to do. Then later, I was honored to stand with you in facing the witches.

I am sorry for my own actions that evening. I should never have left your side. You were shot and almost killed, and I was neither there to prevent it nor there to help you after the fact, though I wish for you to know that I felt your distress and was trying to get to you when the witch, Antonia, stopped me and forced me into the hold of her spell. Still, I should not have left you to start with. I will endeavor to make no similar mistakes in priority in the future.

As for the main reason for this letter, I find that I must tell you that we formed what is called a blood bond as we made our exchange.

This is different from the blood tie we had before or the one that you have with Bill.

I can tell you only what I know of bonds, and even though I have a thousand years of accumulated knowledge, I admit that I know little of them for two reasons. First, they are rare among my kind. Second, I have never pursued one before, so I have not chased knowledge about them. I am currently sorting through many books from Godric's library which may hold more information; I will tell you if I find out more.

What I do know is that bonds are a type of tie, the strongest type. Thrice bound to each other, sharers of blood will be bound permanently. Some rules of ties will apply to bonds as well. I will be able to locate you; I will also feel your emotions more fully than with a tie. You may also "feel" me to some extent, though if the bond is not

strengthened with a second and third exchange, this may never amount to much for you and will fade with time.

Rest assured that a bond allows me no influence over you, actually even less than a tie would allow for since a bond is viewed as an equal exchange of essences between human and vampire, which is, as you may guess, the reason for their rarity.

So, I can feel you more than I did before, and you might be able to feel me a bit. I can sense where you are, though I would have to be closer than I am now (Shreveport) in order to pinpoint you exactly.

You may also be able to sense when I am near. Additional exchanges would mean that the connection would broaden and we could actually send each other waves of feelings—not to control, as I know you would fear, but to strengthen and comfort.

I feel that I must tell you that I do not regret your taking my blood. I didn't have my memories, but the same desire for you that I had then would still fuel the offering now. I could not, however, tell you the repercussions of taking my blood at the time, and I regret that. You will most likely hate the idea that I can feel you even more and that the connection is so strong for me now.

I will, if you wish, endeavor to learn how to stifle the feeling of you—just as you have learned to block out the thoughts of humans you don't wish to hear. I will act as you wish in this matter and will stay away from you to mute the bond if that is your desire.

But never—never—think that I regret our time together. I would have all the time in the world with you if it were my choice, but the choice is yours now. I will remain in love with you regardless. It

was thus before you took my blood in the cubby and before I took yours.

As I told you before, I will be waiting if you should want me. If you do not, I will endeavor to forego my natural impulse to take that which I desire, and I will leave you to live your life in peace—but unless I meet my true death, I will always be only a call away.

Your bonded,

—E

Sookie's eyes dripped with tears as she finished the letter. She could imagine the dueling looks in his eyes as he'd written it, hope and defeat. And here she was, about to remove the bond and the ties that she had with all vampires, including the man who had just spilled his heart to her in the letter. She had a moment of pause. The idea of being bonded with Eric was not a bad one in her mind, but she still didn't know for sure what was real or not. Could she take Eric's word that he wouldn't try to influence her with his blood? Could she take Bill's? She had deep feelings for both of them and, therefore, wanted to believe them both, but she would never know for sure as long as their blood was in her. She needed her clean slate. And if she did really love one of them, she could reassess things later. She could even re-form whatever ties or bonds

she wished. And that would be the difference this time. It would not be forced. It would be *her* choice—a mutual choice for both parties.

Sookie quickly showered and gathered up some clean clothes to last a couple of days. Most of her clothing had been destroyed during Maryann's stay, and the rest had been packed up in boxes during the restoration of her home. She opened a box that had been put near her old dresser, and right on top was the red Fangtasia shirt she'd been given to put on after the Maenad attack. "High-handed vampire," she thought to herself as she added the Fangtasia shirt and a few other comfortable T-shirts and sweatshirts to her bag.

She killed the rest of the time she needed to by unpacking the boxes. She thought briefly of moving her clothing into Gran's old room, which she'd almost decided to make her own, but she didn't. She didn't want to face taking her Gran's stuff out of there today on top of everything else. She did, however, move the empty boxes into that room so that she would be ready if she did decide to relocate to the more grown-up space.

At 2:30, she left to go by the store to pick up some food to take to Lafayette and Jesus's place. On a whim, she bought a four-pack of TruBlood, but even as she drove to the boys' house, she scolded herself for doing so and wondered if it was their blood that was making her want to see them both right then.

She sighed. No matter what, she was ready to figure out her own mind. If her heart really did belong to one of them, then so be it. If not, then she could at least be certain of that and then move on with her life.

Chapter II: Untying

When Sookie pulled up into Lafayette's drive at 2:58, she noticed that her brother's truck was already there. Jason and Lafayette were standing on the porch when Sookie parked. Both of them came to help her unload the groceries from the car.

Lafayette picked up the TruBlood and looked at Sookie questioningly.

"Don't ask," she said as they took everything inside.

Lafayette just rolled his eyes.

Once inside the house, Sookie was surprised by what she saw. The living room furniture had all been pushed back against the walls, creating a large space in the center of the room. Plus, there was first aid equipment on the kitchen table, including things to start IV's and even a portable defibrillator. When Sookie's eyes took in everything, it was enough to give her pause for a few moments.

Seeing what Sookie was looking at, Jesus spoke up from one of the couches in the living room, "A friend of mine who works for an ambulance company brought that over for me to use." He motioned toward the table.

"Do you think we'll need all that?" Jason asked coming in behind Sookie.

Jesus shook his head, "No, but I won't risk this without being prepared for anything. Please, come talk to me after all that's put up."

"Go ahead," Lafayette said. "I gots all this." He motioned to the groceries.

Sookie joined Jesus on the couch, and Jason pulled over a chair from the table.

Jesus took a deep breath and opened the book of spells in front of him. "I want you both to listen really carefully to what I'm going to say. I'm ready to do this today, but if you need

more time or if you change your mind after I tell you about the spell, all you have to do is say the word.”

“Okay,” Sookie and Jason answered at the same time.

“All right.” Jesus said. “The kind of spell I would do on you is designed to remove the vampire blood from your bodies, but to do that, their blood has to be literally burned out. This is what will cause you a lot of pain. And you will become feverish, which is why I got the I.V. stuff and some saline. If the process lasts longer than we think it will, especially for you, Sookie, your body may become dehydrated.”

“And you said earlier that it takes ten minutes?” Jason asked. “Why so long?”

“Well,” Jesus said. “It’s not just a matter of burning the blood from your bodies. Vampires create ties and bonds by the magic *within* their blood, so the spell must also destroy that magical link; it has to sever the connection.”

“So the vampires will feel it too?” Sookie asked apprehensively.

“Yes, to a certain extent. What happens is that the spell we do will find the vampire blood within you and will begin to burn through it until only the magical connection is left. Then our spell will literally follow that connection, piggybacking off of it until it gets to the source, the vampire. At this point the spell enters the vampire and looks for the tie within him or her as well. Once the tie is found, our magic destroys it at the source.”

“Will it hurt them?” Sookie asked quietly. “I don’t wanna hurt them. If it will, we have to find another way.”

Everyone knew who the “them” was that Sookie was referring to. Jesus shook his head, “According to the book, they will feel our spell tracing through their bodies looking for the

origin of the tie. Once the spell finds it, then they will feel it disappearing, but it will not cause them actual pain. They will, however, immediately recognize that the tie has been broken.”

Sookie asked, “How do you know it won’t hurt them?” The thought of hurting either Bill or Eric bothered her more than she could say, and the image of Eric’s pained eyes from when he was under silver flashed into her head for a moment.

Jesus answered as he looked back down at the book. “This spell originated at the behest of vampires, Sookie. Therefore, it is made with their relative ease in mind; the burden of pain falls to the human, I’m afraid.”

He continued, “There have been many times that vampires wanted to break ties before the human’s natural death occurred, and for one reason or another, the vampire didn’t wish to kill the human outright. Often when the human reaches old age, the vampire will let him or her go. Or if the vampire is leaving an area and not taking the human, he or she will sever the tie so that the human can live on.”

“Why not just let the blood fade away in time—like it’s doin’ with Lafayette? Why go through all the bother?” Jason asked.

Jesus looked pensive. “The more blood that is given, the more control a vampire can take, so the human can become dependent—a kind of addict over time.”

“Like Renfield?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, but don’t worry. Neither you nor Sookie has had sustained blood from a vampire for a long enough period of time. Historically, ties have been used by vampires to create loyal subjects that they can control for years and that can protect them in the day. Humans tend to become like Renfield only after a decade or more.”

“Oh,” Sookie said. “So they would feel your magic in their bodies and then the tie breaking, but not really pain?”

“Right,” Jesus confirmed.

“And then after the tie is broken, then what happens to us?” Jason asked nervously.

“Well,” Jesus answered. “As I said, the whole process of burning through the vampire’s blood to isolate his or her magic and then following that magic to the source and finally destroying the tie can take some time. It all depends on the strength of the tie. The human will feel the pain of the burning and then will continue to feel pain as the spell moves into the vampire. The human’s energy is used to power the magical spell in a way. Then, after the spell is finished, the human will literally pass out.”

“Really? Pass out!” Sookie exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s actually a good thing though,” Jesus said. “When the human passes out, this is a sign that the spell has worked and is complete. The spell contains an element that will cause the human to fall unconscious after it is over so that the human body can begin to recover itself. For most people, destroying the tie will take about five minutes, and the human will sleep for a while and just feel a little tired when waking.”

“But you said that people have died before?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Jesus said looking at Sookie. “Generally, a vampire keeps the tie alive by giving the human just small amounts of blood every once in a while. This means that the human doesn’t get addicted as badly and retains his or her personality relatively intact. These ties are actually easy to break, even if they’ve lasted years. But when the human has gotten a lot of blood from the vampire, the tie can be harder to destroy, and the spell must be done for a longer period of time. The longest recorded spell took about fifteen minutes.”

“Oh,” Sookie exhaled loudly. “And you think it will take a long time for me.”

“Maybe,” Jesus said. “It depends on several things. First, you have blood from *two* vampires. The spell should find both of the ties you have and start working to destroy them at the same time, but it might take longer since there are two. Second, your bond with Eric is probably a lot stronger than a normal tie. A bond *is* a kind of tie, so the spell should still work on it. However, the connection is stronger, and the spell might have more work to do to eliminate it. Then again, once it finds the bond’s origin in Eric’s body, it may be able to destroy it as easily as a regular tie.”

“So that equipment over there is for me mostly, right?” Sookie asked.

Jesus nodded. “I’ll be honest. If the spell takes a while, you’ll need I.V. fluids to help you replenish, but I’m planning to give Jason an I.V. too, just to make sure that he’s okay. Otherwise, he’ll feel tired—almost like he has a cold—for a few days.”

“What about the deaths it’s caused?” Jason asked his question again.

“Well, there have been several deaths reported with this spell. One or two have been from the human developing an unrelated illness in his weakened state following the completion of the spell. That was well in the past before modern medicine, but it’s also why I want to make sure I help your bodies to build back up right away.”

“And the others?” Sookie asked.

Lafayette was walking in the room as Jesus continued, “Those deaths happened as a result of the witches stopping the spell before the human was unconscious. The witches must keep up a chant throughout the spell’s usage—to keep the spell active and looking for the tie in the vampire. Then, once the tie is gone, the chanting can stop. But if the witches stop prematurely, then the magic that had been searching for the tie rebounds into the human and tries

to destroy the vampire magic from within the human's body. This will stop the human's heart and kill him or her."

"So you have the defibrillator," Sookie observed.

"Exactly," Jesus confirmed.

"Once we start, we won't stop. I's promise, baby girl," Lafayette said. "This house could be fallin' down 'round us, but we won't stop."

"But if something were to happen, we'd be ready," Jesus added.

This information caused both Jason and Sookie to tense a bit, and the siblings looked at each other before sharing a nod. They both needed to do this, and both were silently happy that they were not alone in it.

Sookie reached out and grabbed Jason's hand before turning to Jesus and Lafayette. "I trust you both to do your very best here, and if something were to go wrong, you can't blame yourselves for that, okay?"

She waited until both of them nodded. Then she gave a little smile and said, "Okay. I want this. I *need* it. Even though I know it might be harder for me—might even kill me, I have to be my own person again. It is worth the risk to me."

Jason also nodded. "I need to do this too. Either I really love Jess, and I need to do something to make that work for us. Or it's the blood, and I need to recover my friendship with Hoyt, but as it's going right now, I'm gonna lose them both."

Jesus looked at the clock; it read 3:30. "Okay. But I want to do you two separately."

"I'm first then," Jason said quickly.

"But, Jason," Sookie began.

“No arguments, Sook!” Jason said firmly. “They think mine will be easier anyway. It can be a kind of practice, to make sure it’s all workin’ okay. Once they know they got it right, they can move on to you.”

“But Jase, what if something goes wrong?” Sookie asked.

“Then it’ll go wrong on me, little sis,” Jason said forcefully. “I haven’t always been the best of big brothers to you, Sook, but you know I have always tried to protect you, and my going first now is doing that. We’ll know it works before they even try with you.”

Sookie nodded and gave Jason a big hug.

“All right,” Jason said, looking at Jesus. “What do I need to do?”

Ten minutes later, a circle with about a seven foot diameter had been drawn on the living room floor with some kind of powdery mix, and Jason was sitting inside of it.

“You sure?” Jesus asked one more time as he and Lafayette sat down a few feet from the circle. They sat facing each other Indian style. Sookie was sitting on one of the couches watching her brother nervously.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Jason said looking at Sookie with certainty in his eyes.

“And don’t stop no matter what,” Jason added, looking at Jesus and Lafayette.

“We won’t,” Jesus assured as he began crushing a mixture that looked like herbs and oil in a cauldron that sat between himself and Lafayette. Once the contents were mixed, he and Lafayette grasped hands. “Ready?” he asked the man he loved.

Lafayette nodded, and the two began to chant words that sounded Latin to Sookie’s ears.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, but then Jason doubled over in pain. Sookie had to remind herself that she couldn’t go to her brother as she wanted to. Jesus had instructed

her to stay out of the circle no matter what. Jason lay on the floor groaning for a few minutes, his body breaking out into sweats. Then after about four minutes total, he let out one last grunt and fell into unconsciousness.

Jesus, who had been looking at Jason the whole time, gave Lafayette a look and stopped chanting. He rose and went into the circle, checking Jason's pulse. "It's strong," he assured Sookie and Lafayette, who were looking on with concern. Sookie sighed with relief and went into the circle to pull Jason to her. Jesus got a kit to start an I.V., and then Lafayette helped him move Jason to the couch. The I.V. started, Sookie waited for her brother to wake up.

A short time after Lafayette and Jesus had begun chanting, Jessica woke up from her day sleep with a start. As a precaution, she was still sleeping in Bill's locked basement with him, although they were no longer wrapped up in chains. She looked anxiously around, wondering what had stirred her.

Bill, feeling his child's anxiety, also woke up, afraid that she was being attacked. "Jessica?" he said.

"Fuck," Jessica said, grabbing at her stomach, "is this another spell?"

"What wrong?"

"I'm feeling somethin' really weird here," she said with uncertainty in her eyes. "I don't know. It doesn't feel like I'm being compelled to do anything like before. It just feels like somethin' is inside of me, like someone is reaching around inside of me, trying to find somethin'."

Groggily, Bill rose and went to his child, looking over her body for any wounds. There was nothing visible. "Try to be calm," he said.

Jessica, obviously freaking out, said, “What the hell is happenin’?”

Bill tapped into his bond with his child. He felt no pain from her, just her anxiety, so he held her hand, trying to calm her.

She continued to squirm for several minutes and then finally seemed to stiffen and fall back to sleep. As she fell into her slumber again, Bill heard only one word from her mouth, “Jason.”

Bill checked his bond with his child again. She had returned to her day sleep and felt normal to him. No longer compelled into wakefulness by his child’s anxiety, Bill returned to his bed as well and fell back into his rest, wondering what could have happened to his child and why she seemed to think of Jason Stackhouse as she fell back into slumber. He was determined to look into it as soon as he rose.

Jason woke up about 15 minutes after the spell had been completed.

“How do you feel?” Sookie asked, both concern and relief clear on her face.

Jason thought for a second and then answered, “Fine. I feel better than I did when I woke up this morning, that’s for sure.” He sat up on the couch and looked at the IV a bit warily.

“Just fluids, like I talked about,” Jesus assured. “As soon as the bag is done, I’ll take it out.” Jesus checked Jason’s vitals again. “Everything seems normal. The vitals are just like they were before we did the spell.”

“Cool,” Jason said. “Like I said, I feel fine, maybe a little tired, like after I wake up from a long nap, but otherwise normal.”

Sookie let out a big sigh of relief and hugged Jason to her.

Looking at Jesus, Jason spoke up, “But dude, could I get this thing out now? I kind of am freaked out by needles in me.” He looked down at the I.V. in his arm squeamishly.

Jesus laughed. “Yeah, you have probably had enough, and you seem good.” He carefully pulled out the I.V. and then put a bandage over the wound.

“Do you feel any different, you know, without the blood?” Lafayette asked.

Jason again paused to assess himself, “Nah. I feel like I did before. I guess I’ll just have to wait until I see Jessica to know if any of the feelings I was having are still there.”

“So there’s no bolt of lightning telling you what you feel?” Sookie asked ruefully, wondering why it couldn’t be that easy.

“Sorry, Sook,” Jason answered.

“Oh well,” she sighed. “At least now, you’ll be able to explore how you feel the old-fashioned way—using your own mind.”

“For what that’s worth,” Lafayette joked.

Jesus rose and looked at Sookie. “You ready for this?”

“Yep,” Sookie answered, “more than ready.”

Chapter 12: Into the Fire

A/N: The title of this chapter comes from the song "Into the Fire" by Thirteen Senses.

Sookie stood in the middle of the circle as Lafayette and Jesus sat as they had before, a new cauldron of fresh ingredients placed between them.

"Ready?" Lafayette asked this time.

"Wait," Jason said. "Be sure to sit down first, Sook. That first bolt of pain will knock you down otherwise."

"Good idea," Sookie said smiling reassuringly at her brother. "Do it," Sookie said, her voice quivering slightly as she looked at Jesus and Lafayette.

"And don't stop no matter what," Jason added.

"No matter what," Sookie whispered, trying to gather all her courage together.

Jesus began crushing the mixture into the cauldron as he'd done before.

Sookie glanced at the clock. It read 4:14 p.m., still more than two hours before sunset. She thought about the two vampires whose blood would soon be eliminated—or as Jesus described it, burned—from her body. She hoped Jesus was right that they wouldn't feel any pain; perhaps they wouldn't even wake up, she tried to tell herself, suddenly wondering if she should wait until the next day to make sure Jessica was okay after the spell. She shook her head. Despite the fact that she loved them, she had to do this, and she didn't want either of them to have a chance to try to talk her out of it.

In the end, she had to love herself more than she loved them, or she would always wonder and never be certain of herself. If she was ever to be in any kind of healthy relationship,

she knew that she had to do this. She owed it to all three of them, and even Alcide or another potential partner for herself out there. It couldn't all be about the blood, and she'd soon know how deeply her love really went for the two vampires. She tried not to let herself hope for one over the other. She needed to be smart and remain neutral.

“Ready?” Jesus asked Lafayette, disturbing Sookie’s reverie.

Sookie shook a bit, remembering her previous time in a magical circle when Marnie had tried to burn her to death. Now she was facing a different kind of burning. Sookie inhaled deeply and looked at Jason for strength as Lafayette and Jesus started chanting.

At first, Sookie felt nothing, but suddenly it felt like her whole body was warming up.

She doubled over, feeling the most intense pain of her life. She felt like the breath had been knocked out of her body, and suddenly she was as feverish and weak as she had been when she'd gotten pneumonia as a child.

She closed her eyes and tried to focus on anything else other than the pain. For some reason, the face of Gran was the first thing she thought of, and she held onto that as the pain got even worse.

Jason looked at his sister with concern as Lafayette and Jesus continued to chant.

Sookie was now writhing in agony, certain that she was going to die at any minute. She tried to control her breathing as the pain shifted from burning to more of an ache, but she soon lost all control and curled into the floor.

Ten minutes later, Lafayette and Jesus looked at each other anxiously but continued to chant. They'd been chanting for over fifteen minutes by that time, and Sookie's pain showed no signs of diminishing.

Long before this, Sookie had lost track of time as her body swayed to the pain that had become her whole existence. Her brother, after several warning looks from Jesus, had stayed planted on the couch, his legs bobbing up and down nervously and his hands running through his hair constantly. Sookie was curled into the fetal position, jerking with a pain that seemed to travel all along her spine and then to her toes before curling upwards and traveling back to her head. She felt as if the sun had decided to take up residence in her stomach and like she'd be ripped apart.

She had no way of knowing this, but two vampires had been awoken a few minutes after the chanting had begun.

Bill woke again with a start and looked over at Jessica, who thankfully was still asleep. He realized that he was now experiencing the odd sensation that Jessica had spoken of. She'd been accurate. It did feel like some kind of force was looking for something in his body. It didn't hurt exactly, but it was quite uncomfortable. His not knowing what was happening made things worse. Obviously, this thing had affected both himself and his child, but it didn't feel like the necromancer's curse to him.

As with Jessica, the force seemed to travel through him, and he jostled as it moved, unable to get up. A few minutes after it started, he felt the force latch on to something in his body. Bill tensed, and he realized what was happening as he felt his connection to Sookie sever and then disappear. He fell into his slumber moments after.

Eric, alone in one of his safe houses, had awoken the exact moment that Bill had. Of course, he had no way of knowing whether any other vampires were experiencing what he was. It began as an odd sensation, like an electric current traveling around his body, and then came the pain. He'd been tortured many times in his long life, and the only pain that he could compare this to was the few minutes he'd spent with Russell, burning in the sun after Sookie's blood had lost its protective power over him.

Amidst the pain, he tried to think logically. Being tortured before had taught him to compartmentalize as a coping mechanism. He tried to concentrate. He wondered if the necromancer had somehow returned into another medium as Antonia had before, but he wasn't being compelled to seek out the sun. He felt more like he was burning from within although no marks were present on his body. His infallible internal clock told him that it was two hours and five minutes until sundown. He wondered if the spell would end then and resolved to endure the pain as he always had before. He would hold on for Sookie, so that he could protect her, so that he could try to win her heart fully—try to deserve her if she would let him.

Upon thinking of the woman he knew he loved, Eric's pain lessened to some degree for a split second, but then he began to sense the energy bolt traveling through him, as if it were locked on to something, almost like the pain had a purposeful meaning.

Right after this realization, he was struck by an especially hard jolt of pain right in the space that housed the thread—the bond—connecting him to Sookie.

He stiffened, but held onto the cord that held her blood to his, the cord of their new bond. Two years ago if someone had told him that he'd be holding on to a human so tightly, he would have denied it fervently. The fact that he could love at all had shocked the hell out of him at

first. Now, he twisted in his bed and put his whole mind to keeping hold of his magic in her body.

He was truly frightened for the first time in his long life, frightened that the fairies may have returned for her or that she was clinging to her life somewhere. So he refused to let go of their bond despite the fact that his struggle was causing him intense pain. He used all the power he had over his blood to hold to hers, certain that if he didn't, she would slip away from him. Yet as he tried to grip the bond more and more tightly, the agony grew worse and worse. He closed his eyes, as he ordered all the magic in his body to flood toward his bond with Sookie. His magic held to the bond even more tightly than before, and the magic of his blood and the bond seemed to become infused with a bright white light, which helped him keep his grip. He held on and held on, determined to make it to sunset and then to somehow go to her.

At 6:22 p.m., three minutes before the sun finally set, Eric struggled to rise, exhausted from his more than two-hour ordeal. For the first time, he noticed blood around his ears and nose. He was dressed in only a pair of track pants, but he didn't care. He slumped over, waiting right next to the door of his day chamber with his cell phone in his hand, waiting for the sun to fall.

As soon as the sun was down, Eric managed to open the door of his chamber and climb the steps that led outside. He was sluggish, but he had to find Sookie. He knew that he couldn't fly or run to her, and he also knew that he would be unable to drive himself. He opened his cell phone and called Pam.

She answered on the first ring, with concern clear in her voice. "Master, what is wrong. I feel you are in pain!"

Eric cut her off, “Get here, now!” He slammed his phone shut and slumped outside his home, waiting for his child. He could barely stand as he waited for her, but he was relentless in his hold of the bond; he wouldn’t let her go again, especially not now, not now that he knew that he loved her—that he’d been able to acknowledge it to her as well as himself. The stubborn fairy might not choose him over that pompous ass of a king Bill, but he damned sure wasn’t going to lose her presence in his world for another year, or worse, forever.

Pam’s brakes squealed as she pulled her minivan up his driveway six minutes later. As soon as she saw him, she bolted to him, concerned for his safety. She’d felt his pain since she had risen, but had never seen him look as tortured as he did now. She looked him over for wounds, noticing only blood dripping from his ears and nose as if he’d had the bleeds.

“What is it, master?” she asked as she reached him and grabbed his body to hold up next to her own.

“Sookie,” Eric said weakly. “Have to get to her.”

Pam sped into action for the sake of her master, a master whose forgiveness she was still desperate to earn. “Where?” was all she asked as she got Eric into the car and zoomed to the driver’s side.

“Bon Temps” was all Eric could manage.

As Pam drove like the proverbial bat out of hell, Lafayette and Jesus continued their chanting, now exhausted after more than two hours. Sookie was still in the circle and still in obvious pain; her body was covered with sweat, her hair matted to her forehead. More than once, Jesus had wondered if they should just stop and hope to revive her with the defibrillator, but they had kept going.

Jason was now sitting just outside the circle, with tears flowing freely down his face, watching his sister's torment. He glanced at Jesus and Lafayette, both also covered with sweat. Their eyes were closed as they grasped each other's hands. He could do nothing but pray that his sister would live through what was happening to her. Every once in a while, he'd said the words, "Don't stop," aloud when he saw Jesus or Lafayette looking especially tired.

Eric was able to direct Pam to Lafayette's home through signals and grunts, the pain getting harder for him to bear as he got closer to Sookie. Despite its being night now, the bleeding continued from his ears and nose, and blood was escaping from his eyes now too, laying tracks down his cheeks and bare chest. He was crying.

Pam screeched to a stop in front of Lafayette's house and pushed on her horn, cursing the fact that car horns had become so damned wimpy sounding. She zoomed over to Eric's side and pulled her master up to his feet. She had to rest almost all of his considerable weight onto herself as she practically carried him to the door.

As soon as she reached it, she pounded, sensing four humans and a shit load of magic inside. One of the humans was definitely Sookie, and Pam also recognized the scents of the others as Sookie's useless brother Jason, Lafayette, and his witch boyfriend Jesus. She took a split second to think about how much she would love to kill the two witches for their part in her curse despite the fact that it had been lifted by either Antonia or Marnie's death two nights before. But she remembered her master's command and put the thought out of her mind.

Jason barely registered the horn sounding, but once the heavy pounding started, he rose and went to the door, avoiding the circle and hoping that neither Lafayette nor Jesus would stop their work. Sookie, her eyes closed, was now convulsing in the center of the circle.

As Jason opened the door, he tried to comprehend the strange sight in front of him. Pam, dressed in what looked like pajamas, was holding up Eric, who had on only track pants. Blood was flowing from Eric's nose, ears, and eyes, falling into lines that trailed as far south as the waist band of his pants.

"What the fuck?" Jason said, surprised by the sight in front of him.

"Let. Us. In." Eric growled weakly. He could feel that his invitation to enter had not been rescinded by Lafayette, but he needed his child's help to stand at this point, so he hoped Jason's invitation would be enough to help them pass through the magical barrier.

"Must. Help. Sookie," Eric muttered, hoping Jason would understand that she was in danger.

"Come in," Jason said after a moment's pause. Then he quickly added, "But don't do a damned thing to mess up the spell or step into the circle thing, or you will kill Sook!"

Pam had to pick up her master at this point, and she carried him into Lafayette's living room to a couch. She carefully avoided the circle drawn in the center of the room.

Pam took in what was happening quickly. Sookie was in the circle, and Lafayette and Jesus, now looking at the two vampires with trepidation, were chanting to the side of her. They looked exhausted, but Sookie looked near death.

"Don't!" Jason yelled as Eric tried to push himself toward Sookie.

Pam laid him onto the couch and moved to hold him back, surprised at the strength he could muster in this state.

"Explain," Eric managed weakly.

"Now!" Pam added when Jason paused. She noticed that neither Lafayette nor Jesus stopped their chanting.

Jason flinched, looking anxiously toward Sookie. “We decided to do this spell that would take away the vampire blood magic. I needed to get rid of Jessica’s blood, and Sookie wanted to get rid of Bill and Eric’s,” Jason gestured at Eric before continuing. “It worked on me like a charm. You have to go unconscious. That’s how you know it has worked, and it only took a few minutes on me. But when they tried it on her, something must have gone wrong. It’s been just like this for hours, and I don’t know what to do. If they stop, she’ll die. If I try to take her out of that circle, she’ll die. I think she’s dying now!” As he finished, his words had turned to sobs.

Eric, despite his agony, looked at Jason. His clear, sharp blue eyes cut through Sookie’s brother. He managed, “She wanted this?”

“Yes,” Jason answered still sobbing and not able to hold Eric’s gaze. “She wanted to know which of her feelings was real and which was because of the blood.”

Eric nodded, understanding finally why the string between Sookie and himself was being pulled upon. The magic that held their blood together was being threatened. His reaction had been to try to hold onto their connection, to try to use his side of the bond to keep her alive, to keep her with him, to keep her strong. But he’d inadvertently been causing the spell, which she had wanted, to slowly kill her. He knew in a split second what he had to do, but it was the hardest decision he had ever had to make.

He looked at Sookie, curled up and convulsing in pain, and then he let go of their bond.

Chapter 13: An Empty Spot

As soon as Eric let go of the bond, Sookie sunk into unconsciousness, and the two exhausted witches looked at each other with relief evident on their ashen faces.

Eric had also collapsed and was unconscious on the couch. The blood that had been flowing from his body freely now began to pool and stop.

Pam, Jesus, Lafayette, and Jason all looked at each other in silence for several moments before Jason went into the circle to gather his sister into his arms.

“Carry her to the bed,” Lafayette said, the exhaustion clear in his voice.

“I’m going to go check on her,” Jesus said. Though exhausted, his nurse instincts had obviously kicked in, and he took an I.V. kit in with him to the bedroom where Jason had taken Sookie.

Lafayette had also stood up and moved slowly toward the kitchen, his own fatigue showing. He brought a damp rag back from the kitchen and awkwardly handed it to Pam. “To clean him up,” he said in a whisper, pointing to Eric.

Pam didn’t know whether to kill everyone in the house or weep. She’d never seen her master asleep before. He was older and could stay awake longer than she could. She’d also never seen him so vulnerable. She crouched over his prone position and began to clean the blood from his face and chest.

Several minutes later, the blood was wiped off of Eric’s body although streaks were still clear on his pants despite the fact that they were dark grey. Jesus and Jason walked back into the room.

Lafayette asked them, “How is she?”

“She’s okay,” Jesus answered, as a stunned looking Jason stood silent at his side. “She’ll probably need to sleep a while, but I was able to start an I.V. on her, and her pulse is strong. She is clearly dehydrated, but she is going to be fine in a day or two, I think.”

“An IV?” Pam asked, knowing that her master would be concerned.

“Yes, it’s just fluids to make sure that she rehydrates. She may need a couple of bags, but with rest, she will be fine, though she may be tired for a while,” Jesus said.

Jesus and Lafayette sat back down on the floor, just outside the edges of the circle. Jason sat in the chair to the side of the couch. All four conscious beings in the house sat looking at Eric for a while before Jason finally spoke, “Hey, I got one of them TruBloods in my trunk, in my vampire safety kit.”

“Vampire safety kit?” Pam deadpanned looking from her master to Jason. “What the hell is that?”

“Standard issue,” remarked Jason. “Silver chain, stake, TruBlood—all the things you might need to assist or subdue a vamp.” Jason said this like he was reading it off of a cue card.

“Lovely,” Pam said, rolling her eyes and then looking back at Eric.

Jesus said, “Yes, Jason, you better get that for when he wakes up. I don’t know much about vampires, but he lost a lot of blood, and he will probably be pretty weak.”

“He’s never weak,” Pam said fiercely as she looked down at her master, even as a tear threatened to escape her own eye. She quickly recovered, “But the blood would be nice.” She looked at Jason and said the next word as if chewing it, “Thanks.”

Jason rose and left the house to retrieve the blood, seemingly grateful for something to do. He felt bad that his time going through the spell had been so much easier than Sookie’s.

As soon as the door closed behind Jason, Lafayette seemed to have been woken from a tired stupor, “Sookie bought some blood today too. It’s in the fridge if you needs more.” He looked at Eric, “Why do you think he fought so hard?”

His question wasn’t directed at anyone in particular, but Jesus continued the thought. “We were saying the spell for over two hours. The longest recorded time it has taken in the past was about fifteen minutes.”

Pam looked at them, “He was going through *that* for more than two hours?” She turned her eyes toward Eric, coming to realize for the first time that he must really love the fairy in the next room. She vowed in that moment to do whatever was necessary to protect Sookie for her maker’s sake. This, she hoped, would make up for her disobedience. After all, Pam reasoned in her head, Sookie was not so bad for a breather. She’d gone out to save her maker from burning next to Russell.

“How long will he be like this?” Pam asked Jesus, who seemed to know about what was going on more than the others.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “Like I said before, the spell has never taken this long, and there was no mention of a vampire ever trying to hold on to the blood connection like that.” Jesus looked at Eric with a kind of respect in his eyes. Whatever the cause of Eric’s attempt, Jesus was in awe of the vampire’s resilience even though it had caused things to be harder for Sookie. He was even more in awe of the fact that Eric had allowed the connection to be severed by his own choice as soon as he realized what was happening.

Jesus was certain that he would do the same for Lafayette, both fight for him to the point of physical debilitation and protect him even if it meant giving him up. He reached out to take his beloved’s hand at the thought and mouthed the words, “I love you,” to him.

Just as Jason came back in, Eric stirred slightly and then sat up abruptly, immediately looking into the circle for Sookie. Without a word, he rose and walked into the room where Sookie lay, still sleeping from her ordeal.

Jason looked a bit concerned until Lafayette said, “You better warm that thing up,” as he gestured to the bottle of TruBlood in Jason’s hand.

Eric knelt next to the bed where Sookie lay. He could no longer feel his blood inside of her, and her blood was gone from him too. The bond, too, was no more, but he felt a kind of void where it had been, an empty spot. However, even if he could no longer feel her, he could still smell her, and his body still ached for her. He, more than anything, wanted to crawl into the bed and hold her to him, but he refrained.

She had initiated the severing of the blood magic, the bond between them. He knew that she had done what she had deemed was necessary. As much as that decision was now killing him inside, he also knew that he could not interfere. He reached out and very lightly traced her hairline. Her beautiful blonde hair, so close in color to his own shade, was sticking to her forehead, a product of her profuse sweating. Eric reached his other hand up to his own hair and felt the dried blood there. “Two peas in a pod,” he whispered before leaning in closer to Sookie.

“It has never taken blood between us for me to love you, min kára. I will feel the same all the days I walk this earth. It is both my punishment and my reward, Little One.” Eric rose and began to back out of the room, never taking his eyes off of Sookie. “You will find me when you are ready,” he said, sounding more confident than he felt. “I will wait. I will hope.”

Only Pam could hear his words from the other room, and as soon as she saw her maker emerge from the room where Sookie was, she was in front of him, bent onto one knee in

humility. “I didn’t know, Master,” she said quietly to her maker. “I swear by my blood, which is your blood, that I will do everything I can to keep her safe.”

Eric looked down at his child, noticing the blood collected in the corners of her eyes. “It is fine, Pam,” he said to her. “You were right to try to stop me the other night. I forgot myself for a moment. I cannot very well protect her or you if I am finally dead, now can I?”

He bent down and raised his child into a hug, whispering so that only she could hear. “It is up to you to make sure that I don’t kill us all now that I have feelings. And I will *try* to listen.” He kissed her forehead.

She smiled up at him and then brushed a tear away from her eye before it could fall.

The humans in the room watched the vampires with curiosity, never having seen this kind of affection displayed between them before. Once again, Jason broke the silence, “Hey, I have this for you, man.”

Eric looked at Jason from over Pam’s shoulder, amusement clear in his face at being called “man” by Sookie’s brother. He smirked, but accepted the blood before he sat down on the couch, establishing control over the room without even trying. Eric downed the bottle in one long gulp.

Jesus looked at Eric with a mixture of curiosity and wonder. “Would you like another?”

Eric nodded. Truth be told, he was quite tired from the ordeal of the afternoon and night.

Pam sped into the kitchen and the ding of the microwave was heard soon after as she raced back into the living room with two more TruBloods in her hands.

Eric took them and began to drink as the others looked on. The ancient vampire moved his gaze around the room before settling on Jesus. “Tell me what happened,” he half questioned and half demanded.

Jesus looked at Lafayette a little nervously before answering, “Yesterday, we all were talking about the blood ties between vampires and humans. I told Sookie and Jason about a spell I’d come across in one of Marnie’s books that would sever the blood magic. Both chose to have this spell done.”

Lafayette continued for his boyfriend, more nervous than Jesus, “We’s had no idea that it would go so hard for her.”

Jesus got up and retrieved the book from across the room before handing it to Eric, the pages still opened to the spell and the description of blood magic that he had recounted to Sookie and Jason earlier.

Quickly, Eric read the page and closed the book. Deep in thought, Eric placed the book onto the couch beside him before speaking, “This is something Sookie felt she needed to do, yes?”

Lafayette and Jesus both nodded as Jason said, “We both did.”

Eric looked at the three and then spoke, “It is done. Now she will have her free will, and she cares about this more than anything else, I think. I made a tie with her in Dallas to try to counter Compton’s hold, but also to try to bring her to me,” he paused, “for reasons of my own.” He looked significantly at the humans in the room. “It was only *after* giving her my blood that I realized my error and that she would always doubt me because of it.”

He looked again around the room before continuing. “And my recent state of amnesia has surely left her confused about my,” he paused again, “feelings for her.”

Jesus noted that Eric’s tone was that of a rational businessman even as his eyes betrayed a deep sense of loss.

Eric kept speaking, “Regardless, now Sookie is completely herself, and she will be able to tell what is best for her without any influence from Compton.” He almost spit out the name.

He looked seriously at the Jason, Jesus, and Lafayette in turn. “She must not know that I was here this evening.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

Eric looked at Sookie’s brother, wondering if it wouldn’t be better just to glamour him right then. He decided against it for the moment and spoke. “The blood magic, as Jesus called it, was strong between Sookie and me. The book is right in that the severing of a blood tie is usually much easier. Tonight I felt that Sookie was in danger; I thought that she was being dragged off to the fairy realm again or that she was dying, so I used the connection to try to hold onto her. I have never heard of this kind of thing happening before, which is why I didn’t recognize that this spell was being used. I don’t fully understand why I was able to hold on to the bond for so long, but I can tell you that something in Sookie was also holding on to me just as strongly.”

“Then she should know that,” Jesus spoke up. “That kind of magic is something that can’t be ignored.”

“But ignore it you *will*,” Eric emphasized. “This is imperative. If Sookie’s reason for severing the blood magic within her was to start over with a clean slate, then this is what she must do. If she knows I was here and what happened this evening, then that might influence her. She must come to her own conclusions if she is to feel right about her life. You all know this,” he said, again looking around the room before settling his gaze on Jason.

Jason nodded, “He’s right.”

Happy with Sookie's brother showing some sense, Eric continued. "I do not know what happened with Bill's tie to Sookie or how long it took to sever, but he will likely make his way here tonight. He will no longer be able to use the tie to find her, but he will deduce that she is here." He spoke his next words to Jason, "Jessica will probably come too."

Jason nodded.

Eric continued, "They will likely be upset that the magical ties have been broken, but it is imperative that you not let either one in here tonight. Bill will probably seek another opportunity to get his blood into Sookie as soon as possible, and she cannot face him until she is stronger."

He looked again toward Jesus and Lafayette. "To this end, you must help her work on her fairy magic. It is powerful, but not consistent yet. She seems to be able to use it in dire situations, but not every time she needs it. If she could control it, she most certainly could have used it to stop Marnie in the parking lot of the Moon Goddess Emporium."

Eric continued, "She was able to harness it onto me to prevent me from killing Bill." He stiffened a bit, knowing that it was Sookie's love for Bill that had caused her to turn her magic onto him to save her first love. He wondered if Sookie would have been willing to kill him to save Bill, despite her emotional turmoil.

Eric looked down at his hands for a moment. Not for the first time, he was uncertain that Sookie would choose him. He flashed back to how empty his life had felt without her, an emptiness he didn't even know he had. He flashed forward to what his existence would be like without her. She was his light—literally and figuratively. He could continue to eke out a successful existence without her, but he no longer wanted to imagine that empty world for himself. He knew that if she were irrevocably lost to him, he would choose to meet the sun.

Jesus, Lafayette, and Pam caught Eric's momentary silence. All three were shocked to realize that Eric was worried that he would lose Sookie. Yet the vampire's actions still indicated that he was going to give her the space and time she needed to decide what she wanted on her own. In that moment, they saw the depth of love that the ancient vampire had for Sookie.

Eric continued, "She was also able to use the power of her fairy magic to break Marnie's spell two nights ago, correct?"

Jesus and Lafayette nodded.

"And she also shot that Maenad with it," Lafayette added.

"That I did not know," Eric chuckled, a look of amusement shining in his eyes.

"And she killed her meat tree too," Lafayette said for good measure.

The mirth became even more apparent in Eric's eyes for a moment. He shook his head before his serious countenance returned. "I know of her using it two other times, once to try to save Bill from Russell in Jackson, an act which alerted Russell to her power, unfortunately. And once to save my life."

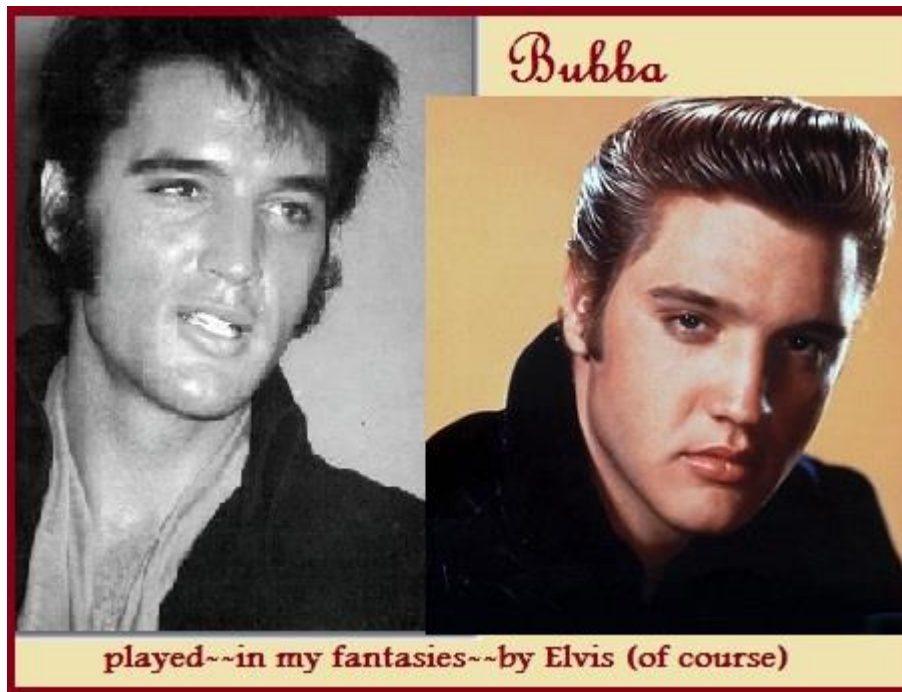
"She used it to shoot that bitch queen in Fairy Land too," Jason piped in.

"What?" Eric said interested.

Jason continued, happy to finally be able to contribute, "Yeah, them fairies wanted to keep her there so that she couldn't give her blood to no more vamps, but she shot the crazy bitch in charge with her microwave hands and then ran away."

Eric's amusement at Sookie's moxie was mixed with his concern over the fairy problem. He knew that at least one fairy, the one he had killed, had pursued her since she had returned to this realm. He would have to arrange for her to be protected now that the bond was severed and he couldn't do it himself. And since it was Sookie, he knew that this protection would have to be

either invisible or palatable to her. “Good luck with that, Northman,” he thought to himself. He wondered if Bubba might not be the answer before he continued speaking to the people he now recognized and respected as Sookie’s closest supporters. He would try to work with them, especially now that he could no longer feel her.



“So, clearly she can harness this power at times, but I would like her to be able to call upon it at will.” Eric looked again at Jesus. “Do you know anything about fairy magic? I can smell what you are.”

Jesus looked disconcerted but then was excited that Eric might—at least at some point in the future—be able to tell him more about the being that inhabited part of him, the demon. Jason looked at Jesus curiously.

Jesus answered Eric’s question. “I know that there is such a thing as fairies, but I don’t know much about them. I can ask my grandfather. He might know more. And Marnie had many magic books that I could look through if I had them.”

“Good,” Eric said, contemplating his next move. “I assume you had to go to the witch’s shop to get this book.” Eric thumbed the volume next to him.

Lafayette nodded.

“How did you manage? Bill arranged for everything to be moved.”

Jason puffed up, proud of his role in the previous afternoon’s raid on the Moon Goddess Emporium, “I ordered these movers to desist and told them that there was an official investigation going on in drug trafficking at the business.”

Eric and Pam both chuckled before Eric turned to his progeny. “Pam, get someone over there to clear it out and have all the books brought here.”

Jesus looked up in surprise before Eric turned to him, “I will pay you to go through these books to look for information that will help Sookie develop her powers. You may tell her that Jason used his police connections to have the books brought here if you wish. She may want to help you go through them when she knows what you are looking for.”

Lafayette laughed, knowing that Sookie *would* want to help, and was surprised that the vampire whom he’d been scared shitless of the year before seemed to know his friend so well.

Pam immediately stepped outside, already dialing her phone and issuing orders on the way out.

Jesus had been working up to a question for Eric for several minutes and finally found the courage to ask it, “Do you know at all how you did it?”

Eric raised his brow as he looked at Jesus, “Did what?”

“How you managed to hold on to the bond for so long? What it was in Sookie that you think held on to the bond as well?”

Lafayette and Jason also looked at Eric, the curiosity clear in their eyes.

“As I said before, it was a strong connection,” Eric answered slowly contemplating what and how much to say. “It was much stronger than it should have been.” He paused, took an unnecessary breath, and decided to confide in these people, whom he trusted to take care of Sookie.

“We established a blood bond only a few days ago when I was still without my memories. A bond is much stronger than a blood tie.”

Jesus nodded, “Yes, the book helped us figure that out.”

Eric nodded and then added, “Yes, I have read what your book offered, and it was a good start, but it did not mention that this kind of bond must be the choice of *both* the human and the vampire in order to work, and the blood must be shared during a very close timeframe.”

“The choice of *both*,” Jesus whispered, taking in what Eric was saying.

Eric decided in that moment to like the young demon hybrid in front of him. Perhaps, he’d even introduce him to Catalides. He respected that the young man had not said his words as a question, but had spoken them as a statement.

Eric nodded to the young brujo demon. “Yes, it must be a choice freely made by both human and vampire. The magic protects both parties in this case, whereas in a tie, the blood protects only the vampire.

In the case of a bond, the magic must be entered into with premeditation by all involved.” Eric looked around to make sure everyone had understood the implications of his statement, that Sookie, whether she knew what was happening fully or not, had chosen *him* in the moment she’d bonded with him.

“The blood can also tell if there is coercion or force. The bond is not solidified if both parties are not certain. We had,” he paused a bit to make sure everyone was listening carefully,

“a very strong bond considering we had only mutually exchanged blood once. I was able to feel her emotions much more intensely than I thought I’d be able to.”

“And you entered her dream,” Jesus said.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed, not surprised that Sookie had trusted the people in that room with her experience. “She called me, and I was able to come, going against all knowledge about vampire-*human* bonds.”

Jesus posited, “So you think that there was something in Sookie’s *fairy* nature that was helping you hold on to the bond.”

Eric nodded, “That is my guess.” He smiled sincerely, a look that no one else in the room had ever expected to see from him. “I once told her that there were two Sookie Stackhouses—the human and the fairy. I think that the fairy wanted to hold on as tightly as I did.”

The others in the room were trying to take all this in when Eric tensed, “A car has just turned from the road.”

Immediately, Pam came back inside, “Master, the arrangements are made.” She looked at Eric with some concern in her eyes, “You heard the car?”

“Yes, it is likely Bill.” Eric quickly began issuing orders. “Pam, you will stay in the open. Make sure that Bill thinks that I sent you here to check after I felt my *tie* with Sookie break. Do not let him know that I am here, and say nothing about us being bonded. And do not, under any circumstances, allow anyone inside. Bill may,” he said as he gestured toward the humans, “try to glamour them, but it is imperative that neither Compton nor his progeny come inside and see Sookie in her current state. I will remain with her just in case.”

“You,” Eric said, gesturing toward the three other men in the room, “tell Compton the truth about the spell. Tell him that it was Sookie’s decision, and tell him that she is resting from the ordeal. Do not say more than is necessary.” He directed his last statement towards Jason. “If you are asked about my scent, say that I was here earlier and have gone. Bill’s sense of smell is not that developed, so he will believe you.”

He heard the car pull up and park in the driveway and retreated silently to the room where Sookie was located, hiding himself in the shadows since the curtains would allow someone to gaze inside. He stared at the woman he loved more than ever. He’d been monitoring her steady breathing from the other room. He could not deny the comfort that her mere presence gave him.

For about the twentieth time since he’d awoken on Lafayette’s couch, he couldn’t help but to search for the bond he’d become quickly attached to in the last few days. But it still wasn’t there; only the empty space remained.

He stilled as he heard a knock at the door and recognized Bill’s and his child’s scents. He was confident that his own child would handle the situation.

Chapter 14: Visiting Hours

Bill stood outside of Lafayette's door; he was furious at Sookie for breaking their tie. But he needed to be cautious. He smelled Pam and Eric as well as both witches, in addition to Jason Stackhouse and Sookie.

After he had risen for the night, he had immediately felt for his blood tie with Sookie, quickly confirming that it was indeed gone. Jessica had been hysterical upon rising, and he had been forced to waste precious time trying to calm her. She had thought that Jason had been killed. Bill had had to explain the nature of blood magic and ties to her and had calmed her down by telling her that he thought the ties had been severed by both Sookie and Jason, but that they were most likely alive and well.

At this point, Bill had had to waste even more valuable time trying to stifle Jessica's hurt and anger at Jason for breaking their tie after Jessica had saved his life—twice. Bill couldn't agree more. He loved Sookie, but he was frustrated. Why wouldn't she just accept their tie?

In addition to loving her, he wanted her for her blood and for her skills as a telepath. He had also found her to be a somewhat interesting companion, someone that he could easily mold to become his perfect mate. He had thought, after the last time he'd saved her life by giving her his blood and especially after she had clearly chosen to save his life by attacking Eric, that she had finally forgiven him for following the orders of his queen. After all, now that he was king, Sookie could not be taken from him by anyone if she chose to take her rightful place by his side.

He had been mildly concerned that Eric in his incapacitated state might take over in Sookie's affections, and he chided himself for his momentary lapse in letting his sheriff go instead of staking him, but he knew that Sookie would never forgive him if he killed Eric—at least if he did so overtly.

Bill did not wish to take Sookie by force, at least not unless it became absolutely necessary. He needed to assess the situation and then come up with an appropriate strategy to get her back under his influence.

“No,” he thought. It was better to have Sookie see his compassion in sparing Eric, to have her feel *obligated* to him and to have her soften toward him after the debacle of the previous year when Eric had forced his connection with Sophie-Anne to come to light. Eric continued to be a thorn in his side, though two nights before he’d proven he could be a useful one. All Bill had to do was convince Sookie that now that Eric was back to himself, he was still the vampire she had hated all along.

In retrospect, he was glad that he’d had to take the time to calm Jessica. His own rage had diminished in the ninety minutes since nightfall. He knew that the best way to approach Sookie was to do so reasonably and calmly.

Now that she had severed the tie, he wondered what he would have to do to convince her that it had to be reestablished immediately. He planned to start this mission that very night and knew that he could get her to listen to reason by telling her of all the dangers she would be susceptible to if she wasn’t connected to him by blood. After a little thought, he was even excited, knowing that Eric would no longer have a tie to her either. He’d be able to get Sookie to agree to the tie this time, and the taint of the Rattray incident and the compelling force of Northman’s thousand-year-old blood would not be factors. Bill optimistically thought that Sookie may have even initiated the severing to get rid of Eric’s blood specifically. Now, she could be solely Bill’s again.

Bill looked around as he knocked on the door, noticing several cars, including Pam's minivan. Jessica sighed, and he looked at his child compassionately. "It will all be fine," he said to a pouting Jessica.

Bill was quite unhappy, however, by the presence of Northman and his child.

He was even more unhappy when Pam opened the door.

"Well, if it isn't King William," she drawled in a tone that was the opposite of respectful.

"Pam," Bill said stiffly. "What are you doing here? And where is Eric?"

"Oh, my master sent me here to check on his property and interests," Pam said, continuing her disrespectful tone.

Bill recoiled slightly, but carried on, "I asked where Eric is; I smell him here."

"He's busy tonight, making up for lost time now that he has his memories back. I believe that you're scenting that he was here earlier, but he was told to leave by the owners of this," she paused and looked around, "dwelling."

Bill looked at Pam, half smirk and half snarl on his face. Even though Pam knew that vampires did not age, Bill looked at least five years older since he'd become king, and he now had a very unfortunate haircut as well. "Unhappy *is* the king," she thought to herself.

"I know Eric is here, Pam," Bill insisted. "His scent is everywhere."

At this point, Lafayette, Jesus and Jason came around from the back of the house, a move that they'd strategized as the car had pulled up. This way, none of them would be inside to invite Bill or Jessica in if the vampires attempted to use glamour.

Immediately, Jessica sped to Jason as he approached the porch. Jason felt his heart lurch as he looked at the beautiful vampire in front of him, knowing that he'd now have to face the music.

The others turned their gazes curiously toward the pair. Pam stepped outside and on to the porch, closing the door firmly behind her.

Inside Eric smiled and listened to the events unfold.

Her face full of hurt, Jessica asked Jason, “Why would you do this? I saved your life twice, Jason Stackhouse, and I don’t appreciate just bein’ got rid of.”

Jason tried to determine what he was feeling for the redhead in front of him. He still found her beautiful and exciting, but he was happy that his overwhelming need to touch her had been replaced by a kind of calm affection. He could work with that.

“Jess,” Jason said, his tone screaming apology, “I found out about this tie breaking spell, and I thought I should do it for Hoyt—since he’s my best friend and all. Also, now we will know for sure if we want to be together because we really like each other and not just because of the blood. This way, we can take things slow if we want to.” Jason brought his hand up to caress Jessica’s cheek affectionately. Bill could only hope that his reunion with Sookie would go this well.

Jessica’s response was unexpected by everyone, especially given Jason’s affectionate gesture.

“But I don’t want slow things any more, and I don’t want no relationship,” she said, looking like a child getting ready to have a temper tantrum. “You are supposed to be a good screw and a good meal to me. No strings! That’s how you do things, Jason! That’s how everyone in town—including Hoyt—talks about you!”

Jason’s face betrayed the hurt he felt. He took a step away from Jessica and decided to man up. “Listen, Jess. I like you, but Hoyt’s been my best friend since I can remember. I ain’t riskin’ all that for somethin’ casual. I may have been that man in the past but not now.”

Jessica looked at Jason, surprised that he was turning down the casual and most definitely sexual relationship she was offering.

Jason continued, “Jess, I appreciate you savin’ my life and all. I will never forget that, and I’ll always try to help you if I can, but I don’t want to do casual no more.” As he’d been sitting and waiting for Sookie to fall unconscious during the spell, he’d promised her and himself that he’d work to get his act together, and casual sex with a vampire who just happened to be his best friend’s ex was not the way to do it. “I’m sorry, Jess,” he added.

Jessica lowered her head and seemed to be pouting. “*This* is when you choose to get a moral conscience, Jason Stackhouse?” she raged at him. Then she turned to Bill. “I’m goin’ to find dinner!” She raced away at vampire speed while Jason looked on in shock.

“I thought she really liked me,” Jason said almost to himself.

“Guess not,” Lafayette couldn’t hold back his sarcasm.

Pam smirked and winked at Lafayette; maybe she could learn to like the witches, after all. Maybe she could even get them to curse Bill so he’d have to keep his bad haircut forever. She grinned wickedly at all the fun she could have if she had two witches on her side.

Inside, Eric was happy that there was one fewer vampire to contend with outside. He looked at Sookie and hoped that her peaceful sleep would continue through the night.

Bill looked into the darkness, following the path of his child long after the others on the porch could, at least with the exception of Pam. He chided himself for not teaching Jessica more patience, but he was also proud of the progress she *had* made, and he was a bit perturbed by Stackhouse’s reasoning.

He turned his thoughts back to the reason for his visit and addressed Pam again, “I told you earlier that I could smell Eric’s scent everywhere. Where is he?”

“Not here,” Pam answered again.

Lafayette piped in at this point with his predetermined line. “He was here to check on Sookie earlier, but we’s didn’t want him botherin’ her, so we sent him away.”

Not accepting the explanation yet, Bill asked, “What about *her*? Why is *she* here?” He gestured toward Pam.

Jesus spoke up. “She came with Eric.”

“And why is she *still* here?” Bill pursued.

It was Jason who spoke up, “I’m the one that asked her to stay for a while. I wasn’t sure how Jessica might take the tie-breaking thing, and I thought that Pam might help her if she was upset.”

Bill still looked skeptical. “Pam, you are not known for your compassion. Why would you agree to stay for this reason.”

“I did not,” Pam said as if she were currently being tied down with silver. “It was punishment from my maker. He is still angry that I disobeyed him the other night and thought it would be funny for me to play counselor to a fledgling vampire and an idiot human.” She looked right at Jason as she said the last line.

Bill considered this for a moment before seeming to accept the explanation. He said, turning to Lafayette now, “I want to see Sookie. I wish to check on her safety.”

“Oh, she is perfectly fine, my king,” Pam said with a mild flourish just this side of insubordination. “I just saw her myself. She is sleeping off the effects of a little magic.” She winked at Lafayette and Jesus.

Bill looked at the two witches again. “You performed a severing, did you not?” His polite façade was betrayed by the slight twitching of his eye.

“Yes,” Jesus answered, stepping forward a bit, unconsciously placing himself between Bill and Lafayette. “Sookie and Jason both decided to eliminate the blood magic in them so that they could start afresh. Jason, as you can see, recovered quickly. Sookie’s experience was a bit more difficult since there were two vampires that she was tied to, but she will be fine, I assure you. She is resting now, and I am monitoring her.”

Bill remembered that Lafayette’s boyfriend was a registered nurse. “At least that’s something,” he thought to himself even as he worked to hide his frustration over Sookie eliminating their tie.

“Even so,” he said trying to capture Lafayette’s eyes so that he could subtly glamour him into an invitation, “I would like to make sure that Sookie is being taken care of—personally.”

Lafayette, warned by Pam not to make eye contact with Bill, looked down at the patio table in front of him and busied himself as if he were going to clean up some left-out drinks from earlier in the day.

Jesus answered for his boyfriend, calling upon his most professional voice, “Sookie needs her rest right now. I’m sure that she will want to talk to you later this week, but for now, I think that one visitor,” he gestured towards Pam, “was enough.”

Pam continued to look bored before acknowledging that she’d heard her name. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through some text messages. “Yeah, fairy okay—check. A simple blood tie severing—check, check. Blah, blah, blah. Just another day in the fucked up life of Sookie Stackhouse. The *only* amusing part of the evening was when the witches wouldn’t let my master in to see her; he was fit to be tied!” She winked at Lafayette and Jesus. “Seriously, Bill,” Pam’s sarcasm was in high form, “what is it about her that has both you and my maker so

damned enthralled? He was just as anxious to check on her as you are.” Pam rolled her eyes. “I cannot believe that she is *that* good in bed.”

Bill snarled at Pam. “You will show respect to my . . .” he paused. He couldn’t say ‘future wife’ without putting his cards out on the table. Instead, he continued, “. . . friend. In fact, Sookie has shown great loyalty to all vampires. Of course, as king of Louisiana, I must ensure the safety of such an asset to our world.”

Pam rolled her eyes again before saying, “Fine, fine, fine.” Just then, she received a text from Eric, asking her to relay that Nan Flanagan had been seen in the area. Eric wasn’t certain if this was true, but he was expecting Nan—herself a very old vampire of over 800 years—to be paying a visit to both Compton and himself soon. He was still trying to figure out how to deal with the Nan problem since she’d seen Sookie use her power. This was yet another reason why he wanted Sookie to hone her fairy gifts. Inevitably, others would want to take her as theirs. If she could stop them, she would keep herself safe. So far, he had just seen Sookie’s power stun others who were threatening her, except in the case of when her power hit him. But he felt that she could be even more powerful if she worked to develop her light.

Eric had a hard time finding words to describe how Sookie’s hitting him with her light had felt, and he knew over 100 languages, some of them not used for almost a millennia. Certainly the power had stopped him, but it hadn’t really hurt him in any way. If anything, Eric had felt clearer than he ever had, and the memories he’d lost came spilling over him, followed in quick succession by his memories of his days with Sookie. Her light had warmed him in a way that he’d never felt from an enemy.

This is what gave him hope that her shooting him with her magic had not been a testimony of her choice of Bill over himself. If that were the case, Eric felt that he would have

experienced pain from Sookie's blast as he'd seen Russell do the previous year. Russell had been sent twenty yards and had been in obvious pain because of Sookie's power. By contrast, Eric had, in a sense, been healed by Sookie's magic. He resolved to talk to the brujo demon about this the next chance he got. Maybe Jesus could find something to explain how Sookie had been able to break Antonia's spell in one of the witch's books.

From outside, Eric could hear the brilliance of his child as she spoke out loud while typing him a text message reply. "No, master," she typed as she rolled her eyes at being bothered with a task she seemingly thought was beneath her. "There has been no sign of Nan—the bitch—Flanagan here. And Jessica has come and gone, so may I leave now?" She looked up at Bill before she hit send, "Your majesty, have you seen our intrepid Ms. Flanagan tonight?"

Bill shook his head and asked the blonde vampire in front of him, "Why do you ask?"

She gestured down at her phone. "Eric texted that she has been seen in the area. He wants to make sure that I avoid her if I can." Pam finished her text with a flourish. "And King Bill hasn't seen or heard from her either." She hit send and put her phone back into the pocket of her black leather jacket, again turning her attention to her nails.

She noticed Bill become restless after the mention of Nan and once again marveled at Eric's ability to hone in on people's vulnerabilities.

Bill was thinking about what a bastard Eric was, checking on his child and warning her about Nan, but not informing his own king directly. Despite wanting to talk to Nan about the sheriff situation, he was also concerned about what Nan would do now regarding Sookie, whose powers had been on display to her. Bill knew that Nan was not above keeping secrets from the Authority if she was served by them, but he wondered what her play would be this time.

At the very least, she'd have questions for both Bill and Eric, and she'd want to talk to Sookie. If Sookie admitted that Bill had known about her nature for a long time, Nan would realize that Bill had been lying to her. She could then issue a warrant for his true death or at least have him removed from his office. Bill wouldn't accept either of those possibilities. Maybe it *would* be better for Sookie to lay low for a while, and if she were tired from the severing of their blood tie, then she might stay put where she was instead of returning to her own home, which any vampire could enter since Eric had bought it. He once again thought about the selfishness of the Viking in this act. Eric didn't understand how to protect Sookie as he did.

Bill turned back to Lafayette, who was still working to straighten up the porch. "Lafayette, given this information and Nan's interests in Sookie, it might be better if she stayed here with you for a few days. Because of Sheriff Northman," he snorted, glaring at Pam, "she is vulnerable in her own home since vampires can enter there at will."

Bill knew that his words would paint him as the unselfish hero and Eric as the villain, and he hoped that Sookie's friends would at least report his actions and behavior to her. He felt confident that she would be his—this time *only* his and by her own choice—very soon.

"I will wish you good night then. Please tell Sookie that I came by and inquired about her health. Lafayette, Jesus, Jason." Bill bowed slightly to each of the men before giving Pam a curt nod, "Pam." With that, he walked off the porch. Pam also made a show as if she were leaving, once again taking out her phone and texting as she walked towards her car. By the time Bill's car had disappeared into the distance, Pam had sent two texts to Chow and had played a quick game of Sudoku.

Chapter 15: A String of Light

As the four re-entered the house, Eric was once again standing beside Sookie's bed. He couldn't stop himself from taking a deep, unneeded breath. He marveled at the fact that he was comforted by Sookie's scent and presence alone. Quickly, he zoomed into the bathroom and prepared a warm, wet rag so that he could bathe her forehead and face. He couldn't stand seeing her hair matted like that and knew that Sookie would feel better if she woke up a bit fresher. He glanced at himself in the mirror and saw the red stains in his own hair, left by the blood from his earlier bleeding. He couldn't help but wish that he could settle both himself and Sookie into a warm bath together, but he knew that he'd have to be patient. Luckily, patience was something he'd perfected long ago.

As he walked back into Sookie's room, he noticed that Jesus was checking her vitals and the drip of the IV.

Jesus looked up and spoke to Eric in a comforting voice, like he might to a husband next to his wife's bedside. "She is still doing well. She'll probably sleep through the night."

Eric walked over to the bed and sat down gently so as not to stir Sookie. He began to lightly clean Sookie's skin with the warm rag, marveling at her beauty.

Jesus took in the tenderness on Eric's face and decided to leave the vampire alone to his task. Before he could leave the room, however, Eric's voice, low and calm, stopped him.

"I appreciate what you were willing to do for Sookie and her brother today. As you know, the cost of magic can be high—even for the one performing the spell—if there is a mistake."

Jesus nodded solemnly, "Yes."

Eric continued, “I believe that Bill will continue to try to see her and will work to get her to take his blood, but I don’t think he will try to force her, at least not *yet*. He has, however, used manipulation in the past.”

Jesus nodded again, saying, “Yeah, she told us about the Rattrays earlier.”

It was Eric’s turn to nod. “I would have her choose me on her own.” Eric couldn’t believe that he was admitting this to the young demon, but he was generally a good judge of character and felt that Jesus would be a valuable and loyal friend to Sookie and maybe even an asset to himself.

Eric continued cleaning Sookie’s brow, even as he continued his admissions, “I do not know what she will do. Since I have known Sookie, she has been pursued by many, but she is yet to recognize her own worth. I was one of those pursuers and offered her my protection before I lost my memories, but I went about it in the wrong way. Thus, she didn’t understand that I would have protected her without—what do you call them?—oh yes, without *strings* attached.”

Jesus spoke softly in return, “I don’t know Sookie well yet, but I don’t think she’d agree to ‘strings’.”

“No,” Eric let out a chuckle, “she denied me quite adamantly. She hates—I have come to find out—any kind of manipulation.”

“So you think Bill was using his blood to manipulate her?”

Eric nodded. “It is a testament to her strength of character that she understood innately that there was something wrong and sought out an end to the tie. Generally, the human host to a vampire’s blood—especially given the amount that Compton had given her—is easily influenced

by the vampire, but Sookie is different. She always has been.” He looked down at the sleeping woman with a look Jesus could only interpret one way; Eric was proud of her.

Jesus couldn't help himself from venturing, “Did *you* manipulate her?”

Eric looked over at Jesus. Again, he registered that he was really starting to like Sookie's choice in friends; like her, they had courage. “I tried once,” Eric admitted with a chuckle. “But as always, nothing with Sookie has ever happened as I thought it would.” His tone grew serious, “I believe, however, that she feels I have tried to manipulate her at every turn. I also believe that some of that thinking has been caused by the influence of Compton.” Eric's voice grew low. “Now, for the first time, Sookie will be able to see me without his voice in her head and his blood in her body. Perhaps, that alone is reason enough to hope.”

Jesus nodded.

Eric brightened a bit, “Sookie is also not a fan of what she calls highhandedness, and I'm afraid that I *am* guilty of this at times. I will have to work hard to avoid being this way—at least not so much—if I am to earn her trust and affection fully. Meanwhile, I will try to make sure she is safe in a way that not even she could object to. And I will continue to vie for her against the likes of Compton and the Were Alcide Herveaux and maybe even her shifter boss too—that is, if she will allow me to do so now.”

Jesus grinned a bit, happy that his suspicion that Sam was a shifter had not been off base. Jesus's lips fell out of the smile, however, when he saw the look of fear in the eyes of the ancient vampire before him.

Almost too softly for Jesus to hear, Eric said, “I fear that, in the end, she will choose another. Several nights ago, I told her I loved her, and she told me that she loved Compton. At first, when my memories returned to me and when we were finally alone to talk, she wouldn't

even look at me. I knew, then, that she felt the loss of the Eric she had fallen in love with during my amnesia; she could not quite believe that he and I share the same feelings for her.”

Eric continued, “So I told her that I had given myself to her completely, and through the bond, I had felt that she had given herself to me as well. But then she said that she loved another also, and through the bond, I was able to *feel* her love for Bill. It was,” Eric paused for a moment, “difficult to have to feel this.”

He looked at Jesus. He saw that the young demon was observing him with the compassion of his profession.

Eric continued, “I am telling you these things because I want you to have the knowledge you need to research one more aspect of fairy magic for me.” Eric’s words flowed from him low and evenly, not betraying his emotions. “I have lived long enough to hear legends of wars between vampires and fairies. I have heard of powerful fairies that could use their magic to basically disintegrate their enemies.”

Jesus’s eyes grew wide, and he spoke up in a loud whisper, “Sookie wouldn’t want to be able to do that.”

Eric liked Jesus even more in that moment as he seemed willing to stand up to even Eric for his friend. Eric chuckled, “It’s okay, Jesus, this is not the magic I want you to explore or the power I want Sookie to learn. If she simply gets a handle on how to stun more effectively, she will give herself ample time to get away from danger, even from vampires if needed. No, I’m telling you this because I have never heard of fairy magic doing what Sookie’s magic did to me the other day. I was being controlled by Antonia, and I couldn’t stop myself from attempting to kill Compton. I could recognize that Sookie was there trying to prevent me from doing this, but I couldn’t fight against the necromancer’s hold. It was so strong that I even threw Sookie away

from me at one point, and I could have harmed her.” Eric looked down at Sookie remorsefully and paused for a moment, thankful that he’d caused her no lasting physical injury from that action.

He continued, “I saw Sookie use her power on an enemy once, and he was clearly hurt by her. I, on the other hand, was healed. The blast did cause me to stop attacking Bill, but I was not thrown away from him, nor was I rendered powerless, not even for a few moments. Her magic, for lack of a better word, restored me and seemed to absorb into my body; it even energized me to some extent.” He paused, again wondering how much he should say. However, if his theory was correct, then Jesus needed to know one more thing to do his research properly. “In fact, I think her magic somehow *fed* our bond with each other.”

Jesus’s eyes got a bit wider.

“Today, when I woke up, I felt the magic of your spell roving through my body. It seemed to be looking for something, and as soon as I thought of Sookie, the magic of your spell shifted toward our bond. The bond shouldn’t have held as it did, but it seemed to be buffered somehow by a white light, unlike anything I have ever heard about or experienced, and I was able to literally order my own blood to keep hold of her using that light. Again, this is not a vampire ability, and this light did not originate from me.”

“Is that also how you were able to get into her dream? Did this light help you then as well?” Jesus asked perceptively.

“Yes,” Eric said. “That is also unprecedented. Perhaps, it was the *combination* of her fairy magic and my vampire magic that allowed me to go to her dream and that held the bond together for so long. Or perhaps, it was her magic alone. Even when I accepted the severing and let go, I felt a brief resistance that was not coming from me before I felt the vampire bond

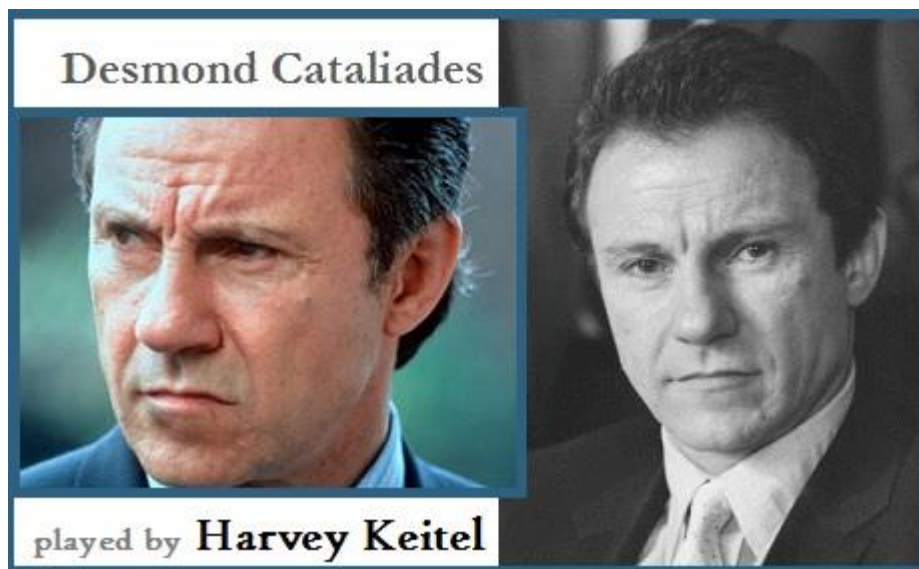
disappear. Again, none of these things have been heard of among my kind. I would like for you to see if you can find out anything about the different kinds of magic Sookie may be able to wield. Also, I would like for you to see if you can find out if a fairy and a vampire have ever been bonded before.

“How can I do all this?” Jesus asked. “I cannot imagine that I will learn much you don’t already know from Marnie’s books.”

Eric nodded, “Maybe not, but I will have Pam begin to collect other books for you to work through as well, including some from my late maker and some from a demon I know.”

Jesus perked up at this, anxious to hear anything about other demons.

Noticing Jesus’s excitement, Eric assured, “I will try to arrange a meeting between you and Mr. Cataliades as well; like you, he is part demon. He is actually my attorney for supernatural affairs, but he lives in New Orleans.”



Jesus nodded. The two left the room at the same time and rejoined the others. Eric spoke, again with all the authority of his one thousand years. “Pam, I will be staying here as long as I can and will go to ground at my closest safe house.” Pam nodded, knowing where Eric

meant. “You will need to go to Fangtasia and make sure everything is okay. Keep a sharp eye out for Nan, and do try to *avoid* her rather than confronting her about her cheap fashion sense,” he teased. “Also, monitor Bill.”

Eric looked at the three other men in the room warily, noticing Jason was yawning loudly. “For now, I actually agree with Bill that Sookie would be safer here, and by tomorrow, I will have guards in place to look out for her. Hopefully, she will not be bothered by them; however, I do intend to alert her to their presence.” He paused, “And there is one last thing that needs to be done.”

Jesus spoke up, anticipating Eric’s request, “You want to glamour us so that we cannot tell Sookie or even *think* about what happened tonight, don’t you?”

Eric nodded. “With Sookie’s telepathy, it would be impossible for you to keep your thoughts about tonight from her, and as I said before, the fact that her and my bond was so strong might influence her, and I want her choices to be completely her own. If she directly asks me about the bond and the effects of your spell on me, I will tell her the truth, but I want—*I need*—for her to be the one to initiate that discussion.

She needs to think through her choices now in the way that she had intended, without the influence of anyone else’s blood or bonds or thoughts. I have also told you that I think Bill will try to manipulate her into taking his blood again, and my opinion of him shouldn’t influence her choices either. Perhaps Bill will prove himself to be better than I think he is. Perhaps she will even find him to be the better choice for her once she considers all her options. Either way, your knowledge of what happened here tonight shouldn’t influence her. You may tell her that Bill and I both came by to make sure she was well if you wish, but beyond that, I’d like her to have her clean slate—at least until *she* decides to muddy it.”

The three men each agreed to be glamoured. They would remember everything, but wouldn't be able to think or talk about the night in specifics, especially where Eric's presence was concerned. Eric hated keeping secrets from Sookie, but he felt this was the only way to give her what she'd wanted. As Eric saw it, the glamour simply fixed a problem he'd inadvertently created.

He was surprised to realize that if she would have trusted him enough to tell him that she was planning to sever their bond before it happened, he wouldn't have tried to stop her. He also would never have tried to fight against the magical spell if he had known what it was for. Sookie had almost died *again*—and again inadvertently because of him. He would always be grateful for Lafayette and Jesus's determination. Most witches would have stopped the spell and left Sookie to her death.

After Pam departed, Jason also left, insisting that he felt fine and wanted to get home to his own bed. Shortly thereafter, Lafayette and Jesus settled into their room. Eric could still feel Lafayette's emotions to a small extent and was pleased to know that Lafayette no longer feared him. In fact, he seemed comfortable that Eric was still in his home, and okay with the fact that he planned to sit with Sookie until near dawn.

Eric knew that if he flew at top speed, he could reach his nearest safe house in just under ten minutes. Accounting for daylight savings, which had begun that night, he would plan to leave at 6:18 a.m., exactly 15 minutes before the sun would rise.

Eric pulled a chair next to Sookie's bed and sent off a flurry of texts to Pam so that Sookie's protection could be arranged. He then sent some instructions to Bobby. When he was done, he simply watched over his beloved quietly, monitoring her vital signs more carefully than any machine could.

He didn't even notice when he began to softly sing an ancient lullaby to her. The rhythms of the song matched the sound of her heartbeat closely, and this was the soothing sound that Eric concentrated on for the rest of the night. He couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before he would hear it again like this.

At precisely 6:17 a.m., he rose from his seat and gave his beloved a last look. "Space and time, min kära. This is what you need, and I will do my best to make sure you have it." With those words, he left the house, making sure that the door was locked soundly behind him. He also did a quick sweep of the woods surrounding the house, double checking that Compton and his minions had not returned. Satisfied, he zoomed into the remnants of the night.

Chapter 16: Awake

Sookie woke up feeling like she hadn't slept at all; her body was sore, and she felt a bit empty inside. She wondered if this was a side effect of the connections to Bill and Eric being gone.

She heard a rustling to her right and saw Jesus standing next to her, taking her pulse.

"Hey," she managed, her throat feeling dry.

"Hey Sook," Jesus returned quietly, moving his hand from her pulse point to grasp her hand gently. "How you feelin'?"

Sookie noticed that Jesus had finally taken up the nickname used by most of her friends and family, which made her smile. After what they'd all gone through the previous day, she was glad. She smiled up at him even though it hurt to do so.

"What happened?" she asked quietly, her throat scratchy. "It took a long time to break, didn't it?"

Struggling to gather his thoughts, Jesus took a moment before answering. "Well, the process was much harder for you than I could ever have thought it would be, I guess since there was both a tie and a bond to break. But you are doing fine now that you have had several IV's to rehydrate you. You've been sleeping for a while now."

"What time is it?" Sookie asked, trying to sit up a little. For the first time, she noticed that the IV was still hooked up to her arm.

Jesus followed her eyes, "This is the last one you'll need, Sook. You lost a lot of fluids during the spell; your body was pretty worn out by the time it was completed. You will also probably be sore and weak for a couple of days. Laf and I want you to stay with us until you feel

better. It'll do him good not to have to be alone too when I'm at work, and it'll make me feel better to have you close so that we can keep an eye on you."

Sookie nodded in agreement. She *was* awfully tired. She looked more closely at Jesus and saw that he was in his work clothes. "Are you coming or going, Jesus?"

Jesus chuckled, "Actually, I just got home from work."

"Shit, what time is it?" Sookie asked again, trying to sit up a bit more forcefully.

"It's 4:25 or so."

"P.M.!"

"Yeah, you needed a lot of rest, but you'll be feeling normal in a couple of days."

Sookie laughed a bit, "Nothing is *ever* normal with me, Jesus. You'll find that out." Her voice cracked a bit, and Jesus handed her a glass of water.

Lafayette had heard Sookie's voice and rushed into the room, a look of relief on his face. "See Laf, I told you she'd be fine," Jesus said.

"Shit hooker," Lafayette said, as he walked to the other side of the bed and took her other hand, "you had us some kind of worried."

"Sorry," Sookie said sheepishly.

Jesus left to go change clothes and call Jason to tell him that Sookie had awoken. Jason had promised to be by after his shift ended at 5:00 to check on Sookie.

Lafayette sat down next to his friend. "Don't scare me like that ever again, okay?" he asked, looking concerned.

Sookie nodded, reaching out to pull him into a hug. She felt warmed by his affection, and she was thankful, so very thankful to have her good friends with her. She just wished that

Tara could be there, but she understood her need to escape. In a way, it was the same need that had pushed her to rid herself of the vampire blood in her body.

“How do you feel?” Lafayette asked, as Jesus re-entered, now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

Sookie contemplated for a moment before answering. She knew that Lafayette was asking about both her physical and mental well-being.

“It’s hard to know,” she finally said, after downing another half a glass of water. “I feel tired and sore from the physical stuff I went through. And my throat hurts. To be honest it feels like I’m just starting to get over the worst flu of my life.”

“I think that’s good considering what you went through,” Jesus said.

“Do you think the spell took so long because of all the blood I’d had recently?” Sookie asked as Jesus and Lafayette shared a look. “I had a little of Eric’s, and I don’t even know how much of Bill’s after I got shot.”

Jesus only shrugged; because of the glamour, he was unable to answer with the truth of why the spell had taken so long or even think about it.

Lafayette asked, “What about the other thing? Do you’s *feel* any different? *Inside?*”

Sookie nodded slowly. “I do, but I don’t know quite how to describe it. It almost feels like I’m missing something that I was used to. It’s kinda like when you feel as if you are still wearing a ring even after you take it off. Or like you are still on a roller coaster when you lie down to go to sleep after riding them all day. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

Jesus nodded and tried to encourage Sookie, “Well, you *are* sort of missing something. I think I know what you mean though. I used to go with one of my uncles to fish on the Gulf.

We'd spend all day on the water, and when I finally went to bed at the end of the day, I'd always still feel like I was floating a little."

"Yeah, like that," Sookie said before sinking back into her thoughts for a minute. She couldn't pinpoint what felt off or where the feeling was coming from, but she made a note to ask Eric.

Then, she wondered why she thought about asking him and not Bill before she reasoned that the older vampire would obviously know more about blood magic. She seriously wondered if she'd be able to get straight answers from either of them, however. What they didn't know was that their willingness to be upfront was going to help her to determine the choice she would ultimately make regarding them.

Thinking about the vampires, Sookie suddenly felt concerned. "Did anything happen with Bill or Eric after I was out last night?" She was worried that they had been hurt, considering the length of the spell. And she was also concerned that one or both of the vampires would be angry that she had severed their connection. She was especially concerned that Eric might act on that anger. Bill had told her early on that Eric was known for his ruthlessness, especially when things didn't go his way. Sookie bit her lip, waiting for Lafayette or Jesus to answer her.

Jesus finally did, "They both came by last night to check on you. Bill came with Jessica, who talked to Jason for a little while. I don't think that relationship is going to happen, but you'll have to ask him."

"And was Bill okay?" Sookie asked. "Did the length of the spell hurt him?"

"No," Jesus answered. "He seemed fine, as if his experience with the spell took a normal amount of time."

“And Eric? Was he okay? He didn’t try to hurt you, did he?” Sookie asked, looking at Lafayette.

“No,” Lafayette quickly answered. “He mainly just made sure that you were okay. Pam came by too.”

“And he wasn’t hurt either?” she asked.

Lafayette sort of just shook his head, again not able to answer because of the glamour.

Sookie accepted this as a “No,” and asked, “Do you think they’ll be back?”

“We tolds them ‘bout the spell, and they both seemed to take it okay,” Lafayette said the lines that he and Jesus agreed would be the best thing to tell Sookie. The glamour from the previous evening prevented them from saying much of anything else.

“So are they coming back tonight?” Sookie asked again.

Jesus answered this time, “I don’t know, but maybe.”

“Were they angry?” Sookie continued.

“Didn’t seem to be, honey,” Lafayette said. Just then, he heard a knock at the door. It was just after 5 and the sun wasn’t down quite yet, so he figured it was Jason. “Lemme go let Jase in, baby girl,” Lafayette said, pulling his pink, leopard print robe tight against his body.

“Do you think everything will be okay?” Sookie asked Jesus as soon as Lafayette was gone. The last thing she wanted to do was scare Lafayette; he’d already had to deal with torture from the old Eric, and she was worried that any more vampire problems would set him off.

“It’ll be fine, Sook,” Jesus assured.

“Still, I don’t think I should stay here and cause problems.”

“Don’t be silly, child,” Lafayette drawled, as he reentered the room. “You’s gotsta stay here so I don’t worry ‘bout you in the vamp zone that is yo’ house.”

Sookie laughed. “Okay, Lala, but I’ll just stay a couple of days. Then I have to figure out what to do with work.”

Sookie spent the next few minutes hugging Jason, who had followed Lafayette into the room a bit timidly. The siblings held each other tightly, both glad that the other was safe.

“What about Jessica?” Sookie finally asked.

Jason sighed, “I don’t know. I mean, I know that I still like her; I *really* do. I’m attracted to her, and I thought last night that I’d actually like to try to pursue somethin’ with her, but she only seemed to be interested in sex and blood from me.”

Sookie couldn’t help her blush as her brother continued, “She was mad about me breaking the blood thingy—um, the tie thing—that we had. When I told her that I wouldn’t sacrifice my friendship with Hoyt for anything less than somethin’ that had the potential to get serious, she left even more angry.”

Sookie noticed that Jason looked upset about Jessica’s reaction. Sookie continued to be amazed by the changes in her brother that had occurred while she was gone for a year. Those changes were even more profound to her since they’d seemed to have happened overnight. He was growing up and was actually sort of looking for a more substantial relationship, though his taste in women was still somewhat destructive, Sookie thought to herself.

“What about you, Sook?” Jason asked. “Have you figured out how you feel ‘bout them vamps?”

Sookie looked inside of herself. She still felt affection for them both. When she thought specifically about Bill, she couldn’t quite pinpoint her feelings. She wanted to find out what it would be like to see and spend time with him without his blood in her, but she was wary of him due to his past actions.

When she turned her thoughts to Eric, her heart gave an involuntary leap, and the empty spot that seemed to exist inside of her lurched a bit. Sookie definitely wanted to see him as well and was strangely comforted by the thought of spending time with him. But she couldn't be sure if she still loved either of the vampires.

She finally answered, "I don't know, Jase. Like you said before—it's not like there's been a strike of lightening to make everything clear. I just feel like I want to give them both a chance to prove themselves right now. My instincts tell me that after I have seen them and spent some time with them, I'll figure out how I feel."

Suddenly, Jason's stomach growled loudly.

Lafayette laughed, "Shit, Sook, you must be starvin' too! I put on some of grandmomma's gumbo."

Sookie nodded, realizing that she *was* hungry—weak and tired too, but also hungry. "Is my overnight bag in here?" Sookie asked, realizing also that she *really* needed a bath after her ordeal the day before.

Lafayette walked over to the small table where the bag had ended up and picked it up. "Thanks," Sookie said. "I think I'd like to take a bath and then grab a bite once I feel a little more clean."

Jesus took that as his cue to remove the IV, and they all chuckled as Jason left the room muttering something about how he'd rather get bitten by a vampire than stuck with a needle.

Lafayette insisted on helping her into the bathroom and started the water in the tub, dumping in some bath oil that smelled like jasmine. "This oughta make you right as rain."

After Lafayette left her alone, Sookie waited for the bath to fill and stripped off her very smelly clothes, wondering how her friends had stood her for so long. Looking down at herself,

she realized that she must have sweat buckets, but when she caught her reflection in the mirror, she was surprised to see that her face seemed clean, even though her hair was most certainly worse for wear. She determined that Jesus or Lafayette must have taken a wet cloth to her face and resolved to thank them if she remembered after her bath. For now, she just wanted to sink herself in the hot, fragrant water, clear her mind, and plan her next step.

And that's just what she did for the next 40 minutes.

Chapter 17: The Suitor

Lafayette, Jesus, and Jason were sitting on the porch as the sun disappeared under the tree tops about 10 minutes into Sookie's bath. They all looked at each other, but said nothing as they took in the waning sunlight.

Jason sighed. He'd spent the day thinking about what to do with the Jessica/Hoyt situation and still wasn't certain if he should tell his best friend that he'd slept with Jessica. To make matters worse, Jason still felt desire for her even after the tie thing was broken. He wondered if Sookie felt the same way about Eric or Bill.

Jason knew—even though he hadn't understood exactly what was happening—that he'd been witness to something major with Eric and Sookie the night before. He also realized that the glamour he'd been given by Pam seemed to prevent him from thinking about the events of the previous night only when he was close to Sookie because he'd pondered them many times throughout his workday.

He'd been the one to open the door to Pam and Eric and invite them into the house as the spell had been going on, and though some might challenge him on the idea, Jason knew that he wasn't stupid enough to let vampires in without a good reason. He'd realized as soon as he saw Eric and his condition that he didn't actually *know* anything about the vampire, not really. Eric had looked—well, he'd looked like death warmed over—and he'd seemed desperate to help Sookie—to find her and to save her—despite his condition. Jason had expected Eric to be angry about his sister breaking the blood thing like Jessica had been, but he'd reacted unexpectedly on that too. As soon as he'd known what Sookie was trying to do, he'd done something to the magical blood thing himself. Jason had also been shocked to see the vampire pass out right

along with Sookie after the spell. He was still trying to figure that one out. He hadn't thought vamps could sleep at night.

But what he didn't need to figure out was the way the vamp took control after he finally woke up. Jason was as protective of his sister as any brother could be, and he recognized that same desire to protect her coming from Eric. When they'd all come back into the house after Bill had left, Jason had gone to Sookie's room and looked in on her from the door, not completely sure that the vamp was trustworthy. But as soon as he'd seen Eric, standing a few feet from the bed and looking at his sister reverently, he'd turned and left them alone. Jason had never given anyone *that* look, nor had he seen it given to him, but he still recognized what it was. He couldn't help but wonder what his sister would do now that all the vamp blood was gone from her body. But he hoped that whoever his sister ended up with would always look at her the way Eric had been. He'd seen Bill look at his sister quite a bit, but he'd never seen that kind of mixture of respect and devotion from him.

"Let's go inside," Jesus said as the sun disappeared completely. The foreboding note of that statement struck all three of them. And they all wondered which vampires—if any—might show up.

"It sho' gets dark quick once you turns the clocks back." Lafayette observed, as the three went inside.

After her bath, Sookie joined the boys and her brother in the living room, where they'd settled in with beers and gumbo, a few minutes after dark. She turned down a beer but accepted the gumbo and a large glass of water as she eased into Lafayette's comfortable recliner. She ate slowly, savoring the mixture of spices that reminded her of Gran, even though they irritated her

sore throat a bit. She had finished half of a bowl and the glass of water when there was a knock at the door. Out of instinct, she dropped her shields and discovered that there was one void outside.

She tensed, wondering which one it was, Bill or Eric. Or maybe it was Jessica or Pam or some other vampire she didn't even know. For once, she didn't have a feeling about who it might be, and she realized that she had almost always known instinctually if Bill was the void she was feeling. She now realized that this must have been part of the tie's effects. She also had begun to sense when Eric was the void too—at least after Dallas.

Jesus looked around at the others and nodded to Jason. Both of them rose and went to the door. Sookie thought for a moment that the two looked like bodyguards as they pushed out their chests and stood at full height. Jesus signaled Jason to remind him not to look a vampire in the eye.

Lafayette walked over to Sookie to grab her hand.

Though Sookie couldn't see who was at the door from where she sat, she immediately recognized Bill's accent, "I have come to call on Sookie. I trust she is feeling better this evening."

Sookie's reaction was to grab Lafayette's hand a bit harder. The friends had not talked about whether Sookie would want to see either Bill or Eric, but now that she heard Bill's voice, she wished that she had spoken to them. What she really wanted was some time to process everything before she saw them, but given Bill's insistent tone, she wasn't sure she was going to get it.

Jason spoke up, "This isn't a good time, Bill. Sookie is still very tired and needs her rest. She just woke up a while ago, and she's eatin'."

Bill answered, his politeness sounding a bit off even to Sookie's ears, "I will wait then, even outside if I must, but I insist upon seeing her this evening." He paused and then added, "I wish to check on her health for myself, of course. I will not do anything to harm her."

From the door, Jason angled himself to look at Sookie, looking over Jesus's shoulder to do so. He was silently asking for a signal about what to do.

Jesus stepped forward a bit, "Mr. Compton, I know that you are worried for Sookie, but she is fine. She is still weary, but she is getting stronger. I'm sure she plans to call you as soon as she feels better."

Sookie could have kissed Jesus in that moment and hoped that Bill would just leave for now.

"While I appreciate your attentions to Sookie's health," Bill started, "I don't intend to leave tonight until I confirm her well-being myself."

Sookie didn't want to risk her friends' safety no matter what, so she spoke up, her voice a bit stronger now that she'd had some warm food and more water, "It's okay, Jesus, Jason. I'll talk to him for a minute on the porch."

Lafayette shook his head no, but Sookie gave him a pat on his hand, signaling that her mind had been made up. "We'll be here if you need us, Sook," he whispered as he helped her to her feet. "And I'll be watchin' from the window."

Sookie gathered herself together and walked slowly to the door, wondering why she was so nervous about seeing Bill. She chided herself for her fear; this was the person who had saved her life just a few days before. Still, she was nervous to see how he'd react to her severing the blood tie. Plus, she hoped that he wasn't going to be as pushy as he'd been the other night.

As she walked past Jesus and Jason, she gave them both reassuring pats on the shoulders before joining Bill on the porch and closing the door behind her. She looked into the dark eyes of the handsome vampire in front of her; she noted that he looked very good in his tailored suit, which fit him to perfection. He held an elegant bouquet of red roses in his hand.

“I believe it is still customary to bring flowers to wish someone good health,” he said with a warm smile on his face.

Sookie accepted the gift and gestured toward the small table on the porch.

“Thank you, Bill. Please, let’s sit. I’m a little tired.”

“Of course, darling.” Bill pulled a chair out for Sookie.

Sookie took the seat warily, and pulled back a bit when his hands brushed her shoulders.

After Bill too had sat, he began, “I understand why you felt the need to break the ties between yourself and Eric as well as with me. You have suffered through so much because of this situation with the witches, the Russell situation,” he paused for a moment, “and even the deception that my queen forced me into.”

Sookie looked at Bill and sighed in relief that he seemed to have accepted her choice.

He continued, “In fact, I think it is good that you broke the ties. Now we will have a chance to start anew.”

“Thanks, Bill,” Sookie said sincerely. “That’s all I really want—a nice, clean slate so that I can decide what I truly want with my life.”

Bill looked at Sookie pleadingly. “I have always regretted the way that the queen made me coerce you into drinking my blood, Sookie. This gives us a chance to make things right. You and I could enter a tie by choice and love this time.”

Sookie stayed silent, though tears had begun to gather in her eyes. She certainly didn't feel ready to hear Bill's words; plus, she didn't like the fact that he seemed to be blaming all his actions on the queen. Nor did she like that he seemed to just assume that she'd want to take his blood again. The emotion and toil of the last few days caused tears to roll down her cheeks.

Bill misinterpreted Sookie's tears as a sign that she now regretted breaking their tie. He also took them as a sign that she would soon be his again. He felt certain that his use of words such as "choice" would show Sookie that he was willing to let her come to him freely. He also wanted to convey to Sookie that his first acts concerning her had not been by his instigation. Certainly, he'd come up with the plan with the Rattrays, but he had been ordered by his queen to get his blood into Sookie by any means possible as soon as he had reported that she could not be glamourised.

Bill continued, "Sookie, you are the love of my life, and I want you to be by my side. I know that even without the blood, you must feel the same." He looked deeply into her brown eyes, hoping that even though he could not glamour her, he might be able to influence her a bit.

Sookie felt a pressure in her head, one that she hadn't felt from Bill since the second night she'd known him. She wondered why he'd attempt to influence her in this way, but the sobering thought that he *would* made her tears stop falling. She took in a long breath to compose herself. "Bill, I'm not ready to make any big choices right now. I need time to work things out before I decide anything."

Bill looked at Sookie with affection and reached out, grabbing her hand, which had been on top of the table, still grasping the flowers he'd brought. "It is fine, darling. I know that now that Eric's influence is out of your system, you will do what is right for you. And I will be waiting."

Sookie felt a strange mixture of discomfort and familiarity at his grasp. “Like I said, Bill,” Sookie continued more forcefully, pulling her hand from his slowly, “I need time to think about what I want.”

Bill took a deep, unnecessary breath before looking at Sookie with an expression she associated with a parent looking at a child. “Sookie, you must understand that you are in danger as long as you remain unclaimed. I know that you believe you need time to work out your feelings, but Nan Flanagan and others may know of your gifts, and I fear that if you do not tie yourself to someone, you may end up being taken.”

Sookie stiffened in fear that Nan or someone else might try to kidnap her. She also thought about the fairy threat she still faced; she didn’t think that Claudine would be the last fairy she encountered. Someone else would eventually come looking for her. She thought momentarily about Eric’s words to her before he’d lost his memories. He’d offered the same thing to her—protection. Eric had called upon her practicality—Fairy Sookie—to rule her. And then she recalled Pam’s words to her the night she’d gone to Fangtasia looking for Eric, ‘You need to be somebody’s or you won’t *be* at all.’

For a moment, as she looked at Bill, she saw the vampire she’d seen the first night she met him. His mind was quiet to her, comforting. He also loved her, of that she was almost certain. For a split second she thought about how it would be very easy to just take a drop or two of his blood so that he could sense it if she was in danger.

Bill saw the various emotions stream across Sookie’s face, finally seeing a flash of acceptance in her eyes. He spoke, hoping to take advantage of the moment, “Darling, I meant what I said in the restaurant that night. I do want to marry you. Since then, I know that things have gotten beyond our control, but I am now free of both Lorena and the queen. I became king

for you, Sookie, to make sure that I would always be in a position to keep you safe.” Sookie noticed the slight glance to the side that sometimes accompanied Bill’s speaking. He continued quietly, “And then you disappeared without a trace. Now we have been given a second chance.”

Sookie looked closely at Bill, her tears threatening to fall again, this time because of Bill’s words, which were pulling at her heart. But as much as she might want to just collapse in the arms of the first man she’d ever loved, the one she’d given her virginity to, a little voice in her head pulled her back. She steeled herself and said to Bill, “Thank you. I know that you didn’t mean to hurt me.” As she looked at Bill’s face, she was certain of that much at least. “But Bill, I’m not ready to give myself to *anyone* right now, despite the fact that there might be dangers for me. I know that there are vampires and others that would want to use me for my telepathy, and I also know that my stupid fairy hands and blood only add to that, but I need time to figure things out.”

Bill realized that Sookie’s stubbornness had reared its ugly head as he saw the resolve in her eyes. He decided that his best tactic would be to withdraw for the moment.

“All right, darling. I will, as I said before, be waiting for you. I ask only that you do not return to your home as you are making your choice and that you decide as soon as possible.

Since Northman owns your property now, you would not be able to keep any vampires out.”

The last thing that Bill wanted was for Sookie to return to a house owned by Northman.

Sookie nodded, “I have already decided to stay here for a couple of days until I feel better anyway.” Sookie took in a deep breath and told Bill about another decision that she had made while she was soaking in the tub. “I think it would be a good idea to get together—to talk—before I make up my mind about anything.”

Bill nodded, happy about any excuse to spend time with Sookie.

Sookie continued, "I would like to have dinner with you, day after tomorrow at my home. That'll be Tuesday evening. I'll cook myself something, and I'll have TruBlood for you. I want to ask you some questions about things."

Bill answered, "I'd be honored, Sookie." He had to use the best of his Southern charm to hide the fact that the thought of her eating in front of him was really not appealing to him. However, he would suffer through if it led him one step closer to Sookie. He leaned toward Sookie and raised her hand, which he had taken back into his own, to his lips. He smiled with satisfaction as he heard her heart rate pick up. Whatever questions she might have, he was certain that he would be able to address them satisfactorily.

He laid Sookie's hand back over the roses and stood.

Sookie looked up at him with a slight smile on her lips, "I will see you Tuesday evening, Bill. Let's say at 8:00? And just so you know, I intend to have made my decision about what to do by Friday night. I know that I cannot wait too long to make my choice because of all the threats you rightly pointed out.

Bill bowed slightly, "I will look forward to both Tuesday and Friday nights then, darling."

He walked to his limo at human speed, glancing back once at Sookie and giving her a slight wave and smile as he opened the car door.

As soon as he had gone, Jesus joined her on the porch after having been elected by the other two, who were having a hard time keeping their emotions in check. "You okay, Sook?" Jesus asked, the concern evident in his eyes.

"Thanks, yeah. All in all, Bill was real decent about me breakin' the tie."

Jesus handed her a fresh glass of water he'd brought her. She accepted it gratefully, smiling up at him.

"Do you wanna come in?" Jesus asked, a bit worried about Sookie sitting on the porch alone at night.

"Can I have just a few minutes, Jesus, and then I'll be in?"

"Sure, Sook." With some hesitation, Jesus turned and walked back into the house though he was keeping a close eye on Sookie through the open curtain.

Sookie sat back in her chair, taking her water with her. She sipped it slowly, letting the liquid swish on her tongue, which still felt a little swollen. She thought about her visit with Bill, and she realized that the encounter had left her with mixed feelings. On the one hand, she didn't like the fact that he seemed to be trying to pressure her into a decision; she was certain that he would have given her his blood tonight if she would have let him. Given the fact that she'd just gone through so much to sever her blood tie and bond so that she could make a rational choice for herself, she thought that Bill's behavior was a bit clueless—at best. At worst, it was downright suspicious! On the other hand, her heart couldn't help but be warmed by his protestation that he'd become king to keep her safe. Of course, all that felt a bit odd too since he was now telling her that she needed to retie herself to him in order to keep safe. Was being king not enough to work to keep her safe without the blood tie? Whatever was the case, she certainly was confused.

She tried to clear her mind as she continued to sip her water. She set her glass back on the table next to Bill's roses, and she ran her fingers over the petals. She remembered that Gran had once told her that red roses signified both love *and* respect, though most people only knew

about the love part. Gran had also told her that the two things always went hand-in-hand and that true love—the real and lasting kind—never existed if respect wasn't also there.

She shook her head and whispered out loud to herself, “Bill, you might love me, but you need to work on the respect part.”

Sookie leaned back into her chair, letting her muscles relax into the cool wood. Within minutes, she was dozing.

Chapter 18: Carving a Heart

Eric flew to Lafayette's, although he was not planning to actually see Sookie. He landed in the woods about two hundred yards away from the home. "Dawson," he said to the Were he had keeping an eye on Sookie that day, "anything to report?"

Tray Dawson had smelled Northman coming, so he was not surprised by the vampire's abrupt landing. "Nope, been real quiet here. The brother came a little under an hour ago. The nurse went to work this morning and returned in the afternoon. Other than that, there's been no activity."



Eric took in the mountain of a Were in front of him. Tray Dawson was one of the few people that Eric trusted with his daytime security when he had to travel and couldn't stay in a secure location.

The Were asked, "Will you need me here tomorrow?"

"No," Eric said. "The man I've hired to be Sookie's usual day guard will be starting then. However, I appreciate your willingness to come on such short notice today."

Tray shrugged, "You can owe me one. Anyway, I didn't have any pressing orders at the shop."

“Motorcycles losing their popularity?” Eric asked with a good-natured smirk.

“Nope, I just do too good of a job. Not a lot of return customers.”

Eric laughed, “It is true, Dawson. You are too competent.”

“How’s your old Harley?”

“The ‘69 Shovelhead or the ‘80 Sturgis?”

“Both.”

“Still running smoothly, thanks to you.”

“You ever start wearin’ a helmet?” Tray joked.

Eric laughed again, “I’ll start wearing one of those when you start driving a Volvo.”

Tray nodded, “I’m sure those two things will happen on about the same day.”

Eric said thoughtfully, “You should try to be the new Were packmaster, Dawson. As you know, Marcus Bozeman is dead.”

“You know I’m independent,” Tray said.

“Yes,” Eric returned, “but you are only that way because the pack had deteriorated so much under Bozeman’s leadership. Your father was an honorable and strong pack leader; many would welcome another leader of the same ilk.”

Tray snorted, “Careful, Northman, you’ll make me go all misty-eyed here.”

“We wouldn’t want that.”

Just then, Eric turned his head in the direction of the road. A few seconds later, Tray also went on alert. As soon as Eric smelled Bill, he turned to Tray. “You may go for the day. I will call you should I need your services again.”

Tray shook his head. “I’ll stay.”

Eric looked at the Were with appreciation. "I'm afraid it is the king; there is not much you could do. I'll monitor the situation from here."

Tray nodded and walked further into the woods.

It took all the willpower Eric possessed not to fly immediately to Sookie's side. He didn't trust Bill, but he had to trust in Sookie. He began to pace, turning the large envelope that he held in his hands over and over. He kept this action up for the next fifteen minutes until he heard the car returning down the driveway.

A few minutes after Bill left, Eric couldn't take it anymore. He'd keep his distance, but he had to make sure that Sookie was okay. Anyway, he reasoned, he still needed to drop the envelope off with Lafayette or Jesus. "Yes," he said to himself, "I'll just talk to one of the witches, make sure Sookie is safe, and then hand off this envelope."

He was met with Sookie's beautiful form, sleeping lightly, as he landed silently on the porch. He took her in and inhaled deeply.

Immediately, from both the lingering smell of Compton on the porch and the roses sitting on the table, he knew that Sookie had spoken to him. He inhaled once more to see whether Bill's blood had mixed with hers, but he found her scent to be comprised purely of herself, something that he had never experienced until the night before. He now realized that he'd always smelled her scent mixed with Compton's, even from the first moment he'd met her. Her scent now was even more amazing to him. It reminded him of the mornings after the rains had come when he used to play in the saturated fields near his father's crops.

Eric stayed at the edge of the porch, afraid to approach Sookie, not wanting to scare her or awaken her with his presence. His dead heart lurched; one part of him wished that he could

stop the fears that Sookie brought out in him, fears unlike any he had experienced in his more than one thousand years until that morning in Dallas when Godric had decided to leave him. Eric's heart lurched again as he thought about his maker and his losses in the last couple of years.

First, he'd lost Godric. He'd actually taken up with Yvetta to try to curb that pain, even though it was another blonde from whom he had truly wished to seek comfort. Then, the Russell debacle hadn't satisfied him in any meaningful way; he realized then that his millennium of searching for revenge had been all but wasted. However, Eric knew that the most pain he had ever felt had come the night that Sookie had disappeared to the fairy realm. At first, he had tried to hide his pain by searching relentlessly and threatening whomever he could. Then, he'd finally settled into waiting; something had told him that she would return. He'd bought her home as soon as it went on the market and had thrown himself into its repair, much to the chagrin of Pam.

He'd painstakingly gone through the items damaged by the Maenad. He remembered especially the night when he'd discovered a picture of Sookie and an older woman, obviously the woman she called Gran. He'd been in a room that seemed to belong to Sookie's Gran, one that had contained lovely hand-crafted furniture. The damage to that room had been the most extensive in the house, and Eric posited that Sookie had simply closed the room off, perhaps too overwhelmed or saddened to deal with it in the midst of Bill's disappearance and the Were threat.

He had found the picture under the old, damaged bed. The picture frame had been smashed, but Eric had been drawn to the two smiling female faces. Sookie looked a few years younger than she was now. She was dressed only in jeans and a red tank top, her hair pulled into a pony tail. The two stood out in the sun, and Sookie's smile shone brighter than the light in her

hair. Sookie's grandmother, who Eric had learned was named Adele, had her arm around her granddaughter affectionately. The gesture told Eric that she had been devoted to Sookie; the twinkle in Adele's eyes told him that she had been just as fiery as Sookie. Eric had taken special care of Adele's old room following his find, thinking that Sookie might eventually want to move into the matriarch's room when she returned.

That night, he had taken the photo and had arranged for many copies to be made. Since then, a copy had sat next to his daytime sleeping spot in all of his homes, and another was in his desk at Fangtasia. It was this photo that he'd eventually focused on as he'd waited for nightfall the previous day; it had helped him have the strength to cling to their bond.

In the last year, he'd felt comforted by the picture of Sookie and Adele Stackhouse and had even, unbeknownst to anyone else, begun taking flowers to Adele's grave beginning on the one-year anniversary of her death. He initially went because he felt that it was what Sookie would have done. He took Adele white daisies, a flower that he'd guessed had been her favorite based on some of the broken knickknacks in the older woman's room.

He'd also taken a lot of time to personally repair the bed and other furniture in the room, appreciating the strength of the original wood maker. He wondered if the craftsman had been an ancestor of Sookie's as he'd sanded, mended, and refinished the wood. He'd found much comfort in drawing upon the woodworking skills he'd learned as a boy and young man.

More than anything else, including his ultimate defeat of Russell, those days repairing Adele's furniture had healed him of wounds that had been opened for more than one thousand years. Truth be told, he had found himself taking flowers to Adele's grave more and more often over the months. Inexplicably, he also found himself talking to her lifeless, decomposing body, buried six feet into the ground, as if she were a lifeline to him. He told her about all the repairs

he'd made to the home she'd loved; he told her everything that he wished for Sookie and himself; he told her everything he had wanted to be telling Sookie. He felt more connected to Sookie there too; it had, after all, been the place where he'd tracked her scent to the night of her disappearance.

More and more, he'd found himself leaving Fangtasia at closing time and traveling to Sookie's home in the six months since he'd owned it. He hired people during the day to repair much of the structural damage and replace many of the items in the house, always painstakingly choosing things that would fit in with the feel of Sookie's home, but Adele's room was his special project, and he saw to almost everything in there personally.

Even so, no one could ever accuse him of being naïve, and he had known that when Sookie returned, she would resent his owning her home and his changing it, even if it was ultimately all for her. He knew especially that she would hate the fact that he'd put a resting place for himself into the home, but as he found himself there more and more frequently after his bar and sheriff duties were completed, he felt that he needed to be able to stay the day, to be close to Sookie's fading scent within the house. It was only there that he was able to smell her at all anymore.

He'd moved a few of his books to the light tight room that Sookie had later labeled his cubby. Often, especially on Mondays, the one night when Fangtasia was closed, he would spend the majority of his time at Sookie's home, though he never thought of the house as his. Once he had completed the repairs to Adele's room, he spent his time fixing or replacing other things he would notice, especially other handmade furnishings, like the hutch and buffet in the dining room.

Then he had cleaned the old fireplace in Adele's room and replaced some mortar to make it sound again. It had obviously not seen a fire in years. After it was ready, he had spent another evening cutting wood and stacking it in neat piles outside of Sookie's home, wondering if she'd be back before the winter to use it, wondering if he'd ever be able to build them a fire to share together.

After he had finished these tasks, he would often build fires in Adele's room at night. He'd sit in an old chair in the corner of the room, and using techniques he'd learned over a thousand years before, he painstakingly carved a piece of soft cedar wood into a small pendant with an "E" and "S" entwined.

He had worked on the pendant for several weeks until the letters were perfectly formed and ornate. He had even used human speed so that he could really enjoy the work—savor it. Sometimes, he'd set the pendant aside to read or simply enjoy the smell of the old house. When he closed his eyes, he could always imagine Sookie, young and full of life, enjoying time with Adele. Eric didn't miss the irony that his visualizations of Sookie never included him in them anymore.

Finally done with the pendant, he'd put it on a leather cord necklace. He wrapped it in a lace handkerchief and placed it into Adele's old bedside table, which he'd also repaired.

Eric thought about the annoying song that insisted that, "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." This sentiment had been around long before the mediocre song, but he'd never understood it until he sat in Sookie's home waiting for her all those months.

It was only happenstance that had prevented him from being at her home the day that she returned from the fairy realm. He'd been contacted by one of the Ancient Pythoness's guards that night and had been called to a meeting. The A.P., as he affectionately liked to refer to his

maker's maker, had wanted to warn him of yet another threat from Compton, who had continued to act behind the scenes to try to eliminate him as sheriff. Luckily, Eric had powerful friends, none more powerful than the A.P. And he also knew his value to the AVL, who had made him a spokesperson for the mainstream cause, ironically enough. Eric's PSA's often drew record hits on the Internet.

Eric had found it strange that the A.P. had been close by and had called him to see her in person, something she very rarely did, especially for a matter that was ill-conceived on Bill's behalf and would never have worked anyway. And she'd kept him just long enough to ensure he'd not be able to return to Sookie's and would have to seek shelter in another of his safe houses that morning. He remembered the twinkle in the A.P.'s eyes in the hours before dawn and knew now that her keeping him there had been by design. The ancient oracle of Delphi had obviously used her skill of reading the future to keep him from being in Sookie's house when she returned; just why she did it, he was yet to fathom.

He'd felt Sookie's return from one of his Shreveport safe houses, and he'd longed to go to her right then, but it was day time. As soon as the sun had set, he'd taken off in flight, only to be stopped by Compton. Ironically, despite her return, Eric felt farther away from Sookie than he had in the previous six months. She'd looked at him with cold, suspicious eyes that night instead of the eyes he'd come to know from the picture, the warm, light-filled eyes that he wished fervently would shine for him.

Eric was a bit ashamed that he'd been unable to show Sookie the real effect she'd had on him in the first few days after she'd returned—before the witch cursed him. As much as he hated to admit it, seeing Bill there first had made him defensive—jealous even, and the next night, he'd tried to win Sookie with promises of protection rather than affection. He rationalized

that she would never believe his sincerity anyway, so he'd tried to appeal to her practical side, fairy Sookie. Truth be told, he appreciated both sides of Sookie's personality and how they intermingled seamlessly together. He'd been spending the last year trying to reconcile the thousand-year-old killer with the person who wanted nothing more than to earn someone's love. As Pam could probably attest, there had been *growing pains* to him developing this new side of his own personality.

Ironically, it had taken a complete erasure of his thousand years of experience as a vampire to leave him unencumbered enough to finally accept his human side and admit *out loud* that he loved Sookie. Even more importantly, she'd been able to love that *other* Eric back, to accept him.

He watched on as she peacefully slept and was reminded of the nights they'd spent together when he'd listened to her heart beating, its echo filling his own dead body. He was reminded especially of the night when he'd asked her if she would still love him once he got his memories back. That Eric had no idea of the changes he'd already been making in order to be a more acceptable mate for Sookie. Sookie—mostly because of Eric's reversion to his arrogant persona the night he'd made her his offer of protection—also had no way of knowing the lengths that Eric had and would go to in order to prove himself worthy of her affection.

Sookie had admitted that she was uncertain about whether she would still want him after he got his memory back; all she could offer was that she *wanted* to still feel as she did then, and that had been enough to give him hope at the time. Now, her words just made him apprehensive.

They'd made love for the first time that night, first in the woods and then in almost every room of her home. His body had burned for her as it had never done for another. But later, she had told him that she would have never let the "old" Eric into her bed.

Now as he looked at her, he felt uncertain in a way that he hadn't felt since he experienced the loss of his parents as a human. The vampire in him wanted to run away or drain her—he could admit this—but he was well past this stage of self-preservation with Sookie Stackhouse. He'd learned to prioritize the feelings of another above his own, according to his child's muse, Dear Abby.

Now, all he could do was hope that Sookie would accept him, all of him—the restored him. Given her previous statements and her desire to remove his blood from her body, he felt that the odds were long against him, but he'd faced tough odds before and was determined to face his fate with Sookie, whatever it may be. But one thing was nonnegotiable for Eric—he would do what it took to keep her safe.

She might choose Bill—or even the Were or the shifter—but until he felt that she was protected adequately, he was committed to seeing to her safety even though he foresaw trouble from his little spit-fire. He chuckled lightly, thinking of the varied reactions Sookie could have once he told her that he'd hired both daytime and nighttime guards for her.

As he thumbed the envelope in his hands, he was glad that he'd told her in a letter.

Chapter 19: The Unresisting Heart

A/N: I don't own the poem "The Seafarer," although I have quoted from it in this chapter.

Sookie woke up slowly, feeling much better than she had before when Bill was there. She was startled slightly by Eric's soft and calm voice from across the porch.

"Sookie," he simply said, making sure she realized he was there so that she would not be frightened.

As she looked at him across the porch, her heart jumped.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"Yes, tired, but okay."

"Good," he almost whispered. He stared at her for a few moments, drinking in the rich brown of her eyes.

She didn't know what to say, but she felt the physical distance between them sharply, almost as if something were tugging at her insides. "How are you?"

"I am fine." Eric couldn't help the smile that spread across his lips as he tried to remember the last time someone had asked that question of him.

Sookie shifted in her seat, still not knowing what to say, but wishing she could find words that would make him come closer to her.

"I'm afraid I have disturbed your sleep when I did not intend to," he said, sounding regretful. "You need your rest."

Sookie nodded.

Eric took an unnecessary breath and decided to bite the bullet, “I came with the intention of speaking to your brother or one of your friends about some protection I have ordered for you.”

Sookie immediately bristled, “What?”

Eric spoke cautiously, “I don’t mean to frighten you, Sookie, or to try to control you, but with Nan sniffing around and with other potential threats, I just wanted to see to your safety.”

“You offered that before,” Sookie said, the resentment now clear in her voice. Eric knew that he’d have to do something quick, or she would order him away.

“I made a mistake in the way I did that,” he said matter-of-factly.

Of all the words Sookie had expected Eric to say, ‘I made a mistake’ was at the bottom of the list. She looked at him, a bit at a loss for what to say next, so he took the opportunity to continue. “This protection requires no reciprocation on your part, Sookie. I know what you told me before. You are *not* mine. I simply want to make sure that you can have peace for at least a little while as you decide what you wish to do next.”

Sookie softened a bit as she continued to stare at Eric with surprise.

He smiled at her, the kind of smile *her* Eric had smiled that reached all the way up to his beautiful blue eyes.

He looked at her mischievously. “I have even arranged for you to have the guards that I thought would be least offensive to you, one that is not even in *my own* best interests.”

“What do you mean?” she asked curiously.

Eric took small, slow steps toward Sookie before placing a large manila envelope next to the roses on the table. He didn’t move to sit, nor did he attempt to touch Sookie; he nodded to the envelope and assured, “All your answers are in here. I had intended to ask one of the men inside to pass it along to you.” He smiled again, this time a bit broader, “But I am glad that I got

to see you for myself.” He reached out very slowly, like one would if trying to pet a stray animal. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and ran his hand down her jawline to her neck before stepping back.

“I will leave you in peace now, Sookie. I hope you find what you are looking for.”

Before he had walked off the porch, Sookie stopped him, “Wait.”

Eric turned around quickly, looking like he had when she’d called to him from her porch, the night she’d kissed him, the night Bill had found them together in her home. His eyes were full of hope.

Sookie took in the vampire before her, dressed again as the Eric she’d known from Fangtasia. He was in dark blue jeans and a black tank, his leather jacket completing the look she’d started to think of as quintessentially Eric.

“I’d like to invite you to my home for dinner Wednesday evening,” she said, almost shyly.

“What time?” Eric asked quickly, a smile forming on his lips again.

“Let’s say 8 o’clock?”

“I’ll be there.”

“I’ll have questions for you then,” she warned.

His smile broadened, “You always do.”

She couldn’t help but return his smile, “Will you answer them this time?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

Remembering her dream from the other morning, the one that had left her so disturbed, Sookie said, “I have one question for you now.”

A look of mirth settled on Eric's face. "I would expect nothing less of you, Miss Stackhouse."

She chuckled a bit and then turned more serious, "What does 'min kära' mean?"

Eric was taken aback by her question and wondered briefly if she'd heard him say it to her the night before. "Where did you hear these words, Sookie?"

"They're Swedish, right?"

"Yes," Eric confirmed. He approached Sookie slowly again. He asked with his eyes if he could take the seat opposite her, and when she nodded, he sat down and stretched out his long limbs comfortably.

Even though she may not have registered it, Sookie relaxed immediately as he sat. Eric *did* notice.

"Are these words that you spoke when you were human?" she asked.

"Not quite. We spoke a form of Old Norse, the language associated with the people now referred to as Vikings."

"Did you live in Sweden when you were human?"

Eric nodded, "But my people were not known as Vikings then. We were called the Rus, and I was from a place called Svealand."

"Like in *Beowulf*?" Sookie asked.

"Yes," he answered simply, once again pleased by the kinds of knowledge Sookie carried. Her depth no longer surprised him though.

She continued speaking, sinking back even more comfortably into her seat. "I had to read *Beowulf* in high school; I didn't really understand it. I tried it again, though, a few years ago when I came across a new poetry version in the library."

“Ahh, Seamus Heaney’s?” Eric questioned.

“Yeah—that one I liked.”

“It *was* good,” Eric agreed, watching Sookie’s eyes begin to droop a bit. “It is hard to make the translation work right; Heaney did better than most.”

Sookie looked at Eric, interested, but obviously drowsy too. “Was *Beowulf* written in your language?”

“No,” Eric said, his voice quiet and lulling, “it was written down first in Old English, which is very different than modern English. By the time it was written, a group of Norsemen had long since settled in what is now Scotland and northern England. They were eventually absorbed into the culture of their new home, along with their stories and part of their—my—language. The story is set in Scandinavia though, and Beowulf eventually becomes king of the Geats in an area known as Götaland or Geatland. Actually, the people of my land and that land were often involved in skirmishes.”

Sookie felt soothed by Eric’s words, but remembered her original question to him, “And ‘min kära’?”

Eric looked solemnly at Sookie before answering. “‘Min’ means ‘my’ in Swedish and ‘kära’ means something close to ‘beloved one’, so the phrase means ‘my love’. But why are you so interested in these words all of a sudden, Sookie?”

“I heard them from you. You said them to me.”

Eric was taken aback. He couldn’t remember exactly what he’d said to Sookie the night before as he’d sat by her bedside, but he had been certain that she was sleeping the whole time.

“In the dream we shared?” he finally asked.

“No,” Sookie shook her head, “but it was a dream I had with you in it. It happened a few mornings ago, the morning after Marnie was killed actually.”

Eric looked curious. “And I said these words to you then?”

“Yep. You told me what they meant and what language they were from in the dream too.”

“So why did you ask then?” Eric questioned, his brow raised.

“I’m trying to figure out if what you told me in my dreams is real.”

Eric looked thoughtful, “I did not experience the dream you are speaking of with you, Sookie, but if the translation I gave in the dream matches the one I just gave you, then what I said there was accurate.”

The two were silent for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts.

“How would you say, ‘my love’ in your original language, in Old Norse?”

Eric looked contemplative. “There is not really the exact equivalent in my birth language, but it would be something like ‘minn sváss.’ But since that language is dead now, I taught Pam the modern language, Swedish, and this is also one of the languages that Godric and I used the most. However, we did speak to each other in Old Norse when he first found and turned me, but my native language died soon after I did.”

Sookie nodded, fascinated and more awake now. She stretched for her water which was slightly out of her reach. So quickly it was almost imperceptible, Eric had placed her glass into her hand, lightly brushing her palm with his fingertips. She felt a momentary jolt at their shared touch and smiled. She settled back into her chair, taking a drink of water.

“What do you think in?” she asked after a few moments of comfortable silence.

Eric looked a bit perplexed. “What do you mean?”

Sookie explained, “Well, everyone thinks in a certain language. For instance, Jesus thinks mostly in Spanish even when he’s talking in English. I don’t know how he keeps everything straight.”

Eric had never thought about this question before. Knowing many languages had been an essential in his life, but after mastering many of the foundational or parent languages, he found modern language to be pretty easy. He answered Sookie even as he tried to work out the answer for himself. “To be honest, I don’t really think about what language I’m thinking in. I know many, but I have been in America for a long time. Right now, because I’m speaking it, I’m also thinking in English, if that makes sense.”

Sookie nodded, taking another drink.

Eric continued, “When I am alone though, trying to work out a problem, I think that I mix various languages together in my mind, almost as if the different meanings that words can create will help me find a solution.” Eric smiled again at Sookie. “I must think in Swedish quite a bit though since I still speak it quite regularly to Pam.”

Changing the subject, Sookie asked, “Do you know the poem called “The Seafarer?””

Eric smiled again. The last thing he would have expected for this evening would have been a discussion of literature, but he found himself enjoying Sookie’s company too much to even contemplate leaving to do one of the many things he needed to take care of that had fallen by the wayside because of the witch’s curse.

“Yes, it is a good poem. It was also spoken and then written in Old English originally, but it is about a man who was on the sea for most of his life.”

“Is that what you did? What Vikings—um Rus—did?”

“Some,” Eric said. “In the warmer months, my people went in long boats to explore or fight our enemies. After I reached 15 years, I went with the men, first my father, and then, after he died, I had to lead the raids.”

“Did Russell really kill your father? Your whole family?”

Despite the dim light on the porch, Sookie could see Eric nod. “Yes,” he answered in a low voice.

“Did finally getting him help you feel better?”

Eric leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table and resting his chin in his hands for a moment before sitting back in his chair again.

“You don’t have to answer,” Sookie said, worried that she’d pushed the ancient vampire too far.

“It’s fine,” Eric said, a slight catch in his voice. “To be honest, no. I did not feel better. I am glad that I finally know who was responsible though.”

“Sorry,” Sookie said, reaching out and briefly touching Eric’s hand, which still lay on the table. After only a few seconds, she withdrew it and picked up her glass again.

The momentary touch had meant much to Eric.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Eric spoke again, “Yes, I like ‘The Seafarer’ very much. It seems to relate to my people as much as it does to Englishmen.”

“When did you first hear it—or read it?”

“Many hundreds of years ago, actually. It had not been translated into modern English when I first saw it. I was making some money as a kind of linguist at the time, and since scholars were often looked at as eccentric, I was able to study and do my translations at night. I

was mostly translating Latin texts into English, but I ran across a copy of ‘The Seafarer’ then and memorized it.”

“It’s hard to imagine you doing something like that—working as a translator, I mean. It’s like you had a *real* job.”

Eric laughed, the sound lifting the melancholy of the last several minutes. “I have a *real* job now Sookie. I own many businesses and manage Fangtasia. And I am a sheriff.” He sighed unnecessarily, “I have done many things, Sookie, in the last thousand years. Many vampires simply glamourous to gain money and position before we came out to the public, but I enjoyed having access to libraries, especially in the days when the written word and texts were more rare and valuable. And I didn’t want to glamour the minds out of the scholars of the time; I wanted to learn from them.”

“I think I would have liked you then.”

“Probably not,” Eric chuckled honestly. “Just because I didn’t glamour or feed on the scholars that I respected didn’t mean that I was innocent. I have always fed on humans Sookie, both before and after the invention of TruBlood.”

“But you didn’t kill the people you drank from, did you?”

Eric shook his head, “I killed some humans by accident when I was a young vampire, despite Godric trying to teach me discipline. Discipline, I’m afraid, was not a virtue I had carried over from my humanity, so it took time. But, no, by the time I was in England and working as a translator, I no longer was killing people by accident as I fed unless I had been injured. Glamouring worked well enough, and well-concealed bite marks were much easier to hide than dead bodies.”

“Very practical,” Sookie said a bit heavily as she tried to take in the fact that Eric had been a cold-hearted killer at various points in his life. He was also the man she had felt love for—and maybe even still felt love for.

Eric sensed her conflict, “You have seen me kill, Sookie. I will not hide this. I could not. It is in my nature to do so, and I am good at it, but I try to keep this confined to my enemies.”

Sookie nodded. She would think about Eric’s words the next day, but she’d seen him kill twice in the last week with her own eyes. The first time, he’d been *her* Eric too.

The two settled into silence for a moment, and Sookie’s eyes began to droop again.

“I should go so that you can rest, Sookie. I will see you on Wednesday evening.”

“Wait,” Sookie said again, feeling sad that her conversation with Eric was about to end but very exhausted at the same time.

“Yes?” Eric asked, thinking about how the word ‘wait’ was quickly becoming his favorite word.

“Can you do me a favor without drawing any false conclusions from it?”

Eric smiled, wondering what the beautiful fairy sitting across from him wanted.

“Maybe,” he answered truthfully. “I will happily do any favor you ask of me.” His lip turned up roguishly, “But I retain the right to draw whatever false conclusions I wish.”

Sookie smiled up at him, enjoying the glimpse of the flirtatious Eric she had known. Of course, Eric was usually even more suggestive, but he was being extra nice that evening for some reason.

Sookie bit her lip, “Would you carry me inside to where I am sleeping? I feel so tired and stiff right now that I think I might keel over if I try to get up on my own, and I’m afraid that

being carried by Jason or Jesus might hurt more than help. And, well, I don't want Lafayette to break a nail or anything," she chuckled wearily.

"Of course," Eric said, getting up. He moved to the door and knocked. Moments later, Jesus answered. The trio inside had been monitoring Sookie from the window until Eric arrived.

After Eric had sat down with her and the men knew that Sookie would be safe, they returned to the living room and settled in to watch one of the *Matrix* movies on television.

"Hi Eric—um Sheriff Northman," Jesus said.

"Eric is fine. Sookie has asked that I carry her inside to the room she is sleeping in since she is weary and sore. Is this okay?"

Surprised a bit that he was asking, Jesus answered, "Sure, if that's what Sookie wants, it'd be fine." He opened the door wider.

Eric again approached Sookie slowly, not wanting to spook her. He turned her chair slightly as he lifted her into his arms, making sure not to jostle her too much. Her arms went instinctively around his neck, and their eyes locked briefly before she laid her head onto his shoulder.

As Jesus, Jason and Lafayette looked on silently, the tall vampire gracefully carried Sookie into her room.

He sat her on the bed gently. "Will you sleep in this?"

Sookie nodded. The yoga pants and T-shirt she was wearing were doubling as her pajamas. "Will you help me take my sweatshirt off though?"

Silently, Eric reached down and gently lifted the bulky shirt, careful not to move too fast. Sookie raised her arms wearily. The sweatshirt gone, Eric helped Sookie to get under the covers,

keeping his intense eyes locked on hers the whole time. It took all of his willpower not to crawl in with her.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. Moments later he returned with a fresh glass of water and set it on the nightstand.

“Thank you,” she said sinking into the pillows.

Eric sat carefully next to her on the bed and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear as he’d done before.

Almost in a whisper, Sookie asked, “Are you angry?”

“About what?” Eric asked just as quietly.

“That I made the blood bond go away?”

Eric shook his head, “No, I am saddened, but I realize that you are acting for your own best interests, and as someone who has survived for a thousand years following the same philosophy, I cannot fault you.”

Sookie nodded. “Did you say that you memorized ‘The Seafarer’?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know it in English I would understand?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me some of it?” Sookie sank down even lower under the covers and closed her eyes.

Eric thought for a moment about whether to begin at the beginning or in the middle. He opted to start with his favorite lines since he couldn’t imagine Sookie staying awake much longer. He spoke the lines slowly and softly as he ran his fingers lightly through Sookie’s hair.

And now my spirit twists

out of my breast,
my spirit
out in the waterways,
over the whale's path
it soars widely
through all the corners of the world—
it comes back to me
eager and unsated;
the lone-flier screams,
urges onto the whale-road
the unresisting heart
across the waves of the sea.

Eric knew from Sookie's heart rate that she was asleep already, but he continued the poem until the end just as he continued the movement of his fingers, taking more comfort in the action that she was at this point. The loss of the bond had affected him more deeply than he could communicate in any of his many languages. He felt like the most substantial and significant part of himself had been hollowed. But he couldn't help but take hope from his encounter with Sookie, especially since he'd previously resigned himself to not seeing her at all that evening. She'd seen Bill too, but he hadn't stayed long.

Eric rose; it was 10:30 p.m. He had planned to call Pam after he'd dropped off the envelope and to watch over Lafayette's house himself until she arrived to replace him. But knowing that he would not be seeing Sookie until Wednesday, three nights from then, made him yearn to sit with her as long as he could.

Plus, the strongest instinct within him told him to stay next to her—to make sure that she was safe. Bond or no bond, tie or no tie, that instinct was still firmly intact.

He quietly left Sookie's bedside and went into the living room where Jason had just risen to leave. Jason didn't know everything that was going on in Sookie's head, but after seeing her cradled in Eric's arms as if it were the most natural place for her to be and comparing that to the apprehension he'd felt from her as she'd gone out to meet with Bill, he knew whose team he was on.

Jason walked up to Eric and extended his hand, despite the fact that his police training had taught him that vamps do not normally shake hands.

Jason, never one to stand on much ceremony, thought that if Eric wanted to be with his sister, he ought to be willing to shake hands with her family.

Eric looked into Jason's eyes and saw both acceptance and a challenge there. He had to admit that the Stackhouses did have their ways of surprising him.

Much to the astonishment of both Lafayette and Jesus, Eric took Jason's hand and shook it.

"Oww," Jason said when Eric squeezed a bit too hard.

Eric quickly pulled back. "We don't usually do that," he said by means of apology.

Jason quickly recovered as he rubbed his hand. "It's okay. But if you are going to be around my sister, we're going to have to work on your grip."

Eric chuckled as Jason turned to leave. Jason told Lafayette, "Tell Sook that I'll call tomorrow and that I'll be by after my shift again."

Eric was already beginning a phone call to Pam as Jason disappeared out the door.

"Pam," Eric said on his end. "Is there anything to report?"

He listened for a moment as Lafayette and Jesus watched him.

“Good,” he spoke into the phone. “Tell Compton if he calls back that I am out surveying Area 5 to see how many vampires were lost because of Marnie’s sunlight spell and that I am contacting the others from the area to let them know that they may return. If he still insists on speaking to me, give him this number. I’m about due for a new phone anyway.” He smirked at Jesus and Lafayette before continuing.

“I will be staying here again until near dawn, but you may text me if you need to report anything.” As Eric was finishing up his phone call, he walked quickly outside and surveyed the area, scanning to make sure there were no threats. He retrieved the envelope and Sookie’s roses and brought them inside before locking the door. “She would probably want these put in water to preserve them,” he observed, putting the flowers down on Lafayette’s table before turning to face the two men.

Eric gave Lafayette and Jesus a little bow. He could probably count the people he had thanked on one hand, but he spoke anyway. “You have my thanks for your care of Sookie and for allowing me to be in your home. I believe it is good for Sookie to have strong people in her life, especially now.” He bowed again and then handed the envelope to Lafayette. “Will you see that she gets this when she awakens?”

“Sure,” Lafayette answered, as Eric walked back to Sookie’s room.

As soon as he was out of the room, Lafayette and Jesus turned to each other, the disbelief clear in their eyes.

“That motha fucka loves her,” Lafayette said quietly.

“Yeah,” was all Jesus could say as he went into the kitchen to find something to put the roses in. As soon as that was done, the couple went to their bedroom and closed the door.

Eric carefully lay next to Sookie though he kept his body above the covers. He was pleased as she instinctively reached for him and placed her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest. Eric breathed in her scent and put his arms around his beloved, careful to keep his touch light so that she wouldn't awaken.

Sookie stirred a bit in her sleep before mumbling, "Eric, can you keep saying the poem till I fall asleep?"

Though Eric could tell she had already fallen back into her slumber seconds after asking her question, he began to recite the poem again, this time from the beginning.

After he'd said it all the way through, he carefully pulled out his phone and took care of some business via a series of texts and emails to Pam, Chow, and Bobby.

About twenty minutes before dawn, he rose carefully, settling Sookie back onto her pillow and pulling the blankets snugly around her.

He took in her form one last time as he whispered, "Until Wednesday, min kära."

Eric was about halfway to his safe house when he got a text. He checked it quickly and found that it was from Isabel, who had taken over Godric's position as Sheriff of Area 9 in Texas. It said only 4 words, but they were words



that chilled him, “Danger, go to ground.” Too late to check on the nature of the threat, he forwarded the message to Pam, flew to a secluded spot in the woods where he wouldn’t be tracked, dug a hole, and went to ground for the day, praying to gods that he’d ignored for hundreds of years that Sookie wasn’t in danger too and that his protection for her would be enough.

Chapter 20: Blue

A/N: Extended dreams in italics

Sookie couldn't quite place where she was for a few moments. It felt like the wood floor under her was swaying, and it was most certainly creaking. She was in a very small room with the only light coming from the edges of what looked to be a small hatch. She barely saw the few steps leading up to the hatch and climbed them. As soon as she managed to open it, she was bombarded with bright sunlight and recognized that she was on some kind of ship. A beautiful cerulean blue sky spread out above her.

She stood up on deck and noticed what looked like benches where people might sit and row, but she didn't see anyone. She walked carefully to the side of the boat and sat on one of the benches. There was land in the distance, and the sun seemed to be at its zenith. The air smelled of salt, and the water below her was a slightly darker shade of blue than the sky. She looked down and noticed that the boat was moving slowly through the water, running parallel to the land.

"My home is over there," a voice said from behind her.

She looked over her shoulder and noticed Eric standing near the rudder of the boat, about twenty feet away from her. The sun shone in his blond hair. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a white patterned T-shirt, the same clothes he'd worn when he'd killed the Were in her home. He looked out of place yet very at ease on the boat.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We are on what my people called a drekar, a kind of long ship. He walked gracefully toward her despite the slight listing of the boat. "Come, I want to show you something." He

pulled Sookie to her feet and steadied her before leading her to the front of the boat, which was all together about 70 feet long, Sookie guessed. Once at the front, Sookie saw a wonderfully elaborate dragon carved into the wood. She ran her fingers along the part of the design she could reach.

“This part of the boat is called the prow, what my people called the framstafn.”

Sookie repeated the word, trying to pronounce it like Eric, “framstafn.”

“Yes,” Eric said confirming her pronunciation. He ran his own hands along the carved pattern as well.

Sookie was surprised by the smoothness of the wood as well as the obvious craftsmanship. “This is beautiful,” she said.

Eric beamed, “Thank you. I helped to carve this when I was young. My father, despite his being what you would call the king of my people, encouraged me to learn about how our ships were made from the time when I was very young, probably 6 or 7. When he found out that I had some natural skill with the working of wood, he allowed me to learn from the town’s best woodworker, who designed this dragon.”

“Wow,” was Sookie’s only reaction.

Eric continued to smile at his memory. “Do not be too impressed, min kára I actually did very little of the work, mostly just this part.” He led Sookie’s hands to a large patch of scales carved in the wood. “My father was generous in allowing me time, especially in winter, with the woodworker, but he also expected that I learn many other things so that I could be a good leader after his time had passed. I was in the winter of my thirteenth year when I did this work.”

Sookie looked up into Eric's eyes, which she noticed were the same shade of blue as the sky. They were very bright and alive with his memory. She found herself lost in them.

"I have not thought of this dragon ship in many years. It was finished only a few years before my human death, but it took to the water well and was used by me in many successful raids."

"Is it true that y'all raped and pillaged and all that stuff?"

"Ah, the all Vikings are plunderers of lands and women myth."

Sookie looked a bit embarrassed until Eric laughed.

"Certainly some Norsemen did act ruthlessly," he said becoming more serious, "and the women of conquered lands were sometimes treated as property just like crops and precious metals."

Sookie cringed a bit before Eric continued.

He shrugged, "It was a very different time. The women of the conquered often became our servants and sometimes were taken as bed partners by the men, but my father was a strong king, and he did not allow cruelty toward anyone. He taught me that even conquered men and women had to be treated with respect, lest they would never be trustworthy servants. Most of the time, the people that we took back home after a raid were eventually absorbed into our people, helped to increase our numbers, and fought alongside us when our town was threatened."

Sookie nodded, trying to imagine what things were like when Eric was human. The time between their human lives floored her.

As if sensing Sookie's thoughts, Eric continued, "It was very different then, but still quite the same too. We had close-knit families, even more so than now, and we all worked together to create as much comfort and peace as we could. There were battles and raiding among our

enemies and ourselves, but there was also a lot of peace during my father's reign and then my own. At our core, my people were explorers."

Sookie spoke up, "Did you have brothers and sisters?"

Eric responded, "I had a sister, who was a small child when Russell's Weres came. She was killed with them. My parents lost several other children between me and her though—most died at childbirth or within the first few months of life. I had one brother that lived to be almost four before he died during my ninth winter."

"Oh," Sookie said, "I'm sorry."

Eric smiled warmly at her. "It was a long, long time ago, and like I said, he was very young when he died."

"Still, I cannot imagine losing my brother, so it must have been hard."

Eric looked thoughtful, "Yes, I remember that Leif had really begun developing his own distinct personality before he fell ill. He was always what you might call underfoot with me. I had started to teach him to fish in the little streams near our home the summer before he died. I was a good brother to him, and you are right, I did mourn his loss."

The two fell into silence for several minutes before Sookie sat on the bench closest to the dragon so that she could continue running her hands along the design. Eric sat down a few minutes later, facing her from a bench a few feet away.

"How can you be here now that our bond has been broken?" she finally asked.

"I do not know," he said. "But I have never left you; I can tell you that."

"How can that be? Your blood and magic were burned from me, weren't they?"

"Yes," he answered. "There is no trace of my blood nor the magic that it carried within you."

“So how?”

Eric smiled as he reached to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, “Anything is possible with you, min kära.”

They spent a few more moments in silence with Eric looking up toward the sun and enjoying its warmth.

Sookie spoke as she raised her hands up to Eric’s carving, “It really is beautiful. But why did y’all have this kind of carving on your ships?”

Eric answered with mischief in his eyes, “Well, one common belief nowadays is that we used the carvings of beasts to frighten our enemies, to cause them to surrender before we even lifted a sword.” He paused as she turned her eyes to him.

“But,” he continued, “this is not the main reason we had them. We believed that these carvings would protect us and the ship from real sea monsters that lived in the oceans.”

“Sea monsters?” Sookie’s eyes lit up.

“Yes,” Eric said.

“Did you ever see one?”

Eric laughed, “No, they didn’t really exist except in the beliefs of my people, a way to explain missing ships and men and to connect us to our gods. The gators and crocodiles of your time are much more real than the monsters of mine,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“The other day when you were drunk on Claudine, you said you were a sea god.”

“Yes, Ægir, and you were my sea goddess,” he began.

“Rán,” Sookie finished.

“Yes, in the myths of my people, she wielded a wide net that could entrap men when they were at sea. She was a beautiful and dangerous goddess.”

Sookie snorted, “So now I’m dangerous? It doesn’t seem like a very good comparison.”

Eric laughed. “Come now, min kára. Rán is what you might call a badass today. And you have certainly entwined me into your net.”

Sookie couldn’t help but laugh back. “Fine, but what was this Ægir like? Maybe I don’t wanna be his sea goddess.”

“He was king of the creatures of the sea, according to my people, and he threw a grand party.” Eric winked at Sookie.

They settled into another comfortable silence as both looked at the land in the distance.

Sookie smiled brightly at Eric. “I like sitting here with you, talking like this.”

“Me too,” Eric said seriously. He looked down at his hands before looking back at Sookie.

“Why do you think we’re here?” she asked after a few moments.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just wondering why I’m dreaming of us on one of your ancient ships like this.”

“Hmm,” Eric thought, “I don’t know. Maybe you are curious about my human life, or maybe you are still thinking about the poem of the seafarer as you sleep?”

“Yeah, that’s probably it,” Sookie said continuing to trace the pattern of the scales with her hand.

“I wonder if I will dream of Bill next, maybe in his home when he was building it or maybe during the war?”

Eric looked at her, his expression falling slightly and his eyes brightening. “Maybe. It would only be fair, after all.”

“I suppose.”

“But then again, I hope you do not dream of him.” Eric smirked a bit, “I am pleased that you still dream of me even though we no longer share blood between us. It shows that you must like me—at least a little,” he winked at her again.

“Maybe I’m just interested in history,” Sookie said, her own eyes twinkling with mischief now. “Or maybe I just like boats.”

“You are cruel to me, Miss Stackhouse,” Eric said as he brought his hands to his chest as if she had stabbed him in the heart. “You wound me.”

She laughed at his antics as he fell backwards from the bench.

As he straightened himself after a dramatic roll around the deck, she said, “Maybe I do like you a little.”

“Well thanks for that—a little is better than none, I suppose.”

The two sat smiling in silence for a few more minutes before Eric spoke, his voice serious again.

“I admit that am selfish when it comes to you, Sookie, even when it comes to your dreams. I want you to be mine; I have wanted that since I first saw you. So I do not wish for you to dream of Compton or anyone—other than me.” He said his last words at a volume that Sookie could barely hear.

Sookie woke up feeling much stronger than the evening before. She looked at the clock and saw that it was only 9:03 a.m., and she was thankful that she hadn’t slept the day away. Still a bit sore, she sat up gingerly and then saw the glass of water Eric had brought her next to her bed. Noticing that her throat was better but still a little sore, she took a drink and thought about her dream. It had been a vivid dream, just like those she’d had when Eric’s blood was inside of

her. She smiled and looked at her hand; she could still feel Eric's carvings on her fingertips. She thought about his eyes, shining in the sunlight and so closely matching the sky. They had seemed to glow in the light, and she mourned that he could not always be in the sun like that.

She had not dreamed of Bill.

[A/N: Sookie did have a dream with Eric in it, but it was not a shared dream. Eric will tell us later that vampires cannot really have dreams—at least not in my story. He was pulled into one of Sookie's dreams by her, but if you remember, he was completely awake at the time. All mysteries about how all this happens will eventually come out. I hope you enjoy as everything unravels.]

Chapter 21: Deeds

Sookie sat at Lafayette's table, looking at the flowers Bill had brought her. They really were quite beautiful.

"Thanks for bringing these in and puttin' them in water," Sookie said to Lafayette, who had just woken up and was pouring himself a cup of the coffee that Sookie had made.

Lafayette looked nervous for a few moments before answering. Eric had said nothing about glamouring away the events of the night before, so he was able to answer truthfully, "Actually Sook, it was your blond vampire that brought them in and asked us to take care of them. He also left that envelope for you." He gestured toward the large manila envelope on the counter.

Sookie shook her head in surprise. Eric had certainly stunned her in more ways than one the night before. He'd sat with her for a long time, just talking. The conversation had been easy between them. She remembered feeling like she didn't want him to leave, and she'd even asked him to carry her to bed.

She drank a long sip of coffee, enjoying the feeling of the warmth on her throat. She couldn't believe she'd basically asked him to tuck her in and tell her a bedtime story. She rolled her eyes at herself in surprise. But Eric's presence *had* made her feel more peaceful. After Bill's warning of danger, it had been nice to know that Eric was there if anything happened.

She looked at Lafayette, who had joined her at the table. "Yeah, Eric was," she paused looking for the right word, "*nice* last night." Even as she said it, she couldn't believe that "nice" would have ever been a word she would use about Eric Northman, at least for the version of him that didn't have amnesia.

She looked again at Bill's gift and pulled the vase closer to her. The roses smelled lovely and sweet, unlike the kind generally found in grocery stores nowadays. She hadn't received flowers many times, come to think of it, and she appreciated Bill's thoughtfulness.

She got up and slowly walked to retrieve the envelope and refill her coffee cup. She rejoined Lafayette at the table and felt the weight of the envelope, which she hadn't held the night before. There seemed to be a thick set of papers and something rattling around inside. She opened it curiously.

Sookie gasped as her house keys, specifically the key ring she recognized as Eric's set, dropped onto the table top. She touched the keys gingerly before pulling out the other contents of the package, which consisted of a thick, stapled legal document and a smaller envelope with "Sookie" written on it.

It didn't take her long to realize that the legal document was the paperwork selling her house back to her. What did surprise her was that the date on the legal work indicated that the bill of sale had been initiated one day after her return. And according to the document in front of her, the sale had closed on October 30.

"Oh my gravy!" Sookie exclaimed.

Lafayette asked, "Is that what it looks like Sook?"

She handed him the document.

"Shit," Lafayette said, drawing out the word. "This says that after you sign, the house is yours again. And, fuck!" he exclaimed reading further down. "The sale is for a dollar, Sookie! It says right here that after you give him a dollar and sign the paper, your house is yours again!"

Sookie grabbed the papers back from him and gasped again as she read them more closely. Sure enough, the document indicated that the house would be hers for a mere dollar.

“Why would he?” Sookie asked softly. “I mean on the same day that it says these were drawn up, he came to my house and asked me to be *his*—his property. He told me that since he owned the house, he owned me! I don’t understand this!”

“Maybe he explains in that,” Lafayette said, pointing to the smaller envelope sitting next to the keys to Sookie’s house.

“Maybe,” Sookie said, thumbing the envelope, almost afraid of what she’d find in there. She was burning with curiosity to read Eric’s letter though; however, she wanted some privacy.

Seeming to sense this, Lafayette picked up his coffee and walked toward the front door. “I’m gonna be right out here, Sook, if you needs me.”

Though his back was turned to her, Sookie nodded, unable to really say anything.

She picked up the ivory envelope, turning it over in her hands several times. From the thickness of it, there seemed to be several sheets inside.

Again, she noticed Eric’s elegant script on the envelope as she opened it and took the letter out. She took a deep breath.

Eric’s penmanship was something of a masterpiece in and of itself. The paper was thick and unlined, but all the words were spaced perfectly, and the lines of text were straight. When Sookie wrote with a pen, her work contained many mistakes, words scribbled out and lines of text running a bit askew even when she was working on lined paper. Eric’s letter contained no mistakes, blurred letters, or scratched out words from his changing a thought. She was not surprised after having seen his precision in other things. She couldn’t help but smile to herself as she imagined him pouring over manuscripts in candle-lit libraries and perfecting his penmanship during his days as a translator.

She sighed as she began to read the beautiful handwriting.

Sookie,

It is difficult for someone as old as I to change his ways even though adaptation has been a staple of my life. The changes that have come over me due to my experiences with you during the last weeks—actually the last year and a half—have left me trying to balance the old with the new. My position as sheriff of Area 5 demands my continued ruthlessness and ties me to the rigor of vampire politics. Also, there are many more facets to the inner-workings of vampires than you can imagine as of yet, and I have reached my age by looking out for myself above all others.

Now, I find that my first instinct is not always to do that; it seems that looking out for you has become just as—if not more—important to me, and the idea of this leaves me uncertain for the first time that I can remember. This is dangerous for someone who

lives on the edge of the sword as I must; however, I find that I would not change the fact that you walked into my club in your pretty little sundress a year and a half ago.

I find that I owe you many apologies, most of which I hope to make in person, but one that I feel the need to write down. After the witch, Marnie, asked for Bill and my deaths in exchange for your freedom, I agreed to the terms. My child stopped my potential martyrdom, and even though I was angry with her at the time—even banishing her from my sight—I must admit that she acted rightly, as I have always taught her to do.

I'm afraid that I allowed my jealousy to rule me in the moment I agreed with Marnie's scheme. Bill was most clearly willing to give up his life for you—to die for you, so I felt the need to make the same offer. I will admit to you, but no other, that I have been struggling to

find myself on even footing with Compton in your eyes since the first moment I saw you. My agreement to die for you was juvenile at best.

Angry and hurt, Sookie looked up from the letter. Was Eric trying to tell her that she was not worth dying for? That this decision would have been a mistake? That putting her life above his own was a mistake? A single tear dripped down her face. She whispered ruefully, “Eric has always been and will always be out for himself above everyone. I should have known that *my* Eric was gone. *He* would have always put me above himself, even if I didn’t necessarily want him to.”

Clearly, thought Sookie, Bill’s affection for her ran deeper than Eric’s. She looked at Bill’s flowers and touched them lightly, feeling the soft petals on her fingertips. Her eyes drifted to the keys sitting next to the vase.

They were a very different kind of gift. She steeled herself for what must have been the millionth time in the last few days and continued to read the letter.

If I know you, Sookie, you are probably angry with me for my words and my lack of the Southern honor that Compton seems to have in spades. As you are probably thinking—he was willing to die for you in a second and without second thoughts, but this is not how I operate, Sookie.

She snorted, uttering a barely audible, “No doubt about that,” under her breath before continuing to read.

What would have been the result if we had both died our true deaths? The witch had told us that she'd let you go, but what guarantee did she give us? Also, you would never have left your friends behind, so you would have probably gotten hurt or killed trying to mount a rescue even if she had let you go. Jessica is too young to have been much help to you then, and Pamela, I'm afraid, had been overextended already given her own curse and taking over both my duties as sheriff and the running of Fangtasia due to my incapacitation. If I had died alongside Bill, she would have been the only vampire of any type of authority left in Louisiana, and she would have been able to do very little to protect you from the Authority or Nan Flanagan. Even if you had survived the Marnie situation and saved your friends, Nan knows about your power now, and she may tell members of the

Authority to solidify her position. Without Bill or me as a buffer, I fear you would have been in extreme peril. This only adds to the threat that I have guessed that you currently face from your fairy kin. You have not told me for sure where you went in your more than year absence, but to the fairy realm is the only logical answer. This also would explain the lapse of time you experienced. I know a bit about fairies from stories told to me by Godric and his maker, and I would not wish you to be left vulnerable to them. Your lack of a lasting reaction when I "killed your fairy godmother" indicates that they are not your friends, so I can only posit that they are a potential danger to you.

My final death would have, perhaps, been a grand gesture, but it would have also been an ultimately fruitless one. My death would have helped you for one night—maybe. Alive I can be of more service

to you. So, Sookie, I will not die for you as Compton would. But I do aim to live for you and to keep you alive as well.

Sookie looked up again from the letter, Eric’s logic sinking in. She scolded herself for always jumping to the wrong conclusions about Eric—and jumping fast! She asked herself out loud, “Why do I do that? Where does it come from?” The answer struck her like a bolt out of the blue. Bill’s words and opinions had been the first she had ever heard about Eric, and the thoughts of her first love had always tainted her perceptions of her second. “Well that’s just bologna,” she said, continuing to scold herself. “You know how to make up your own frickin’ mind, Sookie Stackhouse! Gran taught you better than this!” Sookie vowed right then and there that Bill’s words and thoughts concerning Eric were never—ever—going to cloud her own perceptions of him again.

Eric was right. If Bill and he had died the true death that night, it would have been for little purpose. Marnie would have still been possessed and would have probably found a way to kill Pam and Jessica.

Lafayette, Jesus, Tara, Holly and the others had not been guaranteed their freedom, and Eric was right that she wouldn’t have left without them. And even if all the



vampires of Louisiana had been killed, there was no indication that Marnie would have stopped

her vendetta; in fact, she seemed to be getting more and more fanatical. Sookie continued reading.

So I apologize to you for acting without thought and out of jealousy. I have admitted before that I am a selfish being, but since you have become so important to me, I find that your best interests and mine have begun to line up more and more. Perhaps, through a stroke of cosmic luck, I can remain just as selfish and still work for your best interests as well.

Sookie couldn't help but smile. She could imagine Eric smirking and giving her a cheeky look as he said the last line to her.

Now, I must move on to the practical. You have, no doubt, seen the order for sale for the house on Hummingbird Lane, your home. I reverted to my baser nature two nights after you returned to this realm and attempted to use the house to make you mine. I had already set in motion the transfer, but I couldn't resist taking the opportunity to try to convince you to become mine in exchange for my

protection. I am nothing if not an opportunist. However, the risk to you in not being able to keep vampires out of the home was too great, so I had hoped that you would agree to accept protection from me while I was waiting for the paperwork to go through. I admit to my duplicity, Sookie. I cannot tell you how odd a sensation it was to feel half of myself wanting to secure you in any way possible—even if through misleading you—and half of myself being ashamed for trying because I knew you would hate me if I succeeded. In short, I know now that I behaved badly, and I am sorry for that too.

Sookie let out another snort. Again, she felt anger at Eric's attempted manipulation, but she was also surprised that he was willing to admit it.

You have no reason to believe me, but my offer to protect you and to declare you as mine would not have been contingent upon your giving me either sex or blood. I would have tried to keep you safe—and will continue to try—for nothing in return.

Don't get me wrong, however. I am no saint. I would have used all my considerable powers of persuasion to try to seduce you, but I have never wanted your affection as some kind of payment for services rendered.

I must also admit to another small crime that evening when I was in your home. Before I entered your bedroom and saw your delicious naked body for the first time, . . .

Sookie blushed as she pulled her knees up to her chest and got more comfortable. She bit her lip.

. . . I saw your purse downstairs and stole a dollar from you. I shall count this as payment made in advance for the sale of your home, so the papers will be complete as soon as you sign them. I have already had them notarized, and the official sale has been backdated to October 30 for the title records, so sign that date, if you don't mind. I hope that you will invite me into your home when next we meet there. If you

decide to stay in your grandmother's old room from now on, as you said you might during our last evening together in that house, I would like to see to that squeak in your bed. It is the least I can do for you.

Sookie's blush moved throughout her whole body and her eyes grew wide before she smiled broadly. There had most definitely been a squeak in that particular bed. She put down the letter momentarily, fanned herself, and then went to grab a pen she'd seen in Lafayette's living room. She poured more coffee, returned to her seat and immediately signed and dated the Bill of Sale that would make her house hers again. She went back to the letter.

I realize, given your nature, that you may wish to somehow pay me, at least for the improvements I made in your absence, . . .

Sookie nodded as she read, her own Southern pride and desire to NOT be a kept woman in any capacity flooding her.

. . . but I would like for you to consider why your home was damaged in the first place. It was done when you were away from Bon Temps and working for me. More significantly, it was done when you were aiding me in finding my maker. The Maenad was most likely in the midst of her destruction the very night that you survived a rape

attempt, our time in the church, and a bomber's attempt to kill everyone in Godric's home, in addition to my trickery to get you to take my blood. Even as you stayed with my maker when I could not and stood by his side, shedding tears for him as he met the sun, the Maenad may have been desecrating your grandmother's things. I ask that you allow me to share in the responsibility in preserving Adele's memory by repairing her—now your—home. You did, after all, aid Godric in a way that I could never repay. I hope that you will consider us even when it comes to the repairs.

Sookie reached for a dish towel that was on the table to wipe some of the newly forming tears from her eyes and cheeks. Eric's words about Gran and Godric had touched her deeply.

For the rest, you may ask your brother about the price I paid him for the property. If he has retained some of the money from the sale, I will accept that. However, beyond that, I do not wish to accept any other money from your brother or yourself. I am an old vampire, and I

have been smart in business. I have more money than I will ever know what to do with—despite having Pamela as a child—and the price for your home and its repair has not—I can assure you—left me deficit in any way. I hope that you will accept this, but I know that the matter will probably be a topic of discussion in the future, and I am ready to listen to any counter-proposals you wish to make.

Oh, speaking of money, Pam will be visiting tomorrow—Monday evening—to pay you the promised sum for your taking me into your home when I was incapacitated, your babysitting as I think you called it. Given what happened between us, I'm sure you are bristling at the thought of still taking this money, but I ask that you do. If it makes you feel any better, writing the check from her personal shopping fund and delivering it to you herself are some of Pamela's punishments for shooting a rocket directly at you. I have also ordered her to apologize

to you for this act. I admit to being a bit envious that I won't be there to see it. I asked her to be extra contrite.

Sookie's emotions turned once again, as she smiled at the thought of Pam's punishment. She'd have to think about whether to cash the check, but she would take it just to see the look on Pam's face. She imagined the smirk on Eric's face as he issued this orders to his child.

Finally, I must write to you about some measures I have put in place to protect you. I'm sure by now that Bill has impressed upon you the perilous position you are in, and I wrote about it above. I know that your first impulse will be to resist protection and to try to take care of yourself, . . .

"Damned skippy," Sookie said to herself. She didn't want to owe Eric for this, no matter how much she was coming to value him. Also, she was afraid that a bodyguard from Eric would mean that her privacy would be lost. At the same time, however, she acknowledged her fear. Even the night before, she had contemplated whether to take Bill's blood again, just to ensure her own safety. And she couldn't deny that she *had* felt a lot better, knowing that Eric was there.

. . . but I ask you to go against your nature in this for the short term—at least until you have decided on what direction you wish to take

for your life. I have chosen two protectors that I feel will be most palatable for you. In addition, you may gain a sense of satisfaction in knowing how uncomfortable the situation will make me once I have explained it fully. After all, if you are to be put-out—so to speak—in accepting my aid, then I shouldn't be in the position to celebrate your discomfort.

To this end, I have arranged for Alcide Herveaux to look after you during the day hours. As I am sure you can surmise, my jealousy that he can protect you when I cannot knows no bounds.

However, I am learning from my previous lesson the other night and have put my jealousy to the side—with great difficulty, I can assure you. Lest you feel that his protection of you is completely noble, I have agreed to pay off some gambling debts accrued by Herveaux's

father, which have estranged the whole family from their original pack in Mississippi.

I sacrificed much pride to ask for his aid, especially after the Were growled at me that day at the lake when I was still experiencing the after-dinner effects of your fairy godmother.

Sookie couldn't help but laugh, imagining Eric's mixture of sarcasm and disgust if he were saying these words in front of her.

Moreover, I did not like the way he was looking at you or the way he spoke to you on your porch that day. (Yes, I could hear you from my "cubby.") I like it even less that he stood naked next to you, and although I did not catch you looking, I still didn't like it.

Sookie had to shake herself out of the memory of being so close to two beautiful, naked men that morning. She'd been so worried about Eric at the time that she'd not been able to enjoy the sight as much as she'd wanted to, but she *had* sneaked a peak at both Eric and Alcide's beautiful bodies that morning. She blushed again.

I am comforted only by the fact that in this situation, I will once again prove myself to be the "bigger" man (pun definitely intended) just as I was that morning—despite the chill of the water, I might add.

Sookie's blush at Eric's words knew no bounds. In this point, she would definitely have to agree. She had only seen three male "tools" in her life, and to be fair to Alcide, she didn't see him aroused or anything, but she was definitely sure that Eric's—um gracious plenty—was in a class by itself. Hell, it was the *teacher* of that class!

You may call Alcide's cell as soon as you are done reading this letter. If you are reading this in the daytime, then he is already close-by, keeping an eye out for any danger. However, I asked him to wait for your call before he showed himself at the house.

As for your night guard, I cannot help but feel that you will want some distance from Bill and myself, and I will respect this and try not to contact you unless something arises concerning your safety.

I have arranged for you to be protected by a very special vampire friend of mine, whom I feel you will like very much and who is extremely

good at keeping out of sight. This particular vampire is also under the protection of most of the kings and queens in America, as his case is special. He has worked for me from time to time, and since I treat him with respect, he is very loyal. I feel as though I must prepare you, however, for his appearance.

The first thing that you must know is that you have to refer to him as Bubba. If not, there will be trouble. Do not, under any circumstances, call him Elvis or even Mr. Presley! This is imperative, and I must insist that Lafayette, Jesus, and especially your brother be well-schooled in this rule as well. It may be pretty clear, now, to whom I am referring; you will be able to recognize him immediately, I am sure. I will not tell you the whole story now, but suffice it to say that he was too near death from overdose, one of the paramedics was a vampire and a huge fan, and the turning did not go well at all.

Remembering his past makes him extremely agitated; thus, he must be Bubba and Bubba only. Oh, and make sure that if Lafayette has a cat, that Bubba is told it is off limits. I have ordered him to listen to you in all things. He will arrive this evening with Pam, who will make the introductions. Oh, and don't ask him to sing. He will sometimes break out into song on his own, and you can take my word for it that it is a great treat, but he doesn't respond well to being asked.

I must wrap this up now so that I can drop it off for you with Jesus or Lafayette. Please suggest to them that they place protective wards around both their home and yours. After feeling their power personally, I am certain that they are strong enough to place very strong wards. I am having all of Marnie's magic books and many of her supplies delivered to them this afternoon, so I'm sure they will find an appropriate spell there.

I will close by saying something about the spell that they placed, the spell that severed our blood connection with each other. You need never try to justify this decision to me. You have already told me your reasons, and I have accepted them.

Sookie looked up, wondering what Eric was talking about; they hadn't discussed her reasoning as far as she could remember.

You said at Compton's the other night that you loved both Bill and me. I could see in your eyes that it was tearing you apart; I just didn't know how to help you then. You said that you thought the love might be because we'd give you our blood, that it might only be chemical. It is your time now Sookie—your time to find out if your theory is correct. You were right that night when you told me that I had given myself to you—completely. I stand by that decision even now; I would do it again as both the Eric you came to love and the one writing to you now. I want you to be "mine," Sookie Stackhouse. I am very

aware that you hate this term, but since you can most definitely label me as "yours" already, I feel that it is only fair. I hope the love you felt for me remains in you even as you read this. If it does not, I will still offer you my protection—again, with no strings attached.

Either way, I will await your call as I did before.

Yours,

-E

Chapter 22: Another Offer

Sookie couldn't count the number of mood swings she'd felt as she had read Eric's letter. She folded it carefully and tucked it back into its envelope. The letter had broken her heart, made her angry, and made her laugh—sometimes more than one thing at a time. He'd confided in her, and there were secrets shared that she wouldn't want to go any further, so she placed the letter in her purse, zipping it safely in the side pocket. When she got home, she would pry up the old floor board in the attic, where she used to keep her childhood treasures, and place it inside so she would be assured of its safety.

She sighed loudly, drained from the past week and from the emotional turbulence the letter had caused. “Who knew Eric Northman was so darned long-winded?” she said out loud, though a smile played on her lips. She wished he was there for a moment so that she could chide him for his high-handedness. Then she retrieved her cell phone out of her purse, remembering that she needed to call Alcide.

He answered on the first ring. “Hey cher.”

She couldn't help but love the way that both he and Sam called her ‘cher’, and she resolved to go speak to Sam about her job soon.

“Alcide, Eric told me that you would be looking after me during the day. After everything that's happened, I'm just so appreciative. I know how you feel about vampires.”

“It's okay, Sook. I'm sorry about how I spoke to you the other night after you'd been shot. You know that I'll always be your friend and support you, right?”

“Thanks. Why don't you come on up? Actually, give me five minutes first, so I can warn Lafayette that you're coming.”

“No problem. See you real soon.”

Sookie went out to the porch where Lafayette was looking at a fashion magazine. “You all right?” he asked, taking in her swollen eyes.

“Yep,” Sookie answered. Though tired, she did feel better after reading Eric’s letter. “I need to warn you that Alcide is coming. Eric arranged for him to protect me during the daytime.”

“Is that the tall, dark, yummy drink of water with the chest to die—or kill—for?”

Sookie laughed, “Yep, that sums him up pretty well.” She thought that Alcide was definitely handsome enough to be the fodder of daydreams, so she couldn’t begrudge Lafayette’s lust-filled look.

Just then, Alcide emerged from the woods, in his signature flannel shirt and a pair of sinfully tight blue jeans.



“Oh Lordy!” Lafayette muttered after spying the Were.

Alcide approached and gave Sookie a big hug, which she returned gladly. Alcide had a way of hugging her like a big, old bear. At the contact, she couldn’t help but hear in his mind

that he thought she smelled like jasmine and that Debbie liked that scent too. He seemed a bit sad.

“Thanks again, Alcide—so much,” Sookie said, pulling out of the hug. “I know that you must be missin’ work or something to be here, and I appreciate it. Both Bill and Eric think something might come for me and that I might be in danger.”

“When are you not in danger?” Alcide smiled at her, repeating sentiments he’d shared with her before.

“Do you know my friend Lafayette?” Sookie asked.

“I think I’ve seen him before, but I don’t know if we’ve officially met—Alcide Herveaux,” Alcide reached out to shake Lafayette’s hand.

Lafayette rose and tightened his purple robe dramatically before reaching for Alcide’s hand. He looked the taller man over from top to bottom. “The pleasure is all mine,” he said, “for now.” Sookie could tell that whatever Lafayette was doing to Alcide’s hand during their shake was making the Were a bit uncomfortable. She had to try hard to stifle a giggle.

Sookie had decided that Lafayette and Jesus should be told about Weres since she’d be staying with them for at least the next day. After everything with the witches, she knew that they could take it. Of course, Jason already knew about Weres, so telling him about Alcide wouldn’t be such a big deal. She also wanted to tell Alcide about the spell that had been done on her. She wanted all her allies to be on the same page for once.

She looked at Alcide, “Hey, do you mind if I talk to you for a sec in private?” She looked apologetically at Lafayette before leading Alcide to the side of the house.

“What’s up, Sook?”

“Alcide, I want to tell Lafayette, Jesus, and my brother about what you are, if that’s okay. I know that you don’t want a lot of people knowin’, and I get that because of my own ability, but you might have to shift in front of them, and I don’t want them freaking out.”

Alcide looked at Sookie for a moment, “Are they trustworthy?”

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation. “Jason already knows about Werepanthers on account of him gettin’ bitten by one, and he’s been able to keep that to himself. Jesus and Lafayette are much more discreet.”

“Okay, Sook, I trust your judgment here,” Alcide said nodding.

Sookie gave him a little pat. “Thanks, Alcide.”

The two returned to the porch where Lafayette looked to be primping. His eyes followed Alcide as they sat down.

Sookie started, “Laf, I wanna tell you somethin’ about Alcide, but I need you to swear that you won’t tell anyone.”

Lafayette looked momentarily concerned until Sookie added, “except Jesus. We were plannin’ on tellin’ him too.”

Relieved, Lafayette nodded before Sookie continued, ripping off the Band-Aid, “Alcide is a Werewolf.”

Lafayette sat in silence for a minute or two, taking in what had been said. His response was not what either of his listeners expected. “Jesus is some kind of demon AND a witch, and I can channel dead people.” He sighed, sinking into his seat.

“O-kay,” Alcide finally said slowly. “Now that that’s all settled, do you have anything to eat?”

Surprised by the lack of fall-out to the revelations, Sookie looked at Lafayette, suddenly feeling hungry herself.

“There’s stuff for sandwich fixins’ in the fridge. I’ll warm up the gumbo for dinner tonight,” Lafayette said.

Sookie nodded and then rose. “I’ll go make some sandwiches then,” she said, turning to open the door. “Wait!” she exclaimed, remembering a crucial piece of information she’d been given by Eric, “the king is coming here tonight!”

Lafayette looked nonplussed. “Bill was here last night. I wish that bitch would just take a hint and chill.”

“No, Lala,” Sookie said. “The KING is coming tonight, as in Elvis!”

Sookie had never been so glad about finishing making sandwiches in her life. She quickly took the plate of sandwiches and two iced teas and carefully thread her way through the whirlwind that had been Lafayette in the last few minutes. Ever since he’d learned that Elvis was coming, he’d been in a cleaning frenzy and was currently trying to figure out where he’d stored a paint-by-number painting his mom had done of Elvis.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sookie said opening the door carefully and using all her waitressing skills to avoid dropping anything. “Remember what Eric said. We have to call him Bubba and pretend he’s not who he is.”

“Fine,” Lafayette said even as he continued to dust.

Sookie sighed as she sat down on the porch, offering one of the teas and a sandwich to Alcide.

“Did you know that Elvis was a vampire?” she asked.

Alcide nodded, “Yeah, it’s pretty well known in the Supe community. Since he is the way he is, most of us that know kinda look out for him, but he’s really pretty good at stayin’ out of sight, according to what I’ve heard. I’ve also heard that he’s quite strong, especially given his age.”

Sookie spoke again after finishing a bite of sandwich, “Eric said he had overdosed and was turned too late. I guess there’d already been brain damage that couldn’t be corrected by the vampire blood?”

“Yeah, that’s the same story I’ve heard. I’ve never met him though. I guess we’ll all see what he’s like tonight since I’m supposed to wait until Pam gets here.” Alcide rolled his eyes at his mention of Pam.

After she’d finished half a sandwich, Sookie decided it was time to tell Alcide about the spell. “Alcide, I need to tell you about why Eric wanted you to protect me.”

As he chewed a bite, Alcide gestured for Sookie to continue.

“As you may know, the witch that was trying to make all the vampires walk in the sun was killed a few days ago.”

Alcide nodded.

“Anyway, I came over here the next day, and we all got to talkin’. As Lafayette said, Jesus is a witch, and he told me about a spell that could get rid of vampire blood in humans.”

Alcide sat forward in his chair, clearly interested in what Sookie had to say.

“Anyway, Jason, who had drunk Jessica’s blood—Jessica is Bill’s child, you know?”

Alcide nodded. “Well Jason and I decided to do the spell. I wanted to see if the feelings I had for Eric and Bill were real. I learned from Jesus that vampire blood could amplify things that

were already there—like attraction could seem like love or dislike could seem like hate, that kind of thing.”

Alcide nodded again, encouragingly.

“So we did it day before yesterday. It took a lot out of me, but I thought it was the only way I’d know if my feelings were from me or from the chemistry of the vampire blood.”

“What did you find out, Sook?”

“I don’t know yet, Alcide. I’m still tryin’ to recover from the spell a bit; then, I’ll work it out.”

Alcide was contemplative for a few moments. Then he spoke as he reached out to pull Sookie’s hand into his. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you did it. You are finally free of all those bastards.”

Sookie pulled her hand away from Alcide’s and picked up her tea to cover her discomfort at his statement. Even now, Sookie refused to believe that all the members of one group could be bad. She’d seen good in both Bill and Eric, after all.

“Why do you hate them so much?” she finally asked.

“You’ve seen how manipulative they can be?”

She had, so she nodded.

“Well, us Weres and them have never really gotten along. They think they are so superior to us.”

Sookie had seen Alcide’s kind of prejudice from most of the Supes she knew, as well as most of the humans. She gestured for Alcide to continue as she took another bite of her sandwich.

“They also have done some bad things to my father. He got into debt at a casino on the Mississippi that is owned by a vamp. He’s been beaten up more than once.”

Sookie nodded again, trying to see Alcide’s point. After all, his father’s gambling addiction couldn’t be blamed upon vampires.

She spoke, “Why don’t *you* like them?”

Alcide took a deep breath. “It’s sort of complicated, Sook,” he said, frustration filling his voice. “They act superior, which sets us all up against each other to start with. Just look at how Northman behaves. He had Pam call me night before last, and she basically *ordered* me to protect you even though I would have done it if she would have just asked. Northman just assumes that if he says jump, everyone will immediately hop to.”

“Yeah, that does sound like him,” Sookie said, a bit of a smile behind her eyes.

Alcide took Sookie’s hand in his again, looking into her eyes sincerely and with intensity. Sookie’s heart had started to jump around a bit until she caught a flash of Debbie roll through Alcide’s mind.



“Sook,” Alcide said, “I think that your breaking your connection with the vamps couldn’t have come at a more perfect time for us.”

“Us?” questioned Sookie.

“Yeah, you once said that if you had a chance to do what was *best* for you, you would fall in love with someone like me. Sookie,” Alcide said, squeezing her hand more tightly, “I think that we should just do what’s best for once. We can start a new life *together*.”

Sookie pulled her hand back a bit, “What about Debbie?”

Alcide pulled Sookie’s hand back more fully into his grasp, “Debbie and I are done, Sookie.”

“When?”

“The other day. I’ve abjured her.”

“What does that mean?” Sookie was a bit uncomfortable from the intensity of Alcide’s grip, so she shook her hand a little. He let go, and she placed both hands in her lap and sat back.

“It’s when a Were decides to cut all ties with another. Basically, it means that I will no longer transform with her or run with her. She is dead to me.”

“What happened, Alcide?”

“She slept with our pack leader, for one thing.”

Sookie couldn’t fight her compassion and reached for Alcide’s hand again. Immediately she wished she hadn’t as she caught a glimpse from Alcide’s mind of him killing a man, who she assumed was the pack leader. She also caught a glimpse of Sam.

“You killed him?” she said, pulling her hand away again.

Alcide nodded.

“Was Sam there?”

Alcide looked strained before launching into his story. “Marcus, the pack leader, came to me for help. He said that some *shifter* was tryin’ to take away his wife and daughter and asked me for my help scaring him. I agreed.”

Sookie looked down at her hands, a bit disappointed that Alcide would agree to such a thing and also that he seemed just as prejudiced against shifters as he was vampires. To be honest, Sookie didn’t much care for this aspect of Alcide, and she didn’t think it was justified based on his explanation. “So you were going to rough him up?”

Alcide shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “Yeah, a little.” He continued, “Turned out, the shifter was your boss, Sam Merlotte.”

“Sam?” Sookie exclaimed. “You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

Alcide looked even more uncomfortable, “He came to an auto shop owned by one of the Weres in the Shreveport pack, which I joined with Debbie. I thought we were just gonna intimidate him a little to get him to keep his paws off of Marcus’s wife—or maybe just rough him up a little like I said, but things got out of hand.” He looked down, ashamed. “It ended up that it wasn’t actually Sam there. It was his brother, Tommy, who had somehow gotten the ability to shift into humans. Anyway, he got beat up real bad before I could put a stop to it.”

Alcide stopped for a minute and then looked at Sookie. Speechless, she nodded for him to go on, though she wasn’t certain she wanted to hear what he had to say.

“Well, Tommy was alive, but barely. He asked me to take him to Sam, but he died soon after.”

Tears gathered and then fell from Sookie’s eyes as she thought about her friend. She was so thankful that it hadn’t really been Sam to get beaten and killed, but she also felt awful that

Sam's brother, whom she had met only a couple of times, was dead. No matter what had happened between Sookie and Sam in the past, she loved him, almost like a brother.

Alcide was going on, "Sam asked me what had happened. That was when I found out that Marcus was divorced from Luna, his ex-wife. He had also attempted to take their daughter out of the area once, so his visitation had been limited after that."

"So Sam's seeing this Luna now?"



"Yeah, she's a shifter like him. I swear I thought that Marcus just intended to protect his family," he looked at Sookie pleadingly. "Anyway, Sam wanted to go after Marcus because of Tommy, and I agreed to help."

Sookie nodded again. She thought about how much the Were and shifter worlds were like the vampire world. No Supe group would think about calling the police. They all believed in administering their own justice.

"We looked for Marcus everywhere I could think he might be. And then, four nights ago, Luna's daughter went missin' too. Thankfully, she was able to call Luna, and the caller I.D. said she was at my house of all places!"

Sookie looked at Alcide surprised.

“It gets worse,” he continued. “Debbie, it seems, had started taking V again and had hooked up with Marcus in our own bed while I was with Tommy and Sam. When Sam, Luna, and I got there, we found Debbie and Marcus in our bedroom. Sam and Marcus fought for a while, and Sam stopped just short of killin’ him while I held Debbie back. Sam was gonna let Marcus live—probably for Luna and the girl’s sake—but Marcus moved to attack Sam, so I,” he paused.

“So you killed him,” Sookie completed, catching another glimpse of what had happened from Alcide’s head.

“Yeah,” Alcide said, looking pretty sad about what he’d had to do. “After that, I abjured Debbie. She’s out of my house and out of my life now, Sookie.”

“But is she out of your heart?”

Alcide looked at Sookie with sincerity in his eyes, “She will be soon, Sookie.” He paused and then continued, “Now that you and I have both gotten rid of our ties to the past, we could have a real shot together, don’t you think?”

Sookie sighed, even more confused than she’d been before. Here was yet another offer to add to Bill’s and Eric’s.

“I don’t know, Alcide. To be honest, I feel like I’m being pulled in about 100 directions right now, and I don’t know where I’m going to end up.”

“Just think about it, cher, okay?” His brown eyes were warm and inviting. “If you get back in with them blood suckers, I’m really afraid for you.”

Sookie forced a smile but didn’t say anything responding to Alcide’s concern or his offer or his word choice. She hated terms like “blood suckers” that she felt showed clear prejudice. Instead, she stood up and moved to go inside, placing her hand on Alcide’s shoulder. She knew

that she shouldn't do it, but she listened into his thoughts more fully. They swirled a bit, so they were harder to read at first, but she picked up that he still loved Debbie despite everything. She also picked up his intense dislike for vampires, especially Eric, and his real concern for Sookie. He sincerely wanted to be in love with Sookie and felt that she was the kind of woman he'd be proud to call his mate.

Sookie patted his shoulder in a comforting gesture. "I think I'm going to go rest for a while. I'm still real worn down from the spell. I'd stay out of Lafayette's way if I were you," she grinned at him and then went into the house.

Lafayette was nowhere in sight although she heard rustling coming from the back of the house. She quickly grabbed the deed to her home and her purse from the kitchen table so that they wouldn't be lost in the shuffle and then slipped into her room and pulled the door closed.

She lay down on the bed, pulling a quilt over her. She put the deed on the pillow next to her and whispered, "Thank you, Eric." Then, she pulled Eric's letter out of her purse, curled up into a tight ball, read it again, and fell into a nap.

Chapter 23: A Normal Life

A/N: Extended dreams in italics

“Why are you always here? How can you even be here anymore?” Sookie asked Eric as she sat down at her kitchen table, coffee in hand. The morning light was streaming in through the windows of her kitchen, and she looked at Eric with curiosity. He was dressed in only the black gym shorts she’d given him to wear while he’d had amnesia. He was leisurely reading a newspaper, his pale bare chest seeming to glow in the sunlight. His hair was not styled and fell boyishly onto his forehead.

“Always where?” Eric answered her question with one of his own.

Sookie’s breath caught as he looked over at her and gave her a glorious smile, a smile like her Eric would have given.

“You look like him right now,” she whispered.

“Like whom?”

“Like the vampire I fell in love with, like you did when you didn’t have your memories.”

“Ah, him.” Eric’s eyes fell a bit, and he looked off into the distance.

“I can go if you want,” Eric said rising. “You need only want me gone, Sookie, and then I’ll be gone.”

“No, it’s okay,” Sookie responded, gesturing for Eric to sit again. She realized that something was suddenly wrong with Eric and wanted to help him. “What’s wrong?”

Eric sat back down, but instead of answering her last question, he answered her earlier one. “I’m not one hundred percent sure why I keep popping up in your dreams, but I will admit that I’m always happy to see you like this. I miss you.”

“You just saw me last night, silly,” Sookie chided.

“I did?” Eric asked, looking surprised. “Well, I still miss you. I miss the bond and I miss feeling you all the time.” He finished in almost a whisper.

“I miss you too; I feel more at peace when you’re close to me. In fact, last night when I saw you, I made you stay with me until I was asleep. You tucked me in and told me a story,” Sookie responded, a small smile playing on her lips.

Eric didn’t return the smile; instead he looked at her searchingly, “Which me do you miss, Sookie?”

She was a bit taken aback. “I don’t know. I liked how you were when you were stayin’ with me, but I didn’t want you to be without your memories forever—without yourself. And then the last few days, after you got your memories back, you seem to be different again. I’m kinda confused.”

Eric looked contemplative, “I asked you once if you would still want me if I remembered.”

“Yes, and I said that I didn’t know but that I wanted to. I hoped I would.”

Eric finally smiled at her again, not as bright and wide as before, but still sincere and beautiful. “I hope that too.”

He resumed reading his newspaper and reached for a cup of coffee. He took a long sip, “This was not around when I was human. But I think I like it.”

“It’s weird to see you drinking coffee, to see you in the sun.”

“It is strange for me too.”

“I had a dream of Bill sort of like this before. It was right after we got together.”

“Oh?” Eric asked, his eyes betraying a bit of disappointment that she’d mentioned Bill.

“Yeah, he had cooked me a big breakfast, and he was sitting right where you are in the morning light. But he was dressed.”

Eric smirked and teased, “I just don’t feel like wearing many clothes when you’re around.” Then he paused and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Sookie looked a bit baffled.

“Well, as you can see, I made no breakfast,” he winked.

“It’s okay.”

Sookie looked nervously to the window and then to Eric’s skin, a heavy frown forming on her beautiful face.

“What is wrong, min kära?” Eric asked. When he saw the worry on her face, he was immediately kneeling in front of her. He put a hand lightly onto her cheek and then moved it to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

Sookie looked at the light coming in and then back at Eric. “In my dream with Bill, he burned,” she said quietly, trying to cover up a small sob.

Eric looked at Sookie closely, his eyes intense. “That’s not going to happen to me; everything is fine. See,” he said moving his hand so she could see it, “I am not burning, nor will I.”

“But you did already,” Sookie said, tears now escaping her eyes. “You were burning outside of Fantasia with Russell and then again at the lake the other morning.”

“No, you saved me, Sookie—both times. You came for me. You healed me. You protected me. Please don’t cry. I hate your tears, min kära. You don’t have to be afraid.” He placed his hand gently onto her cheek, wiping the tears away.

“But I do have to be afraid,” she sobbed louder. “You’re going to leave me just like everyone else.

Eric looked at Sookie, seriousness radiating from his eyes. “No, Sookie. I will never leave you. Even if you decide that you don’t want me anymore, I will stay close enough to be there if you ever need me. I won’t leave; I swear this on the memory of Godric.”

“But you already did,” Sookie said weakly, “as soon as you got your memories back.”

“No!” Eric said fiercely. “One day you will see that I am the same person as that other Eric. Sookie, you need your clean slate right now so that you can make things right in your life. Can you not see that the time under the witch’s spell was my clean slate? But he is still me, and I was always him.”

Sookie looked at Eric and couldn’t help but laugh ruefully. “We are a fine pair, aren’t we?”

Eric smiled back, again brushing a piece of Sookie’s hair behind her ear. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you say that there are two Sookies, the fairy and the human. And now there are two Erics, the sweet one and the badass sheriff.”

“Then we make two fine pairs,” he corrected, a twinkle in his eyes.

“We’ll have to double date sometime,” Sookie hiccupped, the last of her tears drying up.

Eric laughed out loud. “Well, speaking for both Erics, I accept your offer for this date.”

Sookie grinned back as Eric tenderly stroked the sides of her face with his graceful fingers.

After a few moments, she looked at Eric seriously, “Promise me that if you start to burn, you won’t stay here.”

“I promise, Sookie.”

“I don’t wanna lose you,” she said softly. “I don’t have very many people left that really love me now that Gran’s gone.”

“You have one right in front of you,” he said, looking at her earnestly.

She bent down and hugged him to her, feeling his cool back with her hands. Eric returned the hug, holding her tightly. They stayed that way for several minutes.

“Okay now?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said breaking the hug.

Eric took the seat next to hers instead of returning to the one across the table from her.

She reached out and took his hand in hers, and they settled into the quiet of the morning for a few more minutes.

Finally Sookie spoke, “You said you weren’t 100 percent sure why you are still in my dreams. Does that mean you think you might know?”

“Picked up on that, did you?” Eric winked at Sookie. “You always were quite sharp, Miss Stackhouse—couldn’t get much past you.”

Sookie grinned at him, “Don’t try to change the subject; tell me what you think about the dreams.”

Eric looked thoughtfully out the window. “I have a few theories, but I cannot say which—if any—of them is correct.”

“What are they?”

Eric looked at her, the mischievous glint that she liked so much appearing in his eyes. “I will tell you one of my theories now. The rest you may ask me about during your next dream, if you wish.”

Sookie laughed, "Is this your way to make sure that I want to dream about you again?"

"I am, as you know, an opportunist, Miss Stackhouse," Eric returned, the mischief clear in his voice.

Sookie fake pouted, "Must you always be so difficult?"

He smiled widely. "Must you always be so easy to frustrate?"

She couldn't help but to smile back at him. "Fine, tell me one then."

Eric leaned over and brought her hand, which he'd not let go of, to his lips, kissing it gently. He began in a steady, but quiet voice, "You are working to make an important decision, maybe the most important decision you will ever make. You are deciding whether you wish to give your heart away, and to do this, you must confront the real possibility that the love you thought you felt might have been an illusion. Whatever decision you make, your life will be changing profoundly. I'm also certain that you are frightened: you have been targeted by vampires, Weres, fairies, and now witches."

"Don't forget the Fellowship of the Sun," Sookie added with a long sigh. "I sometimes wish that I could just have a normal life."

"I know," Eric said. The two sat in silence for a long moment.

"So why are you here?" Sookie asked again.

"As strange as it sounds, Sookie, I believe that I—or at least the version of me that spent the last week in your home with you—am a representation of that 'normal life' for you in a way."

"Huh? How?" Sookie asked.

"Well, between the memory loss, and the fairy high, and my almost being executed, and the silver chains, we spent a lot of time just being together."

Sookie blushed.

Eric chided, "And I'm not just talking about the sex—which was great, by the way."

She blushed even more.

Eric continued, "We talked a lot about little things, mundane things. You told me what you liked and about your days. Even while I was chained all day, we talked about your family and why you loved Bon Temps so much."

"I rambled on and on because I was so afraid and hated seein' you in silver like that," she said.

"Yes," Eric responded, "but as much as I was in pain, I was also happy to be there with you like that. I liked just being with you."

"Me too," Sookie admitted.

Eric smiled, "We developed a kind of 'domestic comfort', you might say. So maybe I am here because you trusted the person you spent that week with and want someone by your side right now. You managed to bring me comfort when I was wrapped in silver chains and when I had no idea who I was. Maybe I am here to offer you comfort now."

"Maybe. But why am I not dreaming of you the way you were without your memories then?"

"That I do not know," Eric said quietly.

Sookie waited a few minutes and then asked some questions that had been nagging at her, "Why are my dreams with you in them still so vivid to me? I remembered everything that happened in the one from last night. Is it possible the spell didn't work? Could your blood still be in me? I mean, only vampire blood makes dreams that vivid, right? So if I am just bringing

you into my dreams from my own subconscious—as a kind of helper—then why aren't they like normal human dreams? Why do I still remember every detail when I wake up?"

Eric looked at Sookie with something akin to pride in his eyes, "These are good questions to ask, Sookie. I do not think my blood is in you because I can no longer feel you, and I can tell you for sure that your blood is not in me, but I have felt a kind of emptiness inside since the spell broke our bond; there is definitely still something residing where our bond used to be, but it's hard to describe. It's kind of like a bookmark put in a book with blank pages."

"I think I feel something like that too—like a hollow place," Sookie confessed quietly. "I know that something was there, and I still feel where it was, but I cannot feel what it was—if that makes sense."

Eric nodded, "I does, min kära. However, this is not what normally happens when a tie or even a bond is broken. Normally, once the vampire's blood and magic are gone, the entire connection is destroyed, as if it were never there to start with. For me, it is almost as if something was left behind other than blood, but I do not know what it is."

Sookie cleared her throat and looked at Eric almost apologetically, "But how can I be sure you are telling me the truth, Eric. If some of your blood or magic is still in me, it would only benefit you. It seems to be the only way, I'd still be having this kind of dream about you."

Eric smiled at Sookie, again something akin to pride in his eyes, "You are right to be skeptical and question me. In Dallas, I showed you that I was willing to trick you to get you to take my blood, and even though I would not do so now, you are not wrong to distrust my word."

Sookie nodded slightly.

“I will earn your trust one day, Sookie. Until then, you may question me all you need. Ask Jesus and Lafayette if you are unsure about the effectiveness of the spell. Explain to Jesus what I said about the hollowness left behind. See if he can find anything in the witch’s books.”

“I will.”

Eric paused for a moment, “Sookie, if you wish it, I will try to stop coming to your dreams. I do not know if I can prevent it, but I will try.”

“No,” Sookie said quickly, causing the smile to return to Eric’s face. “I mean. It’s okay that you are here. It’s nice, actually.”

“Okay, then I shall see you in your dreams,” he smirked.

“Don’t get too full of yourself, buddy,” Sookie chided playfully.

“Too late,” he smirked in her dream, right before she woke.

Chapter 24: Daisy Chains

Sookie was startled awake by a loud yell from Lafayette, “Where the fuck is I goin’ to put all this shit?”

Sookie heard Jesus’s calm voice reassuring his boyfriend, “It’s fine, honey. We can have them put everything in our room or Sookie’s room. Then I’ll sort through everything tomorrow. I have the day off, remember?”

“But I don’t want all those sweatin’ men traipsing through my clean house! The King is comin’!”

Sookie rolled out of bed, still trying to wake up fully. As she entered the living room and took in Lafayette’s frazzled appearance, she couldn’t help but smile a little. If she was excited to meet Elvis, Lafayette was over the moon. “Lala, why don’t you go take a shower and get ready. Jesus and me will make sure that everything is fine.”

Lafayette huffed to his bedroom, mumbling, “Why we’s got to have all that witch shit brought over right now is beyond me.”

Jesus smiled at Sookie. He was still in his scrubs. “Thanks,” he said sighing. “He’s a bit excited.”

“Did he tell you about the Bubba thing? About how we can’t call him Elvis no matter what?” Sookie asked as she and Jesus walked toward the front door.

“Yeah. It’s pretty incredible to get to meet him tonight, even if he’s a bit off.”

Alcide was on the porch, talking to a short man dressed in a three piece suit. He looked very out of place next to the large Were. Two men in delivery uniforms were leaning up against a van.

Sookie walked onto the porch with Jesus.

“Are you Miss Stackhouse?” the man in the suit asked impatiently.

“Yeah,” Sookie answered approaching the man. She clearly saw a look of mild disgust on Alcide’s face as he looked at the man.

“I am Bobby Burnam, Mr. Northman’s day man.”

“Day man?” Sookie asked.

Bobby sneered, his whole manner screaming that he was too good for the people in front of him and the task Eric had set for him. Sookie listened in on his thoughts; they matched his demeanor exactly. He was wondering why his “master” would bother with such a country bumpkin. Sookie hated to admit it, but she had moments of feeling the same way.

Bobby answered Sookie’s question, his sneer still firmly in place, “I conduct Mr. Northman’s daytime business, Miss Stackhouse. He tasked me with bringing you the items you are expecting from Moon Goddess Emporium. Where should we put them?”

Sookie saw no reason to be overly polite considering the man’s obvious distaste for her. “They can stack the boxes in the bedroom that’s right off the living room. I’ll show you. But make sure they don’t track in any dirt, and make sure they don’t mess up anything in the house,” she added quickly.

Bobby nodded to the two men at the van, and they began to bring in boxes. Directed by Sookie, they quickly stacked twenty or so uniformly shaped and sized boxes neatly in the corner of the room she was staying in. While they were working, Jesus began heating some gumbo, straightening the kitchen as he went so that Lafayette would remain calm.

Sookie went back to the porch after the last box had been delivered. Bobby was waiting with a bouquet of white daisies. “Mr. Northman asked that you receive these and this,” he said as he handed her the flowers and a small card.

“Thanks,” Sookie offered as Bobby turned on his heel without another word and went to a black sedan that was parked behind the van. As the two vehicles drove away, Sookie noticed the look of distaste had not left Alcide’s face as he stared at the flowers in her hand.

Sookie smiled at Alcide, but she recognized that it was the kind of smile she used with her customers at Merlotte’s sometimes to hide the fact that she’d heard a particularly nasty thought. “I’ll just put these in some water.” She walked inside, leaving Alcide on the porch, where he’d established what Sookie was now thinking of as his base camp. She chuckled a bit at the thought.

Once inside, she opened the note. It was printed and not written in Eric’s handwriting, so Sookie guessed he must have called in his order last night after he left. The note read:

I am ashamed to admit that I do not know your favorite flower, but I saw many of these in knickknacks throughout your home, especially in your grandmother's room. These, I am told, represent purity, beauty, and loyalty—all attributes that remind me of you.

—E

Sookie read the note again and smiled.

Jesus broke her out of her reverie. “Those from Eric?”

“Yeah,” Sookie smiled wider.

Jesus reached under the sink and retrieved another vase. “If you keep staying here, the house might become full of flowers.”

Sookie put the flowers in the vase and carried them to the living room, looking for a place to put them that Lafayette would approve of. She finally settled on the small table next to the couch. She looked back and forth from the daisies to the roses Bill had given her, realizing she still had a lot of thinking to do. Right now, however, she decided to shelve her confusion and help Jesus in the kitchen. It was only 4:30, but she was certain that Lafayette would want dinner to be finished and cleaned up after well before sunset, which came a bit before 5:30 that evening.

“What can I do to help?” she asked Jesus.

“Maybe grab some bowls and set the table?” Jesus responded.

Sookie busied herself preparing five places at the table, expecting Jason to join them at some point.

Jesus sighed, “I just hope he doesn’t come out wearing his white Elvis jumpsuit.”

Sookie couldn’t help laughing, “Yeah, I don’t exactly know how *that* would go over.”

After a few moment’s pause, Sookie said, “Hey, sorry for all those boxes and things. Eric said that he wanted you to look in them to see if you could find some protection wards or something to put on your house and mine.”

Jesus searched his mind and found that he could actually talk about some things from the night before last as long as he was nonspecific when he spoke. “Actually, I was expecting the books. Eric told us he was sending them over, and he’s paying me to do some research about fairies.” Jesus looked thoughtful, “And protection wards aren’t a bad idea either. I think that I saw some in one of the books at Marnie’s before. I’ll look for them tomorrow.”

“Why research about fairies?” Sookie asked.

“He wants you to know all you can about the magic you have and how to control it, I think. He wants you to be able to protect yourself.”

Sookie glanced at the daisies. She thought about how nice it would be to understand and control the power that she had. She also thought that it was awfully high-handed of Eric to initiate the research without her knowledge, but then again, she was happy that Eric seemed to want her to be able to protect herself. She wouldn't have to be so reliant on the protection of others if she could channel her own powers.

Bill's protection seemed to involve her taking his blood again and her relying on his position. Eric's protection, at least for the moment, consisted of his sending Alcide, of whom he seemed at least a little jealous, to protect her during the day and the King of Rock and Roll to protect her at night. At the same time, he was looking into how she could develop her own tools to protect *herself* in the future. Sookie was surprised when she realized that Eric had not yet brought up the subject of her taking his blood again. He had said that he missed the bond, but he'd not tried to frighten her into thinking that she needed his blood to survive. She wondered if that was what Bill was doing. She shook off these thoughts, tabling them for later. She needed to take some time to really think about both vampires, and in the frenzy of the approaching evening, now was not that time.

Sookie smiled at Jesus, once again thankful for the new friendship she'd found with him, “Eric said that you were a strong witch—hey is that even what you call yourself?”

Jesus smiled back, “Actually, my people call themselves brujos, which basically means witch or sorcerer.”

“Well, Eric seemed to think that you and Lafayette could make a really strong protection ward,” she said, proud of her friends.

Jesus went back to stirring the slowly warming gumbo as Sookie began pouring glasses of tea. “Jesus, can I ask you somethin’?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think there’s any way that I might still have vampire blood in my system?”

Jesus looked a bit confused and then answered, “I don’t think that’s possible, Sookie, based on the nature of the spell we did. According to the book, that would be pretty much unfeasible, given the fact that you are alive right now.”

“Oh,” Sookie said.

“Why do you ask, Sook?”

“Well, I’m still having dreams.”

“What? Of Bill and Eric?”

“Just Eric so far,” Sookie answered, her voice low.

Jesus was honestly surprised. “Well Sook, I don’t think it could be vampire blood or magic causing them. The spell removed all the blood magic, of that I’m almost positive.”

Sookie nodded. Still speaking very low so that Alcide wouldn’t hear, she added, “How are people supposed to feel after a tie—no, actually, after a bond—is gone?”

“Normal, I guess—like they did before the tie or bond happened.”

“Are they supposed to feel a kind of emptiness inside?”

“How do you mean?”

“Like a hole or a hollow place, kind of.”

Jesus shook his head. “No, with the magic and the blood gone, there’s nothing at all to feel. Why?”

Sookie was a bit reluctant to say the next bit, but she forged ahead, “I feel something like that; I think it’s where my bond with Eric was once. And then in the dream I had earlier, Eric said he was feelin’ the same kind of empty spot. He told me to ask you about them. I don’t know if the real Eric feels it too or just the one in my dreams. And that Eric might just be a figment of my subconscious, especially since you think the blood is all gone, but I thought I’d ask.”

“I haven’t read anything that talks about any kind of ‘empty spot’, but I’ll work on it tomorrow, okay?”

“Thank you,” Sookie said, hugging Jesus tightly. “You have become such a wonderful friend to me. I can’t thank you enough.”

Just then, Lafayette emerged from his bedroom, thankfully not wearing his white jumpsuit. He was dressed in an impeccably cut silver-gray suit and vest that looked like they were straight out of the 70’s; instead of a tie, he was wearing a deep purple scarf.

Jesus went over and kissed Lafayette, careful not to disturb his makeup. “You look beautiful, sweetheart.”

Lafayette beamed and then inspected the house. Seeing that nothing was amiss, he kissed Jesus on the cheek.

Sookie smiled at the warmth of the exchange and glanced at the daisies, visible from her position by the kitchen table. She went out to get Alcide. Jason was pulling up as she stepped out onto the porch. Once her brother and Alcide were introduced, they went inside and joined the others for dinner.

Chapter 25: The Sheriff

Before they'd even finished their dinners and certainly before they could have the seconds they both wanted, Lafayette had shooed Jason and Alcide out to the porch, even as Jesus and Sookie had taken to the dishes. After only ten minutes, the kitchen was spotless again.

While Lafayette did last minute tidying of his already spotless house, Sookie took a quick shower and changed into jeans and her Fangtasia T-shirt, the last of the clean clothes she had left. She sighed, knowing that she'd be returning home tomorrow afternoon and that she'd be seeing Bill for dinner tomorrow evening. She was looking forward to seeing him and to the talk she wanted to have with him. But at the same time she was nervous, as if it were their first date. She had been sensing something "off" about him too, especially after the tie was broken. She planned to spend a lot of time thinking about all of her interactions with Bill the next day *before* their dinner.

And she didn't even know what to think about Eric right now. In her dreams, he was quickly becoming a kind of confidant, a sounding board, a friend even. She couldn't imagine what the real Eric would think about that, but even he seemed different than before.

She wondered why she didn't tell dream Eric to stay away from her dreams—or at least to try to. But then she realized that he'd been right; she did feel comfortable with him, and she needed support while she was making her choices about everything. Perhaps it wasn't fair to Bill, but the Eric in her dreams felt just as "safe" to her as he'd been when he didn't have his memories. Come to think of it, the Eric from the night before—the real one—had seemed pretty damned terrific too. She was a bit surprised to find herself anxious to see both of them again.

Sookie sighed in confusion. According to Jesus, Eric couldn't still be in her dreams because of the blood, so she figured it was her subconscious putting him into her dreams. In

them, he was her friend more than anything else, and the dreams were not sexually charged. She made a mental note to think about all of the dreams that she'd had about both of the vampires in her life the next day. Maybe if she took the time to really analyze them, she would come up with some answers about what they really wanted from her.

Sookie glanced at the clock by her bed and noticed it was 5:31. The vampires would have just arisen a few minutes before, so she threw on her sweatshirt and went to join the others, who were all awaiting Bubba's arrival on the porch since Lafayette had banished everyone from the house.

As soon as the sun had set, Eric dug himself out of his impromptu resting place and called Pam to check on her. She'd also gone to ground near one of her homes.

"Pamela, I want you to call Chow and tell him to run Fangtasia tonight. Stay away from there and from all your usual places until I learn more."

"Yes, master," Pam answered. "Do you have any idea what's happening?"

"An inkling, but I will talk to Isabel before I waste time in supposition. What of Bubba?"

"I was going to meet him at 7:00 at Fangtasia."

"Give him the address to Sookie's farmhouse instead, and meet him there as soon as you can. I want him to see the lay of things on her property, and make sure that he understands that he is to watch her as inconspicuously as possible. Also, show him where Compton's house is and explain that he needs to avoid interaction with Billy and his guards."

"Will you tell Bill that you have hired Bubba to watch over Sookie?"

“I believe I must since he will most likely run across him or catch his scent, but Bubba is under the protection of all the rulers in the South, Bill being no exception. Even Bill is not fool enough to try to interfere with Bubba.”

“I don’t know,” Pam deadpanned on the phone, “his stupidity can get pretty fucking epic.”

“Still haven’t forgiven him for the cement in your hair, Pamela?” Eric asked, the smile clear in his voice. Then he turned serious again. “If everything is secure at the farmhouse, take Bubba to Lafayette’s and get him settled there. And, Pamela, don’t forget to take your checkbook.”

Eric chuckled at Pam’s grunt and hung up.

Just as he was about to dial Isabel’s number, his phone rang. It was Compton. As he answered, Eric thought that it was indeed time to change phone numbers again.

“My liege,” Eric answered, his voice perfectly even, not betraying his contempt at Bill being his superior in rank. When his memory was gone, Eric had been ready to die by his king’s side because he respected the position of king. Hell, he’d even respected Sophie-Anne’s title, despite all her machinations. Eric had been taught by his father to obey without question and honor a good leader. Unfortunately, neither of his last two monarchs had been honor-worthy. But Compton had set him free when he could have legally staked him, and he’d known that Eric was going to return to Sookie. Not even Bill was dim enough not to guess what was going to happen between them that night.

Eric had yet to figure out if Billy boy was sincere in his desire to see Sookie happy or if he had an ulterior motive for his seeming display of altruism. Since he’d gotten his memory back, Eric had been more deferential to Bill, at least on the surface. He wanted to find out what

the king's intentions were toward Sookie, and if he had to pretend to be a loyal subject to do it, he would.

Eric processed these thoughts in moments, his mind clicking with vampire speed and one thousand years of experience. As Bill began speaking, Eric was already considering several scenarios given the fact that Isabel had called to warn him of eminent danger.

“Eric, I trust you are catching up with your area's business.”

“Indeed, your majesty. Everything is in good order.”

“Fine. I need you here at 11:30; Nan has called a meeting with us at midnight, and we have some things to discuss before her arrival.”

Eric liked Nan even less than he liked Compton, if that was possible. She'd disrespected Godric, something he'd never forgive her for, and she was also privy to Sookie's powers, a fact that Eric knew also concerned Bill. Perhaps in this, at least, they could be allies. Nan would need to be taken care of and soon. She was powerful in the AVL, however, and had the ear of the Authority. She was also over 800 years old, not as strong as Eric by any means, but still much stronger than a vampire like Bill. He knew that Bubba, though an excellent fighter and tracker, would be no match for her in a one-on-one fight. He'd have to get her out of the way before she became a direct threat to Sookie.

“I will be there,” Eric responded.

“Good. 11:30 sharp,” Bill said rudely as he hung up.

Eric rolled his eyes and dialed Isabel's private number.

She answered after the first ring. “Eric,” she said, her Spanish accent prominent, “I trust you found a safe resting place last night.”

“Yes, thank you for the warning. Now, what was it about?”

Eric had known Isabel for longer than Pam had been alive. She had been by Godric's side for most of that time, acting as his lieutenant, first in Seville, Spain, and then in Texas after Godric moved to the States in the late 1800s. Eric's relationship with his maker had gotten a bit strained in the last 50 years or so as Godric had become more introspective and withdrawn, but Eric had moved to Louisiana and had become sheriff to be close to his maker. He could admit that he also liked having a little corner of the world to himself. But, like his maker before him, he did not want to become a king. His own father had trained him to be a leader of men, and Eric, as Sheriff of Area 5, was a respected leader to the vampires in his area, but he didn't want to have to deal with all the posturing that kings and queens did. The thought of spending time at court like Sophie-Anne did made him cringe. And even though kings could choose to seclude themselves a bit, like Compton had done, they had to continually deal with the AVL and the Authority. This thought did not appeal to him at all.

Isabel answered, "My contact in the Authority called me last night."

Eric was more than aware that their contact was the same individual, a vampire named Rasul.



“And what did our mutual friend have to say?”

“Nan Flanagan apparently met with the Authority last night. For all intents and purposes, they threatened to fire her, telling her that if she didn’t eliminate your king as well as yourself because of the debacle with the necromancer, she would be out.”

Eric was somewhat surprised, “I am not a huge fan of Compton, but I must say that the matter went better than it could have. Only a few vampires were lost, despite the necromancer trying to make us all walk in the sun. Even the damage control after the Festival of Tolerance was effective as most of the humans were glamoured and no videos have been leaked. In fact, it was Nan that told Bill *not* to kill the witch to begin with. All the trouble could have been avoided if she’d given him leave to execute her before she was fully possessed by the spirit of the necromancer.”

“Spies for the Authority apparently know all this, but the majority of the members want to start over with the power structure of Louisiana since four out of five sheriffs are now dead. They feel Bill is too young, and he was basically Nan’s protégé anyway. They want him gone because they eventually want *her* gone.”

“Nan’s protégé? I knew she was propping up his kingship because he’d killed Sophie-Anne, but protégé?”

“Yes, according to Rasul, Bill was recruited by Nan the 1980’s, as an agent she could use in the effort to mainstream. He was first her spy in Sophie-Anne’s court and now he’s something of a puppet king, ready to do anything Nan tells him to do—at least until the other evening with the witch.”

Eric snorted, thinking about the irony of Nan Flanagan, one of the most ruthless vampires he’d ever known, being the spokesperson for mainstreaming. He shook his head; Nan’s motives

in mainstreaming had never been for the advancement of vampires. She was always much more concerned with her own power and ambitions. Hell, he'd had more to do with the ability of vampires to mainstream than Nan had. Always with an eye to the future, Eric had been a key investor in TruBlood, a product that had been in development since the 1960s, but he'd kept his involvement in the product anonymous. His return on the investment was enough that Eric could probably buy a small country, but only Godric had known of his interest in developing synthetic blood. Only Godric knew that Eric had been tired of hiding who he was and sneaking around in the shadows as if he should be ashamed. Godric had taught Eric long ago that it was best to hold your cards close to your vest until you knew which side would come out on top. Eric had become a master at concealing his true motivations and intentions—at least with everyone except a certain blond barmaid, telepathic, human-fairy hybrid he'd been thinking about constantly since he'd arisen.

He internally laughed at the thought of Pam finding out that he'd been partially responsible for TruBlood; she'd most certainly hold Eric *personally* liable for the bad taste of the product.

Again, Eric's thoughts blasted through his supple brain in moments as Isabel continued, "As you know, there continues to be much dissention within the Authority. Many of the members do not wish to see Bill removed since he's proven himself to be a useful public figure, and they still remember how you were able to incapacitate Russell. I think they would call back the order to execute yourself and your king if you were able to get rid of the Nan problem and if Bill were to demonstrate his capability, but all this would have to happen right away."

Isabel continued, "Apparently, Nan's become a bit of a loose cannon and quite full of herself—even more than she had been before. She has probably guessed that some members of

the Authority want to take her out almost as soon as she takes you and Bill out. However, she has been hinting around that she has a valuable piece of information that she will share with the Authority *if* her position is guaranteed. She feels that this information will ensure her membership to the Authority, and she has an audience with them later tonight, at 4 a.m. Obviously, she plans for you to be dead by then.

“Obviously,” Eric said evenly. He knew that Nan planned to negotiate herself back into power using Sookie. The bitch would have to die, but first he needed to shore up both his position and Bill’s.

“Isabel, as you know, the vampires in Louisiana were forced to flee to avoid the necromancer’s range. And from what you are saying, the Authority is hoping to eliminate Bill and myself this evening—before our numbers return. I assume they want me eliminated because someone else wants the position of king. Does Rasul know whom they intend to put in Bill’s place?”

“He has heard rumors that Felipe de Castro, king of Nevada, is looking to expand his casino interests. And Rasul saw



Victor Madden emerge from a meeting with the Authority just last night.”



“Interesting,” Eric said. “Felipe’s lapdog was most likely presenting an offer from his king.”

“What do you need, Eric?” Isabel asked, always very practical.

“Tonight, I need numbers, and I need them now. Do you have any who are trustworthy to send? If the Authority requires a show of Bill’s competency, then he will need to have new sheriffs in place before 11:00 p.m. tonight. I have learned that Nan has requested a meeting with him at midnight. I can call in Thalia, who would probably be willing to take over as Sheriff of Area 2 since it is not heavily populated.”

“Yes, her age alone would ensure respect, and, of course, no one wishes to tangle with her. But she will not agree to work under Bill’s leadership.”

“Perhaps not ordinarily, but she owes me a favor. And I think that Rasul would be an excellent choice for Area 1.”

“He would be a loss as our ears in the Authority.”

“Not really. He has mentioned to me that some suspect that he is a spy for the Ancient Pythoness, and she has already placed at least two others around the Authority—at least two that I know of. For all we know, some of the Authority members themselves are probably in her back pocket.” He chuckled, knowing that his sire’s sire was a master at the game of vampire politics.

“Well, if what you are saying is true, she probably arranged for Rasul to get the information he’s giving us now.”

“She is a crafty old crone,” Eric said fondly.

“What of Areas 3 and 4?”

“Well, I’m hoping that’s where you might come in. I have some younger vampires in my Area, but I don’t want to deplete all my own forces. And there are no stand-outs currently living in either Area 3 or Area 4. Can you think of anyone in your area who would be apt for the jobs? He or she would need to be at least several hundred years old, though the older, the better.”

“I can think of a few. How about me for one?”

“What? You are already Sheriff of Area 9 there.”

“Actually, I am not. Last week I met with my king and asked to be removed. I never wanted such a heavily populated area to rule, and I do not want to stay here anyway. The memories of Godric and Hugo are too great. So after I made sure that the area was as stable as it was before the bombing, I asked to step down.”

“Oh,” was all that Eric could say for a moment. “Yes, Isabel. Your presence would be helpful here. And if you would be willing, I believe Bill would merge Areas 3 and 4. These areas both border the Mississippi River, and there are several profitable casinos already there, so it could be a very lucrative area if run well.”

By this time, Eric had flown to his home and searched the surrounding area, making sure that there were no scents he did not recognize there. Truth be told, most of his safe houses were unknown to everyone but Pam, so he felt that it was secure anyway, but he was nothing if not cautious. A few close calls during his first hundred years or so—brought on by his overconfidence and prevented only by his maker—had been enough to teach him to be extra careful.

“I will leave Dallas now. I can be at your king’s residence by 11,” Isabel said.

“I will look forward to seeing you.”

Eric quickly made a call to Rasul, who immediately agreed to take the position in Area 1. He would not be able to get to Louisiana that night, but if necessary, he could confirm his new appointment via teleconference. They both felt it better if he lay low for the evening, however, just in case he became a target for the Authority.

Next, Eric called Thalia, who had just gotten back to Area 5 from Arkansas the night



before. Without preamble, she hissed, “Norseman, you had better not be calling to tell me I have

to relocate again because of another fucking necromancer. If you do, I will have your balls on a platter.”

“It is nice to speak to you too, Thalia,” Eric deadpanned.

“Cut the shit, Norseman.”

Eric laughed. Thalia was older than he was by a few hundred years, yet she’d never learned to be polite. In fact, she had become even more anti-social since vampires revealed themselves. Despite her taciturn nature—or maybe because of it—Eric had gladly given her permission to reside in his area six months before. She’d kept a relatively low profile since then but had caught the attention of some fangbangers at one of her monthly required attendances at Fangtasia. Now she had a bit of a cult following that enjoyed her special brand of malice.

“Ah Thalia, I have some good news. I have finally thought of a way that you can make up for *one* of the times I saved your life.”

It was a sore spot for Thalia that Eric and Godric had saved her life twice over the span of their long acquaintance. She growled, “What do you want Viking?”

“I assure you that it will be *relatively* painless.” Eric laughed, knowing that the last thing that Thalia would want was to be a sheriff. She was more than capable, but she hated having to deal with others. However, he felt that since she would be able to order everyone around, she might actually find that she liked being a sheriff. “I need you to meet me at Compton’s at 11:00 tonight. He’s going to offer you the position of Sheriff for Area 2, and I need you to take it.”

Thalia grunted and scoffed. “Fuck you, Northman!”

“Thalia, dear, we both know that Area 2 has hardly any vampires, and you will have free run of it. Also, it will mean that you no longer have to come to Fangtasia to enthrall the vermin.”

There was a pause.

“Fine, Norseman. But this will settle our debt *completely*, agreed?”

“Understood, Thalia. I’ll see you at 11:00.”

She hung up on him, and he quickly took a shower, happy to be rid of his dirt-stained clothing. As he showered, he allowed himself a moment to wish he was with Sookie in a very different shower, instead of dealing with all this political bullshit.

Bill was a waste, but he knew that he would have to solidify Bill’s position to one of strength if he wanted to survive the night.

Eric also knew that he’d be of no use to Sookie if he were truly dead. As he toweled off and quickly dressed, he hoped Bill would listen to reason and accept the plans Eric had made. He was certain that the younger vampire would resent Eric’s command of the situation, but Bill could get the fuck over it, as far as Eric was concerned. The king had proven that he was willing to be a puppet to Nan and the AVL. And now that Nan was not going to support him and had—in fact—agreed to execute him, Eric felt Bill would probably acquiesce to his plan. He also thought that Bill would act to preserve Sookie’s life as well as his own. The likelihood of Nan using Sookie as a bargaining chip to ensure her own life and position in the Authority would only add to Bill’s motivation to do things Eric’s way.

Of course, Eric also knew of Bill’s propensity to become defensive, so he vowed to himself to stay as calm and as respectful as possible no matter how annoying the king got. Since Eric didn’t want to be king, Bill was his best option right now, and part of Eric still hoped that Bill might make a good king, given time.

Nonetheless, Eric also planned to use the distracting nature of the evening to plant a few more listening devices in Bill’s home. In addition to his investments in TruBlood, Eric was an anonymous investor in various companies that developed high-tech equipment, so he was able to

get his hands on the most ground-breaking devices available. The little gems that he was planning to put into Bill's office, study, and wherever else fortune smiled upon him that evening would be undetectable even by the most sophisticated equipment.

Eric put a few of the devices into his inside jacket pocket. His cards would indeed stay close to his vest in his dealings with the king of Louisiana.

Chapter 26: Moral Support

Eric knew just one thing for certain as he took off flying into the night sky, and that was that he wanted—no *needed*—to see Sookie before he greeted his fate later that night. Even though he felt confident in the outcome, there was a possibility that he would not survive the night or that Bill would reject his plan and he would have to flee. And he wasn't about to leave Sookie to the wolves (pun intended).

Eric knew that the Ancient Pythoness probably already had enough influence in the Authority to ensure his survival, but he also knew that she wouldn't want to use her leverage in this case. Instead, she was probably waiting to see what steps he would take to handle the threat now that she'd arranged for him to know of it.

Once again, Eric chuckled. The A.P. loved to see how he'd react in situations like this. In the past, she'd told him that he'd given her hours of amusement as she watched him getting out of one conflict or another. She'd nicknamed him her "little cat" about 500 years before when he'd managed to both out-manuever the vampire King of Russia and ingratiate himself to the ruler at the same time. "You always manage to land on your feet, my little cat," she had told him with a twinkle in her eye as he recounted the tale to her, despite the fact that she'd most likely known what was going to happen before he had even done it.

The A.P. had successfully hidden her relationship with Godric and, therefore, Eric as well; only Isabel and Pam knew the A.P. had been Godric's maker. Most vampires thought she'd made no children, a fact that only added to her mystique. Until his recent encounter with her, he'd not seen her in person for about 200 years; she preferred covert contact and enjoyed her little intrigues, which now apparently included seeing if Eric could survive the threats of Nan, the Authority, the AVL, and Felipe de Castro.

Eric flew to Lafayette's home, touching down silently thirty feet from the porch. It was a little past 7:00. One quick inhalation told him that Pam and Bubba had not arrived yet and that Bill had not been there that evening.

Eric walked toward the porch, being sure to make a lot of noise so that he would not startle the group. When he was about twenty feet away, he was greeted by the expectant stares of four humans (or mostly humans), waiting eagerly on the porch, as well as by the low growls of Alcide, which he chose to ignore. He chuckled at the look on Lafayette's face, which went from excitement to disappointment in a split second once he registered that it was Eric. "I guess Elvis hasn't lost his appeal to the masses," Eric thought to himself.

"What's you doin' here?" Lafayette asked loudly since Eric had stopped his progress toward the group. "El—, I mean Bubba is still comin', right?"

Eric laughed, "Do not worry, Mr. Reynolds," Eric said with a slight bow, "he should be arriving soon with Pam. I'm so sorry to disappoint, but I need a quick word with Sookie in private, if she will allow it."

Eric took in Sookie's appearance behind the two witches, her brother and the Were. She was dressed in jeans, and she wore the sweatshirt she'd had on the evening before for warmth. He smelled that her hair had been newly washed, and it was waving in natural curls down her back. She wasn't wearing a stitch of make-up, except what looked like lip gloss. She was the most beautiful sight in the world to Eric.

Eric's thoughts were interrupted by Alcide, who—much to Eric's annoyance—continued growling and had stood up. He boomed, "I don't think that Sookie wants to speak to you, Northman. She's made it abundantly clear that she wants nothing to do with you. Can't you take a fucking hint?"

“What hint is that?” Eric said, stepping forward just a bit, his seemingly calm demeanor more frightening than any overt threat he could make.

“She severed your tie to get away from you and that other fanger!” Alcide growled louder.

“Oh, is that how you see things?” Eric said casually. “I thought you would know Sookie better than that by now.”

Alcide launched off the porch toward Eric, wisely stopping about five feet away from him, “What do you know about her—except that you want to use her for your own purposes and take her blood! And then what? You’re going to either kill her or get her killed!”

“Alcide! Eric! Stop!” Sookie yelled as she ran toward them from the porch. The fact that Eric’s fangs had come down and that his body had tensed did not escape her notice.

As soon as she had reached Alcide, she laid a hand gently on his shoulder, noticing that his body had begun to shake as if he were going to shift. “It’s fine, Alcide. Don’t do anything dumb, okay?”

“You don’t have to see him anymore,” Alcide said, never taking his eyes off Eric and not relaxing his pose.

“I know, Alcide,” Sookie said soothingly, “but I want to talk to Eric for just a couple of minutes.”

Eric retracted his fangs and spoke up, his voice much more conciliatory than she would have expected, given Alcide’s demeanor. “Herveaux, hurting you this evening is not something that I have time for—especially since I need you to continue with the job *I* have hired you for.”

By this time, the other men had reached Sookie and Alcide. Jesus spoke up, trying to keep the peace. “Maybe since Eric’s here you can take off now Alcide. If I understand right,

you will have to be back tomorrow at dawn, so you need some rest, right? Anyway, if Eric hired you to protect, Sook, he's obviously not out to hurt her."

Alcide looked at Sookie with an almost pained expression, "Is that what you want, cher?"

"It'd probably be best. Anyway, Pam will be here soon with Bubba, and Jesus, Lafayette, and Jason are here. I really wanna talk to Eric though."

Eric smirked at the hurt look on Alcide's face before receiving a warning look from Sookie. "Fucking Were," he thought. If Sookie wasn't Alcide's friend and if he didn't have his uses for him, Eric would have been tempted to kill him for his disrespect. It certainly wasn't Eric's fault that Alcide's father had a gambling addiction and had gotten into debt with some ruthless vampires.

But truth be told, Eric had been on his way to respecting the Were, despite his obvious contempt for vampires, until he'd become so belligerent. But at least Eric could justify that behavior somewhat, given the Were's own attraction for Sookie. Regardless of his personal feelings, Eric knew that Alcide would do everything possible to keep Sookie safe, and that was what mattered most to him.

Alcide scoffed. "Fine. I'll see you in the morning, Sookie." He made a show of bending down to kiss Sookie's cheek, looking Eric in the eye during the entire action.

Eric smirked at Alcide's obvious attempt to show some kind of possession over Sookie. He knew that such an action would not sit well with the spitfire in front of him.

Sookie shifted uncomfortably, hating that she was being used by Alcide to try to bait Eric.

"Remember what I said today and my offer, cher," Alcide said as he went to his truck, which he'd moved into the driveway earlier.

Sookie breathed a sigh of relief once he was gone. Her relief seemed matched by that of Jason and the boys, who returned to the porch and once again took up their beers and looked anxiously toward the road in anticipation of Bubba's arrival.

Sookie couldn't help but chuckle at the looks on their faces as they returned to their vigil. She turned toward Eric, who was looking at her with intensity and maybe even a hint of nervousness.

"I am sorry to disturb your evening, Sookie, especially after I promised to stay away. But I needed to speak to you; it won't take long."

"It's fine, Eric. Do you want to walk a bit?" she asked, knowing that Lafayette would prefer that no one be in his clean house. "There's a creek about half a mile that way," Sookie gestured. "And it's a nice night."

"That sounds lovely, Sookie," Eric said, motioning toward the sound of the creek and the little pathway he assumed led to it.

Sookie and Eric began to walk slowly down the path. They walked next to each other, their hands swinging within inches, but never touching. Simply enjoying each other's presence, neither spoke until they had stopped and were looking at the water.

"Why did you need to talk to me?" Sookie finally asked.

"Would you believe for moral support?" Eric responded, a smile playing on his lips.

"Moral support?"

"Yep," Eric answered. "I learned right after I rose for the night that Nan Flanagan is planning to kill Bill and myself this evening. She made an appointment with Bill for midnight, so that is to be the time, I suppose."

Eric's casual tone infuriated Sookie, even as his words frightened and shocked her.

“What the fuck, Eric? What are you going to do? Does Bill know?”

“Do not worry,” Eric said as he reached out and touched Sookie's cheek in a comforting gesture. “I have already made plans to ensure Bill's survival and my own. We should be able to eliminate the threat Nan poses to you too.”

“I don't like people being killed because of me!” Sookie said forcefully, her frustration apparent.

Eric chuckled, “Well, if it makes you feel better, she will be coming to kill Bill and myself, so you can think of it as self-defense if you wish.”

“But why? How do you know what she's planning?”

“I have my sources. I'll tell you of them sometime,” he said enigmatically. “But for now, I can tell you that the vampire Authority wants to replace the entire regime of Louisiana in the wake of the necromancer.”

“But y'all killed her.”

“Yes, but there are powerful vampires who would like to get their hands on Louisiana since it has the potential to be a very rich state due to tourism and legal gambling in the Gulf and along the Mississippi.”

“What are you going to do to stop them?”

“The ones who want the state? Nothing—at present.”

“But why?”

“Their voices are only being listened to because the state is currently perceived to be weak under Bill's regime. The reaction of the Authority is actually quite normal, especially given that Nan is no longer in favor and cannot act to protect Bill's interests.

“She was protecting him? But he seemed to hate her.”

“You’ve met Nan. We all hate her,” Eric deadpanned. “And yes, she has been protecting Bill and even arranged to help him kill Sophie-Anne so that he could take over the state. He’s been basically acting as her go-to man in matters of P.R. He’s a great poster boy for the AVL and the mainstreaming movement, after all. In exchange, she’s given him access to the guards he’s using and has kept away threats that might have occurred given the fact that he’s so young. I found out this evening that she recruited him in the 1980s and that he’d been her spy in Sophie-Anne’s court as well.”

Sookie was silent for a minute, taking in Eric’s words. “So Bill’s been a kind of figurehead king?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, but this is the same with many vampire kings and queens. It is the sheriffs that must do most of the real work.” He winked at her. “And now that four out of five of Louisiana’s sheriffs are dead and Bill has no way to consolidate his power on his own, he is a vulnerable target.”

“And you?” Sookie’s voice cracked a bit

“Well I’d be the last member left of a fallen regime. I would be—for lack of a better term—a lose end. I’m sure the fact that I was recently possessed is a convenient excuse, however.”

“So Nan’s coming to kill you at midnight,” Sookie said matter-of-factly.

“Something like that,” Eric smiled down at her and then looked at the creek. He couldn’t help but recall how they’d made love for the first time on a night similar to this one, near a similar body of water.

“But you’re not going to let her kill you,” Sookie said with resolve.

“Something like that,” Eric smiled again.

“So, what’s your plan? I know you have one.”

“Indeed. I have arranged for three powerful vampires—one older than even me and the other two very well-regarded—to take over as sheriffs tonight. That is, *if* Bill agrees, of course. He will contact the authority shortly after 11:00 p.m. with myself and two of the others at his side. It will look like he has reestablished the power structure of the kingdom and as if his command is not in question here.”

“So the ‘official’ reason for *removing* Bill will be *removed*,” Sookie observed.

“Yes.”

“And you and Bill will be safe.”

“I *always* will account for my own safety as well as yours,” Eric winked. “But, yes, if Bill agrees to this plan, he will be safe as well.”

“What then?”

“When Bill speaks with the Authority, they will most likely order him to kill Nan; she has become something of a thorn in their sides, and they will be thirsting for someone’s death this evening. They will see it as a win-win situation. If Bill is able and willing to dispose of Nan, who is herself a very powerful vampire, then he will be perceived as strong enough to stay king and will be looked at as independent from Nan for the first time. If she somehow succeeds in killing him, as well as myself and the other sheriffs, then their original plan will have worked out.”

“Oh,” Sookie said, looking concerned. “You say that she is powerful. Could she win tonight?”

Eric looked contemplative, “Possible, but not likely. She will not expect Thalia and Isabel to be there. Plus, she will not be aware that we know of her plan to eliminate us. However, she will most likely have guards with her even more highly trained than Bill’s, and since Bill’s own guards were originally arranged by Nan, they will not be trustworthy. But—no— I don’t think she will succeed in her plans. She has always been over-confident, and tonight it will be her undoing. I’m sure that she intends to kill me first as I am her only perceived threat, but I have some tricks up my sleeve and under my shirt,” he said with a twinkle in his eye as he pulled up his T-shirt to reveal a very thin garment that resembled a bullet-proof vest. “This will repel any wooden bullets that her guards—or Bill’s—wish to send my way.”

Sookie reached out and touched the vest lightly, “Silver bullets too?”

“Yes,” Eric said quietly, watching Sookie closely as she touched him through the vest. “It should repel those as well.”

Sookie raised her eyes to Eric. “You’re going to be the one to kill her, aren’t you?” Sookie asked softly.

“It will most likely have to be me,” Eric returned, looking Sookie straight in the eye so that he could gauge her reaction. “She is over 800 years old and Bill would be no match for her, and I plan for Isabel and Thalia to be out of sight when we confront Nan.”

“But why? Why not have them there to make sure you survive.”

Eric looked back toward the water, “I wish to try to get Nan to disclose whether she has told anyone about your abilities, and if she sees the others, she will know that she has fallen into a trap. If, however, she thinks she is about to defeat us, she may well be boastful.”

“Oh,” Sookie took in a deep breath. “Do you think she’s told anyone about me?”

“I am almost certain she has not.”

“How can you know?”

“There have been no vampires around your residence as of yet. If the Authority knew, it would have attempted to take you by now.”

“Oh.” Sookie didn’t know whether to be comforted or terrified by Eric’s words.

He continued, “Also, I have been told that she has requested an audience with the Authority for several hours after she is meeting with Bill and me. She must know that her own position is tenuous. She has also hinted that she will be in the position to demonstrate her continued essentiality to the Authority.”

“You think that’s about me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“I don’t want you to endanger yourself just to get information from her.” Sookie continued passionately, “Promise me that you won’t do that.”

Eric shook his head, “I promise that I will be alive at the end of this night. I promise that Nan will be no more. But I can never promise not to do everything possible to ensure your safety.” His eyes shone with sincerity and fervor.

The two were silent for a moment as they stood there looking at each other.

“I appreciate your telling me what’s going on, Eric,” Sookie finally spoke.

“I probably shouldn’t, but I . . .”

Sookie interrupted, “needed moral support?”

“Yes,” Eric laughed.

“What did Bill say about all of this?”

“To be honest, I have yet to tell him.”

“You came to see me first? To tell me before him?”

“Yes.”

They stood silent for another moment, both turning their eyes to the dark water. Finally, Eric spoke, “We should probably get back. Pam has been here for a few minutes now, and I have one more errand before I go to Bill’s.”

“Pam’s here?” Sookie asked excitedly. “Is Bubba with her?”

“Yes. Your friend Lafayette has already shown him the house and is fawning all over him even as we speak.”

“How do you know all that?”

Eric pointed to his ears.

“Ah, so you have super hearing?” Sookie asked. “I had no idea vampires could hear from this far away.”

“Well, we are not actually that far away as the crow flies, and . . .”

Sookie interrupted with a wry smile, “or as you fly.”

“Right,” Eric smiled back, “and I also have really, really good hearing, much better than other vampires. It’s one of my special gifts.”

“Special gifts?” Sookie asked.

Eric reached out to take her hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. Hands entwined, they began walking back to the house at a leisurely pace.

Sookie looked at their joined hands, so comfortably locked together. She prayed that he and Bill would be okay.

Eric followed her gaze. His eyebrows waggled. “We fit together well, don’t you think? And in many ways too,” he said suggestively.

Sookie's blush was obvious even in the dark. "Don't get fresh, mister," Sookie responded, enjoying that Eric was flirting with her, in spite of herself.

He laughed before answering her previous question. "Most vampires have one or more 'extra' strengths; we call them gifts."

"Oh?" Sookie asked.

"We sometimes get gifts from our makers, passed along traits through the blood. Godric too could fly, for example. I am lucky; I have two gifts other than flight, though I am not certain where they come from—if I had to guess, however, I would say they are from Godric's maker. A vampire's gifts also get stronger and stronger as he or she ages."

"What are your other gifts?" Sookie asked curiously, stopping their progress toward the house.

"I have very good hearing, as I said. And I have an excellent nose."

"I wouldn't call it *excellent*," Sookie said reaching her unoccupied hand up to tap him lightly on the nose, "but it's adequate."

Eric smiled broadly as he realized that Sookie was flirting back with him. He had to reach far back in his memories, but he knew that he was feeling like he did when a kitchen maid first flirted with him when he was around twelve or thirteen years old. If Eric didn't know better, he'd think he had what humans called 'butterflies' in his stomach.

"It's a *useful* nose, at least," he said grinning. "I can track much more easily than anyone else of my kind that I have ever met, and my range is much farther. I can also pick up many scents that even the oldest of Weres will miss."

“I can see where that might be handy.” Sookie paused and then bit her lip as she thought about some of the other ways Eric was *gifted*—his gracious plenty being one of them. She couldn’t help the blush rising to her cheeks again.

Eric was able to surmise what Sookie was most likely thinking about from the flush on her cheeks and the increase of her heart rate as well as the scent of her arousal. He chuckled and thought about remaining silent so as not to embarrass Sookie, but he couldn’t help himself. He spoke seductively, “My, my, Miss Stackhouse. Let me assure you that whatever you are thinking about right now is *not* another vampire ‘gift’; it is a natural ability, one which I have endeavored to *perfect* over the years.”

Sookie blushed even more, and then they both laughed.

Hands still firmly together, the two resumed their walk toward Lafayette’s house.

“Does Bill have a gift?” Sookie asked suddenly.

“I don’t know. You will have to ask him,” Eric said. “We tend to guard our gifts carefully. They can give us an advantage if our enemies do not know of them. Many vampires know that I can fly because they have seen it, but only Pam, Godric, and Godric’s maker ever knew of my other gifts. And now—you know, of course.”

“Well, I’m honored, Mr. Northman. And I’ll keep your gifts to myself,” Sookie assured, smiling up at him. “Can Pam fly?”

Eric chuckled, “She cannot. And she never lets me forget it either. According to Pam, it is all *my* fault too; she thinks I must not have been *trying hard enough* when I turned her. She often reads me Dear Abby columns to confirm her supposition.

Sookie laughed, “That sounds like her!”

A few moments later, Eric stopped walking and turned to Sookie, his eyes taking on a very serious look. “I want you to promise me something.”

“What?” she asked, frightened by the sudden, heavy tone of his voice.

“If things go badly tonight, I want you to run. Pam will know what to do, and she will have money for you to use.”

Sookie shook her head and was about to speak when Eric insisted, “Sookie, if Nan succeeds in killing us or if the Authority does not lift the execution orders for Bill and myself, then you will be in grave danger. Nan most likely plans to find you after doing away with Bill and me, and she will tie herself to you by the blood against your will. Then she will try to control your gifts and use you as a bargaining chip to further her own ambitions. This is not a life you would want, Sookie.” His voice had gotten low and his thumb stroked the palm of her hand. “Please,” he said, a desperate tinge to his voice, “In order to be at my sharpest tonight, I *need* to know you will be safe—no matter what happens to me.”

Sookie looked into his bright blue eyes and couldn’t deny him. She nodded in silent agreement.

“Thank you, Sookie. I will notify Pam after it’s all over—when I know we are all secure. And in addition to Bubba, I will leave Pam here. If there is no word from me by 12:30, Pam will know what to do.”

Sookie shook her head. “Your notifying Pam won’t be enough for me.” She gripped his hand tightly. “Come here—come back to me—when you know we are safe,” she said in a desperate whisper.

Eric nodded. “Always” was his simple response. He bent down and kissed her forehead lightly.

Eric and Sookie finished the walk to Lafayette's home in silence, still holding each other's hand. Pam was sitting on the porch with Jason, who had a star-struck look on his face.

Pam drawled, "Mister Genius here almost said the E-word, so I'm babysitting while the witches fawn over Bubba."

Eric laughed and then began speaking to Pam quickly in Swedish. At one point he looked seriously at Sookie. After a few minutes, Pam nodded and said, "As you wish, master."

After Eric was done talking to his child, he turned to Sookie, "You ready to meet the King?"

Sookie put her anxiety over Eric and Bill's safety to the side and let her excitement build back up. She nodded and stared eagerly at the front door.

Eric took Sookie's hand again and led her inside. Standing in the middle of the kitchen and looking somewhat nonplussed at the TruBlood in his hand was Elvis Presley. Sookie couldn't hold back her squeal, and Eric gave her a slight warning glance.

"Bubba," Eric said, "I'd like to introduce you to your charge."

Sookie grinned as Bubba moved toward her. He reached out his hand to shake hers. Knowing vampires usually didn't shake hands, she looked at Eric, wondering what to do.

Eric nodded at her and then dropped her hand, signaling that it was fine to answer Bubba's gesture, so Sookie reached out and shook the hand of the King.

"Howdy, Miss Sookie," Bubba said warmly, his tell-tale accent apparent. "Mister Eric said you was pretty and you sure are!"

Sookie smiled, "It's so nice to meet you, Bubba, and thanks so much for taking care of me like this."

Eric took in the room, noticing the daisies he'd sent arranged in a vase. Sookie followed his eyes.

"Thanks for the flowers, by the way," she said looking at Eric.

He smiled. Again, he bent down to kiss her on the forehead. "I'll see you later, Sookie."

She caught the sob that was trying to rise in her throat and responded, "You'd better."

"Don't worry none, Mister Eric," Bubba said. "I will look after her real good for you."

"That is good, Bubba," Eric said gratefully. "She's very important to me." He took Sookie's hand once more and brought it slowly to his lips, giving it a soft kiss. "May I take one?" he asked, gesturing toward the daisies.

Sookie just nodded as Eric took a flower from the vase. He gave her one last glance, and then disappeared out the door.

Chapter 27: A Prayer from the Dead

Eric flew quickly to Sookie's home and landed on the porch. He inhaled deeply. Bubba and Pam's scents were fresh. He also smelled Compton, probably from a night or two before. There were no other recent supernatural scents, and he sighed in relief. He found the extra key Sookie had hidden in a flower pot—something he'd discovered when he'd had to replace the plant in said pot. He checked the magical barrier and found that he could not get into Sookie's home. He was relieved to confirm that the sale of the home back to her had gone through properly, and he returned the key to Sookie's spot.

He sat down on the porch swing for a few moments and let the fingers of his right hand trace a pattern that he'd carved into the side of the swing one night. It was a Celtic love knot that he'd once seen in an old church, marking the entombment of a husband and wife who had died in the 15th Century. According to the mythology of the village, the couple had married against their powerful families' wishes, so they had to flee from France. They settled into what was now Wales, and became prominent citizens of their town, well-known for both their generosity to the church and their enduring love for each other. The wife had died before the husband due to an illness she'd gotten as she had tried to nurse their first grandchild back to health. The child had lived, but the wife had perished soon after. Less than a month after his wife had died, the husband also passed away, reportedly due to a broken heart.

The children of the couple had then commissioned a young artist to create a tomb in tribute of their parents' everlasting love for one another. The Celtic knot was used to symbolize that love, and Eric had recalled the story as well as the figure one evening as he'd been sitting on Sookie's newly-reconstructed porch after he'd owned the house for about a month. He'd spent the rest of the evening carving the remembered figure into the swing.

Now as he traced the pattern, he thought of the husband's broken heart. If Sookie chose not to be with him, Eric had resolved to stay alive and attend to her safety for however long she needed it; it would give him purpose. But he also knew that if—when—Sookie died, he would become like the husband in the story.

It was now 10:10, and Eric wanted to be at Bill's in about twenty minutes. Eric thought that the less time Bill had to think over any other options, the more likely it was that he'd agree to Eric's plan and not do anything stupid or rash like trying to contact Nan to get her back on his side. That would be the worst thing he could possibly do where Sookie was concerned. Plus, it would warn Nan that they'd discovered her true purpose for their 'meeting'.

Eric got up from the swing and inhaled deeply once more, but this time it was to take in Sookie's lingering scent around the property. He walked to the spot where Sookie had called out a single word to him, "Wait." And then she'd kissed him. He closed his eyes at the memory and the feeling in it. Tonight he'd be doing everything that he could to make sure that she could return to that porch—to her home—in safety.

He flew off the porch and traveled toward the cemetery between Sookie's home and Bill's. In the last six months, Eric had come to realize that Bill's range of smell must not extend very far, given that he'd never once questioned Eric about his continual presence at Sookie's home or at Adele's grave. Still, Eric stayed vigilant and used his gifts to ensure that he was truly alone when he landed next to Adele's headstone. He picked up and discarded a now-dead bouquet of white daisies that he'd left for Sookie's matriarch a few nights before her return from the fairy realm. He replaced them with the single daisy that he'd taken from Sookie's bouquet.

"It is a paltry offering, I'm afraid," Eric said lightly as he sat comfortably next to the grave as he'd done many times before. "But your granddaughter has the others."

He touched the headstone lightly, brushing a dead leaf off of the top of it. “I am happy to tell you that Sookie is back now. She was, as I assumed she would be, displeased that I’d bought the home and had constructed my ‘cubby’, as she calls it. But she seems to enjoy many of the repairs and upgrades, though she has not mentioned them directly.” Eric paused.

“I have also done as I promised and returned the home to her. I’m sure that I will get an earful later about my high-handedness in the way that I went about doing it, and she will probably wish to pay me more than the dollar I took from her wallet, but I’m sure she is happy to have it back. And I imagine that you too are glad to have it back in your family.”

Eric’s eyes flashed a twinkle, “You would be impressed, Adele. Tonight, I managed to distract Sookie with tales of impending death threats and takeovers, and she didn’t remember to mention the house once. Perhaps, if I come back alive tonight, she will be so relieved that she will accept the home with no argument.”

He looked at Adele’s name on the headstone and sighed. “No—I don’t really think she’ll let it drop either.”

He was quiet for a few moments. “I hope that the next time I am here, it is with Sookie. She has broken the blood tie I told you existed between us as well as a bond that we formed when I had amnesia. *That*, however, is a story that will take longer than I have at present to tell.

“But I do wish for you to know that I will do what I must to make sure Sookie is safe, and now that she has returned to this realm, she will, I’m sure, take over the care of your grave. As you know, I continue to hope that she will one day accept me as her beloved. However, she may in the future come here with Bill Compton or another that she chooses to be her mate.

“If that is the case, I fear that I will not be welcome here anymore, so I have come to say goodbye just in case. I am no believer in ghosts, Adele, but I am also not blind to the fact that I

have felt comfort here these long months. If it has been your spirit, then I must convey my gratitude. This place has offered me much solace, and I have enjoyed having somewhere to speak my thoughts concerning your granddaughter. I'm afraid that Pamela would not have been nearly as receptive, and as I told you before, now that Godric is gone," he paused, "I had no one else. For the briefest of times, just last week, your granddaughter filled that role for me, and it was very pleasurable to me. However, the irony was that I was unable to tell her any of the things I had confided in you that I wished to say because I did not have my memories. Perhaps it is my fate to always be one step away from my heart's desire." Eric drew in a long, unnecessary breath.

"If your spirit is somehow in this place, Adele, I know that we will continue to have the shared purpose of watching over Sookie, and given her propensity for drawing danger to herself, I'm sure that we will *both* be needed," he chuckled a bit.

"If you are able to hear me or if you are with your God, I ask that you say a prayer for me—that it will be me who returns with Sookie and no other."

Eric rose and gave a deep bow in the direction of Adele's grave. Not for the first time, he felt a sense of peace and comfort flow over him in this place.

He smiled wryly, "I hope that means you are on my side, Adele. I will need all the help I can get if I am to win her."

He bowed once more, "I wish that I had had the opportunity to meet you." With that, he took off into the night sky to make the short trip to Compton's.

Chapter 28: Wooden Bullets

Anyone looking at Eric would have described him as relaxed. Inside, however, he was anything but. He was pissed. He'd arrived at the mansion a little over ten minutes before and had been waiting for King Bill to give him an audience. As soon as he'd arrived, he'd told a young, petite woman, dressed in a business suit and introducing herself as Bill's executive assistant Kelly, that he needed to see the king immediately about a time-sensitive matter.

Of course, Bill had elected to act like a child. A minute after Kelly had entered Bill's office, one of the guards "keeping an eye on" Eric had been informed that the king was in the middle of an important *business* meeting and that Eric would have to wait.

Eric's sharpened and acute senses told him that the *meeting* was with the same female who had just walked into his office. Her A+ blood was currently being fed upon by the king, and from the sounds of her annoyingly high-pitched screeching, she was about to fake an orgasm.

Eric was leaning against the doorframe between Bill's foyer and the den where he'd had his conversation with Sookie. There, he could pick up the faint echo of his beloved's scent. This, more than anything else, calmed him. He'd give the king five more minutes before he *insisted* upon an audience. Nan wasn't expected for another hour and fifteen minutes, but Eric wouldn't put it past her to come early to gain an extra advantage. After all, that's what Eric himself would have done.

Still outwardly displaying an air of calm nonchalance, he took in the four guards around him. Each of them was a potential threat since Nan had been the one to "give" them to Bill in the first place. Next, Eric looked at the obviously expensive table in the middle of the foyer; Nan had arranged for the restoration of Bill's ancestral home as well so that Bill's public image could be even more established as the genteel Southern gentleman. Eric thought it contemptible that

any king or queen would agree to accept such help, but then again, Compton had no other choice really. He did not have many friends among their kind that Eric could discern.

His arrogant, superior attitude about mainstreaming lost him one group of potential supporters. Another group—the one that included Eric—would never be able to forget Bill’s actions in the past. Bill had spent more than eighty years with his maker, basically causing one bloodbath after another. Eric certainly wasn’t an innocent, but the gratuitous violence of Bill and Lorena had been both demented and potentially dangerous to their kind. And when the Authority finally stepped in to put an end to their rampage, Bill had insisted that Lorena was to blame for *all* his actions, and he’d played his role as the victim to perfection. The Authority had ordered Lorena to free Bill and then had put her in silver for five years, whereas Bill had gotten off scot-free. It was another decade *after* this incident before Bill “changed his ways” and took on the compassionate, loner vampire persona that must have attracted Nan’s attention.

Of course, Eric knew much that Nan apparently didn’t know or chose to ignore about Compton, who had nested with Malcolm and Diane in the 1930s—right after Lorena had been put in silver—and then again for a short stint in the 1970s after they’d added Liam to the group. By the 70s, Eric was already sheriff of Area 5 and had had to clean up the carnage left behind after one of the nest’s little “parties.” He’d banished them from his area from a quarter century after that episode and had been secretly pleased to hear that Malcolm, Diane, and Liam had been killed. Of course, as sheriff, he’d still had to execute one of the arsonists who had been responsible for the fire that had killed them, but he’d virtually ignored the others involved. He’d done just enough to send a message to other potential vampire killers and to appease the thirst for retribution in his own community. However, part of him had wanted to give the arsonists a

reward for dealing with a group that could have potentially become a thorn in Eric's side—yet again—since they'd taken up residence in Monroe.

Eric could not abide a hypocrite, and Bill's continual waffling between bloodthirsty killer and tortured saint pissed him off more than anything else. To Eric, this showed a lack of personal integrity and honor, traits Eric had always respected above all others because of the examples of his own human father and Godric.

Eric leaned more fully into the doorframe and internally steadied himself. Bill had one more minute before Eric *required* an *immediate* meeting.

Eric looked at one of the guards and gave him a wink. He had already plotted three different escape routes and attack plans, and the guard he was looking at would be the first to die in each of the scenarios. Eric pulled his cell out when it signaled he had a text message. Isabel would be arriving in ten minutes.

When he had thirty seconds to go, Bill appeared at the door of his office, "Sheriff Northman, I thought I told you to arrive at 11:30—sharp. I do not have time to speak to you until then."

"Sorry, my king," Eric said, trying to muster up deference despite Bill's blatant disrespect. As graceful and lithe as a lion, Eric crossed the foyer to stand in front of Bill. Eric consoled himself with the knowledge that Compton would soon have to learn to respect his elders, or Eric would eventually *remove* him from the kingship. He'd had about enough of Compton's arrogance, especially considering the fact that he had so little to be arrogant about. Yet Eric forced himself to be respectful, "Some very important information has come to my attention that I felt you needed to hear."

Bill sighed dramatically and motioned for Eric to follow him into his office. As they entered, Bill shooed Kelly, who was still fixing her clothing, from the room.

“Care for a taste?” he asked Eric as the petite brunette passed him.

“No thank you,” Eric returned smirking. “I prefer blondes.”

Bill snorted and looked at Eric contemptuously. After Bill closed the door, he grunted toward a seat, which Eric took immediately.

“You can drop the act, Northman,” Bill said. “I know you have about as much respect for me as you do for a Were.”

Eric looked up at Bill and shrugged his shoulders, “Fine Bill. If honesty is what you crave, then let me get right down to it. Nan is coming here tonight to kill us both. She has been ordered to do so by the Authority, and she hopes that in doing so, she can regain the favor she has lost among them and the AVL. After we are dead, I think she will try to find Sookie, tie herself to her, and then present her like a lovely little gift to the Authority so that she will finally get her seat among them. I want to kill her instead so that she is no longer a threat to Sookie; you can either come along for the ride or sit back quietly, waiting for Nan to kill you. Is all that *honest* enough for you?”

Bill looked dumbfounded. “How could you possibly know all this?”

“Unlike you, Bill, I do not distance myself from other vampires, pretending to act superior. I embraced my nature when I arose vampire.”

“That is why Sookie will always prefer me!” Bill said rising defensively.

Eric had predicted that Bill might act like this, so he answered Bill’s charge immediately and calmly, “Perhaps you are right, Bill. Sookie will soon make her choices, and I, for one, have decided to abide by them no matter what she chooses, *even if* it is you. As for how I knew about

the attack against us tonight, I have many friends in high places who make sure I have the knowledge I need to survive. And tonight, I wish to use that knowledge to protect myself, you, *and especially Sookie.*”

Bill shook his head. “I do not believe that Nan would betray me in this way. We have been allied for more than two decades! I’ll simply talk to her, and we’ll work all this out.” He went to grab the phone on his desk.

Before he could touch it, Eric had stood up and was covering the phone with his hand. “Two decades is *nothing* in an 800-year life. Regardless of what you might believe, Nan is always looking out for herself first and foremost. The last few days should have clued you in to that. Plus, I believe that you went against her orders for the *first time* when you attacked the witch, did you not?”

Bill nodded and took his hand away from the phone. “The Authority would not stand for this!”

No longer feeling the need to placate Bill with deference, Eric responded, “Really, Bill? Do you not study vampire history at all? What happens when a regime is deemed weak by others?” Eric rolled his eyes, and as he answered his own question, his voice was dripping with a level of sarcasm that even Pam would be impressed by, “Oh yes, I have it; that regime *dis-a-fucking-pears.*”

“This regime is not weak!” Bill yelled, again going into defensive mode.

“Oh let’s see. You have lost four out of five sheriffs. Have you made moves to replace them yet?”

Bill was silent as Eric continued, “And a necromancer was running amuck in your kingdom. Oh, and at least four vampires in this state walked out onto their lawns to enjoy the

afternoon sun and were burned up in a very public way. And then there's the fact that you are a young vampire, and your only ally is Nan, who is currently in deep shit with the Authority because of the Festival of Tolerance fiasco, which *she* blames on *you*."

When Bill still said nothing, Eric continued.

"Make no mistake, Bill. Tonight one of two things *WILL* happen. Either you will die or Nan will. As for myself, I have contingency plans in place either way, but as much as you annoy me, Sookie would be saddened if you were no more. Plus, I hate that fucking bitch Nan, so I will help you if you accept my help. If not, then I'm going to disappear for a while." Eric sat down again and began picking invisible lint off his jeans as he waited for Bill's response. What Eric didn't tell Bill was that he had a private jet fueled and ready for Pam, Sookie, Isabel and himself if the king didn't agree to his plan. He also intended to end Nan either way. Whether that occurred before or after Bill met his final death at Nan's hands was currently a choice in his monarch's hands.

"Fine—what do you suggest?" Bill finally said.

"I suggest you *help* the Authority to recognize that you are a fit monarch."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Bill said, "Enter," and Kelly came in.

"You have another visitor, your majesty," Kelly said as she gave a slight bow. "She says her name is Isabel Beaumont."

Bill looked at Eric, who nodded. Bill turned to Kelly, "Tell her to come in."

As soon as Isabel came in, Eric and she exchanged respectful nods. Eric was glad to see his old ally.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Ms. Beaumont?" Bill asked.

“If I may, your majesty,” Eric said, taking control of the meeting. “Isabel is here at my request. As I was saying, you need to demonstrate to the Authority *tonight*—preferably within the next half hour or so—that you are strong and well-supported. Otherwise, you will be deposed by means of your true death. The first thing you must do is to convince them that you have strong sheriffs, ready to ‘stand by your side’.”

Bill looked a bit perplexed. “It would be impossible to arrange such a thing within half an hour Eric—even for you!”

Eric grinned. “Maybe, but I started planning a few hours ago. Bill, I have arranged for three very strong and well-respected vampires to take over the sheriff positions left vacant. Isabel here has agreed to take over Areas 3 and 4, which would have been combined a long time ago if Sophie-Anne had not wanted to get tribute from an extra sheriff.”

Bill’s confused look was still in place as he addressed Isabel, “But you are Sheriff of Area 9 in Texas—are you not?”

Isabel shook her head, “No, I gave up that position a little over a week ago; however, Eric has convinced me that seeking a new post in Louisiana would be both profitable and personally satisfying for me.”

Eric continued. “In addition to Isabel, I have asked Rasul Mendez, an old acquaintance of mine to be Sheriff of Area 1.”

“I have heard of him. He works for the Authority. How did you manage that?”

“As I said, he is an old acquaintance,” Eric said being purposely vague.

Bill nodded. “And who is the last?”

Just then, a loud commotion was heard outside in the foyer, and the office door was pushed open. Thalia stood in the doorway dressed in all black with a mood to match. “I do not appreciate having to wait,” was all she said as she calmly took a place next to Eric.

“Ah, the third is Thalia. I believe you met her at my club one evening.”

Taking a step back, Bill nodded. If there was one vampire his didn’t want to cross, it was her. She was known for both her strength and her combustible attitude throughout the vampire world.

“Thalia, Isabel, and I are prepared to stand right behind you tonight as you speak with the Authority, but Rasul could not get here in time. He will be here tomorrow to swear fealty.

With that, Isabel and Thalia each took a knee in front of Bill, pledging themselves to his kingdom.

Bill looked at Eric. “Why would you do this? Why not just become king yourself?”

“That is something I never wanted, Bill. I hated Sophie-Anne, but did nothing to overstep her authority as long as she was fair and left me to rule my own area. I have no desires for grand power and wish only to keep me and *mine* secure.” He gave Bill a meaningful look at these words. “Despite our differences, Bill, I will always serve you loyally if you don’t interfere with my territory. If you think about it, that’s what I have been doing for the last year.”

Bill reluctantly nodded and then asked Thalia and Isabel to rise. Thalia’s look could only be described as menacing.

“What now?” Bill asked.

Eric spoke, his voice full of power, “Now, I suggest you contact the Authority to reassure them that Louisiana is solvent. Then, I’ll tell you how we are going to confront Nan so that we can both kill her and get some information we need.” He looked at Bill significantly.

Understanding that Eric was talking about Sookie, Bill nodded.

Eric continued, “I assume you have video conferencing.”

“Of course,” Bill assured.

“Good—then Isabel, Thalia, and I will stand behind you to be seen. I do not predict that you will have any problems, but we will know if your new regime is accepted by whether or not the Authority asks you to get rid of Nan. That will be your test.”

At Bill’s confused look, Eric continued, “Bill, you must make it seem as if installing more powerful vampires as sheriffs in your realm was *always* your plan. Act as if you were simply waiting for the chance. If you can convince them of this, they will leave you alone, at least until they need another public appearance from you.”

Bill nodded and sat in his large chair behind his desk. The others gathered behind him with Eric standing in the middle of the two women.

“Oh, and Bill,” Eric said, an edge of sarcasm to his voice, “it wouldn’t hurt to remind them what a wonderful public image you have.”

With that, Bill used his computer to set up the call.

Fifty minutes later, Bill’s authority had been solidified, and the king of Louisiana had been ordered to kill Nan Flanagan, who, conveniently enough, was headed his way for a “completely unrelated appointment,” according to the Authority’s spokesperson. Just in case any were loyal to Nan, all the human guards had been locked into the basement by a jubilant Thalia, who had given herself permission to rough them up a bit. Any donors on the premises had also been locked up as had Kelly, both for their safety and because they could have been spies for

Nan as well. Isabel and Thalia were stationed upstairs, ready to kill any guards that Nan brought with her who remained outside Bill's office.

And, of course, Eric had taken the opportunities offered to plant his listening devices in Bill's office as well as his study, the library, and even his bedroom, where he'd gone—all with Bill's permission—to secure donors who were still in the house. Avoiding the range of Bill's video surveillance equipment had been the most challenging part of the operation, but Eric had been able to assess the blind spots quickly enough and plant the bugs in places where he was certain they wouldn't be found.

Now at 11:55, Eric sat casually on the porch waiting for Nan. Jessica, who had arrived fifteen minutes before looking incredibly pink, had been placed as sentry to the locked-up guards.

Nan arrived in a limousine at 12:01. "Where are Bill's guards?" Nan asked, getting out of the vehicle. She was dressed in all black. Three guards of her own, heavily armed with automatic weapons that were most certainly loaded with silver or wooden bullets, got out immediately after Nan. The driver stayed in the car.

Eric rose and inhaled subtly. Three other unfamiliar human scents were located several hundred yards away, probably in the cemetery, just beyond Bill's property line. Eric walked toward Nan slowly. "I arrived only a few minutes before you, but the king has informed me that the guards simply left about half an hour ago. He called the Authority to try to find out the problem but has not yet gotten through."

Nan smirked, thinking the Authority had arranged for the guards to leave so that her job would be even easier.

She looked at the vampire sheriff in front of her. She knew that Eric would be—by far—the harder of the two vampires to kill. The key would be getting him off his game, but luckily, she knew just how to do this. A quick, well-timed mention of Sookie Stackhouse ought to do the trick.

Nan spoke, her voice as grating as ever. “Whatever. I don’t have time for all this shit. I need to talk to you and Compton.”

Eric gestured his arm in a wide sweep inviting her into the house. “The king is, I believe, still in his office trying to get ahold of someone in the Authority. Perhaps, you can help him get through while you’re here.” He winked at her.

“Let’s get on with this!” Nan said rudely.

Eric trailed Nan and her guards into Bill’s office and closed the door behind him. From past experience, he knew that Thalia would easily track the three additional humans outside, and he expected that the limo driver and they would be dead in a matter of minutes.

Keeping his seat behind his desk, Bill greeted Nan, “Miss Flanagan, to what do I owe the honor?”

Eric noted that the three guards had stationed themselves between Nan and the door, their guns draped seemingly casually against their arms. However, Eric recognized that the guards would be ready to fire at a moment’s notice. He and Bill had agreed to hold out as long as they could before killing Nan so that she could give them a good indication of whether she’d spoken to anyone about Sookie’s powers.

“Can it, Compton,” Nan yelled. “I have not live 860 years to listen to your drivel. Now you will listen to me. The Authority has basically threatened to fire me! Can you fucking believe that! I am the reason the AVL has any status in this country at all!”

“Why are you here then, Nan?” Bill asked, tightly gripping the stake that was in his lap and hidden out of view.

“That’s the funniest part, Bill. I’m here to find out what you can tell me about your little barmaid so that she can be my ticket to getting back into favor.” At that the guards pulled their guns out and pointed them at Eric’s chest. “But I don’t need the Viking for that.” The guards fired immediately, sending a hoard of wooden bullets toward Eric’s chest.

As the gunfire stopped and the smoked cleared, Nan noticed that all three of her guards had been decapitated. She was currently being held by the throat, at least a foot up in the air—by Eric Northman.

Nan was barely able to mutter, “How?”

“A type of Kevlar,” Eric answered, his smirk obvious. “It’s not just for humans anymore. Plus, I’m just *that damned fast*. See?” he said looking down at his chest. “No holes—which is lucky for you. I quite like this jacket.”

Bill said, “Set Ms. Flanagan down, Eric. I think that we might be able to make a deal with her.”

Eric nodded deferentially, performing this part of their predetermined performance to perfection.

Bill gestured for Nan to take a seat, and she straightened her jacket as she sat primly in the offered chair.

“As you said, Nan,” Bill began, “you are over 800 years old. But here we are, all at risk from the *Authority*.” He seemed to choke out the last word.

Eric continued, “The Authority would have had you kill two powerful vampires tonight. And then they were planning to kill *you* later. But the days of the Authority are numbered.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Nan said defensively.

“We mean to lead a movement against the Authority,” Eric said. “You must know of the dissention in the ranks.”

Nan nodded.

Eric continued, “Then you know that there are more powerful forces than the Authority.”

At this, Bill looked a bit surprised, but luckily Nan was focused on Eric and didn’t catch it.

She nodded again.

Eric said, “You should join us, Nan. We will soon have enough forces to topple the Authority and to take control of the AVL; from there, we will be able to lift the antiquated rules that stifle our ambitions.”

Nan looked thoughtful and then smug, “Or I can just take the knowledge of your little fairy to the Authority. That would make me the favorite again. And you two would be killed for hiding her nature.”

“Fairy?” Bill asked unconvincingly.

“Please,” Nan said, “don’t insult my intelligence. The lights from the hands thing is proof enough, and then there’s the fact that she has both of your sets of balls securely wrapped up in her hands. It’s clear what she is.”

“Ah, Nan,” Eric said. “You have figured us out, but don’t you think that her powers will be beneficial to our cause? After all, she has proven to be a match for a witch already, and her power is, as of yet, undisciplined.”

Bill continued, "But we need time to train the fairy, obviously, so that she is capable of being a powerful ally against enemy vampires as well."

Eric took over, "You have not done anything to prevent us that time, have you, Nan?"

"If you mean, have I told anyone about Sookie Stackhouse and her magic hands, then no, I have not, but I better get something good for my discretion."

"Oh you will," Bill stated. "How about a seat at the table in the *new* Authority?"

Nan nodded in agreement. "In that case, I am most definitely *in*, gentlemen."

There was a blur of movement in the room that Bill couldn't follow, but when it came into focus, Bill saw that Nan's body was already disintegrating on the floor. Eric was standing over her, holding her head in his hands. He dropped it onto the rest of her corpse before reaching down to grab an expensive looking necklace from the vampire's remains. "Pam will just love this," he commented, putting the bauble in his jacket pocket.

"Well," Bill stated, "at least we know that Sookie's secret is secure."

"Yes," Eric agreed, "and so is your kingdom." He bowed slightly to Bill. "I meant what I said earlier, Bill. I will not challenge you unless you interfere with me and *mine*."

Bill was immediately defensive again. "Sookie is *not* yours."

"No," Eric stated evenly. "But she is not yours at this moment either. I will agree to back off completely from her if she chooses you. I will even let her out of the bargain we made long ago that she help me with her telepathy whenever I wish. I will do this if you agree to back down if she chooses me or if she chooses a life without either of us."

In his confidence that Sookie would choose him, Bill agreed immediately, "Those terms are acceptable."

Eric nodded and then looked at Bill sharply. “If you renege on this promise, Bill, I will put my own desires to the side and take this state from you. Your sheriffs, as you may guess, would support me. They will be *absolutely* loyal to you while I am, but they will fall to my side if I decide that you are no longer worthy to be king.”

“Are you threatening me, Eric?” Bill asked.

“Yes,” Eric said looking at Bill with the cold, deadly eyes of a thousand-year-old warrior. “Sookie will soon decide what she wants for her life, and I will abide by that; I require only that you do the same. If that happens, then your kingdom will remain secure as long as I draw breath to secure it.”

“Agreed,” Bill said confidently.

Eric bowed and turned to leave.

“Oh by the way, sheriff,” Bill said, arrogantly, “Sookie has asked me to come to her home tomorrow night.”

Eric showed no emotion as he exited Bill’s office, closing the doors behind him. He went outside onto the front porch where Thalia and Isabel waited. “How many did you kill?” he asked.

“Only four,” Thalia said, a bit saddened by the lack of numbers.

Eric smirked, amused by Thalia and glad they’d eliminated the entire threat. “In that case, I think we can all go now. There are no more.”

“Can he be a good king?” Isabel asked as she stood by the car she had rented to get her there from the airport.

“Soon we will be able to see if he is worthy,” Eric answered. “He is no longer under Nan’s yoke and may begin to rule the state with some vision. If he does, then he may grow into his title well.” Eric spoke honestly even though he hated thinking well of Bill at all.

“And if not?” Thalia asked.

“If not,” Eric answered, “then you ladies will help me become a king.”

With that Eric bowed to both women and took to the sky, leaving their mouths gaping in his wake.



Eric could not abide a hypocrite, and Bill’s continual waffling between bloodthirsty killer and tortured saint pissed him off more than anything else. To Eric, this showed a lack of personal integrity and honor, traits Eric had always respected above all others because of the examples of his own human father and Godric.

(...)

Eric had yet to figure out if Billy boy was sincere in his desire to see Sookie happy or if he had an ulterior motive for his seeming display of altruism.

Since he’d gotten his memory back, Eric had been more deferential to Bill, at least on the surface.

He wanted to find out what the king’s intentions were toward Sookie, and if he had to pretend to be a loyal subject to do it, he would.

Chapter 29: I Want to Kiss You

It was midnight exactly, and Sookie was on edge, knowing that Eric and Bill would be facing Nan at any moment, if they weren't already. Bubba had gone into the woods in search of dinner—assuring Sookie that he'd be close enough to hear if she was in trouble. Earlier in the evening, Pam had informed everyone that Bubba's favorite meal was actually a cat, and Jason had made a joke about Bubba having a field day in Hot Shot. When Pam had explained to Bubba that Hot Shot housed a community of Werepanthers, Bubba had gotten a serious look on his face.

He'd told Jason sincerely, "Oh, no thanks, Mister Jason. I don't really care for Were blood, not even panther. Just a good old fashioned cat is what I like best of all."

That had effectively put an end to that discussion.

Since Lafayette had promised Sam that he would work all three shifts the next day to make up for yet another day of calling in, Lafayette and Jesus had gone to bed at around 11:30 to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Jason had taken off about fifteen minutes after that.

Right after Jason had left, she packed the few belongings she had at Lafayette's, ready to go at 12:30 if they had not heard from Eric.

Sookie glanced at the clock on her cell phone again—12:02. She felt her anxiety welling inside of her and had unconsciously begun to bite her nails.

"Please," Pam drawled, "your anxiety is hard enough to take, but I cannot abide the desecration of a good fingernail."

Sookie dropped her fingers from her mouth and grasped her knees with both hands to stop them from shaking. "I'm sorry. I'm just real nervous."

Pam looked Sookie straight in the eye, "You need not fear. No harm will come to Eric."

From the look in Pam's eyes, Sookie could tell that the vampiress was trying to convince herself of this as well.

Pam stood up and pulled a small envelop from the pocket of her jacket. She handed it to Sookie and spoke formally, "My master has tasked me with paying you for his care while he was cursed."

Sookie accepted the envelope and looked up at Pam, "Thanks. But after everything, I feel weird takin' this."

"You must take it," Pam said. "Or Eric will find other—even worse—tortures for me."

After a few moments, Pam added in a mumble, "Oh and I'm sorry I shot at you with a rocket launcher, okay?"

Sookie couldn't help but laugh at the pained look on Pam's face as well as her sentence, which would have been ridiculous in any other context. "That's fine, Pam," Sookie said magnanimously. "In retrospect, I'm actually glad that you did. It stopped Eric and Bill from dying needlessly."

Pam nodded as she took her seat again, "That is just what I think." She gave Sookie a half-smile/half-smirk, "Perhaps you will be good for my master, after all—especially if you agree to be on *my side* in matters such as this one. Dear Abby says that we women must stick together as we gently and covertly prod the men in our lives to do what we wish for them to do and to prevent them from acting like idiots. Of course, we have to do all this in such a way that they will think it is all their idea."

"Well, I'm not sure launching a rocket counts as a 'gentle' prod, but I see your point," laughed Sookie. After a moment, she looked at the vampiress with sincerity, "Thanks."

"What for?" Pam asked, the curiosity clear in her voice.

“For distracting me for a minute.”

“He *will* be fine,” Pam said more forcefully this time.

Sookie very much wanted to believe her.

At 12:15, Sookie nervously took a big gulp of the glass of wine Jesus had brought out to her before he went to bed. Pam was choking her way through a TruBlood.

“These really are horrible,” Pam said.

“Well, you could always go looking for cats with Bubba,” Sookie deadpanned.

Pam looked at Sookie and laughed, “I can understand what he sees in you now.” She turned serious. “I couldn’t before, and for that, I am sorry.”

Sookie nodded and looked out into the woods. “Will he *really* be okay?” Sookie asked, unable to look at Pam directly.

“He always has been,” Pam said, her voice sincere.

They sat for a few more minutes, Sookie continuously eyeing her cell phone. It was 12:18.

“Do you still feel him?” Sookie suddenly asked, looking at Pam again.

“Yes, he is still alive,” Pam answered.

Sookie let out a breath she didn’t even know she was holding. “If I had a blood bond with him, could I feel him too?”

“Yes,” Pam answered. “And he would feel that you are anxious for him to return to you as well.” The vampiress gave Sookie a slight smile.

“You’ll tell me if you feel something happening to him?”

“Yes,” Pam answered simply. “So far, he has been only calm and then exhilarated. These are both common emotions for him in battle.”

Sookie watched her clock turn to 12:20 and then 12:21, feeling more and more nervous at each tick. Pam had to admonish her many times for biting her nails.

“Do you love him?” Pam asked when Sookie’s phone read 12:22. She’d been studying Sookie all night, and Pam was becoming more and more certain that Sookie did indeed love her maker.

Sookie paused, “I care for him very much. I like to be with him. He makes me laugh, and he makes me feel safe. And I,” she paused again, “miss his presence when he’s not with me. But I am not sure about love yet. I’m still trying to understand what I really feel.”

Pam spoke quietly, but passionately, “He will give you your time, Sookie. And if you let him, he will give you his *whole* dead heart. But for his sake, if you do decide that you love him, make sure you can also accept *all* that he is. Do not make him feel ashamed of his own nature. I couldn’t bear to see that.”

“I won’t do that to him,” Sookie said looking at Pam sincerely. She clearly saw the vampiress’s love for her maker in her eyes. Sookie looked at the time: 12:24.

Three more minutes had slipped away when Sookie’s phone rang.

“Hello?” she answered immediately.

“Min kära, how was your evening.”

Sookie sighed with relief and then launched into Eric, “You scared me to death! It’s 12:27!”

Eric chuckled on the other end of the line, “I guess that visit is out of the question then? It’s a pity; you look particularly lovely in the light of the porch.”

Sookie looked around and then noticed an Eric-shaped shadow just out of the light at the side of the porch. Pam bowed to her master and quickly retreated inside the house.

Sookie launched herself at Eric, engulfing him in a hug. “You’re alive,” she managed to say into his chest.

“Yes,” Eric said. “Everything is well, min kära.”

Sookie grasped him tighter. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” Eric said.

They held each other for a few moments before Eric led her to the porch and onto the swing at the end. They sat quietly for a moment, enjoying the silence and each other, as Eric swung them slightly.

“You’ve only ever called me that in my dreams before,” Sookie said as she took Eric’s hand.

“I will stop, if you wish, Sookie. I did it without thinking because it is how I think of you in my head, but if it makes you uncomfortable, then . . .”

“No,” she interrupted. “It’s okay—for now—but if I decide to be alone or to be with someone else . . .”

It was his turn to interrupt, “. . . then I shall have to stop saying it out loud. Yes, I understand.”

After a few more minutes of silence, Sookie asked, “What happened?”

“It was as I thought,” Eric said. “The Authority recognized Bill’s dominion once he had demonstrated that he had the backing of powerful sheriffs. Then Nan came and we eliminated that threat as well.”

“You mean *you* killed her, right?” Sookie asked placing her head on Eric’s shoulder as the porch swing swayed back and forth.

“Yes,” Eric answered swiftly and passionately. “I killed her right after it was clear that she had told no one of your powers. And I would do it again a thousand times.”

Sookie took in a deep breath and then grasped Eric’s hand harder even as she laid her head more heavily against his shoulder. “I know you would,” she said in a whisper.

“Is Bill okay?” Sookie asked after several more minutes. She couldn’t help but feel a little bad that she hadn’t checked on Bill before then.

“Yes,” Eric answered. “His position has been fortified. He now has four powerful sheriffs, much more powerful than he had before. The Authority entrusted him with Nan’s death, and he succeeded in this test. He is secure.”

“And what about you? Are you secure?”

“Yes,” Eric answered simply.

The pair sat in silence for a while until Sookie began dozing. Eric tucked her more closely into his side and enjoyed her warmth for a few more moments before speaking softly, “You should go to bed, min kára. You have a long day tomorrow.”

Sookie sighed groggily, “Will you take me again?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Eric said as he picked her up in his arms. Pam opened the door for the couple and then moved to the side as they entered.

Eric nodded to his child and then took Sookie to her room.

Sookie was glad that she had changed back into her yoga pants in order to be more comfortable after Bubba had left. Once again, Eric helped her take off her bulky sweatshirt. “I like this T-shirt,” he said with a glint in his eye as he tucked Sookie in.

Sookie smiled up at him. “Yeah, some high-handed vampire made sure it was right at the top in a box of my clothes.”

“The rascal,” Eric said with mock disgust. “Perhaps he was just trying to make sure that you thought about him.”

“I don’t need a shirt for that,” Sookie said, smiling coyly.

“I’m sure he would be *very* happy to hear that,” he said as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She gave him another lazy smile. “Can you stay until I’m asleep?” Sookie asked closing her eyes and sinking comfortably into the bed.

“I can,” he said sitting next to her and lightly touching her cheek, jawbone, and hair.

“I’ve been dreaming about you the last few days,” Sookie’s voice was even groggier.

“Even without the blood?” Eric asked surprised.

“Mmm hmmm. Do you dream too?” she opened her eyes a crack to see him watching her, a soft at-ease expression on his beautiful face.

“Vampires cannot dream, Sookie. We are quite literally dead when we sleep, the magic that animates us regenerating in our blood.”

“Oh,” Sookie said softly. She was surprised to find herself disappointed; she wished that Eric could somehow enjoy the same dreams that she was.

Eric looked thoughtful, “I did have what you might call a daydream about you once. It was an—odd—sensation, one I’d never experienced until then.”

Sookie sat up a bit against her pillows, a little more awake now and wanting to hear more.

“What happened in the day dream?”

Eric took off his jacket and boots slowly, giving Sookie a chance to protest if she wanted to. Then he moved so that he was lying on his side on top of the covers next to her. She mirrored his position so that they were facing each other. He reached over to her and settled his hand comfortably, but innocently into the dip above her hip bone.

“It happened right after you had gone to Jackson and before I had to go there in order to save Pam.”

“Save Pam?” Sookie asked settling her hand onto his broad chest where his heart would have been beating.

“Yes. Oh, you don’t know this part of the story, do you? The queen had been forcing me to sell vampire blood to finance her lavish lifestyle.”

“I know *that* part,” Sookie said a bit angrily, as she removed her hand from his chest and looked down. “Lafayette and Jesus told me that you made Lafayette sell V again, despite that time in your dungeon.”

Eric looked contrite and removed his hand from her body too. He shifted backwards a few inches, getting ready in case Sookie ordered him from the bed. “I am sorry for that, Sookie. Lafayette had had my blood by then, and he already had a clientele. Plus, he is very discreet, so it was expeditious to have him do it. The queen left me with few choices, and the Magister was breathing down my neck.”

“He’s the one that made Bill make Jessica, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he administered justice for the Authority. Someone had leaked information that the queen had been selling V through me. I later found out that the leak came from Russell via Bill.”

“Bill?” Sookie sounded angry.

“Do not judge him too harshly for that,” Eric said fairly. “He was trying to stay alive in Russell’s grip, all while dealing with his psychopathic maker and trying to keep your name out of it.”

Sookie shuddered at the thought of Lorena. “What happened with Pam?”

“The Magister came to Fangtasia while I was not there one evening, and he found some V that had just been delivered by one of the queen’s lackeys.”

“That sounds like too much of a coincidence,” Sookie observed.

“Indeed,” Eric said. “I made a similar deduction. I have since discovered that Russell, in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Sophie-Anne, informed her that the Magister knew about the sale of V in my territory. He did not tell her that he’d been the informant, but that is of little matter. What did matter greatly to me was that the queen had decided to use the situation as a chance to get rid of me—to make sure that the Magister would find evidence when he arrived.”

“What a bitch,” Sookie observed.

“You have no idea,” Eric agreed. “The thing that made me most angry was that I had served her loyally for over 40 years by that point, no matter how ridiculous she could be. Of course, once I found out about her duplicity toward me—and her actions toward you—I had no desire to serve her any longer. If Bill wouldn’t have taken her out when he did, she would have died by my hands.”

“Would you have been the king then?” Sookie asked curiously.

“I would have pushed for another sheriff, Luis, to become king. He was competent and desired advancement.”

“Oh—so what happened with Pam?” Sookie prompted.

“After the Magister arrived at Fangtasia, he began to torture her for information; he silvered her.” Eric’s face was a mixture of anger and pain as he thought of his child under silver.

Sookie couldn’t help but raise her hand back up to his chest, a comforting gesture for the ancient vampire.

“I arrived at Fangtasia to try to help Pam, and she came up with the idea to say that Bill had been selling the V.”

“Why Bill?”

“He had disappeared. Finding him would give me what we needed—time. The Magister agreed to give me two days to locate Bill, but he would keep Pam under silver as collateral until I returned with him.”

“Why not say Sophie-Anne was responsible?”

“Ah—the rub there is that I would have been guilty of treason if I had done that. And I would have been subject to the true death for that alone.”

“You would have let Bill take the fall for the queen?”

“Honestly,” Eric said, looking down, “there is not much I would not do to protect those I care about. And if Bill had been the source of the leak, as I thought he’d been, then . . .” his voice trailed off.

“Then you would have felt justified,” Sookie finished.

“Yes,” Eric said simply.

They were silent for a minute, and then he continued, “As soon as I got to Russell’s house, however, my plans were made much more complicated. Lorena didn’t want to give Bill up, and he had already sworn fealty to Russell. I saw that I could align myself with Russell and

help him force the queen into a marriage with him. In exchange, he agreed to help me save Pam from the Magister.”

“Why did he want to marry Sophie-Anne? He was in love with Talbot, right?”

Eric nodded. “Ambition. His head was big enough that he wanted to become king of the *whole* United States, I think. And he definitely wanted to bring down the vampire Authority. Sophie-Anne ran Louisiana like a money pit, but this state, with its casinos and the lore of vampires in New Orleans, could be very profitable, much more so than Mississippi. Russell, though mad, was always good at business.”

Sookie nodded, “I can definitely agree with you about the crazy part.”

Eric tentatively reached his hand back up to place it on Sookie’s hip and then continued, his face relaxing, “Then things got even more complicated. All within half an hour, three events occurred that made me uncertain about what to do next.”

“You uncertain?” Sookie asked teasingly. Her hand was now stroking his chest lightly.

“Yes,” Eric smiled over at her, but she noticed it did not reach his eyes. “The vampire that had taken your friend Tara, Franklin Mott, was an investigator for Russell. He’d come back from Bon Temps with a file on you, one he’d found hidden at Bill’s home.”

“Russell showed me that,” Sookie said quietly.

“It confirmed that you were a telepath, and indicated that Bill was looking into your genealogy to try to find out why your blood had a different taste. The branch that led to your grandfather, Earl Stackhouse, seemed to be of particular interest to him.”

“Grandpa Earl was in the fairy realm,” Sookie confessed. “He thought that he’d been there only for a few hours, but he disappeared over twenty years ago. They were tryin’ to keep

us all there by having us eat this light fruit, but I didn't want to do it. When they tried to force me, I shot this queen person with my light, and then Grandpa Earl and I ran."

Eric nodded for her to continue.

"Some other fairies wanted to help us get back to this world but said that Grandpa Earl couldn't come because he'd eaten the fruit. I didn't want to leave him, and the bad fairies were coming. The doorway to this world was shutting when Grandpa Earl pulled me in with him. He died when we got back here. It was like losing him for a second time." Sookie's voice had gotten quiet as tears collected in her eyes. Eric pulled her to him, and she buried her face into his chest, crying softly for several minutes. He ran his hands softly and slowly through her hair and down her back. After a while, she stopped crying but didn't pull away for a few more minutes as she enjoyed the comfort he was bringing to her.

Finally, she resettled into her former position though she was a little closer to him than before. His hand again came to rest at her hip, and hers stayed resting on his chest.

"What were the other two things that happened?" she asked.

"Talbot, Russell's husband, was taking me on a tour of the mansion. As it turned out—this was something to keep him busy while Russell was trying to capture you. In Russell's collection was my father's crown, which one of the tattooed Weres had taken to a cloaked figure the night they had killed my parents. I had been trying to find the leader of these Weres for a millennia, as you know. But I didn't know that Russell was the one in the cloak until that moment."

Eric paused and Sookie moved her hand to his cheek; this time it was her turn to comfort his losses.

"I'm sorry you had to lose your family like that," she said softly.

“It was a long time ago,” he said as he arched his neck so that her hand moved to his lips; he kissed her palm slightly before speaking, “but thank you.”

Sookie nodded, giving him a moment before asking, “And the third thing?”

Eric smiled a bit—this time the emotion reaching his eyes—as Sookie ran her hand back to his chest. “The third thing was a spitfire blond barmaid being dragged into the mansion, challenging a 3,000-year-old vampire all the way.” He chuckled. “If I hadn’t been so worried that you were going to die any minute at Lorena’s hands or that you were about to be entrapped in Russell’s, I would have simply pulled up a seat, grabbed a blood, and watched you work.”

Sookie grinned, “I guess it wasn’t really smart to talk back to them like that.”

“I guess not,” Eric smirked, “but it makes for an entertaining memory for me.”

“Not entertaining at the time though,” Sookie pouted.

“No, it was not,” Eric agreed, the seriousness returning to his eyes.

Sookie looked contemplative, “So when you told me that I meant nothing to you in Russell’s mansion, you were . . .”

Eric looked at Sookie intensely and tightened his grip on her hip slightly. “I am sorry I said that to you; it was a lie. I was . . .”

“Not yourself,” Sookie finished his thought as well as her own.

“No, I was not. I was trying to figure out how to kill a 3,000-year-old vampire—with ten times my strength—in order to take vengeance for my parents.”

“And you were trying to figure out how to save Pam.”

“Yes, and then you were there, and all I could think about was how to save you at first. And I became angry at myself for wanting to put you over Pam and my parents. I’d never felt so tied up in knots before, and I just . . .”

“Said something you didn’t mean,” Sookie finished quietly. “And then I said something that I didn’t mean.”

“You said you hated me,” Eric said quietly.

“I was hurt and scared.”

“I know. I think I knew that you didn’t mean it even as you said it, but it still hurt me more than any words ever had before. And I also knew in that moment that my words must have hurt you too. I was going to take them back, but that’s when Russell came back in. It almost killed me to leave that room. I almost risked everything by trying to attack Russell right then.”

The two lay in silence for a while, absorbing the information that had been shared. Sookie finally spoke, “Well, we’re even then. We both said something we didn’t mean because we were both in horrible situations. It happens.”

Eric squeezed her hip in silent agreement.

“Hey, you never told me about your daydream,” Sookie said. “You aren’t getting out of that!”

“Wasn’t trying to,” Eric said innocently. “*You* distracted *me*, remember.”

“Spill it, cowboy,” Sookie said playfully.

Eric got a faraway look in his eyes and then looked at Sookie in mild surprise. “You called me that in my daydream, actually.”

“What? Cowboy?”

“Yeah.”

“It wasn’t some kinky sex dream was it? ‘Cause if it was, I don’t think I need to hear about it, after all.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Eric laughed. “Well, not at first, at least. And even then, we really just kissed and then you shoved me onto a bed.”

“What? Okay, now you *have to* tell me,” Sookie said as a surprised smile spread across her lips.

“Fine,” Eric said playfully. “Like I said, this was before I went to Jackson, but after you had been there for an evening. I had felt your emotions earlier in the night. You had been frightened at the Were bar; I could tell you were in danger for a few moments, but then you were okay. Later, you became so sad, and my instinct said that I should go to you, but I didn’t. Instead, I tried to distract myself.” Eric didn’t add that that distraction had been in the form of Yvetta dancing for him.

Sookie spoke, “I was sad because Bill had called and broken up with me. He’d told me that he was with Lorena and that they’d just had sex like only two vampires could. He said that he’d always had to hold back with me and that our natures were too different to be together.”

Eric was silent for a moment as tears again gathered in Sookie’s eyes. “It was a harsh thing to say,” he finally said, “but I am certain he was also trying to protect you, to make you *not* want to find him.” Eric caught the tear that had fallen on Sookie’s cheek with his thumb.

“Please, don’t cry, min kära.”

“Is it true that vampires hold back when they have sex with humans?” she asked after several moments. “Did you have to hold back when we had sex?” she continued shyly, her face turning pink.

“Of course, we hold back our strength with humans, but that is not necessarily a bad thing, Sookie. When vampires have sex with other vampires, the act tends to be . . .” Eric paused, looking for the right word to use, “. . . rougher. But I can tell you that I much prefer sex

with humans to sex with vampires. And you may think it exaggeration, but I am being truthful when I tell you that having sex with you has been the greatest carnal pleasure of my life.”

Sookie’s blush went full red. “But you must have been with thousands of women before.”

Eric smirked, “Yes, so you should feel especially *smug* right now—not embarrassed. I think that you broke me when we made love, Sookie.”

“Broke? But everything seemed to be—umm—working okay when we were together.”

Eric laughed hard, “You didn’t break me physically, Sookie. But I feel like I will never be able to enjoy sex with another again the way I enjoyed it with you. So in a way, I am ruined for others—broken.”

“Oh,” Sookie said quietly before adding even more quietly, “You weren’t so bad yourself.”

“Ahh, a thousand years of practice finally pays off,” he teased.

She smacked him on the chest. “No dirty talk! And you still haven’t told me about your daydream. Get to it, *cowboy*.” This time she emphasized the nickname.

“*Again*, you are the one that interrupted,” he continued playfully. “So as I was saying before you distracted me yet again, I had been thinking about you and feeling your emotions all evening, which was disconcerting enough, and then I had this vision of you, of us—a daydream.”

She nodded, gesturing for him to continue.

“You were sitting in Alcide’s apartment in a bedroom. You were wearing a robe with little flowers on it, and there were spent tissues on the bed, so I knew you had been crying. And as you know, I hate that.”

Sookie nodded as she unconsciously continued drawing circles into his chest.

“I flew down to the window, and when you saw me, you got up and opened it. You asked me if all vampires could fly. And I asked you if all humans could sing. And you said something quintessentially Sookie—let me get this right. You said that you ‘couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it’.”

Sookie laughed. “That’s very true. It’s also true that I had been crying all evening.”

“Interesting,” Eric said meditatively. “You invited me in, and I asked how your search for Bill was going. You said that you had realized that he wasn’t who you were looking for, and then you put your hand on my chest, just where you have it now,” he said looking down at her hand. “You told me that I smelled like the ocean in winter and that I had played by the North Sea as a child, which was true. You said that you could smell my memories.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“That’s what I said,” Eric intoned playfully. “And that’s when you said that you had skills I couldn’t even dream about, and then you called me cowboy.”

“I bet you *loved* that,” Sookie said sarcastically.

“Oh, you know it. But I loved the next part even more.”

“Dare I even ask?” Sookie said nervously.

“You slid my jacket off my shoulders and kissed me. And then you pushed me on the bed and climbed on top of me.”

“Wait, I don’t think I need to hear any more,” Sookie said, blushing again.

“Well, unfortunately *for me*, there’s no more to tell. The daydream was interrupted by someone talking to me.”

“Too bad *for you*,” Sookie teased.

“Indeed.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, just looking at each other. Finally, Sookie spoke, “You know I cannot smell your memories, but you do kind of smell like the ocean to me. I never really thought about it before, but you definitely have your own smell. It reminds me of a time when I was really little when my father and mother took Jason and me to the beach in the middle of the winter. It was really cold outside despite it being sunny, but we had a great time playing in the sand. You smell kind of like that day to me.”

He smiled, “You have a certain smell to me too.”

“Fairy fragrance,” Sookie grimaced.

“Yeah, maybe, but also sunlight and wheat and honey.”

“You said that to me before—when we were on the road right after you’d lost your memories.”

“Yes, I remember,” Eric said quietly.

“Do you think that everyone thinks I smell like that?”

“I don’t know. As I told you, my sense of smell is very strong, but your skin does hold the smell of the sun like no one else I have ever encountered.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like what you might compare to sheets that have dried outside versus those that have been dried in a dryer.”

Sookie nodded. “I think I get it, at least a little.”

There was a minute of silence again before Sookie spoke, “You told me your memories in the dream I had last night. Do you think what I dream about is real all the time, like it was when you told me what ‘min kára’ meant? Or is my subconscious just making stuff up?”

“I don’t know,” Eric said thoughtfully. “Ask me about something I told you, and I’ll tell you if it’s true.”

Sookie thought for a moment, “Did you ever help carve a dragon on one of your people’s boats—uh you called the boat a . . .” Sookie paused trying to remember the word.

“A drekar?” Eric finished, looking surprised. “I did help with the carving when I was young.”

“What part did you carve?” Sookie asked, looking for more confirmation that her dream was accurate.

“I’m afraid that at that time I was not as skilled as I would have needed to be in order to carve the main part of the creature,” he smiled at his memory.

“So you carved just some of the scales, right?”

“Yes,” Eric said looking at Sookie. He was now even more surprised.

“You showed them to me. I touched them.”

Eric shook his head, his eyes showing disbelief, just like they’d shown in his daydream when Sookie had announced that she could smell his memories. To him, the two things felt the same.

Sookie took a deep breath. “The Weres killed your parents and your baby sister.”

“Yes,” Eric answered quietly.

“But you had a little brother too, right?”

“Yes.”

“He died when he was four?”

“Yes,” Eric’s eyes were again full of wonder.

“And you had started teaching him how to fish the summer before he died?”

Not understanding what to do with the emotions that were welling inside of him, Eric sat up in the bed and turned, putting his feet on the floor and his face in his hands.

Sookie sat and raised her hands to his shoulders, laying her head on his back.

“How is it possible that you are dreaming about me and that I’m telling you real memories—especially now that my blood is no longer in your body?”

“I don’t know, Eric,” Sookie said as she wrapped her arms around his body. They stayed like that for a few minutes while Eric gathered his thoughts.

Eric turned so that he was looking at Sookie. They stared at each other for several long seconds, Eric looking down at her lips.

“I want to kiss you,” he said, his voice full of emotion.

“I want to kiss you too,” she said back.

They both smiled, and Eric rose from the bed. “We will wait though.”

“Yes, we should.”

Eric’s smile dropped. “Ask your friend Jesus what he thinks of all this tomorrow. He may be able to find something out. This kind of thing doesn’t even happen when vampire blood is inside a human, and I can tell you for certain that my blood is no longer in you because I cannot feel you.”

“You can only feel a little empty spot?” Sookie asked.

Again Eric looked surprised and nodded.

“Me too. And you told me *that* in a dream as well. Dream Eric also told me to talk to Jesus about that, and I already have. He’s going to start looking into it tomorrow since it’s his day off.”

Eric nodded again and looked like he wanted to say something before he stopped himself.

“What is it, Eric?” Sookie asked.

“I just . . . I just wanted to ask if you were dreaming of Bill like this too,” he said with uncertainty in his eyes.

“No, just you.”

Eric couldn’t help the smile that crept onto the corners of his lips.

“Don’t get too full of yourself, cowboy,” Sookie said shaking her head and then lying down again, suddenly feeling the weight of the day on her shoulders.

“You should have been asleep an hour ago,” Eric said, the concern clear in his eyes.

“I would have been if *you* hadn’t kept me up,” Sookie said playfully, although the fatigue was now clear in her voice as well.

Eric lay down next to her again and replaced his hand on her hip.

As she took in the many shades of blue swimming in Eric’s eyes, Sookie stated rather than asked, “You fixed all the wood furniture in my house yourself.”

Eric nodded.

Sookie said in a quiet voice, “Grandpa Earl made all that for Gran. Your fixing it means a lot to me. It means the world.”

Eric brought his hand up and began to stroke her cheek as she closed her eyes. He spoke quietly, “I will not see you tomorrow, *min kära*. Bill told me that you had invited him to dinner tomorrow evening, and I will respect your need to spend time with him. I cannot feel sorry for the time we have spent together during the last few days, but it had been my intention to leave you completely alone until you called me. I’m afraid that I have failed miserably in this.”

“I know that from your letter,” Sookie chuckled tiredly, not opening her eyes. “But things keep coming up.”

“Yes.”

He continued stroking her hair, “Bubba will be outside your house tomorrow night should you need him.”

Sookie nodded almost imperceptibly and then drifted to sleep.

Eric rose and looked down at the woman that he fell more in love with every time he saw her. He thought back to the hours after they’d shared blood in the cubby: the shower of snow, the bed with furs on it, their making love. He had never experienced anything like it, even when he’d taken Sookie’s blood before. It had felt like a kind of high, something like what V-users might experience, but even stronger from what he could gather. But he’d never heard of anything having such an effect on a vampire before, and he’d *shared* in that experience with Sookie. In that imaginary world they’d inhabited for a time, he’d said that *everything was possible*, from the snow falling on them without making Sookie cold to the fact that he wasn’t burning in the sun. With the woman now asleep before him, he was beginning to believe that everything *was* indeed possible.

He left the room, quietly closing the door behind him. He needed to call Bill to let him know about Bubba protecting Sookie since the king would no doubt smell him outside Sookie’s farmhouse the next night. He also needed to get Pam up to speed on the events of the night.

He found Pam standing on the porch with a disgusted look on her face. “I think he’s managed to tree a cat,” she said gesturing toward the woods, where Bubba was hunting.

“Indeed,” Eric confirmed as he inhaled, smelling both the feline and Bubba about 50 yards into the darkness. “Bubba does have eccentric tastes. Do not tell Sookie, but I have arranged to have quite a few feral cats—which are already scheduled to be destroyed at

Shreveport's animal shelter—delivered to the woods around her home for Bubba. Perhaps a few will even make it to freedom,” he said with a wry smile.

“Yuck,” Pam grunted.

Eric spent the next ten minutes speaking to Pam in Swedish in low tones. Then he pulled out his cell phone and called Bill.

“What now?” the king answered, not even saying hello. “You interrupted my feeding.”

Pam rolled her eyes even as Eric remembered that he had not yet eaten that day. He gestured toward an empty bottle of TruBlood on the table, and Pam dutifully went into the house to warm them both one. Though disgusting, she was stuck there for the night and was hungry. For the first time in her life, she envied Compton, who was probably snacking on some yummy young woman.

Eric did everything he could to hide his sarcasm, but some still seeped into his words, “I apologize, your majesty, but you told me that you are seeing Sookie tomorrow night.”

“What of it?” Bill said, obviously jumping straight from calm to defensive yet again.

Eric paused for a moment to let Bill stew a bit, “I just wanted to inform you that I have hired Bubba to watch over Sookie at night for the time being. He has been told to keep his distance, but I'm sure you will sense him there.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Fine,” Bill said, frustration clear in his voice. “Is that all?”

“Yes, your majesty,” Eric said smoothly.

Bill hung up.

“So rude,” Eric laughed to himself as Pam returned with his blood.

Pam turned up her nose as she took a drink. “Drinking this is fucking torture,” she grumbled.

Eric shook his head, “It’s grown on me.”

Pam looked at Eric closely, “If she chooses you, you’re going to try to be monogamous aren’t you.” She couldn’t help the disapproval and disbelief working their way into her voice.

“I will not have to *try*, Pam. I will just *be*. I *am* already, truth be told.”

“But how? It’s against the nature.”

“*Anything is possible*, Pamela,” he said as he put his empty bottle down and flew into the night sky.

Chapter 30: To See the Light

A/N: Extended dreams in italics

Sookie stood next to Gran's grave. This time, she was not afraid to be in the graveyard, and it was not dark at all. In fact, the sunset was causing a gorgeous blend of pinks, oranges, reds, and purples in the evening sky, which was full of puffy clouds that were soaking in the colors. Most importantly, she was not afraid because Eric was standing right next to her.

Eric stared at the sky in amazement. "When I was a young teen, I once saw the waning sunlight play with the clouds in this way. I had been collecting bundles of wood as a punishment from my father for sneaking off with a servant girl when I was supposed to be practicing swordsmanship. I was, of course, bitter about my father's punishment, as I always was." He winked down at Sookie. "However, I became thankful for it when the sky opened up with so much color. It felt that Freja herself must be smiling into the sky."

Sookie smiled at Eric's memory and noticed that he was carrying a bundle of white daisies. "Are those for me?" she asked.

Eric turned his gaze from the sky to Sookie, staring at her with just as much reverence and awe. "You are even more beautiful than the sky tonight, min kära . . ." he began, his voice full of love.

Sookie blushed.

Eric continued his thought, ". . . BUT I'm afraid these flowers are for a different woman."

Sookie frowned.

Eric chuckled, "I brought them for Adele."

Sookie looked surprised. “Why?”

Eric’s look turned serious. “After you disappeared, I was able to track you here, and I picked up traces of fairies as well. Your trail, however, ended right here, right at Adele’s grave.”

Sookie looked down at the headstone and sunk to her knees next to her Gran’s grave. “I missed her so much that night and wanted only to talk to her about everything that had happened with Bill and with you. Even though it was probably stupid, I came here to be close to her.”

Eric sunk down next to Sookie and placed the flowers gently against the headstone. For the first time, Sookie noticed another bunch of flowers that looked like they had been placed on the grave a few days before. Eric picked up that bunch and tossed it away before settling into a more comfortable position.

“This is not the first time you have come here like this, is it?” Sookie asked.

“No,” Eric said as he sighed unnecessarily. “At first, I came here to be close to your lingering scent. But then there was a hard rain that took it away.” He looked forlorn at these words, and Sookie couldn’t keep herself from reaching out and taking his hand.

He continued, “And then, months later, I started coming back after I bought your home. This place has been a comfort to me.” Eric paused. “I admit I was curious about your Gran and found out about her—including about how she died.”

Sookie was silent for a moment. “I was supposed to be home the night she was killed by Rene. He was the one who killed Dawn and Maudette.”

“Yes,” Eric said. “I learned about Rene Lenier after you had traveled to the fairy realm.” He squeezed her hand lightly and looked at her, the emotion swelling in his eyes. “I am glad that you were not there that night.”

“But he killed Gran instead,” Sookie said, her eyes filling with tears.

Eric had his arm around her shoulder in moments and pulled her into his body. “I know. She would not have wanted for you to die too though.”

After a few moments, Eric continued, “I am sorry that I did nothing to prevent her death, Sookie.”

“What could you have done?” Sookie asked as her sobs turned to whimpers.

“Perhaps nothing, but I could have investigated the matter more. After your first visit to Fangtasia, I told Bill to glamour the police in order to find out if they had any suspects other than your brother. I also asked that he inform me if there were any other deaths or if you needed assistance in your own brand of investigation.” He lightly tapped her head to indicate that he was referring to her telepathy.

“Oh—Bill never told me any of that.” Sookie was surprised. “What did he find out from the police?”

“The police had no suspects except for your brother and Bill; that is probably why he said nothing to you.”

“So you were trying to help?”

Eric nodded. “But I could have come here myself; I should have spoken directly to you instead of following vampire protocol and approaching you only through Bill. I failed to follow up adequately, and for that, I am sorry. I didn’t even know that Adele had been a victim at the time; thus, I was unaware that you were facing an immediate threat from the killer as well.” His voice became almost a whisper as he finished his sentence.

Sookie reached up and grabbed Eric’s hand which was still on her shoulder. She gave it a squeeze, and then pulled him closer to her. “I don’t think that you could have done anything

else to prevent Gran's death, Eric. And I appreciate that you tried to do somethin'. I wish I would have known at the time."

Eric shrugged. "As I said, I did little, not nearly enough, considering that the victims had been with vampires." He became quiet for a moment, "I'm afraid that I counted on only Bill for information when I should have sent someone else. Bill never told me about your Gran being a victim, Sookie. If he had, I would have come to your home and tried to track the killer. Maybe I could have stopped him before he came after you again." His voice grew low as he raised his hand to stroke her cheek. "While you were away, I learned that you had to kill Lenier in self-defense, and I'm sorry you had to go through that. I should have done much more for you, especially considering how I felt about you. Perhaps it was my denial of my feelings at the time that prevented my action, but still, I regret it."

Sookie nodded and then looked at Eric seriously, "Wait—Bill didn't tell you about Gran being murdered? But you asked him to inform you if there were more victims."

"No, he did not," Eric answered simply.

"But why wouldn't he?"

Eric was silent for a minute, "I am not certain, but I'm afraid that I probably hold some of the blame for that as well. I made no secret of the fact that I wanted you for myself when I informed Bill that I needed your help finding the thief at Fangtasia. I might have," Eric paused, "antagonized him."

Sookie snorted, angry that Bill would use a petty reason like that not to tell Eric about her Gran.

Eric continued, "Bill wanted my involvement with you to be limited. He took a calculated risk that he'd be able to protect you from both the killer and myself. He was not

wrong in recognizing that I would not have been good for you at the time. I knew I wanted you then, but I had not yet acknowledged that I was attracted to more than your telepathy, scent, and blood.”

Sookie nodded.

Eric continued, “So Bill not telling me was the wrong decision, but I am convinced that he did it to keep me away from you. If I had been around you more then, there is no question that I would have found a way to have you, and Bill couldn’t allow that because of the queen, remember?”

Sookie was silent for a moment, “So Bill didn’t tell you about Gran’s death in order to keep you from taking me since the queen wanted me?”

Eric nodded, but then added, “I believe he also cared about you. He didn’t want you to fall into my hands because of that either.”

Sookie shook her head, “But at the time, he was still plannin’ to hand me over to worse hands, the queen’s.”

“Yes,” Eric agreed.

Sookie sighed heavily, and they fell into silence as the sky darkened fully. Sookie looked up into the night sky, which was now brightening with stars.

Eric followed her eyes, “You can see a lot of stars here. It reminds me of my human home.”

“They are beautiful.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

After a few more minutes, she spoke again, “They were her favorites, you know.”

“What?” Eric asked.

“Daisies,” Sookie said, smiling at the flowers.

“Oh,” Eric replied. “Good. I’m glad.” He got a faraway look in his eyes, one Sookie recognized he got when he was trying to remember something or when he was figuring out the solution to a problem.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“These flowers, what you call daisies—something similar grew in my homeland on the southern coasts. I used to gather them for my mother, who made medicines from them. She would take the juice from them and moisten bandages to put over sword wounds.”

“Really?” Sookie asked, looking at the flowers.

“Yes, these flowers open only in the daylight though, so I did not see them like this again for many, many years—not until cut flowers began to be used as decoration.”

His voice grew quiet, “There were some of these growing along the water’s edge by the small lake I swam in after drinking the fairy blood. They were the first I’d seen in the daylight since my human days.”

Sookie squeezed Eric’s hand, having no words to help comfort his loss of the sunlight for over a thousand years.

After a few minutes, Eric spoke, “I’m glad they were her favorites. I would have liked to have met her.”

“She would NOT have liked you—at least not at first,” Sookie said, taking Eric a bit by surprise.

“Why not?” he asked, a bit hurt and a bit intrigued.

“Well, you know how you were when I first met you—she would have thought you were an arrogant ass.”

“Well I am an arrogant ass,” he said with a brilliant smile.

Sookie hit him lightly on the arm. “You would have grown on her though, you know?”

“Like I grew on you?” he asked with mischief in his eyes.

At the same time, they looked at each other and both delivered the line she’d given to him after she’d slapped him, “I’d prefer cancer.” They both chuckled.

“You did eventually grow on me, you know,” she said dragging her fingernail over his palm.

Eric nodded, the light in his eyes turning lustful, “You do know how to make me grow, Sookie.” He gave a meaningful look toward his crotch.

Sookie laughed and slapped his arm again, “How many times have I got to tell you—no dirty talk!”

They laughed together for a few moments before Eric asked, “What’s your favorite flower?”

Sookie shook her head. “I don’t think I’ll tell you; you don’t actually dream these dreams with me, and I’ll just have to tell the real, awake you all over again.”

“But maybe I can bring you some in your dreams, min kära,” Eric said invitingly.

“Fine,” she said shaking her head. “I like hydrangeas, the blue ones.”

Eric smiled widely. “Wait until spring, min kära. I had some of those planted in your front yard.”

Sookie couldn’t help the large smile that broke out onto her face.

Chapter 31: Markers

Even though it had been well past 3 a.m. when Sookie went to sleep, she was up a little before 9:00, feeling more refreshed than she had since the spell had been done. She was anxious to go home later and smiled when she thought about the hydrangeas planted somewhere in her front yard. She'd have to scope them out and take some time to figure out what else Eric had planted for her.

The smell of coffee dragged her out of bed, and she found Alcide sitting with Jesus at the kitchen table. Alcide gave her a bright smile. "Morning, cher."

Sookie picked up from Alcide's mind—which she had a hard time blocking when he was broadcasting in pictures—that he thought her bed-head was cute and that he wouldn't mind waking up to her all the time. Of course, that thought was immediately replaced by a picture of Debbie with bedhead. Sookie raised her shields extra tight and returned his morning greeting, smiling at both Alcide and Jesus. "Where's Lafayette?" Sookie asked.

"Sam called him in early to take in some shipments," Jesus answered.

"Oh," Sookie said, feeling bad that she hadn't talked to Sam since she had learned of his brother's death. She grabbed her coffee and went out to the porch, her cell phone in her hand. When Alcide followed her out, she gave him a "just a minute" gesture and dialed Sam's cell number. He answered after a couple of rings.

"Sookie?" his voice sounded tired.

"Sam," Sookie said nervously, not really knowing what to say to him, but he'd been there for her after her Gran's death, and she wanted to be there for him if he needed her. "Sam, I know that the last time we spoke was kind of bad with you firing me and all, but I just want you to know that Alcide told me about your brother, and I'm here if you need a shoulder."

Sam sighed, “Thanks Sook.” Then he continued, with surprise in his voice. “Sookie, I never fired you; I think I’d remember that. In fact, I called your house a couple of times yesterday when you didn’t show up for your shift.” He sighed in frustration, “I’ve already gotten Holly to cover your shifts for the next two days since I couldn’t get ahold of you yesterday; I figured you were wrapped up in more vampire shit.”

“I’ve been staying with Lafayette for a few days, and you *did* fire me Sam—more than a week ago now,” Sookie said, a bit frustrated herself.

Sookie heard Sam mutter, “Shit—Tommy,” on the other end of the phone and suddenly realized that it must have been Tommy shifted into Sam that she’d talked to the previous week.

Sookie spoke softly, “Oh Sam, it was Tommy I talked to, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, cher, it was.”

There was a brief pause before Sam continued, “Look, I need to go right now because a marker for Tommy’s grave is bein’ put in today, but why don’t you come back to work on the lunch shifts on Mondays through Wednesdays, like we talked about before? You can start next week, cher, since I already promised

Holly your shifts for the rest of this week. She’s countin’ on them to help her make up for some work she missed last week. Actually, could you also pick up this Saturday’s lunch shift too? Arlene mentioned wanting to go to the carnival with her kids that day if I could find someone to cover it.”



“Sure, Sam. You want me to come with you to Tommy’s grave?” she asked quietly.

“No thanks, cher. I just need to say goodbye myself. Anyway, Luna and her daughter are coming by later.” Sookie noticed that Sam’s voice warmed when saying Luna’s name.

“Okay, Sam. Let me know if you need anything—anything at all.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

Sookie hung up the phone, sorry that Sam was going through the loss of his brother, but also happy that he seemed to have found—in Luna—someone that really cared about him.

Alcide’s voice interrupted her thoughts, “It’s too bad about Sam’s brother, Tommy.”

“Yeah,” Sookie said.

After a few minutes of silence, Alcide spoke, “Listen, cher, I was wondering if you had given any thought to what I said yesterday.”

Sookie was brought out of her thoughts about Sam. “A little, Alcide, but I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

Alcide nodded. “Listen, I know you have a lot to think about, but I want you to know that we’d be good together. We could have a family together.”

Sookie reached out her hand and patted Alcide’s. The contact caused her to hear Alcide thinking that he could have kids with her, whereas he hadn’t wanted to with Debbie because he knew they’d be Weres. Since Sookie wasn’t a Were, he thought she would be safe to have children with, and he really was attracted to her too. He imagined that they’d make some cute kids.”

Sookie pulled her hand away and planted her smile on her face, not wanting Alcide to know she'd read his thoughts. "I'll add that to my list of things to think about, but for now, I think I need some alone time. I'm going to go out back and sit in the sun since it's so warm."

Alcide nodded. "I'll be right here if you need anything, and I'll know it if anyone comes onto the property," he assured, touching his nose.

Sookie nodded, wondering briefly how Alcide's sense of smell would compare to Eric's. She grabbed her coffee and went into the house to brush her hair into a pony tail. Jesus was sitting crossed-legged on the floor of her room, sifting through an open box full of Marnie's books. An empty box and three stacks of books sat next to him.

Sookie sat on the bed as she brushed. "Find anything yet?"

"I'm just grouping them right now," he said gesturing to the piles.

He continued, "Like I told you before, Eric asked me to find some stuff about fairy magic to help you learn how to control your hand thing, and I'll also try to find something about that "empty spot" you told me was left after the blood bond was gone."

"Oh!" Sookie exclaimed. "Eric—the real one, not the dream one—confirmed that he felt that too!"

Jesus looked surprised, "Really?"

Sookie nodded, "And there is more. The Eric in my dreams has told me about some of his memories, things that the real Eric never told me about."

Jesus nodded for her to continue.

"It turns out the things I've been dreaming he's told me are actually real. They are his *real* memories. Do you know how that's even possible?"

Jesus shook his head, “No idea, but I’ll look for any information on that too. Whatever is happening to cause those dreams of yours seems like a big deal though. Have you had any about Bill since the tie was broken?”

“No,” Sookie answered.

“Has Eric had any dreams?”

“No, he said that vampires literally cannot dream, but he once had a daydream about me.”

“Really? Did it contain anything like what you’re telling me you experienced?”

“No,” Sookie answered, thinking about what Eric had told her. “Wait, I did tell him I couldn’t sing in the daydream, and I can’t, but that’s a little thing. And in the daydream, he said that I told him I could smell his memories, and now I’m hearing about them in my dreams. But I think those are just coincidences.”

“Maybe. Regardless, this is all very interesting.”

Sookie rose, her hair now feeling much better. “Well—I have to say, it’d be real nice to be dull for a change.” She sighed. “I’ll leave you to this. I’m going out back to sit in the sun for a while to think.”

“Okay,” Jesus said and then chuckled. “Lafayette said you would want to spend the day in the sun. He dragged a lounge chair out there for you this morning before he left.”

Sookie smiled gratefully. “He’s the best.”

Jesus agreed.

Chapter 32: A Smart Girl

Sookie was a smart girl—maybe not book smart in the traditional sense, but she had what Gran had called, “good old-fashioned common sense.” And Sookie had also gained a lot of insight into the way people worked—from the inside out—over the years. She’d learned that her instincts about people often matched the nature of their thoughts, and she’d become excellent at reading what people’s faces meant by tying their expressions to the thoughts they had in their heads. She’d become so proficient at this, in fact, that even when she had her shields up to keep others’ thoughts at bay, she was still good at reading people’s intentions through their faces.

She was also very well-read for someone with her level of education. With books, she got to know people without their thoughts invading her brain. She could form her opinions only from the words on the page, and she liked that aspect of reading most of all. Therefore, she read all the time, not only the fun romance novels and mysteries like Gran had gotten her hooked on, but also histories, biographies, and what some might call ‘academic’ literature. She was just as likely to be found reading *Wuthering Heights* as she was reading a bodice-ripper.

When some people looked down on her because she was checking out romance novels at the library, she dismissed their elitism. The thoughts of people who posited that she read romances because she was too simple to understand anything more complicated were harder to dismiss and hurt her a bit more. But there was only one time that she truly questioned her reading choices, and that had been when Bill asked her why she didn’t choose something of “substance” to read.

He had come over unexpectedly one evening, and she was sitting on the porch and reading to try to forget some particularly mean thoughts she’d heard from a rowdy bunch of boys who were at Merlotte’s to celebrate one of their 21st birthdays. When she’d tried to explain to

Bill that she enjoyed a good story that she didn't have to think that much about, especially after a hard day at work, he'd given her a smile that could only be described as indulgent or patronizing. And Sookie had put the book down for a whole week before finally deciding that she *refused* to feel bad about anything she chose to read no matter what anyone—including Bill—thought about it.

In fact, Sookie felt that her reading choices and the diversity therein were actually a sign of her good, old-fashioned common sense. She read the romance novels and mysteries, what some thought of as low literature, in order to unwind and relax her mind when it was over-tired from the demands of her gift. Those stories might not change her life, but they could stretch her imagination, and she *had* learned from them. The historical romances she liked so much were often set in historically accurate pockets of time, and the mysteries were great for helping her see things in different ways.

On the days when her mind was not strained by her so-called gift, she enjoyed more demanding pieces; like many young women, she loved reading Jane Austen and had read each of her books several times, always returning over and over again to *Persuasion*, which was about a girl who turned down the man she loved because of her family's influence, but who got a second chance years later. She also loved *Pride and Prejudice*, which was about a young woman who formed a quick opinion about a young man—that he was reprehensibly prideful—before she really got to know him. It turned out that much of his behavior and attitude were justifiable and that he was actually just reticent about sharing himself with new people; he was shy. Sookie giggled a bit as she realized that Mr. Darcy, the man from the story, and Eric Northman had more than a few things in common. Then she blushed as she recalled the crush she'd formed as a teen for Mr. Darcy's character. "Yep, definitely a lot like Eric," she chuckled to herself.

She also liked to read Shakespeare; her Gran had a big book with all of his plays, and she used to like to speak out the parts when she was growing up and felt isolated due to her telepathy. She'd been reading from that book since she was twelve, and even though she still didn't get some of the lines, she got more with each new read. Plus, she loved how the language would flow from her lips, even when she didn't understand everything she was saying.

She also had an extensive vocabulary, both because of her reading and because of her desire to feed what she called her "word muse." She kept lists of words that she didn't know from books just so that she could look them up. Tara had thought this was so funny that she started getting Sookie a word of the day calendar when they were in their teens. Sookie thought about Tara for a moment and shook her head, wishing more than anything that her best friend could find peace.

"Hmmm, best friend," Sookie thought to herself. In that moment she realized that her best friend right then was probably none other than the Sheriff of Area 5—not only the one in her dreams, but also the one who had come to see her the previous evening, first for moral support and then to assure her of his safety. He was the one that held her when she cried, the one that talked to her like an equal, the one that stayed with her until she fell asleep. She shook her head, wondering how the world could become so topsy turvy that Eric Northman—the whole man, not the memory-loss version—would become her closest friend.

Sookie shook herself out of this thought with a smile and resumed her previous train of thought.

She also tried to increase her vocabulary by looking up unknown words that she caught from people's heads. Just the day before, she'd caught Jesus saying "debacle" in his head, and after she had looked it up, she'd actually laughed out loud. She'd discovered that "debacle" was

basically another way to say her new favorite word, “clusterfuck.” Indeed, she sighed, that was what she was in the middle of now, a debacle—a cluster-debacle. She giggled at her new made-up combination.

Before she developed her shields, Sookie had become an excellent student of human behavior; she had had to be in order to survive school without being hauled off in a straightjacket. Sure—the town called her crazy Sookie in their heads or behind her back, but Sookie had learned—by using her common sense—how to survive, despite her telepathy. She’d also learned that even though there were times to shield out the thoughts of those around her, there were also times to use her gift to make sure she wasn’t getting cheated or to check the motives of people she wasn’t sure of.

People might make fun of her old ‘clunker’ car, for example, but it kept running, and she’d picked that car only after she’d picked the brain of the used car salesman, who had been trying to unload several *real* clunkers onto her. She heard from his thoughts that only one car within her price range was worth anything, but he didn’t want to waste it on some stupid blonde. After that, she hadn’t felt guilty at all to read his thoughts in order to figure out what the lowest price he’d accept for her car was.

Sookie was also very aware that her telepathy had made her more familiar with “the ways of the world,” so to speak. She’d seen some dark things in people’s heads. She knew at ten years old that the minister of her church had cheated on his wife more than once and with more than one woman who was sitting in the congregation that day. She knew that the man who often rang up her groceries was in counseling for anger management problems because he’d hit his fourteen-year-old son in the face. She also knew that he’d hit his wife a few times. She had learned about sex, violence, hatred, bigotry, prejudice, resentment, loneliness, bitterness, and

grief from the brains of the people around her—all when she was very young. In all these ways, her telepathy had been a curse.

But she had also gotten to learn about love, tolerance, acceptance, perseverance, courage, and strength from people's brains. She knew that Mrs. Warren, who owned the beauty salon in town, had marched with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s when she was only sixteen. She'd been one of the only white people to march in the rally she'd attended, and she had faced down questions from not only those she'd gone to fight against, but also some of the people that she was fighting with and for. Sookie had learned about courage and strength from her thoughts one day when her Gran was getting a haircut. So her telepathy was also a gift at times.

By far, the hardest thoughts that she had to face were the ones that people let slip or those that they directed at her. She would never forget her fear and helplessness as she had to listen to her uncle's thoughts as he touched her inappropriately. But then she'd used her gift to know where he was and what he was thinking so that she could avoid him from then on, at least until she'd found the courage to tell Gran about it.

Over the years, Sookie had had to learn to ignore the thoughts—or at least *to try* to ignore the thoughts—of the people she loved most in order to keep her sanity intact. She knew that Jason occasionally resented having to stick up for her so much when they were kids and had wanted a “normal” sister at times. But she also knew that most of the time, he thought just the opposite and loved her as she was.

Sookie knew that her mother had preferred Jason and that she felt guilty for loving one child more than the other. Michelle Stackhouse had even blamed her daughter's telepathy on her own inequitable love for her children, and that blame had led her to drink too much. At times, she'd even hated Sookie because of what she called her mental handicap and wished that they'd

stopped at one child. But Sookie also knew that her mom had actively tried to think of things to do for Sookie so that her daughter would *feel* love from her even if Michelle *didn't feel* it herself. The trip to the beach on that winter's day, for example, had been done with Sookie in mind since she had loved digging in the sand and collecting shells. And looking back, Sookie could see that this was the best her mom could do at the time.

Sookie knew that Tara blamed her for Eggs's death. But she also knew that Tara *didn't want* to blame her and fought hard not to.

She knew that the first boy she'd ever kissed thought she was crazy and that it would be easy to grab her boobs. She knew that the second and third boys she'd ever kissed thought basically the same thing. The last guy she'd kissed before Bill, JB Du Rone, had thought that she was sweet and smart, and he'd genuinely liked her, but as they got into heavy petting on one occasion, his thoughts turned to analyzing her body, and hearing that he thought her thighs were too big and her boobs were too small wasn't pleasant, especially when he was groping them at the time. So she'd stopped dating anyone after that and had basically given up on love—until Bill, that is.

So, yes, Sookie was a smart girl, but sometime—right after she'd met Bill—she had left her smarts at the door, and if she was being honest with herself, it was even *before* she took his blood.

She'd been fascinated by his otherness and excited that she couldn't hear Bill's thoughts. She was so enamored by his silence that she'd become immediately infatuated by the handsome, dark-haired vampire. And she'd not consulted her good, old-fashioned common sense at all.

If she had, she would not have gone after Bill and the Rattrays by herself. For goodness sakes, Jason was in Merlotte's at the time, as were Sam and Hoyt and about ten other guys. Even if they didn't want to help a vampire, they would have certainly helped her! Why had she wanted to go after Bill alone? She wondered if vampire glamour might not have some kind of effect on her after all. Either way, it wasn't something that good, old-fashioned common sense would have allowed her to do.

Then, the very next day, she agreed to meet a vampire she'd known for 20 minutes all together alone in a dark, secluded parking lot. Even though she'd thought she could trust Bill, she was showing zero common sense. The thought of that shook her a bit. Then, right after that, she'd had his blood, and then the tie was there to possibly twist around her feelings or at least make them stronger.

Again, her common sense should have told her to be cautious, but between the tie, her thirst for companionship with a man, and the fact that she could not hear Bill in her head, her common sense was lost to her for a good, long time.

Now that her head felt clearer and she knew her thoughts were her own, she was anxious to move forward with the help of her good, old-fashioned common sense and her trusty instincts. She shook her head. If there was one thing that the lack of vampire blood in her body had already shown her, it was that she'd been using the blood as an excuse to avoid making her own choices. And she knew that Gran would tan her hide for that.

It wasn't that she shouldn't be trusting, Sookie thought. It was that she had to remember—especially when dealing with vampires and others she couldn't "hear" well—to use her common sense and instincts to evaluate situations and judge people's characters. Sookie felt

especially proud of this resolution. After all, her problems with vampires were her responsibility.

She was also proud of the fact that she'd gone through with severing her blood tie with Bill and her bond with Eric so that she could find her way to the right answers in her life using just her sense and instincts.

For the first time in a very long time, she felt completely confident in herself; she liked the feeling and resolved to keep hold of it no matter what she decided.

Chapter 33: Sense and Instinct

Sookie stretched out in her lounge chair and started the arduous task of analyzing her feelings. She had been setting aside things to think about later for so long that she now had a very long list to get through. She sighed.

As expected, she was still uncertain about many things regarding the men in her life as well as what she wanted from her relationships with them. She was especially wary of what *they* wanted from *her*. However, she did feel certain that she would be able to rationally meet all of her doubts head-on, and she was actively taking steps to use her dinners with both Bill and Eric to accomplish just that.

What she *hadn't* expected was the intense grief that she'd been feeling for Gran ever since the blood tie and bond had been destroyed. She tried not to be angry with herself, but she was having a hard time with that too. She realized she'd never really dealt with Gran's death—never *felt* the grief she needed to. It was true that she had grieved right after Gran died, a mixture of shock and intense loss, but she realized now that she'd never dealt with those emotions or honored Gran by feeling them as she should have. Instead, the night after Gran's funeral, she had literally run directly to Bill—in a virginal nightgown, no less. She scoffed at her own actions, “What were you thinkin', Sookie Stackhouse?”

She'd heard of many people dealing with grief by replacing it with something else, but Sookie wondered if her grief had been stifled at least in part by Bill's blood. Her major emotion changed from acute grief to absolute love overnight—literally—and though she had been saddened by the loss of Gran after that, she never felt it acutely again, at least not until now.

It was perhaps natural for her to have avoided her grief. From the thoughts of those around her, she knew all about denial. But it did not escape her notice that her grief hit her hard

again only *after* the vampire blood was gone. Now Sookie intended to reason out the reappearance of this strong emotion and to honor Gran by putting her common sense to it.

She *had* felt intense grief immediately after Gran died. “What could have changed that grief so much in just one night?” Sookie asked herself out loud. Well, she’d lost her virginity; that was definitely a change. She had felt like she loved Bill after that night, but she also knew that was a normal reaction. After all, it was common, especially for girls, to fall in love with—or to think that they were in love with—the ones they’d lost their virginity to.

Suddenly, the other major part of her first sexual encounter hit her like a ton of bricks: Bill had bitten her and taken quite a bit of her blood that night.

Could that have strengthened the tie enough to alter her emotions? At one point, she had also thought that she tasted blood when they were kissing—*before* he had actually bitten her. She had thought he might have nicked her tongue with his fang, but what if he’d bitten his own tongue or something? She cringed mentally, wondering if he’d do that. She answered her own question out loud in a whisper, “He may have. At that time he was still out to procure me for the queen, so sneaking more blood into me would have been good strategy.”

Still, she wondered if he would have gone that far, especially since she had just lost Gran. He’d seemed so loving that night, after all. But then she remembered that only about a week before, he’d paid the Rattrays to beat her to near death while he’d stood by watching them do it and waiting for her to reach a point when she’d gratefully take his blood.

She shuddered. She’d also become much more comfortable, even compelled in a way, to tell Bill her secrets after they’d had sex. She’d thought it was a sign of the trust and intimacy they’d had, but she wasn’t sure anymore. Now that she thought about it, Sookie realized that Bill certainly hadn’t opened up to her in the way she’d opened herself to him. There was no real

exchange of thoughts or emotions between them. It had just been *her* opening up. Whenever she'd asked him a question, he'd evaded it or told her that it was a vampire issue and, therefore, not to be spoken of.

She'd told him about Uncle Bartlett, and only two others had ever known about that—Gran and Tara. Looking back, she wondered why she'd spilled her most painful secret to someone she'd known only for a short time. Then Sookie remembered something that Jesus had said the other day. A vampire could use a tie to subtly influence a human's emotions or actions since there was a kind of “glamour within the blood itself.” Sookie had put that idea to the side because she was able to resist regular vampire glamour, but what if she couldn't fully resist the glamour within the blood tie itself?

Sookie felt like she'd been functioning in a room with dim lights, which had kept her from seeing everything clearly. Since the blood tie and bond had been removed, the lights in the room had been turned on full blast.

She wondered briefly if she was just being paranoid about Bill, but common sense Sookie scolded her. Bill *had* manipulated her—at least for a while. He *had* lied to her. He *hadn't* told her the truth even *after* he had said that he loved her. That thought was the most disconcerting of all to Sookie. Still, she felt that she needed to give Bill a chance later that evening. Whatever his motives had been at first and however he may have tried to use his blood, they had been through a lot together, and she would give him an opportunity to come clean. She was also willing to let her feelings occur naturally with him. She knew that her instincts and her common sense—if she listened to them—would help her determine whether she still loved Bill.

Sookie took a deep breath and centered herself. Gran had always taught her that to solve any problem, she needed to consider all the angles and directions. As Sookie saw it, she had five choices, and she planned to work through them logically, giving each one a fair examination with the old common sense.

One—she could re-tie herself to Bill. He was king now and could protect her because of that. And most of all, she was almost certain that he did love her, despite all the deception that had existed between them before.

Two—she could take Eric’s blood, and she could bond or tie herself to him. Though not king, Eric was the strongest vampire she had known with the exceptions of Godric and Russell. And she was certain that he was the smartest. He seemed to love her too, and they were connected through her dreams somehow even without a blood tie or bond.

Three—she could say no to vampires altogether and go for Alcide. He’d given her an offer the afternoon before and something extra to think about that morning. He was a Were, so she couldn’t hear his thoughts as clearly as a human man’s. And he was right; they could have children. That would never be a possibility with a vampire.

Four—she could just be on her own, stay in Bon Temp, and try to get something of a “normal” life back. This was a very tempting possibility, especially since she was certain that Eric was being serious about continuing his protection of her no matter what.

Five—she could run; after all, she’d been prepared to do it the night before if Eric and Bill had been killed. Now that no one had her blood, she could run away clean from Bon Temps. It would be a struggle and she’d have to give up her family and friends for the most part, sort of like she was entering the witness protection program, but she’d be free as long as she stayed away from Supes. She had the check that Eric had made Pam give her in her purse, and that

money—which turned out to be twenty thousand dollars—would pay for her to start a new life. If she were very careful, she might even be able to stay in contact with those she cared for the most by using anonymous email accounts and the like.

Sookie had decided to consider these options one by one until she finally landed on the best one for herself or until she came up with another, better option.

She could already eliminate one of her five options: Alcide. She felt horrible about it, but she knew that Alcide and she wouldn't work out. Sure, there was bad timing between them as there always had been, but ever since the vampire blood had been gone from her system, she realized that the increased libido thing had been at least partially responsible for her attraction to him. Certainly, he was a beautiful man to look at—dark curly hair and brown, soulful eyes to die for, as well as a body to rival even Eric's. He was all muscle—all man—and Sookie couldn't deny that her stomach fluttered when she saw him even now, but it had done a lot more than flutter before the blood had been taken away. She'd almost kissed him several times while she was still in love with Bill, for goodness sakes! And she would never have done that if it weren't for the blood; she knew that now. The physical pull she felt toward him was definitely gone.

Thinking rationally, Sookie knew that Alcide would be a good man for her in a lot of ways. He was strong, and as a Were, he'd have ways to protect her from other Supes. But the fact of the matter was that she *could* hear him to a certain extent, especially when they touched. And he was most certainly *not* over Debbie. No matter what she'd done to him in the past, he loved her, and up until just a few days before, they had been sharing a life that he was happy with.

Sookie Stackhouse was no rebound girl! And, if she was telling herself the truth, Alcide felt like a rebound to her as well. He seemed like he'd be a great guy to help her get over Bill and Eric, but at the end of that, she wondered what would be left between them except hard feelings.

Also, she knew that if she tried to have sex with him, that the emotions and the pictures from his mind would be especially hard to ignore, and the thought of having to keep her shields tightly in place during sex wasn't something that appealed to her. And she knew as sure as she was sitting in Lafayette's back yard that he'd eventually think of Debbie during sex because she was the one Alcide really wanted, whether that was what was best for him or not. She could feel the bile rise in her throat at the thought of having to deal with his thoughts about her all the time.

Plus, Sookie had seen flashes from Alcide's mind of how he thought it was a pity that Sookie had slept with vampires—as if she'd somehow tainted herself. He had decided in his conscious mind that he liked her enough to overlook her past, but the subconscious often fed people's thoughts, and she knew that Alcide would unintentionally—but inevitably—hurt her with his negative thoughts about her past lovers.

He was also so concerned about not passing on the Were gene that he wasn't even thinking that Sookie might be concerned about not passing on the telepathy or the fairy gene. He didn't want a Supe child with Debbie, and she knew from Debbie's thoughts the other day that Debbie had been insecure about that and really wanted kids. Debbie was proud of what she was, and for that, at least, Sookie had tried to like her. Debbie was also head over heels in love with Alcide; she was just really frightened and tended toward self-destruction as a defense mechanism.

Sookie wondered if Alcide would really want kids with her once he seriously thought about it. Their kids would not be “normal” if they inherited from Sookie. And Sookie wasn’t sure if she wanted kids anyway. Given the danger she was constantly in now, she couldn’t imagine bringing kids into the world, and even if she somehow managed to escape and find a “normal” life, she would always fear that the fairies might find her and take her children. And, of course, if she had kids with Alcide, she’d be able to hear all his thoughts about them too, and she knew first hand that people’s thoughts about their children were not always positive.

No—she didn’t see herself as a mother in the foreseeable future. She’d imagined once or twice during the nights that she was holding Eric after making love with him that they could have kids. She saw beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed boys toddling around in the yard as she and Eric looked on, but she knew that this particular fantasy was for naught, so she had put it out of her mind. Still, in all her life, she’d never imagined having *anyone’s* children until those thoughts about Eric. She realized that she didn’t have the same kind of thoughts related to Alcide; simply put, not only did she not want to have children at that time, but also, she didn’t want them with Alcide in particular.

As much as she might like Alcide, something felt off with him; maybe it was the fact that he seemed to hate all vampires just because of what they were. Maybe he did have better reasoning than what he had conveyed, but Sookie didn’t operate in that way. She refused to judge all members of a group by the actions of one—or even most—of the other members of that group. For every Russell, there was a Godric. For every Queen Mab, there was a Claude. For every Cooter, there was an Alcide. For every Rene, there was a Hoyt. For every Marnie, there was a Jesus. For every bad thought, there was a good one. That’s just how she looked at the world. She didn’t see Alcide putting aside his preconceptions enough for her to be comfortable

having a life with him. Heck, even Eric had shown that he could put aside his prejudices and work with other “species” more openly than Alcide had. Eric seemed to be equally guarded with everyone at first, no matter who they were. In that sense, he really was like Mr. Darcy. But he gave trust to everyone that he felt deserved it, no matter what their “species”; his behavior toward Jesus, Lafayette, her brother, Bubba, and even Alcide showed her that.

She sighed. Choosing Alcide would not be the best thing for her. The only question was whether she should tell him that right away. After thinking for a few minutes, she decided not to. Maybe it made her a bad person, but she didn’t want Alcide to have to guard her after she told him. It would be awkward for both of them. She resolved to ask Eric to find someone different for her if she needed to be guarded after she had made her choice on Friday. She’d make sure that Eric paid Alcide’s father’s debt no matter what though. She just hoped that she and Alcide could remain friends after she let him know that was all she wanted.

Chapter 34: Motives

Jesus interrupted Sookie's thoughts by bringing her brunch, which consisted of an omelet, toast, and iced tea. "I thought you might be hungry," he said.

Sookie gestured for him to sit in the folding lawn chair next to her as she took an appreciative sip of tea.

"Thanks so much! Y'all have been spoiling me somethin' fierce!"

Jesus smiled. "I also wanted to tell you that I've found out some more stuff about dreams that might interest you. Nothing about the kind that you're having now—I'm afraid—but something about the dreams caused by vampire blood, which the book I just read from calls 'blood dreams'."

"Blood dreams?" Sookie asked popping a bite in her mouth and making a contented murmur as the egg, cheese, mushrooms, and green onion flavor mixed together.

Jesus laughed, "Glad you like it."

Sookie nodded vigorously, taking another bite and making another "mmm" sound.

"What did you find out?" she asked after finishing her bite.

"So far, I've read a bit about dreams in general. And then I found a really detailed passage about dreams induced by vampire blood in particular that I didn't see when Marnie and I did our initial research. Some of what it said matches what I have already told you, but there's some new stuff too."

She gestured for him to continue as she took another bite. She wanted to know everything that she could before meeting with Bill that night.

Jesus spoke, his voice sounding almost professorial, "A lot of ancient cultures thought that dreams were messages from the gods or predictors of the future. Others thought that they

taught people lessons about life. Nowadays, they are seen as a way to connect with our subconscious thoughts. Whatever the culture, though, there seems to be one commonality—dreams are viewed as extremely important ways to work through problems whether it be by getting direct help from a god or another person, by learning some kind of a lesson, by working through various scenarios until the best one stands out, or by just offering a release valve for the pressures in our lives. Whatever the case, when people have been prevented from entering R.E.M. sleep, which is the stage of sleep during which most people dream, they become distraught and anxiety-filled. In fact, preventing people from sleeping long enough to reach a dream-state was considered the first form of psychological torture.”

Sookie listened intently to Jesus as she finished her toast and took a sip of tea. “What about the vampire dreams?”

“Well, as we already knew, blood dreams will be especially vivid. And they are often very sexual in nature. However, there seem to be two varieties of blood dreams. One type contains a clear element of violence and danger, despite the fact that they will most likely be extremely sexual as well.”

Sookie coughed and turned a bit red.

Jesus continued quickly. “The other type of blood dream *may* be sexual, but it is often not. In this type, there is no real violence, nor is there that element of danger. This second type is much less common.”

“What makes for the differences?”

“Do you remember the other day when I told you that there are different kinds of ties—the common ones that are about the vampire taking some control over the human and the much less common ones where the tie is made more for the human’s sake?”

Sookie nodded.

“Well, it seems that the differences in the nature of the dreams are brought on by the vampire’s motives in making a blood tie more than anything else.”

At this, Sookie stopped eating and sat up straight, her attention totally on Jesus. “So the *dreams* can help me to understand exactly what Bill and Eric want from me!”

“I thought this part would interest you most,” he chuckled a bit.

“Yes,” encouraged Sookie, gesturing with her fork for Jesus to keep talking.

“Well, the *usual* type of blood dream is caused by vampires who are motivated by their own interests. The mixture of lust and/or fear in the dream works not only to enthrall the human but also to keep them securely under the hold of the vampire. The ultimate goal here is for the vampire to gain power over of the human.”

“And the second type—the less common type of blood dream?”

“Well, there have been fewer occurrences of this; it’s probably a one-in-a-thousand type of thing, but in the second type, the motive of the vampire giving the blood is not selfish, but somehow *selfless*. In these cases, the vampire may want to protect the human or may even love the human. Since a vampire’s personality and spirit—his or her entire being—is wrapped up in the blood, it seems that the blood somehow carries the vampire’s essence into the human; this essence will include his or her intentions.”

Jesus paused and then turned more serious, “Sookie, because of the unselfish nature of the second kind of tie, a vampire making one has a very limited influence over the human. The vampire *may* be able to influence dreams that reflect his or her motives—to love or to protect. But there is also some indication that the vampire who creates this kind of tie cannot even

control *when* the human dreams. Thus, these dreams seem to originate mostly from the human and are tinged with only the essence—or the spirit—of the vampire.”

Jesus took a deep breath and continued, “And, Sookie, a vampire who creates a bond with a human cannot control the human’s dreams at all; because the balance of power becomes equal between them, the appearance of a vampire in his or her bonded’s dream seems to be totally by the choice of the human.

Jesus waited for a few moments as he saw Sookie thinking over what he had just said.

When she gestured for him to go on. Jesus summed everything up. “Vampire magic makes a tie when a human takes vampire blood only if it is directly from a vampire and only if the tie is *intended* by the vampire; as I said the other day, this is why V users don’t have ties to a bunch of random vampires. But once the tie is made, it seems to be able to take on a life of its own in the human, at least in relationship with the dreams. And this relationship is directly determined by the vampire’s motives in giving the blood in the first place.”

Sookie sighed, knowing that she was going to become a dream analyst during the next few hours. She looked at her watch; it was almost noon. She would have to leave at about 3:00 to go to the grocery store and to prepare for her 8:00 dinner with Bill that evening. That gave her three hours. And she knew that she could really use Jesus as a sounding board right about then, but she also knew how good Alcide’s ears were.

Sookie gestured for Jesus to come closer so she could whisper to him. “I have a favor to ask. Do you know of a spell or something that would let us talk to each other without anyone being able to hear us?”

Picking up on Sookie's meaning, Jesus looked toward the front of the house. He spoke in a low voice, "I did look at the spells for warding places just a bit, and one of them included a part that would make the people within the ward virtually unseen and unheard by those outside of it."

"Could you do that for us back here?" Sookie asked tentatively. "I really want someone objective to talk over all my dreams with, but I also want to keep them private," she whispered.

"Sure," Jesus said. "It'll be good practice. The spell I'm thinking of looked really easy, in fact—just a circle and a little chanting. It doesn't last too long, only until the people leave the circle, but it should work for us here."

Jesus went inside to get the spell book he needed, and Sookie took the opportunity to take her empty dishes inside, grab another glass of iced tea, and go to the bathroom.

By the time she got back outside with two glasses of iced tea, Jesus had drawn a circle with a substance that looked like salt around their two chairs and had brought over a little table where he'd laid the book. Sookie added the tea to the table and sat back down.

"What now?" she whispered.

"Now I just say these words, and we should be sealed in."

Sookie watched as Jesus softly chanted. She felt what could only be described as an electric current pass through her.

"Did it work?" she asked as he finished.

"I think so," he said.

"Only one way to find out," said Sookie. "Alcide," she yelled at the top of her voice. "Help!"

The two waited and nothing happened.

"Looks like it worked just fine," Sookie said.

Jesus grinned proudly, “Yeah, looks like.”

Then she laughed, “I never thought I’d become the boy who cried wolf.”

Catching the joke, Jesus chuckled. Then he got a twinkle in his eyes. “Now lay down on the couch, Miss Stackhouse, and tell Doctor Velasquez about your dreams,” he said taking on the air of a psychologist. “Start with the very first one you had.”

Sookie laughed again, took a deep breath, and launched in.

Chapter 35: In a Nightmare

[A/N: For the sake of full disclosure, I'll remind you that Sookie's first dream described below actually took place before she took Bill's blood for the first time on the show; I have "revised history" so that the dream occurs after the first blood transfer between them. I hope I don't offend you by changing things. It may be hard to believe after you read this, but I don't hate Bill (I just prefer Eric and Sookie). However, since I'm writing an Eric/Sookie story, and since the dreams are an important part of that, I'm taking some artistic license here to create more drama. Again, this is my interpretation of how the story would go if I were in charge, so when I add to or change something, I'm doing it in the spirit of that. I have changed the tone of the second dream about Bill too—though just a bit—again, to work better with my overall story. I also added another dream about Bill—the fourth one here—that Sookie never had on the show, which, again, I'm doing for the sake of my narrative. Finally, the most recent dream Sookie had on the show, where she told both vampires that she loved them and where they both ended up biting her, annoyed me more than I can even talk about, so I have changed that one too, again just to make the tone of it fit better with my story, but I won't be getting into this last dream until the next chapter.]

When Sookie started talking, she didn't begin where Jesus thought she would. Instead, she said, "You never got to meet my Gran."

Jesus shook his head. "No, I didn't."

"Well, she was amazing—the best person that I have ever met, in fact." Sookie smiled.

"She loved the Beatles and absolutely adored John Lennon. I think that she had a huge crush on

him, actually.” She chuckled, “She didn’t, on the other hand, like Yoko Ono. I think she was a bit jealous of her.”

“Really?” Jesus asked, wondering where Sookie was going with this.

Sookie nodded. “When I was little, I used to get horrible nightmares. Actually, I think that it was my brain just tryin’ to work out all the stuff that I’d picked up from my telepathy that day. I used to have a hard time gettin’ to sleep too sometimes, especially when someone in the house was thinkin’ real hard. And my mom used to stay up late and drink after my dad had fallen asleep for the night.” Her voice got quiet, “I didn’t much like listenin’ to her thoughts when she believed I was asleep and couldn’t ‘hear’ them.” Jesus noticed the forlorn look that had crept onto her face and reached out to pat her hand encouragingly.

She smiled at him in thanks and continued, “I liked stayin’ with Gran most because she didn’t think bad things. At night, she mostly just thought about what she was plannin’ to do the next day. She’d go over recipes in her head, and she’d think about who she was gonna visit or what part of the yard she was gonna work on. And she’d always listen to Beatles records.”

Sookie chuckled, “She’d sing along in her head. She wasn’t even in tune there—just like me! When I did have nightmares at her house, she’d always come into my room and sit with me until I fell asleep. I loved that; it made me feel safe.”

She continued, “My mom would always tell me that my nightmares weren’t real and that I should just ignore them, but they were real to me—very real. On the other hand, Gran used to tell me the same John Lennon quote over and over again—every time I had a nightmare. He once said, ‘Who’s to say that dreams and nightmares aren’t as real as the here and now.’”

Somehow Gran knew that this was what I needed to hear from her; I needed to think of my nightmares as *real* things before I could battle them. I had to figure out what they meant and

where they were comin' from. And now, all I can think about is that quote that Gran used to tell me.”

Finally understanding her point, Jesus nodded and picked up her thought, “Because your dreams and nightmares—the blood dreams—really are *real* in a way.”

Sookie nodded. She sat quietly for a few moments, collecting her thoughts. She knew that once she dove into the dreams, she'd have to face the music, so to speak, but that was the only way she'd ever know the truth about Bill's and Eric's motives regarding her. And she needed to know so that she could figure out if Bill and Eric were telling her the truth now.

Jesus gave her the time she needed to think as he sipped his tea.

After several minutes of silence, she finally spoke, “It's strange. I didn't actually have that many dreams about either Bill or Eric when I had their blood in me. I had four about Bill after I took his, and then after I had Eric's blood, I had three dreams. After I came back from the fairy realm, I had three more blood dreams, but all of those were after I had taken both of their blood again.”

“Hmm,” Jesus looked contemplatively, “That seems to be different than the norm. Vampires usually use their blood to influence humans to dream more often than you did. But then again, the book also said that the concentration involved in creating blood dreams can be taxing, so vampires tend to send them only when they need to solidify their control. Still, according to the book, the dreams are generally sent several times a week.”

“That *is* strange,” Sookie agreed. “I honestly don't know why I didn't dream more often; maybe they didn't send them to me much, or maybe because I'm part fairy, it didn't work as well when they did. The strangest thing to me is that I've dreamed of Eric almost every time I've

been asleep since the blood was *taken away*; I didn't dream of him nearly as often when I had his blood in me."

Jesus looked thoughtful and then offered, "It makes sense that vampire blood affects you to a lesser degree since you are part fairy. That may very well explain why you've had fewer dreams. Or maybe Eric and Bill had reasons for not sending them very often. Of course, after the bond was made between you and Eric—at least according to the book—he *couldn't* have sent you any dreams."

Sookie nodded. "So altogether, Bill's sent seven that I know of—three of them quite recently and in close succession, right before I broke the tie. And I've had three about Eric; well Eric was in the last three too along with Bill, but according to what you said, he couldn't have sent them."

"Nope," Jesus said. "If he was in your dreams *after* you had the bond, you put him there."

"Or—as with the case of the last one before I broke the tie and bond—I *called* him there."

Jesus nodded. "But Eric told you he'd only 'tried' to send *one*, if I'm remembering right."

"Yep," Sookie confirmed, "at least that's what he said."

Jesus asked, "Have you ever felt like Bill or Eric was trying to influence you with their blood while you were awake?"

Sookie thought for a moment. "I know I felt them both trying to glamour me the first time I met them; I could tell because of a little pressure I felt in my head, but I was able to push them both out."

Sookie steeled her resolve. She knew it was time to start telling herself some cold, hard truths now. She continued, “As for *after* I took vampire blood, I think that Bill did influence me, at least to some extent. I told him about my telepathy and about other private things right after I’d taken blood from him. I remember feeling like I needed to tell him—had to trust him—with those things, but I thought at the time that I was just falling in love with him and wanted to share my life with him.”

“Is that what you still think?”

Sookie shook her head, “No, now that all the lights are turned on, so to speak, I realize that there was a kind of force pushing me to tell him things. I didn’t feel that force in my *head* though, so I didn’t recognize it as Bill’s influence at the time.”

Sookie lowered her head and continued, “And there were other times too that I seemed to do things out of character, right after getting doses of Bill’s blood. Forgiving him so quickly for hiding the fact that he made Jessica was out of character, but after I took his blood following the Maenad attack, I forgave him—almost instantly. Havin’ sex with Bill after he nearly drained me dry and after I’d broken up with him was out of character, but he’d just healed me with his blood. Wantin’ to get back together with Bill even after he told me he’d killed Eric was *way* out of character, but I’d just had his blood yet again. And forgiving Bill completely for his deceptions and fallin’ in love with him again even after I’d already fallen in love with Eric were also out of character. But he healed me with his blood after I got shot by the witches.”

Sookie looked at Jesus, tears filling the corners of her eyes. “If he was using his blood to push me to do these things, then he’s been doing it *all along*, and he didn’t stop even after he said he loved me.”

She shook her head as if taking herself out of a fog, “I can’t be 100% sure though. All the things I did could also be explained if I really *did* love him too, couldn’t they?”

“Maybe.” Jesus looked at Sookie with sympathy and gave her a few moments to gather herself. “What about Eric? Did you ever feel him try to influence you?”

Sookie snorted. “Influence me? Sure. He tried to get me to have ‘passionate, primal sex’ with him when I was still engaged to Bill.” Sookie used air quotes to mark Eric’s exact words even as she imitated his voice. “But if you are asking if I ever felt pushed like with Bill, then the answer is no. Never.”

Jesus sighed, “Listen, Sook, I’ll keep looking for more information about fairies and vampires mixing, as well as the blood glamour vampires can use. But for now, let’s just get back to the dreams that you have had. Maybe they can at least tell us something about Bill’s and/or Eric’s motives in making the ties.”

“Okay,” Sookie agreed, taking a big gulp of her iced tea before she started. “I’m actually a little nervous about telling you all this. The dreams get a bit—umm—intimate at times.”

Jesus laughed, “Sookie, I’m sure I saw and experienced stuff that you cannot even imagine during my younger years, so speak freely. I promise that what you say will be between *us*. I won’t even tell Laf that we had this particular conversation.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said gratefully even as she kept her shields up tight in order to avoid glimpses of Jesus’s ‘younger days’. She took a deep breath and launched in. “Okay, the first dream I had about Bill was the night I first took his blood.”

“So it was basically right after it happened?” Jesus clarified.

“Yeah, that same night. I dreamed that I was woken up from my sleep, and when I looked out the window, Bill was standing there looking up at me.”

“Were you scared of him at all?” Jesus asked.

“No,” Sookie answered gauging her words and feelings carefully. “I think I was excited to see him, and I was a—umm—virgin at the time, so I was thinking that he might be there to, you know . . .” she paused as Jesus nodded his head.

“Anyway,” Sookie continued, “I grabbed my robe and went down to the yard where he was, but I didn’t see him at first. I turned around and around, but he wasn’t there. And then, suddenly he was,” Sookie let out an unconscious shudder; Jesus took note but didn’t interrupt.

“And then Bill looked at me like—well—he looked at me like he wanted to have sex,” she blushed, “and I said that I wasn’t expectin’ to have sex with him—at least not *that* soon.”

Jesus nodded for her to continue.

“Well, then he said something like, ‘Who said anything about sex?’, and then his fangs dropped down, and he licked his tongue across them, and then I woke up,” Sookie finished quickly.

“And you were scared then?” Jesus asked.

“Yeah, I was,” Sookie admitted. “Scared, but also—um—aroused, I guess.”

“Well,” Jesus said, “if you want my honest opinion, that sounds like the first kind of dream that I described. It seems to have been about stirring up both lust and fear in you. The fact that he sneaked up on you like that also seems like an important detail to me.”

Sookie nodded, “The second dream I had was nicer though. Not long before I had that dream, I had broken things off with Bill because I’d met three really bad vampires in his home when I’d gone over there to give him the numbers of some contractors I was helping him get in touch with. I had thought he was going to let them bite me!”

“What happened?” Jesus asked, not having heard this story before.

“Well, they sort of surrounded me while Bill just sat off to the side in the shadows, but right as they were about to bite, he stopped them, and said that I was his. After that, one of them offered to let Bill bite this human they had with them, and Bill was gonna do it.” Sookie shuddered at the memory. “It was really creepy that he’d bite the guy right in front of me; he looked like he wanted to resist bitin’ him, but he was still gonna do it. That’s when I heard the guy—his name was Jerry— think about having Hepatitis D, and after I warned Bill, Jerry attacked me. It took all Bill had to make the other vampires leave without questionin’ me more about how I knew about the Hep D. The female vampire that was with them, Diane, was especially nasty, and she said that she and Bill had had some kind of sexual thing in the past. After that, I broke up with him; I was just so unsure about him at that moment.”

“So you’d broken things off with him *before* you had your second dream?”

“Yeah,” Sookie said, looking down. “You think *when* I had the dreams is just as important as *what* I dreamed, don’t you?”

Jesus nodded, “The timing seems a bit too convenient for me, Sook. Knowing that vampires can actually send the dreams, I’m guessing that is just what he did once he knew that you were doubting him.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I didn’t think about it at the time.”

“What happened in the dream?”

“Well, I went to Bill’s house, and I just told him straight up that I was a virgin, and I thought it would be best if we just had sex right then and there so that I could get a good night’s sleep.”

Jesus laughed.

“And so he got up and came over to where I was standin’. He was being really tender with me, and he started kissin’ me on the neck. I told him I didn’t want to be bitten, and he just smiled at me and continued kissing me, but then I heard his fangs click down, and then I woke up. Actually, I think my cat might have woken me.”

Jesus sat silently for a minute. “What did you feel like when you woke up?”

“Well, to be honest, my hand was kind of . . .” Sookie paused, “down there.” She gestured shyly toward her crotch. “I was definitely—um—enjoyin’ myself,” Sookie continued as she became flushed.

“But you heard his fangs click down *after* you told him not to bite?”

“Yeah, but I woke up so fast after that, that I didn’t really have a chance to know if he was gonna bite; a vampire’s fangs always come down during sex,” Sookie said confidently, but then she stopped herself. “Wait, that’s not true. Eric’s never came down when we—um—did it.” Sookie shook her head in confusion, “Maybe because he’s older or somethin’? Bill’s fangs always came down during sex.” Sookie’s blush, by this time, had become permanent.

“What about the third dream you had about him?”

Sookie launched in, having just talked about this one with Dream Eric the day before. “I dreamed it was morning time, and Bill had made me a huge breakfast. Once I sat down with him to start eatin’, I realized that the sunlight was pouring in and asked him how he could possibly be out in the daytime. After that, he started to burn, and then I woke up right after.”

“Well, that definitely sounds disturbing.”

“It was,” Sookie agreed, “but there was not really lust involved in that dream, mostly just fear that he was gonna burn and then sadness when he did.”

“Okay,” Jesus said, “what about dream number four?”

Sookie brought her legs up to her chest in a gesture designed to comfort herself. Jesus couldn't help but notice her action.

He reached out his hand to her knee, "It's okay, Sook. I'm the only one here."

Sookie nodded. "It's just that this one wasn't good. I had it the night before I left for Dallas with Bill. We were going because I had been hired by Eric to find a vampire, who turned out to be Eric's maker, Godric. Anyway, it was right after the Maenad attack on me when Bill had given me some of his blood."

Jesus spoke up, "Yeah, you mentioned that before. Laf told me about the Maenad too. I just didn't know that she'd attacked you like that."

"Yeah, she was an evil bitch," Sookie said without charity. "She attacked me after Bill and I had had a fight, and Bill took me to Fangtasia for help. Eric arranged for a strange little doctor to come, and she was able to get the poison out. Then Bill gave me his blood to finish the healin'."

Jesus nodded, "Is that when you found Laf in the basement?"

Sookie nodded, "Yeah, the next day after I'd woken up. He had been hurt pretty bad by then," Sookie said quietly. "Ginger, their human employee, had shot him when he tried to get away, and I'm pretty sure the vampires had been feedin' on him."

Jesus sighed, "I'm so glad he lived through that. It's kind of hard for me to reconcile the vampire that did that to the Eric I know now."

Sookie nodded and sighed deeply, "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Jesus brightened a bit, "Lafayette says that he has moved on and that now he thinks of Eric as just—and I quote—'a bad mother fucker that he's got to avoid getting on the bad side of.' But he actually called him 'not so bad' yesterday. Of course, he was probably high on his Bubba

euphoria then, but it's something. Anyway, from what I've heard before, V dealers are usually killed immediately when they are found."

"Yeah," Sookie said solemnly. "I know that the rules are different for Supes, but I still don't like to think of anyone going through what Lafayette did."

Jesus nodded again, "Me neither."

Sookie sighed and continued, "Like I said, the dream happened right after that night at Fangtasia; it was the day before we were leaving for Dallas, and I could tell that Bill was upset that I'd agreed to help Eric in exchange for Lafayette's freedom."

"What happened?"

"Well, a couple of weeks before I had that dream, those three vampires that had been at Bill's that I told you about had been killed. Some vampire haters burned down the place where they were staying in the day time, and four bodies were found. I had been scared that Bill had died with them, but he turned out to be okay. Anyway, the dream started with me trapped with those vampires. And Bill was sitting off to one side, just like he'd been the night I actually met them."

Jesus encouraged Sookie to continue by squeezing her knee since he could sense her reluctance.

"I begged Bill to stop them in my dream, but he didn't, and then Diane bit me while Bill just watched. He finally got up and came over, taking me from them. He told me that I was *his* and that he loved me. He said he'd always do what was best for me, and then he started to undress me even though the three other vampires were still there." Sookie sobbed a bit. "The worst part was that I kissed him back as soon as he started kissing me, and he was about to—um—have sex with me with them there, and I wasn't stoppin' him." Sookie looked away,

ashamed. “But then in the dream, it seemed like the house had caught on fire, and Bill told me that the only way we’d be able to survive was if I listened to him. And then I woke up.”

Jesus again squeezed her knee and gave her a minute to collect herself. “Sookie, I think it’s pretty clear that your dreams of Bill fall into the first category, except for maybe the third one, which didn’t have an element of sex in it. Still, that one seems to have elicited fear in you, fear for Bill’s safety, so it still fits the pattern.”

Jesus continued, “But this all makes sense because you told us that he was sent at first to secure you for the queen; his blood was given to you while his motives were still to take you to her, so it makes sense that the dreams would be tainted with that. Maybe his motives changed as he fell in love with you.”

Sookie sobbed a bit and shook her head, “After the Maenad attack and after the poison was out, he gave me his blood again, so the last dream of him happened right after that. He had already told me he loved me by then.”

“Oh,” was all Jesus could say for a few minutes. Then he offered, “Maybe the tie takes on the characteristics of the first transfer of blood and cannot change?”

“Maybe,” Sookie said softly.

Chapter 36: In a Dream

Sookie and Jesus sat in silence for a couple of minutes, contemplating Sookie's dreams about Bill.

"What about your dreams about Eric?" Jesus finally asked.

Sookie brightened a bit, her blush returning. "Well, Eric tricked me into drinking his blood in Dallas by getting me to suck bullets out of his chest."

"Yuck," Jesus exclaimed, though his eyes twinkled because of the little spark he saw in Sookie's eyes.

"And I dreamed about him that same night—or morning actually."

"What was it like?"

"Well, it was odd. We mostly just talked."

"Talked?"

"Yeah. We were in bed—um—naked, and we had obviously just done *it* when the dream started, but we were talking. The dream actually started in the middle of a conversation we were having about me becoming a vampire. I thought I'd make a terrible one, and he thought I'd be perfect."

"Did you feel threatened by him at all—like he was planning on turning you into a vampire?"

Sookie made sure for a second and then shook her head, "No, he was kind of being playful about the whole thing; we both were. He said that I could trade the sun for the moon and stars, but I told him 'no' and that I wanted them all."

Sookie and Jesus both smiled at that.

“He called me greedy and smiled at me. He said that he loved that about me. And all the while he was just holding and kissing my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he’d done it a thousand times before. It felt nice; it was comfortable. Then, he said that I’d make a good vampire because I was ruthless when it came to the people I loved, and after that, I heard Lorena.”

“Who’s that?”

“She *was* Bill’s bitch of a maker; she showed up a few times in the dream, reminding me about Bill. She was kind of toying with me, I think; she made me feel guilty for being with Eric in my dream when I should have been with Bill.”

“What else happened?”

“Well, Lorena went away for a while, and Eric and I started talking again. Basically, I told him that he was a big faker with his cold-hearted act, and that he *did* feel.” Sookie backed up a bit, “He had told me earlier—not in the dream, but in real life—that he didn’t know what love was, that he didn’t feel love, not even for his maker Godric.”

Jesus nodded.

“And so after I told him he was a faker, I said that he was deep and that he *did* feel—that there *was* love in him.”

“What did he say?” Jesus asked, engrossed in the story.

“He said that he felt love only for me. Then he started to kiss me,” Sookie blushed.

Jesus chuckled a bit, “Nice kiss, huh?”

Sookie nodded and finished the last gulp of her tea. “I thought a kiss couldn’t get better than it was in that dream. In fact, I thought it was so good *because* it was in a dream—that there

was *no way* one could really be that good, but that was before I . . . ,” she paused, fanning herself with her hand.

“Before you kissed him for real?” Jesus supplied.

“Yeah—in his office the night before he faced Russell.” Her voice grew a little quiet, “He was sayin’ goodbye to me with that kiss; he thought that he was gonna meet his true death. It felt like he was tryin’ to tell me a million things in that kiss—to share a thousand years in it. I tried to fight against it at first—since I was still sorta with Bill—but I couldn’t. That kiss felt like supernova goin’ off in my mouth, destroyin’ everything before it and makin’ something brand new. The crazy thing is that every kiss with him has felt like that. The feeling of kissing him is almost too much to take in at times.” She’d unconsciously drawn up her hand to rest over the empty spot inside of her that she’d begun associating with Eric.

Jesus smiled at her. “That’s what it’s *supposed* to feel like, you know. I spent a lot of my late teens and twenties accepting and exploring my sexuality. I had quite a few partners in that time and several serious relationships, but no one has ever stirred me up like Laf. It’s like you said—the first time I kissed him, there was a kind of combustion, but there was also amazing synergy there. And it just gets better and better.”

“Yeah, synergy is a good word for it.” Sookie reached out her hand and took Jesus’s. “I’m thankful more and more every day that you and Lala found each other. You’re a good man, Jesus—a really good man.”

“Lafayette is the best thing I’ve ever had in my life. I feel like I can be my *whole* self with him and that he loves me for that whole self.”

Tears started to form in Sookie's eyes. "That's exactly what I'm lookin' for—someone to love my whole self like that, not just love me for my blood or my telepathy—and not in spite of them either."

Jesus nodded. "Well—in that case—we need to get back to talking about your dreams so that you can figure things out." He prompted, "You had just started kissing Eric in your first dream with him."

Sookie picked up the story, "Yeah, he started kissin' me and movin' against me. And then Lorena came back saying that I didn't care about Bill, but Eric interrupted her, and told me, 'This is the beginning'," Sookie used air quotes around the last part. "Then we kept kissin' even as I heard Lorena laughing in the background; I felt so guilty once I woke up in bed next to Bill—because a really big part of me wanted it to be Eric there."

Jesus took a minute before saying, "Sookie, your answer to this next question is important, so really think about it. Did you feel any kind of threat at all when Eric said, 'This is the beginning'?"

Sookie took her time before answering, "No. It felt more like a promise, like he was saying that it was the start of something good. He was looking right into my eyes when he said it too."

"What did you see there—in his eyes?"

"Lust, for sure," Sookie answered quickly, "but something else too. I thought I was imagining it at the time, but there was love there."

Jesus nodded and then asked, "You never took Lorena's blood, right?"

"Yuck! No!" Sookie cried out. "Gross!"

“Then she must have been the part of your subconscious that wanted to cling to your love for Bill. Either that, or she may have been Bill’s blood trying to interfere with your dream about Eric. I’m not sure.”

Sookie looked meditatively at Jesus. “You think that my dream about Eric was the second type, don’t you?”

“What do you think?” Jesus asked, not wanting to unduly influence Sookie.

“Well, we talked a lot, more than I ever did in the dreams with Bill,” she smiled and bit her lip as she remembered the dream. “And we were actin’ like we were a normal couple, kind of flirtin’ and squabblin’ in bed. It was nice. It was only at the end that we—um—you know, started to have sex, and even that was nice, you know romantic.”

Jesus turned serious, “Did he bite you at all?”

“No,” Sookie answered immediately. “His fangs didn’t drop the entire time.”

He nodded. “What about the second dream?”

“Well it happened the day we all returned from Dallas. It started with me walkin’ down the hallway of our hotel in Dallas. I noticed Eric’s door was open, and I went in. His face and chest were covered with blood; he’d been cryin’.”

“Do you know why he would have been crying?” Jesus asked.

Sookie nodded. “Yeah, that happened before the dream. His maker had just basically committed suicide. Godric had surrendered himself to the Fellowship of the Sun to be sacrificed. Eric, of course, didn’t know this, and mounted a rescue, usin’ me to get information from the Newlins. Then I was kidnapped, and Godric saved me from this guy that was gonna rape me.”

“What?” Jesus exclaimed.

“Yeah, Godric was just in time though, and then Eric showed up. Godric ordered us to leave, but they captured us, and Eric agreed to sacrifice himself if Godric and I could go free.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Sookie said again. “But then, Jason shot Steve Newlin with a paint ball gun.”

Jesus looked startled and then couldn’t hold in a laugh.

Sookie smiled too. “I know it sounds weird, but at least the paint ball *did* stun him for a minute. And then all the Dallas vampires and Bill came in, and then Godric, who was super powerful, was there. After that, I got the silver chains off of Eric, and Eric was gonna kill Newlin until Godric stopped him. We all eventually left and went back to Godric’s nest, but then a bomb went off, and that’s when Eric tricked me into drinkin’ his blood—oh, he’d saved my life from the bomb too. He sort of shielded me.”

Jesus nodded, trying hard to keep caught up with the story.

“And then I had that first dream, like I said, and then we all had a meeting with Nan Flanagan, and Godric—did I mention he was a sheriff?”

Jesus shook his head starting to get a little confused.

“Anyway, Nan came and basically stripped Godric of his title. I thought Eric was gonna kill her, but then Godric just seemed to give up, and he told Nan to make Isabel, his second in command, into the new sheriff.”

Sookie paused giving herself time to catch her breath and giving Jesus time to get caught up with the story. Finally she asked, “With me so far?”

Jesus nodded. “I think so.”

“So that’s when Godric said he was goin’ to the roof, and both Eric and I just knew. He was goin’ up there to kill himself, to meet the sun. Bill tried to confront Eric about givin’ me his

blood, and he even hit Eric, but Eric was so . . . ,” Sookie paused. “He seemed so lost. And then he left to go to the roof, and when I finally got up there too, I found Eric literally begging for his maker to stay with him.”

Sookie looked closely at Jesus. “Please don’t tell anyone about that part; I don’t think even Pam knows.”

Jesus nodded, “I promise Sookie.”

Sookie continued. “Thanks. Well, Eric had to leave the roof because Godric ordered him to since it was so close to dawn by then. As Eric walked past me, I grabbed for his hand. And I told him I’d stay with Godric until it was over, and I did.”

Sookie let out a sigh, the emotion of that morning coming back to her.

“So the dream happened after that?” Jesus prompted after a minute.

“Yeah, it started as if I was just comin’ back down from the roof after Godric died. In real life, I went to my room, the one I was sharin’ with Bill, but in the dream when I passed Eric’s room, his door was open, like I said.”

“And he’d been crying,” Jesus prompted.

“Yeah,” Sookie said quietly. “I went in to him, and he was all slumped over, bloody tears staining his cheeks and his chest. He looked broken. He acknowledged that Godric was gone, and his voice sounded so weak that I couldn’t help but reach out for him. I kissed both his cheeks even as he looked up at me in surprise over what I was doin’. I wanted to kiss his mouth too, but I was pullin’ away when his hand stopped me. He pulled me back to him, and we started to kiss. It was tender, almost like we were both grievin’—him for Godric and me for my Gran.” Sookie stopped for a minute and realized that in that moment with Eric, she’d actually felt the full force of her grief for Gran as much as he’d been feeling anguish over Godric. She shook her

head as she realized that that was the closest she'd come to really *sharing* her grief with anyone, and it was all in a dream with Eric.

She continued, "I can't really describe it, except to say that it felt like I was right where I should be, getting and giving comfort."

Jesus nodded.

"Then Eric laid me down on the bed, and he was over me, looking down, his eyes asking permission for somethin'. Then his fangs came down, and I was startled."

"Scared?" Jesus asked.

"No, just a little startled. I reached up and traced his fangs with my hand actually. And that's when I realized what kind of permission Eric's eyes had been asking for. I lowered my hand and tilted my head to the side, letting him know that it was okay to bite me, that I wanted him to. And then I woke up."

"So you basically asked him to bite you?"

"No, he asked—well, sort of. And I gave permission."

"But you never felt scared?"

"No, I was mostly just wanting to comfort him, but I have to admit that I wanted him—um—sexually too, especially after I felt his fangs. There was something extremely intimate in that act."

"They work as erogenous zones for vampires," Jesus supplied.

Sookie's blush came back in full force. "Good to know," she managed.

Jesus finished up his tea and sat back in his chair, waiting for Sookie to speak. The events of the night during which he and Lafayette removed the blood bond were at the edge of his thoughts, but the glamour kept them from spilling out.

Sookie was finally the one to speak. “Despite the fangs, I am pretty sure that was the second kind of dream too. I felt attracted to Eric, for sure, but I didn’t feel any inkling of fear at all. I simply wanted to be there for him, and strangely enough, I felt like he was there for me too.”

Jesus nodded, “What about the third dream?”

Sookie responded, “Actually that one happened lots later. It was after Bill had been kidnapped and he was back again. It was also after he nearly drained me accidentally in the back of that van. He had given me his blood again, but strangely enough, I didn’t dream of him. I dreamt of Eric.”

“What happened right before you had that dream?”

“Well, Eric had come to visit me the night before, but Bill basically cut him off. I was still mad at Eric for some stuff he’d said in Jackson.”

“But you’d forgiven Bill for almost killing you?” Jesus said in disbelief.

Sookie looked contemplatively at her bare feet. “Yeah, I don’t know why, but I was a lot angrier at Eric.”

“It could have been Bill influencing you with his blood,” Jesus posited.

Sookie nodded, almost ashamed. “I think it was. He gave me *a lot* in the hospital, and like I said before, we had—uh—already had sex again. We were even kind of back together at that point. But I didn’t dream of Bill then, so I guess that’s somethin’.”

“Yeah,” Jesus agreed.

“Wait!” Sookie exclaimed, sitting up straight. “I just thought of somethin’. After I had Eric’s blood in Dallas I didn’t dream about Bill again until after I’d come back from the fairy realm. Maybe my tie with Eric was somehow keepin’ Bill from sending me dreams.”

“Maybe,” Jesus agreed. “But then again, you had dreams with Bill in them once you’d had *both* of their blood again, so Eric’s blood in you obviously couldn’t counteract Bill’s completely.”

“You’re right,” Sookie said meditatively. “But maybe everything changed once Eric and I formed a bond. Eric said that bonds give vampires even less power to manipulate or influence a human, so maybe since I had a tie with only Bill at that point, he was able to send me dreams again.”

“I don’t know, Sook,” Jesus said, “but it’s all something to think about.”

Sookie nodded and then picked up her previous train of thought. “So Eric came by the night before the third dream and seemed to be sayin’ goodbye. He was resigned to the fact that Russell was probably gonna kill him. The dream happened later that night—no it was probably the next day when I finally fell asleep.”

She continued, “In the dream, I was sleeping on Jason’s couch, and I woke up. Eric was there, sittin’ on the other side of the couch, actually up on the arm of the couch. I told him that I knew it was all just a dream, and he said that I might as well enjoy it. I asked him if his blood would ever wear off so I’d quit dreaming of him.”

“What did he say?” Jesus asked.

“He said that it wasn’t just the blood; he said that I also had feelings for him.”

“What then?”

“Well, I pretended to be disgusted, and then he kissed me. He told me that he knew I liked it when he kissed me. He also said that I knew that I couldn’t trust Bill. He said that it wasn’t his blood talkin’ then; it was my own survival instinct.” To herself, Sookie added, “Fairy

Sookie equals common sense Sookie?” Then she continued out loud, “Then he seemed to be goin’ in for a bite, and I woke up as Jason came in.”

“And it turned out that Bill *was* keeping something from you?”

“Yeah, the fact that he’d been sent by the queen to procure me by makin’ me fall in love with him and the fact that he had hired the Rattrays to beat me up so that he could give me his blood.”

“Did the dream make you scared?”

“Well, I think I was nervous about Bill keeping somethin’ from me. I knew he was, but I couldn’t figure out how to make him tell me. But I wasn’t scared of Eric.”

“Even when he went to bite you?”

“No,” Sookie shook her head, “not even then. The thing is, I wanted him to—at least in the dream.” She blushed deeply.

Jesus nodded. “You said you had three dreams after you got back from the fairy world?”

“Yeah,” Sookie confirmed, “I had exchanged blood with Eric by then, and we’d formed our bond.”

“So Eric would *not* have been able to send you a dream, Sookie.”

She nodded, “I had the dream right after I’d taken blood from Bill again—after I was shot by one of the witches. But both Eric and Bill were in that dream.”

“Both,” Lafayette said, looking for confirmation.

“I know! It’s confusing, right? If Bill sent the dream, then why would it have Eric in it. It even started off with *only* Eric.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I woke up on my couch, and I was wearing this scanty red robe with matching underwear. I looked like a naughty version of a lady in the 1950s,” Sookie said, embarrassed again. “I heard a knock at the door, and it was Eric. He swept right into the room and kissed me, despite the fact that it was daylight. He was kissing me while I was lying on the dining room table, and then all of a sudden Bill was there too! I ended up telling them that I loved them both, and the funny thing was that they could both hear *my* thoughts and each other’s. I sat them down and told them that I wanted them both—that I was tired of being good little Sookie and that I was gonna have them both.”

“You did what?”

“I know—out of character, right? Well, I said they’d have to share me, and they didn’t agree to that initially, but when I took off the robe, they both started kissing on me, and then they both bit me.”

“Wow, that sounds pretty hot actually,” Jesus said.

“It was—except for the fact that I’d never want to have a threesome like that in real life—but there was one thing that was a bit off about the whole dream.”

“What was that?”

“It was the way they looked about the whole thing, I think. Bill looked like he’d won somethin’—like he’d just won a game or somethin’—when I proposed that I have them both. And Eric, well, he just looked hurt—like he’d just lost somethin’. And even though he kissed me and bit me right along with Bill, his touches were more about longing rather than just pleasure, at least I think that’s a good way to describe them.”

“Was there any fear?”

“No—at least not with Eric.”

“And Bill?”

“I’m not sure. It was just the way he was looking sorta smug that bugged me, made me nervous.”

Jesus sighed, “To be honest, Sook, I think Bill sent you the dream, but you imported Eric into it yourself. That explains the lust and the anxiety in the part about Bill. It also explains the hurt in Eric’s part. From what I gather, any member of a bonded pair would be heart-broken to ‘share’ like that.”

“Yeah,” Sookie said tearing up again. “And that kinda explains the second dream after I got back too.”

“What happened in that one?”

“I dreamed it the morning before I came over here. It was one of the reasons why I wanted the vampire blood gone so much.”

Noticing a tear winding its way down Sookie’s face, Jesus squeezed her knee again.

“This one upset you a lot, didn’t it?”

Sookie nodded, and Jesus gave her a minute.

Finally, Sookie spoke up, mustering her courage. “The dream really freaked me out, more so every time I think about it. It started out with me sunbathin’. And then Bill was there, and he started kissin’ me on my face and then my chest. He had pulled down my top when I noticed that Eric was also there.”

“Did he join in this time?”

“No.” Sookie continued sadly, “He just stood there, lookin’ at the sun. He called me ‘min kära.’ That means ‘my love’ in Swedish. He told me that he was being punished for takin’ my blood with Russell without my permission and for drainin’ my fairy godmother.”

Sookie was sobbing in earnest now, her words coming between cries. “He just stood there as Bill continued to—have sex with me. And I knew Eric was sufferin’, but I didn’t do anything. I had two flippin’ orgasms for gosh sakes! And Eric had to stand there miserable. He said it was his punishment to have to stand by while I loved someone else, while I loved Bill.”

Jesus moved next to Sookie on the lounge chair, holding her to him as she continued to sob.

“And Bill told Eric that I would never love him now that he had his memories back, and I tried to argue, but Bill was *in* me at this point, and I just let him keep goin’, and you should have seen Eric’s face. It broke my heart, but I wasn’t able to do anything but lie there and let Bill . . . ,” her voice trailed off as she broke down in her sobs.

After a few minutes, her crying subsided a bit. “Bill bit me in the dream—a lot—and when I opened my eyes after we’d finished having sex, Eric was gone. He’d left me.”

Jesus asked astutely, “Are you afraid of that, Sookie? Afraid that he’s going to leave you?”

“*My* Eric, the one that lived in my house for almost a week—the one that I fell in love with and the one that loved me—*has* already left me,” Sookie sobbed.

Jesus placed his arm tightly around her shoulders. “No, Sookie,” he said with a strange mixture of sternness and caring. “I don’t believe that any more than you do. Just let yourself think about it for a minute. He’s still there; maybe he’s got a bit of the old Eric too—okay maybe more than a bit—but the person who has come here for the last few nights to be with you is not someone who has left you. I may not know everything about vampires, Sookie, but I do happen to know what a man looks like when he loves you. And Sookie, Eric *does* love you.”

Sookie nodded, drying her tears with her hands, “I know. I know he does. I’m just being dramatic, I think. The dream I just told you about has been eating at me.

“What about it made you so upset?”

“It was the look on Bill’s face—that triumphant look again. That look wasn’t about love and it wasn’t about me; it was about him—him winnin’.” She paused, “But most of all, I’m bothered by the look on Eric’s face—the hurt. And I didn’t do anything to stop that hurt!”

Jesus asked carefully, “Sookie, do you love him—Eric?”

Mustering up her courage again, Sookie nodded. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I love him. I love him more every day. I love him more now than I did even when his blood was in me, more even than when he had amnesia. I feel like I have been spendin’ so much time with him, between the dreams and him bein’ here. But all I can think about when he’s not here is that I want him here.”

“Sounds like love to me,” Jesus smiled.

“Yeah,” Sookie admitted. After a minute, she added, “And, of course, you know about the third dream, the one when I called Eric to me?”

“And he came to you,” Jesus said.

“Yes he did,” Sookie said confidently. “He always does.”

The two were silent for a few minutes.

Sookie finally spoke up, her voice edged with fervor, “Did you know that his first visit last night was because he just needed to be with me—for moral support—because he was nervous about somethin’? And then when that was over, he came back to tell me everything was fine. And then he’s been basically telling me bedtime stories for the last two nights and has been stayin’ with me until I fall asleep, just like Gran used to do when I’d had a nightmare. Did you

know that he hired Alcide and Bubba because he knew it was the only way I wouldn't say no to protection?"

Jesus laughed quietly, "I could guess that."

Sookie continued, her tears now falling for a different reason, "Have you ever noticed that he bends over a little when he talks to someone shorter than him—which, let's be honest, is almost everyone? And he hates it when I cry. Dream Eric wanted to know my favorite flower, but the funny thing is that real Eric had already planted some in my yard even though he didn't know. And he visited my Gran's grave when I wasn't here, and he took her daisies, which were her favorites. He cares about things like that! He brought me water when he settled me into bed the other night, and I didn't even have to ask. He just knew that I'd want it! And every time I think about him, I feel that emptiness in me, like I lost somethin' profound when I got rid of our bond." Sookie touched the spot near her heart where she felt the void after the bond was gone. She hadn't drawn breath during her last few sentences and had to pause.

"You love him," Jesus said again.

Sookie laughed and buried her head into her hands. "I am in love with Eric Northman," she said as if testing the words. "Blood tie or no blood tie, bond or no bond, I know that I love Eric."

"What about Bill?" Jesus asked after a minute or two.

Sookie looked up and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think so. I don't know for sure though. I have a plan for the next two nights. Tonight is Bill's turn, and Wednesday is Eric's. I am plannin' to ask them questions and see if I can get *honest* answers. I've asked Eric a lot of things already, to be honest, but there are more questions I want to ask. But mostly, I need to see how Bill will answer, and I need to know if I still feel any love for him at all."

“What did you feel about him when you saw him the other night?”

Sookie shook her head, “I don’t know. He seemed concerned for me, and he told me about all the dangers I was facin’.”

“That’s why Eric gave you protection, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did Bill offer to do something like that?”

Sookie shook her head, “No, he offered me his blood again.”

“Oh.”

“I know. The worst part is that he had me so scared that I was thinkin’ about givin’ in for a second or two.” Sookie threw up her hands. “I don’t know what to think about Bill. But I’m so grateful to you for sittin’ here and listenin’ to me about all these dreams, Jesus. Now that I’ve talked about them, I can see that there has always been a difference between my dreams about Eric and my dreams about Bill. That means that the kinds of ties that they formed with me were also different. I think that it’s safe to say that Bill’s motivations were selfish when he gave me his blood, and Eric’s were not—even in Dallas. Before I took Eric’s blood, my dreams about Bill were usually at least a little frightening, even disturbing at times. With Eric, the dreams have always been more about a relationship between us. They’ve been about me caring for him or him tryin’ to warn me about Bill. Even in Eric’s daydream that he told me about—he came to me when he could feel that I was upset.”

Jesus nodded. “And I think the last three dreams before we did the severing spell are also meaningful. Bill, for lack of a better word, seems a bit *untrustworthy*; as you said, he seems to be treating the fact that he got you in the dreams like some kind of game prize.”

Sookie continued, “And Eric seems destroyed by the fact that I have chosen—or may choose—Bill.”

She looked at Jesus for a moment and then said, “I have to ask one more thing about the spell you did to break the tie and the bond. As you know, when I took Eric’s blood the last time, I’m almost certain that we formed a bond, but I want your opinion to be sure. He still had amnesia at the time, and I’d just taken off the silver chains I’d used to keep him from going into the sun during Antonia’s spell. He was weak, and I wanted to give him my blood because I loved him and didn’t want to see him suffering like that. Right after he took mine, he broke the skin in his own hand and offered me his blood. He said that if I drank, we’d be one, and I drank.”

Jesus said solemnly, “Sookie, that sounds like a bond—for sure.”

Sookie nodded in agreement. “I just need to make sure one last time that the spell you and Lafayette did worked on that kind of bond just like it would a regular tie.”

Jesus nodded. “Yes. As I said before, any kind of tie, even a bond, would be removed by the spell. The spell we did literally burns out all vampire blood; that’s why there’s so much pain—so all vampire blood is removed no matter why or how it got there.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said.

They were silent for a while as Sookie took in the implications of their discussion. She now knew that most of Eric’s appearances in her dreams had not been instigated by him. She also knew that because Eric had made the second kind of tie with her and then a bond, he had been unable to manipulate her all this time; he’d been telling her the truth. She also knew that the last three dreams had originated from Bill, and Eric’s presence in them had been caused by her somehow.

“Thanks,” Sookie said to Jesus. She got up and stretched. Looking down at her cell phone, Sookie saw that it was 2:43. “I need to take off, Jesus,” Sookie said. “I can’t tell you how much it’s meant that I could stay here the last few days. It’s made things a lot easier on me. And your letting me talk to you about these dreams and doing all this research has helped more than you’ll ever know.”

Jesus returned, “It was no problem, Sook. We’d have you here all the time, if you wanted. You are Lafayette’s family, and that makes you mine.”

Sookie reached out and gave him a huge hug.

“Okay, what do we do to break the privacy spell thing?” she asked.

“Just walk outside of the circle.”

Sookie apprehensively walked beyond the circle; the only indication of magic was the little jolt of electricity she felt. She turned to see that Jesus was no longer there. She looked around, confused about where he was until he also walked out of the circle.

Sookie gasped, impressed by Jesus’s spell. “Well that thing works like a charm,” she whispered, going into the house. Her bag was already basically packed from the night before, so she was ready to go after giving Jesus a final hug and thanks.

Chapter 37: Preparations

Sookie walked out of the front door and saw Alcide where she'd left him on the boys' porch. The only difference was that there were now several dirty dishes and cups on the table.

"I'm ready to head to my house now, Alcide, but I have to stop by the grocery store first," she said as she started gathering up the dishes.

Alcide helped her take the dishes to the kitchen. "Sure, Sook. I'll just follow you to the store and then home. I'll be stayin' until Bubba shows up. And I'll take up position outside since that's what Northman said you'd want," he said with an air of frustration.

Sookie responded with a bright Merlotte's smile, "That'd be great, Alcide.

The Were added, "Anyway, that's probably better 'cause I can smell stuff comin' sooner if I'm outdoors."

"Okay," Sookie said, actually quite relieved that Alcide would be outside. "The porch is really a lot nicer now, so we can get you settled there."

Sookie unlocked her car and threw her tote bag into the backseat. "Oh, and I'll be stoppin' at the bank too."

Alcide waved in understanding as he strode over to his truck and jumped in.

Sookie got into her car. Just as she turned on her ignition, Jesus came out of the house with both bouquets of Sookie's flowers, their stems now wrapped in moist paper towels. Sookie rolled down her window, thankful for Jesus's thoughtfulness.

"Thanks, Jesus. I would have missed these," she said looking at the daisies.

Sookie stopped by the bank first and deposited the check from Pam. That got her a few stares and quite a few negative thoughts from the teller, Marilyn, but Sookie decided to ignore

them. After all, just because the teller thought that Sookie had been in the “loony bin” for the last year and that now that she was back, she’d started prostituting herself to vampires—again—didn’t bother Sookie like it may have in the past. Sookie didn’t need Marilyn’s approval, and one look into the bank teller’s head told Sookie that she liked to fabricate and spread rumors to overcompensate for her own loveless marriage.

Much more painful was the stray thought that escaped Alcide’s brain when she added two four-packs of TruBlood to her rapidly-filling cart once they were at the grocery store. The picture in Alcide’s mind of Eric making love to her in the woods tinged with all of Alcide’s judgmental impressions and disappointments was not pleasant. And then the mental mantra he repeated—“Sookie is a good girl; as soon as we’re together, I can put a stop to all this vamp shit”—throughout her time in the produce section was not much better. By the time they’d reached the cereal aisle, he’d calmed down, and there were flashes of thoughts about Sookie making someone—hopefully him—a great wife. The rapidly changing mood of Alcide’s thoughts directed toward her almost gave her whiplash, and Sookie was even more sure that they could never be a couple.

When she was in the meat department, picking out steaks, Alcide’s thoughts zigzagged from wondering if she was picking them out with him in mind as a dinner companion to trying to figure out how she liked her steak cooked to scoffing mentally that she probably liked it rare because she enjoyed vamp blood so damned much. At this point, Sookie picked up the image from Alcide’s brain of Bill feeding her his blood after she’d been shot. Interested to see exactly what had happened, she stopped walking for a second and turned, putting her hand on Alcide’s arm as if to get his attention. The image of Bill trying to feed her his blood sharpened. She saw that she wouldn’t drink it at first and registered Alcide’s panic that she was probably going to

die. Then she watched Bill bite into his wrist another time and basically force feed the blood into her mouth, shut her lips tightly, and then massage her throat to make sure the blood went down. Sookie saw that she had never stopped breathing and wondered why she'd not taken the blood at first. Then, inside his memory, she heard Alcide ask, "Isn't that enough, Compton?" even as Bill kept feeding her. She also saw that when Bill turned back to Alcide, the concern that had been in his eyes had turned to the same expression she'd seen in her dreams, a look like he'd just won something. Alcide had thought that Bill was just excited that he'd managed to get Sookie to take the blood, but Sookie recognized the look of conquest that had been disturbing her thoughts so much.

Sookie removed her hand from Alcide's arm and said, "Hey, Alcide. I'd like to have a nice lunch on Friday to thank you for all your help with everything, but I'm not sure what kind of steaks you like best." Sookie felt bad for covering up the fact that she'd been reading Alcide's thoughts by distracting him, but she was also past the point in her life when she refused to acknowledge the usefulness of her telepathy.

She felt even worse when she heard from Alcide's mind that he thought Sookie was going to use their lunch to tell him that she was ready for them to be together as a couple. She let him pick out two large steaks, which he placed in the cart while giving her a meaningful look. The expression on his face mirrored his thoughts perfectly: Alcide imagined eating these steaks as an appetizer and then having sex with her as his dessert. Sookie grabbed three more steaks after picking up Alcide's thoughts and decided that she'd be inviting Jason, Lafayette and Jesus too.

Were or no Were, Alcide was a strong broadcaster, especially when he was thinking directly of her or at her. And without the vampire blood and the rise in her libido to tinge her

reactions to him, she was catching his thoughts more and more. She resolved once again to get Eric to replace Alcide when she saw Eric on Wednesday and even thought about calling him to come by after Bill left tonight to talk to him about it. But she stopped that last thought. She had committed to giving Bill a *real* chance tonight. She was certain that her love for Eric had not been just about the blood. Now she needed to know about Bill so that she'd never regret any decisions she would make. If she still loved both vampires, she'd have to reassess once again, but she owed Bill a chance.

As she paid at the checkout stand, she realized she'd never spent so much money at the store before, but she was also out of most everything at home, and a lot of her staples either had been thrown out when the house was sold or had expired, so she needed a lot of basic items. At that moment, she was very grateful for Pam's check even though she'd felt bad for taking it. That money, along with the money Eric had given her for Dallas, gave her a nice little nest egg, and now that she was going back to work part time, she knew she wouldn't have to use it all up just to pay bills. She might even be able to pay Eric back for some of the improvements he'd made to her home, and she resolved to talk to him about the house that he'd basically just given her the next time they spoke. Sookie couldn't believe that she'd gone this long without mentioning it to him, especially given the high-handedness in the way he'd done it.

At that thought, she made a mental note that she'd have to change all the utilities back over to her name now that she actually owned the house again. She wondered if Eric had to do anything to cancel his before she started hers, and she made another mental note to add that to her list of questions for him.

As Sookie pulled up into her newly redone driveway, she smiled. Gran would have been so happy by the way everything looked. She chuckled to herself as she parked. Gran had

immediately taken to the genteel Southern charms of Bill, but Sookie knew that she would have been put off by Eric at first. She couldn't imagine Eric *doing genteel* at all. But Sookie also felt that Gran would have soon fallen for Eric's particular brand of charm. If nothing else, Eric had proven that he could wear down the stubbornness of a Stackhouse woman.

Sookie decided to put a lock on her thoughts about Eric for the time being even though that was difficult given the fact that she had memories of both their physical and emotional intimacies in almost every room of her house now. Plus, he'd been the one to restore her home, and she was still finding little touches of his care with it here and there—like the pretty light fixture with dragonflies on it that had replaced the bare bulb that had been on the back porch. She'd seen that touch as Alcide had helped her bring in the groceries.

After giving her a hand, Alcide spent a few minutes checking the inside of the house before going outside and literally sniffing around. Sookie busied herself in the kitchen putting everything away and taking the opportunity to reorganize things a bit. Most of her dishes had been destroyed during the Maryann clusterfuck/debacle and had been replaced by beautiful ceramic turquoise-patterned dishes. She smiled to herself, thinking that they were an unusual choice for a farmhouse, but the interesting and unique patterns on the dishes were exactly to her taste, and she loved the color. “High-handed vampire,” she smiled to herself before she once again resolved *not* to think about Eric Northman.

She looked out the window and noticed Alcide's clothes stacked up on the hood of his truck. She figured he must have shifted, so she lowered her shields to make sure there were no threats. She picked up only Alcide's mind and breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that he was probably just scouting around. She then resolved to keep her eyes inside until he came back and was fully re-dressed.

Sookie unpacked her overnight bag and added the dirty clothing to the rest of her laundry. She noticed that it included some jeans and a flannel shirt worn by Eric; she allowed herself a moment—but *only* a moment—to breathe in Eric’s scent from the shirt. She smiled; he *did* smell like the sea on a cold day, she thought. Then she took everything to the new, top-of-the-line washer and dryer that sat on her now-fully-finished and screened-in back porch and started a load. “High-handed,” she muttered again, under her breath. Once again, she mentally chastised herself. “You’re *not* supposed to think about him,” she whispered to herself in a sing-song voice.

Just as she was starting some light dusting in her living room, she heard a knock at the back door and saw through the screen that it was Alcide, fully clothed thankfully. “Come on in!” she yelled, dust rag in hand.

Alcide came in looking a bit sad. “What’s wrong, Alcide? Everything okay outside?”

“Umm, yeah. There isn’t any sign of trouble, but I did want to ask you something, Sookie.”

“Shoot,” Sookie said sitting down on the couch and gesturing for Alcide to sit in the seat opposite her.

“It’s just that I smelled Debbie’s scent outside and inside your kitchen too. It’s not fresh, so don’t worry about that,” he added quickly. “Do you know why it’d be here?”

“Well,” Sookie explained carefully. “Debbie came here last week. It was actually the day after I’d been shot. She wanted to be my friend, I think.”

“Oh,” Alcide said. “She would have smelled me here then.”

Sensing that Alcide needed a minute, Sookie waited before she spoke, “You know that I don’t trust Debbie—on account of the stuff last year—but I listened to her thoughts, and they

told me that she loved you and wanted to do right by you. They also showed that she was real scared of disappointin' you," Sookie said quietly.

Alcide nodded, taking in the new knowledge.

"And then she actually helped me out by distracting Marnie while I snuck into the Moon Goddess Emporium and talked to Eric, who'd been cursed by the witch to be some kind of zombie-type killer for her."

Alcide looked up surprised, "The witch was able to do that?"

"Yep, but I was able to find out from Eric that the plan was to kill Bill, so I stopped that at least when I zapped Eric with my magic fingers and broke Marnie's spell."

"Debbie helped with all that?"

"Not all of it, but she did help at the Moon Goddess, and then she drove me to the Festival of Tolerance where the rest of it happened. For what it's worth—and I know that she made a lot of mistakes right after that, so it might not be worth much—I think she was really tryin' to be a better person for you."

"It's worth somethin', Sook," Alcide said quietly, "but not enough anymore."

Sookie nodded as Alcide got back up. "Well, I'll be headin' back outside to keep watch."

Sookie smiled, "Feel free to take a glass of water, or there's fresh iced tea in the fridge."

Alcide went to the kitchen and grabbed some water before heading out to the front porch. Sookie looked at the clock and saw that it was 5:00. She went over her mental list of things to do before Bill arrived. She needed to prepare the casserole she was making for herself and put it into the oven, she needed to finish straightening the house, she needed to take a shower and get dressed, and she needed to write out all the questions she wanted to ask Bill so that she wouldn't forget anything.

If Bill thought he was in for a night of romance, he had another thing coming, Sookie thought to herself. She envisioned the meetings she was having with Bill and Eric for the next two nights as just that—meetings, business meetings even. And she was either going to get the honest answers she needed to *all* the questions that had been collecting in her mind since she'd met Bill and Eric, or she was resolved to cut them both out of her life, whether she loved them or not.

She put away the dusting supplies and surveyed the living room. It was good enough. She transferred the newly washed clothes to the dryer and then started another load. "I'll wash the sheets tomorrow and then hang them out to dry," she thought with a smile as she remembered the analogy that Eric had made regarding sheets dried outside.

Then she quickly put together her casserole before sitting down at the table to write out the list of questions she wanted to ask Bill.

At a little after 5:30, right after sunset, the front doorbell rang.

She listened with her telepathy, and heard that Alcide was at the door with a void. She smiled when she saw it was Bubba.

"Hey, Sook, I'm taking off now," Alcide said, sniffing into the house. "I'll be here bright and early," he continued after a pause.

Sookie barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes as Alcide thought about lingering long enough to try to get a dinner invitation from her. She put on her brightest Merlotte's smile and said, "Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow, Alcide." Then she invited Bubba in to show him around and tell him where he could find some TruBlood.

“Oh, thank you kindly, Miss Sookie,” Bubba said, “but I don’t like to drink that stuff if I can help it, and there looks to be some good huntin’ in your woods, so I’ll just do that for my dinner.”

Sookie cringed slightly at what Bubba might mean by good hunting, but then smiled at him warmly. She had to admit that Eric was a bit of a genius to send him. Sookie found Bubba’s manner to be both innocent and sweet. Perhaps he was no longer the king of Rock and Roll, but Sookie found that she liked Bubba just as he was—with, perhaps, the exception of the cat thing.

Bubba broke her thoughts, “Mister Eric said you’d be gettin’ a visit tonight from King Bill from across the cemetery.”

Sookie nodded, “That’s right, Bubba.”

“Mister Eric also told me that I needed to stay within hearin’ distance in case you needed me, so I’ll wait to go huntin’ until after he leaves.” Bubba paused, “He also said that I shouldn’t get upset if King Bill gives you a hug or a kiss later.”

“Why’d he say that?” Sookie asked, a smile on her face at Bubba’s serious expression.

“Well, since you are Mister Eric’s girl, he knew that I might get upset if someone else was huggin’ on you or kissin’ you, so he told me that it was okay and that you and King Bill are friends too. He said that I could only do somethin’ to get King Bill away from you if you asked for help.”

Sookie smiled at Bubba, “That’s just fine, Bubba. And I appreciate you waitin’ for your dinner like that.”

Bubba beamed.

Sookie couldn't help herself as she gave Bubba a little peck on the cheek and said, "Thank you so much Bubba."

With an even bigger grin on his face, Bubba excused himself to go outside.

As Sookie walked back to the dining room table, she wondered if Eric had told Bubba that she was *his* girl or if Bubba had just assumed it. She felt equal parts frustration and amusement if Eric had been the one to tell that to Bubba, but she put thoughts of Eric aside once again in order to focus on finishing her list of questions for Bill.

She'd also decided during her talk with Bubba to get herself a new kitten in the next week or so if she decided to stay in Bon Temps. She missed Tina a lot and had loved the comfort that a furry companion could give. She'd just have to make sure that Bubba knew her new kitten was off limits, but she trusted Eric could help her with that.

At 6:30, Sookie was surprised when thoughts from a human brain—Bobby Burnham's brain—filtered into her head. As the doorbell rang, Bobby's thoughts were a mixture of fear—that Bubba might actually hurt him—and frustration—that he'd once again been sent to this 'God-forsaken town in the middle of nowhere' to drop off something for the 'country-bumpkin' blonde.

As Sookie opened the door, she had to make a Herculean effort to stifle her laughter. Bubba had a hold of Bobby by the collar of his very expensive suit, and the unpleasant little man looked about ready to pee his pants.

Bobby spoke slowly, "Bubba, Mr. Northman sent me with a message for Miss Stackhouse. Didn't he call you and let you know I was coming?"

Bubba returned, "Sure, Mister Eric called just a little while ago, but I don't like the way you talked about Miss Sookie when you asked if she was inside. Miss Sookie is Mister Eric's girl, and you need to talk about her with respect. My momma always told me that a man without respect for a *real lady* ain't much of a man at all!" His grip got even tighter, and he raised Bobby up so that the diminutive man had to stand on his tiptoes.

Sookie couldn't hold in a slight giggle but quickly regained her composure, "It's okay, Bubba. I'm sure Mr. Burnham here didn't mean nothin' by it, right Bobby?"

"Nothing at all, Miss." Bobby managed to sound almost respectful even though his thoughts betrayed him. If Sookie hadn't already also picked up from his thoughts that Bobby was completely devoted to Eric, she would have told him to immediately hire a new day person, but the little weasel worked hard to make sure that all of Eric's requests were met in a timely fashion even if he did sometimes have to work a twenty-hour day to do it. Sookie decided that she could stomach the man if Eric could.

Reluctantly, Bubba let go of Bobby but stayed close to him. Hoping to appease Bubba, Bobby bowed to Sookie. "Miss Stackhouse, Mr. Northman has tasked me with giving you this." He handed her a manila envelope.

"Thanks, Bobby," Sookie said politely. Her Gran had taught her manners, after all.

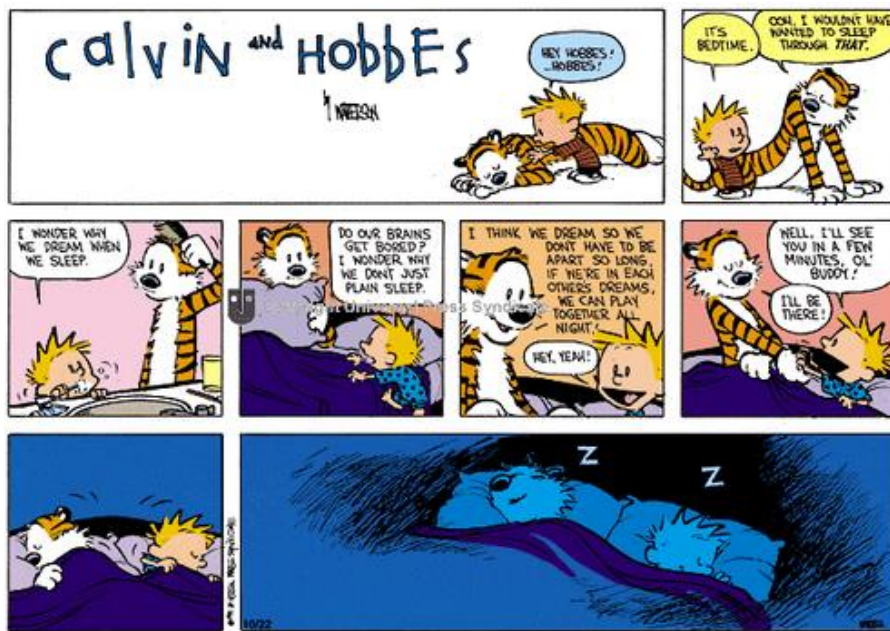
Bobby bowed again and said, "Unless you require something more of me, Miss Stackhouse, I'll be going." His eyes shifted back towards where Bubba was still standing menacingly.

Sookie couldn't help herself, "Bubba, would you make sure that Bobby gets safely to his car?" She smiled even as she heard Bobby say a very clear, 'Oh shit,' in his brain. Sookie thought, "Gran may have raised me with manners, but she also didn't raise no pushover!"

After a cursory goodbye to Bobby and a genuine smile for Bubba, Sookie went back inside, anxious to see what Eric had sent her. She opened the envelope and was surprised when a laminated Calvin and Hobbes comic strip fell out into her hands. She looked inside the envelope again to make sure there was no note and then read the comic.

In the strip, Calvin was waking up Hobbes so that they could go to bed. Sookie laughed. Hobbes, the cat, was commenting on the fact that he'd been woken up just to go to sleep again. What really got her attention though was what Hobbes said in the middle of the strip; the words had been circled in red pen: "I think we dream so we don't have to be apart so long. If we're in each other's dreams, we can play together all night."

A tear formed in the corner of Sookie's eye, and she sniffed deeply so that she wouldn't cry. Immediately, however, she laughed when she noticed that a fang—also drawn



with the red pen—had been added to Hobbes's mouth at the end of the strip. The words, "Sweet dreams," had been added in Eric's idiosyncratic handwriting.

"Well fuck!" Sookie exclaimed out loud. "You make it impossible *not* to think about you, you high-handed vampire!" She stomped into the kitchen and put the comic up on the

refrigerator with two magnets. She smiled widely at it, wiped a tear from her eye, and stomped upstairs; she was thinking *only* of Eric at that point.

By 7:00, Sookie was showered and dressed. She had decided to dress casually, not wanting to look like she'd gussied herself up for a date or anything. She'd put on a pair of tan cargo pants that she'd picked up the summer before—actually that'd be two summers before—from Old Navy. They were comfortable and casual, which were her main concerns. She also threw on a V-neck navy T-shirt that was cut so that it was form-fitting but still pretty conservative. Since it was a long-sleeved T-shirt, she had opted not to grab a hoodie despite the fact that the house had cooled down because she'd had the windows open until about 6:00. She finished off her outfit with white socks and practical tennis shoes and looked in the mirror. “Nope, you definitely don't look like you're havin' a date,” she said out loud to herself, pleased by the overall effect of her outfit.

She grabbed the list of questions she'd been working on and went to the kitchen to check on everything. For a while, she busied herself with setting the table and adding last-minute questions to her list.

At 7:45, Sookie took the casserole out of the oven so that it could cool. It had been a recipe of Gran's, and the smell of it couldn't help but remind Sookie of her. Sookie also took out a bottle of TruBlood and put it next to her new microwave.

Under her breath, she muttered, “Bill Compton and Eric Northman, I invite you both into my house.” For some reason, she didn't want for Bill to know that she was the owner of her home again, and she felt better knowing that Eric could get in. As an afterthought, she said, “Oh, and Pam Ravenscroft can come in too.”

She took the vase that she'd filled with the red roses Bill had brought her and put it on the buffet next to the dining room table. Then she took Eric's daisies as well as her list of questions and walked them into her living room, where she knew she'd be having the main part of her conversation with Bill. She put the vase and the list on the coffee table. She was sticking to her resolution to give Bill a fair shot and to see if she still felt love for him, but she was also glad that she'd have the daisies there. She laughed at herself, knowing that she needed Eric's moral support—even if it was just in the form of his daisies—tonight, just as he'd needed hers the night before.

She took a deep breath. She was ready.

(Source of comic: http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_17st4nKDUw1qzdjmk.png)

Chapter 38: Half-Truths

At 8:00 sharp, Sookie heard her new doorbell ring. She took a deep breath, inhaling the comforting smell of her Gran's recipe, and went to the door. Bill stood outside in a sharp-looking suit, carrying yet another bouquet of red roses. She could see Bubba at the tree line watching over her. Sookie smiled and stepped to the side, silently beckoning Bill in without a spoken invitation.

Bill entered her home and gave her a bright smile even as his eyes betrayed some disappointment at Sookie's attire. As he gave her the roses, he also gave her a light kiss on the cheek. Sookie felt a slight wave of discomfort at the act, but recovered well by putting on her Merlotte's smile.

"Thanks so much, Bill," Sookie said, smelling the flowers. "They really are beautiful." She walked into the dining room and grabbed the vase that was already there, taking it into the kitchen. "Let me just add these to the ones you brought me the other day." After she'd finished this task, Sookie returned the vase, now completely full of the elegant flowers, to the buffet.

Bill stood a bit awkwardly in the dining room until Sookie gestured for him to sit. She'd decided that they would sit across from each other, but she wanted to see his face clearly, so she'd set the places at the sides of the table, rather than at the head and foot. Bill's place was set with one of her Gran's crystal goblets, which had miraculously survived the Maenad's wrath.

"I thought that we could have a nice dinner and then talk for a while in the living room," Sookie said in a business-like manner, immediately trying to take control of the tone for the evening.

Bill looked a little surprised but recovered quickly, "That sounds lovely, darling."

For some reason, Bill's calling her that bothered Sookie. She didn't think he'd really earned it, but she put that thought to the side as she popped a TruBlood into the microwave and served herself a plate of casserole.

She had deliberately planned her evenings with the vampires to include a meal for both of them. If she was going to have a relationship with either one, she wanted to make sure they could do something domestic like share a meal together. The few times that she'd eaten around Bill before, she had noticed what she thought might have been slight discomfort, and she wanted to talk about that with him.

After the microwave went off, she shook the bottle to even out the temperature of the blood and went to the dining room. She put her plate down and then poured his blood into the goblet before sitting down opposite him.

She smiled at him. "I really appreciate you comin' and the flowers, Bill, and I'm glad to be spendin' some time with you this evening, but I feel it's only right to let you know that I *don't* look at this like a date. I see it as a meetin'. I have a lot of questions that I want to ask so that I can make the best choices for myself."

Bill returned her smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's fine, Sookie. After Friday, we will have all the time in the world to reconnect on a romantic level. I want only for you to make an informed decision, as I know you will."

Sookie noticed that his Southern drawl was especially strong at the moment. She had the feeling that he was hyping up the genteel Southern gentlemen thing a bit. Still, she managed to speak warmly, "Well, let's eat and then get to it, shall we?"

Bill nodded and took a drink of his blood. He watched as Sookie took a bite and made an "mmm" sound. He recoiled a bit.

Bill hid his discomfort pretty well, but Sookie noticed a little flicker of aversion pull down his lip for a brief moment. She decided to begin her questioning with the food issue.

“So,” she said after she finished her bite, “does it bother vampires to watch humans eat like this?”

Bill looked a bit uncomfortable and then answered, “To tell you the truth, it does bother us, I’m afraid. As you know, vampires have a strong sense of smell, and most odors from human foods are unappetizing to me.”

Sookie sighed, but still smiled at Bill politely. “Then I take it, you’d prefer *not* to be around humans as they eat?”

“Yes,” he continued uneasily, “it reminds me of my human life too, and the thought of not being able to share human meals with you—as I might want to—also saddens me.”

Sookie nodded, accepting the fact that with Bill, at least, mealtime was not going to be a usual domestic activity. But she shook off her disappointment and thought of other things they might do together that “normal” couples did, like watching the news or going to movies.

Bill was working hard to keep his expression even as Sookie finished her meal. The concoction in front of her was particularly unappealing to his senses as he smelled a mix of ingredients. He knew that once Sookie and he were together, he’d be able to convince her to schedule her meals before he rose or while he was attending to his kingly duties.

However, he did revel in the fact that Sookie had gone to the trouble of setting the dining room table elegantly for them. She’d obviously wanted to make what she called their “meeting” as special as possible. He doubted that Northman would be receiving the same attentions. Smiling, he took in the crystal goblet in front of him and the overflowing vase of red roses he’d

been responsible for. They were obviously on display. One little meal was certainly worth it if he could get Sookie to recognize her affection for him.

As soon as she had finished eating, Sookie rose and took her plate into the kitchen.

“Would you care for another TruBlood?” she asked Bill from the kitchen.

“Thank you. That would be lovely,” he said as he rose.

“Why don’t you get settled in the living room,” she said, as she popped a bottle of blood into the microwave.

As Bill walked out of the dining room, Sookie took a moment to take a deep breath. She covered the casserole with tin fowl; she’d wait for it to cool completely before putting it into the refrigerator. Then she refilled her glass of iced tea and went into the dining room to retrieve Bill’s goblet. She rinsed it out and dried it, before pouring in the new bottle. She took another deep breath and moved to join Bill.

Sookie sat down on the couch opposite to the one Bill had chosen. She started with some words she’d been thinking over in her mind for the last several hours, “Bill, I know that our relationship started off wrong because of the queen and because she ordered you to pursue me, and I also know that you really couldn’t avoid doing what she asked you to do.”

Bill nodded, very encouraged that Sookie recognized his position. He had hoped that she’d understand that the queen had been responsible for the negative things that had happened between them. He smiled at her.

Sookie continued, “I want to take tonight to really talk about everything I have had questions about since we met. I know that sometimes, especially right after we first met, you had

to be more secretive than you might have wanted to be. So I want tonight to be a kind of starting over point for us, okay?"

Bill nodded again, "Nothing would please me more than that, darling," he said. Bill was certain now that Sookie had been using her time without the ties to clear away the confusion of the Eric situation. And he was ready to begin afresh without the shadow of the queen looming over them, just as Sookie seemed to be.

"Okay then," Sookie said, reaching out for the little composition book she'd put on the table and opening it to the list she had written.

Bill seemed surprised she had her questions written out, so Sookie said, "I wanted to make sure I remembered everything."

Bill nodded, "I will answer anything you ask, my dear."

Sookie smiled in thanks and then began with a question she already knew the answer to. She wanted to give Bill the chance to literally rewrite history by being completely honest. "I want to start by asking you about blood ties. When you first gave me your blood, you told me some things a tie would do, but I think that you had to hold back a bit, so I just wanted to make sure I have all the information just in case I decide to tie myself to a vampire again."

Bill shifted a bit in his seat and then responded, "Well, I told you most of it that night after you first took my blood. When a human takes blood directly from a vampire, the blood has the power to heal the human of wounds. It also makes a human's senses more keen, as you experienced."

Sookie nodded and gestured for Bill to continue.

"And it enables the vampire to track the human. And, as I told you, it increases the libido," Bill stopped.

Sookie waited for him to go on. “Anything else?”

Bill shook his head, “No, that about covers it.”

“Didn’t the blood tie help you to know that I was in trouble when Rene attacked me?”

“Oh yes,” Bill added hurriedly, “if enough blood is exchanged, then the vampire can feel the human’s stronger emotions, like fear, anger, and love.”

“And after I was tricked by Eric in Dallas, you told me that I might start feeling attracted to him, so the blood makes someone not only have a stronger libido but also be more attracted to the specific vampire that gave the blood, right?” Sookie was trying to hide her disconcertment over the fact that Bill was still being less than forthright.

“Yes, to some extent. It might make the human feel things that weren’t there before, as it did with you and Eric. I know you hated him before he tricked you, and after you took his blood, you,” he paused, “seemed to soften toward him a bit.”

Sookie didn’t bother correcting Bill’s supposition that she had hated Eric even though she now knew that she had not.

“So the blood can create *totally new* feelings that weren’t there before?”

Sookie noticed that Bill’s eyes shifted slightly to the side before settling back onto her. She’d seen this look before from Bill. More significantly, she’d seen it from other people whose words were the opposite of their thoughts. In that moment, she knew that Bill was about to lie to her. He said, “Yes.”

Sookie nodded, schooling her expression so that her disappointment was not revealed. She knew from what Jesus had said that vampire blood could amplify but *not* create feelings. She was certain that Bill was trying to mislead her to think that all her feelings for Eric were a

product of the blood only, whereas he was trying to make her overlook the possibility that all her feelings for him might be because of the blood too—at least if that same logic were applied.

Sookie went on with her questions since Bill was unwilling to offer up the information voluntarily, “What about dreams? Can vampire blood make a human dream about the vampire?”

Bill hesitated, his eyes involuntarily making a trek to the side again, “Well, the blood *can* make a human prone to having dreams, I’m afraid. Those dreams are often sexual in nature. They might also contain disturbing images that reflect the human’s subconscious fears of vampires and death.” Bill stopped for a moment, obviously contemplating his words carefully, “If you have dreams about a vampire you love—like about me—then that shows the subconscious connection of the human to the vampire. Having dreams about a vampire you *dislike* indicates that the vampire is trying to manipulate the human into feeling some affection.”

Sookie almost scoffed at Bill’s flawed logic and obvious attempts to make her accept that she must love Bill and hate Eric. However, she was able to maintain a placid expression due to all the practice she’d gotten hiding her telepathy. She was most unsettled by the fact that she would have certainly believed Bill if she still had his blood in her. She wondered how many times she’d taken him at his word when he was misleading her.

She asked, “Did you ever try to use your blood to influence me?”

His eye twitching like a beacon, Bill answered quickly, “Of course not, darling. I realized right away how special you are to me.”

“You mean *after* the Rattrays attacked me?” Sookie asked quietly.

“Yes,” Bill said, the shame real in his voice, “I am ashamed of arranging that. I did not really know you then, and I was just following orders. Once I knew you could not be glamoured, I had to tie you to me somehow. At the time, I was simply doing my duty for my queen.”

Sookie nodded, remembering an early conversation she'd had with Bill about glamouring. "So you lied to me the night I asked if you'd ever tried to glamour me and you said no?"

"Yes," Bill admitted. "I had tried to glamour you twice before then: the first time I met you and the second night I saw you when you sat down with me at my table at Merlotte's and took my hands."

"Why'd you lie?" Sookie asked, careful to keep her voice calm and steady.

"There were two reasons. First, I was under orders from the queen. And second, I had already begun to care for you, even then, and I didn't want to disappoint you." Another eye twitch.

Sookie decided to give Bill one more chance to come clean. She asked him directly, "So you *never* tried to influence me with your blood?"

Yet another twitch. "No," Bill shook his head. "As soon as I tasted you that evening, I knew that you were very special."

"Okay," Sookie said as she took in what Bill had said and *how* he'd said it. Stalling so that she could think for a minute, she took a drink of her tea and used her good, old-fashioned common sense. He was trying to mislead her. She knew he had influenced her at least a couple of times, starting right after he'd given her his blood for the first time. As she lay on the ground after the Rattrays had beaten her, her face smeared with his blood and her own and her body newly healed, she'd told him about her telepathy, one of her most closely guarded secrets. She had looked up at Bill that night and had felt compelled to trust him with everything about herself after taking his blood. Before that, she'd been attracted to him, especially his silence, but she'd also been put off by his manner after she'd saved him from the Rattrays.

“Hey,” she said, thinking of a new question, “did you pay the Rattrays to attack you that first night?”

Bill’s eyes shifted as he said, “No.”

Seeing that he was lying yet again, Sookie decided to change the topic before she lost the ability to control her expression. “Okay, I wanted to ask you about Lorena now, if that’s okay.”

Bill looked down and then nodded.

“When you called me in Jackson to break up with me and tell me to stay away, you said you’d just slept with her. Was that true?”

“Yes,” Bill said, looking her straight in the eye.

Sookie was glad Bill was at least telling the truth about that. “And did you mean what you said about sex with a vampire being better?”

Still being forthright, Bill responded. “No, I was saying those things to try to keep you away. I had had sex with Lorena in a fit of anger, but I didn’t love her. I loved you. She wanted to kill you, and I wanted to keep you safe, so I lied to protect you. I felt disgusted with myself for having slept with her and felt unworthy of you.”

Sookie nodded as she recognized he was telling her the truth. She asked, “After she was dead, were you sorry at all?”

Bill hesitated and contemplated his response, but still seemed to answer truthfully, “The bond between maker and child is strong, Sookie. And I did feel the breaking of our bond when you killed her, so there was a moment when I experienced her loss intensely—even as I was suffering from the torture she’d been executing on me. However, the sense of loss was immediately replaced by relief—relief that I was free from her at last.” He continued, obvious sincerity shining from his eyes, “I never said thank you for saving my life that day. You saved

me from Lorena's torture and, more importantly, from her influence forever. I am only ashamed that I almost killed you for your pains."

In that moment, Sookie saw the vampire she'd once fallen in love with. She reached out and patted his hand. "I've forgiven you for that, Bill. You were not yourself." Sookie gave Bill a minute and thought about the words she'd just spoken. She *had* forgiven Bill for nearly draining her in the back of the van, and she felt certain that had been an accident. Yet she couldn't help but to contrast Bill's loss of control to Eric's keeping his control when she fed him her blood after he'd been burned so badly by the sun. Perhaps, Eric was able to be more disciplined because he was so much older. Or perhaps, he'd been able to recognize that it was her and that he didn't want to hurt her.

She turned her line of questioning again. "Eric told me that he asked you to keep him informed about what the police had found out about the murders after we went to Fangtasia for the first time. He also said he asked you to inform him if there were more murders. Why didn't you tell him about Gran dyin'? And why didn't you tell me he was lookin' into things too?" Sookie knew she was taking a risk in asking these questions. She had learned of this information from Dream Eric only, but she felt certain that it was true, just as his memories had been.

Bill looked down at his hands, a mixture of frustration and remorse in his manner. "I am sorry how things progressed regarding the Rene situation, Sookie," he answered truthfully. "I knew that Eric wanted you for himself, and I did not want that for you. I told him only what the police initially knew about the murders. I thought that between Sam and myself, we could keep the killer from getting to you, but I did not anticipate his getting to your grandmother. For that, I will be forever sorry."

Sookie nodded, her eyes burning a bit as tears threatened to fall.

Bill continued, “And after your grandmother’s death, things happened very fast with the tribunal and Jessica. I was still hoping to protect you from the killer, as well as to keep you away from Eric. I did what was best, but I’m afraid, it put you in danger.”

Sookie looked directly at Bill and asked quietly, “Did you want to keep me away from Eric because you loved me or because you had orders from the queen?”

Bill’s eyes shifted, “Because I loved you, Sookie.”

She nodded and sighed, a sign that Bill mistakenly took as her acceptance of his explanation.

Finally, Sookie began her last line of questioning, which in many ways was the most important to her. “Bill, I need to know exactly *when* you first started lovin’ me.”

Bill shifted a bit before answering truthfully, “It was the night I killed Longshadow. He attacked you, and I acted on pure instinct to make sure you were not harmed.”

Sookie nodded, cataloging their time together in her mind. He’d taken her virginity without loving her first; they’d had sex on his grave without him loving her first. These were hard pills for her to swallow. Until Longshadow’s death—at least—Bill’s endgame would have always been to take her to the queen. What she had thought was the foundation of their love for each other was being chipped away in her mind.

“Would’ve you still taken me to the queen after that?” she asked quietly.

Bill nodded, “I would have had to, Sookie, but I was already planning to set certain conditions, like that only she and I could feed from you.”

Not able to hide her disgust, Sookie bristled visibly at this.

Bill quickly added, “Later, after the Maenad incident, I resolved not to take you to the queen at all, Sookie. I *was* going to go to Vermont with you, marry you, and then run away with you to get away from her and keep you safe.”

Sookie nodded and was silent for a moment.

Bill once again mistook her silence as her acceptance. “I would have disobeyed my queen to keep you safe, Sookie. I love you that much,” he declared.

She asked, “Why didn’t you tell me about the queen’s orders after you had resolved to keep me away from her? Why not tell me *before* you asked me to marry you?”

Bill looked at his hands once again, “I swear I kept this from you because I didn’t want to hurt you. After a while, there was no need to tell you. I had already arranged with the AVL and Nan Flanagan to help me kill the queen and to take her place, acts that were completed the night Eric told you about my work for the queen.” He said the last part of his sentence bitterly before changing back to a more contrite tone. “I had thought I’d found a way to protect you from everyone, including Eric, and since the queen was about to perish, the truth would have served only to hurt you more—as it did.”

Sookie nodded again. There had been many opportunities between Bill’s proposal and the night Eric had compelled him to tell her the truth when he could have told her about the queen, but he hadn’t. She knew that he was telling the truth about not wanting to hurt her, but she also knew that he had been omitting things in order to protect himself and keep his hold over her as well. Most troubling was that he was still omitting things even now.

Bill spoke up, “I became king to keep you safe, Sookie. I became king because I love you so much.”

Sookie saw the truth in Bill's eyes and knew that he *did* love her—or at least he thought he did. She asked her last and most important question, “Why Bill? *Why* do you love me?”

Bill seemed taken aback for a moment, “What?”

“What is it about me that you love, Bill?” Sookie rephrased.

Bill looked thoughtful for a few moments before answering, “It's hard to say, Sookie. Like I told you, I attacked Longshadow out of a kind of instinct to make sure you were safe.”

“Yes, but you have to have a reason why you want to protect me—why you love me.”

Bill answered, speaking hesitantly. “It is many things, Sookie. It is your innate goodness and your desire to accept people, even vampires, at face value. I know you have had a difficult life with your gift, but you always give others a chance to prove themselves. I value all these things in you.”

“Is it also the taste of my blood, Bill?” Sookie asked softly.

Her question caught Bill off guard, but he answered right away, “No Sookie. As I said to you before. It is *who* you are and not *what* you are that makes me love you.”

Sookie recognized the words that Bill had said in this very house the night she'd been taken to the fairy realm, but this time, she also recognized something else. Right before he said them, his eyes twitched momentarily to the side. Sookie knew two things for sure in that moment. First, Bill Compton, whether he could admit it to himself or not, loved her mostly because of *what* she was—because of her fairy taste—not *who* she was.

Second, she knew that she would be able to kick his ass in poker because she could see his “tell” when he was lying or misleading her all the time now. She realized that having his blood had kept her from recognizing what was right in front of her face before. She was thankful to be seeing clearly now and even more thankful that she'd dusted off her good, old-fashioned

common sense and put away her rose-colored glasses. As she looked at the daisies on the coffee table, she felt as if her Gran would be proud.

Sookie spoke after several moments of silence had dragged between Bill and herself. She mustered up all the politeness that her Gran had ever ingrained in her. “Bill, I want to thank you for coming over here tonight. And I want to thank you even more for answering my questions. I know it is difficult to talk about vampire knowledge, and I know how secretive y’all have to be.”

“Sookie, you know that I would do anything for you,” Bill said sincerely. “If you agree to be mine, we will have a good life together. As king, I will always be able to protect you, and I’ve recently even arranged for my position to be much stronger,” he added, his eye twitching. “You could come and live with me in my refurbished house, which has everything you could ever want—servants included. And I am even planning to add a pool out back because I know of your love for the sun, and I can add anything else you like. Now that Eric is lording this home over you, you can leave it behind. However, if it is what you wish, I will keep pressuring him until I can buy this house back for you. I want you to be with me Sookie, and we will have a happy existence together. I know it.”

Sookie looked at the man she had given her virginity to, the first man she had ever thought she loved. With difficulty, she managed to give him a slight smile. “You have given me a lot to think about tonight, Bill. As I told you before, I will give you my answer on Friday.”

Sookie rose and Bill followed her to the door. He bent down to kiss her gently on the cheek.

Sookie opened the door, ready to call Bubba if Bill tried to get all handsy again, “Come by Friday at 10:00, Bill.”

“Until then, my dear,” Bill said as he walked out the door and zoomed away to his home. Sookie watched the darkness that he’d disappeared into for a few minutes until Bubba walked out of the shadows slowly.

“Miss Sookie, now that King Bill has left, I’m gonna do my huntin’ if that’s okay. Don’t you worry none though. There’s a real nice critter close by, so I won’t be far at all, and I’ll be able to tell if anything’s wrong, okay?”

Sookie grimaced slightly when she heard the word, “critter,” but still managed to smile at Bubba. “That’ll be just fine, Bubba. I’m glad that there’s—uh—food for you close by.

Sookie went inside and grabbed the red blanket she’d wrapped Eric in that day she’d found him in the lake. Though his skin had gotten red, he hadn’t had time to burn, thankfully, so the blanket had been good as new after it’d been washed. She pulled it out onto her porch and sat on her swing, wrapping herself up in the blanket. She thought of the morning it’d been wrapped around Eric: the way the sun had glistened in his hair, the playfulness with which he’d invited her into the water, the frightened look on his face when he’d started to burn. She loved him with all her heart.

However, she knew now that she *did not* love Bill though she might always have some kind of affection for him. She still believed, despite all the half-truths and downright lies he’d told her, that he loved her—at least the best he could. But none of that was enough for her. Bill had tried to manipulate her with his blood—of that she was certain. He’d—at the very least—used it to make her feel like she could confide anything in him. She’d told him her two deepest secrets—about her telepathy and her Uncle Bartlett—right after getting his blood and giving him hers. The dreams caused by their tie also indicated his motives, and he had not been forthright about them. Looking back, she saw that he’d always kept vital details from her,

sometimes in the name of protecting her but mostly in order to protect himself. His choices had led to her continued danger at the hands of Rene. Moreover, he'd still intended to take her to the queen and "share" her even after he'd fallen in love with her. She didn't like that kind of love, not at all. Even now, his love was based on her blood—of that she was positive, whether Bill could see it or not.

She resolved that she would try to build a kind of friendship with Bill if that was possible, but she also knew that she would never trust him again. And that was coming straight from the gift she should have been relying on the whole time with the vampires: her common sense! She mentally scratched another item off her list of options, somewhat surprised that she'd been able to eliminate Bill so quickly and so decisively.

Her right hand dropped and began to trace the strange pattern she'd discovered carved into the porch swing the week before. Her fingertips grazed the circular designs. Thoughts of Eric enveloped her even as she pulled the quilt tighter around herself.

For Bill's part, he returned to his mansion confidently. He'd done what he'd set out to do. Sookie's silly questioning tactics had given him the perfect opportunity he needed to plant even more seeds of doubt concerning Eric. Bill did legitimately fear that the Viking would only hurt Sookie in the long run, especially now that his memory was back. And he honestly felt he was the better choice for her.

Bill felt momentarily guilty that he'd had to mislead Sookie about a few things, but he was trying to protect her, just as he'd tried to protect her with the queen. Eric had been the one who had messed that up.

Bill grunted. He wished that he could just immediately arrange for Northman's death, but he also recognized that if he did so, he'd lose his own life and his position. He was, unfortunately, stuck with Eric Northman for the foreseeable future, but soon that would not matter. Once Sookie was his, he could rub that fact in the sheriff's face. Bill could recognize that Eric was and probably always would be the better *vampire* between the two of them. But that is not what he felt Sookie wanted. Yes—she wanted a vampire, someone she could not hear with her gift. However, she wanted one who embraced his *humanity*, as Bill was trying to do. He knew Eric would never do that.

Bill entered his office and called for a human to be brought to him. Being around Sookie all night had made him both hungry and horny, but he'd have to make do with donors—at least until Friday night.

Chapter 39: Flannel and Leather

Sookie went inside after she heard what sounded like a cat hissing in the dark. She was working very hard to be okay with what was going on when Bubba hunted, but that didn't mean she wanted to hear it.

As soon as she was in the house, she said under her breath, "Bill Compton, I rescind your invitation." Sookie immediately felt better, and she was saddened when she realized why. She wouldn't put it past Bill to try to sneak in so that he could force her to take his blood again. Her anger rose in her body at the thought, and she felt her fingers start to tingle. She chuckled, "That's right, Fairy Sookie. If Bill tries anything, you have permission to blast the shit out of him!"

She put the casserole leftovers into the refrigerator, unconsciously running her fingers over the comic strip. She washed the few dishes from the evening and folded the load of clothes that had been in the dryer. As she folded the flannel shirt and jeans that Eric had worn, she said out loud, "Screw It! I'm just gonna call him!" Bill had received his fair chance as far as she was concerned, and she wanted to hear Eric's voice. She could be honest with herself. After almost 24 hours apart, she missed him like crazy.

She got her cell phone and dialed Fangtasia. She would need to get Eric's personal cell phone number soon, she resolved.

An extremely bored-sounding Pam answered, her usual drawl exaggerated. "Fangtasia, where all your *bloody* dreams come true."

Sookie laughed, "Pam, you need to come up with a better line than that."

Pam sighed dramatically, "I would, but the vermin love that one. It's disgusting really."

"Oh," Sookie said still chuckling, "well as long as the *vermin* like it, I guess it's okay."

“I see you wasted no time depositing my check,” Pam deadpanned.

“I was afraid you’d cancel it if you saw a new pair of shoes you liked,” Sookie countered sarcastically.

Pam laughed, “You are an entertaining human; I’ll give you that. He’s in his office; I’ll get him for you.”

Sookie stammered, suddenly feeling a bit nervous, “Um, if he’s busy, it’s okay. I don’t want to disturb him if he’s in a meeting, or—uh—feeding, or anything.”

Pam made a disgusted sound on the other end, “Pfft, don’t worry about that, Sookie.” She continued in a conspiratorial tone, “He’s had only TruBlood since he’s gotten his memories back. Even before then, he’s been mostly on the bottle for a little more than a year.”

Sookie couldn’t help but to smile at the implications of Pam’s statement.

“It’s revolting really *and* pathetic,” the vampiress continued, though Sookie could hear a smile in her voice.

Sookie’s own smile grew wider. She’d had questions about whether Eric could be satisfied by feeding only from her. Her other major insecurity—whether or not he could be faithful to her in other ways as well—had been sitting in the back of her mind since she’d admitted that she still loved him. Despite that love, she knew that she would not be willing to be with Eric if he was going to feed from and have sex with other people. She hoped—in the end—that he’d think she was enough. But if he wouldn’t be faithful to her, it’d be a deal breaker. The topic of fidelity was already on the list of questions that she’d started for him.

Within moments, Sookie heard Eric’s voice on the line, “Hello Sookie, is everything well?” His question was full of significance.

Sookie relaxed immediately upon hearing his voice and plopped herself down onto the couch, “It’s fine.” She looked at the daisies on the coffee table and sighed contentedly for the first time that night.

“Hard night?” Eric asked. Sookie could tell he was trying to hold back from questioning her about Bill, even as he fished for information.

“Yeah,” Sookie admitted. “But I think I got what I needed out of it.”

After about thirty seconds of silence, Eric asked playfully, “You’re being purposely vague to toy with me, aren’t you, *min kära*?” He continued in a stealthy voice, “It’s still okay for me to call you ‘*min kära*’, isn’t it?”

Sookie couldn’t help her chuckle as she recalled their exchange the night before. She’d given him permission to call her that as long as she hadn’t chosen someone else. She shook her head. He was sneaky; she’d give him that. “It’s still okay,” she paused dramatically, “for now—at least.”

She thought she heard a sigh of relief from the other end of the phone before Eric spoke, “What can I do for you this evening then, *min kära*?”

Sookie shook her head, “I just—um—well I guess I just missed you and wanted to say hello—or goodnight.”

Eric chuckled. “I have been sitting here working for the last four hours getting things caught up from when I was incapacitated, but have been missing you too,” his voice was sincere.

“Oh,” Sookie said, her lips turning up into a smile. “You almost caught up?”

“With sheriff’s business—yes. Pamela did an excellent job in my stead, despite all the other problems she was having.”

“Hey—is her curse thing gone too?” Sookie asked.

“Yes, it broke when the necromancer gave up her existence on this plain.”

“Uh—that’s good.”

“Yes, it’s *very* good. You did not see her face before she had treatments from Ludwig. It was not a pretty sight. And her scent was quite—unnerving.”

Sookie chuckled. “Hey, I was wondering. Did you want to have those clothes you wore while you were here? I washed them.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone before Eric sighed even though Sookie knew he had no physical need to do so. “No thank you, Sookie. While I appreciate the offer, I’m afraid I’m a bit set in my tastes when it comes to my clothing.”

Sookie giggled both at Eric’s choice of words and the apparent trepidation in his voice. “That’s okay. I guess you’re just not a flannel shirt kind of guy.”

“No,” Eric answered quickly and then laughed too. “Just like you’re not a leather kind of gal, I fear.”

“Nope,” Sookie answered definitively. “Though I didn’t mind so much those black leather pants I saw you wear that once, but I couldn’t help but wonder how someone as tall as you could get yourself into such tight pants. Weren’t you afraid of—uh—chafing?” She found that she couldn’t help flirting with him a little.

“We vampires are graceful creatures,” Eric said, chuckling. “Plus, Pam taught me all about the magical power of talcum powder; I assure you, there was no chafing in any spot you might be concerned about.”

Sookie blushed.

“But that’s not really important right now,” Eric continued, his voice brimming with suggestiveness. “What *is* important is you telling me more about what you liked about my leather pants.”

Sookie grinned. “I thought I told you that I’d have no dirty talk from you.”

“Hey—you’re the one that brought it up.” Eric was trying to sound innocent. He was failing.

“Well,” Sookie paused and then continued more brazenly, “I thought your butt was cute in them, if you wanna know the truth.”

Eric laughed on the other end of the line, “Cute? I think I have lived a thousand years without having that adjective used to describe any part of me.”

“Really?” Sookie said in mock surprise. “Impossible. I can think of lots of things on you that are cute.”

“Do tell, lover,” Eric purred.

Sookie got goose bumps from both Eric’s tone and his use of the word “lover.” She should have, perhaps, been offended by the word, but she couldn’t deny the truth that they *had* been lovers. The tingling of a particular part of her body was currently reminding her of that fact; she shifted in her seat a bit.

She pulled herself together enough to tease him. “Well, the dimple on your chin is cute.”

“Humph,” Eric grunted.

“And then there’s the cute way your bangs flop around when they don’t have all that gel in them.”

Eric snorted.

“And of course there are those two cute little dimples right at the top of your cute little bottom.”

“Sookie,” Eric said in mock warning.

“Oh, and there’s that cute little crevice that forms when you smile. And your cute little ears, which, by the way, are too small for your head.” Sookie paused and laughed. “Should I go on?”

Eric grunted in mock derision, “No, I think I have had quite enough *cute* for one night, min kära.”

“Okay then,” she giggled “Oh—thanks for the comic, by the way. I hadn’t pegged you for a Calvin and Hobbes kind of guy.”

Eric chuckled, “To be honest, it is not my favorite. However, my memory for things is excellent, and that particular comic seemed appropriate.”

“Hmpff.” Sookie spoke sarcastically, “You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“What did I do?” Eric asked, still not managing to pull off the innocent act.

“You just *had* to try to get me thinkin’ about you before I met with Bill, didn’t you?”

“That depends, lover.”

“Oh—on what?”

“On whether it worked,” he said seductively.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Sookie evaded.

“I would,” Eric countered.

Sookie changed the subject, “Hey, I don’t think Bubba much cares for Bobby.”

“No one much cares for Bobby—not even Bobby himself,” Eric said, letting her get by with the subject change. “However, he is efficient.”

“He’s also quite—uh—unpleasant,” Sookie said carefully.

“He has done something to offend you?” Eric asked with an edge to his voice.

“No—he hasn’t *done* anything.”

“Ahh—so he has *thought* something that offended you.”

“You’re not gonna kill him if I say yes, are you?”

“No,” Eric laughed. “I will simply explain to Bobby that he should endeavor to be more polite to the people I care about.”

Sookie smiled at his words, “That’s okay. I think Bubba already did that this evening.”

Eric chuckled, “I would have liked to have seen that.”

There was a pause on the line as Eric listened to Sookie’s sure and steady breaths. The sound comforted him. Sookie simply enjoyed knowing that Eric was on the other end of the line.

“Did you talk to Jesus about the dreams?” he finally asked.

Sookie knew that Eric was talking about the dreams she’d been having since the bond had been broken and answered accordingly. “Yes, I told him about them. He’s added that to the list of things you and I have him looking into. You know, you really ought to pay him *a lot* for all the research he’s doing.”

“Already arranged,” Eric said simply.

“Well, that’s good,” Sookie said. “I guess I should go. I’ve got a lot to do before tomorrow night when I see you, and I should get some sleep.”

“Okay. Sleep well, min kára.”

“Wait,” she said before hanging up.

“Yes?” Eric said. He smiled at her use of his new favorite word.

“I need to get all the house’s utilities changed over into my name, I guess.”

“Already in the works,” Eric answered. “All will be officially changed over as of this Monday, except the satellite television and Internet set-up. We’ll talk about those to see if you still want them.”

“Oh,” Sookie said. “Okay.”

There was a pause.

“Eric?”

“Yes?”

“You really were very high-handed about the way you did the whole house thing, you know.”

“I am aware.”

“We’re not done talking about that.”

“I am also aware of that, min kára,” he said with a smile in his voice.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Goodnight. And, Sookie—pleasant dreams.”

A bright smile on her face, Sookie hung up the phone, feeling better after having heard Eric’s voice. Yes, she most definitely loved him, but she was still not ready to decide to take his blood again or even to be in a relationship with him. She could love him all week long and twice on Sundays, but if he lied to her or told her half-truths as Bill had done, she wouldn’t be able to be with him.

She also figured that noticing Eric’s tells would be more difficult than discovering Bill’s. Eric had had a thousand years to school his expressions, but she also knew that she had two secret weapons. One was her knowledge of him when he had amnesia. She had seen what he looked like when he was being completely open and vulnerable with her, and she was going to

compare that to what she saw the next night. The second was her own dreams. She planned to ask Eric some difficult questions if she dreamed of him later that night. Then she would match Dream Eric's answers to real Eric's. She had a pretty good idea that dream Eric *couldn't* lie to her.

She'd been the naïve girl in her relationship with Bill, and she never wanted that again. If she was going to be with Eric, she was going to have a real partnership with him, one that was honest and equal. And she was *not* going to have one that was based on a foundation of secrets.

Sookie washed her face and brushed her teeth before changing into her pajamas. She'd decided to spend one last night in her old room, but one of her tasks for the next day was to move into Gran's beautifully restored bedroom. Sookie felt her Gran would have approved of this choice.

Chapter 40: Discoveries

Sookie knew where she was the moment she stepped onto the roof. The dawn was approaching as Sookie walked toward Eric, who was standing in the spot where she'd witnessed his maker meet his final death.

Sookie reached Eric and stood quietly behind him as the sun rose in the east. She felt tears rolling down her cheeks as she remembered both Eric's pain on that day and Godric's death.

After a few moments, Eric reached his hand out behind him, and Sookie reached to hold it, moving to his side. She saw that red tears were slipping down his face to match the clear ones on hers.

"This saved me that morning," he said quietly as he squeezed her hand.

"Huh?" Sookie asked inelegantly through her tears.

"When you took my hand that morning. It saved me from despair," he said, still looking on as the sun rose.

"Oh," Sookie said, putting her head onto his arm. "I know that I felt something when I touched your hand."

"Yes," Eric said. "I felt it too."

"Like a spark?" Sookie asked.

"Yes," Eric said. "It made me feel better."

"What do you think it was?"

"It was what it always has been between us, min kàra—a little bit of magic."

"Fairy Sookie was tryin' to make things better for you, I think," Sookie posited.

"She succeeded." He squeezed her hand again.

They stood in silence, both looking toward the east.

“It really is quite a beautiful sight,” he said quietly, looking at the sun, which had now risen fully in a burst of orange and pink.

“Yes, it was beautiful that morning too,” Sookie assured leaning more fully into Eric. After a few moments, she continued. “I don’t know why, but it happened really fast. He didn’t burn like you and Russell did outside of Fangtasia or like Bill did when he tried to get to me when Rene attacked me. He just seemed to disappear in a ball of blue flame and light.”

“That is how it would work for someone as old as he was, someone who does not marshal the magic within himself or herself to heal, someone who does not resist the sun. We are—especially as we get older—able to decide whether or not to heal ourselves. It was Godric’s choice to just let go of his magic; that is why it happened so quickly.”

Sookie took the opportunity to ask about the blood, “Can you control what your blood does like he was able to?”

“To a certain extent,” Eric said as he used his black sweater to wipe his eyes. “I can, in a sense, ask my blood to heal one area before another, making it more efficient for me.”

“What about once your blood is in someone else?” Sookie asked tentatively.

“Ah, I sense your meaning now,” Eric managed a chuckle as he led Sookie over to a place on the roof where they could sit and enjoy the sun. “You are continuing to question things—to use your beautiful and unique brain to work out what is true rather than just taking things at face value.”

“Yes,” Sookie admitted.

“I’m glad, Sookie. I want no doubts left between us after all this is over.”

“Me neither.”

“Okay,” Eric began. “Once my blood leaves my body, I have some agency over it. The amount of agency a vampire will have varies according to several factors. The first is the age of the vampire. The older the vampire, the stronger the blood. Since I am over a thousand years old, I would generally maintain quite a bit of control over my blood; this was true with Lafayette while I opted to use my influence over him.

“The next factor is my motive in giving the blood. If I give the blood for my own benefit, my power to manipulate the human is strong. If I give the blood for the benefit of the human—if I give it unselfishly, in other words—the power I have to manipulate is very weak. In order to form any kind of tie, you see, the blood must be given by the vampire with a clear intention. Intent determines influence, in other words.”

“Did you ever use your blood to influence me?”

Eric laughed. “You are straight to the point, min kära. I love it.” He grew more serious, “ I did try. That night in Dallas right after I’d tricked you into sucking those bullets out of my body, I attempted to compel you—through the blood—to seek me out, but you did not come to me. Then later, I compelled my blood to make you dream of me, but the results were,” he paused, “not what I was expecting.”

“Why not?”

“Well, as you may know, a vampire can sense the feelings of a human who has had his or her blood, so I was able to sense you as you were dreaming of me, especially since you were so close to me—only across the hall in the hotel. I had forced myself to stay awake that morning so that I could influence you to dream of me. But even though I knew you were dreaming, things were not happening as I had wanted them to—as I had been told that they would happen.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I had not given my blood to a human—except to make Pamela and then to heal your friend Lafayette—for my entire existence before you. But I learned long ago from Godric that dreams fueled by vampire blood are generally able to help the vampire establish and then maintain control over a human through a combination of lust and fear. Therefore, these are the emotions that vampires attempt to instill within the dreams.” He continued in a regretful voice, “These are the emotions that I tried to place into the dream I sent to you that morning.”

Seeing the look of hurt on Sookie’s face, Eric continued quickly, “However, as you dreamed that morning, I felt no fear from you and not much lust either. I felt companionship, comfort, love, and at times guilt—but I never felt fear. I was a bit at a loss, I think. So I mustered all my influence and sent Lafayette a dream too to test whether that would elicit the desired reaction. It did; lust and fear mixed in him, and I felt him fall under my influence even more. With you, my attempts at influence had an opposite effect. I felt that after I’d sent you that dream, I had no influence over you whatsoever; in fact, you seemed to have gained some hold over my feelings.”

“Must have been disconcerting,” Sookie said sarcastically.

“Indeed,” Eric said, a twinkle in his eye. “I finally fell into sleep, and when I rose, the first thing I did was talk to Godric about it.”

“Oh?” Sookie asked curiously. “What did he say?”

“He actually laughed at me when I described the situation.” Eric scoffed, though his tone betrayed that he was fondly remembering his conversation with his maker, a conversation which Sookie realized must have been one of their last.

Eric continued, "He told me that he was happy that he'd lived long enough to see me meet my match." Eric's eyes grew darker as he now understood the hidden meaning in Godric's words. "He told me that I had unwittingly formed a rare type of tie with you, a kind where a vampire acts with unselfish motives toward the human. I spent about twenty minutes arguing with Godric, telling him about my desire to take you from Compton, telling him about the smell of your skin and blood, and assuring him that I wanted you only because I desired to fuck you, bite you, and use you for your telepathy."

"Thanks so much!" Sookie said, hitting Eric as hard as she could on his arm. "Ouch," she exclaimed as she pulled back her fist.

Eric laughed, "Would it be better if I pretended like that hurt, lover?" he purred.

"No," Sookie pouted. "Just keep talking, and you better hope that your story gets better because I'm feeling pissed off at you right now."

Eric threw up his hands in surrender. "Do not worry, min kära. I think you will like the next part. After I had gone on and on about how I could not have made the second kind of tie, Godric ordered me to shut up and sit down."

Sookie smiled.

"Yes, I thought you would like that," Eric laughed. "Godric made me listen silently as he described the rare kind of tie in greater detail, and I realized—much to my own shock—that this was indeed the tie type that my blood had made with you. That was the only explanation, given my ineffectiveness in controlling the tone of the dream and my inability to compel you, despite the strength and age of my blood. Godric told me that I would still feel your emotions and know if you were in danger. He explained that you might even dream about me, but unlike

with the other type of tie, I would have no real dominion over my blood inside your body. In fact, the more control I tried to take, the more my own blood would rebel against me in a sense.”

“But you seem to have intended to make the other, more common, kind of bond, right?”

“Yes, and that was my best argument against Godric’s theory until he convinced me otherwise.”

“How did he do that?”

Eric paused. “This part is not easy for me to confess, not even to you, min kára. It seems there are two situations in which the second kind of tie is forged. One is when the motive for making the tie is unselfish, but I initially felt that my purposes were selfish that day. However, when I thoroughly analyzed the moment, I realized I also wanted the tie I made with you to weaken the tie you had with Bill, and it did. I thought at the time that this helped only me, but I have come to see that part of me may have known that you needed it too in order to fight Bill’s influence over you.

“Right before the bomb went off, I had been angry at Lorena’s treatment of you and frustrated by Bill’s inability to adequately shield you from her. It was my own instinct to protect you, more than any other factor, that caused me to get between you and the bomb’s blast, so at the moment of your taking my blood, I might have been acting unselfishly. The truth is, I am uncertain.”

“What is the second thing that could have caused this kind of tie, according to Godric?” Sookie asked, already suspecting what the answer might be.

“Love,” Eric answered simply. “Godric told me that I loved you. He said that was the only clear explanation for the second type of tie being formed.”

Sookie looked a bit shocked. "But there is no way you loved me then! You even said that you didn't understand love when we talked in the church."

"True," Eric said quietly. "And I mentioned all these things to Godric before he finally convinced me that I did indeed love you."

"How did he do that?"

"Simple," Eric said. "Godric was my maker. He could feel my emotions, and unlike me, he could feel them objectively. He told me that every time I saw you or your name was mentioned, he felt love from me. He was certain, and I could not doubt him."

"Shit," Sookie said inelegantly.

"Shit indeed," Eric answered.

"So, that's why he wanted me to take care of you?"

"Huh?" Eric asked.

"Up here on the morning he died, he asked me to care for you."

"What did you say?"

"I told him that I wasn't sure I could because of the way you were, and he said he had to take the blame for that."

Eric chuckled. "That sounds like something you would say. And like something he would say too."

"Yeah," Sookie said quietly. "When?"

"When what?"

"When did you start loving me?"

"Oh! That's what you want to know," Eric said playfully.

"Yeah," Sookie said just as playfully.

“I thought a lot about that, actually,” Eric said, becoming serious again. Initially, I felt that if I could analyze what I felt, I might be able to get rid of it.”

Sookie hit him again. “Don’t try to do things like that!” Sookie said, the hurt clear in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” Eric said, touching her cheek lightly. “Honestly, I didn’t know how to react to the feelings that were opening up in me, first because of you and then because of Godric dying. It was all a bit,” he paused.

“Overwhelming?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded and then was silent for a moment. “I wish I could say that I felt love for you at first sight, but I cannot. That first night you walked into Fangtasia, you were like a breath of fresh air, but it would be a lie to say I fell in love with you then. Lust—yes. Interest—hell yes. Did I want you for my own?—Abso-fucking-lutely yes! But I did not love you then.”

He continued, “I thought for a while it was when you slapped me in Fangtasia, but then I realized that I already had love for you before this point. Then I thought it might have started when Bill brought you in the night before, when you were near death because of the Maenad attack. I had felt fear then, fear that you might die and that my life would be emptier somehow without you. As you can imagine, I stifled that emotion as soon as I felt it at the time. Then, I thought back further to the time when I’d come to Merlotte’s to collect Bill to take him to the tribunal. Do you remember when I looked at you across Merlotte’s?”

“Yes,” Sookie answered. That look had made her breathless, despite the fact that she was upset over Bill.

“I realize now that I loved you even then. I felt guilt that you would be hurt when I took Bill away. And I felt jealous that he had your love and not me, but again, I pushed those

thoughts away and told myself that I should be celebrating that you would be left without Bill and that I could swoop in and take you for myself.”

“But you didn’t do that.”

“No, that was most unlike me.” Eric laughed, “At the time I told myself that I was going to challenge myself by trying to win you over—that the victory would be sweeter that way.”

“So when was it?”

“I finally realized that the feelings of love that had been growing steadily in me began the night Longshadow was killed by Bill.”

“Ironic,” muttered Sookie.

“Why?” Eric asked.

“Bill told me that was the night he first began to love me.”

“Well you were magnificent that night, lover,” Eric said, pride clear in his voice.

Sookie scoffed, “Why? On account of the fact that I had blood all over me and looked like a human bloodsicle?”

“No,” Eric answered seriously. “You surprised me that night when you looked me right in the eye and required that I make a deal with you to turn over any guilty parties you found to the police. You should have just done what I asked without questions, both for your own safety and for Bill’s, but you stood up to a thousand-year-old vampire, and you made a deal YOU could live with. You didn’t flinch, and you didn’t consult Bill.”

“So you fell in love with my stupidity?” Sookie asked, dumfounded.

“No, I fell in love with your fire, Sookie,” Eric stated with raw passion in his voice. “I think I knew in that moment that you were made for me, even if I couldn’t acknowledge that to myself at the time. You are beautiful, you are supernatural, and your smell attracts me like no

other. But it is your fire that I love most of all. You challenge me, and in that moment, I realized I respected you. And respect is not easily earned from me. Your other attributes made me look, but that fire was what hooked me. Every time you challenge me, you make me think about things differently, and that in and of itself is a small miracle.”

Speechless, Sookie stared at Eric in open shock. Finally, he asked, “When did you know you loved me?”

“Hey, who said I loved you?” she asked playfully.

“I say,” he said moving to his knees in front of her. “Please say that I’m right.” He looked at her with the intensity of a thousand years of longing; her love for him opened up even more.

“Of course I love you,” she said.

“How could you not?” he joked, the twinkle quickly returning to his eye.

“I can think of some reasons,” she joked back.

He rose and walked a few steps away, looking at the sun.

“I can think of some reasons too,” he said earnestly.

“Hey,” she said, getting his attention. “I’ll have none of that kind of talk. When I tell you that I love you, I don’t want you getting all melancholy.”

“As you wish, milady,” Eric said bowing. He returned to sit by her side. “Do you know when you first loved me?”

“Hmmm, I admitted it to myself for real just yesterday. I mean I admitted that I loved the whole you and not just the amnesia you.”

“Well, that’s a comfort,” Eric said, the playfulness returning to his voice. “It was the sex that did it, wasn’t it?”

Sookie shook her head. “Nope.” She paused, “I actually don’t know when it happened. I’ll think about it and tell the real you tomorrow.”

“You don’t know?”

“Hey, mister, you have had a long time to think about all this, and I just got rid of my blood ties and bond a couple of days ago. Give me a break!” Sookie exclaimed playfully.

“Fine,” he grumbled, though there was a smile on his lips. He reached out to grasp her hand and brought it to his lips. “I’m glad you love me, min kära. It doesn’t matter when it started as long as it never stops.”

She squeezed his hand back. “I’m glad you love me too.”

“Will you tell me about it—the dream I tried to send to you?”

Sookie nodded. “Well, we were in bed.”

Eric’s face lit up, “Oh were we now? Perhaps, my sending powers were greater than I thought?”

Sookie smacked his arm again, this time making sure she didn’t do it so hard that it would hurt her in the process. “Hold your horses, buddy. We were just talkin’.”

“What did we talk about?” Eric asked curiously.

“Mostly, it was about whether I should become a vampire or not.”

“You would make a good one, min kära.”

“That’s what you said in that dream too.”

Eric’s expression turned serious again, “He will do all that he can to try to convince you to be turned, you know. He—no we—can no longer imagine a world without you.”

“I just don’t know about that, Eric. I don’t wanna be a vampire—at least, that’s where I stand right now.”

“We can be very convincing,” he said, again changing the tone of the conversation and leering at her.

“Oh, I’m sure you could try,” Sookie returned, picking up on Eric’s playful vibe.

“We have many, many ways to try to convince you, lover.”

“I look forward to you trying,” she said as he drew closer to her. “Wait,” she said, right before he kissed her. “I’m not gonna have my first real kiss with you be in a dream!”

“But we have kissed before,” he said, looking a bit confused.

“I know, but it’s never been with you and me—both—totally whole and totally willing, except maybe in the dreams.”

“What about that time in my office?” he asked.

“Well,” she said coyly. “That was real nice, but you kind of made me kiss you.”

“I remember you jumping right in after a couple of seconds,” he smirked.

Sookie blushed. “Well—still—you were talkin’ about dyin’ and everything. It wasn’t really both of us wantin’ exactly the same thing at exactly the same time.”

“And then the others were when I had amnesia,” he added.

“Exactly—or in the dreams.”

“So that means that the dreams don’t really count, and you can kiss me,” he said hopefully.

“Oh no you don’t, mister,” Sookie said as Eric’s lips once again drew closer to hers.

“As much as I might want to, I’d feel almost like I was cheatin’ on him.”

Eric looked confused, “But I am him.”

Sookie shrugged. “I didn’t say it made sense. Anyway, the real you still has some work to do before I’m completely won over.”

Eric drew her hand up to his lips again and placed a light kiss on her palm, “Then I will—very reluctantly—settle for this and hope that the real me doesn’t fuck things up.”

Sookie’s lips turned up into a smile. The couple settled in next to each other and looked off into the morning light, sharing a comfortable silence.

“I kept his shirt, you know,” Sookie said after a while. “Godric took it off before he died. I always meant to give it to you, but the time hasn’t seemed right.”

“I know,” Eric returned quietly. “I found it when I was sorting through your home, salvaging what could be saved from the Maenad.”

“It wasn’t destroyed, was it?” Sookie asked, suddenly worried.

“It was not,” Eric answered. “I found it the first night I was there by its smell. You had put it in a box that seemed to be full of other small treasures you’d held on to—keepsakes, I believe. This box was not damaged by the Maenad.”

“I’m glad,” Sookie said. “Did you take it?”

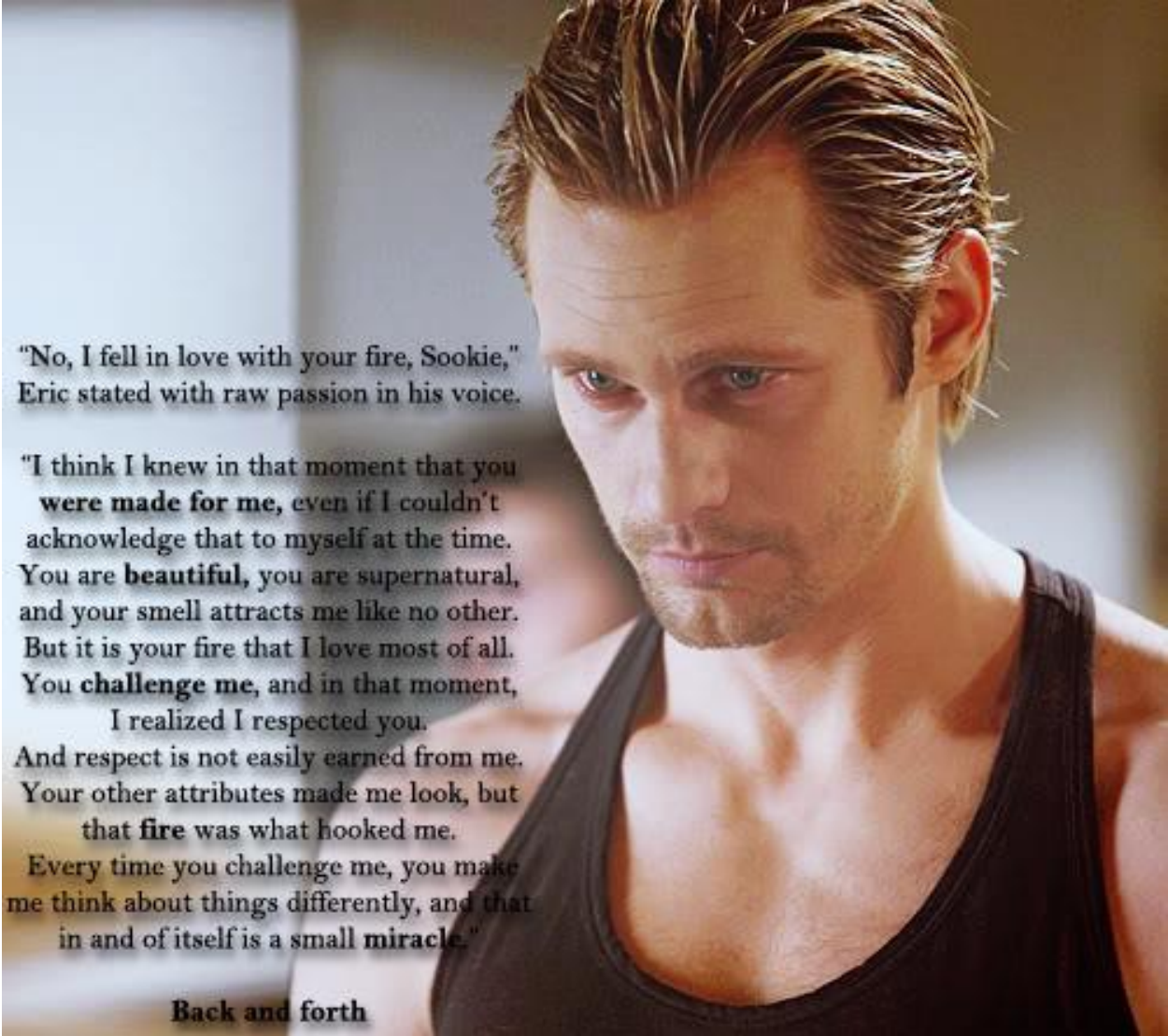
“No,” Eric shook his head. “It wasn’t mine to take; it seemed to belong where it was, so I let it be, though I admit that I moved the box into Adele’s room, which is where I did most of the repairs myself. I liked the idea of it being close. It’s up on the closet shelf in there now.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said.

“For what?”

“For somehow knowing what I need before I need it.”

“Right back at you, min kära.”



"No, I fell in love with your fire, Sookie,"
Eric stated with raw passion in his voice.

"I think I knew in that moment that you
were made for me, even if I couldn't
acknowledge that to myself at the time.
You are **beautiful**, you are supernatural,
and your smell attracts me like no other.
But it is your fire that I love most of all.
You **challenge me**, and in that moment,
I realized I respected you.
And respect is not easily earned from me.
Your other attributes made me look, but
that **fire** was what hooked me.
Every time you challenge me, you make
me think about things differently, and that
in and of itself is a small **miracle**."

Back and forth

Chapter 41: The Fairy Bond

Sookie woke up to her cell phone alarm at 9 a.m. on Wednesday morning and rushed into Gran's old room, opening the door of the old wooden closet. Hanging up were her Gran's clothes, at least the ones that were left after the Maenad's reign over the house. On the top shelf was Sookie's box of keepsakes. She pulled a chair over and then got down the box, placing it on her Gran's bed. She knew that Eric must have replaced the mattress and box springs, and the bed itself, which had been hand-crafted by the man she now knew was her fairy grandfather, Grandpa Earl, had obviously been repaired. She moved her hands along the curves of the designs Grandpa Earl had carved in the headboard.

She had mourned the bed's destruction after the Maenad had seemingly destroyed this room. After Maryann was gone, Sookie had simply shut the door to Gran's room, thinking that everything inside was lost and being unable to deal with it at the time. But now, she noticed how the headboard and footboard had been painstakingly repaired and refinished. The bed looked even more beautiful than she remembered it. She ran her fingertips up and down a bedpost, enjoying the cool smooth texture of the wood. She remembered what Eric had said in her dream and thought about how he'd been the one to do all the work in that room. She looked around at all the wooden furnishings and now saw both her Grandpa Earl's and Eric's hands in them. She put her head into her own hands and cried until the ring of the front door bell caused her to get up.

Wiping the tears from her face, Sookie did a quick inventory. She'd worn only a long T-shirt to bed, so she quickly grabbed a robe in her room before going downstairs to answer the door. She felt Lafayette and Jesus with her mind and quickly opened the door, warmed by their smiling faces and by the coffee and pastries they'd obviously picked up on the way over. She

nodded at Alcide, who was leaning against his truck, holding his own cup of fresh coffee and a huge bear claw donut.

Sookie welcomed the duo into her home.

Lafayette looked around and whistled, “Shit Sook, that vamp done did yo’ house up proper.”

“I know,” Sookie smiled, thinking fondly of Eric and the effort he’d made.

Jesus made a “shhh” gesture with his index finger and then sat down cross-legged near the bottom of the stairs. He closed his eyes and then began chanting in a voice that barely even registered as a whisper. After he was done, he rose. “Okay, now anything we say will be private.”

“I thought you had to draw one of them salt circles,” Sookie said.

“Nope. I found a better way. And this spell will last for a whole day, whether you leave the area of the spell or not. And before long, I think we will also be able to ward your house to prevent the entry of anyone with ill intent!” he said excitedly. “I just need to gather a few ingredients that we need; I think I’ll be ready by Sunday!”

“Yeah, he been up all night readin’ them books,” Lafayette said fondly with just a bit of annoyance. “I thoughts with yo’ skinny ass outta the way, I’d be gettin’ me a nice, loud piece last night, but I’s was put aside fo’ witch books.”

Sookie reddened and then laughed. “Sorry, Laf.”

“You better be, hooker. He dragged me outta bed too damned early too! Then, we’s just had to gets over here first thing!” Lafayette grumbled good-naturedly.

“I *did* buy you coffee,” Jesus gave Lafayette a winning smile.

“Humph,” Lafayette grunted as he took a sip.

Cautiously, Jesus asked Sookie, “How did your night go last night?”

“With Bill?” Sookie asked as Jesus nodded. “Well I asked all my questions, and he lied half the time, but other than that, it was great,” she said sarcastically. “One thing is for sure about Bill,” she continued earnestly, “I don’t love him. I think it was the tie and his magic that made the initial attraction I had for him feel like love. I’ll probably always care about him—or at least I *want* to care about him—but I’m not sure if there was ever really any love there at all.”

Jesus nodded and opened one of the books he’d brought with him. He gestured for Sookie to come close and look at the title of the page. In ornate letters, it read, “For lessening the effects of vampire glamour.” Sookie looked at Jesus curiously, and he gestured for her to look at Lafayette. As Sookie focused her attention on Lafayette, Jesus began chanting the spell. After a few minutes, Lafayette made a huge effort to speak. “Sook, ask Eric why they glamourous us the night we did the spell on ya.”

Sookie looked on, perplexed by the actions of her friends. Jesus had stopped chanting by this point and both men looked drained.

“Don’t ask us anything else ‘bout that,” Lafayette managed. Sookie nodded, got up, went to the kitchen, and added a new question to her growing list for Eric.

By the time she returned, Lafayette and Jesus seemed to have regained most of their energy and were settled in the living room. Jesus seemed relieved, as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Sookie had to fight against her curiosity in order to respect their wishes and not ask what their spell had been all about.

Instead, Sookie gave them a few more minutes to recover as she happily chomped on a blueberry scone and sipped her cup of coffee.

Finally Jesus spoke, “Sookie, I think I found out something about the ‘empty spot’ both you and Eric were talking about.”

“Oh?” Sookie asked, nervous that Jesus might tell her that Eric’s blood had somehow remained in her and had been influencing her all along. At this point, that was her biggest fear.

Jesus said, “I found some information in this real old book that Marnie had; it was written in Latin, but I was able to get the gist of it. It is the only thing I have found so far that mentions fairies or their magic.”

“Really?” Sookie asked, sitting forward.

“Yeah,” Jesus continued. “The book is kind of like an encyclopedia for Supes. It gives some information on all known varieties of supernatural beings.”

“Hooker, you wouldn’t believe some of the shit that’s out there,” Lafayette added as he took a drink of his coffee. “In fact, I’m hopin’ to forget most of it myself.”

Sookie wasn’t able to question Lafayette about his comment because Jesus picked up his previous thought, “So the book didn’t really explain how to control your magic, but I’m sure it talked about things you don’t know yet.”

“Well, that’d be easy!” Sookie exclaimed, “considering that I really don’t know much of anything about fairies.”

Jesus began, “Well, first the book describes various types of fairy powers. Telepathy, it seems, is the most common fairy trait. Apparently, in the fairy realm, communication via the mind is preferred, and fairies are able to block their thoughts from others there when they wish, sort of like you block out other people’s thoughts from your mind, I guess. Anyway, most fairies are able to both hear thoughts and project thoughts into other people’s minds.”

“Wow!” Sookie cried. “I have always heard thoughts, but I have never projected like that.”

Jesus continued. “Another common power among fairies is a kind of teleportation. They basically use these dimensional door things in their world to act as conduits to other places. They are able to—in that way—just kind of pop to where they want to go.”

“Shit,” Sookie said, suddenly frightened that a fairy could just pop in on her at any time and force her to go back to the fairy realm.

Jesus sensed her fear and tried to comfort her, “Apparently, the skill to teleport like this is not that common among fairies, and it requires a lot of effort on their part. It also requires a door or portal to be present.”

That made Sookie feel at least a little better. The door that led to the cemetery had been closing when she and Grandpa Earl jumped through it. Of course, Claudine had still managed to find her again, but Sookie was bolstered by the fact that no other fairies had come for her.

Jesus continued, “Other powers that some fairies have include hiding their scents from others and harnessing their fairy light as a kind of weapon.”

“Well I have that last one for sure,” Sookie said.

Jesus agreed, “Yeah, that ability also comes with the opposite—using your light as a healing agent.”

Sookie thought about this for a moment and then nodded. “I think that I did that with Eric when he was under Marnie’s—uh Antonia’s—control. I wanted to save Bill, certainly, but my light didn’t hurt Eric, which seemed weird at the time. It just made the spell go away.”

Jesus nodded. “I agree.”

“How do I make the magic work though?” Sookie asked.

“As I said, the book doesn’t talk about that,” Jesus reported with regret.

“What else?” Sookie prompted. “You said something about that ‘empty spot’ feeling?”

“Yeah,” Jesus said as he gave a meaningful look to Lafayette.

“What?” Sookie asked, suddenly concerned.

“Well,” Jesus started slowly, “it seems that fairy magic can be just as potent as vampire blood in binding two people together.”

“Huh?” Sookie asked inelegantly.

“It has to do with your light. When two fairies bond, they ‘share’ their light through touch, but I’m betting that it could be transmitted through a blood exchange, just like vampire magic. And just like vampire magic, there must be intent for it to work. There’s no record in the book of a fairy binding herself to a vampire, but when fairies bind themselves to each other, and then for some reason break the bond, there is a kind of void left behind.”

“So you think that I bonded myself to Eric in some kind of fairy way even as he was binding himself to me in the vampire way?”

“Oh yes,” Jesus said excitedly. “Either that, or you created a fairy bond with him when you broke Marnie’s spell with your light. Of course, Eric’s intent would have had to be right there with yours in either case, so during your blood exchange with him seems to be the most likely time—that is, if you did create a fairy bond like I think you did.”

Sookie gestured for Jesus to go on.

“I think that the fairy bond is actually more powerful than the vampire bond you had in some ways. I also think that—using that fairy bond—you have basically held on to Eric’s essence that was in his blood, and I think that is what has been in your dreams.”

“Eric’s essence?”

“Yes, his spirit or his soul. The spell we did got rid of all the blood and all of his magic, but I’m guessing that your own magic basically decided to keep Eric around in the only form it could. You sort of fused his essence to your light in a way.”

“So it’s still Eric in there?”

“Yeah, I believe that the part of him you retained contains his essential spirit—at least from the moment you bonded with him.”

“Do you think that this dream Eric of mine could lie to me?”

Jesus shook his head, “I think that it lives only in the fairy magic within your body now, so I can’t see how it could deceive you.”

Lafayette piped up, “This is all so f’ed up, hooker, that it’s making my head spin!”

“Not helping!” Sookie admonished her friend in a sing-song voice.

Jesus looked at her much more sympathetically. “The book also gives a bit more information about vampire ties and bonds. From what I have been reading, I think that vampire blood retains a lot of power, even after it’s been in a human host for a while. The blood, in essence, stays magically animated in the human. Most humans have no control over what the blood is able to do. This goes back to the motives of the vampires we talked about yesterday. The magic works only for the vampire’s benefit if the blood was given by the vampire for his or her own self-interests.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Well that’s where things get interesting, and your being a human/fairy hybrid complicates everything. I am having to make educated guesses about things based on your previous dreams and our supposition that Eric formed the second kind of tie, the unselfish kind, with you in Dallas.”

Sookie broke in, “He confirmed that he did in my dream last night.”

Jesus nodded and continued, “When he formed that tie, I think your fairy genes became able to use his blood and, in turn, Eric, when you needed or wanted to, so that explains why you had your dreams when you did, except for the first one you had about him, which I’m still trying to figure out. You had one when *you* wanted to comfort him, and you had one when *you* needed him to help you learn the truth about Bill. He seemed to have had little or no control of his blood in you at that point. As far as I can tell, he’d only have been able to use his blood to monitor your emotions and your location.”

“In my dream last night,” provided Sookie, “he said that he caused and then tried to control the first dream that I had about him. This was before he realized that he loved me and when he thought we had a regular blood tie. He said that the effect of the dream kind of backfired, and after that, he wasn’t able to influence me with his blood at all.”

“That makes sense,” Jesus said, after thinking for a minute.

He continued, “Then, once you exchanged blood again—a real exchange this time—it seems that the bond you created became very strong because it was infused with both of your magics and both of your intentions. It was, in a sense, like a marriage of your bonds.”

Sookie was stunned. “So there’s some kind of magic from me that is creating the dreams and that has left this feeling of hollowness in both of us? Does that mean that Eric may not really love me,” Sookie’s voice caught, “that it might just be *my* magic that’s making him love me—like I thought it was *his* blood making me love him?”

Lafayette, who had stayed relatively quiet up to this point, came over to where she sat on the couch and placed his arm around Sookie’s shoulders in a comforting gesture.

Jesus said, “I don’t think so. Like with a vampire bond, both parties must agree equally to be bound by fairy magic. It’s the same kind of safeguard. Both types of bonds are very different from the kind of tie you had with Bill, which was one-sided and which was able to influence you to some extent.”

Jesus continued, “If a vampire repeats a bond—not a tie—three times, the relationship equalizes completely, with the human also being able to feel the location and emotions of the vampire. Both can send their bond-mates feelings and emotions, like comfort, but neither can control or manipulate the other. Thus, I don’t think a vampire bond or a fairy bond could actually *cause* love to occur. If love weren’t already present, the bond couldn’t have formed in the first place.”

Sookie looked relieved.

“Your fairy magic, I think, worked to strengthen the vampire blood bond somehow. Or maybe the vampire blood strengthened the fairy bond. Since there may have never been a bond between fairy and vampire before, I don’t know what else it may do. I did read about what happens when two fairies share this kind of magical bond. Basically, they become mates for life, and they are able to share and combine their magics to protect their bond. A true fairy bond like this is uncommon, however, because fairies are not, by nature, monogamous.”

Sookie sighed, not really knowing what to think.

Lafayette tightened his grip on Sookie and hugged her to him, finally speaking. “Listen here, bitch. You’s just been told that you has a kind of magic that can make you equal to a big, bad, motha’ fuckin’ vampire. And you’s been told that none of this magic binding shit even works unless everyone in the process agrees, so what’s the big issue here? You’s loves his ass, and he loves yo’ ass. When y’all up and exchanged blood—which by the way is fucked up, you

know—both of you’s magics gots busy together making sweet love. That’s kinda romantic, don’t ya’ think?”

Sookie laughed, loving Lafayette more than ever before. “Yeah, it actually is kind of nice,” she agreed. “I just hope he thinks so.”

“He will, Sook,” Jesus said confidently.

“You bet yo’ sweet ass he will!” Lafayette added.

Chapter 42: Keepsakes

It was about 10:30 when Lafayette and Jesus left, promising to come again for lunch on Friday. Sookie had told them that she wanted back-up for when she told Alcide that it wasn't going to happen between them. She didn't think he'd get angry, but it was always better to be safe than sorry. Plus, the boys wanted to work on the wards that day as well.

Sookie quickly put on some jeans and a T-shirt before she stripped the sheets off of her bed and her Gran's bed. She inhaled fully as she took off each set since Eric's scent lingered on both of them. She smiled and then blushed as she thought of all the fun they'd had in those beds. Then she went down to take the sheets off the bed in the cubby. They were still stained with Eric's blood and the silver chains were in the corner. She looked down at the blood on the sheets and felt almost possessive of it all of a sudden. "Great—now *I'm* blood-thirsty," Sookie sighed.

She gathered up the chains into the sheets and brought them carefully up the ladder of the cubby. Sookie threw her Gran's queen-sized sheet set and half of the sheets from her bed into the washer, making a full load. She carefully put the chains to the side avoiding the bloody bits and then started to work on the blood stains on the cubby sheets by scrubbing them with a brush; then she left them to soak in bleach in the small utility sink next to the washer.

Next, Sookie grabbed some utility gloves from under the kitchen sink, retrieved the chains, and took them outside to hose them off. She found Alcide sitting on the front porch with a newspaper.

"Hey you," Alcide said fondly. "You've been quiet as a mouse in there. Have you been napping?"

"Umm, I've been going through some old keepsakes," Sookie lied, knowing that she'd actually been making a lot of noise in the house. It looked like Jesus's spell was still working

like a charm. He'd told her that it would basically hide what was going on inside from the outside.

"What's that?" Alcide asked, gesturing toward the chains and recoiling slightly at the sight of the silver.

"It's the chains I had to use to keep Eric bound up so that he wouldn't run out in the sun the other day," she said. "I'm just going to wash them off."

Alcide seemed happy to let her take care of that task by herself, and to be truthful, Sookie was grateful as well, given the tenor of Alcide's thoughts when she mentioned Eric's name.

As she walked toward the side of the house where there'd always been a utility hose, she saw a patch of beautifully groomed hydrangea plants. They were not in bloom and wouldn't be until the spring, but Sookie smiled anyway. She kept thinking about the flowers that would be on those plants in order to keep her mind off the grisly task of getting Eric's skin and blood off the chains. Once done, Sookie put the chains over some wooden lattice pieces so that they would dry. Then she went back inside the house, nodding to Alcide as she walked by.

Sookie decided to pull out the casserole leftovers for an early lunch and warmed a plate for herself. She sat down at the table and propped her feet up on another chair as she ate the leftovers and drank a huge glass of orange juice, relishing the feeling that the food gave her. Even more so, she enjoyed controlling the entirety of her emotions again. She was able not only to feel the loss of her Gran fully but also to appreciate the wonderful effect she'd had on her life.

Sookie realized at that moment that she *really* resented Bill's blood tie with her. It had worked to manipulate her emotions, and even though her fairy nature and Eric's blood may have diminished its influence, the tie had literally altered her ability to feel. It had made her fixate on

Bill and the love she felt for him. She'd listened with fervent attention to every negative thing he'd said about Eric and hadn't ever questioned those things. She'd never truly judged Eric with her own eyes as she could now.

Certainly, some of what Bill said had been proven somewhat accurate—after all, Eric *had* kept Lafayette locked up in his basement for goodness sakes! But, Sookie reasoned, even Lafayette admitted that other vampire sheriffs would have killed him, and Eric had spared Lafayette *for her*. Sookie knew that if she wanted to be with Eric, she'd have to accept that he could be a ruthless vampire when called upon, but he was also willing to change a little in that regard—and change *for her*. He'd already agreed to turn in human wrong-doers to the authorities when she helped him with her telepathy, after all. Plus, she'd never witnessed an act of random violence from him. Acts of violence—yes! But these had all been against people that were looking to hurt him or the vampires in his jurisdiction.

However, Bill had painted Eric as absolute evil, someone to be feared and avoided at all costs. Yet Bill had dumped his own child off on Eric for a while. And Bill had taken her to Eric after the Maenad attack. He would have done neither if he really thought Eric was evil. Again, Bill had been purposely trying to mislead her about something. Sookie sighed ruefully.

The most disturbing thing about the tie in her mind, however, was that it had prevented her from mourning Gran's death. Now that she'd actually spent some time with Bill without his blood in her, she recognized that the tie had mostly likely been what had drawn her to him the night after Gran had died; she'd literally felt *compelled* to run into his arms. She'd believed that no one else could help her. Looking back with the lights of her mind fully on, she knew that Bill had tricked her into taking more of his blood that night too. After that, her grief had been supplanted with an increased fixation, almost obsession, with loving Bill. And she had never

examined any of her feelings for him; she felt like hitting herself for her past inability to question *how* exactly she'd fallen in love with the man who had seemed so creepy and rude outside of Merlotte's after she'd saved him—or thought she'd saved him—from the Rattrays, the man who had let Malcolm and his nest mates paw her, and the man who had asked to kiss her just moments after he'd been going to feed on Malcolm's human, Jerry. There had been a hundred signals that he was not the charming Southern suitor he was pretending to be, and she'd recognized many of them, but when it came to actions, she had always *NOT* followed her instincts. She'd quickly overlooked all the warning signs that came with Bill.

Then a pattern to Bill and her relationship had emerged. They'd seem to be blissfully in love, then something would happen that raised a red flag in her, and then he'd find a way to influence her to accept him back into her life, despite her doubts. And each time the pattern happened, she'd feel more and more compelled to defend him and their so-called love.

She felt angry with and ashamed of herself. But she shook herself out of these unproductive feelings and instead focused on Gran. After a few minutes, she whispered, "I'm so sorry, Gran. I love you so much."

Sookie looked down at the empty dish in front of her. She smiled fondly as she realized that Gran would skin her hide for not offering some of the dish to Alcide. She warmed a huge plate of casserole for the Were and took it to him along with a glass of iced tea. He sniffed and smiled appreciatively as Sookie quickly excused herself to get her laundry out of the washer.

She put the wet sheets in the hamper and started a new load with the rest of the sheets.

Sookie hummed lightly as she hung up the sheets on the clothesline, which had been refitted with new cord. Sookie chuckled at Eric's thoroughness and thought more about her Gran. She could picture her hanging sheets and then sitting in the sun to enjoy the sound of them

flapping in the wind. A tear drifted down Sookie's cheek at the thought, and she was struck by a sudden desire to visit Gran's grave. She quickly finished hanging the sheets and took the hamper back inside before grabbing both the roses and the daisies from their respective vases.

She found Alcide on the front porch, now with a clean plate in front of him and a satisfied look on his face. He looked like a man in desperate need of a nap. Sookie chuckled, "Hey Alcide, I'm going to go visit my Gran's grave and take her some flowers."

"I'll have to go with you, Sook," Alcide said almost apologetically, "but I promise I'll give you all the space I can."

Sookie nodded appreciatively and started in the direction of the cemetery. About twenty yards from Gran's grave, she gestured for Alcide to stop and then approached the final resting place of the person who had been more like a mother to her than anything else. On the way, she passed her parents' graves and split the roses between them. When she got to Gran's grave, she smiled to herself as she saw a single daisy that looked a couple of days old. She added the bunch in her hands and dropped to her knees. She noticed that Alcide had turned around to give her what privacy he could, but she knew he might still be able to hear what she said if he tried.

She sighed, wishing that Eric were with her, but then she thought of her magic and the fact that she'd somehow bound a part of him to her, and she knew that he really was there with her. She smiled at this thought and looked at the headstone. "I hope you would approve of him, despite what you said through Marnie," she whispered in a barely audible voice. "I have faith in him. I just hope he proves me right tonight." She sighed again, got up, and then rejoined Alcide on the path. He looked at her sympathetically, and then they silently trekked back to the house.

Grabbing the dirty dishes, Sookie left Alcide on the porch again and found that the second load of sheets was done. After inspecting them to make sure they were free of blood, she hung them on the line too.

Sookie checked the clock and saw that it was 12:20. She went back to her Gran's room, where she'd started the morning, and took a moment to lose herself in the feel of the carved wood on the headboard again. She smiled and then put the keepsakes box back on the bed. Inside were mostly cards and photographs she'd been collecting throughout much of her life. She opened the lid and pulled out Godric's linen shirt, determined to give it to Eric. If he decided to keep it here in his cubby, that was his decision, but she wanted him to have the choice. She made sure it was folded perfectly and then put it on the dresser. Then she returned the box of keepsakes to the top shelf and returned the chair to its place.

She decided that right then was as good a time as any to begin the process of moving her things from her old room to Gran's room. She carefully packed what little there was left of Gran's belongings into the empty boxes she'd left in the room a few days before. She separated Gran's things into two boxes, things she wanted to hold on to and things that could go to Goodwill.

It took Sookie only 10 minutes to pack what was left of her Gran's possessions. She was saddened that a whole life could fit into just two boxes, but the Maenad's destruction to Gran's things had been especially acute. Most of what was left were housedresses and underclothing. Sookie felt her eyes burning when she thought of Maryann in Gran's wedding dress.

Sookie left the two remaining daisy knickknacks that Gran had loved where they were on the dresser. She'd looked closely at them earlier and had noticed a few glue marks to show that they'd been put back together, more than likely by Eric. Most of the other decorative things,

including the antique silver brush set that Gran had inherited from own grandmother, had been stolen or destroyed.

Sookie took the box for Goodwill to Jason's old room next door. She'd look around the house in the next few weeks to see if there was anything else she wanted to take. She took the other box to the hallway and pulled down the steps to the attic. Though the box wasn't really that heavy, she took it carefully up the narrow steps. It did not escape her notice that even the attic steps looked as if they'd been refurbished and were more stable than she'd ever seen them before. She smiled as she thought of Eric handing out hundreds of edicts to workmen in her home. She laughed out loud when she imagined the thousands of tasks that Bobby must have been required to perform during the repair of her home.

Left untouched by the Maenad, the good-sized attic looked just as Sookie remembered it with the exception that it was now cleaner and had a fresh coat of paint on the walls. During his teenaged years, Jason had decided that he needed more privacy and had begun to turn the space into a kind of den for himself. He'd lost interest in the project, however. As Sookie took in the beautiful streams of light coming in through the slanted attic windows, she thought that it might be a good idea to make a reading room for herself up there.

Again, tears welled up in Sookie's eyes as she noticed the stack of boxes in the corner of the room, boxes that had stayed in that position for almost two decades. Sookie placed Gran's things next to those boxes, which Gran had packed with Grandpa Earl's belongings a few years after he'd disappeared. Sookie vividly remembered the day when Gran had carefully folded up all of his clothes and lovingly placed them into the boxes. Her thoughts that day had been confident that her husband would make his way back to her if he could.

A few tears fell from Sookie's eyes as she thought about the tragic love story of Gran and Grandpa Earl. They were so happy, but because of the fairies, Gran had to spend almost two decades without her soul mate. Sookie could only pray that somehow, somewhere their souls had found their way back to each other after so many years of faithfulness and devotion between them. She also said a quick prayer that Eric and she would never be parted like that. The thought of leaving him to the rampages of time while she was stuck in the fairy realm made even more warm tears fall down her cheeks.

Sookie went to the opposite corner of the attic and kneeled. She worked up the loose floorboard and took out the little wooden box of treasures she found there. She had decided to take it downstairs to her new room so that she could store Eric's letters inside of it but still have quick access to them.

It took only another 20 minutes for Sookie to transfer her clothing and personal items from her old room and bathroom to her new one. She too had lost a lot of clothing to the Maenad and resolved to take some of the money from Pam and do something that the vampiress would actually approve of—shop! She'd start by buying a few new hoodies so she would no longer have to wear the ones she had gotten when she was eighteen. The thought of continuing to walk around in the one with the purple and pink hearts on it actually made her cringe.

Once everything was in place, Sookie opened the little box of treasures from the attic. She smiled when she saw the charm bracelet that her dad had given her when she was four. It looked so tiny now. She picked up one of the shells she'd found on the beach that long-ago winter's day and put it to her ear. It still looked and sounded perfect. As she placed the shell back into the box, her thumb hit what she was looking for, a little piece of silver. It had been one of the pieces she'd drawn from Eric's body in Dallas. She had put it in her pocket and kept it.

She didn't have any logical reason for doing that at the time; in fact, she had every reason not to, given his trickery. But here it was in her hand.

She thought about Dream Eric's question and wondered if she could have been falling in love with Eric even in Dallas. So that the reminder of the first time she'd taken Eric's blood would be even closer to her, Sookie decided to put the fragment into the little hidden drawer in one of the tables next to the bed. She lifted the doily covering the table and pulled out the drawer. Inside was a lace handkerchief that she recognized as her Gran's. She pulled out the lace and opened it to find a beautifully carved wooden pendant on a leather cord. Two entwined initials formed the shape of the pendant, an "S" and an "E."

"Eric," Sookie gasped quietly, thumbing the beautiful piece of woodwork. The tears were back and had begun to drift down her cheeks. "If you lie to me and mess this up tonight, I'm going to stake you myself. I swear." She carefully placed the pendant back into the handkerchief and added the silver fragment. She put both into the little drawer. Then she put the little wooden box into the bottom drawer of her side of the dresser. The other side remained empty—for now—both because she didn't have enough items left to fill it and because she hoped that someone else's things might soon need a space of their own.

Sookie sighed and looked around her new room. She felt closer to Gran in there, and she took a minute to sit in the rocker in the corner, noticing that the afghan thrown over the back of it smelled like Eric. She sighed and inhaled deeply. This was the room that might soon become *their* room. "Just don't fuck it up, Northman," Sookie reiterated under her breath.

Satisfied with the room and in need of a break from her emotional overload, Sookie decided to put on her bikini and get a bit of sun. It was only about 75 degrees outside, but the sun was bright and warm, and Sookie missed proper sunbathing. Being in the sun the day before

had been nice, but there was something about being in a bikini and doing it right that just made things so much better.

Struck by a sudden idea, she went into her new bathroom, which was attached her new room, and quickly showered before putting back on her bikini. She knew that Eric would appreciate the smell of the sun on her skin, and if she showered after she sunbathed, the smell would be muted.

She grabbed her cell phone , put on her robe, skipped down the stairs, went out back, and pulled her lounge to a nice, sunny spot, happy that Alcide was probably dozing on the other side of the house. She closed her eyes and relaxed, letting her mind drift to the question of *when* she first started to love Eric Northman. She knew for certain that it was before their most recent exchange of blood. She had already loved him when they had made love for the first time too. She thought back farther in her mind. She was already in love with him when her Gran warned her via Marnie that the love would be fleeting. Sookie took a minute to speculate again about her Gran's warning. Eric's love, as it turned out, didn't seem temporary. She wondered if her Gran's warning had become moot since her magic had helped Eric regain his memories. Sookie couldn't help but hope that Gran had gotten her after-life wires crossed somehow, but the memory of her warning still nagged at the back of Sookie's mind.

Sookie continued to think back to one of her dreams, the one she'd had right before she'd gone to Fangtasia and shared her first non-dream kiss with Eric. Of course, he had to screw stuff up by chaining her up in the basement right after that. "Stupid, idiot vampire," Sookie said under her breath, mentally adding another question to her list. She flipped over and continued her musing.

In that dream, Eric—the Eric that she had obviously planted into her own dream—had told her it wasn't just his blood and that she had feelings for him. And in that dream, she'd known he was telling the truth, which is why she'd gone to his office that night to start with.

Thinking about that kiss still put a blush on her face, and when she realized that Eric was indeed kissing her goodbye, she couldn't imagine a life without him in that moment. If she was being really honest—and she was finally doing just that—she could admit to herself that she had been in love with him even then. The words that he'd spoken to her that night—"Don't pretend that you care about me; this is about Bill"—had cut into her, even though she'd said nothing to contradict them.

She thought back farther, much farther, thinking that working her way from a time when she *knew* she didn't love him toward that moment in his office when she had already been in love with him seemed like a logical plan. She did *not* love him in Dallas, but she knew that was where her heart had started to turn toward him. Before Dallas, she had been intrigued and attracted, even if she didn't admit these positive feelings to herself at the time. Despite Bill's admonitions and the influence of his blood tie, she'd actually found Eric quite interesting and witty in her several encounters with him—at least, before she found out about Lafayette. That day, she'd felt profound disappointment as much as she'd felt anger.

Yes—by the time she'd left Dallas, her heart had definitely begun to turn. She now knew that it wasn't really the blood that did it either, at least not fully. The blood, or at least Eric's influence on it, may have been the catalyst for the first dream she had, but that dream only proved that their tie couldn't actually be controlled by Eric. And there were other things that happened in Dallas that turned the tide in his favor. His fervent desire to rescue Godric from the Fellowship of the Sun was one of those; she found herself *wanting* to help him, despite

everything with Lafayette. And then after Godric had saved her from Gabe in the basement, she remembered Eric zooming in like a bolt of beautiful lightning. He'd taken her breath away. Then against all odds, she *had* trusted him when he asked her to, and when he was chained up on the altar in that church, she would have done anything to save him. All she could see was his pained blue eyes tearing through her; there had been something so transcendent in those eyes. She now knew that it was his love for her.

So even before the blood, she'd been drawn to him. Eric—at least Dream Eric—had said they were a “match,” one he recognized at their second meeting. She speculated about whether some innate part of herself had recognized it too. She wondered if it was her fairy part that was initially drawn to him. Indeed, it was only days after she took Eric's blood that the light in her hands began to manifest. Part of her hypothesized that taking blood from Eric had *activated* her in some way since, according to Jesus, at least one other aspect of her magic had seemed to respond to him as soon as his blood was in her body. If she'd been capable of using her light before, she'd certainly had a good reason when Rene had attacked her, but she didn't use it then. It was only *after* Eric's blood was inside of her that she'd instinctually raised her hands and shot at Maryann.

She flipped over again. She'd definitely *not* loved him when she saw him naked in the basement of Fangtasia with Yvetta. But she'd had one hell of a jealous moment, so she had obviously been well on her way.

Then over the next two days, she'd gone to Fangtasia to tell him about the tattoo, and he'd come to her house to save her from the Were. Those two days were confusing for her, but looking back, she had felt her attraction shifting to something else during that time. He'd been

sincere, charming and protective, and he'd opened up to her even though she could tell that a big part of him was almost afraid to.

He'd said that he was "risking everything" to tell her the truth about the Weres, and when she'd asked him what he meant, he talked about how he was somehow putting her into more danger by telling her. Now, she realized that she'd been witnessing his conflict between telling her the truth and keeping her safe, but in the dark. He'd opted for the former; she recognized now that his struggle those two nights had been because he loved her. She couldn't help but contrast Eric's actions to Bill's. Bill, it seemed, always wanted her in the dark—all in the name of love. Eric could have kept her in the dark and justified it the same way, but he hadn't. He'd told her about the Were's tattoo, he'd told her that Jackson referred to the place and not a person, and he'd sent Alcide to take her there—despite his obvious desire that she not go. Sookie whispered, "Please, Eric, don't fuck it up."

She returned to the question of *when* she had started loving Eric and suddenly had what Oprah Winfrey would call an "Ah-ha moment." She replayed the memory a few times and shook her head. Frustrated, she muttered to herself, "Of course, *that* would have to be the moment. Sookie Stackhouse, you are just one big walking, talking fiasco. I can't believe you fell in love with him *then*." She rolled her eyes at herself, right as her cell phone alarm beeped, preventing her from continued self-flagellation.

She got up, put on her robe, and took her chair back to its original spot. The chair, too, was perfect and comfortable, another addition by that frustrating, high-handed vampire that she'd fallen head over heels in love with at such an "f"-ed up moment.

She walked over to the clothesline and ran her hands along the sheets, pleased that they were all dry. She inhaled deeply, loving the scent of the fresh breeze trapped inside of them.

She couldn't help but hope that she'd managed to absorb some of that scent into her skin for Eric, even though he was currently a pain in her ass.

She grabbed the laundry basket and quickly took down the sheets.

Once inside, she downed a glass of water to rehydrate after being in the sun. It was 4:30, three and a half hours before Eric was coming, so she decided to prep for dinner. She'd opted to make a vegetable beef soup that Gran had been famous for, so she pulled out and began to chop up vegetables. Alcide interrupted her once with a knock on the door to bring her the empty glass he'd been using for water all day; he eyed her outfit a bit too closely, and Sookie unconsciously tightened her robe. Since he'd be leaving as soon as Bubba arrived, which was within the hour, he'd said his goodbyes then and assured her he'd be back before sunrise.

By 5:30 all the vegetables were prepped, and the meat had been cooked enough to drop it, along with everything else, into a large pot of beef stock. Sookie stirred in all the spices she remembered Gran using as she waited for the mixture to boil. Once it'd been boiling at a good rate for a few minutes, she turned down the heat to a simmer. The soup would be perfect by 8:00. Adele Stackhouse's philosophy about soups never failed. Just put in good ingredients and let everything percolate, she'd always said.

Sookie picked up the laundry basket and carried it toward the cubby. She pulled out the sheets to that bed and climbed down with them. After she had made the bed, she remembered the chains and went outside to grab them. As soon as she was outside, she noticed Bubba standing at the tree line and gave him a big wave.

Bubba used vampire speed to come over to her, "Good evenin', Miss Sookie." He eyed the chains warily. "Is them silver chains?"

Sookie looked at Bubba apologetically. “Yeah, but don’t worry Bubba. No one is gonna get silvered here anytime soon—not if I can help it. I had to use these to hold Eric down when that witch was doin’ that spell that made vampires want to go out in the sunlight.”

Bubba nodded. “I heard ‘bout that. Glad I wasn’t here then.” He continued to eye the chains.

“Well,” Sookie said, “I’ll just get these inside.”

Bubba nodded, looking grateful that the offensive material was going to be taken away. “Well, I’ll be close if you need me Miss Sookie. Mister Eric said he’ll be here at 8:00, and I’ll do my huntin’ after that.”

Sookie smiled. “Thanks Bubba.”

When she got the chains back inside, she didn’t really know where to put them. “Definitely not back in the cubby!” she said out loud.

Finally, she settled on the small closet that had always held her Gran’s shotgun and Jason’s guns when he’d lived there. Gran had always been a stickler for self-defense, and she’d made Sookie learn to use the shotgun and a handgun when she was thirteen. Sookie had actually become really good with them over the years as Gran insisted she practice and then learn to clean the weapons. Sookie was pleased to see the shotgun tucked in next to the water heater where Gran had always kept it. The closet was relatively free of dust, so she guessed that Eric’s little cleaning teams had been in there too. She put the chains in the closet, and then picked up the shot gun, pleased to see it clean and in good shape as well. She checked and found it loaded; there was an almost full box of shells next to it in such a pristine looking box that she could only think of one source. For what must have been the one-thousandth time that night—since the

phrase had become her mantra as she had cut vegetables—Sookie muttered, “Don’t fuck it up, Northman.”

She put the gun back in place and closed the closet door before putting the sheets on the two remaining beds.



However, Bill had painted Eric as absolute evil, someone to be feared and avoided at all costs. Yet Bill had dumped his own child off on Eric for a while. And Bill had taken her to Eric after the Maenad attack. He would have done neither if he really thought Eric was evil. Again, Bill had been purposely trying to mislead her about something. Sookie sighed ruefully.

The most disturbing thing about the tie in her mind, however, was that it had prevented her from **mourning Gran’s death**. Now that she’d actually spent some time with Bill without his blood in her, she recognized that the tie had mostly likely been what had drawn her to him the night after Gran had died; she’d literally felt compelled to run into his arms. She’d believed that no one else could help her. Looking back with the lights of her mind fully on, she knew that Bill had tricked her into taking more of his blood that night too. After that, her grief had been supplanted with an increased fixation, almost obsession, with loving Bill. And she had never examined any of her feelings for him; she felt like hitting herself for her past inability to question how exactly she’d fallen in love with the man who had seemed so creepy and rude outside of Merlotte’s after she’d saved him or thought she’d saved him from the Rattrays, the man who had let Malcolm and his nest mates paw her, and the man who had asked to kiss her just moments after he’d been going to feed on Malcolm’s human, Jerry. There had been a hundred signals that he was not the charming Southern suitor he was pretending to be, and she’d recognized many of them, but when it came to actions, she had always NOT followed her instincts. She’d quickly overlooked all the warning signs that came with Bill.

Back and forth

Chapter 43: Don't Fuck It Up, Northman

At about 7:00, Sookie stood in front of the mirror in her new bedroom and took in her appearance. She'd chosen dark blue jeans that were just as much about comfort as they were about curves and another long-sleeved T-shirt, this one in red. She thought it set off her tan well and she knew that Eric liked red, but other than that, she'd not really tried to dress herself up. She had on a little mascara and a little lip gloss, the only items she'd worn for Bill as well.

However, instead of putting on perfume as she had the night before, she'd decided to let the sunlight do the talking, so to speak. She pulled on a pair of socks and her trusty tennis shoes. Then, she put her hair into a comfortable messy bun just as she'd done the night before. She took a deep breath, knowing the next several hours would determine the rest of her life in so many ways. "Don't fuck it up, Northman," she said one last time as she opened the little drawer and looked at the pendant and silver again.

She glanced over her list one more time and set her little notebook on the coffee table. She grabbed the two now flowerless vases, rinsed them out, dried them, and put them away. She thought about how Eric must have bought them since there were definitely no surviving vases after the Maryann situation.

She set the table, similar to how she'd done it the night before. She put a bowl next to the microwave and stirred the soup, enjoying the smell of it wafting through the room. Most of all, she tried to keep her nerves in check.

At precisely 7:59, there was a knock at the door.

Sookie opened it and saw Eric shifting nervously on the porch, his back to her. He spoke low, and she could barely hear him, "All the way over here, I've been telling myself that I'd

better not fu—I mean muck—this up, and now that I’m here, I find myself,” he paused, “pensive.”

“Sounds oddly familiar,” Sookie muttered as Eric turned around. He looked at her from head to toe, a large grin spreading onto his face as he did.

“Did you spy on me?” she asked indignantly, placing her hands on her hips as she took in his appearance. He was wearing a pair of dark blue jeans in the same shade as hers, though his were most definitely not bought at Target like hers had been. His T-shirt was also a similar shade to her own; moreover, it was a V-neck, just like hers. He wore black boots with his signature leather jacket.

Eric laughed, “I swear, I did not. However, now that I think of it, I could have just checked the footage from the camera I installed in your bedroom.” Eric’s eyes twinkled in mirth waiting for Sookie to take the bait. He didn’t have to wait long.

“You didn’t!” she screeched.

After a dramatic pause, Eric looked saddened, “No, I’m afraid you returned before that part of my dastardly plan came to fruition.”

As she sighed in relief, he smiled sincerely at her. “You do look lovely in red, Sookie.” He handed her a bunch of yellow flowers of all different varieties. “Is it in there?” he asked playfully.

Knowing that he was asking if her favorite flower was in the bouquet, she shook her head.

He shrugged, “Oh well, process of elimination.”

She smiled and turned on her heel, heading inside.

He followed her in without needing an invitation. “You always were particularly clever, Sookie,” he said as he closed the door. “Did you rescind his yet?”

Sookie turned around again, “Of course,” she smiled. “I did it right after he left last night.”

“And when did I get mine?”

“At the same time he did.”

“Pam too?”

“Of course.”

“Savvy, savvy Sookie,” he said following her to the dining room. He leaned comfortably against the door frame as she got her favorite of the two vases out from its spot. She put the flowers in the vase, added some water, and then handed the arrangement to Eric, who looked around before taking the flowers to the coffee table in the living room.

Sookie popped his blood into the microwave and filled a soup bowl for herself after turning off the burner. The soup smelled heavenly. “I gave the daisies to Gran,” she said as he sat down unbidden at the place she’d obviously set for him. “I take it the other one was from you—the one you took from my arrangement the other day?” She peeked at him from the kitchen.

“Of course, min kära, I always find that it is important to ingratiate myself to the family,” he said with a wink.

Sookie laughed. “Gran would have liked that,” she said as she brought the bowl in with a potholder since it was very hot to the touch. By the time she had put it down and turned around, Eric was pulling the TruBlood out the microwave and giving it a shake. Sookie had a seat as Eric poured his blood into the goblet and grabbed Sookie’s potholder, taking both it and the

empty bottle to the kitchen. He was halfway back before he turned around as if remembering something important.

“Pam gave me a message for you,” he said from the kitchen as he rinsed the bottle and threw it into the recycling bin just as she’d asked him to do the last night he’d stayed with her.

“What was that?” she asked as he took his seat opposite her.

“She told me to tell you that she feels in need of a ladies’ night—or at least a shopping spree using *my* credit card—in order to make up for the year you were gone when she had to, and I quote, ‘Put up with all my whininess’.”

“Well I could use more clothes,” Sookie said as she dug in. “I was lookin’ at my post-Maenad wardrobe today, and it’s pretty paltry.”

Eric took a drink of his blood, sitting easily into the back of his chair and stretching out a bit. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “Mmmmm. Turnips, carrots, rutabagas, okra, potatoes, tomatoes, parsley, parsnips, green beans, jasmine rice, beef, pepper—a lot of pepper—salt, oregano, and is that a pinch of cinnamon?”

“Yes,” Sookie said amazed at his nose, “but you forgot one.”

“No,” he said playfully. “I’m just choosing to ignore the fact that you put garlic in your soup when you knew you were having a vampire guest.”

“But it’s *so* much better with garlic, and I halved the amount in the recipe,” Sookie said teasingly.

Eric laughed.

“Are vampires really allergic to garlic?”

“Most,” Eric said, “but I have found that I do not share that particular problem. It’s not really an allergy anyway. It just makes the blood taste odd to most; it is irritating more than

anything else, according to Pam. However, since my sense of smell has always been so strong, I have learned to become accustomed to things like garlic, which can linger in the blood for many days, actually.

Sookie took a deep breath, “Does it bother you to be around me—when I eat?”

Eric shook his head, “I admit that I am not fond of the smell of what you humans call fast food. The scent of the overused cooking oil is bothersome. But I quite like the smell of some human food, especially things like your soup, which reminds me of my childhood days when my mother used to make such concoctions. Of course, she used different herbs, but many of the vegetables were the same. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, it’s just Bill. He doesn’t like to be around human food at all. I believe my casserole last night almost made him choke on his TruBlood.”

Eric laughed. “Well Bill is quite young; perhaps he is simply not used to it. I will have to ask Pam if it irritates her. But I’ve never had that problem. In fact, I have always enjoyed smelling the different ingredients in foods, as long as everything is fresh. Rotten food, I’m afraid, is very unpleasant to me.”

“What are your favorite foods to smell?” Sookie asked, her bowl almost halfway empty already.

“Peaches,” Eric said without hesitation. “I have peach trees put into the yards at most of my homes just so that I can smell them ripening.”

“Mmm, I love peaches too,” Sookie smiled.

“Good,” Eric returned, “because the gardener for the house is going to put some in when the season is right. I thought that in the back yard beyond the clothesline might be a good spot, but now that you are back, you will, of course, be making the decisions about that.”

Sookie shook her head and spoke evenly, her voice full of mirth, “You are a high-handed and frustratin’ vampire. What if I don’t want peach trees? What if I don’t want a gardener?”

Eric looked a bit taken aback and then mirrored her tone, “You are a stubborn and frustrating human, and an even more stubborn and frustrating fairy. And, of course, you’d want peach trees! You just said that you love them.”

Sookie feigned a look of frustration, “There you go—usin’ my own words against me.”

They laughed for a moment and then settled into silence as Sookie finished. “Do you want more?” Eric asked getting up. “I could get it without the potholder.”

“But you’d burn yourself.”

“Not really. It wouldn’t be bad enough even to hurt.”

“Fine, I’ll take half a bowl, but use the potholder.”

“Frustrating woman,” Eric muttered as he went into the kitchen.

Sookie was pleased to see that he returned carrying the bowl with the potholder though.

He settled back into his chair.

“What other foods do you like to smell?”

“I like the smell of honey very much,” he said quietly looking at her. “I like the sweetness of it.”

“I smell like honey to you,” she said just as quietly.

“Yes—I wonder sometimes if that part is my imagination turning you into the perfect woman for me.”

A slow smile spread on Sookie’s face. “What else?”

“I like blackberries; they remind me of home, actually. And I like the smell of fresh kale.”

“That’s like a heavier version of lettuce, right?”

Eric nodded and then looked at her intensely. “None of these smells comes close to the way you smell tonight, min kära. I know you don’t like the thought of everyone smelling you all the time, but I’m finding it difficult not to bury my nose into your hair. You smell exquisite.”

“I lay out in the sun today. I took a shower before I went out so I wouldn’t wash off part of the smell.”

“You did this for me?” Eric asked, his voice heavy with emotion.

“Yes, I thought you’d like it.”

“I do—very much. May I?”

Sookie nodded as Eric rose and walked slowly over to her side of the table. He bent so that he was on his knees, and she shifted in her chair so that she was facing him. They looked at each other for a long moment as Sookie reached back to pull her hair out of the bun, shaking it gently around her head. Eric’s eyes dilated just a bit as he took unnecessary inhalations. Very slowly he raise himself up and moved his face so that his nose was touching her neck lightly; he smoothly gathered some of her loosened hair into his hands, bringing that to his nose as well, and then he breathed in long and slow.

Sookie felt her pulse racing and goose bumps rising as Eric leaned into her body. She’d shared many physical pleasures—most of them with the man on his knees before her—but for erotic moments, this one ranked right at the top of the list. She held her breath as Eric pulled away and looked her in the eyes, his intensity having grown even more.

His voice was low and full of reverence. “This is a beautiful gift you have given me, Sookie. Thank you.”

Eric rose and returned to his seat looking at Sookie no less intensely. After a few moments, he said, “Sookie, I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Then *don’t* fuck it up, Northman.”

Chapter 44: The Edge of the Ocean, Part I

[A/N: The titles for chapters 44-46 come from a song by Ivy called "Edge of the Ocean."]

Sookie had gathered up the few dishes from their dinner and had taken them to the kitchen. As she warmed another TruBlood for Eric and fixed herself another glass of iced tea, she looked at Eric, who was still sitting at the table, looking a bit shell-shocked.

“Why don’t you go on into the living room, and I’ll be in there in a sec, okay?” she said, her voice stirring him.

In moments, he was up and taking their drinks into the other room for her. She shook her head a bit as she put the lid onto the big pot of soup. There was enough left to freeze several portions, she thought happily.

As she sat on the couch opposite the one Eric had chosen, she noticed that they were sitting in the same positions they had been in after Tara had confronted them, telling Eric of all the bad things he’d done to her. She also noticed that he’d used coasters, a fact that almost had her melting before she’d even begun.

Sookie steeled herself and spoke, making her voice sound as business-like as she’d done with Bill the night before. “I think it’s only fair to warn you that I have a lot of questions to ask you tonight.”

Eric immediately understood Sookie’s tone. He was a businessman, after all. A smile spread onto his face. “You are being systematic—having a night of questions with Bill and then one with me before you deliberate about your decision. I like this Sookie, by the way, the one

that questions and doubts before making a decision. I hope to be able to answer anything you wish this evening, min kära. And if I cannot, I will tell you why I cannot.”

Sookie nodded and opened her notebook to the page that contained her questions, an act that gained her a half-smirk/half-smile from Eric. Sookie looked down at her list. “Okay, let’s start off easy; tell me all you know about blood ties. Tell me what they do and the effects they can have.” Sookie was nervous as she gazed at Eric. Dream Eric and Jesus had both told her a lot about ties, and Eric’s letter had also given her a bit of insight. However, Bill had been less than forthcoming. This question was the first major test to see if the real Eric would be 100% truthful.

Eric began immediately, “Ties are caused by the magic within a vampire. When given with intent, the blood can be a powerful tool of control for a vampire. The vampire can feel his blood running through the body of the human who has it. He can sense the human’s feelings—more and more with each new quantity of blood given—and he can locate the human. The blood causes the human to want to be loyal to the vampire because the blood work as the vampire’s agent in the human. There is an efficacy to the blood, an ability to influence the human, just as glamour might, but this kind of influence is much more subtle and insidious.”

Eric looked at Sookie to make sure she was following and then continued. “This part is important. A vampire must be careful about whom he gives his blood to. Any emotions felt by the human for the vampire will be amplified by the blood. So if the human hates the vampire and wishes him harm before the blood is given, those feelings will be heightened ten-fold. Vampires generally choose humans to tie with that are already attracted to them or that fear them. These feelings—when made stronger—are beneficial to the vampire. But even then, in normal ties, a vampire can work to strengthen the human’s devotion. A vampire does this by

activating his blood to cause dreams in the human; these dreams generally combine aspects of lust and danger, making the human fear the vampire even as he or she becomes more and more enthralled. For most vampires,” Eric said disdainfully, “this kind of devotion is thought to be very beneficial. Have you heard of Renfield?”

Sookie nodded her head.

“This character was based on a real human, just as Dracula himself was based on a real vampire. A strong vampire who forges a tie and continues to strengthen it by giving a lot of blood and dreams can eventually make this kind of devoted, though certainly insane follower. This type of individual was often used to protect the vampire during the day.”

“Did you ever have a Renfield?” Sookie asked shuddering.

“No,” Eric said with derision. “Godric taught me better ways to survive in the day, ways that didn’t involve counting on practically mindless beings. He always warned that tying a human too tightly would eventually backfire, and the vampire would be vulnerable. Also, I retained my lessons from my human father on negotiation, and Godric helped me learn to adapt to new situations and stay alive without the use of a Renfield.” Eric paused and then continued. “Godric taught me that the blood was sacred and gave his only a few times in his more than two thousand years. I have voluntarily given my blood to only six beings during my thousand years of existence. One was Godric, who needed it to heal once. The second was Pamela, the night I made her. The third was a Were, whom I was questioning about the tattooed Were pack. The fourth was you friend, Lafayette, whom I needed to help me sell the queen’s V.”

Sookie sighed in displeasure at this.

Eric explained further, despite knowing that Sookie would dislike what he was about to tell her, “Selling the V was such a dangerous enterprise that I wanted both Lafayette’s fear and

his allegiance to me. Since he already feared me, it was a perfect scenario. And he needed to be healed as well, and I hoped that my act would ingratiate myself to you in some way. My motives were for my own benefit, and I admit that I sent Lafayette dreams to make sure he stayed frightened.”

Eric looked down at his hands. “I stopped the dreams when I finally was able to get out of the hold of Sophie-Anne, and at this point, very little of my blood remains in Lafayette. In a few months, I will no longer be able to feel his emotions, and I will lose my ability to track him. I know that you think ill of me for doing this to your friend. I had other choices, but that one was the best I had at the time for both doing the queen’s bidding and furthering my goal to make you mine.”

Sookie listened carefully as Eric continued. “The sixth was your cousin, Hadley.”

“Hadley?”



Eric nodded. “I was using her to coerce the queen into telling me why she was so interested in you. It is how I discovered you were a fairy.”

“Hadley knew?”

“Yes—it seems that after tasting Hadley’s blood, Sophie-Anne questioned her about your family, hoping to find out why Hadley’s blood tasted so much better than a normal human’s

blood. After Hadley told the queen about your gift of telepathy, Sophie-Anne posited that you might both be part fairy. Your having telepathy bolstered the queen's theory, and she sent Compton to discover if she was right. Hadley was in the queen's confidence, and—in turn—it seems that your cousin gave Compton and Sophie-Anne information about you before Bill pursued you.”

The hurt on Sookie's face over finding out even more about the ways Bill had been able to worm his way into her life was clear. “Why did you give Hadley your blood?”

Eric sighed, “I bit your cousin in my attempt to force Sophie-Anne to tell me what she knew, and I had taken a lot of blood before Hadley herself told me. Since she was your cousin, I gave her some of mine to save her life.”

Sookie nodded and sighed deeply.

“Of course, the fifth person I gave my blood to was you. I guessed that you were attracted to me already in Dallas, but you also seemed to despise me at times, so the bombing actually gave me the perfect kind of opportunity to get my blood in you. I knew that you would refuse to remove the silver if you truly hated me, but you didn't refuse. Your basic kindness prevented you from hating me; in fact, after the church, I was certain you were beginning to trust me, a fact that I'm afraid the bullet trick squelched. But I was happy that my blood was in you. I intended to use it to make you even more attracted to me. The blood also increases the sexual appetite of the human, especially towards the donor vampire. So the blood tie was an ideal tool in my pursuit of you: I would be able to feel your emotions to some extent, to track you, to cause you to desire me, and to force you to dream about me. And you also had some cuts from the bomb and bruising from my falling on you. As you know, vampire blood heals and enhances the beauty and senses of the human for a time.”

“So you wanted to manipulate me with your blood?” Sookie knew the answer, but the hurt still shone in her voice.

Eric looked her in the eye. “I am not a good person, Sookie. For a millennia, I have survived because I put my own needs and desires above all others, except for Godric, perhaps. I wanted you to be mine—I wanted you with a fervor that I had never felt for anyone else before—so I found a way to get my blood into you. And I would have used it for my benefit if I had been able to, but as always with you, things did not go as I planned.”

He continued speaking, “That night after you had my blood, I was exhilarated. I enjoyed knowing you were near; the sensation of my blood in you made me feel something I now recognize as comfort. I could tell that I was *not* your favorite person at that moment, but I also knew for certain that you did not hate me. In fact, I felt that you cared for me. I have to say that I liked knowing that.”

Sookie smiled slightly, not having heard that part from Dream Eric.

“Then all my grand plans suddenly came tumbling down, as they tend to do where you are involved. I tried using my blood to make you come to me, but you did not. And then, I marshaled my strength and sent you a dream. I’m certain you dreamed of me that morning.”

Sookie nodded in confirmation.

“I stayed up into the day to send you the dream, but something happened that I did not expect: the dream did not conform to my wish to create lust and fear in you. It did not help me gain a foothold into you at all; in fact, it had the opposite effect. While you were dreaming, I was able to monitor your feelings, but they were not what I had tried to send through the blood. They were feelings of affection, camaraderie, and devotion for the most part. Later in the dream, there was something close to lust, but it felt different somehow, and it was also muted by guilt. I

was so confused by it that I immediately sent Lafayette a dream to test whether I was able to control the blood as I'd been told I would. Despite my physical distance from him, his reaction was exactly as I expected, so I went to my daytime rest baffled and anxious to discuss the situation with Godric.”

Sookie had heard enough. Eric's story and explanations rang with truth, and he wasn't holding back the parts that might make him look bad as Bill had done. If anything, he was doing the opposite. She let him off the hook, “And then Godric made you sit down and shut up after your little tirade. And then he told you that you'd formed a second type of tie with me either because your motives were selfless or because you loved me,” she smiled when she saw his mouth fall open in surprise.

He composed himself quickly and asked, “Dream Eric, I presume? Has he let any other deep, dark secrets slip? You have been testing me, haven't you, min kára?”

“Yes,” Sookie answered all three of his questions with a single word.

“And how am I doing?”

“So far, so good, but don't get overconfident, cowboy. You have a long way to go tonight.”

“Understood,” Eric said, a smile playing on his lips. “What else did dream me tell you?”

“For one, he told me when it was that you fell in love with me.”

Eric laughed, “Yes, Godric's theories caused me to become a self-analyst where that question was concerned. It took me a while to arrive at the answer.”

“So just to confirm, why don't you tell me again,” Sookie prompted with a sly smile.

Eric relaxed into the couch, putting his arms up on the back of it on either side. His eyes were sparkling with merriment. “I fell in love with you on another night when you'd taken on

this delicious business-like demeanor. You were in my bar to help me catch a thief. You were surrounded by vampires, and you were dressed in a virginal white dress, though by then Compton had unfortunately taken that gift from you.” Eric’s eyes darkened, “For that act alone, I have fantasized about killing him.”

“Don’t kill anyone on account of me, Eric—ever!”

“I know, min kära. I know that you do not want me to kill for you, but if something is threatening you, like that Were was, I will kill it,” he said these words with certainty. “I am a killer; you know this about me, and you saw me do it to the witches when they threatened my kind. I kill drainers in my area as well. I cannot apologize for these acts or for the times when I am likely to kill again to keep you, Pam or myself safe. But I do not kill unless I have to, and I will not kill Compton or others you care about unless they try to kill me or you. I promise.”

Sookie saw the truth in Eric’s eyes. She had already resolved to love this part of his nature, along with everything else. “Just try to keep it to a minimum; as long as it’s for self-defense, that’s okay, but don’t go killin’ anyone because they did something you don’t like or that I don’t like! Agreed?”

Eric chuckled. “Agreed.” He paused, “This is what I fell in love with. You can be sitting in a room full of killers and you show no fear. You negotiated for the lives of all the humans you discovered with your telepathy with a thousand-year-old vampire, and you were not going to have it any other way than *your* way. That is the moment that something happened to me—that something changed in me. I did not see it as love until much later, but from that moment on, my main thoughts have been about you and then about us.”

“So is that why you love me—because I’m good at negotiating?” Sookie knew what Eric’s answer would be, but a girl likes to hear it anyway.

“Oh, you are *good* at a lot of things,” Eric said suggestively. “But your fiery, stubborn nature is my favorite. You challenge me, and though I have always hated being challenged by anyone else, I loved it when you challenged me—right from the start. When you slapped me that morning at Fangtasia, I admit to practically cumming in my pants.”

“Stop right there, mister,” Sookie said, her face turning as red as her shirt. “I don’t want to hear that kind of talk.”

“But it is the truth, Sookie,” Eric said playfully as he leaned forward. “I wanted to kiss you so badly in that moment. And my fangs did not come down out of anger, I can assure you of that!”

Sookie shook her head at the vampire before her and fanned herself.

Eric spoke again, the seriousness back on his face. “I love other things about you too. Would you like to hear them?”

Sookie nodded.

“I love that you are loyal to your friends and those you love, that you would sacrifice yourself for them even though I get frustrated by your extreme recklessness.”

Sookie snorted as Eric continued, “You have a warrior’s heart that rivals my own. I love that you ran out of Fangtasia to save me from burning despite what I had done and what you must have thought of me. I loved the expression on your face as you shot Russell with the light in your hands and told him to watch his ‘fucking language.’ I love that you make me laugh and that you understand my humor, which is—*difficult*—for some to get. I love that you sat in the sun today with me in mind so that you would smell of its light. I love that you think about me like that; nobody has cared for me in that way—ever. I love the quiver in your lips when I say

something you like, like right now, but I do not like your tears, even when they fall in your happiness, so I'm going to stop talking now.”

Sookie looked at Eric. Her lips were indeed quivering and tears were threatening to fall. “In the first dream I ever had about you—the one you tried unsuccessfully to manipulate—I told you that all your cold-heartedness was an act. I told you that you were just a big faker.”

“I am, Sookie, but only with you.”

“That’s what you told me in the dream too.”

Eric chuckled, lightening the mood a bit, “I think I would like this Dream Eric character. He seems to be quite smart. Is he as good looking as I am?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Sookie said teasingly as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She got serious again, “Do you also love me for the taste of my blood.”

Eric nodded. “I do. Blood, for better or worse, is my lifeline. It is the conduit of the magic that animates my body, and yours is the best I have ever had in my life, but when I take it, it is not just about nourishment or physical pleasure, Sookie. It is hard to describe, but when I’ve taken your blood—all three times I have tasted you—I felt as if our very essences, what makes us who we are, have linked together. I love your blood’s taste, to be sure, but it is the feeling that your blood gives me that stirs me most.”

“Good answer, Northman,” Sookie murmured. “I liked yours too, you know.”

“My blood?”

“Yeah, the taste and the way it made me feel.”

“What does it taste like to you?”

“Ironically—given the fact that you can be an arrogant, high-handed, and downright frustratin’ ass—it’s sweet, kinda like dark chocolate.”

“And you like dark chocolate?” Eric asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, very much,” Sookie grinned at him.

“So, may I ask *you* a question, or is it just your show?” Eric asked.

“You may *ask*,” Sookie said rather formally, her voice teasing him.

“When did you fall in love with me? Was it in the basement of Fangtasia when you saw my not so little companion?”

Sookie’s blush was back. “No! Your gracious plenty did *not* make me fall in love with you!”

Eric actually roared in laughter, “Oh, min kára, it has been called many things in a thousand years, but that has to be my favorite.”

Sookie looked sternly at Eric, “You need to learn to keep your ego and your little ‘companion’ in check.”

“With labels like the one you just gave me, Sookie, that’s going to be very *hard*.”

Sookie giggled.

“So if it was not seeing my ‘gracious plenty’ that made you realize you loved me, when was it?” he asked again.

“It’s embarrassing,” Sookie said, looking away. “Dream Eric asked me this same question last night, but I wasn’t sure then. I spent all my time in the sun today figuring it out, and it’s just too embarrassing.”

“Oh, now I must know then,” said Eric, his eyes dancing.

Sookie looked at her hands. “I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this. It is like the worst time that I could have fallen for you, but I’m certain this is when it happened. It’s just so ‘f’-ed up!”

Eric looked at her seriously. “You don’t have to tell me if it upsets you, Sookie. It’s enough that you loved me.”

“I *do* love you, Eric,” Sookie said significantly.

“Present tense, min kära?” Eric asked softly, his voice almost shaking.

“Yes, present tense.” She smiled at him. “It was not just the blood.”

Eric smiled, a sincere, beautiful, heart-rending smile.

Sookie looked at that smile and spoke, “I knew that I was in love with you the moment you told me that you cared nothing for me when we were in Russell’s mansion.”

Eric looked surprised. “Then?”

“Yeah, I told you it was screwed up. But it had been coming on for a while. You were right; after Dallas, I really began to care about you. Then in the days before I left for Jackson, I knew that I really did like you—that I enjoyed your company, that I felt safe with you. And then when you said you didn’t care, it broke my heart. It couldn’t have been broken like that if it wasn’t already yours, so that is when I knew—even though, like you, I kept trying to push it to the side.”

She continued, “When I came to your office at Fangtasia, you were wrong when you told me that I was only there to find out about Bill. I was not pretending to care about you; I was pretending *not* to care. And then you kissed me—as if you were kissing me goodbye—and I felt like my whole world was gonna fall in on itself. And then, of course, you had to go and screw things up.”

“By chaining you up in the basement.”

“Yes—why did you do that anyway?”

“When Pam called me out of the office after our kiss, she begged me to do something—anything—to save myself. She told me to give you to Russell, but I refused. I was truthful later when I said that I would *never* have given you up to him like that. But then she suggested that I figure out a way to use you, and in that moment, I did. I knew that I could entrap him with the promise of your blood. I knew from Bill that your blood would indeed let us walk in the sun, but only for a few minutes. So for you and for the memory of my family, I resolved to remove the Russell problem.”

“Even though you knew you’d have to kill yourself in the process.”

“Yes,” Eric said quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have helped you.”

“I know, *min kära*, but I had a few reasons. First, Russell is one of the oldest vampires I know of, which makes him difficult to deceive. I was almost caught by him several times, and if you gave the plan away, we all would have died. I am sorry; I should have trusted you. I know better now, I hope,” he finished contritely.

“Why else didn’t you say anything?”

“I could feel your emotions to some extent, remember? I didn’t know if you loved me then, but I could feel that you cared for me. I knew that you would have tried to stop me if I told you what I planned.”

“Damned straight!” Sookie said. “I don’t want you sacrificin’ yourself for me, and it’s a bad habit you have—first at the church in Dallas and then with Russell.”

Eric chuckled. “See what I mean? You would not have let me do it; you would have tried to save me and would have ended up dying. No—by not telling you, I made sure that you

wouldn't do anything heroic. Plus, it would have been easier for you to hate me rather than care for me if I had died."

"So when you chained me up in Fangtasia, it *was* to try and protect me."

"Yes."

Sookie reached over and slapped Eric's arm. "Well stop doin' that kind of thing! I mean it! You don't get to decide how you want me to feel about you. You don't get to try to keep me from talkin' you out of meetin' your final death, and you don't get to make decisions that will take you away from me—ever again! We could have planned to do what I did anyway—run to your rescue after Russell had fallen for your trap. And we could have had donor blood ready for you to make sure you got enough to heal. We could have been better prepared!"

Eric smiled. "You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met, but you are also right."

"Well, you are the most high-handed man I have ever met, so I guess we are even."

"Like I said, *min kära*, I have learned my lesson from the encounter with Russell. It is always better to have you fighting by my side."

"Damned skippy!" She paused for a moment as they shared a smile. "Okay. I have more questions."

Eric chuckled, "I had no doubt."

"These next few won't be pleasant for either of us."

Eric nodded and gestured for Sookie to ask them.

"Did you call Lorena to come to Dallas?"

"Yes," Eric answered with no hesitation. "I knew that she was a possessive maker and that her fixation with Bill bordered on the insane. I thought that she would take him and that you would be left alone. I was willing to do whatever it took to make you mine, as I said before, and

she was just a means to that end, or so I thought. But she turned out to be an error in judgment on my part. She wasn't able to re-bind Bill to her side, and I soon realized she might be a danger to you when she barged into Godric's home. I would have killed her if Godric had not banished her. And then, like a bad penny, she reappeared in Mississippi, again a danger to you. Calling her was a mistake because it put you in jeopardy, and for that, I am sorry."

"But you don't regret doing that to Bill, do you?"

"No," Eric answered truthfully. "To be honest, I don't like Bill—never have. I went to him before the Maenad attacked you to request your help in Dallas, but he refused, even though you had promised me your services in exchange for our agreement about humans. I had been showing him a courtesy by approaching him first, but he showed me none, and I was his sheriff. It was then that I began to suspect that he was not being perfectly honest concerning his intentions toward you. He had talked about the need to protect you as if it were some kind of edict before, so I began to suspect Sophie-Anne's involvement—though I had no proof until much later. Even on your porch that night when I forced his confession about the queen, my charge about the drainers was purely an educated guess."

Eric paused to let his point sink in and then he admitted, "So my calling Lorena was partially motivated by my desire to pay Bill back for his disrespect of me and my position. Perhaps this was a petty reason, but then again, as Pam likes to say, all men really are 5 year olds in some ways."

Sookie nodded in agreement before asking her next question, "What would you do if I chose Bill or Alcide and not you?"

Eric looked down, the look of defeat—like he'd had in her dreams—brimming in his eyes. "I would do the hardest thing I would ever have to do in my life, Sookie. I would accept

your choice and back away from you. I would stay close in order to make sure you were protected, using resources like Bubba, but I would try not to be near you or to make you uncomfortable in any way. I would watch from the sidelines as you gave your love to another.”

Eric was quiet a moment before continuing, “I have thought a lot in the last few days about whether I would even be the wisest choice for you. Perhaps someone like Alcide is more appropriate, someone you could enjoy your sunlight with, someone who could father children for you. That is not possible for us, *min kára*, and you must think of these things.”

“I already have,” Sookie said quietly, “and I don’t want Alcide. For one thing, I can hear his thoughts too often, and I don’t always like what I hear. And he doesn’t want Were children, so I wonder if he could even accept any children we would have if they carried on my traits. No—I have decided that I cannot be with a human or a Were romantically; I don’t want to spend my life having to keep my shields at full strength. With you, I can relax and just be. You and Bill spoiled me to this.”

“And children?”

“I won’t rule out artificial insemination or something like that, but I cannot imagine being intimate with a human or Were. The touching and emotions would make my shields non-existent. It just wouldn’t work. And right now, I’m not sure that I want children; it doesn’t feel right puttin’ a child into the middle of the danger I face from fairies and other Supes. And I don’t know if I’d want to risk passin’ along the telepathy. I know you see it as an asset, but it has always been kind of a curse too.”

Eric nodded.

“And don’t worry; I’m not going to choose Bill either. I don’t love him.”

Eric looked relieved. “So when the tie went away . . . ,” he started.

“. . . the love went away too,” Sookie completed.

Eric smiled.

Sookie hurriedly said, “Don’t get cocky again. I still haven’t decided if I want *any* man right now, okay?”

Eric nodded again, though he was still smiling, “You cannot stop me being a bit ‘cocky’, Sookie. After all, you have just told me that I am the one that you love and that the others who would have your affections have no shot at getting them.”

Sookie sighed in mock frustration. “Okay, but I still have more questions for you. For example, can you be faithful to me if we are together? Can you avoid sex *and* blood from others?”

Eric’s expression sobered as he answered immediately, the sincerity washing over him, “I *will be* faithful to you, Sookie. I will not have another woman—or man—as long as we are together. I will never need one if I have you. As I said before, I am ruined for others. And I am an old vampire and can exist on less blood than others. If we are together, I will feed on no others. I will have TruBlood, and if you will allow, your blood, but nothing else unless it is in battle or in the case of an emergency when I would die otherwise. I have not slept with another since we were together, and even before that—after you disappeared—I have had very few encounters in the last year or so. I have wanted only you for a long time now, and others are mere shadows. As far as blood goes, most humans’ blood now tastes as dull and unappetizing as TruBlood to me. It is a way to get nourishment, but it is not satisfying as it once was. So I am ruined in that way too.”

Sookie was struck by Eric’s answer and the sincerity behind it. Of all the things she

thought she'd never see, one was a monogamous Eric Northman. She smiled. Just as she was about to speak, Eric's phone rang.

He cursed in Swedish and looked at the number, "Bubba?" Eric answered as he picked up the phone. "Yes, come in," he said after Bubba said a few words.

"Sorry, Sookie, but Bubba wishes to come in for a moment; he has smelled someone around your home this evening, which is very odd because I have not."

Sookie looked worried, but Eric reassured her. "Do not fear, min kära. I will not allow harm to come to you."

Bubba knocked on the door. Eric answered and stepped to the side, allowing Bubba entry. The King of Rock smiled fondly at Sookie and gave a little bow to Eric.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your evenin', but I had not heard any noise in here all night, and I wanted to check to make sure you were all right. I smelled another vampire had been outside when I got back from huntin', and I wanted to check on Miss Sookie."

"That's good, Bubba," Eric said. "Did you recognize the other vampire's scent?"

"Sure did," Bubba said proudly. "You know that I'm a good tracker."

"Yes Bubba," Eric agreed. "That's what makes you an excellent guard."

"Thanks," Bubba said even more proudly. "The other vampire I smelled was King Bill."

Just then, Sookie's cell phone rang. She looked down at the number and saw that Bill was calling. Eric gestured for Bubba to be silent and then told Sookie to answer it, "Bill?"

"Sookie, thank God you are okay," Bill's voice said on the other end of the line. Eric's sharp ears caught every word.

“I was informed by my guards that Eric’s corvette was at your home this evening. I had told them to do a routine security check of your property since Bubba is notoriously apt to wander off.” Bubba looked upset at that, and Eric put his hand on the other vampire’s shoulder in a silent gesture of support.

“I’m just fine, Bill.”

“Well, when my guards told me about Eric’s presence, I wanted to check on your welfare, so I asked that they knock on your door. Nobody answered, and I became concerned, as you might imagine, given Eric’s violent history.”

“Bill, I’ve told you Eric won’t hurt me.”

“Perhaps not the Eric that had lost his memories, but we cannot forget how Eric is generally.”

Sookie shook her head and then lied, “Don’t worry, Bill. I am home now and just fine. In fact, Eric did come by earlier this evening, and we did leave the house to take a little flight, but I got cold and we returned. Then, he got an urgent call from Pam and left quickly. He said he would come and pick up his car tomorrow evening. He was here for only about twenty minutes all told. He didn’t even stay for dinner!”

Eric’s eyes grew bigger at every lie Sookie told.

“In fact,” Sookie finished off, “I was just headin’ for bed, so I’ll see you Friday evening, Bill.”

“I shall look very forward to that, Sookie.”

“Bye Bill.” Sookie hung up before Bill could say anything else.

Sookie was fuming, so Eric went into command mode. “Bubba, I want you to go outside and do a quick sweep to make sure no humans nor vampires are currently on the property or within sight or sound.”

Bubba left the house quickly and came back in about a minute. “Ain’t nothing out there, Mister Eric.” He turned around to a still fuming Sookie and said sincerely, “And Miss Sookie, I just want you to know that I would never wander off if I was protecting you. Mister Eric gave me an hour to go off further into those woods back there to do some huntin’ while he was visitin’, so I knew you were safe and sound the whole time. Otherwise, I would have caught King Bill’s smell right away.”

Sookie put her anger to the side and then kissed Bubba on the cheek. “I know Bubba; you did just as you were supposed to. Thank you.”

Bubba beamed as Eric said, “Bubba, you can go back outside now, but stay close for now. And let me know if anyone else comes into range of the house.”

“Sure thing, Mister Eric,” Bubba said before zooming away. Eric walked out of the front door, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Sookie saw him look quickly into the direction of Bill’s house before he turned around and rejoined her inside, latching the door behind him.

Eric looked at Sookie carefully, “In a moment I want you to tell me what has you so angry, but for now, I will tell you what I smell outside. There have been no human guards on your property tonight. There are currently five humans on the perimeter of Compton’s property, but they have not gone beyond his property line. The only fresh human scents I smell are from you, Lafayette and Jesus. Alcide was here today, as you know. Compton’s scent is very clear, and it is fresh—obviously from tonight. He circled the house a few times, probably about half an hour ago—well after I had arrived. He did not step onto your front or back porch, though he was

close to doing so. I don't know why I didn't smell him while he was here or why he misled you on the phone, but I'm hoping that you can help me with those answers."

Sookie nodded. "Jesus came by today and put a spell up around the inside of the house. It is designed to prevent people from hearing or seeing inside, a kind of privacy spell. It must still be working, and it must go both ways, keeping you from smelling what's outside too."

Eric nodding, understanding Sookie's anger. "So you think he came over here to listen to us—to spy on us—but the spell thwarted his efforts?"

"Yes," Sookie said bitterly. "I think he guessed that you would be coming here tonight as he did last night. Bill did everything he could last night to convince me that he was the good guy and you were out only for yourself, but he's the one that lied to me, and let me tell you, he's not a good liar."

"No, he's not," Eric agreed.

They looked at each other and said at the same time, "His eyes twitch!"

They laughed.

The mischievous glint back in his eye, Eric smirked, "So you told him a story that would support my having a lack of care for you and one that would also explain the continued presence of my car."

"Yes," Sookie said conspiratorially.

"Clever."

Nwalmn



"Oh, you are good at a lot of things," Eric said suggestively. "But your fiery, stubborn nature is my favorite. You challenge me, and though I have always hated being challenged by anyone else, I loved it when you challenged me right from the start. When you slapped me that morning at Fangtasia, I admit to practically cumming in my pants."

"Stop right there, mister," Sookie said, her face turning as red as her shirt. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk."

"But it is the truth, Sookie," Eric said playfully as he leaned forward. "I wanted to kiss you so badly in that moment. And my fangs did not come down out of anger, I can assure you of that!"

Back and Forth

Chapter 45: The Edge of the Ocean, Part 2

Sookie returned to the couch after taking care of her human needs—as Eric called it. When she got back, there was a fresh glass of tea on the coffee table, and Eric was building a fire for them. Sookie watched him work for a few minutes in silence appreciating how his glorious ass looked in his jeans.

She finally spoke to distract herself, “If I need a daytime guard after Friday, will you get someone other than Alcide?”

“Certainly, min kära,” he answered. Then his expression darkened. “Has the Were done anything to offend you?”

“Hey Mister,” Sookie chided. “Remember the rule: no violence just because someone says or does somethin’ you or I don’t like.”

Eric smiled evilly, “I never agreed to no violence, Sookie, just no killing.”

“Well I’m adding to the rule then,” Sookie said.

Eric laughed, “Frustrating woman.” Then he grew serious again, “I do wish to know why you want someone other than Alcide though.”

“Well, for one thing, Alcide wants me.”

“I know,” Eric sighed.

“Yes, and that will get uncomfortable after I tell him I don’t want him romantically. I can be his friend, but nothing else.”

“What’s the other thing?”

“Well he pretty much hates you, and I love you, so I don’t like people dissin’ you for no good reason.”

Eric’s face lit up, “You are so feisty when you get protective, my lover. I love it.”

“Anyway,” Sookie rolled her eyes playfully at him. “We need to get back to your questions.”

“Okay. Keep ‘em coming. It’s only midnight, and I am at your disposal until dawn.”

Sookie smiled, “What do you miss the most about the time when you had your amnesia, about those days you spent with me?”

Eric leered at her.

Sookie added quickly, “I mean other than the sex, that is.”

Eric smiled playfully and then answered, “Well it was such a strange time for me; I didn’t know myself, and then there was the witch’s threat, but I enjoyed many things about that time.”

“But what do you miss most?”

Eric became thoughtful. “I spent a morning in the sun for the first time in a thousand years. I saw the sunlight glint in the ripples of the water. I saw wild flowers that open only in the sun. I felt the heat of its rays on my skin, warming me. I thought the world was as perfect as it could be, and then I saw you standing there. I will always remember the sunlight in your hair, *min kära—always*. It was the most beautiful sight I have ever beheld.” A red tear escaped from Eric’s eyes, surprising him. He quickly wiped it away.

Sookie smiled, “So that morning in the sun is what you miss the most.”

“No,” Eric shook his head. “It probably should be, but it is not.”

“What is it then?” Sookie prompted.

“It happened several times, actually,” Eric started, “but, like you and your story from before, this is a bit embarrassing for me.”

“Why?”

“Well, it probably has to do with what Pam would call ‘man issues’.”

“Yet it’s still your favorite part about that time?”

Eric nodded. “It was those times when you held me.”

“But we held each other a lot, Eric,” Sookie said confused.

“No, it was when you held me, when I would lay on your stomach or chest listening to your heart and your breathing. You would be touching my hair or caressing my shoulders and face. *You* were holding *me* then; I was not holding you, nor were we holding each other. In my human and vampire lives, Sookie, I have never allowed myself to be vulnerable to the point of allowing that, yet those moments rank as some of the most profound of my life. In them, I had a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of being in just the right place with just the right person.” Another tear dripped from Eric’s eyes even as one made its way down Sookie’s cheek.

“I felt that way too, Eric,” she said, her lips trembling.

He wiped his second tear away less hurriedly than the first. They shared an intense look of understanding before Sookie continued, “If we decide to be together, what will our life be like? Where would we live?”

Eric looked at the fire thoughtfully. “I have thought much about this, Sookie, since I no longer wish to be parted from you. I would live where you wish, which, I believe, is here.”

Sookie nodded.

“I would have to make it more secure for us, especially in the daytime, and I would want to make our room light tight so that I could go to my rest next to you. I am a powerful sheriff, and that means that I will always have those who might wish me harm, so they might try to go through you to do that. You would have to accept permanent guards, which, I know you do not like. I would want you to try to hone your light power, so that you could protect yourself when I am not there. I would never wish you powerless, Sookie,” he reiterated forcefully.

He continued, “I would hand most of the day-to-day running of Fangtasia over to Pam and Chow, as I would no longer want to be displayed to the fangbangers as I have been. I would not wish to expose you to their jealous and angry thoughts either. I would still have to go there several nights a week to work in my office and conduct Area business, and I sometimes might wish for your presence to aid me with the human matters that come up, but I would spend much less time there. I conduct much of my area business via phone, computer and the occasional personal surprise visit anyway, but this house is already set up for wireless, and there is a secure hardline to the cubby.”

“High-handed vampire,” Sookie muttered, her lips turning up in a smile.

“As for the rest—as for *us*—I do not know how that would go, Sookie. I have never had a relationship like the one I wish to have with you. I want to be a husband to you Sookie. *That* is what I want if you will have it. I know it is not legal in this state yet, and I know it may take time for you to be ready for that, but I want you to be my wife, my help-mate, and my partner, for as long as you live. I also warn you that I will try to convince you to join me as vampire so that we can be together even longer than one lifespan. I fear that I will not want to go on if I lose you, min kára. I already feel unable to handle a world where you are not present as I did for the last year.”

Sookie’s throat tightened as tears glided freely down her cheeks, but Eric went on, “Pam was right. I was not in a good place the year you were not here. The only things that kept me from meeting the sun were a desire to stay with Pam and the hope that you would return to me.”

Sookie was openly sobbing now, but Eric finished, “And then after I bought this house, I turned myself to it, imagining it being our home, Sookie. I had such big plans in my head about us here.”

Sookie buried her face in her hands, unable to stop her cries. Eric rose and went to the kitchen to grab a clean towel for Sookie's tears. He bent down before her and gently began to wipe them as they looked into each other's eyes. Sookie hiccupped, "Just a couple more questions, okay?"

Eric nodded, "Of course, min kära." He handed her the glass of tea so that she could relieve her throat and added a piece of wood to the fire before returning to his seat.

Sookie finally composed herself and asked the question she'd been dreading all night, "Why did you glamour Lafayette, Jesus, and I'm guessing Jason too?"

Eric sighed, "Yes, it is time that you know everything. You will not like it, but I have been keeping something from you so that it could not influence the choice you were trying to make or prevent your finding out your true feelings. I am sorry that I have kept this from you, but I hope you can forgive me. The reason why you went through the blood breaking spell to start with was to have a clean slate. I kept from you what I am about to tell you because I wanted to give you that clean slate; you almost died to get it.

Sookie looked at Eric with apprehension and shock, "Almost died?"

"Yes," Eric said in a whisper, "and it would have been my fault if you had."

"Your fault? How?" Sookie asked.

"First, please know that I never intended you any harm and that as soon as I understood what was happening, I stopped what I had been doing."

"Tell me," Sookie whispered.

“As you know, the blood of vampires contains magic, and as the vampire voluntarily gives blood, a bit of that magic moves into the human. That is what makes the ties or bonds and what accounts for the connection between the human and the vampire.”

She nodded.

He continued, “The spell that Jesus and Lafayette did is known as the scorching spell among vampires because it literally incinerates the blood tie, which accounts for the pain that you went through that night.”

Sookie nodded again, “Yes, the pain was very bad.” She shuddered and looked into the fire.

“To work, the spell has to destroy the tie in both the human and the vampire. From what I have discovered, the spell first locates the vampire blood in the human host and isolates that blood; then the spell sort of latches on to the magic, which it then traces back to the original vampire donor.”

“Yeah,” Sookie confirmed. “Jesus said that the spell piggybacks on the vampire’s own magical force at that point and begins to seek out the tie in the vampire’s body.”

Eric continued, “And I’m sure that Jesus also told you that if the spell is stopped before completed, the human host will die because the spell will rebound onto the human and try to destroy the vampire magic there.”

Sookie nodded again. “Yes, he told Jason and me that before we did the spell.”

“Okay, as you may also know, the process of the spell generally takes between 5 and 10 minutes, as the witch’s spell must first find and then isolate the vampire blood and magic in the human and then trace the magic back to its source. Then, as I said, the witch’s magic must travel throughout the vampire’s body until the location of the tie is discovered. At that point, both

halves of the tie—the human’s and the vampire’s—are literally burned. The human, at that point, feels intense pain, which induces him or her to pass out. Thus, unconsciousness is seen as a sign that the spell has worked and the witches may stop chanting.”

Sookie nodded again. “I know all this from Jesus.”

“Good,” Eric said. “Pam questioned Jessica last night at Fangtasia when Bill was here. The normal process of breaking ties is precisely what happened with her and with Bill, according to what he told her. They were both awakened when the spell was begun, and Jessica said that she felt a sensation like there was an energy moving through her body. Bill was awakened at that point by Jessica’s distress, and they thought that the necromancer might somehow be back. Jessica said that the energy movement finally became localized in her body, and then she felt something akin to a momentary shock, realized her connection to Jason was gone, and then fell back into her day slumber. When she woke up, she felt that Jason might have died, but then she learned of the spell. Jessica thinks that her experience lasted about 3 minutes altogether. When she and Bill rose the next day, he talked about how his own experience had lasted a few minutes longer than hers, but he also felt the tie break with you to be like a momentary shock.”

“This isn’t what happened to you, is it?” Sookie asked worriedly.

“No,” Eric said slowly, “as always, you are very astute. As you know, when we exchanged blood the other day in the cubby, we began a blood bond. A bond is a type of tie, so Jesus’s spell worked on it, but as you also know, there’s a much more profound connection in a bond than there is with a tie.”

She nodded, the anxiety clear in her eyes.

“I told you of the experiences I had when I drank your blood; its taste was wonderful, but it also created feelings within me. There is a human song that compares a deep love connection

to the feeling of being *home*, that a beloved one can ‘feel like home’ to another. This is the only way I have to try to make you understand how it really felt when I took your blood into me. I had no memories or knowledge of ties or bonds in my state at the time, but my instinct fueled me to offer you my blood.”

“So when you said that we would be one . . .” Sookie started.

“. . . that was an instinct; I felt driven to make us one, Sookie. A bond forms instead of a normal tie if and only if two factors are present. The first is a true blood exchange, meaning that the exchanges are made within a short amount of time, literally the blood must be on both lips of the sharers in the same moment. Your blood was still on my lips as you drank from me that morning. The second factor is intent, and this protects both human and vampire. The vampire’s intent cannot be selfish if the blood is to bind. The vampire must love the human. In this way, the tie that we had at first was similar to the bond we made. The difference is that the human must also choose to bind himself or herself to the vampire. The human’s motives must be pure as well; there must be love from both for the bond to form. If there is not, then only a tie results. Do you follow?”

Sookie nodded again.

“I know that we formed a bond that morning because of our shared daydream. After I completed my work at Fangtasia last night, I did some research in some of Godric’s old books that I’d had shipped to me after his death and then had stored until now. A true blood bond is really rare among my kind, as you can well imagine. But when it is formed, there is a kind of euphoria shared by both human and vampire. I believe that your fairy blood turned that euphoria up a notch, so to speak.”

“The shower and the bed in the snow,” Sookie whispered.

“The idea that anything at all is possible,” Eric added also whispering.

“So the bond was harder to break than the tie?”

“Yes,” Eric said, “as I indicated, my experience was very different than Compton’s or Jessica’s. Like them, I was woken up, and from what Jessica said, my initial experience was similar to theirs. However, instead of feeling just an energy traveling, I felt pain, acute pain.”

“You felt *my* pain, didn’t you?” Sookie asked trembling.

“Yes. And though our bond was new, I tried to take some of that pain from you, but I do not know if I succeeded.”

Sookie shivered again, remembering the pain she’d initially felt before she seemed to lose awareness. She wondered if Eric had somehow managed to take away at least the conscious experience of her pain. “I think you did,” she said.

“That is *something* at least.” Eric continued, “I knew that there was some kind of foreign magic in my body, and I felt it try to latch on to our bond. And I resisted it.”

“You resisted it?”

“Yes,” Eric said dragging his fingers through his hair. “Like Compton, my first reaction was to theorize that the necromancer had somehow managed to find a new host, and I tried to hold on through the pain, to survive for Pam and for you. Then as soon as I began thinking about you, it was as if the spell homed in on our bond. It began to try to sever our connection, but I grabbed onto the bond.”

“You can do that?” Sookie asked, engrossed.

“According to Godric’s book, I should not have been able to, but I marshaled the magic in my blood, and I sent it to the bond to protect it.”

“And all that time, you were in agony, maybe even more than I was?”

“Yes,” Eric said softly. “But I didn’t know you wanted it gone, Sookie. I thought that you might be dying or that the fairies might have returned. I felt that if I let go of the bond, I would lose you.” Sookie saw red tears forming in the corners of Eric’s eyes.

“What happened then?”

“I just kept holding on, trying to control the pain until sunset.”

“Wait. We started that spell more than two hours before sunset!”

“I know,” Eric said heavily.

“But you wouldn’t let go,” Sookie added softly.

“No, I couldn’t— wouldn’t —lose you again.” Eric paused for another moment and stood up, pacing the room. “Finally, it was sunset. I managed to move outside, but I couldn’t fly or run or even drive because of the pain. I called Pam, and she drove me to you.”

“To Lafayette’s?”

“Yes. Your brother let us in even as the witches continued their chanting. You were curled up on the floor in the middle of the circle. You were convulsing and barely conscious, but unaware. I felt that you were very close to death. I felt your pain in me even more intently by that point. It had increased the closer I got to you, and I was trying to take more and more from you.”

A tear drifted from his eye as he continued, “Your brother was able to explain what was happening, and when I knew that you wanted to sever the bond—to burn my blood out of you and yours out of me—I let go.”

“I don’t remember you being there at all,” Sookie said as large warm tears fell down her cheeks.

“You wouldn’t, min kära. You were in so much trauma by the time we arrived that you were unaware of anything but your pain. You could have died, and it would have been my fault.”

“No,” Sookie said insistently, jumping to her feet and stopping Eric’s pacing by placing herself in front of him. “You don’t get to blame yourself for that. I was the one that kept it a secret. I thought you or Bill would try to stop me or hurt Jesus and Lafayette so that they couldn’t do it. I was wrong about you in that, but I now believe that Bill would have done anything to keep me tied to him. You couldn’t have known what I was doing.” Sookie’s voice dropped into sobs as she reached up to place her hand along his cheek. “You were fighting for me—for *us*. You fought despite being in agony yourself.”

Sookie shook her head fiercely. “You never need to apologize or blame yourself for fighting that hard of us, do you understand!?!?”

Eric grasped her hand, which held his cheek and then sunk down to his knees in front of her, two trails of red flowing on his cheeks. He pulled her body to his, holding his arms around her stomach and burying his face into her red shirt.

Sookie put her hands into his hair and stroked gently, comfortingly.

After a few minutes, Eric looked up at her and smiled, “At least your shirt’s already red.”

Sookie laughed and sunk to her knees before him, grabbing the kitchen towel that he’d discarded on the coffee table. She wiped the blood from his cheeks carefully and then kissed him lightly on each of them. She sat down fully onto the floor and pulled him to sit next to her by the fire. They watched its flames in silence for a few minutes.

“So Godric’s book said that you shouldn’t have been able to hold onto the bond like that?”

“No,” Eric said his voice now composed again.

“How did you do it then—and for so long?” Sookie asked.

“I’m not certain, but I felt that I had your help somehow.”

“My help? But I was the one that decided to have the spell done. Why would I help you keep it in tact?”

“I have been trying to figure that out since Saturday, min kära. All I know is that I sent my magic to hold onto our bond, but it still felt like it was slipping away. Then my magic seemed to be aided by something, a white light that engulfed the bond and helped hold my magic to it. Without it, I would not have been able to withstand the pain and keep my grip.”

“Did Godric’s books say anything about that?”

“No, but then again, ours is a unique case. Bonds are rarely entered into to start with and are even more rarely broken, and then when you add to that the fact that you are not merely human, then it becomes impossible to find a case like ours ever happening before.”

“Cheese and rice!” Sookie exclaimed sitting up straight and jumping to her feet.

Eric was quick to follow her to her feet. “Sookie, you used that expression in the day dream I had of you; does it mean that you are hungry? Can I get you more of your soup?” Eric looked concerned.

“No,” Sookie said laughing at Eric. “It’s an expression. It means that I just realized something important, something that surprised me.”

“Oh,” Eric said, his brows furrowing. “Human expressions are getting odder and odder by the year.”

“Okay, but that’s not the point, Eric. I think I know what that little white light was twisting around our bond.”

Eric looked at Sookie, interest apparent in his eyes. “What was it, Sookie?”
“You’d better sit down,” she said heavily as she gestured toward the couch.

Chapter 46: The Edge of the Ocean, Part 3

As he sat, Eric smiled when he saw that Sookie did not sit on the opposite couch again. Instead, she sat next to him and reached out for his hand.

“I need to tell you some things that Jesus told me today, and then you can tell me if you think I’m right about the light.”

“Okay,” Eric said, squeezing her hand in encouragement.

“Well, first of all, Jesus told me some things he learned about fairy magic. My fairy blood is definitely the reason for my telepathy; fairies actually prefer communication via telepathy to speaking, and I got a taste of this first hand when they tried to keep me there.”

Eric’s hand gripped hers a little tighter and she smiled, “I’m not going anywhere, Eric. I promise.”

He released his grip a bit and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“Anyway, in addition to telepathy, fairies are supposedly able to propel their thoughts into other people, but I’ve never done that. Some can also kind of beam into places, like *Star Trek*, but I cannot do that either.”

She looked at him to make sure he understood the reference before going on, “And then some fairies have the light in their hands, like me. Jesus said that the light can be used to both attack and to heal.”

“Ah,” Eric said. “I asked Jesus to look in to that since your light did nothing to hurt me at the Festival of Tolerance. In fact, it broke the witch’s curses and helped me recover my memories.”

“That’s what I thought,” Sookie said excitedly. “I think it knew that I wanted to save Bill but not hurt you, so it just healed what was causing the problem.”

His voice got low, “You also used it to make me feel better one other time, Sookie—or at least, I think you did.”

“That morning on the roof?” she asked.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Before you took my hand, I wanted to die right along with Godric; after you touched me, I felt like I could go on somehow. I thought it was just the comfort that my blood being in your body was giving me, but now I think it was more.”

Sookie nodded, “I think so too.”

After a few moments, Eric asked, “Did he say anything else about the fairy magic?”

“Yes,” Sookie said nervously. “He said that fairy magic could work kind of like vampire magic in a way,” she paused, “to make bonds.”

Eric looked at her in surprise.

“Jesus thinks that the magic in me could also be transferred by sharing my light or even by my blood, just like your kind of magic. As with vampire bonds, the fairy bonds have their safeguards, so it takes permission and intention from both parties to form them as well.”

“So we formed one of those too,” Eric stated, certain of that fact even as he said the words. “But it must be stronger than a vampire bond, Sookie—or at least stronger than a first bonding like ours was. The fairy bond must account for the empty spots we both feel. It probably also explains how you called me to your dream and how I was able to come to you.”

“That’s what Jesus guessed,” Sookie said. “And I think that the white light you saw, trying to encase the bond, was my magic too. That’s why you got the impression that it was me trying to help you.”

Eric looked at Sookie seriously, “I believe you are right.” He stood up and walked over to the fireplace, standing a few feet in front of its dying embers and looking intently into it.

Sookie gave him a moment, hoping that he would not be angry that her fairy-ness had somehow gotten a foothold into his body. She perceived that vampires probably had a double-standard about ties and bonds. It was fine as long as it originated from them, but she wondered how Eric would feel about being bound to her just as much as she was to him.

Finally, she stood up and took her empty tea glass and his empty goblet in the kitchen and began to prepare some dishwater. Doing nothing would make her crazy, and he deserved his time to process things, just like she'd had hers.

She suddenly felt his hands come around her waist from behind. His embrace was tender, and she sank backwards into his body. "Why did you go, min kära?" he asked.

"I thought you might want some time to think about everything, to see what you thought about the whole fairy bond thing. I hope you're not angry."

"Angry?" he asked, real surprise in his voice. "Why would I be angry?"

"Well, you were basically trapped into a permanent bond with a fairy while you had amnesia. I'm sorry I didn't know."

"But that is the same thing that happened to you. You were first tied and then bonded to me without full knowledge of all the repercussions of it. I cannot be angry at you because your kind of bond is actually much more powerful than mine. It only adds to your extraordinary nature."

"So you are not mad, and you are not upset?"

"No. I was thinking about how honored I am that you chose to bond with me in this way. But you did not understand what was happening, so I found myself concerned that you regretted the bond.

“I don’t,” Sookie said quickly.

“I don’t either,” Eric added.

Eric loosened his embrace after dropping a kiss on Sookie’s head.

Sookie smiled at the gesture and began washing the few dishes from dinner. Eric nudged her away and took over the task as Sookie looked up at him in surprise.

“What?” he asked in mock hurt. “I know how to wash a dish.”

She smiled playfully, “I can see that.” She paused dramatically, “I just thought I never *would* see it.”

He laughed as she took some Tupperware containers out of the cabinet. She ladled the leftover soup into single-serving portions and secured the lids tightly before putting all but two in the freezer. She put those into the refrigerator.

By the time she had finished that and wiped down the table and counters, Eric had washed the dishes including the big soup pot. She glanced at the clock and sighed. It was 4:00 in the morning, and she was feeling the strain from all the spent emotions of the night.

Eric smiled down at Sookie. “I should probably go, min kära. It is late, and I’m sure you are tired.”

“It is late, and I am tired,” Sookie agreed, “but I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

He stared at her intensely, “What do you want?”

Sookie looked up at Eric, her gaze rivaling his in the intensity department. “I want you to come to bed with me, and when you have to go down to your cubby because of the dawn, I want you to take me down with you. I want to hold you until I fall asleep tonight. And I want to be held by you until I wake up. I want you to spend the rest of the night after I fall asleep making sure you want to reestablish a vampire blood bond with me. And while I lie outside tomorrow in

order to absorb more sun into my body just for you, I want to spend some time making absolutely certain that's what I want too. And then when you wake up tomorrow, I want to be the first thing you see. Finally, after we have another dinner together, I want us to talk about what we have both decided."

"You want a lot," Eric said, a contented smile playing on his face.

"It's not a lot to ask if that's what you want too," Sookie said hopefully.

"It's not a lot to ask at all, min k ara."

While Sookie saw to her human needs and changed into a comfortable nightgown, Eric checked in with Bubba and did a quick sweep of the area himself. He made sure the fire was out fully before following his nose to Sookie, who was in Adele's old room.

His nose also picked up one other thing, Godric's shirt. He walked over to the dresser and picked it up carefully.

"You should have that," Sookie said. "Your dream self told me that you found it but that you left it here. I should have given it to you a long time ago, but it never seemed to be the right time."

He sat down on the bed, the shirt held firmly in his hands. "I felt no pain from him that morning." Eric looked up at Sookie, his eyes shining brightly, "But I did feel pain from you. You mourned him."

"Yes."

"You picked up this shirt so that you could give it to me."

"Yes."

“I smelled you returning downstairs that morning. I smelled this shirt. I smelled the salt of your tears. I wanted to open the door when you walked by.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“It was all too much—what I was feeling. It was more than I knew how to feel.” He stood up and went to the closet. He pulled down her box of keepsakes, placed the shirt inside reverently, and returned the box to the shelf. He turned back to look at Sookie, “It feels like it belongs here for some reason.”

Sookie smiled at him. “Okay then,” she said softly. She grabbed his hand and led him to the bathroom where his toothbrush from when he stayed with her was waiting for him. They brushed their teeth together, sharing both the sink and teasing glances through the mirror.

When they were both done, Sookie reached up with a towel and wiped some water from the corner of his mouth. “It always surprised me that y’all brushed your teeth?”

“Why?”

“I just didn’t think you could take in anything but blood.”

He laughed, “We can take in a minimal amount of other fluids. The trace amounts of water that we take in when brushing our teeth or when out in the rain cannot harm us. Also, we can take in human fluids other than blood, if you remember.”

She blushed warmly. “I remember.”

They put their toothbrushes next to each other in the copper holder and then returned to the bedroom.

“I see you decided to move rooms after all,” he said as he casually stripped himself of his shirt and jeans, glad for once that he was wearing some boxer briefs underneath.

“It was time,” Sookie said softly as she pulled down the covers on the side that seemed to naturally be hers. “Plus, this was the bigger bed.”

“Oh, I like that part,” Eric said suggestively, waggling his eyebrows.

“Not tonight, cowboy. Now come here,” Sookie said, settling in and then patting her stomach. “Come and let me hold you for a little while.

“Are you really going to make me do this?” Eric asked in mock frustration.

“Yeah, I sort of am,” Sookie returned.

“Stubborn woman!” Eric huffed jokingly.

Sookie patted again.

Eric smiled and settled onto her stomach comfortably as Sookie started to drag her fingers through his hair.

“Now you don’t have to miss it,” she said softly.

“You washed the sheets and hung them out to dry in the sun, min kära,” Eric sighed as he nestled in more.

“I did.”

“Did you do that for me too?”

“Nope, that was for both of us.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

After a few minutes, he resettled so that he was on the pillow next to her, looking into her eyes.

“You like the sound of what?” she asked, picking up on his earlier words.

“Of you using the word ‘us’ to describe—well—*us*.”

She smiled over at him.

“What part did you miss most from when I was amnesia Eric?”

Sookie giggled at his phrasing, but then looked at him seriously, “It was this part.”

Eric pulled her to him and held her to his chest, inhaling the scent of the sun that she had captured just for him. He closed his eyes as she relaxed into him. Eric felt the empty spot that had been left behind in him after the severing of the blood bond pulse slightly. She had wanted him to make sure—to be certain that he wanted her and wanted to bond with her in every way.

He had respected her desire for time, but he needed none; she would always be his first choice. He was a ruthless killer, yet she could love him. She had also taught him that he was still a man that wanted to love and be loved.

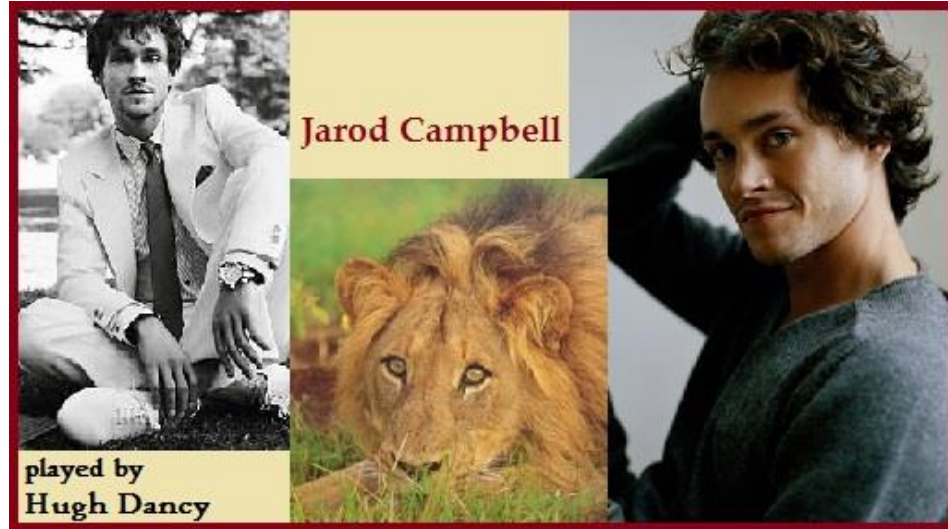
He listened to the beating of her heart as it slowed into a regular rhythm that indicated she was asleep.

After an hour or so, he felt the dawn drawing nearer. He carefully sat up so that he wouldn't disturb Sookie and grabbed his cell phone, which he'd put on the little table next to the bed.

He sent a quick text to Miranda Stevenson to see if he could secure her and her partner Jarod Campbell as Sookie's daytime guards. Both owed him a favor and had been very loyal to Godric, so he trusted them with her protection. He asked that they come as soon as possible.



Next, he speed dialed Pam. His child answered on the first ring. “You are happy tonight,” she said by way of greeting.



“Yes,” he said simply, keeping his voice quiet. “Is there anything to report?”

“No. Thalia, Rasul, and Isabel are all in place. Isabel has brought a sizeable retinue of vampires from Godric’s old area. Rasul is recalling the New Orleans vampires and is already planning ways to increase revenue through tourism. And Thalia is—well—Thalia.”

“Sounds like things are as we expected. And Bill?” Eric said as he ran his fingers lightly through his beloved’s hair.

“He seems to have done very little today. The bugs you installed in his home picked up nothing of substance.”

“Well, he was a nice figurehead for Nan; hopefully, he will stay that way and let us run our territories in peace.”

“You will make him a rich man,” Pam said disgusted.

“Yes, between Rasul, Isabel and myself, we will turn quite a profit, I think.”

“Will he accept the inevitability of you and Sookie?”

“That remains to be seen, but that is why we are listening to him. Because I love her, I hope he does.”

“And if he does not.”

“If he does not, then I will do what it takes to make sure Sookie and I are protected, even if it means removing him from the picture permanently.” Eric paused. “I am staying at Sookie’s home tonight. I will touch base tomorrow at some point.”

Eric hung up as he continued to stroke Sookie’s hair.

“I hope you don’t have to hurt Bill,” Sookie said, her voice quiet and heavy with sleep.

“I hope that too.”

“But you would?”

“Yes, you need to know that I would do anything to protect us now.”

Eric continued to hold Sookie as she fell back to sleep. In the past, he would have tried to hide the fact that he had a dark side from her, but she had a right to know what he was like *before* she bonded herself to him this time. He just hoped that she could accept him.

His phone signaled a new text, and he was pleased to see that Miranda and Jarod could be in Bon Temps sometime on Friday. Like Sookie, he’d be glad when Herveaux was out of the picture; he’d certainly never intended for her to be uncomfortable around the Were.

Ten minutes before dawn, he picked her up, carefully cradling her body to his. He would make sure that converting this room to a light tight space would be a priority. She nestled into his chest and sighed contently as he carried her to the cubby, using his power of flight to make sure she was not jostled in any way. He settled them into the small bed, snugly fitting her body to his. He inhaled the scent of sheets dried in the sun and buried his face into Sookie’s hair as he

spooned her body to his. The dawn was already twenty minutes old before he finally let himself succumb to his daytime sleep.

Chapter 47: A Voice in My Head

“Mmmm,” Sookie murmured. She was sitting forward on her lounge chair. Eric was behind her rubbing suntan lotion onto her back. “You do this very well.”

“I am from Sweden,” he laughed, “at least what you call Sweden now.”

Sookie sighed deeply and settled back into Eric’s strong chest. For once, the couple had very little to say to each other, but Sookie finally spoke up.

“I’m gonna tell him—I mean you—my answer tonight.”

“What answer?” he asked, caressing her arms.

“I want to re-bond tonight—or whatever you call it. I just have one more thing to do first.”

“Oh?” Eric asked. “And what’s that?”

Sookie shook her head, “I don’t wanna talk about it, okay? I just wanna sit here and enjoy this with you.”

“Okay,” Eric said, pulling her closer.

After a few minutes, she said nervously, “I just hope he wants to re-bond as well.”

Dream Eric smiled into her hair. “He will. This will make him very happy. It makes me very happy.”

“Will you still come to me in my dreams too? I want you to still be able to be in the sun like this.”

“I will come if you need, but I do not think you will need me like this after the bond is re-formed.”

“I’ll miss you in the day,” Sookie said groggily.

“Maybe,” Eric returned enigmatically.

Sookie woke up to a heavy, but comfortable weight on her waist. Eric's arm was slung over her, and she couldn't help but smile at their closeness in the little bed in the cubby. She inhaled deeply, taking in his scent before she pushed his arm off of her and sat up, turning her head toward him. Eric's face looked peaceful and beautiful in the dim light that he had left on for her in the cubby. She was, of course, slightly disconcerted that he was quite literally dead, but as she touched his hair and pushed it from his face, she knew that she loved him more than ever.

She looked at the little clock she had put next to the bed the week before; it read 9:03. She shook away the memory of the last time they'd been in the cubby at 9:03 a.m.—when he'd been under silver—and gave herself a few more minutes to curl back up next to him and snuggle into his chest.

The previous night, he'd done just what she'd hoped he would do. He'd told her the truth, even though it was ugly at times. In so doing, he'd shown her a kind of respect that Bill seemed incapable of showing.

She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Eric Northman was in love with her, and she was 99.9 percent sure that he still wanted to bond with her. In fact, she was quite certain he'd have done it the night before if she had asked.

Still—Sookie had paused and asked that they wait one more day to be sure. It wasn't that she didn't love Eric. She did—oh boy, how she did! She loved him in a big way that she didn't even know how to put words to. But in the back of her mind, there was one doubt lingering, one voice that was keeping her from giving her heart to Eric completely. And that voice scared her to death.

“I have to find out for sure,” she said out loud to the still and silent body next to her. “I have to find out for both of us. We deserve no doubts between us.”

Resolved to do what she had to do in order to put her last doubt to rest, Sookie sat up. She cupped Eric’s cheek with her hand. “Whatever I find out today, I love you.” She kissed him lightly on the forehead. Reluctantly, she left Eric’s side, giving him one last long look as she climbed out of the cubby.

As soon as she secured the doors to Eric’s resting place, she went to the kitchen, picked up her phone, and dialed.

Lafayette picked up after the fifth ring, “It’s too fuckin’ early, hooker,” he said, obviously having checked his caller ID before picking up the phone. “Jesus made me get up early fo’ your skinny ass yesterday. Now I knows you ain’t wakin’ me up early again today!”

Sookie stammered apologetically, “I’m sorry, Lala, but I need to talk to you.”

“Ain’t you keepin’ vampire hours now? Why you callin’ before 2:00?”

Sookie chuckled a bit.

“Yeah—well—whatever you wants better be good, hooker. I gots my beauty sleep to attend to!”

Sookie chuckled again before turning serious, “It’s important, Lala. You workin’ today?”

“Yeah, the night shift,” Lafayette returned.

“Do you think you could come over here for a while? I need a big favor, and I want to talk to you about it in person if that’s okay.” She paused and then added in a low voice, “And can you do that privacy spell thing Jesus did?”

“Oh hell no!” Lafayette exclaimed, picking up on her mood. “What kinda shit you got yo’self into this time?”

“I just need to make sure about something, and I need your help to do that.”

“Fine, hooker. I’s be there in 20, but I can’t do the privacy thing like Jesus did, but he showed me the one he did for y’all the other day with the circle, and I thinks I can do that one.”

“Thanks, Lala,” Sookie said, the relief clear in her voice. “I’ll cook you a big breakfast!”

Lafayette grunted. “Just make sure you’s got plenty of coffee,” he said as he hung up.

As she put on some coffee, Sookie couldn’t help but to smile at seeing the dishes from the night before stacked neatly in the drainer. She thought about Eric’s strong arms coming behind her and encircling her waist the night before. She had to shake herself out of her memory so that she could run upstairs to use the bathroom and to put on some sweatpants and a T-shirt. She also grabbed the small locket she’d worn to the Moon Goddess and placed it around her neck. Not for the first time, Sookie was grateful that she’d had the locket, Gran’s high school graduation present for her, with her in Dallas so that it had not been in the house during the Maenad’s reign. Most of her other jewelry had been stolen or destroyed during that time.

After she was dressed, she returned to the kitchen to put on some bacon. As she waited for it to achieve her desired level of crispiness, which was pretty crispy, she made pancake batter.

She was just pulling the bacon out of the pan when she heard the doorbell.

She covered the cooked bacon with a paper towel, turned off the burner, and went to get the door. She was greeted by a groggy-looking Lafayette, a bag slung over his shoulder.

A sour-faced Alcide stood behind Lafayette. Sookie was immediately bombarded by the Were's thoughts of disapproval because Eric's car was still outside. She decided right then and there that she'd be ecstatic when she had a different guard.

"Hey Alcide! Good mornin'," Sookie said trying to sound cheerful.

"Long night?" he asked, the judgment clear in his voice and his head. Pictures of Eric and her in the woods worked their way to her from his mind.

"Yep," she tried to answer without showing her frustration. "Eric came by and we had a long talk."

"It looks like he's still here." His voice brimmed with possessiveness and anger.

"Yeah. It was late, and Bubba had smelled a vampire on the property that shouldn't have been here, so Eric stayed and watched over me while I slept," Sookie said, being intentionally vague. "He's in his cubby right now." If Alcide was going to judge her and think the worst of her just for spending time with Eric, then he sure as hell didn't deserve to know about her private business, as far as Sookie was concerned.

"Oh," Alcide said, his thoughts confused about whether he should be pissed that Eric had stayed the night or thankful that he cared about Sookie's safety.

Sookie decided to change the topic, "Look, Lafayette and I are gonna have a visit and a bit of breakfast. I'll bring you a stack of pancakes in a few minutes, okay?"

"Sure thing, cher," Alcide said, brightening.

Lafayette took this moment to speak up, "All right. Now that all the *good* mornin's and how-de-dos are done with, I's be needin' that coffee now."

Sookie laughed and then shut the door behind herself and Lafayette. "There's already a big cup of coffee waitin' for you on the table, Lala. Thanks again for comin'."

He grunted but said nothing as he made a beeline for his steamy caffeinated mecca.

Sookie gave him his moment as she returned to the kitchen and turned the burner back on. While she was waiting for the bacon grease to reheat, she took a long sip of her own coffee and then turned her attention to making a big heap of pancakes.

She placed a large pile for Lafayette and a smaller one for herself onto the table before taking a big stack and a cup of coffee out to Alcide. She quickly came back inside and joined Lafayette at the table.

After Lafayette had devoured his stack and drunk a second cup of coffee, he finally asked Sookie, “Okay, hooker, now what’s so important that it required me to leave my warm bed and come see yo’ skinny ass?”

Sookie put her index finger up to signal that she didn’t want to talk about it until the spell was in place and then quickly cleared the table, bringing in the coffee pot to give them both a refill. Meanwhile, Lafayette had opened the bag he’d brought in and was pulling out a book and a Ziploc bag full of the salt-like substance Jesus had used the other day.

“Where you want it?” Lafayette asked in a low voice.

Sookie thought about which floor it’d be easiest to clean when they were done. Looking at the wooden floor in the room they were standing in, she said, “Let’s do it in here.”

Lafayette nodded. “Hey, leave that pot inside the room. I have a feelin’ I’ll be needin’ more coffee.”

Sookie smiled and nodded.

A few minutes later, Lafayette had circled the table with the salty substance and opened the spell book to the right page. “Let’s just hope I remember how to say this right,” he said as he took a deep breath. “Otherwise, I might turn us into chickens or somethin’.”

Sookie gave a nervous laugh as Lafayette started chanting in a low voice.

When he was done, he looked up from the book. “Well, we’s ain’t chickens.”

“Nope,” Sookie said.

“Wanna see if it worked?”

“Okay,” Sookie answered. She took a deep breath and yelled, “Alcide, help!”

The Were didn’t break down the door to get inside, so Lafayette said, “Shit, I guess it *did* work.”

Sookie nodded, “Yep, looks like!”

“Okay, now why is I here, hooker?”

Sookie said softly, “You’re here because I love Eric.”

“I knows that already! What? You needs me to tell you ‘bout the birds and bees or somethin’?”

Sookie reddened and shook her head.

Lafayette turned serious, “Hey, Sook, if you think I’m gonna be upset with you if you’s gets with him because of all that shit from before, don’t sweat it. I’m over that. Just don’t let that fine-ass man of yours or his dominatrix sidekick lock me in no more dungeons, and we’s square, okay?”

Sookie hesitated, “I’m glad that you’re okay with Eric and me, but it’s not your disapproval that I’m worried about.”

“Well hooker, don’t you worry none ‘bout what all the bigots and rednecks ‘round here think. The good folks—the ones that matter—will come ‘round.”

“It’s not them either,” Sookie said quietly, looking at Lafayette with tears in her eyes.

“Well who is it then?” he asked, concerned over his friend’s reaction. “Tara?”

Sookie shook her head. “No—it’s Gran.”

“Gran!” Lafayette exclaimed in surprise. “But she never even met Eric!” He paused. “She might’ve been enamored by Bill’s Civil War era behavior, but she would want you’s to be happy, and if Eric does that for you, she’d have been first in line to approve of him.”

“I know,” Sookie said. “It’s just somethin’ she said to me—through Marnie.”

Lafayette tensed, “Marnie?”

Sookie nodded. “I heard about Marnie from Holly’s head after Eric was cursed, and I went to the Moon Goddess to scope out the place and see what I could get from Marnie’s thoughts. I pretended that I needed a readin’, and I heard Gran talkin’ to me from Marnie’s head.”

“Really?” Lafayette exclaimed.

“Yeah. Gran warned me that Marnie was dangerous.” Sookie’s voice grew quiet, “She also told me not to give my heart to Eric—that it wouldn’t last between us.”

Lafayette contemplated for a moment. “Listen, Sook. Maybe you misunderstood what she was gettin’ at. Or maybe it wasn’t even her.”

“No,” Sookie said. “I don’t think I could have misunderstood. And she *was* speakin’ to me; I’m sure of it. Through Marnie, she said that I wasn’t to give my heart to the new man in my life. She said that the situation was ‘temporary.’ And then I heard Gran’s voice in my head; she said exactly this: ‘It isn’t going to last.’”

“Shit,” Lafayette said.

“I know. I finally realize how much I love Eric and that I’ve loved him for a while now. I finally have my head on straight about vampire blood and Bill. And I have finally figured out

that I want nothing more than to be with Eric and share my life with him, but in the back of my mind, I can't stop hearin' Gran's voice tellin' me that it won't last. And I'm scared to death."

"So you's afraid he's gonna leave you or somethin'," Lafayette supplied.

Sookie nodded. "And I just don't think I can handle that, Lala—not if I give him my whole heart like I want to."

Lafayette looked at Sookie closely. "You's wants me to try to channel her for you, don't cha?"

Sookie nodded and spoke quickly, "I hate to ask you to do this. I know you think it's screwed up that you can channel dead people, and if you say no, I'll understand."

Lafayette lowered his gaze and took a minute to think. Sookie remained quiet while he did.

Finally he looked at her. "Okay, but I don't know exactly how to go 'bout it."

The relief clear in her eyes, Sookie looked at Lafayette and said, "Well, Marnie just wanted to hold onto somethin' of mine. She used this." She took off the locket. "Then she just closed her eyes and sorta concentrated. She told me to think of a question. Then I started hearin' these different voices in her head until finally I heard Gran."

"Okay," Lafayette said nervously. "Lemme see the locket." He closed his hand around it. "Now think about who you wanna talk to and whatcha wanna talk about." He closed his eyes tightly, and Sookie started to listen in to his thoughts.

Before long, she began to hear voices in his head, but Lafayette tensed and opened his eyes.

"Shit!" he said, the fear clear in his eyes. "I don't thinks I can do this, Sook."

Sookie nodded, "That's okay, Lala. You tried."

Taking in her crestfallen look, Lafayette said, "Let's try one more time, hooker."

"Thanks," Sookie said gratefully, "but you don't have to."

"I know," Lafayette said.

Once again he closed his eyes and concentrated. Sookie began to make out the voices in his head again, and suddenly she heard her Gran in there.

Lafayette's eyes popped open again, "I think I hear her, Sook!"

"Yeah, she's definitely there." Sookie spoke to her, "Gran, why did you say that Eric and me wouldn't last."

Sookie heard her Gran's voice in Lafayette's head, "Sookie dear. You want to talk to me about your young man, don't you."

"Yes," Sookie whispered; the tears started falling from her eyes as soon as she heard Gran's voice. "I love Eric so much."

"And you are afraid of what I told you before?" Gran asked.

"Yes," Sookie said.

"Don't be," Gran said confidently. "I was wrong."

"But how?"

"Well, it seems your young man has some kind of angel on his shoulder—or at least someone powerful protectin' him. He was supposed to be killed recently, but somethin' happened to change his fate, and that seems to have changed yours as well."

"So he's not gonna leave me?" Sookie asked, the tears falling steadily now.

"No. That young man of yours seems pretty stuck on you. Actually, I suppose he's not so young, is he?" she chuckled. "Well, he still looks like a youngin' to me. He reminds me so much of your grandpa with all his carvin' and dinkin' around the house." She chuckled again.

“Your grandpa was also pretty high-handed at first, but I straightened him out, just like you’ll do with your young man. But he’s devoted to you, Sookie. That’s for sure.”

“Gran,” Sookie sobbed, “I love you so much. I miss you.”

“You don’t have to miss me, Sookie. I’m just fine. I have everything I’ve ever wanted now that your grandpa is with me.”

“He is?” Sookie asked, brightening.

“Of course he is. I always said that he’d be back with me one day. You just have to have a little faith.”

“I will,” Sookie promised. “I love you both so much.”

“We love you too,” Gran returned. “Now, Sookie, it’s time for you to move ahead with your own life. And you be sure to make Lafayette my apple custard pie since it’s his favorite. And be sure to look after Jason and tell him that I’m *so* proud of him.”

“I will, Gran,” Sookie promised.

“Also, you tell your young man somethin’ for me.”

“Okay,” Sookie whimpered.

“You tell him to be sure to prune the roses back more in the winter. He’s done a good job with the house so far, but I don’t like the way those people he’s hired are lettin’ my roses grow wild. You’ll never get quality blossoms in the spring that way!”

Sookie laughed through her tears. “I’ll tell him, Gran.”

With that, Lafayette seemed to gain awareness of himself again, and Gran was gone.

Sookie launched herself into her friend’s arms, “Did you hear all that?”

“Yeah, Sook. I’s heard it all.”

“Oh thank you, Lala. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Just make me that pie, Sook.”

Chapter 48: Her Choice

Sookie felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of her when she hugged Lafayette goodbye at the door at 11:00.

As she cleaned up the circle in the dining room, she thought about how thankful she was for all the people who had truly loved her in her life. The list was not long, but everyone on it was a treasure. She knew what kind of sacrifice Lafayette had made to help her, and she resolved to make him an apple custard pie every week if he wanted one.

After she'd cleaned up the dining room and the kitchen, she went upstairs to shower. She chose a new hand-made soap, which smelled of lavender, that had been placed in the shower. She loved its relaxing scent, and she stayed in the shower longer than she might have normally, enjoying the comfort of the warm water and lavender.

She got out of the shower and got dressed in her bikini and a comfortable dress. She had seen that the weather was turning colder the next day and wanted to take advantage of this one for both herself and Eric.

Now that she knew she had Gran's stamp of approval, she felt happier than she'd ever felt before, but she still intended to take the rest of the day to make absolutely certain that a new bond was what she wanted. She needed to go over the final two options from her list and to be positive that those were not better choices for her.

As she walked down the stairs, she saw Alcide on the front porch. She sighed, feeling bad that he would be hurt by her choosing Eric. Distracted by this thought, she dropped her book and suntan lotion on the stairs, which caused a loud bang. After she'd picked them up, she noticed that Alcide was looking in at her. He'd obviously heard the noise and could see her.

She waved to let him know everything was okay, and he nodded at her and continued to walk the porch.

Knowing that she'd want privacy later that night, she dialed Jesus's cell phone.

"Hey Sook," he said as he answered.

"Hey Jesus. I was wonderin' when you get off work this afternoon. If you can, I'd like you to come over and do another of those *things* you did for me yesterday."

Jesus responded. "Well, I get off at 5 and could be there between 5:30 and 6:00 if you want."

"That's perfect. Eric will be up by then," Sookie smiled. "Thanks."

She went out to the porch to speak to Alcide, "Have you had lunch? I made my Gran's vegetable beef soup last night. Would you like a bowl?"

"Sure!" Should I come inside with you?" he asked tentatively.

"No, that's okay," Sookie said quickly. "I'll just warm it for you and bring it out. I'm not quite ready for lunch yet."

Sookie busied herself inside as she warmed up the soup for Alcide and popped a piece of toast in for herself as a snack.

She took some peach jelly from her cabinet, smiling about Eric's love of peaches. And then she had an inspiration. She could probably still find peaches at the grocery store this time of year, and even though they wouldn't exactly be ripe, they'd cook up really nice in a pie. Plus, she needed to get ingredients for Lafayette's apple custard pie.

She took Alcide's soup to him and told him she had to run to the store to pick up a few things after he was done. He said he'd be ready in ten minutes and began to down his soup.

Sookie grabbed a pair of Keds and put on a jean jacket over her dress. By the time she had looked over Gran's recipes for the pies and written down a short list, Alcide had finished the soup. They set off in his truck.

Sookie was sad that conversations between Alcide and her had grown awkward since the blood tie had been broken. She liked the Were and certainly wished him well, but her instincts continuously told her that he was stuck on Debbie. And she was *most definitely* stuck on Eric. She wondered why Alcide seemed to be pushing so hard for them to be together.

"So, what are you lookin' to get at the store?" Alcide asked.

"I was wantin' to make a couple of pies," Sookie responded.

Alcide's eyes lit up, thinking that they were most likely for his lunch with Sookie the following day. Sookie felt guilty that she hadn't told Alcide the truth about her choice not to be with him, so she decided to at least try to lower his expectations of the next day's lunch. "Yeah, I'll be makin' both a peach and an apple custard. That one is for Lafayette mostly. And since Jason and the boys sure can eat a lot, I should pick up some more food for lunch, especially since they'll probably stay to watch a movie."

"Oh," Alcide said disappointedly.

Sookie tried to smile brightly as they pulled into the grocery store parking lot. As they walked the aisles, Alcide wondered what it meant that others were coming over for lunch and then dismissed his anxieties. His brain told her that he was certain she would do the "right" thing by picking him and staying away from the vampires, whom, she learned, he also blamed for Debbie's addiction.

For her part, Sookie tried keep her shields raised during their trip to the grocery store. She'd been elated when she found supermarket peaches that almost smelled like "real" peaches,

but her good mood turned when Alcide had scoffed at her picking up more TruBlood, a whole case this time.

When they finally made it back to her home at 12:20, she was glad to leave Alcide sulking on the front porch. She preheated the oven so that she could prepare the premade piecrusts that she'd bought at the store. She silently promised her Gran that she'd make homemade crusts the next time. Then she prepped the fillings for the pies. After about thirty minutes, the kitchen smelled like fresh apples, peaches, and cinnamon. As she put the pies into the oven, she set the alarm on her cell phone. She grabbed a glass of tea, a leftover apple, and her book and went out back, happy that the sun was bright that day. She set up her lounge and took off her dress and shoes.

Sookie smiled when she thought of Eric's reaction to the smell of the sun on her skin the night before; in fact, she smiled when she thought of Eric at all. She spent about twenty minutes thinking and smiling about the previous night. "Thank goodness that you didn't fuck it up, Northman," she'd muttered to herself at least half a dozen times. She'd seen no deception, no omissions, and no half-truths in his answers to her questions. And more importantly, they'd shared the domestic activities and spaces of her—hopefully soon to be *their*—home in comfort. She laughed a bit as she thought about her and Eric's natural synergy with each other in the kitchen. "What are the odds?" she asked herself.

She had just flipped over to her stomach when Alcide came walking around the back, a grin appearing on his face as he took in her scanty attire. She heard him thinking about her butt in a bit too graphic of a way to suit her.

"Hey Sook," he said, leering a bit. "I was just doing a quick walk-around and stretching my legs. I smelled you back here, so I thought I'd say hello."

“Uhh—hello, and thanks for making sure everything’s okay,” replied Sookie. She kept her eyes trained on the book she’d brought out with her but hadn’t yet touched, trying to pretend that she was engrossed in it rather than made uncomfortable by Alcide’s attentions. After tomorrow, Eric *had* to get someone else, she resolved.

Finally, Alcide drifted back around to the other side of the house. As he went out of sight, Sookie remembered that she’d wanted to systematically go through her other choices in order to make sure that she wanted to bond again with Eric. She closed her book and her eyes for a moment to center her thoughts.

“Okay, Bill and Alcide are *definitely* already out!” she thought to herself.

One of her other options had been to leave her life behind and run away. She had actually decided that this was her best choice if she discovered that Eric was just as willing to lie to her as Bill had been. Now this option seemed unviable. She didn’t want to run away; truth be told, she wanted to run straight to the cubby and Eric, and now she knew it wasn’t just the blood. She’d spent some time in the shower earlier wondering if her own fairy magic was influencing her to love Eric because of the hollow spot it had left within them both, but she dismissed that. She’d loved him well before that bond was forged, and he’d loved her even before that.

Nope, she wouldn’t be running.

She thought through another of her options. “Should I try to get back my life as it was before vampires came into it and live a ‘normal’ life?” she asked herself. As appealing as this idea may have sounded to her in the past, she wasn’t too keen on it now. First, it was unrealistic, and second, it would leave her without Eric, and she just couldn’t have that. She knew that Eric would continue to protect her if she sought this option, and she appreciated him and loved him

even more for that. But she didn't want to take a step backwards in her life and just ignorantly hope that fairies or vampires, like Bill and Sophie-Anne, didn't try to entrap her.

She'd thought of one other option too—she could be with Eric without doing a blood bond. She considered this option seriously for a while. After all, she didn't want vampire blood to manipulate her emotions and do things like numb her to the grief she should have been feeling after Gran's death.

But then she dismissed her fears in this area too. If Eric and she bonded again, they'd both do it unselfishly, and they loved each other. The safeguards in the bonds ensured that she would be protected, and she trusted Eric with her very existence at this point.

In the end the choice was an easy one: she wanted Eric. Moreover, she wanted the blood bond with him without the taint of Bill's tie.

After her cell phone alarm signaled the timer for the pies, Sookie put her dress back on and went to the kitchen to pull them out of the oven. While there, she grabbed a glass of water for herself, and her Southern manners told her to take one to Alcide too. That done with a couple of exchanged pleasantries, Sookie returned to the kitchen and warmed up some soup for herself. She took her soup and water outside and continued absorbing the sun, trying not to worry about whether Eric would choose her as well.

At 4:00, all her thinking done and the day beginning to cool down uncomfortably, Sookie went inside. She cleaned up the living room a bit before going to her bedroom to make the bed. She saw Eric's clothing discarded on the chair and then remembered her red shirt, which had gotten some of Eric's tears on it, from the day before. She decided to wash those things, along with some other dark clothes she had. Eric would just have to wear the flannel shirt and jeans left from his previous stay until his clothes were dry. She chuckled, remembering their phone

conversation of a couple of days before when he had turned down the clothes. She took his keys out of his pockets and laid them on the dresser, enjoying the domestic feel of the task very much.

She took the laundry downstairs and treated the stain before starting the load.

Sookie remembered to call Jason to check in and was glad he was not working the day shift and would be able to make it to lunch the next day, not only because he was great on the grill but also because she appreciated more back-up for the Alcide situation. Jason offered to bring some beer and snacks so that they could all watch a movie or television after lunch. Since Jason had been avoiding Hoyt as well as Merlotte's—so that he wouldn't run into Hoyt—he was happy to have plans for his Friday afternoon.

At 4:30, Sookie went to the kitchen to prep the components of the salad she'd decided on for the night. The pies were on the cooling rack next to the oven, and the kitchen was abounding with the smell of the desserts.

After her preparations, Sookie glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was about half an hour before sunset. She put her completed salad into the refrigerator. All she had left to do with it was to put the dressing on, and then her dinner would be ready.

She went to her bedroom and pulled on her comfortable jeans, this time pairing them with a pink T-shirt. She opened the little drawer of the nightstand and took out the pendant; she put it around her neck and tucked it under her shirt. Finally, she put the little silver fragment in her pocket and went to go be with her vampire—her *choice*—when he woke up for the night.

Chapter 49: The Meaning of Gardenias

The second Eric became enlivened for the day, he also became very, *very* hard. Sookie, though dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, was by his side and spooned into his body as she'd been when he fell into his sleep. As if her presence alone wasn't enough to arouse him, she also smelled strongly of the sun again, and he knew that the incredible woman next to him had purposely soaked in its scent after her shower so that the smell would linger. He pulled her more tightly to him and inhaled deeply, picking up the smell of peaches as well. He smiled into her hair, knowing that this was also for him.

She snuggled into him delectably, moving her little bottom against him and gripping his arms tightly.

Eric sighed, "Min kära, I believe that if I could wake up like this every night, I would be the most content being in existence."

Sookie chuckled, "Yeah, I can plainly *feel* your contentment back there, mister, but don't get ahead of yourself. We need to have our dinner and our talk before we do anything else. Plus, Jesus is coming over between now and 6:00 to refresh his privacy spell. I don't want anyone hearin' us tonight when we talk."

Eric said teasingly, "My G.P. is merely saying good evening, lover. Perhaps later, you would be willing to *say it back*."

"G.P.?"

"Yes," Eric whispered nuzzling his face into the hair next to her ear and nibbling the lobe slightly, sending streaks of electricity straight to Sookie's center, "my gracious plenty."

Sookie giggled and went to get up. Eric half-heartedly tried to pull her back to him. "Mmmm, come back to bed, lover," he purred.

“Nope,” Sookie laughed, standing up next to the small bed. “We have a plan, and we’re stickin’ to it. We have to make sure we get things settled *before* there’s any funny business.”

Eric leered, “There is nothing funny about the business that I wish to conduct with you, Miss Stackhouse.”

Sookie laughed and then pointed to the floor, gesturing for him to get out of bed.

After a moment of good-natured grumbling, Eric got up, adjusting himself in his shorts as he did so in order to gain a bit more comfort.

Sookie gasped at seeing his member straining against his boxer briefs.

It was his turn to laugh. “You were the one that wanted me *up*, lover. And now that I am, what are you going to do with me?” he asked suggestively.

She rolled her eyes and pointed toward the stack of clothes on the bedside table. “I am washing your clothes, but they aren’t dry yet.”

He looked at the pile and then leered at her again, “Wouldn’t it just be better if I stayed this way—at least until the others are dry? Don’t you like what you see?”

Sookie inhaled sharply and turned a deeper shade of pink.

Like the predator he was, Eric slowly stalked toward Sookie from the other side of the bed as she backed toward the steps that led out of the cubby. “Care to join me for a shower?” he asked, looking her up and down.

“But then you won’t get to enjoy my delicious scent,” she reminded.

Eric seemed to be weighing his options before he said decidedly, “I’m willing to take that chance, lover.”

Sookie slapped his arm as he approached, “You, Mr. Northman, are incorrigible.” She gestured for the stairs leading out of the cubby.

Eric, a mischievous look in his eyes, smirked, “Ladies first.”

The glint in Sookie’s eye was no less naughty-looking, “No, please—I insist. You are still a guest in this house, after all.”

“Why Miss Stackhouse,” Eric said in mock surprise, “I think that you just want to look at my—what did you call it, oh yes—*cute* little bottom as I go up the ladder. Do not think that I missed you ogling it as I made the fire last night.”

Sookie snorted in mock indignation. “And why, pray tell, do you want me to go up first—because I don’t think your motive is chivalry,” she challenged.

“That’s no mystery at all, lover. I want to stare at your delectable body as it wiggles its way up those steps.” He moved even closer to her, causing her to back into the steps, but he did not quite touch her.

“That’s real interestin’,” Sookie said, her voice low and seductive. She raised her hand up into the inch that he had left between them and ran it down his bare chest, leisurely caressing all the way down to the waistband of his briefs. Keeping her eyes locked into his, she slowly pulled the elastic waistband toward her, knowing that if she looked down, she would see the culprit behind the tent in Eric’s underwear.

Eric took in a sharp, unnecessary breath as the air hit his cock. Sookie pulled until the fabric was at its limits, and then she let it go, causing the elastic to pop loudly as it made contact with his lower abdomen.

His face was a beautiful picture of surprise and sulking for a few seconds before his lips spread into a broad grin. “You, my lover, never fail to surprise me.” His voice was thick with both mirth and what Sookie thought sounded like gratefulness.

“Well—then I think I deserve a reward,” Sookie purred. “So get that cute little ass of yours up those steps, and give me a show!” she said, surprising herself at her own brazenness.

Eric chuckled and went to grab the clothes that had been set out for him. “Pity,” he said suggestively, “there’s no underwear here. I suppose I will have to do without since I don’t have another clean pair with me.”

Then he returned to the steps and carefully moved Sookie to the side so that she could get a good view. He slowly mounted and then climbed the steps, moving like a cat and making sure all his assets—emphasis on the “ass”—were on clear display.

Sookie sighed lustfully and then mumbled, knowing that Eric could hear her easily, “Cute as a button.”

Eric was waiting just outside the cubby, “Enjoy your show, my lover?”

“It was *acceptable*, Northman. Now, go take your shower. I want you presentable when Jesus gets here.”

Eric sighed in mock exasperation and then zoomed to Sookie’s room; moments later she heard the shower water running.

About ten minutes later, Sookie sensed Jesus’s brain signature outside and skipped from the kitchen to the entryway.

She opened the door for Jesus before he could even ring the doorbell. Giving him a winning smile, she hugged him excitedly. Then she waved happily to Bubba, who stood about ten feet from the porch. “Hey Bubba!” she grinned.

“Evenin’, Miss Sookie. I’ll be keepin’ my eye out tonight.” Bubba assured before dashing back to the tree line.

Sensing Sookie's giddiness, Jesus couldn't help but to comment on it, "Good day, today, Sook?" he asked, a playful glint clear in his expression.

"Yep and a good night last night too," she whispered.

Just then, Eric zipped into the room and embraced Sookie from behind. Of its own accord, her body melded backwards into his. He'd dressed in the jeans and flannel shirt, and he smelled of the lavender soap. "A very good night indeed," Eric added.

Sookie blushed as Jesus chuckled and came inside. He was very happy to see both the woman that he now regarded as a very good friend and the thousand-year-old vampire that he was also beginning to see as a friend looking so content.

After leading them into the living room, Sookie said quietly, "I'd like you to do that privacy spell thing from before, okay?" Then she turned to Eric, "Don't you agree that'd be best for tonight?"

He nodded, "Yes, I think that we want our actions tonight to be *very* private, min kära."

Sookie blushed yet again as Jesus chuckled. He went back to where he'd done the spell the day before and repeated the chant.

"That spell will last for a day, right?" Sookie asked once he was finished.

"The way I'm doing it lasts for a whole cycle of the sun, but with a bit of adaptation, it could probably be made to last longer—if you want."

"I think I'd like that, Jesus. Eric is most likely gonna be here a lot more from now on, and Bill came by last night—to spy on us—but the privacy spell made him think that we weren't here, so he left."

Eric added, "I would like for you to try to adapt the spell even more if you are able. I noticed that with the spell in place, we could *see* what was happening outside, but I could neither

hear nor *smell* what was happening. Thus, I did not sense Bill's presence last night." Eric paused for a moment, "I would like to be able to use my senses to monitor things outside even as we are safely hidden from prying eyes, ears, and noses inside.

"Okay, I'll see what I can come up with. I've almost got the protection ward I told you about figured out too, Sook," Jesus said, looking excited. "But I had to order one of the ingredients I needed, so it'll be a day or two more before we can try it."

Eric quickly zipped into the kitchen to grab a pen and a pad that he knew Sookie kept by the phone. He wrote something down and handed it to Jesus. "This is the information for my day man, Bobby Burnham. Contact him when you need anything for your spells, and he will secure it for you quickly."

Jesus took the information. "Thanks."

After a bit more chatting, Jesus said he wanted to get home and change since he was going to Merlotte's so that he could visit with Lafayette and grab a bite to eat.

Sookie saw him to the door. When she turned around, Eric was right in front of her, looking down at her with soulful eyes. He gently placed a kiss on her forehead.

"We should have our dinner too, *min kära*," he said softly.

Sookie worked quickly to get the table set, her salad dressed and plated, and a TruBlood ready for Eric. She heard the door open and close twice within the ten minutes that she was working, but she knew it was Eric since she was following the void that his mind registered to her telepathy. She figured he was talking to Bubba or getting something from his car.

As she took her salad and his warmed blood to the table, she saw him leaning against the doorframe leading from the dining room to the entryway. One of his hands was behind his back

and there was a cheeky grin on his face as he produced a beautiful bunch of white gardenia flowers and leaves.

Having set down their dinner, Sookie put her hands on her hips. “Now, exactly *where* did you get those from, mister?”

Looking like the cat that ate the canary, he shrugged, “I have my sources.”

“Hmm,” Sookie mock admonished. “Would those ‘sources’ be the gardenia bushes I saw right next to Bill’s house?”

Eric laughed, “Indeed, my lover. I saw that—despite the lateness of the season—these were still in bloom the other night when I was there.”



Sookie shook her head indulgently as she accepted the flowers, went to the kitchen, and pulled out the second vase for them. Eric trailed behind her, his signature smirk planted firmly on his face.

“I don’t want you to antagonize him, Eric. What if he smelled you there? What if his guards would have stopped you?”

“Oh, lover, do not fear on those accounts. The human guards are nice for show; however, they are not a danger to me, and I made up an excuse for speaking to Bill so that he wouldn’t suspect my being there simply to steal his flowers.”

“And what was that?”

“I let him know that Isabel, Thalia, and myself would agree to increase our tribute percentage by 5% if that money were redirected to Rasul to help with the rebuild of New Orleans. Even this long after Katrina, there is still much work to do, and it will help with vampire/human relations as well as tourism. I actually wonder why Bill hadn’t done it before.”

“Well, that *is* nice,” she granted. Then she looked at him closely, “At least you had the sense to put on your jacket and zip it up so that your shirt didn’t show. I doubt Bill would much accept you as a flannel man.”

Eric’s eyes glinted wickedly. “He still smelled you on me, lover.”

“Great! And how did you explain that one?”

“I told him that I’d called on you to see if I could leave my car here while I took care of some more area business.”

Sookie looked thoughtful. “That’s all well and good, but you shouldn’t risk goin’ over there like that *just* for flowers.”

“There was no risk, *min kära*,” Eric said as he took his jacket off and hung it on the back of one of the dining room chairs that they wouldn’t be using. “Plus, there are two *excellent* reasons why I needed to secure those flowers for you.”

“And what are they?” Sookie asked as she put the vase on the end of the table so that it wouldn’t impede them being able to look at each other.

“Well, first, I have yet to see if these are your favorite.”

Sookie shook her head and smiled, “Nope, but nice try. They smell lovely.”

“Too bad,” Eric shook his head. “I suppose I will have to redouble my efforts.”

“I think I’m going to like that,” Sookie said as they both sat down at their places. “And the other reason?”

“It involves the meaning of the flower.”

“Oh, and what’s that.”

“May I tell you that in a while, min kára?” he asked soberly.

Sookie nodded and took a bite of her salad as Eric took a drink of his blood.

After finishing her bite, Sookie gestured to the blood. “I don’t know what your favorite type is, and I should probably know that.”

Eric smiled, “Well, as I said before, they leave something to be desired, flavor-wise, but I enjoy variety.” He thought for a moment, “In the 1980s I drank occasionally from a college student who lived in a building I owned at the time. I hired him to collect the rent from the other tenants. He was quite amusing actually—very much into Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Jung—and was always up at nights studying, so I got to know him more than most people; plus, he was rather easy to glamour. He was quite poor, and every time I entered his home for a snack, he complained about having to subsist mostly on a food called Ramen noodles.”

“Those are packaged noodles. I have seen them in the store, but Gran never bought them, and I’ve never tried them,” Sookie supplied.

“I’m glad. They have a very unpleasant odor. I imagine that TruBlood tastes similar to vampires as those noodle meals taste to humans after eating them for a while. The different flavors make them more palatable, I suppose, but there is little else to be said for them.”

“Hmmm,” Sookie thought. Then she looked at Eric meaningfully. “You know what I like about you?”

“I have a *few* ideas,” he leered.

Sookie shook her head, “Not that! I like how you always try to make analogies so that I can understand what it’s like to be you—to be a vampire.”

Eric looked at Sookie seriously, “I like that you want to know what it’s like to be me. I like that you care. And I especially like that I *want* to tell you such things—to share myself with someone as I never have before.”

Sookie’s smile slowly spread across her face as she looked at Eric through hooded lashes. “I *like* that you like those things.”

The rest of their meal continued in a comfortable silence as both gathered their thoughts.

Chapter 50: I See You

A/N: This chapter title comes from a song called “I See You” by Mika. I first became aware of this song by watching a Sookie/Eric Youtube video, by someone called SilverVintage82. If you like watching this kind of video, I definitely suggest this one. It brilliantly tells the story of Eric and Sookie through Season 3 of the show. Just go to Youtube, and in the search box, put in “Eric and Sookie I see you,” and you will find it. The lyrics to the song fit really well with my chapter here too, and it was playing in my head when I was writing this.

As soon as she was finished with her salad, Sookie began to bubble with excitement.

“What do you have up your sleeve?” Eric asked perceptively.

“Oh, just another little surprise for you,” Sookie said innocently.

“If this surprise has something to do with the smell of peaches I have enjoyed since my waking, I am anxious to see what it is.”

Sookie looked at Eric in mock frustration, “I won’t ever be able to surprise you, will I?”

Eric laughed. “You surprise me all the time, lover, but when it comes to this,” he pointed to his nose, “surprises will be difficult. I smelled the scent of peaches on your fingers in the cubby.”

Sookie pouted as she went to the kitchen to cut herself a piece of pie. Eric was by her side in a moment. He looked down at her sincerely, “I am sorry that your surprise was lost, *min kära*. But please do not stop your gifts. They make me feel very,” he paused, “*happy*.”

Sookie’s pout was gone and she smiled up at him. They returned to the table, and he breathed in the sight and scent of her eating her pie.

Sookie had a hard time stifling her smile as she saw the pleasure on Eric's face. She'd long since given up on the possibility that she would be able to cook a meal for a man that she loved, but here she was—she'd done just that! Although Eric couldn't enjoy the food the same way she could, from the look on his face, she knew that his enjoyment was no less profound.

"Thank you," Eric said as Sookie finished her last bite.

As Sookie was about to say 'you're welcome,' she saw that Eric's eyes were swimming with a mixture of emotions that were hard to isolate or define. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Eric shook his head. "I do not know *why* you do all these things for me, min kára," he said quietly. "I do not know why you absorb the sun for me, why you bring peaches into your home and prepare them for me, why you are considering sharing your life with me."

"Because I love you," Sookie said sincerely.

"I can see that you do. I can feel that you do," Eric said. "But I do not know *why*, Sookie. All your questions last night made me wish to ask this one of you. Before we commit to each other, I want to know. I need to know *why* you love me. I admit to feeling," he paused, "unworthy of your love at times."

Sookie looked at the vampire before her with an expression of disbelief. "Unworthy of me?" she asked, her voice full of shock and, perhaps, a tinge of anger. "Eric," she continued, "I am a barmaid from Bon Temps! I have no education beyond high school and no money to speak of, except for what I've made working for you or Pam. And, by the way, I know you made Pam pay me too much! Really—if anyone is unworthy in this equation, it's me."

Eric interrupted, "But Sookie, you are *good*. That light in you really is the most lovely thing that I have ever seen, and it has *nothing* to do with your fairy nature. I, on the other hand, have done many evil things in my long life."

“Now wait just a minute, mister,” Sookie said, the anger now clear in her voice. “You told me you were never one for random violence, right?”

Eric nodded. “That is true, but I have still killed many, hurt many.”

“Yeah, and you know I don’t like that, but you don’t just go ‘round killin’ Sunday school teachers, do you?”

He answered soberly, “Only if they are also drainers or are threatening my kind, which has happened before, I’m afraid.”

“Oh—you know what I mean!” Sookie said with exasperation. “You may have done evil things, but I know you are not evil. Otherwise, do you think that I would be here with you now? I already told you—and I don’t ever wanna have to say it again, okay? I have always—*always*—known that you are more than your worst self! So don’t say things like you don’t deserve me or that you aren’t worthy. That’s *my man* that you’re talkin’ about when you say things like that, buster!”

Eric laughed and put up his hands in surrender. “Fine, min kära. No more talking like that. But I do still wish to know. I *need* to know.

“Well—just look at you!” Sookie blurted out. “You’re beautiful!”

“Ah,” Eric nodded, somehow managing to look equal parts arrogant and disappointed. “So it is for my body that you love me,” he stated.

“No!” Sookie cried. “I mean, yes—you are beautiful, and hot, and sexy as hell.”

The smile on Eric’s face was widening with each word Sookie spoke.

She blushed, “And I love making love with you, but none of that is the reason I love you.”

Sookie paused for a minute, looking down at her hands. Slowly, Eric's smile disappeared. "Can you *not* find a reason?" he asked, dejected.

Sookie looked up and took in Eric's expression. "Of course, I can think of a reason, you idiot!" she exclaimed. "The problem is that I can think of about a million reasons. I just don't know where to start!"

Eric's smile began to return. "Start with *one*," he said, mischief making its way to his eyes.

Sookie grinned at him. She couldn't help it. At that moment, he looked so playful and innocent with his bangs flopping around his forehead.

"Fine," she said in mock exasperation. "For one thing, you *get* me."

"Get you?" Eric asked, not quite understanding the idiom.

"It means that you understand me. You seem to know what I need before even I do sometimes."

Eric smiled wider, "I do try to anticipate your needs, *min kära*."

"It's not just that; it's like you *know* me—know me better than anyone else has or ever could. You know when to be quiet and when I need a minute to think. No one's ever really *gotten* me like that before."

Eric nodded. "Yes, this is quite nice. You 'get me' as well."

Sookie laughed. The slang didn't quite seem to work coming from Eric. "And that's another thing. You make me laugh. And you laugh at the things I say that I think are funny, even when no one else would."

"We do seem to see humor in many of the same things," Eric observed.

“Exactly!” Sookie said. “We keep each other entertained. We can have fun with each other, just hangin’ out. And then there’s the fact that you *respect* me. You have never made me feel less smart or less valuable than you, despite the fact that you have one thousand years of knowledge on me. You didn’t bat an eyelash, nor did you seem surprised at all that I’d know about *Beowulf* or ‘The Seafarer.’ No—you treated me like an equal that you *wanted* to talk to about those things. And you shared your own knowledge with me. You never try to dumb things down like Bill did and like most of the people in my life have done.”

“You are *not* dumb!” Eric said fiercely. “You are one of the cleverest people I have ever met.”

See!” Sookie said victoriously. “That—what you just did! That’s another reason I love you.”

She continued, her tone getting more serious. “You also make me feel safe, not just from physical threats like the fairies or other vampires either. You make my *heart* feel safe. I know you will always look after it—that you truly value it.” Sookie’s voice softened. “You bought this house because you had *faith* that I’d be back. You had faith just like my Gran always did for my Grandpa Earl comin’ back. Your hand is in every detail in this place now. After the Maenad, I was afraid that I’d lost so much, but you repaired *everything*. After Bill’s deception, I was afraid that I would never be able to trust again, but you repaired that too.”

She went on, hardly taking a breath. “You may not think that I see you for who you are, but I do. And I love *everything* that I see. I love that you will do anything to make *us* safe. I love that the biggest thing on your bucket list before you faced Russell was kissin’ me. I love that you believe in me. I love that you spent months fixin’ all the hand-made furniture that you somehow knew that I’d value more than anything else in this house. I love that you took daisies

to my Gran when I couldn't. I love that you are honest with me even when it's not easy for you. I love that you are a thousand years old and willing to change and grow—just because you love me. I love that I feel that I can be exactly who I am with you—warts and all.”

Tears now tumbling down her cheeks, she added, “And most of all, I love how you make me feel like I can be the very *best* version of myself if I'm with you. You make me want to be that Sookie.”

Eric was at her side kneeling by her seat in a flash. He gently used his napkin to wipe away her tears. He looked deeply into her eyes, his own love shining through. “Your love is a miracle to me, Sookie Stackhouse,” he said simply.

“Eric,” Sookie said, her voice low and trembling. “Please—kiss me.”

“My pleasure.”

Just as he leaned in, his phone rang. Eric and Sookie both let out noises that resembled growls more than anything else.

“Bubba,” he answered even as he kept eye contact with Sookie. He paused for a few seconds, listening to the other vampire. “Understood. Keep your position, but be ready to move.”

Eric rose and offered Sookie a hand up. “We will have to wait on that kiss, I'm afraid.”

“Why's that?”

“You were very wise to have Jesus redo the privacy spell, min kára.”

“Who's out there?” Sookie asked wiping the rest of her tears away, the anxiety clear in her voice.

Eric smiled. “Bill just crossed his property line. He is walking this way now at human speed. If you wish, we can stay in here and out of sight.”

“No,” Sookie said, her voice rising a bit as anger replaced the emotions she was feeling before. “I have this! Just wait in here. I don’t want him to know you’re here.”

“Very well, min kära. But I will not be able to hear you from inside the spell. I will watch from the window, and Bubba is also close and will be watching.”

Eric gave Sookie a quick kiss on the forehead and stepped out of sight as Sookie took a step out of her front door. He made a note to give Jesus a bonus for the privacy spell, which had already come in quite handy. He also made a note to kick Bill’s ass at the first possible opportunity for interrupting the kiss he’d been wanting to share with Sookie for days now.

Chapter 51: Tokens

Sookie was able to settle herself onto the porch swing just before Bill broke through the tree line. She could see Bubba and Bill exchange silent nods, and she felt comforted by the fact that Bubba was nearby. She looked inside, and even though the privacy spell prevented her from seeing him, she knew that Eric was also watching over her. She gave the window a little smile.

With difficulty, she managed to sustain that smile as Bill approached the porch. “Bill, I didn’t expect you until tomorrow night,” Sookie said politely.

Bill smiled warmly at Sookie before answering her implicit question, “I came to check on your safety for myself this evening. I noticed that Eric’s car was still here and wanted to make sure that he was not bothering you.”

Sookie shook her head, “No—actually, he came by briefly a while ago and asked if he could leave the car here for a bit longer.”

“Strange,” Bill said, his face heavy with what Sookie thought was exaggerated concern. “I wonder why he did not just pick it up when he was here.”

Sookie responded, “He said something about stopping by to see you and then having other business in the area. Frankly, I don’t care if the car is here, and I didn’t want to know what his business was about, so I just said okay. Anyway, he said that Bubba would be returning it to him right before dawn, so I don’t expect that Eric will be back tonight.”

“With Eric, it is hard to know,” Bill said. “If you wish, I can send a guard over, or *I* could stay *myself* to make sure you remain safe.”

“No thanks, Bill.” Sookie smiled her best Merlotte’s smile. “I’m just gonna go to bed early tonight. And Bubba is stayin’ till almost dawn anyway, so I’ll be fine.”

Bill leaned in a bit to whisper to her, “Sookie, Bubba is a good guard in *some* ways—and very loyal—but I would feel better providing you with someone less—uh—damaged.”

With even more difficulty, Sookie kept her smile in place. She felt her fingers warming up at Bill’s proximity, her body instinctually preparing to zap him if he tried to bite her. She was also offended for Bubba’s sake.

She spoke firmly, “I’ll think about your offer, Bill, and we can talk about it *tomorrow*. But for now, I feel comfortable with Bubba,” she said, putting an end to the discussion.

Bill straightened, backed off, and then smiled. “That’s fine, darling.” He inhaled deeply and then looked at Sookie with sincere concern, “You have been crying. Are you alright?”

“Yes, Bill,” Sookie said stiffly, trying to hide her anger. “I have been thinking about Gran all day—about how much I miss her and how I’ve *not* been facing my grief over her death for *too* long.” She looked at him right in the eye but kept her countenance even.

Bill shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. “I know how much your Gran meant to you,” he said. “She was an extraordinary woman.”

“Yes—she was *very* extraordinary. Good night, Bill,” Sookie said with an air of finality to her voice. She managed, however, to keep her expression from showing her anger for the man in front of her.

The Civil War veteran looked like he wanted to say more, but seeing the resolved look on Sookie’s face, he simply said, “Until tomorrow night, darling.” He leaned in again and kissed her cheek gently. Sookie had to concentrate very hard not to give away her uneasiness.

“Bye Bill,” she said.

He turned and walked away, still going at a human pace as if he were inventorying his surroundings.

Sookie waited for a few minutes until Bubba approached her. “He’s gone, Miss Sookie. Mister Eric told me to tell you that it’s okay to come back inside.”

“Thanks, Bubba.”

Sookie walked back into her house and slammed the door behind her before locking it. “He was here to spy *again!*” she said loudly. “I’m about to blow a gasket with him! And if he calls me ‘darling’ one more ‘f’-in time, I’m gonna shoot him with my light!”

Eric laughed. “Remind me *never* to make you mad, min kära.”

Sookie also chuckled, releasing her anger. She continued more calmly, “He’s not gonna take it well when he finds out that I don’t want him. I know he thinks that I’m gonna pick him.”

Eric reassured her, “I will put a stop to his bothering you tomorrow, Sookie— whatever we decide tonight. I won’t have him making you uncomfortable.”

Sookie sighed. “You need to get Bubba to take away your car near dawn. That’s what I told Bill to make him think that you weren’t coming back here tonight.”

“My clever one,” Eric beamed.

Sookie smiled back at him, “I just need to run to the bathroom to wash my face, and then I’ll meet you in the living room for our talk, okay?”

Eric laughed out loud. “That’s a good idea, min kära. I’ll be waiting.”

Sookie knew she was being petty as she scrubbed the cheek that Bill had kissed, but he was seriously starting to give her the creeps and piss her off. While she was in the bathroom, she also took care of her human needs. Then, she paused a long minute to look in the mirror. This was it—the moment when she was going to tell Eric that she wanted him. She had no more doubts about her own choice and hoped that he felt the same way. She grasped the pendant and

pulled it so that it was outside of her shirt and visible. The entwined “E” and “S” fell to her breastbone, and she admired the carving’s beauty. She thumbed the small piece of silver in her pocket. She was ready.

Sookie returned to the living room and sat on the couch, leaving room. She knew that Eric would join her there. His back was still turned to her as he completed a fire, and she took in the strength of his movements as his muscles rippled gracefully. Not for the first time, she wondered how she had been so lucky as to end up with a man who seemed made to pose for statues.

He turned and looked at her, seeing the necklace he had carved around her neck. He smiled slyly and joined her on the couch, slowly raising his hand to thumb the pendant he’d made for her while she’d been in the fairy realm.

“Do you know of tokens?” he asked softly.

“Tokens? You mean like subway tokens?”

“Not that kind,” Eric said, his face becoming serious as he looked her in the eye. “The kind of token I mean is an object given as a gift to a beloved. In Medieval times, ladies would give their knights tokens for luck, and in many cultures even today, a groom will give his bride special coins as tokens of love. In my culture, small gifts like this one were made to represent similar things. We used them to show our affection, and they were given as a sign of a couple’s faithfulness and promises to one another as they joined together in marriage.”

“Oh,” Sookie responded, enchanted by the beauty of his eyes. “Did you make this as a token for me?”

Eric nodded, “I did, min kära.”

Sookie smiled and reached out her hand to take his.

“Sookie, you asked me to consider whether I wanted to remake the bond with you, but there is nothing to consider. I know that I wish to bond with you. I have wanted it for a long time, but I did not know how to tell you before. I did not know how to *show* you. I relied on my thousand years as a vampire to try to make you love me, but I failed.

He continued as she grasped his hand more tightly, holding onto it as if it were her lifeline, “The witch tried to harm me, but she actually gave me the opportunity to let go of everything except the human that was left in me. And you helped me learn how to show love, how to *be in love* as a man. Now that I remember everything, I will spend the rest of my days, both as man and vampire, loving you—if you will let me.” He looked at Sookie earnestly, “Please—let me.”

Sookie’s eyes welled with tears. She asked softly, “Eric, what do gardenias mean?”

He spoke with a fervor, “They mean ‘secret love’, the kind of love that I have felt for you for so long. They mean ‘beauty’, just like the beauty that I see before me now, the beauty of your love for me. And one more thing, Sookie—they mean ‘joy’.”

Tears slipped from Sookie’s eyes as she took her hand from Eric’s and reached down to pull the fragment of silver out of her pocket. Somehow, through her tears, she managed to whisper, “My token to *you*, Eric,” as she put the silver on the coffee table in front of them.

Eric’s eyes clouded with confusion.

Sookie reached out again and took Eric’s hand in hers. “Do you know what that is?”

Still confused, Eric shook his head. “Sookie, that’s silver. How can that be a token for me?”

“Eric,” Sookie began, her voice taking on a teasing lilt despite her tears, “use your nose.” She touched his nose lightly with her free hand as she said it.

Still very confused, Eric bent toward the silver and inhaled sharply. He sat up in surprise. “Sookie, my blood is on that. How . . .” he couldn’t complete his thought.

“That silver was inside of you, Eric,” Sookie stated simply.

“Dallas,” Eric said, realization hitting him.

“Yes. It was the second piece of silver I sucked out of you. I spit it out right next to you as Bill was coming in, but for some reason, I reached out and grabbed it. And even though I was so angry at you for tricking me, I put it in my pocket.”

“Why did you save it?” Eric asked, mystified by the woman in front of him.

“I cannot say for certain, except that it felt somehow important. I thought that I hated you, but when I got back to the hotel, it was still in my pocket, and then I put it into my purse, and then I brought it home, and then I hid it away in a little box that I kept under a loose floorboard in the attic—a box that has always held my *secret* treasures. I thought about throwing it away lots of times at first, but I couldn’t. I thought it was your influence and your blood at the time, but now I think it was something else.”

“What?”

“I think it was that part of me that was drawn to you from the minute I laid eyes on you at Fangtasia, it was that part that knew you wouldn’t hurt me when I challenged you in front of other vampires that night I questioned people for you, it was that part that saw the concern in your eyes after the Maenad attack, it was the part that hated the effect you had on me even after I found out about Lafayette, and it was that part that knew I could trust you in that church. Maybe it was my fairy blood or my instincts that told me all these things—that made me predisposed to

want you, to love you, and—yes—maybe even to hate you a little. I can only tell you that now when I look at this little piece of silver, I can see only the vampire that saved my life from the bomb—only the vampire that *didn't* trick me into taking his blood with selfishness in his heart, as it turned out. I see the man that I would always be willing to save because he would do the same for me. I see someone that I want to bond with *now*, just as much as he wanted to bond with me—even when I took this little piece of silver from his body.”

Chapter 52: Somewhere Only We Know

[A/N: The title of this chapter comes from Keane's "Somewhere Only We Know."]

Eric was kneeling on the floor in front of Sookie before she'd finished speaking her last word, his two large hands gently cradling her face. "Sookie," Eric said gruffly, "there can be no going back this time. If we do this, I *need* it to be permanent—for both of us. I couldn't take another breaking of the bond."

Sookie smiled and rested her hands on Eric's cheeks, mirroring his actions. "You told me last night that you wanted to be a husband to me, and now I'm telling you that I want to be a wife to you. I'll bond with you by vampire blood and magic. I'll bond with you by fairy blood and magic. I'll marry you by human law as soon as this state lets me. And I have already given you my heart, Eric, and that's the biggest bond I could ever make."

Eric looked deeply into Sookie's eyes. "I want to kiss you now, *min kära*."

"Then kiss me, my love."

Eric moved his face the short distance to Sookie's at a slower pace than she could imagine him being capable of, given the passion that was roaring in his eyes. Sookie literally felt him trying to savor the moment that would be their first real kiss in so many ways. Sure, they'd kissed in his office the night he thought he was about to die, but he'd forced the issue. And they had kissed an awful lot after he lost his memories, but the man in front of her was now a *complete* Eric.

When his lips were just an inch from hers, he stopped, as if to ask permission one last time. She answered by closing the final gap.

Their kiss began slowly as their lips melted together—tasting, delighting, and remembering. They each seemed to part their lips at the same time, and their tongues began to explore each other’s mouths in soft caresses. Sookie’s hands burrowed into Eric’s soft hair, and he nudged her body back further into the couch, his hands gently traveling over her cheeks and into her hair.

Sookie moaned as Eric pulled back from her right as his fangs came down. Unafraid, she reached up with her fingers and gently stroked his exposed fangs as she had in a dream once. Eric’s eyes grew even darker as he practically growled, “Sookie.”

She brushed her finger along his bottom lip and whispered, “Eric, take me to our bed—*now*.”

“*Our* bed,” he repeated as he rose with her in his arms bridal style. She lifted her lips to his again, knowing that he could make his way there even with the distraction.

It took him only seconds to get them up the stairs and into the bedroom. Once there, he set her gently onto the bed and drew her shirt off of her, only breaking their kiss for a moment to let the fabric move between them. Their lips crashed together once again, more insistent now, and their tongues played more roughly, but Eric was careful to avoid taking her blood, despite the fact that he didn’t seem to be able to retract his fangs. The vampire had never felt such uncontrolled desire.

One of Eric’s hands held her to him as the other traveled over her neck to her collar bone. He lay down next to her, turning her toward him gently so that their lips could keep up their current pursuit. She arched into his roving hand, helping it find its way to her breast faster. For a moment, his touch was a gentle flutter over her bra, but then he stretched his whole hand over

her breast and squeezed it gently as Sookie arched into his touch even more and pulled his lips more powerfully into hers, winding her fingers through his hair. She felt on fire.

Eric heard Sookie's heart beat faster and made very short and destructive work of her bra, before gently tugging, squeezing and pulling on one nipple before moving his hand to take care of the other one.

Needing more, Eric pushed Sookie onto her back and broke their kiss. His eyes were blue molten pools, and Sookie writhed under him as his lips attacked her cheeks, her neck and her shoulder before making their way back up to her ear where he whispered, "Tonight, min kära, I'm going to make love to you until you are screaming for me to stop," he paused as his lips trailed over her forehead to her other ear, "and after that, I'm going to fuck you until you can no longer scream at all."

Sookie moaned out an "Eric" as his lips traveled down her other cheekbone to her neck. Both of his hands had begun assaulting her breasts by now with a mixture of tender and more passionate strokes. At this point, Sookie's body was under his complete control. The only lucid thought she had was that she wanted—no *needed*—to get him out of his shirt so that she could feel his flesh on hers. She managed to drag her fingers from button to button of his flannel shirt, luxuriating in each new patch of cool flesh she exposed. After having unbuttoned everything, she went to slide the garment from his shoulders only to be held up by the fact that his hands were still roving over her breasts. She grunted as her over-stimulated mind tried to solve the problem of how to remove Eric's shirt so that he wouldn't remove his hands from her body.

Sensing her frustration, Eric quickly took off the offending garment and chuckled as Sookie sighed in relief as she found much more of Eric's cool skin exposed to her hot hands.

As soon as the shirt was out of the way, Eric's lips found Sookie's neck again and then trailed down slowly before he was finally at her breasts. Sookie cried out in frustration when Eric stopped the motion of his talented hands and raised his mouth from her flesh. "Look at me, lover," he said, his voice pure sex.

Sookie opened her eyes and took Eric in. He seemed to be hovering above her now, his hands on either side of her body and his mouth inches away from her aching nipple. "Please," she managed before he rolled his tongue around her nipple, keeping eye contact with her the whole time. Sookie whimpered as Eric purred, "I want you to watch what I do to you, lover. I want you to see how you make me long to worship your body."

Sookie tried to keep her eyes on Eric's actions as his mouth closed fully over one of her nipples his tongue sweeping it into a cool embrace as his lips sucked gently. One of his hands went to her other breast and Sookie couldn't help it when her head lolled backwards briefly.

Eric's other hand now stroked Sookie's stomach, drawing slow lazy circles around her belly button. Again, Sookie found herself trying to raise into Eric's touch, as his circles began to travel lower and lower, causing her skin to burst out in goose bumps as his fingers brushed the top of her jeans.

"I need you to . . ." Sookie lost her thought as Eric's fang scraped her breast but did not draw blood.

"You need me to do what, min kära?" Eric asked, his voice low in promise of what was to come.

Sookie moaned a bit and then managed to grunt, "touch me."

Eric smiled into her breast and took it more feverishly into his mouth, causing her to groan wantonly and throw her head back again for a moment.

He used one of his hands to unfastened her jeans, and then he pushed his hand into them even as she tried to wiggle to give him more room.

“Please,” Sookie muttered again, unable to get Eric’s hand close enough to her center despite her movements. Eric raised his lips off of her breast and licked lazily from her nipple all the way back up to her ear again with the flat of his tongue. He took the lobe between his teeth. “Do not forget to watch me, lover,” he whispered before moving once again to take her lips with his own.

Sookie gave in completely to the kiss, pulling on Eric’s shoulders as hard as she could, trying to meld their lips together. His fingers reached and then began to caress her folds slowly through her underwear. Ablaze with passion, she used her tongue to stroke his fangs, pricking it slightly so that Eric could taste her.

Finally the first new drop of blood was passed between them—her blood and *her choice*. Eric’s low growling sound at the taste of her blood filled the room as he sucked in her offering. When she finally had to break away to catch her breath, Eric looked at her with fire in his eyes, which had turned a darker shade of blue than she’d ever seen them. She felt like she might explode beneath his gaze.

Eric said nothing as he moved lower and used both hands to take off Sookie’s jeans, shoes, and socks. She writhed under him clad only in a pair of red, lacy, and very wet panties.

“My favorite color,” he growled, looking at her with desperate desire. He gripped the sides of her underwear and dragged them off of her body. Despite his anxiousness to be inside of her, he moved all the way down her body until he was at her feet and began to kiss her, slowly moving upward to ankle, then knee, and then thigh. He worked up her outer thigh to her hip as

Sookie twisted under him, wanting him to settle into the place she desired most. But Eric denied her as he painstakingly worked his way down her other leg in pleasurable torture.

Sookie tried to keep her eyes on Eric as he worked her body into a frenzy. She felt as if her temperature had been rising slowly and was now to its boiling point. She longed for Eric's cool lips and tongue to leave their current location, her ankle, and go to where she needed them most—to put out the flames within her.

“Please,” she whispered again.

In moments, Eric's mouth was hovering above her sex, and the flat of his tongue slowly stroked from her entrance all the way to her clit. Sookie groaned and threw her head back again as Eric licked a few more long sweeping strokes before he flicked his tongue back and forth on her clit. She began to squirm under him, and he moved one hand to her belly to hold her down even as his other hand began to stroke her folds.

“So sweet,” he crooned as he moved his tongue from her clit to her entrance, sucking in all the juices that were flowing from her. He worked his tongue into her entrance slowly, even as his lips gently kissed her folds. “Look at me, min kära,” he said, pausing at his task.

She raised herself up on her elbows and locked her eyes into his. “Please,” she gasped. He rewarded her plea by increasing both the intensity of his tongue and the pace of his fingers, which were drawing circles around her clit. Sookie would have surely come off the bed if he hadn't been holding her down.

Eric moved his tongue back to Sookie's clit as his eyes again captured hers. She saw unbridled lust in them—lust, which she was certain was reflected in her eyes as well. He put his fingers at her entrance and penetrated her with two of them, searching for the spot that he knew would push her over the edge. He curved his fingers towards her clit just as he sucked it hard,

and Sookie came undone, exploding in an orgasm that shook her whole body. She screamed Eric's name as her juices poured into the vampire's waiting mouth.

Sookie had shut her eyes tightly in the height of her passion and now heard Eric's voice speaking softly in her ear. "Min kära, are you ready for me?"

Sookie registered that she must have lost awareness for a few moments as she was coming down from her high because Eric had obviously had time to strip off the rest of his clothing. She suddenly became acutely aware of his naked body above hers. His cool skin—covering her own heated flesh—brought her back to cognizance as he looked earnestly into her eyes.

"I'm ready," Sookie managed as Eric lowered his aching member toward her equally ready entrance. He spent a few moments sliding the head of his very hard shaft up and down her sex, letting it soak in her juices as well as stimulate her clit. Only when their eyes locked did he thrust inside of her.

He paused for several moments, as he felt himself completely inside of her. "Home," he whispered as he captured her lips. "You feel like home."

Sookie gasped at both his length and his words. She marveled at the way his size seemed to have been made just for her, touching her in all the right places and in all the right ways.

Breaking their kiss, Sookie gasped, "Move—please move."

Eric didn't disappoint. He began to glide in and out of Sookie slowly. From their time together before, he knew that she enjoyed for him to go deep inside of her, so he took her right leg in his arm and thrust deeper.

He was rewarded with a deep moan and an, "Oh God, Eric, yes!" He smiled, realizing that he had hit what he was aiming for.

As soon as he knew he was striking her G-spot, he was relentless, hammering into it over and over again. She responded by raking her nails down his back in her ecstasy. She wrapped both legs around him tightly, encouraging him to go even deeper as he sped up the pace.

Eric was pressed as far inside Sookie as he was capable of getting, which was far considering his length, and she took everything he had as if they were two missing pieces of the same puzzle. He thrust, and she met his thrusts roughly. Yet the caresses of Eric's hands remained always gentle, alternating between cupping her breasts or her face before traveling south to rub her clit in order to bring her to the brink of completion again.

He nuzzled her neck and Sookie turned it toward him. "Bite, if you want," she whimpered.

"Yes, I want," he gasped. "But not yet."

He continued to thrust into her as a huge orgasm swelled up in her. Sensing she was close to exploding, Eric kissed her again and shifted his body slightly, offering her a different angle and even more penetration. She gasped and then yelled out his name again as she orgasmed; her hot sex contracting against his was enough to send him into similar pleasure.

They both shook for several moments as they came down from their highs. Eric's cock was still buried inside Sookie's warm body, but he managed not to crush her. He turned their bodies so that they were both on their sides and facing each other though still very much connected at the center. Sookie leg was slung over Eric's.

Eric was the first to be able to say coherent words, though they were hardly eloquent, "So. Fucking. Good. Sookie. So. Fucking. *Mine!*"

Sookie smiled into Eric's chest and nodded her head in agreement even as she tightened her leg around him. She could feel that he was still hard inside her, and she moved her hips a bit and returned, "So *big*, Eric. And so *mine*!"

"Yes!" Eric said, as he began to slowly move in and out of Sookie again.

Sookie looked up into Eric's eyes as he moved inside of her. "I need you so much, my love. Please."

Eric knew that Sookie was not just talking about sex, and—never pulling out of her—he flipped them over so that he was lying on his back and she was straddling him. She grinded her hips around him, making slow circles with them and keeping his cock embedded within her fully.

Eric growled and reached up to take both of Sookie's breasts in his hands. "You're beautiful like this," he managed.

Sookie put her hands onto Eric's chest for leverage and began to lift herself, riding him slowly and building them both up again. Eric moved his hands to her hips to help her move faster. Their eyes never left each other's and seemed to speak a language that was all their own.

He raised himself into a seated position under Sookie, and she wrapped her legs around his hips and ass. He lifted her hips up and down slowly as the tip of his cock dragged across her G-spot over and over.

Still looking at each other, the couple moaned together in shared pleasure as they moved slowly—back and forth.

Eric spoke, "There will be no going back, *min kära*. I need to hear that you are certain one more time." He stopped his movements and held Sookie's hips still.

Sookie nodded, "I know what I want Eric. I want *you*. I need *you*."

Eric moved his lips to Sookie's and kissed her passionately as he began to slowly move inside of her again.

Sookie thought that she might break apart in sheer ecstasy as he stretched her center, and she molded to him. Eric had never felt such exquisite tightness and warmth during sex before Sookie, and from a thousand years' worth of experiences, he knew that nothing would ever compare to her.

He pulled back from the kiss and braced himself for what was next by putting one hand flat on the bed behind him. He brought his other hand to his mouth as Sookie tracked his movements and licked her lips in anticipation, all while slowly continuing to grind into him. Eric bit his hand and turned the open wound to Sookie.

"We will be one," Sookie whispered as she took Eric's hand firmly into both of hers, pulling it to her mouth. She kept her eyes locked on his as she bit a little into the already-opened wound, sensing that he would like that. Then she began to pull his blood into her body.

Eric yelled out in another language as Sookie bit him and began to drink his blood; he felt his magic—the same magic that would connect him to her again—flowing into her body. He thrust into her harder as she drank, unable to control his passion at the simultaneous invasion of his cock, blood, and magic into the woman he loved more than his own life.

When Eric began to thrust into her more forcefully, Sookie drew in a sharp breath, even as she drew in more of his blood. But it was the combined storm of lust, desire, frenzy, and love in his eyes that almost sent her over the edge again. As she felt her orgasm approaching, she looked at his beautiful, expressive face and tilted her head to the side, offering her neck to him.

Eric moved his face to Sookie's neck after sharing one more meaningful look with her and whispered, "We will be one," as he bit into her gently.

The feeling that passed between them in the cubby when they started the bond the first time was ecstasy; Sookie could only come up with one word—“heaven”—to describe her current feelings.

Sookie and Eric were literally one in every way two beings could be one. As they simultaneously took blood from each other, their bodies still joined and moving, they were one being—two halves of the same soul, finally fused together.

Feeling a carnal impulse, Sookie bit again just as Eric’s wound threatened to close, and the feeling of that, along with her exquisite blood now flowing through his own body—nourishing and enriching him—sent Eric over the edge.

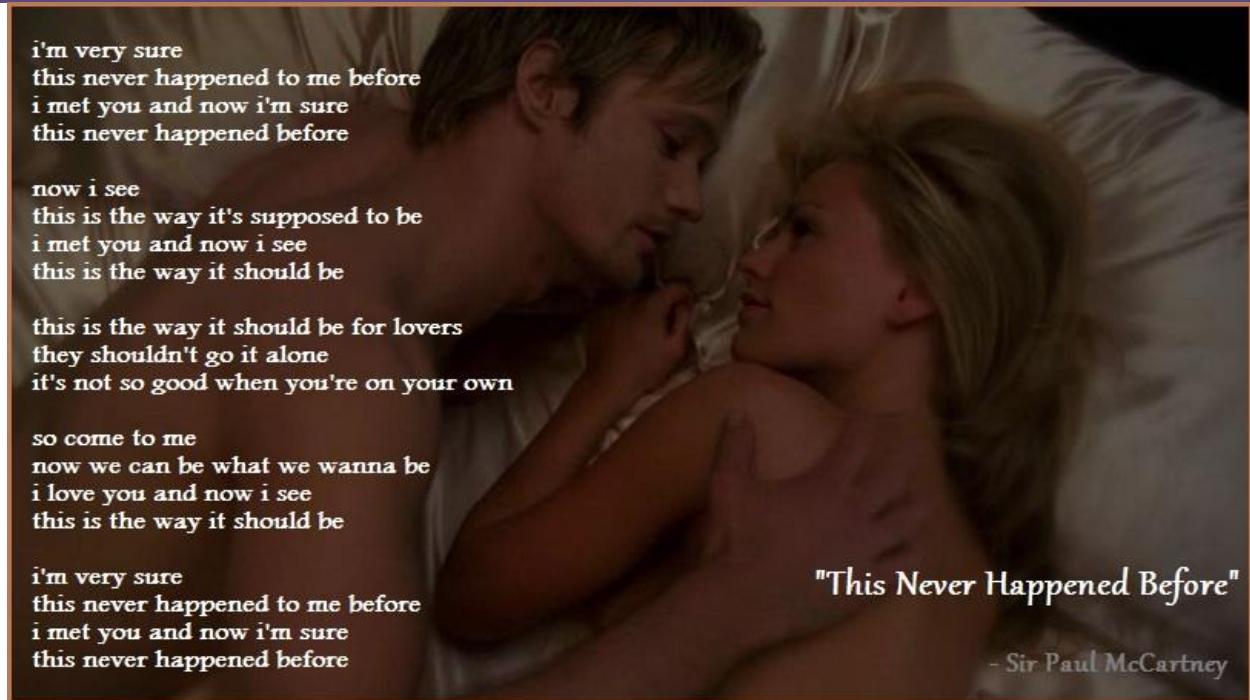
As the first burst of his seed hit her walls, Sookie joined him, her muscles constricting around him and milking him even more.

There, entwined in each other’s arms, sitting together in a lovers’ embrace, and still connected, their blood mixed and traveled through their bodies. And just as their orgasms began to subside, the vampire magic in him and the fairy magic in her collided in both of them—in a blinding rush of white light. The empty spots left within them from the scorching spell were filled.

The crashing together of their two magics sent both of them into orgasm again. Each yelled out in what sounded like a mixture of triumph and relief, and then they collapsed forward into each other’s bodies—still seated, still connected, now sated. Both had their eyes shut tight as their minds tried to take in the profundity of their connection. Neither succeeded in doing so.

Chapter 53: This Never Happened Before

[A/N: You probably get tired of my taking my chapter titles from songs, but sometimes when I'm writing, I get one stuck in me that seems to go along with a section of the story. This one is named for Paul McCartney's beautiful "This Never Happened Before."]



When Eric opened his eyes several minutes later, it was to the sun shining on his face. He was lying on some kind of cushion; he felt Sookie's body curled tightly into his, and he smiled down at her hair splayed out on his chest. He registered that they seemed to be floating and then felt wetness on his leg, which was draped off the side of the cushion into water.

"Sookie," he whispered, "where are we?"

Sookie stretched languidly and snuggled closer into Eric's strangely-warmed flesh.

"What do you mean?" she answered lazily. "We're in bed. And why are you so warm all of a sudden?"

“We’re not in bed, lover,” Eric said with a chuckle. “Open your eyes.”

Sookie grunted and then slowly opened her eyes, bringing them to Eric’s with a sleepy smile and then refocusing them on the world beyond him. “Oh!” she cried out when she recognized the sun was on them. “Am I asleep?”

“I do not think so, lover—not unless I am too, and I cannot dream.”

Suddenly concerned, Sookie cried out, almost tipping the cushion, “Eric, we’re in the sun. You have to get inside!”

Eric hugged her to him reassuringly. “I don’t feel like I’m in danger, my love. I think that we are sharing a vision, just as we did the first time we bonded.”

Sookie looked around more carefully and nodded. “We’re in the lake, Eric—the one where you asked me to play with you.”

Eric’s smile spread. “Your blood is a miracle, Sookie. You have given me the light again. You are giving me the sun. I can feel its heat on my body.”

“All is possible,” Sookie echoed the words from their previous experience.

Eric stretched out like a cat on the mat and sunk his leg farther into the cool water as he looked up into the blue sky. Sookie peeled her body from his and lay on her back as well, putting one leg into the lake to mirror Eric’s position and draping the other one over his. She grabbed his hand and held it in hers before lowering her other hand into the water. Both naked as the day they were born, they drifted through the lake silently for a while.

It was Sookie who finally spoke, “And that was only the first one! We have two more exchanges to go before the vampire blood bond is permanent, right!”

Eric chuckled and squeezed Sookie's hand before raising it lazily to his lips, "Yes, min kära. There are two more exchanges needed for the vampire bond to take permanent hold, but I can already feel you quite strongly. Do you feel me—my emotions—yet?"

Sookie let her mind touch their bond and was surprised when she felt amusement, contentment, and love coming from it. She took a moment to access her own feelings—surprise, love and devotion—and was able to recognize the different origins of the feelings.

"Oh my gosh!" Sookie exclaimed finally, "I can feel you! You are content and you're tickled by something. And you love me like crazy!"

"Yes, and you are surprised to be feeling me. Oh, and—of course—you love me like crazy too, min kära."

Sookie giggled before turning more reflective, "But I couldn't feel you like this before. What's different this time?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "Maybe it's just a part of this place where we are now, the immediate after-effects of the bond being formed. I remember feeling very connected to you after we made the first bond last time—as we made love on the bed in the snow."

Sookie sighed and blushed at the memory, causing Eric to laugh so hard that the floating cushion almost tipped again.

"What are you laughing at?" Sookie asked.

"You, lover. After all that has passed between us, I find it hard to believe that you still blush."

"Humph," Sookie grunted.

After a minute or two, Eric spoke again, this time more serious. “We’ll have to see if we can feel each other’s emotions to this extent after we have come down from our . . .” Eric paused, searching for a word.

“Our high?” Sookie supplied.

Eric chuckled. “Yeah. I wonder if you’re high on vampire blood and I’m drunk on fairy blood right now? Maybe in reality, we are running around the yard naked, giving Bubba a show.”

“No! You don’t really think so, do you?” Sookie’s blush grew.

Eric laughed out loud again, “No, I’m pretty sure that our bodies are still in your bed, my love.”

“*Our* bed,” she reminded.

Eric squeezed her hand a bit tighter. “Our bed.”

Sookie stretched out and then turned her face to look at Eric, who returned her gaze, “I don’t care what it is. It’s wonderful being here with you like this and seeing you in the sun.”

Eric smiled. “You were so beautiful that morning when I saw you in the sun. All I wanted to do was bring you into the water with me and make love to you in the light.” He paused and looked at her closely, “I love the way the sun plays in your eyes.”

Sookie brought her wet hand up to his cheek tenderly. “You’re beautiful like this too.” She continued suggestively, “Now—why don’t you do what you wanted to do then.” She dragged her hand over his body until she grasped his cock. She stroked him slowly as Eric groaned and gave into her touch. “Make love to me, Eric. Make love to me in the water.”

A moment later, Sookie found herself fully submerged in water with Eric’s arms around her. He stood up in the water, which was just above waist deep for him in that spot, and pulled

Sookie to him. Her legs instinctively wrapped around his hips even as her arms enveloped his neck. Their lips met feverously. When he felt Sookie's need to breathe, Eric moved his mouth to Sookie's ear, cheek, chin, and then neck before he broke the kiss and whispered, "I love you," just as he thrust his engorged member into her tight, very wet center. He moved in and out of her, the waves created from their joining adding to the intensity of their experience.

Eric's wet mouth was everywhere—making its way from her face, to her neck, to her breasts, to her shoulders, and finally to her lips again. Sookie's mouth, too, was very busy as she kissed any part of him she could reach until she could find purchase with his lips again.

The water splashed higher as Eric's pace quickened, and Sookie arched into him, working to meet his slippery thrusts. She tightened her grip on his neck and brought her mouth down to his shoulder, tasting the water and the warmth of the sun on his skin. She licked his flesh and then brought her blunt teeth down and bit a little, though not drawing blood.

Eric shouted out. "Harder," he gasped. "Bite harder. Please, Sookie. Taste me."

Instinct and pure carnal hunger taking over, Sookie bit into Eric's neck as hard as she could, and she tasted his blood flow into her for the second time that night. The angle of her body allowed Eric access to the top of Sookie's breast, and he plunged his fangs into her silky flesh, completing the second blood exchange. Sookie groaned into Eric's neck as she succumbed to her orgasm, her body pulsing over Eric's very ready cock; he exploded into her even as he took one more pull of her blood.

Sookie collapsed onto Eric's shoulder, and he had to grip her legs to keep them around him as he slowly walked to the shore and then laid Sookie on the grass-covered bank. Eric lay down and kissed her lightly on the forehead before curling up next to her and placing his cheek on her flat stomach. He closed his eyes and rested in the sun with his beloved even as their bond

grew and strengthened inside of both of them, the white light of her magic swirling around and then interweaving with his magic and their shared blood.

As Sookie brought her hands up to slowly brush Eric's wet hair, he fell asleep in the sun in their shared world.

Chapter 54: In Her Light

Sookie was awakened by Eric's slight movement next to her. She was deliciously sore and tucked into his body, her flesh touching as much of his as she could in their position.

"Don't move," Sookie said groggily.

Eric chuckled, "I'm sorry, min kära. It is already a bit past dawn, and I will have to go to the cubby soon. I feel that my time lingering in your light is almost at an end."

Eric's words slowly filtered into Sookie's conscious mind until she grasped them suddenly. Her eyes opened widely, and she shot up into a sitting position. The morning sun was already flittering slightly into the window.

"What are you doing?" she cried out. "Why aren't you in the cubby?"

Eric shrugged a bit. "I did not feel the pull of dawn, lover. And from here, we are not in the direct line of the sun. I think it must be the fairy blood or the bond—but I do not feel as if I am in danger right now."

Sookie got up, obviously upset. "Eric, you need to get to the cubby *right now*. I can't have you burn; I can't lose you!"

"Sookie," Eric said calmly, "you won't. A vampire's instinct, more than anything else, pulls him to his daytime rest. Right now, that instinct is not telling me to flee from the sun."

Sookie tried to calm herself. Eric was only half-covered by the blanket; his face, arms, and chest were all exposed to the dim, natural light in the room. However, the direct light of the early morning sun was still on the other side of the room. Sookie walked around to Eric's side of the bed and examined his exposed flesh for any redness or burning.

"See, min kära. I am fine. It seems you really have given me light again."

Sookie sat on the bed next to him. “Promise me that as soon as you feel anything—even a twitch of your vampire instinct thingy or a tic on your skin—that you will go to the cubby right away.”

“I will,” Eric promised her.

“What time is it anyway?” When did the sun rise?”

“It is 6:49; the sun rose at 6:37, min kära.”

Sookie sat pensively next to him before Eric drew her into his arms and covered her with the blanket. Eric spoke quietly into her ear, “Do not worry, little one. I will *never* leave you now. I promised, remember?”

Sookie nodded and settled into Eric, though she was still obviously nervous.

“Remember on that day with Russell—your blood protected me from the sunlight.”

“I know, but that was only for a few minutes, and by the time I got to you,” Sookie had to stop in order to hold back her tears at the memory of his burning flesh.

“I know. I’m sorry, Sookie,” Eric said, pulling her closer.

She composed herself, “Did you take more from me last night than you did that morning?”

Eric considered for a moment, “Probably about the same, I think. Russell took more than I did by far, but he is older, so I knew that once your blood wore off, the sun would kill him more quickly.” Eric began to lightly stroke her hair.

Sookie pushed herself more fully into Eric’s embrace, subconsciously trying to cover up as much of his body with hers as she could. “That morning—when you and Russell took my blood—I wanted to hate you so much. I wanted to despise you, but as soon as you bit me, I felt

your hand stroking my hair, just like you're doing now. Somehow, at that moment, I knew that things weren't as they seemed."

"Is that why you came for me, Sookie?"

"Yes. There was that. But also, I felt—I don't know," she paused. "I felt that if I didn't get to you, that I'd be losin' somethin'—some part of myself." Sookie pulled herself up, once again studying Eric's flesh closely.

"Everything's still okay, min kära. I'm still fine. Enjoy this morning with me, Sookie."

She settled back into him and sighed.

"Do you remember being on the lake with me?" she asked.

"Of course, lover," Eric purred. "And I remember being in the lake with you. And I remember being *in you* in the lake."

Sookie swatted his chest playfully, "Okay, enough dirty talk, mister. Did we actually do the second bond in real life or just in that fantasy that we were in?"

Eric looked at the two almost-healed puncture marks on Sookie's breast. He ran his fingers lightly over them, raising goose bumps on her flesh. "These are from the bond we made at the lake. And I feel you more strongly than before. I believe us to be twice bonded, my love."

Sookie nodded, "Good."

"Very good," Eric agreed. "Can you still feel my emotions as you did at the lake?"

Sookie once again concentrated on their bond. She picked up wonder and joy coming from Eric. "Yes, you are happy right now—real happy. And you seem surprised by something."

"Yes," Eric said quietly. "I am very happy in this moment and very much in awe of your gifts to me."

They lay silent for a few minutes.

“Tell me what you will do today,” he asked. “Talk to me about your plans after I fall into my day slumber.”

“Well,” Sookie began. “I’m fixin’ lunch for my brother and the boys—that’s what I call Jesus and Lafayette now. And Alcide too. In fact, I—uh—well, Alcide sort of told me he wanted to *be* with me the other day. And today I’m gonna have to tell him that that’s just not gonna happen. I don’t want to hurt him, but after the increased libido caused by Bill’s blood was gone, I just didn’t really feel that attracted to him anymore.”

“You have vampire blood in you again, my love. What do you think you will feel now?”

“Honestly, I was a bit worried about that until Jesus and then you told me more about blood bonds. I’m guessin’ that it is the tie that caused my—uh—sex drive to get all out of whack. I think that the bond is only about you and me and will work to make me *less* attracted to anyone else. Given what we have and given that I know now that I really love you, I don’t think the increased libido thing will be an issue.”

“Better not. I do not handle jealousy well, my love,” Eric said, though his demeanor was casual and secure.

“Me neither.”

“Anyway, I can take care of any increases in your libido, lover.

“I just bet you can,” Sookie purred, smoothing her hand over his chest.

“You will wait until your brother and the witches are here before you tell him, *min kära*?”

“Yes,” Sookie agreed. “I know it is kind of cowardly, but I wanna wait to make sure we’re not totally alone. I know he won’t do anything, but . . .”

“But you have learned that being cautious is best when it comes to supernatural things.”

“Yes,” Sookie agreed.

“I am sorry that I arranged for Alcide now, my love. I wanted you to be comfortable around your protectors, but now I can feel that you are not; I made an error in judgment.”

Sookie smiled, “No—you didn’t. You knew I would accept Alcide, and you were right that I wouldn’t have accepted anyone else right then. I can be a bit . . .”

“Stubborn,” Eric completed.

“Maybe,” Sookie said coyly, “but pot meet kettle!”

Eric laughed, “Oh—how I love your sayings, little one.”

“Still okay?” Sookie questioned looking him over.

“Yes,” Eric answered smiling at the woman in his arms. “About your day guards . . .” he began.

“What about *them*?” Sookie asked, picking up on the fact that he’d used the plural.

“I have arranged some protection for you, just like we spoke of before, something more permanent. I’m also sure that you will be more comfortable with them than you are now with Alcide.”

Sookie sighed. “I know I need it because of everything Eric; I just hope it doesn’t *really* have to be permanent.”

Eric brought her tighter to him. “I know, but when I am not with you, I must know that you are taken care of. Believe me, if I thought I could get away with it, I would chain you to my side even as I sleep.”

“Oh, I believe it,” Sookie said sarcastically. She noticed that the sun was brighter and cringed a bit.

“I am still fine, Sookie,” Eric said, sensing her apprehension. He reached to the nightstand and picked up a piece of paper. “This is the phone number of some old associates of mine, Jarod and Miranda. They will be your new daytime security. I think you will like them.”

“Associates?” Sookie asked.

“Yes, I once saved their lives, and they were also part of Godric’s day security team, so I trust them.”

“Are they Weres?”

“She is a Were, but not a wolf. She turns into a lioness.”

Sookie gasped a bit. “Wow!”

Eric continued, “And he is a shifter like your boss, but he enjoys taking on a lion’s form in order to run with his beloved.”

Sookie smiled, “Are they together then?”

“Oh yes, as long as I have known them. I saved Miranda’s life one night about eight years ago when a large group of deer hunters had her trapped in my area. Jarod had tried to attack to save her, but he was also taken.”

“And you swooped in?”

“Yes, quite literally,” Eric laughed. “Miranda and Jarod had been caught off guard by the hunters, but I could tell that they were formidable; they could have killed the humans, but obviously did not want violence. That being the case, I sent them to Godric. They stayed with him, protecting his daytime resting place, until . . .”

Sookie hugged Eric tightly to her, not needing for him to continue. They sat quietly for a few minutes.

“What else will you do today?” Eric asked after a while. He could feel his body becoming tired but still felt safe in Sookie’s presence. He felt certain that his own survival instinct and the bond would tell him when he had to go to the cubby.

“After lunch, I’m gonna do a whole lotta nothin’,” Sookie smiled. “Jason’s gonna watch a movie or television with me, and Lafayette and Jesus will probably stay unless Lala has the night shift. Oh—and I’ll call and invite Miranda and Jarod over as soon as Alcide leaves, I guess. It’ll be nice having another girl around—too much testosterone already!”

Eric chuckled.

After a pause, Sookie asked, “Oh—do you want Jesus and Lala to wait to work on their spells until after we talk to them together?”

Eric thought for a moment. “That would probably be best, lover. I want to talk to Jesus about whether the privacy spell can be altered. As I said before, I like very much having *privacy* with you, my lover,” he leered, “but I also need to be aware of what is outside.”

Sookie smiled up at him, kissing the cleft of his chin. “You’d think,” she teased, “that after two blood exchanges, lots of sex, and even some kind of shared drunken ‘trip’, that you would be satisfied, vampire.”

“*Never*,” Eric said, kissing Sookie’s forehead. He enjoyed his morning with her for a minute longer, and then began to feel a bit sluggish. “I think it is time for me to go to the cubby, lover,” he said regretfully.

Sookie jumped up and examined him.

Eric chuckled, “Do not worry, min kära. I am just feeling a slight pull now, but nothing else is happening to me physically. Will you join me for a while?”

Sookie smiled. “I was planning on it.”

Sookie grabbed her robe off of the end of the bed and her phone, and Eric picked her up, half carrying and half flying her to the cubby. They settled into each other comfortably after Sookie set her phone alarm.

“I love you,” Eric whispered as he fell into his daytime slumber.

Chapter 55: My Wife

Sookie was awakened by her cell phone alarm at 10:30. Happily, she noticed that she no longer felt sore at all; in fact, she felt well-rested and full of energy. “Must be your blood, vampire,” she chuckled as she kissed Eric lightly on his lips. She thought she felt him stir slightly at her action, but she began to dismiss the thought since he was most decidedly dead for the day, despite his tardy beginning to his sleep.

Then, she stopped herself. Her days of dismissing the odd things that happened to her were over. She was going to talk to Jesus about Eric’s new ability to stay up and be in the indirect sun well past the dawn. She knew that since Eric was an older vampire, he could resist the pull of the sun to some extent, but she also knew that he’d never felt ‘safe’ in the light before. He’d said that he hadn’t even perceived the sun’s pull for a while—that he’d sensed no threat from the ambient light in the room. And now, he may have stirred in his sleep, and he should have been quite literally *dead* for the day. Sookie knew that something was up, and she wasn’t willing to put it on the backburner of her mind and just hope that it worked itself out.

As Sookie got up and slipped on her robe, she immediately longed for the feel of Eric’s naked flesh against her own.

“What are we gonna do with each other if we can’t even bear to get dressed?” she laughed to herself. She checked the bond between them. She felt Eric’s life force thrumming along, and she mentally stroked the bond. She was surprised to hear Eric make a sound like a sigh of contentment in his sleep, and she added that to the list of things to talk to Jesus about. Vampires, most decidedly, were *not* supposed to sigh in their sleep.

Sookie bit her lip in worry; Bill would be coming by at 10:00, and she wasn’t sure how he’d react to the news of her and Eric being together. She hoped that he would take the news

with the kind of Southern grace that he'd shown in the past, but now she wondered if all his previous actions and behavior had been authentic at all. She feared he might act in anger or do something to try to reintroduce his blood into her body. Sookie knew that if he tried to do that, she would defend herself with everything she had, and she knew that Eric would kill Bill.

Still, she felt sorry for Bill. In his own way, he did love her. But as she looked at the man in the bed before her, she could find no comparison between the Viking and the Civil War vet, except that they were both vampires.

Bill *seemed* honorable on the surface, but it was he who had tricked her into taking his blood—more than once. Eric *seemed* more dangerous, but when it all came down to it, the tie he'd made with her was the pure one, the one made out of love. Eric's bullet trick in Dallas now seemed like a misdemeanor when contrasted with Bill's felonious behavior since the first night she'd met him.

Sookie steeled herself. Alcide and Bill would both have to be dealt with that day; she'd put it off long enough, even though she'd been leaning toward choosing Eric for days. She'd felt an ache when she had awoken after the severing spell and hadn't been able to quite put her finger on what was causing it. After the previous night, she realized that she'd been aching for—*longing* for—her missing piece; she'd been longing for Eric from the moment she'd expelled his blood and magic from her body .

After one lingering look for her beloved, Sookie went upstairs and took a quick shower before putting on a pair of comfortable cargo pants and a T-shirt. As she came downstairs, she glanced outside and saw Alcide sitting on the porch. There was no indication that he heard her moving about, so she guessed that the privacy spell was still at work.

She quickly made a pot of coffee and then set to work marinating the steaks. She threw some potatoes in the oven to bake and then looked at the pies she'd made. She smiled and cut a big piece of the peach pie to set aside for Eric and her later. From past experience, she knew that if she didn't hide a piece now, her brother would devour the whole pie before she knew it! After that, she made some fresh iced tea even as she eased herself awake with more coffee. She pulled together a salad that would complement the steak and potatoes.

At 11:45, the doorbell rang, and Sookie used her gift to 'hear' that it was the boys. She opened the door and stepped outside slightly, giving both Lafayette and Jesus big hugs. Alcide looked a bit confused, however, as Sookie waved good morning to him.

"I didn't hear you in there, cher. I thought you were still asleep," he said.

"Nope, I've been up for more than an hour, Alcide. I've just been real quiet," Sookie lied, not wanting Alcide to know about the privacy spell for some reason.

Jason's truck pulled up, and Sookie began to walk across the porch to greet him and to help him with the beer and chips she knew he was bringing. However, as soon as she stepped further onto the porch, the cool November breeze picked up a bit, carrying her scent to Alcide.

Sookie heard the Were's low growl and immediately looked around, as did Jesus and Lafayette, to see where the danger was coming from, but she found Alcide's predatory stare trained on her.

"Oh fuck!" Lafayette said when he too saw the target of the Were's glare. He instinctively took a defensive stance in front of Sookie.

Jesus also put himself between Sookie and Alcide as the Were's growling continued.

Clueless to what was happening, Jason jumped out of his truck and called out, "Hey everyone! I brought some beers and stuff!"

Alcide rose from his seat on the porch and began to slowly stalk toward Sookie, still growling low. Only then did Jason notice that there was a problem, and he left the items he brought in his truck and ran to the porch to stand protectively next to his sister.

“What the fuck did he do to you, Sookie?” Alcide roared, coming closer, a look of pure hatred in his eyes.

At that moment two things happened almost simultaneously. The first was that Sookie felt afraid of Alcide for the first time—*real* fear, like he might harm her. The second was that a very naked Eric suddenly zipped onto the porch, placing his body between the angry Were and his beloved. His skin was completely exposed to the sun, which was bathing the porch with bright light. Eric and Alcide stood fewer than five feet apart and both were growling menacingly.

“Oh my fuckin’ God,” Lafayette muttered as he took in Eric’s beautiful body even as he tried to reconcile the fact that Eric was out in the sun.

“Eric!” Sookie yelled, as she saw his skin begin to get a little pink. “Get inside—*right now!* Please!”

Eric did not turn to look at her; instead, he leveled Alcide with a withering look that invited him to attack. He smirked, “The sun might be shining, Were, and I might burn to a fucking crisp, but I can guarantee you that I will still kill you before you make one move toward *my wife!*”

“Wife!” yelled Alcide derisively. “I’ll fucking kill you so that she can finally be free of you!”

Sookie had had enough. She yelled at Alcide, who had begun growling again. “Alcide stop! I have chosen Eric, and if you cannot accept that, you can get the fuck off my property right now!”

Alcide went to speak, but Sookie stopped him even as she reached for Eric to try to tug him back inside. “Alcide Herveaux, I want you to be my friend, but right now, I don’t give a rat’s ass what you have to say! All I care about is that your fuckin’ reaction has caused the love of my life to endanger himself, and I won’t fuckin’ have it!”

His skin turning pinker by the second, Eric gently shook off Sookie’s hold and continued to stare down Alcide.

Alcide’s growl turned more deadly, and his body began to shake as if he were about to turn into his wolf form; meanwhile, Eric’s skin became even redder and small wisps of smoke began to rise from his body. Eric growled and spoke in a voice of cold, deadly steel, “If you turn, Were, it will be the last thing you fucking do.” He postured himself for attack.

“Fuck!” Sookie yelled loudly, drawing everyone’s attention to her. Even Alcide and Eric froze and stopped snarling long enough to take in Sookie’s hands, which seemed to be collecting light; however, instead of hitting Alcide with her power, she pooled the light and aimed it directly at Eric’s chest.

Everyone on the porch, including Alcide, gasped with surprise as the light slammed into Eric and then absorbed into his skin, causing the vampire’s body to become momentarily rigid.

“See!” Alcide yelled. “The bastard was about to attack, and she used her power to stop him!” Alcide looked victorious in his mistaken belief that Sookie had just supported him by attacking Eric.

“What the fuck, Sook?” Jason yelled. “Why you hittin’ Eric?”

“Oh my God!” Jesus exclaimed as he realized what had happened. “Look at his skin!”

As Sookie rushed to embrace Eric, everyone else looked on as Eric’s skin healed, the redness and burns that had begun to form on him disappearing. Smoke was no longer coming off of his body.

Sookie held Eric tightly even as the ripples of her magic ebbed in his skin.

“Min kära,” Eric said, his lips on her hair, and his arms holding her to him, “you are my miracle.”

Sookie looked up at Eric, her eyes pleading, “Please, *please* go inside before you start burnin’ again. I can’t bear you being burned. Please, Eric!”

Alcide’s mouth had dropped, and a very audible “shit” was heard from Lafayette.

Eric looked down at Sookie. “I will go in, but *only* if you are by my side. I will not leave you with *him*.” Eric gestured toward Alcide, who still looked dumbstruck.

Sookie nodded and looked at Alcide. “If you want to try to retain any kind of friendship with me, Alcide Herveaux, you can come in to talk to *us* in 10 minutes after you simmer down. Until then, you can decide whether or not you can behave! I won’t be scared OR judged by you, Alcide. Not on my property! Not anymore!”

With that, she turned on her heel and led a perfectly healed and still *very* naked Eric toward the door. Eric’s eyes never left Alcide’s except for a moment—right before he entered the house—when he glanced toward the sun with wonder.

“Fuck!” Jason and Lafayette said in unison even as Jesus looked on in awe as the door closed behind Eric and Sookie.

Not able to help himself, Lafayette let out an enormous sigh, “Well, at least now I knows that Viking-sized refers to *everything* on the body.”

Jesus chuckled and Jason cringed a bit at the thought, even as all three friends kept a close eye on Alcide.

For his part, Alcide looked equal parts shocked and ready to spit nails.

As soon as Eric and Sookie were inside, Sookie led him to a part of the living room that was not taking direct sun. She embraced him fully, “What were you thinking?” You could have burned. You *were* burnin’!”

Eric pulled her just as tightly against his form. He spoke feverously, “I was thinking *only* of you. You were frightened, my love. I *had* to come to you.”

“But how are you awake? How did you wake up?”

“I don’t know. But I felt your fear, and I had to get to your side, min kära.”

Eric placed his forehead against Sookie’s, an intimate gesture on his part that always left her breathless.

After more than a minute that way during which they simply appreciated the fact that they were both safe, Sookie said, “Eric, I need to talk to Alcide, to try to salvage something of our friendship.”

Eric nodded but spoke firmly, “I understand, but I cannot let you do this without me—not now, not after he frightened you.”

Sookie raised her lips to his, “Thank you.” She kissed him lightly and then ordered, “I want you with me while I do this, but I also need you to *try* to be nice. And go put your pants on, cowboy!” she added as she playfully smacked his bottom.

Eric growled and pulled Sookie into a deep and passionate kiss. She felt his member rising to attention between them and almost gave into her carnal desire to let him take her right then and there—Alcide be damned.

Mustering up all of her resolution, Sookie pushed him away. Breathlessly, she whispered, “Go cover that thing up before Lafayette changes his religion.”

Eric smirked, “No fun, Sookie. Just no fun!”

Eric walked toward stairs—careful to avoid the pockets of direct sunlight in the room—even as he made a point to give her a show with the retreating form of his bottom. She couldn’t help her wistful moan, and she heard him chuckle as he reached the top of the stairs.

While he was dressing, Sookie pulled the drapes tight in the living room and the dining room. The front door didn’t have a heavy curtain over the window, so light still poured into her entryway.

By the time Sookie had closed out all the sunlight she could, Eric had returned to her side in the living room, clad in his jeans and flannel shirt, though he hadn’t bothered to button the buttons. Sookie looked him over from head to toe to make sure there were no more burn marks.

Once she was satisfied, Eric pulled her to him in a comforting embrace. “I called Jarod and Miranda. They are coming but were still on the other side of Shreveport when I talked to them. I will stay awake until they arrive.”

“Will you be okay?” she asked as a knock sounded on the door.

Eric smiled, “For some reason I have not fully figured out yet, *min kära*, your light just healed me, and now I can feel it protecting me like a blanket. I don’t know how to explain it, but I know I’m safe from the sun for now, as long as I stay out of its direct rays.”

“Okay,” Sookie relented. “But I mean it. If you start to feel any burning at all—even a baby tinge—you have to tell me! Oh, and you need to stay calm. I’m probably gonna say things that you won’t like—about how I thought I felt about Alcide at one point—but I need you to remember that I love you and *only* you.

Eric nodded.

Sookie gestured for him to stay back as she went to the door; reluctantly, he backed up so that he was farther from the direct light.

Through the door’s window, Sookie saw Jason standing right outside; she opened the door slowly. Jesus and Lafayette were blocking Alcide’s access, and Jason was looking to be in full cop/brother protective mode.

Full of thankfulness for her brother and her friends, Sookie noticed that Alcide looked a bit calmer and somewhat contrite. “Y’all can go ahead and let Alcide in, and give us a few minutes, okay?” Sookie said.

Jesus looked at Sookie significantly, “We might not be able to *hear* if you get in trouble, Sook.”

She nodded as she was reminded of the privacy spell and then said, “All right, then. Why don’t you guys go to the kitchen and wait in there so you can be sure to hear if there’s trouble.”

Jason spoke up, “But, Sook, I don’t want you to be alone with Alcide. I don’t know what’s got into him, but he’s not bein’ himself.”

“I won’t be alone,” Sookie said, patting her brother’s hand reassuringly. “Eric’s gonna stay with me.”

At Eric’s name, Alcide scoffed, but Sookie decided to deem that as an improvement over the growling.

“But Sook,” Jason said. “I didn’t think he could be awake in the day, and he was in the sun for a while without burnin’ up much. And what did you shoot him with, anyhow?” Jason looked confused.

“She gave him her blood,” Alcide said gruffly, the judgment thick in his voice.

Sookie looked at Alcide irritably and then told her brother, “Just go on ahead with the boys into the kitchen. I’ll explain things to you all in a little while after I talk to Alcide.”

Sookie moved back to allow Jason, Jesus, and Lafayette to come in. Lafayette gave her an affectionate pat before the trio moved slowly toward the kitchen, keeping a close watch on Alcide as they went. Sookie backed away toward Eric as Alcide entered.

Sookie could feel Eric’s protectiveness and strength from the bond. She knew that if Alcide tried anything, the Were would be dead in moments, so she kept her voice calm.

“Alcide, can I assume from your reaction that you smelled Eric’s blood in me?” Sookie asked.

“I can smell a lot *more* than his blood, Sookie,” Alcide said crudely.

Eric took a step forward but Sookie held her hand back to stop him.

“Alcide, I’m sorry that you found out like you did. I was hopin’ to tell you today. It was my mistake to not consider that you might be able to tell what had happened from the scent.”

Alcide spoke up, confusion clear in his eyes, “I shouldn’t be able to smell him like I do, Sookie, especially since, from the look of your hair, you just took a shower. But it’s like his *stench* is flowing out of you.” Alcide sniffed with disgust.

Sookie tried to keep calm even though she was now boiling with rage at Alcide’s words and demeanor. “I think we should all go and sit down in the living room,” she said firmly in a polite voice that even Gran would be proud of.

Alcide sneered in Eric's direction and went into the living room. Uneasily, he sat in one of the chairs, and Sookie took a place on the couch that was further away from him. Eric slowly moved to sit next to Sookie and leaned back casually even though Sookie could feel that he was ready to attack if need be. She continued to sense his protectiveness through the bond, but added to that were now pride and respect for Sookie. She shared a look with him and put her hand on his leg, between thigh and knee. The gesture settled both of them.

By contrast, Alcide reacted to the touch with a low growl.

"None of that, Were," Eric said evenly, once again leveling Alcide with an intense blue stare. "I have not killed you yet because of Sookie's regard for you, but I won't have my bonded threatened."

"Your *bonded*," Alcide spit out. "That's not likely for a selfish son of a bitch like you, Northman! I don't know what bullshit you have been feeding Sookie—besides your blood—but I'm not gonna let you keep your fangs in her!"

"Even so," Eric continued, his voice dangerously low, "we *have* bonded. Sookie is *mine*, and I am *hers*. Accept it now, or I'd be happy to send you to that little dog pound in the sky."

"*Enough!* Both of you!" Sookie said loudly.

Alcide quieted down and looked closely at Sookie, "Did he force you? If he did, I will kill him, vampire or no vampire."

Eric tensed, but Sookie squeezed his knee. The last thing she needed was a continuation of the testosterone exchange. Eric relaxed a bit at her touch. From her bond, Sookie felt Eric's emotions shift from mainly anger to trust in her. Again, Sookie gave Eric a thankful look.

“Listen Alcide,” she said. “You have been a good friend to me, and I want us to remain like that, but you don’t get to make accusations against Eric or suggest that I was somehow manipulated by him.”

Alcide went to interrupt, but Sookie stopped him, “No, Alcide, I’m gonna say everything I need to say, and then you can talk, or I’m gonna ask you to leave.”

Alcide grudgingly nodded as Sookie continued.

“*I’m* the one that decided to have all the vampire blood removed from my body so that I could see things clearly and choose what I really wanted based upon my *own* feelings—without the sway of vampire blood in my system. And that’s exactly what I did. More than anyone else—including *you*, Alcide—Eric was patient and let me work things out on my own; he never tried to pressure me into anything or sway my feelings against anyone. If anything, he did the opposite, even where you were concerned.

“But that’s all part of his game, cher!” Alcide couldn’t keep himself from speaking.

Sookie’s hurt expression silenced him, “I know that you hate vampires, Alcide, but I love Eric, and I’m the one that ultimately decided that I wanted to exchange blood with him and to be *his*.”

“But, Sook,” he’s a master manipulator. “You cannot trust a vampire! I thought that you and I were finally gonna be together. With their fucking blood out of you, we could have had a life together without their influence.”

“I realize what you *think* you wanted, Alcide,” Sookie said quietly, “and I am sorry, but it’s not what I want.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you wanted a normal life. You said once that if you were smart, you’d have fallen for someone like me. Without the blood, it just seemed natural that you’d be able to get past all the bullshit.”

Eric tensed at Alcide’s words, but Sookie again gave him a reassuring squeeze, “I *did* get past the bullshit. And Alcide, I realized that I love Eric—for real. With or without blood—it didn’t matter. I love him, and I have for a while. It was gettin’ Bill’s blood again that confused me so much.”

Sookie took a deep breath and continued, “As for us, Alcide. I have come to recognize that we would never work together; even if I had decided not to share blood with a vampire again, I wouldn’t have chosen to be with you.”

Alcide looked hurt, and Eric felt Sookie’s pain in causing that. He covered her hand reassuringly with his larger one.

“But why?” Alcide asked quietly, taking in the couple before him.

“Because we don’t love each other, Alcide,” Sookie said compassionately. “We were attracted to each other, but that’s not love. You helped me during some vulnerable times in my life, and those few times when we almost kissed . . .” Sookie paused as Eric stiffened next to her. “Well—I was not myself then. I was hurt and sad after Bill’s kidnapping. And then I was heart-broken by his break-up with me and findin’ out that he was with Lorena. And then I was even more messed up after Bill’s attack on me, and, of course, he fed me more of his blood that time too in order to heal me. So added to all the shit that was going on, I had had even more vampire blood, which made my libido get all blown out of whack—again. I would never have let myself get that close to kissin’ you otherwise. If I had been thinkin’ clearly, I wouldn’t have done those things—which I can see now were really mixed signals to you. And I’m sorry for sending those

mixed up messages your way, Alcide. But as soon as the vampire blood was out of me, I didn't feel that kind of attraction for you anymore."

Alcide looked crushed, and Sookie hurried on, "I do value you as a friend, Alcide, and like I said, I want to keep you as one. But nothing else is gonna work between us."

"What about *his* blood?" Alcide asked bitterly. "Won't it do the same thing? Won't it confuse you again?"

Sookie shook her head, "No—with Eric, things are different."

"But Sookie, I thought you wanted to get away from vamps. We could have a family and children. What can he give you but death?"

Sookie could feel regret coming from her bond with Eric, so she scooted closer to him, sinking her shoulder into his.

"Alcide, the truth is that you didn't want a kid with Debbie because you didn't want to bring a Were—a Supe—into the world. Clearly, you just haven't thought things through about me. What makes you think I wouldn't pass along my telepathy or my fairy powers to a child? Would you really want a kid like that when you seem to want only so-called normal kids? And, Alcide, even though I try not to, I can still hear your mind at times. And that just won't work for me in a relationship. I don't want to be with someone that I have to hold up my shields with every minute, just to avoid hearin' something I don't like."

"But, Sookie," Alcide appealed, "I love you. We could make it work."

Sookie shook her head, "No, Alcide, you don't love me. I can see into your mind, remember? As much as you might like the idea of me, you don't love me. You are still in love with Debbie."

Alcide was silent for a minute as he took everything in.

After several moments, he said, “I still think he’s wrong for you, Sook.” He gestured toward Eric.

“That’s *not* your decision to make, Alcide. If you wanna be my friend, you have to accept that Eric and I are together now.”

“If he hurts you, Sookie, I’ll kill him.”

“Then there will be no problems, Were,” Eric spoke up. “Sookie is my bonded; I will not see harm come to her, let alone be the cause of it myself. As you are her friend, I will forget about your behavior today—as long as it never happens again.”

Alcide grunted and then looked closely at Eric and Sookie, sitting comfortably close together despite the tense situation. He saw how Sookie was sunk into Eric’s shoulder, he noticed their now-entwined hands, he took in Eric’s protective but still relaxed posture, and he saw the love reflected in their eyes as they glanced quickly at each other. Alcide sighed, and then he let himself be honest with himself; Sookie was right. He wasn’t over Debbie. All he could think about at that moment was that he was jealous that he and Debbie had never fit as comfortably together as the unlikely couple that was sitting in front of him.

Finally, he spoke, “Listen Sook, it is gonna take me a while here. I wasn’t expectin’ this.” He took in a deep breath before continuing, “But I want you to be happy. In the end, I thought I’d be the one to do that, but if it turns out to be him . . .” he paused. “Well, if Eric makes you happy, then that’s what’s important.”

Eric nodded at Alcide. “Herveaux, I know of your feelings about vampires due to your father’s problems, but you have been a valuable associate of mine at times despite those feelings. You—and everyone else—will see that my intentions toward Sookie are honorable. Still, I want

to keep the closeness of our bond and the knowledge of her power within a small circle in order to ensure her safety. Sookie—and I—would appreciate your discretion.”

Alcide looked slightly insulted but then assured Sookie, “Your secrets are safe with me, Sook. No matter what happens, you can count on that.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said gratefully. “Alcide, I know that this is hard for you, so just to let you know, Eric’s got me new daytime guards from now on.”

Alcide nodded, “It’s probably for the best, but if you need anything Sookie, anything at all, you will call, right?”

“Yeah,” Sookie answered. “And you can do the same, you know.”

Eric spoke up again, “As per our arrangement, I have already settled your father’s debts in full. And if you wish, I will ask the new sheriff of Areas 3 and 4, Isabel, to ban him from the vampire-owned casinos on the Mississippi that he is still frequenting. She has taken over the last sheriff’s holdings, which include many of the casinos, so she could—perhaps—frighten him away instead of taking advantage of his addiction.”

Sookie held Eric’s hand even tighter and sunk into him more, her gratefulness and pride for him swirling in the bond.

Alcide spoke in a low voice, “You would do this?”

“I would,” Eric said. “It pleases, my bonded. Plus, as I have said, you have been a good asset in the past—though I know you have worked for me *only* out of the need to repay your father’s debts. Perhaps in the future, our dealings can be about mutually beneficial business rather than debts.”

Alcide nodded a bit to Eric and then stood up. “I think I’ll go now, Sook. With everything that’s happened, I might also go back to Jackson for a while—check on family and such.”

Sookie and Eric stood simultaneously, never losing the link between their hands. “I am sorry about hurting you, Alcide,” Sookie said, her voice low. Part of her wanted to hug Alcide, but she knew that wouldn’t be good for the Were at that time.

“It’ll be okay,” Alcide said, the kind-hearted warmth that she loved in him finally returning to his eyes. With a small nod in their direction, he went to the door. “Remember, Sookie. If you need me, you just call.”

“Thanks,” Sookie returned as Alcide left.

Sookie sunk back onto the couch, taking Eric with her. She put her head onto Eric’s shoulder, and he rested his head on hers. “You still okay?” she asked after a minute of quiet.

“Yes. I’m not even feeling the pull to sleep yet. Your magic is truly a miracle, my love.”

“Yeah—well—right back at you, baby.”

Chapter 56: Okay

Sookie and Eric spent the next few moments in comfortable silence before Eric spoke up, “I think that given the strength of our bond, it will be very easy for other supernaturals to sense it, just as Alcide did. This could be good or bad, depending on the situation. On the one hand, it will make others recognize more quickly that you are mine, which is good. However, it will also hint at the strength and unusual nature of our bond, which might spur some to ask questions about you. I think we should consider asking Jesus for help with dampening our scents from others. Regardless, the fact that you smell so strongly of me will make things—more *difficult*—with Bill tonight.”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about that too,” Sookie sighed, pulling back so that she could look at Eric. “I’m a little afraid.”

“I know, min kära. I can feel that.” He paused. “I also know that you hate it when people tell you what to do, but . . .”

“Lemme guess,” Sookie interrupted. “You *insist* on being with me when I tell Bill.”

Eric smirked playfully, “I was going to say ‘strongly suggest.’ I thought those words might work better than ‘insist.’”

Sookie chuckled, “Well—at least you are learning not to *seem* so high-handed, mister vampire sheriff.” Her expression turned serious, “But after Alcide, I was gonna *insist* that you are with me too. Right now, I trust Bill about as far as I can throw him.”

Eric nodded, “Yes—I am also having a hard time anticipating how Bill will react. After the attempt on our lives the other night, I entered into a bargain with him that if you chose him, I would back off. He agreed to do the same if you chose me; however, . . .”

Sookie picked up, “. . . however, Bill has proven himself to be dishonest in the past, especially where I’m concerned, so he’s a wild card.”

Eric nodded again. “That is why I intend to be with you the whole time as you confront Bill. He will *not* touch you—I promise.”

“If he tries, I plan to zap the hell out of him,” Sookie added.

Eric’s eyes lit up lustfully. “I love it when you are feisty, lover.” With a twinkle in his eyes, he added, “It makes me want to pillage you.”

Sookie laughed, “Be good, Viking!”

After another few minutes, she gave Eric a kiss on his chest and went to get up. “You sure you’re still okay?” she asked her beloved.

Eric nodded. “Okay,” Sookie said, looking him over. “You stay here where it’s darkest, and I’m gonna go get the others and let them know everything’s fine.”

A few minutes later, Sookie came back into the room, a warm blood for Eric in one hand and an iced tea for herself in the other. She was trailed in by Jason and the boys.

“Wait,” Jason said. “Before you start talkin’, Sook. I’m gonna go get the beer out of my truck. I have a feeling I might need one.”

Sookie chuckled. “Bring one for me too. I could probably use somethin’ stronger than iced tea myself.”

Jesus and Lafayette agreed and soon Jason had returned inside; he tore open the twelve pack and brought each of them a bottle of Dixie beer.

Once everyone was settled, Sookie began, “Last night, Eric and I decided to re-bond. We shared our blood twice, and with one more time, the bond will be permanent.”

“You sure ‘bout this?” Jason asked, keeping his tone even so he didn’t risk offending Eric.

“Yes,” Sookie smiled, putting her beer down on the table and grabbing Eric’s hand in both of hers. “I realized that I have loved Eric for a while now—even before the amnesia thing—and we have decided to be together. And at least for the time bein’, he’s gonna move in here.”

“So y’all are *together* together now?” Lafayette asked.

“Yes,” Eric answered, putting his TruBlood down next to Sookie’s drink and adding his second hand to the pile on Sookie’s lap. “I love Sookie, and we are now bonded by even more than vampire blood.”

Sookie explained, “Jason, Jesus told me the other day that the fairy blood I have also has the magic to make a bond, one that was already permanent between me and Eric even before we removed the vampire blood with that spell last Monday.”

“Can I do that kind of bond too?” Jason asked, looking at Jesus.

“I don’t know,” Jesus answered meditatively. “So far, you haven’t really manifested any fairy qualities like Sookie has, but who knows what might happen in the future.”

There was a brief moment of silence before Layette spoke. He was looking directly at Eric when he did. “You’s called her your *wife* earlier. What’s with that?”

At this, everyone—including Sookie—looked at Eric, who chuckled under the scrutiny. “Yes—perhaps—that *was* a bit premature, but it sort of slipped out.” Eric now looked at Sookie closely and then turned to face Jason.

Eric bowed his head a bit to him before speaking, “Jason Stackhouse, you are the oldest remaining male of your family, I believe.”

Jason nodded, looking a bit confused.

Eric went on, “Then, I believe it is a tradition in your culture that I seek your approval to marry your sister. In my time, the family of the groom had to provide a *brudpris*—a bride price—but I believe this tradition is no longer the case. I wish to marry Sookie in any way that I am able—by both vampire and human customs. I vow that I will take care of her and secure her safety. I am willing to do whatever I must to earn this right.”

From the other side of the room Lafayette sniffled, even as tears formed in Sookie’s eyes.

Jason was silent for a moment as he took in what Eric was saying. “Well, I appreciate your askin’ me and all, but Sookie’s sorta the smart one in the family, so I reckon that if she wants to marry you, then it’s a good idea.” Jason’s tone got more serious. “But you better take good care of her, or it won’t matter that you’re no vampire.”

Eric bowed his head to Jason again and looked at Sookie penetratingly before dropping to one knee before her. Her tears were dripping down her face freely now.

“I gave myself *fully* to you last night, and now in the light of the day—a light that I am able to survive in only because of you—and in front of your friends and family, I vow that I will always love you and stand by your side. After our bond is complete, I wish to be pledged to you by vampire custom. It will make us married according to vampire law, and no vampire—not even a king—could separate us then without the true death being brought upon him or her as punishment. Then, as I told you before, as soon as Louisiana accepts vampire-human marriage, I wish to marry you according to human custom. Will you agree to be my wife, Sookie?”

Sookie sunk onto her knees and into Eric’s embrace before he had finished his question, “Of course! I told you I would last night, you silly vampire!” She kissed him fully on the lips. And then pulled away from him, “You still okay? No burns?”

Eric chuckled again and wiped the tears from Sookie's eyes. "I'm still fine. I'm not going anywhere."

Tears had also formed in Lafayette's eyes by now, and he rose to his feet, "Damn it you two! Stop all your bein' all crazy in love shit before my face gets all ruined."

Sookie laughed as she and Eric sat back up on the couch.

Lafayette added, looking straight at Sookie, "And he better gets you a kickass ring too. The man's loaded; he up and gave me a car once. You better get somethin' real fine."

Sookie grinned and looked right at Eric, "I already have something *real fine*." She kissed him softly on the lips.

Lafayette rolled his eyes as Jason shifted uncomfortably, not liking to see his sister kissing on anyone.

After a few moments, Eric looked at Jesus, "I would like to speak to you about the spells you think you can perform to protect this house, as well as your privacy spell."

Jason interrupted, "Well, while you are doin' that, I'm gonna turn the grill on and get the steaks goin'. I'm starved after all this drama!"

Lafayette added, "I'll help you while these three talk shop."

Sookie smiled gratefully. "Hey, Jase, check to see if the potatoes in the oven are ready to come out. There's also a salad made in the fridge and the steaks are already in there marinatin'. Oh, and Lala, look under the towel in there. There's an apple custard pie with your name on it!"

"Oh," Jason said sheepishly. "We found the pies earlier, Sook."

Sookie smiled knowingly as Lafayette and Jason grabbed what was left of their beers and went to the kitchen. Sookie assured Eric, “Don’t worry. I hid away a piece of the peach for us for later.”

A sincere, appreciative smile lit up Eric’s face as he looked at his beloved.

Jesus looked at Eric, still a bit shocked by the transformation of his own opinion about the vampire. When he’d first met Eric because of Lafayette’s troubles, he would never have thought that he would see him with such a smile on his face. He couldn’t help but shake his head at the funny way the world worked.

“So,” Eric began, “it is clear now that our bond doesn’t work like a normal bond between vampire and human. We have made only two exchanges thus far, but even after the first, Sookie could tap into my emotions, and for humans, that happens only after the bond is complete with three exchanges.”

Jesus nodded. “That matches what I read too. The bond between a vampire and a human is very rare, but in all known cases, it took three exchanges to make it permanent and give the human access to the feelings of the vampire. Humans with a full bond are also able to sense and find their vampires. But I think that Sookie can feel you because of *her* magic, not yours. Or maybe because her magic has strengthened the bond? I’m not sure; there’s never been a case of a fairy and vampire bonding that I know of, so a lot of what I’m saying is pure conjecture.”

Eric nodded. “Godric’s books mention no vampire/fairy bonds either. To be honest, pure fairies do not live long around vampires. The compulsion to take their blood is too great.” He looked at Sookie a bit guiltily as they both remembered her fairy godmother.

Jesus asked a bit nervously, “Would you be willing to tell me what else has happened with you since you remade the bond and how it is different? Maybe then I could figure out more

about it. I have been reading all I can about fairies and their magic. To be honest, there's not much since most thought they were myth."

"Figures," Sookie mumbled.

Eric chuckled and then looked at Jesus seriously, "Sookie trusts you brujo, and you have already proven yourself to be a formidable ally to both of us. I find it hard to believe that I would align myself with a part demon, part human, and part brujo, but stranger things have happened, so if Sookie agrees, then we will tell you."

Sookie giggled a bit at both Eric's words and his formality, and then she looked at Jesus, "Of course we can trust him. And I'm speaking from my own instincts as well as from what I see in his head right now." She tapped her forehead and then looked at Jesus a bit apologetically.

Jesus smiled at the couple and took them in. Sookie was now leaning against the arm of the sofa with her half-finished beer propped up on her stomach and her feet in Eric's lap. Eric had been absentmindedly stroking Sookie's bare feet since they'd arrived in his lap a few minutes before. Every once in a while, he would gaze at Sookie and a look of utter contentment would cross his face as he seemed to drink her in. For her part, Sookie was going back and forth between enjoying both her beer and her massage and leaning forward to check on Eric's skin, making sure it wasn't turning pink.

Eric took in an unnecessary breath, "First, as you know, when the vampire blood was removed from Sookie, I could no longer feel her, though an imprint of a fairy bond was left behind in the form of that empty space I told you about. Sookie had a similar space, but I was able to smell no vampire blood in her at all."

Eric continued, "Last night, as Sookie said, we decided to reform the bond. It was an *extreme* experience to say the least," he added grinning mischievously at Sookie, who gave her

obligatory blush. “After we had exchanged, I felt our bloods and our magics meld together, literally filling that empty spot from before. After that, it seemed like a white light entwined our shared blood and welded itself to the magic in my blood.” Eric paused, “I cannot explain the feeling any better. It was like a fusing of the two magics. After that, I felt Sookie more than I had ever felt her before, even more than after our previous first bond. And she was able to sense my emotions too. Then, later, when we exchanged a second time, my ability to feel Sookie grew exponentially, which is why—I think—I was able to feel her fear even in my daytime sleep earlier.”

Sookie added, “Oh, and then there’s the whole shared drunken high thing.”

Jesus looked confused as Eric continued. “Yes, when Sookie and I exchanged our blood last night, it was almost as if we shared a kind of fantasy plane for a while. We were together at the lake in broad daylight. It seemed as real as us sitting here now. One of Godric’s books describes that a state of euphoria is achieved at the first bonding between a vampire and a human; I think that this is what occurred, but I’m certain that Sookie’s fairy blood caused the experience to be more—*intense*.”

Jesus contemplated what Eric had said before asking, “Did any of these things happen last time when you made the first bond?”

“Well, we did have a little fantasy trip thing together. Only that time, it started snowing in my shower, and we were in the sunlight and in the snow too,” Sookie said. “But I wasn’t able to feel Eric’s emotions then. And I know I couldn’t locate him because when he was taken by Marnie, I couldn’t feel where he was.”

Jesus thought for a moment before asking about the literal elephant in the room, “Eric, you are awake in the daytime and you are sitting in a room that has sunlight—not much, but some. How are you doing that?”

Eric looked at Sookie and then at Jesus, “Well, as you may know already, when a vampire takes a fairy’s blood, there is a kind of tolerance to the sun passed along. One of Sookie’s fairy relatives came to take her away again, and in my state of amnesia, I simply drained her. After that, I felt drunk—or at least that’s the only human memory I have which I can compare it to—and I was able to be up in the day for a while until the effects of the fairy blood began to wear off. In fact, that morning, I spent at least an hour in the direct sunlight without suffering ill-effects, nor did I feel the pull of the sun. After drinking from Sookie last night, I was able to stay awake well after dawn this morning. As an old vampire, I can choose to do this anyway, but I cannot stay in the light, nor can I prevent myself from feeling a pull. Also, vampires who stay awake past the time our bodies order rest get the bleeds. And I had none of that this morning. Even when I awoke from my sleep due to Sookie’s fear, I was not struggling against the day as I normally would. And in the sun when we were on the porch, I should have been burning a lot more and a lot quicker.”

Sookie sat up and returned her beer on the coffee table. She repositioned herself so that she was tucked in next to Eric; her anxiety over having seen Eric’s skin being damaged by the sun was apparent through the bond.

He held her close and comforted her as he went on. “And as you saw, after Sookie shot me with her light outside, the minor wounds I had developed healed immediately, and now I feel even more secure than I did this morning—as if the sun could not harm me. It is unheard of for a

vampire, even the oldest of our kind, to be so easily awake in the middle of the day, but here I sit.”

Jesus inhaled deeply, trying to form his thoughts. “I think most of the unusual stuff happening is related to your fairy magic, Sook. Or maybe it’s the combination of fairy with vampire magic. Either way, in the fairy bonds I have read about,” Jesus looked at Eric since he’d previously told most of what he was about to say to Sookie,” it seems that the two bonded ones are able to share each other’s power in some ways, thus becoming stronger together than apart. Maybe Sookie can feel your emotions already because she’s sort of piggybacked onto your own magical ability. I also think that the healing light in her, or the light that you say is sealing your bond, is working as a kind of protection for you. It is possible that after the vampire bond is complete, especially if you continue to share blood, that you will become more and more resistant to the sun’s rays, though I doubt that you will ever be fully immune to them. In fairy bonds, the two sort of pool and share their magic in order to strengthen and protect the bond.”

“Fuck,” Eric muttered.

Sookie looked confused. “What’s wrong? Don’t you like the idea of being less susceptible to the sun?”

“Of course, *min kára*. This gift would be wonderful, but the price if found out by others would be too high. Right now, several people and vampires, including Bill, already know that your blood can protect them from the sun for a short while. But if you make me more and more resistant to sunlight over time, or even less susceptible as I am right now, it would be *very* bad if other vampires found out.”

“But I couldn’t do this for them. I am bonded *only* to you. I’d have to choose; I couldn’t be coerced, right?” Sookie asked looking back and forth between Eric and Jesus.

“Yes,” Eric answered. “But that would not prevent some from trying to take you or trying to force you to bond with them. I can think of one vampire right across the cemetery who might try to do this. It is better if no one beyond a small circle knows about your ability or the gift you have given me.”

“You can glamour us,” Jesus volunteered, “so that we wouldn’t be able to tell.”

Eric nodded, “Thank you.” He looked at Sookie, “With your permission, my love, I will send Pam to do Alcide too.”

Sookie nodded regretfully but agreed. “What about Jarod and Miranda? You called them in the day time.”

“They will agree to glamour,” Eric said reassuringly.

“Okay,” Sookie said. “So basically, we are sharing our gifts with each other to some extent. What else could we do? Do you think I could fly?” she asked excitedly.

Eric chuckled.

Jesus shrugged. “I don’t think so, but after the third bond, you could try things out to see what you can share.”

Eric nodded and then changed the topic slightly, “From what you have said, as well as from what my own instincts tell me, Sookie and my bond will become even stronger over time. And even after two exchanges, you saw the effect that it had on the Were. Is there a spell that we could use to dampen the way others perceive the bond, especially what they would smell?”

“Hmm,” Jesus contemplated. “I don’t know. There are all kinds of spells about hiding or cloaking things, so I bet I could find something. The privacy incantation I’ve been doing is a spell of this type. I’ll have to do a bit more research, however.”

Eric followed up, “The privacy spell, Jesus. Tell me exactly what it entails.”

“Well, it lasts the cycle of the sun—or a day—right now, but I can change the language easily enough to extend it—to say, the cycle of the moon. It basically prevents anyone from knowing someone is within the confines of a specified area unless they show themselves voluntarily. For the last two days, I’ve been specifying the inside of this house as that area.”

Eric nodded. “So that is why Bubba could see Sookie from the door—because she was ‘showing herself.’”

Jesus continued, “Yes. Right now, the spell also includes words that allow those inside to see the world outside even as they are not seen.”

Eric posited, “So the spell could be adapted to allow those inside to hear and smell as well?”

Jesus nodded, “That’s what I’m thinking too, but I still need to work on the exact language before I attempt it.”

“Good,” Eric said. “For now, I think it’s best if we wait to redo the spell.”

Confused, Sookie looked at Eric, but then he gave her a look that told her that he had a plan, so she relaxed.

“What is the other spell—the protection spell—that you told Sookie about?” Eric picked up.

Jesus’s eyes lit up. “This one is cool! Basically, this spell will work to ward anything that is your property, Sook, anything you own—this house, the land around it, your car! It works to repel or keep out those with bad intentions. They would not be able to pass the barriers of the ward.”

Eric asked, “This is a powerful kind of magic, Jesus. I have heard of it before. Do you think you can do it?”

“Well,” Jesus said, “normally, I would say no, not even with my Demon blood, but Lafayette is extremely powerful, so if we do it together, I think it will work.”

“You make a good team too,” Eric complimented even as he looked at Sookie. “When can you do that one?”

“I got the ingredient I was missing this morning, thanks to your person Bobby. We brought everything we needed with us, so we can do it today if you want.”

Eric looked at Sookie. “Do it,” Sookie said.

Jesus looked a bit uncomfortable. “Sookie, anyone inside the property whose intentions are bad will be expelled as soon as the spell is completed.” He looked at Eric and then back at Sookie.

She tightened her arms around Eric, “It looks like you have one more test to pass, my love.”

He laughed. In mock exasperation, he added, “Always little tests with you, min kára. Never a peaceful moment.” He touched his forehead to hers and they embraced each other as Jesus looked on. Without turning toward Jesus, Eric asked, “What if someone’s intentions change after he or she is already inside the barrier?”

Sookie knew that Eric was talking about Bill, and she sighed, lamenting that she too had major doubts about Bill at this point.

Jesus thought for a moment, “They’d be immediately expelled from what I can figure.”

“Good,” Eric and Sookie said simultaneously.

Jesus could tell that their conversation was done, and he rose out of his chair and went into the kitchen, giving the two some privacy.

“You still okay?” Sookie asked Eric.

He smiled and pulled her closer, cradling her onto his lap. “You agreed to be my wife in every way a little while ago. *Okay* isn’t even close.”

Chapter 57: Protection

Ten minutes later, Lafayette and Jesus entered the living room to see a resting Eric and Sookie on the couch. Both had their eyes closed. They were wrapped together with Eric holding Sookie to his chest. His leg was slung over hers. A slight snore was coming from Sookie, and a sound similar to a purr was rising quietly from Eric's chest.

"It's the damnedest thing!" Lafayette said softly. "If someone had told me a year and a half ago that I'd be seein' this, I'd have told them that they's crazy."

Eric and Sookie were stirred as the doorbell rang. Both straightened into a sitting position, and Sookie's first impulse was to check Eric for burns. "Still okay, min kára," he assured.

Lafayette looked out the door and saw a couple standing there. "It's a man and woman."

Still not able to use his sense of smell from inside the privacy spell, Eric rose and neared the door, even as Sookie tried to keep him in the darkest parts of the room.

"Miranda and Jarod?" she asked.

He nodded once he was able to see them through the window in the door. Sookie gestured for Jesus to let them in.

Jesus quickly opened the door and told the couple to come in. Immediately, he shut the door behind them, trying to limit the light allowed into the room.

Sookie was struck immediately by Miranda's red hair, which shone in the reflected light of the sun that streamed in after the couple. Miranda stood about 5'10" and looked like she was straight off of a fashion-show runway. She was dressed in blue jeans and a black sweater with combat boots on that looked like they'd seen actual combat. Miranda's sharp blue eyes immediately began to take in and assess her surroundings.

When her gaze landed on Eric, she gasped. “Fuck, Eric. What are you doing? I thought it was bad enough that you were forcing yourself to be up in the day to call us, but what the *hell* are you doing in sunlight?”

“Waiting for you to get here,” Eric answered coolly. “Now come, so that I can introduce you to my fiancé.”

Jarod and Miranda looked at Eric like he’d just been abducted by aliens. “Fiancé?” Jarod asked, his Australian accent prominent with even one word.

“Yes, this is Sookie Stackhouse. She is my bonded. And she will soon be my pledged. And these are our,” he paused, “*friends*, Jesus and Lafayette.”

Just then, Jason came in from the kitchen proclaiming, “The steaks are almost ready, Sook. We eatin’ at the table or in the livin’ room?”

“Ah,” Eric continued. “And this is Jason Stackhouse, Sookie’s brother.”

Miranda breathed in sharply and looked at Sookie and Eric with a shocked expression. “You *are* bonded!” she said with a slight Irish accent.

“That’s what I said,” Eric deadpanned.

Jarod was the first to recover from his surprise at seeing Eric awake and in the daylight as well as from the news that the vampire was bonded. He reached out and shook the hands of the men before he walked over to Sookie and extended his hand to her. His bright green eyes were full of amusement, and his curly, messy brown hair spoke immediately to his casual attitude. “It’s an honor, Miss Stackhouse,” he grinned with a short bow. “I have met many people in my travels, but I never thought I would meet one who would tame Eric Northman.”

“Trust me,” Sookie deadpanned as she took Jarod’s hand, “he still bites.”

Jarod, along with Lafayette, broke out in laughter, “Oh, Eric, I like her already.”

Ignoring the men in the room, Miranda came forward taking a long look at Sookie. “The night before he died, Godric called me to tell me to clean up the mess that had been made of his home by a bomber. He said that he’d met an amazing woman named Sookie, who had helped Eric find him at the Fellowship of the Sun church. Godric also said that this woman had stolen his child’s heart. He was talking about you, I assume?”

“Yes,” Sookie whispered even as she felt her bond with Eric open up with his sadness at hearing Godric’s name. She grasped his hand and held it firmly.

“Well then,” Miranda concluded, “it will be a pleasure to take care of your safety. I think we will be good friends. For now, however, I want to check the perimeter of your property.” She looked at Eric, obviously ready to take command. “Tell me everything I need to know to keep my charge safe.”

Eric responded, his tone matching hers, “The property extends to the old cemetery on the northeast side and the road to the south. It goes to the rivulet to the west and encompasses about 15 acres, all told. Beyond the cemetery is the property of the vampire king of Louisiana, Bill Compton. He may be a threat to Sookie since he was once tied to her by the blood. He has heavily armed human guards; their guns are most likely loaded with silver bullets. Sookie is also part fairy, and they may try to kidnap her and to take her to their realm; they have tried at least twice already. Because of her fairy blood and her telepathy, she has been coveted by multiple vampires, and she may become the target of others. Jesus and Lafayette here are witches and are going to put a protection spell around Sookie’s property today, which will make things easier, but if I know my bonded, she will not agree to stay within its boundaries and will, therefore, require your protection during the daytime until further notice. She is also,” Eric paused, looking

for the right words, “a danger magnet, so good luck!” He ended with a falsely innocent smile at Sookie, who punched him lightly in the arm.

“Ouch!” Eric said jokingly about two seconds after she’d hit him.

Sookie glared at him playfully before adding, “I’m also starting back to work tomorrow; I’ll be workin’ the day shift—that’s from 11:00 to 4:30—at Merlotte’s. I’m a waitress.”

Eric rolled his eyes but did not argue with Sookie about her job. He knew better. Instead, he looked at Jarod, “Sam Merlotte is also a shifter and a friend to Sookie, so that may make things go more smoothly.”

Miranda sarcastically asked, “Anything else?”

“Nope, not unless you count the fact that my fairy magic is letting Eric have some access to the daytime and the fact that he wants to glamour y’all so that you can’t talk about that to anyone.” Sookie chuckled a bit. She had liked both Jarod and Miranda immediately. “Oh—and there should be some extra steak left for lunch, and you should both come eat when you are done with your little perimeter patrollin’ thing.”

Miranda smiled and took Jarod’s hand. “We will return shortly.” Then she looked over at Eric, “Nothing is ever easy with you, Northman.” She led Jarod out the door.

As soon as they had left, Eric looked down at Sookie, “Min kára, do not fear, but I am beginning to feel the pull, so I should retire to my resting place, but we have time to talk and plan before 10 tonight. That is when Bill arrives, correct?”

Sookie looked concerned and nodded, shoing Eric toward the cubby. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she said over her shoulder to her brother and the boys as she followed Eric to the cubby.

As soon as Eric was in bed, he chuckled, “You need not tuck me in, min kára.”

“I know,” Sookie said lying down next to him. “I just want to be close for a few more minutes, okay?”

Eric pulled her to him. “I am always pleased to have you near me.”

Sookie lay with Eric until he went completely still and she knew he had re-entered his daytime slumber. She kissed him lightly on the forehead and got up. “I love you,” she sighed as she began to climb the steps.

Almost imperceptible behind her, Sookie heard Eric answer, “I love you too, wife.”

Sookie beamed and climbed higher.

Chapter 58: In the Mirror, Part I

When Eric woke up again, he was greeted by Sookie's body next to his. She was sleeping, and her steady exhalations were falling softly against his bare chest. Eric pulled her body closer to his and buried his nose into her hair. "You'll never be close enough," he murmured, his voice barely audible. She nuzzled into his chest more fully and settled into him, still sleeping peacefully.

Eric inhaled deeply; Sookie smelled of lavender and sunshine. He smiled. His beautiful lover had obviously sat out in the sun—probably with him in mind—at some point after he'd returned to his slumber. He would miss the strength of this scent on her once the winter prevented her from being comfortable outside. In addition, she'd have fewer days in the sun now that she was going back to work for the shifter.

However, Eric was an intelligent man, and as such, he knew that he could not interfere with Sookie's personal needs, which included her desire to work. He'd been lucky to know many powerful women in his long life—his human mother, the A.P., Isabel, and Pam, being the chief among them. From them he'd learned—sometimes the hard way—that women were powerful and tenacious, and trying to control one was like trying to control the sea. He knew that Sookie wouldn't react well if he insisted that she quit or if he tried to pay for everything even after they were married. Her independent nature had started to shine again, and—more than anything else—Eric was happy that the blood severing spell had raised Sookie's confidence in herself. Though he wouldn't have thought it would be possible, she'd become even more attractive to him since she'd taken back complete ownership of her life, and Eric would do nothing to squelch that, despite the fact that his inner Viking—actually more like inner

caveman—wanted to care for her every need and give her every material thing that her heart could ever desire.

In the past, Eric had been troubled by Sookie's lack of thinking things through before jumping into a situation, especially where Compton was concerned. By contrast, he'd been witness to her using her head where he himself had been concerned, and he had always admired her cleverness as well as her bravery in questioning him. The only exception to that had been when he'd tricked her into taking his blood in Dallas, but she'd reacted in the moment to save Eric's life. Generally in their interactions with each other, he'd found her to be both courageous and shrewd.

It was clever Sookie that negotiated with him about the humans she used her telepathy on. It was clever Sookie that later arranged for Lafayette's release, Bill's presence, and a wad of money in exchange for the Dallas trip. It was clever Sookie that had come up with the plan to infiltrate the Fellowship of the Sun and find Godric, a plan that would have been flawless if Hugo hadn't been the betrayer. It was clever Sookie that had sought him out after Bill's kidnapping, first as a suspect and then as an aid in finding Compton. It was clever Sookie who listened to her intuition and pursued the truth regarding Compton. It was clever Sookie who did not taste the light fruit in the fairy realm. And it was clever Sookie who broke the blood tie and the blood bond because she knew deep down that she wasn't the kind of girl to be in love with two men at the same time. He laughed to himself, "And it was definitely clever Sookie that picked me."

After the blood severing spell, her cleverness was on even more display as it coupled with her self-confidence and her knowledge of people's inner workings. She also seemed more ready to use her telepathy as a practical aid, something that Eric was extremely happy about.

No—it had been where Compton was directly concerned that she had seemed to falter and not use her common sense and innate cunning. Whereas she had questioned Eric and his motives from day one—as she should have—she’d never questioned Bill in the same way as far as Eric had seen. Bill had been duplicitous from the beginning of their relationship, yet Sookie had been oblivious to that and seemed willing to take him back again and again. She’d taken him back after she experienced firsthand his association with Malcolm and the other deviant vampires, she’d taken him back after the Jessica debacle, and she’d accepted him without question following the Maenad attack even though they’d had valid disagreements before that.

She’d even accepted him back into her life after he’d been with Lorena. Certainly, as a vampire, Eric knew that a child could not refuse his or her maker unless he or she had been released. But Bill *had* been released by Lorena, yet he had slept with her at Russell’s. Eric’s nose had sniffed that one out upon seeing Bill there.

Even more so, she’d accepted him back after he almost killed her in the back of that van, something that Eric had not known about at the time. If he had, he would have killed Compton, consequences be damned. She’d been ready to take Bill back right after Russell’s entombment and may have if Eric hadn’t shown up covered in cement and forced Compton to admit the truth. And then as soon as Bill got fresh blood into her, she was ready to love him again. Eric had recognized that the only explanation for any of these things on Sookie’s part was the influence of Bill’s blood, which had taken Sookie’s original curiosity and attraction for Compton—as well as her innate desire to care for others—and had twisted those pure, unselfish, and distinctively Sookie qualities into something that Bill had manipulated. For that alone, he wished to kill Bill.

But he couldn’t—not just because of Sookie, but because he recognized that at one point in his life, he may have done the same thing to her. Looking down at the woman beside him and

imagining her tied to him because of manipulation and not love was a thought that now repulsed Eric.

He was comforted slightly by the fact that he seemed to have been following instincts that were even more innate than his vampire instincts from the start with Sookie. That first night at Fangtasia, he'd wanted to take her—badly. Her scent alone—then virginal—had literally enthralled him. He'd kept his seat on the throne and waited to summon her with extreme difficulty, and then when she'd shown him that she was a spitfire, he almost was unable to control his desire to kill Compton and lock Sookie up into his dungeon. But he'd put aside both of those vampire instincts, at least in part because he had been immediately drawn to the passion and fire within her. He knew her value as a telepath, certainly, but he also recognized her spirit.

He'd seen that spirit before—in the fucking mirror. Godric asked him when he was in his last moments of human life whether he'd dwell on earth as his companion. In the face of the monster before him and near death, Eric had been defiant to the end, yet when Godric had offered one thing—*life*—Eric had taken the offer and risen a vampire. Much later when Eric had asked why Godric had chosen to turn him—him and no one else for two millennia—Godric had said it was because of the defiance and fire in him.

Eric inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, allowing Sookie's scent to travel throughout his body and infuse his blood. He smiled. She was even more defiant and spirited than he'd been as a human. She was not his equal in her thirst for life; she was his superior because she managed to have spirit and zest while at the same time being both kind and genuinely unselfish. Eric had never managed the kind and unselfish part; only now—with Sookie—was he even willing to try.

At their second meeting at Fangtasia, when she'd managed to get him to agree to turn over guilty humans to the human authorities, he should have known immediately that he was lost

to her. The shock he felt from Pam over his relenting to Sookie's demand was palpable. He should have been clued in that he'd fallen head over heels for the telepath because he was *not* shocked that he'd relented. That compromise with Sookie had seemed natural to make. And he was a vampire who did *not* compromise often. Moreover, he'd agreed to her terms for Dallas *after* she'd slapped him. Looking back, he recognized that he never had wanted her manipulated and placid as Bill wanted, and that thought alone gave him some comfort that he might deserve her after all.

He was now ashamed that he had allowed his vampire instincts to take over when he tricked Sookie in Dallas, but even that ploy had back-fired. Eric had been lucky—damned lucky—that the tie didn't work as he'd wanted. He was lucky that the conscious, selfish thoughts that he *wanted* to rule him were outmanned by his unconscious motivations and love for Sookie. He'd never believed the adage that it was better to be lucky than good until that moment.

He was self-aware enough to know that a creature like him didn't deserve the angel in his arms, but he was damned sure going to try.

And he was sure about another thing too—Compton was never—*never*—going to get his blood into his bonded again. “If he tries, he will meet my sword, min kván,” he swore to the still sleeping woman beside him—*his* woman.

Chapter 59: Up to No Good

Eric's cell phone vibrated in his jeans, awakening Sookie. As she stretched next to him and smiled up at him, Eric felt the bond between them surge with her happiness, just as she felt the same from him.

"You're grinning like an idiot," she said sleepily.

"*Oh no*," he exclaimed dramatically as he fished for the phone in his jeans, "you have finally discovered my secret identity. Vampire was just my cover."

Sookie giggled, as he saw that Pam was calling. Still smiling, he answered the phone. "Pamela."

Pam heard the smile in Eric's voice and felt the happiness in their bond. She deadpanned, "I had assumed that things were going well last night *until* you failed to call me before dawn—and that's when I assumed that they were going *very* well."

"Indeed," Eric confirmed. "At this exact moment, things could not be better, in fact."

Sookie smiled and snuggled, somehow repositioning herself so that even more of herself was touching Eric.

The vampire sighed contentedly as Sookie burrowed into him. "What have you got to report, Pamela—because I know that you are not simply calling for a chit chat."

"Things are fine. Isabel has taken over Louis's casinos without incident, and her people are settling in easily with those who are returning now that the necromancer is gone."

"Good. Contact her and tell her to gently dissuade Alcide Herveaux's father from visiting anymore casinos."

Pam sighed dramatically. “Fine, I’ll add that to the list. Rasul is also jumping right in; by the way, he appreciates the *king’s* generosity in aiding him in the effort to rebuild vampire holdings after Katrina. *Your* doing, we assumed?”

“Indeed. But it will bring revenue to the whole state if we all work to increase tourism in New Orleans.”

“Of course. And Thalia has managed to antagonize everyone who has returned to Area 2. Luckily, she is asking for nothing more than the normal percentage of income and to be left completely out of all vampires’ business, so most are staying in the area despite her little *quirks*. Of course, everyone is too afraid of her to create any problems in the area. She has also already eliminated some drainers that had been in the area for a while. It seems you were right about her efficiency.”

“Yes, Thalia will make a good sheriff if she can keep herself from killing everyone,” Eric chuckled. “Anything of Bill?” he asked as he softly raked his fingers through Sookie’s hair.

Sookie placed a hand under her chin on Eric’s chest and listened more attentively. Their eyes met, and nervousness was suddenly felt from Sookie’s end of the bond.

“He’s been a very busy bee. He is making plans,” Pam began.

“Wait a moment, Pamela.” Eric pushed the mute button on his phone so that Pam could not hear him. He looked at Sookie, “Do you want to hear what she says. I will turn on the speaker if you wish, but be aware that Pam will not soften her information about Bill for you as I might try to do.”

Sookie looked up at Eric, the fire rising in her eyes. “Two things Viking! Number one—you *never* have to soften things for me. I want to know the truth about the things that

involve me—the whole truth—even if it’s not pretty. And number two—of course I wanna hear what Pam has to say! We’re meetin’ with Bill in a few hours, and we need to be prepared.”

Eric’s pride for the woman lying on his chest surged through the bond, causing Sookie to smile at him again, though her high-spiritedness didn’t leave her eyes.

Eric said, “I did not mean to suggest that I would lie to you, *min kära*. I would not. I will always try to tell you the whole truth about everything, even vampire business. And when I cannot, I will tell you when and why I must leave things out. But, as you know, Pamela does not hold back either her words or her thoughts about things. I would not lie to you about what she says concerning Compton, nor would I sugar coat it. But I also wouldn’t be as . . .,” he paused, looking for the right word, “. . . *crass* as Pam is likely to be. I could not be because I love you, and I would not want my words to hurt you unduly.”

Sookie nodded. “Fine—but you remember that I always need the truth from you, mister.”

Eric lips widened into a grin. “You will always get it, or you will know it, my Sookie. You are already able to read my emotions. You would sense it if I were to lie to you, just as clearly as if I proclaimed it out loud. I am afraid that you have me securely under that pretty little thumb of yours.”

“Good,” Sookie smiled.

“Don’t be so quick to gloat, my love. It works both ways; I’ll be able to tell if you are misleading me too.”

“Nuts,” Sookie said jokingly. “I guess I’ll just have to give up all my secret boyfriends.”

“Indeed,” Eric smiled.

“Now let’s hear what Pam has to say,” Sookie said, her resolve and courage clear in the bond.

“Let’s.” Eric pressed the mute button again and then hit the speaker button, “Pamela, you may proceed.”

Pam continued where she’d left off, “Bill is making plans. He expects that Sookie will be returning with him to his home tonight. He has sent most of the donors he’s been fucking and feeding from away. He has glamourised the rest of them into thinking they are regular employees and servants so that Sookie cannot read them and so that he can continue feeding from them. He also intends to carry on having sexual relations with them if Sookie is still—and I quote—‘as naïve in that department as she was before.’” Pam chuckled, “He actually said that a welcome result of Sookie’s time with you might be that she is less inhibited; he wonders if she picked up some tricks in the bedroom from you, master.”

Sookie looked ready to spit nails even as Eric stroked her shoulder comfortingly. “What else?” he asked.

Pam continued, “Bill told all this to a vampire named Lillith who arrived at the mansion only last night, but whom he seems to trust a lot. He has tasked her with keeping an eye on us;



she is to officially report to you Sunday night as you conduct area business at Fangtasia. Once

there, she is to ingratiate herself to us in any way she can think of. Oh—and this is rich—he has asked her to seduce you.”

Sookie kept quiet, but through the bond, Eric could feel her anger rising higher and higher as Pam continued speaking.

“Find out what you can about this Lillith,” Eric said, keeping his voice even. “Anything else?”

“Well—Bill’s conversation with this Lillith was quite informative. It seems he feels like there is little he can do about permanently removing you as sheriff right now—what with your saving his paltry existence and arranging for all the other new sheriffs.”

She continued, “He is also *extremely* confident that Sookie is going to choose him tonight. Oh— and he wants nothing more than to murder you, but he knows he will lose control of Louisiana and will be killed by the Authority if he does. Plus, he cannot wait to lord over you the fact that he has Sookie and you don’t. He’s already planning to bring Sookie with him on weekly visits to Fangtasia, intending to rub their relationship in your face as often as he can.”

Pam squealed, “Oh, and here’s the funny part. He and this Lillith decided to reignite the ol’ flames, so to speak! I’ve never heard a vampiress fake an orgasm before, but I’m pretty sure that after about ten minutes with the *king*, she was faking one just to get it over with!” Pam chuckled and then turned more serious, “While they were pillow-talkin’, he told this Lillith that he wants her to work on a 10-year plan to get you out of the way for good. He wants to use you short term for the money he knows will be generated now that he has high-quality and ambitious vampires in place as his sheriffs. During the next decade, he wishes to slowly turn Isabel and Rasul’s loyalty from you to himself so that they will stay in place after he arranges for an

accident to befall you. He feels that Sookie would have outgrown any kind of silly, girlish affection she may have had for you within that time anyway.”

Her voice turned low and angry, “He intends to use a new tie with Sookie to make her more and more complacent over time. He told Lillith that he plans to be more subtle this time so that—and I quote—‘she doesn’t even think to question him about the blood.’”

“Fuckin’ A-hole!” Sookie let out, unable to control her temper anymore or remain silent.

Pam gasped audibly on the other end of the phone before she spoke, “Master, I did not know that Sookie was able to hear. Mistress, I am sorry.” She paused, “I feel I have painted Compton in the worst light. Sookie, I can also assure you that he told his confidant that he does love you. He wants to keep you from Eric because he feels that Eric wants only your blood. He was very clear with both Lillith and the humans that he glamoured that your comfort and happiness were his number one concerns.”

“Thank you, Pam,” Eric returned in a low voice. He’d never stopped caressing Sookie’s hair and shoulders comfortingly during the phone call. He regretted that his soft touches could not completely take away the pain his bonded was feeling. “Is there anything else for now?”

“No,” Pam said softly.

Eric hung up the phone and held Sookie quietly for a few minutes as she reigned in her anger and her hurt.

Chapter 60: To Tame a Vampire

After letting Sookie stew for a few minutes, Eric said, “Bill is a vampire, Sookie. It is hard for us to remain *good* after we become undead. We literally feed off of humans, and, therefore, we lose much of our humanity. Most of us learn how to stifle the rest of it. The *only* good thing about your being gone for over a year was that it allowed me time to dig into myself in order to find what was left of my own humanity. Without that time and without the witch’s spell, who knows if I could even be speaking to you as I am now.”

He continued, even as he tried to comfort her with light caresses, “Despite Bill’s obvious faults, I do not feel that he is all bad. He is devoted to you. His biggest flaw is that he has always failed to recognize your inherent strength to accept and deal with the truth. If he had been willing to be honest with you, he may have been here with you instead of me.” Eric’s voice became quieter. “However, I refuse to pity him. I am too selfish and would not have us trade positions for all the world.”

Sookie rose up a bit so that she could look Eric in the eye. She spoke passionately, “You are nothing like him, Eric. You never were. He told me that you were evil—that you were inhuman—but you aren’t. Even at your worst—even with Lafayette—you always showed restraint, and more often than not, that restraint was for me! But I let myself believe in *him*. The sad thing is that I still cannot hate him because I know that he loves me in the best way he knows how, but I also will *never* be able to be his friend or trust him after this, and I no longer feel love for him in *any* way.”

“He simply wishes to have you, min kära. I cannot blame him for that.”

“Maybe not—but I can sure as hell blame him for the *way* he wants to go about it. He wants to slowly control me, so deviously that I don’t even know I’m being controlled. He wants

to use you and then kill you, all in the name of some kind of jealousy and all in a way that would hide his duplicity. He might think that he is doing it because he loves me, but anyone who really *did* love me would know that these are the last things I would want.”

“I know, min kära,” Eric whispered into her hair.

“I know that you do,” Sookie said, looking at Eric. “And that’s the biggest difference between the two of you. You have always wanted me for who I am, not some fantasy version that is all blood and all obedience. You have respected me, whereas he has twisted truths around for his convenience. That’s not love, Eric. Love is accepting another and taking steps to form a partnership with that person. It’s about making yourself a better partner—not because the other person demands it, but because you want to be better for both yourself and the person you love.”

Eric smiled at her. “You are an incredible woman, my love.”

She smiled back, “Yes—I know.”

He laughed, the mischief dancing in his eyes. “Do you really think that is the *biggest* difference between Bill and myself?”

“Well there might be a few *bigger* things about you,” she teased. “I suppose I should have said the *most important* difference.”

Eric raised up to kiss Sookie. The contact began lightly as their lips drank in the taste of one another; then Sookie shifted so that she was straddling Eric and brought her lips more forcefully down onto his. They both groaned as their tongues joined their lips in mutual exploration, and Sookie felt Eric’s erection rise behind her. “There’s one of those *bigger* things right now,” she smiled into his mouth.

“Would you like an introduction, lover?” Eric purred.

“Oh, I think we’ve met,” Sookie said as she reached a hand behind her and touched his engorged member through his jeans. “And I think I know a way to make him even *bigger*.”

“Oh?” Eric asked as he moved his lips to Sookie’s chin and neck.

“Uh huh,” Sookie sounded as she began to back down Eric’s body, purposing dragging her core over the bulge in his pants.

Eric groaned as Sookie stopped her progress and grinded their clothed sexes into one another. Pushing his still-unbuttoned shirt to the sides, she licked and kissed his bare chest, stopping at one of his nipples to suck.

“Sookie,” Eric grunted, “please—bite a little.”

She obliged him, watching him squirm below her as she created more friction between their lower bodies by circling her hips.

Sookie lifted her body off of Eric and sat at his side, despite his audible groans of protest. To quiet his protestations, she bit down again on his nipple, even as she twisted the other one with her fingertips. He arched into her mouth and hands, and Sookie enjoyed the power she was able to wield over her thousand-year-old vampire even as she reveled in the pleasure she was giving him. She slowly pushed his shirt off of his shoulders, and he rose up to help her remove it before settling back down.

Once his shirt was out of her way, Sookie moved her lips to his other nipple and nibbled on that one as well before biting down harder. At this, she heard the tell-tale click of his fangs extending.

Slowly, she circled his abdomen and traced his muscles with one hand before moving it to grasp and then massage his cock through his jeans. His hips lifted off the bed to create more contact, but she moved her other hand to press him down.

She said brazenly, “Down, cowboy. I’m not quite ready to *ride* yet.”

Eric’s eyes opened widely in surprise before a grin swept across his face. “Let me know when you are ready, my lover,” he smirked. “I am available to be ridden at your leisure.”

Sookie wiped the smirk off of his face by putting more pressure on his cock. She brought her other hand down and used both to unbutton and unzip his jeans carefully since he had on no underwear. She slowly pulled his pants over his cock as he lifted to help her. She continued to pull the jeans off of his body, teasing the flesh on his hips and legs with her lips as she went. She took her time, wanting to work up Eric even more. Finally, when he was completely naked, she began to trail kisses up his foot, ankle, knee, thigh, and hip, going even more slowly than he had the previous night when he’d performed a similar sweet torture on her body. He twisted and moaned under her ministrations, just as she had under his. Then, she licked her way across his well-formed abs before methodically kissing, rubbing, and nibbling down his other long, sculpted leg.

Finally, after what seemed like hours to Eric, Sookie had worked her way back up to his straining cock. She said lustfully, “Don’t forget to watch me, lover.”

Eric’s eyes snapped open as he took in Sookie’s hand slowly encompassing his member. She dragged her hand up his length slowly before lightly brushed the tip of his cock with her fingers. Deliberately, she raised the moisture she’d found there to her lips and sampled him. “Mmmm, you taste *very* good, lover.”

Eric groaned as he took in the eroticism of Sookie’s act; the idea that Compton found her lacking when it came to sex was unfathomable to him. She currently had him quivering, and Eric couldn’t remember a time when he’d ever quivered before.

The vampire lost the ability to remember anything as Sookie used the rest of the moisture gathered on the tip of Eric's penis to lubricate her fingers, which she then began trailing lightly up and down his staff.

"Oh fuck, Sookie," Eric groaned as he took in the devilish and seductive look in her eyes.

Sookie grinned mischievously as she fisted and then tightened her hand around Eric's cock and stroked him a bit harder. Then she spoke as if pouting, "It's much *too thick* to hold all the way around. See? What's a girl to do?" She drew her right hand slowly across Eric's belly even as she continued to stroke his cock rhythmically with her left. She made certain to drag her nails sharply across Eric's abs as she drew them toward his balls and then gently started to fondle them. Eric arched his body upwards again, not able to control his reaction. He growled passionately as Sookie played him. Sookie mused again, "It's just *so thick*. My poor *little* hand just isn't big enough." She raised her second hand to join her first on Eric's staff, using the pressure of both to stroke him harder and encompass him fully.

Eric moaned words in a different language and looked hungrily at Sookie as she played him like a maestro. He closed his eyes, close to exploding due to both her actions and her words.

Sookie stopped her movements and clicked her tongue to get his attention. "Don't forget to watch me, lover," she purred before contemplating the motion of her hands. "Well that solved one problem, but it's *so long* too, and even though I can reach all the way around it now, I cannot reach all the way up it. What's a girl to do in this kind of situation?" she asked playfully.

He shook his head incoherently, now completely under her power and no longer able to find words.

She moved one hand so that it was above the other, making sure to use her thumb to massage the sensitive tip of his cock every time she drew her hands upward. She continued

studiously, “Tut, tut. Well, now I can touch the whole *length*, but the *width* is a problem again, so that’s not going to work.”

Eric’s head fell back, and he growled at Sookie’s ministrations.

“Any ideas?” she asked Eric, once again drawing his eyes to hers.

At this point, Eric could only groan, his eyes animalistic as his hips rose and fell with her hands. If he could have, he would have begged for his release. He would have turned himself inside out for her. He would have flown to the fucking moon and back if she would just finish him off! “Hmm,” Sookie chided, stopping the motion of her hands as Eric growled desperately. “Nothing useful from you I see. Well, it looks like I’ll have to get creative.” Sookie held Eric’s gaze as she brought her hands back into a tight, complete circle around his shaft and lowered her head toward it, licking her lips seductively as she went. She stuck out the tip of her tongue and licked the head of his penis like a lollipop before giving it a chaste kiss.

Finally finding some words, Eric begged, “Fuck, Sookie—please.” He twisted below her.

Looking at him seductively, she took him into her mouth as far as she could, using her hands to make up the distance she couldn’t reach. She swirled her tongue around his shaft and used her lips to create more suction, a technique she’d seen in Lafayette’s head once.

Already so close to bursting before, Eric yelled out a warning, “Sookie, I’m going to . . .”

The rest of his words disappeared in his throat as Sookie picked up the pace and increased the pressure of her hands and the suction of her lips. He exploded into her mouth, muttering more words from that other language. As soon as he was done, he had Sookie on her back with her clothes strewn on the floor around them. His lips were devouring hers, his tongue tasting the remnants of his own release on hers. She groaned beneath him as he used his fingers

to check her readiness. He smiled upon discovering that she was dripping for him, aroused from having pleased him.

“So wet for me, Sookie,” he managed as he moved his lips to her cheek and ear so that she could catch her breath. “So fucking wet and ready just for me.”

He plunged his still very hard cock into her body with one thrust, and she moaned under him, raising her hips to increase the depth of their contact even more. He stayed still for a moment, allowing her to adjust to his size, before he began to move in and out of her in long, languid strokes.

“You have no idea what you do to me, do you, lover?” he asked as it was her turn to writhe and moan incoherently beneath him.

“You make me feel so many fucking things I didn’t even think I was capable of. You just had me powerless in your hands, my love. That has *never* happened to me before.” He continued to thrust into her, now more forcefully. “Even now, you could ask anything of me, and I would do it or die the true death trying to do it.” Eric increased his pace again as he felt Sookie begin to tighten and then pulse under him. He lowered his hand to her clit and circled it in time with his thrusts. He flooded their bond with all the lust and love he had for her as she exploded beneath him, her orgasm drawing another release as well as more Swedish curses from him. He collapsed on top of her, careful not to crush her body.

After a few moments of recovery, he was able to settle onto his side, enfolding his arms around her stomach and settling his cheek unto her chest lightly as she was catching her breath.

Once calm, Sookie brought her fingers to play in his hair and laughed. “That was something!” she giggled.

“Yes, my love. You were incredible.”

“Was I?” she asked. He could feel apprehension in the bond.

Eric raised himself up and brought his head to lie next to hers. He looked into her eyes.

“Yes, lover, you are *always* incredible to me, but what you did just now was—well, there aren’t really words for it, and I know an awful lot of words in an awful lot of languages, little one.” He stroked his fingers over her cheek lightly. “Why do I feel uncertainty from you, min kära?”

Sookie blushed, “It’s just that the one time I tried to do—um—oral sex with Bill, he sort of tensed up and didn’t seem to like it. I wanted to make sure you enjoyed it.”

Eric reassured Sookie, “What did you feel in the bond when you were doing it?”

Sookie blushed even more, “You were *very* turned on and happy.”

“Indeed. Bill is a fool. What you did and how you did it were both amazing. You needn’t worry that you don’t please me, lover. You couldn’t please me more. And it’s not just that beautiful body of yours and what you do to mine. It’s that I love you while you are doing it, and I can feel your love as well. It’s like . . .”

“Magic,” she finished for him.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “It is your magic and my magic together.”

Chapter 61: Daggers

Reluctantly, Sookie looked at the clock on the table next to the small bed. “It’s 8:30 already,” she groaned. “Bill will be here in 90 minutes.”

Eric nodded. “And we will be ready, min kära.”

Sookie sighed deeply. “Do you think that he’ll even be able to pass onto my property?” she asked. “After all, his intentions toward me are definitely *not* honorable.”

Eric contemplated for a moment, “I believe he will. From what I know of this kind of spell, it is the immediate intention of harm that would keep out or expel someone from your property. I do not believe that Bill intends to harm you this evening. If I did, I would not want you to meet with him at all.”

Sookie thought for a minute. “Should we finish the bond now?” Sookie asked.

Eric thought about it for a minute but then shook his head. “Sookie, I want to finish the bond as much as I have ever wanted anything, and I would do it right now if I thought it would prevent Bill from saying or doing something that might be hurtful to you, but it would not. Selfishly, I want the exchange that completes our bond to happen when we have no distractions and when I have time to adequately worship your body.”

Sookie blushed.

“I will never get tired of this reaction from you, my love.” Eric chuckled and pulled her tighter to him.

She sank into his chest and sighed.

“I also want to use a ceremonial dagger to finish the bond—if you will allow this.”

“A ceremonial dagger?” Sookie asked as she propped her hand under her chin so that she could look at him.

“Yes, it was one of Godric’s possessions that he passed on to me. Godric was a kind of priest among my kind and was, therefore, able to perform vampire weddings. A dagger is used in the pledging ceremony.”

“He was a priest—really?”

Eric chuckled, “The term is not exactly equivalent to the human meaning, my love. It requires simply a bit of paperwork and the approval of the Authority to be able to perform weddings, and the Authority gives the title of priest to almost anyone who pays the fee and turns in the correct forms.”

Sookie nodded in understanding.

“As I said, a ceremonial knife is used in such rituals, and Godric possessed one of the oldest and most powerful known to my kind. Ceremonial knives are generally merely symbolic, but the one that Godric had contains real magic.”

“Magic,” Sookie whispered.

“Yes,” Eric continued. “Vampire marriages tend to last for only one hundred years and are made for political reasons more so than affection; however, Godric’s dagger is known to create much longer-lasting alliances, which solidify more and more throughout the years.

“Wow,” Sookie remarked. “I bet that made a lot of vampires want to use him as their priest.”

Eric chuckled, “Actually, it had the opposite effect. Most vampires enter into marriage for one reason only—the benefits that will come to them. Often, they cannot wait for the one hundred years to end so that they can seek out new, even more profitable alliances.”

Sookie laughed too. “Figures. What kind of magic is in the knife? How would it work if we used it?”

“Well,” Eric began, “I’m not one hundred percent sure about the origin of the magic, but I have a theory. I examined the knife carefully on Tuesday night and compared the symbols on it to some in an ancient text Godric also passed along to me. I believe that the markings on the knife are fairy, so I can only assume that the magic in the knife is as well. From what Jesus has said about fairy bonds, they are stronger and longer-lasting than vampire bonds. I cannot be certain, but—given the nature of the kinds of marriages that Godric’s dagger created in the past—I believe that it may have been used between fairies to solidify their bonds in blood.”

“That’s why you want to use it?”

“Partially. But also because of the symbolic nature of its use among vampires. Ceremonial knives symbolize the pledge or marriage between vampires, and I want this knife to be our marriage knife. If we use it to create the last bond as well, I believe that the magic within the dagger will work to strengthen the bond that we already have and the pledge as well. I cannot explain why I feel this, but when I held the knife in my hands a few nights ago, I felt the empty space inside me—what I now know was the fairy bond left behind in me after the vampire bond was gone—stir to life for a moment.”

Sookie raised one of her hands to Eric’s cheek and caressed it softly. She felt his deep emotions for her coming through the bond and saw them reflected in his eyes. “Then we will use it to complete our bond, but I want to do it tonight after we see Bill. I assume that Bill does not know where *you* live, right?”

“No,” Eric answered. “The house where I keep the dagger and the things of most value to me is known by no other than Pam, now that Godric is dead.”

“Then, I think that we should go there tonight. I trust the spell that Lafayette and Jesus did, but I don’t want to be that close to Bill after we tell him we’re together, especially knowing that he wants you dead.”

“That’s not going to happen, my love.”

“I know, but better safe than sorry. I assume that you have some kind of listening device in his house, considering all that Pam knew.”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed with a smirk. “Several.”

“Then, I wanna hear what he says when he regroups after he leaves here tonight.”

“My clever Sookie,” Eric said, kissing her forehead. His pride was slipping into the bond.

“Anyway,” Sookie said with mock seriousness, “you don’t have any clean underwear over here. I did finish washing your clothes from Wednesday, so at least you won’t have to wear flannel again—unless,” she paused, a look of pure naughtiness on her face.

“Unless?”

“Well, I was thinkin’ that if you were wearin’ that shirt, it might help drive the point home with Bill.”

Eric laughed, “Bill, I’m sure, would appreciate that, my little minx.”

Eric turned more serious. “Sookie, I have never driven to the home we’d be going to. There is a road that workmen have used in the past, but it is difficult to find, and I have never risked taking one of my own vehicles there in case it was being tracked somehow. It is my most secure resting place, and I don’t want to take a chance of its being found. In fact, even though Pam is aware of it, even she has never been to that location.”

“So you don’t want me there?” Sookie asked, her hurt filtering into the bond.

“No, that’s not it at all!” Eric assured. “It’s just that we’ll have to fly there. I do not even want Miranda and Jarod to know of the location. That means that there is no way for you to get back for your work tomorrow. We can take food and anything else you might need, but you will have no transportation once we are there—except for me.”

Sookie sighed. “Fudge,” she muttered as she took Eric’s phone from the bedside table, sat up, and dialed Sam.

Her boss answered on the first ring. “Hello?” he asked.

“Hey, it’s Sookie,” she said. “Listen, Sam, I need to ask you a favor before I make a decision. I want to go with Eric somewhere tonight to avoid a potential threat on his and/or my life. But if I do, I won’t be able to return to work until Monday. I’m not gonna risk you firing me for real though, so if it’s not okay, Eric and I will make another plan.”

Sam sighed on the other end of the line as Eric grinned at the woman in front of him.

After a long moment, Sam asked, “Do you need help, Sookie?”

“No, Eric and I can handle it, but I’m tryin’ to cover all my bases.”

“Okay, cher. Hold on a minute, and I’ll ask Holly if she minds pullin’ a double shift tomorrow.”

Sookie made a face at Eric as she waited for Sam to come back, and she was rewarded with some tickling from the vampire. When Sam returned to the line a couple of minutes later, she had to stifle her giggling. “It’s fine, Sookie. Holly doesn’t mind. Thanks for lettin’ me know, and call if you need any help. We’ll see you Monday, right?”

Having composed herself, Sookie said, “Thanks, Sam. I know that these may sound like empty words, but I *will* be there Monday, come hell or high water, okay?”

“I know, Sook,” Sam said.

As Sookie hung up, she sighed. It was a little after 9:00 o'clock. "We need to take a shower, mister. Just because Bill wanted to rub everything in your nose doesn't mean we have to do the same."

"You know he will smell the connection anyway, don't you, lover?" Eric asked as he rose to his feet and pulled Sookie up too.

"I know," Sookie sighed. "But I'm sure a shower might lessen it a little. Plus, it will make *me* feel better," she added.

"Well then, let's go," he said, as he climbed the steps, obliging her with a view of the world's most perfect ass.

Forty five minutes later, after Eric had used some good, old-fashioned distraction techniques in the shower to keep Sookie's nerves at bay, the couple was almost dressed and ready. Sookie wore her comfortable jeans and a sweater since she'd be flying with Eric later. She couldn't help the fear and anticipation that leapt into her as she thought about being held closely by Eric as she flew with him for the first time.

Sensing her sudden mood shift, Eric arched a brow and looked at her in question as he buttoned up the last button of his flannel shirt. He'd opted to complete his outfit with the jeans he'd worn on Wednesday, but he'd indulged Sookie—and himself—by wearing the flannel shirt again.

Sookie answered his unspoken question, "I was just thinkin' about flyin' with you later."

Eric leered at her suggestively until her fear and anxiety had shifted into lust coming from her end of the bond. "That's better," he chuckled.

"Uppity, high-handed vampire," Sookie mumbled.

“Stubborn fairy,” he answered back playfully.

Sookie finished tying her shoes and then grabbed her pendant off of the dresser. She silently handed it to Eric and raised her hair so that he could put it on her. When he was done, she turned around into his arms and they shared a light kiss, their bond echoing gratefulness back and forth.

Sookie broke their kiss and looked up at Eric seriously, “Will you kill him?”

Eric shook his head. “I do not plan to harm Compton tonight. And despite the fact that it would give me some personal satisfaction to see him finally dead because of the pain he has inflicted upon you and his current intentions toward you, there are several reasons why I’d prefer not to kill him at all.”

Sookie cocked an eyebrow.

Eric continued, “One—is that I would not hide my killing him from you, and I don’t want you to have to witness it or to live with any guilt over it. Two—is that I think that if Bill could get over his obsession with you and me, he could actually make a satisfactory king. He excels at dealing with humans, and he has potential if he can put aside his personal feelings and learn not to kill those who could be his best assets. Three—is that I don’t want to be king; I don’t want the hassle. However, if I were to kill Bill now, or in the next five years or so, I fear I would have little choice. It would be that or risk someone even worse taking over the state. And I want neither a new Sophie-Anne nor a wildcard like a Russell Edgington moving in. What I really want is some peace right now so that you and I can enjoy each other and remain safe—*for once*.” Eric paused, “However, Bill’s actions and behavior will determine mine, and I will *not* risk either of us to keep him alive if he threatens to harm us or the bond that we share.”

Sookie nodded. “I agree.” She paused and raised her hand to his chest, “Tonight, I wanna do most of the talking with Bill, okay?”

“I agree,” Eric echoed, smiling at her and kissing her nose. “But if you become frightened, . . .” he began.

“I know, I know,” Sookie said, rising onto her tiptoes and pulling him down so that she could place a kiss on his nose as well. “If I get scared, you get to be all big and bad and kick his ass!”

“Damned straight, lover,” Eric crooned.

Eric’s cell phone rang. It was Bubba’s ring tone—appropriately enough, Elvis’s song, “(You’re The) Devil in Disguise.” Eric answered and listened for a moment. “Bill is on his way, min kära,” he said after he’d hung up.

Sookie straightened and tensed a bit.

“He’ll be able to tell we’re in the house and will smell us now that the privacy spell has worn off,” Eric said softly.

“But if he intends me immediate harm, he’ll be sent packin’,” Sookie added as she gave Eric a quick kiss on the cheek before grabbing his hand and leading them down the stairs.

Chapter 62: In the Mirror, Part 2

Bill had been anxious since he'd risen—not nervous, just eager to get the evening over with and to get Sookie back to the mansion. He'd thought several times about going to Sookie before the 10 o'clock time that she'd set, but he had resolved to proceed carefully with the telepathic fairy this time—at least until she was safely tied tightly to him.

Lillith's being there had helped to pass the time, and they'd had sex for old time's sake the night before as well as earlier that evening. However, Bill did intend to *try* to be faithful to Sookie if she was able to satisfy him sexually, so he'd made it clear to Lillith that they could not have an on-going sexual relationship—for the time being at least.

He hadn't had sex with a vampiress since Lorena—unless he counted that unfortunate one-night stand with Nan a few months before, which he actively tried to forget. And he and Lillith had always had a special connection since Lorena turned her in 1917. They'd had to survive the whole craziness that was Lorena and that shared survival had strengthened into a friendship and had built trust between them.

As crafty as their maker, but not crazy like her, Lillith would be an excellent ally in helping Bill find a way to hold onto his position as king and bring Eric Northman to his knees at the same time. For the thousandth time, Bill cursed the soft spot that he had for Sookie. That had been the main reason why he hadn't staked Eric when he had him docile and on those knees during his amnesia.

Still, Bill knew that things had worked out for the best. Eric would lose Sookie, and Bill would be able to enjoy watching the sheriff's torment. Moreover, Eric would serve out his usefulness to Bill for the next decade or so, and then he'd get rid of both him and his annoying

progeny. Yes—Bill knew how to be patient when ridding himself of annoyances. He'd had to wait a very long time, after all, to be free of Lorena.

A bonus would be getting to see Lillith work her seductive magic on Northman, coercing him to spill all his secrets to her. If things worked really well, he thought, he might be able to lead Eric to his final death in half the time he expected.

Bill looked in the mirror and straightened the collar of his shirt. He'd carefully chosen his clothing that evening to be closer to what he'd worn when Sookie and he had been a couple, opting for casual chinos and a polo shirt rather than a suit. He'd had his day person get him another bouquet of red roses and had also arranged for his bed to be strewn with rose petals as a romantic gesture. Lillith was ready to light candles at his signal, after which he'd asked her to hide in the basement of the house, not wanting Sookie to recognize her when she saw her at Fangtasia.

At 5 minutes until 10, he decided to begin the walk to Sookie's home at human pace. He wanted to appear to her as the genteel Southern caller, a character-type he knew that she loved from *Gone with the Wind*. At this thought, he was reminded of Sookie's cousin, Hadley, who had been the source of most of his initial information about Sookie—before he had even returned to Bon Temps. Bill had tried to find Hadley—to use her as a replacement blood source for Sookie—when he'd lost hope of Sookie's return, but she'd disappeared without a trace. He licked his lips and wondered where Hadley might be now. Certainly, she was not quite as tasty as Sookie, but the girl had been very sexually satisfying and utterly devoted to Sophie-Anne. Bill smiled; now he would have no need for a lesser replacement like Hadley. However, he was hopeful that Sookie would eventually reach the level of docility and devotion that her cousin had achieved. Bill knew that it would most likely take a lot of time and effort on his part—since he

would have to tread carefully with his fairy because of her stubborn nature—but he also knew that his blood would eventually work to transform Sookie into the perfect companion for him.

As he passed Bubba at the tree line heading up to Sookie's home, he barely contained his grunt of distaste. The brain-damaged vampire had prevented him from keeping close tabs on Sookie for the last several nights. The only surveillance he'd been able to maintain was his watch on the road, so he'd been monitoring the people who came and went from the home. From the Were-panther he'd employed as spy, he knew that Sookie hadn't left her residence that day and had entertained several guests including her brother, the witches, Alcide Herveaux—whom, he'd discovered, Northman had hired as Sookie's day guard—and a shifter and his woman. From their descriptions, Bill figured that the shifter was Sam Merlotte; the woman was probably his currently love interest. Bill smiled again. Sookie had most likely been telling her family and close friends about her decision to be with him.

Still, Bill had been uneasy that he could not maintain a closer watch on Sookie due to Bubba's constant presence at night and the Were's presence during the day; he'd wanted to make sure that Eric wasn't around her too much, but from what he could tell, the older vampire had not been bothering Sookie—other than the annoying episode of his confusing Sookie's home for his own personal parking lot. Of course, there was little Bill could do about that since, technically, Eric did own the property and could, therefore, use it to house a fleet of cars—if he wished. The fact that Eric himself had not spent a lot of time with Sookie was of some comfort to Bill.

Regardless, he would be glad when Sookie was living with him full-time so that Bubba could move on and freeload off of someone else's regime. Unfortunately, the damaged vampire was basically untouchable among vampires, a fact that made him a nuisance since he was clearly in Northman's pocket.

As Bill walked toward Sookie's porch, he ran a hand through his hair, once again cursing the unfortunate haircut he'd gotten. At least the stylist had been good for a feed and a blowjob afterwards. His hair would grow back eventually, he mused. Fingernails and hair grew on vampires; it just took a bit longer than with humans.

Once on Sookie's porch, Bill inhaled deeply, trying to figure out who had been at Sookie's home since his last visit. Unfortunately, his sense of smell was not getting much better with age, but he had other assets from Lorena, such as his ability to ingratiate himself to humans. That gift of charm had made him an excellent procurer for Sophie-Anne. Bill was also an expert at glamour, much better than most other vampires he knew of his age.

He smelled a shifter and posited that it was Merlotte since most shifters smelled pretty much the same to him. He also smelled Alcide Herveaux, whose scent was very distinctive, as well as another Were, perhaps Sam's lady friend. He smelled Sookie's worthless brother and her witch friends as well as Sookie herself. And he smelled two vampires, Bubba and Eric. He was perturbed to realize that Eric's scent seemed fresh, and he was surprised when he picked up the unmistakable scent of burning vampire on the porch. Perhaps, Eric had met with an unfortunate accident, he thought hopefully to himself. That would solve a lot of his problems, but it was probably too good to be true.

Bill walked up to the door and rang the doorbell, hoping that Sookie would greet him in one of her delightful little sundresses and jump into his arms.

The sight and the smell of her when she opened the door, however, were not what he was anticipating at all. An instinctual growl began in the back of his throat, and his fangs clicked into place.

Chapter 63: Overdue

Eric had stayed back as Sookie opened the door, but upon hearing Bill's reaction, he rocketed in front of his bonded, careful to stay inside the invisible barrier that only an invitation to her home could overcome. In addition, Eric had confidence that if Bill really did intend Sookie immediate harm, the brujo's spell would kick in, literally kicking Bill off of the property. So far that hadn't happened; therefore, with difficulty, Eric stifled the urge to drop his own fangs.

Truth be told, he didn't feel that it was in anyone's best interests to kill Compton that evening, so he kept his voice steady and calm, even though his posture made clear that he was going to protect Sookie from all threats. "My king, I'm going to need you to calm down—*right now.*" He said the last words slowly.

Bubba had approached the porch by this time, sensing a possible danger to his charge.

"You okay, Miss Sookie?" he growled, sounding more like a vicious vampire than Sookie had ever heard him sound before.

"She's fine," Eric answered. "The king here is just surprised, but I'm sure that he will compose himself in moments. Thanks, Bubba. You may go back to your station. I have this well in hand."

Bubba moved away quickly as Sookie spoke, "Bill, I'd like to talk to you so that I can explain things, but you're gonna have to stop with the whole growling and fang thing if you wanna come in."

At that moment, Bill tried to enter the house without an invitation, but was repelled by the invisible blockade.

“That’s right,” Eric said, his voice still calm, but now tinged with a hint of danger. “This is officially Sookie’s home again, so I will ask *another time* that you calm yourself—for her sake.”

Bill was visibly shaken, but after about a minute, he seemed to compose himself and drew in his fangs. Eric could tell that Bill was doing mental somersaults trying to figure out both how things had gone so differently than he’d desired and what to do next. Finally, Bill seemed to reach a kind of mental resolution, and Eric stepped aside, giving Sookie a slight nod as he did.

Sookie backed up a bit and leaned into Eric for strength. Then she said in an anxiety-filled voice. “Bill, I need you to understand that if you do anything violent tonight—including trying to give me any of your blood—Eric has my complete sanction to stop you in any way he sees fit. I know that things are not turnin’ out how you had hoped, but I would still like for us to be civil to each other. You have been an important part in my life, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Bill nodded, now fully in control but also somehow detached, “I assure you, Sookie, I will listen to what you have to say without resorting to violence. That is not *my way*,” he said as he looked at Eric.

“Excellent,” Sookie said, choosing to ignore the insult to her bonded—for the moment at least. “Then come on in.” Bill entered warily, and Sookie gestured toward the chair in the living room where Alcide had sat earlier. Sookie sat where she had earlier as well, happy for the space between her and her first love.

“Eric,” Sookie said, “would you mind setting Bill up with a blood?”

Sookie looked up at Eric with certainty in her eyes, and he returned her confident look. He hated leaving her side for even a second, but he knew that his woman was testing him—to

see if he trusted her. He did. He trusted that she knew what she was doing in asking to be alone with Bill for the seventy-four seconds that it would take him to complete the task she'd set for him. He trusted that she could take care of herself in those seconds. He trusted that if Bill did try something while he was out of the room, that Sookie would shoot him with her light or that Jesus's protection spell would send him out. He had to hold back his chuckle; there were always little tests from his lover, and he fucking adored every single one of them. "Iced tea for you?" he asked his beloved casually, though there was a slight smirk on his face just for her.

"Sure," Sookie said brightly, even as she sent her appreciation through the bond.

Eric's trust in Sookie flooded their bond, and she knew that he'd be monitoring her and that he'd come zooming in if Bill frightened her in the least. Her own hands were at the ready too, and she counted on her fairy powers to activate if she felt danger from Bill. Sookie knew, however, that she needed a moment alone with Bill so that the Civil War veteran could ask his obvious first question without Eric being there.

As soon as Eric had left the room, Bill spoke, "Darling, did he force this on you? I am king. I can protect you from him."

Sookie shook her head, "No, Bill. As I said before, I broke all the ties I had with vampires so that I could be certain of my choices, and I am. I have chosen Eric."

Bill looked at Sookie in shock, "But—how could you . . ."

His question was interrupted as Eric returned to the room at human pace, carefully setting a bottle of warmed blood in front of Bill before taking his place next to Sookie. With difficulty, he did not initiate touch with her, but he was pleased when her hand latched on to his as if they were attached by magnets. They both relaxed at the touch, a gesture not lost on Bill.

It was also not lost on Bill that Eric was dressed in the clothing he had worn when he had amnesia. Bill spoke, hoping to raise Sookie's doubts about Eric, "Sookie, if he has tried to convince you that he is as he was before—when he was cursed by the witch—I beg you to see that he is not being honest with you. Only a few nights ago, he killed three humans before my very eyes with no compunction whatsoever."

Knowing exactly what Bill was referring to and frustrated at him for trying to skew her opinion based upon actions Eric had done to save both Bill and himself from Nan, Sookie did not take the bait. Instead she said, "Eric has not hidden the fact that he has and will kill for his own safety or for mine—or that he will do what is needed in service of his king—of you, Bill. I understand fully what kind of man Eric is, and I love him. I'm sorry if that hurts you, but he makes me very happy." Eric squeezed her hand; his joy at her words was swimming in the bond.

"But, darling, he is a vicious murderer," Bill kept going. "He will use his blood to manipulate you—to control you. He already is. Can't you see this? I would only love you. He will certainly hurt you."

Sookie stiffened next to Eric, a sign that Bill mistook for discomfort with Eric. Thus, Bill kept digging his own figurative grave. "I would *never* lie to you as he has obviously done. I want only to keep you safe from those like him. Please, Sookie, you must reconsider. He will bring you only pain."

If Bill had really known Sookie, he would have recognized that her stiffening was a sign that she was getting angry, very angry. Eric knew this sign and felt the rage bursting through the bond as well, so he squeezed Sookie's hand, not hard enough to hurt her, but hard enough to get her attention. She looked at him and nodded gratefully.

Bill was still talking, “Sookie, I lied to you only because I was ordered to do so, and now that the queen is no more, I would *never* lie to you again, nor would I trick you into loving me as Eric is obviously doing.”

At that moment, two things happened at almost the same time. First, Sookie and Eric both noticed the eye movement Bill had made, a telltale sign that he was lying, despite his current protestations. Second, the bond from both ends was filled with amusement at this discovery. Sookie and Eric looked at each other, the mirth clear in their eyes, but somehow both managed to stifle their laughter.

Noticing their exchange, Bill finally stopped talking. Sookie took the opportunity to jump in, “Bill, I can see how you feel, and to be honest with you, I can understand why you might doubt Eric’s motives toward me—*given your own*,” she added sharply.

Bill cringed a bit at those words, but Sookie continued, “All I can do is assure you that you are wrong about Eric and his intentions toward me.” She took a deep breath and slowly drove in her point, “*I—am—Eric’s.*”

His mouth agape, Bill looked at Sookie in shock before responding, “But darling. . .”

Sookie interrupted, hoping to finally make Bill understand that he needed to give up.

“There are no buts, Bill. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t call me ‘darling’ anymore. It’s not really appropriate given that I’m *Eric’s* now. I have given him my blood and intend to do so from now on. In addition, he has given me his blood, as I am certain you can tell. When I said I was sorry that you have been hurt, I meant it, Bill, but beyond that, I think it’s better if we no longer see each other or speak.”

“But Sookie,” Bill stammered, “we can at least maintain our friendship, can we not?”

Sookie shook her head sadly, “We were never friends, Bill—*not really*. By the second night I met you, you had already arranged for me to be beaten up, and that forced . . .”

Bill interrupted, “That was *all* because of the queen!”

“Maybe—but the fact remains that you put your blood into me on the second night we met. Moreover, despite your protestations to the contrary, you did not tell me *everything* that the blood tie did. You definitely didn’t let on that it would make me attracted to you specifically.”

“But it didn’t; it just increased your libido.”

“*Really, Bill?*” Sookie said as she felt her light begin to rise along with her anger. In that moment, she was extremely grateful that Eric’s support was keeping her power in check. “If I hear the word ‘libido’ from you one more time, I’m going to explode! After I had a *few drops* of Eric’s blood, you were crushed. You told me that it would increase my attraction for *Eric*, not in general. So you lied about the blood tie one of those two times, Bill. Maybe I didn’t pick up on that discrepancy at the time, but it seems like you were very quick to tell me all about the ways Eric was going to try to use his blood to manipulate me. However, you avoided telling me the *truth* about how you could use it—about how you *were* using it! You can’t have it both ways, Bill.”

Bill looked like the proverbial kid caught in the cookie jar for a few moments before insisting, “But I *never* used the blood to manipulate you. I love you!”

“Bill, *why* did you give me your blood then?”

“The queen ordered me to bring you to her, and when you couldn’t be glamoured, I had to tie you to me.”

“*How* would blood tie me to you, Bill? I get that you could find me using it. I get that you could sense my emotions, but *how* would any of that tie us together? And while I’m asking

questions, why did you lie to me about tryin' to glamour me. Right after you gave me your blood, I asked if you'd ever tried to glamour me, and you said no, but just the other night, you confirmed what I felt at the time. You *did* try to glamour me—not once, but twice!”

Bill started to answer her question, but Sookie stopped him, “Wait, Bill. I actually don't wanna hear your response. The important thing is that you did it, and you lied about it. And it was *after* the glamour failed to work that you gave me your blood. And then in the *very next* moment, I was telling you all about my telepathy, almost like I was *compelled* to let you know my deepest, darkest secret. How can you expect me to believe that I didn't do that because of the influence of your blood, Bill? I'm not stupid. And now that your blood is no longer in me to cloud my judgment, I can see things very clearly for what they were—and for what they are!”

Sookie went on, anger being replaced by hurt in her voice, “And despite knowing that I was a virgin, Bill, you still didn't warn me that your blood would make me be attracted to you in particular. I'll never—*ever*—know now if I would have given you my virginity if you had not given me your blood first, so as far as I'm concerned, Bill, you stole something from me!”

“Sookie, I *do* love you,” Bill insisted. “Do not doubt that.” Red tears had begun forming in the corners of Bill's eyes by this point.

“I don't doubt that, Bill, but I *do* doubt why I felt love for you back. Whether you intended for it to or not, your blood influenced me to be more attracted to you, just like you warned me it would do with Eric, and I made choices based on that attraction.”

Bill spoke harshly, “It was the same with *him* too then.” He gestured sharply toward Eric. “His blood made you more attracted to him. Do not forget, Sookie, that Eric tricked you into taking his blood.”

Eric could feel Sookie's anger rising again in the bond, and he squeezed her hand in reassurance. By this point, part of Eric wanted to simply grab Bill and toss him on his ass outside, but he knew Sookie needed her closure, and he didn't need a shit storm from the Authority, so he kept his calm and he kept quiet.

Sookie, however, did not. "I *won't* forget, Bill. Eric tricked me into drinkin' his blood right after he threw his body between mine and a bomb. The truth is that he could have died—*was willing to die*—to protect me!" Sookie squeezed Eric's hand back. "But you, Bill—you tricked me into drinking your blood right after you paid the Rattrays to beat me up. You *risked my life* on purpose. Your rescue was fake, and you killed the Rattrays to cover up your falsehood, just like you tried to kill Eric. I don't think even *you* thought Eric would break my trust or tell the secret of my being a fairy, so why did you try to bury him in cement, I wonder."

"He has twisted everything in your mind, darling," Bill pleaded. "He has had over a thousand years to learn to be a master manipulator."

"Maybe," Sookie granted, "but he is not now, nor has he *ever* manipulated me like you did. And—Bill—if you ever call me 'darling' again, you can expect to feel my fairy powers firsthand!"

Sookie stood up abruptly with Eric at her side. She'd heard about all she wanted to from Bill and had said all she needed to except for one thing. "The truth is that after the blood tie was severed between us, Bill, I no longer felt love for you. Still, I wanted to make sure, so I spent Tuesday evening with you, but you still told me half-truths. I wanted to see if I could love you, to make sure that I no longer felt love for you. And without your blood in me, my confusion about my feelings was gone."

“But Sookie,” Bill said, also rising, his voice pleading, “you can’t feel anything for Eric after all he’s done to you! His blood must have somehow stayed in you, even after you did the severing spell!”

Sookie shook her head. “Do you mean I couldn’t possibly feel anything for the man who has now saved my life or protected me in the Fellowship of the Sun church, from a bomb, from the Weres from Jackson, from a 3,000-year-old vampire, and from everything that currently wants to take me? Do you mean that I cannot possibly feel something for a man who is willin’ to change for me even though I never asked him to? A man who sets my heart aflame with or without his blood in me? A man who makes me laugh all the time, and who understands what I need and tries to give that to me unselfishly? A man who respects me enough to tell me the *fuckin’ truth* about what a tie will do, and a man who was willin’ to accept my choices without question?”

Eric looked on in awe as Sookie—his beloved, his partner—continued. “Because if that’s the kind of person I’m supposed to *not* fall in love with, then I didn’t get the *fuckin’ memo!* And I *do* love him, Bill. I love him like crazy, and I knew that as soon as all the vampire blood was gone from me. His was the face I most wanted to see when I first woke up after the ties had all been severed. His was the presence I still longed for. He was the one that made me feel safe and loved, who will always make me feel like that!”

Bill looked defeated, but it was Eric’s reaction that most struck Sookie. He was not glorifying in her telling Bill off as one might have thought; in fact, no gloating of any kind was present in the bond. His emotions were a mix of pride, awe, devotion, and love—all directed straight at her.

She looked up at Eric and had the strongest urge to kiss him. And she was *really* ready for Bill to leave.

“Bill,” Sookie said carefully, “I said all this to you tonight so that you would know that I really do love Eric, and believe it or not, he loves me. We are together, and you need to understand that there is *no hope* for you and me to be a couple again. I had decided this even *before* I chose to be with Eric and well before I took his blood again. I hope that you can accept my choices, and if you can, we *may* be able to establish a kind of friendship in the future. If, however, you cannot accept Eric and me—well, frankly, I don’t give a shit.”

She continued in a more conciliatory tone, “But you *do* need to understand one thing. Just because Eric and I are together, that doesn’t mean that he won’t be a good sheriff to you. After all, he was a loyal sheriff to Sophie-Anne for years and years. And he has told me that he prefers you to her. And I want you to know that as Eric’s, I will happily read humans for you from time to time when Eric is with me. But there cannot be a personal level to our relationship right now, Bill. You need to move on, and I hope that you find someone that you can love and that you never feel the need to deceive.”

Eric took that as his cue, “Your majesty, I echo Sookie’s sentiments and simply reiterate that I have sworn fealty to you and that I will continue to work in the best interests of your regime as I have been doing since you took over. I have proven that I can be a profitable asset even if we do not care for one another on a personal level. However, I give you fair warning,” Eric paused, his intensity increasing to palpable levels. “*Sookie. Is. Mine.* And as long as she wishes that to remain so, she will *remain* mine.”

Bill moved to the door, defeat clear on his face. However, Eric could also perceive that Bill was making plans even now, and he kept on alert. As Bill reach the entryway, he paused

and turned to Sookie and Eric, “I wish you well, Sookie. However, I *know* that Eric will hurt you, and when he does, I will be waiting. I know that he has painted me as a monster to you, but my *sole* concern is seeing you happy.”

Neither Sookie nor Eric missed his eye shifting.

“Good night, Bill,” Sookie said as Bill left the house.

Chapter 64: Matriarchs

Eric gestured for Sookie to be quiet and turned his head to the door, listening to Bill's departure and monitoring his progress. A minute later he inhaled deeply. "He is out of range, min kära."

Sookie quickly said, "Bill Compton, I rescind your invitation—you lying A-hole!"

Eric grinned at Sookie's words. "I see that you saw his eyes twitch too."

Sookie couldn't help but return Eric's grin. "I *cannot believe* that you almost cracked up when he was talking!"

"Me—my lover?" Eric said innocently. "I was *much* more in control than you were. Imagine if Bill's *heart-felt* words had been interrupted by *your* laughter. The ego bruise alone may have sent him to his true death."

The couple looked at each other and burst into laughter for several moments, both to relieve the tension from the encounter and because Bill's continued unwillingness to tell the truth—even when caught in a lie—was so pitiful that it had become funny. After they composed themselves, Sookie looked at Eric's face, still boyish from his laughter, especially given the fact that his bangs were flopping on his forehead.

There was only one reaction that she considered viable at that moment: she jumped him. She literally launched herself into his arms, wrapped her arms and legs around him, and took his lips greedily with her own.

Though momentarily surprised, Eric quickly gripped Sookie's legs so that they wouldn't slip down his body. He moaned into their kiss. Sookie trailed her lips over his cheek and chin and to his neck as she caught her breath.

“You were magnificent tonight, lover,” Eric purred into Sookie’s ear, as he nibbled on the lobe. “There were many times that you had me in such awe that I wanted nothing more than to bend you over the arm of the couch and worship your body.”

Sookie looked up at Eric with hooded lashes and commanded, “Worship it now, Viking.”

Eric growled and pushed Sookie up against the wall, its stability allowing him a free hand. He ran his fingers under her shirt and bra and took her breast roughly into his palm.

“Oh God,” Sookie moaned as he pinched and rolled her nipple with his finger. “Eric, I need you—*now—please.*”

Feeling just as desperate, Eric set Sookie onto her feet for a moment in order to free his erection and to pull off Sookie’s pants, taking her shoes and one sock with them. He made even quicker work of her underwear, ripping her soaked panties apart with two hands. However, Sookie didn’t care at all about her underwear as Eric lifted her up again and thrust into her, slamming her against the wall, even as he used one of his arms to take the brunt of the force. She wrapped her legs around him tightly and met his thrusts as he continued to pound into her again and again.

“Fuck, Sookie. So good,” he managed to groan as he buried his head into her shoulder, kissing and licking her now salty flesh.

“Please, Eric,” Sookie begged, “please bite me. We can wait to do the exchange, but I need your fangs in me *right now!*”

Eric growled, and his fangs clicked into place. His desperate thrusts pushed Sookie upward a bit, and he bit into her breast, pulling on her blood even as he pulled her orgasm from her. His was not far behind as her sweet blood entered his system and pulsated around their bond.

As soon as both of their orgasms had subsided and Eric had composed himself, he tucked his extremely satisfied cock back into his jeans and refastened them. He secured Sookie against him by placing a hand under her bottom, and then he started to walk toward the stairs.

Having just caught her breath, Sookie said, "I'm gonna need my pants, cowboy."

Eric chuckled and bent down gracefully to retrieve them.

Sookie sighed and buried her face into his chest as he carried her up the stairs to the bathroom so that she could clean herself up. He set her down carefully on the bathroom counter and kissed her forehead gently. He zipped out of the room and was back in seconds with a clean pair of panties and her missing sock.

Sookie smiled appreciatively as Eric warmed a washcloth for her.

"You were *amazing* tonight, lover," Eric reiterated.

"Mmm," Sookie sounded. "You're amazing too."

Eric chuckled. "Oh course—the sex was amazing, lover," he said as he kissed the tip of her nose. "But I was also referring to how you dealt with Compton. I thought for a minute there that you were going to zap him. In fact," he added with mischief in his eyes, "part of me was hoping that he'd call you 'darling' just one last time."

She grinned, "I have to admit that part of me was hopin' the same thing."

Eric tone turned more serious as he picked up a brush to smooth Sookie's hair. "Still, I hope that your words had the effect you desired. Perhaps, he will abandon his earlier plans and leave us alone."

Sookie sighed at the feel of Eric brushing her hair and smiled at him teasingly. "*You* were incredible too. All that lying and nonsense from him, and you hardly said a word *AND* you didn't kill him either!"

Eric chuckled. “It was very difficult, min kära—I assure you. May I have a prize.”

Sookie crooked her finger at him, “You may have a kiss, Viking.”

Eric bent down and gave Sookie a soft, soulful kiss.

When they broke apart, Sookie smiled up at him, “I should get dressed and pack a bag with a change of clothes.”

Eric nodded. “Pack two changes. We may, perhaps, wish to stay at my home tomorrow night as well. Oh,” he said as if remembering something, “I forgot to ask if you had eaten your dinner before I rose this evening. I’m afraid that you’ve been distracting me.”

Sookie chuckled, “Yeah, I ate, but that was several hours ago.” She got a mischievous look in her eyes, “Can you make a sandwich?”

Eric laughed, “I know the ingredients for a sandwich, my love, but I have never made one.”

“Well—then you have your job for while I’m packing.”

Eric’s chuckle deepened as he put down the brush and stroked her hair with his fingers, “You are a demanding woman, little one. *Always* testing me.”

“And you are a high-handed vampire, *big one*.”

His laughter only amplified as he left the bathroom to go to the kitchen.

About ten minutes later, Sookie had a backpack filled with two changes of clothes and something pretty she wanted to wear for Eric when they did the third bond. He had a small bag filled with a couple of sandwiches, some apples and bananas from a bowl on the counter, and the leftover peach pie, which his nose had led him to. He’d also grabbed a small container of something that he thought was a leftover casserole of some kind from the refrigerator and a

container of the soup she'd frozen. He'd enjoyed the smell of the soup very much and thought that Sookie might want a bit of variety while she was at his home for the next day or so. He'd purchased a small amount of human food for her, but he was not sure she would like it, as it was canned goods or freezer items.

She unzipped one of the compartments in the backpack and added the bag of food to its contents, careful not to crush anything.

"You should grab a coat for yourself, min kára," Eric said.

Sookie reached into her coat closet and pulled out her worn jacket. Eric looked at it disapprovingly. "Now you wait just a minute, mister!" Sookie exclaimed, irritated by Eric's reaction. "This is a perfectly good coat!"

Eric put his hands up in surrender. "I was wondering only if it would be warm enough for you as we fly; it can be quite cool in the air, and I want to make sure you are comfortable."

"Oh," Sookie said, feeling Eric's honesty through the bond.

"Perhaps, you might wrap yourself up in this as well," he said pulling an afghan off the couch.

"Okay," Sookie said chuckling. "Sorry—I assumed you were criticizing my coat, but you knew what you were gettin' into with me, cowboy."

Eric returned the grin, "But of course, lover. I am well aware of your fiery nature, and you know I love it. Oh, and by the way, I was already planning how I could get Pamela to make sure you purchased a new coat during your upcoming shopping trip." He winked at her as she hit his arm lightly.

"High-handed vampire," she mumbled.

"Beautiful, fiery, sexy, amazing fairy," he returned, causing her to smile widely.

“Let’s get goin’, Viking,” Sookie said authoritatively. “I want you to get me back to your secret lair so that you can properly pillage me.”

Eric growled, “That, lover—I *can* do.”

Before stepping outside, Eric took a moment to call Pam. “Pamela, is there a report for me?”

Pam responded, “Is Sookie listening?”

“Does she need to be?”

“No—it’s just that Bill went home and called in all this human donors; then he proceeded to fuck Lillith, whom I found out was made vampire by Lorena in 1917. As far as I can tell, Lillith and Bill were Lorena’s only progenies.”

“But he’s taken no action regarding Sookie or myself?”

“No, the humans have just arrived and seem to have joined Bill and Lillith in their *fun*.”

“Very well. Keep monitoring. “Call only for emergencies. I have important *business* to see to,” he hung up as he ran his hand across Sookie’s collarbone and grazed the tops of her breasts.”

Sookie moaned and Eric bent down to whisper, “Soon, my fairy. I will be pillaging you very, *very* soon.”

He straightened up and asked, “Do you want to hear what Pam said?”

Sookie nodded.

“Bill ordered all his human donors to be brought back, he and Lillith had sex, and now it seems the humans are joining in.” Eric looked at Sookie, gauging her reaction.

“Well, I can’t really blame him for the sex thing, given what we just did against the wall, and earlier in the cubby, and in the shower, and, of course, what I intend to do to you again soon.”

Eric leered at her.

“And as for the feeding—well, as long as the humans aren’t hurt, that’s to be expected too. And he’s done nothing against us?”

“No.”

“Well—then, Bill’s business is his own as far as I’m concerned.” Even Sookie was surprised to not be more upset.

“Lover, there was one piece of pertinent information. Lillith is Bill’s vampire sibling. She was Lorena’s child.”

Sookie looked down and then back up at Eric, “Talk about a bad penny. Well—if she does anything to you or to us, I’ll send her to meet her maker.”

Eric bent down and captured Sookie’s lips in a quick, searing kiss. “I love it when you are ruthless,” he whispered as he released her and took her hand in his.

Eric walked out on the front porch first and inhaled deeply. There were no out-of-place scents, so he called Bubba over.

“Hello Miss Sookie,” Bubba said as he came out of the woods. “I hope that King Bill didn’t bother you none.”

Sookie smiled at him, “No Bubba, we all just had a talk. I appreciate that you were here though—to help if we needed it. I’m real thankful.”

Bubba smiled widely. Eric spoke, “Bubba, Sookie and I are going to one of my residences tonight, but I need you to stay here to keep Sookie’s home secure until Miranda gets

back in the morning. Feel free to hunt anywhere on her property that you want; you don't have to stay close to the house for the remainder of the evening. Just inform me if someone tries to pass the property line."

Bubba's smile widened even more if possible, and Sookie cringed a bit, knowing that Bubba would be hunting cats. She suspected that Eric had arranged for a whole parcel of strays to be brought to her woods, but that was one secret she *didn't* want to confirm with her bonded.

After the couple watched Bubba disappear into the woods, Sookie locked up the house. As she turned back toward Eric, her eyes were drawn to the overgrown rose bushes next to the front porch. "Oh, by the way, cowboy," she smiled up at him, "Gran told me to tell you that the people you have pruned the rosebushes are a bunch of idiots. You need to trim them back more."

Eric looked at Sookie in confusion. "What? Your Gran?"

"Yep!" Sookie said, leading Eric over to the porch swing. "I guess in the middle of everything else that was happenin', I didn't tell you about yesterday. I talked to Gran, Eric." Sookie spoke with tears in her eyes, and Eric could feel her sadness, excitement, and gratefulness through the bond.

"Lafayette?" Eric asked perceptively.

"Yes, but I need to go back a bit and tell you about somethin' that I haven't told you—something about Gran and Marnie."

Eric raised a brow. "What about them?"

"Well, once I learned from Holly's head that Marnie was the one that had done the spell that took away your memories, I went to the Moon Goddess to see what I could find out."

Eric stiffened a bit.

“Now—wait just a minute, Viking!” Sookie scolded. “Don’t forget that I can take care of myself. I didn’t put myself in danger that day. I just went in like I was a customer; I intended to read Marnie’s mind.”

Eric nodded. “I know, min kära. It is just that I do not like the thought of you taking risks like that.”

“Would you have done the same for me?”

“Yes,” Eric admitted.

“Then—get used to it, buster! I was tryin’ to figure out how to fix you, so don’t give me any trouble, okay?”

Eric smiled and kissed Sookie’s forehead. “I will try, my love.”

“Good! Now, where was I? Oh yes—I was in the Moon Goddess, and in order to have better access and more time to read Marnie’s thoughts, I pretended that I wanted a readin’ done.”

“And since Marnie—like Lafayette—was a medium, you heard your Gran through her,” Eric posited.

“Yes. Gran told me to get out of there and that Marnie was dangerous, so I high-tailed it out of the Moon Goddess right away!”

Eric chuckled. “I think that your Gran and I share the same purpose of trying to keep you safe.”

Sookie took Eric’s hand and kissed it before turning more serious, “On Wednesday when we told each other how we felt, did you wonder why I didn’t want to re-bond with you right then?”

Eric looked closely at Sookie. “Yes—I admit that I still sensed some hesitation from you that evening, so I was very glad when you asked me to stay here. I thought that you might just want one more day to be sure. But there was something else, wasn’t there?”

“Yes,” Sookie nodded. “Through Marnie, Gran told me that I shouldn’t give you my heart—that we wouldn’t last together.”

Eric looked surprised. “And you didn’t want to enter into the bond again until you knew what Gran meant.”

Sookie shook her head. “Truth be told, I would have most likely bonded with you either way—even if Gran had confirmed that we weren’t gonna last. I don’t think that I could have done anything else at that point.” Sookie got quieter as tears rose to her eyes once again, “Eric, even one day with you—one minute—would have made the bond worth it to me. You need to understand that! No matter how much time we have together, it’s worth it to me—even though it will *never* seem like enough.”

“I know,” Eric returned quietly as he brought his forehead to hers. He asked quietly, “What did your Gran tell you through Lafayette?”

“She said that she’d given me that warning because you were supposed to die recently. I don’t know when, but I’m guessin’ it was either at Antonia’s hands or the night that Nan was supposed to kill you. Gran said that you had some kind of guardian angel looking over you, and your fate changed.”

Eric chuckled.

Sookie looked up at him confused.

He said, “I’m sorry, my love. It is just that I think I may have *two* guardian angels. You saved me from Antonia’s grip. She, most certainly, would have led me to my final death after

she was done with me if you hadn't broken the spell. And Godric's maker most likely saved me from my fate at the hands of Nan Flanagan."

"Godric's maker?" Sookie asked. "He must be really old!"

Eric used his senses to confirm that no one was in range of their discussion and then continued, "*She* is. She was a powerful seer—a teller of the future—at Delphi before she was turned vampire."

"Like in that movie *300*?" Sookie asked.

Eric nodded and continued, "In fact, she was turned when she was very old in human years by one of the first known of my kind. After he found her, he intended to use her, and he did use her very cruelly for many centuries. But the old bat bided her time and eventually used her own gift to set up his downfall." Eric's voice was full of affection for his maker's maker.

Sookie chuckled, "You like her, your—um—grand-maker."

"Very much," Eric confirmed. "Few know that she ever made a child, and even fewer know that Godric was that child. I have only ever told Pamela and now you. I believe Godric told Isabel, but I don't think anyone else knows of my connection to the A.P. unless she has told others."

"A.P.?" Sookie asked smiling at what she assumed had to be a nickname.

"Yes, she is called the Ancient Pythoness by my kind. She is revered by most vampires. As vampiress, she has retained her ability to see some things in the future, though she hardly ever interferes despite many attempts made by others to control her over the years. As you can imagine, she is excellent at *thwarting* those attempts."

"And she helped you with Nan?"

“Yes—she made sure that I was warned about the impending threat. I would have been on alert anyway, but who knows? Nan may have caught me in an unguarded moment. She certainly did *try* to distract me that evening by bringing up your name.”

Sookie sank into Eric’s shoulder. “I don’t like the idea of people usin’ me to get to you.”

Eric reassured her, “I said that she *‘tried’* to distract me, min kära. I did not say that she succeeded. Despite the fact that she had all her guards firing wooden bullets at me, I was not hit, and even if I had been, the vest would have protected me.”

Sookie shivered next to him as he spoke of getting shot at. “But you don’t always wear your vest, Eric.”

He chuckled, “Believe me, my love. I always had it on when I knew I was to meet with Nan.” He embraced her more fully, sending comfort through their bond. “Even as you saved me from Antonia, I think the A.P. may have saved my life that night with Nan. She protests that she will not act to change anyone’s fate, but she does seem to enjoy having me around.”

“Well—then it looks like she and I share a similar purpose too, just like you and my Gran.” Sookie smiled up at him.

Eric pulled her even closer and wrapped her in the afghan.

After a few minutes, Sookie asked quietly, “Why didn’t the A.P. stop Godric from meeting the sun?”

Eric looked into Sookie’s eyes. “That was my first question too,” Eric said. “And I was angry with her for a while. But then she contacted me and *‘set me straight’*—so to speak. She said simply that she loved Godric too much to stop him from doing what he needed to do for her own selfish reasons. And then she told me that I needed to grow up.”

They both chuckled at this. “I think I would like her a lot,” Sookie said.

“She would most certainly like you as well, my love,” Eric assured. He returned to their earlier conversation and asked a bit nervously, “So—your Gran approves of me now?”

“Yes,” Sookie smiled. “And she seems to approve of everything that you have been doin’ for the house, but she was mighty unhappy about the state of her roses!”

Eric laughed, “Well then—I’ll see to them *myself* as soon as we get back!”

Chapter 65: The Course of Stars

Sookie looked up at Eric, “How do we do this?”

“Well Eric said, there are a few ways.” He put down the backpack he’d been holding and quickly picked up Sookie bridal style. “I can hold you like this.”

He then slung her around to his back, piggy-back style. “Or you can hold on like this.”

Finally, he brought her body around to his front again and put her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He put one large hand under her bottom to support her and used the other to pull her close so that their foreheads were touching. Sookie blushed, as she was reminded of the position they’d had sex in against the wall inside—not an hour before. “I think I like this one best,” he whispered suggestively, running his hand down her spine.

Sookie bit her lip to keep from moaning; she could feel how much Eric liked their current position on her inner thigh. “This one *is* nice,” she finally said, “but I think I’ll go for the first one. I’d kinda like to look around a little this first time.”

Eric chuckled, “You are a cold-hearted woman, Sookie Stackhouse.”

She giggled, “Said the vampire with no heartbeat.”

Eric put Sookie down briefly and slung her bag over his shoulder. Then he pulled the afghan securely around her and picked Sookie up into his arms.

“Ready?” he asked with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

“Go slow, okay?” Sookie said, her nervousness rising and filling the bond.

“I would never let you fall, min kära,” Eric whispered into her hair as he kicked off from the ground. He hovered for a few seconds, as Sookie’s arms tightened around his neck. Her eyes were firmly shut. “I thought you said you wanted to look around,” Eric joked.

“I do. I will. I just need to get used to it. I’m a little scared of heights and flying—if you wanna know the truth of it.”

Eric held Sookie securely and began moving upwards and over the trees on Sookie’s property. He quickened his pace just a bit, and Sookie took in a deep breath. “I have you, my love,” he assured.

“I know,” Sookie said taking in a deep breath. Finally, she opened her eyes and looked into Eric’s.

“Look up,” he said, pushing his own gaze toward the stars.

Sookie followed Eric’s suggestion and saw a canopy of bright stars above her. With no ambient light present, they were brilliant. “Beautiful,” she muttered.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “It is only in flight like this that I am able to see the stars as vividly as when I was a young boy looking up at them in my homeland. From my father, I learned the course of all the stars to aid in our sea travels. But I will admit that I enjoyed the stories that my mother would tell me about them even more than learning about their pathways from my father.”

Sookie smiled and looked back at Eric. “Will you tell me those stories sometime?”

“If you like,” he answered looking wistfully upwards. “And I can also tell you the myths that the Romans and Greeks had for the stars. And I can tell you about other cultures’ beliefs of them as well. Even in my vampire life, I have enjoyed hearing such stories.”

Sookie brought one of her hands from around Eric’s neck to his cheek and leaned further into his body. “In one of my dreams once, I told you that I knew you had feelings, that you were deep. Every day, I find that you are deeper than I could imagine.”

Eric leaned into Sookie’s touch on his cheek as he looked down at her. “You would not believe how different my whole existence has become since my feelings opened up for you, min

kära. I have listened to the stories of other cultures with interest, I have had many professions, I have fought in wars and battles, and I have seen many wonders, but in more than a thousand years, I have never found someone that I wished to *share* all these things with—to speak to about all these things. It is a new feeling, Sookie—a phenomenal feeling—that you have given to me. The concept of sharing my life with someone had never occurred to me until you were in it.”

Eric grew quiet and Sookie nuzzled into his chest; she felt the bond between them thrumming with contentment and affection. She looked around her and saw the tops of trees below her. She listened to the stillness of the night. “It really is beautiful up here. How long will it take to fly to your house?”

“Generally, from your home, it takes about 20 minutes. But it will take longer tonight since I’m not flying very fast.”

“Wait!” Sookie said interrupting him. “You can’t say that anymore.”

“What, my love?” Eric said, his confusion filtering into the bond. “What did I say that upset you?”

“Nothing upset me. You just can’t call it *my* home anymore. You need to start calling it *our* home.”

Eric smiled into Sookie’s hair where she couldn’t see it, but she felt his happiness surge.

“I will remember that, min kära. From now on, everything that was once yours or mine becomes ours.”

Sookie was quiet for a moment and then spoke in a sarcastic voice, “This does *not* mean that you get to give me a new car, you know.”

Eric sighed, “But yours is a death trap, my love. And I have more than 20 cars all told. Perhaps, you will see one you like and decide to drive it; they are all *ours* now, after all. It’s not as if they are currently getting much use. When I drive, I usually use my new Vette.”

Sookie rolled her eyes, “Twenty, huh? What are they all for?”

“There are different types for different purposes. To be honest, it is somewhat difficult to keep track since Pam has arranged for many of them. Her current car of choice, if you believe it, is a minivan. She jokes that it is practical for hauling around dead bodies, but I know that it is mostly for her shopping trips.”

“Pam hauls around dead bodies in her minivan?” Sookie asked seriously, horrified by Eric’s casualness.

He answered, “No lover—at least not in a car that she *likes*. She’d never get the smell out.”

“Oh,” Sookie said. Eric could tell that Sookie was upset by his words.

His took a deep, unnecessary breath. Sookie could feel anxiety rise in Eric as he spoke in a quiet voice. “Sookie, you know that Pam has killed, and you know that I have as well. You have seen me kill, and I have told you of other deaths that I have dealt out. As sheriff, especially before the revelation of my kind, I had to put many vampires to death for brazenly killing humans and threatening our secret. I killed humans by accident before I had learned to control all my vampire urges. I have killed drainers and V distributors. I have killed Fellowship members who planned to blow up my club. I have killed many in battle. I have killed and would kill any that threaten me or mine. You need to be certain that you can live with this aspect of me before we complete the bond.”

Sookie didn't wait a second before answering, "I *am* certain, Eric. I might not like it all, but I understand most of it. And I believe you when you say that you will not kill without a very good reason. And I know what it's like to kill in order to save your own life or those you love; I've had to do it twice now. And I've also aimed my powers at people with the intent to hurt them. It's just that I don't like to think about *anyone* dyin'."

"I know, min kära. I hope that you are never in a position when you must kill another again, which is why I wish for you to learn how to use your fairy gifts with more control. And—as I vowed to you before—I will not kill unless it is to preserve us or my kind. And even then, I will look for other avenues first."

"I know," Sookie said, placing her hand on his chest and looking earnestly into his eyes. "I have already seen it." She paused, "Please know that even when I feel regret over things you might have done in the past or have worries like I did just now, it doesn't mean that I don't love you and accept you as you are. We'll be able to feel each other even more after the bond is completed tonight. That means we'll feel it when we get angry or frustrated with each other, and knowing how stubborn we can both be, that might happen quite a bit."

Both she and Eric chuckled at that.

She continued, "And there might be times when we feel each other's hurt or disapproval over our actions. But you will *always* feel the love I have for you underneath any of those other things, Eric. I love you *as you are*. What you've been and done—the good and the bad—helped to form that—helped to form what I love."

Eric landed softly onto a slightly overgrown lawn in front of a small cabin in the middle of the woods. Only a narrow dirt road led up to the house. He set Sookie down on her feet carefully, making sure she was steady. He looked at her intensely, "You are my miracle, min

kära. That someone like you could love someone like me is a miracle—more of a miracle than the magic of your blood or of my blood. *Your love is the miracle*. I will never take that for granted.”

Sookie put her arms back around Eric’s neck and drew up to kiss him lightly. “We make the miracle together,” she whispered.

After a moment of contentment passed between them, she drew back and smiled at the little cabin. “This is not what I was expectin’.”

Eric laughed, “I have my Gothic castles in time shares right now.”

Sookie giggled and took Eric’s hand, “You said this one is your favorite, right?” She gestured toward the dark cabin in front of them.

He nodded.

“Show me.”

Eric beamed, and Sookie knew that his open smile in that moment had not been given to another person in at least a thousand years. She stifled her emotions so that she wouldn’t cry and walked by Eric’s side to the cabin door. He opened a concealed panel to the right of the door and put in a code as well as scanned his thumbprint.

“That’s like James Bond,” Sookie marveled.

Eric chuckled. “It’s also very practical. I have many safe houses all around the area and until recently, I rarely stayed anywhere for two nights in a row. Often, I would decide where to stay at the spur of the moment, so bringing that many keys with me would not be—um—comfortable. This house, as I said, is my most secure. Over many years, I have built much of it myself, and the humans that wired it for electricity and plumbing and later for satellite

and wireless service were all driven here blindfolded by me, and they were glamoured to forget all about it after each night of work.

“You have wireless—even up here?”

“A man has to be connected, my love.” His eyes glittered. “And satellites are amazing things! I also glamoured the surveyors from my cell phone company to feel like they *just had to* have a tower nearby.”

“Crafty vampire,” Sookie teased.

Chapter 66: Put There for Me

Eric opened the door of the cabin and turned on the lights to reveal a modest-sized living room. He closed and secured the door behind them and then turned to Sookie. “You can explore while I make a fire—if you want to.”

Sookie let go of Eric’s hand after giving his palm a soft kiss. He smiled as he began to build the fire and kept one eye on her as she explored.

She walked slowly around the living room, admiring the furnishings; everything except for a large, comfortable looking couch was handmade from oak, the smell of which filled the air. The floors, too, were made of oak and obvious effort had been made in smoothing the planks to fit the room perfectly.

Along one wall were several bookcases filled to the brim with volumes of all shapes and sizes, many of which looked very old. Sookie decided to make a point of browsing through them while Eric slept the next day. She also noticed a few paintings on the walls and wondered if Eric had done them himself.

She wandered into a small dining area furnished with a table and two chairs. A desk with a laptop on it sat in the corner of the room, and Sookie could see an small outbuilding through the window.

Next was a small kitchen. Sookie returned briefly to the living room to retrieve the food from the backpack and smiled to herself as she took in Eric lighting the fire. Happiness burst from her end of the bond as she realized he was humming softly to himself. Sensing her there, he turned around and gave her a smile that lit up her insides before returning to his task.

Sookie went back to the kitchen and opened up the bag of food; her smile of contentment widened as she noticed all the food Eric had packed and the two sandwiches he’d made for her.

She put everything except for the fruit into the refrigerator, which had been stocked with only TruBlood before.

She ran her fingers over the beautiful granite counters and noticed that there was a new oven and range in addition to the microwave she had expected to see. She briefly wondered why Eric had an oven as she opened a cabinet and saw some dishes. Again, she wondered why Eric would need dishes as she pulled out a large bowl to put the fruit into.

Next, Sookie wandered down the short hall and found the only bedroom; it was dominated by a huge handcrafted bed made out of what Sookie guessed was rosewood. The bed was made up with dark blue linens that felt softer than silk to her touch. A dresser and a cabinet-style closet—crafted out of the same kind of wood as the bed—completed the furnishings in the room. A huge cream-colored rug softened the overall masculine effect of the space.

Sookie saw a door leading to a bathroom; she gasped as she looked inside. The bathroom was bigger than her bedroom at home. In the middle of it was a huge, old-fashioned-looking tub, which was twice as large as the one Bill had. In the corner was a large shower with glass walls and doors. It looked to have about three nozzles. There were two sinks and a toilet. Seeing that, Sookie's surprise kicked in once again. "Why would Eric need a toilet?" she wondered to herself. When she saw a full roll of toilet paper hung up next to the toilet, her shock really set in.

"What has you baffled, little one?" Eric asked from behind her.

Sookie spoke but kept her eyes trained on that toilet paper. "It's just—why do you have a toilet here, Eric? Or a stove? Or even dishes? You said you built most of this place yourself. I don't get why you'd need human stuff if no one else ever came here. You have toilet paper, for goodness sakes!"

From behind her, he entwined his long arms around her stomach and bent down, taking in the scent of her hair as he loved to do. “I had the kitchen and bathroom redone in the last year, min kära. I knew you would return, and to be frank, making sure that all my homes could accommodate you helped me to keep busy, especially right after you disappeared. I wanted you to be comfortable here—in *this* place—most of all.”

“But you didn’t even know I’d come back, and even then, how could you know that we would ever get together?” she asked as she turned around in his arms to face him.

“As I told you before, I somehow knew you would return, no matter what anyone else said or thought. And as for the rest, you could call it *hope*—maybe even *faith*.”

He smiled a bit, “Oh, and—of course—I had to occupy myself somehow on the nights that Pam banished me from Fangtasia because of my foul mood. It was either remodel or go on a killing spree, my love,” Eric said jokingly.

He continued as he stroked her hair, “I even put a few canned goods and other nonperishable food stuffs into each of my homes for you. But the renovations to this one were the most extensive since the others were initially designed with humans in mind.”

“Do many humans go to your other homes?” Sookie asked, a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

Eric chuckled at her reaction. “Not really. Bobby knows of a few of them and makes deliveries for me at certain locations. I also have some cleaning staff that rotates to take care of most of my homes, but they are, as you can imagine, heavily glamoured. If you mean to ask if I have taken other women or men back to my homes for sex or to feed on, then the answer is no. Godric taught me long ago that it was best to keep those things separate from one’s personal life. I have only one home where human donors have gone, and it is similar to the one you saw of

Godric's in Dallas. When I must host parties or house important visiting vampires, it is always in that home, and human escorts are generally expected, so I must provide them."

Sookie shook her head disapprovingly.

Eric chuckled, "I do not care for that kind of thing either, my love. I am not the most," he paused, "*social*—of vampires."

"But you have tasted and have had sex with many of these donors and fangbangers over the years?" Sookie asked quietly, a tinge of insecurity filtering into the bond.

"Yes," Eric answered evenly, "but no more—*never* again."

Satisfied by his answer, Sookie steeled herself and nodded. Eric gave her a moment as her insecurity turned into resolution and contentment, and then he took her hand. "Do you like it?"

She smiled, "I love it. Did you make all the furniture?"

"Much of it," Eric said, the pride clear in his voice. "I have a little shop out back where I keep my tools. I enjoy this kind of wood working, but I do not show it in my other homes. This is something of my sanctuary. And now it is *ours*."

Eric raised Sookie's hand and kissed it gently before leading her toward a door that she hadn't noticed in the small hall. Eric opened it, and they were met by what looked to be a closet.

"Wait," Eric said. "If you didn't expect a toilet here, how were you going to take care of your human needs?" he looked down at her curiously.

Sookie smiled, "Well, to be honest, I hadn't really thought about it." Then she put her hands on her hips. "Plus, I'm a country girl. I woulda come up with somethin'!"

Eric chuckled and then bent down slightly to avoid hitting his head on the door frame of the closet. He pushed a panel and revealed another key pad. After putting in a code and his

thumbprint again, the back of the closet slid open and revealed a set of steps similar to those of the cubby. Eric led Sookie down the steps and into a room about twice as large as the cubby space at the farmhouse. There was a bed and a desk with another computer set-up. What looked to Sookie like security equipment occupied the rest of the surface of the desk. A small refrigerator sat in the corner of the room.

Eric raised the laptop lid, and it sprang to life. “I need to borrow your thumb, dear one,” he said as he placed her digit on a small pad that was hooked up to the laptop. “I’m entering you into the computer system. This will give you access to all my—I mean *our*—homes. All you need to do is memorize this six-digit code: 070708.”

“Well, that’s easy enough to remember. Where’d you come up with that number?”

Eric smiled softly, “That was the day I first laid eyes on you, *min kära*.”

Sookie sat on the bed and said nothing for a few minutes as Eric continued setting her up in the security system.

“When do I get to marry you?” she asked abruptly just as he was finishing his task. “I don’t wanna wait a long time. I mean—I know we are finishing the bond tonight, but I wanna marry you in your vampire way—uh—pledge to you.”

He turned and smiled at her, “Impatient, my love?”

“I’m just sure. And I want something official, you know? Gran would have skinned me alive to be livin’ with someone before I was married to him. And I’m not willin’ to be away from you again, so we’d better do it soon so that Gran doesn’t haunt us. Remember that she could give us *both* a good scolding through Lafayette if she wanted to.” Sookie was only half joking.

Eric chuckled, “I agree—I do not think that I want Gran angry at me.”

Sookie giggled and then her expression sobered. “A pledging is not some kinky vampire ceremony thing, is it?”

Eric chuckled again and an evil glint entered his eye. “We could make it kinky if we wished. Many vampires mate publically after the marriage ceremony—to make it *official*, as it were.”

Sookie’s mouth fell open, “We don’t have to do that, do we?”

Eric laughed loudly, “No, my love. Vampire marriages are odd. They often include provisions for *exactly* when sex will be had, usually at yearly state meetings or the like. The marriage negotiations have been known to last longer than the one-hundred years of the marriage itself. But the actual pledging is very easy. In fact, if you agree, I would like for it to occur at Fangtasia Sunday night.”

“Now look who’s in a hurry, buster,” Sookie teased.

Eric was meditative for a moment, “I *am* in a hurry, actually. I find that I am eager for you to be my pledged.”

“Have you ever been vampire married before?”

Eric scoffed, “No—vampire weddings are rare, except among the monarchy, and as I suggested, those marriages are mostly made for political reasons.”

“Wait!” Sookie said suddenly. “I can’t miss work on Monday. I promised Sam!”

Eric chuckled, “We will make sure you are home in plenty of time, *min kära*.”

“Will the house be safe then—I mean from Bill?”

“Well, we will keep listening in to have a better idea about whether he makes any immediate plans regarding us. And tomorrow during the day, Miranda is implementing some

extra security for your—I mean *our*—home. She'll be installing entry devices like the ones here. If we also stay here tomorrow night, then she can add some other security features as well.”

“When did you arrange all that, mister high-handed vampire?”

“Right after I made your sandwich, miss test-giving fairy.”

With clear purpose in her eyes, Sookie got up and went over to him. She took both his cheeks into her hands and then planted a loud kiss squarely on his lips. “How did I ever find someone so perfect for me?” she mused, almost to herself.

Not really having any words, Eric simply smiled up at her.

Sookie picked up her previous train of thought. “Somehow all that James Bond stuff seems like it will be out-of-place at Gran’s house.”

“Maybe—but it is necessary if I am to be safe resting there, especially when you are not there to protect me, little one.”

Sookie scoffed, “Don’t tease me like that, Eric.”

“Who’s teasing, *min kära*?” Eric asked seriously. “I have lost track of all the times you have saved my life. You pulled those chains off of me in the Fellowship church, you willingly sucked silver out of me, you helped me—though unintentionally—to entrap Russell, . . .”

Sookie interrupted, “None of those *actually* saved your life though.”

“They did, my love; do not sell yourself short. You and you alone saved me when you dragged me inside of Fangtasia so that I wouldn’t burn even though you have mentioned before that I—and I quote—‘weigh a ton.’” His eyes glinted with teasing before he turned serious again. “You used first your light and then your blood to save me *twice* that day. And then you took me in when I had amnesia; you stood up to the vampire king to argue for my life. You protected me from the witch’s daylight curse and held me down when I almost broke through my

chains. You broke into Marnie's business to try to rescue me. You broke her spell over me and cured me of its effects. Oh—and then there was the healing today after I was in the sun. Sookie, *never* doubt the value I place on your ability to protect those you love. And *never* doubt the value I place on the fact that you've made me one of those."

The passion thick in his voice, he continued, "You are smart. You are loyal. You are brave. You are powerful. And you are mine. I will *always* be safer if you are there during my resting time."

Sookie smiled shyly and looked up through long lashes, "I like that you value me."

"Good," Eric returned her smile and teased, "Perhaps one day you will even become accustomed to it?"

Chapter 67: *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*

[A/N: The title of this chapter might seem odd at first; it is named for a song by Sarah McLachlan called “Fumbling Towards Ecstasy.” I think this song is hauntingly beautiful and kept going through my head when I was writing the chapter, so I had to give it homage. If you listen to the words, it works for the mood I want to create in this chapter.]

“Let’s make sure you’ve been entered into the system properly,” Eric said as he closed the lid of his laptop.

Sookie gave him a sly smile and then obliged him by going up the steps first; she made sure to shake her bottom wantonly and gave him a seductive glance over her shoulder. She was rewarded by a low rumble from her vampire.

As soon as Eric joined her in the hall, he bent down to kiss her breathless. It was only with great difficulty that he stifled his urge to take her right then, especially when he saw the lust burning in Sookie’s brown eyes. “Soon, min kära,” he whispered as he composed himself.

As Sookie caught her breath, he gestured for her to try opening the panel. After they’d successfully tested the system, she looked up at Eric expectantly.

“There are a few more things we should discuss before the final bond, my love,” Eric said gruffly, though his desire for her had not left his eyes.

Seeing his resolution, Sookie nodded, “Okay. Then, let’s go into the living room so that we can enjoy the fire.”

Once they were settled on the couch, Eric spoke up, his tone a bit nervous, “When you return to work on Monday, Jarod will accompany you. Because he’s a shifter, I feel that Merlotte will be more likely to accept his being there.”

Sookie nodded. “Okay.”

“Jarod will be seeking out your boss later today to let him know about the arrangement. Jarod is also much more—uh—*laid-back* than Miranda is. She will remain behind in the day to guard the farmhouse when you are not there. The farmhouse will also be more secure because of Jesus’s protection spell, though since it is keyed to the property that you own, it might not protect me as it would you.”

“Oh!” Sookie spoke up. “I asked Jesus about that after he and Lala did the protection spell while you were asleep. He had two ideas. One was to put the property in both of our names. Then he could redo the spell to include you. But I don’t know. Would that keep vampires from entering without an invitation?”

“No, I’m afraid not” Eric clarified. “If a vampire owns the home, even if it is jointly owned with a human, the invitation rule does not apply, unfortunately.”

“Oh well—Jesus doesn’t think that matters too much anyway. You see, the spell literally says that anyone who comes to harm the owner of the property will be repelled, and if someone tried to harm you, it would definitely harm me too, so he thinks the magic will serve to protect us both, especially since we are bonded—since *my* blood is in you.”

“Excellent,” Eric said. “Let us hope that this is the case.”

Sookie added mischievously, “Plus—especially after we are married—you’re gonna belong *to me*, Viking, and the spell protects everything that is *my property*.”

Eric chuckled and pulled Sookie to him, “If others find out just how much I am already *your* property, min kära, I’m afraid that my reputation will suffer.”

“We can’t have that now, can we?” Sookie teased. “I suppose I will have to keep my ownership of you a secret.”

Eric gave an exaggerated sigh of relief, “Thanks, my love. My standing as a badass vampire will remain intact.”

She winked at him playfully.

After winking back, Eric continued where he’d left off before. “If anyone with ill intent *is* able to get through the protection spell when you are not there, Miranda will be prepared to deal with the threat in the day, and she will lock down the house. We will also have Jesus strengthen and add wards as he finds them to aid in the protection of our house. You, *min kára*, may also be able to help strengthen the wards by using your magic. Some of Godric’s books discuss fairy magic, and I will be lending those to Jesus soon to see what he comes up with.”

Eric gestured toward two boxes in the corner of the room. “Those are the ones I will be taking to him. You may, if you wish, look through them tomorrow. One of the boxes contains books that are in English, and in the other are Latin texts. Many witches know this language, but I have yet to ask Jesus if he is one of them.”

“Oh,” Sookie said, “he is! He said a spell in Latin the other day, and I asked him about it.”

“Good,” Eric said. “The security of my resting place—,” he paused and smiled, “the cubby—is also much greater than you may have noticed up to this point. It can act as a safe room and is fireproof as well. Once Miranda connects its independent system to the new all-house system that she will install, the cubby will virtually lock down if the alarm is triggered. At least until our room can be similarly secured, I will spend my days in the cubby when you are working.”

Sookie sunk her shoulder into his. “So you will be safe in the daytime. And if I’m not at home, Jarod will keep me safe.”

“Yes,” Eric said, “And, of course, Bubba, the magic, and I will be there at night to serve as defenses. We can add to this security as needed if, for example, Bill begins planning against us.”

Sookie smiled up at Eric playfully. “Okay, so it’ll be safe to go home Sunday night, and us gettin’ hitched won’t prevent my working on Monday, so let’s do it.”

Eric grew serious, drew back from Sookie a bit, and took her hand. “There are a few more things that I need to tell you about the pledging; you need to know everything before you make up your mind. And you should eat a bit, I think. As soon as we are done talking, you will need *all* your energy for what I plan to do to you.”

Sookie blushed and shivered due to the intensity in Eric’s eyes. “Okay,” she squeaked out. “That sounds like a plan.” Sookie took care of her human needs, slipped off her shoes and jacket, stowed them in the closet, and grabbed a sandwich and a glass of water before rejoining Eric in the living room. He’d set up some quilts and pillows on the floor in front of the fire.

“All right—tell me,” Sookie said as she sank down next to him on the floor and took a bite of her sandwich.

Eric began, “The reason I chose Sunday to pledge is because all the *right* people will be there as witnesses.

Sookie nodded for Eric to go on as she took another big bite.

He cocked his head to the side. “Test passed? Sandwich good?”

“Mmm,” she sounded.

He grinned and then continued with his earlier train of thought, “As you know, Fangtasia is closed to the public on Sundays and Mondays.”

Having finished her bite, Sookie said, “Yeah, I interviewed those people for you on a Sunday, right?”

“Indeed. I generally conduct area business on Sunday evenings, and the day after tomorrow, Pam has arranged for Rasul, Thalia, and Isabel to join me. She has planned a small reception after my business is taken care of—ostensibly to celebrate the tenures of the new sheriffs. This is an excuse for their presence in the area both Sunday and Monday nights. I wanted to make sure to have powerful allies near if Bill reacted impulsively to our pledging.”

“When do you have the time to make all these plans?” Sookie asked, shaking her head as she took a sip of water.

Eric chuckled. “Texting is a wondrous invention, lover. I find that I can get much work done even as I hold your delicious body to mine as you sleep.”

Sookie rolled her eyes, “Okay, so *why* is it important that we have the *right* witnesses at our pledging.”

“Two reasons. First—all the witnesses to a pledging are bound by tradition to protect it. This is why vampire weddings between monarchs usually take place during large summits of several states. Second—I want Bill to know about the pledging immediately. If he knows about it, he will be unable to do anything to interfere with our relationship; even his position as king would not stop him from facing the true death if he did. Moreover, if he is himself a witness to the event, then his punishment for interference would include *much more* than just his final end.”

Sookie cringed and asked quietly, “So Bill will be there too?”

Eric nodded. “Most likely—Pam has issued an official invitation to him for the reception, and since all his sheriffs will be there, he will most likely feel obliged to attend. He accepted the invitation last night, but that was *before* you had spoken to him.”

“So—what if he decides not to come?”

“I will conduct area business early in the evening, and I assume that Bill will still send Lillith to Fangtasia. According to Pam, she remains on the official docket for the evening. If Bill plans to go forward with his ruse to have her spy on me, she will most certainly stay for the reception when Pam invites her.”

“So even if Bill’s not there to see it, we will use his own spy to make sure he knows about our pledging right away.”

“Exactly. As his sheriff, I would also inform him officially after the fact, but having him there would be better since we would be able to respond to his immediate reaction. We would have Isabel, Rasul, and Thalia, along with Bubba, Pam, Chow and some other area people with us. Though Bill may have a couple of human guards with him, his only vampire ally there will be Lillith.”

Eric paused for a moment. “To be honest, my love, I do not fear Bill when he has time to plan. Not only do we have listening devices planted throughout his home, but his moves tend to be quite easy to predict. Trust me—the last year has been filled with his not-so-subtle attempts to undermine me to the Authority or have me removed as sheriff. It is his *initial* responses to problems that are harder to gauge. They are sometimes rash and can be quite annoying. I was picking cement out of my hair for a month because of one of them; Pamela was inconsolable at the loss of a pair of Jimmy Choos.”

Sookie chuckled at the thought of Pam’s shoes and then got serious, “I could have lost you that night, Eric. And I was such an idiot that I almost took Bill back despite his telling me that he’d ended you. How can I forgive myself for that?”

Eric shook his head and took Sookie's hand. "Sookie, I watched the security footage from that morning at Fangtasia, the morning when I took your blood without your permission and I allowed Russell to do the same. You have forgiven me for this, my love?"

Sookie nodded.

Eric continued, "I made sure that we did not take too much blood from you that morning. When Russell took more than I had anticipated, I pulled back sooner than I'd intended. You had fainted but would have been fine without Bill's blood. However, he gave it to you anyway; he gave you *a lot*." Eric paused and then smiled at her with pride in his eyes. "Despite his fresh blood in you, you still slapped the shit out of him and came outside to save me. I saw you basically tell Bill to fuck off when he tried to stop you from getting to me." Eric squeezed Sookie's hand tenderly. "You were amazing that morning; you resisted the influence of his blood in order to save my life from the sun, and then you fed me to save it again—after you had *him* create the wound no less!" He chuckled a bit. "I do not blame you for almost falling prey to Bill's influence later. Your actions that day need no forgiveness from me or yourself, *min kára*," Eric vowed forcefully.

Sookie nodded and squeezed his hand before taking a deep breath and deciding to put her past with Bill where it needed to go—behind her. She was looking at her future, after all. She grinned at her vampire, "You know, you didn't look half bad in cement, Viking."

He deadpanned, "Well, they say it *is* the new black."

Sookie chuckled and took another bite of her neglected sandwich.

A few minutes of comfortable silence passed between Eric and Sookie as she finished her food and thought over what he had said. After she put her used dishes on the coffee table, she abruptly asked, “So you were never married to a vampire, right?”

“No, I was not,” Eric answered.

“Were you married as a human? Did you have children?”

Eric’s eyes took on a faraway look as if he were searching the pages of his past. “Yes, after my parents died, I did my duty and married as I felt my father would have wished. Before I died my human death, I fathered three children, two sons and one daughter. The daughter was stillborn, I’m afraid.”

Sookie took his hand to offer him comfort. His gratefulness for her act swelled in the bond. “What was your wife like?”

“She was strong,” Eric reflected. “She was a good mother to our children, but I did not love her. Of course, in arranged marriages of the time, love wasn’t generally a factor. Russell and his Weres had lowered my people’s numbers, and uniting my village with hers was a wise thing to do. Her father was the chieftain of his clan, but he was old and infirmed and had no son. It was a good arrangement.”

“What was her name?”

“Aude.”

Sookie was sad for a moment, thinking about how someone else had given Eric children, something that she couldn’t do. As if sensing the source of her pain, Eric slid closer to her and placed his hand gently on her stomach, where she would have carried their child if it were possible.

He said quietly, “I never desired children as a human, even though I was duty-bound to make them with Aude. But if you had been the mother of my children, I would have felt—*differently*. I will always regret not being able to give you a child, Sookie. I can imagine a girl with your eyes and your beautiful smile running in the yard. In my mind, she is in the sun you love so much and playing among the peach trees that I put in. I would wish for her to be *exactly* as you are—the same kind spirit, the same fire. It would be a beautiful sight, and if you ever decide you wish to have a child, we *will* find a way. I could not be her father in a biological sense, but I have stopped questioning the possibilities in life when it comes to you, min kära.”

Sookie smiled at him through a blur of unshed tears. She put her hand over his on her stomach. “I would have liked to have had your son, Eric. I would have liked seeing him grow strong like you. He would have been beautiful.”

Eric smiled. “I don’t remember much of my children, I’m afraid. By the time Aude had them, I was already much off to war and leading my people. I remember feeling proud to have them, but both the boys were fewer than three winters old when I met my human death.”

They shared another few moments of silence before Eric said, “You are the first I have ever *wanted* to marry, Sookie. And we will be the first vampire and human to be pledged that I know of.”

“The first? So this is a big deal, then?”

“It is to me, my love. And it will make us safer.”

“Won’t the fact that we are pledged draw *more* attention to us?”

Eric smiled. “You are shrewd to ask this, min kära. Yes, there is that danger, but too many already know of your telepathy, and being my wife by vampire law will make you untouchable to others while I live.”

Sookie asked apprehensively, “Who knows about my telepathy?”

Eric took a deep, unnecessary breath, “Isabel and a few others from Texas know of it because you helped find Godric, but they have kept it to themselves.” He paused and looked at her with regret in his eyes. “From what I can tell, it seems that Lorena contacted several monarchs about your talents after she left Dallas. It seems that she received the highest bid for your whereabouts from Russell, and that is how she came to be in his retinue. I have found out that the original intent of Russell’s Weres was to kidnap *you* along with Bill at the restaurant, but Bill—to his credit—told the Weres that you had left, and in their V-intoxicated state, they took only him.”

Eric continued, “But because of Lorena, at least three other kings know of your telepathy, though they do not know of your fairy heritage. And your year-long disappearance has, most likely, caused them to lose interest if they had it to begin with. Telepaths, though rare, are not unheard of, and most vampires would trust the power of their glamour over a telepath. You would be coveted by only those who like,” he paused, “rarities. Sophie-Anne, of course, wanted you because she had somehow learned that you telepathy was indicative of your possible fairy lineage, and she was also a collector of unique humans. Russell seems to have wanted you because of his own proclivity for collecting things.” He paused again as he thought of his father’s crown and how it had been just one more trinket to Russell. As he looked at the woman next to him, he was loathe to imagine her as a part of that same collection. He continued, “Most vampire kings and queens would enjoy the thought of having a telepath available but would not risk the true death to acquire one.”

“Well that’s something at least,” Sookie said. “But how did Lorena find out about me?”

Eric looked at Sookie unswervingly. “I am not sure. I know that it was not from myself or Pam.”

“Bill,” Sookie said sadly.

“Most likely.”

“She’s a fuckin’ bad penny.”

“Yes, lover, and she’s a penny I introduced,” he said contritely.

“Well, you have the rest of my life to make it up to me, Viking,” Sookie whispered.

Eric nodded, “I will.”

“Okay, so if we pledge Sunday, what will that involve *exactly*.”

“I will conduct my area business, and after the sheriffs’ reception begins and everyone is in place, I will have Pam call you. Bubba will escort you into the club, and you will simply walk up to me and present me with this.” Eric picked up a velvet bag from the coffee table and opened it to reveal an ornate and ancient-looking knife.

“Godric’s dagger?” Sookie asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s beautiful,” Sookie said running her fingers over the symbols on its handle. “So I give you this and then what?”

“That’s it, min kára. You hand me the dagger, and I accept it, and then we are pledged by vampire law.”

“Okay. That sounds easy enough. Is there anything else that I need to know?”

Eric looked a bit pensive, “There will be donors there for the others.”



“Fine,” Sookie said, quickly. “They will not be coerced and will be well-paid, I assume?”

“Of course—any that I arrange for will always be thus,” Eric said, smiling at Sookie’s practical question.

“Okay then. And just to make it crystal clear . . .” she began.

“. . . I will *not* be having any blood from them or *any* humans other than you,” Eric continued.

“Unless you have been injured and would die otherwise,” Sookie added.

“Or unless I take some during battle.”

“Fine,” Sookie said again.

Eric reached for Sookie’s hand. “I know it is not how you may have imagined your wedding, my love. Our human wedding—when we are allowed to have one—can be totally of your planning. And I will arrange something else for the pledging if you wish.”

“But you think this way is best?”

“In many ways—yes. And what matters most will be accomplished. You will be my wife in the eyes of other vampires and supernaturals by the end of the night.”

“I want to have my brother there with me; can we do that? It wouldn’t feel the same without my family there.”

Eric smiled. “Of course. And if you wish, Jesus and Lafayette may accompany you too. I will take you to one of my safe houses Sunday after nightfall; it’s quite close to Fangtasia. Bubba, your brother, and the witches can meet you there and wait with you. Then when everything is ready, Pam will call. Miranda and Jarod can be set up at the residence before we

arrive to make sure it is secure.” Eric pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and sent a quick text to Miranda.

“How long will we have to wait there before we come to Fangtasia?” Sookie asked, feeling butterflies all of a sudden.

“Only a few hours, I suspect, min kära. Pamela has been efficient in keeping the night’s business docket light.”

“Okay,” Sookie said.

“Okay?”

“Yes, it looks like you are getting a wife Sunday night.”

Eric’s smile lit up his beautiful eyes, and Sookie reached out for him, taking his chin in her hand. “That’s all the talkin’ we needed to do tonight, isn’t it, Viking?” she asked, her brown eyes sparkling seductively. “You—if I remember right—were supposed to be showin’ me your skill at pillaging, and I’m still waitin’.”

Chapter 68: One

Eric wasted no time. Before she could even take a breath, Sookie was on her back on the blankets, and Eric was on top of her ravaging her lips with his. He lightly sucked on her bottom lip, requesting entry into her mouth, and Sookie answered greedily, entwining her tongue with his.

Suddenly, Sookie stopped the kiss and pushed at Eric's chest. "Wait!" she said urgently.

Eric immediately pulled himself off of Sookie and sat up. "What is it? Are you uncertain, my love? Do you not want to make the third exchange?" Sookie could feel Eric's anxiety coming through the bond, even as his eyes momentarily took on the same heartbreak she'd seen from him in the most disturbing of her dreams.

Sookie was immediately sorry to have upset him. "No, Eric! It's not that," she assured. "I'm certain. I want you. I want to bond with you, marry you, and spend the rest of my life with you!"

Eric immediately relaxed, and his side of the bond calmed. "What is it then, *min kära*? Did you have more questions of me?"

"No," Sookie blushed. "It's just that I brought something—um—special that I'd like to wear for you if that is okay."

A grin spread onto Eric's face. "You wish to prepare yourself for me, *min kära*?"

Sookie's blush became darker as she nodded.

"I would be honored by this," Eric said, bowing his head almost formally.

Sookie jumped up nervously. "I'll need just a minute, okay?"

Eric nodded. "I will be here."

Sookie grabbed her backpack and ran into the bathroom. She took some deep calming breaths. She knew that she wasn't getting married—or pledged—for a couple of days, but this night and the third blood exchange that would make their bond permanent felt more important to her than even the pledging. Feeling like a bride on her honeymoon night, she grinned into the mirror and blushed. She chided herself. She'd already had 'primal and passionate sex' with Eric three times that night, once against a wall for goodness sakes! And yet, here she was—nervous.

She opened her bag and pulled out the negligée she'd brought. It was a red silk nightie that fell to mid-thigh. Simple in design, its only embellishment was a thick strip of matching red lace at the bottom.

Sookie quickly took off her shirt, bra, and jeans. The nightie certainly wasn't ornate, but as she put it on, Sookie knew that she looked good in it. The spaghetti straps showcased her slight tan and the V-neck of the garment hinted at the swell of her breasts.

She ran her fingers over the material, which was soft and smooth. She'd gotten the garment on sale at Victoria's Secret more than two years earlier—before she'd even met her first vampire. She hadn't had a clear reason for purchasing it at the time; she definitely hadn't had a man in her life then. Even when she had been with Bill, she'd never worn it. The garment hadn't seemed right for him, and for some inexplicable reason, she'd felt the need to save it for something—or someone—else. It's being stored at the bottom of her sock drawer, hidden away for the right moment, was what had saved it from the Maenad.

Now, as she took out her brush to smooth away the tangles caused by her flight with Eric, she knew exactly who she'd been saving the nightgown for.

She pulled a pair of red lace panties out of the backpack. They hadn't come with the negligée but were close enough in shade to look like a match. Taking off the underwear she'd

put on after her encounter with Eric against the wall, she couldn't help but smile to see that they were already a bit damp after only the one kiss he'd just given her. "Sexy ass Viking," Sookie muttered under her breath.

She looked in the mirrored and steadied her nerves. She was about to bond with Eric permanently, and she couldn't have been more ready.

When she re-entered the living room, only the light of the fire lit her way. Eric was putting another log on, but as soon as he sensed her in the room, he turned around, his heated gaze traveling slowly up her form.

Eric's eyes sparkled at the sight of her. He noticed that she was dressed in his favorite color, which offset her skin to perfection. He noticed the curve of her hip and the swell of her breast in the garment. He noticed the mixture of strength and fragility in her body. And he drank in the sight of her eyes, which were now meeting his with a passion that he was certain rivaled his own.

"You are beautiful," he said quietly—reverently. He reached out his hand to her.

Sookie came to him slowly, reveling in his form in the firelight. Her own hand reached to meet his. And then their other hands connected in the next second. They stood looking at each other for a few moments before they sank to their knees as one. Neither had words for the moment, but the shared love flowing through the bond was more weighty than any vocabulary.

Eric brought both of her hands to his heart before wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into a tender kiss. Unhurriedly, Eric lowered Sookie onto the pallet and deepened the kiss as his fingertips gently stroked her body over her silk negligée.

Their kiss became more heated as Sookie entwined her arms around him and pulled his body down closer to hers.

Eric's hands caressed and cupped Sookie's breasts over her nightgown more and more forcefully as he enjoyed the feel of the silk material, but he eventually wanted—no *needed*—to feel the silk of her flesh even more. He brought his hands down to her thighs and began to raise the fabric inch by inch, all the while continuing their kiss. Finally giving her a chance to breathe, Eric lowered his lips to her neck, worshipping it with open-mouthed kisses.

After a few minutes, he raised Sookie's nightgown over her head and saw that she had on only lacy red panties. He couldn't help the growl of passion that escaped his throat. "Beautiful."

Sookie pulled him to her in a frenzy, rejoining their lips in a blazing kiss.

Eric was suddenly very aware of the offensive nature of his shirt, which kept his flesh from hers, and in the next moment, his flannel shirt was lost for good, its buttons flying around the room. Eric lowered his chest to hers, bare flesh on bare flesh, his cool on her warmth. They both sighed into each other's mouths at the contact—at the contrast. Sookie loved the feel of his weight on her and pulled his body even closer, stroking his muscular shoulders with her hands.

Sookie broke her lips from his to take a breath. They took the opportunity to use their mouths to explore any flesh they could find. There was a frenzy of blunt teeth, lips and tongues as they drew their bodies even more flush.

Sookie pulled Eric's ear lobe between her teeth and bit lightly, an action that caused him to grind into her roughly. He tangled his hands into Sookie's hair and pulled her lips back to his desperately, their tongues stroking in time with the movements of his grinding hips.

They groaned in ecstasy at the friction they were causing to each other's sexes and then in frustration that Eric's jeans and her underwear were preventing their bodies from touching fully.

"Eric," Sookie's voice pleaded urgently as she moved her lips to his neck.

"I know," Eric groaned back, fueled by a passion that seemed beyond them both.

In a blur of movement that Sookie couldn't follow with her heavily-lidded eyes, Eric had pulled off his jeans as well as Sookie's panties. Immediately, he returned his lips to Sookie's, and they continued to devour each other's mouths. Both moved so that their bodies could create the most contact possible.

"Now, please," Sookie begged as she briefly came up for air.

"I know," Eric repeated, his voice a barely audible groan.

Eric lowered his hand to check her readiness, and not able to help himself, plunged two long fingers into her opening. Sookie arched into his touch.

"Please," she repeated. "I need you *now*," she gasped.

Eric curved his fingers, finding Sookie's spot, which caused her to whimper against him.

However, like Sookie, he couldn't seem to wait for them to be joined. He removed his fingers quickly and immediately replaced them with his hard length. They both sighed in relief as they were finally connected.

"I can *never* be close enough, lover," Eric gasped as he found a rhythm that made them both moan in ecstasy. Sookie locked her legs around Eric's lower back, deepening their contact, as Eric rocked into her. He changed his angle slightly, and she arched wantonly as he re-found the spot he'd previously primed with his fingers.

"So close," Sookie muttered after only a few minutes of their rocking into one another.

Eric increased his pace slightly, taking her lips with his again, their tongues in perfect timing with his thrusts.

Sookie moaned into his mouth, and her release came quickly; as she shattered and writhed beneath him, he lunged a final time, his cool seed flooding into her. He collapsed onto his elbows above her, never breaking their kiss, which had moved from frenzied to slow and tender. Sookie brought her hands to his hair and stroked it lightly as they sunk into each other further. The passion in their kiss slowly began to build once more. Still inside of her, Eric hardened again until he was filling Sookie fully.

They groaned into their kiss, and Sookie suddenly felt as if she was floating. She opened her eyes as Eric's lips moved from hers, and she found that she really was flying as Eric had lifted them off into the air and was slowly turning them so that he would be below her.

His cock still embedded deeply within her, Sookie moaned as he resettled them on the floor with him leaning back against the couch and her in a seated position on top of him.

Both sets of their hands slowly entwined together as they looked lovingly into each other's eyes. Simply enjoying the way that they fit together, neither moved for a moment.

Finally, Eric brought one of Sookie's hands to his mouth and kissed the back of it lightly before turning it over and kissing her palm and then her wrist. She moved slightly against him, causing them both to groan as she brought his opposite hand to her lips, mimicking his actions, first kissing the back of his hand and then his palm and then his wrist.

Neither could break their shared gaze, and Eric felt certainty and love coming from Sookie's end of the bond. After one more kiss to her palm, he once again set her hand onto his heart and then reached for the black velvet bag on the coffee table. His movement caused more friction at the connection of their sexes, and Sookie grinded herself into him, circling her hips

into him slowly, reveling in the feel of him inside of her. Her eyes began to sting as the emotion of the moment threatened to overwhelm her.

Reverently, he took the knife from its pouch and held it between them. “No going back, min kära,” he said seriously, asking her an implicit question.

“No going back, min kära,” she echoed.

Eric began to move his own hips in small circles to match hers. “This is where I will always return, my love. In you, I find my home. In your eyes, in your flesh, in your love.”

Hot tears streamed unabated down Sookie’s cheeks, but her voice was strong through her tears, “And this is where I will always stay, Eric. You are my home; you are my *light* in the dark. I will love you my whole life.”

“And I you, my love—my whole life.”

Eric handed the dagger to Sookie, who again felt the raised symbols. This time, the handle warmed in her hands, its magic spreading out onto her palm and causing the magic within her to rise up from her hand and encompass the blade in a white light.

Eric took in the sight and spoke with awe, “I knew this dagger would draw on the magic in you, min kära.”

Sookie smiled at Eric, her tears still falling. For the first time, she was unafraid of the magic that dwelled within her. She said with certainty, “Your magic binds us together in love, and mine will keep us that way forever.”

“Forever,” Eric agreed.

“What do I do?” Sookie asked uncertainly, even as Eric wiped some of her tears with his free hand. He then moved it to join hers on the dagger handle and guided her hand so that the

blade was at his chest above where his heart would have beaten. He entwined his fingers around hers along the handle of the knife.

“Make a deep cut and drink, min kära, and then I will guide the knife to your flesh, and I will drink.”

Their hips continued in slow symphonic circles as Sookie looked deeply into his blue eyes, which shined with his love. Sookie smiled confidently at Eric through more tears and slid the knife across his chest, causing a deep wound to form. Eric groaned and thrust into her more forcefully as Sookie latched on and drank from him.

Their hands still entwined around its handle, Eric moved the dagger and created a similar but more shallow wound near Sookie’s neck. As their blood mingled on the magical blade, Eric moved his mouth to the cut.

Their hands tightened around the dagger as they drank, the power of vampire magic and fairy magic combining within them to create something wholly unique to them. They were lost in the ecstasy of their connection, and orgasms rippled violently through their bodies even as they drank.

The white light emanating from Sookie’s hand entwined with Eric’s, causing a surge through their bodies, which elongated both of their releases. The dagger, which they were both still clinging to, heated even more in their shared grasp, and the white light slowly enveloped their bodies as their orgasms subsided and their wounds began to close simultaneously due to the healing qualities of Eric’s blood.

The pair rode out the euphoria of their shared releases, their shared blood, and their shared magics. Their still locked gazes reflected their wonderment. Then they brought their

foreheads together intimately and rested into each other, the bond between them fully open and now permanent.

Chapter 69: Explorations

Five minutes later, neither Eric nor Sookie had moved significantly.

There had been no need for a euphoric, shared vision or daydream, for they were both exactly as they wanted to be. The bond between them pulsed and sang with energy—with joy. Eric’s penis was still lodged in the sheath of Sookie’s body. And their foreheads were still firmly set together. The dagger had been moved back to the table and their arms were slung around each other’s bodies in an easy embrace. Finally, Eric shifted slightly, and with a moan, removed himself from Sookie’s body, causing her to moan at his absence as well.

As Sookie lifted her forehead from his and raised herself up a bit, Eric sighed deeply. Then—both laughing—they looked at each other. Playfulness and love swirled in Eric’s blue eyes. “Before, it was *difficult* to stifle the impulse to be inside of you all the time, my little fairy. I think that now you are trying to make it *impossible*.”

“Me?” Sookie asked innocently. “You’re the one that is always lookin’ at me like I’m dinner or somethin’.”

Eric laughed louder, “You *are* dinner or something.” He playfully nudged her neck with his nose.

Sookie snorted and teased, “I knew you were only after my blood, you big, mean, *old* vampire.”

Eric’s eyes filled with mischief as he said, “I vont to suck your blood!” His fangs clicked down, but the smile on his lips belied any danger.

Sookie laughed out loud and popped Eric on his chest. “If you aren’t careful, Mr. Viking vampire, I’ll have to go all Tinker Bell on your ass.”

Eric leered, “Feel free to tinker anything you want on my ass, Miss Stackhouse.”

They both laughed and then sighed at the same time, enjoying the closeness that the bond afforded them.

Eric retracted his fangs and gently placed Sookie down on the blankets. He got up and added more wood to the fire, not wanting her to be chilly in the cool early November night.

When he was done, he turned around to find Sookie staring appreciatively at his ass. He chuckled. “Oh all the parts of me you have to choose from, I cannot believe that this is your favorite,” he said patting his bottom.

“I have *lots* of favorites,” she protested as he settled next to her, propping himself up on his elbow and pulling the afghan that had been made by Sookie’s Gran over them.

“Oh really? Do tell, min kván.”

“Well, I love your eyes for one. And that little dimple on your chin,” she said as she touched it. “And I love your hair when it’s soft like this.” She ruffled his bangs playfully and he pretended to purr like a cat. Sookie giggled.

She asked abruptly, “Hey! ‘Kván’ is new! What does it mean?”

“It means ‘wife’ in the language of my parents.”

Sookie’s smile glowed. “Aren’t you bein’ a bit premature, cowboy?” she teased.

Eric shook his head seriously. “No, what we just shared was far more than a normal bonding and more than a normal pledging and more than a normal wedding, I suspect. Sunday night might make it official in the eyes of other vampires and supernaturals, but you are already my wife in every way that matters to me.”

Tears gathered behind Sookie’s eyes again. “How do you say husband in your language?”

“A husband is called a bóndi.”

“I like that,” Sookie laughed. “It sounds kind of like ‘bonded’ already.”

Eric laughed with her and kissed the tip of her nose before pulling her toward him and settling her onto his chest. After a while, he felt Sookie’s body relax completely into his, and he heard the even breathing that signaled her sleep. He carefully picked up his cell phone, which he’d put on the coffee table earlier, and texted Pam and Miranda with additional orders for the next two days. Though not the same as a human wedding, he wanted to make the pledging as memorable for Sookie as he could. Then he checked in with Isabel and Rasul. After about a half hour of work, he eased himself closer to Sookie and sighed contentedly as she snuggled deeper into him.

The fire eventually went out of its own accord just as sunlight began to filter through the windows. Eric felt no danger from his old nemesis, nor did his body tell him to sleep. He lightly ran his fingers through the hair of his lover, his beloved—his wife—and he thought about the miracle of her love for him as well as the miracles wrought on his body because of that love. He lay next to her for a long time as the sun rose higher and higher and more light steamed in—until finally it reached his exposed foot. He watched for a long time as his flesh was lit by the indirect sunlight but not burned by it.

It was 8:04 in the morning—exactly 86 minutes after the sun had risen—and light was streaming into the windows before Eric’s body finally registered the pull of the dawn and the need to be out of the sun. He gently nudged Sookie, “It is time for me to go to my day rest, min kván.”

Sookie stretched and then noticed the sun coming into the room. “What time is it?” she asked Eric warily.

“It is a little after eight o’clock, and I have just felt the warning pull.”

“You’re okay though right?” Sookie asked, her worry leaking into the bond.

“Yes,” Eric answered placing his cheek on her forehead. “I have been enjoying the sunlight spilling through the window and lighting your face.”

Sookie put her arms around Eric’s neck sleepily and whispered, “Take me to bed where we can both rest, min bóndi.”

At 12:15 Sookie awoke to her own face smiling back at her. Eric had left on a dim light in his cubby so that Sookie could see where she was. She could also see a framed picture of her and Gran on Eric’s bedside table. The picture had been her favorite since it had been taken. Carefree, both Stackhouse women were smiling at the camera. Sookie couldn’t even remember the exact moment it had been taken, which made the picture all the better in her mind. When she saw it, it symbolized one of a million beautiful moments with Gran.

She felt a tear in her eye as she thought of Eric cherishing the photo as she had. There were many pictures in the old farmhouse of just Sookie, but Eric had chosen this one to put next to his resting place. When she thought about it, however, it seemed like a uniquely Eric choice.

She sighed happily as she felt Eric’s arms around her body and his head resting lightly on her abdomen. She smiled to herself, remembering that this was Eric’s favorite thing and noticed that her fingers had unconsciously begun to play with her beloved’s hair. Sookie allowed herself a few minutes of enjoying her sleeping vampire, who the next day would officially become her husband in at least one sense. She smiled at the fact that he’d called her wife already—more

than once—and she realized that she thought of him as her husband already as well. Something about his body, his blood, his magic, his mind, and most importantly his heart sang out to her.

With great reluctance, Sookie climbed out of the bed and grabbed the T-shirt Eric had left for her at the end of it. If her bladder had not been extremely insistent, she would have been tempted to stay in bed until nightfall. She gave Eric one last look and climbed up the steps.

Sookie saw to her human needs and then took a quick shower. She decided to forego a bra for the sake of comfort and threw back on Eric's T-shirt, which smelled deliciously of her vampire. "My vampire," she thought with a smile. "My *property*," she said out loud with a laugh. She added fresh underwear and yoga pants to finish her comfortable ensemble and then went to the kitchen.

She sighed contentedly as she found a coffee maker on the counter and soon found coffee and filters in the cabinet above. After starting a pot, she grabbed an apple but longed to have a toasty bagel. She'd have to make some additions if they were to stay at the cabin a lot. She sat down at the table and enjoyed the sun streaming into the window as she munched on her apple and enjoyed her coffee.

Next, Sookie decided to explore the cabin a bit. The bookcases in the living room were her first destination. She thumbed the spines and noticed a bit of dust. She chuckled when she thought of Eric cleaning. He had told her, after all, that she was the only other person he'd brought up here, so he must be the one to do his own housekeeping there. The thought of him with a dust rag in his hand was equal parts sexy and hilarious to Sookie.

Most of the books on Eric's shelves were old, clearly first editions. Sookie pulled a copy of *Moby Dick* from the shelf and cringed. She'd always hated Melville. She smiled at Eric's copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, knowing that she'd get good usage out of that book. In addition to

literature, Eric had a good deal of history and philosophy books on his shelves, and Sookie took out a worn copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. She smiled at a marked passage: "The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy." Eric was clearly 'a fighter of old,' and he'd lived through everything that had come at him for more than a thousand years, a thought that still boggled Sookie's mind.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sookie saw the boxes of Godric's books that Eric had told her about the night before. She got a refill of coffee and quickly discerned which of the boxes contained the books that were written in English. Putting that box on the coffee table, she settled onto the couch, which seemed even more comfortable than it had the night before.

As she began to pull the texts out, she grew a bit nervous. Some of them seemed to have been written hundreds of years before and were bound in velum. Sookie quickly went to get a clean dish cloth so that she wouldn't have to handle those books directly with her hands.

The books seemed mostly historical, containing stories of supernatural beings. Some actually seemed to have been written by Godric himself, journals that recorded vampire wars throughout the years as well as human events that touched the lives of vampires in some way, such as the Great Plague that swept through Europe, the Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials.

Sookie was in awe of all the history contained within the books but refused to get lost in it. She promised herself that she would return to read everything once she was more settled into her new life.

One of the more promising-looking books seemed encyclopedic in nature, despite its being handwritten, and was entitled *History of the Undead*. Sookie was excited to see a table of contents inside and quickly turned to the section titled "Ties and Bonds."

As Sookie began reading the section, she recognized that it contained all the information Eric had told her a few nights before concerning ties and bonds, and she guessed that this had been the book Eric had been referring to during their conversation.

Sookie kept reading and found a piece of information about the second kind of tie that confirmed the fact that vampire blood—given unselfishly or for love—could not be used to control or manipulate the human. Basically, the blood couldn't go against the vampire's original intentions in giving it, even if those intentions were to change. Vampires, therefore, were warned to avoid making this kind of tie.

Sookie huffed, "It figures."

The description of blood bonds was also cautionary, warning that the human in the pairing would end up with just as much power as the vampire in the bond. As Eric had told her, bonds allowed humans to sense the vampires' emotions, locate them, and tell if they were being untruthful. The book indicated that, in order to keep humans from accessing the vampires' emotions, they could, over time, develop something that seemed akin to the shields she used to keep out people's thoughts. She filed that piece of information away so that she could discuss it with Eric at a later date.

Sookie thought of the irony of her situation. She'd spent her whole life looking for someone she couldn't hear. And now, she would soon marry someone that she had voluntarily agreed to "hear"—maybe not his thoughts, but his emotions. However, she had no trepidation. She'd felt Eric's emotions throughout their lovemaking the night before, and his feelings had worked only to amplify hers. As she reached out for the bond between them and felt the peaceful sensation that signaled his sleep, she grew to love the bond even more.

She looked back at the book and continued reading. Vampires who formed the first kind of tie, the kind designed to control—the kind Bill had formed with her—were warned that this type of tie could change. In other words, if a vampire who created the first kind of tie were to change in the way he or she felt about a human or fall in love with the human, the bond type *would* change if blood were given again. Ties could be “redrawn” from selfish to selfless, and vampires were counseled to avoid getting too close to the people they tied with. They were cautioned that this would cause them to lose the ability to influence or control their blood in the human.

For Sookie, this information was the proverbial last nail in the coffin for Bill. “Pun intended,” she said ruefully to herself. If Bill’s intentions toward her had transformed from selfish because of the queen’s orders to selfless because of love for her, the nature of the tie would have changed too. He would no longer have been able to influence her, nor would he have wanted to, according to the book. She would no longer have had disturbing dreams about him. Yet, every time Sookie had taken Bill’s blood, his attempts to manipulate and control her would recommence even more forcefully.

Sookie shook her head. “He might act the genteel, honorable Southern gentleman, but when it all comes down to it, those are just empty actions,” she said quietly to herself.

She continued looking through the books for a while. Most of them had no real sense of organization and would have to be read through completely by someone. She did become engrossed in a passage describing Dracula, who was apparently quite real. Sookie resolved to ask Eric if he knew the famous figure.

After another hour or so with the books, Sookie decided she needed a break from them. She'd found nothing else pertaining to her situation, but she looked forward to delving into them some more after Jesus had mined them for hidden gold.

Next, she turned her attention to the paintings in the living room; all were of seascapes in grays and blues. The waves seemed to be rising from the canvases, the paint thick and buoyant. In one of the paintings, she noticed a Viking longship, what she knew from Eric was called a drekar. Though she could not clearly make out the dragon carving, she knew that she'd been on the vessel before in her dream. She gasped at the realization.

None of the paintings were signed in any distinguishable way, but she intuited that they had been done by Eric, and her pride and awe for her vampire grew. "Mine," she grinned again at the thought.

She next wandered into the bedroom. She'd spent very little time there the night before. She opened the closet and saw several versions of what she considered Eric's uniform inside—high-end T-shirts and jeans that she knew would fit him in a way that should have been illegal. She ran her hand along the wood of the closet, knowing that Eric had crafted it, and then brought her hand up to the pendant with their initials on it, which hung around her neck. She sighed as she thought about his long fingers and strong hands working the wood. She walked over to the side of the bed that she already thought of as Eric's side and lay down, inhaling deeply. The pillow, however, did not smell of Eric, and Sookie realized that he probably had not actually slept in that bed, despite the fact that there were no windows in the bedroom. With a blush, she looked forward to helping him christen it.

Chapter 70: Warmth

At 4:00 and with more than an hour left to kill before sunset, Sookie decided to take a long bath. Her wandering and researching had been interesting, but she felt that a little relaxation was in order.

She poured some lavender scented oil into the steamy water she'd run for herself and settled in. She was surprised when—about 10 minutes later—a deep, lust-filled voice said, “Lover, I *very* much hope you will let me join you.”

“Eric!” Sookie sat up in the tub in surprise. “How are you up already?”

Still just as naked as he'd been in bed, Eric stalked toward the tub and then sank in behind Sookie. “I believe the miracle of your blood and our bond is the cause for my waking early, *min kära*. If this morning and afternoon are any indication, I am becoming resistant to indirect sunlight. The intense light of day still calls me to my sleep, but my body does not crave to hide from the sun as it once did. It can only be your magic that is protecting me.”

Sookie sighed as she sunk her back into his chest. “Well, whatever it is, I like it if it gives us more time like this.

Eric chuckled, “We will have to renovate Gran's house to have a tub like this, my lover. I find that I quite like feeling your body against mine in this way.”

Sookie and Eric relaxed comfortably into the bath. Finally, Sookie spoke, “You painted the pictures in the living room, didn't you?”

Eric ran his hand over Sookie's damp hair and said, “Yes, I went through an artistic phase after I met Van Gough in Amsterdam.”

Sookie gasped and turned her head to face him, “You knew Vincent Van Gough?”

“Uh-huh,” Eric answered casually. “I enjoyed meeting the artists of that time. They were quite revolutionary, so many remained unknown in their own time. However, I always thirsted for things that were new and different. Van Gough was an especially tragic figure, however. But he was also quite full of life in his own way, and he was a bit of a night-owl.” He flashed her a brilliant smile. “Like me!”

Sookie couldn't help but slap his knee playfully. “You think you are so cute and clever, don't you buck-o.”

Eric leered, “What *you* think is more important, lover.”

“Wouldn't you like to know?” Sookie said mysteriously. “Now—tell me more about Van Gough!”

Eric laughed and continued, “There's not a whole lot to tell, I'm afraid. I liked Vincent's techniques with paint and studied with him for a time.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed.

Eric laughed, “I'm afraid I was never that good—nothing compared to the master. He said that I had the hands of an ape once, and I had to glamour him to continue with the lessons. He was in need of money due to his health problems, however, so he taught me for several months.” Eric added fondly, “When I refused to listen to him about how to mix a certain shade of blue correctly, I don't think even my glamour would have convinced him to continue with the lessons.”

Sookie laughed and then muttered, “Stubborn vampire.”

Eric's tone turned more serious. “I'm afraid that when it came to color, I was never quite able to make the hues match the memories in my head of the daytime from my human days. Blue—especially the blue of the sea on a sunny day—always eluded me in my painting.”

Sookie settled back against her beloved and stroked his arms in comfort.

After a minute or two, Eric continued, “He did help me learn a bit about how to create texture with paint. Working with him was quite enjoyable actually. I admit that several years later when I learned of his death, I was somewhat regretful that I hadn’t given him my blood. He was sick much of the time even when I knew him.”

Eric entwined his arms around Sookie and settled his hands on her stomach.

He reflected for a moment. “I will take you to Amsterdam sometime if you wish. Many of his paintings are lodged there, and you would enjoy all the canals, I think.”

“Canals?”

“Yes, Amsterdam actually has more canals than Venice.”

“Ooh Venice!” Sookie exclaimed. “Can we go there too?”

Eric chuckled, “We can go anywhere you wish, min kván. I will enjoy revisiting all these places through your eyes.”

“Will you take me to where you grew up?”

Eric laughed. “Of course.”

“Why are you laughin’?”

Eric answered, “It’s just that Pamela is the only one other than Godric who has seen where I grew up, and she calls it a ‘windy shithole.’”

“Still,” Sookie resolved, “windy shithole or not, I wanna see it.”

Eric smiled. “Then I will take you there. It will make me,” he paused, “*happy* to be there with you.”

They rested against each other until Eric felt Sookie shiver due to the cooling water. With his toes, he lifted the drain and turned on the hot water. “There is a natural hot springs on

the land I own in Sweden. It is unknown to outsiders, but some of the people who are tenants on the farm I have there use it. When we visit, we will go there. It is lovely, and I bathed there as a child.

“I’d like that,” Sookie said. After a few minutes, she asked, “What do your tenants do on your farm? I mean—is it a real farm?”

Eric chuckled. “Yes, it is a working farm, and I own about a thousand acres all told. Now, mainly wheat and a bit of sugar beet are grown there. And the tenants tend to that; most of the families there have been on the land for many, many generations. I have a home that I keep there, but I have not visited in more than a decade. Before the great reveal, I had to be very careful not to be seen in a place for too many years—for obvious reasons.”

“We’ll go soon?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” Eric answered, stopping the drain again. After the tub had refilled with hot water, he turned off the nozzle—again with only his feet.

“You have talented feet,” Sookie laughed.

“I have talented other things too, lover,” Eric purred as he raised his hands from her waist to her breasts. Sookie moaned as he rubbed circles around her hardening nipples. Eric brought his mouth to Sookie’s neck, kissing it lightly even as he increased the pressure of his hands. He trailed soft kisses along her shoulders as one of his hands left her breast and traveled downward. She arched into him as his hand circled lower and lower, creating waves of movement in the water. Finally, the tops of his fingers touched her mound, combing through the trimmed hairs that he found there.

Sookie moved her own hands to his knees that were on either side of her thighs and began stroking his flesh even as she spread her own legs wider apart to allow for more of his touch.

Eric moved two fingers so that they were on either side of Sookie's clit, and then circled them back and forth, causing her to groan lustfully. He brought his other hand down to her entrance and traced her folds slowly. Occasionally, he would shallowly dip his finger into her center briefly, only to remove it and continue his attention to her folds. His other hand never let up on slowly circling her nerve center.

Sookie was certain that she was going to melt into the hot water any moment under Eric's skillful touch, and as he finally plunged a finger fully into her core, she cried out. He worked his finger in and out of her unhurriedly, curling it into her in just the right way to brush her G-spot.

"Please," Sookie begged.

She felt Eric shake his head, "No, min kära. This time, you must cum for me first before I enter you."

Sookie groaned and moved her hips in time with the thrusts of his finger. When he added a second, she threw her head back against his chest and dug her fingernails into the flesh of his outer thighs. She ground her back into his steel-hard erection.

Now it was Eric's turn to groan, and he increased the pace of his thrusting fingers.

"Cum for me, lover," Eric whispered desperately into Sookie's ear. "I want to feel your beautiful core pulse around my fingers. You feel so hot, so tight, lover. I cannot wait to bury myself into you."

Sookie brought one of her hands to the back of Eric's neck and twisted her head so that she could take his lips with hers. Their kiss was all hot passion, and Sookie exploded beneath

the onslaught of Eric's touches. Her orgasm seemed to go on forever as he continued to stroke her lightly, bringing her slowly down from her pleasure.

Finally, Sookie was able to utter a coherent, "Oh God," but Eric gave her no rest as he lifted her body and plunged into her still ready entrance. Sookie sunk her back into Eric's chest as he slowly began to move beneath her. When she'd recovered enough from her previous orgasm, she moved her legs to the outside of his in order to increase the depth that he could achieve in that position. Then, she complemented his movements with her own, meeting him thrust for thrust.

He growled into her ear, "Do you know how fucking perfect we fit together? How good you feel to me? So. Fucking. Good."

Their movements increased in speed and desperation, and water began to spill over the edges of the tub. When Eric knew that they were both close to their releases, he felt a pull from their bond to be even closer to her. He answered it by biting into his hand and offering it to her.

She gripped his wrist and greedily took the offering, marveling at the way Eric's blood seemed to ignite her own magic. Her now-glowing hand continued to hold Eric's bleeding one to her mouth, and he felt a surge of electricity flow into him as he bit into Sookie's neck, completing the circuit between them.

Both cried out as their orgasms pulsed through them. After their releases had stopped and their wounds had closed, Eric lifted Sookie off of his sated member.

Once she had caught her breath, Sookie turned and sat on Eric's lap so that she was facing him. She looked into his eyes and then kissed him fully but chastely on the lips before pulling away. "I love you, Eric Northman," she whispered as she brought her mouth against his neck and lay into him.

“I love you, Sookie Stackhouse,” Eric answered as he put his arms tightly around her.
“Tomorrow night, you will be even more mine, if that is even possible.”

She sighed into his chest. And they sat in the cooling water, quietly and completely content.

Chapter 71: Shieldmaiden

After several minutes of shared bliss, Sookie observed, “We *are* gonna have to get a tub like this at home.”

Eric chuckled, “Indeed.”

Sookie raised up a bit, “Where’d you find a Viking-sized tub anyway?”

“Special order,” Eric said with a twinkle in his eyes. “Standard sizes are too short for my legs, I’m afraid.”

She giggled coyly, “Well, this one seems to be the perfect size, and you can still reach the nozzles with your toes.”

He grinned at her. “Tell me lover, what did you do while I was sleeping today?”

She returned his smile and then leaned back so that she could look at him easier, “I explored a bit. I looked at your books and paintings. Oh, and I read a bit of Godric’s books, but I didn’t find out much new, except. . .”

Sookie paused, and Eric felt a mixture of anger and sadness seep into the bond. “What is it, my love?”

“I found out that Bill could have changed the type of tie he created with me. If his motives toward me had truly become pure and unselfish—honorable—then he wouldn’t have been able to help its changin’, just like you couldn’t help forming the second kind of tie with me. That means that Bill never really loved me at all.”

“Bill is a fool,” Eric said as he stroked Sookie’s back in comfort and pulled her once again into his embrace. “And I am the beneficiary of his fool-heartedness.”

A few moments later, Sookie smiled into his chest, “And the book also confirmed what you told me the other night about ties and bonds. *That* was nice to know.”

Eric chuckled, “You were very clever that night, min kära.” His side of the bond filled with amusement and pride. “You managed to use myself—my dream self, that is—to make sure that I couldn’t lie to you without your knowing it.” Another chuckle rumbled in his chest. “I love seeing how your mind works its way around a problem.” He turned a bit serious, “I hope that you have no more doubts where I am concerned, but if you need to continue questioning me, it is fine.”

Sookie leaned back again and looked Eric in the eye. “No doubts—not any more, Eric. *None.*” Then she got a mischievous look in her eyes, “Even if I did, the book confirmed that you would be unable to deceive me without my knowing.”

“Darn—now how will I ever be able to keep my world domination plans or my love of snuggies from you?” He gave an exaggerated sigh. “We will just have to be honest with one another, min kära.”

“Damned skippy,” she returned, splashing him a bit.

Eric laughed. “Lie back in the water, my love. Let me wash your hair?” Eric requested as he braced her back with one strong hand.

She leaned back and gave control of her body to Eric. After wetting her hair fully, he brought her back into a sitting position and massaged shampoo into it. She moaned in pleasure. “That feels so good!” she said as she closed her eyes.

Eric leaned her back into the water to rinse her hair. He next kneaded conditioner into it and repeated the process. Once he was done, Sookie pulled the drain, started new hot water in the tub, and grabbed the hand-held nozzle. She wet Eric’s hair and gave him the same treatment he’d given her.

“I have never had my hair washed by a lover,” he purred contentedly, “not in a thousand years.

“It’s a first for me too,” she smiled as she put back the hand nozzle. She picked up a loofa and poured some body wash on it. She used it to lather his body with tender touches, keeping her eyes on his the entire time. After she was done, he wordlessly took the sponge from her and washed her as well. Once finished, he rinsed off the loofa and put it to the side even as she turned on the hand-held nozzle again and rinsed them.

When she was done, he turned off the water, lifted them out of the tub, and pulled two towels out of a cupboard. They dried off one another slowly, their eyes never leaving each other’s. Their touches were about care and devotion rather than lust in that moment.

With a quick kiss to her forehead, Eric disappeared into the bedroom for a moment and returned with a robe and a pair of boxers. He put on the boxers and draped the large robe around her body. She smiled up at him, “We work well together, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “Are you hungry, my love?”

She returned his smile. “Yes, I should definitely eat considering the fact that I’m sure *you* will keep me up late tonight.”

Eric tried to look innocent, which only caused Sookie to break out into laughter.

Eric’s failed angelic look turned devilish, “You are right, lover. I have many intensions for you tonight, so let’s go get you fed.”

The laughter left Sookie’s face, and it was immediately replaced by worry. “But it’s still light out,” Sookie insisted. “You should stay out of the sunlight for another half an hour at least. I’ll bring my food back here.”

Eric looked at Sookie seriously, “I’d much rather watch the sunset with you, min kära.”

“But Eric, what if . . .” Sookie began.

“Do not worry about the ‘what if’,” Eric interrupted. “My body—my instincts—will tell me if the sun is going to hurt me.”

Sookie looked a bit skeptical.

“We will go outside only right before the sun falls,” Eric reassured. “And if I feel any trepidation at all, I will not venture out.”

Reluctantly, Sookie nodded. She raised her hand and cupped his cheek. “It’s not that I don’t believe in this magic—my magic—that seems to be making you less and less threatened in the sunlight, but you have to understand that one of my greatest fears in you burnin’. When I saw you outside with Russell, and your face was all blackened up, it really made me afraid that I was going to lose you.”

“I know,” Eric said in a soft voice. “It was right after I had had your blood for the first time, and your emotions, which had been muted to me because we had not completed the tie before then, came to me strongly for the first time. That morning, I felt the sun warming my skin, and it was amazing—at least, until your blood wore off. But even that did not compare to feeling your determination to save me and your worry that you had been too late. It was then that I knew that you cared for me. Feeling that from you was more beautiful than seeing the sun again.”

“You couldn’t tell I cared for you after the kiss in your office?” Sookie asked coyly as she tentatively opened the door of the bedroom and let in some of the streaks of daylight.

“I felt your body respond to me, and after our kiss, your eyes held something that I thought I had lost after saying what I said to you at Russell’s. But I feared that you would always despise me after I chained you in the basement. And then, I allowed Russell to taste you,

and I tasted you without your consent,” his voice trailed off low and regretful. “You would have been justified in hating me. You *should* have hated me.”

“But instead, I loved you.”

“Yes, I felt that you just might love me too that morning. I hoped that you might.”

Sookie took Eric’s hand and led him into the hallway and toward the kitchen. “If you feel *anything*, you have to use vamp speed back to the cubby, okay?”

“Yes dear,” Eric said in the exaggerated fashion of the old sitcoms Gran used to watch.

Sookie couldn’t help giggling a bit. “Okay, you sit here.” Sookie pointed to the chair at the table that was farthest from the window, and she closed the curtains tightly for good measure. Then she pulled out the Tupperware container of casserole and the peach pie from the refrigerator. As she was warming her food, she fixed a glass of water for herself and readied a TruBlood for the microwave. After a few minutes, everything was prepared, and she sat down opposite Eric, still watching him like a hawk.

“How long until sunset?” she asked before taking a bite.

“About 20 minutes,” Eric said.

Sookie nodded and began eating. When she made her way to the pie and opened the container it was in, she saw Eric’s nostrils flare.

She smiled at him, “When will the peach trees be planted at the house?”

He returned her smile, “After the winter. I have arranged for already-mature trees to be put in. Perhaps there will be peaches this year if the trees take to the soil well and recover quickly from their transplant.”

“Even if they don’t,” Sookie smiled, “there are some peach trees at Arlene’s place, and she always has too many ripen at once. She brings the ones she doesn’t use to me.”

Eric grinned. “You are a wonder, min kván.”

Sookie looked at him in question.

“It is a wonder to me that you think about my wants in this way,” he clarified.

Sookie smiled and then finished her dessert.

Anxiousness clear on his face, he glanced toward the door.

“You sure?” she asked.

He nodded and grinned at her like a kid getting ready to go on a roller coaster.

Sookie went into the living room and got the old afghan. “Put this around yourself at least,” she ordered. Then she took Eric’s hand and led him to the door. She entered the code to disarm the security system, and wordlessly, the couple walked outside. The sun hovered just above the horizon in front of them, bathing the few clouds in the sky with orange light.

Eric inhaled sharply and unnecessarily, not taking his eyes from the beautiful sight—even as Sookie never took hers from his body.

She began to shake after a few minutes, and Eric dragged his eyes from the rapidly setting sun to reassure her, “I am fine, my love. It’s okay.”

She nodded bravely, but continued to worry, her fear welling inside of her. Suddenly, she felt the magic in her body heighten and flow through their joined hands. Eric arched into her touch.

“Min kára,” he whispered as the sun finally sank into the horizon, and he sank onto his knees, overwhelmed by her light flowing into him.

“Shit,” Sookie said, falling to her knees beside him and pulling her hand away from his. “I hurt you, Eric. I’m so sorry. I was just so scared!”

“No, Sookie,” Eric said recovering and looking into her eyes with intensity. “I could literally feel your magic reaching into me to protect me. It was,” he paused, looking for the right word, “startling, but not painful. I felt your love as if it was surrounding me and shielding me. You are truly my sköldmöns.”

“What’s that?” Sookie asked.

“My shieldmaiden.”

Chapter 72: Share with Me

Sookie and Eric stood on the porch for a few more minutes before Eric noticed Sookie shivering. He shook himself out of his awe for his bonded one and wrapped the old afghan around her before picking her up and taking her back inside.

“A fire, min kära?” he asked.

“Please,” she smiled and then asked, “So, what’s on the agenda tonight? Don’t you need to go into work at some point?”

“I *am* working,” he said in mock defensiveness.

“Oh—and what kind of work are you doing, pray tell?” she asked, feigning sternness.

He pulled her into his arms, “I am in training to be a good husband to you. I am working to make sure all your *needs* are met.”

Sookie smiled, “Well, so far, your training is going quite well.” Then she became more serious. “But Eric, I don’t wanna be the reason for you not doing what you need to.”

“As I told you, now that we are together, I will be turning the running of Fangtasia over to Pam and Chow. Truth be told, this has been all but done already in the past year.”

“But you *love* your club, Eric.” She flashed him a mischievous smile, “You love sittin’ on your throne and being the center of attention.”

Eric scoffed, “I am a tourist attraction, my love—or at least I was. I admit that I enjoyed the challenge of making Fangtasia successful after the Great Reveal, and at first, I also enjoyed the choice of women who would present themselves to me in my club.”

He felt Sookie’s jealousy rising in the bond, so he quickly continued, “But I have not felt that way since you walked into the doors of Fangtasia. From that moment on, I wanted you more than any other—until finally I wanted *only* you. Fangtasia no longer holds any delight for me,

and as I have told you before, I have more money than I could spend in a thousand more years, more than even Pam could spend in a thousand years, I think.” He chuckled. “And I have investments that are making me more every day.”

He reached over to stroke her cheek, “Many times in my life, I have taken time to find a new passion or business interest. If you think you could bear having me around, then that is what I intend to do for the immediate future, even as I enjoy learning to be a doting, attentive, adoring husband.” Eric bent down and kissed Sookie’s forehead at each of his last four words before placing a light kiss on her lips. “I think they call it a house husband.”

Sookie giggled, “Oh, I think I can handle having you around—as long as you earn your keep.”

“Whatever do you have in mind, lover?” Eric leered, pulling Sookie closer to him. “I’m ready to beginning *earning*.”

Sookie smiled up at him teasingly, “Then you better get that cute ass of yours in gear and make me a fire!” Sookie swapped his bottom playfully.

“Cold-hearted woman,” Eric sighed in mock exasperation.

She laughed. As Eric made a fire, Sookie tried to distract herself from looking at his beautiful body, now clad only in his boxers, by pulling the quilts that she’d folded earlier back down on the floor and remaking their pallet. She said, “I should call Jason and tell him about our pledge!”

Eric looked back at her, “Of course, lover, but I instructed Pam to make sure Jesus, Lafayette, and your brother met you tomorrow evening at the safe house. If you wish to tell them in person, you may do so then.”

Sookie contemplated for a moment. “I think I’d like to call him now, just to tell him what’s happening.”

Eric zipped to the cubby and back at vampire speed, returning with his phone. He was dressed in track pants and a T-shirt when he came back in. “I will give you a few moments in private to call your brother and friends. I’ll just do a quick sweep of the surroundings to make sure we are secure.” He kissed her gently on the forehead and left her sitting on the pallet in front of the warm fire he’d built for her.

She dialed Jason, suddenly quite nervous.

“Hello?” Jason answered after a couple of rings.

“Hey Jase,” Sookie replied.

“Sook! Pam called me last night to tell me I had to come to Shreveport tomorrow night, but I was sorta asleep when she called, so I thought I might be dreamin’ it. When I came by your house this mornin’ to ask you about it, only Miranda and Jarod were there. What’s up?”

Sookie took a deep breath. “Well, Jase, remember the other day when Eric proposed to me?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you can’t tell anyone about this, but tomorrow night, we’re gonna be pledged—that’s like gettin’ vampire married.”

There was a pause at Jason’s end. “Do I have to give you away or anythin’? Should I wear a suit?”

Sookie laughed, “No, Jase. It’s not all that—uh—formal. I’m just gonna go in to Fangtasia and hand Eric a dagger, and then we’re pledged.”

“A dagger?” Jason asked. Then he paused again. “Well, vamps don’t do shit normal, that’s for sure. But I’ll be there, Sook.”

She grinned into the phone, “Thanks, Jase. See you tomorrow, and remember not to tell anyone, okay?” After Sookie hung up with her brother, she dialed Lafayette and Jesus’s house. Jesus answered.

“Hey Jesus,” Sookie said.

“Hey Sook,” Jesus returned, “what’s up?”

“Well, I was really just callin’ to give y’all some warnin’ about tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, Pam called us last night—actually real early this morning—and told us to meet you in Shreveport tomorrow night. We’re supposed to ride in with Bubba. What’s going on, Sook?”

“Jesus, Eric and I are gettin’ pledged tomorrow night.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for several moments. “Sookie, this is big.”

“I know,” Sookie smiled. “Eric said that a vampire has never pledged to a human before.”

“Wow,” Jesus said. “Laf is at work right now, but I’ll tell him, Sook,” Jesus assured.

“And I’m real honored to be there for you.”

“I’m happy you and Lala will be there too, Jesus.”

Sookie hung up the phone and lay on her side looking into the fire. She thought about all the people she’d like to have at her pledging that would not be there: Gran, Grandpa Earl, her parents, Tara. But of all of them, she’d miss Gran the most.

It was the bond that let Sookie know that Eric was back in the room with her. She turned and saw him standing just a few feet away from her.

“Hey,” she greeted.

“You are sad, min kära,” Eric said in a low voice. “Does your family not approve of our pledging?”

Sookie smiled up at him, “It’s not that. Jason and Jesus both seemed happy for me—us. I was just thinkin’ ‘bout all the people I’d like to be there, especially Gran.”

“Oh,” Eric said as he lay down behind Sookie and pulled her to spoon into his long body. He rubbed gentle circles into her shoulders and arm for several minutes before speaking. “I find myself wishing that Godric were here as well.” He paused for a moment, “And, like you, I wish that your Gran were able to see us pledge. She became,” he paused again, “*important* to me.”

“I know. Your dream self told me.”

Sookie nestled into Eric and lay her head onto his arm. He draped his other arm over her and tucked her into him fully.

Pressed together, they lay quietly for a little more than an hour, just looking at the fire. Eric felt Sookie’s grief for her Gran through their bond and knew that there was nothing that he could do to take that particular kind of pain from his beloved one. He recognized that he could distract her body and mind with a sexual act, but that would merely cover up her grief, not take it away.

Eric knew first hand of the emptiness of such attempts. He had tried to use Yvetta and many others to cover up the hole that had been left inside of him after Godric’s death. That hole had been healed only by time.

So he lay quietly with Sookie, soothingly stroking her arm and shoulder as he watched the fire with her, and he gave her time.

Chapter 73: Understanding

Finally, Eric got up to stir the fire and add wood. As he turned back to Sookie, he saw a tear streaking its way down her eye. She was looking at him with intense love.

He was before her on his knees in less than a second, wiping the tear with his thumb. “I hate when you cry, min kván.”

“I know,” Sookie said smiling lightly. “And that’s why I’m crying.”

Eric seemed confused. “What?”

Sookie sat up in front of him as Eric sat down facing her.

“Eric, you knew just now from the bond that I was sad and grieving for Gran, that I was crying on the inside—right?”

“Yes,” Eric said in a low voice. “It is difficult to feel you that way.”

“I know how hard it is for you to feel like you can’t do anything to help me. Remember—I can feel you in the bond too, and that is what I felt from *you*. Yet you just lay with me for a long time; you didn’t try to take my mind off of what I needed to feel. You respected my need to feel it. That’s where my tear came from.”

Eric still looked a bit confused.

“I was crying because of the love you show me, the respect. Bill . . .” at the sound of his name Eric stiffened a bit, and Sookie paused. “Eric, can I tell you about what happened between Bill and me the night I lost my virginity to him. Uh—not the sex stuff, but other things? Can I talk to you about that without hurtin’ you?”

Eric brought his hand up to Sookie’s cheek, feeling both her uncertainty and her sadness through their bond. “You may tell me of anything. I will not lie; I hate to think of you ever

being with Bill—or anyone other than myself for that matter. But you need never keep *anything* from me.”

Sookie looked at Eric thankfully. “It is difficult for me, too, to think of being with anyone else but you.” She brought her hand up to his, which was still stroking her cheek. “And it’s gonna be difficult to talk about that night and what I’ve come to realize about it.”

“I’m not going anywhere, min kära.”

She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it lightly, another tear finding its way down her cheek. “I know.” After a minute or two, Sookie took a deep breath. “The night I found Gran dead on the kitchen floor, I think I went into shock. There was just so much blood,” Sookie’s voice caught, and Eric readjusted his position so that he could pull Sookie onto his lap and cradle her to his body.

It was another few minutes before she was able to continue. “I was supposed to be at home that night too, but I’d gone out with Sam on kind of a test date. When I got home, I felt something ‘off’ in the house. I always tried to block out Gran’s thoughts and the thoughts of the people I care about, but I can always feel their minds there anyway, like lookin’ at a television that’s been muted or something. That night, she wasn’t there at all. And then I found her in the kitchen. And then Bill was suddenly there. Maybe he felt my emotions through the tie, or maybe he was spyin’ on me even then; I don’t know. And then Sam came to check on me since the door was open. And then the police were there, and before I knew it, they were takin’ away my Gran.”

Eric listened quietly, stroking her hair and shoulders in comforting gestures.

“So I think I was in shock right after I found her, and I felt—just so empty inside. She was the *only* person that *never* had a bad thought about me that I picked up on—not even a stray

one. She never once thought about me being a burden to her or wondered why I couldn't just be normal.”

Sookie paused and then picked up her train of thought, “I didn't really sleep the night she died, and by the morning, all that shock had worn off, and I was heart-broken. People kept comin' by the house—pretending to offer sympathy. But I knew from their minds that only a few really cared about Gran or me or Jason. Some even thought that I deserved to have died too because I'd been seeing a vampire. Most were there for the gossip or to see if there was still,” she paused, her voice choking up, “blood on the floor.”

Eric interrupted her story for the first time. “Who cleaned the blood, min kára?” he asked in almost a whisper.

Sookie's eyes filled with tears. “I did.”

“Bill did not see to this before dawn?”

Sookie shook her head as Eric tried to squelch his anger so it wouldn't seep into the bond.

“I am sorry you had to do this task alone,” Eric said sincerely. “I am sorry I was not yet with you.”

Sookie nodded before continuing. “Jason finally heard about Gran and came over the afternoon after she'd died. By then, Lafayette had given me something to help me sleep. Jason was real angry at me. He hit me.”

Eric stiffened.

Sookie looked at Eric and took in a deep breath. “I'm not excusing what he did, and I've told him that I won't stand for that kind of thing if he wants to be in my life, but he was,” she paused, taking another deep breath, “taking V at the time. He's not anymore,” she added quickly. “But he was then.”

Not seeing surprise on Eric's face, Sookie paused her story to ask, "You knew, didn't you? You already knew about Jason?"

Eric spoke in a low voice, "I did not know he had struck you, my love."

Sookie could feel his anger rising and brought her hand up to caress his cheek. "He will not do it again, and if he does, he knows that he is no longer allowed in my life. He's changed a lot since then too."

Eric leaned down to kiss Sookie's forehead and then cheeks before his lips met hers in a light touch. Then he rested his forehead against hers, a gesture that calmed him. After a few minutes, his anger left the bond. He pulled back from her a bit and spoke, "I *did* know about Jason's V-habit."

"How?" Sookie asked.

"I apprehended some V-users at Fangtasia. The blood they had was from a relatively young and not well-adapted vampire named Eddie Gauthier. I went to confront Eddie, but he had disappeared. At his home, I picked up the scents of three humans, two of whom you know very well.

"Lafayette and Jason?"

"Yes—I had found out from the V-users that Lafayette had sold them the blood, and using glamour, I was able to get his address from them. Once I had confirmed that Lafayette's was one of the scents I had picked up at Eddie's home, I simply waited for a good opportunity to apprehend him. After questioning him, I did not think that he'd harmed or taken Eddie. Apparently they had an arrangement that was mutually beneficial for both of them, but since Lafayette was a known V-dealer and Eddie was still missing, I had to," Eric paused.

"Hold him," Sookie completed.

Eric nodded. “The next night, I followed up on the other two scents from Eddie’s home. I recognized both from a few days before at Fangtasia. I knew one of them to be your brother; Pam had informed me of his name—Stackhouse—the night that he’d come into Fangtasia. He had been trying to locate V that night and left with a woman, who was the third scent from Eddie’s home. I allowed him to go unharmed that night because I had guessed his connection to you. I intended to find him later and glamour him to no longer take V, but Eddie’s disappearance came before I was able to see to this task.”

“You were gonna make him stop?”

Eric nodded, “This seemed the easiest way. I couldn’t allow him to continue using, and I didn’t want to do him physical harm.”

Sookie nodded and placed her hand lightly on Eric’s chest.

“After Eddie disappeared, I found out where he lived and picked up on Eddie’s scent there; he had met the true death. I also picked up on the scents of your brother and Amy Burley, who had also been slain there. By this time, your brother was in jail for allegedly killing Miss Burley. Then he disappeared and didn’t resurface until Dallas.

Sookie looked at Eric in shock. “A vampire was killed at my brother’s house?”

Eric nodded, “Since Jason was your brother, I dug into Miss Burley’s past and discovered that she’d been suspected of involvement in several vampire drainings in New Jersey.”

Eric looked a bit guilty, “I threatened your brother in Dallas. I told him that I knew of his past drug habit and his connection to Eddie. I told him he’d be killed if he used V again.”

Why didn’t you punish him like Lafayette? Question him about Eddie?”

“You know why, min kära, “Eric said, stroking Sookie’s hair.

“You could get into trouble for covering up his involvement, couldn’t you?”

Eric shook his head. “The true death of Eddie Gauthier was probably dealt out by Miss Burley. Despite his shortcomings, I do not believe your brother would have killed him, though after hearing of his behavior toward you while being high on V, I am not as certain of this as I once was. Regardless, Miss Burley has been officially identified as the killer, and as she is already deceased, there will be no further inquiry.”

“You did all this for me, didn’t you?”

“Your brother proved himself to be brave and loyal to you in Dallas, but yes—if he had not been your brother, my actions would have been different from the first night he entered my club.”

Sookie raised up to kiss Eric on the cheek. “Thank you,” she said in a whisper.

Eric got up to add another log to the fire as Sookie went to take care of her human needs and grab a drink from the kitchen.

As they settled back onto the floor, Eric sat with his back against the coffee table and pulled Sookie so that she was cradled into his body once more. He could feel that she was anxious to continue her story.

After a few moments, she did. “So Jason came and blamed me for my Gran’s death. I felt alone and so sad. I mean—Lafayette and Tara were there, but . . .” she stopped.

“ . . . You felt like a part of yourself was gone, like you’d never be the same,” Eric supplied softly.

“Yes,” Sookie said as she leaned further into Eric.

“This is how it was for me after Godric.”

“I know.”

They sat silently in shared grief for a few moments before Sookie continued. “Then the next day was the funeral, and Uncle Bartlett came.”

Eric felt Sookie’s fear at this name and tensed. “This man hurt you in some way?”

“Yes,” Sookie said quietly. “He did things to me when I was a child—touched me inappropriately—but the nastiness in his head showed me that he intended things that were a lot worse. When I told Gran, she banished him from our home and told him she never wanted to see or hear from him again. Jason never knew about it, so he contacted Uncle Bartlett and told him about the funeral.”

“Does this man still live?” Eric asked, his rage boiling just under the surface.

Sookie felt his anger through the bond. “No,” Sookie said quietly. “I told Bill about him, and Bill killed him.”

“At least in this—we can agree,” Eric said.

“I don’t want killin’ done for me. I never did!” Sookie said forcefully as she pulled away a bit. “Bill went behind my back to kill him, and that’s not somethin’ I needed on my conscience. Uncle Bartlett was too old to hurt me anymore, and it’s God’s job to punish him, not mine.”

Eric buried his face into her hair and pulled her closer to him, “We will sometimes disagree about things such as this, min kära. My very *first* instinct has become to protect you. Given your uncle’s actions, I would have wanted to do the same thing Bill did. I will be honest and tell you that part of me wishes he were still alive so that I could be the one to exact justice for you. But I would not have acted without first speaking to you. I would have, however, tried to get you to see and accept my way of thinking.”

After a few moments, Sookie responded, “I can live with that. But I would have also tried to convince you as well.”

“And we would have come up with a course of action together.”

Sookie nodded in agreement.

After a moment, Eric said, “So your Gran had been killed, your brother was on drugs and violent with you, and your pedophile uncle was at the funeral.” Eric’s sorrow for his beloved was flowing through the bond even as he tried to send her comfort as well.

“And I had to give a eulogy, but when I heard everyone’s thoughts, I—well, I kind of went a little crazy. And then I went home and ate every last bite of Gran’s pecan pie. It was the last thing she made before she . . .” Sookie’s voice trailed off due to the tears that were now streaming down her cheeks and the sobs that wracked her body.

Eric turned her and cradled her to his body again. “I have you,” he said simply as he held her close.

After a few minutes, Sookie continued, “That night, I went to Bill, and we had sex for the first time.” Sookie’s voice grew almost inaudible. “I’m certain he snuck more of his blood into me that night, and he took some of mine. It was right after that, that I felt compelled to tell him about my uncle. But I’ve realized something even worse about what happened that night.”

“What’s that?” Eric prompted quietly after Sookie had been silent for several moments.

“Because of the tie and his manipulations, my grief for Gran became numbed. And my emotions turned to only love for Bill—to the point that I was practically *blind* to everything else.” She paused and looked up at Eric. “So a while ago, when you just held me, and when you let me feel my pain and sorrow over Gran without trying to do anything to distract me or sidetrack my emotions, I was so grateful for you—for the kind of man you are.”

Eric spoke, “Bill acted with dishonor, taking advantage of you in your time of crisis. And he continued to act with dishonor as he muted your feelings and replaced them with those he desired for you to have.” Eric was silent for a moment. “However, I cannot profess to be a saint. I have committed many dishonorable acts over time, including taking advantage of people’s vulnerabilities. I am learning a different way now—from you.”

Eric was relieved when Sookie didn’t pull away from him again. He continued, “Perhaps, Bill was operating under the misperception that such a thing would be best for you, that forgetting your grief would be a gift to you. However, this would not have been my way.”

“I know,” Sookie said, nestling into Eric. “That is why your respecting my feelings is so important to me. You are the *first* man to do this, as it turns out.”

“I will always do it, min kära.”

Sookie relaxed into Eric’s arms, and it wasn’t long before she was dozing, her light snore making Eric smile. He retrieved his phone off the coffee table and made some final plans for the next night via emails to Pam. He also made some final arrangements for his “wedding gift” to Sookie with Miranda. It would be waiting for them at their Bon Temps home.

After his work was completed, he simply held Sookie to him, enjoying the rhythms of her sleep through the bond.

Chapter 74: Fallacy

“He’s over a thousand years old, Bill,” Lillith said reasonably. “And there is nothing you can do right now to kill him. Otherwise, you risk your position as king as well as your life.”

Bill grunted and stretched his arms behind him, cradling his head into the pillows he’d propped up for himself. “Still, there must be a way to eliminate him immediately. It is *his* interference that has turned Sookie against me.”

Lillith stifled her urge to roll her eyes. Bill had been going on and on and around in circles about the Stackhouse girl for hours, and frankly, his whining was beginning to annoy her. However, she loved her vampire brother—at least as much as she could love—and was resolved to help him. Plus, ever since Bill had told Lillith that it had been Sookie who had killed Lorena, Lillith had become more and more curious about the little fairy telepath.

“Bill, I believe that your previous course of action is still best,” she purred as she slunk her naked body toward him seductively. “We will bide our time and then bring him down. And then the fairy will be ours.”

“Mine!” Bill insisted, pushing Lillith away. “Sookie will be mine!”

Lillith’s tone was conciliatory, “Of course, your majesty. I didn’t mean anything by that. It’s just that—well—after she has been trained to be your companion, as you have designed, it would be nice to,” she paused, “taste her. Of course,” she bowed her head deferentially, “I would never do anything without your permission.”

The bow, as Lillith well knew, was all it took for Bill to brighten. “Yes, perhaps when Sookie is truly under the power of the tie, she would give you her blood voluntarily—occasionally.”

Lillith smiled and nodded her head again.

Bill's face darkened, "But now, it seems, it will be many years before Sookie is back at my side where she belongs. If only Eric were not so strong! If only I had ended him when I had the chance!"

Lillith spoke up rationally, "My king, you must wait to act against him in order to solidify Louisiana."

Bill groaned again, "Fucking Eric Northman! Now he has even managed to place his allies as the other sheriffs in the state!"

"But you are very good at bringing people to your side," Lillith encouraged. "If you play your cards right, the other sheriffs will begin to show you—and not Northman—their loyalty. You need only be patient."

"Or I could find a vampire even stronger than Eric to kill him." Bill's eyes flashed, and he sat up quickly. "I know where Russell Edgington is entombed! He could easily kill Northman."

Lillith placed her hand onto Bill's arm, "But darling, Russell would not stop at just Eric. From what you have told me, he is crazy and would most likely kill you as well. And he would never allow you to have Sookie. In digging him up, you would create a more formidable opponent than Northman."

"But if I rescued him, he would feel obliged to me."

Lillith thought for a moment. "Perhaps he would do as you wished and kill Northman, but I believe he would soon realize that he didn't need you any longer."

Bill sat back against the pillow. "I suppose you are right," he said crestfallen.

Lillith curled into his body and began to stroke his chest, running her fingernails through the hair she found there. “Everything will work out as you desire. I will infiltrate Northman’s little circle, and then we will figure out all his weaknesses. We already know *one*.”

“Sookie,” Bill said, as he began to caress Lillith’s back.

“Yes.”

“If only I could find a way to give her my blood again. Then, she would come to understand how much I love her, and she would leave behind her childish, schoolgirl crush for Northman.”

“Then why not do just that?” Lillith asked.

“Northman would try to kill me if I did.”

“Surely, the Authority would kill him if he attempted regicide; he wouldn’t risk his life for the human, would he?”

Bill shook his head, “I do not think so, but his pride would motivate him, and he is stronger than I am right now, both politically and physically. I cannot risk forcing Sookie to take my blood while she is his.”

“What if we arranged for her to have a little—*accident*? If you were near at the time and happened to give her your blood in order to heal her, surely Eric would be grateful and would have no reason to want you dead. Then you could slowly begin to change her thinking about you—and him.”

Bill nodded. “I have thought about this, but I do not think Eric would believe that my being near in order to heal Sookie was a coincidence. Plus, I do not wish to risk Sookie’s life.”

Lillith crooned, “But I could craft the accident to make sure she was hurt and would need blood but be in no immediate life-threatening danger. She’d be at no risk as long as you were close at hand.”

Bill sighed, “I am not so sure. The night Sookie was shot by one of the witches, I gave her my blood, but it took much effort to do it. She did not drink from me at first?”

“She resisted?”

“Not exactly,” Bill continued. “She was unconscious, but her body seemed to reject my blood at first. Even when I finally began to sense it going into her body after I’d forced it into her, she never voluntarily latched onto me. I do not want to risk something like that happening again.”

Lillith looked surprised, “How could she have resisted the blood, especially if she were not conscious to do it?”

Bill shrugged. “Northman’s influence? Her fairy nature? Who knows for certain, but I wouldn’t want her to die if something went wrong.”

“Fine,” Lillith said. “But we might be able to use her to distract him.”

Bill scoffed. “Eric does not love Sookie! He would not be distracted if she were hurt or in jeopardy. He cares only for *himself*.”

“Well then,” Lillith purred. “If that is the case, I will seduce him easily, and then I will make sure that Sookie discovers us in a—let’s say—*compromising* position.”

Bill smiled, “And then she will run to me. Yes. We will stick to the original plan. It may take me longer to get Sookie, but Eric will eventually show his true colors, and Sookie will despise him for them.”

“And you will be waiting to help her pick up the pieces of her failed relationship.”

Bill bent down and gave Lillith a hard kiss on the mouth. He pulled away.

“Yes—Sookie will be distraught, and I will be waiting for her.”

He wrapped Lillith into his arms, “Meanwhile, I must distract myself somehow. Do you have any ideas?”

Lillith purred, “I have a few, your majesty. Shall we call in that lovely little B+ donor you got for me?”

“Let’s.”

Chapter 75: The Nearness of You

[A/N: This chapter title comes from the song by Nora Jones called “The Nearness of You.”]

It was several hours later that Sookie woke up. Eric had repositioned them so that they were lying on the floor on the pallet. Gran’s afghan and a quilt were pulled snugly over Sookie since the fire had been dying down.

“I’m sorry I slept so long,” she said groggily as she turned to face Eric.

“Do not be sorry, my love. It has been a very long few weeks for you. And I very much enjoy holding you as you sleep.”

Sookie chuckled, “Not boring?”

“No,” Eric said seriously. “It is odd to feel so at peace, but it is,” he paused, “*nice*. Plus, I did some work.”

“What time is it?” Sookie asked.

“It is just after 3:00, min kára.”

Sookie nestled her body more tightly into Eric’s and sighed into his chest. “It *is* nice.”

After a minute or two, Sookie spoke, “I found out something strange from Alcide’s head the other day.

“Hmm?” Eric asked, seeming to come out of down-time. “What was it? I hope not some plan to kill me and take you as his own,” he said half-joking.

“No,” Sookie shook her head, “but he does pretty much hate vampires in general and you in particular.”

Eric sighed, "It is a pity. I suppose I do understand why a Were from Mississippi would dislike vampires; I have learned that Russell's Weres had pretty much taken control of the packs in the area in order to recruit. Alcide showed courage in remaining independent. Still, in my dealings with him, I have been fair, especially since I always saw his potential as an asset; that is why I thought of him when I needed someone to guard you."

"I'm afraid I'm at least partially to blame for why he dislikes you."

"Jealousy," Eric stated.

"Yeah, that. And," Sookie blushed, "he saw us in the woods that night when we were making love."

"Ah," Eric said. "Then I can see where his jealousy would stem from. The love between us that night would have been obvious to anyone." He pulled her closer and chuckled. "Surely this cannot be the *strange* thing you got from his head."

"No, Alcide was there the night I was shot; he took me from the graveyard to the house, actually. And then I saw Bill in his mind, trying to give me his blood."

"Trying?" Eric asked.

"Yeah, at first, even though I was still breathing and everything, I wouldn't take it. Alcide thought that I was dyin', and the look on Bill's face was one of surprise."

"You were unconscious?"

Sookie nodded in confirmation.

"Did you see from Alcide what happened after that?"

"Well, Bill literally pried open my mouth and force fed me for a while."

"Even after you'd taken some of his blood, you didn't begin feeding on your own?"

"Not according to the picture in Alcide's head."

“Interesting,” Eric said. “And you *are* right; that is strange.”

“It was like I was tryin’ to reject his blood. Do you think this has to do with the bond or my fairy heritage?”

Eric nodded. “I can only guess, my love. But I think it has everything to do with the bond we have. I think it makes us desire to belong only to each other. Since we bonded the first time, the thought of taking blood from another is repellent to me. In fact,” he paused, “when I killed the witches and drank their blood, it tasted rancid.”

Sookie added, “And the thought of taking blood from or giving blood to someone else makes me nauseated.”

Eric chuckled. “Then I think it was our first bond that made you try to reject Bill’s blood, that made you want no other.”

“That was how I felt until his blood was in me. And then all of a sudden, I thought I loved him again. I can’t believe that I didn’t recognize what it was doin’ to me then. If I had been using my sense, I would have seen it all along.”

“Vampire blood is strong in a human,” Eric tried to comfort her. “And as you experienced, a tie works insidiously to control. You could not have known. Plus, as difficult as it was to be without our bond when you had Jesus conduct the severing spell, in the end it was for the best. You are now free of Bill completely.”

Sookie nodded and took Eric’s hand in hers, entwining their fingers.

“Even without the bond, I always wanted to be close to you.”

“And I you.”

Eric kissed Sookie's forehead and began to lay soft butterfly kisses around her face. Sookie sighed into him and raised her own lips up to meet his. "Make love to me, Eric," she whispered.

Not needing to be told twice, Eric had his own clothing off in moments as Sookie slipped her robe off of her shoulders.

Eric lay his long and lean body over hers, touching her in every way possible without crushing her. Sookie enjoyed Eric's weight and pushed up into him, devouring his neck with kisses as he worked on her cheek and ear.

Sookie felt him hard against her leg, and she was dripping for him, desperate to be connected even more. "Now, Eric," she said. "I need you now."

She felt Eric's hand moving down to test her readiness, but she stopped it with hers, "I'm ready for you," she said, arching into him. "Please—now."

With a growl that showed that his anxiousness matched her own, Eric buried himself to the hilt. "Fuck," he managed. "I was made to be inside of you."

"Yes," Sookie muttered, capturing Eric's lips with hers. Their tongues matched the rhythm of their bodies as they slowly rocked against each other, neither in a hurry to find completion. Still, despite their languid pace, several minutes later, Sookie found her release due to Eric's angling himself to hit her G-spot just right, but he resisted the urge to follow her even as her body pulsed around his shaft. Instead, he continued his long, slow strokes and bent down to capture first one breast and then the other with his mouth.

Sookie felt one orgasm rolling into another as Eric continued to stroke her with his hands, mouth and penis.

"More," she muttered as she lolled her head to the side.

Eric understood exactly what she wanted and needed; he felt the same desire from within himself. He grabbed the knife from the coffee table and quickly unwrapped it, handing it to Sookie. “Take what you need, min kván. I am already yours.” She pushed the point of the dagger into the flesh of his shoulder and drank, even as he bit into her neck. An even stronger orgasm rocked her just as his finally overtook him.

The dagger once again was lit up in Sookie’s hand, and the white light of the fairy magic enveloped and strengthened the bond between them, sealing them even more tightly together.

Eric unhurriedly licked the wound he’d made on Sookie’s neck and then watched it heal due to the blood she’d just taken from him. His flesh had already healed, and Sookie lay panting beneath him, kissing the area where she’d made her cut.

He took the dagger from her grasp and laid it back on the coffee table before slowly pulling himself from her and settling onto his back beside her.

She moved with him and settled herself onto his chest, still trying to recover her breath. After several minutes, however, she sat up abruptly. Eric, as if a magnet in his body were connecting his heart to hers, sat up with her.

“What is it, min kära?”

Sookie answered, “It’s just that—why haven’t we had another one of those strange fantasy trips again? I mean, we’ve had each other’s blood more times now, but there’s been no lake in the sun or bed in the snow.”

Eric chuckled but then looked contemplative. “I don’t know, my love. Perhaps it occurs only at the first bonding. Or maybe this moment with you right here and right now is fantasy enough. I cannot imagine a place I would rather be right now.”

Sookie grinned, “Me neither.” She sunk back into Eric’s chest, and he laid them back down. “Still, it’s one more thing to wonder about, right along with why I’m so blood-thirsty all of a sudden!” She sighed.

“Indeed,” Eric chuckled again. “It must be that you cannot resist me.”

Sookie snorted and then hit his arm playfully, “Or—maybe I’m just craving chocolate.”

Eric laughed and pulled her closer.

Chapter 76: Twenty Questions

Right after Eric had settled them comfortably onto the floor and wrapped them in blankets, his cell phone rang. He reached a long arm over to the coffee table to retrieve it.

For the first time, Sookie noticed what the ring tone was and laughed out loud.

“Seriously, Eric—‘Suicide Blonde!’”

Eric looked a bit shame-faced. “Pamela programmed it. She believes she is *quite* funny.”

“Wonder whom she inherited *that* from.”

Eric almost managed to look innocent as he answered the phone. “Pamela, do you have a report?”

“Yes,” she said on the other end of the line. “I think Sookie should hear too.”

Eric’s face took on a serious expression as he asked, “Bill?”

“Yes.”

Eric set the phone to speaker.

Sookie propped herself up on Eric’s chest and said, “Good evenin’, Pam.”

Pam deadpanned, “Depends on who you are. I must say, however, that you are managing to keep my maker quite happy. Whatever were you *doing* to him about fifteen minutes ago? I had to wait to call until he’d,” she paused, “*settled down* a bit.”

Sookie’s face went deep red as Eric half-heartedly cautioned, “Enough Pamela,” even as he winked at his bonded. “You have a report for us?”

Sookie couldn’t help but smile at the casual way Eric had said ‘us.’

“Yes. You and Sookie have been a constant topic of conversation at Bill’s home tonight—that is, when they’ve been *talking*.”

“And?” Eric asked, not wanting for Pam to make Sookie feel too uncomfortable.

“He and Lillith have been weighing his options. They discussed whether Bill should try to somehow force or manipulate Sookie into taking his blood again. Bill seems to believe that this alone would make Sookie be in love with him.” Pam scoffed.

Sookie shivered and Eric pulled her closer to him and tucked the afghan around her more tightly.

Pam added, “They have decided, however, *not* to pursue this course of action.”

Eric felt Sookie’s relief as Pam continued, “Apparently, Bill fears that Sookie would reject his blood.”

“Damned right!” Sookie piped in.

Pam chuckled. “And he also fears that Eric would try to kill him.”

Eric spoke seriously, even as he caressed Sookie with light touches, “There would be no *trying*.”

Sookie kissed his chest, appreciating for the thousandth time the mixture of hard and soft in her vampire. She had come to accept that Bill would seal his own fate if he tried to harm either of them.

Pam continued more soberly, “They also briefly discussed resurrecting Russell from his entombment.”

Sookie tensed even as Eric stroked her hair reassuringly.

“Thankfully, this Lillith seems to have some sense and pointed out that Russell would most likely kill Bill too—as well as take Sookie—so that idea was also scratched.”

“And?” Sookie asked this time, her relief apparent in her voice.

Eric smiled at his bonded.

Pam spoke, “They have decided to continue with their previous course; I’ve started thinking of it as ‘Operation Succubus.’” She paused dramatically. “Lillith will try to get Eric’s attention and seduce him.”

Sookie and Eric both scoffed at this at the same time and then grinned at each other.

Pam, hearing their reaction, chuckled. “I assume, master, that your response indicates that you *won’t* be playing along.”

“Hell no he won’t!” Sookie said possessively.

Eric chuckled, “You heard my bonded. Perhaps, Lillith can be persuaded that *you* are the finer catch, Pamela.”

Pam purred, “Oh—I like the sound of that. I can make poor little Lillith into my playmate for a while, and we can feed her whatever information we wish. I did always want to be an actress, you know.”

Eric rolled his eyes, “Didn’t you try that once, Pam? I seem to remember a certain stint on Broadway.” He winked at Sookie.

Pam let out an exaggerated sigh, “Yes, but the director was an idiot. Even his blood was awful!”

“Yes, Elia Kazan was just awful,” he deadpanned.

Pam snorted, “Obviously—he was over-rated.”

“If I remember correctly, didn’t you glamour him so that you would get a lead role and so that he would schedule all the rehearsals for night? And didn’t the critics . . .”

Pam interrupted him, “I was ahead of my time. They simply didn’t understand my craft.”

Sookie was working hard to stifle a giggle as Eric rolled his eyes again.

Eric asked, “Is there anything else we *need* to know?”

Pam sighed, “Just that Billy boy still wishes you very much *deader* than you already are.”

That statement sobered Sookie immediately.

Sensing some concern coming from both Sookie and Pam, Eric assured, “Do not worry; I will be watching my back, ladies.” He hung up the phone with Pam.

“You’d better be,” Sookie said seriously.

Eric kissed her forehead and tried to send reassurance through the bond.

“And I want you wearin’ your vest for the pledgin’, mister.”

Eric smiled, “I was already planning to, *min kära*. Of course, that means you will have an additional item to remove from me after it is over. Think you can handle it?”

She smacked him playfully on the chest and nestled into his body.

“Getting chilly, lover?” he asked as he felt her cooling flesh against his.

“A little,” she said, trying to snuggle in more. “*Someone* here doesn’t have much body heat,” she joked.

“Wonder who that is,” Eric chuckled. “Well—since my body heat is deficient, I will build the fire back up.”

Sookie protested weakly as he went to get up, but since she wanted the fire, she didn’t stop him. Before he went to the fireplace, however, he zipped into the kitchen and brought her a warm rag and towel. Without a word, he lovingly cleaned up the evidence of their earlier lovemaking from her body so that she would be more comfortable. She couldn’t help but arch into his touch.

After he was finished, he gave her a light kiss on the lips and went to the fire. She enjoyed the show as he bent to stoke the embers and added more wood.

“I know what you are doing, lover,” Eric purred with his back still turned. “I can feel your naughtiness through the bond.”

“Yeah, I’m enjoying the fine piece of ass that is officially gonna be *my property* tomorrow night,” Sookie said unapologetically.

“My ass is *your* property now?” Eric asked playfully.

“Yep—all *mine!*”

Eric turned and stalked back toward her, his gracious plenty flaccid but still quite impressive. Sookie took in a deep breath. Suddenly, she was no longer cold at all.

“Do you wish to take ownership of anything else on my body as well?”

“Yep,” she said, continuing the play, even as her face turned fire-engine red and heated.

“But you need to come over here so that I can *inspect* the goods.” She crooked her finger.

“What would you like to inspect first, lover?” he teased suggestively.

“Those,” she said, pointing to his feet.

He sat down and stretched his legs out before her. She reached out for his feet as if she were going to massage them, but instead, she tickled for all she was worth. And the thousand-year-old vampire in front of her doubled over in laughter and pulled away.

“You are an evil woman,” Eric smiled after he’d recovered.

“And you’re a ticklish vampire,” Sookie laughed back.

Eric tilted his head to the side and looked at Sookie predatorily. “How about you, my love?” He began crawling toward her slowly, and she tried to wrap the afghan tighter around her body even as she scooted away. “Now where was your ticklish spot again?”

He launched, and before she could even take in a breath, the afghan was off of her, and he was tickling her ribs. “No fair using vamp speed,” she managed between chortles. After a

few more seconds, he stopped his assault and pulled her to him in an embrace. Contentment flowed between them in strong waves.

“Cheater,” Sookie said, as she sunk into him and put her arms around his neck, playing with the baby hairs at the nape.

“Who me?” Eric chuckled.

Sookie pulled away from him and pushed her finger into his chest, “Yes, vampire—*you*.”

Eric smiled, “Do not forget that you started it.”

She scrunched up her nose.

Eric gave her a tender look that melted her heart and pulled the robe back onto Sookie’s shoulders so that she would be warm. He then put back on his track pants, knowing of Sookie’s propensity for modesty. She smiled appreciatively.

“Tell me something no one else knows,” Sookie requested suddenly as he settled back onto the floor next to her.

Eric contemplated for a moment. “I like American professional football. I got into it once Monday night games were started.” He paused. “It was one of the reasons why I decided to keep Fangtasia closed on Mondays and to complete area meetings on Sundays.”

Sookie’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“What?” Eric asked. “It is also much more convenient now to enjoy the sport since DVR recorders are available. I often watch a game after I return home following work.” He looked at Sookie a bit sheepishly. “I confess that this is why I installed satellite television into the farm house as well.”

Sookie giggled.

“What?” Eric asked again.

Unconsciously, she began to stroke his bare shoulder. “It’s just that I have a hard time imagining it.” She paused, “I like football too, you know. You’d better be a Saints fan! Hey,” she said without taking a breath, “we should have people over on Monday night. I know Jason, Jesus and Lafayette would be in. And Bubba could come inside to watch too!”

“I could force Pam to attend as well,” Eric said with an evil glint in his eyes. “The Pittsburgh Steelers will be playing the Denver Broncos. She will not approve of either uniform.”

Sookie laughed.

After a second, however, Eric became more serious, “But you are working that day, my love. I do not want you over-tired in preparing for a party as well.” He added, “Oh—and, of course, I like the Saints.”

Sookie smiled. “Good. And—no—it wouldn’t be too hard for me. If Pam and Bubba’s noses can take it, we’ll order pizza. I’ll just make some salsa for chips, and with beer, the humans will be all set. And, of course, we’ll just need bloods for you, Bubba, and Pam.”

Eric lifted Sookie’s hand to his lips. “Is this what it will be like to be with you Sookie? I tell you something I enjoy, and you strive to make it even better for me?”

Sookie smiled at the sincerity in Eric’s shining eyes. “Yep—that’s about right.”

He kissed the back of her hand tenderly.

Eric repeated Sookie’s request, “Tell me something I do not know about you, min kära.” He got a twinkle in his eyes, “Tell me your favorite flower.”

Sookie shook her head. “I thought you were gonna keep bringing me flowers until you got it right.”

His eyes were full of mischief. “Perhaps I could tickle it out of you, lover.” He reached toward her.

“No!” Sookie yelled, laughing. “Wait! I’ll give you a hint.”

Eric stopped. “Oh, a game!” He rubbed his hands together in glee, just like a little boy.

“I do not often play games, min kära, but when I do, I always win.”

She laughed at the mirth in his eyes and coming from his side of the bond. “Okay. We’ll play twenty questions.”

“I do not know this game,” Eric said, his brows furrowing .

“Well you ask me questions that can be answered with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Your goal is to try to find out what I’m thinking of—in this case, my favorite flower—in twenty questions or less. For example, if it were a rose and you asked me, ‘Does it have thorns?’ then I’d have to say, “Yes.”

“So it is a game of logic. What will I get if I win?”

Sookie contemplated. “A kiss?”

Eric looked at Sookie seriously. “Agreeable. And if I should fail, what will you ask of me?”

“The same.”

“Agreed.” The corners of Eric’s lips smirked up. “Then I shall begin. Is your favorite color blue?”

Sookie laughed, a little surprised by Eric’s seemingly off-topic question. “Yes.”

“I thought so, but this is something that a husband must know.” He kissed Sookie on the cheek.

Sookie pushed him away playfully, “Hey, don’t get ahead of yourself, cowboy. You haven’t won that yet.”

“Of course.” Eric gave her a million-watt smile, which made Sookie want to kiss him back, but she stopped herself. He looked at her knowingly before asking his second question, “Is your favorite flower blue, lover?”

“Ah, I see your logic now, vampire. Yes—it is.”

“Hmm,” Eric sounded. He knew that he’d placed several varieties of blue flowers into Sookie’s garden while he’d owned the property. Based on the objects in her room, he’d narrowed down her favorite color to either blue or yellow, so he’d also had many yellow flowers planted. And, of course, he’d put in a lot of white daisies for Adele. He’d kept all of the mature rose bushes that he had been certain Adele had nourished throughout the years, but most of the other plants had been left to die in the months after Sookie had disappeared.

He asked his third question, “Did I plant the flower in your garden, min kära?”

She smiled, “Yes.”

“Is it currently in bloom?”

Sookie shook her head, “No.”

He contemplated briefly and then asked his fifth question, “Is there just a single bloom on a stem?”

“No.”

He smiled, “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” she smiled back.

“Are you mine?”

She grunted, “Yes.”

“Am I yours?”

“Hell yes!”

He chuckled, “Are you as eager as I am to be pledged?”

“Yes.”

“Married?”

“Yes.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Would you be angry at me if I bought you a new car as a pledging gift?”

“Eric,” her voiced warned him, “yes.”

They both laughed.

“Will you let me take my kiss from wherever I choose?” he purred.

Sookie suddenly felt breathless, “Yes.”

“Would you like to carry blue hydrangeas tomorrow when you pledge with me?”

Sookie nodded, “Yes.”

“Then you will.” He lifted Sookie’s hand to his lips again and took his kiss.

Eric rose to re-stir the fire and put another log on it as Sookie went to the bathroom. When she came back, he arranged them so that they were lying comfortably in each other’s arms on the pallet. The couple fell into easy silence, Sookie feeling the lateness of the hour and Eric enjoying simply being near his bonded.

“This is the first day we’ve ever spent completely alone, min kära,” he whispered after a while. He ran his fingers through her hair.

“I know. It’s heaven,” Sookie sighed, snuggling into Eric’s shoulder and slinging her leg over his.

Eric continued to caress Sookie's hair lazily, enjoying the firelight shimmering off the her blonde curls. After a while, he felt anxiety creep into the bond.

"What is it, my love?" he asked.

"Eric, I have one more secret that I've kept from you—from everyone. I love you, and I wanna tell you about it, but I'm also afraid."

"I will not break your confidence. I could not." Eric said sincerely.

Sookie sat up. "It's just that the secret isn't about me, and it's big, but I don't wanna keep anything from you."

Eric sat up with her and took both of her hands. "I can feel the burden of this secret for you. As my bonded—and soon to be my pledged and wife according to vampire custom—you have already given me innumerable gifts. You have given me your love; you have given me the sunlight again. Please, min kära, the least I can do is help you bear your burdens. Is this not what a helpmate does?"

Sookie smiled and squeezed his hands. She took in a deep breath. "Hadley had a child named Hunter, and that child is like me."



Eric took in this knowledge and nodded. "I understand your reluctance to tell anyone this secret, my love. Do you know where your cousin and her child are?"

“No. But I wanna try to find him and help him with his telepathy. I was so scared when I was his age.”

Eric could feel the pain of Sookie’s past fear through the bond and bent over to kiss her forehead in a comforting gesture. He spoke, “Then—we will find your nephew so that you can help him, my love. Plus, we will need to protect him from the fairy threat. If they are trying to round up those of their kind, then they either already know of Hunter or they will in the future.”

“Yes, I’ve thought about that too,” Sookie sighed and then hesitantly asked, “Can you feel Hadley, Eric? I know you had her blood, and she had yours.”

Eric could feel a bit of jealousy from Sookie through the bond and squeezed her hand. “I have not tried to feel your cousin through the tie I made with her in over a year, Sookie—not since I influenced her to warn you to flee before Russell came for you.”

“Can you try now?”

Eric nodded and closed his eye, activating the magic that held his tie with Hadley. He tried to use it to seek her out, but there was nothing there. He opened his eyes. “I’m sorry, min kära. I do not feel her.”

Sookie’s bit her lip. “Does that mean she’s dead?”

“Not necessarily. She had very little of my blood, and it has been a long time since she took it. If she is far away, then I would not be able to feel her.”

Sookie sighed with relief. “Okay, now what?”

“I have a human private investigator that I use from time to time. He is very discreet, and I will have him begin a search for Hadley and your nephew. No one will be able to trace this search to us, and he will not need to know of the boy’s telepathy. Once we find them, we will

make sure they are safe and taken care of so that Hunter can stay off the radars of *both* fairies and vampires.”

Sookie pulled herself into Eric’s lap, “Thanks.”

Eric laid them back down. “Try to sleep, min kära.” Eric said quietly, “I will begin thinking of what can be done to covertly aid your nephew and cousin.”

Sookie burrowed into him and was asleep within minutes.

At 5:00, still more than an hour and a half before the sun rose, the thousand year old vampire did something he’d never been capable of before; he *decided* to take his rest during the night. He curled his body into Sookie’s and as much as the vampire could, he slept next to his bond-mate.

Chapter 77: Butterflies

Sookie stretched lazily against her soon-to-be husband. Drowsily, she gathered the quilt into her body and drew closer to her beloved. His chest felt a bit warmer than usual, and she opened one eye. Seeing the sunlight streaming in through the window, Sookie was fully awake in seconds and sat up next to Eric.

He seemed to be sleeping next to her—peacefully sleeping. The sun had warmed his exposed skin just as it had her own, but that was all. She looked closely to make sure there was no reddening or burning. Seeing none, she tried to relax.

His light-colored flesh looked ethereal, and his hair shone in the sun. In addition to his upper chest and head being exposed to the light, one of his feet was also peeking out from under the blanket. She reached out through the bond to find him resting serenely. She breathed in a sigh of relief and marveled at his beauty in the sunlight. Her love for him surged through the bond, waking Eric up.

“You are watching over me in my sleep my love,” he said with a smile on his face as he opened his eyes.

“Always,” she said, touching his cheek. “You are beautiful in the sun.”

“As are you, *min kära*,” he said, returning the gesture.

Eric pulled her into a kiss that began soft but quickly became heated as their passion stirred.

“Are you okay to do this, Eric? It’s day out.” Sookie gasped as he pushed her robe off of her shoulders.

“I am *always* okay for *this*,” he leered as he freed himself from his pants and pulled her on top of him, once again claiming her lips.

She moaned in pleasure as she lowered herself onto his straining member.

“So good, Sookie,” Eric muttered as she began to ride him slowly. He raised his hands to her breasts and let her set the pace, all the while keeping contact with her eyes, which were also drinking in his.

She drove herself onto him hard, moving faster and faster until he brought one hand to her hips to help her movements. He used the fingers of his other hand to circle her nerve center.

“Oh God,” she managed, as she writhed above him in pleasure. She raised her wrist to Eric’s mouth. “Take some—please.”

Eric shook his head and lifted his body up until he was sitting beneath her. “Not from there,” he groaned as he bit into the top of her breast, causing both of them to slip over the edge into orgasms.

Eric licked Sookie’s wound closed, enjoying the fact that he’d just made love to his bonded with the light of the sun heating their bodies. After a few minutes, he stood up with Sookie wrapped around him. “Shall we go to bed, min kära. It will be a long night tonight.”

Sookie nodded, having still not caught her breath. Eric made a pit-stop in the bathroom so that Sookie could clean up and take care of her human needs, and when she came out, she saw that he was waiting for her in the bed. As she looked at him a bit confused, Eric said merely, “It is light tight in here, and any light that comes in from the hall if you open the door will be too little to affect me. I want to sleep in my bed with *my woman*,” he said, his tone half-joking, even as his eyes were full of sincerity.

Sookie laughed as she lay down and then pulled him to lie onto her chest. “Okay, Mr. Caveman, but this morning, I get to hold you.”

He nestled into her, and given the contentment that was in the bond at that moment, it was not surprising that both were asleep in minutes.

Sookie woke up at almost 2:00 p.m. on the dot and looked down to see that Eric was still lying on her stomach. He'd managed to wedge his arm under his body so that there was hardly any weight on her, and Sookie smiled when she thought of all the little, thoughtful things that her vampire did for her like that. She ran her fingers through his boyish hair lightly, just as she'd been doing before she had fallen asleep that morning.

About fifteen minutes later, both her stomach and her bladder insisted on taking some attention away from her beloved, and Sookie slid out from underneath him. Seeing him lying without a pillow didn't suit Sookie's domestic inclinations at all, however, so she managed to slide her pillow underneath her Viking's head, even though she was almost certain it didn't matter what position he slept in. Still, she smiled when he inhaled deeply and nestled into her pillow as if he were taking in her scent. She bent down and gave him a slight kiss on the forehead.

Sookie smiled brightly as she used the toilet Eric had installed just for her. She kept smiling as she traipsed through *their* little cabin in only his T-shirt. She smiled as she began a pot of coffee in the coffee maker he'd placed in their cabin just for her. She grinned as she warmed the soup he'd packed for her in one of the pots he'd bought for her on the range he'd put in just for her. As she ate the soup and a piece of fruit, she looked out of the window at the little building next to the house. She smiled at the thought of his working in there, making the bed that he was sleeping in for the first time—with her. She smiled and hummed as she washed

the dishes and put them in the drainer that she was certain had not been in the cabin before Eric had prepared for her being there.

She skipped to the living room like a child and smiled as she folded the blankets they'd made love on. She blushed and smiled even wider as she said to herself, "We're really gonna have to make love in that big bed one day."

Then, she sat on the comfortable couch and picked up the dagger, which had been left on the coffee table. She examined it closely. She probably should have been disgusted that she could see the evidence of their shared blood on the blade, but she couldn't be. As she touched the blood on the dagger point tentatively, energy began to pool in her hands, and her palms shone as they had during their third bonding and then again during their lovemaking the previous night. She carefully put the dagger back into its velvet encasing; she'd need to make sure that the pledging ceremony didn't include her holding the dagger. The last thing she needed was to light up like a Christmas tree in front of lots of vampires while she vampire-married Eric.

At this thought, she smiled again even wider than before. By this time tomorrow, she thought, she'd be Eric's pledged—his wife!

She hugged herself in joy for a few moments.

Suddenly, Sookie sat straight up, her smile fading immediately from her face. "Fuck!" she yelled aloud.

Desperately, Sookie got up from the couch and ran for her backpack. She dug through it until she found her cell phone.

Quickly, she dialed Lafayette's phone.

He answered on the third ring, "Bitch, this better be good. I's up to my elbows in orders here!"

“Lafayette, you *have* to help me!” Sookie said, her voice panicked.

Lafayette grew immediately serious, “You in trouble, Sook? Is someone tryin’ to hurt you?”

Sookie was confused for a moment but then answered, “No! Nothing like that. I’m just—well—I’m gettin’ married tonight, as you know, and the only clothes I have here are a pair of jeans, yoga pants, and a sweater! I don’t even have lip gloss!”

Lafayette sighed with relief and chuckled, “Hooker, you just ‘bout made my heart stop! Is that all you’s troubles? I’s already on it, hon. Pam called me yesterday night. The bitch woke us up, matter of fact, and told me to go by yo’ house and get what you’d be needin’. Course, I was already plannin’ to do it anyways. So don’t worry none, hooker, we’ll get you all fixed up.”

Sookie let out a big, very audible sigh of relief. “Thanks, Laf.”

“No worries, but I gots to get back to the grill ‘fore Sam sees that I’m hiding in the walk-in. I’m already cuttin’ out early to come to yo’ shin-dig.”

Sookie laughed and hung up the phone. She sank her body back into the couch, thankful that Eric had thought of everything as he always seemed to do. If he weren’t so damned cute, she’d probably find his attention to every little detail annoying, but luckily for him, he was. She grinned.

Sookie was nervous about what Lafayette would bring for her to wear but decided that she needed to trust her friend. To take her mind off of her nerves, she began to make a list of the things she would like to bring to the cabin. She started in the kitchen with a toaster.

After an hour of wandering around and adding things to her list even as she did more exploring, Sookie decided to try to take a nap to bury her anxieties. She went back to the

bedroom, undressed, and joined Eric in the bed. She spooned herself into his body and drew his arm over her stomach before holding his elegant hand in hers. She nestled in as close as was possible.

She heard his contented sigh and felt his serenity in the bond as well. Their touch had the same effect on her nerves, and within minutes, she was asleep next to him.

Sookie awoke to Eric's fingers running slowly up and down her side. She was still spooned into him.

"Awake, my lover?" he asked, his voice husky. "I have been waiting for you."

"Yes," Sookie answered, her grogginess quickly being replaced by lust as she felt his erection dragging along her bottom.

"Ready, my lover?" was Eric's next question.

"Yes," Sookie whispered, now breathless, as Eric lifted one of her legs over his thigh and positioned himself so that he could enter her.

He tested her readiness with his fingers. "Always so ready for me, lover," he purred as he pushed himself into her slowly.

Once he was filling her, they both sighed as he stayed still for a moment. Then he started making long, languid strokes in and out of her, even as he kissed her shoulders, the top of her back, and the sensitive nape of her neck.

Sookie grabbed onto his thighs and pulled him closer. She'd never experienced sex in this position, but she reveled in the closeness of their bodies and the skin-on-skin contact that they were able to maintain, and she quickly learned to complement Eric's movements with her own.

She spoke, “I love that I can feel so much of your skin on mine.”

Eric nodded into her nape, which his lips were currently caressing. “Never enough,” he mumbled, increasing his speed as he brought his hand up to worship Sookie’s breasts.

Eric slowly brought them both toward completion. From this angle, he was able to stimulate Sookie’s G-spot on almost every upstroke. He moved his hand slowly down her body and then began to draw unhurried circles around her clit. As her heart-rate increased and she felt about ready to topple over the edge into her orgasm, Sookie arched her neck invitingly for him.

Eric bit down gently, and moments later, his seed began to flood into her body even as her blood flowed in his. Eric’s release was the last catalyst Sookie needed to find her own, and they both groaned and trembled in satisfaction.

Once their orgasms had subsided, Eric withdrew his fangs and his penis from the body of the woman who would soon be his wife according to vampire law. After licking her bite sensually with his healing saliva, he buried his face into her hair and inhaled her scent, feeling emotions that he didn’t even know how to name arise within his body. Among the ones he *did* recognize, however, was extreme thankfulness.

Feeling his swirl of emotions through the bond, Sookie pulled his arm around her even more tightly and entwined her fingers with his. “Soon—very soon, you will be my husband.”

She felt him nod into her hair and smiled.

After a few minutes of peaceful silence passed between them, Eric asked what was becoming his standard question after his waking, a question that Sookie loved, “What did you do while I was sleeping *min kván*?”

She smiled, “I explored a bit more and made a list of things we need to bring up here to make things more comfortable for me, mostly kitchen stuff. Oh—and I panicked about not

having something to wear for the pledging, so I called Lafayette and scared him half to death. Thanks, by the way, for arranging for everything with him.”

Eric shrugged, “You should thank Pamela. I texted her that you had agreed to be my pledged and wanted your family with you. After that, she took charge.”

Sookie laughed a little, “I think she still scares Lafayette a bit.”

“Lafayette is wise then,” Eric chuckled.

Sookie nestled into him and then looked at the clock, which read 5:31; that meant that the sun was already down.

Sookie turned around to face Eric. “What time do you need to be at Fangtasia?”

“About 7,” Eric said, stroking Sookie’s hair lazily. He added suggestively, “but since I am sheriff, I can be late if you want to stay in bed for a while. I find it quite *comfortable* here myself.”

“Oh no, cowboy!” Sookie said, sitting up. “We’d better get ready. I have a weddin’ tonight, and I don’t wanna worry about being late on top of everything else! You’re not gonna distract me.”

Eric chuckled. “You are a cold-hearted woman.” He got out of bed, making sure that Sookie could see her favorite part of him, and then asked seductively, “Would you care to save water and shower with me, min kära?”

Sookie sped after him. “Well it *is* a very big shower,” she said as he laughed at her eagerness. She smacked him on the ass as he picked her up over his shoulder and carried her into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, she'd been washed, dirtied, and then washed again, but she was certain that no water had been saved. Eric had a satisfied smirk on his face as he finished drying off and put a towel around his waist. She tried to look disapprovingly at his expression but failed due to being distracted by the way that towel was sitting dangerously low on his beautiful hips. She had to inhale sharply as she took in the V-shaped cut of his body disappearing underneath the towel.

His smirk grew even more pronounced at the spike in her lust, and Sookie threw her own towel at him.

Eric caught the towel easily and his eyes roved over her naked form. "If this is your idea of punishment, lover, remind me to be continuously naughty."

Sookie picked up another towel and tried to pop him with it, but Eric laughed and zoomed out of the bathroom. Sookie couldn't help her own chuckle as she grabbed the robe and followed him out.

Sookie quickly put on her jeans and a sweater and then turned around to watch Eric as she slipped her pendant over her head. He put on form-fitting black pants; a steel gray button down shirt, which he left unbuttoned to about mid-chest; and a black, perfectly cut jacket similar to the one he'd been wearing the night they'd met. He finished the look with his usual necklace.

To Sookie, he looked like sex on a stick.

Feeling Sookie's lust spike, Eric turned and faced her, smirking yet again. "See something you like, Miss Stackhouse?"

Sookie blushed, but met Eric's eyes directly. "Yes, as a matter of fact. I like it *very* much. You usually don't wear shirts like this; it reminds me of the first night I saw you."

“Ah,” Eric smiled as he walked slowly toward her, “the night you brazenly came into a vampire bar asking questions, the night you warned me about the police raid, the night that I had a very hard time pretending that you were not having such a big effect on me? Yes—I do remember that night, though I admit, what I was wearing had slipped my mind. What *you* were wearing, however, has not left my mind since that night. Perhaps, you could model it for me in private?” he asked suggestively.

Sookie sighed, “Sorry, but that dress was a casualty of the Maenad attack.”

A twinkle in his eye, Eric said, “What a pity—*for me.*”

Sookie remembered that line as well as Eric’s delivery of it from their first conversation and smiled. “You were such an ass that night, actin’ all big, bad vampire.”

“With everyone else, it is no act, *min kära*; however, with you, I have never been able to quite pull it off, have I?” His eyes were still twinkling.

“Nope, not really,” she deadpanned. “Something in your eyes always gave you away.”

“I’ll work on that,” he said.

“Don’t you dare!”

They both laughed, and Eric bent down to lightly kiss Sookie’s forehead. They made their way to the living room, and Eric put the velvet case with the dagger inside into Sookie’s backpack.

“I don’t have to hold the dagger at all, do I?” Sookie asked. “When I picked it up today, my hand lit up again.”

“Interesting,” Eric said. “No, you will hand me the dagger still inside its velvet wrapping. I will open and handle it. You needn’t touch it.”

Sookie sighed in relief.

Eric picked up the folded afghan from the couch, where Sookie had put it earlier. “I do want you to be careful though. Don’t let anyone see the velvet pouch before you give it to me. We don’t want someone *like Bill* stepping between us and trying to intercept it. You can hide it under the bouquet of flowers that should be waiting for you at the safe house.”

“He could do that—intercept the knife? Would that mean that I’d get pledged to him?” she asked horrified.

“He could try, but there has to be clear intent on the part of the giver so that,” he paused, “*mistakes* do not happen.”

He continued after a moment, “However, Bill is desperate to have you, so I put nothing past him.”

“He doesn’t know about our pledging, does he?”

“No, only Pam, Miranda, Jarod, Lafayette, Jesus, and your brother were told.”

Sookie suddenly got nervous, “What if Jason let something slip?”

Eric smiled, “I’m sure he did not, but remember that we are closely monitoring Bill, so if he knows of our plans to pledge, we will know it.”

“Okay,” Sookie said.

As the couple stepped outside, Eric took the backpack and wrapped the afghan snugly around Sookie as he’d done before their flight two nights before. He picked her up bridal style, and she locked her arms snugly around him. “Ready?” he asked.

“Yep,” she nodded as they took to the air.

Chapter 78: Gifts, Part I

Twenty minutes later, Eric and Sookie landed in the front yard of what looked like a normal suburban home in a normal suburban neighborhood.

“I’m still waitin’ for that Gothic castle, Northman,” Sookie grumbled playfully.

Eric smiled at her, “Miranda and Jarod are inside, min kära.”

“Everything else okay?” Sookie asked, reaching up to touch his nose.

“Yes,” he answered. “No one who shouldn’t have has been here.”

“Good.”

Eric held Sookie steady until he was certain that she had regained her balance after their flight, and then each grabbed the other’s hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. They grinned at each other.

“They’re like magnets—you know?” Sookie said squeezing his hand and raising their shared grip up a bit.

“I know.” He pulled their hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers before letting them drop. She playfully swung them back and forth as they walked toward the house.

Eric approached the front door and exposed a hidden panel, not unlike the one at the cabin. “So all your houses have this?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. “Yes—most of *our* houses do. But different people have different levels of access. For instance, you know the main code that I use, and your thumbprint has been keyed to access everything. Pam is the only other to have this level of security, though even she has a different number to use than we do. Others, like Miranda, are coded only into certain residences.”

“Oh,” Sookie acknowledged.

As Sookie and Eric entered, they were greeted by Jarod, who nodded, “Hey, Sookie! Good evening, sheriff.”

Miranda came into the room, “Everything is ready, Eric. Bobby dropped off the food you ordered, and Pam came by earlier.” Miranda looked at Sookie with a little smile playing on her lips. “We put the packages she dropped off for Miss Stackhouse into the master bedroom.”

“Excellent,” Eric said.

“What packages?” Sookie asked.

“You’ll have to find out, min kära,” Eric said mysteriously. “For now, I should go so that I can see to area business. That way, we can get to ours quicker.” He bent down and kissed Sookie lightly on the lips. “Soon—my love.”

And with that, he left at vampire speed. Sookie felt an immediate sense of loss at his absence that seemed to pulse through their bond. She wondered if Eric felt it too. She smiled, thinking about how they’d been closer than any two people could be in the last several days, ever since Wednesday night when he’d come over for her “test.” They hadn’t been apart since then, and she sighed at the separation now, wondering if she’d ever get used to it.

Miranda interrupted her thoughts. “Miss Stackhouse, there is some food in the kitchen. And the others will be here in a little while. I suspect that you might want to start getting ready right after that.”

“You should call me Sookie—please,” she told Miranda with a smile.

“Okay,” Miranda responded, looking closely at Sookie.

“What?” Sookie couldn’t help but ask.

“It’s just that you smell a lot like him now, and he smells of you as well.”

“Well, we’ve been around each other a lot, and we’ve had each other’s blood. Wouldn’t that do it?”

“Yes,” Miranda agreed. “But there’s something a little different too. I just can’t quite place it.” She shrugged, “Oh well, you hungry?”

Sookie nodded her head vigorously, “Famished actually.”

Miranda pointed out the direction of the kitchen, and Sookie had begun to follow her toward it when she suddenly stopped, remembering something. “Oh damn!” she said, worriedly. She turned toward the front door nervously. In her mind, she was screaming, “*Eric!*”

Eric had felt the absence of Sookie by his side acutely from the moment he’d left her. His side of the bond was throbbing with his longing for her, but he managed to squelch his desire to immediately return to the safe house. “Suck it up, Northman,” he said to himself. “You’ll see her in just a few hours.” He sighed and smiled to himself. Never in his life had Eric felt so connected to another individual, not even to Godric. Sookie was such a large part of him now that he was not surprised that his mind and body cried out in her absence. The feeling of it—the feeling of being part of something bigger than just himself—made him all the more thankful for her.

When he was about a minute away from Fangtasia, he suddenly felt something odd from Sookie’s end of the bond. It was a rapid burst of anxiety. Immediately thereafter, he felt something that could only be compared to a vampire summoning his or her progeny. He’d had a similar feeling when Sookie had summoned him into her dream, but what he was experiencing right then was even more powerful—more like it felt when Godric had compelled him to do something.

Instantaneously, Eric stopped his progress and whirled around before heading back to the safe house as fast as he could.

Less than a minute later, Eric touched down in the yard. Sookie was waiting for him and launched herself into his arms. Miranda and Jarod were both standing close by and on high alert as they had reacted to Sookie's sudden behavior shift from a minute before.

"What is it, my love?" Eric asked anxiously, even as he inhaled deeply to search for any threats. There were none.

"I'm sorry," Sookie said into his chest. "It's just that—I remembered something, and I got worried."

Eric picked her up into his arms and walked them over to a bench on the porch. He nodded toward Miranda, and she and Jarod went inside the house. "What did you remember, Sookie?" he asked softly as he settled them onto the bench.

"You didn't put on your vest, Eric," Sookie said worriedly. "You promised me you would."

Eric couldn't help but chuckle a bit. "Sookie, the vest is at Fangtasia. I promise that it will go on me as soon as I get there, and I will carefully scan the area before I land there; I even have a secret entrance on the roof that I use. I will be fine, *min kära*."

Sookie looked up at Eric, her large brown eyes bright with her worry. "I know, Eric. I know that you are more than a thousand years old and that you are obviously really good at surviving. I know that you can protect yourself and me, but I just can't help but worry when I'm not with you." She chuckled a bit at herself. "I just feel all wifey all of a sudden. And having snipers with wooden bullets seems like *exactly* the kind of thing Bill would do."

Eric pulled her onto his lap and touched her forehead with his. “I like the idea of you feeling ‘all wifey,’ Sookie. And you needn’t worry about snipers; I am able to hear even guns that have silencers on them. And, as you know, I can avoid bullets if I wish.”

“Yeah—or run right into them.” She sighed, remembering when he had intercepted the bullet she’d intended for the Were from Jackson.

He grinned. “Perhaps that was all just a ploy to see if you’d suck it out again, *min kära*.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” she said, looking up at him with mirth in her eyes. “That is *absolutely* somethin’ that you would do, you tricky Viking.”

Eric grinned wider. “Did you know that you called me to you?”

“Huh?” Sookie asked inelegantly.

Eric chuckled, “You called me like a maker can call his or her vampire progeny—like I can call Pamela or like Godric could call me.”

Sookie looked a bit confused and then asked, “Do you think that this could be what Jesus was talkin’ about—us bein’ able to share each other’s gifts to a certain extent?”

Eric nodded, “I think so. Also, our bond and my blood may be magnifying your own fairy powers. Remember that some fairies are able to project their thoughts into others.”

Sookie nodded and bit her lip. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you or anything. I just wanted to make sure you’d be safe.”

Eric pulled her close again. “It is alright, my love. I like that you have this ability now and hope you will retain it. This way, you can call me to you whenever you need me. Also, it is nice to see that some of my own powers are being transferred to you. I was beginning to think that I was the only beneficiary when it came to gift-sharing.”

Sookie hit him lightly on his chest and looked up at him seriously. “You know that the only gift I need is the one I’m looking at, right?”

He nodded, “Ditto.”

“You really have—like—a bat entrance on the roof of Fangtasia?”

Eric chuckled, “Yes. I’ll show you sometime.”

“I bet you have a bat cave somewhere too—don’t cha?”

Eric laughed out loud, “But of course. It is underneath my castle.”

Sookie smiled and rested into Eric for another minute before getting up. He stood beside her.

He spoke low, “The next time I see you, you will be coming toward me to be my bride.”

He kissed her forehead and then rested his on hers for a long moment.

“The next time I see you, you will be waiting to be my husband,” she said in a low, emotion-filled voice as she entwined her arms around him.

Eric kissed her lightly on the lips and escorted her back inside the safe house.

Chapter 79: Gifts, Part 2

Sookie walked into the kitchen and noticed a veritable feast of what looked like catered food. There were fixings for sandwiches and various types of salads as well as sodas and tea. Sookie filled up a plate with a sandwich and two types of salad and grabbed a Dr. Pepper since she hadn't had a soda for several days.

"There's plenty for everyone to have some food," Sookie said to Jarod and Miranda as she went into the living room to join them.

Jarod quickly took her up on her offer and went to the kitchen.

Sookie took a seat on the couch so that she could set her plate onto the coffee table.

"We were just watching a bit of the news," Miranda said. The two women watched quietly and a bit awkwardly for several minutes as Sookie ate her food.

When Jarod rejoined them, he had a plate piled with more food than Sookie could have eaten in a whole day. He gave her a wink.

"So you worked for Godric?" Sookie asked after a few more minutes, trying to make small talk and to get to know the couple that she was going to be seeing a lot of for the foreseeable future.

"Yes," Miranda answered with a sad smile on her face. "He was a great vampire. He treated the Weres and shifters in his area with respect and sought to work with them. He saw them as equals, which is unusual for vampires."

Sookie smiled, "That doesn't surprise me. I didn't know him for long, but he seemed so kind-hearted and wise."

"He was," Jarod said. "It was a pleasure working for him."

"I just wish we had known that he was going to . . ." Miranda's voice trailed off.

“I know,” Sookie said quietly.

“You were with him,” Miranda asked quietly, “at the end?”

Sookie nodded.

“And Eric?” Miranda asked.

“He was there right before,” Sookie said quietly. She didn’t want to share any specifics about Eric and Godric’s last exchange. The emotions it brought up in her were raw, both concerning the loss of Godric and the pain her beloved had felt.

Just then, Sookie’s cell phone rang, and she went to the entryway to fish it out of the backpack.

She saw Eric’s number displayed on the caller I.D. and smiled as she answered.

“You just left *again*,” she chided.

“True,” his voice said on the other end, “but I found that I missed you *again* as soon as I had parted from you, min kván. And then I felt your sorrow. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Sookie said. “We were just talking about Godric.”

Eric was quiet, and Sookie reached into the bond and felt Eric’s own sadness at the mention of his maker.

She changed the subject, “So has your business started yet?”

“No, but the first vampires I am seeing will be arriving soon.”

“Vest on?” she asked.

He chuckled, “As soon as I got here.”

“Okay,” Sookie said.

There was a pause. “I will see you soon, my love.”

“And I, you. Eric, I love you.”

“And I, you,” he echoed as he hung up.

She stuck her phone into her pocket.

Jarod smiled at Sookie when she returned to the living room. “Eric’s a lot like Godric, actually,” he said.

“Maybe,” Miranda said screwing up her brow.

“He *is* open to the new,” Jarod said looking at Sookie significantly.

“Yes, he it,” Miranda relented.

Sookie watched with interest as the exchange continued between Miranda and Jarod. It was obvious to her that the two were deeply in love. The little gestures they made to each other gave them away—their leans toward one another, their stolen glances, the way they smiled at each other with their eyes. Sookie stopped listening to what they were saying after a while as they went on to other topics. Instead, she became lost in her own world as she wondered if Eric and she looked like that to others.

She was interrupted from her reverie when both Miranda and Jarod went on high alert, their bodies tensing. Sookie couldn’t help but wonder what they looked like when they shifted into lions.

After a moment, Miranda relaxed and Jarod followed suit immediately after. “It is Bubba and your people,” Miranda said as a knock sounded at the door.

Jarod gestured for Sookie to stay seated and Miranda took a position between Sookie and the entryway as Jarod went to the door.

Sookie stayed tense until Lafayette, Jesus, Jason, and Bubba came into the entryway. Jason went immediately to Sookie and gave her a big hug. “Sis, I forgot to tell you on the phone yesterday, but congratulations.”

Sookie smiled widely and chuckled, “Thanks, Jason.”

“Well, I’m real happy for you, Sook. I think Eric’s a real good guy—I mean vampire. Gran would be real happy that you found someone who loves you like that vamp does.”

Sookie hugged her brother again, this time with tears in her eyes.

Lafayette spoke up, “This is all well and good, hooker, but you’s needs to get yourself ready or you’s gonna be goin’ to yo’ weddin’ in blue jeans.”

Sookie smiled and brushed the tears out of her eyes.

Miranda spoke up, “You should use the master bedroom, Sookie. And check those packages from Pam before you get dressed.” She winked knowingly at Sookie.

Sookie started toward the stairs and then paused, “Lafayette, when we talked earlier, you were at Merlotte’s, right?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Could anyone have overheard you talkin’ to me about the wedding?” she asked him.

Lafayette shook his head, “No, Sook. Don’t worry your pretty little head ‘bout that. I stepped into the walk-in freezer to talk to you, hon.”

She looked at Jesus and Jason, “Y’all didn’t tell anyone about us gettin’ pledged tonight, did you?”

Both shook their heads and Sookie confirmed this information with a glance into their thoughts, just to make sure that they hadn’t been glamourous. She did the same with Lafayette.

Sookie sighed with relief and looked at Miranda, “Can you text Eric to say that everything is still okay and that no one told anyone.”

“Sure,” Miranda said, already pulling out her phone.

Lafayette grabbed Sookie's arm in his and said dramatically, "We'll be back when we's beautiful."

"Last door on the left!" Jarod yelled as Lafayette dragged Sookie toward the stairs.

Sookie heard Miranda telling Jason and Jesus that there was food in the kitchen, and she smiled at Jason's predictable excitement.

As Lafayette pulled her into the master bedroom and then pulled the door closed behind them, she noticed for the first time that he was holding a bag over his shoulder.

"Da-yum," Lafayette intoned, seeing the room. "You's got yourself a keeper!"

Sookie took in the room as well. It looked like a picture out of *Architectural Digest*, but Sookie found herself longing for the rustic charm of the farmhouse or the cabin. In that moment, Sookie realized that at the end of the day, her taste and Eric's were actually quite close. His favorite home had all the uniqueness and comfort of Gran's; she smiled to think that Eric had seen this too as he had painstakingly renovated Gran's home—now *their* home.

She was pulled out of her musing by Lafayette, who was grasping a tiny box from Tiffany's that lay on the bed. "Shit, girl, who do all these belong to?" Lafayette said, gesturing to several boxes and a garment bag on the bed, all with designer labels on them.

Sookie shrugged. "Miranda said that Pam brought them for me."

"Hey, there's a note," Lafayette said, picking up an envelope with Sookie's name on it and handing it to his friend.

Sookie opened it. "It's from Pam," she said. She read it out loud, "Sookie, Eric asked me to pick out some things that you might like for this evening. But the Tiffany's is something he got for you right after the Longshadow incident. It'll be good to have it out of his desk drawer at Fangtasia (and you're welcome for not stealing it). The little black box is something

that he had made. The rest is the best I could do with such short notice. Really—given all the trouble I had to take, you must ask me to be your bridesmaid at your human wedding now, just to make it all up to me.”

Sookie chuckled, especially at the underlined words, and then put down the letter. She took the Tiffany’s box from Lafayette’s out-stretched hand. She opened it tentatively, and in it, she found the most beautiful ring she’d ever seen. It had three deep blue sapphires along the top, each one surrounded by small diamonds. The middle sapphire was round and larger. The other two, one on either side of the center-piece, were square. The overall effect of diamond and sapphire was beautiful, and the platinum band that held the stones was the perfect balance of delicate and thick.

Lafayette gasped as Sookie picked the ring out of the box and held it. “Shit, Sook,” was all he could manage.

Sookie looked at the ring and saw an inscription inside. It read, “min kära.” Tears



began to pool in her eyes as she held out the ring for Lafayette to see.

“What does it mean?” he asked, looking at the inscription.

“It means, ‘my beloved’ in Swedish. He first called me that in a dream, and now he says it all the time.”

“So what did she mean by right after Longshadow?”

Sookie smiled, “That was the second time we met. I was still with Bill then. It was before Eric kidnapped you. It was before—well—almost everything he and I have ever gone through together.”

They both sat down on the bed side by side. Lafayette asked, “So he bought this before you disappeared, before all that shit with the maenad, before you even went to Dallas?”

Sookie only nodded as she twirled the ring in her hands. She finally said, “He likes red; red is his favorite color.”

Confused, Lafayette waited for Sookie to make a point.

“He didn’t know blue was my favorite color at the time either. How could he have known that I love sapphires so much?” She continued to turn the ring over and over in her hands.

Lafayette shook his head, “Somethin’ about that vamp just seems to gets somethin’ about you, baby girl. Don’t ask me to explain it.”

“Yeah,” Sookie nodded. “He always has.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “It’s the perfect ring for me, Lala. It’s not too gaudy or big, you know? But still so beautiful! It looks antique!”

“Put it on,” he encouraged.

Sookie slipped the beautiful piece of jewelry onto the ring finger on her left hand. She gasped as it fit perfectly and seemed to light up her whole hand. “Perfect,” she whispered.

“Yep,” Lafayette agreed. “It looks right on your finger—sure enough.”

She smiled at him, her tears threatening to overwhelm her.

Lafayette quickly said, “None of that, hon. Don’t make your eyes all swollen ‘fore the weddin.’ Let’s check out these other packages.”

Sookie nodded, and Lafayette picked up and unzipped a thick garment bag. The bag held three dresses, all in Sookie’s size. Sookie and Lafayette both gulped as Sookie ran her fingers over the beautiful garments.

Lafayette opened one of the boxes and found lingerie, also all in Sookie's size. Sookie blushed as she saw them, but then noticed that they were obviously chosen with each of the dresses in mind.

Another box held three pairs of shoes and handbags, each item meant to complement a dress.

"Shit, Sook!" Lafayette said as he handed her a small black box that had been on top of the lingerie. "This shit makes the stuff I brought you seem pretty uninspirin'."

"I can only imagine," she said as she thought about her closet's contents. She lifted the lid of the black box and gasped for what must have been the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. Inside was a pair of beautiful drop sapphire earrings that had obviously been designed to match her ring.

Sookie sat speechless as she tried to take in all the beautiful things around her. It was Lafayette that sprang into action. "Well, missy, you's needs to get movin' and try these dresses on so we's can pick one. How long do we got?"

"About two hours or so," Sookie said a bit overwhelmed.

"Well, then you's better scoot, hooker!" he grabbed the boxes of lingerie and shoes and put them into the en-suite bathroom. Then he pulled out the first dress. "Here, put on this one first," he ordered. "After you's done pickin', we can gets to your nails and hair and make-up."

Sookie nodded obediently. She took the dress, went into the bathroom, and shut the door to change. The dress was mostly ivory, though there was a black ribbon that tied around the waist. It was sleeveless with a V-neck, but the straps that went over the shoulders were sheer. The shirred chiffon that made up most of the dress began with a flattering modern sweetheart style cut. After the black ribbon pulled in the fabric to a flattering waistline, the skirt flowed to

mid-thigh in a subtle A-line shape. Sookie grabbed the ivory-colored strapless bra and the matching lacy thong and quickly dressed. She added the ivory, strappy heels that were in the box and then took herself in in the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

“Hey, hooker, you’s still in there?” Lafayette called through the door.

Sookie opened the door and peaked out. The dress fit her like it was made for her, and the cut was both flattering and a little sexy. She loved the crinkled look and feel of the chiffon.

Lafayette whistled a bit as she walked out. “Wow, Sook! You look really pretty.”

“Thanks, Lala,” she grinned. “I don’t think the others can be better, do you?”

“Maybe not, but you’s gonna try them anyways. Here—this one’s next.”



Sookie grabbed a deep blue, satin cocktail dress from Lafayette’s hands. The color was beautiful and the blue matched the stones in her ring almost perfectly.

Sookie returned to the bathroom. Wistfully, she took off the ivory dress, putting it on the counter lovingly; she was certain that she’d be coming back to it, but Lafayette was right. She needed to try on the other dresses just in case. She pulled on a black lacey bra and panty set that she knew was meant for the blue dress. She pulled the dress off the hanger and carefully put

it over her head. She shimmied into it and marveled at the effect even before she zipped it up. This dress was sleek and sleeveless, much tighter than the first. The neckline, like the one on the other dress, was V-neck, though it plunged much more deeply and much less innocently. Right under the bust-line, the vertical ruching of the top of the dress gave way to tight, horizontal ruching, making the dress a modern take on an empire cut. The dress hugged and slimmed Sookie, and she immediately felt like the sexiest girl in the world in it. Whereas the ivory dress had been innocent with a touch of sexiness, this dress was all sexy.

She pulled on the black stiletto heels that Pam had gotten for the dress and again took herself in. She smiled sexily at the image; Eric would definitely like this one. And she absolutely loved the color.

She stepped outside the bathroom door. “Oh, baby!” Lafayette said, “I think we’s got ourselves a new front-runner.”

Sookie grinned. “I know—right?” By this time, Sookie was ecstatic. The ivory dress had been a ten in her book, yet this blue one seemed even more perfect.

“One more,” Lafayette smiled as he handed her the final dress, a one-shoulder fire engine red number.

Sookie took it and headed to the bathroom. She pushed off the black heels and unzipped the blue dress even more lovingly than she’d done the ivory one. She put it down gently on the counter and quickly changed into a red strapless bra and matching lacey boy shorts. After maneuvering the one-shoulder design of the red dress over her head, she felt it drop over the rest of her body with ease. The fabric felt luxuriant and was shirred toward the shoulder. The dress flowed naturally from the top of the single shoulder to her waist and beyond until it reached a

few inches above the knee. The skirt, to off-set the one-shoulder look perfectly, was slightly asymmetrical.

Sookie pulled a pair of red strappy heels from the box and sat on the toilet lid as she maneuvered them on. As she stood up, she took her first look at herself in the full-length mirror and gasped yet again. She would have never picked this dress off a rack for herself, but there was something about it that made it seem meant just for her. The color off-set the lingering tan of her skin, and she felt the perfect mixture of feminine and sexy in it. The second she saw herself in it, she knew it was the dress she would pledge herself to Eric in.



She stepped out into the bedroom to the stares of both Lafayette and Jesus, who had obviously just brought his boyfriend a plate of food. Neither said a word as they took in Sookie. They didn't need to.

Sookie turned a full circle, and Lafayette finally managed to speak. "That's it, girl."

Jesus added, "I didn't see the others, but I agree."

Sookie's grin was radiant. She thought of how free and easy she felt in the dress, like some kind of goddess. And she also thought about Eric. He'd love the exposed shoulder, ready only for him to touch—to bite. She had to fan herself at that thought.

He'd love the way the color played with her sun-kissed skin; he'd know that the color of her skin had come from the days she'd sat out in the sun with just him in mind. Plus, it was his favorite color, and she thought about how she'd look next to him: he in his perfectly cut black

suit and her in this dress. She swirled again, thinking of how the blue of the sapphires would contrast vibrantly with the red of the dress.

At that moment, a buzz was heard from her phone, signaling a text. She lunged for it, knowing it was from Eric. It read, “Remember to tell me what you were doing at this exact moment, lover. I must know.”

Sookie quickly typed back, “You’ll know when you see me.”

A moment later, Eric had sent, “I miss you. Soon.”

Sookie sent, “Yes, soon.”

Sookie smiled brightly as she put her phone back down. She raised her eyes to see Lafayette and Jesus looking at her with wide, indulgent grins on their faces.

She could only grin back.

Chapter 80: Friends and Enemies

As Eric addressed the few complaints between vampires and Supes that needed his attention, he felt extremely grateful for both of the women in his life.

Pam had—even more skillfully than he could have hoped for, given his almost complete absence from his sheriff duties for more than two weeks—managed to keep his schedule light and was currently expediting matters even more by exacting the punishment on two vampires who had carelessly fed from an under-aged human. His keen hearing picked up on both the screams of the two young vampires, who were currently getting silvered, as well as the taunting words of his child.

The main woman in his life now—his bonded and soon-to-be bride—had also been delighting him through their bond for most of the evening. Her emotions were sling-shotting between nervous and eager, elated and content, and euphoric and determined. And under all of her fleeting feelings was her love for him, humming in the background, never wavering.

As he listened to the mundane details of a business dispute between two vampires, he found himself wondering what each of Sookie's spikes in emotion had meant. If he were brutally honest with himself—and he had been a lot lately—he would admit to the world that he missed Sookie terribly, right from the moment she was out of his sight. He missed being with her to personally decipher what all her changes in emotions indicated.

Earlier in the evening, he had felt a mixture of intense joy, love, and surprise from her, and he guessed that was from when she saw her ring for the first time. He had debated waiting to give the ring to her in person after their pledging, but for a reason he couldn't name, he wanted it on her finger when she handed him the dagger. A ring was, after all, a symbol that she would understand well. The dagger, in many ways, was for him; the ring was for her.

Still, he wished that he had had a chance to give it to Sookie himself at the safe house, but he'd been running late already, even before she called him back to her. Of course, he hadn't minded her call; his first priority would always be his bonded. Plus, he hadn't been joking with Sookie earlier: he was the fucking sheriff, and anyone that wanted to see him was on *his* fucking time as far as he was concerned.

However, he knew that if he'd been the one to give her the ring, she would have looked up at him with those beautiful doe eyes of hers and would have had an expression on her face that fucking *compelled* him to make love to her right then and there. The thousand-year-old vampire certainly understood the limits to his own control, and sometimes he just couldn't fucking resist taking his bonded. Her body called to him during his every waking moment, but sometimes it fucking screamed; at those times, there was no way for him to abstain from burying himself into her. And if he had taken her at the safe house, he wouldn't have had time to properly worship her beautiful body if they were to complete the pledging that night as well. It was a fucking quandary—a Catch-22—as far as he was concerned, and in the end, he had ordered Pam to include the Tiffany's box and the earrings he'd had made with Sookie's other packages.

He regretted, however, missing the look on her face when she first saw the ring. He imagined her beautiful brown eyes glistening.

He thought back to the day that he'd first seen Sookie's ring. He certainly had not been intending to buy her one. After all, he hadn't even acknowledged—let alone admitted—his feelings for her when he got it. To this day, he couldn't put a finger on what had compelled him.

Pam had been looking through a Tiffany's catalogue of vintage pieces that were to be sold at a special auction. And as Pam had shown him the tenth piece she wanted him to bid on

for her, he'd seen the ring, and a fleeting thought of Sookie had immediately come to him. By the time the auction took place two days later, that thought had wormed its way into Eric to the extent that he couldn't help but bid on the ring. He arranged for Bobby to buy it at whatever price was necessary, and after a while, he could no longer picture Sookie's hand without the ring gracing it.

It was right after Dallas that he'd arranged for the inscription, and Pam had stumbled upon it the night Sookie and Jessica had come to Fangtasia looking for information about the tattoo they'd found on the Were.

He'd come into his office after Sookie had left that night to find Pam sitting at his desk with the Tiffany's box on top of it. She'd looked at him like he was going insane. Very aware that the rediscovery of the location of the tattooed Weres might lead to his final death, Eric had said only, "Make sure she gets that if something happens to me."

Pam had said, "I saw this in the Tiffany's auction catalogue, Eric. You must have gotten it weeks ago."

Eric had nodded and left the office without another word. He'd gone to his cabin that night and had thought about the very different ring that was then in residence on Sookie's finger. It was the ring Bill had given to her, a pretty solitaire diamond on a gold band. It had been slipping around on Sookie's finger, and Eric had wondered how the hell Bill hadn't gotten the fucking size right. "He's a vampire for fuck's sake!" Eric said to himself. And a vampire's vision and sense of proportion were perfect when it came to judging the sizes of things. Even if Bill's vision was as deficient as his other senses, he'd had plenty of time to study Sookie's finger and get it the fuck right!

That incorrectly-sized ring, more than anything else, had annoyed Eric that night. Plus the ring had been ordinary—expensive, but ordinary. He had thought about how Sookie deserved something beyond that. He'd stayed up until the bleeds started that morning, wondering what the hell he was going to do about Sookie Stackhouse and feeling guilty for having lied to her. He'd gone to her the next night as soon as he'd risen and told her as much of the truth as he could at the time.

Eric shook himself out of his memories as the vampires in front of him finally shut the fuck up. Just as he was preparing to hand down his judgment, he felt a particularly sharp spike of happiness from Sookie. He told the vampires to wait as he texted her. He managed to keep his countenance business-like and bored through the whole exchange with his beloved, and then he finished up with the vampires.

Next was his meeting with the new Werewolf pack leader of the area. He smirked as Tray Dawson walked into his office and sat down across from his desk without a word.

“I see you took my advice, Dawson,” Eric began.

“Let’s just say—I thought over what you said and realized that there was no other alpha worthy of the position.”

Eric nodded. “I assume the pack will no longer actively detach itself from vampire business, nor will it interfere with it.”

Tray nodded, “May I assume the same?”

“Of course. Just so you know, the Werelioness, Miranda Stevenson, and her partner Jarod Campbell, who is a shifter, will be in my area providing protection for Sookie Stackhouse for the foreseeable future.”

There was a pause. “You really care about that woman, don’t you?”

“She is my bonded mate, and tonight she is pledging herself to me by vampire rite.”

Tray looked at Eric squarely for a moment and then nodded. “I still hope to find my mate one day. You are lucky to have found yours.”

Eric chuckled, “I hope it takes you less time than it did me.”

Tray chuckled as well, “So do I.” There was a pause. “Ms. Stevenson is well-known among all Weres; the pack will invite her and her partner to run with us at the full moon.”

Eric bowed his head a bit, “Miranda will appreciate the invitation.” He reached down in his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of fifty-year-old Dalmore single malt scotch.

“Congratulations are in order for both of us tonight,” Eric said as he handed Tray the bottle.

“Shit, Northman,” Tray said smiling. “You know I’m just as happy with a bottle of Jim Beam.”

Eric chuckled, “Then grab a bottle of that too on your way out. And sell the Dalmore on eBay.”

Tray laughed as he stood up. “I might just do that, Northman! You start wearing that helmet yet?”

“You get that Volvo?”

The two nodded at each other, and Tray left.

Eric shifted through a bit of paperwork on his desk as he waited for his next appointment, Isabel. The female vampire arrived with an extremely smug expression on her face.

“All is in place, Eric,” she said, her accent prominent. “Rasul and Thalia will be here within the half hour, and my people have formed a perimeter with some of yours just in case the king decides to do anything unexpected.”

“Very good,” Eric said, trying to ignore her expression.

She waited for a few seconds before speaking in a teasing voice, ““How does Bill Compton feel about your interest in Sookie?””¹

Eric smirked at her. “Just like in Dallas, I have very little concern over what Bill Compton *feels*.”

Isabel chuckled, “It seems *your interest* in Sookie has changed, however.”

“No—my willingness to share that interest with vampires that do not know how to mind their own business is all that has changed.”

Isabel laughed, “Oh Eric—it is a pleasure to see you be the one who is bitten for a change.”

Eric smirked, “Fine. I admit it. I love Sookie, and I will protect her with all that I have. She is the *most* important thing to me.”

“You know—I could have told you all this in Dallas especially after the way she stood up for Godric. I could see how you were looking at her then.” Isabel sobered, “Godric would have approved of her as well, you know. He often told me that he wished for your happiness—wished for you to move beyond your quest for vengeance.”

Eric nodded, “You—*also*—were very important to Godric.”

The two vampires let the silence sit between them for a moment as they thought of Godric.

¹ You will notice that Isabel says what her character in *True Blood* said. I don't own this dialogue.

Finally, Isabel spoke, “I will go take my position before Bill’s spy arrives.” With that, she left the office.

About five minutes before his appointment with Lillith, Eric called Pam to him. She was at his side in moments. “Have fun?”

Pam looked at the fingernails, “Always. I do so enjoy my *work*.”

Eric smiled at his child, “If Sookie’s reactions this evening are any indication of the quality of your other work, then I guess I’ll be getting you those limited-edition Louboutins you’ve been begging for.”

“I think you will enjoy her outfit no matter what she chooses, but I have my money on the red one.”

Eric perked up, “You know I like red.”

Pam winked and then went into the bar area to collect Lillith, who had presented herself as they had expected—a vampire who wanted to relocate to the area and who was hoping to find work at Fangtasia.

Pam was pleasantly surprised by Lillith, very pleasantly surprised. She was about 5’9” and had the body of a runway model. Her hair was deep brown and her eyes matched it. Pam was going to enjoy the role that Eric had suggested she play—that of a child whose maker had basically deserted her for a mere human. “Well hello,” Pam said. “Aren’t you pretty as a picture—a very, very delectable picture.”

Lillith bristled a bit before returning Pam’s smile. Pam led her back to Eric’s office. “This is Lillith,” Pam purred as she walked into the office. “Isn’t she a dish.”

Eric couldn't even muster a look of interest at the beautiful vampire who had just entered his office. When first hearing of Bill's plan on the Friday before, he'd thought for about a second that he might try to play along—at least ostensibly. He knew that he would be able to convince Bill's spy that her plan of seduction was working, but one thought of Sookie had caused him to disregard that idea.

It wasn't that he thought Sookie would suspect him of infidelity. However, Eric found that he couldn't fathom the idea of even feigning interest in someone other than his bonded. He chuckled to himself as he thought of Sookie's possessive reaction the evening before. No—there would be no playacting on his part.

He looked up at Lillith and could see her beauty clearly, but it meant nothing to him.

“Sheriff Northman,” Lillith said, her voice oozing seductive charm, “I have been told that you are fair and generous, and I would like the opportunity to serve a,” she paused and looked at him enticingly, “*useful* capacity for you in *any* way you would have me.”

Eric sighed dismissively, grateful that he could leave the seducing part up to Pam, “Miss Jansen is it?”

“Yes,” she answered.

Eric continued with an indifferent air, “Your previous sheriff gave you an adequate recommendation. You may settle in the area. Will that be all?”

Lillith looked a little flustered and then tried again, “Thank you, sheriff. I was hoping to find work here. I have some dancing experience, and I am a certified bartender. I could give you a *private* audition if you wish.”

“Pamela,” Eric said. “Miss Jansen seems to be well-suited for the opening we have at the bar. Get her settled. That will be all.” Eric literally couldn’t stand the innuendo in Lillith’s voice anymore. Pam could deal with her.

Pam led Lillith out of the office, her hand poised dangerously close to the brunette’s ass.

“I had heard he was more . . .” Lillith began as they walked back into the bar.

“Oh he *was*, to be sure,” Pam interrupted and rolled her eyes, “but now he’s pussy whipped over a human woman.” Pam snorted, playing her part perfectly.

“He’s with a human?” Lillith tried to ask casually.

“Yes, a little blond number and the *bane* in my fucking existence,” Pam complained.

“Do tell,” Lillith pushed.

“What do you think of pillow talk?” Pam leered as she slowly dragged her perfectly manicured finger from Lillith’s neck to the top of her plunging bodice.

“Sounds nice,” Lillith said, though Pam could tell from her eyes that she wasn’t really enthusiastic. Pam knew that in a matter of fifteen minutes, she could have Lillith squirming under her in ecstasy—and much more satisfied than ‘ten-minute Bill’ was making her.

Pam laughed to herself as she thought about her new nickname for King Compton. Meanwhile, Lillith brought her hand to settle on Pam’s and was managing to give her a seductive look.

Pam smiled to herself as she imagined all the sex she’d soon be having with the beautiful vampiress in front of her. She’d have to thank her maker later for letting her take over the task of “being seduced.”

Pam cooed, “Why don’t you stick around tonight, doll? I could show you around the place. Plus, there’s a tedious little gathering to celebrate the new sheriffs in the state in a little while. I’m sure I’d be much more *entertained* with you here.”

Lillith smiled, a tinge of triumph momentarily meeting her eyes. “Sounds nice,” she said casually. “Let me just make a quick call, and I’ll be right back.”

Pam ran her fingertips over the side of Lillith’s breasts as the brunette smiled a bit uncomfortably and walked away. Pam grinned after her and went back to Eric’s office. She closed the door behind her. Eric looked up and raised a brow.

“She’s staying for the party, of course. It’s just lucky for you that Lorena’s taste in women was obviously better than her taste in men. If I had to be seduced by a female equivalent of ‘ten-minute Bill,’ you would have owed me the *entire* spring line of Gucci.”

Eric smiled indulgently and then dangerously, “You laid it on a bit thick, don’t you think, Pamela? Pussy whipped?”

Pam laughed, “Don’t worry, she’ll soon be eating out of my hand—and other places too.”

“I’ve no doubts,” Eric smirked. “Let’s get out there. The guests will be arriving soon. After all the sheriffs are here and the human donors you have arranged are settled, I want you back here monitoring the surveillance at Compton’s. I want to know what our little Miss Jansen is reporting to him.”

Pam nodded.

About an hour into the party, there was no sign of Bill, and Eric was beginning to wonder if he should just go ahead and call for Sookie. Lillith had been trying to ingratiate herself with both Pam and—when Pam went back to the office—himself. And he was frankly annoyed. He

was also anxious to see Sookie, whose excitement and anxiousness were spinning through the bond.

Eric reached down for his phone after it signaled a text from Pam and excused himself from the group he'd been talking to in order to go talk to his child.

“He’s been waiting to see if Sookie was going to show up,” Pam said after Eric had closed the door. After the whole Sophie-Anne debacle, he had made his office soundproof, and he checked it several times a day for listening devices. Luckily for him, his ears could pick up the minute transmission signals of all surveillance monitors currently available, even the next-generation models he had placed in Bill’s home. Not for the first time, he was grateful to have gotten such a useful gift when he’d been made vampire. He was even more grateful that he’d never found another vampire with such acute senses as his, with the possible exception of his grand-sire.

Pam continued, “Lillith has called him a couple of times, and they are now pretty confident that Sookie is not going to be here. Apparently, they had two plans. If she was here, he was going to behave all forlorn and martyr-like to try to garner her sympathy. According to what I heard, he was going to act like he had accepted her choice, but he’s made clear to Lillith that they are still going to move toward his ultimate goal of getting you out of the way. He is certain that you are just a phase for Sookie and that she will come running to him once you are out of the picture.”

“Lovely,” Eric deadpanned. “And what is plan #2?”

“Well, since they believe Sookie will not be here, Bill’s gathered up some lovely donors to bring along with him—chosen especially for the occasion based on their resemblance to Sookie. He hopes to tempt you with them since Lillith’s charms don’t seem to be working. And

if that doesn't work, at least he'll be able to lord them over you for the evening. You should have heard his reaction when Lillith reported the part about you not showing any interest in her; I could almost hear the wind rushing out of his sails. He's asked her to keep trying, certain that any fidelity you are attempting to maintain with Sookie will be short-lived. Meanwhile, she is to get *close* to me and *seduce* me if necessary."

"I wonder if she will accomplish her task," Eric mused sarcastically.

Pam licked her lips. "It's is mystery," she deadpanned.

"Very well," Eric said, turning to the door. "Continue monitoring for a few more minutes to make sure they don't change their plans, and then join me in the bar so that Lillith will get out of my face. After Bill arrives, wait ten minutes, and then signal Miranda."

More than an hour and a half after the invitation had indicated, Bill finally arrived, flanked by several human guards and donors—all of whom were very pretty and blonde.

Despite his rising derision for Bill, Eric was pleased that he had decided to *honor* the gathering with his presence. It suited Eric's desire to pledge in front of Bill, and hopefully, it would put an end to Compton's illusions that Eric and Sookie were a temporary pairing. Even if it didn't, however, Bill would be much less inclined to act on his desire for Sookie if the repercussions of interfering with a pledged couple loomed over his head.

Eric was even less impressed by the vampire who had been placed as his sovereign than he'd been before. After all, Eric had pretty much single-handedly prevented Bill's death and used his own connections to buttress Bill's dying monarchy. And the thing that annoyed Eric more than anything else was that he wanted only to control his own little corner of the world in peace. He was an extremely efficient sheriff with a reputation for using the perfect balance of

brutality and fairness when dealing with his people. In other words, any king should be trying to hold onto him as an asset, rather than secretly planning to kill him.

Eric had put aside his personal distaste of Sophie-Anne to serve her loyally for many years, and he was willing to serve Bill too. He was certain that Rasul, Isabel, and even Thalia would do the same. But he was almost as certain that Bill would continue his obsession with Sookie and the vendetta against him—and that, Eric would *not* stand for.

Moreover, by showing up so late, Bill was signaling to all of his sheriffs that he felt himself above them. This slight had not escaped the notice of the other sheriffs either, though all of them—Thalia included—greeted Bill respectfully with bows.

Bill spoke, his accent full with what Eric had come to know was false gentility, “Sheriffs, it is a pleasure to see you again. Or in your case, Rasul, to finally meet you. I’m sure that we will be able to reestablish Louisiana as one of the richest and most welcoming states for our kind. And to celebrate this, I have brought each of you a gift. He gestured toward the four blonde donors behind him.” Bill’s eyes met Eric’s in challenge; turning down a gift from a monarch could be considered an insult, a fact that Bill intended to take advantage of. “Eric, as you are our host, you may have the first selection of the beauties behind me.”

Eric bowed. Fortunately he had been playing the game of vampire politics almost a thousand years longer than Bill. “My liege, you honor me, but I see you have brought only four donors with you. I will relinquish my gift so that you may enjoy her.” He kept his head bowed in apparent supplication, and the other sheriffs played along, applauding Eric’s seeming generosity.

Bill looked visibly put-out for a few moments and then bowed back slightly to Eric and grabbed the blonde closest to him. The other sheriffs each selected a donor, and everyone moved further into the bar.

“I assume it is fine to feed in here tonight?” Bill asked sharply.

“Indeed, your majesty. Fangtasia is closed, and the area has been secured. There are no prying eyes.”

Bill immediately sat down, put his donor on his lap, and then glared in Eric’s direction.

Eric nodded slightly to Bill and looked across the room to see Pam sending a text, and his sense of anticipation welled. Compton could do as many annoying things as he wanted to tonight; the important thing was that his bonded would soon be on her way to him.

Chapter 81: Time

Unable to control her excitement, Sookie tensed when Miranda's phone buzzed. She'd been ready for more than an hour and had traded off periods of talking nervously to Jason and the boys without really listening to them, pacing the living room floor, and sitting uncomfortably in a comfortable leather chair, her legs shaking up and down.

Earlier, Lafayette and Sookie had argued about how to fix her hair, but she'd finally decided on a neat bun, gathered at the nape of her neck. Lafayette had somehow managed to make the up-do look both elegant and effortless, weaving some braided pieces in and out of the bun in a way that Sookie was certain she'd never be able to imitate. The effect was stunning and her neck and left shoulder would be fully open to Eric.

Lafayette had painted her fingernails and toenails to match her dress, and after another argument, Sookie had convinced her friend that she needed only minimal make-up. She had wanted just mascara, a little eyeliner and lipstick. When Lafayette had thrown a fit, she'd agreed to a compromise and had added a touch of eye shadow and a hint of blush.

When she'd put on the dress again, there'd been a minor emergency as the strapless bra kept showing due to the dip in the back of the dress. However, Lafayette had come prepared and had performed some kind of fashion magic with double-sided tape.

Lafayette had assured her that the sapphire drop earrings made a nice contrast to the red of the dress, and Sookie had completed the outfit by asking Lafayette to retie the leather strap that held her carved pendant so that it was more like a choker. He'd braided the excess leather to flow neatly down the back of her neck. The mix of jewelry was a bit unorthodox, with the rustic pendant and the elegant earrings, but Sookie could not imagine being without her pendant, especially on that day.

Her final look had been elegant—with just the right amount of sexiness and uniqueness thrown in—and both Lafayette and she had almost fallen into tears as she'd stood in front of the mirror fully ready. Lafayette had waved his hands in front of her eyes to dry her tears and had threatened her with witch juju if she let even one tear drop.

Sookie had zipped the silver shard into a pocket in the red purse that Pam had gotten to match the dress. Somehow it felt right to carry it for luck. She also put the dagger into the purse.

Now that the signal had come for them to leave, Sookie was thrumming with butterflies.

Bubba, who had been outside monitoring the area, walked back into the house at Miranda's signal. When he saw Sookie, a huge grin spread across his face, "Miss Sookie, you sure do look pretty. Mister Eric is gonna be mighty happy when he sees ya."

"Thanks, Bubba," Sookie said, trying to hold back her tears yet again.

Bubba continued, "Mister Eric told me to make sure that you get to Fangtasia safe and sound tonight, so don't you worry none."

"Thank you, Bubba," Sookie responded, giving the vampire a kiss on the cheek.

Miranda spoke up, "Sookie, Jarod and I will drop off Lafayette and Jesus, and then we'll be taking up a perimeter position." She handed Sookie a little device that looked like a car alarm button. "This is a panic button. If anything happens, push it, and we'll come right in."

"Thanks," Sookie said nervously, putting the object into her purse.

"Don't worry none, Miss Sookie," Bubba said. "I will be with you the whole time."

"So will we," Jason said motioning to himself, Jesus and Lafayette.

Sookie smiled and took in a deep breath.

Miranda smiled warmly as well, an unusual look for the Werelioness. “There’s just one more thing.” She crossed into a small utility room next to the kitchen and returned with a modest-sized bouquet of blue hydrangeas. “He wanted you to have these right before you left.”

As Sookie took the beautiful bouquet, she had to try even harder to hold back her tears. The soft blue of the flowers looked amazing against her dress.

She followed behind as Miranda and Jarod led the way out, and then she got into a car with Bubba and Jason. She wondered briefly if Bubba was “all there” enough to drive, but quickly dismissed that thought. Bubba, though sweet and humble, was obviously no idiot. She smiled at the vampire sitting next to her; she knew for certain that Bubba would risk his life for her and protect her with a fierce devotion. That was all that mattered to her. However, in addition to that, Bubba had his own brand of intelligence and charm. Sookie pitied anyone who failed to take him seriously.

It took five minutes to drive to Fangtasia, and Sookie spent that time actively trying to be calm. She went over the plan in her head one last time. Pam was going to meet them at the door and lead them in, and Eric would be standing near the bar. If things were going according to plan, the others—including Bill—would be further toward the rear of the club and might be feeding from donors. She steeled herself to *that* thought. Bubba had assured her that as soon as she was safe in Eric’s hands, he would take care of Jason, Jesus and Lafayette to make sure they weren’t mistaken for donors themselves.

Sookie was supposed to walk in and go directly to Eric. Her presence would not go unnoticed given her scent, so by the time she reached Eric, she could expect everyone to be watching. Isabel was the only one who had been told about the pledging, and she would block Bill if he recognized what was happening and tried to intercept Sookie. Meanwhile, Pam would

make sure that Lillith couldn't get in the way. And Bubba would be there to make sure that Sookie got to Eric. They knew that they could count on Chow, Thalia, and Rasul to step in if things got ugly.

Eric anticipated no problems, but Sookie could definitely appreciate the fact that her vampire was covering all his bases. She knew that he always planned for any outcome, and she felt much safer knowing that he had plans A through Z thought-out and ready. "Heck," Sookie thought, "my vampire probably has plans for every alphabet he's ever learned going through that beautiful brain of his." She smiled at that thought.

Their car pulled up to Fangtasia right after Miranda's, and by the time she was ready to step out, Jarod was at the car door and helping her. "Good luck, Sookie," he said with a wink and a grin.

As expected, Pam was outside the door waiting for them. She took in Sookie's appearance with a huge smirk on her face. "I somehow knew you'd wear that one. He's going to love it, you know."

"Red's his favorite," Sookie said.

"Oh yes," Pam confirmed, "and even if it wasn't, you in this dress would convert him."

Sookie smiled at the unexpected compliment from Pam. "Thanks, Pam. I know that you haven't always been my greatest fan, but . . ."

Pam interrupted, "Past is just that, Sookie—past. My maker is happy with you; that's what matters."

Sookie smiled appreciatively.

"Ready?" Pam asked, putting her hand on the door.

Sookie spoke up, "Just a sec." She unzipped her purse and pulled out the velvet satchel.

“Here, I’ll take that from you,” Pam said, motioning toward Sookie’s purse.

“Thanks,” Sookie said, handing Pam the purse and then tucking the velvet clad dagger in under her flowers.

“Okay,” Pam said. “I’ll be walking in front of you and to the left. Bubba, you will follow. You three,” she said gesturing toward Jason, Lafayette and Jesus, “will follow Bubba and remain silent until Eric has accepted the dagger. Then,” she winked at Jason, “the party will *really* get started.”

Sookie nodded again as Pam opened the door.

For a vampire, time is an odd thing—in many ways—irrelevant.

But Eric had found that he enjoyed the passage of time very much and had always been drawn towards moments of immense change. He’d watched the fall of great cities and the rise of others. He’d traveled to Asia with Godric to learn about the mysteries of the East. He’d emigrated with the Renaissance itself—following it from Florence, to Paris, to the Netherlands, to Germany, and finally to London. As soon as ships could be secured enough for long voyages for his kind, he’d traveled to the New World—though he enjoyed reminding Pam that Vikings had discovered North America well before any other Europeans. He’d explored Central and South America for decades before he settled in North America. He’d traveled to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to witness the first night space shuttle launch in 1983. As he had watched the human machine jet into space, he had been humbled by the potential number of beings in the universe. He wondered when his kind would achieve travel in the stars.

Every culture he had come across in his long life had a different perception of time, and all of them saw themselves differently in relationship to the history of the world at large.

Eric was more than twice the age of the country he resided in. It had been 123 years since he had painted with Van Gogh. It had been 403 years since he had talked about the theatre with William Shakespeare in a London tavern. It had been 699 years since he'd screwed Dante's supposedly virginal muse Beatrice up against a wall in Florence. It had been more than 800 years since Eric's own people and culture had sunk into the background of history. And it had been 932 years, 3 months, and 17 days since Godric had made him vampire.

In many ways, time was arbitrary to a vampire, yet it was also the most important thing. A vampire's body intuited the sun's progress through the sky. It always knew the day from the night—right down to the second. But the lifespans of mortal men had meant little to Eric until he had begun to consider Sookie Stackhouse and the fact that—if she did not become vampire—he would eventually be without her. He had also been forced to consider the finiteness of time when he felt the bond he had with Godric break after almost a thousand years of its being his constant companion.

These things made him feel more vulnerable—more *mortal*—than he'd ever felt before; even when he was human, his father had taught him to buck against the possibility of death. He knew now that his own lifespan was unequivocally tied to Sookie's. The only secret that he'd determined to keep from his bonded was that the day of her final death would be the day of his as well. It was impossible for him to imagine an existence without her anymore. He was certain also that if he should die first, Sookie *would* carry on living, and he was proud of this knowledge of her tenacity. A thousand years of moving through time like a boat on a wave had stopped for Eric when he fell in love with Sookie; she had literally anchored him to time itself. That—more than any other gift she could give him—was the most precious.

All of these thoughts poured through Eric's head almost simultaneously, even as another new experience flooded his senses: the feeling that time had completely stopped around him.

That was the phenomenon he faced when he saw Sookie walk into the door of Fangtasia. The world around them meant nothing, and the physical space between them meant even less. The blood and magic that connected them was *everything*. He felt an immediate pull to be next to her, one that was echoed in her. And as she began walking to him, he could not help but to start moving to her, despite the fact that this was not part of the plan.

It had been three hours and fifty four minutes since he'd seen her, according to the eternal clock within him that always kept track of his relationship to the sun. She'd been gone to fairy for 381 days, 6 hours, and 21 minutes. He'd seen her for the first time at 11:57 p.m. on a Tuesday night. It was early that Wednesday morning—12:18 a.m.—that he'd summoned her and Bill to him. And it was 12:19 when he heard her voice speaking to him for the first time.

But if someone had asked him the time at that moment or had needed to know when the sun was going to rise, he would not have been able to answer. He wouldn't have *known* the answer.

What he did know was that Sookie was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. She seemed to have dressed with only him in mind, her one-shoulder red dress making her look like a goddess. Her blond hair was gathered into a bun, and her shoulder and neck seemed to be aching for his touch. She wore the ring he had picked out for her on the finger reserved for human engagement and wedding rings. She wore the earrings he had designed himself to match the ring, and on her neck was the pendant he had carved in order to symbolically show the connection he felt with her even while she was in another realm. He'd made it with a prayer to

his long-forgotten gods from his long-dead heart, and the answer to that plea was standing in front of him, her eyes shining with love—love only for him.

Time had stopped for both of them, and suddenly they were less than three feet apart in the middle of the dance floor. Their eyes were locked into each other's. Nothing else existed.

Meanwhile, in the world around them, time did not stop—at least not right away. As soon as Sookie walked in, the other vampires in the room caught the aroma of Eric and her shared blood, and Bill had tensed and stopped drinking from his donor, the poor imitation of Sookie who was sitting on his lap. Within moments, all the vampires in the room that had been seated were standing, and Isabel, Pam, and Bubba were poised for a possible fight. Lafayette and Jesus each felt their bodies humming with the magic that seemed to emanate from Eric and Sookie.

But there was no fight, and after a tense thirty seconds during which everyone else in the room seemed to be ready to act or react, there was no movement from them either. Everyone, including Bill, seemed to freeze. Even Jason felt the overwhelming desire to be silent and still as if he knew he were witnessing something profound.

In fact, another full thirty seconds passed when no one moved a muscle as Eric and Sookie drank each other in with their eyes.

The first major movement in the room came from Sookie. With a soft smile meant for Eric—and Eric only—she pulled the velvet case from under the flowers and held it up for her vampire.

Returning the secret smile, Eric took the bundle, opened it, and pulled out the dagger. As a very audible gasp emanated from Bill from across the room, Eric raised the dagger to his lips

and kissed it, effectively sealing the pledge between them. He said in a voice that was both loud enough for all present to hear yet somehow intimate and for Sookie only, “Beloved, by this dagger and the blood we share, we are now one, pledged before these witnesses.”

Sookie’s smile grew wider. She whispered, “Min bóndi, I love you.”

“Min kván,” Eric responded in an equally low voice, “as I love you.”

Reverently, Eric put the dagger back into the velvet satchel and then into the inside pocket of his jacket. As soon as it was put away, their hands found one another’s, and they both sighed in relief. Eric moved forward and bent down. He kissed Sookie lightly on the lips and then trailed his nose slowly from her ear, to her exposed neck, to her bare shoulder. “You are the most beautiful thing I have seen in all my long life, min kván. I will be *yours* always.”

Sookie brought her arms around Eric’s neck and spoke in a clear, feverous voice that could easily be heard by the other vampires in the room, “I am yours—your bonded, your pledged, your mate, your wife—and I will remain so for the rest of my life.”

As Eric brought a hand to Sookie’s cheek to brush away a tear that had emerged in her fervor, he felt that time had once again started.

The magic that had seemed to hold everyone in place dissipated. And in the next second, Eric felt in his blood—as much as he noticed with his senses—that a movement was being made toward his pledged, his wife. He had turned his body around to block Sookie from any kind of danger well before Bill was in front of them.

In between the newly pledged couple and the king stood Bubba and Thalia; both vampires looked ready to kill.

Thalia was growling at a low pitch, and though her frame was petite, no one in the room missed the power that flowed from her. Bubba stood almost as fiercely as the ancient vampiress by his side and was leveling Bill with a blistering glare.

Across the room, Lillith had tensed, and Pam was keeping close watch on her. The human guards seemed clueless about what *had* or what *was* taking place.

Surprising Eric immensely, it was Thalia who spoke up, “I am certain—*certain*—that your aggression toward this *pledged* couple is an error on your part. The pledge is to be protected by all vampires present; it is sacred among our kind. That is the way that things have always been. There are none who can interfere.” Her voice grew even more dangerous and low. “Any who threaten this pledge in my presence will meet the true death—king or no king!”

Bill responded with a low growl.

Bubba was next to speak, “I don’t appreciate you makin’ that kinda noise toward this here fine lady or around Miss Sookie. Miss Sookie is Mister Eric’s girl, and you’re gonna need to keep your distance.”

Bill took a minute to calm himself as he studied the vampires in front of him. If he tried to hurt Bubba, the kings and queens of at least fifteen states would stand in line to exact punishment from him. If he moved against Thalia, he knew that he’d be dead in seconds, another notch on the she-devil’s sword.

Bill looked beyond the pair in front of him to the pair behind. Eric stood slightly in front of Sookie, and his posture and cold-steel eyes indicated that even if Bill could somehow survive long enough to get past Bubba and Thalia, he’d be dead in the next moment. Sookie was right behind Eric, staring at him with eyes just as fierce. He’d seen those same eyes when she’d used her fairy powers on Maryann.

Bill steeled himself and calmed down. “I wish only to speak to Eric and Sookie,” he said to the two vampires forming the blockade that was preventing him from doing just that.

“Eric?” Thalia asked, even as she still faced Bill.

“It’s fine,” Eric said, the confidence clear in his voice.

With that, Thalia reached out and took Bubba’s hand in hers, pulling him off to the side. However, it was clear that she was still on high alert, as was her unlikely partner.

As soon as they were out of the way, Bill stepped forward. “What is the meaning of this, Eric?” he demanded. “What have *you* done?”

“Is that not clear, my liege,” Eric answered carefully; the last thing he wanted for Sookie on this night was to have to deal with the emotions that would inevitably come to the surface if he had to kill Bill. “My bonded and I have pledged.”

“*Bonded?*” Bill asked in a low, shocked voice. “Surely you did not . . .” his words trailed off.

“We did,” Sookie said firmly but politely, just like Gran spoke when she wanted to make a point but not cause trouble. Sookie slowly moved forward until she was at Eric’s side rather than slightly behind him. She entwined her arm with his and leaned into his body. She was ready, however, to give Bill a very unhealthy dose of fairy power if he made one move at her husband.

Eric added in confirmation, “We have exchanged blood three times. Sookie is my bonded and now my mate by the knife.”

Bill was obviously fuming internally, but was still speechless.

Sookie spoke up, “Bill, I am sorry if you are unhappy, but Eric is my husband now. We both hope to remain assets to your kingdom.” She bowed a bit and Eric followed suit, surprised

and pleased by his wife's clear grasp of the tenuousness of Bill's state as well as the need to give the king a chance to save face.

"Well," Bill said, outwardly recovering a bit. "What is done is done. This kingship recognizes the pledging we have seen today. It seems there is another reason to celebrate now, Northman." Bill's look at Eric as he spoke was even and cool, except for a less-than-one-second slip, which most would have missed completely. But Eric was not *most*, and his one thousand years of life had taught him the need to see the almost-unseeable. Into Bill's eyes had slipped the same thirst that Eric knew must have stolen into his own when he first learned that Russell had been the one who killed his family: the overpowering desire for revenge. Luckily for him, it was Talbot who had been with him at that moment and not the cunning king of Mississippi.

Eric now knew that he'd eventually have to kill Compton, but as he grasped Sookie's hand tighter, he hoped that he could wait long enough for one of the other sheriffs to become established enough to be king or queen of the state. For now, he would have to be vigilant and hope that Bill stuck to his timeline. But Eric was certain—absolutely fucking certain—that Bill would continue seeking his death. Eric was also determined to make sure that Sookie did not get hurt in the crossfire, as she'd been when his own obsession for vengeance with Russell had endangered them all.

Sookie felt Eric's recognition and resolution through the bond but had not seen the flicker in Bill's eyes with her human ones. However, she conveyed her support to her bonded by tightening her grip on his hand and sending it through their bond.

Eric bowed more fully to his king, "You *honor* us, your majesty."

Without another word, Bill turned and walked back to his former position at human speed. As he sat, he derisively waved off the donor who approached him.

After Bill had moved away, Jason came forward and nodded to Eric, who—surprising pretty much everyone in the room—dropped Sookie’s hand and reached out for her brother’s. Jason smiled, nodded, and took Eric’s proffered hand firmly in his. As soon as they were done with their male gesture of bonding, Jason said, “You’re getting better, man, but it’s still a little firm.” He grimaced a bit as he flexed his hand.

Sookie laughed, launched herself into her brother’s arms, and gave him a big hug. “I love you, big brother,” she said.

“I’m happy for ya, sis,” Jason responded.

After hugs for Sookie and congratulations for Eric from Lafayette and Jesus, Eric and Sookie re-found each other’s hands and once again leaned into each other. Eric chuckled a bit at the unconscious way their bodies were drawn to each other. “Magnets,” he said under his breath.

Sookie tightened her grip on his, “Yes, magnets.”

Eric moved Sookie to the bar. Her favorite drink, a gin and tonic, was waiting for her. Sookie took an appreciative sip of it in order to calm her nerves after the confrontation with Bill.

Eric, however, waved off the bottle of blood Chow offered him. He gave Sookie a devilish grin and gently caressed her bare shoulder and collarbone. Sookie smiled up at him just as devilishly and whispered, "You're gonna have to wait a while for your drink, Viking."

A few minutes later, Bill rose and took his leave after a series of rushed goodbyes to all of the sheriffs present except for Eric. About five minutes after that, Lillith received a text message and made her excuses as well, after promising to begin work on Tuesday night.

With them both gone, Sookie sighed with relief, and Eric looked at her with a grin.

Eric sent a text to Miranda and moments later he received a reply, confirming that the king and his spy had left the area. Since Isabel and he both had vampires outside, he invited Miranda and Jarod to join the party, an act that made Sookie smile up at him. Quickly thereafter, Eric signaled for Pam to shoo out the human donors, leaving just his and Sookie's close circle behind.

A few minutes later, Bubba came up to the couple. "I'm real happy for you two," he said with a little bow. He looked shyly at Sookie. "I'd like to sing y'all a song if that's okay, Miss Sookie. I don't feel like singin' too much, but I was wonderin' if you might like for me to sing tonight."

Sookie beamed. "Oh Bubba, that'd be so nice. Eric and I would both love that so much!" she gushed.

Bubba smiled widely as Eric called Pam over. "Pam, Bubba is going to gift us with a song this evening. Will you get him set up with what he needs?"

Pam smiled. It was the first genuine smile that Sookie had ever seen grace her lips, and Sookie chuckled a bit, which earned her a glare from Pam as the vampiress led Bubba to the stage.

"May I have this dance?" Eric bowed, his eyes sparkling.

"I'm sorry," Sookie teased. "I have reserved this dance for my husband."

"What a pity," Eric paused, "for me."

Sookie laughed as Eric took her in his arms.

By this time, Pam had found Bubba a guitar, and he was standing shyly on stage. A hush fell over the dozen or so vampires and humans left in the club as the familiar timbres of "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" began.

Both Eric and Sookie chuckled lightly as they began to sway to the music. “Perfect choice,” Eric whispered to Sookie as he pulled her even closer to him. “And he’s right, you know. I can’t help it; I never could.”

She smiled as she sank into his chest, enjoying the gentle rhythm of the song, the privilege of having it sung for her by the King himself, and the joy pulsating through her bond with Eric. In that moment, she was able to forget about every threat and every problem that she and Eric might face. She closed her eyes and matched her beloved’s graceful movements, their bodies moving together in complete sync.

The rest of the people in the room had their eyes on Bubba, who was still clearly able to hypnotically pull people into his songs with him. As soon as the song had ended, the room broke out into applause. As Sookie looked at Bubba, she couldn’t help her wide smile. She was certain that Bubba would have been blushing if he could.

As he said, “Thank you, thank you very much,” in his familiar cadence, she saw Lafayette swoon, and she got a bit weak in the knees herself, truth be told.

Bubba began strumming again, and soon the sounds of “Love Me Tender” were filling the club. This time several couples joined in with Sookie and Eric.

As Eric began to move them again, Sookie looked around the room. There were only friends and family left in the club. Pam and her brother were dancing, a fact that disconcerted Sookie to some extent. Jesus and Lafayette were also dancing, slow and close; Sookie smiled when she saw Jesus lean in to kiss his beloved tenderly. Miranda and Jarod were swaying closely together, looking at each other with love-filled eyes. Isabel and Rasul were dancing cordially. Even Chow looked content as he swayed behind the bar.

“Look at that,” Eric whispered, gesturing to the area to the left of the stage.

Sookie followed his gaze and saw Thalia, staring at Bubba, seemingly enthralled. Sookie gasped again as she noticed that Bubba now seemed to be singing only to the ancient vampiress.

She looked up at Eric, “Do you see what I see?”

Eric chuckled. “Yep.” He pulled Sookie in close again as they continued to dance to Bubba’s impromptu concert.

Chapter 82: Song

[A/N: Iconic Line Alert! I have used a line directly from Charlaine Harris in this chapter. If you are readers of the books, you will recognize it. If you are not, it's in all italics. I mean no copyright infringement. As always, I own nothing about this story, except my brain, which has merely figured out the order of the words on the page. Harris and HBO own everything.]

After an hour of dancing with his wife and a quick stop at his safe house in order to pick up Sookie's belongings and some clothing for himself, Eric drove on the narrow country roads from Shreveport to Bon Temps as if he were racing on the Autobahn. Sookie spent the trip trying to talk herself into believing that her husband's vampire reflexes would prevent their crashing. Her pep talk *almost* worked, but Eric had chuckled at her many times during the trip as her pulse rate had risen.

She had lost count of the number of times she'd had to slap his hand away as he'd tried to get fresh along the journey, and then she'd had to endure his talking about his talent for multi-tasking before telling him that if he didn't keep *both* eyes on the road and *both* hands on the steering wheel, she was going to withhold sex for twenty-four hours. She smiled to himself. *That* had caused him to straighten up real fast even though she had still felt a lot of mirth from his side the bond. Of course, he knew that she wouldn't be able to follow through with her threat, but he'd behaved himself anyway.

Still, she was happy when they made the journey in much less time than it would have taken her to drive it.

As Eric parked the corvette behind the farmhouse next to Sookie's car, he asked, "Not even as a wedding present?" He gestured toward the pile of bolts that was her car.

"No," Sookie answered playfully. "Married or not, you don't just get to buy me stuff like new cars."

Eric thought for a moment and then resolved, "I will not *buy* one, then. I have told you about all the cars I own that are not in use. They are all *our* cars now anyway. Perhaps, once you see them, you would prefer driving one of them to your—*current* mode of transportation."

"You are a sneaky vampire, min bóndi. I don't think I can let you get away with it," Sookie said friskily. "Maybe you should be *punished*."

Eric growled and leaned over the car's middle console. He placed a tender kiss on her bare shoulder and then a series of others along her collar bone. His fingers traced the edge of the fabric of Sookie's dress until they were at the top of her opposite shoulder. Then he pushed the fabric down a bit to expose more skin on that side too. "My wife, I think it is about time that I took a *closer* look at this dress you are wearing."

The combination of Eric's words, kisses, and touch caused Sookie's skin to erupt in goose bumps.

"Cold, lover?" Eric asked teasingly. "Perhaps, I should get you inside and *warm* you up."

Sookie moaned as Eric nipped at her shoulder with his blunt teeth. She felt his hand moving down her body slowly, brushing the side of her breast, tracing the dip of her waist, and finally stroking the curve of her hip. She leaned into his touch—both from hand and lip. She could feel the moisture of her arousal pooling at her center.

Eric growled low and whispered into her ear. “It has been almost six hours since I was buried into that part of you that is readying itself for me even now. Too. Fucking. Long.”

She gasped and then smiled seductively, “Six hours is a very, very *long* time, my love.” She moved her hand into Eric’s lap, outlining the large bulge in his pants lightly with her fingertips. “Why don’t we get inside so that I can *scratch* this itch you seem to have.”

He chuckled, “You are a minx, min kära.” He gave her one last kiss on the neck and unbuckled her seatbelt.

Despite his desire to immediately take Sookie on the hood of his car, he steeled himself as he maneuvered his long, lean body gracefully out of the corvette.

He inhaled deeply. The smell of magic was faint—likely too faint for other noses to pick up on—but Eric recognized that the protection spell set by Lafayette and Jesus was still in place. He smelled Bill’s scent left at the house from two evenings before, but there was no more recent trace of him at their home.

He did, however, pick up the scents of Compton and Lillith over at the king’s residence and was thankful once again that one of his gifts was the strength of his nose. He was even more thankful that Godric had taught him to hide the most important of his gifts from others.

While others might be loath to live so closely to an enemy—and make no mistake, Eric had now firmly placed Compton into the category of individuals who had been fool enough to make an enemy of him—he was glad for the proximity. His nose would tell him when Bill was at his residence. The protection spell would keep him away if his intention was to harm Sookie. And the nearby graveyard? Well—it would provide an extremely convenient place to put Bill’s remains if he dared make a move against his bonded. Eric chuckled to himself. There was even an existing gravestone for Bill. “Indeed—*very* convenient,” Eric thought to himself.

The Civil War veteran's own attempts to monitor Eric were sad at best. Eric could tell that the Werepanther stationed at the road was competent, but the Were couldn't get close enough to see anything of importance. He could only keep track of who came and went via car, and Eric had arranged for both Miranda and Jarod to have vehicles with tinted—and bullet-proof—windows. As for Eric's movements, he could take the Vette when he *wanted* Compton to know he'd left, and he could simply fly when he didn't. Eric was certain that Bill's range of scent was not far. Several day before, Bill had had to be basically right next to Sookie to pick up their shared scent. Plus, Eric had been staying at the farmhouse and visiting Adele's grave for months while Sookie was gone. Neither had drawn Bill's attention.

Eric inhaled again. He smelled that Lafayette and Jesus had been at the house earlier that day. Miranda had been there more recently, leaving approximately fifteen minutes before they'd arrived.

He could not smell inside the house yet because Jesus had successfully modified their privacy spell. However, Miranda's recent presence told him that Sookie's gift was in place.

His assessment completed as he walked at human-pace over to Sookie's side of the car, he opened the door for her, reached for her hand, and helped her out.

He smiled at Sookie as she gracefully stood on the very tall heels Pam had chosen for her. He forced himself to drop her hand so that he could open the small trunk of his car and get out the bags he'd packed for himself as well as the small bag that held what Lafayette had brought to his bonded as well as the other new garments she'd chosen from earlier that evening.

Eric looked up at the old farmhouse in front of him and smiled, not quite believing that this would now be his main residence. Truth be told, it suited him perfectly, even more so

because it suited his bonded perfectly. And the cabin was just a short flight away in case of emergency.

Sookie had grabbed her backpack from behind her seat and was now digging for the keys to the house. Eric chuckled. The pack looked completely out-of-place with her beautiful red dress.

“What are you laughing at, Viking?” Sookie asked, with a mock glare for Eric.

“Nothing,” Eric answered innocently. “It’s just that you don’t actually need a key anymore.”

“Oh yeah,” Sookie said shaking her head. She looked at the back door, a bit confused. The door knob no longer had a key hole. “Well, where’s the secret panel thingy?” Sookie asked turning toward Eric.

He approached the door and pushed in a barely visible panel to the right of the door frame. Sookie entered the date of their first meeting and placed her thumb over the reader, trying to get used to the James Bond element now in her life. She heard a click and then tried the door knob. “Well, it’ll be one fewer key I have to carry,” Sookie said brightly. “Hey—what if the power goes out?”

Eric chuckled, loving the fact that Sookie was so quick to figure out potential problems. “The security system has a back-up generator. If the power goes off, it will kick on and maintain the system for 24 hours.”

“Oh!” Sookie said before looking up at Eric with a smirk, “I guess you *are* useful for more than just good looks.”

Eric winked.

Even as Sookie started to walk into the house, he dropped his bags on the porch and picked her up bridal style. Sookie squealed.

Eric asked, “I think this is the human custom, is it not? I am supposed to carry you over the threshold, yes?”

Sookie smiled at him, nodded, dropped her backpack into a pile with the other bags, and entwined both of her arms around Eric’s neck. “It’s for good luck,” she said as she nuzzled into him.

Eric took a long stride into the house—their house—with his bride in his arms. He set her down with a kiss and then retrieved their bags in a flash of movement. He quickly made sure the house was secure. Miranda and Jarod would be there the next morning, and when Sookie went in for her work shift, Jarod would go with her. Bubba would be arriving within ten minutes, and Eric had every confidence in Jesus’s magic. They were as safe as he could make them at that moment.

He turned and looked at his beloved with a predatory glint in his eye.

“What now, Mr. Northman?” she asked coyly, reaching up slowly and taking out the bobby pins holding her bun in place. She shook out her hair seductively.

“Now, I get to make love to my wife,” Eric declared, his eyes sparkling.

He dropped the bags again and swept her up into his embrace. Her dress slid up as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

They both looked at each other and sighed, contentment rolling through the bond.

“Now—I get to make love to my husband,” Sookie responded tenderly.

Their lips came slowly together, and as soon as they touched, their mouths opened so that the connection could be as deep as possible. Eric carried Sookie up the stairs to their bedroom

unhurriedly and then gently lowered her on the bed, only then detaching his lips and tongue from hers.

“Do you know how beautiful you are tonight, min kära?” Eric asked in an even tone as he took one of Sookie’s feet in his hands and slowly removed her shoe. “You are every fantasy I have had or will ever have, all rolled into one.” He took off her other shoe and began to rub her feet and calves sensuously. “Do you know how much I have wanted to bury myself in you since I first saw you in this dress?”

Sookie was able only to shake her head as Eric’s hands continued under the skirt of her dress and reached her lacy underwear. He snaked his fingers under the lace at her hips and pulled off the garment slowly—teasingly—before tossing it to the side. “I thought I was going to die my second death from hunger. That is how much I have been aching for you in this dress. I imagined making love to you in the middle of the dance floor, lover, but for your modesty’s sake, I restrained my urges—with *extreme* difficulty.”

As soon as her panties were dealt with, Eric brought his hands slowly up her legs again, pausing, at times, to caress them as he went. “I have wanted to touch you like this,” he said as he reached her dripping folds, “since you took one step into Fangtasia, both tonight and the very first night I saw you.”

Sookie arched into his ministrations as he slowly circled her opening with his fingertips before plunging two digits into her. Sookie cried out.

“So wet for me,” Eric said silkily. “I have smelled your desire for me *all* night long. When you smell like this, min kära, *I just wanna fuck you and bite you and rub myself all over you.*”

Sookie moaned as Eric increased the pace of his fingers. He used his other hand to slide her dress up past her hips. Then, he bent down over her. “Watch me, wife,” Eric ordered, his voice low with passion. She watched him as he pulled his long fingers from her body, causing her to whimper at the loss. But her whimper turned almost immediately into a moan of rapture as he used the flat of his tongue to lazily trail from her opening to her clit. By the time he had repeated the action several times, Sookie was writhing out of control underneath him. He paused the movements of his tongue for a moment and rested one of his hands on her lower abdomen to keep her still. His eyes captured her glazed-over stare, and he said reverently, “Så söt, liksom den sötaste honung.”

When she groaned for him to continue his ministrations, he plunged his tongue into her opening and brought his other hand down to draw circles around her clit. In moments, Sookie was undone, her orgasm careening through her forcefully and leaving her trembling.

Eric quickly shed his clothes, including his Kevlar vest, and lay beside his wife as she rode through the aftershocks of her intense orgasm. He used his long fingers to trace the path she had created for him, from her neck to her bare shoulder. Then he placed butterfly kisses along that same pathway.

“What did you say?” she finally asked, still a little breathless.

He brought his mouth to her ear and said in a low voice, “*Lover*, your blood was, I *thought*, the best flavor I would ever have, but tasting you as I just did—tasting your arousal, your release, that is *just* for me—is sweeter than any flavor I have experienced as vampire or human. I was telling you that you taste like the sweetest honey to me.”

Sookie laced her hands in Eric’s hair and pulled him to her. “I need to taste *you* now, husband,” she whispered as she brought her lips to his tenderly, sensually. They spent several

moments just moving their lips over each other's giving sweet kisses of affection. Sookie sucked slightly on Eric's lower lip, and soon, their tongues joined their lips as the two tasted—moaning into each other's mouths. Sookie brought her tongue to Eric's fang and stroked it slowly.

Eric growled and then pulled Sookie's dress carefully over her body, breaking contact with her lips for only a moment. After her bra had joined her dress, he pulled her closer, their chests now flush and bare against each other. Their re-joined mouths became more frenzied.

Sookie moved her tongue to Eric's other fang and purposely nicked it a bit. Eric's tongue immediately moved to cover hers, and he groaned unintelligibly into her mouth.

Once Eric's saliva had sealed her small wound, she pushed him onto his back and brought her legs on either side of him to straddle him. She pulled her lips from his and ran them softly over his cheek before taking one of his earlobes between her teeth. She whispered, "Do you know how I crave to taste *you*, min bóndi? Your salty-sweet flavor, cool and crisp like a winter morning at the seashore? I'm gonna sample you all the way from here," she moved her fingertips to touch his forehead and then trailed them over his smooth flesh until they brushed his straining erection, "to here. Would you like that, husband?"

As she raised her eyes to meet his, he managed to moan, "Snälla." He was in awe of the tiny mostly-human girl who commanded such dominion over his body.

"I can't help you, min bóndi, unless you translate," Sookie teased. "What do you mean by 'snälla?'"

"*Please*," Eric grunted. "*Please*, Sookie."

Sookie smiled and bit her lip seductively. "Well—since you asked *so* nicely." She brought her mouth down to Eric's forehead and brushed her swollen lips and tongue along his hairline. Then she began to trail wet kisses downward, stopping to spend time at her favorite

spots—his graceful cheekbones, the cleft in his strong chin. The sinewy muscles of his long, beautiful neck received a considerable amount of her time as her hands explored his chest and torso.

Every once in a while, Eric moaned out a jumbled word or phrase, but the only things Sookie recognized were her name and the occasional curse word in English. She loved that she could wield as much power over her bonded as he had displayed over her earlier.

Sookie finally left his neck behind and brought her lips across his broad chest. She took one of his nipples into her mouth and swirled her tongue around it.

She looked up at Eric, whose eyes were closed in ecstasy. “If you want me to *bite*, min bóndi, you’re gonna have to watch me,” she purred.

His eyes immediately opened, and lustful blue was aimed into lusty brown.

Holding his gaze, she bit down in the way that she knew drove him crazy. His answering groan did not disappoint as she licked her way to his other nipple before biting even harder, causing his skin to break and a small taste of his blood to brush against her tongue. “Mmmmm,” she sounded as he groaned even louder and writhed beneath her. It took all of Eric’s remaining control not to push her into the bed and pound into her, but he managed to stay on his back—under *her* hands—as he anticipated what was coming next.

Sookie licked the nick in Eric’s nipple until it healed and then laved his abs with her tongue. She roughly dragged her blunt teeth along the definition of the muscles she found there. Finally, she arrived at the V-shaped trail of his hips that would lead her to her ultimate destination. She nipped her way down one side of it as her fingertips traced the other side.

Her fingers and mouth met at his imposing, beautiful cock, and Sookie wasted no time licking the tip of it. She seductively repeated his words from earlier, “You are dripping for me, min bóndi.”

“Yes,” he gasped as she took as much of him as she could into her mouth and used her hands to cover his excess girth and length. He moaned and raised his hips slightly as she raised and lowered her mouth onto him, pausing every once in a while to lick the entire length of his shaft.

After several minutes of this kind of teasing, Eric groaned an almost incoherent, “Snälla—please,” and Sookie increased the pace of her mouth and tightened her lips around his shaft. She continued to use one hand to stroke in time with her thrusts, but brought the other down to caress his balls.

“Åh fan! So close, Sookie!” he yelled right before erupting into her mouth.

In moments Sookie was under him and his mouth was on hers in a frenzy.

“You do some very naughty things with that mouth of yours, lover,” he gasped as he brought his lips to her ear. He looked at her with equal parts desperation and love in his eyes. “I need you *now*, min kván. I *need* to be inside of you.”

“I know. Me too,” Sookie said, her desperate look matching his. She spread her legs open for him as he slowly lowered himself fully into her. Their connection caused both of them to shiver, as if a bolt of electricity were locking them together.

“Perfect,” they both sighed in unison. After several moments, Eric began to move in and out of her languidly, savoring the sensation of their sexes pressing into one another over and over again. Sookie’s legs went around his hips so that she could better meet his thrusts.

All the while, their gazes stayed locked and Sookie's hands gently stroked Eric's shoulder blades almost as if to calm them both.

Over the next hour, Eric slowly, gently, reverently brought them both to the brink of orgasm again and again, only to pull back and still them. There was nothing rushed about their joining; it was all tenderness, steadiness, adoration. Soul to soul, bond to bond, and blood to blood, they spoke to each other with only their eyes. Finally, just when Sookie thought she might be overwhelmed by her physical pleasure and the strength of their emotional connection, Eric sent her over the edge with one last well-angled thrust. Sookie was lost and began pulsating around Eric, drawing out his release as well.

Their foreheads brought together in shared bliss, Sookie and Eric continued to move slowly together until their orgasms had subsided, and then Eric pulled out of her. He turned them over so that he was on his back and she was resting fully on top of him, her face nestled into his chest. He pulled a blanket over them so that she would stay warm, and then he drew his arms around to encompass her body and rested his chin into her hair.

They lay like that for a long while, each stroking the other's skin softly as if to savor the moment. For several minutes, neither of them spoke as the bond of magic and blood that they shared sang with happiness.

Finally, after a while, Eric began reciting a poem, his voice low and awestruck, his eyes closed.

Drink to me only with thine eyes,

And I will pledge with mine;

Or leave a kiss but in the cup

And I'll not look for wine.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise

Doth ask a drink divine;

But might I of Jove's nectar sup,

I would not change for thine.

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,

Not so much honouring thee

As giving it a hope that there

It could not withered be;

But thou thereon didst only breathe,

And sent'st it back to me;

Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,

Not of itself but thee.

As Eric spoke, Sookie propped herself up on his chest and watched the moments of his mouth. She recognized the first line of the poem, but after that, the words were unfamiliar to her—unfamiliar, but also *so familiar*. She felt the lump in her throat grow and the tears in her eyes well. As she listened to each word, she understood that no matter who had written the poem, the words coming from Eric's mouth were from his beautiful heart, the heart that *he* would say was dead, but that *she* knew was very much alive—the most enlivened thing that she had ever encountered.

As he finished, she said nothing. Instead, she kissed his chest where that heart lie and then lay her head upon it.

In that moment, her own heart beat only for him.

[A/N: The poem that Eric recites is by Ben Jonson, who—if you don't know—was a contemporary of Shakespeare. The poem is called "Song: To Celia" (or sometimes just "To Celia"). This poem kept traveling through my mind as Sookie and Eric pledged and during this scene. I hope you enjoy it! If the language is a bit difficult at first, don't worry. Jonson can be a bit difficult to decipher if you are not used to him, but he's a lovely poet and playwright—at least I think so. ☺

I'm afraid I don't speak Swedish, but as far as I can tell, "Så söt, liksom den sötaste honung," is the Swedish for, "So sweet—like the sweetest honey." "Åh fan!" means "Oh Fuck!"]

Chapter 83: Presents

The bonded pair lay together in contented silence for about half an hour, each luxuriating in the love that was flowing through the bond. Her breathing and heartbeat soothed him, just as his soft touches and caresses lulled her.

About an hour and a half before dawn, Sookie raised up on her elbows, abruptly breaking the silence, and exclaimed, “I’m starving!”

Eric chuckled at his wife. “Well, we must feed you then, and you still need to get your present.”

Sookie looked at Eric curiously, “Present? It better *not* be a car, mister.”

He laughed.

“I mean it, Viking!”

Again, there was just laughter from him.

Sookie rolled her eyes. “If you got me a car, I’ll run your cute little ass over with it.”

Eric laughed even louder.

As they were getting out of bed, Sookie smacked that cute little ass and then noticed that there were large, very thick black curtains installed over the window. Eric followed her gaze and said, “I had Miranda put those in so that I could rest safely beside you in *our* bed on *our* wedding night.”

Sookie’s mood immediately softened, and her eyes welled with tears.

Eric continued as he softly ran the backs of his fingers up and down her cheek. “A contractor I trust will be meeting us here Tuesday evening, and we can talk about how to secure the room more permanently with light-tight shades then. Shades won’t cover the window as

cumbersomely as these curtains, and we can put them on a timer or control them manually so that we can both, perhaps, enjoy the morning and evening light in this room.”

“Is this my present?” Sookie asked, gesturing toward the curtains. She slipped on her robe and made Eric pull back on his boxer-briefs.

Eric smirked at his wife’s modesty, especially given what they had done to each other earlier, but his expression softened into a genuine smile as he thought about how the behavior was quintessentially Sookie. “Nope,” he answered playfully. “After you eat, you’ll get it.”

Sookie looked again at the curtains. “We’ll keep them up until we are able to make this room light tight,” Sookie declared determinedly. “And if they need a few days to get things set up, I’ll just sleep with you in the cubby. I’m *not* spending another day *or* night of sleeping without my husband, Mr. Northman.”

Eric smiled and picked Sookie up into his arms before carrying her downstairs to the kitchen. He set her into her seat at the table, “I’m afraid I can manage little more than a sandwich, my love. Will that do?”

She nodded happily, and within moments, he had returned with her plate. “Water? Tea?” he asked.

“Tea,” she said. When he returned again, he was carrying both a glass of iced tea for her and a warmed TruBlood for himself. Suddenly, Eric cocked his head just a bit. “Excuse me just a sec, min kván,” Eric said as he zipped up and down the stairs again. When he returned he had his phone in his hand and was checking a text.

“What is it?” Sookie asked as she took a large bite.

“Pam,” he answered as he moved a chair from the end of the table so that he could sit closer to his bonded. “Everything seems quiet for the night. Bill, after some major fit throwing

and object breaking, has settled down thanks to Lillith's *calming* presence. However, they are determined to carry on with his original plan. He is certain that it is just a matter of time before I break your heart, and he intends to pick up the pieces."

Sookie sighed, "Is it just me, or can he just not take a freakin' hint?"

Eric spoke in an even tone, "He is delusional, Sookie—either that or he's the most obtuse vampire I've ever met."

Sookie sighed again as she took another bite. "Hey, can people hear us in here?" Her face grew flushed at that thought as she remembered the loud noises she'd been making earlier.

Eric chuckled, "Lafayette and Jesus performed a new privacy spell before they left for Shreveport earlier. Jesus believes that he has successfully modified it to allow us to see, smell, and hear what is occurring outside even as our movements remain unknown as long as we are inside. He has also adjusted the spell to last for the cycle of the moon instead of the sun."

"Is it working? Can you hear and smell what's happenin' outside?"

A huge grin broke out on Eric's face. "Indeed lover. I have heard some extremely *interesting* sounds coming from the woods."

Sookie cringed, "Don't tell me if Bubba is out there killin' cats, Eric!"

He laughed, "Actually, until about twenty minutes ago, he was *chasing* a very different kind of *tail*."

Sookie gasped and blushed again. "Thalia?"

Eric snickered. "Indeed. It seems that the King of Rock & Roll is still very much capable of making new," he paused, "*fans*—at least if the sounds Thalia was making are any indication." He grinned devilishly, "He even had her *singing* at one point."

Sookie laughed and hit him on the arm, “Stop it! Don’t tell me any more! That’s supposed to be private.”

He grinned.

Suddenly, Sookie got a horrified look on her face. “What if the spell isn’t working? What if they could hear us too?”

Eric’s grin turned to a smirk. “Well—if they could, I’m sure it only *inspired* them.”

Sookie hit his arm again, “Eric, I’m serious. I don’t want the stuff we—uh—do in the bedroom to be heard by anyone else!

“Then, let’s test out the rest of the spell, shall we?” His eyebrow raised wickedly.

“Haven’t we already done that?” Sookie answered, turning tomato red now.

Eric laughed heartily and then dialed before putting the phone on speaker mode.

“Howdy, Mister Eric,” came Bubba’s distinctive voice.

“Hello Bubba,” Eric returned. “I need you to confirm that you haven’t heard, seen, or smelled anything from inside the house since you arrived.”

“No, Mister Eric. If I didn’t know you was in there, I’d think the house was empty.”

Eric said, “Excellent. We *are* in here, but the witches’ spell is obviously working as intended. Feel free to do a bit of hunting and *whatever else* you wish before you go to ground.”

He paused, “And Bubba—tell Thalia hello from us, will you?” Eric winked at Sookie, who immediately turned pinker again.

“I sure will!”

Sookie could hear the happiness radiating from Bubba’s voice, and she couldn’t help but be happy for her friend. Bubba continued, “Miss Thalia’s waitin’ for me while I do a little huntin’, but I’ll tell her when I see her.” He paused. “Miss Thalia sure is pretty, ain’t she?”

Eric chuckled good-naturedly, “She certainly has her own unique brand of beauty.” He winked at Sookie again.

“You have a nice end to your evenin’, Mister Eric.”

“You too, Bubba.” Eric pushed the button to end the call and then set the phone on the table.

Despite her lingering blush, Sookie looked much more at ease. She smiled and took another bite of her sandwich.

Eric tilted his head to the side and grinned at his beloved before he leaned toward her and tenderly moved a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, a gesture that Sookie was getting used to.

Finishing her bite, Sookie looked at him earnestly, “You’re just a big ol’ pussy cat, you know—always touchin’, and rubbin’, and snugglin’.”

Eric crinkled his nose. “All your fault, min kära. If you weren’t so touchable, I wouldn’t need to touch all the time.”

Sookie grinned, “You happy with the privacy spell now?”

“Yes—it’s working exactly as I had wished,” Eric returned as he played with another strand of her hair. “Now, I can hear and smell what is going on outside—though my range is not quite as far as it usually is. It is sufficient for me to have adequate warning of any threats, however.”

“And Jesus and Lafayette’s protection spell should stop anyone who intends us harm anyway,” Sookie added.

Eric nodded.

“Good,” Sookie said. “And if anyone does get through that barrier somehow and threatens me or *my family* in the day time,” she continued passionately, her southern twang prominent, “I’ll either zap ‘em or shoot ‘em.”

Eric chuckled, “I have *no* doubt, lover. But Miranda and/or Jarod will always be with you as well.”

She continued fiercely, “Good, but I want you to know that no one—*no one*—is ever gonna get close to *you* in the day—not if I’m here!”

Eric was kneeling next to her in moments and had turned her chair so that their lips could crash together. He had her robe off and his underwear torn to shreds almost before she registered his presence and was able to respond to his hungry lips with her own.

He quickly lifted her up to the edge of the table and checked her readiness with his fingers. Finding her already wet and waiting for him, he growled and thrust into her roughly. Whereas their love-making had been slow and tender earlier, this joining was about the raw passion that Sookie stimulated in Eric. They groaned into each other’s mouths.

“Fuck, Sookie,” Eric rumbled. “So tight for me. So *strong*. So perfect. Min *sköldmöns*.”

To keep from flying across the room from his hard thrusts, Sookie wrapped her legs around his thighs and complemented his movements with her own. She sank her fingernails into his back, both to keep herself attached to him more fully and to spur on his own passion.

He plunged into her even faster and with more penetrating strokes until they both exploded in their mutual pleasure.

Eric brought his arms tightly around Sookie and leaned into her as she collapsed into his chest, trying to catch her breath. “Jeez, Eric,” Sookie said when she was finally able to speak, “what brought that on?”

“Well, other than the fact that I pretty much want to be doing that to you *all* the time, lover” he chuckled suggestively, “it was your fierceness that acted as the *immediate* catalyst. When you say things like that—when you call me your *family* or when you get protective—I feel that I must have you immediately,” he added sincerely. “I am afraid I have very little ability to control myself when you behave in such ways.”

She laughed, “Well, you protect me in the night; I’m just prepared to do the same for you in the day. That’s all.”

“It’s no small thing, min kván. In fact, it’s maybe the *biggest* thing in my long life,” he said, his voice still earnest.

Sookie smiled wider and kissed his chest where his un-beating heart lay. “Hand me my robe?” she asked.

He lifted her off the table and set her gently on her feet as he kissed her forehead. After she’d put her robe back on, she reached down for his torn underwear. “Well, it looks like these are done for, buster” she teased him.

Eric zipped into the kitchen to throw away the destroyed garment and take her used dishes to the sink. He was back before her in moments and picked her up bridal style. “That’s all your fault too, you know,” he said playfully. “If you were not such a temptress, I would not be tempted all the time.”

“Well, Mister Impulse-Control-Problems,” she teased, “it’s gonna be dawn soon. And I need to get cleaned up and go to sleep since I have to go to work tomorrow. And you need to get

unpacked and get your cute little behind in bed too.” She paused, “And, you know, I *am* capable of walking, Viking!”

Eric kissed her nose, but did not set her down. “First things first, min kära,” he said mischievously. He carried her to her old bedroom, the door of which had been shut. He set her on her feet before it. “Inside, you will find your wedding present.”

Sookie opened the door and squealed as she saw a little gray and black striped tabby kitten curled up on her old bed. She ran to it and picked it up, stroking its soft fur.

“Oh Eric!” she said. “I love her!”

“*Him*,” Eric corrected, walking over to Sookie to pet the cat as well. It purred loudly and greedily accepted their attention. Eric motioned to one wall where a litter box, food, and water were set up. “I had Miranda bring him in here for the evening so that he’d be a surprise,



but we can move these things to wherever you wish tomorrow. He is supposed to be already house trained, and Bubba has been informed that he is *not* to touch this cat even if it goes outside. I had to claim the kitten as *mine* formally, my love, but Bubba will leave him be.”

“Wait!” Sookie exclaimed. “You won’t have to bite him to claim him, will you?”

Eric chuckled, “No, my love. Bubba has agreed to recognize the claim without that. Plus, Miranda told him last night that you will most likely love this animal, so he actually agreed to protect your kitten from harm, no matter how good it might smell.”

Sookie chuckled happily and continued to pet her new kitten. “He’s perfect, Eric. Thank you.”

Eric sat next to her on the bed. “You must think of a name for him, *min kära*.”

Sookie nodded, even as the kitten was falling back into slumber. She kissed Eric lightly on the cheek. “I think we’ll leave him shut up in here for the night. When I get up in the morning, I’ll start introduc’in’ him to the rest of the house.” She gave the sleeping kitten a final pat, “Now—I should really get cleaned up and get to bed, and *you* still have to unpack.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Eric said as he picked her up again and carried her to their bathroom, kissed her forehead gently, and then zipped back to the entryway to retrieve their discarded bags.

He heard her speak after him, “I really *can* walk by myself, you handsy vampire!”

Eric chuckled.

Chapter 84: Nesting

While Sookie was seeing to her human needs and cleaning up a bit after their lovemaking, Eric unzipped his bags and cased out the closet. He'd not brought many clothes since there simply wasn't room for them yet. Because of the Maenad, however, Sookie did not have much clothing either. He knew that with the additions that he would need to make and the shopping spree that Pam was bound to take Sookie on, the small closet would soon become inadequate for their needs.

Sookie came out of the bathroom and took in the sight of Eric, naked and contemplative, in front of the closet. The image took her breath away for a moment.

"What are you *studying* there, lover?" Eric asked in a teasing voice.

She shook her head and grinned at her husband, choosing to answer his question with one of her own. "What are *you* studying in there, cowboy?" she asked as she walked behind him, smacking him playfully on the bottom.

"I'm just thinking that we need a bigger closet," he chuckled before hanging up a few shirts. She walked over to the chest of drawers and gestured toward the left side.

"All these are empty for you," she said, opening the top one. She grabbed all the neatly folded underwear from his suitcase, except for one pair, and put them into the top drawer. She threw the remaining pair at Eric, whose back was again turned to her. Still, he caught them and grumbled good-naturedly as he put them on. Sookie sighed as she checked out *her property*, now disappearing into the boxer-briefs. She then added some socks to the top drawer before closing it and pulling open the middle one. While she neatly stacked some T-shirts into it, Eric put a few pairs of folded jeans onto the highest closet shelf, which he could reach easily.

“Maybe when the contractor is here Tuesday, we can talk to him about making our bedroom and bathroom bigger by combining them to Jason’s old room next door?” Sookie suggested.

Eric looked at her a bit surprised, but also quite pleased, “I confess, *min kära*—I’d thought about doing that right after I bought the house, but I wasn’t sure you’d approve.”

“Well, we *do* need a lot more closet space, and if this is gonna be our light-tight room, I’d like to make it so that there’s a desk for you to work at if you’re awake a bit in the mornings and late afternoons like you’ve been the last few days.”

Finished unpacking Eric’s smaller suitcase, Sookie unzipped her own bag and backpack, which he’d also retrieved from downstairs. With a smile on her face, she hung up the two gorgeous dresses she hadn’t chosen. Meanwhile, Eric picked up the red dress and his discarded clothing from earlier. “I will have Bobby add this dress to my dry cleaning—if that’s okay, *min kván?*”

Sookie nodded appreciatively and then took her dirty clothes out of the backpack. She gave Eric a smile as she walked into the bathroom, carrying the clothes to the hamper. While in the bathroom, she took off her necklace and beautiful sapphire earrings and set them reverently into her jewelry box.

She then completed her nightly ritual by brushing her teeth. Within moments, Eric had joined her at the sink and was brushing his too. She couldn’t stop herself from giving him a pasty grin as he winked at her in the mirror.

“And it would be nice to have a bigger bathtub as well, lover,” Eric suggested provocatively as soon as he was done rinsing his mouth out.

Sookie looked at the average-sized bathtub and then at her anything-but-average-sized husband. “You’ll have to special order us another Viking-sized tub,” she smiled at him as he lightly wiped off a bit of toothpaste from the corner of her mouth.

“With room for a fairy too,” Eric added as he kissed the spot he’d just wiped.

The couple returned to the bedroom, and Sookie set her cell phone alarm while Eric zipped his smaller bag—now empty—and put it into his equally empty larger bag.

“And we could *definitely* use a bigger bed,” Sookie laughed. “As much as I love to snuggle into you, I think the cuteness of seeing your feet hanging off the end of the bed is wearing off.”

Eric winked as he set the consolidated suitcases into the corner of the room and then climbed into his side of the bed. “I will *always* wish to hold you close to me, min kván, but I admit that it would be nice not to be hanging off the end of the bed while I’m doing it.”

“Well then,” Sookie said as she dropped her robe and slipped naked into bed next to him, “we’ll talk to the contractor Tuesday, and I’ll think about some things I want while I’m at work, and you can think about some stuff you want before you sleep. We’ll compare lists tomorrow night after the football party.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said. Then he pouted, a look that seemed so out-of-place on her thousand-year-old vampire that Sookie couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“What’s wrong with you, buck-o?” she asked teasingly. “Did someone take your toys away?”

Eric’s eyes glinted wickedly even as he attempted to pout even more deeply. “Why do *you* get to be naked while *I* have to wear these?”

She heard him pop the waistband of his underwear. “Fine,” she said permissively. “I just don’t want you runnin’ around the house naked.”

He smiled brightly and winked again as he shimmied out of the garment and threw it to the end of the bed. Then, he pulled her naked body into his so that she was lying on his chest. They both sighed at the convergence of their flesh, her warmth on his cool. Knowing of Sookie’s need to sleep so that she would be ready for her work the next day, Eric calmed his smoldering desire to once again bury himself into his beloved’s supple, welcoming body. Instead, he softly stroked her hair as she nestled into him snugly. She laid her left hand on the other side of his chest, and he covered her hand with his free one.

“Do you like it?” he asked, touching the ring.

“Oh gosh!” Sookie exclaimed, raising herself up a bit so that she could meet Eric’s eyes. “I love it. It’s perfect. I don’t know how you picked it, but I think that if every ring in the world were lined up for me to choose from, *this* would be the one I’d take.”

Eric smiled. “I was feeling a lot from you through the bond when we were apart, but I think I know when you saw this for the first time,” he said, once again touching the ring. “It was soon after Miranda texted me to tell me that you’d cleverly confirmed that your brother and friends had not discussed our pledging. You were very, very happy in that moment and a little surprised too, right?”

“Yep,” Sookie confirmed as she eased back into him.

“And when I texted you later? What had happening right then?”

“Well, Pam had given me three dresses to choose from, and I’d tried on the first two, and they were really beautiful, but you texted right after I put on the last one, which is the one I wore.

I knew that I was wearing my wedding—or pledging—dress right then. And I was thinkin’ about how much you’d love it.”

“I *did* love it,” he whispered into her hair. “And I love *you*, min kván.”

“I love *you*, husband,” Sookie smiled into his chest. “I can’t wait to marry you again once humans can marry vampires in this state. I’d marry you a thousand times if I could.”

Eric resumed stroking her hair until Sookie’s breathing evened out to indicate her sleep. At dawn, he missed seeing the sunlight coming in through the blocked off window and was anxious to have shutters that he could control in their room. He thought briefly about some of the other things he’d like to have in their renovated master suite including larger windows or maybe even a little balcony.

He then wondered if he could convince Sookie to redesign the whole second floor to be light tight. Currently, there were three smaller bedrooms upstairs, plus the one that they were in, which was a bit larger. He loved that this room had a fireplace, but it really was quite small for two, especially since one of them was a 6’4” Viking.

They could keep Sookie’s old room and en-suite bathroom available for guests if she liked and could even make it light tight in case Pam needed to stay over. However, Jason’s old room and the next room over, which now housed mostly boxes of things that Eric had saved after the Maenad episode, were not used much as far as he could tell. They could make that space into an office for himself and a little library and reading room for Sookie, with floor to ceiling bookcases on one wall. Since he knew that the contractor could reinforce the floor, walls and ceiling so that they could be essentially fire proof, he would feel comfortable bringing many of his books here so that Sookie could enjoy them too. The thought of his bonded sitting in a

window seat in that room, absorbing the afternoon sun and enjoying a book, made him smile widely. He couldn't stop himself from thanking God, or the gods and goddesses, or fate, or magic, or whatever had brought Sookie to his side.

The bedroom they were currently occupying was on the left at the top of the stairs, and its bathroom was in the corner of the house sharing a wall with a small bathroom attached to Jason's old room. Given the shape, Eric felt that their master bedroom could be easily extended into the space of both current bathrooms and that walk-in closets could be added. Jason's old room could be converted into a large, luxuriant bathroom for them. Their bedroom would essentially become a large rectangle, and they could have a little sitting area over by the fireplace.

He smiled at the thought of building new furnishings for that area. His hands imagined the smoothness of the wood even as his fingers continued to enjoy the smoothness of Sookie's skin. He'd certainly had his beloved in mind when he'd made the furniture for the bedroom in the cabin, but this would be different. He'd be making these furnishings *knowing* that they would be used by both of them—for *their* home. The thought of building a little workshop for himself behind the house and spending nights fashioning the wood even as Sookie watched him, or read, or played with the kitten, or did anything at all—just as long as she was near him—made his heart want to burst forth with beats of happiness after a thousand years of dormancy. It lay still, however. Yet the space inside of his body where the fairy bond had formed did thrum and pulse, alive and enlivened by his love.

As he continued running his fingers lightly through his sleeping wife's hair and along her flesh, Eric wondered if Sookie would agree to make all those changes he was contemplating. They'd be nice, but what mattered most was that his bonded and he would be together in the rooms, no matter what they ended up looking like.

The sun had been up for about an hour when he finished his musings, but Eric still didn't feel the need to sleep, nor did he feel any danger from the sun. He thought briefly about going to the living room, where most of the curtains were still drawn, and enjoying the indirect sun of the morning, but he couldn't bring himself to leave Sookie. As much as the thought of sunlight enthralled him, the source of that light—his beloved one—was much more captivating to him.

So Eric held Sookie closely and simply breathed in her scent until he chose to go to sleep.

Sookie awoke to the sound of her cell phone alarm and grumbled as she had to detach herself from Eric in order to turn it off. It read 9:30, which meant she had gotten about four and a half hours of sleep. She knew she should have been exhausted, considering her recent mental and physical exertions, but she'd had Eric's blood too much recently to feel anything other than refreshed. She thought seriously about pushing the snooze button and curling back into her *husband*. Even thinking that word made her want to put her cheek back on his chest and wrap her arms around him, but she managed to sit up.

The room was quite dark thanks to the black-out curtains, so Sookie reached over to her nightstand again and turned on her lamp. She gathered her robe off of the end of the bed and slipped it on.

She looked back at Eric's sleeping form and thought again about how innocent he looked in his slumber. He could be a cruel, violent vampire to his enemies, and he could be a passionate *and* primal force of nature with her (the slight tenderness in her lady bits—despite the vampire blood—was a testament of that). But in bed like this, he looked completely at peace—completely innocent. His hair was ruffled and fell onto his forehead in the boyish way she loved so much. The planes of his beautiful face were completely relaxed. She could admit

that she was still not a hundred percent used to the fact that he didn't breathe, but she'd become comfortable with the feel of his cool, unmoving body next to hers. Having never slept with a warm-blooded man, Were, or whatever, she wondered if the difference would be shocking, but was also certain that she'd never have to find out. Despite Eric's not breathing, however, Sookie felt the vivacity of their shared bond even as he slept dead next to her. Its constant presence and pulse more than made up for Eric's own lack of a pulse.

She couldn't help reaching out to trail her fingertips from Eric's forehead, down his cheek, to the cleft in his chin, and finally to the perfect spot on him where his collar bones met one another. She sighed wistfully and whispered, "So beautiful."

Eric grunted a bit in his sleep and then surprised Sookie by opening his eyes groggily before focusing them on her face. "Mmmm," he mumbled. "That's exactly what I think every time I look at you."

"You're awake?" Sookie asked, her surprise evident in her tone.

Eric slowly sat up in bed and propped himself against the headboard. He spent a moment analyzing what his body and blood were telling him, and then he answered. "Yes—very much so. I was not yet being pulled under by the sun when I took my rest this morning. I decided, however, to enjoy the act of sleeping next to my bride," he continued as he raised his hand up to copy her previous movement—fingertips trailing lightly from her forehead to the hollow under her neck. "But I think I've been in something more like downtime than my usual sleep. I feel rested, but the sun is yet to pull me under, min kära. Again, all this is evidence of your gifts to me."

"But won't you get the bleeds? What if you lose your ability to sleep completely? Won't you die?" Sookie was worried now.

Eric shook his head. “I do not think so, my love. I have felt the same as I always do despite not going to my rest right at daybreak and not sleeping until dark. And downtime for vampires can be as restorative as our sleep. It will be fine.” He pulled Sookie into him and held her for a moment.

He kissed her forehead and asked, “So what were you getting ready to do, wife?”

She grinned at him, “Well—other than petting you—I had just gotten up, and I need to shower and eat before I go to work.”

“Ah, you must be there at 11:00, correct?”

She nodded.

“And it is currently 9:43, so you have about an hour before you must leave, correct?”

Sookie nodded again, smiling at her husband. As simple as it was, knowing that Eric knew her work schedule was a big thing to her. Bill used to ask only if she was working the next night, and though it hadn’t occurred to her then, she now realized his question had little to do with wanting to know about *her* life. It had to do with *Bill’s* plans in regard to her. Whether she worked in the day or not was inconsequential to him. However, Eric was interested in her—in Sookie Stackhouse—*both* the day and the night versions.

Eric could tell that Sookie was processing something in her beautiful mind and gave her a moment to do it. When she looked back at him, he kissed her nose lightly. “You shower, min kván. I will sit with you as you eat your meal if you will have it in the living room where the sunlight can be muted.”

Sookie smiled even wider. “That sounds wonderful.” She returned the kiss to his nose and got up. She quickly grabbed the clothing she would need for work and looked at Eric. “I love you.”

“The feeling is *very* mutual,” Eric returned, wanting nothing more than to shower with and ravage his beautiful wife. However, he knew how important being on time and dependable in her work were to her.

“Oh—check on the kitty,” she added, as she bounced into the bathroom. Eric chuckled at his wife’s exuberance. As he got up and reached into the bottom of his three drawers to pull out a pair of dark gray track pants that Sookie had unpacked for him, he smiled at all the little things he was beginning to associate with their domestic life. They seemed to naturally fall into sharing tasks like his unpacking or her dishes. Finally being with Sookie sexually had been a revelation, to be sure, but to be sharing her space, her time, and her life were more like bolts of lightning to his very spirit.

He thought for a moment about going to the kitchen to prepare her breakfast—not that he could do much. But even though Eric felt that he would be fine, the sun did stream fully into that room, especially in the mornings, and he did not want Sookie worrying before her first day back at work.

As he carefully walked into the hall and avoided most of the light entering the house, he decided to see if Miranda or Jarod could prepare her morning meal. He knew Sookie might be a bit frustrated that he’d done this—calling him high-handed—but he would ask the couple to join them to eat so that she would be less likely to be upset. He dialed Miranda.

After a short conversation, Eric hung up a bit frustrated. As the call had ended, Miranda had been giggling on the other end of the phone. For his part, Eric had not even thought that the fierce Werelioness knew *how* to giggle.

She’d been amused when he had asked—rather than ordered—her to cook some form of breakfast food for Sookie. And then she’d found it even more funny when—after asking him

why he'd requested and not just commanded—Eric had explained that Sookie would not like that. He had expounded on his statement by telling her that his wife was prone to see Miranda and Jarod as friends more than guards and that she wouldn't want Eric to be inhospitable. That is when Miranda's chuckling had started. She'd said something about never seeing a tamed thousand-year-old vampire before, and then she'd broken into what could only be termed a giggle fit.

Eric had closed the curtains in Sookie's old room and was petting the kitten lightly. He had not been pleased when he'd hung up, but at least Miranda was sending Jarod inside to prepare something called French toast while she herself checked to make sure all the curtains in the living room were drawn sufficiently. They'd also both agreed to join Eric and Sookie in the living room for the meal. Still, Eric bristled as he heard Miranda's giggles return sporadically from the floor below. However, he eventually shrugged off his frustration. Thinking about it, he didn't mind if the close circle around them knew how much he was willing to set aside his vampire nature to be a better partner and husband to Sookie. If his behavior caused giggle fits in a ferocious Were, he resolved to see those fits as merely another way in which his life with Sookie was unique and full of wonder.

He picked up the kitten and took it with him to their bedroom, certain that Sookie would want to greet the little creature.

As Sookie re-entered the bedroom dressed in her work uniform, Eric was putting on a T-shirt and the kitten was curled up on the end of their bed working its claws into the quilt. He asked, trying to sound casual, "Do you enjoy a breakfast food called French toast?"

Sookie looked a bit baffled as she sat next to the kitten and began petting him, "Yeah—why?"

“Well,” Eric said innocently. “Jarod is preparing this meal for you, Miranda, and himself, and they will join us to eat—if that is okay with you.”

Sookie was not fooled by Eric’s innocent act; she knew just how *NOT* innocent he was. “And whose idea was this little breakfast meal, Eric?” she asked with a more frustrated air than she felt.

Eric looked relieved despite her tone because he could tell through the bond that she was more amused than upset.

She smirked, despite herself. “This bond thing isn’t gonna let me pretend to be upset with you at all, is it?” she pouted.

“Nope, lover,” Eric chuckled as he zipped over to her and pulled her into his arms. “But then again, how did you know that I’d asked Miranda to arrange for your breakfast?”

“Hmm,” Sookie voiced contemplatively. “I guess I felt you hold something back, or at least like you *wanted* to hold something back.”

Eric chuckled again and then turned a bit more serious. “It may be possible for us to learn to shield our emotions from each other, though we could never be untruthful. I suspect the skill would be even more easy for you to learn than myself since you are used to shielding your mind from the thoughts of humans. If you want, we can look into it more.”

Sookie looked up at Eric even as he bent down and met her lips with a soft kiss. “That might be a good idea for sometimes, Eric. I love our bond—don’t get me wrong—but no one wants someone else to be able to gauge their thoughts *or* emotions all the time.” Sookie smiled ruefully, “I know that first hand. Until I learned how to control my telepathy, I was always finding myself in the thoughts of my family and friends, and it’s just not right to know

everything. There are a lot of thoughts, just like there are a lot of emotions, that are for the thinker or feeler alone.”

“I love our bond too,” Eric said as he pulled her to his chest in an loving embrace. “But it would be nice to be able to shield things from you at times.”

“Like what, buster?” she asked teasingly, looking up at him.

He grew quiet for a moment and answered seriously, “Like when I am frustrated by work or when I must exact punishment on someone. Honestly, I do not wish for you to know how much I sometimes enjoy that part of being a vampire—at least not first hand. I’d also want to be able to surprise you sometimes without you thinking I’m hiding something.”

She spoke up with a twinkle in her eye, “And I’d like to be able to surprise you too or even pretend like I’m exasperated with you, even when I’m really not. And it *would* be nice to be able to just feel my own feelings at work and not have you worried all the time or angry about my normal, everyday frustrations.”

“Then we will look into it,” Eric said as he kissed her forehead. “Jesus will be in possession of Godric’s books soon, and we’ll add blocking out each other’s emotions to the list of things for him to look into.” He paused for a moment, “In fact, I am thinking about putting him on retainer; on-call consultant would be his official title. He is part demon, you know, and if he had more time to really work on his craft, he could be an excellent sorcerer, or as his family calls themselves, an excellent brujo. Of course, this would most likely involve him quitting his job as a nurse, and I am not sure if he would be willing to do that.”

Sookie had finished toweling off her hair and quickly returned the wet towel to the bathroom, picking up her hairbrush along the way. Once she was back in the bedroom, she answered Eric’s implicit question meditatively, “Honestly, I think that Jesus would like to do

what you're thinking of asking him." Eric interrupted her train of thought briefly as he reached for the brush and motioned for her to sit on the edge of the bed. He settled behind her and began gently untangling her hair even as the kitten resettled onto her lap. "Ahhh, that feels nice," Sookie said closing her eyes in bliss.

She smiled to herself as her husband stroked her head even as she stroked the kitten's. "My two boys," she thought to herself joyfully. After a minute or two, she continued where she'd left off before, "Anyway, I think Jesus would like to have time to learn everything about bein' a brujo, and I know after the whole Marnie thing that he's real powerful. He was able to expel Antonia from Marnie, after all, and saved me from the circle of fire Marnie'd trapped me in." Eric's touch became more tender at the mention of those events. Sookie could feel through the bond Eric's regret that he could not get to her.

Sookie attempted to send comfort to him through their bond, her first time trying to do such a thing. Immediately, he sighed appreciatively, "Thank you, min kära."

She smiled and continued her earlier thoughts about Jesus. "And he's kinda afraid of all the demon stuff, I think. So it'd be nice if he could have some time to deal with all that, but I also know that Lafayette's mom lives at the facility where he works, and that might make him more prone to stay there."

Eric was done removing the tangles by this point, but continued brushing. The act comforted him, and he could tell it relaxed his beloved. Their shared bond echoed with their joy at being close.

"Will you let me mention it to him first?" Sookie asked, settling backwards into Eric's chest.

“Of course, min kära,” Eric answered. Jesus will feel freer to tell you of his true desires on the matter.” He brought his arms around her stomach and rested his chin on her shoulder as she sank into him. After a few minutes, her stomach grumbled, causing them both to laugh.

“Let’s get you fed, wife,” he said rising and extending a hand to help her up. “And then I can kiss you goodbye before you leave for work.” Sookie grinned and patted his ass as he turned around.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

Just then, her cell phone rang. “Hey Sam,” Sookie said, answering the phone after checking the caller I.D.

After a pause, she said, “Yep, I am getting ready for work right now, and I’ll for sure be there.” She rolled her eyes. Eric could hear the skepticism in the shifter’s voice on the other end of the line.

Then Eric tensed. Sam had just asked about Eric and whether they’d solved the problem that had kept her from working two days before. He also asked if the vampire had finally left her in peace.

Sookie took a deep breath, “Listen, Sam, I know you have your issues with Eric, but you need to know that we are together now, a real couple. So I don’t want you talkin’ bad about him around me, okay?”

There was a long pause on the other end. “Fine,” Sam said gruffly. “See you later.” He hung up.

Sookie sighed as she turned off her phone and then sought the comfort of her bonded’s arms. Eric knew better than to talk badly of Sookie’s friend or suggest that she quit her job, so he just held her close for a few minutes, sending his pride for her and comfort through the bond.

The kitten chose that moment to begin crawling up Sookie's pant-clad leg, and she couldn't help her giggle. She reached down and picked up the tiny creature and then looked up at Eric. "It seems like both my boys are trying to make me feel better."

"Always," Eric said, kissing Sookie's forehead even as he pet the cat's head. He looked at Sookie with a glint in his eyes. "Now, let's get you fed, wife. We wouldn't want you to be late for work."

Chapter 85: Out of the Bubble

Sookie was overwhelmed. Holly had called in because her son was sick, so Sookie had to cover the lunch shift by herself. Truth be told, she was also rusty, especially during a rush, and her shields were a bit out of practice since she had been spending more and more time with Eric lately—luxuriating in the peace of his mind.

Of course, he'd felt her anxiety and had managed to wake himself up to call her at about 12:30 in the middle of the biggest flurry of customers. She'd not answered, instead telling Jarod to text Eric to say that everything was okay and that she'd text on her break, but that he should sleep. That earned her a bit of frustration from Eric's side of the bond, but Sookie couldn't help but notice that love and pride were the underlying emotions from him. She also couldn't help but be heartened by the fact that he cared so much about her; however, she was anxious to figure out how to mute her side of the bound. She didn't want Eric's rest to be interrupted every time she had a bad or frustrating moment at work.

Lafayette was working the day shift as well—actually manning the bar while Terry was in the kitchen. Both men seemed to like that arrangement, and Sam wasn't due in until 3:30 or so; thus, Sookie hadn't seen him. She couldn't help but wonder



how her boss was doing, given his brother's death, and was anxious to see for herself that he was okay.

Sookie wound her way around tables for several hours straight before the rush died down. Finally, at 2:30, she was able to pause to get something to eat and send a text to Eric.

“Everything’s fine here. I miss you, HUSBAND. Lala, Jesus, and Jason confirmed for football tonight, and I require a foot rub. Love you.”

She didn’t get an answer from Eric, nor did she expect one. She’d felt only the buzzing of his life through her body for more than an hour, signaling that he had slipped back into his slumber. If all went well, she would be able to leave work at 4:30, stop by the store for a few things for the football-watching party, and be home right before dark, which was at 5:17 that night. If things went as they had the last few days, however, Eric would be awake before she got home, but she’d still be able to be there in case he did something foolhardy like try to watch the sunset without her there. She’d had a very hard time convincing the stubborn vampire that he needed to return to their completely light-tight room before she left for work. Sure—she trusted that he knew his own body and the dangers to it, but she wasn’t about to lose him when they’d just found their way to each other. She was pretty sure that she had agreed to light-tight, remote controlled shutters for the whole house in order to get him to their room before she had left for Merlotte’s. “Sneaky, manipulative, sexy-as-hell vampire,” she laughed to herself. Of course, she would have agreed to sun-blocking shades anyway, and had even planned to bring the topic up when they spoke to the contractor, but Eric hadn’t known that.

Sookie remembered the toe-curling kiss goodbye he’d given her, and her *flesh* warmed. But then when she remembered him sitting on the bed and the new kitten jumping up onto his lap right after that kiss, her *heart* warmed. “My two boys,” she whispered to herself with a huge smile on her face.

After she scarfed down the BLT Terry had made for her, she went to check on her few remaining tables. There was a definite spring in her step; she'd be home with Eric soon. The being apart thing—even when it was for only a few hours—was *not* fun. But she wasn't about to give up her independence. That simply wasn't her.

Still Sookie was really happy when Arlene showed up a little before 3:30. Lafayette had left an hour earlier, and Sookie had covered the floor and bar since he'd gone, not that very many people had come in.

The first thing that Arlene did was run up to Sookie and grab her hand, taking in her ring. “Oh my gosh!” she exclaimed. “I heard from Janelle Stevenson who heard from Maxine Fortenberry that you had a big ring on your finger. What's up, Sook? You get engaged to that Vampire Bill?” she asked with some distaste.

Sookie shook her head vigorously, “No! Definitely not!” All day long, customers—especially the regulars—had been noticing her ring. Their minds asked questions and made judgments, ranging from the speculative, “I bet she's going to Vermont to marry that vamp”; to the hurtful, “Her Gran would turn over in her grave”; to the unflattering, “Who would marry Crazy Sookie?”; to the downright evil, “Vampire-loving whore; you deserve to go up in flames with all of 'em!” Sookie had been working very hard to keep her shields in place to block the thoughts. However, despite all their speculating, no one had actually asked her any direct questions, and Sookie hadn't volunteered anything.

“Well?” Arlene probed.

“Well, I'm getting married; I already am sort of married,” Sookie gushed.

“Huh? Did you elope or something with somebody when you were gone for a year? How can you be *gettin'* married when you already *are* married?” Arlene asked confusedly.

“Well, do you remember Eric?” Sookie began.

“That big, blond vamp?” Arlene asked with a little fear in her eyes. “Yeah, after you left, he came in here a few times to talk to Sam. Please tell me you aren’t with him, Sookie! He’s even more evil than Vampire Bill!”

Sookie bristled at Arlene’s words and attitude. Eric could be cruel, and some people—take Lafayette as a good example—might have good reason to fear or hate him, but Arlene didn’t really know him. She fished into Arlene’s mind for a moment and saw Eric there. He had indeed visited Merlotte’s quite a bit in the time Sookie had been missing, and he’d talked to Arlene a few times too, but he’d never threatened or intimidated her. However, Sookie could clearly see her exaggerating the encounters to everyone she’d told about them. She also saw how Terry had talked to his wife about her blowing things out of proportion and how he’d told her that Eric looked merely like a man looking for a lost loved one—like he’d seen hundreds of soldiers look when their friends went missing in war. Finally, Sookie heard how Arlene had been contemplating going to the Fellowship of the Sun church that had recently opened in Monroe. Terry, however, had been resisting. In that moment, Sookie’s respect for the veteran skyrocketed. Despite everything Terry had witnessed and experienced in war, he was an extremely tolerant and good man.

Sookie took a deep breath, not wanting to ruin her long friendship and hoping that she could convince Arlene that Eric was good for her. “Eric’s *not* evil, Arlene. And yes, we are together. We got married in the vampire way last night, and when it’s legal, we’re gonna do it in the human way too. I know you don’t really like vampires, but I hope you can be happy for me because I’m *really* happy, Arlene”

Arlene looked skeptical for a moment, and Sookie shut out her thoughts tightly. “Okay, Sook. But you be careful,” her friend finally said.

Sookie smiled appreciatively and gave Arlene a hug, “I will be.”

After quickly catching Arlene up on the few tables in the section she was taking over, Sookie gestured toward Jarod, signaling that she was headed back to the bathroom. She smiled at her bodyguard. She was liking Jarod more and more. He’d simply sat in a booth during her shift, staying out of the way, except for the occasional request for a fresh cup of coffee and then lunch. When she’d gotten really busy, she’d seen him get up to refill his own coffee a few times, instead of asking her. He’d spent most of his time reading or working on the newspaper crossword though Sookie could tell he also stayed on alert. Plus, he always had a funny comment when Sookie checked on him.

As Sookie walked toward the back, she saw Sam entering through the employee entrance. She realized as soon as she saw him that she should have warned him about the blood bond between Eric and her as well as her scent. A low growl, which sounded almost comically like it was coming straight from Sam’s alter ego, Dean the dog, escaped from the shifter’s throat.

Almost as soon as she had heard it, Sam seemed to catch himself and relaxed his body a bit. But he tensed again as Jarod came running into the back to stand in front of Sookie.

“Merlotte!” Jarod threatened. “Stand down!”

To Sookie’s great relief, both shifters immediately calmed down from their aggressive stances.

“Sookie?” Sam sounded, as she peaked at him from behind Jarod.

“Hey, Sam,” Sookie answered awkwardly. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Though Sam seemed to be trying to stay calm, he became angry once again when he inhaled deeply. Jarod retook his protective stance in front of his charge.

“What. The. Fuck. Sook? Why do you smell so much like Northman?” Sam asked in a low, angry voice.

Sookie’s tone matched his in anger. “Sam, I told you that I’m with Eric now! What’s the big problem?”

“I know what you told me, but you didn’t say that you were drinking enough of his fucking blood to smell *exactly* like him, Sook! What are you fucking thinking?”

“Listen, Sam,” Sookie said, her own voice lowering as she tried to regain a bit of her own calm, “it’s none of you ‘F’-in business what I do or whose blood I drink. As it so happens, Eric and I have a blood bond with each other. Oh—and we got pledged last night. If you can’t deal with that and treat me and my relationship with my *husband* with a little respect, then you and I are gonna have a problem, Sam Merlotte!”

“Pledged?” Sam questioned, looking at Jarod for confirmation.

The other shifter nodded.

“Yes, Sam Merlotte. Eric and I are pledged, and I *know* what that means for Supes, so you’d better start gettin’ used to it!” Her tone was still harsh.

Looking chastised, but still very concerned, Sam raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Sorry, Sook. It’s just that—well—I hope you know what you’re gettin’ into. We haven’t seen each other for a while, and now you’re hittin’ me with a lot all at once.” He ran his hand roughly through his hair.

Sookie calmed too.

“Why don’t we go into the office and talk a bit, cher? Sam asked. “I’d feel better if I knew *you* knew what you’d gotten yourself into.”

Sookie nodded, “Fine, Sam, but only for a couple of minutes. I have some prep I need to finish up for tonight’s shift, and I want to get out of here on time.”

Jarod looked at Sookie in question, and when she nodded and gave him a little smile, he relaxed and moved back toward the bar. “See you out there,” he said.

Sookie followed Sam into his office, and as he settled behind his desk, she sat in the chair opposite.

“I *am* sorry, cher,” Sam started. “It’s just that you’ve taken me by surprise here. Do you even know what a blood tie means to a vampire—what it does?”

Sookie actively worked to calm herself, given Sam’s almost-patronizing tone. She took a deep breath, “Listen, Sam. I will have to talk things over with Eric before I tell you everything about our *bond*, but I can tell you that it’s not like a normal tie between a vampire and a human.”

“But Sook, a tie with a vampire can give him control over you, and I have never, *ever* smelled a tie this strong. I’m afraid for you.”

“Sam, Eric and I don’t have a tie,” she said slowly, hoping he’d start to understand. “We have a *bond*. It’s different.”

“But, cher, how can you know that? You can’t trust *anything* that Eric says. He can use his blood to manipulate you.”

Sookie tried to smile reassuringly. “I know you are concerned for me. I just want you to know that it’s not like that with Eric and me.” She paused and took a deep breath. “Last week, I had Jesus and Lafayette do a spell on me that literally burned the vampire blood out of me—*all* of it.”

Sam looked at her with surprise. “That sounds dangerous, Sook.”

“It was, but I needed to know what feelings were mine and which were from the blood. You see—for a while there, I thought I loved *both* Eric and Bill.” She paused. “Turns out, my feelings for Eric were real—*very* real. And Bill—well—let’s just say that I understand why you are worried that my feelings might be being manipulated. But Eric is not doing that—he’s not even *able* to do that. I can’t tell you how I know that until I make sure that Eric is fine with you knowing, but you need to trust me.” She paused. “I love him. He loves me. It’s *real* simple, Sam. And you are just gonna have to take my word on this.”

Sam took a deep breath, noticing Sookie’s confidence. In fact, she seemed more sure of herself than he’d seen her in a very long time. “Okay, cher. I just want you to be happy, and after everything you’ve been through, you deserve it.”

Sookie smiled. “Thanks, Sam. I’ll be fine with Eric—*more* than fine actually.” She brightened. “You’ll have to just see that over time.”

Sam nodded and then looked sheepish, “I’m sorry that Tommy fired you, Sook. I know that I didn’t react well when you got back, but I wasn’t about to fire you.”

Sookie smiled at her friend. He looked tired. “You doin’ okay, Sam?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “It’s just a little hard, but I’m real glad to have Luna and her daughter in my life right now.”

“She’s a shifter too, right?” Sookie asked.

“Yeah,” Sam confirmed, now smiling. “I’m happy with her, Sook. I don’t know; it’s like she makes me feel okay to be in my own skin.”

Sookie smiled, “I know *exactly* what you mean, Sam. That’s one of the many things about Eric that I love.”

She gave her friend a quick hug.

“Are we okay, Sook?” Sam asked as he opened the office door to go into the bar.

“Yeah, Sam, we’re fine as long as you lay off of Eric. Hey,” she added, “would you tell Jarod that I’ll be out there in a few minutes? I still need to visit the ladies’ room.”

“Sure, cher.”

Sookie breathed in a sigh of relief as Sam left. She was really tired of having confrontations about her and Eric and was ready to just settle peacefully into her new life with her vampire.

Thinking about the irony, she laughed a little. Eric, a thousand-year-old ruthless warrior vampire, was craving peace just as much as she was. Sookie bent over to get her purse out of the bottom drawer of Sam’s desk so that she could reapply some lip gloss.

As she grabbed her purse, all thoughts of peace were lost to her as a cloth steeped in chloroform was put over her mouth and nose. She tried to struggle and to call Eric, but in the next moment, she lost herself to the darkness.

Chapter 86: She's Not Here

Eric awoke suddenly. He knew three things as soon as he was conscious. One was that it was exactly 86 minutes and 23 seconds until the sun went down. The second was that his body had not woken up naturally; he felt the sun seeking to pull him back into rest, but he resisted because of the third thing. The bond he had with Sookie was muted. She was not gone as she had been when she was in the fairy realm. No—she was near. However, the bond felt heavy, deadened somehow.

He didn't like the feeling. In fact, he hated it.

He sat up quickly, disturbing the kitten who had been slumbering next to him. Within a second, he was dialing Jarod. He somehow knew that Sookie would not be able to answer her cell. Nervously, he scratched the little kitten's head as he waited for the call to go through.

When Jarod picked up, Eric said only three words, "Where is she?"

Jarod answered evenly, "She was talking to Merlotte. It got a little intense, I think, but she was fine. Sam just came out into the bar a couple of minutes ago and told me she'd be along after she finishes up in the ladies' room. Why?"

Eric reached out to the bond—it was still muted. Sookie wasn't upset from a talk with the shifter. She wasn't transmitting *any* feelings. Something was wrong; he knew it to his very soul. "Check her—*NOW!*" he ordered, even as he put the kitten in the center of the bed and quickly dressed.

Eric could hear Jarod's footsteps and then an abrupt curse from him, followed by his calling for Merlotte. "What. Is. It?" Eric yelled into the phone.

In more than a thousand years, Eric had felt completely powerless only one other time: when Godric was up on that roof in Dallas ready to meet the sun. As he waited for Jarod's words, he experienced the same sensation in spades.

"She's not here," Jarod answered. "I'm following her scent through the back door right now. Fuck!" There was a pause. "The scent ends in the parking lot. Obviously, she was driven off by someone. My car is still here."

Eric reached out to the bond again, this time trying to get a fix on Sookie's location, but he could not. He could tell only that she was not too far away. "How long?!" Eric half-questioned and half-demanded.

"Couldn't be more than three minutes since Merlotte came back to the bar. Eric, I'm sorry. I don't know . . ."

Eric cut him off, his voice low and icy. "Later. We'll deal with your incompetence later. Right now, we need to find her. Tell Merlotte to keep everyone out of the back of the bar; I'll be there in a few minutes with Miranda."

"But Eric, it's still day; you can't just . . ."

Eric hung up the phone and sped down the stairs, grabbing his leather jacket from the coat closet where his bonded—his love—had hung it. He used it to cover as much of his body as he could.

Eric opened the front door and felt the sun on his face. He bristled against its rays, sensing its danger for him. It was late afternoon, but not late enough apparently. His mind and body were both telling him to seek shelter. However, just as when he had confronted Herveaux a few days before, he felt no immediate burning on his body. Still, he knew he'd be of no use to

Sookie damaged, so he zipped back inside and got the thick red quilt she'd used to cover him that morning at the lake after he'd drained her fairy relative.

By the time he was back outside, Miranda was coming around the side of the house, a fierce and commanding look on her face and her phone to her ear, obviously being filled in by Jarod.

She took one look at Eric, who was using the blanket to cover most of his head, face and hands, and spoke sharply into the receiver, "We are coming. Make sure we have privacy." She hung up without another word.

She walked to her car and unlocked it quickly. Eric sped to the passenger side, keeping himself as hidden from the sun as he could.

As soon as her door closed, she had the car on and was tearing out of the driveway. Neither said anything for a moment. Then, not looking at her, Eric spoke in a low voice, "From now on, you must be with Sookie when I am not. I thought that—given Jarod's humor—she would like that better, but it *has* to be you."

Miranda noted the tone of Eric's voice. He seemed both determined and frightened, and she knew that he was trying to plan for *after* Sookie was recovered so that he could stay calm.

"Of course," Miranda said. "She will get used to me after a while." Miranda knew that Jarod would not take offense at the new arrangement. After all, Sookie had been taken on his watch, and Jarod would most likely work even harder to regain Eric's trust, but in the end, they both knew that Miranda was the better tracker and guard. She was also decidedly detached and would not have let Sookie out of her sight for even a few minutes, no matter what the girl had wanted. Jarod had explained that Sookie had gone to the back of the restaurant alone several

times that day, assuring Jarod that she'd use her fairy powers if someone came at her before he could get to her. Miranda would have never allowed Eric's bonded to have that much freedom.

Jarod's more casual demeanor was why Eric had decided to allow him the duty of guarding his bonded in the first place. But now, cocooned in the quilt that carried both his and his bonded's scents, he regretted that decision. *Of course*—Sookie had been able to convince Jarod that she would be safe alone in the bar; Sookie had a way about her that could convince the Pope to give Buddhism a try. Eric himself had been taken in by her confidence in her own ability to protect herself. After all, he'd let her go into the Fellowship of the Sun church with only the treacherous Hugo. He'd let her go to Jackson, he'd let her fight the witches, he'd let her meet with Bill after the blood tie had been broken, and he'd been the one who had let her go back to work in the first place. Eric shook his head. No—*none* of that was quite right. No one *let* Sookie Stackhouse do anything. She did what she wanted or what she felt she needed to do. And he fucking loved her for it—even though a major part of him wanted to chain her to his side because of it.

Her bravery was one of the things he admired most about Sookie, but his confidence in her ability to protect herself until Jarod could get to her in the event of a problem was obviously imprudent. Something had attacked his beloved, something against which she either couldn't or hadn't had time to activate her powers.

Eric looked down at his phone and noticed that he'd received a text earlier from his wife. He opened it and read: "Everything's fine here. I miss you, HUSBAND. Lala, Jesus, and Jason confirmed for football tonight, and I require a foot rub. Love you."

Eric almost laughed at his bonded's words, except "everything" was definitely *not* fine. Nothing would ever be fine again if he lost her. There would be no more of Sookie with him.

There would be no more of her doing things to make his life more special. There would be no more of the influx of her life, her spirit, her light—and even her friends—into his dead life.

There would be no pleasure from little things like watching a football game or giving his wife her foot rub or fixing her a sandwich. There would be no pleasure in making furnishings that she would never use. There would be no more feel of her skin on his. There would be no more holding her. There would be no more being held *by* her. There would be no more kisses, laughter, tickles, teases, or talks. There would be no more comfort. There would be no more love. There would be nothing.

There was silence in the car for a few moments before Miranda said, “Jarod thinks that he smelled traces of chloroform when he returned to search Merlotte’s office for any clues about Sookie’s abductor. I assume, then, that you cannot currently track her, and that is why we are going to Merlotte’s bar?”

“Yes. The bond between us is,” Eric paused, “*stifled* at the moment, and I cannot sense her location.”

Miranda sensed the rage and the sadness underneath Eric’s calm and stayed silent for the last two minutes of the trip. There were still around 75 minutes left until sunset, but Eric pushed off the blanket as soon as they parked.

Miranda looked at him in question.

“I no longer feel a threat or pull from the sun,” he said by means of explanation. In fact, Eric had, in the last minute or so, begun to feel like he had two evenings before when he’d woken up well before nightfall and had felt no danger at all from the sun. He wished, more than anything else, that he was by Sookie’s side as he’d been then.

Standing just outside the back of the bar was Jarod, his eyes taking in the surrounding area as Miranda and Eric got out of the car. As much as Eric wanted to punish Jarod for allowing someone the chance to get to his beloved, he knew in his gut that Jarod hadn't been neglecting his duties. Moreover, Eric had other things to concern him. His nose immediately picked up the scent of the one who had taken his bonded.

He pulled out his phone and began dialing even as he and Miranda walked into Merlotte's. Sam was on the other side of the door, and as soon as he saw Eric—fully awake and obviously not burning up or even smoking despite the fact that he'd just been outside in the sun—his mouth opened in question. Eric put up his hand to tell the shifter to keep silent as the person he had called answered the phone.

“Herveaux. Your woman has taken *mine*. I need to know where she would take Sookie, and I need to know it *now*.”

“Eric?” Alcide asked on the other end of the line. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Impatient, Eric replied quickly, “I have no time for lengthy explanations. Sookie was kidnapped from her workplace. The culprit is Debbie Pelt. I am unable to track Sookie because your bitch of an ex-mate has drugged her. Can you offer assistance or not?”

“Fuck!” Alcide exclaimed. “Yeah, sure. But I don't know where Debbie is. She didn't have many friends, and I have abjured her presence. But I'm still in Shreveport, and I'll begin checking with members of the Shreveport pack.”

“Tray Dawson will be in touch in a few minutes,” Eric said. “He is the new packmaster and will help you.”

“Eric,” Alcide said hesitantly, “there is something you need to know. Debbie is on V again.”

“Very well, Herveaux.” Eric paused. “In deference to my bonded, I will inform you that once Debbie Pelt is found, she will not survive long—if Sookie is *unharm*ed. If Sookie has been harmed in *any* way, she will *survive* a very, very long time,” Eric said, his voice icy.

“I understand,” Alcide said right before Eric hung up.

Eric once again gave Sam a look to hold his questions as he dialed again.

“Dawson,” Eric said after the new Were packmaster answered. “A member of the Shreveport pact, Debbie Pelt, has drugged and kidnapped my pledged and bonded one. Pelt’s ex-mate, Alcide Herveaux will do what he can to cooperate in the search.”

Before Eric could even ask for his help formally, Tray was offering it. Though neither Were nor vampire had ever used the word ‘friend’ in their more than decade of dealings with each other, the mutual respect between them had always been clear.

“I’ll activate the pack and find out who Debbie spent the most time with. According to pack records, she and Herveaux joined only at the last full moon; however, if she did form a friendship with anyone, we will start there. The pack is at your disposal, Northman.”

Eric responded, “Do you require Herveaux’s number?”

“No,” the Were answered. “I have it.” He paused. “Your mate *will* be found alive.”

To that, Eric said nothing for a moment, “Call with any updates.” He hung up.

Finally, Eric turned to Sam, who was still shocked at seeing Eric walking around in the day time.

“I assume, shifter, that I may count on your discretion about my ability to move around in the day. This gift has been an unexpected byproduct of my bonding with Sookie, and it would not do well for it to get beyond a few trusted people. Sookie trusts you, so I will not glamour this knowledge from your mind, but if I deem that you are a threat to us or if you tell of this to

others, I will have to *re-evaluate* my decision.” Eric’s threat was clear and Sam just nodded his head.

“Good,” Eric said. He sniffed the air and walked into Sam’s office before bending down in front of the desk. Sookie’s purse was on the floor, as was her cell phone. As he went to stand up, he also saw the necklace he’d carved for Sookie. He picked it up and tied it around his neck with an almost silent sigh. He closed his fist around the carving even as he closed his eyes and reached out for Sookie again. She seemed further away, but he still couldn’t get a handle on her direction. He’d learned all he could from the scents in the room, so he walked back out of the office.

“Miranda,” he said, his voice commanding, “drive toward Shreveport and make contact with the Werewolf packmaster there, Trey Dawson. Help him to find out who Debbie Pelt was friends with and question them. Also, get what you can from Herveaux.

“Jarod,” Eric continued, though not looking at the shifter. “I want you to get to Shreveport as well. By the time you are there, Pam will meet you. You and she will question any known V-pusher or user for information on Debbie Pelt. I will stay here until the bond reawakens. Pelt is most likely headed toward Shreveport, but I will not risk being further away from Sookie when she wakes up and calls to me.”

Sam had been studying Eric. The vampire’s concern for Sookie was evident, but there was something else under his calm, in-charge demeanor. It was this *something* that made Sam question his earlier doubts about Eric; Sam saw fear in Eric, fear that he would lose the woman he loved. It was not the look of a man who was desperate to keep Sookie, the look that Sam had always seen in Bill’s eyes. It was the look of a man who was desperate not to lose her. Sam shook his head a bit. It went against almost every instinct in him as well as everything he’d ever

known about vampires, but he felt himself becoming certain that what Eric and Sookie had *was* different, just as she'd told him.

Sam caught Eric's gaze, "You can use my office to stay out of sight until the sun is officially down. I'll get you a bottle of blood."

Eric nodded and went back into the office as Miranda and Jarod left. He was texting Pam with instructions when Sam reappeared with the bottle. "I couldn't warm it," he said apologetically. "I didn't want Arlene to be asking any questions."

"It will be fine," Eric said, looking at the shifter closely. He opened the bottle and forced down the liquid. He'd need strength to find Sookie, so he tried to ignore the fact that the taste was even worse than usual since it had not been warmed.

Sam took in a deep breath, "This is partly my fault. I was questioning her about you two, and that's why she wanted a minute alone. I shouldn't have left her that way."

"It is my responsibility to keep my bonded—my *wife*—safe, Merlotte," Eric said gruffly. "The blame is *mine*." Eric's anxiety was clear in his voice for a moment before he forced down the rest of his blood.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Sam asked.

"I'll take another bottle of this."

"Sure—be right back," Sam said, leaving the office again and closing the door behind him.

Eric was trying to focus and to think of all the chess pieces in his arsenal. Herveaux and the Were pack were activated. Pam would awaken around the time Jarod made it to Shreveport and would join him to question any suspected V-user or seller. Thalia was also still in the area, and Eric texted for her and Bubba to join Pam. Thalia had a knack for finding V-users and

tracing them back to their source, and he intended to use her talents. And despite his young age, Bubba was one of the best trackers he'd ever met. Eric was certain that if they caught Debbie's scent or Sookie's scent, he would track them down.

Suddenly, Eric dialed his phone again, angry at himself for not thinking of a resource earlier. "Jesus," he said as the brujo answered the phone. "Sookie has been kidnapped. I need you and Lafayette to come to Merlotte's right away, and bring anything you can think of that might help us find her."

Jesus told Eric that they were on their way, and Eric hung up, again probing the bond. It was still dim as Sam entered carrying two more bloods and a glass of whiskey for himself. He sat down behind his desk even as Eric took the seat his beloved had sat in less than half an hour before. He could smell her scent strongly there, and he closed his eyes to take it in.

Sam said quietly, "You love her."

"Yes," Eric confirmed quietly before opening his eyes and looking straight into Sam's.

The shifter seemed to settle something in his mind. "Good. That is what she deserves. And you *will* find her. She will know that; she won't be afraid, no matter what the person who has her tries to do."

Eric nodded to Sam, "When she awakens, the Pelt woman will have more to fear than just me. Sookie is capable of *much* on her own now."

Eric said these words as much for himself as he did for Sam in that moment. He needed their comfort. He needed to remember that if he couldn't get to her immediately, Sookie could defend herself using her fairy magic.

Sixteen minutes later, there was a knock on the office door, and Lafayette's voice could be heard. "Sam, you in there?"

Sam opened the door, and Jesus and Lafayette entered and closed it behind them. Both took in Eric's daytime appearance without question. They were carrying several books and a bag full of ingredients Jesus thought they might need for spells. "I should get out to the bar," Sam said, looking warily at the contents of the bag. "But let me know if y'all need anything."

Eric nodded.

Jesus took in Eric's demeanor and recognized it instantly. Other than the lack of overt physical pain, Eric looked as concerned as he had the night Sookie had severed their blood bond. Jesus quickly got to work. "We can do a spell that basically recreates what happened here if you want."

"Do it," Eric said. Despite the fact that he already knew who had taken his bonded, he hoped the spell would yield some clues about *where* Pelt had taken his wife.

"Okay," Jesus said. "We need a focusing event—something that we know Sookie was doing. Then the spell will trace her movements for a few minutes before it fades. The closer the focusing event to her actual taking, the longer we will see beyond it. We may even get the direction her abductor drove off in—if we are lucky.

Eric thought for a moment. He knew that Sookie had been speaking to Sam and that the shifter had left her alone in the office. Then he saw Sookie's purse before him on Sam's desk and gestured toward it. "She must have been getting this when the chloroform was used on her. The drawer to the desk was still open and the purse was on the floor. That is the last thing she would have consciously done before the attack."

"Perfect," Jesus said. "We'll set up the spell. It'll take just a few minutes."

While they worked, Eric willed himself to drink the last bottle of TruBlood Sam had brought to him. As he finished the final gulp, he reached out to the bond again, but nothing had changed.

When they were ready, Jesus and Lafayette stood across from one another and gripped hands. Eric remained silent as a smoky, translucent image of Sookie appeared, kneeling before Sam's desk and opening the drawer to get her purse. The figure of a woman, Debbie Pelt, slipped up behind Sookie quickly. Eric stood and wanted to reach out to his beloved, but one warning glance from Jesus made him back off and simply watch.

Eric saw Sookie's eyes register shock for a mere moment before she collapsed forward and dropped her purse. Debbie reached out to grab Sookie, dislodging her necklace in her haste. Eric unconsciously thumbed the carving he'd made as he continued watching.

Obviously pumped up on V, Debbie took Sookie's cell phone out of her waitress apron and threw it to the floor. She then hoisted Sookie over her shoulder and looked around quickly and nervously before leaving the office. The abduction had taken less than thirty seconds. Eric followed the two hazy images. He watched Debbie go out the back door and then roughly throw Sookie into the back of a gray van. He could tell that the impact would have caused Sookie many bruises, and right then and there, he vowed to make Debbie Pelt's death as ugly as he could. As Debbie slammed the van doors, Eric looked down and noticed the license plate number. He was already sending a text to Pam with the numbers when the magical image disappeared.

He hurried back inside. Jesus and Lafayette looked exhausted. "Did it help?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," Eric bowed a bit. "There was a license plate number."

Both witches looked relieved.

Next, Eric dialed Sookie's brother. He hoped he could get the boy to stay calm long enough to have him use his police resources to run the license plate number.

"Jason, this is Eric," he said gruffly. "You need to listen to me and remain calm. Can you do that? Sookie *needs* you to do that."

"Okay," Jason said on the other end, the worry clear in his voice.

"Sookie was kidnapped from Merlotte's by a woman—a Werewolf—named Debbie Pelt."

When Jason tried to speak, Eric cut him off, "Stackhouse! Listen! I need you calm—*right now*."

"Okay," Jason managed on the other end, obviously intimidated by Eric's tone.

"Good. I was able to get a license plate number and the make and model of the van Debbie was driving. I need to know if you can run the plates for me. And I need you to be discreet. This is *not* the time for police questioning and procedures and delays. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Jason answered, happy to have a task to do so that he could keep his nerve. "I am at the station now. Just give me a few minutes to distract Kendra so that I can get to the computer to run the check."

"I'm texting you the license plate number now. Call me when you have something, and, Stackhouse, remember to be calm." Eric hung up the phone.

Jesus asked abruptly, "What do you feel from your bond?"

Eric looked at the brujo, who obviously had another spell in mind. “I feel a kind of numbness. I can feel Sookie there, but I cannot locate her. It’s like the bond has been muted.” He paused and his voice lowered, “The bond feels deadened to me.”

Jesus looked a bit confused, so Eric made a comparison the brujo might understand, “It would be like you trying to seek Lafayette in the pitch dark in an area the size of Sookie’s property. You know that he’s there somewhere, but he cannot call to you, you cannot hear him and you cannot see him moving. This is how I feel.”

Jesus looked disappointed.

“What is it?” Eric asked.

“There is a spell that can amplify a blood tie, just as there is a spell to sever one. However, it would merely magnify what you currently feel. It sounds to me like you don’t have a strong enough reading on Sookie right now to make the spell effective.” Jesus paused, “In fact, I think that the spell would only give you more pain.”

Eric looked up sharply at Jesus, who stepped back due to the vampire’s penetrating gaze.

Seeing the brujo’s reaction, Eric steadied himself. His vampire instinct told him to hate the fact that Jesus could sense that he was in pain—pain at the loss of the bond’s energy, pain that he could do nothing to find his bonded. Eric spoke up, “You are right, brujo. I *am* in pain that I cannot feel Sookie as I once could. You are also right about the fact that the spell you speak of would only cause that emptiness to grow exponentially inside of me.”

Jesus nodded and relaxed a bit, even as he went back to his books, hoping to find something else to try.

Eric probed the bond again. Nothing had changed.

His cell phone rang. “Jason, what did you learn?”

“The van is registered to Alcide Herveaux’s construction company. There’s an address for the business, but that’s all.”

“Fine,” Eric said. “Stackhouse, if you are able, you should go to Sookie’s house and monitor the phone there. If she gets away, she may try to call. And—Stackhouse, do not let any vampires into the home, especially not Compton. In fact, do not even let him know you are in the house.”

Jason added, “Okay, I can also put out an APB on the van if you want—say it was involved in a drug deal or something.”

Eric nodded, “Do it, and be sure that you are called *first* if it’s found.”

“Okay,” Jason said worriedly. “And, Eric, call me if you learn anything at all; I mean *anything*.”

Eric hung up and dialed Alcide again. He didn’t even give the Were the chance to say hello before he launched in, “Debbie has taken Sookie using one of the vans from your construction company. Do you have GPS in them.”

“No,” Alcide said.

Eric sighed loudly, trying to calm himself. “Fine.” He hung up and sat back down in the chair, once again probing the bond. There was still nothing more than before.

To make matters worse, Eric had run out of ideas about what to do at that moment, and there were still twenty one minutes before night fall. He felt more powerless than even before as he waited for his beloved to call out to him through their bond.

With nothing else to do, Eric closed his eyes and silently prayed:

I do not know whether there are many deities or one or none. And if there is a God, I do not know if he or she would listen to me anyway. For more than 900

years, ever since the deaths of my parents, I have doubted that you benevolent. I have even doubted that you are real. And when I learned of the beliefs of other cultures, I thought that you must simply be a figurehead—a myth—for people to turn to when in times of crisis, as I am in now. And as I make that turn, I doubt that I am worthy to ask anything of you. However, my beloved one, my Sookie, is gone from me. And I find that I do not care what name you go by. I do not care if you are one or many; I do not even care if you are real or not. All I care is that my bonded believes in you and in your benevolence. And I believe that her faith will suffice for the both of us. I can make you no promises about being a better person—my promises are made to my bonded already. I have no illusions that you would take me into your heaven even if I made and kept a thousand promises. But I will ask something of you anyway—just one thing, just that you will wait to take Sookie to your kingdom. Please—wait. I need her.

As Eric finished his prayer, he didn't even bother to stop the red tear that escaped from his eye. Lafayette and Jesus said nothing as they redoubled their efforts to find another spell that would help them find their friend.

Chapter 87: Little Deceptions

About twenty minutes after the sun had gone down, Eric, Jesus, and Lafayette were still in Sam's office, waiting for the status of the bond to change.

Eric raised his head sharply.

"You got somethin'?" Lafayette asked, breaking the silence that had existed between them for the last forty minutes as he and Jesus had been pouring over their magic books while Eric tried to access his bond with Sookie every few minutes.

"It's not Sookie," Eric said. "I smell Bill. He's just pulling up in the parking lot now, and he will smell that I am here. He cannot know of Sookie's disappearance. If he learns of it, he will either deter us or try to use the situation to his advance to take her for himself. Either way, I have no time for him."

Lafayette sprang into action, "Well, that bitch don't need to know nothin', that's fo' mother fuckin' sure! Let's go, and follow my lead."

Jesus and Eric were a bit taken aback for a brief moment, but both followed Lafayette as he led them into the bar and to an open pool table. He threw a few balls on the table along with the cue ball, and he grabbed two discarded beer mugs left by some previous customers, handing one to Jesus. He motioned to Sam, who was at the bar, and looked significantly at the front door just as it opened and Bill entered with one of his human bodyguards.

Eric had picked up on Lafayette's idea, had handed Jesus a pool cue, and had one in his hand as well, even before Bill walked in.

Everything had happened so quickly that the few people eating in the main bar area barely noticed.

As soon as he knew that even Bill was in earshot, Eric said in a bored tone, “Really, gentlemen, it would be impossible for you to beat me, even though I am giving you two turns for my every one. I do not know why you demanded a rematch.”

Sam, by this time, had called Holly over to him and had a new pitcher of beer on a tray already. The microwave dinged, and he placed a blood on the tray as well and silently motioned for her to take the drinks to the pool table.

Holly picked up the tray and carried it over even as Bill walked at human pace toward the back of the bar.

Eric took the blood from Holly and looked at it disdainfully, playing the part he’d determined was necessary. He looked right at Lafayette. “We must really change the stakes. Buying a round of drinks for the winner—especially when my prize is this shit—is not quite stimulating my desire to win.”

“Well, you can feel free to lose whenever you wants to, bitch,” Lafayette snapped playfully as he used the new pitcher to fill up the two fresh and frosty mugs that Sam had also sent over. “Meanwhile, I believes that it’s my shot!” He took the cue from Jesus’s hands and approached the table, lining up to hit a striped ball since there were three times as many of those still on the table.

By this time, Bill had stepped up to the pool table and was looking suspiciously at the group. Just then, Eric’s phone buzzed, and he picked it up. There was a text from Pam, saying, “Have hooked up with Jarod. Just checked surveillance. Bill is on his way to you. He somehow knows Sookie never came home after her shift.”

Eric looked up nonchalantly and put the phone back into his pocket. “My king,” he said with a slight bow in Bill’s direction. “Would you care to join the game? A bit of real competition after these *humans* would be welcome.”

“Fuck,” Lafayette said under his breath dramatically as he missed his shot.

Bill shook his head. “Thank you, but no, sheriff. I wonder that you are here and not at Fangtasia.”

“Ah,” Eric said shrugging his shoulders. “I have decided to pass the responsibility of the bar to Chow and Pam for the most part. I will, of course,” he nodded to Bill again, “continue my sheriff duties and will even be able to devote *more* time to them now.”

Bill looked at the three even more suspiciously. “Then, I would think that you would wish to spend the evening with Sookie—celebrating the pledging.” He almost spit out the words.

“Indeed,” Eric said rolling his eyes toward Lafayette and Jesus. “That would have been my preference, but Sookie insisted that we have,” he paused, looking at Lafayette. “What did she call it?”

“Male bonding time,” Lafayette supplied, without missing a beat.

“Indeed,” Eric said again with obvious displeasure.

“And where *is* Sookie this evening?” Bill asked, looking around. “Not working, I see.”

“No,” Eric said, sighing dramatically as if for an audience. “Sadly—for me, that is—my child has taken Sookie shopping with my gold card. Of course, I know that Sookie alone would not do damage to my finances, but since Pamela is with her, I’m slightly concerned.” He winked at Lafayette.

Jesus grinned as if he didn't have a care in the world, "Sookie called that part female bonding, right?"

"Indeed," Eric said yet again, this time scoffing.

Bill looked completely nonplussed. He'd been hoping to find Sookie at the shifter's bar this evening, preferably with Eric nowhere in sight. Instead, he had found Eric making nice with Sookie's friends, something he'd never been able to succeed in doing no matter how hard he'd tried to ingratiate himself into their circle. His only consolation was the fact that Eric looked so bored.

"Well, sheriff, I'll leave you to your male bonding," he sneered. "Please give Sookie my regards."

Eric bowed a bit as Bill turned to walk away. The few patrons who had gathered in Merlotte's after their work shifts for a quick dinner and beer or to watch the football game had become accustomed to Vampire Bill during the past year or so. Even they could sense the tension in the Civil War veteran as he turned and began to walk out of the bar.

Eric, on the other hand, continued to look nonchalant as he sunk the only solid ball that had made its way onto the table with a seemingly impossible shot. As Bill neared the entrance, he spoke again for his benefit, "Really, gentlemen, perhaps we should find another activity if we are to continue this *bonding* ritual my wife seems so hell-bent that we perform."

"Well—the football game starts in a little while," Jesus supplied helpfully.

Eric scoffed, "American football? Only the Viking team—I believe it is from Minnesota—interests me."

Still playing their parts to perfection, Lafayette and Jesus both chuckled at this.

Through the corner of his eye, Eric saw Bill glance back once in their direction as he exited. Smelling that Bill was still right outside, probably spying through the window, Eric lined up the eight ball, sank it in the side pocket, and then continued his bored banter, “Care for another game, gentlemen?” Eric turned his back to the entrance and looked at the two witches significantly so that they would know that Bill could still most likely see them, if not hear them.

Jesus said, “Why not. This time, we will go first.” He began to pull all the balls out and put them on the table to rack them. Eric sat on a stool as if it were the throne at Fangtasia and picked up his phone, seemingly ignoring the actions of the two humans with him—or, in other words, behaving exactly as Bill would expect him to.

Lafayette laughed, “Well, it looks like we owe you another blood.”

Eric looked up at Lafayette and continued the act. “What joy is mine,” he said sarcastically as he downed the one he’d been given a few minutes before.

The balls racked, Jesus took the cue from Lafayette and lined up for his break. As soon as the balls stopped spinning on the table, Eric stood. His expression turned from detached to tense in a millisecond. “He is gone,” he said quietly, motioning toward the door. “And Sookie is waking up. She is frightened.”

“Can you find her?” Jesus asked in a low voice.

“Yes, the signal is weak, but I can follow it as long as she is not drugged again.”

“I need you two to drive toward Monroe. That’s the general direction that I feel her in. I just texted Miranda and Pam, and they are also on their way there. They will contact you if they are able to figure out a likely location where Debbie took Sookie.”

Eric had been in agony the past ninety seconds after the bond had reactivated, as he’d waited for Bill to be far enough away for him to leave Merlotte’s undetected. The limo Bill

arrived in was just past Eric's hearing, so he knew that he could now go without the notice of the king. Without another word, he zipped at vampire speed to the back door of the bar and took off into the night sky, sending all of his love and assurance through the bond.

Chapter 88: You Are the Bond

Sookie slowly became more aware of herself, but she was trapped in a fog that she couldn't quite break through. She felt like she was in that place she got stuck in sometimes, just between sleeping and being awake. She tried to wake herself up—even feeling tingles in her body—but she couldn't manage to force her eyes open.

Something told her that she needed to get up, that she was in danger. She just couldn't get her body to listen to her mind and make that final break into consciousness. Having used up all her energy, she fell into the darkness once more.

Three minutes after Eric left Merlotte's he stopped his progress. The bond that had been weakly transmitting Sookie's whereabouts had become muted once again. Still he had a place to start his search, so he continued toward Monroe, praying once again to Sookie's God as well as to his gods and goddesses of old that she would be safe when he found her.

"Hey There!" Eric said.

"Hey yourself," Sookie answered brightly, taking in her surroundings as she leaned back against a sitting Eric. They seemed to be in a big cave, the only light coming from a small campfire in the center of the cave floor.

"I made this for you—so you could see in here," Eric said, gesturing toward the fire.

"Thanks," Sookie said, happily sinking into Eric's body even more. His fingers enclosed around hers, and the two sat silently and comfortably for a while.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" Sookie asked.

"Yes," came Eric's simple response.

“I was trying to wake up. Why can’t I?”

Sookie felt Eric shrug behind her. “I don’t know. What were you doing when you fell asleep, min kára? Perhaps, the answer is there.”

Sookie stared into the fire, trying to remember. “I was at Merlotte’s working.”

Dream Eric scoffed a bit.

“Hey—enough of that,” Sookie scolded.

Eric stiffened a bit behind her, “I wish you did not work for the shifter, my love.”

“But I have to work, Eric. I have bills to pay.”

“The bond we have tells me that you are my pledged now—my wife,” Eric said softly and sincerely. “I want to be the one to take care of you.”

“I know,” Sookie said squeezing Eric’s hands. “And I love that you want to do that. I really love it. But it’s just not in me to sit around and not do something—not contribute.”

Eric nodded and pulled Sookie even closer to him. “I know, min kván. Truth be told the women in my time did as much work and were just as strong as the men in some ways, even stronger in others. I do not wish for you to feel like less of a partner in what we have.”

“Then you do understand,” Sookie said tilting her head back to look into Eric’s beautiful blue eyes. The firelight danced in them, mesmerizing her for a moment.

“I do. But I still wish more for you. Maybe you could go to school? I always enjoyed my studies. Over the years, I was able to arrange for private tutoring during the nights. And then when night school became common in American colleges, I took many classes. There are now also online programs that you could use should you wish to avoid being around the thoughts of so many people.”

“Maybe,” Sookie said contemplatively. “I’ll think about it. I never much liked school because I wasn’t really able to control my telepathy. But now that I have it under better control, perhaps I could go to college.”

Eric spoke up seriously, “Please do not think that I am not proud of you as you are, min kván. In wanting more for you, I do not wish to say you are less as you are. If you are happy being a barmaid and working for the shifter, then this is what you must continue to do. I will get used to not liking it. And you will get used to—what does Pam call it?” he paused. “Oh yes, ‘putting me in my place.’”

Sookie chuckled. “I will think about college though. To be honest, I haven’t ever really considered it. By the time I got my shields under control, my grade point average was already too low to get scholarships, and we couldn’t really afford it anyway.”

“So you never let yourself think about it,” Eric guessed, “because you did not wish to cause financial strain for your Gran.”

He felt Sookie nod. “Well, min kván, now you may think about everything you wish—anything. And I will think about things I wish as well.”

“What do you wish?” Sookie asked curiously, tilting her head back and to the side so that she could look up at him.

“I wish to travel again. It has been a long time since I have visited many places, and I should very much like to see them with you.

“That’d be nice,” she said, kissing his neck.

“And I wish to share a life in peace with you.”

“Peace!” Sookie exclaimed. “That’s exactly what I was thinking about when something happened to me.”

“What happened to you, my love?” Eric asked.

Sookie froze, trying to remember. “I was arguing with Sam about us, and then I just wanted a moment or two of peace, and I was wishing—wishing that we could just have a time of harmony with no one wanting to hurt us or to tear us apart.”

“That is my wish too, min kván.”

“But I can’t remember what happened after that,” Sookie said frustrated.

“It will come to you,” Eric said confidently, pulling Sookie closer again.

She settled into him and looked again at the flames of the fire. “Where are we, anyway?” Sookie asked after a few minutes.

“It is where Godric brought me after I was turned. This is where I awoke vampire for the first time, min kära.”

“Oh,” Sookie said, taking in that information.

“Were you frightened?” she asked after a few more minutes.

“I was—uncertain. But Godric began teaching me how to survive as a vampire immediately, and as you know, I am good at surviving.”

Sookie smiled wryly, “I know.”

Eric spoke as if searching his past, “This is where I fed for the first time as well. Godric had to command me to stop drinking, and even then, I tried to disobey at first and was punished. Like all new vampires, I lacked control; plus, I was spoiled and willful in my human life. I am frankly surprised that Godric did not kill me that night.”

Sookie smiled and brought their entwined fingers to her lips, kissing his hand gently. “I am glad that he didn’t. It seems that he must have longed for a companion who was strong-willed.”

“Perhaps, but looking back, I think that I would have killed me,” he chuckled.

“No you wouldn’t,” Sookie said confidently. “You didn’t kill Pam, did you?”

“Actually, I did.”

They both laughed.

“No, I didn’t,” Eric said finally. “I do not like meekness; I like those whom I can respect. Like Pamela. Like you.” He now brought their joined hands to his lips.

Sookie was contemplative for a moment, “I have not been dreaming of you since the bond was re-established.”

Eric rocked their bodies in a comforting motion. “You have not needed me this way again—until now. The bond between yourself and the ‘real’ me is sleeping somehow, so I am here now with you, at least until the ‘real’ me is able to find you. And he will Sookie. You know that he will be coming for you as soon as the bond awakens—that he is trying to find you even now.”

“I know he will,” Sookie said. “But I can’t feel him,” her eyes filled with tears as she reached for but couldn’t find their bond.

Eric turned her around to him. “That is why I am here, min kära. And I am not going anywhere. He will always come for you, and I will always be here inside of you until he gets to you. Between the both of us, you will never be alone.”

Sookie’s tears streamed down her eyes as Eric reached up to wipe them away with his thumbs. She looked deeply into his eyes, still picking up the light of the fire in them.

“Can’t you see him in my eyes?” Eric asked, repeating the question he’d asked her right after he’d gotten his memories back. “Look, Sookie. You will find what you are seeking.”

Sookie was pulled into his eyes, mesmerized by the seemingly hundreds of subtle shades of blue that lived in them.

She began speaking, "I was in Sam's office, getting my purse, and that's when I felt something—a cloth—over my nose and mouth." Fresh tears began to flow down her cheeks. "I wanted to call to you, but I couldn't do it. Everything happened so fast. I'm so sorry."

Eric pulled her to his chest tightly. "There is nothing to be sorry for, min kára. Nothing."

"But I can't reach you."

Eric pulled back from her a bit. "You know what you must do, min kván. You already know it. And until you realize it, you will be here with me—safe with me."

Sookie looked into his eyes again; she'd never get tired of them. Those pools showed his soul to her—only her. She reached up and ran her fingertips down his cheeks. As always, she felt a kind of electricity when she touched him. "Magic," she whispered.

He smiled back at her, "Yes—magic, min kván. It is always magic with you."

She spoke excitedly. "I can use my magic to wake myself up, to wake up the bond."

He continued smiling.

"My magic can heal."

"It has healed me, my love. It has saved me."

Sookie took a deep breath and concentrated on Eric's eyes. They looked back at her with intensity and pride as she called forth her magic. "You are the bond," she cried, as she shot her magic into him.

Chapter 89: Innate Fairy Badassness

Sookie awoke with a start but immediately drooped onto the bed she'd been tied up on. She was drained, both from the remnants of the drug she'd been given and the usage of her magic to wake herself up. The room was dark, the only light coming from a window—moonlight. Sookie rejoiced to see that it was night. “Eric,” she whispered to herself. She mustered all her remaining power, she reached out to the bond, and she call her husband to her. She felt a jolt of energy in return.

He was coming. She smiled in the dark.

Eric was flying faster than he ever had before. He had finally felt her fully; she was awake, she was calling him, and she was waiting. He was not going to make her wait for long.

Sookie took in her surroundings more fully as her eyes lost some of the haziness of the drug and adjusted to the faint light. She was in a child's bedroom, obviously one belonging to a little girl. A few dolls stood up on the nightstand, and even in the dim moonlight, Sookie could tell that the curtains were pink.

Sookie was tied up tightly. She was lying on her side, facing the window. Her arms were tied behind her back in two places, first at the hands and then along her upper arms. Her shoulders ached already from the pressure. Her legs and feet were tied together as well. She'd also been tied down to the bed itself; a thick rope attached to her arm bindings was knotted to one end of the headboard on the twin bed on which she lay. Her leg binds were tied to the opposite end of the footboard, placing her diagonally on the small bed. She struggled futilely against her bindings, but they didn't budge. She tried calling upon her fairy magic or the

vampire blood in her system, but at that moment, she felt weak, much too weak to break through the tight knots and thick cords that held her down.

She tried to calm herself. From her position, she could see a small dresser in the corner of the room next to the nightstand. She ran her eyes along the wall with the window. It was about four feet away from her, and she could see the door that must lead to the rest of the house on the wall perpendicular to the one that she was facing.

She reached out using her telepathy. There was a familiar mind—Debbie Pelt. Her thoughts were swirling with one thing—hatred of Sookie—and she was broadcasting that hatred loudly. Debbie felt that Sookie had caused her break-up with Alcide. She blamed Sookie for Marcus's death. Sookie didn't even know who Marcus was, but she did know two things about Debbie in that moment. One was that she was crazy. The other was that she was high on V and was currently taking even more of it.

Sookie dug around in the Were's head for another few seconds, trying to see if she was working with anyone. The thought that Bill might have somehow found and manipulated Debbie using his blood as payment frightened her more than anything else, but in Debbie's mind, Sookie saw only blind madness and rage.

Sookie went against her first impulse to yell for Debbie and thought for a moment. The longer Debbie thought that Sookie was asleep, the longer Eric would have to get to her. Plus, she might be able to rebuild her own magical energy if she had a bit of time. Her hands were securely tied behind her back, so she wasn't exactly sure how she'd be able to focus her energy, but she was damned sure going to try.

She stayed silent and closed her eyes. She clung to her bond with Eric. He was closer now and sending piles and piles of love and strength her way. She breathed in and out, latching on to that strength—*his* strength. She felt her power beginning to grow.

Eric landed outside of a home on the outskirts of Monroe. The van that Debbie Pelt had used to take Sookie was in the driveway, and his bonded, his pledged—his *wife*—was inside. He wanted to burst through the fucking door and kill the Were bitch, but he stopped just where he was, certain he'd be beyond Debbie's scenting ability. She, however, was not beyond his.

The Were was separated from his beloved by thirty four feet and by three walls.

Eric reached into his pocket and sent quick texts to Jesus, Miranda and Pam. Debbie had brought Sookie to the home of the old packmaster, Marcus, who had been killed by Herveaux. Jesus texted back almost immediately. They were about fifteen minutes away. Miranda texted right after—20 minutes away. Pam was the farthest away, 25 minutes.

Eric inhaled deeply. He smelled V in the room that Debbie was in. High, Debbie would be stronger and more out of control than if she were sober. However, his experience told him that her senses would most likely be deadened by the drug. Thus, she would not be able to smell him if he approached the house.

Eric had never regretted being a vampire more than he did in that moment. He'd never be able to get into the house without an invitation. Unless Sookie could get herself out, it would be fifteen minutes before he could get help in to her. But he could not leave her alone. If nothing else, he could, perhaps, distract Debbie if she came at Sookie.

Sookie's mind felt Eric's void close in, even as the bond warmed from his nearness. She turned her eyes to the window, and suddenly, he was there, looking at her with those blue eyes that she loved more than anything else about him—her *true* favorite part of him. Though it sounded cliché, those eyes were truly the windows to his soul, his heart, and his thoughts. They were capable of telling her a thousand things in a minute. And right then, those eyes were looking at her with absolute love and devotion. But they also held something that she didn't like, powerlessness.

Sookie had a sudden moment of realization and then fear; he'd never get in to her without an invitation.

Needing to be closer to her in any way he could, Eric broke the lock on the window almost noiselessly and opened it. His eyes were locked on Sookie's, cool blue ocean on warm rich soil, water meeting earth.

Sookie broke their gaze and looked toward the closed door of the room. Eric inhaled; Debbie was still where she had been before, half the house away from his beloved.

"Can I invite you in?" she whispered.

He shook his head. Only the owner, a resident, or a guest of the owner could issue an invitation.

She tried anyway, whispering, "Eric Northman, please come in."

Eric looked at his beloved longingly and tested the barrier. However, as he feared, he could not go beyond its magical force, and she was tied to the bed, so she could not get to him.

"I love you," he whispered. "Lafayette and Jesus are less than fifteen minutes away."

Sookie struggled against the ropes holding her hands together. She shook her head at Eric when she once again could not budge them. "I love you too," she said desperately.

Sookie felt the movement of Debbie Pelt's brain even as Eric heard her nearing. "I'll tear the fucking house down if I have to," Eric whispered as he gave Sookie once last look before silently shutting the window and moving so that he couldn't be seen. He was counting on Debbie's frayed senses and the fact that Sookie smelled so much like him to hide his presence.

"Lovely, I see that you are awake, bitch!" Debbie slurred as she opened the door, stepped into the room, and turned on the light.

"Why are you doing this, Debbie?" Sookie asked, knowing that the more she could stall, the more likely she'd survive until someone could get into the house. She felt Eric's strength washing over her through the bond, as if he were transmitting his power and courage straight into her. She felt the magic within her revving up, but since her hands were tied behind her, she was unable to get it focused.

Debbie's eyes raged. "'Why,' little miss perfect? How dare you fucking ask me 'why?' Everything was perfect between Alcide and me until you were back in the picture. And then—just like before—it was all *you* on his mind!"

"No, Debbie. That's not true. I know that you think Alcide wants me, but I have seen into his head; he still loves you."

"I don't believe you!" Debbie exclaimed rocking back and forth on her heels.

"It's true, Debbie. And even if it wasn't, Alcide and me would never work together. I don't love him. I love Eric Northman."

Debbie shook her head maniacally. "It doesn't really matter what you want or who you love. What matters is that Alcide wants *YOU!* Your continual rejection of him just makes it all worse. There I was just wanting to love him, trying to be the best woman I could be for him, keepin' his house beautiful, fixin' his meals—doin' everything I could think of to make up for

my bad patch in Jackson—and you showed up on our doorstep, needin’ help yet again. And then all that work I’d done was out the fucking window. *Nothing* I could do would ever stack up against the great fucking Sookie Stackhouse!”

As large tears began to stream down Debbie’s cheeks, Sookie couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for her. In some ways, the Were was right about Alcide. “Debbie,” Sookie began softly, “I’m sorry about Alcide. I never wanted to hurt you. And it was unfair of Alcide to make you feel like you weren’t good enough, but please, Debbie, just let me go, and maybe we can talk to him together. I’ve already told him that I’m with Eric, and that’s where I’m stayin’. And I told Alcide about how I felt your love for him that day when you helped me with Marnie. Debbie—*please*—just let me go, and see if you can get your life back.”

Debbie raised her eyes to Sookie. Despite the tears that were still evident, they had lost all their feeling and sat like two stagnant pools of muddy swamp water, hiding all kinds of danger within them. Debbie shook her head, “Do you know what it means to abjure someone, Sookie?” she asked numbly. “It’s the worst thing that one Were can do to another one. And that’s what Alcide did to me. There is no going back from it. There is no life for me to get back to, and what little life I have left, I’m going to spend making sure you pay.”

Sookie shrank back in fear as much as her ropes would allow as Debbie pulled a large knife from her back pocket. Debbie continued coldly, “I could have just killed you in that hell hole you work in, but that would be too easy for you. I wanted to take my time.” She walked threateningly toward Sookie.

Just then, the window was literally shattered to pieces. Sookie ripped her eyes from Debbie and the knife and turned them to her husband, who stood outside the window like the

Viking warrior he was. Both his eyes and his voice were filled with icy rage, “Debbie Pelt, if you touch her, it will be your last act.”

Debbie only laughed madly, “Oh look, Sookie, it’s the conquering hero come to save the damsel in distress. But the poor little vampire can’t get in, can he,” she said in a sing-songy voice.

Eric pounded his fists into the outside wall of the house, an act which shook the dwelling to its very foundation. “There are other ways of getting in besides being invited,” Eric threatened. “Do not make the mistake of thinking that you are safe from me in there.”

In his mind, Eric was counting down the minutes. There were still seven left before he could expect Jesus and Lafayette. While Sookie had been trying to stall Debbie, he’d texted them about the situation. Luckily, Lafayette had put his gun in his car earlier that evening when Eric had called them to come to Merlotte’s. But Eric was not certain if Sookie would live seven minutes more. His punch into the house to test the strength of the walls had told him that the structure was not sturdy, and if he continued to try to get in that way, Sookie would likely be killed right along with Debbie as the house fell in. His mind quickly went through all of his options, weighing pros and cons.

Debbie sneered at Eric as she put down the knife and pulled a gun from the back of her jeans. She moved the barrel to the side of her own head. “You think I care about what *you* will do to me vampire? Don’t flatter yourself. As soon as I take care of Miss Stackhouse here, I’m gonna put a bullet into my own brain.”

“Just let me go,” Sookie whimpered from the bed.

Debbie shook her head. “There’s no way I’m gonna let you live. You don’t get to live all happily ever after with prince charming here—not after you destroyed *my* life. Plus, as long

as you are alive, Alcide will still want you, and there's no way I'm gonna stand for even the possibility of you trapping him permanently in your web."

Debbie looked back toward Eric, "Listen here, Romeo. I have no doubt that I'm gonna die tonight—by my own fucking hand or by this house falling in on me. I don't fucking care! But *nothing* you can do will change the fact that your little Juliet is gonna go first! You can watch if you want to." She cocked the gun and aimed it straight for Sookie's heart.

Eric yelled from outside, a heart-rending wail. And then he did something he thought he'd never do. He begged, "Please! No! Debbie—I will get you whatever you need. Money, a new life, even V if you want it—even my *own* blood! I'll make sure that you get out of here safely. I'll even make Herveaux take you back. I'll fucking glamour him to make that happen if you want. *Anything*. Just don't hurt her. *Please*." Eric had never felt so desperate in his life.

Still—he was not above begging for the life of the woman who literally meant life to him. His pride was not hurt by it, and that knowledge surprised him. He'd get down on his fucking knees if it would make Sookie safe. If he thought that any promise he could make to Debbie would actually stop the insane Were, he would even follow through with them all—just for the life of his bonded. But even as he made his offers to Debbie, he knew she would not take them. And, of course, everything with Eric was strategy. He knew that—at the very least—the promise of his blood would get Debbie's attention. He knew that Lafayette and Jesus would be in that house and saving Sookie in less than five minutes now—if he could just keep her alive for those minutes.

Debbie looked at Eric, bloodlust in her eyes. V—*any* V—fuelled her like nothing else. And this was the V of a vampire Alcide had told her was over a thousand years old. Memories

of the potency of Russell's blood made her pause, but her madness and her anger at this very same vampire for taking Russell from her made her turn the gun to Eric and fire directly at him.

The world slowed down for Eric. The vampire in him saw the bullet coming and analyzed it. It was silver. On its current trajectory, it would hit him in the right shoulder, shattering his rotator cuff. It would hurt like hell and would cause him to lose function in that arm for several minutes.

He could move out of the bullet's way fully, but he wanted to be struck—wanted to bleed. The smell of his blood would cause Debbie to become frenzied, just like the Were he'd killed at the farmhouse before Sookie went to Jackson. Debbie wouldn't be able to stop herself from attacking him, coming *outside* after him, and, most importantly, leaving Sookie's side. He lurched a bit to the right so that the bullet would strike him just under his clavicle; it would hurt, but the wound would not incapacitate him.

As the bullet ripped through Eric's flesh and lodged into his muscle, several things happened at roughly the same time. Eric felt the burn of the silver, and the impact of the large caliber bullet shot at such close range caused even him to fall to the ground several feet away from the window. Mere moments later, the scent of his blood hit the air, and, just as Eric had predicted and hoped, Debbie lost all thought of anything except getting to it. She lunged toward the window, dropping the gun onto the bed. Sookie felt Eric's pain through the bond, and the magic that she had not been able to harness up until that moment pulsed through her in one large wave, incinerating the ropes that had held her.

Debbie was just out the window, and Eric was still on the ground when Sookie grabbed the gun. She ran to the window. Debbie's back was to her, but she could hear the Were growling and could see that she was getting ready to leap at Eric. Sookie was also able to see the

blood on Eric's shoulder, but she could not see his face. If she had, she would have known that he had recovered enough to meet Debbie's attack. But Sookie couldn't see that, and the confidence she felt from him through the bond was still tinged with pain.

And there was one thing Sookie wouldn't fucking stand for, and that was for her mate to be in pain! Something—call it innate fairy *badassness*, perhaps—kindled within her at that moment. Sookie let out a kind of strained battle cry. “Get away from him, you bitch!” she yelled as she pulled the trigger once; the bullet struck Debbie in the back of the head and sent her straight to the ground.

The impact of shooting the large-caliber handgun pushed Sookie back a couple of steps. She recovered quickly, however, and went back to the window to make sure that Debbie was indeed down. Eric was standing over the Were's dead body but looking right into Sookie's eyes. “Min sköldmöns,” he said reverently.

“Is she dead?” Sookie asked.

“As a doornail,” he confirmed.

Sookie sighed with relief, put the gun down on the windowsill, and reached out to Eric, who pulled her carefully to him through the window, making sure that she was not cut by any of the glass. He carried her several yards away and set her feet down on a patch of grass. She saw him wincing from the wound he'd suffered earlier.

“Your shoulder,” she said. “Is it silver?”

He nodded. “It will be fine, min kván,” Eric said softly.

“Kneel down so I can see,” Sookie commanded. When he complied, she ripped his already torn shirt easily and exposed the wound.

He looked up at her with a twinkle in his eye. “You know—it would heal a lot faster if you would, uh . . .” he looked at her suggestively.

She slapped his other shoulder playfully and then kneeled down in front of him. “Sit,” she commanded. He did and she lowered her mouth to his wound.

Eric pushed her away gently. “Sookie, I was joking. You don’t have to . . .”

She interrupted, “I don’t have to do what? Take care of my husband?! Make sure that he feels as little pain as possible?! Excuse me, but that’s *exactly* what I *have* to do,” she said defiantly, even as she looked into his eyes lovingly and softly stroked his cheek. She lowered her mouth again to the wound and sucked until she felt the silver slip into her mouth.

She looked at the small piece of metal almost affectionately. “Another one,” she whispered, putting the bullet into her pocket.

Aroused by her ministrations, Eric growled, “I would take a *thousand* of those to keep you safe.”

Sookie raised her wrist to his mouth. “Take some blood,” she whispered. “Heal.”

Even as Eric carefully bit into her offered wrist and drank a few sips of her blood, Sookie held her other hand over his healing wound; her light rose into her fingertips, sealing the wound even faster than Eric could heal.

Eric’s eyes held Sookie’s, passion and adoration battling and building in them. He licked the small wound he’d made on her wrist to stop the bleeding and then kissed it lovingly before picking up her other hand and kissing her fingertips. He leaned into her slowly, gently taking her lips with his. Their blood mingled in their kiss, an idea Sookie would have found somewhat sickening a few months earlier, but with Eric, nothing seemed more natural than the mutuality of their blood and magic. If her blood tasted of wheat, honey and the sun to him, his blood tasted of

dark chocolate and the salty air of the ocean to her, a taste made even better because of the fact that he was so ready to spill it for her.

Eric broke the kiss and pulled Sookie into his lap. He rested his chin on her shoulder and breathed in her scent, so quintessentially her own but now his as well. “I could have lost you tonight,” he said quietly even as he heard a car approaching the house.

“You will never lose me,” Sookie said forcefully. “*Never.*”

Eric nodded even as he thought about the words Sookie had said the night she had convinced him that they had to help Bill with the witches, that they couldn’t just run away and be together. That night, she’d told him that there was no such thing as *forever*.

Eric acknowledged that there might be no such thing as forever, but *for* Sookie—and *with* Sookie—he was determined to get them as close to it as he could!

[A/N #1: Sookie’s line, “Get away from him, you bitch!” is a direct reference to (but not quite a direct quote of) a line from the movie *Aliens*, which also includes a badass female lead character.

A/N #2: Eric’s answer to Sookie when she asks if Debbie’s dead—“as a doornail”—is in homage to the fifth book of Charlaine Harris’s Sookie Stackhouse series.]

Chapter 90: The Cavalry

“Your rescue party is starting to arrive, milady,” Eric whispered to Sookie as he held her to him lovingly.

She chuckled into his chest, “Did you call in the cavalry, Eric?”

“I sometimes think I *need* an army to make sure you don’t get into trouble,” he said, only half-joking as he heard two car doors closing and the sounds of Lafayette and Jesus searching for them.

He continued, his voice low and heartfelt, “I don’t think I can let you go, not even to greet your friends.” His voice had taken on an almost desperate tone—a tone somehow tinged with greediness and thankfulness all at once. He pulled her even closer, burying his face into her hair.

“You don’t have to let me go,” Sookie reassured, stroking Eric lightly on his cheek and lips before taking his hand in hers. She looked up at her Viking. His eyes held her world in them. He was looking at her as if any separation—any loss of contact at all—would mean a final death to him.

In that moment, she came to understand the fear that he must have faced in the hours while she was gone. Her heart ached, and her own eyes lit up with fervor, “I’m not gonna let go of your hand, Eric. I’m here. *I have you.*” She brought his hand up to her lips.

“Jag älskar dig med allt jag har inom mig—med min själ. Ni har *alla* på mig.”

Sookie kissed his palm and then his wrist as she looked at his soul through his eyes. For once she didn’t ask him to translate. Those eyes told her all she needed to know.

Sookie heard Lafayette and Jesus approaching the side of the house where she and Eric were and turned toward the noise. She felt Eric's desperate longing for her to stay close through their bond and tightened her grip on her beloved's hand.

She looked back up at him and repeated, "I have you." Eric nodded and lifted himself and Sookie to their feet.

Lafayette was the first to engulf Sookie in a hug, but true to her word, she didn't drop Eric's hand. If anything, she tightened her hold even more and laced their fingers together.

"Hooker, why you gots to pull shit like this?" Lafayette asked, the relief clear in his voice. He looked at Debbie's dead body. "Shit! Looks like y'all didn't need us to take care of the bitch, after all."

Sookie just shook her head as a tear snuck its way down her cheek. Eric used his free hand to quickly brush it away.

Jesus was the next to embrace Sookie, though seeing the tight grip she had on her vampire, he made sure only to give her a half embrace even as he nodded to Eric.

Eric nodded back, respecting the brujo once again for both his skills of observation and his discretion.

Just then Miranda joined them, along with Alcide and Tray.

Eric tensed and placed his body between his bonded and Alcide, even as he continued to hold her hand in his. Sensing Eric's worry, Sookie leaned into her bonded comfortingly, bringing up her free hand to grasp Eric's bicep, both to steady herself and to calm her vampire.

Alcide took in the scene and whispered, “Debbie.” He went immediately to the side of his ex-mate and sunk to his knees. “What happened?” he asked after a few moments of silence had passed.

Sookie spoke, though she kept her voice quiet. “She planned to kill me, Alcide. She blamed me for the fact that you abjured her. She blamed me for Marcus’s death.” Sookie paused and then clung onto Eric even tighter as she readied herself to say what she’d seen in Debbie’s mind. “She wanted,” Sookie paused, “to *cut* me, to *punish* me.” Eric stiffened next to her as she continued, “Debbie wanted me to suffer like she had suffered. Her thoughts were so . . .” Sookie stopped as tears rose into her eyes. Still hand in hand, Eric pulled Sookie into an embrace, and with his free hand, he stroked her hair even as he tilted his head and rested his cheek on her forehead for a moment before Sookie nuzzled into his chest, seeking the comfort that she could only find by being close to her husband. Eric’s eyes never left Alcide’s as he watched to make sure the Were didn’t make a move to revenge his woman’s death.

Eric continued the story, speaking for his bonded when he realized that it was too painful for her to go on at that moment. “Your ex-mate threatened Sookie with first a blade and then a gun. I tried to intervene, to buy time as we waited for someone who could enter the house to get to Sookie. I tested the walls, but given the weaknesses in the dwelling’s structure, I could not safely tear down a wall without the whole house falling down upon Sookie, so I was forced to,” he paused, “*wait*.”

It was now Eric’s turn to stop recounting the story as he remembered how powerless he’d felt as he’d been separated from Sookie by a mere four feet—four feet that might as well have been a thousand. Eric inhaled deeply to comfort himself with his bonded’s scent and then picked up the story. “Debbie Pelt aimed her gun at the heart of my mate, so I distracted her. She shot

me instead of Sookie and then became frenzied after scenting my blood. Then, my wife shot her as she moved to attack me,” he said with pride in his voice as he continued to stroke his bonded’s hair with his free hand.

“Sookie?” Alcide asked with disbelief. “Sookie shot Debbie?”

Eric spoke, now with ice in his voice, “Debbie Pelt would have suffered far worse at my hands, Herveaux—*far* worse.”

Alcide looked up at the couple even as he tried to absorb everything that Eric had told him. Then he returned his gaze to Debbie and gently touched her hand. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Meanwhile, Sookie shivered from the intensity of Eric’s words. She didn’t like to think of Eric torturing anyone, but she’d seen the fear lingering in his eyes, and she felt his inability to let go of her even now. Those things taught her all she needed to know about her vampire’s state of mind. He was outwardly calm, but through the bond, she could still feel remnants of his terror that he might have lost her. And in that moment, she understood better than ever before the depths of his love for her.

Sookie, too, had to acknowledge a hard truth about herself: if the roles had been reversed and someone had been threatening to take Eric from her, she would have wanted to cause that person immeasurable pain as well. The torture that Debbie had planned for her would be nothing—a cake walk—compared to the pain she would wish to inflict upon anyone that hurt her bonded or that tried to steal him from her life. As much as Sookie hated violence, she knew that she would tear someone *a-fucking-part* to save Eric.

Her desire to keep Eric safe and by her side was so potent in that moment that she sensed her fairy magic warming in her body. By instinct, she transferred that energy into Eric through their joined hands.

Eric had been detecting Sookie's turmoil and then resolution through the bond. He could also feel her guilt for killing Debbie and for hurting Alcide, but he was happy that she felt no regret at her actions. He could only imagine what kind of toll the taking of a life—even one as worthless as Debbie Pelt's—would have on a soul such as his beloved's, and he resolved to help her deal with any guilt she felt as best he could.

At that moment, he felt the jolt of energy as his wife's magic absorbed into his body. He closed his eyes and took it in, sighing; he kept them closed for another moment as he gently ghosted a kiss to her forehead. "Du är magi, min kära," he whispered.

She looked up at him in question. "You are magic, my love," he translated with reverence in his voice.

Sookie sent her love through the bond, and once again placed her cheek on Eric's chest.

After a few more moments, Eric spoke to Alcide; his tone was stern but controlled, "Were, you would do well to thank Sookie for her mercy. If you choose to retaliate against her in any way, I will *not* be merciful with you." Sookie raised her free hand to Eric's cheek to once again settle him.

She turned to face Alcide. "I'm sorry about Debbie," she said in a quiet voice. "She did love you, but in the end, she was just," Sookie paused, looking for the right word, "broken."

Alcide looked up at Sookie, his eyes bright with unshed tears, "You needn't be sorry, Sookie. If there is anyone to blame here, it's *me*." Alcide turned his gaze to Eric, "You need not worry, vampire. Sookie has nothing to fear from me."

Even as Alcide spoke, another car pulled up. Within moments, Pam, Bubba, and Thalia had joined the group.

Sookie looked up at Eric and graced him with a slight smile. “Cavalry indeed, min bóndi,” she whispered.

He placed another gentle kiss on her forehead.

“Miss Sookie,” Bubba said, “I sure am sure glad to see you all safe and sound. We was all real anxious for you.”

“Thanks, Bubba,” Sookie replied, reaching out her free hand to touch Bubba’s arm. “Thanks for searchin’ for me—everyone.”

Bubba grinned.

“Mistress, I am glad to see you *still* in one piece” Pam smirked, actually bowing slightly. Thalia also gave a little bow to the pledged couple.

Alcide rose and approached Sookie and Eric. Though Alcide’s posture and demeanor were the opposite of aggressive, Eric and Sookie both noticed that Pam, Bubba, Thalia, Jesus, Lafayette, and Tray were all on guard. The gratefulness that Sookie felt for her friends in that moment filled the bond. Eric smiled down at her and whispered. “You see, min kära, it is not just I who would lay down his life for you. You are loved by many.”

As Sookie looked up at her beloved, another tear rolled down her cheek. In that moment, she felt more love than she thought was possible. She also felt—maybe for the first time in her life—completely at peace with herself. Eric once again wiped her tear away with his thumb.

Alcide broke the moment. “What will happen to her?” he asked quietly, his voice catching on the words.

Eric responded, “She will be interred where no one can find her; her death will not be traced to any of us.”

Alcide looked as if he were going to argue, but he stopped himself and then simply nodded. “May I know where?” he asked after a few moments.

Eric looked down into the expectant and trusting eyes of his beloved and then back at the Were. “If you agree to be glamoured so that you are not able to speak of the events of this evening or of Sookie and myself, then you may know of the place.”

Alcide nodded. “Thank you, Northman.” He looked at Sookie and said softly, “I’m sorry for what Debbie intended.”

Sookie reached out and touched her friend’s arm, even as she kept her other hand firmly lodged in Eric’s grasp. “Alcide, I’m sorry too.”

The Were gave Sookie a half smile, though it did not reach his eyes, and then looked at Eric. “I’ll just take my van if that’s okay?”

Eric nodded. “Tomorrow night, I will send Pam to you. She will tell you where Miss Pelt lies and will perform the glamour.”

Alcide nodded in return. “Thanks.”

Eric turned to Pam, “Find the van keys for Mr. Herveaux.” Pam bowed and checked Debbie’s body for the keys. They were in her jeans pocket. Recognizing the need for tact *after* she’d received a warning look from her maker, Pam silently handed the keys to Alcide. The Were turned to walk toward the van and then stopped. Without turning around, Alcide spoke, “And—Northman—thank you for my father. I am in your debt.” With that, he left.

Sookie stroked Eric’s palm with her thumb and mouthed a “thank you” to her beloved.

As soon as Alcide was gone, Eric went into what Sookie liked to think of as his Viking mode, issuing orders to those who remained. She couldn't help but to sigh at how sexy her mate was when he took command. As these feelings seeped into the bond, Eric gave her a smirk and then a quick kiss on the lips.

"Pam," Eric commanded, "I want you to collect all of Debbie's belongings from this house and dispose of them along with her body so that she cannot be traced. Be sure to collect the weapons in the room where she held Sookie as well. Then, at first dark tomorrow, you are to lead Herveaux to her final resting place and then glamour him as I indicated before."

Sookie gave Eric a significant look, which made her vampire chuckle a bit. He added, "And—Pam—no alligator farms. Place Debbie's body somewhere that the Were may visit safely—somewhere," he paused, obviously making an effort on Sookie's behalf, "nice."

Pam scoffed and then said sarcastically, "It's like you don't trust me or somethin'."

"We don't," Sookie and Eric deadpanned at the same time, causing Lafayette to burst into laughter.

When Pam gave Lafayette a severe look, he only laughed harder, "Sorry, hooker," he said. "But I wouldn't trust you none either."

Pam dropped her fangs in a threatening gesture at Lafayette's words and tone, but there was a twinkle in her eyes that belied her own amusement at the witch's behavior.

Lafayette stopped laughing for a moment and then snorted. "Hate to break it to you, hooker, but you's master said you don't gets to fuck with me, so you's can keep yo' fangs to yourself," he teased.

Pam teased back, "Oh Lafayette, you do amuse me. And—for the record—I have not been a lady of the evening for more than eighty years." Then she put her hand on her hip and

tilted her head to the side. “You really *must* tell me where you get your manicure.” She winked at him and then went inside to begin gathering up Debbie’s belongings.

Next, Eric tasked Bubba and, by default, Thalia to return to the farmhouse to monitor Bill and secure the property.

Eric then asked Jesus if there was a spell that could be done to cover up the scent around the area, and the brujo confirmed that there was one but that he’d need to return home to collect a few ingredients to perform it. Eric ordered Miranda and Jarod to keep Marcus’s house secure until Jesus and Lafayette could return to perform the spell.

Meanwhile, Sookie called Jason and Sam to let them know that she was okay. She promised her brother that she would call him again the next day to give him more details, and she reluctantly agreed when Sam told her to take the rest of the week off.

Given the fact that she would not be going to Merlotte’s the next day and that she felt a strong urge to be completely alone with her bonded, she suggested that they go to the cabin, an idea with which Eric readily agreed.

As soon as her calls were made, Tray approached the couple. He gave Eric a wry smile and nodded at him.

Eric nodded back, “Sookie, you should meet Tray Dawson, the new Werewolf packmaster for the area; he’s an old associate of mine. Tray, this is Sookie Stackhouse, my pledged mate.”

Sookie stretched out her unoccupied hand and shook Tray’s meaty paw. She gave her husband a smirk, “It is always a pleasure to meet a *friend* of my husband’s.”

Tray gave her a sincere smile and then looked at Eric, “You have made a good match, I think, vampire.”

Eric nodded and squeezed Sookie hand. “I have,” he said simply.

Tray returned Eric’s nod and tilted his head to the side slightly. “I fear a helmet would look odd on you, Northman—give you a bad case of helmet head—but you might consider one for the missis.” He turned and began toward Marcus’s home as he added, “I’m gonna check the house for additional pack records before your friends here,” he gestured toward Lafayette and Jesus, “do their spell.”

“Help yourself,” Eric returned.

Sookie gave one last one-armed hug to Lafayette and Jesus, who had agreed to check on the kitten the next day.

Jesus nodded at Eric in farewell. The brujo smiled as he took Lafayette’s hand in his as they walked back to their car. It had not escaped his notice that during the whole time that Eric and Sookie had talked to Alcide, the whole time that Eric had been issuing orders, and the whole time that Sookie had received assurances from and given assurances to her friends and family, the pair’s hands had stayed interlocked. He tightened his grip lovingly on his own man’s hand.

Two things were certain in Jesus’s mind after the trying afternoon and evening they’d all had. The first was that he was going to take Eric up on the job offer that Sookie had mentioned to him earlier that day when he’d come to pick up Lafayette from Merlotte’s. And second was that he now saw both Sookie and Eric as integral parts of the family he was making with Lafayette.

As he opened the car door for his beloved, Jesus gave him a tender and thankful kiss on the lips.

[A/N: Again, I apologize to any Swedes if my translation is wrong. I lack proficiency in Swedish, and I'm relying in online translators, but this is as close as I can get. Eric's words, "Jag älskar dig med allt jag har inom mig—med min själ. Ni har alla på mig," mean roughly this: "I love you with everything I have within me—with my soul. You have all of me." By the way, I insert the Swedish at times because of two reasons. First, I imagine that it is what Eric's thinking in at times of great emotion for him. Also, it is a beautiful language to listen to in my opinion—a symphony of vowel intonations to my ears. I wish I could do it more justice.]

Chapter 91: Studies

Sookie and Eric were quiet for a while as Eric flew them toward the cabin. For warmth, Sookie had taken the quilt from the bed she'd been tied to, a quilt that had been scorched by her magic as it destroyed the ropes holding her. She had covered herself in it and then had hopped up onto Eric, opting to wrap herself around him and stay as close as she could. She rested her head on the same shoulder where he'd been shot, luxuriating in the feel of his flesh against her cheek. Her arms were wrapped tightly around his neck, and her legs were around his hips as they flew. He held onto her thighs to keep her secure and close to him; he flew slower than usual so that the biting wind would not be too uncomfortable for her. Neither needed to express in words what they had almost lost.

Finally, Sookie said, "I don't think I'm ever gonna get back on a normal work schedule again. I don't know why Sam doesn't just fire me."

Eric chuckled. "You are, I'm sure, the best waitress there, *min kära*. And more importantly, you are Sam's friend. He is quite loyal to you; you need not worry about him firing you."

Sookie gasped in surprise, "Why Eric Northman, I believe that is the first time you have ever called him *Sam*, and what is with you not trying to use this as a chance to get me to quit?"

Eric chuckled more loudly, "By this time, my love, I have learned that in these matters, I must accept what you want."

"That's what you said in my dream," Sookie said contemplatively.

"Hmm?" Eric asked.

"I had a dream while I was on that drug Debbie gave me."

"Chloroform," Eric supplied. "What dream?"

“I think that when I need you—when somehow I can’t feel you through our bond—I dream about you. I think it’s the fairy bond. That’s what happened when I didn’t have your blood in me, and—again—that’s what happened tonight when I couldn’t feel you. I think that something about the fairy bond keeps that Eric—the dream one—ready for me when I need him.”

Eric chuckled, “I shall try not to be jealous of *myself*, Sookie, but I do not like the idea of another being with you when I cannot—even if it is a version of me. He’d better keep his hands to his fucking self,” he added, only half-kidding.

Sookie laughed, “You would like him. He showed me the cave where you awoke for the first time as a vampire.”

“Really?” Eric asked.

“Yes. He told me about how you almost killed the first person you fed from there.”

“I would have if Godric had not ordered me to stop.”

“He said that you didn’t stop at first—that Godric had to punish you.”

“Indeed,” Eric laughed. “I was as petulant and as disobedient a child at first as Pamela. Godric was quite *kind*, however, and even his punishments were meant to teach. He required that I drink only from men for the next year,” Eric paused, “*very* ugly men.”

Sookie laughed. “I bet you hated that.”

“Yes, as you know, feeding and having sex are often linked, especially for new vampires. At the time, I had no interest in trying men sexually, especially the unattractive ones that Godric managed to find for me. It was a long, *difficult* lesson in self-discipline, I’m afraid. But it was one that I needed. Godric did not have to punish me again for a long time after that.”

Sookie laughed again. “I’d imagine not.”

“What else did you and this *dream me* talk about?” Eric asked as he landed them in front of the cabin.

“He suggested that I go to college. He told me that he—I guess that means you too—had enjoyed studying. Oh—and he told me that he wanted for us to travel together.”

“These things are both true, lover. What did you think of these ideas?”

Once settled on her feet, Sookie grabbed his hand and led him toward the door. “I’m thinking about the college thing; it’s something that I think I would like, though I would have to think about what to major in—maybe English literature or art history? You’d come in handy with both of those, I think,” she smiled up at Eric as he disarmed the alarm system. “You could help me study.”

“Indeed,” Eric answered. Sookie walked in first, and Eric secured the door before coming up behind her and pulling her back to his chest. He whispered seductively into her ear, “Art and literature are well and good, but right now I would like to help you study something else.”

She caught her breath just as one of his graceful hands caught her breast, his long fingers stretching out to cup it completely over her shirt and bra. “What’s that?” she managed to squeak as he began massaging.

“Anatomy,” Eric said, placing his other hand over her other breast and massaging it as well.

“Oh God,” Sookie sighed, sinking her back into his chest. She felt his hard erection next to her bottom as he began to grind into her. She tried turning to face him, but he held her in place.

“Not. Yet. Lover,” Eric growled. “Let me worship your body like this for a while.”

She moaned in protest and then in pleasure as his hands slipped from her breasts to the hem of her shirt. He pulled it off of her in one slow, continuous movement.

The next thing Sookie felt was his bare chest against her back—though she had no idea when he'd managed to remove his jacket and shirt. He slid his lips softly over her shoulders with feather kisses and then moved her hair so that it hung over her right shoulder before continuing his kisses on the back of her neck. Eric slowly worked a parade of kisses down her spine until he'd sunk to his knees behind her. His hands glided to the center of her back and unlocked her bra before slipping under the back straps and following them around until his fingers were under the cups of the lacy garment, flicking and rubbing her nipples.

Sookie moaned again, afraid her legs might give out if Eric continued—and certain they would if he stopped.

He rose behind her, dragging his bare chest over her bottom and naked back as he did. He returned his lips to her shoulders and then grabbed one of the shoulder straps of her bra with his teeth before slipping it over her shoulder blade. He moved to the other side slowly, trailing kisses and licks along the way, and repeated the action with the other strap, all the while continuing to rub and squeeze her breasts firmly.

Sookie was about to fall over the edge just from Eric's attention to her breasts; she had no idea someone could orgasm from just that, but she was pretty sure she was going to find out first hand.

Eric heard and felt his lover's heart beat rising and smiled into her shoulder. He returned his lips to the nape of her neck and kissed it with sensual, open-mouthed kisses.

She groaned and leaned into him even more, trying to grind herself into his erection. "Eric," she gasped. "So close. How are you doing this to me?"

Eric smiled again and brought his lips along the side of her face and then to her ear. “Do you like this, lover?” he whispered. “Do you like what my hands are doing to your beautiful breasts?”

She whimpered as he continued a steady rhythm, massaging her breasts in luxurious circular movements with his hands and thumbing her nipples in smaller circular patterns, every once in a while pinching them with just the right amount of pressure.

Eric took Sookie’s earlobe in his mouth and sucked before speaking again. “You have the most beautiful breasts I have ever seen, lover,” he purred. “A thousand years, and it is yours that fit perfectly into my hands.”

“Fuck!” Sookie exclaimed as her orgasm hit her hard due to the combination of Eric’s words, lips, and hands. He held her body to his as she pulsed in front of him.

He gave her a moment to recover and find her legs again before he trailed his fingertips toward the top of her black workpants. Sookie once again tried to turn around to face him.

“No, lover,” Eric said with mock sternness and a light swat to her bottom. “I am not done with you—not by a long shot.” His dexterous hands unbuttoned her pants, and she heard the zipper click down one agonizing tooth at a time. His hand that was not occupied with the zipper was snaking its way down the trail left in the wake of her unfastened pants, carefully staying above her panties. As his long fingers reached her mound, she gasped and her knees buckled a bit, but he steadied her before continuing his trek.

Sookie felt near orgasm again, just at his teasing touch, and when he spoke into her ear once more, his words almost had her coming undone for a second time.

“So wet for me, my love,” he whispered, trailing his fingers down her nether lips through her panties. “Your poor little panties are *sopping*. They cannot be comfortable, lover,” he

continued as he worked one long digit underneath her panties and circled her entrance with it. “Would you like me to help you take off these *soaking wet* things before you catch cold?” As he finished his question, he thrust his finger into her opening.

“Yes,” she gasped, though she wasn’t sure whether she was answering his question or responding to his touch.

Eric wiggled his finger in a quick come hither motion and then just as quickly pulled it out, leaving her at the edge of an orgasm. He slowly lowered himself to his knees behind her again and pulled her pants down, taking them, along with her socks and shoes, off. Still on his knees behind her, he raised his hands to the top of her panties and began slowly moving them over her hips as he placed kisses along her lower back and the dimples of her bottom. As soon as the garment had cleared her hips, he let it fall to the floor. He ran his hands slowly up her legs as he rose again behind her, the straining erection in his pants poking into her bottom and then her back as he stood up.

“Aren’t you uncomfortable too?” Sookie asked in a strained voice, as Eric was moving his hands slowly back toward her mound.

“What ever could you mean?” Eric asked innocently as he began to move one finger up and down her nether lips lightly.

“It’s just that you,” Sookie had to pause as Eric increased the pressure and brought his other hand to her clit to begin slow circles around it. She was desperate to turn around in his arms; she was desperate for him to just enter her and put her out of her sweet misery. But she was even more desperate for him to keep doing just what he was doing. She pushed her bottom into his erection, grinding into him and creating friction. He moaned behind her. “It’s just that

you feel so *constrained* in there. Wouldn't you be more comfortable with your clothes off too? I imagine they are also a bit *wet*."

In fact, Eric's erection was pressing uncomfortably against his jeans, and there was a pool of pre-cum collecting along the inside of them.

"Good observation, lover," Eric purred, as he pulled his hands away from Sookie's sex, causing her to groan. He quickly unbuttoned his jeans and released his fully erect cock. He had his jeans, his socks, and his boots off in moments and was once again dragging his body up behind her, this time with his completely naked flesh drawing along hers. "You were right," he purred as his lips once again reached her ear. "I do feel *much* better now, don't you?" He dipped a bit so that the head of his penis traced the line of her bottom. Sookie moaned loudly in response.

"I'll tell you a secret," Eric said whispering into Sookie's ear. His hands were massaging her shoulders. "I have often fantasized about having you like this, being able to run my hands along your body. Just. Like. This." He paused as his hands once again found her breasts and stroked them. "I love the feel of your skin, *min kván*," Eric continued whispering. He lightened his touch, causing goose bumps to rise along her stomach, where his hands were now traveling. "Do you know how I know your flesh *craves* me, my lover?" he asked as his fingers continued moving toward her mound yet again, causing even more goose bumps to rise.

Sookie could only shake her head no as one of his fingers resumed its assault on her clit even as he grinded his engorged penis into her lower back.

Eric continued his whispers in a sensual voice that was almost enough to make Sookie come undone in and of itself. "I know you crave my touch, lover, because your flesh leaps to meet me."

“Yes,” Sookie answered as two fingers from his other hand slid down her slit, found her opening, and plunged inside of her.

Almost buckling again, she found the strength to bring her arms around Eric’s neck to hold herself up.

“So—*so*—wet for me, min älskare. *So* ready.”

Just as he spoke, she burst into a thousand pieces as she experienced the most powerful and longest orgasm of her life. She pushed against him as she rode out the waves of her pleasure on his hand.

Eric stood behind Sookie, holding her up with one arm, even while the hand of the other continued to pet her sopping womanhood. Her beautiful, erotic pulses continued to flow onto his hand until she collapsed against him.

“Oh my God,” she finally said; she would have scolded herself for not being able to share an intelligent thought, but—well—she was incapable of having one at that moment, so she let herself off the hook.

Eric let his bonded rest a few minutes even though his aching erection was anxious to find its own purchase. Finally, he turned her around, and she collapsed into his chest.

“Things like that should be illegal,” she said still trying to catch her breath.

“They are in some countries,” Eric chuckled as he pulled her more closely to him, taking all her weight.

Sookie could not help but notice his erection against her stomach as he brought their bodies closer together. Impossibly—or maybe with Eric there was nothing that was impossible—her lady bits were screaming out for more of him than she’d already had, so she

brought her hands up along his outer thighs, his hips, his stomach, and his ribs until they finally settled onto his chest.

She looked up at him seductively. “You have taught a *very* informative lesson about *female* anatomy, Professor Northman, but I feel that I need to learn more about the *male* body.” She slid one of her hands down to tightly grip his throbbing member. “I’d especially like to learn about *this* part,” she added, licking her lips.

Before she could complete that action, Eric’s lips were on hers. Their tongues were dueling in shared passion and something even more profound—maybe even a kind of shared existence.

“Eric, *please*,” Sookie gasped between kisses.

“Hell yes,” he said as he picked her up and entered her in one movement.

She cried out as her very ready channel gripped his throbbing member. At some point, Eric had backed her into a wall, and she reached back trying to find something to grip on to before finally reaching forward to hold onto Eric’s shoulders.

Eric stayed still for several moments as their eyes locked together in shared love, shared communion. Their bodies registered the sublimity of their connection—the *rightness* of their fit. In their eyes was the appreciation that they felt for each other as well as the absolute love they shared.

The moment was perfection.

Chapter 92: Anatomy

Suddenly, a wall and a frenzied encounter were not enough for Eric, not nearly sufficient for the welling of emotions he was feeling for his wife. He pulled her to him more fully, staying lodged completely within her tight sheath, and slowly—at human pace—carried her to the bedroom and the bed that he had built with her in mind. He used his ability to fly in order to place them—still attached to one another—in the center of the bed.

Sookie brought her hand up to Eric’s cheeks. A drop of blood had slipped from his eye, but she didn’t question it; she simply brought it to her lips and took it into herself.

“Min kván,” Eric said in a low voice as he began to move within her.

“Min bóndi,” she returned, now holding both her hands against his cheeks as she met his slow thrusts by raising her hips to his.

His lips lowered to hers, and their mouths explored each other as if for the first time. Their tongues echoed the slow thrusts of their bodies.

Sookie broke off from his lips so that she could taste his cheeks, chin, and neck. “Eric,” she whispered, “you said a new word tonight, something like askare?”

“It was älskare,” he said back in a low voice matching hers.

“Tell me what it means?” she asked, arching into him.

“It means ‘lover,’” he returned, burying himself once again deeply into her body.

The corners of her mouths turned up. “I like that one. I *shouldn’t*, but I do.”

He lifted one of her legs to give himself a different angle into her as he slowly withdrew and thrust again. “Why shouldn’t you like it?” he asked as he brought his lips to her brow and along her forehead even as he continued his slow, steady rhythm of thrusts into her.

Sookie sighed as his member drove deeper into her. She wrapped the leg he wasn't holding around his hip so that he could go deeper still, an act that caused sighs from both of them. She finally answered, "It's just that the word 'lover' can mean something like a mistress, like an adulteress or something."

His lips had found her earlobes again, something that always elicited groaning and writhing from her. He loved playing her body as if it were his own well-tuned instrument. As she ran her tongue along the curves of his neck, he realized with a groan of his own that she could play his body just as skillfully.

He had to concentrate in order to respond, "'Mistress' to me means something else. A mistress is a *partner* to the master of a domain. You *are* my mistress, min kván."

"And *lover*?" Sookie barely managed to ask as he licked the canals of her ear.

He smiled into his task and stopped his gentle thrusting while he was buried deeply inside of her. Then he propped himself up on his elbows so that he could look down into her eyes better. "'Lover' is *best* of all." His eyes sparkled as he slowly circled and ground his hips against hers, all the while staying buried in her to the hilt.

Sookie's back arched into the contact which seemed to be stroking her clit from both the inside and the outside at the same time. "Why's that?" she whimpered.

"You are the *first* I have called my lover. To me, it means that you have ownership of my body. It is yours to do with as you will, just as your body is mine. I have had sex with many," he paused as her face darkened at this thought. "But do not worry," he continued. "I have never loved someone that I coupled with before you. You—*alone*—have been and will continue to be my *lover*."

She smiled up at him as he continued his grinding movements. “I can live with that, but is it really *best* of all?” She was beginning to circle her own hips, moving to counter and complement his grinding. “What about ‘bonded,’ ‘pledged,’ or ‘wife?’ Aren’t those better?” she asked with a teasing twinkle in her own eye, even as their bodies continued giving each other immense pleasure.

The mixture of Sookie’s movements and her teasing made Eric want to pound into her hard. She woke up such passion in him that he sometimes didn’t know what to do with it all. Instead, he focused on the pleasure he was bringing to her, and slowly drew out his cock until he felt the tip drag against her G-spot. He saw, felt, and sensed the shivers from her body at his interior touch and began to mix the grinding, which he knew was stimulating her clit, with the slow half withdraw, which he knew would stoke her G-spot.

After several minutes of those movements, which had left Sookie almost weeping in pleasure, he answered. “‘Lover,’ ‘beloved,’ ‘bonded,’ ‘pledged,’ ‘wife’—these are *all* best for me; they are all best because they are all *YOU*.”

Tears escaped from her eyes at the ecstasy both his words and his body were bringing to her.

Sookie noticed another red tear slipping from his eye as well.

Eric’s overwhelming love for the woman below him and the earlier fear of losing her while he looked on powerlessly overtook him for a moment.

“Eric,” she whispered as she raised her fingers to capture the tear as she’d done earlier. Unconsciously she brought it to her lips as another one began to track the other side of his face. She grasped his shoulders tenderly. “Eric,” she repeated, “I still have you.”

Her voluntary taking of his blood—of taking him into her, of accepting him, of loving him—enflamed Eric. He rested his forehead against hers and kept his eyes locked on hers by arching his neck upwards. He increased the pace of his thrusts and was joined in movement by the woman that was everything to him. He would meet the sun the day he lost her because losing her would equate to losing himself.

“This is best. This is right,” he groaned as her brought them both toward release. “We are best. We are right.”

Eric felt Sookie’s head nodding into his. “Yes,” she gasped before repeating, “We are best. We are right.” She added, “We are magic.”

Their releases were simultaneous and overpowering, sending them both into wave after wave of pleasure. Even after Eric had recovered slightly and his cool seed had stopped flowing from his body, he continued his gentle thrusting into his lover’s body so that her pleasure would be drawn out.

“Shit,” Sookie muttered as she shivered and quaked below him, experiencing an orgasm that easily doubled in intensity and length the one she’d had earlier that same night.

When her pulsing finally stopped, Eric withdrew from her and drew her body to his as he lay down on his back. He pulled the comforter from the other half of the bed so that it would cover her body and keep her warm against his cool flesh.

[A/N: Readers of the books will notice another line that I have borrowed, this time from *Dead and Gone*. I mean no copyright infringement. As always, I own nothing. The quoted line is in full italics above, and I give absolute credit to Charlaine Harris, who in that moment allows Eric to say exactly what he feels about his relationship with Sookie.]

Chapter 93: Sharing Life

Sookie finally caught her breath and found her voice after about ten minutes of resting her head against Eric's silent chest, "You should write a book."

He laughed, "On what, my *lover*?" He emphasized the last word, causing an involuntary shiver to go through her body.

"Female anatomy—and, *of course*, what to do with it."

He chuckled. "Do you think it would be a great money-maker, *min kván*?"

"Oh yeah," she sighed. She was silent for a moment and said contemplatively, "I don't know how you manage it, but it seems that sex with you just keeps gettin' better and better and better. And since our first time next to that little brook was the best physical experience of my life up to that point, the fact that it's gettin' even better is almost impossible to believe. It's *scary*."

"I shall have to strive to keep improving then," he chuckled as he lazily stroked her back. "There is still *much* we have not done together," he said, his voice rippling with promised future passion.

"Cheese and rice!" Sookie exclaimed. "If it gets better than tonight, I don't know if I can take it!"

"Oh—you'll *take* it," Eric teased naughtily.

Sookie laughed and hit his arm lightly. "Don't get all nasty," she playfully scolded.

"But I cannot help myself," his voice was just as playful. "I want to do all kinds of very, *very* bad and *nasty* things to you."

She swatted him again but giggled. "Well, you're gonna have to shelve those thoughts for now, cowboy, 'cause I can hardly move!"

He grasped the hand that had just swatted him and entwined his long fingers with hers. “I do *love* it when you call me that. I am glad that you haven’t chosen a pet name that I do not enjoy. There are many insipid ones in common use today.”

Sookie laughed. “You’d better keep me happy then, *cowboy*, or I’ll start calling you something like ‘sweetie pie’ or ‘snookums.’”

Eric chuckled with her, “I shall endeavor to do everything I can to avoid that, *min kára*—even if I must make your happiness my *sole* pursuit in life.”

They both smiled widely, she into his chest as she snuggled deeper, and he into her hair as he took in her scent.

Her fingers had unconsciously begun to trace patterns on his chest and fell upon the pendant he’d carved for her, which was lying next to the claw necklace that he always wore. She’d noticed that he’d been wearing it when they’d made love; now she thumbed it gently. “I’m glad you found this. I didn’t even know I’d lost it.”

Eric brought his hand over hers—over the pendant. “When Debbie took you, it was torn from you. The knot did not hold.”

Sookie sat up in bed next to him. She readjusted so that she was sitting cross-legged facing Eric and then pulled the comforter over her lap. “Well, Mr. Viking. Do you know how to tie knots that can’t be broken.”

Eric looked at her seriously. “I do.”

She nodded. “I thought you would. Show me.”

Eric sat up against the headboard and took off the necklace he’d made for Sookie. His deft fingers quickly untied the simple knot he’d put in the leather cord earlier, and his fathomless blue eyes took on the faraway look they got when he was about to access his human past. Sookie

couldn't help but to reach out and put her hand on his hip, which was poking out just above the blanket. No matter how close she was to him, she longed to be touching him, especially when he shared a part of himself with her like she knew he was about to.

He spoke in a low voice. "My father taught me to tie knots that would lock a ship to its anchor no matter what the condition of the sea or weather. He taught me how to moor one of our ships at harbor through the winter so that it would be secure until it was needed again the next spring."

Eric took Sookie's hand in his and then held it up before him. He placed the leather cord that held the pendant over her wrist. "Godric told me of the Knot of Hercules, the love knot. In ancient Greece and Rome, this knot was used to symbolize the everlasting bond of marriage."

Eric smiled at Sookie as he moved his own wrist next to hers and entwined his fingers with hers. He draped the leather cord over his wrist as well and then circled their joined wrists with it.

"Have you heard the phrase 'tie the knot,' lover?" Eric asked, his tone equal parts playful and serious.

With a smile of her own, Sookie nodded as Eric brought the leather strip around their joined wrists a second time.

"The phrase is most likely derived from the use of knots to symbolize eternal love as in the case of the Celtic love knot." He paused as he lightly traced the path of the leather strip around their wrists with his free hand. "More than five hundred years before I was born, the Celtic love knot was first seen in art and stonework. Celtic love knots are said to represent the entwining of two souls for eternity."

Sookie tilted her head a bit and looked into Eric's soulful eyes. "Is that what you want, Eric? Eternity?"

The vampire continued to trace the leather cord around their connected wrists even as he looked directly into her expressive brown eyes, which seemed so deep that they anchored him to the very earth itself.

"It is *not*," he said, surprising her. "Not unless that eternity includes *you* with me."

Sookie looked at Eric contemplatively, "What is it like to live for a thousand years?"

He returned her earnest look. "It is *long*. Sometimes—in moments of great change—it is wonderful. The world seems to open up to endless possibilities and a thousand lifetimes seems too little. Other times, I have felt like one of the wooden ships of my people that I have seen in museums—weathered and worn away until there was little left of value or use." He raised his free hand up to Sookie's cheek. "I was in such a state when I first saw you."

"And now?" Sookie asked.

Eric smiled, a smile that literally took her breath with it; his eyes lit up like the pictures of the Mediterranean Sea that she'd seen in travel magazines. "Now—I am the one who has been moored safely to harbor, *min kära*, safely knotted to my home—to you."

A tear slipped down Sookie's cheek. "In another thousand years, would you be tired of me, Eric?"

The vampire shook his head and smirked. "Sookie," he said sincerely, "a thousand years with you would be the tip of the iceberg. I am sure that you would surprise me every day because you—my love—are the kind of woman who would learn something new every day just so that you *could*."

Another tear joined the first down Sookie's cheek even as a slide of tears formed on her opposite cheek. Eric used his free hand to thumb away her tears and then returned it to the leather cord around their wrists, giving Sookie a moment of silence to compose herself. She moved her free hand over Eric's, and looked at him through unshed tears. "One day, you're gonna want me to become a vampire, aren't you?"

Eric nodded.

"And if I don't?" Sookie asked, her voice tumbling with emotion and—perhaps—a bit of fear.

"It does not matter, *min kära*," Eric reassured, "not as much as you might think. It is simply what I want, but not what I *need* to have happen."

She looked at him with questions in her eyes, "Why not?"

He answered, "Our days—our very existences—are tied like a knot now. Five minutes, five hours, five years, five decades, five centuries, five millennia—these are all merely numbers that represent corporality. I will take all the time with your body that I can, but after that," he paused and took in an unneeded breath, "after that I *now* have found confidence in my soul. It *will* find yours in whatever realm it moves to after this body meets the true death."

"And my soul won't let yours get away," she smiled as more tears slipped down her cheeks. "Never."

Eric smiled back at her with confidence. "So it is settled then, and you have time to decide what you want."

"Time to decide if I wanna be a vampire."

"All the time you need, *min kära*," Eric said sincerely.

Sookie smiled wider, “In that case, you’d better tie me a good knot then.” She gestured toward the leather strip around their wrists.

A smile grew on Eric’s face as well, “Which one do you want? The Celtic love knot? The knot of Hercules?”

“Tie me the one from home, Eric.”

A red tear slipped down Eric’s cheek as he tied the knot that his human father had taught him almost a thousand years before, a knot that he hoped would forever moor Sookie to his side.

Once finished, he gently placed the necklace back over his beloved’s head. He had left just enough give in the leather cord so that it could be put on easily but was still secure. The pendant with their carved initials fell to just above her heart. He knew that the knot would hold.

Sookie brought her hand up to wipe away his tear and then moved it to the pendant. She stroked it lovingly before moving her fingers to his chest, where the necklace he always wore lay.

“What kind of claw is this?” Sookie asked thumbing Eric’s pendant.

Eric smiled and brought his hand up to join hers. He traced the claw’s edge and then leaned back against the headboard more fully again. “It is an eagle’s talon.”

“Why do you wear it?”

Eric smiled wider, “Godric gave it to me.”

“Oh? Does it mean anything?”

“It means *many* things, my wife. Do you know who Odin is?”

“Yeah,” Sookie nodded. “He was one of your gods, right?”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “Odin, the All-Father, was chief among the gods and goddesses of my people in the Æsir, which was the pantheon of our gods. He was associated with battle, war, and,” he paused, “*death*.”

Sookie moved so that she too was sitting against the headboard but turned her body so that she could look at Eric as he spoke; unconsciously, he pulled the comforter over her.

He continued, “Odin was also associated with magic, poetry, and wisdom. He was able to transform himself into an eagle to better see the actions of men and the other gods. He was a crafty one, was Odin.” He smiled.

“Like you,” Sookie said as she once again brought her fingers up to his pendant.

“Perhaps,” Eric smirked. His eyes once again drifted into the long ago past. “When I was young, I loved hearing the stories of Odin more than any others my mother told. I liked that he had two sides. He was a fierce warrior when he needed to be, but he was always wise and prepared for battle. In addition to becoming an eagle himself at times, he had two ravens that he sent out every day to gather even more knowledge for himself. I admit that even as a young boy, I was thirsty for knowledge, especially from those whom my people had captured and brought back to our homeland as slaves. Once they integrated into our community and learned our language, I could often be found pestering them for their people’s stories. My father, however,” Eric smirked again, “did not like my interest in other cultures, but in my mind, I thought of Odin.”

Sookie grinned, “So you compared yourself to a god.” She joked, “And I thought your ego was big *now*!” She reached over and tickled his ribs a bit, causing the vampire to giggle like the boy he’d been when he’d first heard the tales of Odin from his mother. And the thousand-year-old vampire let himself giggle freely too, a fact that caused Sookie to grin even wider.

Eric went to tickle her back, but Sookie raised her hands. “Wait!” she squeaked. “Tell me more. Why did Godric give you the eagle talon?”

Eric laughed at his bonded’s diversionary tactics and settled for a quick kiss on the lips rather than a tickle. He leaned back once again, resting against the headboard he’d made and enjoying the feel of the smooth wood next to his skin. “I once told Godric about my fascination with Odin and why it was that I liked him so much; I was especially drawn to his ability to transform into an eagle.” He chuckled. “I think it was because I was able to fly too as a vampire. I have often used this ability to gain knowledge.”

Sookie shook her head, “Maybe you *are* a little like Odin, after all: a warrior, but a wise one.”

“I try to be,” Eric said earnestly before continuing his story. “Godric was born Gaul, but when he was a young boy, the Romans took over the area where he was raised, and he was taken in by a Roman legionnaire, who trained him in the art of war,” Eric smiled and then added, “as well as the art of love.”

Sookie gasped, “How old was Godric? He couldn’t have been much more than a kid.” Involuntarily, she cringed, as she thought about Uncle Bartlett and her own experiences as a child.

Sensing Sookie’s change of mood and correctly guessing the source of that change, Eric quickly scooted closer to her so that he could take her into his arms in comfort. He assured, “Things were not the same for young people in the past, Sookie. In Godric’s culture, he would have been declared a man at age 12 or 13. It was the same for me. And people often married quite young.” Eric stroked his beloved’s hair. “Do not fear that the Roman took Godric against

his will. My maker often talked of him with great affection. I am certain that even after more than two thousand years, Godric carried much love for him.”

Sookie nodded and snuggled into Eric’s chest. “Tell me more?” she asked.

Eric continued, “Godric followed the Roman legionnaire into many battles. The eagle was the symbol of the legion. This predator was said to carry Jupiter’s thunderbolts into war; thus, it was a sign of great strength.”

Sookie once again thumbed the talisman.

Eric’s voice grew quieter. “Godric saved my life many, *many* times, especially when I was a young vampire. That ego you spoke of got me into trouble at first, and I was often overconfident. But Godric was always there until I learned better.”

Sookie sighed and kissed Eric’s chest, becoming even more thankful for Godric.

“I saved Godric’s life once, *only* once,” he continued. “It was almost 700 years ago, and we’d been traveling in northern Spain, trailing and feeding upon a group that was on a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Godric and I separated one evening near a small town. He went to feed, and I desired to take a look at the structure of a Medieval church that was nearby; the church was reputed to have used a unique kind of buttress as support. About an hour after we had separated, Godric called me to him, which was unusual. Even more unusual was that I felt anxiety from him through our bond; generally, Godric was extremely proficient at shutting his side of the bond off from me. It was one of his many talents, but that night, I could feel that he had lost control of that ability. I flew to his location quickly, but I did not go straight to him. Instead, I stopped so that I could figure out the best course of action before I went in to get Godric.”

Eric grasped Sookie's hand lovingly and then continued, "Many of the pilgrims were quite wealthy and had precious materials with them to present as an offering once they got to the cathedral. Somehow, a group of them had discovered Godric feeding, and by chance, one of these offerings was a silver sceptre with a sharp, pointed end. Godric had been stabbed by it, and the silver was weakening him; he could not escape. The pilgrims had other silver pieces too, and they had been clever enough to place them over Godric's body as well. They had sent some of their number to awaken the town's priests, for they thought that Godric was an agent of Satan, who had come to deter them from their pilgrimage.

"There were about twenty men left behind to guard Godric with one acting as sentry outside the dwelling, which luckily was not a private residence, but was instead a kind of stable and storage house about a mile from the town proper. I glamoured the sentry to believe that another minion of Satan had been spotted attacking the town, and all but two of the pilgrims were sent to help. They took several of the pieces of silver with them. I was able to incapacitate the two remaining men quickly, and I took Godric safely from the area before the others returned. It was close to dawn by then, so I fed Godric some of my own blood and the blood of an eagle, which I had found near the cave that we'd been staying in. The next evening, he presented me with the eagle's talon as well as with my freedom. Of course, I chose to stay with Godric on and off after that, but the gift of freedom from a maker to a child is very precious, especially given the number of makers who wish to keep complete control over their progeny."

Eric said this last part with derision, and Sookie couldn't help but think about Lorena.

Sookie ran her fingers once more over the talon and sighed as she thought about the complexities and depth of the man she loved.

After a few moments of silence, Sookie yawned, and Eric lay them down again. After they'd settled once more into each other, his hand reclaimed hers, and he placed their shared grip over his heart.

His fingers traced the lines of her palm for a few minutes, and then he brought her hand to his lips before lightly kissing each fingertip, the back of her hand, her wrist and finally her palm. He said softly: “If I profane with my unworhiest hand / This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: / My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.”

“What’s that from?” Sookie asked. “I’ve read that before; I know I have. Is it Shakespeare?”

“Yes,” Eric said softly, once again kissing her palm. “It is from *Romeo and Juliet*—when they first meet.”

“Love at first sight,” Sookie sighed sleepily.

“Probably closer to lust,” Eric chuckled. “They were teenagers, after all.”

“And they died before they even got started,” she said sadly.

Abruptly, Sookie sat up in bed, now fully awake; the tension was clear on her face.

“What is wrong, my love?” Eric asked alarmed, as he also sat up.

Sookie spoke passionately, “Debbie called you ‘Romeo’ earlier and me ‘Juliet,’ and I don’t want to compare us to them.”

Eric would have laughed, but Sookie’s look was so serious—so earnest. He assured, “I was not intending to compare us to them, *min kván*.”

Sookie nodded her head, her fiery nature spilling out. “We can *fight for* each other—always come to save each other like you did for me tonight, but we can’t be stupid like they were.”

“Stupid?” Eric asked.

“Yeah. I hated that play after I was done reading it. When you think about it, Romeo and Juliet are just two stupid kids. At first, he’s all talkin’ about how he loves some other chick named . . .,” she paused as she tried to remember.

“Rosaline,” he supplied.

“Yeah—that’s it. And then Romeo and Juliet see each other and fall in love in—*what*—like two minutes, and then they get married within two more, and then, the next thing you know, Juliet is takin’ a drug that’ll make her look dead *before* Romeo even knows the plan! *Before* he knows the *frickin’* plan! I would make darn well sure you knew the plan *before* I did anything half so dumb! And then Romeo kills himself, and then she kills herself for real. Stupid—*right?*”

Eric couldn’t hold in his laughter this time. “See what I mean?” he said. “You, my love, see things in such unique ways. I will never get tired of hearing everything you think.” He gripped her hand and raised it to his lips again. He got a mischievous look in his eyes, “Then who should we compare our love to?” Antony and Cleopatra? Tristan and Isolde? Or maybe your Rhett and Scarlet?”

“No!” Sookie exclaimed quickly before laughing at her own zeal. “Definitely *NOT* Scarlet and Rhett. That silly woman lets that beautiful man get away, and I don’t intend to do anything of the sort. She pines away years for Ashley Wilkes and can’t even see that the love of her life has been in front of her the whole time—*always* watching out for her!” Sookie snorted.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think that Ashley was a vampire and that he’d tied himself to Scarlett and was manipulating her with his blood. That’s the *only* possible explanation for her not recognizing that Rhett was *so* much better!”

Eric laughed out loud. “The actor that played Wilkes was certainly as pasty as Bill Compton. Of course, Bill’s Southern accent is *much* more annoying.”

Sookie giggled, “Scarlett needed to break the blood tie and toss Ashley to the curb.”

“Like you did with Bill,” Eric said, reaching out to tickle Sookie’s ribs.

She laughed and pushed his hand away. “Exactly.”

After a minute, Sookie added, “I don’t think we should compare what we have to *anyone* else.”

Eric chuckled, “You are right, min kván. There is no one like us.”

“Damned skippy,” Sookie said, smiling. Just then, her stomach let out of loud growl, causing them to laugh together again.

“We must feed that *monster*,” Eric said dramatically, rising from bed. He went to his dresser and quickly pulled on a pair of track pants before going to the closet and getting a black, button-down, long-sleeved shirt out of it. He turned to her and leered, “I would *very* much enjoy seeing you wear my clothing, min älskare.”

The lustful look in his eye when he said those words made Sookie shiver again. She bit her lip and got out of bed, walking naked toward him. She turned around as he helped her into the dress shirt, and then she turned back around as they both buttoned her into it, him starting from the top and her starting from the bottom. Their eyes never left each other’s.

“You know I want you *again*,” he growled. “I always want to be buried into you—to be as close to you as possible.”

She smiled and bit her lip even harder, ready to forsake her stomach so that they could both take what they wanted from each other's bodies. However, the traitorous organ had other plans and growled again, even more angrily.

They both laughed. "Soon," he promised.

"*Very soon,*" she confirmed.

Sookie quickly went to the bathroom and saw to her human needs before washing her hands. She found Eric in the kitchen, looking in the cabinets. "We shall have to get you more and better food tomorrow evening, wife. I'm afraid, I do not have very many selections."

"What you have is fine," Sookie scolded as she reached up and grabbed a can of soup. "I love everything that you bought and put into this house—and all your other houses—just for me. *Everything* is perfect!"

Eric chuckled as he got out a pot for Sookie to use to warm her meal and the can opener from a drawer. He loved it when Sookie's passion rose unexpectedly over mundane things.

He opened the can for her and then dumped the contents into the pot. She turned on the burner as he put the pot onto it. And then she wrapped herself into his arms, enjoying the feeling of his cool, bare chest on her warm cheek.

"Shall I build us a fire, my love?" he asked as he kissed her forehead.

"That would be real nice," Sookie answered. He kissed her again and moved into the living room as she staying in the kitchen and stirred her soup.

It didn't take long for it to warm, and by the time it was ready, Sookie had prepared a tray with some crackers she'd found, a glass of water for herself, and a warmed blood for Eric. She added the steaming bowl of soup, a napkin, and a spoon, and walked into the living room just in

time to see the best sight in the world, Eric's bottom in the perfect position for study as he bent over the fire to add another log. He'd already fixed them a pallet on the floor.

"Yummy," she muttered as she put the tray on the coffee table and sat down on the pallet.

"You seem quite *enthusiastic* about your—uh—*food*, lover," Eric teased as he turned around to face her. From the flame that immediately colored her cheeks, there was no doubt about what she'd just called "yummy."

Sookie teased back, "Yes, I was just thinkin' about how scrumptious and tasty my *soup* is gonna be." She took her spoon and dipped it slightly into the hot soup before bringing it slowly to her lips and blowing on it. When it was cool, she brought the bite to her mouth and then made a point of licking the spoon until it was sparkling clean. Her eyes never left Eric's.

Eric watched her with glazed over eyes, his cock stirring noticeably under his thin track pants. "If you want to get through that meal of yours, *min älskare*," he growled dangerously, "you'd better be a bit less naughty yourself." His eyes glistened with amusement and lust.

Sookie chuckled as Eric calmed himself, joined her on the floor, and picked up the blood she'd brought for him. They settled into a comfortable silence for a few minutes as they ate their respective meals.

"What will you name your kitten, *min kära*?"

"Don't you think *we* should name *our* kitten together?"

Eric thought for a moment. "Perhaps, but he was your gift, so I think that ultimate naming rights go to you."

"Always you with your logic," Sookie teased. "I don't know. Maybe we should wait to see what his personality will be like. We hardly know him yet. I think we should bring him up here with us when we come, however. I don't like that we've left him all alone."

Eric smiled, “If you really wish to bring him to the cabin, we will. However, he’ll have to learn to fly with us.”

“We’ll get him a little cat carrier that we can close him up tight in so that the wind doesn’t freeze him,” Sookie said, taking another bite of her soup.

Eric laughed. “We’ll get a special one made if need be.”

There were a few more minutes of comfortable silence between them as Sookie finished her meal.

“I love this,” Sookie sighed contentedly as she stared into the fire.

“Sharing meals?” Eric asked, following Sookie’s gaze.

“Yeah that,” Sookie said as their eyes pulled from the fire to each other’s at the same time, “and also just sharing *life* with you.”

Eric nodded. “I love this too.”

Chapter 94: Found and Claimed

As soon as Sookie finished her meal, she expected for Eric to be on her like a starved man, but instead, he leaned back against the coffee table and pulled her to him so that her back was to his chest. She nestled comfortably into his body, and he raised his knees slightly on either side of her, giving her perfect armrests. Then he pulled a quilt over her legs to keep her warm and wrapped his arms lightly around her, bringing his hands to rest on her stomach over his shirt.

They snuggled into each other like this for quite a while, enjoying the warmth of the blanket, the fire, and most of all their shared bond.

“I’m *fine*, you know,” Sookie finally said; she’d been sensing Eric’s concern through the bond for several minutes.

“I did *not* like not being able to get to you,” Eric said quietly, kissing the top of her head.

“I know,” she said just as quietly, comforting him by rubbing soft circles into his legs.

Another few minutes of silence passed between them.

“I wish to always be able to protect you—to keep you safe—and tonight I failed,” Eric said with regret.

“Don’t you talk like that, mister!” Sookie ordered, turning around to face him. “You *did* protect me; you *do* keep me safe! I knew that you would come for me. And when you got there, you did and said exactly what you had to in order to stop Debbie from killin’ me and to give us the time we needed. Even though you weren’t able to come in and get me, I *knew* that I’d be okay once you were there.” She brought her hand up to Eric’s cheek. “Don’t you see, you silly vampire! You and I are *not* like Romeo and Juliet—not at all! I know you will always have a plan—even if I don’t know what it is exactly. I will *never* give into despair and shrivel up and die. I’ll always be waitin’ for you to come.”

Eric nodded and agreed, “I will always wait for you to come for me too.”

Sookie looked up into Eric’s eyes, “We *are* gonna be able to make it through everything that will be coming at us, right?”

“Yes,” he answered with certainty.

“But there’s so much that could go against us,” she said.

Eric nodded thoughtfully; he could feel her fear and anxiety rising through the bond.

“You are right about Romeo and Juliet, my love. They were too young to act with wisdom, but you and I are not. We will use your creative mind and my thousand years of experience. We will use all the lessons we have garnered from Godric and from your Gran. And we will encounter all our enemies with logic and carefully-made plans. We will start now,” Eric said, already feeling Sookie calming through the bond. Her confidence was rising as well.

He continued, “Let’s make sure we have plans in place for every contingency. What are our threats, *min kván?*”

“Bill,” Sookie said first. “He’s got some power over you as your king, and despite anything he might say to our faces, he still wants me—wants to possess and control me, wants my blood for his own. And he wants you dead out of some misguided idea of vengeance.”

“You’re right,” Eric agreed. “He will keep up his machinations with Lillith in hopes of weakening my position. He will bide his time until he believes that I am unguarded, and then he *does* intend to kill me. After that, he believes that you will see the light, so to speak, and come to him.”

Sookie scoffed, “He’s ‘F’-in crazy if he thinks that.”

“And that is what will make him potentially more dangerous to us. But do not fear, *min kára*. Because he believes so strongly that he loves you, he would *not* harm you.”

Sookie shook her head, “If he harms *you*, that is the same as trying to harm me, and I won’t fuckin’ stand for it!” Her fire was back up.

Eric smiled at her and gripped her hand. He had felt that same protective fire from Sookie as she’d pulled the trigger and killed Debbie because she’d perceived her to be a threat to her husband—*hers!* Eric once again thanked whatever power had brought him to Sookie—or her to him. She was his match in every fucking way. Had they been together when he was human, he wouldn’t have been able to be separated from her either. She would have fought next to him always, his shieldmaiden.

Sookie’s logic overcame her anger, and she continued calmly and with certainty. “But Bill *won’t* be a problem for us.”

“Why not?” Eric asked, still with a smile on his lips.

“Because we’re watchin’ him and listenin’ to him, and we’ll be waitin’ at every turn to stop him—*unless* he finally pushes us to the point that we have to kill him.”

Eric was both surprised and proud of his bonded’s confidence and certainty. “Yes, it will most likely come to that,” Eric agreed. “But hopefully Bill will surprise us both and become truly accepting of us over time. It would be ideal if he could focus on being king and become a good one. If he does not, however, we will be ready.” He paused and looked at Sookie steadily, “I must tell you, *min kván*—if he *ever* tries to get his blood into you again, I will tear his body to fucking shreds.”

Sookie raised her hand to her husband’s cheek. Her vampire was practically shaking with emotion at the thought of Bill having his blood in her. She comforted him, “I would kill him *myself* if he ever tried, *min bóndi*. It is *your* blood—yours and yours only—that I crave. There will never be anyone else.”

Eric began to relax at her words and her touch. His eyes, lit up by passion and the flames of the fire reflecting in them, calmed as he was once again grounded by her. He inhaled deeply to take in the scent of his lover and then pulled her into his body tightly.

Sookie held him and sent him comfort while taking her own from the feel of his skin on hers. After a few minutes, she pulled back a bit and took his left hand in her right.

“I just hope that Bill behaves—at least long enough for Rasul or Isabel to become established in the state in order to become king if he must be eliminated.”

“I agree,” Eric said, now fully composed again and impressed by Sookie’s ability to see his own possible endgame. He was even happier that she seemed to agree with it. “I would not wish to be king. It is too difficult a job to *quit* once it’s gotten. I will not trade my freedom for an endless series of political machinations if I can help it.”

Sookie nodded, “So we will bide our time with Bill, hoping that he comes around, but we will always be a step ahead of him if he continues to be a threat. And if he comes after either of us—well—then Ashley Wilkes will finally pay the piper.”

“Exactly.” Eric chuckled. With a twinkle in his eye, he asked, “What else is there that threatens us, my love?”

“The Authority,” she said. “If that bitch, Nan Flanagan, told anyone about me, they might decide to come for me. Plus, they might still come after *you*. They were, after all, ready to kill you about a week ago.” It was now Sookie’s turn to be visibly upset, and Eric reached out and took her other hand in his, sending her comfort.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “Dealing with the Authority has become tricky, especially with certain members becoming more and more factional; some are even openly speaking out against the AVL now and subscribing to an attitude similar to Russell Edgington’s.”

Sookie shivered at the sound of that name, and Eric squeezed her hand gently in comfort. “Do not worry about him, my love. He is safely entombed in concrete, and that’s where he will be staying for the foreseeable future.

“But what if he gets out? He’s much older than you are—stronger too.” The thought of Russell returning scared Sookie more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. She could still remember the resignation in Eric’s eyes when he’d kissed her goodbye in his office at Fangtasia; she never wanted to see that level of hopelessness in her vampire again.

As if reading her mind, Eric spoke up, “In my office that day, Sookie, I had given up, but things are different now. I have much more to fight for—to *live* for; I have you and the life we are building together. Despite the fact that Russell is three times my age, he will *never* touch you,” Eric said fiercely.

“And I’d use my light to blow him to fuckin’ smithereens if he tried to touch *you*,” Sookie said passionately.

Eric smiled at her and raised her hand to his lips. “He wouldn’t stand a chance against the two of us.”

“Nope,” Sookie said with certainty. She smiled at him, “That reminds me—you need to buy Pam a new pair of shoes or a designer purse or something.”

Eric quirked an eyebrow in question.

“Well—she *is* the one that convinced you to fight Russell, right? And even though you totally should have told me the plan, it was Pam that made sure you didn’t just shrivel up into a hole and wait for Russell to come and get you.”

Eric smirked, “She *was* very convincing.”

“Good!” Sookie exclaimed. “You’d better listen to her. Don’t forget that you made her for a reason! If you stop listenin’ to the women in your life, you’re gonna get yourself into even more trouble than usual, Northman,” she smirked.

Eric smirked back, “I’ll have to remember that, min kära.”

“See that you do, cowboy,” Sookie said. She paused a moment and then became serious. “Why didn’t you kill Russell that day, Eric? Why let him live?”

Eric looked past her eyes and into the fire behind her. “It was strange, min kära. I had wanted my vengeance more than *anything* for so long, and Russell had become a threat to you as well. But out there in the sun that morning as we lay handcuffed and burning together, I saw a vision of Godric.”

“Like the one you saw when you had amnesia at my house?”

Eric shook his head. “No—the vision I had at your house was odd. In it, Godric was telling me to feed from you, and he fed from you against your will—something he would *not* have done in real life. I think his presence at that time was a product of my own conscience—fighting with my vampire nature.”

“Well—I’m glad Jiminy Cricket won,” Sookie winked at him.

“As am I,” Eric agreed, catching her reference to *Pinocchio*. He continued, “That morning with Russell, Godric told me that I had to forgive; it was something that the *real* him had told me many times before. In fact, it was why we’d seen each other less and less in the last half century or so. For many years, he helped me seek my vengeance, but he evolved into the vampire he was when you met him, and he wanted me to forsake my obsession with the Were pack and their master to seek peace in my life. Looking back at that morning, I think that his

spirit was trying to tell me that killing Russell would not help me—that vengeance would not fill the hole in me.”

“At the time, you said you wanted Russell to suffer.”

Eric nodded. “That was part of it, but something Godric said also made me think. I,” he paused, “*regret* some of the actions I took. I am not sure what to do about Russell now—to be honest. So for the moment, I am watching and seeking guidance.”

“You have the place where Russell’s entombed under surveillance,” Sookie stated more than asked.

“Of course,” Eric confirmed. “He is under guard at all times in case others find him, especially since . . .” Eric paused, looking back into Sookie’s eyes.

“Especially since Bill knows where he is,” Sookie completed.

“Yes,” Eric said, “It is possible that Bill may still determine that he could use Russell to kill me.”

“But Russell’s insane! Bill could never control him.”

“No, he could not,” Eric agreed. “But if Bill becomes so desperate that he loses his sanity completely, he might try. Right now, ironically enough, it seems that Lillith is keeping him from doing just that.”

“But you are watching the place where Russell is buried.”

“Yes. If Russell somehow managed to break out of the cement, he would be very weak, and I have Were guards during the day and vampire guards at night, ready to restrain him in silver before he could possibly get away.”

“And those same guards would stop anyone who came for him?”

“Exactly,” Eric confirmed.

Sookie thought for a moment, “You said you were gettin’ guidance about the Russell situation. From whom? Why?”

Eric looked back into the fire, “As I said before, I have *regrets* about some things that I did.”

“Talbot?” Sookie guessed.

“Yes,” Eric said quietly. “My maker would have hated that I took my revenge by killing Russell’s family—his beloved. Godric would have said that I’d become as bad as he whom I hated. And he would have been right,” Eric said. “Killing Russell for what he did to my *family*, for what he wanted to do to *you*, or just to keep him from fulfilling his insane plans would have been justifiable, but I acted rashly in killing Talbot. And the repercussion was that you were almost killed.” He paused for several seconds. “And then as I was finally moments away from killing Russell, I couldn’t go through with it, so I have asked someone much wiser and older than myself for advice.”

“The A.P.,” Sookie guessed.

“Indeed,” Eric confirmed. “She is currently *thinking over* the matter.”

Eric seemed to stare past Sookie for a moment before looking at her again. “I think she told me about you once—more than five hundred years ago, actually,” he said quietly.

“Really?” Sookie asked, gesturing for him to say more.

“Yes, Godric would take me along on his visits to her, and she grew a fondness for me—well at least after a couple hundred years.” He chuckled. “She always said at first that she didn’t want to waste her time with me until she knew I’d live long enough to make it worth her while. Of course, she knew I would all along.”

Now it was Sookie’s turn to chuckle.

Eric continued, “Eventually, she wanted to talk to me. She said she liked hearing about my exploits and my studies. She said that too few vampires bothered with education and that most just took what they wanted using glamour and power. She taught me to judge an asset as an asset, no matter if he or she was a vampire, Were, human, or something else. She also enjoyed the fact that I didn’t treat her as lesser because she was a female. Of course, as I have told you, Viking women were extremely strong, especially my mother. The A.P. liked that I was not the chauvinist that most male vampires were in the past.”

“What did she tell you?” Sookie asked, very curious now.

“She said that she liked that I respected women. She said that one day I would meet a woman that I would respect more than any other.” He got a faraway look in his eyes as he remembered the rest of her words. “She told me that I would need to heed the lessons she had taught me about humans and other types of creatures being potentially equal in gifts and value. She said that *if* I could do that, I would find my true mate, someone that would complete the missing part of myself. She called this person my “compare anima.”

“What does that mean?” Sookie asked as Eric’s eyes once again met hers.

“He squeezed her hands a bit. Today, it would be translated into English as “soul mate.”

“Oh,” Sookie gasped and then squeezed Eric’s hands back. She responded confidently, “Then you’re right. She *was* telling you about me.”

Eric chuckled and bent to kiss her lightly.

“Indeed.”

“So is the A.P. on our side, then? Would she step in if something happened with Russell?”

“Perhaps. And she has agreed to speak with me about him once she finishes contemplating what I have done for a while.” He laughed. “She loves *contemplating*, my love. You will come to understand this when you meet her.”

“You’ll take me to meet her?”

“But of course,” Eric said. “She did, after all, prepare me for you in many ways.”

“What about the Authority?” Sookie asked, moving back to their earlier topic.

“Well, I have spies in both the Authority and the AVL, *min kván*. I am old and have accumulated many allies and collected many favors owed to me. The A.P. also keeps her hand in the pot, so to speak. It was she who introduced me to Rasul, who was one of her spies in the Authority for many years. And as I told you before, he was the one who warned me that Nan had been ordered to assassinate me and Bill.”

“So the A.P. has your back,” Sookie observed.

“Yes, it appears she does, but she also doesn’t do too much to overtly interfere. She likes to *test* those she cares for—to see how they will handle difficult situations. Of course, it does not hurt that she can see what is going to happen in the future. However, she tends to prefer letting things play out as they are supposed to. She certainly does enjoy *knowing* though.” Eric got a twinkle in his eye, “But I suspect that the old hag has done a bit of dabbling in the happenings of fate from time to time—when things aren’t going *her way*.”

“Like when she disposed of her own maker? Or when she warned you about Nan?”

“Indeed. I have no doubt that if she looked into the future and saw something that she really could not abide that she would interfere to a certain extent.”

“So,” Sookie concluded. “We have our eyes on Bill, our eyes on the Authority, and our eyes on Russell. And an ancient vampiress, almost as old as Russell himself—and who can actually see the future—has our back.”

“Yep.”

“Well, then we’ve got those things under control,” Sookie said confidently. “But what about the damned Fairies? I really think I pissed them off when I wouldn’t stay in their realm and when I shot their queen with my light and knocked her onto her ass.”

Eric chuckled at that.

“And then there’s the whole vampires bein’ able to get to the fairy realm if they have had our blood thing.”

“Huh?” Eric asked inelegantly.

“Oh,” Sookie said. “I didn’t tell you this part?”

Eric shook his head.

“Well, apparently if vampires have had enough of our blood, they can access the fairy realm somehow. I guess Bill did it after he took so much of my blood in the back of that van. That’s how he confirmed that I was a fairy. Claudine told him. They wanted me to eat their light fruit so I’d get stuck there forever. They told me I was a danger since at that moment only two vampires had the ability to enter their realm: you and Bill.”

“I did?” Eric asked. “You mean, I could have come for you all along?”

“I’m not sure,” Sookie said. “Bill said that he somehow dreamed of the fairy realm while he was in his day rest. I don’t know if he was actually *there* or not. But while I was there, I don’t think he came, and since he’d been there before, you’d think he would have tried. I don’t know how it all works, to be honest.”

Eric contemplated for a moment, “And I killed your relative, so others might come looking for her or seeking revenge. I admit, *min kära*. It is the fairy threat that I fear the most right now.”

“Me too,” Sookie said pulling herself tightly into his embrace. “I don’t even want to *think* of being separated from you. I can’t imagine what it was like for you with me bein’ gone for so long. For me it was only fifteen or twenty minutes, but for you it was more than a year. I couldn’t stand that.”

“So, my love, we cannot let that happen again. What are we *already* doing to prevent it?”

“The magic barriers at our home, my guards, Jesus learning all he can about fairies and their magic so that I can learn to use my own magic better.” Sookie used her fingers to number off their actions so far.

“Yes,” Eric said, “And *you* are our best asset in stopping them from taking you.”

Sookie pulled back a bit and looked at him, “Every time I went with Claudine—right after Bill had almost killed me in the van and then again the night I found out about his deception—I had to *choose* to go with her. And when Claudine came that night when you ended up draining her, she was trying to convince me to go with her then too. She didn’t seem to be able to take me against my wishes.”

“This is good, my love. Perhaps, an element of choice is involved in your going to the fairy realm. Plus, you were able to choose to come back. The light fruit you spoke of seems to be designed to take that choice away, but it, most likely, can exist only in the fairy realm.”

“So I’ll just never *choose* to go back there with them.”

Eric nodded. “Yes, that might be enough to keep you in this realm, but they may still try to harm you here. So we will stay vigilant.”

“And I will get better at using my light so that I can kick any fairy’s ass that tries to mess with us.”

Eric grinned, “And if they come near you at night, I’ll be there to drain them.”

Sookie scoffed. “You just want to get fairy drunk again.”

Eric’s grin widened. “I must admit, lover, the sensation of being intoxicated was *interesting* after so many years of sobriety.”

Sookie hit his arm. “Well it scared me half to death when you went off and didn’t come back before the day time.”

“I just wanted to *play*,” Eric pouted. “I was having a good time—at least until Alcide showed up.”

Sookie punched his arm again playfully. “Yeah, yeah. I know. You were killing ‘sea monsters.’” She used her fingers to gesture in air quotes. “But it scared me when your skin started to redden, and until I found you in that lake, I feared that I might find only a pile of ashes on the ground and not you!”

“I am sorry I frightened you,” Eric said sincerely. “But I was not totally myself.”

“And you pinched my bottom too,” Sookie said in mock anger. “You should apologize for *that* as well.”

“*Never*,” Eric swore playfully, pinching it again lightly.

Sookie shook her head and swatted his arm yet again. “Okay, so that takes care of Bill, Russell, the Authority and the fairies. What else is there?”

“Felipe de Castro and Victor Madden,” Eric answered, his tone even.

“Who are they?”

“They are the vampires that were going to use Bill’s and my deaths to get a foothold into Louisiana. Victor was seen by Rasul meeting with the Authority in the days before the death warrants for Bill and myself were issued.”

“Well fudge!” Sookie exclaimed. “Do we still need to worry about them even now?”

Eric thought for a moment. “Not as of yet, my love. Putting into place three strong vampire sheriffs, who, along with myself, can solidify the power of the state will have stopped their plans for the short term at the very least; however, Felipe is the king of Nevada and has been anxious to expand his casino empire into the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. And Victor Madden is very ambitious in his own right.”

“Well, what are we gonna do about them?”

Eric looked contemplative for a moment. “I have been thinking of that. I’m pretty sure that Felipe and Victor will put their plans on hold for the time being—as long as Bill continues to look strong, but I’m working to put someone close to them.”

“You and your spies,” Sookie joked.

They were silent for a few moments until Sookie finally cried out. “Why Louisiana? Why not Mississippi? I mean, who’s king or queen over there now? If this Felipe guy just wants casinos on the Gulf and in the Mississippi River, why not there?”

Eric scratched his chin. “Interesting idea, my love. The monarchy of Mississippi is being held by one of Russell’s old sheriffs, but Russell was a heavy spender, and after he murdered the newscaster, many vampires left the state. Some feared that when people learned that Russell was from Mississippi there would be reprisals by humans.”

“Were there?”

“Some,” Eric nodded. “For a while, the Fellowship became more prominent there, and then other vampires left. The state has very few vampires left now. Some have settled across the River in Area 3, which Isabel now controls.”

“So Mississippi is as weak as Louisiana was, maybe even weaker?”

“Yes, and the AVL is displeased with the king that the Authority has installed.”

“But would they order him to be killed too? I don’t want someone I don’t even know dyin’ just so that we can have a plan with this Felipe guy.”

“Well—the current king has a few friends in the Authority, which is why he’s been given longer than would seem reasonable to turn things around in the state. Even here, Bill had been a competent king, not particularly profitable, but competent—especially when it came to P.R.—before the necromancer took over Marnie’s body. Neither the Authority nor the AVL will kill a king without a very good reason.”

“So what can we do?”

“Well, we’d have to somehow get Felipe interested in Mississippi instead of Louisiana, and to be honest, because of New Orleans and its vampire-tourist connection, this is the more attractive state.”

“But not worth the bother if there is powerful leadership.”

“Exactly.”

“So we have some time to think about how to do it. Meanwhile, you do your spy thing and we work on a plan. As long as this Felipe and his little minion, Victor, are in a holding pattern, we can work on figuring out how to get rid of our incompetent neighbor king without getting him killed.”

Eric kissed Sookie on the top of her head. “You see, between my experience and your ability to think outside the box and come up with creative solutions, we will always be able to defeat potential threats.” He kissed her forehead and then got up to put another log on the fire. “So, my love, we now have plans for all these threats. Can you think of anything else?”

He joined her again, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her.

She answered, “Just the fact that most of the people I know will think I’m crazy for being with a vampire.”

“Ah—you once told me that everyone in town thought you to be ‘Crazy Sookie’ anyway, so what’s the difference?” he smirked. “And everyone that cares about you will come around.”

“Yes,” Sookie said sighing. “On the phone earlier, even Sam sounded better.”

“I think he finally saw how much I love you.”

“And Lafayette, Jesus, and Jason are *definitely* on team Eric now,” she joked.

Eric was silent for a moment. “I am sorry about your other friend, Tara.”

Sookie sighed louder. “Maybe even she’ll come around one day. She was hurt before by vampires.”

“And she was right. I did threaten to bite her when I didn’t realize she was your friend and she threatened me. Maybe—in time—she could even get used to me.”

“*Anything* is possible,” Sookie smiled up at him. “And, of course, there are the usual prejudiced people—the Fellowship and all the other vampire haters.”

“We will keep our eyes open for them as well, my love.”

Sookie took a deep breath, “So we have to look out for Bill and his minions, the Authority, the AVL, Russell if he ever gets out, fairies, Felipe de Castro and his minions, the Fellowship of the Sun, and all the other crazy prejudiced types.”

Eric nodded and smirked. “I *think* you have everyone, min kära—at least for now.”

Sookie hit him in the shoulder. “But—at least for now—we have everyone covered.”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed, “and we will always work to stay one step ahead.”

“And if we don’t—or if something like what happened tonight surprises us again?”

“Well,” Eric sighed and pulled Sookie into his embrace, “we think well on our feet too.

So when surprises come, we will always deal with those together.”

“Together,” she said, pulling herself onto his lap.

“Always,” he agreed.

“And we have a lot of friends we can count on in a pinch.”

“Indeed, my love. We have many assets.”

“We have *friends*.”

Eric pulled back from her a bit so that he could look at her. He loved how her hair glowed in the firelight. “Yes, we have many useful allies.”

“*Friends*,” she corrected again with a grin. “We have Lafayette and Jesus.”

“A very powerful witch and a brujo with demon blood to boot,” Eric said nodding.

“And they *like* you now.”

“A bonus,” Eric smiled.

“And *you* like them too.”

Eric raised an eyebrow, “I admit to seeing their use, and Jesus is a perceptive individual.

Sookie swatted his arm again, “You *like* them.”

He scrunched up his nose. “Just do not tell them.”

Sookie laughed at him. “And we have Jason, for what it’s worth.”

“He will always be willing to help protect you, so it’s worth a lot, min kván,” Eric said sincerely. “Plus, he is with the police now. And that is definitely a benefit. Even this evening, he was able to use his connections to find out the owner of the van that you’d been taken in. Such information could have been extremely valuable.”

Sookie nodded, “And we have Miranda and Jarod.”

“Yes, they are extremely loyal, and Miranda is one of the strongest Weres in the country, even more powerful than the famed Weretiger, Quinn, who lives in Nevada and is currently in the service of Felipe.”



“So if their kitty comes for us, ours will scratch his frickin’ eyes out.”

“Precisely, my love.”

“And Sam, I think, would help us if we needed.”

“Yes—*now*, I think he would. And I think he will give you less trouble about me now too.” He winked.

“And there’s Bubba.”

“Yes, he likes you very much and will be loyal to you as long as you need him.”

Sookie nodded. “And we can’t forget Pam! She’d walk through fire for you.”

“No, I couldn’t forget Pamela—even if I might want to sometimes,” Eric deadpanned.

Sookie chuckled. “And Isabel and Rasul and the A.P.”

“And Thalia and Chow and others in Area 5 are quite loyal to me as well,” Eric added.

“So we have lots of powerful friends—and good ones too,” Sookie smiled.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “We have many good,” he paused, “*friends.*”

Sookie smiled at him and kissed his nose. “And we also have that brain of yours working for us.” She poked his head playfully.

“And we have yours too.” He returned the gesture.

“And you’re a big badass Viking vampire.”

“And you’re a telepathic fairy barmaid.”

“You can break people in two like twigs.”

“And you can charm them to death.”

“If people mess with us, you can eat them for frickin’ dinner—literally.”

“If people mess with us, you can light them on fire with your hands or shoot them across a fucking parking lot.”

Their foreheads pressed together, they laughed for a minute.

Eric gently touched her cheek and spoke sincerely, “And you have given me the gift of your magic, which has made me less susceptible to the sun.”

She touched his opposite cheek in a similar gesture, “And we have given each other our hearts, and that has made us even stronger.”

“Our blood,” he whispered.

“Our bond,” she added.

“Your magic,” he continued.

“And yours.”

“Ours together,” he finished.

“Yes,” she said as she brought her lips to his.

Their kiss went from slow to burning passion in moments, and Eric had them out of their clothing in even less time, his track pants flying across the room and the shirt he’d given her to wear losing all its buttons. He sat again with his back to the coffee table as she lowered herself onto his waiting and very aroused cock. There was no foreplay this time; there was no waiting. Neither one *could* have waited even if they had wanted to.

Sookie rode Eric as he thrust into her. They held each other’s hands, their foreheads touching, their eyes locked in an embrace more powerful than any physical one could have been.

She rose and he fell. He rose and she fell.

She was his anchor to the earth, and he was her rocket into the sky.

Their releases were eminent when Sookie brought Eric’s wrist to her mouth, kissed it lovingly, and then bit down hard, taking in as much of his blood as she could. In the same moment, he was gently nuzzling her neck and then biting into it carefully so he would cause her no pain.

Their releases washed over them, sating them. Their hunger for each other satisfied for the moment, they both lovingly licked the bites they’d made. Once both sets of hands had re-entwined, they brought their lips to one another’s, even as their bodies continued to roll together, sharing the after-effects of their orgasms. Their tongues, still tasting of each other’s essence, mingled together.

Once their kiss had ended, they looked at each other and smiled.

“I love you,” Sookie told her husband.

“I love you,” Eric returned.

For the last few hours of dark and into the first few of the new day, their bodies continued to make a physical magic all their own, even as the bond that connected them swirled with the magic of both vampire and fairy as well as the magic of the love that they had made together—the magic of soul mates found and claimed.

The end of Back and Forth.

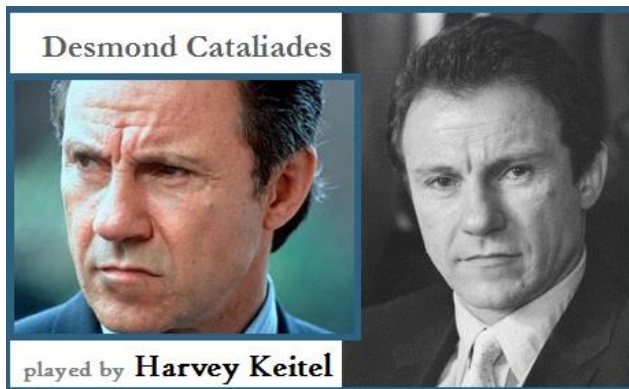
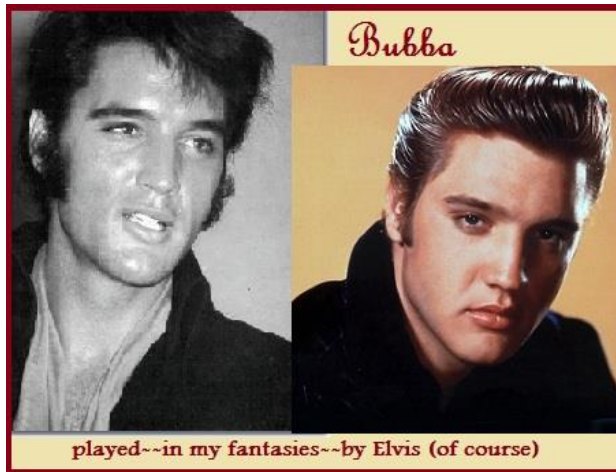
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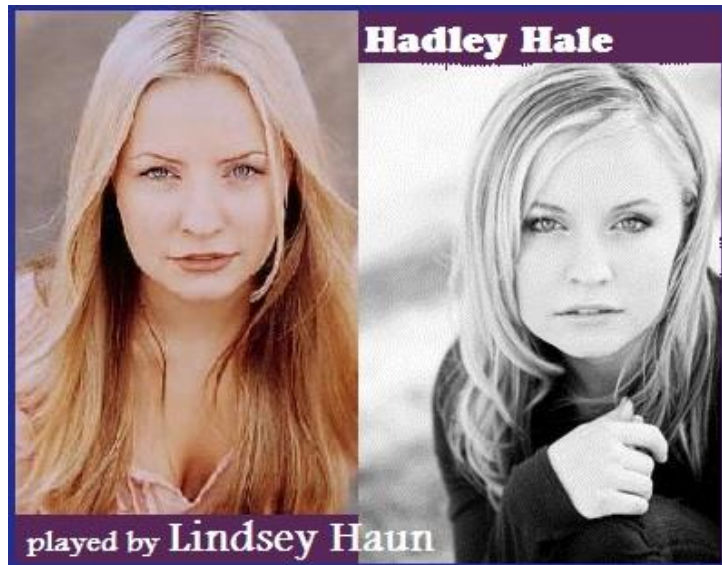


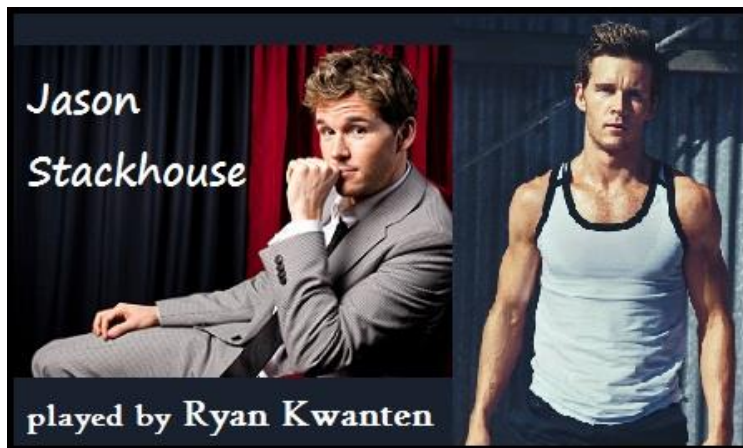
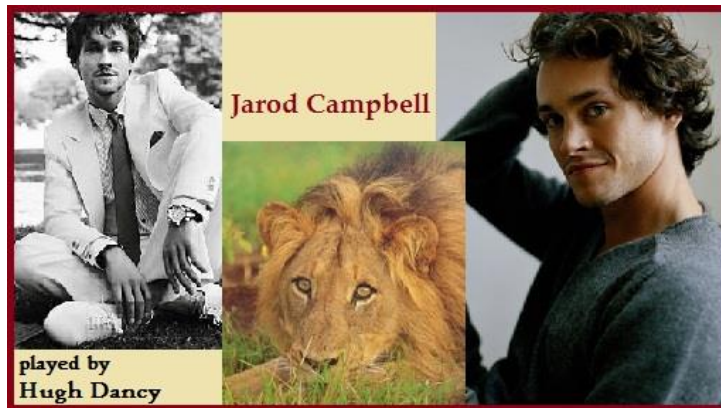














Jessica Hamby

played by Deborah Ann Woll



Jesus Velasquez

played by Kevin Alejandro



Lafayette Reynolds

played by Nelsan Ellis

Lillith



played by **Monica Bellucci**

Luna
Garza

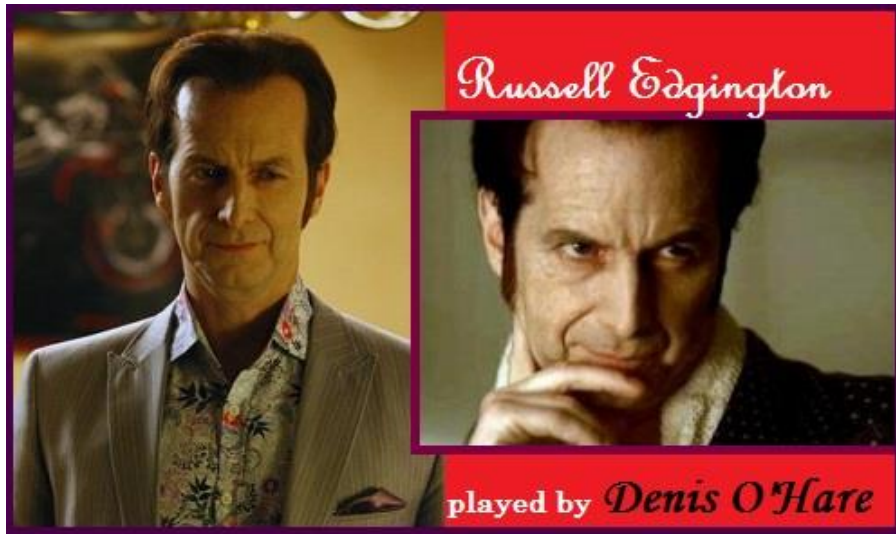


Played by
Janina Gavankar













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