

The Goblin



by California Kat

Summary:

Fairy tales are thought of as fiction only by those who do not know of the Supernatural world; of course, the humans often don't know the whole story. "Rumpelstiltskin" – SVM/True Blood style. Written for Kittyinaz's June 2015 Writing Contest:



Content Warning:

This story contains dark themes and mentions of sexual assault and physical violence, though these topics are not glorified in any way. However, the author understands if you choose not to read this story and encourages you to read the others in the contest and to vote for your favorite among them.

Story Inspiration:

- Grimm, Jacob, and Willhelm. "Rumpelstiltskin." *Eastoftheweb Short Stories. East of the Web*, 2015. Web. 15 Jun. 2015.
 - NOTE: The few lines in **BOLD** are taken directly from the source fairy tale.
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Beta:

The wonderful **Kleannhouse!!!**

Story Banner:

Kittyinaz generously makes banners for all contest entries. I love what she did for this story! You will find it on page 4.

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Prologue: The Quest

NEAR LONDON, 1425

ERIC POV

I found the human realm to be such an odd place – despite the fact that my origins were in it. I suppose five centuries away from it had increased its novelty and its strangeness, but I was ready to return home: to Nenvia, the realm of the vampires.

A realm where the sun rose for only five hours per day.

A realm of peace.

A realm of sense.

Ironically, it had been the Fae, a race which had – in ancient times – been the mortal enemies of vampires, who had helped vampires find and establish Nenvia. And it had been they who had helped us to build our portals between the human realm and

Nenvia. And in exchange for a homeland of our own, we had offered the fairies the peace they so greatly desired, too. Now both fairies and vampires could travel to the human realm, but we couldn't stay there indefinitely – nor did we fight there.

In fact, a treaty between all Supernatural creatures ensured that peace was kept among us.

As part of our traditions and the treaty, vampires were somewhat restricted in our travels to Terra – what we called the human realm. However, all vampires were required to “tour” Terra during their five-hundreds; I was 599 years vampire and had only a month left in to my “tour,” which was called the Quest by vampires.

The Quest requirement was designed to educate us.

And to recruit.

Indeed, our questing was a chance for us to find worthy human companions to help us keep Nenvia well populated and infused with “fresh blood” – both literally and figuratively. Some of the humans – we simply took to Nenvia and “dropped off” before continuing with our Quests. These worthy folk lived among us as citizens of the realm. In turn for peace and the opportunity to escape the narrow confines of humanity in order to live up to their true potentials, the humans offered vampires a few feedings per week. Some of them eventually chose to be turned; others simply lived out their human lifespans. Some had families, and their children could stay in Nenvia or immigrate to Terra, where they would be glamoured to forget about vampires, but given a substantial amount of money to begin new lives.

None of the Terrans in Nenvia were blood-slaves by any stretch of the imagination! Such practices had been discontinued many, *many* years before I was born, chosen, or made.

During my own Quest, I had found three humans worthy of citizenship in Nenvia: a Persian scientist well ahead of his times, a Florentine artist who had been imprisoned for canvassing a nude male body, and a “witch” of Britannia, who was about to be killed for using herbs to ease a human woman’s menstrual cramps.

On occasion, a questing vampire would also find a human suitable for turning during the Quest itself. The choice to become a vampire, however, was *always* left to this human – as was the choice of citizenship. If a questing vampire found a child, he or she would turn the human and begin his or her training even as the Quest continued.

I had found Pamela during the ninth year of my Quest. If the “pull” had not been great, I would have tried to ignore it, for being in Terra that long with a new child didn’t appeal to me. However, I could not help myself and Pamela was incredibly worthy.

I had never regretted making her.

Pamela had visited Nenvia only when we had transported the citizens I had found. Not surprisingly, my child was anxious to settle in the vampire realm! Of course, she also wondered if she would truly love Nenvia since she had lived as a vampire in Terra for the greater part of a century. However, I had no worries in that arena. Though I had seen and learned much during my Quest, I never doubted the

superiority of Nenvia compared to Terra, *especially* for vampires. The day stole too much of our time on Terra.

Like most makers and their progeny, Pamela and I had enjoyed the physical pleasures found in one another's bodies for a while, but we soon fell more naturally into a familial relationship. Contrary to my fears that having a new child would be cumbersome during my travels, she had proven to be an entertaining companion. We had journeyed this way and that across Terra, traveling through Asia, Africa, and Europe in turn.

While most of the humans we encountered still believed that Terra was limited to the lands that had already been discovered by them, vampires knew that was not so; in fact, Pamela and I had traveled to one of these "new" lands with a group of people related to my own human ancestors. After making sure the boat that would carry us had an adequate light-tight space – thanks to a little glamouring of the crew – Pamela and I traveled from Norway to Iceland to Vinland and finally to a land that had not been named, a land of people with unique clothing, customs, and languages. Like the people of the North, these humans believed strongly in the supernatural. Pamela and I were regarded with near awe by them; thus, they were quite sharing of their knowledge, and Pamela and I soon learned their language enough to function there. We stayed with them and explored part of that "new" world for ten Terran years. It had been an exciting part of our travels.

Now in the final month of my time in Terra, Pamela and I had made our way to London, which was the city of my child's human *and* vampire births. It was also within a night's distance from the portal that would take us to Nenvia.

I: The Miller

ONE YEAR EARLIER

CORBETT STACKHOUSE POV

My father had been a poor miller, though he'd been – ironically enough – named “Earl” Stackhouse. And I was only slightly better off. My wife, who'd once been an incredible seamstress – and who had made quite a healthy supplemental income for us because of her gift – had taken ill when she had been heavy with our second child, and she had died trying to birth her.

Our first, a boy named Jason, had followed in my footsteps and had become a miller.

The child who had killed my wife was called Sookie because Jason had not been able to say Susanna when he was a little boy.

I sometimes wished that I were a good or wise enough man to forgive my daughter for taking my wife from me, but – ever since Michelle had died – I had become harder. I often needed to work from dusk until dawn in order to support my family. And, with the droughts during the last several years, profits had become difficult to make. I had always dreamed of leaving my son more than my own father had left for me, but I now feared that might not happen.

My only outlet was the occasional trip to the tavern to drown my sorrows in mead.

Still, I could never totally drown away my memory of the error that had led to my heartbreak. I had once been lax about pulling out of Michelle's body before my seed flowed into her. And that laxity had brought about the girl-child.

As for Sookie herself? Part of me wished that I had left her to die with my wife's corpse. Surely, she would have starved quickly. But my own mother, a woman who'd had too soft of a heart, had convinced me that the girl could have some use.

In truth, I was a little frightened of Sookie. All of her life, she had been different – devil-touched. Almost from the first day that she could speak, she seemed to know things that she ought not to know. And, as she gained vocabulary, she would speak out the thoughts of those around her. Luckily, the priest of our parish, Steven Newlin, was a great man. He had known how to deal with such issues, and the devil was beaten from the child until she no longer spoke out the words of others.

By the time Sookie was ten years old, she had *seemed* meek, barely speaking even to my mother – not that many tried to speak with her often. Having beautiful blond hair and eyes the color of a sparkling sea, she had looked a lot like her mother. Sadly, unlike my sweet Michelle, Sookie's very soul was corrupted; thus, the devil revisited her – obviously trying to reclaim his own. One afternoon, Sookie had attempted to seduce my own God-fearing uncle. Thankfully, they had been discovered before he tainted himself by entering her with his manhood, but his thick fingers had already pierced her, and her maidenhead had been broken.

The damage was done.

Again, Priest Newlin had come to our aid. Uncle Bartlett was quickly rescued from the child's spell, for Bartlett's heart was pure. He repented immediately. The girl's repentance had to be fought for much more vigorously.

Showing that the devil's aim was to ruin the good reputation of Bartlett, Sookie had, at first, claimed that the situation had been instigated by him. She had, therefore, needed to be beaten for her lies as well as for her other transgressions. The brightness that had been in her eyes had obviously been devil-sent, for it dimmed with every beating she was given until it was finally purged. And with that gone, Priest Newlin had been certain that God had won and freed Sookie from the devil's voice in her head. After that, the girl had confessed and repented. It was only her young age and the family's desire to protect my uncle's reputation that had prevented me from killing her myself after that episode – just to protect her from being taken over again.

It was clear to us all that she was especially weak when it came to resisting the devil.

In fact, the priest made clear that – if Sookie were ever taken over again – he would not be able to help her. I will admit that part of me wanted that to happen – so that I could turn her out and be done with her.

However – for the eight years since her confession – she had been the picture of modesty and humility. Instructed by the priest, she had taken to wearing shapeless clothing and covering her hair. Even now, she attended confession once a day in order to ask God to keep the devil from her and to beg for forgiveness for being a burden to her family.

And she was a burden! Even if she had not been “spoiled” by the loss of her maidenhead, she would have had no allure for the men in the parish. There were too many rumors left over from the past – whispers that she was a witch, anecdotes about her mind-reading as a child, or simply the general consensus that she was a little crazy. Thus, the burden of feeding and clothing her would always fall upon me. And – given the gossip – it was not as if I would draw another wife to me. So the girl had burdened me to be a perpetual widower as well.

For these reasons, I had almost accepted Bartlett’s offer to take Sookie off of my hands a few years before. A merchant of goods from the East, Bartlett had decided to move to Italy where he would have more opportunity. He had the means to provide for Sookie, and he needed someone to keep his house. All who knew of the situation years before had found his level of forgiveness to be remarkable, for Sookie had once carried the demon who had tried to ruin Bartlett.

My uncle had gone ahead to Venice to secure an appropriate dwelling; thus, I had three months to contemplate my decision. In the end, however, it was Sookie’s own behavior that had convinced me to keep her – well, that and my cost versus benefit analysis of the situation.

Oddly enough, Sookie seemed to favor simple food to meat, so she began making separate meals for herself, mostly unseasoned vegetable broths. The practice added to her strangeness, but it lifted part of the burden she caused me as well. Also, instead of asking for cloth when her dress became worn, she made a shift from an old coarse blanket that she had found discarded on the street. Moreover, my own saintly

mother had died the year before I had to make my decision about Bartlett. Thus, Jason and I needed someone who would keep house for us. Once Sookie unburdened me of much of her cost of upkeep, I knew that I would not be able to find someone to do her work for less of a price. Therefore, though my feelings had still been mixed on the matter, I had turned down Bartlett's kind offer.

Indeed, in the subsequent years, Sookie had proven to be a good housekeeper for Jason and myself. Of course, my own mother had taught her to cook, launder clothing, and clean by the time the girl-child was five years old, so she was used to the crafts involved in keeping up a home. But she was nothing like my Michelle! Michelle was a seamstress who could spin mere wool into the finest silks – figuratively, of course. My mother had been less gifted with needle and thread, but had taught my child what she knew of textile making. Still, Sookie could only mend clothing – or make the most rudimentary of things, like her formless, plain shift. Her specialty – if it could be called that – was in the making of quilted blankets. She had a talent for weaving things together to create warmth, but there was very little beauty in anything she did. Still, I had bragged about the first of her creations at the local tavern, and soon Sookie was adding small contributions to the family's coffers by making similar blankets to sell.

It was something – at least.

But it was not as if she could spin straw into gold!

Though I liked to joke that she could when I was at the tavern.

II: The King

KING WILLIAM POV

I had been King of England for only three years and had become so when my brother, Henry VI, had died of what his doctors called a “strange illness.” Of course, I knew that the “illness” was actually caused by an untraceable poison that a witch in my employ had created for me.

Indeed, Hallow was gifted, and I had rewarded her well for her services. While others were frightened of the Supernatural, I embraced it, and doing so ensured my rule. Once I had learned about shifters and Weres, I offered them employment as mercenaries. They were strong and ruthless, and – best of all – they would complete any task if the price was right. My enemies soon learned that any dissention was met with an “unlucky” accident. I had heard talk that there were fairies in my realm too; however, I was yet to catch one. According to Hallow, they were magical, alluring creatures, who often hid among humans. I knew that vampires, demons, and goblins were also real.

Indeed, the two-natured beings in my employ, who could recognize vampires, made it known to them that – for a price and knowledge of their travels – they could have a safe haven at my court, including a secure resting place and an endless selection of meals.

As long as they did not feed from me.

In addition to controlling my kingdom through the use of supernatural beings, I also employed many spies. They were instructed to mix with the people, listening for any signs of insurrection. Taverns were especially good places to secure information.

The best situation, however, was when a shifter also made a good spy. Often they were too volatile, and Weres simply could not do the task. I had learned that early on. But a few shifters in my employ had both guile and control. My best spy, by far, was Sam Merlotte. With his amazing hearing, he could sit in a corner of a tavern and glean all of the secrets inside of it.

And it was in such a place that Sam had heard an amazing story. A miller claimed that his daughter could spin straw into gold! Though outlandish to a mere human, I did not consider myself a “mere” human. I knew too much of the world for that! Could Sam have come across a fairy?

I knew for a fact that there were creatures who could take even the mundane substance of straw and turn it into gold. In fact, I was still financing my country because of one such creature, a goblin. However, my coffers were drying up. Sadly, the goblin who had once made me rich was an uncooperative little bastard! And a trickster. I had needed to kidnap his sister in order to compel the little goblin to fulfill his promise to me when he tried to get out of it due to a loophole. Indeed, despite the gold, dealing with the little freak was too bothersome, and I had been glad when the goblin and his sister had moved on.

However, a fairy was another story! And—if there was such a creature—I wanted her.

That was why I ordered the head of my guard, Quinn, to go with Sam to bring this miller and his daughter to my court.

III: The Daughter

SOOKIE'S POV

The thoughts of the men who came to my father's door were hazed with red and lust. The lust was nothing new. Men's thoughts were often dominated with it. I had learned that the hard way when I was only ten years old.

The only good thing about my uncle Bartlett was his job. As a merchant, he often traveled. And – when he visited – Gran had, while she was alive, always been home.

Except for one time.

Oh – he'd had his dark thoughts about me from my earliest memories of him. But the first time I had been alone with him, he had acted upon them. Gran had been delivering baked goods to an ill friend when he had come.

Like a rabid dog, Bartlett had wasted no time in taking what he wanted from me. I fought him, but what could I do? If I would have told others of his thoughts and plans for me – or of what he had been doing to my cousin, Hadley – I would have faced the priest's whip again.

Indeed, the only lesson I knew more than my own powerlessness was to keep my mind-reading ability a secret. When I was a very young child, I had not understood. I had spoken aloud or answered the thoughts of others. Eventually, I came to learn that my ability to read minds was not shared by those around me. And I learned that responding to thoughts would spur beatings from both my father and the parish priest, who – by the way – was the one who was truly a child of the devil, for he *enjoyed* beating young children.

I just thanked the good Lord that I was a girl, for Priest Newlin's most twisted proclivities were restricted to the young boys he helped "purge" of their sins. I knew that some of the boys' "redemptions" included being drugged and raped by Newlin. At least they did not remember, and the pain of the rapes was covered up by the pain of the whippings Newlin had given to them.

On the contrary, I remembered well the day my uncle had forced me to take his ugly member into my mouth. I remembered well how much it hurt when he put his fingers into my body. I remembered the blood. I remembered him laughing at my useless struggles and my tears. I remembered him telling me that his actions were all my fault, for I was *too* pretty to resist. As I heard my uncle thinking that it would be safe to fill me with his seed – since I was yet a child – Gran returned, and my father was with her.

Though Gran initially believed me when I cried that Bartlett had done me wrong, my father did not. Thus, to the church, I was dragged by the hair. Given the priest's baser habits, it was no surprise that he immediately denounced me as being a child of the devil. My uncle, on the other hand, was labeled the harlot's victim – my victim. And, a true child of God herself, my good grandmother reluctantly believed the parish priest. Why would she not believe a man who was supposed to be an agent of God on earth?

Hearing Gran's prayers that I be cured of my dark sins hurt me as much as the beatings. I was whipped each day for many weeks, but I also knew that Priest Newlin would not accept my confession as valid if I made it "too soon," so I listened to his

thoughts so that I would know the right time. It took twenty-eight days – twenty-seven beatings – before I knew he would believe me. During those days pain-filled days and nights, I had prayed to God to take my life. But that prayer was not answered. I lived, and eventually my wounds healed to scars, which would always remain on my back – no matter how much Gran had tried with natural remedies and kind attention to heal them.

To me, the scars did not matter. What mattered was that my uncle had seen them as Gran was dressing them one day. They had disgusted him, so he had decided – at least for several years – to look elsewhere for his sick pleasures.

I had much guilt that I could not help my cousin or the others he victimized. Of course, had I spoken out, I would have been labeled as demon-possessed again. And I had just enough self-preservation to know that I could not survive another purging at the hands of Priest Newlin.

After that, I also had the self-preservation instincts to cover any beauty that might be seen by men. I kept myself clean, but I made sure I covered my hair and my body as much as possible. I kept my eyes trained on the floor whenever possible. I wore the plainest clothing possible. However, not long after Gran died, Bartlett made another visit. Thankfully, my father was home, but that did not stop my uncle's thoughts. He had gotten Hadley pregnant, and the "treatment" that he arranged for – one designed to kill the child before it even showed in her body – had killed her too. That is why he asked my father for my "service" when he moved to Italy. He had planned to take poor Hadley.

Of course, Newlin lauded Bartlett for his forgiveness. And, of course, my father considered “being rid of me” for many weeks. I was not surprised. After all, my father’s thoughts about me held no affection. He blamed me for killing his beloved wife. He blamed me for my lost virginity. He blamed me for the burden I would always be to him. But my father was also a practical man. He was forever figuring the cost of one thing or the other – whether it be for his business or his household. In fact, from his brain, I had learned mathematics.

I had learned how to calculate cost versus benefit. I also knew that my brother and father were not prepared to keep the house or cook for themselves, though my father felt that hiring someone unused to the “luxuries” I received would be cheaper than keeping me. Making calculations of my own, I found a way to make my own cost to my father shrink to almost nothing. From the brain of the local tavern master, I learned that the mutton bones and scraps left after his customers’ meals were thrown to his dogs just before dawn every morning. A few times a week – I would use my skill to secretly navigate my way to the alleyway behind the tavern. There I would wait in the shadows until the bones were tossed carelessly outside.

The dogs were – thankfully – not too violent, and there were plenty of bones and scraps to go around, especially on Saturday and Sunday mornings, so I was able to steal enough from the canines. I cleaned the dirt off of my prizes and used them to make simple food for myself, thus cutting out most of my father’s cost to feed me. When my dress became tattered beyond mending, I “heard” from a grave digger that the blankets used to cover the bodies of those too poor to afford a coffin on their way to the cemetery

were thrown into a pile, which was periodically burned. Living close to the parish cemetery, I was able to secure a discarded blanket easily.

From it, I made a simple dress, which had the added benefit of being rough and formless. It covered the curves that were growing onto my body in a way that the last dress Gran had made for me did not. The material was coarse at first, but – from a woman at church – I “heard” that such fabric could be softened by rubbing a stone over it many times. Of course, the woman did not tell me this information out loud. Indeed, she initially felt pity for me when she saw my dress, but then she remembered that I was “crazy Sookie,” the “devil’s child.”

The woman had neither the courage nor the motivation to engage me in a conversation long enough to tell me how to be more comfortable. In fact, no one other than my brother and father ever spoke with me anymore – unless the priest was counted. To keep up the appearance of repentance for sins I had not committed, I walked to the church daily in order to confess to being a burden to my poor father and beg for God to forgive me for my past “wrongdoings.” Every day, I also asked the priest to protect me from the voice of Satan. Newlin’s “protection” was to strike me on the palms with a rod after each confession.

He enjoyed it, and I became numb to it.

As the weeks of my father’s consideration of Bartlett’s “charitable offer” went by, I prayed to God every moment that I was awake. I prayed that my father would notice that I was no longer costing him anything, other than the price of a few carrots, potatoes, and onions, which I put in my soups so that I would have some vegetables.

However, I was the one who tended to the small family garden that provided these things. It was just the seeds that were provided by my father, and I had already been taking only the vegetables of least quality for myself. After all, Gran had taught me that it was a woman's duty to offer the best to the men she took care of.

Eventually my father noticed that I was wearing a "new" frock and asked me about it. I explained that I found a discarded blanket and had crafted the shift from it in order to lighten the burden I was on him. The next day, my father noticed the pot of simple soup I had made for myself. Of course, my father never saw the mutton bones and meat scraps. I would put them into the soup only while my brother and father were at the mill. And I always returned the "used" bones back to the dogs after I'd gotten all the use I could from them. After all, they might eventually be discovered if I buried them in the garden.

In addition to cutting my cost in my father's eyes, I also attempted to raise my benefit. The house had never sparkled so much as it did in the weeks when he was considering giving me to my uncle.

And, eventually, my prayers were answered when he turned down my uncle since even a part-time housekeeper/cook would have cost more than I did. Still, there was a niggling in my father's thoughts, and every time he noticed me for more than a few seconds, he wondered if he had made a mistake in not giving me away. He wondered if he might find a wife if I were gone from the household. He even began writing a letter to my uncle telling him that he had changed his mind and that he could still have me if he wanted – though he had also decided to ask my uncle for some

money in exchange. It was this point that made my father pause. He could not decide how much to ask for.

With his delay, I made a last effort to save myself from Bartlett. I stole two more blankets from the graveyard. Not sleeping for three nights, I wore skin from my hands using a stone to soften them, and then I used a technique I had once “heard” about from an old woman in the church who had once made gambesons, which were quilted garments worn under soldiers’ armor. I used feathers and straw to act as my quilting agent. Even softened, the fabric of the blankets was still thick, so my finished product was soft and warm. I presented it to my father, who enjoyed it.

Unfortunately, my father did not do what I had hoped he would by bragging on my handiwork when he became drunk at the tavern. I knew from his thoughts that he was a horrible braggart. But he did not think to brag about my small accomplishment. Thankfully, my brother’s intellect was a dim one, so when he demanded that I make a blanket for him, I was also able to introduce the thought that such things might bring a profit to the family. My brother told my father “his” idea, and – in turn – my father told his drinking mates “his” idea.

The letter to my uncle was burned in the fire that night as my father began making calculations and asked me questions about how long it took to make the blankets. Since he actually invested in some materials for me, the time spent was lessened, but I always made sure I came in “under budget” by continuing to steal as many blankets as I thought I could get away with from the graveyard between

burnings. Luckily, the grave diggers were drunkards who did not care about their work anymore than my father and brother cared about me.

But that did not matter. Compared with many girls, I felt lucky. I had a home to live in and food to eat. I had security as long as I “paid for myself” and had use to my father. And I was completely unsought by men who would add child production and sexual servitude onto my other household duties.

I thanked God every day for my life – and for the gift that had been a curse to me as a child, but had become my means of survival.

I should have known that God had no care for me either.

But I did learn this harsh lesson when the men with the red-tinged thoughts came to my father’s home. Though their thoughts were harder for me to “read,” I still recognized their desire for me right away. They did not care about my formless garment. They cared only that I smelled appetizing to them. They wondered if I really was a fairy. And their thoughts told me what they were as well – men who could shift into animals! Years of fear and discipline had made not reacting to thoughts my automatic response, but despite that, I had a difficult time holding in my reaction.

Oh – it was not my shock over learning about the supernatural that had almost caused my lapse. No – it was discovering God’s cruel sense of humor where I was concerned. Apparently, the same bragging that had made others pay me for my work so that my father wouldn’t sell me had also been my doom.

One of the men—the one who could shift into any animal he wanted—had heard my father bragging at the tavern that his daughter could spin straw into gold! And the king, who knew about the supernatural elements of the world, believed him.

Of course, God's greatest trick was that it would be a king who would be the man that would bring about my doom—instead of a priest or a member of my own family.

Only “the best” suffering for me, apparently!

That thought almost caused me to laugh out loud several times as the shifter and the Were-tiger escorted my father and me to the king's castle.

IV: The Task

SOOKIE POV

Before meeting the king, both my father and I were “made presentable.” It seemed King William did not like to interact with people who looked “poor.” I was put into a relatively plain dress, though it was finer than any other thing that I had ever worn before. My hair was styled and left uncovered. I was shown myself in a mirror while a woman put something onto my cheeks and lips that reddened them. I shook with fear, knowing that I looked *too* pretty. I prayed to a God I now knew was out to get me that the king preferred to fuck men. I prayed that I would be killed, rather than be used by men.

My father gasped when he saw me. He thought that I looked like my mother, but he still had no idea why we had been asked to court. The Were-tiger and shifter lusted for me even more when they saw my golden hair and my curves.

I “heard” that they had already asked the king for me if I could not deliver gold from straw as reported. They each imagined raping my body and allowing others of their kind to do the same.

Other than us and King William, the throne room as empty. As we approached the dais where the king sat, I again prayed for death. However, this time I prayed to the devil himself.

Perhaps, I was his child. And, perhaps, he would show mercy.

King William leered at me as he began speaking, though he was clearly addressing my father rather than me.

“Corbett Stackhouse, I have been told that you have an extraordinary daughter. I am pleased to find that she is beautiful as well!”

“Your majesty?” my father asked, keeping his head lowered. Of course, we were both already on our knees before him.

“Do not be modest. It is said that your daughter has an amazing gift: the ability to spin straw into gold!” the king said excitedly, his greed clear.

My father gasped and quaked next to me. “Your majesty, I”

King William interrupted, “I wish to buy your child from you, miller.”

I could tell that the king was not prepared to take “no” for an answer.

My father was now trembling with fear. “Your Majesty, I am sorry to have to tell you this, but she cannot”

“Cannot do what?” King William snarled. “Cannot do what *you* claimed she could? If you lied, miller, you *will* be killed!”

I could tell from his thoughts that the king was having fun toying with my father. I could also tell that the Were-tiger had told the king about my alluring scent. Thus, King William *truly* believed that I was a fairy. Moreover, he believed that I could do as my father had boasted.

And from my father’s thoughts, I realized that my fate would soon be sealed.

“She can make gold, Your Majesty. She *does* have the ability, but I do not know from whence it came. However, she cannot be trusted. She has never used her gift to help her kin,” he charged. “Uh—the only time she ever used her gift was to make a single coin of gold which—uh—turned into ash when I tried to use it. She is of the

devil! You may ask the priest in my parish, Your Majesty. She is a bad seed! In fact, I have – uh – kept her in my household only out of fear of her – uh – witchcraft!”

“Well, then, you will not balk at selling her now,” King William smiled. “How does fifty pieces of gold sound?”

“More than adequate,” my father said quickly, his mind spinning around his new wealth. “But – uh – what if she is with you just as she was with us: unwilling to use her talent?”

“I will worry about that,” King William waved in dismissal before gesturing to Quinn to hand my father a bag of coins.

“You may go,” Quinn said to my father, who hurried away without a look in my direction.

“Tell me, fairy,” King William said as soon as my father had gone, “are you a changeling?”

“I am not a fairy,” I stammered.

“Oh – but according to these men, you smell like one.” The king looked at Sam. “What of the father? The brother?”

“Neither smell of the Fae,” he answered.

“And there is no mother?” the king asked me.

“She died when I was born,” I responded in a quiet tone.

“Ah – so you are either a changeling or the killer of your own mother,” he said cruelly.

I could say nothing, for what he said was true. My mother did die because of me, even if I had not intended her harm.

“Here is the deal, fairy,” King William said sharply. “I have taken a liking to you, and so have my two-natured friends. There are two paths you may choose to walk through this life. The first is as a queen and the second is as a whore.”

Wide-eyed, I looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I am going to put you into a room full of straw and a loom. You will be locked into that room for three days and nights. But do not think me cruel. You will be given three days’ worth of bread and water. At the end of the third day, I will open the door. If *all* of the straw has been turned into gold that will STAY gold, then I will make you my wife and you will live in luxury for the rest of your life. You will be mine – but *only* mine.”

“And when the gold runs out?” I asked, my voice cracking. I did not even know why I asked. It wasn’t as if I could actually make gold from straw.

“I will vow to use your gift only once. And I have learned something about negotiating with the Supernatural, so I will not go back on my word.”

Unbelievably, he was telling the truth. Of course, from his mind, I saw that the room he was going to lock me into was huge and absolutely teeming with straw.

“There is a caveat, however.” He leaned forward, leering. “If you become my wife, you will allow me to take your body whenever I desire. And – if you fail to give me an heir within five years’ time, you will make me another room full of gold.”

He chuckled. "Of course, you might decide not to use your gift for me – or maybe your father is simply a braggart and you cannot do as advertised. Whatever the case, if I open that door in three days' time and you have not turned *every* piece of straw into gold, I will give you to my Weres and shifters to use as they will."

I had already resolved to find a way to end my own life during the next three days, when he continued, "I was going to have you killed, but I think that death would be a relief to you rather than a punishment. And – in light of that – know this: If you somehow disappear from the room or if you kill yourself, the lives of all your kin will be forfeit in the most painful way I can devise."

He looked at Sam. "Other than the father and brother, who are her kin?"

Sam looked at piece of paper. "There is a great-uncle. And there is an aunt – the sister of her father. The aunt is married, and – though her daughter is dead – she has taken in two orphans from one of her neighbors: two boys, aged three and five. However, Sookie's father and the aunt are not close, so she may not even know much of her family."

The king scrutinized me for a moment. "I wonder if you care for any of them. I'll tell you what. If you harm yourself or disappear, they *will* all die. And – in addition to them – I will choose one hundred innocents. Children. Orphans. All girls. I will make sure that they suffer greatly and for a *very* long time before I kill them," he grinned.

His thoughts told me that he spoke the truth and that he would enjoy carrying out his threats.

Yes – God had a wonderful sense of humor, and all of it seemed to be at my expense.

I could not hold in my rueful laughter this time – or my tears.

I was roughly brought to my feet and then led to the room full of straw. There was no bed. There wouldn't have been room for one. There was only a tiny path to the loom in the center of the room. Next to it were several loaves of bread and a large cask of water. Since it was the afternoon, the room was light from the many windows that were near the ceiling, but I could not see outside. I noticed that there were no candles or lanterns, so I asked Sam about this.

“Fairies can see just fine in the dark,” he laughed.

It was more proof that I was not one.

“I truly hope you fail,” Sam said, licking his lips. “Of course, the king will not be a kind husband, but he will tire of using you every day – at least after you are with child. But your scent ensures that I would *never* tire of you, nor would any of my kind.” With those words, he shut the door. I heard the clicking of locks, but they would not have been needed. My life was not worth a hundred and seven others, even if one of them was Bartlett. In truth, even protecting just my father or brother would have been enough to prevent me from killing myself.

No. It did not matter that my father had sold me. It did not matter that he had never shown me any affection. It did not matter that my brother thought nothing of me at all. Gran had loved them, and I had loved her. I was sorry that I would never get to

her heaven now that I had prayed to the devil for his help. But I hoped that she was happy there. And free.

As I would never be.

Having nothing else to do, I sat at the loom and picked up some straw. I wove it together automatically, preparing it as I would have for one of my blankets. It was all that I knew how to do with straw, after all. Later, I planned to take off my fine dress and make a small blanket using the needle from the loom.

It would be the only dowry I brought to my life as a whore for the Weres and the shifters in King William's employ.

V. The Creature

RUMPELSTILKSKIN POV

To a goblin, a grudge was a living thing – as was the desire for revenge. King William of England had once “hired” me for a task, changing straw into gold. As a goblin, changing one substance into another was easy for me. And I laughed at King William for preferring shiny metals to a substance that could feed his animals and keep him warm.

But King William was greedy bastard, and I enjoyed tricking his kind most of all. He was too arrogant to know when he was being foolish.

He and I had made an agreement. In exchange for changing “the straw in a large room into gold,” I was to receive three orphan children. Of course, humans would judge me harshly for my dietary preferences. Hell – most of my own kind judged those who “kept to the old ways!” But none would argue that children didn’t make *very* tasty meals, indeed!

However, there were “rules” – rules steeped in the magic of creation itself that *had* to be followed. Thus, I could not simply kidnap children left and right!

Every species had its magical limitations. The two-natured had to shift during the full moon; they had no choice in the matter. Vampires had to wait for an invitation to enter a human home. Fairies were prevented from using their telepathy on any other Supernatural with the exception of the two-natured, who were – sadly enough for them – at the bottom of the supernatural barrel. Demons could not survive for more than a few minutes in the rain. Indeed, all had their restrictions, but I felt those placed

upon goblins were the harshest. We craved child-flesh, but could not take it ourselves. In fact, to get it, we had to be given it by a human monarch!

Perhaps, for this reason, I ought not to have tried to trick King William as I did, but I had other sources I preferred anyway, and William was a twit. Was it my fault that he failed to specify *how much* of the straw in the room I had to change into gold. Was it my fault that I was tired from the king's tiresome company and had the energy to make only a few pieces? NO! But the bastard withheld payment of two of the three children AND then followed me home – since I cannot teleport with a human. The next day, he captured my beloved sister and she cannot teleport at all! Then he blackmailed me into completing the room and gave me already slain children since I had not “specified” that they were to be alive.

I have always hated meat that was not fresh!

And I have hated King William since then. That fucker had bested me. But I knew that I would ultimately have the last laugh.

In fact, I had found my perfect opportunity to get him back. I learned from my spy in King William's court that he had a fairy in his custody – one whom he had ordered to turn straw into gold!

As if fairies could do that!

VI: The Bargain

SOOKIE POV

It was the second night of my captivity. After spending the first night of darkness fitfully tossing on the uncomfortable floor, I had decided to treat myself to a fresh straw mattress. Still, I tossed and turned even as I tried to glimpse a star through the high windows. I saw only darkness.

I tried counting the hours as I lay there, hoping that the night would not seem as endless as the one before it. After I lost track of the minutes, I planned what I would do when the morning came. It would be my third day, and I needed to finish my blanket. I had already managed to get it half-quilted. With any luck, it would be done the next night – the last night of my “freedom.” It would not cover all of me, but it would cover some. Even though I had already destroyed my dress, I still had on undergarments, but the room was cold, for it was winter, and I – obviously – had no fire.

Since my brother and father had always slept closest to the hearth, I knew what cold was like at night. But I longed for the blanket to be finished – to offer me a little heat on the last night that I ever intended to “feel” anything.

Yes – that was my new strategy. I would simply cease to “feel” once I was handed over to the two-natured men. I hearkened back to the “training” I’d received from Priest Newlin and Uncle Bartlett, and I was back to thanking God for it. For, indeed, their actions had prepared me for the violations and violence that I was sure would come.

For example, I knew that physical pain could be compartmentalized. And there was always hope – after all. One of the Weres might impregnate me. And my mother had died when having her second child. For me, that might be as little as eighteen months away!

If God decided to bless me with his mercy. Finally.

I startled from the daze of half-sleep and disturbing thoughts to a new mind in the room – one I could not read.

“You know I am here,” a voice in the dark said.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“But you cannot hear my thoughts, can you, fairy?” he asked.

“No,” I said without thinking. “How do you know that I can . . . ?”

He interrupted with a chuckle. “Goblins and fairies are distant cousins. Others may not be privy to the fact that most fairies read minds, but I am,” he said in a taunting voice.

I tried to look toward the source of it.

“But I am not a fairy!” I said.

“You are Fae. That is for sure,” the voice cackled.

“But fairies can see in the dark,” I countered, focusing on the buzzing in my head to try to figure out where the creature was.

The Goblin.

He was moving toward me.

“You are only part Fae,” he commented, now seemingly on top of the hay stacks right next to me. I looked that way, but he had already moved again.

“Part?” I asked.

“You favor a half-fairy I once knew named Fintan,” he offered. “I had heard a rumor that he had bedded a human. Perhaps, you are the offspring.”

“But my father and brother are not fairies. They do not smell like me,” I said. “I heard the Were-tiger and shifter thinking of this.”

“Hybrids do not smell like Fae unless they have the essential spark, and that you have, girl!”

His voice was cruel, and though I could not fathom his thoughts, I recognized that his intentions were evil.

“You will be the means for my revenge, milady,” he jeered.

“How?” I asked. “Please do not kill me!” I added with desperation.

He laughed. “You fear for your life?” he asked. “You are a selfish creature.”

“No. I thirst for death,” I corrected. “But the king will kill more than 100 innocents if I kill myself or disappear during the time of my task. If you kill me, they will die, too!” I explained.

“What is your task?” he asked.

“I am to spin the straw in this room into gold,” I replied.

“I see no gold,” he laughed. “I see only an ugly blanket.”

“It is . . . ,” I paused. I had thought to defend my greatest creation to date, but I stopped. Indeed, my technique would seem “good” only to a humble being. “It is not beautiful,” I said. “But it will offer some warmth.”

“What will happen to you when you cannot do the task the king has set for you?” he asked, his voice actually sounding marginally softer.

“I am to be given to his two-natured employees. They plan to use me roughly and pass me around,” I informed, trying to keep my tone devoid of emotion.

“And how do you *feel* about that?” he chuckled.

“I feel nothing,” I lied.

“So – if you fail, you will become the plaything of beasts. If you kill yourself, you will kill many, *many* others. What if you succeed?”

“I cannot. I have not the skill required.”

“But if you did?” he asked.

“The king will take me as his bride if I fill this room with gold. I will live in luxury and not be asked to fill more rooms as long as I give him an heir within five years.”

The creature laughed loudly. “I offer you a bargain then, milady.”

“A bargain?” I asked, still looking for the man in the dark.

“Yes. I can save your life.”

“How?”

“I can make this straw into gold,” he shared.

“You can?”

“Oh yes!”

I was silent for a moment. “What is your price?” I asked.

“A child – specifically, your firstborn with the king. That would satisfy me,” he said.

“My child?”

“Yes – and I am going to take one of your choices away, too!” he laughed cruelly.

“Which one?” I whimpered, even as I closed my eyes.

“You will not become the plaything of Weres and shifters, Your Majesty,” he teased. “Either I will turn this straw into gold and take your child, or I will kill you now. Trust me when I say that it will look like suicide. And many, *many* will be killed by the king.”

“No,” I whispered, even as my tears began to fall. “Please – no.”

“Sorry,” he said insincerely, “but I do love a plump child. And – make no mistake. I *will* kill yours and eat it! Or,” he continued speaking, as I continued weeping, “*you* could kill more than a hundred people by letting me put you out of your misery.”

“What,” I paused to hiccup through a sob, “have I ever done to receive such cruelty from you, sir?”

“Fintan was my enemy just as King William is,” he answered flatly. “And so is Fintan’s father, Niall. You are but a vessel for my revenge upon all of them.”

“I am innocent of all of their crimes,” I cried.

“Women are *never* innocent – not in these times,” he intoned. “However, I am a goblin of great mercy.”

“Mercy,” I gasped, saying the word as if it were a prayer, though I did not know to whom I’d sent that prayer. For all I knew, the devil himself was before me, and God had finally had the last laugh.

“Yes. I will transform this straw into gold. In a year’s time, I will come to you. You will have a child by then. I am certain of it; you are ripe even now. I will give you three chances to guess my name. If you fail, I will take the child; if you succeed, I will leave you alone.”

“Three chances,” I whimpered.

“Three.”

“But I won’t succeed.”

He chuckled. “No – you will not. You will fail miserably, and I will have the child and a laugh. But you will take me up on my offer anyway.”

RUMPELSTILKIN POV

The part-fairy was pathetic. Had she mettle, she would have begged me for death, for I could tell she had no skill for teleportation. Telepathy was her only weapon, and it did not work upon me!

However, she was more concerned with pathetic humans than she was about herself – as if even a thousand humans would be worth even one fairy-hybrid. I knew that she would agree even before I made the offer. I would get a yummy part-fairy

child – thanks to a HUMAN queen. I had been longing to taste a fairy child all of my long life! Of course, once I took the child, she would likely be blamed for the disappearance anyway. King William would, I speculated, kill all that she loved AND then give her to his Weres and shifters. So she would – in a sense – get *exactly* the fate she had been aiming for before I came into her life.

Eventually.

Was I not merciful?

And for me?

I would get baby fairy flesh – even if it was muted by human blood.

I would get revenge upon Fintan and Niall for wrongs of the past.

And I would take something from King William, too!

Win. Win. Win! For me.

And the “hope” I gave her? It was laughable. Not even my sister knew my name. Plus, the pathetic hybrid couldn’t even see me to describe me! She would torture herself for a year, ripening with a child, which she knew she would lose – even as she prayed for a miracle that would never, ever come.

It would be my perfect “trick.” My pinnacle. In one fell swoop, I would ensure that she eventually suffered *all* of the horrible destinies that her king had allowed her to choose from. Ultimately, she would have no choice at all!

Be forced to marry a greedy, cruel tyrant? Check.

Cause the deaths of so many innocents that her soul would never recover?

Check.

Be the whore to mongrels? Check.

The bonus would be her having to give up her child to me!

I was already planning the songs I would write on my own behalf, even as the miller's daughter repeated, "one or one hundred and seven," over and over again.

"One hundred and eight," I wanted to say. But I held my tongue.

Finally, she spoke. "Are you an agent of God or of the devil?" she asked seriously.

"I belong to myself," I responded with amusement.

"To appease the king, you must transform ALL the straw, including that which I placed inside of my quilt – as well as that forming my mattress. Every piece or fragment must become gold, or there will be no bargain."

"All will be gold," I swore.

"And it must stay gold," she said.

She was craftier than the king. That was for sure.

"Yes. Yes. It will stay gold," I agreed. "It will be as golden as your hair."

"Can you make my hair less golden?" she asked. "Can you make the scars on my back more hideous?" she begged.

"No," I stated. "That will not be a part of our bargain. In fact, for overreaching, I will make your hair so golden that it would beckon the dead! And I will heal your scars, making your skin as pristine as," I paused, "a newborn baby's."

She gasped out a cry. "Your *mercy* tells me that you must have been sent by God. I will pray for you as loudly as I have ever prayed for myself," she added, hinting at the

fact that she might have had great spirit if it had not been beaten out of her. In fact, her scars, clearly visible to my eyes under her thin chemise, indicated just how much she had been beaten.

I waved my hand and they were gone.

I wiggled my finger and her hair rived the sun.

“I will see you in a year, my *queen*,” I taunted before easily filling the room with gold.

VII: The Child

ELEVEN MONTHS LATER

SOOKIE POV

My son had been born nine months to the day after King William had found the gold and taken me for his wife. The boy had been named William II by his father.

I had never called him any name – at least not out loud. I would not call him a devil's name, and that was what William was to me. In my mind, I called my son Erik, for I had once heard a story about an explorer from the North who had left his homeland never to be seen again. I had envied the man. I had prayed that the story ended with the man happy and free.

It was the impossible prayer that I also had for my child.

Adding to my self-torment, I poured all that was left of me into my child. All of my affection went to him. All of my hope went to him. On the contrary, I took nothing from him in exchange, not even allowing myself to feel happy when he smiled at me. I did not deserve to be happy, after all. In only one month, I would be handing over my beautiful boy to a monster. That would also be the day when I would begin killing myself! Neither the goblin who had “saved” me nor King William had bargained for my life during *that* time. I had already planned it, already stolen the ingredients I needed to make the poison that Hallow had been thinking about using on one of William's enemies the last time she was in the castle. The poison would work slowly. It would take at least a week. And my pain would be acute. I was determined that my

child would not suffer a harsher death than his mother. That would be my final gift to him – and my final punishment to myself.

Until then, I had vowed to make sure that my child experienced all the love I could give – though that love was, sadly, conditional. I had already established the condition when I had decided that one hundred and seven lives were more important than his. And – if I could go back in time – I would make the same choice.

That was my greatest sin of all!

My son would be dying soon – because I had failed in this world. And I couldn't even hope to see him in the afterlife, for I was certain that I was bound for the very bowels of hell, while my son was bound for heaven.

King William had been just as “attentive” of a husband as I had feared. He had raped me night after night until my belly had grown to disgust him. Thankfully, his witch had yet to declare that I was healed enough from the birth to suit William. By good fortune, William was due – the very next day – to leave for a three-week tour of the Northern part of the kingdom. With any luck, the weather would turn bad, and he would be delayed until after I was dead.

Otherwise, I would face added torture during my final week with my child, for Hallow had already declared that I would be “ready” by the time William returned from the North.

I had thought long and hard about the names I would say when guessing the goblin's name. I had already decided to limit my guesses to two.

Steven.

Bartlett.

They were the names of the other demons I had known, so I could not think of any better ones to guess.

Realistically, however, I knew that I had no real chance of saving my son.

The third name I would say that day would not be a guess. It would be spoken to my child.

Erik.

“An explorer. A free man,” I whispered as I took my child into my arms and held him close. “You are going to be so happy exploring heaven,” I told him with my mind. Though he could not understand my words yet, I knew that he understood their meaning.

Yes. The boy that I had traded for a year of torment and the lives of over a hundred others was a telepath.

I wondered if he already knew of all of his mother’s sins.

I wondered if – even when he was in heaven – he would find the grace to forgive me.

VIII: The Vampire

ERIC POV

I entered the court of William of England with a frown on my face. Though the monarch “accepted” vampires, he required both tribute and information. I was, however, planning to offer incomplete or false information to the cruel king. Indeed, his reputation preceded him, so I knew him to be a tyrant and the murderer of his own brother.

Despite this, William’s castle was undeniably the safest place for my progeny and me to stay in the area. It was also quite a few miles from the main city of London, and – though Pamela planned to tour the city of her birth extensively in order to see what had changed – I was content to spend my last month in Terra in relative quiet.

A hundred years was a long time, and I had accumulated much wealth – in human terms. I offered it all to William in exchange of a “quiet life” in his court. He agreed wholeheartedly, even giving me unmonitored access to his library, though he thought it was so I could write a chronicle of my travels for his benefit. After I was long gone, he would realize that I had left him blank paper to “read.”

By luck, William planned to be away from the castle for most of the duration of Pamela and my visit in his lands, and I could not have been more pleased about that, for the king was just as I had expected he would be: arrogant without good reason and powerful without good judgment.

In my experience, he was the standard human king.

Indeed, I was prepared to settle in and lay “low” as Pamela said her last goodbyes to her human home.

But that was before I saw *her*.

She sat next to King William as if she were like me – already dead. Yet – in contrast to me – she seemed to be lacking any hope. Oh – she kept a constant smile on her face – but even the court regulars had termed it a “crazy smile.”

She held a child on her lap – William’s son, a boy named for the father.

Both mother and child smelled quite sweet, so out of caution, I commanded Pamela not to touch either of them, for I figured they might be part Fae. However, it was not Queen Susanna’s scent that struck me the most; it was her eyes.

And the sudden burst of hope I saw in them – when they first beheld me.

SOOKIE POV

“I am Eric Northman,” the man with no thoughts told my husband and king. “We have exchanged letters,” he added.

William greeted the man, and they exchanged meaningless pleasantries. But I could hardly hear them as I used my telepathy to explore the creature.

Even the sleeping infant on my lap woke up and strained to see the stranger. I knew it was because the void that the creature projected instead of thoughts was “comforting” to him too.

“Eric.” The name was as beautiful as the man it belonged to. And the man’s thoughts were as silent to me as I had always prayed a man’s could be.

His mind felt so different from the mind of the goblin who had “helped” me by creating gold from hay. That man’s thoughts had been unknowable, but like stingers piercing the night. Eric’s brain was like a blanket that I could hide within. In fact, concentrating upon him lessened the noise of all the others. And I could tell that my child was doing just as I was. He would not understand, but Eric was a life-long prayer coming true.

However, I was not used to prayers getting answered.

And I knew that there was always a “catch” with God. Perhaps, I was being granted the feeling of comfort only so that my pain upon losing my child would be even more acute.

Perhaps, I was being tested by a God who wanted to learn if I would take my comfort even while holding my son during what might be his last time at court.

With that sobering thought, I backed away from the silent, comforting brain of the stranger. After all, what comfort did I deserve? I was the woman who had sold her child to a creature who planned to eat him.

So, instead of letting myself disappear into Eric’s mind, I delved into Quinn’s always disturbing thoughts. As usual, they were tinged with lust and violence. But they also explained what Eric was: a vampire.

IX: The Arrangement

ERIC POV

Even though the king was away from court, it took me a week to glamour everyone who needed to be glamoured in order to ensure that my visit with the queen would be private.

Surprisingly, she didn't seem surprised to see me when I entered her room.

She simply watched me carefully, her eyes offering that same glimpse of hope that I'd seen in them at court. She was sitting in a rocking chair, breast-feeding her child – an odd thing for a royal woman to do. Most of them opted for wet nurses from my understanding.

She was wearing only a robe. But her body wore a black eye, a cheek fracture, and many other bruises that were new since I had last seen her.

A parting gift from her husband no doubt.

"Eric," she whispered as I approached.

"Yes," I responded as I sat in a chair opposite her.

"It is the name I would have called my son if I would have had any choice," she mused to herself – as if speaking aloud her preference for the first time.

"You did not?" I asked. "Have choice?"

She laughed ruefully, but did not respond otherwise.

For the thousandth time since I had come to Terra, I wondered at the practices of humans. The woman before me – quite obviously – had been beaten down by her life. She sat in front of a warm fire in a silken robe, her hair coifed perfectly about her face.

Yet her eyes told a story of woe that I knew instinctively would break my un-beating heart.

Of all the oddities of humans, the one I had always wondered about the most was how most of their cultures treated – or, rather, mistreated – their woman. In Nenvia, gender made no difference. It was age that determined power and respect, though even the elders were wise enough to listen to younger vampires with attention. And, among the humans in our midst, women were – perhaps – treated with even more respect than men, for they brought children into the world.

“What is your child’s name?” I asked the queen after a few moments.

“I do not have a child,” she said hauntingly.

“Whose is at your breast?” I asked.

“He belongs to my husband and king for three months. And then he will belong to the one who made me a queen,” she whispered.

I leaned forward and tried to use my glamour. “Tell me of it. I am a traveler and enjoy hearing the histories of others.”

She laughed ruefully. “There is no use speaking of things that cannot be changed!”

I tilted my head in confusion and then understanding. Obviously, she could not be glamourised. That, unfortunately, confirmed that she was a fairy. However – though I was attracted to her scent – I did not lust for it. That meant that she was only part Fae.

Still, in such matters, the treaty between vampires and the Fae was absolute; there was a clause of non-interference. Now that I had confirmed her species, I had no

right to stay in her company unless I was invited into it. Clearly, her words indicated that I had not been.

Thus, I stood to leave. I would not break the treaty, despite my curiosity.

“Please!” she called out desperately right before I got to the door. “Will you stay? I am not,” she paused, “used to having conversation. I *should* have told you all that you wished to know. I should have—uh—offered you blood? That is what you eat—right? I did not mean to be rude. I—uh—do not know manners. Please, sit. Yes—that is what I should have said to you when you entered. But, you see, you are my first visitor. I did not know how to . . .”

She stopped her sentence with a loud and off-putting laugh, which was meshed with tears.

“Of course you will wish to go,” she muttered to herself. “Why would you stay? But, please, sir. Please, stay. For my child. I will do,” she paused, “anything you wish. If it is my stories you want, I will tell them.”

I turned and saw that she was now looking at the fire as if she wanted to climb into it. Her entire being was a contradiction. Her eyes were streaming tears, yet the rest of her body was acting to nourish the child she had not given me the name of. Her hands lay lovingly on his back, supporting him as he fed. Her feet had continued to softly rock the chair throughout my visit with her.

Every motion she made spoke “mother” as if the word were alive in the room. Yet every emotion seen in her eyes told me that she had never really lived.

“You offer me your blood—freely?” I asked.

“As long as it will not harm my child,” she whispered.

“It would not,” I informed.

She looked left and then right. “An hour then?”

“An hour?” I asked.

“You may ask me about anything you wish, and I will answer as well as I am capable,” she breathed. “And then you can have my blood as long as I am strong enough to feed my child.”

I paused, going through the rules regarding fairy/vampire relations in this realm in my mind – and making sure that her proposal would break none of them. The only issue was that I did not want to chance taking her blood. However, clearly she was inviting me into her company.

She mistook my pause for hesitation about staying.

“Ten minutes?” she asked. “Five? But one, sir. Please?” she begged. “You need not even speak, sir. Please! Just sit. My child is taking comfort in your presence.”

Her body literally shook with need, but it was not her own need that she was begging for.

“Please, sir. I will tell you anything your wish to know,” she panted. “The boy’s name is William. His father named him, but I do not call him anything because William is a monster, and this child is innocent!”

“You said that he did not belong to you?” I asked.

“The law says he is the king’s,” she answered, her voice quivering. “As I am the king’s property.”

“You also said that he would soon belong to the one who had made you queen. What did you mean?”

“My father is boastful when he drinks mead. He joked that I could spin straw into gold and one of William’s shifter spies heard him. Believing I was a fairy who could actually do as my father had said, William put me into a room and gave me three days and nights to make gold of the straw.” She paused to catch her breath. “A – uh – goblin came to me on one of the nights that I was in the room. It demanded this child in exchange for completing the task for me. The goblin will be coming for him in but three weeks. I did not want to bargain with the creature. I wanted to die,” she rambled, near hyperventilation now. “But I would have been responsible for 107 deaths if I hadn’t agree. So I sold my soul and my child.”

Her comforting rocking and hand movements had not altered on bit, though her eyes were now ponds of sorrow. And she gasped for air like a fish out of water.

“Do you not wish to hear more, sir? I could tell you *all* of the story of my life. I promise you that you would be entertained. God certainly finds pleasure in my misfortune.”

“Misfortune?” I quarried. “But you are surrounding by finery.” I gestured around the room. The furnishings were rich, the textiles silk.

“That is the funniest part!” she relayed. “I will tell you everything. If you spend time here – uh – with my child present, too, you need never speak of yourself,” she promised. “Uh – a year at a time,” she said hopefully. “My husband is to be gone for

another fortnight, and I can remember sixteen of my years!" she enthused now panting.

"I will tell you about *all* of them if you wish."

"In exchange for merely my presence?" I asked.

"Yes. Just for that. For the child."

"You will start by telling me *why* he desires to be in my presence?"

"Yes. That is where my own story begins too!"

And that *was* where her story began. She told me about her earliest memories in great detail – the detail she had been afforded only because she was a telepath, just like her child, who – I quickly learned – "was resting" in my "void."

Sookie, however, swore to me that she never would do the same – as if doing so would somehow cause me a hardship.

I welcomed her into it, but she shook her head forcefully, explaining that her story would soon make clear why she could not accept my generous offer.

Honestly, before she'd spoken of her own, I had not known that telepathy was a Fae quality. Of course, all Supernaturals guarded their strengths and weaknesses carefully.

I stayed for much longer than an hour, long enough for her to calm herself.

And – at the end of the night – I promised her that I would return all of the nights that her husband was away and would stay from two hours after sunset to two hours before sunrise. Of course, I planned to stay longer when possible, but I needed to factor in time to feed.

And to punish those whom I had already learned had wronged her.

Because she seemed more comfortable with deal-making than the concept of friendship, I framed it as an arrangement. I would exchange my presence for her stories – just as long as she had some to give.

And with our bargain, I earned the first sincere smile that I had seen from her.

It made me feel as if I were already back in Nenvia – back home.

X: The Fortnight

ERIC POV

Each night Queen Susanna – Sookie – told me about more of the hell that she had called a life. Each night I listened to how she had survived in spite of all that she had faced.

Each night, I recognized more and more that the broken woman cradling the child was my true mate.

But there was a problem: a big one! She was a fairy, too. And the treaties established millennia ago could not be broken without risking my entire world.

It was for this reason that I did not offer her my blood to heal her wounds, which I had wanted to do from the first night. It was for this reason that I did not offer her any hope that I could be anything to her other than the void that her child sank into each night.

I did not tell her when I arranged for a place where I could “play” with the priest who had beaten her, Steven Newlin. I drew out his pain as long as I could and allowed Pamela to give him additional attentions when I was with Sookie and the child. The man begged and pleaded for mercy – until I taught him how to beg and plead for death.

But the greatest boon was Bartlett. When I went to Sookie’s father’s home to glamour him to tell me Bartlett’s exact location, I learned that the merchant and pedophile was due to meet with William upon the king’s return to London. And, even better, Bartlett was already in London.

Oh—how I punished Bartlett Hale! I had never taken such pleasure in torturing a body, and I was certain that I never would again! Vampires were “civilized” now—*mostly*. But we still knew how to deal with enemies and deviants. And what I did not know before, I learned with Bartlett Hale.

Newlin screamed when I finally gave him the mercy of death. Hale was not afforded that luxury. My last night with him, I cut off his cock and then broke his back so that he could not use his arms or his legs. And then I glamoured him to forget all about vampires. I also glamoured him to be haunted by his sins—plagued by them in nightmares until he died. Then, I left him on Corbett Stackhouse’s doorstep.

Of course, I had wanted to kill Sookie’s father and brother too, but I knew doing so would hurt her. So I refrained. I felt that the burden of Bartlett would be a fitting one for them, however. Oh, and I glamoured them to give me the quilts that Sookie had spoken of so lovingly. I took them to her, but she begged me to keep them for myself—to hide them away, lest they be destroyed by William. She told me that they were payment for my continued visits. Though rudimentary due to the limitations of her materials, they were warm and comforting to me, and I could not help but to wonder what she might produce with finer materials.

During our nights together, I freely shared some of my own stories with her, too.

She reveled in hearing of my adventures in Terra and smiled through all of my recollections of my homeland.

Meanwhile, I had placed “feelers” into all of the acceptable channels regarding Sookie. But no fairy had contacted me regarding her. It seemed that she had been

written off by any fairy kin she had in the same way that she had been abandoned by her human kin.

I so wanted to make her mine – if she chose me.

However, I was powerless to intercede or to interfere in her situation beyond our talks; maddeningly, I could not even risk touching her – though she offered me her blood each night and always worried when I took none.

Eventually, she offered without hope, though she offered all the same. It was clear that she thought her blood was unwanted by me – rather than forbidden. But how could I tell her that without also telling her that the fairies of Terra ought to have been looking after her all along.

How could I tell her that even more people than she had thought had discarded her?

And then we received bad news. The weather had stayed fair, and William was to return as planned.

When – on our next to last night together – she told me specifics of the goblin with whom she had bargained, I finally realized *why* her kin had not claimed her, and I dared to hope.

I knew the name Fintan. He was known to have a part-human family. But his father Niall did not know where they were since Fintan had taken great pains to hide them. After I left Sookie ten minutes before sunrise, I sent a message to Niall, though I wondered if it would reach him in time to do any good.

I wished that the treaty would allow me to kill the goblin and to – at the very least – rescue Sookie from her current situation with King William. But Sookie had made a bargain with the goblin, and a Supernatural’s word was a bond that could not be broken. And my hands were still tied regarding the rest of her situation too; because she was part Fae, I could not interfere with Sookie’s life no matter how much I wanted to do so!

No matter how much she would have wanted it – if I could have offered.

On our last night together before King William was due to return, Sookie had focused mostly upon the child, to whom she had given all of the love that she could. She told me of both her despair and joy upon realizing that she was with child. She told me of how she had learned to sequester the despair in her mind so that her telepathic boy would only ever feel the joy. She told me of how she expected to burn forever in hell-fire – just so that she could ensure that her innocent boy could be raised in a place she called heaven by a woman she called Gran.

I had been right. Her story had broken my heart.

As dawn crept upon us that last night, she rose and beckoned me toward a chest near her bed. In it was the most beautiful quilt I had ever seen.

“It does not even contain straw!” she laughed as she offered it to me, calling it a “token” of gratitude. She apologized that it was not made out of a single color, even as I marveled over the pattern that she had created with garments that had been worn when she had been thick with child.

So that I might remember both her and the child.

She told me that she had “heard” that vampires’ skin was very cold from the Weres in the castle. Thus, she had made the quilt extra thick for me. Even as she had offered the stories of her life as if they might not be good enough to hold my interest, she offered her gift with an apology.

I had resisted my urges regarding her for so many nights, but I could no longer do so, given that I might never be alone with her again.

I kissed her. A gentle kiss – barely a touch. I risked my life to give it.

“Know that you are loved, dearest Sookie,” I said before zipping out of the room moments before the sun rose.

I vowed to risk more for her. There was only a week until I had to return to my own realm. A week until Sookie would be forced to give the goblin her child or tell him his name.

I swore that I would spend that week doing all that I could for the woman who dwelt so fully in my heart.

XI: The Torment

SOOKIE POV

God had found a last way to torment me. I had experienced the feeling of falling in love, even as my child had been comforted by Eric's presence.

My child had clung to Eric's void as if it were his only chance at peace. Perhaps, it was. I could not help but to wonder if I—too—had “looked” for peace as an infant. In the end, it did not matter, the vampire gave my child reprieve from the minds around him. And that was the best gift I could offer him during his last weeks of life.

But then William returned. And I no longer felt Eric in the castle— not even when I stretched my gift out as far as I could.

A smaller void was still present during the days; perhaps it was Pamela, the child Eric had told me about. But I could never get my son close enough to take comfort in the lesser void.

And what of my own heartbreak over a love discovered and lost? It was simply another torment for me—a test to see if my legs could stay strong enough to stand under the additional pain of loss. When Eric had touched his lips to mine, it had been my first kiss. For Bartlett had not tried such a gesture. And William preferred to hit when he fucked.

But Eric's kiss seemed to me, now, to be another sign that I was God's most hated creation for some reason.

It was joy shown to me, but then taken away. It was pleasure that I had been allowed to taste for a moment, but only so that I could starve all the more violently after it was gone.

Still, I would not trade my nights with Eric for anything – except for my child’s life.

When William returned to my bed, my suffering was even greater than before because of the contrast between the violence of my human husband and the kindness of my vampire beloved.

Even then, however, I remained grateful that I had once had a companion who had cared enough to sit with me for my child’s sake.

Of course, William, as always, enjoyed hitting me as he used my body. But what upset me the most was that the child was distraught from both losing his nightly comfort and from my own distress, which I had failed to hide completely when I was receiving the worst that William offered me

Another failure to be added to my long list of them.

But my son’s pain would last for less than a week more. That was the comfort I tried to send to him when I cradled him.

“You will be in heaven soon. Gran will look after you,” I soothed over and over again.

It was two days from the end of my son’s last week that God decided to show me that he had not yet even begun to make me suffer. It was Sam Merlotte who first smelled the child growing in me.

Fuck shifters and their supernatural sense of smell!

Before Merlotte had spoken of the life inside of me, I'd had a clear plan.

Care for my son as if my very soul depended upon it.

Make my hopeless guesses to the goblin.

Give up my child.

Take the poison.

Suffer for my failure to my child.

Burn in hell.

My fate had seemed resolved.

But there was now a *second* child.

If I killed myself, I would kill him or her too! If I did not, I would have to stay alive at least long enough to birth the child.

Nine more months of a hell worse than hell.

Nine more months to live with the fact that I had traded away my son's life.

Nine more months of remembering what I could never have with Eric.

Nine more months of enduring William's "affection."

And – after that? Could I abandon the child? Could I leave him or her all alone to be reared by William to be a monster?

And if I did, what kind of monster would that make me?

ERIC POV

I had thought of Sookie throughout all of my waking hours since the last time I had seen her. With King William back in court, it was too dangerous for me to see her, but I did hear tell of her from Pamela, who glamoured maids to feed me information. Sookie had suffered new wounds on her body in the days since I had last left her.

My blood had boiled and I had be forced to stay away from the castle, lest my bloodlust cause Sookie's situation to become even worse.

However, my beloved's focus was – as always – on her son.

And, then, there was other news; she was with child again.

She had told me that she intended to take her own life after she knew her son's was gone. But I knew – now – that she would not allow herself that release from captivity and torment. Not if she would have to kill a child to do it.

I was tempted to ruin everything that vampires like my father had fought millennia for – by taking Sookie and her child to Nenvia with me, but I knew we would *all* be killed there.

Law was law – even for a vampire king's child.

And then there was a glimmer of hope: a letter from a fairy.

I had never met a full-blooded fairy before. Part of our treaty with them required that questing vampires stay away from their territories. And I had done just that during my time in Terra. Even trying to contact a fairy through emissaries – as I had done multiple times since I had met Sookie – was frowned upon. But – on the second to last night I was to spend in Terra – I was given audience with Niall Brigant himself.

Of course, there were rules to our meeting. I had to literally place my body into silver in order to show that I had come in peace. But I had not hesitated to do so. Neither Sookie nor the child had time for that!

“You are the child of the rulers of the vampire realm,” Niall said as he approached me once I was secured. I leaned toward him and my fangs elongated; I could not help myself.

Indeed, he smelled that damned good!

But, within a few minutes, I had regained control. I forced my fangs into my gums.

“Yes,” I finally said, responding to his question. “I am the child of those venerated vampires; I was made by Godric – though Pythia is just as responsible for my rearing.”

“And why are you here?” he asked.

I held nothing back. “Your son Fintan had at least one child with a human. From that child came another. And then another. The product is a young woman named Susanna – Sookie. She is, as far as I can tell, Fintan’s only descendant with a Fae spark. As a child, she was beaten for her telepathy, for her father thought it was a sign that she was devil-touched. I have killed the priest that spear-headed her beatings already. His suffering was great.

“Before she was a woman, Sookie’s uncle molested her, but the child was blamed for the sins of the man when he was discovered right before he could fuck her. The priest of the parish made sure that everyone thought that Sookie was to blame. And the

devil was – once more – beaten from her. The uncle – too – has been taken care of. And I offered him even more of my skill than the priest was given.

“Despite all she faced, Sookie endured. She learned to use her gift of telepathy in order to keep her safe, but her human father’s idiocy eventually led her to become the plaything of King William of England. Her father had boasted that she could spin straw into gold. The king believed this, for he had known a goblin before – who could do the same. Sookie was sold to the king by her father. She was placed into a room full of straw. She was given three days. On the second night, the goblin teleported into the room. He offered to turn the straw into gold for a price: her firstborn.”

Niall looked at me in question after this statement, but he had not spoken.

“King William gave Sookie two options when he locked her into that room – actually three options. If she accomplished the task, he would make her his bride, and – as long as she gave him an heir and spread her legs whenever he desired – he swore not to ask her for more gold. If, on the other hand, she did not accomplish the task, he vowed to hand her to his Weres and shifters; she would have been passed around.”

Niall began to growl. At least that was something.

“King William, having dealt with the goblin before and knowing at least something of fairies, told Sookie that if she took her own life or tried to escape rather than accept one of the two options he ‘mercifully’ offered, she would be condemning her entire family and one hundred innocents to their deaths. Sookie did not even think

about killing herself after that, though I believe she has longed for death for a long time.”

I did not pause before I went on, for I knew time was limited.

“During the second night of her time in the room full of straw, Sookie received a visit from the goblin. He offered to turn the straw into gold, but only in exchange for her firstborn, which she had to give him one year after the bargain was struck. She accepted the deal, but only because the goblin told her that he would kill her otherwise. You see – she was prepared to belong to the Weres as their whore, for, in that case, it was only she who would suffer. But the bastard goblin took that choice away from her! So to save 107 lives, she sacrificed one: her very own child. And she knew that it would be a death sentence for the child, for the goblin taunted her with honesty, saying that he would eat her baby.

“However, as goblins do, this one offered her a riddle – though one that he felt was unsolvable. She has three tries to guess his name. But, of course, her telepathy is useless with goblins, and you know how covetous they are with their names.”

“Speak a goblin’s name and his magic will wane,” Niall muttered.

“Is that saying true?” I asked.

Niall shook his head. “I do not know, but – you are right – they covet their names more than anything else.” He sat down near to me, likely testing my control.

“How do you know my great-granddaughter?”

“I happened upon Sookie by chance when I first met King William in his court. By a twisted twist of fate, I am due to go home to Nenvia on the same night that she is to hand over her child to the goblin.”

“What is she like?” he asked.

“She believes herself to be a failure and quite broken, but she is the strongest person I have ever known. She is a good woman. An excellent mother,” I continued, my voice now betraying my love for her. “In fact, she offered me her story in exchange for my presence so that her child could experience the peace that my mind affords. But King William has returned to court and now I cannot be with either Sookie or the babe.”

Niall looked at me through wizened eyes. “You love *both* of them.”

I thought for a moment. I had known that I loved Sookie, but did I love the child as well? I knew the answer to that question even as I knew my own name.

“I love all three of them,” I corrected. “Sookie is with child again.”

Niall was silent for several minutes as he studied me. I could not help but to wonder what he saw. I was about to enter my six hundredth year, but the fairy before me was even older than my maker. I found myself wanting to be approved of by him.

“Direct contact between fairies and vampires is almost always forbidden, according to the treaty that I helped to put into place many, many years ago – the same treaty that made the vampire realm of Nenvia possible. Tell me – have you held to that treaty – with her?”

“No,” I whispered.

“Explain,” he ordered, though his voice did not sound angry.

“I kissed her goodbye and told her that she was loved,” I answered honestly.

“However, I never took the blood that she offered me.”

“Offered?”

I nodded. “Yes. She offered every night that I visited her in her chambers.”

“You resisted?”

“She is but part Fae. I wanted her – more and more each night – as my affection for her grew. But I resisted.”

“Except for the kiss?” he asked.

“Yes. I am ready to receive your punishment, fairy prince,” I said evenly.

“That punishment could be your true death,” he returned.

“I am prepared for that.”

“Was she worth it?” he asked.

“There is no limit to Sookie’s worth!” I said fiercely.

Niall was silent again – this time for even longer than before. “What do you want of me, vampire?”

“I want nothing,” I whispered.

“What do you *wish* for me to do?” he clarified.

“If you know of the goblin, I would ask that you allow Sookie to learn his name so that she may save her child. I would ask that she be rescued from the hell within which she lives. I would ask that you offer her sanctuary in your territory. I would ask that she be free.”

“You have asked for more than I can give,” Niall said heavily. “Right now, Sookie would be accepted into Faerie only if she agreed to mate with another fairy. I could offer her say in her choice, but not exemption from the task. If her firstborn is telepathic – as you say – I could give him sanctuary with us, but if she bore a child without a spark for her second child, the babe would not be able to survive in my realm.”

I closed my eyes. “She would likely lose a child AND be a brood mare to your kind too?”

Niall sighed loudly. “There is dissent among the Fae. Treaties have been forged for the greater good and I cannot break them.”

“Not even for your kin?” I challenged.

“Especially not for my kin,” he said, looking agonized. “If I show her favoritism, my tenuous grasp on the throne will become even more vulnerable.”

“Then all hope is, indeed, lost for her,” I said resignedly.

All of a sudden, the remarkable scent of him disappeared, and the fairy removed my chains.

“Not all hope, Eric.” He smiled at me. “*You* are my hope. And hers.”

I had honed my stealth through years of practice. It did not hurt that a fairy had teleported me to within a mile of my prey. It did not hurt that he was waiting to teleport me back to London. It did not hurt that I could fly. It did not hurt that I was a

vampire. And it certainly did not hurt that I had been given a potion to cover my scent by the prince of the fairies himself.

I was not above taking advantages of ALL advantages.

According to Niall, the goblin who was most likely responsible for “saving” Sookie and for her woe was one who coveted his name as much as he coveted children’s flesh to eat. Luckily, Niall knew where the cruel bastard had settled down!

Concealed in the trees half a mile away from the goblin’s cottage, I heard celebratory singing. It sickened me. And it heartened me.

**“To-day I bake, to-morrow brew,
the next I’ll have the young queen’s child.
Ha, glad am I that no one knew
that Rumpelstiltskin I am styled.”**

I was ready to return to Sookie with knowledge—and with an offer.

XII: The Name

SOOKIE POV

Hope was a new phenomenon for me. But I found that I now had it.

Perhaps it simply took believing in the right “devil” for me to gain it – though I loathed to call Eric any word that had ever been given a negative connotation. No – he was my savior.

But a part of me still feared that I was being given hope only to have it stripped away like everything else.

However, this time seemed different. I trusted Eric more than I had ever trusted anyone, though I had never heard anything from his head.

Still, I felt that I had heard his heart, though he assured me it no longer beat.

No matter. William’s beat, but he had none.

However, the world as I knew it had often lacked logic. A priest had been a monster. A family member had been a fiend. A king had been a brute.

And a vampire had been the only man I had ever known who had not taken my blood, though I wanted him to – very much.

Yes, the world often lacked logic.

I would not be meeting the goblin alone, nor would I be meeting him in the dark. But I would be meeting him in the “gold” room.

I had receive a note that afternoon – or rather I had found it on my rocking chair by the fire. It read simply: “Midnight. Where we met before. Bring the child and your three guesses.”

I had asked William to secure three bales of hay to place in the room: one to commemorate each of my initial nights in the space. I told him that I wanted to make him an anniversary present, for – indeed – it was almost a year to the day since William had taken me for his wife after finding the gold. I also told him that I would be taking our child with me. I told William that the child had inherited my gift and that I wanted him to begin learning immediately by watching me work.

To say that the greedy king was pleased would have been an understatement.

I invited William to come to the room ten minutes after midnight to see my handiwork and to celebrate our wealth.

His enthusiasm was pathetic.

I walked into the “gold” room without a guard escorting me or locking me in this time, and I was comforted when I felt the nearby voids of two vampires: Eric and Pamela, his child, whom I had met the night before when Eric had brought me his news and a choice – not that it was a difficult one.

Just as the bell of the cathedral rang to signal the new day, the goblin appeared, and I got my first look at the little creature. He seemed to project malice and evil.

The goblin looked around the room, first at the straw and then at the child before eyeing my belly hungrily. Obviously, he could somehow tell that I was pregnant again.

“Do you wish for me to change this straw into gold in exchange for the child you now carry, milady?” he asked with a cruel cackle.

“No,” I said calmly.

“Too bad,” he grinned as he looked back at my son who was asleep in his small basket. Next to it was a bag containing changing cloths and a few other things belonging to the child. “I see you packed provisions for the infant,” he laughed even louder than before. “I can assure you that I will not need them.”

“I, too, can assure you that you will not,” I said.

The confidence behind my words surprised him.

And angered him.

“Let us get this over with,” he huffed, suddenly impatient. “Make your first guess.”

I looked at him as if I was studying him, trying to pick out his name from his face. Eric had told me that goblins were uncommonly short, and this one was no exception. He stood only three feet tall. And if there really were such things as demons, he looked like he was the father of them. His various expressions all showed a twisted cruelty, and his eyes were black pools that seemed ready to absorb all of the happiness in the world.

“I’m waiting!” he said even more impatiently as he tapped his foot on the floor.

“Is your name Stephen?” I asked, prepared to toy with him for a moment.

After all, he’d had a year to toy with me.

“No!” he said, back to his cruel grin.

“How about Bartlett?” I asked.

“No!” he triumphed.

“Strange,” I mused, “I have known demons with those names.”

“One more guess and then my prize!” the little man demanded.

I looked him right in his beady eyes. “Your name *is* Rumpelstiltskin.”

His mouth gaped open in surprise, and from that open space came an unworldly yell.

“The devil has told you that! The devil has told you that!”

“I thought that you were the devil,” I smirked.

He screeched running toward me – no doubt to inflict harm.

However, he was met by a wall of vampire, for Eric had zipped into the room.

Rumpelstiltskin bounced backwards off of Eric.

“I am no devil,” Eric said with a smirk. “Leave now, goblin!”

I noticed that Pamela, too, had entered the room. She was standing protectively next to my son.

“No! The child is mine by right! This bitch cheated! She has cheated me!”

Rumpelstiltskin wailed.

“She had *beaten* you,” Eric corrected. “Now go!”

“No!” The goblin yelled even as he stomped his right foot through the floor so hard that his whole leg was lodged into the stone.

The vampires and I watched in disbelief as the creature – his rage having obviously driven him insane – pulled at his left leg and quite literally tore himself in two, spraying the bales of hay with his blood.

The commotion had clearly caught William’s attention as he had approached the room. He hurried in, his sword drawn.

I could tell that neither vampire was concerned by the human weapon.

“What? What has happened here?” he stammered.

I turned to face him. His eyes were not quite as dark as the goblin’s had been, but they – too – contained much cruelty.

“This goblin came to me a year ago. In exchange for the gold that *he* made, I was forced to promise him our firstborn child, you greedy bastard!”

“You will be punished for speaking to me like that!” King William yelled before looking at Pamela and Eric. Pamela had picked up my child and his belongings.

“What are you two doing here?” William asked.

Eric’s voice was menacing. “The treaty that allows vampires access to this world also prevents us from becoming involved in supernatural matters here. And we are forbidden to kill any supernatural unless we are personally attacked. I was hoping that the goblin would attack me so that I might rip him apart. However, he saved me the trouble by doing it himself.”

The vampire continued. “The treaty also forbids a vampire from taking blood from or bonding with a fairy. However, there is a little-known loophole – almost forgotten by time, for it has never been used. Luckily, one of the treaty’s architects remembered. Since Sookie is mostly human, she can choose to bond with me as long as she has the permission of the patriarch of her fairy bloodline, as well as a member of the Supernatural Council.” Eric grinned. “Luckily, I was able to obtain all the permissions I needed. I will be taking Sookie back to the vampire realm tonight. And – once she is there – I will ask her to marry me.”



I gasped and looked up at Eric. He was looking back at me with love in his eyes.

Meanwhile, King William had taken a step toward Pamela. "You may not take my child! My children!" he added, looking toward my belly.

"Oh – but I can and will," Eric growled. "They will stay with their mother until they come of age. Then they will be able to decide where they choose to dwell. Again, I have received the permissions required," he smiled, showing William his fangs. I had never seen them before, but they gave me no pause, nor did they spur my fear.

"You cannot steal them!" King William yelled. "And you cannot marry this whore either, for she is *mine!*"

"There is an interesting thing about that treaty I referred to earlier," Eric grinned. "It contains no rules regarding humans!"

With that, Eric zipped to William quickly and did to him what the goblin had done to himself. He ripped him in two. William's blood was soon running in small streams down the piles of gold.

"You may consider that a divorce," Eric said as he threw the pieces of William next to the pieces of the goblin. He looked at me. "Let the Weres and shifters figure that out," he smirked before licking some of William's blood from his lips. He frowned.

"Not good?" I asked.

"Like acid after yours, my love," he said gently, his tone contradicting in all ways the violence he had just committed.

I smiled. I had offered to feed him again the night before – after he had told me about Niall. He'd not hesitated. Soon, he would give me his blood too; however, we'd

had to wait so that the more recent bruises that William had given to me would not be healed.

“Are you ready to begin your new life?” he asked. “You may still choose to remain in this realm – you know. You cannot live with Niall, but he would help you find a safe place and give you means of support,” he added with some trepidation.

“I choose you,” I smiled.

He smiled too.

Epilogue: The Fairy Tale

FIFTY YEARS LATER

ERIC POV

After leaving Terra, it had taken Sookie many years to truly become comfortable with her happiness. She was so unused to kindness and safety that she continuously worried that her new life was just a dream.

I understood her need for time.

Of course, she was welcomed into the vampire realm and allowed to pursue the education she had never been offered before. Not surprisingly given her resilience, she had been clever enough to learn in all ways that she was able even in Terra. She had used her telepathy to learn mathematics from her father. She had also learned to read and write that way. She would linger in Corbett's thoughts every time he was reading; thus, she would see the words as he thought them. And she would occupy his thoughts when he wrote too. She memorized what each letter looked like and practiced writing in the dirt of her garden. Needless to say, she was a quick study in all subjects she gained an interest in.

And, as was best, in the vampire world, women were held as equal to men. In fact, the humans that were given the choice to come to the vampire realm had to agree to this principle first and foremost. If they did not or if their sincerity was questioned, they were glamoured to forget all about vampires before they stepped foot inside of our realm.

Indeed, without the limitations of prejudice, Sookie quickly found her place. Her talent for constructing quilts, a skill that she still taught anyone who desired to learn, was only a hint at her mastery when it came to design and construction. Over the years, she had become the most sought after architect in the realm!

She and I completed our bond and pledged about six months after my Quest in the human realm was over. We waited at my request, for I wanted her to make her ultimate choice when she knew that she was safe and would stay safe no matter what she did. I wanted for her be sure of her choice – of me.

Luckily for me, she was.

Sookie had renamed her son Erik – since it was the name that she had preferred all along. It was coincidence that it was also my name – with the exception of the spelling – but it was not coincidence that the boy thought of me as his father, for I raised him as my son, instructing him in all I knew. He had a particular talent for agriculture and had also carried on his mother’s tradition of quilting. When he was nineteen years old, he had met and fallen in love with a vampiress named Thalia. They had bonded and pledged a month later. He had decided to be turned by his wife on the night of his twenty-fifth birthday. I was exceedingly proud of him in all ways – as was Sookie. But she was mostly thankful for his happiness and his life.

Of course, Erik knew the whole tale of how he came to be; we had told him on his fifteenth birthday. He had also been told that he had some claim to a human throne, and I vowed that – if he wanted the seat of power – I would make sure he got it.

However, he wanted no legacy from his human father, and he was – thankfully – nothing like the bastard either!

Sookie's second child, a daughter named Adele for Sookie's Gran, was my daughter, too – in all the ways that mattered. Like Sookie and Erik, Adele was telepathic. And she, too, had been quick to learn. However, her subject of choice was politics. She also had a thirst for exploration and the ability to teleport, which came in quite handy for her.

She had become a woman of many realms, spending almost equal amounts of time in Terra and the Fae realm. She had chosen a half-Fae husband named Gabriel and had helped her Great-great grandfather, Niall, establish lasting peace in Faerie. She had also made Sookie and me grandparents seven times! And those children had made us great-grandparents twenty-two times! Since Gabriel could cover his scent and their children's ratio of fairy to human blood was not too much for vampires to resist, Adele kept a home in the vampire realm and visited us several times a year.

Sookie and I still missed our girl, but she was amazingly independent by nature, and we would never stifle her. However, two of Adele's children had chosen to pursue lives in the vampire realm fulltime, and Sookie and I could not have been happier about that. We also received an almost constant stream of visits from our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who we knew would soon begin adding even more to our legacy.

Thanks to Adele's savvy, travel between Terra and the vampire world was not restrictive at all for the part-Fae in our family, though we vampires were still limited on our visits to Terra. Most vampires saw the human realm only during their Quests. The

exception was the members of the Supernatural Council, who went to Terra for about a month every year in order to keep relationships between our races congenial and settle any disputes.

According to my vampire father, who had been on the Council for years, the meetings were generally just an excuse to have a month-long celebration with friends of multiple species.

As for Sookie and me? Our love seemed to grow with each touch given and each memory made. With my blood and her spark, she had not aged. Thus, for the time being, she was happy to remain warm to my cool – my perfect partner and complement.

Oddly enough, my wife's story had become the subject of what the humans called a fairy tale – an appropriate label in this case. Of course, the passage of the story through time and many narrators had altered it to a certain extent. But some details were eerily accurate, and Sookie had listened in awe as one of our grandchildren had recounted the story.

The miller's boasting *had* been the reason why his daughter was noticed by the king.

A creature *did* appear out of thin air and changed the straw into gold.

The king *had* been a greedy bastard who took the young woman as his wife.

A year later, the creature *had* returned for the queen's child.

And she *had* been able to guess the goblin's name because the boastful song that he sang in the woods was overheard by a "messenger."

However, the first two guesses of the young woman in the story were inaccurate, for Sookie did not guess “Conrad” or “Harry.” She named the two greatest monsters of her childhood – Steven and Bartlett. I smiled to myself every time I remembered punishing them.

Of course, the third guess in the story was accurate, and the name of the creature who so coveted his name would be forever known.

I could not help but to hope that he heard each time that name was spoken from whatever hell creatures like him inhabited. And I liked to imagine him tearing himself apart every single time.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” I said aloud – just in case.

I smiled to myself and went to find my wife. After all, I had a happily ever after to get back to.

The End

