

Every Contingency

Dearest Sookie,

It might surprise you to know that the concept of independence was heavily frowned upon in my human culture. It might surprise you to know that my human life was never truly my own.

My father was a chieftan, though he was little known beyond the people ...

I hope that you bring me the dagger tonight that you agree to pledge to me. That is my preference. But I am aware that I may never see you again. That thought saddens me more than you will ever know. Regardless, make the choice that is best for you.
Your Bonded, Eric Northman

By California's Kat

Inspired By ncmis12

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Summary: An SVM what-if—How would've Sookie's and Eric's fates been different if Bobby also delivered a message to Sookie when he delivered the knife that would pledge her to Eric? What if Eric explained the situation to Sookie so that she wouldn't feel like he'd manipulated her into pledging? Will she choose to pledge? Or will she get the hell out of Bon Temps to escape all the vampires in her life? (This "SHORT" is inspired by ncmis12)

Every Contingency

Story Prompt from ncm12

I have been wanting to see a story for a while that takes place when Eric sends the knife to Sookie, using Bobby. You know where Bobby gives Sookie vague verbal instructions on what to do with the object, that she is too tired to open or question because it is late at night, at work, right before her shift is over. She brings the bundle to Eric and presents it to him in a respectful manner, per the instructions, not knowing what it is, what it means or even what is going on or why. So instead I would like to see, Eric command Bobby to bring her the bundle and a letter, right after dawn. Giving her time to process. With the letter explaining why she has to bring the knife to him and what it means and even why he is willing to do this for her and with her. Because I am sure that Eric is smart enough to know that even if Sookie says she doesn't want to know his feelings for her, that it would help the situation. I think this surprise marriage is one thing, that caused even more problems in their relationship. It made him look weak to vampires and the king, that Sookie did not take their marriage seriously enough to live with him or call him her husband. I think that if Sookie had the morning and afternoon to think about it, she would have agreed to the marriage. I also think since she would have known what she was doing at the time, it would have had more meaning to her, so she would have respected the tradition and its meaning, even if it differed from her own. In the thousands of stories I have read on Eric and Sookie, I have not found one that covered this idea!

Note

This story picks up near the beginning of *Dead and Gone*. Weres have recently come out, and Sam is in Texas tending to his shot mother. Not surprisingly, Sookie's stepped up to make sure Merlotte's stays running, especially since Arlene quit after the second "Great Revelation" made her bigotry boil over. Meanwhile, Eric has kept his distance from Sookie since the takeover by de Castro's vampires. Thus, the newly bonded pair hasn't seen each other for more than two months, nor has Sookie heard from the Viking. This story will take some cues from *Dead and Gone*, but will deviate in many ways. The few quotes from the book will be in bold.

Thanks

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Chapter 01: Priorities

ERIC POV (early morning, Thursday, January 12, 2006)

It hadn't surprised me that Sookie'd not responded to the *several* messages I'd left for her—both on the cellphone I'd gotten for her and on her home phone, which I knew had an old, though relatively reliable, answering machine attached to it.

Of course, with the shifter gone to Texas to tend to his injured mother (rumor traveled fast in the Supe community, especially since I had glamoured spies in place to keep an eye on my bonded), Sookie was spending even more time than usual at the bar where she worked—trying to make sure that the place didn't fold during Merlotte's absence.

In my opinion, the world—and, most importantly, I—would have been dealt a favor if the hovel did close its squeaky doors.

But Sookie took pride in her work. Thus, the dump hadn't gone down in “friendly” fire—which I was an expert at creating.

When it served my purposes.

Except that I didn't want to hurt *her*.

I growled into my phone as the electronic voice once again encouraged me to leave a message.

“Call me right away—before you sleep! It is urgent!” I said, trying to stop myself from yelling too loudly.

In fact, all of my messages to Sookie had conveyed the importance of her calling me *before* the night was over—indicating that there was no time that was too late for me. It's not as if she'd “wake me” during the night.

My last call to Sookie's home had been answered by one of the witches that my bonded had taken in—I think the older one. She'd grouched about “normal folks” sleeping at night and then had hung up on me—*before* apparently taking the phone off the fucking hook!

As if witches were examples of “normal folks!”

Normal folks didn't take away vampires' memories!

I scoffed as I dialed Sookie's cell phone number again. In my opinion, my bonded surrounded herself with way too many people who felt that “normal” was the way things *should* be.

And most of them were fucking hypocrites!

None of the people around Sookie seemed that fucking “normal” to me. Her roommates were witches. Her boss was a shifter. Her neighbor was a vampire. Yet—ironically—*they* didn't encourage Sookie to be *all* of who she was. In fact, they seemed to be the strongest voices telling her that she ought to be “normal.”

Again, the electronic voice toyed with me before a secondary message recorded in an even more mechanical tone informed me that the “Sprint customer whom I was trying to reach” had a full fucking mailbox.

I hung up and threw my phone across the room, watching it skip on the bed like a rock in a still pond. I'd learned long ago that there were strategic places to toss phones—unless one needed to see them break. And sometimes I did!

Be tonight I just wanted the motherfucker to ring!

“What's normal?” I grunted as I thought of the humans in Sookie's town. From what I could tell, *if* they were the epitome of “normal,” then I wouldn't want to be anything like them.

Most of them were prejudiced, more concerned with gossiping and judging than having an original fucking thought!

Every time I had entered Merlotte's Bar, I had been systematically objectified and/or summarily condemned as "evil"—*often both*. And often by the same people!

Yet I would place my ethics against any other being's ethics. I was not ashamed of who I was, and I certainly wasn't a "son of Satan" as Sookie's redheaded "friend" had mumbled when she'd last seen me. My human father had been a man of honor during a time when honor was difficult to justify or to maintain. But honorable he'd been! And my maker—despite being a bastard that I truly would prefer never seeing again, if truth be told—wasn't Satan.

Almost. But not quite.

I sighed as I sent *another* text to Sookie—given the fact that her voice mail had reached capacity.

By this point, I didn't expect a reply. Why should I? All the others I'd sent had been ignored.

"I got you the damned cellphone so that I could call you when I needed to!" I told the thin air as if it would stir up Sookie if I became frustrated enough. I was well on my way to being just that.

Was the cellphone gift high-handed? Maybe.

But it was also practical!

Indeed, sometimes high-handedness led to *upper*-handedness. Not against Sookie—never her. For some reason, I didn't want to gain the upper-hand against her; I wanted us to be on even terms.

A first for me.

But against our enemies? Yeah—I fucking wanted the upper hand!

Always.

Undeniably, sometimes a few hours made all the fucking difference in the supernatural world.

And this was one of those times!

One might ask why I didn't just go to Sookie—why I was counting on phone calls and text messages for communication.

One might ask why I'd not visited her many, *many* times since the monarchy of Louisiana had changed hands.

Since I'd remembered *everything* about our too-fucking-short nights together.

Those nights that haunted dreams that I couldn't quite have—but that felt like *possibilities* since Sookie Stackhouse was a part of them.

Why hadn't I gone to her?

The truth was that I had several reasons—all good.

The first was that I had needed to figure out what kind of “arrangement” to pursue with Sookie. Call me cold, but I understood well the way that the supernatural world worked. If Sookie were willing to embrace her status as a fairy and as a telepath, that would be one thing. But I knew that she was not.

At least not yet.

“If she'd answer her goddamned phone, however, she might have cause to reevaluate!” I muttered.

I took an unneeded breath, though it didn't quell my worry.

Sophie-Anne had pissed me off several times throughout the years of my service to her, the last time being when she'd tried to poach a certain blond telepath from my area. But, overall, our relationship had been downright congenial compared to most sheriffs and their monarchs.

And—truth be told—the fact that she'd sent Bill to “fetch” Sookie had told me something extremely important about Sophie-Anne. Bill *was* the prototypical Southern Gentleman that a simpleton like Hadley would have thought her cousin would want. It had been hoped that Sookie could live in ignorant bliss with the fuckwit! And maybe a part of Sookie still wanted that. But there was so much more to her than the Southern Belle Compton had wanted to cultivate—so much bubbling right beneath the surface.

Tantalizingly close.

Ready to boil.

I'd seen “it” in her the night we'd met. And I'd seen “it” again—time and again.

But she'd resisted the “more” with doggedness and stubbornness; time and again, she'd pushed away the things that might have made her happy because she was afraid of loss.

And why wouldn't she be? Her innocence would have been lost when she was very young indeed—as she had to listen to the sin-filled thoughts of humanity (or “humanitah” as her Southern suitor so sanctimoniously pronounced it—as if humanity had ever done Sookie Stackhouse a fucking favor!).

Sookie's parents died when she was very young. Her dreams for love had been decimated because of the betrayal by her first love. Her belief in the propriety of her Gran had been eroded by the truth that Adele Stackhouse had had an affair with a fairy in order to have children.

Why wouldn't she push me away, too?

No matter how much Pam called her a tease—or a “mistress of mixed messages”—Sookie was the reason Pam was still alive. Hell! She was the reason *I* was still alive. When the investigators’ report had indicated that there were bombs set in the floor right under mine—in *the room right under mine*—it became apparently fucking clear that Sookie Stackhouse had saved my un-dead ass!

But it was logical for her to waver in her feelings for me. Hell! I’d done enough wavering for the both of us!

I knew that she didn’t believe that I cared for her as *myself*—as Eric Northman, Sheriff of Area 5. I knew that she thought that *that* Eric—*me*—actually wanted her only for her “assets.”

And she was right. But—because I’d never told her—she had no idea about the kind of assets that I truly craved.

Companionship with a woman I respected.

Sex with a woman who wanted my *being* as much as my body.

In short—*life*.

For a vampire, that word was amazingly profound and had meanings beyond any that humans could imagine.

Humans called vampires “dead.” And I suppose we were—in their narrow minds. We did not need to breathe to live. We did not digest food as humans did, nor did we expel waste as they did. Our hearts didn’t beat.

But I felt more alive as a vampire than I’d ever felt as a human. And the times when I’d felt most alive had been with *her*.

That was likely because she treated me as a *living* being—no different from her.

No better. No worse.

For better. For worse.

I reigned in my frustration—and my flailing hope—as I sent off another text.

“Sookie, it’s important that you contact me ASAP.”

I hit send.

“Please.”

I hit send again, painfully aware that I rarely uttered that word—let alone put it into print.

I shook my head—both in frustration and in amazement.

The “arrangement” I *could* have made with Sookie had Sophie-Anne still been alive was straightforward, for I speculated that Sophie-Anne would have left us *mostly* alone—even if Andre had stayed alive to skulk around. As a matter of fact, I bet that Sophie-Anne would have been pissed to know of Andre’s little power play in the halls of the Pyramid of Gizeh. Clearly—even from the start—the queen hadn’t wanted Sookie to be taken against her will. She’d merely wanted to shape Sookie’s will through Bill. It was a fine line, but Sophie-Anne would have thought it all perfectly acceptable as long as Sookie stayed ignorant to the more manipulative forces that had infiltrated her life.

Ignorance was bliss. And Bill was the fucking King of Ignorance.

Until he fucked even that up.

As a matter of fact, had Sophie-Anne lived, I was prepared to court Sookie—as soon as she’d realized that the ridiculous Were-tiger was not for her, which I had no doubt she would have done.

The takeover just shortened the timeframe.

“The fucking takeover,” I muttered as I tried—once again—to text Sookie.

Any “arrangement” I made with Sookie would now be complicated—much more complicated—especially since Victor seemed determined to crawl up my ass with a magnifying glass!

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose as Sookie—once again—didn’t respond. Because Victor had called my hand, I now had two choices when it came to my bonded: all in or fold.

There would be no more bluffing.

I had wanted for de Castro and Victor to determine that Sookie was, indeed, a *mere* asset to me—one that I didn’t feel the need to call to me often. I wanted them to believe that a thousand-year-old vampire had determined that she was of use *only* sporadically. Of course, once her heroism in Rhodes had become widely known, that had become a harder fiction to weave. Still, my attempt to do just that had been another reason why I’d stayed away from her since the takeover. If my plan had worked, neither de Castro nor Victor would have coveted her.

But Victor just couldn’t fucking cooperate!

I’d conveyed indifference; thus, he *should* have deemed her of minimal value. Oh, he might have asked for the use of her telepathy now and again—as may have the king—but an occasional use would likely be all she’d have been required for.

After all, if a thousand-year-old Viking—known for his pragmatism—hadn’t deemed her worthy enough to pull into his retinue full-time, why would they want to?

Sadly, Victor saw through my bluff.

He had figured out that I deemed Sookie *too* worthy—and not just because of her extra sense.

I wanted her all the time. All of her. I wanted her in my bed and in my home. I wanted her for my wife, and it wasn't just a week of returned memories that had taught me that.

Priorities had.

I was a fucking fighter—through and through.

Yet—when Sookie was endangered, I found myself looking to her first—rather than satisfying my bloodlust.

She was my priority. Time and again.

In Dallas: enemies had been outside and I'd had only superficial injuries that would have healed—quickly. Not only had I protected Sookie with my body, but I'd also refrained from chasing the culprits of the attack upon Stan's home.

An anomaly?

No. A priority.

Mississippi: a Fellowship member tried to stake a vampire. That useless dog Herveaux had jetted off after him—just as Bill had been caught up in the hunt in Dallas. But me? I couldn't be torn from Sookie's side as I made sure that Russell and his people took care of her properly.

Priority.

The night of the takeover: Of course, I had contingency plans to get the fuck out of Louisiana if I was ever threatened. I would have disappeared—*in style*—for a few years and then resurfaced in a new place. Felipe would have overlooked me as a non-threat by then, and I could have planned a glorious revenge upon the be-caped king. Hell—I'd done such things before.

Or—like Pam had done outside of Fangtasia on the night of the takeover—I could have systematically worked to take out my enemies one by one. *None* of them would have been able to stop me, for none of them were older than I was. Thus, with a little patience—and maybe a year or so—I could have won that fight, using my familiarity with my area to my advantage.

After all, I was a great studier of Machiavelli. He'd written to his Prince that he should “never raise his thought from [the] exercise of war, and in peacetime he must train himself more than in time of war; this can be done in two ways: one by action, the other by mind.”

I'd used a thousand-year-old, well-trained, and well-honed mind to imagine every way that I might be attacked. And Pam had been such an effective assassin because I'd imparted that knowledge onto her.

I'd drilled her—and a perfect performance was always rewarded with very expensive shoes.

Her priority.

But I hadn't fought the night of the takeover. I hadn't lain in wait for de Castro's army to scatter and search for me so that I could eliminate them one by one.

My priority.

I had flown like a fucking torpedo toward the one person whose life mattered to me *more* than my own—even before my memories had been returned to me. Bill fucking Compton could pronounce his willingness to die for Sookie over and over again. And she could fall for his line again and again.

But I *didn't* fight—when I'd wanted to. I didn't fight *because of her*.

Did I want the yoke offered to me by Felipe and Victor? No.

But I *had* to endure it—*for her*.

However, I *wanted* to endure it—*with her*.

Priorities or not, I was selfish. I wanted her to be mine. I wanted her to *choose* to be mine.

My aspirations had always been lofty.

Glancing down and seeing that my texts had still not been answered, I called Bobby. Then I pulled the ceremonial dagger from my safe. I took it out of its protective encasement and admired it.

And then I got out some stationary—old parchment, really. I saved it for important documents. I realized that I was about to write one of the most important letters I would ever pen.

As I wrote, I imagined that Sookie and I were sitting in front of her fireplace on one of her quilts with her hideous afghan wrapped around us. I contemplated her reactions; I anticipated her questions. On sheet after sheet, I “spoke”—and sometimes rambled—to her as I’d never spoken to anyone before.

Knowing that I might never see her again—and needing for her to *know* me—I bared my soul.

Only for Sookie.

Chapter 02: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

SOOKIE≡ POV, THE≡ NEXT DAY

“Sook?” Terry Bellefleur yelled worriedly from the kitchen.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Um—you just been standing there for a few minutes,” the war-worn veteran observed.

“Not movin’!”

“Sorry!” I returned, trying to sound more light-hearted than I felt. “Just lost in my thoughts. Tired I guess.”

“You did a double yesterday—right?”

I nodded in confirmation—though it had been more like a triple. “And I had to be here at 7:30 a.m. since a shipment came in this morning.”

A shipment that Sam had forgotten to tell me about.

Of course, I really couldn’t blame him. He had other things weighing him down.

Terry gave me a little smile—one that told me that we were “in this together.” I could tell that he didn’t just mean covering for Sam while he was with his mother either.

I gave Terry another little nod—this time of appreciation.

He and I had both faced wars of sorts, but I suddenly felt more than a little ashamed.

Terry had been in war for an extended period of time—long enough to make him twitch at the sound of a breaking glass or a dropped pan. Hell—not even two years before, I’d seen him cower into a corner at the sound of a car backfiring.

But—despite all he’d been through—I’d *never* seen nor heard Terry feeling sorry for himself.

By contrast, I'd been doing too much of that lately.

A part of me wanted to justify my self-pity—to remind the world that I'd had a bad fucking year or two.

Gran dying.

Finding out the man I loved had lied to me from the start of our relationship.

Falling in love a second time—only to have my beloved forget our time together.

Being beaten up, sliced up, and “staked up.” Being shot at. *Almost* being raped.

And then actually being raped—by my first love no less.

Being kidnapped.

Being threatened with a blood-bond to the creepiest vampire I'd ever met.

And that was only a warm-up!

I mean really! A cluster of bombs going off all around me in a hotel!

“Sledding” down the side of that pyramid-shaped hotel on a Pam-loaded coffin with a half-asleep Viking vampire!

The same vampire I'd just been forced to complete a bond with—a bond I still didn't know much about!

FBI agents looking for me because I'd decided to use my cursed telepathy to find survivors after the blast!

A takeover—seemingly held at my house!

An Eric who—right afterwards—remembered the most vulnerable week of my life!

The *best* week.

The week that—if Eric hurt me or rejected me—would be lost to me yet again.

In an even worse way.

I didn't think I could survive Eric ripping into that week—criticizing the “him” who had loved me. It would be as if he were telling me that I *couldn't* be loved. And—so far—*my Eric* had been the only being who had ever truly loved me.

For me.

The sad thing was that—in many ways—I was the one to blame for others not loving me. Most of the time I was too scared to give them a chance.

“Self-fulfilling prophecy,” I muttered to myself.

“What's that?” Terry asked.

“Holly's pulling up now. I think I'll go ahead and unlock the doors and then do the schedule before the lunch crowd builds up,” I informed.

“Oh—sure!” he said with a lop-sided grin as he peeked out the kitchen window.

I grinned back at him. It looked as if he were having a good day today. In fact, he'd had mostly good days for the past year or so and seemed a lot calmer.

I thought briefly about checking his mind to see what was making him happier; maybe I could borrow some of that happiness for myself. But then I remembered a time when my shields were worn and I had inadvertently heard the troubled thoughts of Terry Bellefleur.

I shuddered. No—his mind wasn't a place I needed to visit.

“Annie's gonna have another litter of pups!” Terry yelled out excitedly as I rounded the bar.

Annie was Terry's beloved dog, a Catahoula. I smiled to myself; Annie was likely one of the sources of his calm. Taking care of her and the puppies she'd had the year before had been downright therapeutic for him.

“You should reconsider and take one this time,” he said brightly. “There would be no charge for you—of course!” he added, taking away one of my arguments against such an idea.

I’d always considered myself a cat person, but living with Bob the “cat” had changed my preferences a bit. Oh—it wasn’t that he was a “bad” *cat*; it was more that it was a little disconcerting knowing that there was a “person” underneath the fur. And, of course, then there was the Bubba factor. Though I didn’t see my vampire friend too often, he was excessively fond of cats—or at least their blood. I shivered a little at that thought.

“I’ll think about it,” I smiled at Terry over my shoulder.

And I would think about it. In fact, I made a deal with myself. If I wasn’t taken out of town on vampire business during the time it took for the pups to be born and weaned, I *would* take one.

“Knock on wood,” I whispered.

I rapped quietly on the front door before unlocking it.

“Howdy y’all!” Holly said loudly as she came in the back door.

I smiled to myself again. I always enjoyed working with Holly, who was still dating Hoyt. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he proposed soon.

Since the delivery had been so early and I didn’t want to go all the way home and come back just for twenty minutes in my bed, I’d already prepped the waitress station and the bar, as Terry had prepped the kitchen, and—in exchange for coming in a little later—Holly had agreed to stay a little later in order to retrain Tanya Grissom. And for that I was extremely grateful! I’d had to call Tanya Grissom to help cover Arlene’s abandoned shifts until Sam got back and hired a permanent replacement. I knew that Holly and the other full-time waitress, Danielle, might be willing to work a double or two, but both of them had kids. And, because of her new temp job,

Amelia had agreed to cover only a few night shifts—and even that agreement was offered begrudgingly. It looked as if there would be quite a few doubles in my future, but having Tanya would help. I just hoped that Sam didn't try to get her to stay on permanently.

My history with the werefox who'd once spied on me for the Pelts was complicated—at *best*.

“You mind if I do a bit of paperwork for a while?” I asked Holly as she put on her apron.

“No problem! I'll let you know when it starts getting busy,” she winked.

“And I'll cover the bar as much as I can,” Terry volunteered brightly.

After thanking them both, I snuck back to Sam's office and picked up the schedule. Thank goodness Tray was willing to cover most of the evening bartender shifts! And with Amelia and Tanya doing a few shifts apiece, I hoped to get the schedule filled out relatively quickly. The only problem was that Arlene had been given several day shifts, and neither Tanya nor Amelia could do those. So I'd have to shuffle things around a bit without saddling Holly or Danielle with too many day shifts since the tips weren't as good.

“Okay, you can do this before the rush, Sookie,” I whispered, trying to give myself a pep talk. “Otherwise, you will have to stay later than you've planned,” I added a warning.

In fact, after my double/triple the day before, I was hoping to sneak away by 5:00 p.m. that evening—before the dinner rush. In the meantime, I'd man my tables during the lunch rush and try to cover most of the bar duties since Sam had been originally scheduled for bar duty that day and I couldn't get anyone to cover the shift.

I sighed. I was looking forward to a full night's sleep!

A sliver of red caught my attention on the desk, and I closed my eyes as I ran my fingers over the phone Eric had gotten for me. I remembered then that he'd left me a message the night

before, but the bar had been very busy, and I'd not had time to listen to it. In my haste to get home so that I could crash, I'd forgotten my cellphone when I'd left the night before. As I picked up the phone, I recalled seeing that the answering machine at home was flashing too, though I'd not taken the time to listen to any messages since the delivery man was already waiting. Something told me that Eric was responsible for that flashing, too.

I grunted at the cellphone when I saw that its battery was dead.

"Darn it!" I muttered, knowing that I didn't have my charger in my purse.

I sighed. I wasn't gonna lie and claim that a part of me wasn't glad about that. Since the take-over, Eric and I had been long overdue for a discussion about "us"—since the Viking had finally remembered the time he'd spent at my home when he'd had no memories.

Of course, until his messages, he'd seemed about as anxious as I was to have our talk—which meant he'd been putting it off. In fact, there had been very little contact between us since the takeover.

Okay—there had been *none*, a fact that hurt me not just a little.

A fact that filled me with more and more dread with each passing day.

Given the months of no communication, I figured that it was more likely than not that Eric had decided against further entanglements with me. After all, we already had a blood bond—a mysterious sort of connection that even Amelia and Octavia couldn't find out much information about, despite Octavia's connections in the supe world and Amelia's savvy with computer searches.

Eric certainly hadn't volunteered much information about it—though he did tell me that I would come to like it.

I wasn't so sure.

It had been odd “feeling” Eric’s presence in my very being. I felt it when he awoke each night, and I felt it when he had a strong surge of emotion. Mostly, that emotion had been frustration during the months following the night he’d remembered “us.”

I couldn’t help but to wonder if he was frustrated that he’d let himself “almost” love me when he had no memories. I couldn’t help but to wonder if he regretted the time he’d spent sharing my life with me. I shook those thoughts away.

“Self-fulfilling prophecy,” I muttered again.

I’d once truly believed that Bill wanted to share a life with me—that he would put me first in his life, just as I had prioritized him. I’d believed in “our love story” to my very core. Maybe that’s what everyone thought of his or her first love. I only knew that I’d been happy and truly hopeful for the future, probably for the first time in my life.

But the ugly truth was that our relationship was never as wonderful as my rose-colored glasses had made it look. My suspicions about the Rattray attack aside, there was the situation with Malcolm’s nest that should have given me a lot more pause. And then there was the intense possessiveness, especially when the topic of Eric was brought up. And then there was the argument we’d had which had left me in the woods and ripe for the pickin’ by the Maenad. And then there had been Dallas—when my rose-colored glasses got a few more cracks in them.

Though it probably shouldn’t have bothered me so much, I’d been upset when Bill had fed in the next room when we’d been at the Silent Shore Hotel. However, if that was a little “paper cut” of hurt, Bill’s behavior after the attack on Stan’s nest had been a hit to the gut. Bill had prioritized revenge and a snack over checking on me. Maybe I was selfish to have wished that he’d done things in a different order.

Maybe I was selfish to wish that he'd not tried to make me jealous by taking Portia to the football game right after the Dallas trip—that he'd truly grasped *why* I'd been upset with him in Dallas.

But he hadn't grasped anything—except at the straws that had been holding up his lies.

I shook my head, judging myself.

Despite his lack of understanding, I'd ignored my doubts and pain, and I'd taken him back.

However, the life that I'd wanted with Bill was proven to have other holes once we'd fallen into the routine of couple-hood following the Dallas trip.

Goodness knows that I didn't need a man to fawn all over me all the time. But I *did* want one who asked me about my days—one who seemed to want me around. For Bill, that had been asking too much, I guess. After Dallas, he became buried in his work, and there were many nights when I felt utterly ignored by him. And then, without telling me much at all, he'd left to be with his maker. He arranged for Eric to be the bearer of the news that our separation was permanent and that I was being “pensioned off.” Still, when it became clear that Bill was with Lorena against his will, I'd helped him. I'd killed for him. I suppose it was only fitting when he almost killed me in return.

I think that—in the moment that Bill was draining me and violating my body, even if it was because of bloodlust—all of my dreams about finding a man who loved me and valued me enough to put me first were smashed.

However, despite this fact—or maybe *because* of it—I'd broken things off with Quinn without putting up a real fight. And, even before I'd dated the Weretiger, I'd used my fears to justify why I could never be with *Sheriff* Eric Northman.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

Indeed—the duo I’d pursued relationships with since that horrible night in the car trunk had been the very definition of men I was guaranteed to fail with.

When I’d let myself fall for—and *with*—the memory-less Eric, a part of me had known that it was not going to last. Okay—*most* of me had known it! How could it last? While it had been nice to live in the brief fantasy world of domesticity with Eric—nice to be the being that he prioritized and cared for—I’d known that the clock had been ticking down.

Tic. Toc.

Five. Four. Three. Two. Done.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

Still, I could have done things differently when Eric was restored to himself. I could have taken a chance and told him about “us” right from the start. I could have asked if he and that “other” Eric were alike in any way. I could have asked if he would like to pursue a relationship with me.

But I didn’t. Without even considering an alternative, I’d already resolved that Sheriff Northman would not—could not—prioritize me over anything else. He had his sheriff duties. He had his allegiances to other vampires. In fact, I couldn’t imagine that I’d been anywhere near the top of Eric Northman’s list of priorities.

So I’d never tried to be on that list at all.

Though I now recognized that I had loved *my* Eric with everything in me.

And I knew that I wouldn’t have fallen nearly so hard and so fast if I hadn’t already desired Eric before then.

Okay—*more* than desired. I’d *liked* him. Cared for him in a way.

But could a vampire like Eric really be satisfied with a simple barmaid like me? I'd answered my own question without ever asking him.

No.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

Getting involved with Quinn had been another example of that concept brought to life. I'd known from the start that our relationship would be marked by geographical distances and time separations. I suppose that such a "relationship" was safer for me emotionally at the time—given the fact that I was still battered by losing two "loves" on the heels of each other. Of course, I'd not known that the separations between Quinn and me would last so long. I hadn't known that the communication between us would be so sparse. I'd felt low on his priorities list even before I'd learned about his mother and sister.

In fact, truth be told, I'd felt like a booty call to him the last couple of times we'd been together.

With him, I'd chosen another relationship that was doomed to fail.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Who would want Sookie Stackhouse, defective barmaid?" I muttered to myself. "Who would want her enough to put her first in his life? Who would want a happily ever after with a person whom even her own mother thought of as a freak?"

Answer? *No one.*

"Or maybe I'm wrong," I whispered, glancing back at the phone Eric had given me.

"No," I assured myself. I'd not seen Eric in months, and he'd popped in and out of my life irregularly before that. Yes—many of our encounters had been full of tension, often of the

sexual variety. And, other times, he'd been downright tender. But then there would be times when he'd regard me with tepidness.

"No use getting your hopes up," I said, thumbing the phone back a few inches.

"Hopes," I whispered again, closing my eyes.

I recalled Eric and my dance together in Rhodes. It was difficult to quantify the joy I had felt in those few minutes—the lightness. I had felt *right* in Eric's arms—safe and cherished.

But then the dance had ended—and so had the fantasy that I was in the arms of a man who loved me—or at least felt something close to love.

That something "close" was likely to be the best I'd ever get.

I opened my eyes and sighed, filling Sam's office with the sound of my dreams and longings and knowing that it was useless to think about them. Oh—there were moments when it seemed as if *Sheriff* Northman had more in common with "my Eric" than he let on. But then there were times when he seemed almost indifferent to me. He was enigmatic (thank you word-a-day calendar)—to say the least.

Indeed, Eric Northman confused the heck out of me. And I wasn't ashamed to admit that—except maybe to him.

"But it's useless to think about him. Several months of no contact is a pretty good indication of how he feels about you," I whispered to myself, even as I shored up my shields since the first customers of the day were entering Merlotte's.

If I wanted to leave by 5:00 p.m., it was time to get to work.

Chapter 03: Work

SOOKI≡ POV, continued

With difficulty, I managed to keep thoughts about Eric from my mind as I finished the new waitress schedule. I smiled at it. Happily, I would have to work only one more double that week—if Amelia agreed to the two evening shifts I'd put her down for. And I'd even given myself Monday off, though I'd have to come in before opening in order to do the books from the day before. There was no way I could do them Sunday night after my double!

Glancing at the clock, I noticed that it was 11:15 a.m.; that meant that the lunch rush would begin soon. I put my useless red phone into my purse so that I wouldn't forget it on Sam's desk as I'd done the night before and then put my hair up into a ponytail before grabbing my waitress apron. After giving myself a lecture to keep my exhaustion to myself so that I could get some much-needed tips, I mustered my smile and hurried into the dining room where Holly was just about to get overwhelmed.

She gave me a grateful look as I went to see to the customers who'd just sat in my section. After putting in their food order to Terry, I began pouring drinks for both my table and for a couple of Holly's, which she'd not gotten around to doing yet. As I was putting hers on a tray, the restaurant phone rang.

"Merlotte's Bar and Grill," I answered, as Holly gave me a thankful grin and bustled off with the drink orders for her tables.

"Sook," Amelia greeted brightly.

"Hey Ames," I returned, hoping that she was calling to confirm the evening shifts I'd asked her to do on her voicemail. If not, my one double would turn into more.

“Um—Octavia called and wondered if I—or, um, either of us—would have time to drive her to Wal-Mart today,” Amelia said somewhat apologetically. She knew how busy I’d been; in fact—truth be told—I was a little frustrated at her for asking.

I sighed as I watched Holly seat more people in my section. “I don’t think I will, Ames,” I responded. I felt bad that Octavia was in my house without a car and that she’d lost most of her worldly possessions during Hurricane Katrina. But all I wanted was to sink into a bed when I got home. “Maybe you could do it during your lunch hour?” I asked. Amelia had recently started working some dayshifts for an insurance agency since the regular receptionist was out on maternity leave.

“Um—I was hoping to meet up with Tray for lunch. Since he’s gonna be working so many nightshifts there,” she added with a hint of blame in her tone, “our time together is gonna be limited. Uh—what time do you get off work? Maybe you could take Octavia then?”

I almost gave in, but my nerves were already fried. “Not till at least 5:00 p.m.,” I said. “And then, honestly, I’m not in any mood to do anything but rest my feet.”

“Uh—do you have tomorrow off?” she asked.

“I won’t have a day off till Monday,” I returned calmly, though I was beginning to get a little pissed off that Amelia was pushing.

Amelia sighed with disappointment, obviously having expected me to give in. If I’d not been torn from my sleep that morning and just begun my fourth shift in a row, I might have.

Proving that a bad day could get worse, Bobby Burnham strode into Merlotte’s, looking around like the very air would soil his impeccable suit.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“What is it?” Amelia asked.

“Look, Ames. I gotta go. Sorry about Octavia, but my plate’s already full. I have tables filling up, and—to make things even worse—Eric’s day-man just walked in.

“Oh!” Amelia said as if remembering something. “Octavia said that Eric called several times last night and left you messages. And then when he called *again* after she’d gone to bed, she answered and told him to stop. I think she might have left the phone off the hook after that too,” she added as if tattling on a naughty child.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, still trying to keep calm. “He called that many times?”

“Filled up the answering machine,” according to Octavia. “That’s why she finally picked up when the ringing didn’t stop. It was before either of us got home though,” she added.

I sighed. I’d gotten home at 2:30 a.m. the night before, and Amelia hadn’t been there yet. I’d figured that since she’d picked up Tray from Merlotte’s, they were together for the night.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that my situation was my own doing. Letting Octavia move in had been one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions that I’d not thought fully through before I made the offer. I’d felt bad for her. And now I was going to have to have a “talk” with the older woman. Don’t get me wrong—I understood how annoying getting calls late at night could be, but I still didn’t think it was her right to take my phone off the hook!

I sighed. In some ways, living with Octavia felt as if I was living with Gran again, just without the loving grandmother part. Since she’d moved in, I had felt as if I needed to be as quiet as a church mouse when she went to bed—and that was often by 8:30 p.m. And since she was so “early to bed,” she was “early to rise” too. She was often banging pans around in the kitchen by 5:00 a.m. Heck! I didn’t mind being considerate of others’ needs, but I sort of wanted them to do the same. But now was not the time to think about Octavia.

“Listen, Ames. I really do have to go,” I repeated as Bobby approached the bar, though he was careful not to touch it. I wanted to smack him already.

“Sure, and—uh—I’ll deal with Octavia,” she said, though she sounded a little put-out by it.

“Great! Thanks!” I responded, trying to sound chipper, though I really felt frustrated with Amelia in that moment, especially when I remembered that she’d not confirmed her schedule.

“Miss Stackhouse,” Bobby said with barely disguised distaste.

Because of that, I felt absolutely no need to try to be nice.

I pointed to a chair. “I will be happy to talk to you *after* my tables are caught up,” I said, gesturing toward my impatient customers. Thankfully, Holly had come around and delivered the drinks for my first table. But now I had four other tables that needed to be tended to.

“And when will that be?” he asked.

“Around 2:00 p.m.,” I smirked, though I was exaggerating a bit.

He sighed. “2:00 p.m. then,” he returned.

“You want lunch?” I asked, ready to thrust a menu into his smug face.

“I will come back at 2:00,” he responded with a little bow and a click of his heels.

His words sounded almost like a threat, though I knew they weren’t meant to be one.

For Bobby, this was “good” behavior.

I shook my head and hurried off to my tables. Between them and the bar, lunch hour moved rapidly, and I felt as if I was always behind. Thankfully, by 1:30 p.m., people weren’t ordering much food, and Terry was able to step away from the kitchen and help me get the bar

back in order and the tables bussed. Several loads of dishes later, and I justified a trip to the ladies' room that I'd needed for more than an hour.

As I washed my hands, I recognized the fatigue in my eyes and the black bags under them. I honestly didn't know how long I'd be able to cover bartending, waitressing, and managerial duties. I sighed loudly, contemplating using Sam's absence to call Eric and ask him for help. Of course, the last time I'd done that, Charles Twining had been introduced into my life. And I lost a kitchen and almost my life out of that acquaintance!

"Actually, you *do* know how long you can do this," I said, trying to instill confidence into my own voice as I looked at the haggard face in the mirror, "until Sam gets back." I gave myself a nod of resolution as I dried my hands.

When I stepped out of the restroom, it was only to be greeted by Bobby.

Suddenly, the fact that Eric had left me multiple messages the night before was forefront on my mind, and my anxiety level skyrocketed.

"Is there a place where we can speak privately?" he asked.

I sighed with both weariness and wariness, but nodded and led him to Sam's office.

I gestured toward the chair in front of the desk, but I didn't wait for him to sit before taking Sam's chair. Gran would have given me "her look" for that act of rudeness, but I *needed* to get off my feet—and quickly.

"Miss Stackhouse," Bobby said, laying the courtliness on thick. "My master asks that you come to Fangtasia tonight for a sit-down with the new king's lieutenant."

"Fuck!" is the word I thought in my head. But I didn't say it. It had been months since I'd last seen Eric. Thus, it shouldn't have surprised me that I was getting a summons rather than an invitation to speak privately with Eric about our "issues." And, as the air seemed to disappear

from the room for a moment, I realized that a part of me had been excited that he'd called, excited that he wanted to see me. It turned out that it was business.

Just business.

I pushed my disappointment to the side—just as I'd been doing for months.

A few times, during the week or so after the takeover, I'd actually imagined that Eric would invite me out for a date—like I'd initially thought he'd done the night he took me to meet Niall. I even mentally picked out what I would wear—a simple, but elegant black dress that Tara had put aside for me until it went on sale at her store. Having given up, I'd finally worn the dress in December when Amelia had talked me into a girls' night out with Claudine.

I *know* that it was my disappointment over being summoned—by Bobby of all people—that made me bite out at him.

“You ever hear of a phone?” I asked—and not very kindly either.

“He left you messages last night—” Bobby informed, **“several. He told me to talk to you today, without fail. I'm just following orders.”**

I huffed even though I knew I had no right to be angry at Bobby—for once. In truth, given my full answering machine, my frustrating/frustrated roommate, and my uncharged phone, Eric would have had a very difficult time getting ahold of me the night before. I wondered briefly why he'd not just called the bar, but then I realized that he might have been thinking about privacy. That thought made me even more nervous.

Bobby went on. **“He said, ‘Track her down, deliver the message in person, and be polite.’ Here I am. Being polite.”**

He was telling me the truth, and it was just killing him. That was almost enough to make me smile.

But “almost” only ever worked with horseshoes and hand-grenades.

The truth was that Bobby *hated* having to be nice to me. He thought me little better than trailer trash. And he definitely found me unworthy of his master’s attentions.

With quick, efficient movements, he took two items from his briefcase: a velvet bag and a thick letter.

I stared at the items as if they were rattlesnakes.

“He said 7:00 p.m. would be perfect,” Bobby informed, closing his briefcase and getting up.

“Perfect for what?”

“My master did not elaborate.”

“What are these?” I asked, gesturing toward the items.

“I didn’t asked,” Bobby said as he left Sam’s office.

Staring at the items Eric had sent, I waited for Bobby’s mental signature to be out of the range of my telepathy.

And then I stared a little longer, though I couldn’t bring myself to touch either item.

After a few minutes, I admitted to being a coward and went to check on Holly—*actively* trying not to think about the items that had been delivered as I prepped the bar for the night and then helped Terry get the kitchen ready for D’Eriq.

Of course, my attempts *not* to think about them were in vain.

Would the note be a Dear John letter?

And what of the item in the velvet bundle?

Bill had once tried to pension me off. Would the bag contain some kind of vampire version of a parting gift? A cheap gold watch for past telepathic services rendered?

Or maybe there was nothing to fear at all! Maybe the envelope contained a more official version of my work agreement with Eric, and—by extension—Felipe de Castro. It would be just like Eric to have things put down in black and white. I could imagine a clause limiting the time commitment I was willing to make. Hell—knowing Eric—he would work health insurance and a life insurance plan, given my history. He was a practical vampire, after all.

In this case, maybe the bundle just held a “welcome *officially* to the Nevada team” gift. I found myself wondering what the vampire equivalent to a plant would be.

Or maybe there was a fountain pen in the bundle—something that I could use to sign the contract in blood?

As I continued trying *not* to wonder what was in the Bobby’s deliveries, my nervousness turned to anger.

How dare Eric? How dare he steal away my evening—an evening that I *really* wanted to be full of a comforting soup, a long bath, a good book, and an early bedtime.

How dare he take away my first free evening in days with his summons!?!

By 3:15 p.m., my nervousness and anger had morphed into rebellion. Screw Eric *and* his letter *and* his package! Screw his summons!

I resolved not to go to Fangtasia at all and began to help Holly with the prep work at the waitress station.

“Sook,” Holly said gently when I accidentally sliced my finger, ruining a batch of lemons, “why don’t you go ahead and take off for the day.”

“Huh?” I asked, even as I brought the little wound up to my mouth, thankful that it would have time to scab over before my meeting with the vampires—*not* that I was going, I reminded myself.

“Clearly, you are stressed out about something,” Holly said compassionately.

“What? No I’m not!” I insisted.

She chuckled warmly. “Ever since uptight, fancy-suit guy left, you have been buzzing around this place like a bee on crack! You’ve been stocking and chopping like it’s an Olympic sport.”

I had to laugh at her descriptions. I always had been one to work and clean when I was stressed out. Of course, I had also always been one to put off dealing with things—like the two things on Sam’s desk.

“Why don’t you take off for the day, Sook,” Holly suggested again.

“Oh—I couldn’t,” I said guiltily.

She waved me off. “What will staying till 5:00 p.m. really get you? You know that Tanya will pick things up real quick since she used to work shifts here. And Danielle’s a good waitress too. Meanwhile, Terry and I won’t have any problems at all covering things till the next shift gets here—right Terry?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Not a problem!” Terry responded loudly from the kitchen.

I sighed. Generally—given how tired I was—I wouldn’t have hesitated in taking her up on the offer, and I knew that Terry and Holly could handle the afternoon traffic easily. Plus, I trusted both of them.

However, if I went home now, then potential problems with Octavia and Amelia would arise. After all, I’d told Amelia that I would have no time for Octavia’s Wal-Mart trip this

afternoon, and if I got home before 4:00 p.m., then the older woman would think I'd been lying. And she would likely mention it to Amelia, who would likely be mad that she'd had to skip her lunch with Tray for "no good reason."

I sighed again, wondering when my house had become a place to be avoided.

I did like having roommates—in a way. And it was better than the alternative. After Gran had died, I'd spent a lot of lonely nights there—too trapped in my own thoughts and regrets to get any real peace.

With the exception of a single, beautiful week more than a year before.

Undeniably, Amelia was fun, and we'd become fast friends. Still, it was often tiring being around her. And then I'd felt obligated to let her mentor move in. With yet another tired sigh, I realized that I'd been spending more time in my room lately—even avoiding the "public areas" of my house at times because I missed the quiet.

Apparently—when it came to having roommates—I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

It was then that an image popped into my head. After I'd learned to drive, I'd found a pretty pond on the property caddy-corner to Gran's, and—if anyone owned the land—they'd never bothered to go there. There was a rough road leading to the pond. Teens sometimes went there to swim in the summer—or to make-out on warm nights. But in January, in the afternoon/early evening, I figured it would be the perfect place to hide out and read Eric's letter.

To be honest, I was reticent about reading it either at work or at home. My gut was telling me that the words in it were private. And my heart was telling me that it was likely about to be broken. Who wouldn't prefer to be alone when something like that happened?

“Thanks, Holly. Thanks, Terry!” I said, hoping that they heard the appreciation in my voice. “I think I’ll take you up on that offer!”

Holly gave me a little smile.

After I put a Band-Aid on my cut and gathered up my things, including the bundle and the letter, I made my way to the pond.

As I thought it would be, the place was deserted. I quickly got out of the car to retrieve the quilt in my trunk so that I wouldn’t get too cold with the car—and its heater—shut off. I dropped my shields and stretched out my telepathy as far as I could.

I sighed with sweet relief. *Nothing.*

I would be able to leave my shields completely down, resting them.

It was a rare treat for me nowadays.

After draping the quilt over my legs, I took the items Bobby had delivered out of my purse. Then, I put both on the car seat next to me.

Fearing the letter more, I opened the bundle first and gasped as I took out the same ancient-looking knife that Eric had used to cut his flesh in Rhodes—the same knife that had enabled me to drink from his chest so that he and I could maintain a little privacy from Andre when we exchanged blood.

I shivered at the implications of the item in my hands. Was Victor, like Andre, demanding that Eric and I exchange in front of him?

Taking a deep breath, I put the dagger down and bit the proverbial bullet—which I’d also done in a *literal* way a time or two.

I opened the envelope carefully since the paper that it was made of seemed too fancy to tear. The sheets inside the envelope were made of the same thick parchment.

Carefully, I opened the pages—though my eyes closed for a few moments.

What was that prayer that Andy Bellefleur always said to himself when he'd been attending his A.A. meetings regularly? If I remembered correctly, it was called the Serenity prayer. I'd never been much of a drinker, but it struck me that the prayer was perfect for the occasion, so I said it aloud, hoping that voicing it would give it just a little more power.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.

After I was done praying, I opened my eyes and began reading.

Chapter 4: Cannot Change

Dearest Sookie,

It might surprise you to know that the concept of independence was heavily frowned upon in my human culture. It might surprise you to know that my human life was never truly my own. My father was a chieftain, though he was little known beyond the people-groups that immediately surrounded our own.

Because of the times and the way of things, he was what one could call “a big fish in a little pond.” I had an older brother, Leifr. He was my father’s heir, and he was to be the one who would take over the village when my father died or became too old or infirmed to rule.

One might think that the fact that I had an older brother let me “off the hook.” But the times were different then—very different. I was a “spare” son—no more, no less. Thus, it was my duty to prepare as if I would one day rule, while at the same time showing clear deference to my brother. It was a difficult proposition to balance these conflicting ideas, but if I showed any ambition while Leifr was alive, I understood—and accepted—that he would kill me. And—if he didn’t—my father would. You must understand; it’s just the way things were. I had no bitterness against them. In fact, “bitterness” was not an emotion I learned until much later.

And, truly, I never had a thought that my life could be any different. I never wanted for it to be different. I simply did my duty—and did it in the way it was required of me. Indeed, the life I led was mapped out from my birth.

I hope that you will indulge me as I further explain.

I was never asked if I wanted to learn the sword. I was never consulted over whether I wanted to learn to hunt and to plant crops. I was simply taught these things. I was deemed a man at twelve and sent on raids with the other men. I was told to kill people I didn’t know and to

take things that didn't belong to me, but I never questioned the morality of such things. Those things simply were. Had I been in a group that took women against their will as a part of the conquest, I am certain that I would have done as they did, but I was not in such a group—for which I am now grateful—so I did not adopt that practice. However, my people did capture slaves when we were on our raids. If they survived and proved cooperative and productive, they would eventually become members of our village.

Sometimes, the slaves would become the lovers of various warriors; whether they were female or male didn't much matter. I suppose they were similar to the modern individuals who choose to be prostitutes or strippers because their career choices are limited. The other slaves that were taken were most often put into the fields—to work the crops. But they didn't question their place in the world any more than anyone else did. Most of them simply toiled like the rest of us and were eventually absorbed into our culture—adapting to the roles that they were given and having children of their own that continued in the same vein. Honestly, anyone we captured who was unlikely to fulfill his or her expected role was easy enough to spot, and these people were generally thrown to the sea over the sides of our longboats before our return trip home was finished.

I suppose you would view all of this as savagery. But—to us—it was simply life.

Leifr married a woman named Aude when he was sixteen. I think she was around fourteen, which was closer to my age at the time. Almost immediately, she conceived a child—a sign of my brother's virility and worth. And when she bore a son, my status changed again. I became much less valuable in a way, but I was still expected to serve a role. I was a trained warrior, and I was to have my father's and brother's and nephew's backs. I was to hunt for the

people of the village. I was to kill when needed to increase my people's worth. I was to perform my duty without question.

Oh—don't get me wrong. I enjoyed my life in a way. I remember laughing as I sparred with my brother or other men in the village. I remember boasting when I killed the largest buck of the season one year. I remember listening to the stories told around fires with smiles of anticipation on my face. But the main aspect of my life was duty.

With the male line secured through my brother, my father was limited in the kinds of marriages that he could arrange for me. I would, of course, have to marry a woman of status, but she could no longer be too valuable of a prize. Thus, my father bided his time in marrying me off, looking for me to further distinguish myself in battle so that my potential breeding stock could become an element he could barter with.

However, things changed when my brother was killed in battle—as my nephew was still an infant. Almost immediately, I was made to marry Aude. Though I think she had affection for my brother, I never saw outward grief from her. And I was in her bed, fulfilling my duties as her husband, within a week of Leifr's death.

Without pause or question, I took over the raising of my dead brother's son. And when Aude began to bear my children, I never thought to raise mine above Leifr's son. In my mind, they were all one; thus, I began training Leifr's boy to be chieftain.

Eventually, Aude bore a second son—a spare.

Soon after, my own father died. And I took over as the leader of my people. I did my duty to them, though I never felt privileged or happy because I led them. I felt responsible. I felt more weight upon my shoulders, though I never thought to wish that my existence was otherwise.

And then Aude died as she tried to bring a sixth child into the world. The child went with her. He would have been yet another spare son.

After that, it was my duty to marry again—to secure a mother for my children and to create a possible alliance with a neighboring clan. I did not cry for Aude, though she was a good wife. I simply went on about my obligations to my people.

It was when I was returning to my village after I made a new match that my maker found me.

He fucked me. He drained me. He turned me. I cannot remember the order.

And my status altered yet again.

Not surprisingly, the notion of independence was just as foreign to me as a new vampire as it was when I was a human. My maker could command me, but the truth was that I didn't require much commanding.

I had been conditioned to be obedient and dutiful, both things that Appius required.

And things that he resented in a way. He'd killed other children for resisting too much. I think that he might have killed me if I had I done the same.

During the last several centuries, I have looked back at my time with my maker as being something that I would not choose again, but—as I've indicated—the concept of choice was quite foreign to me as a new vampire. As a human too. Beyond simple things, such as, “Would I bed this thrall or that one?” or “Would I eat the stew or the fish?”, I simply didn't have many choices.

With my maker, I exchanged one set of duties and behaviors for another. Appius Livius Ocella taught me to hunt and to feed the vampire way. And I learned. I never questioned the ethics involved in feeding or glamouring or killing. I did as I was told without rebellion, which

was truly a foreign concept to my people. Instinctively, I knew that Appius was more powerful than I was, so when he wanted me to become his sex partner—his thrall—I complied, even though sex with another man was neither something I'd done before him nor something I particularly enjoyed. During my human days, however, I'd performed many duties that I'd not enjoyed. But I had rejected the amorous advances of stronger men during the long journeys at sea. One simply didn't fuck the son of a chieftain unless he welcomed it; of course, I witnessed other men fuck one another—but only when there was willingness on both sides.

No one thought “less” of the men who took pleasure and release in one another, for homosexuality didn't carry with it the same kind of taboos that it does for some Americans today. After all, the boats were cold and the journeys were long and lonely.

Anyway, I am sure that—by now—you are wondering why I've told you this history about me.

Perhaps, you think I want your pity. But that is not it.

I have told you so that you understand that the world has stayed the same just as much as it has changed.

Some vampires adapt, while others do not.

Some, including my maker, are still utterly footed in old-world views. I am positive that Appius still considers me his property to do with as he wishes. However, now I am—as Pam might describe—a piece of old clothing that was so used that, even if it came back into style, would be left in the back of the closet. And I am more than fine with that.

But here is the salient point: many kings and queens also view their subjects as property—pieces on a chess board that they own.

I'd had hope that Felipe was more modern in his thinking, and perhaps he is. But Victor is not, and Victor has been placed in control of Louisiana, so it seems that the yoke around my neck is to be tighter than I would have wanted.

Still, Felipe has decided to keep me on the chessboard; if you know chess, you might think of me as a knight—a valuable piece, unique in its movements, but ultimately expendable. Certainly, if Victor “helps” Felipe to play the game, he might soon whisper into his master’s ear that he should sacrifice his knight in order to take—say—a queen.

You.

And if that happens, I will be unable to do a damned thing to stop it.

Indeed, despite the fact that it will be deplorable for you to hear, there are some things that cannot be changed. Even by a thousand-year-old Viking.

First, now that he’s my king, I cannot outwardly defy Felipe. The best I could do would be to go into hiding and isolate and kill his minions one by one. But I doubt I would ever get close to Felipe himself. I don’t have the resources to defeat him in open battle, and—even if I did—I would be dealt the true death for treason, for, according to the rules of my world, I have no just cause to challenge him.

A knight might be able to kill a king in a game of chess, but Felipe is not the king in the scenario. He is the one playing the game—the one moving the pieces.

By all rights, he could have killed me at your home on the night of the takeover. But he did not.

In swearing fealty to him, I have become his. If he orders me to perform a can-can dance in his presence, I would have to put on a pretty little skirt and dance away. If I didn’t, I would be punished.

And then I would dance.

Or die.

Second, another thing that cannot change is that vampires see themselves as superior to all other beings. That is why, according to my world, you are property—currently my property just as much as I am Felipe’s. Actually, your relative status is much less according to the rules of my world. As a human—as my human bonded—you are to, quite literally, heel to me, just as Andre once suggested. In a blood bond between a vampire and a human, the vampire is supposed to have the upper hand. I should be able to command you. But I cannot. Otherwise, you would have handed me that goddamned soda can bomb in Rhodes!

Trust me—I was trying my damnedest to get you to give it up.

Your ability to deny my blood, ironically enough, undermines both of us. If it is seen that you can defy me—deny the blood of your bonded—I will be looked upon as weak, you will be taken from me, I will likely be killed, and you will be forced to bond with another. Once it is known that you cannot be controlled by that vampire either, any freedom you had left would be forfeit. Or you might just be killed.

Vampires, especially old ones who do not like to adapt, prefer to destroy that which they cannot control.

Wouldn’t a chess player destroy any piece capable of moving on its own? Especially a rogue one?

Ironically enough, it is only with the bond that I have any kind of say whatsoever in your life—say that is given precedence to even the king’s say. Of course, I am his subject, so he need only order me in order to order you.

Or he could simply kill me and take you.

As for you? Officially, you no longer have any personal say in your life or choices; I am, quite literally, seen as your master by my kind. Just like the thralls in my human days, you are part of a new society—the supernatural world—though a valuable part.

But make no mistake, Felipe, Victor—everyone who doesn't know us—believes that you open your legs to me any time I wish it and that you feed me your blood any time I want it. They believe that your telepathy is mine to command. Should it become known that this is not how things are between us, I will be deemed unfit by my king. And if I am unfit in one way—well—Victor will tell Felipe that the knight on his chessboard is useless. I would be killed. Or Felipe could simply have me punished by putting me in silver for a month or so. Then, he could claim the right of “looking out for you” given my lack of fitness for the task.

Knowing you, Sookie, I am certain that you are crying out against the very concept of everything I've written, but—like I said—there are things that I cannot change.

But there are some things that I can. I think you know me well enough to know that I am not the sort of vampire who has refused to change—to evolve.

The concepts of independence and choice are likely even more meaningful to me—more valuable—than they are to you. I don't mean to belittle your own notions of these concepts; I just want you to understand that I view every choice that I am afforded as precious. I value all my days—when no other being commands my actions—as gifts.

Those days had become more and more common when I was Sophie-Anne's sheriff, but you should know that I never took them for granted.

Not a single one of them.

I covet each choice I have as if I were a greedy child. I revel in them.

I recognize each of them as what it is—the best evidence that I’ve ever had that there is a god.

Following are some of the choices I’ve had that pertain to you—and the choices you have as well. But I must begin with a little context.

When you introduced Barry to Stan, you inadvertently helped your own situation—and, therefore, mine. Barry is clearly not as powerful of a telepath as you are—clearly not as in control. But, by choice, he is one of Stan’s retinue in a way that you have never been forced to be by any monarch of Louisiana.

At least, not yet.

In truth, Barry is part of the reason why Felipe hasn’t already called you to Las Vegas. You see—Felipe called in a favor to Stan and hired Barry to do some screenings before Rhodes. Barry tired easily. He needed days of rest between sessions; after spending only one evening in one of Felipe’s crowded casinos, he suffered from a debilitating headache. Felipe sent him back to Stan before his allotted time was up and demanded a partial refund since he got very little benefit from Barry’s visit.

Apologetically, Stan appeased Felipe, but he later divulged to me that he was pleased that the situation had occurred so that others would be less likely to covet his asset.

Don’t get me wrong, Barry is not seen as useless. You and he are both viewed as heroes of Rhodes; however, your skill level is thought to be equivalent to Barry’s. Sophie-Anne, of course, recognized your usefulness, but—thankfully—she didn’t boast about your level of skill. Thus, it is believed that you have some ability—like Barry.

But that you might be more trouble than you are worth—also like Barry.

I will admit that I have worked to foster this notion. First, after Dallas, you will note that I haven't asked you to perform your telepathic services for me—at least not officially. Given this fact, and especially now that you are my bonded, others should have assumed that I honestly haven't found you that useful.

I am known as a practical vampire, after all.

I hoped that no one would suspect that it is my regard for you that dictates my behavior toward you. Of course, from your point of view, you may feel that my behavior toward you is cold and heartless.

I suppose I cannot blame you if you do.

Bill has the luxury to swear up and down that he would die for you—that he loves you.

Those are not words that I would choose to say in the presence of others. Those words would demonstrate that you are valuable to me on both personal and professional levels. My enemies could use you, and my leaders would covet you.

Make no mistake—vampires are predictable in one way: If something is important to another, then they view it as valuable too.

I suppose this is similar to your media telling you that a new technological trinket is valuable just because someone famous has it.

Therefore, the more I seem to notice you, the more others will, too.

Going back to the chess analogy, consider this: a queen is considered a great asset. In many ways, she is the most powerful piece, and the loss of her is often a game-changer. On the other hand, a single pawn isn't nearly as noticed.

Victor became intrigued with you the night of the takeover. By not approaching you since then, I have been hoping to convey that it was coincidence that I was at your home on the night of the takeover.

That I was there for merely some kind of a booty call.

I was trying to make him think that, instead of a queen, you are a mere pawn.

I can imagine your temper boiling right now.

But you must—at least—acknowledge that my choice to “change the narrative” of the night of the takeover by pretending that you mean very little to me has afforded you the ability to hold on to many of your own choices up until now.

Here is the myth that I chose to project to my new rulers: Sookie Stackhouse isn't really that valuable to me. In fact, she can't do much of anything that a little glamour cannot accomplish. Would I really allow her to stay in Bon Temps and work for a lowly shifter if she was an indispensable asset? Hell no! I would keep her close!

I wanted them to assume that you smell better than you taste; otherwise, why wouldn't I have called you to me and made you be my constant blood source? I am vampire, after all.

I wanted them to assume that you are lousy in bed. Admittedly, to foster this notion, I have insinuated that you were allowed to be with Quinn only because I had no need of your “meagre” services in that capacity, except for the occasional “booty call.”

Are these things lies? Yes.

But they are also choices.

My preference would have been to continue the seduction plan I had begun to implement in Jackson. I wanted you so badly by then—and I want you still.

But after the witch's curse, I chose with you in mind—not me.

And now that you know how much my choices mean to me, I hope that you will understand the significance of this.

About a week after the Hallow business, Sophie-Anne called me and questioned me about you—about the power of your skills, your disposition, etc. Of course—at that time—I didn't know that Bill had been sent for you in the first place.

I told her only that you and I had a “contract” so that you would do work for me. I claimed to be your “manager.” I didn't offer any other particulars, and—thankfully—she didn't push.

Why was I so grateful that she let the matter drop for the time being? I will admit that I didn't understand my reasoning at the time. All I knew was that I didn't want Sophie-Anne to understand your true value to me anymore than I want Victor or Felipe to do so now.

When I told you that I didn't like having feelings in Jackson, I could have also conveyed that I was unused to most kinds of feelings. The ones I had for you were all but foreign to me. Of course, without the memories of our time living as a wedded couple—which is how I now view our days in your home, by the way—I didn't understand how my feelings had gotten even stronger during the time I was cursed.

I know now.

As I am certain you can understand, given my explanation of my background, any personal feelings or preferences I had were viewed as irrelevant when I was a human and a young vampire. In fact, they were punished—whipped from me as a human youngster and fucked out of me as Appius's child.

As I said before, I have evolved over time—becoming more familiar with the concept of personal choice. But it might surprise you to know that some things that you take for granted were hard lessons for me to learn on my own.

For example, even after Appius got tired of me and told me to leave his side, I continued on as if he were still watching me. I moved through life and followed the same kinds of routines he had set for me. Appius trained me to use my superior senses and vampire gifts to become an even better fighter than I had been as a human, but he never taught me how to be an independent being. He'd been an aristocrat and a general during his human life, and that was how he behaved during our time together, too. We would spend time in monarchs' courts. In exchange for my maker's and my service, a king or queen would offer Appius payment and shelter. Thus, for a while, I drifted from court to court, offering my soldiering services on a freelance basis.

You will find this strange—perhaps even pathetic—but it took me more than a decade to realize that I could begin fucking women again. For almost two hundred years, Appius allowed me to have sex only with men. Actually, that is not quite accurate. Appius and others more powerful than me would use my body as they willed, so I can't say that I actually "fucked" anyone else, though I was fucked a lot. In addition, Appius commanded me not to touch my own cock to seek my own pleasure. And he certainly never felt the need to touch me. In fact, he used to find it amusing to fuck me or watch me being fucked for hours—even as I would beg to be touched so that I could have a release.

Perhaps, I should not say these things. Even as I write, I wonder why I am confessing so much to you—explaining things that should go unsaid in "polite company." Bill wouldn't speak of such things; he has always thought of you as a "delicate Southern Belle," however.

I know better. I know that the heroine in your favorite movie shook her fist toward the heavens and defied God himself. I know you would risk your well-being (mental and physical) to find the murderers of a friend and vindicate someone who—at best—was scared of you. I know that you would take a stake for a vampire whom you'd never met. I know you would try to save a vampire with whom you'd just been forced to bond—instead of running from a building full of bombs.

For these reasons, you are beyond the scope of my choices, Sookie. But I have, would, and will kill to be yours. That—I can choose.

Tears clouding my eyes, I stopped reading for a moment. I lay my head against the steering wheel, inadvertently activating the horn. But I barely heard it, for I was weeping too loudly. Sorrow, anger, fear, loss—and something else.

Something a lot like love.

Chapter 05: Courage

SOOKIE≡ POV, continued

After I'd cried myself out for the time being, I lifted up my head and continued reading Eric's letter.

Sookie, I am glad that you cannot hear my thoughts because I want to spare you from the graphic details of my memories, but I also know that—if you could hear them—your overriding reaction would be pity for me and not disgust of me.

In truth, however, you should not pity me. I did not pity myself at the time, nor do I look back upon my centuries with Appius as particularly bad. Yes—he used my body. And, yes, he could be a sick and twisted bastard when it came to sex, but, other than that, my life was not so bad. In current, human terms, one might have categorized me as the kind of being who liked his job, but had a home-life that was shitty.

If he tried to do the same to me now—now that I have changed into the “me” you know—my state would be pitiable. But let us hope that does not occur.

As I was saying before I got off-track (sorry; I did not know I was so prone to rambling), for a long time after Appius expelled me, I continued to have sex only with vampire males who were what would be called “dominant” in this day and age. Or, if I was between the courts of monarchs, I would glamour a human male to give me blood and to fuck me. Though—when he'd sent me away—Appius had lifted all of the commands he'd placed upon me, save for the one that I never harm him, I rarely touched myself or asked others to touch me.

Now, it's odd—difficult even—for me to think about that time, given the fact that I've allowed my own preferences to guide me for so long.

Why did it take me so long to simply choose what I preferred once I was “free?”

Because even away from my maker, I didn't realize I could.

As I said before, I had been molded. I'd had no choices for so long with Appius—not even the little ones I enjoyed as a human. I suppose I was suffering from what psychologists nowadays call Stockholm Syndrome. Today, what Appius did to me would be called rape; at the time, I thought it was my duty to serve him in any way he wished. And that duty was the only conception of the world that I had. There was no option B or door number two. And, even if there had been, I doubt if I would have been capable of recognizing it.

You would not understand the euphoria and the fear that I experienced when I made my earliest choices, when I began living my life in the way I wished.

How I struggled at first!

But slowly and surely, I changed my way of thinking. I began to choose women for blood and sex. I chose to use my glamouring ability to get an education. I chose to learn about industry and trade. As a human, I'd had an interest in how our people's long-boats were made, though—of course—I didn't have the opportunity to pursue that interest since building boats was not an aspect of my duties. However, centuries later, I chose to study how ships were built. I chose to learn how to design them myself. I earned my first legitimate fortune when I chose to open a shipyard.

Maybe, one day, I can tell you about the frigates I designed—if you are intrigued.

The point is that I chose these things because I liked them. I was happy to be doing such things.

Happiness was novel to me. Exciting. Astonishing.

But, even then, I was always under the control of others. I had to pay tribute to the monarchs in the areas where I settled. Since I was known to be a good fighter, I was often called into their service when there were threats. It didn't matter if I agreed with the fight or not; I would simply obey. Sometimes—at court—I would be noticed for my physical attributes, too. Especially as I became older compared to other vampires—I had much say in whom I fucked. However, if a king or a queen wanted me sexually, I couldn't deny him or her.

Such practices are still in effect, but—thankfully—older vampires' preferences are taken into account, and it would be untoward for someone younger than me, even a king like Felipe, to require that I have sex with him. However, if he showed a particular preference for me, I would likely just fuck him and get it over with. There would be many fewer potential problems that way! Trust me—I know.

Again, you are likely wondering why I am blathering on and on in this confessional way. Would it surprise you to know that this is how I have always wished to speak with you?

You think that I want you for your body and your blood and your telepathy. And I do. But, in you, I also see an infinitely more amazing gift!

Vampires don't often share themselves. We fear that others will learn about and exploit our weaknesses. We covet the lessons we have learned and the knowledge that we have. Indeed, it is rare that we speak openly to anyone. Even with Pamela, I've had to hold back, though she is an excellent child! However, as her maker, I must project strength. And, frankly, there are things even within this letter that she would not be able to understand.

Don't get me wrong—she had her own struggles between duty and independence. But by the time she was alive, the notion of rebellion was robust. She didn't like the constraints on the women of her time, and she didn't want to marry the older upper-class man her parents had

chosen for her because she found him unattractive. I'm sure that you won't be surprised that—even then—she was not one to be stifled; in fact, it was her rebellion that put her in my path.

You may be wondering why I feel you will understand my history better than my own child.

It is simple. Like me, you know what it is like to have things happen to you that are completely beyond your control.

Your telepathy, for example.

Yes—I want you to master your gift and find all of its potential advantages, preferably for the both of us. But I also recognize that you hate it and wish there was some way to eliminate it.

Indeed, it was not your choice to be inundated with the thoughts of everyone around you. It was not your choice to be basically ignored by your fairy kin who might have helped you understand how to better use your telepathy.

But, despite not having control, you have adapted. Untrained by anyone else, you conceptualized your own shielding. Where others might have been driven crazy or have been compelled to hate mankind because of hearing all of its sins, you chose to follow the lessons of your grandmother and your god.

I have seen you forced into situation after situation that you would have preferred not to be in. But you survived each one intact; you haven't let them alter the kind of person you've chosen to be. You see—we are the same in this way; at least I hope that I have evolved enough to be considered like this.

Like you.

I have been and will continue to be pushed into situations I don't prefer, but I can choose how to react to them. I can choose not to let them defeat me.

I can tell you all of the things in this letter because I trust you. I don't worry about the security of my words because I know you will keep them as safe as you kept me when I was without memories.

How wonderful it is to trust! How rare it is to be understood!

You would have to be a thousand years old to truly understand.

But I need to stop rambling about my life and get to the meat of the matter. Dawn is but ninety minutes away, and Bobby will be here soon to collect this letter and the object which you must now decide how to use.

First, I must tell you more about blood giving and sharing. As I have indicated before, the giving of vampire blood to a human is done almost exclusively as a means of control. Renfield was fictional, but the character was not far off from what reality can be—if blood is given often. Renfield-types are called blood-slaves and are completely tied to and controlled by their masters. After a while, nothing of their former selves remain. However, the vampires do not feed from such creatures because they don't want to create bonds with them.

You must understand—even one dose of his or her blood will give a vampire an advantage over a human. And a vampire does not need to have the blood of his or her victim for this to be the case. Bobby has had my blood one time, for instance—though I've not had his. We have what is known of as a blood-tie; it is not permanent, nor would I ever allow it to be. My blood in him has allowed me to know that he is truthful and loyal to me. I glamour him not to tell my secrets, but if he were to be bribed by a rival, for example, his blood would tell me of his deception. Since I have no desire to renew his contract, I will cut him loose as soon as the blood-tie wanes to the point that I cannot feel his attitude.

The basic rule is this: the more blood a vampire has in the human, the more influence he or she will have over the human. Obviously, there is not enough of my blood in Bobby's body for me to actually control him. Otherwise, he would be more respectful of you, even in his thoughts.

As opposed to a blood-tie, a blood-bond requires that the vampire and human exchange blood, though this needn't happen simultaneously.

Since you and I have now exchanged multiple times, our bond has become permanent. That is how you are able to feel what I feel. As it stands, my insight into you and your emotions is stronger than ever, and that won't wane—even if we never exchanged again. In turn, if you probed, I am certain that you could feel my emotions just as much. You will also be more comfortable in my presence—as I am in yours. And—with training—you could learn to track me, as I can you. Finally, now that we are bonded permanently, we can “push” emotions to each other. But, as would be expected, the vampire still retains some control. I should be able to “push” you hard enough to guarantee your compliance, bending you to my will as I could a progeny, but I've already covered that I cannot do this. Everything else about our bond seems to be “normal” thus far—except for the fact that you can shield against my “push.”

As you can surely discern, by completing a bond, the vampire and human are on more equal footing in many ways, but that can be dangerous for both of them, which is why completed bonds are so rare. For instance, you would be able to tell others if I were lying to them. You could also be tortured until you would lead enemies to me.

That is why vampires will generally give their blood to humans they wish to claim only once, but will take their humans' blood as much as they desire. The humans in this category are known as “pets.” A pet is a claimed human that a vampire has an interest in beyond a single feeding. The human might have especially good blood or be good at sex—or divert the vampire

with his or her sense of humor. Vampires might choose a pet for any number of reasons. Pets are given some distinction in vampire culture; in other words, they are viewed as more significant than mere foodstuffs. By tradition, the vampire who “owns” the pet (and—yes—it is seen as ownership) has exclusive rights, though he or she often shares with nest-mates. For unique pets, an older vampire can vie to take a pet from a younger one, but the younger will most often give in without much of a fight. After all, an older vampire—if he or she covets something enough—will likely just plan the murder of a younger one should he or she refuse to give a pet up.

The gods know I was considering that with Bill! You were a prize I wanted from the moment I laid eyes on you.

Talk about coveting!

Again, I can just imagine your anger. But this is what honesty looks like, Sookie. It is often dark and unpleasant.

When Bill brought you into Fangtasia the first time and declared that you were “his,” he was, quite literally, claiming you as a pet. A more conventional pet/master relationship was what Hadley and Sophie-Anne had before Hadley was turned.

As I said, you and I are now permanently bonded. However, to most vampires, you are still simply a pet—though you’re at the top of the pet hierarchy. Because of this, an older vampire or a monarch could still try to push me to share you or even to transfer your “ownership.”

Trying to prevent this kind of thing from happening, I told Victor and Felipe that Andre and Sophie-Anne had forced me to bond permanently with you because neither of them wanted

the bother of feeling your emotions—let alone the kind of vulnerability that a permanent bond could bring.

This explanation makes sense to Felipe, but it has not worked with Victor. Through a spy I have in New Orleans, I have learned that Victor is already making plans to frame me for treason. If his plan works, Felipe would be forced to execute me; then Victor intends to take you as his own. According to my source, he is obsessed with the idea of having you; he covets you because he has seen through my lies and has discovered how important you are to me.

Make no mistake—I, too, covet you. More than ever!

But my feelings are decidedly “un-vampire-like.”

Yes, I want you for my own. But I do not want to own you. I do not consider you a pet or a commodity because I choose not to.

I have chosen to love you.

Yes, Sookie. That four letter word that you seem to doubt on principle—unless it comes from Bill’s lips.

Love.

In fact, I want you to pledge with me.

There are two kinds of pledgings done among supernaturals: those which are political and those which are based on love.

Pledging is the closest thing that most supernaturals have to human marriage. Those done for political reasons are finite; depending on the species involved, different time frames are employed. Weres and shifters tend not to pledge, but if they do it is for no less than fifty years. Between vampires, pledgings may last for up to one hundred years. Daemons pledge for two

hundred years—at minimum. I do not know the time frame for fairies, but I know they recognize the practice among their kind.

You witnessed a political pledging between Russell of Mississippi and Bartlett of Indiana—though the two also have affection for one another. There are ways out of such pledgings. Hell, most monarchs avoid being pledged like a plague! They have seen that pledging is a prelude for assassination about fifty percent of the time when it is made for political reasons. Case in point: Sophie-Anne and Peter Threadgill of Arkansas.

Pledgings between vampires are usually political in nature, as you might imagine. Pledgings among the Dae are almost always for love and are different from their other form of what you would call marriage. Except in rare occasions, the two-natured tend to skip the pledging and go with a human-style wedding. I've not been able to find any specific data on fairies though.

Political pledgings can be ended by the death of one of the partners—as I've already alluded to. In other words, they allow for flexibility.

Inter-species pledgings are recognized, but the only kind of those allowed are pledgings which are founded in deep devotion and commitment.

Love.

Otherwise, they are deemed “false” and nulled by the Supernatural Council.

They have no time limit. No expiration. Once they are done, there is no undoing of them.

As I am positive you can imagine, in vampire history, most pledgings occur between vampire monarchs. In the studies I've made during the previous months, however, I've found a few examples of pledgings occurring between vampires and demons, vampires and humans, and

even a vampire and a shifter in one case. In all of these “love-match” cases, the pair was blood-bonded, too.

A love-pledge is considered sacrosanct—inviolable. It cannot be interfered with—not by a maker, not by a king, not by a member of the Vampire Council, not by the pair themselves. Not even by the Ancient Pythoness herself!

Anyone who interferes with a love-pledged couple forfeits his or her life, and even the death of one of the pledged pair does not wipe out its efficacy, for the Supernatural Council is obliged to punish anyone who is responsible for the death and—more importantly—responsible for keeping the remaining person safe for the remainder of his or her life.

Human marriage vows often contain the line, “Until death do us part.” It is essential for you to understand that this concept is not included in the concept of pledging for love. In the case of a love-based pledge, it would be unheard of for the other member of the pair to bond, to pledge, or to “marry” again if a death occurred—though a casual lover could be taken for physical release. It is imperative for you to recognize that a pledge is stronger than a human marriage.

I have several reasons for wanting to pledge with you.

First, doing so would help to secure us both. As unlikely as it might be, Appius might come back into my life, and—if he did—he could command me to do whatever the fuck he wanted. I doubt if a blood-bond, even a permanent one, would deter him from taking you from me. Or he might order me to harm you, for that is the kind of thing he would find amusing. Were we pledged, such actions on his part would be met with by swift punishment from the Vampire Council. Similarly, Felipe couldn’t force us apart either; therefore, you couldn’t be commanded to live in Las Vegas and to work for him, which I’ve discovered he is considering as

an option. Also, my spy tells me that Victor Madden has already petitioned the king to have you move to New Orleans in order to serve in his territory.

Thankfully, his petition was denied—for the time being. But that is no guarantee that Felipe will continue to respect our blood-bond.

The second reason why I wish to pledge with you is related to the first: I wish for you to be able to retain as much of your independence and as many of your choices as possible. Pledged to me, you could maintain much of your current life. I could make a big production out of “becoming a modern, mainstreaming vampire.” I have already been outlining a profile that you and I would submit to Vampire GQ. In the profile, I would state that—although we cannot marry according to Louisiana laws—we have wed by supernatural tradition. I would explain—using generalities, of course—the sacredness of pledging. I would talk about how I support your decision to continue working and would compare you with the women of my time, who were very hard workers indeed! In short, I would do all I could to justify why you didn’t simply sit by my side looking pretty. I know that you view the concept of the “kept woman” with distaste, but it is exactly that kind of thing that vampires would expect for me to do with a human “wife.” In truth, it is already what they expect—since we are permanently bonded. As I am sure that you have fathomed, most human pets are “kept.”

Thus, according to custom, I should already be taking care of all of your needs, financial and otherwise—because I can. You should be dressed in expensive clothing. You should be driving a new, expensive car. This is the kind of thing that any affluent master would do for a pet. In addition, since we are permanently bonded, we should be living together. It is only the fact that Felipe believes I was compelled to bond with you—but would not have done so otherwise—which has kept him from punishing me for mistreating a permanently bonded pet.

You must understand. Felipe likely views your working for little more than minimum wage not as your choice, but as my disservice to you. And, according to my spy, Victor has been sharing his “concerns” with Felipe about what he is now calling my “disregard for an important asset.”

If we were to pledge, I could present your working as a “husband” indulging his headstrong and/or modern “wife.” And—even if I was privately thought to be mistreating you—no one could challenge me.

Of course, I might also remind you—often—that you need not work for the shifter in order to work. Your potential is boundless; you could do a great many things! It is your family’s economic status and your ability which have kept you from reaching elsewhere. I would challenge you: Are you truly happy being a waitress? Is that the work you really prefer? If the answers to those questions are “yes,” then you need but tell me, and I will never say another word about Merlotte’s or your work there—other than to ask you how your days there have gone.

The third reason I would like to pledge with you is to—ironically enough—limit the political bullshit. Situations like the one with Victor would be less likely to happen if we were pledged. Even if Victor managed to get me executed for treason, you’d be off limits unless he wanted to lose his head too. Yes—at times, we would have to offer your services to the king, but I believe we could do this just once a year—maybe twice. For a couple of weeks, we would visit Las Vegas—or wherever in his kingdom Felipe wished—and you could use your gift to serve him. And then we would go on with our normal lives. Of course, you would also be expected at summits, but those only occur every few years. To help our position, we would offer your service

to Felipe at no price—as a gift. He is a fan of courtly behavior; thus, he would like the idea of your working for him because of duty and honor—rather than for money.

The fourth reason I wish to pledge is purely selfish. I want to have the opportunity to convince you to love me, as you seem to have loved the man who lived with you with no memories. I would endeavor to win your heart. And—being pledged to you—I wouldn't have to worry about the repercussions of doing this openly. I understand that you have valid concerns regarding my interest in you. Therefore, I will offer up examples to support my candidacy as a good partner for you.

In Dallas—when you were initially hurt at the Fellowship church—did I not care for your wounds? Was I not careful and attentive as I took glass from your body? I did this out of concern for you. In fact, the only reason why I went to Dallas as Leif was to keep an eye on you—even though you were not my human at the time. You might believe that this was only because you were an asset, but it was more. I cared about your well-being.

Also in Dallas—after the bombing—did I not put aside my instinct to feed and hunt in order to take care of you? Yes—I will admit that I lost control of myself when I kissed you. But I stayed with you. I did so again in Jackson in the bar when Herveaux left you. You were my first priority in both cases.

That desire to put you before myself is very strong in me. In Rhodes when I protected you from Andre, I wasn't thinking about myself. And, again, after the takeover I put aside my personal desire to see you in order to try to manipulate Victor and Felipe's conceptions of our relationship.

I also believe that the sexual chemistry between us makes me a good candidate for your affections. I think that you are beautiful and my desire for you is—I'm sure—clear to you. I

believe that you find me desirable in a physical sense. My returned memories also confirm that we are compatible physically.

I think that we are compatible in other ways, too. We used to laugh together. We could, I think, have fun together. I would like to know your opinions about things. I would like to experience things with you and travel with you—as our schedules allow. And, as I have already made clear, I trust you and want to talk about my life with you.

I want to share my life with you, Sookie.

In front of your fireplace, you told me so much about yourself. In a thousand years, I have never felt more intimate with a being. It was nice to listen to you speak—to understand you better by listening to your words and your thoughts. I was grateful to hear even about the mundane things you chose to share with me. Even when I wasn't interested in the content of your words, I still enjoyed the intimacy of the conversation itself. I would like to experience all of this again—many, many times. But—in the future—perhaps you would do me the honor of listening in return.

Yes—I would like to have these kinds of exchanges with you very much!

And, as this letter teaches you, I am capable of sharing many words—though I'm sure they may be more difficult to say in person.

For a while. But I think we could muddle through—learning together?

However, you must also consider my shortcomings as you ponder whether you would like to pledge with me.

After the witch's curse, some of my behavior was harmful to us both—especially when I unintentionally harmed you. I can defend myself only by telling you that I was frustrated and

confused. I felt as if something had been stolen from me, and it seemed for a while that you were the thief. I know—now—that this was an error on my part.

But, by the time I had recognized this, you had begun a relationship with the Were-tiger. I suppose that some of my behavior during that period of time must be attributed to jealousy. And then I learned of Sophie-Anne's plan to have Bill procure you. And—given Sophie-Anne's more obvious interest in possessing you—it became necessary to be more cautious when it came to showing my own interest in you.

All I can promise is to try to behave more attentively if we are truly a couple. Though I cannot promise that I won't sometimes be jealous, I can vow that I will try to remember that my jealousy would be irrational—given the trust I have in you.

Also, you have called me high-handed before in that sometimes I “do” things without taking the time to consult with you. This is accurate, but—where I can—I will endeavor to evolve if we establish a relationship.

Undoubtedly, I will make errors. I have never been in a romantic relationship like the one I wish to establish with you. I would ask for your patience.

In addition to considering my personal shortcomings, you must also take into account the changes that we would be forced to make.

First, pledging would require that we became involved romantically—or at least seem as though we were. I would, clearly, prefer that this be a real aspect of our relationship. However, if not wanting such a thing is the only reason why you would turn me down, I offer the following compromise: you would, in public, need to pretend that we were a couple, and you would need to do little things to signal affection. For instance, we might share a dance if you were to spend time at Fangtasia. Or you might hold my hand as we walked somewhere together. These small

gestures would go a long way toward projecting the idea that we were pledged for more than simple convenience.

Remember, interspecies pledgings can be based on love only. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for you or for me to take another lover—at least not while we are both living. Should you choose a relationship with me, I will endeavor to satisfy you. Moreover, I would promise equal fidelity. Do not worry; it will not be a hardship for me to do so. I was more than satisfied with you when we were together. Regaining my memories merely substantiates my earlier claim that you are the best I've ever had.

Next, our living arrangements would need to change. I can see no way around this item. Simply put, we would have to share a home. I would be willing to move to Bon Temps—if some accommodations were made for a resting place for me. The small box in the closet of your guest room would do only for the short term.

Of course, your current roommates would likely be a problem. I doubt either of them would take kindly to living with a vampire, and I do not trust them with my safety as I do you. But, perhaps, a compromise might be made: a safe-room with a coding system built under your home? I think that the water table in your area is adequate to accommodate such a structure. I took the liberty of having a geologist write me a report on the issue, though I realize as I write this that you might see that as high-handed.

I am sorry.

Alternatively, you and I could live in one of my safe houses. I have a home on the outskirts of Shreveport which I believe would suit you quite well since I had you in mind when I bought it.

Wait. That was likely high-handed too.

Sorry again. As I said, I will learn.

Just so you know, the house suits me as well. I bought it after I remembered our time together because it has two beautiful fireplaces—one in the living room and one in the master bedroom suite. I've had the home renovated to fulfill all of the requirements I believe you would have, though—you must know that I had no expectation of your stepping foot inside of it. However, fitting the home for my dream of us was something I could do to take the edge off of my longing to come to you or contact you after the takeover.

Anyway, I remember looking at all of the recipes in an old box in your kitchen when I didn't have memories—or much to do with my late nights. I have outfitted the kitchen with the various implements required for the recipes, though some of the items are quite foreign to me.

A zester, for example. I had thought that the rinds of citrus fruits were always discarded. Obviously, I was incorrect.

I could not find the same model as your beloved coffee maker, though I took care to get something similar. There were more expensive brands on the market, but I felt something more like you were familiar with would be better.

Even as I write this, however, I shake my head. For all my carefulness, I fear that you will see all of my efforts as presumptiveness. Please do not. I saw it as

“Therapy” is probably the best word.

I cannot imagine that this letter has been the proposal of marriage you dreamed of when you were a girl.

Perhaps, you might imagine me on one knee in front of you—with a diamond ring?

But—then—I've not had the chance to win your affections yet, at least not in a conventional way.

Indeed, you are likely fuming right now. I can see your hands on your hips—your lips turned down into a frown.

I'm almost positive that you think that any positive feelings you have for me are from the blood—our bond. It won't matter that I swear to you that I have never used my blood to influence you. The fact that I might be able to is enough to make you distrust me—is it not?

This is why I give you the following instructions with very little hope. To pledge with me, all you have to do is bring me the dagger. Hand it to me while Victor is a witness. I will kiss it. That is all there is to it.

I began this long letter telling you about my early life, a life during which I did not recognize choice or agency or independence. Why I told you all of that will become even more apparent now.

Sometimes, there are no choices. There is only duty or death.

But, today, Sookie Stackhouse, I offer you the choices I can.

I have done much research since we completed our bond in Rhodes—since I first felt you disdain for the connection. I found a spell that can sever our bond. And likely—even as you are reading this—Bobby has already delivered the required materials to your home.

All but one—the dagger.

Your witches will be able to conduct the spell.

The incantation is, surprisingly, simple. It requires my blood, but there is a vial of that in what Bobby is delivering as well.

However, there are also dangers. If you break our bond, it will be open season on you. You'll have to leave your little corner of the world, or you will risk being taken by Felipe or—worse—Victor.

I've taken the liberty of sending a letter via Bobby to Claudine. It should arrive around 7:00 p.m. Should you choose to sever our bond, I suggest that you do so tonight and then flee to her immediately, lying low for a week or so. With Bobby's letter to the fairy is information about an account that you can access to help you escape. I have more money that I could ever use—including stacks of cash in Fangtasia's walls—so you should not feel bad about taking the comparative little I am giving you. Desmond Cataliades can be contacted to arrange for new identification and travel documents for you, for you cannot stay in Louisiana with Claudine indefinitely.

I suggest you seek a home near the equator; vampires tend to enjoy their nights and those places have less of them. Or—you might establish two homes—one in the extreme south and one in the extreme north. The less night, the better. Also, it is essential that I do not know your plans or your new name.

It is safer if I am ignorant.

The one choice I am incapable of giving you is the option for you to continue living as you have been. As your pledged bonded, I can give you the gift of your friends and family. I can attempt to manipulate the situation so that you can retain your employment with the shifter if that is your wish. I can take steps to help you stay in your home—though you would have to accept me as a living partner there.

I am sorry that I can no longer shield you, but the situation with Victor has come to a head.

Sever the bond and leave. Or pledge and stay.

Those are your two viable choices.

Both have merit. Think of the life you might have away from the small minds in this area. I know you love some of the people here, but have any of them ever truly valued you?

All the places you might see if you decided to travel! All the things you might do!

Free, Sookie! You could be free in a way that I could never be! That is one of the choices I offer you. And—in truth—it might be the choice I would make in your shoes. To be unencumbered. To be without a yoke.

The dagger is yours to do with as you wish. Like I said, it is an element needed to break the bond. Or it is the implement by which you could pledge to me. Again, the choice is yours.

Come to Fangtasia tonight at 7:00 p.m. Or make sure you sever the spell and leave the area by tomorrow night. Otherwise, Victor will come for you.

Of course, I would try to stop him. However, I currently have no proof of his machinations against me—beyond the word of a spy. Thus, if I went against him now, I would be signing my death warrant. But I am prepared for that contingency as well.

And, even if I could kill Victor and get away with it scot-free, there would be another regent or Felipe to challenge for you—as long as you are attainable.

I find that Bobby is at the gate, and I'm out of information to share.

I hope that you bring me the dagger tonight—that you agree to pledge to me. That is my preference.

But I am aware that I may never see you again. That thought saddens me more than you may ever know. It is another reason why I have written so much. This may be my only chance to do so.

However, do not consider me when making your choice; make the choice that is best for you.

Your bonded,

Eric Northman

Chapter 06: The Difference

SOOKI≡ POV, continued

I gasped as I finished Eric's long letter. Truthfully, each and every page had caused me to gasp.

And growl.

And cry.

And laugh.

And yell out into the growing night.

I felt tired, but I knew that the thousand-year-old author of the biography—the offer—in my hands had more right to be tired.

Since he was so independent and strong now, Eric as a controlled puppet was difficult for me to imagine.

“Two hundred years,” I sighed, unable to fathom what being virtually enslaved for that long would do to a person. I had the urge to sharpen a stake—just in case Appius ever showed his face near my bonded.

“My bonded,” I said with a shake of my head. “How does he *get* me better than anyone else ever has?” I asked the quiet car as I thought about Eric's analysis of my telepathy. He was right. I may not have chosen it, but—as soon as I was able—I *had* chosen how to deal with it.

I'd built my shields out of self-preservation.

Suddenly, I felt pretty proud about that.

I spoke to the letter as if it were Eric himself. “It's just like you, you highhanded vampire, to buy every possible kitchen gadget I might need.” But how could I be angry at him

for committing Gran's recipes to memory when he had nothing in his head but a bunch of blank spots.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?" I asked the paper angrily.

Of course, I already knew the answer to that question. If I would have had my eyes open from the start, I would have always known. "Timing," I muttered. "And naivety," I added with incredulity in my tone.

Eric Northman, thousand-year-old vampire, didn't know any more about romantic relationships than I did!

Why wouldn't he deal with things on his own? What I called highhandedness, he likely called "practical care." I'd thought that he was trying to take my choices away from me, but—in truth—he was choosing to care for me.

"The driveway. The coat," I whispered.

I shook my head again. "You even bought a house for me."

A house he didn't think I'd ever inhabit.

For a moment, I thought about Pam. From what I knew of Eric and her relationship, he insulated her from the rest of the world as much as he could. Now I knew that it was so that her own choices wouldn't be limited—any more than they had to be.

But as much as I recognized what I now had to call unselfishness in him, I was still angry at him. After all, he'd made plans and then back-up plans without consulting the one he was planning for!

Was he trying to manipulate me into some kind of supernatural marriage with him using fear tactics?

“No,” I said aloud, answering my own question. “He could have easily just tricked me into bringing him this knife without telling me that we would be pledging. He’s not manipulating me,” I added with a grateful sigh.

I thought again of the Serenity Prayer, and—once more—I recited it.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.”

I sighed. Eric was right. Undeniably, there were some things I couldn’t change. My life couldn’t go back to how it had been before Hadley spilled the secrets about my telepathy. The cat was out of that bag.

“And Bubba’s eaten it,” I said sourly—to nobody.

As I brought down my forehead to rest it against the steering wheel, I realized that I’d avoided truly accepting the unchangeable all of my life.

I’d never really accepted my telepathy. Instead, I tried to cover it up and pretend it wasn’t there. Every day, I did my best to block it. I’d rarely had a conversation about my handicap. Hell—even the fact that I still thought of it in such negative terms proved that I’d never accepted it.

It was a part of myself that I hated, and I knew that—because of it—I had never been able to love myself.

Or ever really even like myself.

I was too busy hiding myself.

Thus, it had been difficult for me to imagine others accepting me—let alone, loving me. And—if they did—it had always been *despite* my handicap.

At least, until vampires had entered my life.

“Accept what you can’t change, Sookie,” I ordered myself.

In my mind, I made a list:

Number one: Telepathy.

Number two: My brother being a selfish asshole 85% of the time. Okay 90%.

Number three: My first love being based upon a lie and a string of manipulations.

Number four: Vampires being a permanent fixture in my life.

Number five: Being seen as a commodity by most vampires.

Number six: Being—quite literally—at the mercy of the supernatural world.

And then I thought about the things I *could* change.

There were several paths before me. I could be stubborn and do nothing, pretending that Eric’s letter didn’t exist. However, I believed Eric when he said that things were coming to a head with Victor. Could I be lucky enough to kill Victor when he inevitably came after me? And—even if I did—would I be any better off? And what about Eric? Could I live with myself if he was killed trying to protect me from Victor?

Then, there were the two paths that Eric had offered me.

Pledging. To be honest, a part of me hated the idea. To connect myself to Eric in what would—at least—begin as a marriage of convenience of sorts went against a great many of my romantic notions. However, clearly, Eric saw this option as both convenient *and* romantic.

“He wants to *court* me,” I said disbelievingly, given the time that had passed since we’d last seen one another.

I thought about the marriages made during Eric’s human days.

“For duty,” I said aloud, even as I realized that Eric had spent a great deal of his letter alluding to how pledging to me would *not* just be a duty to him. I realized that—by offering me this choice—he was combining the very best parts of himself: his honor, which had been shaped and honed over the years, and his own desire for independence, which had been fought for with every ounce of his being. And I knew that, by pledging with me, he would be pushing Felipe and Victor. Despite the safety afforded to a pledged couple, my eyes weren’t shut. I figured that some of our enemies would come after us no matter what, but if we pledged, the wisest among them would be deterred.

“And Eric would just kill the dumb ones,” I said, shaking my head.

“This is the best he can offer me,” I gasped with realization. “It’s *everything* he can give. *Everything.*”

I adjusted the rearview mirror and looked into it, needing to see what my own eyes showed me—needing to match them with the complicated feelings that I was experiencing. But my eyes looked surprisingly gentle—full of affection for Eric. And I realized that that affection wasn’t just for the memoryless version of him either. It was for every part of him.

“*Everything,*” I muttered. “Damn him!” I added, speaking to my own eyes. But those eyes told me that I didn’t mean those words. In truth, I *wanted* to be courted by Eric. I wanted to believe that we could live a life similar to the one we’d enjoyed in my home for that precious week.

I wanted that more than anything.

But I was afraid.

“Afraid that choice will finally kill me on the inside,” I whispered, knowing that if I let myself love Eric as I knew I was capable—as I knew that I *already* did but was too afraid to acknowledge—I would be demolished if he got tired of me.

“And why wouldn’t he get tired of you?” I looked back at the eyes in the mirror. They were sad now, imagining betrayals the likes of which would harm me irreparably.

I imaged Eric doing some of the things that Bill had done.

Feeding from another when I was in the next room.

Seeking enemies and blood instead of making sure I’d survived a battle.

Becoming cold to me—distant—once we’d been together long enough for his interests to drift elsewhere.

Bidden to go to his maker.

Almost draining me—raping me—as I tried to help him.

Being with me—*not* because he wanted to be—but because some kind of outside force had commanded him to be.

As I thought of each thing, it was like a knife gutted me again and again. But then I looked down at the dagger. “He’s not Bill,” I told myself firmly. I looked into its mirrored surface. “He gave you this knife to fight with; he didn’t stick it into your back. *He’s not Bill,*” I repeated.

In the blade, my eyes shined.

It was time to recognize that I’d been using false comparisons between Eric and Bill in order to hide from my feelings for Eric.

“Fallacious comparisons,” I smiled ruefully. “Fallacious” had been my word-of-the-day the last time I’d had time to check the calendar, which had been several days before.

“Fallacious” meant “containing a deceptive, misleading, or false notion or belief.”

It was appropriate that the calendar had been stuck on that word for a while since I was stuck there too.

“Time and again, Eric’s actions have shown me that he is *nothing* like Bill,” I said aloud. “You *know* Eric’s the better man.”

I chuckled even more ruefully. “And that’s why you’re so scared. What if the better man hurts me too—rejects me too?” I responded to “myself.”

I’d seen—I’d *heard*—Gran suffer, aggrieved every day of her later life over the loss of her husband. Could I bear to truly love and then lose? And—what about Eric? What if I decided not to become a vampire? Was it fair of me to pledge with him? According to the “rules,” he would never be able to bond or pledge again. He was sacrificing his potential future choices for me.

“*His choices*,” I said loudly.

I closed my eyes to avoid the mirror.

Instead of pledging, I could break the bond. The damn ingredients were waiting at my house—thanks to Eric! Heck! Octavia and Amelia were likely already mixing them up!

But—if I did break the bond—I knew that I would have to run as Eric had said. There was no way that I wanted to be free-game, and I was certainly no longer naïve enough to think that breaking the bond I had with Eric would make me free.

No—it would make me “supper.”

I had no doubt that everything Eric had set up for me would help me to disappear. But leaving would cost me my friends and family. Granted, that list of people was small, but I valued them nonetheless.

But breaking the bond and leaving Bon Temps forever might just be the only way I would ever be “free.”

Not just from vampires.

From “crazy” Sookie too.

Of course, I had other options—some that Eric hadn’t mentioned—probably because they’d be foolhardy. If I broke the bond, I could go to Alcide, using my status as friend of the pack to try to get some protection from the Weres. I bit my lower lip. Maybe between them and the witches in my life, I could remain safe?

I sighed and shook my head, realizing why Eric hadn’t suggested it. Weres tended to put me in just as much danger as vampires ever had. I liked Alcide and had at one time harbored a “what if” or two, but he had taken Debbie Pelt back into his life—*after* she’d been responsible for putting me in that trunk with Bill. He hadn’t abjured her then; instead, he’d let her believe that I’d had sex with him! He’d fucking fueled her jealousy and craziness, rather than setting her straight. Did I blame Alcide for Debbie’s actions? No. But I did question him for his own. And I didn’t trust him with my safety—not really—which is why I knew I couldn’t completely trust the pack.

And it wouldn’t be fair of me to make Amelia and Octavia into even bigger targets. Plus, they may have been able to ward my home, but they couldn’t ward everywhere in the world that I wanted to go!

I thought about my fairy family. What if I broke the bond with Eric and sought their protection. Niall had once offered to kill Eric for me, and—though I certainly didn’t want that—I knew that Niall wouldn’t offer anything he couldn’t deliver. And, if he could kill Eric, it stood to reason that he could kill Victor and even the new king if need be. But, then again, Niall didn’t seem ready or able to offer me constant protection. And he’d certainly not scheduled weekly or monthly visits to get to know me better.

Moreover, any fairy protection I had would just be an extra draw for vampires. And—as much as I loved Claudine—my personal fairy godmother hadn’t always “popped” up to help me when I was in danger, even when that danger occurred during the daytime. My terror in the trunk as I waited for night to fall and a starving Bill to wake up came to mind as an example.

Even more disturbing was the fact that none of my fairy kin seemed to have any interest in Jason. Therefore, I knew that they didn’t care about family as such. No—Niall cared about me only because I had the fairy spark thingy. And that just didn’t sit right with me.

I shook my head and sighed so loudly that I wondered if the car would shake from it.

Then I found myself shaking from fear and from the magnitude of the choice I was facing.

“The courage to change the things I can,” I whispered.

What *could* I change?

“The way I *view* things,” I answered myself aloud.

I could change how I saw my telepathy. Gift—not handicap.

I could change the way I saw Eric. Partner—not adversary.

I could change the way I dealt with the world around me. Thoughtfully and with full knowledge—not haphazardly, even as I tried to keep my hands “clean” of the supernatural.

I could change the way I saw “normal.” Why did it have to be what I’d always idealized—my Gran’s life. Hell! Even she didn’t have a “normal” life. She wasn’t faithful to the man she was married to—the man that I now knew wasn’t my real grandfather. For goodness sakes! Gran had sex with a fairy in order to attain her version of “normal!”

“What is *your version*, Sookie?” I asked the girl in the mirror. “What do you want your ‘normal’ to be?”

I wanted someone to love; I wanted to be loved in return. I didn’t want to hear his thoughts. I wanted to share my life with someone who didn’t think of me as “broken” or tainted.

Indeed, being with Eric during our week had been the normal I’d wanted.

The normal I needed.

And now Eric was offering me that—because he wanted that “normal” too!

I looked down at the dagger. And then I picked it up.

“God, please grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” I recited again, before adding an extra prayer that I could accept *myself* as I was—at long last.

“God, please give me the courage to change the things I can,” I continued, knowing that I still had the opportunity to decide certain things—but only because of a Viking vampire who’d had such a difficult time making his own early decisions.

That thought comforted me in a way—bolstered me. Maybe there was hope for me yet.

“And, God,” I sighed, “please grant me the wisdom to know the difference.”

Chapter 07: Making the Best of Things

ERIC POV

At 5:25 p.m., ten minutes before sunset, I'd awoken to Sookie's turmoil.

Not surprising on the one hand. And welcome on the other.

At least she'd not yet broken the bond. I took that as a hopeful sign.

Victor expected me at Fangtasia by 6:00 p.m., but I knew he would slink in as soon as he could after sunset, so I quickly took a shower and drank a bagged blood. One of the blessings of bonding with Sookie had been that her blood was even more appealing to me than it had ever been before. One of the detriments was that other blood tasted that much blander. But it was a tradeoff I was willing to make—even if I never got another taste of my bonded.

In fact, feeding from Fangbangers had become annoying at best—something I'd managed to avoid for months. Not only did they moan like porn stars faking it, but they also tended to smell like alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and too much perfume.

But—as with other things—I'd adapted. I'd used my own disgust as motivation to start up Vood, which was basically a vampire “health food” store, which I'd opened for vampires looking for something more “healthy”—and tasty—than Fangbangers.

Vood was an invitation only club where vampires would select from a “menu” of donors. The donors were paid a base salary of four hundred dollars per week, plus any tips they earned, and they were given a food allowance so that they could maintain healthy diets. They were limited to four donations per week, and vampires made appointments using a menu, which included blood-type and pictures. There were other rules in place too. Donors were to avoid drugs, with the exception of alcohol in moderation. Their hygiene products had to come from a

list, which I compiled myself; all of the products were organic and actually did the work of cleaning versus simply covering up stench. Sexual encounters with vampires were at the discretion of the donors themselves—rather than something to be expected. All of the donors went by aliases, and none were allowed to “fraternize” with vampires outside of work. In exchange, their true identities were protected.

In addition, all of the employees had undergone a psyche-analysis to make sure they weren’t just fangbangers or Fellowship members in disguise. And all of them were hired based on the quality of their blood—not their looks. Hell—my favorite donor, Clyde, was a fifty-year-old construction worker who was looking for the extra income in order to build up college funds for his kids.

Indeed, Vood was the *anti-Fangtasia*, and most of my employees there were college kids, single mothers looking for a job that didn’t tax their time, and people hit hard by the still-deflated economy. The “store” itself was actually one of my own houses, and I’d tasked Thalia with the security of the service. She ensured that the donors got to and from Vood, which had been warded to expel those with evil intent, without being followed. Given Thalia’s disdain for “enthraling the vermin” at Fangtasia, she could be happier with her new job.

In the month Vood had been open, most of the vampires of Area 5 who could afford it had utilized the service several times. In exchange for two hundred dollars, which most vampires could easily afford, plus any tips they wanted to offer their donors (twenty percent was the suggested minimum), they were guaranteed a meal that they could relish. I hadn’t been surprised that many also enjoyed the benefit of not having to hassle with fangbangers. Of course, there were still Cretans who preferred “free” fast food compared to expensive fine dining.

I smirked. Since he'd been back in my area, Victor had proven himself to be such a bottom-dweller. At first, he'd been expecting for me to offer him the services of Vood for free; hell, I'd extended the invitation to take part in the service only with reluctance. When I didn't cater to his sense of entitlement, he'd begun criticizing the enterprise, though its profit potential was great. But, honestly, I didn't care if Vood made me any money.

On the nights when I had time, the service gave me access to good blood from donors who didn't try to rub against me like cats in heat. I could feed in fucking peace! Indeed, even if I didn't already have plenty of customers to turn a small profit, the business was worth my money.

Of course, my meals weren't the gourmet of Sookie Stackhouse; no one else would ever be that to me again, but the donor blood was an acceptable diet. And bagged blood filled in the gaps, though the plastic taste annoyed me to a certain extent.

I knew as I left my safe house to quickly fly to Fangtasia (I never drove when Victor was in town) that I would be facing one of two situations that night.

Possibility one: Sookie would grant me what I now knew—thanks to Hallow's spell book—was “my heart's desire” by pledging herself to me

Possibility two: At some point during the night, I would very likely have to hide the fact that my bond with Sookie had been severed. Though the witch I'd bought the spell from assured me that the breaking of the bond wouldn't cripple me, it would feel like I'd been sucker-punched in the chest. I just hoped that Victor wasn't around if it happened. If he was, however, and I couldn't control my response, I was already planning to cry out “Appius” as if something had happened to my maker. It wasn't as if Victor knew how to contact Appius for confirmation or anything.

I knew that I would not pursue Sookie if she did break the bond. I would have to let her go completely; I wouldn't risk a tracker following me to her. There weren't many vampires who could keep up with me, but there were a few. And, of course, Appius could command me to give up her location if I knew it. Though I honestly never expected to see my maker again, I wasn't prepared to leave anything up to chance when it came to my bonded—even if she stopped being that. Thus, even if she chose to break the bond, I planned to give her as much of a head start as possible.

The night before, Victor had demanded an audience with “the telepath” before he left for New Orleans, but he'd not specified anything about a particular time or night for her visit. I would wait until the last possible second and then “pretend” to be toppled over with pain. From there, I would act my ass off trying to convince my “hostile” audience that Sookie was dead. With great luck, that fiction would be believed. But even if it was learned that she'd simply broken the bond, my act would be enough to mask my complicity in her disappearance.

I hoped.

But I knew I wouldn't be completely off the hook—no matter what theory was believed. No—I *would* face punishment for losing the telepath. Victor would likely advocate for the true death, but there was no precedent for such a thing. If needed, it would be easy enough to convince Felipe that Sookie initiated the severing spell with her witch friends; the materials for the spell had been collected in great secrecy and couldn't be traced to me. And there would be no shortage of humans, shifters, and Weres ready to testify that Sookie *hated* the bond.

No. Felipe wouldn't kill me for Sookie's loss, but he would punish me. He would have to. I figured it would be with silver. A month in a silver-lined coffin would be the minimum, I imagined. Of course, I figured Felipe would go beyond this. Given the punishments he

generally meted out, he'd likely order me to spend a year in silver chains—perhaps under the “care” of Victor, who would celebrate my state with his taunts and threats. But they would be just words. Once Sookie was safe, he would have nothing to truly hurt me with, except for Pam.

And I trusted my child to watch her own back—just like I'd taught her to do.

In fact, Pam had her instructions to oversee things if my absence was required, though she had no idea why I might be gone for a while. I'd told her that it was best to have contingencies in place for whatever eventuality might befall us. She didn't question my motives after that.

She was a good child. She knew her duties and followed them by *choice* rather than by force or convention. That fact had been the greatest gift I could give to her, though I'm not sure she realized that.

No matter.

As I landed on the roof of Fangtasia and then went to my office, I thought about the duty I felt for my bonded. Most of that duty—I had *chosen* to take on. And I didn't regret that choice.

I never would.

I sat at my desk and smiled as I picked up a note that had been placed there. “Done.”

I knew the handwriting. It wasn't Bobby's telling me that he'd completed the tasks I'd asked him to do. It was Thalia's scrawl. I enjoyed the feeling of the word in my hand before throwing the note away. Even if Victor saw it, it wouldn't mean anything to him.

But it meant a lot to me. It meant that another contingency had been eliminated. Mainstream pretender or not, Bill had been one of the first I'd “invited” to Vood. And he'd, of course, jumped at the chance to enjoy “civilized feeding.” When I'd told him about the business,

he'd managed both to be happy about it and to imply that I likely wouldn't partake in it myself—because I was a godless pagan.

Both within the same goddamned sentence! I'd expected no less of him.

And I'd certainly not expected any more.

I didn't bother telling him that I had many more gods—and goddesses—at my disposal than he had. He wasn't worth the effort.

Regardless, because he was a frequent customer and had shown preference for a particular donor, a pretty young blonde woman, he'd paid the extra cost for exclusivity with her—one thousand a week to ensure he got all four of her available feedings as well as to guarantee that she fed no others.

I rolled my eyes. His preference had been predictable and his possessiveness pathetic. Why he just didn't get a pet or two was beyond me. That's basically what he was paying for. However, because he was feeding at Vood, he could pretend that he wasn't following the “barbaric” practices of vampirism. Again, his behavior was typical and predictable.

I scoffed. Bill's “civility” hadn't stopped him from fucking his donor. Of course, she'd consented to the extra “work.”

And I was sure that it was work.

Regardless, I'd followed-up with Thalia to make sure that the donor's consent was *actual* and not glamour-induced. According to Thalia, the female donor was using Bill for a fuck-buddy of sorts because she didn't want to deal with a relationship while she was in college.

Plus, Bill tipped her very well.

Of course he would. He was a “gentleman” and all.

Knowing that their activities were confined to Vood and that he didn't know the donor's real name, I was ambivalent about Bill's arrangement. Other vampires who preferred the 21st Century alternative that I was offering to keeping permanent pets had already made similar arrangements, and a few of the other donors had agreed to sexual arrangements too.

My thoughts about Bill were—thankfully—interrupted. The interrupter left something to be desired, however.

“So, Northman,” Victor said snakily as he slithered into the room, “are we to be honored with the presence of your bonded tonight?”

“Hmm,” I sounded noncommittally, “Tonight or tomorrow night.”

“You left the decision up to her?” he asked as he slinked into a chair—*unbidden*.

I looked up from my paperwork to lock eyes with my “boss.” I knew well how to keep all emotion from my voice and my countenance.

“I have no particular need for Miss Stackhouse at this time. However, since you requested her company before you leave for New Orleans in two nights' time, I have conveyed to Sookie that she should appear tonight or tomorrow night to bid you farewell.” My eyebrow quirked and I reached for the office phone. “Did you have a more specific night and time in mind? If so, I will inform my bonded immediately.”

Victor studied me for a moment, his lip quirking up as if he were actually learning something about me. But I'd seen that expression enough to know that it was a bluff.

“Don't bother. It will be,” he paused as he thumbed through some papers on my desk, “rather interesting to see if she is anxious enough to see you to come sooner rather than later.”

“Miss Stackhouse has no reason to be anxious—either way,” I responded, my tone imitating a cucumber.

As for Victor's fumbling, I didn't have anything to hide from my king or his minions related to my Area or my businesses—at least the ones in my name—but I did resent the fact that Victor fondled my things as if he owned them *and me*. He reminded me a little of my maker, and the comparison did him absolutely no favors.

“So have you managed to get the ledgers ready yet?” he asked haughtily.

“Do you mean the ones for the quarter that ended just last night?” I asked evenly. “Of course. Your fingers are tapping them even now,” I informed, nodded toward the black book in front of him.

“So on top of things,” Victor sneered. “I wonder if your efficiency is meant to hide something from our king.”

“I am certain that your audit of Area 5 will be thorough enough to ferret out anything that is amiss,” I returned.

In truth, Victor only had stopped short of climbing into my ass with a flashlight during his time in Area 5. But he'd found only evidence of my competency and my people's loyalty, two things that he commented upon as if they were crimes. I never thought I would prefer Andre to any other overseer, but I found myself missing that particular snake as I looked at the more venomous version in front of me. At least, Andre was ultimately loyal to Sophie-Anne, who respected me. Whatever Felipe might have thought, I doubted that Victor was loyal to anyone but himself, and respect seemed to be a concept that he'd missed learning. He was a simpering flatterer to Felipe—in the king's presence—but I saw no sincerity in the man sitting across the desk from me.

“Well—I suppose that I shall select a meal from your stock here since those available at Vood are overpriced,” Victor sneered, standing up. “Care to partake?”

“I have seen to my appetites already this evening,” I responded. “And, of course, I wish to finish these invoices so that you may include them in your study of Area 5,” I added with a slight nod of the head.

Victor scoffed. “I had heard that you were quite the ladies’ man, Northman. Yet I’ve not seen you *enjoy* your brood of fangbangers during my time here.”

I smirked. “Ladies’ man? What an odd expression. As if I would ever *romance* my meals?” I chuckled. “How amusing you are. I shall miss your humor when you return to Area 1.”

“Right,” he responded sourly. “Of course, one might think that you were being *faithful* to someone,” he added suggestively.

I laughed even louder. “I cannot quite figure you out, Victor. You set many tasks before me—tasks that leave me with only enough time to feed and find a quick release each evening so that I can be available to you throughout your audit. Should you wish to revise the list of requirements you have for me to include a study of my fucking techniques,” I smirked, “I would be happy to oblige.”

Victor glared at me. “You would do well to remember that *you* are the subordinate here.”

“Which is why I labor to finish this,” I returned, holding up the list Victor had thumped down on my desk when he’d entered my area the week before. “Care to add anything to it?” I offered.

He scoffed and left the office quickly, not bothering to close the door.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I hated Victor more and more with each fucking night! And not just because he was actively looking for a way to set me up so that the king would execute me.

I frowned, knowing that—within minutes—I’d have to listen to his grunting and the awkward thumping that I now associated with his fucking. I shook my head. Given his age, Victor really should have developed some rhythm by now.

Too soon, the tell-tale sounds of sloppy Victor sex filled the air. Tonight the woman’s moans sounded so canned that I was sure she was faking. Pamela entered my office—seemingly only to roll her eyes—before leaving again.

Proving once again what an excellent child she was, she shut the door on her way out—shutting out the noise of Victor’s “torrid” encounter.

There was a God.

Chapter 08: Standing Tall

ERIC POV, continued

Thankfully, Victor always showered after his meals. Sadly, he didn't have very much stamina, so he was back in my office not twenty minutes after he'd left it. Currently, he was rifling through my filing cabinets, obviously leaving them purposely out of order.

Fucking asshole!

Of course, I had everything scanned and in electronic copy too—a virtual filing cabinet, if you will. So, if Victor managed to conveniently “lose” anything, there was that to fall back on.

At intervals, Victor grunted and scoffed with disapproval and condemnation, even as he made notes in the little book that he carried with him at all times.

I paid him little mind as I worked on. However, schooling my emotions had become more difficult than I'd ever imagined it would. And it wasn't because I was angry and frustrated at Victor. No—covering that up was easy.

On the other hand, covering up my excitement over the fact that my bonded was getting closer and closer was *not* easy.

Approximately thirteen miles away.

Was she coming to pledge with me?

Or—in that stubborn, reckless way that she behaved on occasion—was she coming to throw the knife at me—blade first?

I prayed that the latter was *not* the case as I gauged her mood through our bond—which she'd clearly *not* broken.

A good sign?

She was anxious, but determined.

Another good sign?

Victor chose that moment to begin a lecture about filing methods, and—for once—I was grateful for his prattling. Not being good at multi-tasking, the idiot couldn't talk and sabotage at the same time, so as he sat down, I was actually able to relax into my own thoughts as my bonded approached.

Ten miles.

I thought about the various times I'd seen her. And I knew that what she was wearing would signal her intentions.

If she had decided to turn me down and spit in my face, she would have on her Merlotte's uniform. I also knew that I would know from the cadence of her steps if she were stomping her way back to my office to break my un-beating heart. And—if that were the case—I hoped to stop her from doing herself damage by immediately telling her to keep the item I'd sent to her. With luck, that would stop her in her tracks. And, as she was befuddled, I'd make sure to remind her that Victor was present to *audit* Area 5. With more luck, her survival instincts would set in and she'd choose her words carefully.

Seven miles.

I allowed myself a moment to think about what she might be wearing if she had accepted the pledging. She was not a dainty Southern belle by any stretch of the imagination—despite what Compton might say. No. Sookie Stackhouse was a proud woman; however, because I had conveyed to her the nature of the pledging, she would likely choose something lovely and feminine on her “wedding” day.

She favored sun dresses that I knew made her feel both beautiful and adequately covered. I pictured her in the one I'd first seen her in—white with red flowers. Pam liked to tease me about being fixated on that garment, but I had been fixated on the woman, not the dress. As a matter of fact, my favorite of Sookie's garments that I'd seen was a yellow sundress. It contrasted with her sun-kissed skin. And her golden hair put the threads of the garment to shame.

Of course, I'd never seen a garment that hadn't been put to shame by the curves of her body.

Five miles.

I nodded and grunted in response to an idiotic question Victor posed as I continued to picture Sookie in my mind's eye.

She wasn't a tall woman, but she had a way of holding herself that made her seem much taller than she was. I'd always been quite tall comparatively. Though Vikings were now thought to all have been huge people—that just wasn't the case. Most of the men I knew during my human days were much closer to Sookie's height than my own.

I was the freak back then.

Standing out by standing up straight had been strictly forbidden by my maker; being shorter than I was, Appius didn't like having to look up to address me. That is why he would rarely speak to me unless I was on my knees before him.

Thus, I had stooped my way through centuries, only learning how to stand to my full height—both literally and figuratively—in stages. Still, there were often occasions when I was compelled to stoop—to defer to vampires who took dominion over me. I couldn't help but to

think about what my life would be—*will be*—like when I outlived all who would degrade and defile me.

Seeing them all become dust or sludge before me was one of the motivations that had dragged me from lifetime to lifetime—one of the motivating factors that had compelled me to accumulate wealth, status, education, and favors.

Three miles.

I understood well that I was doing myself no favors politically by pledging with Sookie. As a loyal subject, I *should* have given the telepath to Sophie-Anne, and then immediately after the takeover, I *should* have transferred her to Felipe.

But *those* choices would have been impossible for me.

For there were two simple, undeniable truths that were as much a part of me now as my blood.

First, I loved her.

Second, she made me wish to never stoop again.

And for those reasons, I was hers.

One mile.

I could hardly keep a thought in my head as I waited the two minutes it took her to drive that mile.

I felt her arrival outside of Fangtasia. She was still for a moment. I imagined her taking several deep breaths.

There was more nervousness.

There was more determination.

And there was also something else—*hope*.

The steps that she took out of her car and then through Fangtasia were not angry stomps. They were hurried paces.

There was a knock at the door.

“Master,” Pam said professionally, “Sookie Stackhouse is here.”

Victor’s gaze immediately shot to the door, becoming as predatory as I’d ever seen it.

Pam ignored him, and so did I.

Soon he wouldn’t matter.

“Please, tell my bonded that I would be happy to see her,” I said.

Pam bowed a little and left. Not ten seconds later, Sookie entered the office with Pam trailing her. She wore a strapless ice-blue sundress that reminded me of the dress she’d worn to the ball in Rhodes.

Her wedding dress.

Beautiful.

She glanced at Victor for only a moment, but clearly only to inventory his presence as the letter had told her to do.

“Miss Stackhouse,” Victor greeted, his tone as oily as the man himself.

Sookie said nothing to him as she approached me. I stood at my full height, even as she stood at hers.



As she looked up at me, her eyes showed the determination that I felt within her and the same kind of fire that had enlivened me from our first acquaintance.

“How lovely to see you,” Victor said with a smarmy smile.

However, instead of turning toward him to acknowledge his second attempt at a greeting, she reached into her clutch and pulled out the dagger.

Before Victor could speak out a protest—or even process the scene—I’d taken the weapon and kissed it.

“What?” came Victor’s question as if he were having a difficult speaking even a single word.

“A pledging!” came Pam’s surprised voice.

Sookie and I said nothing for a moment. We didn’t need to. Our bond was speaking for us. I could tell that she felt my happiness and my relief. And I felt similar emotions from her.

I was even happier when I saw that Victor looked about as unhappy and constipated as Compton always did. However, with a force of will I didn’t know he possessed, he quickly got ahold of his emotions, though I could still sense that his blood was boiling.

“Very interesting,” Victor said finally.

“Thank you,” Sookie responded as if he’d just offered us his congratulations.

“Then I’ll take the tiger’s request off the table,” he said smarmily. “Our king was unhappy about him wanting to relocate from Nevada anyway.”

“Quinn?” Sookie asked, looking up at me.

Victor looked at Sookie almost triumphantly. He was obviously trying to cause dissention between me and my pledged wife.

A big no-no. It just proved how stupid he was.

And how ready for death.

Soon, I promised myself.

“Yes,” I responded to Sookie. “Only tonight Victor made me aware that the Were-tiger wished to see you in private in order to try to convince you to recommence your relationship with him. He was willing to relocate for you,” I added evenly, praying to my gods that Sookie wouldn’t be disappointed that the tiger would no longer have his chance to petition her.

I smiled when I felt no disappointment from the bond.

“Oh—well,” Sookie said, looking at Victor. “Too little. Too late. Quinn and I are finished; we said pretty much all that needed to be said the last time he came into my house.”

“And when would that have been?” Victor weaseled.

“The morning after the takeover. He came to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Victor asked.

Sookie shrugged noncommittally. “It wasn’t as if I needed an apology from him. By then, Eric had already explained to me that Felipe was powerful and would be good at running Louisiana,” she conveyed with the savvy and sincerity of a career politician.

I’d rarely been as proud of anyone as I was of her in that moment.

“Still, I know that the tiger will be disappointed,” Victor said.

“Well,” Sookie smiled, “now that Eric and I are pledged it will be better for Quinn. He will have to finally accept that he and I just weren’t going to work out long-term for a *variety* of reasons.”

I could feel the truth in her words. I knew that she’d once cared for John Quinn, but clearly that ship had sailed for her many months before.

Her new ship: Viking longboat.

Victor looked at Sookie through narrowed eyes and then turned those orbs toward me.

“Of course, I’ll inform my master about your prior claim. We acknowledge your formal attachment to this one,” he said as if he were being forced to drink rotten blood. He moved to leave my office.

I felt my pledged one’s anger at his calling her “this one” rather than by her name, but to her credit, she simply moved to stand next to me as we faced him.

“What of the rest of your audit?” I asked as he moved past Pam.

“I’ve seen all I want to see here,” he muttered before turning on his heel and leaving.

I placed a finger over my mouth to indicate that he would still be able to hear us. Likely he’d planted a bug or two in my filing cabinets too. I sighed. Indeed, it would take several sweeps before I would be comfortable speaking freely in my own goddamned office again.

“Where’s your coat?” I asked Sookie, who was looking up at me nervously now. I was even more proud that she’d been able to hide that anxiety up until this point.

“I’ll get it,” Pam volunteered, zipping from the room. She was back a moment later.

I placed the dagger into my jacket pocket before helping Sookie into her coat.

“Will you fly with me?” I asked her.

“Isn’t it a little cold for that?” she asked with a slight smirk.

“On it,” Pam said. After zipping out and then in again, she had a thick blanket in her hands.

“Fleece,” my child informed. “And brand new to the gift shop. On the house.”

It was clear to me that Pam desperately wanted to ask me about the pledging, but she was wise enough to keep her questions to herself for the time being.

Sookie seemed to sense Pam’s anxiousness too and smirked at my child. “Thanks, Pam.”

After making sure that Sookie was wrapped up as warmly as possible, I took her up to the roof, knowing that it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for Victor to be lying in wait to ambush us. Until our status as a pledged couple was known, we would be vulnerable. To that end, I quickly took out my phone and dialed the number I'd preprogrammed.

It was answered on the first ring.

"It is done. File the paperwork. The witnesses were Victor Madden and Pamela Ravenscroft." I hung up and then picked Sookie up bridal style. It seemed appropriate.

By instinct, she buried her face against my chest, and I made sure the sides of my jacket would help to protect her from the cold wind.

"It's a short flight," I promised as I took off into the air. Indeed, it was always quick to travel as the birds flew.

I'd never been happier that assholes couldn't fly.

Chapter 09: A Well-Made Choice

ERIC POV, continued

I landed us at the home I'd purchased with Sookie in mind. After entering the security code, I carried her inside of the house—over the threshold.

Sookie unwrapped herself from the blanket and turned in a circle, looking around the home's foyer before walking into the living room. I said nothing as she ran a hand over the tan sofa I'd gotten for its length and its comfort.

"Make a fire?" she requested.

Elation—I felt elation.

Feeling what I was feeling through our bond, she smiled softly at me.

Silently, I went about the task as I heard Sookie's footsteps taking her around the rest of the ranch style home. I could feel her curiosity until she came to the stairs that led down into the basement, which had been one of the selling points for the house—that and its back porch. The porch was part old-fashioned and part modern, given the fact that it helped to frame a swimming pool. Highhandedly, I'd already taken the liberty of putting in a porch swing.

Sookie's steps came back into the living room. The fire already blazing, I stood and turned to face her.

"You look lovely tonight," I said. I cannot say why, but I'd wanted to wait until we were alone before I told her that.

"You aren't wearing your customary T-shirt and jeans," she said, gesturing to my black dress shirt and slacks. I'd already discarded my suit jacket when I'd made the fire.

"I had reason to dress up tonight."

She acknowledged my words with a nod.

“Will Victor be a problem?” she asked.

“Only if he wants to die. Oh—and that reminds me,” I said, taking out my phone and dialing the king’s direct line.

“Northman. Speak!” Felipe answered somewhat impatiently.

“Your majesty, good evening. I will not take up too much of your time; however, I wished to make sure you knew that Miss Stackhouse and I became formally pledged tonight.”

“Pledged?” Felipe asked so loudly that even Sookie heard it.

“Ah. I thought by now Victor would have called to inform you,” I said evenly, pretending that I didn’t hear the anger in my king’s tone.

“Victor?” Felipe growled.

“Yes. He was with me when my bonded presented me with the ceremonial dagger,” I clarified. “He informed us that he would contact you; however, I wanted to share the happy news with you directly.”

“Don’t forget to tell him that we hope to honeymoon in Las Vegas and would be happy to spend two of our evenings reading the thoughts of anyone that he wishes,” Sookie said from across the room.

I looked at Sookie with surprise that was quickly replaced with pride. “Of course, my love,” I responded as if to her alone, though I knew that Felipe could easily hear all that we’d said.

“But make sure that he knows of my limitations,” she added with fake sadness, a little smirk on her lips. “After what poor Barry went through, I’ll need to be careful. And I don’t want to disappoint Felipe.”

I winked at her. “I am certain that the king will be very understanding. Why don’t you go get something to drink, dearest? I believe the refrigerator produces cold water.”

Sookie winked back and left the room.

“I am certain that you heard that, your majesty,” I said into the phone. “However, my pledged is unused to how things work. I will, of course, submit my formal request for a week off of work tomorrow night, as well as my request to enter Nevada territory for our celebratory vacation.”

“There’s no need, Northman,” Felipe returned, having already recovered from any disappointment or surprise he’d felt over the announcement of his sheriff becoming pledged to the asset he’d likely wanted to make his own. Felipe was pragmatic, after all. And he wasn’t about to risk his kingdom over an asset. “I look forward to meeting your pledged and will arrange for you to have accommodations in the honeymoon suite at my hotel.”

“You are very kind, your majesty.”

“*However*,” he said firmly, obviously wanting to reestablish control, “I will require Miss Stackhouse’s services for *three* nights during your stay.”

“Of course. However, in that case, I must request a week and a half of vacation time. Sookie becomes terribly tired and much less effective if she doesn’t have several days of rest between taxing assignments.”

“Like Stan’s telepath,” Felipe said with disdain. “I hired him for a few nights last September, and he was useless after the first of them.”

I smiled. I’d known that.

“As long as my Sookie has time to rest and has me there to help her to maintain her shields and send her strength, she will be able to give you three full nights of effective service, as you require, your majesty.”

“What do you mean that you need to be there to strengthen her?”

“It is an aspect of our bond,” I said in a low voice, as if telling a secret. “A few drops of my blood before she works can amplify her control.”

“Why didn’t you tell Victor of this?” he asked.

“Sookie and I felt we should keep this to ourselves in order to better take advantage of it. Only Sophie-Anne knew of it before; she didn’t even tell her children of it,” I lied through my teeth. “I had thought that you might feel the same way and would have told you had you inquired about using Sookie’s telepathic abilities before now.”

“She was blood-bonded to Bill Compton at some point too—was she not?” Felipe asked incisively.

“Indeed, my king. However, his blood never had the same effect on her as mine does. Perhaps, it is the fact that our bond is permanent, while they didn’t have enough exchanges to achieve that. Or, perhaps, it is related to my age. We have never been sure,” I added.

“I will expect you and Miss Stackhouse within two weeks,” he indicated after a short pause.

“Of course,” I returned. “I will have my second make arrangements with Ms. Sechrest tomorrow night.”

The king said nothing more; I hung up after he did.

“I’m off the phone,” I informed loudly. Moments later, I heard a loud popping noise.

A minute after that, Sookie returned to the room with a flute full of champagne and a goblet full of Royalty. She handed me the goblet.

“You knew I’d say yes—to the pledging?” she asked as she took a drink.

“No, but I planned for every contingency,” I responded, consciously stopping myself from moving toward her, which is what I wanted to do.

She nodded. “Who did you call earlier?”

“Cataliades, the demon lawyer.”

“You did the paperwork for a pledging, but also arranged for him to help me leave the area if I broke the bond?” she inquired.

“Like I said—every contingency.”

“There’s sweet tea in the refrigerator too.”

“I wasn’t sure whether or not you’d want a celebratory drink; there’s harder liquor in the cabinet.”

“In case I wanted to drown my sorrows?” she asked.

I nodded in confirmation.

“Every contingency,” she whispered.

Every. Fucking. One.

We were silent for a full minute as she sipped her champagne. I sipped my blood just to make her feel more comfortable. But neither of us sat.

Finally, I realized that she needed me to be the one to break; plus, I was having a difficult time bearing the silence. “You are being *too* quiet.”

“You thought I’d yell at you, be angry, and call you highhanded?”

“To start with,” I confirmed. “Actually, I didn’t think we’d get this far,” I added honestly, allowing my insecurities to show and to be felt by her.

Only her.

“I would say that I didn’t have much choice, but you gave me choices, and there were other choices I considered too.”

I nodded. “I figured you would. Niall. Herveaux. Maybe even Quinn. Hell—maybe even Bill.”

I felt a flash of anger from her. “Do you think I’m still naïve enough to trust Bill?”

“No,” I responded quietly. “But I know you still care for him.”

“Once I care about someone, I—uh—it’s difficult for me to stop,” she informed, sitting down with her now empty glass.

“No matter what they do?”

She nodded.

“Do you want more?” I asked.

“I’m not used to that much alcohol, and champagne will go straight to my head.”

“So more then?” I smirked.

“Please,” she chuckled, holding out her glass.

I put my own hardly touched beverage onto the coffee table and went to the kitchen. Within a minute, I was back with the champagne, a glass of Royalty for me, and a tray of fruits and cheese for her.

She didn’t look surprised to see the food.

“What now, Eric?” she asked after she’d eaten a few grapes and drunk more champagne.

“Depends on you,” I said.

“How so?”

“Are we to be a fake couple, or will you allow me to try to convince you to want me for real?”

“Wanting you has never been a problem,” she said under her breath.

“What *is* the problem? Trusting me?”

She shook her head. “No. Trusting *myself*.”

“You value yourself too little,” I said softly.

“I’ll work on that,” she said seriously.

I smiled at her and raised my blood as if to toast her words.

“I want to give us a chance,” she stated firmly, after taking a few moments and a few deep, calming breaths.

“Okay. Good,” I responded, though cautiously.

“I want to keep my job,” she said, testing me.

“I know that, but I would have you imagine other things you might do too.”

“Telepathic things?” she asked suspiciously.

“Not necessarily,” I responded.

“Then what? I have very little education.”

I chuckled. “Yet you have managed to create strong ties between four supernatural communities.”

“Four?”

“Oh—you are right. *Five*,” I corrected.

“Five?”

“Fairies, Weres, shifters, demons, and vampires.”

“Demons?”

“Cataliades only agreed to be my lawyer because he is yours,” I shared.

“Huh?”

“He takes a special interest in you. I believe there is more to his interest than we yet know about. I am looking into it, but he is trustworthy, so I’m not concerned.”

She shook her head and sighed. “I don’t think I want any more *interest*.”

“The more that your ability—and its *many limitations*—”, I smirked, “become known among supernaturals, the better for you. And a rumor about your fairy heritage would be fortuitous too.”

“But you were the one who kept me from calling Niall on the night of the takeover,” she said with confusion.

“Your fairy relatives would have had to start a war that night if you had. However, now we can use them as leverage to keep people from fucking with us; they’ll be yet another deterrent.”

“But Niall’s enemies?” she asked.

“Will be easier to deal with if we know to expect them. His enemies could already know about you; your sense of security that they do not could be false.”

“Fallacious,” she muttered.

“Yes. Plus, most fairies will be deterred if they know we are pledged.”

“You think the pledging will protect us that much?” she asked somewhat incredulously.

“It should,” I returned confidently. “And if it doesn’t, I have permission to go berserker on people,” I added with a smirk.

“I think you’d like that,” she chuckled, taking another drink.

“Part of me would,” I returned unapologetically.

“Your early life . . . ,” she began.

“Yes?” I was prepared to tell her anything she wanted to know.

“I just wanted you to know—I *don't* pity you.”

“I hoped you wouldn't. I didn't think you would. I'm glad I was right,” I returned.

“If he ever came back, I'd find a way to kill him,” she said forcefully. “I swear to you—I *would.*”

I didn't need to ask who the “he” was. I believed her.

It was another reason for me to love her.

“I work tomorrow,” she said after the silence had grown between us. “I have to. Sam's out of town.”

I nodded. “I am aware of the shifter's situation. I can send a couple of waitresses to you tomorrow afternoon. They could lighten your load.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. “That would help.”

“I hate that you work at Merlotte's,” I said honestly, knowing that she'd felt my disdain at the mention of her boss.

“Where do you want me to work—Fangtasia?”

“If you'd like, but not as a waitress. You could be my personnel manager—to start.”

“Your what?”

“Hiring, firing, scheduling,” I responded.

She rolled her eyes. “You don't need someone just to do that.”

“It would be for more than just Fangtasia. Plus, there's filing,” I added.

“Let's just see if we can actually get along first,” she said.

I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m compromising here,” she said with a shrug. “What you said about how important it is for you to *look* good in your world—I listened. But—for now—I keep my current job. Once Sam’s back, I’ll rethink it. Okay?”

Almost afraid to relax, I nodded. She was being *too* accommodating.

She chuckled, obviously reading my momentary pensiveness. “So—um—how am I gonna get there—to work?”

“There’s an extremely *practical* car in the garage. A Honda Civic.”

She sighed.

“It has GPS,” I added, “already programmed for Bon Temps.”

She sighed again.

“It’s a hybrid,” I tried.

“I didn’t take you for a Honda driver—or an environmentalist,” she responded through narrowed eyes.

“Contingencies,” I returned.

She closed her eyes and took another long drink.

I zipped into the kitchen and brought back the bottle.

“Trying to get me drunk so that I accept more contingencies?” she asked as she accepted another glass.

“You’ve accepted the car?” I asked.

She sighed. “Like I said, I listened to your reasoning. And I don’t want to give asses like Victor reason for judging you. Plus, we’re pledged now, so that’s it.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

She nodded. “I made my choice. I know I’m giving up the chance for other relationships, but since I really do want to build one with you, that’s fine. Yes—a part of me worries that you’ll get tired of me eventually, but the part that wants to be right is the part of me that trusts you with my heart. That’s the part I’ve *chosen* to go with. *Chosen.*”

I was speechless for a moment. Clearly, she’d chosen the pledging. But it was becoming more and more clear that she had chosen *me* too.

She looked at her glass skeptically. “I really shouldn’t have more. I don’t want a headache tomorrow at work.”

“A drop of my blood will cure any hangover you have,” I shared, coming out of my stupor.

Her eyebrows soared toward her hairline.

She was curious, surprised, and concerned, though I could feel a surge of lust from her.

“Feel free to take it after I’m already dead for the day. Otherwise, things might become heated before you’re ready.”

She nodded, took a deep breath, and then gulped a long drink—and then another deep breath.

And then another gulp.

I could tell through the bond that she was starting to feel inebriated, and I knew her inhibitions would be lowered. That she seemed comfortable enough to get drunk told me that she trusted me enough not to take advantage. I knew that, given the events of her day, she needed the liquor, and I also sensed that she had welcomed the “liquid courage” throughout our talk.

“I know my life has to change a lot now,” she sighed as she poured another glass.

“Yes.”

“Yours too,” she acknowledged.

“Yes,” I agreed again.

“So you—uh—want us to court?” she asked, a blush blooming on her already flushed face.

“Very much so.”

“You *really* remember everything, Eric? Everything that happened between us?”

Chapter 10: Worth It

ERIC POV, continued

I nodded. “Yes. Now I understand why my feelings for you became so intense during what seemed to me to be one day-sleep. You have to know that I would have behaved very differently that evening that I left your home if I’d remembered everything—if waking up in your home with unexplained feelings hadn’t been so damned disorienting.” I shook my head. “In truth, I should have behaved better despite that. I already cared about you—wanted you.”

“And I didn’t help by keeping things from you,” she sighed. “Maybe I just suck at the relationship thing.”

“You’ll practice,” I offered. “We both will.”

She chuckled, but then nervously took another drink. “So—um—about the living arrangements.”

I tensed, hoping that she wasn’t going to fight our living together. Our pledging would certainly be challenged if we didn’t.

She raised her hand in a calming gesture. “I understand that there really isn’t a choice about our living together, Eric. I was just asking about logistics.”

I calmed immediately and handed her a folder that had been on the coffee table.

“What’s this?”

“Choices,” I responded.

She didn’t say a word as she looked through the folder. In it were descriptions and photos of each of my safe-houses (save the one being used for Vood) and a detailed construction plan for the building of a safe-room in her home in Bon Temps, which included an estimate of

how long it would take. There was also a picture of a piece of property located almost exactly halfway between Bon Temps and Shreveport as well as a preliminary sketch of a floorplan for a home that could be built on it.

“Highhanded?” I asked as she closed the folder.

“Contingencies,” she offered instead.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“The house between here and Bon Temps—why so huge?” she asked.

“Two separate wings. Two separate entrances. Like a large duplex—though there would be a door between the wings that could be dead bolted from either side,” I answered.

“Like adjoining rooms in a hotel?”

“Exactly.”

“A his side and a her side,” she commented.

“If that’s what you wanted,” I responded. “Privacy. Independence.”

“We’d live together, but be next door neighbors?”

“If that’s what you wanted,” I repeated.

She sighed. “It’s not.”

“What do you want?” I asked.

“What about you?” she challenged.

“What we had when I had amnesia,” I answered without hesitation.

“That’s impossible. You have responsibilities,” she said.

“I know,” I returned with a slight roll of my eyes. “But instead of walking aimlessly around your home after you fall asleep, I could use those hours to fulfill my duties.”

“What about Fangtasia?” she asked.

“I don’t have to sit on display to run the bar. Now that we are pledged, I have a good excuse not to. But—in truth—I didn’t need one. I’ve already hired vampires to replace me on the throne.”

“When?” she asked.

“As soon as I’d healed—after Rhodes,” I responded.

She smirked a little. “And have you been faithful—since Rhodes?”

I chuckled. “No. Have you?”

She frowned. “I haven’t been with anyone since then, but that’s because I wasn’t in a relationship.”

“Neither was I,” I challenged.

“I know.” She looked worried. “And now?”

“I’m yours,” I answered.

She didn’t look surprised. Good girl. Finally seeing her worth—at least starting to.

“Won’t you get bored?”

I scoffed. “You must really stop thinking that could happen. Would you have thought that the ‘other’ me could get bored with you—be unfaithful to you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Is that why you didn’t accept *his* proposal that he stay as he was?”

“No,” she responded immediately. “I didn’t want to rob you. And—I would have missed *you*.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help myself. “I’m glad you feel that way. Now you get *both*.”

She smiled back. It was a rich smile, one full of hope and gratefulness. “That easy—huh?”

“I’ll be as easy as you want me to be,” I leered. And then chuckled when I saw a blush and felt a surge of lust from her. “Don’t worry, Sookie. We’ll work by your timeframe.”

“Courting?”

“Fast or slow—whatever you like.”

“If I wanted to keep living with Amelia and Octavia in Bon Temps . . . ,” she started.

“Then construction of my safe-room would begin tomorrow,” I finished. “Meanwhile, we’d need to stay here or at another one of my homes.” I gestured toward the folder. “Unless Octavia accepted me in her closet.”

“You’d be miserable living with them though,” she commented.

“I would adapt,” I said.

“But you wouldn’t *choose* that,” she emphasized.

“Ah—but *you* chose the pledging. That is what *I* wanted. Where we live is less important to me. And no residence is ever permanent.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s not. I told Octavia you might move in, and she responded by telling me that she’d move out if that happened.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. She doesn’t hate vampires or anything. Heck, she even offered to do some work for you while she’s here—warding and things.”

“You asked her for that?”

She nodded. “I thought we’d need it.”

I couldn’t hide my pride from my face or the bond.

She smiled at me. “Anyway, her living with Amelia and me was always gonna be temporary. And—frankly—she was starting to wear on me. Best to part as friends—right?”

“Yes. You don’t want a witch on your bad side.”

She snickered.

“Amelia?”

“Selfish at times, but who isn’t? And she’s a lot more tolerant,” Sookie said. “She worries I might be making a mistake, but she really does want me to be happy. No matter where I live, she’s gonna stay in the house—at least until she knows how things with Tray Dawson are gonna work out. Once she does, I figure she’ll either move in with him or go back to New Orleans.”

I nodded in understanding.

She was quiet for a moment. “We should build the safe-room in Bon Temps regardless. Meanwhile, we’ll stay here and reassess after the construction is done.”

“We’ll need to go to Las Vegas within two weeks,” I said.

“The later the better?” she said as a question. “That’ll give Sam longer to get back.”

I nodded in agreement. “Sounds good. By the time we get back, the safe-room should be done.”

I got up to stoke the fire.

“Where will I sleep tonight?” she asked.

“You can choose any bedroom in the house, though the master bedroom has the nicest bathroom.”

“What’s *your* room like?” she asked.

“I thought we were *courting*,” I smirked.

“We *are*,” she responded. “What’s it like?”

“Nicer than most of my other resting places. The basement was unfinished when I bought the place, so I was able to tinker. Plus, it’s large. I designed a sitting room, bathroom, and bedroom.”

“Does the bathroom have a toilet?”

I chuckled. “*Every* contingency, Sookie.”

She smiled. “You gotta T-shirt I can borrow? I don’t want to sleep in this.”

I nodded as she rose and took the leftover food to the kitchen. She’d polished off the bottle of champagne. I followed her with the empty bottle and both of our empty glasses.

I was curious about where she would sleep. And—given her level of drunkenness—I was also curious about how she was walking in a straight line. After she’d wrapped and put away the food, she walked (still in a relatively straight line) to the door that led down to my chamber and seemed to be mentally steadying herself as she opened the door and then carefully walked down the stairs.

Again, I followed. At the bottom of the stairs was another door.

“The code?” she asked as her fingers were poised over the keypad.

“I prefer words to numbers,” I informed.

“So do I,” she agreed, looking back over her shoulder at me.

“E.” She punched it.

“V. E.”

She giggled and quickly punched in R-Y-C-O-N-T-I-N-G-E-N-C-Y.

The woman “got” me.

Gratefulness is what I sent to her through our bond.

Maybe it was because she was drunk, but she didn't glare at me for sending her a part of "me." Instead, she smiled at me, and I felt the odd feeling of happiness being sent from her to me. It was the first time she'd actively "sent" something my way.

I liked it.

Once the door was open, she looked around for about a minute before taking one of my T-shirts into the bathroom to change her clothing. I took the opportunity to change into sleep pants as I heard her opening a new toothbrush and then using it. "Every contingency," she muttered as she spit.

Yes.

Every. Fucking. One.

She walked to the bed when she left the bathroom. "Which side's yours?"

"Both. Once I die, it doesn't matter. And I want to keep the mattress sound, so I switch."

She chuckled and chose her side, climbed into bed, and then patted mine. "This is yours now."

"Okay," I agreed.

"You don't need to sleep yet. There are several hours before dawn," she grinned. "But I *know* you're here for a reason."

My eyebrow rose. "Not sex," I said firmly.

She chuckled. "No. As soon as you poured me a second drink, I knew you weren't looking for that." She patted "my" new side again.

"Then what's the reason?" I asked as I lay down. I was content for her to tell me since I wasn't quite sure myself.

She sighed and snuggled into my body before taking hold of my hand.

“*This*,” she said simply.

“Yes. This,” I responded. “But *this* isn’t courting?”

“Define courting,” she challenged, as she snuggled deeper into me.

“I had no idea until I looked it up online,” I admitted.

She giggled. “And what did you find?”

“Dates: movies, dinners, walks in parks, weekend getaways. Flowers: roses bought with color in mind to represent stages of a courtship rather than preference of color by the receiver. Discovering one another’s interests, dislikes, and likes. Determining compatibility. First date—holding hands. Second date—a simple kiss. Third—a longer kiss, some petting. Fourth and beyond—let the woman dictate the pace. And don’t be an ass if she wants to go slower than you do.”

She barked out a chuckle and looked up at me. “You learned all that online?”

I shrugged. “There was a lot more. Those seemed to be the more reasonable rules.”

She squeezed my hand. “Don’t you think we are past rules?”

I nodded. “Yes, but I’d be willing to follow any rules you set.”

She sighed. “You? The man who loves having choices?”

I knew she wasn’t teasing me or taking advantage of knowing my past because I could “feel” the sincerity of her question.

“I trust you,” I said.

She smiled. “I don’t think that I’ve thanked you for that part.”

“And I am remiss in thanking you,” I returned.

Her smile softened.

“I would enjoy watching movies with you, Eric, but I prefer home to the theater.”

“Because you don’t want to have to block thoughts,” I said. “I considered this when I bought the home-theater system here.”

She chuckled and shook her head, but then nodded. “As for dinner—I’ll try anything at least once, and I haven’t found many things I don’t like to eat. I don’t mind restaurants so much—as long as they’re not huge.”

I nodded, taking in her words and running them against the list I’d already considered.

“Walking or flying with you would be nice, but I’d prefer waiting until it warms up.”

I chuckled. “Noted.”

“Flowers are sweet on occasion, but I don’t care about meaning. I like yellow and white best—and not just roses.”

“Okay.”

“As for the rest, we’ll learn about each other together.”

“Together,” I mimicked.

“As for the time frame? I can’t imagine a scenario where I don’t attack you in the shower tomorrow night,” she stated.

I laughed. “I could shower tonight.”

“I’m too drunk to properly enjoy it,” she responded, smiling against my bare chest.

I squeezed her hand. “At least I got the first date level of affection right.”

She giggled before I felt her mood turn serious. “Court me for the rest of my life if you want, Eric, but you have to know that I’m *already* yours.”

Again, I was speechless.

“If Bill hadn’t raped me in Jackson . . . ,” she whispered.

With difficulty, I kept my growl at bay. I'd known that he'd violated her, but this was the first time she'd acknowledged it aloud in my presence.

"If he hadn't," she continued, "I would have broken up with him—officially. And on my own terms."

"And I would have begun my *official* courting then," I said.

Once again, she smiled against my flesh. "We would have gone out on proper dates."

"Hallow would never have happened," I said.

"No loss of memory."

"No hurt."

"I would have chosen you," she said.

"I'd already chosen you," I returned.

Again, she smiled.

It tickled everywhere—especially into my unmoving heart.

Unmoving. Not dead.

"I've chosen you too, Eric," she said in a whisper of kisses against my chest.

We lay quietly until her breathing was steady. I carefully peeled myself from her side without waking her up and then pierced my finger. After giving her a little blood so that she wouldn't wake up with a hangover, I zipped upstairs only to find Pam sitting in front of the fire. I'd known she was there. After all, I'd called her.

As I put out the flames, she studied me, her curiosity as strong as I'd ever felt it.

"You've protected yourself and her by pledging," she finally said. I could tell that she admired my strategy.

“As much as I can,” I responded as I sat next to her on the couch. “But I would have wished to pledge with Sookie even if we had no enemies.”

She nodded in understanding—and relief. “Even a pledge won’t stop imbeciles,” she cautioned.

“Imbeciles will be dealt with. And they are easier to kill than kings. Kings have to stand by the ‘rules,’ or the Council will remove them.”

“You always were a crafty bastard,” she smirked.

“Yes—but that’s not why I did it,” I returned.

“You love her,” she commented.

“I know,” I responded.

She got up to go toward the door.

“No more questions?” I asked her.

“None worth asking,” she responded, grinning at me. “By the way, Victor tried to follow me here.”

“But you lost him.”

She nodded. “Yes. And while I was waiting for you to come up from your lair with the telepath, I filed a formal report with Sandy *and* the Council explaining that Victor was clearly trying to overstep against a pledged pair.”

“You are the best child a maker could ask for,” I grinned.

“And an unimaginable bitch,” she added.

“Of course that.”

“It gets better.”

“Do tell.”

“Lambert, the Council’s chief enforcer, was deployed to take out Victor. Apparently, the Ancient Pythoness had already foreseen Victor’s attempt to interfere with a pledged pair. Judgment had been dealt out an hour before I called to report the crime. They were only waiting for Victor to actually make his first move.”

“Which he did by following you.”

She looked like the Cheshire cat. “*Exactly.*”

“Lambert won’t be swift about things,” I observed.

“No. He is a time-taker,” she returned with an evil grin. “He could teach even you a thing or two.”

“I’d love to watch him work.”

“I’ll call to see if I can arrange that before his current job is done,” she smirked.

“Felipe?” I asked.

“The Pythoness apparently saw Victor’s attempted coup too.”

It was my turn to grin like the mythical cat. Vampire “rules” didn’t protect kings from usurpations, so the Ancient Lady chose not to interfere in those. That meant that Victor’s duplicity against Felipe was now known only because my pledging to Sookie had been threatened. And the Ancient Pythoness’s involvement provided a validation stamp for that pledging!

Pam walked toward the door but then paused. “Sookie’s okay with it all?”

“Not all, but her complaints aren’t about the big things.”

She turned to smile at me. “Good. You deserve,” she paused, “all you desire.”

I moved to kiss her forehead. “Thank you,” I whispered.

After Pam left, I did a little work. I secured Fangtasia's two most "normal" waitresses to report to Merlotte's the next day. I researched an itinerary for Vegas. I responded to an official email from Felipe informing me that Victor was to be executed. Sandy was to replace him. She was inexperienced, but efficient. I'd already decided to like her.

"Better," I said to myself as I went down to the room Sookie had *chosen* to share with me. "Much fucking better," I added quietly when I saw she was wrapped around the pillow I'd been using earlier.

Of all of my contingencies, the one I'd given the least thought to had been perfection. At minimum, I'd thought that it would take much "courting" before I was in Sookie's bed—let alone in her heart.

"I missed you," she mumbled, reaching out for me, despite still being mostly asleep.

I took my place next to her and held her. "I missed you too, my wife," I returned even though she was already fully asleep when I said it.

Yes. I'd planned fully for every contingency but the one I was living. "That's one of the reasons why I love you," I added softly as I gently caressed her hair.

Sookie. My bonded. My pledged. My beloved.

My *choice*.

She was *beyond* contingencies.

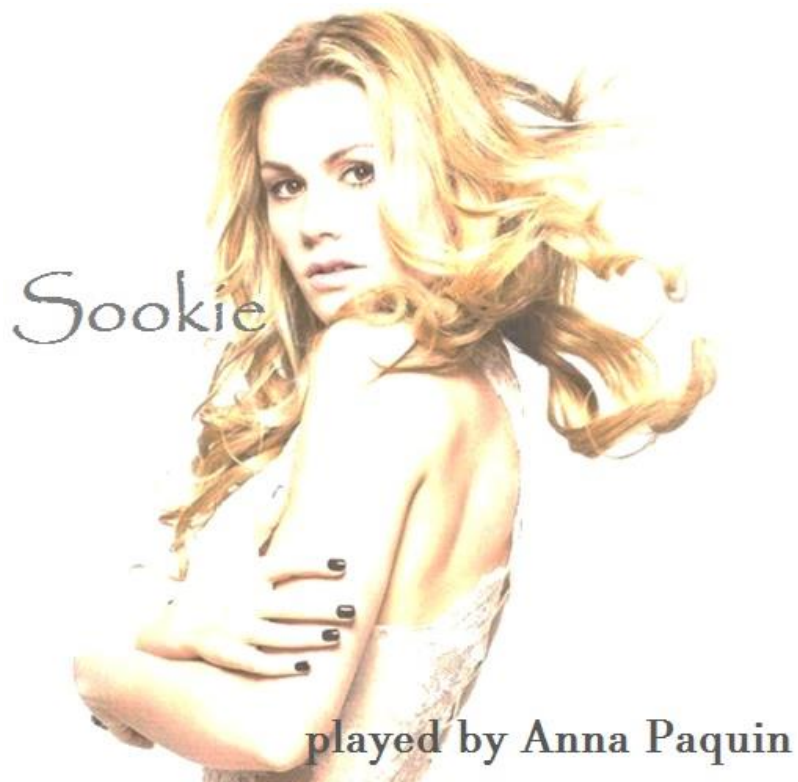
But I'd still plan for all of them I could fathom nonetheless.

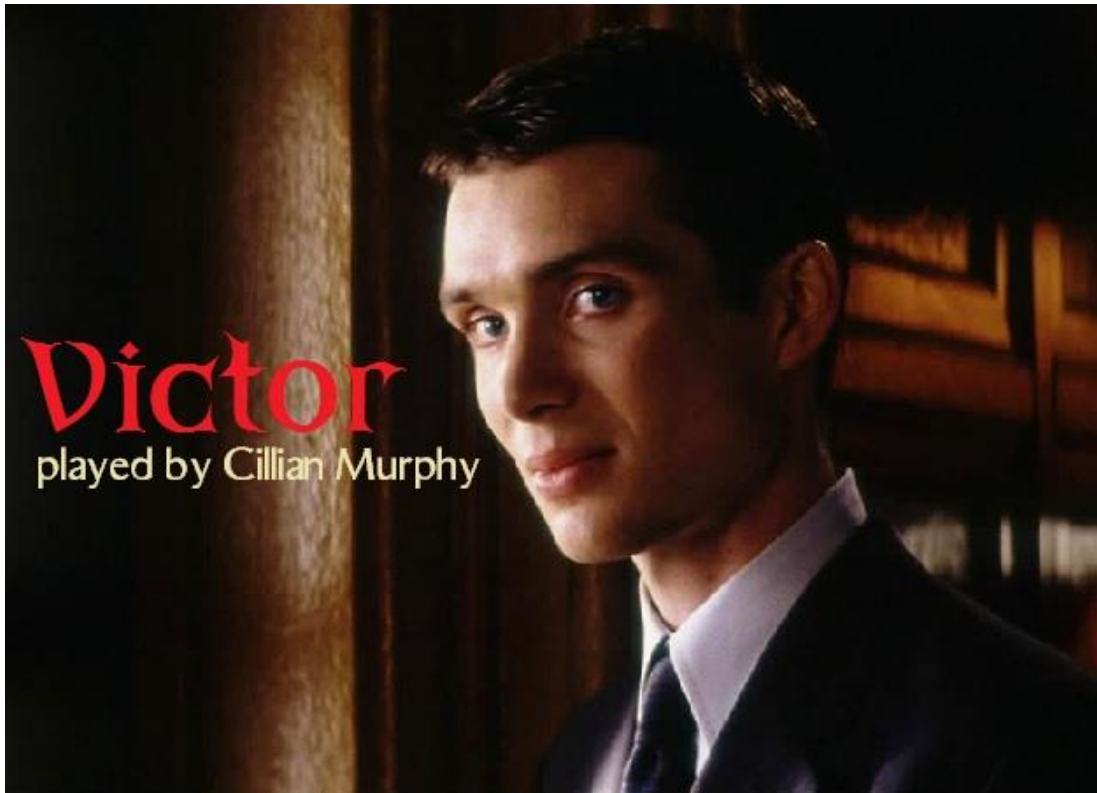
She was worth it.

And so was I.

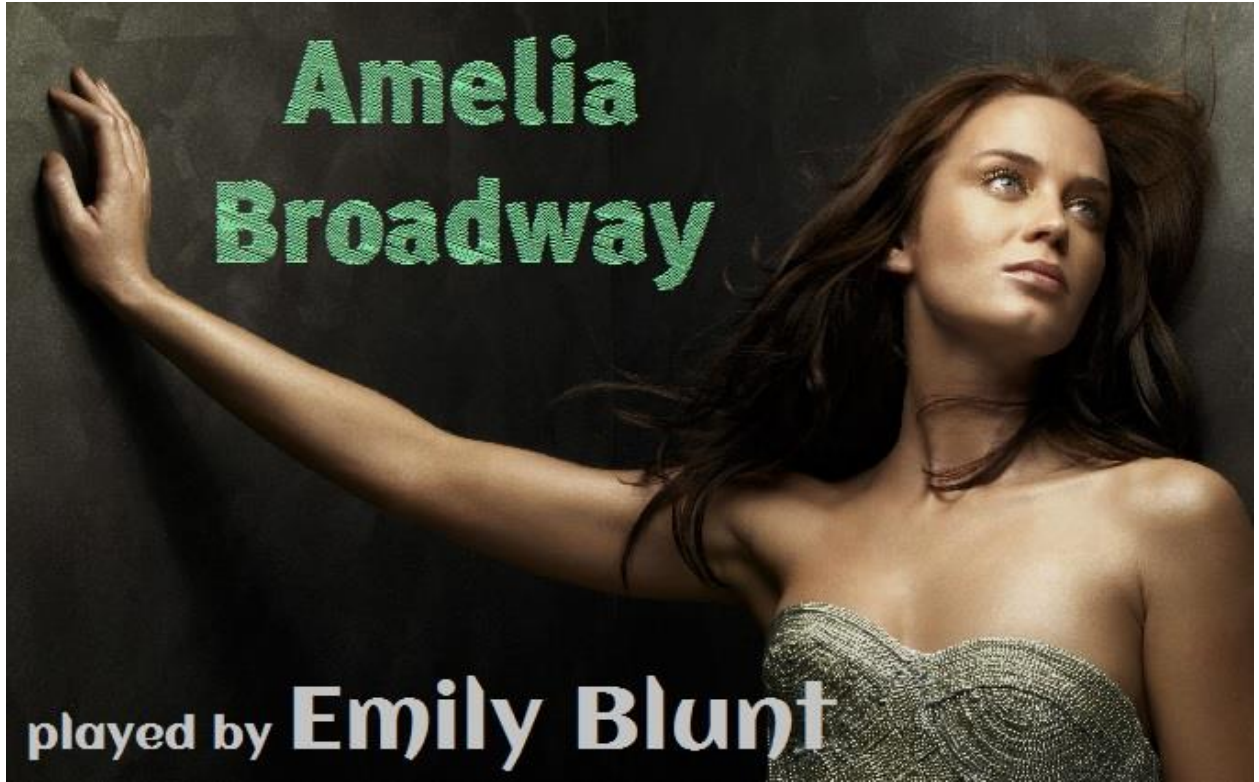
The End

The East









**Amelia
Broadway**

played by **Emily Blunt**