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## **Chapter 1: Chapter 1 - Lego House**

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### Chapter 1 – Lego House

#### **SPOV**

"I think that's all of it."

The sound of his voice drew my eyes upward where they met Sam's staring back at me. It was probably the first time I'd really looked at him at all in days.

Weeks.

Months.

"I'm sorry Sam," I whispered with tears filling my eyes. My near constant weepy state lately made me surprised I had any left to shed.

"Chere," he offered softly and took a hesitant step in my direction before stopping himself. It was symbolic of our entire nearly yearlong relationship.

Hesitant and stopping before either one of us could make any sort of real connection.

"You know I'll always love you, right?" he asked.

I nodded because I did know. I knew it from his thoughts. Just like I knew I would always love him in exactly the same way.

As my friend.

We tried. God knows we tried to put everything behind us. Tried to build on our friendship hoping it would turn into something more. Something that would flourish into the kind of life we both wanted. A normal life filled with love and laughter and happily ever afters. A life worth fighting for.

Now it was a struggle just to maintain eye contact.

"I'll always love you too Sam."

And as true as it was, I knew now it wasn't enough. It wasn't the kind of love that evoked passion. The kind others would look at and say, "Theirs is a love for the ages." The kind that would be able to stand the test of time.

It barely withstood the last eleven months.

He gave me a small sad smile, mirroring my own, before turning and leaving the house. And I knew it was for good this time. But instead of mourning our failed relationship, the finality of it only served to remind me of someone else who'd left my life for good. Someone whose presence would probably be with me forever. No matter how many miles were between us or how hard I tried to forget him.

I could blame Eric for coming between me and Sam. Lord knew I'd been prone to blaming him for a lot. He was the one to add on his ridiculously highhanded caveat of only giving Sam the money to bail me out of jail if he would never romantically pursue me. And as much as I hated to admit it, it probably had a lot to do with why Sam and I gotten together. I'd had more than enough of him deciding my life for me and I would be damned if he got any say in it when he was no longer a part of it.

At least that was how I used to feel.

Now I just felt like a fool.

I'd never realized just how much I'd blamed Eric for nearly everything. The bond. The marriage. Him seemingly keeping me in the dark at every turn and allowing me to be blindsided in return. It made me angry and distrustful. Nearly every man in my life had disappointed me in some way or another. My father died when I was too young to have ever gotten to really know him. My uncle physically molested me and raped me mentally with his thoughts. And Bill, well...

I didn't need to go there again.

But Bill, Alcide, and Quinn...they all had ulterior motives when it came to being with me. And if I was being honest with myself, so did Eric.

But if I was being honest with myself, then I had to admit I had them too.

I'd had a choice to form our blood bond. Granted, it wasn't a great choice, but a choice nonetheless and I'd chosen Eric over Andre. Not only because of the safety I knew he would provide or our complicated – if not amorous – past, but because I knew being bonded to Andre would be the things nightmares were made of. Our marriage by knife in hindsight is what kept me out of Felipe's clutches. If anything, I only became even more of a liability for Eric. Something he would've known at the time and yet he'd gone through with it anyway. My undoubtedly stubborn refusal would've been my downfall had he told me beforehand.

Something he also would've known.

But I'd been so suspicious. Always dismissing every good deed and scrutinizing Eric to the Nth degree expecting him to disappoint me as well. And he had – at times – done that all on his own. But not once did I ever take a good hard look into my own self-righteous mirror. Not once did I ever scrutinize myself or my own actions – or non-actions as the case may be – because if I had, I would've seen my own numerous flaws. Maybe even in time to do something about it.

Instead of now. When it was too late.

Looking back Eric wasn't the only one to keep me in the dark. I'd done a pretty good job of doing that myself all but shoving my head into the sand and shouting I didn't want to know. He tried coming to me the night before our divorce. And as I was also prone to do, I'd sent him away. Again. I can only assume he meant to warn me of what was to come. He *had* warned me by telling me no matter what happened in public I shouldn't doubt that he loved me and cared for me.

But I couldn't hear him with my ears so full of sand.

So of course I ignored every word and I let my doubt and humiliation color everything else. Doubted he ever loved me at all because I had the nerve to be surprised by our very public and humiliating divorce.

I didn't need a Word-A-Day calendar.

What I needed was a Crow-A-Day dinner. Lord knew I'd eaten enough of it over the last eleven months.

And suddenly feeling full from my hubris, I felt the need to walk it off. Alone.

Like I would be for the rest of my life.

Even now that Sam had moved out, I didn't feel any lonelier than I had when he'd still been living with me. Granted, he'd only been gone for less than an hour, but it had been almost a year since I'd felt the kind of contentment that came from being in the presence of another. And I wasn't allowed to even enter the state said other now resided in under penalty of death, but again.

That was my own fault.

Not because I'd allowed my hurt and blind rage to automatically scoff at Eric's request that I join him there as his mistress. But because I'd been too blinded by my own naiveté to realize I'd had the answer to our problems in the palm of my hand all along.

The Cluviel Dor.

And while Eric shouldered some of the blame for not explaining to me in detail that he literally couldn't refuse to marry Freyda, it was my fault as well for blanketing supernatural politics in my human ideals.

Scratch that.

My *American* ideals.

I knew good and well there were still some parts of the world where the bride and groom don't get a choice in who they marry. Sadly it's just the way their world works. And by not seeing that possibility in the supernatural world I'd come to see for myself was steeped in ancient traditions, I'd been the one to seal our fate by allowing my panic to overrule common sense.

My alarm at seeing Sam die made me react without thought in using the Cluviel Dor on him. It was a trait I'd come to recognize was a serious flaw I needed to work on. And while my heart hurt even now at the thought of him dying, logically it would've been something I would be forced to deal with at some point in time even if he had been the great love of my life.

But by using it to save Sam, I'd simultaneously condemned the great love of my life to 200 years of servitude.

I'd been walking blindly, lost in thought, and only knew I'd collapsed to the ground when I felt the wet grass hit my forehead. My only thoughts were of Eric. Of the horrible life I knew Appius had forced him to live and now I had to live with the bitter knowledge I was no better.

I cried for what we had lost. I cried for subjecting Eric to 200 years of slavery. I cried for the hopelessness and helplessness of it all.

I don't know how long I lay there. Time no longer held any meaning for me once the realization hit me that I would run out of it long before Eric would be freed. So when I felt the void closing in on me I didn't bother to look up. While I couldn't bring myself to pray for my own death, I couldn't deny I was certainly due for a karmic kick in the ass. So I didn't struggle at all when I felt their arms wrap around my body and lift me up from the ground. They did so gently, but I still didn't look to see who it was.

Bill, maybe.

I didn't care. They weren't allowed to harm me. To feed from me.

I didn't care about that either.

I felt the familiar and worn cushion of the porch swing when I was placed on it and then the weight of someone else sit beside me. But still I didn't look. I didn't want to. I didn't need to.

I already knew it wouldn't be the vampire I wanted to see more than anyone else.

But even now, I couldn't be rude. It was so ingrained in me that it didn't take much for me to straighten my spine and try to put on a gracious face when I finally glanced over to my side. I'd been expecting my guest to be Bill, so I was surprised to see Eric's first child, Karin instead.

We hadn't talked since she'd come to summon me to Fangtasia for Vamp Divorce Court, but I knew she'd been tasked with watching me for the year following it. I'd felt her presence in the woods surrounding my house every night since then, but I hadn't ever come out to talk to her. Unfairly, I had put some of the blame on her shoulders for my humiliation that night.

That whole 'Don't kill the messenger' phrase was born for a reason.

"It is not my place," she began. "But I could not allow you to remain on the ground, knowing my master holds you up much higher than that. That – in and of itself – is a miracle I never thought I would see."

Her soft laughter and gentle smile – just like her kind words – were unexpected. The added tears filling my eyes were not, so I quickly wiped them away and tried to smile in return when the dam broke all over again. The tears streamed down my face and my throat tightened while I tried to choke out the words spilling straight out of my heart to the closest thing to Eric as I could get, crying out, "I'm sorry. For everything. I'm sorry you've been forced to spend night after night in my woods. I'm sorry I've never once come out to try and talk to you. I'm sorry that my own selfishness and stupidity has cost you the company of your maker for the next one hundred and ninety-nine years. I'm just so sorry."

My sobs took control of my body by then, so I doubled over, crying for everything that had been lost.

She sat silently at my side and let it run its course, but when I calmed down some, she asked, "The shifter has moved out?"

"Yes." While I was sorry for what my actions had inadvertently cost her, I didn't know her well enough to want to elaborate. There wasn't much to tell anyway. Eric might as well have been physically standing in between me and Sam all along. And it broke my heart even further to realize Sam could be interchanged with anyone.

Eric would always be in their way.

I really would spend the rest of my life alone.

I had once thought I would be okay with that. And maybe I would have been had I never met Bill. Back when I didn't know what it was like to be with someone and not have to use my shields. Even Sam had to concentrate on not letting me hear him and we'd learned over the last eleven months, it wasn't so easily done when we spent so much time together.

It was how I knew I didn't compare to Jannalyn in bed.

But that was okay too. He didn't come close to Eric's skills.

And the fact I could slough off the unintended insult so easily told me Sam and I weren't meant to be together. But my irrational jealousy over thoughts of what – or who – Eric was doing on any given night told me who held my heart.

Who would always hold my heart.

Since I hadn't said anything else, Karin moved the conversation along by saying, "You know I only have four weeks left of watching you. When my time here is done you shouldn't be out after dark alone. You will still be protected by royal decree, but sometimes that is not enough." Catching my eye and staring hard enough I almost expected to feel the push of her glamour when she added, "*Sometimes a royal decree means nothing.*"

Huh?

I had the sneaking suspicion she was talking about more than the tasty Sookie-treat I would be to other vampires with less – or no – scruples.

"It doesn't?" I asked, hoping my naiveté could work for me for once.

In my experience, vampires weren't a chatty bunch when it came to their secret handshakes or whatever. And given the arch of her brow, I could totally see the resemblance she had to her sister Pam.

"No."

I swear. Sometimes it was like pulling fangs to get them to answer a question.

Deciding to spell it out for her in the hopes she would spell it out for me, I said, "You're going to have to spell it out for me. My inability to decipher anything on my own and y'all's cryptic rigmarole is why you can't see Eric for the next two centuries."

And why I'll never lay eyes on him ever again.

She was definitely Eric's child because instead of answering, she had her own agenda and asked, "Why are you no longer with the shifter?"

My guff was up at her personal question, but I was too tired to put up much of an outward fuss and took the easier road by explaining, "It just wasn't working. I tried. We tried. We acted the part and tried to put all of the pieces together to make them fit. But without a strong foundation to anchor it all together, it just blew over like a house of cards."

Saying it all out loud made me realize I'd done the same thing with Eric. I kept trying to force him to fit into the role of a human boyfriend. Thinking and acting in a way that a human would,

while railing about my own humanity at every opportunity whenever he would try to explain to me how his world worked and my place in it.

And so now I sat alone. A pot without my kettle.

"You do not love him?" she asked.

Gah...did she follow Dear Abby too?

It made me realize I missed Pam.

"I do," I huffed. "I just...I love him like I always have. Like a friend."

"And my master?" she prodded. "How do you feel about him?"

"Does it matter?" I snapped, once again unfairly taking my frustration out on her. Realizing that, I dialed it back a notch and answered my own question saying, "It doesn't matter. None of it matters."

"Does my presence here not matter?" she asked. "That my master would negotiate your protection to ensure you remain safe when he can no longer be here to see to it himself?"

My heart clenched again. After the way I had treated him and after everything I'd done – or didn't do – I couldn't hold it against him, but I explained, "Pam told me not to get sentimental about everything Eric did. The protection measures. None of it. She said it was his way of showing Freyda he is loyal and protects his own."

Ass. He protects his own ass by protecting my ungrateful one in the process.

Alright. So maybe I held it against him just a little.

She stared back at me with a knowing look and mocked, "*Pam told me* you are a passionate creature. You allow your heart to overrule your head. You act without thinking regardless of the dangers present."

"And the *sky* is *blue*," I snarked back. "What's your point?"

"My *point*, you daft girl, is it was Pam's way of putting her own protective measures in place. You are banned under penalty of death if you step one foot into Oklahoma. Do you not think it odd for Freyda – a Vampire Queen – to be so concerned over a simple human? She has my master by the balls thanks to his abomination for a maker. He is indebted to be her puppet for two hundred years and yet she made it a point to ban you from her state. Why do you think that is?"

"Because she's a bitch?"

It had been my working theory ever since I'd learned about the whole marriage mess.

Her eyes crinkled in the corners when she smiled, but her face became more serious when she said, "You have power over Eric. Without the power of magic or bond, you have power over my master. Freyda knows this and so she fears you. She knows if you were still in Eric's life, she would never have complete control of him. That is why she banned you. My sister acted in good faith by telling you the things she did. She knew once your hurt subsided and you calmed down – if you realized Eric did everything he could to make sure you would remain safe for the rest of your days because he still loves you, she worried you might do something crazy." Catching my eye yet again, she arched her brow and added, "Like trying to rescue Eric."

Huh?

"How would I do that?" I asked, even though my mind was already creating impossible scenarios. But the realist in me still added, "That whole death-if-I-enter thing would kind of make any rescue attempt a moot point, wouldn't it?"

"Did my master not come to you after the divorce and ask you to come with him? There are ways to sneak you in." Her eyes and voice took on a challenging note as she added, "*If you are willing.*"

Was I?

Eric did try to come to me the very next night. He'd already been banned from seeing me and looking back now I realized he risked himself yet again because he couldn't stay away. He couldn't leave things the way they were. He couldn't leave me without asking me to go with him and be his secret lover when he knew one (me) if not both of us would be killed if we were caught. I'd thought it was completely selfish of him at the time.

But now I wondered if maybe he had just been that desperate.

"But what if he doesn't want me?" I whispered out, giving voice to my biggest fear. And because I was still a human with many flaws, I couldn't stop myself from bitterly adding, "I'm sure he's moved on by now. *Many times.*"

"Yes, that could be," she nodded stoically at my side and then sampled the air around us. "I can see why you would be upset to learn he has *moved on* a time or two, especially now when you absolutely *reek* of the scent of celibacy."

Ouch.

The truth *did* actually hurt.

And I would bet her and Pam were pretty tight.

"So, what?" I asked, ignoring her truthful jibe.



Just like I would ignore whatever Eric had been up to over the past eleven months if by some miracle we could be together again. But in order to do so, I knew I would have to be the one to make the first move. And I'd have to do it blind. I had no idea if he would want me back even if I could find him a way out of his marriage contract.

What if I managed to move heaven and earth only for him to send me away?

After all, I was still due that karmic ass kicking.

Since she was still waiting for me to give her a hint about my 'what', I added, "You think I should just sneak into Oklahoma – where the penalty if I'm caught is *death* – and somehow manage to find a way to Eric when I have no idea if he even wants to see me? And then what?"

I loved him. God knows I loved him almost more than anything.

But I didn't love him more than I loved me.

We were very alike like that.

I couldn't be 'the other woman' in his life. I could understand the political nature of their marriage. I could understand him having to put on a dog and pony show in front of the other vamps because I'd done it many times myself.

But there was no way I could lie in bed waiting for him to return to me from another woman's. Even if it only happened once a year.

I was selfish in all aspects of my life and that was never truer when it came to Eric. I wanted him all to myself and I would take nothing less. It was why I'd had such a hard time seeing him feed from that...that Kym Rowe.

My lips twisted up all on their own so I wouldn't call her the gardening tool her last name rhymed with.

"You mean as my master did when he came to you the very next night?" she asked. "Knowing how angry and hurt you were. Knowing if he were caught doing so he would be punished severely. And yet he still came to you. He still had *hope* you wouldn't refuse him."

"He *said* he should've just turned me against my will," I spat back, more angry at myself for not seeing it all before. I'd been too blinded by rage.

And stupidity.

"And yet you still live," she replied. "He could have commanded either Pam or me to do it. To make you immortal so that you would still exist when his servitude comes to an end. Two hundred years is a very long time, Sookie. Long enough that you might have forgiven him by then."

She was right. I knew she was right about all of it, but all I could focus on was, 'Two hundred years is a very long time.'

Eric was stuck for two hundred years. He would have to ask permission before he made any move. He could no longer think for himself or do as he wished whenever he wanted. He'd always had a boss, but this was different. Freyda for all intents and purposes *owned* Eric now.

What if she didn't take care of him? What if she broke him?

I had no idea of what her true nature was like. But considering all that Appius had done to Eric and he'd been the one to make the deal with Freyda, it didn't bode well in my now overactive mind.

Despite his horrific past, Eric had somehow managed to retain a passion for life. Sure, he was deadly. And he could look completely bored sitting on his throne in Fangtasia, but that was just the Eric everyone else got to see.

My Eric laughed. He came with a pocket full of one liners and a twinkle in his eye. He wore pink spandex to an orgy with me. He had my driveway fixed and sent me a coat. Not because I asked him to but because I needed it.

He always knew what I needed.

He danced with me. Cared for me. Loved me.

He even beheaded a vampire or two for me.

But now he was expected to be someone's lap dog. Now, at least once a year every year, he would be forced by the terms of their contract to...

"How?" I asked. "How do I get to him and how do I get him out of his marriage contract?"

"I only said I can get you into the state unseen," she shrugged.

"You're a lot of help," I snapped sarcastically.

She took a page out of Pam's book and became interested in her fingernails, saying, "Are you not the one who rescued a vampire being held by the Fellowship? The one who rescued your unfaithful lover and staked his three hundred year old maker? You participated in the Witch War and helped to restore my master's memory. You found the killer of shifters while you yourself were the target of a vengeful Hot Rain. You singlehandedly thwarted Arkansas's attempted takeover of Louisiana. Hell, you even somehow managed to rescue both my maker and my sister from an exploding building. Nine floors up. In the middle of the day." She managed to look both impressed and disgusted as she said, "You are all Pam has been going on about for the last three years, but I must admit, I have yet to see *that girl*. So tell me Sookie, was it all hype?"

I got your *hype* right here missy.

And she got my goat up. Honestly, I didn't know what I wanted more. To hug her or hit her because her words gave me hope and her condescending attitude pissed me off.

I hadn't felt so alive in almost a year.

"Those are just my greatest hits," I smiled and it grew seeing one appear on her lips. My confidence grew with it when I added, "And I think it's about time I started working on my next big hit."

It would be my epic.

Either my one true masterpiece or my last and final act.

But either or, all of it would be for my Eric.

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## **Chapter 2: Chapter 2 - Madness**

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### Chapter 2 – Madness

#### **EPOV**

A swath of cloth.

White cotton.

White cotton dotted with little drops of red.

It wrapped itself around me. Hugging me. Smothering me from the inside out. Filling my head until it was near bursting. Such a cold and sterile hue stood out in a sea of darkness and yet it felt warm.

Golden.

Sun kissed.

And it was sweet?

"Not especially."

There it was again. The voice haunting my dreams. I shook my head to rid my ears of the sound, but like always, it never truly left. Be it a in the form of a whisper. A tinkling laugh. A sigh of ecstasy.

An indignant huff.

I could not turn it off no matter how it chose to reveal itself.

But still I tried. My mind worked to call upon another dream. Was it a dream? Something told me no. The word precognition came to mind instead.

It was interesting.

"Did the psychic think so?"

There she was again. The haughtiness of her tone led me to believe she did not like to share my attentions. Even if it were only within the confines of my addled mind. But I already knew I could not deny her wishes. I could not control her hold over me.

I could not control her.

Night after night my mind was under her spell. At her command and at her mercy. Some nights she was angry with me and would fling accusations like a boomerang. Throw it with perfect precision, so that it would leave its mark on my soul. And then catch it upon its return only so she could repeat the process all over again.

"You don't seem too happy about something."

No. No, I wasn't happy at all. Even the word itself seemed foreign to my mind.

"Would there be something wrong with me rescuing the two of you?"

*Yes?*

*No?*

My mind couldn't decide on which stance to take. Nor could it discern a third party within my nightmare for her words to make sense.

"Where do you get off, telling them that I'm your...your lover?"

The obvious distaste in her tone laced with her anger forced a grunt from my chest as her verbal barb sliced through my skin. But I welcomed the pain. Physical discomfort was less cumbersome than the emotional turmoil her words were capable of conjuring.

Perhaps the other she spoke of was her true lover?

The thought provoked another painful hiss from my lips. One I wished I could bestow on the one she was spoken for. Because even her anger could not dissuade the hold she had on me. I welcomed her presence in any form.

"Why?" she cried out. "He actually came to rescue me. Why get mad at him?"

My back arched in agony hearing the hurt in her voice as she beseeched, "Where were you?"

I had no answer for her question. All I knew was the darkness of my mind. Her voice my only rudder, steering me in whichever direction she wanted me to go. I attempted once more to call up her image. To make out the distinct features blurred out by the light that always accompanied her form whenever I tried. But it was impossible.

It was like trying to stare directly into the sun.

"I hoped you would come," she cried brokenly. "I prayed you would come. I thought over and over you might hear me."

She was killing me with nothing more than her words.

*I hear you now. I am here for you now. We are broken together.*

Perhaps that would be enough.

And just as her words were capable of inflicting agony, so too were they able to soothe my pain. Ease the never ending ache in my chest. Alleviate the perpetual soreness in my limbs. My body. My soul.

"Oh, Eric."

Her soft spoken words were no longer broken. Instead they evoked a sense of tenderness. Pity too, perhaps. But I didn't care. I would gladly take her pity over her hurtful accusations.

"Eric, I'll do my best to keep you safe."

Safe.

Another word just as foreign to me. And as if to remind me I could not trust her promises, another groan escaped my lips as the burning sensation sliced through my thigh.

"Come on," she called out into the darkness, pulling me back from the pain and replacing it with a new sensation. Not one of burning but of warmth as it encased my hand. It lit up in my chest and shone brightly in my mind. Its light burning away the lingering pain in my body, so I focused on my indistinguishable savior trying to recall her name.

"Sookie," she whispered back to me. "Sookie Stackhouse."

*Thank you, Sookie.*

I settled in beside her in my mind. I needed the break, but a sweetness hit my tongue then. Its flavor familiar, but obscured from my memories. Its effect instantaneous. My already addled brain churned like a hurricane trying to place it. A snarl worked its way from my chest, knowing despite its memorable essence it was all wrong.

Exquisite, but wrong.

But I was rendered powerless. Like the angelic voice of my conscience, my body was no longer my own to control. I knew it and yet I still fought. I fought to regain the upper hand. Waged war with myself because if I could not silence her voice, I should at least be able to manage my body's reactions.

The futility of my actions was not foreign to me. It was ingrained in me. No matter how much I wanted to make it stop – to get away – it was a compulsion I could not resist.

But perhaps sensing my hopelessness, my Northern Star named Sookie chose to once again make her presence known. In the state I was in, I wasn't sure which side she would choose to grace me with. Her temper flared just as easily as her passion.

"Excuse me... I didn't mean to walk in on you. I should have knocked."

Her hesitant words mirrored the shyness I could feel coming from her as if it were my own. Caution. Uncertainty. They oozed from her and straight through my veins just as much as her undeniable lust.

*Never, lover. You never have to apologize for that.*

"Yes, but intruding wasn't polite."

This side of her was always sweet. Exquisitely so.

My mind was racing now with another part of my body experiencing a different kind of pain. A throbbing need that could only be relieved in one way. Sensations of standing in the midst of a rainfall besieged my mind, while memories of something soft and supple ghosted under my palms.

Another sensation made itself known then – rougher than I had expected it to be – and trailed across my chest. Simultaneously familiar and foreign, but already caught up in my favorite dream, I repeated the words I knew should come next.

"Bite a little."

A sharp pain drew another hiss from my lips as the pain worked its way through my chest and through my psyche. No longer sweet. No longer gentle.

Nothing but a raw brutality.

It was all wrong. It was nothing like my dreams. Nothing like how I knew my unseen lover to be, but my body was its own. It reacted to the physical stimulation on primal instinct and while I could not control it, I could recognize when another foreign presence entered my now unfamiliar dream. As my body shuddered uncontrollably with my release, I intuitively bit down on the skin shoved into my mouth. But instead of swallowing the cool liquid that followed, I spat out the unsavory flavor that had been forced onto my palate.

There was nothing exquisite about it.

Instead it was rank with desperation.

Entitlement.

And now, defeat.

My head snapped to the left when she backhanded me for refusing to take her blood yet again. And since they pissed her off so much, I repeated my actions and spit out the newest bit of blood tainting my tongue, caused by her own actions when my fangs tore through her skin. As her *royal consort* our blood was not shared as a part of our ceremony, like it was when I officiated between Mississippi and Indiana. The sharing of each other's blood would give us *equal* power over one another. Something only *her equal* would be worthy of. But in the eyes of *my queen* and the rest of the supernatural world, I was less than. It was why she'd been trying to force her blood into me ever since. To have some sort of power over me.

She should have negotiated a better contract.

One of its only redeeming qualities was that it forced my mind to focus and it cleansed my palate of the small amount of fairy blood she'd fed me. It was only a drop, but it was her latest ploy to get me to submit. Hoping my high induced fucking, coupled with my erratic feedings and lack of rest, would be my undoing.

If that was her A-game, she didn't stand a chance.

The only thing it did was bring an end to the downtime thoughts my mind had retreated to. Had always run to whenever she chose to play her games. Sometimes I was able to direct my thoughts on my own. To choose which memory I wanted to relive. But other times, more so when she drew out our *play dates* into days' long sessions where I would be kept awake by her Were guards while she was forced to her daytime rest, my mind would retreat on its own. Always to the same place. Always to the same one. But it was always a tossup on how I would be received by her.

Sookie – my teaser or my tormentor. They were one and the same.

Once I knew she was safe and I was forced to move to Oklahoma, I tested my chains. My only saving grace was that unlike Ocella, she couldn't command me to do anything. Freyda could say

the words, of course, but it was my choice to follow her orders. She had chosen me because of my age and my strength.

She should have thought that through.

To automatically simper at her feet wasn't something I would do nor would it be expected. In order for me to gain the upper hand, I would have to test her. To make her retaliate and beat me into submission – much like my maker – before giving her the small and subtle signs it was working. Allow her to believe she was breaking me – had broken me – and then let her build me back up as being completely loyal to her. It was the only way for her to not question my fealty. I needed her to believe I would be loyal to her above all others and when she did, I would take her undead life.

And I would be king.

It wasn't something I wanted before now. I still didn't want it even now, but I was done with having to answer to anyone. Done with having my life dictated to me. Without a maker and without a liege, I would be free to do as I wished.

Just as Sookie had been free to do as she wished.

I had spies in Oklahoma's court. Ones who would fill me in on the life I'd left behind. With one child as sheriff of the area she lived in and my other outside her house every night, I knew everything Sookie had been up to. And who she'd been up to it with.

Fucking shifter.

While the thought of his filthy paws on her voluptuous skin galled me, at least he was far enough removed from the supernatural world for her to maintain some sort of normalcy. The normal human life I had always known she'd craved.

The kind of life I could never give her.

And by becoming king I knew it would forever seal my fate in her eyes. Knew more than ever she wanted no part of my 'vampire shit' and I couldn't blame her. Our vampire shit is what had turned her life upside down. Cost her nothing but pain and misery.

So perhaps my first order of business as king would be to have Compton brought before me so I could stake his antebellum ass.

Now, however, I was forced to acknowledge the one in front of me. A stake would be too quick of a way for her to die, so my mind moved on from sweet little telepaths and sideburn wearing cocksuckers to the bitch who would meet her end by my hand.

"Who do you owe fealty to, Eric?"



The sound of her voice was like tiny strands of silver feathering over my balls. Something she had not yet thought of because her imagination was pitiful. While there was a reason why she'd risen to the station of queen at such a relatively young age, there was no amount of sadism she could subject me to that my own maker hadn't prepared me for. Nor could she hide her insecurities from me.

Timorous cunt.

Undoubtedly it was why I was brought here to begin with. She needed a warrior at her side in order to keep her throne before others figured out she would be easily overthrown. I could effortlessly rip her head from her shoulders now if my arms weren't shackled in silver to the ceiling above me.

Because although a timorous cunt, she would not have become queen by being stupid as well.

It was a game we played. One that had lasted on and off over the last eleven months. But it would not last forever. Not even over the next two centuries.

No. I would not last that long.

But I would not overreact either. I needed to bide my time. To learn who could be trusted and who could not. To see for myself just how far her reach went and then work twice as hard to make sure my own doubled her span. Ocella might have sold me out. Taken my life from me once again from beyond the grave, but that very same grave meant I did not have to be anyone's puppet. Not for long anyways.

The silver tipped whip sliced through the air and sliced through my skin when I didn't answer her highness in an expedient manner.

"Royal consort!" she snapped, attempting to remind me of my place, but only succeeded in reminding me why I would not rest until I wore her entrails like Pam wore her Burberry scarves. And when that same thought also reminded me I missed my children as well, thanks to my *queen*, I decided then and there I would be sure gift each of them with one of her fangs.

"*Who* do you owe fealty to?"

"Sophie-Anne?"

My throat was dry, so my words came out in a hoarse gruff. I had been denied any rest for days and only been fed occasional sips of synthetic blood. My body was weak from the silver restraining me and the numerous wounds covering my body were healing much slower because of it. They were not caused by Sookie's words in my dreams, but in actuality had been by Freyda's hand. However my words succeeded in leaving their mark on her given her livid expression.

Sophie-Anne was a devious bitch, but she'd at least deserved having her own kingdom.

So Freyda reminded me of my place by leaving another mark on my skin with her whip, repeating, "Who do you owe fealty to?"

"Count Chocula?"

Sookie had thought it hilarious to leave a box of the sugared cereal at my house for when she visited, telling me I wasn't the only vampire she put in her mouth.

Fuck, I missed her.

I tried to forget her. As soon as she rescinded my invitation from her house, I returned to Shreveport telling myself I was done with her for good. That she didn't love me enough to even try and see that I only asked her to be my mistress because *I* loved *her* – and would've spent the rest of her days loving her – told me I needed to forget about her.

Ironically, now it was only because of my memories of her that I had somewhere warm – if not sometimes hostile – to retreat to in my mind.

And I smiled, practically able to hear the snort Sookie would've made at my swearing allegiance to Count Chocula.

"You think this is *funny*?" my soon to be ex-wife screeched.

The one who came before her had prepared me for that reaction as well. And while my former lover could be infuriatingly stubborn and irrational, *she* at least made it *worth* the effort.

This one was worth at most a pitiful three grand street value, if I made the effort to drain her blood into tiny vials and sold it off to the dregs of society.

It would be *too much* effort for me.

Pam though. She would happily do it.

Freyda came at me with a silver dagger and from the angle she maintained I would've guessed she was aiming to make my smile a more permanent one by carving it into my face. I was restrained and already weakened, so there was nothing I could do to stop her. But her second in command stepped forward and halted her progression, saying, "He's already lost too much blood. You shouldn't weaken him any further."

"He should learn to obey me!" she shouted.

"You need him to remain strong, my queen. As he is now, he would be of no use to you if we were to come under attack." Pausing long enough for the rationale to take hold, he added, "He will honor his contract. You know this."

Ah yes, *the contract*.

My maker was dead so there would be no vengeance for me there. For my queen I already had compiled a long list of ways in which I would exact my revenge. But there was still another. One more vampire on my vampire shit list.

Felipe de Castro.

He could have stopped it all. Without my maker to command me, as my king he could have denied Freyda's request to have me honor any promises made to her by Ocella. I was his sheriff. I lived in his territory and had sworn my fealty to him. There would've been nothing she could do about it.

But he sold me out instead. And I knew it wasn't for money or territory. By agreeing to Freyda's request he gained the one thing he would never be able to get ahold of with me there.

Sookie Stackhouse.

I knew the moment he felt safe. The moment he heard through the ever present supernatural grapevine that I had fully submitted to Freyda, he would make his move. Contractually bound to stay away from her or not, there was no court who would uphold it. Any of them would want their very own telepath and many were likely making plans to acquire one.

One who was living with a fucking shifter and likely making a litter of puppies at that very moment.

But it was what she wanted. What I could never give her. So I would be graceful and bow out.

But I would take out every ounce of my hostility on Felipe's hide. Once I overthrew Freyda and Oklahoma was mine, he would be the next one in my sights. And when he fell and Louisiana became mine, then Sookie could spend the rest of her days with a pup on each teat if that was what she wanted.

"Will you?"

My balls tightened once more, feeling the imaginary sting of silver gliding over them, as her voice glided back into my consciousness.

"Will you honor our contract?"

"Of course, my queen," I replied, throwing her a bone. One she didn't need fairy blood to get from me.

Unless there was a connection by blood, vampires having sex together was unnatural. We did it from time to time, but not on a regular basis. It was why nearly every marriage contract specified it only had to be done once a year. Likely to reestablish the by then weakening blood tie formed at the ceremony. Small amounts taken over the span of a year would not complete a blood bond.

Freyda's only motivations in fairy fucking me had been to get her blood into me. And perhaps it was also retribution for me fucking her favored pets upon my arrival in her palace until they preferred me over her.

I'd held out hope in the days following our public divorce Sookie would come to see reason. Hoped once I calmed down that she would as well. That her hurt and anger would subside so that she would see I'd had no choice. In the previous three years she'd come to the rescue of many vampires she both knew and didn't know. Myself included. So in those first few weeks, I almost expected her to come barreling into the room at any given moment, pulling the impossible out from her ass and wielding it like a stake as she declared, "That's *my* vampire!"

I was *her* vampire. Or at least I *was* her vampire.

But my hopes were not met.

I should have known better considering who she had chosen to use the Cluviel Dor on. The same one with whom she now chose to share her bed. Her life. And when that realization finally sunk in, I attempted to fuck her from my mind, using any and every one of the donors who pandered to my *new* wife.

I viewed it as killing two birds with one stone.

But it only took my first week long *play date* for my mind to go running back home. To seek solace from my memories of Sookie. And now that I had some distance from it – from her – I could see why it all fell apart. I could recall each and every misstep each of us took. But even if we had made all the right moves, ultimately we were destined to fail.

I never accepted Sookie was just a human and Sookie never accepted she was anything but. She never accepted her place in the supernatural world she was undoubtedly a part of. And it wasn't just the vampire shit she didn't want to deal with. She was the great-granddaughter of the Prince of the Sky Fae. He'd told her himself she had been born with their essential spark. She was *always* a part of the supernatural world before Bill had ever been sent for her. Before Hadley had run her mouth to Sophie-Anne.

Before any vampire shit landed on her doorstep, Sookie Stackhouse was already one of us.

But her mind refused to acknowledge it. Refused to accept her status as 'other' and she continued to color in the box marked 'human' until her pen had worn through the paper.

I could accept that she didn't want to be turned. I hated it, but I could accept it. It wasn't a life I would have chosen if I had been given the choice, but that didn't mean I hadn't come to appreciate my new life. She too could have found joy in making new discoveries. In witnessing lifetime after lifetime of the advancements in technology. To see for herself the progression of her beloved humanity.

But it would seem the thought never even crossed her closed mind. I only wished I'd had more time to try to convince her otherwise.

Now though, I would leave her be. She'd made her choice and that choice hadn't been me. But I would still see to it that she would remain free, so once I took Oklahoma I would make a move on Nevada. I wanted nothing to do with the state and would leave it to rot. But taking out Felipe would be the only way for me to acquire Louisiana and my only concern was Louisiana.

Because all of my concerns were in Louisiana.

Freyda came to stand before me and jerked my head upright, looking into my eyes for the truth of my words.

Unable to see her own demise behind them taking form in my mind.

"You will protect me and mine from all who threaten us?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied truthfully.

I would allow no other to take her head. That pleasure would be mine.

My honesty – sans treasonous designs – appeared to be good enough for her for now. She even looked somewhat pleased when she turned to her second and said, "See to it that he's cleaned up and given donors. He's already missed court too often and I want him healed by tomorrow night so he can join me."

"Yes, Your Majesty," her lackey bowed.

He would be my second as well.

My second target.

"Who are you loyal to, Eric?" she asked in an almost singsong voice as an afterthought. The way she strode towards the door gave the impression she was damn near joyful.

I couldn't have that.

So I gave her another truth and replied, "Sookie," tugging on my invisible chains once more and making both Freyda's elation and her exit from the room come to a halt.

But I couldn't have Sookie, so I wouldn't let Freyda have her delight.

Nor would I let her think she had broken me *that* easily.

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## Chapter 3 – Next To Me

### SPOV

Just like Pam had so accurately described me – all heart and no brains – I almost asked Karin to sneak me into Oklahoma that very same night. But if I truly wanted to change things, I knew I needed to start with my own actions and running off into a foreign state where the only person I knew was the one I wanted to save, wouldn't do either one of us any good. I needed to be smart about it for once, which meant I needed help. Help figuring out how to actually free Eric in a way where he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. I knew him well enough to know that was a life he wouldn't want to live.

If he had, he would've taken off long before the contracts were ever signed.

I didn't know where to start or how to even begin figuring out a way to get Eric out of his marriage contract. Supernatural legalities weren't my specialty, but it was that very same thought that gave me my first clue on who I needed to talk to.

So I called Mr. Cataliades.

Thankfully he happened to be in Shreveport on other business and agreed to meet with me the very next afternoon. So with my heart on my sleeve and my stomach in knots, I met him in an office building the following day.

Seeing me enter his office, he was as warm as ever and greeted me by saying, "Sookie, I hope you are doing well?"

I fought against the tears that were constantly threatening to spill out of my eyes and tried to smile through them, admitting, "Actually, I'm not. That's why I'm here. I need your help."

He gestured for me to take a seat and looked appropriately concerned as he said, "I'm sorry to hear that. I take it you're here to see me about taking away your telepathy?"

"What?" I asked in shock. At least it was enough to make my emotional state toughen up some, so I added, "No. No I...I guess it's nice to know that I have the option, but it's a part of me. It's what made me who I am."

And it was a part of me that I might need in order to free Eric, hopefully one day soon. I'd spent my whole life bemoaning my weirdness. Crying inside over wanting to be normal. Not once did I ever embrace my otherness, even if I had no issues with using it to my advantage when my life – or someone else's I cared about – was on the line.

I really was a hypocrite.

Looking confused, he said, "Well then my dear, I'm afraid I don't know your purpose in asking for this meeting. Do you have legal issues you need assistance with?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Leaning forward, I let my desperation shine through and asked, "Do you know of any way for Eric to get out of his contract with Oklahoma?"

In my past dealings with Mr. C, I'd seen his eyes dance with amusement. I'd witnessed them scorn the Arkansas vamp Jade right before he killed her for murdering his own niece. I'd observed him remain completely stone faced during Sophie-Anne's trial in front of the ancient oracle in Rhodes and saw them weary when he carried her injured body from the rubble. But now I was beholding an entirely new sight on his face.

Shock.

If he were a cartoon character, his eyeballs would've shot out of his skull on springs, while the sound of a trumpet blared in the background.

But the savvy lawyer in him quickly returned, with him wiping his face clean of any emotion when he questioned, "Why do you ask, my dear?"

I wasn't sure if there was some confidentiality clause he was bound by. And knowing some of what the supernatural world was like, I knew that could very well mean he literally couldn't talk about it. He could be bound by some sort of magical mouth shutter that would make it impossible for him to speak of it, but I was desperate. I knew there was no way I could rescue Eric on my own and I would do whatever I had to do in order to set him free.

Even if that would mean he would then be free to choose not to be with me again.

He might not be my monarch, but Eric was my butterfly.

I didn't hold back anything and admitted, "I miss him terribly. I still love him and I hate that I didn't try to fight for him when everything went down. I know he still loved me at the time and I have no idea if that still holds true today, but I can't leave things the way they are. I can't live with myself knowing he'll live his next two hundred years as a slave. So I'm asking is there anything that can be done to get him out of it? Is there some being in higher power I can go to, to ask for their help? I know the money my great-grandfather left me isn't much in the grand scheme of things, but I'm willing to give it all to whoever can help free Eric. And I'm willing to use my telepathy for them whenever they have need of it for the rest of my life."

It was the least I could do, considering Eric had committed himself to an additional one hundred years of slavery to ensure my own freedom. I had another fifty years at best, if I was lucky.

It was a bargain price.

Fifty percent off.

"What you are saying could be considered treasonous," he warned.

And if I could find any humor in the situation we were in, I would've made a show of turning out my pockets to show him I didn't have a single fig to give.

But seeing the small smile form on his lips, I assumed Mr. C was fig-free too, right before he added, "Were we in *Oklahoma*."

"But we're *not*," I smiled in return, with hope filling my chest.

"No, my dear," he smiled, showing me his razor sharp pearly whites. "We most certainly are *not*." He put his lawyer face back in place and said, "As the lawyer for the Sovereignty of Louisiana, I had a hand in negotiating the contract on King de Castro's behalf and thereby in part, on Mr. Northman's behalf as well."

I had a feeling he was putting down something I should be picking up, but I didn't know quite what it was. That is until his eyes pierced mine – with them saying much more than his actual words – when he adopted a formal tone in saying, "Sookie Stackhouse. Are you here to notify me of your intention to claim *your husband* and keeping him bound to *your marriage* by the knife, by invoking *your birthright* as Princess of the Sky Fae?"

I could do that?

How many times had I hated that very thing? It was thanks to my grandfather Fintan's friendship with Mr. C that made me end up with my curse of telepathy to begin with. It was my fairy heritage that made me the prize for Lochlan and Neave, causing me to experience pain the likes of which I hadn't known was possible. But even then – even when Eric was being tortured himself by Victor – he did all that he could to take my pain away through the bond I'd always been suspicious of. He came to me as soon as he could and healed me with his blood, even though he needed it himself. He stood side by side with me and took down the fairies who came to finish me off, when he was still weak himself.

Before that he'd come to me on the night of the takeover, standing with me when it could've very well been our end. Jackson. Mickey. New Orleans. Both when I'd been kidnapped and when I was later in the hospital. The hallway in Rhodes where Andre would've forced me to bond with him. Even when he didn't know his own name, he'd headed straight for me.

Over and over, time and again, Eric had always come for me. He'd always come to me.

No matter what – when it counted – that was where Eric always was.

Next to me.

Now I would gladly go through the torture all over again if it meant I would get Eric back. Now I knew I would never be normal. And if being normal meant I wouldn't have Eric, then I didn't



want to be. I would gladly shout from the mountaintops, telling everyone I was a fairy goddammit!

Hear me roar!

And I wanted to roar at Mr. C and ask him why he didn't tell me about my fairy birthright sooner, but I knew even if he had, I probably wouldn't have used it before now. Just like I hadn't used the Cluviel Dor to save him. I'd still been too angry. Too hurt. Too blind to see what had been in front of me all along.

Or rather, beside me all along.

But I had a feeling he wasn't looking for me to ask any questions – even if I now had a million more – so I trusted my gut instincts – and him – and simply replied, "I am."

"Very well," he smiled. I'd apparently picked up what he'd put down satisfactorily, so he glanced down at his desk calendar and shook his head ruefully, saying, "My schedule is *quite full* over the next several days. I'm afraid I might not have the chance to inform Oklahoma of your intentions right away." Looking back up at me, he put down something new when he offered, "Perhaps you could use that time to speak to your great-grandfather. It is his duty to stand by his kin in matters such as this. Royalty by blood supersedes royalty of any other kind in the supernatural world, regardless of the species involved. And his presence would help solidify your claim when you appear before Oklahoma."

"When I do what, now?" I asked.

I assumed he could just make a call. Send a snowy white owl or an email. I could sign something in blood and have him pass it on, along with a message to my husband to pick up a gallon of milk on his way home.

"I'm forbidden to go into Oklahoma," I reminded him when he just stared at me. And in case he forgot, I added, "On penalty of *death*."

"Yes," he nodded, like I wasn't wearing a bullseye on my back. His eyebrow quirked up as he said, "I believe the contract specifically states, *'If the human Sookie Stackhouse is found within Oklahoma's borders, she shall be killed forthwith.'*"

I waited for him to at least give the appearance he was concerned over my forthwith death, but instead he just smiled and said, "So it's a good thing you won't be entering Oklahoma as the human, Sookie Stackhouse. Isn't that right, *Princess Brigant?*"

Oh. I see what he did there.

"You did that," I said, finally realizing what he meant. And realizing there was only one reason why he would make sure it was written that way.

Tears filled my eyes again, seeing him nod, but I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Why?"

He didn't owe me anything and yet he ensured a way for me to get Eric back when even I didn't know at the time that I would want to. I'm sure if I had been asked back then, I would have vehemently stated, "Hell no!"

"My dear," he smiled softly and explained, "When I offered the gift of my blood to your grandparents, at the time I thought it a grand gesture of friendship towards my good friend Fintan. But when we finally met, I could see how much your telepathy had cost you over the years. At the time of my offer, I didn't think of the troubles you would face due to my interference. Even if I took your telepathy away now, it wouldn't take back all that you've had to go through because of me. And as for why I made sure the contract was worded in a specific way, even a blind man would see that you loved the Sheriff and I know he loved you as well. But I also knew you were hurt by everything that transpired, so I made sure you would have the option to seek a more fitting resolution, if you chose to do so later on."

After what felt like a lifetime of not having any choice in what happened in my life, I wanted to hug the stuffing out of him. But I wasn't sure if that would be appreciated, so instead I just smiled through my tears and sincerely offered, "Thank you."

"It was nothing," he replied and then said, "But be aware, if you claim Mr. Northman as your husband by invoking your birthright, your fairy heritage will be known to the entire supernatural world. It will cause quite the ruckus and you will never again be able to go back into the shadows of living as a pure human." Locking his gaze onto mine, he added, "And as a royal, Mr. Northman will be bound to abide by your wishes. No matter what it is you wish for him to do."

"What was that?" I asked.

I'd already come to terms with throwing my fairy weight around, so I had no issue with who knew about it if it meant I could free Eric. But I could've sworn he said something about me having the higher hand over Mr. Highhanded.

"You are a royal by blood. Mr. Northman is not and he was merely a Sheriff when you married. Even if he'd been the King of Louisiana at the time, his station would never supersede your own. He will once again be your husband, if you claim him by your birthright, but you will never be equals," he explained.

That right there was hooky talk. A leopard didn't change their spots and I didn't think for one moment Eric would suddenly be kowtowing to me because I wore an invisible tiara. Nor did I want him to.

I'd hated each and every time he said something that came off as humans being inferior to vampires. How they were so much better because they were immortal or whatever, but I would never use my royal fairy blood against him to make him do whatever I wanted.

I enjoyed his fire. I even liked fighting with him because making up was so much fun. Eric would always be my equal no matter what my royal pedigree said, of that I was sure.

And if I got to Oklahoma and he said he wanted to stay there, then I wouldn't force him to come with me either. He'd suffered enough coercion to last many lifetimes. I wouldn't add to it.

It would be my karmic ass kicking I was still owed.

But in order for me to collect on my possible ass kicking by karma, I needed to get to Oklahoma. And apparently I needed Niall there to back me up, so I asked, "Do you know how I can get in contact with Niall? Aren't the portals closed?"

"I can get word to him," he nodded. "And he was able to open the portals so your cousin Claude could reenter the human realm. I'm sure he can do it a second time."

"But do you think he will?"

While Niall had left me his earthly possessions, and I now had him to thank for not having to worry about money ever again, I never truly trusted him to stand by me. And I'd had a feeling the Cluviel Dor had been a test of my relationship with Eric.

One that we epically failed.

I didn't know if he'd be willing to risk opening the portals just because I needed him. And I didn't know how he'd feel about me claiming my Brigant birthright in order to claim a vampire – their natural enemy.

And since my pockets were empty of figs, I couldn't give him one either if he had something nasty to say about it.

"I will make sure he knows of your intention to invoke your birthright. The prince *will* open the portal," he said assuredly.

At least one of us was sure.

Mr. C told me he would send the magical carrier pigeon off into the fairy realm – or however it was they traded information – and told me to go home and wait. But I didn't want to wait. I was impatient. I was worried about Eric and what could possibly be happening to him.

I wanted to run all the way to Oklahoma dressed as Tinkerbell and wave my glittery plastic wand at them, telling Freyda to back the hell off of my man while I shoved that same wand up her ass.

But Mr. C had already proven he knew best by writing a loophole into the contract, so I could have the opportunity to shove plastic wands up vampire queen's asses.

So I went home and waited – sans glittery plastic wand.

Karin had known what I would be up to over the daytime hours, so I wasn't surprised to feel the void approaching the farmhouse at first dark. Grabbing a warmed TruBlood and a glass of sweet tea, I went out onto the porch to greet her.

Only to find Bill coming up the steps.

"Sookie," he smiled. "I just came to see how you are faring. I heard Sam has moved out?"

Uh huh.

And given his hopeful expression, I could assume he thought that meant he could move right on in.

Not. Happening.

Ever.

"Yes, Bill. He did," I admitted and took a seat on the porch swing. He took the seat beside me without waiting for me to offer it to him and it struck a nerve.

After all, it wasn't the first time Bill took something from me I hadn't offered.

And when he reached for the bottle of TruBlood still in my hand, I pulled it away from his outreached grasp and admonished, "Did I say that was for you?"

I could already imagine Gran's horrified expression over my rudeness. But then I imagined if she could've seen what Bill had done to me in the trunk of that car in Jackson, she would've sharpened the stake to end him herself.

He looked both confused at my unexplained anger and chagrined at the same time, saying, "I am sorry. I just assumed you'd brought it out for me."

"You do that a lot," I said, with my anger building and flowing out through my mouth. "Just like you assumed I was there to feed from and fuck when Debbie Pelt locked me in that trunk with you."

He looked like I'd just shoved silver-tipped bamboo under his fingernails.

But I didn't care, considering what he'd shoved into me in that trunk.

I don't know why I was suddenly thinking about all of it now. Maybe it had something to do with wanting to rescue Eric. Even if he never wanted to see me again after that, I needed closure. It was something we didn't get to have before he'd left for Oklahoma.

And it was something I'd never gotten with Bill because I avoided feeling much of anything back when it happened. Even as recently as the night before I hadn't wanted to think about it, but it seemed like I was ready to finally face the facts.

"You raped me," I informed both him and my psyche.

"Sookie, I...I..." he stuttered, looking dismayed. "I wasn't in my right mind. I'd been tortured and starved. I didn't know what I was doing."

"I know that Bill," I agreed. And I did know it. I think that was a big reason why I'd been able to push it aside at the time. I'd seen the state he was in thanks to Lorena.

But that didn't mean it didn't happen, nor did it make it okay.

And I was sick at myself when I remembered thinking about having revenge sex with him when I'd been mad at Eric over everything that happened nearly a year earlier. I truly hadn't been in a very good place back then, so I was just thankful I hadn't actually gone through with it. But more than my gruff got up when he said, "I love you! I've always loved you, sweetheart. I came for you and rescued you from Lochlan and Neave. I nearly died for you!"

Me and my gruff stood up, so I could glare down at him and yelled back, "And I came for *you* in Jackson first! *I* nearly died *twice*! I got staked at Club Dead because I was there for *you* and then your maker nearly killed me when I rescued you!" My hands slapped onto my hips as I spat out, "I think we're even on that front. But *I* didn't violate *you*!"

And my heart hurt remembering not only had Eric rescued me in the club, but he'd rescued me from that trunk with Bill too.

I hadn't even thanked him for it.

It wasn't the only thing I hadn't done. I was so angry I didn't sense the approach of anyone else when Karin was suddenly standing in between Bill and me. With her back to me, she looked down at him and said, "Billy Bangs. Are you bothering my mistress?"

"Karin the Slaughterer," he acknowledged, sounding just as amiable as I did a minute earlier.

But seriously? *That* was her full name?

It sounded like she'd won in it some ludicrous contest.

"Sookie is no longer your *mistress*," he snapped out and then gloated, "Or perhaps you have forgotten your maker is newly wed."

Oh. No. He. Didn't.

But it was Bill. So of course he did.

My mind flashed back to when he'd told me about Eric's stipulation that he would give Sam the money to bail me out of jail, but in exchange Sam couldn't pursue me romantically. Bill had had that same gloating tone when he told me all about it, gleefully tattling on Eric as a payoff for when Eric forced him to tell me the truth on why he'd come to Bon Temps in the first place.

And I felt the same hurt and rage I'd felt in New Orleans all over again.

The differences between Eric and Bill had never been clearer in my mind. Eric never purposefully hurt me. But that was all Bill seemed capable of doing.

I took a step to the side, so I could glare down at him too and said, "You can bet your pasty white ass Eric is still *mine*. And you can take that same pasty ass off of my property. I don't want to see you again Bill Compton."

"Sookie," he gasped. "I'm sorry you're upset, but you have to realize Eric is no longer yours. And you are no longer his. When she leaves after her yearlong commitment to watch over you, you'll need me to keep you safe."

"Is *that* what you've been waiting around for?" I shrieked. "Did you think I'd go running back to you – *my rapist* – in the hopes you of all people would keep me safe from harm? Who in the hell would be protecting me from *you*?"

He stared back at me, looking as if I'd physically slapped him in the face, and maybe I would have had he not opened his mouth and said, "You have some foolish notion you can get Eric back."

I already *knew* I could get Eric back – at least if he *wanted* to come back, but I didn't trust Bill with that information.

He'd already sold me out once to the Queen of Louisiana. There was no reason to believe he wouldn't sell me out to the Queen of Oklahoma too.

So instead I replied, "No Bill. The only foolish notion I had was thinking we could still be friends after everything you've done to me. Betraying not just my heart; or our relationship; or my body, but you betrayed everything I hold dear in a friend. A friend doesn't gloat and hurt their friend, just so they can feel good about themselves. A friend doesn't twist the knife when their friend already felt like they'd been stabbed in the heart. You are not my friend Bill Compton and you never were. But I see that now and now I would like for you to leave."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but Karin snarled out menacingly. I wasn't quite sure how old she was, but I knew she was older than Pam and therefore older than Bill.

She could kick his ass all the way to New Orleans, I was sure.

Her last name must have been Slaughterer for a reason.

When he was finally gone, I invited her into the house just in case Mr. Nosy was lurking close enough to hear what we said. She looked just as hopeful as I felt when I told her everything Mr. C had told me that afternoon. But remembering what she'd said about Pam's protective measures and her worry about me acting rashly, I had to ask, "Why are you so okay with this? Pam obviously didn't want me to do anything *foolish*," I bit out remembering Bill's accusation. "So why did you plant the seed last night?"

I expected her to say something about missing her maker. Or perhaps feeling vengeful over his forced servitude. But given how vamps normally treated humans – royal fairy hybrids or not – I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was hearing her say, "I don't care about you."

"Well thanks for clearing that up," I snapped back at her.

She smiled, making me want to punch her all the more, and said, "You misunderstand me. I care about you in that my maker cares about you. I will always see to your welfare for that reason alone. But I do not care for you as Pam does. Her affection for you has grown over the time she has known you. She does not want to see you hurt, physically or emotionally. I do not know you as she does, but I'm starting to see what it is that holds you in their high esteem."

"Oh," I mumbled.

Well that certainly cleared things up.

But before either one of us had the chance to ruin our bonding moment with another misconstrued remark, we were suddenly interrupted.

And by *suddenly*, I meant poof!

Because Niall had just popped into my living room.

"Great-granddaughter," he acknowledged, but ignored the vampire at my side. And thankfully, she ignored him too, so I assumed he was blocking his scent.

If nothing else, I viewed his acknowledgement as a good sign. It showed he still saw me as one of his own, but his face gave nothing away when he said, "I understand you wanted to speak with me."

Well...here goes nothing.

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## Chapter 4: Chapter 4 - Grenade

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### Chapter 4 - Grenade

**EPOV**

It had been a year.

A fucking year.

A whole fucking year of my two hundred year *sentence* had come to pass. I knew because my insipid *queen* was planning an anniversary party to mark the occasion. I'd just as soon celebrate by marking her skin, fileting it from her body with a silver knife, and using all the care of Doctor Mengele himself, while I made paper dolls in her likeness with her hide.

After all, she was my queen and my wife. She deserved nothing but my best efforts.

We were still playing our game and for now it was at the non-tortuous phase, physically at least. It was my turn to pretend I would heel – *mostly* – and she would pretend I wouldn't rip her head from her shoulders at any given moment. She'd made me pay, of course, for my disobedience in her dungeon by declaring my fealty to long dead queens, boxes of cereal, and Fae hybrids. Poorly hiding her fear and pretending she held any power over me from behind her guards and the silver chains that kept me from acting rashly and ending her prematurely. But she knew she could only push me so far before I pushed back, so she wisely refrained from doing so whenever we were in the presence of others.

Just who was supposed to be training who?

Cunt.

In all of her wisdom she'd decided to let me out of the dungeons two weeks earlier, pretending to be merciful, while imposing her asinine restrictions on me. I could feed from donors, but not fuck them. My movements were supervised by her guards and I was allowed no privacy, so I could not speak freely with any of the spies I had reporting back to me on what was going on in Louisiana. It was my punishment for disobeying her. But in reality she needed to allow me to heal in order to show both the guests in her kingdom and her subjects that *I heeled*. She'd already run her mouth at our ceremony, inviting everyone in attendance to her palace a year from then to show off our powerful alliance. By canceling now, it would make her lose face. Make her appear even weaker than they already suspected her to be. A weakness already evident in her unrelenting pursuit of obtaining me as her enforcer by compelling me to comply with my dead maker's brokered deal.

That fucker Felipe was probably brokering bets at that very moment on who would end up dead by the end of the night.

And had it been even six months earlier, I would've bet the house it would be Freyda's death at Sookie's hand. Back when I still held out hope she would return. But just like physical pain, hope diminishes over time as well. And while I could not stop my mind from retreating back to *her* – my blond inner demon – when the pain and fatigue had taken its toll on my body, my conscious self no longer held out any hope she would come to me. I would've put my treasonous plans on hold for her if she had. Made sure she was safely hidden away, while fueling myself with her mere presence alone. Caution would've taken precedence over the reckless abandonment my now



shortened fuse threatened to detonate the ticking time bomb counting down within me at any given moment. I would have redoubled my efforts at keeping my head, while planning to take the queen's from her, so I could return to Sookie and glory in our victory together. But if she hadn't come to see reason – hadn't changed her mind by now – then I knew she never would.

Admittedly, that stung more than anything Freyda could have done to me.

When I could direct my own thoughts my memories replayed on a reel, highlighting our time together, both good and bad. When I looked at them objectively, I could certainly appreciate her countless selfless actions. But – objectively – while I might not have always said the words, the fuck if I hadn't shown her *with my actions* how much she fucking meant to me.

I staked another vampire when all her bangs-with-fangs *boyfriend* did was watch while she was attacked.

I covered her body with my own and took a bullet for her in Dallas, when at the time – or so I thought – all I wanted to do was fuck her.

Club Dead. Russell's mansion. That fucking trunk.

Even without my memories, I ran straight for her. Dove in front of her, taking the shot from that Were bitch's gun that would've taken her life.

New Orleans where that whore's family kidnapped her along with that giant endangered pit pussy tiger.

New Orleans where any number of vampires would've taken her life in that ballroom had it not been for me and my sword.

Rhodes. Andre.

And even when our state was under attack. My monarch's death all but assured and a takeover was imminent, I went straight to her.

Granted, intermingled in those times, she too had saved me. In Rhodes. In that fucking shifter's parking lot when Sigebert was filming the pilot of his new reality show – When Saxons Attack.

But... *fuck*. Did none of it matter?

Did I not matter?

Had anything ever mattered to her at all?

Her yearlong absence was proof enough I supposed. It was my own foolishness for believing I could have something like love.

Yes. I'd been a fool all along, but I would be a fool no longer.

One day soon I would end Freyda for my own need for retribution.

One day soon after I would shove Felipe's ridiculous Count Chocula cape down his throat and drown him in a giant bowl of the sugared cereal bobbing in liquid silver.

In the days beyond that I would leave Sookie be. Let her waste away in her backwoods town, while she lived in the land of DNA denial and made trips to PetSmart to buy her beloved's anniversary gifts.

One day in the very distant future, I would forget Sookie Stackhouse ever existed.

"You will not embarrass me tonight, Eric."

The sound of my queen intruded on my pretend precognition. I could only imagine if I'd been forced to hear her voice for the entire two hundred year sentence, by the end of it my balls would have taken up permanent residence in my throat to hide from the chill inducing screech of it.

Taking more time than was necessary to put on my cuff links – a part of my costume for the masquerade that was our anniversary celebration tonight – I made her await my response until I was through.

"I won't," I eventually replied, but my ambiguous tone left her wondering if it was a statement or a question.

Glancing over, I did nothing to hide my smirk while she hid her dismay behind red painted lips and a diamond choker.

"You won't," she said, with her eyes boring into mine, but she too sounded ambiguous.

Only a year and already we were sounding alike. Before you know it we would be one of *those* couples who wore matching hibiscus printed luau shirts everyone laughed at.

Pam would certainly laugh. We both would and then I would dance with each of my children on Freyda's exploded remains.

The twist would do nicely on a Freyda lubricated marble floor.

I smiled not only at the thought, but at Freyda's growing panic seeing it form. She tried to hide it from me. Attempted to bury it underneath her couture gown and lacquered nails, but she could put it on a rover destined for Mars and I would still see it.

I had excellent eyesight.

So I slid my arms into the tuxedo jacket and buttoned the front as I strode towards the door, taking control of our conversation as a warning for her to behave by ordering, "Come. We shouldn't be late for our own party."

Her foot lifted and took one step before she caught on, but she still heeled and marched ahead of me, hissing, "Remember your place, *royal consort*."

"Of course, my queen," I chuckled darkly. "Behind you and to your left, if I'm not mistaken."

And that would be her biggest mistake.

Putting me in her blind spot.

While the party was formal, the occasion was not, so we were announced to the room and then expected to mingle with the guests. I hoped to be able to speak with one of my spies regarding my month long absence of news about Louisiana, but I had two of Freyda's guards shadowing my every step.

I took up a spot near the side of the room and grabbed a glass of Royalty Blend from one of the passing waiters, looking for my opening to ditch them when Felipe de Castro of all people sauntered up to me. Putting my own disdain for the monarch on a Mars-bound rover, I nodded deeply, as was dictated by our stations, and acknowledged, "Felipe." Seeing the ridiculous cape he'd adorned himself with, I couldn't stop myself from adding, "Love the cape. General Mills, if I'm not mistaken?"

He looked genuinely confused by my comment and didn't respond. It seemed no one around me had a sense of humor and I quashed the thought over who I knew would've spit her drink out hearing my red carpet question.

Fucking blond demon would sit on my shoulder for all of eternity.

Instead, he narrowed his eyes up at me and said, "The telepath is missing. I don't suppose *you* have any idea of where she's gone to?"

"What?" I asked, nearly spitting out my own drink, and added in rapid succession, "What do you mean she's missing? How long has she been gone? Where's Karin? She should've been watching over her until tonight."

No matter how bitterly angry I was at her – no matter what I tried to tell myself I would do once freed from my silver ball and chain – I couldn't stand the thought of Sookie being hurt. It was like reliving the ordeal of her kidnapping all over again. Only this time I didn't have the benefit of a blood bond to feel her pain and use it to draw it away from her. I couldn't track her location. I couldn't even leave the fucking palace to go and look for her.

In my millennia long existence, I'd never felt more helpless and I hated myself for caring about her wellbeing at all.

Felipe studied my reaction before saying, "She hasn't been seen in a month. Pam has turned up nothing in Area Five, nor have the remaining sheriffs in the state. Your other child claims the telepath was gone when she arrived to watch over her at sunset and the shifter she was living with had already moved out. He has been glamoured by another vampire in my retinue whose gift works strongly against their kind and he has no knowledge of her whereabouts. Nor do her friends or her family have a clue as to where she is. So I ask you again, Northman. Do you know where my telepath is?"

The goblet in my hand shattered hearing him call *my Sookie his anything*. But I stayed my hands from doing any more damage. If I attacked him now, I would have no chance of mounting my own search and rescue. As it was, my mind was already making a list of possible suspects.

Compton?

He had certainly made no secret of his desire to have Sookie all to himself. If the shifter had moved out, but Sookie had still scorned his advances, he may have been desperate enough to have taken her.

Why wouldn't he when he'd taken her body against her will once already?

My fangs snapped down at the memory of what I'd found in that trunk in Jackson, but I forced myself to focus on who else might be suspect.

The tiger?

He'd staked Andre for her. She'd already shown her tolerance for the two-natured by shacking up with one. Would he have expected the same treatment if he'd come calling when he'd learned there was a vacancy in her dog house?

And thinking of dogs – could it be the wolf?

Herveaux had long been straddling the fence, with Sookie on one side and his pack obligations on the other. Could he have decided to throw caution to the wind and finally grown into the set of balls he'd been born with? For all I knew he'd met his obligation by impregnating one of the bitches in his pack and was free to pursue her. It wasn't as though I'd had any reason to have my spies keep up with his goings on. He could've taken her back to Jackson, hoping there would be a new collar from PetSmart in his anniversary future.

Or had it been the shifter?

Felipe had said he'd been glamoured, but I knew all too well how difficult it was to try and glamour the two-natured. Even if the Kreskin vampire in Felipe's retinue had the power needed, if he hadn't asked the right questions, the dog could've still been hiding something from them. To know for sure it would require a telepath to read his thoughts.

And the only one I knew of was the reason I would need her.

My gut churned over the last possibility. The thought of one other nameless and faceless foe who could have been responsible for Sookie's disappearance.

A fairy.

Niall had supposedly sealed the portals between our two worlds, but he'd already shown his dereliction of door duty by allowing his insane grandson access to the human realm. If he had been one of the bouncers at Fangtasia's door, I would have fired him and then set him on fire for his incompetence. So what if he'd allowed another through the portal? What if Niall had been defeated in their civil war and he'd lost power over their realm, allowing his successor to do as he pleased? To eradicate *every* Brigant in existence? What if there had been a water fae left in this realm – loyal to Brendaen – who had been hidden in the shadows all along, biding his time and waiting for the right moment to exact vengeance? No one but Sookie believed her to be human. Ignorance of her species wouldn't be a plausible defense. A water fae wouldn't grant her absolution for her misguided beliefs.

My jaw sawed back and forth, with my need to rend and tear whoever was responsible growing rapidly. When I could no longer stand still, I took to pacing back and forth under Felipe's watchful gaze, with my mind working through my immediate and rapid departure. Fuck them all if they thought I would stay there, upholding the terms of our contract when they'd already broken the most important clause.

Sookie would remain safe and untouched for the rest of her life.

"Eric."

It wasn't hearing my name that halted my manic steps.

It was the voice attached to it.

My hand attached itself to Compton's throat before my eyes were even able to take in his colonial cocksucking countenance. And my countenance for him was at an all-time low.

"Where. Is. Sookie?" I hissed into his shocked face.

His hands fruitlessly struggled against my grasp, while I struggled with my own urge to rip his throat out.

I didn't want to have to wait for him to heal in order to get my answers.

"You took her," he accused, with the air left in his lungs. "I know you did. When I last spoke to her she claimed you were still hers. She went missing the very next day and I've been searching for her here ever since. I know you've hidden her. I know had a hand in her disappearance!"

Felipe snarled, fully prepared to believe I'd reneged on our deal. But I was fresh out of fucks to give and ignored him, tightening my grip on my lover's traitor's throat, while my heart tightened

hearing she'd claimed me to him as recently as four weeks earlier. I didn't know what to make of it, considering she could've very well said it to hurt him. Spoken out of anger as she was prone to do. I would have no way of knowing if she meant it without hearing it straight from the hybrid's mouth, so I seethed, "Do I *smell* like Sookie? Her sex? Her blood? Even if I had last drunk from her a month ago, you would still be able to smell it on me."

And there was no question, had I seen her a month ago I would have partaken in at least one – if not both – of those things.

Sookie and I were pros at having makeup sex.

But the thought of anyone else defiling her – taking from her what hadn't freely been given, just as he had done once upon a time – was the final straw.

My shortened fuse was officially at the end of its wick.

Taking a hold of his shoulder with my other hand, I pulled until his head detached from his body, all the while staring into his frightened eyes as I said, "For your betrayal of my bonded."

His body exploded into tiny little Bill bits, with everyone in attendance staring wide-eyed at me. So I preened, with my toothy snarl on display for all to see, and turned to Felipe saying, "I hope you didn't have high odds on Bill making it through the night. I'd hate for you to lose your cape in paying out the bets."

Although I was fresh out of fucks to give, Felipe seemed to be carrying one or two of his own and he snarled at me in return, hissing, "You *dare* to speak to me that way? *I am a king!*"

His shortened stature and my nonexistent fuse made it easy for me to loom over him as I snarled, "But you are not *my* king. *You* made sure of *that* by pimping me out to Oklahoma. Now why don't you run off and find the other two amigos before I take your head and mount it on top of my Christmas tree."

While I wanted to turn the ballroom into a bloodbath, a takeover was the last thing I had the time for now. I'd made no progress in securing my own army. I'd counted only four spies of my own in the room. Felipe hadn't been stupid enough to bring any with him who could've still been loyal to me. The five of us alone couldn't mount a winning offensive, but it made no difference. My only thought was getting out of there and hunting down those who held my bonded.

I didn't need my blood in her body for her title to still hold true.

I could hear the stunned guards at my back now moving forward, so I grabbed the sword from Felipe's side and cleared the area surrounding me with one twirling swing. And those who didn't get out of my way lost whatever appendages were left in my hokey pokey circle when I turned myself around.

A left foot in. A right hand out.

Where the fuck was Sookie? She would be crying with laughter if she could hear my mental song.

But instead she was likely crying for a wholly different reason.

And I would sooth away her tears with the blood of her captors.

"Eric!" Freyda screeched as she ran towards me, but wisely stayed back far enough out of my reach, knowing she didn't want to hokey pokey with me. "Stand down!"

Having gotten his voice back, even if he was now minus his sword, Felipe turned on her and yelled, "*This* is the way you run your kingdom? You allow your boy toy to wreak havoc and act insubordinately towards *a king*? He killed one of *my retinue* without provocation! I demand retribution for his actions!"

While the two of them compared the size of their dicks, my eyes darted around the room looking for my escape.

After all, I was out of fucks to give and they still seemed to have plenty they were hell bent on throwing around.

But I was afraid I was already out of time. I had no idea where Sookie was. If she even still lived. I needed to get back to Louisiana. Back to my children and the remaining vampires I could trust to have my back, while I searched for her. I would leave no stone unturned. No human home would remain standing on its foundation if I had any cause to believe she was trapped inside. I would search for her until the time came when time itself worked against me and I knew without a doubt she would have been dead from her age alone.

The vampires in attendance were watching the royal spectacle before them, with the rapt attention all gossip whoring supernaturals made no point in hiding. Little did any of us know, the party was just getting started.

"I apologize for arriving late, but Pam assured me it was fashionable."

Again, it wasn't the words that got my attention.

It was the voice attached to them.

With the crowd having circled our fray like buzzards at a roadkill buffet, a large portion of the dance floor had been emptied. Large enough for the unexpected arrival of the numerous Royal Fae Guards who had teleported into the room to have taken up an offensive formation and flanking those at the front of the spear.

Pam.

Karin.

Niall.

And her.

The blond demon no longer sat on my shoulder because she'd placed herself front and center at the tip of the spear.

Sookie.

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## Chapter 5: Chapter 5 - My Songs Know What You Did I

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### Chapter 5 – My Songs Know What You Did In The Dark

#### **SPOV**

My hands tingled at my sides, while my eyes catalogued every person in the room before they finally came to rest on Eric.

Covered in blood. Paler than I could ever remember seeing him. His face frozen in disbelief.

He was still a sight for sore eyes.

Even after everything that had happened over the last month. After accepting my heritage and all that it would mean. After learning what I was truly capable of once I had, I'd still been nervous over this moment. Worried I would let my human side take over and stress out over the violence I now knew was inevitable.

Sookie Stackhouse may have hidden her eyes from the bloodshed, but I wasn't Sookie Stackhouse.

I knew now that I never was.

My own Gran had seen to that and then hidden the truth from me. Kept secret from me the reason why I never belonged. There wasn't a drop of vampire blood in me – I'd stupidly taken care of that all on my own – but I didn't have a drop of Stackhouse blood in me either. However I now accepted that too and I was even glad for it. A plain old human wouldn't be able to stand there staring down a vampire queen. A pure human couldn't rightfully claim what was never theirs to keep.

But I wasn't a plain old pure human. I wasn't even Sookie Stackhouse. I was Sookie Brigant and before the night was through, they would all know exactly what happened when they fucked with me.



Eric had once told me fairies were both beautiful and vicious, and I now knew those words to be true. While the beauty was subjective, the intensity I felt for bloody retribution couldn't be denied. I now had a better understanding of Lochlan and Neave. I understood now why they'd gotten such enjoyment from hurting me. Even a month earlier I would've been horrified knowing I could feel those same things.

But now – a month later – I couldn't imagine feeling any other way.

I relished in it. Let it embolden me. Empower me. Seeing my love standing mere feet from his captor brought out equals parts passion and aggression. I was fighting off allowing my own hostility to shine through, not wanting to show my hand too soon, but I could feel it trying to force its way to the surface. Snarling and hissing its way through my veins, wanting to show husband-stealing vampire queens what true power looked like.

No glittery plastic wands required.

Even Niall had been surprised by that little development. When he'd come to me a month earlier, I hadn't known what to expect. Wasn't sure what it was he would ask of me or what I would have to do in order for him to help me, but I was prepared to do anything he said except for one thing.

I wouldn't give up Eric.

*One month earlier ...*

*Karin had immediately left the house upon his arrival. I didn't know if it was because she didn't want to be tempted by remaining in the room with a fairy or if she just wanted to give us some privacy. I was okay with either reason, but when I didn't say anything after her departure, he got the ball rolling by saying, "The demon lawyer informs me you wish to reclaim the vampire as your husband by invoking your birthright."*

*"Yes," I meekly admitted, hoping he wouldn't deny me. If he did, then I would need to come up with a Plan B where the 'B' didn't stand for 'Brigant'. "That's true."*

*"Why?" he asked.*

*Such a simple question for such a complex answer, but I knew now wasn't the time for holding back. He was my one good shot at getting Eric freed.*

*Like those figs, I was fresh out of Cluviel Dors at the moment too.*

*So I told my great-grandfather everything. Everything Eric had done for me over the years. Everything he'd made me feel, both good and bad. I didn't try to hide my own missteps or downplay my part in how everything fell apart. I told him all that I'd done – or didn't do – giving him a detailed blow by blow of the buildup of our relationship all the way to its explosive conclusion. Hearing myself lay it all out made me realize our story was both magnificent and tragic.*

*But it was me and Eric, warts and all.*

*When I was through, he stared down at me for what felt like a lifetime before he said, "I once told you the vampire was a good man and that he loved you. Did you not believe my words to be true?"*

*I remembered exactly when he'd said it. Right after the fairies had taken me. Right after both him and Bill had rescued me. Right after Eric had healed me and protected me from the ones who tried to finish the job.*

*"At the time, I wasn't sure who you'd meant."*

*It was true.*

*At the time.*

*"And now?" he asked.*

*Now there was no question. Bill had shown me his true colors time and again, but I'd been colorblind.*

*The blinds were off now.*

*"Now I know you were talking about Eric," I admitted. "I won't make excuses for my actions, great-grandfather. I acted childishly and held Eric up to an impossible and unfair standard. I refused to even try to understand who or what he was. I refused to see every other impossible and unfair standard he was bound to abide by in his world. That was my mistake. One I regret deeply. So I beg of you, please don't make him pay for my faults for the next two hundred years."*

*Niall sighed as his eyes dropped to the floor and for the first time I could see a true weariness take over his handsome face. I knew he was quite older than Eric, but he didn't look a day over fifty. Now, however, I could see the weight of each and every day of his long life etched onto his face, so I reached out and took his hand in mine. Dermot and Claude had once told me that fairies recharged – healed – in the presence of their kin. The touch of skin to skin contact worked like a supernatural aloe to soothe their soul, so I held his hand and hoped it would do him some good.*

*He smiled back at me.*

*That was certainly good for me.*

*When he asked what I was doing, I explained and it was his next words to me that really hit home.*

*"So you accept that you are a Brigant?"*

*"Of course," I replied.*

*Wasn't that why I was born with a target on my back?*

*As if he could read my mind, he added, "Truly, Sookie. By your own admission you refused to see the Northman for what he was. Who he was and all that entailed, just as you have never accepted your place in our world. Not just as a fairy, but your own inclusion into the supernatural world the vampire you claim to love is a part of. You have declared yourself a human time and again, rebuffing anything that didn't conform to those same ideals and morals at every opportunity. You've claimed to be accepting of others and yet you've snubbed your nose at traditions that predate your own by thousands of years. So if you want my help, then you must make a choice. You can no longer stand firmly on the side of humanity and then use your Brigant bloodline only when it suits you."*

*He all but called me a hypocrite, but I couldn't exactly deny it. Not when he'd laid out an ugly truth I couldn't hide from. Not even from myself.*

*And still I opened my mouth to argue that I was human, when his words really sank in.*

*I wasn't. Not completely.*

*I cut myself some slack on it though, considering I was raised as a human, with human ideals and morals drilled into me from birth. But now that I knew better – really knew better – what would that mean? What choice did I have to make? Would I change? Did I want to? Did I really think my life up until then was so great that I didn't want it to change?*

*And wasn't that what life was all about anyways?*

*Change?*

*I loved my home, but even I could admit had I been 'normal' I doubted I would've stayed. There was nothing for me there other than my brother and I'd always wanted more than what Bon Temps was capable of offering. I'd stayed because it was easier – expected – and out of my loyalty to a woman who had lied to me for my whole life. I still loved my Gran and I was grateful she had taken me and Jason in as children. But I was angry at her for keeping a secret I had every right to know.*

*I was never a Stackhouse. I'd been born a Brigant.*

*And it was more than a mere change in last names. The essential spark coupled with the demon blood is what made me who I was. What I was. It made me an outcast in the only world I'd known. She could've told me. She could've explained why I was different. But she kept silent and allowed me to silently suffer instead.*

*And now I would never know why.*

*Once I decided to accept it – I had no choice, really – it felt like everything else fell into place on its own within my mind. The first twenty-five years of my life had been spent as a chrysalis, cocooned in the human world I'd been born into. A world that had brought me some joy, but the pain, misery, and isolation outweighed any brief moments of happiness I could recall. Nothing I could've done would have ever made me fit in with them because I was never really one of them to begin with. I knew that now, just as I knew I never felt more like I belonged than when I was first introduced to the supernatural world. Suddenly I wasn't the only 'freak' in the room. I wasn't treated like a pariah because of my abilities. I was accepted by them as much as my declared humanity would allow.*

*Ironically I'd never felt more alive than when I was with the undead.*

*Niall had said I couldn't have it both ways. I couldn't proclaim my humanity if I wanted to reclaim my vampire husband. But now that I'd had the time to really think about it, I knew my decision would have nothing to do with Eric at all. I would do it for me.*

*I was ready to be a butterfly.*

*And the smile he graced me with when that realization dawned on me was a brilliant one. I knew Niall too was still mourning the loss of his kin, but now he had one back.*

*And so did I.*

*He went on to tell me what I would need to do. The choices I would have to make and the consequences of what would happen once I did. Thankfully he didn't sugar coat any of it. Fairies were sneaky bastards, but they didn't lie. They couldn't lie, so he told me the dangers that could be found on either side.*

*Human and fairy.*

*But nothing he said had deterred me. My decision had already been made.*

*I was a fairy goddammit.*

*Hear me roar!*

*I went with him into the Fae realm for a week. It was necessary to fully charge my essential spark. Niall said it was needed if I intended on claiming Eric as my own. Other supernaturals would see my new glow – recognize me on sight as 'other' – so there would be no question what I was. My human side meant I would never be a full Fae, but I was more than okay with that.*

*Eric and I would really never work out if that had been the case.*

*Their realm was a beautiful place to be sure, but nothing out of this world spectacular. Maybe my expectations had been too high. Maybe it held no real interest to me because I knew I didn't want to stay. It reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of Ireland.*

*But I could hop on a plane in Shreveport and be there by nightfall. No portal necessary – just a passport – so I wasn't all that impressed.*

*And I met other fairies there. Each one more beautiful than the last and they all looked like they could grace any New York fashion show catwalk or glossy magazine cover. And again, I wasn't impressed.*

*None of them held a candle to my vampire.*

*We learned by accident that a charged essential spark combined with a southern woman's temper made fairy fire extinguishers a necessity. I'd been practicing my sword skills – something I clearly hadn't inherited from my Brigant bloodline – and I'd thrown the sword away into the grassy meadow we were practicing in, in frustration.*

*Why couldn't guns be a part of the supernatural arsenal?*

*But my actions left a flaming burnt trail behind it like Nicolas Cage's Ghost Rider character had been riding the hilt.*

*We gave up on sword play and from then on we practiced my flick a Bic skills. Like flying vampires, some fairies had gifts. Niall could mask his scent and I seemed to have not only a hothead, but hot hands to boot. He suspected it had something to do with Mr. C's blood because it was something he'd never heard of happening before.*

*But I didn't care. I was officially badass.*

*For once my anger worked for me and I had no trouble setting things ablaze. All I had to do was think back on my relatively short life to find the fuel.*

*Gran's secrets and lies that could've given me the answers I'd been desperate for my entire life.*

*Bill's betrayals over everything I'd held dear.*

*My Uncle Bartlett.*

*Everything I'd suppressed over the years had exploded out of my hands at will. I had lots of time to practice since no one wanted to come near me for fear of pissing me off and being turned into a crispy critter for their troubles. But that was okay. I didn't feel isolated or scorned because of my freaky fingers.*

*I felt focused.*

*We returned a week later to find out a month had passed. Niall had said time moved differently between the two worlds, but hearing and seeing were two different things. I hated that so much time had gone by, not knowing what had been happening to Eric while I was gone, but I appeased myself with the knowledge it was coming to an end.*

And feeling the bloodlust now rising within me, I let my eyes trail over to Freyda and smiled.

Her reign was about to come to an end too.

She took my smile as her cue to yell out, "What is the meaning of this? Guards! Bring the human to me!"

"Ah ah..." I smiled back and raised my hand up, sending a little warning shot across the room and onto the floor at their feet. I hadn't wanted to show her my full power just yet, so it merely scorched the floor.

Fairy smoke and mirrors. But only one of us would be the fairest of them all by the end of the night.

And just in case she was too stupid to pick up what I had just blasted down, I added, "There's no run of the mill *human* over here."

"Things are always so much more fun whenever you're around," Pam whispered gleefully behind me.

Karin added an amused, "I finally see what you've been going on about, sister."

Freyda's confidence took a hit, but she didn't let that stop her from informing everyone in the room, "Sookie Stackhouse is banned from entering this state under penalty of death." Hesitantly locking her hateful eyes onto mine, she added, "By law, your death will be mine."

Mr. C. took his own turn at playing smoke and mirrors, seeming to appear out of thin air when he stepped from the crowd and in between our two groups. He gave me a quick wink and a smile before turning a stoic face back towards Freyda. He nodded deeply as he said, "Your majesty. The contract precludes the *human* Sookie Stackhouse from entering Oklahoma. But considering what we have *all* just witnessed, one might conjecture the woman who stands before you now is not *human*."

"Nor is she a Stackhouse. She is a Brigant," Niall added warningly, as he came to stand beside me. "A royal in her own right, born of my bloodline and into her station as a Princess of the Sky Fae."

So shove *that* into your tiara and smoke it, you Okie bitch!

Mr. C. said we would cause a ruckus and boy was he right, given the hushed whispers that thundered around the room like tiny tornadoes. I doubted this is what he had in mind though, but I was not only still fig free.

I gave not a single fuck what any of them thought about it save one.

Eric's eyes hadn't left me. I cursed myself for getting rid of our blood bond because I had no idea of how he felt about this little development. His expression gave nothing away.

I wanted to be able to feel him.

And as if Pam had been gifted with telepathy, she took a step forward and bowed towards Eric, saying in a questioning tone, "Master?"

Back when I was still living as a plain old human, I'd always viewed those kinds of things as demeaning. But now I knew better.

Now I knew it was a show of the love and respect she had for him.

My back automatically began to bend at the waist to mimic her actions, with me feeling those very same things for him, but Niall caught my arm in his hand and kept me upright.

Okay then. I supposed I could bow later, just not right now.

Got it.

Pam went on to say, "I hope you are well. I have felt great...*discomfort* coming from you over these last several months."

Say what?

We hadn't had any time to talk. When Niall poofed me back into the human world, we'd popped into Fangtasia – literally – and popped back out with both Pam and Karin in tow once I told them what I was going to do tonight. For all of her worries about me acting rashly, Pam looked genuinely relieved to hear me say the words and no one asked any questions. There hadn't been time.

But looking at Eric now, I was starting to realize what she was trying to say. I'd noticed Eric had looked paler than I remembered him being, but hearing Pam's words made me put two and two together.

And the likely answer made my hands heat up in response.

When he didn't answer her right away, too busy staring at me with no expression, I asked, "Have you been injured?"

My eyebrow quirked up like I'd learned to do from him over the years as I spoke directly to him for the first time in over a year. My eyes traveled over his blood covered body and while he could have already healed from a recent wound, his clothes weren't torn. I didn't think the blood was his.

So whose was it?

And because he knew me better than anyone else ever had, he answered my silent question by simply saying, "Bill."

It explained the massive pool of blood he was standing in. And once upon a time I would've been outraged and horrified over finding out my first lover's death had been brought about by the hand of my second. But I wasn't that same girl anymore.

My fairytales had a different theme to them now.

Eric studied my expression like there would be a pop quiz later on, but I had no reaction to hearing he'd killed Bill. If anything, I might have found some guff to get up over not having a hand in it myself, but I couldn't begrudge Eric for taking Bill's life on his own.

God knows Bill had pushed both of our buttons over the years.

Repeatedly.

So I only shrugged finding out he'd finally pushed Eric's one time too many. Sloughing off the knowledge Eric was standing in a Bill puddle of his own making, I repeated, "Have *you* been injured in your time in Oklahoma?"

My mind and hands were still simmering over Pam's choice of words.

Discomfort.

Code word for *pain*.

Freyda decided she'd had enough of being ignored and moved to stand in between Eric and I. Far enough out of our physical reach so that neither one of us could touch her because she foolishly thought she was untouchable.

I'd show her differently.

Soon.

"The Northman is *my* royal consort to do with as I wish. If I choose to carve him up piece by piece, it is my right," she sneered.

Both Pam and Karin hissed behind me and I hated my own ignorance for the last year. Not only because I hadn't given much thought to what Eric would be subjected to, but because I'd been too ignorant to stop it from ever happening in the first place.

Eric and I may have perfected the art of dancing – both on a ballroom floor and in between the sheets – but our communication skills with one another were practically nonexistent. That was never truer than it was now. We had no blood bond for me to know what he wanted. My telepathy was of no use when it came to reading his mind at will.



But I had. Once before.

Of course I couldn't be gifted with another glimpse into his head right now to know for sure he still wanted me. To know for sure he wanted away from Freyda. There wasn't any time to pull petals off of daisies and play 'He loves me/loves me not'. So if I chose to go ahead with our plans now, I would have to do it by taking a leap of faith.

So I jumped in with both feet.

My eyes returned to the vampire queen, but I showed her no reaction. She deserved more than a harsh glare and I was more than prepared to give it to her. She wasn't as good as Eric was at hiding her feelings. She'd been shocked – and a little scared – seeing me mark her floor with nothing more than a flick of my fingers. But now her face held nothing but contempt. Unadulterated anger and hatred dripped from her eyes and down her extended fangs as she stared back at me.

But I'd been confronted by more than one bitch like her. However, I doubted she'd ever been confronted by a bitch like me.

Maybe she thought her gown was fire retardant. Maybe she had an ANSI fire suppression system built into her tiara.

Maybe she didn't know the wrath of a Princess of the Sky Fae burned hotter than the sun.

But she was about to find out.

I steadied my mind and fingers, recalling the words drilled into me by Niall before I spoke up, saying, "As a royal by blood and Princess of the Sky Fae, I hereby invoke my birthright and claim my husband by the knife, Eric Northman."

Freyda's eyes widened, but I had no clue if she knew what that meant. I had no clue if she'd even known about my tasty fairy blood before now. But even when I was still human, I knew *one thing* to be true about the supernatural world.

A blood offense was a serious infraction.

And considering Eric was *my husband* and he was never truly *her royal consort*, I knew she owed me a debt.

And us Supes always collected on our debts.

The air turned electric – or maybe that was just me – but perhaps sensing her demise was on the horizon, Freyda crouched with her hands turning into claws right as she screeched, "Attack!"

I'd been involved in more than my fair share of Supe brawls in the past. Everyone around me had always seemed to move at the speed of light and I'd always done my best to scurry out of their way. But not now.

Never again.

Being in Faery had given me more than a charged essential spark. Now I was able to see the inhuman speed all supernatural creatures seemed capable of. It reminded me of Neo in the movie 'The Matrix'. Everything slowed down and I was able to react with the added time it allowed me.

Freyda's guards and her retinue moved in on us, while the guests in attendance moved to the sides of the room, not wanting to be caught in the fray. My hotheaded temper was still front and center, making my hot hands rise up and shoot what amounted to sunlight at the star of the party. But she jumped up and to the side, just as I saw Eric lunge for her with his sword at the last second, and made me miss my mark before it could inadvertently find him instead.

Everyone froze – or so it seemed – when my sunshine hands lit up the room for a second and left a crater where Freyda had been standing only moments earlier. But just as quickly the battle picked up pace again, with a sense of urgency and glee that could only be found in the supernatural world.

My world.

Our royal fairy soldiers, covered in silver chainmail and armed with silver swords, spread out and tore down any and all who approached us. In my peripheral I could see Eric swinging the sword in his hand like a true master, beheading vampires left and right, while his hair fanned out all around him.

He truly was beautiful.

His eyes were both hard and soft. He seemed to need the release a violent battle would afford him and with every body he left in his wake, so too did the tension in his body seem to diminish.

He was clearing a path towards Freyda where she was huddled behind five of her biggest guards. I didn't want to believe he was headed that way to protect her, but I couldn't be sure. And I couldn't say that I really cared either.

He and I could just fight about me killing his pseudo-wife later on.

Also not the first fight I would have of that nature.

She too had gotten her hands on a sword, but with the five of them surrounding her she had no one to use it on. And while Sookie Stackhouse may have tried to run and hide, Sookie Brigant was no coward.

I would be running into the fight.

Everyone in our group was involved in the battle around us, but I didn't need their protection. Nor did they need mine, so I left our protective circle. Every vampire that came at me met their crispy end at my hands, with their bodies exploding like vampire fireworks in the air. I'd always been good at dancing and this felt very much the same. I twirled and moved around the room to my very own music, smiting those trying to cut in on my solo dance as I went. In a way it reminded me of a red carpet movie premier with the flashes going off left and right, only now the room wasn't lit with camera flashes.

It was lit up by a pissed off fairy princess who was hell bent on showing vampire queens a thing or two about stealing their man.

The room was a whirlwind of violence and my fire hands only added to the cacophony. Left and right, up and down, Oklahoma's vampires met their explosive ends at my hand. My fairy dress was ruined by blood and soot, but I couldn't be bothered to care. My only focus was on Freyda the closer I got to her. On some level, I continued to register the others still fighting around me, but I paid them no mind and they did the same. I didn't know if I'd possessed the same kind of power Niall had to make others not notice him – like when I'd first met him in that restaurant what now felt like a lifetime ago – but given the fact everyone else seemed to pass me by, I would guess it to be true. It wasn't something I was trying to do. I just had tunnel vision.

And my concentration brought with it another revelation.

Freyda's mind opened up to me and in it I could see every depraved thing she'd done to Eric. Everything she planned to do to him once this night was over to make him pay for what was happening now. The torture he'd faced at her hands already and her plans to repeat them. The rapes he'd suffered by drugging him with fairy blood that she would force him to endure all over again.

They say the devil was in the details.

And she had no idea that the one she missed – the bitch coming for her who in fact had demon blood flowing in her veins as well – would be her end.

I felt my body heat up along with my growing rage. While the battle waged on around me in blurred images, only two were crystal clear in my field of vision.

Eric – who was currently fighting off a vampire I recognized as belonging to Felipe's retinue.

I didn't spare him a glance as I raised my left hand and exploded his foe's body, while I continued on my path towards the only other in my sights.

Freyda.

Perhaps it was my own hubris that lifted the fairy veil I'd seemed to put over myself, while I'd strolled through the carnage like I was on a leisurely walk after a springtime rain, that allowed her to finally see me. After all, supernatural seemed to be synonymous with pride.

I *wanted* her to see me.

I wanted her to know she hadn't met her match because *she* was no match for *me*.

Her eyes grew wide and I could see in her thoughts my own approach towards her. I felt her fear. I felt her anger.

I felt her snap.

A snarl ripped from her lips as she raised her sword in the air facing me. Still standing behind her defensive line, I decided she needed a lesson in picking fights with someone her own size, so I raised both hands and shot down two of her soldiers. Another second ticked by and she was covered in the smoking bits of two more. With only one left to hide behind, I prepared to microwave him like his name was TrueBlood, when I was blindsided by a blur, knocking me to the side and making my shot go wide.

I found my footing, but lost my focus seeing the vampire version of Michael Oher now standing directly in my path and staring back at me.

Eric.

I couldn't stop myself. Not that I tried. Not that I wanted to.

We still had plenty we needed to talk about, but now wasn't the time for words. Communication was never our forte anyway.

So I didn't think twice before I kissed him.

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## **Chapter 6: Chapter 6 - Demons**

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### Chapter 6 – Demons

#### **EPOV**

It couldn't be.

I couldn't trust my eyes. I couldn't trust the vision before me was real.

Could she really be standing there?

My lover. My bonded. Bathed in a golden brilliance, as though the sun all but told the moon to fuck off, and shone down through the night sky out of her very pores.

Only for her would it do such a thing.

Perhaps, only for me would I dare to believe it to be true.

But I'd learned I couldn't trust my own mind to not retreat to my blond demon in its desperation to escape whatever tortures my body was being subjected to. This could very well be one of those times. Her ethereal glow only substantiated that thought. She looked the same and yet different. She'd spoken impossible words in a language I knew and yet could not understand. Pulled the impossible out of her ass, the same as she'd often done several times before, and yet now it too was different.

Was it my own internal desperation – the one I'd tried to convince myself no longer existed – wanting to hear her claim me in a way no other could deny?

Or was it real?

I could be imagining it all. I could very well still be strung up in Freyda's dungeon. Silver shackled to my wrists while they bled my body. Drained my sanity with every drop of blood extracted from my lifeless form, and teasingly – fruitlessly – replacing it with the stale synthetic blood that would do no more good than wetting my lips. Freyda had already proven her own desperation to keep her kingdom by forcing me into upholding my maker's deal. She'd already shown she was a miserable cunt by trying to coerce me into behaving as though her one hundred and fifty years as a vampire made her my better simply by wearing the crown I would one day use to cut Freyda cookies out of her torso.

Had I pushed her too far and now I was paying my penance? Would I awaken from my stupor to find myself in the company of Were guards and wearing the stench of an infected whore queen instead of the Fae royalty and Bill-stained tux my mind was trying to convince me were real?

I had no way to know. Nothing to gauge my own sanity. No sliver of rational thought left.

No reason to believe Sookie would come for me at all, much less declare herself a Brigant and use a supernatural birthright in order to claim me for her own.

Not when all she'd ever done was declare herself to only be human.

None of it made sense, but then rarely did anything make sense when my mind was no longer my own to control. And yet still, I attempted to force some sort of logic into the fairytale equation, starting with the royal fairy himself.

Niall had closed the portals. Even if he'd been idiotic enough to let his insane grandson back into this world, Niall would never enter it for long himself. Not now. Nor would he leave his realm undefended by taking his royal guard with him.

To a vampire ball.

But I'd been witness to enough bizarre behavior by the Fae that I couldn't completely dismiss it altogether. Just like my lover, they were both irrational and enchanting. Crazy and captivating.

The fact I could be imagining it all made me realize perhaps we were more alike than I had ever cared to admit.

The evening I had only moments earlier thought to be real played on fast forward through my mind. Checking my sanity against the insanity before me. Felipe telling me Sookie had kicked out the shifter. Bill showing up and me giving him his true death. They were fantasies I'd humored myself with many times before, but were they reality? It would be no surprise to learn the illusory demise of Sookie's relationship and her first lover would make their way into my capricious mind.

And then there were my children. Feeling my tie to them flare with concern and rancorous anger told me nothing. If my body was physically feeling pain and my mind had already shutdown to block it out, I wouldn't be able to keep them from feeling it in our bond. The physical manifestation of them before my very eyes could be yet another trick I was playing on myself. Sensing their worry and bitter resentment so much more strongly, not due to their actual proximity but because perhaps they too suspected I was nearing my end.

And it was that thought that had my eyes traveling back to take in the light at the end of my very dark tunnel.

Real or imagined, my mind's eye didn't care. Seeing Sookie standing before me had unimaginable healing powers. Always blocked from my vision when my mind retreated to her in the past, finally seeing her again was both a gift and a curse.

If I awoke in the dungeon and found it was all a dream, I wasn't sure how much longer I would be able to play the game. Ocella had done far worse to me physically, but my psyche was a proven pussy when it came to my blond tormentor. I hadn't factored into my plans how it would affect me, but that same thing could've been uttered on the very night she'd walked into my bar, wearing her *naïveté* like she'd worn a white dress, and been just as true.

I never could have planned for just how much Sookie would affect me.

She'd given me her love, once. She'd shown me how to love in return. It was a gift I hadn't realized I wanted. An emotion I never knew I was capable of feeling much less returning after a thousand years. I may have tried to force her into seeing her supernatural side, but so too did she force me into feeling more human than even when I was one.

The roles of the pupil and the professor were interchangeable. Sookie and I were one and the same regardless of who sat at the bigger desk.

But a small part within me tried to spare myself the additional pain. Tried to force reason into the unreasonable circumstance I'd found myself in. Attempted to replace longing with logic by telling me Sookie would never slough off so easily the knowledge I had been the one to finally end her first lover. The woman I knew would rage and rail over the injustices of my world. Scorn me once more for who and what I was. Blood wasn't a suitable price to pay for a transgression in her eyes. Especially for an offense committed against her.

No, the Sookie Stackhouse I knew would never stand for such a thing so passively.

My first instinct had been to lie at her silent question. To hide the truth and shelter her from the beast who always dwelled inside of me. Always lurked in the dark shadows of my mind and my chest and my very soul. I barely acknowledged his existence, only slackening his tether in front of her eyes when it was her life in danger. Only showed her that part of me when she could not hold it against me.

But no more.

There was nowhere to hide. Not for the beast, my lover, or I. There was nothing I could do. His chains were no longer my own to control, but perhaps it was for the best. Even if it only happened within the confines of this strange dream where wishes and nightmares collided, it was a start. Closure, perhaps. Righting a wrong I had committed against her. Against us, for it was my attempts to keep that part of me hidden that was one of many dominoes that felled our relationship. Lies by omission were still lies just the same no matter the intention behind them. The road to hell was paved with the best of them and my own had undoubtedly led me straight there.

I had warned her once – what felt like a lifetime ago. I may not tell her everything, but what I told her would always be the truth. And so now would be no different, even if it was just her eyes that asked the question.

Her very image should tell me this was a dream. Not the appearance of her in the room – my very own special nightmare within a nightmare – but *her appearance*. Sookie's skin always held a golden hue. Be it due to her own vanity or her oft denied Sky Fae DNA, she'd never hidden her torrid love affair with the fiery orb in the sky. And while still sun kissed, now my lover positively glowed. It was nothing like the luminescence of my own kind – like the fog surrounding dry ice left out in balmy temperatures – but an otherworldly glow that evoked warmth. A pulsing aura of a golden white light surrounded her frame like a lover's embrace and I was sure if I dared to reach out – if I dared to touch what was no longer mind – my skin would burn just the same as if I was meeting the sun.

Perhaps I was?

Maybe that was my true reality and this was the way my mind chose to spare me that knowledge. Bringing forth the only Valkyrie I would accept, when it was apparent Odin's shieldmaidens had already shunned me more than a thousand years earlier once my maker had stolen my last breath.

Did I care?

I couldn't decide.

Perhaps it was for the best either way. If I truly was meeting my true death, I could do so with the one I loved in front of me. If all of this were real – if she truly stood before me now – it would be but a Band-Aid placed on a sucking chest wound. It would merely be putting off the

inevitable and our roles once again interchanging for she would be the one to eventually die. It would be cruel to be given 50 more years with her only so I could be separated from her in a way much more final than any harsh words or desperately penned royal decree could bring about.

I would be unable to withstand it twice.

My words spoken to her on the night following our public divorce – that I had considered turning her against her wishes – were true. I had indeed considered it. Many times. By ordering Pam to turn her, Sookie would've never felt the need to part from me as makers and children often do. And while my words were spoken in hurt and anger, my actions should've been just as loud to her ears. As selfish as I was, I couldn't do it. I couldn't betray her wishes or my own promises to her. My inability to lie to her – even after the fact – would sentence me to my very own purgatory now that my Valkyrie too had forsaken me. There would be no atonement for my sins – either against her or myself. Either way – either choice – someone had to lose, so I made the choice where the only loser would be me.

But thoughts of her death – brought on by sunrise, heart disease or a Mack truck – brought me no closer to figuring out which world I was dwelling in and only drove me crazier. Real or imagined, I had no way to know. So I clawed my way through the chasm dividing psychosis and sanity to what I knew to be true.

I wasn't the only one prone to speaking out in anger. Fiery too was my lover's temper, but no matter how long she allowed the star's rays to caress her skin as my fingers once had, shooting sunlight from the palms of her hands was unlikely. And yet I could smell the smoke left behind by her scolding finger flick.

Watching her do it made the possibility of something other than sunlight to shoot from somewhere lower on my body very likely.

And it were those feelings of lust – the kind only she had ever been able to evoke within me – that caused my initial hesitation when Freyda shrieked her order to attack.

But it was finally an order I was more than willing to obey.

Lunging towards her with my sword drawn, I missed my mark as did my lover's scorching rage. Rationally – as though I had any rationale left – I knew it must be a dream. A manifestation in my mind of what could very well be my dying wish. To have my lover with me – fighting for me – in a way that I knew to be impossible. But I no longer cared.

It was yet another gift, even if it was only from me to myself.

Seeing her move through the room with vampires coming at her from all sides made me itch to move closer to her. To protect her. To hold her close and shield her from everything. But I saw there was no need now that my imagination had gifted her with the ability to protect herself. And since my imagination had also gifted me with a sword in my hand and my queen in close proximity, I would not be denied my bloody retribution.



Her death would come by my hand and if I awoke to find her before me, I would find a way to have it again.

Having Freyda enter my unconscious mind was something new – like the physical appearance of my lover – and I would not be denied my vengeance. I could no longer pretend that Sookie wouldn't always be there, lurking in the depths of my thoughts, no matter how deeply I buried the memories. The witch's curse had proven that. But there, at least, she was safe and sound. Shackled beside me for all of eternity, I now knew. And knowing it was likely I was the one who was shackled in reality had me moving towards the witch responsible for the curse of my last year.

My mind acknowledged her cowardly cunt ways, seeing her hiding behind her largest guards, so my path set out towards her. Her couture gown now torn and stained. Her carefully coifed hair now in disarray. Her overly made up face now contorted to show her true identity.

A frightened little bitch who had no hope in besting a Bon Temps barmaid.

Her eyes were only for my lover. Trained on her like she now knew she'd risen for her last night. But my selfishness hadn't completely dissipated because it was a gift I didn't want to bestow on Sookie. I wanted it for myself, so I continued to slay my way there. Freyda would get her curtain call by my hands and when the light faded out in her eyes, I wanted it to be me she was looking at. I wanted her to crawl before me and beg for mercy – of which I had none to give her. She'd dug her own grave. Her masquerade of a monarchy was over and I would do everything in my power to make a mess of her party to match the mess she'd made of my sanity.

The battle was exhilarating. Even if it only existed in my mind, I'd needed it. The brutality. The bloodlust. The release of a yearlong rage. It had been emasculating to live under her thumb, no matter how hard I'd tugged on my chains – both literal and figurative. They had existed nonetheless.

If I could've spared a hand, I would've cupped my balls and said, "Welcome back boys."

And speaking of balls, my imagined lover had big ones in the form of fiery orbs that shot from her hands, bringing down her attackers in a Fae carnival game of Whack-A-Vamp. It was yet another clue I was imagining it all. Sookie would never gleefully take lives. She'd felled her own share of attackers in her short lifetime, but it had been out of necessity and she'd always done it with a fair amount of guilt. Now she didn't even look as though it was an unavoidable circumstance.

She looked exultant.

She was always in my peripheral. My eyes unable to not keep track of her movements, no matter who I was facing, so my undead heart skipped a beat when she suddenly disappeared from my sight. I panicked inside thinking my dream was coming to an end. I cursed my addled brain for taking her away from me and yet leaving behind every other extraneous character I cared nothing for, with the exception of my children. My eyes sought them out, sure they would be the next to

vanish from the confines of my mind, but in doing so my make believe opponent got the upper hand. About to deliver his hallucinatory blow, he was instead blown into oblivion.

Perhaps I was as well. Sure I had blown my own mind in the process because Sookie suddenly appeared out of thin air. Covered from head to toe in blood and soot, my smudged lover stalked forward, her eyes trained on Freyda with my eyes trained on her. I wouldn't lose sight of her again – not even to my own muddled mind – but now that my focus was on nothing but her, feeling elated at her return, my feet drew me to her without any conscious thought.

But remembering how big her balls were, and seeing her fire off a few to remind the rest, I made sure to stay out of their trajectory before coming to stand before her. I'd knocked into her in my haste, but now when she was literally within arm's reach, I was afraid to touch her. Everything about her looked both real and unreal. Both old and new. I was afraid if I reached out – intentionally trying to lay hands on what my heart desired the most – I would fell the first domino in what would lead to me realizing this was indeed a dream. That she would disappear again.

Close enough to see the glisten of sweat on her skin and then being forced to face the reality she was still – and would forever be – out of my grasp.

But perhaps that too was for the best. She would never accept me as I was. I could never be what she wanted me to be. I was tired of letting her down – of being letdown. While flawed, I still believed her to be pure. Good. She would live her life and when her time on earth had passed, she would go on to her Christian heaven. No matter what deities I believed or didn't believe in, I learned a long time ago that would not be my fate. Ocella had shown me that.

No matter my intentions, good or bad, I was hell bound.

I couldn't hide that from her, but if I managed to make it out of Oklahoma alive and sane, it would only be due to her. For her. I would do all I could to make sure she had that life to live, whether I was welcome to be a part of it or not. Her eyes staring back at me now said she did want me to be a part of it and it was all that was needed to finally give me my answer.

None of this was real.

I never believed in fate and instead held the belief our destiny was made by our own choices. But perhaps I was wrong. Looking back at her now – a shining memory of who I remembered her to be – I knew she was irrevocably woven into my soul. It was something I never would've willingly chosen.

And I needed to let her go.

Her eyes had always shone so brightly. Her spirit and personality matched them to a tee. The light from within her soul had always been there – even before I'd imagined her to be a literal night light in my dark thoughts – but I wanted to save it. Savor it. It was perhaps the real reason why I never turned her against her wishes.

I didn't want her to be without it no more than I wanted to be without her.

The darkness of my fate had already been set. The darkness inside of me was already ingrained, even if my inner demon no longer remained hidden inside. There would be no escape for me. I loved her too much to doom her to the same.

All of my thoughts flitted through my mind in a matter of seconds. Staring down at my inner demon while she stared back up at me. Waiting for her to disappear now that I had finally settled on letting her go and hoping I would somehow set myself free by doing so.

But my mind was nearly as cruel as my queen because instead of allowing me to watch her gracefully fade from view, Sookie was suddenly in my face. Her breaths fanned across my face and her scent – a more sweetened version of the one I remembered – engulfed me.

As did her lips.

The warmth of her body quickly thawed my own. Only the sound of my sword falling to the ground reminded me I'd been holding it all along. My arms snaked around her body while her tongue slithered across my own and I dove into it, knowing it wouldn't last.

It couldn't last.

It wasn't real.

It was the only reason I kept my back to our enemies. They weren't really there. Neither was I. So when she pulled back to pant in breaths she wouldn't need in my imaginary world, her next words all but tore my heart apart like it was an accusatory antebellum ass named Bill.

"I love you, Eric."

I'd already established my mind was just as cruel as my queen and maker combined, and proved it by pleading in a hoarse whisper only for her ears, all but begging her to pull the impossible from her ass once more.

"Show me, Sookie. Show me it's real. Show me *you* are real."

I had no idea of what I was asking. How she could prove to me my mind wasn't playing the cruelest of all tricks on me. She stared back at me like she didn't know how either, until a wicked gleam in her eye appeared seconds before her lips were back on mine.

Her teeth bit into my tongue while her own slashed against my descended fangs. Her blood exploded on my palate and my senses, while the two flavors entwined with one another like long lost lovers. They danced the tango across my taste buds and seeped down into my veins, forming the beginning of another blood bond.

There was an old Chinese proverb called The Red Thread of Destiny. Legend had it their gods tied red cords around the ankles of those who were destined to be lovers, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. The red thread may tangle or stretch, but it would never break.

Soulmates.

I knew it now to be true. Our bond may have been broken by magic, suspicion, and doubt, but our tie to one another at our very core had never truly severed. My soul had been bound to hers long before we'd ever shared the first drop and had continued to linger long after it had been dissolved. But now that I could feel her again, it felt like being reborn. If I could've torn my lips from hers I was sure I would be panting in air I didn't need.

She did still love me. Her blood told me so.

I knew now that it was just as real as her body in my arms.

And I was given a painful reminder of that fact when I felt the steel blade slice into the skin at my back. Falling from my lover's embrace and down onto the floor at her feet, my eyes closed against my wishes, so all I heard was Sookie yelling out my name right as I felt her fury, matched only by the sudden wave of blistering heat that exploded around us.

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## **Chapter 7: Chapter 7 - Radioactive**

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### Chapter 7 – Radioactive

#### **SPOV**

Feeling Eric's lips on mine, having him in my arms again, I don't know how I could've possibly thought I would be okay without him. We'd had our problems, but who didn't? Most of them we'd brought on ourselves. Created drama where there was no need for any. But after being without him for the last year, I knew now more than ever I never wanted to be apart from him again.

Eric may have technically been dead, but he was the only one who had ever made me feel so alive.

Or more torn apart.

Seeing him look so unsure when he stared back at me hurt more than any of my visible scars ever had. Knowing it was in part my fault, even though I didn't know exactly what it was he'd been thinking. His mental silence was still a gift. Still a curse. But I could tell by the way he looked at me he still wanted me. How he could feel that way after everything I'd said and done, I didn't know. Not when I'd done such a thorough job of throwing everything we had away.

But I was thankful.

And I was grateful he didn't seem to mind me starting a new blood bond without talking to him about it first. That part didn't surprise me so much, considering he'd more or less done the same thing to me once before. I'd been horrified at the time, but now I wouldn't trade that memory for the world.

It was only fitting the prince in my fairytale was my big bullshitter and I was his little bullet-sucker princess.

And if somebody didn't like it, they and Walt Disney could both suck it too.

But watching him contort in pain and then drop to the floor, I felt something else entirely.

Rage.

Charged essential spark or not, the Sookie of old was still in there too and showed herself by once again reacting without thought. The guard I'd mentally dubbed TrueBlood barely had the chance to draw back his sword from slicing into Eric's skin when I exploded. His body turned into ash as I mentally berated myself for getting caught up in making up with Eric and I spun around in the next second to look for other attackers. And in doing so, I'd unwittingly placed Eric and me in the center of a ring of fire.

Just call me Johnny Cash.

"Eric?" I asked, dropping down to my knees beside my man in black. My rage dropped back down just as quickly seeing him lying there and in pain. "Are you okay?"

I knew now from my glimpse inside of Freyda's head at least some of what Eric had had to endure. The beatings. The bleedings. So I wasn't surprised to see his back wasn't healing as quickly as I knew it should have.

But I'd be sure to pay her back in kind for each and every mark she'd left on his body.

"Fine," he snarled and slowly pulled himself up onto his knees.

Always my big bullshitter. But at least now I knew some of the Eric of old was still in there too.

The word vampire could be the antonym for verbose, with a picture of him next to it in the dictionary.

"Of course you are," I smiled, still feeling a little giddy being so close to him again. All I wanted to do was run away with him. Spend the rest of the night talking or maybe even finding other things to do together that didn't involve speaking at all. But we couldn't. Not yet.

We still had asses to kick.

"You're really here." It was more of a statement than a question and it made me wonder what was behind it when I remembered his words to me just moments earlier.

*Show me you're real.*

Placing each of my hands on either side of his face, I stared back at him and smiled, "Of course I am." Keeping a hold of him, I moved closer and tilted my head until my neck was at his lips and said, "Drink."

There was no time for finesse. Even above the flames I could hear the fight still going on around us, but we wouldn't be protected by fire alone. A well thrown sword could end either one of us before we ever had a chance to start again.

But even knowing all of that, I couldn't stop my body from reacting to his touch. The feel of his arms snaking around my body and the cool moisture of his tongue licking along my vein brought my insides to a boil.

And given Eric was poking my body with more than just his fangs, I could tell he felt the same way too.

A moan rumbled from my lips feeling his fangs slide into my skin and I could feel something like a rumble start up somewhere lower on my body. With the first pull of my blood into Eric's mouth I melted further into him, but stopped myself from closing my eyes like I wanted to.

I couldn't let us get blindsided again.

So Eric chose that moment to blindside me himself.

He'd only taken a single mouthful when he swallowed and pressed my head against his neck as he pulled back from my own and said, "Bite."

The little bit of his blood I'd had only moments earlier was enough to start another blood bond, but I knew having more now would only strengthen it. It was something I wanted, something I'd thought about often once Niall had whisked me away to Faery and I had nothing to do but think. But in my mind I'd imagined it would come about after lots of talking. Ironing out every little detail of what it would mean to each of us.

I should have known better.

After all, I was more fairy now than human and fairies were allergic to iron. Apparently that extended to smoothing out the minutiae of our connection to one another.

His only warning I'd agreed was my countdown.

Three kisses to his neck.

Two swipes of my tongue across his skin.

And one bite over my bullseye.

I moaned again as soon as his blood exploded across my tongue and he growled against my neck as he dove in for seconds. It would've been so easy to get lost in him. To forget we weren't in the middle of a war of my making. But my spidey senses were tingling, telling me it wasn't safe to do so and I knew he couldn't afford to give me too much. He was still weakened by what he'd endured, so I latched onto my sanity just as strongly as I'd latched onto his skin.

He pulled back after only three more pulls and when I tried to hold him there, knowing he needed more, he resisted and licked the wounds closed, so I forced myself to do the same when he spoke against my skin and repeated my very thoughts by saying, "I do not want to weaken you. We're not safe yet."

We're.

Just hearing him use that simple four letter conjunction to describe the two of us made me mentally swoon. Using it in a way to depict it was 'us' versus 'them' told me he viewed us as being a single entity.

If he'd gotten down on bended knee and held out a ring, I don't think I could've been any happier.

But I'd always been a simple girl and a simple four letter conjunction was enough for me, so I pulled back even further and stopped him from healing the marks on my skin – out of habit, I supposed – and said, "No. Leave them so they all know I am yours."

"Are you?" he asked. His tone was soft, but his eyes were hard as he stared back at me.

I couldn't blame him for questioning me. I'd flip-flopped on this subject more than when I tried to even out my tan on the chaise lounge out in the yard. We still had a lot to talk about. Issues to resolve and old wounds to heal.

But just like I didn't think a simple 'sorry' would suffice when I'd been attacked as a message to him by the maenad, I thought he deserved something a little fancier than a simple 'yes'.

Cupping his face in my hand, I smiled and entreated, "Angelic Eric, vision of love and beauty, I am prostrate that the wicked, evil queen violated the sanctity of our marriage in an attempt to keep her kingdom by taking you away from me. But no matter the distance – hundreds of miles or hundreds of days – I am and will always be yours."

The smirk I'd missed more than I knew formed in the corner of his mouth, hearing some of the words he'd said to me so long ago, but because he still wasn't feeling particularly chatty, all he said was, "Good to know."

With one arm still wrapped around me, he reached down and picked up his fallen sword with the other, flying us straight up into the air and out of the ring of fire, saying, "Now, let's kick some ass, shall we?"

And just like that my bitch face was back on.

The room was bathed in red, only further heightened by the flames still burning below us. But the fight was still waging on.

It was just waging on around my little tribute to the man in black.

"There," Eric snarled and my eyes trailed the same path his had taken, seeing Freyda now standing behind an even bigger defensive line. Still hovering up in the air unnoticed by everyone below, I let go of Eric with one arm to aim my hand towards her when he said, "No." Spinning us around and quickly lowering us to the ground before I could get a shot off, he smacked my lips with a fierce kiss from his own before explaining, "Her death will be mine."

I really didn't think it was fair that he got to kill Bill and now wanted to deny me my own revenge on his rapist, but I wouldn't argue with him over it knowing a little of what she'd done to him. Instead, I smiled and accused, "Greedy."

He smiled in return and I raised my hand to fry a vamp that got a little too close to our negotiations, saying, "How about I go find Felipe and meet up with you later?"

"Of course, lover."

And with that, we were off.

Eric raised his sword above his head and started clearing a path towards Freyda, while I raised my hands up and started blasting my way through the crowd in the opposite direction. We'd brought a hundred of Niall's Royal Guard with us and at the time, I'd thought that seemed like overkill. Supernatural posturing. But Freyda must have invited every vampire in her state to the palace because while there were plenty of vampire puddles on the ground, there were still plenty more still fighting.

As I moved along, with my eyes seeking out the caped king, I was shocked to see Stan Davis fighting back to back with Pam.

Seeing Pam lop off the head of her challenger, I detonated Stan's opponent for him on my way by, but his eyes met mine and for a single brief moment I caught a glimpse of his thoughts, like I had back in Dallas.

*Amazing. Freyda was foolish to piss her off.*

I was booted out of his head just as quickly, but I smiled at his mental praise and he returned it before we both returned to the battle.



Even if I knew how to work my fairy cloak – if I even *had* fairy cloaking powers – it wouldn't have shielded me from being hit with the spray of blood that showered the room. So I kept my mouth closed and continued to shoot my fairy flares all around me, while keeping my eyes peeled for Felipe.

I really should've just let Sigebert kill him when he had the chance.

My poor Malibu hadn't been the same ever since I ran him over.

With my senses heightened even more now that I'd had more of Eric's blood, the scents swirling around the room were almost overpowering. Burnt flesh, be it from my flamethrower hands or silver swords searing undead skin, tickled my nose. But it was the mixture of blood that was overwhelming, so I used the sleeve of my ruined dress to wipe it away from my face, and pushed myself further into the fray when my eyes finally landed on the prize.

Felipe.

The hem of his cape was frayed and had torn away on one side, so it hung lopsided behind him, looking even more ridiculous than usual. Deciding to relieve him of his fashion faux pas, I sent him a little reminder capes only belonged on superheroes – and he was no hero. The restrained discharge from my hands lit up his cape, starting at the hem, and quickly rose up behind him, with him tearing the fabric free from his body just as the flames were about to lick his neck. His alarmed eyes darted to mine, so I smiled and waved.

Fuck him if he thought I was going to curtsy.

The alarm in his eyes turned to fury in a flash and he zipped towards me, but I was ready for him. Pointing a single finger in his direction – one I'd been raised to believe shouldn't be raised by a proper young lady – I turned its vertical positioning horizontal before he could reach me and seared a blazing scarlet letter 'C' onto his chest.

Cuckold. Cheat. Cocksucker.

Take your pick. They were all true.

His race to get to me stopped just as quickly now that he'd become his own Olympic torch and he tried to bat away the embers still burning on his chest, while his eyes never left my flickering fingertips.

"You are in *my* retinue," he seethed once he was left with nothing but the residue and a singed 'C' on his chest. "You reside in *my* state. You are *my* telepath. Apologize and I won't punish you for your treason."

Or the 'C' could just stand for 'cocky'. He was certainly acting that way.

Tilting my head to display Eric's mark on my neck, I said, "I am *Eric's*. It's your own fault you traded him away for nothing of value. I would've thought being the King of Nevada would've made you know better than to fold when you had a winning hand."

"Do you think I will let your actions go unpunished?" he snarled. "That I will allow you to return to your home?" Taking a fateful step closer, he sneered, "I will lock you away for the rest of your life. I will snatch your friends and your family from their lives and force you to watch as I take their lives one by one. I will chain you up and allow others to entertain themselves with your body and your blood when I am done taking everything I can from you. You will wish for death, but I will turn you and continue your punishment for all of eternity. With a Maker's command, you will have no choice but to comply. No matter how much you might want to."

Or the 'C' could stand for 'cracked'.

He was.

And he was high on some if he thought I'd let him touch me or anyone I cared about.

Hearing his Appius-like threats invigorated me all the way to my bones. While I'd been in a sort of daze after going separate ways with Eric, moving through the room mostly on autopilot, now I felt as though I was just waking up. The fog was lifting.

A yearlong fog.

I'd been a fool to believe Felipe would've kept his word. That he would've allowed me to live my life in peace once Eric had signed away two hundred years of his to guarantee that very thing.

But I was done being a fool.

And his reign over me and three states was done too.

Reminding *him* I was no longer the same uninformed *human girl* who would cower at such blatant threats, I recapped our evening thus far by saying, "Were your ears so full of your own bullshit that you missed my entrance to this shindig?" Sending my own firebolt that wouldn't help him win any Quidditch match, he howled and clutched his arm just beneath his now burning right hand, trying to fan away the flames but only succeeded in fueling them.

"Won't it be difficult to hold me down without both of your hands?" I taunted and took another step closer. While his eyes desperately searched for something to put it out, I sent another one, managing to light up both of his feet with one shot, and as he tried to stomp the flames out, I laughed, "Oh...you can't dance your way out of this one."

I doubted he'd heard me over his own pained screams, so I decided to really get his attention by making my next mark count.

And with his penchant for capes, one would think he idolized the Sesame Street's Count.

The crotch of his pants was burning hotter than anything he'd ever managed to do with whatever it contained and when his hands reached down on reflex, much too late to block my flaming blow, he ended up setting his other hand on fire too. Falling to the ground, I moved to stand over his rapidly burning body and just as the recognition was fading from his eyes, I asked, "How does it feel? To be incapacitated? To know your death is looming and there is no stopping it? To know there is no one to help you? To save you? To be ended when you're too weak to defend yourself?"

I'd often thought of Sophie-Anne's final moments. While I had issues with how she'd gone about seeking me out, sending Bill to try and seduce me, I could understand her reasoning. And Flambé Felipe had just reminded me I could've had it much worse than a lying boyfriend. She didn't deserve what happened to her.

I still couldn't find any sympathy over Andre's death though.

Raising my arms up in the air, I gestured to the room around us and stared down at him saying, "This is what happens when Monarch's overstep their bounds. It's a revolution."

And I continued to stare at him long after he was well and truly dead, and when he was nothing but ash and a bad memory, I said to no one in particular, "Welcome to the new age."

"Are we too late for the barbecue, lover?"

My head whipped around at his voice to see Eric standing there holding Freyda in his grasp.

And there was nothing romantic about it.

Rage bubbled up inside of me, having her so close, and if Eric hadn't been in danger of being collateral damage, I would've exploded her like a firecracker on the Fourth of July.

Eric wasn't the only one who was greedy.

Her eyes sought out an escape that she wouldn't be getting, but my own traveled along with hers when I noticed the fight seemed to be over.

And we had won the war.

While I didn't recognize every vampire left standing, those who were seemed to be standing guard over those who were no longer fighting, and I was happy to see the majority of our group had survived unscathed. Both Pam and Karin looked none the worse for wear and Niall was standing off to one side issuing orders to his remaining guards. I noticed the unmistakable fairy dust in some spots on the floor, so I knew not everyone on our side had survived, but they were quick to remove the injured fairies before the scent of their blood could start up another frenzy.

"Just get it over with."

The sound of Freyda's defeated voice drew my attention back to her and seeing her look resigned to her fate did nothing to assuage my fury.

I wanted her to bleed.

I wanted her to feel pain.

I wanted her to feel fear.

I wanted it all.

Eric seemed nonplussed by her demeanor and instead he stared down at her and smirked, "Now where is the fun in that? You may no longer be my queen and you were *never* my wife, but that doesn't mean I can't return your hospitality during my stay here."

She shuddered hearing his implied threat.

I enjoyed seeing it more than I knew was possible.

There was a time, not so long ago, when I would've accepted there was vampire justice I had no say in. A way of handling their affairs that we would just have to agree to disagree on. I would've shook my head and clucked my tongue as I walked away to go stick my head in the sand and pretend it wasn't happening.

But not now.

Not with her.

It really was the dawn of a new age.

The dawn of a new me.

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## **Chapter 8: Chapter 8 - Vengeance Is Mine**

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### Chapter 8 – Vengeance Is Mine

#### **EPOV**

Her head hung low with her face shrouded by the long dark strands now pulled loose from their pins. Her body suspended in the air by the same silver manacles that had kept me prisoner not so long ago, now attached around her wrists above her head. The silver exposed, no longer covered by either my blood or leather. Nothing to stop them from burning through her skin to the bone underneath.

Like her treatment of me had slowly burned its way through my sanity.

I felt no sympathy of course. For a year my mind had been shrouded by the long dark strands of my past.

All because of her.

Bloody rivulets, now dried to her naked skin, trailed down the front of her body. Both sharp and angular, she was the epitome of everything I didn't want in a woman inside and out. The antithesis of the single spectator still in the room.

Standing. Watching. Waiting.

For her turn.

On my shoulder, in my mind, or in a corner of the room, Sookie was always there. But now wasn't the time to go searching for the meaning of it – past, present, or future. Now my mind had a single focus.

On my former queen.

My children had gone first. Like any good parent, I saw to their needs before my own and had allowed them first crack at their evil stepmother. Disney had officially gone dark and now my two princesses each had a new fang to hang around their necks – both a keepsake and a cautionary notice to others – retrieved from the former queen by their own hands.

How else can children learn to do for themselves if they're never taught to work for what they want?

But I had trained my girls well and merely watched with pride as they took turns in taking out their frustrations on the woman who had upended our lives for a year. A pittance of time, when one has all of eternity, unless yours is the life being upended.

She deserved the same meticulous treatment, but I would not drag it out for a year. I'd wasted enough time and energy on someone so undeserving of anything of mine, so I needed to make this – her last night – count for the last three hundred and sixty-five. She had already wasted five minutes of it, having passed out when Pam had to encourage Freyda's fang to loosen from her gums.

She'd encouraged it with a left hook.

So now I'd been forced to wait for her to regain consciousness.

After all, it was her party and I didn't want her to miss a moment of the fun.

And while I could ignore Sookie's presence in the room, I couldn't ignore her presence in my blood. Both left me admittedly conflicted, but I didn't want to delve too deeply into the reasons why just yet. Now that the battle had been won, with me and my sanity the victors, doubt and confusion over what her presence and proclamations had meant were starting to seep in.

She loved me.

She'd said it and I could feel it as the truth. But it wasn't a truth I hadn't heard and felt from her before.

I still had a year's worth of questions. Ones I needed answers for. A year's worth of fact versus fiction to sort through, but I didn't want to get lost in my own head yet again. Not when I still had Freyda to contend with.

One thing at a time.

I'd spent enough time in the room to have memorized every nook and cranny, so I walked to the ornately carved armoire – a torturer's tool chest – and selected some of her favorite pieces. Seeing a few favorites of my own, I chose those as well and laid them out on the table beside her still form like a doctor preparing for surgery. I guessed it was in a way.

I was about to surgically extract the festering cancer from my life once and for all.

And I could already imagine the fangy ribbons Pam would insist on wearing to celebrate my remission.

I could both feel and hear Sookie's approach behind me, but I hadn't needed to turn to ascertain why. Still covered in blood from cruising through our earlier crusade, she backhanded Freyda across her face, eliciting a soft moan from her lips and alerting us to her conscious state before her mind could even register her present state.

"Wakey wakey," she taunted before switching to a chiding tone I'd heard directed at me on more than one occasion, as she added, "You're not a very good hostess."

Still so very much alike the naïve girl who walked into a vampire bar in a white dress, this Sookie was so very different as well. She'd never been one for violence – even if she found ways to ease her mind with whatever rationales to explain away acts committed by her that would allow her to sleep at night. But now that my mind had adjusted to my new reality, I could see the glow surrounding her was just as real as the blade still clutched in my hand. Her scent, while not overpowering, was decidedly stronger.

Sweeter.

It was just one more question on my list. One more answer I hoped to get. Was it a temporary magic bestowed on her by Niall?

It was the only thing that would make sense in this nonsensical circumstance.

Just like my dream that wasn't a dream, when we'd separated in the ballroom – both going off on our own quests – my eyes and my blood had kept track of her. Watching. Waiting. Prepared to fly off to her should the need arise, so I was witness to her attack on Felipe. I'd zeroed in on their conversation and heard every threat uttered from his lips. At one time those words would have shocked her. Made her cower internally, no matter how straight her spine appeared. She couldn't hide her reaction from my blood in her veins, but instead of feeling any fright, she felt exasperated. Amused, even.

And most of all she felt pissed off.

But that was nothing compared to the rage now flowing through her.

Her new fire power was yet one more thing I wanted answers for, but there would be time for that later on. Now however, I set my own need for vengeance aside and gestured to Freyda's form, saying, "Lover? Is there anything else you need to get off of your chest before she's gone?"

Turning to meet Freyda's resigned eyes, I added, "For good."

The moniker felt both foreign and familiar on my tongue. It was one I had never used before her and one I never would've used again if she hadn't been the recipient. It was yet one more thing for me to consider.

Yet one more thing for me to push aside for now.

Her blood warmed in an entirely different way hearing me address her in such a way, but outwardly she showed no reaction and I watched as her eyes traveled over Freyda's body from head to toe. I could feel her assessing. Searching. Strategizing. Flipping through whatever it was that clogged her mind, looking for whatever she deemed justifiable.

I must say, I was just as surprised as Freyda over her chosen method.

I don't know that she could somehow tell that the dried blood on the on the steel rod was mine – caning was one of Freyda's favorite past times – but she felt a wave of disgust as she reached for it before it was then swallowed by her fury. Taking a step back to allow for the needed distance, she planted her feet and asked, "Do you remember when you waltzed into my house and made crude remarks about *my husband*? Threatening me and walking all over me? Well your waltzing days are over."

Swinging the metal rod like her last name was Ruth, the crack of Freyda's ankle bones mimicked the crack of a homerun ball's bat, and she swayed by her shackled wrists like a banner in a breeze. The scream that left her throat would make one think she'd wagered heavily on the opposing team and had just lost her shirt on the bet.

But then she'd already lost her shirt a while back.

Sookie ignored her yelling and snarled over her screams, berating her with, "You thought you were so *high and mighty* with your backroom schemes. You had to resort to *buying* Eric like he was some goddamn supermarket special. Well you know what bitch? He was never for sale."

She took another swing – my lover was apparently a switch hitter – and broke Freyda's other ankle. Rolling her eyes and waving her hand in the air like she could fan away the noise Freyda was making, she made her way over to the chains that held Freyda suspended in the air on a pulley system. Using all of the gentleness of an 18th century inquisitionist, Sookie lowered Freyda's body until she was forced to rest her weight on her now broken legs. And knowing how quickly our kind healed, when she was satisfied with the height of the chains, she walked over and grabbed a length of silver chain and wrapped them around Freyda's lower legs.

The sizzle from the silver meeting her skin crackled in the air and the scent of burning flesh permeated around us. I was still a shocked spectator to this new version of Sookie, so my mouth may have been agape when she turned to me, with her eyebrows furrowed in thought, as she asked, "Smells like chicken, don'tcha think?"

Quickly schooling my features – agape or otherwise – I offered, "I think *you* would be a better judge of that."

She gave me a glimpse of the Sookie I knew when she giggled and said, "I suppose..."

I thought perhaps she was done with what she wanted to do Freyda.

I thought wrong.

Her eyes scanned the room and landed on the vial of blood perched on a shelf. The very same fairy blood Freyda had given me in order to force me to comply with my duties as her Royal Consort. The taste of full blooded Fae would forever be tainted in my mind because of it, so it was just another reason to be thankful Sookie was a hybrid.

And I discarded the thought just as quickly, not yet knowing what – if any – future we had together entailed.

Grabbing the vial, she pulled the stopper from the top and waved the opening underneath Freyda's nose. Vampires didn't need to breathe, but she was panting thanks to the pain from her broken and silver bedazzled legs.

"Did you know the Fae can sense the blood of their kin?" Sookie asked, using no more inflection in her tone than if she'd asked about the weather. Damming the top of the bottle, she flipped it over and coated her fingertip with the contents, before turning it upright and showing Freyda the blood now coloring her skin. Her tone remained the unaffected air of a professor lecturing a room full of students as she explained, "Even in a bottle, I can tell this fairy was one of my own. My blood tells me so. I can't tell who or how far removed, but the fairy you drained was of the Brigant line." She swiped her blood stained finger down the length of Freyda's nose, with the close proximity of the scent causing her to snarl and hiss. So close and yet too far for her to taste,



Freyda hadn't been deprived of feeding for weeks on end, like I once was. She should have had more control.

But she'd already proven time and again she never really did have any control.

Sookie ignored the flailing former queen before her and repeated the process, moving down to her bare chest. She hadn't flinched once, her human morality and sense of modesty having been checked at the door as it seemed, when she said, "Do you remember asking me if the rumors of Eric's sexual prowess were true? I know you were eager to find out for yourself. After all, Eric's skills are legendary. As a telepath I knew that before I ever got to experience it firsthand. But what *you* should have known was something like that can only be *given*. Not *taken*." By the time she'd taken a step back, I could see she'd painted a scarlet letter 'R' on her chest, as she ended with, "There. Now everyone will know that you're a *rapist*."

Her assaults on my body weren't as horrific as Ocella's had been, but they were just as unwanted. Even if I had gone to her bed willingly, I never would've given her the pleasure I was capable of. Sookie was right when she said it had to be given freely. Not taken, by force or royal decree.

But it was also the one punishment I wouldn't repay her in kind. I wasn't a rapist in my human life and that had carried over with me into my undead one. Rape was about power, not pleasure of the flesh. The power, I already had, and I would derive no pleasure from her flesh that didn't come from a blade.

"He was *mine* to *take*," Freyda foolishly snarled.

"He was *never* yours," Sookie snarled in return.

If I had to choose a word to describe what I felt coming from her through our shared blood in that moment, the one most fitting would be venom.

Pure venom flowed through her.

I still hadn't given a lot of thought to her new powers, so I was shocked stupid again when Sookie reached out and touched Freyda's body. Hovering her fingertip just above the painted 'R', Sookie traced the letter and in the process scorched it onto her skin. Freyda fruitlessly tried to arch away from the hybrid blowtorch in front of her, but it was a pointless exercise and only succeeded in adding to the strain on her broken legs.

And despite my doubts over where we stood with one another, I couldn't help smirking at Sookie and asking, "Did I ever tell you how hot you are?"

"You may have insinuated it once," she smiled back at me. "On the way to the orgy."

My mind immediately leapt back in time to those shorts she'd worn.

"Like a caterpillar embraces a butterfly," I recalled aloud.

Perhaps it was the bloodlust. Perhaps it was the scent of pure Fae blood. Perhaps it was the memory of a much simpler time when murdered fry cooks and maenads were our biggest worries that caused our own kind of butterfly effect.

I don't know who moved first. Me or Sookie. Maybe it was just the fucking rotation of the earth on its axis that forced our bodies together, but the only fighting we did against it was waged over who would dominate the kiss when our lips crashed together.

All teeth and tongues. There was nothing sweet or sedate about it. There was no past. There was no future. In that moment we were both firmly rooted in the present and in each other's mouths.

Fuck. Bite. Rub.

I wanted it all.

Right there.

Right now.

And while Sookie had definitely changed, I wasn't so sure she'd changed enough to be okay with fucking right then and there with Freyda as a spectator. I certainly didn't give a fuck, but I also knew if we did, it would be akin to climaxing too soon. The sexual tension we felt now would only add to my enjoyment over ending Freyda later. And no matter her state, I knew Freyda would get some enjoyment merely watching me fuck Sookie like she'd wanted me to fuck her.

Sookie and I could fuck later. And if I still hadn't located my balls by then, maybe she could help me search for them while we talked about what it would mean.

But first I needed to end that bitch.

## **SPOV**

"Later, lover," Eric whispered against my lips before he pulled away.

Screw 'later'. I wanted to screw right now, but when he lifted his leg and kicked Freyda, making her body sway, her scream reminded me we weren't alone, so I let him pull away.

Nothing about him was for her eyes and Eric gracing me with his graciously plentiful talent definitely qualified as something that wasn't for her.

But it was hard to let him go. Our earlier kisses were filled with doubt. Doubt they were real? Doubt we would last? I couldn't tell, but *that* kiss was one I remembered all too well. *That* kiss was given by the Eric I remembered. Cocky. Self-assured.

That was the kiss of a thousand year old Viking vampire.

And while I would be happy if he would just stake the bitch and be done with it, I knew Eric still had some retribution of his own he was due. So I tried to passively watch as he took the steel blade in his hand and slowly sauntered around her writhing body. She visibly shuddered when he pressed the cool metal against the skin of her spine and arched away from his touch, but it was impossible to be out of his reach.

I wondered if she now realized no matter what she'd done to him, she never would've been out of his reach.

I wouldn't know without asking him, but I assumed he had a plan in place. He was Eric. Eric always had a plan, so I doubted he would've put up with her for the entire length of his contract. Eric was never a passive spectator to his own life, but he was a pragmatist. He would've plotted and waited for his opening to do whatever he needed to do to free himself. Of that I was sure.

I just sped up the process.

"So young," he taunted, dragging the sharpened tip down the length of spine. Not deep enough to sever any nerves that would relieve her of any pain she felt, but deep enough to inflict more of it on her. He watched the fresh river of blood flow down her back and added, "So impetuous. Foolish. Your maker did you no favors by not warning you to avoid conspiring with the likes of mine."

"You've got your little human whore back," she hissed. "Just be done with it already."

When would this bitch learn?

Before he could even open his mouth to respond, Passive Sookie fled the room and left Pissed Off Sookie in her place. I moved to stand in front of her and reminded her, "I'm neither a *human* nor a *whore*. Only *whores* would force a man into fucking them with fairy blood."

I didn't give her the time to reply or any warning it was coming, when we were all assaulted by the stench of burning flesh once more, intermingled with the scent of sulfur that came with burnt hair. Freyda's pained shriek filled my ears, but it was nothing like the screams she'd let out from either her broken legs or the silver digging into her flesh because now the smoke was emanating from much lower. Eric glanced over her shoulder to see my still outstretched hand facing Freyda's now smoking snatch, but his only response was an arched eyebrow.

Leaning forward, I smirked back at Freyda's fangless screams, saying, "I'm no Moses, but I'd still call that a burning bush."

Even if she hadn't repeatedly raped Eric over the last year, I didn't think that was something he would return to her. He may have been a vampire, but that didn't mean he was a monster. No matter what, I didn't believe he would willingly defile another being in that way.

No...Eric was no Bill.

So I didn't feel bad making that part of her closed for business.

For more reasons than just that one.

Eric's chuckle was accompanied by his own smirk and he took advantage of her open mouth by grabbing onto her jaw with one hand and a pair of pliers from the table with the other. I took a step back to give him room to work and watched as he gripped one of her molars with the pliers, pulling the first of many from her mouth while telling her, "My children will wear your fangs, but perhaps my lover would like a charm bracelet with what's left to remind her of our time together."

Not really, but it was the thought that counted.

Right?

He kept working until her mouth had no more teeth to pull, intermittently singing the stanzas to, 'This little piggy.' One went to the market. One stayed home. Blah blah blah.

I waited until he was finished to remind him that the singing game was meant for toes.

So he started all over again, pulling those off instead.

The bloodied stumps that were her feet were kind of gross, but I couldn't find any sympathy in me to care. I was done with trying to apply human decency to the supernatural world. They certainly hadn't used it with me when I still believed myself to be human and now that I'd taken the steps to make me more like them than Eric knew, I wouldn't shy away from my chosen path.

Never again would I turn a blind eye. I was all in.

And my new mindset came in handy when Eric moved on to cutting ribbons of flesh away from Freyda's body. Instead of being grossed out, I was enthralled, watching like a fascinated pupil as he skillfully fileted her body without so much as nicking the tendons underneath.

I wondered how well he'd do carving a Thanksgiving turkey.

When there was no more skin left to be fileted, other than her scorched letter 'R', he began cutting away the muscles. His attention to detail was so meticulous, he hadn't uttered another word once the last little piggy had gone wee wee wee all the way home. Her pained screams and flailing body were of no consequence to him and he continued to work like Michelangelo sculpting a Mengele masterpiece.

His tool of choice was steel. I assumed because silver would've cauterized the wounds. Eventually she'd shouted herself hoarse, so our ears were spared from her wailing and I learned vampires could live without the majority of their internal organs.

The majority of hers sat in a pile off to the side of Eric's feet.

When he finally stood back and assessed his work, he seemed satisfied and tossed the blade down onto the table. Picking up a large syringe, he dipped the needle into what looked like a bottle of liquid silver and filled it with the shiny liquid. He'd left her eyes intact, so she was able to see what was coming, and given the fright that shone out of them I could only assume this wasn't the way she'd hoped to go.

Apparently a stake to the heart was too quick for Eric.

He slowly pressed the needle into her heart and gradually pushed its contents into her. Because the majority of her flesh was exposed, it was easy to see Eric had left her major arteries intact. The silver pumped through her veins, turning them black as they burned their way through her body, before traveling all the way back up to her heart.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Refused to blink and possibly miss seeing the finale. Her entire body seized, forcing her to bear even more weight on her broken legs, and her mouth opened in a silent scream as wide as her horrified eyes.

And then she slumped.

Her blackened veins turned to ash and began to quickly flake away, with the rest of her body charring and doing the same. It was like watching a fast moving forest fire without the flames.

And without the same sense of dread one might feel for any lives lost.

The pillar of ash left behind wasn't much different than the pillar of salt Lot's wife became. But like Lot's wife, Freyda should have heeded the warning.

Eric simply stared down at what was left of his tormentor. He didn't twitch. Didn't take a breath because he didn't need to. Didn't blink. Without a fully formed blood bond, I had no idea of what he was feeling. No guess as to what he was thinking, but considering he was just standing there and not trying to initiate sexy times with me, I had to assume he was still processing it all.

He was the unofficial king of four states now. The last I'd heard, he didn't want to be king of even one, so I was sure that was weighing heavily on his mind.

Maybe he thought he would be called before the council – like Sophie-Anne when she'd killed Threadgill – unaware that my claim on him negated any contract he once agreed to.

I'd told him I loved him. I'd told him I was and would always be his. I'd forced the start of another blood bond on him, but he'd initiated the second exchange. It may have taken me a year to get my head out of my ass, but I was back in his life now. For how long, only he could say.

I wished he would say something.

But Eric had always been the silent type, so I didn't expect him to suddenly open up and share his every wish or worry with me. He would need time. Something I now had an abundance of, so I left him to his thoughts and left the room to go in search of a shower.

All the while wishing he had said *something*.

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## Chapter 9: Chapter 9 - Feel Again

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### Chapter 9 – Feel Again

#### EPOV

"Enter," I called out, not needing to ask who was knocking on the door.

I could *feel* who was on the other side.

And similar to her telepathy, it was both a gift and a curse.

Sookie entered the room and shut the door behind her before coming to stand before me, now looking much more like the woman I remembered. The shyness she wore was just as real as my oversized t-shirt covering her body and the residual moisture on her skin and hair, left over from her shower. And while I now knew her to be real and not a figment of my imagination, it didn't make the circumstance any less surreal.

Freyda was finally dead, as was de Castro. Felling two monarchs who ruled four states in one night could be cumbersome were it not for the fact I was only interested in one of them. Stan Davis was happy to take both Nevada and Oklahoma off of my hands and Russell Edgington accepted Arkansas after a fair amount of eye rolling. I didn't want the added headache the extra territories would've brought with them, but having my own state bordered on all sides by allies was a boon in and of itself.

But was it really my own?

Sookie may have looked the same, but I knew looks could be deceiving. From the moment I'd laid eyes on her I had noticed the differences and sharing blood with her twice, only strengthened that fact. The bloodlust I felt coming from her, both when she ended de Castro and when she had her own turn at ruining Freyda's last night on earth, was something I never would've guessed she'd been capable of. Not once did she grimace. Not once did she feel any amount of guilt or horror.

Not once did she react in any way I had come to expect in all of the time I had known her.

Instead of bolstering my hope something had indeed changed for the better, it only made me more cautious.

Her blood was to blame. I was sure of it. Not only was it sweeter, but so was her scent. And because she carried Brigant blood in her veins, I assumed Niall had fairy spelled her in some way. It must have given her the ability to shoot fire from her hands in order to protect herself from the danger she'd walked into. But at her behest or not, it made no difference if the affects were to wear off and I'd be left with more of the same.

Sookie *Stackhouse* in place of Sookie *Brigant*.

It was the mindset I was concerned with. Not the name that went with it.

But if she had truly accepted her supernatural pedigree, I needed to know to what degree. As a royal born by blood her station would rise above my own even as a king. I would be bound to abide by her wishes, no matter what.

And as I had once confided in her, I did not like being overseen.

It was no less true now that I was a king than when I was a sheriff.

Thanks to our recent blood exchanges, I could feel her hesitancy as if it were my own. Hell, perhaps it *was* my own, simply made stronger by the addition of hers. And like two sides of the same coin, we each steeled our nerves and asked in unison, "Are you ready to talk?"

She chuckled out of nervousness, while I merely watched, unable to return her mirth when I had a feeling whatever was to come next would be the defining factor of our future.

Together or apart.

It took a year for my hopes to have been realized. I wouldn't be duped into believing they would all come true in a single night.

"You first," I entreated. She'd come all this way. She'd freed me from my prison sentence and declared her love for me. And yet still, quite frankly, I needed a complete dissertation – not the bullet points – on what that meant. I needed to scour the fine print and would assume nothing.

There could be no room left for doubt.

A single year had never felt so long in my existence. Even when I was a newborn held captive by Ocella, the pain I'd felt over the separation from my family was nothing compared to the pain I'd felt being apart from her. I'd let my anger take over initially and attempted to erase her from my mind. Rubbing her from my memories by rubbing myself against other warm bodies, trying to find any amount of pleasure where it turned out none could be found. In the short time she'd been a part of my life, she had changed me in ways I had no way of knowing until she was gone. Like an amputee still felt an itch in their missing limb, so too had I felt her long after she'd broken our first blood bond.

She'd left me numb to everything but her.

But as soon as she was before me once again, that numbness fell away. It started out a tingle just underneath my skin. Grew into a figurative beat from my undead heart. Once the pulse of her blood once again pulsed through my veins, just as mine now flowed through hers, with her – because of her – I felt whole again.

I both hated and loved her for it.

Because with her – *because of her* – I would be held captive once again, only this time by the fist-sized organ pumping her life's elixir through her veins. I knew even if we parted on this night, never to lay eyes on one another again, I would still be held prisoner.

To her existence. Her mortality.

I was screwed either way.

"Where should I start?" she finally offered.

"The shifter," my mouth responded without my brain's consent. I had a million things to contend with. The council to worry about and a debt now owed to the Fae to repay. I had yet to establish my rule over a state I still didn't want and my first thought was to ask about the man she'd chosen over me.

Petty? Perhaps.

Just call me Tom.

My little blond heartbreaker grimaced as she took a deep breath and opened with, "It was a mistake."

Choosing him over me? Kicking him out? Coming for me?

The ambiguousness of her reply made my fists clench. I hated unknowns.

And I hated hanging on her next words even more.

"I panicked," she began. "When I saw Sam dying, I panicked and didn't think things through when I used the Cluviel Dor to save him. I didn't understand everything that was happening with Freyda. I didn't know you couldn't just say no to her. And after I'd used it on Sam, the magic of the Cluviel Dor made me feel things for him that weren't real. They weren't *my* feelings. I've always loved Sam as my friend, but it made me feel *more* for him than what was real. And I was so hurt by everything that happened between us, I didn't care. Not at the time. I told myself he was a safe option. He was – *is* – a good man and has done his best to stay out of the supernatural world. I thought he could give me the life I thought I always wanted. Marriage and children. A normal life."



My jaw clenched hearing her confession. How often had I heard her question her own feelings for me due to our blood bond? How often had I had to answer for her imagined musings I'd somehow manipulated her with it?

*She* was the manipulator and a hypocrite to boot.

But it was the latter part of her explanation that made my heart clench. Marriage, I could give her. Some states allowed for it now, however I would always be a part of the supernatural world. And children and a normal life?

She may as well have asked me for a pet unicorn. One of those would be easier to be had.

Still stuck in my pettiness, my mouth had free reign over my common sense and spat out, "I take it *doggy style* wasn't getting the job done then?"

I hated the thought of her giving herself over to anyone but me. Irrational – I could admit – but true nonetheless.

However the last thing I wanted was to fight – *again* – but before I could take the words back or issue an apology, she surprised me by replying, "Honestly? It was like two seals slapping together. But it – *all of it* – was just one big lie. One I was taught by my Gran to be true and grew up believing. And once she was gone, I took over and kept telling myself it was the truth. But the fact is I was never normal. My Gran saw to that well before I was ever born and then kept that truth from me for my entire life. I love her and I'll always be grateful she took me and Jason in as kids, but I'm angry at her for keeping my heritage a secret. I'm angry she let me grow up thinking I was a freak when she'd had the answers all along. I'm angry she chose keeping her secrets over giving me the peace of mind sharing her secrets would have given me. I always thought I wanted to be just like her when I grew up, but the sad truth is I don't want to be anything like her. She cheated on her husband so she could have children he worked himself to the bone to raise as his own. They could've adopted. She could've kept her vows and raised children who needed a home, but she chose her own selfish need to procreate over keeping her marriage sacrosanct. I don't need a husband. I don't need a white picket fence and little Jimmy or Molly tugging on my apron strings to validate my existence. If I can't be comfortable in my own skin, no amount of a 1950's June Cleaver emulation is going to do that for me. And quite frankly, I was never a *normal* human. That's something *normal* humans have made perfectly clear to me for as long as I can remember. But that's okay too because I've finally embraced who I truly am and I actually like who that is."

With every impossible word spoken from her lips, my blood in her veins loomed menacingly over her emotions. Holding a magnifying glass in one hand, the other pistol whipped our blood tie in search of the truth, fact checking her words and finding nothing but verity in her declaration.

Still hesitant to let go of my skepticism – still waiting for the other shoe to drop – I cautiously asked, "And who are you?"

Were her fireball blasting hands and blistering rage nothing but enchanted blustering? Fairy smoke and mirrors just to free me from my yearlong nightmare because she'd finally come to realize every argument we'd ever had could be whittled down to the simple truth that we loved one another and were both too stubborn to admit it? Did she expect we would be able to return to a less hostile version of our previous relationship – something that had been too distant for my tastes even then – or had she truly accepted her royal station and – regardless of her fairy drawn carriage turning back into a pumpkin at the midnight hour – did she expect me to retain mine as her Royal Consort?

Her timid smile made my insides warm, so I threw a cold blanket over it trying to snuff out the embers before they could turn into a raging fire.

"I am Sookie Brigant, Princess of the Sky Fae." She curtsied – looking simultaneously ridiculous and ridiculously sexy wearing nothing but my oversized t-shirt – and added, "Nice to meet you *King Northman*."

Hearing my new title, my balls tightened from the invisible noose the state of Louisiana had become, but I didn't care about any of that right now and only said, "I know what comes with my new title, but I am still unsure what exactly comes with yours."

"Besides fairy storm troopers?" she grinned. I fought my lips' want to return it and seeing my still blank expression, she sobered up and said, "It means nothing more than what I said. Niall oversees the Faery Realm and as his direct descendant, I had very distant rights to his throne. Ones I've already abdicated. I may not believe myself to be fully human any longer, but I know I'm not fully Fae either and have no desire to rule anything." Locking her gaze onto my own, she added, "Or *anyone*."

She took several steps towards me, bringing her closer and reminding me her scent was sweeter than I remembered it being, as she explained, "I used my birthright to get you out from under Freyda's thumb. But Eric, that's *all* it means. You are a born leader. You've always been the type of man who thrives on being in charge and I would never use a pedigree – one I'm not so sure I even deserve – to lord over you. I came for you because I love you. I took the steps necessary to make that happen not just for you, but for me as well. I'm done with trying to force my square fairy peg into the round human hole. I was never truly one of them and I'll likely never be one of you. I am just me and I'm perfectly happy with that."

I assumed the steps she'd spoken of were magical ones, but my insides twisted hearing her say she *still* had an aversion to being turned. The day would one day come where I would *still* be forced to lose her. Forced to go on for an eternity without her and my anger got the better of me when I spat back, "Then why are you here? Declaring your love for me and starting another blood bond, when at most we'll have another fifty or sixty years together where I'm forced to watch you wither away and die!"

I ignored the fact the words I'd spoken made it seem like our spending those fifty or sixty years together was a given. But then I'd always been susceptible to ignoring a lot of things where Sookie was concerned.

Her feet carried her forward, like she could feel my heart reaching out and pulling her closer, when she took the seat beside me and said, "I am here because I love you. I started another blood bond because I've missed it. I've missed *you* more than I have words for, but I knew better than to expect you to believe anything I said. I knew you would need to *feel* what I feel to be certain."

She shifted in her seat and seemed to steel herself as she further explained, "When I asked Niall to help me get you back he told me there was only one way for that to happen. There was only one way where no one could challenge our connection to one another ever again. But to do it, there would be consequences. He told me if I chose to go ahead with it, it would change me at my core in ways that no amount of magic could ever undo. There would be no going back for me." Her eyes softened once more as she nearly whispered, "But there wasn't much left of me when you were gone anyways."

I hated hearing the hurt in her voice. I hated how it affected me still, knowing it would always affect me. Knowing I would hear her voice for all of eternity, long after she was gone. But before I could tell her to just spit it out already, she went on to say, "He took me back into the Fae Realm with him. I was born with the essential spark, but I needed to spend time in their world in order for it to fully charge. By doing so I became more fairy than human. A week there turned out to be a month here, but that was long enough for it to work. I'll never be as powerful as a full fairy, but as you might have noticed earlier, telepathy isn't the only gift I now have thanks to the demon blood in me. I can't be sure if it's my boosted spark or I'm just more ornery now that the blinders are off, but I don't feel the same as I once did. I still care about a lot of the same things and the same people, but it's my first night back in this world, so I don't know if it'll hold out. All I know is when we arrived here and I saw *her* – when I saw in her thoughts what she'd done to you – there isn't enough blood she could've ever shed that would've satisfied me. At one time that would've scared me, but now it doesn't. I'm embracing the new me. I'm as fairy as I'll ever be, but I am what I am and I'm okay with that. And – for obvious reasons – there are no other fairy/vampire bonded couples that Niall knows of. If we were to complete a bond, he thinks new gifts might emerge or things could stay exactly the same. I'm okay with that too. But even without bonding – if I never had another drop of your blood – he estimates I could live for another couple of hundred years or so. If I go back into the Fae Realm every now and again to recharge, I could live even longer. If I were to add to that the blood of a powerful vampire, he thinks it would extend my lifetime even more. As it stands now, I could do neither and I won't age at all for another seventy or eighty years."

My mind whirled with everything she'd just said and her hand hesitantly reached out towards my own before she seemed to think better of it and pulled it back, as she added, "I have no expectations of you Eric. I want to be with you, but I knew going into this that you might not want me anymore. Your feelings for me could have changed and you might not forgive me for the way I've acted in the past. I can't say that I would blame you, but I want you to know I *am* sorry for the way I treated you. I'm sorry for holding you to a higher standard than anyone else in my life. I'm sorry for doubting you. I'm sorry for always being suspicious of you and for allowing that suspicion to destroy our bond. I'm sorry I didn't try to understand you and instead tried to force you into the role of how a human boyfriend should act. I'm sorry I didn't realize at the time, every highhanded tactic you had to make with me was to keep me safe, even when it made me your weakness. I'm sorry it took me a year to figure it all out and try to make amends."

I've failed you in nearly every way possible and if you choose to go on without me, then I'll have a couple of hundred years to pay my penance. Fitting, considering you willingly put up an additional one hundred of yours to keep me safe. Every day since the night you saved me from Longshadow was a gift. I see that now. And every day forward from here on out is the same. It's a gift I hope to share with you, but if you choose not to, I will survive that too."

Her assertion she would survive without me was the only time I felt her emotions falter. She wasn't so sure of her words and her own uncertainty decimated my own, as her hand once again reached for mine. This time she didn't hesitate to entwine her fingers with mine and she looked at me with tears welling in her eyes and said, "I love you Eric, enough to set you free. Not just from Freyda or Felipe, but from me. All you have to do is say the word and I'll release you from our pledge. You'll be free to do whatever you want, with whomever you want."

Taking a deep breath and visibly swallowing the lump in her throat, she softly added, "But before you kick me to the curb, let me say thank you. For everything you've done for me, even when I fought you tooth and nail because of it. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

It was all too much for my mind to wrap around.

She would live for centuries? Breathing and warm and unchanged?

She wouldn't force me into answering to her higher station as a royal born by blood?

She would truly be mine?

Her soliloquy was spoken as a swan song. A long goodbye, I knew because I could feel her hesitancy stemmed from her certainty I would not forgive her. That I would not believe her words, not knowing with every one spoken, a link on the chains surrounding my heart pulled open until the strain was too great. When they broke free, scattering the invisible shrapnel throughout my body, I gasped aloud from the acuity of the sensations coursing through me.

Relief. Joy.

Love.

Without a fully formed bond, she couldn't feel the affect she had on me. She couldn't tell that from her words, my entire body was alight with awareness. Aware she was close by. Now struggling to contain the internal uproar taking place just beneath the surface, my body was furious my mind hadn't allowed me to close the distance between us.

Too busy marveling over the fact she was giving *me* the power to choose *her*.

Cognizant of the fact she was *thisclose* to being mine completely.

Never in my wildest dreams did I believe we would actually be face to face once more. Well, maybe in my *wildest* dreams, but not once had I imagined a scenario where the possibilities were endless.

The possibility of a near eternity together where neither one of us had to give up the beating of her heart. The warmth of her body. The light from within her.

But I couldn't let her take the sole blame for our past failings. Before her recent revelations, I'd known all along Sookie believed herself to be human and had a certain expectation when it came to relationships. I'd pretended to be human for much longer than I'd lived as one, so I'd known what would be envisaged by her ideals. But I too had failed her in that respect, so I offered, "I should have done more to show you what you meant to me. Told you with both my words and actions how much I cared for you. Loved you. I should have kept you informed of what I was going through instead of expecting you to blindly accept whatever scraps of information I thought prudent to share with you. I'd been so busy trying to figure a way out of Ocella's deal with Oklahoma, I didn't give enough thought to how you would perceive it. I should not have left you that night before our public divorce without explaining to you in blunt terms what would be happening the next night and what it all really meant. In my desperation to keep you, I insulted you with my offer to hide you as my mistress. I never purposely tried to hurt you and yet that was all I could seem to do towards the end. I wanted to protect you from the harsh realities of my world and yet in the end you were the one who ultimately came to rescue me. I am not sure that I deserve your love, but I will not reject it. Simply, I cannot."

No longer able to withstand the mere inches still separating us, I used our entwined hands to pull her into my arms where she would stay for hundreds of years to come. Her body instantly melted into mine and my next words fell from my lips, pressed against her own, and into her mouth as I revealed, "I love you Sookie Stackhouse. I always have and I always will."

Her heart beat wildly in her chest and her lips screwed up into a smile, belying her chastising eyes, as she teasingly corrected me with, "It's *Brigant*. Have you even heard a single word I've said?"

Oh, I heard them alright. Each and every one of them.

And each and every one of them had burned up like tiny ants underneath my magnifying glass, pistol whipped and blood tie verified.

"Why don't we split the difference and just make it Northman?"

My facial expression might have been amused at her impression of a deer in the headlights, but internally I was as frozen as her shocked expression, waiting for her response.

"Did...did you just ask me to *marry* you?" she whispered disbelievingly.

I couldn't blame her. I was feeling a healthy dose of disbelief myself.

My question had been off the cuff. Obviously, I had no ring to offer her. I doubted Freyda's incisor adorning her hand would be welcome. Per usual, my mouth had a mind of its own when it came to speaking to Sookie. And while I'd once told her our marriage was the only one that mattered to me, I'd known our pledge by the knife wasn't the type of ceremony she'd dreamed of one day having as a child. I had failed her in that aspect, however I was both ready and willing to rectify the error of my ways.

But seeing she was still waiting on *my* affirmation that yes, I had indeed proposed marriage – no matter how uncharacteristic it seemed coming from me – I gently pecked each of her still gaping lips with my own and smirked, "What? Is the concept *too human* for you now?"

Vampire King. Fairy Princess.

What-the-fuck-ever.

Anyone who'd witnessed her powerful display tonight would think me a fool if I *didn't* tie myself to her in every way. Anyone who questioned or ridiculed our *human* bonding ceremony would find out just how inhuman we could be. Anyone who'd ever spent five minutes in her presence would wonder why I'd taken more than five minutes to make her mine.

My immobile lungs took in an unneeded breath of air that suddenly felt very necessary when her disbelief gave way to pure happiness. Her eyes sparkled with joy as she said, "Yes. Yes, I will marry mmpff..."

Sadly, her final word was cut off by my insistent mouth claiming her own. A mind of its own, remember? But – for once – I didn't doubt that she was choosing me. For her own. For all of eternity.

She was mine as I was hers.

At fucking last.

The room we were in was the same one I had been using at the palace that wasn't the dungeon. The dead bitch's private chambers were more luxurious of course, but they smelled like infected cunt.

Stan would have to fumigate.

But my soon-to-be-former room was currently filling with the scent of arousal, coming from the as-fairy-as-she'll-ever-be in my arms. It was narcotizing and my head swam with both her natural aroma and the certainty that I would have her with me for centuries to come.

So I wanted to celebrate by making *her* cum.

I had her on the bed and on her back before she could gasp, "What the fae?" My shirt, covering her body, was turned into ribbons next – much like the hostess of our evening – and like a moth to a flame, my eyes moved down to where my hands held her other gifts.

Telepathy. Flamethrower hands. Neither could compare to the bountiful endowments I currently held in each of my own.

It had been so long. Too long and yet I couldn't make myself go any faster. I wanted to savor each and every moment we had together. As she had said, every one of them was a gift. One I now knew better than to squander. So even though I had every intention of fast and furious fucking in our future – it had its own merits – for now I took my time.

Her back arched into my palms, desperate for more than the gentle fondling I had been doling out. So when I slowed down my ministrations even more, I could feel the fast rise of her own fury over me fucking with her in ways that didn't involve fucking, before she whimpered out a pleading, "Eric..."

Music to my fucking ears.

"Say it again, lover," I softly demanded, giving her something else to whimper about as my mouth descended on her golden skin. I may have whimpered myself – not that I would ever admit to it – because even the taste of her skin had become sweeter as well. While I wondered over the changes she had gone through, I pulled the light pink tip in front of me in between my lips and she cried out my name once more. Both pleading and demanding.

Some things never changed, but I was okay with that too.

After paying sufficient homage to one, I moved over to the other before it could become jealous. Only an unbidden image of the dog slapping against my lover in an attempt to make seal pups with her entered my thoughts and suddenly it was I who became jealous.

Covering her body with my own like a cold green blanket, even though I could smell no other on her skin but me, I ripped the flimsy lounge pants from my body and rubbed the whole of me against the whole of her.

And in the process, rubbed the whole of me against the hole of her.

Now coated in her arousal, my cock kept trying to plug that leak, but I forced myself to hold still and attempted to rid myself of the invidious images invading my head. Even without a fully formed bond to know I was in the midst of planning Louisiana's very first seal hunt, Sookie wrapped herself around me completely and pulled me down even further into her body, with my head moving into the space between her head and shoulder that was meant only for me.

A simple hug and I was once again putty in her hands.

Perhaps I could muster up some outrage over my missing man card later.

Warmth flooded through her and into me, while a contented sigh left her lips, and she used those same hands to travel the length of my back before working their way in between our two bodies. She left one over my heart and used the other to grip the hair at the back of my head and pulled, repeating my oft used request of her as she bade, "Look at me lover."

Unable to deny her anything – certainly not this – I stared into her eyes and wondered what she planned to do. Worried for a split second she'd somehow overheard my murderous premeditation from a moment earlier – remembering her confession of hearing the cunt's thoughts – my eyes flicked down to her hand on my chest, wondering if I was about to get zapped. Instead, she clucked her tongue and gave my hair another tug, so that when my eyes once again met hers, I could see the truth in them when she said, "I love you Eric. It's always been you and there will never be anyone but you for me."

Before I could do or say anything else, my dexterous lover shifted her hips and the tip of my cock came to rest just inside of her. She may have gasped. It was difficult to tell over the sound of my own sharp inhale, but always full of surprises, I was lost to her – in her – the moment she whispered against my lips, "*This is best. This is right.*"

I sank into her depths as I had on that night so long ago. A night that had also begun with thoughts of her ex-lovers and things left unspoken between us. I'd meant the words spoken to her then, just as I knew she meant the ones spoken to me now. But now, though, there were no doubts. There was nothing left unsaid. Nothing left between us with the exception of one thing.

She gasped again – in surprise this time – when I flipped us over so that she was on top. Her body continued to move atop my own without missing a single stride and I took a few moments to merely enjoy watching her seek out her own pleasure, sharing it with me in the process. Not wanting it to end, I kept my hands on her hips to keep her pace slow. Unhurried.

The impending dawn could fuck off because I was being loved by my very own sun.

She obliged me for a while and kept her eyes locked onto my own, knowing I liked seeing her come undone, until I trailed my hand across her body. Working her small bundle of nerves with my thumb, her movements grew increasingly erratic and her eyes lost the battle, rolling into the back of her head as she sought out her release. It was impossible to not lose myself with her – because of her – and I happily fell victim to her seduction.

The one thing still between us – the one thing still left unspoken – I'd already pushed aside when I'd pushed my body underneath hers.

Completing our blood bond.

I had no doubts it would happen. There just hadn't been the time to discuss it. Not when I had so many other important things to ascertain.

Like the fact the shifter couldn't fuck my lover without the sound of Morgan Freeman's voice narrating their mating ritual for National Geographic.



But Sookie's body was for no one else but me now, so I sat up, intent on giving her an experience in which she would only hear her God. Pulling her body down onto mine, I thrust upwards into hers and her head fell back, with her hair falling in waves and tickling the tops of my thighs. Her entire body glistened with sweat and the room reeked of sex. Her arousal coated my balls and thighs and the only disappointment to be had was that I couldn't bathe myself in it. I was quickly falling down her fairy hole and just as I was about to flip her onto her back and remind her of her promise to nail my ass, while I nailed hers into the bed, Sookie threw herself forward and plastered her body against my front. Grinding her hips down on top of my own, she continued to work us both into a frenzy, when suddenly her blunt teeth were scraping the side of my neck. I could feel her slight hesitation, just as I felt her want to bite, but I suspected it was because she didn't want to assume.

Silly girl.

I gripped the back of her head in one hand and her ass in the other. At the rate I was working her body against my own, she would need my blood for more than just a bond, but she didn't seem to mind, so neither did I. I dipped my tongue into the hollow of her collarbone, moaning as soon as the sweetness hit my palate, and blazed a trail along her clavicle. Molesting her carotid with my tongue, I felt the crescent shaped moons her fingernails were pressing into my back. She was also pressing my resolve to not explode prematurely, so I moved on to explore the shell of her ear before softly whispering into it, "Bite me, Sookie. Drink me in and be mine in every way."

Silly me.

Sookie had never been one to take orders well. She often hemmed. She excelled at hawing. So it was a good thing my mouth was already hovering over her neck because when her teeth sunk into my own, my fangs automatically sank into hers. I'd had no choice. No will or power to stop them or myself and I could only hope she would somehow survive the experience by sustaining her life on the torrent of cum I was shooting into her body because I was surely draining equal amounts of blood from hers.

Our bond exploded, just like our bodies, and like a long lost friend, I felt that part of her settle back into her rightful place inside of me. My eyes rimmed with bloody tears, feeling suddenly overwhelmed. The vestiges of the last year were slowly – but surely – sloughing away, leaving behind a sense of being reborn. I was left humbled and awed at all that had been changed.

Me.

Sookie.

It was no longer a dream. No longer a fantasy. I'd finally found my sanctuary in her arms.

I eventually pulled away and gently cleaned the already healing marks from my bite on her skin, feeling Sookie do the same. And when she finally looked back at me, seeing the bloody tear I could feel trailing down the side of my face, she swept it away onto her fingertip.

There was another time – another place – when she had done the same thing. But back then she'd put that same tear into my mouth and felt a bitter dose of resentment as she did it. This time she popped it into her own mouth before leaning forward and lovingly cleaning the tracks away with peppered kisses across my face. She likely was just as confused at feeling my tumultuous emotions as I was because she softly implored, "I love you Eric, with all that I am. And I'm sorry it took all of this happening for me to realize it, but I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

My vampiric instincts told me the sun was now up, but I could only guess the chaotic events of the night and my now riotous emotions were keeping me awake. However, that didn't negate my need to rest and Sookie was feeling just as weary, so I pulled her down onto the bed with me and when she was snuggled against my chest, I attempted to return us to a more lighthearted mood and teased, "Not that you need to, but just *how* do you plan on making it up to me? Something sheer and lacy, perhaps?"

"Is that all it would take?" she snorted. Hearing the inelegant sound offered me more comfort than any words she could've said, but still she tried by adding, "I offer you the world and you ask for Victoria's Secret?"

Her head jostled with my shrug, so I took advantage of it and kissed her crown before saying, "You are my world. You are here. You are mine. There is nothing else that I need or want."

Truer words had never been spoken and her heart warmed hearing my adoring confession. A much nicer sensation than the guarded and wary reaction I'd felt from her in the past.

I could get used to it.

"You're sure, now?" she yawned. "This is a limited time offer only good for the next century."

*My heart* warmed then, hearing her speak in terms of centuries together and not decades, so I didn't sound as convincing when I said, "You are a horrible negotiator, lover. You're supposed to low ball me to start off with. Not offer me a hundred year penance when you haven't even been alive for thirty."

Something else warmed within me when her hand trailed lower down my body and she cupped my balls – assuring me they *were* still there despite my starry-eyed state – before coming back up to stroke the evident effect she had on me. She nibbled my chest and pulled at my arm until I was on top of her once more. Jostling until her hips were in position, she placed me at her entrance and feigned innocently, "I don't have any balls, so you'll have to share yours with me."

I laughed. Long and hard.

Sookie had balls that rivaled Paul Bunyan's Babe the Blue Ox.

I would know. Pam had dragged me to see the ridiculous statue when I'd once visited her in Minnesota.

Her face lit up in that special way I'd remembered. The innocent happiness she would always emote whenever she managed to make me laugh. It made her feel proud.

Something so simple simply made me love her even more.

Thrusting into her all at once, I swallowed her moan with my mouth and paused to give her the time to adjust as I said, "All that I am, lover. All that I have. It is yours for the taking."

Wiggling her hips once more, signaling me to begin moving, she pulled me down for another kiss and smiled not so innocently, "As I am yours, Eric." Lightly biting my lower lip, she released it with a pop and challenged, "So take me."

And I did. Well into the late morning hours.

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## Chapter 10: Epilogue - I Belong To You

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### Epilogue – I Belong To You

#### **SPOV**

I could feel Eric's growing excitement – and relief – the closer I got to Fangtasia. We'd returned to Louisiana the night after we'd completed our bond months earlier and hadn't spent more than a few hours apart at all in that time. But I'd had a few errands to run, so I'd left while the sun was still up and hadn't seen him since that morning.

He lived with me now. Niall had popped Pam and Karin back to Shreveport while Eric and I were...reuniting, and they'd had the foresight to go ahead and make the farmhouse light tight before we got back. At one time I would've accused them of being highhanded, like some Makers I knew. But I had a different view of the world now that my head was out of my ass and instead I'd gratefully hugged them both when we found them waiting for us when we'd returned.

They were looking at me pretty gratefully too, so we were even.

Eric and I were still blissfully unaware of anything but our own happiness at being together again, but there had been an awkward moment that night when Sam showed up unexpectedly. I hadn't warned anyone I would be away for a while, so my month long disappearance had raised a few eyebrows. Karin had told Sam I'd gone away on a trip, but he hadn't believed her, believing instead that I had once again been snatched up by the evil Supes I'd been a magnet for.

Instead Sam had been the one to be snatched up by a jealous bonded vampire when he blew through the front door without knocking first.

And then he got knocked around a bit by a not-so-jolly green giant.

At one time I would have thrown myself into the fray without giving a second's thought to my own safety to try and stop them, but I wasn't that same dumbass anymore. I didn't want either one of them to hurt the other – neither one deserved an ass whoopin', but I knew they had their own issues they needed to work out – so I left them to it and went and took a nice long bath instead.

I knew Sam would calm down once he got a few licks in and even though Eric could easily kill him, I knew he wouldn't.

Like Eric had said, he would never purposely hurt me.

And he knew Sam's death would hurt me, so I wasn't surprised to find them both standing there, a little worse for wear, staring at me with shocked looks on their faces – and wild hair and blood stained clothes – when I eventually came out of the bathroom in my robe.

"Feel better?" I asked and as soon as they each nodded, I gestured to the now trashed living room and said, "Good. Now clean this mess up."

And I had a good long laugh over my cup of coffee watching Eric trying to work a broom again.

Some things never changed.

The whole time they worked at cleaning up the mess from *their reunion*, the tension in the air hadn't dissipated at all. So once everything was squared away, all I had to do was look at Eric and push my need for him to understand, for him to leave the room so I could speak with Sam alone. I knew he could hear our conversation from any room in the house, but Sam deserved at least the appearance of having some privacy for what would come next.

He'd kept a lock on his thoughts from the moment I'd left the bathroom, so I only had his expression to work with. And knowing he could smell Eric's blood in me – among other things – I pulled up my big girl panties and admitted, "I love him Sam. I never stopped loving him, even though I denied it to myself the whole time he was gone. I'm sorry if that hurts you."

Running his hands through his hair, he didn't look so much hurt over hearing I'd been in love with another man the entire time we were together as much as he was resigned when he said, "You're bonded to him. Again."

It wasn't a question. It wasn't an accusation. It was a statement of fact, so I didn't respond.

"He loves you," he offered quietly when the silence in the room had grown uncomfortable.

Also not a question, but I replied anyway and answered, "More than anything."

I could feel Eric's pride, love, and affection coming from him at hearing my words. So much that if I hadn't already been sitting down, my knees would've buckled.

Our bond – while missed – would take some getting used to again.

I pushed my own love back at him while I waited for Sam to say something. To say I was surprised would be an understatement when he finally said, "Well then I'm happy for you. You deserve it Chere. You deserve to be happy."

But it shouldn't have surprised me, really. Sam had always been a good man and an even better friend to me. It was what helped me believe we could maybe be more to one another once upon a time, but while he could be charming, there could only ever be one Prince Charming in my fairytale and he wasn't Sam.

"So do you, you know," I smiled through my tears and got up to hug him. "You deserve to be happy too."

I would always love Sam. I could just never love him like I loved Eric.

And while I wouldn't call them friendly, they were at least able to be civil to one another now. However having a bromance blossom between the two of them just wasn't in the cards and I was okay with that too.

But that was our last free night for the next several weeks. Eric needed to establish his rule over Louisiana – something he did with a sense of dread. Kind of like going to the gynecologist – you didn't look forward to it, but you knew it had to be done. But the transition had gone a lot smoother than when de Castro had taken over. Felipe had ruled through fear with a heavy hand and while Eric was certainly no pushover, he didn't push back unless someone gave him a reason to. He valued honor and loyalty above everything and most of the vampires who were left in the state had known him when he was a Sheriff. Most of them even seemed relieved to have him back and when it had become clear there wouldn't be anyone challenging him for the throne, he promptly abdicated his rule to Karin.

She had been traveling for centuries, but she'd come to like Louisiana and was ready to put down roots. With her sister as one of her Sheriffs and her thousand year old maker (and his fairy sidekick) residing in her territory, anyone would be a fool to attack her.

We protected what was ours. Viciously.

Anyone who doubted that would merely have to look at the fang dangling from the platinum chain around her neck to know. But with Stan Davis bordering one side and Russell Edgington ruling the other two, we were left in peace.

Finally.

Eric and I were married in a small ceremony right in our backyard in late September. He'd put a ring on my finger the night we'd arrived at the palace in New Orleans, but we waited until the dust settled to plan the wedding. The only people who were invited were the only ones we really cared about. Pam was my Maid of Honor and Karin stood up for Eric. My brother was there with

his wife and Mr. C officiated the ceremony, but I was surprised when Niall had shown up to give me away. I shouldn't have been though.

He'd proven to me beyond a shadow of doubt he was my family and in my corner.

As he walked me down the aisle towards my future, he leaned down and whispered, "Do you remember when I told you, you were meant for great things?" When I nodded, recalling those words spoken to me so long ago, he glanced over at an exultant looking Eric watching our distance shorten with every step we took, and smiled, "Do you believe me now?"

"I do."

I'd been a fool not to see it all along. I'd been so stubborn in holding onto the belief that I could be normal. Have a normal life. I hadn't allowed myself to believe I could keep Eric *and* my heartbeat, but it was only when I finally accepted both who and what I was, that my dreams were made possible.

Besides, who would want a normal life when you could have an extraordinary one?

And I repeated those same two words only moments later, binding myself to Eric in every way possible and sealing my fate. The one I'd always been meant for, with the one I'd always been meant for.

We'd only just returned from our honeymoon a few days earlier. He promised to take me to see the Seven Wonders of the World, but we'd only hit two so far on our month long getaway. We had close to forever to see them all, so I was in no rush. We'd be leaving again in a few weeks to head for Eric's homeland where we would spend our first Christmas together as a married couple. I'd been shopping for thermals and mittens, but Eric was doing his damndest to convince me I didn't need anything more than my toothbrush.

My jar full of orgasms had been traded in for a barrel. I would have to upgrade to a silo soon, but it wasn't something I was going to complain about.

We still had our share of arguments. We were both still as pigheaded as the day was long, but now our fights weren't centered on whatever it was we were disagreeing about. It was more about seeing how long we could keep up the charade until we couldn't keep our clothes on.

No new gifts emerged after our bonding, unless you counted the fact Eric could stay up past sunrise. He couldn't go out in the sun – something we learned the hard way, with him reaching out into the sun's rays and me pouncing on him with a blanket when his hand had begun to smoke – but he could tolerate being in the shadows. He got to watch me through the window standing in the sunlight and then we both got to enjoy him basking in the scent and taste of it on my skin when I came inside.

Not a bad prize for runner up.

But what had shocked me the most was how much *I* hadn't changed. Yes, I was more fairy than human and yes, I could carry the title of the ultimate grill master until my dying day, But a large part of me was still the same girl who had been once been wonderstruck at finding out there was a whole other world where folklore and fact collided. The only difference now was I knew my place in it. I accepted the fact I was a part of both worlds and that I would always be.

A little of this and a little of that. That was me. A mutt.

And I was okay with that.

And just like I would never change, I no longer expected Eric to either. We made compromises, but we accepted who each of us were. I loved him at his most powerful and at his weakest, just like he loved me and all of the baggage I brought with me. We were a mess at times, but we untangled it all together.

Just like now. He was shooting his impatience at my delayed arrival through our bond, practically pushing my foot down on the accelerator with nothing more than his blood inside of me.

So I shot him back with my annoyance, practically screaming at him, *'I can't make the traffic light turn green any faster!'*

Like I'd said, I hadn't gotten any new fairy powers.

One of my errands had been a visit to Dr. Ludwig's. She'd made a request through Pam, asking for my help. There was a Were – a female, barely old enough to shift – who had been separated from the pack during her first run almost a month earlier. She'd come back the next day, but hadn't spoken a single word since and her parents were desperate to know what was wrong. There were no physical signs – no clues for them to work with – but Weres healed quickly and since she wasn't talking, Dr. Ludwig asked me to listen. Normally, I wouldn't have wanted to intrude on someone's private thoughts in such a way, but after speaking – and listening in – to her parents, I couldn't ignore their concern for their daughter. They were desperate to help her. They just didn't know how.

She'd sat there quietly, her body curled into a ball in one of the plastic chairs in the room, so I sat next to her, quietly listening. And then my stomach curled in on itself, hearing what was going through her head.

She'd been attacked. Raped by another pack member when she'd been separated from the group.

It brought back the memories of my own childhood trauma and I know I might have benefitted from having someone like me around for that experience alone. It had gone on much longer than it would have because I had to work up the courage to tell someone what my Uncle Bartlett had been doing to me. This girl could've been subjected to her attacker all over again at the next full moon if I hadn't been able to warn her parents, but now she didn't have to.

I offered the use of my other fairy power to her family before I left, but the experience – while traumatic for both sides involved – made me realize how much good I could do with my telepathy. When the FBI had been pursuing me after my display in Rhodes, I'd run for the figurative hills, afraid of what would happen to me. Scared at being permanently outed as not being normal. Frightened to admit even to myself that I would never be normal, but I wasn't. I knew that now and if I could embrace that now, then why shouldn't I use my gift to help others? I would never use it for something greed driven – like parking my ass in a casino – but if I could use it to help others who've been traumatized by not having to relive it by speaking of it, then why wouldn't I?

I had a feeling maybe this was one of those great things I was meant for too.

Eric internally chuffed at my rebuke, so I harrumphed at him in turn until he went the other route and began caressing me through our bond in ways that would have made me blush once upon a time.

But not now.

Now I enjoyed every feathery touch I felt on the inside and couldn't wait to feel them in person.

Pam was still running Fangtasia, like Eric had when he'd still been Sheriff, but she'd made us promise to visit there whenever we were in town. Not because she missed her Maker, so much as whenever he made an appearance, their profits were blacker than the walls of the club. So he was up on the dais sitting on his throne when I casually strolled through the door. Pretending I didn't notice him, I sauntered over to the bar and ordered a drink. Turning to lean my back against it with my glass in hand, I acted like I couldn't feel his eyes burning a path across my intentionally displayed cleavage and began scanning the room, filtering through the thoughts of the humans, while ignoring the brigade of women trying to goad my husband into biting them.

Among other things.

Eric's fidelity wasn't something I would ever question. If anything, I was still a bit awestruck by the strength of his devotion to me. It was similar to what I'd felt from him before everything had gone to hell in a hand basket, but it was different too.

Different in that neither one of us questioned our feelings for the other any longer.

There were times when I still felt like I didn't deserve it or him, but it wasn't like I was going to give him up. I'd learned my lesson and wouldn't be repeating that mistake, but perhaps it had been a mistake to ignore my bigheaded bonded because I felt when he'd hit his limit at being disregarded just as I felt his body pressed against my own.

"Why do you taunt me so?" he purred into my ear, rubbing his hands up and down my side.

My backside.



"What else do I have to do for the next century?" I asked and smiled, hearing his throaty chuckle merge with the vibration still rumbling through his chest.

"I can make you a list if you'd like," he offered. And feeling his writing instrument poking me through his pants, I didn't need a bond or to be a mind reader to know what was on his.

Dirty vampire.

But because Eric was still full of surprises, instead of trying to convince me to become reacquainted with his former office – which was what I'd expected – he pulled me out onto the dance floor. And for the next few hours he twirled me around it like we didn't have a care in the world.

And honestly? We didn't.

He'd known I always loved to dance and he was certainly no slouch as a partner, so it was no skin off my nose to bump and grind against him. Eric met each of my moves with ones of his own, but we both managed to resist the sadistic foreplay we were bestowing on the other.

And Pam could've rested completely safe from the sun's rays the following morning underneath the pile of money we made her that night.

But our resistance only lasted until we pulled up to the farmhouse. Eric had flown to Fangtasia, so we'd driven back together in my car, but one too many not-so-innocent double entendres on how well he could work a stick shift made for one frisky vampire.

Which made for more scraps of fabric for my collection of once upon a time dresses.

"You'd think you would have learned by now, not to taunt me," he leered when I gasped in mock outrage over my decimated dress.

Matching every step he made – backwards, forwards, side to side – I taunted, "You'd think you would have learned by now, I can be pretty thick."

My eyebrow went up in challenge. His waggled at me in return.

Then he was on me like white on rice, knocking me to the ground and talking over my fit of giggles saying, "I'll show you *thick*."

And boy, did he.

By the time we were done – although we were never *really* done – I could tell by the light in the sky the sun would be up soon. Eric felt it too because he wrapped me tighter in his arms before saying, "We should get inside."

"In a minute," I whispered, with my mind taking in everything. Everything over the past year – the past four years really – and everything the future held when it really hit me.

I was holding everything.

So I enjoyed my arms around him, the sense of him not just next to me, but within me. And if you were to ask me, I would confess that I no longer had any doubts Eric and I would be together, not just until Christmas, but for always. I couldn't imagine a future without him. He wouldn't turn away from me any more than I could turn away from him and no matter what the future held for us, it would be us who faced that future together. We were survivors and together we would find a way to flourish like the yard that still bloomed and grew around my family home. But it wasn't the house or the yard I was attached to any longer. No matter where I hung my hat, it would always be the man at my side that made wherever I was my home.

I'm Sookie Northman. I belong with him.

*The End*

Outtake – Have a Little Faith in Me

**EPOV**

"Mr. Northman? Sir? *Excuse me! Sir?*"

Sookie's flustered assistant continued to trail behind me, in spite of my blatant disregard, and sounded as though she was about to hyperventilate when she added, "I'm very sorry, but Mrs. Northman is *very* busy right now. If you would just have a seat, I'll let her know you're here."

I was half-tempted to drop my fangs and hiss in her direction. It had been quite a while since I'd had the occasion to act like an asshole, but knowing my darling wife would take umbrage, I ignored her human and let myself into my wife's office.

Busy or not, she was exhausted, but she wasn't the only one who was sick and tired. Thanks to our bond I was feeling the effects of her weariness too.

Stronger than ever – now in its seventh decade – I was certain if either one of us attempted to break our bond now, as Sookie had done once before, neither one of us would survive the experience.

Nor would I want to.

Blue on blue, our eyes locked the moment I shut her office door and she gave me a small smile, but continued to speak to her business associates and ignored me otherwise. I didn't take offense. I knew she was busy, which was why I had waited as long as I did before coming to her.

My beautiful bride might be nearing her hundredth birthday – even though she hadn't aged at all since the night of our second bonding and would never admit to being a centenarian – but at times she could still act like a hormonal tween.

Especially as of late.

Her moods swung wildly. Giggling one moment, she'd be in tears the next. But that wasn't my concern right now, instead focusing on her sheer exhaustion. Stubborn as the day I'd met her, she refused to take any time off from her work, using the excuse she had just returned from an extended leave.

While true, I didn't give a fuck.

*It hadn't been by choice and could hardly be considered a vacation.*

She worked because she wanted to, not because we needed the money. And while her position as the North American Liaison in the Department of Supernatural Affairs was an important position, nothing was more important to me than her and her wellbeing.

And right now nothing about her being was feeling very well.

Her call had barely ended when I captured her eyes with my own and said, "Get your things. We're leaving."

Her eyes rolled, more from exhaustion than annoyance, and she gestured to her cluttered desk, arguing, "I *can't* Eric. I have all of this to get through before my meeting tomorrow morning."

"I'm sure your snoring through the meeting would be titillating, but hardly constructive," I volleyed back, with an arched brow.

"I *don't* snore," she grumbled.

I could sense her mood was turning sour, so I teased, "Then I must have been sharing a bed with John Deere for the last seventy years."

Our bond began ascending up the rollercoaster of her emotions, with her sour mood forgotten and a more playful one taking its place, as she glared back at me saying, "Keep it up, Mister, and you'll *need* a tractor since you'll be forced to find another kind of meadow if you get the itch to plow through one."

"Lies."

Her libido surpassed even my own at times.

I was a lucky vampire.

But she'd been so tired lately, we hadn't done more than some making out and light petting since our return from the Fae Realm, two and a half weeks earlier. And while I *always* wanted her, I hadn't minded or even had the urge to complain, knowing just how exhausted she'd been feeling.

And we'd both been more than satisfied before we returned to this world.

*Fucking her under the sun in the fairy-scented Fae Realm had been fucking spectacular.*

But I quickly reorganized my thoughts before I was forced to readjust my pants and filled our bond with my concern for her, while saying, "Really, Lover. You need to rest."

And for once, she didn't argue with me.

*I loved that she could still surprise me after all of this time.*

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She was hiding something from me.

It had been four weeks since we'd been back and her exhaustion was still prevalent in our bond, but now it was tinged with worry.

And wariness.

Our bond made it impossible to keep much of anything from each other, but knowing there were times when one just needed to deal with whatever issue was bothering them, we'd both learned when to back off and give the other space.

*One such time had been when her brother had finally passed away a decade earlier and she'd crawled inside of herself for weeks.*

*It was the one and only time I'd been afraid of losing her.*

But I'd given her the space she'd needed then and allowed her to come back to me on her own. Now, though, I got the sense something similar was going on and had nothing tangible to hold accountable for her actions.

She was acting secretive.

Her demeanor was off.

Any questions posed by me as to the cause were met by her wide eyes and stuttered denials.

Interrogating my wife was at the top of my short list of things I never wanted to do, so I did the next best thing.

I had her followed.

Her telepathy made it so that I couldn't choose just any private investigator if she would be able to read their thoughts and know their mission. Her ability to move about freely during the daytime meant using a vampire was impossible, so I went one step beyond.

My bonded was priceless to me, so the cost of hiring a Britlingen was nothing.

I'd known from our experience in Rhodes she could sense their presence, much like a vampire's void, but with their ability to cloak themselves, I hoped she wouldn't notice.

And she hadn't.

At first.

Lursa had been able to remain undetected for nearly a week, following my bonded's every step as she moved about. Her daily reports were filled with nothing but Sookie's meetings with her colleagues and the occasional lunch with one of her girlfriends. Nothing that appeared out of place or unexpected.

Nothing to confirm my suspicion that she was keeping something from me.

But it was on Day Six of her reconnaissance mission that everything seemed to fall apart.

Sookie wasn't home when I'd risen for the night, which wasn't all that unusual anymore, so I checked my email to read Lursa's report when the bottom seemed to fall out from under me.

Sookie had been to see Ludwig. Lursa wasn't sure of what the appointment entailed – not wanting to get close enough to alert Sookie of her presence – but it had been just the two of them in the office and when Sookie left, she'd been in tears.

She still did the occasional favor for the doctor, listening in on the thoughts of patients too traumatized to speak their fears aloud, so I didn't think much of it at first.

A hundred year old part-fairy, bonded to a thousand year old vampire, my wife still had a tender human heart, whose strings were easily pulled.

But instead of returning to work or home, she'd driven all the way to Bon Temps and visited her family's graves.

She'd been in tears the entire time, but hadn't said a word out loud.

We still owned her ancestor's farmhouse, but we hadn't stayed there in years. Sookie had given up on the idea she needed the house to remind her of her roots.

She'd said I was the only foundation she couldn't live without.

So when her brother had finally passed and with him, her last tie to the life she'd once lived, she allowed his children and grandchildren to take over the running of the household indefinitely.

And while she'd forgiven her grandmother her secrets, she rarely felt the need to go to the cemetery. So while it too was unusual, it wasn't unheard of, but it was her next stop that gave me pause.

Lursa had followed Sookie to the town's church.

The last time she'd entered any place of worship had been for her brother's funeral. While she was still spiritual, she no longer believed in one almighty God and instead her faith encompassed a more earthly spirituality.

And given everything she'd been feeling – everything she'd not been saying to me – I could only draw one conclusion.

She was dying.

She could have contracted some sort of mystery fairy disease when we'd been in the Fae Realm, helping Niall fight off the attempted coup. Sookie had been there for a little more than two days earth time, during one of her scheduled visits to recharge her fairy spark, when our bond erupted like Mount Vesuvius. I couldn't have ignored it if I'd tried, but the force of it was able to draw me straight through the portal and into their world.

Not even being in another world could have kept us apart.

The weeks we'd spent there turned out to be months here, but she'd appeared fine when we'd left. If anything, I had been the only to experience symptoms – if you could call it that – by being able to be in the sun and not burn up from it.

At times I would have even sworn my heart had been able to beat for the first time in a millennia.

But just as the realization she could be dying came to me, I heard the front door open in the next and only then realized I could feel her close by through our bond. So I flew from the bed and into the foyer, prepared to turn her right then and there, when I was greeted with her accusatory eyes.

“You had me *followed*?”

That *so* wasn't the important issue right now and in my anger, my mouth took off on its own by hissing out, “I will do whatever I *have* to do when it comes to you. You know this.”

Never one to back down – least of all from *me* – she took another step closer and poked my chest with her accusing finger as she hissed back, “Why can't you have a little faith in me and let me come to you when *I'm* ready?”

“Why can’t *you* have a little faith in *me* and know there is *nothing* I wouldn’t do for you?” I yelled back. “You’re *my bonded!* I should be the one you can come to with *anything*, no matter what it is, so we can deal with it *together!*”

Her face heated up and I was sure I was in danger of getting fried with her fricassee fists, when she yelled, “Maybe there are times when our bond does jack shit and I need to figure things out on my own before bringing you into it!”

Done with her stalling – and terrified of what was to come – I waved her off and said, “You’ve just been delaying the inevitable. Make whatever calls you need to make to rearrange your schedule because I’m done waiting for you to tell me *jack shit.*”

“What?” she asked, feeling genuinely confused. “What calls? What are you talking about?”

“I’m sure your eternal absence from your morning meetings will be noticed,” I scoffed. “And I need to contact Pam so she can clear her schedule and remain here while we’re underground. Lursa can stay here for the next three days to guard us while the sun is up.”

“What?” she repeated, feeling even more confused.

But the fact she’d felt any confusion at all only gave me pause.

To become even more terrified.

“We’ve discussed this,” I reminded her, taking her by the shoulders and staring into her eyes. “You agreed when the time came, I would turn you. I’m not going to lose you.”

The thought alone was enough to weaken my knees.

“And you think the time is *now?*” she asked incredulously. “*Why?*”

“I’d prefer if we *didn’t* wait until you’re actually knocking on death’s door.”

“What?” she repeated once more, only this time she added, “You think I’m *dying?*”

I was sure my expression all but said, ‘*Duh!*’

From decades spent with her brother, I was sure.

“Eric,” she said more calmly than she actually felt. “I’m not dying.”

“Then what is it that had you going from Ludwig’s, to your family’s graveside, to church?” I asked. “What’s made you feel so not like yourself over the last month?”

My fear only grew in tandem with hers, so I was quite possibly the palest vampire on earth, when she finally whispered, “I’m pregnant.”

“What?” I asked, repeating her own question back to her.

It was impossible.

Not only would I have been able to tell from both our bond and my sense of smell if she had been unfaithful, I knew in my core she would never stray.

In. My. Core.

We had discussed the possibility of having a child of our own in the past. Technological advances in medicine meant we could have selected a donor who not only resembled me in physical appearance, but we could even select the gender. But she'd always claimed it wasn't something she'd wanted. She'd said she was happy spoiling her brother's offspring and then their offspring. That our lifestyle wasn't conducive to raising a child of our own.

Her job was our only obligation and it was one she could leave at a moment's notice if the mood struck.

“I'm pregnant,” she repeated, while tears filled her eyes. “I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want you to think I cheated on you *because I haven't*, but Doctor Ludwig said she's sure. I'm knocked up and somehow, you're the one that did it.”

“The Fae Realm,” I guessed out loud.

I'd fucked her six ways from Sunday when all was said and done.

*Bloodlust was our mutual aphrodisiac.*

And as I pulled her into my arms and kissed the tears from her cheeks, I felt my own forming in the corners of my eyes at the thought of laying eyes on a little person in the very near future.

One who was a little bit of Sookie.

And a little bit of me.

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“Again,” she whispered, stubbornly fighting against her eyelids' want to close.

So much like her mother.

But I closed the book I could recite from memory and kissed the top of her head, saying, “Tomorrow. Right now, little ones need to go to sleep.”

“But *Daaddyyy*,” she whined, using her most lethal weapon against me.



My baby's baby blues.

So I opened the book and started back from the beginning, while Sookie smiled at us from the doorway and whispered, "Sucker."

I couldn't really refute it.

Sleep seemed to finally win out over her stubborn nature halfway through the tale, so I gently closed the book and kissed the top of her head, still just as awestruck now almost three years later, as I had been when Sookie had first told me the news our little miracle was on her way.

She'd been right. I should have had more faith in her.

But I'd learned my lesson and found an ingenuous way to never forget it.

As I bid my daughter a good night, and stood from her bed, she sleepily returned the sentiment in a whispered, "Night Daddy."

Unable to contain the smile, with the love that always filled me hearing her precious little voice, I gently pulled her door shut, while whispering in return, "Sweet dreams, Faith."