

All Together Dead

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Extract

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ALL TOGETHER DEAD

CHARLAINE HARRIS



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THE SHREVEPORT VAMPIRE BAR WOULD BE OPENING late tonight. I was running behind, and I'd automatically gone to the front door, the public door, only to be halted by a neatly lettered sign, red Gothic script on white cardboard: WE'LL BE READY TO GREET YOU WITH A BITE TONIGHT, AT EIGHT O'CLOCK. PLEASE EXCUSE OUR DELAYED OPENING. It was signed "The Staff of Fangtasia."

It was the third week in September, so the red neon FANGTASIA sign was already on. The sky was almost pitch-black. I stood with one foot inside my car for a minute, enjoying the mild evening and the faint, dry smell of vampire that lingered around the club. Then I drove around to the back and parked beside several other cars lined up at the employee entrance. I was only five minutes late, but it looked like everyone else had beaten me to the meeting. I rapped on the door. I waited.

I'd raised my hand to knock again when Pam, Eric's second-in-command, opened the door. Pam was based at the bar, but she had other duties in Eric's various business dealings. Though vampires had gone public five years ago and turned their best face to the world, they were still pretty secretive about their moneymaking methods, and sometimes I wondered how much of America the undead actually owned. Eric, the owner of Fangtasia, was a true vampire in the keeping-things-to-himself department. Of course, in his long, long existence he'd had to be.

"Come in, my telepathic friend," Pam said, gesturing dramatically. She was wearing her work outfit: the filmy, trailing black gown that all the tourists who came into the bar seemed to expect from female vampires. (When Pam got to pick her own clothing, she was a pastels-and-twinset kind of woman.) Pam had the palest, straightest blond hair you ever saw; in fact, she was ethereally lovely, with a kind of deadly edge. The deadly edge was what a person shouldn't forget.

"How you doing?" I asked politely.

"I am doing exceptionally well," she said. "Eric is full of happiness."

Eric Northman, the vampire sheriff of Area Five, had made Pam a vampire, and she was both obliged and compelled to do his bidding. That was part of the deal of becoming undead: you were always in sway to your maker. But Pam had told me more than once that Eric was a good boss to have, and that he would let her go her own way if and when she desired to do so. In fact, she'd been living in Minnesota until Eric had purchased Fangtasia and called her to help him run it.

Area Five was most of northwestern Louisiana, which until a month ago had been the economically weaker half of the state. Since Hurricane Katrina, the balance of power in

Louisiana had shifted dramatically, especially in the vampire community.

“How is that delicious brother of yours, Sookie? And your shape-shifting boss?” Pam said.

“My delicious brother is making noises about getting married, like everyone else in Bon Temps,” I said.

“You sound a bit depressed.” Pam cocked her head to one side and regarded me like a sparrow eyeing a worm.

“Well, maybe a tad wee bit,” I said.

“You must keep busy,” Pam said. “Then you won’t have time to mope.”

Pam *loved* “Dear Abby.” Lots of vampires scrutinized the column daily. Their solutions to some of the writers’ problems would just make you scream. Literally. Pam had already advised me that I could only be imposed on if I permitted it, and that I needed to be more selective in picking my friends. I was getting emotional-health counseling from a vampire.

“I am,” I said. “Keeping busy, that is. I’m working, I’ve still got my roommate from New Orleans, and I’m going to a wedding shower tomorrow. Not for Jason and Crystal. Another couple.”

Pam had paused, her hand on the doorknob of Eric’s office. She considered my statement, her brows drawn together. “I am not remembering what a wedding shower is, though I’ve heard of it,” she said. She brightened. “They’ll get married in a bathroom? No, I’ve heard the term before, surely. A woman wrote to Abby that she hadn’t gotten a thank-you note for a large shower gift. They get . . . presents?”

“You got it,” I said. “A shower is a party for someone who’s about to get married. Sometimes the shower is for the couple, and they’re both there. But usually only the bride is the honoree, and all the other people at the party are women. Everyone brings a gift. The theory is that this way the couple can start life with everything they need. We do

the same thing when a couple's expecting a baby. Course, then it's a baby shower."

"Baby shower," Pam repeated. She smiled in a chilly way. It was enough to put frost on your pumpkin, seeing that up-curve of the lips. "I like the term," she said. She knocked on Eric's office door and then opened it. "Eric," she said, "maybe someday one of the waitresses will get pregnant, and we can go to a *baby shower!*"

"That would be something to see," said Eric, lifting his golden head from the papers on his desk. The sheriff registered my presence, gave me a hard look, and decided to ignore me. Eric and I had issues.

Despite the fact that the room was full of people waiting for his attention, Eric lay down his pen and stood to stretch his tall and magnificent body, perhaps for my benefit. As usual, Eric was in tight jeans and a Fangtasia T-shirt, black with the white stylized fangs that the bar used as its trademark. "Fangtasia" was written in jazzy red script across the white points in the same style as the neon sign outside. If Eric turned around, the back would read "The Bar with a Bite." Pam had given me one when Fangtasia first got into marketing its own stuff.

Eric made the shirt look good, and I remembered all too well what was underneath it.

I tore my gaze away from Eric's stretch to look around the room. There were lots of other vampires crammed into the smallish space, but till you saw them you didn't know they were there, they were so still and silent. Clancy, the bar manager, had claimed one of the two visitor chairs before the desk. Clancy had just barely survived the previous year's Witch War, but he hadn't come out unscathed. The witches had drained Clancy near to the point of no return. By the time Eric discovered Clancy, tracing his smell to a Shreveport cemetery, Clancy was one Vacutainer short of dead. During

his long recovery, the red-haired vamp had grown bitter and snappish. Now he grinned at me, showing some fang. “You can sit in my lap, Sookie,” he said, patting his thighs.

I smiled back, but not like my heart was in it. “No, thanks, Clancy,” I said politely. Clancy’s flirting had always had an edge to it, and now that edge was razor sharp. He was one of those vamps I’d rather not be alone with. Though he ran the bar capably, and he had never laid a finger on me, he still set off warning bells. I can’t read vampire minds, which was why I found it refreshing to hang with them, but when I felt that tingle of warning, I did find myself wishing I could just dip into Clancy’s head and find out what was going on in there.

Felicia, the newest bartender, was sitting on the couch, along with Indira and Maxwell Lee. It was like the vampire Rainbow Coalition meeting. Felicia was a happy mixture of African and Caucasian, and she was almost six feet tall, so there was more loveliness to appreciate. Maxwell Lee was one of the darkest men I’d ever seen. Little Indira was the daughter of Indian immigrants.

There were four more people in the room (using the term “people” loosely), and each one of them upset me, though in varying degrees.

One of them was someone I didn’t acknowledge. I’d taken a page from the Were rule book and treated him like an outlawed member of my pack: I abjured him. I didn’t speak his name, I didn’t speak to him, I didn’t recognize his existence. (Of course, this was my ex, Bill Compton—not that I recognized that he was in the room, brooding away in a corner.)

Leaning against the wall next to him was ancient Thalia, who was possibly even older than Eric. She was as small as Indira and very pale, with tightly waving black hair—and she was extremely rude.

To my amazement, some humans found that a complete turn-on. Thalia actually had a devoted following who seemed thrilled when she used her stilted English to tell them to fuck off. I'd discovered she even had a website, established and maintained by fans. Go figure. Pam had told me that when Eric had agreed to let Thalia live in Shreveport, it was the equivalent of keeping a badly trained pit bull tethered in the yard. Pam had not approved.

These undead citizens all lived in Area Five. To live and work under Eric's protection, they'd all sworn fealty to him. So they were required to devote a certain amount of their time to doing his bidding, even if they didn't work at the bar. There were a few extra vampires in Shreveport these days, since Katrina; just like a lot of humans, they had to go somewhere. Eric hadn't decided what to do about the undead refugees, and they hadn't been invited to the meeting.

Tonight there were two visitors in Fangtasia, one of whom outranked Eric.

Andre was the personal bodyguard of Sophie-Anne Leclerq, the Queen of Louisiana. The queen, at present, was an evacuee in Baton Rouge. Andre looked very young, maybe sixteen; his face was baby smooth, his pale hair was thick and heavy. Andre had lived a long existence caring only for Sophie-Anne, his maker and savior. He was not wearing his saber tonight, because he wasn't acting as her bodyguard, but I was sure Andre was armed with something—knife or gun. Andre himself was a lethal weapon, with or without an aid.

Just as Andre was about to speak to me, from beyond his chair a deep voice said, "Hey, Sookie." Our second visitor, Jake Purifoy. I made myself hold still when every impulse I had was telling me to get out of the office. I was being an idiot. If I hadn't run screaming at the sight of Andre, Jake shouldn't make me think of bolting. I forced myself to nod to the nice-looking young man who still looked alive. But

I knew my greeting didn't look natural. He filled me with a terrible blend of pity and fear.

Jake, born a Were, had been attacked by a vampire and bled to the point of death. In what had been perhaps a mistaken gesture of mercy, my cousin Hadley (another vampire) had discovered Jake's nearly lifeless body and brought Jake over. This might have been considered a good deed; but as it turned out, no one had really appreciated Hadley's kindness . . . not even Jake himself. No one had ever heard of a turned Were before: Weres disliked and distrusted vampires, and the feeling was heartily reciprocated. The going was very rough for Jake, who occupied a lonely no-man's-land. The queen had given him a place in her service, since no one else had stepped forward.

Jake, blind with bloodlust, had gone after me as his first vampire snack. I had a still-red scar on my arm as a result.

What a wonderful evening this was turning out to be.

"Miss Stackhouse," said Andre, rising from Eric's second guest chair. He bowed. This was a true tribute, and it lifted my spirits a bit.

"Mr. Andre," I said, bowing back. Andre swept his hand to indicate his politely vacated seat, and since that solved my placement problem, I accepted.

Clancy looked chagrined. He should have given me his chair, since he was the lower-ranked vampire. Andre's action had pointed that out as clearly as a blinking neon arrow. I tried hard not to smile.

"How is Her Majesty?" I asked, trying to be just as courteous as Andre had been. It would be stretching it to say I liked Sophie-Anne, but I sure respected her.

"That's part of the reason I am here tonight," he said. "Eric, can we get started now?" A gentle chiding for Eric's time-wasting tactics, I thought. Pam folded to the floor beside my chair, crouched on the balls of her feet.

“Yes, we’re all here. Go ahead, Andre. You have the floor,” Eric said with a little smile at his own modern terminology. He slumped back down into his chair, extending his long legs to rest his feet on the corner of his desk.

“Your queen is living in the Area Four sheriff’s house in Baton Rouge,” Andre said to the little assemblage. “Gervaise was very gracious in extending his hospitality.”

Pam cocked an eyebrow at me. Gervaise would have lost his head if he *hadn’t* extended his hospitality.

“But staying at Gervaise’s place can only be a temporary solution,” Andre continued. “We’ve been down to New Orleans several times since the disaster. Here’s a report of our property’s condition.”

Though none of the vampires moved, I felt their attention had heightened.

“The queen’s headquarters lost most of its roof, so there was extensive water damage on the second floor and in the attic area. Furthermore, a large piece of someone else’s roof landed inside the building, causing a pileup of debris and some holes in walls—problems like that. While we’re drying the inside, the roof is still covered with blue plastic. One reason I came up this way is to find a contractor who will start reroofing immediately. So far, I haven’t had any luck, so if any of you have personal influence with some human who does this kind of work, I need your help. On the ground floor, there was a lot of cosmetic damage. Some water came in. We had some looters, too.”

“Maybe the queen should remain in Baton Rouge,” Clancy said maliciously. “I’m sure Gervaise would be overwhelmed with delight at the prospect of hosting her permanently.”

So Clancy was a suicidal idiot.

“A delegation of New Orleans leaders came to visit our

queen in Baton Rouge to ask that she return to the city,” Andre said, ignoring Clancy completely. “The human leaders think that if the vampires will return to New Orleans, tourism will pick up again.” Andre fixed Eric with a cold gaze. “In the meantime, the queen has talked to the four other sheriffs about the financial aspect of restoring the New Orleans buildings.”

Eric gave an almost imperceptible inclination of the head. Impossible to say what he felt about being taxed for the queen’s repairs.

New Orleans had been the place to go for vampires and those who wanted to be around them ever since Anne Rice had been proven right about their existence. The city was like Disneyland for vamps. But since Katrina, all that had gone to hell, of course, along with so much else. Even Bon Temps was feeling the storm’s effect, and had been ever since Katrina had hit land. Our little town was still crowded with people who had fled from the south.

“What about the queen’s entertainment estate?” asked Eric. The queen had bought an old monastery at the edge of the Garden District for entertaining large numbers of people, both vamp and non-vamp. Though surrounded by a wall, the estate was not considered easily defensible (since it was a registered building, historic and unchangeable, the windows couldn’t be blocked up), so the queen couldn’t actually live there. I thought of it as her party barn.

“It didn’t suffer much damage,” Andre said. “There were looters there, too. Of course, they left a trace of their smell.” Vampires were second only to Weres in their tracking abilities. “One of them shot the lion.”

I felt sorry for that. I’d liked the lion, sort of.

“Do you need help with the apprehension?” Eric asked. Andre arched an eyebrow.

"I only ask because your numbers are low," Eric said.

"No, already taken care of," Andre said, and smiled just a tad.

I tried not to think about that.

"Aside from the lion and the looting, how was the estate?" Eric said to get the discussion of the storm damage back on track.

"The queen can stay there while she views the other properties," Andre continued, "but at the most for a night or two only."

There were tiny nods all around.

"Our loss of personnel," Andre said, moving on in his agenda. All the vampires tensed a bit, even Jake, the newbie. "Our initial assessment was modest, as you know. We assumed some would come forward after the impact of the storm was absorbed. But only ten have surfaced: five here, three in Baton Rouge, two in Monroe. It seems that we have lost thirty of our number just in Louisiana. Mississippi has lost at least ten."

There were tiny sounds and movements all over the room as the Shreveport vampires reacted to the news. The concentration of vamps, both resident and visiting, had been high in New Orleans. If Katrina had visited Tampa with that much force, the number of dead and missing would have been much lower.

I raised my hand to speak. "What about Bubba?" I asked when Andre nodded at me. I hadn't seen or heard of Bubba since Katrina. You'd know Bubba if you saw him. Anyone on earth would know him; at least, anyone over a certain age. He hadn't quite died on that bathroom floor in Memphis. Not quite. But his brain had been affected before he was brought over, and he wasn't a very good vampire.

"Bubba's alive," said Andre. "He hid in a crypt and survived on small mammals. He isn't doing too well mentally,

so the queen has sent him up to Tennessee to stay with the Nashville community for a while.”

“Andre has brought me a list of those that are missing,” Eric said. “I’ll post it after the meeting.”

I’d known a few of the queen’s guards, too, and I would be glad to find out how they’d fared.

I had another question, so I waved my hand.

“Yes, Sookie?” Andre asked. His empty gaze fixed me in place, and I was sorry I’d asked to speak.

“You know what I wonder, y’all? I wonder if one of the kings or queens attending this summit, or whatever you all call it, has a—like a weather predictor, or something like that on staff.”

Plenty of blank stares were aimed my way, though Andre was interested.

“Because, look, the summit, or conference, or whatever, was supposed to take place in late spring originally. But—delay, delay, delay, right? And then Katrina hit. If the summit had started when it was supposed to, the queen could have gone in a powerful position. She would have had a big war chest and a full quiver of vamps, and maybe they wouldn’t have been so anxious to prosecute her for the king’s death. The queen would have gotten anything she asked for, probably. Instead, she’s going in as”—I started to say “a beggar,” but I considered Andre just in time—“much less powerful.” I’d been afraid they’d laugh or maybe ridicule me, but the silence that followed was intensely thoughtful.

“That’s one of the things you’ll need to look for at the summit,” Andre said. “Now that you’ve given me the idea, it seems oddly possible. Eric?”

“Yes, I think there is something in that,” Eric said, staring at me. “Sookie is good at thinking outside the box.”

Pam smiled up at me from beside my elbow.

“What about the suit filed by Jennifer Cater?” Clancy asked Andre. He’d been looking increasingly uncomfortable in the chair he’d thought he was so clever to snag.

You could have heard a pin drop. I didn’t know what the hell the red-haired vampire was talking about, but I thought it would be better to find out from the conversation than to ask.

“It’s still active,” Andre said.

Pam whispered, “Jennifer Cater was in training to become Peter Threadgill’s lieutenant. She was in Arkansas managing his affairs when the violence erupted.”

I nodded to let Pam know I appreciated her filling me in. The Arkansas vampires, though they hadn’t gone through a hurricane, had undergone quite a reduction in their own ranks, thanks to Louisiana’s group.

Andre said, “The queen has responded to the suit by testifying that she had to kill Peter to save her own life. Of course, she offered reparation to the common fund.”

“Why not to Arkansas?” I whispered to Pam.

“Because the queen maintains that since Peter is dead, Arkansas goes to her, according to the marriage contract,” Pam murmured. “She can’t make reparation to herself. If Jennifer Cater wins her suit, not only will the queen lose Arkansas, she’ll have to pay Arkansas a fine. A huge one. And make other restitution.”

Andre began to drift around the room soundlessly, the only indication that he was unhappy about the topic.

“Do we even have that much money after the disaster?” Clancy asked. It was an unwise question.

“The queen hopes the suit will be dismissed,” Andre said, again ignoring Clancy. Andre’s permanently teenage face was quite blank. “But apparently the court is prepared to hear a trial. Jennifer is charging that our queen lured Threadgill to New Orleans, away from his own territory,

having planned all along to start the war and assassinate him.” This time Andre’s voice came from behind me.

“But that wasn’t what happened at all,” I said. And Sophie-Anne hadn’t killed the king. I’d been present at his death. The vampire standing behind me right at this moment had killed Threadgill, and I’d thought at the time he was justified.

I felt Andre’s cold fingers brush my neck as I sat there. How I knew the fingers were Andre’s, I couldn’t tell you; but the light touch, the second of contact, made me suddenly focus on an awful fact: I was the only witness to the death of the king, besides Andre and Sophie-Anne.

I’d never put it to myself in those terms, and for a moment, I swear, my heart stopped beating. At that skipped beat, I drew the gaze of at least half the vamps in the room. Eric’s eyes widened as he looked at my face. And then my heart beat again, and the moment was over as if it never had been. But Eric’s hand twitched on the desk, and I knew that he would not forget that second, and he would want to know what it meant.

“So you think the trial will be held?” Eric asked Andre.

“If the queen had been going to the summit as the ruler of New Orleans—New Orleans as it was—I believe the sitting court would have negotiated some kind of settlement between Jennifer and the queen. Maybe something involving Jennifer being raised to a position of power as the queen’s deputy and getting a large bonus; something like that. But as things are now . . .” There was a long silence while we filled in the blanks. New Orleans wasn’t as it had been, might never be so again. Sophie-Anne was a lame duck right now. “Now, because of Jennifer’s persistence, I think the court will pursue it,” Andre said, and then fell silent.

“We know there’s no truth to the allegations,” a clear,

cold voice said from the corner. I'd been doing a good job of ignoring the presence of my ex, Bill. But it didn't come naturally to me. "Eric was there. I was there. Sookie was there," the vampire (Nameless, I told myself) continued.

That was true. Jennifer Cater's allegation, that the queen had lured her king to her party barn in order to kill him, was completely bogus. The bloodbath had been precipitated by the decapitation of one of the queen's men by one of Peter Threadgill's.

Eric smiled reminiscently. He'd enjoyed the battle. "I accounted for the one who started it," he said. "The king did his best to trap the queen in an indiscretion, but he didn't, thanks to our Sookie. When his plot didn't work, he resorted to a simple frontal attack." Eric added, "I haven't seen Jennifer in twenty years. She's risen fast. She must be ruthless."

Andre had stepped to my right and within my line of vision, which was a relief. He nodded. Again, all the vampires in the room made a little group movement, not quite in unison but eerily close. I had seldom felt so alien: the only warmblood in a room full of animated dead creatures.

"Yes," Andre said. "Ordinarily the queen would want a full contingent there to support her. But since we're forced to practice economy, the numbers going have been cut." Again, Andre came near enough to touch me, just a brush of my cheek.

The idea triggered a kind of mini-revelation: *This was how it felt to be a normal person.* I hadn't the slightest idea of the true intentions and plans of my companions. This was how real people lived every day of their lives. It was frightening but exciting; a lot like walking through a crowded room blindfolded. How did regular people stand the suspense of day-to-day living?

“The queen wants this woman close to her in meetings, since other humans will be there,” Andre continued. He was speaking strictly to Eric. The rest of us might as well not have been in the room. “She wants to know their thoughts. Stan is bringing his telepath. Do you know the man?”

“I’m sitting right here,” I muttered, not that anyone paid any attention but Pam, who gave me a sunny smile. Then, with all those cold eyes fixed on me, I realized that they were waiting for me, that Andre had been addressing me directly. I’d become so used to the vamps talking over and around me that I’d been taken by surprise. I mentally replayed Andre’s remarks until I understood he was asking me a question.

“I’ve only met one other telepath in my life, and he was living in Dallas, so I’m supposing it’s the same guy—Barry the Bellboy. He was working at the vamp hotel in Dallas when I picked up on his, ah, gift.”

“What do you know about him?”

“He’s younger than me, and he’s weaker than me—or at least he was at the time. He’d never accepted what he was, the way that I had.” I shrugged. That was the sum total of my knowledge.

“Sookie will be there,” Eric told Andre. “She is the best at what she does.”

That was flattering, though I faintly recalled Eric saying he’d encountered only one telepath previously. It was also infuriating, since he was implying to Andre that my excellence was to Eric’s credit instead of my own.

Though I was looking forward to seeing something outside of my little town, I found myself wishing I could think of a way to back out of the trip to Rhodes. But months ago I’d agreed to attend this vampire summit as a paid employee of the queen’s. And for the past month, I’d been

working long hours at Merlotte's Bar to bank enough time so the other barmaids wouldn't mind covering for me for a week. My boss, Sam, had been helping me keep track of my overage with a little chart.

"Clancy will stay here to run the bar," Eric said.

"This human gets to go while I have to remain?" the red-haired manager said. He was really, really unhappy with Eric's decision. "I won't get to see any of the fun."

"That's right," Eric said pleasantly. If Clancy had thought of saying something else negative, he took one look at Eric's face and clamped down on it. "Felicia will stay to help you. Bill, you will stay."

"No," said that calm, cool voice from the corner. "The queen requires me. I worked hard on that database, and she's asked me to market it at the summit to help recoup her losses."

Eric looked like a statue for a minute, and then he moved, a little lift of his eyebrows. "Yes, I'd forgotten your computer skills," he said. He might have been saying, "Oh, I'd forgotten you can spell *cat*," for all the interest or respect he showed. "I suppose you need to be with us, then. Maxwell?"

"If it's your will, I will stay." Maxwell Lee wanted to make it clear that he knew a thing or two about being a good underling. He glanced around at the assemblage to underscore his point.

Eric nodded. I guessed that Maxwell would get a nice toy for Christmas, and Bill—whoops, Nameless—would get ashes and switches. "Then you'll remain here. And you, too, Thalia. But you must promise me that you will be good in the bar." Thalia's required tour of duty in the bar, which simply consisted of sitting around being mysterious and vampiric a couple of evenings a week, did not always go by without incident.

Thalia, perpetually sullen and broody, gave a curt nod. "I don't want to go, anyway," she muttered. Her round black eyes showed nothing but contempt for the world. She had seen too much in her very long life, and she hadn't enjoyed herself in a few centuries, was the way I read it. I tried to avoid Thalia as much as possible. I was surprised she'd even hang with the other vamps; she seemed like a rogue to me.

"She has no desire to lead," Pam breathed into my ear. "She only wants to be left in peace. She was thrown out of Illinois because she was too aggressive after the Great Revelation." The Great Revelation was the vampire term for the night that they'd gone on television all over the world to let us know that they actually existed and, furthermore, that they wanted to come out of the shadows and into the economic and social flow of human society.

"Eric lets Thalia do what she wants as long as she follows the rules and shows up on time for her hours at the bar," Pam continued in her tiny whisper. Eric was ruler of this little world, and no one was forgetting it. "She knows what the punishment will be if she steps out of line. Sometimes she seems to forget how little she would like that punishment. She should read Abby, get some ideas."

If you weren't getting any joy out of your life, you needed to . . . oh, do something for others, or take up a new hobby, or something like that, right? Wasn't that the usual advice? I flashed on Thalia volunteering to take the night shift at a hospice, and I shuddered. The idea of Thalia knitting, with two long, sharp needles, gave me another frisson of horror. To heck with the therapy.

"So, the only ones attending the summit are Andre, our queen, Sookie, myself, Bill, and Pam," Eric said. "Cataliades the lawyer and his niece as his runner. Oh, yes, Gervaise from Four and his human woman, a concession since Gervaise has

been hosting the queen so generously. Rasul, as driver. And Sigebert, of course. That's our party. I know some of you are disappointed, and I can only hope that next year will be a better year for Louisiana. And for Arkansas, which we now consider part of our territory."

"I think that's all that we needed to talk about with all of you present," Andre said. The rest of the stuff he and Eric had to discuss would be done in private. Andre didn't touch me again, which was a good thing. Andre scared me down to my polished pink toenails. Of course, I should feel that way about everyone in the room. If I'd had good sense, I would move to Wyoming, which had the lowest vamp population (two; there'd been an article about them in *American Vampire*). Some days I was sorely tempted.

I whipped a little notepad out of my purse as Eric went over the date of our departure, the date of our return, the time our chartered Anubis Airline plane was arriving from Baton Rouge to pick up the Shreveport contingent, and a rundown of the clothes we would need. With some dismay, I realized I would have to go borrowing from my friends again. But Eric added, "Sookie, you wouldn't need these clothes if it wasn't for the trip. I've called your friend's store and you have credit there. Use it."

I could feel my cheeks redden. I felt like the poor cousin until he added, "The staff has an account at a couple of stores here in Shreveport, but that would be inconvenient for you." My shoulders relaxed, and I hoped he was telling the truth. Not one flicker of an eyelid told me any different.

"We may have suffered a disaster, but we won't go in looking poor," Eric said, being careful to give me only a fraction of his stare.

"Don't look poor," I made a note.

"Is everyone clear? Our goals for this conference are to support the queen as she tries to clear herself of these ridiculous

charges, and to let everyone know that Louisiana is still a prestigious state. None of the Arkansas vampires who came to Louisiana with their king survived to tell the tale.” Eric smiled, and it wasn’t a pleasant smile.

I hadn’t known that before this night.

Gosh, wasn’t that convenient.