

Charlaine Harris

Dracula Night

in "Many Bloody Returns"

Sookie Stackhouse #7.1

2007

ISBN: 9780441015221

Index

Dracula Night

A Few Words

When we were approached about editing this anthology, we were like two kids with a new toy. We had some wonderful planning sessions about the theme. We decided to pick two apparently unrelated concepts—vampires (the dead) and birthdays (celebrations of life)—and see what different ways some very talented writers could combine the two.

After the great fun of drawing up a dream list of contributors and receiving their stories, we had to buckle down to the actual work of editing. We imagined the work would be tedious, or nerve-wracking, or possibly (horrors) boring. But it wasn't. Every day a new story arrived was like—well, like a birthday.

It's amazing what creative minds can do with the same theme. None of these stories are the same. Some of them are funny, and some of them are tragic, but all of them are fascinating. Read and enjoy.

Charlaine Harris

Toni L. P. Kelner

Charlaine Harris, New York Times bestselling author of the Sookie Stackhouse series, also writes books about Harper Connelly, a lightning-struck corpse locator. Charlaine has won the Anthony, the Sapphire, and two Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice awards. She lives in a small town in Arkansas with her husband, a duck, three dogs, and three children. Her website is simply www.charlaineharris.com, and she tries real hard to keep it up-to-date.

I found the invitation in the mailbox at the end of my driveway. I had to lean out of my car window to open it, because I'd paused on my way to work after remembering I hadn't checked my mail in a couple of days. My mail was never interesting. I might get a flyer for Dollar General or Wal-Mart, or one of those ominous mass mailings about pre-need burial plots.

Today, after I'd sighed at my Entergy bill and my cable bill, I had a little treat: a handsome, heavy, buff-colored envelope that clearly contained some kind of invitation. It had been addressed by someone who'd not only taken a calligraphy class but passed the final with flying colors.

I got a little pocketknife out of my glove compartment and slit open the envelope with the care it deserved. I don't get a lot of invitations, and when I do, they're usually more Hallmark than watermark. This was something to be savored. I pulled out the stiff folded paper carefully, and opened it. Something fluttered into my lap: an enclosed sheet of tissue. Without absorbing the revealed words, I ran my finger over the embossing. Wow.

I'd strung out the preliminaries as long as I could. I bent to actually read the italic typeface.

ERIC NORTHMAN
AND THE STAFF OF FANGTASIA

REQUEST THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT FANGTASIA'S ANNUAL PARTY
TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTHDAY OF
THE LORD OF DARKNESS

PRINCE DRACULA

ON FEBRUARY 8, 10:00 P.M.
MUSIC PROVIDED BY THE DUKE OF DEATH
DRESS FORMAL RSVP

I read it twice. Then I read it again.

I drove to work in such a thoughtful mood that I'm glad there wasn't any other traffic on Hummingbird Road. I took the left to get to Merlotte's, but then I almost sailed right past the parking lot. At the last moment, I braked and turned in to navigate my way to the parking area behind the bar that was reserved for employees.

Sam Merlotte, my boss, was sitting behind his desk when I peeked in to put my purse in the deep drawer in his desk that he let the servers use. He had been running his hands over his hair again, because the tangled red-gold halo was even wilder than usual. He looked up from his tax form and smiled at me.

"Sookie," he said, "how are you doing?"

"Good. Tax season, huh?" I made sure my white T-shirt was tucked in evenly so the "Merlotte's" embroidered over my left breast would be level. I flicked one of my long blond hairs off my black pants. I always bent over to brush my hair out so my ponytail would look smooth. "You not taking them to the CPA this year?"

"I figure if I start this early, I can do them myself."

He said that every year, and he always ended up making an appointment with the CPA, who always had to file for an extension.

"Listen, did you get one of these?" I asked, extending the invitation.

He dropped his pen with some relief and took the sheet from my hand. After scanning the script, he said, "No. They wouldn't invite many shifters, anyway. Maybe the local packmaster, or some supe who'd done them a significant service...like you."

"I'm not supernatural," I said, surprised. "I just have a...problem."

"Telepathy is a lot more than a problem," Sam said. "Acne is a problem. Shyness is a problem. Reading other peoples' minds is a gift."

"Or a curse," I said. I went around the desk to toss my purse in the drawer, and Sam stood up. I'm around five foot six, and Sam tops me by maybe three inches. He's not a big guy, but he's much stronger than a plain human his size, since Sam's a shapeshifter.

"Are you going to go?" he asked. "Halloween and Dracula's birthday are the only holidays vampires observe, and I understand they can throw quite a party."

"I haven't made up my mind," I said. "When I'm on my break later, I might call Pam on my cell." Pam, Eric's second-in-command, was as close to a friend as I had among the vampires.

I reached her at Fangtasia pretty soon after the sun went down. "There really was a Count Dracula? I thought he was made up," I said after telling her I'd gotten the invitation.

"There really was," Pam said. "Vlad Tepes. He was a Wallachian king whose capital city was Târgoviște, I think." Pam was quite matter-of-fact about the existence of a creature I'd thought was a joint creation of Bram Stoker and Hollywood. "Vlad III was more ferocious and bloodthirsty than any vampire, and this was when he was a live human. He enjoyed executing people by impaling them on huge wooden stakes. They might last for hours."

I shuddered. Ick.

"His own people regarded him with fear, of course. But the local vamps admired Vlad so much they actually brought him over when he was dying, thus ushering in the new era of the vampire. After monks buried him on an island called Snagov, he rose on the third night to become the first modern vampire. Up until then, the vampires were like...well, disgusting. Completely secret. Ragged, filthy, living in holes in cemeteries, like animals. But Vlad Dracul had been a ruler, and he wasn't going to dress in rags and live in a hole for any reason." Pam sounded proud.

I tried to imagine Eric wearing rags and living in a hole, but it was almost impossible. "So Stoker didn't just dream the whole thing up based on folktales?"

"Just parts of it. Obviously, he didn't know a lot about what Dracula, as he called him, really could or couldn't do, but he was so excited at meeting the prince that he made up a lot of details he thought would give the story zing. It was just like Anne Rice meeting Louis: an early Interview with the Vampire. Dracula really wasn't too happy afterward that Stoker caught him at a weak moment, but he did enjoy the name recognition."

"But he won't actually be there, right? I mean, vampires'll be celebrating this all over the world."

Pam said, very cautiously, "Some believe he shows up somewhere every year, makes a surprise appearance. That chance is so remote, his appearance at our party would be like winning the lottery. Though some believe it

could happen.”

I heard Eric’s voice in the background saying, “Pam, who are you talking to?”

“Okay,” Pam said, the word sounding very American with her slight British accent. “Got to go, Sookie. See you then.”

As I returned the phone to my purse, Sam said, “Sookie, if you go to the party, please keep alert and on the watch. Sometimes vamps get carried away with the excitement on *Dracula Night*.”

“Thanks, Sam,” I said. “I’ll sure be careful.” No matter how many vamps you claimed as friends, you had to be alert. A few years ago the Japanese had invented a synthetic blood that satisfies the vampires’ nutritional requirements, which has enabled the undead to come out of the shadows and take their place at the American table. British vampires had it pretty good, too, and most of the Western European vamps had fared pretty well after the Great Revelation (the day they’d announced their existence, through carefully chosen representatives). However, many South American vamps regretted stepping forward, and the bloodsuckers in the Muslim countries—well, there were mighty few left. Vampires in the inhospitable parts of the world were making efforts to immigrate to countries that tolerated them, with the result that our Congress was considering various bills to limit undead citizens from claiming political asylum. In consequence, we were experiencing an influx of vampires with all kinds of accents as they tried to enter America under the wire. Most of them came in through Louisiana, since it was notably friendly to the Cold Ones, as Fangbanger Xtreme called them.

It was more fun thinking about vampires than hearing the thoughts of my fellow citizens. Naturally, as I went from table to table, I was doing my job with a big smile, because I like good tips, but I wasn’t able to put my heart into it tonight. It had been a warm day for February, way into the fifties, and people’s thoughts had turned to spring.

I try not to listen in, but I’m like a radio that picks up a lot of signals. Some days, I can control my reception a lot better than other days. Today, I kept picking up snippets. Hoyt Fortenberry, my brother’s best friend, was thinking about his mother’s request that he put in about ten new rosebushes in her already extensive garden. Gloomy but obedient, he was trying to figure out how much time the task would take. Arlene, my longtime friend

and another waitress, was wondering if she could get her latest boyfriend to pop the question, but that was pretty much a perennial thought for Arlene. Like the roses, it bloomed every season.

As I mopped up spills and hustled to get chicken strip baskets on the tables (the supper crowd was heavy that night), my own thoughts were centered on how to get a formal gown to wear to the party. Though I did have one ancient prom dress, handmade by my aunt Linda, it was hopelessly outdated. I'm twenty-six, but I didn't have any bridesmaid dresses that might serve. None of my few friends had gotten married except Arlene, who'd been wed so many times that she never even thought of bridesmaids. The few nice clothes I'd bought for vampire events always seemed to get ruined...some in very unpleasant ways.

Usually, I shopped at my friend Tara's store, but she wasn't open after six. So after I got off work, I drove to Monroe to Pecanland Mall. At Dillard's, I got lucky. To tell the truth, I was so pleased with the dress I might have gotten it even if it hadn't been on sale, but it had been marked down to twenty-five dollars from a hundred and fifty, surely a shopping triumph. It was rose pink, with a sequin top and a chiffon bottom, and it was strapless and simple. I'd wear my hair down, and my gran's pearl earrings, and some silver heels that were also on major sale.

That major item taken care of, I wrote a polite acceptance note and popped it in the mail. I was good to go.

Three nights later, I was knocking on the back door of Fangtasia, my garment bag held high.

"You're looking a bit informal," Pam said as she let me in.

"Didn't want to wrinkle the dress." I came in, making sure the bag didn't trail, and hightailed it for the bathroom.

There wasn't a lock on the bathroom door. Pam stood outside so I wouldn't be interrupted, and Eric's second-in-command smiled when I came out, a bundle of my more mundane clothes rolled under my arm.

"You look good, Sookie," Pam said. Pam herself had elected to wear a tuxedo made out of silver lamé. She was a sight. My hair has some curl to it, but Pam's is a paler blond and very straight. We both have blue eyes, but hers are a lighter shade and rounder, and she doesn't blink much. "Eric will be very pleased."

I flushed. Eric and I have a History. But since he had amnesia when we

created that history, he doesn't remember it. Pam does. "Like I care what he thinks," I said.

Pam smiled at me sideways. "Right," she said. "You are totally indifferent. So is he."

I tried to look like I was accepting her words on their surface level and not seeing through to the sarcasm. To my surprise, Pam gave me a light kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for coming," she said. "You may perk him up. He's been very hard to work for these past few days."

"Why?" I asked, though I wasn't real sure I wanted to know.

"Have you ever seen 'It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown'?"

I stopped in my tracks. "Sure," I said. "Have you?"

"Oh, yes," Pam said calmly. "Many times." She gave me a minute to absorb that. "Eric is like that on *Dracula Night*. He thinks, every year, that this time Dracula will pick his party to attend. Eric fusses and plans; he frets and stewes. He sent the invitations back to the printer twice so they were late going out. Now that the night is actually here, he's worked himself into a state."

"So this is a case of hero worship gone crazy?"

"You have such a way with words," Pam said admiringly. We were outside Eric's office, and we could both hear him bellowing inside.

"He's not happy with the new bartender. He thinks there are not enough bottles of the blood the count is said to prefer, according to an interview in *American Vampire*."

I tried to imagine the Vlad Tepes, impaler of so many of his own countrymen, chatting with a reporter. I sure wouldn't want to be the one holding the pad and pencil. "What brand would that be?" I scrambled to catch up with the conversation.

"The Prince of Darkness is said to prefer Royalty."

"Ew." Why was I not surprised?

Royalty was a very, very rare bottled blood. I'd thought the brand was only a rumor until now. Royalty consisted of part synthetic blood and part real blood—the blood of, you guessed it, people of title. Before you go thinking of enterprising vamps ambushing that cute Prince William, let me reassure you. There were plenty of minor royals in Europe who were glad to give blood for an astronomical sum.

"After a month's worth of phone calls, we managed to get two bottles."

Pam was looking quite grim. “They cost more than we could afford. I’ve never known my maker to be other than business-wise, but this year Eric seems to be going overboard. Royalty doesn’t keep forever, you know, with the real blood in it...and now he’s worried that two bottles might not be enough. There is so much legend attached to Dracula, who can say what is true? He has heard that Dracula will only drink Royalty or...the real thing.”

“Real blood? But that’s illegal, unless you got a willing donor.”

Any vampire who took a human’s blood—against the human’s will—was liable to execution—by stake or sunlight, according to the vamp’s choice. The execution was usually carried out by another vamp, kept on retainer by the state. I personally thought any vampire who took an unwilling person’s blood deserved the execution, because there were enough fangbangers around who were more than willing to donate.

“And no vampire is allowed to kill Dracula, or even strike him,” Pam said, chiming right in on my thoughts. “Not that we’d want to strike our prince, of course,” she added hastily.

Right, I thought.

“He is held in such reverence that any vampire who assaults him must meet the sun. And we’re also expected to offer our prince financial assistance.”

I wondered if the other vampires were supposed to floss his fangs for him too.

The door to Eric’s office flew open with such vehemence that it bounced right back. It opened again more gently, and Eric emerged.

I had to gape. He looked positively edible. Eric is very tall, very broad, very blond, and tonight he was dressed in a tuxedo that had not come off any rack. This tux had been made for Eric, and he looked as good as any James Bond in it. Black cloth without a speck of lint, a snowy white shirt, and a hand-tied bow at his throat, and his beautiful hair rippling down his back...

“James Blond,” I muttered. Eric’s eyes were blazing with excitement. Without a word, he dipped me as though we were dancing and planted a hell of a kiss on me: lips, tongue, the entire osculant assemblage. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. When I was quivering, he assisted me to rise. His brilliant smile revealed glistening fangs. Eric had enjoyed himself.

“Hello to you too,” I said tartly, once I was sure I was breathing again.

“My delicious friend,” Eric said, and bowed.

I wasn’t sure I could be correctly called a friend, and I’d have to take his word for it that I was delicious. “What’s the program for the evening?” I asked, hoping that my host would calm down very soon.

“We’ll dance, listen to music, drink blood, watch the entertainment, and wait for the count to come,” Eric said. “I’m so glad you’ll be here tonight. We have a wide array of special guests, but you’re the only telepath.”

“Okay,” I said faintly.

“You look especially lovely tonight,” said Lyle. He’d been standing right behind Eric, and I hadn’t even noticed him. Slight and narrow-faced, with spiked black hair, Lyle didn’t have the presence Eric had acquired in a thousand years of life. Lyle was a visiting vamp from Alexandria, interning at the very successful Fangtasia because he wanted to open his own vampire bar. Lyle was carrying a small cooler, taking great care to keep it level.

“The Royalty,” Pam explained in a neutral voice.

“Can I see?” I asked.

Eric lifted the lid and showed me the contents: two blue bottles (for the blue blood, I presumed), with labels that bore the logo of a tiara and the single word *Royalty* in gothic script.

“Very nice,” I said, underwhelmed.

“He’ll be so pleased,” Eric said, sounding as happy as I’d ever heard him.

“You sound oddly sure that the—that Dracula will be coming,” I said. The hall was crowded, and we began moving to the public part of the club.

“I was able to have a business discussion with the Master’s handler,” he said. “I was able to express how much having the Master’s presence would honor me and my establishment.”

Pam rolled her eyes at me.

“You bribed him,” I translated. Hence Eric’s extra excitement this year, and his purchase of the Royalty.

I had never suspected Eric harbored this depth of hero worship for anyone except himself. I would never have believed Eric would spend good money for such a reason, either. Eric was charming and enterprising, and he took good care of his employees; but the first person on Eric’s admiration list was Eric, and his own well-being was Eric’s number one priority.

“Dear Sookie, you’re looking less than excited,” Pam said, grinning at me. Pam loved to make trouble, and she was finding fertile ground tonight.

Eric swung his head back to give me a look, and Pam's face relaxed into its usual bland smoothness.

"Don't you believe it will happen, Sookie?" he asked. From behind his back, Lyle rolled his eyes. He was clearly fed up with Eric's fantasy.

I'd just wanted to come to a party in a pretty dress and have a good time, and here I was, up a conversational creek.

"We'll all find out, won't we?" I said brightly, and Eric seemed satisfied. "The club looks beautiful." Normally, Fangtasia was the plainest place you could imagine, besides the lively gray-and-red paint scheme and the neon. The floors were concrete, the tables and chairs basic metal restaurant furnishings, the booths not much better. I could not believe that Fangtasia had been so transformed. Banners had been hung from the club's ceiling. Each banner was white with a red bear on it: a sort of stylized bear on its hind legs, one paw raised to strike.

"That's a replica of the Master's personal flag," Pam said in answer to my pointed finger. "Eric paid an historian at LSU to research it." Her expression made it clear she thought Eric had been gyped, big-time.

In the center of Fangtasia's small dance floor stood an actual throne on a small dais. As I neared the throne, I decided Eric had rented it from a theater company. It looked good from thirty feet away, but up close...not so much. However, it had been freshened up with a plump red cushion for the Dark Prince's derriere, and the dais was placed in the exact middle of a square of dark red carpet. All the tables had been covered with white or dark red cloths, and elaborate flower arrangements were in the middle of each table. I had to laugh when I examined one of the arrangements: in the explosion of red carnations and greenery were miniature coffins and full-size stakes. Eric's sense of humor had surfaced, finally.

Instead of WDED, the all-vampire radio station, the sound system was playing some very emotional violin music that was both scratchy and bouncy. "Transylvanian music," said Lyle, his face carefully expressionless. "Later, the DJ Duke of Death will take us for a musical journey." Lyle looked as though he would rather eat snails.

Against one wall by the bar, I spied a small buffet for beings who ate food, and a large blood fountain for those who didn't. The red fountain, flowing gently down several tiers of gleaming milky glass bowls, was surrounded by crystal goblets. Just a wee bit over the top.

“Golly,” I said weakly as Eric and Lyle went over to the bar.

Pam shook her head in despair. “The money we spent,” she said.

Not too surprisingly, the room was full of vampires. I recognized a few of the bloodsuckers present: Indira, Thalia, Clancy, Maxwell Lee, and Bill Compton, my ex. There were at least twenty more I had only seen once or twice, vamps who lived in Area Five under Eric’s authority. There were a few bloodsuckers I didn’t know at all, including a guy behind the bar that must be the new bartender. Fangtasia ran through bartenders pretty quickly.

There were also some creatures in the bar who were not vamps and not human, members of Louisiana’s supernatural community. The head of Shreveport’s werewolf pack, Colonel Flood, was sitting at a table with Calvin Norris, the leader of the small community of werepanthers who lived in and around Hot Shot, outside of Bon Temps. Colonel Flood, now retired from the air force, was sitting stiffly erect in a good suit, while Calvin was wearing his own idea of party clothes—a western shirt, new jeans, cowboy boots, and a black cowboy hat. He tipped it to me when he caught my eye, and he gave me a nod that expressed admiration. Colonel Flood’s nod was less personal but still friendly.

Eric had also invited a short, broad man who strongly reminded me of a goblin I’d met once. I was sure this male was a member of the same race. Goblins are testy and ferociously strong, and when they are angry their touch can burn, so I decided to stay a good distance away from this one. He was deep in conversation with a very thin woman with mad eyes. She was wearing an assemblage of leaves and vines. I wasn’t going to ask.

Of course, there weren’t any fairies. Fairies are as intoxicating to vampires as sugar water is to hummingbirds.

Behind the bar was the newest member of the Fangtasia staff, a short, burly, man with long, wavy dark hair. He had a prominent nose and large eyes, and he was taking everything in with an air of amusement while he moved around preparing drink orders.

“Who’s that?” I asked, nodding toward the bar. “And who are the strange vamps? Is Eric expanding?”

Pam said, “If you’re in transit on *Dracula Night*, the protocol is to check in at the nearest sheriff’s headquarters and share in the celebration there. That’s why there are vampires here you haven’t met. The new bartender

is Milos Griesniki, a recent immigrant from the Old Countries. He is disgusting.”

I stared at Pam. “How so?” I asked.

“A sneaker. A pryer.”

I’d never heard Pam express such a strong opinion, and I looked at the vampire with some curiosity.

“He tries to discover how much money Eric has, and how much the bar makes, and how much our little human barmaids get paid.”

“Speaking of whom, where are they?” The waitresses and the rest of the everyday staff, all vampire groupies (known in some circles as fangbangers), were usually much in evidence, dressed in filmy black and powdered almost as pale as the real vampires.

“Too dangerous for them on this night,” Pam said simply. “You will see that Indira and Clancy are serving the guests.” Indira was wearing a beautiful sari; she usually wore jeans and T-shirts, so I knew she had made an effort to dress up for the occasion. Clancy, who had rough red hair and bright green eyes, was in a suit. That was also a first. Instead of a regular tie, he wore a scarf tied into a floppy bow, and when I caught his eye he swept his hand from his head to his pants to demand my admiration. I smiled and nodded, though truthfully I liked Clancy better in his usual tough-guy clothes and heavy boots.

Eric was buzzing from table to table. He hugged and bowed and talked like a demented thing, and I didn’t know if I found this endearing or alarming. I decided it was both. I’d definitely discovered Eric’s weak side.

I talked to Colonel Flood and Calvin for a few minutes. Colonel Flood was as polite and distant as he always was; he didn’t care much for non-Weres, and now that he had retired, he only dealt with regular people when he had to. Calvin told me that he’d put a new roof on his house himself, and invited me to go fishing with him when the weather was warmer. I smiled but didn’t commit to anything. My grandmother had loved fishing, but I was only good for two hours, tops, and then I was ready to do something else. I watched Pam doing her second-in-command job, making sure all the visiting vampires were happy, sharply admonishing the new bartender when he made a mistake with a drink order. Milos Griesniki gave her back a scowl that made me shiver. But if anyone could take care of herself, it was Pam.

Clancy, who'd been managing the club for a month, was checking every table to make sure there were clean ashtrays (some of the vampires smoked) and that all dirty glasses and other discarded items were removed promptly. When DJ Duke of Death took over, the music changed to something with a beat. Some of the vampires turned out onto the dance floor, flinging themselves around with the extreme abandon only the undead show.

Calvin and I danced a couple of times, but we were nowhere in the vampire league. Eric claimed me for a slow dance, and though he was clearly distracted by thoughts of what the night might hold—Draculawise—he made my toenails quiver.

"Some night," he whispered, "there's going to be nothing else but you and me."

When the song was over, I had to go back to the table and have a long, cold drink. Lots of ice.

As the time drew closer to midnight, the vampires gathered around the blood fountain and filled the crystal goblets. The non-vamp guests also rose to their feet. I was standing beside the table where I'd been chatting with Calvin and Colonel Flood when Eric brought out a tabletop hand gong and began to strike it. If he'd been human, he'd have been flushed with excitement; as it was, his eyes were blazing. Eric looked both beautiful and scary, because he was so intent.

When the last reverberation had shivered into silence, Eric raised his own glass high and said, "On this most memorable of days, we stand together in awe and hope that the Lord of Darkness will honor us with his presence. O Prince, appear to us!"

We actually all stood in hushed silence, waiting for the Great Pumpkin—oh, wait, the Dark Prince. Just when Eric's face began to look downcast, a harsh voice broke the tension.

"My loyal son, I shall reveal myself!"

Milos Griesniki leaped from behind the bar, pulling off his tux jacket and pants and his shirt to reveal...an incredible jumpsuit made from black, glittery, stretchy stuff. I would have expected to see it on a girl going to her prom, a girl without much money who was trying to look unconventional and sexy. With his blocky body and dark hair and mustache, the one-piece made Milos look more like an acrobat in a third-rate circus.

There was an excited babble of low-voiced reaction. Calvin said, "Well..."

shit.” Colonel Flood gave a sharp nod, to say he agreed completely.

The bartender posed regally before Eric, who after a startled instant bowed before the much shorter vampire. “My lord,” Eric said, “I am humbled. That you should honor us...that you should actually be here...on this day, of all days...I am overcome.”

“Fucking poser,” Pam muttered in my ear. She’d glided up behind me in the hubbub following the bartender’s announcement.

“You think?” I was watching the spectacle of the confident and regal Eric babbling away, actually sinking down on one knee.

Dracula made a hushing gesture, and Eric’s mouth snapped shut in midsentence. So did the mouths of every vamp in the place. “Since I have been here incognito for a week,” Dracula said grandly, his accent harsh but not unattractive, “I have become so fond of this place that I propose to stay for a year. I will take your tribute while I am here, to live in the style I enjoyed during life. Though the bottled Royalty is acceptable as a stopgap, I, Dracula, do not care for this modern habit of drinking artificial blood, so I will require one woman a day. This one will do to start with.” He pointed at me, and Colonel Flood and Calvin moved instantly to flank me, a gesture I appreciated. The vampires looked confused, an expression which didn’t sit well on undead faces; except Bill. His face went completely blank.

Eric followed Vlad Tepes’s stubby finger, identifying me as the future Happy Meal. Then he stared at Dracula, looking up from his kneeling position. I couldn’t read his face at all, and I felt a stirring of fear. What would Charlie Brown have done if the Great Pumpkin wanted to eat the little red-haired girl?

“And as for my financial maintenance, a tithe from your club’s income and a house will be sufficient for my needs, with some servants thrown in: your second-in-command, or your club manager, one of them should do...” Pam actually growled, a low-level sound that made my hair stand up on my neck. Clancy looked as though someone had kicked his dog.

Pam was fumbling with the centerpiece of the table, hidden by my body. After a second, I felt something pressed into my hand. I glanced down. “You’re the human,” she whispered.

“Come, girl,” Dracula said, beckoning with a curving of his fingers. “I hunger. Come to me and be honored before all these assembled.”

Though Colonel Flood and Calvin both grabbed my arms, I said very

softly, "This isn't worth your lives. They'll kill you if you try to fight. Don't worry," and I pulled away from them, meeting their eyes, in turn, as I spoke. I was trying to project confidence. I didn't know what they were getting, but they understood there was a plan.

I tried to glide toward the spangled bartender as if I was entranced. Since that's something vamps can't do to me, and Dracula obviously never doubted his own powers, I got away with it.

"Master, how did you escape from your tomb at Târgoviște?" I asked, doing my best to sound admiring and dreamy. I kept my hands down by my sides so the folds of rosy chiffon would conceal them.

"Many have asked me that," the Dark Prince said, inclining his head graciously as Eric's own head jerked up, his brows drawn together. "But that story must wait. My beautiful one, I am so glad you left your neck bare tonight. Come closer to me...ERRRK!"

"That's for the bad dialogue!" I said, my voice trembling as I tried to shove the stake in even harder.

"And that's for the embarrassment," Eric said, giving the end a tap with his fist, just to help, as the "Prince" stared at us in horror. The stake obligingly disappeared into his chest.

"You dare...you dare," the short vampire croaked. "You shall be executed."

"I don't think so," I said. His face went blank, and his eyes were empty. Flakes began to drift from his skin as he crumpled.

But as the self-proclaimed Dracula sank to the floor and I looked around me, I wasn't so sure. Only the presence of Eric at my side kept the assemblage from falling on me and taking care of business. The vampires from out of town were the most dangerous; the vampires that knew me would hesitate.

"He wasn't Dracula," I said as clearly and loudly as I could. "He was an impostor."

"Kill her!" said a thin female vamp with short brown hair. "Kill the murderess!" She had a heavy accent, I thought Russian. I was about tired of the new wave of vamps.

Pot calling the kettle black, I thought briefly. I said, "You all really think this goober was the Prince of Darkness?" I pointed to the flaking mess on the floor, held together by the spangled jumpsuit.

"He is dead. Anyone who kills Dracula must die," said Indira quietly, but

not like she was going to rush over and rip my throat out.

“Any vampire who kills Dracula must die,” Pam corrected. “But Sookie is not a vampire, and this was not Dracula.”

“She killed one impersonating our founder,” Eric said, making sure he could be heard throughout the club. “Milos was not the real Dracula. I would have staked him myself if I had had my wits about me.” But I was standing right by Eric, my hand on his arm, and I knew he was shaking.

“How do you know that? How could she tell, a human who had only a few moments in his presence? He looked just like the woodcuts!” This from a tall, heavy man with a French accent.

“Vlad Tepes was buried at the monastery on Snagov,” Pam said calmly, and everyone turned to her. “Sookie asked him how he’d escaped from his tomb at Târgoviște.”

Well, that hushed them up, at least temporarily. I began to think I might live through this night.

“Recompense must be made to his maker,” pointed out the tall, heavy vampire. He’d calmed down quite a bit in the last few minutes.

“If we can determine his maker,” Eric said, “certainly.”

“I’ll search my database,” Bill offered. He was standing in the shadows, where he’d lurked all evening. Now he took a step forward, and his dark eyes sought me out like a police helicopter searchlight catches the fleeing felon on Cops. “I’ll find out his real name, if no one here has met him before.”

All the vamps present glanced around. No one stepped forward to claim Milos/Dracula’s acquaintance.

“In the meantime,” Eric said smoothly, “let’s not forget that this event should be a secret amongst us until we can find out more details.” He smiled with a great show of fang, making his point quite nicely. “What happens in Shreveport, stays in Shreveport.”

There was a murmur of assent.

“What do you say, guests?” Eric asked the non-vamp attendees.

Colonel Flood said, “Vampire business is not pack business. We don’t care if you kill each other. We won’t meddle in your affairs.”

Calvin shrugged. “Panthers don’t mind what you do.”

The goblin said, “I’ve already forgotten the whole thing,” and the madwoman beside him nodded and laughed. The few other non-vamps

hastily agreed.

No one solicited my answer. I guess they were taking my silence for a given, and they were right.

Pam drew me aside. She made an annoyed sound, like “Tchk,” and brushed at my dress. I looked down to see a fine spray of blood had misted across the chiffon skirt. I knew immediately that I’d never wear my beloved bargain dress again.

“Too bad, you look good in pink,” Pam said.

I started to offer the dress to her, then thought again. I would wear it home and burn it. Vampire blood on my dress? Not a good piece of evidence to leave hanging around someone’s closet. If experience has taught me anything, it’s to dispose instantly of bloodstained clothing

“That was a brave thing you did,” Pam said.

“Well, he was going to bite me,” I said. “To death.”

“Still,” she said.

I didn’t like the calculating look in her eyes.

“Thank you for helping Eric when I couldn’t,” Pam said. “My maker is a big idiot about the prince.”

“I did it because he was going to suck my blood,” I told her.

“You did some research on Vlad Tepes.”

“Yes, I went to the library after you told me about the original Dracula, and I Googled him.”

Pam’s eyes gleamed. “Legend has it that the original Vlad III was beheaded before he was buried.”

“That’s just one of the stories surrounding his death,” I said.

“True. But you know that not even a vampire can survive a beheading.”

“I would think not.”

“So you know the whole thing may be a crock of shit.”

“Pam,” I said, mildly shocked. “Well, it might be. And it might not. After all, Eric talked to someone who said he was the real Dracula’s gofer.”

“You knew that Milos wasn’t the real Dracula the minute he stepped forth.”

I shrugged.

Pam shook her head at me. “You’re too soft, Sookie Stackhouse. It’ll be the death of you some day.”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” I said. I was watching Eric, his golden hair

falling forward as he looked down at the rapidly disintegrating remains of the self-styled Prince of Darkness. The thousand years of his life sat on him heavily, and for a second I saw every one of them. Then, by degrees, his face lightened, and when he looked up at me, it was with the expectancy of a child on Christmas Eve.

“Maybe next year,” he said.