When Monsters Meet

by Greye

Summary

When a group of poachers destroys a wolf family in the forest around Forks, Chief Swan thought he was rescuing a wolf pup from a slow, lonely death. What he got instead was the ultimate gift he could receive: a family.

In which Bella is Faoladh.

Rosella. (Rosalie/Bella) F/F. Formerly titled "The Girl Who Cried Wolf".

Notes

Greye's Notes: So this story is completely different from others I've written, as I'm sure you will see immediately! Nevertheless, I hope that you will read, and enjoy. If you really like it, or are just feeling generous, please leave a review! I'd love to hear your thoughts. (Hehe, Edward joke.)

As always, many thanks to my sister Lady_Lullaby for keeping me from falling flat on my face here! If you like Harry Potter stuffs, check her out!

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Meet the Cullens

There was nothing quite like running with the wind in her fur, Bella reflected as her paws landed amongst brush and bracken of the forest. Her lupine nose was filled with the scents of the forest-decaying earth, rich pine, the faint smell of rain-a storm coming, no doubt - and, there. Her ears perked up when her nose picked up the unmistakable smell of rabbit. She could feel saliva building in her jaws as she closed in on her prey. The jack rabbit sunning himself in a clear patch of forest never knew what got him. Her jaws snapped his neck with a swift crack, and that was that. Bella swallowed the warm, mouthful of meat, satisfied by the rich flavor. Her ear twitched as she heard someone calling her name. Resigned, she finished her meal quickly and padded back into the forest.

She emerged from the woods behind a modest, two-story home to find her father standing with hands on his hips, about to call her once more until he spotted her familiar, red, grey-brown form trotting from the woods.

"Good grief Bella," he chastised, his expression stern, "You're nearly late for your first day at school."

The wolf rolled her eyes and let out a huff, before rolling her shoulders as a series of cracks rippled through her body. Her father winced and looked away as the transformation took hold. In the place of the wolf soon stood a teenage girl, mostly. Her eyes were a greenish brown, her ears had just the slightest taper to them, and her brown hair was peppered with the occasional red, grey, and white. On an ordinary human, the hair might have had an aging effect - but on Bella, who was not human at all, it looked natural. She stretched her human form, only satisfied when her back gave a very audible pop. The change didn't hurt precisely, but it certainly wasn't comfortable.

She smirked at Charlie's red face, still resolutely turned away. "Come on Dad, it's not like you haven't seen this before. You're such a prude." Stark naked, Bella walked past him and back into the house.

As she got ready for school, Bella reflected on the years leading up to this moment. Even though she had lived with Charlie all of her life, she had never attended the schools in Forks. This was partially because Charlie feared what would happen if people discovered what she was - which, she admitted, was a valid concern. After all, ordinary humans didn't generally turn into wolves on a whim. And when she had been younger, Bella had not understood the need to keep her identity a secret. The wolf was an equal part of herself - she was as much wolf as human, and so her wolf state was as natural feeling as her human state. She had shifted from wolf to human and back again with no thought to who might be around to see. Some of that rebelliousness was still there, she thought ruefully as she pulled a white t-shirt over her head, evidenced by her change in front of Charlie. That had been completely unnecessary, but oh so fun. She grinned again when she remembered the look on his face. Charlie became so easily flustered.

Selecting a pair of jeans and some worn out chucks, Bella finished getting ready quickly. She slung a side bag over her shoulder-her choice in place of a regular backpack-and headed back downstairs.

Hiding had been necessary in those early years. Bella had needed the time to acclimate to being a human being, and Charlie wasn't always the best teacher. Now, at 18, she understood why she needed to keep her wolf form under wraps. She would never understand why humans were so callous toward beings different from themselves, but she guessed, as Charlie had repeated to her dozens of times over the years, that was just the way things were. In preparing her to enter society though, Charlie had not neglected her studies. He had been a diligent tutor, and had acquired for her necessary materials to cover areas he himself struggled with. As she neared the upper levels of high
school, however, he had reached well past his limit in what he could adequately teach her. And so it was, she thought with a thrill, that she would actually get to attend school. Despite herself, a giddy grin stretched across her face. A grin which withered when she ran into Charlie at the foot of the stairs, his arms folded and a grim expression on his face.

"Cheer up Dad, it's not like I'm going to my execution." She said, grinning cheekily at him. Charlie only shook his head, and she could guess what he was thinking. Bella released a sigh as she moved past him. "Alright alright, I know already. Keep my head down, don't get into trouble, and don't trust anyone." Finally, a small smile cracked his facade.

"That's my girl." He said fondly, reaching out to ruffle her hair. Bella deftly ducked out of his reach with the ease of practice, laughing. His expression grew serious again. "Just be careful, Bella. I want you to enjoy this, but I don't know what I would do if anything ever happened to you." Bella sobered as she saw the worry in his eyes.

Settling herself, she did her best to look reassuring. She didn't want him to change his mind, after all. "I promise I'll be careful. I'll call you if I have any trouble." She stuck her hands in her pockets and smiled. There was silence for a few moments, before Charlie smiled as well and they both relaxed.

"Okay," he said, gesturing to the door, "If I hold you up any longer, you really will be late. Go on outside, I have a surprise for you."

Lifting an eyebrow in interest, Bella spun on her heel and headed for the door. When she pulled it open, she couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips. There, in the driveway, was a banged up old truck. The red paint was worn off in places, and it looked like it had survived a war zone. Bella instantly loved it.

"I know it's not much, but I got it for a good price and I know it runs..." Bella cut off Charlie's rambling when she turned back around and threw her arms around him in excitement. She squeezed the breath out of him.

"Dad it's perfect! Thank you so much!" She released him and missed his pained groan and the hand he passed over his ribs in her haste to check out her new ride. She went to open the door before realizing she didn't have the keys. She turned back to Charlie expectantly only to find that the keys were already arcing through the air toward her. Bella snatched them from the air easily, and grinned at Charlie's red face.

"I'm glad you like it." He mumbled after a moment, embarrassment still clear in his features. "Now get going!"

Bella didn't need to be told twice. She hopped into the cab and laughed in delight when the loud engine growled to life. Her ears flinched away from the magnitude of the noise, but she didn't care. It was perfect. As she looked back at her father standing in the doorway, her heart suddenly swelled in her chest. She had been so lucky to be taken in by this man. What her life would have been like with out him, she didn't dare think about.

After carefully backing out of the driveway, she was off.

Getting to the school was easy-Forks was her hometown after all, and she had been by there before with her father. What she wasn't expecting was the sudden bout of nerves that hit her the moment she pulled into the parking lot. Every head swiveled in her direction, surveying the loud truck and the new student driving it. Bella parked as quickly as she could and killed the engine. Her heart was suddenly pounding and her face was flushed with embarrassment. What she was embarrassed about exactly, she wasn't sure. Being dropped off in her dad's squad car would have been even more
embarrassing, she reminded herself. After taking a deep breath, she hopped out of the cab and slung her bag across her body.

"Take it easy girl." She muttered to herself under her breath. "You're the new kid, but you aren't exactly new. They know who you are."

Pep talk over, Bella headed toward the front office to get her schedule for the day. She studiously avoided meeting the curious stares directed her way, and kept her hands clenched around the strap of her bag. Her eyes stayed firmly on her shoes as she walked until she reached the office. Shyness wasn't normally part of her personality, but she couldn't help feeling nervous. Nerves quickly fled her mind when she reached the office, however.

The moment she walked into the room, her sharp nose picked up a scent she had never encountered before. The hackles at the base of her neck rose, and she felt a growl building in her chest. Startled by her sudden, instinctual reaction, Bella forced herself to stop and take another whiff to figure out what was going on. Again, immediately, her body reacted. The fine hairs on her arms stood on end, and she could feel the wolf wanting to be free. Only a lifetime of carefully practiced control kept her from changing right then and there. Bella took a careful step out of the office and braced her back against the cool bricks of the building. She forced herself to focus on the cool, rough surface behind her and took a deep breath of fresh air. Thankfully she didn't smell it out here. Whatever the scent belonged to must have entered the office from the main building.

Once she was sufficiently calm, Bella felt only dismay. What could possibly be here that would set off her instincts that way? The animal part of her brain was practically screaming danger. This was just what she needed! Irrational anger surged in her. She finally, finally had a chance to go to a real school and she almost blew it on the first day! "Great job, idiot." She growled under her breath. What even was this smell?

The bell rang. Noting the time, Bella forced herself back into the office to get her schedule, breathing through her mouth this time to be on the safe side. Once that was completed, she gave herself time to think.

It hadn't smelled bad persay—it was a strange, sweet scent that otherwise might even have been pleasant. She had no idea what it could be, but clearly her wolf side recognized it as an enemy. What would happen when she met the owner of this scent? She hardly dared think of it. Her keen ears picked up someone moving to fall into step with her.

"Hello!" A jovial voice sounded in her ear and she winced slightly. Distracted, she offered the boy a faint smile, taking in his slicked back black hair, black frame glasses hiding blue eyes, and acne ravaged face. He sported an open, welcoming smile that caught her a little off guard. "I'm Eric!" The boy stuck out his hand, and Bella warily met it with her own. After giving her hand a surprisingly firm shake, he continued. "And you're Isabella right? Chief's kid?" Bella winced at the use of her full name, but nodded. "I've seen you around before, thought it's been a while." He hadn't asked a question, but Bella felt it all the same.

"Dad used to home-school me, but this year I thought it would be fun to try regular school." She explained. Eric nodded in understanding. "And call me Bella," she added.

"Well then, allow me to welcome you to Forks High, land of terrible cafeteria food, and well-meaning, but boring teachers." His grin was crooked and infectious, and despite her previous unease, she found herself smiling back. "Let me see your schedule?" Eric asked, and Bella wordlessly passed it to him. She was relieved he hadn't questioned her about her homeschooling. Charlie had led her to believe that high schoolers were a nosy lot, but Eric seemed alright.
"Cool," he said, interrupting her reverie, "I've got 1st hour with you; we can walk together." He passed her back her schedule, and Bella slipped it into her backpack.

"Thanks," she replied, finding her voice again, "I might have been late trying to find it." Eric waved her off and chattered animatedly about their 1st hour math teacher, sharing everything he'd heard about the man. Bella found herself unintentionally tuning him out as she inwardly exulted that she'd already met someone nice, who might be her friend.

"Here we are!" Eric announced, and Bella realized they'd made it. Most of the students were already there, but she found a spot easily enough and returned Eric's wave as he sat across the room. Class got underway a few minutes later, and she was glad of Eric's help. No need to draw more attention to herself by being late to her first class ever.

Math class was surprisingly easy, but she reminded herself that math was Charlie's best subject, so naturally the material came more easily to her. Her next two classes passed simply enough—English and wood shop. Bella came out of wood shop beaming and covered in sawdust. She shook some of the dust from her grey/brown hair and laughed. She knew which class would be her favorite. Eric found her again in the grassy area in front of the wood shop, and she met his smile more easily this time.

"Hey Bella!" He laughed when he saw the state of her, and Bella continued brushing the saw dust off herself. "I see Ms. Ruben already let you guys work. She's pretty cool." His eyes glazed a little and Bella raised an eyebrow. Seemed he was hung up on the "pretty" part. Well, Bella couldn't blame him. Ms. Ruben was in her 30s at least, but that didn't diminish her good looks in the slightest. Her light brown hair, bright blue eyes and dimples were killer...not to mention how good she was with her hands... With a start, Bella realized she was probably mirroring Eric's glazed expression. Her cheeks flushed as she shook herself out of it, and she cleared her throat rather pointedly at her companion. Eric nodded several times and motioned for her to follow him. "Come on," he said, "Lunch room's over here. You can sit with us."

Bella followed after Eric happily enough, sparing only a stray thought to who "us" was. Eric would introduce her, she was sure.

As Eric pushed the double doors open, Bella found herself overwhelmed by the sudden noise—so many people. Her first instinct was to cover her ears against the cacophony of clattering silverware and trays, scrape of chairs, and din of raised voices. One hand even drifted up, but she jerked it down and took a deep breath, trying to calm her thundering heart. Eric turned back to say something and must have seen something of her expression because he immediately ushered her back out of the room and closed the doors, blessedly blocking some of the noise.

"Hey, you okay?" He asked awkwardly, hands shoved in his pockets. Bella smiled gratefully at him. "Yeah, sorry. The noise and the people—just kind of overwhelmed me for a sec. I'm good." She felt a little embarrassed, but the way Eric's expression morphed into understanding made her feel better.

"Oh sure—that makes sense. I can see how it would be unsettling at first, since you've never gone to public school. All good now?" When Bella nodded, he opened one of the doors again and led her first to the line, where they each received the day's lunch—Bella saw what he meant by "horrible", her enhanced sense of smell was not enjoying the stench of over cooked vegetables, stale bread, and something that was decidedly not real meat on it.

She felt Eric glance at her sidelong. "Too bad burgers are your first taste of cafeteria food," Eric remarked. "At least taco day isn't this bad." Bella just shrugged in response. She'd get used to it.
It was as she followed Eric to a table that the smell from the morning hit her again. Her muscles locked and heart rate spiked as her instincts screamed to take over. It took a monumental effort not to drop her tray, and to force her legs to start moving again. To appease her instincts, she told herself she was going to act like she had noticed nothing until she had identified and assessed the threat. This seemed to help loosen her muscles a bit, and she cast her brown eyes slowly around, her brain deftly filtering through the other scents in the lunchroom until-

Ahh.

As her eyes landed on the table of students a few tables away from the one Eric had led her to, she knew without further investigation that the danger smell was coming from *them*. Bella allowed her eyes to take them in-their bodies such utter perfection even her keen eyes detected no flaws. It wasn't natural. And the way they sat-so still. They might as well be stone. She swallowed the growl rising in her throat. Whatever they were, they couldn't be human.

"Here Bella, let me introduce you." Eric's voice disrupted her thoughts for the second time that day, and it was difficult this time to refocus on him, to deliberately turn away from the threat.

*I don't know what they are yet,* she told herself internally, *Until I do, it's best to stay away.* That was easier said than done, however. It went against her kinds purpose-protection. Protection of humans. She forced a smile as she was introduced to Mike, Angela, Lauren, and Jessica. She sat and endured their questions-and imposing a calm on herself that she didn't really feel. Her facade only cracked once when she felt eyes on her. Bella's eyes flicked up to meet burning gold. She assessed the boy looking at her, with his burnished bronze hair and perfect skin. She supposed he was handsome, but just then there was a look on his face that made him look constipated as he stared hard at her. The dominance of her wolf rose in her and kept her from looking away. She felt satisfied when he finally did, and tuned back in to the table only to find they had gone silent. She flushed sheepishly.

"Sorry, what?"

They were all smiling at her now, but it was Mike who spoke up. "Don't worry about it. Everyone who sees the Cullens for the first time does that. They're hard to miss, right?" He nodded his head to the table she'd been looking at.

Bella blinked. "They're all related?" She glanced back at the table again, taking in the bronze-haired boy, the hulking guy next to him with short black hair, the short, petite girl with spiky black hair, and the boy of medium height and build by her with shaggy, sandy blonde hair. None of them looked remotely related, apart from clearly being the same type of creature, and her eyes detected no even vaguely similar facial markers that would indicate siblings. She looked back at Mike, who explained.

"They're all adopted, actually. Emmett, the big guy, and Alice are the only two actually related." Bella's eyes flicked over sharply and assessed Emmett and Alice again. No-no way they were related. Her eyes narrowed, but she looked back at Mike as he continued. "They all moved down here last year. The doctor at the hospital, Dr. Cullen, is their dad. He and his wife are really young though." Bella took in this information and popped a fry into her mouth.

Jessica interjected. "Mike, you forgot Rosalie and Jasper." Bella gazed turned to her as she spoke. "Rosalie and Jasper are brother and sister too-and their last name is actually Hale. Jasper dates Alice and Emmett dates Rosalie, though I guess she's not here today." Bella's eyes had tracked back to the table already and noted this "Rosalie" must not be here because she saw only one female at their table. Jessica was still talking, she realized.

"Unnatural, if you ask me." Bella froze for a second before she realized the girl wasn't talking about her. She relaxed as the girl finished. "They shouldn't all be dating like that." Bella frowned.
"Well if they aren't related, what difference does it make?" She posed the question to Jessica, but she swore she saw the smallest Cullen, Alice smile from the corner of her eyes. Could these creatures hear them? Alarmed at the possibility, she immediately decided to watch her words.

Jessica huffed in response. "Still..." she grumbled. At that point Mike suddenly swore as he noted something on his phone, and the topic changed to the Seahawks prospects for the season. Bella was thankful for the subject change, as it gave her a chance to think.

So there were at least five of these creatures...these Cullens. She knew instinctively they were not human, anymore than she was. As for what they were, only time would tell. For the moment at least, they didn't seem to be causing any harm. She wondered suddenly if they could tell that she wasn't human, either. Worry worked through her until she had an idea. If they knew, they couldn't necessarily out her. Not unless they too wanted their secret revealed. That would have to be enough.

The bell rang, and Bella realized with a start that she had barely touched her food. She got up to dispose of it, and found herself in sudden proximity to one of the Cullens - Alice. She eyed the small girl cautiously, and felt suspicion snake through her when it became apparent none of the Cullens had eaten anything from their trays either. She handed her tray off to a lunch lady and turned to leave, but stopped short of running right into the small Cullen - Alice - again. The creature was looking up at her with a curious smile, and Bella couldn't help smirking back. Odd, considering her reaction to their scent. She tentatively scented the air, and felt some of the same reactions coming. She resigned herself to breathing through her mouth until she got a handle on this.

"Hi!" Said Alice, in a voice so bubbly and cheerful it could only be described as a chirp, "I'm Alice! Who are you?" Bella hesitated a moment, surprised Alice didn't seem to know of her. Or perhaps she did, and was merely being polite.

"Hi." Her response came belatedly, "I'm Bella...Swan." Alice's eyes seemed to shimmer in delight, and she held out her hand. "Swan like Chief Swan?" At her nod, she continued, "I like your dad, he's a nice man." Bella wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or alarmed that this creature knew her father. She eyed Alice's outstretched hand for a moment before shaking it. Alice's hand was surprisingly cool, cold even, Bella thought. Regular humans felt a bit cool to her too, as her blood naturally ran hot, but Alice's hand was markedly cooler even than a human's.

"Yeah, he is. Well, nice to meet you Alice. See you around?" She ventured after a moment. She was painfully aware of how suspicious she herself was acting, but couldn't find it in herself to do any better. Alice, for her part, just smiled her assent and skipped away. Her eyes widened incredulously. With any luck, she'd be ahead in that class too and be able to ponder what she had learned. Not for the first time, she lamented the loss of her family, who might have educated her more about the supernatural world. She had been too young - only five - when they were killed. She remembered little. It was possible Charlie knew more, but she was certain he would have warned her if he had noticed anything...off...about them. She sighed, and realized her feet had delivered her straight to the Biology room. She pushed the door open just as the bell rang.

"Cutting it a bit close Miss Swan, aren't we?" The teacher addressed her as she walked in, and she flushed. The Cullen scent washed over her then, and she closed her eyes in resignation. No rest for the weary it seemed. Funny how the thought of just ditching school never occurred to her. "Take a seat beside Mr. Cullen please - you two will be partners this semester." A groan escaped her and her eyes flew open when she realized she'd groaned aloud. The teacher, Mr. Banner, raised an eyebrow and waved her to her seat. She turned and stopped briefly when she realized she was partnered with
the constipated Cullen. Jessica, who had that class with her, looked at her strangely as she passed, for her reaction at being paired with a Cullen. No doubt Jessica would have been thrilled in her shoes.

She settled gingerly in the chair beside the Cullen boy. For his part, he turned on her a look half curious, half accusing. "I'm Edward." He said peremptorily.

"I'm Bella." She responded in kind, and was grateful that Mr. Banner started the lesson then, because she really did not want to talk to Edward.

She felt his eyes on her from time to time, and whenever that happened she felt the fine hairs at the back of her neck stiffen and it was all she could do to keep her lips closed when all they wanted to do was pull back in a snarl. Once, she couldn't suppress a twitch - and she knew that he had seen it. Bella sat stiffly through the remainder of the class, and moved to leave immediately after. His scent bothered her even more than that girl Alice's. She was certain now that he was whom she'd smelled in the office.

Before she'd made it out the door she heard his soft voice calling her back. There was a quality to it that she couldn't quite identify... It was like he was flirting without actually flirting...or something. Was he trying to be charming? Caught, she turned back toward him reluctantly and found him staring at her intensely in what she was now cluing in as his idea of a sultry, sexy look. No doubt this drew in humans by the dozens, but Bella was not human. To her, it looked like he was angry or constipated again.

"What?" She asked, just this side of rude. Normally she was quite polite, but she was still struggling with her danger instinct, and she knew it wouldn't stop until she had fully identified and assessed the threat. It was just how she worked. Besides, she was a little offended that he was turning this look on her without even talking to her first. Sleazebag.

Edward, for his part, seemed puzzled by her lack of reaction, but he recovered. "I wondered if I might escort you to your next class? I wanted a chance to get to know you a little." His words were courteous, but Bella knew he had an ulterior motive. Still, Mr. Banner was eyeing them impatiently, and she did need to get to her next class.

"Fine." Her answer was short, and she spun on a heel and headed back into the hallway. Edward appeared next to her after a few seconds, and it seemed he planned to make the most of his time because he jumped right in.

"So you're Chief Swan's daughter?" His tone remained distant, and Bella glanced over at him sharply. He already knew the answer to this question.

"How about you ask me what you really want to know?" She was rewarded by the sight of the skin around his eyes tightening. *Ha,* she thought, *got him.* He shot her such a sudden look of frustration and perplexity that she almost thought he'd heard her thought. But that was impossible.

"Alright." His tone was clipped, and she felt inordinately pleased that she had spoiled his niceties. She waited and kept her heart rate under careful control. Whatever these creatures were, they were definitely predators, and they likely had excellent hearing. They stopped outside the history classroom, and he turned to look at her. She noted that his eyes had darkened from a bright yellow gold to almost black. She added that to her mental list of what she knew of these creatures.

"Why haven't you been to school before today?" His voice was too soft to be overheard, but she answered normally.

"Because my dad homeschooled me. I talked him into letting me try high school this year." This was
an easy enough answer, and it was pretty much the truth. Edward didn't seem satisfied.

"My family moved here last year, and we've - I've - never seen you before. Forks isn't a big place."

Bella's brow drew down in agitation. Who did he think he was? Luckily, she had a ready answer.

"Not that it's any of your business, Captain Constipated, but last year I tried an alternative school. It was like boarding school, so I was rarely home." Another partial truth. Bella rested a hand on top of her bag and shifted her weight impatiently. "Was that all? Class is about to start." And my other self wants to rip your throat out even though there would be no satisfying gush of hot - Bella's eyes widened as her brain suddenly realized what her ears had already noted. No heartbeat. Edward, who sported a strange expression on his face now, was standing plenty close enough for her humanoid ears to pick up...silence. Despite her earlier resolve to remain calm and keep a steady heartbeat, she found herself unable to do so anymore. He noticed the change, she could tell, and there was something else behind her eyes. Almost as if he knew of her animosity.

"That's all for now." He said finally, walking away. Bella gratefully slipped into her history classroom and had to resist the urge to cry when she saw that the only open seat was beside Jasper Cullen. This was the most stressful day of her life, she thought glumly. And that included the time a bear attacked her because she'd eaten some of his honey. It had taken weeks to calm him back down. Normally Bella could reach an understanding with animals, but bears were temperamental at best.

With some trepidation, she crossed to sit beside Jasper, and found herself relieved when all he did was offer a faint smile by way of greeting. He didn't seem as chatty as his brother, which could only be a good thing. As she began pulling books and things from her bag, Bella felt some of her previous worry dissipate. It was going to be fine, she reassured herself. These creatures were dangerous, but if they were hurting people she thought it would be obvious. And she lived with the police chief; she would know if there were murders or disappearances right? And, she reflected, she was dangerous too.

Bella passed that class feeling strangely relaxed. She even forgot to think about the fact these things had no heartbeat.

Reality crashed back over her the moment she put some distance between herself and the history class. She gasped as her pent up worries flooded her again. "What the hell?" She asked herself, startling a few students nearby. She apologized and hurried on to the gym.

Did my brain fall asleep or something?

Okay, so what had she learned? No heartbeat. She would have to make sure to pay attention the next time she was near one to be certain they were all that way, but she had no real doubts. When she got into the girls' locker room, she breathed a sigh of relief that no Cullens were around to ambush her. She pulled the shorts and t-shirt she had been told to bring from her bag, and started dressing out with the other girls. It wasn't until after she'd pulled her shirt off that she belatedly remembered her original plan to only change in the bathroom. Damn these Cullens and their distractions! The gasps around her and widened eyed stares made it clear the damage was done. She sighed.

"Bella..." a girl, Angela, Bella thought, spoke. She knew the unspoken question. A thick, ropy scar curved from beneath her left breast and extended over her rib cage to stop about halfway across her back.

Bella pulled her gym shirt on slowly before answer, letting the girls have a good look. Better they got their fill now, she reasoned. "I had a bad accident when I was little." She sighed when this didn't seem sufficient. No doubt this was gossip gold. So she told the story she and her dad had concocted together about her back story. "When I was five, my parents and I were in a car accident. My parents died, and I almost did." She saw the next natural question and answered it quickly. "Chief Swan is
actually my adopted father. He knew my parents, and took me in." It always hurt to say, but getting it out fast helped. She felt pity in some looks, sympathy from Angela, and almost...glee? From Jessica and Lauren. She narrowed her eyes as anger flashed through her Gossip mongers. Well, she'd just learned who was and was not friend material. Without another word, she walked out the the locker room and into the gym.

She pulled up short when her eyes took in the other students in the gym. It seemed the Fates weren't done with her yet, Bella thought with a mental groan. Emmett Cullen was standing near the boys locker rooms, talking to the teacher. Coach Clapp, Bella thought. Well, might as well get this over with.

A few minutes later, Coach Clapp had divided the class up into two teams. They would be playing basketball - a sport Bella had never played. Despite her "supernaturalness", as she called it, Bella could be a little klutzy sometimes and she'd never really given organized sports a chance. Charlie had taught her some self-defense, but that wasn't really something that she would need against an ordinary human. Still, as she eyed Emmett Cullen on the opposing team, she thought that perhaps some of those moves would come in handy after all. The big guy met her eyes then, and she narrowed hers in response. Green met gold intensely, and felt the challenge issued. A half feral grin crossed her face, and she gave him the faintest of nods.

Coach Clapp blew the whistle, and the game began. Bella realized early in that the humans around her moved at a much slower pace than she did, and grudgingly slowed herself down so that she wouldn't stand out too much. She also realized that she totally sucked at basketball. She grimaced as Emmett easily slipped around her guard and scored a layup. And she hadn't even known what a "layup" was until that day. She felt angry as her team took the ball back down the court. Bella didn't always consider herself competitive, per say, but there was something about losing to this creature that she just couldn't abide. Picking up the pace a bit she easily caught the ball as Mike passed it to her, and went to dribble up to the basket only to halt as a huge wall of pale skin appeared in front of her. Bella skidded back to avoid slamming into Emmett, and couldn't help the faint growl that escaped her when he stole the ball from her with a shit-eating grin on his face. He raced past her back down the court and Bella followed just as quickly, pulling up next to him easily. She reached out to swat the ball away from him and cursed as he pivoted away from her so quickly she would have missed it if she'd blinked. The next thing she knew he was dunking the ball and receiving the adulation of his team. He shot her a wink as he jogged away and she gaped at him, affronted.

Her green eyes narrowed once again. Alright Bella. What is it that Charlie always says? Get my head in the game!

The next several minutes of the game was fierce as Bella focused solely on Emmett, and he on her. Once she got a feel for the game, Bella found that she could keep up at times with the huge pale boy, and was gratified to see the surprise in his eyes. And was that...delight? It looked like the creature was genuinely delighted that she could keep up with him. Well, she guessed it did make the game a little more fun. Not much honor in defeating a bunch of humans when they can't help that they just aren't as strong and fast as she is. But Emmett? She knew she hadn't even seen the least of his abilities. That scared her...and oddly thrilled her.

By the end of the game, she was a little winded and enjoying the adrenaline rush. Despite her caution, she met Emmett's smile with a surprisingly genuine one of her own. The big guy followed her towards the girls' locker rooms and she paused so he could catch up.

"Hey, Bella right?" His voice was open, friendly, and surprisingly warm. "That was awesome! I mean, I could tell you've never played this game before, but you picked it up really fast." Bella found herself smiling at him, much as she had at his sister Alice. Some kind of reflex she didn't know she
had. Something about Emmett, despite her instincts still indicating danger, made her feel at ease.

"Yeah, that's me." She replied, "No, I've never played before. My dad loves it, so you'd think I'd have picked up a thing or two but..." She shrugged. A glint entered her green eyes as she recalled the game, and she grinned. "It was fun playing against you Emmett. I think P.E. will be a fun class this year." Would they ever get a chance to really test their skills against one another? She wondered.

Emmett returned her grin, but she saw the surprise on his face. "How did you...?"

Bella shrugged, "Same way you know my name, I guess. People talk!" Emmett nodded, and took a step back toward the boys' locker rooms.

"Well, I've gotta get ready to go. It was nice meeting you. See you tomorrow Bella!" With a light wave, Emmett turned and jogged away to get himself changed, and Bella turned back into the girls' locker room herself. She couldn't help it, she thought as she went to get changed. She rather liked Emmett.

The other girls didn't stare much when she got changed this time, and she fell into an easy conversation on the way out with Angela. As soon as she made it to her truck, though, she was ready to escape. She needed time to think about what she had seen today, and to talk to Charlie about it. A decision would need to be made. Would she return to Forks High, or continue to be homeschooled? She knew what she wanted, but Bella had learned early on that what she wanted and what was best were often at odds with one another. With a sigh that didn't really relieve the knotted tension inside her, she turned the key in the ignition and headed for home. So preoccupied was she, that she didn't notice the four pairs of curious, golden eyes that followed her departure.
Meet the Blacks...and Someone New?

Chapter Notes

Greye's Notes: Enjoy this next installment!

Many thanks to my sister Lady_Lullaby for editing this for me! If you have a moment, go check out her awesome stories!

Disclaimer: As always, I own nothing of Twilight-just my own original characters and ideas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bella got home, she groaned to see her empty driveway. Of course Charlie wasn't home yet, he would be working late. Even later if something happened that he needed to help with. She growled in frustration and hopped out of the truck. Two steps toward the house and she felt her skin suddenly itching, burning. Changing directions, Bella sprinted for the woods, grasping at her shirt collar and just making it into the trees before stripping it off. Fur erupted from her skin and she groaned as she felt her bones begin to shift and reform before she could get her pants off. The tell-tale rip echoed through the woods and Bella whined, though more from disappointment than pain - she had liked those pants. But this change did hurt. Her groans turned to whimpers as her body twisted andreshaped itself until finally, just the echo of pain remained.

Full awareness came back a minute later and she realized she was laying on the ground panting like she'd just run a marathon. Give herself a shake, Bella got to her feet. Arching her back like a cat, she felt satisfied as her spine cracked a little. Her now yellow-gold eyes snagged on her torn cloths, and she huffed. Damn it. She hated when she changed like this. Her subconscious still sought comfort in the wolf, as it had been her natural, original shape. When things became to stressful, or scary, this was her body's knee-jerk reaction. Bella had gotten better at controlling this urge over the years, but today's events had been overwhelming. And whenever the change wasn't her choice, it freaking hurt.

A faint, thudding heartbeat reached her keen years and she froze, locating the sound. She wasn't really hungry, but the desire to hunt was strong. She shrugged mentally. She might as well make the most of it, Charlie wasn't home yet anyway. Allowing her cares to drop away, Bella moved deeper into the forest to engage in the hunt.

A couple of hours later, Bella returned. Her belly was sated, and she felt a good deal calmer than she had when she'd left. Returning to the wolf was a balm. She couldn't allow herself to let go like this all the time, she reminded herself. Running away from trouble was not her way, or the way of her kind. As she got nearer to the house, Bella could smell that Charlie had company. A faint growl escaped her. She wouldn't be able to just walk into the house naked now. The wolf paused and glanced around, yellow-gold eyes catching on a log a few paces away. Once there, she confirmed that this was indeed the log she had left clothes in for herself. Then she allowed her human flesh to return, pulling the wolf back inside.

Back when she had started trying to research herself, Bella had come across a type of people who referred to themselves as "skinwalkers". Supposedly they could wear the skin of an animal and turn into it. Bella thought they had it backwards, however. It seemed more like the term referred to an
animal who sometimes wore a human skin. She often identified with that concept. After all, she was half wolf.

Pulling on her sweats and throwing on the hoodie she found in the log, Bella let herself reflect. Once her tennis shoes were tied, she walked slowly back to the house, mind lost in memories.

Last year, she and Charlie had had a sort of...falling out. She guessed it was really like any teenage rebellion. There were a lot of accusations thrown around, mostly from her. Things like, *You aren't really my father!* and *How could you understand? You're just a human!* It hurt to look back on, because she didn't want to remember the incredibly hurt look on Charlie's face when she had left him behind. She had been so tired of his rules and his seeming paranoia, and Bella had allowed her anger and frustration to get the best of her. As a result, she had run away. The next year she would spend as a wolf, living among varying wolf packs across northern Washington, Canada, and Alaska. This was her year of "alternative school" as she had described it to Eric. She had wanted to learn what it meant to be a wolf, and wanted to know if she preferred the company of wolves over humans. Those had been some defining days for her, but had ultimately lead to more questions.

Bella paused by the treeline behind her house, trying to see who exactly was visiting Charlie. She let her senses quest out to listen, and heard muffled voices in the kitchen. It was hard to tell who the voices belonged to though with the TV blaring from the living room. All she could tell was that there were two other men in the house. Setting aside her walk down memory lane, Bella paced up to the house and entered through the back door. "Dad, I'm home!" She called out.

"In here!"

Bella found her father and two other men sitting in the kitchen, with a ball game on in the background. "Oh, you went for a run? I wondered where you'd gotten off to!" Her green eyes alighted upon Charlie's face, and she returned his smile.

"Yeah...I wanted to clear my head after school." He knew, of course, what she had actually been doing. But running was a convenient excuse in front of guests, and it was why she had left running garb for herself in a log behind the house. She made a mental note to make sure she replaced her stash, and to go pick up the bits of shredded clothes scattered around thanks to her uncontrolled change.

Her eyes shifted to their company. One man she recognized immediately, and the smile on her face widened as she beheld his familiar, weathered face, dark hair, and wheel-chair bound form. "Billy!" She exclaimed delightedly, and laughed as he scooped her up into his arms and spun her around. She smacked his arm playfully. "Put me down you big oaf!" Jake just chuckled and spun her once more before depositing her back on her feet. She smacked him again before wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. Unable to resist, she breathed in his comforting scent and sighed. "Good
to see you again." She murmured, finally releasing him. A new scent briefly touched her nostrils, and she frowned for a moment. It was like...fur. The fur of an animal, but it definitely wasn't her own smell.

Before she could investigate further though, Jake went to ruffle her hair. She dodged him skillfully and grinned. Jake returned her smiled, "Good to see you too, shrimp!" He laughed. Bella shook her head ruefully.

"You may be taller than me now, Jacob Black, but that hardly means I'm a shrimp!" She put her hands on her hips, ignoring the way the older men were barely restraining their laughter.

The big guy's eyes were lit up with a happy light, and Bella felt something ease within herself. She had been so stressed and tightly wound, that even a hunt in the forest hadn't fully relaxed her. Being here with her family, though, was doing the trick. "Bella, you've called me a shrimp my whole life. I think it's time I returned the favor." His arms flashed out with wicked speed and he pulled her into his arms, ruffling her hair. Her shrieks of protest fell on the deaf ears of three laughing men.

A while later, after they'd eaten a dinner of fried fish, Bella found herself sitting outside with Jake. It was dark now, and she knew that he and Billy would be heading home soon. She smiled when she heard Charlie laughing from the house, and felt glad that he hadn't been totally alone, when she had abandoned him. Her heart twinged as she recalled the look in his eyes when she had finally come back a little over a month ago.

"What's wrong Bella?" Jacob asked from where he sat near her. Bella turned to appraise him in the moonlight, eyes gliding over the familiar, yet changed features of her best friend. Jacob was like her brother, but even he didn't know the truth of her origins. She didn't like lying to him, but she felt it was necessary. Maybe one day, she would be able to tell him the truth.

"Just thinking." She finally responded. His dark brown gaze eyed her skeptically, and Bella shrugged uncomfortably. Looking away, she sighed. "Alright. I was just thinking about how glad I am to be home. How I wish I had never left." There. That was the truth, after all.

Jake was quiet a while, and she could practically feel him turning her words over in his mind. His voice finally came, hesitant. "Can I ask...why did you? Leave, I mean. Why did you leave?" What should she tell him, she wondered? How much could she? She suddenly fiercely missed being a small child with Jacob, when she hadn't needed to lie because they didn't talk about things like this.

"I left partly because Dad and I had a bad argument." She lowered her head, ashamed. "I said some things...I wish I could take back." It took her a few moments to regain composure, but she continued. "So I found a school far away, and told him that I was going to go there, because I didn't want to be here. And I did." She tangled a hand in her hair, thinking of how she could phrase this to Jacob without revealing too much. It also gave her a convenient excuse to avoid his probing eyes. "It wasn't long before all I wanted was to come home." She passed a hand over her face. "Stubbornness is a trait I do share with Charlie, however. So I finished the year, and then I came home. Charlie - Dad - forgave me." She let out a hard breath, pain blooming in her chest. "Which was more than I deserved, after the way I treated him." Her fingers curled into the cool grass, seeking to ground herself.

Soft, warm fingers touched her chin and gently tilted her head to the side. Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes to look at Jacob who was looking at her with such kindness and understanding she caught her breath. Before she even knew what she was doing, Bella found herself on her knees reaching for him. Jake pulled her into his arms and she rested her forehead against his shoulder. "It's okay you know. Teenagers do this kind of stuff. And our parents forgive us - that's what they do. That's why they're our parents." She missed most of what he said next, as she struggled to hold back tears.
building in her eyes. Bella hated crying, but with the stress of the day, and all the guilt she hadn't
dealt with that had only grown over the past month, it was a losing battle. And to have the boy she
considered her brother comforting her this way... A few tears leaked out. She felt Jake stroke her
hair, and allowed herself to feel at peace with his warm arms around her.

Warm arms.

Bella's eyes flew open and she jerked back from Jake in surprise and worry. Jake let out a grunt of
surprise when she broke out of his hold, but Bella's hands were flashing up to touch his face, then his
forehead, in concern.

"Bella, wha-"

"Shh." She shushed him and pressed her ear to his chest, listening for his heartbeat. It didn't sound
accelerated, and when she leaned back to peer into his eyes, they seemed clear, and not fevered.
Mercifully, he let her conduct her silent examination, though in baffled silence. Finally, she stopped
and looked up at him. "Jake, are you sick? You feel overheated-" Which wasn't actually true, it felt
more like his temperature matched her own, which it shouldn't. No one should feel warm to her.
Especially not someone who had formerly felt cool. "Do you have a fever?" Jacob looked back at
her startled for a second, and then let out a booming laugh.

"What are you talking about? No way!" Jake shook his head, still laughing, but Bella sensed
something behind his words. Some kind of nervous tic in his laugh. She narrowed her eyes.

She gripped his shoulder tightly and looked him in the eye. Jake's laughter stilled. "I can tell you
aren't being truthful with me. Come on Jake, if you're sick I want to know." They held each others
eyes for a long, silent moment, before Jake looked away.

"I can't explain, alright? Just know that I'm fine. I'm not sick or anything." He glanced back at her for
a moment. "Actually, I'm more than fine. Just leave it at that, okay?" Bella huffed in frustration and
took her hand from his shoulder. She rocked back off her knees and onto her toes, glad she had taken
her shoes off so they could dig into the dirt.

"Whatever Jake. Fine, don't tell me." She rose from her crouched position and walked a few steps
towards the forest. It hurt inexplicably that he wasn't being honest with her, but she knew that she
had no right to feel that way. She hadn't ever been fully honest with him either, after all. Still, it
sucked.

She heard him get up behind her and move softly through the grass. His movements seemed more
graceful than she remembered her mind noted idly, but that could well be from growing up the last
year. Still, she filed it away.

"I'm sorry Bells, I just can't talk about it right now." She heard the frustration in his voice, and also
the sincerity. He really couldn't talk about it, it seemed. She nodded, and then realized he might not
have seen the gesture. Turning, she gave him another nod.

"Alright Jake. Just know that I'm here to listen when you need me, too. That's what friends do." She
smiled at him, and he returned her smile tentatively.

A few moments of comfortable silence passed before Jake scrubbed a hand back through his hair and
said, "So how did you like your first day of public school?"

And just like that, the stress of the day returned. Bella closed her eyes and groaned. She felt more
than heard Jake close the distance between them. "Bella, what is it? Did something happen?" Taking
a second to compose herself, Bella shook her head.

"Not exactly." Her eyes slid open, and she felt somewhat comforted by the concern in Jake's eyes. He really was a good friend, she thought. "More like, it was totally overwhelming. There were so many people!" Jake's expression softened at her words, and she realized that he'd been a little tense. What was he planning to do if something actually had happened, she wondered?

"Oh," he said, "Yeah, I bet it was kind of strange at first. Did you get used to it though?" He stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels. His tight shirt stretched over his muscles, and Bella rolled her eyes at the sight good naturedly. She was sure the girls just loved him.

"It's going to take some time for me to get acclimated, I think. But I'm sure I'll figure it out." He nodded, and she wondered if he should mention the Cullens. Not her observations about them, of course, just something general to see if Jake knew anything about this family that had moved here while she'd been away. Making a snap decision, she said, "I did meet this new family though," she kept her voice casual, like it was an off-hand remark, "apparently they moved here while I was gone. The Cullens? I had never seen any of them before today."

Jake's reaction was immediate. At the mention of their name, his muscles seized up and his eyes flashed in a way she had never seen them do before. In the blink of an eye, Jake had his hands wrapped around her biceps and was holding her up against a tree. His face was right in hers, eyes frantic and deadly serious. They were also filled with...hate. The strange animal smell from before returned, stronger this time. "Don't go near them Bella. That family is dangerous. Fucking hell, if they even fucking come near you I'll-" This was too much. A growl escaped her before she could stifle it.

"Let me down this instant Jacob Black." Her voice was forceful, and she brought her wolf to bear. She knew her eyes were flat, but her animal instinct was telling her that this was a threat to her dominance, a threat to her territory. It was all she could do to hold back the snarl. Jacob's dark brown eyes immediately widened, and his hands released her as if of their own volition. He looked at her in bewilderment for a moment, then looked at his hands, before stepping back. "Jacob," her voice was still harsh as she took a step toward him, "You may be my best friend, but don't you ever do that to me again. Understand?" She didn't feel like giving him a warning, but she was certain that her eyes conveyed the silent threat. He continued to look at her in confusion before nodding his head. This was more for his protection than her own self comfort, however. Jacob was her friend, and that was the only thing that had prevented her from attempting to tear him apart for jumping her like that. Even being her friend had its limits, though. Sometimes she couldn't help but act on instinct, especially when she felt threatened.

"Now, calmly, tell me what the hell you're talking about." She glared at him, and Jacob had the decency to look sheepish.

"First," he cleared his throat, "Sorry about that. I shouldn't have grabbed you." A silent nod to continue. "It's just that...the Cullens," his voice curled grotesquely around their name again, "are terrible...people. It's safer to stay away from them." He shook his head, the anger coming back. Bella watched carefully as his muscles practically shook. "Please Bella, stay away from them." His dark eyes pleaded with her, and behind them she could see the swirling hate and resentment. What was up with these Cullens?

"Jake, I trust you with my life, you know that." The boy nodded stiffly. "But you have to give me more than "they're dangerous" and "stay away from them". What's the big deal? I mean, they're a bit strange, but I don't see why-" Jacob suddenly took an aggressive step toward her, anger rolling off him as his body shook, and Bella reacted.
Her body moved forward of its own accord until she as standing directly in front of Jake, looking fiercely into his eyes. "Stop." Her voice lashed like a whip. "You will calm down, or you will leave." The last word left her lips in a snarl and she held his gaze intensely for a very, very long minute. Finally, he looked away. Then he did a curious thing with his head, tilting it to the side. It was almost like an act of submission... Bella's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Sorry." He grunted. "They make me angry. I can't-" the frustration grew in his voice, but he showed no signs of the strange shaking or aggression, "-tell you about them either. Just trust me on this one." He met her eyes again in resignation, and Bella stepped to the side a little, to release him from the intensity of the dominant will she had just pressed on him, but was careful not to step back. She wasn't in the mood for another battle of wills today, even though she knew that ultimately she would win. Jake may be a dominant human, but he wouldn't stand a chance against her wolf.

"I will take your warning into account. That's the best I can promise." She said at last. Jacob was clearly displeased, but he still nodded. These Cullens definitely bore further investigation.

Just then she heard Charlie calling for them from the house. "Come on, I think your dad's ready to go home."

After Billy and Jake had gone home, she filled Charlie in on the events at school, and her strange conversation with Jake. Charlie looked extremely disgruntled that Jake had put his hands on her, but Bella was quick to interject. "He wasn't trying to hurt me Charlie, I could tell that much. It was like something possessed him for a second. And he couldn't have hurt me in any event, we both know that." Charlie only grudgingly nodded at that. "Still, I think something big has changed about him."

Charlie rubbed his chin thoughtfully, fingers catching on the stubble and causing Bella to wince slightly at the unpleasant sound. "Well he has grown a lot, but that's the way of teenage boys. It's not strange to see that he's shot up in the last few months. I'm sure you're right though - I trust those instincts of yours." Pleasure spread through her at his words, and she fought a smile. She felt warm. It was good to be trusted.

"As for the Cullens, I've just met Dr. Cullen. He's a very nice man, and an excellent doctor. Set a couple fingers when I broke them a while back."

She frowned, when had Charlie broken his fingers? The uncomfortable look on his face reminded her of her absence the last year. Guilt immediately surfaced, but Charlie jumped in before she could speak.

"Now don't go worrying about it, it was just an accident. I tripped and caught myself wrong, was all. Dr. Cullen fixed me up easy enough, and just seemed like a real nice fellow. Very young to have so many children, especially of their age, but I thought at the time it was just nice of a young guy like him and his wife to use their wealth to help others." Charlie fell silent, and Bella allowed his "cop process" to work. Her father was a very thoughtful man who took his time thinking through things.

"What you've said about the gold eyes, and how they all have them. Dr. Cullen had gold eyes too. And his skin was also very pale, and cold. I took that at the time for him having an indoor profession. And doctors hands are always cold." Charlie shrugged. "It does seem very suspicious that they would resemble each other in that way, though they are still clearly unrelated."

Bella sucked in a breath. There was one thing she hadn't mentioned yet. "And...Dad?" Charlie's brown eyes rose to look at her questioningly. "When I was with Edward Cullen, he stood close enough to me at one point that I could tell that..." She couldn't believe she was going to say this, "he had no heartbeat. His heart wasn't beating. I didn't get a chance to check the others, but I would
wager a guess that none of them have beating hearts either."

Charlie's eyebrows had shot up nearly to the roots of his hair, his mouth dropping open slightly. Shocking Charlie wasn't easy, but Bella didn't blame him. This was crazy.

"What..." Charlie seemed at a loss. She waited patiently for him to try and wrap his head around it. "How are they alive with no heartbeat? What are they?"

Bella shook her head. "I don't know, but I intend to find out. My reaction to them alone told me they were dangerous, and Jake going off like that confirms that there is something...different about them. Maybe it's nothing, maybe they're some harmless supernatural creature." Her instincts screamed at her that that idea was wrong. "But I need to find out for the safety of the whole town." And my family. She added silently to herself. She knew that Charlie wouldn't appreciate the idea of her protecting him, but if these creatures were supernatural like her, then she would be the only one able to defend herself of the two of them. "And obviously Jake knows something about them. I'm going to find out what."

Charlie met her gaze steadily, and she felt his worry. "If you're going to do this, you may just want to go visit their house. I know where they live, I can give you the address. But you would have to promise me to be careful Bella, I can't lose you." The unspoken again in the air made her wince, and she nodded.

Bella trotted through the familiar forest around Forks, using her father's directions to navigate as she went. They had argued for an hour over whether she would go over in wolf form or human form - and Bella had finally won out. It was awfully late to be turning up as a human, after all. Since night had fallen, she would be better equipped to handle a little recon mission as a wolf. Charlie hadn't liked it, stating that they didn't know anything was bad about the Cullens yet, after all. Bella reminded him that she wasn't planning to attack them - just watch.

And now, here she was resisting the urge to stalk a herd of deer nearby so that she could get to the house, see what there was to see, and then go home. She still needed to get some sleep before school tomorrow, after all. She paused. What if all the Cullens were already asleep by the time she got there? Well, she guessed this could be a very short recon mission.

The she-wolf continued moving through the woods, her red/brown and grey coat blending well with the night-muted colors of the forest. Her large paws ghosted over the twigs and leaves that would have crackled under her were she less careful. Her lip lifted in a wolf smirk. One good thing had come from living the last year as a wolf, among wolves. Her hearing had been quick to correct her inexperience. A memory surfaced of being treated as a pup in one pack, even though she was technically older than several pack members combined. She would have smiled, if she could. Shaking her head, she refocused. If these things were supernatural creatures, like she suspected, she couldn't afford to get distracted now.

Through the thinning trees, Bella could make out a huge house. It seemingly rose out of the forest, though as she got closer she could see that the forest had been cleared back a goodly distance around it. A tactical move, she thought. No one could approach without being seen. And most of the house appeared to be made of giant windows - curious.

Stealthily, the wolf moved in the woods around the house. She felt like she was casing the place, and she guessed that, in a way, she was. She didn't observe any movement, and no lights were on that she could detect. Her paws were placed carefully, and her heart rate kept under careful control. She didn't know the full capabilities of these creatures, after all, and she was already pretty certain that they had advanced hearing if nothing else. With intense focus, she strained her hearing toward the
house. She heard nothing. No movement, no talking, no...breathing... It was like there was no one home. Well, maybe there wasn't.

What if they didn't actually live here?

She tilted her head speculatively, ears swiveling out of habit. Perhaps they used this as their "official" address; something to appease the humans. But that didn't seem right, either. Why bother going to school? Why put on the charade, unless they wanted to be human?

A new scent touched her nose. Her nostrils flared wide as she took in a deep lungful of the sweet scent, her brain scrambling to identify it even as her body sought to breathe it in again. Flowers, she thought. It was a soft, fresh fragrance like flowers on a cool, summer day. It was wonderful. The wolf was instantly enamored, and it was hard to bring her human rationale to bear. Her eyes tracked around her, seeking the source of this scent, and froze.

There, at the edge of the trees, was the most beautiful creature Bella had ever seen. Her breathing halted for a moment, before resuming. Yellow-gold eyes fastened on this new creature, taking in the human form and pale, flawless skin. Golden hair fell in waves around a face so perfect Bella thought she might have discovered a real-live angel. Under the moonlight, she was utterly breathtaking. She didn't know what to do, and couldn't have moved to do anything if she did. After an agonizing second, two beautiful black eyes turned and met hers.

And then the angel did something very un-angel like. Perfect lips peeled back over elongating fangs that descended from her mouth, dripping a clear liquid that sizzled on the forest floor. A predatory hiss escaped those lips, and finally her instincts reminded her how very familiar this creature looked - no doubt she was one of the Cullens.

Bella's ears went back as the creature dropped into a crouch. Oh shit.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Yes, a little non-canon there with the fangs. I just think vampires should have fangs!
Meet the Vampires

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the reviews and kudos! I hope you enjoy this next chapter. My updates won't always be this fast, but I hate leaving folks on a cliff-hanger. Enjoy

Many thanks to Lady_Lullaby for reading this over for me first.

Disclaimer: I surely don't own Twilight!

Last Time: And then the angel did something very un-angel like. Perfect lips peeled back over elongating fangs that descended from her mouth, dripping a clear liquid that sizzled on the forest floor. A predatory hiss escaped those lips, and finally her instincts reminded her how very familiar this creature looked - no doubt she was one of the Cullens.

Bella's ears went back as the creature dropped into a crouch. Oh shit.

It was definitely the fangs that gave it away. Seeing those two curved fangs descending from an otherwise perfect mouth kind of clued Bella into the fact that these creatures, these Cullens, were vampires. And if she weren't about to be thrust into a life or death situation, she might have been stunned, shocked even. But as it was, said vampire was now hurtling through the air towards her at top speed and any distraction at this time would be met only with her untimely death.

Bella kicked herself into high gear and gave herself fully over to the instincts of the wolf, the instincts of her kind. As the vampire rushed her, her body responded, carrying her in a swift dodge away from the threat. The vampire blurred past her. Her eyes locked onto her form as she flew by, and watched in befuddlement as the vampire seemingly paused in confusion. She wondered if the vampire had any idea that she was more than just a wolf. It didn't seem to matter either way, though, as those black eyes fixed on her with a look of rage and blind hate. This Cullen didn't seem anything like the ones at school. This didn't look good for her.

Even as she found herself readying for the blonde vampire's next attack, Bella found within herself no answering rage. A will to defend herself, yes, but she had no desire whatsoever to harm this creature. Strange, since that seemed all that it wanted to do to her. She didn't have much time to ponder that however, as the vampire launched herself at her once again. This time Bella was too slow to escape and their forms crashed together. Despite herself, a snarl tore from her muzzle as they rolled together through the underbrush, leaves, sticks, and other detritus launching into the air around them in a cloud. She snapped at the vampire, showing off the fangs that she too possessed. More than ever, Bella wished she had the ability to speak in this form.

The vampire's arms came around her body in a crushing embrace and Bella released a whimper of pain at the creak in her ribs. This vampire was strong. She managed to get her paws between them and dug her claws into the vampire's shoulders, shoving her away and narrowly missing being bitten. Her body rolled across the ground, cracking twigs and smashing the undergrowth of the forest as she went. Four paws scrabbled trying to find purchase until she was finally able to spring back to her feet once more. She panted hard, and winced when she felt a twinge of pain from her ribs. She looked in the direction of the creature and froze when she saw that it was gone.
A heavy weight slammed into her back, driving her hard into the ground. The dirt around her compacted under the force of the blow, and Bella felt the breath leave her lungs; all that escaped her was a grunt of pain. The weight disappeared for a moment, and Bella struggled to get to her paws. Another blow took her full in the side before she made it up, and her body flew into a tree. Pop. Yep, that time the rib definitely broke. Another whimper escaped her as she got her paws under her, side throbbing, and eyes darting everywhere, trying to track the movement of the vampire. Too late she remembered the creature's last method of attack. Her eyes lifted to see the she-demon dropping once more from the trees, to land on her back once again. Bella immediately reared up onto her hind legs, trying to dislodge her, but the vampire dug her fingers painfully into her furry shoulders. The wolf opened her jaws and bellowed as sharp fangs descended into the skin between her neck and shoulder.

"Rosalie, no!" All at once, the weight was off of her, and the cause of pain removed. Bella slumped to the ground, shoulder throbbing where the vampire's fangs had pierced her, and side twinging from her broken rib. She lifted her eyes and caught sight of two familiar people, who now struggled to hold a fiercely enraged vampire.

"Calm down Rosalie!" Snarled the smaller of the two, Alice, Bella remembered. "You don't want to do this!" The larger one, Emmett she recognized, threw her a wink over his shoulder to which she furrowed her brow in confusion. Did he recognize her somehow? The struggling vampire between them didn't seem to hear Alice though, and strained against their arms. Alice kept talking to her, but Bella wasn't in much shape to try and listen.

"Hey, Wolf," Emmett called, and Bella lifted her head. "It would be easier to calm her down if you, you know, went away. Why don't you go back to the house?" Bella perked her ears as she realized that Emmett was indeed talking to her. And he had called her "Wolf". Maybe he didn't recognize her then, but he knew she was more than she seemed. She levered herself to her paws and turned away, somehow trusting that the other two - who must certainly be vampires themselves to be able to restrain one - to hold her. Rosalie. So this had been the mysterious fifth Cullen kid, she mused as she limped away. Shit, she hurt.

Bella had never faced off against another supernatural creature before, and it disturbed her greatly how poorly she'd fared. If Alice and Emmett hadn't come along... But then there was her own reaction. She hadn't even wanted to fight. It wasn't that Bella had a bad temper or anything, but she could definitely get her blood up in a hurry if the situation warranted it. And this situation had definitely warranted it. She had practically stood there like a ninny while the vampire attacked her as she pleased! A faint growl escaped her, but no more. She hadn't been afraid, so what had been the deal?

She realized with a start that her fight with the blonde vampire - Rosalie - had taken her far from the Cullen home. It took her a few minutes of walking to reach it again, but before she crossed the treeline, she hesitated. Should she go in there? She would essentially be entering a den of vampires. Den? Nest? What did they call it, anyway? She shook her head. Now was not the time to be thinking about that. She should really just go home, Bella thought. Charlie would be worried enough as it was. But she was curious.

_Curiosity killed the cat, Bella._ A wry voice spoke inside her head, but she shook it off. Wasn't their dad a doctor anyway? Didn't they take oaths to "do no harm" or something? She let a huff of breath escape her, before entering the open space behind the house.

Bella limped her way around toward the front door, and was startled to find another female vampire standing in the doorway. Unlike the one who had attacked her, however, this one wore a smile on her face.
"Hello there," she said, and Bella shivered as the warmth of her voice slid over her like a blanket. This woman fairly radiated comfort, and she was also extremely beautiful with caramel colored hair and golden eyes. "Please, come inside. We mean you no harm." Bella cocked her head to the side and watched as the woman backed in through the doorway and into the house beyond. Now there were lights on inside, unlike before, and Bella felt herself drawn forward. Something about this woman felt so safe that she found that no worry for her own well-being remained. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the brightness once she was inside, and were she human she would have gasped as she looked around. The house was easily as enormous inside as it had appeared outside. The ceilings were vaulted, and she could see that she was in a living room. A couple of couches faced a huge TV that looked like it had every game console ever invented hooked up to it. Sweet. A look to the other side of the room showed the entrance to a really nice, modern kitchen filled with spotless stainless steel appliances. A gently curving staircase led up to what she was certain were equally luxurious areas, and Bella all at once felt quite like a dirty dog inside this seemingly opulent palace. She glanced down and winced when she saw the dirt that she had indeed tracked onto the immaculate white carpets. Her head lifted and she looked apologetically at the small vampire woman who stood in the entrance to the kitchen watching her. If she were to stand next to her in her current form, Bella thought that she could almost touch the woman's shoulder with her muzzle.

As if she had read her mind about the carpet, the woman waved a hand. "Oh don't worry about that - dirt comes out easily enough! Now, you're a shifter of some kind, aren't you? I'm assuming you have a human form?" Startled, Bella found herself bobbing her head in a nod. "Right, we'll need to get you some clothes. I don't know what size you are, so I'll just put an assortment into the next room, and you can pick through what you want. Does that sound alright?" Another gentle smile, and all Bella could do was nod. "Perfect! Just a moment." The woman blurred from the room, reminding Bella immediately that she really was in fact a vampire, just like the one out in the woods.

Just as she was reassessing her plan to enter this potential den of demons, the woman reappeared. "Alright. We have a bathroom on this floor just down the hall there, you can't miss it. I put some clothes inside. Feel free to shower too, if you feel so inclined." Bella let her head dip once in acknowledgement before padding off down the hall, feeling bad that she couldn't seem to keep her paws from depositing what seemed like an inordinate amount of dirt onto the carpet.

Once in the bathroom, after awkwardly closing the door behind her large form, Bella immediately triggered the change. With her injuries, the change hurt even worse than when she had force-changed earlier that same day. She groaned and blacked out for a moment as her ribs reformed, one still very broken, and came to on the bathroom floor panting. Shaky, she pushed herself to her feet and appraised herself in the mirror. Of course this place had a full length mirror.

Before even closing her eyes, her eyes scanned down her body, taking in the huge, discolored bruise across her side and abdomen and the still-bleeding puncture wounds on her shoulder as the most immediate worry. The familiar, ropy scar that curved around the left side of her torso looked inflamed, but didn't hurt when she touched it. She was covered in a myriad of other bruises as well, and was pretty certain she had sprained something in her foot or ankle. "Damn, blondie did a number on me." She muttered under her breath. She froze then, heart pounding as she remembered that vampires, like she, had superior hearing. Better not talk to myself anymore.

Her eyes fastened on the wound on her shoulder again, worried that it hadn't stopped bleeding. If anything, she could still feel a burn. Whatever had been on that blond's teeth was now there, burning. Normally cuts healed up quickly, especially after she changed, but these looked as raw as when they had been inflicted. Experimentally she touched them with one finger, wiping the blood away, and hissed in sudden pain as heat spread through her shoulder. After a quick evaluation of the bathroom, she surprisingly found a kind of gauzy substance under the sink. She would use some of that to stem the bleeding if it hadn't stopped after her shower, she reasoned.
Bella was tempted to just get changed immediately, but the shower was very tempting and she did want to get cleaned up. She shrugged. Might as well have the shower. If the vampires did plan to kill her, at least she'd go fresh and clean. Before she stepped in, she glanced at herself in the mirror once more, checking for any other injuries she might have overlooked. Finding nothing, she looked up into her own eyes for a second and stopped. Frowning, she stepped in closer to the mirror and studied her eyes. Her face looked as familiar as ever, if a little battered. But her eyes. Normally a brown/green that seemed to shift one way or the other with her mood, they now shone green completely...with gold shot through them. Bella blinked. Was it a holdover from her wolf? Maybe it was part of her body trying to heal itself. She leaned back from the mirror and got into the shower, still thinking.

The hot water was an immediate balm on her sore muscles, and she sighed in relief. Immediately, her concerns washed down the drain with the dirt and sweat from her body. Also distracting was the fact that showering injured was difficult at best, and painful at worst. It was with careful focus that she moved in the shower, intent on not offering her ribs and side further distress.

After a quick shower (as quick as she could manage), Bella dried herself off carefully and picked through the clothes the vampire woman had left her. In among them she found a grey flannel shirt that seemed alright, and a pair of jeans that only fit a little loosely. The gauze she had found under the sink ended up unneeded, as the bleeding had stopped, though the puncture wounds remained. Studying them she discovered that, unlike a snake bite, there was more than just two large punctures. This bite left a kind of crescent shaped mark in her shoulder. Curious.

She was about to open the door when another article of clothing caught her eye. A hand reached for it before she made the conscious decision to do so, and she found that she was holding a soft, silk scarf. It was beautiful, with a pattern of rich greens and golds that was eye-catching and yet subtle at the same time. Hesitantly, she brought the scarf to her nose and inhaled. Oh, heaven! A scent that made her think of flowers on a mild, summer day. Even though silk didn't really go with flannel, Bella couldn't stop herself from winding it around her neck once and taking in one more lungful before leaving the bathroom. It didn't occur to her to consider why such an article would have been left for her in the first place.

Her bare feet padded across the carpet, and she marveled that it was already clean from the mess she had made coming in. Apparently, super-cleaning was also a vampire ability.

She could hear movement in the next room and, sure enough, found the vampire woman from before getting up the last of dirt from the carpet. She shuffled awkwardly and cleared her throat, though she was certain the vampire knew very well that she was there. "I'm sorry about that. I should have wiped my paws before I came in." The woman stood up with inhuman speed and walked over to her, rag in hand and a smile on her face. Bella felt that same odd, soothing comfort from before. "It's alright dear, with my boys there is a constant mess in this house anyway." Bella glanced around the spotless home with a raised eyebrow. "Come along dear." She turned and saw that the woman was motioning for Bella to follow. She didn't even think of disobeying, her feet following the woman immediately.

They came to a stop in the kitchen, and when the woman gestured for Bella to sit in one of the available bar stools, she shifted uncomfortably. "Thank you, ma'am," she said respectfully - the woman didn't really look much older than she was, but she instinctively knew that was the appropriate title - "I would rather stand, if that's alright." Her ribs were really starting to hurt and, while she knew they would heal, she didn't want to risk sitting and causing further pain, or risk sending them out of alignment. That would really suck.

The woman tilted her head in concern, and suddenly flashed to Bella's side. Bella immediately
jumped back out of reflex, and winced as this movement jostled her ribs, a growl rippling from her throat. The woman held up her hands apologetically. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have moved so quickly. I just wanted to see what was causing you pain. May I?"

The wolf absolutely did not want to show weakness to this fellow predator, but it was hard to say no to that kind, warm face. Bella hesitated a long moment, fighting with herself, before slowly nodding. Carefully, she lifted her shirt to show the woman the massive bruise that had only darkened since her shower. The vampire gasped and pressed very light, cool fingers to the angry flesh. The coolness of her skin was soothing, and Bella sighed in momentary relief. "Rosalie did this?" The woman's tone of voice had changed, and was no longer nearly as warm as it had been. "I can't believe that girl."

Bella looked at the woman sharply and was startled to find that the woman's eyes had darkened from a warm gold to a deep ocher. Nervously, she sidled away. Noticing the movement, the vampire slowly removed her hand from Bella and took a few steps back. "I have to apologize again. I have a hard time believing my daughter would do something like that, hungry or not."

Bella's eyebrows rose. Her daughter? Bella had a hard time believing this woman could have a teenage daughter, but if that was true, then that meant -

"Forgive me dear, I have forgotten my manners." The small vampire offered her another smile, eyes lightening. "I'm Esme Cullen, I believe you've met my children?" Bella took the proffered hand almost unconsciously, trying to reconcile that this small, petite, young woman was Mrs. Cullen. Wife to a doctor, and mother of five adopted children. Manners, right.

Bella took in a breath, acknowledging that Esme Cullen smelled very sweet herself. The danger instinct, while still present, was much subdued. "Pleased to meet you Mrs. Cullen, I'm Bella Swan." She managed a smile for the other woman, and was surprised when it was genuine. Esme seemed delighted.

"Oh none of that, please, dear. Call me 'Esme'. Everyone else does!" Bella smiled again, awkwardly, and ducked her head in acknowledgement. Esme released her hand and moved back toward the counter, though her eyes lingered on the scarf around Bella's neck. "Now, my husband should be home shortly. If you'll allow him, I'm sure he can do something for those ribs of yours. In the meantime, I'm sure you have questions?"

Bella laughed despite herself. Questions? She had a hundred questions! And this had been one hell of a long day. She longed for her bed, but knew she couldn't lose this opportunity. She started with the most pressing question on her mind. "Why did that girl - Rosalie? - why did she attack me?"

Esme frowned, and Bella immediately felt bad for putting that look on Esme's face. What the hell? Maybe it was just the way Esme was, she thought. It was odd knowing that Esme was as much a predator as she herself, and as ferocious as Rosalie. She seemed like a calm, motherly type and Bella found herself yearning for that kind of attention. Bella pushed that feeling down. No way was she getting attached to a freaking vampire. At least not until she knew what was going on.

"Bella, before I answer that for you, I have a question for you. Do you know what we are?" Esme posed the question to her, and Bella formed a response without thinking.

"Vampires." It sounded preposterous, but no more so than a girl who could shift into a wolf at will, she supposed.

Esme nodded gravely. "Yes, we are. Now some of what you know of vampires from stories and such is likely true. For example, we do have to drink blood to survive." Bella had gathered that, from the way that Rosalie had attacked her. She nodded for Esme to continue when it looked like the caramel haired vampire wanted to hesitate. "But what you may not know is that not all vampires
drink from humans. You can tell it from our eyes. Those of us with golden eyes are what our kind call "vegetarian," she smiled briefly, "a sort of inside joke, if you will. Those of us with golden eyes drink only the blood of animals. If you ever see a vampire with red eyes, they drink human blood." Bella was starting to get an inkling for what may have caused Rosalie's attack. "Rosalie was out hunting, and I believe she mistook you for an animal to hunt." This made sense to Bella, and she wondered if that was all it was. If so, then it was an answer she could understand. Once the hunt was started, it was near impossible to switch her own instincts off until the hunt was over.

Esme clasped her hands delicately in front of herself and drew a breath Bella knew she didn't really need. "Now, I must ask you for the safety of my family," Bella frowned, but met her eyes. "How closely are you allied with the Quileute shifters? I ask only for the sake of the treaty."

Bella's eyebrows drew down severely, confusion plain on her face. "Um, what? I mean, I have friends among the Quileute. I've spent a lot of time at La Push. But I'm not aware of any shifters there? There's only ever been me, as far as I know." And really, Bella didn't consider herself a "shifter". Her mother had used another word. Now Esme frowned, and opened her mouth to speak again but paused as they both turned at the footsteps coming up the front steps. The front door soon opened, and a new voice answered.

"Let's leave it at that for the moment." A young - seeming - man stepped around the corner and into the kitchen. Dr. Cullen was also insanely attractive, Bella thought. His platinum blond hair framed a well-formed face. His eyes and skin matched his wife's, however. He too was a vampire. She wondered idly if the attractiveness was to draw in prey. Since their prey would normally be humans, it made sense.

"Dr. Cullen." She said, and there was no question in her tone. Here was the last Cullen. She had now met them all. He smiled at her and took a few steps further into the room, brown loafers whispering over the polished floor.

"That's right. And you must be Bella, Charlie's daughter." He held out his hand, and she took it in her own for a firm shake. "Now, pleasantries aside, what's this I hear that you've been injured?" If the concern on his face was faked, Bella thought, then he had an excellent poker face. Instead of questioning him, she just nodded.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I broke a rib." She lifted her shirt to show him, and he *tsked* as he approached her. He came slowly, which she appreciated. Her inner wolf did not like showing all these predators her weakness, and she was glad that Carlisle wasn't pushing it. His eyes lingered on her scar, and she breathed a soft sigh of relief when he didn't comment on it, choosing to focus instead on her newer injuries. She didn't really feel comfortable getting into her past, though she guessed for once she could actually tell the full story.

He inspected her side carefully with a practiced eye before nodding. "Yes, just one though, which is fortunate. It will heal on its own, as I'm sure you know, but I can wrap it for you to hold it in a better position?"

Bella nodded gratefully, surprised by his generosity. "That would be great, thank you." This all felt so surreal. This morning she had been dealing with scents setting off her instincts in a bad way, then she got an earful of Jake's prejudices, and now she had been attacked by one vampire, and was being treated by another. This had to be a first day of school for the history books. Carlisle walked away at a human pace and returned a few minutes later with wrapping supplies. She wordlessly took her shirt off. Bella wasn't particularly shy, after all, but she did flush in embarrassment when Esme gasped. She was rather bruised she guessed. Then she saw where Esme was looking, and remembered the bite left by Rosalie.
"Oh, yeah. So...she also kind of bit me. Is that bad?" The looks on Carlisle and Esme's faces were difficult to read, but she could guess that even if it wasn't bad, then it still probably wasn't good.

"Of course it's bad!" A new voice joined them, and Bella jumped badly as she saw Edward enter the kitchen. Her hand flashed out for her shirt, but Carlisle had deftly moved in front of her, blocking Edward's view. She shot Carlisle's back a grateful look while she slipped her shirt on, fingers doing up the buttons in a flash. "Vampire venom is deadly."

"Edward." Esme's voice came out in an angry snarl. Bella's head snapped around in surprise, eyebrows raised. Esme's eyes had gone black. "How dare you come in here while our guest is changing!" Edward had the decency to look abashed, but Esme didn't give him a chance to respond. The vampire mother flashed across the kitchen and shoved Edward out the door. Bella could hear her shoving Edward around the house and back to the front door, berating him all the way. "You were raised better than this!" and, "You call yourself a gentleman?" were among Esme's outraged exclamations. Bella heard him trying to apologize and smirked to herself, thinking of how obnoxious he had been earlier that day. Served him right.

Carlisle turned around with an apologetic look on his face. "Sorry about that. My eldest son, for though he is usually a gentleman, has a penchant for showing up at exactly the wrong moment." Bella simply nodded in response. Edward hadn't seen anything, so she didn't feel too worried about it. And as an added bonus, he was getting crap from his mom now too. "How about we finish taking care of your ribs in my office? There's a door." Bella laughed despite herself, wincing at the pain she felt in her side as a result. The faint humor in Carlisle's eyes made her like him immediately. Perhaps there was more to vampires than attacking wolves and drinking blood.

"Thanks for your help." She said, following him up the curved staircase. She was referring to her ribs, and the Edward incident. Carlisle merely smiled at her, and soon they were passing through a heavy oak paneled door and entering a room that looked more like a library than an office. Her head swiveled around, eyes curiously taking in the many shelves of books, items behind glass cases, and paintings on the wall. Many of the things she saw looked beyond ancient. "Your office is cool." She said after a moment, and blushed when she realized that Carlisle had been watching her appraisal.

The doctor smiled at her, "Thank you. I like to think so. Now, let's get that shirt off again." She blinked and saw that he had bandages in his hands. Deciding not to waste her time wondering when he'd gotten them, she divested herself of her shirt once more. "Alright Bella, arms up and breath out." Once her arms were up as high as she could lift them comfortably, she let out her breath and watched as Carlisle's hands blurred around her, the bandage setting quickly and easily. It only hurt for a moment when he clipped it together. "Alright, arms down." He inspected his work critically for a moment, and then gestured that she could put her shirt back on. She was again grateful that he hadn't said anything about her scar.

"Thanks doc." It felt much better to be wrapped this way, and she didn't feel as much pain as before.

"My pleasure Bella." His eyes on her, while scrutinizing, were not nerve-inducing. She waited patiently for him to conclude his assessment. "Now," he cocked his head to the side and finally met her eyes. "Tell me, how is it that a..." here Carlisle hesitated for a second so short she nearly missed it, "being like you could lose so easily to a vampire?" The word he had planned to say had not been "being", she knew that. Bella studied Carlisle in turn. Did he know what she was?

Bella opened her mouth to reply, but a sudden rush of pounding feet clued her in just in time to move as the door of Carlisle's office crashed open. There, with the widest grin she had ever seen, stood Emmett. "Bella!" He bellowed, and she stared at the exuberance on his face. He suddenly rushed at her, arms open wide, but Carlisle stepped in to stop the huge man's embrace.
"Hold on there son, Bella's injured. No need to add to that. Gently." Emmett visibly deflated, but slowed his advance and settled for taking her hand instead, which he proceeded to shake enthusiastically.

"Bella! When they told me it was you I had to see for myself!" His eyes were wide with a childlike delight that Bella could do nothing but smile at. "I knew today in gym that you were special! No human could ever keep up with me!" They were then sporting matching grins as they recalled their class together and the competition that followed.

"Yeah, that was pretty great! I've never met anyone who could keep up with me, either." She said, and felt Carlisle give her a sharp look. No doubt this sounded surprising, but it was the truth. Finally Emmett let her hand go.

"But this is great! We can play together and roughhouse and not have to worry about hurting each other!" He shrugged when she raised an eyebrow, "At least, not badly. Bella, I can tell that we're going to be best friends!" To Bella, who had never really had a friend besides Jake, whom she considered a brother, this meant a great deal. Suddenly the day's events were catching up as she felt emotion beginning to overwhelm her.

Carlisle stepped up beside her then and rested a hand on her shoulder. "I think we'd best get Bella home now Emmett, so she can be at her best for school tomorrow." He glanced at the clock and shook his head - it was already 1am. "It's past time for all good wolves to be asleep." Bella shot him an amused look, but a yawn caught her before she could say anything. She did really want to rest.

"Emmett, why don't you take Bella home? That way you can talk to her more." Emmett shouted in joy and rocked happily on the balls of his feet for a second before racing away, his voice floating behind him.

"Come out when you're ready Bella!" She heard him open a door below and soon after the hum of a deep engine being brought to life. Her head turned automatically back to Carlisle, and she lifted a hand to shake his briefly.

"Thank you Dr. Cullen, I appreciate your help and hospitality. Would you please extend my thanks to Mrs. Cullen as well? You both have been so kind." She glanced down at her borrowed clothes and smiled sheepishly. "I'll wash these and give them to Emmett to bring home tomorrow." Carlisle laughed and walked with her down the stairs to the front door.

"Don't worry about the clothes Bella. I do hope you'll come back soon though; I think we have much to discuss." The older vampire lifted a hand in farewell as Bella walked across the cool grass to the Jeep Wrangler waiting on her. She clambered in next to Emmett, settling back against the leather seats. With the wrap Carlisle had done, it didn't hurt nearly as much to sit as it would have earlier. A shiver passed through her, though it was a warm night. Carlisle's words had made her both excited and fearful.

She was quickly distracted by her companion, who was practically quivering in excitement. One dark brown eyebrow raised in silent question to Emmett, who was grinning. He took that as his cue, his pleasant baritone pouring out, "So, where to Bella-Bear?" That did it.

Bella's mouth fell open in shock for a moment before a peal of laughter escaped her, and even the twanging pain in her ribs couldn't restrain it as she laughed and laughed, barely able to let Emmett know where he was going. She didn't notice the pair of golden eyes watching her departure from the forest, or the beautiful vampire to whom they belonged. Bella was letting herself enjoy having a new friend, and right then she didn't have room for anything else. And the best part? With Emmett and the Cullens, she didn't have to hide who she was. Not anymore.
As Emmett drove skillfully down the road, Bella bent her head and nuzzled the scarf around her neck briefly, taking in a deep whiff. She recalled her promise to Carlisle to return the clothes. Maybe she would keep the scarf.
Meet the...hey, where is everybody?

Chapter Notes

Greye: Please enjoy the next installment! Many thanks to my sister Lady_Lullaby for taking a look at this chapter to make certain it wasn't a complete trainwreck. Many thanks also to those who took time to leave kudos, and write a review! You guys are awesome.

Disclaimer: Don't own a thing Twilight created.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Last time: Bella encountered a hungry Rosalie in the forest around the Cullen mansion, and experienced a peculiar lack of fighting response. The timely intervention of Alice and Emmett saved Bella from further injury, and she proceeded to have a much more cordial experience with the vampires (as she now knows them) than she would have expected. Emmett ended up driving her home that night. Hell of a first day.

A few days had passed since her...altercation...with Rosalie Hale. She had healed rapidly of course, though Charlie insisted she miss the next day of school when she had gotten home that night. Only a lot of fast talking had kept her father from attempting to go over to the Cullens’ and arrest them all for hurting her - or at least from trying to fight Carlisle which, she knew, was a terrible idea. Not only because Carlisle was a vampire, but Bella also knew that the situation had not been an intentional one. And frankly, she had kind of been trespassing on their property.

Now though, four days after her little adventure, Bella was starting to feel irritated. Currently she sat in Biology class...alone. The other students were there of course, but Edward Cullen was not. After her first encounter with him, Bella wasn't exactly unhappy that he wasn't present, but she was perplexed because she hadn't seen any of the Cullens all week. They had all been mysteriously absent. She hated the idea that they were avoiding her, because all she wanted to do was talk with them more. From her own instinctual response to their scent Bella had gathered that their kinds were possibly enemies of some kind, but Bella was so starved for the supernatural, for other people like her, that she didn't care. She passed a weary hand over her face and missed the disapproving look Mr. Banner was giving her from the front of the room.

Well, if they didn't show up soon, Bella resolved to go back to their house and look for them. The memory of a black-eyed, violent, and breathtakingly beautiful vampire flashed through her mind and she shivered. Possible death by dismemberment aside, she also wanted the chance to catch just a glimpse of Rosalie Hale again. There had been a moment in the forest when Bella had felt...something. She didn’t even have words to describe it, but it was a kind of connection. She wanted very much to know if it had something to do with the vampire who’d tried to kill her, and in fact that thought had been driving her somewhat to distraction of late. It was like an itch that she couldn't reach, an ache that she couldn't alleviate. She knew something had happened, she just didn't know what. Absently, she lowered her head until her nose brushed the green and gold scarf wound around her neck, and inhaled the sweet scent that still lingered on the delicate fabric.

Her thoughts turned to reflect on the past few days again. Though uneventful she did have to admit that had the Cullens been around, she likely would have been too distracted to start developing the
friendships with some of the other students she had started on her first day. Now she sat at lunch every day with Angela and Eric, and Mike and Jessica often sat with them as well. Wolves were social creatures, and it felt good to have something like a "pack" around her. Jessica didn't really like her that much, of course, but Angela and Eric were fast becoming two of her best friends. She smiled faintly to herself. The entire week hadn't been a loss, then.

A voice cleared beside her. "Miss Swan. If you find my class so very boring, why don't you finish the rest of the period in the office?" Bella looked up into the angry face of Mr. Banner, and winced. Had she missed a question he'd asked or something? Surely she wasn't the only student to ever look bored in his class...but now wasn't the time for that.

"Sorry Mr. Banner." She said, doing her best to look apologetic. He snorted and strode back up to the front of the class. Bella hadn't actually been bored, exactly, more like distracted. Still, it wouldn't do to cause a scene. Quickly and quietly she gathered up her things and slipped out of the room, exchanging a rueful look with Mike as she passed.

Once out in the hallway, she sighed. This was ridiculous, she thought. Getting kicked out of class just for looking "bored" was one thing, but she had been extremely distracted of late, and she could blame no one else for that. Sure, her meeting with the Cullens had been intense. But it didn't change the fact that Bella had wanted to attend a normal school for her entire life. She couldn't let her distraction over them screw this up for her. Determined to do better, she headed for the office.

After a very uncomfortable conversation with the principal about school expectations, Bella was allowed to resume the school day. Her history class passed uneventfully, and she went on to gym. The girls didn't even notice her scar anymore when she dressed out, and they all talked normally as they got ready for class.

"I heard we're actually going outside today," said Angela, "Since the weather's been so nice. The sun's out too." Bella smiled at this, glad to be outdoors as well. A couple of the other girls groaned, and she just laughed.

"Come on guys, it's not that bad! Who knows? Maybe we'll even get a tan." Bella joked, and finished tying her tennis shoes. With some reluctance, she slipped the scarf from around her neck and deposited it into her assigned locker.

Jessica sighed dramatically in response. "Yeah right, as if that'll ever happen." Rolling her eyes, Bella followed her and the other girls out into the gym where Coach Clapp was busy handing out gear - they were playing field hockey today. "At least we have some eye candy." Jessica said, eyes glued to Mike on the other end of the gym. Bella stifled a snicker.

Another girl spoke up, "Yeah, Mike's alright, but it's too bad Emmett isn't here. Now he's some real eye candy!" A couple of the girls tittered in agreement, and even Jessica shrugged in solidarity. "Bet they're all out having a blast right now."

Bella turned to look at the girl in confusion. Lila, her name was? "What do you mean? You know where they all are?"

Lila scoffed, her nose lifted out of superiority at knowing something the new and instantly popular girl didn't. Bella rolled her eyes, and Angela beside her covered her laugh with a very unconvincing cough. "The Cullens always go camping when it's nice out, didn't you know that?" Her snide tone rubbed Bella the wrong way and she glared in irritation. "You won't catch them here when the sun's out." Lila turned away, missing the look on Bella's face.

"Ease off Bella, Lila's always like that." Angela murmured next to her, laying a light hand on her
forearm. "Just ignore her." Bella shook off her ill attitude and smiled at her friend. Together they
got to find some equipment that wasn't too worn out or damaged before trooping outside.

Automatically Bella turned her face into the sunlight, enjoy the warmth of it on her skin. Forks was
by no means a warm clime, but it had its good days. Lila's words rolled around in her head. So, she
thought, it wasn't necessarily about her after all. The sun had been out a lot the last few days, and if
what Lila said was right...

Well, maybe vampires did have an aversion to sunlight. Her eyes lifted to take in the clear skies and
enjoy the sunshine for a moment more before she allowed herself to hope that next week they were
cloudy and grey again. The coach's whistle blew then, and Bella focused in on class. At least she
couldn't screw up gym class.

Famous last words, Bella thought darkly as she helped Angela to the nurse's office fifteen minutes
before the end of school. "I'm sorry Angela, are you alright?" She asked the girl quietly, supporting
her weight easily.

They had been playing field hockey well enough, and Bella had quickly found herself enjoying the
physical competition. Everything had derailed, however, when the ball had been hit in her direction
and as she went to collect it with her stick, Angela had apparently decided to do the same. Their
sticks had gotten tangled and they had collided while Bella had been trying to disengage without
hurting anyone. She hadn't been prepared for Angela to knock into her like that, and she could tell by
the dazed look in Angela's eyes that the other girl hadn't been prepared to essentially run into a wall.
She had flown back from Bella's body and hit the ground pretty hard. Bella winced to remember it.

"Shit Bella..." Came Angela's slurred voice, "What the hell are you made out of anyway?" If Bella
hadn't been so shocked to hear Angela cuss, she would have laughed. As it was, she worried.

"Well you did hit me pretty hard." She said back. Angela didn't get a chance to respond because they
had reached the nurse, and the woman had taken one look at Angela and immediately called the
hospital to prepare for a concussed patient. Bella helped Angela to sit down, and helped the nurse to
keep her focused and awake until paramedics arrived. As the EMTs appeared and Bella moved to
get out of their way, she felt a hand wrap tightly around her wrist. She halted and looked back at
Angela. The girl still looked dazed, but she was managing to focus on Bella pretty well and was
looking at her pleadingly.

"Please come with me?" Her quiet voice and unspoken fear tugged at Bella's heart, and she
immediately agreed. A surge of protectiveness surged inside of her and startled her for a moment. It
didn't take long to figure out: it was her nature to protect. Add to it Angela's more submissive
personality and their mutual friendship, and Bella knew she couldn't leave her. Fortunately the EMTs
didn't mind if she rode along since Angela wasn't in a currently life-threatening situation.

The pair of girls sat quietly in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, and Bella worked to give the
EMTs plenty of room to check out Angela. She could smell how nervous the other girl was, but she
admired her for hiding it so well otherwise. The rest of the ambulance, she had quickly noticed,
smelled like blood, death, and disinfectant. She had chosen to focus her olfactory senses on Angela
immediately.

"Yep," said one man, "You definitely have a concussion. It doesn't look like a bad one, but we'll run
a scan at the hospital just to be sure." Angela nodded, and Bella looked away guiltily. She really
needed to remember to be careful. Humans were so fragile.

"Bella," Angela's soft voice called her, and she looked over, raising an eyebrow in silent question.
"It's not your fault you know, I don't blame you. It was an accident." Bella sat back in surprise, her hands curling around the bench seat she currently sat on. Angela clearly didn't know exactly why she felt so guilty (because if she did, she would know that it kind of was Bella's fault, however unintentional), but she had read from Bella's expression enough to know that Bella blamed herself. Bella was the daughter of the Police Chief - hiding what she felt was something she was practically trained to do. Angela was good.

"I -" Bella paused for a moment, before reaching over to take Angela's hand. "Thanks. I'm still sorry though." She offered the other girl a slight smile which Angela returned.

Then they were at the hospital. A nurse came and separated them, after making it clear that only family could accompany Angela past this point, since she was a minor. Bella fairly growled at the nurse, but she subsided at a look from Angela. She did take the other girl's hand in her own for a parting squeeze. "I'll be in the waiting room. You won't be alone." Angela nodded gratefully, and then she was gone.

Bella had only been sitting on the unforgiving plastic seats in the waiting room for about twenty minutes when two people came running in. They looked about Charlie's age, and she guessed immediately by their appearance and smell that these were Angela's parents. They looked frantic. The man - Mr. Weber she presumed - grabbed a passing orderly. "Where is my daughter?" The man's voice was tightly controlled, but she could hear the shrillness of fear and anger wanting to break through. The orderly didn't know anything of course, and she could practically feel the Webers' worry grow. She quickly got out of her seat and approached them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weber? Are you Angela's parents?" Both adults immediately rushed over to her, and Bella felt briefly overwhelmed by their sudden proximity. Mr. Weber was about Bella's height with dark hair shot through with grey. His blue eyes had laugh lines around them, but now were tense and worried. Mrs. Weber had bottle blonde hair, brown eyes, and still had on the tell-tale earpiece of a receptionist. It was evident they had come straight from work.

"Please," Mrs. Weber begged her, "Where's Angela?"

Bella held up her hands comfortingly. "I'm Bella, one of Angela's friends. She fell and hit her head during gym, and when we got to the nurse, she called the paramedics because it looked like Angela had a concussion. We just got here about twenty minutes ago. The EMTs said it was a concussion too, and that they were coming to run tests to make sure it wasn't more serious." Mrs. Weber looked about ready to faint, and Mr. Weber looked pale too. She had a feeling this kind of thing didn't happen to Angela often. It was really nice that Angela had parents who cared so much; the thought flickered through her mind and she felt briefly happy for her friend. She reached out and clasped their hands reassuringly. "Wait right here, I'll get someone to come talk to you about what's going on." Mrs. Weber nodded a dozen times or so, and Mr. Weber seemed to snap out of his daze and realize that his wife was on the verge of passing out. He helped her into a chair and shot Bella a grateful look.

Bella quickly headed up to the nurses station. When she caught the attention of the nurse who'd originally shown her the waiting area, she got a stern look in return. "Look kid, you're just going to have to wait -" The wolf girl cut her off apologetically.

"I'm not here for me. Angela Weber's parents just arrived, and they don't know what to do. Can someone come talk to them?" She glanced back in their direction, and the nurse followed her gaze. Bella lowered her voice as she looked back at her. "They're pretty scared. I think Mrs. Weber might faint." The nurse's eyes widened and she quickly got out of her seat and sent a junior nurse to go get an update from the doctor before heading over to talk to the Webers herself.
Unsure what to do with herself now, and not wanting to intrude into Angela's family, Bella loitered around the hospital entrance, away from the waiting area, until the Webers went back to see Angela. She had promised the other girl she would be here with her, and she didn't want to leave until she knew Angela wasn't alone back there, one way or another. Finally, a doctor came out and talked to her parents for a minute before leading them back into the hospital. Bella breathed a sigh of relief. She would call Angela later. At least she had her family with her now. Her gaze strayed to a clock on the wall, and she realized quite suddenly that it was well past time for her to be back home. If Charlie was back from work, he would be worried.

A scent passed under her nostrils, caught by her brain even mixed among the burning chemical stench that filled the air. It was sweet, and had the faintest fragrance of caramel and honey intermixed. She knew that scent.

Her head lifted and she saw Carlisle Cullen approaching her from across the lobby, a smile on his face. Her lips curved in return.

"Bella." He stated her name quietly when he was close enough to speak to her without the humans wondering how she would hear him. "It's good to see you. Did you by chance come to see me?" His expression was curious, open, and warm. Bella didn't fully understand Carlisle, but she appreciated a good man when she saw one.

"No," she said, stepping to meet him, "I'm afraid not. I'm embarrassed to admit that I forgot that you work here." She ran a hand through her hair sheepishly and laughed. Carlisle's happy expression slowly changed to concern.

"If you aren't here for me, what has happened?" The concern in his voice was genuine, Bella could tell, and she realized how it must look to him. He was a doctor in a hospital - he probably didn't like to see people he knew come in here.

She quickly reassured him. "I'm alright, and Charlie's fine. I'm here because one of my friends at school, ah" here she hesitated, and glanced around to see if anyone was in earshot of their conversation. It didn't look like it, but she lowered her voice anyway. "Well, during gym class today one of my friends got hurt. She asked me to come with her to the hospital - the EMTs think it was a concussion." The worry and guilt she had been keeping at bay flooded back in the presence of someone she could actually share them with, who would understand. Unable to hold his comforting, golden gaze for long, her eyes sought the floor. "It was my fault." Her voice came low, barely audible even to supernatural ears. "We were playing field hockey and our sticks got tangled, and she ended up running headlong into me, which knocked her straight to the ground. I didn't react quick enough."

A cool hand landed on her shoulder, and Bella looked up hesitantly. The sheer compassion on Carlisle's face nearly overwhelmed her, and she felt tears form in the back of her eyes. She held them in check, but couldn't believe how emotional she felt. This was more emotion than she shared even with Charlie. Of course, Charlie had the emotional range of a teaspoon, but he meant well. A hard breath escaped her, but that was all. "Bella." Came Carlisle's warm voice, "It's okay. This was not your fault. It was an accident, one that you didn't mean to happen." Bella began to shake her head, but Carlisle held up a finger and she subsided. "Listen. It is hard for beings like us to be around humans sometimes. Even though many of my children are over one hundred years old, they still struggle from time to time. It takes practice." He squeezed her shoulder, and she marveled that he was strong enough to do so that she could really feel it.

The urge to hug him came over her, but she held herself back. This was only the second time she'd met Carlisle after all. It was hard to believe that he had won her trust so thoroughly, so very quickly.
Especially considering that vampires were probably a little more dangerous to humans than she was.

Still, she let herself take some comfort in his words. "Thank you Carlisle." She murmured. "One of the few things I know about my kind is that our purpose is to protect humans. Or at least, to keep an eye on them. It is certainly not our mission to hurt them." A glint of interest appeared in Carlisle's eye, and she wondered again what he knew of her. Suddenly something he'd said a moment ago hit her, and she choked, eyes wide.

"A-a hundred years?" Bella sputtered, unable momentarily to reconcile the image of the Cullen kids with that age. She guessed it made sense, from the little she knew of vampires, but still. A hard swallow made its way down her throat.

Carlisle just chuckled. "There is much for you to learn. This isn't really the best place, but please come around the house anytime you like." She nodded faintly, working to restore her equilibrium.

A thought occurred to her. Thankful for the distraction, she latched onto it.

"Sir...something the kids at school mentioned?" At his raised brow, she continued. "Aren't you supposed to be...camping or something?" Her eyes shifted around, still leery of being overheard.

The doctor genuinely laughed at that; clearly that hadn't been a question he'd expected. He sobered quickly, and drew his hand back from Bella to clasp both hands together in front of himself. "Ah yes, our "camping". Well, sunlight can be a bother to us, though not in the way you might expect. I'd be happy to explain more later, but for now, just know that sunlight makes us a little more...conspicuous. We don't really go camping, so most of my children are probably at the house now. It was overcast this afternoon long enough for me to get here without issue, though if I had been truly needed earlier, I have ways." Bella's expression turned to relief, and Carlisle frowned. "Was there...something else you thought was going on?"

Bella shook her head, a faint flush rising in her cheeks. "Just foolishness." She didn't really want to tell Carlisle that she had been conceited enough to think they had been avoiding her. She was certain Carlisle knew she wasn't being completely honest, but he let it pass.

There was a polite pause in conversation, and then Carlisle changed the subject. "Well since you're here, how about I take you back to see your friend?" Bella met his eyes in gratitude.

"Yes! That would be great; I would really like to see if she's okay." Bella met his eyes in gratitude.

After her visit with Angela, and saying goodbye to Carlisle, Bella walked out of the hospital feeling a lot better than when she had walked into it. Standing in the hospital parking lot, she remembered that she didn't have her truck. She face palmed. "Ugh, seriously?" She grumbled under her breath. Glancing down at herself, she realized that she was still wearing her gym outfit. A run back to the school wouldn't be a bad thing, she thought, it was only a few miles. She couldn't go all out or anything, but she could use up a little energy.

Stretching out a bit, Bella set off in an easy jog back towards the high school. As her feet beat a pace on the pavement, she let her mind wander.

There was a lot she had learned that night at the Cullens', and she had learned a little more about
them today. She had been mulling it over for days, but it didn't get any less spectacular that there was a family of vampires living in Forks. It was nice not to be the only non-human thing around, though she supposed that at least the Cullens had once been human. Or at least, she thought so. The stories of vampires she'd grown up on clearly weren't completely correct; reassessing would be a good idea.

She picked up her pace a bit as she moved through a lesser populated area, enjoying the stretch in her muscles. Maybe after she got home she could take a real run in the woods.

Her mind thought back to something Esme had said upon first talking to her, after she'd regained her human form. She had asked about whether or not Bella was allied with someone from the reservation, someone Quileute. It made no sense to her. Specifically, the vampire woman had wanted to know if she was allied with the "shifters" among the Quileute. As far as Bella knew, there were no such creatures on La Push. But then, she had been gone for a year and in that time, the Cullens had arrived in Forks. "Is this just becoming a hotbed for non-humans or what?" She muttered. Still, it bore looking into. Maybe she would pay a visit to Jake this weekend. The Cullens could wait until next week - the forecast did predict rain. If what Carlisle said was true, then they would be back. A slight thrill went through her at the thought. She might even, finally, get to meet the mysterious Rosalie.

At last she made it back to the school. She was relieved to find the doors to the building still open, as all of her things - including her truck keys - were inside. In the gym locker room she changed quickly, hesitating only briefly when she pulled the scarf from her locker. Feeling somewhat foolish, she pressed it to her nose for another breath that both calmed and excited her before winding it around her neck. Why she was so fixated on the scarf, she wasn't sure. She did know that more time with the Cullens would likely answer that. Pushing away the distraction, she grabbed the rest of her things and headed back outside. Making Charlie wait any longer could result in unfortunate consequences.

Staying just inside the speed limit, Bella drove home. It was getting on evening now, and she was pretty certain her father was home. As she pulled up on her house, her suspicion was confirmed when she spotted his cruiser parked in the driveway. She pulled her old truck up next to it and killed the engine. Focusing on her ears in the intervening silence, she could just hear Charlie moving around inside the house, and a game on the TV playing. She relaxed slightly. If he had the TV on, he couldn't be too worried.

The door creaked when she opened it, and when she closed it after she'd slid out of the cab. "Hmm..." She mused to herself quietly. She didn't know a whole lot about cars, but she did know the wonders of WD-40. Filing that away for a later date, Bella headed up to the house with her bag slung across her body.

"Dad, I'm home!" She called as she opened the door. There was silence for a second before footsteps approached her. Charlie came into the living room from the kitchen and looked her up and down once with a frown on his face. His eyes gazed at her expectantly. Bella sighed.

Shuffling over to the couch, she dropped her bag on it and muted the TV so she could talk easier. Then, without prompting, she laid out for Charlie exactly what had happened at the school, then the hospital, and then her run home. All the while Charlie maintained the same frown, though he did gain a speculative look on his face as she spoke.

"Alright." He said when she'd finished, "I think it's good you went with your friend to the hospital," Bella knew what was coming, "but she shouldn't have needed a hospital in the first place. Bella, you need to be careful. I know you know this, and I'm know today was an accident." His gaze hardened. "And I know it isn't fair, but you can't afford to have accidents. Period." Bella hung her head. She
knew that Charlie was right. "A concussion isn't a big deal; it happens in sports all the time. But you and I both know it could easily have been worse." Charlie continued to stare hard at her for a few moments more before softening his gaze. "Okay, I think that's enough Dad-talk. Come on, I made dinner."

Bella wasn't sure if the grimace on her face was from his talk, or the fact that he'd made dinner.

That night, Bella laid awake for a long time. The lights were off in her little room, but that made little difference to Bella. Her green eyes shone briefly gold in the darkness as they adjusted to the low light. She stared up at the whirl pattern on her ceiling, absently following one line back and forth. Today she could have seriously hurt Angela. Charlie had been right to reprimand her, even though she knew full well what she had done. Angela could say it wasn't her fault, but Angela didn't know what Bella was. She resolved to be even more careful in the future, and to try and limit her P.E. interactions to Emmett, whom she knew she wouldn't hurt with a lousy trip-up like that. Her mind decided to set that aside for the rest of the night - she'd already beat herself up enough for one day.

The weekend was here. What should she do? She knew what she wanted to do: she wanted to see the Cullens again. If there was anything Bella didn't want though, it was to turn into a pest. It wouldn't kill her to wait two more days to see them again, she reasoned with herself silently. Shifting beneath her cool sheets, she let her earlier idea to visit La Push enter her mind. Yes, that just might do it. It was the next best thing. Not only would she get to see her best friend Jake, which was always a plus, she could snoop a little about these supposed "Quileute shifters". If they were real, Bella had a feeling that Jake would know. Whether he would be willing to tell her was another story; afterall, she herself often played the secretive type. It was decided then: she would go to La Push on Saturday. She didn't allow herself to dwell on the idea of how cool it would be to meet other creatures like her - no point in getting her hopes up.

Now that the inner turmoil had ceased, the wolf girl began to feel tired. Propping herself up on one elbow, she flipped her pillow to the cool side and snuggled back in with a sigh of contentment. Sleep engulfed her quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Greye: Many apologies that Rosalie did not make an appearance this chapter. She will be back next chapter!
Chapter Notes

Greye's Notes: Hey everyone! First, I need to apologize for the long delay here. My goal has been to update every week to two weeks, and I shot that to hell pretty quick. Long story short, my mom has been extremely ill, and I finally got back to the state she lives in to help. I've been staying in the hospital with her and helping her transition back to my parents' home. That's been my entire focus for the last little while here.

She is doing much better now though, and has regained a lot of her strength! So I have a little more time to pursue other things, like writing. Thank you for your patience! Enjoy this next chapter.

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Last Time: Bella spent a week at school with no sign of the Cullens. While she was at first worried they were avoiding her, Bella used the time to get closer to her human friends Angela and Eric. After a concussion (caused by Bella) sends Angela to the hospital, the wolf girl gets a chance to talk to Carlisle and learn the real reason the Cullen kids aren't at school: sunlight. Now it's the weekend, and Bella has decided it's time to go to La Push and find out what exactly Esme was talking about when she asked if Bella was affiliated with the "Quileute shifters"...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bella killed the engine outside Billy Black's house on the reservation and sighed. Ordinarily, a trip to visit Jake would have raised her spirits. After her conversation with Charlie that morning, however, she found herself hesitant and unsure.

"Bella, I've known the Black family almost my whole life - I practically grew up on that reservation myself. If there are shifters there, then they are damn good at hiding it." Charlie's voice was troubled, and Bella looked at him across the kitchen table. They were eating mac and cheese for dinner that night, but neither had really touched their food. Bella had spent Saturday with Charlie, and had decided that Sunday would be the day she went down to the reservation.

Studying her father, she realized that he didn't want to believe that Billy would lie to him. She smiled at him reassuringly. "Dad - don't forget, we have a pretty big secret too." When he looked at her blankly for a moment, Bella felt such a sudden surge of love and affection for her father that she was nearly overwhelmed. Charlie had never cared what she was - never treated her any differently, other than doing what he felt was necessary to keep her safe. He trusted her and loved her as his own daughter, and he never thought of her as anything less. Not for the first time, she thanked whatever gods were listening that Charlie had been the one to find her in the woods that day.

Finally Charlie caught on and raised his brows speculatively. "You do have a point there Bells. Still...I'm a cop. I would have hoped I'd notice something."

Bella shrugged. "You've never known to look for it before. Anyway, I need to find out for myself."
Here Charlie looked at her seriously, and Bella straightened unconsciously.

"Bells, I understand why you need to know, but please be careful. And don't get your hopes up too much. They are probably human like most everyone else in Forks, and if they're not..." His voice became impossibly gentle, his eyes full of love and sorrow, "They may not be like you." Bella stared at him in silence, before swallowing the hard lump in her throat and looking down into her mac and cheese.

Charlie had accurately deduced her hope, and simultaneously taken it away. It hurt, but she knew why he had done it. She let out a hard breath, but nodded that she understood.

So now, sitting in front of the house that had been like a second home growing up (once she'd gotten past the tendency to shift into a wolf from moment to moment), she wasn't sure what she felt.

A thump on her window startled her from her thoughts, and she turned to see Jake leering at her. She rolled her eyes at the goofy faces he was making.

"Come on Bella!" His voice was somewhat muffled by the glass, but her ears picked him up clearly. "Are you coming in or not?" Jake thumped the glass once more before turning to head back into the house. Laughing to herself, Bella scrambled out of the truck cab and hurried after him.

Inside, she was surprised to find that Billy wasn't home. Jake answered her unspoken question. "Council meeting. Dad's probably going to be gone for a while." There was an odd tone in his voice, and Bella frowned. The boy - erm, could she really think of him that way anymore? he was as big as a house - didn't meet her eyes for a moment, and she felt his stiffness. Choosing not to reply for the moment, she let her eyes roam over the familiar setting. The tired old couch, comfortable and lumpy, set before a modest TV set with an Xbox placed next to it. A couple of faded armchairs, and old lacy curtains over the windows that Bella knew came from Jake's mother, before she passed. Billy had never removed anything his late wife had done to the house. Her eyes trailed over to the half-wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. She could just see the vintage fridge from where she stood. The hallway to her right she knew extended further into the ranch-style house with bedrooms and a bathroom.

Feeling Jake's eyes on her again, she looked up at him and smiled. "I haven't been by in a while. Doesn't look like you've changed much." Even as she said that, her eyes snagged on a new picture sitting on the mantle above the small fireplace. Crossing the room, she inspected it. There were six shirtless young men in it, one of whom was Jake. They all had matching shoulder tattoos, and insane muscles. Her eyes narrowed, some of these guys looked familiar... "Woah! Is this Paul? And is that Seth Clearwater? Jeez, I was only gone a year and you guys went and developed into linebackers!"

She felt Jake at her shoulder, and his laugh had a nervous quality to it. "Yeah...we all uh, decided to work out a lot last year." His explanation sounded lame, and she raised an eyebrow at him. Jake winced, and looked away. Bella guessed that was all he was going to say about it.

A finger lifted to point out the matching tattoos. "What's with the ink? Are you guys all in, like, a club or something?" Again with the uneasy laugh. She had to work hard to catch his brown eyes.

"Sure, something like that." Jake shuffled his feet awkwardly and abruptly headed into the kitchen. "Can I get you a snack or something? I know you're always hungry." Bella narrowed her eyes at this obvious diversionary tactic, but when her stomach growled she couldn't deny that a little something to eat would be a good thing.

Jake fixed enough eggs and ham to feed a small army, but between him and Bella, they devoured it
quickly. As she ate, that strange, musky scent from before touched her nostrils. While she finished eating, Bella took in a casual, deep breath and tried to catch the scent again for further analysis. It seemed to pervade the house, but it was definitely strongest around Jake. The smell was almost familiar, but it was unique enough that Bella was having a hard time deciding what it was. Her eyes studied Jake as the young man wolfed down his share of the food. She had known Jake nearly all of her life, and she knew his scent as well as Charlie's or her own. Was it possible for someone's scent to change? Her eyes narrowed speculatively before she went back to her own food, sating her stomach and sighing in appreciation.

"Thanks Jake, that hit the spot." Rising from her chair, she went over to the sink and began washing up the dishes. It was habit now; whenever one of them cooked, the other would clean up. Kept things neat that way, and it also kept Billy and Charlie from going crazy when they saw how many dishes the pair could go through in just a couple of hours. Jake was silent as she washed up, and she could feel his tense presence behind her. What was he so nervous about, she wondered?

Finally, she turned around. Jake had gotten to his feet and was now leaning against the back wall of the kitchen. He didn't look relaxed in the slightest.

Okay, enough of this.

She thought.

"Jake," she said, "What is going on? You're as tense as that time we had to tell Billy that we broke a window in the community center." Jake's expression clammed up, and she tried for a smile. "Come on man, we've known each other forever. Can't you tell me?" That did it.

Jake's head snapped up and his eyes blazed in frustration. He moved across the room and stopped before her. It was clear that he was resisting the urge to storm up and grab her like he had last week, and she was glad that he at least had the presence of mind to remember last time. Breath came hard through his nostrils, and his eyes were angry, but Bella held his gaze calmly. Finally, "I wish I could tell you Bella, I'm trying, but I can't. I -" The muscles in his neck seized up, and Jake closed his mouth with an audible snap. His body shook, and the musky scent became stronger. "All I can say is, if you really want to know, you'll have to find out for yourself. Remember the history of my people - remember all of the stories I've told you and that you've heard from others here. Maybe you'll figure it out." Bella held his strained gaze, before finally nodding.

"Okay Jake. I don't understand why you can't just tell me, but I'll do as you say. If I think I've guessed it, I'll let you know." Jake released a huge breath, and his shoulders sagged in relief. Bella's brow knitted in concern. "It's going to be okay.." She reached out and rested a hand on his arm, but gasped as Jake reached out and pulled her tight into his arms, his face burrowing into her shoulder. His skin felt warm again, and she could feel him shaking. This time, with suppressed emotion.

Bella quickly wound her arms around him in return and hugged him as tight as she dared. Whatever was going on with him, she was going to figure it out. And if this "club" he was in turned out to be some kind of sick gang? Her brow drew down in rage. She would handle it.

"Bella...please figure it out. It would be so much easier if you knew." She felt his voice vibrate through her collarbone, and ran her fingers soothingly through his short hair. Yes, she thought, if someone was hurting Jake, she would destroy them. Jake was like her little brother, and she loved him.

After a few minutes of comforting, Bella knew Jake needed a transition to something else. Really, they both did. After a final pat to his back, Bella pulled away from him.

"Okay, enough of that for now! I came here to have some fun too you know." When Jake just gave her a perplexed expression, she grinned. "Didn't you get a new Call of Duty game?" The boy in front of her perked up immediately.
"Yeah! Come on!" He moved past her and leaped over his couch to the TV to get set up. "Bella, fair warning, you won't stand a chance!" Pleased that she could turn his mood around so quickly, Bella took a moment to smile to herself before following Jake's move and hopping over the couch.

"You're on!"

A few hours later found Bella saying goodbye to Jake. Billy still hadn't returned, but Jake assured her that he'd be home eventually. She gave him a parting hug and a whispered promise that she would figure out whatever it was that was troubling him. He smiled at her, but his eyes were sad and baleful. She turned to her truck and stopped. There were three young men standing in front of it. The way they eyed her had the fine hairs at the base of her neck standing on end, and she stifled a growl. Jake, it seemed, didn't like their presence either. And she did think she heard a growl from him. Her eyes looked them over. She recognized two for certain, and thought she knew the other. "Hey Seth, Paul. How are you guys? Haven't seen you in ages." Paul and the guy she didn't recognize ignored her, but Seth at least gave her a small, shy smile. He'd always been a nice kid, she thought.

Jacob wasn't playing polite. "What the hell are you guys doing here?" His voice was angry, borderline snarl. Bella raised her eyebrows in surprise. Jake sure did seem to get angry a lot these days, and weren't these guys his friends?

The trio stared at Jake impassively, unimpressed by his anger. "Sam wants you. Said you need to get over there right now." Paul was the one speaking, and he shot Jake a hard look. "Or he'll make you."

Now Bella knew she wasn't imagining the growl. Her brow drew down. "Make him?" She repeated, staring hard now at Paul. "Jake doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to do, and no one has any right to "make" him do anything." Paul's gaze shifted towards her and he took an aggressive step forward.

"Shut up Bella, you don't know what you're talking about. This is tribe business - stay out of it." He glared at her, and she matched his stare with one of her own. No way was she backing down from something like that.

Bella took a step toward him of her own, maintaining eye contact. She could sense his surprise, and she brought her own dominance to bear as she had when Jake had been too belligerent before. "No Paul, I won't stay out of it. Jake is family, and -" She felt a large hand close on her shoulder, and she broke off. She didn't break eye contact, but waited to hear what Jake would say.

"It's alright Bella, I'll go. I don't like how they came and got me, but I do need to go." The resignation in his voice pained her, and the sudden triumphant look on Paul's face was infuriating. She narrowed her eyes at him and shrugged Jake's hand off.

Three steps brought her face to face with the smug, arrogant little prick. "If I find out Jake is being hurt or taken advantage of in some way, it will be your nuts I come for first Paul. I thought we were friends once. Guess I was wrong." Bella finally released him from her gaze and shoulder checked him, hard, on her way past to her truck. A growl sounded behind her, and then Seth was shouting.

"No Paul, calm down! Bella, move!"

Bella whirled around in time to see Paul shaking, as she had seen Jake shake, and the looks of horror on the three other faces around her before Paul's form seemed to explode outward. An enormous wolf leapt at her in Paul's place. Adrenaline kicked in, and time slowed. Instinct took over. Bella's gaze sharpened and her green/gold eyes found Paul's furious brown ones. Her arm came around lightning fast and slammed into Paul's shoulder, driving him into the ground. Her voice boomed out
in the front yard, laced with dominance and power. "Down." Before Paul could even get up, his paws were knocked from under him by the force of her will. Dimly, Bella wasn't exactly sure how she was doing this, but she didn't want to question currently. Paul struggled against her hold for a moment before finally averting his eyes. He bared his throat the tiniest bit, and Bella relaxed her hold on him enough for him to stand. She could feel three pairs of stunned eyes staring at her. Now that Paul stood before her in wolf form, she smelled the same musky scent she had from Jake. She also noted that, at some point, the sharp claws from one of Paul's paws had raked her arm. Trickles of blood trailed down her arm. She ignored it.

"I see now. You are wolf shifters." Her voice sounded distant to her own ears, and she realized that she felt a little light headed. She couldn't reveal that in front of them, however, especially not Paul. Her gaze shifted to Jake, who was staring at her in bewildered surprise. "Jake, we'll talk later. I think it's best I go for now." He didn't respond, and Bella got into her truck. She drove away with many eyes still following her.

Once she was a sufficient distance away, she allowed herself to panic a little. "Holy shit. What just happened?" Her heart raced in her chest and sweat had broken out across her brow. Her hands tightened on the wheel until it creaked. "Shit shit shit shit shit!" If her instincts hadn't kicked in, Paul could have seriously hurt her. As it was, she'd just gotten a little scratch. Her eyes glanced down at the fading claw marks on her arm. There was still blood dried on her skin, but the wounds were healing quickly - far more quickly than the vampire bite she had sustained. Bella filed that away. She wasn't sure how she had known what to do, but she had. What did it mean? "They're shifters, just like the Cullens said." She shook herself, working to calm herself down after the showdown that had just happened. How much had she revealed of herself there too, she wondered? And how had she done that? As much as it hurt, it was blatantly obvious that whatever the Quileutes were, they were not like her. They were another type of creature, though similar. She guessed it was too much to hope that she'd find more of her own kind in such a small place. But that was a worry for another day.

Jake was a shifter too - she knew it. Now she would know what that scent was, and what it meant. And the shaking, that seemed to be a sign of the change coming on them. Their tempers seemed to rule. And was this Sam guy their Alpha? She vaguely remembered an older guy on the rez called Sam Uley, and figured it must be him.

She drove in silence for a few minutes, approaching the reservation line. "Fuck!" She yelled suddenly, the expletive leaving her lips and using every ounce of breath she had in her lungs. And then she started laughing. How crazy was this? Slightly unhinged laughter filled the cab for a few moments before petering out and Bella released a deep sigh. Charlie. She needed to find Charlie. Her eyes snagged on the beautiful green scarf she had gotten from the pile of clothes Esme had placed before her over a week ago. She reached for it and wrapped it around her neck, taking a deep breath of the calming scent it still held.

The reservation line approached, she could see the stretch of road that would carry her across it ahead. She didn't care where Charlie was or what he was doing she decided, she was going to find him and he was going to take the day off. Period. Over the line.

A ball of tension eased from her shoulders and she released a relieved breath. Then she blinked.

A woman appeared in the road.

"Shit!" Bella swerved the wheel and cut the truck around the woman. She could feel the tires wanting to come up off the road and struggled to get the truck pulled around and stopped. Then she flung the door open and jumped out. "Are you o - " Her eyes widened as she saw familiar dark eyes,
a fall of wavy blond hair, and a face that looked stark and beautiful. Her breath caught in her throat for a moment, and then her brow drew down. She so couldn't deal with this right now.

"What the actual hell? You could have destroyed my truck!" She was certain there was no way the truck would have left even a scratch on her.

Rosalie took a few steps toward her and stopped, her dark gold eyes surveying Bella from head to foot but curiously not meeting her own gaze. The vampire's gaze fastened on Bella's bloodied arm, and she thought she could see lines suddenly appear around those perfect eyes. She thought she heard the vampire mutter something like "fucking dogs" under her breath, but Rosalie's voice was so quiet even Bella's keen ears struggled to pick it up. The vampire seemed to be utterly ignoring her otherwise, much to Bella's frustration. "Hey, blondie! I'm talking to you." A part of her didn't actually want to be rude like this, but she had just received the shock of her life. Plus, the last time she'd seen Rosalie, the beautiful vampire had been trying to kill her.

In response, Rosalie took a few more steps forward until the space diminished between them enough that she could slowly reach out toward Bella. Curiously, she didn't feel her hackles rise at this invasion of space. In fact, she felt only her heart beating faster and a flush coming to her skin. "What are you doing?" Bella said, her voice significantly quieter.

Again the vampire didn't respond, but her pale fingers fastened around the scarf Bella wore around her neck. "This belongs to me, wolf." This was the first time she had ever heard Rosalie speak, and Bella's eyes widened at the sound. All of the vampires had beautiful voices, no doubt another draw for their intended prey, but Rosalie's voice...there was nothing to compare. Finally, Rosalie's eyes met hers and Bella realized that even though she had seen Rosalie's eyes before, now she was actually seeing the woman behind them. Before, there had been only blind rage and hunger. Now, there was a soul. Bella swallowed, and something almost seemed to snick internally. She didn't know how she knew, but Bella was positive that she wanted to hear Rosalie's voice again. Every day. She wanted to see her, hear her, be near her, for all days. The tidal wave of emotion rising inside was unlike any she had ever felt before, and a hard breath left her under its weight.

"I need to see." Rosalie's voice came again, and Bella latched onto it, and tried to ground herself before she fell to pieces before the vampire. What the hell was happening?

She couldn't respond verbally to Rosalie, so she merely stood still while the vampire looked at whatever she was looking at. Slowly, the scarf came off from around her neck, and she watched as Rosalie wound it around her own. She would have released a very un-Bella-like whimper at its loss, if it weren't for the fact that clearly that wasn't Rosalie's entire game. When her hand rested on her shoulder, the one that Rosalie had bitten, Bella knew what she wanted. Before she could reach down to pull off her shirt, the hand at her shoulder ripped the fabric under it.

"Hey -" Bella managed to choke out, but Rosalie forestalled her with a raised hand and the words died on her lips. The vampire stepped impossibly closer, and Bella was made suddenly aware of the fact that Rosalie was a tall woman, not quite as tall as she was, but tall enough that they could see nearly eye to eye. She felt the vampire's soft breath on her cheek as she leaned in, and the ghostly touch of cool fingers grazing the bite mark that lay on the skin between shoulder and neck. She knew what Rosalie would see. It had stopped bleeding, and now there was an angry looking scar there in the perfect shape of teeth bearing down. The edges of it, that were healing faster, had gone a silvery white. She suspected that this bite was healing at a more human rate but, having never been exactly human, wasn't sure.

"I see. It would seem that Carlisle and Alice were...right." Rosalie's voice had a quality to it that Bella didn't like. She sounded slightly angry, disgruntled, and maybe a little sad?
Feeling a little more herself, but uncertain what exactly was happening, Bella tried to meet Rosalie's eyes. "What were they right about, Rosalie?"

A faint shiver seemed to pass through the vampire as Bella spoke her name, and had Bella herself not been of the supernatural type, she would never have seen it. "It doesn't matter." Rosalie's response almost surprised Bella, for she hadn't thought the vampire was ever going to speak directly to her. Rosalie's deep gold eyes finally lifted to meet her own, and Bella nearly gasped at the depth of emotion there. "It doesn't matter, because it isn't going to happen. Can't happen." Bella wasn't sure what Rosalie was talking about, but she could hear the pain in her voice. She wanted to take that pain away. Rosalie took several steps back from Bella, and unconsciously Bella found herself taking a step forward to follow.

"Stop!" Rosalie's strident voice cut through Bella and the wolf halted, uncertain. "I don't want to talk to you, I don't want to see you. Coming here was a mistake." Those words hurt for reasons Bella didn't yet understand, but she found herself following a step even as Rosalie turned to run.

"Wait!" She called, and felt relieved when the vampire did in fact pause. She didn't turn around, however, and so Bella spoke to her back. "If...if I can't see you again..." This was going to sound stupid, but Bella needed it, "Can I have the scarf back? Please?" Rosalie's shoulders tensed, and she could see her shaking again for a split second before Rosalie's voice responded, rough but still beautiful,

"No." Before Bella could blink, the vampire had disappeared into the trees.

Her eyes stared after the departed vampire for a long time, and her feet remained planted on the road. She couldn't remember ever feeling so bereft, so utterly alone in her entire life. It felt like something so very precious had just been ripped away, before she even fully grasped what it was. Bella realized dimly that her cheeks were wet, and it was some time before she managed to rouse herself enough to collect her truck and get herself home. Forgotten was her need to see Charlie, and forgotten was her torn shirt and revelation about the Quileutes. When she walked into her house, she laid down on the couch and pulled a blanket over herself. Fatigue settled over her, emotional and mental, and she didn't have the energy to think about either anymore for now.

Bella woke to the feel of the couch dipping beneath her as another weight settled there, and a familiar, warm hand settled on her leg.

"Bells?" Charlie's gruff voice queried, and she could hear the worry there. Pushing back the lethargy of sleep and exhaustion, Bella sat up. She stared at Charlie for a moment, before leaning forward and putting her arms around him. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed.

Startled, her father froze for a moment before returning her embrace. Bella wasn't generally one for big displays of affection, at least not with him. She knew this would be setting off warning bells for her dad, but right now she just needed him to hold her like he had when she was a little girl, and scared. "I'll tell you about it in a bit Dad. I just need to not talk about it yet." She murmured, voice partially muffled by his shirt. Her feelings were so muddled, she wasn't even sure how to begin to explain what had happened.

Charlie ran a hesitant hand over her hair. "Okay Bella, whatever you need."

After a little while, Bella felt good enough to disengage from Charlie and push herself up from the couch. "I'm going to go get changed." She said, voice a little distant. Charlie's hand fastened around her wrist before she could move however, and she looked back to him to see his wide eyes fastened on her arm.
"Bella...is that blood? Is that your blood?" The fear in his voice caused Bella to become more present in the conversation, and she sat down on the coffee table across from him. That's right, she should probably shower too. But a shower and a change of clothes would need to wait for a moment.

"Yeah, it's mine. I'm okay now though, it has healed - that's all dried. I'll explain more after my shower, but Dad...the Quileutes are shifters. At least some of them. Jake..." she hesitated for a moment, "Jake is too. Just know that I'm okay. I have a lot to tell you though. Maybe you should make some coffee?" Bella waited patiently as Charlie carefully inspected her arm; he didn't release her until he was satisfied that the damage was in fact healed. Her dad's eyes met her own seriously.

"I'll wait until you're done Bella, but I need to know what happened." Without another word, he got up from the couch and went to the kitchen to start making coffee. Bella took that as her cue to head for the shower.

An hour or so later, Bella stood looking into the bathroom mirror. Steam still swirled around her, but the fog on the glass had gone away and she gave herself a careful inspection. Everything looked pretty much the same. Her green eyes were still shot through with gold, rather than their usual brown, which she decided to attribute to the fact that she'd been injured again, however mildly. Fatigue shone in her face, and she could see the strange sadness she felt reflected there too. Her eyes moved down from the mirror to inspect her arm. It hadn't taken too long to get the dried blood cleaned off, and there were just the faintest white lines to attest to the damage that had been there. The wound had healed surprisingly quickly, she thought, especially considering how long it was still taking for the vampire bite on her shoulder to heal. Perhaps because she and the shifters shared certain similar physiological aspects, the wound healed faster. Or perhaps there was a substance on the teeth of a vampire, whereas the claws of a shifter, however deadly, were just claws. Bella placed a hand over her face and sighed heavily. There was too much to think about. Too much when there was still this sadness, and this weight on her heart that she didn't understand. Rosalie's face flashed in her mind. She missed the scarf.

Reluctantly she went back to her room and got changed into soft sweats and a t-shirt, before going to face Charlie. It would be good to tell him about it, she knew.

At the kitchen table, a steaming mug of coffee, black, was waiting for her. Bella wrapped her fingers around it gratefully and sat down. Charlie's eyes were on her, but she took her time having a sip before she met his gaze. "Ok. I'll start with La Push."

As she knew he liked it, Bella carefully recounted every detail of her visit with Jacob that she could recall, and then moved on to the confrontation with the three other rez boys. Paul, Seth, and she thought the third was Quil, but hadn't been sure. As a police chief, Charlie appreciated all the details, so she described their appearances and their attitudes. When she got to the part where Paul had attacked her while her back was turned, she saw his knuckles turn white around his mug and marveled that he didn't break it.

"Here's the strange part though, Dad. He didn't hurt me - not really. My instincts or something kind of kicked in, and I don't think I've ever moved so fast. This huge wolf was sailing at me, and I got my arm around pretty quickly and with strength I don't think I knew I had before this, I was able to put him down. And I even yelled "down"." A faint smirk played around her lips thinking about it. "Not sure exactly where that came from, but I guess it seemed appropriate at the time." Bella shook her head and took another sip of coffee. "After that, I was able to keep him from attacking me again by the force of my will. I learned some of that from my time...away." Charlie shifted uncomfortably, and Bella looked away.

She had learned during her time among wolves that an amplified ability she possessed from the wolf
was a certain level of dominance that she could impress upon others as necessary. She had yet to meet any creature who could match her, but then she had never met another creature like herself. At least, not until today.

"What did the other boys do?" Charlie asked, and Bella remembered that she hadn't finished.

Glancing back at her dad, she shrugged. "Then I left. I told Jake we would talk later, and they were all in a kind of state of shock, so I got out of there. I think at least part of the cat is out of the bag about what I am, but I guess that's fair. Since I know their secret now too." She fell silent, and finished her coffee over the next few minutes while Charlie processed what she had said.

When she got up to go and wash her mug, he spoke. "Well, not too much we can do about that right now. I reckon Jake will be showing up here soon to talk to you, but until then, I think we just give the rez a wide berth." Bella nodded and set her mug in the dry rack.

"Yeah. I think this is a lot for both of us to take in. Wouldn't surprise me if I don't hear from him for a day or two." Hungry, she moved over to peruse the fridge for leftovers, and found some pizza that didn't look too bad. The silence stretched for a few more minutes while she got that heated up. The moment she dreaded was coming, she knew, but it was inevitable.

"So you said you were going to "start" with La Push..." Charlie finally said, turning in his seat to look at her. "What else happened Bella? What happened to put that look on your face?"

Leave it to Charlie to notice that something was amiss. Bella sighed. She hadn't really planned on hiding it from him anyway. "I saw Rosalie Cullen again..." She explained their brief interaction. "Dad, I don't understand what I'm feeling myself. I'm disappointed and sad for reasons I can't grasp. Was it because she took the scarf? I mean, if it belonged to her, then she should have it back, right? I feel like I lost something." Absently, she placed a hand over her chest, right over her heart. "And the saddest part is, I'm not even sure what I lost." She didn't tell him about the intense feelings she'd had when Rosalie had looked her in the eye, or the way she had wanted to follow Rosalie and felt irrationally like she wanted to be near her always. Was it possible she'd even actually felt that, she wondered, or had her own mind dramatized it? It seemed so far fetched.

Charlie gave her a pensive look. She thought he was going to say something profound, but he just looked at the clock and said, "Well, it's getting late. And you've got school tomorrow. Let's both get some sleep, and maybe in the morning things will seem clearer." Surprised he didn't want to talk more, she agreed. Bella finished her pizza and went up to get ready for bed.

Tomorrow was supposed to be overcast. She would see the Cullens, and maybe get some more answers. For now though? Bed sounded really good.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: A big thanks as always to my sister Lady_Lullaby who took the time to proofread this and to try to keep me on the straight and narrow!

Also thanks to those who have commented, kudosed, and bookmarked this fic! You guys have been a really great motivator for me. Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Hey guys! So sorry for this long stretch between updates!

I saw mention in the reviews (love you guys) that you also enjoy a slow burn! That's good. I will say I don't intend for this to be extremely slow and excruciating, and to the reviewer who questioned whether I'd have a lot of filler chapters with minimal interaction between primary characters, let me put your fears to rest. (I hate that too!) There will be plenty of action between Bella and Rosalie. I'm still building up to that, but you will see more of our favorite vampire (well, my favorite vampire) from now on.

Thank you all again for your generous reviews! And thanks as always to my sister, Lady_Lullaby, for doing her best to proof this for me. I hope that you enjoy this next chapter.

I also appreciate the kind words about my mom. It has been a long road, but she is doing better, thank you.

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Previously: Bella went to La Push on Sunday, and made some discoveries about her Quileute friends...and herself. When Paul became angry and attacked, Bella stopped him with the force of her will. This interaction was followed by an encounter with Rosalie, in the middle of the road outside the rez. Bella felt an instant, powerful connection to Rosalie, and was crushed utterly by the vampire's rejection of her. Rosalie also took her scarf back. What will Monday bring? (Things to also remember: Angela is in the hospital after receiving a concussion (accidentally) from Bella)

Somehow, the morning did not make everything alright. Bella groaned before she even opened her eyes, and rested an arm over her face. She felt as empty and sad as she had yesterday, after...the event. The only difference a good night's sleep had done was make her feel more alert, and she wasn't sure that was a good thing. Maybe Charlie would let her just stay home today?

A rumble of thunder outside disturbed her inner musings. Her arm lifted off of her face and her eyes popped open. Thunder? That meant a storm! And a storm meant...

Bella sat up in bed and looked out her window. A smile stretched across her face when she saw the cloud cover. Hope began to build in her chest that maybe, just maybe...she would be at school today. Carlisle had said his kids went to school on days like this; they only avoided sunny days. It was insane, she knew, but there was a deep part of herself that wanted to see the vampire again. Rosalie could yell and curse and fume at her if she wanted, and Bella would just be happy to be there.

A dim voice in the back of her mind reminded her that her reaction was not normal, but it only lasted a moment.
Even though she still hurt inside, Bella used this as a motivator to get up and start her morning routine. Fifteen minutes and she was downstairs, dressed, and ready to go. Button-down plaid, jeans, and boots. Her usual sneakers wouldn't keep out this kind of wet, she knew.

"Glad to see you up." Bella turned to see Charlie sitting on the couch in his uniform. She frowned. She must really be losing it if she hadn't even realized he was still home.

"Dad, shouldn't you be at work?" She came around the couch and plopped down on the arm of a chair. Charlie gave her a faint smile and got to his feet.

"Yep," he rubbed a hand through his hair, "I just wanted to wait until you were up this time. Last night being what it was..." She nodded, remembering. She hadn't exactly been in great shape.

When Charlie didn't speak again, Bella filled the silence. "I'm still not sure what's going on with me Dad, but I promise I'll tell you if things get too bad. For now, one day at a time." She was relieved when he nodded in agreement. Talking about the events of yesterday again was not something she wanted to do this morning.

Chief Swan smiled, though worry was still clear in his eyes, and turned for the door. "Alright. I'll be down at the station then." Bella turned back to the kitchen to make breakfast when she heard Charlie open the door, and a stream of expletives leave him at the same time.

Faster than she thought possible, Bella crossed the room and stood beside him. "What? What's going on?" She was on edge, ready, but Charlie just pointed down. He had the door cracked open, and she could see now why he hadn't opened it all the way. Someone was lying in front of it. Snoring. Perplexed, she stuck her head out and around the door, craning to see exactly who this was. When she recognized him, her eyes widened, and then narrowed.

"Paul!" She shouted, suddenly angry, and shoved the door open wide, sending the young man sprawling. That woke him up. He rolled to his feet snarling, until he saw her looking at him. He immediately stopped and dropped to his knees, hands up.

"Wait Bella!" The tone of his voice brought her up short, and Bella realized suddenly that she had very nearly changed on the spot and attacked him. Being on edge like she was, and still raw from yesterday, she wasn't sure what she'd have done if he hadn't spoken up quickly. Since when had her emotions ruled her change like this? Keeping her eyes locked on his, she eased some of the tension from her muscles. She felt Charlie step up beside her, but didn't take her eyes away from Paul.

Her Dad's voice was all Police Chief. "Paul? The young man who attacked my daughter yesterday?" She felt rather than saw her father level an intense stare at the shifter. "Paul Lahote, explain what you are doing on my front porch. If this is some sort of prank, I have to warn you that I am not in the mood." Paul glanced briefly at Chief Swan before returning his eyes to Bella. Something in his face and demeanor gave Bella pause.

"Dad, I think it's fine. Paul's just here to talk to me. This is a strange way to go about it, but I'm not worried." She finally broke her eye contact and looked at her father reassuringly. "Go ahead and go to work. I won't let Paul make me late to school." Charlie looked back at her searchingly and, satisfied, shot Paul a hard look before stepping off the porch and heading for his cruiser.

"I'm a call away if you need me Bella," the Chief's eyes found Paul, "and I know where you live young man. Think carefully about your actions." He called over his shoulder. His tone sounded relatively nonchalant, but the threat implicit in his words was real enough.

Once Charlie was gone, Bella turned back to Paul and motioned with one hand. "Get up, and tell me
why you're here." Slowly, the other wolf shifter got to his feet, though clearly maintaining a submissive position. It was odd, she thought, considering how aggressive he was the other day. Perhaps it was because they were on her territory now...

"First," Paul spoke, "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry, for yesterday. I have the shortest temper on the rez, and I'm sorry that I hurt you." His eyes lingered on her arm, and she realize that he knew that he'd clawed her. When he didn't continue immediately, Bella motioned for him to keep going. She knew that wasn't the real reason he was here.

A frown creased his brow as he continued. "Okay so, now that that's out of the way... I don't know exactly how to explain it, but when we..." Paul looked frustrated for a moment, as if searching for the words. Bella waited patiently, arms crossed. "When we had our...uh, tussle, the other day, something happened." He took a breath and met her eyes for a second before looking away. "You took control of me the way only an Alpha can do. And you did it in such a way that..." Paul huffed, and put his hands out wide in a helpless gesture. "Look, I don't know how, or why, but my link to my pack has been broken."

Bella's hands dropped to her sides and she stared at Paul, stunned. Before she could summon words, he continued.

"I can't...can't hear their thoughts anymore when we are in wolf form, and they say I don't smell like pack anymore. Sam chased me off rez grounds until I figure this out." Paul gazed at her helplessly. "The only thing I could think of was to come here to see if...to see if maybe you're supposed to be my new Alpha? Or see if you can fix what was broken." He wrapped his arms around himself self-consciously. He must be really messed up to show her this level of vulnerability.

Bella waited a moment to see if he would say more, and gave herself more time to think. Had she really done this, broken his bond? How was that even possible, and how in the world was she supposed to restore it? "Paul, if I am responsible, I promise you it wasn't intentional. I would never sever a pack bond like this." She waited for him to nod before continuing. Being what she was, Bella understood the seriousness of what had happened. Though she herself had never really had a pack, she knew that for wolves who'd had one, he loneliness of losing it was crushing. She met his gaze sympathetically. "As for fixing it, I'm not even sure how I broke it." He seemed desolate at this response, but she pressed on, "And I don't know about being your Alpha. I have no pack, so I don't know where I would fall in the hierarchy, or if it's even possible for you to "join" my "pack"."

Paul's head jerked up in surprise. "You - you don't have a pack? You are a wolf, aren't you, like us?" He gazed at her in perplexity. "You used your dominance to stop me like an Alpha would. Or at least, like a more dominant wolf would."

Bella twisted her lips in a crooked smile. "I'm a wolf, but I'm not the same as you. I am not certain what you are, exactly, but I would wager a guess that you are more human than wolf. I am half human, half wolf. Either part of me can be more present over the other at anytime, and I make little distinction." It felt strange to be saying this much about herself, but it wasn't like Paul was exactly human and unfamiliar with the supernatural. "I am Faoladh." It was a word that hadn't left her lips in years, and something tight inside of her unwound and became word at the name of her kind escaping her.

Paul tilted his head, uncertain. "Well...that must be close enough to control me like that. Even Sam struggles...struggled...to keep my temper in check. Didn't seem to faze you much though." He paused. "Isn't Charlie part of your pack? He was kind of acting like your Beta. Is he like you?"

Bella frowned at the thought. Yes, she supposed Charlie was pack. Being raised by him though, the term she generally used was family. "I don't know if I'd give myself the title Alpha, but I guess yeah,
he's pack. He'd pretty much be it though, and no, Charlie's not a wolf." Her gaze dropped to the watch on her wrist and her eyes widened. "Look Paul, I want to talk about this with you more, but if I don't leave now I'll be late to school." She brushed past him and headed for her truck, glad she'd decided to leave her book bag in there over the weekend. Her stomach growled in protest at her missed meal, but she didn't have time to care. Footsteps hurried after her.

"Wait Bella!" She stopped at the door of her truck and looked at Paul. "Please," he said, and she was surprised to find no trace of the animosity from yesterday, just pained desperation, "Please, I have to know if you're my new Alpha. I need a pack!" He looked away, ashamed. His voice came small. "I don't want to be alone."

Bella's wolf instincts came roaring to the fore and she allowed them to take over for a moment. Two steps brought her closer to Paul, and she laid a hand on his shoulder. "Paul, look at me." Her voice held the same command as yesterday, but it was gentler this time. Paul's dark eyes met hers. "You are not alone. Until we figure this out, I accept you into my pack." Curiously, she felt inside an immediate connection establish itself, like the tiniest sliver - a tether that stretched from her, to Paul. Unless she concentrated on it, she would barely know it was there. Tension seemed to melt out of Paul under her hand, and his eyes slid closed.

"Thank you Bella." Relief was clear in his voice, and she thought that he must have felt it too. What must if have been like, she wondered, to be connected to so many others, and then to have all those connections severed? Paul opened his eyes, and Bella took her hand back. "What now?"

Bella tapped her watch. "Now? We get to school. Hop in, I'll drive you to my school and you can head back to the rez from there. You can take my truck, if you want. Just bring it back to my house later." Paul nodded, and immediately got into the passenger side.

All the way to school, Bella was silent and focused on driving. Inside she reeled. What had she just done?

Paul didn't seem in the least bit worried, Bella thought as she slid out of the truck. "Did you want to borrow my ride?" She asked, holding the keys toward him. The shifter shook his head.

"Nah, I'll just change in the forest and run back." He grinned. "Perks of having the tribe know what you are, is that the teachers let us slide a little bit." His smile dimmed a little, and she wondered if he was finally worried. "It'll be weird to see the guys though and not...be one of them anymore."

There was a sad silence for a moment, and Bella pocketed her keys. "Paul, just because we're pack now doesn't mean we can't still try to figure out a way to get you back into Sam's pack. This is just a..." she searched for the right word, "temporary substitution." She gave him a weak smile of her own. "I don't have a cell, so if you need me...well, you'll know how to find me." That certainly felt like a strange thing to say, but she could feel the truth of it inside now.

Paul nodded. "Okay well, I'll come back once school is finished. See you later boss."

It wasn't until she'd nearly reached the school that Bella realized she hadn't even noticed that he'd referred to her as "boss". She shook her head. There was just too much going on. Her eyes snagged on a familiar Jeep Wrangler, and a shiny silver Volvo sitting next to it. Her first genuine smile since she had been playing video games with Jake stretched across her face. The Cullens were back. Worries about Paul faded to the back of her mind as she turned her focus to them.

Bella slipped into Math class with a minute to spare, and shared a smile with Eric, taking a seat beside him. Her eyes lingered over the empty chair that was Angela's, and she guessed her friend
was still in the hospital, or maybe recovering at home. There wasn't time to do more than wonder, however, because class started.

After class ended, Bella followed Eric out into the hall, and grinned when she realized he had waited for her. "Hey." She said in greeting.

"Hey yourself!" He replied, and they fell into step together. It was nice, Bella thought, to have some friendships forming. She would never have guessed it was so easy to connect with people. Her only real friend prior to coming to Forks High was Jake. The sporadic changing of her younger days had made finding other companionship difficult, and potentially dangerous. And then, of course, she had disappeared for a year. Shaking off the pang of guilt that brought, she turned to Eric, who'd just been walking beside her in comfortable silence.

"Eric, have you heard from Angela? I don't have a cell or anything, and I don't have her number to call from my house. I just wanted to know how she was doing." Her concern was real, as was the faint twinge of guilt and regret she felt over what had happened. Even Dr. Cullen's words, comforting as they had been, weren't enough to completely absolve her.

The boy beside her nodded, "Yeah. She texted me last night, actually. Said she was still a little out of it, and asked if I could get her homework for her today." Catching her wince, he added sympathetically, "I think she'll be back tomorrow?" Bella nodded with a barely suppressed sigh.

"Thanks for the update. Would you let her know I'm thinking about her too?" Before she'd even finished, Eric had whipped out his phone and shot off a text.

"Done! I'm sure she'll be glad to hear from you." He offered Bella a smile, which she returned readily.

It really was nice to have friends.

English was probably straightforward enough, but Bella would have been lying if she'd let anyone assume she was paying attention. Her eyes kept straying toward the clock, willing the minute hand to move faster. Her fingers tapped feverishly against her leg. She knew what she was waiting for, anticipating. Beyond a doubt, she knew that the person she was seeking was here, somewhere. And lunch was the most likely place she'd see her.

Oh, how she wanted to see her.

As she headed for Woodshop, Eric passed her and shot her a knowing wink. It took her a few steps to realize why: Ms. Ruben. She smiled faintly to herself as she crossed the grass outside toward the shop. Ms. Ruben was very attractive. And last week, had been a pleasant distraction. The truth was, though, that her Woodshop teacher held no allure for her anymore. Ms. Ruben didn't hold a candle to Rosalie.

She pushed open the door, hefting her bag over her shoulder as she did so, and stopped in her tracks as a familiar scent assaulted her nostrils. Her eyes followed her nose and found a beautiful fall of blonde hair and piercing gold eyes staring, no, glaring, right at her. Bella couldn't help it. She smiled.

The glare turned into a glower, and she watched as lips curled into a scowl. Bella beamed back. In the back of her mind, she knew she was baiting Rosalie - and that the vampire wouldn't understand that it wasn't intentional. It felt so good to be near the vampire again, no matter her temperament, that Bella couldn't be upset or hurt by Rosalie's reaction. It didn't matter. She also couldn't pretend that she wasn't happy to see her, despite Rosalie's obvious displeasure.
Finally, she turned from the vampire and greeted their teacher, Ms. Ruben, and picked up her assignment for that class. They had an option today to build sawhorses or potato boxes. Bella wasn't sure what she or Charlie would do with a potato box, but figured someone would find a use for a sawhorse. Maybe Jake.

Ms. Ruben had taken a few days to train them in shop safety, and introduced them to different tools with short, priming assignments. They knew enough to follow the directions on the assignment sheet. Theoretically anyway, Bella thought as she watched one girl try repeatedly to put in a screw with a drill that was rotating the opposite direction. She shook her head and smiled to herself for a moment, before stepping over to the girl's workbench and quietly suggesting she check her drill rotation. The other girl turned pink in embarrassment, but thanked Bella.

Just then, she could feel two eyes drilling holes into the back of her head. Turning slightly, she met two angry, darkening eyes. Bella raised an eyebrow in question. Hadn't Rosalie told her just the day before to stay away from her? Shrugging, she crossed the room to get her supplies around so she could get started.

The class passed quickly, and Bella managed to get several pieces measured and cut before time ran out. She was glad Charlie had included this kind of thing in his homeschooling. She cleaned up her station, returned her safety glasses to the bin, thanked Ms. Ruben, and slipped out of the shop. Rosalie was already gone. Standing in the grass outside, she heaved a sigh. It had felt good to be near her, but Bella knew she wanted more. Would it really be too much for Rosalie to just talk to her? Or even look at her without glaring? Bella had thought it would be enough to be close to her, but she was wrong. She still hurt inside.

"Bella!" A voice bellowed across the small yard. Her head snapped around in time to see Emmett barreling toward her at top human speed, and she comically tried to escape at human speed, but he was already on her. Huge arms lifted her into the air and crushed her against a broad chest. "Hi Bella Bear!" He fairly crowed, as Bella uselessly squirmed against him. It wasn't like she could show off her true strength here.

"Emmett, for goodness' sake!" Came Edward's exasperated voice beside him. Bella rolled her eyes at his tone, but returned Emmett's hug the best she could.

Despite herself, she laughed. "Alright Emmett, let me down!" She could feel, rather than see, his pout, but he set her back on her feet. The strange pain she felt momentarily forgotten, she beamed at Emmett and shot a grin and Alice and Jasper, who were heading in their direction too. "Hey guys, glad to see you back."

Alice fairly floated across the intervening space and offered Bella a hug too, which surprised her, but she returned it readily enough. "Yes, we had a rather long camping trip this time," said the smallest Cullen with a wink, "it's good to be back." Bella nodded in response - Dr. Cullen had explained, at least partially, their aversion to sunlight. She still didn't know exactly what happened to them under sunlight, but had never felt gladder for overcast weather.

"Would you care to sit with us at lunch, Ms. Swan?" Jasper's calm baritone interjected, a clear Southern accent coming through. She looked at him in shock.

Alice tittered, and slipped a hand into Jasper's, "She believed you were selective mute, or something." Bella's eyes snapped to Alice and narrowed contemplatively. It was like the small vampire had plucked that thought right out of her head. "It would seem, dear Bella, that there are some things you should know about us." A glance at Emmett's smile was enough to convince Bella, and she shook off her surprise.
"Sure, it would be fun to sit with you for lunch. And Jasper, please call me 'Bella'." She directed her next words to the tall vampire with honey-gold locks. He bowed his head in acknowledgement. A worry started in her gut though, as she remembered the all important reason she wanted to come to school today in the first place. "But..." she hesitated, "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

Edward focused on her then and frowned, "What about Rosalie?" Surprised, Bella stared at him hard.

"Coming back to how you knew that's what I was thinking about..." she turned to the rest of the group, "Rosalie...doesn't want to see me." The words came out with more emotion than she had planned, and she felt four pairs of interested eyes on her. Alice's in particular shone with...was that excitement? Bella frowned in confusion. Emmett's arm settled companionably around her shoulders, and she glanced up at him.

"Don't worry too much about Rosalie," he said, "She'll come around." He sounded so sure of himself, that Bella had to wonder if they knew something that she didn't. "Now come on! Time to fill up that Bella-Bear belly." He steered her in the direction of the cafeteria even as the rest of the vampires laughed, and even Bella cracked a smile. Then he patted her belly.

Gasping in mock indignation, Bella shoved Emmett hard enough that he stumbled. "You sir, go too far!" She saw Jasper cover his mouth from the corner of his eye, but Alice had no such reservation, laughing uproariously. Edward rolled his eyes, and Emmett gazed at her with big, sad eyes.

"Aww, come on Bella! I just want you to take care of that belly..." Bella was about to retort when she realized that there were several people watching their exchange. Frowning, she looked around at the other students who had stopped to watch them.

"Move along!" She told them with a shooing motion. To the vampires, "Alright, let's get in there before we make even more of a spectacle." And she could hope that Rosalie would be there.

Once inside the cafeteria, she broke off from the Cullens to drop by her usual table. Dropping Eric a smile and a nod to Mike and Jessica, she explained that she was sitting with the Cullens today. Mike and Jessica seemed floored by this statement, but Eric just waved her off. Interesting, she thought.

Once she'd filled a lunch tray, Bella turned toward the Cullen table and took a deep breath as she let her eyes roam over those seated. Emmett...Edward...Alice...Jasper... And two empty seats. The breath she hadn't realized she was still holding left her in a disappointed rush, but she headed over to take the seat beside Emmett. She couldn't stop the forlorn little gaze she gave the empty seat beside her, and knew the vampires had picked up on it. Fortunately, they were kind enough not to say anything. How much did they know, anyway? She scoffed at herself internally. Was there even something to know?

Suddenly it became clear that, once again, four pairs of curious eyes were on her. Edward's were particularly intense. She shot him an annoyed look but smiled nervously at the others. "Sorry, what did you say Emmett?" Her eyes turned to the hulking man beside her, and he turned on her a full, mega-watt smile that couldn't help be warm her from the inside out.

"I said, Bella-Bear, that we're playing baseball tonight. It would be fun if you came to play with us!" Bella stared at Emmett in perplexity. Baseball? How could they-

Edward's voice interrupted her train of thought. "We play when there is a thunderstorm, so that no one can hear us. There is supposed to be a storm tonight." Bella whipped around and stared hard at Edward, meeting his deep gold eyes with her own. Maybe it wouldn't have been difficult to guess what she'd been thinking, but this was becoming a little too much. A test was in order. Bella focused
hard and, still staring hard at Edward, forced her brain to picture a violent image of snarling wolves-bright flashes of blood arcing through the air as they fought, and yelps as teeth tore muscle and bone. With fascination she watched Edward blanch suddenly and turn away. Bella let the images fade, though her blood fairly thrummed in her veins from the remembered fight.

"You can read thoughts." Her tone came out even more accusing than she'd thought it would, and she felt the others still around her. Then Alice began to laugh. The tension was broken as Emmett joined in and even Jasper cracked a smile, though Edward still looked a little miffed. Bella looked at them in confusion-laughter wasn't exactly what she'd expected from that pronouncement.

Alice finally settled down enough to speak. "Yes Bella, Edward can hear thoughts." She cut a look at Emmett then and smirked, "You owe me, Emmett Cullen." Bella frowned as Emmett bowed his head in dejected defeat. Alice grinned and explained, "We had a bet going on when you figured out we had other gifts, and whose gift you'd figure out first." Bella raised her eyebrows.

"Gifts?" So there was more? Alice nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes! Edward can hear human thoughts, Jasper can affect the emotions of those around him, and I-" Here her little chest puffed up, "I can see the future." The smallest vampire was smiling proudly, and Bella was trying to pick her jaw up off the floor. Before Bella could form a response, another voice broke in.

"That is enough." The words came as an angry hiss, barely at hearing level, but to Bella they were beautiful. Her eyes flashed around, trying to find the owner of that magnificent voice, but Rosalie wasn't in sight.

"Just go ahead and tell the wolf all our secrets, why don't you." Rosalie's voice came in a snarl, and despite the hurt her words caused inside, Bella was glad she'd kept talking. Alice on the other hand, looked angry.

The small vampire responded, her voice equally low but just as easily heard by the non-human ears in the room. "That's not fair Rosalie, and you know it. Bella isn't a vampire, but she isn't human either-and she's our friend. We can tell her what we like." Bella held her breath and strained her ears, hoping Rosalie would speak again, but she didn't. Despite herself, she sagged. More hurtful than the words themselves was Rosalie's refusal to even speak to her face. A large hand settled comfortingly on her shoulder, and she knew that Emmett was doing his best, but it wasn't enough.

"I'll see you guys later, I need some air." She murmured, and got up. Even the revelation that some vampires had more abilities than others wasn't enough to disperse the sudden cloud of melancholy that had descended. The vampires around her wore ranging looks of disappointment and sympathy, but they didn't stop her.

After dumping her tray, Bella sat outside until it was time for her next class. The rest of the day would pass like a blur, with not one more glimpse of the golden haired, golden-eyed beauty who'd somehow crept inside of Bella and made herself important. Bella just didn't understand why this was happening, or why she was feeling this way. Even football with Emmett couldn't cheer her up.

She went out to her truck after school, keenly avoiding the Cullens and their sympathetic eyes. Somehow she didn't think she'd make it to baseball tonight.

When she opened the cab, her eyes widened to find someone already inside.

"Hey boss," said Paul, offering her not quite a smile, but a concerned gaze nonetheless. Bella said nothing as she climbed into the truck and got the engine running. She didn't feel like talking. Paul
seemed to get the hint and just rode with her in silence until they were back at her house.

Bella set a mug of hot coffee in front of Paul, and walked back across the kitchen to the plate full of warm cookies she'd just made. While cooking wasn't exactly something Bella would say she enjoyed, she did derive satisfaction from cooking for others, and the first smile she'd worn in hours crossed her face as Paul enthusiastically dug in. She settled down across the kitchen table from him with her own mug of coffee and watched him eat for a few quiet moments. She hadn't spoken since they'd arrived, and neither had Paul. She thought that perhaps their new connection lent him a little insight into her emotions. Or maybe he was just better at reading people than she'd ever given him credit for.

"I feel something, inside." She said into the quiet, and Paul looked up at her wide-eyed, a cookie comically half hanging from his mouth. He quickly finished it and sat back.

"What do you feel?" He asked, his voice quiet.

Bella shook her head, uncertain how to describe it. "It's like..." She cast her eyes up to the ceiling, "It's like this longing, deep inside. This ache that won't go away. Like there's this thing I've wanted, like I've never wanted anything before-" She shook her head. "No, that's not right. It's not a want anymore, it's a need." She fell silent, and glanced at Paul for a moment. He seemed to just be waiting patiently, attentively.

"There is a person. And when I am alone, I feel a twisting need to be with them and it's like all of my emotions are constantly raw and on edge when I'm not." She took a breath, "And when I am with them, every word from their lips is beautiful-no matter how hurtful their words might be, just hearing their voice is a cause for joy." Bella chanced another look at Paul, and saw his frown. "There's more but...I can't even begin to find the words."

Paul studied her silently for a few minutes, and Bella wondered if she'd been foolish to share this with a relative stranger. But then, Paul wasn't really a stranger anymore-the wolf identified him as pack now, and that brought with it a certain, undeniable level of trust. Finally, the shifter spoke.

"What you speak of sounds very similar to something that happens to us shifters." Bella sat up straighter in her seat-he knew what she was talking about? Paul's voice came slow and steady; he knew how important this was to Bella, and he wanted to make certain that he told her exactly right. "We call it, an "imprint". It can happen in an instant-the first time you see someone, a connection can establish itself. Almost like a pack connection," he gestured between Bella and himself, "but stronger. So much stronger. I have never experienced it myself, but Sam has. He imprinted on a woman named Emily, and broke off an engagement he had with another woman because of it."

Bella had never listened to anything as closely as she was listening to Paul's words now. An explanation-she never would have dreamed that there was something actually going on, something beyond her own control. An "imprint". Had she imprinted on Rosalie, was that possible? Another question weighed on her, and she looked at Paul with hesitant eyes. "Paul...what happens if the person you imprint on...doesn't want you or need you back?" "What if she hates you?" Her words came small and weak-a weakness her wolf didn't care to show, but the human side of her couldn't avoid. Paul leaned forward and reached for her hand, which she allowed. He held it gently between both of his and gazed at her with eyes void of the usual residual anger, and instead filled with a brimming kindness she hadn't known he was capable of.

"I'm sorry Bella, but I don't know. I do know that Sam tried to ignore his feelings for Emily, because he didn't want to hurt his current fiancee, but that only caused pain for both of them." He released her hands and settled back in his chair. "I think that we don't imprint on people by accident, though.
There must be the possibility for a connection for one to form, right?"

Bella brought a hand to her face and closed her eyes, turmoil raging inside of her. What did it all mean? Was it possible that Rosalie was rejecting her for someone else, like Sam? Or was it possible that there was something more going on? Either way, it felt like there was a hot knife twisting in her guts and it was impossible to forget Rosalie's words-telling her to stay away, calling her "wolf" like it was a derisive term, trying to keep her from becoming close with her family-and avoiding her like the plague. All of it hurt.

Together they sat in silence, the quiet only broken occasionally by the sound of Paul munching on his cookies. Finally, Bella lowered her hand. Her green/gold eyes were ablaze with determination, and her gaze sharpened when she heard thunder rumbling outside. "Come on Paul. Let's go play baseball." One way or another, Bella was going to find out the truth from Rosalie herself. The beautiful vampire couldn't hide from Bella forever-she would get to the bottom of this whole imprint business. Her eyes flickered to Paul to who was looking at her in confusion, but also stuffing his pockets with cookies for the road. And she would take her pack with her to help. She'd just have to warn him that they were going to play baseball with vampires-but that could wait until they were in the truck.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I apologize for the long stretch in updates. Things are getting back into a normal routine for me now, and I hope that I'll have more time to update more frequently!
Hey everyone! Thank you for the kind comments, and for the many kudos! So glad that people are enjoying this work!

I wanted to say a big thank you to Lady_Lullaby for helping to proof this piece - she also came up with this chapter title, LOL. So enjoy folks!

Last Time: Bella discovers that Paul Lahote is now part of her pack, and she is the Alpha. Paul tells her about imprinting, and Bella decides to join the Cullens for a game of baseball in a thunderstorm - hoping to have a chance to talk to Rosalie about it.

Paul was mostly quiet on the ride over to the Cullens’, and it took Bella awhile to notice that the shifter was clearly ruminating about something. She’d been too focused on resolving this thing...this imprint thing...with Rosalie to pay him much mind, and as she glanced at him now she felt guilty. He was pack now, though that was still a somewhat foreign concept to her. Bella had never really had a pack before - not since her parents were killed. She supposed Charlie was something like pack, but the emotional connection she shared with him, however important, was not the same as what she felt now. It was like she was physically tethered to Paul, she could feel him distantly and, when she concentrated, she could read his emotions.

Then there was this whole "Alpha" business. She wasn't sure if she ought to be a pack leader. When she had visited wolf packs during her year long sojourn in the wilderness, she had been only a visitor. A temporary guest, and never actually a part of the pack. Being able to accept Paul the way she did though must mean she had at least the potential to be a leader. Her own dominance and ability to subdue him was also an indicator. Bella gave herself a mental shake. In any case, she was his leader now, and she'd best start getting better at it.

"Paul," she said at length, "What's bothering you?" She wondered if it was the fact that they were going to see the Cullens - Jake had made no secret of his own distaste for them, and it stood to reason that his entire pack would feel similarly. The shifter tilted his head for a moment, thinking, before turning his dark eyes on Bella.

"I just...I feel like I should feel angry. We're going to see the enemies of my people...for a game of baseball...but I don't feel any anger. At least, not like I used to." He frowned hard, and Bella thought she could almost feel the gears shifting in his head. She waited silently as she drove, and he spoke again. "In fact, I haven't really felt angry since you...ah..." He gestured vaguely with a sheepish expression on his face.

"Paul," she said at length, "Since I destroyed your pack bond?" Her voice was dry, and Paul huffed with something resembling amusement.

"Yeah, that." He scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. "With Sam, I mean, with everyone...it was like we were all simmering on the edge of rage. Me, I was just worse than everybody else. I had anger problems even before my first change, and now..." Paul shook his head. "It's like this angry haze has lifted and is allowing me to...I don't know, see more clearly, or something." He lifted his
hands in a gesture of confusion. "I don't feel constantly on the brink of violence." He glanced at Bella sidelong. "I had forgotten what it was like to not be angry all the time."

Bella pulled into the long driveway back to the Cullens' house. She'd only glimpsed it from her four-legged trip here before, and was glad she'd found it simply enough.

"And..." She looked at him again when he paused, and he met her eyes. "I think I have you to thank for that."

Bella didn't know exactly what to make of this admission, but was glad that whatever this was between them - pack, connection, whatever - it had helped Paul, and maybe it was helping her too. "I'm glad." She said after she'd killed the engine. She wasn't sure what else she could say, but it seemed to be enough from the smile her packmate flashed her.

Bella hopped out of the truck and looked up at the darkened house. Where were they? She'd expected them to be out playing in the front yard, or maybe around back. She couldn't see, or hear anyone around here though. "Paul," she said after a moment, "I know now what the Cullens represent to you, and I'm glad you're anger is not as much of a struggle for you." She looked at him seriously. "The Cullens are my friends, and if you think you can't handle being around them anymore at any point, tell me right away. I don't want to risk anyone getting hurt." Paul nodded in agreement.

"Okay, let's see if we can find - "

"Bellllllllllllaaaaaaa!" Bellowed a loud, familiar voice. "Over here!" The direction was unnecessary for both she and Paul had immediately located the owner of the voice - Emmett - who was jumping up and down at the edge of the trees and waving excitedly. "Come on! This way! Alice sent me to get you!" Bella glanced at Paul and shrugged before jogging quickly over towards Emmett. She heard him following behind her. Stretching their connection carefully, she was relieved to discover only a mild irritation at the vampire. At least for now, there was no rage.

As was becoming habit, Emmett scooped her up and crushed her to him the moment she was in reach. Free to be herself, Bella growled playfully and wrapped her arms around him in return, squeezing tight enough to elicit a grunt from the vampire. Satisfied, she let him go and felt herself drop to the ground. "Wow Bella-Bear, you're stronger than I gave you credit for!" Emmett grinned.

By this point Paul had caught up to them and caught Emmett's words. He stared at the vampire uncertainly. "Um...Bella's a wolf. She's not a bear."

Emmett and Bella both stared at Paul for a few seconds, and then Emmett threw his head back and laughed. Bella chuckled herself and clapped Paul on the shoulder. "Come on Paul, I'll explain on the way."

It wasn't far to the clearing, and Bella and Paul had joined Emmett in the quick run over. All the while Bella kept an eye on Paul, just in case. So far she'd sensed his discomfort and unease, but the anger she'd come to associate with him was mostly absent. As they approached the rest of the vampire family, she felt him tense beside her. Subtly, she took a step forward and slightly in front of him as they walked, exerting her dominance a little. That seemed to do the trick and he calmed down as she took the lead. Paul flashed her a look; he'd noticed what she'd done, but he didn't seem angry about it. He seemed almost relieved. Maybe this Alpha thing would come more naturally than she'd originally thought.

Her thoughts were diverted as a familiar, wonderful scent met her nostrils and she suddenly couldn't
stop herself from taking in a deep, deep breath. Paul snorted behind her, but she didn't care enough to feel embarrassed even though the vampires around them had no doubt noticed her strange action. Her green/gold eyes tracked through the Cullen family quickly until they rested on the one she sought - Rosalie. The beautiful creature wasn't looking at her, and Bella had a feeling that action was deliberate. That hurt, but she quickly brushed the feeling aside in favor of enjoying Rosalie's nearness.

Now that Bella knew what she was experiencing wasn't some freakish thing on her part, but in fact a reaction written into the code of her kind upon finding a partner, she didn't feel nearly as bad acknowledging her feelings for Rosalie. The suddenness of those feelings, especially absent any real interaction apart from their fight, seemed somewhat silly, but she couldn't help them any more than she could help breathing.

Paul nudged her then, breaking her from her thoughts. She realized that she'd been staring hard at Rosalie then, and coughed somewhat awkwardly as she offered a sheepish smile to everyone else. She would swear there were a few knowing looks floating around, but she chalked that up to her imagination. "Hello everyone! Good to see you again."

Carlisle stepped forward and laid a hand on Bella's shoulder. "You're always welcome to join us, Bella," he said, and the vampire's eyes drifted to Paul and he raised one elegant eyebrow, "Which is true for your pack, as well."

Bella's mouth dropped open in shock, and she could feel a similar reaction from Paul beside her. "Carlisle, how did you know Paul is in my pack now?" The doctor's eyes glinted mischievously and he tapped his nose, letting his hand drop away from Bella.

"He smells like you now, not like them." Was his simple response. Bella shook her head, disbelieving.

"You're good Carlisle." She said after a moment, and smiled sheepishly as the coven around them laughed.

Esme approached her next, offering her a hug which Bella eagerly reciprocated. "Well dear, Carlisle has been around for a while." With the knowing tone in Esme's voice, Bella suddenly wondered just exactly how long Carlisle had been alive. Or, not alive. Whatever.

"He's approximately 377 years old." Edward coolly walked over to Bella and Paul. For the first time, she felt Paul tense beside her. She let her hand stretch to rest a few fingertips on his taut forearm. Gradually he relaxed.

She shook her head at Edward, irritated that he'd read her mind again. "Try to stay out of my head, ok?" But 377? She glanced over at Carlisle again, evaluating briefly the fact that he didn't look a day over 23. Carlisle caught her look and laughed.

"I look pretty good for my age, don't I?" His smooth, honey tones commented, sending Esme into gales of laughter. Surprisingly, she heard Paul huff out a laugh beside her too. Perhaps this would be a good game of baseball after all. If only she could speak to -

"Enough." The beautiful tone evoked an instant reaction in Bella, and she ceased movement and laughter, eyes seeking out Rosalie's. The vampire's eyes were a dark, burnished gold, and she read anger and irritation in them. "Are we going to play, or not?" Her voice was turning into a borderline snarl. "If the mutts must be entertained, then let's get to the game, or get out of here." Inwardly, Bella flinched as Rosalie so cavalierly insulted them, but outwardly she showed no sign of perturbation. Paul released a quiet growl beside her, and Rosalie shot him a contemptuous look. "Does that mutt
have to be here? Can we at least put a muzzle on it?" Alice and Emmett gasped, while Esme and Jasper shook their heads in disapproval. Edward seemed unaffected, but Carlisle was preparing to intervene. Bella held up a hand forestalling him, and took a step towards Rosalie.

Bella's eyes burned, and a strange energy flashed inside her. It was one thing for Rosalie to throw insults at her - Bella didn't really mind, almost couldn't mind. But Paul was pack now, and he was her responsibility. She could feel it inside, the need to protect, to defend. She didn't know, if it came down to a physical fight, if she would be able to find it in herself to fight Rosalie. Bella hoped never to find out. But right now? Rosalie's insults? That was something she could deal with. "Alright, lay off." She said, her voice more forceful than it had ever been when directed at Rosalie.

The blonde vampire's eyebrows rose, and Bella thought that was the most taken aback look she'd ever get from Rosalie. "Look, insult me all you want - but Paul is off limits." Bella's words were hard, and she hoped she'd be able to back them up. While she doubted she was capable of ever hurting Rosalie, she knew she'd do what she could to protect Paul. "He is working very hard to be here right now, to give this meeting a chance because I asked him to," Her eyes flattened. "You won't screw that up with your mindless words."

Rosalie looked angry for a second, and Bella mentally prepared herself for an argument, but then a curious thing happened. If Bella hadn't been so focused on the vampire's eyes, she might have missed the sudden flash of some unknown emotion there. Rosalie turned her head and looked away, silent. Six vampires turned to look at Bella as one, faces expressing everything from shock, to awe. She had a feeling people didn't get the better of Rosalie very often.

"Alright then," said Carlisle after a moment, "Let's play ball!"

With nine players, it was easy to split up into two teams of four. Esme served as the ref and umpire.

"Woo!" Said Emmett, "There's almost enough of us here to break up into real teams!" His exuberance was infectious, and soon everyone was smiling, apart from Rosalie, of course. Even Paul couldn't help himself, though Bella could feel that he was still uncomfortable with the whole situation. The teams were divided up with one consisting of Bella, Paul, Carlisle, and Jasper, and the other with Rosalie, Emmett, Alice, and Edward. Needless to say, Rosalie didn't care to share a team with Bella or Paul, and the competitive glint in her eye made it clear that she wasn't about to go easy on them.

It was evident early on in the game just why the vampires needed a thunderstorm to play. Bella watched happily as they went all out, smacking the ball with every ounce of strength they had. How they didn't break the bats was a marvel - maybe they had designed them themselves. Bella was itching for her chance to bat, excited at the prospect of indulging her own strength for once.

When at last it was her turn and Emmett handed her the bat, she quickly realized that the bat was different after all. For one thing, it was heavy. While that produced no real problem for her, she could tell that this was not the standard baseball bat. Hefting it a few times and giving it a few, experimental swings, she decided that she liked it. Getting up to the plate, she raised her eyes to see that Rosalie would be pitching. She didn't really like the look in the vampire's eyes, or the knowledge that Rosalie now had free reign to throw things at her.

But the blonde vampire merely wound back, and launched her pitch. The ball moved so fast, it took all of Bella's senses to keep up with it. Her bat didn't move. "Strike!" Called Esme. Bella held back a grimace, before stepping out of the batters box for a moment. Rosalie relaxed on the mound. Bella did another practice swing before pointing her bat into the air in the direction of Emmett.
"Right over your head big guy!" She called, to Emmett's intense laughter. Paul cheered behind her, and Bella stepped back into the batter's box. She noted Rosalie's narrowed eyes, and got into her batting stance, fingers firmly settled into the grooves on the bat.

Rosalie wound up, and released the pitch! It sailed rapidly toward Bella, faster than before, but this time she was ready. The bat whipped around and smashed the ball, sending it skyward and way out past the treeline. Emmett had blurred off after it, but Bella had stopped watching. The bat dropped to the ground and her legs pumped rapidly, carrying her closer and closer to base. From the corner of her eye she saw Emmett sprinting in her direction and heard Edward yell from first base to hurry up and throw the dang ball, and Bella took that opportunity to leap forward and slide. Her hands touched the bag a mere second before Edward caught the ball.

"Safe!" Declared Esme, and Bella leapt to her feet with a whoop. So far it had been a very close game with only one score per team.

Just as Paul stepped up to bat, Alice suddenly raced forward and stopped by the pitcher's mound, entire body quivering in excitement. Everyone hurried to meet her, though Bella guessed it was rather unnecessary to do so as they all had superhuman hearing and could have heard her had she whispered a mile away. Still, she wondered what was going on and went with the others, her hard won base forgotten.

"Visitors!" Alice said once everyone was near, rocking backward and forward on her feet with a big smile on her face. Her eyes flashed to Carlisle. "The Denali coven have decided to stop for a visit. They heard us playing - oh I hope they want to play too!" Smiles broke out all around the group and Bella guessed that whatever this "Denali coven" was, it was a good thing. She glanced over at Carlisle and got his attention.

"What exactly is a "Denali coven"?" The Cullens paused in their talking to wait for Carlisle to respond.

The elder vampire raised his eyebrows. "I forget sometimes Bella that we have not had that long talk yet. A "coven" is a family of vampires. We are referred to as the "Olympic coven" by others of our kind," he gestured to his family. "The Denalis are our dear friends - we consider them an extended family, of sorts." Bella took this in and considered it. Of course there were other vampires, she thought, that only made sense.

Paul's voice interrupted, and she felt his presence beside her. "More bl - ah, vampires, are coming?" His voice was tense, and Bella immediately turned to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. This time, Paul didn't relax right away. "Are these vampires like you?" He pointed to his own eyes, explaining his thought process, and Bella herself went still. She hadn't considered that these new vampires coming might be human drinkers.

Carlisle hastened to reassure them. "Yes, they are like us. They too are "vegetarian", as it were. That's why we initially decided to consider ourselves extended family." Now Paul relaxed, somewhat, but she could still feel the tension just below the surface. Keeping a hand on his shoulder, she pulled him away from the rest of the group.

"We'll be right back." She said, and watched as Emmett and Carlisle nodded while the others crowded around Alice for more details.

She and Paul walked out towards the woods. Bella stopped them when they reached the treeline, and turned to face Paul. The Cullens would still be able to hear them at this distance, but she trusted that they would be discreet and she didn't want to give Carlisle any reason to believe that they would be a threat. Paul was a scant inch taller than she, so meeting his eyes was easy. She allowed the wolf
room to show, and knew that her eyes would be solid yellow now. Bella waited until Paul allowed his own wolf to show - though his eyes didn't change. Slowly, she reached up and wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him in until their foreheads rested against one another. Using their connection, Bella allowed feelings of reassurance and understanding to pass through. In return, he shared with her is worry. Silent communication reigned for a time, eye contact unbroken.

Finally, she spoke. "It will be okay." She said quietly. "If this is too much, we can leave now. You have done so well." She felt his wolf's pleasure at the words of approval and suppressed a smile. Paul's gratitude shone in his eyes for a moment, but his response surprised her. Or, maybe it didn't.

"No, we should stay. I need to know that this new group really are okay if I am to have any peace of mind." His words reminded Bella that they'd never talked about a purpose for their pack. Not that there'd been much time to do so yet, but even so. It was in her blood to protect humans - not just from vampires, but from other creatures as well. But she didn't preach blind hate for anything not human or wolf, either. That was a conversation they would need to have, but at another time.

She released his neck and they each took a small step back to create space between them again. "Okay then." And then she smiled. As she turned to go back to the Cullens, she felt Paul's hand catch her wrist.

"Wait." Bella paused curiously, and turned to look at him again. Paul released her awkwardly and glanced away for a moment, feet shuffling. "Look Bella..." he said, "I just wanted to say...thank you." Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Sam...he isn't a bad sort but...he never would have done what you just did for me." He met her gaze. "Usually he would just use his dominance to keep me in line. Granted, I was angrier with him. Still, I just thought that you should know that I feel safe with you. I trust you." Bella knew these words weren't easy for Paul, and what they meant far exceeded what he'd said. She took two steps toward him and pulled him into a rough, hard embrace that he reciprocated. They held onto each other for a moment before Bella released him and stepped back. She met his eyes seriously for a moment before turning and heading back toward the Cullens. Now she knew it really would be okay.

When they got back to the group still standing by the pitcher's mound, she shared a small smile with Carlisle. She could feel Rosalie giving her a strange look, and decided this time that she wouldn't take the bait. Let her look, she thought, maybe she'll come around and realize that Bella wasn't the enemy.

"They're here!" Alice announced, but her announcement wasn't necessary as the sound of running feet reached their sensitive ears. Bella swiveled her head and focused on the stretch of tree line she could tell the people running would come out of. Sure enough, not a second later she saw three women heading their way. They slowed to a walk once they'd crossed most of the space between them, and Bella took the chance to look each one over. First - gold eyes, check. They were all blonde too, and had similar patterns in their faces. Not enough to denote siblings, but enough to denote a region potentially. The woman in the center pulled slightly ahead of the other two, and she recognized that this must be the leader. "Tanya!" Alice's light, musical voice sang and the small vampire launched herself into the other woman's arms. The woman - Tanya's - previously stoic face morphed into a smile, and Bella was struck by how extraordinarily beautiful she was. Had Bella not imprinted on Rosalie already, she thought she would definitely be interested.

"Hello Alice!" Tanya laughed and hugged Alice's slight form, and the two women beside her laughed as well. She let Alice go and looked around at the rest of the Cullens. "We were headed south to visit friends, and decided to visit our extended family too. Hope you don't mind the interruption." She nodded at Carlisle, who nodded back with a genial smile. "Although I'm sure Alice already told you that." She smiled at the little vampire, who beamed back. "It is always so
good to see all of you..." Her voice trailed off and a slight frown formed when she spotted Bella and Paul. Likely the scent of so many vampires had temporarily overwhelmed her senses, but it was clear she smelled them now. And likely heard their heartbeats. "What have we here?" There was curiosity in her gaze, but the other two were watching them like hawks. Tanya drew near to Bella, and took a half step around her, breathing deeply. "Interesting." She murmured. Was that...approval? Her nose crinkled slightly as she took in Paul, and Bella had to wonder if the difference in their species was evident in their scent.

"I must say Carlisle," Tanya said after a moment, gaze lingering on Bella, "if you're taking in strays, I certainly approve of your choice. And this one is a rare find...the Volturi would be beside themselves." Bella felt Paul stiffen beside her, but gave him credit for not saying or doing anything. She remained still, but inwardly wondered what in hell the "Volturi" were. Another question for Carlisle. "Hey little wolf, would you like to play?" Her voice had dropped to a deep purr, and Bella felt distinctly uncomfortable. It was very clear that Tanya was coming on to her, and Bella was exceedingly aware of the very public forum in which the vampire had chosen to do so. Tanya reached out then as if to touch Bella, and suddenly Rosalie was there.

The vampire snatched Tanya's hand and growled. Bella was shocked. And it was clear from Tanya's expression, that she was too.

"Don't touch." Rosalie hissed through gritted teeth, and Bella sucked in a breath to see how black Rosalie's eyes had become. Tanya slowly retracted her hand.

Tanya waited until Rosalie had released her before speaking. "My apologies, Rose, I didn't realize." Bella had the feeling that normally Tanya was the sort to make a joke, but everyone could see that Rosalie was not in a state to deal with that very well. She didn't know what was going on, but it pained Bella to see Rosalie so stressed and angry.

Carlisle interjected, his voice soothing and calm. "Rosalie, Tanya meant no harm. Please calm down. The Denali have come to visit, and that's reason to be happy." Some semblance of awareness seemed to be coming back to her.

"Damn Rosalie, who'd have thought you'd want anything to do with a mutt?" One of the other Denali vampires spoke suddenly. Tanya threw a belated hiss to be silent over her shoulder, but the damage was done. Rosalie's eyes were coal black and she snarled at the Denalis. The three vampires took a defensive stance and hissed back. Things were escalating rapidly and Bella could feel the other Cullens getting agitated too - not to mention the frustration coming off of Paul in waves. She knew instinctively that if it came to a fight, she would fight with Rosalie. She also knew that a fight should not happen.

Before she knew what she was doing, Bella had walked up to Rosalie and taken her arm. The vampire whirled on her with a furious hiss, but stopped when she realized that the one who'd touched her was Bella. This only added to Bella's confusion, but she didn't let any of that show on her face. "Rosalie, come with me." She spoke calmly, soothingly. The vampire faltered. "Let's go for a walk, just you and me." Some of the tension seemed to ease out of her, and Bella let her hand slide down Rosalie's arm to take her hand, giving it a firm squeeze; the half worry floated through her mind that Rosalie could still rip her arm off for touching her. Still, she didn't take her eyes from Rosalie's. Slowly at first, she walked the vampire away from the others. She felt out her connection with Paul and impressed upon him the need to stay put - that she would be alright. A whine escaped him, but she knew he would obey.

Soon the trees were closing around them as they walked, and Bella held Rosalie's eyes still. She utilized other senses as they walked to navigate. The thunder had largely stopped, and now there was
just light rain. The trees around them muted the fading rumblings over head, and sheltered them from the worst of the rain.

When she deemed they were far enough to escape further distraction, she spoke again. "Let's run." Eye contact was finally broken as together they burst into motion and moved fluidly through the trees. They ran for a time and Bella just kept track of Rosalie, waiting until the vampire had come back to herself. Or until she wanted to talk. They ran in silence for a long time.

A river became visible through the trees, and Rosalie changed direction to run toward it. Bella followed and slid to a stop when she realized that Rosalie had.

The vampire stared intently into the water for a time before at last turning to Bella. There was a defeated look on her face, but Bella was glad to see that some of the gold had returned. Bella waited patiently for the other woman to speak, and worked on tamping down the inward exaltation at this unexpected time together.

"I guess that's it then." The sound of Rosalie's voice startled Bella, but she quickly recovered as confusion clouded her features. At least Rosalie wasn't yelling or making scathing remarks, though Bella understood this version of Rosalie even less.

Perplexed, Bella took a few moments to respond, hoping the vampire would elaborate. Finally, "Rosalie, I don't know what you're talking about. What's "it"?" Bella tilted her head a little, a very wolf-like (or dog-like) move, and Rosalie gestured uselessly and gave a little laugh that sounded a little sad, and a little hysterical.

The vampire folded her arms and looked away from Bella. "Now you know. Now you know that I - " Her head whipped back around and the burning gaze that Bella had come to associate with Rosalie was back in full force. There was a kind of anger burning there, but strangely most of that anger seemed to be turned inward. She seemed angry with herself. "That I..." the words clearly came hard for her, "...care about you. Damn it."

Bella blinked. Dimly, her brain registered that her mouth was probably hanging open, but she didn't care. Of all the things Rosalie could have said to explain her behavior before, this hadn't even occurred to her. How could it? When the vampire had shown her nothing but contempt and disdain for weeks? And yet, her words struck a cord inside and Bella couldn't help but feel a little warmth curl around her heart. The bite mark between her neck and shoulder that was now a healed, silvery scar that normally felt cool to the touch, burned.

Somehow, she found her voice. "Rosalie, I - " The vampire held up a hand, forestalling her words, and Bella frowned.

"I don't want to hear it, Bella." That was only the second time Rosalie had actually used her name, she thought. Or was it the first? "The only thing I want to hear from you is that you understand that this" she gestured between herself and Bella, "whatever this is, cannot be. Ever." She waved her hand in the direction of the trees angrily. "Go flirt with Tanya, or Paul, or anybody. Just stay away from me." And with that, the warmth growing inside of Bella was crushed. Inside, agony was growing, expanding and filling her up.

Did Rosalie even realize the power her words had over Bella? If she felt even a shred of what Bella did, how could she not? She stood in silence for a moment, allowing the wolf to embrace her inside and push some of her more human feelings aside so that she could breathe. She doubted she had been successful in keeping her reaction off her face.

"I can't." She said finally, the words coming out just barely from a chest twisted with hurt and
longing. Her voice could not hide her pain. Rosalie glared at her, and the pain intensifed. The wind picked up and now that they stood outside the relative protection of the trees, it bit into her. "I can't do that, Rosalie. I can't go flirt with Tanya, or Paul, or anybody. And I can't stay away from your, or say that I understand." The vampire looked like she was going to cut Bella off, but faltered when she took in Bella's tortured expression. "I can't do what you ask," Bella said, voice ragged, "even though I want nothing more than to make you happy because I imprinted on you. You are my imprint and, for better or worse, you mean everything to me."
Oh, Imprints

Chapter Notes

Greye's Notes:

First, thank you so very much to those who left comments on my last chapter, and who left kudos! I'm overwhelmed by the response. Second, I am sorry I left you all like I did, and where I did, in the story. Part of that was that I wanted to get the conversation between Rosalie and Bella right, but mostly life caught up to me in a rather unpleasant way for a while. Anyway, thank you all for your interest in this fic - I hope this chapter was worth the wait! Many thanks as always to my sister Lady_Lullaby for taking the time to check this over for any glaring errors.

Last Time: Paul and Bella have a heart to heart, and the Swan Pack plays a little ball with the Cullen coven. Denali coven interrupts. Bella worries that the presence of more vampires may be more than Paul can bear, but it isn't Paul who makes a scene when the beautiful Tanya approaches Bella. Rosalie and Bella retreat to the woods to talk after Rosalie nearly attacks Tanya, and Bella finally spills the truth of her imprint. Rosalie tells Bella to stay away from her, find somebody else, but...

"I can't." She said finally, the words coming out just barely from a chest twisted with hurt and longing. Her voice could not hide her pain. Rosalie glared at her, and the pain intensified. The wind picked up and now that they stood outside the relative protection of the trees, it bit into her. "I can't do that, Rosalie. I can't go flirt with Tanya, or Paul, or anybody. And I can't stay away from you, or say that I understand." The vampire looked like she was going to cut Bella off, but faltered when she took in Bella's tortured expression. "I can't do what you ask," Bella said, voice ragged, "even though I want nothing more than to make you happy because I imprinted on you. You are my imprint and, for better or worse, you mean everything to me."

She pulled her shirt collar aside, revealing the silvery mark on her skin. "And this? This tells me that something like that has happened for you too." Rosalie stood stock still, and Bella stopped speaking. She knew instinctively that another word or move from her would cause the vampire to bolt, and Bella didn't feel like chasing after her. This conversation was overdue, and it would happen now. Though to be honest, she wasn't really sure about the mark. She was bluffing a bit, remembering how Rosalie had wanted to see it that day at the edge of La Push. Since Rosalie wasn't laughing immediately, she thought maybe she was right.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, some of the tension eased and Bella released her shirt collar. Rosalie's eyes were regaining some of their golden color, and despite her frustration Bella inwardly thrilied when she began to speak. She couldn't help it.

"You are marked by me, yes." It sounded like the words were hard for Rosalie to say, so Bella didn't interrupt. The vampire met her eyes, and Bella could see the burning anger and resentment there, though curiously again it didn't seem to be-at least completely-directed at her this time. "But I was not in control of myself when I marked you...when I marked you as mine." Her words sent a shiver through Bella, and the wolf regretted it when the vampire stiffened in response, eyes flashing.
Rosalie took a deep breath, which of course she didn't really need, and continued. "When you saw me in the woods that day, hunger had taken over me completely. I had surrendered to the hunt. When I saw you, my first thought was that I had found my meal. Once I got a taste of your scent, however…" She closed her eyes, and Bella waited. "It was like there were two parts of me, fighting. One side wanted to mark you, claim you as my own, but the rest of me…" Her eyes opened, blazing hot. "I never wanted this. I don't want a mate-I don't! I was fighting myself, my urge to make you mine, and as a result ended up fighting you, though a part of me didn't want that at all, either."

Rosalie looked frustrated trying to explain.

Her words were hard for Bella to follow, but she thought she understood. Whereas for Bella, the imprint had been all-encompassing and she hadn't even had a chance to have the will to fight it, whatever the reverse was for Rosalie wasn't enough to completely eclipse a lifetime's desire to remain alone. That realization was painful.

Bella absorbed this silently, turning it over in her mind. So...Rosalie had marked her. But, she hadn't wanted to. Not really. Or rather, she didn't want to want to? This was making her head hurt, and not helping her heart to ache any less. Finally, she looked back at Rosalie, fingers digging into her jean pocket to clench the fabric there. It was a failed attempt to ground herself.

"Tell me then." Bella said quietly. "Is it not as hard for you to be away from me, as it is for me to be away from you?" She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer, or what she would do with it once she had it, but she asked anyway.

Rosalie gave her a pained expression in response. "Sometimes." She answered rather cryptically. Bella closed her eyes, frustration and fatigue at this game tangling inside.

"I wish you could just give me a straight answer." She muttered. Her eyes slid open. "Look, Rosalie. Just because I imprinted on you, does not mean that we have to be mates." The words pained her on the way out, and she scuffed her boot into the damp undergrowth. "All it means is that I am bound to you. We can decide what that means. I just…" She gritted her teeth, but said it anyway, "I just need to be near you. Not all the time, but more than this. Please. I don't want to feel this way anymore." She touched two fingers to her chest, where the painful feeling felt tightest, and exhaled. Her green-gold eyes sought out Rosalie's then, asking. It was hard to admit this...this dependency, but Bella was at her wit's end. And she knew the wolf in her already accepted Rosalie as mate, so this display of vulnerability wasn't as trying as it might normally be with a fellow predator.

Rosalie's face was unreadable though, and Bella resigned herself to wasting away. She couldn't very well force her presence on the vampire. Even if she thought she could, she wouldn't do that anyway. The part of her that so desperately needed to be near Rosalie, was also the part that so desperately seemed to want to please the vampire. It was quite a quandary.

The beautiful vampire was as still as stone for several long moments, before suddenly taking a step toward Bella, and stopping abruptly, almost like she was catching herself. "Alright." The word came softly enough that even Bella had to strain her ears to hear.

"What?" She breathed, uncertain.

"Alright," said Rosalie louder, clearer, "We can...spend some time together. Well...in the vicinity of one another." Her gold eyes flashed warmly. "I won't take any unwanted advances. I don't consider you my mate, and I never will. This...whatever it is, between us, will have to be dealt with. In the meantime, I suppose we can come to some sort of arrangement."

Bella strove to keep the utter joy that suffused her off her face. She wasn't sure how successful she was from the slim, golden eyebrow that lifted, but at least Rosalie didn't remark on it. For the first
time in weeks, the knot in her chest loosened.

Rosalie wasn't giving her much, but it was enough. For now at least, it was enough. As the mention of "unwanted advances" registered, her joy dimmed a little and she frowned. "Thank you, Rosalie. This means..." She had been going to say everything but stopped when she saw Rosalie's face. "Anyway, listen. I know you don't have any reason to trust me, but I promise you I would never try to take advantage of you in any way. My Imprint wouldn't allow me to do that even if it were in my nature. I could never hurt you. Not intentionally, at least."

Rosalie didn't respond, and Bella wasn't sure that her message had been well received. "Come on," Rosalie said abruptly, "The others will be waiting for us to start the game again." The vampire turned and stepped into a supernatural run, her figure not quite a blur to Bella's eyes. Bewildered, Bella shook herself before leaping forward to follow.

Clearly, she thought, there was a nerve there. She wasn't sure what it was, but she was going to find out.

For now though, there was a game to play.

As they broke into the clearing, Bella suddenly hit a wall of emotion that caused her to stumble, and a gasp at its intensity escaped her. Dimly she realized that her knees had hit the ground, a furrow from the force of her fall dug into the grass, revealing bare dirt. Her hand grasped her chest while her mind struggled to wrestle control of these feelings that weren't her own.

"Bella?" An alarmed voice that still managed to sound beautiful came from what seemed like a great distance. She couldn't find her own voice to respond right away, focused as she was on walling off this sudden flood. "Carlisle!" The same voice, Rosalie's she recognized, shouted. At last she managed to close herself off from what she now recognized was her connection with Paul.

Bella released a breath of relief and rocked back on her heels. Her eyes widened to find Rosalie crouched beside her, eyes black and filled with worry. Instinctively, Bella reached out to touch the vampire, reacting to that concern. "I'm alright." She said. "Something's going on with Paul, and it overwhelmed me for a moment."

"I think I can explain that."

Bella's head snapped around to see that Carlisle had come at Rosalie's call. The vampire beside her growled a soft warning, and Bella tightened her grip on Rosalie's elbow in reassurance, waiting for the coven leader's words. "Although," he said, "You might have an idea yourself what's happened." He looked at her pointedly, and the wolf recalled the feelings she'd experienced, and allowed the tiniest sliver of her connection with Paul to re-open.

Blinding need. Devotion. Desire. And maybe...love.

Before the feelings could overwhelm her senses again, Bella closed off the connection and thought. Those feelings were familiar, intimately familiar. Her eyes settled on Rosalie for a moment, and then widened. She looked back up at Carlisle. "He imprinted. On who?" Her eyes moved to look over the field again and took in the familiar forms of the Cullens...but no Paul. He was close though, she could feel that much. She mentally counted, and realized that someone else was missing too. One of the Denali coven.

"Her name is Kate." Carlisle supplied. "Ironic, since she seemed to be the one who viewed you both with the most distaste. They've..." he cleared his throat, "retired, to ah...figure things out." Bella
frowned. Would Paul need her help? He didn't want this vampire taking advantage of him… Her eyes tracked back up to the eternally youthful doctor and saw his expression—her mind clicked. Her face flushed.

"Oh." She gave herself a quick shake and double-checked that the connection between her and Paul was completely blocked, before pushing up from the ground and getting to her feet. Carlisle smiled, but refrained from the kind of laughter she knew she would have gotten from Emmett. With a nod to both of them, he headed back toward the rest of the family. "Come over when you want to play again." He said as he retreated.

Suddenly she remembered that Rosalie was still beside her, and that her own hand was still clenched tightly around Rosalie's forearm. Instantly she let go, though the loss of contact was hard. "Rosalie, I'm so—" The breath whooshed from her lungs as Rosalie's arms pulled her into a crushing embrace, her apology effectively cut off. Bella's mind reeled as she felt the vampire bury her face in her neck, and her heart very nearly burst with joy at this unexpected display of affection. Her senses were flooded with Rosalie's sweet scent, and it was hard to convince herself to breathe out at all.

Before she'd could bring her own arms fully around Rosalie in return, the vampire was gone, sprinting away at lightning speed and leaving a very happy, very befuddled Bella behind. "Wow." She murmured, heart still pounding from the exchange. She had no idea what had driven Rosalie to hug her that way, and so suddenly, but Bella found she didn't mind at all. Not one bit.

Her eyes began to focus again and saw a familiar, huge figure approaching her. "Emmett." She greeted with a smile. He grinned back.

"Well, are you going to come back and play? We definitely need you now. Rose is gone, and so's your man Paul. Luckily Tanya and Irina said they'd fill in—but you can't leave too! We'd be one short." Bella laughed, of course he was still focused on the game. She allowed herself another moment to bask in Rosalie's lingering scent, before nodding.

"Yeah, let's play."

A few hours later found Bella sans Paul, the Cullens sans Rosalie, and the Denalis sans Kate, back at the Cullen house. Emmett had persuaded Bella to stay a while longer to play video games, and how could she say "no" when he pulled out a classic like Duck Hunt and paired it with puppy eyes that would have put an actual puppy to shame? She borrowed the Cullens' phone to call Charlie and let him know she would be home late, and surrendered herself to more fun. After a few rounds of fierce competition, Bella passed the orange plastic gun off to Jasper and went in search of Carlisle. It was getting late, and now was as good a time as any speak to him about a few things. Even the Tanya and Irina had left and continued on their original trip, with promises to stop by on their way back again. Her mind wandered to Paul briefly, and his new imprint Kate. Would she stick around? That question faded as she refocused on the questions she really wanted answers to - and the only person who could answer them.

She found him in his study, unsurprisingly, and responded to his warm smile of welcome with one of her own. "I wondered if you would want to talk tonight." Carlisle said. "Please, have a seat." Bella eased herself comfortably into one of Carlisle's leather wingback chairs, and was pleased when he came around his desk to sit in the one next to her. She curled her legs under her, and the Cullen patriarch waited patiently while she got comfortable. She did have several questions, after all.

"So Bella," said Carlisle, "where should we begin?" Bella opened her mouth, and stopped. Where did she want to start? There were so many things she needed and wanted to know, but she hadn't thought to sort them out or prioritize them. What he knew of her heritage was a burning question
inside, but that was a big topic and would take a lot of time to dissect. Were there other things she should start with? Like what he knew of her connection with Rosalie, or why Edward could only seem to read her thoughts sometimes but not all the time. She also wanted to know about vampires in general. Did they all have special abilities, or even most? Emmett didn't seem to have anything like Edward, Alice, or Jasper, unless it was his strength. And what were these "Volturi" that the Denali coven had mentioned?

She shook her head, frustrated, and decided to start with the one she thought was the simplest. "Why is it that Edward can only read my mind sometimes? Is there a way to keep him out?" Having her thoughts on display like an open book was disturbing to think about, and to experience. Frankly, Edward unnerved her.

Carlisle pressed his fingers together and leaned back in his chair, considering his response. "If there is a way to block him from reading your thoughts, I don't know it. As for why he cannot always glean your thoughts...I have a theory." Bella waited silently, and he continued. "Your species is something utterly foreign to Edward. You are not the same as the Quileute shifters, at all. Your very nature...is inhuman."

Bella's eyebrows shot up and her mouth opened to protest, but the words froze on her tongue at Carlisle's raised hand.

"Peace, I do not mean that as an insult. Merely as a statement of fact." Unsettled, Bella crossed her arms. "You are not human. You were raised by a human, and your current form lends you to be very similar, but you aren't the same. When your mind is functioning as a human's does, reacting the same way and thinking in similar patterns, Edward can read your mind as he can any other. But, when your true nature is present - you might think of it as when your wolf is driving your thoughts - your mind is alien to him, and he cannot understand it. For all that we are more than human now, we were only human once and that is how our brains operate most of the time. Mind you that is only a theory." Bella had a feeling that Carlisle's "theories" were more concrete than fact.

She sat back in her chair and considered his words. For what she'd thought was the simplest question, there was much to consider. Thinking of herself as something other than human was hard, even though she knew it was true. How could she not? Charlie had raised her, but they would never been the same. With difficulty, she set that line of thinking aside. There was more to be asked.

"I want to know also about your kind, vampires, and what you know of my kind..." She whispered the name of her species softly, and Carlisle smiled kindly.

"You don't have to hide what you are here Bella, yours is a noble race. Take pride in it." His words seemed, somehow, to be exactly what she'd needed to hear. For a moment her chest swelled with pride for her heritage.

Locking eyes with the vampire, she stated clearly, "I am Faoladh. And I don't know if I'm the last of my kind, but I've never met another. Not since my parents were killed and Charlie took me in."

Carlisle nodded sympathetically, and she wondered how much he knew of her story.

"Unfortunately, those two topics are not exclusive of each other." Bella wasn't sure what he meant by that, but knew he'd explain in due time. "I'll start with vampires, since I know the most about my own kind." Bella listened intently as Carlisle talked about vampires, reality and myth. No the sunlight didn't harm them, but yes they avoided it. His explanation of wide made her eyes grow round with wonder. Wouldn't it be something to see someone's skin sparkle! Her mind immediately jumped to Rosalie, and she flushed at Carlisle's knowing look. She gave herself a mental shake, and he went on to explain the process by which one became a vampire, which sounded awful, and some of their abilities.
"So not every vampire has some awesome power?" She interrupted, and Carlisle smiled patiently.

"No," he replied, "I think you've observed enough of my children to know that. Edward can read minds, Jasper can influence feelings, and Alice can sometimes peer into the future and see possibilities...but the rest of us have no such powers. In fact, most vampires don't. We still have the enhanced strength, speed, and senses, as well as the ability to lure in our natural prey - humans - merely by our appearance. We are crafted as the perfect predator." Imagining the Cullens as mindless, bloodthirsty killers was impossible for Bella, even remembering her initial reaction to Edward's scent. She hoped she would never have cause to meet a red-eyed vampire. Her instincts growled inwardly at the thought, however, confident in her ability to destroy such a threat.

Carlisle waved a hand. "There's a little more to vampires, but I think that gives you the basic information you need. Feel free to ask more specific questions later if you want." Bella held in the urge to blurt out that she wanted to know about vampire mates - she could wait, she told herself. The old vampire fixed her with an intense gaze that made her shift uncomfortably. "What I am about to tell you, is a terrible, horrible truth. I don't think there is a way I can prepare you beyond telling you that." The hairs on her arms stood on end, and Bella swallowed before nodding. "You asked about the Volturi. I was going to tell you about them soon enough, for they will prove a great threat to you, should they ever learn of your existence." His eyes drifted to a painting on the wall of his study, and Bella followed his gaze to see an image in which Carlisle's familiar face stared out, though he was garbed in the clothes of a different time. Around him were other men, each with a cruel set to their faces that Carlisle alone lacked.

"Aro, Caius, and Marcus. Those are names you need to know - remember them. They are the leaders of the Volturi, a kind of vampire royalty, if you will. They lay down the laws my kind must abide by. The penalty for breaking any of those rules, is death. The Volturi have long arms, and many, many loyal servants. I lived with them for a time, many years ago, but I could not abide their senseless cruelty." Carlisle took a breath, and Bella pulled her eyes from the painting and was startled to see a pained expression on the face of the usually stoic doctor.

Carlisle passed a hand over his hair and sighed. "It is to my great shame and regret that I did not stay, and try to prevent that genocides to come. The Volturi decided around a hundred years ago that they would eliminate anything and anyone they perceived to be a threat to vampire dominance. This included many races of beings - several of which were actually harmless - as well as your own." A shiver and a sudden flash of rage ripped through Bella, and she knew that her own eyes were blazing. She remained silent, however. There was more. "The Faoladh, of course, are anything but harmless." Fierce pride bloomed in her bosom.

"We are protectors, guardians. We would be poor guardians indeed if we were weak." She said, and Carlisle inclined his head in agreement.

"Just so. And because your kind generally protect humans, the food source of most vampires, the Volturi slated them for elimination." His eyes slid closed. "There was much killing, on both sides. But your people generally lived isolated from one another, scattered throughout the world. This proved beneficial to Aro, Caius, and Marcus, who sent out death squads that worked with such brutal efficiency that it was rare for a warning to make it from one family to another."

Pain and old, familiar grief settled in her chest. The rage had dropped to a simmering anger.

Carlisle's eyes opened and met hers, warm and sorrowful. "I don't know, Bella, if you are the last. You are certainly the only one I've met in decades. I did not know your parents, I'm afraid, but I would not be surprised if they were discovered by servants of the Volturi. The fact that you escaped is remarkable." His expression grew grave. "Be on your guard, for if the Volturi learn that you
survived, they will return."

Bella's eyes blazed. "Let them." She could feel the saliva pooling her mouth even as her canines lengthened. Her eyes, she knew, had changed as well. "I will rip those murderers to shreds." The words came out as a guttural growl, but she was cut off as Carlisle's arm suddenly flashed through the air. For the first time, she saw intense emotion on his face.

"No." He said, voice firm, almost harsh. "Bella, hear me. The Volturi are extremely powerful, and extremely old. They have vampires working for them with powers terrible to behold, and they will spare you no torment." His voice softened slightly. "I will do everything in my power to protect you, but please don't go looking for them."

The anger, the desire to avenge her parents and fallen people was a hot brand inside that burned, but she heard what Carlisle was saying. Besides, she thought grimly, she needed to learn how to fight vampires before she went looking for the really nasty ones. But one day, she vowed to herself, she would reign hellfire on the Volturi for what they had done.

When Carlisle seemed satisfied that she had calmed enough, he stood. "I think that's enough for today. It's getting very late, and Chief Swan will be expecting you home soon, I'm sure."

"Wait," Bella protested, "I still wanted to ask you about...well...me and Rosalie." Her ears turned pink, and grew hotter at the look on the doctor's face.

His lips lifted in a smile. "I can answer a few questions for you...tomorrow. But you're going to have to speak to my daughter to get the answers you really seek. All I will say now is to give her a little time and space. She'll come to you."

Bella groaned. Why was this so hard? Still, she had learned a lot today and despite Rosalie's disappearing act, they had made progress too. And she should probably check on Paul to make sure he was in one piece. With a sigh, she got to her feet. "Thank you Carlisle, you've filled in a lot of gaps in my understanding. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me." The Cullen patriarch brightened.

"Of course. Come to me with questions anytime." He nodded toward the door. "Emmett will give you a ride home, if you want. Try to get some sleep tonight." She'd have to, she thought ruefully. Wasn't like she could do without like her eternal friends. With a final wave to Carlisle, Bella left the study, closing the door softly behind her.

Before she'd even made it a step, two familiar arms lifted her in a big hug. "Bella!" Whined Emmett. "You were gone for ages! Jasper's been cheating." Laughing, she let Emmett carry her down the stairs and back to the TV.

"Jasper," she called to the stoic vampire, "What's this I hear of cheating?" She was delighted to see him smirk.

"Well," his southern drawl came out in his response, "Utilizing all resources available to me doesn't seem like cheating." Emmett set her down and she quirked an eyebrow at him in question.

Emmett had folded his arms and stuck his tongue at his brother. "It is so cheating when you use your emotion-changer-power-thing to make the other person all...all sleepy or whatever!"

"Really Emmett, you still call it that after all this time? It's "pathokinesis". Not that hard." Jasper shook his head with a faint smile, and Bella laughed. She couldn't help herself. She'd just gotten a load of heavy information, and laughing helped. Thank goodness for Emmett, she thought.
The big vampire folded his arms and stuck a tongue out at Jasper. "Whatever. That's what I said."
Jasper rolled his eyes, and it was only through sheer will power that Bella kept from dissolving into
laughter again. She really did need to get home, after all.

"Alright well, we'll have to leave this up to Alice." Bella said when she'd caught her breath. Her eyes
looked up at Emmett hopefully, "Carlisle said you'd drive me home? I've got to get back and go to
bed." Emmett groaned dramatically at this announcement, and to her surprise even Jasper looked a
little disappointed.

The big man heaved a deep sigh. "Alright. I guess my Bella-Bear needs her beauty sleep." She
laughed again, and Emmett wagged a finger in her face warningly. "Don't think this gets you off the
hook though. We're going to play Duck Hunt again until everyone knows that I'm the best player."
Bella shook her head ruefully, but knew she wouldn't mind playing endless games with Emmett.

On the drive back home Bella realized that her heart was full. Even with learning the true nature of
her parents' deaths, and her connection to vampires... Bella felt good. She had so many people in her
life now, so many friends. And Rosalie. It was hard to imagine what life had been like before she'd
met the Cullens, and she didn't really want to try. Sleep that night wouldn't come easily as her mind
wanted to replay the events of the day, memories of Rosalie most prominent. The beautiful vampire
was the last thing Bella thought about before she succumbed to sleep's waiting embrace.
Meet the Alphas

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you to all those who commented on my last chapter, and the generous folks who left me kudos! I appreciate each and every one of you. As promised, a chapter that has taken me less than a month to post! I hope you enjoy it. Many thanks also to my dear sister Lady_Lullaby for taking the time to proof this for me. Also, I surely don't own Twilight!

Last Time: Bella finally has a chance to talk to Rosalie, and they come to a compromise of sorts. Rosalie will allow some interaction between them, and Bella is greatly relieved. Upon returning to the game Bella is struck by the wild emotions of Paul, who has imprinted upon Kate. She's temporarily left incapacitated by the strength of his emotions, and curiously Rosalie remains right beside her, calling Carlisle for help. After it's ascertained that Bella is fine, Rosalie shocks the wolf further by embracing her tightly. A bemused Bella returns to the game. Later that night she speaks to Carlisle and gets a few answers about vampires, as well as learning the Volturi's role in the destruction of her own people, the Faoladh. (Also remember that Angela had a concussion and was out of school)

Bella woke early the following morning, and let out a sigh of satisfaction. Sleep was one of the true pleasures in the world, she thought, arm coming up to rub her eyes blearily.

Something crinkled between her arm and her face.

"What the - ?!" She sat up immediately, hand flying to her face to find a note stuck there - literally taped to her forehead. "Who in the hell..." The growl died from her lips as her nose took in the sweet scent around the folded paper. Quickly, she opened it.

For a supposed top predator, you sleep like the dead. You should really work on that.

Bella's heart dropped.

In the spirit of keeping my promises though, however ill-made, I left something for you on your desk. In return, I took something of yours.

Bella blinked, and flipped the page over. That was all it said. She lifted her head to look at her desk and her eyes widened. Rosalie's scarf! In a flash, she was out of bed and across the room, the silky-smooth fabric pressed to her face. Inhaling, Bella let the strong scent soothe her and she sighed contentedly. "Thank you Rosalie." She whispered, letting her mind wander back to the day before and the pleasant interactions she'd gotten from Rosalie. A pause.

"Wait, what did you take?"

She spent the better part of the morning trying to figure it out, to no avail. Finally she heard Charlie calling for her and had to give up the search.

Charlie gave her a quizzical look when she came down the stairs, eyeing the scarf wound around her
neck, but he didn't ask her about it. He'd seen it before, she knew, but she was glad he didn't question her about it now. She wasn't sure what she would say. "I'll see you later." She told him, and headed out the door.

Bella stopped short when she saw Paul leaning against her truck. He raised a hand in greeting, and smiled at her. "Hey Paul," she grinned, "I figured you'd still be," she paused significantly and cocked an eyebrow, "busy."

At least he had the decency to look embarrassed. Bella rested a hand on her hip. "You almost knocked me out, by the way." At his sudden look of alarm, she waved him off. "Yesterday, I mean. When you imprinted, I felt it like a punch to the gut." She shook her head. "I couldn't tell which way was up for a minute there."

Paul rubbed the back of his head awkwardly and grimaced. "Sorry about that, I couldn't help it."

"I know." She walked around the truck and unlocked it. "Get in, we can talk on the way."

He hopped in the cab next to her as she got the old truck going. Soon she was headed down the familiar road to school. The silence in the cab stretched until Bella decided to poke a hole in it.

"So..." Her eyes slid to Paul. "You and Kate..."

Paul blushed. "Um...yeah. It just kind of...happened."

"Does she still think we're mutts?" Bella asked, partially to mess with Paul, and partially because she genuinely wanted to know. Presumably Kate had accepted Paul as her mate in return if Paul's...feelings...the day before were anything to go by. Her own situation with Rosalie made her all the more curious. Her packmate shook his head vehemently. "No, no. That all changed the second we..." He blushed again, and even Bella felt her ears heat. She did not need anymore information.

Bella was quiet for a few moments, mulling this information over. So with Paul and Kate, the bond that developed between them had been immediate. And even though Kate had seemingly had a distaste for creatures of their kind, she got over it very quickly. So what was the hold up with Rosalie? Why was it so much harder for them? Was it just that she and Paul were different species, and their imprints manifested differently? But vampires didn't imprint, at least, not like they did. So what had happened to Kate to make her respond so positively? Questions, so many questions.

"Is Kate going to be staying?" She asked suddenly, glancing at Paul. For the first time since they'd got into the truck, Paul looked uneasy.

"I don't know." He said. "I had hoped she would, but she has been around a long time and settling here...didn't seem to sit well with her. For now, she's gone to join her sisters on their original trip. She should be back in a few days." He sounded morose. Bella could sympathize. Rosalie had also gone off for a few days...maybe to spend time with the Denalis, who knew.

As Bella pulled up outside of the school, Paul turned to look at her. She killed the engine and gave him her attention.

"Bella, I sympathized before, with you and your imprint...but now I don't understand it. The pain I feel from Kate's absence is incredible, but at least I know she will come back to me." He paused, and Bella felt her chest ache. "But the way Rosalie is with you...I don't think I could stand it. I don't think I could survive if Kate did the same to me." His eyes revealed his sympathy and shared pain at her
plight. "I'm so sorry, Bella. You keep yourself closed off from me, but you can share those feelings...if you need to. Maybe it would help."

Bella's heart pounded in her chest and her head felt light. Paul's words, while meant to be helpful, had pushed her to acknowledge again the hole inside her, and the ragged, bloody edges around it. She swallowed hard, working to close those feelings off again but it was hard, with Paul sitting right there.

"I can't do this right now Paul." She murmured finally, eyes turning to look down at the steering wheel. "I have to go to school."

Catching the latch with her fingers, she opened the door and slid out of the cab. Bella reached in and grabbed her bag from the middle seat and slung it across a shoulder, closing the door, and heading up to the school. Paul hurried to catch up.

"Wait Bella, I'm sorry - I shouldn't have brought it up here." He paced next to her, but she wouldn't look at him. Couldn't.

Not if she was going to keep her cool. "It's fine Paul. I just need to focus now." She felt his worry, but thinned the connection between them until she couldn't feel anything. Paul whimpered as he felt her do that, and she felt a pang of regret - but it was necessary. If she was going to make it through the day, it was necessary.

"Come find me after school." She said finally, and Paul stopped walking with her.

"Ok!" He called after her, before turning to jog into the woods around the school. Despite her refusal to talk with him, Bella really was grateful to have Paul in her pack. It was hard to believe that it had only been a couple days since he turned up on her porch; she felt reluctant about losing him back to Sam. Her eyes took in the school as she approached it, the milling students and door that was perpetually opening and closing. Rosalie. Her mind whispered, and misery twisted inside.

School was hell that day. All of her senses were on edge - the cloying stench of perfume and cologne burned her nose, the banging of lockers and scrape of feet on linoleum shattered her ear drums, and the lights felt too bright for her eyes. Eric tried to talk to her, as well as a few others, but she couldn't give them her attention. They were too close, everything felt too close. She couldn't even feel happy that Angela was finally back at school, and barely managed to say "hi" to her.

At lunch she went outside to avoid the hell that would be the lunchroom, and tracked down a tree to lie down under. With her arms resting over her eyes, it was her ears that picked up the subtle movements of her friends who came to check on her.

"Hi Bella." Said Alice, her voice sweet.

Bella sighed deeply. She knew they had come because they were worried, but all she wanted was to be left alone. "Please go away." She whispered.

The ground shuddered as a large, unyielding body flung itself down beside her. "Can't do that, Bella-Bear! You're like family now." Emmett's boyish voice said, and she winced at the sudden barrage to her senses. They weren't nearly as bad as the humans, but everything felt so raw right now she felt she would notice and cringe if a leaf fell and brushed the ground right now.

She groaned. "If you're going to stay...Jasper, can you help me out a little? Please?" Immediately she felt calmer, and soothed. It wasn't a perfect cure, but helped to mute the worst of what she was experiencing. At last she lifted her arm from her eyes and looked around into the concerned faces of
her friends. Even Edward was there, though he seemed more preoccupied with watching the school. Remembering what Carlisle had told her about his suspicions regarding her occasional ability to block Edward out, she focused more on the feelings and instincts swirling through her and avoided thinking with any actual words. When Edward suddenly looked at her intensely, she suppressed anything more than the feeling that she'd been right.

When his attention was drawn back to the school, no doubt watching for anyone approaching, she looked at Alice and Emmett. "I'm not much company right now." She warned. The vampires sported matching smiles.

"That's alright Bella. Friends are there for you even when you think you don't want them." Jasper's voice startled her, and she looked up into his calm, gold eyes and felt another wave of that calm pass over her. It worked to dull her senses somewhat, and she sighed in relief.

"I'm just a little overwhelmed right now, that's all. My senses were getting the best of me, and I needed break. Thanks, Jasper." She added, and the vampire inclined his head in response.

Emmett frowned, "What do you mean?" When she explained what she'd been feeling, everyone wore somewhat matching expressions of sympathy and understanding. Curiosity flickered through her, had they gone through something like this?

"Yes," said Edward smugly, and she cursed herself internally. She'd let her mental wall slip. "Happens a lot when you're a newborn, though you're usually so overcome with bloodlust you aren't thinking straight enough to be too bothered." She shivered at that blunt description, and almost missed the glares the others sent him. From her conversation with Carlisle, she knew what "newborn" meant, but hadn't really allowed herself to consider that each of the Cullens had been one once. "But occasionally it happens to us even now. Usually when we're under enough stress. So Bella, what's stressing you out so much?" She instantly submerged herself in her more instinctual feelings again, avoiding that smirk. She hated having him in her head.

Her eyes sought out the others, and saw their encouraging looks. "Well, I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I have an idea..." Alice's eyes drifted down to the scarf Bella was absentmindedly rubbing between her fingers and sucked in a breath.

"This has to do with Rosalie, doesn't it?" She said quietly. Jasper and Emmett stared at her with wide eyes, while Edward snorted. Emmett was up in a flash and smacked the back of his head.

"Cool it, Eddie. Just because Rose would never have anything to do with you." Edward snarled at his brother, and it took Jasper intervening to keep the two from coming to blows.

Jasper's commanding voice cut through the squabbling. "Edward, go hunt. Go! You're upsetting Bella by being here anyway." A quiet hiss left Edward's lips, but after a glance around at his siblings, he turned and ran off, disappearing into the trees.

While the boys had been handling Edward, Alice had sat herself down beside Bella and was now looking at her expectantly. "Rosalie must have given you her scarf back for you to have it now." She said knowingly, and Bella just nodded. "So...are you going to tell us what is going on?" Jasper and Emmett lowered themselves to the ground too, and Bella resigned herself to explaining everything.

She pulled herself up into a more comfortable sitting position, crossing her legs under her and letting her fingers run through the cool grass. Fall was getting on toward winter, and soon these green areas would be covered in snow. She'd have to enjoy this while it lasted. Bringing herself back to the present, she met the eager, golden gazes around her, and spoke. "Look, something you should know about Rosalie and me... Well, you remember that first time she and I met?" At the winces, especially
from Emmett and Alice - who'd pulled Rosalie off of her - she nodded. "Yeah. During that, um, fight...well, I imprinted on Rosalie."

Alice clapped her hands to her mouth, and Emmett's mouth dropped open. Jasper looked startled, but mostly maintained his composure. She had a feeling he'd been able to tell something was up between them, and this probably only confirmed his suspicions. He confirmed her theory a second later.

"I had felt...something...at the game, but I hadn't guessed..." Jasper's voice trailed off, and Bella nodded in response.

"I only discovered recently that "imprinting" was something my kind even did. My parents died when I was so young, I guess they didn't have a chance to tell me. Once I learned about it, the sudden...feelings...I had developed for Rosalie made more sense." She laughed nervously, running a hand through her hair. "I thought for a while that I was turning into some crazy, obsessive stalker."

She rubbed a hand over her face and looked helplessly at the Cullens. "And now she's gone again." The ache inside was mercifully dulled by Jasper's powers, but it was still there. Her hand lifted the edge of the scarf to her nose for a moment, inhaled Rosalie's scent and felt soothed again, temporarily.

Alice glanced sidelong at Jasper for a moment, before her eyes widened in understanding. "I'm so sorry Bella, I can't imagine what this must be like..." Jasper murmured similar sympathy. Emmett didn't seem to understand in the same way, but he laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

A sigh escaped her. "I just don't understand. Vampires mate too, don't they?" At the confirming nods of the three vampires, she lifted a hand helplessly. "And you also have a kind of mating bond, if I have guessed correctly." At their second nod, she continued. "I am reasonably sure that Rosalie feels drawn to me too, but she avoids me like the plague. I can't...I can't live like this forever." How could she describe to her friends that her insides felt like a huge, gaping wound? That even her skin right now felt oversensitive and pained, like she had some fever? She wished Paul hadn't said anything earlier, though she was kidding herself to think this wouldn't happen eventually.

Those blissful moments with Rosalie the night before, while a balm for her wounded soul, had only made the need to be near the vampire worse. She partially hated herself for this insatiable need. Was she really so weak?

She was pulled from her musings by Jasper clearing his throat. Looking around, Bella realized that all three vampires looked a little nervous, and that got her attention.

"Bella," said Alice after a moment, "There are...things...in Rosalie's past. We can't say any more than that, but consider that there may be reasons behind her actions. It may just be that she is hesitant to be..." Alice stopped, frustrated. It was clear that she didn't want to betray her sister's trust, but that she also felt that Bella should understand a few things.

Emmett chimed in. "What Alice is trying to say is, if you want Rosalie, you're going to have to be prepared to go slow. Like, really slow. She's old fashioned, so think about that too."

Their words didn't help the empty feeling inside, but they did help her to gain a glimmer of comprehension. So Rosalie's past wasn't a pretty one, and it was something the others couldn't share without Rosalie's consent. She shuddered to think what that could mean. The rest though, she would keep in mind. Maybe there was a way for Rosalie to give her a chance after all.

Her eyes met three pairs of golden ones, and she smiled gratefully. "Thanks for coming out here, I'll keep what you said in mind." Slowly, she got to her feet. Green/gold eyes tracked the woods around
them, yellow flecks starting to spread through them. "I think I need to go for a hunt myself." She said, partially to herself. Glancing at the trio, she said, "It's been too long since I took to four legs. That might be part of my problem. I'm going to run off some steam now; I'll make my excuses to the teachers tomorrow." They nodded in understanding, and she strode away into the woods, toile off her shoes as she went. She didn't mind shredding her clothes, but shoes were another matter. Right now though, skipping school and her conversation with the Cullens didn't matter. Spending some time outside was desperately needed, as was a return to her more primal self. Pulling off the scarf, she gazed at it contemplatively. She was loathe to part with it for even a moment, and knew she would be devastated if she were to lose it. Decided, she tied it very loosely around her arm, judging how large her wolf leg would be to fill it out. She hoped she'd judged right.

As soon as her bare feet burrowed into the leaves and undergrowth of the forest, the change triggered.

A howl escaped her before she could suppress it, a howl of relief and joy as, for the first time in hours, her senses weren't over-heightened painfully. She stretched her connection with Paul wide and called him to join her. She was going on a hunt, Rosalie's scarf tied securely around her leg. She spent hours in the forest, maybe even a day. Her senses melded with the world around her, and time was a non-issue. Her paws struck the ground in a perfect rhythm, making barely a whisper over the leaves and needles. Her predator instincts urged her to hunt, but she ignored them for the time being, content to run. Trees blurred around her like a video fast-forwarding periodically, as she allowed her supernatural speed to claim her. Normally she preferred the challenge of hunting without it, but when she wasn't hunting...speed was a thrill. Miles passed unnoticed, and it wasn't for some time that Bella began to recognize her surroundings again. She'd lost herself in the forests of Washington for a time, but it would seem that her subconscious had directed her paws home.

She slowed her passage to that of a more reasonable wolf's, and would have been blind-sided by another had the wind not suddenly shifted in her favor. A scent sour with hate and fear curled into her nostrils, making her ruff stand. She crouched instinctively, and a larger than life wolf sailed right over her head. Bella whipped around snarling at her ambusher as he scrambled to get back to his paws after the unexpected landing. The huge wolf had an answering snarl, and his dark eyes were flat with rage. She didn't immediately recognize him, but she knew from his size and bearing that he was a Quileute shifter, and definitely not Paul.

Bella immediately tried reaching out with her mind to talk, even though inwardly she howled to fight - to prove her dominance over this foolish whelp. They paced around each other, each calculating the best moment to lunge.

Her efforts to reach out were futile, as this wolf was so lost in his fury he could not be reached. She would have to beat him. Excitement at this contest of strength coiled through her, even as her confidence surged. This fool had no idea who he was dealing with.

The wolf took a step forward then and glared at her - she felt it immediately, his dominance flooding out. It was strong, she would give him that. A snarl lifted her lips to reveal long, pearly fangs. But it wasn't enough. Bella unleashed her own dominance, and it became an almost silent battle between them as they circled. Distantly she felt Paul's alarm and knew he was on his way, but she couldn't focus on that now. Despite his inability to get an edge on her, Bella knew it would take everything she had - maybe more - to make him bow.

Recognition rippled through her then. This could only be one wolf, only one of the Quileutes might have the dominance to challenge her this way. Sam Uley. This must be the Quileute pack alpha. Her eyes narrowed. And he was trespassing on her territory, attacking without provocation. Her own
rage rippled through her at his arrogance. As if on cue, Sam lunged forward, mouth slavering. Bella jumped forward to meet him.

The two wolves locked together and crashed to the ground, writhing wildly, biting, snarling, and straining to get the upper hand. Bella found herself on her back, and struggled for a moment to get her hind legs between them. Her claws raked his soft belly and with a squeal, Sam rolled away. Blood dripped from him and stained her claws. Bella flipped to her feet and leapt at Sam, managing to land on his back. She sunk her teeth deeply into his shoulder and heard a satisfying yelp of pain, but Sam wasn't finished. He twisted his body and Bella found herself crushed between Sam and the ground. Despite herself, a bark escaped her and she released his shoulder, using her legs to shove Sam off of her. He was bigger than she, but not necessarily stronger.

Their forms came together again, the crash of their bodies colliding causing the ground to shake and leaves to shower them from the trees. Teeth sank into her paw, bones snapped and a howl erupted from her jaws. Another howl answered hers, and she realized that Paul had arrived. Redoubling her efforts, Bella rolled over Sam and found his ear, biting down hard enough to get a whine in response. She tasted blood for a moment, and then they separated to circle again. Feeling Paul preparing to jump to her defense, she connected her mind with his.

Don't! She all but shouted at him. Her body wanted to limp from the agony of her mangled paw, but she wouldn't allow it too, keeping up her snarl at Sam. Do not interfere.

His distress was evident. But you're hurt! Let me help drive him away.

Bella kept her eyes on Sam as she replied. This is an Alpha fight. I must drive him away on my own. A flicker of surprise went through her when she realized that others were present too.

Sam used her surprise against her and lunged, taking her to the ground again with a growl.

The fight lasted what felt like an eternity until finally, finally, Bella found enough leverage to pin Sam to the ground, her teeth fastened around his neck. The other alpha struggled for a moment, and stilled. Both panted hard, but Bella didn't back away. She battered down his mental defenses viciously.

Change! Now! The force of the mental shout received a wince from the other wolves in the clearing. With an side thought she directed Paul to get her some clothes, but waited while Sam decided his fate.

Finally, familiar shudders began running down the large wolf's length. Bella didn't release his throat until the change was fully triggered. When she backed away, she sensed a presence at her side and turned to see Paul with a bundle of clothes for her. She gave Paul the direction to stay and watch Sam before backing into the woods and changing back herself.

The change was excruciating. Adrenaline hid the worst of her injuries, but her hand in particular felt as though it were being cleaved in two. She didn't know how, but she managed to keep her pain from becoming vocal. Showing weakness now would end her, especially with, who she presumed, was Sam's pack standing around. Anger rose as she spied the now tattered silk scarf on the ground, torn and speckled with blood. It was a short matter to re-secure it around her upper arm now, but there would be hell to pay from Sam for ruining it. She pulled on the cut off shorts and t-shirt Paul had gotten for her carefully, and walked proudly through the trees back to the group of wolves. Sam lay panting on the ground. Though blood ran from numerous cuts, gouges, and wounds, Bella's inner predator was satisfied that Sam seemed the worse for wear.

Her eyes grew cold, a deep rage coiling inside. "Sam Uley. You have come onto my territory, and
attacked me unprovoked. I have done nothing to merit this attack. Explain yourself." The force of her wolf came through in her words, her human mouth barely containing the ripping growls.

A laugh escaped the still-rising figure, followed by a gasp of pain. Further satisfaction. "Unprovoked? That's rich. And this is hardly your territory." The Uley pack alpha gasped out, turning his baleful black eyes on her. Her hackles raised at his insolence, but she waited and the wolves around them bore silent witness. Getting into another fight now, however satisfying, would not answer her question and, if she were being honest with herself, her wounds were already extensive enough that she knew she would need to see Carlisle after this confrontation was over.

Back on his feet, Sam leveled a glare at her that would have dropped her to her knees were she a lesser creature. As it was, she met his gaze head on. Finally, he broke the contact with a muttered curse. He spoke. "You steal Paul and then send him to recruit others of my pack, and take over this land as if it were yours. My people have always been here, it is our land anyway." He shot her another glare. "And you spend time with the bloodsuckers. Why shouldn't I attack you?"

At the mention of Paul she shot him a look. There must have been a lot of latent dominance in it because he immediately dropped to his knees and tilted his neck in submission. She relaxed her intensity, somewhat apologetic. That had been an unintentional side effect. "Paul, explain what he's talking about." Paul winced, but got to his feet reluctantly. He shivered under the powerful gazes of two alphas, and she gave him credit for standing his ground as well as he did.

"I wasn't trying to recruit people, not really." He started. When Sam began to disagree angrily, Bella held up a hand, cutting him off, and nodded at Paul to finish. "I was just telling the others what it was like being in your pack." He shuffled nervously. "It's not like it's my fault if they liked what they heard." Bella's gaze drifted back to Sam and her hand fell back to her side.

"Stealing your pack was never my intention, Sam." She said. "Paul was an accident - I never thought I even could have a pack. Paul will leave that be from now on, so long as you continue to let him reside in his own ancestral lands." She waited until Sam inclined his head ever so slightly, the anger still in his eyes. "That said, if anyone comes to me of their own volition and wishes to be a part of my pack, that is their decision. Not mine. I will not recruit, but I won't turn anyone away either."

Sam growled, eyes narrowed. "No one leaves my pack." She didn't have to look around the assembled wolves to feel their doubt, but she didn't acknowledge it either.

"That's your business." She responded briskly. Sam couldn't say anything to that. "Now, as to what you said about the land. I have been here since I was born, and I have been what I am since I was born. Can you claim the same?" Sam frowned, and looked unsure how to respond. "I'm not a shifter like you, and I'm also not human. My kinds' purpose is the protection of humans. I think you have a similar purpose?"

Sam nodded grudgingly. "We do."

"I don't claim much as "my territory", but I do guard it jealously. The property around Charlie Swan's house is what I deem my own - it's not much, and it is not a part of the La Push reservation though," she inclined her head to Sam, "as you say, this land did belong to your people of old. I don't mind visitors, but if you mean harm to me or Charlie, I will destroy you. Is that acceptable? I have no plans to expand my territory, nor any need."

Sam folded his arms and thought about what she'd said. Bella could practically hear the gears in his mind working, until finally, she received a slow nod.

"So long," he said, "As you truly mean and do no harm to humans." She could tell the words were
dragged from him, and she suspected he would not have said them at all had he fared better in their fight. His brow drew down. "But that still doesn't explain your association with the bloodsuckers. Surely you see the danger they represent, if you are in fact this great protector of humans?" His tone was mocking, but she took his question seriously.

"I will be honest," she said, now addressing the gathering at large. "I did not trust them at first. My instincts screamed at me that they were an enemy, and dangerous. It took everything in me not to attack them when I saw them at school the first time. But I watched, and waited. I have spent time observing them, and I feel confident that they mean no harm to the humans here anymore than we do. They want only a peaceful existence, and I can respect that." Her eyes flashed. "If, however, that ever changed...I would aid you in their destruction."

The callous words hurt her to say, for she truly liked the Cullens, but she knew she couldn't forgive them if they suddenly turned on the town. She was confident they would not, however. Sam was looking at her with a newly appraising stare, and a tiny bit of the hostility and animosity had leaked from his eyes. They would always be at odds, she suspected, but now maybe he would talk to her before he just attacked.

There was one more thing she thought she should tell them, considering what Paul had told her of how the Quileutes treated one another's imprints. She didn't know if hers would be afforded the same respect and courtesy, but it was worth a shot. "One last matter of business. My Imprint is one of the Cullens." Sam's jaw dropped open. If wolves could gasp, she knew that the assembled ones would have. "Rosalie Hale is my Imprint and as such, is under my protection. She will not be harmed, or there will be consequences." There would be if any of the Cullens were harmed, she thought, but particularly Rosalie.

Sam glared at her angrily. "How could you imprint on a bloodsucker! What kind of wolf are you?"

He took an aggressive step forward, and Bella snarled a warning.

"Sam," said Paul, stepping up beside her, "You know that's not how it works. We don't choose who we imprint on!" He took a breath and glanced around the group. "And for the record...I also imprinted on a vampire." All kinds of barks and yips broke out from the assembled wolves, and Bella wasn't sure if it was shock or congratulations. Maybe a bit of both. "Her name is Kate. She's not a Cullen, but she's not a human drinking vampire either." Bella placed a hand on his shoulder, and he flashed her a grateful smile.

She took over. "They are under our protection, even as your imprints are under yours. Please respect that." She said steadily. The other wolves seemed to accept it, but Sam's eyes were dark with hate and malice. This wasn't over, she knew. He glanced around at his assembled pack, and spit on the ground.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're both as good as one of them. Neither of you are to set foot in La Push again, period. If you do, we will see it as an act of war."

Bella's eyes widened. War? Was he serious? "In turn, we will avoid the town of Forks. Should we ever need to speak, the line between Forks and La Push will be deemed safe territory. Otherwise, be prepared to die."

"Sam be reasonable. La Push is Paul's home, he should be allowed to return. What about his family? What about Charlie, he and Billy Black are practically brothers." Bella said, trying to keep the creeping rage from her tone and sound civil.

Sam's eyes flicked to Paul beside her, and hardened. "He's a traitor to us. He may not return unless he wishes to die. Charlie...so long as he is human, may visit." Sam turned on his heel and strode
through the trees. Bella's instinct was to run after him and take him down, but her injuries reminded her that this would be a bad idea. And most of his pack was here, she thought. Her eyes drifted over the forlorn looking wolves. Jacob was missing, and she didn't recognize the others. One...two...three...weren't there four here? A naked woman emerged from the trees, her hair cropped short and her eyes fierce.

Her eyes lacked the hate of Sam's though. "I'm Leah. We'll try to talk some sense into Sam." Bella nodded and looked around at the other wolves assembled, a frown on her face.

"Leah, where's Jake? Is he okay?" Now that she thought about it, she had expected him to at least call her after the altercation outside his house. Leah winced.

"He's alright," said the other she-wolf, "But Sam has been keeping him on a tight leash. He hasn't let him leave the rez in days, and he's forbidden to call you." Another bout of rage ripped through Bella. She stared hard at the she-wolf, and let out a hard breath through her nostrils. "Thank you for telling me. If you see Jake, and you're able, please tell him that I'm alright and we'll figure this out." Leah nodded, sympathy and curiosity reflected in her face.

Leah's eyes shifted to Paul and softened. "We'll talk to your parents, okay? Let them know what's going on. I'll drop off a bag of your things at the line." Paul nodded dumbly, and Bella thought he was going into shock. Her grip on his shoulder tightened in reassurance. No packmate of hers would go without a home.

"Thanks Leah." She said again, and the woman nodded before letting her wolf out again. Then the four wolves padded silently away.

Paul's stricken face turned to look at her then. "Bella, what are we going to do?" She felt light-headed all of a sudden, and her heart was pounding in her ears. Paul seemed to be speaking from very far away, even as she tried her hardest to focus on him.

Before she could answer, her knees buckled and the world went black.
Revelations and...Progress?

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I am SO SORRY I haven't updated in so long! I didn't intend for this chapter to take as long as it did. I had most of it written when I posted the last chapter. Between finals and the holidays, I found myself unable to finish until now. Thanks for sticking with me. I appreciate the kind reviews for my last chapter! We didn't get to see much of Rosalie last time, so I've done my best to make up for it this time! Enjoy the chapter, and as always, thanks to my dear sister Lady Lullaby for being my unofficial beta and checking this chapter over for errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Last Time:_ Bella found herself overwhelmed at school with Rosalie's absence, and took off for some R&R in the woods. As she came back home, she was ambushed by Sam Uley. They fought brutally, and soon were joined by part of the Uley pack, and the Swan pack. Words were exchanged between the Alphas to the effect that the Swan pack is forbidden from stepping foot in La Push, and should they breach that term, there would be war. Bella is worried for Jake, Paul, and herself. After the Uley pack depart, Bella's injuries from the fight catch up with her and she collapses.

Consciousness was slow to return. Wherever her mind had gone, it was dark, and quiet, and peaceful. The waking world was not, and Bella shied away from the raised voices she could hear around her. Waking up into that didn't seem pleasant at all, her mind told her, and so she let herself drift.

Finally, she felt strong enough to wake. Her eyes were still closed as her mind came-to, and she assessed herself carefully. Everything pretty much ached, but the sharper pains from before were gone. Sucking in a breath she realized that her mouth was dry, and her ribs at least were intact. Her body felt almost feverish, except for a cool spot on her hand. Wiggling her fingers experimentally, Bella realized that someone was holding her hand. The hand around hers tightened, and Bella decided it was time to open her eyes.

Lifting her eyelids was oddly harder to do than she would have guessed, but she managed it and was startled to find two, burning ocher eyes staring back into her own with such intensity she wasn't sure how she didn't combust right there. Recognition swept her.

"Rosalie!" She exclaimed, and her body snapped upright - partially out of shock, and partially out of instinct. Now that she was awake, the predator inside didn't want to seem weak by laying down. Especially in front of her imprint. Still, this didn't account for pain. Despite herself, Bella's muscles suddenly seized and she doubled over on herself, a groan escaping her clenched teeth. Gods above, _everything_ hurt. Dimly, she realized that she now had Rosalie's hand in a death grip, but couldn't relax enough to release it.

"Bella!" Rosalie had gasped at her sudden movement. She tried to remove her hand from Bella's to push her back down and was surprised to find it trapped. Giving up after a moment, she pressed her other hand to Bella's shoulder to gently guide her back down. "Lay down, silly. You're going to hurt yourself. Carlisle patched you up, but it's only been a couple of hours since you...since your..." She stopped, unable to continue. Her golden eyes were troubled, Bella registered as she let herself be
pushed back. Her muscles instantly felt better once she was relaxed back in the bed, the coolness of the sheets, and Rosalie's hands, soothing.

Her brain finally caught up with the rest of her senses, and she appraised the vampire beside her, as well as acknowledged that there was no one else in the room with them. Though she had never been in this room, as her green/gold eyes gazed around, she knew instantly that it was Rosalie's. That must mean that they were at the Cullen house, she mused. Thinking back to the fight in the woods, she wondered if Paul had brought her here. Wait, what about her dad?

Bella's eyes widened again, but before she could rise Rosalie was already holding her down. "Take it easy, wolf." She said, some of the haughtiness from before edging into her voice. "Didn't you hear me?" Despite a part of her mind reveling in the fact that Rosalie was touching her without trying to kill her, her current concern outweighed that.

The she-wolf's eyes sought out the vampire's, worried, "Charlie?" She asked, keeping the question simple. Rosalie's expression changed to one of understanding.

"Don't worry," she said, "He knows - he's downstairs. Do you...do you want him?" Was that a trace of uncertainty in Rosalie's voice, Bella wondered? Nevertheless, she was relieved. She couldn't imagine Charlie's state of mind if she had just disappeared on him. Guilt flickered through her. Again.

Focusing on Rosalie's query, she shook her head the best she could manage while laying down, and offered her a weak smile. "No, that's alright. I'll talk to him later." Besides, who knows how long I will get with you? She didn't add aloud. The vampire seemed relieved somehow, and Bella didn't know what to make of that. She also didn't know what to make of the fact that Rosalie was here, now, at her bedside. And that somehow, Bella was in Rosalie's room. Her heart suddenly pounded harder for a moment. In Rosalie's bed. The vampire's eyes flicked to her chest, and Bella flushed in embarrassment, knowing that her rapid heartbeat was plain as day. It was fortunate, she thought, that Rosalie couldn't read minds like Edward. It was a struggle, but she eventually calmed her heartbeat down to something more reasonable. Immediately, she decided to try and keep the vampire with her as long as possible. She would even avoid topics that might make Rosalie bolt...like the imprint.

Glancing at Rosalie nervously, who had been silent now for several minutes, she asked, "So...not that I'm not happy to see you, but why are you here? How are you here? I thought you were traveling."

The vampire looked away, and something appeared on her cheeks that Bella would have sworn was a blush. "I..." Rosalie's voice was very soft, and Bella strained her keen ears to hear the words she spoke. She cleared her throat and seemed to get a hold of herself, before turning to look Bella dead on. "Look, I knew something was wrong, alright? I came back." She gestured in useless frustration with one hand. "By the time I got here, you were already..." She gestured to Bella's form on the bed. Rosalie reached up to pinch the top of her nose in a gesture Bella had never seen her use before, closed her beautiful eyes, and released a sigh. "It's not easy for me, understand? This whole...caring...thing. I've gone almost a hundred years without it, and I don't want it now. But there it is." Her eyes snapped open and looked at Bella almost accusingly.

Despite the nearly hostile look Rosalie was giving her, Bella couldn't help the sudden warmth that suffused her body. It burst from her chest and curled in warm tendrils to her fingers and toes, and she smiled. Rosalie cared. At least enough to come and see her. She caught something in Rosalie's eyes before the vampire grimaced in return.

"Don't do that." She grumbled. Bella frowned in confusion.
"Do what?"

Rosalie gestured vaguely at her face. "Smile at me like that."

Now Bella was even more puzzled. "Like what?" She had only been smiling - did Rosalie not want her to smile at all? Irrationally, a part of her brain wondered if she could manage it, if that would please the vampire.

The beautiful vampire gave a long-suffering sigh. "Like I'm..." She looked away in annoyance, "Like I'm wonderful or something." A breath of frustration left her lips as she muttered quietly, "You're like a damn puppy."

Bella gazed at Rosalie in silence for several seconds, letting her eyes drift over the elegant contours of her face, lingering on her expressive eyes, aristocratic nose, the gentle curve of her lips. Rosalie Hale was, Bella concluded not for the first time, the most beautiful woman she had ever laid eyes on. And she knew, unreservedly, that she would continue to think so all the days of her life. When her eyes finally returned to those eyes so full of feeling, she realized that Rosalie was now watching her in return. A conversation she'd had with the other Cullens earlier floated through her mind, as well as things she herself had observed about Rosalie through their brief interactions. Perhaps she understood where a little of the vampire's discomfort with their...situation...came from.

"Rosalie," Bella said seriously, ignoring when the other woman tensed, "I could lie here and tell you all night how beautiful I think you are, and how wonderful - because I really do feel that way, I can't help it - but it is true that you and I don't really know each other. I would never pressure you to do anything you wouldn't want to do," a wry smile curled one edge of her lips, "and I doubt I could, even if I were to try. But...if you were willing..." Bella paused and took a breath, nerves suddenly winding through her. Rosalie was watching her intently, and her sudden and full attention was a thing Bella suddenly wasn't sure what to do with. "What I'm trying to do in a rather roundabout way," she barely managed to stifle the nervous laugh bubbling up, "is ask if you would like to go out on a date with me?" She smiled at Rosalie again, and did her best to curb the, uh, look, that made Rosalie so uncomfortable.

The vampire was frozen, staring at her. Bella held her breath, amazed that Rosalie could remain so utterly still. Were it not for the light burning furiously in those golden eyes, Bella might have thought she'd turned to stone. And then, an amazing thing happened.

"Rosalie," Bella said seriously, ignoring when the other woman tensed, "Of all the words you might have spoken," came the quiet response, "asking me on a date was the last thing I imagined." Despite the almost smirk, Bella detected no hostility in her gaze - only a kind of amusement, and curiosity. Did she dare hope? Rosalie took her time giving her answer, and the she-wolf had the traitorous thought that she was dragging it out on purpose, enjoying Bella's squirming. Finally, "Alright." Her voice was oddly apprehensive, Bella thought, but it was hard to focus on that when her mind registered that Rosalie had agreed.

Joy bloomed inside, and it was everything she could do to keep that overwhelming feeling off her face. Her success was only partial she thought, but it must have been enough because Rosalie graced her with the littlest bit more of a smile.

Then it seemed the vampire remembered herself, and the smile vanished to be replaced with a harder look. "Friday at 7pm. Pick me up." Bella's mouth fell open in surprise, but she had no response ready. Rosalie rose fluidly to her feet. "I'll go let the others know that you are awake." Before she could decide on reply, her imprint was gone.

Though she was disappointed they hadn't spoken more, Bella couldn't deny her pleasure at having so
much unrestricted time with Rosalie - and time where the vampire wasn't simply hurling insults at
her, or telling her to stay the hell away. She suspected that keeping the conversation relatively light
had helped; inside she still burned to talk about the imprint, and ask Rosalie if she felt anything in
return. How could it be that Kate and Paul could feel so strongly for one another, but Rosalie felt
nothing? Her agreement to the date was heartening, she had to remind herself. She wouldn't have
agreed if she really had no interest, right? Bella really didn't get the impression that Rosalie was in
the habit of doing anything she didn't want to do.

She blinked. "Wait a minute..." Rosalie had been wearing a t-shirt. While not in itself shocking, it
specifically had been Bella's Van Helsing t-shirt. It was one of her favorites that she'd gotten in
response to the new TV show on Syfy...but it was utterly hilarious that Rosalie had chosen the shirt
with the name of a vampire hunter on it. A laugh escaped her and she wondered if Rosalie
appreciated the irony. "So that's what she took from me..." This realization reminded her about the
scarf, and she cast around for it immediately. Sam had nearly destroyed it during their fight, and it
had been dirty and stained with blood. Surely they wouldn't have thrown it away...? Her hands
smoothed over the sheets and her eyes searched around the room before finally catching a glimmer of
green and gold sticking out from under her pillow. Gently, she pulled the scarf free and marveled that
someone had gotten the stains out and folded in neatly for her. It was still torn, but it was clean again.
Bringing it to her face, she inhaled gently and sighed as the scent of Rosalie wafted from it. Bella slid
back under the covers. She was surrounded by the vampire's scent, she realized now, and the thought
made her happy.

A voice broke into her musings. "Hey there..." She glanced toward the door and smiled, carefully
lifting herself back into a sitting position.

"Hey Dad." She said, laughing quietly when he immediately rushed to her side as she eased up.

"Take it easy there, no need to rush it." Charlie fluffed a few pillows behind her so she could rest
back. Her strength was returning more rapidly now, but she didn't have the heart to tell him just yet,
he was being so attentive. He took the seat Rosalie had just vacated. "So..." he glanced around a little
uneasily, "How are you feeling kid?"

She felt bad for his nerves. It wasn't often Charlie saw her laid up like this. Generally she was pretty
unbreakable. Even as a small child, falls or play that would have resulted in a broken bone for a
human child left little impact upon her. He was accustomed to not having to worry too much about
her. Now though, there were other creatures all around who could hurt her. Kill her, even. Charlie
didn't know what to do with that, clearly. So Bella reached for his hand and smiled. "I'm okay Dad.
You should see the other guy." She cracked the weak joke, and was rewarded by a slight smile from
Charlie. She breathed a mental sigh of relief.

"Not funny Bells. I have seen my daughter seriously hurt more times in the past month than the rest
of her life combined. I don't like it." His smile turned into a frown. "Still, I'm glad there's finally a
doctor you can see." As if referring to him summoned him, Bella heard Carlisle's familiar voice from
the doorway next.

"And how is the patient?" His calming influence was welcomed as he entered the room slowly. Her
wolf didn't appreciate showing weakness to so many, but Bella forced in the reasoning that this was
different. These weren't strangers, but friends, and family. She offered him a friendly smile.

"I owe you my thanks for patching me up again. So how banged up was I? I have to admit, I'm kind
of surprised I passed out like that." She shrugged her shoulders sheepishly.

Carlisle's countenance took on a more serious cast, his "doctor face", she figured. "Well, you tore
several muscles and partially ruptured one of your kidneys. I suspect the internal bleeding was what
initially caused your collapse. Fortunately, that began healing on its own before you even got here - surgery wasn't necessary. You also had several lacerations across your body and..." Here he paused and gazed at her sympathetically, "I'm afraid you've a permanent notch in your left ear now."

Bella's hand flew to her ear, feeling the tender flesh in equal parts horror and fascination. There was indeed a chunk from the shell of her ear missing. It didn't feel like a huge space, but certainly noticeable. "Well, I guess there was a point Sam had my ear between his teeth. The fight was so fast, or it felt that way. I hardly had time to keep track of the damage to my body." She shook her head ruefully. "Well, there go my roguish good looks."

Charlie scoffed beside her. "Hardly the time to joke, Bella. Besides, you'll always be beautiful." Bella rolled her eyes, but shot him a smile. Come to think of it, she thought, Rosalie hadn't mentioned her ear or even looked at it during their entire exchange. She wondered if it bothered the vampire. Or if she had even noticed.

Carlisle cleared his throat, and she returned her attention to him. "If you don't mind Bella, I'd like to check your muscles now and see how you've healed. In case you were curious, you've been out about six hours." Her eyebrows lifted. Not as bad as she had thought. She nodded her permission then for Carlisle to go ahead. The doctor gently pulled the blankets away from her and did a brief but thorough examination of her legs, torso, and arms. When he stepped back, he gave a nod. "It looks to me like you are healing nicely. Take it easy for a day or two to give your muscles time to fully heal, and you should be fine. I'd also avoid any more stress to your kidney area for a time - no need to cause a full rupture. Even with your quick healing, that might require surgery."

Both Bella and Charlie listened intently to his directions, and as Charlie thanked Carlisle and rose to speak with him a little more about post care, Bella took it upon herself to get out of bed. She noted with some relief that she wore the same clothes she'd had on, though someone had taken the time to clean her arms and face. A quick sniff brought a smile to her lips. Esme. She stood carefully, testing her legs. They felt weak and sore, but they bore her weight alright. Satisfied, she moved toward the door.

Charlie noticed her then and rushed to her side, breaking off his conversation with Carlisle. "Bella! Why are you up already? Lay back down, there's no hurry." Bella leveled a look of exasperation at him. She appreciated his concern, but really. "Charlie, I'm weak, but I'm ok. I can walk, and I'm sure Rosalie will be happy to have her room back." That caused a soft chuckle from Carlisle, and she shot him a curious look, before addressing a question to him. "Well doc, can I be up then?"

Carlisle looked at Charlie when he answered and nodded. "Bella's fine to get up now, if she wants to. She won't do anymore damage just walking around, as long as that's all she does." Charlie nodded, and Bella sighed.

"Now that's settled, I'm going downstairs." Just then the scent of cooking eggs and sausage filled the air and Bella felt her stomach rumble. "Oh sweet spirits, there's food." She hurried as fast as her weak legs could carry her from the room and down the stairs, Charlie's reluctant laugh following her.

Coming around the corner and into the kitchen, she came upon Esme. The small vampire was flitting around the kitchen at supernatural speed, getting out dishes and silverware and setting a place at the kitchen island. Edward lounged in a corner of the kitchen, and she could see Jasper and Alice playing chess in the living room. That just left -

"BELLA!" The booming, exuberant voice filled the entire house and she felt two huge arms lift her off her feet. Her tired muscles protested the tight hug, but she laughed and hugged Emmett back
anyway as best she could.

"Emmett Cullen, you put her down this instant!" Esme had rushed from the kitchen then and swatted Emmett's arm. "For goodness' sake, she's probably still sore." The big vampire assumed a hurt expression and put her down gently. Esme tsked and turned to Bella, her expression one of concern. "I was just getting ready to bring some food up, are you sure you should be out of bed already?"

The concern in Esme's eyes warmed her, and Bella couldn't help but smile. "I'm alright now. Just a little tired... Whatever you're cooking smells amazing by the way, thank you."

The worry in the Cullen matriarch's eyes didn't waver, but she did return Bella's smile. "As long as you're not pushing yourself too hard..." She turned and went back into the kitchen. While Esme's back was turned, Bella turned to the quiet man beside her and gave him a big, tight hug. Emmett returned it eagerly and beamed at her. Bella stifled a laugh and pulled Emmett aside to speak to him. "Thanks for the hug. I always feel better around you Emmett." The happiness in his eyes was clear with her words, and Bella felt again how lucky she was to have met him. Before she had gone to Forks High, her only friend in the world had been Jake. Now she had Emmett, Jasper, Alice, and Paul... Paul!

Bella's eyes widened and she immediately reached for the connection deep inside, opening it wide. "Excuse me Emmett, I'm going to track down Paul." The vampire nodded, and Bella paused at the kitchen on her way outside. "Esme, would it be too much trouble to ask you to split what you're making onto two plates? I'm sure Paul is hungry too. If you don't mind, I would like to share with him." The little vampire smiled happily.

"Of course! I can't believe that didn't occur to me. I'll make more!" She resumed her work with a flurry of activity. Bella frowned, about to assure Esme that she didn't need to go to the trouble of making more, when a voice stopped her. "Just let her work." Bella almost jumped - she'd forgotten about Edward in the corner. He continued, "Esme likes cooking, and she rarely gets the opportunity to do so because we don't eat human food." He straightened from the wall, his eyes lingering on her in a way that made her skin crawl. She didn't think Edward meant to be creepy, but he was. "It's really no trouble Bella," said Edward. His eyes hardened then, and his voice came so low she barely heard him, "But you are." He stalked away, leaving Bella stunned and on edge. She glanced at Esme, busily working behind her. The woman seemed to have heard nothing. Unnerved, she looked after him for a moment. Shaking off his words, she went outside to find Paul.

Once she was free of the house, Bella took a deep breath of fresh air and smiled. It was dark now, probably really late - but that somehow always made the air seem sweeter. As if it were preparing for the new day. Opening the connection between herself and Paul wide, she called him. Feeling a response come to her, she was relieved. At least he was alright. Paul's relief and joy at her contact seeped through their connection, and she blushed in embarrassed, glad there was no one to see the color of her cheeks. It wasn't easy getting used to feeling someone else's emotions, and on top of that, Paul was becoming so unabashedly affectionate in his feelings that Bella didn't know quite what to do with herself. The only two people in her life who'd ever really cared enough about her to feel that way were Charlie and Jake. Her mind winced away at the thought of her best friend. She wouldn't be seeing him for a while.

Soon enough, she saw a familiar figure emerge from the trees and jog towards her. She grinned. Feeling a little uncertain about their pack connection didn't dim the good feelings that came with it. "Hey Paul." She greeted when he was closer. He returned her grin and didn't stop approaching until he was right in front of her.
"Hey boss." Paul responded, his head tilting ever so slightly in a sign of submission meant to excuse his sudden invasion of her personal space. "I'm glad you're okay, you had me worried there." His brow furrowed, and she felt his worry and fear drift through their link before he shielded those feelings. "Are you okay?"

Now Bella frowned slightly. Paul seemed oddly hesitant - like there was something he wanted, but wasn't asking for. It took her wolf instincts prodding her for her to figure it out. She reached for his hand, the warmth of his skin a contrast to the coolness of Rosalie's, but pleasant nonetheless. A relieved expression crossed his face, and she gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I'll be fine. A little internal bleeding knocked me out for a bit, but I'm recovered." Mostly. She added internally. Paul returned the squeeze to her hand and smiled gratefully. To anyone else, holding Paul's this way might have indicated more than was there. In truth, wolves were social creatures at heart, and touch was an important part of their communication, indicating comfort, security, friendship - and more. It was necessary. Bella had lived so long without it she'd almost forgotten that need to be close, the comfort that came from having a pack.

"Thank goodness." He said. A mischievous look crossed his face. "I'm going to hug you now." Bella didn't have time to react before Paul pounced on her.

Laughter escaped her as she wiggled free from him and sprinted across the yard, careful not to push too hard. Paul matched her pace easily in her weakened state and, laughing as well, took her to the ground where they rolled around wrestling playfully for a few minutes, the occasional growl escaping them as though they wore fur instead of bare skin.

At last they both lay stretched out on the grass panting lightly. Bella felt light and happy despite the soreness still lingering in her body, and despite the threat of war hanging over them. It was hard to stay worried when she knew she had Paul, the Cullens, and Charlie with her. Her eyes focused on the stars above, absently counting them as she let her mind run over the events of the day.

She didn't have long to muse, however, because soon enough she heard Esme calling them in from the house. Bella spread a hand wistfully over the cool, soft grass before getting to her feet. "Esme cooked for us." She told Paul when he looked at her quizzically. A wolfish grin crossed her face. "Race you!" Before Paul could get up, Bella bolted for the house, laughter carrying behind her.

Paul caught up to her quickly, but chose to pace beside her rather than outrun her. A flicker of gratitude went through her - until they reached the front door where, with a grin and a sudden burst of speed, Paul pulled ahead and shot into the house. "Hey!" She called. There was no anger in her voice though, just an amused irritation. It was good they could play like this, she knew. It meant they were okay.

Once inside, the scent of the food Esme had cooked reached her nostrils and Bella was ravenous. Walking into the kitchen, her eyes widened to see two plates side by side, piled high with eggs, sausage, and bacon. She licked her lips self-consciously, not wanting the saliva pooling in her mouth to turn into drool. Paul was in no better shape.

"Wow Mrs. Cullen!" Exclaimed her packmate. "This looks amazing, thank you!" Bella eagerly echoed his sentiments, and with nearly synchronized movements they took their seats and dug in. The food was delicious, and each wolf took time to thank Esme again and compliment her cooking. Esme's eyes shined happily as she watched them devour their food, and Bella could practically feel the happiness emanating from her. If cooking made her this happy, Bella thought, then Esme could cook for her anytime.

Too soon their plates were empty, but neither could complain of still being hungry. Bella rested a content hand on her full belly. "Thank you Esme." She said earnestly. The kindness of the vampires
(minus Edward) never ceased to amaze her. Especially since she thought they were technically supposed to be enemies. The thought of enemies pulled her from her food coma and she straightened in her seat - she still hadn't told everyone what had happened with Sam and the La Push pack. She turned to Paul and touched his shoulder when she saw his head drooping a bit. "Hey," she said, "Did you fill everyone in on what happened?" Before Paul could respond, Charlie entered the kitchen.

"No," he said with a sober expression, "He did not. Apart from the fact that you'd been in a fight with Sam Uley." The police chief had his thumbs through his belt and she saw his fingers clench briefly before relaxing. Bella winced. That probably should have been the first thing she did upon waking.

"Okay," she said in a normal volume since everyone would hear her, "If everyone would meet me in the living room when they are able, I will explain everything. There are things that have occurred that will affect you all too." Taking a deep breath, she headed into the living room. Alice and Jasper were already there, and Emmett bounded in a second later. This was followed by a more sedate pace from Esme and Carlisle, and Charlie's own human shuffling. Finally they were all assembled. Well, everyone except for Rosalie. "Rosalie," she said, "If you're still in the area, I want you to hear this too." There was the quiet noise of shuffling as the vampires in the room moved into the vacant chairs and sofas, getting comfortable. Just when she'd given up on the golden haired beauty showing up, a flicker of movement from the corner of her eye told her that Rosalie had arrived too. Paul sat on the floor by her feet, and she rolled her eyes at his dog-like behavior.

"Okay," she said again, feeling nervous suddenly with so many eyes on her. "So you all know that I had a fight with Sam Uley. Let me explain what happened." She nodded at Alice, Jasper, and Emmett briefly, "When we were at school and I left you guys, I went for a run in the woods. A wolf run." She left out the reason why she'd felt the need to leave school. It wasn't really relevant anyway. "I ran for awhile before heading for home, and that was when Sam jumped me." Bella wasn't trying to sound sensational or anything-she deliberately kept her voice even and calm. Nevertheless, Esme gasped, and Charlie's face turned a violent shade of red, bordering on purple. "I was almost home," she continued quickly, not wanting to get bogged down in any questions yet, "he didn't give me any warning. We fought, hard. While we fought, I called Paul. He, Sam, must have called the rest of his pack too though because they showed up before long. I managed to beat him down enough to force him to change, and then I changed myself so that we could talk."

Bella's glance cast down to look at Paul at her feet, who returned her gaze with a grim smile. "He accused me of having stolen his pack member, Paul. While not completely true, it was my fault that Paul's connection to Sam was severed." She shrugged uncomfortably. "Still not sure how I did that."

She took a steadying breath. "Anyway. We had worked out a truce of sorts when I told him of my imprint, and Paul shared his." Her eyes ran over the vampires and her father in the room, serious. Here was the meat of the issue. "Sam has outlawed Paul and I from the rez; we are not allowed to set foot there without it being taken as an act of war." Alice sucked in a breath, and she felt rather than saw Rosalie shift uneasily. The expressions on everyone else's faces ranged from angry, to dismayed. Her gaze focused on Charlie. "You are still allowed to go visit Billy Black." He nodded, but the anger in his face didn't change. "But Paul can't go home now, so he'll be staying with us."

Charlie objected, "Bella, we can't just have a teenage boy living in the house with us -"

Bella cut him off, her voice hard. "My packmate needs a place to stay, and I want him to stay with me. We have a spare room. Paul is family now." Charlie frowned at her tone of voice, and crossed his arms. Bella realized that she'd never taken that tone with him before, and she softened her voice. "Please Charlie-Dad. Do this for me." If he said no, she planned on returning to the woods, though she didn't voice that. It seemed Charlie could read it in her eyes though, because he gave a resigned
"Fine. But there will be rules, which we will discuss later." Bella nodded, and flashed Charlie a small, grateful smile. Her eyes flicked to Carlisle, who returned her gaze with understanding. She knew that Carlisle and Esme would have offered Paul a room, but it wasn't their place to do so. She was Paul's Alpha, and it was up to her to see to it that he had what he needed.

Paul's voice broke in then, "Thank you both. I appreciate having a place to stay." He touched her leg, and Bella smiled down at him. Paul was her responsibility now, and she was glad she could do this for him.

Her gaze returned to the Cullens then. "That's pretty much it. I think there is dissent in the La Push pack - it didn't seem like everyone was alright with Sam's declaration."

Paul spoke up from his place on the floor, addressing the assembled vampires, "I can attest that even before I left the La Push pack, there were problems. Mainly from Jake and Leah, but Sam does not have the complete control he pretends he does." Bella's expression soured, and her lips twisted into a grimace.

"Which is probably why Sam has bent Jake to his will so fiercely, and won't allow him to leave La Push," she said. It was far easier to control a pack member when they were close. She was definitely worried about Jake.

When it seemed that both wolves were done speaking, Carlisle took a slight step forward, drawing attention to himself. "If I may," his smooth tones were soothing, and Bella could almost feel herself relax. Maybe Carlisle had a similar ability to Jasper's. "This is a lot to take in. We have held an accord with the La Push pack for one hundred years. To think that it may be dissolved so suddenly is troubling." His fingers lifted to rest against his chin in thought. "Still, the terms are much the same as our original treaty - the one I made with Ephraim Black generations ago." Carlisle lifted his gaze to look at Paul questioningly. "How would you describe your former pack Alpha, in terms of temperament?"

Startled at being addressed by the vampire coven leader, Paul was silent until Bella prodded him with their link. Then his voice filled the space. "Sam is..." Paul scrunched up his face in thought before continuing, "...angry. His impulse control isn't great, and it's been getting worse. The tribe puts a lot of pressure on him as the Alpha, and many question his authority because he's an Uley, and not a Black. That has made him...unpredictable."

*Great, Bella thought in resignation, and I essentially emasculated him further by breaking his supposedly unbreakable bond with Paul, thus making his role as Alpha even more tenuous. At least in his mind.*

Carlisle seemed to have been thinking along the same lines, because his countenance was troubled. "I do not think Sam Uley will let it rest where he left it, based on your description Paul, and Bella's experience. We must remain vigilant." Almost before he'd finished, Edward was stepping forward, outrage written across his face and emanating from the tension in his body.

"WE?" He yelled incredulously. "Carlisle, you cannot be serious." He thrust his hand out at Bella and Paul. "They are not a part of this coven, and there is no reason for us," here Edward very poignantly included only the Cullens in his gesture, "to get involved in this in any way. Either we cut ties with them and go back to living as we have been, or we leave Forks altogether and start over somewhere else." His eyes were blacked and burned with resentment when he looked at Bella.

Esme frowned disapprovingly, "Edward, don't speak that way to -"
A sudden hiss startled all of them; Esme fell silent, and all eyes turned to Rosalie, whose eyes were also black. Fury filled them as she looked at Edward, and Bella felt a twinge of unease. She didn't want Rosalie to quarrel with her siblings over her - especially not when Edward was essentially right for once. What he'd said earlier, about her being trouble, flashed through her mind.

"Rosalie." She spoke calmly, before Carlisle could get off a word. She waited until Rosalie's black eyes were fixed on her. "Rosalie," she repeated the vampire's name to assure she had her attention, "Edward is right." The beautiful vampire straightened as if slapped, her form almost blurring briefly from the swiftness of the movement.

She looked at Carlisle, who bore a look of mild surprise. "Carlisle, I thank you for everything, but I do think Edward is right. It would be safest for you and your family to distance yourselves from Paul and I." She smiled wryly, "I think I've become public enemy number one for La Push, even over vampires." She didn't want any of the Cullens to get hurt on her account, though she could already see Emmett shaking his head, and a frown on Alice and Jasper's faces. Rosalie's face was unreadable, but her form was shaking slightly and her face was oddly flushed - something Bella had never seen with a vampire. For a human it wouldn't be noticeable, but on a vampire it was almost like there was real color in her cheeks. She must be really upset, Bella thought. She quailed inwardly at the kind of rage Rosalie must be experiencing to show it outwardly like that.

Safer to focus on Carlisle for the moment.

The Cullen patriarch had remained silent, and she could see him turning over her words. Edward looked surprised by what she'd said, but he too refrained from speaking, waiting.

Charlie, however, weighed in. "Bella, I think we could use the Cullens' help on this one." His face was troubled, and she could tell it pained him to admit that.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Dad, what are you -"

He forestalled her with a hand, and she fell silent. "I can't protect you from this. If Sam comes for you again, the best I can do is try to shoot him. And I don't think it will do much good." His frustration was evident in his voice and demeanor, but he met her eyes steadily. "You can't fight him alone."

"She won't be alone." Paul had risen beside her, his voice determined. "Bella's my Alpha now, and I've got her back." She could feel the surety of his words, and she shot him a grateful look.

Charlie looked ready to protest again, but Carlisle laid a hand on his arm. "I think your daughter has decided for herself." He said quietly. "If Bella wishes to ask for our help, we will give it. But until that time, we will respect her wishes." Carlisle's caramel eyes met hers, and she could see the worry there though his face and voice betrayed nothing. She felt her respect for Carlisle grow in that moment, for he had acknowledged her as an equal rather than a pup.

"Thank you Carlisle." She dipped her head respectfully, and offered him a smile which he returned. "Charlie," he looked at her, "I think it's time for us to go home." He was distressed by her decision she knew, but he was still a police chief. Managing pressure and stress was part of his job. After a sigh, he nodded and headed for the door.

"I'll meet you back home then, I've got the cruiser with me." His voice was gruff again, a tone he used to mask anxiety or worry.

Bella held in her own sigh and followed, Paul falling into step beside her. She paused near Esme and smiled at the little vampire. "Thanks for everything Esme, you're really wonderful." If vampires
could cry, Bella thought, she suspected that Esme would be. The Cullen matriarch swept her into a hug, gentle and fierce.

"You come back any time." She whispered, and Bella smiled, warmed by her generosity.

Almost before she'd left Esme's embrace, she felt herself swept into another one - this one more crushing. "Bella Bear!" Emmett whined. "We'll still play at school, ok?" It was almost like he was asking her, and she huffed a laugh as he set her back down.

"Of course Em, I'll kick your butt at basketball next time." She grinned when he stuck his tongue at her, and then she was free to head to the door - giving a nod to Jasper and Alice as they passed.

It was starting to feel like they were all watching her march off to her execution, she reflected, and hurried her steps to the door.

"Bella." The voice she longed for more than any other spoke, and in the two syllables of her name she heard so many things: stop, why, please? She paused in the doorway and looked back at Rosalie.

Her eyes flicked to Carlisle briefly before returning to Rosalie, and she smiled. "As long as Carlisle doesn't mind, I'll still be picking you up for that date on Friday. Even rabid wolves couldn't stop me." For an odd moment she thought she could sense the other woman's feelings - relief and joy, as well as darker feelings of self-loathing and despair - but chalked it up to her own emotions.

Bella left the house, determination spreading across her face. She and Paul walked silently to her truck, and drove silently back most of the way to Bella's house.

"I know what you're doing." Paul spoke into the quiet of the cab.

Bella smiled grimly. "And?"

"Nothing," he replied firmly. "I'm in."

Chapter End Notes

Again, I am SO SORRY for the time it took me to complete and upload this chapter. All I can say is finals ate my time, and now I'm into the holidays.

I hope you enjoyed this update! Any guesses what Bella is planning?
Hello my lovely readers! It has been way too long, and I am so sorry about that! I got a little stuck in my writing, and I had work got crazy on me for a while. Please forgive me! This chapter totally wouldn't have been possible without your support, and it would have come even later had it not been for my most excellent sister Lady Lullaby, who edited this for me and helped me with continuity.

Thank you, thank you for all of the wonderful comments! I can't tell you enough how much I appreciate them. Your words really are the best motivation. I hope that you enjoy this chapter.
"Hi Paul..." She cooed, and Bella frowned in disgust while Paul's eyebrows scrunched up in confusion.

"Erm," he responded awkwardly, "Hi?"

Lila seemed to take that as an invitation and leaned even further into his space, letting her fingertips graze his arm. Bella could smell the discomfort rolling off of Paul, and felt his uncertainty. "Gosh, I was just wondering..." and here her eyes shot to Bella, "if you had any plans tonight? Since you're new around here, I could give you a personal tour of the best spots in town..." Her tone was so suggestive Bella didn't think anyone could miss what she was insinuating. Paul gave Bella a panicked look, and she took that as her cue to step in.

The Alpha stepped up next to Paul and right into Lila's space, her hand wrapping around the other girl's wrist like steel. She removed her hand from Paul. "Kindly leave my friend alone." Though her words were light enough, the threat in them was implicit. Lila narrowed her eyes at Bella.

"Paul's a big boy - he can decide what, or who, he wants." She licked her lips, and Bella tightened her grip around Lila's wrist in response until the other girl winced. Then she relaxed her hand and let Lila pull hers away.

"Yes he can. But as his friend, I reserve the right to run off anyone I think is unworthy of his time." Bella's gaze hardened to flint, and her wolf was satisfied when Lila flinched from her gaze. "Leave him alone." Again, the threat wavered unspoken in the air. This time, Lila turned and left them.

A hand on her shoulder startled her somewhat, and she glanced up at Paul. He smiled at her gratefully. "Thanks boss. Wasn't sure what the best move was there."

Bella had waved him off, but Lila wasn't Paul's only suitor that week. He had similar encounters with Jessica, Lauren, and a girl named Veronica that Bella hadn't met before. Eventually Bella started making Paul get rid of them, though he had to be much politer about it than she did.

On Thursday was when things came to a head.

It was lunchtime and Bella had just gotten her tray and sat down at the table Eric, Angela, Mike, and Jessica were seated at with Paul not far behind, when Lila came storming into the cafeteria, slamming the doors open with far more force than necessary. The resulting bang resulted in a hush over the students and every gaze turned to her. Her eyes were red-rimmed and looked half hysterical, her chest heaving with ire. She leveled a finger at Bella and advanced across the lunchroom, shaking with rage. "If you think," her voice was shrill and loud, "You can just waltz in here like you own the place, and bag every guy here, you've got another thing coming Bella Swan."

Bella's eyes were wide in shock as she stared at Lila. What the hell?

Lila was looking around at the other girls in the room. "Am I right? She comes into this school, our school, and is suddenly Miss Popular when some of us have worked our whole lives to get here!" Bella opened her mouth to respond, but Lila shrieked over her, "You don't get to speak!"

Reluctantly they nodded at her, and then she remembered her less human friends. Her eyes shot to the Cullens' table and locked with Rosalie's furious, burning gaze. "No." Bella whispered quietly, not moving her lips. Rosalie getting involved in this was the last thing that should happen. Nevertheless, the fact that Rosalie looked angry made her feel...happy.
Murmurs broke out among the students and Bella gleaned a few snippets of conversation - mostly wondering what was going on with Lila, and where the lunch teacher was. She wondered about Lila too - was all this anger really directed at her? And of course the lunch-duty teacher seemed to have stepped out. The girl in question was still glaring heatedly at Bella, but it looked like she'd actually run out of words even though she had just told Bella she couldn't speak. "You get everyone's pity with that stupid scar," her words sounded almost half-hearted though her face still bore a hateful expression, "and you think you can get away with anything - well not anymore!"

Now Bella turned a withering glare on Lila. It wasn't like her scar was a secret, but she didn't need the entire school knowing about it. "That's enough, Lila." She said, voice clear and hard. Though she didn't raise it, her voice cut through every conversation in the room. Slowly, Bella rose from her seat until she veritably towered over Lila, who, to her inner satisfaction, took a hasty step back. "You've said your piece. Now I'll say mine." When Lila didn't respond, her eyes shifted to the other students in the room so she was addressing everyone. "Lila says I'm stealing all the boys, that I'm using my "popularity" to get around. Not that it's anyone's business but my own," her eyes returned to Lila, "but newsflash. I'm gay. And I certainly wouldn't play the field like that." When Lila's mouth dropped open and the rest of the cafeteria broke out into excited whispers, Bella took that as her cue to sit down.

She turned back to her lunch and her friends with a smile, clearly ignoring Lila. "So Mike," she said, addressing the dumbfounded blond, "How about them Seahawks?" She could feel Rosalie's amusement and approval from here, and it made her feel warm.

After school, Paul and Bella headed back to the Swan house. On the way there, Paul gave Bella a nod of respect. "You handled that really well, at lunch. I think I would have been a bumbling idiot."

Bella rolled her eyes, but didn't dispute him. He'd already fumbled through several rejections already. She glanced at him sidelong as she drove. "Have you heard from Kate?" His emotions had been all over the place the last day or so, and she couldn't think of anything else that could be the culprit.

Paul was quiet for a minute, and by the time he spoke she'd pulled into her driveway and killed the engine. They sat in silence in the cab, and then, "Yeah, I saw her. Just to tell her what you told the Cullens - that we're mostly staying away for the time being. But that's not all." He looked at her, worry in his eyes. "My mom said she would be coming to see me. She hasn't come yet, and nothing else has been left at the line. I'm just...worried."

Bella frowned. "Do you think Sam would try to keep her from coming to visit you? He's been way out of line, but you know him better. Would he do that?" She hadn't thought he'd interfere with anyone non-wolf or vampire.

Paul chewed his lip in an uncharacteristic display of nerves, and let out a hard breath. "I don't know. Maybe? He's always been petty - spiteful. It's possible." She could see the unspoken concern too, that Sam may have done something to hurt her. Reaching out to grip Paul's arm tightly, Bella met his eyes with steady reassurance.

"Paul, I'm sure you're mom is ok. Sam may be keeping her from visiting, but there is no way he would hurt her. His duty is to protect his people, his human people in particular - and your mom falls under that category first and foremost." Bella only partially believed herself, but was glad when Paul nodded with relief evident on his face. She hoped she was right.

"Thanks Bella, you're probably right." He flashed her a grateful smile before climbing out of the cab. Bella was right behind him.
Once they both entered the house, seriousness darkened their countenances.

"Alright," the she-wolf growled. "Let's try again. First, eat." Paul nodded and headed into the kitchen to pull out sandwich fixings. Bella soon joined him and together they put together almost a dozen sandwiches, and then promptly devoured them. She met Paul's eyes. "If you meet one, you know what to do." The steady resolve in Paul's eyes was enough. "I'll go first."

Stepping into the living room, Bella quickly stripped herself of her clothes, piling them neatly on an end table, and ran for the backdoor - change triggered as she leaped off the back porch. A satisfied snarl curled her lip when four paws solidly met the ground. A moment later, a dark, chestnut colored wolf stood beside her, only a half-hand taller than she. Her wolf had grown again, she thought in amusement. It must be a reaction to the larger Quileute shifters. Would she actually get as big as they? She rolled her shoulders, working out a few kinks. It didn't matter whether she did or not.

With one last glance at Paul, she took off into the woods, paws carrying her swiftly and silently away from her house. With unspoken agreement, Bella and Paul split ways and then she ran alone. Paws flattening onto scattered tree detritus, claws digging shallow furrows, Bella allowed herself to find peace in the simple strength of this body and its movements.

Nearing the first place of her patrol, Bella slowed and went over the plan she and Paul had concocted together. It was really quite simple. Visit the border every night and stay out late, in the hopes of meeting one of Sam's packmates. Hopefully Leah or Jake - they would be ideal. Her yellow/gold eyes narrowed as she scanned the dense woods that continued on the other side of their drawn line. She sniffed in irritation. Sam thought she was taking his pack? Well she'd better step up her game then. Ideally, if she could get Leah and Jake into her pack they would have enough muscle power to abolish this foolish banishment and threat from the Quileutes. Then Paul could go home.

And she suspected that Leah at least was on the same page, from the scent-marking she had left near the pile of Paul's belongings several days ago. She and Paul had been patrolling the line carefully ever since, and Bella had left her own scent marker by Leah's in hopes the other she-wolf would scent it and understand. Bella didn't think Leah would have left a marking like that for any other reason than the desire to communicate. It wasn't like the border lacked any for markings, after all.

Still, this was day four of border patrol, and there had been no further sign or communication from anyone of the La Push pack. Bella was starting to doubt the marking Leah had left behind meant anything at all.

She paused at the original drop-site of Paul's belongings, cautiously edging out of the cover of the trees and scenting the air by the border. Nothing. Nothing new, anyway. The she-wolf turned to head back into the woods, but paused when she heard a faint snort behind her. Slowly, Bella turned around and beheld a grey wolf - smaller than she, but wiry. Yellow eyes burned into hers, and it only took one breath to recognize Leah. Her jaw dropped open into a wolfish grin, tongue lolling out while she relaxed her stance. Leah's tense muscles slowly eased until she was resting on her haunches with her head tilted to the side. Bella took a moment to open the link between herself and Paul to call him, and then sat herself. The she-wolves appraised each other silently for several minutes, and Bella wished that they could communicate beyond body language. With normal wolves and Paul, she could. But there was a barrier that separated her from the other La Push wolves, and she could not speak to them when they were in their four-legged forms.

Finally, Paul's familiar tread caught Bella's ears. She wrinkled her nose in annoyance at how noisy he was being - she really needed to work with him on silent running. When his furry hide was on the scene, Bella pulled the wolf back in and donned her human skin. Once she stood on two feet again, she cracked her neck and let out a breath of discomfort as a few bones slid back into place. Paul
averted his eyes, but Bella wasn't bothered by her nakedness. She was used to it, and she had a feeling that the shifters generally felt the same way.

"Hey Leah." She said. Her voice came out almost like a growl and Bella frowned in annoyance. Placing three fingers against her throat, she shoved until she felt a familiar pop. "Let's try that again." Pleased that her voice was fully human now, she smiled. Careful not to show her teeth and offer an unwitting threat, she continued to smile. "Hey Leah." The wolf across the boundary line continued to appraise them both for a few more silent minutes, and Bella waited patiently. At last, the familiar popping sounds of a change filled the small clearing.

When Leah wore her human flesh again as well, she looked at Bella again. In those dark eyes, Bella saw fierce pride. She also saw great unhappiness. Curious, she waited for the other she-wolf to speak. Leah's first words were unexpected.

"I want to join."

There was no warning. No tensing of muscles, flashing of eyes - nothing. One moment Leah stood speaking to Bella normally. The next, her flesh had erupted and expanded outward into the wolf once more, while leaping through the air, fangs bared. Bella was so startled she barely had time to gasp before Leah's massive paws connected with her bare shoulders, bringing her to the ground.

Pine needles and twigs were crushed under her, and the scent of blood filled the air. Her blood.

Instinct kicked in then, and Bella snarled as the tearing of her own flesh registered. The wolf wanted out again, and it would not be denied. Her own change had never been as immediate and explosive as the Quileutes, but something inside of her was changing. Perhaps from having Paul as a part of her pack, or perhaps from a kind of swift evolution in response to new threats. Either way, her wolf responded far more quickly now. Fur sheathed her quickly, pain only a dim acknowledgement in her mind.

She worked to get her hind legs between herself and Leah, raking at the other she-wolf's underbelly even as she strove to shove her off. Another four-legged form crashed into Leah, pulling her clean off of Bella and for a moment, Bella thought she now had two adversaries before sense kicked in and reminded her that she had Paul. Watching the two former packmates roll across the ground left her furious, and she advanced on them with terrible purpose. Power rolling from her thoughts and being, she proclaimed "Enough!"

Paul immediately flipped onto his back and twisted his head painfully to reveal his neck. Inwardly Bella felt guilty for making him do that, but watching as Leah fought her hold, she knew she couldn't have been any more lenient. Eyeing the errant she-wolf angrily, Bella towered over her struggling form. "I said," she forced her thoughts into Leah's mind, "That's enough." Leah's attempts to break away from her dominance slackened for a few moments, before renewing. Exasperated, Bella engulfed herself in the wolf within and pushed her dominance outward so forcefully that Paul let out a high-pitched squeal of pain. That did it. Leah finally flopped over and bared her throat, chest heaving. Despite having won this fight, Bella leaned down and opened her mouth, carefully placing her teeth around Leah's neck. The she-wolf below her remained very still, even as Bella applied the slightest pressure. Bella wanted it to be clear that she would tolerate no more. Finally, she released Leah and reigned in her dominant pheromones. Once the oppressive dominant miasma had abated, both Paul and Leah sighed in relief.

Stepping back, Bella pushed the wolf back with some difficulty to regain her human form. Once back on two feet, she reached out to Paul through their link to soothe his discomfort. She walked to him and placed a hand on his shoulder in apology. He leaned into her a little, rolled his eyes and huffed. She smiled - they were alright. Now it was time to deal with Leah. Turning back around, she
wasn't sure what more to expect. Lifting her eyebrows in surprise, she found that Leah was kneeling behind her in human form again. *She must have changed back while I was with Paul*, Bella mused, *But I can't believe I didn't even hear it. I must be tired.* Still, this at least made communication easier. Frowning, Bella folded her arms as she gazed down at Leah. "Speak." She commanded. There was no need to clarify further, as there could be only one thing she was demanding.

Keeping her eyes downcast and head tilted slightly to the side, Leah did as she was bid. "Please forgive me for attacking you, Bella. I did so only because I did not think there was another way to free myself of Sam." If she had chanced a look up at Bella just then, she'd have seen a suddenly perplexed expression on her face, but she did not. "When Sam fought you before, and you told him in the clearing that getting Paul into your pack was an accident, that it wasn't your intent. And when Paul was still on the rez, he mentioned that breaking his bond with Sam hadn't been intentional on your part and that you weren't sure how it happened. I was afraid you wouldn't know how to help me get out too. And I couldn't afford for Sam to hear my thoughts before I could get you to free me; he would have branded me a traitor and..." Leah shivered. "He's been angrier than ever lately, and I don't know what would have happened. I have other reasons for wanting to get out of that situation that I would be happy to explain to you later but..." Finally, Leah lifted her head to meet Bella's hard gaze. In Leah's light brown eyes, Bella saw only desperate need, and her own anger faltered. "Please Bella, let me join your pack. Please."

Bella stared at Leah in silence for long minutes. She maintained her dominant stance though it wore on her to do so, while she thought. On the one hand, Leah had a point - Bella didn't know how she'd broken the connection between Paul and Sam, though a new suspicion was swirling in her mind about that. But on the other hand, Leah had just *attacked* her in the hopes that Bella would instinctively do the same thing to Leah that she had done to Paul. She could feel blood trickling down her back, and more moving down her chest to pool in her crossed arms. That had been a very foolish thing to do. Her wolf was disgruntled that in exchange, she'd only left shallow scratches across Leah's abdomen.

If Bella let Leah into her pack, was there a chance the she-wolf would attack her again? No, she didn't think so. But was this incident indicative of consistent behavior on Leah's part? Particularly, was her behavior always so rash, impulsive, and aggressive?

*Paul had anger problems too.* An inner voice reminded her. *And he also attacked you.* But Paul had merely given in to his rage. Leah's attack was more calculated and manipulative. It would be a risk taking her into the pack.

*Wait.* Her humanity shoved to the forefront of her mind suddenly, and Bella realized that she had only been thinking as the wolf. What about the memories she had of Leah? Growing up, Jake had been her main friend, but she had known Leah too, and Paul, and a number of others. Admittedly they hadn't continued to hang out, and especially not recently, but Bella had memories of Leah as a carefree young girl with a sometimes caustic wit and a deep, undying devotion to her younger brother Seth. That girl was still inside this young woman, Bella sensed. This had been an act of desperation, no matter how calculated.

Her decision now was mostly made, but she opened her connection with Paul for a moment to get his take. When all she felt was warmth and approval, Bella unfolded her arms and knelt on the ground before Leah. Reaching out, she placed a hand on the woman's bare shoulder. She didn't have to ask if her connection to Sam had been broken, she doubted Leah would have stopped until it was. "Leah Clearwater." At the sound of her name, Leah looked up. Bella's eyes were grave. "I don't approve of your methods, but I was hopeful that there would be others who would like to join us."

That had been the plan with Paul all along, after all. They had carefully patrolled the borders the last few days in the hopes of meeting someone from La Push who might want to defect. If Sam's forces
were weakened, Bella and Paul had reasoned, he wouldn't be so quick to threaten a war. She refocused her thoughts on Leah. "Are you certain this is what you want?"

Leah nodded, and Bella was shocked to see tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Desperation, indeed. "Yes. Please." Bella winced inwardly. She wasn't trying to make Leah beg.

"Alright then." She said, and settled her free hand on Leah's other shoulder. "Leah Clearwater," she lent power to her voice, "I accept you into my pack." When suddenly there was a link established, Bella sighed in relief - she hadn't been certain that would work. Two arms surged around her neck then, and a surprised gasp escaped her. The tears she had noted in Leah's eyes a moment before came freely now, and she felt them dampen the skin of her neck as Leah rested her head there.

"Thank you!" Leah whispered fiercely. Bella returned her hug for a moment, before suddenly becoming acutely aware of the fact that both she and Leah were, in fact, naked.

Face turning scarlet, Bella extricated herself from Leah and helped her to her feet. "You're welcome. Now, did you happen to bring anything with you? I don't think you can go back to the La Push for now." If Leah noticed her sudden discomfort she didn't show it, just wiped the tears from her face and nodded. She turned and headed back into the trees on the La Push side of the line and came back carrying a duffel bag.

"I'm all set." She said, smiling. Despite it all, Bella couldn't help but feel happy herself. Inside she felt even more complete than she had with Paul. With the three of them, it felt more like a real pack and, with Charlie, more like an entire family.

They made it back to Bella's house eventually. It took some time because Bella hadn't wanted to make another change again so soon, especially not with untreated wounds on her shoulders that hadn't closed up. Leah had apologized profusely for them several times already and now that they had an established link, Bella could feel her true remorse.

"I meant to keep my claws back, I really did. I'm sorry." She said, more than once until Bella told her to let it rest. She would heal, given a little time. She might pay a visit to her friendly neighborhood vampire doctor though, if they didn't close up on their own.

When they finally trooped into the Swan house Bella was relieved to see that her father wasn't back yet and hurried upstairs to take a shower and get changed, leaving Leah and Paul to talk a little. Once she'd gotten cleaned up, bandaged her shoulders as best she could, and donned some baggy sweats and a t-shirt, she headed back downstairs. It had gotten late, she realized looking out the window at the darkening sky.

Leah and Paul were sitting in the living room. They weren't talking, but they weren't being hostile or tense either. She sensed they were both tired, and went around to sit in an armchair with them.

She focused on Leah. "We've got one more spare room that you can stay in for now, upstairs. Tomorrow I'll see if what can be done to get you enrolled at Forks High with me and Paul, though you may end up getting an extended weekend." She cracked a smile at her newest packmate, and was rewarded when she felt the other woman relax a little.

"Thank you Bella," Leah said, "For everything. I'm sorry for the way I went about it. Maybe tomorrow when you're back from school, we can talk more about it?" Maybe she could sense Bella's own fatigue, the alpha wondered. It was true that she was pretty dead on her feet at the moment. It would be better for everyone if they just slept on it, she thought. She had a lot of burning questions about Leah, about her brother Seth (how did he feel about this?), and especially about Jake. It was
late though, and they were all very tired. It was past time for all good wolves to be asleep. A faint smile touched her lips - now there was more than one wolf. Warmth stole over her at the thought as she looked softly at her pack. It felt so good to have them when she had not for so long. She had not known until this moment how very lonely she had felt. As much as she loved Charlie for being her father and family when she had none, there had been a hole he could not fill. For a moment, she basked in this new found sense of security and belonging.

Then, "Sure Leah, that's fine," Bella agreed easily, "tomorrow after school works. In the meantime, I'll write Charlie a note since he probably won't be back until late now, and then we -" Bella broke off and her eyes widened as a cold realization rushed over her like a bucket of ice water. She shot straight out of her chair, ignoring the sudden protest of the wounds on her shoulders and the gasps from her packmates.

"Oh no, I forgot!" Bella practically shouted, body vibrating in panic.

Paul was the first to respond, getting out of his seat and approaching his alpha cautiously. "Bella, forgot what? What's happened?" He kept his movement slow and submissive, though he needn't have worried as Bella wasn't the type to get over excited and hurt someone. Nevertheless, he'd never seen her with such nervous energy before.

Bella's panicked gaze met his, "I forgot. I have a date with Rosalie tomorrow!" And just like that there was no way she was getting any sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who guessed about Leah...well done! I hope that this chapter was enjoyable and next chapter...well, we get to see our two favorite ladies! Bella finally takes Rosalie on that long-awaited date. I can't promise on my next update, but I will definitely do my best to not take so damnably long this time.

As always, thanks for reading!
Whew! So my friends, it has been a while since my last update! I hope that the length of this update helps to make up for that a little. Many thanks to my sister, Lady_Lullaby, for checking this over for any glaring errors I may have made!

Thank you, thank you to everyone who has taken the time to comment! I really appreciate your kind words. Thanks also for the kudos! You guys really are great, and I so hope you continue to enjoy this story!

Side note: I didn't realize until I was writing this chapter that Paul Lahote actually lived with his dad and not his mom in canon, but I already referenced his mom so...Paul is now living with his mom! An explanation for any sticklers or curious parties out there ;)

Disclaimer: I don't own a lick of Twilight!

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Last Time: Bella and Paul spend the week patrolling the border with La Push, hoping to run into other wolves who want to defect from the Uley pack. Bella has decided that the best way to diffuse Sam's threat of war, is to level the playing field a little. Meanwhile at school, Lila blows up at Bella for seemingly attracting all the male attention. Bella takes that opportunity to announce, in the lunchroom to virtually the entire school, that she is in fact gay. On Thursday evening Bella finally runs into Leah, who claims she wants to join the Swan pack right before launching an attack on Bella. Caught by surprise, it's an intense tussle later before Bella can overwhelm Leah with her dominance and sever the connection between her and Sam, which was what Leah wanted all along. After some explanations are given, Leah is accepted into the Swan pack and the trio head back to Bella's house. Once they've settled in, Bella suddenly has the alarming realization that she has completely forgotten one very important thing: Friday is her date night with Rosalie. Her first date with her imprint, and her first date with a vampire who up until now has done everything possible to push Bella away. Gulp.

As it turned out, sleep did come for Bella and the Swan pack. The trio stayed up late discussing plans for Bella's date the next evening, and by the time Charlie got home in the wee hours of the morning, he found a pile of blankets, pillows, and limbs from which an occasional snore could be heard on his living room floor. After further investigation, he smiled when he recognized Leah, and the peaceful face of his daughter. The frustration he'd felt at her ultimatum about Paul abated a little. It wasn't that he didn't want to help the boy - he just hadn't appreciated that Bella had tried to dominate him. And another part of him was somewhat angry that she had succeeded. It had taken almost a week for Charlie to reconcile again the fact that Bella wasn't really human, and her reactions and abilities were not the same as his own. It was something he had known since the day he'd found her, torn nearly in half in the woods. Sometimes, nature won out over nurture and he needed to deal with that. Leaving them to sleep, Charlie took himself up to bed for his own well-earned rest.

The next morning, Bella woke to the smell of eggs cooking and bright sunlight streaming in the big windows. Her rumbling stomach soon had her stumbling to her feet and licking her lips in anticipation. Surprise crossed her face as she looked around in bewilderment, recognizing her living
room. The pile of blankets around her reminded her of the impromptu slumber party the night before, and she smiled. The light connection she could feel between herself, Paul, and Leah made her feel almost whole. It was a feeling she could get used to. Not seeing Paul or Leah, she figured they were either in the kitchen or upstairs getting ready. Following her nose, she found Leah expertly flipping an omelet in a skillet, and Paul setting the table with glasses of orange juice, plates, forks, and knives. A quick sniff told her Charlie had already left for work that day; a ripple of concern went through her, Charlie rarely worked shifts that close together. Her worry faded though once she took in the spread before her again, forgotten in the wake of her hunger.

"Wow! This all looks amazing!" She said, grinning at her packmates. "What brought all this on?" A scent touched her sensitive nose that surprised her: anxiety. She noted the nervous looking smile on Leah's face, and Paul's stiff motions. The grin slowly dropped. "What...what's wrong?" Could something have happened to upset her little pack already?

Leah whipped around and slid an omelet onto one of the plates Paul had set out. "Nothing!" She said, with a smile that looked forced to Bella. "We just wanted to make you breakfast, that's all." Bella opened her mouth, but then Paul was there, ushering her into a seat.

"Yeah, try some! Leah's really good at omelets." He said, sliding her glass of orange juice toward her as well, just a little too eagerly. Bella's eyes couldn't help sliding to the omelet, as her belly reminded her again that she was hungry. And it did smell really good.

"Well..." She reached for the fork and knife, and suddenly felt a twinge of anxiety and almost fear that definitely wasn't her own. She dropped the cutlery and turned a look on Leah and Paul. "Ok, someone explain to me what the heck is going on? Why are you two so nervous, and why am I the only one with an omelet? Weren't you making breakfast for all of us?" She looked pointedly at the now empty skillet on the stove, and the lack of more ingredients, before flicking her eyes back to the two shifters.

They cowered, and Leah actually flinched. Bella immediately softened her gaze and sniffed the air tentatively. She hadn't been letting off dominant pheromones, so what...? "Guys, you don't think I would hurt you...do you?" She paused, uncertain. Bella felt like there might be an answer staring her in the face, but she just wasn't getting it. She ran a frustrated hand through her hair as the members of her pack continued to keep their eyes averted.

Deciding to focus on their connection for answers, she could feel that they had both drawn as far away as possible. She could still feel them, however, and the greatest anxiety was flowing from Leah. From what she could feel, it was a feeling that was almost...leaking...into Paul. So Leah was the source of this...whatever this was. What had changed since the night before? Bella slowly rose from the chair and to her feet, careful not to make any sudden movements. Leah and Paul both held perfectly still, as if they were worried she would lunge at them. Her heart clenched painfully inside - gone was the happiness from mere moments ago. Something was stressing them out to the max, and somehow she was the cause of it. Slowly, very slowly, she moved towards Leah. Carefully, she reached out and touched Leah's hand gently. The other young woman shivered, and tilted her neck in response. Even the wolf inside sensed something very wrong with this response. She was not demanding submission, and this was her packmate, one she should not need submission from in this way. Not like this.

"Leah..." She breathed quietly, slowly curling her hand around the shifter's and lifting it up. She placed the hand over her own solidly beating heart and held it there even when Leah's eyes widened in alarm. She heard the quick breaths, and could even hear the rapid beats of her heart. "It is okay." She spoke softly, "You are safe here, with me, and with Paul." A thought occurred to her then, "You do not have to cook or anything like that just so that you can stay. We're pack now. All of us,
together. We'll help each other." The Alpha was silent for a few moments, and just focused on her own breathing and heartbeat, sending those rhythms to Leah through their link. Gradually, the female shifter's heart rate began to slow to a normal speed and her breaths weren't as rapid. "That's better." Bella murmured. She was pleased to feel that Paul had calmed down too and was just staying close in case she needed him. "Now, do you think you can look at me?" While direct eye contact was rarely safe between predators, their situation was a little different. Leah was really a human with an ability and a bunch of confusing instincts to go along with it, and Bella was Faoladh, neither human nor wolf exactly. When Leah's dark eyes met the Alpha's, Bella smiled warmly at her and pulled her into a tight embrace. Leah hesitated for a moment before clutching tight at Bella's shirt, material bunched in her fingers, and pressing her face hard into her shoulder. Bella felt a shudder pass through the other woman, and continued to hold her until it seemed that Leah had collected herself. At last they parted, and this time it was Bella who ushered Leah and Paul into seats before taking her own.

"Alright," she said, "Let's divide up this most excellent omelet now and you two can tell me what just happened."

Twenty minutes later, and ten minutes late for school, Bella sat back in her chair in incredulity, struggling to keep the shock off her face and outrage from showing too clearly through their bond. She didn't want to scare them or have them think her anger was directed at them when she'd just gotten Leah calmed down. Still, it was a tough pill to swallow. The she-wolf took in a deep breath in an effort to simmer down, and tried to speak calmly. "You are telling me, that Sam made you cook and clean for the rest of the pack because you were the female? And he threatened to humiliate you if..." Now pain washed away the anger as Bella couldn't even get the words out. She looked away from Leah and Paul and stared hard at the faded flower wallpaper of the kitchen for a long minute. Leah had brought along her fear from the Uley pack that her Alpha would require things of her, in exchange for protection. Protection from what? From the Alpha. Bella's head hurt. Her heart hurt. Paul hadn't suffered as much as Leah, evidently, but the males were more subject to receiving the physical displeasure of the Alpha when he was in a mood. No wonder there had been so much anger, Bella thought darkly. This was not how a pack should be.

Her head came back around to see that both Leah and Paul looked downcast. She groaned inwardly. Being the Alpha was tough. Evidently they'd felt a little of what she'd tried to hold back. "I'm not angry at either of you. Not even a little." She said gently. Directing her next words to Paul, she said, "Since you have joined my pack, Paul, have I ever hurt you or tried to make you do something you didn't want to? Have I done anything like that?" Her question was genuine, for while she hadn't thought there'd been anything like that, if she had then she wanted to make amends immediately. "Please tell me the truth." When Paul hesitated, she added, "I swear on my blood, on the spirits of my dead parents who died for me, that no matter what you say next will not anger me, and I will not hurt you as a result."

Paul glanced up at her then, awe shining in his eyes at the strength of her oath. He swallowed then and found his voice. "No Bella. Not really, not since the day you severed my bond with Sam. And maybe a bit when you were breaking Leah's bond yesterday, but I know you weren't trying to hit me with your dominance. I know that wasn't your intent, and I'm glad you did it." His eyes slid to Leah briefly. "If you had let up for even a moment, Leah might have broken free and then she never would have been free, not really." He fell silent, and Bella breathed an internal sigh of relief. She nodded to Paul in thanks for his honesty.

Her eyes returned to Leah. "Leah, I must ask you." And while normally this would be a private question, there really wasn't much privacy in a pack. Paul might already know, and even if he didn't, he would know soon enough due to the nature of their bonds. "Did Sam ever..." She left the question
hanging, loaded in a way that any woman would recognize. Leah met her eyes in response, and shook her head slightly. Bella breathed a heavy sigh of relief and felt her shoulders sag, one of which twinged with the remembrance of the day before. That was one thing, at least. The humiliation Leah had described before had included driving her naked through the streets of La Push with snapping wolves on her heels, her own brother included and her own ability to shift being suppressed and crushed by the Alpha. That was terrible enough. An outpouring of dominance like that though might not even leave Leah capable of standing, and Bella was a little suspicious that Sam could even pull such a thing off. And if he did, and Leah so much as stumbled, the wolves chasing her with the force of their crazed Alpha behind them could easily devolve into the instinct of predator versus prey. Sam was even more dangerous than she had thought.

Bella took a deep breath, and focused on both members of her pack. "I recast my vow. On my blood, and the spirits of my dead parents who died for me, I will never abuse my power as Alpha over you. If ever I do use my strength in that way, you will know the reason why: a situation like yesterday, or a day during which I think either of you is a threat to the safety of innocent people, which I think I need never fear. You will always know where you stand with me, and you will always have the right to walk away. We are pack, and pack is family." Her expression was fierce as she lifted her hand to her mouth and bit down hard, tasting copper on her tongue. She showed the welling blood to Leah and Paul. "It is sealed." She wasn't certain where the urge had come from to spill her own blood, but she had acted on instinct and it felt right. Deep inside, she felt that her words had been locked into place, and that she could never break them.

Though both pack members seemed relieved, Leah looked at her with mournful eyes and Bella knew there was more story to tell. "Sam always told us that is what real wolves were like," Bella felt a flash of anger at that but held her tongue, "But the hardest part for me is that...Sam loved me, not so long ago. And I loved him, we were going to get married. Then he phased for the first time and everything changed. He imprinted on Emily, my best friend. It wasn't long after that that they fell in love, and Sam broke up with me. Then I phased, and things were so awkward because I could feel that he no longer felt anything for me. I felt and heard in his thoughts his devotion for Emily." Bella winced, and Paul kept his gaze averted - he knew this story. Leah took a breath and continued. "And then one day, Sam got angry. A bear had torn up the garden that Emily had painstakingly planted and tended behind their house, and he was furious. Emily trying to calm him down only made him more mad and...and he phased right then. Emily was too close and between the phase and his rage...she didn't survive," Bella gasped. She couldn't imagine hurting her imprint, let alone killing her. Even by accident. Even when Rosalie had been attacking her, Bella wasn't even capable of really defending herself. How could Sam have done this, even accidentally? It was impossible to imagine and, she realized, impossible to experience. Sam's constant rage and seeming instability made sense now, and Bella couldn't believe he was even still alive. "After that, I think he resented me for still being alive." Leah's eyes flicked to Paul, "Maybe all of us. And I think it was the fact that you, Paul, imprinted at all that made Sam say you couldn't come back, not the fact your imprint is a vampire. I think he's jealous."

When Leah fell silent, Bella shot her a questioning glance, "How long ago did this happen? With Emily, I mean."

Leah winced. "Eight months ago." Bella sucked in a hard breath, feeling alarmed. While she wasn't an expert by any means on imprints, going eight months without hers and knowing she killed her would be enough to drive her mad. The situation with Sam suddenly felt even more serious. A sudden knock on the front door cut off further discussion abruptly and the two shifters jumped in response. Bella waved them back into their chairs. "Stay here, I've got this."

Getting up, Bella hurried to the front door. Who could possibly be here at this time? Anyone looking for Charlie would know to go to the station, and anyone looking for her... Well, they ought to know
by now that she'd be in school. Of course, she reasoned as she rested a hand on the doorknob, her truck was right outside. Swinging the door open, a surprised gasp escaped her. Before her was a familiar woman, tall and lean, around Charlie's age. Her long black hair and warm brown eyes reminded her keenly of a wolf sitting in her kitchen. "Joanne, you're here!"

Like a shot she felt Paul race out of the kitchen as fast as his legs would carry him, chair knocked over in the process. Swiftly the Alpha stepped out of the way of her packmate, and Paul came to a rocking stop in the doorway. Both Lahotes were quiet a moment, and then Paul lurched forward into his mother's embrace. Bella politely backed away to let them have their reunion. She was very curious to know how Joanne had gotten here, and what her experience had been talking with Billy Black and the Council, but that could wait a few minutes.

Bella returned to the kitchen and sat with Leah. She could tell by the broad smile on Leah's face that the shifter knew who was here, so she didn't say anything. They waited in companionable silence until Paul and Joanne walked into the kitchen. Smiles adorned both faces and Bella felt warm. This was the best thing that could have happened, she thought. Glancing at Paul's mom, she had to admit to herself that Joanne did not look like she could be old enough to be Paul's mom. Her hair was a beautiful, shiny black without even a hint of grey, and her lovely, coppery skin was unblemished. Only fine wrinkles at the corners of her warm, kind eyes and slightly defined laugh lines by her mouth betrayed that she was older than she looked. She was, simply, beautiful. She was suddenly startled when Joanne's previously gentle eyes fixed on her with surprising intensity. Bella sat up straighter.

"Thank you," said Paul's mom, "For what you've done for my son." Bella's eyes widened in surprise. Joanne glanced at Leah briefly and the intensity lessened a little as she smiled. "And for Leah." A swallow lodged in her throat when Joanne met her gaze again, and Bella tried not to choke. She hadn't thought Paul's mom would be upset with her exactly, but she didn't think the woman would thank her either. Relief seeped through her, and the feeling was so unexpected and pulled along with it so much emotion that all at once the she-wolf found herself with tears streaming down her face.

Paul was instantly at her side, "Bella?" Concern rang in his voice, and it was almost too much. Leah was there too, and Bella could sense her uncertainty even as she tried to get a handle on her emotions. She turned to look at Paul helplessly, unable to stop.

Joanne seemed of the four of them the only one who understood what had happened, and what to do. "Alright," she said, her low voice warm and gentle. "Why don't you both leave your Alpha with me for a little while." When Paul and Leah snapped conflicted looking gazes at her she added, "She'll be okay." Only after Bella managed a nod, did the pair reluctantly leave. Joanne pulled up the chair Leah had recently vacated and sat in front of Bella slowly. With non-threatening, controlled movements she reached out and gathered the Alpha's hands in her own. Bella bowed her head in response, eyes screwed tight in an effort to stem the tide. Even her wolf side felt overwhelmed currently.

"Bella." Came Joanne's voice. Bella couldn't help associating it with baking cookies on a cold night, stories told as she was tucked in, and a kiss goodnight. With a safe den and fresh milk, a soft and warm body curled around her...and a steady, reassuring heartbeat beneath her ear. She couldn't help associating Joanne's voice with the jumbled concept in her mind of "mother". More tears slipped out. What was happening to her? Why now? Her emotions felt all over the place, and it was a struggle to hold back the building sob. "Bella." She said again. "I know it's been hard. I'm sure you've been worried about what to do, and how to do it. It can't be easy to go from being on your own, to caring for two people." Joanne's words struck a cord in Bella, and she opened her eyes, the green shining brightly through the film of tears. "But you have done a wonderful job. This is the first time, ever,
that I have seen my son look so calm. I've only been here a few minutes but I see the change. For the first time since this change came over him, I can tell that he feels \textit{safe}." Bella was shaking her head, but Joanne placed a hand on her cheek to stop her.

"You can say Bella, that you don't know what you did, that it wasn't you...but it was. Even if you don't know how, it was you. And I can only be grateful. So don't worry too much. You are a good Alpha." She finished by stroking Bella's hair once, giving it a fond tug at the end that had Bella smiling despite herself. Something inside felt infinitely better, and she wiped her tears away more successfully this time.

"Thank you Joanne." She managed through a shaky whisper. That had been something she needed to hear. The older woman nodded and smiled, sitting back to give the wolf space to recover. She supposed the events of the past couple weeks had caught up with her all at once. Gratitude that Joanne had been here when it happened flooded through her.

When it looked like Bella had gotten a hold of herself, Joanne's countenance darkened. "Now, I do have some things to tell you, if you're ready to hear them."

Bella listened in silence as Joanne related the goings on at La Push to her. She didn't stop to interrupt, and the only outward display of emotion she made was when Joanne related that the Council of Elders had denied her request to allow Paul to come home, citing that it was Sam's decision as pack Alpha. The skin around her eyes tightened in anger.

"Bella," Joanne continued, "I think the Elders were scared. Everyone knows that he isn't right anymore, not after Emily, but no one is brave enough to talk to him. Not with his mood swings, and his temper. He has been more and more aggressive with regular humans now too, as has the pack."

The Alpha quickly met Joanne's gaze, "Jake?" She questioned, concern evident in her tone.

The first smile Bella had seen on the older woman's face in over an hour touched her lips, and something like hope lit in her eyes. "Jake is our hope. He is the only one who has been capable of challenging Sam, though so far he hasn't been successful." A grimace marred the smile, and Bella felt an instant flutter of worry for her old friend. "We are all hoping Jake is able to take over the pack, and return it to the old way. For now though, everyone walks on eggshells."

A sigh escaped the she-wolf, and she suddenly felt tired. A sense of foreboding hung over the room, and she couldn't shake the sense that this conflict would not end well. "Thank you for bringing us this information," she said finally, "We should fill in Paul and Leah now, I think. And I'm sure Leah will want news of her mother and brother." Bella paused and glanced at Joanne sharply. "Does Sam know you're here?" The mother shrugged, and something like steel flashed in those kind eyes.

"I don't know, and I don't care. I'm here for my son. I got a room in town so that I can be near him until this is over."

Respect welled in Bella at the other woman's words, and she bowed her head in acceptance. This was a mother as fierce as any, willing to risk the wrath of an angry, possibly insane wolf shifter, for her child.

Soon after Bella and Joanne had relayed the information to Paul and Leah, the female shifter's eyes drifted to the clock and widened in surprise. It was already full afternoon.

"Bella, don't forget about your date tonight." Leah frowned. "I'm surprised your imprint wasn't worried when you didn't show up at school."
Bella’s eyes widened in shock as she remembered that today was Friday, and tonight was to be her first (hopefully first of many) date with Rosalie. "Crap." She muttered, leaving the kitchen and heading out into the living room. How could she have let herself forget again? Pack problems was how, a little voice in her head replied. When she had imprinted, every waking moment was spent with thoughts of the beautiful vampire and her desire to get closer to her. While those feelings were just as strong now, what she also had now that she didn't before was an obligation to care for her pack that she felt deep in her soul. She still bemoaned the fact that she could have lost track of Rosalie in today's mess. Glancing at the front window, she sighed in relief. It was bright and sunny out still—probably why none of the Cullens had come looking for her when she hadn't gone to school today. They wouldn't be there either.

The sound of sirens split the air.

Bella's heart immediately leaped into her throat as tires squealed down the pavement and she saw her father's cruiser skid into the drive. Fear flooded her for a moment before she saw the familiar figure of her father jump out after no doubt slamming the car into park. He sprinted to the door and threw it open, startled to find Bella standing near the threshold. He wiped the surprise off his face however, and she could see how serious this was. His worry and slight fear rolled off of him, and Bella's sense of alarm rose again. "Dad, what's going on?"

Chief Swan looked at her gravely, and she noted his unshaven face and the dark circles under his eyes. "I need you to come and look at a body. Dr. Cullen is on his way too."

Shock jolted through her at his words. A body? Charlie had never been one to beat around the bush, but of all the things he could have said... Her eyes widened as her own fear flooded through her. "Why do I need to look at it?" Her voice sounded small to her own ears, and, in annoyance, she forced herself to feel more grounded than she did. "Is it... is it someone I know?" Her heart pounded loudly in her ears and she swallowed heavily, trying to prepare herself for the worst. Vaguely she noted that Paul and Leah had appeared at her side, and she was sure Joanne was behind her now too.

Charlie's expression immediately softened and he reached out to place a hand on her shoulder. "No - no, God no. I'm sorry, that's not what I meant." He rubbed a tired hand over his face. "The method of murder has me concerned, and I need your keen senses. I need you to come now." His gaze strayed from her to the two silent shifters behind her. "It's up to you if you bring... your pack." Bella hesitated, and glanced back at them. She looked at Joanne, and thought for now it would be best if they stayed behind. She didn't want to expose them to this if she could avoid it, and Leah still hadn't heard about her family.

"Stay here. I'll call if I need you." Leah and Paul nodded gravely at her, though she felt a flicker of worry from Paul in her direction, which she soothed with a reassuring smile. Turning back to Charlie, she nodded at his cruiser. "Let's go."

Sitting silently in Charlie's cruiser as he raced towards the crime scene, she wondered ruefully if she would ever get the chance to have that date with Rosalie tonight. She let herself dwell on thoughts of her imprint, memories of Rosalie's beautiful form by her bedside was comforting.

"We'll talk about you ditching school later." Charlie belatedly added, and Bella was suddenly reminded that she really was supposed to be in school at this time - or nearly, school would be out now. "I'm glad you were at home," his knuckles tightened on the steering wheel as he resolutely faced forward. Worry began to spread through Bella again. "I really don't know what to think on this one, Bella." The young Alpha could tell it was hard for her father to admit that he might need her help, and she could see the stress lines etched deeply into his face. Whatever was going on, it was bad. Reaching over, Bella placed a hand on his arm and squeezed.
"I'll help any way I can." She said, and Charlie smiled faintly. After a moment, his hand came to rest on top of Bella's.

"I know. Thank you."

A more comfortable silence fell over the pair, and Bella said still until the cruiser began to slow down. Looking around, Bella recognized the boat launch, and there was a familiar Mercedes parked in the gravel lot along with two other Forks PD cruisers. As Charlie pulled up, the door to the Mercedes opened and Carlisle Cullen stepped out. Bella immediately glanced up and was relieved that between the new cloud cover and trees, there was no direct sunlight to be had. Still, Carlisle was wearing a hat, and she saw a pair of shades hooked into his shirt front. He also had on long sleeves and pants, both of which would help in the event of a sudden cloud shift. She guessed living for several centuries would give a person at least a few tricks.

Charlie got out of the cruiser and headed right for Carlisle, hand extended. "Dr. Cullen," she could hear him say as she scrambled to get out of the cruiser as well, "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

Carlisle was responding as Bella arrived. "Please, call me Carlisle. I hope that I can help, I am always at your service, Chief Swan." The vampire's warm, golden gaze swept over Bella and with a faint flush she realized she probably didn't look very put together. She was wearing the same clothes she'd changed into the day before, and was now painfully aware of the fact that she hadn't bothered to brush her hair. With a wince, she figured that she probably looked more like a feral werewolf now than the Faoladh she was. But Carlisle wasn't looking at her hair. His eyes were fastened on her shoulder with a look of concern. For a moment Bella was confused, and then a light twinge of pain reminded her of her injuries the day before. She shot a quick look at Charlie and whispered far lower than her father could hear,

"Please don't say anything. I'm fine, he has enough to worry about."

She saw the frown on Carlisle's face grow the littlest bit before he turned back to Charlie to let him lead the way to the body. Somehow, she knew the issue of her shoulder was far from over.

Green/gold eyes appraised the small, makeshift shelter building they were heading toward. Forks didn't have a true marina exactly, but there was a dock and a little roofing over the dock for people who kept their boats there. The same feeling of foreboding she'd felt before swept over her as they approached one boat in particular - a boat she recognized. A strangled sound escaped her throat as they got closer, and Charlie stopped and turned back to her. There was a briefly anguished expression on his face before he managed to school it. "It's Waylon." He said, and Bella felt a shudder pass through her. Waylon was one of her father's best friends. He worked - had worked - as a police officer with her father for decades. While Bella hadn't known him nearly as well as her father, due largely to her father keeping her well away from other humans over the years until she could control her changes, she now understood why her father had seemed so off kilter before. And for her, Waylon was like extended family. She sucked in a hard breath, feeling Carlisle's sympathetic eyes on her, and marched forward. There had already been enough tears today, she told herself. Now was the time to act - she would help her father get to the bottom of this. A faint growl escaped her before she could stifle it. And there would be justice for Waylon.

Charlie finished leading them over to the boat, and waved the forensics guy away so that she and Carlisle would have no one to witness their observation but Charlie. Bella's eyes fastened on the corpse of her father's friend, and she allowed the wolf in to keep herself a little more detached. She appraised the body carefully, noting the tearing of the flesh, but the curious absence of blood... Her nostrils suddenly flared and her head snapped around to look at Carlisle to see what he had already concluded. Vampires. Her eyes flicked up to Charlie. "Vampires." She said quietly, so the other
officers wouldn't hear.

A tremor passed through Charlie’s body and he closed his eyes for a few moments. Vampire and faoladh waited patiently until he opened them again. Charlie first focused his eyes on Carlisle. "Like you?" Carlisle shook his head.

"No. These vampires smell...feral. Human blood drinkers, probably nomads. If you ever were to see them in person Chief Swan, you would not doubt them for what they are: predators, monsters." Carlisle's voice came serious, grave. Bella had never heard him speak thus before. "They will have red eyes, unless they are wearing contacts. Contacts dissolve in our eyes after a time, but we can use them. Their clothes will likely look strange, maybe outdated or mismatched." Carlisle's eyes flashed intensely. "Chief Swan, I know you have a crime to solve and justice to be done, but these criminals are beyond what you and your men can handle. My coven and I will take responsibility."

Bella interrupted, "And my pack will help too. I'm sure that we could even get Sam on board, if it meant hunting vampires. Especially ones who are actually a threat to the human population." Her hackles rose at the thought, and she fought the urge to start the hunt right then and there.

Charlie's shoulders slumped. "I thought you both might say that. We found two hikers in the woods killed just like this last week. My deputies thought it was a bear, but a bear would have eaten part of the bodies, and there would have been more blood. There also likely would have been dirt ground into the wounds." He gestured helplessly at his friend, unable to actually look at him. "And who has ever heard of a bear attacking a man on a boat? I was afraid something like this might be going on." Looking at both Carlisle and Bella gravely, he reached into his pocket and pulled out two deputy badges. "Alright then. In the interest of preserving something like the semblance of the law, I hereby temporarily deputize both of you, as is my right as Chief. If you both accept the duties and responsibilities that come with being deputies, I will release you both to pursue the culprits." Bella was surprised, but gave her assent, as did Carlisle.

"Please keep me in the loop." His eyes lingered on Bella. "And please, be safe." She nodded in response.

"If it's alright then, I'll take Bella with me and we'll get started." Carlisle said, pocketing his badge. Charlie waved them off and turned to call back the forensics man and the coroner to come and take the body. Bella followed Carlisle, and paused at his car.

"Could we swing back by my house to pick up my packmates? I'd like to shower and change too, if there's time." Carlisle met her gaze for a moment before the corner of his mouth lifted in a little smile. "Certainly, as long as you also allow me a moment to look at that shoulder." Bella groaned but agreed and got into the car.

Back at her house, Bella quickly filled in Paul, Leah, and Joanne on the goings on at the dock while she divested herself of her shirt and allowed Carlisle to look at the bandage and wraps she'd applied to the claw marks in her shoulder. He had removed them carefully and tsked under his breath. "Bella, I would expect a police chief's daughter to be a little better at first aid." He admonished when she had finished relating what she had seen to the others.

Bella frowned and resisted the urge to shrug. "I thought I did well enough. And it's not like I'm used to getting hurt this often! Jeez, I've bled more in the last week and a half than in the rest of my life combined." That was mostly accurate, she thought, not including the time she'd been dying back when Charlie first found her. Carlisle just shook his head and cleaned out the still oozing wounds carefully. They had started to heal up, but the sections that hadn't become new, pink and red scar
tissue were still open and bleeding slowly. Bella growled when Carlisle applied a little more pressure than she was comfortable with, and she gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry."

He flashed her a smile. "That is okay. So...tell me. How did you acquire these? They are going to leave quite magnificent scars, if I do say so myself." He placed a light bandage to the side and gave Bella a tap to let her know she could go shower now.

Leah flushed and Bella smirked at her. "Well, our newest member here had the brilliant idea to try and force me into breaking her bond with Sam the same way I did Paul's. I came out a little worse for wear." Leah ducked her head, abashed, until Bella chucked her on the shoulder.

"It's alright though. I got a new packmate out of it, and these will heal." The female's shifter's head came up slowly and she offered her Alpha a shy smile of gratitude. Carlisle watched them thoughtfully. Bella turned and hurried upstairs to get her shower in and find some fresh clothes.

Ten minutes later, Bella was back downstairs with a pair of jeans on, boots, and another plain t-shirt. This one plain black in case blood seeped through her bandage. Carlisle applied the light bandage he had set aside when she returned, and Bella raised a questioning eyebrow. "That's all I need?"

Carlisle smiled wryly. "You don't think Rosalie is going to let a bandage stop her from seeing your wound with her own eyes? You might want to bring an extra shirt too, just in case. My daughter can be...a little dramatic." His eyes drifted to Leah and came back to rest on Bella. "And while I wouldn't suggest lying to my daughter, be very careful how you tell her what happened." Bella's eyes widened and she worried. Would Rosalie really care that Bella had sustained these wounds? They weren't exactly life threatening or that concerning, like the wounds she had received from Sam. She still wasn't certain Rosalie felt the same connection to Bella, that Bella felt to the vampire. A silent thrill went through her at the thought of Rosalie being concerned for her well being. Her eyes strayed to Leah then, and she worried. She wouldn't let Rosalie hurt Leah over this, she knew, but she worried about her ability to stop her. After all, she hadn't been able to even defend herself before. Something inside told her that this would be different.

Giving herself a shake, she looked to Paul and Leah and gave a nod when she received their non-verbal affirmations that they were ready. Then she turned to Carlisle. "We're ready." Together they followed the old vampire out of the house, Joanne staying behind.

Getting into the car, Bella suddenly felt Leah's uneasiness at being bombarded with vampire scent. Remembering how volatile Paul had been, Bella immediately sent soothing waves to Leah through their link to help keep her calm. Paul sat close beside her too, which helped. As they drove, Leah gradually relaxed from a state of hypertension. She had never exhibited anger problems on the same level as Paul, so maybe her worry was for nothing. Still, Bella gave Paul a look in the mirror and waited until he met her gaze before glancing at Leah once and giving him the silent message to help keep an eye on her during the visit. He gave a very subtle nod in return.

Carlisle turned onto the drive toward the Cullen house, and Bella felt her eyebrows lift in surprise to see all of the Cullens already outside of their house waiting for them as the trees cleared. The Cullen patriarch just smiled, "They must have heard your heartbeats. Or, perhaps Alice saw me coming." Bella's eyes were immediately drawn to the tall, blonde figure that was Rosalie. Her heart rate sped up, and she heard a snicker from behind her.

"Shut up Paul." She muttered, but her voice had no bite to it. Worry, anger, and fear from before melted away in the face of Bella's happiness at being near Rosalie again. Carlisle killed the engine and Bella was out of the car and a half dozen steps towards the vampire before her brain caught up with her and she stopped. Rosalie was looking at her with a veiled expression, but Bella felt she detected amusement and maybe satisfaction. Glancing at the other Cullens who were sporting large,
matching grins, Bella felt her face flush.

Emmett broke the silence. "Bella!" He ran over to her without reservation, his movements faster than a human eye could follow, and scooped her into his arms. Initially, Bella laughed. Leah had gotten out of the car behind her and offered a growl at Emmett before Paul began explaining to her quickly that they were friends, and that Emmett wasn't attacking Bella. Bella was happy to let Paul handle it and wrestled around with Emmett for a few minutes. Somehow, he just had a way of making her feel better - lighter.

"Dude, I just saw you yesterday!" She grunted as she got him into a headlock. The big, childish vampire always acted like he hadn't seen her in years. Still, it was nice. Emmett was possibly her best friend, besides Jake. The vampire laughed in response.

"Alright you two, we need to get in the house and explain the situation to everyone," Carlisle voice wasn't exactly stern, and there was definitely laughter in it, but his order was clear. Bella released Emmett with a sigh. It had been a nice diversion, but Carlisle was right that they needed to spell out the situation for everyone else now. The big man wasn't quite through yet though, and let out a delighted yell as he caught her off guard, his big hand coming down on her shoulder with the intention of knocking her over. It was a move she should have been able to dodge or deflect, but somehow he did knock her over, and a jolt of pain flashed through her. A yelp escaped her before she could stifle it, and Bella only just managed not to bring her hand to her shoulder and give it away. Even so, the damage was done.

Rosalie was beside her in an instant, holding out a hand to help her up. Her golden gaze was dark with concern. "Are you hurt?" She flashed an angry look at Emmett who stood looking confused that such a relatively light push had caused any pain. Bella grimaced - she probably shouldn't have been roughhousing with Emmett. Perhaps it was foolish to hope for, but Bella had thought that maybe, just maybe, she could get through this day without Rosalie finding out that she had been hurt...again. And by whom. A confrontation between her imprint and the newly joined female shifter in her pack was not something she wanted to deal with. Her pride hurt a little too - she didn't want Rosalie to think she was weak.

Letting the fingers of one hand curl in the soft grass, Bella reached up with the other to grasp Rosalie's. "I'm alright," she said, "Emmett just caught me off guard there - it was a fair move." She flashed Emmett a reassuring grin that quickly turned into a dopey smile when Rosalie's slender, cool hand took hers.

She and Rosalie were holding hands.

Spirits, stop! She berated herself silently as she let herself be pulled to her feet. Turning to mush every time her imprint was in her vicinity was getting silly. Still, her imprint was a hard woman to resist. Was it odd that a thought made her swell with pride? Straightening, Bella met Rosalie's eyes and felt her knees weaken, threatening to send her to the ground all over again. Spirits, stars, and moon above, Rosalie was easily the most breathtaking woman Bella had ever met. And she didn't think that impression would ever change.

For a moment, it was just Bella and Rosalie.

Rosalie looking up slightly to meet her gaze, with an expression of concern and, Bella dared hope, affection, and Bella returning her look with an open, innocent desire to remain close to the vampire. Rosalie lifted her hand, almost against her will it seemed, and rested it on Bella's shoulder. What would have happened had things been different, she would never know.

The spellbound atmosphere shattered when the she-wolf winced. The vampire immediately lifted her
hand with a frown, fine blonde eyebrows drawing down to dramatic effect over searing eyes that now stared hard at her shoulder. Rosalie reached up with both hands and ripped the fabric over her shoulder.

"Hey!" Bella exclaimed in annoyance. Carlisle had been more of a prophet than he knew when he told her to grab a spare shirt. With a start, Bella realized that Rosalie had just ripped her shirt open in front of everyone. The vampire was far more preoccupied with staring at the bandage on Bella's shoulder than acknowledging that she'd just bared the other woman to over half a dozen people. While Bella normally wasn't a shy sort, something about having her shirt torn partially off in public felt embarrassing, and she flushed. "Rosalie," she tried to get the vampire's attention. "Look, I'll explain, but can you not rip my shirt off in front of your whole family?" Rosalie blinked and looked at her family, half of Bella's shirt still held in one hand.

A piercing wolf whistle split the air, and Bella shot a withering glare at Emmett who was hooting and laughing now, and fist pumping like a maniac. "You get her Rose!" He laughed and made faces at them. Bella growled in annoyance, but Rosalie released a startling hiss that had Emmett hooting all the louder. Her vampire tensed, eyes suddenly black with anger as she turned toward Emmett and her other siblings who were smirking knowingly by now.

Bella reached out and took Rosalie's hand in her own, holding it tightly. "Come on, ignore them. We'll go around the side of the house and talk." Her voice was low, soothing. Her instinct was to reach out and put her arms around Rosalie's waist, assure her that Bella wasn't going anywhere, but a more logical part of her brain reminded her that Rosalie probably wasn't ready for that level of contact. Heck, she might not ever want it. Rosalie subsided somewhat, and Bella locked eyes on Carlisle.

"Sir, I think you should go ahead and fill everyone in on what's going on." Her eyes slid to her packmates, and she silently requested that they stay with him. Paul's response was solid, while Leah's a little more unsteady. An extra glance at Paul had him nodding again that he would help keep an eye on Leah. "I'll tell Rosalie. But we need to start dealing with this now, before they hit again." Her serious tone of voice caught the attention of the other Cullens, even Emmett, who looked at her curiously. Carlisle agreed quickly and started ushering everyone into the house. By then Rosalie was tired of waiting, and was making use of Bella's hand in hers by pulling her, and almost dragging her, around the side of the house.

Once they were out of sight of the others, Rosalie immediately went back to inspecting Bella's shoulder. She lifted off Carlisle's bandage and released a hiss that contained either sympathy or anger, Bella couldn't tell. "What happened?" Rosalie's terse voice had Bella's eyebrow rising all on its own.

"An accident." This wasn't actually far from the truth, for Bella was certain Leah hadn't meant to actually hurt her. "In breaking Leah's bond with Sam so she could join my pack, we had a bit of a scuffle. I caught the sharp end of her claws." Bella shrugged. "It's not nearly as bad as when I got into my fight with Sam." Rosalie gave her a flat look and Bella shuffled uncomfortably. Clearly that comparison wasn't appreciated.

The beautiful vampire sighed and muttered something under her breath that Bella didn't quite catch. Even the furrows in her brow couldn't lessen her radiance.

"What was that?" Bella asked gently, uncertain if Rosalie had meant those words for her. The vampire hesitated and glanced up at Bella. "I said, that I don't like that my -" She cut herself off abruptly, and Bella watched in amazement as something very close to a blush appeared in Rosalie's cheeks. Those perfect lips tried again. "I don't like that you are so...breakable." Gold eyes flicked to
the side, discomfiture evident.

Bella wasn't sure how she felt about that admission. On the one hand, it was a nice change to know that Rosalie could and did worry about her. The prideful, wolf part of herself however didn't like that her imprint thought her weak.

"I wouldn't say 'breakable'." Bella said after a moment. She waited until Rosalie met her gaze once again, and her voice softened. "Look, this is new for me too. I'm used to healing pretty quickly," her shoulders lifted in a light shrug, "I guess I'm not used to being vulnerable at all, actually. Wounds from other creatures like me..." she paused a moment and jerked the opposite shoulder of her shirt down, revealing the silvery crescent scars left from the fangs of the very vampire in front of her, "...and creatures like you, tend to take longer to heal, I'm finding." She readjusted her shirt, and gathered up two perfect, elegant hands in her own. "But I do heal. It's fine."

When no response was forthcoming, Bella released the hands she was holding and took a half step back. "Now, I'm going to get my other shirt." As she turned away, gentle fingers fastened on her elbow, halting her movement.

Turning back, Bella said, "Hey, I'll be right -"

Cool lips silenced her words, and fingers slid up her arm, over her shoulder and into her hair. Heat flushed through Bella rapidly until she felt like she was burning inside, her heart pounding wildly in her chest and her lungs tight as her breathing stopped.

Could this really be happening?

Even before her mind caught up, her arms reached for Rosalie, drawing the other woman tight against her with fingers splayed wide across her back. A gasp escaped her when Rosalie's other hand snaked up her side until those fingers, too, were tangled in her hair, pulling her tighter, closer, and then their lips were meeting again. For all that Rosalie Hale appeared to be made of marble at times, her lips were soft and pliable beneath the she-wolf's, the taste of them sweeter than honey. A pleased sound escaped Rosalie as Bella pulled her in still tighter, and Bella echoed the sentiment - it wasn't often she could exert her full strength. Before Rosalie, Bella had imagined having a lover would be difficult because she would have to work to be gentle. Humans were, after all, fragile. A memory of Rosalie calling her breakable surged through her, and Bella wanted so desperately then to show her mate that she was anything but.

Having Rosalie in her arms this way, in reality, was beyond fathoming. She imagined heat was coming off of her in waves. Could Rosalie feel it?

Something tickled the back of her mind, but Bella brushed it aside and focused on ravishing the lips currently capturing her own.

A stray thought bothered her again, and she flicked it away in irritation. Why couldn't she be allowed to focus on Rosalie?

She was just contemplating lifting the vampire in her arms and pressing her back into the house beside them when a sudden dose of reality crashed over her like a bucket of icy water. Startled, she pulled her lips back from Rosalie's to catch her breath and as the haze of happy desire lifted, she realized that Paul had been trying to get her attention. He had forced the connection between them wide and was pushing through wave after wave of feeling - frustration, irritation, anxiety and a myriad of other things coming so fast Bella couldn't identify them. Bowing her head under the weight of them, a growl escaped her. "Alright Paul, enough! I hear you." Immediately the flood ceased with just a hint of apology left behind. Bella was beyond irritated to have been interrupted,
but Paul was right. They had important things to discuss. As over the moon as Bella was that Rosalie reciprocated her affections, she needed to fill her in on what was going on.

Rosalie's golden eyes looked on with a touch of hurt and confusion. Bella quickly dipped in to kiss her again, briefly. "Rosalie," her imprint's name came out sounding more husky than she'd intended, but she couldn't help it. "You have no idea how much I want to keep kissing you." Rosalie smiled a little, which Bella quickly returned.

"I'm glad," she said, and Bella was gratified to hear that her voice a little smokier than usual, "I would have been disappointed otherwise." Bella nodded.

"But I did come with a purpose," she winced, "and it wasn't for our date." She really wished it had been for their date. Rosalie's countenance darkened, but her eyes shone only with concern. Letting her arms slip from around the vampire, Bella reached for her hand. "Come on, I'll explain everything while I get my other shirt from Carlisle's car." Frowning, Rosalie followed.

"Alright, I'll hear what you have to say," she said, with a touch of the haughtiness Bella had become so familiar with, "But so help me, Bella Swan, we will have our date." A faint smile curved Bella's lips despite knowing that their date probably wouldn't happen that night or the next, and that the situation they would soon be in was a dangerous one. Yes, she thought, we definitely will have our date.

So focused on one another were they, that the three pairs of red eyes watching them from the depths of the forest went unnoticed. It helped that the wind was in the favor of these interlopers too, but, even more importantly, their coven leader was a hunter. And a hunter would never allow themselves to be seen by prey. At least, not until death was imminent.
New Eyes, Warnings, and Truces

Chapter Notes

Greye's Notes: Hey guys, I know it has been a long time. I'm sorry! My job has kept me thoroughly occupied these past couple months. I only had time to add a little here and there. I hope you enjoy this chapter! I know many of you have been wondering about Seth and Jake, so a little something for you there. I have also had many people request something from Rosalie's perspective! Let me tell you, that was WAY harder to do than I had thought. Rosalie...well, she's a tough nut to crack! Let me know how I did there, and if you would like me to do it again sometime in the future.

Thank you, thank you to my lovely commenters! I appreciate your words of encouragement, I am so glad you like my work. I hope that continues to be the case! I also appreciate all of the kudos! You guys are amazing.

As always, many thanks to my dear sister Lady_Lullaby, who did her best to help keep me on the straight and narrow with this chapter.

Last Time: The Swan Pack has added a new member in Leah Clearwater, and Bella learns a little about what life was like having Sam Uley for an Alpha. She also gets a peek into Sam's past - his instability now makes sense after learning that he accidentally killed his imprint. Joanne, Paul's mother, makes an appearance and commends Bella for helping her son and soon after Charlie arrives with sirens blaring and tires squealing. His friend Waylon was murdered, and he requests Bella's help to identify the creature that did it. Bella investigates the body with Carlisle and they both come to the conclusion that red-eyed vampires are responsible. Charlie deputizes them so that they can officially help with the case, and then everyone sans Charlie and Joanne heads back to the Cullen house to debrief the others. Some rough-housing with Emmett reveals that Bella's been injured again, much to Rosalie's intense displeasure, but talking around the side of the house leads to a toe-curling kiss. Now we find our heroes making a plan to deal with the nomadic vampires...

Rosalie's face hardened as Bella related what she and Carlisle had seen at the dock. Feral vampires were a very real threat, and one her faoladh was not equipped to handle - at least not yet. Fury built inside her at the thought of these feral, uncivilized, barbarians coming after Bella. She would destroy them. Her focus on the issue suddenly wavered as Bella began to pull on the spare shirt she'd left in Carlisle's car. Powerful muscles flexed in her back, marred only by the curving claw marks left by Leah, and as Bella began to turn she was rewarded with a flash of smooth bronzed skin sheathing lightly defined abs. Rosalie sucked in a breath, and ran a tongue over lips that somehow felt swollen.

As if she had blood running through her veins again.

Well, she kind of did have blood running in her veins. Sort of. While the heart didn't beat anymore, there was venom in the body that was very much alive and anytime a vampire was angry or scared, it might seem, and feel, like there was blood running through their veins. She could feel it now, looking at Bella. She was beautiful in a rough, wild kind of way that drove Rosalie to distraction. Everything about Bella made her feel electrified. Which was infuriating. Not having control over her own emotions was frustrating on a level Rosalie had never encountered before. She wanted to be near Bella, to hear her voice, to touch her - and yet, she wanted, needed, to feel like she had a choice.
Rosalie had fought that pull with everything she had, even hurting Bella in the process, she knew. Losing control...was not something Rosalie Hale knew how to do.

Bella caught her staring and lifted an eyebrow. "Everything alright?" The rich, warm timbre of her voice wrapped around the vampire like a cocoon; the comfort and concern Bella exuded in almost everything she did was something Rosalie hadn't known she craved. Crushing those feelings, she retreated back into herself, eyes darkening.

"I'm fine." Her own voice came out more clipped than she'd intended, and she winced mentally at the hurt behind Bella's eyes. There was a loaded pause between them, and Rosalie inwardly groaned at her inability to deal with Bella. It was no wonder the faoladh was hurt; Rosalie had just kissed her a moment ago. And what a kiss. Rosalie pushed that thought down before she became distracted again, annoyed with herself. She hadn't been able to help it, before. The overwhelming need to be close to Bella, really close, had taken over and she had pulled the wolf back into her arms for a kiss before she'd had time to decide against that idea. The sheer level of need inside terrified her; she refused to be beholden to anyone. Even if that person made her non-existent pulse race every time she was near.

"Well," Bella said finally, uncertainty clear, "We should go inside. The others will all know what's going on by now, and we will need to develop a plan of action." Rosalie just nodded, and fell into step with Bella back to the house. The silence remained unbroken until they made it into the Cullen's living room where everyone was gathered.

Rosalie observed as Bella immediately zeroed in on her pack mates: Paul and Leah were sitting together on a couch, Paul situated so that he was between Leah and the vampires in the room. She raised an eyebrow curiously. It looked like he was doing so more to protect the vampires than Leah. That was an interesting development. Her gaze flicked back to Bella and she watched the silent exchange between them, noting the smoothing of worry lines on her faoladh's face as whatever they said seemed to be agreeable.

Next she sought out her coven leader, Carlisle. He was waiting patiently for Bella to finish her silent communication. Seeing him brought an unexpected rush of affection. Carlisle had always been so accepting of others, and he had made room in the family for Bella and her pack without batting an eye. He really was a remarkable man, she thought, not for the first time wondering if she deserved his kindness. The Cullen patriarch turned to look at her then, and he smiled warmly at her. Despite herself, Rosalie felt the corner of her lip curling faintly in return.

"So everyone knows?" Bella's voice broke the silence. The question was unneeded, and yet it was one of those unavoidable quirks of humanity: asking the obvious. When nods were made all around, Bella continued. "We don't have a description of these, nomads? Is that what you called them Carlisle?" A pause while Carlisle nods in the affirmative, "There were three distinct scents at the scene, so we're dealing with a group. It would be great if we could narrow down suspects, so I wondered if anyone here might be familiar with a trio like this one. Maybe their M.O. seems familiar?" Listening to Bella's voice, strong and sure, was something Rosalie knew she could do all day, every day.

Paul snorted, but it was a good-natured sound. When Bella shot him a suspicious look, he held up his hands with a grin, "Next thing we'll be calling you Chief Bella. 'Suspects'? 'M.O.'? I didn't know you were looking to follow in Charlie's footsteps!" The shifter laughed as did Emmett, but Bella just frowned as if mulling over his words. Rosalie guessed she had used those terms like it was second nature. Suddenly a frown was developing on her face too as she imagined Bella becoming a police officer. She didn't think she could handle Bella having a job that put her in danger all the time.
At last, Carisle cleared his throat, and every eye turned to him. "Now, Bella makes a good point. Though we have lived much of our lives together, we have each spent time apart. Do the actions of this group seem at all familiar?" Each vampire clearly took the question seriously, as did Rosalie herself.

She had not encountered many nomads on her travels, but then, she had always taken great pains to avoid meeting anyone. Red-eyed vampires in general? No, she wasn't acquainted with any. She heard similar responses from the others. Rosalie glanced around the faces of her family, and was unsurprised to see Jasper thinking the hardest. He had spent time with a newborn army once upon a time, after all. And he was the most recent of them to have tasted human blood. If any of them knew, or knew of, these nomads, it would most likely be him. Finally, he shook his head.

"No," came his soft voice, "I don't know any of this type. I have known many killers, but none who behave this way." Regret showed on his face, and there was a look of torment in his eyes. Rosalie felt for Jasper, she really did. A more kindhearted soul she had never met; he didn't deserve to be haunted by such a grim, bloody past. Her sister slipped her small hand into his, and he flashed her a grateful smile. A stab of jealousy struck Rosalie, watching them, watching how easy it was, how simple. She immediately hated herself for thinking that way, shame rising up to quench the green flames. Alice and Jasper deserved happiness, she reminded herself sternly.

"That's alright Jasper," Carlisle said steadily, "It was worth a try." The coven leader turned to Bella. "Alright then." He clasped his hands behind his back, face serious. "Nomads typically do not strike more than once in the same place. They want to avoid attention, but they also normally travel constantly. One death could be understood, as they were passing through, but two, and the manner in which the second was executed, speaks to something else." His eyes lingered on Bella, who nodded in grim agreement. Rosalie frowned, disturbed that Bella had been drawn into something so gruesome. Prior to this, she suspected, Bella had never encountered other supernatural beings or murder. She worried what something like this would do to the faoladh, and wished she could shield her in some way.

"Carlisle," Bella's voice startled Rosalie, its normally warm tones now laced with steel, "I think we should track them. We can send a warning to La Push, and then break ourselves up into two groups. Trackers, and those staying behind to patrol the town and keep an eye on people." Carlisle regarded Bella silently for a few moments, mulling over her suggestion.

Eventually, he nodded. "I agree Bella," he hesitated, eyes troubled, "But I really would rather not risk fighting them, if we can avoid it. Best just to persuade them to leave, so no one else gets hurt." Rosalie could almost feel the disagreement coming from Bella, but her mate wasn't nearly as impulsive as the Quileute wolves. She bit back her words and nodded, showing respect for Carlisle's knowledge and experience.

As they continued to talk strategy and decide who would do what, Rosalie realized that she had begun thinking of Bella as her mate. The feeling had been there since their first encounter in the woods, and now that she had gradually allowed more and more time with Bella...things were changing. Her expression darkened visibly, and she could feel Bella's distress at her change, though the faoladh said nothing.

Abruptly, Rosalie turned and left the room and the conversation. She couldn't handle this right now. Bella was not now, nor could she ever be, Rosalie's mate. The kiss before had been a mistake, an act of desperation that could not be repeated. Before Bella had time to catch up with her, Rosalie put on a burst of speed and fled the house and even the Cullen land. Her eyes were black as conflicting emotions roiled within her. Want, need, desire, love versus denial, anger, and self-loathing. Rosalie's "plans" such as they were, had never included a mate.
She couldn't have mate.

Not after Royce.

Memories of her once fiancé rose up despite her desperate attempts to keep them down. Venom pooled uselessly at the corners of her eyes where tears should have been and, once she was a safe enough distance away from the house, she screamed her frustration and pain to the heavens. As always, there was no answer.

Bella stared in bewilderment after Rosalie, perplexed by her sudden departure. She could feel...something. Something was off. It was odd, like a detached feeling lingering outside of her own body. Her frown deepened as she tried to grasp it, understand it, but beyond the vaguest sensation of hurt, she could glean nothing. Soon, the feeling faded. Her first instinct was to go after Rosalie - she wanted to find out what was causing her mate distress, both parts of her were in sync on that point. However... Resolutely, she turned back to the assembled vampires and her pack.

As much as she wanted to go after Rosalie, this needed to be taken care of first. And she wasn't entirely sure Rosalie would welcome her presence right now. She met Paul's sympathetic gaze and smiled joylessly before resuming her discussion with Carlisle. The coven leader's eyes conveyed kindness, but he didn't remark on his daughter's absence. A fact for which Bella was grateful. She was already distracted enough.

"Bella," Carlisle said, "I think it prudent for your pack to remain in town, patrolling. We will scour the forests looking to make contact with these nomads." Bella began to protest, but subsided at a gently chiding look from Carlisle. Folding her arms, she waited for him to finish. "We are of the same species, it might be easiest for us to talk to them without the threat of violence and simply ask them to leave."

She saw the merit of his words, she really did, but the idea of letting murderers escape galled her. Looking away from Carlisle for a moment, she locked eyes with her pack mates. She could feel Leah bristling with outrage, and she didn't blame her. Even Paul looked disquieted, a little of his former rebellious nature flashing in his eyes. Closing her eyes, she took in a calming breath. As much as she wanted to go after these murdering creatures herself, she knew logically that would be a bad idea. Her pack only had three members, and there were three of these nomads. Already not great odds, considering Bella's track record with fights so far. It hurt her pride to admit, but she was not skilled enough to face the nomads if it came to a fight. And if she and her pack found them first, it most certainly would.

"Carlisle," Edward spoke up, his voice laced with disbelief. "You would really put us in harm's way?"

The coven leader frowned, staring hard at Edward. "I don't think of it as putting us in harm's way. We are all capable, skilled vampires, and this is our home. It is our duty to protect it." Edward didn't look done but Carlisle's expression became stern. "I would think you would understand that, Edward." Gritting his teeth, Edward subsided.

Her eyes had remained closed throughout this exchange, filing away further evidence of Edward's enmity, but now slid open and locked on Carlisle, who had been waiting patiently for her decision. "We are agreed." A growl rippled from the two wolves on the couch, and Bella shot them a stern look, quelling it instantly. She turned back to Carlisle. "With the stipulation that we will attack them if we see them in the town. We can only assume if we see them in town after three murders already that they are once again on the hunt." The doctor suddenly looked tired and sad, but he nodded. She felt the approval from her pack, and had to stop herself from rolling her eyes.
"Let's get started now Carlisle, the sooner they're found, the better. We will go alert the La Push pack." She didn't add her reservations about how that would go down, but turned and headed for the door. Paul and Leah hurried after her without prompting. Bella paused in the doorway and glanced back at the still-assembled vampires. Her eyes lingered over each and every one, even Edward who stood silently fuming in a corner of the room. "Please be safe."

Bella didn't speak to the others until they were sheathed in fur and deep in the woods, well on their way to the treaty line. Though sharing thoughts wasn't exactly the same in their pack as it was in La Push - they didn't have a kind of "hive mind" that didn't allow privacy - they could still communicate.

We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that Sam may attack us - me - again. She flashed a glance at the lean grey wolf keeping pace at her side. He will not be pleased that you have left. Leah's lip curled in a snarl in response, and Bella took that to mean Sam could basically shove it. Despite herself, she was amused.

A fight is not what we want, alright? Regardless of how we feel. We just need to inform them of the situation so they are on alert, and then back off. She felt a questing thought from Leah that the other she-wolf tried to prevent from crossing between them, but Bella caught the gist anyway and slowed their pace until all three wolves stood facing each other. Bella looked at Leah steadily. If your brother is there...we will see what can be done for him. Her paws ghosted across the ground between them until Bella was able to rest her muzzle lightly on Leah's shoulder, offering comfort and reassurance. Seth could of course have a place in her pack, if he wanted it. But she also did not want to get into another brawl with Sam, if she could avoid it. This would be a very tricky meeting, she thought.

Turning, she raced back into the woods. Best to get this over with.

At the treaty line, Bella stopped and scented the air. She didn't smell any of the La Push wolves nearby, and it didn't seem that any had passed this way recently. Casting her head up, Bella released a bone-jarring howl that echoed into the forest around them. She let the howl last as long as she had breath in her body, and then allowed it to cease. The small clearing she stood in rang with silence as the echo faded away. She hoped Sam would answer the call, or else she may have to risk sending Joanne, Paul's mother, back to La Push with the message.

After what felt like an hour, the sounds of approaching paws reached her sensitive ears and Bella felt a thrill of adrenaline race through her like lightning, gearing her up in case this wound up being a fight after all.

She saw the eyes first, and then a huge russet body burst through the trees, coming to a skidding stop a dozen feet from her or so. Warm brown eyes met hers and Bella felt her heart swell. Her jaw dropped open and her tongue lolled out in a wolf grin. Jake!

He came forward slowly, and she met him gladly. They exchanged smells and then Bella nuzzled into the ruff around his neck, the best she could do for a hug. He seemed all in one piece, and Bella was glad for it. Backing up, she rested back on her haunches and sent him a questioning look. Communication wasn't nearly as easy as it was between herself, Leah, and Paul, but he seemed to get the message. Jake backed into the trees for a moment, and she knew what he was doing. Backing up a little herself, she triggered her own change and quickly pulled on the shorts and t-shirt she'd had wrapped around her leg. Coming back out, she saw Jake waiting for her. Paul and Leah maintained positions to her right and left, and kept their fur on. Bella grinned broadly seeing Jake's more familiar form, and she hugged him fiercely.
"I'm so glad you're okay Jake." She said, voice somewhat muffled by his shoulder. She pulled away and saw him return her smile.

"Same, Bells. I heard that Sam tore you up pretty good," he slid his hands from her shoulders to her hands, holding them lightly, "But you seem okay now." Bella winced at Jake's mention of their fight, and shrugged.

"Yeah. I heal pretty quick." Her smile was lopsided, and they just grinned at one another for a good minute before Paul shuffling his feet behind her reminded Bella that she actually had a job to do. "Right." She dropped his hands and settled hers on her hips. "I'm actually here for a reason, and as much as I want to know how you're here now instead of Sam, this takes precedence."

Jake's expression immediately sobered and he frowned, eyes cautious and curious. "What's going on?" He asked.

Bella took a breath, hoping this wouldn't trigger Jake to change on the spot. "There are red-eyed vampires in Forks. They've killed three people. Two hikers, and Waylon, Charlie's old friend." Jake sucked in a breath, eyes almost as black as a vampire's the way his pupils expanded, but Bella plowed on. There was more he needed to know before he went off. "There are three of them. I smelled them where they found Waylon. The Cullens call them "nomads", but their behavior isn't typical, they said. Normally a nomadic vampire might make one kill in an area, and then move on. That's their way. The fact they have stuck around for a second attack, days after the first, is concerning."

Jake folded his arms angrily, and Bella could tell he was doing his damndest to keep a tight rein on his temper. "And why," he spoke through gritted teeth, "Are you just telling us this now?"

Bella's brow drew down as anger of her own spiraled up. Were she in wolf form, she knew her ruff would be raised. "I just found out myself today, wise ass. I didn't know about the hikers, but Charlie just showed me Waylon's body today because he was concerned about the method of murder." She folded her own arms and leaned in, voice hard. "And I went to the Cullens first because they haven't tried to start a war with me." She leaned back. "So you want to stop being angry at me?" She knew the whole war thing wasn't Jake's fault, but he didn't get to be upset with her over this.

Jake glared at her for a few moments before looking away. He took a few calming breaths and turned back to her. "Alright, sorry." He said finally, "But I will try to be more civil, for you." That was probably the best she'd get for now, so she bowed her head slightly in thanks.

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Jake glared at her for a few moments before looking away. He took a few calming breaths and turned back to her. "Alright, sorry." He said, and he did look suitable chastised. "I'm just a little wound up right now. Thank you for letting us know. We will increase patrols."

Bella nodded and relaxed her stance. That was better. "The Cullens are out looking for the nomads right now, trying to make contact. Paul, Leah, and I will be patrolling Forks in case they try another attack there."

Jake flinched at her use of the Cullens' name again, and her eyes flashed. "Like it or not Jake, the Cullens are allies in this particular fight. They don't hunt people, remember? And they want to keep living here, so getting rid of vampires like these nomads is in their best interest too. And in case you didn't hear already..." she took a deep breath, "my imprint is one of the Cullens. Rosalie Hale. So if we are to keep being friends..." she let out a distressed huff, "you have to try and give them a chance. Please." The idea that he would end their lifelong friendship over who her imprint happened to be was unthinkable. The pain that thought caused her was sharp and deep.

Her best friend did not look pleased, but he also didn't look surprised so she guessed he knew about Rosalie. "I can't promise to like them, Bella," he said finally, "But I will try to be more civil, for you." That was probably the best she'd get for now, so she bowed her head slightly in thanks.
"Ok," he said suddenly, "Things are changing over here, you should know." Jake looked significantly at Paul and Leah for a moment, as if trying to convey a secret message. "So keep an eye out, or an ear out." He glanced away for a moment and took in a breath. "The reason Sam's not here right now instead of me is because he is currently otherwise occupied. So I was able to come instead." He offered Bella a small smile. "And I'm glad I could." She felt warmed again for just a moment, as if it were old times. How she wished it were old times.

His smile faded as a howl rang in the distance. "I have to go," he said, "Stay safe." He turned to leap back into the trees, but Bella called him back.

"Wait!" she cried, and he paused. Bella stared at him, expression hard and borderline desperate. "Jake, you're my best friend. Not being able to see you...to know you're okay...is killing me." There had to be some way they could send messages or communicate at all. Anything was better than this silence. Jake opened his mouth to reply when the howl sounded again, and he grunted in frustration.

"I can't talk about this right now Bella," he said, voice becoming a growl. "I have to go." Jake completed the change and took off into the woods on the La Push side, his russet hide disappearing quickly as the trees swallowed him.

A deep, careworn sigh escaped the faoladh and she stared after her friend for a long minute. "You be safe too." She murmured, though only Paul and Leah could hear her. "Come on guys, let's go home and regroup." Instead of changing back right away, Bella chose to walk through the woods as human for a while. She wasn't keen to get home anyway, not just yet. There would be no escape from this frightening new reality they lived in if they made it straight back to the house. Going on patrol? She scoffed inwardly. Less than a month ago that thought wouldn't have crossed her mind, and further back yet she would never have considered putting herself in a position to be killed by powerful, supernatural creatures. All the same, here she was.

It was a couple of hours before the small Swan pack arrived back at Bella's house. As she had expected, Charlie's cruiser was no where in sight. She doubted she would see him again that night. Leah and Paul walked beside her, their bare human feet made little noise on the grass of her front lawn, and she remembered that she wanted to work with them on walking and running silently when they donned wolf skin. Maybe that was something they could work on while on "patrol".

She opened her mouth to voice the thought but shut it abruptly as a piercing cry split the air. Bella froze for a moment, eyes darting around for the source, and as the cry came again she realized it was coming from the backyard. Before she had even decided to investigate, Leah bolted from her side.

"Seth!" The name tore from the she-wolf's lips in a desperate, ragged cry and Bella's eyes widened and her heart sped up. Immediately she and Paul sprinted after her.

Coming around the side of the house, Bella gasped. Seth lay writhing on the ground in agony, his body twisted grotesquely, half human and half wolf - stuck. Blood oozed from split skin all across his body, and whimpers alternating with more human screams escaped him. Leah was on her knees next to him, and it was clear she wanted to touch him, but the knowledge that such a touch would only bring more pain stayed her hand. Bella was paralyzed as she took in the scene, only jolted into motion again when Paul grabbed her arm and dragged her forward.

Hysterical tears streamed down Leah's cheeks and her eyes were wild when she turned to Bella. "Please!" She screamed, her voice a strangled, desperate sob, "Do something!" Another cry of helpless frustration came from her throat, her hands coming up to twist in her hair.

"I -" Bella choked on her own words. What could she do? She had no idea what to do! Panic rippled
through her as another scream tore from Seth's lips and his body contorted unnaturally, the cracking of bones filling the area. Sobs escaped Leah as she crawled closer to her brother, trying to talk to him and calm him. Leah's feelings of panic and fear flooded into Bella, amplifying her own and she stood rooted to the spot staring in abject horror. She had never seen anything like this, never been witness to -

Paul suddenly blocked her line of sight, his hands grasping her biceps in a painful grip as he gave her a shake. "Bella! Come on, you have to do something. Only you can!" He shook her again, his face filling her vision. Bella forced herself to focus on him, though what he said next she missed as her mind still reeled.

"What -?" She gasped and felt Paul's fingers digging more painfully into her muscles. The pain grounded her. Staring at him with unabashed fear, she begged him wordlessly for an answer.

"It must be Sam," Paul's words came tumbling over each other in his rush, "Seth must have come here against his orders, and now he's trying to call him back. Seth is fighting it, and it's tearing him apart." Literally. The word went unspoken, but the young wolf's screams on the ground were evidence enough.

Bella took a breath and pushed past Paul, dropping down on Seth's other side. What could she do? She retreated into instinct, and realized that she would have to break his connection too. But how? She had never done it deliberately before. And time was running out she knew, as his thrashes weakened. Blocking out Seth's cries and his sister's sobs, Bella tried to latch onto the power inside, the power that made her an Alpha. Where was the connection she had used to sever the bonds of Paul and Leah?

Leaning over Seth, she tried to focus on pushing that power out towards him, looking for the invisible cord that bound him to Sam. She couldn't find it. Groaning in her own desperation, she groped inwardly searching, searching. "Come on!" She grunted in frustration. Damn it. She wasn't about to let Seth... Her mind recoiled from the thought immediately.

"Please Bella!" Leah screamed, and instinctively Bella reached out and grasped Seth's half-changed shoulders, blood making her hands slick. Seth howled in agony at the touch, it must have felt like every nerve ending was on fire tenfold.

The physical tether made it easier, and Bella could feel the internal strain Seth was experiencing. "Hang on." She muttered, though whether that was for Seth or herself, she wasn't sure. Concentrating, Bella gripped him tighter and yelled as she expelled her dominance in the most powerful wave she could must. "Break!" She yelled, her own voice coming out strangely high and hoarse, every vein in her neck and forehead bulged and she felt her own howl building as she struggled until finally she felt a snap.

All at once energy and strength drained from her and she slumped over, Seth's screams ceased and she felt more than saw his change complete, leaving a spent boy lying naked and bloody in the grass, chest heaving. Leah continued to cry as she gathered Seth into her arms and rocked him, and Bella felt the smallest twinge of relief coming from both her and Paul. Or maybe it was her own.

Bella let herself stretch fully onto the ground and closed her eyes, flinging an arm over them as she concentrated on getting her heart rate back under control. "Ok." She mumbled. "It'll be okay now." She wasn't sure whom she was speaking to, and she didn't care.

All four wolves remained there for several minutes, letting the adrenaline wind down. At last, it was Seth who broke the silence. His voice was exhausted and weak, but he managed, "Thank you." Leah hugged him tighter, and he was able to wrap his arms weakly around her in return.
"Here kid," Paul knelt beside brother and sister, a t-shirt and basketball shorts in his hands. Bella lifted her arm off of her eyes long enough to witness Seth take them, his arms shaking. Paul wordlessly helped him get his clothes on, Leah only reluctantly letting go of him long enough for that. When had Paul even gone to get clothes, she wondered tiredly? Not that it mattered.

Groaning, the faoladh turned over and pushed herself swaying to her feet. "Let's get inside," she said, "Seth you can lie down for a while and recover, and then tell us what happened." Although Bella already had an inkling of the truth, she knew that none of them were prepared just then to deal with it. Leah helped Seth get to his feet, keeping an arm wrapped securely around his waist to support him. Bella and Paul followed behind them into the house. Once inside, Leah effortlessly picked up her brother and carried him upstairs, no doubt to put him to bed. Bella took a step towards one of the kitchen chairs and her knees buckled. Had Paul not caught her elbow and steadied her, she would have fallen.

"Thanks." She murmured, and let him help her sit down. Once she was sitting in the chair, Bella began to feel a little steadier. A quick look around confirmed the fact that Paul's mom Joanne wasn't here anymore. If she had been, Bella felt confident that she would have stepped in to help.

"Well that was..." Paul's voice trailed off and the alpha just nodded in understanding. There were no words. She had never seen a shifter or any other creature like herself in such agony, and she never wanted to again. Rage at Sam flared up for a moment before being quenched by her own fatigue. She took a few steadying breaths, and fixed her eyes on Paul.

"I don't know what that was, but I do know that we still have a job to do." As scary as that had been, there were still three depraved vampires on the loose. "Paul," she hesitated briefly before going on, "I am sorry to ask this of you, but I think you will have to patrol alone for a little while tonight. I can barely walk, and Leah's..." She nodded her head upstairs, the unspoken knowledge that Leah would not leave her brother's side for a while evident.

Paul, for his part, straightened in his chair at her words and she felt a flicker of pride from him. "I can do it," he said, "I can."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I know you can." His eyes seemed to shine at her words, and her smile became more genuine. "Ok. I want you to head out now and just do basic circuits. Hit the edges of town and do your best to stay out of sight. If you run into them or spot them, don't try to engage. Call me, and I'll call the Cullens." Seeing Paul's skeptical expression, she waved him off. "We need all the help we can get." Especially with half her pack essentially laid up.

"Yeah, I can do that." He acknowledged, already getting back up. Turning towards the door he paused and looked back at Bella, and then glanced at the ceiling where no doubt Leah and Seth were. His eyes came back to Bella's. "Let me know what you find out." Bella nodded and reminded him to be careful, and then he was gone.

Sitting at the kitchen table alone, Bella put her head in hands still wet with blood. "This is not how I thought this day would go." Suddenly, she really wished Rosalie were there.
Hello everyone! Another chapter for you. I hope you enjoy it! A huge thank you to everyone who has taken time to leave me a few words, I appreciate you all!

One thing, I am taking a few liberties with James and his coven. You will note that some backstory has been altered, and...well, I don't want to spoil anything. Just keep this in mind as you read! This is pretty much an AU after all! Hold on for the ride.

Thank you as always to my sister, Lady_Lullaby, for proofing this for me and generally helping me to keep on the straight and narrow.

Trigger warning: Mentions of rape, abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last Time: A little of Rosalie's perspective is seen, along with her inner turmoil over the budding relationship with Bella. One name is dropped as a possible origin of that turmoil: Royce. Rosalie finds herself overwhelmed by what she feels for Bella, and her own desire to remain isolated. As a result, she leaves the Cullens and the Swan pack for an indeterminate time. Bella opts not to go after her, at least initially, because she is in the middle of discussing with the Cullens and her pack what will be done about the nomads. A plan is put into motion: Cullens search the greater forests to make contact, Swan pack patrols the town of Forks. First though, Bella must travel to La Push to inform the wolves there of what is happening. Instead of meeting Sam, she meets Jake! A happy reunion followed by the sobering news of the nomads, and Jake's own statement that something is happening in La Push... Upon return to Bella's house, the Swan pack discover Seth Clearwater in the backyard, caught between changes and in excruciating pain. Paul surmises that Seth tried to leave the La Push pack, and Sam was trying to bring him back. After moments of failure and panic, Bella manages to sever the pack bond between Seth and Sam, saving Seth's life.

Emmett paused in the seemingly endless expanse of forest, head tilted as he listened for his family. They were spread a few miles apart each, canvassing the forestland around the town of Forks in their hunt for the nomads. They were carefully searching squares of land that Carlisle had charted out on their maps, each family member with a designated path to follow and clear. As he heard Alice to the west calling "clear", he knew it was his turn and called out as well. So far, they had found nothing.

This was frustrating on a few levels for Emmett. He had always been a man of action, for one. All this searching, all this talking, was grating on his nerves. He wanted to just fight something and be done with it. In his long lifetime, he had rarely seen a need to do more than that. When most things in the vampire world came inevitably down to a fight anyway, why waste time talking about it?

Receiving the signal from Carlisle, he sped off to his next location, mind racing as quickly as his supernaturally enhanced body. This particular case, too, seemed more urgent to him. Maybe because he had a friend outside of the family involved...a decidedly not immortal friend. At least, he didn't think she was. Bella was entirely too breakable for comfort, and as Emmett hadn't had a friend outside the family in decades...he wanted to keep her. Even bigger than Bella though, these nomads were potentially proving to be a menace to the local human population. He gnashed his teeth, his
normally cheery gold eyes turning black. That just couldn't be allowed to stand. Forks was one of his favorite places to live for many reasons, but the greatest of these was the feeling of normalcy. It was a small town, and the Cullens always caused a bit of a stir because they stood out, but... Even for all that, the people here generally accepted their presence and it was just peaceful.

Laid back, outgoing, and friendly Emmett might be...but he was also extremely protective. If these nomads had stuck around, there was going to be a nasty fight. No one threatened his home.

Carlisle's voice reached him, "Everyone, gather in the clearing by the 'Dillo." Despite his anger, Emmett grinned briefly. The "Dillo" was a mound of tumbled rocks in the middle of a small clearing about seven miles east of Forks. Technically, Emmett had named it the "Armadillo" about thirty-five years ago when they'd first stumbled across it, thinking it rather looked like the cute creature. The name had weirdly stuck, though it had been shortened, and even Rosalie called this location the 'Dillo.

Emmett changed directions, frowning as he thought of Rosalie. She liked to think she was an enigma, but he knew that she also had a kind heart. If she didn't, she would have left him to bleed out after being mauled by a bear in 1935. Instead, she had taken him to Carlisle to be changed. That was not the act of an indifferent soul, and for a time he knew the family had watched them, thinking they would be mates. They had been nothing more than friends though, which Emmett was okay with. He knew what Rosalie had been through, and he just wanted her to be happy. This whole thing with Bella had her in knots, and he wished she would let someone help her.

He missed his sister who spent all day and all night working on cars and swearing at anyone who interrupted, his sister who dedicated herself to the study of a new language every year so that she could enjoy all of the places they visited, his sister who often performed acts of kindness so small most people wouldn't notice, like choosing to wash all of the cars instead of just her own, or occasionally remarking that she had no clothes she liked just so Alice could take her shopping...but Emmett noticed. They all did. If she came back to join them in the search, he resolved, he would try to talk to her again.

Emmett was the last to make it into the clearing, and he smiled sheepishly at his siblings and Carlisle. He was probably the slowest of them, though not by much. His thoughts had slowed him down more than he'd realized. "Sorry," he said. Carlisle nodded, and then turned to address the group.

The coven leader addressed the group. "We have now covered the immediate areas north, south, east, and west, except the La Push territory, and found no sign of the nomads." He glanced significantly at Alice, and she shook her head regretfully.

"I haven't seen anything of them," the smallest vampire stated, eyes downcast.

Jasper clasped her hand in support. "It is not your fault darling," his voice was comforting. "You have done what you can." Emmett was quick to vocalize his agreement, and Alice looked at them gratefully, though he could tell she was still disappointed in herself.

"Do not be discouraged Alice," Carlisle said kindly, "I suspect very much, unless our nomads have left the area, that our friends also have abilities, to be able to hide themselves from us so effectively." Emmett looked at him sharply, and felt his response echoed by the others, Edward the most strongly.

"What?" He barked, "What kind of abilities?" Emmett winced, annoyed at Edward's tone. His brother had been grumpy ever since Carlisle had given him an ultimatum about helping.

Carlisle merely raised one perfect, golden eyebrow in Edward's direction, but from Edward's immediately downcast eyes, Emmett was sure Carlisle had privately rebuked him. He rejoiced
inwardly but stopped when Edward shot him a glare. *Sorry bro,* he thought, *but try taking a chill pill.* Edward just continued to glare, so Emmett just shrugged and focused back on Carlisle.

The coven leader continued as if nothing had happened. "I doubt these nomads are gone. If they had left, we would surely have run into some trace of them by now. If they were leaving, why hide? Why go to the trouble of covering their tracks if they didn't have a reason to cover them?" Carlisle shook his head. "No, they're still here somewhere. I would be willing to guess that one of them has an ability to hide, or conceal. Hard to say for sure, of course."

Emmett rubbed his chin thoughtfully, letting Carlisle's words sink in. "If they are deliberately hiding from us," said the big vampire, "and keeping out of range, then we might surmise these vampires are aware that some of our members have abilities. They may even know what they are."

Silence reigned, and Emmett chanced a look around. Jasper and Alice just looked concerned, but Edward's face was dark with barely contained rage. Suddenly Emmett felt his worries lighten, and he glanced at Jasper. His brother's eyes were focused on Edward. Looking then at his impetuous sibling, he was relieved to see that Jasper's efforts were being rewarded as the vampire began to relax.

Carlisle's soft voice commanded their attention again. "I believe the same, Emmett." He looked at them each gravely in turn. "If they do know the nature of our abilities, and which of us possess them, we could have a harder time than we thought catching them." He sighed. "Let's regroup at home, see if Esme has returned from our northern friends yet." Carlisle's wife had gone to the Denali coven to request backup, just in case. Normally Rosalie would have gone, but none of them had seen her in several hours.

Emmett nodded and caught Carlisle's final admonition as he ran, "And all of you, hunt!"

Yes. Their eyes had all been dangerously black, and even Carlisle, who was so often in control, had eyes darker than usual.

When Emmett returned to the house, he found that he was only the second back, after Carlisle. He walked into the kitchen, following the telltale signs of Esme bustling around. Who she was cooking for just now, he wasn't sure, but he knew that the action soothed her. He hopped onto one of the bar stools at the counter. "Hey Mom," he said, eyes alight, "What's for dinner?" Esme rolled her eyes and smacked him with her dish towel.

"Oh ha, ha. Watch it mister." She brandished the towel at him again and Emmett held his hands up in defense. He was pleased to see a small smile curling the corner of her mouth. There was a comfortable silence for a moment.

"So...what did the Denalis have to say?" Emmett rested an elbow on the counter, his chin in his palm. Esme was agitated, he could tell.

Carlisle appeared. "I was going to wait until the rest have joined us, but it seems they may be a while yet." Emmett fixed his eyes on Carlisle expectantly, but Esme spoke.

"Tanya told me that these nomads sounded familiar. She thought she had heard about a group like them before, but she couldn't remember the details. She and Irina went to see if they could find the vampires they heard the story from before. Kate is on her way over to Bella's to find Paul." Esme set down the spotless pan she had been washing and sighed. "I had hoped they would come right away, but Tanya seemed to think gathering intel was more important. Kate will stand with us, at least."

Emmett nodded, taking that in. "Kate is one more than we had." He smirked. "And frankly she's
worth two. She's a hell of a fighter, and that electro-power thing she has can knock even me on my ass."

*Smack.*

"Ow! Esme, what the heck was that for?" Emmett stared at her, a wounded look on his face.

Esme shook a finger at him, and chided, "Language young man." Carlisle hid a laugh with a poor attempt at a cough. As if vampires even coughed. Emmett released a long suffering sigh and pushed himself to his feet.

"Well then, I think I'll just go make myself useful and see if I can track down Rose. She should know this stuff," he frowned, "And she needs to get herself back on board." Carlisle nodded his approval, and Emmett took that as permission to go.

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Rosalie was far north in the forests of Washington, nearly in Canada, when she sensed she was being pursued. Her emotions were tumultuous, and no amount of running had come even close to helping to organize her thoughts. It was so hard, so incredibly, indescribably hard to think, to *concede* that she might need someone. Rosalie Hale had spent decades upon decades ensuring that she would never truly need anyone again. The Cullen family had been all she allowed herself, and she had even been distant with them much of the time, often going off to hunt alone or seek out the Denali coven for a time.

The vampire slowed her pace and decided to wait for whomever followed her. A snarl lifted her lips, revealing one long, glistening fang. She hoped it was a nomad. Maybe tearing something apart would help her to feel less adrift. As she waited, her thoughts returned to Bella. Inevitably, no matter what she was doing anymore, her thoughts revolved around the faoladh.

After Royce, after her assault, Rosalie had never felt comfortable even considering a relationship beyond distant and platonic. The feeling that had arisen in the past was difficult to pin down, but it was negative. She had certainly felt dirty for a long time, used. She didn't think that was the feeling anymore...more like, broken. Defective. And maybe...scared. Acknowledging fear was something Rosalie rarely did, but she could not deny it this time. It didn't matter that, rationally, she knew Bella would never hurt her. She knew what an imprint was for a wolf - she knew that it would likely be physically impossible for Bella to ever cause her harm. She knew that. Rosalie also knew that everything with Royce had happened long ago; it was far in the past now. None of that mattered. Despite knowing it was irrational, Rosalie admitted to herself that she was terrified of this newfound connection Bella, of this deep desire and need. This fear, this feeling of *what if.*

What if, despite everything, Bella *did* hurt her? What if she let the faoladh in, only to have herself shattered again? What if...what if she, Rosalie, wasn't good enough for Bella? What would the faoladh think of her, if she knew the truth? That fear felt the worst of all.

Awareness of light feet approaching rapidly filtered through her senses, and Rosalie realized with a start that at some point she had crouched on the ground and wrapped her arms around herself. Letting her arms drop, she rose from her crouch and turned toward the approaching person, muscles tensed and ready. A familiar scent reached her and she relaxed. It was just Emmett.

Soon enough, his familiar, bearish form appeared through the trees. He slowed when he saw her, and she felt a flicker of wry amusement when he seemed to approach her with caution. Then again, she had gone half out of her mind more than once in the recent past, so perhaps his careful approach wasn't unwarranted.
"Hey Rose." He spoke finally, when she failed to do so. Rosalie watched him. When she didn't respond, Emmett shifted his weight uncomfortably and scratched the hair at the nape of his neck. "Um, sorry to chase you down like this. But there are some things you should know." When Rosalie nodded for him to continue, he quickly filled her in on the things they had surmised about the nomads (powers), and the knowledge that at least one Denali would stand with them and the others would provide support via information.

Rosalie let the information sink in, her eyes drifting over the pine trees around them. "Thank you for coming to tell me." She said after a few silent minutes had passed. Her tone had been a dismissal, but Emmett took another step toward her instead.

"Rose..." he said hesitantly, "I can't know what you're going through, and I can't imagine what you're feeling right now...but if you can, I think you should try to give Bella a chance."

Rosalie stared resolutely into the trees. The only indication that she was listening was that her hands had come up to grip her own arms tightly.

"Right now," he continued, "Things are crazy and dangerous, I get that. But...that need you feel inside? Bella feels that too, for you. She is as helpless in this as you are, though maybe a little more receptive to it." Emmett was close enough now to rest a hand on Rosalie's shoulder.

"Letting go is hard, and I know it is especially for you. I'm not saying you have to, or that you need to let go all at once. I'm just saying for your sake and Bella's, to try a little." Rosalie turned to look up at Emmett, and observed the smile on his face.

Her voice came softly, even to her own ears. "Emmett...what if I'm scared?"

The big man paused thoughtfully, and she was sure he was surprised she had admitted that much. But Emmett was her dearest friend, and the only one she could confide that feeling in.

Emmett rested a second hand on Rosalie's other shoulder. "It's okay to be scared." His eyes glinted kindly in the fading light. "Remember that Bella is scared too. And at the end of the day Rose, you do have a choice." He took a breath, eyes serious. "You can choose to reject this bond with Bella. Doing so will have consequences, maybe bad ones, but you do have that choice. And I know Bella would never fault you for making it." Emmett's hands dropped from her shoulders and he took a step back.

"All I'm saying is, I think you should give it a try. Go and talk to Bella some more, see what she's feeling, what she's thinking. She needs you."

Even as the words left Emmett's lips, Rosalie felt an unfamiliar twinge in her chest, a kind of pain. When it came a second time, she knew it wasn't just her.

"I think you're right Emmett. I'm going to go now." She turned to race from the trees, but paused for a moment to look at her friend once more. A small smile graced her lips, though it didn't fully reach her eyes. "Thank you."

When Paul returned to check in the next morning, he found his exhausted Alpha passed out on the couch in the living room. He was relieved to see that she had at least cleaned the blood off of herself and changed clothes. Affection filled him as he watched her rest, and he acknowledged that feeling that way felt strange. Strange, but good. Paul moved silently across the room and lightly draped the blanket from the back of the couch over Bella's slumbering form.

Never could he have imagined caring about his Alpha in this way. He felt proud of what she had
done for Seth, and Leah. He was proud that she had managed to become such a good leader in so short a time. When he had desperately begged her to take him, it had been to fill the hole left by leaving the La Push pack. But Bella had done more than fill that hole. She had taken away his anger, she had valued him, trusted him, and given him purpose. Paul would do anything to protect this new pack.

He walked into the kitchen to find a quick snack, his rumbling belly reminding him of part of the reason he had stopped in. Paul's eyes immediately caught the still, silent figure in the room and he jumped nearly a foot, just stifling a yelp when he realized that he recognized her. How had he not smelled her? His eyes snagged on a familiar looking Led Zeppelin t-shirt, and he realized that her scent was muted by Bella's. She was wearing Bella's shirt. "What are you doing here?" He finally managed to ask, catching his breath. The last he had seen Rosalie, she was running for the hills. A flash of protectiveness streaked through him; he didn't like that she was hurting his Alpha.

Rosalie, for her part, viewed Paul with an air of disdain. She leaned her weight on one foot and folded her arms. "My mate needed me." She said simply, and Paul frowned.

"What about when she needed you at the meeting? What about when she needed you when she was trying to help Seth?" He bit those questions back sharply at her, thinking again of the forlorn looks he saw often on Bella's face, and the hurt he felt from her inside. It didn't occur to him that she probably didn't even know about Seth yet.

A troubled look crossed Rosalie's face so rapidly he almost missed it. The disdain returning, she shrugged. "It's complicated."

Paul felt the stirrings of his old anger, but this time that anger had a purpose. He took a step toward Rosalie and lowered his voice, unable to keep a slight growl out of it. "Then uncomplicate it! Don't you see what your indecision is doing to her? It is tearing her apart! If you really can't accept this imprint, if you can't accept her as your mate, then you need to make that clear and stop this..." he gestured wildly with his hands, "this playing with her, or whatever you're doing." Rage glittered dangerously in Rosalie's eyes, but Paul plowed on, his voice rising to an impassioned plea. "Bella is a good Alpha, a good person, and she deserves better." He'd have said more, but a quiet voice silenced him.

"Enough."

Bella's tired voice, soft as it was, was enough to quell Paul's growing anger and Rosalie's indignation. "Paul," she said, and her voice was gentle, "Go upstairs and check on Seth and Leah. If Seth is doing alright, ask Leah to join you for your next patrol. Make sure you rest some, and you both eat." Though she didn't voice it, Bella let her gratitude for Paul's words on her behalf filter through their link. Paul nodded and headed up the stairs without another word. The she-wolf's eyes lingered on Rosalie's shirt for a moment, a faint smile curling her lips.

"Another one of my favorites, I see." Bella's voice was warm and gentle, but Rosalie fidgeted uncomfortably anyway. Bella could feel her discomfort, and disliked that she was the cause of it. "Why don't we go for a walk?"

Rosalie's slim, golden brows drew down. "You need to rest, you are still clearly exhausted from helping that boy. If the nomads come -"

Bella shrugged and cut her off, "If the nomads come, you will protect me." She didn't say it as a challenge or an order, it was just a simple fact that Bella knew to be true on a deep level. Despite their struggles to connect, she knew that they would fight to the death for each other. "We won't go far. I will call my pack if need be." The frown remained on Rosalie's face, the uncertainty in her
golden eyes clear, but finally she nodded.

Red eyes watched the home of one Bella Swan with a mixture of curiosity, almost lustful excitement, and malicious intent. Keen ears picked up the sound of movement within, and his quarry leaving the back of the house with a vampire. How interesting. If his heart still beat, it would be racing in his chest. As it was, his breaths were coming quicker, black pupils expanding and contracting. The time was near. So very near.

"James." The soft voice of his mate interrupted his focus, and he shot her an annoyed glance briefly. "James, are you sure we should do this? The coven here far outnumbers us...and it appears they have a sort of alliance with these..." her voice became tinged with disgust, "...wolf things. A fight with all of them would not be wise."

His eyes quickly found Bella and her vampire companion again, but he responded intensely. "Faoladh, not "wolf things". She is, anyway. The others are mutts, not worth my time." He thought that over again. "Well, maybe later. But she is the prize. I have not seen one in decades; it will be a worthy hunt." And wolves, apex predators themselves, made excellent prey. As did vampires. His eyes narrowed gleefully. Coming to Forks had been far more of a treat than he could have anticipated. He hadn't had a hunt like this in too long; he planned to enjoy it. So many wonderful targets, too. Not only had he found an elusive faoladh, but the vampire Mary Alice Brandon as well. He had not seen her since he had killed her creator. It was amusing to watch her valuable gift be foiled repeatedly when faced with the combination of Victoria's and his own. A cruel smile stretched across his face. Oh yes, her time would come also.

His attention returned to the house and its occupants, particularly the two who'd just left. "I will be going after them. You and Laurent can do as you will with the rest."

Without waiting for a response, James took off into the trees after Bella and Rosalie. He kept a careful distance, knowing instinctively how far out of range he needed to be to avoid notice. Or would he? Excitement raced through him again - the thrill of the hunt. Would the hunter become the hunted? He knew they hunted for him, but they were novices whilst he was a master. A feral grin stretched across his pale, dead face.

The pair walked in silence for a long while. The faoladh was content to enjoy the quiet peace of nature with her mate and let Rosalie come around in her own time. Glancing down at her clean hands, one question nagged at her. "Did you clean me up and put me on the couch?" When she had awoken to Paul's raised voice, she had realized that there was no longer blood on her hands. Looking down at herself, she noted she had on a different shirt too. "Did you change my shirt?" She cast her eyes on Rosalie then and could swear she saw an almost blush.

"When I arrived at your house, you were asleep at your kitchen table." Rosalie's voice, though muted, was lovely to listen to. "At first, seeing the blood on you, I panicked." She shot an accusing look at Bella. "You do have a nasty habit of getting into scrapes." The she-wolf just shrugged. "But listening in on Leah," Rosalie continued, "I gathered what had happened. So, I cleaned you up the best I could and found you another shirt." She paused and tugged the shirt she wore lightly, the barest hint of a smile curling her lips. "And one for me too. Then I put you on the couch to rest." She shrugged. "Your Beta put the blanket on you."

Bella gave that a moment of thought. Was Paul her Beta? She consulted the wolf. Both Paul and Leah were strong individuals, and could be leaders given the opportunity. Should she have ranks in her pack like that? When it had just been her and Paul, that hadn't been an issue. Definitely something she would have to devote some thought to in the near future, she knew. Thinking of Paul
as her Beta, as her right hand, however, did feel right.

The caring actions of her mate filtered through her thoughts then, and she smiled. It warmed her to know that Rosalie had done those things for her, had wanted to. "Thank you, Rosalie." She responded, her voice equally quiet.

Though it was only just nearing midday, it was overcast in true Forks fashion, Bella noted regretfully. It was a shame the sun wasn't out so that she could see what Rosalie looked like with the sun dancing on her skin and in her hair. That would have to wait for another time, she supposed. She received a flicker of feeling from Paul, an alert that he and Leah would go on patrol together after a little rest and food. She felt reluctance from Leah, and determination from Paul. Hopefully that meant that Seth was doing alright. She would have to see if he wanted to join her pack when she returned. It was likely that he did, considering the lengths he had gone to get here, and she still needed to ask him about that too.

"I can feel you thinking over there." Rosalie's voice had her attention immediately. She smiled at the vampire, and was pleased to receive one in return. Smiles from Rosalie were rare enough.

"Yeah, there is a lot to think about these days." Bella realized they had come to a stop, and consciously resumed their slow pace. "My new pack, these nomads...you." She chanced a look at Rosalie, and saw that her golden eyes were currently hidden by a curtain of shimmering hair. "I don't understand you Rosalie," pain was raw in her voice, "but I want to. Won't you let me in?"

It wasn't just frustrating, it was downright agonizing. Bella wanted to know everything about Rosalie: her history, her wants, her needs, her interests. She wanted to know what made her happy, and what made her sad. Did she like to be comforted, or left alone? What places had she visited in her long life, what people had she met? What was her greatest dream? Bella wanted to know it all. And at the moment, most of all, she wanted to understand why Rosalie struggled so much letting that happen.

Rosalie was silent for a long time. And then, "Will you tell me about your scar?"

Slightly thrown, Bella frowned. Then she remembered the fight with Sam, subsequent change of clothes, changing her shirt in front of Rosalie yesterday, and then Rosalie changing her shirt as she slept today. Obviously she had seen the large, ropy scar. Bella wondered why she hadn't asked about it sooner...or why Bella herself hadn't shared the story, especially when she herself was so keen to hear Rosalie's.

"Well, " Bella started, and then stopped. She hadn't actually told anyone the true story. Not really. Some people knew, like Charlie, and she assumed Carlisle. But to the kids at school, she had told the carefully concocted lie that she and Charlie had fabricated. It felt strangely liberating and emotional to share this story at last.

"You know what I am," she started again, "Faoladh. Well, when I was very young, my parents and I lived with a wolf pack outside of Forks. Looking back now, I don't really know why we lived with wolves rather than humans. After having talked to Carlisle, I think now they - we - were being hunted." Running a hand through her hair, she continued.

"Anyway, when I was about five, poachers tracked some of the wolves from my pack back to our den. I don't remember a whole lot of what happened, just the frantic voices of my parents, telling me to hide...throwing themselves at the poachers trying to buy me time..." She shook her head, as if shaking off the fear and desperation of that night.

"I was so young though, and I didn't understand what was going on. I stumbled into the middle of
their fight and wound up catching a blade, I think, from one of the poachers." She lifted her shirt, tracing the scar that curved from her breast around her back. "They cut me nearly in half. I think the only reason they left me behind instead of skinning me was because they thought my pelt would be worthless so damaged." She shrugged. Before she could lower her shirt, Rosalie's fingers replaced hers, skimming along the marred skin. She shivered beneath her cool touch.

"That's how Charlie found me. He saved me." She fell silent, walking, until she felt Rosalie's eyes on her. When she turned to look at the vampire, her eyes were filled with such compassion that Bella felt a lump rise in her throat. It was only with great difficulty that she swallowed it down.

"Thank you for telling me," Rosalie said quietly after a moment, and Bella nodded, still collecting herself. She felt surprisingly drained, but Bella supposed that came with sharing such a personal story. She was glad when Rosalie chose not to question her further, perhaps the vampire could sense that this was as much as she could talk about right now.

Rosalie watched her for a few quiet moments and then, "The reason I asked about your scar," she reached out a hand and rested it lightly on Bella's shirt, atop the scar she had revealed, "is because I have a scar too, though you can't see it." Privately, Bella thought that actually she could see it. Rosalie withdrew her hand and took a measured breath, "I'll tell you about it." Bella inwardly thrilled. The warmth that spread in her chest at being let in, even a little, quickly banished the lingering sorrow of her own tale.

It seemed they walked miles before she spoke again, though really they were just making a large arc that would eventually culminate at the house. Her voice came so softly that Bella had to strain to hear her. Eyes focused straight ahead, Rosalie began. "To understand me, to know why I am...this way...you need to know my history. My human history." Silence again, and then, "I was born and raised in Rochester, New York in 1915. My family was very wealthy, and we managed to stay wealthy even during the Great Depression."

Bella listened intently, elated that Rosalie was sharing this with her. Her eyes were alight with curiosity as she listened. "When I was human," said Rosalie, "I was very vain." The vampire took a breath. "I was extremely self-centered, and my parents encouraged it - they often capitalized on my beauty. One day when I was dropping off lunch to my father at work, the son of a very wealthy man took an interest in me. This delighted my parents, and I was excited too. Being married to a wealthy man who could support my vanity was my aspiration in life at that time, and Royce King...well, he very much fit the bill." Her voice turned wry, and Bella was shocked to hear a note of self-loathing in it, "It didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes too." She really didn't like the mocking tone Rosalie used, and the way it was directed at herself.

They walked for a while longer, and Bella could tell that Rosalie was working herself up to tell her something. The struggle was clear from the turmoil in her eyes and the tenseness of every muscle in her body. When Rosalie still didn't speak, Bella reached for her hand and pulled her gently to a stop. She worked on the fist in her hand until the fingers loosened. The faoladh laced their fingers together and held Rosalie's hand tightly before meeting her eyes.

"Rosalie," she said with gentle sincerity, "Whatever it is you're struggling to tell me, you don't have to. I want to hear it, I want to know everything about you, but if it's still too hard, you can tell me another day." She squeezed her hand. "And if you're struggling because you don't know how I will take it, well..." Bella shrugged and tilted her head, "Even if it's bad, even if it's horrible, it's a part of your past and I want to know. I can't promise how I will react because, well, I don't know what it is yet," Rosalie started to pull away, but Bella tightened her grip on her hand and reached out to catch her other one, holding it despite the rigid muscles.
"But," she whispered earnestly, "I can promise that my feelings for you won't change. That my desire to know you, to stand beside you, will not waver. There is nothing that you could say that would threaten how I feel; I could never lie to you Rosalie, not about this." Part of that was the bond, but not all of it. Bella had grown very fond of Rosalie all on her own.

The vampire's eyes flashed dangerously, and she snapped back, "Even if I murdered humans? You could see past that?"

Bella didn't flinch from her tone. She studied Rosalie's face and eyes for a moment and then, "I don't believe you would do that. Not without cause. And if it was in your newborn phase..." Bella shrugged, not bothering to hide the slight discomfort she felt at the idea of Rosalie on a rampage. "I may not like it, but you are a vampire. And I know from Carlisle that very few vampires can control their urge to hunt right after being changed."

The vampire was quiet for several tense seconds, not able to meet Bella's eyes. The she-wolf thought she detected tears standing in Rosalie's eyes, threatening to fall, but that was impossible. Vampires couldn't cry.

Finally the vampire moved, gently pulling one hand from Bella, though she left the other linked. "Let's keep walking." She murmured, and Bella happily fell into step with her once again. Another mile passed before she spoke.

"Things went well with Royce, and I was over the moon because I believed I was getting what I always wanted: a wealthy husband and, eventually, a family. Having a child...despite my own vanity...was something I had always wanted. Soon, we were engaged." Bella paused, and took in a steadying breath before continuing. "I didn't love Royce though. I realized that our relationship lacked love when I observed my best friend Vera and her husband. They were so happy, and Royce and I...well, we were too wrapped up in worrying about physical appearance."

Bella couldn't deny that a part of her was jealous, hearing of Rosalie's previous fiance. It didn't really matter to her that this relationship had occurred many decades before her birth - the idea of someone else kissing Rosalie, holding her...it was hard to think about. Angry at herself, Bella shoved those feelings aside. Rosalie was sharing this with her because it was important, and that was what she needed to focus on. And it really wasn't fair of her to feel that way anyway; these events had happened long before she was born.

"It was a week before my wedding to Royce when I realized where we were emotionally as a couple. I was thinking about that while walking home from Vera's place late one night when I ran into Royce." Rosalie stopped abruptly, letting her long hair shield her face again for a moment before turning to face Bella resolutely. She grasped Bella's hand tightly for a moment, before releasing it and stepping back, arms folding in front of her chest. It looked like an aggressive stance, but Bella was getting to know Rosalie a little more now, and she recognized that for Rosalie, her body language screamed defensive. Bella dreaded whatever was coming next, and did her best to keep her eyes on Rosalie's and her own body language open.

"Royce was drunk," Rosalie continued, "and so were the friends he had with him. I tried to skirt them and go home, but Royce insisted on introducing me to his friends. He started bragging about my beauty, and I tried again to say goodbye and go home." Bella realized that Rosalie's breath was coming faster and faster as she spoke, until her chest was veritably heaving. This was the most distressed she had ever seen Rosalie, and every part of her wanted to reach out for the vampire, but she sensed that contact right now would not be welcomed. And Rosalie needed to say this, even if Bella had a sinking feeling she knew what was coming.

Rosalie's eyes flashed and she straightened, chin held high. "They didn't let me go home. They beat
me, raped me, and left me to die."

Rage, terrible, impotent rage like Bella had never known flooded through her. Rage that she had not been there to defend her mate, rage at the men who had committed this crime, and a rising wave of pain and overwhelming empathy for Rosalie. Her mate who had suffered so horribly, and who continued to suffer now. Gods and spirits, this was beyond what she could have imagined.

Her mate wasn't finished though. Eyes black with remembered hate and continued self-loathing, "That's how Carlisle found me, broken in an alley. He gave me immortal life," her eyes narrowed, "And I took revenge. I killed every one of Royce's friends, one at a time, and then I killed Royce. I tortured him first." She shook her head in disgust, "I didn't drink from them. I couldn't. " She took a shuddering breath, "The idea of having anything of them...inside of me...again...was unbearable. I've never had human blood. But I did kill them, and they did suffer."

Rosalie grimaced, "This is my history. It's who I am. Now you know." Her eyes found Bella's, still black and defiant. They faced each other silently for a few seconds until Bella managed to wrestle some control back from her run away emotions. Every nerve ending felt raw, and she couldn't imagine how Rosalie felt, having laid her soul bare.

Of all the reasons she could possibly have imagined for Rosalie's reticence, this wasn't one of them. She didn't even want to think about it now, but she did. It was Rosalie's reality, something she had to think about every day. And especially now that Bella had imprinted on her; the memory must be inescapable. She thought maybe she understood Rosalie just a little bit better now.

Finally, she found her voice. "Thank you Rosalie, for telling me." She stepped forward slowly, until mere inches separated them, maintaining eye contact as she did so. Rosalie stiffened, but didn't move away. Slowly, Bella raised her arms and slid them around the vampire, ignoring the fact that her mate's arms were still folded. Rosalie remained stiff as a board for a moment, and then let her forehead rest against Bella's shoulder.

"Nothing has changed for me," Bella whispered in her ear, choosing her words carefully. "Except that I am fiercely proud of you. Those men got what they deserved; I think no less of you for killing them. I am in awe of the self-control you had as a newborn vampire, and I am in awe of your strength in telling me of your past today."

They were not human, and there would be no forgiveness, no "forgive to forget". Bella had never really thought much of that human phrase anyway. Gradually, Rosalie unfolded her arms and slipped them around Bella in return, hands fistling in the faoladh's shirt. "I know it was unbelievably hard to tell me," Bella continued softly, "Thank you." She held the vampire tight, knowing that her supernatural body could well withstand it, and felt Rosalie grip her tightly in return.

A slow clap startled them both, but Bella didn't release her hold on Rosalie, merely looked up.

Standing a few dozen feet away was an unfamiliar vampire. His clothes were worn out and torn, and definitely weren't of a design seen within the last fifty years. His long brown hair looked tangled in its pony tail, which Bella thought was a feat for a vampire, but it was his red eyes that were the most shocking. They were a bright, violent color and gazed at them with a frightening mixture of pure malice and amusement. Bella knew it instinctively. This man was dangerous.

"Well done ladies," his mocking voice was grating, "Well done indeed, sharing such intimate stories, becoming closer - it's just lovely, isn't it?"
And there we are! You may be happy to know that I've written most of the next chapter, and I anticipate on having more time to write. Of course, I guess I always say that. I will try to update more frequently, but I shouldn't make a promise I'm not sure I can keep!

I hope you liked this chapter. Again, thank you so much to those of you who have commented, bookmarked, or given kudos to this story. You all are the reason I keep working!

Next Time: Will there be a fight? Stay tuned and find out.
Divide and...

Chapter Notes

Greye's Notes: Hey everyone! I'm so sorry for the tardy update! Here it is now, and I hope it will be worth the wait. Thanks as always to my sister, Lady_Lullaby, for helping me edit and keep this work more or less in one piece!

One thing to note: Bella's eyes in my fic are more of a mix of green and brown, and recently have been shifting more toward green.

Warning: Violent scenes to come.

Thank you also to my readers and those of you who have taken the time to give me kudos and leave a comment—I really appreciate it. I hope that you enjoy this new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last Time: The Cullens' search for the nomads ends up fruitless, and Carlisle suspects the nomads must have powers of their own to cover their tracks so well. Esme visits Denali and while Kate returns with her to help, Tanya and Irina go to track down other vampires for more information about this foe. Emmett talks Rosalie into going to see Bella. Paul defends Bella to Rosalie, and eventually Bella intervenes and takes Rosalie for a long walk. During this walk, Bella reveals her past and Rosalie shares the trauma she faced at the hands of Royce. Their moment is interrupted by one of the nomads.

Bella felt Rosalie stiffen in her arms and release an enraged hiss. The red-eyed vampire continued talking nonchalantly. "Why, it's almost a shame to interrupt." He exaggerated a sad look on his face, and Bella felt her hackles rise. Could this be...? "But, interrupt I must." A cruel grin overtook his face. "For I am a hunter and you, faoladh, are my prey."

She hadn't thought of a response when Rosalie tore from her arms with a wild yell and threw herself at the other vampire. Bella watched her, stunned. Her blonde hair seemed to arc through the air in slow motion as her own instincts kicked in, the fluid movements of her mate beautiful in all of their destructive glory. She sent out a wild call to her pack inwardly, but didn't have time to wonder when she didn't receive much response.

The smirk on the nomad's face as he watched Rosalie's approach made Bella uneasy, and she forced her tired body into a sprint of her own. She would not let Rosalie face this vampire alone.

Even with her enhanced senses, Bella did not see the nomad move. One moment he seemed to stand still with an amused, gleeful look on his face, and the next he was meeting Rosalie in mid air, a loud crack echoing through the trees. She blinked, and he was past Rosalie and on his way to her. His mocking laugh filled her ears but was quickly drowned out by Rosalie's scream of pain and rage. Bella wasn't sure if her reflexes saved her from the rapid swipe of the nomad, or if he had missed her on purpose to prolong the game. Either way, Bella rolled across the ground, safely away from him for the moment. Getting back on her feet, she gasped when she saw what the red-eyed vampire had in his hand. A feral grin stretched his too-perfect lips sickeningly, and dangling from his grip was...
"Oh," he tutted, "A pity to lose such a pretty limb. But maybe I should take them all to make a collection." Bella snarled, her blood boiling when her eyes found her mate crouched defensively on the ground, pain etched into the pale planes of her face. Thought hadn't formed before Bella flung herself across the space between them, her wolf exploding outward in the most rapid, and painful, change she had ever made. Fury like she had never known pulsed through her body. Her mate was in pain. Her mate was hurt.

"Ah ah ah! Can't ruin the fun yet." His taunting voice echoed in the woods around them as he managed to stay just out of her reach. Still, his filthy hand clutched Rosalie's arm. Bella chased him fruitlessly for a time; his speed rivaled Edward's. She knew he was just playing with her, but she was convinced that if she could just get her teeth into him...

"I think I'm bored with this now." He said, and without warning changed directions and charged headlong into Bella, his stone-hard body barreling her over and plowing her into the ground. Bella's paws flailed against him, scrambling for purchase to get the vampire off of her, but again his speed appeared too quick for her. His fingers tightened around her throat. "Such a shame," he mocked, "Most of your kind give a better fight than this..." A furious growl tore through her, partly stifled by his grip. The faoladh opened her jaws and was satisfied when she managed to clamp them down on his shoulder, however awkwardly. His pained grunt was supremely satisfying even as dots began to swim in her vision, the pressure on her throat increasing.

Rosalie's pale form slammed into him, jerking him off her body and forcing him to release her. Bella turned over immediately, gasping for air and looking around for the nomad. She found Rosalie and their attacker wrestling on the ground. Bella hadn't decided whether her joining in would help or hinder yet when she heard a familiar approach, and turned to see Emmett barreling through the trees. His eyes were black and normally friendly face twisted in fury.

He jumped on both vampires, grabbed the nomad by the scruff in one powerful hand and flung him away hard. The nomad's body broke through several trees before coming to a stop several hundred yards away. Emmett tore off after him, but it seemed their attacker hadn't planned on being quite so badly outnumbered, and disappeared. While Emmett searched for the nomad, Bella turned to Rosalie.

It was hard to see her with one arm gone, torn off at the shoulder. Even harder was seeing the literal cracks in her face, evidence of her pain and the damage she had sustained. Rosalie took a step toward her and stumbled. Bella was there immediately, holding her up with a furry shoulder. Rage flooded through her again, thinking of that disgusting nomad taking Rosalie's arm with him. When she saw him next...

Rosalie's pained sigh brought her back to the present. She quickly nudged the vampire up onto her back and headed toward the house.

She sensed distress from her packmates too, and quickened her pace. She trusted that Emmett would find them when he could.

The house was soon in sight and she could hear howls of rage from inside. She picked up the pace, but remained careful of Rosalie on her back. Slowing, she triggered the change. Rosalie's body against hers during the change was excruciating, but feeling her mate's own pain silenced any cry she might have released.

Rosalie stood on her own for a moment while Bella yanked on a t-shirt and shorts from a nearby log. As soon as she was dressed, Bella slung an arm around her waist and they both hurried into the
Flinging the door open, her nostrils immediately filled with the scent of rage, fear...and blood. "Paul!" She yelled, her voice booming through the house. "Leah!"

She thought about leaving Rosalie in the kitchen, but knew she couldn't bear the separation. Turned out she didn't have far to go anyway.

In the living room she found Paul, Leah, and Kate. Leah was wearing fur and favoring one leg, holding it above the floor. Both she and Paul were covered in blood. Kate crouched beside Paul with a feral look on her face. Bella's eyes moved to the front door, which had been ripped off its hinges. "Paul..." she reached out through the pack bond to get a read on her packmates. "What happened?"

The scent hit her then, or rather scents. A snarl lifted her lips and her eyes darted around. "Where are they?" Her voice had deepened into a growl. Finally, Paul looked at her.

"Where were you?" He asked, voice hoarse. "We needed you!" Bella recoiled, and a soft hiss of warning escaped Rosalie beside her.

"They took Seth!" The ragged scream came from Leah as she struggled to return to human form. Her breathing was labored and tears streamed down her face, desperation plain. Bella walked Rosalie over to the sofa and carefully helped her sit before hurrying over to Leah, lifting her to her feet and over to one of the chairs. Her left leg was very clearly broken. Words poured from Leah. "They said they would rip him in half if we went after them. They said they would do it so fast that he wouldn't even die right away. And I -" She looked helplessly down at her leg and burst into tears.

Impotent rage filled Bella, swirling hot and thick through her limbs. Anger at herself for not being here, self-loathing over what had happened to Rosalie and her pack. What kind of Alpha was she? What kind of mate? Kneeling, she gently drew Leah's head to her shoulder as the she-wolf wailed with fury and pain. Bella never thought she would see the usually tough and stoic she-wolf reduced to this state.

"We will find him." She swore, her voice throbbing with strength and fury. "We will. And we will make the ones who have hurt us pay with their lives."

Paul's gaze met hers in grim agreement. Kate added, "I'll help." Bella nodded at her gratefully. She stepped back from Leah and gazed at her bloodied pack. Bloodied, but not yet broken. Rage swirled inside, but Bella knew she had to pull it together for them. She had to try to be calm, for them. She sucked in a breath, and shoved the anger to the side for the moment. "Alright," she began, "First, get cleaned up. Leah, we need to get that leg seen to. We're going to have to let it heal."

"We will find him." She swore, her voice throbbing with strength and fury. "We will. And we will make the ones who have hurt us pay with their lives."
walked a few paces away to place the call, keeping Paul in sight.

"Listen to me." She watched as all eyes turned to her. Her voice lowered, an angry edge creeping in again despite her best efforts. "They are playing a sick game. To them, this is some grand enterprise." She locked her gaze on Leah, as steady and reassuring as she could be. "They won't kill Seth. Not yet, anyway. They want to play with us a little more first. That means we have a little time." Her eyes hardened, green depths flecked with gold as impenetrable as stone. "Next time we meet? They'll be the ones leaving in pieces." Snarls of agreement filled the room. "Alright, go." She directed that to Paul and Kate, who both disappeared upstairs.

"Leah, I'll be back down in a moment to help you with your leg, and with some clothes." She said, and the she-wolf nodded in understanding, pulling a blanket from the back of the chair she sat in to cover herself for the time being.

Bella quickly turned to Rosalie and, instead of helping her up, simply lifted her into her arms.

"I can walk, you know." Came Rosalie's soft, pained voice.

Bella huffed, relief warming her internally just hearing her speak. "I know."

Taking the stairs two at a time, she reached her room and laid Rosalie down onto her bed. Finally, finally she was able to slow down for a second.

She sat herself down on the bed next to Rosalie, placing a light hand on her knee. Her brow furrowed with worry to see the lines of pain spreading across her mate's beautiful face. "Rosalie, you have to tell me. How bad is this?" Her eyes gazed at the shoulder no longer bearing an arm, taking in the crystallized look of the stump. A clear liquid seemed to glisten faintly around the edges. "You aren't bleeding so I don't know...

Hesitating for a moment, Bella gathered Rosalie's remaining hand into her own. "Tell me what to do."

Rosalie gazed back at her for a few moments, as if debating on telling her something. At last, "It will heal fine on its own, eventually. It just hurts like hell at the moment. Probably worse than anything I've felt since the change." She grimaced. "I'd almost forgotten true pain. My venom will seal it up in time."

Bella frowned as Rosalie stopped speaking, and cocked her head. A faint smile touched Rosalie's face and she said, "You look like a dog when you do that." Despite her pain, a soft laugh escaped her. Bella's expression softened into one of fond annoyance.

"Hey, watch it there." She responded playfully and shook her head. "Why is it we can only seem to get along when one of us is hurt and lying in bed?" The vampire smirked in response, but when another crack appeared on Rosalie's face, Bella sobered and changed the subject. "Rosalie, it seemed like there was something else you were going to tell me just now, but you didn't. What was it?"

The faoladh was shocked at the vehemence in Rosalie's voice, and the earnest, pleading look in her
eyes. It was clear that her desire was to keep Bella from getting hurt. Bella lifted a light hand to rest it against Rosalie's cheek, a warm smile overcoming her face as she did so. Without speaking, she simply leaned forward and rested her forehead against Rosalie's and let herself breathe deeply. Slowly, she eased Rosalie back down onto the bed, letting herself come to rest beside her. Mindful of her missing limb and the pain she knew was radiating from the shoulder, Bella slipped her arms around Rosalie and held her close.

She wasn't sure Rosalie would want to be comforted in this way, but when the vampire seemed to sink into her gratefully, Bella thought maybe it was alright. At least this once. "I promise you that I won't risk my life needlessly," she murmured. "But we are going to have to go after Seth. He's so young. When we go to get him, I am going to try and bring back your arm too. I'll just promise that much." She could feel that Rosalie wasn't sure she agreed with this plan, but she voiced no objections. Gods and spirits, it felt so good to hold her mate this way. She knew Leah needed her downstairs and that she had to go, but for a few moments more she lingered.

The insane events of the past hour flashed before her eyes, Rosalie sharing her past, and Bella saw again James coming away from Rosalie, holding her arm with glee. They hadn't even gotten to talk about what Rosalie had shared with Bella. She hadn't been able to tell Rosalie how much her heart hurt for her, that she would be there for her no matter what, and that trauma like that didn't just go away. Not even when a hundred years had passed...and it was okay to still be hurting over it. She sucked in a pained breath and turned her face into Rosalie's hair. So many things they hadn't gotten to say; it seemed that the universe conspired against them. A cool arm slid around her, and now Bella was the one being comforted. "Rose," she whispered, voice shaking, and unconsciously using a nickname for the first time, "When I saw what he had done... Gods, I'm so sorry I couldn't stop him. I'm so sorry you got hurt." A tear escaped her, and she felt Rosalie stroke her hair gently. Too much had happened.

"It's not your fault Bella," Rosalie whispered, "I rushed him without thinking...and he was so damned fast... No, there was nothing you could have done, and I am glad he didn't get a chance to attack you." Bella shook her head, not sure she believed that. Her fighting skills were sorely lacking compared to the hundred or so years of experience the nomad had. Rosalie ignored her and continued, her serious tone cutting through Bella's internal rebuke. "Don't forget Bella, you were the target. He wanted you. Please...please be careful. For me." The faoladh wasn't even sure she still deserved Rosalie's concern anymore. Still, she knew the warmth she felt from Rosalie now was real. It was everything Bella could do to pull herself together enough to lean away from Rosalie then. Spirits, she just wanted to stay there on her bed and talk about all the things they needed to. She wanted to rest her head on Rosalie's shoulder for a little while longer, but that would have to wait. Taking a deep breath, she offered Rosalie a shaky smile. "I will be careful. And Rose?" When the vampire's slender, golden eyebrow rose in question she said, "Thank you."

That perfect brow furrowed. "For what?"

Bella's smile grew. "For giving me a chance. I promise too that we will have our date. And no gods-forsaken red-eyed vampires are going to stop us." Rosalie's startled expression gave way to a smile, which grew wider still when Bella leaned down again to press her lips lightly to her cheek. "I'll be back as soon as I can. If the pain gets better, come on down." Rosalie nodded, and Bella got up and quickly headed back downstairs, grabbing bandages for Leah as well as a shirt and shorts as she went. Despite everything, her heart felt warm in her chest with Rosalie's care. She knew better than to hope too much, but she desperately wanted to think that maybe things would work out for them after all.

Once she was back in the living room, she hurried over to Leah. "Hey, okay. I've got some loose
clothes for you and some bandages." At the worried look on Leah's face, Bella huffed out a soft laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not going to splint it. Not unless I really have to." Bella shook her head, "Dr. Cullen will be here soon, and he can definitely do a better job than I can."

Leah offered her own pained smile in response. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but that sounds good." She leaned forward to take the shirt Bella offered, pulling it on before doing her best to help her alpha slide the loose shorts up her legs. A gasp escaped her when her injured leg moved, and Bella whispered an apology. "Thanks Bella." Leah murmured shyly, her cheeks flushed slightly in embarrassment.

The faoladh dropped into a crouch next to her packmate and reached out to clasp her hand tightly. "You're welcome. I know you'd do the same for me if our positions were reversed." Leah nodded fervently, and Bella smiled. Though she was usually comfortable in her own nudity, she knew that Leah and the others had not been born with their abilities. Even Bella became self-conscious once in a while, so she sympathized. Additionally, she didn't want Leah to feel even more vulnerable in front of Carlisle. That could have unfortunate results. Not too long ago Leah and Paul considered the Cullens deadly enemies; leaving her in too vulnerable a position with a vampire might be enough to push Leah into a defensive state.

It turned out that Bella had gotten Leah dressed not a moment too soon, for she soon heard the sound of squealing tires in the driveway and a familiar car door slam. "Bella!" Came Charlie's voice from outside, and she winced, giving Leah's hand a final squeeze before getting to her feet.

"I'm alright Dad." She said calmly when Charlie came barreling in the front door, weapon drawn. He looked around carefully for a moment before returning his gun to his holster and hurrying across the room to her.

"What happened Bells? There's blood everywhere!" His eyes stopped on Leah's broken leg and pain-lined face. "What happened!"

She began to give him a rundown of the last several hours when her keen ears picked up the sound of swift, sure feet approaching. A moment later Carlisle stood in the doorway, and she could see just over his shoulder that he wasn't alone. She broke off her narrative to her father and addressed him, "Please come in Carlisle. Everyone." Charlie whipped around in shock, not having heard the vampires. Carlisle bowed his head in acceptance and crossed the threshold.

Not that vampires actually needed an invitation. Carlisle was just very polite. Bella took Charlie's stunned silence as an opportunity to usher him to the kitchen. "Dad, I'll explain everything. Just wait here for a minute, please?" Charlie protested for a few seconds, but subsided after re-stating that it would, in fact, only be one minute that he would wait.

Bella hurried back out into the living room and found that Carlisle was already looking at Leah's leg. After a nod to Esme, Jasper, and Alice, she said, "There was a fight here with the nomads, and Leah's leg was broken in the process." She crossed to the back of the chair and laid a calming hand on Leah's shoulder, looking down at Carlisle as she did so. "Can you set it here?"

Carlisle glanced up at her briefly, his fingers gliding lightly over the injured area. "Yes, though it's fortunate I didn't get here any later. The bone is already starting to heal this way." He nodded to his family, "Why don't you all follow Bella into the kitchen to hear what happened, and I will tend to Miss Clearwater out here?" They nodded dutifully and walked into the next room. Bella could hear them greeting Charlie. "Bella, before you go, would you help me move Ms. Clearwater to the couch? It will make it easier to stretch out her leg."

Bella came around the side of the chair and slid one arm gently under Leah's thighs and the other
around her shoulders. "Is this alright?" She asked quietly. Leah took a breath and nodded. Carlisle carefully supported the broken limb as they transferred her to the couch.

The vampires who had arrived ran through her mind, and Bella realized there had been one missing. She raised an eyebrow at Carlisle, and to his credit he knew immediately what she was asking.

"Edward," he said, "Is keeping watch outside. He's making rounds so he can alert us if they come back." Bella nodded thoughtfully, and put him out of her mind for the moment.

"Paul!" She called up the stairs. Immediately, her packmate came clambering down them.

"What is it?" He asked. He'd taken the time to get cleaned up, as she had suggested. A few moments later, Kate followed him down. She gestured to Leah.

"Stay with her please," she said, "Dr. Cullen is going to set her leg. I need to start briefing everyone on what happened so we can form a new plan." Paul nodded gravely, and went to sit beside Leah's head, taking one of her hands in his. "Leah," she met the she-wolf's worried eyes, "It will be alright. Dr. Cullen is very good. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me." She kept their link open, allowing soothing feelings to filter through until she saw Leah begin to relax.

Bella headed for the kitchen, pausing at the threshold. "Rosalie, do you want to come down?" She whispered, knowing the vampire could hear her.

"No," came the quiet response, "I'll rest here. I can hear what's going on." Rosalie must still be in a lot of pain, Bella surmised. For a moment, red-hot rage flared within her again, but she quashed it along with the intense desire to go upstairs to be with her. Now wasn't the time.

Walking into the kitchen, she blinked at the unexpectedly domestic scene: Esme had found a skillet and was cooking something, Charlie was leaning against the fridge flipping through his notebook, and Alice and Jasper were seated at the kitchen table as if waiting for...what time even was it? She thought it must be time for supper by now, surely. Was it Sunday yet? Was she supposed to have school tomorrow? Giving her head a shake, she resolved not to worry about that for now...

Addressing the group, Bella wasted no more time and divulged the events that had transpired over the past few hours.

She described with as much detail as possible what had transpired in the woods between herself, Rosalie, and the nomad who attacked them, ending with Emmett driving him off and giving chase. Angry hisses filled the room when she revealed that the nomad had taken Rosalie's arm. "And Emmett hasn't come back yet," she said with some worry. Esme immediately looked at Alice, who had a faraway look on her face. After a moment, the smallest vampire blinked and leaned into Jasper.

"I saw Emmett," she said, "He's coming back this way. He lost the nomad." The relief in the room was palpable, but Bella also felt a small measure of disappointment. She had rather hoped Emmett had caught the nomad and returned the favor for Rosalie's arm.

Bella resumed her explanation. "I don't know all of the details of what happened here at the house, but I know that the other two nomads attacked everyone here." She looked at the assembled vampires and her father grimly. "Not only did they rough up my pack, but they took Seth." At the confused looks of the vampires, she elaborated. "Seth is Leah Clearwater's little brother. He came here yesterday to see Leah against Sam's orders. I managed to break his connection to Sam so that he could stay but..." Bella heaved a heavy sigh. "Well, now they've taken him. I can't track him through a pack bond because Seth isn't in my pack. We hadn't gotten to that yet."
She heard a high pitched whine from the next room, and winced in sympathy. Leah obviously hadn't thought of that. She sent soothing thoughts toward Leah. A moment later, she and Paul appeared in the doorway. Leah's leg was splinted, her face utterly devastated. Paul helped her into a chair, and Carlisle appeared soon after them.

"It sounds like," said the Cullen patriarch, "These nomads are playing a game." His voice was grim, and Bella nodded.

"That's what I thought too," she said, "Especially the way the one in the woods talked to me and Rosalie. He said he was going to "hang on" to her arm." A growl rippled through her at the memory, and she worked to stifle it and added, "And he was so fast."

Rosalie's voice drifted down the stairs. Everyone but Charlie could hear her. "Bella, make sure you tell them what he was really after." Her tone was chiding, and Bella looked down in embarrassment.

"Bella," asked Carlisle in concern, "What does she mean?"

When Charlie just looked confused, Alice leaned over to him and quietly repeated what Rosalie had said. Bella sighed in resignation. "The nomad was after me. He seemed...excited...at the prospect of hunting someone of my species." Disgust dripped from each word. Silence reigned for a moment as this information was absorbed.

Charlie was the quickest to recover. "Why would he be specifically after you? That makes no sense! Vampires can't drink your blood..." He glanced at Carlisle for silent confirmation, and when the Cullen patriarch nodded he continued. "So what would he get out of attacking you?" His police training was kicking in, looking for motive. Carlisle was the one who provided it.

"Bella, I fear that I know the answer to that." The doctor clasped his hands before him. "Do you remember when we spoke in my office?" Bella frowned, thinking back while Carlisle continued to speak. "And I told you about our vampire royalty, the Volturi?"

The faoladh's eyes widened in sudden remembrance and she sucked in a breath. "You mean..." She trailed off, her heart rate picking up as she began to put some of the pieces together.

Carlisle nodded solemnly. "Yes. I don't think the nomads came here knowing that you were here, but this hunter nomad you encountered...when he realized that there was one of your kind here he decided to stay. I suspect he was once a hunter for the Volturi. If he does in fact have gifts like our Alice, then he would have been a perfect assassin." Carlisle's eyes fixed on Charlie's stricken face. "Chief Swan, there was a time when the royal vampire court decreed open season on other supernatural creatures. Faoladh among them. If the Volturi were to find out that your daughter exists, they would come for her." His eyes drifted around, taking in the alarmed looks on the faces of his family. Paul and Leah looked angry. "I don't think the Volturi know. I think this has occurred by chance. We need to keep it that way."

Bella looked up suddenly. Carlisle meant that the nomads needed to die. The game had changed. Leah and Paul both growled their approval, but Bella felt uneasy. It was one thing to take out a threat to the human populace. It was another to kill someone on her own behalf. She wasn't sure what she thought about that.

"Okay well," Bella said, "So they're after me." She shrugged with nonchalance she didn't really feel. "That just means that we know how to get to them. Eventually, he's going to want to come after me again. If we make sure to set it up right, we can get him when he comes. In the meantime, we can still try to track them. It's possible they deliberately left a trail this time because they want me to follow them."
"No Bella," The faoladh turned in surprise to see Rosalie in the doorway of the kitchen, leaning heavily against it. Her eyes burned. "You will not be bait."

Bella quickly crossed the kitchen, reaching out as she did so. "Rosalie, take it easy." She was relieved when the vampire allowed her to slip an arm around her waist and take some of her weight. It was obvious the vampire was still in a lot of pain. "Come on, let's get you into a chair." Paul vacated the one he had been sitting in, and Bella sent him a flash of gratitude through their link. A moment later, she was helping the protesting vampire into the seat. "I know you don't need to, just humor me." She murmured, and the vampire finally subsided.

Rosalie's eyes were very, very black. Bella's eyes strayed to her very human father for a moment. While she didn't think Rosalie would ever hurt him, no matter how hungry she was, she didn't want her mate to suffer. Placing a hand on Rosalie's good shoulder, she leaned in and placed a light kiss on her cheek. "I'm going to hunt for you." She knew the beautiful vampire would argue, so she kept talking. "Just let me do this for you. I'll be alright, I won't need to go very far." Bella knew the fauna in the area very well, and she knew exactly where to go to catch a deer. "How do you feel about whitetail?"

The golden-haired vampire opened her mouth to argue, but found Bella's sweet, earnest face irresistible. Being cared for in this way was something foreign to Rosalie and, despite herself, she felt a faint smile curve her lips. "Alright." She said, her usual annoyance absent from her voice. As Bella turned away from her she caught the surprised look on Jasper's face, the smirk on Alice's, and the sheer happiness from Esme. Carlisle just continued to exude his usual kindness. "I'll be right back." She said to the room.

Charlie spoke up, "I don't think that's a good idea Bella, not with those things after you." The worried tremor in his voice caught at her heart, but she needed to do something. Anything. And this was something she could do for her mate.

She looked at him as reassuringly as she could. "I doubt they'd attack me again so soon, and I'm just going to the falls, you know where. They're very close." Charlie didn't look happy, but he finally nodded. Bella glanced at Carlisle, "Keep planning. Let me know what I missed when I get back." The patriarch nodded, and gestured to Alice and Jasper as he replied.

"Actually, I think hunting is a very good idea. We're all a little stressed. Why don't you two go for a hunt too, and Esme and I can whip up something here for everyone else?" His soothing voice washed over everyone, and Bella marveled at his natural ability to gain the trust of those around him. Something about the doctor felt reassuring, even when it shouldn't be. "I'll send Emmett, too, when he gets here."

Esme clapped her hands together, "Oh, I know just the thing!" She grinned at Charlie, Paul, and Leah and started pulling things from the kitchen fridge and cabinets. Bella shot a glance at Leah, and was relieved to see that the she-wolf was too tired to get angry. Or maybe she just understood that all that could be done, was being done at the moment.

Bella nodded, pleased that everyone would take a short break. "Ok, then lets go." She said to Jasper and Alice, who fell into step behind her. They left through the backdoor and split up from there. Once in the cover of the woods, she stripped off the clothes she had donned not long before and again let fur sheath her limbs. She was tired, her body told her, but knowing that there was something she could do for her mate lent her the strength she needed. The joy she felt from the simple task of providing for Rosalie could not be denied either.

Allowing her wolf instincts to take over, Bella stalked silently through the forest. Her ears swiveled as she listened for prey. A rabbit was nearby, but she knew this would not satisfy her mate. Not with
so great an injury. As she moved stealthily toward the falls where she knew a herd of deer liked to bed down, she was reminded again that she would need to work with her pack on silent movement.

At last, her keen ears picked up what she had been looking for: a familiar heartbeat.

The hunt was over too soon, but this time, time was of the essence. Her great jaws had made quick work of the buck's neck. She did her best not to spill too much of the precious blood; this proved more of a challenge than she had thought, and it was hard to resist the temptation to take a few bites herself. Shifting again, Bella ducked her head under the belly of the deer and hoisted it onto her shoulders. She kept up a steady jog back to the house and, as she thought, ran into nothing more sinister than another rabbit on the way back. The nomads were gone. At least for the moment.

Getting her clothes on again, Bella looked up to see that Jasper was already walking out with Rosalie. His hunt must have been even faster than hers, she mused. She could practically feel the hunger rolling off of her mate, and smiled when Rosalie fell on the deer. Jasper walked over to her once he was sure Rosalie was fine, and offered her his own smile.

"Taking a little break was a good plan," he told her in his soft southern drawl. "Things were getting tense." He tilted his head at Rosalie. "She usually goes for predators..." he glanced sidelong at Bella and winked, "But I think she may not do that so much anymore."

Despite herself, Bella felt a blush rise in her cheeks. "Well..." She shifted uncertainly, "Rosalie can hunt whatever she likes." Though Bella did privately hope that Rosalie would consider not hunting wolves now. Jasper just chuckled and shook his head.

"I'll leave you to it. Best come back in soon though." He raised a hand as if to tip a hat that wasn't there, caught himself, and bowed his head instead before going back into the house.

Bella waited until Rosalie's borderline frenzy seemed to fade before approaching. "Rose?"

The beautiful vampire stood gracefully, using her remaining hand to lift her lovely hair over her shoulder. When she turned, Bella watched mesmerized as a pale tongue licked blood stained lips clean. Feeling hot suddenly, Bella swallowed and gave herself a mental shake. Lifting her gaze to Rosalie's eyes, she gave a start. While a normal "vegetarian" vampire's eyes were gold when they were sated, Rosalie's were now different. Taking a step toward her, Bella studied them intently. While her eyes were still mostly gold, and as striking as ever, they were now shot through with flecks of green.

"Bella?" The vampire questioned uncertainly, concerned by the faoladh's long silence. Bella quickly relaxed her gaze and flashed a reassuring smile.

"Sorry," she said. Seeing the discomfort on Rosalie's face, she reached for her hand, interlaced their fingers and gave it a firm squeeze.

Tension eased out of Rosalie, but there was still worry in her eyes, "I thought maybe seeing me feed..." she searched Bella's face intently, and the faoladh's heart dropped.

Squeezing her hand tight, the she-wolf shook her head vehemently. "No no, that wasn't it!" She gazed at Rosalie earnestly, "That hadn't even crossed my mind. Rose, we are alike in that way. We both need to feed, and both of our methods probably seem a little strange to outsiders but," Bella smiled again, "you never have to worry about that with me." Rosalie relaxed.

"Well if that's not it, why were you looking at me like that?" She tilted her head curiously, and Bella almost laughed. Rosalie had just teased her for the same motion not long ago.
Sobering, she studied Rosalie's eyes once again. "It's your eyes," Bella explained. "They're different. Instead of just gold...there's green now too." The vampire's delicate eyebrows drew down in confusion.

"How...?" Rosalie paused, and then, "Carlisle!"

The Cullen patriarch appeared a moment later. Without waiting for an explanation, he spoke. "I had wondered if something along these lines would happen." He strode toward the pair and gestured toward Bella's green eyes, "Bella, your eyes are now flecked with gold. Previously they were a green/brown, though now I see mostly green and, of course, gold flecks. Have you not noticed?"

Bella frowned in thought, vaguely remembering that she had noted the change in her eyes at some point. "I had just thought it had to do with my increased wolf activity. My eyes turn yellow when I shift..." Carlisle shook his head.

"No, the gold in your eyes," he turned and nodded to Rosalie, "And the green in yours, is indicative of the fact that you have each, in your own ways, accepted the bond between you. This is a physical manifestation. This is common in your kind Bella, to adopt traits of your mate." Carlisle stroked his chin thoughtfully as he studied Rosalie. "But I wasn't sure how this would translate to a vampire mate."

Bella and Rosalie stared at each other curiously. "I wonder if anything else will change?" Bella questioned aloud, thinking of her own slightly tapered ears and mottled hair. She barely resisted the urge to reach up and feel her face. And then the implication of Carlisle's words hit her fully. This meant that Rosalie had accepted the bond. While it had felt that way before, in her room, to hear it said out loud... Tears suddenly sprang to the corners of her eyes as emotion overwhelmed her.

"Bella!" Rosalie moved in front of her, reaching out to cup her face as a tear escaped. "What is wrong?" Her voice was upset, and Bella wasn't sure how to reassure her that really, nothing was wrong. Everything was right.

Carlisle had slipped away, but neither Rosalie nor Bella noticed. Bella took Rosalie's hand from her face and placed it over her heart, holding it tightly. Instead of speaking, she reached inwardly for her mate, feeling that flickering connection that had sprung up between them when Rosalie had attacked her. That connection had been weak, faltering, but now it was gaining strength, and Bella held onto it tightly, trying to share her feelings with Rosalie almost the way she could with Paul and Leah. This felt different though. Private, intimate.

Gazing into golden eyes now shot through with green, Bella poured her joy, comfort, and rapture into the bond between them. She knew when Rosalie finally felt it, finally understood, when her eyes widened.

"I'm so happy," Bella whispered, voice raw, "That you are giving me a chance. I promise I won't waste it."

Rosalie leaned forward and pressed her lips lightly to Bella's, so tenderly that she felt her knees weaken. Bella lifted Rosalie's hand again until it rested around her neck, and slipped her own arms around the vampire's waist, holding her close. The kiss ended, and Bella rested her cheek against Rosalie's, enjoying the deep feeling of sharing.

For the first time, she could feel more from Rosalie than a flicker and as she embraced that connection she gasped as some of Rosalie's pain seeped into her. Her own arm burned with phantom pain, and Bella could feel an even greater torment beyond. She tightened her grip around Rosalie even as her mate tried to pull her pain back. "It's okay to share." Bella murmured. "Let me carry
some of your pain, for a little while?" A deep, shuddering sigh escaped Rosalie then, and she buried her face in Bella's shoulder for a moment, nodding. Bella had to strain her ears to catch the faint, "Ok".

In response, Bella welcomed in Rosalie's pain, suppressing a gasp as she did so. Taking a moment to adjust to the feeling, she then tried to send back relief. Maybe it would help.

"Let's go back inside." She suggested quietly, and again Rosalie nodded. Together, they headed back into the house.

Break time was over. It was time now. Time to plan for war.

Chapter End Notes

Alright! Well that's another chapter! I truly hope that you enjoyed it. Thank you to those of you who have left me so many kind comments, and bookmarked my story! You all make it worth it.
Let Slip the Dogs of War

Chapter Notes

It has been a long stretch since my last update, once again! I apologize. Late fall, early winter is a very busy time for me at work. I also may have taken a break in November to take a crack at NaNoWriMo. To my shame, I didn't complete it! It was a fun ride though, and an excellent challenge. Additionally, I have been under a lot of mental strain both in my personal and professional life. I have truly been struggling the past few months to find the motivation for anything. This particular chapter was also a difficult one to write - there's a lot going on. Now, on to the main event! I hope that you all enjoy it. Thank you as always to my sister Lady_Lullaby who helps me to stay on course with every chapter, and of course to my darling readers who have left me so many kind words. Thank you all!

Trigger Warnings: Violence, mentions of torture, and death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last time: Bella and Rosalie are attacked in the woods by a nameless nomad, who removes Rosalie's arm in the scuffle and taunts Bella with the knowledge that she is his prey. Emmett arrives and drives him off. Bella and Rosalie return to Bella's house to find tensions high for Paul, Leah, and Kate-they had been attacked by the other two nomads, Leah's leg broken in the process. Additionally, Seth had been taken. Bella invites the Cullens over and gives them and Charlie the rundown of events, and when Rosalie comes down decides to take a little break in order to hunt for her mate. Jasper and Alice decide to hunt too, and the brief reprieve is welcomed. Rosalie and Bella share a moment as they discover that the mating bond has now been accepted by both parties.

When Bella laid down to rest that night, it was with the knowledge that they had a plan. It certainly wasn't fool-proof, but it was a plan, and that was more than they'd had before. Her body and mind were so exhausted that she couldn't have worried more over it even if she had wanted to anyway. To help settle herself, she let her mind gloss over the main parts...

First, Edward, Alice, and Jasper would disperse through the woods around her house to find any trace of the nomads that they could. Edward, for his mind reading ability, speed, and intellect, Alice for her premonition abilities, and Jasper for his tracking experience. Between the three of them, if there was anything to be found, they would find it.

Second, while Edward, Alice, and Jasper were hunting, Bella would be training with Emmett to learn more about vampire fighting. They didn't have much time, but Bella wanted to gain as much knowledge and experience as she could before the coming fight. Paul would join her for those lessons. Leah would stay with Paul's mother, Joanne. Her leg wouldn't be healed enough to come with them, though Leah had argued that point hotly until Bella put her foot down.

Third, Carlisle and Esme would look after Rosalie, and Kate would reach out to her sisters to let them know that it was time. Regardless of any information they may have found, all hands were needed on deck for this fight.

Fourth, Bella herself had reached out to Joanne, to alert the La Push wolves to the situation. She
would much rather have spoken to Jacob herself, but he had been unreachable. She didn't know what was going on at the rez, but she knew she'd just have to trust that Jacob was doing whatever he could to stabilize his pack and deal with Sam. Whether the La Push wolves would join them to hunt down the nomads...she didn't know. If it were left up to Sam, she doubted they would be showing up anytime soon. For the time being, they weren't counting on additional support.

Finally, once a trail had been found, or even an idea of direction, the Cullens and the Swan pack would set out in two waves to attack the nomads. The primary goal being, of course, to rescue Seth. The secondary goal, to the group, was to kill the nomads. Privately, Bella's secondary goal was to recover Rosalie's arm. She fervently hoped that the nomad who'd ripped it off had kept it.

As if the thought had summoned her, Bella's nose picked up a familiar scent. Her eyes opened and a weary smile crossed her cheeks as she looked up from her bed to see Rosalie standing beside her. The moonlight through her window seemed to make her glow, heightening her already astounding beauty. Rosalie had initially gone back with the Cullens, but Bella could feel through their link that she hadn't wanted to stay away. Bella hadn't wanted her to go, either.

The faoladh lifted a hand out to Rosalie, which the vampire took readily. Gently, Bella pulled her down onto the bed beside her. Rosalie gracefully slipped beneath the covers and turned so that her back was facing Bella, her wounded shoulder, now bandaged, faced up. Sensing what she wanted, Bella moved herself forward and tucked her body around Rosalie's, slipping an arm lightly around her waist, half afraid of hurting her. That worry was soon dashed though when Rosalie's remaining hand grabbed Bella's and pulled it more tightly around her body. Bella happily tightened her grip, smiling faintly when she heard Rosalie release a contented sigh. No words were exchanged between them; none were needed.

Feeling far more at ease than she had a moment ago, Bella let herself slip into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Seth cracked his eyes open blearily. His thoughts moved sluggishly, and his head throbbed. His shoulders also ached, though it took some time for him to figure out that this was because his arms were bound tightly behind his back, wrapped in thick cord from elbows to wrists. He couldn't feel his hands. The voices that had woken him trickled in, gradually bringing him to a state of greater wakefulness. Memory returned, and he remembered that the last thing he saw before losing consciousness was a red-eyed vampire. The voices around him were unfamiliar, and as his eyes focused on two figures standing near him, they shot open wide to see two such creatures, currently in hot debate over something. His heart raced as his predicament became clear.

One of the vampires, a woman with flaming red hair, broke off and looked at him suddenly, no doubt picking up on his increased heart rate. A cruel smile twisted her lips as she prowled toward him. "Looks like the whelp is awake..." A low, sinister laugh passed her lips. "I think you should have just killed him James, but since he's here...why don't we play a little?"

The man, James, strode forward quickly and grabbed her arm before she could reach Seth, who looked on with wide eyes, fear pounding through him. It was painfully clear to him how vulnerable he was. No pack, injured, and restrained so tightly that shifting right now...might do serious damage.

"Victoria," he hissed, "my sweet," he added when she glared at him, "we need him alive so that the faoladh will come to us. She is the prize." Victoria's lip curled in jealousy and disgust.

"I don't understand your obsession with this girl!" Victoria shook him off angrily. "Kill her, fine! But why all this song and dance? And ripping off the Cullen girl's arm?" She leveled a toe-curling look at him. "James, with only three in our coven it would be foolish to piss off the largest coven in the area."
We can't take all of them, even with Laurent.”

James drew back frowning, "Where is Laurent, anyway?" He said, looking around the secluded warehouse they were in. After taking off from Forks, the nomads had taken Seth to the outskirts of Port Angeles, settling in a mostly abandoned warehouse district.

Victoria threw her arms up in frustration. "That's not the point!" She yelled, voice reverberating off the sheet metal walls. "He's off hunting somewhere - James, please." She stared at him intensely. "Can't we just leave? Let's kill the whelp, and get out of here. I don't want to start a war with the Cullens." James stared at her dispassionately, and it was evident from his eyes that he cared little for her pleas. His gaze flicked to Seth, who swallowed.

"Hurt the shifter if you want. Just don't kill him." He walked away. Something very like a growl reverberated from Victoria's chest, and her eyes glowed red in the dim light, rage evident in every plane of her face. She couldn't take her rage out on James, her mate. Slowly, she turned around, hateful gaze burning into Seth. He gulped, feeling painfully alone.

"Let's play, dog."

When Bella woke early the next morning, she realized sleepily that she was not alone in her bed. Reflexively, her arm tightened around the body next to her, and she remembered with sudden elation that it was Rosalie. And Rosalie had stayed. Vampires didn't sleep, she knew, and yet Rosalie had stayed.

"Good morning," she murmured against Rosalie's neck, sleep still in her voice. She felt Rosalie shiver in response. Bella took a slow breath in, savoring the light, sweet scent that was her.

"Good morning," the vampire returned, somewhat shyly. Bella scooted back a little and allowed Rosalie to turn over. They shared a bashful smile for a moment, and Bella allowed herself to bask in the perfect feeling of right that was waking up with her mate beside her.

A curious look touched Rosalie's face, and Bella rose an eyebrow in silent question. "I think..." Rosalie murmured, "I think that I actually slept a little..."

Bella's eyes widened. "But I thought vampires don't sleep?" This was an interesting development.

"We don't..." Rosalie responded slowly, puzzling over it, "I haven't slept in almost eighty years..." As she sat up, Bella sat up with her. "I wonder if this is one of those changes Carlisle mentioned?"

Bella shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe? Perhaps I'll need less sleep in the future...and we'll start to balance each other out?" She felt a little anxious, uncertain how Rosalie felt about this new development. Her fears were quickly assuaged as a beautiful smile crossed the vampire's face.

"I actually slept," she said again. "I can't believe it!" A little laugh bubbled up, and Bella found herself smiling too, pleased that her mate was happy. "Sleep was one of the things I missed the most about being human." Rosalie shook her head in amazement.

Bella rested a light hand on Rosalie's leg, over the covers. "Then I'm glad." They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, and then Bella sighed. It was time to get started. Edward, Alice, and Jasper had likely already started their sweep, since they certainly wouldn't have needed sleep. It was time for Bella and Paul to start their training with Emmett.

"I wish I could stay here with you, Rose," Bella said, "but I have to go now." She moved to slide out of bed, but stopped when Rosalie's hand fastened around her arm. Before she could react, Bella felt
herself pulled backward almost roughly. "Wha-?" Her back hit the mattress. She blinked and Rosalie was straddling her, gazing down at her with tempestuous, beautiful eyes, and spun gold hair falling in waves over one shoulder. Bella caught her breath at the sight, her heart speeding up in her chest. A deep blush spread across her face, and Bella could even feel the tips of her ears burning. "Rose?" she breathed.

The vampire leaned down until her face was a hair's breadth from Bella's, words coming low and heated. "You had better not get yourself hurt again, Bella Swan, do you understand? You had better come back to me in one piece." The faoladh gazed up at her, speechless. "No foolish risks. I will not be held responsible for what happens if anything happens to you." Rosalie drew back a moment, eyes studying Bella's face hard, as though memorizing it. "I've only just found you..." she breathed, and swiftly leaned back in to press her lips fiercely to Bella's.

The kiss was deep, passionate, and Bella gasped into it as she felt Rosalie force the connection between them wide, flooding her with feelings of need, want, and desire...but also, leading all of these, was love. Bella wrapped her arms around Rosalie and drew her tightly against her, returning the kiss with her own intensity. She sat up, bringing Rosalie with her, not disconnecting their lips. Rosalie's hand drifted up and into her hair, threading through it.

At last Bella pulled back, breathing hard, and leaned her forehead against her mate's. Her heart was nearly beating out of her chest, and it was with some work that she managed to slow it. Rosalie, of course, had no such problem, though for a vampire her cheeks were flushed and she looked about as gloriously disheveled as Bella had ever seen her.

When she had caught her breath, Bella said, "Wow." Never in her life had she experienced a kiss like that. She didn't think anything had ever been harder than pulling away. A satisfied smile touched Rosalie's face for a moment, and then she sobered.

"Promise me." Rosalie whispered, hand resting against Bella's neck and cheek. "Please." Her eyes had darkened, but the expression and emotion in them was earnest, and vulnerable. Rosalie's heart was laid bare, Bella realized, and it was up to her to handle it gently.

Bella held her gaze and rested her hand around Rose's. "Rosalie, I promise that I will come back to you." Her lips twitched into a smile, "I could never leave you." It was in her nature to crack a joke to alleviate moments like this, but for once she held it in. This was serious. She was making a promise she may be unable to keep, but Rosalie needed to hear it. Bella meant it. She would not allow the nomads to destroy what they had managed to build. Leaning in, she pressed a brief kiss to her mate's lips, and rested her cheek against the vampire's for a few precious seconds. "Ok," she whispered, "now I have to go. Emmett will be waiting." And she knew that Esme and Carlisle would be waiting for Rosalie.

This time, when she got up, Rosalie didn't stop her, but got up as well. A second later, she was gone.

Bella wasted no time in getting ready, and called for Paul. As difficult as it was, she would put Rosalie from her mind for now.

A harsh grunt escaped as the air left her lungs in a great whoosh. The impact with the ground left a deep furrow and reverberated through her body. Bella groaned.

"You can't try to follow me with your eyes Bella," came Emmett's voice above her, unusually stern. She had never before seen Emmett so serious; today, there was no jocular glint in his familiar golden eyes.
Paul rushed over from his spot across the glade, his concern evident on his face and through their link. She felt also a flicker of anger toward the vampire, which she quickly quelled. Emmett was being serious and tough because the situation in which they now found themselves was equally such. There was a life on the line, and the focus needed to be on him - not on the Swan pack's inexperience with this kind of fight. She did take Paul's hand though, and flashed him a small smile of gratitude.

She turned to Emmett and lowered into a crouch. "Again."

Before the word had finished crossing her lips, Emmett blurred into motion. This time, Bella did her best to rely on all of her senses. Although she wasn't yet quick enough to completely dodge Emmett's tackle, she was able to move her body in the same direction and lessen the impact, rolling away across the ground relatively unscathed this time.

When Emmett stopped again, he offered her a grim nod of acknowledgement. "Better."

They continued working for the next few hours, stopping only when Alice appeared at the edge of the glade, expression tense.

All three paused and looked at her. "What is it Alice?" Bella ventured first. Her shirt was drenched in sweat from exertion. Dirt and leaf detritus stuck to her face and in her hair, with flecks of blood interspersed from scratches here and there. Paul didn't look much better - Emmett had really put them through their paces. They would need a lot more training in the long run, but in the short run, Bella felt better prepared to deal with the nomads or other rogue vampires.

Alice took a few agitated steps forward, "We think we found something," she responded, "Come on." When her small form took off, there were three larger ones in immediate pursuit. As Paul's feet crashed through the undergrowth loudly, Bella winced. She had forgotten to work with him on that. Now there was no time. A sudden, wild thrill pulsed through her body, and her heart raced in anticipation. It wasn't precisely excitement - for that would be inappropriate. No. It was the high before the hunt. Her wolf howled inwardly, fiercely pleased to have a chance to hunt down their enemies. The wolf grin that spread across her face, canines elongated, was mirrored by Paul when she looked at him. No doubt her eyes glowed yellow.

A few minutes later, they caught up with Jasper who knelt low on the ground, looking closely at something. That must be an old habit, Bella thought as she slowed to a walk. She knew for a fact that his eyes were plenty keen enough to have seen whatever he was staring at so intensely while standing - heck, maybe even from high up in a tree!

She stopped a short distance away and waited for Jasper's assessment, allowing her senses to range outward. Her ears picked up nothing unusual in the sounds of the forest, and her nose picked up little as well. Concentrating on her nose, she breathed deeply - there. The faintest whiff of a familiar scent touched her nostrils, and her eyes widened. Breathing again didn't bring her the scent anymore, but it didn't matter, she'd gotten it. "Seth." she said aloud. Paul looked at her sharply, and now Jasper did look up from his task.

He offered her a grim smile. "You smelled it, then?" When Bella nodded, he waved her and Paul over. She approached him curiously, and looked toward the spot he indicated. It took her time to realize what she was looking at: a drop of blood. To be precise, it was a drop of blood smaller than a pinhead. How on earth Jasper had ever seen it, she didn't know.

"It's so small," Jasper said softly, "I thought it must have been a mistake on their part. In their hurry, they had a momentary lapse..." He shook his head. "Now, I don't think so." He looked up at Bella, eyes calm and serious. "The nomad you fought was interested in you, yes?"
Bella nodded, "Yeah. That's what he said, anyway."

Jasper nodded and rubbed his chin. "Well, in light of the fact that they have not made communication, I think this was deliberately left so that you could find them...and walk into a trap."

Instant anxiety from Paul flooded into her, and Bella abruptly cut off their connection. A soft whine from Paul made her shoot him an apologetic glance. She couldn't afford to let his worry throw her off balance. This would be a fight of literal life and death.

Looking hard first at Alice, and then at Jasper, Bella straightened. "Alright. Then let's spring this trap."

There was worry on all of their faces now, but she was glad none of them voiced it. "Let's bring the others into this then," said Emmett, "I'll call Carlisle. We can strategize here as well as anywhere."

He took a few paces away from them and slipped a cell from his pocket.

Paul took that moment to come up beside her, reaching out a hand to lightly touch her wrist. The need to establish physical contact was evident on his face, and, she thought a little guiltily, he probably needed it after she'd closed their empathic link so abruptly. "Bella," his voice came low and urgent, despite the fact that all three vampires in the vicinity could hear him anyway, "We shouldn't rush this. I want to rescue Seth as badly as you do, but we can't risk you too." His normally warm, brown eyes were now clouded with worry, and Bella sighed.

She turned fully to face him and took his hand in her own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I'm not rushing Paul; I know the risks. I also know that these nomads are sick, twisted people, and who knows what they could be doing to Seth right now?" She shook her head, "The male ripped off Rosalie's arm and then laughed about it like it was some kind of game." Paul opened his mouth, but Bella cut him off gently. "Seth isn't pack yet, but I still consider him so anyway. He's Leah's brother, and basically yours as well—you've probably known him his whole life, right?" When Paul nodded, she released his hand and placed both hands on his shoulders, squeezing tight.

"All the more reason that we need to get to him as quickly as we can. We'll still be careful, I promise." Besides, she thought wryly, she wouldn't make much of an Alpha if she couldn't even gain the confidence of one pack mate, however well-intentioned he was.

Paul sighed and looked away. "Okay." Cautiously, she opened the link between them again, letting him feel her confidence and determination. The sting of his concern was still there, but now she could feel that it was more tempered. Satisfied, she pulled him in for a quick hug and then turned back to Jasper and Alice. For just a moment, she caught a glimmer of respect in Jasper's eyes, but then Emmett returned and her attention was diverted.

"They're on their way." He said by way of explanation. Bella glanced around then, and frowned. "Where's Edward?" she asked, still looking around as though she had just overlooked the tall, brooding vampire.

Alice answered, "He went on ahead. He's looking to see if the nomads left any more of a trail, and searching for a place they may have decided to use as a base of operations." Bella nodded, taking that in. She was surprised Edward had taken such initiative, and wondered if Alice had made him do it. Her eyes took in Alice's innocent features; the littlest vampire seemed to receive at least some genuine affection from Edward. Maybe she'd used that.

A howl sounded in the distance, echoing towards them through the trees and successfully diverting her attention. Bella recognized that howl. She looked at Paul as he looked at her, and they both
breathed the same name at the same time: "Jacob."

Now she was torn: stay with the Cullens and decide on a plan, or go and see what was going on with the La Push pack, and determine if they would be able to serve as reinforcements? Her body was taut like a bowstring, and then she looked at Paul again. She had been wondering which of her packmates would be a stronger Beta... "Paul," the shifter straightened at her change in tone, "go to Jacob. See what he wants, and if Sam isn't there, share everything we know and our location." Couldn't risk Sam making a mess of things. "Be careful." Paul gave her a nod, and dashed into the woods, changing as he went. A few seconds after he had disappeared, she heard his responding howl.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then Bella detected the faintest rustle of movement. Her eyes caught the rapid movements of Edward as he returned to their little group, and then she caught the faint scent of Esme's approach. Carlisle must have stayed with Rosalie. Once they were all together, Jasper quietly assumed command. His eyes fastened on Edward. "What do you have?" His voice was still the soft, familiar southern drawl, but now there was an edge of authority in it. This wasn't the Jasper that she knew, this was now Major Whitlock, former officer of the Confederate army. She had heard a little bit about his involvement in some vampire wars after he was turned as well. Of the lot of them, he easily had the most experience in situations like this. Even her dominant wolf side had little problem acceding control to this soft-spoken, experienced military man.

Edward stepped closer into their group, expression grim. "I tracked them to a warehouse outside Port Angeles," he began. Bella's eyes widened - all the way to Port Angeles? "Signs of human life around that area are negligible at best, and all sides are clear of other buildings or debris for at least fifty yards."

That would make sneaking up on them nearly impossible.

She wanted to ask if he had seen Seth, but he beat her to it - perhaps he'd read her mind. "I could smell the shifter inside..." he hesitated a moment, and looked directly at Bella as he continued, "I could also smell a lot of his blood." Bella sucked in a breath, pain lancing through her at this confirmation of her worst fear.

Following the pain came a terrible anger. An anger so deep and vast, Bella knew that if she got the chance...she would kill the nomads. She would kill them for this. Seth was fifteen. Not that age made torture excusable in any circumstance, but his youth and innocence made this all the more terrible.

Kate raced up to them, inadvertently breaking the building tension. Not far behind her were Tanya and Irina, both looking ready for a fight. "We're here," she said. Her eyes trailed around, finally settling on Bella in silent question.

"He went to meet with Jacob. We might be getting backup from the La Push pack after all." Bella responded. Kate nodded thoughtfully. Edward quickly filled in the sisters on what he had told them already. Esme arrived a moment later, but she wasn't alone, Bella realized in sudden alarm.

A deep, furious growl ripped from her throat as her eyes fastened on the vampire approaching, his red eyes seeming even more penetrating against his dark skin. Blood filled her mouth as one of her canines sliced through part of her lip, the coppery tang only serving to fuel the rage within. She was a split second from shifting on the spot when Esme's voice reached her ears.

"Wait! Wait Bella, wait!" Glowing yellow eyes flicked to Esme as her muscles strained against the desire to change, she could already feel her throat morphing, rendering her mute beyond the growls that continued to escape her.
Once satisfied that Bella was holding off as she'd asked, Esme went on quickly. The other vampires in the clearing were as displeased as Bella, and only the regard they held for Esme was currently keeping them in check. "This is Laurent. Yes, he's one of the nomads - he has come to us with information; he's defected."

This gave Bella pause, as well as made her instantly suspicious. Still, it was enough for her to reign in her deep desire to rend him limb from limb. If only for a few moments more. Once her vocal cords were more or less human again, she spoke.

"And why would he do that?"

Laurent himself answered her, red eyes staring directly into her own. A growl lifted the corner of her lips at his audacity in meeting her gaze. "Because I can't stomach what they, James and Victoria, do anymore." He shook his head, perfect, even dreadlocks swaying as he did so. "I haven't been with them long," He looked around at all of the vampires assembled. "I just wanted a place to belong...I didn't want to be alone anymore."

His words struck a cord deep within Bella, and she thought of Paul. Perhaps covens were more like packs than she had thought.

Laurent passed a weary hand over his face. "I didn't know when I met them just how...crazy, they are."

Kate hissed at him, taking a threatening step forward as she did so, eyes black. "And yet you helped them attack my mate - and kidnap a young boy!" There were hisses of agreement all around, and Bella felt another growl building within her chest.

Esme cut in. "Yes, he did, but the point is that he is willing to trade us information about them, in exchange for his life."

Bella's immediate instinct was to reject this; all of the nomads needed to pay said her inner wolf, which saw justice as very black and white. All participated in the acts, all knew exactly what they were doing. Remorse after the fact was irrelevant. Still...information could give them an edge. Despite her misgivings, Bella nodded.

"What kind of information are we talking about here?" She asked, shrugging off the gasps of surprise around her. Yes, shock perhaps that she was even considering hearing him out. Normally, Bella didn't think she would be or could be so forgiving - but any information that could help them recover Seth safely...well, that was worth it.

Laurent held her gaze for a moment, and she sensed his gratitude and relief. Suddenly annoyed, she growled, "Well," she snapped, "Out with it!"

She felt enormously satisfied when he flinched.

"Yes, right," he said, voice a little higher than it had been. He shoved his hands into his pockets and let out a breath. "James and Victoria, as you might have already guessed, have special...abilities...even beyond those of a vampire." Laurent paused, gaze flicking around and taking in the curt nods of those assembled. "James is a hunter of unparalleled skill...his ability, to the best of my understanding, gives him an edge with anything or anyone he considers prey." Crimson eyes settled on Bella, "He has an uncanny knack for knowing exactly where his prey is, and how they will respond to his hunt. It isn't always a perfect science, I know that, but he is very good at hunting, and I have never seen him fail to get his prey." He paused to allow that to sink in. "He is also extremely unstable. I have seen him fly into rages before that have sent him on a rampage."
Bella felt a slight chill when Laurent finished describing this...James. A vampire rampage was something she didn't want to imagine. She wondered if he would be able to anticipate her move, and had to conclude that he would because he had set it up to be so by taking Seth and Rosalie's arm...

She mused on that silently for a moment, before waving at him to go on. "Alright, and what about this...Victoria?" Time was of the essence. They needed all the facts Laurent could provide now.

Laurent spoke. "Victoria. She's isn't always as unstable as James, but she's completely devoted to him. They're mates. Her ability is like a kind of survival skill." He lifted his hands, as though trying to find a way to describe it. "She has a...sixth sense about danger, and can tell if someone intends to harm her. Somehow she also knows exactly what she needs to do to escape that danger." He shrugged uneasily. "It's almost like she does it unconsciously too."

Bella stared at him intensely, deeply disturbed by this turn of events. Together, James and Victoria would be a nearly invincible pair, able to anticipate and react to anything they did as if she and her friends were shouting their plans aloud. "Is there any more?" She asked. When he shook his head, she sighed. "Alright, well we need to work on our plan then." Her eyes fixed on Esme. "Would you mind taking him back with you, and keeping an eye on him until this is all over?"

Despite his help, Bella didn't think it wise to fully trust Laurent. Not yet. She looked at him directly then. "You will be free to go as soon as this matter is handled, your life is yours, as agreed." Laurent didn't look excited by the prospect of staying longer in Forks, but he didn't argue.

"I am happy to do that, Bella," Esme responded, "But first, I was asked to give you this when I saw you." The faoladh turned to her in surprise, eyebrows lifted curiously.

"Give me what?" she asked. Esme drew a small square from her pocket, and extended it to Bella.

She recognized it immediately.

The moment the silk touched her hand, Bella felt the tenseness begin to leech from her shoulders. She hadn't realized they were so tight. Ignoring those watching her, she brought it to her nose and drew in a deep breath, comforted by Rosalie's scent. Swiftly, Bella unfolded the familiar, now tattered, green and gold silk scarf and tied it around her neck. *My lady has sent me a favor to take into battle.* The thought rose in her mind, unbidden and silly, but a giddy smile lifted her lips and Bella pulled Esme in for a hug, whispering her thanks. Esme returned her hug in earnest before leaving with Laurent in tow.

They all waited in silence until they knew the pair were a safe distance away. And then they all looked at Jasper, master tactician.

"Okay," he said quietly, eyes and voice steady. "Here's the plan..."

Bella crouched low, fur on and flanked by Paul. Her eyes were fastened on the warehouse, senses wide open. They were a few hundred yards away from the building, taking cover near a pile of refuse beside a decrepit old depot. An idle thought passed through her mind, wondering vaguely when was the last this little train station was in operation. The tracks were long since gone - no doubt pried up for their worth as metal. Many of the railroad ties were gone as well, and what remained was covered in garbage and that nasty growth of weeds one only finds in cities.

Paul sent a query to her through their link, and Bella shook off the distraction, annoyed at herself. It was hard to stay focused when she was so high strung.

She sent him back an order to continue waiting. They hadn't received the signal yet.
Jasper had decided on two waves of attack, as they had thought to do before. First, would be the Cullens. James would be expecting Bella to come, would be focusing all of his senses on her. The idea being that he would be so intent on Bella that he would not expect an attack without her. Victoria was the wild card though. Despite Jasper's experience, they weren't sure they could get around her ability. Jasper had come up with the idea that if they all worked hard to focus on James as the target, perhaps her ability wouldn't alert her to the impending danger. There was, of course, no way to test this theory ahead of time.

There was also no more time to lose.

Second, after the vampires had made entrance into the warehouse, the La Push and Swan packs would descend. Bella let her mouth loll open in a wolfish grin as she recalled Paul meeting them halfway toward the warehouse, Jacob's pack in tow. Jacob's pack, sans Sam. They hadn't had time to talk about it much, but Bella gathered that Sam was out and Jake was in. That was a story she wanted to hear, but at another time. With Jake were Quil, Embry, and Jared. She didn't know Jared very well, but if he was with Jake, she trusted him. They were situated about the same distance away on the other side of the warehouse. James would be focused on Bella, and would likely not expect an immediate, secondary attack from other wolves he had never encountered.

Blurs suddenly raced past Bella's field of vision, and her heartbeat quickened. Focusing her attention and abilities, she was able to distinguish the forms of her friends streaking forward. A second later, glass shattered and Bella knew it was time for her and Paul to make their debut as well.

Without another thought, both Swan wolves plunged forward, sinking their claws into the gravely dirt to propel themselves even faster as the sounds of fighting reached their ever keen ears. Rosalie's silk scarf fluttered around Bella's neck, and for a moment the she-wolf felt almost as if Rosalie were there too, cool arms wrapped around her in a sweet embrace.

Be safe. The whisper sounded in Bella's mind, and she knew that they were Rosalie's words, pushed through their razor-thin link. Her determination hardened.

When she and Paul reached the warehouse door, they threw their fur-cloaked bodies against it with all their strength. The rusty, pitted steel gave beneath them and they were sent tumbling into the largely dark space. The only light came from shattered skylights in the roof - the entrance the Cullens had chosen. Not that a lack of light was a problem for any of them.

Scrambling to her feet, Bella scanned the warehouse and immediately spotted Emmett and James tussling across the floor, hissing at each other. The other Cullens had fanned out to look for Victoria it seemed, with the exception of Edward, who stood watching the fight, no doubt looking for an opportunity to help. Bella was about to launch herself into the fray, to see if spotting her would divert James' attention, when a shimmer caught her eye. Looking upward again, a sound between a strangled wheeze and whimper - the wolf equivalent of a gasp - escaped her. Far above their heads, dangling from a rope just in view near the skylight and shimmering in the fading sunlight, was Rosalie's arm. The instinct to retrieve her mate's arm was overwhelming, as was the rage that threatened to consume her from the inside out.

Paul's shoulder leaned into hers, and Bella growled at the intrusion. A moment later though, she felt more grounded and sent him a flicker of gratitude, followed by a lick of the shoulder. This was no time to be losing her head. They still needed to find Seth, and Victoria was out there.

An ear-shattering howl split the air, and Bella knew that Jake and his pack would soon arrive as well. Come on, she sent to Paul, Let's find Seth while James is distracted. Keep your eyes peeled for Victoria. His eyes narrowed at the mention of the redhead, and Bella could feel that he wanted another shot at her, just as Bella ached to fight James herself.
Together, they raced around the warehouse. The Cullens hadn't found Seth yet, but their main priority really was Victoria and any nasty surprises that might be waiting for them. Jasper had cautioned them that James and Victoria may have brought in extra muscle, or even created newborns. She was glad that didn't seem to be the case, so far.

As she raced in the direction opposite the Cullens, searching, Bella was surprised Seth's location wasn't immediately obvious. Then the stench hit her. It was overwhelming and nearly knocked her from her paws. Acrid and stinging, the powerful scent of urine pervaded the air. Paul let out a hack beside her, and she knew it wasn't just she who was so affected. Following the smell was not something Bella wanted to do, but she had a feeling she needed to. A few steps later she was able to get past the initial smell and recognized Seth's scent.

Quickening her pace around a stack of pallets, she found Seth bound hand and foot, several layers of duct tape wrapped around his mouth - clear around the back of his head. All the spirits... His chest was bare and crisscrossed with cuts of varying depths, but worse was that she could tell the urine was his. He had wet himself. The smell was eye-watering to her; it would be to a vampire too. Maybe it had been enough to keep them from torturing him further.

His eyes searched out hers desperately, and she could see tear tracks down his cheeks. Just hang on Seth. She thought, though she knew he couldn't hear her. The faoladh jerked her head at Paul, and he dashed off to get Jacob and his wolves over to them. It had been decided that they would safeguard Seth and get him home. For now though... Bella crouched near Seth, ignoring the stench, and clenched the thick ropes binding his arms behind him in her powerful jaws. It took a few seconds, but she managed to chew through them enough for Seth to work his arms free. One arm hung limp at his side, but the other shot up to work at the duct tape around his head. It took him nearly a minute to loosen and tear at the duct tape, despite his strength. She wished she could help, but her jaws would have just been in the way.

Once he'd managed to get it away from his lips, Seth threw his good arm around Bella and gasped, "Thank you." She gave his shoulder a comforting lick, wishing she could do more. It was almost certain that his other arm was dislocated at the shoulder. She could fix it, but it would be too dangerous to shift right now. There was no telling when -

"Well, would you look at that. I lost my bet."

Bella whipped around at the unfamiliar voice, crouching with a snarl. The red-eyed vampire had unmistakably red hair, or, well, more orange, she thought. This must be Victoria.

The vampire was standing with one hip cocked and arms folded nonchalantly. "I thought you would certainly try to retrieve your mate's arm..." Bella's eyes widened a fraction, but Victoria definitely caught it if her laugh was anything to go by. "Oh yes...we guessed you were mates." Her expression soured. "How...positively disgusting. To think a vampire would ever stoop so low and accept a filthy mutt like you as a mate." She shrugged. "Oh well."

Bella didn't care to listen anymore. The second she felt Paul re-enter the warehouse, the others hot on his heels, she launched herself at Victoria with all the speed she could muster. Her lessons with Emmett kicked in. The vampire ran to meet her, a feral smile on her lips. They met once, twice, with neither gaining ground. Victoria was fast, but she wasn't as fast as James, Bella quickly realized as her jaws closed on empty air again. But she did seem to know what Bella was going to do a split second before she did it. She recalled what Laurent had told her about Victoria, mind working furiously even as she flung herself backward to absorb a strike she couldn't entirely evade. Thank you Emmett.

Victoria could interpret her movements because of her ability; Bella was so focused on hurting
Victoria that it would be easy for her ability to detect her movements. Bella scrambled away from Victoria, around a teetering pile of old, moldering pallets, leading her deeper into the warehouse and farther away from Seth. It was a good thing she was fast too, she thought. With sudden dread Bella realized the pallets stacked a few dozen feet high weren't just teetering, they were falling. She sprung forward across the broken concrete floor, zigging and zagging as the pallets tumbled around her. One caught her shoulder and caused her to stumble, but soon she was clear, panting and staring in consternation at the mess of fallen pallets, some shattered across the floor.

*Sorry Rose,* she thought, *guess I'll have at least one bruise to take home.* Yellow eyes scanned the area around her, looking for a tell-tale flash of orange anywhere. Wait, that was it. The more she thought about Victoria, the easier it was for the vampire to anticipate her movements. If she could just focus on something else... Bella turned all of her thoughts to James, and did her best to imagine it was James she was looking for right now as she prowled around, this time steering clear of any other precarious looking piles.

An orange streak shot across the space towards her, and this time Bella held her ground thinking furiously about James. When Victoria's stone-hard body crashed into hers, Bella was able to snatch Victoria's arm into her teeth. Using their momentum to assist, she spun them and held on tight to the vampire's arm even as Victoria's body was flung away. A shrill screech pained her ears as the arm came free with a sound like grating stone. As Victoria tumbled across the floor, Bella flung the arm as far away from herself as she could, wishing she could spit properly to get the nasty taste from her mouth. It hadn't initially been her intent to maim Victoria, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it, but there wasn't time to dwell.

Racing back across the warehouse, she gave no more thought to Victoria - who was likely trying to find and fix her arm about now. This time she really was focused on James. Paul was with Seth and the other La Push wolves, she could feel, and so it all came down to the hunter.

Skidding into the big, empty space where she had seen James and Emmett tussling before, she was shocked to see that a huge fire had been started. Her eyes drifted and widened upon seeing Emmett and Edward holding down a prone James; she knew what the fire was for. Steeling herself, she padded over to them. Alice and Jasper stood nearby, ready to assist. She looked at Jasper as she passed and met his eyes solemnly. His gaze was bleak, and she felt the emotion behind it deeply in her soul. This was something that needed to be done, in order to protect them all. It was especially hard because she knew that mostly, this was to protect herself.

Bella stopped in front of James and gazed down at him.

"It's alright Bella, we can do this," said Emmett, looking at her sympathetically. Edward remained silent. The fact that her new friends were willing to kill for her was overwhelming, and Bella knew she couldn't let them. If James was going to die for killing humans, hunting her, hurting Seth, and hurting Rosalie, then she would do it. Her friend seemed to sense her decision, and he nodded. "It really is all we can do. If you were to let him go, he would never stop hunting you, never stop killing and hurting others. It's a part of his nature, and there isn't exactly a vampire jail." The words were meant to comfort, but they were also an excuse. Even though it was necessary...it was still killing.

Before she could over think it anymore, she crouched low so that she could meet James' eyes in the flickering light of the fire. He met her look with cold, black eyes and grinned at her. "There's my prize. Or am I your prize, now? The hunter becomes the hunted." His sudden laughter filled the space, a hint of madness threading through it. "A fitting end, perhaps, for one such as I. Be careful faoladh, that you do not become that which you despise." Bella had heard enough. Her head lunged forward, powerful jaws closing around his neck. She strained mightily, cracks and pops filled the air as James' flesh gave way. Emmett and Edward helped her out by jerking his now limp form
backward, together tearing his head from his body.

Bella kicked it into the flames as Emmett and Edward made quick work of breaking his body into smaller pieces to feed into the blaze. She felt physically sick suddenly, and turned away to empty the contents of her stomach. A soothing hand suddenly threaded through her fur, and lifting her head she saw both Emmett and Alice standing beside her, faces lined with empathy. A wave of calm washed over her, and she welcomed it, her eyes seeking out Jasper to say a silent 'thank you'. He nodded in return.

It was a horrible thing, but sometimes even horrible things needed to be done. Be careful faoladh, that you do not become that which you despise.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Next time we'll see more of Rosalie, we'll learn what went down with the La Push pack(s), see Seth's recovery, speculate on Victoria's whereabouts, and more. Thank you for reading, I genuinely hope you enjoyed it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!