With You, My Brown Eyed Girl
by Lee_so

Summary

Damon decided on a European vacation, and finds himself in a small village in Tuscany, Italy. He's caught snacking on a young woman in a dark ally. Aro finds the vampire born of blood magic and witchcraft fascinating. After a decade hanging out in Volterra, Damon encounters a brown-eyed girl in the Volturi throne room offering herself up to save a tormented Cold-One.

Notes

A/N. I do not speak French, and I don't trust google translate not to utterly shred all dignity from the language, so, let's just assume Damon could communicate with the Denizens of Paris, and enjoy the tale!

Title inspired by Van Morrison's - Brown Eyed Girl.

SM owns Twilight. CW owns Vampire Diaries.

Warning: Lemons - It is Damon, afterall.
First stop: London. The nightlife in London wasn't quite the way he remembered. It had been three decades since he crossed the pond. His last trip here, he attended a Beatles concert before the group exploded onto the American scene.

With the musical, British invasion on American soil ensued a revolution of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. Damon remembered this era fondly. No more compelling sweet girls for sex and nourishment—the women in this new age were up for almost anything.

No, this was no longer the London he remembered, only a new, shinier after dark party. The drugs were different, yet still bore the same results. Human inhibitions lowered using the excuse of mind-altering substances. He didn't care, it wasn't as if he suffered any ill effects of their drug use.

Stupid humans. He'd stick with the classics: well-aged scotch, and bourbon.

England was fun for a minute, though he found nothing deeply interesting to keep him there any longer. Damon rented a glossy, smoky gray Porsche 911, and hit the open road. A shiver of excitement shot through him as he zipped through the English tunnel, working his way to France. Weaving in and out between other cars with his headlights off, and accelerating up to one hundred and twenty miles per hour gave him a minor amount of excitement. Particularly when the sluggish humans blew their horns or screamed obscenities out of their car windows.

Gay Paree, how I've missed you! It was time for a little French cuisine.

Paris never seemed to change much. More crowded, and new buildings blended in with the old, Damon easily found his way to an outdoor café that had been serving the finest spirits since the early nineteen hundreds.

Finding a small table under the awning, he sat and pulled out and unfolded a map. He perused over the different countries and decided he'd go to Italy next.

An adorable young woman came to his table and asked Damon for his order. She was petite, with long, golden blonde hair that curled naturally at the ends. He'd not considered her beautiful, per se, but she was cute in that sweetheart sort of way. She exuded innocence and naivety—the type of girl he'd enjoy spoiling with random acts of debauchery.

Looking deep into her eyes, Damon smirked when she lost her sense of balance once he had her hypnotized. "I'll have a whiskey, straight. After you fetch me my drink, you'll go back and get your things. I need a travel date," he compelled her, and then added. "Don't tell your boss, I'll arrange everything."

While the server was getting his drink, Damon tracked down the manager of the café. The host pointed over to an older man with gray-brown hair, wearing dark slacks, clean button down, silk shirt, and a hideous leather vest. "Hey Garçon," Damon called out.

The man had sweat glistening on his forehead and neck. Damon noticed the man's heartbeat was irregular. "My name is Larue, not Garçon," the man corrected Damon indignantly, and mumbled what Damon assumed by the tone, was a slur. It amused him.

Waving his hand in the man's face, annoyed. "Yeah, whatever, Garçon. See that pretty little thing
over there pouring my drink?" Damon pointed. "You're going to give her a vacation, now. You're happy to give her all the time she needs, and you'll pay her for it too."

Damon turned away from the man, rolled his eyes, and turned back. Garçon looked up from his inventory sheets and Damon poked him softly in the chest. "Go see a doctor, lay off the stogies, and greasy foods. Your ticker sounds like shit." Satisfied, he walked away in search of his drink, and his French dessert.

After two long pulls, emptying his tumbler of whiskey, Damon led the server by the elbow and away from the café. When they came along side of the Porsche, he turned and looked deep into his new companion's eyes. "You will not prattle on, nor will you offer commentary while we travel. You are welcome to answer direct questions, but don't bore me with any nonsense, I'm not in the mood," he commanded. "And another thing, do you think we should get a convertible? France—summer, and all that?"

The girl simply nodded in agreement. "Good girl, I knew I liked you, at least for now. Get in," Damon ordered. The girl scrambled to the passenger side of the car, and swiftly situated herself in the seat.

Making his way to the car rental place near the airport, he traded in the Porsche for a 1994 Jaguar XJS, two seated Luxury convertible. Once they buckled up, Damon asked the little blonde-haired woman, "How do you feel about Italy?" She nodded and minutely shrugged her shoulders. "Well then, let's see what sort of trouble we can find, shall we?"

Now on the open road, Damon flipped through radio stations. After some frustration, he finally found one that didn't offend his ears. He looked over at his new companion, observing her sun-kissed, firm skin. She wore a mid-thigh denim skirt, a white t-shirt, and a matching denim jacket.

"Take off your panties and hand them to me," he said - his voice a dark caress. She hesitated briefly, but complied after her initial shock. "Nice," he complimented her. Fine white silk and lace, just how he had imagined. He brought the soft garment to his nose and Inhaled deeply. "You smell amazing, Mon petit."

Another hour passed by and Damon noticed the girl fidget in her seat. "What?" he asked sharply.

She lowered her head and looked down at her hands on her lap. "I—I need."

Damon smirked. "Hold it in, babe. It'll be another thirty minutes before we cruise through another village. Or," he drawled with amusement, "I can pull off road, and find a private spot for natures call."

"I will wait, Monsieur."

He chuckled darkly. She was shy and modest, which made it even more fun. Damon gracefully reached over and placed his cool hand on her leg, resting it just below the hem of her skirt. She squirmed under his touch. Slowly, teasingly, he reached for her inner thigh, and smoothed his hand up under the denim. A faint blush crept up her neck and cheeks. "Lovely," he murmured. Her blush deepened, and he could feel her body heat rise. The scent of her arousal spurred his own desire. Leaning over while still watching the road, he practically purred in her ear. "Do you want me to touch you, Mon petit?" She shook her head without conviction. "Are you sure?" he teased, his breath tickling her skin. She shook her head again, and he smirked knowingly.

Damon drew small circles inside her leg. With each stroke, gooseflesh raised over her sensitive skin. "Do you want more?" he asked roughly, giving her thigh a demanding squeeze. She took in a deep
breath, but remained quiet. Abruptly, Damon withdrew his hand and laid it over the gearshift. The sweet little blonde squirmed and her eyes fixated on the absent hand. "What do you want, sweet-thing?"

Not feeling overly merciful, Damon wanted—no needed her to submit to him. The scent of her excitement was heady, and her breaths quickened. "Tell me what you want, sweetness," he said, offering a dark promise of release.

Rather than telling him, her knees parted and the skirt she wore hiked up just below the apex between her legs. Her scent elicited a low growl in Damon. With his eyes still fixed on the road, he released the gearshift, and grabbed her small hand in his, lacing their fingers together. Gently, he pulled her hand with his and cupped her sex. "Show me what you like, Mon petit." She stilled her hand in his, and Damon gave her a pointed glare. "Look at me," he demanded. His irises dilated and his gaze was unrelenting. "Show me, now."

Tentatively, her hand started to move. Damon let her guide their joined hands. She teased her soft folds before entering her core to gather the pooled moisture. He delighted in the fact that she was so easily responsive. She dipped a single finger into her core, and he added one of his own, bending at the knuckle, he applied pressure in just the right spot. He added a second finger, and started slowly thrusting into her slick heat. Her own fingers untangled from his, and she leisurely moved to the sweet bundle of nerves, rhythmically stroking small circles on the swollen flesh.

Between labored breaths and salacious moans, she begged for more. Damon removed his hand from between her legs, unfastened her seat-belt, and roughly turned her body to face him. "Open," he growled. She placed one foot on the side of the driver's seat, and the other on the dashboard. She was completely open to him, the glistening pink lips of her sex now exposed and vulnerable. "Continue."

Without pause, her slender fingertips reached between the swollen folds of her sex and resumed their ministrations. Damon swiftly, and without preamble plunged two fingers deep into her center. She gasped and whimpered. He added a third finger, and her flesh stretched around the intrusion. Crooking his middle finger, he massaged the sweet spot, and she screamed with pleasure. "Come for me," he said with a deep rumble, commanding her body to comply. The walls of her core contracted and spasmed, coating his fingers anew with her orgasm. He slowed his thrust while she rode out the waves of her climax.

Once she calmed, Damon reached down and opened up his button-fly jeans, releasing his painful erection. Twisting himself, he grabbed his leather jacket hanging on the back of the driver's seat and laid it over the emergency brake. "Your turn," he said while waggling his brow. She went to lower her skirt down, and Damon stopped her. "Na-huh. I want to see that pretty little ass while your head is in my lap." To make a point, once her hot mouth teased his tip, he reached over and pulled the skirt up over her rounded bottom, and gave it a little smack.

He hummed to a random song on the radio, with one hand on the wheel, and the other buried deep into silky blonde curls. Damon decided he was going to enjoy Italy.
To What End?

Near the border of France, and before entering Switzerland, Damon decided to stop for the night. The picturesque city of Montbéliard offered an old world charm he loved. After booking a room at the Hotel de la Balance, a 16th century beauty, he took his Mon petit for a little shopping.

"What's your name, anyway?" he asked his traveling companion. Not that it truly mattered; she'd wear out her usefulness once Damon grew bored of her.

Shyly, she peeked up at him briefly and then looked down at the stone pathway as they walked towards a clothing boutique. "Claire," she offered barely above a whisper.

"Well, Claire," Damon drawled, "today is your lucky day." She glanced up at him again waiting for him to continue. "We're going shopping considering we left Paris so quickly, so it is my gift to you!"

She simply nodded. Damon had to admit her mute responses were grating on his nerves. He compelled her too well. Grabbing her shoulders and lifting her chin, he gazed into her eyes. "You are free to speak your mind, but no screaming or yelling at me – unless it's in the throes of passion," he finished with a satisfied grin.

Drawing in a deep breath, Claire squared her shoulders. She wasted no time once the compulsion lifted. ""You have taken me from my home—my work—and my family. To what end, Monsieur?"

"To what end, indeed," Damon repeated thoughtfully. "You won't be remembering any of this when the time comes," he offered with a shrugged. She raised a delicate brow questioningly, obviously waiting for him to elaborate. "I wanted a travel companion, and I chose you," he simply stated.

Claire nodded, resigned, and they continued their walk. Once entering the clothing store, Damon smoothly compelled one of the assistants solely to cater Blondie's needs. "I want her sexy, but not trashy," he instructed and handed the sales assistant his credit card. He considered how much longer he'd be keeping her around. "Make sure she has enough clothing to change into over the next couple of days."

After two hours, and several ensembles later, their little shopping excursion was finished. Damon carried the garment bags, and they went back to the hotel. Once in the room, he perused the clothing items, and chose an outfit for Claire. "Go shower, and wear this," he told her. "We'll go have dinner, maybe find some sort of nightlife here, and I'll be rolling out first thing in the morning."

"You," she sounded out slowly. "Only you?" she questioned. Damon smirked and gave her a little wink.

Lifting her chin, his eyes bored into hers. "You will shower, get that sweet-ass dressed, and ready for a night out. No using the phone, no leaving the room. I'll be back shortly."

She huffed out an exasperated breath. "You are a deek!"

Damon chuckled. "Did you just call me a dick?"

"Yes! A deek!"

Shaking his head highly amused. "You realize that sexy accent of yours, and calling me a dick is almost adorable." He watched her face go from incredulous to fury in a beat. She stomped her foot, stalked off into the bathroom and slammed the door. Damon smirked. He was happy he'd removed
some of her compulsion. She had fire!

After running a few errands, Damon entered the hotel room and noted Claire still in the bathroom. He rapped on the door. "Finish up, sweet-cheeks. I made reservations for eight." She snorted and he chuckled again.

The bathroom door opened and a billow of steam rolled into the room. Claire had yet to dress, and wrapped herself up in a white, fluffy bathrobe. Right away, the smell of blood hit his senses. His eyes darted over her body and noted a piece of toilet paper stuck to her leg, blood seeping through the thin barrier.

In a blur, he was behind her, scooping her up, bridal style, and quickly placed her in the center of the large, king-size bed. Damon quickly shed his clothing, crawled from the foot of the bed, up the length of her body, and hovered over Claire until they were face-to-face. She gulped nervously, but hadn't tried to move away from him. "You will enjoy this – as will I," he said firmly, sexily. After opening up her robe, he trailed cool kisses along her jaw, down the column of her neck, between her breasts, giving each hardened peak a little nibble. He moved down her stomach and swirled his tongue around her belly button, and finally settled between her thighs. Her scent ignited more than his arousal – he was voraciously thirsty. She opened her legs voluntarily, and he plunged into the slick folds. There was no teasing, no slowness, and he drank her in, eliciting strangled screams of ecstasy. Just as she was about to pique, he drove two fingers deep into her core. Her body shuddered and her cries grew frenzied. As her orgasm reached its precipice, Damon extracted his fangs, the veins in his face darkened and he sunk his teeth into her femoral artery and drank deeply.

After the blood frenzy in him calmed, he pricked his tongue on one of his incisors, and swirled his blood over the puncture wounds in her leg. Shifting from between her legs, he did the same for the little razor cut on her calf. Both wounds healed over quickly.

Damon knew he'd not drank too much of her blood, but she would need a hardy meal, and hydration. As Claire laid in the bed, unmoving, he showered quickly and dressed for dinner. She was still in the center of the bed, stretching languidly with a soft smile curving her mouth. "Feeling okay there, Mon petit?"

"Oui," she breathed sweetly. Damon laugh quietly, feeling very smug.

He reached for her, and pulled her into a sitting position and started to help her dress. With uncharacteristic care, he assisted with her new dress, silk stockings and garter belt. Grabbing the new shoes still in their box, she slipped her feet into them while he held them steady. After he appraised the sales assistance choices, Damon nodded to himself, and reached for a brush, handing it to her. "You finish up and we'll go have dinner. If you're up for it, I found a club with a live band playing tonight."

Admittedly, Damon enjoyed his last night in France, and Claire's company. They had unhurried sex that night after a couple hours of dancing, live music, and far too much wine. When morning came, Damon and Claire had a brief tryst before showers and breakfast.

After dressing and repacking his overnight bag, he pulled out a new piece of luggage he bought while she showered the night before, packed her old and new clothing up and then handed her a train ticket back to Paris. "Claire," he said, getting her full attention. His irises dilated and she swayed slightly. "You had a romantic fling with..." Damon snickered with his wicked thoughts, "a charming American named Stefan Salvatore. You made mad, passionate love for two days, and you have no regrets." He went on, filling out each detail to her. He didn't want to risk any loopholes and have her remembering him. He kissed her on the cheek and sent her to the train station. Inside her luggage, he placed enough French currency for her to have some comfort for a while. "I'm turning into a sap," he
muttered to himself.

Decidedly, he would breeze through Switzerland, and make his way to Italy alone, only stopping for a quick meal and refuel. Maybe one of his meals would prove interesting enough, and he'd pick up another travel companion.
Switzerland proved nice enough. The scenery was endless, and Damon found two auburn beauties, twins no less, to keep him warm at night after checking into his hotel. Both were quite tasty. He loved room service!

Before checking out, he decided to call his brother. They'd not talked in quite a while, and although he had a vendetta to fulfil, Stefan was still his kin; the only family he had left. Pulling out his long distance phone card, he pressed for an outside line and entered the numbers.

"Hello, Stefan speaking," he heard his brother answer politely. Damon rolled his eyes.

"Well, well, little brother. I guess my little bird gave me decent information this time," Damon waited and the other end of the line went quiet for a minute. "Come-on, Stefie, aren't you going to tell me you miss your wayward bro?"

"What do you want, Damon?" Damon smirked. He'd not seen Stefan since the early 70's while Stefan was attending Harvard.

"What do I want? Love – an endless supply of fresh blood and women – and live the American dream, you know, all the basics," Damon said in mock cheeriness. "How's Nawlins treating you? Lexi keeping you on the straight and narrow – decimating the bambi population?"

"If you just called to-"

Damon cut Stefan off. "I called to check up on my only sibling. Can't it be as simple as that?" He couldn't hold back a smirk, almost visualizing Stefan's incredulity.

"Probably not," Stefan replied somewhat sadly.

"You're right," Damon knew that would sting. It was his life's mission to torment his brother. "I'm about to leave Switzerland. You should come to Europe, the cuisine is spectacular."

"Have a nice trip, Damon. Call me in another twenty years."

Click

"Well, that was rude," Damon muttered while cradling the receiver.

After settling his bill and checking out of his hotel, he pulled the top up on the Jaguar, and rolled through the countryside. Damon had only sixty-four miles until he hit the Italian border.

Once he arrived in Milan, he stayed two nights, and picked up an American model. He almost felt bad when she missed her first professional shoot—almost. He saw to it that she was happy enough, and dropped her off at her hotel before shooting off to Bologna for a night. He stayed in that night, resting up and tore open a blood-bag he nipped from a small village hospital.

When he arrived in Florence, he stayed a single evening, and while walking through the markets, he saw a flyer for Red Night, in Volterra.

Red as the sunsets over the mountains of Corsica

Red as Rosso Fiorentino
Red as the blood of the Chapel of the Cross

Red as grape juice

Red as passion

Red as fire

Tribute to Volterra between art, culture and flavors

Damon laughed silently after reading the flyer. He deduced it must be kismet. Red was his favorite color – well, actually black was, but the color red sustained him. He liked a good red wine, too. After reading up a bit on the ancient village, subsequently he decided that was his next destination.

After dropping off the Jaguar, Damon decided on a motorcycle. He rented a Honda ST-1100 Pan. It was sleek, fast, and easy to maneuver through the narrow streets of Italy. As he sped through the countryside heading south for Volterra, he opened up the throttle and pushed the bike to its limits.

Not once, but three times Damon had to compel police officers that pulled him over for speeding. Idly, he wondered how many tickets he'd have stacked up since the invention of motor vehicles. The numbers would be staggering.

Volterra's fortification wall came into view over the horizon. The sun was about to set, and the orange, red, and yellow hues streaked the sky blending with the low-level clouds. The village itself was nestled into a small mountainside, and its ancient architecture looked to be unchanged for several centuries.

Parking his bike just outside the city entrance, Damon admired the large stone archway. The primordial structure stood proudly, and although there were signs of deterioration, the design was magnificent.

Meandering around the narrow paths, he finally found the accommodations he'd been looking for. The resort, Vicarello Di Volterra sat remotely in Volterra with amazing views, and amenities. Because of the festival pending, the front desk clerk insisted they were all booked up for the week.

"Are you sure there isn't one standard apartment available?" Damon compelled the young male. He knew most hotels and resorts kept a few back in case of any VIP showing up last minute.

The young man coughed lightly. "I will check again," he said smoothly. "It seems you are in luck, we had a last minute cancellation," the clerk offered. Damon smirked knowingly. His good luck, indeed.

"How fortuitous," Damon said with a snicker and tossed his passport and credit card on the highly polished marble countertop.

Once he had his room key, Damon pulled a few travel guide booklets from the counter and made his way to his room. It was small, but well decorated and efficient. The mini fridge, fully stocked, as well as the bar, he grabbed two single serve bottles of bourbon and sat on the small balcony overlooking the panoramic scenery below. Opening the second bottle, he thumbed through the booklets looking for places to hang out. One medieval themed pub looked interesting. The festival wasn't set to start until the following night.

The sun fully set, and a younger crowd of people began burgeoning in the village square while the older folk returned to their hotels or homes. Damon could hear a mix of different music styles echoing from the city center. A leggy brunette stood with one foot on the wall of a fountain, and it
appeared she was trying to buckle her sandal. Damon swaggered up next to her. "Need help with that?" he said, his voice low and sultry.

She looked away from the offending footwear and he caught her gaze. She stammered slightly and blushed prettily. "The metal is bent," she said while pointing at the shoe with a little frown curving her lips.

Smoothly, he bent on one knee, manipulated the metal prong, and secured the leather strap. Damon's eyes traveled up her long, lean legs that seemed to go on forever. She was tall, at least his height, and her olive-toned skin shone with a healthy glow. She reminded him of a young Sophia Loren. "So, Sophia, may I buy you a drink?"

Damsel in shoe distress tilted her head queerly and her eyelids fluttered with confusion. "Why do you call me Sophia? That is not my name."

Damon shrugged nonchalantly. "You remind me of Sophia Loren when she premiered in her first American film - Boy on a Dolphin."

"You sound as if you were there for the day-one release!" she said with a giggle.

"Imagine that," Damon teased and winked at her. The truth was - he sat in a smoky theater watching the movie when it was newly released - not that he could tell her that. "I guess the lovely Miss Loren made an impression on me. Just as you were standing so beautifully next to this fountain." He knew he was laying it on a bit thick, but the chase for a woman's affections were fun when he had the time to bother. And it appeared to be working, if her pink, heated cheeks were any indication.

"Flatterer," she told him bashfully. "We'll go with calling me Sophia, and I'll call you Carlo."

"Very well, Sophia. May I?" he agreed and tucked her hand in the bend of his elbow. "I was on my way to a pub. Could I entice you with the promise of fine wine and music?"

"Oh Carlo," she crooned dramatically, "you know I am unable to resist the sweet nectars of Italy."

Damon chuckled and decided she was exactly the right kind of entertainment for him tonight. Daresay, he even liked her—a little.

Two bottles of Barbaresco and a cheese board later, Sophia was much more amiable to Damon's advances. At first, she put on a show of innocents, but he knew better. Under the sweet smiles and coy glances, he could smell her arousal.

The band was playing a leisurely, bluesy tune, and he pulled her up from her chair, wrapping his arms around her waist, and started a slow, lazy dance. Her body pressed against his and she nuzzled his neck with her nose. "You smell amazing, Carlo."

Damon brushed his lips over the shell of her ear and whispered. "Anything else you like about me, Miss Loren?" She shivered when his mouth connected with the delicate skin at her pulse point; his tongue danced over the fluttering artery.

"Everything," she struggled to say through panting breaths.

Damon decided he'd risk not compelling her. He took her hand and beckoned her to follow. She went with him without any resistance. He wanted her now! His blood thirst and lust warred for dominance, and they never made it back to his hotel suite. A dark, abandoned ally came into sight, and he picked her up effortlessly. "Wrap your legs around me," he nearly growled, and she did. Damon whirled around and pressed her back against a rough wall of stone. His ministrations sent her
heartbeat into a frenzy, which made his mouth water. His fangs extracted and he carefully bit into her neck, and drank deeply.

So lost in his feeding, he failed to hear the footsteps nearby. An icy, rock-hard hand gripped the back of his shoulder, while a second person blurred around him, reached for his date and snapped her neck! "For fuck's sake. I was planning to take her home tonight. What a fucking cockblocker!"

The icy cold hand pressed down on his shoulder, and squeezed him painfully. He tried to stand, but then the date killer helped hold him down. "Tsk tsk," a childlike voice chided him. "Public feeding is against the rules. We can't have dead bodies lying about."

"Dead bodies?" Damon asked incredulously. "I wasn't killing her Tinkerbell! I wanted to fuck her! You know, the horizontal shuffle – bumpin' the uglies, or my favorite, going to the boneyard!"

A fiery pain erupted inside Damon and he doubled over. It was like nothing he'd ever suffered in over one hundred and fifty-five years, human or vampire! It was so intense, he couldn't even scream. "Enough, Jane! Aro wants him in the throne room."

The pain receded as quickly as it came on. "Yeah, enough Jane, whoever you are," Damon choked out. The little icy hand released his shoulder and Damon stood shakily. He finally focused on his attackers, and Sophia's murderers. "Great, I tried to explain sex to a pair of prepubescent teenagers with creepy red eyes."

"Come," Tinkerbell commanded tersely.

"I was trying to." Damon said with a snarky tone.
Tea Leaves

Damon followed Tinkerbell and Peter Pan through the enormous castle. Both childlike creatures muttered to one another in hushed tones. He could hear most of their conversation, most of which regarded Damon.

"What is he?" the fairy questioned.

Peter Pan shrugged. "Aro will read him soon enough."

"I'm right here, you know," Damon bit out scathingly. "You could just ask me and save yourself from the mind-bending quandary."

Tinkerbell sniggered and her childlike voice set his teeth on edge. The little girl had some sort of witchy-vooodoo gift that scared the piss out of him. Emily Bennett had a similar ability to inflict pain on his kind, but nothing like the tiny fairy.

Rather than provoke further conversation with the wonder twins, Damon took stock of his surroundings, and the humans working at various points throughout the castle. His eyes landed on Tinkerbell again, and noted that her skin looked like a marble carved statue you see in hoity-toity gardens or museums. Werewolves existed, witches, and even ghosts, so why not believe in an entire unknown species.

"Through here, freak," Tinkerbell's high-pitched voice directed him through a heavy set of double doors.

The large, sparse room with three ornate thrones perched upon a dais, and a high domed ceiling didn't impress Damon much. For some reason, he expected it to be far more opulent. The three porcelain looking men sitting on said thrones gave him pause. The one in the center with blue-black hair stood and clapped his hands excitedly. "Dear ones, I see you have retrieved the strange young man with great success."

Tinkerbell bowed her head, and spoke with reverence. "Yes, Master. We have also taken care of his prey. We had her body removed, and there is no lingering evidence," Voodoo teen informed the porcelain man. Then she sneered at Damon and added with disgust, "He was playing with his meal" Master. Really? Damon thought and had to hold in a snort. The little voodoo fairy went on and gave her Master a full account of what they had witnessed. Jees, had they been watching him since he came to the city?

The 'Master' turned his bright, ruby red eyes on Damon and the man smiled almost manically. Damon had one thought flit through his mind. Crazy. "Forgive my manners, strange one. I am Aro of the Volturi. To my left, my brother Caius, and to my right, my brother Marcus. Welcome to Volterra!"

Aro's congeniality was a stark contrast to his anxious laugh, a high pitched, girly giggle. Damon ran his hand through his hair, and looked into the eerie red eyes of the deceptively jovial creature. "I found it difficult to turn down the invitation," Damon said flatly.

… And who was he calling strange? Has that dude looked in a mirror?

"Yes, of course, our dear Jane can be quite persuasive," the porcelain, animated statue said casually, which was disturbing.
"Very," Damon offered dryly. "So..."

Aro tilted his head with interest, and clapped his hands again like a child on Christmas morning. "I've heard rumors of your kind. You are the first I have encountered."

"My kind?" Damon queried, raising a single brow. "What kind would that be, exactly?"
Consternation set in and Damon looked up at the Dais. A very bored looking porcelain statue sat disinterested in the entire debacle, while the other male with white-blonde hair sneered at Damon. He pointed up at the far left throne, and asked Aro, "Who shit in his post-toasties?"

"Aro looked at his brother and back at Damon. "I do not understand your question, young one."

Unthinkingly, Damon rolled his eyes. "Don't get out much, do you?"

Before he could blink, the disgruntled blonde-haired man lunged from his perch; his hands curled into claws and went for Damon's throat. He wasn't taken by surprise this time, feigned to the left, and spun out of the way of the man's attack. Aro spoke hurriedly, and the bored looking man reached for his brother and pulled him back.

"You are quite fast," Aro appraised. "Most impressive."

"Thanks," Damon huffed and then glared at the blonde psychopath "Was that necessary?"

"Forgive my brother," Aro crooned preemptively, "He can be impulsive at times."

Impulsive... Was he seriously using that as an excuse? "I'm the definition—no—the epitome if impulsive. That," he pointed at the blonde again, "was just down-right rude!"

Just as he was about to ask another question, Aro extended his hands out and asked while reaching out towards Damon "May I?"

"May you what?" Damon asked with confusion.

"Read you, of course, dear boy."

"Firstly," Damon said, holding up one finger, "I am not a boy and what in the sam hell do you mean by, read me?"

"Worry not, young one. I only wish to glean your intentions, why you are here in Volterra," Aro said amiably.

Damon fought back a snigger. "So, no drinking a cup of tea so you can read what's in the leaves?"

Aro looked mystified. "Why on earth would I give you a human beverage?"

It was Damon's turn to look puzzled. "I don't know. Maybe to be a good host?" Damon asked flippantly. "This castle of yours is rather dry, though a well-aged scotch would be nice."

Aro's eyes opened wide with amazement. "Fascinating," he drawled and turned to a huge man standing stone sill near the dais. "Felix, please call Camille and have her go to the human quarters and bring a tumbler of scotch for our new guest."

Guest. Damon thought darkly. From the way Aro spoke, it sounded like he'd not be leaving anytime soon. Dammit, what have I gotten myself into with these creatures?

"Neat or on the rocks," Felix asked dryly. He seemed annoyed with his master's request. Aro raised a
brow curiously at the man. Felix shrugged. "You pick up on things while out on a mission."

Damon hid his grin, and answered casually. "Neat, thanks."

Once again, Aro reached out for Damon to take his hand. Damon bristled at the thought of touching the man's bizarre skin, but acquiesced. After a moment, Aro raised his brow queerly. "My, my, but you have lived a most colorful life, and you have a true sibling that was changed at the same time. How intriguing!" Aro released Damon's hand, turned to his brothers, and spoke sweetly, like he were explaining things to a small child. "My dear Caius, Marcus. He is truly a wonder," Aro crooned manically. He then touched each of his brothers, and sat back on his throne.

All the touching was making Damon fidget uncomfortably. "That's me. The eighth wonder of the world," Damon mumbled.

Felix came back through the double doors with a full bottle of scotch and tumbler in hand. Damon sighed with relief. A few finger's deep of the amber liquid would certainly help the situation. At the very least, if couldn't hurt. He met the large man halfway across the room and reached for the proffered bottle, quickly twisting the cap off, and pouring himself a full glass. Damon tossed back the first serving, and poured a second, nursing the blessed beverage. Now feeling a little warm and fuzzy, he boldly sat down on the dais steps below the thrones. "Mind if I sit here?" He asked after the fact. "It's been a long night and I'm beat."

Murmurs erupted in the marble room. "He sleeps? – He drinks human beverages! – Was he really planning on having sex with that human woman?" – "Is he getting inebriated?"

"Still right here!" Damon said a little loudly. "Talk with me, not about me! Furthermore, yes, I was going to have sex with that gorgeous woman. Yes—I'm sporting a little buzz—and yes! I sleep! I'm fucking tired as hell. So either let me go to my hotel, or point me to a bed."

"Heidi, dear," Aro called out. "Please escort Mr. Salvatore to his hotel suite, and bring him back in the morning. See that he sleeps peacefully."

"Wait, what?" Damon asked, disbelieving this Aro character was sending someone to watch over him. That was until Heidi walked through the double doors. She was tall, divinely, smokin' hot and everything about her dripped with sex appeal. "Never mind – I go willingly, babysitter and all."

"Very good," Aro said happily and excitedly started clapping again. "We will see you first thing in the morning, dear one."

Dear one. Damon shivered at the odd term of endearment. It was far from endearing. He turned his wrist and looked down at his watch. "It is three in the morning. I am totally shit without my eight hours. I'll see you after lunch," he said firmly. Aro appraised Damon skeptically. "Scouts honor."

Damon shot back his half glass of scotch, and swaggered over to Heidi. "Let's go, sweet minder of mine."

Back at his suite, Damon entered first and without regard for his new guest, he stripped down naked and flopped back onto the bed. Heidi's eyes roamed over his body. "Like the view?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yes," she answered unashamedly. "What are you?"

He peered up at her standing at the foot of his bed. "A vampire."

"No you're not," she disagreed dryly.
"Okay, I'm not. Now, either stand there staring at my naked ass, or crawl in and go to sleep."

"I don't sleep."

"Ever?" Damon asked, genuinely curious.

"Never. Our kind does not sleep."

"Your kind," he trailed off. A different sort of vampire, perhaps? "What are you?"

"A Vampire."

"Whatever," Damon retorted with irritation, punched his pillow and laid his head down. "Good night."
By the very definition, regardless what type of vampire you were, Damon had learned his brand of vampire wasn't the only game in town, but a completely different species. They all required one fundamental similarity – blood to sustain them.

Immortality had been a long-suffering debate with Aro over the last decade. Damon felt the word was used too lightly, and to be immortal meant you could not die, no matter what. They could be killed; they simply didn't die of any natural causes. Aro on the other hand did not agree.

As peculiar a start he had when he'd first met with the Volturi, the large coven of vampire enforcers became a comforting, and captivating place for Damon to visit. He'd spent hours learning more of their cold, stone hard existence, while he shared what bits he knew about his own kind. According to Aro's records, Damon's vampirism was born of an old dark blood magic. The origin of the witch was still unknown, that of the first witch-born vampires. Whether they still existed or not, Aro was highly keen to find out.

Hard to believe, but Caius and Damon became frenemies. They were both fiercely competitive, always trying to gain an advantage over one another. Damon bet Caius he could score more female phone numbers in a local pub, so Caius popped in hideous muddy-colored contacts to hide his blood filled, red eyes. The Cold Ones naturally repelled humans, and Caius had women backing away before he could use his glamor-mojo on them. Damon acquired a sleek new BMW after winning the bet. He also went home with a warm body that night.

Per request, Aro asked Damon to assist on a few missions, since he was able to blend in with the human population so well, and not sparkle like a Tiffany's display case in the sun. In addition, he easily infiltrated nomads of their kind, and other covens. They had no idea what to make of him. The one drawback to these missions; he'd been bitten a few times and the fucking venom stung like wildfire. Again, it piqued Aro's curiosity because Damon didn't scar from the poisonous bites, nor did it affect him other than hurting like a son-of-a-bitch.

The first mission and most memorable had to be two abandoned newborns running amok near the Hungarian border. Like the witchy-twins, these newborns changed between eleven and thirteen years old. Damon had very few self-imposed rules he followed, and the main one – do not touch kids. He barely understood Aro's rationale for Jane and Alec's transformation, though the Volturi found Jane tied to a fiery stake accused of witchcraft. At the time of their change, humans didn't see the wonder-twins as defenseless children. Damon reasoned with himself, it was a mercy killing.

In the past decade, Damon came and went from Volterra as he pleased. Aro assured him that he was always welcome. As winter ended in 2006, Damon left the states and returned to the Volturi, planning to spend the spring in Italy.

"What is that you carry in your hand?" Caius asked his natural curiosity piqued.

Damon preened a little. The Volturi kings were so far behind the times; only their human employees seemed to be current aside from Demetri, he loved technology. "It's a Blackberry Pearl," Damon explained and leaned in to show Caius the features of his new phone. "Sadly, it doesn't work here in Europe, but I'm going to see about getting a SIM card to replace my American one."

"You and your little toys," Caius said with a scoff, though Damon caught him peeking over at the phone several times.
"If you like this, wait till you see the PS2 I brought, though," Damon said with a frown, "The PS3 comes out at the end of this year."

"I'm in!" Demetri offered enthusiastically from the other side of the throne room.

"Hells yeah," Damon agreed with a grin. "I have Need for Speed - Most Wanted, Guitar Hero, Call of Duty 2: Big Red One and," he paused with a chuckle, "Castlevania: Curse of Darkness."

"I care little for your human toys," Caius said feigning indifference.

Damon raised a brow challenging Caius. "Chicken shit. Scared you'll lose?"

Caius grimaced and Damon shrugged. "C'mon, Demetri. Let's set this baby up."

Near the human quarters, there was a spacious lounge with a state-of-the-art TV system. Damon and Demetri made quick work of connecting the PS2, and chose Need for Speed for their first game. "I can't believe you play Guitar Hero," Demetri teased.

"It came with the system," Damon lied. "Besides, it's good for unwinding, and mindless entertainment."

Demetri snorted while choosing his car in the lineup. "Caius will sneak in here while you're sleeping and try and learn how to use the game system."

"I know," Damon agreed. "Why do you think I taunted him?"

The screen split and both vampires were racing each other. "No fucking way!" Demetri cried. "You did that on purpose!"

"Well, duh. This isn't My Little Pony. Suck it up tracker," Damon provoked the other vampire after cutting his car off and forcing him into a wall.

After their fourth race started, Demetri cleared his throat, a very human gesture. "Heidi was excited when she heard you were back," he informed Damon with a sly grin.

"Ugh," Damon groaned and briefly lost control of his car. "She needs to move on – seriously. She's fine as hell and all, but sex with her is like using my dick for ice fishing," he explained with a shiver. The morning after the Volturi caught him feeding on a human, they'd sent Heidi to babysit while he slept. Damon woke to glassy, cold lips wrapped around his manhood. At first, it wasn't bad and a great way to wake up, but once he tapped that perfect piece of ass, his favorite appendage wanted to shrivel up and scurry away from the deep freeze.

Demetri barked with laughter. "Should have tried it in a hot tub," he offered in jest.

After finishing their ninth round, Demetri came out ahead five to four. He plucked up the Castlevania: Curse of Darkness case and read the cover. He looked to Damon with a raised brow. "Seriously? A vampire game?"

Damon shrugged, and defended yet another game choice. "You gotta admit, humans can be very creative, and it's not like we can't relate to them entirely – we wouldn't be what we are without being human first."

"You really like them, don't you?" Demetri queried seriously.

"They are not so different," Damon explained. "We love – they love – we need to feed – they need
to eat – we are emotional creatures, intensified – humans actually have better control over their passions – whereas we tend to react on instinct and impulse. What's not to like?" he challenged the tracker. "Besides, when you don't kill your meals, and can actually have intimacy with them, you glean a better viewpoint. Perspective is always a good thing."

"I suppose," Demetri conceded unconvincingly.

"Have you ever tried not to kill your meal?" Damon asked seriously. "Don't get me wrong, dude, I'm no saint, and I have killed – a lot, but rarely have I ever killed my prey. I mean, my blood heals humans and vampires alike, and from what I understand, your venom seals wounds, does it not?"

Demetri nodded. "Yeah, but it is the bite in conjunction with the venom that is the problem. If we don't kill them, they would all turn into vampires."

Damon removed Need for Speed from the game console and added Call of Duty. "So, you have no control over your venom?" Damon asked seriously. He had wondered about this over the years, though he never asked until now. Damon and Demetri had an easy friendship and he felt comfortable enough to broach the subject.

"Yes, and no," Demetri admitted. "Our thirst produces the venom automatically, though I can swallow it down and clear my mouth briefly."

"So…" Damon said as he worked out the possibilities in his head. "What if you were to swallow it down, get your nibble on, and then just suck from the vein, rather than keep your teeth sunk into their skin? After, seal the bite marks with your venom?"

"Never tried it," Demetri offered with a shrug. "Would be interesting to find out if it worked."

"Yeah, besides," Damon started while contemplating, "there are enough freaky humans out there that are in love with the idea of vampires, they'd likely volunteer their necks for the thrill of it."

"Aro would never allow it. He's not keen on taking risks and exposing us," Demetri explained quietly.

"Hey, man, I'm not being judgy, but with the way the world is today, most humans are in one database or another. Too many go missing, and authorities will start looking for the source. A few well-armed fighter jets could take out an entire city," Damon pointed out. "I doubt any of you have tested the effects of modern weapons on yourselves."

"Hardly," Demetri confessed sardonically. "Aro does fear modern technology, though, and what it could mean for our species."

"He should," Damon agreed. "Which is why it would be prudent for you all to find other methods to feed."

Demetri was about to comment when the lounge doors opened. Felix blurred in and looked at the TV screen. "That looks awesome!" he said with excitement. "But, uh, Aro wants you both in the throne room. One of the Cullen coven members is waiting for an audience. Aro thought you might like to sit in," he said while looking directly at Damon.

"Which one?" Demetri asked.

"Carlisle's first," Felix explained.

"The mind reader," Demetri murmured. "What does he want? It is strange for the animal drinkers to
Damon raised his brow in surprise. "They'd love my brother!" he said mockingly. "He's been thinning out the wildlife population for years."

Felix looked down at Damon, waiting for him to elaborate. "Another time, big guy. Guess we better go see what show Aro plans on putting on today."

The three men entered the throne room, and as per usual, the kings sat on their royal perch. Aro sat at the edge of his throne looking excited. "Such a joyous day, Aro sang. "My dear friend Carlisle's first born has come for a visit!"

Damon chose not to say anything, and sat on the first step of the dais. Aro instructed Jane and Demetri to escort their guest in to greet them.

A tall, lanky male vampire followed Tinkerbell and the tracker into the massive room, and left him standing at the base of the dais. Damon noticed the dark circles under the man's eyes, and the pitch-black irises. He was starving, which also meant, dangerous. Blessedly enough, the blood in Damon's veins never truly appealed to the Cold Ones, though there were a few curious about how he tasted. Much to his amusement and their surprise, Damon gave them a sampling of his blood. It had to rank high up with the most hilarious things he'd ever encountered. Alec claimed it wasn't bad, but a little stale, Felix wrinkled his nose, and said he'd stick with humans. Heidi wanted a nibble, and unlike the others, she became aroused after licking his wrist.

Aro stood, pulling Damon from his reverie. "May I?" Aro asked the guest while holding out his hands. The tormented looking vampire blanched at first, but then held out his hand for the ancient vampire king. "I see," Aro said after a few moments. "All of this for a human girl?"

Damon snapped his gaze on the bronze-haired man. He idly wondered how old he was when he was changed. He couldn't be sure because the boy was so tall, and the worn, starved features marred his face. If Damon had to guess, this vampire's frozen existence happened in his late teens.

"Mr. Salvatore," Aro drew his attention away from the new guest, and brushed his hand along Damon's skin as he walked back to the throne. Aro shared in his strange way after touching Damon's arm the boy wanted to die because his human lover drowned.

"What are your thoughts on the matter, dear one," Aro asked for Damon's opinion. The term, dear one, though still creepy, Damon didn't shiver from it any longer. Immediately, his thoughts of Katherine entombed by the witches since 1864 brought on a pain he'd suppressed over the years. Aro must have remembered he shared a loss of love even though Katherine wasn't technically dead, which in Damon's opinion, the fact that she was locked away and alive, was far worse.

Damon thought of the album, The Game, released in 1980 by Queen. "Don't try suicide, nobody cares," Damon bit out harshly. His comment may have been cruel, but true nonetheless.

"How very profound," Aro murmured.

"Thank Freddie Mercury, not me," Damon muttered. Aro's brow furrowed with confusion. "Lead singer of a rock band. It is the name of one of their songs."

The brooding teen growled at Damon. "Please," Damon drawled. "After spending time with these guys, do you think your pissy grumbles bother me?"

Demetri snorted, as did Caius. Felix outright laughed.
"If you truly want my opinion, Aro, then I'd refuse him. He is acting on impulse, as our kind often does. I'd force him to think about it for a while."

"Ah, young one," Aro spoke to the suicidal, heartbroken vampire. "Damon does make a sound point. What I am more concerned over, is the fact you shared knowledge of our existence with this human lover of yours."

"She figured it out on her own," the new vampire explained quietly.

"Yes," Aro sounded amused. "And yet, you did nothing to dissuade her theories. What will stop you from repeating such a grievous error?"

"I loved—love her," he amended.

"And yet you left her alone—abandoned her. You had no intention of changing her – all to watch her grow old and die," Aro chided. "That is not love, dear Edward that is selfishness."

"I refused to damn her soul!" Edward cried out sullenly.

Damon sneered at the drama queen. "How can a soulless being fall in love? That's an oxymoron."

Aro abruptly interrupted. Edward appeared he was about to argue with Damon. "Your request is denied, young Edward. Please take care when leaving the city. I suggest you wait until sunset." Aro dismissed Edward, and left the throne room, asking Damon to accompany him.

As they walked the corridors together, Aro spoke quietly. "I ask that you monitor Edward Cullen. He can read minds, so do try to keep your thoughts random while following him. I am concerned he will not take our denial of his request lightly."

"You want me to go on suicide watch?" Damon said with a frown. He didn't much like being put in the position.

"More or less," Aro vaguely replied. "I worry he may be impetuous and attempt to force our hand. At the moment, he is in much pain and not seeing clearly."

"If Demetri accompanies me, so tracking him won't be a pain in my ass," Damon finally agreed under his terms."

"Very well," Aro agreed happily. "Go and fetch him."

Demetri and Damon stayed in the shadows of the narrow alleys between the ancient buildings. Demetri was able to pick-up on Edwards's tenor whatever that meant. He admitted that his friend's ability came in handy. "I sense him five blocks over. We should be out of range and he won't be able to hear our thoughts," Demetri informed him. "He is standing just steps away from the plaza. Go up top of the buildings and cross over. Sing whatever song pops in your head so he can't read your thoughts. He will be able to sense me, but since we were not able to figure out what you were at first, I doubt he will either."

Damon sighed. "Fine, but Aro owes us big time."

Demetri grinned. "Maybe we'll ask him to pre-order the PS3."

"I like the way you think," Damon agreed with the tracker. "Up I go!"

After scaling the wall, Damon leapt from roof to roof while REM's Shiny Happy People played in
his mind. A good annoying tune to keep Edward out of his head. Just above the depressed vampire, Damon watched in horror as the man removed his shirt and tossed it to the ground. He weighed his options – intervene, or run back to Demetri?

"Well, fuck," Damon muttered and gracefully landed behind the vampire. It was too late. Edward stepped out into the sun. He heard a strained female voice cry out and the next thing he knew, the female clung to Edward and begged him to cover up. Her hoarse pleas broke between labored breaths.

Without time to consider, Damon came up from behind the vampire and pulled him back into the shadows. The brunette human still clung to Edward. "You goddamned idiot!" Damon said through gritted teeth. The young woman disentangled herself from the stone body, and fell to her knees. Her breaths were dry and she started to cough.

"We'll take it from here," Tinkerbell and Pan appeared out of nowhere.

"Fine by me," Damon said and glared at Edward. "I've had my fill of this dumbass for the day."

"Return to the throne room," Alec instructed Damon.

"Whatever," he half-heartedly agreed and looked at the panting woman on the ground. Damon shook his head wondering why this human woman held so little value for her own life.
Before returning to the throne room, Damon stopped by Gianna's desk. "Hey, gorgeous," Damon said sweetly, drawing her attention away from her computer screen. "Have any fruit juice and maybe a spare sweater or hoodie lying about?"

He knew the human girl would be in some state of shock. Damon wasn't sure why he cared to bother, but he chose not to look too deeply into his thoughts on the matter.

"Of course, Mr. Salvatore," she nearly gushed when she replied. "I will return shortly."

While he waited for Gianna to return, the wonder-twins appeared with Edward, a tiny, dark-haired woman, a tall, blonde male, and the human girl in tow. Demetri and Felix stepped out of the elevator at the same time. He watched the interaction from the shadows. The blonde male looked oddly familiar.

Gianna returned with a bottle of apple juice and a pale green cardigan, though Damon was still hiding in an alcove. The secretary sat the items on her desk and watched the vampires and human proceed to the throne room until they were out of sight. "Thanks doll," Damon said as he came into view. Gianna jumped and placed her hand over her heart, which made him chuckle with amusement.

"You are welcome," she said still breathing heavily.

As he approached the throne room, Damon's jumbled thoughts were giving him an imaginary headache. Several humans knew of his kind, granite, most of them were witches, and a select few were your basic, run of the mill human. It was easy enough to compel them not to speak to others about their knowledge. The Cold Ones did not have the same ability. Their mojo only worked in the moment – a tool to lure their kill.

Opening one of the double doors, Damon slipped in behind the new group standing closest to the exit. "Damon," Aro sang in a high-pitched voice. Damon wanted to shake his head; Aro was in 'show mode'. "Please join us," he pointed to the spot next to him at the bottom of the dais.

Great, show and tell time for his royal highness. Damon held up a finger, needing a moment before joining Aro's circus. He stopped in front of the human woman and offered her the sweater and juice. "I'm fine," she murmured.

"No, you are not fine. You're in shock."

"Really," she tried to convince him. Her voice was rough and strained from screaming in the plaza, and she shook with obvious chills. "I'll be fine."

"Look at me," Damon said firmly. Slowly, she looked over at Edward and then finally locked eyes with Damon. Doe-like, large brown eyes—warm and beguiling reminded him so much of, her; it nearly had him undone. He pushed the thought far away and focused on the human. His irises expanded and he spoke concisely. "You will put the sweater on, and you will drink this apple juice or you will pass out soon. Got it?"

Automatically, she reached out for the sweater. Damon held the garment open and assisted as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. He popped the lid off the juice and handed it to her. She drank slowly, but steadily. Once satisfied, Damon took his place next to Aro.

"I would like to introduce to you, Damon Salvatore," Aro presented proudly. "He is similar to our
kind, though he is more human-like, do you not agree?"

The tiny, spiky-haired woman nodded minutely, the human looked at him curiously, and the blonde male smirked. "I know you," the blonde vampire commented.

"I get that a lot," Damon said in jest, but then he took a closer look at the man, his god-awful scars, and though his eyes were golden, Damon sifted through his memories. "Holy—shit. Major Whitlock?"

Aro clapped excitedly, and Damon hid an eye roll. "Fabulous! You two know each other!"

"My memories are a little cloudy, but Private Salvatore is difficult to forget," the Major said with a snort. "Got my entire company drunk on campfire-made, ole Kentucky Bourbon – his version of it anyway. They were sick as dogs for two days!"

"Maybe so, but you couldn't exactly court-martial me for it," Damon teased. "You were drunk too!"

The petite dark-haired woman next to the Major looked like she was watching a tennis match between the two men. "Perhaps we can reminisce later," she gently offered.

"Indeed," Aro agreed. He walked over to Edward and demanded his hand. "So this is the lovely Bella," he sang sweetly after releasing Edward. "It is a pleasure to meet you, my dear, and alive and well!"

Taken aback by Aro's actions, Damon noticed the king surreptitiously sniffed the human, and he could smell vampire venom coming from several points in the room. She did smell nice, but he didn't understand the frenzy her blood was causing.

"La tua cantante," Aro said reverently.

"Blood singer," Damon said, easily translating his ancestral language. "What does that mean?"

Aro stepped close to Bella once more, lifting her hair, and inhaling her scent. Damon bristled by the little act – he truly worried for the young woman. "It means her blood sings for young Edward, and he has made it his mission to resist the call," Aro said as he took a few steps back away from Bella. "Such a waste," Aro said, sounding almost disgusted.

Edward started to snarl, and Aro simply glanced his way and smiled. "It would seem we are at an impasse, dear friends," Aro commented deceptively kind. "I do wonder, though, if Bella is immune to all of our gifts."

"Not mine," Damon pointed out. He was able to compel her to drink the apple juice and put on the sweater. He gestured to the empty bottle. "She did as I compelled her to."

Bella gasped and looked at the small, empty bottle. Edward growled again, and the woman next to the Major looked curiously between the human and Damon.

Aro chortled with his girly cackle. "Amazing!" he almost cheered. "Dear, Bella. May I?" Aro held out his hand. She looked terrified but her boyfriend nodded and she raised her hand for Aro to try to read her. The king folded both of his hands over hers and pulled her closer to him. Damon watched careful not to show his concern for the girl.

"Fascinating," Aro murmured. Damon thought the ancient king looked constipated. He turned to the curious onlookers and spoke with grandeur. "She truly is a marvel." Aro then turned back to Bella. "I wonder..." he trailed off in thought.
Edward snarled and yelled, "No!" Felix restrained the protective vampire, while the Major held the small female next to him and shook his head in warning. Aro dismissed Edward's antics.

"Jane, dear. I would like to see if Bella is immune to your gift, as well." Damon fought hard not to protest. He knew Jane's gift wouldn't kill the human, at least he hoped.

Jane looked eager and turned her beatific smile on Bella. Nothing happened. Damon noticed Jane trying again, and still, Bella stood unharmed. Aro cackled feverishly and applauded enthusiastically. "She confounds us all! Aside from Damon's compulsions, how intriguing!"

Aro looked over at Damon, and he had to wonder if the king was jealous. "It's because I'm so pretty," Damon deflected trying to defuse the tension.

"Stop with the theatrics, Aro. You've already made your decision," Caius spat with annoyance.

"Patience – patience, Brother," Aro tried to appease Caius.

Good luck with that one, Damon thought sardonically.

"You leave us little choice, Edward Cullen. You say you love her, yet, you refuse to change her. Or..." Aro said and flitted his gaze around the room, "unless you have changed your mind?"

"Edward," Bella spoke softly, beseechingly. "I want this."

The pained expression on Edward's face spoke every word he wasn't brave enough to say to the woman he supposedly loved. "I see," Aro said hungrily and glided closer to Bella.

The tormented vampire went into a rage and tried to attack Aro. Demetri, Felix and Damon all blocked the king from his attacker, and Felix went into Hulk Hogan, WWF style, body-slamming Edward into the floor and walls. Damon watched with morbid fascination as the vamp-teen's skin cracked like fine china and then healed over just as quickly.

The woman standing next to the Major screamed out in a panic. "I've seen it! Bella will be one of us!"

Damon's mind scrambled with vampire speed. He thought of those big, dark chocolate eyes turning a horror-show red. Her soft, warm skin becoming stone cold. Thoughts unbidden, he made a decision. "Alice," Aro held out his hand, and the tiny vampire unsheathed her gloved hand. Before Aro could get a reading on her, Alice's eyes unfocused and she appeared to be in a trance of some sort.

Edward started howling in anguish and Alice looked over at Damon. "How could you?" she said sorrowfully. "We love her."

Aro took Alice's hand while Felix and Demetri held Edward in place. Jane decided to jump in and cause the young man her own flavor of pain. Edward crumpled to the ground and screamed from Jane's torture. "No!" Bella cried, kill me. Just take me, and leave him alone!"

Aro snapped his gaze at Damon, much to his credit; Damon looked unfazed, not realizing what everyone was getting so bent out of shape about. "Keep him restrained," Aro commanded Demetri and Felix. He looked back to Damon," Come with me." Damon followed the king into a private antechamber.

"You want to change her?" Aro asked in a hushed tone so that no one overheard their conversation.

Damon blinked several times trying to clear the confusion from his mind. "How did you..."
Aro held up a hand, and halted Damon from asking. "Alice is a seer, dear one. You must have made a decision, one that I ultimately would agree too, or she would have never seen it come to fruition."

"Oh," Damon whispered lamely.

"Is this something you truly wish for? I must ask why, and you must know, you will be one hundred percent responsible for your progeny."

Damon scrubbed a hand over his face. It had only been seconds since the thought flitted through his mind. "Yes," he said, for only Aro to hear. "I wish I could tell you why – it's a gut feeling – an instinct, if you will allow the vague explanation."

"Trust your instincts before your mind, dear one. I will allow it, if Bella agrees without compelling her."

"I would not turn her against her will," Damon assured Aro.

Aro nodded and beckoned Damon to follow him back into the throne room.

Aro left Damon standing across from the visitors, and walked over to the other two kings. He leaned down and whispered something to Marcus. The lifeless king perked up marginally, and focused on Bella and then Edward.

"I see a bond between the young-ones, though it is embroiled with many strong, contradictory ties," the bored king offered.

"Such as?" Aro grew even more curious, if that were possible.

"I only feel the bonds, Aro, not the particulars," Marcus said while scowling at his brother.

"I've seen those particulars," Aro affirmed smugly. "The boy does care for her, although the challenge he places upon himself to resist her blood is arrogant and self-satisfying—an achievement he is proud of. The fact that her mind is silent to him, both frustrated him, and gave him peace. Such an odd contradiction."

Damon watched as Bella's mind caught up with Aro's assessment. Incredulity changed the fear in her eyes to confusion, maybe even a little hurt.

Aro pressed on while ignoring the human and her vampire lover's glances at one another. "And dear, sweet Bella?" he asked Marcus to continue.

"She loves him," Marcus said without feeling. "She also idolizes him – as if she were star-struck." Marcus bothered to stand and peered down at Bella. "She is also conflicted. He hurt her deeply, and she does not trust him entirely. I see the dark shadow of pain she tries to hide."

"It would seem you are not immune to my brother's talents," Aro mused. "I believe you have some mental defenses, though they will not manifest until you are changed."

The Major took one-step forward and spoke calmly. "My gift works on her, as well. Emotions are more than just mental—they are a physical thing that affects the body as well as the mind. Which would explain why Marcus can read her too."

"Interesting, yet," Aro turned to Damon and continued unraveling his quandary. "Mr. Salvatore's gift of compulsion works on Bella. Would his ability not be considered a mental one?"
Damon shrugged. "It isn't a gift – it comes with the package. Fledglings have a harder time controlling it, but as we age, our abilities grow stronger, both mentally and physically."

"A puzzle to work out another time," Aro said, almost sounding sad that he couldn't untangle the enigma so easily. Ever the mercurial king, Aro brightened up and turned to Bella. "It would seem young one that you have options before you, and you should choose carefully."

Bella straightened her stance, and squared her shoulders. She took in a deep breath and visibly relaxed. Damon wondered if it was bravery or resignation of her fate. "What might those options be?" she asked quietly. Damon decided she was acquiescent and awaiting judgement. Sadly, he understood why. She only had two options, and one was death.

"Be changed or die," Aro stated simply, as if the option was no more important than choosing what to have for dinner.

"I haven't graduated yet," Bella mumbled.

Was she seriously worried about being a high school dropout over dying? Damon shook his head at the ridiculousness of her statement. "You can finish high school," Damon assured her, but another thought entered his mind. "How old are you, Isabella?"

She looked at him directly, only for the second time since he'd arrived in the throne room. "I'm eighteen, and I graduate in two months."

"Aro," Damon called, getting the king's attention. "Will you allow her to graduate first?" He was certain what the answer would be.

"I think not, dear one," Aro said casually. "She will not leave here today as a mortal."

Damon had already prepared himself for the answer. "I'll help you with your control, you can finish school, Bella," Damon tried to assure her. "My kind have a bit more control as newbies, and as long as you are well fed, you'll be fine."

Edward snarled and tried to free himself of Felix and Demetri's hold on him. Alice whimpered and the Major's face remained calm and impassive. Aro looked thoroughly amused.

"Edward," the Major barked with pure authority. "Cut it out, now! Would you rather see her die? Do you want Bella's blood staining your hands? Because make no mistake, if you keep protesting to this, the silly girl will choose death."

Bella's voice strengthened and she expressed more of her concerns. "My mom and dad – they don't even know where I am. I can't even say goodbye to them?"

Damon looked into her eyes as Bella spoke, he saw her sincerity; she was more concerned for those she loved, rather than her own life changing forever. "You don't have to say goodbye, at least not yet. I can compel them to keep our secret. They can know everything without risk."

That little moment of reality had her thinking. "How?" she asked Damon.

"I compelled you," Damon pointed out without any smugness. "My mojo isn't fleeting – it's permanent."

Why am I so hell-bent on being the one to change this girl?

Damon looked into those dark brown pools of warmth again. He was unable to stop questioning his
reasoning or motives. None of it made sense. It wasn't as if he was the knight in shining armor, mounted on a white stallion willing to save the damsel in distress; so what was it about Isabella that altered him so completely. He didn't even know the woman! The entire situation started to piss him off. "Choose, Isabella," Damon demanded firmly, brooking no more arguments or questions. "It is time."

Aro surprisingly stayed quiet. Demetri looked at Damon and a slight grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Felix was still glaring down at Edward. Alice's head bobbed between Damon and Bella. The Major's expression told nothing of his thoughts. He was much the same when he was human.

Bella glanced down at Edward, her expression went from pure sadness to anger, and then settled on determined. "Okay," she whispered so quietly, if the room were not filled with super hearing vampires, they'd not have heard her.

"Speak clearly," Damon said decisively. "I'll not accept any wavering answers."

"Yes!" Bella answered plainly with a little bite in her tone.

"That's my girl," Damon praised with a cheeky smirk.

"Your girl?" the Major asked Damon with a raised brow.

"Shut up," Damon spat and rolled his eyes. Damon turned to Aro. "A place with some privacy?"

Aro pondered Damon's question for a moment. "I wish to witness the change."

Again, Damon found himself rolling his eyes. "Always so curious. I am sure you've seen it in my memories."

"Memories pale in comparison," Aro said kindly. Damon wasn't going to get away with changing Isabella without a minor audience.

"Only if the Major and his..." Damon assumed Alice and Whitlock were together, but he could be wrong.

"My mate and my wife," the Major clarified.

"Yeah, that," Damon said with a grin. "If they come too. They care about her, and I want them to see I'm not harming her. Well, not killing her, completely."

Aro sighed dramatically. "So let it be. Come with me."

The Major, his wife, Bella, Aro and Damon walked at a human pace into Damon's guest suite. "Sit on the bed," Damon instructed Bella. "It's not the same process as being turned by a Cold One. No burning – no waiting days – and no massive transformations. And bonus! You get to keep those gorgeous eyes of yours."

"Will you take me to hunt?" Bella asked meekly.

"You have to feed to complete the transformation. If you don't, you will die within twenty-four hours once it starts."

"Animals?" she asked hopefully.

Damon shook his head. What was with the Bambi killing vampires? "No. I get why the Cullens live as they do, sort of. We may both be vampires, but not of the same species," Damon explained and
then knelt down in front of Bella sitting on his bed. "We don't kill to feed. At least, many of us don't. It isn't necessary."

"I don't want to hurt people," she said miserably.

"You won't, and as an added plus, they won't even remember it," Damon assured her. "As a matter of fact, they'll go on their happy way after you've fed."

"Promise?" she asked hopefully. Her voice lilted cutely, and for the first time Bella didn't sound as if she was suffering holy terror.

"Promise," Damon avowed with a chuckle. "Now, you have to drink my blood, and when you rise, I'll help you with the transition."

Bella's fair skin drained of what little color she had. The expression 'green with sickness' made sense.

"The smell of blood makes me sick. I've fainted from it," she confessed with a measure of embarrassment. It was odd for a human to smell blood so acutely.

"I can help with that," Damon offered and looked at Aro. "I promised not to compel her decision, but I may need to for her to drink."

Aro nodded his assent and Damon turned back to Isabella. "Ready?" She slowly nodded. "Isabella. Are. You. Ready?" Damon asked resolutely. "There is no turning back, and bobbing your head up and down is not an answer."

"Yes," she agreed. "I'm ready."

Damon reached up and gently held her face and looked into her eyes. "You are going to take my wrist into your mouth, and you will drink until the wound closes. You will not smell blood – you won't smell anything. It will be no different than drinking your favorite beverage. Say yes if you understand?"

"Yes."

Damon extracted his fangs and tore into his radial artery. With his other hand, he cupped Bella's head and brought his wrist to her mouth. She drank delicately and neatly. A vampire sharing their blood was an intimate act, and Damon felt the effect while she pulled his blood into her mouth. The wound started to close, and Damon pulled away. "See you on the other side, Bella." Damon brought his other hand up and steadfastly held her head. An audible snap resounded through the room as he broke her neck and laid her comfortably on the bed.

"You killed her!" Alice said with a gasp. "You are a liar!" The tiny vampire lunged at Damon, but the Major was faster, and held his wife back.

"I did kill her," he explained and looked down at a very peaceful Bella. "Not permanently. It's how our kind change a human. She'll rise in a few hours."

"I'm thinkin' our species got the short end of the immortal stick," Jasper mused aloud. Aro scowled at the Major, and Alice dropped her jaw incredulously. Damon snorted, but chose not to comment, even if he did agree with the Major. He could feel Aro's glare likely expecting Damon to voice his opinion. That wasn't going to happen. Damon knew when to pick his battles.

"Now we wait," Damon murmured, and sat beside Bella's prone, dead body.
A half-hour after Damon killed Bella; Aro grew bored and left the room, insisting they call him back when she woke. Damon and Jasper spent time chatting – he filled Jasper in on memories of their short time together in Galveston. The mobile unit he was assigned to at the time in early 1863 joined the Major's company to assist in evacuation efforts. Jasper went missing in action seven weeks after Damon's unit arrived.

Both Jasper and his wife keenly listened as Damon shared stories of their short time together in the Confederate army. He also talked about the search party that spent nearly a month looking for the Major after he'd gone missing.

Another hour had passed and the three vampires decided to pass the time playing poker. Damon tossed his cards down on the table and huffed with annoyance. "Alice, are you cheating?"

"She does that," Jasper said with a grin and tapped his wife's head. "I have no idea why we play anything with her or Edward. They both cheat."

"Can I take your wife to Vegas?" Damon asked half-jokingly.

Alice hummed thoughtfully. "It could be fun, but Bella isn't old enough to get into a casino. Jazz should call Jenks and get her a new identity."

"Let me guess – an attorney specializing in alternative needs?" Damon asked. "My last one died of a heart attack. Think he's up for a new client?"

Jasper snorted with amusement. "Alternative needs. Sounds about fittin'."

"At any rate, we don't need to set her up yet," Damon commented. "She can see her parents and graduate, but she will have to face the fact that saying goodbye to them is inevitable." Damon shared his thoughts and looked over at Bella still lying on the bed. Her skin was clear with a healthy glow – her hair slightly thicker and glossy – the dark shadows previously under her eyes disappeared. Their kind didn't change drastically, the alterations were subtle, and like the Cold Ones, to the human eye, they appeared nearly perfect.

"Are you going to let her see Edward?" Alice asked timidly. "I know what Aro and Marcus said, but I do believe he loves her."

Damon slowly turned away from examining Bella and looked directly at Alice. "It's not like I can stop either of them. She wants to finish her senior year."

"You're coming back to Forks?" Jasper asked, sounding a little shocked.

"Did you think I lied to her?" Damon asked feeling slightly put-off. "I may be a lot of things, and yes, I'm a liar, which I am sure all immortals learn to be good at, but I promised her and I keep my promises," he said sullenly. "Usually."

Jasper raised his hands, palms forward. "I meant no offense. Just a tad-bit concerned how this will all play out."

"She will wake in fifty seven minutes and eleven seconds," Alice interrupted. "She looks amazing! She smells different, too – sort of like you Damon."
Damon raised a single brow quizzically. He breathed deeply through his nose and tasted Bella's scent. "I guess she does, a little. It must be my blood in her system."

"No," Alice said and offered no explanation.

"No?" Damon asked. "Care to elaborate oh seer of all things decided."

She grinned, and started shuffling the deck of cards. "She does that too," Jasper offered with a grin. "If she believes we're better off learning on our own, she won't part with the details.

"Well, that's annoying," Damon said, irritably.

"Yep," Jasper agreed and Alice pinched his arm. He let out a mock yelp and pulled his arm back. "Darlin' what was that for?" She didn't answer and stuck her tongue out at her husband, which made him quietly laugh.

Aro entered the room before Damon could try and get Alice to talk more. Two humans followed him into the room, one being Gianna, and the second, a young male Damon hadn't met yet. "For Bella," Aro explained.

Damon had planned to ask Gianna, and he wondered if Aro threatened his human employees. Gianna would have likely done it without question. "I won't let her kill you," Damon assured the two humans. "You may want to go grab a bottled water and a snack, though the blood loss will feel the same as if you'd donated."

The male volunteered to run back and get the snacks and water. Damon could smell the adrenaline coursing through the young man. He was scared, which meant Aro likely gave the guy no choice in the matter. It would have been easier to compel him so he didn't feel the fear, and Bella wouldn't smell it, possibly causing her blood lust to escalate. "I'll be compelling him before Bella rises," Damon said firmly. "He is terrified and she'll be able to hear his rapid pulse and smell his anxiety. It is problematic."

"As you wish," Aro agreed unrepentantly, having no qualms over his intimidation tactics.

"Twenty two minutes and eighteen seconds," Alice chirped with her singsong voice.

Aro looked over at the seer questioningly. "She's been counting down Bella's rising," Damon explained. Out of curiosity and mostly for Jasper and Alice's sake, Damon asked Aro for an update on Edward. "How's the boyfriend doing?"

"He is at peace," Aro said with a very blasé attitude.

Damon looked at the ancient king skeptically. "Alec?" Aro nodded. Alice sucked in a shaky breath, and Jasper pulled a calm, unemotional expression. "You are such a bully, Aro."

"Perhaps," Aro answered blithely. "He was being difficult, threatening to find Bella and take her away from this place. We explained that she could not be moved, for now, and that it would be dangerous for her. He is not thinking clearly."

A swoosh of cool air rolled into the room as the door opened. The young male stepped in carrying two bottled waters, sandwiches and some fresh fruit. Gianna grabbed some of the items and help set them next to the abandoned card game. Alice cleared her throat and everyone turned to look at her. "I don't think Jazz and I can be in here while Bella…"

"Feeds?" Damon finished for her.
"Yeah," she said and lowered her head, apparently feeling shame over the blood weakness. Jasper wrapped a protective arm around his wife's waist and kissed the top of her head.

Damon rubbed the back of his neck, he thought with them here when she woke - it would be easier to keep the fledgling, baby vamp calmer. "We can hold our breaths, though no promises," the Major suggested. "We may have to remove ourselves. We're not exposed to human blood very often."

"How about this. When she rises, you two reassure her, and then leave the room when she feeds to complete the process?" Damon said, offering an alternative.

"That'll work," Jasper agreed. He turned his gaze on Aro. "Are you going to allow us to take Edward outta here once this is all over?"

Aro waved his hand dismissively. "Of course, although, If he would like to stay with us, he is more than welcome."

Damon snorted. "Nothing like using heartbreak to your advantage, aye, king?"

Aro shot a nasty glare at Damon, but he was unfazed. "Do not think because I like you, dear one, that my mind cannot be changed."

"I know—I know," Damon placated the porcelain king. "Sorry, just feeling tense at the moment."

"Three minutes," Alice offered. "We should prepare ourselves. She is going to be confused and frightened."

Looking back down at Bella, Damon hid a small smile. He believed she would be fine after the initial shock of heightened emotions; even more so, once she was well fed and sated. "Major, get your mood ring ready just in case."

Jasper chuckled. "Mood ring ready and waiting."

Alice stepped close to the bed and gracefully sat next to Bella. "It's time," she whispered. Just then, Bella stretched languidly and rolled over onto her stomach. She grabbed a pillow, punching it and buried her face into the feathery fluff. Aro moved closer to the bed, his fingers laced together tightly in anticipation. Jasper took a few steps back, actually understanding Bella could feel overwhelmed. Gianna and the other human stood along the far wall, and Damon went to the other side of the bed in the direction Bella's face was turned.

"Morning, sunshine," Damon said to her softly, not to startle her. "Welcome to your new life."

Taking a deep breath, Bella exhaled and slowly lifted her head. She looked around, taking inventory of the attendance in the room. It was a natural thing for their kind to scan their surroundings, assessing any possible threats. She looked back up at Damon and a small smile played across her lips. "Hi," she murmured. "Your blood wasn't gross."

Damon couldn't hold back his laugh. He shook his head, disbelieving that was the first thing that came to mind after she'd risen. "I compelled you not to think that," he reminded her.

"I know," she said and furrowed her brow. "Still, I think I knew deep down what your blood tasted like."

"Huh," he replied lamely. "Hard to tell."
"Bella," Alice called to her best friend. Bella's head whipped around and she turned her body to face the petite vampire. To Alice's credit, she sat unmoving and waited for Bella to speak. She didn't have to wait long. Bella bounced on the mattress and folded her friend into an excitable hug.

"Oh my gosh!" Bella sang enthusiastically. "You are so pretty! Even prettier than I thought when I was—was…"

"Human," Damon quickly finished her thought. "You aren't quite finished. You'll see even better once your transition is complete."

Damon looked to Jasper while the two women embraced each other and babbled in hushed tones. He raised a brow quizzically. The Major shook his head and frowned. "We really did get the short end of the stick, or Bella is a freak of nature. She is so damn calm!"

Damon looked to Bella and back at Jasper. "She's only just risen," he said with a shrug. It wasn't unheard of, a newbie with decent control but it was very rare. Damon remembered waking after his own father shot him in the chest, though he thought Katherine was lost to him forever, and he decided to die, until Stefan talked him out of it. "She needs to feed."

Bella gasped after Damon mentioned feeding and her hand reached for her throat and stroked down the column of her neck.

Alice hurriedly explained why she and Jasper needed to leave the room. Bella looked slightly crestfallen, but nodded with acceptance. "Love you guys," Bella told Alice and Jasper.

"Love you too," Alice sang back and added. "See you soon!"

Damon walked over to the two humans waiting along the wall. "Gianna, did you agree to this of your own free will?" Damon asked inflexibly. She nodded, but her pulse was racing. "And you?" he asked the man next to Gianna. The man didn't answer and his nervousness was almost palpable. Damon started with the male first, and compelled him to relax – reassured the donor that everything was fine, and that he would not be harmed in the process, at least he hoped. He then turned to Gianna. She was willing, but anxious nonetheless. Damon simply calmed her.

Aro's irises turned black, though he appeared to be under control. "Bella," Damon called to her and offered her a hand to stand away from the bed. "I am going to walk you through this, and make no mistake, if you go off the rails, I will be forced to restrain you. I know you do not want to hurt anyone, so you have to listen and do as I say. Understood?"

She started to nod, but Damon assumed she remembered he didn't find that as an acceptable reply. "Yes," she said, her voice unwavering. "I'll follow your lead."

"Good girl," he told her and wrapped an arm around her shouldres. They walked the few steps over to the human donors, and Damon explained they were both compelled to remain calm and still. Damon took Gianna's hand and raised her wrist close to Bella. "Think if your hunger – think of feeding, and your canines will lengthen naturally."

"I have fangs?" she asked brightly. "That is kind of awesome!"

Damon laughed at the absurdity of her question. He remembered that he failed to mention that part of becoming like him. "Yes, you have fangs – way more sexy than venom," he teased and Aro growled. 'Oh, don't get your robes in a bunch, you're pretty too," He told Aro from over his shoulder.

Pretty fucking creepy.
"Now, look at her wrist, and listen for her pulse," he explained and waited for her to tune into the steady beat.

"I can hear it," she said after a moment of concentration.

"Good. I want you to continue listening while you feed. When you hear it start to slow it is time to pull back." Damon instructed her. He watched as she focused on the woman's wrist, eyeing the vein that promised to quell her thirst. Bella's mouth opened and he saw her fangs lengthen – it was hot. Mentally shaking his salacious thoughts away, he watched as she tentatively closed her mouth over Gianna's skin, and sunk her teeth in. Damon firmly cupped the back of Bella's neck in case he had to pull her away, hopefully without tearing the woman's skin from her arm.

Damon heard Gianna's pulse slow but Bella didn't pull back, in fact, she pulled on the vein even harder with more vigor. "Ah-ah-ah," he chided and pressed his fingers into her neck roughly. She pulled back and tilted her head away from the woman's arm. Damon released his own fangs, pricked his tongue and sealed the two puncture wounds left from Bella.

Looking down at the healed skin, Bella's jaw dropped open. "Am I able to do that?"

"What?" Damon asked, not sure what she was referring to.

"You healed her!"

"Yes, but the older the vampire, the more potent the blood." Damon explained to Bella. He found it a little odd that she was so excited and inquisitive, rather than a raging bundle of emotions and blood lust. "How do you feel?"

Damon watched as her expressions flashed from worried, curious, consternation and back to worried, and then she frowned. "Is something wrong? Am I not doing this right?"

Reflexively, Damon pulled her to him, and tucked her under his shoulder. "There isn't a vampire 101 manual to follow. Still thirsty?" She nodded and he picked up the man's arm and brought it to her. "Remember what I told you. Try and stay focused."

She fed, and he had to stop her again. She growled this time when he forced her away, and he chuckled. "Down girl." She had the decency to look contrite. "Still thirsty?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't think so, anyway."

"Trust me," he replied. "You would know."

"Immortality suits you, dear Bella," Aro, who had been quiet, finally spoke up. Bella shied away from the Volturi king's appraisal, and hid her face against Damon's chest. "I'd like to speak with you in private, Mister Salvatore."

Mister Salvatore. Aro addressing Damon formally never meant anything good, at the very least, not anything good for him. He wanted something, and Aro asking, no matter what, was always under the deceptive guise that the other party actually had a choice.

Damon quickly healed the young man and told both humans to eat and drink. "Bella, why don't you join Alice and Jasper, they're just outside in the hallway?" She nodded and quietly made her way to the door. She looked back at Damon and smiled shyly before exiting the room.

"You wanted to talk?" Damon asked the ancient king skeptically. "Not sure what it is you want, but it won't be Bella."
Aro sighed dramatically, and walked over behind Gianna's chair. He gathered the woman's hair in his hand and pulled her head back, threateningly. The congenial smile on Aro's face turned menacing, and dark. "I want more like you."

Okay, I didn't see that one coming, though I probably should have. Damon mentally chastised himself for not expecting something like this to happen.
Beyond speechless, Damon was completely thunderstruck. His mind raced, thinking of Bella standing out in the corridor. A new vampire of their kind, although more powerful than a human, had zero defenses against a Cold One.

"It would be a shame to kill the lovely Gianna because you refused me, do you not agree?" Aro offered calmly, as if they were having a chat regarding the weather.

Damon couldn't hold back his smirk. "If you think killing a human I've known all of five minutes will pull at my humanity, think again. I've killed for less when I'm in a bad mood."

Gruesomely, Aro bent down in a blur, tore Gianna's throat to shreds, and greedily drank her blood until her veins were dry. The crimson liquid still dripped from his mouth as he snapped her neck after he was finished with his impromptu meal; all to make a point. The young male in the room, whose name Damon never bothered to ask was next. Both bodies lay slumped over the table, and the abandoned deck of cards now stained and slick with gore.

Damon shrugged. "You're a messy eater."

Aro cocked his head curiously and smiled feverishly. "Perhaps young Bella would be a good motivation for you," the king sneered. "Your new progeny's life for more of your kind," Aro tried to barter. "Or, we could keep her, and let you go. She would likely do anything to keep the Cullens safe."

"Here's the thing, King," Damon drawled confidently and started to pace in front of Aro. "Newbie, baby vampires can't turn humans. Their blood is too weak, and so are they. Do you have any idea how long it takes one to become as strong as me?"

"How long?" Aro asked, and Damon laughed.

"I've been a vampire since 1864, so that long?" he quipped mockingly. "There are more out there considerably older than I am, and much more powerful, just not as handsome."

"Perhaps your life is worth something to you then," Aro said with deceptive charm. His feral smile told Damon he wasn't going to let go of this.

Damon feigned indecision and made some hard choices. If this didn't work, they were all fucked. "Let Bella and the Cullens leave Italy safely, and I'll make a few baby vamps for you."

"A dozen," Aro countered.

"Six, and if you refuse, then screw it," Damon bartered uncaringly, "you'll just have to kill me. I won't be staying to raise your newbies. Deal ends at creating them."

"Very well," Aro agreed. "I'll let them go after you have completed your task."

"No way. You have me here, and it's not like I can fly away." Damon protested. "I want all four out of here and on a flight back to the states before I do any changing. And I want to speak to Bella and all three Cullens before they leave."

"Why?" Aro asked, obviously not trusting Damon's intentions.
"I need to give them some instructions on how to deal with a new fledgling vampire. We're not the same," Damon explained and walked over to the large stained-glass window and opened it. "And can you get someone to clean your meals up. It is starting to smell like rotted flesh in here already."

Surprisingly, Aro acquiesced and agreed to Damon's terms. "One other thing, Aro. I want Demetri to escort them to the airport and see that they board the jet without incident."

"So untrusting," Aro chided.

"Ditto," Damon retorted flatly. Aro nodded and left the room.

Damon made his way out into the hallway and saw Alice, Jasper, and Bella waiting just outside sitting on a bench along the wall. Bella looked beyond stressed. Alice and Jasper both kept a cool calm. "We need to talk," Damon informed the three vampires. "Not here, though somewhere without sun."

All four of them made their way through the castle maze and into the human quarters. Damon turned to Alice. "Spidey senses kickin' in?"

Alice offered a nervous smile and then looked towards the door; all four of them watched as Felix escorted Edward in to join them. She ran over and hugged him fiercely. "Are you hurt?" Alice asked while her eyes roamed over her brother's form.

"No," Edward said while shaking his head and astonishingly, he turned to Damon. "Thanks for saving my family and Bella."

"Don't thank me yet," Damon said morosely. "Not until you land in the states."

"Damon," Bella called to him softly, and her voice was thick with worry and sadness. "Are you really going to do it?"

He looked at her pointedly and grimaced. "I'll do what I need to in order to get the fuck out of Dodge," he admitted but then looked at Alice. "Some choices have been made," he offered the seer his cryptic message.

While out in the lounge, Damon gave them a rundown on how to deal with Bella in case her moods started swinging erratically. How to help with the newborn thirst and how to keep her from killing her meals. He also gave them a west coast contact that supplied black market blood bags as an alternative due to their own bloodlust issues. Bella wrinkled her nose when he explained liquor was a great way to quell the cravings. That made him laugh. "Don't worry baby-girl, it isn't easy for us to get drunk, but it's fun trying!"

"Ugh," Edward sounded disgusted. "Must you turn her on to your depravities?"

"You're just jealous because you can't get drunk," Damon said with a cocky grin. "And don't forget, she can eat human food, but blood is necessary to process it. If she goes too long without feeding, it will weaken her."

While talking about what to expect from Bella, Demetri entered the room with a dark look on his face. "I wish I could say I can't believe Aro is doing this," Demetri said grimly. "But I promise I will see them off safely."

"I know, man," Damon assured and gave his friend a squeeze on his stony shoulder. "We do what we have to in order to survive in our fucked up world."
The tracker nodded and let the group know the limo was ready for their departure. "We'll leave through the garages and the windows are darkly tinted. By the time we get to Florence, the sun will be setting. Aro has booked passage on our private jet."

"Think not," Jasper refused the offer. "I'd rather a commercial flight with a pilot not employed by the Volturi, but thanks anyway."

"Bella can't be in the sun," Damon pointed out. "Timing will be everything when it comes to her safety," he warned them of her major vulnerability. "I'll be getting her a ring like mine, but I have to travel somewhere to see a witch that won't like me showing up at her doorstep."

"Not even askin'," Jasper said while shaking his head.

Damon grinned at the former Major. "I knew one of her ancestors. I'm sure there is an entire segment regarding the Salvatore brothers in her Grimoire."

Demetri coughed and reminded them it was time to go. Damon agreed and handed Jasper a folded piece of paper. "Here is the direct line to Gianna's desk phone. Call collect when you land so I know it's coming from the states."

The Major shook Damon's hand, Alice gave him a hug and whispered in his ear, "It'll work," she said and released him. Edward nodded.

Bella shocked him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the side of his neck, raised up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I need you. Please stay alive."

Damon had no words, and if he did, they were stuck in his throat. He chose action over promises and held her tightly, pressed his lips against her temple and sent her off with the Cullens, and hopefully to safety.

Twelve hours and a lot of pacing later, the late Gianna's phone rang. Jasper had made the collect call, and Damon accepted the charges. They had landed in Seattle and rented a car to drive the rest of the way home. Bella had slept most of the flight after Jasper order her a few shots of Jose Cuervo to calm her cravings and nerves. Edward voiced his displeasure, but Bella was happy for the temporary relief.

It was time to deal with Aro. Damon asked one of the lesser guards to request the king to join him in his guest suite.

Both vampires stood face to face in Damon's room. Aro watched expectantly so Damon chose to speak first. "Do you like birds?" Damon asked offhandedly. "I, myself am partial to the crow. They're intelligent, cunning, great instincts, amazing eyesight, and have a knack for escaping danger."

"The crow," Aro mimicked. "To what extent will you blather on in order to misdirect?"

"Oh, I'm not misdirecting anything," Damon said with a chuckle. "I have to wonder, though, when you do your memory reading thing, did you only go through the major highlights, or did you pay attention to every single detail since my human life? I keep a few things very secret. One of which I am inclined to believe you were unable to read," Damon said casually and looked Aro straight in the eyes. "Are you curious at all what that might be?"

"Very," Aro said drolly and rolled his eyes.

Damon had been picturing his crow form since Aro threatened Bella's life, and worked to make very
firm choices. Praying that Alice saw everything and her words rang true; Damon transformed into his bird and flew out of the stained-glass window. He flew high in the sky and looked back to see the ancient king's face full of fury glaring out the window he'd just exited.

Because his crow was almost like a separate entity from himself, he made the dicey bet that Aro could not get a read on that ability. Damon's crow cawed mockingly, and successfully made his escape.
Virginia was the last place Damon planned on visiting for a long while. He'd made his random drop-ins to check on the boader house, along with the Bennett family because of a promise he had made to Emily Bennett. Emily promised Damon that she would cast a spell to protect his beloved Katherine in exchange for protecting her lineage. The currant living relatives were Sheila, Abby, and the youngest, Bonnie. Admittedly, he had not checked on them since Bonnie was barely out of diapers.

Once he landed at Dulles International Airport after leaving Italy, Damon rented a car and made the drive to Mystic Falls. He avoided the main part of town, and drove the back roads to the Bennett home.

Standing on the porch of Sheila's home, Damon listened with his vampire hearing and quickly assessed only one heartbeat within the house. He knocked on the door, though no one answered. He knocked again and shouted that he wasn't going to leave until she agreed to talk with him.

The weather beaten door slowly opened just enough for Sheila to peer out at Damon. She had not removed the chain lock, and spoke through the small opening. "I know what and who you are."

Damon sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "I know what and who you are, too."

"In that case," she snapped, "then you should know what I am capable of."

"I need a favor," Damon blurted without bothering with polite niceties. "And if you are half the witch Emily was, then it should be easy enough for you."

"I don't do favors for vampires," she hissed. "It only leads to unpaid debts and troubles with your kind."

Rather than let the witch rankle his nerves, Damon chose another approach. He plucked up a chair away from a small outdoor table setting, faced it towards the doorway and sat. "Now," he said while pointing to himself and continued. "I'm not going anywhere and I am sure you don't want a scene for your neighbors to gossip about. Besides, the favor isn't for me, exactly." Sheila raised a brow at the vampire and Damon went on to explain about the vampires he'd met in Italy, the leaders that called themselves kings, and how different they were from his kind. He also explained about Bella, and how she had to choose death or immortality, and that Damon volunteered because in his opinion, his kind of vampire was the lesser of the two evils.

"And what is it you want from me?" Sheila asked sounding slightly less disinterested.

Damon reached inside his leather jacket and pulled out a small gift box. He sat it next to the threshold and stepped back unthreateningly. "I need a daylight ring. She needs to graduate and stop with the judgy glare, she is an adult and she made the choice of her own free will. Mind you, it was under duress, but not by me."

"Which brother are you?" she asked and he knew the answer could backfire on him.

"Does it matter?" he deflected her question, knowing she would likely not accept his ambiguity.

"The Ripper or the jackass?" she asked with a sly smirk.

Damon had to laugh, and wondered if he may have an in with this witch. "Not being the Ripper win
Sheila opened the small box and gave the ring a critical once-over. "Fine craftsmanship and expensive. She must be someone you've grown fond of."

"There no law saying function can't be fashionable," Damon defended his choice in rings. "She has to wear it a long time, and you know what the say – diamonds are forever."

After buying his airline ticket from Milan to Virginia, he had ten hours before his flight boarded and Damon went and browsed several jewelry shops while killing time. The third shop he entered, had a display case with chocolate diamond rings. One caught his eye right away and asked the sales assistant to pull it from the protective glass. It was an eternity ring, which seemed fitting, cast in platinum with several small brown diamonds in a grain setting. It was simple, understated, yet elegant. It was very Bella-like.

Before Bella had risen, Damon secretly removed a ring off her right hand middle finger. He had placed it in his wallet, knowing she would need a daylight ring if he were going to be the one responsible for her in the long term. At least the first year until she had good enough control and could go out on her own. He offered the jeweler and obscene amount of extra cash and Bella's ring so he could size the new one, all to have it finished before his flight.

"I'll come back before I have to leave for the airport," Damon informed the jeweler, which was very happy with his new commission. "Put it in a nice box."

Still having seven hours before he had to check-in through customs, he searched for a decent pub. After finding a not-so decent bar, he chose to suck it up because it was between the jewelers and the airport. "Scotch, on the rocks," Damon ordered after searching for a clean bar stool to sit on.

A gangly man with greasy, slicked back dark hair slid Damon's drink in front of him and mumbled a greeting. "Welcome to Eliseo's. My name is Alonzo. Two rules here, pay your tab and don't cause trouble."

"Keep my glass full, and it's all good," Damon replied dully. "Do I smell pizza?"

Alonzo rolled his eyes and muttered fucking tourist under his breath, assuming Damon didn't hear him. "It's Italy, isn't it?"

"This fucking tourist calls bullshit," Damon spat bitterly. "You have an American accent, douchebag."

Alonzo wasn't fazed by Damon's outburst. "I was born here in Milan, moved to the states when I was two, and recently came back to run my uncle's bar," he explained as though he'd repeated the tale several times over and was bored of it. "So do you want some pizza, or not?"

"Whatever you recommend," Damon said dismissively.

"Pippa," the barkeep barked rudely. "Bring a single order of today's special pie!"

Within a few minutes an olive-skinned, older woman came through the kitchen door wearing a white
peasant blouse and a flowing skirt, carrying a plate with two slices of Lazio style pizza-pie. She sat the plate down and winked at Damon. He eyed her from head to toe and decided she was attractive for a woman likely near forty. A few gray hairs blended in with her brown-black hair, which was long and braided. She had startling green eyes that shone brightly even in the dim bar. Her skin looked healthy with a few laugh lines around her mouth and eyes. "Thanks, beautiful," Damon said charmingly.

"Careful, tourist," Alonzo warned. "That one may be a damn good cook, but she's a man-eater and would take a young guy like you to task."

"I think I can handle myself," Damon said with a smirk and winked at Pippa who licked her lips suggestively. "First, I want to eat this amazing pie, and maybe another drink."

"And then after that?" Pippa whispered coquettishly.

Damon waggled his brow provocatively. "Depends whether this pizza is all that and a bag of chips."

"You want chips?" Alonzo asked dumbly.

"Good grief, dude," Damon said disbelievingly. "Get a clue."

Alonzo huffed and went back to stocking the bar while Damon ate both slices of pizza and tossed back two more glasses of scotch. He threw some crumpled cash on the bar and walked into the mens-room to wash up. As he was drying his hands, the bathroom door opened quietly and Damon heard the bolt sliding into place, locking the door. "Wondered if you'd follow me in here," Damon said after picking up her scent. "Sleazy place for a clandestine tryst, dirty girl."

Pippa laughed seductively, walked up behind Damon, and pressed her body flush with his back. "You have no idea how dirty," she whispered in his ear.

Damon whirled around faster than any human should be able too, causing her to sway dizzily. He reached behind her, grabbed her firm backside with both hands, and roughly pressed his fingertips into her flesh and lifted her up. "Show me," he ordered.

Strong legs wrapped around Damon's waist and he briefly noted she must work out, a lot. She was strong for a little human woman. He reached between them and stroked the thin cotton of her panties. "Been anticipating this, have you?" he growled in her ear. She was already damp, her musky arousal filled the air in the small bathroom.

An expert hand wriggled between them, and Pippa had Damon's belt and button fly opened impressively fast. He slipped his hand underneath her cotton panties and ripped them away. "You are so eager," he hissed. "I'm going to fuck you, and then I'm going to bite that tasty neck of yours."

"Gods, yes!" she said breathily, begging, and already panting with excitement.

Spinning her around, Damon slammed the cook's back to the wall and with a punishing roughness; he entered her, filling her completely. He set a grueling pace, though she cried for more. Using some of his vampire speed and strength, his thrusts increased. This woman had no damn limits! He almost felt sorry for human males brave enough to have sex with this woman.

"More—more—more!" she cried out while trying to claw at his leather jacket.

He could feel the muscles in her heated core start to contract and Damon ran his tongue over her rapid pulse and lengthened his fangs. He sunk into the soft flesh slowly as her orgasm started to pique and drank her life's blood while she came apart around him, forcing his own release while
swallowing the sweet nectar from the open vein of her neck. He sealed the wounds quickly and thrust into a few more times before withdrawing from her body…

"Mr. Salvatore!" Sheila called out his name sharply. Damon blinked and looked directly at the woman. "I was trying to get your attention for the last five minutes. Where were you?"

Damon shook his head. "No place you want to hear about," he admitted hastily, and brought the subject back to why he was here. "So, about that daylight ring?"

"Tell me more about this new vampire you created," the witch said, more like insisted.

Not sure what all he could offer, he started with what he knew for sure. "She's ridiculously selfless, a bit of a martyr, willing to give her own life for those she cares about, and her self-worth is horrible," Damon offered some of his own insight into the girl. "Although, she is funny without trying, and stupidly brave. I think she's unusually observant and intelligent, too. Honestly, I haven't known her for very long."

Damon also elaborated on how he met Bella, and all the events that led up to him, offering to be the one to turn her. Sheila looked very thoughtful as he finished his account of the mayhem in Italy.

"How soon do you need it? I have Emily's spell, though I've never performed it before."

"As soon as possible," Damon confessed. "She's holed up in the other vampire's house right now, and her father is likely going to file a missing person's report soon."

"By morning, then," she agreed and closed the box holding the ring. "Then I have your word that you are not planning on staying in Mystic Falls?"

"No plans, though I can't agree to forever," Damon said honestly.

"For now," she accepted his word. "See you in the morning."

Shelia closed the door and Damon went back to his rental car. He decided on going to the boarding house and stalk from a distance. He parked the car, hidden in the woods and watched the house that he'd not lived in for decades. By now, most of the humans that were alive when he last resided in Mystic Falls would all be dead or very old and memories of the Salvatore brothers died with them.

Quiet contemplation took over as he looked unseeingly out the driver side window. Sheila jolted him out of his disturbed memories before leaving Milan. The woman in the bar, the seedy hookup in the men's room, and the punishing sex he abused her body with; it all had him reeling.

Why had he been so pissed off? What about the sordid little tryst, torqued his insides after pulling out of the eager woman's body? Damon compelled her to believe it was the best fifteen minutes of her life, pushed her out of the bathroom and washed any evidence of her off his body. Bella flitted through his mind, briefly, and he pushed it away, not willing to analyze why her name popped into his head, or those doe-like eyes of hers staring into his.

Day turned into night while his thoughts consumed him over Bella. He wanted to be the one to change her, though, were his intentions altruistic or was it his lack of trust for Aro that drove his need to be the one? Within the Volturi, he and Demetri became friends over the past decade, and friends were not something that came easily to Damon. Caius, he also considered a friend, sort of, but he knew where Caius's loyalties would lie in the end if it came down to Aro's demands and desires.

Damon fell into a troubled, uncomfortable sleep and disturbing dreams haunted him; Bella held
captive by Aro – her starving body locked in a Volturi dungeon – desiccation setting in while those chocolate brown eyes dulled and became lifeless. Her cheeks stained of dirty, dried tears – her nails ripped from the beds of her fingers as she struggled with her newborn thirst and fear. Before he woke from the nightmare, the last thing he witnessed was Bella's vampire blood being drained so that Aro could create his own brand-new vampires of his kind, and he had no way of getting to her.

When Damon woke, the eastern angle of the sunrise intensified through the windshield of his rental car. He slept so poorly, the sleepy miasma shrouded his mind until there was a tap at the passenger side window. Damon snapped his gaze sharply, and a shock ran through his body once he realized who was standing outside the car.

"Demetri," Damon spoke cautiously and popped the automatic locks.

The tracker gracefully sat in the passenger seat, pulled the hood of his cloak down and frowned. "Why are you just sitting here? You've been here all night."

"Not my first choice for accommodations, but I'm on a tight schedule," Damon offered tiredly. "Why are you here, Demetri?"

Demetri frowned again, and sighed heavily. "Not like I had a choice in the matter," he admitted regretfully. "Jane, Felix, and Caius are here, as well."

"For fuck's sake," Damon spat angrily. "Has that psycho king of yours, nothing better to do?"

Demetri raised a brow bemused. "No?"

"Are you asking me, or telling me, no?" Damon said between clenched teeth. "I'm not making baby vamps for King, crazy-pants."

"Good," Demetri quickly agreed. "But there is a matter of Aro wanting you dragged back to Volterra – dead or alive."

Damon snorted and reached for the key and started the engine. "I have to be somewhere, and if you're coming along, shut the door."

"Where to?" Demetri asked, not really sounding very interested. He shut the car door and relaxed back into his seat. "I'm not bringing you back. Caius doesn't want to, either, though I can't say the same for Jane."

"Tough-tits for Jane, because I'm not going unless you all kill me," Damon replied with forced indifference. "Good luck with that, either way. I'm going to see a witch about a daylight ring. She promised to have it done this morning. Then, I'm flying to Washington. I fear the Cullens has their hands full with Bella."

"I wonder if she can make rings so that my kind don't sparkle," Demetri mused aloud and chuckled.

"No idea," Damon muttered. "You can't go with me, so you'll have to stay in the car. Witches are twitchy around our kind. At least, my kind, because I'm guessing they don't know about you."

"You didn't tell her anything about us?" Demetri asked curiously.

"A little," Damon admitted. "I had to pull a few sympathy cards for my newbie charge."

The two men rode in silence until Damon parked the car down the street from Sheila's house. He turned to Demetri. "The house is a block that way," he said and pointed. "I won't risk her sensing
you, if she is able. I'll leave the keys in the ignition, just in case."

Demetri nodded, pulled his hood back up and rolled his window down a few inches.

While walking to the witch's house, Damon scanned the area wondering where the other Volturi was hiding out. He found nothing amiss and crossed Sheila's yard and leapt up onto her front porch. She opened the door before he had a chance to knock.

"The ring is finished," she said and held the small gift box in her hand. "I want something from you before I hand it over."

Always a catch," Damon murmured. "What do you want?"

She looked at him speculatively and crossed her arms over her chest. "I want to meet one of the other vampires."

"Why?" Damon asked, unsure why she'd risk exposing herself.

"I want to know about them so I can journal it for future witches, and for my granddaughter."

"They don't need to be invited in," Damon warned her.

"I can protect myself," she said confidently. Damon knew the power of the Bennett bloodline and had little doubt that she could.

"You happen to be in luck," Damon informed her and turned his head towards his parked car. "Demetri. Drive the car a block down and pull into the driveway at the house I'm standing in front of. The witch wants to meet you, and no funny business."

"He can hear you?" Sheila inquired incredulously.

"Easily," Damon said offhandedly while watching for the rental car. Demetri drove the car slowly, and a little unsteadily. When he turned into the drive, Demetri parked the car haphazardly.

"Have you ever driven a car?" Damon asked with amusement.

Demetri hissed. "I've never needed to."

Damon chuckled while Demetri met him on the porch. "Demetri, this is Sheila Bennett from a very powerful line of witches. I knew one of her ancestors back in the eighteen hundreds."

"A pleasure," Demetri offered and bowed his head. He started to offer his hand, but Sheila stepped back away from his reach.

"She doesn't trust us," Damon informed the tracker. "Rightfully so, with most our kind."

"I realize you do not wish me to enter your home, ma'am, but I can't be exposed out here and this part of the country is very sunny."

"Meet me around back," she instructed. "I have a screened in patio with blinds."

The two men made their way around the house and into the three-season patio. Damon didn't have to be invited because it was separate from the house's foundation. All three sat around a large picnic table and Sheila assaulted Demetri with an onslaught of questions. To the tracker's credit, he answered what he could honestly and when Damon asked about all the Cold Ones secret rules, Demetri decided Sheila was just as much a part of the supernatural world as they were.
They also informed Sheila that Aro sent Demetri to find Damon and bring him back to Volterra. "So, this Aro doesn't care if Mr. Salvatore is dead or not?" Sheila asked the tracker.

"No," Demetri answered honestly. "His ego is wounded, though I am sure Aro would love to kill Damon, himself, I suspect he knows Damon won't leave without a fight."

She hummed thoughtfully. "I can help, but..." Sheila looked to Damon, a fierce challenge in her eyes. "You would owe me a favor in return should the need arise."

"Why only me?" Damon whined slightly and pointed at the tracker. "He's the one that is under orders."

"Yes," she drawled haughtily. "I doubt he'd stop coming after you, should Demetri fail."

"You got me there," Damon said, resigned to owing the Bennett witch a favor.

Sheila smiled triumphantly. "Then you agree to my terms?"

"Do I have a choice?" Damon asked rhetorically.

Sheila grabbed a piece of paper, jotted down a name and address, and then handed it to Damon. "Go to the morgue and tell him I sent you. Also, tell him 'protection of the elements', and show him this," she instructed and handed Damon a small wooden medallion with a quarter moon, sun, water, fire and air signs etched on both sides. "He will know it's from me. Tell him I need a male head."

Demetri's eyes opened wide. "A head?" he asked lamely. "I can't take Aro a random head."

"It is nothing more than a glamour spell. It will only last a few weeks," she informed the two men, "so you had better dispose of it before it no longer looks like Mr. Salvatore."

"That," Demetri drawled in awe, "is freaking amazing!"

"Language," Sheila tutted with displeasure. "No need for that young man."

Demetri sniggered. "I have been around since 1000 AD. Young man doesn't quite fit."

"Don't sass me, young man," Sheila scolded while placing her hand on her hip. "You barely look old enough to be an adult - so far as I'm concerned, until you have wrinkles and gray hair, you're a young man."

Demetri chuckled and held up his hands in surrender. "My apologies, Ms. Bennett."

"The thought of my look-alike head on a silver platter is all fun and giggles," Damon said with a mock shudder. "I have a flight to catch soon, so I'll go meet with the Doctor of spare parts, and you stay here and keep your sparkly ass well hidden."

"Nice save," Demetri said with a smirk and turned to Sheila. "If you approve of the plan, Ms. Bennett?"

"It's fine as long as you mind your manners," Sheila said with a grin. "And show me this sparkling thing."

"Very pretty," Damon teased. "Wear sunglasses."

Demetri growled, but Damon slipped out the door and blurred into the car.
The drive to the morgue in the next city and back had taken a good three hours. Damon returned and pulled a cooler from the trunk of the car and covered it with his jacket before carrying it to the patio. Sheila and Demetri were playing checkers. "I get the grunt work while you sit and play games," Damon said and sat the cooler chest on the floor. "Anyone order one freshly decapitate head?"

"I have to carry that thing all the way back to Italy," Demetri countered. "You had the easy part."

"True," Damon agreed with a grin. "Are you going to fill Caius in on our little scheme?"

"It won't leave the three of us," Demetri vowed firmly. "I trust Caius to a point, but it is too risky."

"Agreed," Damon said with a sharp nod.

"All right, boys," Sheila interrupted. "Let's get this show on the road and get you two away from my home before the neighbors start poking their noses in my business."

The spell required several ingredients and the Bennett witch chanted in an old language until the spell took effect. Damon looked down at the severed head that now bore his likeness and shuddered. "That is disturbing."

Better than dead," Demetri offered slyly.

"Point taken," Damon agreed, and watched the tracker pack the head back into the cooler.

"All right, you two," Sheila said as she shooed them with her hands. "Get on outta here, and Damon," she looked at him very seriously. "Remember, if I am ever in need to call on that favor…"

Damon agreed to honor his oath to the witch, said his goodbyes to Demetri. Before he walked away, Demetri asked Sheila a question. "Are you able to remove false bindings?"

"I need more than that to go on," she admitted. "What sort of bindings?"

Demetri explained Chelsea's gift, and that he knew she tried to tie Damon to Aro, but for some reason it didn't work on the other vampire. Sheila furrowed her brow. "I don't know Demetri. I have never heard of such a thing. From what I can tell, your gifts are not witchcraft, but something you are born with, and it becomes more powerful when you are turned into an immortal. I'm just making a guess, though."

Demetri actually looked a little deflated and thanked Sheila. Both vampires left her home and drove off together. Damon broke the silence and asked, "Where do you want dropped off?"

"Nowhere you can be detected. They are waiting at an inn in the next town south of here."

"Drive with me to the airport, take my rental car," Damon offered as a plan. "And please return it so it's not reported stolen. Just tell them we fought, you won, and you made off with my car."

"That should work. It will also explain why the car is heavy with your scent."

"Damon snorted and shook his head. "Blame it on the pretty head, chilling in the cooler."

Damon and Demetri parted at Dulles International Airport. Damon sat in the first-class lounge waiting for the announcement of boarding times, when his cell phone started to vibrate. He pulled it out of his inside pocket and answered.

"Bella is losing it. She just impaled Emmett with one of my stilettos!"
"Can you even be impaled by a shoe, Alice?" Damon asked, disbelieving.

"No, we can't," Jasper answered after taking the phone away from his wife. "Though, baby-vamp is cranky as all get-out."

Just then, the airlines announced all first-class passengers it was time to board. "I'll be there by morning. Get her drunk or something and make sure she's not thirsty."

"Emmett heard you, he's on his way to the liquor store," Jasper said with a sigh. "Can vampires become alcoholics?"

Damon laughed as he hefted his carry-on bag. "No. We have one addiction, and it is the same as yours. See you soon."

Once he settled in first-class, the first thing Damon did was order a double bourbon. It was going to be a long flight.
After landing at Sea–Tac airport, Damon trekked off to baggage claim and then made his way to the car rental counter. Before he moved in the cue, Jasper and a large dark-haired male stood on either side of him. "Seems you have a welcome wagon, and no need to rent a car, we have extras you can use." Jasper informed Damon, while pointing to the other male. "This is Emmett, my brother."

Turning his gaze on Emmett and then back to Jasper, Damon raised a brow speculatively. "You two look nothing alike."

"Not that sort of brother, dude," Emmett said with a chuckle. "Good to meet ya, man," Emmett greeted and shook Damon's hand eagerly, "but we need to roll. There is a baby-vamp driving us all nuts, and she's acting like a caged animal."

Damon pulled the handle up on his luggage and smoothly rolled it behind him while he walked with Jasper and Emmett out of the airport and into the parking deck. "Nice Jeep," Damon appraised. "Do any muddin' with that thing?"

"Hells, yeah!" Emmett said excitedly. "Anytime you're up for a little off-road fun, just say."

"Noted," Damon replied with a nod and looked over at Jasper. "How bad has she been?"

Jasper sighed and quickly glanced over at his brother. "It's not so much that she's been bad, exactly," Jasper started to say and Emmett snorted derisively. "Shut-it, Em."

"What?" Damon asked, feigning seriousness. "A coven full of seasoned vampires can't handle one baby-vamp?"

"Not the way I know how to handle newborns," Jasper said with a frown.

The Major didn't elaborate which made Damon curious, of course. He hefted his bags and tossed them in the back of the Jeep, and the three men were on their way to Podunk-Nowheresville, Forks.

Damon observed his surroundings from the backseat window as they parked the car on the Seattle Ferry – headed for Bainbridge Island. Emmett was the first to remove his seatbelt and jump out of the 4x4. "Let's go hang on the upper deck."

"It's raining," Damon commented dryly, pointing out the obvious.

"It's always raining," Jasper explained with a smirk. "Afraid your hair will frizz?"

"Don't be a dick," Damon spat back with a grin.

"Don't be such a girl," Jasper bantered good-naturedly.

Emmett looked between the two men and rolled his eyes, and then took off for the stairwell leading to an upper level of the ferry. Damon and Jasper both shrugged and slowly followed the huge vampire.

"Is he always so happy?" Damon asked while watching as Emmett bounded up the stairs, taking three at a time.

Jasper chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. "Pretty much. Not much gets him down unless someone is threatening the family – he'll get pissed, but never down. Even his anger is enthusiastic."
Not having anything else to say on the subject, Damon made his way up, leaned up against a
guardrail, and looked out over the gray, choppy waters of the river. Everything was dreary, wet and
very green in the area. He started to think about what Jasper and Emmett said about Bella's mood
swings, and wondered how bad it could truly be. She seemed like a levelheaded human, which often
carried over with their kind. Base nature rarely changed. Sure, emotions are heightened, and mood
swings were common with vampires, but he was surprised that she'd been such a handful, the entire
time.

"You'll understand once we get to the house," Jasper said quietly, startling Damon.

"You're like a damn wraith," Damon said, looking over at his former comrade in arms. "Are you a
mind reader, too?"

"Naw," Jasper drawled. "It wasn't difficult to understand where your mind was based on your
emotions."

"... And what emotions might those be?" Damon asked, though he wasn't certain he wanted to
know what the mood ring picked up from him.

Jasper shrugged and spoke casually. "A little concern, maybe a bit of confusion. Mostly, though,
you're fixated on something or someone."

Damon looked over at the vampire next to him and swore Jasper looked slightly haughty. "Forget I
asked."

"Forgotten," Jasper said, and agreed to drop it. "Esme, our pseudo mom, prepared the cottage on our
land so that you have some privacy. A rare thing in a houseful of vampires."

"Huh," Damon pondered aloud. "How long do you think I'm staying?"

"It doesn't matter," Jasper offered and rested his palms over the guardrail. "She was happy to have a
project, and Carlisle is—well—very curious about you. He is a doctor at the local hospital and it's in
his nature to learn everything."

"A vampire doctor?" Damon asked, slightly taken aback. "You're serious?"

"Very," Jasper assured. "A surgeon, no less. Carlisle has freakish control over his blood lust. He's
never drank human blood, nor has he killed a single person."

Damon tapped his fingertips on the metal railing and hummed in thought. "How long has he been?"
he asked vaguely, not wanting the closest humans to overhear.

"Three hundred and forty three years," Jasper murmured quietly.

Emmett sidled up next to Damon and Jasper. "He's a vampire paragon," Emmett said in hushed
tones, and obviously in awe of his adoptive father. "Only my Rosie comes second to Carlisle's clean
record."

"So..." Damon drawled, working out the oddball vampire family in his mind, "is there some sort of
humanitarian award for Bambi-eating blood drinkers?"

Jasper, who looked a little morose, glanced at Emmett, then back out towards the shipping piers
coming into view. "I take it a couple of us won't be competing for vampire of the year?" Damon
asked Jasper, keeping his voice light and flippant.
"Not even close," Jasper murmured. "You, neither?"

Damon grunted and ran his hand through his rain-soaked hair. "Same as you, bro—same as you."

Emmett frowned and glanced between Damon and Jasper. "I'd not share that with Bella – she's all about not killing, or hurting humans."

"Not gonna lie, big guy," Damon said scrupulously. "If she asks, I'm not going to dodge the truth, or even color it in pretty pictures. Lies like those will bite me on the ass later."

"An honest killer?" Emmett asked, far too amused by the contrast.

"Never said I was always honest," Damon quipped with a silent laugh. "Can you live forever and be truthful in a human, mortal world?" Both men nodded in agreement.

Looking around, Damon noticed the crowded ferry and groups of humans avoiding where the three of them stood. He idly wondered how people instinctively knew to stay clear of vampires like the Cullens. To the mortal eye, they likely looked unnaturally perfect, though he couldn't help but compare the differences between them. The Volturi stayed holed up in their ancient palace, so there was little to base social variances on. The few missions he went on, the Volturi avoided human crowds altogether Only Caius and Demetri braved the big bad social venue with him, and it wasn't often.

The ferry slowed and started steering into a large pier. Before the crowd started migrating down the stairs and into their cars, the three vampires moved slightly faster than the humans and settled back into the Jeep.

Damon pulled out his Blackberry and powered it back up. "Nice phone," Jasper commented after the loading music played over the tiny speaker.

"Thanks," Damon replied and watched as they drove off the ferry. "How much longer is the drive?"

"Two hours if you go the speed limit," Emmett said slyly.

"And if you don't?" Damon queried.

Jasper turned in his seat and grinned. "We should be there in a little over an hour."

"I think I'll close my eyes for a bit, and prepare myself for newbie vamp antics." Damon stretched and slowly closed his eyelids. "Wake me when speed-racer is close to the house."

Both men in the front seats remained quiet, and Damon chose to take the time to think about everything he'd gotten himself into. He was not a selfless man, nor did he willingly rescue damsels in distress, no matter how adorable he thought they were. The only time he turned a human was in 1942, a woman named Charlotte, who had deeply disturbing, co-dependency issues coupled with the rare off-chance sire bond that had only been a myth, until it happened to him. Even now, he was still skeptical regarding the elusive sire phenomenon. The witch that offered to help break the bond failed, which only gave Damon more doubt in the legend. Senselessly, he wondered if Charlotte had stayed in Nawlins, or moved on.

Jasper and Emmett weren't keen on offering details regarding Bella and the troubles they'd been having with the newly minted vamp. Damon wondered if the stark contrast between her human self, and the newly born vampire threw them off guard, not expecting her to be any different; or so he hoped. Regardless, she made her choice, albeit not under the best circumstances. He would make it clear, with the Cullens, no matter how much they loved her and saw her as a member of the family,
Bella was his charge, and none of them would understand exactly what she was going through, more than he did.

"We're five minutes away," Jasper announced and turned in his passenger seat. "You've got some mixed emotions whipping around back there."

"Stuff it, mood ring," Damon said without opening his eyes. "Does anyone ever tell you how annoying that is?"

"All the time," Emmett offered quickly in humor. "Better than Edward, at least. Dude is nosy!"

"Can't he control what he hears?" Damon asked curiously, also making him feel edgy that his thoughts would be exposed.

"He says there's no way to turn it off, but I'm not so sure," Emmett explained, and it seemed to Damon that the big-guy didn't buy the mind-readers excuse. "You can tell when he is trying to listen, and when he's not."

"Guess I'll be on my guard," Damon muttered, annoyed.

They turned off a winding road on to a well-hidden driveway that appeared covered in overgrowth. Damon realized that the arrangement of indigenous plants was intentional, keeping the path obscure from the street.

"Home-sweet-home," Emmett sang and parked his Jeep in front of a three-story mansion that looked both modern and historic. A meticulously groomed blonde-haired woman rushed out to meet the large vamp and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Damon, this is my wife and mate, Rosalie. Rosie, this is Bella's, er…"

Damon rolled his eyes, though he extended a hand to Emmett's wife once she had both feet back on the ground. "Damon Salvatore," he introduced himself and shook her hand.

"Finally!" she blurted, and quickly released his hand. "Get your newb under control before I bury her in the back yard!"

"That wouldn't hold her," Damon said flatly, and then furrowed his brow. "What's got her in such a snit?"

"My idiot brother," Rosalie spat.

Damon hissed and his lips curled in anger, exposing his lengthening canines.

"Dial it down a notch, Fangs," Rose warned. "He hasn't hurt her, or even touched her. He's being typical Edward, trying to tell her what she should or should not be doing, and it is pissing her off. Esme banned him from talking to her," she explained and Damon calmed a little, his teeth retracted but his eyes shone darkly. "By the way, I like your teeth. Very cool!"

"Nice, Rosie," Emmett said to his wife, half-amused, half-jealous.

"Where is she?" Damon asked, and disregarded the other Cullen family members filing out onto the large wraparound porch.

"Third floor," a motherly woman spoke softly. "It is our library, and has no natural light due to the antique tomes and art on display."
"Hope you packed it away in a safe place," Damon said seriously, and three of the Cullens nodded their heads. "I'm sorry, but can we skip the pleasantries until I get her calm?"

"This way," said a blonde male who Damon assumed was Carlisle. He vaguely remembered a few portraits that hung in the Volturi palace. Aro pointed out the coven leader and told him the story of his friend nicknamed Stregone benefic that never fed on human blood. Damon never thought he'd be meeting said vampire.

While climbing the two sets of stairs at a human pace, the coven leader spoke. "I believe my eldest is partially to blame for Bella's mood, for that, I apologize on his behalf." Damon hmm'd but kept quiet. "I know he was trying to help in his own way, though she seems to have some pent up anger towards Edward."

"Were you told about what happened in Volterra?" Damon asked, wondering if the coven leader was given a full account of the events that led up to Bella's change.

"Jasper and Alice explained everything, yes," the doctor said grimly. "I know Aro sees the world in black and white, and he rarely wavers once he's made a decision."

"The lunatic king sees every color of the rainbow, and then offers ultimatums in black and white," Damon replied, not understanding how this vampire, who stayed with the Volturi for decades, wore blinders when it came to Aro's true nature.

The two men stopped in front of a set of French doors and Carlisle opened the one to the right, and stepped off to the side. "I'll give you two some privacy. A few of us are going for a hunt, but we're staying locally."

Damon wondered if 'staying locally' was a warning or an attempt to be comforting. He chose not to comment, nodded and slipped inside the large library and closed the door behind him. He scanned the room, and noted all the empty bookshelves and spaces where paintings once hung. There was a desk with an open laptop, a wardrobe, and a large queen-size bed. In the center of the bed, was Bella, furiously writing in a notebook, a pile of crumpled paper and broken disposable pens leaking onto the floor. "I hear the stock in disposable pens has risen, I think I should invest," Damon said, teasingly.

Bella ignored him, and continued to mutilate the defenseless paper. "I hear you've been a bit moody," he asked, keeping his voice soft and level. "It's normal for a new vampire, but I have to wonder what ignited your anger."

"I'm not angry," she mumbled, still keeping her head down and focused on the notebook, though she stopped writing. "I'm pissed off."

"Explains the strength and control problem," Damon commented, as he walked around the bed to face Bella. Black ink stained her writing hand, as well as her clothing. Damon observed her nails were chipped and a few broken down to the fingertips. "Why are you sitting here writing if it is pissing you off so much?"

"It isn't that," she murmured, and tossed the notepad aside and started to twirl the pen between her fingers.

Damon waited for Bella to continue and after a few moments, he grabbed the chair in front of the desk with one hand, flipped the back to face her, and straddled the seat. "What. Happened," Damon demanded, firmly, reached out, and held her chin between his thumb and index finger so she couldn't look away.
"Nothing," she said, petulantly.

"Na-ah, baby-girl," Damon chided, already feeling exasperated. "I won't tolerate that sort of answer. You will not suffer in silence and then blow up later when none of it makes sense or isn't relevant any longer.

Her cheeks slightly flushed, which meant she fed well, at least. "It's embarrassing," she muttered.

"So get it over with and tell me," Damon cajoled, trying to keep his voice even, yet unyielding.

"Edward," she spat, blowing out a harsh breath. "He—he tried to get me to hunt with him, and I told him no several times, and then…"

"Keep going."

"You're a bully," Bella fired back, and leered at Damon.

"Sometimes. Now continue," he said, unrepentant.

"He provoked me, saying the baby vamp has to feed from a sippy cup, and that a real vampire would hunt down its meal. I was so pissed that I finally agreed, only to prove him wrong," she admitted, and then Bella accused her boyfriend of something Damon could not forgive. "He tried to kill me!"

Before he took off rashly to kill the teenage vampire, Damon inhaled deeply and asked Bella to explain. She unfolded her legs, stretched them out on the bed and looked down at the pen now stationary in her hand. "We ran deep into the Olympic forest and he picked up the scent of a mountain lion. He helped me navigate and when I attacked, the dang thing clawed into me, ripped my skin open and left me lying there bleeding all over the friggin place!"

"I'm going to kill him," Damon vowed, his voice low and deadly.

"No!" Bella begged, and jumped off the bed. "It was my fault. I shouldn't have let him bait me into it."

"No," he agreed through clenched teeth, "you shouldn't have, but he knows how volatile a new vampire can be, and how easily they are triggered, which I am positive he used to his advantage," he added and raised himself off the chair. "Before I go kill him, one last thing, stop taking on the blame for others. It really pisses me off."

Bella wiped her hands on her jeans and smeared the wet ink away, and lifted her gaze to Damon. "You won't truly kill him, will you?" she asked softly, worry etched in the lines around her mouth.

"Still deciding," Damon growled out. Before he left the room, he reached inside his jacket pocket, pulled out the small gift box and handed it to Bella. "For you, so the sun doesn't turn you into a crispy-critter," he offered, didn't wait for her to open the box, and walked out of the room and went to confront Edward Cullen. Whether he killed him or not, was still up for debate.
"Bella will never forgive you for this!" Edward choked on his words, futile as they might be.

"She doesn't have to forgive me, boy. She has to learn to live in this world without douche-bags like you trying to control her."

Standing back, Damon appraised his handy-work. The teen vampire struggled, thrashing his head from side to side. "I had no idea you could be piked, Vlad, the Impaler style. Imagine how happy it made me when it worked!"

Toes, fingers, hands and feet lay strewn over the ground. Both legs broken at the knee, and then torn from the hip joints were half buried and sticking out of the ground like tree saplings. Edward's arms hung from a nearby tree, jerking, and causing the ropes to dance in the windless air. "It is really creepy how your body parts keep wiggling after they've been removed. Even more disturbing, you're just a head and torso now, and you still won't shut the hell up."

"Jasper," Edward cried out, his voice strained and broken. "Don't let him do this!"

"Hear that, Major?" Damon turned to Jasper and flashed a toothy grin. "He's begging for you to save him."

"Just observin' this one," Jasper commented, after he sat on a fallen log, casually stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. "You're creative, Salvatore, I'll give ya that."

"I am, aren't I?" Damon questioned rhetorically and chuckled. "And did you see that fiery, hot metal rod slide right up his ass, and through his body? It was fucking epic!"

"It's a shame that you ruined a brand new pair of Chinos' just to prove your theory, Damon," Alice said with a sigh. "No matter, it's not like he'll need them – he has no legs."

"How—can you two just..." Edward cried out again, his normally smooth voice so disjointed.

"Because, Edward," Alice started to explain and picked up one of Edward's fingers and started drawing pictures in the dirt with it, "we love Bella, and you hurt her."

"You—you're my family! I wasn't trying to hurt Bella. I—I didn't know her skin was so vulnerable! Please!"

"Please?" Damon asked the impaled vampire with mock kindness. "Please, what?" Damon walked up to Edward and pulled at the dismembered boys bottom lip. "Do they make dentures for vampires?" he asked with a sinister laugh. "Probably not. You could start using a straw – just jab it into your kill's artery and drink up."

"He can still bite," Jasper warned Damon.

Damon turned away from Edward to Jasper and smirked. "Care to help out?"

Jasper shrugged, slowly raised himself off the log, sauntered over and stood in front of his coven brother. "I'll pry his mouth open while you extract the teeth."

"Good plan!" Damon appraised cheerfully. "I usually work as a solo act, but we make a great team."

"Most impressive," Alice said in her singsong voice.
Thanks, Darlin'," Jasper said, and turned his gaze on his wife and flashed her a crooked smile.

"Which tooth, first?" Damon asked his accomplices. "Or maybe I can see how many I can knock out at once?"

"One and a time is more torturous, but I have to admit," Jasper said in contemplation," I'd like to see how many you could smash with a single hit."

"Both, then?" Damon asked the Major.

"Hit 'em good once, and then pluck out the rest?"

"Deal," he agreed and crooned up at Edward. "Sound like a fair arrangement to you, boy?"

Edward screamed in agony once Damon's closed fist made contact with his mouth. The shattered teeth made an audible crunching sound on impact. "How many?" Damon asked Jasper for a tally.

"Eleven, not bad," Jazz said, appraisingly.

One by one, Damon violently ripped Edward's teeth out by the roots. The boy's anguish intensified to the point he could no longer scream – hoarse cries, and gravelly sobs echoed in the clearing where his body hung on the metal pike.

"I'll start the fire," Alice offered happily.

The flames roared to life after Alice lit the pile of dry wood with a single match and tossed the finger, she'd been holding into the pile of wood. All three torturers began to gather Edward's dismembered limbs one by one while he was forced to watch as they tossed them into the conflagration.

Damon walked back over to what was left of the impaled vampire, and shook his index finger in Edward's face. "I hope you have learned your lesson, Cullen. Revenge is best served," he grinned triumphantly, "by me."

Damon's crow leapt from a tree in the back yard, flew back into the Cullen residence through a second story window, and soared through the hallway, landing near his abandoned clothing. He dressed quickly and slowly descended the stairs into the living room.

"Edward, please! What's happened to you?" Alice cried out frantically, trying to get her brother to respond.

Damon watched the boy, frozen still as stone against one of the large windows facing the back lawn. Jasper, who sat quietly on a bar stool, glanced between his wife and Damon. "You're feeling very excited, mixed with a great deal of satisfaction." Jasper pointed out, and raised his brow at Damon.

With a casual shrug, Damon walked over and sat on the couch in front of Alice and Edward. "What seems to be the problem here?" he asked curiously, his voice cool and calm. "Alice," Damon drew her attention away from her brother for a moment. "Bella needs to get cleaned up and changed. How about you help the girl out?"

"But…" she started to protest while looking back up at Edward, who hadn't even blinked an eyelid.

"The Major and I will help him," Damon offered kindly. "Bella might not appreciate me tossing her inky ass in the shower."

Alice nodded and blurred up the stairway. Damon turned to Jasper and confessed that Edward likely
suffered some trauma.

"You did this?" Jasper asked incredulously. "How…"

"Honestly," Damon said wistfully, "I had no idea it could be done. I've been able to infiltrate and manipulate dreams while people slept for a while now, but never while they were awake," Damon owned up to one of his secret abilities to Jasper. "And then I wondered, because Edward is telepathic, that his mind could be—susceptible, even though he never sleeps."

"So," Jasper started to say and looked over at Edward, who had yet to move a muscle. "You forced him into a waking dream?"

Damon snorted, sat back on the couch and crossed a leg over his knee. "More like a nightmare."

"What sort of nightmare?" Jasper asked, and Damon could hear the curiosity mixed with concern in his voice. The incredulity was mildly amusing.

"One that he won't be forgetting anytime soon," Damon confirmed honestly. "It's his terror to share, if he ever snaps out of it."

"He'd never admit to you terrorizing him."

"Probably not," Damon agreed, raising one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

Bella and Alice's soft footfalls on the stairs drew his attention away from Jasper. Damon turned his head and watched his new charge cautiously walking into the living room. Her eyes took in the scene before her, and her scrutinizing gaze darted between Edward, Jasper, then landed on Damon, fixing her doe-like eyes on him. "What have you done?"

"I didn't touch him," Damon said in his defense and held up both hands placating.

Bella narrowed her eyes and frowned. "I don't believe you."

Rolling his eyes, Damon quickly changed the subject and asked what happened after Bella was mauled by the mountain lion. Jasper chimed in and explained that something niggled at him, so he kept within a safe distance and followed Edward and Bella when they went for a hunt. When he heard her scream out in pain, he quickly tracked their scent, found Edward breaking the large cat's neck, and pulled it off Bella. The damage had already been done, and Bella suffered several large lacerations across her stomach, legs and shoulder from the animal's sharp claws.

The Major also explained that Bella's scent still had traces of her human blood, and Edward's eyes shone black with hunger. Damon pointed out that, while she is a vampire, her human blood will linger in her body for a while.

"I came in fast and hard, scooped Bella up and brought her to the house. She'd lost a lot of blood, and it took two blood-bags to replenish her body," Jasper finished with his side of the story. "I don't believe Edward realized how vulnerable she is, still, though," Jasper looked at his unmoving brother, "he did provoke her into it after she told him no several times."

"I was so proud of Jazz," Alice said while looking admiringly at her husband. "He handled all the blood without wavering once." A small smile tugged at the corner of Jasper's mouth and he winked at his wife.

"Why did no one stop him?" Bella asked, obviously feeling like someone should have intervened.
"Because, baby-girl," Damon drawled condescendingly. "You are not a child. You say you want people to stop treating you like a fragile doll, and assert yourself when others decide things for you – then pull up your big girl panties and learn to tell your boyfriend no, and damn well mean it."

"He's not my boyfriend," Bella muttered under her breath.

That proved to be a morsel of interesting news to Damon. He looked up at Bella, still standing next to Alice. "And when did he stop being your boyfriend?"

Bella looked at the floor, and shifted from foot to foot nervously.

"Raise your head, and stop fidgeting," Damon said, scolding her. "Big girl panties, remember?"

"Asshat," Bella blurted and everyone in the room aside from a catatonic Edward chuckled, likely shocked by her minor outburst. Damon smirked with amusement.

"Be that as it may, this asshat is asking, since when?"

"Since," she started to say, balled up her fist and huffed out a frustrated breath, "since that jerk was willing to let me die, and willing to let that Volturi king turn me into his personal human juice box!"

"Good reasons," Damon quipped. "Does he know that you two are no longer a thing?"

Bella shrugged. "I would think it is obvious, considering."

Damon pondered her claims and knew she'd yet to confront the broody teen. Leaving their relationship unresolved would only give the boy hope that not all is lost. He believed that Bella was through with her schoolgirl—puppy love crush after realizing what lengths Edward was not willing to go through to be with her, though, she had yet to come to terms with all of it.

Alice grabbed Bella's hand and pulled her into a hug. "You have to talk with him, and be honest," she said softly into Bella's ear. "I'll be here for you if you need to talk, but you need to face this, Bella. Your future has changed so much in the past few days, it's giving me vertigo!"

All four vampires snapped their gaze at the large glass doors. Carlisle, Esme, Emmett and Rosalie gracefully entered the lounge and immediately focused on Edward.

"What has happened to my son?" Carlisle demanded an explanation.

All eyes locked on Damon, and he held up his hands innocently. "I never touched him."
The good doctor expressed his displeasure once Edward snapped out of his stupor, and gave a partial account of his waking dream. Damon was mildly surprised the tortured teen didn't reveal all and out him. Grudgingly, Damon agreed to have a private chitchat with Carlisle, though, not before a little spy session. With a little persuasion, Damon convinced Bella it was time to face Edward and resolve their relationship.

"Going to check out the sleepy little town of Forks," Damon announced to the Cullens sitting and standing around in the lounge.

"I'd offer some company, but the sun..." Jasper said apologetically.

"It's fine," Damon assured, and caught a set of keys Alice tossed his way.

"The 1964 Mustang, I saw that you like the classic muscle cars," Alice said with a grin.

"Creepy," Damon teased, "but true."

Inside a large outbuilding, a row of immaculately clean cars and a motorcycle lined up in the expansive garage, and at the far left end, a white mustang with red leather interior sat waiting for someone to give her some love. Sadly, Damon's plans for going into town were a ruse, and he'd have to hide the car and circle his way back. Bella and Edward were walking into the woods for some privacy.

With the car well hidden a couple miles away from the Cullen property, Damon shed his clothing and stashed it in the backseat, ran into the woods and his crow took shape. From an aerial view, he found the twosome in a small clearing, sitting quietly. Damon perched atop a high tree branch and tuned in to their conversation.

"He will want to leave once you graduate," Edward murmured.

Bella plucked several long blades of wild grass and started to braid them together. Damon watched her expression and almost cawed with amusement when her brow furrowed and she bit her bottom lip. "I know," she offered. "He made that perfectly clear before we left Volterra."

"Do you want to leave with him?" Edward asked quietly, sadly.

*Straight to the point,* Damon thought, mildly impressed.

Bella lifted her head and faced Edward, bravely maintaining eye contact. "I would be an idiot not to go with him. You had Carlisle to mentor you, show you how to live this life, and Damon agreed to do the same for me."

"We can help you, Bella," Edward said defensively. "The entire family is willing to be there for you."

"Like you were there for me in Volterra?" Bella challenged, her voice unwavering.

Edward had the decency to look contrite, and turned his head away. "I didn't want this life for you."

The crow squawked with agitation. Bella scanned her surroundings, and then forced Edward to look at her again; anger replaced her calm façade. "Then maybe you should have stayed away from me
from the very beginning! My life has not been my own since I met you, Edward, and I have been in constant danger. You say I am a danger magnet, but until you, I had no crazed vampires hunting me down. I would not have been standing in the Volturi throne room deciding whether to die, or become something else," she ranted, her little tirade broke something loose in her, and Damon knew it was going to have a snowball effect.

Bella stood and paced in front of Edward. He interrupted, but his words were weak. "It wasn't my choice to make for you."

"No!" Bella spat, fuming. "It wasn't your choice! It was mine, and even when I made it, the man I loved still tried to control the outcome!"

"Loved?" he asked, and looked at her questioningly, his eyes full of grief. Edward stood and blurred in front of Bella, taking her hands and pressing them against his chest. "If my heart could beat, it would be breaking right now."

"Don't," she warned, "Just don't!" Bella tried to pull her hands away from his grip, and Edward's fingers wrapped around her wrist like stony manacles. "You're hurting me, let go!"

Damon's fury burned in his veins – he wanted to phase back and defend her, but he forced himself to wait, and watch; he needed to let her handle the situation and decided not to interfere unless she was truly in danger. Bella was no match for Edward, not yet.

"Don't do what, Bella? Don't tell you I still love you? That I have made so many mistakes where you are concerned?" he questioned desperately.

The barrage of frantic pleas didn't have the effect on Bella that Damon expected. He watched as Edward released her hands only to try to wrap his arms around her. Bella ducked and blurred away from the unwanted embrace and stood several paces away from her first love. "You can't dazzle me, Edward. The power you once had over me is gone forever."

"So you are willing to throw away all we were to one another?" Edward asked and slowly walked toward her. "Are you saying that you no longer love me?" He continued to question her as he edged closer. Damon knew it was a tactic, hoping to rattle Bella, and trip her up on her own words. "Because I don't believe you."

Bella stepped further away, crossed her arms over her chest and Damon watched as he saw anger, strength, and then pity flash across her features. "I suppose I will always have love for you – you were everything to me – an all-consuming thing, but Edward, it wasn't healthy. We were never equals, and you had no intention – no, you refused me equality in our relationship."

"You're wrong," he disagreed with her, still attempting to close the gap between them. Bella moved away again, and Damon felt a swell of pride in his protégée. "You gave me a strength I never knew I had. You brought out the best in me, I thought was gone forever when I lost my humanity."

She snorted derisively. "Humanity isn't about being human, Edward. It is keeping in touch with your beliefs, being able to love, and feel empathy for others, and the ability to feel emotions and deal with them."

"You have made me a better man, love," Edward pressed on, and Damon wondered if he was even listening to her. "The day I left you, I uttered the darkest of all lies, when I said you were not good for me. The truth is, Bella, you are very good for me."

Damon focused in on Bella, and her eyes shone with deep sadness. When she finally spoke, he
wanted to go to her, and assure her that everything would be all right in time. "Edward," she spoke softly and something in her gaze had Damon confused.

**Was she backpedaling? Did she truly want Edward back?**

Bella inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh. "There is one problem with your confession, whether it was a lie or not. You, Edward, are not good for me," she said, and it ended their conversation. Bella walked away at a human pace, leaving Edward standing in the woods, alone to deal with the outcome of what he wrought.

Damon's crow form remained perched on the tree branch until Bella was out of sight, and he knew Edward wasn't going after her. Once he felt all was secure, he flew back to the hidden car and drove into town, covering his tracks.

Forks offered little interest, or anything to occupy his time, but he made a show of it in case anyone decided to check on his whereabouts. He drank coffee at the only diner, and flirted with a middle-aged server. After, he found a small bakery and purchased a half dozen mixed doughnuts, and then walked over to a general store and bought a few magazines, making sure several people saw him in town.

When he returned to the Cullen home, Bella was sitting on the couch talking with Alice, and Edward was nowhere around. Carlisle, however, waited at the top of the stairway, and motioned for Damon to join him for a little one-on-one. Repressing an eye roll, Damon glanced over at the two women on the couch, nodded when Bella looked up at him and he placed the doughnuts on the coffee table. "For you," he offered, opened the pastry box up, and grabbed a cinnamon roll. "And for me," he said with a grin and took a bite of the flaky confection. "The good doctor would like a chat with me. Gather up your things, we'll be going to deal with your father next."

Alice looked into the doughnut box and made a face, and Bella pouted. "They're not for you," Damon said teasingly to Alice and laughed at Bella's pouty lip. "What, you don't like pastries?" he asked her.

"You grabbed the only cinnamon roll," she pointed out. Damon chuckled, and tore the roll in half and offered it to Bella. "Thanks," she said and bit into the sweet goodness with a little moan.

Damon reacted to the sigh of pleasure and considered all the ways he could get her to do that again, repeatedly. He cleared his throat after the tiny fortune teller smirked, and he hastily bounded up the stairs.

Carlisle stood in a doorway on the second floor waiting and waved Damon into an office. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined the back wall behind a large oak desk full of medical journals, and personal reading material. Hung on the walls, old and new paintings methodically displayed throughout the room with care. The desktop was tidy with few personal effects.

"So, this is what a doctor's man cave looks like?" Damon asked, trying to break the awkward tension, and the feeling he'd been called to the principal's office.

"Please have a seat," Carlisle offered. Two high back, leather chairs sat opposite the large desk, and Damon sat, crossing a foot over his knee.

"I assume this is about what I did to your son," Damon said without hesitation. "No reason to beat around the bush, is there?"

The doctor steepled his fingers together and placed them on the flat surface of his desk, leaned
forward and grimaced. "It is one of the reasons I asked to speak with you, yes. Honestly, I have a few questions, if you don't mind, that is?"

"Depends on the questions," Damon said honestly. "And whether or not I'm willing to answer them."

"Fair enough," Carlisle agreed. "How did you get into Edward's mind?"

"Oh, that," Damon said with a smirk. "Your first born is very cocky."

"I'm aware, though Edward's gift makes him somewhat of a know-it-all."

"At least you admit it," Damon replied, a little surprised. "I may have gone a little too far, but now he knows what it feels like to have his mind invaded."

Carlisle looked at Damon curiously, and relaxed back in his chair. "Perhaps, and it may be a good lesson for him to learn, however, you were rather extreme with your example."

"Extreme is never forgotten," Damon said, unrepentant. "Bella has owned up and taken her part of the blame for not standing her ground, but your son took advantage of her heightened emotional state, and don't try and tell me otherwise."

"I cannot speak for my son's motives or his intentions," the doctor pointed out, "though—I am inclined to agree with your assertions."

"All right," Damon said, shock evident in his voice after Carlisle didn't disagree with him. "Have to say, doc, not what I was expecting. I was prepared for an argument"

"Mr. Salvatore," Carlisle's tone took on a serious note, "I may be protective of my family, and I am guilty of far too much latitude when my coven behaves in ways I do not agree with. At the same time, I also know they have been around a long time, and it is not my job to intervene when I disagree unless I feel it is best for all involved."

Damon listened with interest, but something niggled at him after Carlisle finished. "How long do you think Edward would have stayed away from Bella after you and your wife forbade him to speak or see her, and why not enforce the ban once you knew he was taunting her to begin with?"

"They needed to resolve their own problems," Carlisle defended his actions, not that Damon bought any of it."

"I'll agree with part of that, they did need to resolve their relationship, and while I may agree with that, I do not agree with the fact that you left a brand new vampire vulnerable. It isn't as if you are new to having a newborn in your ranks."

"How many have you sired since becoming a vampire, Mr. Salvatore?" Carlisle deflected Damon's question and asked one of his own.

"One," Damon admitted. "Since 1864, I have created one vampire, and trust me when I say this, the fact I was willing to create a second one was something I swore I'd never do again."

"Why?" Carlisle asked, requesting Damon to elaborate.

"Unlike you," Damon pointed out. "I wasn't looking to build a family. She was fun, and after a time, she begged me to turn her, so I did. Big mistake, by the way." It appeared that the doctor was going to ask him to explain why it was a mistake, and he held up a hand, halting Carlisle's query. "End of
discussion on that subject. Next?"

"Very well," Carlisle agreed. "The ring you brought Bella allows her to walk in the sun without being burned, and you wear one as well, how do they work?"

"Witchy-power," Damon explained and held up his hand, and wiggled his fingers. "Not many of us have them, and those that do, made nice with a powerful witch, or the witch owed a debt. Vampires and witches do not have a natural friendship, quite the opposite, actually, though the rules of nature have always managed a few loopholes."

The doctor's brow furrowed and he leaned forward in his seat. "Is a witch able to kill a vampire?"

"Not easily," Damon admitted. "But one with enough power can make you beg for death. They can be quite vindictive. A witch is a part of nature – a balance in the world – whereas, vampires, not so much. I disagree, of course."

"You believe we are part of the natural order?" Carlisle asked, and appeared very excited with the conversation.

"Humans believe they are the top of the food chain, and they are in most aspects of living creatures. Not because they are stronger, but because they are thinking, resourceful beings," Damon explained thoughtfully. "Who is to say that vampires, witches, and the like are not the equivalent to that balance?"

"Perhaps," the doctor murmured.

"Look, as fun as all this speculation is, it is getting late and Bella needs to deal with her father," Damon explained, stood up and stepped away from the desk. "I can send you some journals if I return home at some point, and you can sate your curiosity. One last thing, I'll not apologize for teaching Edward a lesson, though I suppose I can promise not to do it again, as long as he leaves Bella alone."

The coven leader accepted his assurance and before Damon left his office, Carlisle made another request. "Take care of her."

"A promise already made," Damon reminded him, and left to find his charge.

When he reentered the living room, Jasper had joined Alice on the couch, Edward was standing on the back deck, looking out towards the forest, and Bella leaned against the wall of the foyer with a duffle bag sitting at her feet.

"Ready for your dad?" Damon asked as he plucked up her tote.

"No," Bella scowled. "He's going to ground me for life!"

"Don't worry," Damon said with a wink. "Unless you plan on turning him, you'll be free in forty or so years."

"Asshat," Bella spat, and stuck out her tongue.

"Yep," Damon agreed and flashed her a wicked grin. "Let's do this."
Damon parked the car in front of the Swan's humble abode; he raised the emergency break and reached into a small cooler on the floor of the backseat, pulled out a bag and handed it to Bella. "Drink up, baby-girl."

She looked down at the bag and frowned. "I had one this morning. I feel fine."

"Maybe so, but how many humans have you been in close quarters with since your change?"

"You think I'll kill my own father?" Bella asked, affronted. "What kind of monster do you think I am?"

Damon grabbed the blood bag, popped the seal, and handed it back to Bella. "I don't think you are a monster, I know you are a vampire, which also means I know how easy it is for a newbie to lose control regardless who said human might be."

"Make it two," she said, now panicked.

"One should do the trick," Damon assured. "When does your father get home?"

Bella shrugged. "Depends how busy they are at the station."

"How busy can this town be?" Damon asked, but then remembered Mystic Falls when vampires were in town, and all the mayhem that ensued. "Never mind, forget I asked."

While Bella sipped leisurely at her meal, Damon felt someone was watching them. He scanned the area and nothing looked out of place until a set of eyes glowed from the tree line behind Bella's home. Focusing with his supernatural eyesight, a large form well camouflaged behind the thick foliage stood stock-still.

"Stay here," Damon demanded and slowly opened the driver's side door. He looked back to see Bella roll up the empty blood bag and stuff it back into the cooler. When she grabbed the door handle, he rolled his eyes. "What part of stay here do you not understand?"

"I understand perfectly," she said haughtily. "Doesn't mean you'll get your way, Mr. Bossy pants."

"Mature," Damon taunted. "At least stay behind me, or I'll lock you in the damn trunk."

"Like to see you try," she said with an indignant sniff.

In a blur, he moved before she took a step. Damon's age gave him an advantage over the newborn vamp. He came in behind her, scooped her up, and tossed her over his shoulder. The trunk popped open within a nanosecond and he unceremoniously dropped Bella inside and closed her in. "Now, what was that you were saying?"

Before she could protest, a large wolf leapt from the trees and landed on Damon, knocking him to the ground. Rather than continue to attack, the wolf's powerful jaws bit into the lock mechanism and the lid flew open. Bella started laughing hysterically, crawled out of the trunk, and hugged the russet colored canine.

Bella's eyes grew wide when the beast shook her off and bounced back out of her reach. The giant dog and baby vamp locked eyes, though Bella was the first to look away, fear and maybe a little
embarrassment colored her cheeks.

"Introductions?" Damon asked, feigning worry.

"Um," Bella stammered. "Jake, can you phase back, please? I promise to explain everything once Charlie's home."

Fido ran back into the trees and returned wearing a pair of cutoff shorts and nothing else. The bronzed, Native American stood unnaturally tall, and muscled like a brick-shit-house. Damon watched as the person she called Jake, slowly walked towards her and sniffed the air and then Bella. "You smell different," Jake said, wrinkled his nose and pointed at Damon, who still sat on the ground, though he righted himself and maintained a casual appearance. "Kind of like him, but not exactly."

Bella made a face and Damon commented with amusement, "At least he didn't sniff your ass."

"Funny," Bella sneered down at Damon. "Jake, this is Damon, Damon - this is my friend Jacob Black. He's a werewolf."

"No, he isn't," Damon shot back and Bella and Jake snapped their gazes on him. Damon stood up and brushed the dirt and grass off his jeans, and turned to Jake. "Werewolves do not phase at will, and are driven by the full moon. I thought they were a myth until one of the Volturi kings explained otherwise. You are a shape shifter."

"And how would you know that?" Jacob asked, hotly.

Damon sighed, and tried to close the trunk on the vintage mustang. "You owe the Cullens some body work," Damon explained casually.

"How do you know I'm a shifter, and not a werewolf?" Jacob demanded.

"A little bird told me," Damon offered with a smirk. "Regardless, Fido, you are not a child of the moon. Be happy, it's a fucking curse."

Fido fixed a nasty glare on Damon, and the vampire grinned. "What happened to Bella – why does she smell different?"

"That is for Bella to say," Damon said and opened the passenger side door. He removed Bella's bag from the backseat and walked up to the front door. "Fuck-it-all-to-hell!"

"What?" Bella asked, worried. "There is a key under the large plant."

"Not the problem," Damon said with a scowl, chastising himself for not considering the fact Bella would not be able to get into her own house. "We have to be invited by the human owner in order to get into the home."

"Well," Bella said flippantly. "Guess not all the myths are false. You'll have to compel my dad to invite us in before he goes in."

Damon was a little shocked that she suggested compelling her father, not that it mattered. It was his plan, anyway. Having her on board just made it easier.

"Whoa..." Jacob drawled and his head swung back and forth between the two vampires. "Bella Swan, what the hells is going on?"
"After Charlie gets home, Jake," Bella pleaded tiredly. "It is a long story, and I don't want to say it more than once."

Damon reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He handed it to Bella. "Call your father, and find out when he'll be home."

"He'll just yell at me," she protested as she gripped the phone in her hand.

"Likely," Damon agreed. "You'll get over it."

Bella scowled at Damon, but dialed the police station without further protest. "D—dad," she mumbled apprehensively.

Damon tuned into the conversation.

"Bella Marie Swan! Where are you?"

Rather than answer him, she asked, "When will you be home, Dad?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she assured her father. "I did call you and let you know I was okay."

"And you think that makes everything hunky-dory, because you called me from God only knows where!"

"No," she answered meekly. "I'm home now and waiting for you."

"I'll be home in forty-five minutes. Do. Not. Leave!"

"I won't," she agreed. "Promise," she finished, disconnected the call and handed back Damon his phone.

"Two vampires, a dog, and the chief of police all sit around the family dinner table engaging in awkward, polite conversion," Damon said with a smirk. "It's like a remake of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, the Tales from the Crypt version."

"Not helping," Bella muttered.

"The Cullens are coming?" Jake asked, confused.

"Why would they come for a meal?" Damon asked, amused. "Unless Bella's dad keeps a few wild deer, and a spare mountain lion in the cellar, I doubt they'd make for good dinner guests."

"Damon," Bella warned. "Not now."

"Hey, why hide from the shifter? His secret is just as important as ours," Damon pointed out and turned to Jake. "The two vampires in question, me, of course, and the newest member of the undead club, Miss Bella Swan."

Jacob looked between Damon and Bella and rolled his eyes. "Very funny. I know vampires, and you're not one of them."

Damon shrugged," I tried. Guess you know best."

"You don't even smell like them," Jake muttered, but Damon could see the shifter start to doubt his
own words. "Your scent is a little strange, but not the sickly-sweet smell they give off."

"Thank the gods!" Damon said cheerily. "Try hanging out with several of them, it's like living in a cotton candy machine."

"You're really odd," Jacob blurted.

Before Damon could reply, Bella called the shifter's name, and asked him to join her at the edge of the lawn near the copse of trees. He took the time to think while staying tuned into their conversation. His little charge graduated just weeks from now, and he needed a plan because staying in Forks was not going to work.

Returning to Mystic Falls was an option, though, possibly not the best. Maybe they could travel for a while before settling down. Bella lived a very sheltered life up until that point, and the world waited for someone like her to explore it with a fresh set of eyes and wonderment.

Minutely shifting his gaze, he watched the two friends talking animatedly. Damon realized they had a true friendship, though if he were to guess, it suffered difficulties in the supernatural world Bella found herself situated in, until she fully became a part of it. Perhaps she was destined for this life, though Damon believed you made your own fate.

Katherine was another concern that weighed on him. It would be another three years before he could free her from the tomb Emily Bennett spelled, sparing her life, along with several other vampires. The power to open the tomb relied on a comet that would pass over Mystic Falls in 2009. One hundred and forty five years between the time the love of his life had been imprisoned, and her release.

Interrupting his mental meanderings, Damon looked over to see Fido beaming like an idiot after Bella informed the shifter that she and Edward ended their relationship.

Thoughts of Katherine faded as Damon slyly watched Bella stretched out in the grass, completely at ease with the wolf-boy. Her smile was genuine, and her expression relaxed. It had been the first time since meeting her, he'd witnessed true contentment.

What was it about the silly, intelligent, and stupidly brave, beauty that had Damon willing to drop everything, put his own ass on the line with Aro, and brave a witch that could have fried him from the inside out, all to keep her safe?

Before he could explore his thoughts any further, a police cruiser pulled into the gravel drive and parked over a well-worn spot on the lot. Bella jumped up and hurriedly made her way over to the car, and Jacob kept pace at her side.

"Dad," Bella said tentatively as the officer stepped out of the car.

The chief nodded and kept his expression impassive. He had a keen eye for a human, and within seconds of leaving the cruiser, he glanced between the three people waiting outside the house. Bella froze in place, Jacob appeared amused, and Damon took action, blurred over and stood in front of Bella's father. "Mr. Swan," Damon addressed politely and held out his hand. "I'm Damon Salvatore, a friend of Bella's."

Charlie took Damon's hand and squeezed hard for a human, and Damon fought back a grin. "I've never met you. Aren't you a little old to be hanging out with my daughter?"

>You have no idea. "Not really. We're not that far apart in age," Damon said confidently.
Charlie looked at him skeptically and Damon took the moment to lock eyes with the man. His irises dilated and Charlie stared back unblinkingly. "We need you to invite us all into your house. I also need you to remain calm, and keep an open mind. Your daughter has a lot to explain, and she will tell you everything from the very beginning. After, if you wish to remain aware, then we'll need to set some ground rules, if not, I can make sure you remember nothing, and go on about your happy existence."

Charlie blinked and turned to Bella. "Why don't all three of you come inside, and we'll talk over dinner?"

"Good idea, Dad," Bella agreed, and Damon, Jake and Bella followed Charlie into the house. "I have a lasagna in the freezer, I made before leaving with Alice. I can warm it up in no time. You want a beer, Dad?"

"Sure, Bells," Charlie removed his gun belt, and badge, locking them in a metal safe stashed in a hall closet. "I'll go get changed and we can talk."

Charlie's bedroom door shut and Damon turned to see Jacob's incredulous face, his jaw unhinged in shock. "What?" Damon asked casually.

"You really are a vampire?" Jake questioned and glanced between Damon and Bella. "Like the kind we read about in scary stories?"

Damon snorted, and Bella giggled nervously. "Not exactly like the stories, but yes, there are some truths to the tales."

"Like?"

"We have to be invited into a home if owned by a human. Wooden stakes, fire, decapitation, and removing our hearts, all very bad. Holy water, garlic, and crosses, all myth," Damon explained nonchalantly, as if he were talking about the weather. "Sun is bad, too, and it will burn us alive."

"Then," Fido drawled, looking more fascinated than freaked out. "How?"

"These," Damon grabbed Bella's hand and lifted it up with his, showing off their daylight rings. "Witchy-vooodoo rings. Allows us to walk in the sun."

"That's… friggin cool!"

"Charlie's coming!" Bella warned, still looking at her best friend as if he grew a second head.

In the crowded kitchen, Damon and Jake sat after Charlie picked his chair. Bella bustled around the kitchen, making a salad and garlic bread while the lasagna heated up in the oven.

The chief twisted the cap off his beer and dragged a few long pulls of the amber liquid. "You old enough to drink, son?" He asked Damon.

"Yep, and if that's an offer, yes to that as well."

"Hey, Bells," Charlie started to say.

"On it," Bella acknowledged, pulled a second beer out of the fridge and set it on the table in front of Damon.

"Thanks," Damon told her. "You want any help with that?"
"I'm good," she assured. "I like cooking."

"Me too," Damon admitted. "Almost as much as I like eating," he said suggestively and Bella choked on thin air, which made him chuckle.

The three men sat and talked about inconsequential things like sports, the news, favorite beer brands until something Charlie said caught his attention. "Animal attacks?" Damon asked the Chief to elaborate.

"Yeah," Charlie said wearily. "There's a lot of wild terrain in these parts, and that means wild animals, though these attacks are like nothing I've ever witnessed. The joint between the victim's necks and shoulders are torn apart, the spines snapped and they've all had one thing in common that's baffling, they've bled out, but there are few traces of blood at the crime scene."

"Gruesome," Damon said and glanced over at the shifter. "Any leads?"

"Some folks living on the outskirts of town have called in giant wolf sightings," Charlie said with a snort. "Next, I'll be getting Bigfoot reports."

Damon hummed in thought. "Wolves tend to stay away from humans. They are predatory, though often only if provoked."

"Yep," Charlie agreed. "Which is why it doesn't add up."

"Hope you figure it out, Chief," Jacob said sincerely. Damon gave Fido a look, and the shifter shook his head minutely, while Charlie sipped at his beer.

The conversation switched to favorite football teams, and then best beers made in the US, and Canada. Damon offered his input and talked about beers made in Germany and a few in Ireland that he was partial too. Bella placed the food on the table along with glasses of water. All three men grew quiet and started filling their plates.

"Bells," Charlie drew her attention away from playing with her food, and put his fork and knife down after emptying half his plate. "I've been remarkably calm up until now. I think it is time to talk."

She lowered her head and stared into her salad. Damon cleared his throat and Bella looked up with pleading eyes. "Na-ah," Damon said and shook his head. "Your story to tell."

With a little more nudging, even from Jake, Bella finally inhaled deeply and explained from day one meeting Edward, through her time in Volterra, and ended with all four of them sitting at the dining table.

Charlie said nothing for quite a while, his food and beer ignored while his head bobbed between Bella, Damon and Jake. "Are you one, too, Jake?" Charlie finally asked.

Jacob snorted. "Hell no. I'm way cooler than those blood suckers."

"Doubtful," Damon gibed. "I'm way hotter than you, and house broken."

Charlie shook his head, obviously trying to process everything. "Charlie," Damon drew his attention. "Just say the word, and I can help you forget all of this, if that's what you want."

"I don't think that is a good idea," Jake interjected. "He's on the case for all these attacks, and the pack was designed to hunt the Cold Ones. He can call us when a report comes in, and we can
investigate without humans getting hurt."

"The Cullens?" Charlie asked, still dazed.

"Yeah," Jake answered. "But we have a treaty with them because they don't eat humans. They're animal drinkers."

"Good idea," Damon appraised honestly. "It would help you out, chief, and none of your staff will unsuspectingly walk into supernatural danger."

Bella scowled and Damon raised a brow challenging her. "You are all ready to throw my dad to the monsters that go bump in the night!"

"Actually," Damon said hotly, "we are working out how best to protect him. Would you rather he walk into the forest after one of those attacks and a Cold One is still lingering around?" She cringed and Damon nodded. "Thought as much."

Jacob sat quietly at first and then turned to Bella. "Bells. I know you have this bizarre need to worry about everyone, but this is what we do, we protect all non-supernatural life. The Cullens, as much as I hate to admit it, will also help if for no other reason, than to keep their home off the vampire radar."

"While you are all talking about what to do with me, why not ask me instead of talking around me," Charlie insisted, obviously not happy.

"Agreed," Damon said and looked over at Bella.

"Agreed," she echoed.

"How will I continue to see my daughter if she never ages?" Charlie asked, taking his daughter's hand.

"For a while, she can visit here, but then you'll have to come to her or people will notice she looks the same," Damon explained calmly.

"Doable," Charlie said with a nod. "And her mother?"

"Not sure," Bella chimed in. "I'll figure out how to deal with Renee."

Charlie turned to Damon. "And you're not like the Cullens?"

"Fundamentally, yes, though everything else about us is very different," Damon offered and considered how to explain. "We're not cold, or hard like stone. We fit into the human world quite easily, and though our instincts for human blood are similar, from what I've learned, our control is much better, and our prey doesn't have to die." Charlie grimaced uncomfortably. "I'm not going to sugarcoat the truth, Chief."

"I don't want ya to," he admitted. "Just a little hard to swallow at first."

"Dad," Bella's voice was soft. "I want to be able to visit you, but I'll understand if you don't want any part of this."

Charlie stood and pulled his daughter into a tight embrace. "Bells, I always thought the world was full of unexplained things, not this far out, mind you, but you are my only kid, and I'll take what I can get." Charlie looked over Bella's head, keeping her in his arms and spoke to Damon. "I don't want to forget anything, and your secret is safe with me. I'll take it to the grave."
"Done," Damon agreed and stood from the table. "I want to see the pup shift. How about you, Chief?"

Charlie was a good sport about it all, and Jacob took them into a hidden clearing and shifted into his wolf form. When he phased back, Charlie let out an amused snort. "Put your willy away, boy, no one wants to see that!"

Bella turned away while Jacob slipped into his shorts. Damon walked over to her, and draped his arm around her shoulders. "Feeling better?" he asked and pressed his lips into her hair. It felt like the natural thing to do after all the tension that built up, and the huge relief afterward.

"Yeah," she said and leaned against Damon. They stood there until two throats started to clear uncomfortably.

Damon pulled away and frowned. He tried to ignore the irrational sense of loss, and slid his hand down Bella's arm and laced his fingers with hers. Together, they slowly walked back to the house.
Four weeks down, and four to go until Bella's graduation. Damon was ready to leave the sodden state of Washington, and on to new, exciting adventures with his charge.

He'd been spending his days on ride-alongs with Charlie while the two of them investigated several more animal attacks. The two bodies found were fresh kills according to the forensic investigator. Damon texted Jake, and gave him the locale so the wolf could join in; the shifter had the best sense of smell, and the ability to track down a scent.

"You and my daughter are becoming close," Charlie said casually, though Damon detected a hint of fatherly accusation in the man's voice.

"She is my responsibility."

Charlie hmm'd and turned left onto a dirt road. "So," he drawled, "who decides when she is ready to brave the world of the supernatural when the time comes?"

Damon shrugged, but didn't answer. He wondered what sort of reactions the Chief was fishing for, or expected.

"We walk from here," Charlie announced and turned off the cruiser's engine. Both men exited the car and the Chief led the way through an overgrown footpath. Damon scanned the area, watching for any unnatural movement in the thick forest. "You don't seem keen on answering my questions," he murmured, and glanced back at Damon expectantly.

"Not sure what you want me to say," Damon deflected. He had an inkling, but he refused to offer anything specific.

"The truth," Charlie challenged. "I don't want you to say anything you think I want to hear."

"All right," Damon agreed. "Dealing with a girl's father isn't my forte. I'm not exactly the type you bring home to meet the parents."

The Chief snorted. "You don't say?"

"It is what it is," Damon said with a shrug as he kept pace with Charlie. "Keenly observant must run in the family."

"Sorry?" Charlie questioned. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning…” Damon started to explain, and snapped his gaze towards a set of natural caves around one hundred feet to the north. "Charlie," he whispered. "Stay behind me, and text Jacob to get his ass here, now."

Charlie pulled out the new phone Damon gifted him just days ago. "No cell service."

"Fuck," Damon cursed through gritted teeth. "See that?" Damon pointed to the caves. "I saw something enter too fast for a human or animal."

Damon remained several paces in front of Charlie as they drew closer to the cavern. He could hear soft rustles of movement, too quiet for human ears. Damon tapped his ear, letting Charlie know to remain still and quiet. He held up two fingers and then pointed at the entrance. Before he could enter
the hideaway, a Cold One blurred past him and Bella's father went flying backwards. Rather than pursue the vampire, Damon flitted over to the Chief and assessed the damage. A large gash from his collarbone down to the center of his abdomen bled profusely. His arm hung unnaturally and he realized Charlie's shoulder had been dislocated.

Tearing open his wrist, Damon pressed it to Charlie's mouth, and at the same time, he pushed the man's shoulder back into its socket. The sound of screeching metal and the agonizing cries distracted the vampire from his ministrations. A large russet wolf, along with a massive black companion were ripping Charlie's attacker to shreds. "There's another in the cave!" Damon shouted and returned his focus on Bella's dad. He was already healing, though unconscious.

Not wanting to risk the other vamp getting loose and attacking, Damon blurred into the cave and cornered the second Cold One. A very young girl cowered behind a grouping of stalagmites. "Please…" the girl pleaded with a voice like tinkling bells. "I don't want to fight you!"

Damon cursed inwardly and looked the girl over. She appeared to be in her mid to late teens, and very petite. She had long, black curly hair, and newborn red eyes, bright and full of fear. "Why are you out here?"

"He made us come," she said through dry sobs. "He said she would kill us if we didn't create a distraction. I don't want this!"

"Just fucking great," Damon said and tossed his hands in the air. He planned to question her further until the black shifter entered the cave, snarling and ready to pounce. "Hold on," Damon told the wolf, and held up his hand, palm forward. "She's freaked out enough."

The black wolf ignored Damon and kept its focus on the newborn scurrying back deeper in the cave. "I said fucking stop! She's not the attacker, now go set the other piece of shit on fire and make sure you get every part!"

"Done, and done," Jacob had already phased back into his human form. "He's a pile of ashes."

"Good. Now call off Sparky," Damon pointed to the other shifter who had turned his ire on him. "Down, boy. I'm not the enemy here." It did little good; the black beast bared its teeth and sprayed hot spittle in Damon's face. He wiped a hand over his cheek and growled back. "That's just disgusting."

"Sam," Jacob said calmly. "You keep telling Paul to think before he reacts. Practice what you preach, dude."

"If you want to do something constructive," Damon said and pointed to the cave's exit. "Go get Chief Swan home. He should be healed by now, but that shoulder of his will be sore as hell."

An incredibly large, naked man phased from his wolf form and snarled at Damon, and leveled his heated gaze on Jacob. "I do not care if you feel this one is not like the others," Sparky spat and pointed at Damon. "I do not trust him."

"What if I brought you some Scooby snacks?" Damon asked flippantly.

"Not now," Jake said with a groan. "Sam won't appreciate your flavor of humor, Damon. As a matter of fact," he said with a snort, "he has no sense of humor that I've noticed."

"Just get Charlie home, and don't let anyone else try and kill him from point A to B. He has my blood in his system, so he could heal," Damon explained quickly due to the new guy glaring daggers in his direction. "Unless you want to add another vampire to the club."
Sam finally untied a pair of rolled up cargo shorts from a cord tied around his leg, and slipped them on. He turned to Jake. "And what are you two planning on doing with that?" he spat while pointing at the newborn vamp.

Jacob shrugged and looked to Damon for answers. "I think a trip to the Cullens is in order. Little miss here needs to answer some questions."

"Like?" Sam demanded.

"Like…" Damon said mockingly and walked over to the still terrified newborn. He held out his hand, and she hesitated. "I'm not going to hurt you. Not as long as you cooperate I know a whole group like you that would likely take you in, as long as you can live by their rules. They'll keep you safe." She reached out and let Damon take her hand. He pulled her up and pushed her safely behind his body.

Sparky snarled and his body began to shake. "I don't like this!"

"Sam, is it?" Damon asked, keeping his tone cool and firm. "I want answers. Someone sent this kid here, and we need to know why. And how much longer will you let Charlie lay alone in the woods?"

Sam crossed his arms and smirked. "You can take the Chief home, and we can deal with the leech."

"Not happening," Damon refused and mirrored Sam's stance. "And if I have to do both, you can crawl away with your tail between your legs, because you put a defenseless human in danger."

"Just do it, Sam," Jake pleaded. "I promise to fill you in once I know anything."

Without a word, Sam shot one last nasty glare at Damon and left the cave. "You don't seem like the type to beg, Fido."

"He is our pack leader," Jacob said with a sigh. "He could have forced me to attack, and I'd have no choice but to do what he says."

"Well, that sucks," Damon offered, shocked that he felt a little sympathy for the pup. He pulled the newborn to his side and spoke concisely. "You have two choices. Come with us, or die."

"I—I'll come with you," she agreed nervously.

"Do you have a name?" Damon asked as he led the way out of the cave.

"Bree," she answered in a whisper.

"Okay, Bree," Damon said and pointed to Jacob. "That guy can turn into a scary wolf and track you for miles. So be on your best behavior. We'll be following him out of these woods."

"I don't think the Cullens will want me at their home, and honestly," Jacob admitted and crinkled his nose, "I don't want to be there."

"Right," Damon said, exasperated. "The treaty. How will you report back to Sam, then?"

"Speaker phone?" Jake offered.

Damon nodded in agreement and Jake led them out of the woods and near the Cullen home. Damon called Jasper, informing him that he and Jake found two newborns wreaking havoc in the woods. One was dead, the other surrendered, and he was bringing the little guest along.
As they approached the Cullen house, Jasper was at the door awaiting Damon's arrival. The Major grabbed hold of the newborn firmly by the shoulder and led her into the living room where every Cullen stood in attendance. "Sit," Jazz forced Bree into a chair. "Don't move, and if you do, I'll remove your legs. Got it?"

Bree shuddered, though she nodded meekly.

"Bully," Damon said with a smirk. The corner of Jasper's mouth lifted briefly, though he recovered quickly, and his expression turned hard.

"You mentioned this child had been sent here to create a diversion?" Carlisle asked and looked over at Bree.

Damon hit send on Jake's contact number and sat the phone on the coffee table. "Care to share, little miss?"

"I—don't know!" Bree cried out.

"What do you know, then?" Jasper jerked her harshly, digging his fingertips roughly into her shoulder.

She winced in pain, and lowered her head. "I was told to go into the forest, drag a few humans, if I needed to, feed on them, and make sure we left the bodies where they would be found easily!"

"Why?" Damon asked. He tapped Jasper's hand that held Bree in place, and gave him a look. The Major released her, but stayed close.

Bree took in an unnecessary breath and shook her head. "Riley was supposed to gather her scent while we distracted the chief of police."

"Whose scent?" Edward asked, worried.

"They never told us her name. Only that a large, dangerous coven protected the human, and they were going to try and kill us all."

Damon quickly registered what human Bree must be referring to, "Bella," he murmured.

"Why?" Carlisle asked, confused. "Alice?" the coven leader turned to the seer. "Have you seen Bella in danger?"

"I've not seen anything," she said and furrowed her brow. "I have no idea what I would even be looking for."

"Are there more of you, newly created?" Jasper asked sharply, glaring at the frightened girl.

"Yes..." she offered. "Fifteen, maybe more. I'm not sure. They keep killing each other!"

Numbness and confusion set in and Damon sat heavily on one of the couches. His mind raced, questioning the possible reasons why Bella would be a pawn to draw the Cullens out to fight. What sort of threat could a coven of animal drinkers be?

"Someone's creating a newborn army," Jasper said to no one in particular. "Question is, who and why?"

"I've heard of newborn armies through Caius," Damon murmured, still not understanding how Bella played a part in all this. "A power play for dominance and control of an area for feeding, right?"
"Right," Jasper confirmed. "This makes no sense, though. It is tactically unnecessary." Jasper turned back to Bree. "Where were you sent from?"

"Seattle," she answered quickly.

Jasper pressed on with his questions while pacing in front of the new vampire. "And you have no idea who created you, or who is the one handing out orders?"

"Riley never let us meet our creator. He said our thoughts would put us all in danger."

Jasper looked to Alice, and the seer's eyes opened wide. "They are messing with the holes in my visions. How could anyone know besides the Volturi?"

"Hey, leeches, um, I mean Cullens," Jacob's voice bellowed clearly over the cell phone speaker. "What about the parasite we killed that tried to attack Bella?"

"I don't see the connection," Edward answered. "Unless…"

"Unless what?" Damon snapped.

"Carlisle," Edward called to their coven leader. "Do you think Irina could have shared a little too much about us with Laurent?"

Damon sat quietly while Carlisle and Edward filled him in on James, Victoria, and Laurent. Jake chimed in and explained that Laurent tried to dine on Bella not long before she flew off to Italy with Jasper and Alice. That was also when Bella learned Jake was a shifter. Esme pointed out that the French accented vampire had been with the Denali coven for a while, but then Jake informed the Cullens the vampire had fallen off the vegetarian wagon, because his eyes were red as rubies.

All of the pieces seemed to fit different puzzles, and yet something niggled at Damon. "Could any of this be connected?" he asked everyone in the room.

"I don't see how," Edward muttered. "None of it makes sense."

"Doesn't it?" Damon asked with a raised brow. "What if this Laurent met back up with Victoria? Vampires thrive on revenge, and never give up until they have completed their task. You say this Victoria was James's mate?"

He scanned the different expressions around the room. Most looked deep in thought, but it was Jasper, who snapped the last pieces of the puzzle into place. "She is creating an army to take us out, and exact revenge. A mate for a mate.

Alice gasped, and tugged at her spiky hair. "She must know how my visions work, and has avoided any firm choices. That must be what Riley's being used for – her cover man."

Just then, the alarm on Damon's phone sounded off. It was time to pick up Bella from school. They would also need to check on Charlie. "I have to pick Bella up," he announced, telling Jake bye, and slipping his phone into his jacket. "We need to swing by her house, and I'll bring her here after so she can be brought up to speed."

"Maybe she should be left at home," Edward said with a disapproving frown.

"Or, maybe not," Damon fired back, disagreeing whole-heartedly. "Isn't that the crux of most of her disasters, you trying to protect her?"
Edward winced and no one else had anything to say on the subject. "Good, now that it's settled, we'll be back in a couple hours." Damon went to leave and realized he had no car. He turned to Carlisle. "Seems I am without transportation. Gotta spare handy?"

Carlisle blured up the stairs and came back into the living room within seconds. He tossed a set of keys at Damon, who easily caught them. "Could you please keep the wolves from chewing this one up?" Carlisle teased.

"I'll try," Damon said with a grin. "Not making any promises. Those pups need a chew toy."

After finding the car that matched the set of keys, Damon slid into the respectable Mercedes and made his way to pick up Bella.

It baffled him how much trouble one eighteen year old girl could get herself into in the span of a year. More amazing, was the fact she survived after all the horrific events that led up to Damon turning her into a vampire, and she was still in danger.

All the possible scenarios ran through his head as Damon considered strategies. They had one advantage, Bella was no longer human, and her scent had changed. He pulled out his phone and called Jake back. "Hey. I need a favor."

"If you are going to ask me to check out the Swan house, you're too late," Jacob informed him. "When Sam brought Charlie home, he picked up a scent of an unknown vampire. They'd been all over the house, but the smell was strongest in Bella's bedroom. Seems the leech was snooping through her things, either that, or Bella is becoming a slob. Her laundry was all over the place."

"Did Sam try to track down the vampire?" Damon asked, concerned more than ever.

"Yeah, but the trail went cold on the coast," Jake explained. "The tick musta swam quite a ways before going back on dry land."

"Thanks," Damon offered. "Pulling into Forks High now. Stay with Charlie."

"Already on it," Jacob assured.

Damon tossed his phone on the dash and parked the car. Bella and a tall, lean librarian looking girl stood against the wall just steps away from the main doors. "Going to introduce me to this lovely creature?" Damon flashed Angela a crooked grin, lifted her hand and chastely kissed her knuckles. He watched Bella scowl from his peripheral, and he had to hold in a laugh.

Baby girl is jealous.

"Angela, this is Damon," Bella said, feigning disinterest and sounded very bored. "Just ignore him."

"Ignore me?" Damon placed his hand over his heart. "You wound me, baby girl. I can't help but admire a tall, graceful woman that would give any warm blooded male sexy librarian fantasies."

Angela giggled and blushed. She looked down at her feet, and Damon reached out and lifted her chin. "Never hold your head down. One day, you'll realize how gorgeous you are, and all those silly boys will be kicking themselves in the ass for not realizing it."

Okay, maybe I laid it on a little too thick, Damon pondered. The girl looked frozen in place and her eyes grew large. He mentally shrugged, and decided he didn't lie to her; she would be a drop dead knockout once she grew out of her awkward stage.
I ah…” Angela stammered and pulled her eyes away from Damon. "See you Monday, Bella?"

"Sure, Ange," Bella assured and gave her friend a brief hug.

Once seated in the car, Bella tossed her bag in the backseat and glowered at Damon. "What?" he asked innocently.

"You embarrassed her with your stupid flirting!" Bella accused. "Why did you do that to her?"

He chuckled because her rage was hilarious. "All shy beauties need a little encouragement. She'll emerge from her chrysalis one day, and realize she's more than an egghead," he explained simply. "She is a smarty pants, right?"

"That's beside the point," Bella said with a frown.

"It's exactly my point," Damon said confidently.

"Why are you using Carlisle's car?" she asked, quickly changing the subject.

"I was at the Cullen house with no car, and it was time to pick you up."

"And…” she started and furrowed her brow. "Why were you there?"

"Found two newborns in the woods. Jake and Sam killed one, and we brought the other to the Cullens," Damon offered casually. "You know, just another exciting day in Forks."

"… And?"

"When you're home," Damon said and refused to elaborate.

"Whatever," Bella bit back. "You are so infuriating sometimes, you know that?"

"Yep," he agreed.

They pulled into Bella's driveway and Bella practically flew out of the car and ran into the house. Damon followed, knowing a full explanation of the day was pending. He also knew she would either freak out, or want to fight back. New vampires were so unpredictable.

Charlie sat in his favorite recliner with his feet propped up, watching a DVR recording of the latest game. Damon noticed his arm was in a sling and wondered if Sam stopped at the hospital.

Bella stood in front of the chair, looked over her father, and asked what happened. Jacob, who stayed with Charlie, shared the day's events.

Bella listened without interruption and gently hugged her dad, and then Jacob; thankful her father survived the ordeal. Damon watched the exchange and he had to admit, he was proud that she remained so calm.

"Come with me," Bella demanded, and grabbed Damon's hand. "We need to talk."

He followed along and kept hold of Bella's hand while they made their way out into the woods. Damon wasn't certain what to expect; she was acting strange.

When they stopped, Bella faced him and gazed up at him speculatively. "You saved my dad."

Damon nodded, not entirely sure if she was questioning him, or simply stating a fact.
"You care about us," she murmured. Again, he wasn't sure if it was a question or not, and he looked into her warm brown eyes trying to gauge her feelings. She was always thinking, and rarely shared what went on in that beautiful head of hers.

"What are you thinking about?" Damon asked and looped a strand of wayward hair behind her ear.

She shivered from the small, affectionate gesture. He felt his entire body react and his gaze dropped down to her soft, pink lips. Her tongue darted out, and she slowly wet her mouth.

Something deep and visceral clouded all reason from his mind and he bent down and pressed his lips to hers. It was soft, tentative, and the connection had Damon reeling. Bella parted her lips and his tongue swept inside her mouth. Her body pressed closer into his and they were both moving, seeking friction. He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her fingers into his hair, pulling them deeper into the osculation.

Bella was the first to pull away. They were both panting for air, not for the lack of oxygen. Bella was aroused and Damon's entire body went rigid with a primal need. "I think," he said hoarsely, "we should get back to your father, and the Cullens are expecting us." Damon wanted to kick his own ass for suggesting they stop and for reminding her, they were expected to be elsewhere.

"Yeah," she murmured noncommittally. "I suppose we should go."

They both stood facing one another, neither making a move. Damon quickly pulled Bella to him, and let her know exactly how he felt. Every hard angle of his body pressed into her, and she melted back into him for one more kiss before they parted and walked back to the house.

Neither of them said a word, though it was Charlie that looked between his daughter and Damon and narrowed his eyes. "I knew it!"
Bloodoholics Anonymous

Returning to the Cullen home felt awkward this time around, more than usual. Bella sat at one end of the large couch and Damon stood directly behind her. He placed his hands on the back of the sofa and slyly looped a lock of Bella's hair around his finger, and the back of his hand rested behind her shoulder. He refused to think too much about it, but he couldn't seem to stop touching her since their kiss. She didn't seem to mind, either, and leaned into his touch.

"Any plans made since I left this afternoon?" Damon asked. He looked to Bree, who was a lot calmer now. She glanced up at him and offered a tentative smile.

"None yet," Jasper confirmed. "We're trying to decide whether to storm Seattle, or wait until they make their move and come here."

Damon considered both options while gently stroking Bella's hair between his fingers. "Which is more defensible?"

"Bree informed us they are holed up in a network of abandoned warehouses," Carlisle pointed out.

"Are you able to find these warehouses, Bree?" Damon asked the newborn directly.

She fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, and looked around the room at all the expectant faces waiting for her to speak. "I can," she whispered. "But there are so many."

"Not too many," Damon assured and looked to Jasper. "I know your history with newborns, but what about the rest of the coven?"

Jasper shook his head. "Just me, and you, apparently."

Damon thought back on his time with the Volturi. Nearly every mission Aro sent them out on, it was because of out of control newborns running amok. "Limited in comparison," he told Jasper. Bella drew in a sharp breath and he looked down at her. "It is not your fault. It's a crazed vampire out for unfounded revenge. So stop with the guilt."

"He's right, dear," Esme agreed and seated herself next to Bella and patted her knee. "James and Victoria brought this trouble from the beginning. They chose to make a game out of tracking and torturing you. You did nothing to provoke it."

"What I don't understand," Damon said and furrowed his brow. "Why did you all run to Arizona with Bella? It would have made more sense to stay here and build a defense, rather than an overcrowded, unknown city."

"We tried a diversionary tactic," Edward said self-righteously.

"Against a tracker?" Damon challenged the teen's poor logic. "I spent ten years off and on with Demetri, and diversionary tactics were child's play for him."

Edward bristled and it seemed he wanted to argue further until Jasper snorted. "Tried to tell him. Glad someone else agrees with me."

"You all have someone that probably lives and breathes tactical strategy, and he is the last person you listen to?" Damon asked the entire Cullen coven, baffled. At least they had the decency to look contrite, sort of.
"That is a life Jasper escaped," Carlisle offered sincerely. "We don't like to bring up bad memories for him."

Damon threaded the rest of his free fingers into Bella's hair loosely holding the silky locks while trying to understand their reasoning. "And you think he ever forgets?"

Jasper cleared his throat and spoke up. "I remember every detail as if it just happened, but I understand why they try not to bring it up."

"Well, I don't," he said firmly. Damon released Bella's hair, moved to her side, and sat on the arm of the couch. He casually draped his arm across her shoulders and continued his train of thought. "Not when it comes to building a good defense, and if we go after Victoria and her newborns, we'll need an offense just as strong."

Jasper started to pace, and Damon knew the battle wheels were turning exponentially. "We need to train. Fighting newborns isn't the same as battling an older vampire. They are stronger, but predictable. The real danger is if they get a hold of you. Their strength is their only advantage."

"We also need to involve the pack," Damon added to the battle plan. Bella looked up at him in a panic and he fixed his gaze on her. "Accept it, baby-girl. The shifters are badass and you need to stop seeing them as mere humans." She looked away and kept quiet. "Are you all for the pack joining us?"

Jasper grinned, "If they'll join, then hell yes."

Emmett raised a fist, pumping it in the air. "It'll be cool to see what they can do!"

Rosalie shook her head, but her eyes belied her feelings. She was nearly as excited as her husband was; ready for the fight.

Alice spaced out for a moment, when her eyes cleared, she chimed in. "It will work and they will agree to join us. Sam will rail against it at first, but the rest of the pack will convince him otherwise."

Carlisle and Esme looked at one another, and both said in unison, "We're in."

Edward was the last to respond and all eyes landed on him. "Of course I'm in," he said defensively. "It's a given. I'd do anything to keep Bella safe."

Damon glared at the boy, and Edward half grinned arrogantly. *Maybe the cocky bastard needed another waking dream...* There was no time for some fun mind fuckery, though he'd come back to that later if the drama-teen persisted.

Pulling out his phone, he texted Jake to gather the pack and meet in a neutral zone beyond the treaty boundary line.

**Damon S:** Hey, Fido. Up for some wholesale slaughter of newborn leeches?

**Jacob B:** Hell yeah, Fangs! When and where?

**Damon S:** Seattle. Some crazy bitch named Victoria is building a newborn army to kill Bella and the Cullens.

**Jacob B:** What the fuck?

**Damon S:** Yep. Can you get Sam on board with this? We want to take them out before they come to
Forks.

**Jacob B:** Text you later after I talk with Sam.

**Damon S:** Sending a map with the coordinates. Later.

He sent the GPS map and looked up. "Unless Sam goes against it, the pups are in."

"They won't know what hit 'em!" Emmett said, flexing his biceps and full of battle excitement. The hulking vamp was excessively happy.

"I have another call to make," Damon announced and stood to go somewhere private. He wasn't sure the favor he was about to try and collect would produce anything, but it was worth a try. "I'll be back," he said and looked directly at Bella.

Far enough away from the house, Damon scrolled through his contact list and found the witch that could offer a little backup.

"Gloria's," the sexy voice greeted.

"Damn, beautiful. You definitely haven't lost that songbird voice of yours."

"Damon Salvatore," Gloria said with a slow, sweet drawl. "And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Well, I'm not one to beat around the bush," Damon said flirtatiously. "I need to call in that favor you owe me."

"Eighty years later?" she asked incredulously. "What if I'd already dropped dead by now?"

Damon snorted. "My favorite witchy-poo is too vain and loves her club too much to let anyone else run it. I bet you still look smoking hot!"

"Sizzling," she said with a tease. "Fine. No promises though, and only because you removed your ripper brother out of my city."

Stefan had been on another of his human blood benders when Gloria sent him a telegraph, begging Damon to come get his out of control brother. He had little to no influence over Stefan at the time, and Damon tracked down Lexi, his brother's BAS – Bloodoholics Anonymous Sponsor.

Lexi bore no love for Damon, as a matter of fact, she hated him, though Stefan was her best friend and he believed when his brother went off the rails, Lexi found purpose when she put his brother through her special brand of rehab. They tracked down Stefan to a middle class home, positioning the heads he ripped away, back onto his victims' shoulders. His brother's bestie snapped Stefan's neck and dragged him away.

Damon went on to explain the situation in Seattle. He informed her of the newborns created solely to kill the Cullen coven, and his own protégé, Bella. He also gave her the lowdown on the different species of vampires. Much to his surprise, Gloria already knew of the Cold Ones. "If it is the same Carlisle Cullen, I met him in 1921, three years after he… created another. A stuffy teen named Edward."

"Small damn world," Damon muttered.

"He was a good man," Gloria offered. "Seems Carlisle stored important documents, photos and family heirlooms for the boy, and they came to collect them."
"How did you end up meeting them?" Damon asked, very curious. He couldn't see Carlisle in a speakeasy club, even less so, Edward. They didn't even drink.

"I sensed something off in my apartment building, and confronted Carlisle."

Damon furrowed his brow. Carlisle acted so curious about Bella's daylight ring and gave no inkling that he knew about magic. "He knew you were a witch?"

"After I told him," Gloria confirmed. "I have to admit, a vampire that old never running into a witch surprised me. Then again, I never encountered his kind, either."

He saved that little morsel of information and finished explaining the crude game plan they'd cooked up so far. Damon also wanted to try to keep collateral damage to a minimum. That is where witches would come in handy.

"Call me when you plan on going to Seattle. I know a small, but very powerful coven in Olympia. They owe me several favors. I'm going to give them a visit."

"You'll be coming personally?" Damon asked, somewhat shocked.

"I can't let such a pretty face get hurt, now can I?" Gloria cooed seductively. Any other time before... No, he didn't want to consider it, and tamped down his wayward thoughts.

"Lucky for me, you think I'm so handsome," Damon flirted back, though he wasn't feeling it. Gloria was a tigress between the sheets, and normally, he'd be leaping at the chance to have a no holds barred roll in the hay with her.

They ended their call and Damon slowly walked back to the Cullen home. An errant thought broke through his well-placed defenses. *When did baby-girl get so deep under his skin?*
Jasper, Damon and Alice headed off into the mountainside. Damon teased Jasper about hunting down bunnies and squirrels, so Jazz offered to take him on a hunt; solely to observe, of course.

Halfway up the second mountain peak, Jasper sidled up next to Damon, while Alice went on ahead of the two men. "You and Bella," was all Jasper said. He gave Damon a sidelong glance and the corner of his mouth quirked with amusement.

"No idea what you're implying," Damon said defensively, though with zero conviction.

"You don't think any of us noticed, do you?" Jasper pointed out. "I'm pretty sure we all noticed, even Edward."

Damon shrugged and slowed his pace. "Don't you have a poor unsuspecting creature on the menu?"

Jasper chuckled and picked up his stride. They met up with Alice, who was waiting for them on the eastern pass few humans ever dared to venture due to the bear population. "Join us for dinner?"

Alice offered teasingly. "Two old bears to the north, and a mountain lion further to the west," she pointed out and beamed up at Damon. "You should have brought Bella. Hunting together can be very romantic."

"Is this some sort of conspiracy?" Damon asked with a clipped tone.

Charlie and Bella were taking some father – daughter time and they were having dinner in Port Angeles. She had asked Damon to join them, as did the Chief, but Damon felt they needed some quality time together, and he needed to strategize with Jasper.

Alice spent time focusing in on the area where the newborns were hiding out. Because she'd never met any of them other than Bree, she attempted to hone in on the area. Rosalie suggested the seer focus on Bree, and see if anyone was searching for her.

Rose's idea struck gold when the fortune teller saw Riley speaking with a wild looking redhead Damon assumed had to be Victoria. Bree confirmed Riley's description after Alice finished drawing them during her vision. The Cullens knew what Victoria looked like, and the seer witnessed the ringleader of the newborns punish the boy and doled out a series of orders, none of which included heading to Forks. They all seemed random unless you understood the endgame.

In a blur, Jasper ran off and caught an elderly, male grizzly bear. Damon halted his mental meanderings and watched the chase. He had to admit the hunt looked fun, but he crinkled his nose when he witnessed the Major draining the animal of all its blood. Alice joined her husband, and together, they drained the second grizzly. It reminded him of some sort of primal foreplay. The mountain lion was next, and the duo wrestled the large cat with expert ease.

The seer fell back against a tree and her eyes went blank. Damon learned quickly Alice was having another vision. Jasper stood protectively in front of his wife until she came out of her trance. "Alice, what did you see?"

Damon remained quiet and waited. Alice's face darkened and her eyes shone with worry. "After we drained the cat, I started rolling through the Volturi members. First Aro, and then the elite guard," the seer said and buried her head against Jasper's chest. After several dry sobs, she muttered into her husband's shirt. "Jane, Alec, Demetri, and Felix are heading to Washington. I didn't see Aro give the orders – just the four of them arriving. They've come to check on the newborn activity."
"Do you see them cleaning up the mess?" Damon asked, his voice full of concern and anger. He could give a rat's ass about Jane; her sycophantic devotion to Aro had nothing to do with Chelsea creating unnatural bonds. Alec and Felix knew no other life outside the Volturi, and perhaps they were a lost cause, though Demetri's friendship meant something to him. He wondered if Gloria knew anything about breaking the tethers to Aro, so Demetri could break free and make his own choices.

"No," Alice whispered sadly. "I only saw them watching, and Jane bringing Felix to his knees in pain. I didn't see beyond that."

"Could you make sure Bella isn't alone tonight?" Damon asked. "I want to do a little reconnaissance."

"Alone?" Jasper asked, worry evident in the hard lines formed around his mouth.

"I'm going to reveal something to you both…" Damon started to say, and began peeling his clothing off. "Take it to the grave," he said with a smirk. Alice looked away as Damon shed his boxer briefs, and Jasper raised his brow queerly. "Take my clothes and put them in your outbuilding."

Both Alice and Jasper blinked several times and stared at the black crow flapping its wings and circling around the two vampires. "Well, I'll be damned," Jasper murmured in awe. "I can see why you keep it a secret."

The crow cawed several times and flew off; leaving two stunned Cold Ones in the forest. Damon had already studied the warehouses location after Bree pointed out the area on google maps.

There was a mental duality while in crow form. Damon's mind and the bird merged, and yet remained separate. He'd spend days shifted while traveling, and his crow will would take over. Damon found himself waking in corn fields, or his favorite, the black bird had a deep hate for scarecrows, and more than once he'd battle against the crow's desire to tear the effigy to shreds.

Three and a half hours passed by and Damon had a good vantage point from the air. The network of warehouses sat poised in a dilapidated district. A few wild dogs roamed the area and he could smell the scent of rotting flesh and stale blood. This had to be the right place.

Activity was minimal because for once, the sun actually made an appearance. It would mean the army of baby vamps remained hidden inside, not exposing their sparkling asses. Damon circled around several buildings until his keen hearing noticed minute sounds of movement.

A large, hideous green derelict building loomed near the southern gate of the shipping yard and the crow flew into a broken vent that entered a loft. From his perch upon old rusted pulley beams, he could maneuver across the structure, and assessed how many newborns hid in the shadows. It would seem crazy Vicky had been busy. Damon counted seventeen baby vamps, though most appeared out of control and frenzied with thirst. Dead bodies filled shipping containers, and a few fresh ones lay across the concrete floor, blood stains stretched across the vast, open space.

Time was difficult to calculate while in his bird form. The sun still shone through the worn cracks of the metal roof, and its position indicated late afternoon. Damon was about to give up and fly back to Forks until a heavy iron door creaked open and Riley emerged from an unlit stairwell. Victoria must be keeping herself down in the basement, away from her newly created.

He zoned in on Riley. His eyes were a dark crimson, unlike the bright ruby of a newly created vamp. Chief Swan had flyers of this boy that went missing a year ago. He must have been Vicky's first, and she waited until he had enough control to bring humans for her to turn and manage the crazed newborns.
Well, the crazy bitch had dedication and patience when it came to her revenge scheme.

Inching across the beams, Damon followed Riley. A skirmish broke out and three vamps fought one another. Victoria's protégé tried and failed to separate the newbies before one of them lost a head and both arms. The victorious killer slammed Riley into the concrete floor, gathered the decapitated head, and tossed it into a foundry oven. He had to wonder who lit the inferno, and why? Maybe they used it as a threat tactic; it made sense.

"Donavan," Riley barked at a gangly male vamp. "You're with me, just after sunset. We need more bodies."

"How many?" the one that must be Donavan asked in a whiny voice. "I'm so thirsty!"

"We need at least twenty before we can move out," Riley confirmed. Damon found that little tidbit of information useful. Victoria wouldn't make a move until she felt well-fortified.

He watched for a while longer and flew out of the warehouse before sunset. Half way back to Forks, his thirst grew; long stretches of time and travel as the crow depleted his energy and raised his thirst. A lone sailboat lazily drifted down the river separating Seattle and the Olympic forest. Damon landed on the mast and the young couple looked up at his crow. They quickly grabbed their smartphones to take pictures of the daring bird. Damon shifted and stood casually, naked, in the center of the vessel and grinned when the woman dropped her jaw, unable to take her eyes off his nudity.

He compelled the woman first, told her to sit calmly, and went to the male, calming him before sinking his fangs into the man's carotid artery. Between the two human's, Damon was able to sate his thirst without causing any physical harm. After, he plucked up their phones and deleted all traces of his crow landing on the boat. He told the couple they were having an amazing time, drank a little too much wine and that he was never there. He flew off, leaving the happy couple laughing and snuggling like young lovebirds. The analogy made him caw with amusement.

Once he returned to the Cullen property, he flew into the outbuilding and phased back to his normal form. He noticed a black, designer garment bag hanging on the back wall with a post-it attached that said Damon. He shook his head thinking Alice went a little overboard, but once he unzipped the bag, he realized just how overboard she went. Inside, he noticed his favorite leather jacket now cleaned and conditioned, his biker boots polished, and his clothes replaced. A brand new pair of lightly faded button-fly Levi's, his size, of course, a Ralph Lauren, V-neck black T-shirt, and even new socks and boxer briefs, freshly laundered and ready to wear.

Damon sighed and shook his head as he slipped on the briefs. Light footsteps came up from behind him, and the chuckle was unmistakable. "Your wife is a loon," Damon told Jasper. "What was wrong with my clothes?"

"Nothin'," Jasper admitted. "It's just Alice. We rarely get to wear anything more than once, and she was appalled that you would be putting on previously worn attire."

"She cleaned my leather!" Damon put up a half-hearted fuss. "No one touches the jacket, bro!"

"You take it up with her," he said with a chuckle. "And I wager a bet, you lose the argument," Jasper challenged while grinning like a fool.

"What's in your hand?" Damon asked.

"Right," Jasper said and unrolled the black leather belt with a silver buckle that matched the metal on his boots perfectly. He handed Damon the belt and said, "She said if you are going to tuck in your
shirt, then you have to finish the ensemble with that."

"You're shitting me?" Damon muttered and gaped at the new belt. "When the fuck did she have time to do all this?"

Jasper shrugged. "It's a mystery, one I stopped asking ages ago."

"She'll hound me if I don't wear it, won't she?"

"Yep," Jasper confirmed. "It's easier to just go with it."

"You are seriously pussy whipped, Major," Damon said with an irritated growl.

"When the said pussy in question is sweeter than blood…" Jasper let his comment trail off and laughed when Damon crinkled his nose.

"Yeah, yeah," Damon muttered. "Whatever. I'm never getting married."

"If you say so," Jasper teased. "Did you find anything on your recon mission?"

"Loads," Damon admitted. "Where is Bella?"

"At home watching a movie with Alice, Charlie and Jake."

"Let's get everyone here," Damon suggested. "We'll need Edward to pick through my brain so he can see what I saw and we'll load up the exact warehouse I found using google earth."

Damon called Bella first, and then Gloria. He filled her in on what he found and sent her the GPS location of the shipping yard and the exact warehouse.

"I'm on my way gorgeous. I landed in Olympia last night and we have a plan," Gloria offered excitedly. "Anywhere for us to stay in Forks?"

"How many of you?" Damon asked. "This is a one horse town, and the horse moved away."

"Five, including myself," Gloria confirmed.

"Worst case, I'll compel the owners of the only Bed and Breakfast in town to clear out their rooms."

"You paying, sweetness?"

Damon rolled his eyes. "What sort of gentleman would I be if I made the lady pay for her own accommodations?"

"I know exactly what sort you are," she sang seductively. "Call you when we arrive in town."

Damon disconnected the call, and jogged across the lawn to the Cullen house. It was time to put their plan into full motion - Gloria and her witchy friends were Damon's ace up the sleeve.

He thought of Bella, and he felt his slow beating heart flutter. He missed her, and he was willing to admit it. He walked into the house and Edward stood in the foyer shooting Damon a death glare.

Damon smirked and glared back, challengingly. "Stay out of my head if you don't like what you hear."
When Damon informed Jasper that the pack agreed to help, Alice bounced away from the dining table covered in fresh flowers. "I told you they'd agree. I saw you telling my husband exactly like this!" she said cheerily, kissed Jasper on the cheek and went back to her floral arrangements.

"I'll never get used to that," Damon said while shaking his head.

"You do eventually," Jasper commented and grinned over at his wife. Damon could swear she was preening a little.

"We're meeting the pack this evening at seven for a training session. We'll make use of anytime we have left," Damon explained.

Alice spent most of her time looking for anything Riley may be doing, or the Volturi elite guard, since Victoria still managed to slip through the holes in Alice's visions. She saw the newborn numbers rise and fall like a yo-yo. Crazy-Vickie nearly had her twenty cannon fodders and then lost six more before the night was over. "Having a one year old vampire manage so many is a poor strategy," Alice murmured, not looking at anyone in particular. "I suppose alluding me is worth the risks."

Damon looked over at the fortune cookie and laughed. She had a very superior grin on her face. "Let's go train some pups," he said and they prepared to meet in the clearing.

Saturday night was grueling; unlike the Cold Ones, Damon and Bella needed sleep, and they were not nearly as invincible. He was surprised that he was just as fast as Edward was, and though he couldn't take the same harsh beatings without having to heal, he was able to dish out just as much damage. The key would be to stay out of reach and attack with stealth and precision strikes.

Damon trained with Demetri and Felix a lot during his time in Italy. He considered himself lucky to have picked up several handy and underhanded moves from some of their best warriors. Now it was time to share his experience and pass on the mantle.

"Bella," Damon called over across the clearing. She'd been snuggled up against Jake, napping while he was getting his ass handed to him by Sam. The pack leader had something to prove and needed a balm to soothe his bruised ego. Damon walked it off and let Sparky have his due.

"Coming," she said and ruffled Jake's fur. Bella stretched and jogged over and stood in front of him. "If you tell me to make a coffee run, I'm going to go back and take another nap."

Damon snorted and swiftly gave her a swap on the ass. Bella yelped and leapt back before he could reach her again. He chuckled and blurred behind her, wrapping both arms around her waist and whispered in her ear. "No coffee, baby-girl. You are going to learn some self-defense."

She turned in his arms and her eyes were wide with excitement. "Really?" she asked, disbelieving. "You're truly going to show me how to defend myself?"

Damon looked down into her eyes and raised a single brow. "Do you think I'm going to tie you to my back while we battle these newborns?"

"No…” she replied slowly. "I thought you would try and stash me away some place safe for my own good." By the time she finished, her voiced turned sharp and annoyed.
"Where did you get that sort of asinine logic from?" Damon asked, trying not to sound mocking or condescending. It really was a stupid idea.

Bella pointed to Edward.

Damon made sure to speak loud enough that every supernatural would hear him. "Hide you away for your own safety so Victoria has a clear shot and can get you alone? That is the most idiotic thing I've ever heard. You will learn to fight back, as well as you can in a couple days."

"I can join the battle!" Bella's voice raised several octaves hopefully.

"No," Damon said firmly. "You don't have the strength yet, nor the experience. You will be flanked by the younger pups, though in our sights as a precaution."

"I suppose that is better than sticking me on the Res or tucked away somewhere," she said, slightly deflated. "Thanks for not leaving me alone." Bella raised up on her toes and gave Damon a soft kiss on the cheek, and then pressed her lips against his. It was tender, yet brief and several of the wolves started to howl like hormonal teenage boys, because most of them were. "How embarrassing," she muttered and hid her face in her hands.

Damon pulled her hands away and lifted her chin. "That was not embarrassing," he said with a sly grin. "This is," and before she could register what he was doing, his mouth was on hers, and his tongue demanded entrance. He leaned her back in a romantic dip and kissed her until her knees went weak and she completely surrendered to the sensation.

When he released her from his thrall of passion, she let out a breath and grinned wildly. "I wasn't finished kissing you," she said with an adorable mock pout.

"More, later," he promised and Damon pulled her back up into a standing position. "Time to learn how to evade attacks."

Everything happened so fast, he only heard a feral growl in warning. Edward raised from a crouch and charged Damon. Reflexively, he tightened his hold on Bella and they rolled out of the way of the jealous teen's attack. Damon was about to push her to the side and face the boy when the russet wolf bounded over them and landed straight into Edward's chest.

Jacob had Edward pinned to the ground and his jaws locked over the boy's throat, snarling and putting enough pressure to keep Edward from moving, or risk injury.

"Are you okay," Bella asked Damon, while frantically running her hands over him, searching for damages.

"I'm fine," he said with a grin. "You're welcome to keep checking me over, though."

"I think he's had enough, Jacob," Jasper said and Damon turned his head to see the Major walk over and pull his coven brother up off the ground. "We need him for the fight," the Major reminded the wolf. Jake growled, baring his sharp teeth in warning and nipped at Edward's leg for good measure before running over to Damon and Bella.

"Nice moves, Fido!" Damon commended. The wolf snorted and his large, wet tongue hung out the side of his muzzle. Damon started to chuckle until Jake licked his face and leapt away barking some sort of doggy laugh. "Nasty. No treats for you!"

Carlisle went to Edward's side and they were having a very hushed conversation. His son was obviously reading the man's thoughts and answering to quietly for anyone else to hear. "Mr.
Salvatore," Carlisle called. "Edward and I have need of some father-son time. Please keep working with everyone in our absence."

"Have fun with that!" Damon yelled back and looked down at Bella still underneath him, their bodies pressed against one another. "As for you," he said with a grin. "Lesson one, drop and roll when in tight spaces! Lesson two, have an overprotective shifter nearby and lesson three," he paused, reached between them, slipped his hand into the waist of his jeans and adjusted his erection. He waggled his brows, "no combat training with a hard-on."

Bella made a perfect O with her lips, and a warm blush crept up her cheeks. Damon's mind raced with salacious thoughts, and wondered how many different ways he could make her skin flush like that, frequently.

"Let's go, baby-girl," he said and saved her from any more awkwardness. "Time to start learning how to be a badass."

Bella's training was the entertainment that night. Each Cullen had taken turns bull rushing her while she tried to dodge their attacks. Most of the wolves joined in except Sam, and Paul. Damon was proud of her, she'd been knocked flat on her back and her attackers poised for a mock final kill. She would hiss and growl, but never complained.

Before it was time to wrap the session up and get some sleep, Bella blocked Rosalie and Jacob, slyly skirting their attacks. She ended the last session by feigning to the left, leapt back, used Jacob's large form as a catalyst, and flipped onto his back. "Giddy-up, horsey!" she yelled out with laughter and dug her heels into Jake's sides. "Take me home, baby needs a nap!"

Damon chuckled and watched the giant wolf whisk Bella away in the direction of her house. He walked over to Jasper, who flashed him a wide, toothy grin. "Bold move in front of Edward."

"I honestly wasn't thinking of the boy," Damon said scrupulously and shrugged. "One man's loss is another man's gain."

Jasper raised a single brow and smirked. "You really like her," he said and it sounded more like an accusation.

"Problem?" Damon asked, challenging.

"Not even a little bit," Jasper said, unwavering. "You may want to tone it down until after this battle, though. Edward is gonna get himself killed if his jealously keeps controlling his actions."

"Agreed," Rosalie chimed in and joined the two men. "Bella and Edward have always been an enigma to me. The relationship always seemed one-sided, but you two…"

She hesitated and Damon didn't press for Rose to continue. He wasn't sure he was ready for people to start analyzing whatever it was he and Bella had between them. In truth, he was not ready to look too deeply into his own feelings, let alone anyone else offering commentary. "Anyway," Damon drawled. "I am headed off to the Swan house, use their drippy shower, and sleep on their too short couch."

Damon slipped on his jacket and his phone vibrated against his chest. Gloria had sent three text messages. They would be in Forks by nine in the morning. An idea popped into his head and he called Carlisle. As it so happened, the good doctor had evening rounds the next day and agreed to accompany him in the morning. Damon alluded to the exact reason.

This should be fun.
That next morning, Damon stood in front of the stove, he expertly flipped blueberry pancakes and then turned his attention to the bacon nearly finished. There was a knock at the door and he wondered who would visit at seven thirty in the morning.

Jake stood on the other side of the threshold and inhaled deeply through his nose. "Bacon," he drawled out nearly drooling.

"If you're joining us, then make yourself useful and set the table," Damon ordered and stepped aside for the pup to enter. "After you finish that, start squeezing those oranges."

"Hey!" Jacob whined. "I'm a guest!"

Damon snorted. "A guest doesn't show up uninvited as often as you do, so if you want breakfast, get to work."

Charlie was the first to rise and entered the kitchen. Damon pointed to the coffee maker and the Chief mumbled his thanks. "Breakfast in five," Damon announced. "Someone go wake sleeping beauty. We have a long day ahead of us."

"On it," Jacob dropped the half orange in his hand and wiped the juices on his shirt.

"What the hell dude?" Damon questioned. "Are you a five year old? Wash your damn hands."

"I'll wake her," Charlie grumbled and shot Jake a dirty look. "No boys in my daughter's bedroom."

Damon hid a smirk, and Jacob rolled his eyes. "Maybe he should have set that rule when she was dating the leech."

Damon's head snapped up and he fixed his gaze on the pup. "Meaning?"

"Dude!" Jacob said with a hiss. "That creepy fucker used to climb in her bedroom window to watch her sleep. He did it for a month before she was even aware!"

"I can't help but wonder what she saw in that boy," Damon muttered. Before he could speak more on the subject, Bella entered the kitchen in her PJ's and fluffy slippers. "Cute," Damon appraised and winked at her. "Eat, shower, and we'll drive over to the Cullens. Carlisle and I have a pickup to make this morning."

Bella plopped herself into one of the chairs and muttered. "What sort of pickup?" she asked and poured herself some juice.

"The secret sort," was all he offered. "Eat up. And drink up," he said and pointed to the small cooler filled with blood bags that were packed for training. "Need to fortify before getting your ass kicked."

"Lovely," she complained and plucked two cakes from the stack and tossed them onto her plate. After a few bites, she looked up at the cook handsomely standing in her tiny kitchen. "These are really good pancakes."

Damon looked over at Jake, who had stacked six cakes on his plate and several slices of bacon. He shook his head and turned to Bella. "I have a few hidden talents," Damon said and winked at her and she immediately blushed.

Once he turned off the stove-top, Damon sat and filled his plate, splitting up what was left over with Charlie, who returned and filled his coffee cup before joining everyone at the table.
The four of them shared their plans for the day, Charlie was off to visit Billy Black, and the other three would ride over to the Cullens together. Charlie cleared his throat and seemed to hesitate. "What's up, Chief?" Damon encouraged.

"I don't like the idea of Bella going to Seattle," he admitted. "I know it is logical and we don't want those newborns here to wreak havoc on Forks, but it doesn't mean I'm okay with my only child being placed in danger."

Not sure how to allay the Chief's fears, Damon offered the only solace, he could. "Charlie, they are outnumbered with seasoned warriors going up against unskilled newborns. She will be protected."

Charlie's brows knitted together and his forehead wrinkled. "If anything happens to her, son, I will shoot you. Not that it matters much, but I know it'll hurt like a bitch."

"That it would," Damon acknowledged. "I am not fond of getting shot, so you have my word and Jake's too," Damon offered and looked over at the boy still shoveling food in his mouth. Jacob looked up and nodded his agreement. He swallowed his food and crossed his heart. "You can shoot me too, if anything happens."

Charlie snorted, picked up his plate and tossed it into the sink. He gave Bella a quick hug and told her to be safe. She returned the sentiment and watched her dad walk out the door. "I hate worrying him," she said sadly.

"Then we have to win this thing, and come home safely," Damon murmured, and pulled her into a tight hug. He kissed the top of her head and then whispered into her ear. "Easy peasy, baby-girl."

The three of them finished getting ready after breakfast and locked up the house. Jake leapt into the back of Bella's truck and Damon walked over to the passenger side and opened the door. She tried to offer him her keys and he looked down at the them, confused, then back to her and asked. "Why are you handing me the keys to your truck?"

Bella frowned and shifted awkwardly. "I assumed you would want to drive."

"Why would you assume that?" he queried. "It's your vehicle."

Bella's smile brightened and she had a silly look on her face. "I suppose it is," she agreed and she closed her fingers around her keys, skipped to the other side of the rust bucket, and stepped up into the seat. The engine roared to life and Damon nearly cringed. His vampire hearing did not like the loud, old beast.

After dropping off Jake and Bella, Carlisle joined Damon and they drove to the Misty Valley Inn. He found the rooms to be clean, classically decorated and he thought Gloria would approve. Summer had yet to start which meant a slow season for the inns. After securing three suites, the two men waited for the witches to arrive.

"Who are we meeting?" Carlisle asked, and the curiosity was evident in his voice.

"It's a surprise!" Damon replied, not willing to fill the good doctor in on the new guest arriving for maximum effect. He had to admit, bringing Carlisle along was a tactical ploy. He had a sneaking suspicion this reunion would be hilarious, and it would also reveal why daddy-o never admitted to knowing about witches after Damon spoke about them candidly with the doc.

Gloria had years of practical experience over Sheila Bennett and had several covens throughout the country that would bend over backwards to help her. The woman artfully gained favors over her unnaturally long human life.
Damon spotted a white, Chrysler minivan pull into the inn's drive. Gloria sat in the passenger seat, and a young, Native American woman was driving. When they pulled up and parked in front of the main doors, Gloria looked to Damon and then Carlisle. Her eyes widened and she grinned like a Cheshire cat. The good doctor stood still, his face frozen in an incredulous stare.

"It couldn't be," Carlisle murmured almost too quietly for Damon to hear.

"Oh, it absolutely can be and it is," Damon said triumphantly. "Surprise!"

Gloria sauntered over to the two vampires and beamed up at both of them. She reached out and Damon pulled her in for a quick hug. "The second prettiest vampire I know," Gloria cooed in Damon's ear.

"Second?" he asked, feigning offense. "Who's the first?"

She released Damon and moved in front of Carlisle. "Sweet, sexy Mr. Cullen. I daresay you are a sight for sore eyes." Carlisle stared and then blinked several times. Gloria pulled the stone statue into an embrace and sang sweet words into the vampire's ear. "I should be cross with you," she chided playfully. "One unforgettable night, and never to be seen again. A girl could get a complex when a gentleman caller leaves without a trace or a proper goodbye."

Damon had to confess, if only to himself, this was not what he expected.

"How…" Carlisle stammered and stepped out of Gloria's arms. "How can you be alive?"

"Still don't believe in magic, do you?" she teased. "A girl has her secrets, handsome."

"That would make you…" Carlisle started to say and it seemed he had difficulty articulating a single sentence.

"A hundred and six, yes," she offered and looked to Damon. "I take it you orchestrated this little meeting?"

"Who me?" Damon asked, smiling innocently.

The witch smirked and gave Carlisle a peck on the cheek. The doc shook his head and scrubbed a hand over his face. "This could be a problem."

"I'll say," Damon said with a chuckle. "Wifey doesn't have a clue, does she?"

Worse," Carlisle said miserably. "I turned Esme weeks after I met Gloria in Chicago."

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave…" Damon started to say, quoting: Felicia Hemans's famous line until Carlisle glared at him. He looked directly at the good doctor and winked. "My lips are sealed."

The four other witches filed out of the van and started to pull out their luggage. Damon and Carlisle quickly gathered their bags and carried them into the inn. After they finished checking in and keys in hand, Gloria sent the other women up to their rooms.

"Give us time to freshen up and we'll follow you to the Cullen home," Gloria said and turned to Carlisle and smiled mischievously. "It'll be interesting to see what sort of woman snagged the beautiful, Carlisle Cullen."

Damon tamped down his desire to offer commentary, and simply smirked.

Interesting indeed.
Fairy Tales

Each Cullen other than Carlisle surreptitiously stole glances at the five witches standing in the main lounge of the spacious mansion. The room never felt so crowded before today. Gloria sat comfortably in the room full of vampires, while the small group of women fidgeted nervously.

"This was your secret?" Bella asked, leveling her gaze on Damon. "Are we supposed to believe magic is real?"

Damon raised a single brow at her, and Bella shrugged. "The shifters are born of old magic, so why not believe in witches?"

"It was magic that created you," Gloria added, looking directly at Bella. "Not you, exactly, but the beginning of your lineage."

Damon had thought back on Aro's sparse history regarding vampires like him, and the ledgers stated that they'd been created by a very powerful witch over a thousand years ago, though Aro and his researchers never found any substantiated proof. "How do you know this?" Damon asked.

Gloria turned to Damon looking slightly surprised. "Your brother never told you?"

He furrowed his brow and looked at his daylight ring; thoughts of Stefan came flooding in and a strange sensation washed over him. He missed his brother and his promise to make his life an endless, miserable existence was no longer a priority. Bella sat next to him and placed a hand on his arm. He gazed into her questioning eyes. "Later," he vowed and turned back to Gloria. "Stefan and I don't have the sharing sort of brotherly trust."

She pursed her lips and gave Damon a skeptical and critical assessing glare. "Your brother was BFF's in the twenties with Niklaus and Rebekah Mikaelson, two of the first of your kind," Gloria informed Damon, and the rest of the group. "Perhaps Klaus compelled Stefan to forget. I know you two have a strained relationship, but I also know you look out for one another."

"Vampires can't compel another vampire," Damon pointed out.

"The Mikaelsons can," Gloria quickly offered the disconcerting bit of information. "Their father, Mikael has been hunting Klaus for millennia. And let me tell you, the man is a right nasty piece of work. He shot up my club searching for his children. Klaus has some pent up daddy issues."

"At least my father shot and killed me - first try!" Damon muttered, keeping his tone falsely light.

Esme gaped at Damon and her jaw hung open incredulously "Why on earth would a man hunt his own children?"

Carlisle wrapped his arms around his wife and cleared his throat. "I have a shift at the hospital. Please forgive my manners," he said apologetically, and slightly uncomfortably "I will be taking a few personal days after tonight." Carlisle excused himself and left for work. Esme's gaze followed him and Damon could see the confused look in her eyes.

*Never mess with a woman's intuition; they always know when something is off,* he thought to himself and then looked over at Bella who mirrored that same thoughtful questioning expression. *Well, shit.*

Gloria stood and walked over to Esme. Damon watched, unsure if he should be horrified or entertained. "Esme is it?" the witch asked and extended her hand in greeting. "I must say, it is a
pleasure to meet the beautiful woman that ended Carlisle's bachelorhood."

The good doctor's wife tentatively shook Gloria's hand and offered a shy, hesitant smile. "You knew my husband before today?" she asked, and Gloria smiled widely.

"We should take a walk," the witch said sweetly and pointed to the back lawn through the large glass windows. "I would love a tour of your beautiful garden."

Esme, always the proper hostess, nodded and the two women exited into the back yard. Damon groaned inwardly hoping Gloria behaved herself. He decided now was a good time for a distraction. "If you four would introduce yourselves? I've not learned your names yet," he prompted the small coven of women.

"Yasmin," she offered, the first to introduce herself. a tall woman with graying hair streaked through light brown curls nodded and bravely found a place on the couch, sitting rigidly between Bella and Rosalie.

The other three witches remained quiet and Yasmin took it upon herself to speak for them. "Our youngest, Aponi, which means butterfly. She is my adopted daughter," she said, speaking very fondly of her teenage child. "And this is Krista," she offered and pointed to an average looking woman with startling black eyes, which were a stark contrast to her strawberry blonde hair and fair skin. "Last but not least, this is my partner and co-parent, Kaleen."

One at a time, each Cullen, Bella, and Damon properly greeted the newcomers. Alice bounded off into the kitchen and came back with a pitcher of lemonade, a carafe of coffee, and tiny finger sandwiches. Damon looked at the large silver tray and wondered when… right, she obviously saw them coming. He chuckled and Alice winked at him, knowingly.

"I suppose we have to wait for Gloria to return before we discuss your plans?" Damon asked Yasmin.

"Not entirely," she said and asked, "Could one of you strapping young men retrieve the chest from the back of the white van outside?"

Emmett jumped up, opened his hands and waited for the keys. Kaleen reached into her pocket and tossed them in the air, which he caught easily. "On it!"

Yasmin watched on with amusement. "Very enthusiastic, isn't he?"

"You have no idea," Rosalie said with a fond smile. "Someone needs to bottle up his happiness and sell it. They'd make a fortune!"

There was a mix of light chuckles and curious glances shared and Alice blurted. "Your plan will work, but…" she trailed off and frowned.

"What is it, darlin'?" Jasper asked his wife.

"A seer," Yasmin murmured in awe. "I too can see things, but not the future. I can touch someone and visions of their past present themselves to me." She pointed to her partner, Kaleen. "She is able to see a person's aura, and Aponi has a natural affinity with the tarot cards. It is not a practice we encourage because calling the spirits for answers can be tricky, though my daughter artfully crafts her own."

Alice looked conflicted. Her face went from curious excitement to worry. "Alice?" Damon called to her. "Did you see something new we need to plan ahead for?"
"I'm not sure," she admitted, frustrated. "I see the plan working, mostly, but then something changes, and I can't get a clear fix on it."

"Do not rely solely on your gift," Yasmin advised. "Too many things can change to alter your perception. Instinct and observation will be needed."

Alice pouted and Damon could barely keep from laughing. He assumed the little fortune cookie relied on her gift far too often. "Her gift is handy, but agreed," Damon said and gently covered Bella's hand under his. "We have to go in with our strengths and expect all possible scenarios."

The Major nodded in agreement. Damon and he exchanged glances and then their attention shifted to the two women entering the house laughing, walking side by side with their arms locked together. Esme looked tickled, and Gloria was grinning ear to ear.

Emmett reappeared; a large pine chest easily perched on his shoulder. "Where would you like me to set it?" he asked. Yasmin instructed the Incredible Hulk to place it anywhere out of the way, so Emmett sat it behind the large sectional couch.

"Ah, excellent," Gloria said and clapped her hands together. She walked over to the chest, knelt down and unlocked the thick steel padlock. After she lifted the lid, several necks craned to see what was inside.

"What's in the bags?" Emmett was the first to ask. Five burlap bags of equal size and tied off at the tops nestled tightly together, and a sixth bag, much smaller lay over top.

"Salt," Yasmin explained simply.

"Salt…" Jasper echoed with a skeptical drawl. "I gotta ask, why salt?"

"This is not just any salt," Gloria explained and lifted the smaller bag. She unlaced the ties and opened it up. "This comes from the Dead Sea in Jordan. Most believe it has restorative properties, but what isn't well known - there is great power in the fine crystals if a witch knows how to wield it." She sat back down and placed the bag she'd lifted from the trunk and laid it on her lap. "This sack, however, is filled with individual pouches full of volcanic ash from Mount St. Helens after she erupted, right here in this state."

"…And, that is for?" Damon asked. He didn't have the same skepticism as the other vampires. He'd seen Gloria's work first hand.

Gloria smiled and pulled one of the small pouches out of the bag. "This ash was gathered after the mountain cooled down," she explained, opened the little sachet and pinched a small amount of soot between her fingers. "There was a powerful coven living on a small compound on that mountain when it erupted. They were all killed," she said sadly. "I and several others were chosen to gather the ashes. We hired workers and had a few vampires compel them. We excavated the entire compound. The ash is safely stored in a warehouse very few of us have access to."

"So…" Damon started, stood up and paced. "The power of the dead witches will emanate from the ashes?"

"Very good, Mr. Salvatore," Gloria appraised and gave him a saucy wink. Damon felt Bella's glare bore into his back and he avoided facing her. Of course, Gloria noticed and her brows shot up, nearly meeting her hairline. She cleared her throat and continued. "Not only are the ashes blessed by the deceased witches coven, but because they came from a natural disaster here in Washington, they are tethered to the lands. You could say it will have a double whammy effect."
"How will they be used?" Alice asked, genuinely curious.

"A few ways, but the main one will be a protective barrier," Yasmin offered. "We understand the Cold Ones are holed up in a large foundry?" Damon nodded and she pressed on. "We will create a circle around the building with the salt and ash precisely blended and spelled. After we create the magical barrier, we will create five circles spaced evenly and each of us will take our places. They will not be able to get to us as long as we stay in our circles."

Damon looked to Gloria. "You plan on trapping them and we'll pick them off in a contained area?"

"Bravo again, Damon," she commented, although this time she didn't wink at him or use a suggestive tone. "We do not want to draw attention to the mayhem. Keeping it contained means no outside interference. We also have a very large package scheduled for delivery to this house tomorrow. I hope that won't be a problem?"

"What sort of package?" Rosalie asked. "We have… a newborn here and random humans showing up could be problematic."

"No, we don't," Esme chimed in. "Carlisle sent Edward and Bree to Denali."

"How did we not notice?" Alice asked while glancing at each of her family members. "When did they leave? I thought Edward was working with Bree at the cottage."

"That was the plan until Edward attacked Damon," Esme looked over at him apologetically. "Carlisle felt Edward would be a liability considering he is not handling his…"

"Jealously well," Damon finished for her. If Esme could blush, she'd be bright red.

Esme let out a long-suffering sigh. "Little Bree doesn't want to fight. It is not in her nature. And for a newborn, she truly has remarkable control. So Carlisle gave Edward something to focus on, working with our new member."

"I have another question," Jasper spoke up over the murmurs ensuing after Esme's little announcement. "I can see one major problem with this plan. Our kind, we're built like stone and when our bodies clash, especially in battle, it sounds like crashing thunder. That will draw attention in the city."

"That is what the delivery is for," Krista finally spoke up. "They are special Tiki torches built on a tripod filled with sage. We will place them along the salt line. They should muffle out a lot of sounds."

"How will we get at the newborn army?" Emmett asked. The man looked like his head hurt trying to work out all the witchy-woo-woo going on.

"Each of you will place a small amount of the salt mixture in a pocket or in a juju sachet. This will allow you to enter the barrier as well as leave it if you need to regroup."

"We'll be shootin' fish in a barrel, then?" Jasper said chuckling. "Tight quarters for a battle with so many new, out of control vampires, but doable. One last question. How will you set all this up with crazed vampires in the foundry?"

"According to my sources, and the local meteorologist, we will see several breaks in the clouds two days from now," Aponi informed them. Damon noted she had a very soft voice, though she spoke very clearly and confidently.
"Sources?" Alice asked, grinning at the young woman.

Aponi chuckled. "The internet!"

Alice's eyes went off to never-never land again, and Jasper grinned at Damon. She refocused and stuck her tongue out at her husband. "There will be two major breaks in the clouds. 1:46 pm until 2:17, and again at 4:11 pm until 5:01."

"Never bet against Alice and weather," Rosalie said smugly flashing her sister a conspiratorial grin.

"Do you see their progress, Fortune Cookie?" Damon asked, and winked at the tiny-mighty seer of weather reports.

"That is a terrible nickname!" Alice whined. She turned to face her husband who was hiding his own mirth and she pinched him hard on the arm.

"Thanks, dick." Jasper rubbed his arm and glared at Damon.

Damon snorted and shrugged unashamedly. "No one forced you to laugh."

All watched while Alice went blank, and waited. Gloria looked fascinated and Aponi looked on with rapt attention. "They've only managed fifteen in total. Riley's frazzled and I see him lining them up and trying to scare them into submission. It isn't working very well." She blinked out again and when she came back, her expression turned worried. "He told them they have until the end of the week to complete building their numbers. I don't know if that means they will come regardless, or if it meant something else."

"Victoria is tired of waiting," Damon muttered. "We leave early Tuesday and set up? Those who don't sparkle can protect the witches while they lay the groundwork - that includes the wolves."

"We know our time frames, people," Jasper said and walked to the center of the room. He was in full military mode. "We train for the next two days, and pull out."

Rosalie wrinkled her nose. "Your pet dog is coming up from the woods."

Everyone turned their heads as the giant russet wolf exited the tree line and bound through the back yard. He leaped up onto the deck and fixed his puppy eyes on Damon and Bella.

"That would be Jacob, second in command of the Quileute Tribe wolf pack."

"The shifters?" Gloria asked excitedly.

"Yep," Damon said and pointed to Jake. "That one is beastly, and likes to lick people."

Jasper snorted and Bella giggled. "Only you, you must be tasty," Bella said teasingly.

Damon leaned down, whispered in Bella's ear and spoke softly only for her to hear. "You want to find out how tasty I am?" he asked her seductively and nipped her earlobe. He could feel the heat of her blush and chuckled. "Is that a yes?" he prompted her for an answer.

"Shut up," she said with a scowl, stood up, stomped through the living room and fled out the back to meet Jake.

"Someone's in the dog house…" Emmett sang and smacked Damon on the shoulder. "If I had a nickel for every time Rosie got pissed at me…"
"You'd have a fuck-ton of nickels?" Damon spat back without ire and rubbed his shoulder.

"Yep!" Emmett said, beaming over at his wife who rolled her eyes at him. "Like now, huh, babe?"

"Idiot," Rosalie muttered and grabbed her husband's hand. "Help me with an oil change."

The couple left the house and Jasper waggled his brows. "That is code for sex in the garage."

"Jasper Hale!" Esme chided. "Not in front of company!"

"Sorry," Jasper said and grinned sheepishly. Damon knew the Major wasn't sorry, not one bit.

"The rest of the pack is coming," Alice interrupted and wrinkled her nose. "I can smell them."

Damon thought they smelled a little off, but whatever offensive odor the Cullens picked up, it didn't affect him and Bella the same way. "Well, ladies. I would say this is a good time to meet the puppy chow club." Damon said with a smirk, knowing Jake could hear him clear as a bell.

Everyone in the house filed out onto the deck, some meandered down on the lawn while nine giant wolves broke through the trees and leapt over the river. Sam took point and the rest slowly followed behind. Damon turned his gaze on Gloria, who wasn't watching the wolves, and she fixed her attention on Fido and the young witch, Aponi.

The two teens stood steps away from one another and it was as if no one else existed. Neither of them spoke and for once, Damon had nothing to say; he also found the silent interaction strange. Bella grinned wildly, padded over, and stood next to him. She raised up on her toes and whispered. "I have a feeling they are going to be like Sam and Emily."

Damon looked down into Bella's excited face and raised a brow, and whispered back. "I have no idea what that means, and who is Emily?"

"Oh my," Gloria murmured in awe. "I've only seen this happen in Belize - another native tribe - they turn into large black panthers because of werewolves threatening their people."

Sam's wolf howled and the pack joined in, building into a crescendo of merriment. He wasn't sure how he knew, but Damon thought the wolves sang jubilantly.

Aponi stepped closer to Jake's wolf and attentively scratched underneath his muzzle. Fido started to purr like a cat, and Damon leaned down and spoke softly in Bella's ear. "Clue me in?"

"Imprinting," Bella informed him.

Sam ran off to the side of the house and returned in human form wearing a pair of track pants. He sidled up next to Damon and Bella. "He has found the one, like my Emily."

"The one?" Damon asked, still confused. "The one, what?"

"They are two halves of the same whole - a perfect fit," Sam said with reverence. "She is his, and he hers. There is no one thing in the world more important to either of them."

"Is this a mystical codependency?" Damon asked very seriously. The idea of destined couples made him shudder inwardly. He didn't like the idea of having his choices taken away and that went doubly for partner selection.

Before he could say another word, Alice blurred over and grabbed his arm. "Come with me, now!" she demanded. Damon followed her over the river and entered the small cottage Esme originally
offered Damon while he stayed in Forks. She spun around, leveled a heated gaze up at him and wagged her index finger in his face. "Before you say anything stupid, more ridiculous than accusing the wolves of codependency, you need to keep your thoughts to yourself."

Taken aback by the petite woman's ire, Damon stepped back and held up both hands in surrender. "Fine, but I don't know what you're getting so riled up about. It was just a damn question!"

Tugging at her spiky hair, Alice growled in frustration. "Do you wonder why you can't be away from Bella long? Why you keep yourself occupied while she is in school, and why you can't keep your hands off her!" she asked, bombarding him with queries he had no idea how to answer.

"I'm away from Bella now," he stated lamely.

Alice hissed and poked Damon in the chest. "Don't be an idiot. How long did you stay after Jake ran Bella home Saturday night?"

"I stayed and talked with your husband," he answered, annoyed,

"Yes…" she drawled, very condescendingly. "You stayed a whopping two minutes and left. I bet Bella barely made it through the door before you arrived."

Alice," Damon fixed a steely glare down at the woman, now angered by her cryptic babble. "Do you have a point, or did you just want to yell at me?"

"My family is very blessed," she said wistfully, her anger abated. The mercurial shift in her mood left Damon slightly disoriented. "Vampires live very long lives, and some are thousands of years old. What do you think tempers creatures like us?"

"I have alcohol," he said flippantly, and Alice punched him in the arm. "Fine, no more jokes. And why am I getting punched in the arm today?"

"Because in spite of your redeemable qualities, Damon, you really are an insensitive dick sometimes."

Her accusation wasn't breaking news, Damon was very self-aware. He crossed his arms over his chest and deflected her assessment of his base nature. "Still waiting for your point, Fortune Cookie."

"Sit," she said and pointed to the high back chairs in front of the stone fireplace. "I have a story to tell you."

He rolled his eyes, but sat regardless. Damon knew he'd not get away without hearing her tale. "Spin your yarn, for me so we can get back and train."

Surprisingly, Damon remained quiet while Alice spoke about the day she woke as a new vampire. The first thing she saw with her gift was Jasper. She told him of the day they met in a diner, and it was an exact replica of her vision. She spoke about Rosalie finding Emmett in the woods after a bear mauled him and left him for dead. How she just knew with every fiber of her being, the need to rescue Emmett affected Rose marrow-deep, and she ran with his body, covered in blood all the way back to Carlisle, who turned him in order to save his life. She ended with Carlisle and Esme. Her broken body lay in a morgue after the medical staff determined her injuries were fatal, and the good doctor decided to save her the only way possible. Over her newborn year, the two of them fell in love and built a family together.

"Carlisle met Esme ten years before he saved her life," Alice murmured, her eyes shone with a dreamlike quality. Damon realized the vampire coven loved completely and they were the very
definition of family. "She was only sixteen, and it seems the fates brought them back together."

He stared down at the cold, flameless hearth and considered her story, something niggled at him—he wanted her to speak plainly. "It's a nice story, rivals a Rockwell painting, but Alice," he said and looked directly at her," I still don't see your point."

"Gah!" she growled at him and threw her hands up in the air. "You can be so obtuse!"

"I am a lot of things," he said with a chuckle, "dimwitted isn't one of them."

"Says you," she shot back. "You have heard us refer to our partners as mates, yes?" He slowly nodded and waited for her to continue. "When a vampire, much like the shifters, find, 'the one' our souls recognize our mate."

"I don't believe in love at first sight," Damon muttered. "It is a fairy tale."

"I don't believe in love at first sight, either," she agreed and curled her legs up in the chair. "Being a true mate is not love, Damon. It is, however, a catalyst between immortals—love grows naturally from there because the two souls fit as one. Humans may feel it too, though not attuned with their dull senses. The Quileute pack has a much keener sense when they imprint. Jacob explained it to Bella and I'll simply quote to you what she shared with me." She inhaled deeply and let out a breath before continuing. "It's not like love at first sight, really. It's more like... gravity moves... suddenly. It's not the earth holding you here anymore, she does. You become whatever she needs you to be, whether that's a protector, or a lover, or a friend."

"Why tell me this?" Damon asked. He felt very uncomfortable with the subject, though his curiosity won over.

"Because," she said and huffed through her nostrils. "I saw you doing something incredibly damaging, all because of your natural rebelliousness. Damon, you rail against anything, right or wrong, especially if you do not understand it."

He sat quietly once she finished and looked away from her questioning gaze. Damon stood after a moment and walked out of the cottage. Alice followed several paces behind, and for that, he was grateful. The information overload had him whirling, and the implications of what she shared with him, impossible to fathom.

As he approached the Cullen house, several wolves and vampires teamed up in his absence and began training. Jacob, now in his human form, sat with Aponi on the deck, speaking in hushed tones. Two of the witches were watching the mock battle, while Gloria, Esme and Bella huddled together near the vast garden.

As he slowly moved toward the three women, he was unable to take his eyes off Bella. Her head slowly turned and she offered him a sweet smile, and tilted her head curiously. His expression of befuddlement must have been evident because her smile turned into concern. His insides liquefied into a boneless pile of goo.

All of it was too difficult to digest.

*Was this why I wanted to be the one to turn her? My soul knew before my brain, even my heart.*
All Hail the Seventies!

Between Jacob's imprinting, training, and then Alice dumped a mind-bending whammy on Damon, Sunday flew by as they prepared for battle well into the late evening. He felt bone-weary and sore from the wolves' repeatedly pummeling him into the ground, and honestly, he'd not had this much fun in ages.

Bella stretched and yawned with a whimpering sigh. Damon looked to her and of course he yawned in return, making them both chuckle. "One thing we didn't lose from our human lives, yawns are still contagious!" Bella pointed out and grinned again. "Ready to call it a night?"

"More than," he said and yawned again. "Give me a minute. I'll meet you at the car."

Damon jogged over and stood next to Gloria, who was packing it in for the night as well. Alice drove the other women to the inn early that evening, but Gloria stayed to practice some defensive spells. She was curious to see if they affected the Cold Ones. Jasper was apprehensive at first, but once he saw that she could cause misdirection and confuse his kind, he knew it would be an effective battle tactic.

Gloria looked over at him and Damon raised a single brow, curiously. "Ask your question, Mr. Salvatore."

He smirked and nudged her with his shoulder. "What had Esme so amused when you two came back from your garden stroll?"

Gazing off in the distance, she watched Esme tumble out of Embry's reach. "I told her the truth," Gloria admitted easily. "I think Carlisle's unfounded guilt and self-imposed punishment is rather amusing, though Esme is a level-headed woman. She knew Carlisle did not spend over three hundred years living a chaste life, nor did Esme – she was married before he turned her."

So you two are all buddy-buddy now?" Damon asked, wondering if Gloria was up to something.

"I like her," she acknowledged truthfully. "She is the doctor's perfect partner, just as you are for Bella."

He coughed and shifted from foot to foot. "Not you too." Damon said, groaning.

"Fight it, if you feel you must," she said with a shrug. "Some things are simply meant to be. The handsome, snarky, playboy has met his mate," Gloria said with a grin and leveled her gaze on him. "Get over it, pretty boy. The more you deny it, the more miserable you both will be."

Damon remained quiet for a moment and then said his goodbyes. He wasn't comfortable discussing the matter any longer, or at all. Bella was standing next to the Mustang with Rosalie. Carlisle had the trunk-lid fixed on the car and kindly allowed him to continue driving it. "See you two in the morning," Rose said and gave Bella a single pat on the shoulder.

"She has school in the morning," Damon reminded Rose. "I'll be here after I drop her off."

"Dad excused me for the next four days," Bella informed him. "Claimed I was going to Florida to visit my Renee."

Damon furrowed his brow and realized she would have to stay out of sight in Forks. Small towns talked, whether it was anything of note, or not. "You won't be able to go into town, or talk to your
friends until Friday."

"I know," she agreed with a smile. "Already figured that one out."

"Okay smarty pants," Damon said with a chuckle. "Let's roll," he said and told Rose goodbye.

While Bella fussed with packing a few things for Seattle, Damon showered, made up the couch and flopped down with exhaustion. He was half-asleep when he heard her finish her shower and she padded down the steps carrying an over-stuffed sleeping bag and two pillows. He pried one eye open and watched while she spread it out on the living room floor in front of the couch. "Are we having a pajama party?" he asked sleepily.

After fluffing her pillows and propping them in tandem against the sofa, she flopped down on top of the sleeping bag and grabbed the VCR remote control. "Too keyed up to sleep," she muttered. "Want to watch a movie with me?"

"I can't believe your dad still uses a VCR," he said and made a face. "DVD players have a much better quality."

"Have you just met my dad?" she asked with a smirk, one very reminiscent of his own. "The stereo has an eight track player!"

"All hail the seventies!" Damon teased. "A terrible decade—polyester—bell bottoms—perms, and disco," he finished with a shudder.

"I wouldn't know, old man," Bella shot back with a wide grin. She pulled herself up from the floor, stood on her knees and pushed a VHS tape into the slot, and pressed play.

"What are we watching?" Damon asked and watched the Warner Bros.' production logo appear on the screen.

"You'll see," she evaded with a grin.

He watched from the corner of his eye while looking down at Bella. She wore a pair of ratty gray sweatpants, a white tank top, and thick white cotton socks. Her hair was pulled up away from her face and clipped messily atop her head. Damon reached over, released the clip and nearly moaned when the long silky locks spilled over his arm.

He waited a beat and when she didn't complain about releasing her hair from the confines of the plastic hair accessory; he combed his fingers between the long strands, splaying them over his bare abdomen. The sensation caused an immediate raging erection that went from pleasantly excited into painfully needy within seconds.

"Bella," he called to her, his voice gravelly, low and sexy. She didn't respond, nor did she move a muscle. "Baby girl," he tried again.

Slowly, she shifted her head on the pillows, and looked into his eyes, heavy lidded with arousal. Her gazed matched his own, he wasn't alone, she was just as stimulated. Her lips parted, though she remained silent. Damon continued to stroke her hair over his body. "Join me up here?" he asked, nearly begged to feel her body next to his.

Bella scooted into a sitting position and Damon reached down, scooped her into his arms, and laid her over him. Once again, her hair fell and tickled all the right places, his ribs, chest and he fisted the chestnut waves at the nape of her neck, tilted her head back and pressed his mouth to hers.
They had kissed before, though never like this. Their tongues danced a perfect tango, and Damon found her bottom lip irresistible, he nipped and sucked the plump flesh into his mouth. When she moaned his hips thrust of their own volition and he tried to shimmy the blanket the rest of the way down his body.

Too many barriers – too many clothes between them. Damon swept his tongue over her mouth, trailed warm, soft kisses up her jaw, and nipped at her earlobe. "Please tell me you want this as much as I do," he purred into her ear, while his hands desperately sought the feeling of her bare skin under her shirt.

Bella nodded into his neck, but Damon wasn't having it. "No, baby-girl, tell me. I need you to tell me," he growled low in her ear. "I'll stop if that is what you want, it'll suck, but I can wait until you're ready."

He wanted to punch his own balls for taking the high road. *When in his long life did he take the honorable course with a woman?* If she was remotely amiable, he had a hundred and one ways to get a potential to say yes, even if they had doubts.

"Isabella," he said her full name firmly. "We can stop now."

"I don't want to stop," she finally said, her voice muffled with her mouth against his neck. "We could die in a couple days."

"You..." he began and it took another moment to process what she was saying. "You want to have sex with me because we could die in battle?" he asked, incredulous. "Bella that is not a reason to make love."

Not for her, anyway.

"Not just," she huffed and turned her head away from him. Damon lifted her chin and forced her to look at him. She swallowed audibly and cleared her throat. "I know there is something—weird between us. I don't know why, nor do I understand it. It wasn't like this with Edward, he always dictated what he thought was best and I felt so dazed to argue."

Damon wanted to wince when she compared him to Edward, but the stupid teen was still a fresh wound, so he remained impassive as she spoke. He did file the dazed feeling away for a later date. Something was off about that.

She breathed deeply and continued. "When I was with him," she said with a frown, "I always felt like he was a step away from leaving me and I was so sure my love for him was pure. Why else would I feel weak in the knees and wobbly every time we were close? Even a chaste kiss left me feeling overcome."

Thinking back, Demetri told him the many ways they could lure a human into their web, and their meals could not fight or scream. Their voice and breath was like a drug, and they could draw a human in like the moth to a flame. Edward had some explaining to do. It was too bad Carlisle sent the jerk away; Damon felt another waking nightmare was in order.

"Damon," she called to him, pulling him away from darker thoughts of her ex-boyfriend. "When you were playing with my hair, I felt a million tingles start at my scalp down to my toes. I had an ache so amazingly painful—I wondered how I could wish for more. It was like torture and bliss rolled into one."

"I know," he agreed and sighed. "Look," he said and shifted into a sitting position, and pulled her to
"It's been an enlightening day, and I never gave much thought, why I volunteered to turn you, though something inside me, a deep gut feeling, chose before my brain had time to register."

"And, now?" she asked curiously. "Do you know why?"

Damon shrugged; unsure he wanted to explain what Alice so haughtily pointed out to him.

"While I am at school, I get very anxious being away from you so long," she admitted, her cheeks tinged pink and she hid her face. "I can't believe I just told you that."

Knowing fully how she felt, because whether he would admit it to her, he bore the same angst. "We have a long day tomorrow. I'm going to take another shower – a very cold one, and you need to get some sleep," he said and kissed the top of her head. She hid a pout, but he caught it before she turned away. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and assure her that it would all work out, truth be told, he wasn't ready to make that promise. His heart jumped up and down, ready to have a cage match with his stupid fear, but he pushed it away and headed off to the shower.

Idly, he wondered what movie she'd chosen. Not that either of them watched it.

The following morning, they ate breakfast, emptied a blood bag each, and made their way to the training field. Gloria and the Olympic coven pulled up behind the Mustang and joined him and Bella before trekking up the path. "A wonderful drizzly day in the state of Washington," Gloria sang, far too happy. "Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Salvatore?"

"Sure," he muttered. "I've decided gray is my favorite color."

The witch chuckled and eyed him speculatively. "Miss Swan, did Damon wake on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

Damon glared at Gloria. He knew the woman was fishing and trying to trip Bella up, hoping she'd offer the woman some insight. "No idea," Bella replied easily. "He sleeps on the couch, so if he woke on the wrong side, I assume it meant he fell off."

"Good girl," he mentally praised and shot Gloria a cocky grin. Jacob ran on all fours, landed in front of Bella, and licked her face. She made a face and laughed. "Gross, Jake! Now you have to give me a ride to the clearing."

The wolf barked with laughter, lowered his body and Bella climbed on his back. Her personal chariot bounded off and out of sight.

"I'm surprised you're not jealous," Gloria said thoughtfully.

"Why would I be?" Damon asked, annoyed. "He is her best friend, and besides, doesn't his imprint on her," he remarked and pointed at Aponi, "make him null and void?"

"Yep," Aponi said cheerily. "And Gloria is just trying to rile you up."

"Aware," Damon muttered.

The witch stopped goading him, and they entered the training field. Bella was still on Jake's back while they both were dodging Paul's wolf. The scene was hilarious. "Woohoo!" Bella yelled out, "Try and catch us, puppy chow!"

Jasper sidled up next to Damon. "You are a terrible influence on her."
"I know," he agreed and laughed. "Great, isn't it?"

The Major rolled his eyes, though his grin said otherwise. "Let's get to work."

Several hours later, a few healed gashes from wolf claws, lunch, dinner, and two more blood bags, he and Bella stretched out on a blanket. Gloria sauntered over and asked if there was room for her to join. Before Damon could answer, Bella patted a spot next to her. "Thank you, Bella. You are the sweetest little thing."

"Sweet and innocent, inviting a viper to lounge next to her," Damon muttered and smirked when Gloria gave him a haughty look.

"Be nice," Bella chided. "She is here at your behest."

"Not entirely," Gloria admitted with a sly smile. "A girl has to take her adventures in life when the opportunity arises."

"Still," Bella muttered. "You could have told him to take a flying leap, and not put yourself at risk."

Damon's jaw dropped and he felt ganged up on. "Baby-girl, I'd never take on Gloria or any like her unless I could sneak up on her unaware. She'd have me on the ground, writhing in pain before I could extract my fangs."

"Oh?" Bella asked, looked from Damon and then to the witch. "How?"

Gloria observed Bella thoughtfully, and smiled, highly amused. "I could demonstrate."

"Okay…" Belle said, her voice unsure. "If you promise not to kill me, I already have one psycho after me hell bent on my demise."

Damon watched wearily while Gloria seemed to consider whether to show Bella how easily the witch could cripple a vampire. "Ready?" she asked, Bella nodded and tensed up. When Gloria raised her hand and chanted, nothing happened. She tried again, and still nothing. She raised both hands in the air and chanted louder, and Bella looked confused.

"What the fuck?" Damon asked, muddled. "You lose your mojo, Witchy Poo?"

That was the wrong question. Damon grabbed each side of his head and screamed out, the pain unbearable. Bella ran to his side, and yelled for Gloria to stop. The pain subsided, but Gloria was still chanting. Within seconds, the pain had abated completely. The witch dropped her hands and breathed deeply, feeling the strain after she'd amped up her spell. "How did you do that?" Gloria asked Bella, disbelieving. "I felt it, and you blocked my spell."

Damon looked up at Bella, and reached for her hand. He pulled her close to him, protectively, and stroked her hair. "I have no idea," she said, and crawled into Damon's lap. "I just wanted you to stop hurting him."

Jasper and Rosalie heard the commotion and jogged over to ask what happened. Damon looked to Jasper and shrugged. "No idea, Bella somehow protected me from Gloria's voodoo aneurism from hell."

"Makes sense," Rose offered and everyone looked up at her for an explanation. "Well… Aro couldn't read her, Edward was unable to hear her thoughts, and correct me if I am wrong, but didn't Jane and Alec's gifts fail on her too?"
"Everyone except, me, Marcus, and Damon," Jasper pointed out. "I don't get Damon's ability to compel her when she was human, though. It makes no sense."

Again, Damon shrugged. Belle cleared her throat and spoke up. "I remember not wanting to listen to him when he got all bossy about drinking the juice and wearing the sweater. I could feel the push, and it was exhausting."

"Weird," Rose muttered.

"Seems Mr. Salvatore has an extra kick to his compulsion abilities," Gloria said appraisingly. "What are these other gifts you speak of?" she asked Rose and Jasper.

Jasper was the one to explain the gifted vampires within the Volturi and his own gift. The witch was beyond fascinated and asked Jasper to send her some emotional mojo. When he did, she started to giggle like a schoolgirl. "Oh, my, that is amazing!"

Bella didn't understand whatever gift she possessed, but everyone deemed she definitely had one. Carlisle offered to call Eleazar and get a read on Bella. The doctor explained the Denali coven member's abilities and thought it was worth a shot, not that it mattered until after the battle.

After everyone said their good-nights, and Damon drove Bella home. Charlie had to extradite a minor from another county and wouldn't be home till morning. Bella opened up the sleeping bag, added Damon's blanket, and they slept side by side, Bella curled into his side. It felt right. Damon had never slept so well in his entire life, and that was a long time.

Tomorrow they would leave early for Seattle. Damon wasn't a man of faith, though he sent up a little prayer – not for himself, but for Bella, to keep her safe.
There is one chapter left in this story, plus an epilogue. There will be a sequel called -A Promise: Unleashed, which I will start in a couple weeks. The sequel will take place in Mystic Falls.

Thank you!

The ride to Seattle was relatively quiet aside from the hushed murmurs between Jake and Aponi. They were in the getting to know each other stage. Damon glanced at Bella several times, though her eyes remained averted to the passenger side window and her silence had him worried. "Are you all right?" he asked her. When she failed to answer, he tapped her knee and she jumped nervously. "Bella, you've got to get your head in the game."

"It's not a game," she muttered bitterly without looking away from the distorted view of the passing landscape. "People could be hurt, or die."

"Yes," he agreed, not wanting to coddle her with false promises. "We will come out on the winning end, though that doesn't mean no one will fall in battle."

"Bells," Jake called her from the back seat. "We're prepared, and your lack of faith in us is insulting."

Bella fumed, her nostrils flared and she leveled her gaze on her best friend. "It is not lack of faith – I don't want to lose anyone because of me."

Damon snorted, and he was pissed off. "Stop taking on the blame for some crazy bitch with a vendetta. It's getting old, Isabella."

"Agreed," Jacob said between gritted teeth. "You were at the wrong place at the wrong time, so get the fuck over yourself. James and Victoria chose their path, and now the psycho-bitch is trying to save face."

Bella turned her glare back to the window and the four of them remained quiet until the docks came into sight. They met up with Carlisle, Emmett, Jasper and Sam's groups and loaded the vehicles onto the ferry transport. The human passengers gave the large Native Americans, as well as the vampires a wide berth when they assembled on the top deck.

Damon and the Major stepped off to the side. "She looks angry," Jasper noted and nodded over towards Bella.

"She is being ridiculous," Damon offered and shook his head. "No matter what anyone says, she takes on all the blame and worry."

Jasper glanced out over the choppy water and nodded. "She is a caregiver – I think she's takin' on that role because of her shaky parenting. And though I don't agree with the way her mind works, it is what it is."

"I know," Damon muttered and looked over at Bella who met his eyes briefly before lowering her
"Look," Jasper said and turned to face Damon, "we are the ones responsible. Our lifestyle makes us complacent sometimes, and we know how dangerous our kind are. We should never have agreed to let Bella be a part of it," he said with a frown. "In the end, we are all to blame, but I think the turnout was inevitable. As a human, that girl was just plumb-weird."

"Still is," Damon mused and couldn't help but grin, thinking of the terrified, yet, brave human girl in the Volturi throne room.

"She likes you," Jasper teased and lightly punched Damon's shoulder. "I'm inclined to agree."

"Time to load back into the cars," Damon deflected, ignoring Jasper's jibes, though he had to get in the last word. "And she likes you too, so keep that in mind." The Major chuckled and bounded down the stairs.

Damon maneuvered his way through the crowd, gently laced his fingers with Bella's and tried to keep his voice neutral and non-judgmental. "Hey, I get it, okay?"

"Get what?" she asked without looking at him.

"I get that you worry about everyone besides yourself," he said and squeezed her hand. "In a way, I suppose, but this isn't just about you. This newborn army has drawn the attention of the Volturi according to Alice, and that…"

She stopped walking and looked directly into his eyes. "And that?"

"Could be more of a problem for me, than anyone else," he admitted with a sigh. "Aro is likely out for my blood. I didn't exactly leave Volterra on the best of terms."

Together, they finished making their way to the car and Bella pulled Damon into a hug. "What did you do?" she asked, notably worried.

He held her tighter and pressed his lips against her neck. "I escaped after securing your safe departure," he murmured into her ear, surprised he was being honest. "And Aro didn't get what he wanted, which I'm guessing he won't forget or forgive anytime soon, if ever."

"How?" she whispered shakily.

"Not now," he told her, "after, I promise."

Damon shared some of his secrets with Jasper and Alice out of necessity, and Aro knew one of them for the same reason, though he kept Bella in the dark, unsure what his motives were. Once the mess in Seattle was dealt with, he'd come clean with her, and tell her everything.

All four vehicles now parked side by side in the hotel parking lot, Carlisle and Damon left the others outside while they secured their rooms. The good doctor offered to pay for all of them, but Damon insisted on paying half. "I'm not poor," he told the doc. "Not by a long shot."

"Very well," Carlisle said with a sheepish grin.

All the key cards for the rooms were safely stowed away. The large group split up on foot, and met at the old foundry separately to avoid suspicion.

They stayed under cover far enough away so that the baby-vamps couldn't hear them approach. The
five witches synchronized their watches according to Alice's weather predictions. The Quileutes remained in human form until it was time to attack. One pack member and one vampire flanked a witch while the mixture of salt and ash circled the large building. The rustle of movement inside shifted, following the activity outside, though none of the newborns made a move.

Once the barrier was set in place, five additional circles were created evenly spaced outside the protective area. Each witch surrounded themselves in personal barriers for protection.

Gloria called Damon, Jasper and Carlisle to join her. "Each of us will stand inside our own barricades and chant the disorientation spell. As long as you all carry your juju bags, the spell, nor the barrier will affect you," she instructed, and her watch alarm chimed. "Five minutes until the sun slips back behind the clouds. Time to shift, Quileutes."

Before the five minute timer ran out, all pack members shifted and the clouds grew dark and thick. Instead of a drizzle of rain, a downpour struck, though Gloria was delighted.

Seth and Brady were charged with flanking Bella at all times, no matter what. Damon knew the spell should keep the newbs contained, but he was a firm believer in Murphy's Law.

The remaining pack flanked the Cullens and Damon. He and Jasper stepped just inside the spelled circle and started to taunt the adolescent army. Mr. Mood-Ring sent out wave after wave of lethargy and despair, dismantling any false bravado Victoria may have inspired. The witches began their chant and by the sounds of it, the Cold Ones holed up inside started attacking each other.

"Could it really be so easy?" Damon asked incredulously.

Jasper smacked his forehead and glared at him. "Tryin' to jinx us?" Damon chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

On the silent count of three, the two men tore the large steel doors off their hinges and they both grinned. "Heere's Johnny!" Damon drawled darkly and looked over at Jasper.

The Major chuckled. "Come out – come out, wherever you are!"

To his left, a blonde male blurred behind him, though Damon whirled around and put the man in a headlock, dragging him out of the building. He tossed the struggling body into the pack of wolves and darted back in. Two newborns were on Jasper, though the Major seemed to be handling his own, and he watched Carlisle drag two more bodies out the door.

"Two heads are better than one!" Jasper sang triumphantly and held up two decapitated heads, one in each hand, the bodies at his feet still wriggling spasmodically on the concrete floor.

"Freaky," Damon muttered, and ran off behind an old crate, dragging out another body, and he paused at the sight of the young boy, likely no more than eleven or twelve when he was turned. His heart sunk, but the Major shook his head. He sucked in a deep breath and twisted the child's head off. "Someone get a fire started!" he yelled out, still holding the young vampire's torso.

Outside, Aponi tossed salt into a puddle of water filling quickly from the heavy rain and it ignited into blue flames. Esme gathered body parts and tossed them into the conflagration. The sweet smell of burning vampires was gut wrenching, but Damon pressed on.

He and Jake tag teamed three more piled on top of Embry. "Good work Fido," Damon teased. "I knew all you needed was a chew toy!"

Jacob growled while tearing apart two more vampires, and when Damon looked back at Embry, they...
wolf wasn't moving. "Fuck!" he yelled. "Pull him out!" Rosalie, who held a pair of legs in her hands, dropped them to the floor, scooped Embry up in her arms, and carried him outside the barrier.

"Anyone seen red yet?" Damon asked whoever was listening. He heard a few of them answer no, and a few low growls, and assumed that was also a no. Something wasn't right, he felt it in the pit of his stomach. "There's a basement," he pointed. "Let's hit it, Major!"

Together, they stealthily descended the dark stairwell into an open storage cellar. Debris from broken, wood pallets, old iron plumbing, and dead human bodies littered the floor. The smell was putrid and made it difficult to pick up Victoria's scent.

"I've got something," Jasper said with a sniff.

Damon followed him to an open sewage grate. He pulled the metal grille the rest of the way off its hinge and hissed. "Shit-shit-shit, fuckity-fuck!"

"I'll go," Jasper offered.

Damon knew the Cold Ones had a keener sense of smell and placed a hand on the Major's shoulder. "No way will you go down there without backup."

Damon yelled for Sam and Emmett. He explained the situation and all three entered the tunnel in search of any wayward vampires, and hopefully Victoria. "I'll go back up top and search for manhole covers."

The activity in the foundry died off, and the fire outside hissed and cracked as the vampire venom fueled the flames. A woman screamed and Damon bolted for the door. "You idiot, you stupid woman!" Gloria cried out.

Carlisle ran to the witch outside of her protective circle. Damon wasn't a doctor, but he didn't need a medical degree to know her leg was broken, and worse. Kaleen lay on the wet tarmac and writhed in pain. "She's been bitten," Carlisle explained sadly. "The venom is already traveling through her system. What was she doing outside of her protection?"

Yasmin's breath hitched and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Aponi — s—stepped out to h—help Jacob, and," she stammered, bent protectively over Kaleen and a fresh set of tears fell, landing on her partner's face.

Gloria stepped forward and rested a hand on Yasmin's shoulder. Aponi and Jake, now in his human form, knelt down beside her. Jacob's eyes were red rimmed when he looked up at Damon. "Embry's dead. Doc says his ribs were crushed, his lungs punctured and collapsed. Probably some other stuff, too."

He looked where Bella was supposed to be, but she'd walked off with her two guards and helped toss body parts into the fire. Glancing over, he saw Embry, human again, and his body already turning blue. "I'm sorry," Damon said softly. A word he rarely said, unless he truly meant it. "I don't mean to be insensitive, but what do we do about Kaleen?"

"Change me, too," Yasmin begged between sobs. "I will not make her suffer this alone."

"Do you realize what you are asking?" Gloria confronted the Olympic coven leader. "You will lose your magic, and…"

"Become a monster?" Damon challenged angrily. "Or is it best to let the woman she loves go through this alone, and one day she'll watch her grow old and die?"
"Mom," Aponi whispered through her own sorrow watching one of her parents suffering pure torture. "I love you both, always, no matter what."

Damon stepped away from the scene, pulled Carlisle off to the side, and kept his voice low. "Will you do it?"

Carlisle nodded, and looked back at the grieving woman. "Only because they truly love one another."

He offered a curt nod and walked away. He needed Bella—to touch her—feel her body against his. They were alive, but Victoria was still at large and they had no idea who possibly went with her. Mere steps away, he watched in horror when the redhead blurred in, snapped Bella's neck in front of him, and dropped her to the ground. She grinned manically over his baby-girl, leapt up on a roof looking down at Damon, and tilted her head. "Where is the boy?" she asked sweetly, her voice sounded like crystal bells.

"What boy?" Damon engaged in conversation, hoping to keep her distracted. He glanced back down at his girl crumpled on the ground, and deeply frowned for effect. Apparently, Little Miss Crazy Pants had no idea what they were.

"Her mate," Victoria said with a smile. "I want him to suffer for his sins. Mate for a mate," she finished with a sneer.

Damon listened with his vampire hearing and realized there were less people standing nearby. He also hoped Jasper was right behind her with Emmett and Sam.

"So," Damon drawled, letting his old world, southern gentile accent filter through. "You find it a real victory to kill a human girl—create an entire army for revenge over one little mortal? You must be so proud of your achievements."

"Do not trivialize my loss!" Crazy Pants cried out. "They killed my James. They are unnatural and ridiculous—they all deserve to die!"

"Well, Vicky, may I call you Vicky?" Damon cooed condescendingly. "Now that you've had your revenge—what of your own life? Doesn't it seem like such a waste that you're going to die after all your efforts?"

"You missed a few," she said, her eyes lit up and her smile widened.

Before he could register what was happening, three more vampires charged him and had him pinned to the ground before he was able to take a single breath. One bit his neck, another pulled his shoulder out of the socket and the third had a death grip on his legs. Emmett growled and tore into one of his attackers, though Damon suffered extensive injury and couldn't fight back.

The newborn trying to tear his head off his shoulders went flying; Jasper bit and tore their limbs off and tossed them into the fire with quick efficiency. Damon used his legs and trapped the remaining vampire until Jasper could come back and take care of that one too.

"Motherfucker!" Emmett cursed and shifted his gaze down an alley between two buildings. Another Cold One came speeding through and Bella was gone. "That sonofamotherfuckingbitch!"

Damon tried to sit up, his mind and body responding to Bella's abduction. Blood poured from his neck and leg. "Cooler," he choked out. "Carlisle, push my damn shoulder back in!"

The doctor ran over and helped realign Damon's shoulder, while Jacob jogged over with a small red
and white cooler. Damon popped the lid with his good hand and pulled out two blood bags. "Jake, help."

Jacob glanced over to the Cullens, all standing rigidly, and knew what to do. He helped him up and they went into a warehouse alone. Damon quickly popped the first bag open and drained it, the second followed. His wounds quickly healed over, but the bites still hurt like a bitch. Those would take a few hours to knit back together regardless of how well he fed.

"Can you pick up Bella's scent?" Damon asked Jacob, as exhaustion tried to take hold.

"Yeah, they're not far," Jacob said and pointed to the south. "You know who grabbed her, right?"

"A jealous idiot?" Damon spat acerbically. "So much for Alaska."

"He all right?" Emmett asked when he poked his head through a glassless window.

"Yeah," Damon answered, pulled himself back to his feet and turned to Emmett. "I'm sorry, but I may have to kill your brother."

"Figured," the big guy muttered. "But for Esme's sake, maybe just some dismemberment?"

"Where is Victoria?" Jacob asked before they left the building.

"Uh," Emmett shifted nervously. "That was the other reason I came."

Damon raised a single brow; his patience had met an end. "I need to find Bella, now!"

"I—I know, but..." Emmett looked over his shoulder and back through the window. "Alice said the Volturi guards are only a few minutes away."

"Of course they are," Damon spat, his anger going unchecked. "Those sons-of-bitches took their sweet time for this one – funny that!" He turned to Jacob and tried to loosen the tightening of his jaw. "Get the pack and the witches the fuck out of here, now!"

"What about Kaleen?" Emmett asked, concerned.

" Fucking toss her in the goddamned trunk for all I care. She will at least live. If the Volturi gets here first, none of them will be safe!"

Jacob didn't argue and took off like a bat out of hell. He gathered the pack, and witches, including Kaleen, and quickly left the area.

"We'll find Bella's body," Carlisle assured Damon as he and Emmett joined the others. If the doctor could cry, he'd be having a major meltdown right now. "Edward isn't in his right mind and I have to wonder where Bree is."

"She's not dead," Damon said flatly. "But your son's life, though? No promises." Carlisle grimaced, but kept quiet.

"They are almost here," Alice murmured anxiously.

Like a scene out of a horror movie, Jane, Alec, Felix and Demetri swept in, their long dark cloaks flowing behind them. All four remained hooded until they lined up in front of Damon and the Cullens. Felix, however carried a burden: one crazy pants redhead. Her torso with attached head under one arm, and legs and arms tucked under the other.
"Well – well, what do we have here?" Jane asked casually, and looked to the fire and ashes of the fallen vampires. "It would seem we have been rendered useless. How unusual."

"Very," Damon said dryly and glared at the teen torturer. "It's a shame you weren't here for all the fun." He looked to Demetri, and immediately wiped away the sneer he had for Jane. "I have to ask a favor before anything else," he directed at his old friend. "Edward kidnapped Bella, for lack of a better term. Can you please track his ass, and bring her back?"

"No," Jane denied his request harshly. "This one says she is dead anyway, so what does it matter?"


"I'll go," Demetri said and ignored Jane's haughty, indignant glower. "You can't cripple us all, so just deal with it Jane. Cullen isn't far, I can feel him."

"I'll go with you," Alec announced. Demetri nodded and the two Volturi guards darted off to find Bella and Edward.

After the small search party for Bella blurred out of sight, Damon turned to Felix and pointed to the roaring fire. "Just toss the bitch in. It's all warm and toasty."

"I think not," Jane interjected. "Aro wishes us to bring her back with us."

"Of course he does," Damon muttered and rolled his eyes. "Aro gets a read on Crazy Pants so he can add one more phantom grievance against the Cullens? Jealously is such an ugly thing. You'd think after three thousand years, Aro would have a better self-esteem."

The tiny blonde whirled around on Damon and narrowed her eyes. He knew better, though between Bella missing because Mr. Broody whisked her away to gods only knows where, Jane making threats, and the shit storm they all just went through, he did it anyway. And he paid the price. When the pain finally abated, Damon's focus came back and saw Rosalie knelt beside him, holding his hand.

"Thanks," he muttered, still gasping for breath. "She's really good at that." Rose snorted and punched him on the shoulder. He rubbed the spot she hit him "Ow – such a cruel woman!"

"Enough!" Jane barked in annoyance. "We are not here for fun and games."

"Why are you here?" Jasper asked after wrapping an arm around his wife's waist. Felix kept all expression from his face and Jane smiled again.

"We came to assess the disturbance." Jane replied casually. "We have been following the reports in the area and the kings decided it was time to take action."

"Better late than never? It is not like the Volturi to be complacent." Carlisle quipped and Damon was mildly impressed. He didn't think the doc had it in him.

It didn't take long before Demetri made an appearance, Bella's body held protectively in his arms. Damon let out a sigh of relief and reached out to take her. Demetri hesitated briefly, but then gently handed her over. "Thanks," Damon said, his voice thick with emotion. He pulled her tight to his chest and pressed his lips to her temple.

Alec appeared seconds later holding a limp Edward in his arms. The sight was hilarious. Edward was at least a foot taller than the other vampire, and although Alec had no problem carrying the broody teen, all the long limbs dangling loosely in his arms looked very awkward.
"She looks dead," Jane commented flatly. Damon hissed, but ignored Tinkerbell.

"I want Victoria dead," Damon said with a growl. "I will not risk Bella's life again if the Volturi decides to let her run amok."

"You are in no position to make demands, Mr. Salvatore." Jane said without inflection. "Aro will be happy to have your company again."

"Not happening," Damon spat back. "Tell your king, he can kiss my ass. You'll have to kill me first."

Jane smiled and glared daggers at him. Damon waited for it, expected it, but it never came. Jane hissed and narrowed her eyes, her lips tightened into a hard line. The Volturi guards and the Cullens watched, bobbing their heads back and forth. Demetri grinned, and Felix shifted Victoria's body away, trying to thwart her attempts to bite him.

He managed the slightest glance down at Bella. The corner of her mouth tugged into a grin and Damon gave her a little squeeze. "Playing possum, baby-girl?" he asked and kissed her forehead.

"Maybe a little," she whispered back and cried out when she tried to lift her head.

"Yeah, getting your neck snapped is a bitch," he informed her and gently massaged her sore muscles.

Jane huffed and stomped her foot like a five year old. Bella asked to stand on her own, Damon complied, but he didn't let go of her hand.

"We are not going to Italy," Jasper informed the cloaked guards. "You came to deal with the newborns, and it is over. Go home and tell your kings that the issue has been dealt with. You can even take the credit."

Damon looked to Demetri, who automatically turned his head. "Well?" Damon asked his friend. "Time to make a choice. Either you are going to kill me, or finally break free."

"Not like they can track you," Jasper said with a snort.

He had hoped, but Damon wasn't sure how deep Demetri's loyalties were. When the tracker disrobed his cloak and tossed it to the ground, Jane gasped, and Felix's jaw dropped. "Guess I'll join the doomed," Demetri said sardonically and sidled up next to the Cullens.

Even more shockingly, Felix blurred over to the fire and dumped Victoria's body into the flames. With all the venom leaking from her torn limbs, she burned quickly. Jane fixed her painful gaze on Felix.

Bella pulled out of Damon's grasp and ran over to hug the bulky vampire now writhing in pain. "I will fucking hug everyone here until you stop that shit, Tinkerbell!"

Jasper snorted, Damon burst into laughter, and Rosalie walked over and laid her hand on Bella's shoulder. "Seems little sis has figured a few things out on her own," Rose appraised and gave her shoulder a light squeeze.

"You have to wonder how effectively she can stop Jane's gift long enough to…" Carlisle considered aloud and looked directly at Jane. Alec shifted uncomfortably.

"Aro will hear of this!" Jane said with a snarl. Tinkerbell knew they outnumbered her. No one knew exactly how well Bella could block her, or what the gift really was, but it was definitely an
Alec touched his sister's arm and spoke firmly. "Let us go, dear sister. This is not the battle we came for."

"Aro wants him!" she shouted and pointed directly at Damon.

"It's good to want," Damon replied casually. "It builds character."

Jane fumed and darted her eyes on each person, sending bolts of fiery pain their way. She couldn't maintain so many, but she was able to cause them to double over. Damon recovered momentarily, and he heard Gloria's voice off in the distance. She was chanting something and her voice grew stronger as she approached. Jane's knees bent inwardly and she fell to the ground, screaming in agony. Next, her arms twisted at the elbows and Tinkerbell curled up in a ball begging for her life.

"Stop, please!" Alec pleaded for his sister sincerely. "We'll leave, now."

"You tell your kings, the Cullens, Damon and Bella are under the protection of several witch covens," Gloria warned the Volturi twins. "We outnumber your coven by the hundreds. Tell your Aro to keep that in mind before he decides to come after anyone here."

Alec agreed immediately, but Jane said nothing. Damon could see she was still in pain. Alec dumped Edward unceremoniously to the ground and went to his sister.

"Also," Gloria stepped bravely in front of the teen vampires. "That includes covens in Europe. They are only a call away."

Bella ran back into Damon's arms and he pulled her into a tight embrace. "Thank you," he said to the witch, and turned to Carlisle. "Get your son under control, or I will kill him."

Carlisle nodded without argument, and asked, "Back to Forks?"

"Not tonight," Damon said and kissed the top of Bella's head. "I paid for a damn luxury suite at the hotel and we damn well are going to use it."

Emmett picked up Edward and sat him on a dry crate, still dazed from Alec's gift used on the boy, and Cullens spent some time cleaning up any evidence of the battle.

Damon picked Bella up, bridal style and they left for the hotel. She had three days remaining before she had to return to school and he planned to make it the best three days, ever.