As Dreams Are Made On
by Themiscyra

Summary

Brained by a hardcover copy of Twilight's tenth anniversary edition, I've found myself ten years in the past and in the body of Bella Swan. I might be dying, or dreaming, or something stranger still. But if I'm going to survive long enough to find out, I'm going to need to make some changes.
At A Glance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
As Dreams Are Made On

Themiscyra

Based on The Twilight Saga by Stephenie Meyer
Cover art by Gsquare (gsquare-art.tumblr.com)
I’ve thought a lot about how I might die.

I’m not being melodramatic: I’m a diabetic transsexual with a crappy immune system. There was a time when visits to the hospital were an annual tradition for me. I’ve caught antibiotic-resistant infections, horrific stomach flus, and more, and the diabetes has not helped. Leaving that aside, there’s still an unsettling amount of violence against transgender people in this world, and I’ve had to face the possibility that I could be assaulted or worse simply because of who and what I am.

So. I’ve thought about it. I don’t really have a comprehensive list, but if I did, ‘global pandemic’ would be near the top. Your superflu, your Ebola outbreaks, your zombie viruses. Next, your more ordinary infections. Homicide somewhere below that, among the various accidents. Below heart attacks and car accidents, above lightning strikes, plane crashes and shark attacks. Shark attacks are actually at the bottom of the list. I don’t like to swim in the ocean anyway.

Maybe an epic battle. It’s on the list. Fighting for someone or something I love. I’m a pacifist, mostly, but I’d fight for the right cause. I could see myself dying for someone I love. I’d probably die quickly, but hopefully not without any kind of honor.

What I really couldn’t have foreseen - and should have, considering how much I love to read - is that I would die in a bookstore, having accidentally sent a doorstopper of a hardcover toppling directly onto my own damned head.

Although really: did it have to be the tenth anniversary edition of *Twilight*?

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There was nothing but a dark void for a while. Then, gradually, sound returned. The low hiss of an air conditioner in a neighboring seat. The rumble of airplane engines. Sensation: the edge of a flimsy armrest poking into my skin. A kink in my neck. The general discomfort of an airline seat. My hips shifting to try and ease the squirming sensation near my groin.

My eyes snapped open, though my brain was still half-asleep. I was on a plane. Sunlight streamed through the window. And I needed to use the bathroom. Badly.

Though I still felt disoriented, I carefully unbuckled myself and stood, stooping to avoid hitting my head on the overhead bin - although for some reason I didn’t feel as cramped in the airplane’s cabin as usual. I murmured an apology to the woman next to me, who got up to let me pass, and found my way to the restroom, quietly thanking the universe at large when I found it vacant. I stumbled in, locked the door, and pulled down my jeans, dropping into the seat. Something seemed very weird about all this, and I was pretty sure the problem was in my pants. I rubbed at my face. My nose felt strange. I couldn’t feel my glasses.
Suddenly, everything snapped into focus. I prodded at my face - I wasn’t wearing glasses at all. My nose was much smaller. My brow seemed smoother somehow. I felt along my upper lip, where I’d had a mole since birth - nothing. My chin, where I’m plagued with tiny bristly hairs - it was smooth. My skin was soft, dry and smooth. It didn’t feel anything like what I was used to.

I slowly angled my gaze downward, lifting my shirt - a sleeveless top, pristine white with lace accents, nothing like anything I could remember owning - and looking between my legs.

I definitely did not remember getting one of those, and since it had been one of my life goals for the last twelve years, I’m pretty sure I would have.

Shutting my legs, I looked up at the ceiling and did my business, trying very hard not to think about it. At all. When I finished, I awkwardly got to my feet and got myself together, washing my hands in the crappy little airplane sink. Then, taking a deep breath, I looked up at the mirror.

I was pale. That hadn’t changed. But my skin was clear and unblemished. The face that looked back at me was, frankly, prettier than the one I was used to. My nose was smaller, slender, cute. My eyes were wide and expressive, a deep chocolate brown. I wasn’t wearing my glasses, but somehow I was seeing more clearly than I had in years. My lips were a bit thin, but soft and not unattractive. There was still a little baby fat in my face, making me look softer, younger. My frame was slender, with notable curves, nothing spectacular. I looked at my arms: none of the moles I knew, none of the little kitten scratches I’d picked up over the last month or so. I was wearing a silver watch with a brown strap on my left wrist, but no other jewelry, even though I usually have a watch on my right wrist, a Power Rangers communicator on my left (because I’m a nerd), three rings and two necklaces. Above all else, though, as I looked my reflection up and down, I could tell that I was clearly shorter. The ceiling was a good six inches or so higher than it should be. I didn’t need to slouch or duck my head at all.

None of it was right.

This was obviously a dream.

My reflection broke into a smile, showing straight white teeth. This was a dream, and I was aware of it. That meant I could do what I wanted.

I turned toward the door, opening it. I took a high step into the air in front of me, leaving my foot off the ground, fully intending to start levitating. I moved forward. And then, suddenly, I pitched forward, slamming into the lavatory door on the other side of the aisle.

“Miss!” a uniformed flight attendant exclaimed, hurrying up to me. She grabbed my shoulders, helping me straighten up again. “Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“Oh,” I muttered, but it was really no more than a dull ache where my arms had hit the door. “Oh, uh - sorry. Lost my balance. I’m okay.”

The attendant frowned dubiously. “Why don’t I help you back to your seat, miss? We’re going to be starting our descent soon, anyway.”

“Okay,” I agreed, my cheeks burning as I walked with her back to my seat. My neighbor got up again, giving me a curious look at my escort, and the attendant watched as I buckled myself in, finally nodding and moving back to the front of the cabin.

I sat in my seat for a moment, marveling briefly at how much roomier it seemed, then spied a backpack crammed under the seat in front of me. Tugging it out, I zipped each compartment open in
turn, finding a wallet and a passport in one of the smaller compartments. Opening the passport, I found my new face staring back at me. My eyes flicked to the given name.

**ISABELLA MARIE SWAN**

It took everything I had to keep from laughing. That just wasn’t possible. This had to be a dream. But I’d tried levitating and it hadn’t worked. I tried reaching behind my back, thinking, *It’s morphin’ time!* I tried to will Falcort into being outside the window, soaring among the clouds. I tried to will the whole plane away, replacing it with the familiar streets of home. Nothing. I looked at the passport again.

**ISABELLA MARIE SWAN**

That definitely wasn’t right. Text always shifted in my dreams. I’d heard once that you couldn’t read in dreams - that wasn’t true for me, but the text never stayed the same. My eyes scanned the rest of the passport. Date of birth, sex, place of birth, signature, it was all there. I scanned it again. None of it had changed.

I shoved the wallet and passport back in the backpack, then dug in the main compartment until I found a dog-eared paperback. *Wuthering Heights*. I rolled my eyes, but opened it to a random page nonetheless.

For two months the fugitives remained absent; in those two months, Mrs. Linton encountered and conquered the worst shock of what was denominated a brain fever. No mother could have nursed an only child more devotedly than Edgar tended her. Day and night he was watching, and patiently enduring all the annoyances that irritable nerves and a shaken reason could inflict; and, though Kenneth remarked that what he saved from the grave would only recompense his care by forming the source of constant future anxiety—in fact, that his health and strength were being sacrificed to preserve a mere ruin of humanity—he knew no limits in gratitude and joy when Catherine's life was declared out of danger; and hour after hour he would sit beside her, tracing the gradual return to bodily health, and flattering his too sanguine hopes with the illusion that her mind would settle back to its right balance also, and she would soon be entirely her former self.

Keeping my thumb in place, I closed the book and put it on my lap, shutting my eyes. I slowly counted to a hundred in my head. Then, opening my eyes, I opened the book again to the same page.

For two months the fugitives remained absent; in those two months, Mrs. Linton encountered and conquered the worst shock of what was denominated a brain fever. No mother could have nursed an only child more devotedly than Edgar tended her. Day and night he was watching, and patiently enduring all the annoyances that irritable nerves and a shaken reason could inflict; and, though Kenneth remarked that what he saved from the grave would only recompense his care by forming the source of constant future anxiety—in fact, that his health and strength were being sacrificed to preserve a mere ruin of humanity—he knew no limits in gratitude and joy when Catherine's life was declared out of danger; and hour after hour he would sit beside her, tracing the gradual return to bodily health, and flattering his too sanguine hopes with the illusion that her mind would settle back to its right balance also, and she would soon be entirely her former self.

That wasn’t possible. I could not be Bella Swan. This had to be a dream. But it wasn’t shifting at all. It was grounded. Coherent. I couldn’t fly. I couldn’t turn into a superhero. I racked my brain and remembered, suddenly, standing in the bookstore, trying to tug a paperback by Seanan McGuire out of a shelf that had been crammed too full. There were hardcovers on the top shelves of the section, facing outward to entice customers. The tenth anniversary edition of *Twilight* was there. The shelf shook as I tried to get the book I wanted free. The frontmost copy of *Twilight* was already balanced on the edge. It fell over. I looked up in time to see it falling directly onto my face, but I couldn’t
move fast enough, and then - the void.

So maybe this wasn’t a dream. Maybe I was dead. Maybe my brain was sputtering and dying, smashed and swollen by all that Stephenie Meyer had wrought, and this world represented my last dying thoughts.

I looked around the plane. It was awfully full. No one looked dead. There was no blackness fluttering at the edges of my vision. No sign of the Grim Reaper. I saw a perky-looking brunette in jeans and a black tank top across the aisle, and for a second my spirits soared - but no, she didn’t have the telltale eye squiggle, she wasn’t wearing an ankh, and I could see a vivid purple streak in her hair that didn’t really match any of Death’s appearances in the comic. I couldn’t see anything that looked like an ethereal tunnel with a light at the very end, either.

As near-death experiences went, this one left a lot to be desired.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” the speakers proclaimed, crackling to life. “We’re beginning our final descent into Seattle, so at this time, please stow any luggage you may have taken out of the overhead compartments, return your seat backs to the full upright position, put up your tray tables, and keep your seatbelts fastened until the captain turns off the fasten seatbelt sign. Flight crew, prepare for landing.”

Letting out a long breath, I tucked the book back in the backpack, made sure all the compartments were zipped up, and shoved it back under the seat in front of me. Pressing the button to return my seat back to its upright position, I shut my eyes and tried to clear my mind, hoping that one way or another, this hallucination would end by the time I opened them.

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The hallucination didn’t end when I opened my eyes. It didn’t end at any point while I collected my backpack and the parka I fortunately remembered from the book, got off the plane, checked my ticket and the departures board, hurried to Bella Swan’s connecting gate, and finally boarded her flight. Everything I read or glanced at remained stubbornly consistent. I knew the date now - January 17, 2005 - and had glanced at the headlines at a newsstand, though nothing really stuck in my brain. Conflict between Israel and Palestine, political machinations here at home. George W. Bush was still President.

By the time I boarded the smaller plane that would take me to Port Angeles, I’d given up trying to break out of this dream, or hallucination, or dying fantasy, or whatever it was. Clearly that was a non-starter, and I was starting to give myself a headache. Instead I was racking my brain, trying to remember the book. I was pretty sure the book was key here - I didn’t look a thing like Kristen Stewart, so I wasn’t in the movie. Unfortunately, I hadn’t actually read *Twilight* in a while. I didn’t even have a cell phone, let alone my trusty iPhone, and even if I could get on the Internet, I wouldn’t be able to find the Twilight Saga Wiki. I remembered the broad strokes. I would have to hope that was enough to keep me alive and relatively healthy. I still planned to get back to reality as soon as I could, but until I figured out how, I would have to live as Bella Swan.

Emphasis on live. Which would mean making some changes to the narrative, for my own comfort and for my safety. But most of that could wait.

First things first: I needed to find Charlie Swan. Luckily, that wasn’t hard. When I got to baggage
claim in Port Angeles, he was the only man standing alone, and he was wearing a jacket with his badge pinned right on front. He also, shockingly, actually did look kind of like Billy Burke, mustache and all.

Bella had always kept her dad at a distance, even if she always claimed to love him. I’d always thought that was a little shitty of her, and I’d have to live with him for a while, so we might as well get along. I knew he was a good guy, too. So it wasn’t hard for me to muster a smile and wave.

“Dad! Hi!” I called, walking toward him and giving him a brief, slightly awkward hug.

Luckily, he was just as awkward about it, though a big smile broke across his face in return. “Well, hey there, Bells. You’re in a good mood. God, it’s good to see you. Let me look at you,” he said, stepping back for a moment, then shaking his head. “You haven’t changed much. How’s Renée?”

I bit my lip at that comment. If only he knew how much his little girl had changed in the last couple hours. “She’s fine. It’s good to see you, too, dad. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” Charlie said, seeming a little surprised. Maybe I needed to dial back the affection a bit. Still, he smirked a little. “Bet you haven’t missed Forks, though.”

I gave him a crooked grin. That’d be another change: Bella Swan might like the dry heat of Phoenix, but I preferred places with actual seasons, less exposure to the sun, thick green forests and the smell of pine. “Oh, I don’t know, it might just grow on me. Though it’s going to wreck my tan,” I replied, deadpan. He gawked at me for a moment, then barked laughter, shaking his head. The bags started pouring onto the carousel, and he helped me collect a couple huge, overstuffed duffels - luckily he recognized them, because I would have had no way of knowing. Then we went out to the garage, where a beautiful classic Crown Victoria police cruiser with all the trimmings was parked. Bella’s bags, my bags, fit easily in the trunk.

Charlie must have noticed my eyes lighting up at the sight of his car, because he gave me a fond smile as we got in. “Here I thought you hated this old thing.”

Okay: I’m not a huge car person. But I like beautiful things, and classic police cruisers are things of beauty, in their own way. I couldn’t hide my enthusiasm. “I’ve just come to appreciate the finer things in life,” I told him, shrugging. “It’s a gorgeous car, and you’ve kept it in great shape.”

“Well, if you like this, wait until we get home,” he said, checking his mirrors and then freezing, looking sheepish.

I froze too. Because I’d just remembered: the truck. And Bella Swan might have her license, but I’d never driven a real car, and somehow I didn’t think my experience driving in L.A. Noire or Arkham Knight would count for much. “...dad, you didn’t.”

“Oh...yeah, I did. But listen, if you hate it, I’m sure Billy can find another buyer,” Charlie said. “You remember Billy Black, down at the reservation?”

I nodded. “Yeah. And Jacob.”

Charlie seemed pleased when I mentioned Jacob’s name. “You remember Jake? That’s great. He’s a good kid, been helping out his dad a lot. I always thought you were closer to Rachel and Rebecca.”

“Oh, well, yeah. But I remember Jake following us around a lot,” I said. I hadn’t even remembered the elder Black siblings until that moment, but I glossed over it quickly. “So you were saying? About
Billy?"

“Oh, yeah. Well, he’s in a wheelchair now. Can’t really drive the truck anymore. So he sold it to me for a good price,” Charlie said. “And I know you were talking about saving up for your own car, but I thought, well...you’re going through a lot of changes. This is one less thing for you to worry about. The truck’s kind of old, but Billy’s put a lot of work into it and it still runs real well.”

My mind raced as I tried to figure out how to phrase this. I didn’t want to sound like an ungrateful brat, but the idea of getting behind the wheel of a giant, ancient armored tank of a pickup truck, with absolutely no experience, was maybe the most terrifying thing I’d ever contemplated. Finally, I took a deep breath and spoke, slowly and carefully. “Dad, I really, really appreciate it. I do, that’s amazing. And it sounds like a great truck, and maybe when it warms up I can drive it,” I told him. “But it’s the middle of January, and we’re really far north. And I have never driven in snow. Ever. I haven’t really driven in rain. I think I need to build up to that, you know?”

“Oh. Oh, well, sure,” Charlie said. He didn’t sound too disappointed. Maybe a little guilty. “I hadn’t thought of that. I’ve got snow chains for the tires, but I can see why you’d be nervous. Maybe your old man can give you some winter driving lessons, huh? Just a crash course - okay, bad choice of words.”

I let out another breath, smiling and nodding. “Yeah. I’d like that. And honestly I might need some practice with the truck in general. I’m betting it’s a manual, right? I’m used to automatic,” I lied. “But it sounds like it’ll be great once I’ve figured out how to handle it. Thank you, dad, seriously.”

“Aw, Bells. I just wanted to take something off your mind. I’m real glad to have you here. I know it’s hard,” Charlie told me, giving me a sidelong glance. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. At all. But I gave him a reassuring smile and decided to be as honest as I could. “I think this is the best possible thing for me right now.”

He smiled back at me. “Okay. Okay, then,” he said. “Listen, how about we stop by the Carver Café, huh? I don’t have a lot of food in the house. We can grab some dinner. You used to love their pie.”

“That sounds great,” I agreed, smiling more easily now. “But could we stop by a drugstore or something? There’s just some hair stuff I need to pick up. Forgot to do it in Phoenix.”

“Oh - right, heh, girl stuff,” Charlie said, chuckling nervously. “You bet.”

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Dinner was quiet and relaxing - the waitress at the diner recognized Charlie and his daughter, but luckily Bella hadn’t been to Forks for a few years, so it was easy to excuse the fact that I didn’t remember her name at all. I had to make up a lot about Bella’s life in Phoenix, but I’d gotten the impression she didn’t have many friends, so I just let Charlie think I was an introvert (true enough, for me if not Bella) and skated by. I could tell that worried him, so I did my best to assure him that I was perfectly happy being alone.

Then there was a quick pit stop at the drugstore before we arrived at the house. The truck was a sturdy vintage Chevy pickup, painted red, a bit scratched up but still in good shape. It wasn’t entirely to my tastes, but it had some nice, classic curves to the design. Charlie stood beside me while I looked it over, and I flashed him another smile.
“It’s great, dad,” I told him, truthfully. “It’s amazing. Like I said, I just need some practice.”

“That we can do. I’ll drive you to school in the meantime, okay? Least until you find some friends to pick you up,” he said, putting the emphasis on ‘friends’. “Come on, let’s get inside. You have school in the morning.”

I made a face, but nodded, and each of us shouldered a bag and headed inside.

It didn’t take me long to unpack, and Charlie largely left me to my own devices, parking himself in front of the TV and catching up on the news. I didn’t mind - we’d had plenty of quality time in the diner, and I’d need to go through Bella’s things and try to refresh my memory on her life before I could stand up to too much more conversation. Besides, there were a couple things I wanted to do first.

One of them involved a certain item I’d picked up at the drugstore, and an hour or so in the shared bathroom. When I was finished, I stared at my drying hair for a while, holding it up to the light, admiring the dull glint of red that I knew would turn to blazing copper when it was fully dry. I lingered like that until Charlie knocked roughly on the door.

“Oh! Sorry,” I said, opening the door. “Heading to bed now.”

He looked at my hair, his eyebrows rising. “That’s what you needed at the store?”

“Yeah. Real emergency,” I told him, giving him a joking smile, though there was more truth there than I wanted to admit. I hadn’t been a brunette since college - not a full brunette anyway. My hair had been blonde, pink, and purple, but mostly it had been red. Changing Bella’s hair from brown with a hint of auburn to full blazing copper felt like reclaiming a part of myself. My eyes were the wrong shade, I was seven inches shorter (exactly, according to my license), and my nose and brow and whole body were different (okay, I didn’t hate that part), but I was a redhead again.


“I will. Goodnight,” I told him, heading off to my room. Shutting the door, I switched on the computer, restraining a groan as it took approximately forever to boot up. Based on experience with my own dad, I guessed I had an hour or so until Charlie was done with his nightly ablutions, as I’d decided to call them, and I was earnestly hoping startup wouldn’t eat up too much of that time. But this was a secondhand computer, clearly a few years old, and it was connected to an actual phone line. I was officially living in the Stone Age.

“Come on, come on...yes! Oh, God, Windows XP, thank heavens,” I muttered, bringing up Internet Explorer and making a face. I didn’t think Google Chrome was out yet. I made a mental note to get Firefox as soon as possible. Bella Swan helpfully kept a list of her own passwords in the front of her journal, so I was able to log into her e-mail and send off a quick reply to her mother’s two needlessly worried messages, letting Renée know I’d landed safely, but it was late and I had school in the morning, so I’d have to tell her more soon. Then I went to LiveJournal. Bella Swan didn’t have one. I quickly corrected that.

I’d spent much of my time on the flight from Seattle to Port Angeles recalling what I could about the secrets of Stephenie Meyer’s vampires. I couldn’t remember everything. But I could remember enough. The physical characteristics of vampyrus sanguisuga meyerii, if you will. The resilience. The speed. The strength. The venom. The difficult but feasible methods of killing them. The sparkles, oh, God, the sparkles.

More importantly, I remembered the Volturi. I knew their base was in Volterra, Italy. I knew they
had been behind the disappearances of tourists at various festivals for countless years. I knew the
names Aro and Marcus, Sulpicia and Athenodora, even if I couldn’t remember all the others.
Everything I could throw on LiveJournal would probably look like crackpot ranting or bad vampire
fiction. Maybe some teenage girl’s half-baked online RP setting. But vampires in this universe
survived by keeping up with the times. I had faith that the Volturi would Google themselves at some
point. They’d find this post. They’d find me. And they’d descend on Forks like the wrath of God. It
would be impossible to miss.

Having resolved to write all this, I started a new post and typed out my first paragraph.

*My name is Isabella Marie Swan. I live at 775 South 6th Street, Forks, Washington. I am posting this
online because, on the night of January 17th, 2005, at 10:17 pm, Alice Cullen did NOT come alone
through my bedroom window on the second floor of the east side of the house for a vitally important
conversation concerning her brother Edward.*

My back was to the bedroom window, and I smiled as I suddenly felt a breeze blowing across the
back of my neck. I’d deliberately closed the window, hoping this would give me some sign of
Alice’s arrival, and I couldn’t help feeling a small burst of triumph that it had worked. Still, I wasn’t
out of the woods: I’d liked Alice in the books and the movies, but she could be ruthless, I knew. I
would need to handle this carefully, assure her that I meant her no harm. An apology would be a
good place to start.

“I’m sorry,” I said, honestly, keeping my voice pitched low. “I had to get your attention. I had to be
ready to post that. I didn’t want to, but it was the only way. My name is not really Bella Swan, that’s
just what it says on my passport, and I will explain, but we need to talk about your brother. You may
have noticed that the future has changed. At least, I’m betting it has. And Edward might not like the
new Bella Swan as much as he was going to like the old one - ugh, I have no idea how to phrase any
of this. Stuff that’s going to happen, stuff that *was* going to happen, how do you *handle* it? Hey, can
I turn around now? You’re not going to kill me? Right? Please?"

I paused, frowning. Alice really should have said something to me by now. Maybe she’d just left
when the danger was past? Or when she’d seen everything I’d decided to tell her? I swiveled in my
chair, abruptly stopping when I saw her.

She was impossibly beautiful. Even hotter than Ashley Greene. Not even five feet tall and every
rush I’d ever had rolled into one perfect girl. Painfully slender and incredibly graceful, her face
framed by short black hair, artfully mussed. Her chin was gently pointed, her nose small and
upturned, the corners of her lips slightly canted upward, leaving her with the ghost of a natural,
mischievous smile. Her eyes were huge, gleaming gold, and it took me a moment to realize they
weren’t just naturally that wide. She was staring at me. Entranced, awed. Like all the jagged pieces
of the universe had finally come together and snapped into crystal clarity.

Her voice was a soft, tinkling chime. “Cassandra.”

My gut twisted, and I shut my eyes tight, pinching the bridge of my nose. “...oh, *fuck.*"

Chapter End Notes

*As Dreams Are Made On - now with cover art! Thank you to GSquare for this amazing
work.*
“Okay. Hilarious,” I hissed under my breath, glancing skyward. “This has been a lot of fun, and really, two thumbs up on the whole ‘Alice Cullen has a big lesbian crush on me’ thing, but I’m ready to wake up now. Or die. Or come out of a coma, or whatever the hell is going on with this stupid crazy soap opera wish fulfillment fantasy!”

Nothing happened. Growling softly under my throat, I reached over to pinch my arm, but it felt there was suddenly an iron band around my wrist, holding my hand back. I looked up to find Alice simply there, her expression still dazed. After a moment, she released my hand and stepped back.

“Sorry,” she said, visibly chagrined. “You’re more sensitive than you remember, and you were going to pinch yourself hard. You would have yelped, Charlie would have come in, and you would have had some explaining to do, even if I was gone. This isn’t a dream. I know that’s exactly what you would expect me to say, but I also know you don’t really believe you’re dreaming, either.”

“Oh. Thanks,” I said hoarsely, my mind processing the rest. “I usually don’t realize I’m dreaming until it’s over.”

“From what I’ve read, that’s true of most humans,” Alice said evenly, her eyes watching mine, unblinking. It was a little unsettling, but before I could say anything, she blinked, her lips quirking into a small smile. “Better?”

“...yes,” I said, after a pause. “Okay, you can see everything I’m about to say, can’t you? Why aren’t you just answering it all before I even bring it up?”

“First of all, I can’t. That’s Edward. Yes, I can see every possible future, but it’s hard to filter through them all, especially when you’re still thinking about how to phrase things,” she replied. “Second of all, it annoys you in every future where I try it. You’re used to your own brain racing ahead of your mouth, but it makes you uncomfortable when other people do it. Kind of selfish, don’t you think?” Her smile widened, eyes glittering teasingly.

“I’m a pretty selfish person,” I said, getting up from the chair and gesturing at myself. “Case in point. I’m not Bella Swan. I don’t belong here.”

“You can’t wake up. You can’t see a way out - none that you’re willing to take, anyway. You don’t want to die. It’s natural, and believe me, I’m glad,” Alice returned, with a little shudder.

I paused, panic flaring in my breast. “That’s not...entirely true. I’m not thinking of it now, but - back home, I’m depressed. I take medication for it. And I don’t think Bella Swan is all that healthy, either, I mean, in the second book she—”

Alice cut me off, looking cross. “Edward leaves her? And she goes catatonic? Oh, honestly,” she huffed, adorably. I couldn’t help smiling, and she grinned back, briefly, before returning to a serious expression. “Tell Charlie you want to see a therapist. Ask for Dr. Beckett at the hospital. She works with Carlisle, she’s a good person. She’ll help you find medication that works for you.”

I let out a long breath, nodding, already thinking about how to raise the subject with Charlie. “Okay. Thank you,” I said. “So about Edward—”

“Mmm.” Alice looked away from me, her eyes distant. “You’re right. You still smell delicious, most of all to him and - James? Okay, we’ll talk about that one later. But give my brother some credit, Cassandra. He wouldn’t have taken you just because you didn’t return his affections. The larger
concern is that his mate was going to be Bella, not you. The connection wasn’t going to form in the first place.”

“Oh,” I breathed. “You know that’s not reassuring.”

She turned back to me, smiling. “Luckily you’re in good with his favorite sister. Combined with his overdeveloped sense of guilt, it’s a powerful motivator.”

“Yeah. About that,” I said, feeling some guilt of my own. “What about you and Jasper?”

Alice laughed softly. “Friends. Best friends. But not in love. We have something else in common,” she replied, giving me a significant look.

“Oh. Oh,” I replied, my eyes widening. Did this mean I wasn’t in the book? Maybe just a universe adjacent to the book? Or had there been subtext I hadn’t fully grasped? Okay, yes, I was a fan of Alice/Bella femslash...and Bella/Rosalie...maybe the odd Bella/Leah...but I hadn’t really admitted the possibility that the canonical Alice might be gay, let alone Jasper. And the canon had held pretty well so far, as far as I could tell. Still, something else occurred to me. “But you got married.”

“Once. And tried to live as a married couple, truly,” Alice replied. “The ceremony was lovely, I had a wonderful time planning it, and I have no objections to living with my best friend. But the physical attraction simply wasn’t there.”

“So...me,” I squeaked, running a hand through my hair. “And that’s...inevitable? I mean, I tell you my name. Obviously.”

“In every single future from the moment I stepped through the window, yes,” Alice replied. Still, she grimaced, half-smiling without any real feeling. “But no. You and me...we aren’t inevitable. Not yet. It’s possible, but your choices are still yours.”

I felt like I should apologize, but she shook her head at me before I could open my mouth. I settled for sighing instead. “You’re beautiful. Charming. I liked you in the books, and in the movies. I just...don’t really believe in love at first sight. Maybe if I were a vampire.”

“I don’t expect you to,” Alice assured me, though pain flashed through her eyes. “And honestly, I would have preferred not to feel this way - I don’t mean that as an insult. It’s just very...frustrating. Instantly wanting what’s best for someone I’ve only just met, even if I have seen our futures unfolding, seen us becoming friends, if nothing else.”

I looked down, twining my fingers together. “Do you see me going home?” I asked quietly.

Alice hesitated, then shook her head. “No. I’m sorry,” she said. “That doesn’t mean you won’t. That doesn’t mean there’s no way to return. It just means that, for the foreseeable future, you don’t find a way. I can’t see futures that haven’t yet become possible, if that makes sense.”

“It...sort of does? It really doesn’t,” I admitted sheepishly.

Alice laughed softly. “It’s all right. Sometimes it’s hard for me to wrap my head around it, too,” she assured me, though I knew from the books how powerful vampires’ minds were. Probably a lie. “But you need to get some sleep. You have a big day tomorrow. And Charlie’s going to check on you in ten minutes.”


“I’ll help. Don’t worry,” Alice returned. “I can’t do much about gym, but the rest of it shouldn’t be a
problem. And I’ll be at the school first thing in the morning to show the new girl around. We’ll talk more tomorrow. All right?”


“Goodnight, Cassandra,” Alice said, smiling kindly as she slipped out the window. My heart leapt again at the way she said my name, and I forced it down. Stupid teenage hormones. Stupid lesbian crushes. She shut the window behind her, springing off into the trees, and I slipped into bed and tried to calm my thoughts enough to sleep.

*****

My dreams were restless, taunting me with the reality I craved. I kept dreaming that I was back in the bookstore, that I’d avoided the book or it hadn’t hit me that hard, that I’d bought the novel I wanted and headed home. But the subway maps kept twisting into strange runes. People in the crowd kept bursting into prismatic sparkles. When I tried to read my book, the text continued to change.


I sighed and shoved myself out of bed, getting ready to face the day. Looking through Bella’s things, I could tell she really hadn’t been prepared for a Pacific Northwest winter, and I remembered that Forks High School was spread over multiple buildings, for some insane reason, so I made do with layers. Two pairs of socks. Leggings under a pair of jeans. A t-shirt under a flannel button-down under hoodie under the all-too-thin parka she’d brought with her from Phoenix. Knit cap over my hair, which I wore loose and tried to arrange around my ears, though I tucked a ponytail holder in my pocket for later.

Charlie’s eyebrows rose as I came downstairs, a smile quirking his lips. “Morning, kiddo. Think you’ll be warm enough?”

I smiled back. “Here’s hoping. I’ve lived in Phoenix for...I don’t even remember how long, but it’s been a while, remember?”

I instantly regretted it, as he grunted and turned back to his bacon and eggs, clearly uncomfortable. “Yeah, uh, that’s right. Seriously, you going to be warm enough?”

“I’ll be fine, dad,” I assured him, as kindly as I could, pouring myself a bowl of cereal and sitting across from him, giving him a smile. “I’m glad to be here. It’s just going to take some getting used to. Maybe I’ll get some warmer clothes later. The stores back in Phoenix didn’t have a lot of winter weather gear.”

“Yeah...yeah, that makes sense,” he said, looking back up. “Listen, if you want, we can go to Port Angeles this weekend, get you some sweaters and stuff. I mean, there’s a sporting goods store in town, but that doesn’t really seem your style. Might be able to get a better coat there, but that’s about it.”

“That sounds good - you don’t have a fishing trip planned?” I asked, remembering how often Charlie went fishing in the books.
“Nothing I can’t cancel. Don’t worry about it, Bells.”

“No, you should go. Spend some time with the guys. I’ll be okay for a while,” I replied. I really didn’t want to throw the whole timeline into utter havoc. I’d done enough damage, and the more I changed, the less predictable events would become. Maybe James would find me early - though I was hoping he wouldn’t find me at all. Maybe there’d be some kind of shootout with those thugs who menaced Bella in the book, though I was pretty sure Alice would come for me if that snapped into focus. Regardless, I wanted the broad strokes to remain in place.

“Well, if you’re sure. But I want to spend some time with you, too, kiddo,” Charlie said.

“We will. I promise,” I told him. It suddenly occurred to me that Bella did the grocery shopping and cooking in the books. Something else I’d need to take care of, and since I wasn’t driving, I’d need Alice’s help. I felt another pang of guilt at exploiting her feelings for me, but tried to take some solace in the fact that she would have cared about Bella either way, as a friend and sister if nothing else. It wasn’t really helping. “What do you want for dinner tonight?”

“Huh? Oh, geez, it’s your first day of school, you don’t have to do that,” Charlie told me.

“No, I want to,” I insisted. I’d replaced his daughter. I had no way of knowing if I could ever give Bella back to him. Acting like a good daughter was the least I could do. Of course, my culinary expertise wasn’t exactly on the same level. “I could do tacos, does that sound good?”

“Well - sure. Thank you. Truth be told I don’t get a lot of time to cook,” Charlie admitted. “Or shop...sorry about the state of the kitchen.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can handle it,” I assured him, smiling.

The rest of breakfast passed in a companionable silence. I decided to wait to raise anything else - we both had the whole day ahead of us, and talk of therapists and such could wait until the evening. Before long, we were in his cruiser, and it was just a quick hop to the school from there. As promised, Alice was standing outside the office, bright and early, her lips curled into a smile.

Charlie grunted in surprise. “Huh. I think that’s one of the Cullen girls. Alice, if I’m not mistaken. Oh, you wouldn’t know them, Bells, they moved to town last year. Alice’s father is the new doctor at the hospital.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, feigning idle curiosity. “Huh. She’s pretty.”

“That she is,” Charlie remarked, glancing at me sidelong. “The Cullens are a good-looking family. Good people, too. Dr. Cullen’s a great man. Listen, you might hear some idle gossip about them…”

“I won’t listen to a word of it,” I promised, unbuckling my seatbelt and grabbing my bag. “In fact, I’m going to go introduce myself right now.”

“Well, okay then,” Charlie said, sounding pleased. “Have a good day, Bells.”

“I’ll try. Be safe, dad. See you tonight,” I returned.

Charlie stayed and watched as I walked over to Alice, smiling pleasantly. “Hi, I’m Bella Swan. My dad says you’re Alice Cullen?”

“That’s right. It’s good to meet you, Bella,” Alice returned, her smile widening. She leaned past me and waved at Charlie. “Hi, Chief Swan!”
Charlie waved back, and Alice opened the office door for me, gesturing for me to enter. “I volunteered to show you around today. I know how hard it can be to be the new girl.”

“That’s nice of you, thanks,” I replied, stepping inside, Alice right behind me.

“He’s pulling out,” she murmured, too low for anyone else to hear, as we walked to the counter. “He wanted to see you inside before he left.”

“Kinda figured,” I muttered under my breath, though I felt a surge of warmth at the show of affection. If I did find a way home, I’d have to leave something behind for Bella. Maybe an emphatic note telling her to show her dad she loves him, for crying out loud.

The main counter cut the room in half, and it was cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and various brightly colored leaflets taped to the front, featuring cafeteria menus and advertisements for clubs and committees and upcoming events. My eye caught on flyers for the Science Fiction Club and the Student Gaming Society - I’d have to check those out. It might end up giving Bella a reputation as a nerd, but again, my own comfort had to be part of the equation here.

Behind the counter were a few desks. A red-haired woman sat at one of them, wearing a purple t-shirt. She looked up as we approached, smiling at us. “Hello again, Alice. And that must make you Isabella Swan. I’m Ms. Cope. I have your schedule right here, and a map of the school.”

She lifted a few papers off the top of a pile on her desk, and got up, heading up to the counter to hand them over. “Now, you have a slip here for each class on your schedule. Please have your teachers sign them and bring them back at the end of the day. You’ll get your books for each class when you arrive. Alice said she’d show you around the school, but I can point out all the best routes, if you’d like?”

“Oh, that would be really helpful, thanks. Could I borrow a pen?” I asked. We pored over the map, and I marked my path from class to class carefully, nodding when we were done. “Thanks, Ms. Cope.”

“You’re welcome, dear. You have a good day, now. I hope you just love it here,” she told me.

“I’m sure I will,” I said, smiling and waving as Alice led the way out of the office. By now, the other students were starting to arrive, and I could see Edward’s shiny silver Volvo parked in the lot, along with Emmett’s Jeep.

“So which car did you take?” I asked Alice.

“The Volvo, of course. Edward pouted about having to ride in the Jeep, but favorite sister,” Alice replied, smiling. “You know I was going to walk you between your classes, right?”

“I’m a spatial thinker. Maps are easier for me than directions. I’ll learn my way around eventually,” I said. I ran through Bella’s first day in my head and sighed. “Do I still have to deal with Eric and Mike?”

“Yes,” Alice told me, laughing, after a brief pause. “Mike has a thing for redheads.”

“Oh, great. You couldn’t have told me last night?” I grumped.

“That’s what happens when you decide to dye your hair before getting in touch with the all-seeing vampire,” Alice trilled, in a teasing, sing-song tone. “Maybe next time you’ll contact me first.”

I glanced at her accusingly. “You’re only saying that because you want to play with my hair.”
“And your clothes. Not like that,” she added quickly, smirking at me. “But yes. I have some makeup ideas, too.”

“I’m not that much girlier than Bella,” I pointed out.

She batted her eyelashes at me. “But you find me so much more irresistible,” she returned, laughing at my expression and then reaching into her bag. “You’re too easy. Oh, here, I got you something.”

I raised my eyebrows at her, then gasped as she handed me a plush fox. It was larger than the one I had at home, my real home, posed differently, but the fur was just as soft and silky as I remembered.

“Lyra,” I breathed, stroking the fox’s fur. “But...how?”

“Ah! We’re here,” she said, putting a cool finger against my lips. Sure enough, we were just outside Mr. Mason’s English classroom. I’d scarcely noticed, and was suddenly grateful that I’d insisted on the map. “We’ll talk more later.”

Blushing fiercely, I nodded and stepped inside, putting the fox in my bag and introducing myself to Mr. Mason. He started a little when he saw the name on my slip, but signed it and handed me back, directing me to an empty desk toward the back of the room. Not my preferred seat, but it let me go over the syllabus and keep a relatively low profile. It looked as though we were studying *The Tempest* next, and I gave an inward cheer - one of my favorite plays. And surprisingly apt, under the circumstances.

The class passed quickly, with little discussion - Mr. Mason spent most of his time outlining the next unit, explaining the reading we’d be doing each night and the discussion to follow each day. He also had a couple video presentations planned, and I was excited to see that *Forbidden Planet* was on the agenda, along with a Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play. English was swiftly turning into my favorite class.

When the bell rang, a gangly boy with greasy black hair and serious acne leaned over to talk to me as we both got up. “You’re Isabella Swan, right?”

“Oh - yes, but just Bella is fine,” I said, giving him a quick smile. Everyone around us was turning to look at me. It seemed like a bit much. Was the police chief’s daughter that much of a celebrity?

“Sure, Bella. I’m Eric,” the boy replied. “Where’s your next class?”

“Um.” I reached into my bag, pulling out my schedule. “Government, with Mr. Jefferson. Building six, room four.”

“I’m headed to building four, it’s on the way. I could show you how to get to building six,” Eric offered. Luckily we were already heading for the exit, and I could see Alice standing just outside, fighting a grin.

“Oh, thank you, but I actually already have a guide,” I said, gesturing at her.

Eric followed my gaze, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “Whoa, you know the Cullens?”

“I just met Alice. She volunteered to show me around today,” I said breezily. Okay, I was kind of enjoying the reactions now. “Nice of her, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. Wow. Well - maybe we’ll have some other classes together,” he said hopefully. He was already giving me the puppy dog eyes. This boded ill.
“Yeah, maybe. I’m sure I’ll see you around,” I said, forcing a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Great to meet you, too, Bella,” he said, heading off.

Alice laughed quietly as she took her place next to me, and I gave her a level glare. “I’m glad someone’s enjoying this,” I grumbled. “Can’t I just tell them I’m gay?”

“What, right now? Shout it to the whole school? That’s an interesting choice, but sure, if you want,” Alice replied, shrugging and smirking at me.

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Alice said, still smiling mischievously. “And I’m not going to tell you what happens.”

My eyes widened, and I pouted. “What? Oh come on, no fair!”

“Don’t look at me like that. This isn’t a life-or-death decision, and I told you, your choices are your own,” Alice returned, with a reproving look. “I’m not going to walk you through every decision you make. That’s cheating.”

“You cheat all the time!” I protested.

“For good reasons. To keep my family safe and comfortable. To ensure we have the resources we need to move when we have to, to set up new identities, to integrate smoothly into each new community,” she said. “I care about your safety and comfort, Cass, but when it comes to your social life, I’m not going to hold your hand. I’m not going to let you start relying on my powers for every tiny little thing. From what you tell me later, I didn’t do it for Bella, and I won’t do it for you. You won’t be hurt or killed because you come out as gay. You won’t be hurt or killed because you decide to stay closeted. You can weigh all the other pros and cons yourself.”

I fell silent for a long moment, not totally sure how to respond to that speech. “Okay,” I mumbled at last.

Alice’s expression softened, and she reached out to touch my hand, very lightly, very gently. “If it helps, believe me, I want to do exactly that. Guide you through every little choice to ensure your happiness. But in the futures where I do that...you don’t thank me for it.”

I thought about that for a moment, turning it over in my head. She was right. I might be pretty risk-averse, but I also valued my free will. Having my choices narrowed down again and again to the best choice...it would feel like giving me freedom up. I could see how I would become alienated after a while, and it would all be my own fault. I nodded slowly.

“Thanks,” I said again, meeting her eyes.

She smiled softly. “Always. And we’re here,” she said, gesturing at the door. “I’ll see you later.”

*****

The rest of the morning was fairly uneventful. After Government came Trigonometry, and I was right, it was my own personal hell. It didn’t help that Mr. Varner was the first teacher to make me stand up and introduce myself, and of course every eye in the class was on me after that.
It wasn’t all bad - I finally got to meet Jessica Stanley, who sat next to me in Trig and Spanish and looked nothing at all like Anna Kendrick. She was easily as short as Alice, though she had a thick mane of wildly curly dark hair that made her seem almost as tall as I was. She was cute and bubbly, and though she kept up a rapid-fire running monologue on classes and teachers and things to do in Forks (not much) and Port Angeles and La Push (a little more), she was friendly and fun to be around, and I found myself liking her instantly. I ran through a mental catalogue of the others I had yet to meet: Angela, Mike, Lauren, and then Tyler would almost hit me with his car somewhere down the line. Not on the first day, I was pretty sure.

I was a little surprised to see that Alice wasn’t waiting for me when we got out of Spanish, but I let Jessica lead me to the cafeteria without complaining. We got our lunches and took our seats at a round table with six other girls, all of whom seemed comically impressed with Jessica’s daring in talking to the new girl. I recognized Angela and Lauren’s names when they introduced themselves, and tried to commit the other girls’ names to memory: Jennifer, Ashley, June and Samantha. I was pretty sure June had been in my Spanish class, too.

I tried to answer the girls’ questions about Phoenix as best I could, hoping to avoid being called out on anything - luckily, they didn’t seem to know anymore about Phoenix than I did, and the conversation soon turned to other topics. Samantha seemed eager to leave, and was trying to persuade Jessica or Lauren to ditch class, apparently because they had cars. Lauren seemed bored with the idea, and Jessica didn’t want to get in trouble. There was a spring dance coming up at the beginning of March and the committee was debating whether or not to make it girls’ choice. Angela, Lauren, and June, all on the committee, started rehashing what felt like old arguments about that.

I tried to keep up, I really did, but my eyes kept drifting to the doors. This was the part where the Cullens made their grand entrance, right? So why weren’t they here? Had I unwittingly changed the future already? I racked my brain, trying to think of how I could have changed things, beyond the obvious, running through the plot of the book in my head as best I could. Suddenly, I became dimly aware that my table had fallen silent. I looked around to find them staring in awe just over my shoulder, their eyes flicking back and forth between me and whoever was standing behind me.

I turned around, and my heart and stomach both tried to leap free from my torso. My eyes were wide, utterly captivated. I was looking at a goddess or a valkyrie or something. Tall and blonde, taller still in the heeled brown boots she was wearing, with a perfect figure, athletic and gorgeous. A pair of jeans and a gray sweater clung to her curves. Her skin was pale and perfect, like fine china. Her nails were painted gold, almost matching the honey hue of her eyes. Oh. Of course. Rosalie.

“Whu-um-huh?” I mumbled, unable to fight through the haze of visceral attraction to form a coherent sentence. Rosalie had been looking annoyed, resting bitch face if I ever saw it, but at that, she smirked.

“Hello, Bella,” she said, and her voice made my insides melt. “It is Bella, isn’t it?”

I nodded, slowly. “Yeah-huh.”

“I’m Rosalie Hale. Alice’s sister?” she said. “Alice sent me to find you. She wanted to know how your day was going, maybe talk about trig. You’d said you weren’t that good with math?”

“Oh. Yes. I’m...really not,” I got out.

“Well. Luckily Alice and I are brilliant,” Rosalie said, flashing a smile. I was going to have a heart attack. I was going to have a heart attack and die right in front of all these lovely people. She extended her hand to me. “There’s still some time left before next period, if you want to come with me?”
“Okay. Um, thank you, um...excuse me,” I said to the other girls. My mind was a complete whirl. They didn’t seem much more coherent than I did. Jessica’s mouth was open in shock. Her wide eyes flicked to me and she gestured vaguely for me to go.

I placed my hand in Rosalie’s, and her long, cool fingers wrapped around mine as she helped me out of my chair. She leaned over and hefted my bag without any issues, and led me out of the cafeteria. I tried not to look at her, tried to cudgel my brain back into some semblance of working order.

“You’re going to make Alice jealous,” she trilled softly, sounding amused. None of that was helping.

“We really are going to see Alice?” I asked, blurting it out before I thought through the implications.

She let go of my hand, and her voice hardened. “Yes. And the others. What did you think was happening?”

“I - I don’t know,” I said, trying to figure out why the terrifyingly beautiful vampire goddess was now angry with me. “Oh. Shit, no, not that. I don’t know. Sorry. I have a thing for tall, sporty girls, and you’re like the ultimate tall, sporty girl, and it’s really, really hard to think when I look at you, and I’m just digging myself deeper, aren’t I? You, uh. You’re not going to eat me. I know that.”

She snorted, somewhere between anger and amusement. The anger seemed to be lessening. I’d take it. “No, I’m not going to eat you. Alice would never forgive me,” she said firmly. “And try to get over it. I’m straight, I love Emmett with all my heart, and if you’re going to be with Alice, you’re going to have to get used to being around me.”

“I don’t know if I’m...with...Alice,” I said awkwardly.

“Why, because she’s not a tall, sporty girl?” Rosalie snapped. Okay, the anger was coming back. “My sister isn’t good enough for you?”

“Because we only just met! Jesus!” I exclaimed, looking back at her, feeling sort of pissed myself, which was helping me overlook her stunning, probably supernatural beauty. “I’m not a vampire, I don’t get the love at first sight thing. I talked this over with Alice. Maybe I’m going to fall in love with her. Maybe I’m not. I mean, you could turn me into a vampire and then it’d be instantly mutual, but you don’t think I should be one, do you? Because I have so much human life to look forward to.”

Rosalie stepped back, her face crumpling, and I felt instantly guilty. The guilt vanished as her expression turned to fury and she stepped close to me again, her face nearly against mine, the sweet scent of her venom blowing across my nostrils. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I do,” I said, quietly, but firmly. “If Alice has filled you in, you know I do. But it wasn’t fair to bring it up. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she spun on her heel, stalking down the hall and shoving a door open. We seemed to be in an A/V room, just off the auditorium. Alice was sitting at a table among the piles of equipment, staring into space, her lips moving rapidly. She was flanked by two male vampires, one as blond as Rosalie, the other with darker blond hair closer to bronze. Jasper. And Edward. I stiffened in surprise, but both of them seemed busy - too busy to notice me. Jasper was rapidly filling a notebook with light, careful lettering, while Edward was murmuring into Alice’s ear, seemingly directing her visions.

Rosalie stalked away from the door, over to a mountain of a man, over six feet tall and seriously brawny, with close-cropped, dark, curly hair. Emmett, then. That was easy. He put his arms around
Rosalie and she melted against his chest, the two of them murmuring too softly for me to hear. I quietly hoped he wasn’t going to decide to tear my head off when he heard what I’d said to Rosalie.

“Hello, Cassandra,” a voice said behind me, as I watched Rosalie and Emmett embracing. I whirled about. Edward was standing barely two feet from me. My mind raced through the terrible possibility, images of him grabbing me and pulling me into the shadows, tearing my throat open, drinking freely. He cringed, backing away, hands up. “No! I’m not going to do that - please, stop!”

Terrified as I was, his words penetrated. It wasn’t exactly easy for me to stop thinking about all the ways he could kill me, but I pictured something else instead - a metal Power Morpher in my hands, thrust out before me as I screamed _Pterodactyl!_ and instantly transformed into the Pink Power Ranger. Fast, strong, armored and protected by alien technology. It was a comforting thought. Edward lowered his hands slowly, looking utterly bewildered, and my brain kicked back into motion. Could he see what I was thinking? But I was Bella Swan. He shouldn’t be able to read my thoughts.

“Of course I can read your mind,” Edward said, looking even more confused. “What does Bella Swan have to do with it?”
Panic flared in my chest. Edward Cullen could actually read my thoughts. I didn’t have Bella’s power. That was bad. There were a number of things I really didn’t want the world’s most emo vampire to know, including the fact that - no, I didn’t dare think of it.

But it was too late. Edward’s face twisted, first in offense, then in pain. Finally he schooled his expression to careful neutrality, and stepped away, speaking in a low, frosty tone. “Ah. I see.”

I looked down, ashamed. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Edward said curtly, returning to his seat beside Alice.

I stole a glance over at them. Alice blinked slowly, her eyes regaining focus as they fell on me. She smiled sheepishly, rising from her seat. “I’m sorry, Cassandra. I had to trick you. There were a number of things you were going to tell me last night, but there wasn’t time, and what I did see was alarming enough that I wanted the full story. Can you forgive me?”

I stared at her, thinking. “...you saw this. You saw that Edward could read my thoughts. I’ve pissed off at least two vampires, either one of whom could easily tear me to pieces, and you...what Bella was going to be to him,” I said, my eyes flicking over to his face.

Alice cringed, but looked sharply at her siblings. “No one is going to hurt you. But yes. I saw this. I saw that if we didn’t do what you were expecting, you would start thinking through everything you knew about the events to come. Edward would get it instantly. And we could use that to our advantage. To protect you.”

“Obviously he didn’t get everything, since he didn’t know he should have been able to read my thoughts, or...what Bella was going to be to him,” I said, my eyes flicking over to his face.

“No. You were thinking mainly about the hunters, because you were worried something you’d done had brought them in early,” Alice replied. “That’s where my visions were focused, too. They are in the area, but not very close to Forks. You’re safe. We’ll need more time to pick through everything else you remember.”

“Yeah, I’m not comfortable with that. A lot of it is about Edward and Bella,” I said pointedly. “And now I know I can’t keep Edward out of my head. Why can’t I keep Edward out of my head? I should have a pretty hefty shield. It’s pretty much the one thing I’ve got going for me.”

“I don’t know, Cass. Maybe those powers don’t belong to the body. Maybe they belong to the soul,” Alice replied. “Maybe you have another power. Maybe you don’t have any supernatural abilities to speak of. Whatever the truth might be, you haven’t discovered it yet, so I can’t see it.”

“Right. The brain-twisting conundrum of Alice Cullen’s amazing future sight,” I said, groaning. “I don’t suppose we can just start over and forget the fact that I alienated your whole family without meaning to?”

“Not really,” Edward muttered.

“No,” Rosalie added.

Emmett squeezed her gently. “Rose, don’t be like that. She didn’t mean it. Nobody’s perfect.” She turned and arched an eyebrow at him, and he chuckled. “Okay, you come pretty close.”
I suddenly felt a deep, abiding calm. Everything was all right. I was where I belonged, with these people. I didn’t have anything to fear. Somehow...damn it. I looked sharply at Jasper. “I appreciate the thought, but please don’t.”

Alice turned to look at him too, and Jasper gave the both of us a sheepish look as the unnatural calm cut out. “Sorry. Just trying to help,” he said.

“Kind of crossed a line. ...but I’ll let you know if I need it,” I added, a little grudgingly. Now that I thought about it, Jasper’s powers might actually come in handy if things got bad for me. “Do you guys have what you wanted?”

“For now,” Emmett said. “Jasper and I’ll go looking for the hunters, but Alice said they’re not too close and it’s too hard to see where exactly they’re going. You have that book going for you...still not sure exactly how all that works...but until we reach the point where they come into the text, they might be hard to track down.”

“I’ll try to explain later,” I promised, sighing. “Rosalie, Edward, again, I’m very sorry. I hope you can forgive what I said...and thought. Could I have some time alone with Alice, please?”

“Of course,” Jasper said, before the others could answer. He squeezed Alice’s hand and kissed her on the cheek, and I could see now how the gesture was brotherly, not romantic. He murmured to the others, and Rosalie and Edward stalked out, followed by a sheepishly grinning Emmett and Jasper last of all. He shut the door behind him, and Alice and I were alone.

I sighed, lowering myself into a seat. “So that went well,” I snarked, before pausing and thinking it over. “Actually, it really did. I expected Edward to have more trouble controlling himself.”

“When I got back home last night, I made him go out hunting with Emmett. It still wasn’t easy for him, but he was a little better prepared than you remembered,” Alice told me, sitting in a chair across from me, daintily crossing her ankles.

“Is there any way to keep him out of my head?” I asked.

Alice made a face. “No. I asked. He said you’re actually an unusually loud broadcaster, as it were. Your thoughts tend to come to the forefront. He noticed almost immediately, but you weren’t really thinking about his relationship with Bella until, well...just now.”

I groaned. “Great. Not only do I not have Bella’s shield, but I’m screaming at the top of my figurative brain-lungs.”

“He’ll do his best to ignore you. He’s a gentleman. And, again, favorite sister. He knows that I would be unhappy to see you unhappy,” Alice said.

I looked back up at her, my mouth dry. I still wasn’t ready to deal with that. So I shifted topics instead, raising an eyebrow. “The fox? Not that I’m not grateful, but…”

Alice laughed. “Two weeks from now, when you start getting cramps, you tell me about Lyra the fox, and how you find it soothing to stroke her fur when you’re in pain. I spend the next month trying to find a stuffed fox with just the right fur. You’re extremely picky, but the perfect fox is in a toy store in Seattle. I decided to skip all that effort and pick it up now. Don’t worry, I left money for it.”

“You can’t see if I discover my powers or find a way home, but you can see that? Your powers make no sense,” I said. “Also, I thought you weren’t going to cheat for me?”
“It was set in stone. And I considered it an emergency,” Alice said, smiling.

“How is it set in stone? What if I don’t get food poisoning or whatever, so I don’t get stomach cramps, and…” I trailed off. Alice was giving me a pointed look. I flushed as I realized what it was about. “Oh. I guess I get those now.”

“Yes, you do,” Alice said primly. “And that’s one area where I can’t help you. The fox, yes. Amazing chocolate, yes. Any supplies you ask for, absolutely. But you’re going to have to do some research.”

“Chocolate is a sexist cliché,” I said vaguely, making a mental note to do some serious Googling when I got back to the house.

“Yes, but it’s impossible to go wrong in giving it to you, as long as it’s the good stuff,” Alice returned, with a grin. “Also set in stone.”

I cracked a smile in return. “You have a point. Oh, hey, and no more diabetes,” I realized.

“Mmmm. As long as you don’t overindulge,” Alice returned, arching an eyebrow.

“I’ll control myself... mostly,” I said, shifting uncomfortably as she laughed. Time to change the subject. Something had been nagging at me all night anyway. “So...you never saw Edward meeting Bella? Falling for her? And last night, when you came over, you couldn’t see what was about to happen?”

Alice shook her head. “No, I told you. I can’t see anything that hasn’t yet become possible,” she replied. Seeing my frustration, she sighed and went on. “I’ll try to explain. The mating bond is love at first sight - or maybe more than first sight. First scent, too? I’m not really sure. What I do know is that vampires have to be physically present with their beloved for it to spark. It wasn’t enough to see you in a vision, any more than it would have been enough for Edward to see you in Charlie’s mind. Until the moment I came through your window and laid eyes on you, I had no idea what you would be to me. After that moment...that’s when the future started unfolding in whole new ways.”

I felt a pang at ‘beloved,’ but set it aside, nodding, my lips quirking slightly. “Soul meets soul when eyes meet eyes.”

I was just about to explain when I glanced up and saw Alice grinning broadly. “Heart to heart are life-mates bound. Soul meets soul when eyes meet eyes,” she recited. “Maiden, ’mongst those gathered round stands your one love recognized?”

My jaw dropped, and I shook my head. “I show you _ElfQuest_?”

“Please! I’ve read _ElfQuest_,” Alice returned, laughing. “I have a lot of spare time. I like visual media. And it’s a classic.”


Alice gave me a pained look, but kept smiling. “Well, it’s still a possibility,” she murmured.

“But...one of many,” I replied.

“Yes,” she said, her gaze distant, though I sensed this time she was just thinking, not falling into a vision. “Yes, I see us getting married. I see you becoming a vampire and living forever with me, as far as my sight can reach without losing focus. But I also see you getting scared and shying away. I see you meeting someone else, someone who’s everything you want, and falling for her, deciding to
start a family. I see you waiting and pining forever, hoping for a way back to your reality. I see you
dying in an ever-shifting number of ways, and those are the worst futures of all, because I can’t even
content myself with the thought that you’re happy.”

“You could turn me,” I muttered, thinking aloud more than anything. It was stupid to bring it up, I
knew. But now that it was out in the open, I found I couldn’t stop, that I had to know why she
wasn’t doing just that. “It would be symmetrical then. I’d open my eyes and see you and I’d love you
as much as you love me. And you wouldn’t have to worry about losing me.”

Alice shook her head emphatically. “No, never. I won’t take that choice away from you,” she said.
“The transformation is more painful than you can imagine. I won’t force it on you. And, in truth, this
is its own kind of agony. Having all choice ripped away in a moment, loving someone I’ve only just
met. I know there’s a reason. I know we would complement one another, love and cherish one
another. But it doesn’t lessen the sting. I told you before. Your choices are your own. You deserve
that. And if you decide you’d rather have a mortal life, with a mortal lover and mortal children, so be
it. If you decide not to be tied down, to keep looking for a way home, I won’t hold you back. If you
decide to be with me, it will be your choice.”

I stared at her for another moment, unsure what to say. “Thank you,” I said, feeling inadequate.

“Don’t thank me. And don’t get me wrong,” Alice said, holding up a hand. “It’s your choice, but
that doesn’t mean I’m not going to fight for you. I’ll go at your pace, follow your lead, but I will be
lovely and charming and ever so tempting. I haven’t given up hope that our futures will become
one.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I nodded slowly. “Maybe we could start with a date?” I
suggested weakly.

Alice flashed me a grin. “After school? Oh, no, you need to go to the store and make dinner. I see.
Yes, I’ll drive you,” she said, before I could answer her. “It’ll give us a chance to talk. Get to know
each other better.”

I grinned back at her. “Sounds great. Edward won’t mind it if you steal his car again?”

“Of course he will. He’ll pout all night. But I can handle him,” Alice assured me, getting up. “You
don’t have long before next period. There’s a payphone right outside the cafeteria door. Call the
police station, talk to Charlie, let him know your new friend Alice will take him home. Here’s the
number.” She handed me a slip of paper. I hadn’t even seen her writing.

“Oh. Wow, thanks,” I said, taking the paper and grimacing. “I really need a cell phone.”

“Something else for you to talk to Charlie about. Or just wait for your birthday,” Alice told me,
smirking.

“Which one?” I joked.

Her grin widened. “Spoilers.”

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Charlie sounded surprised but relieved when I called and told him about Alice’s offer. He made sure
to remind me to thank her, and said he needed to work a case anyway, but he should be home for
dinner. That accomplished, it was off to biology. Angela was near the front row, and we waved at
each other as I went to introduce myself to Mr. Banner, who gave me a book and sent me to the one
open seat.

Next to Edward Cullen. Of course.

Well, at least we’d already met, and his eyes were an incrementally darker gold than Alice’s, but
nowhere near black. He seemed content to ignore me as I took my seat, and I decided to extend him
the same courtesy. This wasn’t material I had covered in high school the first time, so it wasn’t
difficult for me to turn all my attention to the lecture, taking careful notes on cellular anatomy. When
the bell rang, Edward was out of his seat like a shot, already stalking off into the hall. I rolled my
eyes, shaking my head and collecting my things.

“Are’n’t you Isabella Swan?” a male voice asked. I looked up to see a cute, baby-faced guy with pale
blond hair gelled into orderly spikes, giving me his smarmiest smile. The second of my three suitors,
then. Mike Newton. I really hadn’t expected him to look so much like Draco Malfoy.


“I’m Mike.”

“Nice to meet you, Mike.”

“Do you need any help finding your next class?”

“I’m headed to the gym, and actually Alice Cullen was showing me around...and is not here,” I said,
glancing into the hall. That little sneak was throwing me to the wolves again. The figurative wolves.
Not the actual wolves. Were the actual wolves around yet? I knew Bella didn’t find out about them
until New Moon…

“Hello? Earth to Bella?” Mike asked, not unkindly. I blinked and looked back at him, realizing I’d
spaced while thinking about the books again.

“Oh. Gym, right. Yeah, please lead the way,” I replied.

Mike kept up a constant level of chatter as we walked across campus to the gym building. I found
out that he’d lived in California until he was ten, that he had been in my English class that morning
but hadn’t had a chance to talk to me, that his parents had moved his family back so his dad could
take over the sporting goods store from his grandfather, and that he loved scary movies in general
and horror movies in particular. Had he been this talkative in the book? I guessed Alice was right
about his thing for redheads. I pulled out my ponytail holder and started pulling my hair into a braid,
and his eyes followed my fingers.

“Is that your natural hair color? I mean, uh, shit,” he said, blushing.

I couldn’t help smirking a little. “It’s normally brown. Felt like time for a change,” I said, ignoring
the implications, though my cheeks colored a little as well.

“Oh, well, it looks great,” he said. “Hey, what’s with you and Edward Cullen? I mean, he usually
just ignores everybody, but it’s usually just, like, he doesn’t care, you know? I’ve never seen him
leave a room that fast.”

“Oh, Alice said something about borrowing his car to get to school today so she could show me
around,” I said breezily. “And she’s borrowing it again to run me home after school. I think he’s just
a little miffed.”
“Huh. Well, I mean, she asked, right? What a tool,” Mike said, shaking his head. “Especially for ignoring you. If I’d been sitting next to you, I would have talked to you. Hey, if you need a ride home, though, I could do it.”

“That’s sweet - all of it - but Alice has got me covered. We’re going to the store anyway, we both need to do some grocery shopping,” I said, finishing off my braid and giving him a smile. I actually felt a little bad. Mike had been pretty nice to me, and I knew he had nursed a crush on Bella through at least the first book. But he wasn’t making any open moves, and I wasn’t ready to just blurt out that I was gay. “I should probably go talk to the coach.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. See you in class,” Mike said.

I gave him a wave as I stepped through the locker room doors, finding the coach’s office. Coach Clapp gave me a uniform, but told me to sit and watch for my first day - surprising, but kind of a relief. I might have to get used to using the locker room, but I wasn’t eager to rush into it. The whole communal shower and changing area thing was making me nervous.

The game of the day was volleyball, and I watched four different games running simultaneously. Nothing terribly gripping. I recalled that Bella was notoriously clumsy and decided I shouldn’t expect too much of this body - I just hoped I wouldn’t get hit too hard by any flying balls. At last, the bell rang and I made my way back to the office. To my surprise, Edward was there, and so was Alice, talking with Ms. Cope.

“I’m just having a little trouble dealing with biology right after lunch, ma’am,” Edward said, in smooth, dulcet tones. “I hate to admit it, but Alice has a stronger stomach than I do. It would be so much easier if we could just switch our biology and history classes.”

Ms. Cope frowned, but I could tell that she was swayed by the Cullens’ not-so-natural charisma. “Well...it’s very unusual. But they’re the same classes, same lesson plans, same teachers...all right,” she agreed. “Alice, that means you have history second period and biology after lunch. And Edward, that’s second period biology for you. Sound good?”

“That’s perfect. Thank you, Ms. Cope,” Alice said, giving her a charming smile and then turning around to focus that same smile on me. “Oh, hello, Bella.”

Edward turned and frowned at me, muttering to Alice and sauntering past me to the door. I made my way up to the counter, handing the signed slips to Ms. Cope. “Hi, Alice. Hello, Ms. Cope. Here are all the slips you gave me. Did I do it right?”

Ms. Cope flipped through the slips quickly, then smiled at me. “Perfect, Bella, thank you. We’ll see you tomorrow. I hope your first day went well?”

I gave Alice a little smile. “Oh, yes. Alice is a wonderful guide.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ms. Cope returned, beaming at Alice as well. “You girls have a great afternoon, now.”

“Oh, we will. Goodnight,” Alice returned, lightly touching my arm and steering me toward the door. Edward’s Volvo was the last car in the lot, and we made our way down to it, climbing inside. Alice turned to me with a mischievous grin. “Hey, you sure you don’t want to go to Port Angeles? Maybe Seattle? Oooh, how about San Francisco? You already know how I drive.”

“The grocery store will be fine, Alice,” I told her, though I smirked back at her. “It’s a school night. Show off on the weekend.”
“Fine,” she returned, drawing the word out and pouting as she turned the key. The engine purred softly as it sprang to life, and Alice backed out of the spot and drove only a little too fast out of the lot.

We didn’t end up getting a lot of time to talk at the grocery store - Forks was a small enough town that too many people were either curious about the new arrival or recognized the chief’s daughter from when she was younger. Between the various introductions and small chat and the focus I had to put on stocking up the house, there wasn’t a lot of room for conversation with Alice alone.

At last, we made it back to the house, and Alice helped me unpack the groceries before hopping on the counter and watching as I started chopping an onion and grating cheese.

“Why didn’t you just get the pre-shredded kind?” she asked.

“It’s not as good. Tastes...blander, somehow,” I replied. “I like to grate my own. Even if it’s more work.”

“Oh. I wouldn’t know,” Alice said, frowning.

“That’s right, you don’t remember your human life, do you?” I said, turning to look at her. “So you don’t remember eating. Drinking anything other than - you know. You don’t know what things taste like.”

“Nope. It’s all just...flavorless to me,” Alice replied. “To all of us. We feel the textures, but blood is the only thing that has any kind of flavor.”

“So what you were saying before, about getting me ‘the good stuff’?” I said, raising my eyebrows. She laughed. “You’re extremely picky, remember?” The smile vanished from her face as something occurred to her. “Cass, what is it?”

“Huh? Oh...I was just thinking how I’d miss eating, if I turned. Tasting things, savoring them, feeling full. I love food, you know?” I replied, pausing and frowning. “You didn’t see that on my face. The future changed.”

“It...became a little less likely that you’d choose to be a vampire,” Alice admitted. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted. The future is always shifting and changing.”

“I see,” I said. I bit my lip, then turned back to the onion. “How does that work, exactly? Sometimes it’s like you’re in a trance. Sometimes it just seems to come to you.”

“Exactly? That’s exactly how it works. Some futures flow more easily than others. Sometimes I’m just focusing more intently,” Alice replied. “It’s complicated. Your puny human brain couldn’t possibly comprehend it.”

I looked back at her, jaw dropping, and she cracked up laughing at the look on my face. I grabbed some chunks of onion and hurled them at her, and she tsk’ed me as she caught them effortlessly. “You shouldn’t waste food, Cassandra.”
“You shouldn’t make fun of me,” I said, sticking out my tongue.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, utterly insincere. “So do I get to ask some questions?”

“Why, don’t you already see all the answers?” I returned.

“A few, but I’m trying not to peek. I want to have a conversation,” Alice told me, smiling brightly.

“Let me start the beef cooking first. Oh - is the blood going to bother you?” I asked.

“No, cow’s blood isn’t nearly as tempting. If you started bleeding, it might be difficult, though I’d still manage,” she replied.

“Yeah, I’ll try not to cut myself anyway. Okay,” I said, tearing open the ground beef and putting it in the pan. I grabbed the packet of seasoning and poured it on top, stirring.

“You know you’re not following the directions on the package,” Alice pointed out.

“The directions on the package are needlessly complicated,” I returned, stirring the chopped onion into the mixture as well. “Okay. Ask away.”

“You don’t like to follow directions,” Alice observed, tilting her head. “Why?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it,” I said, shrugging as I considered the question. “I’ll do it if I want to get something exactly right. But it’s just how I was raised to cook. My mom and dad didn’t usually follow recipes or anything, either. Everything was based on memory and instinct, and sometimes experimentation. But I’ll probably look up some recipes to extend my repertoire. Oh, and I have no idea how to cook a steak. Charlie likes steak and potatoes, I think.”

“Tell me about your parents,” Alice asked, though a flicker of sorrow crossed her face.

I could guess why, and I didn’t waste time explaining. “My mom is...gone. She died last year, but she’s been gone a long time,” I admitted quietly. “She used to be a force of nature, a wildfire. I learned to write from her. She taught me how to tell stories. Taught me to stand up for people, to stand up for myself. And then she developed dementia and...she lost her mind.”

“You’re terrified it’s going to happen to you, too,” Alice said softly.

I nodded. “Yeah. I am. Which is a point in favor of just becoming a vampire, isn’t it?” I returned, looking up and giving her a quick, humorless smile. “The future probably just shifted again.”

“I’m not looking at it now. I told you,” she reminded me, reaching out. I took her hand in mine, squeezing softly, and she smiled. “My attention’s all on you. So. You miss her?”

“Of course I do. More than anything,” I said, blinking back tears. “I had a long time to...get used to the idea that she wasn’t coming back. I don’t think it made it hurt less.”

“I’m sorry,” Alice murmured, slipping off the counter and pulling me into a hug. Her body was cold against mine. Room temperature, but still notable. Still, I hugged her back, resting my cheek against the side of her head. “Your father?”

“He taught me how to be a complete nerd,” I said, stepping back and smiling, wiping my eyes. She laughed softly, and I felt my smile widen. “Star Trek, Isaac Asimov, Dungeons & Dragons, I got it all from him. We’ve never been totally comfortable around one another, I think. We love each other, but we both have...awkward personalities. We come off better in text. He moved away after my
mom died. We don’t talk too often these days, just e-mail each other now and then.”

“Not very close, then?” Alice asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. I just...I’m a pretty quiet person. Horribly strong brain transmitter aside,” I said, tapping the side of my head. “I miss him, too. And my sister. My friends. I don’t know if I’ll ever see any of them again. I just - I don’t know what this is. You don’t just get hit on the head with a book and...and fall in. That’s a freaking sitcom plot. The kind of thing that ends in twenty minutes with the main character waking up, some heartwarming hospital reunion, and the laugh track playing us into the credits.”

Alice put her arm around my waist. “If there’s a way to figure this out, we will. I’ll help you. Even if it means sending you home in the end. Even if I never get to see you again.”

“What am I going to go back to, Alice?” I asked, shaking my head. “Best case scenario, I switched with Bella. She’s in a body - a life - that she has no experience with. She hasn’t read a book about my life. She doesn’t know how to do my job, pay my bills, take care of my cats, talk to my roommates...she won’t even know how to log onto my computer. What kind of life is she going to leave for me? Is it selfish to even wonder?”

“Maybe? This is pretty unprecedented, Cass,” she replied. “I don’t know how it’s all going to work out. I can’t even see if it does yet. I can’t even see into the other world, your world, at all. Just the possible futures of this one. But right now, you’re overthinking it. First things first. We try to understand what happened to you. We try to understand if we can undo it, and if so, how. We keep you alive as long as we need to. And if and when the answers come, we deal with that then. Choose our futures as they unfold before us. It’s what I’ve always done.”

I shut my eyes, taking a deep breath and nodding. “You’re right. There’s no point in getting myself worked up about it now. We have too much else to deal with.”

“Including your trigonometry homework,” Alice reminded me, her lips quirking as I groaned. “I’ll help you after dinner. By the way, Charlie’s going to be home soon. Do you want me to leave?”

“Already?” I said, pouting. “This hasn’t been much of a date.”

Alice laughed. “Why, didn’t you have fun? I did.”

“Of course you did. It wasn’t bad, it was just...” I gestured vaguely, then looked at Alice sidelong.

“Don’t look at me. You never figure out how to finish that sentence,” she teased, leaning up to brush her cool lips against my cheek, then freezing briefly and taking a big step back. “Damn it. Sorry.”

“No...no, it’s okay,” I said, my hand going up to my cheek, touching the spot where she’d kissed me. “Um. It’s fine. Look, why don’t you stay, say hello to Charlie? You can even stick around for dinner if you want.”

Alice shook her head. “I shouldn’t. Either I won’t eat and he’ll worry that I’m anorexic, or I’ll force down some food, which will be unpleasant and wasteful. Besides, you were only cooking for two. So I’ll say hello to Charlie, I’ll drive Edward’s Volvo home, and then I’ll come back and wait in your room to help you with your homework. And we can spend a little more time talking before you have to go to bed. All right?”

“It sounds like a plan,” I agreed. “Thank you. Kind of weird that you’re just going to lurk in my room...er, Bella’s room...”
“Easier to just call it yours for now,” Alice said, smiling.

“Right. My room. But I’m grateful,” I said. “English and government are okay, but trig, Spanish, biology…”

“You have some catching up to do. Got it,” Alice said.

I heard Charlie’s car pull into the driveway outside, and then he came in through the side door. “Hey, Bella - mm, smells good,” he said, hanging up his jacket and putting his keys by the door, then turning and freezing in surprise. “Oh, hi there, Alice. Didn’t realize you were sticking around. You staying for dinner?”

“No, thank you, my parents are expecting me home. I was just keeping Bella company,” Alice said politely. “Good to see you, Chief Swan.”

“You, too. Thanks for helping Bella out,” Charlie said, giving me a pointed look.

“Yes, thanks, again,” I added, raising my eyebrows at Charlie and raising him one. “Say hi to your mom and dad for us, okay?”

“You’re very welcome, and of course. Goodnight, Bella. Goodnight, Chief,” Alice said, slipping out the door.

Charlie glanced after her, shaking his head and locking the door behind her. “Well, it’s good to see you two getting along. I was worried you’d have trouble making friends. I know you’re kind of a loner.”

I smiled slightly. Bella and I had that in common. “Yeah, not that I mind too much. But everyone was very friendly. Alice especially,” I assured him. “Dinner’s just about ready. I was just going to warm up the taco shells.”

“Sounds good, Bells. I’ll just go wash up,” he said, unstrapping his shoulder holster and heading upstairs.

I finished up while he put his things away and cleaned up, setting the fixings on the counter and starting to assemble the tacos. Soon enough, we were at the kitchen table, eating.

“So um...about what you were saying before,” I said slowly. “You know, how you were worried I’d have trouble adjusting and making friends?”

Charlie frowned, concern in his eyes as he looked back at me. “Yeah, Bells?”

“Well...look. You know mom doesn’t exactly believe in Western medicine,” I said, having no idea if that was true, but guessing it was probably a safe bet. Renée seemed like kind of a free spirit in the books. “And her health insurance has never been the best. I just...there have been some pretty big changes in my life recently, and if I’m honest, I wasn’t feeling all that great back in Phoenix. It’s why I decided to come up here. I thought maybe a change of scenery would help.”

“And...has it?” Charlie asked, his tone gruff but filled with dread.

“It has. But I also...I think I should start seeing a therapist. Is there someone at the hospital, maybe?” I asked.

“Oh. Oh, is that all?” Charlie said, sounding relieved. “Yeah, Dr. Beckett. Once or twice we’ve had to turn people over to her for psychiatric holds. But I think she sees regular patients, too. I mean,
people who aren’t crazy. Crap. I mean…”


“You’re my kid, Bells. You tell me you need help, I’ll get it,” he told me.

“Still, thanks,” I said again, taking a bite of my taco and chewing it over. He nodded, biting into his, too. We ate in silence for a while, and I let my brain work. There was something else I could tell him, but should I? Would he be okay with his daughter being a lesbian? Did I want him to know about that at all, or did I want to be able to have Alice over without any pointed questions? And what if I found my way home, and Bella came back? Wouldn’t she have some explaining to do?

Then I thought about the book again. Charlie asking pointed questions about boys. Having to put up with three different guys asking me to a dance and having to divert all three of them to my conveniently single friends. Screw it, I wasn’t going through that. I put my taco down. “Hey, dad?”

He sighed a little, putting his food down, too, his eyes on me. “Yeah, Bells?”

“Sorry. I just…there’s something else,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I’m gay.”

“Oh. Uh, geez,” he said, straightening up and running his hand through his hair. “Okay. Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure,” I replied. “I mean, I guess I wouldn’t rule out every guy on the planet, but I’m pretty into girls.”

“Uh-huh. So, you and Alice Cullen…?” he asked.

“We just met. We’re friends. That’s it,” I assured him.

“Okay. Well.” He cleared his throat, shaking his head. “I just want you to be happy, kid. I won’t say I’m not surprised, but okay. You going to tell people at school?”

“If it comes up. But I’m not going to shout it to the cafeteria at lunch or anything,” I told him.

“Well, if anyone gives you trouble, you let me know,” he said, gruffly. “I’ll set him straight.”

I kind of loved him in that moment, and I broke into a huge grin, getting up and crossing over to him, giving him a loose hug and resting my chin on his shoulder. “Thanks, dad.”

He cleared his throat again, reddening a little. “Yeah. Yeah, you bet. Anything for you, Bell.”

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“I’m dead. I’m dead, and this is Hell,” I groaned, letting my head drop to my desk again.

“It’s trigonometry, Cass, it’s not the end of the world,” Alice told me, her voice amused, her small hand rubbing my back.

“It’s math. I stayed out of computer science because I’d have to do math. I gave up on ever being an astronaut because I’d have to do math,” I returned, looking up at her.
Alice raised an eyebrow at me. “Tell me that’s not true.”

“No, I gave up on being an astronaut because my doctor told me I’d grow up to be over six feet tall, and spaceships are pretty cramped. I stopped at under six feet, for the record,” I replied.

“That’s still a pretty stupid reason,” Alice remarked.

I felt my eyes narrow. “I’m sorry, aren’t you supposed to be worshiping the ground I walk on or something?” I joked, without thinking. Then I gasped, my eyes widening. “Alice, I’m sorry.”

But though she gave me a stern glare, her lips were quirking, and finally she just laughed. “Relax. Just be yourself. You’re pretty much going to keep screwing up either way,” she told me. “And being in love with you doesn’t mean I can’t think you’re being stupid. You want to go into space? Work for it. No excuses.”

“The fact that I don’t really remember anything past basic algebra seems like a good excuse,” I grumbled.

“You can do this. I’ll walk you through it, and I’ll tutor you,” she said. “Now stop whining, sit up, and finish your worksheet.”

It was still excruciating, but at last I got through it, frowning at the finished product. “Can you...check this?”

“Mmm, I could,” Alice replied. She was laying on my bed now, flipping through the fashion magazines she’d bought at the grocery store. “Of course, then you’d pick over every possible error you could have made, and go to bed angry with yourself, and wake up in an absolutely foul mood.”

I sighed, putting the worksheet in my bag with my other homework, then flopped onto my bed beside her, looking over at her. “Not an A, then.”

“You’ll live,” she replied, her lips curling into a smile.

I looked over at what she was reading. She had a hairstyling magazine open to pages full of short cuts. “I’m not getting my hair cut that short.”

“You say that now,” she said, in a sing-song tone. “It’ll grow back, you know. One of the advantages of being human.”

“I’ll think about it,” I promised. “So.”

“So,” she said, shutting the magazine and setting it aside, smiling brightly at me. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, is it my turn? Okay,” I said, thinking. “You like comic books. What else have you read?”

“I like graphic novels...okay, yes, comic books. But I’m not exactly haunting comic book shops,” Alice returned, before quirking an eyebrow. “Except you need your weekly fix, and I’m going to have to take you, aren’t I?”

“Got it in one,” I agreed, grinning. “You said you’d help me out. It won’t be so bad. We can find one where girls aren’t treated like an alien species, I’m sure. Now answer the question.”


I let out a low whistle. “That’s the comprehensive list? I haven’t even read half of those.”

“No, not everything. I left out the manga, for one thing,” Alice replied, with a small smirk. “I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I’ll definitely be raiding your library,” I promised.

“Yes, you will,” Alice agreed, chuckling. “All right. What about you?”

“Comic books? Honestly, I don’t remember what’s out yet and what isn’t...Fables, obviously,” I said, thinking. “I’m pretty sure a lot of my favorite series haven’t started yet.”

“You do read books that don’t have pictures, don’t you?” she teased.

I huffed in annoyance. “I’ll have you know I started reading at two. I was reading at an adult level before I was a teenager. Yes, I read plenty of prose,” I informed her, before cracking a sheepish smile. “A lot of science fiction and fantasy, if I’m honest. But I’ve read some classics. I loved Pride and Prejudice. And I’m a big fan of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and W.B. Yeats. I find Tennyson in particular...soothing. Familiar.”

“Hm. That’s good to know,” Alice mused, before giving me a mischievous smirk and raising her eyebrow. “One more question. Vampyrus sanguisuga meyerii?”

I stared at her, then remembered my LJ post and choked down laughter. My shoulders shook, and a low, strangled sound escaped my throat briefly. “Right, um - Hillsthwaite trinomial classification. I invented it for this role-playing game I ran, based on Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I got meyerii from a book called Libriomancer, but...” I trailed off, thinking.

I trailed off, thinking, while Alice laughed again. “Nerd,” she said fondly, before noticing my expression and frowning. “Cass? You okay?”

“Yeah - yeah, I’m fine. It’s just...it’s 2005,” I said, getting up and going over to my computer. “That game I told you about? It started in 2004. I set up a website for it.”

Alice’s eyes widened, and she got up as well, watching over my shoulder as I booted up my PC and brought up Internet Explorer (ugh). I quickly typed in the URL for the fake university homepage I’d set up for my game. And there it was. Every image, every section. The campus map, the fraternity and sorority descriptions, the hidden links I’d set up to tease my players. I sat back in my chair, staring.

“I exist here,” I breathed. “What the hell does that mean?”
Alice slipped out shortly after that, giving me space to think, though frankly my mind was a whirl, fragmented thoughts banging around in my brain and refusing to come into focus. Finally I just changed and slipped into bed, hoping that I’d have some idea of my next step after I’d slept on it.

Of course, my dreams were just as chaotic as my thoughts, once again. There were heroic fantasies: I saw myself swooping in and somehow solving all of my family’s problems, protecting them from every awful thing that would happen to us over the next ten years. And just as quickly I saw it all falling apart anyway. I saw myself stepping up to my own front door, meeting myself, and suddenly blowing away, nothing more than a dream. Or perhaps the life I remembered would blow away instead, leaving me with nothing but the life of Bella Swan. All my visceral reactions, my first instincts seemed wrong.

Except, as I woke, I couldn’t help clinging to a few possibilities.

I dressed quickly and warmly, throwing on the first things I found, really. I twisted my red hair up into a messy bun that nevertheless kept it out of my face. I wasn’t surprised to see Edward’s Volvo pulling into the driveway as I finished breakfast. I was surprised to see Edward himself get out, a pleasant smile on his face as he leaned against the car.


“Yeah, it is. We met yesterday. Just briefly,” I said, frowning a little. We stepped outside, and Edward nodded in greeting.

“Hello, Chief Swan. Hello, Bella,” he said. “Alice had to go into school early to meet with one of her classmates, but she asked me to give you a ride. We know you must be busy, Chief, so we’re happy to help get Bella to and from class.”

“Oh, well, I don’t mind,” Charlie said, glancing between Edward and me. “That’s nice of you, though.”

“It sure is. Thank you, Edward,” I said automatically. I thought quickly. I didn’t doubt that Alice knew about this. I didn’t doubt that she’d come running if I were in any danger. I supposed Edward could have killed her, but that seemed extremely unlikely - and as I watched a shadow flicker over his face, I realized it was flatly impossible. I tried to think of the best apology I could as I turned back to Charlie. “It’s fine, dad, I shouldn’t be relying on you to escort me around town anyway. The Cullens have been great to me. I’ll just plan on riding to school with them from now on. Until I’m used to the truck, anyway.”

“Well - all right. Don’t hesitate to ask if you need me to pick you up or anything, though,” he said. “Have a good day at school, Bell. Thanks, Eddie.”

I caught a brief grimace on Edward’s face at the nickname, but he turned it into a smile before Charlie noticed. “Of course, Chief Swan. Shall we, Bella?”

I slipped into the passenger seat, putting my bag on the floor, and Edward pulled the car out smoothly, his smile vanishing as we took to the road. His whole body was tense, and he looked angry and worried.

“We need to talk,” he told me, in a frosty tone. “What you’re thinking of asking Alice. Don’t.”
I gaped at him. “What?” I said, before screwing up my face in anger. “I thought you were too much of a gentleman to read my thoughts.”

“My sister comes first, always,” Edward snapped. “And you already know that your thoughts are clearer to me than anyone else’s. Don’t change the subject.”

“Fine,” I snapped back. “But you need to understand something, Edward Cullen. This is where it starts for me. Over the next ten years, I watch my mother go from a force of nature to someone who can’t form a coherent sentence. She dies with a brain that might as well be a hunk of Swiss cheese, alone and scared and barely recognizing anyone she knew. There’s no cure. There’s no way to get her back. Except...now I’m in a world where there is a way. And she exists, and her mind has barely started to degrade. One bite and—”

“One bite and she will feel the worst pain of her life. It will haunt her for years afterward, for the rest of her immortal days,” Edward said. “One bite, and she will be cursed with an undying thirst that only the blood of human beings can truly sate, whether she finds the control to feed only on animals or not. Her mind will expand, yes, but her human memories will grow dim with time, overwhelmed by the pain of her transformation and the sudden clarity of her immortal existence. She will have to leave your family. She will never be able to see them again. Does that sound like something you would wish for your mother? For anyone you truly love?”

I stared at him, then shrunk back against my seat, my face crumpling, tears hot in my eyes and on my cheeks. He was right, for more reasons than those he’d already listed, but still…

“I miss her. So much,” I said quietly.

His tone softened, turning to velvet. “Of course you do. But don’t you see? You would miss her either way. And you, the you that exists now, would remain cursed with all those terrible memories. The you of the past, the you that exists on another coast...you would still feel the pain of her loss, whether she was dead or simply missing. There is no way to spare either of you that pain. And consider, too, that your mother is a woman of faith. Would you deny her any chance at Heaven? At seeing her loved ones again?”

“No,” I said, my voice very small.

“No,” Edward echoed, satisfied. He looked over at me. “Cassandra, I am sorry. I barely remember my own parents. I barely had time to mourn them, because I was delirious from the same plague that killed them both. But I can understand the desire to do anything, anything at all, to spare your family pain and loss. In truth, that same desire is what motivates me now.”

I wiped at my face, sniffing. “Alice knows all that stuff, too. She would have said no.”

“No in the face of your grief. Your obvious pain. Alice is a gentle soul,” Edward returned. “I fear she would not have been able to cope, if you had asked her. So I needed you to get yourself together before you saw her. Believe me, it wasn’t easy to persuade her to let me take you to school, nor to dissuade her from peeking ahead at this conversation. She’s very worried about you. You’ll have to explain carefully.”

“I’ll try,” I promised. “I won’t ask her to turn my mother, Edward. I swear. I won’t try to get in touch with my family or change anything at all.”

“Good. Keep that resolve,” Edward replied. We arrived at the school at last - I realized now that Edward had passed it, driven further north and then gradually looped around while we talked - and he pulled into the parking space beside Emmett’s Jeep. Alice was standing beside it, waiting for us,
clearly anxious. I took a deep breath and got out of the car, stepping toward her.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking up at me, searching my eyes and looking crestfallen. I knew she could see the red rims, the tracks of tears, no matter how invisible they might be to mortal eyes. I shook my head.

“No,” I said, though I forced a small smile. “I will be. I’m just not right now. Could I-”

Before I could finish framing the question, her arms wrapped around me, pulling me into her embrace. A chill settled into my body at the combination of her cold limbs and the January weather, but I was past caring as I leaned into the hug, letting go and crying softly into her shoulder.

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It wasn’t long before Alice caught me shivering and made me go inside with her, escorting me to the girls’ restroom and pulling out her makeup kit, fixing up my face to hide all signs of tears. I wasn’t really accustomed to wearing makeup on a day-to-day basis, and had honestly always had trouble finding a look that worked for me, but Alice was an expert at making my dark brown eyes pop, adding just a hint of color to my porcelain skin, shading my eyes to complement my red hair.

“I’ll find you at lunch,” she promised, softly, setting a light, cool kiss on my cheek before walking me to my first class. “It’ll be okay.”

“I know,” I assured her. “I’ll see you later.”

Everything I’d thought about my mother, my family, about contacting myself, about changing anything at all, went into a bin in the back of my mind. It was a black hole, too dangerous to approach. If I came close, I’d just get sucked into it again. It was easy to throw myself into The Tempest in English class, and I surprised myself by taking a lively part in the discussion of the opening scenes. Both Eric and Mike kept looking at me, even when I wasn’t talking, shy smiles on their faces, but it was Mike who approached me at the end of class. I caught Eric glaring as he slipped past us in the corridor.

“Hey, Bella. You look really great today,” Mike said, coloring a little. “Not that you didn’t look great yesterday. I just mean, are you doing something different?”

“No, not really. I mean, a little makeup,” I said, a sinking feeling in my gut. I’d been so focused on letting Alice hide all evidence of my crying jag that I hadn’t thought of the attention it would draw. Had Mike made his move this early in the book? I didn’t think so.

“Well, it looks good on you. And, uh. You were great in class, I mean, really good points,” he said nervously. “Actually, I mean...look, English isn’t my best subject, and my mom and dad have kind of been on my back about my grades. Would you be down for helping me study? Maybe this weekend? I’d totally, like, take you to dinner after or something.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking through my response. Best to just stick with the truth. Pull it off like a Band-Aid and get it over with. “Mike, I’m happy to help you study. But it kind of sounds like you’re asking me on a date, and I’m flattered, but...I’m gay. I’m not into guys at all.”

“No, Mike, it’s okay,” I told him. “Like I said, I’ll totally help you study if you want. And I’m down for hanging out. As friends, all right?” I smiled gently at him.


The rest of the morning was uneventful. Even Trigonometry was a welcome distraction, though I still didn’t feel like I remembered enough of the groundwork. Jessica started squealing over my new look as soon as I sat down next to her in Spanish, and seemed about to burst by the time class ended.

“Okay, come on, we have to show the girls,” she said, grabbing my hand as we got up. “Everyone’s going to have a million questions about your look, it’s amazing.”

“Actually, I’m afraid Bella and I already made plans,” Alice said, slipping gracefully out of the crowd and smiling at Jessica. “More trig tutoring. I’m so sorry to steal her away from you.”

“Alice would be the one to ask about makeup, anyway. This is all her work,” I added. “Maybe Alice could sit with the rest of us tomorrow?”

Jessica’s eyes were very wide, and she nodded vigorously. “That...that would be great. If you want to.”

Alice shot me an amused look, quirking an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“Great! Great,” Jessica squeaked. “I’ll see you two later. Hey, Angela, wait up!”

Jessica scurried off to break the news, and Alice laughed softly, taking my arm. All humor vanished from her voice as she spoke softly to me, though, replaced by gentle concern. “How are you feeling?”


“I’m glad. Do you want to tell me what was wrong?” she asked.

“I was just...pretty emotional. Last night. I guess it was strong enough for Edward to sense,” I explained. “He wanted to try and calm me down before I saw you.”

“Of course he did,” Alice said, annoyance flaring in her voice. “He’s very protective.”

“Yeah, I know,” I agreed.

“I can handle myself.”

“You certainly can.”

“And he certainly doesn’t need to spare me from your feelings.”

“Didn’t say he did.”

“Hm.” She looked back at me, her lips quirking into a small smile. “Are you agreeing because I’m right? Or because it seems like the safest course of action?”

I smiled back, glad to be on a different subject. “You do have my arm. It seems prudent to stay on my best behavior.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Would you like me to let go?”
“No,” I told her, putting my hand on hers. “It’s nice.”

She made a pleased sound, and we walked into the cafeteria.

All eyes were on me, once again, but this time it definitely had more to do with the company I was keeping than the comical novelty of the new girl. I felt clumsier than I ever had in my life as Alice glided gracefully by my side, leading us through the lunch line, where she settled for an apple and a bottle of water while I loaded up my tray, and then to the table where her perfect siblings were gathered. Edward and Rosalie just nodded curtly at us, while Emmett gave me a big grin and Jasper a hesitant smile.

Alice seated me next to her, with Jasper on her other side and the other three across from us. Once we were settled, I leaned slightly around Alice to murmur to Jazz. “Jasper? Could you give me...I don’t know, a good mood? Calm, contentment? Nothing too strong, I want to be able to focus.”

The others all gave me wondering looks, but Jasper nodded, and I felt a pleasant warmth suffusing my mind, a smile coming unbidden to my lips.

“Thank you,” I told Jasper, letting my smile widen for him and then sitting back. Pulling out my backpack, I grabbed my Trigonometry textbook and my notebook, opening them and spreading them out on the table. Picking up my pen, I drew I line in the notebook and started plotting and labeling points.

“Cassandra. Eat,” Alice told me, in a low tone. “Trigonometry is just a cover.”

I looked up at her, then pointedly took a bite of my meatloaf, followed by the mashed potatoes. I’d had worse. I’d also had a lot better.

“Mmmm,” I said, before turning back to my notebook. “This isn’t trig. I’m trying to work this out. Here we are. Early 2005. *Twilight* comes out later this year - probably not in this world, but in mine.”

I thought briefly. Could I track down Stephenie Meyer? Would it help if I did? Maybe she’d be in the BYU alumni records. She wouldn’t be a household name yet. I decided against it. It really didn’t seem like any good could come of that. Shaking my head, I turned back to the page. “So, *Twilight* comes out in late 2005. I read it in...hm...2008. Maybe 2009. Here’s where Bella was born. Here’s where I was born. And...okay, this actually isn’t helpful. Where the hell is the point of divergence?”

“Farther back than that,” Edward remarked. “The Volturi were founded three thousand years ago or more. None of us know when the first vampire came into being, or how.”

“Ugh. You’re right,” I said, making a face and turning back to my food. Then a thought occurred to me. “Is it possible the Volturi would know how vampires came into being?”

“We are not contacting the Volturi, Cassandra,” Alice said, quietly and firmly.

Edward shook his head. “And if they do know, they never told Carlisle. I doubt they would tell us just because we asked.”

“Okay, okay. Forget the Volturi,” I said, sighing. “There must be vampires that predate them...but tracking them down would be insanely difficult. And, yes, potentially dangerous, sorry, Alice.”

Alice gave me a satisfied nod, still eyeing me warily. Across the table, Rosalie sighed. “Just what is it you hope to accomplish here?” she asked, annoyed.

“Well, if I can figure out the point of divergence between our realities, then...I...have...no idea,” I
admitted, sighing as well. “Damn it. I’m not equipped for this. I’m not a physicist or a historian or -
anything. I’m a nerd who reads way too much science fiction. The only way this would ever work
would be if this were some kind of Back To The Future scenario, where someone somehow went
back in time and caused vampires to exist. Except that still wouldn’t explain why I went back ten
years and landed in the body of Bella Swan. And since I don’t have a DeLorean, a Mr. Fusion or the
all-important flux capacitor, I wouldn’t be able to go back and set things right even if that were the
answer. This just felt like the only useful thing I could do. But you’re right, Rosalie. It’s idiotic.”

“It’s not idiotic. You’re doing your best,” Alice said, rubbing my back.

“Wait, wait, no, tell me I’m right again,” Rosalie said, cracking a smile. “Then go back to the part
where you admit you’re an idiot.”

“Rosalie,” Alice said sharply.

“You’re right. I’m an idiot. You’re a devastatingly beautiful goddess of love and I’ve been absolutely
horrible to you,” I said, looking Rosalie in the eyes and raising my eyebrows at her. “Happy?”

“Mmm. I like the goddess of love part, it’s a nice touch,” Rosalie replied.

“I live to serve, o Aphrodite,” I intoned, deadpan, before turning back to Alice. “Is she always like
this?”

“Usually she’s worse,” Alice said, giving her sister a venomous look, though I could see a smile
starting to form. “She must be starting to like you.”

“Huh. Doesn’t seem too different from utter loathing and contempt so far,” I observed.

“Give it time.”

Rosalie rolled her eyes. “You two are hilarious. You should go into show business.”

“She liked being compared to Aphrodite,” Alice murmured to me, smirking.

I smirked back. “I figured.”

“You could compare me to a goddess, you know,” Alice says, adopting an innocent look, her lips
forming into a slight pout. “If you wanted.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, thinking. “Hm. Now, that’s actually not easy. Rosalie as Aphrodite is obvious -
not that you’re not just as beautiful.”

Rosalie raised an eyebrow, and Alice shot her a look. “Hush, Rose,” she said, turning back to me
and smiling pleasantly. “Go on.”

“Let me think. Edward is Apollo - patron of the arts, god of the sun,” I said, glancing at Edward,
who seemed pleased. “Emmett must be Ares, the god of war. Jasper could be Dionysus, with his
power to alter the mind.”

Alice raised an eyebrow at me. “You realize that’s everyone except me.”

“I was working my way around to you. Process of elimination. Also, stalling. Esme must be Hestia,
goddess of the hearth. I’m not sure about Carlisle. So...I think that makes you Artemis. Goddess of
the moon, pale and beautiful, swift and cunning, beloved brother to Apollo,” I said, before smiling
widely and taking her hand, looking her in the eyes. “She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless
climes and starry skies; and all that’s best of dark and bright, meets in her aspect and her eyes; thus mellowed to that tender light, which heaven to gaudy day denies."

All of the Cullens were staring at me now. Emmett seemed impressed, breaking into a grin. Rosalie’s eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed. I couldn’t read Edward or Jasper’s expressions. But Alice’s eyes were shining, her lips slightly parted and spread in a broad smile. I flushed deeply as I realized what I’d just done. Edward grunted and turned away at the sight of the blood rising in my cheeks.

I let go of Alice’s hand, coughing and turning back to my food, trying to fight my blush down. “Anyway, I am way...way too into mythology. Clearly. They’re not perfect comparisons.”

“God of war, Rose, you hear that?” Emmett said, nudging his mate, still grinning.

“Yes, and she basically called Jasper the god of drunks and madmen, so I wouldn’t put too much stock into it,” Rosalie snarked.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said as I ate, grateful that Jasper was keeping my mood up. At least I wouldn’t die from utter mortification. Then again, the artificial good mood might have contributed to my decision to spout off one of Lord Byron’s most romantic poems to a girl who was already hopelessly in love with me. “I’m sorry, Jasper. I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“No, I see the comparison. Even if it’s not a perfect one,” he said gently. “But perhaps you shouldn’t think of us as gods.”

“I don’t. Believe me,” I assured him.

“So,” Alice said brightly, deliberately changing the subject. “What are your plans after school?”

“Oh, um...go home, get through my homework, fix dinner. Nothing too special. Why?” I asked, looking back at her.

“You could come over to our place if you wanted. I’m sure Esme would love to meet you. Carlisle, too,” she replied. “I could help you with your homework, and we could spend some more time together. I’m sure we could pick up something for dinner on the way back to your place.”

I hesitated, thinking it over. After the stunt I’d just pulled...I was pretty sure I was close to falling for Alice completely, and that caused a flare of panic in my breast. I wasn’t ready for that. I’d had my share of intense, furious crushes in the past, but nothing so quick, so absolute, so perfectly reciprocated. It would be so easy to fall in with her, and maybe it would be the right thing, the noble thing, since she was already snared by me. But it felt like losing myself. Committing myself so completely to Bella’s life here felt like the wrong choice. I’d only been here for a couple days. I hadn’t learned anything about why I was here or whether it was possible for me to return home. I wasn’t ready to give up on seeing my friends and family again. I wasn’t ready to give up on giving Bella Swan her life back.

“Not today, Alice,” I said, looking away from her face so I wouldn’t have to see the disappointment I was sure she was feeling. “Maybe some other time. Thank you, though.”

“Oh,” Alice said, her voice unsteady, and I felt another pang of guilt stabbing through my gut. “Of course. Don’t mention it.”

All the Cullens were staring at me again. I could feel their eyes on me as I finished my lunch. But this time I was quite sure that not even Emmett was smiling.
The rest of lunch passed in an awkward silence. So did Biology. Alice worked quietly beside me, keeping diligent notes, though I know she didn’t need to. She tore them out of her notebook and handed them to me when we left class, leaving me without a word.

Mike approached as Alice left, walking with me to gym. “So, uh...Alice Cullen. Is she your girlfriend?” he asked. “You seem close, and everyone saw you two holding hands in the cafeteria.”

“I don’t move that fast. She’s just a friend,” I replied mechanically. I hoped she was still my friend. I wasn’t sure I deserved her, after the way I’d hurt her. I stopped - physically and mentally - taking several deep breaths.

“Uh, Bella? You okay?” Mike asked, stopping as well.

“Fine, I just - I need a minute,” I said, running slowly through my own thought processes. Yes, I’d hurt Alice by acting all romantic and then blowing her off. I was sending mixed signals. But it wasn’t the end of the world. Why was I acting like it was? Simple answer: Bella’s biochemistry combined with my own depressive tendencies and the lack of medication to even me out. My lows were lower than they’d been in a while. I wasn’t thinking or acting rationally. Maybe I owed Alice an apology, but we’d get through this.

Mike looked nervously at the gym building. “We’re going to be late.”

“Sorry. I’m fine now. Let’s keep going,” I told him. “Do you still want to study this weekend?”

“Well - yeah. That would actually be a big help,” he said. “You want to come over to my place? My mom will be there. Study date, I promise, not a date-date.”

I smiled. “Sure. We could still watch a movie after, if you wanted. Actually, maybe Forbidden Planet. It’s pretty good, and watching it in class won’t be the same. There’s a video store in town, right?”

“Yeah, right on the corner of North Forks and Calawah Way,” Mike affirmed.

“I’ll see if they have it, and bring it over if they do,” I promised.

“Okay. You need me to come pick you up?”

“Oh - yeah, if you don’t mind,” I realized, chagrined.

“Nah, it’s cool. You’re doing me a big favor. I’ll come by around noon?” Mike suggested.

I nodded, grinning. “It’s a totally platonic study date. Me, you, William Shakespeare and Leslie Nielsen.”

“Cool,” Mike replied, smiling back at me as he walked over to the boys’ locker room.

I stepped through the door to my own locker room, only to be confronted by Lauren Mallory, in all her blonde, green-eyed mean girl fury. She was drawn up to her full height, just a couple inches taller than me, and her hands were planted on her hips. “Hey - Isabella, right? I heard you were a dyke. Is that true?”

I sighed inwardly, but smiled brightly, trying to keep myself from blushing though the chatter around
us had dropped away and I could feel the other girls staring. “I’m not going to deny it, Lauren, but is that really any of your business?”

“I think it is. I’m really not comfortable with a lesbian watching me change,” she said.

“Okay, show of hands, does anyone here like changing in front of a bunch of other people, gay or straight?” I asked, leaning past Lauren to call out to the other girls. “Anyone? Bueller? No? I’m no different, Lauren. I’ll keep my eyes, and my hands, to myself. Believe me, I am capable of self-control.”

“None of the rest of us are filing naked girls away in our spank bank, though,” Lauren returned.

I blushed, but rolled my eyes. “Oh my God. You actually called it that. Wow,” I said. “You know, I’m probably not the only lesbian on campus. They say one out of every ten people is attracted to the same sex. There are, what, three hundred something students at this school, half of them are girls...that’s at least fifteen lesbians. You could be a lesbian, Lauren.”

She shoved me back, scowling. Okay, that strategy might have backfired. “I’m not a freak like you,” she sneered.

I could already feel the exhaustion settling in. I hated confrontation. It made me tired. It looked like that had carried over to Bella Swan’s body. I tried to save some face by rolling my eyes again. “Fine. I’ll go use the handicapped locker room, I guess. Let me ask the coach if it’s okay.”

Lauren’s eyes gleamed with triumph, and I felt a surge of self-loathing at handing her the victory. Still, I opened my locker, grabbed my things and went to the coach’s office.

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Coach Clapp seemed to think it was best if I stayed away from the other girls, so he had me move my stuff into the handicapped locker room, which held an oversized bathroom stall, half a dozen lockers low to the floor, a low sink, and a single large shower area with wheelchair access and controls at a lower height. I had no idea how many handicapped students there were at Forks. I thought I’d seen a couple in wheelchairs. But there were none in my gym period, so I had the locker room to myself.

I was pissed off - at myself, for letting Lauren win. At Lauren, for starting the confrontation. At whomever had overheard me talking to Mike and passed the news on to the school’s resident Regina George. At Coach Clapp, for deciding the lesbian needed to be quarantined after all. I was insulted. But, to be honest, I was a little relieved. I had hated the idea of communal locker rooms, communal changing spaces. I’d never had to put up with them. The closest I’d come were the curtained alcoves that held my dorm showers in college, and I wasn’t even fully comfortable with those. I appreciated the privacy, even as I loathed the reasons for it.

Gym was a horror show. Bella’s body was completely uncoordinated. I’d never been all that athletic in my own body, so I was sort of used to it, but Bella’s muscle memory kept warring with my own instincts, sending me falling flat on my ass and flailing for the ball. I hit at least two students before my teammates finally decided their goal for the rest of the volleyball game was to keep the ball from coming anywhere near me.

Finally, mercifully, it was over. I returned to my lonely little locker room, changed into my regular
clothes, and headed out to the lot.

Alice was standing by Edward’s car, waiting for me. I felt a surge of surprise, then gratitude, then guilt as I made my way over, giving her a meekly apologetic look.

“You didn’t have to stay,” I said softly.

“I wasn’t going to abandon you,” Alice told me. “I told you, Cass. Your choices are your own. I won’t say I’m not hoping you’ll choose me. But I meant what I said about being there for you, helping you, either way. Besides, Edward told me you had a rough afternoon.”

“I’m surprised he cared. I got the feeling all of your siblings were pretty mad at me, at this point,” I said, before sighing. “I’m sorry. I’m feeling pretty low right now. And what I did at lunch...I really don’t want to lead you on, Alice. I like you. A lot. I could see us together. But I’m not ready, and I shouldn’t give you reasons to hope otherwise. Not until I’m sure.”

“To err is human. To forgive, divine,” Alice returned, giving me a small, reassuring smile. “I made it very clear to all of my siblings that you weren’t to be blamed for that. That it was hardly the only mistake you’d make anyway.”

“Oh. Good. That’s reassuring,” I muttered.

“You’re far from perfect. You’ll live,” she said, smirking. “I also told them that you’d be sorry, every time. You don’t like to hurt people, do you?”

I shook my head. “No. I just can’t seem to help it,” I said softly. “I don’t understand why some people hurt others willfully, without any real cause. I always feel awful when I do it. Even if I don’t know how to make it right. Even if I want to hold on to that anger. The fact that I’m sorry doesn’t necessarily make it any better. ...is all that set in stone?”

“More like engraved in diamond. The details shift all the time. But your essential nature shines through,” Alice told me. “Get in the car, Cass. Tell me what happened.”

I nodded, slipping into the passenger seat, explaining my confrontation with Lauren. I heard a growl rising in Alice’s throat, and quickly reached out to touch her hand. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay. Lauren’s a total ass, and so’s Coach Clapp, but I’m actually okay with using a private locker room.”

“You’re not sick, though! You don’t need to be quarantined,” Alice retorted, as she pulled into my driveway and put on the brakes.

“Neither do the other students who use that locker room,” I pointed out. “The way I see it, this is a perk. There are shitty reasons for it. And if anyone in my period ever needs to use that locker room instead - even Lauren, if, say, she gets in a car accident and breaks her legs, that is not a suggestion, Alice Cullen - but if anyone needs to use it, I’ll pitch a royal fit. I’ll pull in Charlie if I have to, and I’ll make sure Coach Clapp understands that my sexual orientation is not a reason to segregate me. That the handicapped locker room needs to be reserved for the people who need it, not just the people Lauren Mallory feels like ostracizing. Until then...I’m okay with a little privacy.”

“Go back to the part where Lauren Mallory breaks both her legs. I liked that part,” Alice said murderously.

“That was a hypothetical, Alice,” I told her firmly. “I don’t wish violence on anyone. I don’t even joke about it. It’s important to me.”

Alice huffed. “You’re no fun.”
“No, I’m a boring-ass pacifist who takes things way too seriously and can’t make effective threats as a result,” I agreed. “There are other ways to get at Lauren, you know. Someone could sneak Nair in her shampoo, for example. Unless she’s allergic.”

“Hmmm...nope,” Alice said, her gaze briefly distant, an evil grin starting to spread across her face. Suddenly, headlights flashed across her rearview mirror, and her smile vanished as she visibly started. A dusty brown pickup truck pulled in next to us.

“That’s...not Charlie’s car,” I said, rather stupidly.

“No. No, it’s not. Cassandra, stay in the car,” Alice said tightly, unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the door.

“Alice? What’s going on?” I asked.

“I didn’t see this coming. And now I can’t see our futures at all,” Alice returned. “Stay in the car.”

My mind raced as she shut the door behind her. The doors to the pickup opened, and the driver got out, but they were on the other side - I couldn’t see them at all. The passenger stayed where they were. Had anything like this happened in the book? I couldn’t think of anything. Billy and Jacob Black came by eventually, but those were the only non-vampire visitors to Bella’s house I could think of. Something nagged at me about that. Jacob Black. The Quileute pack. The wolves...of course. Alice couldn’t see the wolves, or anything surrounding them.

Oh shit. That meant there was a Quileute wolf here.

I threw my seatbelt off, opening the door, getting out. Alice shot around the car, at my side in a blur, and now that I was out, I could see an old Native American man in the passenger seat of the truck, staring at us with wide eyes.

That meant Jacob was here, too. My eyes shifted to the back of the truck, to the figure unloading Billy’s wheelchair.

It wasn’t Jacob.

The person with Billy was a tall Native American girl, or woman, really, maybe eighteen to twenty. She was wearing a tank top and denim capris that clung to her athletic figure, seemingly perfectly comfortable even in the January chill. Her hair was cropped into a pixie cut, and I could see a black tribal design tattooed on her right shoulder. She looked at me, and my breath caught at the depth of her eyes, so dark they were nearly circles of black, framed by incredibly long, dark lashes. She was gorgeous. Not as supernaturally beautiful as Rosalie, not even as perfectly attractive as Alice, but close.

Leah Clearwater was here, at my house, and she was a werewolf.

The story was officially off the rails.
While I was identifying Leah, she was already turning toward us, her face twisting in disgust. Her eyes fell on me, then on Alice, and her nostrils flared, her whole body tensing, her voice ripping from her throat in a sharp bark. “Get the hell away from her, you bitch!”

I could hear a low growl rising in Alice’s throat in return, and I knew I had to act before this led to bloodshed. I grabbed her hand and squeezed tightly.

“Alice Cullen, if you hurt Leah Clearwater, I will be extremely unhappy,” I told her rapidly. She stopped, wide eyes darting to my face, but I was already turning to Leah. “Stay away from her! She’s not violating the treaty! She’s not hurting me!”

Leah looked shocked and bewildered. I figured confusion was a damn sight better than anger. Anger led to fursplosions. “What?” she asked.

“Yes, I know about the treaty. Not because they told me,” I added quickly, looking to Billy, who seemed just as stunned. “I know about the Quileute shifters - sorry if I’m mangling your tribe name. I tend to pronounce unfamiliar words phonetically. I know that you can turn into a giant pseudo-wolf, and so can Sam Uley. Shit, I’m sorry, things must be tense between you two right now, what with your cousin and all.”

“Emily?” Leah asked, shaking her head, even more confused now. “Why the hell would I be mad about Sam and Emily? Wait, how do you know about Sam and Emily?”

“Uh...because you...used to date Sam? And then he imprinted on your cousin, who’s also your best friend?” I asked. It was my turn to feel bewildered. It didn’t help when Leah gawked at me and then burst out laughing. “...wha-huh?”

“Bella,” Billy said, staring me down. “How do you know all this?”

“It’s...complicated,” I said, sighing. “I’ll try to explain as best I can, but can we call a truce? No one hurts anyone, we all talk like the civilized people I know we all are? Let’s just go inside. Leah, I’ll get you a snack. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“Constantly,” Leah said, recovering herself and glaring at Alice, then smirking slightly. “But your friend’s stench is killing my appetite.”

“You don’t smell any better to me,” Alice retorted.

“Real mature, both of you. Suck it up,” I said, annoyed, as I grabbed my backpack from the car and headed for the door. “Alice, you don’t even need to breathe. Leah, you can just deal. Will you please get Billy out of the car already?”

“You always this bossy, Red?” Leah asked, though I could hear the cab door clang open as she got the wheelchair.

“Only when I’m pissed off,” I told her. She laughed behind me as I opened the door, turning on the lights.

Alice darted past me into the house, and then Leah wheeled Billy in. We gathered in the living room, with Billy’s chair parked near the couch where I was sitting. Alice and Leah stayed on opposite sides of the room, trying not to smell each other, shooting each other venomous looks now and then. I felt
the brief, malicious impulse to turn on the ceiling fan and get both their scents moving. It’d serve them right.

“Okay. I’m going to ask you in advance not to panic,” I told Billy. “None of this is my fault, and I’m trying, as best I can, to fix it. Assuming there’s a way to fix it at all.”

Billy’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded slowly. “All right.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m not Bella Swan. Not really. I mean, a DNA test would say that I am, and yes, I look just like the girl who used to live in this house and play with your daughters,” I said. “But my name is Cassandra. I was transported here from my world, where the year is 2015 and everything here - the Cullens, Bella Swan, you and Jacob, the Quileute shifters - is part of a story I read. A series of books, starting with a book called *Twilight.*”

Billy stared at me. “Leah?”

“She’s a crazy-ass white girl,” Leah said. “But she’s either an amazing liar, or she doesn’t think she’s lying.”

“I’m really not an amazing liar,” I murmured. Something else occurred to me. “Billy, where’s Jacob?”

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Home sick. He caught a bug in Port Angeles last night or something.”

“I think we both know that’s not the whole truth,” I said, as gently as I could. “Alice, did the boys got to Port Angeles last night? Looking for James and his coven, maybe?”

“Yeah. There was a chance they’d be there,” Alice said. “They weren’t, they made a different choice. Why?”

“Let me guess what happened. Your son went to Port Angeles with his friends - Quil and Embry, right?” I said, watching Billy. They were memorable names. I was pretty sure I’d gotten them right. “The shifters don’t exist solely because of vampires, but vampires trigger the transformation. So Jacob runs into a vampire without realizing it. He comes home showing the early signs of the transformation. Maybe his friends show signs of shifting, too. And...what? You know the Cullens are back, but clearly the vampires are more active than you’d thought. You came down to Forks to check on your friend? But of course your girls don’t live with you anymore, Jacob is becoming a shifter, and you’re concerned about the vampire presence, so you rope Leah into driving you.”


Billy shot her a stern glance, but looked back at me, sighed, and nodded. “It was something like that,” he admitted grudgingly.

I shut my eyes, leaning back and breathing evenly for a moment. “I’m sorry,” I said, opening them again. “That was my fault. Later on in *Twilight,* Bella is hunted by a coven of vampires. Not the Cullens. Alice found out about it, and her brothers have gone out looking for them, trying to head them off. They did it all to protect me. Your son shouldn’t have been exposed, shouldn’t have shifted. Not this early. I’ve been here two days and I’m already throwing the timeline out of whack.”

“Yeah, well...it was pretty inevitable, what with the local vampire element,” Billy said, giving Alice a glare. “Besides, it means he’s inherited the old powers. He’s our tribe’s chief, by birthright.”

Leah looked away, a shadow passing over her face. I looked up at her, something else occurring to
me. “You shouldn’t be a werewolf - sorry, shifter - at all yet,” I realized aloud. “When did that happen?”

“Who says I shouldn’t be?” Leah asked, looking back at me, eyebrows raised in challenge.

“The book says you shouldn’t be,” I replied calmly. “It doesn’t happen until the second one. *New Moon*. Also, you *did* date Sam Uley, and he broke your heart when he imprinted on Emily.”

“Listen here, Bella or Cassandra or whatever your name is,” Leah said, straightening. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I never dated Sam. He’s one of my best friends, and Emily is like a sister to me. I was thrilled when they got together. I couldn’t be happier. And you have no right to accuse me of pining for him like some...jealous, crazy ex-girlfriend.”

I jerked back, surprised at her vehemence. Denial? It didn’t feel like it. Billy just looked confused, not at what Leah was saying, but what I was. “I’m sorry,” I said slowly, thinking. “I guess the books weren’t completely right. Wait. Let me make sure I have my facts straight. Sam still turned first, right? He’s the Alpha, and temporary chief, at least until Jacob finishes turning?”

“Like I’d let that Boy Scout lead anything?” Leah said, snorting. “I turned first. I’m the Alpha. Sam’s my Beta. And not that anyone’s happy about it, but I’m the chief by right.” She gave Billy a pointed look.

“For now,” Billy replied.

“That’s not right. That’s not right at all,” I said, rummaging in my backpack and pulling out my notebook. “Leah, when did you become a shifter?”

“A little over a year back. Not long after the Cullens moved to town,” she said, looking at Alice and scowling.

“As exact as you can get, please,” I requested.

Billy looked at her, and Leah sighed. “October 17th, 2003. That’s when it started, anyway. Came home that night with the worst fever I’d ever had.”

I marked it on my makeshift timeline, already thinking I’d need a better one. “That’s before I arrived here. I couldn’t possibly have affected that,” I said, looking up, glancing over at Alice. “Alice, I didn’t do that.”

“Okay…” Alice said, looking at me like I’d grown a second head.

“Still doesn’t really explain why Leah never dated Sam – wait,” I said, starting to grin, my head swiveling back to Leah. “Are you gay?”

Billy sputtered. “What?”

“How exactly is that your business?” Leah asked, tensing.

“Okay, whoa, sorry. Angry shifter, not the result I want here. I don’t mean to offend you, but please. It could be important. I don’t know *how* yet, but it could be,” I said. “If it helps, I am super mega gay. I could prove it. Would you like me to make out with you right now?”

“Cass!” Alice hissed, her face screwed up in anger.

Leah was smirking, though, looking me up and down. “Maybe later, Red,” she replied. “Fine, yeah.
I’m super mega gay, too. Deal with it, Billy.”

I laughed, shaking my head and beaming in triumph as I sprung from my seat. “A-ha! I knew it!”

Alice stared at me. “And what the hell does that mean?”

“I have no idea!” I proclaimed happily, dropping back into my seat. I was starting to feel a little punchy, to be honest.

“I have a question,” Billy said, his eyes fixed on me. “Why exactly shouldn’t I tell my friend Charlie Swan that his daughter’s body has been invaded by an alien spirit?”

I looked up at that, my face falling. “...balls.”

Leah’s lips quirked, but she turned a stern look on Billy. “Oh, come on. You heard her story. This isn’t her fault, and she’s trying to find a way to undo it.”

“So she says,” Billy returned.

“She was telling the truth. You want her to run through it again? Maybe I could put my ear against her chest this time, just to be sure,” Leah joked, shooting me a flirtatious smirk. My cheeks burned in response, and my whole body tingled. Alice growled again from her side of the room.

“Billy, Mr. Black,” I said, as calmly as I could. “I am being honest with you, I swear. I don’t know what happened to me, or to Bella. I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know how to get back. Frankly, I don’t know if I’ll ever find a way home, if I can ever give Charlie his daughter back. But either way, I’m going to look after him as best I can. I’m going to be the best Bella Swan I can be, as far as he’s concerned. A loving, dutiful daughter. Do you really think telling him the truth would help him? You know him better than I do. Do you think that would end well for anybody?”

Billy stared at me in silence for another long moment. Leah cleared her throat and looked at him. “Truth, again,” she murmured.

“Fine,” Billy said, his eyes flicking to Alice. “But we need to talk about the company you’re keeping.”

“No, we don’t,” I said, just as firmly. “Alice isn’t going to hurt me. It is literally the last thing on Earth she’d ever want to do. She’s not going to hurt Charlie, either. She’s been a huge help to me exactly when I needed it most. She’s the best friend I have here. So her presence in my life is non-negotiable.”

“Young lady, I might not want to tell Charlie what’s going on with you, but I can sure as hell warn him about her,” Billy said sharply.

“But you already tried, didn’t you?” I asked. “You can’t tell him the truth without breaking the treaty, and that’s going to bring down far too much trouble. And when you tried to warn him away from the Cullens for less specific reasons, he didn’t believe you. He’d already met Dr. Cullen. He thought Carlisle was a great man - and he is, by the way. It caused a rift between the two of you. Mr. Black, I respect you. I think you’re wrong, but I think you’re trying to do what’s right. I’d like to be friends with you, with your son, with your tribe. If my knowledge of the events to come can help you, I’d like to offer it to you. But trying to keep me away from the Cullens is non-starter. They’re good people. Your grandfather saw it. Someday I hope you do, too.”

I smiled, as pleasantly as I could, while Billy scowled. “Now. What brings you by this evening? Wait, let me guess - Leah, did you two bring us some of your dad’s fish fry?”
Leah grinned. “Good guess. Some fresh fish, too. Also Jacob broke the TV. Billy wanted to watch the Sonics game.”

“Well, you’re both welcome to stay, but I’ve never cooked fish fry before. Mind showing me how?” I asked.

Leah wrinkled her nose, looking at Alice. “Is the vampire staying for dinner?”

Before I could answer, Alice huffed. “Alice is headed home,” she said primly, walking over to me and giving me a level look. “I can see I’m not needed here.”

I took in a sharp breath as she stalked past me. “Excuse me,” I muttered to Leah, following Alice to the door. “Hey, wait. Come on.”

“What? Are you going to tell me that you don’t mean it? That you truly do love me?” Alice asked, turning on me. “After the way you were flirting with that girl? After offering to make out with her?”

I raised my hands defensively. “I - Jesus, Alice, I’m sorry. I fucked up, again. I didn’t think about your feelings. I was just joking around, though.”

“You’re right, you didn’t. But that’s all right. I’m your best friend,” Alice said bitterly. “Your loyal lapdog. Only ask me, and I’ll be your slave, wait on you hand and foot, now and forever. Pine for you for the rest of eternity. I’ll forgive you, again and again, asking nothing in return.”

I felt my heart tearing itself in two. “Alice, I didn’t ask for that. For any of it. If I could free you from this…” I shook my head. “The future isn’t written in stone yet. I still...I could love you. Can’t you see that?”

“Right now? I can’t see anything,” Alice said, stepping out the door. “Goodnight, Cassandra. I’m sure Leah will help you with your trig homework, if you ask. She seems very eager to please.”

I watched her dart to her car, my gut roiling. The silver Volvo pulled expertly out of the driveway and sped out of sight, and there was nothing I could do but walk back into the house.

*****

“Your girlfriend seems like kind of a bitch,” Leah remarked, through a mouthful of turkey sandwich.

I looked up from my homework, raising my eyebrows. “She’s not a bitch. She’s just upset,” I said, before looking out the window and sighing. “And she’s not my girlfriend.”

I’d settled Billy in front of the TV, hoping he’d find something that would put him in a better mood by the time my dad got home. Leah had opted to stay in the kitchen with me while I worked on my homework, eating her way through all the sliced turkey I’d bought at the store. She’d largely been chowing down in silence, though she’d glanced over my shoulder a few times at my work, commenting on a few things I’d missed. Now, apparently, she’d decided the time was right to discuss Alice.

“Oh? Huh. She sure seems possessive enough,” Leah said.

“It’s complicated.”
“So are you single or what?”

I looked back at Leah. “I’m not Bella Swan.”

“I barely know Bella Swan. I’m talking to you,” Leah told me, grinning.

“This isn’t even my world,” I returned.

“You have no way of knowing if you’ll ever go home. Makes sense to assume you won’t, really.”

“Thanks, that’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” I muttered, before trying a different tactic. “Bella Swan is straight.”

“Aha,” Leah said, with a smirk. “But I’m supposed to be straight in those books of yours, too, right? So who says Bella is? Anyway, you’re just avoiding the question.”

I groaned, turning back my homework. “I’ve been here for two days. I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Leah sobered. “Anyone special back home?” she asked seriously.

I shook my head. “No. I haven’t really dated for a while,” I admitted. “A few first dates here and there. Nothing that really went anywhere. I’m kind of an introvert. It’s hard for me to meet people.”

“You don’t seem like much of an introvert.”

“Introverts don’t necessarily lack social skills. And we don’t always avoid social contact,” I said, looking back up at her. “The difference between an introvert and an extrovert is the source of our energy. Extroverts feel energized around other people. Introverts expend energy around other people, and spend time alone to recharge.”

“Huh,” Leah said again, taking a seat across from me at the kitchen table. “So what do extroverts spend their energy on?”

“No idea. I think they’re just like the Energizer Bunny, really. They keep going, and going, and going,” I said, with a small smirk.

Leah chuckled. “But you’re a crappy rechargeable battery.”

“Yep.”

“Sucks to be you.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed, smiling.

“So if Alice isn’t your girlfriend, and you’re totally single...you wanna go out on Saturday?” Leah asked.

I threw my hands in the air. “Oh my God, seriously?” I shook my head, then paused as a horrible thought occurred to me. “Wait, please tell me you haven’t imprinted on me.”

“Ugh, no,” Leah said, making a face. “Like I want to turn into a drooling idiot over someone I’ve just met. God, I hope that never happens. We actually think imprinting has to do with mating - literal mating. Making strong children or whatever. There’s never been another female shifter that the tribe knows of, definitely never another female wolf chief, but...well, it’s pretty clear I can’t have kids. No kids, no mating instinct, no imprinting.”
“Oh...right. I knew that, it’s just...it was harder on you in the books,” I said softly. “I’m sorry, Leah.”

“Ah, don’t be. It’s fine. Besides, lucky me, my partner might be able to bear all the kids anyway. Maybe that’s why the shifter gene activated for me - I was never going to be with a guy anyway,” Leah replied. “By the way, you totally failed to answer my question again.”

“I have plans on Saturday, sorry,” I told her, trying to look stern, though I couldn’t help a small smile. “Do you always move this fast?”

“It’s rural Washington. How many other lesbians do you think I’ve met? And clearly I have competition,” Leah returned. “If you didn’t have plans?”

My smile widened. “Maybe.” Then it vanished again, and I sighed. “Things really are complicated with Alice, though.”

“Because you like her, but you just met her, too,” Leah guessed.

“Yeah, that,” I said, hesitating. “And...because vampires imprint, too. Except it’s not tied to making children. She’s imprinted on me. And if I turned into a vampire, I’d return all her feelings.”

Leah rocked back in her chair. “Whoa,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“That’s...a *lot* of pressure.”

“Yeah.”

A shadow passed over her face, and she scowled. “Wait, all she has to do is make you like her, and you’ll be forced to return her feelings?”

“She’s not going to,” I told Leah firmly. “She wants me to choose of my own free will. Even if it means I don’t choose her. She’s not a monster.”

“Uh, vampire, Red. She literally is,” Leah reminded me.

“You turn into a giant wolf. Some people might say the same thing about you,” I retorted. “She means it. She’s trying to respect my choices. Even though it’s not easy for her. Even though I keep giving her mixed signals.”

Leah raised her eyebrows. “Mixed signals?”

“I quoted Byron today. She walks in beauty, like the night,” I said.

Leah let out a low whistle. “Damn, girl. That’s not a mixed signal, that’s clearance for landing.”

“Yeah, she kind of asked me to meet her parents after that,” I admitted, wincing.

“Of course she did.”

“I was an idiot. I feel awful about it.”

“You probably should,” Leah said, though she gave me a faintly teasing grin, then put her hand on top of mine. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up over it. I’ve been there. Not with a vampire, obviously. But...not being sure what you wanted. Not knowing how fast you should go. Believe it or not, I was an awkward baby dyke once, too.”
“I’m over thirty back in my reality. I’m not a baby dyke,” I said, scowling.

“You’re allegedly over thirty in your own body, ten years in the future, in another world,” Leah returned, her smile widening. “Here, you’re an adorable baby dyke who quotes poetry at girls she’s not ready to date. Hey, what poem do I remind you of?”

I looked at her, eyes narrowing. “There once was a man from Nantucket.”

Leah laughed. “No, no, come on, seriously.”

“I don’t have that much poetry memorized,” I complained, though something did spring to mind, and I let out a huffing sigh. “Tyger, tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night; what immortal hand or eye, could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

“Hmm,” Leah mused, preening a little. “Well, I’m a wolf, not a cat, but that does sound pretty badass. Not exactly Byron, but I’ll take it. You really have plans on Saturday?”

“I really do,” I said. “I’m helping my friend Mike study. Then we’re going to watch Forbidden Planet, if the video store has it.”

“Pity,” Leah murmured. “What’s Forbidden Planet?”

“It’s an old science fiction movie, loosely based on The Tempest,” I explained. “The crew of an interstellar ship land on a planet where they discover a scientist and his beautiful daughter, and they’re menaced by a creature formed from the id, the darkest parts of human consciousness. It’s one of the greatest sci-fi films ever made.”

Leah chuckled. “You really are kind of a nerd, aren’t you?”

“I prefer geek, thank you,” I replied primly. I finished my trig worksheet, scowled at the equations, but couldn’t quite work out whether or not I’d made any errors. A couple things seemed wrong. I silently cursed mathematics once more, and sincerely wished I hadn’t driven Alice off. Another pang of guilt and sorrow flared in my gut at that. I could only hope she’d forgive me by tomorrow.

“You okay?” Leah asked, noticing my mood.

“I was just thinking about Alice again. I know, I know, my choice, I shouldn’t feel pressured,” I said, cutting Leah off. “But whether I want to be with her or not...she’s still my friend. She’s been a great friend, actually, and I’ve been a pretty shitty one. I should’ve thought about her feelings before I spoke. I just felt so giddy, you know? I felt like I was close to a breakthrough, and I wanted to be right. Even though it doesn’t actually help much, if at all.”

“I’m not going to complain about you flirting with me,” Leah said. “Although...okay. If I were in Alice’s shoes...her stinky, nasty undead shoes...okay, okay, sorry. Don’t give me that look. If I were in her shoes, yeah, I’d be pretty upset, too. I guess I didn’t help. If I ever see her again, I’ll apologize.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah. Even vampires have feelings, apparently. Weird,” Leah said, making a face and shaking her head. Then she glanced at the door. “Your dad’s home. Uh, Charlie’s home? Your Charlie?”

“Dad’s fine, thanks,” I said, tucking my homework in my bag and smiling at Charlie as he entered. “Hey, dad. Hope you don’t mind, we have company.”
“So I see. Hi there, Leah, what brings you by?” Charlie asked, grinning at her. “How’s your dad?”

“He’s good. Sent over some of his fish fry - Bella and I are going to make it for dinner,” Leah told him. “Uncle Billy asked me to bring him down here to see you.”

“The cable’s out at his place, he was hoping to watch the Sonics game and catch up,” I explained. “I said he could stay. I hope that’s all right?”

“Hey, that’s more than fine with me, if it’s all right with you. Thanks, Bell,” Charlie said. “Is Jake around?”

“No, I guess he caught a bug,” I said. “Leah and I are going to go ahead and start on dinner. Why don’t you go catch up with Billy? I can bring you a beer in a second.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. I can get my own beer, but thanks,” Charlie said, stepping past me to the fridge. “And thanks for dinner, too, girls.”

“Don’t mention it,” Leah said, nudging my side with her elbow. “Bella and I’ve been having a great time, haven’t we, Bells?”

I looked over at her, unable to resist a small smile. “Yeah. The best.”

*****

Dinner required my focus - I hadn’t been lying when I told Leah I’d never cooked with fish fry before, and I was eager to learn, to expand my repertoire to something like Bella’s. She kept up some light flirting, but made sure to walk me through every step, answering my questions patiently as we worked. I whipped up some mashed potatoes and a salad to go with the fish. Given the combination of fried food and carbs, some greens seemed like a good idea. Then we started putting together plates, carrying them out to Billy and Charlie before grabbing our own food and taking our own seats in the living room.

Charlie looked at me in surprise as I sat down, my eyes on the screen. “Bell, I didn’t know you liked basketball.”

“Oh - it’s kind of been growing on me,” I said. “I don’t follow it regularly, but it’s fun to watch. I like the WNBA a little better, though. The Seattle Storm’s actually my favorite team.”

“Huh,” Charlie grunted. “Well, hey, maybe we can go catch a game sometime.”

“I’d like that,” I said, grinning at him.

“Who’s your favorite player?” Leah asked.

“Lauren Jackson, no question,” I said. “You?”

“Jackson’s all right, but Sue Bird is a monster. I mean, you saw her come back from that broken nose last year, right?” Leah asked, starting to grin.

“I remember that! It was pretty damn badass,” I agreed.

Charlie shot an amused glance over at Billy. “Okay, I’m in over my head. You?”
Billy chuckled, though he was still looking at me like I was from an alien planet. Which I guess I was. “I’m starting to understand what we must sound like to the twins,” he replied. His gaze flicked from me to Charlie. “Your daughter told us something interesting earlier. Did you know she’s apparently, and I quote, ‘super mega gay’?”

I folded my arms, my eyes narrowing, thoroughly unimpressed but a little annoyed. Leah was the one who glared daggers at Billy. But Charlie just looked back at me with raised eyebrows.

“Bell, you told them already? Here I thought you weren’t going to go announcing it to everyone,” he said.

“Well, the Blacks and Clearwaters have always been such great friends to us,” I said, looking pointedly at Billy. “I figured I could trust Leah and Billy. Besides, everyone kind of knows at school anyway.”

I couldn’t help the bitterness in my tone at that last part, and Charlie’s expression instantly turned serious. “What? What happened?”

I sighed, looking back at him. “Nothing major, dad. Mike Newton kind of asked me out, so...I decided to tell him the truth. And I guess someone must have overheard, because Lauren Mallory got wind of it and confronted me in the locker room. Since she wasn’t comfortable changing around me, I offered to use the handicapped locker room, and Coach Clapp agreed that would be best.”

Charlie stared at me for a long moment, then set his plate aside and got up. “That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. I’m calling your coach now. Your principal, if I have to. They can’t shove you into a separate locker room just because you’re gay, and those girls have nothing to be scared of. I know you’re a better person than that.”

“Dad, no. I suggested it. Coach Clapp just agreed,” I said. “I don’t want to turn this into a whole thing, and honestly, I like the privacy anyway. If someone in my period needs that locker room, I’ll tell Lauren to shove it and go back to changing with the other girls. But for now, this is fine.”

Leah’s fists were clenched as she spoke. “You shouldn’t let that little bitch walk all over you, though. What’s it going to take for you to stand up for yourself?”

“More than this. Less than you’re thinking,” I said, looking over at Leah, trying to keep my voice calm and soothing. “I promise I’m not going to let Lauren or anyone else get me down. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum might as well be on my coat of arms, okay? If they keep pushing, I’ll push back. And if I need your help, dad, I will let you know, I promise.”

Everyone was looking blankly at me. “Nolite te what now?” Charlie asked.

I coughed sheepishly. “It’s from The Handmaid’s Tale,” I said, shifting in my seat. I wouldn’t have had to explain to Alice, I was sure. Oh, good, there was my old friend the stabbing pang of guilt. “It’s Latin - bad Latin - for ‘don’t let the bastards get you down’.”

Leah laughed, while Charlie chuckled grimly. “Okay. That’s good to know,” he said, settling back in his seat. “But you keep me posted, Bella. And I will step in if things go too far. Maybe I should have a word with Mr. Mallory as it is. Or with the Newtons - you think Mike told her?”

“No, dad, I’m sure he didn’t,” I said quickly. “Mike’s a good guy. He hasn’t treated me any differently since I told him. Well - okay, a little differently, but not in a bad way. We’re getting together on Saturday to study for English class, as friends. And please, please don’t get Lauren’s parents involved. I don’t think that’s going to make her any happier.
Charlie sighed, searching my eyes. “Okay, Bella. I'll leave it alone for now. If you're sure.”

“I am. Thanks, dad,” I said, giving him a genuine smile.

“Hey, if it helps at all, I'm gay, too. And I've been getting along okay,” Leah added, with a grin.

I shot her an exasperated look, while Charlie raised his eyebrows at her. “Huh. Does Harry know?”

“Yeah, he does. Nearly gave him a heart attack when I told him,” Leah joked. I turned away to hide the horrified expression on my face. “I haven't told too many people outside my family, though.”

“Huh,” Charlie said again, turning back to his food.

The rest of dinner was fairly uneventful. Dad and Billy got caught up enough in the game that I didn't have to suffer any more pointed comments, and by the time it finished Billy seemed tired enough that he was past caring. He and Charlie said their goodbyes, and Leah moved to help him back out to the truck.

“Walk me out, Bell?” she suggested, nodding toward the door.

“Uh...sure,” I agreed, following along. She helped Billy up to the passenger seat, stowing his wheelchair in the back, then grabbed my hand.

“Wait, shit. You got a marker or something?” she asked.

“No – wait, what are you doing?” I returned, raising my eyebrows.

“Giving you my number, obviously. Hang on,” Leah said, climbing in the driver's seat and opening the glove compartment. Billy murmured something to her, and she muttered back at him before returning, slamming the door behind her, looking briefly irritated. When her eyes fell on me again, though, she smiled, and scrawled something in the notebook she'd pulled out of the car. “Here. Phone number and e-mail address.”

She tore the page out of the notebook, handing it over, and I glanced at it before folding it and tucking it in my pocket. “Leah, I don't belong here. And you saw everything that happened with Alice. I told you what she's going through.”

“Ih, you did. I also think none of it matters,” Leah replied. “Bella, Cass, whatever you want me to call you – you're not responsible for anyone's feelings but your own. And as for not belonging here, well...shit, I don't know. Your story's just plain weird, you know? You know lots of things that you shouldn't, true, but it's still a little hard to believe.”

I could feel my face harden. “Oh, you think I'm crazy, and that makes it okay to hit on me.”

“Shit. No,” Leah said, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking me in the eye. “I'm getting this all wrong. I don't think you're crazy. I don't know what's going on. But I get the sense you're just as lost. Be honest with me. You don't even know how you got here. Do you think it's at all likely you're going to figure out a way home.”

I shut my eyes, fighting back the tears I could feel burning against my eyelids. “I don't...I don't
know,” I whispered.

“Hey. Hey, it's going to be okay,” Leah said, pulling me into her arms and holding me close. “I can't imagine what you're going through. I think you're doing the best you can, under the circumstances. But I also think the odds are that you're just... Bella Swan now. You're going to be Bella Swan for the rest of your life. And I think you're confused and hurting right now, and you need a friend who isn't completely in love with you.”

I laughed against her shoulder, without real humor. “You've been flirting with me all night.”

“'Cause you're cute, Red. Smart, sassy, maybe a little weak-willed but you show backbone when you need it. And you're goddamned adorable when you blush,” Leah replied, a smile in her voice. Then her tone turned serious. “But I'll drop it completely if it makes you uncomfortable. Yeah, I like you, but that's all it is. I can tell you need a friend right now, is all. Someone who knows the truth, but isn't a Cullen, and won't judge you for shit that isn't your fault.”

“I could,” I agreed softly, sniffling. “I don't know about the rest. I feel like I don't know anything right now.”

“Okay. Well, you want to talk, just call, or shoot me an e-mail,” Leah said, letting me go, stepping back. “Goodnight, Bella.”

“Goodnight, Leah,” I said softly, heading back inside.

Charlie was at the sink, washing dishes, and looked up as I shut the door behind me. I could hear the truck starting up and pulling away. “You have fun tonight, Bells?” he asked. “I wasn't expecting Billy to drop by. Hope we didn't wreck your plans.”

“All I was planning was a quiet night in. It's fine, I got my homework done. That's all I needed,” I assured him. “It was good to see Leah. And Billy, of course.”

“Yeah, Billy hasn't really been by in a while. That was nice,” Charlie said, drying a plate and setting it aside. “Leah Clearwater's sure grown. Hell of a kid, too. Billy tells me she's really stepped up on the reservation lately, started making a name for herself.”

“Uh-huh...” I agreed, eyes narrowing, not sure where this was going.

“I, uh...I didn't know she was gay. Then again I didn't know you were, 'til last night,” Charlie said, reddening. “Look, Bella, I'm, uh, I'm just saying. Harry and Sue have been my friends for a long time, and they raised two great kids. You and Leah really seemed to be hitting it off, and if that means you're...you know...”

“Oh my God!” I said, my cheeks burning. “Dad!”

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Charlie said, holding up his hands. “I shouldn't meddle. You don't need my permission.”

“Nothing is happening with me and Leah, okay? Or me and Alice, or me and Jessica, and definitely not me and Lauren Mallory!” I told him. “It is entirely possible for me to have friends who are girls without any of them being my girlfriend.”

“No, I know,” Charlie said, turning back to the sink, his voice gruff. “Sorry.”

I sighed, running both hands through my hair. “I'm sorry I snapped at you,” I said softly, stepping over to him and putting a hand on his arm. “You're trying to look out for me. I get it. And I promise,
if I do start dating anyone, I'll let you know. But right now I'm just trying to settle in. Okay?"

“Yeah...okay. I got you,” Charlie agreed, his tone softening.

“You need help with the dishes?”

“Nah, I got it covered. Go hit the sack.”

“Will do. Night, dad.”

“Night, Bella.”
Sleep came for me soon enough, bringing with it my third straight night of troubling dreams. This time, though, they were focused on the world I'd fallen into, not the world I came from. I could see myself with Alice – immortal, beautiful, all my choices stripped away until there was the single inevitable reality of our love. An eternity spent with me as her favorite model, her as my muse, the two of us best friends and lovers who could never be parted. But I could see what I'd be giving up, too. Any semblance of family. Any and all lasting friendships among humans. The possibility of children, of the daughter I'd always wanted. A cold, sterile existence.

And then there was Leah. Beautiful, in a far more human way. Rougher around the edges, but all the more alluring for that. Blunt and bold and exactly my type. I could see myself falling for her, too. Maybe I was already crushing on her a little. My unconscious mind took that and ran with it, showing me visions of a future with her, instead. I could see her driving me ever onward, badgering me into trying new things, into standing up for myself and chasing my dreams. I could see myself bearing our daughter, thanks to some Quileute sperm donor, see us raising her together. I could see her giving up her wolf so we could grow old together. And I could see Alice's grief as I slipped from her grasp forever. It was vast and inescapable, and I had the horrifying idea that she might end her immortal life rather than face eternity without her destined companion. I saw her die in half a dozen creative, horrible ways, and I saw the rest of her family look at me with hate as they left.

So I didn't sleep very well, all things considered, and my mind was still whirling with guilt and confusion when I woke. Morning brought clarity, though, as it always had. First of all, I knew I was getting way, way ahead of myself. Leah had made it clear she was interested in me, but nothing more. And Alice still wasn't inevitable.

More importantly, though, there was something I'd meant to tell Leah last night, and I really ought to do it right away. I turned on the computer, allowing myself a few more minutes to scold myself for my wild imaginings while it booted up, and then I opened my e-mail and dashed off a quick note.

Leah -

There's something you should know, and I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry. Your dad has serious heart problems, possibly deadly. In the second book, he dies from a heart attack. He needs to see a doctor and start on some kind of treatment right away. I don't know whether or not his death can be prevented, but I really, really hope it can.

I'll be thinking about you and your family. And about what you said. Talk to you soon.

- Bella

It was becoming more and more automatic for me to use Bella's name, I realized. That was useful, but unsettling. Maybe Leah was right. Maybe I should admit that I was unlikely to ever find my way home. Maybe I should just start thinking of myself as Bella Swan, and build a new life out of hers.

It felt like giving up. But did I really have a choice?

I showered, dressed, and made my way downstairs for breakfast. I was just about to tell Charlie that I might need him to drive me to school when I looked out the window and saw a sleek, sporty yellow convertible parked in the driveway with the top up. Alice stepped out of the car, nodding as our eyes met through the glass.
I finished my cereal and scrubbed the dishes I'd used before leaning down and giving Charlie a one-armed hug. “Alice is here. See you later, dad.”

“Hey, Bell – I mean it. You tell me if anyone gives you any more trouble,” Charlie said sternly, looking me in the eyes.

“I will, I promise. Gotta go!” I said, hurrying out to meet my...whatever we were now.

Alice put on a smile and waved at Charlie through the window. It vanished as soon as we got in. “Just so you know, I'm still mad at you.”

“I know. I deserve it,” I said quietly. “Honestly, I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd decided to cut off all contact altogether. I was going to ask Charlie to take me to school because I figured you wouldn't show up.”

“I'm not that mad,” Alice returned, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel. “Okay, I am that mad. But I can't just stop talking to you. If I do that...mostly I stop seeing your future at all, and I'm pretty sure I know what that means.”

“Nothing happened with me and Leah,” I told her, and I thought she relaxed incrementally. I couldn't be sure. “You must still see futures where we're together.”

“I do. But with Leah in the picture, I can't see how likely they are,” Alice said, frustrated. I looked away, deciding to change the subject. “This is a nice car.”

“It is, isn't it?” Alice said, a hint of a smile in her voice. “Rosalie dragged me down to Seattle after I got home. I saw this little beauty and fell in love, and we threw money at the dealership until they let us drive it away.”

“Oh. Well, uh...sometimes I like to go shopping when I'm in a bad mood, too,” I said awkwardly. I remembered in the abstract how wealthy the Cullens were, but it hadn't really sunk in until that moment, sitting in Alice's very expensive new toy. “Mostly I just get books or Lego sets or something.”

“I was in a really bad mood,” Alice replied. Silence fell for another moment as she pulled into the parking lot. Then she sighed. “Cassandra, will you promise me something?”

“Um. What is it?” I asked, looking up to find her golden eyes on me. They were the color of dark honey today, black filtering in at the edges. That didn't seem like a good sign. Maybe her hunger was tied to stress.

“Will you still give me a chance?” she said, in a soft, tightly controlled voice. “Whatever might happen with you and Leah, will you still give me the chance to – to take you out, to show you exactly who I am, to try and win your affections?”

“Alice, nothing has happened with me and Leah. I know you can't see that, but get Edward to check if you need to.” I said, sighing. My tone softened as I went on. “But of course you still get a chance. I'm just going to be busy this weekend. I'm helping Mike with English on Saturday, and Sunday I was hoping maybe Charlie would teach me how to drive the truck.”

Alice nodded, lost in thought. “...what if you came over to our place on Sunday instead?” she asked, holding up a hand before I could object. “We could help you learn the basics, so you don't come off as suspiciously ignorant when Charlie tries to teach you to drive stick. And Esme and Carlisle really do want to meet you. Not just because you're my mate – my potential mate. Carlisle would like to
know more about where you came from, what you remember from those books of yours. He likes your trinomial classification system, too.”

She gave me a slight smile, and I couldn't help returning it as I mulled it over. I really was eager to meet Dr. Carlisle Cullen, actually, and maybe borrow a few hundred books from his study. From all the Cullens' personal libraries, now that I thought about it. “Okay. Come by at noon on Sunday. This is strictly about meeting Esme and Carlisle and spending some time with the others, though. This is not an official 'meet the parents' deal, and if I'm going to be courted, I do expect an actual date at some point.”

Alice looked back at me and smiled hesitantly. “I think I can manage that.”

“Cool,” I replied, giving her a small smile in return.

With that, we headed inside to begin our day.

English and Government passed uneventfully, but Jessica caught up with me on my way to Trigonometry, her eyes wide. “Oh my God, Bella! I heard about what happened with Lauren yesterday, are you okay?”

“I'm fine, it's no big deal,” I assured her. “Lauren's a total bitch, but I'll deal.”

“Well, don't worry, I totally disinvited her from our lunch table,” Jessica said, putting on a brave face.

I suddenly recalled that Lauren was supposed to be one of the most popular girls at Forks High, and smiled at Jessica in admiration and gratitude. That had probably cost her. “Jess, you didn't have to do that. You barely know me. Not that I'm not grateful.”

“Well...thanks,” I said. “So does everyone in school know now?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jessica said, grimacing. “Jennifer and Ashley are sticking with Lauren like good little minions. June and Sam are cool. I'm not sure about Angela, though. Her dad's a minister.”

“Oh. Well...I guess we'll see,” I replied. “That doesn't necessarily mean she's anti-gay or anything.”

“I guess not,” Jessica said, shrugging. “Hey, is Alice still going to sit with us at lunch?”

“Um, I think so,” I said, glancing away. She hadn't said anything about going back on her word, and I knew she couldn't have forgotten. Still, she was really mad at me. “As far as I know, anyway.”

“Awesome,” Jessica said, beaming at me as we finally took our seats.

Trigonometry crawled by, followed by an hour of Spanish, and lunch at last. Alice was already sitting at our table when we arrived, leaving the other girls awed. I could see Lauren, Ashley and Jennifer glaring at us jealously from their new table across the room, and suppressed a satisfied, malicious smile.

I stayed pretty focused on my food all through lunch – I didn't have much to share beyond basic makeup techniques, and I really couldn't keep up with the conversation. I made some small talk when the opportunity arose, but otherwise let Alice have the floor until the bell rang. Jessica groaned softly as Alice graciously took her leave.
Angela stopped me as I got up, giving me a sweet smile and a brief hug before walking with me to our next class. “Let me know if you need anything, okay, Bella?” she said softly. “I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I said, not really sure how to take that. “’Cause of the gay thing...?”

“No, because people are going to be awful to you about it, and I'm sorry,” Angela replied. “I don't know what to tell you about the gay thing. My dad's the minister, not me, and he taught me we're all sinners and we should love each other anyway. Hey, but if you'd like to talk to him sometime...”

“I'm not really Christian, Angela, but thanks,” I told her, as we arrived in the bio lab. I hesitated, then gave her another quick hug. “Seriously, thanks.”

“Don't mention it,” Angela told me, flashing me another smile as she took her seat.

I sat down next to Alice, who glanced over at me and gave me a small, reserved smile. “And how is your first day as Out And Proud Bella going?” she asked quietly.

“You didn't skip ahead after the gym incident yesterday?” I returned.

“I'm trying not to pay too much attention to anything that's not a threat to you. Besides, I want to hear what you think.”

I let out a long breath. “Lauren's awful. I'm sure she'll try to find some other way to humiliate me soon,” I replied. “But other than that, it's been great. I mean, 2005 isn't exactly 2015, but it could be a lot worse.”

“I doubt things could have changed that much in ten years,” Alice returned. “This isn't a very revolutionary era.”

“You'd be surprised,” I returned, smirking a little at having one up on the all-seeing Alice Cullen for once.

Alice arched an eyebrow at me. “Oh?”

I grinned. “Spoilers.”

Alice narrowed her eyes, but Mr. Banner called class to order just then, giving me the perfect excuse to turn all my attention to taking notes. Or most of my attention, at least. I glanced at Alice out of the corner of my eye a few times during the class period, smiling pleasantly every time I caught her looking speculatively back at me. Finally, the bell rang, and we both got up.

“You're a little minx, you know that?” Alice grumbled. “Here I thought you'd be trying to get on my good side.”

“Who do you think you're calling little, short stuff?” I fired back, smiling through the little pang of guilt I felt at the reminder. “And I am. But not at the cost of the future. If you can't see it yet, it's not set in stone. Anything could throw it off. I've probably wreaked enough havoc with the timeline as is.”

“Does everything really get so much better that you don't even want to risk it?” Alice asked.

“Well, no. The future's not a complete paradise or anything,” I conceded. “There are definitely things I'd change if I could. But there are things I don't want to lose, either. And I guess...I don't want to jinx it, either. Even if, logically, telling you now wouldn't change a thing. For all I know, I've already
screwed it all up.”

“Hmm. Maybe now you know what it's like to be me,” Alice remarked. “At least a little bit.”

“I don't think I'll ever understand just how your brain works,” I told her, with a small smirk. “Some things man was never meant to know.”

Her eyes narrowed at me again. “Good side,” she reminded me, in a sing-song voice.

“Already apologized,” I sang back. “Will try to do better. But snark is part of my charm.”

“Go to gym, ridiculous human,” Alice muttered.

I gave her a quick salute and retreated, grinning. Maybe things would be okay between us after all.

*****

Gym wasn't a complete shitshow, though my team was playing against Lauren and her friends, and the ball somehow ended up flying in my direction every time any of them had it. The coach was too busy supervising the other teams to put a stop to it. I tried not to read too much into it.

At last, the torture was over. I changed quickly and met Alice at her car. She seemed more relaxed around me, after our exchange earlier. I couldn't help but count that as a good thing, and it put me in a better mood, too. Which meant that I started filling the more-or-less comfortable silence between us with humming.

Alice listened in silence for a bit, then glanced at me as we pulled into the driveway. “I don't think I've ever heard that song before. What is it?”

“Oh – Taylor Swift,” I said, before blushing. “Who...probably isn't even a thing yet. I keep forgetting what's come out and what hasn't.”

“Can't say I've heard of her, though Edward's the music buff, and he tends toward classical. At least in public,” Alice replied, getting out of the car. “It was pretty, though.”

“Most of my friends back home are a little over her. I'm still kind of obsessed,” I admitted.

“Well, it's new to me. Do you remember the lyrics?”

“Um. Not all of them, mostly just the chorus,” I said, thinking, then singing in a soft, low tone.

*And I don't know how it gets better than this*  
*You take my hand and drag me headfirst*  
*Fearless*  
*And I don't know why, but with you I'd dance*  
*In a storm in my best dress*  
*Fearless*

Alice watched me, a small smile curling her lips. “You have a pretty voice.”

“I really don't, trust me,” I replied, flushing. “At least, I never did.”
“Well, maybe on your world, you sound like an angry horse or something,” Alice said breezily. “But here it's pretty enough. For a human.”

“Gee, thanks,” I replied, sticking out my tongue and unlocking the door.

“Do you like to sing? I suppose you mustn't, if you don't like the sound of your own voice,” Alice said.

“I do, actually. I just have a tendency to embarrass myself. I've written a few songs, too. The lyrics, mostly, and melody. I can't read music and I don't know how to play an instrument – I've tried to teach myself guitar a couple times, but I keep falling out of practice. So it's all just...up here.” I tapped my head.

Alice smiled. “I'd like to hear your work sometime. Maybe Edward can help you get it down.”

“Maybe. Some of it's...personal. I wrote a song for my mom, after she passed. For her memorial service. It was pretty much the first time I'd sung in public in ten years.” My vision blurred as tears filled my eyes, and I wiped them away, sniffing.

Alice put her cold, hard little hand on my arm, and I forced a smile as I looked back at her. “I'm fine,” I said. “It's fine. It just...still hits me hard sometimes.”

“I wish I knew what to say,” Alice admitted. “I don't remember my family. I don't know what family I had left.”

I took a deep breath, meeting Alice's eyes, realizing in that moment that I could give her the key to her mortal life – and I couldn't see a good reason not to. Except maybe it would be hard to process right now, even for her. “Alice, there...there are things I can tell you about that,” I said softly. “All of your backstories come up at some point in the books, and I remember some of yours. Your real name, for one thing – I mean, the name you had as a human. And why you were turned. I could tell you, if you wanted.”

Alice's eyes widened, and she looked away for a moment, shutting her eyes. I thought maybe she was looking ahead to the moment when I would spill everything, but after a few seconds, she just shook her head. “Tell me when I ask you. Not before,” she said, her voice slightly strained as she opened her eyes again. “If I find out now, I'm going to want to chase it down as soon as possible. And I can't. Not yet. I need to be here, for you.”

I glanced at my feet, feeling vaguely guilty again. “Well...if you're sure. But whenever you decide you want to know...”

“I'll tell you, I promise. I'm just trying very hard not to settle on anything yet,” Alice replied. “Thank you. I really do appreciate it.”

“Any time,” I promised.

*****

Alice stayed long enough to help me with my homework before bidding me goodnight and heading home. With my schoolwork out of the way, I took down a box of spaghetti and a jar of premade sauce for later, and took some frozen garlic bread out to thaw – not the fanciest meal, but I didn't
think Charlie would complain. Then I slipped upstairs and turned on my computer, opening up my e-mail right away. There was a message from Renée demanding to know how my first week at Forks High was going – if I'd settled in okay, if I'd made any friends, how Charlie was doing, how I liked my classes. I set that aside to answer later, focusing on the other important message in my inbox: a reply from Leah.

_Bella -_

_Okay, it is still really weird to think of my life in terms of 'first book' and 'second book,' and seriously not helpful. Could you give me some actual dates or something? I'm nagging my dad to go to the doctor anyway. Billy's helping. He still doesn't like you, but this is important enough that he's helping._

Anything else I should know? Do Sam and Emily have a three-headed baby? Does my brother fall in with a bad crowd? Do I get ridiculously drunk and end up with a humiliating tattoo?

_You said you were too busy to hang on Saturday. What about next Friday? Not a date. Just two friends going to a movie and talking over burgers. You seen Million Dollar Baby?_  

- _Leah_

I smiled slightly, typing out a reply.

_Hey Leah -_

_What, no nickname this time?_

_Sorry, it's hard for me to stop thinking in terms of the books. But I know the next book starts with Bella's – okay, fine, my – eighteenth birthday, which would be September 13th. Your dad has his heart attack sometime after that – I think a few months afterward. I'm sorry I can't pin it down more exactly. I really wish I had an Internet connection to my world so I could just look this up. I think (and hope!) your dad will be okay if he gets treatment early and avoids sudden shocks, but I'm not a doctor._

_No three-headed babies. Seth worships the ground you walk on, so any trouble he gets in is probably going to be your fault. He does become a shifter, though, so watch out for that. Any embarrassing tattoos you might or might not have were not mentioned in the original text, but if you decide to get one, I vote mermaid._

_I have not seen Million Dollar Baby, but it's supposed to be good. Not a date means I pay my share, so don't get any ideas about escorting the little lady out on the town, Clearwater. Pick me up at 6?_  

- _Bella_

I turned my attention to Renée next, trying to give her all the daughterly attention she deserved.

_Hi mom!_

_Believe it or not, I'm having a great time here in Forks. I miss you, obviously, but I'm settling in really well. My classes are great (except trig, which is the worst) and, yes, I am making plenty of friends. This really nice girl named Alice showed me around my first day, and she's been hanging with me after school and helping me with my math homework and stuff. Her father's a doctor at the hospital and dad thinks very highly of the whole family. And then there's Jessica, Angela, Samantha, June, Mike...I'm really not lacking for friends. Actually, I even met Leah Clearwater last night (or met her again – we probably met when we were little, right?) and she seems really cool._
Dad is getting along well, too. Pretty much the usual routine of working and fishing, but we’ve been spending some time together. We eat dinner together every night and even watched the Sonics game on TV together. (Basketball's really grown on me. As a spectator sport. Don't worry, I'm not going to try to play.)

There is actually something I want to tell you, but...not through e-mail, okay? Please call when you get a chance. I have plans on Saturday and Sunday, but most weekday evenings are probably fine. It's nothing dangerous or life-threatening or anything. I'm not in a gang or using drugs. I'm definitely not pregnant. Don't worry.

Give my love to Phil. Talk to you soon!

Love,

Bella

By the time I sent that off, Leah had fired off another reply, and I grinned as I saw the first line.

Yo, Ginger Spice -

You want nicknames, I'll give you nicknames, Red.

Thanks for the tip about dad's health. I really hope you're right. We'll do what we can.

SETH IS GOING TO BE A SHIFTER?! Way to bury that one, Swan! Fucking noted though. Also noted, your seriously embarrassing thing for mermaids. What are you, six?

6 pm. Friday. I'll be there. Thanks for the warning about not getting any ideas, I was going to buy you a corsage and break out my strollin' pants.

- L

I shook my head, thoroughly amused, then headed back downstairs to make dinner. I wasn’t sure what else lay around the corner, but at least I wouldn't be bored.
Possibilities

The next couple of days passed quietly – no earthshattering revelations, no unexpected meetings, just classes, homework, and a Saturday afternoon spent studying with Mike Newton. His mother was incredibly nice, though she pretty clearly hoped sparks would fly between us. Mike was friendly, grateful for my help, and intrigued when I casually let it slip that Jessica Stanley had kind of a thing for him – making sure to act embarrassed and guilty and swearing him to secrecy as soon as I did.

Most importantly, *Forbidden Planet* was just as much fun as I remembered. Mike wasn't as into it as I was, but he seemed to like it okay, and took notes while I explained the influence of *The Tempest* and the various parallels between them.

And then it was Sunday.

I had to admit that I'd been burning with anticipation since I'd agreed to visit the Cullen house – actually, if I was perfectly honest, since Alice had first extended the invitation. The chance to talk with Carlisle, in particular, was hitting all my science geek buttons, and I hoped to smooth things over with Rosalie, at least, if not Edward. And, of course, there was Alice herself. Beautiful, clever, creative, and instantly and completely in love with me in a way I couldn't yet reciprocate, no matter how attracted I was. I wasn't ready to surrender my future completely to fate, to give up my ability to choose. But maybe, the more time I spent with Alice, the more I would feel that it *was* my choice. Maybe I could start falling in love with her, too.

That was where my head was at when I woke, early for a Sunday, and immediately started agonizing over what to wear, what to do with my hair, how to do my makeup. Bella's wardrobe wasn't the most extensive I'd ever seen, but I managed to pick out a brown skirt that fell a bit past mid-thigh, matching leather boots, black leggings, and a white shirt and dark purple cardigan combo that showed off a little of my cleavage. After watching half a dozen Internet tutorials, I'd managed a fairly nice French braid, draping the end over my shoulder. Bella really didn't have much in the way of makeup – actually, she had less than I did, and I was very much in the 'find a look that works and stick with it until they stop making the makeup you like' camp. So I managed a little eyeshadow and some strawberry lip balm, and that was about it.

Alice pulled into the driveway precisely at noon, just as I'd finished bolting down a quick lunch, and I quickly dashed out the door, shrugging into my too-thin jacket and knit cap and hurrying to the car. I wasn't completely able to hide my shivering as I sat down, but luckily the car was already warm.

“There's a coat in the back. You really need some warmer clothes,” Alice said, looking over at me and smiling, her eyes twinkling. “Hello, by the way.”

“Oh – thanks. We'll mostly be inside though, right?” I asked, twisting around to grab the coat from the backseat regardless.

“Probably, but that isn't completely certain. And this is a long-term issue, anyway. Maybe next weekend we can go to Seattle and do some shopping.” Her golden eyes took on an eager, almost unsettling gleam, her lips pulling into a grin.

“That sounds fun for Alices,” I allowed, with a small smirk. “Maybe not so much for Cassandras. I kind of tend to get what I need as quickly as possible and get the hell out.”

“Really? Why is that?” Alice asked, frowning. “You seem to have fun in the futures where we *do* go shopping together.”
“Um...I don't know. It's how I've always been,” I said, turning it over in my mind. “I mean...I guess part of it is...I hate my body. I hated it when I was still presenting as a guy. I still hate it now. My hair never does what I want, my body fat goes to all the wrong places, my nose is too big and makeup never seems to look right on my face, it's just...it's not hard for me to find clothes I like. It's hard for me to find clothes I find flattering on myself. So mostly I just get some jeans and t-shirts that fit and leave. It's a little easier when I'm with friends, but when it's just me, I'm too hard on myself to enjoy shopping.”

I'd teared up a little while I was speaking, and Alice glanced over at me in concern. “You know I think you're beautiful, don't you?” she asked softly.

“You think **Bella** is beautiful. You never saw my actual body,” I returned.

“No, I didn't. But I sincerely doubt you were as hideous as you seem to think,” Alice said. “I doubt your friends think of you as unattractive, either.”

“I'm not completely repulsive. But I'm not beautiful. I wasn't, anyway,” I said. “This body is pretty close to what I always wanted for myself. Maybe not the brown eyes, but most of the rest of it. I'd say maybe that's why I ended up here, but...”

I trailed off, and Alice waited in silence for a moment before speaking again. “But what, Cass?”

“Wishes don't come true, and prayers aren't answered. Not like this, not so blatantly,” I said softly. “When I started puberty, I got on my knees every night and begged God to please, please let me wake up as a girl. When I broke away from the church I grew up in, became a neopagan, it was spells to cure my diabetes, to alter my body, to reweave reality, in the mad, desperate hope that somehow I could will the universe into the way it was supposed to be. But magic in my world is – weak, if it exists at all. I can banish spirits, ward rooms and houses against malevolent forces, maybe summon a storm if the weather's trending that way anyway, but I can't do anything that couldn't just be coincidence, or delusion, or a psychological trick. I could talk to the Goddess, to people I'd lost, but they could tell me nothing I didn't already know or think on some level, so maybe I was just talking to my own unconscious the whole time, deliberately deluding myself to make myself feel better. So no. I don't think I landed in this universe because I wanted it, or wished for it, or prayed for it. I would have asked to be a hundred other people, to live in a hundred other worlds, before I chose to be Bella Swan in this one.”

Alice was silent for a few more minutes as we drove over the Calawah River, heading out of Forks proper. “You can be happy here,” she said at last. “I've seen it.”

“Well...I can. I can be happy anywhere, for a little while, at least. Happiness is a feeling, not a permanent state of being,” I said, before sighing. “I'm sorry. I get like this sometimes. Even with the meds. It'll pass.”

“Can I help?” Alice asked, her voice breaking a little.

“You can listen to me vent,” I told her, trying to smile reassuringly. “Maybe you can drive me to appointments with Dr. Beckett, if Charlie's not available, or check up on me to make sure I'm taking my meds. You can offer me advice, if I ask for it. You can be my friend.”

“Always,” she said, without hesitation, a lifelong promise in a single word.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice very small, my words completely inadequate. I looked out the window at the trees blurring by and tried to drag myself back out of my funk.
My mood had only improved a little by the time the house came into view, but any lingering malaise was shunted aside, at least for the moment, by the beauty of the scene. Six massive trees arrayed around the clearing it stood in shaded the house and the whole of the rolling yard, and the house itself was a gorgeous Victorian manor, three stories tall and painted off-white, with a broad covered porch wrapping around the first story. As we got out of the car, I could smell the evergreen trees all around us, hear the river waters flowing in the distance, and *Bella's Lullaby* immediately started playing in the back of my mind, the plaintive, yearning music linked forever in my brain to the soaring forests and cloudy skies of the Pacific Northwest.

“Are you ready?” Alice asked gently, offering her hand.

I smiled back at her, feeling better now that I was actually stepping into the Cullen house, and had plenty of other matters on my mind. My fingers found hers, wrapping around her petite hand. “As I’ll ever be. Let’s go meet your parents.”

We walked up the steps and through the front door, and I felt a little breathless as I took in the first floor. I’d known the broad strokes in the abstract, of course, but they were nothing compared to the sight of the place. The kitchen was partially closed off, but the rest of the floor was open, from the front door to the back wall, which was entirely broad glass windows and sliding doors. A huge, curving staircase dominated one side of the space, leading up to the second story. Near the front door, low couches and chairs were arranged in three sides of a square around a broad coffee table and a flatscreen TV plugged into a satellite box and various gaming consoles. Just beyond that, a beautiful old grand piano sat upon a raised dais – and it was here that the other Cullens were gathered, watching and waiting to greet me.

My eyes fell first on Rosalie and Edward, anxious to see how they’d react to my arrival. Rosalie continued to look annoyed and slightly uncomfortable, but Edward was staring at me with naked curiosity. Emmett, standing with his arm around Rosalie's waist, was already giving me an apologetic smile. I was pretty sure Jasper was holding his breath. At last, I let myself look at Carlisle and Esme.

Carlisle looked to be in his early twenties, scarcely older than his own adopted children, but there was a paternal air about him nonetheless. His blond hair was longer than I’d expected, brushing his collar. His jaw and cheekbones were sharply defined, masculine but not overbearing. His eyes radiated strength and compassion. His stance was relaxed. This was a man who had nothing at all to prove to the world, and it somehow made him even more devastatingly attractive, enough to draw a light blush to my cheeks.

Esme looked like a Disney princess given form – thin, arched eyebrows, perfectly wavy light brown hair, a heart-shaped face and full, expressive lips. She was slender, but there was a soft roundness to her. She was beautiful, of course, but it was a gentle, comforting beauty, maternal and warm. She smiled at me as she saw my eyes falling on her at last, and stepped forward gracefully.

“Hello, Cassandra,” she said, her voice soft and smooth and effortlessly reassuring. “I'm sorry, do you prefer Cassandra, or Bella?”

My blush deepened as I realized just how long I'd spent staring. “I'm so sorry, I've been horribly rude,” I said quickly. “Hello, it's lovely to meet you – you and Dr. Cullen both. Um. Cassandra, please, at least in private. For now. Cass is fine, too. I don't really like Cassie.”
“Cassandra, then. Please, don't apologize. I know all this must be overwhelming,” Esme told me. “Welcome to our home. Would you like anything to eat? Or drink? We picked up a few things at the store, just in case.”

“Oh. Wow. I'm not hungry right now, but maybe some water? Please?” I asked. “I mean, I can get it if you just show me where the glasses are.”

“Nonsense, it's no trouble. Be right back,” Esme said, slipping off to the kitchen at a distinctly human pace.

I felt a brief flare of confusion, and Edward answered my thoughts before I could give them voice. “She doesn't want to startle you, or make you uncomfortable,” he explained. “You haven't seen any of us moving at our top speeds yet.”

“Oh, that's nice of her,” I said, before realizing she could hear me. “Thank you, Esme.”

“Not at all!” she called back.

Carlisle stepped forward then, sticking out his hand. “Hello, Cassandra. It's wonderful to meet you. Alice has told us so much about you,” he said. “Please, feel free to call me Carlisle.”

I couldn't help breaking into a smile as I shook his hand. His skin was as hard as stone, of course, but his grip was very gentle. “It's great to meet you, too, sir. Uh, Carlisle. I've really been looking forward to it. I really, really hope I won't be too much of a bother.”

“Relax,” Alice murmured into my ear, touching my shoulder lightly.

Carlisle chuckled softly. “I'll be happy to talk to you about anything you like. Don't worry about it.”

Esme returned with a glass of water then, and as I turned to take it, I saw Rosalie turning to speak quietly with Emmett, her head jerking slightly toward the back doors. Clearing out rather than dealing with the obnoxious human, then – but I still felt a pang of guilt at offending Rosalie, and I still wanted to make it right. Steeling my nerve, I cleared my throat.

“Rosalie?” I asked, as clearly as I could. “I'd actually like to have a word with you, first. In private. If that's all right.”

Rosalie froze, then slowly turned to stare at me, her eyes wide at first but soon beginning to narrow. Emmett nudged her in the ribs, and she shot him a sharp, venomous glance before seeming to relent, turning her gaze back on me. “Fine. We can talk in my room.”

I shot a nervous glance at Alice, and she smiled back at me. “You'll be fine,” she said. “She won't bite.”

“I haven't decided to bite,” Rosalie said, smirking a little. “Yet.”

“Rosalie, be nice,” Esme chided.

None of that was really making me feel any better. Still – it had to be done. I swallowed my anxiety and followed Rosalie up the stairs to the room she shared with Emmett.

*****
Emmett and Rosalie's bedroom was more of a suite, pressed up against the south wall of the house, meaning that one entire wall was floor-to-ceiling windows. There was a sparkling clean bathroom to the left of the entrance, with a tall shelf packed full of cosmetics and hair products, and a walk-in closet on the other end of the suite, most of it given over to Rosalie's clothes and shoes, though it looked like Emmett had a surprisingly respectable wardrobe, too. The bed was king-sized, blocky and very sturdy, and there were a couple chairs and a low table next to the southern wall.

Rosalie shut the door behind us, arching a perfect eyebrow as she stalked past me and lowered herself into one of the chairs. “So. Talk.”

“Um,” I said, glancing around. “Actually, now that I think about it – can't everyone downstairs hear us?”

“All our rooms are soundproofed. Especially mine and Emmett's,” Rosalie replies, giving me a smug, feline grin as I flushed. “Even the glass is specially made so we don't bother each other. Edward could always listen in, of course, but he's learned to shift his attention elsewhere. What's the matter? Are you afraid I'm going to eat you?”

Her voice took on a bitter edge at that, and I flinched, my flush deepening. “No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you ever would. I know you have more control than that,” I told her, hesitating briefly before continuing. “I know a lot about you, actually. Probably more than you'd want me to.”

She grew very still at that, then turned to stare out the window. “Are any of us allowed any secrets from you?”

“There's a lot I don't know. The books don't cover every detail of every one of your lives,” I said, drifting closer, putting my hand on the back of the empty chair. “But I know how and why each of you were changed. I know a little about what happened afterward. And your story was...very memorable. I'm sorry.”

“Why? You weren't behind any of it,” Rosalie replied, still staring at the forest and the river behind the house. “All you did was read a book. We're all just fictional characters to you. Why do you care?”

“Because for reasons I don't understand, none of you are fictional anymore. You have lives outside of the story. And I'm part of them. And honestly, Rosalie, I cared about you even when I thought of you as fictional. You, Emmett, Carlisle, Alice...you were interesting to me. I liked you all a lot,” I said. I looked down at the chair and sighed. “May I sit?”

Rosalie looked back at me, then nodded once, and I lowered myself into the seat. “Liked me? Or pitied me?” she asked.

“Liked you. I wouldn't dare pity you,” I told her, my lips quirking into a small, brief smile. “We're more than the worst moments of our lives. I kind of have to believe that.”

“Hm,” Rosalie grunted, her face neutral. “So why did you want to talk to me?”

“To apologize, and...to explain,” I replied. “What I said to you, that first day – it was out of line. I know why you think I should stay human. And I don't exactly...disagree.”

Rosalie sat up straight, her lips pressed in a thin line, her eyes on mine. “Are you serious?”

I nodded, but couldn't hold her gaze. I let my eyes fall to my lap, instead, and knitted my fingers together awkwardly. “You wanted to know why I wasn't just...falling in with Alice. It would be so easy to do just that, Rosalie. To just give in and be with her forever, to love her as fiercely as she
loves me,” I said slowly. “But there are reasons why I'm hesitating. And that's a big one. I want to have children. I've wanted it as long as I can remember. I've always seen myself with a daughter, someday. I even have a name picked out. Roselaine.”

I glanced up in time to see a smile quirking Rosalie's lips, her golden eyebrows rising, and I made a face at her. “It's not about you, don't let it go to your head,” I scolded her. “I saw it once and thought it was one of the most beautiful names I'd ever seen. And it shortens easily. It was already on my mind years before I read one word about you.”

“Mm-hm,” she replied, smirking slightly, though it soon faded. “So. You've always wanted a daughter. Why haven't you had one?”

“Usual reasons. I haven't met the right person, I don't have money for any of the...alternatives,” I said, waving vaguely. “And...I don't know how much Alice told you, or how much even she's really seen, but...back home, I'm a male-to-female transsexual. And I will never be able to bear children. I mean, barring some medical miracle, that is. I could adopt, of course, or maybe my partner could have kids, and I'd love my daughter, or any of my children, just as much no matter what but...I can never bear them myself. Except now I'm in the body of someone who can. Now I could get pregnant, if I wanted to. But only if I stay human. At least for a while longer.”

I heard a soft cracking noise, and looked up to find Rosalie's fingers clenched so tightly on the arm of her chair that she'd broken part of it off. Her golden eyes were locked on me. “Then that's what you have to do,” she said, quietly but firmly. “Alice will understand. You don't have to become a vampire to be with her, you can wait until you're ready. You'll have to use a sperm donor anyway, won't you? It's not like you would ever be with a man.”

“That's...complicated. But I am primarily attracted to women, so yes, I'd need a sperm donor. Actually...” I trailed off, looking away, my mind suddenly on another train of thought. I gazed out at the trees without really seeing them. “…huh.”

“What? What is it?” Rosalie asked.

My eyes flicked back to her, and I forced my expression into something more casually neutral, shaking my head. “Nothing, I mean, I just thought of something, but – nothing important,” I told her. “You...do understand that there are other reasons why I'm hesitating, right? I mean, I like Alice. I like her a lot, actually, and I've had a serious crush on her since the first time I read Twilight. But I've known her as a person for less than a week. Humans don't really get the whole 'undying love at first sight' thing.”

Rosalie's eyes narrowed at my evasion, but she let me change the subject nonetheless. “No one's asking you to fall in love with her right away. But she wants, more than anything, to be with you. Let her take you out. Let her be your girlfriend. I'm sure you'll be falling in no time,” she said, fingers flicking in a dismissive gesture.

“And what happens if I find a way home?” I asked. “What if I go away and leave Alice all alone?”

Rosalie tilted her head at me, regarding me for a moment, then shrugged. “What if you get in a car accident? What if you fall down the stairs? What if you die and leave Alice all alone?”

I scowled. “I'm serious.”

“So am I,” she returned. “Stop trying to plan for everything. Stop trying to think ten years ahead. You are here, now, and Alice loves you, and you won't even let yourself be courted because you're already looking ahead to being her eternal vampire mate. You're not sure you want that. Fine. There
are lots of stages in between. And yes, you might go away, but that's always a risk. Even vampires
can die. We might be harder to kill than human beings, but we're not invincible. And if you decide
she's not the one you want, she'll be hurt, but she'll respect it. Would you like to go on a date with
my little sister or not?”

Rosalie’s eyes bore into me, and I flushed a little. “Uh, probably.”

“Do you think you would enjoy kissing my little sister?”

“Almost definitely?” I squeaked, turning redder.

“Then stop dithering and give her a chance already,” Rosalie told me, rolling her eyes, then giving
me a pointed look. “Was there anything else you wanted to say to me?”

“Not really,” I said, getting up and biting my lip. “...are we okay?”

“Fine,” Rosalie said, with another dismissive little gesture. “I forgive you.”

I allowed myself a small smile. “...friends?”

“Don't push it,” she replied, though her lips quirked in return. “Send Emmett up here if you see him.”

“I will. Thanks,” I said, slipping out of the room. I had to talk to Alice, of course – but first I wanted to
spend some time with Carlisle. I had a few questions he might be able to answer.

*****

I passed Rosalie’s message on to Emmett, and he hurried up the stairs, the two of them emerging a
split second later and heading out into the woods. Alice, of course, had already seen my request to
speak with Carlisle coming, and sent me up to his study with a smile. The door was open, but I
paused and knocked on the frame nonetheless.

“Please, Cassandra, come in,” Carlisle called.

I pushed open the door, and found myself in a spacious, high-ceilinged room dominated by
bookcases running from floor to ceiling, packed with books on medicine, folklore, mythology,
theology, chemistry, psychology and more. I didn't see any fiction, at first glance, but there were too
many tomes to count. There were a few windows on the opposite side of the room, behind his desk,
and I could see doors leading off to other rooms on either side. Glancing back at the door I'd just
come through, I saw that the wall surrounding it was covered in pictures ranging from oil paintings to
framed woodcuts to photographs of varying ages, many of them featuring Carlisle himself, though I
didn't look at them too closely.

“Wow,” I breathed.

Carlisle chuckled, rising from his seat behind the desk, setting aside the medical journal he'd been
reading. “I take it you approve.”

“You do not need my approval. This place is amazing. The whole house, really,” I said.

“That would be Esme's work,” Carlisle said fondly, walking over to me. “We all add our personal
touches, of course, but she has a knack for decorating to each of our tastes. And you've seen the
common areas, of course. Would you like the door open or closed?”

“Huh? Oh, closed, please,” I said, tearing my attention away from the books as Carlisle nodded and shut the door. “I really can't tell you how much I've been looking forward to meeting you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, believe me,” he replied. “You mean the world to Alice, of course – she can't stop talking about you. And aside from that, you bring a very interesting perspective into play. In some ways, it sounds like you may know more about our world than we do.”

I felt my cheeks warming again. “I wouldn't say that. I remember the broad strokes, not necessarily the fine details. If I had access to the Twilight Saga Wiki or the Twilight Lexicon, I could tell you a lot more. Or even if I had my phone. I have the first book on there, at least.”

“Yes, the circumstances of your arrival were very strange,” Carlisle agreed. “To be honest, if it weren't for the fact that you know things you have no other way of knowing, I might have suspected some kind of psychotic break or dissociative episode. But aside from a few points of divergence, from everything Alice has told me, you know far too much about our world to be so easily dismissed. To all intents and purposes, your consciousness does indeed appear to have been translated from a world where our lives are all part of a work of fiction.”

He gestured at the chair in front of his desk, moving again to his own chair behind it. “Please, sit. Make yourself comfortable. I'd very much like to know whatever you can tell me about these books.”

“Well, they're a cultural phenomenon, really,” I said, lowering myself into one of the most comfortable office chairs I'd ever sat in. “Four books – or five or six, depending on how you count them. Five movies based off of them. Millions of fans, mostly young women. And more fan fiction than I can count, written by people with all kinds of perspectives on the books. Some who love them, some who hate them, some who find the universe interesting but thought the actual books and films were lacking...honestly, I think I remember the fan fiction better than I remember the canon novels, in some cases.”

“I see,” Carlisle said. “You don't still consider this some...fiction-induced hallucination, do you?”

“How can I, when all the evidence of my senses tells me otherwise?” I asked, gesturing vaguely toward him. “I think we're past the point where I can dismiss all this as a story I fell into. If I were dreaming, the world wouldn't be nearly this coherent, and I almost certainly would have woken up by now. If I were hallucinating due to brain damage...I don't know for sure. But I don't think it would be like this. And this all feels real. All of you feel like real people, with lives and thoughts and actions that extend beyond my part of the narrative. None of this makes sense. Things like this don't happen outside of bad sitcoms or soap operas. You don't get hit on the head with a book and wake up in the story.”

“I certainly doubt it was that simple,” he replied. “But I'm afraid I'm out of my depth here as well. I could review everything humanity currently understands about physics and parallel realities, and I doubt I would get any closer to understanding what happened to you, or how to reverse it. I wish I could be of more help.”

“No, it's not your fault. And I'm not expecting any of you to work this out. Not when I barely even know where to start,” I said, shaking my head and looking down at my lap. “...could we talk about something else? I don't like to spend too much time thinking about this.”

“Of course,” Carlisle said graciously. “So, your trinomial classification for our species – vampyrus sanguisuga meyerii – I assume that's derived from the author of these books?”
“Well, I stole it from Libriomancer, at least the meyerii part, but yes,” I replied, looking back up, a smile settling on my lips. “Stephenie Meyer. She's the one responsible for the whole thing. Although it doesn't make a great deal of sense in the context of this world. Assuming Stephenie Meyer exists here, vampire civilization predates her existence on the order of millennia, and she's hardly the one who discovered the species. I'd probably go with vampyrus sanguisuga vulgaris.”


“The system wasn't really intended for this world. To the best of my knowledge, you have four supernatural species worth classifying, and all of them are derived from homo sapiens anyway. I developed it for – are you familiar with Buffy the Vampire Slayer?”

Carlisle chuckled. “Yes, very. We all found it extremely amusing,” he remarked. “The children even dressed up as the cast for Halloween one year. Rosalie and Emmett were Buffy and Angel, Alice and Jasper were Willow and Xander, and Edward was somehow convinced to dress up as Rupert Giles.”

“I...cannot picture that at all, but please tell me you have photos,” I said, snickering.

“Esme has an entire shelf full of albums in the library upstairs. She can find them for you,” Carlisle assured me, smiling. “But you were saying?”

“Yes, well...back home I'm kind of a geek. I was running a tabletop role-playing game based on Buffy, and wanted to introduce some lore on new species of vampires and demons,” I explained. “I started thinking about how a bunch of stuffy British Watchers would see the world, and came up with Hillsthwaite Trinomial Classification as a system used in their central demonic catalogue. The family vampyrus refers to any demonic species that feeds in some way upon the life force or vital fluids of living beings, the genus sanguisuga refers specifically to blood-drinkers, and then you have the various species. I made some notes about the system using deliberately corrupted Latin to excuse my own lack of fluency, of course.”

“I see,” Carlisle said, his eyebrows rising. “And what are the four species of our world, in your estimation?”

“Vampyrus sanguisuga vulgaris – vampires,” I listed. “The Quileute shifters, therianthropus pseudolupus quileute, though they ultimately derive from their tribe's ancient ability to send their spirits out of their bodies...regardless, their abilities now seem to be primarily biological and passed on genetically. The Children of the Moon, therianthropus pseudolupus europus. And...vampyrus sanguisuga hybridus.”

Carlisle stared at me, unblinking. “Hybridus?” he echoed.

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “In the books, Edward and Bella are married, and go on their honeymoon while she's still human. She persuades him to have sex with her,” I said, shifting uncomfortably as I tried to remain as clinical as possible. “This results in a highly accelerated pregnancy and the birth of a hybrid daughter. Part vampire, part human, aging to adulthood in approximately seven years, with a mind as fully developed as any adult human's at birth.”

“That...should not be possible. I've never heard of anything like that,” Carlisle said, his eyes wide.

“The alleged science behind it isn't remotely worthy of the name. It only gets worse from there. But if we assume that this world is close enough to the Twilight canon that most major events have occurred or will occur, then it's not only possible, it's already happened. In the books, there are other
hybrids, fathered by a vampire who's been running incredibly unethical experiments in vampire-human reproduction. I can give you his name as well as his son's name and approximate location. Very approximate.”

Carlisle's eyes narrowed, and he nodded. “It's not something we can address right away, but please.”

“The vampire's name is Joham. His son is Nahuel, and he lives in the Amazon. I'm afraid I don't know much more than that, though I do know that Nahuel is not the only hybrid,” I said. “Nahuel is innocent of all this. He has nothing to do with his father.”

“I see. Thank you, Cassandra,” Carlisle said. “I still don't understand how a vampire and a human could reproduce. Or why it's not already public knowledge among our kind.”

“Most vampires aren't in the habit of having sex with humans – except for the sisters in the Denali coven, yes, I know,” I said, raising my hand before Carlisle could correct me. “But female vampires can't get pregnant, and certainly can't get human men pregnant. Edward and Bella were a special case. Although I...am starting to wonder about something. It seems impossible, but vampire-human reproduction seems impossible in the first place.”

Carlisle frowned. “What is it?”

“This is a very delicate question,” I warned. “When a human becomes a vampire, all of their bodily fluids are replaced by venom, correct?”

“Yes, indeed,” Carlisle said, nodding.

I took another deep breath. “Would that include the ejaculate of the male vampire?”

Carlisle's eyes widened, and he actually seemed taken aback for a moment. “I'm...not entirely sure,” he said. “I'd need to run some tests.”

“Fair enough, but, um, check my thinking first,” I said, flushing. “Bearing in mind that I'm not a doctor. Why would a male vampire's sperm survive the transition from human to vampire when a female vampire's eggs do not?”

“How do we know they don't?” Carlisle asked.

“All right, I suppose we don't,” I allowed. “They could just be sitting in the ovaries, never going anywhere, though that seems pretty unlikely to me. Something worth testing. Second question: why wouldn't a male vampire's ejaculate, full of venom, immediately begin converting his human sexual partner?”

“That question I can answer. Only a vampire's bite, or the venom taken from our mouths, can begin the conversion process,” Carlisle explained. “There is a particular biological process connected with our saliva production which renders vampiric saliva more potent.”

“Ah.” I raised a finger. “It's a matter of potency. So the venom in the rest of the body is a weaker form. Correct?”

Carlisle nodded, and I carried on. “Is it safe to assume that the conversion process rewrites human DNA? That, in fact, venom carries genetic information allowing it to do so?”

“That would seem logical,” Carlisle said, his eyes growing wide again as he followed the train of thought to its conclusion. “You propose that the weaker forms of venom carry that same information. Penetrating the mucus membrane, a male vampire's ejaculate encounters a female human's egg and
begins the conversion process, grafting his own DNA onto the genetic material she has already contributed, leading to an accelerated maturation process into a fully-fledged vampire – no, hybrid. Because the child's body adapts to the venom as it grows, preventing total conversion. It's an interesting hypothesis, though of course it would need to be tested, and it would be difficult to structure ethical experiments...is Bella's body capable of handling the pregnancy?"

“Ah – yes and no. She has to drink human blood to sustain the baby, and the child ends up tearing her way free, forcing the rest of you to turn Bella to save her life,” I said. “It's pretty gruesome, to be honest, but there are probably ways to mitigate the danger.”

“I see,” Carlisle said, frowning deeply. “Then ethical experimentation might be impossible. Perhaps donated eggs could be combined with venom...but then the embryos would need to be implanted or terminated, at some point or another. I'm not sure I like either possibility.”

“It's...tricky. But I think it's worth pursuing, as far as we can,” I said, hesitating. “I do have another question, though. If I'm right, and it's weakened vampire venom that leads to conception, not altered sperm...what's to prevent a female vampire from acting as the father?”

Carlisle looked up, staring at me. “That's a very interesting question,” he said evenly. “One that implies a certain level of personal interest.”

I squirmed under his gaze, looking away. “I'm not committing to anything. It's too soon,” I told him. “But I'm a planner. I like to know my options. All of them.”

Carlisle nodded slowly. “I'll see what I can find out.”

“Thank you,” I replied, looking back at him and smiling sheepishly. “I'm sorry our conversation got this heavy. It's probably not what you expected.”

“No, Alice told me you wanted to speak with me, but – not what it was about. I think she wanted to respect your privacy.” Carlisle said, smiling faintly back at me. “Don't apologize. You've raised some interesting ideas, especially for a layman.”

“I'm really just thinking through the implications of the story. And trying not to think about the chromosome thing.” I returned. Carlisle quirked an eyebrow at me, and I sighed. “In the books, vampires have twenty-five pairs of chromosomes. The Quileute shifters have twenty-four pairs. So do vampire-human hybrids. For some reason this means Alice can't see hybrids, just as she can't see the Quileute wolves, and it means that wolves can imprint on hybrids even though they can't imprint on vampires or other wolves.”

Carlisle blinked slowly. “...all of that sounds extremely unlikely,” he said.

“Thank you!” I exclaimed, throwing up my hands.

Carlisle chuckled, rising from his seat. “You know, you may not be a doctor or a biologist in your world, but you do have another shot now,” he told me. “At nearly any career you'd like.”

I wrinkled my nose. “If I'm going to pick a career that requires that much math, I think I'm going to aim for astronaut,” I replied. “Besides, I'm squeamish, Bella's squeamish...I have a feeling that might not end well. Unless I join you guys, anyway.”

“I see. Well, it might be something to keep in mind. Particularly if you do join us. You may find the vampire mind more suited to mathematics, and you're not likely to find yourself repulsed by blood. Quite the opposite,” Carlisle murmured.
I shuddered, getting up as well and looking at the pictures on the wall to distract myself. “Yeah.”

Carlisle moved to stand beside me, putting his hand on my shoulder. “We'd all work with you, of course. We've all struggled against our impulses, and managed to overcome them. Rosalie and Edward have been to medical school multiple times, even if they don't practice, and they've developed admirable restraint. Jasper finds the struggle more difficult, but even he is managing.”

“I know. Believe me, I know you'd look out for me,” I said. “But I'm scared. Back home, I'm a pacifist. I made that decision a long time ago because I simply couldn't bear the thought of hurting another human being. Having my impulses rewired to the point where I see human beings as food, where all my instincts are screaming at me to hunt them, eat them, kill them...it's terrifying.”

“Then that sounds like powerful motivation to resist,” Carlisle replied. “Alice told me that you take antidepressants, or did, in your world. She wanted me to write you a prescription, actually, even though she must have already seen I wouldn't agree, that I needed to leave it in Dr. Beckett's hands. Weren't you ever afraid that they would change you?”

I nodded. “It's why I resisted medication for so long. I was scared it would change part of who I was. Take away my writing talent, my creativity. Turn me into a zombie or something.”

“But that's not what happened.”

“No. It...took the edge off. Made the lows less dramatic. Gave me the ability to cope, to control myself,” I replied. “But this is different. We're talking about turning me into a predator.”

“But a predator with a human mind – an expanded mind, but an essentially human one nonetheless,” Carlisle said, squeezing my shoulder very, very gently. “Human desires. Human morals. It will take effort, but you will still be able to control yourself, to fight your baser impulses.”

“I can barely resist grabbing a chocolate chip cookie when I know the sugar's bad for me,” I returned.

“The cookie is not a sapient being,” Carlisle chided me, a smile in his voice.

I sighed, nodding slowly. “I haven't decided anything yet. I'm still sorting things out with Alice.”

“I know. Just know that we will be here for you, always, should you decide to join us,” Carlisle said. “That choice is entirely yours, and we will respect whatever decision you make. I absolutely encourage you to take the time to think about it. It's literally life-altering, after all.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that – all of it,” I said. My eyes, still drifting across the pictures, caught upon the largest of them, a painting hanging next to the door in a gilded frame. It was a scene filled with white marble pillars and balconies, populated by pale figures in bright, colorful, swirling robes. On the highest balcony, four figures watched over the crowd, Carlisle among them. The other three men all had dark hair, two of them in black, one in platinum blond or even white.

“The Volturi,” I breathed, feeling a thrill of fear.

“Ah – yes. The rulers of our kind, lax though they are,” Carlisle said. “I see you're already aware of them.”

“They become a vital part of the story,” I murmured. Antagonists, in fact. And I realized, in that moment, that I had no way of protecting myself or anyone else against them. In the books, Bella's shield was vital to her family's survival – and I didn't have it. I might not have any kind of supernatural power at all.
Maybe there was something I could do. Maybe I still had Bella's power, but it worked differently. She kept herself closed off from the world, kept her guard up at all times, consciously or unconsciously. I wasn't like that. I'd always been sensitive – too sensitive, really. I'd opened myself up, worn my heart on my sleeve, and in recent years I'd made a deliberate decision to be open and honest with others. Even so, I did have a 'shield' of my own. A deliberate mental exercise I'd picked up as part of my religious practices, to shield myself from psychic or spiritual harm. Maybe I could use it to call forth Bella's power.

I shut my eyes and concentrated, picturing twining, thorny vines rising up around me, blooming with vivid red roses. A living wall to shield me from all harm, rather than a fragile bubble that could be popped in an instant. Anything that might harm me would be diverted to the roses instead, killing a few blossoms that could be instantly replaced as the brambles cycled around me. Anything that might penetrate the wall would be caught on the thorns and forced back harmlessly. Life was the source of my power. Life was my shield.

“Cassandra?” Carlisle asked. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Just a minute,” I murmured, making the wall in my mind as solid as I could. If I'd successfully summoned Bella's shield, then Edward would no longer be able to hear my thoughts. I was sure he'd notice in an instant, and come upstairs to see what was happening.

“No,” Edward said, stepping into the study. “I can still read you. Please stop filling your mind with roses now. It's distracting.”

I opened my eyes, looking over at him, then at Carlisle. Then I raked my hand through my hair, sighing. “Damn it.”

“What was that all about?” Carlisle asked, frowning. “Why were you thinking of roses?”

“It's...complicated,” I said, with another vague gesture. I really didn't want to explain. With Edward here, I didn't even dare think about it. “And private. I'll explain some other time. Sorry.”

Edward gave me a curious look, but Carlisle just nodded. “If you like. But I do hope you know you can trust us with anything,” the elder vampire said.

“I know you only want to help,” I replied, with a small smile. “But I think I've geeked out enough for now. I'd like to spend some time with Alice, if you don't mind. Edward, is she still downstairs?”

“Of course. We'll talk later,” Carlisle replied graciously.

Edward nodded, offering his arm. “I'll take you to her.”

I hesitated, then smiled as I tucked my arm in his. “What a gentleman,” I teased. “Lead the way.”

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Alice was indeed still downstairs – in fact, she, Esme and Jasper were seated around the piano, with an empty seat left next to her on the loveseat. Edward released my arm as we approached, stepping over to his instrument, while Alice grinned and patted the seat beside her.

“Cassandra, I hope you don't mind, but you were thinking of a melody as you and Alice arrived
“I see,” Edward said, his tone and expression still polite. He sat gracefully on the bench, laying his hands on the keys. “How well do you know it?”

“Pretty well. I listen to it often. Sometimes I play it in a loop when I have trouble sleeping. Or I did,” I replied. “Let me think for a minute.”

I shut my eyes, concentrating, trying to call the song to mind, letting it play out in my head. The room was utterly silent as I thought. Then, as I reached what I thought was the end, I heard Edward begin to play it on the piano, from the beginning, each note resonating through the house. I felt Alice take my hand, her fingers twining with mine, and I opened my eyes, watching as Edward's fingers flew gracefully across the keys, playing with the arrangement.

It wasn't exactly the same, of course – I knew there were other instruments used in the recording. But it was beautiful nonetheless. More than that, it was familiar. Another little piece of home, like Lyra the fox. I squeezed Alice's cold, hard hand lightly, feeling tears in my eyes. At last, the song ended, and Esme clapped in joy.

“That was wonderful, Edward. Cassandra – oh, no, are you all right?” she asked, spotting my tears as she turned to face me.

“Fine,” I said, sniffing and wiping at my eyes. “I'm fine, I just...hadn't expected to hear that again. Thank you.”


I smiled back. “I'd love to hear some of your compositions sometime. They'd be just as novel to me.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, inclining his head again.

“Alice mentioned that you're a songwriter yourself,” Esme remarked, beaming at me.

I looked over at Alice, raising an eyebrow – or trying to. I actually wasn't sure if Bella could raise just one. Hopefully I looked suitably bemused. “Is there anything you haven't told your family about me?”

“It's Esme. None of us keep anything from her,” Alice protested, smiling cutely back at me.

“Oh, really. Does that apply to the stuff Rosalie and Emmett get up to?” I returned, smirking.

“Thankfully the children do exercise some discretion,” Esme interjected, thoroughly amused. “But you may already have noticed that Alice is very talkative. And you've rapidly become her favorite subject.”

“Mainly because of the whole 'from another world' thing. It's not every day I get to meet an alien,” Alice added quickly, giving me a reassuring glance and very, very gently squeezing my hand.
“Right,” I said, shunting aside my lingering guilt and hiding it with a smile. “I'm still human, you know.”

Alice's eyes narrowed suspiciously. “So you claim.”

I laughed, shaking my head, then looked back at Esme. “To answer your question, yes, partly. Mostly I'm just a writer. I'm most comfortable with prose, but I've tried my hand at other things, too. Including poetry and song lyrics.”

“I see. Well, I'd love to see some of your writing sometime. Or hear something you've written,” Esme said.

I smiled ruefully. “Most of it is in another universe, I'm afraid. I haven't committed all that much of it to memory. Really just a couple of my songs, and general outlines or fragments of my other work. But I'm sure I'll come up with something new sooner or later.”

“How many songs have you written?” Edward asked, his fingers still gliding across the keys, playing a piece by Bach, I thought. It sounded familiar, though it wasn't one of my favorites – and just as I thought that, he smiled slightly and switched to Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring. “Better?”

“Creepy,” I told him, though my lips quirked. “Better, but creepy. And around a dozen or so, I think. Some of them better than others. All I really remember are a hymn I wrote in college, the first song I wrote for my Buffy game, and...the song I wrote for my mother's memorial service.”

“You wrote a song for your mother?” Esme asked. “That's so sweet. And I'm so very sorry. How long has she been gone?”

“Less than a year. Well, she...died less than a year ago,” I said slowly. “But she'd developed dementia long before then. By the time she passed away, she couldn't even speak. And as sad as I was, part of me was — relieved. That her suffering was over.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Esme said, rising from her seat and walking over to me, pulling me gracefully into her arms. She was as cold as any of the others, her flesh just as unyielding, but there was comfort in her embrace nonetheless, kindness and compassion radiating through her very being. Somehow she knew just the right amount of pressure to apply, offering comfort without coming close to hurting me. I found my eyes tearing up as I hugged her back, my arms wrapping around her waist while I buried my face in her shoulder. Her fingers ran lightly up and down my back.

At last, I pulled back slightly, sniffling. “Thank you,” I said softly, biting my lip. “I'll...I'll sing it for you. If you want. The song I wrote for her.”

“You don't have to. Certainly not now,” Esme assured me, letting me go.

I shook my head. “No, but I want to. Maybe it'll help. Since I came here, since I found out I exist here too, along with my family...everything I've been feeling the last ten years has been coming up again. And honestly, I don't think I've fully healed anyway. Maybe I never will.” I looked down, twisting my hands in my lap. “And now I have a whole universe, a whole life, to say goodbye to. Maybe this is where it starts. Anyway, I...I messed it up. At my mom's memorial. I broke down, lost the words. My friend had to help me get back on track. Now I can do it properly. With Jasper's help.”

I looked over at him, and he inclined his head. “Of course,” he agreed, pushing another wave of serenity in my direction.

I let out a long breath, nodding back at him as I rose and walked to the dais. “Thanks,” I said, before
glancing back at Edward. “I'm doing my best to remember the arrangement my friend and I came up with. Can you follow it?”

“Yes. When you're ready,” Edward replied.

“Go ahead,” I murmured, drawing in breath as Edward played me in, shutting my eyes briefly to focus on the words.

From the stars of old we came
And to the stars we shall return
Stars we'll never see or name
Past all we'll ever know or learn

The stars themselves will fade and die
All things must fall to dust one day
We hope the soul endures, and I
Hold to this fragile faith and pray

All things fall, and all things rise
All that we were, all that we are
From earth below to fertile skies
From dust to dust, from star to star

You were like the shining sun above
Guiding me through every day
Your strength, your patience, and your love
Set my feet upon this way

There were dreams you dreamed for me
And tales you wove when the nights were long
Now I must dream what's next to be
And weave all my own tales and songs

All things fall, and all things rise
All that we were, all that we are
From earth below to fertile skies
From dust to dust, from star to star

In ending, there must be some grace
Or all ends in futility
There's so much of you I can't replace
But some part of you must live in me

Now let your pilgrim soul fly free
Past setting sun and evening star
Through time and all eternity
To a bright and boundless world afar

All things fall, and all things rise
All that we were, all that you are
From earth below to fertile skies
From dust to dust, from star to star

We commend you now to earth and sky
All that you were, all that you are
All that falls again must rise
From dust to dust, from star to star

I opened my eyes as my voice faded, finding Alice and Jasper watching me, admiring, though there was something else in Alice's eyes, something I couldn't quite read. Esme had moved to my side, and put her arm around my shoulders as soon as I fell silent.

“I never had the pleasure of meeting your mother, Cassandra, but I'm sure she'd be very proud of you,” she said, a small, kindly smile on her lips. “I know I would be.”

I nodded silently, struggling to find an answer. “I'd like to think so,” I said at last. “I lost her too soon. Before she saw me find my place, start to grow into myself. And now I can never see her again.”

With Jasper still pushing calm in my direction, my sadness at the thought was a distant pang, though I know I'd feel it more keenly later, when I had nothing left to distract me. Esme stepped in front of me, her long fingers gently pushing a few stray hair strands from my brow before she leaned in and planted her cold lips softly on my forehead. “Then I suppose I'll just have to be proud enough for the both of us.”

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It was blessedly easy to find other ways of distracting myself after that. As promised, Alice pulled Edward’s Volvo out of the garage, and started teaching me the basics. Then Rosalie and Emmett returned, and Rosalie took over the lesson, drilling me over and over until she finally conceded that I probably wouldn't total my truck the first time out. Then, as night began to settle over us, we watched a couple favorite episodes of Buffy before Alice led me outside and told me just what she had in mind to close out the evening.

I stared at her for a moment, then looked up at the house. “The roof,” I echoed. “You have got to be joking.”

“Nope,” Alice said, giving me a cheerful grin. “Come on, you'll love it.”

“You know we can see the stars just fine from down here,” I returned. “How do we know it'll even support our weight? What if it's too steep? What if I fall?”

“I would never, ever let you fall,” Alice assured me, her smile fading, her eyes serious. “Cass, it will be fine. I promise. We've reinforced the roof – we've all gone up there at one point or another. There's a flat section at the top, and I'll see any trouble coming well before it does.”

I sighed, scanning the rooftop again. “How are we going to get up there?”

The grin returned to Alice's lips. “Piggyback ride. Climb aboard.”

I groaned. “What is it with you people and piggyback rides? At least Edward isn't six inches shorter than I am.”

“Well, if you'd rather ride my big brother...” Alice drawled, giving me a smirk.
I scowled in return. “Ha ha,” I said flatly. “Okay, fine, giddy up. But you're lucky I'm not in my old body, 'cause my legs alone would be a nightmare.”

Alice grinned, turning around, and somehow I managed to get on her back, wrapping my legs around her waist and my arms around her neck. I shut my eyes, deciding I definitely did not want to see this, and all I felt was a rush of air before she set me down on a blanket.

“Okay, open,” she commanded, giggling softly as I carefully pried my eyes open, looking around. Below us, the rest of the Cullens were turning out the lights, until we were left in perfect darkness. I really didn't want to look down, so I turned my eyes up instead.

“Oh,” I breathed softly. “Oh, wow.”

Above us, the skies were clear, a billion stars glittering against the black and blue and purple velvet of the night sky. I hadn't seen a sky like this in over a decade. Even drowned out by city lights, the stars had always made my breath catch – now I couldn't help but gasp at their majesty. My hand found Alice's, and I squeezed her fingers, unyielding as they were.

“Alice, this...this is amazing,” I said.

“I knew you'd like it,” she replied, sounding a little smug.

I raised my eyebrows at her, glancing back in her direction. “Did you cheat?”

Alice laughed, shaking her head. “I did look ahead once I got the idea, but just to make sure there wouldn't be any problems – and that the skies would be clear, of course,” she replied. “I tried not to check your reaction. I might have gotten a little of it. But it was the Byron. The way you quoted the first stanza. You were so...reverent. And I didn't think it was just because you were describing my beauty. Plus you did tell me you wanted to be an astronaut.”

I felt my cheeks burning, and I forced my gaze back to the stars. “I did. For as long as I can remember, it's all I've wanted. I let that dream go when I grew up, but...there is still nothing I wouldn't give to be out there, among the stars. To see other worlds. To find other civilizations, maybe. That's a big draw to joining you, you know.”

Alice stiffened a little beside me, but smiled politely. “Oh?”

I glanced back at her, frowning briefly. “Well...yeah. Immortality would mean watching humanity grow and change across the years. Find a way to other worlds, go back to the moon and on to Mars...maybe even find a way to cross the void between the stars, someday. And if we could ever find a way up there ourselves, vampires would make pretty fantastic astronauts. I mean, you don't need to breathe, you can withstand tremendous pressure, and I don't know what radiation does to you, but I'm guessing you're better at resisting it than human beings are.”

“There is the small problem of blasting off using fire, which is a pretty surefire way to kill us,” Alice returned. “And there's the issue of reentry, too. We wouldn't survive something like Challenger or Columbia. Or the Apollo 1 fire.”

“No,” I said, deflating. “No, I suppose not. Though there are ways around that, too. A space elevator leading up to an orbital launch site. Ion engines.”

“I suppose,” Alice said vaguely. She still seemed distracted, somehow, and generally...off.

“Just...the more you think about immortality, the less likely it seems you'll choose it,” Alice replied. “Or that you'll choose me. You talk about seeing the future, maybe even taking part in it, but...look at you. Look at your life. You have your whole future ahead of you. You could work to join the space program, if you wanted. Maybe even go up into space yourself. But not if you're a vampire. And then there's your mother.”

I froze, my fingers clenching around hers. “What about her?” I said slowly, my voice guarded.

Alice turned to look me in the eyes. “Cass. Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“I...” I shut my eyes, shaking my head. “Of a sort. I believe in reincarnation. But between lives, yes, I do think we get to rest, to see our loved ones again and commune with the divine.”

“And immortality means giving that up,” Alice said. “I mean, best case scenario, assuming you aren't accidentally killed or outright murdered.”

“It does,” I admitted, very quietly. “It would mean that I'm actively hoping to never see my mom again. My Nana. Everyone I've lost, over the years. But Alice, that doesn't mean I want to die. I'm not afraid of death, but – the people I love would want me to live. To be happy. Even if that meant never seeing any of them again.”

“You want to believe that,” Alice said sadly. “I'm just not sure I do. And I'm not sure I want you to give all that up for me.”

I fell silent for a long moment, gathering my thoughts. Then, finally, tentatively, I spoke. “Alice, can you do me a favor?” I asked. “Stop trying to figure out our destiny.”

Alice blinked at me. “What?”

“I mean it,” I said. “Look, it's one thing to check for emergencies – things that might hurt or kill me – and I recognize that you may not always be able to control your powers. But sifting through all our possible futures isn't healthy. For either of us. You can't even see half the stuff that might happen because now Leah's in my life.”

“Don't think I don't hate that,” she replied, making a face.

“Yeah, believe me, I think it's stupid, too. There's no reason your powers shouldn't work when Quileute shifters are involved, it's an absurdly specific immunity on their part, and I wish I could make it better – ow!” I felt a sudden shock leap between our fingers, and jerked my hand back.

Alice sat up. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...fine. Just static electricity or something. Ow, though,” I said, shaking my hand and grimacing. “Look, we're getting off topic. I talked to Rosalie earlier, and she made a good point. I'm overthinking this. And I think you are, too. I know you can't really help that, but try. If we were both human, if we'd just met and started hanging out, all this would be happening naturally. I like you, you like me, we're both into girls, hopefully one or both of us would make a move. Instead we're both dancing around something too big for either of us to deal with. So let's just – pretend there's not a giant elephant in the room and try to get on with it, okay?”

“You do realize the point of the 'elephant in the room' metaphor is that you really can't ignore it, right?” Alice asked, though her lips quirked in a smile.

“Don't be a pedant. I was the English major, that's my job,” I returned, sticking out my tongue.
“I was an English major twice, I win.” She ran a hand through her short, spiky hair, sighing. “So what does getting on with it look like?”

“Well,” I said, starting to smile. “You could start by asking me out on an actual date sometime soon. Maybe something that doesn't involve your whole family.”

“Hmm. Next Friday?” Alice asked, grinning back at me.

“One, that's not very romantic, and I know you have better game than that. Two, I have plans with Leah. Just dinner and a movie. Very specifically not a date,” I added.

Alice made a face, but nodded. “All right. You want romance, I'll give you romance,” she said ominously.

“I'm going to regret this, aren't I?”

Alice flashed me an evil grin. “I hope you're hungry, because I'm going to make you eat those words.”

I smirked back at her. “Bring it, Cullen.”

She smiled smugly, then looked thoughtful, tapping her chin. “You know, it does occur to me that this evening has certain date-like qualities.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I mean, I swept you off your feet, I took your breath away, we lay together beneath the stars...” she replied, inching closer. “If that's not romance, I don't know what is.”

“Mmm, you may be overselling things a bit, but I suppose there were certain romantic qualities,” I conceded, letting her draw me in until our noses were nearly touching. My cheeks burned hotter, and my heart skipped a beat or two.

“And you really want me to just get on with it, do you?”

“That...would definitely be a thing I said,” I allowed, my breath catching in my throat.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Alice murmured, closing what little distance was left between us, her head tilting as her lips met mine, cool and silky and surprisingly pliable, if not exactly soft.

Above us, the stars twinkled away in the endless void, frozen in a single, perfect moment. Back on Earth, I was in Alice Cullen's arms, her small hands on my back, her mouth against mine. And even as the chill settled into my bones and the air in my lungs bled away, I wasn't sure I ever wanted that moment to end. I wasn't sure I ever wanted to come up for air.
Eventually, of course, the kiss had to end, despite my protestations. I needed air, and Alice caught me shivering, so while I still caught her looking at me with longing, she carried me off the roof, ran me home, and scarcely touched me along the way.

“Keep the coat,” she said, as we came to a stop. “You need it more than Rosalie does. We really should go shopping soon. I promise you'll have fun.”

“Well, if that's a promise,” I said, smiling slightly. “I suppose I can give it a try. Although if that's your way of asking me on a date...”

“No, I got it. Romance,” Alice returned with a smirk. “This is solely about your ability to survive the rest of the winter.”

“Okay, okay. We'll figure out a good time,” I agreed. I hesitated for a moment, then took her hand and leaned in to plant a quick kiss on her cold, smooth cheek. “Goodnight, Alice.”

“Goodnight, Cass,” Alice said, giving my hand a very, very gentle squeeze, then brushing her cool lips against my cheek in return. “Sweet dreams.”

I smiled back at her, feeling a faint blush on my cheeks as I pulled back, slipping reluctantly out of the car and into the house. She waited until I was safely inside, and then I saw her headlights swinging away into the night.

“Hey, Bells,” Charlie called from the living room, looking up from the TV. “You have a good day?”

I stripped off the coat and hung it by the door, then walked over to him, leaning over the back of the couch. “The best. You have dinner yet?”

“Aw, kid, you've been cooking for me all week. I was just thinking of ordering some pizza. Sound good?”

“Sounds terrible for both of us. But I'm in,” I replied, grinning and kissing the top of his head lightly. “Thanks, dad.”

He turned at that, raising his eyebrows at me. “Well, you're in a good mood.”

I shrugged. “Like I said, great day. The Cullens are all really something. You were right about Dr. Cullen, he's brilliant. And Alice is a lot of fun.”

I tried to fight off another blush, but from the way Charlie grunted, I didn't think I entirely succeeded. “Uh-huh.”

This time there was no fighting the heat in my cheeks. “She's still not my girlfriend, dad,” I said truthfully.

“Uh-huh,” he repeated, skepticism heavy in his voice.

I threw up my hands in exaggerated exasperation and turned on my heel, ignoring the chuckling behind me. “Give me a shout when the pizza's here!”
I don't usually have a lot of erotic dreams. Not anymore, at least. I had plenty when I was a teenager the first time around, but I'd pretty much figured that phase of my life was over and done with.

I had conveniently forgotten that I was going through a second adolescence.

It started out innocently enough, with my brain replaying the kiss on the rooftop. Then it was Alice's cold lips on my throat, sweeping down my chest and stomach, her cold, hard fingers working down below. And then, all of a sudden, she was on fire, and it was Leah on top of me, our breasts brushing together, her mouth hot on mine. Fragmented scenarios drifted through my head, alternating between them, sometimes starring both of them at the same time, sometimes bringing in special guest stars. I could probably have done without the image of Lauren Mallory naked and begging for our attentions, really, but apparently my unconscious wanted her front and center.

At last, I woke to the winter sunlight streaming through my window. My pajamas and sheets were soaked with sweat. I looked at the trees outside and felt my cheeks burn as I sincerely hoped Alice didn't share her brother's habit of lurking outside their beloved's window – or in her room – all night. As it was, I stripped my bed down, threw the sheets in the hamper with my pajamas, and took a long, hot shower before heading down to breakfast.

As it was, I just had time to heat up a couple Pop Tarts and dash outside with them, shouting a quick goodbye to Charlie, as a car pulled into our driveway. It wasn't Alice's – instead, it was a sleek Mercedes convertible painted a vivid cherry red, and Rosalie was behind the wheel. I stopped in my tracks at the sight, then slowly stepped forward with a mix of caution and reverence, my eyes locked on the car as I carefully maneuvered around it to the passenger side. I slipped into the front seat and eased the door closed, managing to shut it firmly without slamming it.

"Wow," I breathed, once I was safely inside. Then I glanced at my Pop Tarts. "I, uh. I don't think I should eat these in here. I don't even think I should have these in here."

Rosalie rolled her eyes, but there was a pleased little smile on her face. "You can eat. I can vacuum up the crumbs later. Spill anything but water in here, though, and we're going to have words. And try not to get strawberry jam on anything either."

"Deal," I said quickly, before reaching out with one hand to gently brush the dashboard. "Ohhhh, pretty baby. Who's a good little car? Is it you?"

"I'm sorry, are you baby-talking my convertible?" Rosalie asked, pulling out of the driveway.

"Um, yes. Because she's a pretty, pretty baby." I returned, pulling my hand back and starting in on my breakfast. "Sorry. It's early. I might be a little loopy."

"Uh-huh. Well, talk to her like a grownup, at least, will you?" Rosalie glanced over at me, smirking.

I smirked back, tentatively. "Sorry, Rose. I didn't mean to talk down to your car. Does she have a name?"

"I call her Vera," Rosalie said.

I blinked, then started to grin. "Well, my days of not taking you seriously are certainly coming to a middle," I joked, my smile fading as she slowly arched an eyebrow at me. "Uh...we're not...doing Firefly?"
“Vera was one of my best friends when I was human,” Rosalie said evenly.

“Oh. Oh, of course. Geez, I'm sorry,” I said, eyes wide.

Rosalie's lips quirked. “Besides, there's no way I'd trade her for Alice.”

I stared at her another moment, then snickered a few times, hesitantly at first but gradually gaining confidence as her smile widened. Shaking my head, I went on. “Speaking of Alice, where is she?”

“She had some errands to run. She asked me to get you,” Rosalie explained.

It was my turn to raise my eyebrows. “Would these be romantic errands?”

“If they were, I wouldn't tell you. Mystery is at least half of any good romantic gesture,” she told me. Her expression softened. “I'm glad you're taking my advice.”

I smiled faintly, glancing out the window and remembering the kiss. “Me, too. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Rosalie's fingers drummed briefly against the steering wheel. “But look, Cassandra. Don't lead her on, okay? If you ever feel like it's not working, just – let her down as gently as you can and get out. I know what I said about giving this a try, but you need to know when to stop.”

“I'll try,” I promised softly. “I can't promise I won't screw up. I can't promise I'll never hurt her. But I don't want to hurt her, if I can avoid it. Please believe that.”

“I do,” Rosalie assured me, glancing over at me again. “Thanks. I don't want to scare you off, I just – needed to make that clear.”

“Clear as crystal. I wish I could take the whole mating bond away altogether,” I said, gazing out at the trees and houses passing by. “But I'll do the best I can. Under the circumstances.”

“I suppose that's all I can ask. You're hardly perfect, after all,” Rosalie said, preening and smirking. I chuckled, shaking my head. “No, we can't all be you.”

“Oh, you know I hate to brag,” Rosalie demurred playfully, and we both laughed softly as we pulled into the lot.

*****

This was how my romance with Alice Cullen started.

On Monday, when I stopped by my locker to switch out my books before lunch, there was a single red rose resting inside, stripped of its thorns. Resting beside it was a silver charm bracelet with a single charm already on it: a delicately sculpted red enamel rose. Jessica immediately started squealing and cooing over my secret admirer, and dragged me to the usual table to show Angela, Sam and June. I caught Alice watching with definite amusement, a mischievous smile on her face, but the girls were so busy wildly speculating over who my suitor might be, and I was so busy fighting down my blush and steering them away from Alice that I didn't get a chance to talk to her until she drove me home. When she did, she kept me off-balance with a million questions about my life before I arrived in Forks – my favorite animals, the Disney movies I'd liked as a kid, my favorite
poets aside from Tennyson and Yeats, my favorite novels and authors, and more.

Alice picked me up again on Tuesday morning, keeping me busy with more questions until we arrived. Rosalie came up to us as we walked into school, dropping some weird white and silver screw-like things in Alice's hand and winking at me before heading off to class. I had no idea what it was about until Jessica told me someone had stripped the spark plugs from Tyler Crowley's van, forcing him to ride in with Mike Newton, and I suddenly remembered Edward saving Bella from that nasty car accident.

When I stopped by my locker again, there was another gift waiting for me: a silver crescent moon charm, next to a rolled-up piece of paper. I unrolled it to find a pencil sketch of my face in profile, gazing up at a starry sky with wide eyes and an awed, enchanted little smile on my lips. Alice must have drawn it from her perfect memory of Sunday night. I laughed when I saw the title scrawled at the bottom in her delicate handwriting – *Bella Notte*.

On Wednesday, it was a golden quill charm, and a leather-bound journal stamped with the image of a unicorn rampant – balanced on its hind hooves, with its front legs raised in the air. On Thursday, when I was slated to attend my first meeting of the Student Gaming Society, it was a miniature twenty-sided die charm, and a bag of purple polyhedral dice with gold numbers, as well as the *Pathfinder* core rulebook. In the front of the book was a groanworthy little note: *I hope you don't mind that I took the initiative*. Alice would smile and preen a bit when I thanked her for the gifts, but otherwise kept up the questions, committing everything I told her to memory but giving no hints as to what might happen next.

By the time Friday rolled around, I was practically bursting with anticipation, and so were Jessica and the other girls. They all crowded around my locker when I stopped off to change out my books, and Alice didn't disappoint: today's charm was an open book rendered in silver, resting atop a thick hardcover volume titled *The World Treasury of Classic Poetry*. There was a bookmark in the middle, and as I opened it, the other girls abruptly stopped chattering, alerting me to a presence behind me.

"In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria," Alice Cullen's voice murmured, her sweet breath blowing across my face as she leaned in and up, speaking into my ear, "dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: Incipit vita nova."

I shivered a little, but turned, starting to smile. The other girls were all staring. She was, of course, as beautiful as ever, dressed in a deep purple sweater, a black skirt and tall black boots, just a hint of her pale thighs showing. In her hands she held another single red rose. Her golden eyes searched mine, and her lips quivered, pouty and inviting. My smile widened as I drank her in.

"I'm sorry to say I don't speak Italian," I told her. Jessica elbowed me sharply in the ribs. "Ow! Hey!"

"That is *not* what you say to the pocket hottie who's been showering you with gifts all week, Bella!" Jessica hissed in response, too softly for a human to hear – but Alice caught it all, her lips quirking and eyes glimmering.

"It's all right," Alice said, holding the rose out to me. "It's Dante. *La Vita Nuova*. My favorite translation is this: in that book which is my memory...on the first page that is the chapter when I first met you appear the words: here begins a new life."

All the girls around me sighed in unison. A split-second later, I realized it had actually been all the girls *including* me, and I flushed deeply, accepting the rose from Alice and narrowing my eyes as she started to smile. Still, I couldn't fight the smile that still curved my own lips. "Was there something
you wanted to ask me, Alice?"

“Very much so, Bella,” Alice replied. “I was wondering if you'd let me take you out to dinner next Friday. There's a lovely Italian place in Port Angeles. It's called Bella Italia. It seemed too good to resist.”

“Say yes,” Jessica hissed at me. Clearly I was no longer to be trusted with my own affairs.

“Definitely say yes,” Angela whispered, on my other side.

I shushed them both, waving my free hand and smelling the rose as I pretended to think about it. But I couldn't hold back. I broke into a huge grin. “I'd be delighted.”

The other girls squealed, and Alice positively beamed. “Wonderful! Shall I pick you up at seven?”

“Seven sounds great,” I agreed.

“All right,” Alice said, hesitating briefly before leaning up to kiss my cheek. “See you in Biology.”

With that, she waved at the others, then sashayed off. My eyes stayed locked on her retreating figure.

“Oh my God, oh my God, Alice Cullen, Bella! I mean, I knew you were friends, but – I could have sworn she was with Jasper Hale! Wait, does that mean Jasper's single?” Jessica said, looking briefly speculative before shaking it off. “We are so totally going shopping tomorrow. You are going to rock this date. And she's not going to do your makeup this time, so you'll definitely need the help.”

“Why wait?” Samantha asked. “Look, let's just blow off the rest of the day and go now.”

“Sam, we're not skipping. Stop trying to find an excuse to blow off classes,” Angela interjected.

“I have plans tonight anyway. With a friend,” I added, looking sharply at Jessica, hoping to head off a new round of gossip and speculation. “But sure. Tomorrow. I could use some help figuring out what to wear.”

That set off a whole new round of squeals, and soon the others were all fiercely debating the merits of various outfits, hairstyles and makeup choices, while I just did my level best to keep up.

*****

My good mood lasted through the rest of the day, despite contemptuous looks from Lauren and her posse. I could scarcely pay any attention at all in Biology, and Alice had to give me her notes again once the school day was done. She didn't linger once we got to my house, though – she just kissed me on the cheek and smiled as I returned the favor. I tried very hard to keep my face turned away as I walked to the door so she wouldn't see me grinning like an idiot.

Charlie had already told me he planned to reheat some leftovers from earlier in the week for his dinner, and I figured I could get my homework done on Saturday night or Sunday, so I decided to do a little tidying up in the kitchen while I waited for Leah. This soon turned into a little idle bopping as I wiped off the counters, then full-on dancing, then outright booty-shaking as I sang Taylor Swift a cappella at the top of my lungs.

\textit{I stay out too late}
Got nothing in my brain
At least that's what people say
Mmm-mmm
That's what people say
Mmm-mmm

I go on too many dates
But I can't make them stay
At least that's what people say
Mmm-mmm
That's what people say
Mmm-mmm

But I keep cruising
Can't stop, won't stop moving
It's like I've got this music
In my mind
Saying it's gonna be all right
Cause the players gonna play
Play play play play
And the haters gonna hate
Hate hate hate hate
Baby I'm just gonna shake
Shake shake shake shake
Shake it off
Shake it off

Heartbreakers gonna break
Break break break break
And the fakers gonna fake
Fake fake fake fake
Baby I'm just gonna shake
Shake shake –

There was a loud knock on the door then, breaking me out of my Swift-filled haze. My eyes grew wide and my face warmed as I glanced at the clock and then crept towards the door, unlocking the deadbolt and opening it slowly. “How, uh...how much did you hear?”

Leah Clearwater grinned down at me. “Ah, don't worry about it, baby. Just shake it off.”

I groaned, running a hand over my face. “That song isn't going to come out for almost ten years, so you should probably just forget you ever heard it.”

“Yes, that seems pretty unlikely, Red,” Leah returned. “Were you dancing? I heard footsteps. Sure sounded like you were dancing.”

“You can't prove a thing, Clearwater,” I said, grabbing Rosalie's coat – or my coat now, as the case might be – off the hook.

“Um, no,” Leah said, her nose wrinkling as she saw the coat. She plucked it from my hands, holding it at arm's length with two fingers, and tried to put it back on the hook. It fell on the floor instead. She didn't move to pick it up.
“No? I'm not allowed a warm coat?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“You're not allowed one that reeks of vampires. Not in my car,” Leah returned.

“I've been wearing it since Sunday! Rosalie probably hardly ever wore it at all! It can't smell that bad.”

“She probably wore it more than you think. There are still traces of her scent clinging to that thing. In fact...” Leah gently took me by both shoulders, leaning in and sniffing me lightly. I stiffened a little and she jerked back. “Uh, sorry. But the smell's all over you, too. Probably because you're around them all the time. Maybe you could take a shower?”

I let out a long sigh, folding my arms and looking stubbornly up at her. “I could, but one, I'd rather not, and two, if you can smell mere traces of them on me and my clothing, how many showers would I have to take?”

Leah thought about that for a second, then grimaced. “Shit. A lot, probably.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, sighing again. “Is it really that bad?”

“It's – not great. It doesn't smell right,” Leah replied, making a face. “Ugh, whatever. I can deal. You don't need that coat, though. I can keep you warm.”

I raised my eyebrows at her again. “Can you, now?”

Leah broke into an unrepentant grin. “Not like that. Unless you'd like me to, obviously,” she returned. “Just let me put my arm around you or whatever if you're cold. We'll be inside most of the time anyway.”

I thought about that for a moment, then nodded slowly, picking up the coat and putting it back on the hook. “Okay. I'll leave the coat at home. This time. But if I die of hypothermia, it's on you.”

“I won't even let your teeth start chattering. Good to go?”

“Ready as I'll ever be,” I agreed, heading outside with her and catching my first glimpse of Leah's car. It was old, but well-kept, painted a glossy black, and I knew it like the back of my hand. I broke into a grin as I went around to the passenger side. “No way. You have the Metallicar.”

“The what?” Leah asked, looking at me blankly. “It's a '67 Chevy Impala.”

I laughed. “Sure, but come on. You ever seen Supernatural?”

“...the album by Carlos Santana? My parents have it...”

“No, the TV show – oh, it's probably not on yet.” I realized.

Leah shook her head, getting into the driver's seat. “Right, the time travel stuff again. Come on, aren't you afraid of erasing yourself from history or something?” she asked, smirking over at me and lightly tapping her fist on my head. “Hello? Hello? Think, McFly!”

“Quit it,” I protested, pushing her arm aside and sticking my tongue out at her. “I'm not going to erase myself, I already exist here.”

“Wait, what? So why haven't you called yourself or something?” Leah asked as we pulled out of the driveway.
“Because there's still plenty of stuff I could mess up, and...” I shook my head. “It's a bad idea. I'd be tempted to start changing things. Things I can't or shouldn't change, no matter how much I want to. I've already been over this with Alice and Edward.”

“Edward – that's another one of the leeches?”

I gave her a level look. “Cullens, please. Or vampires, if you're referring to the species. Alice doesn't go around calling you a dog, so maybe we could skip the slurs.”

Leah grunted. “Sorry. Whatever. I know you're friends. It's just they're literally what I was made to fight, you know?”

“Your duty is to protect your tribe from danger. The Cullens aren't a threat to you. They don't want to hurt you, or anyone,” I reminded her. “I won't say they aren't dangerous, just like I won't say you aren't, but they're good people. And yes, they're my friends.”

“Okay. Sorry,” Leah said again, a little stiffly. “Maybe we should talk about something else.”


“Driver picks the music, passenger shuts her damn pie-hole,” Leah said promptly, as I started snickering. “Especially if that song back at the house is the kind of crap you listen to, and why the hell are you giggling?”

I waved her off, still laughing. “You are really going to need to watch Supernatural.”

“Crazy goddamned white girl,” Leah muttered, albeit somewhat fondly, as we drove off into the night.

*****

“Fried pickles,” I said reverently.

We were in a dive several blocks away from the movie theater, the kind of place where the lights were low, the floor was sticky, and the grease hung heavy in the air. But the burgers all smelled amazing, there were a dozen different kinds of fried food on the menu, and the prices were low. It was perfect.

Leah looked up from her stained menu, smirking at me. “Fried pickles?”

“Fried pickles,” I said again. “Leah Clearwater – wait, do you have a middle name?”

“It's Sue.”

“After your mother, that's sweet,” I said, flashing a brief smile. “Leah Sue Clearwater, you are my new favorite person.”

“Because I brought you to a place where they fry pickles? Damn, Red, you're a cheap date,” Leah joked, grinning.

“This isn't a date,” I reminded her, feeling a little heat in my cheeks. I quickly turned my eyes back to
my menu.

“Right. Nothing date-like about any of this. So what's so special about fried pickles?”

“What's so – wait, are you telling me you've never tried the fried pickles?” I asked, glancing up again.

Leah made a face. “No, it's weird. What is it with people frying everything? Fish, chicken, potatoes, onions, fine. But Twinkies? Candy bars? Pickles?”

“Fried pickles are amazing, so shut your mouth,” I fired back. “Especially with just the right amount of spice, and some ranch dressing – okay, we're definitely getting the fried pickles. Done.”

“We?” she echoed, her lips quirking.

“Two orders, I'll pay for it, and I will happily eat yours if you don't like them,” I returned.

“Hm. Fine. But you have to try something you think is weird,” Leah said.

“There's not a lot on this menu that I haven't tried,” I pointed out.

“So not tonight. This probably won't be the only time we'll hang, right?” Leah narrowed her eyes, thinking. “Let's see. What have I seen you eat so far?”


“Mmmm. How do you feel about sushi?”

I shuddered. “I really don't feel great about raw fish and seaweed, thanks.”

“Not all sushi has raw fish in it,” Leah returned, breaking into a grin. “Have you ever tried it?”

I squirmed and looked away, making a face. “No...”

“Well then. There we go,” Leah said smugly, sipping her soda and smirking at me.

I scowled in return, but the waitress came by for our order before I could say anything else. Once she left, I sipped my ginger ale and changed the subject. “So. How exactly did you end up becoming a shifter?”

It was Leah's turn to look uncomfortable, and she suddenly became very interested in a spot on the table, her cheeks darkening a little. “Usual way. Ran into a vampire, got sick, had some killer mood swings, lost my temper and poof, wolf.”

“Interesting. Now why would any of that be embarrassing, I wonder?” I said, my lips quirking as I steepled my fingers and looked at her. I thought back over our conversations, then smirked. “You met Rosalie.”

“What? No. What makes you think that?” Leah returned, far too quickly.

“Well, one, you're a terrible liar, so thanks for confirming it,” I returned, breaking into a grin. “Two, you had to ask who Edward was, but you didn't have to ask about Rosalie. Three, I've met her, too, remember? The first time she talked to me, I went totally non-verbal. So if anyone could get the infamous Leah Clearwater this flustered...”

Leah grunted. “Well, I didn't lose the ability to speak. Guess that's something.” She looked back up
at me, then sighed. “Yeah. It was Rosalie. I was at an auto parts store here in town, needed some
stuff for the Impala. I ran into her roaming the aisles. Stuck out like a sore thumb, this freaking –
supermodel picking through a bunch of junk and oil cans and shit, but the look in her eyes, the smile
on her face…it was obvious she was in heaven. So I decided, screw it, might as well go for it, right?”

I stared at Leah for a long moment. “You *hit* on Rosalie Hale?”

“That is what I meant by going for it, yes,” Leah said, with a little smirk. “Wait, I thought she was a
Cullen?”

“She uses her own last name – changing the subject! You *hit* on Rosalie Hale,” I repeated. “Possibly
the most obviously straight vampire on the planet.”

“I didn’t know she was straight *or* a vampire at the time. Girly, yeah, but life’s too short not to take a
shot,” Leah returned. “She was hot as hell and I figured we might have a few things in common. So I
went up to her, asked what she was buying for, and we got to talking. Flirting, really.”

“Rosalie Hale was flirting with you,” I said flatly, raising my eyebrows.

“What, you don’t think even straight girls want all this?” Leah returned, drawing herself up and
gesturing at her curves, which were distracting as hell in the white tank top and fitted leather jacket
she was wearing. My breath caught, and she smirked triumphantly. “You gonna go non-verbal on
me?”

I scowled. “No.”

Leah chuckled, shaking her head. “I’m not saying she was actually into me – that became clear
enough when that boy of hers came in. We were just having fun. I think I amused her. If things were
different...” Her smile faded. “Maybe we would’ve been friends. I gave her my number, but when
she found out I was from La Push...she said she didn’t think the elders would approve of us hanging
out. It was like she just shut down. She and her boy left pretty quick after that. And I started
feeling...off. Feverish, distracted. I figured I was coming down with something, that I’d best get
home. I barely made it, and within a couple days I shifted for the first time.”

“That’s...actually kind of sad. I’m sorry,” I said, reaching out and touching Leah's hand lightly. I
frowned thoughtfully. “Huh.”

“Ah, it happens. What do you mean ’huh’?” Leah asked.

“Just another point of divergence. I don’t think the Leah from the books would ever have talked to
Rosalie. Of course, she wasn’t gay,” I said. “But I don’t think she was quite so into cars, either. Or
that she was a lot like you at all. You’re both pretty blunt, but she was...angrier. Bitter.”

“Because of Sam,” Leah said, shaking her head. “Man, I still don’t get that. I just can’t see myself
ever going out with Sam Uley, even if I was straight. It’s been Sam and Emily since we were all
fifteen. Hell, since we were kids, really, it just took that long for them to finally hook up.”

“Yeah. I’m...trying to wrap my head around the fact that – I don’t seem to be in the story. It’s close
enough to what I’ve read that it doesn’t feel totally alien, but that doesn’t mean I know everyone's
stories. It doesn’t mean I know who you all *are*.” I frowned again.

“Well, that sounds like a good thing to me. It’d be pretty damn boring if you knew everything about
everybody, wouldn’t it?” Leah pointed out, with a small smile.

“I’m not complaining about having to get to know people. It's been kind of fun,” I admitted, my lips
quirking in return. “But the more things change, the less I can rely on. This is a dangerous world. Alice and her family are already looking for a coven of vampires who end up threatening Bella later in the first book. One of them almost kills her.”

“That's who they were looking for when they ran into Jake and his friends,” Leah realized. I nodded, and her eyes narrowed. “They're not just a threat to you, are they?”

“No. I was really hoping the Cullens would have an easier time finding them. But these vampires – they eat people. They're murderers. Serial killers.”

“You know the Cullens aren't the only ones who could go looking for them, right? The pack's already patrolling around La Push,” Leah said, her expression utterly serious.

“There are three of them, Leah,” I replied. “You guys aren't an even match for vampires, right? How many wolves do you have at this point?”

“Seven so far. Me and Sam were first, then Jared and Paul. And you already know about Jacob, Embry and Quil. Kind of seems like we can expect Seth to phase any day now.”

“It might not be that soon. You're already way ahead of schedule. And Jake and his friends are still new,” I replied. “Leah, I just don't want any of you getting hurt. I don't love sending the Cullens after them as it is.”

“Well, that's too damn bad, Bella,” Leah said, heat in her voice and fire in her eyes. She locked her eyes with mine. “It's the pack's sacred duty to protect our people, and I can't stand idly by while these assholes cut a bloody swath through the whole damn area. I don't think you can, either. You said it yourself. This isn't a story anymore. You're part of this world, and people are dying. Real, living people, not just unnamed characters on the page. Let me ask you this: would you put your life on the line to stop that?”

“I...” My mouth was very dry, and I swallowed roughly, my voice falling to a whisper. “I'd like to think I would. My life doesn't matter if it means countless others are saved.”

“Then let us do our jobs, Red. Tell me about these vampires. Please,” Leah said, catching my hand and squeezing.

I shut my eyes briefly and nodded. “It's a coven of three. Nomads. James and Victoria are mates, and they both have powers,” I explained. “James is a blond man, and he's a tracker. He can hunt down prey wherever they go. I'm not exactly sure how, I think it's some kind of enhanced senses, more than just the usual vampire sense of smell. Victoria's a redhead, she has some kind of self-defense power that lets her evade danger. It's almost impossible to get in under her guard. The last one is Laurent. Darker skinned than the others. I don't remember if he has powers or not, but he's dangerous. In the books, he goes up to Alaska to live with some friends of the Cullens. Tries to feed on animals. But he comes back south to hunt humans, and it sets a whole wretched chain of events into motion.”

Leah nodded slowly, squeezing my hand again. “Thank you. I should make a call, pass that on to Sam so he can let the pack know. We'll let the Cullens keep an eye out tonight, but we're joining this fight tomorrow.”

She started to get up, and I grabbed her wrist. “Leah, you should be working with them. The Cullens. I know you're not natural allies, but you should be,” I said. “If you don't coordinate with Alice – I don't know what'll happen, but you'll be stepping all over each others' toes. Plus, in the books, the Cullens defeat James and the wolves defeat Laurent, but it takes all of you combined to
take down Victoria. Granted, that's kind of because she has a whole army of newborn vampires at her back, but her power is very, very potent.”

Leah sighed, sitting back down. “The elders are going to hate that.”

“Aren't you the one always badgering me about courage? About doing the right thing?” I reminded her. “Woman the hell up and tell them to go screw, Clearwater.”

Leah's lips quirked, but she shook her head. “It's not that easy. I'm the first female shifter ever, and the first female chief since before we had shifters. Maybe the first one in our history, period. I'm on thin ice. They wanted to make Sam chief instead of me, and I can tell they're just itching to hand the job to Jake now that he's phased.”

“If your Jake is anything like the one I read about, he won't have any of it. Sam was his Alpha, and Jake Black refused to let him step down. He's not perfect, but he's a good kid,” I said. “Do you trust your wolves to have your back?”

“I do,” Leah replied, seeming a bit more confident. “I'd sense it if any of them were disloyal. They're all good guys. They just want what's best for our people, same as me.”

“Then please. Work with the Cullens on this one, and forget the tribal council,” I said. “You are Leah Sue Clearwater, and you're too damned awesome to let a bunch of scared old farts tell you what to do. Especially when you know they're wrong.”

Leah raised her eyebrows. “Careful, there. My dad's one of those scared old farts.” Before I could answer, though, she smirked. “But he'll probably back my play.”

“Glad to hear it,” I replied, allowing myself to smile as well. The waitress came back just then, setting down a couple baskets of fried pickles with ranch dressing. I gestured broadly. “Fried pickles. Go on, then.”

Leah's eyes narrowed, but she nodded. “I'll try one. But then I'm making that call.” She grabbed one of the breaded chips, dipping it in the ranch and crunching into it. Her eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

“Right?” I replied, my smile widening into a grin.

“I'll be right back. No stealing from my basket,” Leah said, getting up again.

I smirked. “No promises.”

Leah's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and she grabbed the basket off the table before heading off to the payphones, cramming another chip in her mouth on the way.

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“Man, I am so glad that wasn't a date,” Leah said as we walked out of the theater, dropping our empty popcorn bucket in the trash on the way.

“Yeah. Yeah, that was...wow,” I replied quietly. “I knew a little about the ending, but that was incredibly depressing.”

“I swear I have better game than this, Red.”
“I don’t doubt it. But this wasn’t a date.” I smiled slightly, then shivered, wrapping my arms around myself.

“Whoa, hey, I got you,” Leah said, putting her arm around my shoulders and pulling me close, her delicious warmth spreading through me. “Better?”

“Much. I’d definitely like to get to the car, though,” I said, snuggling in against her, trying not to think about the implications.

“We’ll cut through here,” Leah replied, nodding toward a dimly lit alleyway.

I raised my eyebrows, looking up at her. “Yes, because two girls walking through a dark alley late at night? What could possibly go wrong?”

“One crazy white girl and a fucking badass werewolf babe. We’ll be fine, Red. Do you trust me or not?”

I groaned softly. “You had to ask that question. I trust you, I just don't trust whatever might be lurking in that alleyway.”

“It'll cut at least four blocks off our walk,” Leah told me.

I shivered again, despite the warmth of her body, and nodded quickly. “Okay, fine, deal.”

Leah chuckled and led me into the alleyway. It was longer than it had seemed at first glance, lined with doors and little alcoves. At the midpoint, there was some kind of narrow access way running along the backs of the shops and restaurants along the streets at either end of the alley. That must have been where they were lurking.

Four men walked out of the shadows – big, rough guys, dressed in torn jeans and leather jackets. One of them grinned at us with yellow teeth, taking a pull off a beer bottle before throwing it against a wall, the last drops running down to the ground as it shattered. He was the tallest of them, his head shaved, some tattoo I couldn't quite make out scratched into his neck, black and spidery against his flushed, pitted skin.

“Well, well, well. What's wrong, sugar? Couldn't find yourself a real man?” the bald one asked, his eyes locked on me. “Step away from the squaw, sweetheart, I'll show you what you've been missing.”

I felt Leah tense against me, her arm locking down around my shoulders, a rumble in her stomach and chest. “The fuck did you just call me?” she snarled.

“Leah, no, let's just go back the way we came,” I said, tugging at her shirt.

“Aw, come on, now. You're going to hurt my feelings,” Baldy said, with an exaggerated pout. “I promise we'll give you a real good time.”

“Hey, Joe, leave the other one to me. I like a girl with a little fight in her,” one of his pals called, leering at Leah.

Leah outright growled at that, and her body shivered against mine as she fought to control herself. The guys all instinctively stepped back, then looked at each other before reaching for whatever weapons they had. Leah shifted her grip, suddenly, shoving me behind her...

And then the alley was flooded with light, and a car horn blared behind us. Dazzled by the light, the
men all raised hands to their eyes, and I heard a harsh male voice bark, “Stop! Police!”

“Shit – scatter!” Joe shouted, and the men dashed for the other end of the alley, spilling onto the street on the far side. I relaxed, starting to turn, and then a small, Alice-shaped missile nearly knocked me off my feet.

“Oh God, oh God,” Alice Cullen murmured, her face buried in my shoulder and her arms wrapped around my waist. “You're okay? Cass, did he hurt you?”

“What – but – I'm fine...is that Emmett's Jeep?” I asked, seeing the car clearly now that the high beams were switched off.

“Sure is, darlin’, ” Emmett drawled, getting out of the driver's seat as Rosalie emerged from the passenger side.

I shuddered, shaking my head. “No pet names for a while, please. Thank God you guys showed up, I don't know what...”

“I would have stopped them,” Leah said from behind me, her voice cold. “That's what would have happened. What the damn hell? Were you people following us?”

I stiffened a little, then pushed at Alice. She whined softly in protest, but let me move her, meeting my eyes. “Were you?”

“No. No, Cassandra, I swear,” Alice told me. “I had a vision.”

“You and I both know that's not possible,” I said, my eyes narrowing. “You can't see Leah, or anyone with Leah. You can't see any of the Quileute wolves. We were together pretty much the whole night.”

“She's telling the truth,” Rosalie snapped, walking over to us. “Not that she'd ever lie to your face, but if you won't believe her, then believe me. Emmett and I were sitting right beside her when it came. We had to listen to her the whole way here. She was totally out of it, ranting about every possible future until Emmett scared them off. She was terrified. So maybe you should pull your head out of your ass and thank her.”

“I – thank you, obviously, for saving us. All of you,” I said, my anger fading rapidly. “I'm sorry, Alice. I believe you. Of course I believe you. I just don't understand. When we first met Leah, she shut you down cold. You couldn't see anything. Now you can? What the hell changed?”

Alice looked up at me, her eyes shining, and suddenly, impulsively, pressed her lips to mine. I heard Leah grunt irritably behind me, but Alice paid her no mind. Finally, she pulled back, beaming at me.

“You did, of course,” she said. “Don't you see, Cassandra? You've changed everything.”
Changing The Rules

I blinked slowly. “How exactly does that work?”

“I'm not sure,” Alice admitted. “But remember last Sunday, when we were on the roof? You said it didn't make sense that I couldn't see the shifters, and you wished you could make it better, and then you got shocked. I think you did something, Cass. Enhanced my powers somehow.”

“So you weren't following us, you just routinely use your psychic powers to spy on your crush?” Leah snorted. “Thanks for clearing that up. So much less creepy.”

Rosalie drew herself up, looking evenly at Leah. “Envy isn't a good look on you.”

“Yeah, nice to see you again, too, Rose,” Leah returned.

“Okay, stop,” I said at last, raising my hands. “We are still standing in a creepy alley, I can't believe Emmett shouting 'Stop! Police!' worked on those guys in the first place, they could still be lurking around here and might come back at any moment, and the one and only human in this little group is freezing her ass off. Could we please stop bickering long enough to take this somewhere else? I suggest the Cullen house.”

“Oh! Of course. I'm sorry,” Alice said, grimacing and stepping back. “I'll call Carlisle to let him know we're coming.”

“We gave you a perfectly good coat. Why aren't you wearing it?” Rosalie asked, frowning at me.

I sighed. “Because vampires and Quileute shifters smell awful to each other, but I'm thinking you're both just going to have to deal from now on. Emmett, can you give us a ride back to Leah's car?”

Rosalie and Leah both immediately sputtered at that. I looked meaningfully at Alice, then turned around to glare at Leah while Alice did the same to Rose, staring until they fell silent. At last, we all piled into the Jeep, with me settled between my werewolf and vampire friends in the backseat.

The best thing about the ride over to Leah's car was that it was mercifully short and quiet. The switch from the Jeep to the Impala was uneventful, though Alice squeezed my hand lightly and kissed me on the cheek before I changed cars, and soon Leah and I were on the road again, headed back to Forks.

“So,” Leah said, her eyes firmly on the back of Emmett's Jeep as we followed them home. “You and Alice seem cozy.”

I sighed. “We've decided to try dating. Or going on at least one date, anyway,” I said. “We're going out next Friday. And...yes, obviously, we've kissed a few times.”

Leah's fingers tightened on her steering wheel. “You sure that's wise? I mean, she's in love with you.”

“She can't help that.”

“No, I guess not, but her feelings aren't your problem,” Leah returned. “You deserve all the time and space you need to figure out what you want to do. She hasn't been pressuring you, right?”

“No! Leah – Alice is a good person. She's done nothing but respect my choices. If I told her to leave
me alone, she would,” I said. “I'm the one who decided we should try this without getting all caught up in the mating bond stuff. Yes, I decided that after talking with Rosalie, but that's all we did: talk. About my reservations, my concerns, what I’d do if all of this – didn't matter. And the truth is, if we were both human, if Alice was just crushing on me and she’d asked me out, I would have said yes. In a heartbeat. I don't see why I shouldn't give this a try just because, for stupid bullshit mystical reasons, her feelings are deeper than that.”

“You talked to the vampire who leaves you totally non-verbal, and you think you came out of that thinking clearly?” Leah said, glancing over at me.

I groaned shutting my eyes and rubbing my face. “One time! One! I've adapted, mainly because you've all been so damn annoying, and being pissed off helps my focus!”

I heard a snicker, and cracked one eye open to peer at Leah. She was definitely laughing. “Sorry, sorry,” she said, giving me a grin. “You're just so damn cute when you're angry.”

I opened both eyes and glared at her. “Stop the car.”

“Uh, what? We're on the highway,” Leah said, her grin fading.

“Then pull onto the shoulder and stop the damn car, Leah. I'm switching to the Jeep,” I said evenly.

Leah still looked bewildered. “No, I'm not – that's stupid. What the hell is the matter with you?”

“I'm not cute when I'm angry. I'm angry when I'm angry, and I don't like having my feelings dismissed just because you think I'm attractive. I'm not just some crazy-ass little white girl you can laugh off,” I fired back, my cheeks burning and my nails biting into my palms as I clenched my fists. “I'm my own person, with my own mind and the ability to make my own choices. I have every right to make my own choices, and to get pissed off when people keep questioning me and second-guessing, and the appropriate reaction to my anger is not laughter. You said you wanted to be my friend, Leah, so act like it.”

Leah stared at me for a moment, then turned her eyes back to the road, putting her blinkers on and moving onto the shoulder. Up ahead, I saw the Jeep slow and then pull off the road as well. The back door opened, and Alice slipped out, heading for us, her pale face creased with worry.

“I'm sorry,” Leah said quietly. “I'm worried about you, Bella. I really am.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you. But don't second-guess my decisions once I've made them,” I told her, looking over at her and searching her eyes. “And don't lie to me about your reasons for hanging out with me.”

Leah's eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

“Leah, I'm incredibly dense when it comes to relationships, but I'm not a total idiot,” I told her. “You've been acting bitter and jealous since Alice showed up. Even though she freaking saved us, or at least stopped you from wolfing out and killing those men. And I don't think it's just your distaste for vampires, or your concern for me.”

“I told you I didn't imprint on you,” Leah mumbled, glancing away.

“I didn't say you did,” I replied. Alice rapped lightly on my window, and I sighed again, unbuckling my seatbelt. “We'll talk about this later. I'm going to go ride with the Cullens, but you should still meet us at the house. Maybe call Sam or someone over, too. Let's get this alliance started already.”
Leah turned her gaze to the road, both hands on the wheel, but she nodded. “Fine. I'll call him when I get there. Get his ass out of bed.”

“Good.” I hesitated another second, then opened the door and stepped out to join Alice.

“You okay?” she asked quietly, catching my gaze and searching my eyes as I slammed the door behind me. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not really. But I'll be fine,” I told her stiffly. We walked back to Emmett's Jeep and piled in the backseat, lapsing into silence as we drove the rest of the way back to Forks.

*****

I have a nasty tendency to hold on to my anger, to let it fester inside me until I'm ready to start a full-on screaming match with the next person to press my buttons. So, in order to prevent myself from exploding at people who don't really deserve it, I try to stop periodically and ask myself three questions: Is my anger justified? If it is justified, is my anger useful? And if my anger is useful, then how can I channel it most effectively?

It's sort of like the other inventories I sometimes run on my own emotions. It doesn't always work, but more often then not, it keeps me from wallowing in my emotions, or doing or saying things I'll regret later.

By the time we arrived at the Cullen house, I'd more or less settled on the answers. I was still quiet as I walked inside, though I accepted a hug from Esme and gave her a slight, soft smile. Leah's face twisted in disgust at the scent of the resident vampires, but she refrained from commenting, simply asking Carlisle if she could use the house phone and then wandering off to call Sam.

Once Leah finished her call and we all reassembled in the living room, I stood, taking a deep breath and looking around. “Before we get started, I have something to say. Stop coddling me. I get it. I'm the resident human. I wouldn't last five seconds against a hungry vampire, an angry shifter, or even most bigger and stronger human beings. But I'm part of all this now. I'm not an idiot, I'm not totally naïve, and I'm not completely and utterly helpless. I don't need to be tricked or bullied into giving you information, I just need to be asked. And when I say I can't tell you, I need you to respect that I have my reasons. Above all else, I need to be kept in the loop. I need to be part of these conversations, and I need to have my opinions and suggestions and boundaries respected. Some of you have already been doing that. Thank you. The rest of you – you know who you are. So. Stop playing around and start taking me seriously. Clear?”

Leah looked away, grimacing. “Yeah.”

“Of course,” Alice murmured, though she looked guilty as well.

The others offered their assent, though Carlisle and Esme just looked confused and concerned, and I dropped back into my seat, shutting my eyes for a moment and letting out a long breath. “Should we get started without Sam? How long is it going to take him to get here?”

“Not long. He said he'd shift and run over,” Leah said. “He's nowhere near as fast as me, but he can still hit a hundred miles an hour, easy.”

I blinked slowly. “In your wolf form...you can run...at a hundred miles an hour or more?”
“That wasn't in the books?” Leah asked.

“I – probably, but I don't have them all memorized – how the hell do you not tear your own limbs apart?! Freaking cheetahs top out at, what, seventy miles an hour?”

“Sixty-eight to seventy-five. In short bursts,” Emmett provided. I turned to stare at him, and he chuckled, gesturing at his face. “What? It's not just this. I've studied zoology, like, three times. Cheetahs are badass.”

“And yet you somehow managed to avoid getting even one zoology degree,” Rosalie said, though her lips quirked. It had the air of an old argument, with any real tension worn away by time.

“What the hell was I gonna do with a degree, Rose? I wasn't planning to actually be a zoologist or anything,” Emmett returned.

Esme chuckled. “Children, we're getting off topic.”

“Although I'm not really sure what the topic should be,” I admitted. “If Sam's going to be here in a few minutes, then we might as well hold off on discussing James, Victoria and Laurent until he arrives. I guess that leaves...my power? Or my potential power, at least.”

“Your power?” Carlisle echoed, his eyebrows rising.

“I was out with Rosalie and Emmett when the vision hit. I didn't get a chance to tell everyone,” Alice told me, before turning to the others. “I was able to see Cassandra in danger. While she was with Leah.”

There was a general murmur of surprise, and then Esme spoke. “Is it possible that your bond with Cassandra allowed you to see her despite Leah's presence?”

“Maybe, but it seems unlikely. The mating bond snapped into place the moment I saw her in person,” Alice explained, hesitating briefly, her expression suddenly filled with sorrow and remembered pain. “And...Cassandra wasn't in all of the visions I had as we rushed to her side. Or she was, but...”

She turned to me, her eyes finding mine, desperation in her gaze. She drank in the sight of me, clinging to the fact of my existence like a lifeline. “You were dead. I saw it, there were futures where you were dead, where they got to you before Leah...and I saw Leah, naked and bloody, all those men slaughtered by her hands. The police found her that way. It only got worse from there.”

I shifted from my seat again, moving to kneel in front of Alice and take her small, cold hands in my own. “It didn't happen,” I told her, keeping my eyes on hers. “It didn't happen. You saved me. You stopped it. I'm okay, and so is Leah.”

“I know. I know, but...if we hadn't been in time...and just seeing it...” Alice looked like she might cry, and I remembered, suddenly, that vampires couldn't. I stood and pulled her up into my arms, finding her surprisingly light. She buried her face against my shoulder, taking a deep, shuddering breath, setting her hands on my waist. “I can't lose you. Not like that. Not ever.”

“I know. I know,” I murmured to her, rubbing her back gently. “It's going to be okay.”

At last, she released me and stepped back, nodding slowly, though her eyes – a gold dark enough to be nearly brown, now – were still haunted. She resumed her seat, and I sat down beside her, taking her hand and stroking her palm reassuringly with my thumb.
“Why do you think Cassandra is responsible for altering your abilities?” Carlisle asked, gently, once we’d settled.

“Because on Sunday night, when we were talking about my powers, she commented on how stupid it was that I couldn't see Leah or the other Quileute wolves, or anyone or anything around them, and some kind of shock passed between us,” Alice explained. “She thought it was static electricity.”

“I honestly hadn’t even remembered that until Alice mentioned it,” I added, before turning to her. “Though if that was my power kicking in, if I somehow expanded your ability to see the future – why didn't you notice until tonight?”

“I wasn’t trying to look at the wolves before tonight. I thought it was still pointless,” Alice replied. “I wasn't even trying to look at your future, but – it's like I told you, sometimes something just hits me out of the blue. Your...death, or potential death...it was big enough that I just saw it without even trying.”

“Can you see anything else involving my pack?” Leah asked, frowning. “Like – I don't know, when is Sam going to arrive?”

Alice concentrated, her eyes growing distant and unfocused. “Emmett, turn on your stopwatch on my mark. Two minutes, thirty-five seconds...mark.”

Emmett pressed a button on his wristwatch and nodded. Leah snorted, then turned to me. “So let me get this straight. The Cullens here had no way of seeing our futures, of figuring out just what we or the people around us are doing, until you gave them one?” she asked, a little bitterly.

“So it would seem. I didn't mean to do it, for what that's worth. But I did already tell you that you should be allies,” I returned, folding my arms and scowling. “The Cullens aren’t your enemies. They're not going to try to hurt you or your tribe. And Alice isn't going to make a habit of spying on you. Right, Alice?”

“No, I'm certainly not going to deliberately monitor your futures if you would rather be left alone,” Alice added. “Obviously I can't always help it, and I make no promises where Cassandra's safety is concerned, but I will do my best to respect your privacy.”

“Yeah...sure. Swell,” Leah muttered.

I gritted my teeth, restraining the impulse to roll my eyes or throw my hands in the air. “Okay, so let's assume Alice's hypothesis is correct. That means my power is – what? To enhance the powers of others?”

“Perhaps,” Carlisle said, frowning thoughtfully. “Or perhaps that's only part of what you can do. We do have a friend in Denali, Eleazar, who has the ability to identify the powers of others. He would be able to tell us for certain. I'm not sure he would be interested in coming here, however, and of course we can't take you to Alaska on a whim. And even his power might not tell us everything – he can identify the abilities of others by their general type and strength, but does not always grasp the subtle nuances.”

“Right. Impractical for any number of reasons, then,” I said. “So maybe we should conduct some experiments. First, test the theory that I can enhance existing powers. Then see if my ability has other applications.”

“Nerd,” Alice murmured fondly, squeezing my hand.

“If you do possess a power, it's likely to become much stronger once you're a vampire,” Carlisle
pointed out. “It's very rare for gifts such as these to manifest as overtly supernatural abilities in human beings.”

“You say that like it's a foregone conclusion she's going to turn,” Leah interjected.

I gave her a sharp look. “It's not. Everyone settle down, okay? Point taken, Carlisle, but there's no harm in trying, right?”

Just then, the doorbell rang, and Esme rose to answer it while Emmett stopped his stopwatch. “Two minutes and thirty-five seconds,” he announced, gesturing elaborately at his wrist. “The Amazing Alice does it again.”

Leah snorted, but rose to her feet as well, and Sam Uley came in from the cold. He was huge – taller than Leah, easily a match for Emmett, his bare torso packed with muscle. He was wearing nothing but a pair of frayed blue jeans, and there was a tattoo that matched Leah's on his right shoulder. His black hair was cropped short, and dark eyes glimmered under a prominent brow. He looked utterly solemn and stoic...for a moment. And then his nose twitched, and he frowned.

“Yeah, I know, dude,” Leah said, clapping him on the arm. “Try to ignore it. You almost get used to it after a while.”

“Really?” Sam asked, his eyebrows rising skeptically.

“Well, I'm hoping really, really hard,” Leah returned, breaking into a grin.

“Yes, I get it, everyone smells terrible to everyone else, but the human smells awesome and doesn't care, so can we get down to business?” I asked, rising to my feet and walking over, sticking out my hand. “Nice to meet you, Sam.”

“You must be Bella,” Sam said, grinning as he grasped my hand and shook it. “Lee-Lee's told me a lot about you.”

“Sam,” Leah hissed, nudging him sharply in the side, her face darkening.

I snickered, despite myself. “Good old Lee-Lee. I bet she has.”

“Hate you both,” Leah muttered.

Esme ignored the lot of us, smiling pleasantly. “Welcome to our home, Sam. If you'd like anything to eat or drink, the kitchen is fully stocked. I certainly understand if you don't want me to get you anything myself.”

“Oh, right. Okay. Thanks,” Sam said. “I'm good, though.”

“In that case, let's get started,” Carlisle proposed. Alice produced sketches she'd done of James, Victoria and Laurent as they'd appeared in her visions, handing them off to Leah, and we all sat down to share what we could. It wasn't a lot, unfortunately, though Alice was able to add on to what I already knew, describing the behavior she'd seen in her visions and confirming that Laurent didn't seem to have any notable supernatural powers beyond the basic abilities of any vampire. Unfortunately, their precise location was a lot harder to pin down, as their future continued to shift.

“They don't seem to be making any long-term plans at all. Even when I try to look an hour into their future, I get half a dozen possibilities, at least,” Alice said, her frustration obvious. “Maybe they're just that impulsive. Or maybe I'm just not familiar enough with them.”
“That's a factor?” I asked.

Alice nodded. “It can be. With people I know, it's a lot easier to separate the likely futures from the unlikely ones. The better I know them, the more I can anticipate their choices. Obviously outside factors can still throw me off.”

“Too bad we really don't want to get to know these people,” I replied, frowning. “It might not have anything to do with you. Victoria's power lets her protect herself. A supernatural, nearly perfect survival instinct. She could be working against you without even realizing it.”

“Well, how do you end up meeting these leeches – sorry, vampires – in those books of yours?” Leah asked.

“A baseball game,” I said, looking up and smiling faintly as Leah gave me a skeptical look. “I'm serious. Vampire baseball. It is the great American pastime.”

“We do play now and then,” Esme added. “It's a highly modified version of the game, of course. And we can only play during thunderstorms. Our games tend to get rather loud.”

“They're attracted by the noise of the game, I take it?” Carlisle asked.

I nodded. “Got it in one. They figure out it isn't just part of the storm, and come to check things out. You all try to hide Bella, to keep them from catching her – my – scent, but the wind shifts suddenly. James gets a whiff and instantly becomes obsessed with the hunt.”

“Okay, so, you put on a vampire baseball game, invite the pack, and we wait for these fuckers to show,” Leah said. “Seems pretty straightforward. Bella doesn't even have to be nearby. Hell, we could park you down on the rez, get Jake, Quil and Embry to guard you.”

“One, I don't need werewolf babysitters if I'm not even going to be on site,” I said, scowling. “Two, they'd have to be close enough to hear, and if they're running all over the Pacific Northwest, that's not guaranteed. Three, we'd still need a thunderstorm as cover – Alice, do you see any coming?”

Alice's eyes grew unfocused for a moment, then she shook her head. “I don't see any suitable storms for the next couple weeks. Past that it gets a little more unpredictable.”

I sighed, my tone softening as I looked back at Leah. “I'm sorry. Flushing them out is a good idea. But it's not going to be easy, especially since Victoria may very well sense a trap on some level.”

“Fine, but where does that leave us? Waiting until you finally get to play vampire baseball? Or until these vamps find you by chance?” Leah asked. “Hell, we don't even have a good way to get in touch if we happen to run across them – or if you do. Even if we all had cell phones, we can't exactly shift out of wolf form to make a call while we’re fighting vampires.”

“No...no, but Edward can sense your thoughts,” I realized, looking over at him. “Edward, what's your range?”

“Not far. Perhaps a few hundred feet at best. It varies from person to person, and it's easier if everyone is out in the open,” Edward replied. “It's much easier with people I know well – I can sense my family's thoughts, if need be, from a couple miles away – or with loud broadcasters like yourself. You haven't passed out of my range since I met you.”

“Not even when I was in Port Angeles? Geez,” I remarked. “This might be a good chance to test our theory about my power. If I can enhance your powers and extend your range, Edward, maybe you could keep an ear out for any distress signals from La Push. I'm a little worried about the Superman
Edward looked mystified. “Superman problem? Ah. Thank you, Alice, but you’d probably best explain to the rest of them.”

“I was just about to – unless you want to take it?” Alice asked, grinning at her brother, then turning her smile on me.

“You two are going to give me such a headache,” I told her, though I couldn't help smiling as well. “Superman has super-hearing, and while the exact sensitivity of his hearing varies, it's often strong enough for him to hear everyone in Metropolis, at least. He gets it all raw, all the time, and it takes effort to tune out the general chatter. I don't want to overwhelm Edward's telepathy.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure I love the idea of him listening in on my thoughts all the time, either,” Leah said, scowling.

“I do have some experience in filtering out the day-to-day thoughts of others, and focusing only on the important details. I've even learned to tune Cassandra out, for the most part,” Edward said. “I don't want to violate your privacy. I would only listen in if I sensed thoughts of distress or alarm.”

“We only have your word on that,” Sam pointed out.

“That's true,” I allowed. “But you're going to have to take some of this on faith. I trust Edward to stay out of my mind, as best he can considering the fact that my brain is apparently screaming at him nonstop. The Cullens all trust him to respect their privacy. If you don't even want to try this, then we'll find another way, but it's hard to beat the speed of thought. Anyway, this is all assuming I can even do it, and that Edward is willing to let me try.”

“I think I could handle the extra noise. It might be difficult at first, but I would adapt,” Edward said.

“Leah?” I asked, my eyes meeting hers.

She still looked skeptical, her arms folded, but finally she sighed and nodded. “We need a way to communicate instantly. I don't like it, but...we need to be allies on this. And that means extending some trust. Some. You're still not allowed on tribal lands without explicit permission.”


“The elders really aren't going to like this,” Sam muttered.

Leah shook her head. “The elders don't need to know about this. I don't want to deal with that kind of drama. This is my call, and I'm making it.”

I let out a long breath, then got up and walked over to Edward, holding out my hand. He took it, his long, graceful fingers curling into mine, his grip gentle and cautious. I shut my eyes and concentrated, trying to remember what I felt on the roof with Alice, what I was thinking. Something about how the limitations on her powers made no sense – except the limitations on Edward's sort of did, so that train of thought didn't seem likely to get me where I wanted. I flipped through possible metaphors in my mind before finding something that might work.

I imagined Edward's power as a radio telescope. Not a very powerful one – it could pick up strong signals at a distance, or weaker signals that happened to be closer, but it wasn't as sensitive as it could be. I imagined upgrading it with more powerful equipment and a larger dish, extending its effective range exponentially. I didn't actually know how radio telescopes functioned, but since I knew their effectiveness could vary, that some arrays were more powerful than others, that seemed to be a useful
stand-in for Edward's abilities. I felt a sudden, painful shock where our hands touched, and my eyes flew open as I instinctively stepped back. Edward flinched as well, dropping into his chair, a look of intense concentration on his face.

“Did it work?” I asked, shaking the pain from my hand. It seemed to linger this time, longer than a simple static shock should.

“Everything is much louder – there are many, many more voices...ah,” Edward said. “Some of them are focused on where they are...Seattle. Vancouver. I don't think my senses can extend much farther than that. I'm trying to find James and his coven, but if they are in range, they aren't thinking of anything that would identify them.”

“Fascinating,” Carlisle said, looking from Edward to me, then frowning. “Cassandra, it seemed as though the process hurt you?”

“Just for a second. I'm fine,” I assured him, starting to smile. “Holy crap. I have a power. I mean, not exactly my first choice, but – that's still pretty awesome.”


“It is remarkable. I don't believe I've ever met anyone with the ability to enhance the powers of others,” Carlisle mused. “And that may only be part of your power. It bears further investigation – but not tonight, I think. You should take some time to recover between attempts. The pain you feel may be an indication that your body can't handle the strain.”

“It's really nothing, Carlisle. It passes after a moment or two. Besides, there's something else I want to try, if Edward's willing,” I returned, reaching down to squeeze Alice's hand and then turning back to Edward. “As things stand now, you can tell us if the pack is in distress, but we don't have a surefire way of getting a message to them if James and his friends come here. I want to see if I can give you the ability to project your thoughts to others.”

Edward raised his eyebrows. “That doesn't sound like a matter of simply enhancing my powers.”

“It's not. But I'm not sure I simply enhanced Alice's powers, either,” I replied. “I may have actually changed the way they work. At the very least, it's worth a try.”

Edward frowned, but nodded. “All right. If you're sure. But I would prefer not to broadcast all my thoughts, for the record.”

My lips quirked in a small smile, and I reached out again to take his hand. “I'll do my best.”

“Be careful,” Alice murmured, kissing my shoulder lightly before releasing me and stepping back.

“I will,” I promised, concentrating again. I returned to the radio telescope in Edward's mind, imagining myself installing a transmitter – with an on/off switch, of course. This time I felt a little more resistance, and the static shocks traveled up my arm, more painful than before, bringing a small whimper to my lips. I felt Alice touch me lightly and shook my head at her. My mind groped for something that would justify what I was doing, some logical underpinning, and caught on Renesmee Cullen, born with the power to project her thoughts. That potential had to dwell somewhere within Edward’s genes, if his daughter had inherited it. I felt something click over, just as the strongest shock of all hit me and my arm went numb.

I gasped, my eyes snapping open again as I shuddered in pain. Alice was at my side again in an instant, and so was Leah.
“Are you all right?” Alice asked.

“Damn it, we should’ve known this was a mistake. Did it even work?” Leah added, looking from me to Edward.

Edward smiled slightly. “You tell me,” he replied, but his eyes flicked to me, then to our joined hands, and he frowned. “Cassandra, you can let go now.”

“I'm...I'm trying,” I said. I couldn't feel my arm at all. I tried to will my fingers to uncurl, to release Edward's hand, but they wouldn't obey me. “I can't. I can't even feel anything.”

Carlisle rose from his seat, walking over to us. “Alice, Leah, give her space. Edward, try to free your hand. Gently.”

My fingers offered minimal resistance as Edward pried them loose. It was like watching someone manipulate a puppet's hand, or a doll's. I still couldn't feel anything, but he didn't seem to cause me any injury. Once I was free, Carlisle put his hands on my shoulders.

“Let's go up to my office,” he murmured. “Edward, Leah...all of you. You should go ahead and keep working. Test whatever abilities Edward now possesses. Rosalie, if you would?”

Rosalie actually looked worried as she nodded and stood, staring at me. “I'm with you.”

And, with that, we made our way up the stairs.

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Once I was settled in Carlisle's office, Rosalie slipped into the other room, returning with an old-fashioned leather doctor's bag. Carlisle extracted a metal probe, gently poking at my hand.

“Try not to watch, but let me know when you feel something,” he told me.

I nodded, trying to tear my eyes away. Catching the look on my face, Rosalie caught my gaze, offering me a surprisingly gentle smile. “It's going to be all right,” she said. “Look, try to take your mind off it. Let's talk about something else. You have a date with Alice, right? What were you thinking of wearing?”

“I hadn't really decided yet. I'm going shopping with the girls tomorrow,” I replied. “She's taking me to Bella Italia...I don't think it's the sort of place that has a dress code.”

“Mmm, no, but you want to look good for my sister, don't you?” Rosalie returned.

“Of course I do. I also know she's going to look amazing. She always looks amazing,” I said, feeling a little heat rising in my cheeks.

“Yes, well. She certainly works at it. You're just going to have to bring it.” Rosalie smirked. “Maybe I ought to come along.”

“What? Ow,” I said, as I felt Carlisle poke my arm and looked over at him. “Yeah, uh, I felt that one.”

Carlisle nodded, frowning. “About halfway between your shoulder and your elbow. I may need to
run some more tests at the hospital. I have a laboratory in the basement, but it might be difficult to get
you there.”

“Why? It's just my arm that's paralyzed.”

“We took out the stairs, for one thing,” Rosalie explained. “One of many security measures we put in
place to discourage any curious human visitors. We keep a few things down there that could raise
some...uncomfortable questions.”

“So you took out the stairs. You haven't heard of locks?” I asked.

“Oh, the door's locked. And heavily weighted,” Rosalie said, with another little smirk. “Oh, and
there are traps. Purely non-lethal, of course. They're designed to capture intruders as safely as
possible. I constructed most of them myself.”

“What the hell do you have down there? Gold bullion? The lost notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci?
The Ark of the Covenant?” I asked in exasperation, raising my arms – both of them, this time. And
as I did, I suddenly felt the familiar sensation of pins and needles shooting up my right arm, from my
fingertips to my elbow. “Ow! Jesus!”

“What happened? Can you feel your arm?” Carlisle asked.

“Yes – I can move it, too. It's like it's just waking up,” I said, flexing my tingling fingers and
grimacing.

“May I?” Carlisle asked, taking my arm when I nodded, gently prodding it with his fingers.
“Paresthesia. Unusually severe, actually extending into temporary paralysis. You can feel my fingers
now?”

“Yeah. Barely, but I can,” I affirmed.

“Good.” He let go of my arm, stepping back and frowning in thought, folding his arms. “I don't like
this, Cassandra. The effect may have been temporary, but paralysis of any kind is alarming, and
paresthesia can be a symptom of nerve damage. I really don't think you should be making any further
use of your power. Not as long as you're still human.”

I sighed heavily, but nodded. “You're right. Whatever it's doing to me, it's getting worse every time I
use it. I guess there's really no pressing need to modify anyone's powers further anyway. And if I do
become a vampire, I'll have plenty of time to experiment.”

“Not that it's a sure thing yet,” Rosalie added pointedly.

“No, of course not,” I agreed, turning my attention to her. “You really want to go shopping with me
tomorrow? You know you're going to have to put up with me plus four other high school girls,
right?”

“I hadn't considered that,” Rosalie said, wrinkling her nose, then smiling at me as I snickered. “Yeah,
I want to go. I want you to look your best for my little sister, and I don't think any of you are
anywhere near her level.”

I made a face. “Gee, thanks, Rose.”

Rosalie smirked. “Any time. Besides, maybe I should spend some time with people outside my
family. Occasionally.”
“Well, don't put yourself out,” I returned, looking over at Carlisle. “So, what do you say, doctor? Clean bill of health?”

“Any more pins and needles?” he asked.

I moved my arm slowly back and forth, then curled and extended my fingers, shaking my head. “No, I feel fine.”

“All right, then. You're clear for now. But don't use your power, and let me know immediately if you experience any more paralysis or paresthesia,” Carlisle said sternly. “And all things considered, it would probably be best if you went home and got some rest.”

“Will do,” I agreed, rising to my feet. “But I should probably go let everyone know I'm okay first. Thanks, Carlisle.”

Carlisle smiled, opening his office door. “Of course. Just don't make a habit of it.”

*****

Alice jumped up from her seat as soon as I reached the bottom of the stairs, wrapping me in a hug and holding me close. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“I'm okay. I promise. See?” I hugged her back with my formerly paralyzed arm, stroking her back lightly with my fingertips. “Carlisle thinks my body can't handle the strain of my powers. So...no more experiments for now. He also wants me to go home and rest.”

Alice pouted slightly, but nodded, stepping back. “That's probably best. I'll call you tomorrow, all right?”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed, looking over to Edward. “Dude, after all that, please tell me it worked.”

Edward smirked, and suddenly my thoughts were flooded with images of fresh red roses, still sprinkled with morning dew. I heard his voice whispering into my ear, as though he were standing right beside me, even though I could still see him across the room. “Does that answer your question?”

I glanced around to make sure no one else had heard him, but I hadn't even seen his lips move. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess it worked,” I agreed, laughing softly as I recalled our exchange nearly a week ago. “Could you please stop thinking of roses now?”

“Of course,” Edward said aloud, smiling graciously, and my thoughts were once again completely my own. “I seem to have a remarkable degree of control, and I was able to reach the other wolves in La Push. You do some excellent work.”

“I did some excellent work,” I replied, a small tinge of regret in my voice.

Alice leaned up to kiss my cheek. “I still think you're amazing.”

“We should get going,” Leah announced abruptly. “Bella, you want me to run you home?”

“Oh, there's no need. I'll be happy to take Cassandra home,” Alice interjected, looking over at her.
“Guys, I'm too tired to make this a thing. Rose, would you mind?” I asked, glancing at Rosalie, who nodded. “Thank you, Leah. And you, Alice. I'll talk to you both later. Goodnight.”

Alice moved to embrace her again, but I shot her a sharp, steady look before flicking my eyes to Leah. Both of them had the grace to look sheepish, at least. Sam put a hand on Leah's shoulder and nodded toward the door.

“We really should get going, Lee,” he said, before turning back to me. “Nice to meet you, Bella. Or Cassandra. Whichever you prefer. Have a good night.”

“You, too. On both counts. Drive safe,” I replied. I waited until they were out the door and I heard the car start before turning to Alice. “Alice, I like you. A lot. But when you kiss me, it needs to be about kissing me, not about making a point to someone else. Okay?”

Alice nodded, looking down. “Of course. I'm sorry, Cass.”

I let out a long breath, then smiled softly, gently tilting her chin up. “I didn't say I didn't want a goodnight kiss, though,” I told her, leaning down and kissing her softly, chastely. “Goodnight, Alice. I'll talk to you soon. And I'll see you Monday.”

Her lips quirked into a slight smile, and she nodded. “Sweet dreams.”

Rosalie touched my arm lightly. “Come on, Cass. Let's get you home.”
The next morning, after making plans with Rosalie and suffering through another night of restless dreams, I called Jessica to let her know Rose was coming. I'd barely gotten through telling her when I had to pull the phone away from my ear, terrified that her high-pitched squeal was going to tear a hole through my eardrum.

"Jess! Calm down, it's not like we're going on a shopping spree with, um..." I scrambled, trying to remember who was popular in 2005. "Keira Knightley?"

"No, but seriously, Rosalie Hale is going shopping with us!" Jessica said, managing to squeal a little more softly this time. "That's just – oh my God. The girls are going to flip. Wait, is Port Angeles going to be, like, good enough for her? Maybe we should go to Seattle instead."

"How far away is Seattle, Jessica?" I asked patiently, sipping the cocoa I'd made for myself.

"Not far! Like three and a half hours," she replied, a little sheepishly.

"Uh-huh. I'd really rather not spend seven hours in a car today," I replied, even though I knew Rosalie could cut that down to a terrifying fraction if she wanted. Still, with humans around, she'd need to keep up the act. "Look, Rose is just a person, okay? Alice already asked me out. Are you seriously going to lose it every time one of the Cullens talks to me?"

"It's just so weird. I mean, two years at Forks and they barely have any time for any of the rest of us, and then you show up and they're all over you!" Jessica returned. "Seriously, Bella, what is it? What are you doing that the rest of us aren't? Because if you can get me in with Edward or Jasper, oh my God, you can be my maid of honor and you'll be my best friend forever, I swear."

"I really don't think I did anything special. I promise, Jess, I'm as clueless as you are." I glanced up at the clock. "Look, we're probably not all going to want to cram into one car, and Rosalie said she'd pick me up. We'll meet you guys at the dress shop. Deal?"

"Deal! Oh my God, this is going to be awesome," Jessica squealed. "Ciao, Bella!"

I made a face, but Jessica hung up before I could say anything. With an exasperated chuckle and a small eye-roll, I put the phone back in its cradle and went about getting ready for the day.

*****

By the time I got back downstairs, freshly showered and dressed, Rosalie had already arrived and was talking with Charlie in the kitchen. I hung back in the doorway, fighting off a fit of laughter at the way his face shone red through his beard and his gaze kept pointing practically everywhere in the room except in her general direction. I wasn't the only one amused – Rose herself had a small, feline smile on her face, even as she talked politely about working on her car.

After a few moments, though, Charlie's gaze fell on me, and he smiled in relief. "Bells! There you are. I won't keep you, you two go have fun. Drive safe, okay, Rosalie?"
“Of course, Chief Swan,” Rosalie said, her voice pure velvet. Even with the resistance I’d built up to her charms, I still felt weak in the knees as she turned to me with a bright smile. “Hi, Bella. Ready to go?”

“Uh. Yeah. Yep,” I agreed, grabbing the coat she'd lent me off the hook and slipping it on. “See you later, dad.”

“See you, kid,” Charlie replied, quickly taking his coffee into the living room, shaking his head as though to clear it.

Rosalie chuckled softly as we made our way out to her car, and I gave her an accusing glance. “You enjoyed that, didn't you?”

“I can’t help the effect I have on people,” she said, shrugging. “If I didn't find it at least a little funny, I'd probably go insane.”

“It's a gift and a curse. I see,” I said, only half-joking. I dropped into the passenger seat and buckled my seatbelt, thinking. “Did you have that kind of effect when you were still human?”

“More or less. Not as strong, perhaps. I was always considered a great beauty,” Rosalie replied, her gaze distant for a moment before she shook it off and started the car. “And it was more curse than gift, I think. Even before...the end. How much exactly do you know about that, anyway?”

I shut my eyes, letting out a long breath. “Enough. Not all the names and details, but more than enough. Rose, we don't have to talk about it.”

“I've had the better part of a century to come to terms with it. Just tell me what you know,” she returned firmly, pausing a moment before adding, “Please.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. You were born in the early twentieth century, before the Great Depression. Your family was wealthy and your father managed to maintain your wealth through the crisis. You were beautiful from the start, spoiled by your parents and numerous admirers. Eventually, you attracted the notice of Royce, the son of the owner of the bank where your father worked. It was a shallow relationship, but you were engaged to be married. During this time, your friend Vera had a baby, which made you realize how badly you wanted one and how little true love you had in your life. As you walked home from seeing Vera and her child, you ran into Royce and his friends. They were drunk, and they...they...”

My voice faltered, and Rosalie glanced at me very briefly before turning her gaze back to the road. “They raped me,” she said flatly. “Call it what it is.”

“They raped you,” I echoed, my voice halting. “And beat you. And left you for dead. You were discovered by Carlisle, who turned you into a vampire to save your life, hoping you would be a mate for Edward. But Edward wasn't attracted to you, and you weren't interested in him. Once you had gained some control, you tracked down and killed each of Royce's friends, one by one, and then you donned a wedding dress to kill Royce himself. You didn't spill a drop of their blood. You didn't want any part of them. A while after that, you met Emmett after he'd been mauled by a grizzly bear, and saved his life. And you've been with him ever since.”

“Yes,” Rosalie affirmed quietly. “And no. That's not the whole story. After I killed Royce and his friends, after I came to terms with what had happened to me...after Emmett...I started to realize how I'd been deprived of virtually everything that really mattered. I had all the dresses and jewelry I could have wanted, I had the admiration and envy of everyone around me, but I'd been treated like a display piece. Valued for nothing but my beauty. Desired for nothing but my beauty. When I realized
how becoming a vampire had magnified it, I was disgusted. Initially. When Emmett first called me an
angel, I was crushed. But he spoke with me in ways Royce never had. Carlisle, Esme and Edward
valued me in ways my family never had. They wanted to know me, not just keep me. They wanted
me to be genuinely happy, whatever it took. My human family would have been scandalized by
everything I've studied, all the interests I've pursued. Emmett and the others have always encouraged
me to chase everything from engineering to astrophysics.”

I started, glancing at her with raised eyebrows. “Astrophysics?”

“You think you're the only one who looks up at the stars and longs to reach them?” Rosalie asked,
glancing over at me. “I was inspired by the Apollo program. The day Apollo 11 first set down on the
moon...it felt like anything was possible. And then they wound it down. I was frustrated. I wanted to
contribute somehow, give the space program a kick in the ass. I never really figured out how,
though. I spent a few years assisting professors as a PhD candidate and trying to inspire undergrads
as a TA before I had to move on.”

“I never knew that,” I murmured. “Honestly, Bella doesn't spend a lot of time talking to you in the
books. Where did you study?”

“Harvard for undergrad, then I did my graduate work at Cornell. This was in the 80s,” Rosalie said.

“Cornell in the...wait, did you work with Carl Sagan?” I asked, my eyes lighting up. Rosalie took
one look at my expression and burst out laughing, shaking her head as I started to scowl.

“No, sorry, you just – looked like a kid at Christmas. Or Alice at a fashion show,” she replied,
chuckling. “Not directly. Sorry to disappoint. I got to meet him once or twice, and he signed a couple
books for me. That's it. He had a lot on his plate, and he was a celebrity. We try to keep a low
profile, remember? I probably can't show my face around Cambridge or Ithaca for another thirty
years as it is.”

“Yeah...yeah. I guess you must be pretty memorable. Even more so than the others, right?” I asked.
Rosalie nodded and sighed. “Most vampires turn out to be attractive, especially since the changes to
our bodies include making our faces more symmetrical, but I am a showstopper. If it is some kind of
power, I wish I could just turn it off sometimes. Be a little more anonymous. We all have to be
careful, but I have to be downright paranoid. And it's only gotten worse as photography's gotten
cheaper and easier.”

I frowned. “And it's going to get even worse from here,” I realized aloud. “Technology keeps
advancing. Pictures get clearer, digital storage grows more efficient, facial recognition software
improves, people share more and more information on social media, older generations flock to the
Internet to reconnect...it's already started now, but where I'm from, it's just...everywhere. I honestly
don't know how much longer you're going to be able to live among humans the way you have.”

“Well, that's a cheerful thought,” Rosalie muttered, her fingers tight on the wheel. “Maybe I should
take up computer science next. Find some way to purge our images from the Internet every time we
move on.”

“Pretty sure that's next to impossible, but godspeed,” I returned, sighing. “I'm sorry. This
conversation took a turn.”

“I'm pretty sure it did that a while back. It's not entirely your fault,” Rosalie replied. “And we
probably should be thinking about these things. We can't just bury our heads in the sand.”
“True. But we don't have to think about them today,” I said. “So what else have you studied?”

“Medicine, of course, to keep Carlisle up to date and so I'm in a position to assist him if needed. I alternate with Edward. I finished my last residency just before we abandoned those lives and started preparing to move here, so he's up next,” Rosalie said. “It's not my first passion, but I don't mind it. Same with business. We all take turns with that one. Alice's abilities help out with the stock market, but we still need to understand the current state of things so we can manage C.E.E.”

“C.E.E.? What's that?”

“C.E.E., Incorporated. It's our holdings company. Pretty much all our financial affairs go through it, so we're not attracting too much personal attention,” Rosalie explained.

I stared at her for a moment, then patted the dashboard. “And yet. Pretty baby.”

Rosalie chuckled. “We have trust funds established through the company. Insurance payouts. Falsified records of our parents working there up until their tragic deaths and our adoption by Carlisle and Esme.”

“Okay, but – you guys can't keep repeating history over and over, right? Using the same names in different places?” I asked.

“We don't. This is the first time we've all been able to use our original first names for...a while,” Rosalie said, her gaze briefly distant. “Last time around I was Lily Whitlock, older sister to Robert, or Jasper. Alice and Emmett were Alison and John McCarty. Edward was Tony Masen. And Carlisle and Esme were William and Anne Platt.”

“Huh. That must be tricky. Learning to respond to completely different names, assume totally different identities,” I mused.

“You tell me, Cassandra Isabella Cass Bella Swan,” Rosalie teased, smirking. “You seem to have done all right.”

I stuck out my tongue. “I kind of had to.”

“Very mature. So do we,” Rosalie replied. “It helps that we have perfect memories. But we also spend a few years in seclusion, up in Denali or one of our other safehouses. Practice using our new names, adjust to any modified relationships, make sure our legal identities are solid, even though they've already been established years before.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “I guess that makes sense. You'd want as much of a record as possible, and there's not much room for error, especially these days. So you must already know who you're going to be next, right?”

“Mm-hm,” Rosalie said. “If you end up sticking around, you're eventually going to have to get used to calling Alice Emily. That's what she's picked for next time. We're probably going to have to start building an identity for you pretty soon, too, just in case. If you don't stick around...she can die with her parents. We're thinking you'll be Edward's little sister. Or Adam's, more accurately, and that'll make you a Stone. You can probably be Cassandra again if you like.”

My mouth suddenly felt very dry, and everything seemed very far away. I gripped the armrest built into the door for dear life. “Uh. I – guess I'll have to think about it.”

Rosalie glanced over at me, her face softening. “Hey. It's just a contingency. We have to think about this stuff years ahead of time. You're not committing to anything, you're just helping us prepare.”
“Yeah. Yeah, okay,” I muttered. “Just – lots of cognitive dissonance between 'hey, keep it casual' and 'we need to prepare the next identity you're going to assume once you're one of us forever’.”

“I get it. I can't really imagine what it feels like, but I can understand why you're freaked out,” Rosalie said, her tone low and soothing. “You and Alice aren't the first ones to deal with this, though. Not exactly.”

“Carlisle and Esme,” I recalled. “I know. But Carlisle decided to just leave Esme alone rather than make her choose. He didn't turn her until he had to, to save her life.”

“That's true.” Rosalie was silent for a moment, her fingers drumming on the wheel. “Is that what you'd like Alice to do?”

“No!” I shouted, surprised by my own sudden vehemence. I put my hand on my stomach, pressing against the fluttering there, and breathed deep as I shut my eyes.

Rosalie's voice floated to my ears. “Cass? Are you all right?”

“Emotional inventory. Just a second,” I muttered, running through my thoughts. No, I didn't want Alice to leave, or any of the Cullens. My own safety was a concern, of course – we still had no idea when or where or if I might encounter James and his coven – but it was more than that. We already felt like old friends, the way I'd felt when I'd first met other close friends on my world, in my time. More than that, too: I couldn't imagine a life without Alice Cullen. Not anymore. I felt sick just thinking about it. Kissing her had felt right, like it was what I had always wanted and simply never been able to put into words. I wasn't ready to call it love. But that result was inevitable, inexorable. I was falling swiftly and surely in love with her.

I opened my eyes.

“I don't want Alice to leave. I don't want any of you to leave. I care about you all, and I need you around. Not just to protect me, but because you're my friends,” I told Rosalie, quietly and sincerely. “And I...I want her. I want to be with her. I don't know what comes next, but...okay. Let's prepare for a future where we're together.”

Rosalie smiled slightly, and I felt myself grinning in answer. “Good,” she said. “It's about damn time. We'll talk about it later. For now, though, let's just worry about getting you dressed for your first date.”

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The rest of the car ride was pleasantly uneventful, as our discussion turned to styles and colors and other more frivolous things. That was probably deliberate on Rosalie's part, to avoid another crisis, however brief, and I sort of adored her for it. At last, we arrived in Port Angeles, and Rosalie parked a block down from the dress shop where we were due to meet the girls. It looked surprisingly trendy for what seemed like a fairly backwater port town, and I was grateful I wasn't being dragged into the kind of shop that sold bridal gowns and prom dresses – my first date with Alice would, hopefully, be a much more low-key affair.

“Bella!” Jessica shouted, spotting me as soon as we entered, her arms already heaped high with
dresses. My eyes widened with panic, but she was on me before I could bolt, shoving them into my arms. “God, what took you so long? Okay, options. We have the classic LBD, we have some hot red numbers, I got a couple things in green because, well, redhead, kind of expected, right? Let's see, I think there's some purple in here, too. I recommend dark colors, white or yellow's going to make you too washed out. And probably not pink, I don't think redheads look good in pink? Oh! Rosalie, hi.”

Her gaze finally fell on the blonde vampire next to me, and the sight was apparently enough to stop her in her tracks. I took the opportunity to speak.

“Thanks, Jess, uh...how did you guys beat us here? Am I even allowed to take all these dresses into the fitting room?"

“You're not, it's six items at a time,” Angela said, coming up and taking one of the dresses off my pile – a slinky red one that, I could see now, featured cutouts around the midriff. She gave me an amused, faintly exasperated smile. “Hi, Bella. To answer your question, we left early.”

“Too early, and they wouldn't let me bring my latte into the store,” Sam groaned, as she and June joined us.

“This is important! Our little Bella is going on her first date with a Cullen. With Alice Cullen,” Jessica proclaimed dramatically, finding her voice again. “No one else at school has even been able to crack those – uh – no offense, Rosalie.”

Rosalie arched a perfect blonde eyebrow. “I don't even know where you were going with that, so...none taken. For now,” she said, a subtle warning in her tone.

“Little?” I echoed.

“My point is, this has to be perfect,” Jessica continued. “The perfect dress, the perfect shoes, the perfect makeup, the perfect hair. And we need to talk about what you'll be ordering. Nothing with garlic, obviously.”

“It's an Italian restaurant, and can we get back to the part where you called me little?” I returned.

Jessica waved me off. “Just go try that stuff on. And make sure to come back out to show us! You'll need honest opinions!”

“What, I can't make my own decisions here?” I protested.

“Of course not,” Jessica said, starting to push me bodily toward the dressing area. She was surprisingly strong, given her small frame, and I found myself stumbling in that direction despite my best efforts.

“No, I have to agree, I've seen you in flannel. Too much flannel,” Rosalie added, shuddering.

“Ooh, yeah, the flannel has to stop,” Angela agreed.

I gasped as Jessica pushed me behind the curtains. “How dare you! How dare you all! I won't forget this!”

“Put the dresses on!” Jessica yelled, shutting the curtains of the booth behind me.
The fashion show that followed was, largely, a disaster. I vetoed the little black dress as too short, even though Jessica insisted my legs would look like pure sex in three-inch heels. I also vetoed the idea of wearing three-inch heels in the middle of winter. The girls rejected one of the red dresses as unflattering, while I tossed the other as, again, too skimpy for my tastes, with Angela backing me up, even though Jess and Sam thought they made my boobs look amazing. Neither of the green dresses were quite the right shade, and the purple was too big for me. Somewhere in the middle of this all, Rosalie had disappeared; I could see her now and then browsing the racks, but she didn't return until Jessica stood up to begin the search for more outfits.

“Try this,” the blonde vampire said, putting a dress in my hands. It was a dark, rich purple that contrasted nicely with my pale skin. I looked up at her, and she gave me a firm, encouraging nod. The other girls looked interested. Even Jessica sat back down, watching.

“Okay...” I agreed, stepping back into the booth and changing into it. It clung beautifully to my figure, and had a subtle shimmer to it in the light. The neckline draped in gentle folds over my chest, hinting at my cleavage without showing too much, and it clung to the edge of my shoulders, exposing most of the slope from my neck to my arms. In the rear, it dipped down to the middle of my back. At the waist, it flared prettily to settle above my knees. I couldn't help smiling as I admired myself in the mirror, turning this way and that, letting the skirt swish about my legs.

“Come out and show us!” Jessica shouted, as the other girls shushed her. By the time I emerged, Angela actually had her hand over Jess's mouth, though Jess was putting up a fight. Rosalie just gave me a triumphant smirk.

“Wow,” Angela said, her eyebrows rising. Jessica tried to break free and say something, but Angela kept her hand where it was for the time being.

“Shit, Bella, that's it. That's the dress. If you don't buy it, I'm going to have to seriously question your taste,” Sam added, with June nodding in agreement.

“I can't really wear a bra with it,” I pointed out. “And I'd probably still be kind of cold.”

“It's just for one date, you'll live,” Rosalie said. “And you'll wear leggings with it, and a coat when you're outside. Admit it. You love it. It's perfect.”

“Thank you for letting me know what I think,” I said sarcastically, but I turned to the three-way mirror, admiring myself again, and sighed. “I love it. It's perfect.”

Rosalie's smile widened, and she got up from her seat, walking over to me and pulling some of my hair to one side, her other hand touching my shoulder. “I know just what to do with your hair and makeup, too. Alice won't know what hit her.”

I thought of Alice sitting across me at the restaurant as I shrugged off my coat, the look on her face as she saw my ensemble for the first time. I thought of her gazing at me with the same admiration I felt for her, not just the impossible love she felt as my mate, but a deep, carnal lust as she drank in the sight of me. I couldn't help a small shiver, and I saw Rosalie's lips quirk in the mirror as I nodded shakily.

Jessica broke free from Angela at last, and shattered the moment by running up and grabbing my
hand, tugging me away from the mirror. “Shoes! Now!”

“I have to change and pay for this first – let go – how the hell are you this strong, Jessica Stanley?!”

*****

“What the hell just happened?” I asked, sitting in a daze in Rosalie's passenger seat, glancing back in the rearview at the bags piled in the back.

“You bought the dress. Then we bought shoes. Then Jessica and I helped you stock up on makeup, and you briefly escaped with Angela to look at jewelry before we found you again. You bought Claddagh rings? I had to tell you Alice's ring size,” Rosalie supplied helpfully. “There was a lot of squealing and hugging. I wasn't part of that.”

“I bought what?” I said, even I felt the something on my lap and looked down to find a couple of ring boxes in a plastic bag. “Okay. So I went temporarily insane. Sounds like a fugue state. Shit, I bought Alice a ring.”

“It's not like it's an engagement ring. You explained what it meant. It sounds sweet,” Rosalie replied, her lips quirking. “Maybe don't give it to her on the first date. Anyway, we're done. Except for the part where I'm coming over – and I alone, you'll be happy to know – after school on Friday to get your hair and makeup ready.”

“Oh. Good,” I said vaguely. “How'd you talk Jessica out of joining us?”

“I just stared at her and she backed down. It happens more than you'd think.”

I laughed, still half-dazed, but something nagged at my brain. An idea that had popped into my head as the general feeling of drowning in the deep end of the teenage girl pool subsided. I sat up and put my hand on Rosalie’s. “Hey, I want to try something.”

Rosalie's eyebrows rose, and she frowned in concern. “Cass...it's not your power, is it? You know what Carlisle said.”

“This is different. I'm not going to try and modify your abilities, I just want to take a look at them. See if your beauty really is supernatural. If it is, I can modify it later, after I've changed. Wouldn't you like to turn it off sometimes?” I asked, meeting her eyes.

Rosalie stared back at me, and I could see she was tempted. “We should really ask Alice first,” she said, reluctantly.

“I just stared at her and she backed down. It happens more than you'd think.”

Rosalie's eyebrows rose, and she frowned in concern. “Cass...it's not your power, is it? You know what Carlisle said.”

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Rosalie stared back at me, and I could see she was tempted. “We should really ask Alice first,” she said, reluctantly.

“Alice won't even want to chance it. Just a quick peek, Rose, I promise,” I told her.

Rosalie glanced away, but finally nodded. “...a quick peek. You stop at the first sign of trouble.”

“Cross my heart and hope to – live, very much live,” I corrected myself quickly. I took a deep breath and lifted her hand in both of mine, concentrating, trying to find the source of her power and feel out its shape.
It was like an electrical current was running up both my arms. My whole body was suddenly rigid as the shock grew stronger. My eyes were locked on Rosalie as I started to shake, and I saw her starting to move, slowly, her mouth opening. Something unraveled around her, and she was still beautiful, but it wasn’t impossible anymore, there was a subtle pressure that was suddenly absent. I felt my fingers tremble as Rosalie started to pull her hand free, too slowly, far too slowly to stop this. I tried to reverse the current, send back what I’d taken, and the world spun, and dimmed, and just as I flushed her power back to her, it all went black.

*****

In domo mea, mansiones multae sunt. In my house, there are many rooms. In domo mea, mansiones multae sunt. In my house, there are many rooms.

It ran over and over through my head. There was darkness. And there was heat. The air was thick and hard to breathe.

In domo mea, mansiones multae sunt. In my house, there are many rooms.

And all the rooms are on fire.

I was awake, suddenly. Alert. My head pounded, but I felt a sudden surge of vitality. I was in my house. In my house, there are many rooms. Mansiones multae sunt. The rooms were dark, and at once on fire. Even with the flames, I could see only dimly. Everything is on fire. Omnia...sit in flammis? Smoke clouded my vision, filled my lungs.

I ran.

I vaulted over flames, ducked under clouds of smoke. I grabbed what I could. Books. Pictures. Somewhere in the distance, I could see things on the walls, photographs, paintings, something beginning with C. I couldn't make them out, and the flames were too high to reach them. My arms should have been full, but somehow I managed to carry everything. The cats, of course. A painting I'd seen somewhere before. A red pawn and a white queen, the rest of the chess set didn't seem important. A bloody flower – or was it a feather duster? A torn red ribbon. An apple, its red skin whole and shining. I thought I had enough. Most of the house. Many rooms. Are rooms multae? The flames were chasing me, like a living thing, a cheetah racing after prey, black and gold, spots on my vision, spots everywhere. The window was just ahead. Outside, the cool night.

At the end of my tether, my arms full of all I could carry, I leapt for freedom.

The glass shattered.

The world shattered.

Darkness.

*****
Something chimed in the distance, again and again, a slow and steady rhythm. Something was in my arm. There was a fog around my mind, and my eyelids were heavy. I cracked them open and hissed at the bright light around me, shutting them again.

“Bells?” a man’s voice called. Charlie. Father. Dad. Yes. I called him dad. He wasn’t my father, but he thought I was. I didn’t know why he wasn’t my father. I was drawing a blank on the real one. “Bella, are you awake?”

“Dad,” I croaked, keeping my eyes shut for the moment. “Where am I?”

“Forks Hospital. Rose brought you back here. Probably broke about a dozen traffic laws doing it, but I’m letting her off with a – shit,” Charlie said, his voice breaking. “Shit, Bella, you really had me scared. Rose said you had some kind of seizure, Dr. Cullen’s been running brain scans. Did this happen back in Phoenix?”

“No. No, dad, it didn’t,” I said. I slowly opened my eyes again, just a crack at first. The light wasn't as bad this time. I looked over at Charlie and felt my heart ache at the sight. He looked ten years older. Tears were running down his cheeks, dampening his beard. I’d done that. I knew it. I’d nearly taken his daughter away. “Dad, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry!” Charlie laughed, without any real humor. “If this hadn’t happened before, what are you sorry for? You had no way of knowing. I – I should call Carlisle. Let him know you’re up. Maybe those scans have come back, maybe he has answers.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her, Chief Swan,” Alice promised. I looked over on my other side. I hadn't even realized she was in the room...I hadn't even realized she was holding my hand. I still felt sort of numb. I could feel her now, though.

“Thanks. Yeah. I'll be right outside, at the nurses' station. Don't go anywhere,” he said, more to me than to her. He leaned over and kissed my forehead, my face growing damp from his tears, his beard scratching lightly on my skin. His voice was rough and shaking. “I love you, kid.”

“I love you, dad,” I murmured in return. He stepped away, and I looked back at Alice. Once he was gone, the anger in her expression grew, warring with the deep concern and fear I could see on her face.

“Rosalie told me what happened. Before I told her to get out of my sight,” Alice hissed. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Alice, I'm sorry,” I said, licking my dry lips. My eyes were stinging, like I was about to cry. “I'm so sorry. Don't blame Rose, I talked her into it. I thought it would be safe.”

“It wasn't, and I could have told you that if you'd let me check first!” Alice scolded. “Do you have any idea what I went through? Suddenly watching you collapse, and of course Rose didn't take her phone, and Edward and Emmett were off looking for the coven – I had no way to reach you, to stop you, all because you wanted to do exactly what Carlisle said you shouldn't without even talking to me first!”

“I knew...I thought...you'd worry no matter what. You wouldn't want me taking any risk,” I said, realizing as I did how awful that sounded.

Alice growled. “I don't want to keep you in a bubble. I just want you to be safe. And if it had been
safe, I would have seen that, and I would have let you do it. Please, *please* tell me you've learned your lesson now.”

As she finished, the anger vanished from her face, and I could see only her fear and desperation, hear her sincere plea. My heart felt like it would break from my guilt, from her sorrow, from the strength of the love I knew she felt for me. I knew she would be crying if she could. I reached up with what little strength I had to brush her cheek.

“I have, Alice. I promise,” I told her. “I won't do that again.”

“Good,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Good. Damn it all. I love you, Cassandra. I can't lose you.”

“I...” Confusion washed over me. I could feel it fogging my eyes, feel my lips turning in a vague smile. I knew this expression. I hated it. I'd seen it so many times on my mother's face. I'd never felt it on my own, but I knew what it was, and I still couldn't fight it. Now the tears came, as I shook my head, unable to even frame what had mystified me. “...who?”
Mending

Alice stood up straight, staring at me. “Cassandra. It's your name. You remember, don't you? Where you came from? Cass, you remember where you came from, right?”

“I...I don’t...” The smile faded from my lips as I searched my memory. “I remember I'm not from...here. I'm from a world where this is all fiction. I have another life. I have two cats, one of them is just a kitten. I have other parents...I can’t...I can't remember their faces. Alice, I can't remember them. My name there was Cassandra? I don't – that doesn't feel – what's happening to me!”

Panic rose in my gut, and Alice quickly wrapped her other hand around mine, squeezing gently. “It's okay. It's all right,” she insisted, gently but firmly. “Carlisle's going to figure this out. We're all going to figure this out together.”

“It's not okay! This is – this is what happened to my mom, and I can't even remember what she looked like, Alice!” I fired back, staring at her with wide, frantic eyes. “Even my name, even the way you say my name doesn't feel familiar.”

“Then I'll call you Bella until we fix this,” Alice returned, leaning in, her face close to mine. “Do you still feel like Bella's right?”

“Not...right, exactly...it'll work,” I said, nodding slowly. Tears were dripping down my cheeks. “I'm scared, Alice. I can't lose myself. What happened with my mother was so terrible. I can't go through that, I can't put you through that.”

“You won't. You just can't use your power. Okay? No matter what, you can't use it,” Alice told me. She leaned closer still, her hard, cold lips brushing my forehead. “I love you. I'm going to stay with you no matter what, Bella. My sweet, precious, beautiful Bella. It's going to be all right, because we're going to find a way to make it all right. Okay?”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat, my mind still racing. There was a way to fix this, of course, to make sure it never happened again. A way for me to use my power safely. But before I could frame the question, Charlie came back in.

“Dr. Cullen's on his...oh. Uh.” He took in Alice leaning over my bed and his face reddened.

“Sorry, Chief Swan, I was just consoling Bella,” Alice told him, moving back into a standing position and giving him a gentle smile.

“I tried to give him a wan smile through my tears, reaching up to wipe at my face. “Yeah, dad. I'm just kind of freaked out.”

“Of course. Of course,” Charlie said, running a hand through his hair. “Look, girls, is there something you want to tell me?”

I glanced at Alice, who was staring back at me, ready to follow my lead. Squeezing her hand, I looked back at Charlie and smiled, a little more genuinely this time. “Alice and I are dating, dad. Or...we have our first official date this Friday. Assuming...”

I let my voice trail off, my smile faltering. Charlie looked back at me, then away, letting out a long breath. Then he walked back to my bedside, putting his hand on my arm. “Yeah. I know, kid,” he said gruffly. “Assuming. We're going to have to talk about some ground rules, though.”
His gaze flicked to Alice, who smiled weakly. “Of course, Chief.”

Dr. Cullen arrived then, knocking on the door frame as he stepped in. He was smiling kindly, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes, which were as full of concern as Alice’s or Charlie’s. “Hello, Bella. How are you feeling?”

“Like I got knocked into a coma and came out feeling kind of numb – how long was I out for, anyway?” I asked, glancing at Charlie and Alice.

Charlie gave me a grim frown. “Five hours, Bells. It's nine o'clock.”

“Yes. Any loss of consciousness is cause for concern, but the fact that we weren’t able to rouse you for hours after your seizure isn’t an encouraging sign. And of course the seizure itself is troubling. Chief Swan said you had no family history of epilepsy or seizures, and no personal history, as far as he knew. Is that correct?” Carlisle asked, his eyes boring into mine.

“Yes. I mean, no personal history, and not as far as I know on the family history,” I replied, glancing away, not quite able to meet his gaze.

“Have you learned anything from those brain scans?” Charlie asked.

“Not much. It's inconclusive. But it is troubling. There were some dark spots on areas of the brain we associate with memory. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d suffered some memory loss, and we can only hope it's minor. From the numbness you mentioned, I would say there’s been some nerve damage as well. We can only hope you're lucky and the damage largely reverses itself,” Carlisle said, looking from Charlie to me. “We're going to keep you overnight, and I think you should take it easy for a few days. I'll write you a note for school.”

“I'll get all the class notes and homework assignments you need. Don't worry,” Alice added.

“But – Carl – uh, Dr. Cullen – I'm going out with Alice on Friday,” I said, reddening at the admission and at how stupid and petty it sounded at the moment.

“Not if you're still recovering, you're not,” Charlie grumbled sternly. “Alice is welcome to visit if you're feeling up to it, but if the doc says you stay home and rest, you stay home and rest.”

“We'll see how you're feeling by Friday, Bella. If I can honestly give you a clean bill of health, I'll let you and your father know. It'll be his call at that point, of course,” Carlisle said, looking to Charlie and nodding. “But you really can't do anything else to strain yourself at this point. Is all that clear?”

I nodded meekly, casting my eyes down to the hospital blanket. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now I'm afraid visiting hours are over, and Alice, you have school in the morning, so you need to get going,” Carlisle told her. “Chief Swan, if you want to spend the night, you're welcome, of course.”

“Yeah. I'm not going anywhere,” Charlie agreed. “And I think you can just call me Charlie, doctor.”

“Of course. You can just call me Carlisle,” the doctor replied, giving him a small smile and clapping his arm lightly. “Bella, try to get some rest, okay?”

“Okay. Alice,” I said, reaching for her before she could leave the room. She paused, taking my hand again and looking at me. “Don’t blame Rose. And tell her...tell her I'm sorry. Okay?”

Alice hesitated for a moment before sighing and nodding, leaning over to kiss my forehead again.
“Okay. I'll see you tomorrow,” she promised.

She and Carlisle left the room, and Charlie shook his head, grunting. “Why the hell anyone would blame Rosalie or you is beyond me. In my book, that girl's a hero for getting you back here so fast.”

“People can be strange,” I said vaguely, twisting my hands in my lap. “I'm going to try to sleep.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Bella. I'll be right here,” Charlie promised, leaning over to kiss my forehead and squeezing my hand before heading to the recliner in the corner.

“Goodnight, dad,” I said, in a hoarse near-whisper, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before slowly shutting my eyes.

*****

Sleep wouldn't come. I kept searching my mind, trying to dig up memories, feeling along the shattered edges where the knowledge I'd once possessed refused to come. I still remembered the events of the books. I remembered everyone here, friends and enemies alike, and what had happened to me since I'd arrived. The gaps all seemed to be in my old life. My name still didn't seem familiar to me. I knew it, because Alice had used it, but the association with my core identity was just gone. The faces and names of my family and friends back home were just as elusive. I remembered enough to keep myself, or so I thought. And I remembered enough to be afraid of what might come next.

That fear was what really kept me up. I tried to push it aside, to tell myself not to worry about it now, that as long as I resisted any temptation to use my power while I was still human, I'd be all right. I wouldn't get any worse, at least. But one thought in particular kept nagging at me: I'd only discovered my power when I'd used it on Alice by accident. Could I really take the chance that I wouldn't accidentally trigger it again, and cause more damage in the process?

After what seemed like an eternity in the dark room, the same thoughts circling around and around in my brain, nothing but the beeping of the monitor and Charlie's gentle snores for company, I heard Charlie stir and get up, sleepily muttering something about hitting the head and shuffling out of the room. I opened my eyes, and thought I saw a shadow at the window.

“Alice?” I whispered.

She leaned in from the ledge where she was perched, dressed all in black, even her face obscured by a ski mask, so at first I only saw her golden eyes. She pulled the mask off, her short hair bursting forth in messy spikes, and I had to bite my lip hard to keep from laughing. Putting a finger to her lips, she carefully opened the window and slipped effortlessly inside. She shut it softly behind herself before walking to my bedside.

“What on earth are you doing? Why are you dressed like a cat burglar?” I asked, still fighting giggles.

“I'm keeping an eye on you, silly girl. For some reason, I wasn't invited to spend the night inside, so I have to brave the chill of winter,” Alice said melodramatically, her lips quirking, though there was still something serious about her gaze.
“The cold never bothered you anyway,” I retorted, smirking. She raised an eyebrow at me. “Never mind. In ten years, that's going to be hilarious, but forget it.”

“Uh-huh,” Alice said dubiously. “Bella. You should be sleeping.”

I looked away, fidgeting with my blanket. “I know. I can't.” I hesitated, then looked back at her. “Alice?”

She stiffened, then shook her head urgently before I could even ask the question. “No.”

“That's not fair. I didn't even ask yet,” I protested.

“The answer is no. I can't do it. Not now. It would raise too many questions. Charlie deserves better. You deserve better,” Alice said firmly. “Cass – Bella, I know you're scared. I am, too. But you shouldn't let fear push you into doing something you can't take back. That's not who you are. That's not who you want to be.”

“What if I can't help it? What if I screw up and use my power without thinking? Charlie'd lose me just the same. You'd lose me. I couldn't take that back, either,” I returned.

Alice looked up and out into empty space, her eyes growing unfocused for a moment. “I don't see that happening,” she said at last. “You're aware of your power now. You haven't used it without meaning to since we figured out what it was, right? I think just knowing about it has given you enough control to hold back.”

“You can't be sure of that. The future keeps changing. Alice, you can't even see James and his coven clearly,” I said, feeling a twinge of guilt even as I did, knowing that Victoria's power was probably interfering somehow, making their actions all the more chaotic as Alice continued to search for them.

“I'll keep looking. Just like I'm going to keep looking for them. If it becomes urgent – you know I'll do anything for you,” Alice promised. “But until and unless that happens, I'm not going to let you rush into anything.”

“What if you can't reach me in time?” I asked.

“I'll reach you somehow,” Alice said grimly. “Carlisle's going to give you a cell phone when he discharges you. Officially it's so you or someone around you can call 911 if another seizure comes on – you're getting a medical alert bracelet too. But it's also so you can call me before you do something stupid, or I can call you if I see that something's about to happen. You're going keep it on your person and charged at all times. Clear?”

“As crystal,” I said. Unable to help myself, I added, “Can I get it in pink?”

Alice smirked at me. “Brat. I'll see what I can do.”

She glanced briefly at the door, then leaned over, kissing me lightly and sweetly on the lips. Her mouth was freezing, but I still half-leaned toward her, hungry for more. She put her hand on her chest and pushed me back down to the bed.

“I have to go,” she whispered. “Go to sleep. I love you.”

“I'll try. I...” I hesitated. She was already back at the window. I couldn't see her face, but I knew it hurt her that I wouldn't say it back. And I wanted to. I could have died, I could still die, and all I wanted was to tell her how I felt. Screw it. “Alice. I love you, too.”
She looked back at me, a smile breaking across her face like the sun bursting through the clouds. Blowing me a kiss, she quickly slipped outside, shutting the window and ducking out of sight just before Charlie came back in and settled back down in his chair. I shut my eyes again, trying to think of nothing but her.

****

In the morning, Charlie ducked out the hospital just as breakfast arrived, making his way to the station to make sure his senior officers could cover for him for a few days. He'd grumbled apologies and promises to return as soon as possible until I finally shooed him from the room. I was just finishing my far-too-dry toast – they never provided enough butter in hospitals – when Rosalie stepped into my room, shutting the door behind her.

I let the toast drop back onto the plate, feeling nervous butterflies in my stomach. “Uh. Hi, Rose. Rosalie.”

“Hello, Bella,” she said, her expression carefully neutral as she turned to face me and walked over to my bedside. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes. Mostly. I'm sure Alice filled you in,” I said, looking back at her. She nodded, and somewhere inside me, the dam burst. “Rosalie, I'm so sorry. I know Alice blames you. I told her it was all my fault, that she shouldn't. I should never have put you in that position.”

“Good. You should be sorry,” Rosalie said primly, before letting the ice queen mask slip. Her expression softened, and she looked at me with concern and...I wasn't sure. Affection? Was she actually fond of me? “I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have let you talk me into that. I knew it was a risk. I didn't know the effects would be that severe, but I never should have said yes. I mean, of the two of us, I'm definitely the responsible adult.”

Her lips quirked, and I stuck out my tongue, causing her smile to widen as she added, “See? You're only proving my point.”

“Harrumph,” I grunted, folding my arms across my chest. “...you do have a power, you know. I don't think I would have been affected the way I was if you didn't. And I'm pretty sure it is tied to...maybe not beauty, exactly. You seem to have some kind of supernatural charisma. I saw it slip when I was trying to study it. I think for a minute I actually took it in. I don't suppose I seemed impossibly beautiful to you for a second there?”

I was half-joking, but Rosalie shook her head nonetheless. “No. You looked like you always do.”

“Drat,” I said lightly, before turning serious again. “Still, maybe that means you can learn to control it. Even if I can't modify it for you yet.”

“Thanks, but learning that was definitely not worth this happening to you. So no more quick peeks. Got it?” Rosalie asked me, giving me a stern frown.

I nodded. “Carlisle and Alice have both made that very clear.”

“Good,” Rosalie said, as she reached into her bag. “Carlisle said he's going to discharge you after
lunch, but that's still hours away. I thought you might want something to do in the meantime. Alice said you like crosswords, so I got a book of them from the gift shop. And a copy of the first Harry Potter book. I would have gotten that poetry treasury from your room, but it wouldn't have fit in my purse, sorry.”

“You don't have to apologize,” I said, frowning slightly. “Rosalie, you're being...unusually nice.”

“I can be nice,” she replied defensively, setting the Harry Potter book and a thick crosswords magazine down on my table, along with a pen.

“I didn't say you couldn't,” I returned, holding my hands up. “I didn't mean it that way. And I guess it seems like we are getting along better lately. I guess I just kind of expected you to be a lot more pissed about what I did.”

“I am. I'm furious. You could have died, Cass – Bella,” she scolded me, her frown almost as severe as her tone. “We could have lost you.”

“And then you might have lost Alice,” I added quietly, looking down. “I get it. You want to keep me healthy and happy because I make her happy.”

“Oh, for God's sake.” Rosalie sat in the chair beside my bed and took my hand, her cold, smooth skin chilling my fingers. “Don't start in on the pity party. I said we could have lost you. Not just Alice. No, I don't want to see her hurt. But we care about you, too. Not just for her sake.”


Rosalie rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe Edward's still warming up to you. That's not personal, that's – Edward. He can be kind of a tool.”

I laughed softly, and she smirked as she went on. “But he does like that you brought him new music. And that you have an appreciation for his own talents. Anything that strokes his ego. You have to know Carlisle and Esme are very fond of you. Jasper appreciates that you engage him and his powers without much trepidation, that you're honest with him when you don’t want his help and ask him when you do. It's possible we don't always appreciate him and his gifts the way we should. And Emmett, well, he's a giant teddy bear. And he likes girls who speak their minds. Case in point.”

She pointed at herself, and I laughed again, shaking my head. “Wait, Emmett likes me because I remind him of you?” I asked, gesturing between us. “Can't say I see the resemblance.”

“Well, in an annoying little sister sense, anyway,” Rosalie said breezily.

“Hey!”

“What? You can't tell me you don't see it. We both speak a little too freely at times, without any thought for the consequences. We're both stubborn and sometimes prickly,” she said. “You're a little better about not taking your anger out on other people, I'm a little better about not tripping over my own words all the time.”

I huffed, crossing my arms. “It's not all the time.”

“It's a lot of the time,” Rosalie returned, grinning at me. “Oh, and neither one of us likes being wrong, and we both seem to think we can wrap anyone we want around our fingers by pouting and acting huffy. It's truer in my case, though.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Conceited jerk.”
“Spoiled brat,” she fired back, shoving my shoulder very, very lightly, her golden eyes still twinkling in amusement.

“Spoiled,” I gasped. “How the hell am I spoiled?”

“Well. Alice is certainly doing her level best. And the rest of the family, for that matter. I notice you're not disputing the brat part.”

“I guess I've stuck my tongue out a few many times to argue the point. Oh, speaking of,” I added, doing it again before settling down. “...so what about you? Is that how you see me? Your annoying little sister?”

Rosalie smiled fondly, putting my arm. “Well, you're certainly annoying.”

“Ha ha,” I replied, raising my eyebrows at her. “Come on, Rose. You've told me about everyone's feelings but yours. Woman up.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “How much reassurance do you need? But fine. I suppose...I like that I can just talk to you. You already know the worst parts of my story. The worst parts of me. And you actually liked me. You don't judge me – much. You don't pity me – much. I've never felt like I could be totally honest with anyone but Emmett, and he's such a guy. I love him, but there's some stuff he's never going to get. I can go shopping with you and dress you up without falling prey to Alice's complete fashion madness. So yeah, I guess maybe having you for a little sister wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.”

“High praise,” I noted, smirking briefly, then taking her hand again. “I did have fun with you yesterday. Up until I screwed it all up. I guess maybe having you for a big sister wouldn't be the worst thing, either.”

Her lips twitched in a very slight smile. “Good. At least we won't be gnawing any limbs off to escape each other. Pretty sure yours don't reattach,” she joked. “And maybe you'll actually be a moderating influence on Alice.”

I snorted, laughing. “And maybe I'll spontaneously develop the power to control hurricanes. That seems about as likely.”

Rosalie chuckled in response, then rose from her seat. “I should go, let you get some more rest.”

“No, stay,” I told her, picking up Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and offering it to her. “Read to me.”

She paused, raising her eyebrows at me. “You're perfectly capable of reading. You are, right? You haven't had any trouble reading since you woke up?” she asked, growing visibly concerned.

“No, it's fine, just...it's been ages since someone read to me. And I don't want to be alone. Please?” I asked.

Rosalie regarded me for a long moment, then set her purse aside and sat down again, taking the book and opening it to the first page. Before she could start reading, I batted my eyelashes at her and added, in the smallest, most endearing voice I could manage, “And do the voices?”

She whacked my arm lightly with the book. “Brat,” she muttered, before looking back to the text and starting to read aloud.
We only made it through the first chapter before Charlie returned, thanking Rosalie profusely as she excused herself at last. Then, seeing the book, he took over reading, sending me into fits of giggles at his Hagrid impression. I couldn't help loving him all the more for it, and wondering once again if Bella, the real Bella, had ever realized or appreciated how amazing her father was, how much he loved her.

At last, lunch came, and Carlisle arrived soon after, just as Rosalie had promised. “Good afternoon, Bella. How are you feeling?” he asked, picking up my chart but sparing it no more than glance before turning his attention fully on me.

“I'm fine, Dr. Cullen. Really,” I assured him. “There haven't been any more seizures, and I'm feeling a lot better. No trouble getting out of bed or going to the bathroom or anything.”

“But if your tests have shown anything different, of course you should keep her here,” Charlie added hastily. I looked at him, and he gave me a stern frown in return. “Bella, getting you healthy is our first priority. I don't care how you're feeling right now, if there's any chance this could happen again...well, we're not taking chances. That's it.”

“Charlie, I can't promise you there's no chance, but we haven't found anything alarming so far,” Carlisle assured him. “As I said last night, I do think Bella should take some time to rest at home, and we may run some follow-up tests, but she doesn't need to stay here. As long as you're feeling all right, Bella, we're ready to discharge you.”

“Yes, please. Not that the hospital hasn't been great or anything, I'd just really like to go home,” I replied.

“Good. Now, a couple things. First, we've ordered you a medical alert bracelet indicating that you may be prone to seizures and anyone who finds you seizing should call 911. It'll also have your name and my name and number for the sake of any other doctors who may end up treating you,” Carlisle said, reaching into the pocket of his labcoat and pulling out a small box with a pink sticker on one side, setting it on the table. “There's also this. Alice told me you don't have a cellular phone, so here you go. I want you to keep it charged and on your person at all times, in case you or anyone around you needs to call for help.”

Charlie took one look at the box and his eyebrows shot up, his eyes widening. “Doc, that's way too generous. Not that a cell phone's not a good idea, but hell, I'll get one for her.”

“Charlie, it really isn't a problem. We all care about Bella very much, and she's very close to our Alice,” Carlisle said, putting a hand on his shoulder and smiling gently. “It was really no trouble at all to add another line to our plan.”

Charlie grunted softly, glancing at me. “Emergencies only, Bella,” he told me firmly.

“Yes, dad,” I assured him, nodding. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing at the fact that Alice had actually grabbed me a pink one. “Thank you so much, Dr. Cullen. This really is generous of you.”

“Yeah, thank you, Doc. Means a lot,” Charlie added, somewhat stiffly.
“You’re very welcome. Please don’t worry about it, either of you,” Carlisle replied. “Just buzz the nurse when you’re ready, and she’ll bring your discharge paperwork and the wheelchair. I know you probably think you don’t need one, but it’s hospital policy. All right?”

“Okay,” I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, sighing as I nodded.

Carlisle offered his goodbyes and well wishes and stepped out of the room, off to the next patient, while Charlie turned back to me. “About you and Alice being close,” he said gruffly, “I said there’d be ground rules.”

I took a sip of my juice and swallowed, watching him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, letting out a long breath, his ears turning red. “Damn it, Bells, I don’t even know what to be worried about. But I guess it’s only fair I treat her the same way I’d treat any boyfriends you brought home, you know, if you were into that. So obviously, uh, no sleepovers. If she’s up in your room, you keep the door open, and I’d really rather she wasn’t in your room. I don’t want you and her alone in the house when I’m not there, and I don’t want you at her place without supervision.”

“Dad, come on, we're capable of controlling ourselves,” I protested, feeling my own cheeks burn. “We’re not going to have sex any time soon, I promise. And we’d be, um, safe. If we did. Plus she's helping me study.”

“You can study at the library. Or in a group. Or, hell, Esme doesn’t work, right? So if she’s there, you can study at the Cullens’ place,” Charlie insisted. “I know you're a good kid, Bells. I know you try, anyway. But I also know what it was like to be a teenager, and...damn, I don't even know how to say this to you. You can get hurt. Rushing into things. I don't want to see that happen.”

Considering it hasn't even been two weeks since I met her and I'm already telling her I love her, it might be a little late for that,

“Bella...” Charlie sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Damn it. You know I do. And Alice seems like a good kid. This is just uncharted territory, you know?”

“I'm almost eighteen,” I reminded him. “I'll respect your rules. I'll behave myself. But I'm not a little kid anymore. I have to be able to make some choices of my own.”

“You sure you're not? That you can't be, just for a little while longer?” he asked, with a weak smile. “Seems like it was a whole lot easier to protect you when I just had to worry about skinned knees and bruises. ...and broken bones...okay, maybe easier wasn’t the word. But I didn't have to worry someone breaking your heart. Let alone this business with the seizures.”

I smiled back at him, leaning over to give him a hug. “I'm pretty sure being a parent means you always have something to worry about. But I'll try not to give you too much more. Just ease up a little bit?”

Charlie sighed. “Fine, you can be alone in the house. But downstairs, okay? I know I can't really enforce that, but I'm trusting you two to behave yourselves,” he replied gruffly. “Keeping your door open still applies, and no overnight stays.”

“Got it. I can live with that,” I agreed. Leaving aside the occasional emergency vampire conference,
I suppose.

“Good,” Charlie agreed, squeezing me once before letting me go. “Come on, kid. Finish your lunch, and let's get out of here.”

*****

The next few days were excruciating. Charlie really had taken the week off, and he was around all the time, wandering in and out of the kitchen while Alice was working with me on the day's homework assignments, checking on me on an hourly basis, even looking in on me now and then while I slept. Now that the secret was out, at least, Alice and I could be a little more affectionate, but we tried to keep it toned down for his sake. Some hand-holding, some chaste cuddling, some hugs and the occasional kiss on the cheek, but nothing more. I already missed the feeling of her lips against mine, her tiny frame pressed against me.

Worse still, he was too unpredictable for Alice to determine when he'd decide to interrupt us, so we didn't dare discuss my old life or the memories I still had of it. I occupied myself as best I could, keeping up with my reading for school, working ahead in my trigonometry and biology textbooks, trying to make sure I kept up. I read through the poetry collection Alice had given me, feeling out what still felt familiar and what seemed strange, and it seemed sort of hit or miss – sometimes a poem would resonate with me immediately, and I'd be able to quote the next stanza from heart, but just as often, I'd feel a nagging sense of familiarity but I couldn't draw any associated memories out. And, last but far from least, I pored over recipes I'd found online, experimenting with our meals as much as I dared while Charlie, of course, watched me work and tried to help, worried I'd seize again and fall face-first into a hot pan or something.

As if things weren't bad enough, Alice had been absolutely right about when my first period would start kicking in. My past experience with fluctuations in my hormone regimen had left me prepared for the worst, but the mood swings didn't seem that severe. The cramps didn't help, though, and everything else was an educational experience, to say the least. I spent a lot of time curled around Lyra the stuffed fox, stroking her soft fur, and Alice made sure to bring plenty of dark chocolate truffles, pads and painkillers.

By Thursday, we were running out of food, and I started putting together a shopping list just as Alice turned up at the front door, accompanied by Edward this time. I heard Charlie welcoming them in, and poked my head through the kitchen doorway, giving Alice a grin.

“Oh, perfect timing. Do you think we can run to the store?” I asked.

“Why, how wonderful to see you, too, my dear Bella. I'm doing very well, thank you for asking. How are you feeling?” Alice said, with an overly bright smile and an emphatically gracious tone in her voice.

“You're not going to the store. I'll go to the store. Give me the list,” Charlie said firmly, coming over and holding out his hand.

“Dad, I haven't been out of the house in days.” I groaned. “I'll be fine, I'll be with Alice and Edward. They'll know exactly what to do if anything happens. And nothing has happened for almost a
week."

“Until Dr. Cullen gives you a clean bill of health, I don't want you overexerting yourself. Come on, Bells,” Charlie replied. “I can handle a trip to the grocery store.”

“Can you? I remember the state of the kitchen when I moved in,” I retorted, but I handed him the list, my gaze flicking to Alice and Edward. “Please tell me your dad's ready to take me off house arrest.”

“We won't know for sure until your appointment tomorrow. But since you really have been doing well, I think your chances are good,” Alice assured me lightly, giving me a subtle but significant look.

“I don't know about this Port Angeles business,” Charlie grumbled. “Can't you girls go somewhere in town?”

I took a deep breath, shutting my eyes for a moment before speaking. “Dad. It's going to be okay. It really is. If anything happens – well, you know Alice won't let anything happen,” I told him. “I know you're worried, but I can't stay in this house or even this town all day, every day, indefinitely. If Dr. Cullen gives me the all-clear, and I know that's still an if...are you really going to reject his expert medical opinion?”

Charlie grunted, scowling. “Okay. Fine, if he thinks it's all right for you to stick to your plans, I'll accept it. But if he thinks it's better for you to stay in town, or not to go out tomorrow night at all, you have to accept it. Deal?”

Alice squeezed my hand reassuringly, and I nodded. “Of course. Deal.”

“Good. In the meantime, I'll take care of this,” he said, holding up the list and going for his coat. “See you kids in a while. Eddie, keep an eye on things, won't you?”

"Dad,” I protested.

Edward offered him a polite smile and nodded. “Of course, Chief Swan.”

“Good man,” Charlie said, stepping out the door.


Alice giggled. “Don't mind her, Edward, she's just crabby from being cooped up all week,” she offered, brushing some hair out of my face and kissing my temple lightly.

“Thank you, I gathered that,” Edward remarked dryly. “Has it occurred to you that I'm only here because Alice saw Charlie leaving for an hour or so?”

“Uh...it has now...” I remarked slowly, thinking it through. “Wait, is this about probing my memories?”

“In a fashion,” he affirmed. “I can't, of course, sense anything you're not actively thinking of, so I can't view your memories directly. But as you actively reflect on your memories, I should be able to see that. Maybe we can identify a pattern in the gaps.”

“We couldn't do it when Charlie was around,” Alice added. “Even if Edward helped us conduct our conversation through telepathy, you would need to concentrate. The extended silences would attract too much attention, raise too many questions.”
I sighed. “Maybe it would easier if we just told him everything. I know, I know, we can't,” I added quickly, as Edward and Alice exchanged a glance. “Okay. Let's do what we can.”

We sat around the kitchen table, Edward to my left and Alice to my right. Alice took my hand and squeezed, oh-so-gently, locking eyes with me. “Focus on me,” she said gently. “I'll prompt you. When I do, just try to remember everything you can. Go wherever your thoughts take you. Ready?”

I nodded.

“Good. Let's start with the most obvious gap. What do you remember about the name Cassandra?”

I remembered Alice and the others calling me by that name, so many times. Or Cass. Never Cassie. I'd told them I didn't like it. I couldn't remember why I didn't like it. I couldn't even quite remember why I'd chosen the name. It had been important to me. It must have been. There was a Cassandra in Greek myth, wasn't there? But I could scarcely remember my mythology, aside from the gods and goddesses. That felt wrong, too.

I heard Edward sigh, and tried to focus on the name. Cassandra. I had given them that name, but it no longer felt like mine. The hard C sound felt important. I remembered seeing the letter C on the wall of a dark room consumed by flames...the beginning of the name Cassandra, perhaps? I'd seen the name in other places. Cassandra Sandmark, a.k.a. Wonder Girl, a nerd turned super heroine, at least in the comic books I loved. I frowned. How strange I would remember that, and not the Cassandra of myth, or the numerous Cassandras of history or fiction I'd loved just as much...how strange I could recall my emotional connection to a comic book super heroine, but not to my own name, the name I'd chosen for myself, for whatever reason.

“Enough,” Edward said, drawing me out of my reverie. His eyes flicked to Alice, and they were silent for a moment before Alice looked to me again.

“All right. Let's try something else. What do you remember about the novel *Twilight*?” she asked.

My mind raced through the plot of the book. I glanced guiltily at Edward, but this was too important. I gave him everything I could recall, from Bella's arrival in Forks to their dance in the closing pages. I thought I might have been confusing some elements in the book with elements from the movie, but I thought the broad strokes were all still there. I even remembered the cover, the pale hands grasping a perfect red apple.

Something about that nagged at me. I thought about the apple. I saw it, dimly lit, in a dark room full of flames. I saw my own pale hand snatch it up, rescue it, take it with me.

Edward held up a hand. “Wait. That's the second time your memories have brought you through a room that's simultaneously dark and on fire.”

“When were you in a fire?” Alice asked, confused and concerned.

“I...wasn't. Not that I remember,” I said, shaking my head, then looking at Edward. “Can you show me?”

He nodded, and my mind's eye filled with flames and darkness simultaneously occupying a room cluttered with objects I couldn't see all that clearly. I could make out the apple, and the letter C on the wall, but little else. I couldn't understand why the room was so dark with the fire raging all about. Was it smoke? But there was no smoke. How could there be no smoke? With the fire consuming everything in sight, there would have to be smoke...unless it wasn't a real fire.

Everything started snapping into focus. It had been a dream, and I'd had it just before I woke up in
the hospital. I had half-heard, half-thought something in Latin and English, over and over. I had raced around the room gathering whatever I could. Some things were already lost, on the other side of a wall of flame, but others were within my grasp. The apple had been one of them. And the ribbon. The red pawn and the white queen. Something that was simultaneously a flower and a feather duster.

“How on Earth can something simultaneously be a flower and a feather duster?” Edward asked.

“It can't be. Not in real life. But in my memory, if I can't remember it clearly...those are symbols of the four books in the Twilight Saga,” I realized. “I saved them from the fire and the darkness. Other things, too. Things that seemed important. Out of the stuff I could still reach, anyway.”

Edward raised his eyebrows. “You were inside your memory. Treating it as a physical space, and rescuing what you could as it was destroyed.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “Wait. You're saying I was able to pick and choose what I would remember when I came out of the coma?”

“In a limited fashion. By the time you regained enough awareness of what was happening to act, even on a subconscious level, some of it was already lost,” Edward replied. “But in addition to clearly remembering what you took with you, you also remember the room itself. That's probably why certain fragmented memories from your old life are still available, to some degree. You can remember what you saw, but you can't recall the details. You also seemed to prioritize memories that would be important to you now. You seem to recall your time here well enough, and you made a point of retaining your memories of the books where you first encountered our stories. You've also kept memories that you consider important to your core identity.”

“But not my name. Or clear memories of my mother and father;” I murmured softly. “Those weren't important enough to keep.”

Alice caught my eyes, reaching over and cupping my face in her cool hands. “Or they were impossible to keep. Edward literally just said some of it was already lost. And you certainly weren't thinking clearly, or even acting on a conscious level. You did what you could, and it's honestly pretty amazing you were able to do anything.”

“It wasn't enough,” I replied, shutting my eyes against the hot tears I could feel welling in them. Alice let me go, and I wiped my tears away, sniffing and looking to Edward again. “Can I get them back? Fragments mean there's something left, right? Can I fix it?”

Edward hesitated, glancing at Alice. “I'm not sure. It seems...unlikely. Even the transformation into a vampire might not repair your brain,” he said slowly. “But we can't rule it out. Clearly you did retain something of the memories your subconscious failed to rescue from the burning room. And when you used your powers in the past, the side effects did reverse themselves after a time.”

“Can you see anything?” I asked Alice, turning back to her.

She stared back at me, her concern obvious. “Cass...”

“Alice. Please. I don't even feel it when you say that name anymore. I can't explain it, but the connection's just not there and – I'm terrified. I'm changing in ways I don't understand. I've already changed,” I pleaded, grasping her hand, a desperate edge to my voice. “Please just – just look. See if it's going to be all right.”

“Okay. Okay,” Alice said soothingly, stroking my fingers with her thumb. She shut her eyes and
concentrated for a moment, then started to frown, shaking her head slowly.

My heart sank into my stomach. “I don’t get them back?” I asked, very softly.

“No, it’s – it's not clear. There's nothing definitive,” Alice said, opening her eyes again, locking her gaze on mine. “I can still see our future together. I can still see you among us. Content. Happy. Safe. But I'm not sure about your memories. And listen. Whatever happened to you, whatever brought you here – it wasn't physical. Your memories and your powers came with...your soul, for lack of a better word. You believe in the soul, don't you?”

I could feel Edward's gaze on me all of a sudden, almost like it was boring through my skin, but I kept my eyes on Alice. “I...I do. But my body, my brain, they clearly still play some part,” I replied. “Maybe it was just like a file transfer. There isn't any kind of immaterial soul involved, I just got downloaded into Bella Swan, somehow, and now I'm stored in her brain. If that gets damaged, I get damaged. And of course I overwrote whatever was here already.”

I looked down guiltily. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Edward open his mouth, but Alice's gaze shifted to him, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“I'll just...go get some air;” he muttered, rising from his seat and slipping outside.

Alice put her hand on my chin, gently tilting my head up until our eyes met again. Her cold fingers were feather-light as they stroked my jaw. “Someday I will get you to stop blaming yourself for things you can't control, you know;” she told me quietly, the hint of a smile on her lips.

I let out a soft, humorless laugh. “It's not just a habit. It's part of who I am. I may not remember much, but...I remember enough,” I told her. “It's part of my depression. It doesn't stop. I can manage it, but I can't cure it. I can't fix it. I can't send it away for good. No matter how many reasons you give me.”

“But it's not you. It's your brain,” she returned, shifting her hand, stroking the side of my face, working her way up toward my scalp. “Maybe it's an interface to your soul. Maybe it's all just – file storage and processing. But whatever the reason, this thing you have? It's just...chemistry getting in your way. Misfiring neurons trying to sell you on this lie. Trying to convince you you're not important. That you don't matter. That you're a thief, an invader. You didn't ask to be Bella Swan, though, any more than you asked to be born in the first place, to be who you were before. You're the only Bella I've ever known, and the only one this world's got now. And you do matter, to so many people around you. You matter to me.”

She took my hand in both of hers, kissing it and placing it over her cold, quiet heart. I smiled weakly at the gesture. “I can't promise I'm going to stop feeling guilty,” I told her quietly. “Don't ask me to.”

“I won't,” she whispered in return. “Just don't go anywhere.”

“I'll do my best,” I promised. With my free hand, I reached up to stroke her face tenderly, as she'd touched mine. “I don't want to hurt you.”

She smiled at that, but something about her expression turned forced. “I know. You don't have to...to say things you don't mean to spare my feelings, though. I know it's going to take time for you to figure out whatever feelings you have for me, for our relationship to deepen into what it could be. I mean, if it ever does. You don't have to tell me you love me. Not yet.”

I frowned at that, shaking my head. “Alice...did you see something? Did you see me telling you otherwise?”
She gave her head a quick, tight shake in response. “I've been trying not to peek on our conversations, to be honest. At least as far as the immediate future is concerned.”

“But you're afraid of what you might see. Alice...” I shut my eyes briefly, trying to figure out how to put my feelings into words. “I've spent my whole life guarding my heart. Because I was afraid of getting hurt. Because it was unseemly. Because it seemed unsafe. I had a million reasons for the walls I built, the walls I maintained even as I grew up, gained some kind of confidence, stopped caring quite as much about what other people thought. I may not remember the details, but I know there were people I loved fiercely – family, friends – and still I choked on my words trying to say it. But you...you're like a tiny pixie-shaped battering ram. You've broken every wall I've tried to put up. I've only known you a couple weeks, but it feels like it's been...months. A year. Forever. I was scared of falling too fast. Too hard. I still am. But...we could have lost each other. And we still might. Anything could happen, nothing is certain, the universe is cruel and arbitrary...”

She put a finger to my lips, her eyes searching mine. “You know you have an awful tendency to ramble,” she joked, her lips twitching. “You're killing me here.”

I smiled slightly back at her, kissing her finger. “I love you. It's too soon to say it, I know. I feel like a stupid teenager all over again, and I guess I am, but I can't help it. I don't know what's going to come, but I know what I feel now, and I don't want to live – or die – knowing I should have just told you when I could,” I said. “I love you, Alice.”

Her expression melted, and she pulled me in, gently but firmly, until our faces were practically touching. “I love you, too,” she murmured, before pressing her lips against mine.

*****

Sadly, I didn't get much Alice time before she saw Charlie coming home and Edward had to come back inside. He arrived soon after that, and we all took a break to help him put away the groceries. Then, all too soon, I was all caught up on my schoolwork and Edward and Alice were on their way home. I was just trying to decide what to make for dinner when I heard a car pull up and looked out the kitchen window to see Leah's Chevy Impala coming to a stop just outside. She got out, still dressed way too lightly for the January weather, and gave me a wave before pointing at the front door. I waved back and smiled, perhaps a bit tightly, and headed for the door.

“Leah's here, dad,” I announced on the way.

When I opened the door, she was standing right on the stoop, holding three grease-stained white paper bags stuffed with food. “Hey, Ginger Spice,” she said, with a slight, crooked smile. “Edward told me you were housebound. Figured I'd come by with some comfort food.”

Charlie came up just behind me. “Hey, Leah. You know Eddie Cullen?” he asked, sounding puzzled.

I smirked at his use of the hated nickname, biting my lip to keep from laughing as I exchanged an amused glance with her. “That's really nice of you. Please come in,” I said, stepping back. “...wait. Did you go where I think you went?”
“Oh, yeah, we've met. I mean, mainly I know the Cullens through Bella. We ran into them in Port Angeles,” Leah told Charlie, stepping inside and shutting the door behind me. She grinned at me and tossed me one of the bags. “See for yourself.”

I wasted no time getting it open, almost ripping it in the process, and sighed happily as I saw the basket of fried pickles on top. “Oh my God. Leah, you rock,” I told her, popping one in my mouth.

“What're those?” Charlie asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Near as I can tell, pure Bella-crack. ...uh, no relation to actual drugs,” Leah added, remembering who she was talking to. “Fried pickles. For some reason, she's obsessed.”

I chewed and swallowed, glancing back at Charlie. “Yeah, uh, I had them at a restaurant back in Phoenix. They're really good. And I hope you know you're going to clog every artery in this room,” I added to Leah. “But thank you.”

“Ah, don't mention it. Here, Charlie, I brought you dinner, too,” Leah added, handing him one of the other bags.

“That's mighty kind of you, Leah, thanks,” he replied.

I bit my lip, glancing between them briefly. This probably wasn't just a social call, or at least Leah would probably want to talk in private. But with Charlie hovering the way he'd been, we wouldn't be able to talk openly. All I could do was ask, really. “Hey, dad? Do you mind if Leah and I hang in the living room? I haven't seen her in a week it'd be good to catch up. You know, girl talk.”

“Oh. Uh.” Charlie looked at the two of us, and I could see he was weighing his options. Fortunately, it looked like the fact that I was seeing someone else, coupled with his desire to not get involved in the arcane affairs of teenage girls, was winning out. “Yeah, you girls go ahead. I've got some paperwork I should get finished anyway. Job's never over, even when you're on leave. Nice to see you, Leah, say hi to your parents for me.”

“Will do,” Leah agreed, flashing him a smile. We got ourselves settled in the living room and fetched drinks from the kitchen, and then, with Charlie safely out of earshot, Leah hunkered down on the couch and gave me a level stare.

I stared back at her, but after only a couple minutes, I couldn't take it anymore. “Okay, out with it,” I sighed.

Leah feigned surprise, pointing at herself. “Oh, what, me? No, nothing, I'm just wondering how someone so smart can be so goddamned stupid.”

“Edward told you everything, I see,” I said, shutting my eyes briefly. “Great. Look, I was just...experimenting. I didn't realize what would happen.”

“Uh-huh. Okay. See, the part I don't get is the part where you literally shut down the nerves in your arm giving Eddie a tune-up, and then, the very next day, decided it was a good idea to take a look under Rosalie's hood,” Leah returned. She paused, then snorted. “I mean, not that I could blame you for wanting to.”

“Leah!” I protested, feeling a hot flush in my cheeks and glancing away for a moment to compose myself. “Okay, it was stupid. And I'm not going to do it again. I don't need another lecture, I've had this out with Alice and Carlisle and Rose. Believe me, I get it now. I have way too much to lose.”

“Yeah,” she replied, her voice softening as she gave me a more sympathetic look. “Edward told me
you'd had some memory loss. Maybe some brain damage. You doing okay?"

I hesitated, then nodded curtly. “As well as I can be. I remember everything since I got here. I'm pretty sure I still remember the books. It looks like most of the damage was confined to my old life,” I said quietly. “Charlie's still freaked, of course. And so am I.”

“Hmm.” Leah chewed on her burger for a moment, looking thoughtful.

“Hmm, what?” I asked.

Leah swallowed, shaking her head. “I'm not sure you're going to want to hear it, but...maybe this is for the best. I mean, brain damage, bad, don't do it again, it could be way worse next time. But honestly, Bella, how close are you to getting back to that other world?”

I stared at her in silence for a moment, then looked down at my lap. “I don't even know where to start. Aside from maybe finding a big, thick book about 2015 and dropping it on my head.”

“Yeah, I don't think I'd chance that one,” Leah said, wincing. “I told you before I thought the odds were pretty good you're just going to be Bella Swan from now on. They seem even better now.”

“That doesn't mean I want to forget,” I hissed, unable to help myself. “Even if I can never go home, I owe it to everyone I love to remember them. Their faces. Their names. As long as I remember them, they're not...they're not really gone. Not completely.”

“They're not gone even if you, personally, forget them. They're still out there, on your world, living their lives. The people you've lost had other people who loved them, who will still carry their memory. It's not on you to keep your whole world alive. That'd be an awful weight to carry on your shoulders,” Leah told me.

I shook my head, blinking back tears. “My memories are who I am. I – I know I saw my mom as she lost hers. She wasn't the same person anymore. She was drowning.”

Leah took my hand, her skin almost feverish against mine. “I'm sorry you lost your mom. I'm sorry you're having trouble remembering her. But I bet there was more going on with her than just losing her memories. Yeah, I guess the shit we go through turns us into whatever we're going to become, but you don't seem that different. Whatever defines you, it's still there. You're who you are.”

I laughed, without any humor. “You haven't even been talking to me for half an hour.”

“Yeah, well, if you start turning into a totally different person, I'll let you know,” Leah promised, before smirking. “Come on, it's not like you like dudes or anything now, right?”

I laughed a little more genuinely this time. “No. Still super mega gay,” I affirmed, pausing to eat some fries. My gaze flicked back up to meet hers. “Leah, um...you should know...”

Leah gave me a small, sad smile. “You're with Alice.”

“Uh. Yeah. I'm sorry,” I said vaguely.

“It was pretty obvious. I had fun with you, but the way you look at each other...you don't look at me like that. It's obvious you think I'm hot, but that just means you have good taste,” she joked.

I shook my head. “I like you, Leah, I do. I mean, yes, you're hot as hell, you're tall and athletic and that is totally my usual type, but you're also...you. You're funny, you're strong, you don't take any shit. I like spending time with you. But what I have with Alice is just – different.”
Leah sighed. “Yeah. Look, Red, I've been thinking about what you said last week. And okay. It wasn't fair of me to get jealous. You're not my girlfriend. We weren't on a date. Yeah, you're cute, and yeah, I was crushing on you, but I told you I'd be your friend, no pressure, no strings, and then I acted like our thing was something more than I said it would be,” she admitted. “That promise still stands. I want to be there for you, because I think you need more friends who aren't leech – vampires. But if you're happy with Alice, even though she smells totally rank and I don't really get it...I'm happy for you. I don't have to get it to be happy for you. Just as long as she's not pressuring you into declaring your undying love or anything.”

I blushed, fidgeting in my seat. “Pressuring me...no.”

Leah raised her eyebrows. “Oh shit. But you did declare your undying love?”

“No, not exactly, I just...told her I loved her,” I confessed, sighing. “And I don't regret it. But knocking myself into a coma and almost dying probably made a bit more reckless and a bit less patient with that whole thing.”

“Yeah...yeah, that's definitely moving faster than I would,” Leah said, raking her fingers through her short black hair. “Well. She's lucky to have you. And you're lucky to have her.”

I tilted my head, regarding her for a moment. “Are you the only gay kid on the rez?” I asked softly.

Leah let out a long breath. “Only lesbian, anyway. And as far as I know,” she confirmed. “I mean, I've met girls. Nothing serious, though. My long-term prospects are a little bleak at the moment.”

“I'm sorry. You deserve someone awesome,” I told her, squeezing her hand.

She grinned, a bit halfheartedly. “That's true. Whether or not I find her is an open question, though. But hey, if Rose ever breaks up with that giant man-mountain of hers...”

I laughed, shaking my head. “That's pretty unlikely. And I'm pretty sure she's not gay. Also, you hate how she smells.”

“Anything's possible, she might be flexible, and I can hold my breath a really long time,” Leah joked, her grin widening.

“Yeah, okay. I will totally get on asking her about that as soon as I try cliff diving, riding a motorcycle without a helmet, and walking alone into a trap set by a hungry man-eating vampire,” I retorted, nodding sagely.

“I mean, if you want to try cliff diving, there are some great spots near the rez,” Leah said with a smirk.

“My point was that I don't have a death wish, thank you. I don't even know how to swim.”

Leah blinked. “Wait, seriously don't know, or just don't remember knowing?”

“I had coordination problems back home, and this body's even less coordinated, so I'm pretty sure I don't know, period.” I affirmed.

“Damn, Red. We gotta fix that. Once it warms up, you should come out to the beach. I'll teach you,” she said.

“Oh, it's okay. I have a better plan. It's called never going near the water,” I replied breezily. “Ever.”
“What if you're on a plane that crashes in a river or something, though? Or on a cruise ship that capsizes?” Leah asked. “Or caught in a tsunami?”

I counted off on my fingers. “I'd probably just die in a tsunami, cruise ships are deathtraps where people routinely disappear forever so no thank you, and in the event of a water landing, my seat can also be used as a flotation device!” I finished, in a chipper flight attendant tone.

Leah snorted. “Yeah. You got it all planned out. You should still know how to swim,” she replied. “And you should come out to the rez anyway. Actually, you and your dad are definitely invited to our place for the Super Bowl.”

“Charlie told me, but he's still obsessing over my health,” I said, sighing heavily. “I'm really hoping Carlisle talks him into letting me back into the general population tomorrow. I'm going crazy cooped up in this house with him.”

“He loves you, and he's scared. I'd probably lose it, too...honestly I kind of get it. I've been feeling the same way about my dad,” Leah admitted. “They found some stuff when he went to get his heart checked out. They have him on some new medication and we're all trying to help him get healthier, but it's still freaking me out. And he's having trouble sticking to his new diet.”

“I'm sorry. I'm glad he's getting help, though,” I said softly. “And...I know Charlie's worried and trying to help. It's just been a bit much. I've never liked people hovering over me, you know?”

“I get it. But it's his job to keep you safe, and he's not sure how to do it. Cut him some slack, okay?” Leah asked. “And, uh...maybe you should stop calling him by his first name.”

I blinked. “I don't do it to his face...”

“No, but you're still not thinking of him as your dad,” she returned. “I know, you had another dad in your world. But we already talked about that. He's the only father you have for sure, and you're his daughter. That's how he sees you. He'd do anything for you. Don't you think you should respect that?”

“Uh...okay. I mean, I've been trying to be a good daughter...I thought I was doing okay...” I said slowly. “Honestly, Leah, I didn't expect to get this from you.”

“Yeah, well...maybe it's none of my business,” she replied. “I've just been thinking about that stuff lately. Feeling like I haven't appreciated my dad as much. You never know what's going to happen, you know? Life's too short and shit. You should appreciate what you have.”

“I...do. And he's a good father. Mostly,” I said. I let out a long sigh. Knowing what Leah was dealing with, I couldn't just shut her down, and she wasn't exactly wrong. “Okay. You have a point. I'll try to break the habit.”

She gave me a slightly strained smile. “Good. I really think it's for the best.”

“Yeah,” I said, quickly changing the subject. “So. Aside from calling them leeches – which, speaking of habits we should be breaking, is definitely one I'd like to see you drop – you really don't have a problem with the Cullens?”

“Aw, c'mon, they literally drink blood. Not from humans, but they do,” Leah protested.

“You literally turn into a giant, fluffy wolf, would you be okay with them calling you a dog?” I returned.
“I'm not that fluffy, I keep my hair short,” she grumbled. “Fine, point taken. And...no, I guess not. I mean, they are kind of responsible for activating the pack, but they can't help it. Plus being a werewolf is kind of awesome. Other than that, I don't know what they've done outside of Forks, but as near as I can tell, they've kept their promises around here. I don't know why Billy hates them so much. The elders who made the original deal seemed to warm up to them eventually.”

“You'd be able to tell if they'd been feeding on humans recently. Their eye color changes based on their diet. Human blood gives them creepy red eyes,” I told her. “I actually don't know why it's just human blood that does that, though. It must be some kind of mystical thing. I'm pretty sure they all still feed on mammals, and I think most if not all mammalian blood is just as red as ours.”

“I wouldn't even try to apply science to this. It's all weird magic bullshit,” Leah said, waving her hand. “I guess that's good to know, though. And we do keep an eye on any murders or accidents or disappearances in the area. From what the elders have passed down, we're pretty sure we'd smell vampire stink on site if they were involved. And we know how all the Cullens smell. They're not just rank, there are differences.”

I couldn't help smiling. “So, what, you've been dabbling as werewolf CSIs? Shit, I bet Charlie would like to have a couple of you on staff.”

Leah let out a barking laugh. “There's an idea. Think he'd let us blast out The Who whenever we get on scene?”

“Yeah, that might be taking it a step too far,” I replied, snickering. “I wouldn't expect him to let you interrogate suspects, either.”

“His loss, I'd be totally badass as a bad cop,” Leah said with a smirk.

“I can see it.” I raked my fingers through my hair, sighing. “Don't suppose your CSI team has turned up any sign of non-Cullen vampires in the area?”

Leah grew more serious, shaking her head. “Sorry, Red. I know you want this over with. We all do. But none of the incidents we've checked out have been vampire-related, and we haven't even sniffed out any strangers so far. Your girlfriend doesn't seem to think they're anywhere near Forks right now anyway, but she's still having trouble seeing their plans.”

My lips twitched at the word 'girlfriend,' and I felt a brief wave of warmth in my belly, but I sighed anyway. “That'd probably be Victoria's self-preservation power. She senses we're looking, so she's steering well clear, even if she doesn't know the specifics. And she's adding an element of unpredictability that's throwing Alice off.”

“Hey, maybe that sense of self-preservation means they won't show their faces around here at all,” Leah said.

I chuckled softly. “I doubt I'm that lucky. And you're right, I just want this over with. James, Victoria, Laurent, they all deserve to die. James especially,” I growled.

Leah raised her eyebrows. “Uh, okay, that's interesting. I don't think that's just because of what he's supposed to do to you, is it?”

“No,” I replied tersely. “Sorry. It's not my story to tell, not yet. Let's just say I know enough about him to hate his guts. It's shit he did years ago, it's not relevant to the here and now.”

“Guess I'll take your word for it. For now,” Leah said, though I could tell she wasn't thrilled. “Look, Bella, I hate to suggest it, but maybe we should stop hunting them for a while. Stick to protecting our
own, you know? We'll still make sure they don't hurt anyone in Forks or La Push, but other than that...you know when and where they come into the story, right?”

I sighed. “Mostly. It's sometime next month. They're close enough to hear the Cullens playing baseball – which they only do when they can pass it off to humans as a thunderstorm – and they come check it out. I'm supposed to be there, and that's when James is supposed to latch onto my scent. I just...hate the idea of anyone getting hurt while we wait and see.”

“That's happening anyway, you know,” Leah said quietly. “It's not happening here, but they're still vampires, they still kill human beings for their blood, and they're still doing it somewhere.”

“I know. I know,” I replied, shaking my head. “That feels more abstract, but...you're right. The only way to end this is to end this, and letting them come probably is our best shot. It just feels like I'm letting people I don't even know die for my sake, if we stand down and let them make their way here. I'd never even ask that of anyone. How do I live with letting it happen?”

“By recognizing there's shit you can control, and shit you can't, and doing what you can with the control you've got. God, you need to stop blaming yourself for every little thing,” Leah told me. “You're doing what you can. It sucks, and I don't like it either, but I don't see that we have much choice.”

I smiled ruefully. “You're not the first person to tell me that today. Alice said it, too.”

“Well, Alice is pretty damn smart, then. You're damned lucky to have her,” Leah said, her gaze briefly distant, her tone faintly wistful.

“Believe me, I know,” I said softly, searching Leah's expression and thinking things over.

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We spent the rest of the evening catching up on recent events. Jacob Black and his friends had officially joined the pack, and Billy was quietly pushing for his son to take over as alpha, but Jake seemed in awe of Leah and wasn't pushing for it himself. For the time being, Leah was still alpha, fully backed by her father and most of the other tribal elders, and Sam was still her second. Seth still wasn't a shifter, and wasn't showing any of the symptoms of the transformation.

From there, we turned to more idle chatter, but I kept thinking back on what I'd said about Leah deserving someone awesome. She really did, and it seemed like she was carrying a lot of weight around these days. She could use someone in her life to support and encourage her. Emily seemed to be doing just that for Sam, and both of them were offering Leah as much emotional support as they could, but she still seemed lonely. I wouldn't have bothered if it didn't seem to be bothering her, because I knew what it was like to be comfortably single for a while, but I was pretty sure that wasn't the case.

I was still mulling it over when she finally announced she needed to head home and I saw her to the door. I still wasn't sure how I was going to go about it. I'd never played matchmaker before. I didn't know where to start. But Operation Girlfriend was officially a go. Somehow, somewhere, I'd find Leah Clearwater the girl she deserved, imprinting or no.
Now I just needed to figure out where all the local lesbians were hiding.
The next morning, Charlie took me back to the hospital and Carlisle examined me again, running me through a battery of tests that nearly left me doubting Alice's visions, no matter how confident she'd seemed. Ultimately, however, she was proven right once again. Carlisle told Charlie that I appeared to have recovered fully and he saw no reason why I couldn't travel with Alice to Port Angeles for our date, though he did caution me once again against overexerting myself. Though I could tell Charlie was still reluctant to let me go, Carlisle continued to offer assurances until he finally relented.

Rosalie arrived ten minutes after school let out, offering Charlie a quick hello and a smile that left him blushing and sputtering before all but dragging me upstairs. She'd brought some dye to touch up my roots, so we saw to that first before I dressed. Then she went to work with seemingly every cosmetic tool mankind had yet devised, teasing and curling and styling my hair, applying everything from foundation to lip liner with an expert hand. She wouldn't let me look in the mirror for any of it, and shushed me if I tried to move or speak while she worked. At last, she put her hands on my shoulders and gently guided me to the full-length mirror hanging in the upstairs hall, just outside the bathroom.

A stranger stared back at me.

No, that wasn't entirely true: I recognized the general shape of the face and body I'd grown accustomed to over the last couple of weeks. But the long, straight hair I'd kept back in ponytails or braids or messy buns hung loose now, styled into waves and big, soft curls, gathered to the left side of my face and cascading over my shoulder, resting against my collarbone and the front of the dress. The shadow and liner made my eyes seem larger and more prominent, somehow, complementing my hair and even seeming to draw out hints of hazel in the rich brown irises. My lashes seemed longer, my lips fuller and almost perfectly shaped. Combined with the vaguely vintage-style dress, dark stockings and classic pumps I was wearing, the overall effect was something like a *femme fatale* straight out of a noir film.

“Rose, that's...how is that even possible?” I breathed, half-reaching toward the mirror before me.

“I'm just accentuating your best features,” she told me, leaning in so her face was just over my shoulder, her reflection smiling at me. “You're beautiful. I'm just drawing it out.”

I shut my eyes, shaking my head tightly. “Bella Swan is beautiful,” I whispered.

Rosalie chuckled softly in my ear. “You're Bella Swan,” she whispered back. “Congratulations. It's a girl.”

I could feel something break inside me, like a dam bursting, unleashing a torrent of emotion. Without thinking, I spun toward Rose, throwing my arms around her and burying my face in her shoulder, feeling hot tears stinging my eyes. She hesitated for a split second, and then her arms wrapped gently around me, holding me close as she hushed me softly.

“I'm sorry,” I said, my voice cracking. “I'm so sorry.”

“Shh, you don't have to apologize. What is it? What's wrong?” Rosalie asked.

I shook my head, sniffling. “Nothing. Everything. I don't –” I hiccuped, suddenly, violently, bouncing against her with the force of it. “Damn it.”

Rose laughed, very quietly. “Do you need me to give you a good scare?” she asked, gently teasing.
“No – no. I need water,” I gasped, between hiccups.

“All right,” she agreed, letting me go and watching me to be sure I was steady before ducking down to the kitchen and returning with a full glass, handing it to me.

I held my nose and took a rapid series of sips without pausing to breathe, hoping the old trick would work in this body. Rosalie watched me with raised eyebrows, and once we were both satisfied that I’d put a stop to things, she took my hand and guided me into my room, shutting the door behind herself.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“I don't know,” I said softly, sitting on the edge of my bed. “Or I'm not sure. When you said that...it's everything I ever wanted. You know that? All my life I've felt like a freak, and for so long I didn't even have the words to understand why. Even once I knew who and what I was, I felt – wrong. And it didn't help that there were plenty of people out there ready and willing to tell me I was wrong. Broken. An abomination. There were times I just wanted to vanish into the woodwork. To find a way to pass perfectly and never, ever come back out. I hated myself for it, but I still wished for it. And here I am now, and it's like a fairy tale. The cursed, ugly troll wakes as a beautiful princess, safe and loved and surrounded by everything she ever wanted.”

Rosalie hummed, walking over to sit beside me. “You're also in mortal danger from a coven of evil vampires. Or will be. You aren't exactly living happily ever after yet,” she pointed out. “That's leaving aside the fact that your own magical powers could kill you if you use them again. But are you telling me you weren't loved in your own world?”

“No...of course I was. I had family and friends who loved me dearly, cared for me. I knew they'd miss me if I was gone. I wonder what they're going through now,” I replied, briefly staring into space. “I was doing well, for the first time in a long time. I felt like I was finding my place. I wasn't with anyone, and whatever magic existed in my world was subtle and meager, but I was getting by. Still, there was so much I yearned for. I wanted to be loved, romantically. I wanted to stick out less, or at least stand out in different ways. And all of this is just...”

“Too perfect?” Rosalie finished, and I nodded. “You're still worried you're going to wake up, or go back, aren't you?”

“Yes. And it feels wrong that I'm worried about it,” I said, frowning. “Isn't that only fair? What did I do to earn any of this? What right do I have to Bella Swan's life?”

“As though we always get what we deserve,” Rosalie said, with a low, bitter chuckle, putting her arm around my shoulders. “Nothing, probably. But what did you do to earn all the things that happened in your old life, good or bad? How much came to you because you'd worked hard for it, or because you'd made mistakes, and how much was random chance? The rest of us ask these questions too, you know. I didn't deserve to be assaulted and left for dead. I didn't earn eternal life. I didn't do anything to deserve Emmett. What matters is what we do with the chances we're given. You've been given a chance at a new life. It's not a dream or a fantasy, and maybe it wasn't earned, maybe it was just random chance, but here you are. I don't think you've screwed things up too badly yet. Not for lack of trying, of course.”

I stuck my tongue out at her, laughing despite my tears. “Gee, thanks. You're a sweetheart, Rose.”

“Believe me, I know,” she replied, briefly preening and giving me a soft smile before turning serious again. “I'll tell you something else. I don't know what you looked like before. I doubt you were ugly, but so be it. You are beautiful, here and now, but that's not why Alice loves you. She loves you
because she saw something special inside you, and every day she understands you better and cares for you more. The rest of us cared for you first because of Alice's feelings, but as you've shown us more and more of yourself, we've found our own reasons to welcome you into our lives. If we had met you as you were, in your old body, Alice would still have seen what she saw that first night, and we would still have embraced you.”

I laughed softly again, shaking my head. “You know I was in my thirties.”

“I turned ninety just before you arrived. Ninety! Don't tell anyone,” Rosalie said emphatically, putting a finger to her lips and laughing along with me. “As if age matters to us. As if beauty truly matters to us, where friendship or love are concerned. Do you love Alice only for the way she looks?”

“No – she is beautiful, of course,” I said, feeling a hot flush in my cheeks. “But she's kind, and forgiving, and smart and funny. She's...comfortable and exciting all at once. I feel like I've known her forever, like I can trust her with anything.”

Rosalie smiled, pulling me in and brushing her cool, firm lips against my forehead. “Then trust that she feels the same way about you, and she'd love you no matter how you looked or where you came from,” she told me. “Now. I know you're feeling sensitive right now and your mind tends to pull you down the same tracks, but do try to enjoy yourself with Alice tonight, Bella. And try not to ruin your makeup again, hm? Waterproof mascara can only go so far.”

I laughed again, nodding and giving her a loose hug. “I'll do my best.”

She wrapped her arms around me in return, very briefly, giving me no time at all to shiver in her cold embrace, then stood and took my hand. “Well, then. Let's get you fixed up.”

*****

After we'd finished fixing my makeup, Rosalie said her goodbyes and slipped out, making me promise to wait in my room until Charlie had let Alice into the house. I wasn't entirely sure what she had in mind, but I agreed, returning to my room and surfing the Internet at painfully slow speeds as I waited. At last, I heard Charlie calling up to me.

“Bella? Your date's here!”

I felt a flutter run through my body, from the pit of my stomach up to my throat, as I rose from my desk chair. I smoothed my skirt gently, checked my hair in the mirror over my dresser, and took a deep breath before stepping out of my room and carefully descending the stairs. When I saw her waiting for me by the door, her coat in hand, the sight left me breathless.

She was in a black spaghetti-strap dress that clung to her slender curves, from the gentle swell of her chest down to her tiny waist and slim, sleek hips. The hem wrapped around her thighs, gathered higher between her legs than at her sides, exposing her perfect knees and calves. Unlike me, she was unafraid of heels in this weather, and the stilettos she was wearing pushed her up just over five feet. Her short hair was artfully mussed, seemingly random spikes framing her face, and her lips were a wine red that contrasted sharply with her pale skin. Her gorgeous golden eyes were kohl-rimmed and shaded in metallic hues.

Drop-dead gorgeous as she was, though, that wasn't what struck me hardest. It was the way she was
looking at me, drinking me in, her lips turned in a small but growing smile, her eyes full of wonder and deep, abiding love – and it was the realization that this was nothing new. That she had always looked at me that way, from the moment we had met.

I felt myself blushing as I smiled brilliantly back at her, without any restraint, my footsteps light on the stairs as I made my way to the bottom, making sure to hold tight to the railing so as to avoid any accidents. Alice stepped toward me as I reached the ground floor, and we reached for each other almost as one, her hands going to my waist while I cupped her chin in mine.

“Hi,” I murmured, still grinning like an idiot. “You look amazing.”

“Hi,” she whispered back, her smile widening. “So do you.”

I suddenly heard Charlie clear his throat, and nearly jumped a foot in the air, my knees buckling as fresh heat flooded through my face and throat. I'd been so focused on Alice that I'd forgotten he was there. Alice managed to steady me without betraying her unnatural strength, and let out a high, musical laugh. I made a face at her, then looked over at Charlie to find him blushing about as hard as I was.

“Right. Uh, Alice. I expect you to have Bella home by eleven, all right?” he said gruffly. “And you girls be careful.”

“Of course, Chief Swan,” Alice assured him. “I won’t let anything happen to Bella.”

“Good.” Charlie grunted, briefly looking her up and down. “You sure you won't be too cold?”

“Oh, I'm fine. That's very sweet, but I have my coat. And we moved here from Alaska,” Alice replied. “February in Washington is nothing, believe me.”

“If you say so,” Charlie said, before turning to me. “Bells, you take care of yourself. Tell Alice to bring you back if you start feeling tired or anything. You got your phone?”

“Yes, dad,” I promised, pulling it out of my purse and showing him it was fully charged.

He grunted again, nodding. “Good. You, uh…” His ears turned a little red. “You look great, kiddo. You girls have a good time. I love you.”

I smiled, putting my arms around him in a warm hug, and after a moment, he returned the gesture. “I love you, too, dad. I'll see you later.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, squeezing me once before letting me go and nodding to Alice, who nodded back. We slipped on her coats, and she took my hand, waving at him as she led me out the door.

As soon as we were settled in the front seats of her car, she grabbed my hand, leaning in and capturing my lips in a slow, sweet kiss. I let my eyelids flutter shut as I returned it, putting my free hand on her thigh as I leaned over the center console into her embrace. I felt her tongue dart from her mouth, slick with her venom and probing lightly against mine, and as I parted my lips for her, her intoxicating scent filled my nose and mouth. She tasted sweet and floral all at once, her flavor deeply familiar, but I couldn't quite put a name to it. There was a slight, almost alcoholic burn underneath that made me feel all the more lightheaded. My heart stuttered in my chest, and chilled as I was by her embrace, I could feel a warmth rising throughout my body to match it. At last, reluctantly and with a deep groan, I pulled back.

“Whoa,” I breathed, fighting to regain some semblance of rational thought.
She giggled, and though she couldn't blush, I could see in the dim light that her eyes were darker
than usual...maybe too dark. She must have seen something in my expression, or in our future,
because she took a deep breath and looked away for a moment.

“Okay, maybe that was a little too much,” she admitted softly.

“I've had worse experiences with French kissing. I mean, one time a chihuahua stuck its tongue in
my mouth, so – this definitely rates above that,” I said, still slightly breathless and distracted.
Something nagged at me, and my eyes widened as I realized what it was. “Alice, um – your
venom...”

“It would really only be an issue if I bit you,” Alice said, though she briefly stared into space
nonetheless before looking back at me and smiling. Her eyes were growing lighter, I thought, though
they were still more amber than gold. “It'll be fine, nothing's going to happen.”

“We should probably be careful anyway. And we might want to get going before Char – dad
wonders why we're still parked,” I replied.

“You're right. Sorry,” Alice agreed, though the smirk she gave me as she started the car was
completely unrepentant. “It is just so damn hard to keep my hands off you while you're in that dress.
Or, really, ever.”

“You think you have it rough?” I replied, with a soft laugh. “That dress you're wearing is just about
the sexiest thing I've ever seen. It looks incredible on you, seriously.”

“You should see it off me,” she returned with a sly, sidelong glance, laughing again as I swallowed
and blushed ferociously. “You know you're way too easy, right?”

“God, what the hell have I gotten myself into?” I muttered, though I couldn't help returning her smile
with one of my own. “Better question, what's gotten into you?”

“Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's just been too damn long. But I suspect the fact that I'm finally on a real
date with the woman I love – and I can tell you that without scaring you off, because you said it
back, you hopeless romantic – may have something to do with it, too.” Alice shrugged. “Turns out
love makes me a little frisky.”

“More like 'this goes up to eleven' frisky,” I teased.

Alice shook her head, feigning a puzzled look. “Why don't you just make ten friskier and make ten
the top number and make that a little friskier?”

I snickered, but couldn't help thinking of what she'd said a minute before. “So, uh...how long has it
been?”

“Oh,” Alice said, sobering somewhat. “Are we having that conversation already?”

“I'm not going to judge,” I promised, holding up my hands. “I'm not going to get jealous or upset. I
know where I stand. I'm just...curious.”

“It's been a couple years,” Alice replied, her eyes on the road as we reached a clear stretch and she
started speeding up. “We were in Alaska before this. You know about the Denali coven?”

I nodded. “Tanya, Kate, and Irina, the succubus sisters...oh,” I realized aloud. “Uh. I know Eleazar
and Carmen live with them, but since they're mates, I'm guessing not Carmen. Which one? Or was it...?”
“No, it was just one,” she assured me quickly. “Tanya. It was pretty casual for both of us. Edward
wouldn't give her the time of day, we got a little caught up in a hunt, and one thing led to another.
We had a little fling and then we parted as friends. How about you?”

Despite my promise, I couldn't help feeling a little inadequate compared to Tanya. I didn't know
exactly how she looked in this world, but I knew she was blonde, beautiful, and probably almost on
par with Rosalie in terms of sheer hotness. Still, I managed a distracted smile as I responded. “Oh,
uh. There hasn't really been anyone. A few dates here and there. Nothing serious.”

Alice looked over at me, frowning slightly. “Tanya wasn't serious either. I promise. Not like you.”

“I know,” I said, with a sheepish grin. “I'm sorry. I'm being stupid.”

“You're being insecure. Not stupid,” Alice assured me, reaching out to pat my knee. “So, have you
ever even had sex?”

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. “Not...with a partner, no.”

Alice hummed, a little smirk playing across her lips. “Well. Isn't that interesting?”

“Interesting?” I echoed, gazing back at her, my mouth slightly dry.

“Very interesting,” Alice replied, her hand sliding up from my knee, tugging the hem of my dress
aside as her cool fingers glided up my thigh, separated from my flesh only by the fabric of my tights,
which suddenly felt very, very thin. My breath hitched in my throat, and my heart seemed to pound
against my breastbone. Alice's voice fell to a low, husky whisper as she continued. “I've never been
with a virgin. At least not that I can remember.”

Her hand drifted further upward and to the side, and I could feel her fingertips stroking my inner
thigh. I shuddered, gasping softly. “Shit, Alice,” I breathed, letting out a shaky laugh. “At least buy
me dinner first? And maybe don't – don't crash the car?”

“I was planning to. And that sounds like a challenge,” she returned, sparing me a quick glance, her
eyes heavy-lidded. Her other hand was still firmly on the steering wheel, though, and she soon
turned her attention back to the road, even as she stroked her way back down toward my knee.

“What kind of girl do you think I am?” I joked, grabbing her wrist and pulling her hand from my leg,
lifting it to my lips and kissing her fingers.

“The kind of girl who's just as turned on as I am right now. And God, you smell hot when you're
horny.” She giggled softly before adding, in a gentler tone, “But if you want me to slow down...”

“I'd rather you didn't finger me while you're driving. Even if you can somehow keep an eye on the
road while you're doing it,” I told her, though I gave her a crooked smile. “And maybe we could at
least finish our first date first. Plus...your eyes were pretty dark earlier. You sure you can keep
control?”

Alice sighed. “Yes, but that's a good point. I should probably get a good hunt in before we get too
hot and heavy. Meaning it won't be tonight anyway. Probably for the best.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, letting out a long breath as I relaxed a little, though I felt a slight twinge of
disappointment deep down. “So, uh, the virgin thing's a turn on, I take it?”

“Oh, yes, talking about my turn-ons will definitely help me cool down,” Alice teased, though she
laughed softly. “I suppose I hadn't really thought about it before. But I've only ever been with
vampires, and all of them were older than me, more experienced. The idea of seducing a sweet, virginal human has a certain appeal. And there is so very much I could teach you, gorgeous.”

I shivered a little as the husky undertone returned to her voice, and blushed again at the compliment. “How, um, how many other girls have you been with?”

“Just three. Tanya included,” she told me. “Again, assuming I wasn't with anyone in my human life. There was this adorable Southern belle named Jess – Jessamine – about a decade after I was turned. Then there was Maggie, in the sixties, while we were living in England. She’s part of Siobhan’s coven, in Ireland.”

“I know about the Irish coven. Maggie has the power to sense if someone's telling the truth, right?” I asked. “And Carlisle thinks Siobhan has the power to make her plans a reality...and then there's Liam, who doesn't seem to have a power, I think.”

“Yeah, that's right. These must have been extremely extensive books,” Alice said, sparing me a curious glance.

“Well...Bella meets some of your family's friends. Later on,” I said vaguely, trying not to think of the circumstances, just in case Edward hadn't managed to filter out my thoughts for the evening.

“I see.” She paused for a moment, then glanced at me again, biting her lip. “So...you're not mad? Or jealous, or insecure?”

“No, I mean...maybe a little intimidated by the whole Tanya thing. I know she must be drop-dead gorgeous. No pun intended,” I said. “But you said it was nothing serious. You're not still carrying a torch for any of them, right?”

“No. I have fond memories of all of them, but...Tanya and I knew what we were getting into, and neither of us wanted a long-term relationship,” Alice said. “Really, you don't have to worry about a thing where she's concerned. I know she'll like you, and she'll be very happy for us. Maggie and Jess – they both kill human beings. It just wouldn't have worked in the long run. Maggie and I parted as friends, at least. Jess...not so much.”

I bit my own lip at the pained expression that crossed her face, and squeezed her hand. “I'm sorry. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to.”

“It's fine. Honestly, I don't think it would have lasted anyway. We were good friends, but we were very different people. Our dietary choices just brought it to a head,” she said. “I had my first vision of Carlisle and the others while I was still living as a nomad with Jess. I hadn't realized before then that we could survive on animal blood. She didn't understand why I was so desperate to do it, and she was upset that I wouldn't use my powers to help her hunt humans anymore. When I told her about the Cullens, and admitted I didn't see her as part of the family, we had a huge fight. She didn't understand why I'd chase a future she wasn't in. I tried to convince her the future could change, but she thought I was abandoning her, so...finally she decided to abandon me first.”

“That's awful, Alice. I'm so sorry. I can only imagine how much that must have hurt,” I told her. I let go of her hand, reaching up to rub her shoulder.

“It's fine. Honestly, I don't think it would have lasted anyway. We were good friends, but we were very different people. Our dietary choices just brought it to a head,” she said. “I had my first vision of Carlisle and the others while I was still living as a nomad with Jess. I hadn't realized before then that we could survive on animal blood. She didn't understand why I was so desperate to do it, and she was upset that I wouldn't use my powers to help her hunt humans anymore. When I told her about the Cullens, and admitted I didn't see her as part of the family, we had a huge fight. She didn't understand why I'd chase a future she wasn't in. I tried to convince her the future could change, but she thought I was abandoning her, so...finally she decided to abandon me first.”

“That's awful, Alice. I'm so sorry. I can only imagine how much that must have hurt,” I told her. I let go of her hand, reaching up to rub her shoulder.

“I've had a long time to get over it. It just wasn't meant to be. She always was stubborn, I should have known she'd never give up the lifestyle she was used to. She was never going to come with me to join the family.” Alice sighed, shaking her head. “I still miss her. I wonder how she's doing. But I miss my friend, the first real friend I remember having. I wouldn't want to take her back as my partner. Certainly not now that I have you.”
I shifted in my seat, glancing away. “The mating bond didn't give you much choice.”

“Hey,” she said softly, taking my hand again and squeezing very gently. “The mating bond jump-started things. But the moment I saw you, I saw our futures unfold in a thousand different ways. They were nothing more than glimpses, but I still saw so many conversations, so many intimate moments. I saw you. And I'm still seeing more and more of you, every day. I'm not going to lie and say it hasn't been frustrating at times, or that sometimes I wish I could have just fallen for you naturally, but I do think I would have fallen for you. Just like you've fallen for me.”

I looked back at her, and started to smile, very slightly. “You know...I realized tonight, when I saw the way you were looking at me...you always look at me the same way. Like I'm the most amazing thing you've ever seen.”

She smiled back. “Only because you are. You look spectacular in that dress, Bella, but you will always be the most beautiful woman in the world to me,” she promised. “And I could say the same about you. I didn't know for sure where it would lead, but from the night we met, I could see something in your eyes every time you looked back at me. Affection, friendship...I didn't dare call it love until you finally said it. There might have been a little more lust than usual when you saw me tonight, granted.”

I laughed. “Well, you'd be sexy as hell in a burlap sack. But that dress is...really something else.” I kissed her hand again. “I really do love you, Alice Cullen.”

“And I really do love you, Bella Swan,” she replied, her voice soft and reverent, her eyes flicking to me one last time before she turned her attention fully back to the road.

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Bella Italia turned out to be a charming little restaurant near the waterfront, the outside painted in vivid shades of red while the inside was warm and inviting, a blend of modern furnishings and traditional décor. Once again, it looked almost nothing like the set from the movie, though at this point I was scarcely surprised. The place was fairly full by the time we arrived, but Alice had assured me she'd made a reservation, and after a brief exchange with the hostess, we were seated at a relatively secluded table in a far corner of the room, well away from the door.

“So are you going to eat anything? I know you can't, really, but for appearance's sake?” I asked Alice, looking at my menu.

“Mmm. For appearance's sake, yes. But I shouldn't need to eat much,” she replied. “I'm small enough that no one really expects me to clean my plate anyway. You can have the leftovers. What would you like?”

“I'm not sure yet – I didn't get a chance to look at the menu online,” I remarked.

She laughed softly, her amber eyes sparkling as she gazed back at me. “Do you often plan out your meals before you even arrive at the restaurant?”

I blushed, smiling sheepishly. “I like to know what I'm getting into, that's all. I don't plan the whole meal,” I protested.

“Mmm-hmm. Sure. I could look ahead to our next few dates and check,” Alice teased.
“Oh, we're assuming we get a second date, are we?” I returned, trying to look stern as I lowered my menu and met her eyes. I couldn't quite keep a straight face, though.

“You know you love me,” Alice said, preening. “More importantly, I know it, too.”

I snickered, taking her hand and playing with her small, cold fingers. “And now that you do, you're going to be completely insufferable, aren't you?”

“Completely insufferable, confident and sexy, po-tay-to po-tah-to,” she replied, with a little smirk and a dismissive wave of her free hand.

“Uh-huh. You're lucky you're adorable,” I told her, leaning over the table to give her a light kiss. “Now give me a few minutes to look at the menu.”

Alice pouted. “If I must.”

“Somehow I think you'll survive,” I murmured, though I kept hold of her hand as I read the menu, my thumb running over her knuckles.

Our waiter arrived a moment later, a tall, athletic young man with a slightly crooked jaw, a messy nest of black hair and a broad grin. “Good evening, ladies,” he said, in a smooth, slightly husky voice. “Welcome to Bella Italia. My name is Anthony, I'll be your waiter this evening. May I start you off with anything to drink?”

“Oh, hello. I'll just have a Diet Coke, please,” I said, glancing up. Alice quietly pulled her hand from mine, and I looked over at her to see her suppressing a smile, her shoulders quivering lightly. She got it under control again by the time he turned to her.

“I'll just stick with water, thank you,” Alice told him.

“Got it,” Anthony replied, turning his attention back to me with a smile, even as he ostensibly spoke to both of us. “Now, tonight's specials are a ravioli in creamy besciamella with Olympic forest mushrooms, and a baked salmon basted in a lemon garlic butter sauce with a side of asparagus and herb-roasted potatoes. Would you like a few more minutes to look at your menus, or are you ready to order?”

Now that he was turned away from her, Alice was trembling with laughter again, and I raised my eyebrows at her before offering Anthony a polite smile. “Just a few more minutes, please. Thank you.”

“Oh, hello. I'll just have a Diet Coke, please,” I said, glancing up. Alice quietly pulled her hand from mine, and I looked over at her to see her suppressing a smile, her shoulders quivering lightly. She got it under control again by the time he turned to her.

“Of course. I'll be back with your Coke shortly,” he promised, his cheek dimpling as he nodded to me and headed off.

“You know you don't need to drink diet anymore, right?” Alice asked me, still suppressing laughter.

“I know, I'm just used to the taste. Okay, what's so funny?” I demanded.

“Funny? I don't know what you're talking about,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with mischief once again.

I let my own eyes narrow in return, reaching for her hand again, but she pulled it out of sight with a demure smile. “Why am I no longer allowed to hold your hand?”

“Of course you're allowed to hold my hand, I just think you should keep your hands free for dinner,” she said, picking up her menu with both hands.
“The dinner we haven't ordered yet?” I asked.

She grinned, her eyes on the menu. “That's the one!”

“Hello again,” Anthony said, smiling at me as he set down a glass full of soda. “Here's your Coke, miss...I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.”

“Oh, she's Bella. I'm Alice,” Alice interjected, before I could respond.

“Bella,” he repeated. “Beautiful name for a beautiful lady.”

My eyes widened slightly, and I heard Alice snicker softly, quickly turning it into a cough as she took a sip of water. “Uh...thank you,” I said, my cheeks warming slightly. “I'm sorry, could you give us a few more minutes? I'm sure we'll be ready to order soon.”

“Not a problem, Bella. I'll check on you in a bit,” Anthony replied, giving me another charming smile.

As soon as he retreated, I turned on Alice. “And this is amusing you, I take it.”

“Oh, yes,” Alice agreed, her eyes twinkling merrily. “It's fun to watch you deal with boys.”

“I came out at school so I wouldn't have to,” I said, groaning and shutting my eyes. “God, I wish I could order a real drink.”

“Don't sell yourself short. Between the two of us, I'm sure we could persuade that nice waiter that he doesn't need to card you,” she replied, laughing softly. I opened my eyes to glare at her, and she smiled sweetly, adopting a more serious tone. “If it really bothers you, we can be a little more obvious.”

“I don't know if it bothers me. I just don't really get it. Why would he even look twice at me when you're here?” I asked.

“I'm probably not his type,” Alice said, shrugging one shoulder. “Vampires aren't absolutely irresistible to everyone they meet. Even Rosalie fails to turn the occasional head. You're taller, you have longer hair, you're more filled out, could be any number of reasons.”

“Well, I seriously have to question his taste. Because I can't take my eyes off you,” I returned, with a crooked smile.

Alice grinned. “Nice one.”

“Mm, I thought so,” I replied, grinning back at her. “Anyway, as much as I hate to call off the floor show, I'd rather be holding your hand and gazing lovingly into your eyes, if you don't mind. I don't need to march between the tables yelling that we're giant lesbianning lesbians from the land of Lesbiania here on a big lesbian date, but I'm not going to hide it, either. Deal?”

“That little parade would also make quite the floor show. But deal,” Alice said, her smile softening as she offered her hand again. “But I'm afraid Anthony may not quite pick up on the subtle cues.”

I groaned again as I took her hand. “Maybe we should just shove everything off this table, climb on top, and start making out here and now.”

She laughed merrily, but when I glanced up at her, she was gazing at me with a distinct hunger that had nothing to do with my blood. “I'm game if you are, sweetheart.”
I swallowed, managing a weak smile. “Heh, uh, let's see how dinner goes. I might want to come back here sometime,” I joked.

“I'm sure I could learn to cook whatever you like back at our house,” Alice returned, her lips curled into a knowing smirk, her eyes growing incrementally darker as she watched me. “And we wouldn't risk being thrown out.”

My face burned, and I quickly turned my gaze back to the menu, trying to ignore the stuttering of my heart, the fluttering deep in my belly, the cool fingers stroking my suddenly sensitive skin. “Oh, hey, I've never had duck. I think I'll try the duck.”

“My, aren't we in an adventurous mood this evening?” Alice asked, a purr in her throat. I suddenly felt her tiny bare toes running up against my leg, brushing the skin of my calf through my tights, sweeping slowly up toward my knee. “Mmm, let me see. I don't suppose you like your steak rare?”

“No,” I replied, my voice squeaking a little. I took a sip of my Coke to try and steady myself. “I'm afraid not. Medium or medium well. Would, uh – would a rare steak actually work for you?”

“No, not really. At that point, the blood would be like...oh, I can't even think of a comparison. It's thin and cold and tastes unpleasant. And it's probably best if I don't have any blood in front of you anyway,” she said, her toes still sliding upward. “Something vegetarian, then. In the real sense. The tortellini al pesto?”

I looked down at the menu again. “Um. Uh...yes. No. I don't like mushrooms.”

“I'll ask for them without. Or perhaps I'll just get the pasta primavera,” she mused.

“Yes. That looks good,” I agreed, shivering lightly at her touch, looking up as I set my menu aside. She gave me a gently concerned look. “Oh, Bella. Are you cold? Should I come over there and warm you up?”

“Are you planning to behave yourself at all tonight?” I teased, trying to keep my voice steady, though I knew the hot flush suffusing my face had long since given me away.

Alice gasped dramatically, putting a hand to her chest. “How dare you? What kind of girl do you think I am?” she joked. “I'll have you know I have been the very picture of a fine, upstanding young lady, and I demand satisfaction.”

I was about to retort when Anthony returned to our table. “Hi, Bella. Uh, and – Alice, right? Are you two ready to order?”

“Oh, yes. I'll have the pasta primavera, please,” Alice said sweetly.

“Sure, got it.” Anthony agreed, writing it down. “And for you, Bella?”

“I'll have – ” I began, only to be interrupted, suddenly, by the barest ghost of a whisper from Alice's side of the table, so quiet I could barely make it out.

“God, I just want to throw this table to one side, push you up against the wall and kiss you senseless,” she murmured rapidly. “Hike up that dress of yours and – ”

My face felt like it was on fire, and I kicked her under the table, though not too hard, of course. “Uh,
Anthony didn't seem to notice anything untoward, though he blushed a little and gave me a crooked smile at my own expression. “You got it. You let me know if you need anything at all,” he said, putting a slight emphasis on 'anything'.

As soon as he'd left again, I turned slowly on Alice. “You know I'm going to get you for that.”

She gave me a beatific smile. “For what, Bella? I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea what you mean.”

“Of course you don't, you little minx,” I muttered. “Come on, Alice, you've made your point. I surrender.”

“I think you mean you submit,” she returned, her voice a husky purr.

I had to shake my head to try and dispel the sudden image of Alice standing over me in a dark room, clad in black leather and taking charge. I fanned myself, taking a swig from my own water glass. “With great power comes great responsibility, Alice Cullen!”

She pouted. “You're just so much fun.”

“Save it for when we're alone,” I replied, squeezing her hand. “And not in a moving vehicle. Or anywhere my dad can find us.”

“So many rules,” Alice said, but she laughed softly, relenting. “All right. I'll be good. Well. Relatively.”

“Impish little minx,” I muttered, but I smiled back at her. “What was that, anyway? Anthony didn't seem to hear a word you said. Or I hope he didn't, at least. He didn't say anything.”

“Relax, he couldn't have heard me,” she replied. “One of the benefits of being a vampire is extremely precise vocal control. We can speak at speeds, frequencies and volumes that only another vampire – or sometimes certain animals – could hear and comprehend. But we can also direct the sound of our voices very precisely, to the point where we can speak directly to a single person across a crowded room without anyone else picking up it.”

“Seriously? I know there are machines that can do that, but...” I narrowed my eyes in mock suspicion. “You'd tell me if you were a cyborg, right?”

“Damn, you figured it out,” Alice said, smirking, before adopting an Austrian accent. “Come with me if you want to live.”

I laughed, squeezing her hand. “That is basically the plan.”

“Yeah,” Alice agreed, her smile fading as she looked down. “I still haven't been able to find James and his coven. It seems like the harder I look, the harder it is to see them.”

I ran my thumb across her fingers, nodding slowly, my own expression turning more serious. “Because of Victoria’s power. Yeah. That makes sense,” I said softly. “Leah and I were talking about that last night, actually.”

“Leah?” she echoed, giving me a sharp look.

“Hey, relax. We're just friends. For real. I made that very clear,” I told her. “She came over to hang out last night, brought dinner for me and Charlie. Edward told her about my...episode. You didn't see
Alice sighed, shutting her eyes and shaking her head. “Rosalie made me promise I'd stop peeking ahead at our personal future all the time. At least until after tonight. Which makes me think you're up to something.”

She opened her eyes again only to give me a narrow, suspicious look, and I laughed, shaking my head. “Maybe. But you trust me, right?”

“About as far as I can throw you. Which would be pretty far, come to think of it,” Alice joked. “Yes, all right. I trust you. If you say you and Leah are just friends, I believe you. So what did she have to say?”

“She thought...we should stop looking. Let them come,” I explained, flinching a little as I anticipated her reaction.

Sure enough, she scowled heavily. “Nope. Not happening. I hate this idea and everything about it.”

“We can beat them, Alice. I know we can. But not if Victoria's powers keep pinging off of yours, not if they keep avoiding this whole area,” I argued. “We'll never be safe until they're dead.”

“No, we'll be fine, because if we stay together, I'm going to turn you and James won't have any reason to come after you,” Alice insisted. “And if we don't – if we don't, then we'll all leave you alone, and there won't be any vampires around to attract his attention. We can wait them out. It's a far better plan than using you as bait and letting them come.”

“Turning me won't help. He's a hunter, Alice, it's a game to him,” I returned. “If he finds us, he'll make us his prey. We will never be safe until he's dead, and he more than deserves it. So does Victoria. And Laurent. But James most of all.”


I looked away. “It's more than that. Victoria and Laurent hurt a lot of people trying to get at me. Laurent starts a chain of events that leads to Irina's death. And James – he's already hurt a lot of people. He's already hurt...”

Alice stared at me as I trailed off, her expression concerned and pleading. “Who, Cass? Bella, sorry, just – just tell me who.”

I shut my eyes, shaking my head. “We were having such a nice time, Alice.”

“We'll get back to it. I promise. But you need to tell me about James,” she insisted. “Who did he hurt? Why are you so upset? It's not like you to hate someone this fiercely.”

“You haven't seen me talk about politics,” I joked weakly, smiling without any real humor as I opened my eyes and met her gaze. “He hurt you, Alice. He's the reason you're a vampire. He's the reason the vampire who turned you is dead.”

Alice stared at me again in silence, utterly stunned, finally managing a quiet, “What?”

I laughed without mirth. “God, I wanted to wait to tell you. I wanted to settle all this and figure things out and tell you when the time was right. But you deserve to know, and now you've asked. James hunted you, when you were human. You were his singer. I...I hardly know where to begin.”

“At the beginning,” Alice whispered, her eyes very wide and locked on mine. “Please.”
“The beginning,” I repeated, letting out a long breath. “Right. I suppose that would be your human life. Your name was Mary Alice Brandon. You grew up in Biloxi, Mississippi. Like me, you had your powers when you were still human, though they weren’t...dangerous to you. Not in the same way. Not like mine. People didn't believe your predictions, not at first. When they came true, they treated you like an abomination. You were sent to an asylum. The electroshock treatments they gave you damaged your brain, wiped out your memories. There was a caretaker who befriended you, a vampire who treated you like a daughter and tried to protect you.”

“A vampire?” Alice asked. “Working around humans, resisting a singer? Was he like us?”

“I...I don't know. The material I read didn't say much about him,” I admitted. “I'm giving you the abridged version anyway, but in this case I just can't tell you.”

She nodded, still entranced. “That's fine, Cass. We can talk about the full version some other time,” she replied, though I could tell she yearned to know more. “Go on. Tell me what happened.”

“You had a vision,” I continued. “You saw James coming for you. He'd already locked onto your scent. You told the caretaker – your powers had already revealed his true nature, I assume, or perhaps he just revealed himself to you. He knew about your powers, in any event, and he believed you. He made plans to break you out of the asylum and flee, but you saw James coming anyway, no matter what. Finally, he offered to turn you, but James was so close to slipping in and taking you that you weren't certain whether the plan would succeed. He did it anyway, there and then, and hid you away from the asylum. Then he went to face James alone, hoping to buy you enough time to turn.”

Alice looked pained. “...he sacrificed himself. For me. James killed him. Didn't he?”

I squeezed her hand, nodding. “Yes. I'm so sorry, Alice – but it worked. By the time James caught up to you, your blood had changed so much that it was completely unappetizing. He decided to leave you where you were, let you wake as a lost, confused, savagely hungry newborn. If you were still alive in a few decades, he'd see if you'd make good sport.”

“I remember waking outside this little town in Mississippi,” she murmured, her gaze drifting toward the tablecloth. “But I don't remember anything before that. I stumbled toward the town limits...I came across this cabin just on the outskirts and...and you don't need to hear the rest.”

She looked away, and I held her hand silently for a moment, giving her time to think. At last, she looked back up at me. “Did the books tell you anything about my family?”

“Yes,” I said. “Your mother, father, stepmother and little sister are all gone, but your sister had a daughter, and she's still alive. I don't know her daughter's name or if she had children of her own. I know your sister's name was Cynthia.”

“I'm sure I could look them all up. After all this is done,” Alice said. She was silent another moment before shaking it off. “So even if we hid you away...”

“If James found you, he'd want to hunt you,” I finished. “Almost definitely. It's not just about blood for him. He's hunted vampires before. The more powerful the prey, the more thrilling the chase. He wouldn't be able to resist the chance to try and kill a vampire who can see any move he plans to make. And I'm not sure the others would deter him – he might end up trying to take you all down. Split you up somehow and take you out one by one.”

“And you want to let this guy come.”

I sighed. “Want to? No. Have to...I'm beginning to think so. Scary as it is, it may be the only way.”
Alice shook her head, trembling a little. “What if he kills you?” she asked, in a small, unsteady voice. “What if he kills you before we can stop him?”

“To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure,” I quoted, with a bittersweet smile, reaching out with my free hand to cup her cheek. “I’m not afraid to die, gorgeous. I’m not eager to do it, and I have a ton of reasons to stick around, but I’ll do it if I have to. I’m much more afraid of how you’d take it.”

“I can’t even think about it,” Alice replied, shutting her eyes tight and leaning into my palm. “Promise me you’re not going anywhere.”

“I promise I’ll do my best to stay right here,” I whispered fervently. “And I trust you and your family will do your best to keep me safe.”

“Always, Bella, I swear it,” she said. “Are you sure this is the only way?”

I shook my head. “No. But it’s the best option I can see.”

“Okay. We’ll discuss it with the family. Later,” Alice agreed, giving me a shaky smile. “Tonight is ours.”

“Tonight is ours,” I echoed, smiling back at her.

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I was in the middle of regaling Alice with tales of my cats when Anthony came by to drop off our entrees. We were still holding hands at that point, but he seemed to pay no mind whatsoever.

“The pasta primavera for you, miss,” he announced, setting her meal before her and then turning to me with that crooked, desperately charming smile. “And for you, Bella, our espresso smoked duck breast, pan seared with a port wine reduction sauce, and served with roasted garlic whipped potatoes. Bone appétit.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly, taking a sip of Coke and trying to keep a neutral expression. Alice, across the table, was visibly trembling and sucking on her lower lip as her mouth threatened to break into a grin.

“But of course,” Anthony replied, with an actual bow. “Can I get you anything else? More water, more soda?”

I glanced at our glasses, which he himself had refilled only a few minutes before. “No, I think I’m fine, thank you.”

“All right. Enjoy,” he said, heading off reluctantly.

I waited for him to pass out of earshot, then shook my head. “I took one semester of French, and I’d like to think my accent is still better than his.”

“Not to mention this is, in fact, an Italian restaurant,” Alice got out, through soft giggles, her shoulders shaking and eyes sparkling with laughter. “He also just recited the description from the menu. Almost verbatim.”
“Oh, geez, you're right. I barely even noticed.” I shook my head, cutting into my duck. “What would
the equivalent phrase be in Italian?”

“It's actually close,” Alice replied. “Buon appetito. It is, in fact, on the wall over there.” She gestured
at a wall plaque hanging above a table several feet away.

“Oh my God. I can't figure out if that's annoying or almost cute,” I groaned, shutting my eyes briefly
and shaking my head before taking my first bite. “Mmmm. At least the food's good.”

“I'll have to take your word for it,” she said, though she took a bite of her pasta, chewing with an
almost plastic smile that probably looked more authentic at a distance.

“You know you really don't have to put on this pretense for me. Hell, I don't think Anthony would
even notice,” I said, with a little smirk. “Did you notice how he walked off before you could tell him
whether or not you wanted anything else?”

“I don't have to, I'm choosing to,” Alice returned, before smiling wickedly and batting her eyelashes.
“And that would be because he only has eyes for you, Bella.”

I made a face at her, swatting her arm. “Quit it!”

“Oh, but it's such a beautiful name for a beautiful lady,” she said melodramatically, putting a hand to
her forehead and pretending to swoon, then breaking into giggles.

I couldn't help giggling myself at that, shaking my head slowly. “Where was I before we were
interrupted?”

“Salem. The idiot savant,” she prompted.

“Right, Salem. Sweetest little guy, but also the dumbest cat I've ever met. So, when we got him and
his sister, we lived in this house with a basement door that wouldn't latch properly,” I continued.
“We could lock it with a sliding bolt, but only from one side, so if anyone was in the basement we
kept it unlocked. Somehow, over the years, he figured out that he could just push the door open, but
he had to run at it full speed to do it, and of course it would only work if the door was unlocked.
What he didn't figure out was how to tell when the door was locked.”

Alice put down her fork, laughing. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes,” I replied, with a grin. “He really wanted in that basement, so he'd just try his luck. Multiple
times per day. We'd be sitting downstairs and we'd suddenly hear this skitter skitter skitter THUMP!
The damned cat lost a tooth that way. Honestly, I'm surprised he didn't lose more.”

“Poor Salem,” she said, shaking her head ruefully. “I'm assuming he was named after the cat from
Sabrina the Teenage Witch?”

“Oh yeah. He was all black – except for a little tuft of white on his belly – so he looked a lot like the
cat from the show,” I affirmed. “His sister Dee had kind of a bikini pattern. A little choker of white
fur at her throat, tufts of white across her chest, and then a perfect white triangle between her rear
legs. She was a sweet girl, very quiet. We were very close.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. How long has she been gone?” Alice asked, catching my hand.

I gave her a feeble smile. “A few months. Or ten years from now, depending on your perspective. It
was hard, losing her. I don't think I really started to heal until I adopted my new kitten. It was just me
and Snookerdoodle for a while, and I really needed a female cat in my life again. A familiar.”
“As in a witch's familiar?” she asked. “I knew you were pagan, but I didn't know you had all the trappings, I suppose. What exactly does a familiar do?”

I chuckled. “Honestly? Not much. For me, it was really just a close animal companion. Someone I could tell my secrets to. Someone who'd soothe my pain. Someone who'd just...curl up and chill while I was in the middle of a ritual. That's actually how Dee earned the title. I let her and Salem into my ritual circle while I was casting spells one night – my parents were away for the evening – and Salem started running around making a mess, while Dee just curled up in a chair and watched me work. That's just the energy she brought to my life. She was patient and calm, playful when I was in the mood to play, quiet when I just wanted to sit with her.”

Alice gave me a bittersweet smile. “She sounds lovely. And a familiar has to be a female animal, for you?”

“Not necessarily, I guess,” I replied. “But the tomcats I've met have always been kind of goofy. And I've always been drawn to the feminine in my faith and my magical practices...I suppose that's not too surprising, all things considered.”

“That does make a certain amount of sense.” She squeezed my hand. “How many cats have you had?”

“Five, in total. There was Rainbow, when I was a kid – she was a calico, and I was very confused as to what a 'multicolored cat' would look like, but we decided to keep the name,” I explained, with a crooked smile. “Then we adopted Dee and Salem when I was a teenager. Snookerdoodle came along a few years later – a friend of ours had to give him up, and she'd originally named him Shnookums. We tried to rename him, but he wouldn't respond to anything without a 'snook' sound in it, so Snookerdoodle or Snookie seemed like the least objectionable option. And then my new kitten's name is October Willow, or just October or Toby for short.”

“October Willow? That almost sounds like some kind of body wash or fragrance or something,” Alice remarked, her eyes twinkling.

“Or a My Little Pony,” I added, smirking. “The shelter named her Willow, which happens to be my birth tree in the Celtic calendar, so I decided to keep it. But I'd already settled on October as the name of my next cat. It's my favorite month, thanks to Halloween, and the name of the main character in these books I like. I don't think they're out yet.”

“I see. And is October Willow a good familiar?” she asked with a smile.

“She's a kitten. Right now she's mostly just hyperactive. Time will tell,” I said, though my matching smile slowly faded. “Of course I'll probably never see her again.”

Alice looked briefly stricken, then squeezed my hand. “I'm sorry.”

I let out a long breath, mustering a faint smile again. “Tonight is ours,” I echoed softly. “I'm sick of grieving over something I can't change. I know I have friends back there who know how much I love my cats, I just have to believe that no matter what – they'd make sure Snookie and Toby were cared for. Honestly...this is kind of selfish, but I sort of just miss having animals in my life. I've had pets for so long that it's hard to adjust to life without them. Even now I keep catching myself looking around the house waiting for a cat to trot up to me and rub against my legs or something.”

“I can't really say I know what that's like,” she admitted.

“None of you have ever kept a pet?” I asked, pausing briefly as a horrifying thought occurred to me.
“Um...it's not because...you know, they're walking snacks, is it?”

Alice laughed, shaking her head. “No. No, it's not that,” she assured me. “We go after big prey, for the most part. Bears, mountain lions, other large predators...deer or moose or caribou, if there aren't any predators around. I think Tanya and her sisters have even been known to take to the sea and hunt whales. Most domestic animals wouldn't be remotely satisfying. And unless we're absolutely starving, we have to force ourselves to eat animal blood. It doesn't drive us into a frenzy the way human blood can.”

I blinked. “…I have so many questions right now, and all of them are hideously inappropriate for a date.”

“Oh, go on, ask. I know it'll drive you crazy if you don't,” she said, waving me on.

“Oh...if you're sure. You make it sound like you prefer predators? Or at least omnivores? Most bears aren't strictly predators, right?” I asked.

Alice nodded. “We'll eat herbivores if we must, but carnivores or omnivores with partially carnivorous diets tend to be more appealing. We're not entirely sure why.”

“And it has to be mammalian blood? It can't be sharks, or emus, or...I don't know, monitor lizards?”

“If and when we visit the Denali coven, remind me to make Kate tell you the emu story,” Alice said, her eyes twinkling. “There's been a lot of trial and error over the years. Non-mammalian blood doesn't just sit in our systems the way food or drink does, but it's not as satisfying. We get hungrier faster. We tend to feel more lethargic and irritable, too. Also, we start developing animalistic traits. Fish blood is a good way to turn into a mermaid.”

My eyes grew very wide, then narrowed as I saw her shoulders shake. “…you're screwing with me.”

“Yes, I am,” she admitted, with a wicked grin. “You are so easy.”

“Oh, keep that up and I think you'll find I'm pretty hard to get,” I threatened, though I couldn't help a small smirk as I did.

She smirked back at me, and I felt her toes running up my calf again, as her voice became a husky purr. “That sounds like a challenge.”

I shivered a little, but tried to keep my focus. “So – was any of that for real?”

“Oh, most of it,” she said breezily. “Not the animalistic traits, I'm afraid. You're just going to have to find some other way to live out your mermaid fantasies. I do have some ideas.”

“You are incorrigible,” I muttered.

“Oooh, incorrigible. Look at you with those sexy SAT words,” Alice teased, before withdrawing her foot and smiling brightly. “Well, the ladies room is going to be empty for the next ten minutes. I'd best freshen up. See you in a few minutes, gorgeous.”

I made a face at her as she slipped back into her shoes and rose smoothly from her chair. “You're a jerk and I hate you, you know.”

“What was that? You madly adore me? Oh, you're so sweet,” Alice returned, grinning as she blew me a kiss and headed for the restrooms.
I was so busy watching her walk away, slim hips swaying in her tight black dress, that I scarcely even noticed Anthony return to our table until he’d started speaking. “Hey, did your friend just up and leave? Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

I’d jumped in my chair a little, but steadied myself as I glanced up at his lopsided grin and hopeful puppy dog eyes. “No, it’s fine, I was just – thinking. Alice just went to powder her nose.”

He looked briefly confused by the idiom, but shook it off. “Yeah? What were you thinking about?”

Not frustratingly persistent waiters with hearts in their eyes who wouldn’t know a lesbian if she stood up, started banging giant rainbow cymbals together, and began singing the Indigo Girls’ greatest hits, I thought, but I gave him a polite smile nonetheless. “Oh, this and that. The food is really great, by the way.”

“Oh! Yeah. I meant to ask. Great. I’m glad you like it,” Anthony said, gesturing at my plate. “You want dessert or anything? Coffee?”

“Oh, maybe later, I’m still finishing this. Thanks, though,” I replied.

“Cool. Cool. So...do you live in Port Angeles? I don’t think I’ve seen you around or anything, but it’s a pretty big city and all,” he asked.

“No, uh, I live in this little town about an hour away, you probably haven’t heard of it,” I told him, wincing inwardly.

“Oh, I bet I have. I mean, I’ve been around. What, like, Forks? Neah Bay? Oh, wait, are you Canadian?” he asked.

“I’m not Canadian, no,” I said.

“Yeah, I mean, you don’t really sound like it. Is this your first time in Port Angeles? I could totally show you around. If you wanted. I get off in an hour,” Anthony suggested. “Your friend, too, I mean – I was going to meet up with a buddy. We could all hang.”

My next smile was rather more forced. “That’s very sweet of you, really, but I’m pretty sure my girlfriend already had a romantic evening planned. And I’ll need to get home before it’s too late. My dad’s expecting me.”

Anthony stared for a moment. “Your...girlfriend. Your, uh, romantic girlfriend. As in...”

“As in the girl who loves her very much, gets to kiss her whenever she likes, and wanted to treat her to a romantic night out in this lovely restaurant,” Alice said sweetly, having somehow managed to return from the restroom and creep up behind him without either of us noticing. She smiled at me, and I grinned back at her in relief as she took her seat. “If it’s not too much trouble, could I get a box for my pasta, please? I’m afraid I just wasn’t very hungry.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Of course,” he said awkwardly, picking up her plate. “I’ll take care of that for you. Sorry to bother you.”

He scurried off, and I looked to Alice, smiling sheepishly. “You don’t mind that I called you my girlfriend, do you?”

Alice’s lips quirked in amusement. “Oh, I do, actually. I know I literally fell head over heels in love with you at first sight, and I’m prepared to spend eternity with you if you’ll have me, but this is moving entirely too quickly, don’t you think? Girlfriend is just a step too far.”
I felt my cheeks burn, and turned my face toward my plate. “Okay, point taken.”

“The question is whether you're ready for it,” she added, more seriously. “Because of course I'll move at your pace.”

“After everything that's happened, everything that still might happen, I think it's fairly clear I'm throwing caution to the wind, isn't it? I haven't felt like this or tried to move this fast since I was a teenager,” I replied, looking back up at her. “But I feel safe doing it with you. Maybe it's just because I already know exactly how you feel about me. Maybe it's cheating. Maybe it's a huge mistake, but – I don't want to second-guess it. Life's too short. At least for the time being.”

She searched my eyes, keeping her expression neutral. “Does that mean you want to make this official? Let everyone know what's going on with us?”

“Everyone already knows we're dating,” I pointed out.

“They know I asked you out on one date. They don't know I'm your girlfriend,” she returned. “They don't know how serious this is. I'm still not sure I know how serious this is.”

I let out a long breath, then reached into my purse, digging out a small cardboard box. “Okay, um...look, I got you something. I wasn't sure I was ready to give it to you this soon, but...I think it's time. I don't want you to doubt this any more than I do. Although I feel like an idiot half the time so that might not be saying much.”

“You're not an idiot,” Alice said, with a small smile, though her golden eyes were wide as she watched mine. “Cass – Bella. What is this?”

I laughed a little, opening the box but keeping it cupped in my palm for a moment, the contents hidden from her sight. “You mean you're not peeking ahead?”

“You're not an idiot,” Alice said, with a small smile, though her golden eyes were wide as she watched mine. “Cass – Bella. What is this?”

“I laughed a little, opening the box but keeping it cupped in my palm for a moment, the contents hidden from her sight. “You mean you're not peeking ahead?”

“Rosalie made me promise not to. You're killing me here,” she replied. “Both of you.”

“It's not that kind of ring. I'm not quite ready for that yet. But it is important,” I said, setting the box aside and reaching for her right hand. “Give me your hand. Please?”

She bit her lip, but nodded, slipping her hand in mine. With my other hand, I took the silver Claddagh ring I'd bought, accented with Celtic knotwork, and slid it onto her ring finger. It fit perfectly, thanks to Rosalie's help. She looked at the ring, then back at me.

“A Claddagh ring,” she noted, before giving me a small smirk. “Like the one Angel gave Buffy?”

“Of course you'd remember that,” I muttered, smiling back at her. “It's a little more important to me than that. I know Bella and Charlie aren't remotely Irish...or I don't think they are, at any rate...but I am. I was. Among a ton of other stuff, but it was part of my heritage, and an important one, and this was one of my connections to it. I used to wear a Claddagh ring all the time. I never really had a reason to turn it inward. But with you...I have a reason. I belong to you. And you belong to me. And I want you to have something that matters to me, something that symbolizes what we share. Friendship, loyalty and love. I might forget everything else, I might even forget what that ring means to me, but I won't forget that.”

Alice listened as I rambled on, then broke into a grin, her face practically shining as she leaned in to kiss me sweetly. “It's beautiful. Thank you,” she murmured, pulling back to admire it again. “Did you get one for yourself?”
I smiled again, reaching into my purse again and pulling out the second box, this one still tied shut with a ribbon so I could tell them apart. I started to open it, but Alice plucked the box from my fingers, pulling the ribbon free and popping off the lid to produce the ring.

“Give me your hand,” she said, and I instantly complied, offering my right hand to her. My breath caught as she slid it onto my finger, the point of the heart pointed toward my wrist. “That's the way you want it, right?”

I looked up at her, smiling broadly. “That's just the way I want it.”

“Perfect,” she replied, smiling back at me in relief, then giving me a pointed look. “You need to finish your dinner. Let me do most of the talking for a while, okay?”

“Deal. Does that mean I get to ask more questions?” I asked.

“As long as you keep eating. Don't think I haven't noticed how often you get distracted,” Alice returned, her eyes flicking meaningfully to my plate. I made a face at her, taking another bite of my duck and then digging into my whipped potatoes, and she gave me a smug, pleased smile. “What would you like to know?”

“Well – uh, thank you,” I said, as Anthony came back and set Alice's leftovers on the table.

“No problem,” he said, his demeanor somewhat subdued but still polite. “I'll, uh, check on you ladies later.”

“Thanks,” Alice said kindly, as he headed off to see to his other tables.

“Okay, maybe I feel a little bad about that. Although he shouldn't be hitting on customers,” I admitted to her.

“I'll leave him a nice tip. He seems to be behaving himself now,” Alice said. “You were saying?”

“Right. You never did say why none of you have ever tried keeping pets,” I replied.

She shrugged. “I'm not sure there's a single, coherent reason, really. In my case, if I ever had a pet as a human being, I don't remember it, so I haven't really felt the need to keep any now. And then there is the fact that most pets won't even last a single human lifetime, and when you're immortal...it's very difficult to form any kind of close bond knowing that one day you'll have to say goodbye. It's why our closest friendships tend to be with our own kind.”

“I guess that makes sense. It's not like you could just turn a beloved dog or cat into a vampire,” I remarked.

“No, our bite is lethal to animals in any event. Carlisle studied the matter some time ago. He wanted to be sure our diet wouldn't have any unforeseen consequences if our prey ever got away, somehow,” Alice explained. “Even if we could, we wouldn't. They’d be too difficult to control, I imagine. Just like immortal children – did those books of yours explain what those are?”

“Young children turned into vampires,” I affirmed. “They never develop the discipline and control necessary to conceal themselves, and therefore risk exposing the entire species. The Volturi have forbidden them as a result. The Denali sisters' mother died because she created one.”

Alice raised an eyebrow. “Those books really were seriously comprehensive,” she murmured.

“I might have read the Illustrated Guide, too. And some other supplemental material.” I grinned
sheepishly. “How extensive were Carlisle's experiments? Did he test your venom on primates?”

“Ah – no, I don't believe so. But he included specimens of most of our common prey species, and he's run supplemental experiments since,” she replied, giving me a quizzical look. “Why do you ask?”

“Because it would sort of make sense if your venom contained a retrovirus – a virus that actually alters DNA. Like HIV. I mean, I don't know how much science we can apply to any of this stuff, but there seems to be some kind of biological element in play. And viruses can jump species, I mean, HIV probably evolved from a simian virus. Not that I'm an expert,” I added, blushing slightly when Alice just stared at me. “...I read.”

“You would really need to ask Carlisle about all of that,” she replied, shaking it off. “To be honest, I've never really studied medicine outside of high school biology, with the exception of general anatomy. And that was just to improve my life drawing skills.”

“What have you studied?” I asked, turning back to my meal.

She smiled, visibly relieved to be on more familiar ground. “Art, mainly, in one form or another. I've mostly focused on painting and fashion design, but I have spent some time studying sculpture, graphic design, even interior design. Esme loves working as an interior designer, so I spent a few years as her assistant in the eighties. She had a little design studio in Boston. Oh, and you would have loved me in the early nineties. The height of grunge chic. I was at this little art college in the middle of nowhere, swimming in flannel shirts and thick glasses, casting my own bronzes and camping out on the quad to protest a different issue every week.”

“Well, I would have been prepubescent in the early nineties, so I might not have been quite ready for you,” I pointed out, with a little smirk. “I suppose I should be glad you didn't run into my counterpart here. Depending on when in the eighties you visited Boston, I was anywhere from a newborn to a grade schooler. Though part of that time we were living on the other side of the country.”

“I'm sure you were absolutely adorable,” Alice said, patting my hand.

“Oh, I was. I've seen pictures. Chubby cheeks, big blue eyes, a mop of blonde hair, I was the cutest thing on two legs,” I replied, preening. “It didn't start going wrong until adolescence, really.”

“I suppose I should be glad you admit you were cute at one point. Now we just have to convince you it's still true,” she returned.

I gestured to myself, giving her a crooked grin. “I'll admit this body cleans up nicely. We may have to table the rest. For tonight, at least.”

Alice pursed her lips, but nodded. “For tonight.”

“So have you studied anything besides art?” I asked.

“History, once. But, to be honest, I've only been with the others for fifty-five years,” she said. “We tend to go through roughly decade-long cycles. Some high school, four years of college, perhaps some graduate work. Medical school, for Rosalie or Edward. The younger we pretend to be when we first make a new identity known, the longer we can stay in that identity before we begin to strain credibility.”

“I have to tell you you're not all that believable as sophomores or juniors. Maybe as seniors,” I said, with a smirk. “Besides, there are some humans who seem virtually ageless. You could probably push it a bit more if you wanted to.”
“Ah, but those humans tend to be memorable. So are we, really, but that’s all the more reason to be cautious,” Alice returned. “Some people mature early. My siblings and I were turned at young enough ages that we can blur the lines a little. And you’d be amazed at the way we can change people’s perceptions with new clothes, new hairstyles, and a few subtle tricks with makeup.”

“You have a point. I guess we’re pretty easily fooled,” I conceded. “And I have seen what you and Rosalie can do with makeup.”

“Yes, you have, which begs the question: why am I not allowed to play dress-up with you more often?”

She pouted, and I laughed softly. “Maybe because you’d keep me busy for hours and probably forget the human needs to be fed, walked and watered?”

“I wouldn’t be that bad! You went shopping with Rosalie, Bella, you owe me something,” she insisted. “It’s just not fair.”

“Rosalie doesn’t lose her head on shopping trips. Though Jessica Stanley does,” I remarked, shuddering a little. “I’ll go shopping with you if we can bring Rose along to rein you in.”

Her pout deepened. “You want to bring a chaperone with us? On a date? A date involving dressing rooms?” she asked, her voice gradually turning low and husky again, as her toes glided up my inner calf under the table. “Where the two of us will be slipping in and out of God knows what?”

I squeezed my legs together as tightly as possible, giving her a bright smile and trying to suppress the slight shiver running up my spine. “Yep! Sure do.”

“Hmph. Have it your way,” Alice huffed, pulling her foot back and giving me a playful scowl. “Here I thought you trusted me.”

I captured her hand, raising it to my lips and kissing her fingers. “With everything except shopping.”

“I am awesome at shopping. You don’t know what you’re missing,” she retorted. “I bet Jessica would go shopping with me.”

“Oh, she definitely would. And she’d probably die from exhaustion because, again, no one would remind her she had to eat or rest,” I said cheerfully. “Please don’t take my friends on lethal shopping expeditions. If you absolutely must, try Angela, she’s pretty level-headed. Or Sam, she’s just surly.”

She glared at me in mock outrage. “Oh, so now you’re telling me which of your friends I’m allowed to hang out with?”

“I’m just making requests,” I said, pulling her in – or, rather, tugging gently until she leaned towards me – to give her a quick kiss. “Although, since we’re official and all, you probably will have to spend some time with the lot of them. We can’t just camp at the Cullen family table all the time.”

“The sacrifices we make for love,” Alice murmured, cupping my face and kissing me again.

*****

The rest of the evening passed in a blur, as Alice continued telling me stories of her time with the
Cullens and her adventures in the decades before my birth, though I noticed she steered the conversation away from further discussion of her past romantic encounters or the mistakes she'd made while learning to adapt to an animal diet. At times her eyes seemed haunted by memories she wouldn't relate aloud, but she soon shook it off and moved smoothly to another subject.

Anthony hovered a lot less for the rest of the night, checking on us now and then but largely leaving us alone as I finished my duck and indulged in some tiramisu. I was still half-worried he'd leave his phone number on the check or something, but there was nothing there but a scribbled 'Thank You!' when it arrived. Alice left enough cash to cover the check and a generous tip, then gathered up her leftover pasta primavera and the slice of chocolate cake she'd ordered to go before leading me outside to her car.

I scarcely remembered the drive back from Port Angeles – full and content, with soft rock playing from the car's stereo system, I must have dozed off, because before I knew it, we were pulling into my driveway.

“Did I fall asleep? I'm sorry, Alice,” I said, blinking blearily and fumbling at the door handle.

She flashed me a smile as she opened the door on her side. “You're only human. It happens. Honestly, I sort of envy you.”

“Envy me?” I echoed. “For dozing off in the car? I'm pretty happy you can't, to be honest. The fewer car crashes I'm in, the better.”

She smirked, leaning up to kiss me and taking my hand as we walked to the door. “For sleeping, silly. I don't even know what it's like. Did you dream?”

“No, I don't think I was really asleep long enough for that,” I said.

We paused on the doorstep, and she turned toward me, gazing up into my eyes. “When you do dream, Bella, do you dream of me?”

“Uh.” A hot flush filled my cheeks. “It's been known to happen.”

“Then dream of me tonight, will you?” Alice said, a sly smile spreading across her lips. “Dream for the both of us.”

She put her hands on my hips, pressing in close, her body molding to mine as our lips met. I moved my hands to try and support her, at least a little, and I felt my face and neck grow hotter as I realized I was cupping her rear. My mouth opened to her, the whole world melting away as our breath mingled, hers cool and sweet with a subtle fire, mine probably horrible and infused with garlic, though she didn't seem to be complaining. Her tongue darted in teasingly, and I tried to match her fervor, to play just as hard, but I felt clumsy and awkward the whole time and finally just surrendered, letting her take the lead. She pressed me gently against the doorframe, but finally jerked back, her eyes wide and dilated, a soft giggle escaping her lips.

“Sorry! Sorry,” she said. “You were about to jerk a little and hit the doorbell.”

My eyes widened in return. “Oh, uh...oh God. Okay,” I replied, completely out of breath, my skin suffused with heat. I was sure I must be as red as a cooked lobster. “I, um, I should probably get inside before dad...checks on us? Gets ideas? Figures out exactly what we're doing?”

“Yes, you probably should,” she agreed, her eyes twinkling merrily as she let me go. “Goodnight, Bella. I love you. Sweet dreams.”
I shivered a little at that, but smiled softly back at her. “I love you, Alice. Goodnight.”

She leaned up to give me a quick peck on the cheek, handed me the leftovers, then walked back to her car. I watched her until she got in, sliding into the seat and gesturing for me to go inside. It wasn't until I'd turned and unlocked the door, pushing it open, that I heard her car start.

Charlie was in the living room when I got in, watching the news, and immediately turned toward me. “Hey, Bells. You have a good night, kid?”

I turned to take off my coat and hang it by the door, hoping my blush would die down before he got a good look at my face. “Yeah, definitely. How was yours?”

“Oh, you know. Pretty quiet. You feeling okay?” he asked.

“Yep! Great. Just a little tired,” I affirmed, going to the fridge and putting the to-go boxes inside.

“Well...all right. Good. Hey, the Clearwaters invited us over for the Super Bowl on Sunday. Billy will probably be there, too, and Jacob. Think you're up to going?”

I cringed a little at the thought of confronting Billy Black again, but the idea of hanging with Leah and probably Sam and Emily appealed, as did meeting Leah's family. I also felt a stab of curiosity at the thought of meeting Jacob Black.

*Although so help me God, if he imprints on my unborn daughter before she's even conceived, and thus follows me like a lost puppy, I may have to find a way to kick his ass, I thought. “Sure, dad. Sounds like fun.”*

“Great! Been a while since we all got to spend any real time together,” he replied. “It'll be good to see everyone. I know Harry and Sue have been asking after you. Especially with...you know. The health scare and all. You just let me know if you end up feeling too tired or anything. Before or during.”

“I will,” I promised, going into the living room and giving him a loose hug. “I'm gonna get cleaned up and go to bed. Goodnight.”

He hugged me back, frowning slightly. “Okay. You sure you didn't overexert yourself?”

“No, it's just late and it's been a big day,” I assured him. Something in the back of my mind added *and I'll be in my bunk*, and I frantically tried to think of anything but the sway of Alice's hips, the twinkle in her eyes, her long, smooth legs and gentle curves. “Just gotta hit the sack.”


“Love you, too, dad,” I replied, making my exit from the room before my face started burning all over again.
Family and Friends

Though I spent Friday night in the throes of pleasant but increasingly restless dreams of Alice, Saturday turned out to be relatively quiet, which suited me fine. It gave me time to catch up on laundry and homework, and to write in the journal Alice had given me. Since my seizure and the resulting memory loss, I'd taken to writing down everything I could remember about the Twilight books, my old life, and even the new life I'd built for myself in Forks over the last couple of weeks. I still planned to avoid using my powers – I was all too aware I might not survive my next attempt – but if anything did happen, I wanted to be sure my memories endured, in some fashion.

And if the worst happened, and I actually lost my life, I wanted to prepare the Cullens for the threat of the Volturi.

I knew it was dangerous to even think of them, given Edward's expanded powers, but he hadn't said anything to me yet, so I had to assume he'd learned to filter out my thoughts for the most part. Pushing them from my mind entirely seemed impossible, and I knew they'd eventually come to consider the Cullens a threat whether I was with them or not. They were too eager to claim Edward and Alice for their guard, too wary of any coven with too many gifted members. They would find a reason to act eventually. So I made a note of all their secrets, so far as I could remember, along with all the other details I was setting to paper. I filled page after page, until I could no longer comfortably hold a pen, and hoped I would have time to set down the rest, and to tell Alice where she could find the journal if anything happened to me.

Dad seemed more relaxed at dinner that night. The fact that I'd had a night out and nothing bad had happened seemed to set his mind at ease. I noticed his eyes catching once or twice on the silver Claddagh ring I now wore, but he didn't ask about it. We chatted a little bit about nothing in particular, but since neither of us were all that talkative, we spent most of the evening in a comfortable silence.

The next morning, I woke to a chill in my room, and looked over at my window to find it had been opened a crack in the night. There was a rolled bundle of dark blue fabric on the sill, a note pinned to it. When I went over to investigate, I found the bundle was a Patriots jersey with the name Swan printed on it, together with the number 17, and the note was written in Alice's elegant cursive:

*I know you haven't forgotten your hometown pride, love.*

I laughed, setting the jersey aside as I started preparing for my day. When I came downstairs for breakfast, though, I was wearing it proudly over my t-shirt and jeans, and dad raised his eyebrows at the sight.

“Since when are you a Pats fan?” he asked, sipping his steaming coffee.

“Oh, it's Alice's fault,” I said breezily, effortlessly slipping into half-truths as I started making myself some cocoa. I made a mental note to inform her of her die-hard sports fandom on Monday. “The Cullens lived in Boston for a while, before Alaska. You should hear her talk about the Red Sox. I guess she's rubbed off on me.”

“Huh,” he grunted, setting his mug down. “Alice again. I'm guessing she's the reason you've started wearing that ring, too?”

I paused, glancing back at him, then down at my hand. I couldn't help blushing slightly. “Actually, I bought the rings – ring. Damn.”
“Rings?” he echoed, his voice rising slightly.

I sighed, going over to the table and sitting down across from him. “They're Claddagh rings. Um, they're Irish. They're not, you know, engagement rings or anything, they're just kind of...they symbolize a relationship.”

“Bells...” Dad sighed, shutting his eyes. “I told you to be careful.”

“I know. I am, dad, I swear. I know it doesn't look like it, but...” I bit my lip, forcing myself to meet his eyes as soon as he opened them again. “You don't know Alice like I do. She isn't like anyone else I've ever met. She'd never lie to me, she'd never hurt me, not on her life. And I've never felt like this about anyone else, either. I can't explain it, I just know we fit. I'm safe with her. I love her. I know you're scared, but please, can't you trust me?”

“It's not you I don't trust,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“You can trust Alice, too, I swear. You like the Cullens, right? You don't think her parents raised her right?”

“No, that's not the issue, it's just – people can still hurt each other, you know? Even if they have the best of intentions. You don't really know this girl yet,” he protested.

“I know her enough to trust the parts I don't yet know. And if I'm wrong, I know I'll have you and my friends to fall back on,” I said, reaching out to take his hand. “Dad, please. I'm going to be eighteen soon. You can't protect me from everything. You definitely can't protect me from my own feelings. Trust me to know my own heart, okay?”

He grunted again, squeezing my hand. “You're damn straight I'll be here if she hurts you. But you're right. I can't keep you from getting hurt. I do trust you, Bella, I just hope you know what you're getting into. And you better not even be thinking about weddings any time soon.”

“No weddings until I've graduated high school at least, I promise,” I told him, smiling. “And probably not until after college.”

“Maybe not until after graduate school. Or at least a few years in the workforce. Maybe not until you're thirty,” he returned, giving me a stern look, though I thought I could see a hint of a smile on his lips. “Forty's a good age, too.”

“Okay, conversation over,” I said, smirking, as I rose from my chair and went back to preparing my breakfast.

“Bells...if you two really are this serious, I'd like to have her over for dinner soon. Or maybe take you two out,” dad said, his tone turning serious again.

I hesitated for a moment before turning back toward him and smiling brightly, already feeling a little guilt at asking Alice to eat human food again. “Yeah, definitely. I'll ask her at school on Monday.”

“Good. I'm sure her family expects the same – hell, maybe we can all get together,” he realized aloud.

“Oh, well, you and Dr. Cullen are both really busy, but I'll ask,” I promised, inwardly panicking at the idea of my dad visiting the Cullen home. As long as he stayed on the first floor, it might be fine, and with a little warning maybe they could put on a convincing show. Especially if we avoided getting together for any kind of meal. Perhaps they could just rent a house that looked less like the isolated lair of obscenely wealthy supervillains. Or maybe Emmett could mess the place up a bit,
make it less immaculate and more like the home of five normal teenagers and their harried foster parents.

Oblivious to all my concerns, dad smiled and turned his attention back to his coffee. “I'm sure we can make the time, Bells. Don't worry about a thing.”

*****

The sun was still shining brightly by the time we arrived at the Clearwaters' house, somewhere around an hour and a half before kickoff. It was a single-level home, plain but well-maintained, decently sized for a small family but likely to be crowded with Leah's pack and other friends hanging around. There were a few other cars parked along the road, and I recognized Billy's pickup among them as dad found a spot and pulled in. I sighed mentally, but kept a contented smile on my face as we walked to the door, which opened before we could even knock, revealing Leah standing in our path. She gave dad a friendly grin as she stepped aside.

“Hey, Chief Swan, head right on in. I just need to grab Bella for a sec. Girl stuff,” she said brightly. She was dressed even more casually than I was, in ripped jeans and a faded Seahawks t-shirt, paying the cold no mind at all.

He gave her a long, level look, then glanced at me, then snorted at the both of us. “Uh-huh. Well, see you inside, Bells.”

“Sure thing,” I agreed, shooting a questioning glance at Leah but giving my dad a reassuring look nonetheless. He grunted again and walked in, while Leah shut the door and shuffled me back down the walk a ways.

“Take it off,” she said firmly, her eyes boring into mine.

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Well, that's forward. What's the problem? These clothes can't possibly smell like Alice, it's not like she's been rolling around in my wardrobe. And I do wash them regularly.”


“I think you'll find, Leah Clearwater, that the New England Patriots are an excellent football team, and their Super Bowl record will bear that out.”

“They've only won two championships, and they're assholes.”

I grinned. “Bet you they'll win a third tonight.”

“I'm not taking that bet, because time travelers are cheaters and jerks, just like your beloved Pats,” she returned.

I rolled my eyes, then locked my gaze with hers. “Does the jersey really stink, or are you just being a butt?”
Leah blinked, then smirked, then started snickering. “Wait, wait. I'm sorry, Ginger Spice, what did you call me? A butt? Does your kindergarten teacher know you're out here using language like that? Better be careful, you might have to sit in the corner the whole morning.”

“It's a perfectly valid description! A butt, a jerk, a mild asshole,” I fired back.

“As opposed to a major asshole, like – ”

“Like any of the New England Patriots, yes, I got it,” I interjected. “How much of this is genuine disgust over the smell, and how much of this is you messing with me?”

“It's faint, as these things go, but it's not a great smell. Maybe if you gave the jersey a wash first. Or set it on fire and left it to burn,” Leah said, though her cheerful smile slowly faded. “My kid brother's in there, Bella.”

“Okay? But he's not a werewolf...yet,” I realized aloud. “...shit. Okay, well – it's not like he's going to wolf out on the spot. And the others were activated by direct encounters with vampires, right?”

“Or proximity to other pack members. Sam only wolfed out because he saw me wolfing out. We're still not sure exactly what triggers it,” she replied.

I raked a hand through my hair. “Then you can't be sure when or how it's going to happen. And if the smell's faint to you, it seems pretty unlikely Seth will pick it up at all.”

“Maybe not consciously, but it could trigger him nonetheless. There's too much we don't know,” Leah said, giving me a pleading look.

“...there's a way we could find out, though.” I reached into my pocket, pulling out my phone and flipping it open, hitting Alice's number on speed dial. Leah took one look at the thing and snickered, and I gave her a warning look. “Shut up.”

“It's pink, though.”

“I did say shut up.”

“Princess, if you didn't want me to comment on the pink phone, maybe you shouldn't have gotten the pink phone. Did it come with the Barbie Dream House and her hot pink convertible?”

Before I could answer, I heard Alice pick up. “Hello, sweetheart,” she said. “I'm so sorry, I didn't think to check before. I did wash the jersey before I brought it over, but that was after I wore it all day yesterday, so that's probably what Leah's picking up.”

Leah's eyes narrowed. “And I'm sure that was purely a romantic gesture, and had nothing at all to do with the fact that every werewolf in there would have to put up with the stink all afternoon.”

Alice let out a soft, musical laugh, and I groaned. “And not five minutes ago, Leah was accusing me of being as mature as a kindergartener. Nice, Alice.”

“Sorry, Bella,” she replied, though oddly, she didn't sound apologetic in the least. In fact, her voice had turned to a soft purr. “It was mostly romantic. I wasn't wearing anything else yesterday, as it happens.”

I felt a hot flush suffusing my skin, and despite her annoyance, Leah was starting to snicker again. I shot her a glare and forced calm into my voice. “Alice, baby, I love you, but I also hate you just a little bit right now, and this is going on my list.”
“Oh, there's a *list*? You're keeping track of each of my horrible misdeeds?” she said, audibly perking up. “Whatever are you going to do about them? I do hope you have some...creative punishments in mind.”

“We are getting severely off track now,” I blurted loudly, as Leah's laughter rapidly grew so intense she started hiccuping. “Seth. Leah's brother. Is this going to make him wolf out or what?”

“Oh, darling, you're just so easy,” Alice said, before her tone grew more serious. “If you're around him in that jersey all evening, then yes, he'll be sick in the morning and a werewolf before the week is out. Another couple of washes will fix the problem...if you want it fixed.”

“Why – damn it – why wouldn't we – want it fixed?” Leah asked, through her hiccups, as she sobered up as well.

“Seven quick sips of water without breathing, gets rid of my hiccups every time. Well, most of the time,” I told Leah. “And I think Alice is suggesting that if we trigger his transformation now, you can prepare for it. You may not get any warning if you wait.”

“Got it in one, hot stuff,” Alice affirmed. I blushed again, while Leah tried to snort and ended up with some choked sound halfway between that and another hiccup.

“God damn – damn it all,” Leah complained, but she looked as thoughtful as she could for a moment before nodding. “All right. Better to – do this while we can – control it.”

“You're welcome,” Alice called merrily from the other end of the line.

“Oh, Cullen, my revenge will be so sweet,” Leah returned, the effect ruined slightly by the soft hiccup that followed.

“I am surrounded by children,” I complained. “Alice? I'm going to get you back, too.”

“Mmm, I look forward to it,” she replied, her tone low and wicked. “Good afternoon, Bella. I love you.”

I made a face at the phone, sighing heavily as I responded. “I love you, too. Bye.”

“Your girlfriend – is a butt,” Leah said, as I hung up.

“Oh, so now you find the term useful after all. You're welcome,” I said, sticking out my tongue and taking her arm to steer her back toward the door. “Come on, let's get you some water and you can introduce me around.”

Leah grumbled, but dutifully opened the door, revealing the front hall and the living room just beyond. I took one look at the people clustered around the TV, my eyes falling on Sam looking particularly cozy with a gorgeous young woman sitting in his lap, and promptly yanked back on Leah's arm. She gave me a quizzical look but followed me back out, shutting the door again.

“What? What is it – now?” she asked.

“I just remembered something. Ah...it's sort of awkward,” I realized. “I'll be blunt. Your pack needs anger management training.”

She stared at me, pulling out of my grasp and folding her arms. “What.”

I winced. “Look, I don't know if it'll happen here – I don't really want to believe it will, I like Sam –
but...in the books, he hurts Emily during an argument. Badly. She's left with some pretty nasty scars.”

Leah set her jaw, her stare steadily turning into a full-on glare. The temperature all around us seemed to plummet as her eyes bored into mine, dark with fury, angrier than I'd ever seen. “Sam would never hurt Emily. Ever.”

“I'm sorry. Leah, I am,” I told her, raising my hands. “I'm just telling you what's in the book. You guys are dangerous when you lose control.”

She growled, not all that softly, and I felt my legs grow slightly unsteady as I scrambled backwards, backing up against a tree. Oh. Okay, I thought. Good job, Bella. Not that you could outrun a werewolf anyway, but putting your back to a tree, sure, good strategy.

Before I could fall prey to full-blown panic, though, she looked back at me. Her eyes widened and her jaw shifted slightly. Her expression grew slightly less severe, though she was still clearly unhappy. “Red. You know I wouldn't hurt you, right? Or let anything happen to you?”

“I know you'd never deliberately hurt me,” I said, my voice cracking. I licked my lips and swallowed, shaking my head. “I know you don't want to hurt me. Any more than Sam wants to hurt Emily.”

She grunted, shutting her eyes and giving her head a quick shake. “Damn it. Fine. Fucking noted. Anything else you want to tell me about my pack right now? Or are we good?”

“Uh, nope. We're good. Hey, your hiccups are gone,” I replied, smiling weakly.

“Guess that's something,” she replied. She turned away from me, walking toward the forest in the distance. “Go inside. Anyone asks, tell 'em I'm going for a run. If Sam or my parents ask, I'm checking in with Jared and Paul. Got it?”

“Yeah. Leah...”

“Don't.” Despite her clipped tone, she spared me a brief glance. “I'll see you when I've cooled down.”

I nodded, and she turned away and set off at a jog. I watched her pass out of sight, then walked back to the door and entered the Clearwater house at last.

*****

I updated the pack in a low murmur as I entered the house, briefly meeting Sam's eyes across the way as I did. His eyebrows rose, but he nodded in acknowledgment. Emily glanced between us, her own eyebrows rising, then got up and walked over to me, offering me a bright smile, which almost rendered me non-verbal again. As beautiful as Leah was, her cousin was Rosalie-level stunning, not quite supernaturally pretty but close, with wide, dark eyes, long legs wrapped in skinny jeans, glossy black hair tied in a braid that fell to the middle of her back, and a University of Washington sweatshirt that didn't do much to hide the healthy swell of her chest. I had to consciously fight not to drool, forcing thoughts of Alice to the front of my mind...and feeling my face heat slightly as I did.
“Hi, you must be Bella,” she said, sticking out her hand.

“I guess I must be,” I joked, recovering my voice as I shook it. “You must be Emily.”

She smirked, then glanced down at my jersey. “I guess I must be. Patriots fan?”

“Oh, you know, casually. I don't really follow sports, outside of the WNBA. My girlfriend's more into it than I am,” I lied. It was coming rather more easily with practice. I wondered briefly if I should be worried about that. “Leah's already given me grief about it.”

Emily chuckled. “Of course she has. Don't worry, I'm not that into football, either. I'm mostly here for the commercials. And Sue's seven-layer dip,” she joked, before lowering her voice. “Everything okay with Leelee? I don't have shifter hearing, I didn't get the update.”

“Oh, uh, you noticed,” I replied, keeping my voice low as well. “She's fine. She went to check in with Jared and Paul.”

“When you hang around the pack as much as I have, you learn to pick up on a few things. And Sam's not as subtle as he thinks he is. Neither are you,” she noted, frowning at me. “And neither is Leah. Did something happen out there?”

“No, I mean...nothing major.” I sighed. “Things got a little tense for a minute there. She needed to blow off some steam.”

“Hm.” Emily pursed her lips, still staring at me. “So do I need to kick your ass out of this house or what?”

“Wh-what?” I stammered. “No! I mean – I didn't mean to upset her, there was just something I needed to tell her and it was...upsetting.”

She stared another moment before slowly cracking a smile, letting out a short laugh. “Damn. Leelee was right. You are easy.”

“Oh for God's sake,” I muttered, shoving my palm against my face. “Is everyone in this damned state determined to torment me?”

“Most of us, but don't tell the others I told you. I just got to the fifth level,” she replied, putting her finger to her lips. “Come on, let's get you something to drink.”

I groaned, following her into the kitchen. “I don't suppose it could be a drink?”

“Oh, sure, underage drinking in front of your father, the Chief of Police. That seems like a good idea,” Emily replied.

“...point.”

“Awww, you don't need a drink. Just stay high on life, Bella Swan. And maybe caffeine. Coke?” Emily suggested, picking up a bottle from the counter and looking back at me.

I eyed the array of soda bottles. “Do you have diet anything?”

“Okay, you're skinny and all, but you don't strike me as the kind of girl who worries too much about her weight,” Emily said, raising her eyebrows as she picked up some Diet Coke instead.

“It's not that, I'm just...sort of used to the taste. Thanks,” I added, as she handed me the cup.
“Don't mention it. So what did you tell Lee that got her so upset?” Emily poured herself some Sprite, then leaned against the counter, watching me. Seeing my hesitation, she shook her head. “She's probably going to rant at me about it later. I'm kind of the unofficial pack psychologist. So you might as well tell me.”

“She...might not share this one,” I said awkwardly. “Maybe you'd better hear it straight from her.”

Emily frowned in concern, lowering her voice further. “Wait, is it her dad? He's on medication now, and a special diet. I thought he was doing better.”

“No, it's not that, it's pack stuff,” I replied, shaking my head.

She folded her arms. “Imprints are pack. Didn't those books of yours tell you that?”

I blinked. “You know about those? ...wait. Of course you know about those. There are no secrets in the pack, are there?”

“Nope. Not when it comes to something this big. It spreads among the wolves like wildfire, the wolves tell their imprints...well, Sam tells me and Jared tells Kim, anyway. No one else has imprinted yet,” Emily said.

“They will. Uh, that reminds me, maybe try and wait to introduce Quil to your niece,” I said, cringing.

“I only have one niece, and she's two...wait, seriously? Claire?” Emily asked. “What the fuck?”

I goggled a moment as Emily swore – that didn't seem much like the sweet, motherly Emily Young from the books, but then again, I'd probably drop an f-bomb under the circumstances, too. Now it looked like I might have to do damage control, because Emily's gaze was slowly turning toward the living room. “Uh, well, imprinting isn't necessarily sexual or romantic, right? In the books he's just like a goofy big brother to her. It might be more about having someone to protect than anything.”

“Yeah...still,” Emily grumbled. “I think I'm going to be very, very careful around teenage werewolves next time I'm on babysitting duty. Do you know who the other imprints are? It's not a bunch of kids, right?”

“No, I mean, I know Paul imprints on Jacob's sister, actually. The unmarried one, uh...Rachel, right?” I asked, and Emily nodded. “I don't know who Embry imprints on, if anyone. And Jacob's imprint...none of you would have met her yet.” And I don't know if Jacob ever will.

“Damn, well, Paul and Rachel, Jacob's going to love that,” Emily remarked, chuckling. “They didn't like each other as it was, the shift's just made it worse. Lucky they have Leah to keep them in line.”

“Yeah...she makes a pretty great alpha, doesn't she?” I asked, sipping my soda.

“She does. Not that the elders would admit it.” A dark look passed over Emily's face as her eyes flicked toward the living room. “She's not the alpha in your books?”

“They're really not my books,” I muttered under my breath. “But no, Sam is. Leah gets to be second...after Jacob breaks away and forms his own pack. For reasons we don't really need to get into.”

Emily's gaze turned back to me, and she gave me a level look. “You sure about that? Because Billy and Old Quil have been pushing pretty hard for Jacob to take over now that he's a wolf.”
“It's not due to pressure from the elders, I can tell you that. That's not who Jacob is,” I said. “Unless he's a completely different person here, which wouldn't be unheard of. The books haven't been a completely accurate guide to this world.”

Emily nodded, her tone and expression softening. “As strange as it's been for us – meeting you, hearing your story – it must be even stranger for you.”

“I've...adapted.” I gestured vaguely with my glass, then took another sip. “Honestly, it's almost been a little frightening how quickly I've adapted. But I don't think I have much choice. And it helps that I do have friends I can be honest with.”

“I hope you'll consider me one of them,” she said, with a genuine smile.

I laughed softly. “I'm getting there. I haven't had a chance to get to know...well, anyone in the pack aside from Leah. I only met Sam briefly. But you're easier to get along with than Billy, that's for sure.”

“Billy's not so bad when he's not under stress. The Cullens showing up...it's stirred up something in him, I think. Something he doesn't want to talk about.” She frowned, shaking her head. “I don't suppose you know what it is?”

I thought it over, but shook my head in response. “I know he really dislikes the Cullens, maybe even irrationally so, but I don't remember his reasons for it. And it might not be my place to tell you if I did know.”

“Right. Like whatever you told Leah,” Emily said, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“And we're back to that,” I said, sighing.

“We are, because if it's not about her dad, and it is about pack stuff...are you a hundred percent sure I don't need to know? That it's none of my business?”

I grimaced. “Okay. You have a point. And...it does concern you. Just promise me you won't get pissed off. I'm trying to help. And I don't know if it'll happen here. Like I've said, a lot of things are different here, even though the bigger picture seems roughly the same.”

“Well, now you've got me worried. But I promise I won't freak out, at least,” Emily said, frowning. “What is it?”

“Just, uh...maybe we'd better step outside,” I said, glancing back at the living room.

“It's pack business, but you don't want the pack to hear? Not exactly making me less worried, Bella,” Emily murmured, barely loud enough for me to hear. She stepped over to the side door, opening it. “Okay. Come on.”

I followed her out the door, and she shut it behind us before leading me over to a pine tree a few feet away from the house. Then she turned back to me. “All right, spill.”

“Right.” I let out a long breath. “Again, please don't get angry. I'm not accusing anyone of anything. I'm just sharing what happened in the books, because I want to make sure it doesn't happen here. In the books...you and Sam have a much rougher start. He's dating Leah when he imprints on you, and it causes a lot of conflicts between the three of you. That's already untrue here, so I'm hoping the rest of it will prove false too, but at one point you get into a vicious argument with him, and he loses control. He hurts you, badly. You survive, but you're left scarred.”
Emily stared at me for a long moment, then nodded, slowly. “Well, I can see why that would upset Leah. Sam's probably her second best friend in the world, after me. And it's a close contest,” she said, with a sigh. “And I can't think of anything I could say that would ever make Sam that angry, unless...wait. I didn't bring up his father, did I?”

“I really don't know. Sorry, I don't remember every detail,” I said, spreading my hands. “All I really wanted to get across to Leah was that some anger management techniques might not be the worst idea. Sam and his dad...don't get along?”

“That's putting it mildly,” Emily replied, her gaze drifting toward the Clearwater house. “He wasn't a good man. And he was pretty publicly not a good man. You might have a point about the wolves learning to control their anger, but Sam would never willingly hurt me. You don't have to worry about him, or me, okay?”

“Okay. I said what I needed to, so – consider it dropped,” I promised. “No more meddling in pack affairs.”

Emily eyed me shrewdly. “Are you saying that because you're not going to meddle, or because you don't need to do any more meddling?”

“Uh...”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Come on, let's get back inside. It's freezing out here.”

*****

After a stop in the kitchen to refill our sodas, we made it to the living room at last. Emily went to sit with Sam again, while I dropped into an empty chair next to my dad, who looked from me to her with a bemused smile. “Bells, how the hell do you linger outside for girl talk and come back with a completely different girl?”

“It's a long story, and if I told you, I'd have to kill you. Girl code,” I joked, leaning over to snag a chip and dig into the seven-layer dip, meeting Emily's eyes across the way and giving her a curt nod in the process. She nodded back, a smile spreading across her lips. “But I can tell you Leah decided to go for a run before the game. That's been declassified.”

Dad chuckled. “Right, well, guess I'll just look the other way while you ladies plot world domination.”

I grinned at him. “Your future rulers thank you for your cooperation.”

Someone suddenly loomed over us, and I looked up to find a tall, broad-shouldered teenage boy standing there with his hands in his pockets, grinning down at me. He'd outgrown his clothes enough that his black tank top clung to him like a second skin, molding itself to his abs and pecs, showing off every muscle that wasn't already on display. His jeans were too short by half, exposing his calves, and I quickly averted my eyes from the show just below his belt. His jaw was square, his nose broad, his eyes deep-set and glittering, and his hair had been cut close against his scalp. I could see a vague resemblance to Billy, so it wasn't hard to guess who this was, and I smiled brightly back at him while quietly praying he wasn't already imprinting on the contents of my ovaries.
“Jacob? Jesus, you got big,” I said, rising from my seat and vaguely spreading my arms for a hug before thinking better of it. I wasn't sure how we were going to play this, especially since it sounded like the whole pack knew who I really was.

“Heh, yeah,” he said, glancing down at himself with a bashful grin. “You've changed a lot, too. I like the hair. The jersey, not so much.”

I scowled. “The Seahawks aren't even playing, you guys have no dog in this fight! ...and it's my girlfriend's favorite team, I don't really care,” I lied.

He made a show of sniffing the air. “Yeah, I got that. Tell your girlfriend she has terrible taste,” he teased.

“Does that extend to her taste in women?” I asked, pursing my lips and putting my hands on my hips.

“I don't know, does she know you wrestled me into a mud patch once?”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “When was this?”

“I don't even remember that! ...you probably deserved it!” I insisted, glancing between the two of them.

Jacob laughed loudly, shaking his head. “I mean, I might have put a tiny spider down your shirt, but you just blew it way out of proportion.”

I shuddered, but smirked up at him. “I'd probably do the same thing now, so I hope you've gotten out of the habit of putting spiders where they don't belong.”

He grinned. “I'm a lot harder to wrestle to the ground now.”

“It's all about leverage,” I returned, smiling sweetly. “I seriously don't remember that, though, sorry.”

“Ah, it's okay. To me, it was the day my sisters' friend shoved me into the dirt...to you, it was Tuesday,” Jacob said, waving his hand, then turning serious. “And I heard you were in the hospital. I'm glad you're doing better.”

I swallowed and nodded, feeling my own smile fade as I shifted awkwardly in place. “Yeah, uh, thanks.”

“You want me to reintroduce you to everyone?” he offered. “Even without the whole hospital thing, I know it's been a while and people have grown up and shit. Stuff. Sorry. Point is, I wouldn't blame you if you had trouble putting names to faces.”

I chuckled. “You don't have to apologize for swearing in front of me. And that's sweet of you, thanks. That'd help a lot.”

“You should probably stay in the habit of apologizing for swearing in front of me. For the record,” dad said sternly, though I could see his lips quirking a little. “And don't let Sue catch you or you'll be tasting soap for a week.”

“Believe me, I remember. Sorry, Chief Swan,” Jacob said, though he was still smiling. He stepped away, and I followed him as he gestured at his father, who was watching me suspiciously from across the room. He adopted a tour guide voice, though he spoke in a low tone. “On our left, you'll see the rare Pacific Northwest Sourpuss. We call this distinguished gentleman dad, though some of
our guests have nicknamed him 'Billy'."

I laughed without thinking, even snorting quietly and quickly clapping my hand over my nose and mouth as Jake snickered. “You, um... you don’t agree with your dad about... the Cullens? Or me?”

“I haven't met the Cullens yet. Though I doubt I’d like them much if I was stuck downwind.” He smirked and shrugged slightly. “As for you, well, yeah, I got the 'Bella Swan is possessed by some kind of alien spirit' lecture, but... I don't know. I don't know what's going on with you, honestly, but you seem pretty normal so far. Your head's not spinning around or anything. Though you have been pulling the girls away for a lot of secret chats... or makeouts?” He frowned thoughtfully, looking down at me, his serious expression ruined by the way he was waggling his eyebrows.

I shoved his arm playfully, careful not to do it too hard – which was good call, because his muscles were like rocks, and he didn't even twitch, he just grinned. “Sorry, Black, you'll have to come up with some other fantasy for your spank bank. We were just talking.”

He let out a yelping laugh, his expression turning from amusement to delighted surprise as he shook his head. He ducked as everyone turned to look at us, smiling sheepishly. “Sorry, I just did not expect to hear the words 'spank bank' come out of Chief Swan's daughter.”

“I'm a grown-ass woman, Jake, I drop f-bombs and everything,” I joked. I glanced away a second later, though, my smile fading. “Bella Swan was your friend, though. I mean, you knew her, as a kid.”

“I knew a girl I barely remember, who was always closer to my sisters than me. You still look like her. And Leah trusts you, and I trust Leah,” he replied, with another shrug.

“She trusts me?” I echoed.

“Uh... yeah. What, you didn't think she did?” Jacob asked, his brows knitting together in puzzlement.

“I've just... clashed with her now and then, you know? We've pissed each other off a few times now,” I said.

“Oh, please.” He snorted. “She's like that with everybody. Emily's like the one person I've never seen her fight with. No, that's not true. I know Emily's chewed her out once or twice, Leah just doesn't fight back where she's concerned. But her dad? Sam? She'll throw down with anyone in a heartbeat, even the people she cares about most. But I've heard her thoughts about you. You earned yourself a lot of credit when you warned her about her dad. She loves him to pieces. And the rest, well... she doesn't always agree with you, and yeah, she's been pissed at you. But she still trusts you.”

I nodded, looking back up at him and offering him a small smile. “Thanks. That's really good to know, honestly.”

“Yeah, well, she's probably gonna skin me alive when she finds out I told you all that, so, you know, avenge me or whatever,” he said, running a hand through his hair and giving me a sheepish grin.

“Your name will not be forgotten, Jacob Black,” I intoned solemnly, before breaking into a smirk. “Seriously, thanks. So as long as we're gossiping, how does the rest of the pack feel about me?”

“Ugh, don't say gossiping, it makes me feel like we're at the mall talking about boys or some shit,” he said, making a face.

“What, you don't want, like, a totally awesome makeover?” I asked, in my best Valley Girl voice, toying with my hair. “OMG, Chad is like totally into you, Jules, for sure.”
I could hear the boys in the room start to laugh, while Jacob groaned. “Great, I am never going to live that down, and did you have to give me a girl-name? Where the hell did you get Jules from, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Just felt right. Be glad it wasn’t Amber or something,” I replied with a grin.

“Well, you probably just won over Quil and Embry, but I’m definitely leaning more toward ’Bella Swan is pure evil’ now, myself,” he informed me. “Sam likes you. Jared doesn’t really have an opinion. Paul’s...not real happy about the situation. I guess he got so pissed when he found out about you that he was stuck in wolf form for a whole day. He’s going along with Leah, but he’s been arguing pretty fiercely that we should be taking the whole ’spirit possession’ thing seriously, since – uh, long story, actually. It has to do with some old tribal legends and stuff.”

“Oh, right, Taha Aki,” I realized aloud. Jacob stared at me. “...shit, did I get the pronunciation wrong?”

“Uh. A little, but it’s pretty much...you know the story of Taha Aki?” he asked cautiously.

“Maybe not all the fine details, but yeah, most of it. He was an ancient Quileute chief who led the spirit warriors of your tribe, men who had the power to leave their bodies and roam as spirits to help defend and serve their people. He was betrayed by one of his warriors, who took Taha Aki’s body and killed his own original body so Taha Aki couldn’t return,” I said. “But Taha Aki was able to share the body of a wolf, and in this form he returned to the Quileute. When he confronted the traitor, he was able to shift into a perfect version of his old body, and thus the Quileute shifters came to be.”

“Oh-huh,” Jacob said, rubbing his forehead. Glancing around, I could see that the other shifters in the room were now staring at me as well, as was Emily. “So, basically, these books you keep talking about just casually drop a bunch of sacred Quileute lore on anyone who reads them.”

“Uh....yeah. I'm sorry,” I replied, looking down at my feet. “If it helps, I'm pretty sure a lot of it is just fiction in my world. The Quileute and the Makah are real tribes where I'm from, but I don't think their lore is quite the same. I guess I wouldn't really know.”

“I guess you already know the big secret anyway, and you're clearly not about to run around telling everyone about vampires and werewolves. It's okay. Maybe don't let on to my dad or Old Quil that you know this stuff, they'd probably assume one of us told you,” he advised me, sighing. “Which means they'd blame Leah, specifically.”

“Yeah...why the hell do they hate her so much, anyway?” I asked.

“Well, Old Quil's just kind of...old. And sexist. And not thrilled with Leah's whole out and proud deal,” Jake said. “And dad's big on tradition. There's never been a female shifter before that we know of, and it's important to him to keep the shifter bloodlines going. He's pretty sure Leah can't imprint or have kids, and she's gay, so...”

“So there'd be nothing stopping a nice Quileute sperm donor from helping her partner get pregnant, in theory,” I said, rolling my eyes. “There are solutions to this shit. Not that any of you should be reduced to parents. Who's to say you all even want kids? What if Sam and Emily just want to adopt cats and live comfortably to a ripe old age?”

“Oh, Sam and Emily are definitely going to have kids. I'm pretty sure those dorkwads already have names picked out,” Jacob said. He glanced at Sam and Emily, and grinned at something I couldn't hear. “Yeah, love you, too, asshole. Anyway, I don't know. I always figured I'd have some too. But I guess I take your point. Honestly? I think my dad's kind of uncomfortable with shifters in general. It's
personal stuff, but...there it is. He blames the Cullens for turning up and triggering our wolf genes, he blames Leah for taking the alpha spot before I could, he's frustrated that I don't even get to be chief, and...well, a lot of stuff hasn't been easy since mom died.”

His face fell as he went on, and I cringed, looking up at him and reaching out to take his hand, grasping at his fingers. “I'm sorry. I lost my mom a while ago, too, it's...absolute shit.”

“Yeah,” he said, breathing sharply through his nose and meeting my eyes. “Yeah, it is. It's been five years and I still miss her. And Rachel just...couldn't deal.”

“I know what that's like. Afterward...I sort of just spiraled for a while. It took me some time to break out of it.” I shifted, a little awkwardly. “I know we barely know each other, but if you ever want to talk about it...”

“I usually don't. But thanks,” he said, a bit curtly. “Sorry, it's just...easier to not think about it. Anyway, I said I'd introduce you around, right?”


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There weren't too many more people to introduce me to, really – just the Clearwaters, a couple other family friends, and Quil and Embry. All of them seemed fairly easygoing, though Sue pulled me into a warm hug when we met face to face. I wasn't entirely sure if that was because I'd warned Leah about her dad's heart problems or if Sue was just a naturally warm person, but I was pretty sure it was a combination of both.

Quil and Embry were pretty typical teenage boys, snickers and crude jokes and lingering looks and all, but they were easy enough to talk to, and we were soon engrossed in a conversation about video games. I had to dig in my own memories a bit, because a lot of games I considered classics had either just came out or were still in the future, but I was soon engrossed in the conversation, and catching crap from the guys for my tastes.

“Wait, wait, let me get this straight,” Quil said, snickering and shaking his head. “You live in a world of vampires and werewolves...so you spend your free time playing a game with different vampires and werewolves?”

“Sexy vampires,” Embry added helpfully.

“One, I didn't know until recently, two, I'm not playing it now, three, shut up, Embry, and four, Bloodlines is awesome,” I retorted. “I dare you to play the haunted hotel level in the dark.”

Quil snorted. “Yeah, uh, no offense, but I'm pretty sure I can handle it.”

“Why, because you're not a teenage girl?” I asked, grinning evilly. “I dunno, I bet you can still scream like one.”

Jake and Embry started laughing, while Quil's eyes narrowed. “What do you wanna bet I don't?”
“Mmm. Ten dollars says you at least jump, and we get to record it and hang onto the tape,” I said. “I can probably borrow a camera from Alice.”

“Ugh, that thing's gonna be rank, but fine, you're on,” Quil agreed, sticking out his hand. I was just shaking it when someone suddenly cleared their throat behind me, making me start in surprise, prompting another round of laughter from the boys. I glared at them and turned around.

Billy Black was there, having wheeled up while I wasn't paying attention. I didn't know how long he'd been listening in, but he had his eyebrows raised at our conversation. “I didn't know you gambled now, Bella.”

“...just a friendly bet. No big deal,” I replied, shrugging, trying not to sound as awkward and apprehensive as I felt. “Hi, Billy, how’s it going?”

“Oh, well enough. I was just going to slip outside for some air. Would you mind helping me out the door?” he asked pleasantly.

“I'm on it, dad.” Jake stepped forward immediately, only to stop short as Billy gave him a pointed look.

“Oh, I'm sure it's no trouble for Bella, is it? Besides, we haven't spoken in a while, I'm sure we've got a lot to catch up on,” he said, with a slight edge to his voice, as his gaze turned back to me.

I suppressed a sigh, dreading whatever conversation he wanted to have already, but knowing he'd keep trying if I refused. I forced a smile to my face and nodded. “Of course. I've got it, Jake, don't worry. See you guys in a few.”

Jacob put his hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to meet his eyes. “Bella. Are you sure?”

I smiled more genuinely, touched by his concern. “Yeah. I'll be fine. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, avenge me, I guess.”

He chuckled, though he shot a tense look at his father before stepping back. I tried to look reassuring as I turned and took hold of the handles on Billy's chair, helping him wheel about toward the door. Quil smirked at us, trying to lighten the mood. “Hey, watch out for sexy vampires out there.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Punkass wolf who's gonna get his ass kicked by a door says what?”

“What?” Quil said, looking confused as I smirked. “No, seriously, what?”

I ignored him, continuing to smirk as I pushed Billy along, out onto the walk.

“What was that about?” Billy asked.

“Just a video game. Don't worry about it,” I muttered, the smirk fading at once. I shut the door behind us, parking Billy's chair and leaning against the wall. “What do you want, Mr. Black?”

“It's Mr. Black now, is it?” he asked, frowning.

“You haven't exactly been friendly to me. I figured you'd appreciate the formality,” I said, a little sharply.

“I see. Well, you aren't exactly a friend, are you?” Billy returned. “Charlie Swan's my friend. His daughter played with my little girls, she was their friend. I don't know who you are. Except you seem to bring chaos to everything you touch.”
“Change, maybe. I'm not trying for chaos.” I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. “I don't know what I can do to convince you that I'm not your enemy. That I didn't ask for this. That I'm doing my best.”

“Your best. Have you even been trying to return home?” His tone was accusing, and he had a dark look in his eyes. “Or have you been too busy consorting with the Cullens? Helping them overcome our defenses?”

“The Cullens aren't your enemies either. They just want to live in peace. And where am I supposed to start?” I asked, spreading my arms. “I don't know how I got here, not really. I don't know how to go back. My powers, which are too dangerous for me to use, by the way, don't allow me to travel between dimensions. I don't know of anyone with that particular ability. Alice hasn't had any visions that could point the way. I'm sorry, I genuinely am, but I don't know how to fix this. I'm just trying to make the best of it.”

“So she says. So you keep saying. If we still...” He trailed off, eyeing me suspiciously.

I frowned for a moment, then realized what he'd been about to say. “I know the story of Taha Aki and the spirit warriors already. It's in the books,” I replied. “Yes, if you still had spirit warriors, one of them could go out and see if Bella Swan's spirit is wandering somewhere around here, I'm sure. Although there are a lot of unknowns there, and anyway – kind of seems like the Quileute lost that ability when you gained shifters.”

Billy looked disgruntled. “Yes. Perhaps,” he muttered. “...is that an ability you could restore to us?”

I stared at him in disbelief for a moment. “Seriously? As though you'd trust me if I said yes? Or no? Or, hell, anything?”

“If you could restore that particular power, it would go a long way toward establishing trust,” he said, lifting his chin and giving me a stern, steady look.

“Well, I'm sorry, because – I don't know,” I said honestly. “And I'm not about to try. Not while I'm still human. Last time I even tried to use my power, I landed in the hospital with memory loss. Next time, it could put me in a coma, or kill me. I'm not equipped to handle the strain on my system.”

“You intend to become a vampire?” he asked, scowling. “To change Bella Swan's body so completely?”

“It's my body. I don't have a way to change that. And I don't know, but it's a distinct possibility. It's not going to happen any time soon, if it happens at all. But either way, as long as I'm human, I can't safely use my power. So no more experiments. I'm sorry.”

Billy's eyes narrowed. “Convenient.”

“Oh, believe me, it's really not,” I fired back. “Losing my memories, important memories, memories that mattered to be, was hardly convenient. Scaring my father was hardly convenient. Feeling utterly useless while my friends risk their lives trying to protect my helpless ass is hardly convenient. And dealing with your shit on top of everything else is definitely not convenient.”

He stared at me as I ranted, waiting for a moment after I'd stopped. “Are you done now?”

“I don't know. Probably,” I said. “You?”

“Mmm.” He scowled again. “I don't see that there's much else I can do at the moment.”
“Welcome to my world,” I snapped, before shaking my head and running a hand over my face. “Look. Theoretically, if my power even works on shifters and isn’t just limited to vampires...yes. I could do it. The potential is there. If it was an innate ability and not solely the result of a shit-ton of discipline and training, it’s a power I could restore to you. It doesn’t really feel like my place, and I have no idea if it would work, but if Leah asked me to, I would try. Once it’s safe for me to do so.”

“At which time it will be too late to save Bella Swan’s humanity,” Billy said.

“Assuming her spirit is around here, assuming we can fix this crap, and assuming that’s what she’d even want, then yeah, I guess,” I returned. “But I wouldn’t count on it. In the books, Bella was pretty much ready to become a vampire the moment she realized it was a possibility. Compared to her, I’m the model of restraint.”

“So you say.”

“Yeah. So I say. And there’s really nothing more to be said right now. We done?” I folded my arms, pushing myself from the wall and glaring at him.

“For now.”

“Great,” I muttered, opening the door again and then helping him back inside.

*****

Leah didn’t return to the house until it was nearly time for kickoff, and then we were all too busy watching the game, or the commercials, or both to grab time to talk. I caught myself glancing her way repeatedly as she watched the Eagles and the Pats duking it out, and though she seemed a little more relaxed and was even smiling as she talked with Sam and Emily, that could have had more to do with the game than anything. I hadn't really paid attention to it the first time around – it was rare for me to actually watch the Super Bowl, and when I did, I was usually more invested in the commercials. It was a closer match than I’d realized it would be. I was too distracted by Leah to pay that much attention this time, but I did glance at the score periodically and was surprised to see the teams still tied by halftime.

I was basically a quivering bundle of nerves by the time the halftime show started. Since I wasn't all that invested in Paul McCartney's solo work, I took the opportunity to hit the bathroom and get another drink, and started a little when I ran into Leah in the kitchen doorway.

“Oh, uh, sorry. Excuse me,” I said meekly, not quite able to meet her eyes.

“No, hey – wait up,” she said softly, putting her hand on my arm and guiding me to the kitchen table. “Look, I’m sorry. You were trying to help. I didn’t want to hear it, and I almost took your head off. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Maybe not. That...taking my head off thing felt a little more literal than I would have liked,” I joked awkwardly, instantly cringing. “...sorry. I don’t think you would have hurt me. And you didn’t. Obviously.”

“No, it's okay. I got angrier than I should have, and I guess I came pretty close to the line.” She put
her hand on top of mine, meeting my eyes. “I don't blame you for getting scared. I wouldn't willingly hurt you, but...maybe you have a point about our control.”

“Maybe. But maybe I oversold it,” I murmured. “I'm sorry, Leah. I never meant to accuse Sam of anything. He seems like a really great guy, and he and Emily obviously adore each other. And I don't think all the...circumstances quite the same here. But the books, or my memories of them, are all I have to guide me here, and I just felt like I had to tell you. To warn you. Just in case. I guess I did a pretty shitty job this time.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Leah let out a long breath. “I forgive you. You were trying to help. But maybe we ought to sit down sometime and talk through any other stuff you know. Get it out of the way, so there are no more surprises.”

I gave her a sheepish little smile. “We could try. But sometimes my memories have to be triggered by specific things. I tend to forget things when I try to sum up a whole story at once. But tell you what, I'll try to keep a list of anything I remember about you, your pack, or the Quileute in general, okay?”

“Yeah. That sounds like a good idea,” Leah agreed. “Let me know when you have it together.”

“I will,” I promised. “So...we cool?”

“Yeah, we're cool.” She smiled at me, and though it was a little hesitant, it was genuine nonetheless. Then she glanced at the TV in the other room and gave me a smirk. “Hey, about that bet...”

I started to grin viciously, and she groaned. “Never mind.”

“What?” I asked, trying to look innocent. “I'm not that into sports. Maybe I'm remembering this one wrong. For all I know, the Pats get crushed.”

“Seriously?” Leah asked, perking up.

“No, I'm screwing with you, the Pats win,” I said, letting the grin return to my face.

“Damn it,” she cursed, as Sam, passing through the kitchen, let out a soft groan and gave me a wounded look.

My grin widened, and I started to sing quietly. “We are the champions, my friends...”

“Shut up.”

“And we'll keep on fighting to the end....”

“I take it all back, you're not forgiven, you're an asshole,” Leah grumbled.

“I'm a Masshole, Leah, and don't you forget it,” I teased quietly, patting her hand as I got up.

*****

The werewolves, all of whom had heard me, met every point the Patriots scored with groans and dark looks in my direction from then on, while I just smiled serenely. Charlie didn't really seem that
invested in either team, but looked increasingly amused at the blame being heaped on the one Pats fan in the room.

“I think you might be a bad luck charm, Bells,” he joked, as the Patriots kept driving the ball in toward the end.

“No, I'm just a good luck charm for the wrong team,” I said with a smirk.

He chuckled. “Well, the Cullens must be thrilled. Maybe next year we'll watch the game at their place. I think you might have worn out our welcome here,” he said, before catching himself and reddening a little. “I mean...you know. Not that either of us should assume...especially not you.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing at his slip-up. “Well, you never know. Alice and I might still be together then. We'll see. The important thing is that you should probably be ready to make a quick getaway. This could get ugly.”

He looked at me and smiled briefly, then assumed a serious look. “Should I go out and start the car now?”

I looked gravely back at him, then slowly eyed the room at large before meeting his gaze again and shaking my head. “I think we'll have a brief window of opportunity. I'll cover you, just bring the car around so I can make a quick exit.”

“Roger,” he agreed, with a curt nod and a thumbs-up. I laughed and, after a brief moment of hesitation, leaned into him as we watched the end of the game, resting my head on his shoulder. He glanced at me in surprise, but soon smiled, putting his arm around my shoulders and giving me an affectionate squeeze.

As much as the pack might have sort of hated me at the moment, it was a pretty great way to end the weekend.
It wasn't even 8 by the time we left the Clearwater house, though the sun had set over two hours previously. We grabbed some burgers and fries on the way back home, I double-checked my homework over dinner, and then I had an hour or so to kill before bed.

“I think I'm going to take a bath,” I announced to dad, as he switched on the news.

“You are?” he asked, surprised. “I mean, uh, sure. You just never struck me as the...bath type.”

That didn't really shock me. Even by my half-assed femme standards, the old Bella didn't seem to have much in the way of girly stuff. In my old life, even I'd kept bubble bath and scented candles around, though I rarely used them. And I definitely had more cosmetics. I seriously needed to make a supply run sometime soon. I wasn't sure if Bath and Body Works or Sephora were around yet, or if there were locations anywhere near here, but I'd have to look into it. If nothing else, there was always the grocery store.

I smiled and shrugged. “I guess I'm not usually, but sometimes it's nice to get a good soak in. I'll just be in the bathroom for a while, is all.”

“Sure, fine. Have...fun?” dad replied, sounding uncertain. “Heh, you don't need a rubber ducky or anything, right?”

I gave him a wry chuckle. “I think I'll manage, thanks.”

I headed back upstairs, sticking the old, rarely-used plug in the tub and starting the water running. Once I'd gotten the temperature to where I wanted it, I ducked back into my room and grabbed my bathrobe. Shutting the bathroom door, I took a look at myself in the full-length mirror on the back and sighed, getting undressed.

I'd gotten to know my new face pretty well over the last couple of weeks, but ever since that initial experience on the plane, I'd deliberately avoided paying too much attention to my own body. I'd had to get very acquainted with certain things very quickly, especially when my period had come, and of course I'd had to shower, and shave my legs for my date with Alice, but I hadn't really explored myself. In any sense of the word. Maybe it was because it had felt disrespectful, at first. Maybe it was because I'd been afraid of breaking down under the weight of living in a body that wasn't my own, even if it was a lot closer to the body I'd always wanted.

Maybe those were still valid concerns. But I couldn't go on like this, for one simple reason.

“You are Isabella Marie Swan,” I whispered to myself, locking eyes with my reflection. They seemed wrong, as always, but I was no longer sure why, not after my memory loss. Something about the shade not quite being right. “You are Bella Swan. Your parents are Renee and Charlie. You're dating Alice Cullen. This is who you will be for as long as you live. Anything from before...”

My voice cracked a little, and tears blurred my vision. I wiped them roughly away with the back of my hand. I could remember so many nights like this, and as I felt the pain cut through my thoughts, I wondered why my brain had decided to keep those memories. There had been so many times, desperate to deny who I was, desperate to find an easier path, when I'd stood before other mirrors, telling myself who I was, who I should be. Telling myself it wouldn't change. That it couldn't. I had tried, so many times, to shove my feelings deep down inside me, to find a balance that wouldn't require me to unleash the truth. There had been sacrifices, and compromises, and the line had kept
moving, until finally I couldn't pretend any longer. And now, here I was, standing in front of another mirror, in another body that felt wrong, insisting on the way things had to be.

“That was different,” I hissed, under my breath. “This is different. Isn't this what you wanted? Maybe not exactly the body you wanted, but who the hell ever gets exactly the body they want? This is what you prayed to God would happen. So what? What is it? Why are you upset?”

I forced myself to look at my reflection, digging deep into the roiling storm of my emotions. They seemed harder to control, now. That was as good a starting point as any. “I'm off my meds. I haven't been off my meds this long in years. I may be in a different brain, with different brain chemistry, but the hardware's still faulty and maybe the software is, too. Okay. I need to get back on medication of some kind. I'm dealing with teenage hormones. Aside from my hair, I don't look anything like my old self, and now I can barely even remember what my old self looked like. I've already forgotten parts of my old life, I'm afraid of forgetting the rest, and I feel like I'm abandoning my loved ones by settling in here. I don't know what happened to the previous Bella Swan and I feel guilty for taking over her body and her life, even though I didn't ask for it. And I've been so wrapped up in all of that that I've barely even touched myself, I have an incredibly hot girlfriend who loves to tease, and I am horny as shit, so none of that is helping, either. One of these problems can be solved tonight! Guess which one.”

I shoved my hands against the door to either side of the mirror, staring intently at my own face, until finally I couldn't help it. A soft laugh bubbled up in my throat, I cracked a smile, and I shook my head slowly. Finally, I pushed back, sniffing and wiping the remaining tears from my puffy, reddened eyes.

“Well, it's still pretty gruesome when I cry, so that hasn't changed,” I joked, letting another giggle out of my throat. “Come on, Bells, let's see what we're working with.”

My gaze swept slowly downward, away from my face, and I really looked at myself for the first time. I was right the first time, I thought – I looked about as much like Kristen Stewart as any other relatively slender brunette on the planet, and changing my hair had only emphasized the differences. My general build was the same, perhaps, but I was a little less lean. The layer of baby fat I'd noticed in my face was present in the rest of my body as well, giving me a slightly unfinished look. There was still a slight awkwardness to my limbs, which might have explained Bella's clumsiness in the books. I suspected I was a late bloomer. I was definitely a young woman, to be sure, but I didn't think puberty was quite done with me yet. At least it was headed in the right direction this time.

I didn't have Rosalie or Emily's curves, or Leah's athletic figure. I wasn't a petite, elfin beauty like Alice, either. But Bella Swan was certainly someone I would have felt attracted to, in my old life, at least if she were somewhat older. She was pretty – I was pretty. No, I was beautiful, or would be. I could see the hints of the woman I'd become, in a couple years more, as my limbs and features struck their final balance and the last childish softness faded away. I could see the characteristics that would be drawn out when I turned, changing me from beautiful to gorgeous. I could just about see myself through Alice's eyes, just for a moment, and I felt lust stirring deep within me.

I swallowed, and let my tongue flick across my lips, before raising my hand to cup one of my breasts, running my fingers over the sensitive skin. My breath hitched in my throat, and a small, tingling shiver ran through my flesh, goosebumps rising in its wake. Slowly, I ran both hands down my soft stomach, over my hips, down my thighs. I shifted one hand to my inner thigh, running my fingers upward...but I stopped short, biting my lip and glancing over at the tub, which was reaching the point where I risked a spillover when I got in. Abandoning my ministrations, I stepped over to it and switched off the faucet, then tied my hair up in a messy bun before slipping in, letting out a soft hiss as I sank into the hot water.
Shutting my eyes, I took a moment to simply float in the tub, letting my thoughts drift aimlessly for a moment. Then, slowly, gently, I drew my finger up my inner thigh again, reveling in the yearning, nearly achingly tingle that ran through my body. With my other hand, I stroked upward from the spot where my thigh met my pelvis, over my stomach, finally reaching my chest and caressing my breast once more. I could feel myself coming alive with every touch, heat and need rising within me, new and strange but no less pleasurable.

Much as I was enjoying it, though, I felt a slight pang of...something. Guilt, maybe, and longing. I didn't want to do another emotional inventory. I didn't want to think too much about it – or think at all, at the moment. But part of me still wished Alice was there, even if I was doing this partly for her. When the time came, I wanted to know my own body, wanted to be able to tell her what I needed. I was already a blushing virgin, particularly compared to her centuries of experience. I didn't want to be completely ignorant. I was sure she'd have plenty to teach me regardless.

Still...if I concentrated, I could almost picture her entering the bathroom, a wicked smile on her lips, a mischievous twinkle in her golden eyes, her lithe form wrapped in a short, silky, barely-there bathrobe. I could imagine her hips swaying as she walked over to me, leaning over, the curve of her breasts coming into view. I could almost feel her cool, sweet breath against my ear as she whispered to me in a low, husky voice.

"Getting started without me, baby? Tsk. Naughty."

I left my eyes closed, not wanting to break the fantasy, not when it all seemed so vivid. My lips curled into a lazy smile as I replied to my imagined Alice. "Does that mean you're going to have to punish me?"

"Maybe," she trilled softly, drawing the word out in a sing-song cadence, and I swore I could almost feel her cold, firm lips grazing my jaw, kissing down my neck, her venom-slick tongue darting out to caress my skin. I reached for my breast, imagining small, pale, cool fingers stroking skillfully where my hand touched. "First I think you owe me a show. Even if I am joining it already in progress. Go on, Bella. Show me how you touch yourself. Show me how you want me to touch you."

I nodded, biting my lip, and trailed my fingers downward, slowly stroking along the lines of my chest, my stomach, my hips. My hands found my thighs, and my fingers clamped around them, pushing them apart as far as the tub would allow. As I did, I felt the ghost of Alice's hands on mine, guiding my fingers as they moved upward again.

"Are you wet for me, baby?" she murmured, leaning over to brush her lips against mine.

I almost wanted to give her some smart-ass reply about the fact I was in a tub, of course I was wet, but at that moment I touched myself at last, and my breath caught in my throat before coming out in a ragged, strangled whisper. "Oh, yes. Always."

"Always? My, my. That must make your school day very interesting," she replied, with a note of feline amusement in her voice.

I groaned, my hips shifting against the porcelain tub as my fingers kept working. "Shut up."

"If that's what you want. I'm sure I could find better uses for this wagging tongue of mine," she returned.

It went on like that for what seemed like an eternity, my imaginary Alice alternating between wicked teasing and whispered words of encouragement, her phantom lips and fingers seemingly everywhere. At some point, the fantasy shifted, and she was in the tub with me, on top of me, her small breasts
brushing against mine, her fingers working in concert with my hand. I was close, so close, and I wasn't quite sure how to push myself over the top, not until I pictured her leaning down against me and whispering in my ear.

“Come for me.”

The floodgates seemed to burst at that, and I had to bite my lip hard to keep from crying out, not wanting to alert my dad to what precisely I was doing. I let out a strangled groan through my teeth as I shuddered with the force of my climax, and then, at last, I took in a ragged breath, finding release. I floated there in the afterglow for a long moment, my body still tingling. At last, I opened my eyes.

Alice, of course, was nowhere to be seen. As real as it had seemed, it had ultimately just been my own imagination. Maybe I should have been worried about how vivid the fantasy was, but at the time, I could only feel a hollow regret deep in my bones.

“Next time,” I promised myself in a whisper. “Next time it's with her.”

*****

I slept surprisingly well, when sleep took me. Maybe scratching my itch had settled my usually busy mind. If I had any dreams, I couldn't recall them when I woke to the blaring tones of my alarm and the grayish light filtering through the clouds into my room. It was only when I'd finished blinking sleep from my eyes that I remembered what the day would bring, and felt butterflies stirring up a hurricane in my belly.

Alice Cullen was officially my girlfriend, and today was the day we planned to let the whole school know.

Maybe that was a little melodramatic. It wasn't as though we'd be hijacking morning announcements to update every last student on our relationship status. Hell, I didn't even have a Facebook account, and neither did any of my friends here – it didn't look like the site was open to the general public yet. But the small circle of friends I'd gathered would know. The various friends of friends, casual acquaintances and other people in our orbits would soon know. And I was certain Lauren Mallory would find out before the day was done. I could only imagine how she'd react.

Suddenly I felt a lot less sanguine about going to school. I glanced at the door and huddled under my bedspread, frozen in thought. Maybe I didn't have to go. I could always tell dad I wasn't quite up for it yet, that the weekend had taken more out of me than I thought. Of course, he was planning to go back to work today, but maybe if I promised to check in with him, he'd let me stay home alone. The Cullens would undoubtedly collect my homework assignments, and Alice would probably ditch and come over as soon as she saw I wasn't leaving the house today, so we could just get some quiet time all to ourselves. The more I thought about it, the more appealing it seemed, and I could feel a familiar lethargy take me, dragging me down to the place where I just didn't feel like doing much of anything. I just wanted to lay back and sleep. Maybe later I'd read, or watch some TV, or lay back in Alice's arms while she stroked my hair, but all my motivation to do anything else was draining away.

A soft tapping sound came from my window, and I snapped out of my reverie, looking over to find Alice perched in the tree outside. She looked impossibly beautiful, as always, wearing a soft gray
cashmere sweater that clung to her slim frame, a brown skirt that rippled around her thighs in the breeze, black tights and brown boots. When our eyes met, so offered me a slight smile, leaning over to pull my window open and climb inside gracefully. She slipped over to my bed, taking a seat beside me and wrapping her arms around my waist, resting her chin on my shoulder.

“You've decided not to go to school,” she said softly, without judgment. “What's the matter, Bella?”

“I just...it's too much. It feels like too much. Everyone's going to know about us,” I told her.

“Oh,” she said, sounding a little crestfallen. “Well, of course we don't have to tell them if you don't think you're ready. We can wait. We won't wear our rings, we won't act like anything changed, and if anyone asks, the date went well but we're still figuring things out.”

“No, I don't...I don't want to do that, either. I don't want to lie. Not about you. I love you,” I said, feeling guilty and restless.

Alice kissed my jaw. “I love you, too. What do you want to do?”

“I don't know.” I hung my head, and felt shame flooding my mind. What was I doing? I was moping around like a hopeless basket case when I had the perfect girlfriend. Beautiful, smart, funny, surprisingly geeky, talented in so many ways. I should have been proud to show her off, proud to be hers. I didn't deserve her. I didn't deserve any of this, not this stolen life, not the friends that should have been Bella's, certainly not Alice herself. ‘I'm sorry. You should go, I'll be fine on my own, I just need time.”

I felt Alice stiffen beside me, her arms briefly turning to iron bars around my stomach. She didn't tighten her grasp, but I could feel them, cold and unyielding, as I shifted slightly against them.

“You just lied to me,” she whispered.

“What?” I asked, feeling my heart flutter in my chest.

“Just now. You just lied to me, that's the first time you've ever lied to me,” Alice said, but she didn't sound angry. She sounded upset, scared, heartbroken. I felt another pang of guilt and despair. I'd hurt her all over again. I couldn't even spare her from this pathetic spectacle without upsetting her. I felt hot tears in my eyes, and hated myself for it.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “I didn't mean to – you shouldn't have to deal with me like this.”

“No! No, Cass – Bella – I love you,” she said fiercely. She hugged me tightly, though her arms had regained their usual flexibility. “I love you, and that means I have to deal with every part of you. It means I don't abandon you when things get difficult. Not ever. Why didn't you tell me you were hurting? No. No, I'm sorry, I'm not blaming you. How long have you been feeling this way? Did it just come on this morning? Is that how it works?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but before I could say a word, she put a finger to my lips. “Wait. Emotional inventory. Okay, Bells?”

I nodded, blinking back my tears. And I tried, I really did, but the harder I pulled on my emotions, my thoughts, the stronger the pull of the black hole inside me. Every path I followed seemed to turn back on itself, making me feel worse and worse. Finally, I shook my head.

“Alice, I can't,” I said, in a low, strangled voice, choking back a sob.
She hugged me again, burying her face in my shoulder briefly. I could feel her head shake. “It's okay, Bella. It's fine. With everything that's been going on – I didn't even think about your meds, and I'm sure you haven't had time to see Dr. Beckett. Just hang on for a couple minutes, okay?”

She pulled back slightly and produced her cell phone, her fingers flying across the keypad, almost too fast to follow. After a moment or two, she nodded to herself, putting her phone away again and leaning against me, sliding her arm around my waist.

“Charlie's going to call for you in a minute to make sure you're awake,” she murmured. “He's finishing his coffee, then he'll head for the stairs. But I think, before then...”

Something shifted inside me, like a curtain rising or clouds parting. My thoughts came into focus, and all the guilt and despair and self-loathing I'd been feeling seemed to wash away. I could still feel them simmering in the background, but I wasn't drowning under the weight of my feelings, not anymore. I took a deep breath, looking over at Alice, realizing who she must have been texting. A look out my window confirmed it: while I'd been wallowing, Jasper had climbed the tree outside, and taken Alice's former perch among the branches. He gave me a small, sheepish smile as our eyes briefly met.

Before any of us could say anything more, there was a knock on my door, and dad's voice came through. “Bells? You up?”

I wiped the tears and snot from my face, trying to keep any hoarseness or unsteadiness out of my voice. “Yeah, dad, sorry, just picking out an outfit.”

“...okay,” he said, after a long pause. “Well, uh, try not to take too long. You don't want to be late for school. You need me to drive you?”

Alice shook her head, her eyes flicking toward the window, and I smiled. “No, Alice is picking me up.”

“All right, then,” he replied, maybe a little gruffly. His voice softened as he went on. “You sure you're up for it? You feeling okay?”

“I can handle it,” I told him, hoping that would hold true, though Jasper's influence had left me feeling more confident and in control for the moment, at least.

“Okay, if you say so. But you just tell the nurse if that changes, got it?”

“I will,” I assured him. “Be down soon.”

Alice got up and opened my closet and dresser, picking through my wardrobe. I heard the stairs creak as Charlie descended, and she looked back at me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, glancing between her and Jasper again. “Yeah. That was a good idea. You work faster than Celexa, Jazz,” I joked weakly, figuring he could hear me even through the glass. The slight smile he gave me in return seemed to confirm it. “I didn't realize he could do anything this subtle.”

“Mmmm. Jasper's really thrown himself into the study of his abilities. His working theory is that they're rooted in biochemistry, that he's manipulating hormones and endorphins and neurotransmitters directly,” Alice replied, frowning slightly. “Unfortunately, his range is limited. Oh – do you mind if he comes in?”

“No, I mean, I'm decent,” I said, gesturing at my pajamas. “Come on in, Jasper.”
He climbed inside before I could really register it, opening and closing the window smoothly. He leaned against the frame, keeping some distance between us, and he seemed to be trying to keep his breathing to a minimum. His expression was polite and concerned, but slightly strained, as he nodded courteously. “Good morning, Bella.”

“Oh, uh – sorry. I guess the odor in here must be a lot to deal with,” I said, feeling a touch of nerves again as I recalled some of his issues with self-control. “If it would help you to leave the window open...”

“It's February, and it feels like it. I don't want you to catch a chill, now,” he replied. “I can take it. And don't you go apologizing. This is your home, and I'm here to help you.”

“Right,” I said, looking down. “More like save me from completely humiliating myself. I hate it when I get like this.”

“That is not your fault,” Alice said firmly, laying out some clothes on my bed. To my surprise, she seemed to have selected for comfort rather than style, picking out a pair of jeans that the original Bella had long since broken in, along with my white top edged with lace and a thick flannel shirt to go over it all. “But I am worried about you. And Jasper's powers aren't a long-term solution. We need to get you back on medication.”

“I have an appointment with Dr. Beckett on Wednesday after school,” I told her, though I sighed. “I don't know if she'll prescribe anything after one appointment, though. And even if she does, it usually takes a few days to kick in. What exactly is your range, Jazz?”

I looked to Jasper, who grimaced. “I have to be in the same room, or at least in line of sight and within a hundred yards or so. As soon as I get out of sight, or out of range, the effects will begin to wear off. The time that takes varies, but it seems to be connected to how long you're under my influence and how much force I put behind it. No more than a few hours, at any rate.”

“But I won't necessarily drop back into the state I was in before, will I? My previous emotional state isn't locked in, so if I'm already feeling better, I might still be okay?” I asked, a slightly desperate edge to my voice.

Jasper hesitated, glancing to Alice before looking back at me. “No, your emotions will shift naturally, and you might come out of this on your own by the time the effects fade. I'd reckon it'll all depend on how long these episodes of yours tend to last.”

“With medication, maybe a few hours to a day,” I said quietly, my gaze falling to my lap again. “Without it...it can go for days on end. Excruciating despair, hopelessness, social anxiety that leaves me shut up in my room for a week, not to mention some seriously ugly mood swings. And that's just what it was like back in my old life. I'm not even using the same brain anymore. I can't really be sure what's going to happen. In the books, Bella fell into a deeply depressed state for months after you all left, and after that she started hallucinating. Hell, she started deliberately triggering hallucinations of Edward, and since her hallucinations were triggered by putting herself in danger...”

Alice sat down on the bed beside me, lacing her fingers through mine. “I will never, ever leave you. Not ever,” she said fiercely. “This probably isn't going to be the easiest day. Or week. We'll do what we can. Jazz will meet up with you between classes, and we'll sit together at lunch. We'll find a way to make this work. And if you're really not up to it, I'm sure Carlisle will work it out with Charlie. You don't have to do this if you don't want to.”

I shut my eyes, sighing, and leaned against her, resting my cheek against her head. “I want to. I don't want to hide away in my room all day, let alone all week. I'm just scared, Alice.”
“I know, baby. And I wish I could make it better. But I have your back. The whole family has your back,” she said, turning and kissing my shoulder.

I nodded, taking another deep breath, and then opened my eyes to offer Jasper another weak smile. “Thanks, Jazz. When I become a vampire, we’re definitely going to have to take a closer look at that power of yours.”

I felt Alice grow still beside me, and Jasper blinked briefly, but after just a second he offered me an easy grin. “Just as long as Alice says it's okay.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Alice murmured. “We’d better get the car. Will you be all right getting ready on your own?”

I glanced over at her, biting my lip at her mild but unreadable expression, and nodded. “I can push through it if I have to. It helps to know there’s some kind of relief coming.”

“Okay. We'll see you outside soon.” She rose to her feet, turning to give me a brief, tender kiss, our eyes meeting. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I echoed softly. And then they were gone, and it was time to face the day.

*****

I managed to make it through a hurried shower, dressing quickly and grabbing my bag, pausing in the kitchen just long enough to grab a couple Pop Tarts. I didn't recognize the car in the driveway, but it was nice without being obviously flashy, with clean, simple lines and a lovingly polished exterior painted a calming shade of green. Jasper nodded at me from behind the wheel as I approached, relief washing over me once more, and Alice offered me a brilliant smile from the backseat. I slipped into the back beside me, and she watched me buckle my seat belt before catching Jasper's eye in the rearview mirror and gesturing imperiously.

“Forks High School, I think, Jeeves, the air will do us good,” she pronounced, in a snooty, aristocratic tone.

Jasper nodded, affecting an English accent rather than his usual Southern drawl. “Very good, madame.”

I couldn't help giggling, and Alice grinned back at me, reaching out to take my hand. I tangled my fingers in hers, and she shifted closer to me, snuggling against my side.

“The books didn’t mention that vampires are utterly ridiculous,” I told her, kissing the top of her head. “Though, surprisingly, your blatant disregard for seat belt laws did come up.”

“What, are you gonna tell your dad?” Alice teased, her lips grazing my shoulder.

“That you're ridiculous? No, I think he can figure that one out for himself. He's the chief of police, you know,” I said sagely.

Alice laughed. “Speaking of ridiculous.” She pulled away slightly, looking up at me with eyes the
dark amber of honey, her concern clouding the usual molten gold, though the smile she gave me was genuine. “I love being silly with you. When you're in the mood for it.”

“I love it, too. I wish I was always in the mood for it.” I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Okay. So. Two days, and then we'll see what happens with Dr. Beckett.”

“Carlisle's going to have a conversation with her. He isn't willing to exercise any undue influence, as he puts it, but he is willing to tell her he referred you to her and share his observations. Some of which are my observations, but he's willing to cheat a little in that regard,” Alice told me.

“Is that going to work? I don't think spoiler alerts need to apply here.”

Alice grimaced, shaking her head. “I don't know yet. Dr. Beckett isn't going to make up her mind without speaking to you directly, and your conversation isn't exactly set in stone. It has a better than decent chance of working, that's all I can tell you.”

“Right,” I sighed, leaning back against the seat and staring vaguely at the ceiling. “And I have no idea how to frame the things I can tell her, because the truth makes me sound...well, there's really no good way to put it. Suffice to say I doubt she'd be diagnosing me with chronic depression alone.

What about the next couple of days? I mean, Jasper, you can't be around me all the time, and I don't want to impose...”

“Don't you worry about that. You're family, that earns you a little imposition,” he said, meeting my eyes in the rearview. His irises were currently a vividly golden hue, and he smiled broadly at me, though he still held himself as though he was in constant pain. “It's not every day I get a new baby sister.”

I tried not to blush and failed utterly, glancing away. “Well, future sister-in-law, anyway. I mean, you know, not any time soon, but. Um.”

Jasper chuckled. “Yeah, sure, try telling Rose you're not ours already. Girl's already scheming to get you to go blonde.”

I felt a warmth bubbling up inside me that had nothing to do with Jasper's influence, and my blush deepened. “Maybe she should be going red,” I retorted.

“Oh, good, it's a stubborn-off. That's going to be fun to watch,” Alice remarked, smirking, though her expression turned more serious as her gaze flicked to Jasper. “We're getting off-track.”

“Yeah, we did wander just a little,” he said, frowning briefly. “Well, I think all we can really do is stick to what Alice said before. I'll sit with you girls and your friends at lunch, I'll meet up with you between classes, I'll make whatever tweaks I have to make and we'll just...hope they keep long enough to keep you going. Then I'll just camp out in that tree outside your window overnight and keep you on a baseline. I went hunting over the weekend, so I'll be good to go. I reckon I can keep the routine up until this episode passes or the medication kicks in, whenever you end up getting it. I'm mostly worried about what happens if I'm not around.”

“I am, too,” I said quietly, shaking my head slowly. “I didn't actually get on medication until I was around twenty. I made it through two decades without it. I just have to keep telling myself that.”

“But if you need help, you will ask for it, right?” Alice said, squeezing my hand gently and meeting my eyes.

I looked back at her, offering her a slight smile. “I will. I promise.”
I leaned in to kiss her tenderly, and I heard her let out a soft, pleased little purr, shifting closer to me. I shivered at the sensation of her body pressing up against mine, her small fingers raking against my scalp and through my hair, powerfully reminding me of my vivid fantasies from the night before. Our lips parted, and this time I boldly slipped my tongue into her mouth, tasting the sweet tang of her venom. Her grip tightened slightly as she stiffened in surprise, but then she began caressing my scalp, her other hand stroking my side, her own tongue playing against mine, our shared need almost palpable.

“Ah...ladies? Sorry to interrupt, but I'm really going to have to ask you to stop. Please,” Jasper said, rather awkwardly, and I felt my face burn as I suddenly remembered where we were. I jerked back, glancing at him in the rearview, catching a glimpse of the splotchy red blush all over my face and neck. Alice pulled back to her side of the bench seat, looking rather flustered as well, smoothing her shirt and avoiding eye contact with either of us.

“Jasper, um – I'm so sorry,” I told him.

“Me, too, Jazz, I'm...not sure what's gotten into either of us.” Alice shot me a questioning look, and I shook my head tightly, gesturing vaguely.

I couldn't see Jasper's expression all that well, but his hands were tight on the wheel and he was gazing straight ahead. “Don't mention it. It's fine, we're just – well, we're here, so I'm guessing you don't want to give everyone a show, anyway.”

My blush definitely wasn't going away any time soon. Apparently I was an ugly crier and ugly blusher. Wonderful. “No. Nope, we definitely don't. Thanks. Sorry.”

“Really, don't mention it,” he said, pulling smoothly into an available parking space. “I'll see you around, Bella, much as I can. Try to have a good day, you hear?”

“I'll do my best,” I promised, looking to Alice, who offered me an encouraging smile and opened her door.

“Thanks, Jazz,” she said, glancing at him briefly before turning back to me. “Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath and nodded, offering her a smile in return. “As I'll ever be.”

*****

We were already cutting it close to the bell, so I had to rush straight to my first class without stopping by my locker or saying too many hellos. Mike and Eric both broke into grins when they saw me enter, waving enthusiastically, and I couldn't help grinning back as I lifted my hand in return and dropped my homework off with Mr. Mason. His smile was somewhat more reserved, but he sounded genuine when he said he hoped I was feeling better and he was glad to see me back in school.

My other teachers were much the same, really, aside from my sworn nemesis, Mr. Varner, demon lord of the fifth circle of Math Hell. He just accepted my homework with a grunt and told me I should take care of myself if I didn't want to risk falling behind. Lovely.

Jessica, of course, jumped up from her seat as soon as I went to join her in class, pulling me into a
tight hug that had me cursing her preternatural strength once again. I still didn't understand how someone so small could be so strong without vampire powers, but I was beginning to suspect radioactive spiders, or maybe a rocketship from a doomed planet. She seemed more excitable than usual, somewhere above Visiting Her Recently Hospitalized Friend Jessica but below Shopping Trip Jessica. I guess I had given everyone a scare, so it was no surprise they were happy to see me back to normal, so to speak, but I was still bemused at how emotionally invested she was – how invested a lot of the people here seemed to be in the life of Chief Swan's only daughter. For someone accustomed to the relative anonymity of a big city, it was still a little disconcerting.

Jessica walked me to my locker after Spanish, and as we turned the corner and it came in sight, I finally realized why she was so wired. Rosalie, Emmett, Angela, June and Mike were gathered in the hall by the bank of lockers, Mike looking faintly dazed in Rose's presence, which forced me to bite my lip to hold back laughter. They'd threaded the strings of a few purple balloons through the vents in my locker, and taped up some kind of banner, the words WELCOME BACK in purple glitter around the expertly drawn figure of Ariel. Angela waved briefly as she spotted me, grinning, though she had to bring her hand back down quickly to steady the Tupperware container she was holding.

“You guys,” I said, breaking into a grin of my own as I reached them and June pulled me into a quick hug. “You did all this for me? Geez, I should get hospitalized more often.”

“Don't even joke about that, Bella Swan,” Angela said, making a face and handing the Tupperware over to Mike so she could hug me, too. “I can still throw out those cupcakes.”

“Sorry, sorry. Believe me, I'm in no hurry to spend one more night in a hospital if I can avoid it,” I assured her. “You made cupcakes?”

“Oh, yeah, I went all out. Triple chocolate. You're welcome,” she said, pulling back and searching my eyes. “Are you sure you're feeling better? Do they have any idea what caused the seizure?”

“They're still not sure,” I lied, feeling slightly guilty and unsettled at how easily the lies came these days. “Still running more tests. Nothing turned up in the scans but – well, Dr. Cullen's not about to give up.”

“If anyone can figure out what's up, it's definitely Uncle Carlisle,” Emmett said, stepping up as Angela released me and pulling me into a bear hug – though unlike Jessica, he knew his own strength, so I wasn't crushed, even though he did lift me a few inches off the ground. “I'm just glad to see you up and about, Hell's Bells.”

I laughed despite myself, but turned a grimace on him, prompting a deep, rumbling chuckle as he set me down. I patted his arm, shaking my head. “We'll work on the nickname, Em. Thank you – all of you, this is seriously...how did you even know about half this stuff?”

“What, that purple's one of your favorite colors? That you love chocolate more than almost anything? That you're more obsessed with The Little Mermaid than some seven-year-olds?” Rosalie returned, smirking slightly. “You think Alice doesn't listen when you talk?”

“Alice made the sign and sent it with Emmett and Rosalie,” Angela offered. “I made the cupcakes, and Mike and Jess got the balloons.”

June gave me a crooked grin. “I offered moral support. And vital taste-testing services. I solemnly swear those cupcakes are delicious.”

“Good to know,” I said sagely, smiling back at her and glancing around. My smile widened as I saw the glance Jessica and a slightly more lucid Mike shared – it seemed like balloons might not have
been the sole purpose of their outing together. “Where is Alice, anyway?”

I felt something shift subtly inside me. My mood hadn't fallen too far over the last few hours, and it had been buoyed by the show of affection from my friends, but it still felt like stepping off a rocking boat onto solid ground. That could only mean Jasper was nearby, which meant...

I turned around in time to see them walking up to us, Alice's arm tucked in Jasper's. Though she was already smiling pleasantly, it was like the dawn broke across her face when she saw me, and she disengaged from him to step lightly to my side, taking my hand and leaning up to kiss me on the cheek. Jasper took it in his stride, smiling fondly at us and nodding hello to the others.

“So?” Jessica prompted, her attention now firmly on me and Alice.

“Mmm? So what – oh, lunch, yes, I could eat,” I said, feigning ignorance, though my stomach actually did grumble softly at the thought of food. I turned to glance down at my girlfriend, just barely managing to fight back a smile at the thought that she was officially my girlfriend, now. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Alice agreed, though she glanced at my backpack and quirked an eyebrow. “After you unburden yourself, of course.”

“Oh, right. I got distracted by balloons. And someone made a really sparkly sign. I was dazzled,” I joked, unlocking my locker and putting the books I didn't need at the moment away.

“No, not lunch, there was a date on Friday – you guys still had your date, right? You have to tell us everything!” Jessica insisted.

“Oh! I guess we did go out, now that you mention it, but I'm sure you don't want to hear about it,” I said breezily, shutting my locker again and spinning the dial. “Just two girls, out on the town...talking...kissing...I don't see how that would interest you at all.”

“Kissing? There was kissing?” Jessica squealed, her voice growing shrill enough at the end that everyone else winced, myself included.

“And just why is that so surprising?” Alice said, melodramatically feigning indignance. She reached up to brush a strand of hair out of her face, not-coincidentally giving everyone a look at the silver Claddagh ring on her finger. “What, I'm not allowed to kiss my girlfriend?”

“You gave her that ring you bought,” Angela said, her eyes widening a little with surprise, though as she glanced to me, I thought I saw something else in her expression – concern, maybe? Whatever it was, it made me feel slightly uneasy, but I tried to give her a reassuring smile nonetheless.

Jessica, for her part, gasped, then grabbed my hand and squealed shrilly again when she saw the matching ring there. “She's wearing one too! She did the thing! Ohmigod you have a girlfriend and she's a Cullen and your babies are going to be gorgeous and we are going shopping for prom this weekend and I swear to God I better be a bridesmaid, Bella–”

“Jess! Holy shit, ease up,” I said, feeling my cheeks and neck heating up. I just knew I'd broken out in that ugly, splotchy blush again. “Still seventeen here. I am really not thinking about marriage or babies right now, and – well, that's all complicated, anyway.”

“Oh, please, it's the twenty-first century, and you might be an only child, but Alice has two really hot brothers who would probably be happy to – mmph!” Jessica was mercifully cut off as June grabbed her and put a hand over her mouth.
“Okay, let's go to lunch!” Angela said brightly, shooting her a grateful look. “The date went well, I take it.”

“Very. I'll tell you all about it over cupcakes,” I promised. “Jess? You gonna behave yourself?”

“Fine,” Jessica said, breaking free of June's grasp as her initial shock wore off and turned to sullen pouting. “The baby thing is totally a compliment, though.”

“I mean, I could probably fill a turkey baster,” Emmett remarked, earning him a smack on the arm and a glare from Rosalie. “Ow! What? You want Edward to do it?”

“Oh my God,” I muttered, burying my face in my hands. Alice rubbed my back consolingly, gently guiding me through the cafeteria doors.

*****

Lunch was not exactly what I'd call uneventful, given that my return to school was apparently enough of an occasion for the Cullens to invite my human friends to join them at their usual table, turning more than a few heads among the other students. Jasper had a slightly pained expression, and had to step outside a couple times for some fresh air, but flashed me a reassuring smile whenever he saw me looking his way. Edward looked like he was in hell, at first, but Alice had quietly encouraged Angela to sit near him, and shy as she was, the two of them somehow managed to strike up a pleasant conversation. I was shocked to realize midway through the meal that he was actually smiling genuinely at something Angela had said, the expression transforming his face completely.

As for me, I was very nearly in heaven, sitting next to Alice again, her hand reaching out to grab mine periodically or our legs brushing together. Of course, Jessica was watching us both like a hawk, talking at a mile a minute, her questions punctuated now and then by another squeal as she caught yet another little display of affection between Alice and myself.

“Hey, how come you guys never eat anything?” she asked, seemingly out of the blue, her eyes falling on Alice.

Mike sputtered on his soda. “Jess!”

“What? Oh, sorry, is it some personal thing?” she said, glancing between Mike and Alice, though despite her slight, apologetic frown, she still seemed intensely curious.

“Medical. If you really must know,” Alice replied, her voice smooth but slightly tense. “We have a special diet. It's a long story.”

“But you're not even all related, how does that work? Oh my gosh, is it contagious?” Jessica asked, her eyes widening.

“Jessica,” I hissed, this time. “It's personal, and no, it's not contagious. Stop bothering Alice.”

“It's okay.” Alice put her hand on mine, and I let out a short puff of breath, letting my eyes sweep away across the room as she spoke. “It's a genetic thing. Carlisle could tell you more. He and Esme both have it, that's kind of how they met. Rosalie and Jasper are his niece and nephew, and they
adopted the rest of us in part because, well, we were orphans with the same condition. There's no way we could pass it on to anyone else.”

It was another practiced lie, I figured. I stayed silent, tuning out whatever Jessica said next, as I scanned the cafeteria. I could see Lauren Mallory glaring daggers at me from her table, and resisted the childish urge to stick my tongue out or give her the finger or something. No doubt I'd be hearing all about her thoughts sooner or later. My eyes slid away from her, and I caught a flutter of movement in the corner of the room. I blinked, focusing on that corner.

There was a tall Asian girl seated there – I'd seen her around now and then, though I didn't know her name. She was easily as tall as Angela, putting her just over six feet, and I thought she was a senior. She had a letter jacket on, so I figured she was a jock. Once I looked directly at her, she seemed totally normal. She was seated alone, with a book open beside her tray, and when she wasn't reading, she was just glancing idly around the cafeteria. Except for some reason I couldn't put into words...it didn't seem idle. I had the weirdest feeling that she'd been watching us just a second before. That she'd been watching me.

Just as I was thinking that, her eyes flicked up. Her gaze met mine. And a shiver of something almost like recognition ran up my spine. I had no idea who she was, but I knew her, I just couldn't figure out how or why. Some thought or memory was lurking below the surface of my mind, impossible to pick out. Her lips curled in an intent frown, and she began to lean forward, and suddenly I had to look away.

Alice squeezed my hand, bringing my attention back to her. She was frowning as well, concerned. “Are you okay? You seemed – upset? Startled?”

I glanced quickly at Jessica and Mike, but they seemed engrossed in their own conversation now. Thank God for small miracles. I nodded as I turned my gaze back to Alice. “I don't know. Something – weird. That girl in the corner, the really tall girl with the book, who is she?”

Alice's eyes flicked oh-so-briefly over. “Her? Tara Chen. She's the captain of the girls' basketball team. Are you seriously telling me you've never noticed her before? I thought you had a thing for tall, sporty girls,” she said, her lips curling into a teasing smirk.

“What? Did Rosalie – goddammit,” I grumbled, shaking it off as best I could, though my cheeks burned. “That's not what's happening. Alice, I could swear she was just staring at us. Not the way people usually stare at you, not the way Lauren Mallory was glaring at me – stop growling right now – but...I don't know. For a reason.”

Alice still scowled, but the growl that had been bubbling in her throat at the mention of Lauren subsided. Her scowl turned into a slight, puzzled frown after a second, and she shot a brief glance Edward's way. There was some kind of silent exchange between them before she shook her head, throwing her voice so only I could hear. “Well...whatever you're sensing, Edward isn't picking up anything strange. She's as curious as anyone else here about the oh-so-mysterious Cullens and the fact that I seem to be cozying up to Chief Swan's daughter, but it's all...normal teenager stuff.”

“Normal teenager stuff. Right,” I echoed as quietly as I could, letting out a long breath. “Forget it. I'm probably just going crazy. Well. Crazier.”

“Hey,” Alice replied, reaching up to cup my face in her small hands, her golden eyes meeting my gaze. “I love you. And I trust your instincts. You should, too. Do you think this is something we need to worry about? I mean, I don't know what else we can do, but...”

I thought about it, my mind still straining for answers, but shook my head tightly. “No, it's not – my
spider sense isn't tingling or whatever. It's just...weird. We don't need to waste our time on me having weird feelings."

“Okay, what are you two lovebirds whispering about?” Jessica interjected, her attention falling back on us again.

“Nothing.” I said quickly – clearly too quickly, from the way she smirked, which only prompted another blush on my part. Alice took the cue to offer me and Jessica both a satisfied, feline grin, and I turned back to my food, trying to get back to my general good mood.

But despite Jasper's influence, despite Edward's reassurances, despite the fact that I had no real reason to think anything was amiss...something still nagged at me. It felt like I was missing something important. And I had no idea what.

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The unsettled feelings continued through the rest of the afternoon, coupled with a growing dread toward the end of the day. From the way Lauren had been glaring at me in the cafeteria, I was sure she was going to try something at gym, and since Jasper wouldn't be anywhere nearby to keep me from another downward spiral, I honestly wasn't sure how I'd handle it. I hated feeling this way again, like I could lose control at any moment, crumple in the face of confrontation the way I used to. I was seriously tempted to just blow off last period...but I couldn't keep doing that in the long term. It might take a week or two for the medication to kick in, even once I got it, and the school would undoubtedly notice one absence, let alone a long series of them. I had to get through it somehow.

But much to my surprise, Lauren spent the whole period studiously avoiding me. She wouldn't even look in my direction. A couple of her friends shot me dirty looks, but she just glanced at them sharply and they turned away. It was all a bit anticlimactic, but I'd take any relief I could find. I doubted she was doing it out of the goodness of her heart. I strongly suspected vampiric influence.

Alice and Jasper were waiting for me outside the accessible locker room when I emerged, and I felt another wave of relief as Jasper's powers kicked in. I gave him a grateful smile, only to be interrupted as Alice leaned up to brush her lips against mine.

“Hi,” she breathed. “Gym went okay?”

“Hi. Yeah, it did,” I confirmed. “No skinned knees today, and Lauren was surprisingly restrained. Why do I get the feeling you had something to do with that?”

“More like Edward and Rose had something to do with that,” Jasper remarked, leading the way out toward the car. “He didn't like the way that girl's thoughts were going. Rose decided to go have a little talk with Lauren before gym.”

“You're not mad, are you?” Alice asked. “I know you don't like it when we just...act without consulting you, but...”

“But I'm not really in a good position to fight my own battles right now,” I finished, kissing the side of her head. “I'll let it slide this time. Thank you. And thank Rose for me, too. I hope she didn't do anything that's going to land her in trouble.”
“I think you underestimate how scary she can be when she’s got her back up. She didn’t have to do anything, really,” Jasper returned, with a soft snort. “Told you you're as good as ours, far as she's concerned.”

I felt my heart warm at that, and a smile spread across my face. Before I could say anything else, though, Alice stopped me just outside the gym building, turning to face me, her expression deliberately serious – too serious, really, to be anything but a joke.

“Okay, hold on. I have to ask you something, Bella, and it's very important,” she said, in a mock-grave tone.

“Oh? What's that?”

She opened her mouth, then – everything happened in an instant. I caught a spark of surprise in her eyes which seemed to just...freeze there, along with everything else about her. The air itself seemed to grow oddly still. Jasper, standing beside us, was frozen in place as well. I looked around in rising alarm, and everyone was stock-still, like some elaborate diorama.

Except for Tara Chen, who was walking briskly over to me. I backed away, my eyes widening, and she held up her hands, stopping where she stood.

“It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you, or anyone;” she said calmly. “But Cass? We need to talk.”
“Who are you? What – what is all this, what did you do?” I demanded, still half-tensed to run, despite Tara's assurances.

“You don't...know what this is?” she asked, with a puzzled frown.

“Unless you're secretly Piper Halliwell or – I don't know, you just cast Time Stop, no, I have no idea what this is!” I exclaimed, spreading my hands. “Let alone who you are or what you want!”


That gave me pause. Everything from my life before I landed in Bella Swan's body was still kind of a muddle – I still only intellectually knew the name I'd given Alice, rather than feeling viscerally it was my name, and a lot of the other finer details were still escaping me – but I remembered Callie. She just looked a lot different in the memories I still had. Shorter than me, with short, usually brilliantly colored hair. She was probably one of my closest friends...or had been, before I got caught up in some whole new life. It was a miracle I hadn't forgotten her, too, and I couldn't help feeling guilty.

“Callie? What the hell are you doing here? How did you do all this?” I asked, shaking my head in confusion. “Hell, how did you know it was me?”

“Oh, let's see. First Bella Swan dyes her hair red, then she starts acting all gay for Alice Cullen, and then she lands in the hospital for like a week. Which is weird, since I didn't think she was a diabetic, but if it could happen to anyone, it would definitely be you,” she said. Her smirk widened, and she laughed as I made a face in return. “But as for what I'm doing here? I was sort of hoping you could tell me. The last thing I remember, we were still out at Tara, and then I woke up in Forks, it was twenty years ago, and I was a really tall Chinese girl.”

“Twenty years? No, that's not...the last I remember, it was 2015,” I said. “And – Tara? What?”

“Yeah, the Hill of Tara? Ireland? Cass, it's 2025. Are you seriously telling me you don't remember the last ten years?” Tara, or Callie, returned, looking increasingly troubled.

“There's...a lot I don't remember. You're right, Cal, we need to talk.” I glanced over at Alice and Jasper, still locked in place. “Uh...maybe you could stop...whatever it is you're doing and the Cullens could join this conversation?”

“I'm sorry, you want the fictional vampires to join our conversation?”

“They're people. I don't know how they're people, but they are. Or has any part of this world not felt completely real to you?” I returned.

She sighed. “No. It's real. I don't know how, or why, but...everything and everyone here does seem real. And I can't keep this spell going indefinitely anyway. You're sure they're not using some creepy vampire influence on you?”

“Spell? You're not even a witch, and...this is not how magic works,” I said, my brow furrowing. “And no, no creepy vampire influence. I mean, Jasper's helping me manage my depression, but...”
“You really don’t remember the last ten years, do you,” Callie murmured, something I couldn’t quite name passing over her face. Disappointment? Concern? Fear? I wasn’t sure. Whatever it was, it fell away a split-second later, as her eyes widened. “Oh shit! No meds? Okay, let's get things moving, stat.”

She said something in Latin, I thought, and I could feel the air start moving again, hear noise and conversation all around us. In the blink of an eye, Alice and Jasper were both in front of me, standing between me and Callie. I could see Rosalie, Edward and Emmett standing by Emmett's Jeep, turning toward us. I shook my head quickly at them, putting my hand on Alice's shoulder.

“Alice. It's okay, Tara's – she's a friend of mine. From my world. Still not really sure how,” I said.

“Carolina Green. My friends call me Callie,” Callie added, with a bright, slightly forced smile. “Nice to meet you all.”

“You...too. Bella? Explain?” Alice replied, looking back at me.

Callie frowned at me. “Wait, you’re actually going by Bella now? Even in private?”

“Long story, Cal. Seriously, I have very little idea what's going on here. But I think maybe we'd better go back to your place and try to figure it out,” I said, turning my attention fully to Alice. “I'd trust Callie with my life. It's okay.”

Alice frowned, then slowly nodded. “If you’re sure. Do we need to call Leah and Sam?”

“Wait, the werewolves are part of this? They don't even come in until the second book,” Callie said. “I mean, this is still the first book, right?”

“Yes, it is – we'll catch you up. No, I don't think we need the pack in on this. They haven't really been involved in the whole 'I'm actually from a parallel universe' part of things,” I replied. “I mean, they know about it, but Leah's not nearly as concerned about it as, say, Billy. And I do not want to talk to Billy, that's for damn sure.”

“Yeah. Right. You have a car?” Alice asked Callie, who nodded. “Follow us, then.”

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Callie let out a low whistle as she got out of her car – or at least Tara Chen's car – at the Cullen house. “Okay. This is impressive. I'm impressed. Cass, you might actually get your Disney dream wedding out of this.”

“Disney dream wedding?” Alice asked, quirking an eyebrow at me and smirking slightly.

I flushed. “Nope. Forget it. Don't let her distract you. Don't let anyone get distracted by anything that might in any way embarrass me. Hey, is Esme here?”

“No, she's in Seattle with a client,” Alice told me. “This is important, though, which one of us wears the seashells?”
“Thanks so much, Cal,” I muttered.

“Your Disney obsession is not my fault. And your girlfriend clearly knows some of it already. Which, by the way, moving kind of fast, aren’t you?” Callie said, grinning at me. “Whoa, hang on, vampire mom works? I figured she just hung around the house all day acting needlessly maternal.”

“Then you clearly don’t know Esme as well as you think you do,” Rosalie interjected, walking over from Emmett’s jeep, the boys right behind her. “She’d completely lose it if she was stuck at home all day. She’s an interior designer, she just keeps a home office.”

“Huh. Yeah, weirdly, the tortured vampire romance written by a Mormon housewife didn’t go into those details. Not that I remember, anyway,” Callie said. “Okay, so, Rosalie, Emmett, and Edward. Damn, the books really don’t do Emmett or Rosalie justice. Movies, either. Cass, you seen this guy with his shirt off yet?”

“Shit, shockingly, no,” Emmett said, shrugging off his jacket and reaching for the hem of his t-shirt. Rosalie’s arm shot out, and she grabbed his wrist before he could go any further, prompting a low, rumbling chuckle from the man himself.

“This is great. I’m so glad my friends are meeting each other and becoming such good friends. At my expense,” I groaned. “Alice, I don’t suppose you have alcohol in the house? All the alcohol?”

“Surge? Did they still have Surge in 2005? Shit, guys, this is important, is Surge still around?” Callie asked, perking up.

“She means Diet Mountain Dew, Cal, and Alice, don’t answer her,” I said, before anyone else could respond. “We really need to focus on the larger issues here. For example, Callie, since when are you a witch, and since when can magic do – anything that blatantly obvious?”

Callie sobered at that, spreading her hands awkwardly. “Since...a few years back. Since the world started getting seriously weird. If you seriously don’t remember anything after 2015, then I barely know where to start. Partly because a lot of it’s a jumble for me, too.”

Jasper unlocked the front door, and we started making our way in, heading for the living room. I frowned at Callie, my brows knitting together. “It is? But you seemed so certain that it’s supposed to be 2025, that I should know – all this stuff I can’t remember.”

“Because I am certain of that much. It’s just...some of the details are evasive,” she replied, dropping into one of the easy chairs and letting out a long sigh. “Maybe that was the price of the ritual. I lost some of my memories, you lost something like ten years of your life. It didn't even work properly, but the magic still had its price, just like you always said.”


“No – I mean, I will, yeah, but could you try something for me first? You don't remember magic working this way, but that doesn't mean it doesn't. I mean, clearly, I can still do impossible shit, right?” Callie asked, leaning forward, a desperate edge to her voice. “So just try something. Something small, but obvious. Conjure a fairy light or whatever.”

I shook my head. “Cal, I don't know how. I don't even have any tools with me, I don't know the incantation...”
“You don't need those things. You always told me that the heart of magic was nothing but – focus, power, and intent, pressing on reality, and if reality was malleable enough...the trappings didn't matter. Shit, look, lumos,” Callie said, holding out her hand, palm up, and a little ball of violet light burst into being above it, shimmering in place. “You know it can be done. Please just try.”

I stared at the light, eyes wide, and glanced at Alice, who seemed as surprised as I was. Really, it shouldn't be shocking anymore, not after seeing Callie stop time for seemingly everyone but us. But seeing magic performed so obviously, so easily, after a lifetime of struggling through every ritual, doubting myself every step of the way...it still seemed impossible. Even on top of all the other impossible things that had already happened.

She was right, though. In theory, knowing it was possible, I shouldn't have any problem doing it myself. Of course, there was the small matter of possibly hurting myself all over again in the process. I didn't want to burn out any more brain cells.

“Callie? Is it safe?” I asked her quietly.

“Huh? Oh...I...I don't see you coming to any harm, no,” she said, after a moment's thought, biting her lip.

I resisted the impulse to ask her what else she'd seen. I had to make the attempt without knowing either way. I held out my right hand, palm up, and focused my attention on the air above my fingers. I pictured the result I wanted in my head, a little ball of pink light floating in that very spot, swirling and shining. I screwed up my willpower, pushed outward, and muttered, “Lumos.”

And nothing happened. Simply...nothing. I didn't even feel the tingle that had accompanied the spells I'd cast or rituals I'd performed in the past, the possibly psychosomatic sensation that – I now realized – almost matched what I'd felt when using the power I did have here, modifying the abilities of others. Whatever magical talent I'd possessed in 2015 seemed to be gone completely, let alone whatever powers I had in 2025.

“I...I didn't feel anything. Callie, I can't do it,” I said, my voice shaking, despite myself.

Callie, who had been watching me intently, shut her eyes and groaned, leaning back. “Shit. Shit. I'm sorry, Cass, it's – it's not your fault. It really isn't. It's just, when I realized it was you, that you were here, I was hoping we'd figure out what happened, find a way to fix it, somehow. But I couldn't even sense you drawing on magic there. And you don't remember anything. I...honestly don't know where to go from here.”

“You're acting like I'm supposed to be – Hermione Granger. Or Albus Dumbledore, or something,” I replied, shaking my head. “That's never been me, and I barely even recognize the kind of magic you're talking about. The theory, sure, magic is will, intent, and power. But it's subtle. You don't get instantaneous results, or obvious results. And you never practiced magic at all. We never even really talked about my witchcraft. How could all of that have changed in ten years?”

Callie laughed, a little bitterly. “Everything changed. I told you, some of it's a blur, even for me. But the world went to shit. I remember that basic fact. Natural disasters, riots, famine, a whole World War by the end of it...it was chaos. We had to leave the U.S., you and me. Make our way to Europe. And somewhere in the middle of it all, we screwed the world over completely. Some – experiment, or weapon, or something just kind of...broke reality. We didn't know it at first. Hell, we thought it was a gift. Suddenly, impossible things became possible. The spells and rituals you and the rest of the witches out there had been doing for years started working in big, obvious ways. You all devised new spells, and they worked, too. People started flocking to covens, learning all they could. I was one of them. You taught me yourself, as much as you could, even though you were still trying to
figure things out in your own right. We started thinking maybe we could use this new power to turn
things around, to make the world a better place again. But it was all just...a cosmic joke. Reality
was broken, and it was still unraveling. It took time to figure it all out, but we did. We'd killed the
world.”

“What?” I breathed, my eyes very wide as I stared at my best friend, trapped in another body and
filled with more despair than I'd ever seen in her before. No wonder she'd been nothing but jokes
before. If she was telling the truth...I could scarcely wrap my head around the world she was
describing. A world so profoundly broken that the human will had become stronger than reality itself –
but only for a moment. Only for its last, dying gasps. “Callie, I don't even know what to say.
Except – you mentioned a ritual. The last thing you remembered. At the Hill of Tara? What were we
trying to do?”

“We were trying to save the world. Look how that turned out,” Callie said, with another tired, bitter
chuckle. “Every coven we could gather. Every witch. We all came to Tara and tried pouring all the
power we could muster into one big spell. The idea was to send at least some of us back. Back to
before everything started going to hell, before reality itself started unraveling. If the ritual worked,
then some number of us, we weren't sure exactly how many, would find themselves in the past,
memories and powers intact. And we'd find some way to stop it all before it started. It was all we
could think of. One last shot at fixing reality before it broke apart completely.”

“Edward,” Rosalie interjected, her voice quiet but still loud enough for human ears to hear. “Is she
telling the truth?”

“She seems to believe it. But then, I had no idea what she was really thinking in the cafeteria at
lunch,” Edward said, folding his arms and frowning severely at Callie. “Not to mention she's been
here for weeks and I haven't sensed anything else out of the ordinary in all that time. Not once.”

“Yeah. Sorry. Shielding technique,” she said, with a weak smile, tapping the side of her head with
one finger, then looking back to me. “A layer of innocuous surface thoughts to deflect psychic
probes. Something else you taught me, once you figured it out. Way better than that rose shield you
used to use. I wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but I wanted to steer clear of every
supernatural in the area, at least until I figured out my next move. No offense.”

Edward frowned, but nodded grudgingly. “I suppose I can understand that, all things considered.”

“This is all too damn weird,” I said, shaking my head. “I don't recognize the world you're describing.
I feel like I barely even recognize you anymore – Cal, I'm sorry, I don't mean it that way.”

Her face had already crumpled, though, her gaze turning toward the floor. Before either of us could
say anything else, though, Rosalie spoke up. “How do you know it's really her, Bella? Okay, you
trust your friend Callie, but – what proof do you have that this is her?”

“Seriously, Vampire Barbie?” Callie said, looking up, her eyes narrowing at Rosalie before turning
to me, her expression pained and pleading. “Cass. Cassandra. It's me. For one thing, I'm using your
name. For another thing – shit, what do you want to know? You're obsessed with The Little
Mermaid, your second-favorite princesses are Rapunzel and Belle, and you've dressed up as all of
them. You love Moana – shit, 2015. Right. Uh, you played a cheerleading lesbian Slayer in our
Buffy game. Do you want me to give you the List? Patrick Stewart, Alan Rickman when he was still
alive, Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, Chan--”

I threw up my hands, eyes widening. “Nope! Okay, I'm good, you've passed the doppelganger test.”

“The List? Of...people you want to kill?” Alice asked, looking bewildered.
“Kind of exactly the opposite. Rare exceptions to the whole turbo lesbian deal,” Callie explained, gesturing at me, a smirk flitting across her face before vanishing again. “I'm still the same person, Cass. Do you recognize me now?”

There was a bitter edge to her voice, and I winced at the sound of it. “I'm sorry. Of course I do. I don't – quite recognize everything you just said, but...it's you. I don't doubt it, guys, you're just going to have to trust me,” I added, looking around at the assembled vampires, then back at Callie. “I'm just...not sure where we go from here.”

“Yeah. Neither am I. And maybe it was too much to expect that you'd have any kind of answer even if you did remember everything. Even if you still had your powers.” She shook her head, letting out a deep, bone-weary sigh, while Alice and I exchanged a glance. After a split second, she caught us at it, her eyes narrowing again. “What? What is it?”

“Well, I...I'm not totally powerless,” I admitted slowly. “I seem to have some kind of supernatural ability. Not the power Bella had in the books, something else. I can modify the abilities of others. Vampires, anyway. I've used it on Alice and Edward so far.”

“No shit? Well – that might be something. Have you tried it on anyone else? Could you try it on me?” Callie asked, sitting up straight.

“No!” Alice interjected, before I could answer. “No, Bella, absolutely not, you'd better not even be thinking about it.”

Callie scowled at her. “Uh, okay, excuse you – is she always this controlling? And seriously, does no one here use your name? I mean, they obviously know you're not Bella Swan.”

The tension was thick in the air again, and I held up my hands, forming a T. “Okay, okay, time out. Easy. They did use my name, Callie. For a while. Until I fucked up and – it's hard to explain. But Alice isn't being controlling, she's...she's scared. And she's right. Whatever powers I have aren't something I can just mess around with. Not as long as I'm human, anyway. Every time I've used them, something's happened, some...neurological effect. It was mild at first, it just felt like a static shock or something, but the last time I tried...I had a seizure. I was unconscious for hours. And when I woke, a bunch of my memories were just...gone. I held onto some of it, I mean, I still remember you, obviously, but there are these – these holes all over the place now. And my name's one of them. I didn't forget it completely, not exactly. I know intellectually I used to go by Cassandra. But it doesn't...feel like me anymore. Bella fits better, somehow.”

Callie stared at me, then let out another low, bitter laugh, raking her fingers through her hair. “Right. And you say you barely recognize me. No, don't apologize again, you're sorry, I got it,” she said, before I could say anything else. “I guess I should count myself lucky you remember me at all. So what else do you remember? I mean, how do you think you landed here?”

“Uh...well...the last thing I remember before waking up on the plane to Washington was...a hardcover copy of Twilight falling on my head,” I admitted, flushing.

Callie snorted, then started snickering, her laughter more genuine this time. “Seriously? That's what you thought?”

I couldn't help cracking a smile of my own. “Not really, I mean – if getting brained by a book sent you into the book, everyone would be doing it. But it was the last thing I could remember. I don't know! I didn't have a good explanation.”

“Oh God. This must be what going mad feels like,” she replied, taking a deep, slightly hitching
breath and continuing to snicker.

I felt giggles bubbling up my own throat before they just...burst out of me. Nothing made sense at the moment. There was nothing to do but laugh. After a moment, though, I got up and made my way over to Callie's side, pulling her into a hug.

“I missed you,” I said softly, my laughter subsiding. “I'm glad you're here. I don't know what the hell we're going to do, but I'm glad you're here.”

“Oh, we're totally fucked. But I'm glad you're here, too,” Callie murmured in return, hugging me back fiercely, her voice catching a little. After a moment of holding me close, she pulled back. “I guess we have a lot of catching up to do. Starting with just what exactly you've been up to since you got here. If you arrived the day I did, you've only been here about three weeks? But you're already friends with the Cullens and the Quileute pack, and you're dating Alice Cullen?”

“I'm Bella Swan, it wasn't as though I could avoid the Cullens! And, well, we only had our first official date on Friday,” I protested, raking my hand through my hair.

Callie's eyes widened, and her hand shot out, grabbing my wrist as she stared at my fingers, then shot a quick glance over at Alice. I realized a split-second too late what she was looking at, and winced as her voice burst from her throat again. “Cassandra Elizabeth Reardon, why the fuck are you two wearing matching Claddagh rings?!”

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It took a fair amount of pleading, especially where Rosalie and Alice were concerned, but the Cullens eventually agreed to step away for a while and let me and Callie have a long, private talk. I told her everything I could recall of the last few weeks, leaving out the more salacious or genuinely personal details. She was calmer by the time I finished, but not much happier.

“It is just like you to fall head over heels for a girl you've barely even met,” she growled. “Just our luck she mated on you the second she saw you, too. Though I suppose at least it's kept Edward at bay. I can't imagine that going well.”

“I'm an adult, Cal,” I reminded her again, with a sigh. “Maybe not physically, at the moment, but mentally. And I was even older the last time you saw me, apparently. Didn't you ever cut out the big sister act? Maybe sometime around the time I apparently started teaching you witchcraft, of all things?”

“It's not like you were ever that motivated to cut out the little sister act,” she returned, before shaking her head. “You were different by then. I remember you differently. We were more like equals by the end of it. But this – well, it really is like you're ten years younger. Makes it easy to fall into old patterns. Like judging you for having a crush on every girl.”

“Alice isn't every girl. Or just any girl. I know I've had some pretty intense crushes, but this is...I know her. Even though we're still learning about one another, I know her, in a way I can't explain. I've never felt this way about anyone else.” I sighed, reaching out to take her hand. “I know it's hard to believe. But I'm happy. Happier than I've ever been, happier than I probably was in our world.
Can’t you just be happy for me?”

Callie’s gaze softened as she squeezed my hand in return. “It’s...just going to take time, Cass. I’m going to have to get to know her. Get to know you again, too, maybe, and see what the two of you are like together. But I’m sorry I snapped. I’m not your mom. I...know no one can replace your mom. ...that must be really fresh for you right now. I’m sorry.”

I shut my eyes and nodded briefly. “It is, but...it stings a little less now. Side effect of killing a few brain cells trying to play with my new powers, I guess.”

“Yes. Shit,” Callie said quietly, looking down and shaking her head. “Not only do you not have magic, but the power you do have could kill you. Unless you get turned into a vampire, maybe, and I guess we can’t be totally sure it’ll be safe to use then. So you lose ten years of memories, you burn out your magic, you get a power that seriously proves the whole ‘magic has a cost’ rule, and the ritual still didn't do what we wanted.”

“Except this is, somehow, also our world's past,” I mused, frowning. “I mean, it seems to be. Things I remember from our world are still here. It's just somehow also the world of the Twilight novels, for some reason. Or, not quite. The world of the novels, twisted in ways I didn't respect.”

Callie nodded, her gaze turning back up toward me. “Yeah, I was never into the books the way you were, but I'm pretty sure Alice and Leah weren't gay, and the way everyone's powers work seems...off. The fact that Rosalie has a power seems off.”

“Maybe you're right. It's not like I memorized the books, and I can't look them up here and now,” I replied. “But maybe it's an unexpected side effect of the ritual? What if it still worked? You couldn't have all expected to wind up in the same place, and you didn't even know how many people would go back in time, or even who would end up making the trip. You had to have a plan to reestablish contact, right?”

Callie was silent for a long moment, her gaze sinking downward again. “We did.”

I watched her, my heart sinking. “...you've tried, haven't you?”

“First thing I did, as soon as I was able to get online,” she said. “There was a specific forum we picked. We couldn't be sure of our exact arrival date, so we chose this site that had been up pretty continuously from the nineties through most of the war. First one to get online was supposed to make a carefully worded post on a specific topic, then everyone else would get in touch. It was drilled into us, day and night, probably why I managed to remember it even when everything else got hazy. I searched for the post and couldn't find it, so I went ahead and posted it myself. No one's gotten in touch. And now it turns out you didn't even know to look.”

“I'm sorry,” I whispered. “I'm so sorry, Callie.”

She let out a short, humorless laugh. “Always with the apologies. Another habit you actually managed to break during the war, by the way. It's not your fault. This isn't what you wanted. It's not what any of us wanted.”

I nodded, trying to think of alternatives. “I can't believe I'm asking this, and I'm sure you thought of it, but is there some kind of – tracking spell you could use?”

“There's only one I could try, and it hasn't been working. It didn't even work on you, or – it was inconclusive. Enough to bolster my theory that you were, somehow, Bella Swan, but not enough to confirm it,” Callie explained. “The spell's based on a kind of...psychic imprint. Something you only
share with someone you trust implicitly. We shared ours with each other, and some other members of our coven, but...I think you're too different for the spell to work properly. Ten years is a lot of time, and you had to change a lot during that time. Maybe all the others have changed too much, too. Except I didn't even know most of them before everything went to shit, so I don't even have an existing friendship to draw on. As far as I can tell, no one else around here has been acting out of character, but I only noticed what you were doing because you're Bella Swan. Being the new girl and constantly hanging around the Cullens makes you hard to miss.”

“Damn.” I shook my head. “I don't know what else we can do, then. I mean...we can try to keep the war from happening here. If you remember how it started, if there are events we can influence...”

“That's going to take time. And I'm scared I really don't remember much of the specifics, Cass,” Callie admitted. “Some of it may only come back to me when things start going wrong. Hell, maybe they never will here, even if there are parallels to our world. I don't understand enough to know exactly what to do. I'll try to think of some steps we can take, I guess.”

“We will,” I promised. “I may not remember the world you're describing, but – if you tell me anything you remember, I'll try to help. And I'm sure Alice will want to help us, too. She can literally see the future, maybe she can spot any red flags.”

Callie let out a noncommittal grunt, and I tried to hold back a scowl, knowing how much she'd been through. After a moment, she spoke. “Let's talk about your problem. Let James and his friends come and hope your friends can somehow stop them? That's seriously the best you've come up with? Why not, I dunno, insist on moving back in with Bella's mom or something? Or have the Cullens get you a fake passport and move to Switzerland?”

“I can't do that to dad – Charlie,” I said, when Callie raised her eyebrows. “I've gotten used to calling him dad. Even thinking of him that way, honestly, since I lost a bunch of my memories...he's a good man, and he shouldn't lose his daughter. Even if he's kind of already lost her. Goddess knows where the real Bella Swan is now.” It was my turn to look down at the Cullens' pristine living room floor.

“Hey. Come on. Stop blaming yourself for shit that isn't your fault,” Callie told me, reaching up to tilt my chin so I was facing her again.

I smiled weakly. “Isn't it, though? I wouldn't have landed here if it wasn't for that ritual. I wouldn't have forced Bella Swan out of her body, or – whatever happened.”

“You had no way of knowing that would happen. But...look, maybe there's some kind of spell I could work up that would tell us what happened to the original Bella Swan,” Callie suggested. “I'd need time to compose the ritual, and it might take a few tries. But having the real, physical Bella Swan right in front of me gives me a focus, at least. I guess I'd like to know what happened to the real Tara Chen, too. I didn't remember her from the books, so I thought maybe...I don't know what I thought. But I don't like the idea of displacing anyone, either.”

I let out a long breath, nodding. “That...would help, yes, if you can find some way to do it. I still don't know how we'd make things right, but I guess we can burn that bridge when we get to it.”

Callie laughed at the backwards turn of phrase, smiling fondly. “Now that is definitely the Cass I know and largely tolerate talking,” she teased, drawing another smile from me in return. “But we're off-topic. Okay. Why can't you take Charlie with you?”

“Have him abandon his job, his town, everything he knows? Based on some crazy story about killer vampires? Besides, the Cullens aren't likely to let him in on the secret, that's the sort of thing that makes...You-Know-Who deeply unhappy,” I said, carefully trying to keep my thoughts from
straying to exactly what kind of shit the Volturi might pull. I could never be quite sure how well Edward was doing with his efforts to stay out of my head, especially since he'd already told Alice I was 'loud'.

Callie blinked. “...Voldemort?”

“You know I mean the Volturi,” I told her, making a face. “Sorry. I just – one problem at a time.”

“Mm. I should really teach you the surface mind, deep mind technique,” she remarked quietly.

“That would probably help,” I agreed. “Anyway, even if that weren't an issue...running just leaves them alive to keep causing trouble. Killing people. Honestly, we were hoping to be a little more proactive about hunting them down, but Victoria's got this self-preservation power that seems to be interfering. So staying here and waiting seems to be our best strategy. At least I know better than to go running to Phoenix.”

Callie folded her arms. “Still feels like the kind of plan that ends in you getting bitten and possibly outright killed by a hungry vampire, so 'best strategy' might be a relative term.”

“It definitely is. Wait – is there something you could do to help?” I asked, considering the possibilities. “What about that time stop spell you used? Could you freeze them in place so the Cullens can just take them out the second they appear?”

“Yeah, that's not the way that spell works,” Callie replied. “It doesn't really stop time. It takes me outside its normal flow. I can bring one other person outside the flow of time with me, but I can't keep it going for too long, and neither of us can affect anyone or anything around us. We mostly used it for surveillance operations during the war, and its utility was limited. It's incredibly draining.”

“Shit. And vampires here aren't that easy to kill,” I grumbled, frowning. “So even setting up a surprise attack from behind wouldn't do much. And if you can't keep it going for long, we can't flee too far on foot, and if we can't affect anything around us, we can't just hop in a car and drive off. Are there any spells you used in battle?”

Callie shook her head. “Leaving aside the fact that you taught me to avoid using magic that way if there were any other options available, it's not really practical. The little fairy light I conjured for a minute earlier? That's relatively simple, and it can be done quickly. Taking myself outside the flow of time? That's something I've practiced so extensively I could almost do it while drunk off my ass, not that I ever would. But curses, or conjuring something that would actually do harm, or just about anything offensive...it takes time, or at least the spells I still remember did. And I'm pretty sure this world's vampires move too quickly for me to be much good. Maybe if I were totally concealed from their senses, somehow, but right now, I'm the only witch who could possibly do that and I'd have to keep my focus on hiding myself. Which kind of defeats the purpose.”

“Yeah. There might be vampires with that kind of power out there, but I can't think of any, and we may not have time to get them to come help even if the Cullens can think of any. So we're back at letting things happen and hoping for the best,” I said, groaning.

“Maybe I can still help, when the time comes. In the books, the plan was to try running with Jasper and Alice while the other Cullens tried to keep James and Victoria distracted, right?” Callie said, and I nodded. “Maybe I can help them be more distracting. Use glamours to make it seem like you fled somewhere else, or – something. I'm not exactly sure what I could do, but we have time to think about it.”

“I guess we do. And it's not like I'm worse off than before, anyway. All hope isn't lost,” I said, with a
slight smile.

Callie grinned back at me. “Never say die. But for now...I guess we have a lot to think about. And school in the morning. God, I never thought I'd say that again. You want a ride home?”

I glanced at my watch – Charlie wouldn't be home for a while yet, but it was getting late. “Oh, yeah, I should go. Thanks, but – Alice is probably feeling kind of neglected, I should see if she wants to come home with me.”

Callie's eyebrows shot up, and she started to smirk, my stomach dropping as she did. “In your father's house? I thought better of you, Cassandra – that is, Isabella Swan.”

I groaned, though the sound wasn't as harsh as it might have been if Callie hadn't been obviously uncomfortable using my new name. “Don't even joke, you have no idea how hard it's been.”

“I don't think hard is really the right adjective here,” Callie returned, with a devilish glint in her eyes. “Unless you're referring to--”

“Okay! Good talk! See you tomorrow!” I said, getting to my feet and pulling her up as well. Or trying to – she'd always been stronger than I was, and her new height and mass didn't help. Her lips quirked, and she slowly, steadily rose from her seat.

“Yeah, yeah. I'll let up. For now. See you tomorrow,” she agreed, wrapping me in a hug. “Love you, little sister.”

My eyes blurred, and I felt the pinprick of tears as I hugged her back. “Love you too, big sister.”

*****

The garage door was wide open when we emerged from the house, heading for Callie's car. I glanced open and saw Rosalie's convertible parked inside, with Rose herself working under the hood, having changed into torn, stained jeans and a somewhat grubby tank top. Emmett was hunched over a sturdy black laptop on a workbench nearby, playing some kind of video game, while Jasper leaned up against the doorframe, talking to Rosalie. When Jazz saw me looking, he gave me and Callie a smile, a polite nod and a small wave, and I felt his powers wash over me again, bringing relief from the stress and anxiety that had been building in the back of my mind.

Callie caught our silent exchange and frowned slightly, her hand on her car door. “Cass...Bella. Sorry, that's going to take some getting used to. You are working on getting your meds, right? You're not just relying on magic vampire powers?”

“I'm going to have to get used to switching between Tara and Callie, so I feel your pain,” I replied, turning and offering her a smile. “I have an appointment with a psychiatrist after school in a couple days. I'll get back on my meds, or whatever meds seem right here and now, as soon as I can, I promise. Jasper's just a stopgap for the depressive episode I landed in this morning. I know he's not a long-term solution. I wouldn't ask him to be one.”

“Okay. Good,” she said, letting out a breath and giving me one last, quick, one-armed hug. “See you in school tomorrow.”
“You, too,” I agreed, hugging her back. “Goodnight.”

She got in her car, and I watched, briefly, as she drove off, before heading to meet the others in the garage. “Hey. Thanks for giving us some privacy.”

“Well, as much privacy as anyone's going to get around here, anyway,” Rosalie remarked. “You didn't tell me you already had a surrogate big sister.”

“I honestly had no idea I still did,” I murmured, briefly lost in thought again, but I soon shook it off and looked over at her. “You're not jealous, are you?”

She moved smoothly out from under the hood, turning to look at me and arching one perfect blonde eyebrow. “No. Why would I be?” she remarked, before her lips quirked into a slight smile. “...should I be?”

I smiled back, relaxing. “Mmm...well, Callie has been my best friend for years, and she has given me a lot of good advice, fashion and makeup tips, all that...on the other hand, she's never personally gotten me ready for a date, or read aloud to me in the hospital...” I said, spreading my hands and pretending to weigh the matter. “Plus I'm super needy and can use all the help I can get. I think I have enough work for two big sisters.”

“Good. No argument here,” Rosalie said, her eyes sparkling as she turned back to her work.

“Yeah, I – hey!” I made a face, while Rose just chuckled and Emmett let out a low, rumbling laugh. Harrumphing, I turned to the boys. “No respect around here...where did Alice get off to?”

Even Jasper was still smiling at our antics as I looked at him. “Oh, she and Edward went for a quick hunt. She wanted to make sure you had plenty of privacy with your friend, plus she just wanted to go into the week fully sated. She said to tell you she'll come by later tonight, though.”

“Oh, I see. So my girlfriend and her brother tastefully went to give us space, while the rest of you degenerates stuck around to eavesdrop,” I joked, though I felt a slight pang at her absence – after everything I'd discussed with Callie, I really wanted to check in with her. I supposed it would have to wait.

“Careful, princess, you might need one of the degenerates to drive you home, considering Her Royal Highness is still too good to drive her own damn truck,” Rosalie retorted.

I gasped in mock-outrage. “I'm still learning! It's winter! I could get in an accident!”

“You'd live. So would that beast, probably. She's tough as hell, they don't build them like that anymore,” she said, a hint of admiration in her tone, causing my own eyebrows to climb upward. “Well, not unless you're a dignitary for a reasonably wealthy country, anyway. Or just have a lot of money to throw around.”

“Sorry, should I be giving you and my truck some time alone?” I asked.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Rosalie agreed, shifting under the hood of her car. “You have no idea what I'd like to do to that beauty. You can watch if you want.”

“Can I watch? Or help?” Emmett added, looking up from his computer and waggling his eyebrows, grinning lasciviously.

I couldn't help laughing, though my face burned. “You guys! Think of Jasper! Think of his poor ears!”
“Oh, I've heard so much worse, never mind me,” Jasper drawled. “We all have.”

I was trying to think of another retort when I heard a familiar, trumpeting fanfare erupt from Emmett’s computer, and my eyes widened. Both Jasper and Rosalie stopped to watch me as I scurried around the car to his corner of the garage, hauling myself up onto the workbench and staring at his screen to see the familiar streets of Paragon City, specifically Steel Canyon, popping into place. He turned to look up at me, raising his eyebrows.

“Can I help you, Bells?”

“That's City of Heroes,” I whispered reverently.

“Wait, wait. You know this game? I mean, I knew you were a nerd, but...” He leaned back, starting to grin.

“Yes, I know this game – shit, it was the only MMO I played for like a decade,” I gushed. “They closed it down in 2012. I was crushed. Oh, uh, spoilers. I guess. You should buy the studio. And the publisher. And every other company that could possibly shut this thing down.”

“I'm sorry, you're changing the course of history for a video game?” Rosalie asked.

“Shhhhh, Rose, it's a good reason, it's a good game,” Emmett said, waving her off.

“Oh man. It gets better. You have no idea. And they had so much other stuff planned when they went offline.” I knew I was throwing myself into a distraction, after all the unexpected heaviness of the day. I also didn't really care. I kind of needed one.

“Yeah? Don't suppose you have an account,” Emmett said.

“I mean, whatever version of me lives here would, but I don't remember the password, and that'd cause a lot of questions. Actual me, Bella Swan, here and now? Nope,” I replied, popping the P. “Honestly, my computer probably wouldn't even run it. Or anything more complicated than...I don't know, Doom, maybe. Or Descent. Even that might be pushing it.”

Emmett gaped at me, then stood, pulling me into a bear hug, though he managed to hold back enough to avoid crushing me. “You poor, deprived little girl. We're going to fix this. We're going to fix this right now.”

“Emmett, Chief Swan will probably notice if she suddenly has a gaming rig,” Rosalie interjected.

“She can play here.”

“She has homework.”

“I'll do it.”

I squirmed a little in his grasp, not really enjoying the way my feet were dangling above the floor. “I think I'm kind of done being held in the air.”

“Oh, sure,” Emmett replied, setting me back down.

I let out a long breath, then looked up at him, grinning. “I appreciate the offer, but I probably need to get home.”

“Actually, not that I'm taking sides, but Alice did also say I should tell you your dad won't be home tonight,” Jasper said. “He had to take an overnight shift, he left you a note. So you can stay a while if
you want.”

“Maybe do some homework, though,” Rosalie added, while Emmett snorted in response.

My mouth suddenly felt very dry as I realized the implications. “I. Um. Hang on. Dad’s not going to be home all night? Alice saw that? And she's still coming over?”

My voice squeaked toward the end, and I felt my face heating up as I remembered my reverie the night before, the somewhat alarmingly real fantasy I'd conjured. And then I remembered she was going hunting, and her past comments about needing to be well-fed before we tried anything, and another squeak escaped my throat. Rosalie smirked, sharing a glance with Emmett, while Jasper just looked vaguely uncomfortable.

“Ah, yes, that'd be about the size of it,” Jazz said.

“Man, were we ever that dorktacular?” Emmett asked fondly.

“Well, I never got to see you blush. But you did go non-verbal,” Rosalie returned.

“Everyone goes non-verbal around you, Rose, and if you can still speak coherently, you're not doing it right.”

My brain took a sudden left turn to veer away from that topic, and I felt a deep, abiding urge to cut off this thread of conversation as soon as possible. Turning to Emmett, my face still burning, I thrust my arms in the air and yelled, “City of Heroes!”

He grinned back at me, the expression filled with boyish glee, as he returned the gesture, his voice booming through the garage. “City of Heroes!”

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I still managed to get some of my homework done while Emmett worked on setting me up on one of the family's spare PCs and getting me my own game account. Rosalie seemed to have resigned herself to the whole affair, but did insist that I eat dinner eventually, so when Alice and Edward finally returned, it was to the sight of the four of us gathered in the Cullen family living room, tapping away at the gaming rigs Emmett had hauled out and set up for us, a partially demolished pizza still in its box next to me. Esme and Carlisle had already returned from their daytime errands, and though they’d certainly taken in the scene with raised eyebrows, they offered nothing but gentle greetings before excusing themselves to their own private affairs.

“Oh shit, guys, squishy Blaster, squishy Blaster, someone get the zombies away from the squishy Blaster,” I chanted, trying to get my character away from the attacking foes as I laid down another burst of fire.

“Oh it!” Rosalie announced, her Ice Tanker letting off an area attack that pulled their attention to her instead.

“I thought we agreed we were going to try and keep the Defender alive!” Emmett protested. “I'm the one healing you assholes!”
“Defender, defend thyself,” Rose returned. “Guess I just like Solar Storm better.”

Emmett grumbled. “Oh, sure, I see how it is, Ice Queen. Still pretty on the nose, Rose, don't you think?”

“I like it,” I offered.

“That's why I like her better,” Rosalie added.

“I've got you, Emmett,” Jasper promised, his katana-wielding Scrapper leaping into the fray.

“Jazz gets first dibs on buffs for the rest of the night,” Emmett proclaimed.

I heard a familiar voice clearing her throat, and speaking in an amused tone. “So did Bella do any of her homework, or should I just be glad you fed her?”

I looked up to find Alice standing at the front door, smiling at the scene, while Edward came in behind her. I grinned back at her, shifting a little in my seat. “I did some! I'm sure I can still finish the rest. What time is it?”

“Late. We should probably get you home,” Alice replied, though she hesitated. “Or...I guess I could go get some of your things, if you wanted?”

I glanced at the clock on the wall, my eyes widening at the time – and at the offer, which caused my heart to flutter in my chest. “Um. I...crap, I should finish this mission!” I realized, as I saw my hit points start dropping out of the corner of my eye. “Rose!”

“So needy!”

I spent a moment getting out of the line of fire and back into range of Emmett's healing powers while Rosalie pulled the bad guys again, then looked back up at Alice. “I mean, shouldn't I be there tomorrow morning, when dad gets back? And – Jazz, would that be...okay with you?”

“Charlie won't be back until you're already at school tomorrow,” Alice told me.

“And I can handle it, as long as – well, I can handle it. Like I said, I fed over the weekend. I'm good to go,” Jasper said. “Besides, you might like this better than me perching outside your window all night. I mean, I probably would, if I'm honest. I can just hang around the house, and if you run into any issues, Alice can come get me.”

“Right. Um, well, I...I'd like to stay,” I agreed, my voice catching a little in my dry mouth, and my palms sweating as I felt my face heating all over again.

Alice's smile in response lit up her entire face, and her molten gold eyes shone. “Then I'll get you a change of clothes and your toothbrush and – everything. We can drop what we need to off before school tomorrow. I'll be back soon,” she said, before raising her eyebrow and glancing around the room. “...you're going to log off after this mission, right?”

“Yes, mom,” Jasper, Emmett and Rosalie chorused, and I couldn't help but giggle as I nodded at her.

Alice snorted, heading back out, while Edward shook his head and moved towards the stairs. I glanced after him, feeling a little bad that he seemed left out.

“Edward,” I called. “Do you want to join us?”

“No, but...thank you,” he replied, seeming a little surprised for a moment at the invitation, though I
was sure he'd heard it in my thoughts before I said anything. Nevertheless, he came over to my side. “That's very kind, but to be honest, I've never been that interested in computers at all, let alone this kind of game.”

“Oh. I guess you are a little...” I trailed off, realizing 'old-fashioned' might be taken as an insult, and he smiled.

“I don't take that as one,” he assured me, catching my thoughts. “You're right, I am old-fashioned. I don't mind it much. I suppose it can be a little...isolating at times.”

“I can see that,” I murmured, glancing briefly at the screen and making sure I was still keeping up with the others. “There are people out there who can appreciate that, though.”

“There are. I just don't socialize much. Which I suppose is my own fault,” Edward said, looking away.

“I can understand feeling isolated, feeling like...maybe you don't want to socialize. Maybe you don't even deserve it,” I said, haltingly. “I'm sorry, I know I'm not putting this very eloquently. I know you have baggage. We all do. But I know you try to be a good person.”


“Maybe you're holding yourself to a higher standard than you need to,” I said. “I don't think you deserve to be lonely. I don't think you should judge yourself as harshly as you do. And...you know, you and Angela seemed to be getting along today.”

His lips quirked in a small smile, though he still didn't look up at me. “She's a very sweet girl. Kind, generous, gentle...I've never once sensed an unkind thought from her. Not that I make a habit of listening. But she is – truly good. It's easy to be around her.”

“And she's beautiful,” I pointed out.

“And she is beautiful, yes,” Edward agreed. “But I don't think I'd want to...to subject her to the things I've seen in this world.”

“I don't think your world is as bad as you think it is,” I told him, biting my lip. “...we should talk more sometime. I get the feeling you don't do a lot of talking.”

“Perhaps I don't. And...perhaps we should,” he said, looking back at me at last, his expression carefully inscrutable but his eyes warmer than I'd ever seen. “I'll leave you to your game. Good night, Bella.”

I smiled softly at him. “Good night, Edward.”

“Boss fight, Solar Storm, get your ass in here!” Emmett interjected, dragging me back to the game. I quickly turned my attention to the screen, but not before I saw Rosalie and Jasper glancing up at me, small smiles on their faces.
We finished the mission and logged off, and I even had time to shove the leftover pizza into the Cullens' mostly-bare fridge and pull out my remaining homework by the time Alice returned. It was a lot easier to handle than the catch-up work I'd had during my week away from school, and with her help, we made fairly short order of it and packed it all away in my backpack before the hour got too much later.

And then we were headed up to her bedroom.

I felt like I was about to shake apart as we made our way up the stairs, her cool little hand in mine. I was sure I was oozing sweat all over my skin, and no matter how much I swallowed, my mouth still felt dry as a desert. The heat in my skin was a palpable thing. Was I ready for whatever might follow? Was I expecting more than she was actually ready to do? Was my imagination running away with me?

The events of the day, everything I'd learned, everything I'd spent the last few hours working to distract myself from, threatened to push back in on my mind, and with the strength I was still carrying due to Jasper's influence, I did my best to push back. There would be time to talk things over with Callie, time to figure out if there was anything more we could do to find the others, to figure out what had happened to our world and what we could do to keep this one safe. There was no point in rehashing it again and again in my head, not here and now. I'd managed to have a pretty wonderful evening, and now I was with Alice, and no matter what happened next, that could only make my night better. That should be my focus.

“Bella?” she asked, looking up at me through her long, dark lashes, as we paused at the door to her bedroom. “You know you don't have to be nervous, right? It's just me.”

“You say that like being nervous is a choice. And it's never...just you,” I replied softly, reaching up and brushing her cheek. Her eyelids fluttered, and she leaned into my touch. I suddenly remembered something. “Hey. What were you going to say before? Just before Callie showed up, I mean.”

“Oh – yes,” Alice said, her eyes opening again as she drew herself straight. “I had a very important question to ask you. Will you, Bella Swan, accompany me to the dance next month?”

I feigned a gasp of surprise, putting a hand to my chest. “Heavens, Miss Cullen! How forward!”

“Oh, yes, of course, please forgive me,” she replied, looking down in faux chagrin. “You're absolutely right. I'm sure you would prefer some fine gentleman escort. Perhaps that Mr. Newton you've spoken of.”

“Well, no, I'd simply never considered...okay, I'm not keeping this up all night,” I said, with a grin. “Of course I'll go with you, Alice. Like you even needed to ask.”

“Well, I don't know, maybe you hate dancing.” She looked back up at me, grinning back. “It never hurts to be sure. Especially with...”

Her smile faltered, and I felt mine fall away as well. “Callie?” I guessed.

“Well...yes. Or what she represents, anyway,” Alice said, with a heavy sigh.

I hesitated. “You haven't...seen us finding a way home, have you?”

“No. No, I still haven't. I haven't seen anything, really, it's just...it's...strange.” Her lips twisted in frustration. “There's been this...sense. Of something coming. Of choices you're going to have to make which I'm not going to like. Of forces moving around us that are going to change things. I can't see it clearly. That's a first for me. It scares me.”
I chewed lightly on my lip, nodding slowly. “What I learned from Callie today, what it might mean for where we came from or what we're going to find out next...it all scares me, too. I know less about what's going to happen than you do. I don't know what I can promise you anymore. Except that...that if I can help it, I'm not leaving you. That if I have any choice at all, I'll try to make whatever decisions I have to make with you. And I can promise I love you. There's so much I still don't understand, but somehow, I understand that. I love you, and it feels only right to love you.”

Alice gazed up into my eyes, taking my hands. “I love you, too,” she whispered. “Bella, I...we can just sleep. We don't have to do anything you're not ready for, anything you don't want.”

I shut my eyes briefly, shivering at what I knew she was offering. This time, though, I didn't feel my nerves returning. Not the way they had before. Loving her still felt right. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. And the expression of that love – it was, in that moment, everything I wanted.

I opened my eyes to look at her intently, my heart pounding in my chest, my need a living thing rising through my body. I let go of her hands, reaching up to cup her face, and when I spoke, my voice was ragged but fervent.

“I want you, Alice.”

I leaned down to kiss her, and though no heat rose from her cold, firm flesh, it felt as though my body was burning hot enough for the both of us. She fumbled for the door behind us, shoving it open, pulling me inside, our hands already roaming over each other, pulling at one another's clothes. She kicked the door shut and dragged me willingly to the bed, and the whole world seemed to narrow to just the pair of us, alone in the night, blazing for one another like twin stars.

Chapter End Notes

One brief note here: the City of Heroes scene was inspired in part by the story Tossing Stones by Princess Alexandria over on FFN. It's another story about someone from our world ending up as Bella Swan, though it goes in some different directions. The game comes up in the story, and it reminded me of my own passion for CoH, so I couldn't resist bringing it in here, at least for a bit. It's a bit of a tribute to the game and a bit of a nod to Tossing Stones. Go give it a read if you have the time - I liked it, you might like it, too.
Surface and Depth

I scarcely had the words to describe what we did, and in time all words left me, all coherent thought, until there was nothing but Alice and the feelings she inspired in me. I felt like a novice next to her, but at least I could guide her, show her where I liked to be touched, as she did the same for me. She didn't lose control once, not that I noticed, at least. Her eyes burned into mine, lust blazing across her face, but her touch remained gentle, careful. It was still enough to drive me out of my mind, send me into a primal haze of need and lust and, finally, satisfaction. I couldn't hope to keep up with her, and at last I was spent, and we fell back into soft, gentle caresses as I drifted off to sleep.

I couldn't say how long I lay there in dark, dreamless slumber before my brain dredged up some vision. But light gradually returned, in my dreams, and with it shape and substance, my mind painting some new picture. I found myself laying in bed in some rustic cottage, cluttered with mementos that seemed oddly familiar. I thought I saw the shadow of a black cat bolting out of sight. A small woman with short, dark hair lay next to me, still sleeping – Alice, I thought, but there was a warm, rosy flush to her cheeks, and the closer I looked, the more I thought the shape of her jaw and the angle of her cheekbones differed.

I rose from the bed, finding myself in a white shift, not quite like anything I could remember wearing, though it felt natural against my body. There were windows on opposite walls of the cottage, with one offering a view of a sandy shore, the water glittering in the sunlight. The other looked out onto a deep, primal forest. There was a door across from the bed, and I stepped toward it, only to stop as I heard someone calling from behind me. I turned, and –

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“Bella, come on, it's time to get up.”

I groaned, feeling the sunlight against my eyelids, and cracked them open with a soft hiss before wiping at my eyes with one hand. “Morning. Why does it have to be morning.”

“Oh, believe me, I'd be perfectly happy to stay in bed all day, but you'd probably get in trouble eventually,” Alice told me, giggling. I turned to look at her, already dressed and ready and standing by the bed, and pouted.

“Why aren't you here now?” I complained.

She reached out to stroke my hair, and I leaned into her touch, sighing. “Sorry, baby. You would have been too cold if I'd spent the night curled up against you. I had to leave the bed to you once you fell asleep.”

I humphed, pushing myself into a sitting position and putting my arm around her waist. “Stupid vampire biology, messing with our snuggles.”

“I know,” Alice said, kissing my temple. “I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do.”

“You know I don't really blame you,” I returned, with a long sigh. “Okay. I guess I'd better shove
some cold pizza in my face and get ready.”

“Oh, no, Esme went out to grab you something from that cafe in town. Cold pizza is not a proper breakfast, apparently.” Alice's eyes sparkled as she took my hand and helped me to my feet. “She should be back any minute.”

“Cold pizza is a perfectly acceptable breakfast! It's got grains, protein, uh...vegetables?” I tried.

“By which you mean tomato sauce, which is just tomatoes, spices, and sugar, right?” she said, arcing one dark, perfect eyebrow.

“I don't actually know what's in tomato sauce, it could be, like, a superfood.” I glanced down at myself, and that's when my brain actually kicked into gear, heat suffusing my skin. “Uh. Alice? Were you going to mention I'm still naked?”

She gave me a mischievous grin. “Oh, at some point. Definitely before we left the room. Here, I brought your pajamas, we were just a little too preoccupied to get you into them.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah,” I mumbled, taking the pajamas and panties she offered and shoving them on. “Thank you, that's – way better than going to breakfast naked. Or in last night's clothes. Oh God, is your room soundproofed? Everyone else didn't hear us, did they? When did you even get a bed, did you just get a bed for last night, did everyone know this was coming?”

Alice laughed, putting her hands on my shoulders to steady me. “Bella, relax. It's all right. I mean – yes, the others do probably know we weren't exactly chaste last night. But our bedrooms are soundproofed, as best as they can be. And I've had a bed for...entertaining for a while. I wasn't seeing anyone by the time we got to Forks, but you know there have been others.”

I let out a puff of air. “Right. Yes. Of course.”

She looked up at that, searching my eyes, her face falling. “You don't regret what we did last night, do you?”

“What? No! No, Alice, of course I don't,” I assured her quickly. I kissed her forehead, giving her an apologetic frown. “I didn't mean to make you think that, not for an instant. Last night was...incredible. It was everything I could have hoped for. You were a goddess, I...was it good for you? Did I do what you wanted?”

“You were wonderful, Bella,” Alice said, her smile returning, taking on a dreamy cast. “We were communicating, that's the most important thing. And you're a quick study. I can't wait to do it again sometime.”

I blushed fiercely, but a fond smile spread across my own lips as I leaned in to kiss her tenderly. “I'd like that. I'm not sure when, and I still can't really believe we did all that on a school night, but I'm definitely down for another go. I love you.”

“I love you,” Alice echoed, kissing me again, then laughing as my stomach chose that moment to grumble. “Let's get you some food. And caffeine.”

“Oh God, yes,” I agreed eagerly, tucking my arm in hers as we left her room and made our way downstairs.

“So. City of Heroes?” Alice asked, glancing up at me, her eyes twinkling.

“Yes! Oh my God, I'd forgotten how much I missed it. Not that it's quite the game I remember,
toward the end, but – it's still amazing,” I replied. “I guess I should be glad I remembered it at all. I can't believe Jasper and Rosalie ended up playing too.”

Alice smirked. “Oh, Jasper's quite the gamer. He just doesn't advertise it the way Emmett does. But who did you think his usual partner in crime was? As it were. And Rosalie and Emmett's relationship isn't all flirting and sex. And talking about sex. And--”

“Okay, okay, I get the idea,” I said, waving her off and laughing softly.

She flashed me an unrepentant grin. “Anyway, she has been known to join the party now and then. And she probably didn't mind spending time with you, either.”

I felt a warm glow at that, ducking my head briefly before turning a thoughtful smile on Alice. “So where do you stand on the whole video game thing? I know Edward's not a fan.”

“Well, I'm not allowed to play against Emmett or Jasper. Ever,” she replied, smirking. “I'm kind of with Rose. They can be a lot of fun, but I'm not as into them as you or the boys. If you're asking me if I want to put on a catsuit and fight crime with you, though, I think I could be persuaded.”

“Uh...just checking, you are talking about City of Heroes there, right?” I asked, my mouth watering a little at the image nonetheless.

Alice shrugged, her eyes glittering mischievously. “Sure.”

“Would you two just get a room already?!” Rosalie yelled, as we made our way to the dining area, where the Cullens were gathered around the table, amusing themselves with various books or – in Edward’s case – a CD player attached to a pair of noise-canceling headphones. He still looked vaguely pained by our antics, and more so when Emmett spoke up.

“They already got one, Rose, did you forget?” he interjected, waggling his eyebrows, earning him a smack on the arm and a smirk from his mate.

“Emmett, not at the table,” Esme called from the front door, entering the house, carrying a take-out box and a to-go cup. She gave me a broad, warm smile as she approached. “You really don't need to be that vulgar at all. Good morning, Bella, dear. I hope you slept well?”

“Oh, yeah, um,great,” I affirmed, smiling back and trying to fight the blush, knowing I should probably resign myself to being red and splotchy all day at this rate. “Thanks for getting breakfast. You didn't have to do that, I would have been fine with leftover pizza.”

“Nonsense, that's not any kind of decent breakfast,” she said, going to the cabinets and pulling out dishes, quickly unpacking whatever she'd ordered and putting it in front of me. I tried not to watch her disconcertingly quick movements. Soon there was a plate of scrambled eggs, sausage, and a stack of pancakes in front of me, with a mug of hot cocoa to one side. I glanced back up at Esme, and before I could say anything, her mouth formed a slight moue. “Well, I suppose this might not be the healthiest breakfast, either, but it still seemed like an improvement.”

“It looks delicious, Esme, thank you so much,” I assured her. She smiled, putting a hand on my shoulder, and settled into her own seat at the table.

It was a surreal experience, being the only human at the table, the only one eating, the only one still in her pajamas while the others were all ready for the day. But it had become surprisingly easy to fall into a natural rhythm with the Cullens, to talk and laugh with them, to watch as they engaged with one another. Even Edward pulled off his headphones and joined the conversation at Esme's urging. I'd never had a large family, or been much for large groups in general. But here, somehow, with
Alice at my side and the others arrayed around the table, I felt more at home than I had in a long time. I'd never realized from the books just how much of a family the Cullens could be – but now, unexpectedly, I was a part of it.

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Somehow, we had just enough time to drop off the leftover pizza at my house and generally make it look like I hadn't been out all night before heading to school, arriving just before the first bell. All my thoughts were on Alice, especially since the little vixen had spent the entire drive teasing me mercilessly. It was a minor miracle I got through English and Government without incident. My luck couldn't hold, though. Jessica must have seen something in my face, because as soon as I entered Trig, she lit up like a kid at Christmas. Of course, she couldn't exactly start questioning me in the middle of math class, so it was almost worth the inevitable interrogation to watch her squirm in frustration out of the corner of my eye while Mr. Varner droned on.

Almost.

The second we were dismissed, Jess latched onto my arm, sweeping me into the hall. “You're glowing,” she hissed. “Spill, what happened?”

“Seriously, Jess, were you born on another planet? Do you get this funky high on a yellow sun?” I groaned, trying and failing to pull free.

“Yeah, still don't get half your jokes. Stay on topic,” she returned, grinning. “Did you and Alice finally do it or what? I mean, whatever doing it means for lesbians – oh my God you did!”

This last came out in a high squeal, as my face blazed in an instant, my usual splotchy blush spreading across my skin. “Jessica I Assume You Have A Middle Name Stanley, that is not the kind of question you just ask a girl!”

Jess flashed me a feline grin, completely unrepentant. “Sure, it's Piper, and man, it is just adorable when you blush. No wonder Alice is always teasing you.”

I groaned again, running my hand across my face. “You know about that too? This day just keeps getting better.”

“She's not as subtle as she thinks she is. And you're about as subtle as an earthquake.” She smirked, elbowing me in the side. “Come on, though. You don't need to give me the play by play, but was it good?”

“I...you don't...think I'm going too fast?” I asked slowly.

“Okay, first off, do you or Alice think you're going too fast? Because that's what matters here.” I bit my lip and shook my head tightly, and Jessica smiled. “Good. Second, you two were obviously into each other from, like...honestly it was probably day one. I don't know when you actually met, but it wasn't the first day of school, and you were clearly teetering on the edge of Makeout Point.”

I gaped at her. “I don't...I...how, why?”
“What? It's not just this. Or this,” she replied, gesturing at her face, then at her body, moving her hands to emphasize her curves. “Honestly, Bells, you're lucky I'm so easygoing. I'm neck and neck with Eric Yorkie for valedictorian. I pay attention.”

“Yeah, but – you were all – excited to see Alice playing secret admirer, and shopping for my first date...”

“Um, yeah, because it was fun. Do they not have fun on your alien planet?” Jessica returned. “At first I just didn't want to say anything because I figured it wasn't my place to out you or, I don't know, challenge your sexuality or whatever. And then I was just enjoying the show. But come on, you aren't giving me any answers!” She stomped her foot, pouting at me.

I sighed, but I couldn't help smiling. “It was amazing. She was so...gentle, and generous, even while she was driving me completely out of my mind. I've never felt that way before, never stopped thinking so completely, it was like there was nothing but us in the whole universe. I just – I don't know if I made her feel the same way.”

Jessica took my hand, squeezing it softly and looking me in the eyes. “Bells, I've seen the way she looks at you. I'm pretty sure it must have been the best night ever for her, too. Why, did she say something that made you think different?”

“No, I mean – she said I was wonderful. And, um, a quick study,” I admitted, fresh heat rushing to my cheeks. “I'd never...”

Her eyes widened, her mouth forming an O. “Alice was your first? I mean – I wasn't exactly assuming you'd been with anyone else, I guess, but – wow, okay, this is huge. Holy shit. You are seriously lucky, your first time can be totally shitty. Especially if it's their first time too...oh. Oh. You're not her first, are you? That's why you're all insecure.”

“That's really – it doesn't seem like something I should be telling you,” I protested. “And insecurity isn't really anything new for me.”

“You didn't tell me, I figured it out. Shit, it's almost time for Spanish,” Jessica said, glancing up at a nearby clock. “Bella, listen. I'm not going to tell anyone anything, okay? I mean, yeah, I love gossip, but – this is cross my heart and hope to die stuff. Not a word. All of this is just...it's a huge, huge deal, and of course you're nervous, but...you have to trust Alice, okay? Just take what she said at face value.”

“I do trust her. I just – if it wasn't...good, would she really tell me that, or would she want to spare my feelings?” I fretted.

“You didn't tell me, I figured it out. Shit, it's almost time for Spanish,” Jessica said, glancing up at a nearby clock. “Bella, listen. I'm not going to tell anyone anything, okay? I mean, yeah, I love gossip, but – this is cross my heart and hope to die stuff. Not a word. All of this is just...it's a huge, huge deal, and of course you're nervous, but...you have to trust Alice, okay? Just take what she said at face value.”

“Has she given you any reason to think that's what's happening? No,” she answered for me. “I'm, like, a thousand percent sure she hasn't. That's mathematically impossible. That's how sure I am. Bells, I love you, but you really overthink this stuff sometimes. Just ease up on yourself, okay?”

I gave her a faint smile. “I'll try.”

She searched my eyes for a moment, then sighed, nodding, as she tugged me toward our next class. “We'll work on it. Vámonos, Señorita Swan, Señora Goff está esperando.”
Much to Jessica's obvious chagrin, Callie intercepted us on our way to the cafeteria, waving to get my attention. “Hey – Bella, right? I'm Tara Chen. Mr. Mason gave me your name, he said you might be able to tutor me in English?”

Jessica raised her eyebrows, glancing over at me. “Since when are you a tutor?”

“Oh, uh – not long. I've been doing really well in English, and I helped catch Mike up, so Mr. Mason asked if I'd take it on. You know, if I was up for it,” I replied. “Didn't expect it to happen so soon. But yeah, sure – Jess, I'll catch up?”

“Sure,” Jessica said, drawing it out as she glanced between us. “I mean, random, but sure. See you, Bells.”

I smiled and waved as she walked off, then took Callie's arm, steering her away from the stream of students headed to lunch. “Okay, Calliope, don't tell me you’ve forgotten you majored in English?”

Callie smirked. “I'm not the one who lost a whole decade, Cassiopeia,” she returned. “Anyway, it's not like that girl would know any better. It seemed like a decent excuse. Plus you're such a bookworm I knew you had to be doing well.”

“Yeah, turns out Jess is a tiny Sherlock Holmes, so I'd watch myself if I were you,” I replied, smiling at the familiar nickname game.

“Really? Her? Huh.” Callie glanced vaguely in the direction she'd gone. “Wasn't she some kind of shallow bitch in the books?”

“Maybe? I never thought she was that bad,” I said, shrugging. “She said she's got a good shot at valedictorian, and I think she was valedictorian in the movies, actually...I'm still not sure which of the smaller details hold true here. She's been cool so far, though. Freakishly strong and way too obsessed with fashion and romance, but...she's actually pretty great.”

“Yes, I guess this world isn't really a perfect match for the books or the movies. It's weird. You don't look like K-Stew, Alice doesn't look like Ashley Greene...I'm actually surprised you got over the heartbreak. You know, considering your massive lesbian crush,” she replied, with a shameless grin.

“I made a face at her, refusing to let myself blush. Much. Even though Alice was definitely creeping back into my mind and I was desperately scrambling to distract myself from those thoughts. “Well, as you've so often pointed out, I have a massive lesbian crush on every girl.”

“True facts, Casanova,” Callie said with a wink. “Oh shit, that nickname works so well now. Well, no, actually it'd work better if you had a few girls chasing after you...haha, wait, who else? Leah? Oh shit, are you in another stupid vampire-werewolf love triangle?”

I growled, feeling the heat in my cheeks, marking the blush she'd clearly just seen. “I don't know if I'd call it chasing – whatever, never mind. Did you pull me away from lunch to take the shit out of me, or was there something else you wanted?”

“Awww. It wasn't just to take the shit out of you. Although I have missed that. We didn't...things were pretty serious toward the end. There wasn't a lot of time for play,” she replied, her gaze distant for a moment, before she shook it off. “Besides, you used to give as good as you got. Sometimes you could be downright mean.”
“I, uh...I guess,” I said, shifting uncomfortably at seeing my best friend so haunted by whatever had happened to the two of us. “Sorry, Cal. What'd you want to talk about?”

She waved me off. “Don't worry about it. Anyway, I was thinking about something you said yesterday. You don't have Bella's shield power? How have you been keeping Edward out of your head?”

“Oh, uh...” I cringed slightly. “...I haven't. He tries to filter me out, but apparently I'm a 'particularly strong broadcaster,' as he puts it.”

“Well, shit. So, what, do the Cullens just know everything you do by now? All the books and movies and shit?” Callie asked.

“No, I mean – I hope not. Or they haven't said anything if so. We've been pretty focused on trying to stop James and his coven before they become a problem,” I told her. “The rest of it...I've been trying not to think about the rest of it. Especially You-Know-Who.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “At this rate we might as well just call them the Death Eaters. So you don't want to fuck things up by spilling all the beans prematurely, but you can't even think about how to handle things for fear of Edward picking up on it and throwing everything out of whack. That about the size of it?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It's honestly been driving me crazy.”

“And if you actually run into the Death Eaters, especially Voldemort, it could get around a million times worse,” Callie added.

“Wait, Voldemort is – the one with the telepathic powers?” I asked, and she nodded. “Cool, just making sure. And yes, that's completely right, and I'm not at all sure how to avoid it without Bella's power. Not that my power isn't useful...or would be, if I didn't have to worry about seizures and brain damage...”

“Yeah, let's not count on that as a solution for now,” Callie interjected. “I think I should start teaching you some of our old tricks. Starting with the surface mind, deep mind technique.”

“Uh...can't do magic, though. Won't that be a problem?” I asked.

“It's not magic. Not everything we did was magic,” she said. “This is based in meditation and brain training. Learning to keep a couple different trains of thought running, one on the surface, one down deep. It takes practice, but it'll keep your thoughts safe from Edward. The other guy – that's going to take some more work, but we had techniques for diverting deeper probes, too. Not totally sure they'll be effective, but it's worth a shot.”

“I see. Yeah...if it's really not magic...I guess it's worth a shot,” I agreed slowly, shifting slightly as something else occurred to me.

“I think it is...okay, what's bothering you?” Callie asked. “I know that look. I know all your looks.”

“Just...magic. I mean...I've always felt it. All around me. I still remember feeling it, even if I don't remember all the stuff we went through after 2015. And now it's like I'm...cut off.” I wrapped my arms around myself, looking down at my shoes. “And I can't help wondering if that's for the best. I mean, magic helped bring about the end of the world, right? What if by bringing it here, you've put this world at risk, too?”

Callie started laughing softly, and I looked up, frowning. “...what's so funny?”
“Nothing, just – you had to answer questions like that so many times. It feels weird, is all, giving them to you,” she replied. “Okay, there was this really stupid joke you used to love. You used to start with it every time. Magic isn't unnatural, it's supernatural. Groanworthy, right?”

I snickered, despite my lingering worries. “Actually, that's pretty good.”

Callie rolled her eyes. “Christ. I was almost free. Anyway, the point is this: magic is part of the ecosystem. What you said, about how you'd always felt it? That's because it was there. Maybe you couldn't do a lot with it, back in 2015 or before, but it was still there, and it was as much a part of the environment as the rainforests. The water cycle. The jet streams. You and the other scholarly types had a theory that magic naturally ebbed and flowed over time, just as the Earth naturally goes through ice ages and warm periods. But just like any other part of the environment, human activity can throw it out of whack. Ice caps melt, rainforests die, the jet streams get fucked up, and some idiot pierces reality and brings magic flooding back.”

“Okay, but that doesn't mean it's not harmful,” I pointed out. “Everything you're talking about results in ecological devastation. Couldn't a flood of magic be just as destructive?”

“Not in the way you're thinking. It's difficult to explain. But magic was a symptom of what we were doing to the world. It wasn't a cause. It was actually helping, so maybe it wasn't ecological devastation, maybe it was some kind of...immune response,” she said. “That was another theory. The Gaia hypothesis, kind of. If the whole planet is in some sense a living organism, made up of all the plants and animals just like we're made up of cells and bacteria, why wouldn't it have an immune system? I can't say who was right on that one. But I can tell you that we were able to use magic to repair some of the damage. Close breaches, heal scorched earth, treat injury and disease. We just...couldn't do it fast enough. It came at us too hard and too fast. Time travel was our last resort. None of us were worried about pulling magic back with us. We needed it to help stop everything that had happened. We needed every advantage we could get.”

I watched her as she lapsed into a sorrowful silence, and let out a long breath, stepping over to her and taking her hand. “I'm sorry. Again. About everything.”

She laughed, a little bitterly. “There you go apologizing again. Some things never change.”

“Well, I did bring up painful memories. That's something to apologize for,” I returned. “Thanks for setting my mind at ease, though. It helps. With some of it. It's still – frustrating to feel so cut off.”

“Just because you can't use magic the way I can doesn't mean you can't feel it, Casserole. You always said that magic was always there, whether we felt it or not, and if we didn't feel it, we just weren't paying attention,” she said. “The meditation might help with that, too. I know how your brain gets. It's not exactly quiet in there.”


“Is green archer about to die?” Callie teased, shrugging off her backpack and pulling out a couple brown bags, handing one to me. “Creamy peanut butter and strawberry preserves, sour cream and onion chips, and a couple cans of Diet Mountain Dew. Non-perishable lunch of slightly picky, overcaffeinated champions. We should probably start your training sooner rather than later.”

I glanced wistfully toward the cafeteria, already missing Alice, but she had a point. I took the bagged lunch and turned back to her with a grin. “Okay, Yoda, but don't expect any piggyback rides. I'm pretty sure it would be physically impossible for me to carry you.”
“Mmm. Do. Or do not. There is no try,” Callie replied, slinging an arm around my shoulders and guiding me toward an empty room.
The rest of the week passed more or less without incident. Lauren and her friends continued to shoot me the odd death glare, but nothing really came of it. And Dr. Beckett agreed to start me on a low dose of antidepressants, based on Carlisle's observations as well as our initial interview, so while they'd take some time to kick in, I had at least some sense of normalcy to look forward to. Assuming the same medication would work for me here, anyway. I was trying not to overthink that one. Until we knew for sure, Jasper would keep working to help keep me steady.

Callie and I had continued working on mental exercises to keep Edward out of my head, too, every day after school, which meant less time for Alice. That wasn't exactly easy on either of us, and I didn't feel like I could explain what we were up to without spilling the beans on my reasons for it. None of the Cullens seemed to suspect what I was doing, and Alice understood my need to spend time with Callie, but there was still some tension there. Especially since Alice and Callie hadn't had a lot of time to get to know one another, either, and still didn't seem entirely ready to trust each other.

They had, however, both agreed with me on the need to get everyone together and compare notes, so Leah and her pack had been invited to a weekend summit at the Cullen house, and Callie was due to pick me up around noon.

I woke up around eight to the sound of the phone ringing, and before I could get back to sleep, dad was knocking on my door.

“Bella? You up?”

I groaned, but rolled over and pushed myself into a sitting position. “I am now. What’s up?”

“Your mom’s on the phone, she wants to talk to you,” he replied, his voice unusually stiff. I raised my eyebrows, then stood up, cramming my feet into my slippers and shuffling over to open the door. He looked uncomfortable and sheepish at the sight of me, his face slightly red. “Uh, don’t be too mad, it’s eleven there and she forgot about the time difference. Plus you said you’d be out later…”

“It’s fine, just…I’m definitely gonna need a Mountain Dew,” I replied, waving him off and taking the handset, starting to step into the hall so I could head down to the kitchen.

“How about I bring it up?” he asked, entirely too quickly. “And a couple Pop Tarts. You, uh, might want to take this call in your bedroom.”

That brought me to full attention, and my eyes narrowed suspiciously as I peered more closely at his face. “Dad, what is this about?”

“I’ll just run down to the kitchen. You shouldn’t keep your mother waiting.” He didn’t wait for a response before skedaddling.

Sure enough, I could hear Renée’s voice calling my name, and I sighed and turned, putting the phone to my ear as I shut the door behind me. “Hi, mom.”

“Bella! Oh, it’s so good to hear your voice. I’m so sorry I called so early, darling, but I can never remember how far behind Forks is, and Phil and I are going to be out most of the day anyway,” she trilled, speaking about as rapidly as Jessica Stanley on a tear. “How are you? All recovered? I’m sure Charlie would have called if you landed in the hospital again, but I worried, and you hardly ever e-mail…”
I winced. I really needed to get on top of that. I’d always been bad at keeping up on correspondence. “I’m sorry, mom, I’ve just been busy catching up on schoolwork and - everything. I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m fine, there haven’t been any more episodes and...yeah, I’ve been fine.”

“Good. Good. Now, tell me about this girl you’re seeing. Alice Cullen, right?”

Dad knocked again, bringing me a glass of Dew and a couple Pop Tarts on a plate, and I nodded my thanks and frowned again as he quickly set them on my desk and left, shutting the door behind him. “Uh, yeah, Charlie told you we’re dating?”

“He did, yes. Actually, he said you’re getting quite close. Something about matching rings?”

I let out a long breath, dropping into my desk chair. “Claddagh rings, yeah. They’re not - I mean, they don’t have to be that serious. They’re just kind of a sign of commitment. That we’re in a relationship.”

“Oh, Bella,” she sighed. “I always thought you were too levelheaded for that kind of thing. But I guess you are a teenager. Are you sure that’s a good idea? Your father and I rushed into things, too, and - you know I love Charlie dearly, but we were never meant to be partners. Not the way he wanted.”

“I know, mom. It’s...it’s really hard to explain, but it’s not like that with me and Alice. We just...fit. It’s not just puppy love or teenage hormones. I’ve never felt this way about anyone,” I told her, taking a swig of soda.

“Everyone feels that way about their first love. And it’s not as though you were dating anyone that I knew of back in Phoenix,” Renée returned. “Bella, sweetheart, I need you to be honest with me. Are you two sexually active?”

Miraculously, I did not spew my soda all over my desk. I didn’t choke, either. It was a very near thing, and I felt some bubbles go unpleasingly up my nose, but I eventually managed to swallow and let out a raspy, “What?”

“I remember how teenagers can be, darling. And adults, really - I mean Phil and I…”

“Nope,” I interrupted. “I do not need to hear about that, mom.”

“Oh, well, of course. But you haven’t answered my question,” she replied. “I’m going to need an honest answer from you.”

“I...we have...had sex. Once,” I said slowly, not really trusting myself to lie. And I was an adult, right? Mentally, at least. I should be past having to lie to my parents.

“And were you safe?”

“...mom, we’re lesbians. Pregnancy’s not really a concern. Plus I’m still taking the pill, and we’re exclusive with one another,” I ground out.

“But has she been with anyone else? There are other concerns here, Bella, and besides, I know it feels like you’re going to be together forever now, but you might have other sexual partners someday, and you should be ready to practice safe sex,” Renée said. “Safe sex isn’t just about preventing pregnancy, it’s about preventing disease, and making sure both partners stay safe and comfortable during the act. Now, I’m sending you a care package, but when we had the Talk, I was very heteronormative, and I’m so sorry, Bella, I should never have assumed you were heterosexual. So, obviously you should both still be tested, but there are some specifics we need to go into. Let’s
I wanted to hang up the phone then and there, but...I held back. I was an adult. Mentally, at least. I should be able to handle a discussion of safe sex with another adult, even one who was technically my parent. And it had been a while since I’d last looked at safe sex tips for lesbians, so I could probably use the refresher.

And so, gritting my teeth, sinking low in my chair, and cursing the universe and its twisted sense of humor, I shut my eyes and listened to my mother.

After what seemed like an eternity of acting like a responsible young lesbian, listening closely and asking intelligent questions and all, The Talk ended and we spent some time chatting before mom had to go. She made me promise to send her pictures of myself and Alice, and cautioned me again to guard my heart, but all things considered, despite my initial embarrassment, I supposed I’d gotten off easy.

By the time I made it downstairs with my plate and glass, dad was busying himself making a proper breakfast, or at least scrambled eggs and brown and serve sausage. I’d still take it. He glanced briefly in my direction before studiously avoiding eye contact. “Hey, still hungry, kiddo?”

“I could eat,” I said evenly, going to the sink to give the plate a quick wash.

“Guess that’s a pretty stupid question to ask a teenager,” he said, with an awkward chuckle. I glanced back at him. The tip of his ear was a fascinating shade of red. “Good talk with your mom? You were up there a while.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was a long one. Very...detailed,” I replied. “She said you two have been talking a lot too.”

“Well, you know. It’s hard on her, being so far away. I have to keep her up to date, she’s your mom,” he replied. His neck was a bit red too. I could see where I got that ugly, splotchy full-face blush from.

“Sure.” I rinsed the plate and stuck it in the rack to dry, turning to fetch my glass and pour some more Dew, pausing just behind him on my way to the fridge to add, in a whisper, “The day of my vengeance may be slow in coming, old man, but it will come.”

He jumped just a little, looking back at me with narrowed eyes as I started to laugh. “What was that, kid?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I said, adopting the most innocent look I could muster. “I was just asking about your plans for the day. You’d already be gone if you were fishing, so...any games or anything?”

He sighed. “No, some work around the house and then I’ll have to take a nap. I’ve got to work another overnight tonight. Detective Daniels has a new kid, and the baby’s not going easy on him or his wife. I’ve been trying to help out.”

I took a long swig of my soda, collecting myself to try and keep all traces of excitement out of my face and my voice. “That’s too bad. Nice of you to do that, though.”
“Mmm-hmm.” He gave me another narrow-eyed look. “I’ll probably call to check in, though. Maybe drop by the house if I have a few minutes during my shift. Your mom might call again tonight, too, you know how she gets.”

“Sure. That’s sweet of you,” I replied, utterly unconcerned.

He grunted, turning back to the stove. “You can order pizza again if you want. Or - wait, you and Alice were going out tonight, right?”

“Yeah, since Valentine’s is a school night and all. I’m good.” I glanced at the eggs and sausage on the stove, then went to grab plates and silverware.

Dad grunted again. “All right then. Oh, thanks, kid,” he said, a little absently. “Hey. Speaking of games - I know it’s not the WNBA, but there’s a Sonics game in a couple weeks. I was thinking we could go. You, me...Alice if she wants. Does she like basketball? I know you said her family’s into football.”

I grinned, unexpectedly delighted. “I’d like that. And I’m sure she’d love it. She’s not a fanatic, but she likes sports as much as anyone. And she’d definitely enjoy spending time with us.”

“Well, with you, anyway,” he joked, with a slight chuckle.

“Ah, but to know you is to love you, dad. She just has to get to know you,” I replied. “That’s seriously sweet of you. And, I mean, you don’t have to - what do Sonics tickets even cost?”

He waved me off. “Ah, don’t worry about it. I’m allowed to spoil you occasionally. I only had so many chances to do it before.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. Thank you.” I held the plates for him while he dished out breakfast, then we took our food to the table. “So did I give you and mom a lot of sleepless nights? When I was a baby, I mean.”

“You? Nah. You were always a quiet kid,” he replied, digging into his food, letting out another quiet chuckle. “Scared your mom half to death, because to hear her mom tell it, that was not Renée in any way, shape or form. She used to get this look of utter relief on her face whenever you did kick up a fuss...but you were always more interested in just looking at everything with those big brown eyes of yours. Well, they were gray at first. They turned brown soon enough.”

“You really remember stuff like that? What color my eyes were for - however many months?” I asked, feeling a rising, affectionate warmth deep in my heart.

“Kid, I remember everything. Well, the important stuff. And you were always important,” dad said, pausing and blushing a little. “I mean, that’s probably how most parents are with their kids. Anyway, I’m sure I’ve told you all this before, and you must’ve seen that baby book your mom kept.”

“Probably. It’s not like a spend a lot of time obsessing over myself. I, um, I guess you’re right. About parents and kids.” I tried thinking back to my own childhood, what little I could remember, but...none of it was coming back. There was still just this hole where it used to be, and ragged little edges. I remembered I’d had another mom, and she’d loved me very much, and she’d been very sick, and I’d missed her fiercely when I first arrived. I knew, logically, I’d had a dad, in the other world. I could remember what I’d told Alice and the other Cullens, just like I could remember telling them my old name. But the details I hadn’t shared weren’t there anymore, and the details I had given them...they felt like a story I’d told, or a dream I’d had. I couldn’t seem to connect to them anymore.

Dad - or my father here, anyway - watched me as a lapsed into a deep silence, chewing his food for a
long moment before clearing his throat. “Kiddo? Bells? You okay? You look like you’re a million miles away. Did something bring all this on?”

“No. Sorry, I’m fine,” I replied, shaking it off and giving him a smile. “Just thinking. And - I don’t know, sometimes I just like to hear you talk about the old days, I guess. So mom was expecting some kind of baby drama queen?”

He relaxed a little and laughed, shaking his head. “Guess that’s one way of putting it. I think she figured you’d be our little princess. Hence the fairytale name, Isabella Marie.”

“That wasn’t you? At all?” I asked, slightly surprised. It didn’t necessarily seem like his style, but I’d expected he would have had some say.

“Nah, I figured I was already giving you your last name, she could have the rest. And, uh...to be honest, I could only really think of basic names. Sue, Mary, that kind of thing,” he said, shrugging. “I figured she had the better ideas. Mostly. Your Grandpa Beaufort had kind of a health scare a few months before you were born. Your mom went through a phrase where she wanted to name you after him if you were a boy, maybe even Isabeau if you were a girl. I, uh, probably would’ve tried to make that your middle name instead. ...probably.”

I shuddered, then raised my glass to him. “Well, thank you for probably, hypothetically, taking one for the team. Yet another reason to be glad I wasn’t born a boy.”

He smirked a little at that, and we turned back to our food for a few minutes before he spoke again. “You, uh...you don’t want to be a boy, right?”

I looked back up at him, staring for a minute. “What part of all the primping I submitted myself to for my first date with Alice made you think I’d rather be a boy?”

“Are you asking me or trying to persuade - no, I’m sorry,” I said, stopping myself mid-snark and sighing, counting inwardly to ten. “I’m sorry, dad. I know this is still new for you, and you’re trying to understand, and you’ve been really supportive. But no, I don’t want to be a boy. I wouldn’t want to be one even if it meant no one so much as frowned at me and Alice, or even if the girls giving me hell were straight up hitting on me instead. I know I tend to stick to a pretty casual style, but I’m a girl, and I like being one. You don’t have to worry about me coming out as trans. Not that there would be anything wrong with that.”

“No - no, of course not. And I’d still be completely behind you if you were, no question,” dad said firmly. “I just...I know there’s things we can’t talk about too easily, and...some things I don’t want to talk about, I guess. That’s a pretty crappy way of putting it. What I’m trying to say is - Bells, if it’s important to you, you can tell me. I want you to. No matter what.”


If I was surprised at my own admission, or how easily it came, it must not have shown on my face, because he just smiled back, a little awkwardly. “I love you, too, kid. Now, are those girls still bothering you?”

“No, not really. It’s fine,” I said. “It’s really just been dirty looks lately. Rosalie had a talk with them, I guess.”

“Rosalie? Alice’s big sister, the blonde?” he asked, his eyebrows rising.
I nodded. “She can be very intimidating.”

“Huh. She seemed so friendly with me,” he remarked, shaking his head. “Well. I knew there was a reason I liked her.”

I made sure to stuff my mouth with scrambled eggs before another smart-assed remark could come out.

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The rest of the morning passed quietly, with dad puttering around while I dressed for the day and got some of my homework for Monday out of the way. At last, noon rolled around, and I grabbed my bag as soon as the doorbell rang, making my way downstairs just as dad opened the front door, raising his eyebrows and glancing back at me at the sight of Callie standing on the stoop.

“Bells, you know Tara Chen?” he asked.

“Uh - you know me, Chief Swan?” Callie asked, surprised.

“I know your dad. Dave Chen, he’s an attorney. Won’t stop talking about you, every time he’s down at the station. I heard you made captain this year. And had a hell of a season. Congratulations,” he told her. “I’m sure Bella’s sorry she missed it, apparently she got into women’s basketball while I wasn’t looking.”

“Uh, yeah. Well, that’s kind of why we started hanging. That and English tutoring,” I replied, joining them at the door.

Dad glanced back at me. “Tutoring? I thought English was your favorite class.”

“She’s tutoring me, sir. Just want to keep my grades up ’til graduation,” Callie interjected.

“Huh. Well, I’m sure you must have a dozen or so scouts sniffing around. You figured out where you’re going for college yet?”

“No, not yet. Actually, I might take a year off, stick around,” Callie said, with a meaningful, reassuring glance in my direction. “It’d be a good chance to get a job and save up some money for college. Scholarships won’t cover everything. Especially women’s basketball scholarships.”

“Guess that’s probably smart. Assuming none of the schools will hold it against you, anyway,” dad replied, before shooting me a faintly worried look. “Bells, you’re not thinking of trying out for the basketball team, right?”

“What? No. God, no.” I shook my head vigorously. I was pretty sure by now that Bella’s clumsiness had been greatly exaggerated in the books, but I still knew from personal experience that I wasn’t much of a jock. “That’d be living a little too dangerously for my tastes.”

He chuckled. “Good. Figured you had to be more sensible than that. Well, I should let you two get going. Nice to meet you in person, Tara.”
“You, too, Chief Swan. I’ll tell my dad you said hi,” Callie said cheerfully.

“Please, feel free to call me Charlie. And you do that,” he replied with a nod. “Have a good time, Bells. Call me at the station when you get home, got it?”

“Got it, dad. Talk to you later.” I gave him a quick, one-armed hug, then headed out the door.

Callie waited until he’d shut the door behind us before throwing her arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. “Dude, I thought you said none of the people here looked like their actors. Charlie Swan is hot.”

“I said most of them don’t, and oh God, please don’t call my dad hot,” I groaned.

“That’s not your dad, Cass, I’ve met your real dad. He is a total DILF, but he’s not your DILF,” she returned. “God. That mustache. That looks like a hell of a ride, right? Wait, look who I’m talking to.”

“He’s the closest thing I have to a dad right now. Maybe...at all, given everything you’ve told me. And I don’t really remember - that’s one of the things the brain damage killed. My memories of my other dad,” I said softly, glancing away.

Callie fell silent for a moment as we reached her car, a green Ford Taurus, and then she squeezed my shoulders for a second before releasing me. “Jesus. Way to kill the mood, Castaway.”

I slipped into the passenger seat, giving her a weak smirk. “Sorry, Calamity Jane. I don’t think he’d be down for dating a teenager anyway.”

“Who said anything about dating? Maybe I just want to ride that stallion and put him away wet,” Callie replied, grinning unrepentantly as I groaned again. “Anyway, we both know we’re really in our 40s. And look who’s talking, your girlfriend’s, what, a hundred?”

“And yet it’s still less weird! No hitting on Charlie Swan, okay? Bad enough I had to have the sex talk with my mom this morning,” I grumbled.

“No promises, and wait, wait, weren’t you the one who was always complaining about how your parents left a book about puberty on your dresser when you were twelve and that was the beginning and end of it?” she asked.

I grimaced. “I don’t remember, but all things considered, I think I preferred the book. At least assuming it was a good book.”

“Well, it was a boys’ puberty guide, so I don’t think you were a fan,” Callie replied. “Anyway, probably best to get some pointers on that stuff now, right? Before you and Alice start doing the nasty?”

“It’s not all that relevant to my exclusive relationship with Alice, but I guess I did pick up some useful tips. And...we’ve already had sex, actually.” I glanced at her sidelong, bracing myself for another outsized reaction.

Which didn’t come. She glanced at me once, but we both stayed quiet, until finally she looked at me again. “Sorry, were you expecting me to freak? Wait, right, 2015. You still think you’re a virgin?”

“I know I’m - was - a virgin. Or I thought I was,” I replied. “That - changes?”

“Of course that changes, did you think that dry spell was gonna last forever? You were cute, you were funny, you had power and influence, you didn’t have that much trouble picking up girls. Or
guys, on rare occasions,” she said.

I grimaced. “That sounds a lot more...promiscuous than I would have expected. And I couldn’t have been that cute. Plus, you know, the trans thing?”

“Same old Cass,” Callie muttered, shaking her head. “Take it from me, you were cute enough, and the trans thing didn’t matter to everyone. And it wasn’t like that. You had a few short relationships. Nothing that really stuck, but you got close enough to a few people to sleep with them. And you had a few one night stands, just to scratch the itch. It’s not like everyone was getting a ride or whatever.”

“I guess that’s reassuring,” I said, gazing out the window.

“I wasn’t that worried about you. You could take care of yourself, and you weren’t too much of an idiot about it. No more than usual,” she replied, with a small smirk. “So I’m not shocked that you and Alice had sex. If I’m worried, it’s because hello, vampire, and one slip means you’re dead or one of them. And it’s because you’re falling for her real fast. Like, Lauren fast. Not that you even remember Lauren, but God, she was a bitch.”

“Yeah, no, the only Lauren I know is Lauren Goddamned Mallory, here and now,” I muttered. “Who is definitely a...piece of work. What was the other one like? I mean, what happened to make you all - paranoid about me and Alice?”

“That’s the blonde who keeps giving you the stink-eye, I take it. She looks a lot like the Lauren I remember, actually.” Callie drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, sighing. “Man, it would be so much easier if you just remembered this stuff, Cass. Dredging it all up again...I seriously feel like I need a beer. Or a blunt.”

I winced. “That bad?”

“Pretty damn bad. Okay. This was while we were living in Montreal, not long before we had to evacuate to Europe. Magic had just started rising, you had just started teaching me...witches were gathering where they could to try and figure out what was happening,” she explained. “That’s how we met Lauren Pelletier. She was a local, this little French-Canadian oozing with charm. Everyone liked her, hell, I liked her at first. She wasn’t your usual type, but she was smart, funny, insightful, a total social butterfly, and you hadn’t been in a serious relationship yet. Not to mention things were going badly out west, everyone was talking evacuation, I think we were all going a little crazy. She came at you like a freaking blitz, and it wasn’t long before she had you wrapped around her little finger.”

“Every time you describe this stuff, it sounds like someone else’s life,” I said, shaking my head. “So what went wrong?”

Callie let out another long sigh. “Believe me, Cass, there are some things you’re probably better off forgetting. Sometimes I wish I’d lost the last decade, too.”

“I’m not exactly sure I got the better end of the bargain,” I replied. “I’m going to need context on all this, Cal. If it’s going to keep coloring our relationship here and now - I need to know. Please?”

“Right. Right. Okay. Well, Lauren had a talent for reading people. That got a little more literal as magic grew stronger and she could literally peer into people’s minds, pick out their thoughts and feelings. And she was using that talent to increase her own personal power and influence, try and put herself in a better position for...whatever was coming. She saw an opportunity to latch onto an experienced witch who was already turning years of theory into practice and she took it. She used her charm to worm her way into other covens and steal their work, too. She preyed on your
insecurities, brought out your worst tendencies, pushed us both to the point where it nearly ended our friendship. Even after we figured out what was happening and you ended things - it took you a long time to learn to trust other people again. It took you even longer to trust yourself.”

I stared at her for a long moment, watching her shoulders slumping at the memories, the pain written on her face. “I...I can’t imagine ever losing you as a friend. Ever driving you off like that.”

Callie let out a soft, bitter laugh that left me wincing. “No? I love you, little sister, but you are far from perfect. You can be obsessive, cruel, careless...I saw a lot of your worst qualities during the war. We spent a lot of time in very close quarters, and we had some pretty impressive fights. The whole Lauren thing, though? That was something else. And I don’t want to lose you to someone like that again.”

I couldn’t help feeling hurt by her words, and my gaze drifted slowly down to my lap. “I’m sorry, Callie. For whatever I did, even if I can’t remember - you’re right, I can be hurtful. And you’re the last person I’d want to hurt.”

“No...I’m sorry. It’s probably not fair to dump all that on you,” she said, gruffly, after a brief pause. “And we did make up before the end. I shouldn’t be holding it against you now.”

“You shouldn’t be holding it against Alice, either,” I said, slowly and carefully. “What happened with this Lauren girl sounds awful, and I get that I’m psychologically back at this point where I haven’t had a serious relationship before, and I still thought of myself as a virgin before I slept with Alice. I know she makes my head spin. But she’s not like that. Our relationship isn’t like that. We love and support each other, we try to make each other better. I don’t know how I can prove that to you.”

“You can’t.” I looked up at her, and she caught my eye, shaking her head ruefully. “I’m sorry, Cass, but this is just going to take time. I have to get to know her. Hell, I kind of feel like I have to get to know you again, and I have to get to know you as a couple. This isn’t something you can fix with some grand gesture.”

I nodded. “Okay. I get that, just - give us a chance? Please?”

Callie turned her eyes back to the road, inclining her head. “I’ll do my best.”

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A few minutes later, we parked in front of the Cullen house, and Alice came out like a shot the second I got out of the car, throwing her arms around me and leaning up to kiss me fiercely. I kissed her back just as hard, pulling her small frame close, ignoring the momentary sensation of Callie’s eyes burning holes in the back of my head. At last, though, I felt a small, involuntary shiver, and Alice pulled back, smiling as I let out a groan of protest.


“It’s getting warmer! It’s, what, in the 40s today?” I returned, with a sheepish grin of my own. “Happy early Valentine’s Day. I can’t wait for tonight.”
Alice pouted slightly, her voice coming out in a faint whine. “Did you have to tell Rosalie to keep me from peeking? She’s been at it all week!”

“At what?” I asked, just as Rosalie walked out and smacked Alice’s head lightly.

“No peeking!” she barked.

“Ow! I’m with Bella now,” Alice protested, making a face at her, before turning her pout back on me. “You have a lot to answer for.”

“I just asked her to help with the surprise! I never endorsed hitting!” I glanced over at Rosalie, who smiled innocently. “Oh, okay. Now we see the violence inherent in the system.”

Alice buried her face in my chest, clinging tightly. “Help, help, I’m being repressed.”

“Neeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrds,” Callie called, rolling her eyes. “Are we going to get this supernatural summit started or what? Where are the wolves at? Okay, and just to head off Her Majesty the Queen of Tortured References, there wolf, there castle, consider it said.”

“Heyyyyy,” I protested, turning to stick my tongue out at her.

Callie raised an eyebrow. “You were definitely about to pull in Young Frankenstein and you know it. Lying doesn’t become you.”

Luckily for all of us, Esme emerged just then, smiling sweetly as she brought order to chaos. “Leah and her pack haven’t arrived just yet. Hello, Callie, it’s very nice to meet you. I’m Esme Cullen. Welcome to our home. I assume you prefer Callie?”

“Uh, yeah, seeing as I’m only Tara Chen in body and I get enough of that...everywhere else, thanks,” she affirmed. “Thanks for having me.”

“Not at all. Any friend of Bella’s is a friend of ours,” Esme said warmly. “Please, come inside. I’ve set out some snacks and drinks for everyone, if you’re hungry. Oh - and speak of the devil.”

We followed her gaze to the treeline, where four very, very large wolves were approaching, beat-up backpacks dangling by the straps from their powerful jaws. Though I’d been around the pack before, and knew in the abstract that they were all shifters who turned into enormous wolves, this was my first time seeing them in their animal forms, and I couldn’t help the slight thrill of primal fear that ran up my spine. I took a step back involuntarily, my eyes widening, and Alice quickly slipped her arm around my waist, squeezing softly.

“Oh my God,” I heard Callie whisper, but when my eyes flicked to her, she didn’t seem scared. More like completely and utterly enchanted. From the way she was smiling, I half-expected her to start cooing about puppies any moment, and I just had to hope she had better sense than that in this situation.

The lead wolf, a sleek gray one who was slightly smaller than the others, sneezed and dropped its backpack, seeming to roll its eyes at us. Then it began to shift, its limbs and torso changing shape, its head distorting, as the fur seemed to darken and recede into its skin. After a few moments, Leah Clearwater was standing before us, very tall and very, very naked.

I squeaked, feeling my face heat rapidly as I quickly averted my gaze. Callie let out a low whistle.

“Damn, Cass, why aren’t you dating her?” she remarked. Both Alice and I turned slow, steady glares on her. “What? Hell, I practically want to date her. Those abs tho.”
Leah let out a low chuckle. “Yeah? You’re not so bad yourself, beautiful.”

“She’s straight,” I interjected, still shielding my eyes. “Callie, you’re a hundred percent straight.”

“Well, ninety percent.” Callie’s eyes swept up and down the length of Leah’s body once more. “Well, seventy-five.”

“Weren’t you openly drooling over my father earlier?” I hissed.

“Oh, shit, you’re right. I’m sorry, Leah. My heart and my libido belong to another,” Callie said, sighing dramatically.

“Aw, I understand. Not my type, but Chief Swan’s pretty hot as white guys go,” Leah replied, snickering as I gasped at her sudden betrayal. “Yo, Ginger Spice, I’m decent now, you can look. I’ll send the guys around back so you don’t have to look at shifter peen.”

I was already turning my head to glare at her when Callie raised her hand. “Uh, what about those of us who want to see shifter peen? For purely academic reasons, obviously.”

Two of the remaining wolves, a gray one with black spots and a reddish-brown one who was larger than the others, exchanged a glance, but the third, sporting pure black fur, snorted and started nudging them toward the side of the house. Before I could respond to any of this, Alice put both her arms around me and clucked her tongue.

“Take it easy, our Bella is a fainting flower,” she said, in a soft, cloying tone. “A soft, blushing beauty, with delicate sensibilities.”

“I’m not - I mean I don’t want to - damn it,” I protested, making a face at all three of them. “Well, it’s nice to see you three have formed some kind of rhetorical Voltron for the sole purpose of tormenting me.”

“Oooh, rhetorical Voltron. Can I call dibs on the head?” Leah asked, grinning. “No, wait, Alice already did.”

Callie smirked, putting her hand out for a fist bump. “Oh, nice. Though it’d work better if there was a dick involved.”

“Things straight people say,” Leah quipped, bumping her fist. “Anyway, I’ll form the clit just doesn’t sell the joke, you know?”

“Good point. Plus none of the boys would’ve known where to plug in that lion.”

“Esme, aren’t you going to chide them for vulgarity? Please?” I asked desperately, looking back at her. Her shoulders were shaking and she was visibly fighting off laughter. Clearly I could expect no help from that corner. And Rosalie was just watching the show with an immensely satisfied grin, which she only half-heartedly tried to hide when she saw me looking. I scowled at her and turned to my girlfriend. “…Alice? You got anything?”

Alice just nodded sagely, patting my arm. “I did call dibs.”

“Great. Well, I hate you all.” I jerked my head toward the door. “Shall we?”
We made our way inside, and the boys joined us a moment later, back in human form and fully dressed. Callie, back on familiar territory now, was giving all three of them appreciative looks.

“Okay, damn,” she whispered. “Little young for me, but damn, girl. So which of ’em would you wanna fuck?”

“Callie, if I can hear you, so can every single vampire and werewolf in this room,” I groaned, as a round of chuckles rose around us.

“Oh. Right. My bad.” She raised her voice to a normal tone. “So if you were going to be with a guy…”

“And we’re going to start on the introductions now, before the white girl from another world offends the entire Quileute tribe,” I announced.

“Aw, you’re doing your best, B,” Leah said reassuringly.

“I meant - never mind. So, you already met Leah Clearwater, she’s the pack alpha here. The guy next to her is Sam Uley, her second. Then we’ve got Jacob Black and Embry Call.” I looked back to Leah. “Is this everyone who’s coming?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Emily’s busy, and Seth’s...still adjusting. Didn’t seem like a good idea to dump him right in the middle of a bunch of vampires right now. It didn’t seem like a good idea to bring Paul, either, so he’s on guard back at the res, along with Jared and Quil.”

“Wait, Emily? I thought Leah was the only female werewolf in the books,” Callie remarked.

“Still am, as far as I know,” Leah replied. “Emily is Sam’s girlfriend, and more importantly, his imprint. That makes her pack, too. Even if she weren’t, I’d probably have brought her in to help ride herd, honestly. The pack can be a lot to handle.”

I bit my tongue to keep from commenting. “Moving on to the Cullens, you’ve met everyone at this point except - oh, good, there you are. Hello, Carlisle.”

“Good afternoon, Bella,” the doctor said, smiling warmly at me as he descended the stairs, walking briskly over to Callie and offering a handshake. “And you must be Callie. Please feel free to use my first name as well. Sorry I’m late, I had some paperwork to finish up.”

“Not a problem. Nice to meet you,” Callie said politely, shaking his hand. Thankfully, she spared us any DILF comments this time. “Okay, I guess that leaves me. For anyone who hasn’t met me, I’m Carolina Green. I mostly go by Callie. Legally speaking, I’m Tara Chen, senior at Forks High and captain of the girls’ basketball team, but uh...I really prefer Callie, thanks. I haven’t quite...assimilated...the way Cass has.”

She glanced over at me, and I suppressed a wince. “Yeah. Anyway. We’re all pretty much here to compare notes and see if we have a better plan for dealing with James and his coven than ‘wait for them to come and try our best to take them out’. If I remember correctly, we have about a month before they show up.”

“I haven’t really been able to narrow it down any further than that,” Alice added. “I can’t even see...
the storm you were telling me about just yet. Weather forecasts can be tricky, even for me.”

“And that Victoria chick you told us about has that weird, vague self-preservation power, which means setting up some kind of trap or making this vampire baseball game more of a vampire-werewolf game is a no-go,” Leah finished, scowling.

“That’s about the size of it,” I agreed, looking to Callie. “Cal, you said you were going to try and think of spells that might help. Do you have anything?”

“Actually, I did have some ideas. I just don’t know how effective they’ll be.” She reached into her bag, pulling out a notebook and flipping it open. “This would be easier if I had our coven’s Book of Shadows with me, or my personal grimoire, but I think I’ve reconstructed some of the spells we used to use to guard against scrying, wards, any kind of magical detection, really. This one would prevent other witches from pinning down your exact location. This one would keep you from tripping most basic alarm wards. They’re not perfect, I may be misremembering some details, and I can’t promise they’d be effective against vampiric powers. But I could give it a shot, weave the spells into something you can keep on your person for constant protection. Silver would be best.”

“Would sterling silver do?” I asked, exchanging a glance with Alice, then taking off my Claddagh ring. “And could you do it for both me and Alice?”

“Yes, and that shouldn’t be a problem, but why?” Callie replied.

“It turns out James is the reason I’m a vampire,” Alice explained, smiling tightly. “Bella happened to remember that little tidbit from the books. He didn’t turn me himself - another vampire did, a friend of mine who worked at the asylum where I was kept and realized James was stalking me. But Bella’s concerned that I may be a target for him as well.”

Callie shook her head. “You and your obsessions, Cass. All right. You think we have about a month? The full moon is twelve days from now. That would be the best time to cast lasting protection spells, if we can swing it. Give me your rings on the 23rd and I’ll make it happen.”

“Deal.” I put my ring back on. “I had another idea. I don’t know if it will do any good...I’m still not entirely sure how James’s tracking powers work, and I really only suspect they’re supernatural...but maybe it will help confuse him, somehow. He’s going to be targeting me and possibly Alice. So neither one of us should decide where we’re going, when the time comes to run. If he’s somehow tuned into our thoughts, picking up on our decision making, it’ll be better if we have no idea where we’re going. And...possibly if we’re separate.”

“Separate? No. I hate that idea and everything about it,” Alice protested.

“If he picks up on our bond, he won’t suspect that either one of us would be willing to go anywhere without the other,” I said, turning to Alice and taking her hands in mine. “It might mean he chases after you, and - baby, I hate the idea of putting you in danger, but you’re better equipped to kill him than I am. You’re the one who takes him apart. I mean, in the movie. I’m not sure if that’s how it goes in the books, actually.”

“And if he goes after you? Like he probably will, seeing as you’re the easiest prey?” she returned, searching my eyes, looking like she would be near tears if she could cry.

“Then at least I’ll know you’re safe. And I won’t be alone.” I squeezed her hands, then looked over at Rosalie. “Rose, I want you to make our escape plan. You figure out where we’re going and who’s going with us. Jasper, you need to look after Alice. Leah, I want you and the pack to watch my dad when the shit hits the fan. Make sure he stays safe, just in case James decides to go through him.”
Leah exchanged a look with Sam. “Bells...I’m not sure that’s going to work,” she said slowly. “I’m sorry, but with three man-eating vampires running around, we’re going to need to keep the reservation safe. Maybe if we could get Charlie there somehow we can protect him too, at least for a while. But he might be safer if he goes with you.”

“That would involve explaining things to him that he really can’t know. Things the Cullens can’t tell him,” I said, running my fingers through my hair.

“She’s right,” Carlisle agreed. “Our laws are set by a group called the Volturi. They do not set many, but we are absolutely forbidden to share the secret of our existence with humans, unless we intend to turn them in short order. To be honest, we’re probably risking their wrath already by involving Callie in these matters.”

Leah snorted. “Well, one more human shouldn’t make much of a difference then, right?”

“Leah, please,” I pleaded. “Just keep Charlie safe. Jacob, maybe you could convince your dad to invite him out to the res, once we have some idea of when all this is going down?”

“He’d probably agree,” Jacob allowed, glancing to his alpha.

Leah let out a long sigh, leaning back in her chair and shutting her eyes. “Yeah, fine. We’ll come up with something.”

“Thank you. Rosalie, Jasper, do you two accept your parts?” They nodded, and I turned back to Alice. “Alice?”

She grimaced, meeting my eyes again and speaking softly. “I hate it, Bella.”

“I know. Me, too. Do you have a better plan?” I asked. She let out a soft puff of breath, shaking her head slowly.

“Okay, I have a question, though,” Callie said. “What if this plan works too well? What if everything works perfectly and James and his crew have no idea where to find you?”

“She has a point. We do want to take these guys out,” Leah agreed.

“Then...we have to assume they’re going to use scent tracking. Which might lead them to Charlie and give you a shot at them,” I said slowly.

“But I suspect it would be easier to lure them in a trap if we had some bait,” Esme said softly. “Bella, I’m about your size, and I’m not much of a fighter. But I can run. If I borrow some of your clothes, particularly anything that smells of both you and Alice, I might be able to lay a trail for them. If you’ll allow a small exemption to the treaty...I could bring them right to you and your pack, Leah.”

I gaped at her. “Esme, you don’t have to do that. It’s bad enough any of you will be risking yourselves for me, but you’re talking about putting a target on your chest and running off alone.”

“I would do the same for any of my other children, Bella,” she said firmly. “You’re family. Let me do this for you.”

“This plan is getting more convoluted all the time, but I do feel better about getting the humans off the board, I guess,” Leah remarked. “Only trouble is, laying a trap brings us back to square one: Victoria’s probably going to sense traps. Callie, think you can whip up some of those charms for the pack, too? There’s eight of us, all told.”
Callie shut her eyes and let out a long breath, thinking. “That’s a lot to do in one night. I guess I could do some of it in the nights leading up to the full moon. It won’t be as potent, but it might be enough, and if I do some ritual work first to draw down some more power...okay. It’s worth a shot. Come up with some jewelry your pack members wear already or would be willing to wear on a daily basis. You guys have any problems with silver?”

“ Nope, that’s just in the movies,” Leah replied.

“Even European werewolves - the Children of the Moon - aren’t actually vulnerable to silver,” Carlisle added. “Assuming they’re not completely extinct.”

Leah’s gaze snapped to him. “Wait, hang on. There are other shifters out there? How has this not come up before?”

“They’re not creatures you would want to meet. At least not in their animal forms,” he explained. “They’re much closer to traditional werewolves: human most of the time, they transform into wolf-like monsters at night around the time of the full moon. I’ve never encountered any myself, but I’m told they look quite similar to you in your wolf forms, though they retain some more human physical attributes. Unfortunately, in animal form, they’re completely feral. They hunt and eat humans, spread their condition through a bite, and are more than a match for most vampires. It’s against Volturi law to associate with them, and there are standing orders to kill them on sight. I’m honestly not sure how that law would apply to the Quileute, but since you retain your human minds and morals in animal form, I think you would be safe.”

“Oh, good, another reason to hope the agents of your government never decide to drop in for a visit,” Leah grumbled. “That kind of sounds like a bunch of propaganda, dude. The fact that these Volturi guys laid down a law forbidding you to associate with them implies that you could theoretically form an alliance.”

Carlisle tilted his head thoughtfully. “You may have a point. As I said, I’ve never met any of them personally.”

Meanwhile, I was running Taylor Swift lyrics through my head to try and keep my mind from dwelling on the Volturi. “Okay, that’ll probably make for a fascinating discussion some other time, but we should probably focus on the matter at hand. I still hate your idea, Esme, but...honestly, Alice hates my ideas and we’re still going with them, so okay. Thank you. Sincerely. Is there anything else we want to try?”

“Honestly, I think we’ve gone as far as we can go with the planning, at least with you and Alice in the room,” Rosalie said. “We’ll have a family meeting while you two are out tonight and come up with an escape plan.”

“I’d like to be a part of that,” Callie added. “I know it’s not a good idea for me to get directly involved once the shit hits the fan, but I should know where you’re going. In case I don’t hear from you and...I need to follow up.” She looked over at me, biting her lip in concern, while Rosalie nodded curtly in agreement.

Leah looked to Esme. “I can grant you an exemption from the treaty for the purpose of luring in more dangerous vamps for extermination. The elders are sure to hate it, but I’m used to that by now. Honestly, we might need to revisit the treaty in general, especially if Bella ever wants to be turned. We’re technically supposed to come kill you all if you bite anyone.”

“Right. Yes. Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen,” I said hastily. Callie gave me another sidelong look, but said nothing.
Carlisle nodded, giving Leah a genuine smile. “I would certainly like it if we were on better terms. I understand your tribe’s caution, but I really do think we could find ways to help each other and perhaps even form a true alliance. I’d be happy to discuss the treaty here and now, if you’d like.”

“I don’t have the actual text on me, but yeah, I guess we could go over some of the general terms,” Leah said. “Or, hell, you guys probably still have a copy, right?”

“We do,” Esme affirmed, slipping out of the room. “I’ll go get it.”

Callie cleared her throat. “Hey, before we start talking politics, there’s actually something else I’d like to try. I know you guys have all been worried about what happened to the real Bella Swan or whatever. I think I’ve got a spell that would work. It might not be enough to convince everyone, but I tried it on myself and I did get results.”

“Really? What is it?” I asked, looking over at her, my eyebrows rising.

“Something else I remembered from the war. We had a detection spell to...sort of ensure that someone was in their right mind. That they weren’t controlled or possessed by someone or something else,” she explained. “It conjures an image of the target’s true form, then sends that image back into their body and creates a kind of...glow. A red glow means you don’t belong there, a golden glow means you do.”

Leah folded her arms. “Huh. It might not convince the elders, especially since you’re an ‘alien spirit,’ too, but I’d be interested to see what happens. You already test it on yourself?”

Callie nodded. “Yeah, but I’d rather not say what I saw until I try it out on Cass.”

“Kinda making me nervous here, Cal,” I remarked.

Leah stood up. “Here, try it on me first. We know I’m me, so that should give us an idea of what this thing should look like, right?”

“Sure,” Callie agreed, standing as well. She chanted, softly, in what sounded like Irish Gaelic, her fingers forming intricate knots and patterns in the air, trailing white light as they did, until a sort of web of light was formed. Then she pushed outward, the web flying straight at Leah’s chest and suffusing her skin, spreading across her body before separating, drifting to one side and forming a translucent image of Leah herself. After a moment, the image shimmered and shifted into her gray wolf form, changing back and forth a couple more times before her body reabsorbed it, and a radiant golden glow surrounded her.

“Wow,” I breathed, despite myself, gaping at the display.

Leah looked down at her hands, turning them slowly, as the glow gradually faded. “Shit. That was a hell of a thing. You up for your turn, Bells?”

Alice reached out, squeezing my hand and giving me an encouraging smile. I smiled weakly back at her before standing and moving to the center of the room, taking a deep breath and nodding at Callie. “Do it.”

She chanted and gestured again, and in a moment, the web of light was flying at me. I felt a soft, physical blow to my chest as it struck, like someone had whacked me with a pillow or something, and then a tingling warmth began to flow outward, all along my body. It felt like the fine hairs along my arms and the back of my neck were standing on end. A second after the sensation reached my fingertips, my toes and the tip of my nose, the light and warmth separated from me, and I watched as it formed the image of a tall, slightly chubby woman in her late thirties or early forties, wearing
glasses with mottled blue frames, jeans and an Ariel t-shirt, together with a leather jacket. Her hair was long, braided, and vividly red, and I touched my own copper-colored hair as I gazed on the image. Suddenly, like Leah’s, it shifted, the body growing shorter and thinner and shifting until it closely resembled the person I’d seen in the mirror every day for weeks. As before, it switched back and forth a couple times before flowing back into my body, and soon I, too, was glowing gold.

I stared at my shining limbs for a moment before looking back up at Callie. “Okay, what the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know. But I got the same result,” she admitted, shaking her head. “The body I remembered and the body I’m wearing now, switching back and forth for a minute, and then...boom, golden glow. Maybe something went wrong with the spell, or maybe it never worked the way we thought it did.”

“Or maybe it worked perfectly,” Alice said, glancing between the two of us. “Maybe, somehow, you are Bella Swan and Tara Chen. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

“Then how come I woke up in a seventeen-year-old body instead of, I don’t know, as an infant? How come Callie jumped straight to eighteen-year-old Tara Chen?” I asked.

Callie shook her head, spreading her hands. “A wizard did it?”

“Or a whole coven of witches. Somehow,” I muttered.

“Well, however it happened, it kind of seems like you still have no choice but to accept these lives as yours,” Leah said. “We still don’t have any proof otherwise, right?”

I sighed, nodding and running a hand through my hair again. “We don’t. Well...thanks, Cal. I guess I feel a little less like the angry ghost of Bella Swan is going to jump out and eat my soul now.”

Callie raised an eyebrow at me. “Was that something you were seriously considering as a possibility before?”

“...no, not really,” I conceded.

Alice put her arms around me, leaning up to kiss my jaw. “Well, I say it just proves what I’ve been thinking all along. You belong with me, sweetheart.”

I smiled back down at her, kissing her temple in return, ignoring the glance Callie shot us. “Well that much is obvious.”
The rest of the afternoon passed easily enough, with the Cullens engaging in friendly negotiations with Leah and her pack over the treaty defining the relationship between the Quileute and the local human-loving vampires. Or at least I assumed that happened.

I fell asleep.

In my defense, I’d been woken very early by mom’s sex talk call, and once the conversation turned to surprisingly civil political negotiations, I got a little bored. If I’m bored long enough, I tend to shut down. Plus Alice was nestled into my side, all but purring like a kitten, and the house was warm enough that I wasn’t bothered by her lower body temperature, so somewhere in all of that, I just drifted off. And at some point, I started dreaming.

I found myself, again, in the seaside cottage I’d dreamt of earlier in the week. I was in bed again, and the woman I’d initially taken for Alice was curled up next to me, affording me a closer look at her face. Her eyes were shut, her breathing deep and even as she slept, but though she resembled Alice broadly, I could see now that she clearly wasn’t. Her jaw seemed stronger, and her hair was cut more closely to her face - it wasn’t fluffed out or styled the way Alice liked it. And, of course, it was obvious from the warmth of her body, the rise and fall of her chest, the rosy tone of her skin, and the fact that she was sleeping at all that she wasn’t a vampire.

For all of that, she seemed somehow familiar. I just couldn’t put a name to her face. Biting my lip, I touched her shoulder and shook her gently, hesitantly, but she didn’t wake. Before I could bring myself to try anything else, I heard a scratchy meow, and something jumped onto my legs.

Turning to look, I saw a fluffy, short-haired black cat staring at me with blue-green eyes, a strip of white fur visible just below her chin, and more patches of white visible on her chest and between her legs. I gasped in recognition, reaching out, tears springing to my eyes as I felt the rough, familiar fur between my fingers and she purred softly in response.

“Dee?” I asked, my voice cracking. “Dee, I...I’ve missed you so much, what are you doing here?”

She leaned into my hand, shutting her eyes briefly, but opened them and gave me a disdainful look at my question, letting out a huffing feline sigh and jumping off the bed. I glanced over at the woman sleeping beside her, then carefully slipped out from beneath the covers, though my companion didn’t even stir. My feet were bare, and I was clad in the same white shift I’d been wearing before. My hair, somehow, was long enough to tickle the small of my back. Dee wound her way around my legs before sauntering toward the door, and I followed, but couldn’t help stopping at a full-length mirror we passed on the way, gazing at my reflection.

The woman reflected before me wasn’t Bella Swan. She wasn’t my old self, either - she didn’t match my fragmented memories or the image Callie’s spell had conjured. Her hair was almost the same shade of red I preferred, though it was a much more natural hue, and it was longer than I’d ever had it, in either of my lives. Her skin was pale and clear. She was tall and slender, not quite at the level of Rosalie or Emily but certainly beautiful, and her eyes were a dark blue, almost seeming to edge into violet in the light from the windows. As with the woman still sleeping in the bed, I didn’t recognize her, but she seemed familiar nonetheless.
Dee let out another scratchy meow, breaking my trance. I looked over to find her by the door, and looking up, for the first time, I could see a round stained-glass window above the frame, bearing the image of a seven-pointed star tinted in myriad colors. It scattered light in rainbow hues all around the room, and I was surprised I hadn’t noticed before. Still, following Dee’s lead, I didn’t let it distract me. I walked over to her, scooping her up in one arm, and while she butted my chin with her head, I pushed the cottage door open and walked outside.

On my right, a primal forest made of many different trees stretched to the horizon. I really wasn’t sure all those trees could even exist in the same climate in nature. To my left was a seemingly infinite beach, white sands rolling down to a clear blue sea, the sun glinting off the waves in silvery hues. There was a dock extending out into the water, not too far from where I stood. I turned toward the sea, shielding my eyes against the sun’s glare, and in the distance, I thought I could see the white sail of an approaching boat. My heart seemed to flutter at the sight of it. I wasn’t sure if it was excitement or fear I felt, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was coming, something important. Dee purred softly, nudging my jaw with her cold, wet nose, and then I heard someone calling…

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“Okay, Sleeping Beauty, time to get up,” Alice said, shaking me awake. I blinked rapidly before looking over at her in mild confusion, and she pouted teasingly. “Unless you’re too tired for our date…”

“Hm? No. No, I’m not, I -- oh God, did I fall asleep? I’m so sorry,” I said, looking around at the room.

“Eh, I’m used to it,” Callie offered. “It’s still incredibly rude, but I’m used to it. I told ‘em about your early-morning wake-up call and we all agreed to let you doze.”

“You told them my mom called for a sex talk?!” I blurted.

Leah snickered. “No, she left that part out. Wait, your mom had never given you the sex talk?”

“I -- she had, apparently, but she did some more research when she found out I was a lesbian -- moving on,” I said. “How did the negotiations go?”

“Good. I don’t know if we’re ready to write up a whole new treaty, but we agreed to some things in principle,” Carlisle replied, smiling broadly and reaching down to squeeze Esme’s shoulder. She smiled back up at him, putting her hand on top of his. “The specific exemption for Esme, of course, as well as some theoretical conditions for visiting La Push. We’ve also agreed to some joint patrols on either side of the border.”

“And we’ve figured out where I stand in all this,” Callie added. “I’m human, so I’m allowed in Quileute territory, but I have to agree not to do magic there, or on any member of the tribe, without explicit permission from Leah and the elders.”

Leah sighed. “All of this may be a hard sell to the old guard, Billy and Old Quil especially. But I’m pretty sure I can get dad on side, and most of the pack will back me up.”

“I don’t suppose Paul’s going to swayed by Callie’s spell?” I asked.

Leah chuckled in response. “Yeah, I wouldn’t bet on it. Okay, boys, we should head back to the res.
Nice meeting you, Callie. And Bells, good to see you.”

She came over to give me a brief hug, and then Rosalie took my arm, wrinkling her nose. “Come on, Bella, we should get you ready for tonight. Starting with a long, hot shower or two.”

“Yeah, like you smell like roses,” Leah returned, with a brief snort. “See you, Cullens.”

“Goodbye, Leah. Thank you for coming - all of you,” Esme said, looking around at the pack.

Alice stood, her eyes finding mine at once as she offered me a warm smile and leaned up for a quick kiss, her golden eyes sparkling. “See you soon.”

When I really thought about it, I was still a little shocked at how little time had passed since I’d arrived, since I’d met Alice, since I’d admitted to myself and to her that I was in love with her. From time to time, though, I ran into a sudden, painful reminder, and Valentine’s Day was one such occasion. It was hard to believe, but it had only been a little over a week since our first date, and a little over two since she’d asked me out. I hadn’t had the time or the resources to put anything really special together. I wasn’t in any position to give her the Valentine’s Day she deserved.

Luckily, I had Rosalie.

My work with Callie wasn’t the only secret I was keeping from Alice: Rosalie and I had found time to conspire over the last few days, and she’d turned her own formidable talents to helping me make this a night to remember. The Cullens, it turned out, kept a cottage out in the woods on their property, some distance from the main house, for the use of any of them who wanted solitude for a time. It was nearly always used as a love nest for Carlisle and Esme, or Rosalie and Emmett, but tonight it would be Alice’s turn, and mine. Rosalie had set everything up out there to surprise Alice, and picked up the gift I wanted to give her, and taken charge of picking out my outfit, hairstyle, makeup, everything. She’d been an absolute lifesaver, and I was starting to dread the day she asked me for a favor.

Night had officially fallen by the time I came downstairs, freshly washed and all dolled up to Rose’s exacting standards. She’d gone for another vintage look, putting me in a navy dress with a sweetheart neckline, pleated bodice, and cap sleeves. It clung to my curves like a second skin, the skirt wrapping tight around my hips and thighs, stopping just at my knees. My hair had been styled into something she called victory rolls, dominated by large, elaborate curls at the top of my head and smaller curls cascading around my neck and shoulders. And, as usual, her makeup skills had brought me as close to perfection as a human teenager could hope to get.

Also as usual, Alice put me to shame.

She was gazing out the window as I descended the staircase, her back turned to me. She was wearing red this time: a sleeveless swing dress cut low in the back, with a bow positioned just at the small of her back, and some sort of sash tying it together midway up - but otherwise, her back was bared from the small of it to her shoulders. Her skirt flared out around her legs, and when she turned to smile coyly at me, fluttering her long lashes, I could see her dress had a neckline matching mine, clinging to her chest and exposing some of her cleavage. I felt like my heart might stop at the sight of her. Her gleaming golden eyes, her red-painted lips curled in that seductive little grin, her pale skin
standing out against her makeup and her dress...it was intoxicating. One day I was sure I’d be used to the sight of her, but I was in no hurry to reach that point in our relationship.

“You look...completely incredible,” I breathed, meeting her at the base of the stairs, my hands going automatically to her waist.

She slipped her arms around my shoulders in return, looking up at me through her lashes, her voice coming out in a low, sexy purr that left me weak in the knees. “Mmmm. Sure you don’t just want to stay in?”

I shivered, but recovered enough of myself to narrow my eyes at her. “Let’s see. Stay here, go up to your room which is soundproofed but still in the house...or go to the nice secluded little cottage where we can be completely alone.”

“Fiiiiiiiine,” she replied, drawing the word out with a pout. “But you know I’m going to have to carry you.”

“Actually, Rosalie said she was going to put some lighting along the - eep!” I squeaked in surprise as Alice blurred and scooped me into her arms, shifting me into a bridal carry. “Alice!”

“What? It’s a mile and a half away, do you want to spend half an hour or more walking through the woods in February?” she asked, leaning in to brush her cold lips against my cheek.

I felt my face heating, and a pleasant thrill running up my spine, and shook my head slowly as I put my arms about her shoulders. It felt somewhat awkward, given her tiny frame, but her supernatural strength, the security I felt as I rested in her arms...that was such a turn-on. There was something impossibly appealing about her taking charge like this, just for a little while.

“All right then,” she replied softly, carrying me out the back door - someone opened it for us, I didn’t see who - and into the night.

I could see that Rosalie had been true to her word, and staked out some garden lighting along the stone lined path, but that was about all I could see at the speeds we were going. The trees, the lights, the rocks, it was all a blur, and I had to shut my eyes tightly at the sight, cinching my arms tighter about Alice’s neck and trusting her to see us safely to our destination. Mercifully, a mile and a half was nothing to her, and we soon came to a stop.

“We’re here,” she murmured into my ear. “Open your eyes.”

I obeyed, looking over at the cottage. It was nothing short of utterly charming, a tiny two-story house under the towering evergreens, seafoam green with white gingerbread trim and a gray tile roof, with a covered porch winding around the first floor and a little balcony jutting out at the second story. It didn’t look like there could be more than a room or maybe two on each floor. The outside was lit by standing iron lanterns, and an elaborately painted sign above the door proclaimed this to be Pine Cottage. A smile spread across my face at the sight of it.

“It’s lovely,” I said, looking to Alice.

“It’s all Esme’s doing. With a little help from yours truly. I did the sign, and some of the decorating inside,” she replied, jerking her head toward the door. “Wait’ll you see what the interior looks like...assuming Rosalie didn’t change it too much. Apparently someone asked her to get the place ready, and someone else wasn’t allowed to peek.”

I snickered. “I owe her so many favors, seriously.”
“I owe her one or two myself. Don’t worry, she’ll probably wait until you’ve turned to collect,” Alice replied, smirking. “Probably. Shall we?”

“You’re probably going to have to put me down,” I pointed out.

Her eyes narrowed. “Challenge accepted.”

“That wasn’t a challenge,” I protested, but she’d already moved us to the door, shifting her grip to somehow balance me on one arm for a second while her free hand got the door open. Then she was holding me in both arms again, carrying me across the threshold, only to stop in the doorway when she saw what Rosalie had done.

The first floor was, indeed, one large room, with a spiral staircase on the far end leading up to the second story. I couldn’t be sure what it normally looked like. A large portion of the room had been transformed by Rosalie into Alice’s personal atelier, with a couple dress forms standing in the center, sewing and detailing machines set up on small tables, and bolts of fabric and assorted supplies shelved along the walls. With the big picture windows along one wall, I could only imagine what it would look like on a clear summer day, the sunlight streaming through the windows, filtered by the trees, the scent of pine drifting in on the breeze.

There was a surprise for me, too: a small kitchen occupied a far corner of the room, complete with what looked like a brand new stove and refrigerator. Next to it was a little dining table flanked by two chairs, a couple tall candlesticks resting on the tabletop along with two small wrapped packages, one at each place. I knew the Cullens didn’t eat, and this was a private cottage, so why maintain the illusion here? Had they thought they might need to entertain a human one day? Or had they set it up after Alice met me?

“Wow,” Alice breathed, breaking me out of my reverie. “Bella, did you do all this for me?”

I laughed softly. “Well, Rosalie did, but I had the basic idea. You said you wanted to make our dresses for the dance, and...I knew you’d like getting to treat me like your own personal Barbie doll for a night.”

“Mmm, that’s not all I’d like to do to you,” she returned, setting me on my feet at last and leaning up to kiss me tenderly, her hands running over my hips. “But it’s perfect. I love it. I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” I murmured, kissing her again, putting a little more heat behind it this time, my lips spreading in a broad smile as she pressed in close and purred in response. “Hey, what’s the story with the kitchen?”

“Did you think you were the only one capable of conspiring with Rose?” She pulled back, smirking, and walked to the kitchen, pulling an apron off a hook on the wall. “I’m going to make you dinner.”

“What? Alice, you don’t have to do that,” I protested.

“You agreed to be my doll for the evening, knowing exactly what it might entail. The least I can do is feed you. I’ve been studying. And practicing. And I have my own way of making sure I get it right,” she said, tapping her temple as she turned to look back at me. “So. A light garden salad, tri-tip, potatoes au gratin, and I already got a chocolate mousse cake ready for later. I would have tried Key Lime pie, but they’re out of season.”

I blinked in surprise. “I love tri-tip. My mom used to make it for me.”

She grinned. “You told me, back when I was peppering you with questions as a prelude to asking you out for real. There were a lot of questions, so it probably got lost in the blur. But I was listening
when you told me all about your favorite foods.”

“I guess you were,” I replied, walking over to her and putting my hands around her waist, smiling softly down at her. “This is so sweet of you. I just feel bad you’re going to all this trouble for a meal you can’t share.”

My stomach chose that moment to growl, and Alice giggled. “Somehow I don’t think you feel all that bad. And the care and feeding of my human girlfriend is just the price I pay for a relationship with you. The sacrifices we make for love.” She put a hand to her forehead, sighing melodramatically.

“So...shut up and graciously accept the big romantic gesture?” I asked, with a sheepish grin.

“See, you get there in the end,” she teased, leaning up to kiss me again before setting to work.

*****

Alice’s natural abilities allowed her to speed a bit through the prep work, but she was still limited by her tools - and, eventually, by the laws of physics. Once she had the potatoes cooking, she set my salad down in front of me, lit the candles, and joined me at the table, flitting back into the kitchen now and then to see to the rest of the food.

“Okay, not saying I’m not grateful, but it is a little odd to have dinner while you’re just sitting there watching,” I admitted.

She smiled ruefully. “I’d offer to keep up the pretense, but that would be a waste of food. And honestly very unpleasant.”

“No, of course not, I wouldn’t ask you to do that. Maybe we should exchange gifts?” I picked up the little wrapped package Rosalie had left at my place, helpfully tagged with Alice’s name.

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded briskly, picking up her own gift for me. “Yes, let’s. Although just being with you is present enough.”

She battied her eyelashes at me, and I laughed, handing off the present. “Smooth, Cullen.”

“Don’t I know it,” she murmured, tugging on the ribbon and unwrapping her gift, pulling out the charm bracelet Rose had helped me get. The silver chain was a match for mine, but I’d selected a different set of charms for her: a silver lion, a spool of thread, an artist’s palette studded with little crystals in different colors, a sports car, and a blooming moonflower. She beamed at the sight of it, looking back up at me, her eyes glittering. “Matching jewelry again, hm? I think I’m sensing a pattern.”

I let out a soft laugh. “I’m a creature of habit. And you put so much thought into my bracelet that...I just wanted to give you something that reflects everything I think of when I think of you. Your passion, and courage, and your ties to your family. Your talent for fashion and art. That convertible you’re so fond of.”

“And the flower? It’s not a rose,” she remarked, nodding at the corresponding bracelet on my wrist.

“It’s a moonflower. They’re vespertine blossoms - they bloom in the evening, at twilight,” I replied,
“Mmmm. That’s part of why I got you that crescent moon charm, you know,” she said, securing the bracelet on her wrist, then getting up and walking over to me, pushing my chair back from the table and slipping into my lap. “I wanted to be your Artemis. Well. Maybe without the virgin part.”

“So basically you wanted me to worship you,” I returned, kissing her jaw. “Mission accomplished. I’ll be happy to prove it later.”

Her gaze met mine, her dark lashes heavy over her golden eyes. “I’ll hold you to that. Go on, open your gift.”

I unwrapped the small, square box she’d given me, while she rested her head on my shoulder and watched. Inside was an oval locket in silver on a silver chain, the design engraved into the front a match for the pendant I saw Alice often wearing on a choker, and a necklace I’d seen on Rosalie. It was a coat of arms, specifically a sort of hourglass shape etched and blackened into the metal, framed in the natural silver. A tiny gold heraldic lion stood in the lower part of the hourglass, paws lifted and mouth open in a roar, while the upper part of the hourglass held an open silver hand, palm out. In the silver areas to either side, there were leaves, colored green.

“It’s our family crest,” she said, her voice an intimate whisper in my ear. “Well. It’s Carlisle’s, and we’ve all adopted it. Silver for peace and sincerity, sable - black - for constancy. The hand represents loyalty, while the gold lion represents generosity and courage. The holly leaves symbolize hope and truth. The name Cullen actually comes from an Irish name referring to the holly tree, apparently.”

I gave her a sidelong smile, working the clasp and popping it open. There was a tiny picture of Alice inside, smiling warmly at the viewer, her eyes filled with the love she’d shown me since the night we’d met. And, in the other side of the locket, she’d left a lock of dark hair, her hair, embedded in clear resin. My smile broke into a genuine grin, and I shifted to kiss her tenderly.

“I love it. It’s wonderful. Thank you so much,” I told her.

“Thank you. I love your gift, too, it’s perfect,” she replied, admiring the bracelet around her wrist once more, then meeting my eyes and drawing in close. “And I love you, of course.”

“I love you, too,” I murmured, closing the distance and capturing her lips with mine. She hummed appreciatively, hitching her arms tighter about my shoulders, and my eyes began to flutter shut - and then, abruptly, her weight was gone from my lap, and I only just opened my eyes in time to see her blur back to the stove.

“Sorry! Stirring, turning, flipping, et cetera…”

I pouted in protest. “Alice!”

She flashed me an unrepentant grin. “Finish your salad.”

*****

I finished my salad, though it felt like an eternity, and I was grateful beyond belief when Alice finished preparing the main course and I had her undivided attention once more. For someone who didn’t even remember the taste of food, let alone preparing meals herself, she’d done an amazing job,
and she kept me entertained with a constant stream of stories about her life with Jasper and the rest of the Cullen family while I savored the food. Or tried to, when I wasn’t laughing too hard to eat.

“...so by the time Rosalie and I got back from our hunt, Emmett and Jasper were both completely naked, covered in Crisco - to this day, I still don’t know how they got that much Crisco that quickly in the middle of Denali National Park - and Tanya was taking bets,” she said, winding down her latest story.

I set down my fork, shaking my head and trying to fight off the giggles. “So did Rosalie put a stop to it or what?”

“Are you kidding me? She just looked them up and down, raised one eyebrow, and said she’d take on the winner. Which distracted Emmett enough for Jasper to get his arm and slap him across the ass with it,” Alice replied, smirking.

“How does that - wait. Get his arm as in taking it off?”

“Sure. As long as they don’t get burned, it’s pretty easy to stick them back on with some venom. They work just as well. We just can’t regenerate limbs if they’ve been destroyed. Oh, or reattach hair.” She paused, looking at my plate, then back up at me. “I’m putting you off your dinner, aren’t I?”

“No. No, I...well, maybe a little,” I admitted, giving her a sheepish grin. “But honestly, I’m pretty full anyway. If I eat another bite, I’ll be entering ‘uncomfortably stuffed’ territory. I feel bad, though, you made so much!”

Alice chuckled lightly, getting up and taking my plate. “Don’t worry. I was pretty sure you’d end up taking leftovers home. I’m sure Charlie will enjoy it just as much as you did.”

I followed her, looping my arms around her waist as she scraped off my plate and put it in the sink. “So who won the match?”

“Oh, no one. It went on for two days before they finally agreed to call it a draw. Tanya cleaned up,” she replied. “They took some breaks to reattach limbs and and reapply shortening. Honestly, I think Jasper was holding back a little.”

“Remind me not to get on his bad side,” I murmured, kissing Alice’s neck lightly. “So. Barbie doll time?”

“Mmmm, soon. Very soon. Let’s give your stomach a little time to settle first.” She turned, capturing my lips with hers, her hands sliding over my hips, sending a shiver across my skin. “Care to dance?”

She separated from me, making her way over to a record player set up in the corner of the room, plucking an album from the cabinet underneath and setting it in place. I followed her again, stopping a couple feet short.

“Ah...sure, but I should warn you, I’m not that experienced,” I said. “I can turn and shuffle, and I know where to put my hands, but I can’t waltz or anything.”

She looked over her shoulder at me, giving me a sly grin. “Another chance to pop your cherry, then. Don’t worry about it, sweetheart, I’ll lead.”

I flushed, swallowing at the promise in her low, husky voice. “You don’t think it’ll look weird? I mean, not now, but - at the actual dance next month.”
I’m sure we’ll be quite the sensation no matter who’s leading whom,” she said, setting the needle in place and flitting back to me as familiar strains rose from the speaker. “But I suppose I could wear a tux, if we must subscribe to antiquated gender roles.”

“Um. That...could actually be very hot,” I remarked, my imagination already at work. She let out a low, throaty chuckle, taking my hand and putting her other on my hip, while I set my free hand on her shoulder. I swallowed again, glancing at the record player and smiling at the song. “Beyond The Sea?”

“La Mer,” she corrected, as, sure enough, French lyrics followed the introduction. Slowly, gently, she began to guide my steps, the two of us gliding almost as one. “The original. An ode to the sea and all her changing moods.”

“Is that what it’s about? I assumed the English version was a literal translation. I only took a semester of French,” I admitted.

“Mmmm. Honestly, the original lyrics lose something in English. But I still prefer it. Beyond The Sea is just so...sad,” she replied. “Two lovers, separated by an entire ocean, pining for one another...I’d much rather consider the sea itself. And it makes me think of you.”

I tilted my head, regarding her. “Me?”

“Your changing moods. Your complexity. Your beauty.” Her lips curled in a tender smile, and her amber eyes gazed up at me through her long, dark lashes. “The way you’ve broken across my heart. How we’re bound together, now, like the moon and the tides.”

I grinned back at her, leaning down to kiss her. “You do have a certain pull.”

She groaned softly at the pun, but kissed me back nonetheless. “So do you. Despite your terrible jokes.”

“My jokes are amazing,” I retorted. “But I don’t think Beyond The Sea is sad, you know. The lovers may be parted in the here and now, but the future still holds promise.”

“The future is rarely certain. Until it’s too late to do anything about it,” Alice murmured, glancing away.

“Maybe so. But hope still springs eternal,” I replied, leaning in close, singing softly to her.

It’s far, beyond the stars
It’s near, beyond the moon
I know, without a doubt,
My love will lead me there soon

We’ll meet, beyond the shore
We’ll kiss, just like before
Happy we’ll be, beyond the sea
And never again I’ll go sailing

She purred softly, pulling me closer. “I still think it’s sad. But I do love to hear you sing.”

I laughed softly. “That just makes me think of another song.”

“Sing it to me.”
“You’ve probably heard it before. Like, almost certainly.”

“I don’t care. Wait, hang on,” she said, going to the record player and removing the needle, shutting off the turntable. Then she returned to me, pulling me into her arms once more. “Okay. I’ll lead. You sing.”

I bit my lip, but nodded, trusting myself to her guidance as I dug for the lyrics in my mind. Somehow, despite everything, they were still there, waiting for me.

The book of love is long and boring  
No one can lift the damn thing  
It’s full of charts and facts and figures  
And instructions for dancing  
But I  
I love it when you read to me  
And you  
You can read me anything

The book of love has music in it  
In fact that’s where music comes from  
Some of it’s just transcendental  
Some of it’s just really dumb  
But I  
I love it when you sing to me  
And you  
You can sing me anything

The book of love is long and boring  
And written very long ago  
It’s full of flowers and heart-shaped boxes  
And things we’re all too young to know  
But I  
I love it when you give me things  
And you  
You ought to give me wedding rings

And I  
I love it when you give me things  
And you  
You ought to give me wedding rings  
And I  
I love it when you give me things  
And you  
You ought to give me wedding rings  
You ought to give me wedding rings

There was silence in the room as I sung the last line, my vision blurring slightly with tears, and Alice stopped dancing, reaching up to wipe my eyes with one gentle thumb, her voice very soft. “You’re crying.”

“I...I’m honestly not sure why. Or I don’t remember,” I whispered. “I don’t know why I remember that but not - why it makes me sad.”

“Maybe sometimes there’s mercy in forgetting,” she said, leaning up to kiss my cheek.
“Maybe. But I think I'd still rather remember.” I nuzzled her neck softly, feeling very small and 
vulnerable all of a sudden. “Can you just hold me a while?”

Alice guided me to the couch, pulling me down into her arms, running her fingers through my hair. 
“Always,” she agreed, before giving me a crooked smile. “How about we talk about your dress?”

I laughed quietly through the tears, sniffling as I nodded. “Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

While doing research on an unrelated project, I ran across the Irish history of the 
surname Cullen as a name meaning 'holly tree'. Since the crest in the films isn't in the 
books, I decided to redesign the coat of arms somewhat, keeping the lion and open hand 
but incorporating holly leaves and drawing out the heraldic significance of each element. 
For the heraldry nerds among us, here's the proper description: per saltire, Sable and 
Argent, a hand apaume Argent at the honor point, in fess two holly leaves Vert, a lion 
rampant Or at the nombril point.

The song sung in full in this chapter is The Book of Love, by Stephen Merritt, and 
covered by several other artists since. The particular version I listened to while writing 
this chapter was by Stephen Merritt and The Shadowboxers, on The Book of Love 
(Original Motion Picture Soundtrack).
The next several days passed quickly enough, as Alice set to work on our dresses for the dance, banishing me from her brand-new atelier once our Valentine’s Day celebration was done and she’d hit on some brilliant idea. I honestly had no idea what she had in mind - when I’d described the formal wear styles I liked, with corsets and full, twirling skirts, she’d teased me about my princess fantasies and told me we’d save all that for prom. Still, she’d gotten an odd gleam in her eye, like some part of our conversation had inspired her, and I trusted her to come up with something amazing. More to the point, I knew better than to get in her way when she was on a creative tear. So she saw to that, I kept practicing anti-telepathy exercises with Callie, and we made time for each other where we could. My strange seaside dreams had become a recurring theme, but though everything seemed achingly familiar, I still couldn’t place most of it. I didn’t see much reason to share them with the others. They were unusually vivid, but still surreal enough that they had to be mere dreams. It was nice to see Dee again, to cuddle with her and play with her, if only in my imagination, but there seemed to be no greater significance than that. And as for James and his coven, there was little we could do now but wait, so that’s what we did.

Life went on.

That was true for everyone, it turned out. A couple days before dad was due to take Alice and me to the Sonics game, I was walking to lunch with Callie, looking for an empty classroom where we could keep practicing, when Edward caught up with us, touching me lightly on the shoulder. “Bella,” he said softly, raising his eyebrows mildly at Callie when she shot him a dirty look. “I’m sorry to disturb you - both of you - but you said we should talk sometime. I was hoping you might have time for me now.”

“Uh…” I turned my head, meeting Callie’s eyes, and a brief, silent exchange passed between us. She clearly wasn’t happy, but I had told Edward we should chat, and if he needed someone to talk to, I didn’t want to let him down. After a few moments, she sighed and nodded, rolling her eyes, and I looked back at Edward, smiling. “Of course. Privately, I assume?”

“Please. I promise no harm will come to her,” he added to Callie, who’d stiffened slightly. “Yeah, it’s honestly not that reassuring that you have to promise you won’t hurt her,” she grumbled in response. “Cass, just remember to get me your ring at the end of the day, okay?”

“Oh, I can just give it to you now…” I started to pull it off my finger, only to stop as she shook her head emphatically, her eyes flicking again to Edward. I had to suppress a sigh of her own, though I supposed it was nice to know that if something terrible did happen, I would be avenged. “…or not. I’ll see you later, Calypso.”

She smirked, though it was a little weak. “See you, Not-So-Butch Cassidy. Edward.”

“Kind of clunky, but still better than Casserole!” I called after her, as she turned and began to walk away, pausing only to flash her middle finger back at me. Snickering softly, I turned back to Edward, then glanced at the nearest classroom, which appeared to be completely empty. “Shall we?”

“Yes. Thank you,” he agreed, opening the door and holding it for me.
“Such a gentleman. Thanks.” I plopped down at one of the desks in the front row, reaching into my backpack and pulling out my sack lunch. “Oh, uh...about these lunchtime sessions with Callie...”

“She’s teaching you to shield your thoughts, I take it,” he said, shutting the door and going to lean against the teacher’s desk, folding his arms and facing me.

“Well...yes. Sorry. I wasn’t sure how you were going to take it.” I eyed him, biting my lip. “...how are you taking it?”

He let out a long breath. “It’s fine. The fact that your friend Callie can deceive me so readily is...unsettling, it’s true. It’s made it somewhat difficult for me to trust her. I can scarcely imagine how the version of me in your books must have reacted to a young woman he couldn’t read at all.”

“Fascination mixed with mortal terror. You know, the usual,” I joked, with a faint, faltering grin.

“Yes, well. All things considered, I think I prefer our current relationship, even if it’s not precisely the stuff of timeless romances,” he remarked, his tone very dry. “I do know you’ve been fighting to keep certain thoughts from me. But you’ve been enough of an open book otherwise, and I know enough of your feelings for Alice, that I accept you have our best interests at heart. You do, don’t you?”

His eyes bored into mine, and I swallowed hard, feeling my heart stutter a little, though I knew I was telling the truth on this, at least. “I do. I’m sorry - I really am. I want to share everything. But there are things that could be dangerous to all of us. I will share them, I swear, I just...need to figure out when. And how.”

“And you can’t plan for it without the risk that Alice will learn these secrets prematurely, and daren’t think of it around me for fear that I’ll do the same. I expected as much. I understand, and...I’m willing to extend the same trust you’ve shown us,” he replied. “Keep your secrets, if you feel your must. Besides, I’m not the only telepath we know of. I have no idea if the techniques Callie is teaching you will protect you from the other, and given your abilities, it may be for the best if you never meet him, but perhaps...”

He trailed off, shaking his head and speaking again before I could respond. “In any event, that’s not why I wished to speak with you.”

“No? I mean, I didn’t think so. I guess I wasn’t sure,” I replied. “I’m babbling. Sorry. Is this about Angela?”

“Yes - did Alice already tell you?” he asked, frowning slightly.

“Tell me what?”

“Ah. That would be a no.” He glanced away, his jaw shifting awkwardly. “I’m not sure it’s entirely fair that I know this. I’m certain she’s spent a great deal of time contemplating the matter, and she’s not expecting me to know what she’s about to do...”

Two and two slid neatly together in my mind, and my eyes widened. “Alice saw her asking you out?”

He nodded. “To the dance in two weeks, specifically. The committee decided to go with girls’ choice after all. Not that it matters much to you and Alice.”

He cracked a small smile, and I grinned in return. “No, can’t say that it’s terribly relevant, but good for the straight and bi girls, I guess. I’m surprised you’re not swamped in invitations already.”
“There were a few girls who tried asking me out last year. I turned them down politely but firmly. I’d say I’m afraid I’ve developed something of a reputation, but to be honest, this is precisely the effect I’d hoped for,” he replied. “It must have taken Angela quite some time to work up the courage to ask me, despite my record of reticence.”

“I guess so. But you two do get along like a house on fire. On a perfectly chaste, purely intellectual level, I’m sure,” I added hastily, as he arched an eyebrow at me. “Okay. Are you hoping I’ll brainstorm ways to let her down gently? Because I honestly think you should say yes.”

“Why?” he asked, his eyes locking with mine again, his irises a warm, reassuring gold. He wasn’t stressed or angry, then, but there was an edge to his voice nonetheless, something tense and…pleading? I couldn’t be entirely sure. “Why do you think I should let her into my life? My world? I’m a killer. A predator. I’m built for it. How could I ever be worthy of her? Of anyone?”

“First of all, we’re talking about a first date. A school dance. Not even prom! You don’t need to worry about letting her into your world yet. Unless…” My own eyebrows shot upward. “Edward, is she your mate?”

“What? No,” he returned. “It’s not…not all of us form instant mating bonds, the way Alice did with you, or Carlisle with Esme. Carlisle isn’t really sure why any of us form mating bonds that quickly, actually, though he does have theories. It’s far more common for us to fall in love slowly, as humans do. Sometimes, though not always, this solidifies into an unbreakable, lifetime bond. I have not reached that point yet with Angela. I don’t know if I ever will. But how could I base a relationship with her, with anyone, on deception? What would be the point of escorting her on even one date when we’re not made for anything more, when she deserves so much better?”

“You don’t know yet if you’re made for anything more, and you’re not deceiving her - it’s one school dance. You’re overthinking it.” I laughed softly at that, shaking my head. “The same way I was, before Rosalie talked sense into me, and I agreed to try going out with Alice.”

“Yes, but by the time you actually went out, your feelings for her had solidified, had they not? I know you came to realize your love for her after the…incident that landed you in the hospital. And this is different. You didn’t have to concern yourself with hurting Alice, or with how she might react if she knew your history.”

“Your history - you mean the fact that you killed people,” I realized aloud. “But - all of you have done so. Or nearly all of you. Most of you had your share of slips, when you were newborns. It’s awful, but you…you weren’t fully in control yet, were you?”

He shook his head violently. “If Carlisle could control himself…he turned me. I have lived nearly a hundred years by his example. And I failed him.”

“Carlisle set a nearly impossible example for you - I’m not even sure his fortitude in the face of temptation is entirely natural. Not that I’m in a position to check,” I replied, raking my fingers through my hair and sighing. “Regardless, I know what it’s like to give into temptation. More than that, to lose control over your impulses. In my old life…I was a diabetic. I remember that much, and I remember there were times when I was hypoglycemic, and it drove me into a panic, and I’d just - eat, and eat, and damn the consequences.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You weren’t killing people.”

“No. I wasn’t. But I wasn’t entirely in my right mind, and neither were all of you, as newborn vampires. The stakes were higher, but the root cause was similar. You just couldn’t control yourself.” I shook my head. “I can’t absolve you of those deeds. It’s not my place. But - it’s done. And you’ve
learned control. I know…”

I hesitated briefly, and his eyes flicked to mine briefly before he looked away once more. “Yes,” he said quietly. “Your blood calls to me. But I have learned to resist it. You mean too much to Alice. To all of us.”

“And you’d never hurt Angela, right?” I asked gently, trying to still the frantic beating of my heart, feeling a thrill of fear despite his reassurances.

He took a couple steps away from me, moving toward the windows and away from the door, clearing his throat. “Of course I wouldn’t. She isn’t even - she’s not as tempting as you are. Regardless, that’s not the point. And if my actions as a newborn were the only deeds on my mind, I might even agree with you that I am not to blamed, precisely. But…”

“Wait. I remember this. You left Carlisle and Esme for a time. You used your powers to hunt down criminals,” I said. “Murderers, right?”

“Yes. Or...in one case, a highly abusive man. Charles Evenson. Esme’s ex-husband, who used to beat her,” he said, his jaw clenching. “I set myself as judge, jury and executioner. Allowed myself to decide who lived and who died. For four years, before my conscience won out. I remember every man I killed. It’s a mercy that I do not sleep. I’m sure they would haunt my dreams. Should I ever die in truth, I’m certain I will see them once more in Hell.”

I regarded him in silence for a moment, standing slowly and folding my arms, though I wasn’t quite brave enough to move closer to him, not yet. “Do you ever think about the lives you saved?”

He blinked, his eyes flicking up to meet mine in his surprise. “What?”

“I...all of them. Or nearly so. I made a point of hunting those who consistently had murder on their mind, who had not only killed but plotted to kill again,” he said. “But that didn’t give me the right to take their lives.”

“I’m not trying to convince you that what you did was a good thing, or that you should ever - ever - do it again. As I said, it’s not my place to absolve you. And maybe...if the day comes when you and Angela are serious enough that you need to reveal your true nature to her, that you need to come clean with her on everything, she’ll reject you. That’s a risk you’ll have to take. But that day’s a long way off. No one discloses everything on their first date. It’s just a school dance. And...isn’t the possibility of love worth the risk? You can stay alone and torture yourself forever if that’s what you want, but I don’t think it truly is. It’s just...what you think you deserve. And I don’t agree with that. Despite your mistakes. Despite your sins. I don’t think you deserve to be alone forever.”

He stared at me for a long moment, his eyes searching my face. “You are very kind, Bella. Perhaps too kind.”

I laughed softly. “You’ve been inside my head. You know better. But I do try,” I replied. “And I’ve come to care for all of you. I don’t want any of you to be miserable.”
“Not even me? I know you disliked me, when you read of me in your world,” he said, taking a cautious step toward me. I stood my ground, watching him. “I know I still frighten you, sometimes.”

“Not even you, Edward,” I assured him, very gently. “You’re not as bad as I thought. And how can I dislike anyone who loves music the way you do?”

I gave him a crooked smile, and he smiled back, faintly. “Well. I still say you’re too kind. But perhaps you’re not wrong. It is just a dance, and Angela is truly pleasant company.”

“She’s a sweet girl. Which means if you do hurt her, I’ll have Emmett kick your ass, and I’m pretty sure he’ll do it if I ask. Or if Rosalie asks, and she’ll ask if I ask,” I said sternly. “Just so we’re all on the same page.”

“Hurting her - or anyone here - is the very last thing I’d want to do. I swear,” he replied solemnly. “Bella...thank you. I’m very pleased you’ve joined our family, no matter the difficulties it might bring.”

I dropped my severe expression, beaming genuinely at him. “I’m very pleased to be a part of it. Lunchroom, then?”

He nodded, cracking another small smile. “Yes. Let’s not keep Alice or Angela waiting.”

*****

As promised, Alice and I gave our rings to Callie at the end of the school day. It had been less than three weeks since we’d started wearing them, but it already felt strange to go without mine. I missed the feeling of the metal against my skin, the weight of it, the sight of the Claddagh ring on my finger reminding me that my heart belonged to Alice and hers belonged to me. Alice, too, seemed slightly restless through the course of the next school day, fidgeting with the charm bracelet I’d given her, and I caught myself more than once toying with my own charm bracelet or with the locket that hung from my neck.

Fortunately, it didn’t take Callie long to work with magic, and she caught up with us before lunch on Friday to return the rings, raising her eyebrows as we slid them back on one another’s fingers with soft sighs of relief.

“...yeeeeeh,” she said slowly, her eyes shifting between us. “That’s a little codependent.”

“It’s not - shut up,” I retorted, my cheeks burning. The ring tingled oddly against my skin, just for a moment, before fading once more. That was when Jessica came bounding up to us.

“You guys! You’ll never believe what just happened - Angela asked Edward to the dance, and he said yes! Holy shit, right? I’d totally be jealous if I wasn’t already going with Mike. Okay, I might still be a little jealous, but whatever. We have to go get dresses - oh, hi, Tara,” she blurted, abruptly realizing it wasn’t just me and Alice she was talking to. Her gaze flicked to my hand. “Hey, what did you do to your ring? Alice’s too - why are they glowing?”

“Uh...glowing?” I echoed, exchanging a confused glance with Alice.
Tara, though, swooped in at once. “Wow, see, I was just telling these two about that. I guess they can’t see it, but I think there might be something weird going on with the metal? What color are you seeing?”

“Uh, sort of a forest green, and off-white, maybe silver? Wait, you don’t think they’re radioactive or something, do you?” Jessica replied, taking a step back, her eyes widening.

“No! No, they’re not, it’s fine. Actually that’s probably what’s up, Alice heard a rumor that jewelry shop was passing off fake silver, and she has a cousin who’s really into metallurgy…” I said, glancing to my girlfriend.

She took the hint and picked up the story. “Yeah, Denise, she did some kind of chemical test. Real sterling silver. This must be some kind of aftereffect.”

Jessica glanced between all three of us for a second. I thought I saw her eyes narrow incrementally, but a heartbeat later, she just smiled brightly, heading past us into the cafeteria. “Sure, makes sense. See you in there! We’ll talk game plans with Angela!”

I let out a long breath, but Callie grabbed my arm and tugged me into an empty classroom, with Alice following automatically, shutting the door before Callie could even ask. Cal nodded briskly at her, then turned to me.

“You realize she saw completely through that bullshit, right?”

I nodded miserably. “Obviously. I told you, tiny teenaged Sherlock Holmes. With really unsettling upper body strength.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s probably fine, because I’m going to need to reach out to her anyway,” Callie said, glancing at the door. “Hopefully she’s better at keeping secrets than she looks.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “Why do you need to reach out to her? What are you going to say?”

Callie glanced at Alice, who shrugged and smiled at her. “You can go ahead, I know I’d just piss you off if I jumped in here.”

“Right. Cool. Thanks,” Callie replied, turning back to me. “Cass, your friend Jessica’s a natural adept. Kind of like Lauren was. Our world’s Lauren, not this world’s Lauren. Almost anyone can develop a connection to magic with time, discipline, and skill, but adepts have innate talent for it.”

I blinked slowly. “Sure. Jessica Stanley’s a witch who didn’t get her letter to Hogwarts. That makes perfect sense, that’s not weird at all. Is Angela going to turn out to be a fairy queen next? Maybe this world’s Lauren is a bridge troll!”

“Okay, sweetheart, settle,” Alice said, coming to my side and wrapping her arm around her waist, leaning up to kiss my jaw.

“I just - I can’t even feel my connection to magic anymore, except maybe when I’m using my awesome powers that are slowly killing me, and Jessica Stanley gets them without even trying?” I complained. “I’m sorry, Jessica’s...nice, she’s just - Jessica? Are you really sure? How can you be sure?”

Callie scowled at me. “Okay, so remember when I said you had your bad qualities? Petty jealousy doesn’t become you,” she remarked. I pursed my lips, looking away, and she sighed. “I get this isn’t easy for you. Even compared to what you remember, it can’t be easy. Still, it’s not Jessica’s fault, and - this is good. It means there’s someone I can teach, someone I can work with, if she’s willing.
Hell, maybe it means she’s one of us, she just...doesn’t remember.”

I stiffened, grabbing tight onto Alice’s rock-hard arm. “You think that’s a possibility?”

“It could be. Let’s not get our hopes up. Unless you see something,” Callie added, looking to my girlfriend.

Alice concentrated for a moment, then shook her head. “Honestly, Jessica’s actions can be hard to predict at the best of times. I can tell you the prospect of magic is going to interest her, but - I don’t currently see her demonstrating any knowledge of your world. That’s just in the near future, though.”

“Damn. Well, that’s about what I expected, honestly,” Cal replied, sighing. “As for how I’m sure - every witch’s magic has a signature, perceived in different ways by different people. I’ve always picked up scents - you used to smell like lavender, pine trees, and old books, and that was only partly thanks to your Bath and Body Works addiction - but you were always more visual. You saw colors, like a lot of witches, and most of you color types were pretty consistent with your descriptions. You used to tease me about being a total Slytherin, ‘cause my colors were green and silver.”

I let my ass drop into the chair behind me, while Alice shifted to rub my shoulders. “What were my colors?” I asked, my mouth feeling slightly dry now. “...do I still smell like that stuff?”

“Pink, purple, and blue. I used to joke about how you were trying to remake the world in My Little Pony colors. You were probably sorry you ever told me, really,” Callie said, with a crooked, halfhearted smile. “I can’t smell you as strongly anymore. You’re not doing magic. But sometimes I still pick up lavender and pine. Not old books, though. Something...else. I’m still not sure what.”

Her gaze flicked to Alice as she spoke again. “You just smell like jasmine and copper. So strong I can almost taste it, sometimes.”

“You mean it tastes like pennies,” Alice guessed, and when Cal nodded, her lips pursed slightly in response. “Well, I suppose that makes sense.”

I looked up at her, taking her free hand and squeezing, as much as I could. She smiled down at me, and I smiled back before taking a deep breath and looking to Callie. “I think Jess can keep secrets if she really wants to. If she thinks it’s important. So...just impress on her that it is.”

“Cool. Thanks,” Callie said, with another brief, faltering grin. “Now I just have to see if I can lure her into some private spot to initiate her into the ancient tradition of witchcraft. You know, normal high school stuff. ...Cass...”

“It’s fine,” I said, suddenly, desperately, wanting to move on to pretty much anything else. “Don’t worry about me, Cal. I’m happy you’ve found another witch. Or, I don’t know, witch cadet. Even if it’s not me.”

Callie bit her lip, then stepped foward, pulling me into a tight hug. “You have no idea how much I wish it were you, Castanet.”

I let her pull me out of the chair and hugged her back, burying my face in her shoulder. “I know.”

*****
Though I was determined not to let the news cast a pall over the rest of my day, the remaining hours of school just seemed to drag on into an infinite loop of ennui. Finally, though, we were freed, and my spirits started to lift somewhat as Alice and I made our way out to the lot. The reason for that was simple, if a bit silly: I’d driven us to school today, and I was going to drive us home.

It had taken me a very long time to work up the courage to actually get behind the wheel. But Rosalie had kept at me, giving me driving lessons whenever she could and pestering me to actually put them to use, and she’d done enough work on the truck that it was purring like a very large cat despite its age. Charlie had put snow chains on the tires and Alice had offered her gentle encouragement. So, at last, I’d decided it was time.

I was still slightly intimidated at getting behind the wheel of the giant red monster, but I smiled fiercely as I turned the key and the engine came to life, checking carefully before pulling out of the parking spot. Alice grinned at me, flipping down the sunflap on the passenger side and touching up her makeup in the mirror.

“Showoff,” I remarked, glancing sidelong at her before turning my eyes firmly back to the road. “If I ever tried to do that, I’d end up with lipstick smeared across half my face.”

“Not with the way I drive. Plus our cars have a little thing called suspension, maybe you’ve heard of it,” Alice returned, smirking at her reflection.

I let out a scandalized gasp, patting the dashboard reassuringly. “Don’t listen to her, baby, Auntie Rose did the best she could. Your Mama Alice just has a superiority complex.”

She giggled beside me. “Oh, it’s Auntie Rose and Mama Alice now, is it? What’s next, naming your sweet, enormous, potentially terrifying truck-baby? Wait, let me guess, you’ve already decided on Ariel.”

“Does she look like an Ariel? No, my baby’s a brute,” I replied. “I’m going with Red Sonja, She-Devil of Hyrkania.”

“That’s kind of a mouthful.”

“You can call her Sonja for short.”

“Rosalie is a bad influence on you,” Alice said, shaking her head slowly. “Sonja and Vera. I’m sure they’ll be wonderful friends.”

“I’d hope so, they’re cousins,” I retorted, braking at a red light and turning to stick my tongue out at her.

She smiled fondly back at me, even if she did roll her eyes a little. “Have you named anything else I should know about? Your computer? The Volvo? My convertible? Charlie’s cruiser, perhaps?”

“My computer is Don Quixote, thank you. He tries real hard but he’s kind of a doddering old man,” I explained primly. “And I only name my things. Though I’m happy to offer suggestions for your car. She’s a little blonde bombshell, so...actually I guess Rosalie’s going to be pissed if you go with anything but Rosalie II on that basis.”

“Hm. Probably best not to name the car at all, then. Especially since it’s spectacularly unnecessary,” she teased.
“Names are important! Anything you plan on using day to day ought to be named. It’s easier to appease and cajole things when they have names.” I patted the dashboard again. “Right, Sonja?”

“If she’d beeped right then, I might have been impressed,” Alice remarked, chuckling. “So. Did Charlie tell you what I have to pretend to eat tonight?”

“No, but I’m guessing we won’t be going for anything fancy. It’s going to take us a few hours to get to Seattle, plus we’ll have to find parking for the game and everything,” I replied. “So my guess would be fast food or just grabbing something at the arena. Maybe a pub or something if there’s one nearby. You sure you’re going to be okay?”

Alice shrugged. “I’ll live. I don’t really see a way around it. The ‘chronic condition’ excuse only excuses so much. And I want to spend some time with you and Charlie. It’s clearly important to him.”

I smiled slightly. “Yeah, it is. He really wants to get to know you better. Despite everything he suspects we’re getting up to.”

“He had your mom give you the sex talk, and he’s been setting curfews, I think we passed suspicion a while ago,” she returned, with a little smirk, though it soon faded. “It’s important to you, too, isn’t it?”

I let out a long breath. “Yeah. I mean - I know he’s not really my dad. Callie’s reminded me of that often enough. But he’s just...he’s so great. He’s been nothing but supportive, and generous, and yeah, the sex talk thing was a lot to deal with, but...I know he has my back. And I can only remember my old dad in the abstract, through the stuff I told you before. Is it weird that I want his approval?”

“I don’t think so. And according to Callie’s own spell, you are Bella Swan, which means he is your dad. Somehow,” Alice replied, frowning slightly, but putting her hand on my shoulder and rubbing it gently. “I’m still not sure how that works.”

“Neither am I, and it makes my head hurt to think about it, so let’s not,” I groaned, making the turn onto my street. “I don’t know if that counts, anyway. It’s not like I remember growing up with him, going on trips or whatever. I still feel like I’m flying by the seat of my pants with him sometimes.”

“But he loves you. And you love him. Don’t you?” she asked softly.

I pulled into the driveway, setting the parking brake and turning off the engine, then turned to Alice and gave her a small smile. “I do. It’s still...a little surprising to me how much I do.”

“You should count yourself lucky,” she replied. “I love Carlisle and Esme, I really do, but...they’ve never felt precisely like parents to me. More like dear friends, or older siblings. We’re family, no doubt about it, and I’d fight tooth and nail for them, but I don’t really remember what it’s like to have parents. I wonder if mine were any good to me. I suppose they must not have been, considering where I ended up.”

I reached up to stroke her cheek lightly, and her eyes met mine. “Maybe they just didn’t know what else to do. Maybe they were trying to do well by you. I’m sorry, I don’t quite recall all the details. Just what I told you weeks ago.”

“You said people treated me like an abomination because of my powers,” Alice said quietly. “Did that include my own parents? My sister? You said I had a stepmother...did my father send me away at her request, like the start of some twisted fairy tale? There are so many questions I’ll just - never
know the answer to, Bella.”

“I know. I wish I could give you the answers. I wish I had them all to hand, or…” I paused, shutting my eyes and pushing those dangerous thoughts away. I didn’t want to risk triggering my powers by accident, as I had on the rooftop, the night we’d first kissed. I couldn’t be sure what the consequences would be. When I opened my eyes once more, Alice was still watching me, concerned but understanding, and her lips curled into a small, relieved smile. “I’m sorry. That’s all. But - that is all in the past, Cinderella, and you did make it to the ball.”

Alice’s smile split into a grin. “Not yet, I haven’t. Well. Not with you. Still a couple weeks to go on that one, Princess Charming,” she returned, leaning in to kiss me slowly and sweetly.

“Fair point,” I murmured against her lips when we - or I - came up for air, my heart fluttering against my chest. “Anyway, if you need a father figure, you can always borrow mine.”

“Mmm, I suppose we’d have to ask him first,” she said, with a crooked smile. “But I may just take you up on that. And speaking of your father, shall we?”

“We shall,” I agreed, grinning back as I popped open the door and we got out of the truck.

*****

Dad was sitting at the kitchen table studying the newspaper when we walked in, though Alice had already pointed out the curtain in the kitchen window falling back into place as we approached the door, so he wasn’t fooling me for a second. His movements as he folded the paper and set it back down were just a little too deliberate to be convincingly casual.

“Hi, girls, how was school?” he asked.

“It was...school,” I summed up, grabbing a glass from the cabinet and pulling the Mountain Dew out of the fridge. “Sorry, just kind of an average Friday. Alice’s brother Edward is taking Angela to the dance, though, so now you know Forks High’s hottest gossip for at least the next week.”

“Yeah? Good for her. I like Angela. And Eddie’s a good kid.” He rubbed his face thoughtfully. “Well, he’s always been polite to me, anyway. Guess I don’t know how he is with girls. Er, women. You know what I mean.”

Alice smiled. “Don’t worry about it, Chief Swan. Trust me, Edward will be a perfect gentleman. It’s just his nature.”

“Right,” dad replied, with maybe a hint of skepticism in his voice at Alice’s opinion. I caught his eye, sipping my soda and giving him a level look, and he cleared his throat, turning back to my girlfriend. “You, uh - you can just call me Charlie, you know.”

“Oh, if you’re sure. I wouldn’t want to overstep,” Alice replied politely. “Thank you again for inviting me to the game and everything.”

“Ah, don’t mention it,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck and reddening slightly. “I’ve been wanting to get some quality time in with Bella, and seeing as you two are attached at the hip and all
“Dad, we’re not that bad,” I protested. “You know I’d spend some time with you if you asked, just the two of us.”

He gave me a sheepish look. “I know, I know. Just - well, I’m your dad. I want to see who you’ve been spending all your time with. I’d do just the same if you were dating, I don’t know, Edward.”

I sputtered, choking on my soda briefly and setting the glass down as I tried to get my breathing back to normal. Alice came to my side at human speeds, patting and rubbing my back. “Okay,” I croaked, after a few seconds. “I did not need that mental image.”

“What? I thought you and Eddie were friends!” dad said, standing now, eyeing me with concern.

“We are, we’re just - the thought of dating him is - not appealing. No offense,” I added to Alice.

Alice smirked. “I’m perfectly happy to hear that you have no interest in dating my brother, thank you.”

“Anyway,” I added, taking a deep, ragged breath, trying to ignore the lingering tickle in my throat. “Dad, you know perfectly well you’d have been cleaning your shotgun if I’d brought a boy home.”

He flushed again, demonstrating once more exactly who I’d inherited my own splotchy blush from. “Yeah...well...you don’t just go threatening a lady like that. I, uh...guess the shotgun would be a little much anyway. For anyone.”

“Little bit,” I agreed. “Okay, I’m going to go freshen up, then I should be good to go.”

“Oh - wait, hang on,” dad said, ducking into the living room and coming back with a couple gift bags, one bright red, another blue. He handed the red bag to me, offering the other to Alice. “I got you girls a little something.”

“What? Dad, you didn’t have to do that,” I replied, reaching into the bag and pulling out a folded green top. My eyebrows shot up, and sure enough, I unfolded it to reveal a Seattle Storm basketball jersey. I quickly turned it around to the back, grinning fiercely as I saw the name Jackson and the number 15 printed in bold white letters. “Oh my God, you remembered! This is amazing, thank you so much - damn, I just wish we were going to a Storm game.”

“Of course I remembered. Your favorite player, right? And maybe when the WNBA season starts,” he replied. “Tonight, though - turns out she’ll be at the game signing autographs. I heard about it a little while ago.”

My jaw dropped, and I stared up at him at wide eyes. “Wait, you’re serious? You’re serious. Oh my God oh my God oh my God, she’s going to be at the game - Alice, Lauren Jackson is going to be at the game tonight!”

She giggled as I turned to look at her, and nodded slowly in response. “Yes, I heard. Just a moment ago, in fact. Do I need to be jealous? Because I do remember your thing for tall, sporty girls.”

“No - I mean - shut up,” I fired back, my cheeks burning. “She’s just...amazing. I might die. I might actually die. Holy shit. Uh, crap, holy crap, sorry.”

“Damn, with a reaction like this, I’m real glad I didn’t buy you the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue she’s in,” dad muttered, running his fingers through his hair.
“She’s in the Swimsuit Issue?!” I exclaimed, my voice cracking.

“Hey, Alice, why don’t you take a look at your gift!” he exclaimed in response, turning to her. “I wasn’t totally sure what to get you, or if you’d prefer a Celtics jersey or whatever, but I figured another Storm player would be okay.”

“Oh, I don’t really follow basketball anymore, but this is so sweet of you, really. Thank you so much,” Alice said graciously, pulling another jersey from her bag. Hers was printed with the name Bird and the number 10. “Bird?”

“Sue Bird. I’m told she’s a monster,” dad explained, with a small grin.

“She is, she broke her nose last year and still came back to help the Storm win the championship,” I interjected, snapping out of my reverie. “She’s a point guard and she’s awesome. Wait, she’s not signing autographs tonight too, is she?”

Dad chuckled. “Uh, no, just Lauren Jackson. Which is probably for the best, seeing how you reacted.”

“I’m fine. I’m good, I got it out of my system,” I assured him, though I turned my gaze back to my new jersey in adoration. “Lauren Jackson, though.”

Alice shook her head, giving dad a sympathetic look. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t embarrass either of us.”

“Thanks, because I was in no way prepared for this,” he muttered in response. “Okay, kid, go get ready, we should get going soon.”

“Yes. Yep. I’m on it,” I agreed quietly, somehow managing not to trip as I nearly walked on air up to my room, my eyes on the jersey almost the entire time.

****

Dad pulled his own, rarely-used personal car out of the garage for the drive to Seattle, seeing as we were going well outside his jurisdiction and it wasn’t exactly polite to put your daughter and her girlfriend in the backseat of a police cruiser designed not to open from the backseat. The car in question was a green Mercury Sable, maybe a decade or so old but well-kept, and though I’d only seen it in passing before, somehow it seemed very familiar.

We occupied ourselves as well as we could on the long drive. Dad put on some sports talk radio station, and I tried to focus on getting some of my reading assignments out of the way, despite my excitement over the game and the prospect of meeting my favorite WNBA player of all time. Alice kept up a steady, polite chatter while I read, periodically pulling me into the conversation but mostly talking to my father.

About midway through the drive, she caught my eye, flashing me a wicked grin as she spoke. “So, Charlie, weird question - do you ever name your cars?”

“Oh my God, Alice,” I hissed.
“Uh...that is a weird question,” he replied, with an awkward chuckle, glancing in the rearview. “Can’t say that I do, exactly. Why do you ask? And Bells, what’s with that face?”

“Nothing, I’m just pretty sure it’s my dad’s job to embarrass me in front of my girlfriend, not the other way around,” I retorted, pouting at Alice.

She fluttered her eyelashes at me, giving me an innocent smile. “What? Why are you embarrassed? I thought anything you use day to day should have a name. Like Red Sonja.”

“I’m going to get you back for this, Cullen,” I promised.

Dad glanced in the mirror again long enough to raise his eyebrows at me. “Who’s Red Sonja?”

“Aside from the she-devil with a sword, mighty barbarian warrior, and terror of the Hyrkanian steppes, my truck. Because she’s big and red and you don’t want to mess with her,” I replied, half-mumbling.

“I see,” he said, letting out another slow chuckle. “And you name everything you use day-to-day?”

“The important stuff! You know, machines. The truck, the computer.” I raked my fingers through my hair.

“The computer is named Don Quixote,” Alice supplied helpfully, and I shot her a glare.

“Why is the computer named Don Quixote?”

“Nothing, no reason,” I interjected hastily. “It’s great, it’s a great computer.”

“Uhhhh huh,” dad said slowly. “Does this mean you’ve named the cruiser, too?”

“I mean...she’s your car. I might think of her as Vicky sometimes. But that’s just because she’s a Crown Vic,” I muttered. “Pretty obvious, I guess.”

“Are all the machines in your life girls?” Alice asked, smirking.

“I get along better with girls,” I said, giving her a pointed look. “Usually.”

“Mmm, quelle surprise.” Her face split into a grin, and she reached out to squeeze my hand.

“I swear I learn something new about you every day, kid,” Charlie muttered, shaking his head slowly. “Vicky. Huh. That’s not so bad.”

I stuck my tongue out at Alice, leaning against her shoulder. “See, it’s catching on.”

She let out a little, trilling laugh, reaching up to brush some hair from my face. “God help us all.”

*****

It was the start of the third quarter, and the SuperSonics were still trailing the Timberwolves, and I was in the process of yelling myself hoarse. “Defense! Defense! Come on, get some freaking defense!
“I may never take this girl to a live basketball game again,” dad remarked to Alice, both of them still sitting while I was on my feet screaming at the court.

“I’m honestly impressed she has it in her. She could barely even speak when it was our turn with Lauren Jackson,” she replied, grinning.

I dropped back into my seat, pouting in protest. “I managed to get out a hello! And told her she was my favorite player!”

“Mmm, I’m not sure I heard that over the high-pitched squeaking sounds you were making,” Alice teased, putting her arm around my shoulders. “But at least we got the autograph and picture you came for. You having a good time, baby?”

I leaned against her, reaching up to squeeze her hand. “I’d have a better one if the Sonics would turn this game around already. But otherwise, yeah,” I affirmed, nodding, as I looked over to dad. “Thank you so much for - all of this, dad, really. It’s amazing, and you didn’t have to do any of it, really.”

“So you’ve said. But really, don’t mention it, kiddo,” he replied, reddening slightly and clearing his throat, then offering us the bucket of popcorn he’d bought at halftime. “Uh, popcorn, Bells? Alice?”

“Yes please,” I agreed, grabbing a handful and munching cheerfully.

Alice smiled graciously. “No, thank you, Charlie. Actually, I should probably use the ladies’ room.”

She started to disentangle herself, and I shot a glance back at her, giving her another slight, pleading pout. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Mm, how could I? I’m a monster,” she joked, leaning in to kiss my cheek before she got up. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be counting the seconds,” I promised, beaming at her as she headed down the row toward the aisle. I heard dad clearing his throat again as I turned my gaze back to the court, and glanced over at him to see his face was slightly red again, and couldn’t help but blush at my own PDA in front of my father. “Uh. Sorry.”

“No, I mean - I knew it’d happen sooner or later. It’s...odd. Maybe a little unsettling. I’m glad you’re happy, though,” he replied, pausing for a moment. “Bells, I’m - not exactly sure how to ask this, but - do you think it’s possible she has an eating disorder?”

I had to suppress a sigh of relief as I answered. “No, dad, it’s just a medical condition. I don’t have all the details, but we’ve talked about it. All the Cullens have it, it’s partly why Dr. Cullen and his wife adopted them. She has a special diet and she can’t really go outside of it,” I explained, following the old, practiced story...even as I felt a slight twinge of guilt at lying to my father. Though I supposed the ‘special diet’ wasn’t precisely a lie. “But trust me, she’s super healthy, and way
stronger than she looks. She can probably bench press more than you can. Size matters not.”

“Well...if you’re sure. I guess her dad is a doctor, he’d probably notice if something was off,” Charlie said slowly. “I just...she makes you happier than I’ve ever seen you. I know I don’t really get what you two have, but I know you have that. So - I want her to be okay. I want you both to be okay.”

I couldn’t help smiling, my heart melting as I shifted to rest my head on his shoulder, tucking my arm in his. “It’s really sweet that you’re concerned. She’s fine, I promise, and we’re - more than fine. But thanks, dad.”

“Aw, Bells,” he murmured, kissing my temple. “I love you to pieces, and I’m always gonna be here for you. I hope you know that by now.”

“I do,” I promised, shutting my eyes briefly. “And I love you, too.”

*****

The Sonics turned it all around in the fourth quarter, and by then I really was losing my voice from screaming in utter joy. By the time they secured their victory and we made our way through the crowds back to the car, I could scarcely speak above a whisper, though honestly I was so exhausted I didn’t care too much. Dad made a quick stop for coffee before we left the city, turning some talk radio on again to try and keep himself awake for the drive home, and Alice and I huddled in the backseat, leaning against one another and pretending to sleep. In my case, I didn’t think I’d be pretending for long, and I trusted Alice completely to sense if dad was drifting off and keep us both safe.

Her fingers idly ran across my back as my breathing slowly grew deep and even, but I could sense, somehow, that there was something troubling her, and it kept me from surrendering to sleep entirely. Finally, I turned to plant a kiss on her cold shoulder, and murmured very softly, under my breath, so dad couldn’t hear.

“What is it?”

Alice’s voice came clearly to my ears, though I knew from prior experience that she, too, was pitching it just so, ensuring our conversation would remain private. “You love him so much, Bella. I can tell. When the time comes - are you really going to be able to leave him in the dark?”

It took a moment for my sleep-addled brain to work through the question. “You mean...when James comes. When we have to run.”

She nodded slightly, ruffling my hair with the movement. “Yes. What if something happens, what if - that’s the last time you see him? I still can’t be sure what’s going to happen. I may never be sure. You could get venom in your bloodstream, you could start turning, or worse...and he’ll...never be able to know the truth.”

I wanted to sit up, to look at her directly, but I didn’t dare. Not when it would attract dad’s attention. “What are you saying? What other choice do we have?”

“I’m saying...” She hesitated briefly, then pressed on. “I’m saying, love, that if you want to tell him
the truth, I’m with you. No matter what that means. The Volturi don’t bother us much, and I’ll see
them coming. Their visits require a lot of preparation. They may never have to know.”

I felt a chill run down my spine at the mention of the Volturi, but I set it aside as I really considered
her offer. Could I leave Charlie all on his own? Could I really make peace with the fact that he might
never know the truth, that I might simply disappear and he might spend the rest of his life looking for
me, wondering where I went? If I loved him, if I truly loved him, didn’t I at least owe him some
explanation before the time came, and damn the consequences?

The answer came to me, clear as a bolt of lightning, and the answer was no.

I sniffed, very quietly, feeling tears welling in my eyes, and I nodded incrementally against Alice’s
shoulder. “I can’t just leave him behind, Alice. I can’t leave him not knowing.”

“Okay. Okay,” she whispered, kissing my temple and letting out a long breath. “We’ll make a plan.
Go to sleep, Bella. Dream sweet dreams. We’ll work it all out, I promise.”

“I love you,” I murmured, every atom of my heart aching for her.

“I love you,” she whispered back. I hummed softly, and gave my mind over to sleep at last, and we
drove on through the darkness, back to the home I’d made, back to the only home I still knew.

Chapter End Notes

Not much to report this time, but we are nearing the end. The next chapter will cover the
school dance, and then it’s time at last for vampire baseball.

I recently posted the As Dreams Are Made On Spotify playlist to the official story
Tumblr, twilight-adamo dot tumblr dot com. This is the music I’m listening to as I work
on the story. Feel free to take a listen if you like.
It had been easy enough to decide I was going to tell my dad the truth. Actually doing it, in a way that didn’t cause him to freak out and forbid me from seeing Alice or putting myself at risk at all, or maybe just grab me and flee the state...well, on further reflection, that seemed a lot harder. The days continued to pass as we debated the best way to do it. Leah had vetoed the idea of simply shifting in front of him, and though Callie was willing to demonstrate a spell or two, that still left the matter of introducing him to the rest of it, and getting to the heart of the matter: I was in danger, we’d decided the best way to deal with it was to face it down, and Rosalie would basically be kidnapping me once the shit hit the fan, and he could either come with us or go hide in La Push. I didn’t figure he’d find either option all that appealing.

It was Rose, direct and pragmatic as ever, who’d finally interceded with her plan: we weren’t going to tell him until the last minute. Telling him any sooner would give him a chance to throw all our planning out the window, and Alice had to admit she didn’t see him agreeing to our flawless logic and twiddling his thumbs as we waited for James to show up. Plus, even if he did agree to our plan, he’d probably insist on sticking by me, which might give James someone else to fix his powers on. So Callie would meet us at the house when the time came - I remembered from the books that dad had been present when Bella packed up to go - and we’d drop it all on him then and there. It seemed cruel, and maybe it wasn’t really the best plan, but I just couldn’t see a better option.

The day of the spring dance came at last, and Alice swung by my house to pick me up around eleven. I had no idea what she had planned - surely we didn’t have a full eight hours or primping ahead of us - and she’d just told me to eat a light breakfast and dress comfortably. The day was shockingly warm, and clear, so I’d settled on the lacy white top I’d had on when I first arrived in this world, paired with a light tan jacket and the one pair of jeans I owned that were just tight enough to show off my ass and legs without making me feel like I’d cut off my circulation. I kept my makeup light, mostly just eyeshadow and a touch of color in my cheeks and lips, and put my hair into another French braid, and of course I was wearing the locket and charm bracelet she’d given me. The second I saw her pull up outside, the top of her convertible and all the tinted windows up, I was out the door.

“I scarely remembered to lock up before I dashed over to the car, ducking into the passenger seat.

“Hey,” I breathed, leaning over to kiss her cheek. “Where are we headed? I didn’t figure I’d see you outdoors before dark, considering.”

“Like I was going to miss the chance to show off?” she asked, glancing back at me, her lips curling in a coy smirk. “You haven’t seen me shine yet, baby. Don’t you think it’s past time you did?”

I took a second look at her. She was almost totally covered: blue jeans, hiking boots, a long black coat, and a purple silk scarf wound around her head, topped off by a broad-brimmed white hat and round sunglasses with dark rose-tinted lenses. But now, I realized, she’d be shedding a lot of those layers - once we were alone. And there was only one place I could think of where we could be alone while still basking in the sun.

“The meadow,” I realized aloud. “You’re taking me to that meadow in the woods.”

Alice sighed, though she still smiled, shaking her head as she pulled out of my driveway. “I swear, that book spoils all my surprises.”

“Not all of them. There’s still a lot that I never expected,” I assured her, leaning over to kiss her shoulder.
“Yeah? Like what?” she asked.

I smiled fondly, running my fingers down her cold arm. “Like you. The books really undersold you. It’s practically criminal.”

She laughed, high and bright, though it seemed oddly muted, somehow. “Well, they did portray me as straight. Clearly something went horribly wrong.”

“There were moments where you didn’t seem that straight. Maybe that was just in the films. Sometimes I still get a little confused,” I said, turning my gaze up to her face. Her eyes were on the road, and I couldn’t see them clearly behind her sunglasses. “Alice? Is everything all right?”

“Oh...I could lie and say of course it is, but...” She let out a long breath, shuddering slightly in the middle of it. “There’s a storm coming tomorrow. I saw it last night. Perfect conditions for a family baseball game.”

“James is coming.” I rubbed her arm idly, looking out the windshield at the road ahead, biting my lip in silence for a long moment. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Alice repeated, glancing over at me.

“Okay. We knew it was going to happen. We’ve done the best we can. Here it is, no more waiting,” I said quietly. “In a day or two, this’ll all be over. And I trust Rose, and Jasper, and everything around us, to do their best to keep us safe. Don’t you?”

“I do, I just - I suppose I didn’t expect it to come all at once,” she replied. “And you didn’t remember it happening right after the dance?”

I shook my head. “Bella didn’t go to the dance in the books. Edward practically had to drag her to her junior prom. So I guess it all got a little - disconnected in my head. If I’d figured it out, I would have told you.”

“Of course. I’m sorry.” Alice lapsed into silence for a few seconds, then spoke again. “I could lose you tomorrow. It’s still not totally clear. I can’t even see our encounter with them clearly, and - and I’m too scared, Bella. I’m too scared of what I’ll see if I look too hard.”

“I’m scared, too,” I said, very softly, kissing her shoulder again. “But we have to put our faith in the others now. This is the plan we all agreed to. To stop James and his coven forever, not just keep ourselves out of harm’s way. There’s a risk, but...I think it’s right. I think it’s the only moral thing to do.”

“I still hate it,” she murmured, turning briefly to brush her lips across my scalp. “I’d hold off tomorrow forever if I could. Part of me wants to run with you, right now. Hell, part of me wants to bite you before he can even come close to either of us.”

I couldn’t help stiffening at that, very slightly, but I forced confidence I didn’t entirely feel into my voice. “You won’t, though. Not until I ask.”

“Of course not. I’d never take that from you,” she assured me. “I just hate knowing what’s to come and - not knowing we’ll come through it unscathed.”

“Don’t think about it,” I urged her, sitting up and pulling one of her hands from the wheel, squeezing as hard as I dared. “Just...let it go for now. Focus on me, on our time together. We have today, and tonight, and no matter what your powers may show you, nothing about the future is certain. Be in the moment with me. Please?”
She looked over at me, and I could see, faintly, her eyes meeting mine through her long, dark lashes, behind the tinted lenses. Her lips curled into a pained smile, her white teeth flashing brilliantly in the meager light that made it into the car. “I’ll try. I swear I’ll try.”

“That’ll have to do,” I sighed, leaning in and capturing her lips with mine, very briefly. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she echoed, her voice slightly strangled with emotion. I was sure she would be crying, if she could. “So, so much. More than you may ever know.”

I reached up to stroke her cheek, locking eyes with her for a moment before she had to turn her attention back to the road. “I know, Alice. I promise you. I know.”

*****

The pavement of the highway came to an end, and Alice pulled her car off to park in the dirt, beneath the shade of the towering pines. Then, flashing me another brilliant smile, she scooped me up and carefully swung me around to her back, waiting until I had my arms and legs wrapped tightly around her before diving into the trees with a whoop. I had no idea how she dodged every single limb with such grace, keeping me safe from the trees that whipped past, but scarcely before I’d caught my breath, we were on the edge of a wide, sunlit meadow, already filled with wildflowers blooming in riotous colors. A blanket lay at the center of the clearing - the same blanket Alice and I had reclined on weeks ago, when she’d taken me up to the roof of her house to look at the stars. A picnic basket rested in the grass just at the blanket’s edge.

Alice set me gently back on my feet, lingering in the treeline as I regained my bearings and stepped into the sunlight, feeling its warmth on my skin. I basked for a moment, tilting my face upward and shutting my eyes against the golden light. Shedding my jacket, I tossed it vaguely in the direction of the blanket, eager to expose more of myself to the sun. I’d always been painfully pale and prone to sunburn - a combination of Irish and Swedish descent will do that to a girl - but I’d craved the sun nonetheless. And much as I loved Forks for the smell of pine, the quiet seclusion, and the presence of some of my favorite people on Earth, I craved it still.

The moment passed, and I turned to smile coyly at Alice, gazing invitingly through my lashes. She gave me a faintly bittersweet smile in return, removing her hat and scarf, then pulling off her coat. Underneath, she was wearing a purple spaghetti-strap top trimmed in lace, fitted to her slender figure, dipping low enough to show her cleavage. She took off her boots and socks, too, then unbuttoned her jeans and pulled them off, revealing her black panties beneath. She was still far from naked, but she wasn’t leaving much to the imagination, and my eyes were locked on her as she stepped gracefully out of the trees.

The sunlight hit her in earnest, and she seemed to turn instantly to crystal, the light scattering in a billion directions. She glittered like a diamond - no, like a whole handful of diamonds, tiny and perfect and held up to the light - and rainbows danced across the trees and the grass all around us. She had always been drop-dead gorgeous, but now she was positively heavenly, in a very literal sense. She looked like an angel fallen to Earth, and I understood, in that moment, how angels could be both beautiful and terrible to behold.

I had no words. I barely had a coherent thought in my head. I sucked my breath in sharply, and on the exhale, I could only say, “Wow.”
Through the dazzling light, I thought she smiled, and she strode toward me, reaching up to put a hand behind my head and pulling me in for a deep, heated kiss. She still seemed a little on the cool side, but she had warmed rapidly in the sunlight, and I wanted nothing more than to hold her here forever. I grabbed her hips, tugging her closer still, my fingers moving to stroke her rear lightly as I returned the kiss, parting my lips so our tongues could play against one another. I tasted her sweet venom, and my blood thundered through my veins, my need for her burning like a bonfire.


“I know, baby. I know,” she murmured, kissing my throat as she started tugging at the hem of her shirt, stepping back to strip it off entirely. I groaned again, very quietly, in protest, and she smirked, shooting a pointed look at my jeans.

I took the hint, quickly shedding my shoes and socks, yanking my shirt over my head and fumbling to get free of my pants as I watched Alice undress. After a moment, she took pity on me, helping me get them off, her fingers sliding deliciously along my legs as she did.

We crashed into one another, falling back onto the blanket, all but inhaling one another in our passion. We shed our bras and panties like they were about to burst into flames, and then I was kissing my way down the length of her, across her chest and stomach and lower still, my tongue lapping shamelessly at her flesh, my fingers gripping her sides tightly. She moaned my name, and I felt a shudder go through me, tugging at my deepest nerve. Her toes, shoved between my legs, ran against my inner thighs, sending shivers through my skin.

And somewhere in our passion, as we rolled in the blanket and the grass, drinking one another in, we did it. We forgot all that was yet to come, all that had come before, and lived, for once, in the moment. There was nothing in the world but the two of us and our love, and the blessed sun that spread her light and heat upon us, smiling on our union. Some dim and distant part of me wished it could last forever, but that, too, was soon drowned beneath the waves of our lust and need.

*****

I was ravenously hungry by the time we finished, and made short work of the picnic lunch Alice had prepared before falling back into her arms, my appetites sated. She still glimmered beautifully in the light, though thin, wispy clouds scudded across the sky, periodically dimming her brilliance. We cuddled closely, murmuring sweet nothings to one another, but the longer she stroked my hair and skin with her slender, nimble fingers, the more fatigued I became. She whispered at last that I should sleep, if I needed to, and though I tried to fight it, I soon drifted off.

I opened my eyes to find myself once again in the seaside cottage of my dreams, Dee curled up and purring against my side, sandwiched between me and the woman who was my constant companion here, for all that she never even stirred. I had no idea what she really looked like, I realized: I had a vague sense of her face, but I had never seen her eyes, or the shape of her body beneath the sheets. It felt like a violation, somehow, to look more closely, or to try and wake her.

Dee woke and stood, stretching, greeting me with her quiet, broken mew. I smiled back at her, sitting up and scratching her chin, watching her screw her eyes tightly shut as she purred in pleasure. I looked around, my eyes catching on the window that looked out upon the shore. I could see the dock, and there was clearly a sailboat in the sea just beyond, anchored a short distance away from the pier, not quite close enough to dock in earnest. It bobbed gently in the water, and somehow it filled
my heart with dread. I didn’t want it to come any closer. I didn’t dare approach it.

I would stay in the cottage this time, I decided, turning away from the window with a slight shudder. Or if I went outside at all, I would stick close to the forest, visible through the window on the opposite wall. The scent of pine drifted in, familiar and soothing, speaking to me of all the things I loved. If I went too close to the water, I knew, there would be no turning back. But the forest was safe, or so the logic of dreams told me.

I scooped Dee gently into my arms, and she curled obediently against my chest, still purring softly. Carefully, I rose from the bed, and padded across the floor to a set of nearby shelves. On the top shelf rested an apple, a bloodied and torn tulip, a torn red ribbon, a red queen paired with a white pawn, and a red puzzle piece. Then, in the blink of an eye, those random objects were gone, replaced by five books leaning haphazardly against one another. The other shelves were packed with more books, with CDs, with sheet music, and with baked clay figures that seemed to touch some nerve buried deep inside me. I shifted Dee to one arm, and she stirred slightly as I reached out with my free hand to touch one of the figures, feeling the cool, lightly textured surface.

“I made these,” I realized aloud. “I used to sculpt. I’d almost forgotten. This...this is it, isn’t it? This is what’s left of what I was.”

Dee mewed, squirming, and I instinctively set her down. Then, all of a sudden, I heard another cat mewing as well, high and sweet and just barely audible. I looked toward the sound to see a tiny gray and white kitten poking her head out from beneath a covered table, watching me with big gray-green eyes. I grinned, dropping to my knees and holding out my hand, and she skittered over to me, headbutting my palm and mewing again.

“October. Of course you’re here, too. What were you doing over there?” I asked, picking her up and standing, walking over to the table. There was a book resting on the tabletop, open to a poem somewhere in the middle.

I have been here before
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

I shook my head, then looked away, counting slowly to twenty before looking at the page again.

I have been here before
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

“Not a dream,” I breathed softly, stroking October’s head gently with my thumb. “Or not just a dream. Then…”

I looked from one window to the other, biting my lip. Then I put October carefully down, letting her scamper over to Dee and sniff shamelessly at the older cat’s ruffled fur until Dee cuffed her face with one soft paw. I smiled faintly at the pair of them, then stepped to the door.

“The ocean feels like leaving. The forest feels like home,” I said, more for my own benefit than theirs. I let out a long breath, nodding to myself. “I have to go, girls. I hope I’ll see you again soon.”
They turned to watch me in perfect, unblinking silence, curling their tails around their feet as I opened the door and stepped outside. I hesitated on the threshold, but at last I shut the cottage door behind myself, turning toward the forest and walking into the embrace of the towering pines.


*****

I started awake, blinking in the sunlight, still laying in Alice’s arms on the picnic blanket she’d brought. The sun was no longer quite as high in the sky above us, but the day was still warm, and Alice herself still dazzled. I swallowed, already beginning to feel a little lightheaded again with lust for her.

“Baby? What time is it?” I asked at a whisper.

“About three,” she murmured back, kissing my temple. “Did you sleep well? Did you dream?”

There was something in her voice that sent a thrill up my spine, but I turned to face her, nodding seriously. “I did. A dream I’ve been having for...a while, if I’m honest.”

Alice frowned, her brow furrowing slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...I keep dreaming of this strange place. A cottage by the sea,” I started. Within a matter of moments, I’d told her everything. The altered form I wore in the dream. The woman who slept eternally at my side. The cats, the books, the sculptures. The sea and shore, the sailboat, and the old, comforting forest. Her frown deepened as I went on, and finally she shook her head slowly.

“I’m not really sure what it could mean. Prophecy isn’t exactly your superpower,” she said. “Unless there’s more you haven’t been telling me.”

I couldn’t ignore the slight reproval in her voice, and I winced a little in response. “I’m sorry. I really did think they were just random dreams. Sometimes...back home, I did sometimes think I’d dreamt the future. I had a serious case of deja vu on multiple occasions. But that’s a trick of the mind, it doesn’t mean I actually had prophetic dreams. Besides, how could all this be the future? The beach, the cottage, the return of my late cat...all of it seems pretty unlikely.”

“Then maybe it really is some manifestation of your mind. You dreamt of saving important keepsakes from a burning mansion when you overloaded yourself with Rosalie,” Alice reminded me. “Or maybe they really are just dreams. Are you sure you’ve never seen text remain stable in your dreams before?”

I shook my head. “I mean, I’m using a new brain and all - or I seem to be - so I suppose it’s possible the rules of my dreams have changed. But every time I’ve looked away from a book while dreaming, the text has been completely different at second glance.”

Alice hummed thoughtfully, brooding in silence for a moment. “And you’re sure you’ve never seen that woman before?”

“I’m not. I don’t remember her consciously, and - well, maybe my mind is simply modeling her on you. But no, I can’t seem to remember meeting her before.”

“Strange.” She took my hand, stroking my palm with her thumb. “But I can’t see much reason to be alarmed.”
“I guess not. Except I don’t like the looks of that boat. I’m not sure why...well. I’ve never been a strong swimmer, and I did almost drown once. But I’ve been on boats before without any problems,” I replied.

“I’m sure we could find something on dream interpretation in Carlisle’s study, if you wanted,” she suggested, a faintly teasing lilt to her voice.

“Yeah, can’t say I’ve ever really put much stock in that. Besides, I can think of any number of things I’d much rather be doing,” I replied, shifting to face her fully, our chests brushing against one another as I leaned in for a sweet, lingering kiss.

She kissed me back readily, though she pulled back after a moment, her lips curling into a smirk. “Like getting ready for the dance?”

I groaned, running my hand down her side as she giggled. “Don’t we have something like four hours to go?”

“You’re right, no time to waste,” Alice said brightly, looking around and starting to grab our scattered clothes. “We both have to shower, wash our hair, dry our hair, style our hair, do our makeup...”

“We could probably save time if we showered together,” I suggested, leaning down to kiss the nape of her neck as I stroked her lower belly softly, prompting a soft purr in response.

She looked back at me over her shoulder, trying to look stern, though the way her golden eyes glittered under her heavy lids and dark lashes ruined the effect. “Clearly I’ve created a monster.”

“Grr,” I agreed, capturing her lips with mine and tugging her close. “Argh.”

Her eyelashes fluttered, and she sighed against my lips as she turned toward me once more, her fingers running along my bare thighs. “Well, I suppose we could be fashionably late...”

*****

All things considered, we weren’t that late to the dance - it took a little while to get the grass, twigs and other detritus out of our hair, and to scrub down and everything, but Alice had literally been planning this for weeks, and her powers meant she didn’t even have to start applying my makeup or styling my hair to see how it would look. There were a couple false starts, perhaps, and one or two last-minute changes, but once we got underway, she worked quickly and with absolute confidence.

The dress she had made for me was nothing short of breathtaking, and for all her teasing about my Disney princess obsession, she’d come up with a gorgeous homage to my favorite character. The navy bodice, so dark it was almost black, reminded me of Ariel’s outfit from her tour of Eric’s kingdom, though without the billowing shirt underneath. It clung like a second skin to my chest and torso, baring my arms and much of my back, and showing off some of my cleavage. Twin lengths of white silk sprung from the top of the bodice, on either side, sweeping over my shoulders and down my back to rejoin the bodice at its base. The bodice came to a point below my waist, where a skirt as blue as the ocean on a sunny day flared around my legs, the hem falling roughly at the middle of my calf. A pair of strappy navy heels, thankfully not too high, completed the look, and Alice had painted my fingernails and toenails in a blue-green hue with motes of gold and silver shining through the polish here and there. My hair fell mainly in loose waves, though she had gathered some of it to the
left side of my head, pinning it in place and accenting it with a large white flower.

For her own dress, Alice had created an asymmetrical bodice of white lace, held up by spaghetti straps and just translucent enough in parts to tease her bare skin without becoming indecent. The lace flowed into her dark skirt, broken trails curling into the navy fabric as they ended somewhere around her thighs. She’d fluffed out her short black hair to frame her face, and her expertly lined and shadowed eyes seemed especially prominent, as did her ripe, darkly painted lips.

Most of our friends were already at the dance by the time we arrived, though Rosalie and Emmett, despite leaving before us, were still nowhere in sight, and I exchanged a knowing smirk with Alice even as part of me wished we’d taken a page from their playbook. Still, Mike was already dancing with Jessica, and Angela was practically glowing on Edward’s arm, speaking quietly with him near the refreshments table as they both watched the dancers. Alice and I made our way over to the pair of them just in time for Mike and Jessica to take a break and join us.

“Bella! Oh my God, you look amazing!” Jess exclaimed, pulling me into a hug, then looking at Alice and gasping softly before hugging her as well. “So do you! Holy crap, where did you get these dresses? Not Port Angeles. Wait, you didn’t go to Seattle without telling me, right?”

“No - no, we didn’t,” I promised quickly. “Alice made them.”

“Alice made - okay. This is deadly serious,” Jessica said, grabbing Alice’s hands and locking eyes with her. “Do you take commissions? Because prom is in like two months and I have nothing.”

Alice laughed, perhaps a little uncomfortably, in the face of Jessica’s intensity. “Don’t go spreading it around and - maybe we can talk.”

Jess squealed in excitement, and Angela touched my arm, offering me a more sedate smile. “Hi, Bella. You really do look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Angela. So do you,” I said honestly, taking in her radiant smile and dark green dress. My eyes flicked briefly to Edward. “You two having a good time?”

He smiled, genuinely, looking fondly at Angela. “I think so. Are you still enjoying yourself?”

She beamed back at him. “Definitely. Though I’d like to dance to the next slow song, if you don’t mind.”

He brought her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers lightly. “I’d be delighted.”

I started to grin, but before I could say anything else, I heard a low murmur through the crowd, and turned instinctively toward the gymnasium door. I expected to see Rosalie and Emmett walking in - I’d seen Rose in her dress before they left, and I was pretty sure she’d stop traffic on the Autobahn - but that wasn’t the sight that awaited me.

It was Callie I saw instead, her dark hair now sporting a fresh streak of teal and bound up in an elegant updo, while her tall, athletic frame was sheathed in a strapless purple dress. That wasn’t the surprising part. The surprising part was the fact that she was on the arm of Leah Clearwater.

Leah, for her part, was in tight black pants that showed off her muscular legs, a white tank top that was at least clean and bright enough that it didn’t look out of place among the formal wear the other students were sporting, and a cropped suit jacket with the sleeves rolled up past her elbows. A black bow tie was cinched around her throat like a choker, and her short, black hair was playfully mussed. She broke into a grin as she saw us staring, and Callie shot me a smirk, and they made their way over.
“What’s the matter, Ginger Spice, you never seen a couple of girls go to a dance before?” Leah asked. “Careful, that’s a good way to catch flies.”

I realized my mouth was hanging open, and quickly snapped it shut with an audible click. “No, of course - I just didn’t realize...Tara...was bringing you.”

“I think you two make an adorable couple,” Angela offered, with a soft smile. “How did you meet?”

“Through Bella. She and Leah are friends,” Callie told her, pausing for a moment. “You and Edward look really, uh - sweet - yourselves.”

I cleared my throat, eager to get off that particular topic, given Callie’s lingering prejudices. “…couple?”

My voice came out in a slight squeak. This was going so very well.

“Bella, she did say she was only seventy-five percent straight,” Alice murmured to me, taking my arm.

“Actually, I think we settled on, what, sixty-forty?” Leah added, looking over at Callie, who smirked back and nodded.

“Uhhhh huh. Hey, Ca - Tara, I need to go freshen up, want to join me?” I asked.

“Oooh, good idea, I’ll come with,” Jessica added, breaking into a bright grin.

“I - but…” I racked my brain, but couldn’t come up with a reasonable objection.

Callie was visibly trying not to laugh. “Sure, why not. See you in a few?” she asked Leah, glancing back at her.

Leah grinned, kissing her cheek lightly. “Hurry back.”

“You, too. I want to put that dance practice to good use,” Alice added to me, giving me a quick peck on the jaw before releasing my arm.

“Great! See ya, Mike,” Jess tossed off, eagerly leading the way to the ladies’ room while I suppressed a groan. The bathroom was, thankfully, empty when we walked in, with all the stall doors hanging open. Jessica immediately started checking her makeup in the mirror. “You know, Bella, I really never expected you to suffer from internalized homophobia.”

My mouth already open to talk to Callie, I turned slowly, meeting Jess’s gaze in the mirror, my voice flat as I responded. “What.”

“Yeah! I mean, that’s what this is, right? You can’t deal with your friend having feelings for other women,” she replied, before tilting her head. “Or is it more of a biphobia thing? Actually, that would make a lot more sense. Sexuality is a spectrum, Bella.”

“I don’t - I know sexuality is a spectrum! I’m not completely...never mind, that’s not the issue here, I just...I don’t want Leah to get hurt,” I replied, looking back at Callie.

“That sure sounds like biphobia,” Jess offered.

Callie folded her arms, frowning at me. “Leah’s a big girl. So am I. What’s the issue?”

“The issue is - um - Jess, I’m sorry. I really need to talk to Tara alone. Please?”
Jessica turned, raising her eyebrows at me. “If this is about magic stuff, I already know all that. Tara’s a witch, you’re dating a vampire, Leah turns into a wolf…”

I glanced between Jessica and Callie, my eyes widening. “You told her everything?”

“I told her the really pertinent stuff. She should know what to look out for. Anyway, she was pretty close to figuring some of it out,” Callie said, shrugging.

Jess nodded. “Yeah, the Cullens never eat. They get food just to play around with it as some kind of cover, which, by the way, kind of wasteful. That medical excuse only goes so far. Plus they’re never around on sunny days and their eyes change color. But I hadn’t heard anything about weird deaths or disappearances in Forks, and I’m not about to go up to suspected vampires and tell them I know, I mean, I’ve seen horror movies. Nooooo thank you.”

I gritted my teeth. “Does she know our history?”

“What, that you two were friends as kids, and Tara reconnected because she wasn’t sure you knew about Alice? Yeah,” Jessica said brightly, before Callie could answer.

Callie shot me a significant look. “Like I said, I told her the pertinent stuff.” I kept staring back at her, and she sighed. “Jess, if you don’t mind, I guess this really is private. Could we meet you back in the gym?”

Jessica’s smile faded, and she glanced between us. “…yeah, sure. See you guys in a few, I guess.”

She stepped out of the bathroom, and I mentally counted backwards from ten before speaking again. Or that was the plan, anyway. I got to three before Callie interrupted my train of thought.

“Oh, good, it’s Irrationally Angry Cass, I love this version,” she snarked. “We’re dating, princess. We’re not exchanging Claddagh rings, or joined at the hip, or planning our big lesbian wedding, or any of the shit you and Alice are up to. We’re hanging out, having fun, maybe making out a little. It’s only been a couple weeks. Here I thought you might actually be happy for us. We’re your friends, right? Or, what, are you still carrying a torch for the girl you already passed over?”

My eyes flew wide open at that accusation. “What? I didn’t - Leah and I hung out, but I didn’t pass her over, and I am not carrying a torch. I’m in massive, codependent love with Alice, remember? You’ve given me too much shit about it to forget.”

“I’ve given you shit because I’m worried about you, like I’ve said!” Callie threw her hands in the air. “Are you actually worried about me or what?”

“I’m worried about Leah!”
“Why?”

“Because she shouldn’t be with someone who’s going to jump through the first portal out of here!” I yelled, before gasping sharply. I clapped a hand over my mouth, but it was far too late.

Callie stared at me, her mouth working silently for several moments before she spoke aloud. “You think I’m just going to leave. If I ever get a chance.”

I looked away, wrapping my arms tightly around myself. “Won’t you?”

“I wouldn’t leave you.”

“Except I’m staying.”


I ground my teeth, but turned to meet her eyes. “What.”

“You’re staying? If we found a way home, you wouldn’t go back? You wouldn’t want to help try and save our world?”

“If our world isn’t dead, it’s dying. You said as much yourself,” I replied, my voice quiet and grim. “This one has a chance to live. We have time to change things. Whatever happened there, it doesn’t have to happen here. Isn’t that what you said we wanted?”

“Not like this! This world is - it’s literally out of a bad novel,” Callie returned.

“Except the people here are real. I’m in love with one of them. You’re dating one of them. Or are you just using Leah?” I fired back, and Callie’s eyes shifted away from mine, her lips twisting slightly.

“...no. She’s real.”

“Good.” I shut my eyes, letting out a long breath. “Some version of me, my past self, exists here. Yours does too, I assume. Our friends, our families. This is some strange melding of Twilight and the world we knew. I don’t know how it happened. But I know we’re here, now, and we have some power to change things, to keep the future you remember from ever coming to pass. I know there are people here who have lives as rich and full as our own. So even if we had a chance to go back to that world you told me about, I’d want to stay here. To look after a world that can live and thrive, that doesn’t have to make the same mistakes. Not to try and save a world we already lost.”

“But if we ever find a way home, if our world still exists - that means it’s not lost. That it can be saved. By definition,” Callie said, looking back at me. “We owe it to our reality to go back. Be honest, Cass. You wouldn’t even be thinking about staying if it weren’t for this thing with Alice.”

I bit my lip, shaking my head slowly. “When I first got here...getting home was all I could think about. I couldn’t see a path to doing it, but I kept trying to work the problem anyway. But a lot of things have happened since then. Alice is part of it. But I also just - don’t feel the same ties you do. Not anymore, not since I overloaded on my own power. You keep calling me Cass, but I don’t even feel anything for that name now. It doesn’t feel like mine. And that spell you cast, weeks ago, to verify our identities? It confirmed what I already felt, Cal. It doesn’t matter who I was. I am Bella Swan. And Bella Swan belongs here.”

Callie stepped back, shaking her head. “Yeah? Well I’m Callie Green. And Callie Green doesn’t. And I thought I knew my best friend better than this. But if you’re Bella Swan now...maybe you’re
not even the person I should be talking to. Maybe 2005-you wasn’t a selfish coward.”

I opened my mouth to reply, my cheeks flushing, but before I could respond, Alice’s voice rang out, sharp and clear. “Okay. That’s enough.”

We both turned toward the door, only to find Alice standing there with her hands on her hips, and Jessica standing beside her, a rather sheepish expression on her face as she gazed awkwardly at the wall. I felt something seeking deep in the pit of my stomach.

“How much of that did you hear, Jessica?” Callie asked, her voice eerily calm.

“...okay, so...basically all of it,” Jess replied. “That eavesdropping spell you showed me is really good.”

I stared at Jessica for a moment, then slowly turned to face Callie again, forcing my voice out through gritted teeth. “You taught. Jessica Stanley. A magic eavesdropping spell.”

“I taught her a few different spells! I didn’t expect her to - okay, in retrospect, I should have expected exactly this, and that’s on me. Jess, we’re gonna have a long talk about this later,” Callie told her, folding her arms and giving her a stern look.

Jessica cringed. “Sorry, I just - oh my God, I have so many questions now.”

“This is not what we’re focusing on right now,” Alice announced, looking to me. “We’re focusing on the part where you were about to have a complete breakdown because you got into a huge fight with your best friend the night before James and his coven were due, and I would rather not see that happen.”

“Wait, what?” Callie asked, her eyes widening and her arms falling back to her sides as she glanced between Alice and me. “That’s tomorrow?”

I bit my lip, looking back at her and nodding. “Yeah. Alice still can’t see them clearly, but conditions tomorrow are going to be perfect for vampire baseball. Assuming we haven’t seriously fucked up the timeline, that’s when they’ll show.”

“Fuck. Cass…” Callie paused, shutting her eyes briefly and taking a deep breath. “Bella. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have said half that shit.”

“No, but - you meant it,” I replied softly. “And I’m the one who started this fight. I’m sorry. You’re right. You and Leah are both big girls, and if you’ve been honest with her...I don’t have any right to object.”

“Of course I’ve been honest with her. She knows I have responsibilities, she gets it.” Callie sighed, fidgeting with her hair briefly before thinking better of it and lowering her hand. “We don’t even know if there is a way home. If our home is still there. It’s stupid to fight about hypotheticals.”

I hugged myself, glancing away. “I guess.”

Callie hesitated another moment, then stepped forward, pulling me into her arms. “We’re going to have a lot to talk about. Later. When this shit with James and his crew is over, when you survive and come back to me. But that’s what you have to focus on, okay? Surviving. If you’re really going to go through with this crazy plan, you’d better make it back alive.”

I sniffled, tears welling in my eyes as I hugged her back. “Okay. I’ll try.”
“Do. There is no try, and I’m not letting you go away thinking ‘do not’ is an option here,” Callie said fiercely, holding on tight and kissing the top of my head.

I let out a small, broken laugh, and nodded against her chest. “I’ll do.”

“Good. And I’ll see you at your house tomorrow, and - the rest of it can wait,” she replied, stepping back, then looking to Jessica, her eyes narrowing. “I’d better fill this one in now, though.”

“Yeah. Go ahead,” I agreed, waving them off. “I’ll see you guys.”

Callie grabbed Jessica’s arm, tugging her out of the bathroom, and Alice stepped up to me, giving me a soft smile as she led me over to the sink. “Come on, Bella. Let’s fix you up a little.”

*****

It took a while for me to get back in the proper mood, though Alice gave it her all, and I cheered up considerably once Rosalie and Emmett arrived. Callie and I largely avoided each other, not wanting to test our truce, but the Cullens and my other friends kept me busy. First Emmett insisted on ‘taking me for a spin,’ which meant enough actual spinning that I had to laughingly beg him to ease up before I hurled, not to mention a full-on Dirty Dancing-style lift. Then Jasper took over, guiding me through a more sedate slow dance. I could scarcely hold a candle to Rosalie, but when she joined me and Alice on the floor, the three of us bouncing and shaking to the pounding rhythms of the faster numbers, the fact that all eyes were on her did leave me feeling oddly free to move as I wished to the music. Even Edward got in on the action, toward the end of the night, as Angela swapped partners with me and he led me through what seemed like some kind of waltz, while Alice and Angela appeared to be doing something like a tango, with Ang laughing her head off the whole time.

Best of all, if Lauren had anything to say about our shameless display, I didn’t hear a word of it. Rose stuck close enough and shot her glares often enough that Lauren and their friends kept their mouths shut, though I did see them whispering now and then and giving me the stinkeye. I wasn’t their only target - I could see them glaring daggers at Leah and Callie, too - but they didn’t dare directly confront the two tallest, most obviously muscular girls at the dance.

As we all walked off the floor, I grabbed Alice’s arm, leaning in close. “You know I’m insanely jealous of Angela right now. You’ve never done the tango with me.”

“Oh, I think we’ve tangoed plenty of times, darling,” Alice returned, pressing deliciously into my side and leaning up to kiss my jawline. “Besides, it’s all I can do to keep my hands off you as it is.”

I shivered a little, my lips curling into a smile as I kissed her hair. “Good point.”

“Hey,” Leah said abruptly, coming up to us with Callie trailing behind. “Mind if I grab this dance, Ginger?”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. “Sure, Fred, I think I got another one in me,” I said, turning. Leah just looked at me blankly, while Alice snickered and Callie smirked a little. “…Ginger Rogers? Fred Astaire?”

“You’ve been spoiled by a girlfriend who gets your nerd jokes,” Leah informed me. “This is cool with you, right, Alice?”
“Sure, but I’d like to borrow your date. If you’re willing, Tara,” Alice said, turning to Callie, who looked a little uncomfortable, but nodded. Leah took my hand, and Alice took Callie’s, and we separated, each of us finding our own spot on the dance floor.

Alice and the other Cullens really had spoiled me - Leah didn’t do much more than shuffle and turn on the floor, though she didn’t step on my feet, which was probably more than could be said about most of the boys at the dance. I’d seen Jessica cringing a bit as Mike trod on hers. Still, I couldn’t say my own dancing was much better, even with the practice I’d had with Alice, and the dancing was hardly the point.

“She really does love you, you know,” Leah told me, once we were underway, her gaze drifting over toward Alice and Callie across the floor. “Even when she doesn’t like you very much. Even when you hurt her.”

I felt a pang of guilt in my gut, and nodded. “I know. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gone off on her the way I did. You and her - it’s not my business.”

“It’s really not.” Leah sighed. “I appreciate you standing up for me. But I don’t need you to do it. Callie and I - we do talk. And this is just...it’s whatever it is, for however long it lasts. I’m not imprinted on her, I’m not lovesick, I’m just having fun. I’ve had it before and I’ll probably have it again.”

“You’re treating this pretty casually for someone who urged me to assimilate.”

“You were already halfway deep in this world. I could tell. Callie isn’t.”

I looked up at her, frowning. “What does that mean? I tried to figure this out, it’s not like I wanted to steal Bella Swan’s life.”

“No, but you had Alice. You had the other Cullens. Hell, you had me. You were already forming attachments to all of us. Not to mention your dad,” Leah replied. “And you were damned relieved when that spell seemed to indicate you hadn’t stolen anything. Callie may have been shocked when you said you wanted to stay here, even if you got a chance to go back. But it’s about what I expected. I just want you to be happy, Bells. And I want Cal to be happy, too. Maybe someday that’ll mean she puts down roots here. But that’s not where she is just yet. She’s not you, and she never will be.”

“No. I suppose not,” I agreed, very quietly, looking down at my feet.

Leah reached down and tilted my chin back up, until I met her gaze once more. “Here’s what I do know. You’re her root. She might be making friends here, we might be going out, but you’re why she’s here. Like I said, that girl loves you, and I know you love her. And whatever happens tomorrow...you’re both going to regret it if you leave things all tense and weird. You can’t just ignore it. You have to let it go. Both of you.”

I laughed, without real humor. “Easier said than done. Callie’ll be the first to tell you I tend to keep my baggage.”

Yeah, well - you don’t need this weighing you down. So I don’t know. Find a way,” she returned. “I’ll shut up now, but just think about it. Okay?”

I bit my lip, but nodded in response, and as we swept slowly across the floor, I let my mind drift off. I knew I didn’t want to leave things like this, not when - despite my best efforts - I could die tomorrow, or at the very least change. I knew I had to let it be, to just drop it completely. Callie had
been one of my best friends for over a decade, or almost twice as long, from her perspective. I already remembered the two of us being as close as sisters, with all that entailed, from always having one another’s backs to squabbling like only siblings could. How much closer had we become in her experience, with magic flooding into the world, with war and chaos raging all around us? When I’d told her I’d rather stay than go back and fight for our world, that our world was probably gone, how could that be anything but the deepest betrayal? I’d all but said I didn’t have her back anymore. That she wasn’t my priority.

And the truth was...maybe she wasn’t. Maybe we’d never be as close as she remembered, or even as close as I remembered, ever again.

But I still loved her, and I wasn’t ready to give up on her.

The dance came to a close, and Leah and Alice had maneuvered us back into proximity somewhere in the final bars. I nearly bumped into Callie myself as I turned, and laughed awkwardly, flushing slightly. She gave me a crooked smile, fidgeting.

“So-”

“I-”

We each stopped as the other spoke, then laughed again, and she gestured for me to go. I took a deep breath, grabbing her hand. “I’m going to do everything I can to make it back, Callie. I promise. I can’t promise I will, but I’m going to fight like Hell. We all will. And - I will find some way to help you, with whatever you want, no matter what. I don’t know how yet. But I am never going to give up on our friendship, and I’m sorry I...I’m sorry I’ve been a selfish coward, I guess.”

“I’m sorry I called you that. Hell, I’m sorry we had a whole fight about something that may not even be possible,” Callie replied, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know what’s coming next. But I know this world, any world, would be a lot shittier without you in it. Even if you’re annoying as all fuck sometimes. Even if you drive me crazy. Especially because you drive me crazy. I mean, who the hell’s going to take that job, right?”

I giggled, pulling her into a hug. “Oh, I’m sure you could find someone. I bet Leah’d give it a shot if you asked. She can be pretty crazy-making.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t make me put out any job listings,” she said, squeezing tight. “I love you, little sister.”

I shut my eyes against the tears that threatened them, breathing in Callie for what felt like the last time, even if I knew we’d be seeing each other tomorrow. “I love you, big sister. Always.”

We parted, smiling at each other for a long moment before Cal waved awkwardly and drifted off with Leah. Alice took my arm, smiling up at me, reaching up to brush some hair out of my face.

“Last dance, baby,” she murmured, her golden eyes searching mine. “You ready?”

I blinked away my tears, smiling at her and leaning down to kiss her forehead. “As I’ll ever be.”
In the course of my life, I had given a lot of thought to how I might die. Diseases, heart attacks, accidents, hate crimes, maybe even fighting for someone or something I loved. When I was a child, I could think of nothing worse than death, but as I grew, it no longer terrified me. I stopped seeing it as an end to everything I was, and started viewing it as the next stage in my journey. I still wasn’t eager to embrace it, no matter what my depression whispered into my brain in my darkest hours. There was so much I wanted to see and to do. But I made my peace with the fact that one day, I would die, and then I’d see what came next.

I hoped I would die without pain. I hoped I would die without fear. I hoped that, when the end came, I would be warm in my bed, surrounded by loved ones, and I would drift off into an eternal sleep. I hoped for a good death.

Almost none of that came true. There was pain. There was fear. There were loved ones around me, but they wouldn’t get to me in time. It was all I could do to turn the tide and, hopefully, give them a shot at survival beyond my end.

Still, I thought, as the hot blood ran down my arm, as I held my hand high, as the red-eyed, ravening beast turned toward me and, for all his speed, seemed to move in slow motion: I got one wish. I was giving myself for the people I loved.

I was very sorry I had to go. I wanted so badly to stay.

But it was a good death.

*****

The sky was already overcast when Alice picked me up at my house, the clouds dark and heavy with the promise of rain and thunder. She assured me, as she handed me a Red Sox jersey and cap, that I wouldn’t get wet, or struck by lightning, but one look at the sky above was enough to make me doubt even her formidable powers.

Still, she was right. The rain and the lightning bolts fell somewhere in the distance, the thunder booming through the sky after enough of a delay to make that distance obvious. The game was more or less as I expected: the earshattering crack of the bat as it struck the ball, sometimes shattering the bat and ball in the process, forcing the Cullens to pull fresh equipment from the giant bins they’d loaded in Emmett’s Jeep. The immense speed and agility of the players. The boys forgetting themselves and roughhousing now and then, only briefly, until Esme yelled at them to stop. Alice pitched for her small team, with Jasper catching and Edward manning the bases, but her gaze drifted more than once toward me and Esme, tension written all over her face.

The teams had just switched places and Alice was at bat when she froze, abruptly, and her eyes widened with panic. Her voice rang out across the field, clear as a church bell. “They’re coming!”

In an instant, all the Cullens were gathered around me, with Alice at my side, grasping my hand just tightly enough to cause pain. I whimpered, and she loosened her grip, giving me a guilty, apologetic
look, though she still kept her fingers wrapped around mine.

“Alice, what is it?” I asked, as I saw her and Edward exchange a glance that seemed just a little too worried.

“She can’t see them clearly. And I’m having trouble sensing their thoughts,” Edward explained. “We’re not sure how many there are.”

“It’s more than three, Bella,” Alice added, her voice shaking slightly. “All we know is that it’s more than three.”

I shut my eyes, and though my fingers still held a lingering, fading ache, I grasped Alice’s hand tightly in return. “Oh God.”

“We got this. We can take them,” Emmett said grimly. “Might help if we could get some wolves.”

Edward shook his head. “I already asked. They definitely won’t leave the reservation unprotected if there are more vampires than we expected. Leah...she says she’s very sorry, Bella. I’m certain she means it.”

“I’m sure she does,” I agreed, swallowing hard. “Tell Callie to get over to my house. Now.”

“Done.”

Alice turned to face me, putting her hand on my shoulder and meeting my eyes. “Stay with me. Don’t speak. Try not to move, try to stay out of sight as much as you can. Your jersey and your cap smell like me. Try to get your hair positioned around your face, and try not to meet any of their eyes.”

I nodded, fidgeting with my hair, watching from behind the rest of the Cullens as they waited. At last, six figures blurred into the field: three men, and three women. Two of the men and one of the women stood in front of the others, and it was easy to see why. They held themselves like fighters. One of them was honestly pretty forgettable by vampire standards, with an overly large nose and eyes that were just a little too deep-set, a mess of light brown hair framing his face, but he was half-crouched, visibly muscular through his tattered blue jeans and torn brown flannel shirt. The second man was downright gorgeous, with an olive complexion, shining black hair, and full lips - he looked like a Greek statue, and though his trousers, shirt and long jacket were slightly dirty, they were surprisingly well kept. He stood tall and proud, his own strength obvious in his stance.

The frontmost woman was easily as tall as Emmett, her brown hair pulled into a tight braid, her muscular arms and legs bared by the ragged denim cutoffs and clinging white tank she wore. She also seemed more affable than the others, a faint, friendly smile on her face.

And behind them were the rest. A red-haired woman in jeans and a tight green shirt, a flannel tied about her waist, her hair falling in messy tangles down her back, her expression and body language feral as her eyes flicked here and there across the scene. There was a red-haired man beside her who could have been her twin, and maybe he was. And last of all there was a thin, deceivingly delicate woman with long, curling blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders, though she too was in a tank top and tight jeans that afforded a good look at the wiry muscle in her limbs. She was beautiful - all the women were - but I got the distinct impression I didn’t want to mess with her.

Naturally, all of their eyes were red.

I figured the unremarkable man was James, the redheaded woman was obviously Victoria, and I thought the especially gorgeous man might be Laurent. The rest? I had no idea.
Alice and Jasper did, though, from the way they gasped in unison, and spoke the same name in the same instant. “Jessamine?”

There was a pause, as the blonde’s red eyes fixed on them, and Jasper glanced back at Alice.

“Hang on. You know Jessamine?” he asked.

“Jasper - Alice, what the - you know my brother?” the blonde exclaimed, her voice carrying across the field in a sweet Southern drawl.

The gorgeous man glanced between Jessamine and our group, smiling slightly. “Well. Isn’t this a happy coincidence? Some of us are already acquainted. My name is Laurent. We’re sorry to disturb you, but we didn’t realize there were others of our kind in the area. And now it seems we have a reunion on our hands.”

“Yes, how unexpected,” Carlisle said smoothly, stepping forward and offering his hand to Laurent. “It’s good to meet you. My name is Carlisle, and this is my family. My mate, Esme, and our children: Edward, Rosalie, Emmett, Alice, Jasper, and Bella.”

“A pleasure. How do you maintain a coven of such size? I can’t imagine doing so without Jess’s power to smooth things over,” Laurent replied.

Carlisle began to explain the animal diet, while Jasper hissed quietly at Alice. “Alice Cullen. How do you know my twin sister, and how has it not come up before?”

“A Jasper doesn’t know about you and Jessamine? Did you know they were related?” I added, as quietly as I possibly could.

Alice cringed slightly. “We were romantically involved, Jazz. I didn’t tell you because - I don’t know, I didn’t see it going well. She still eats people, and you had so much trouble, especially early on…”

“You had no right to keep this from me! I told you what she meant to me, and you knew the whole time she was alive,” Jasper fired back, his eyes visibly darkening.

I glanced back at the other coven. Jessamine was staring at the three of us, while Laurent was introducing his own companions. This seemed like a very bad time for an argument.

“Jess, thankfully, has a very unique power that allows her to protect the bonds of friendship from outside interference, and our natural competitive drive seems to qualify as such,” Laurent explained, as Alice and Jasper hissed so quickly and quietly at one another that they passed out of my understanding. “Though we do sometimes need to split up for better hunting, we feel there are genuine benefits to our numbers, particularly as she’s not the only one among our number with talent. James is a superb tracker, while Victoria and Victor each possess defensive powers - in Victor’s case, a partial resistance to the abilities of others. Eleanor and myself have no unique talents, but I like to think we’re capable enough fighters to pull our weight regardless.”

“How fascinating. Did you recruit them specifically for their talents?” Carlisle asked mildly.

“Oh, no, just happy coincidence all around,” Laurent said, laughing. “We’re hardly the Volturi. Nor should we ever wish to be. They’ve proven themselves more than capable masters of our kind, when necessary, wouldn’t you agree?”

Carlisle nodded sagely. “Yes, of course. We all have the utmost respect for the Volturi. But perhaps we should retire to our house for further discussion. It’s not far, at our speeds.”
“An excellent idea. I’m most intrigued by your lifestyle, I’d love to learn more,” Laurent said. “And I’m sure Jessamine would appreciate the opportunity to properly reunite with her brother and her...friend. Your invitation is most gracious.”

The wind shifted, and I touched Alice’s arm, instantly snapping her out of her argument with Jasper. Both of them watched with wide eyes as my hair fluttered on the breeze. I could almost see my scent drift across the field, where James’s nose twitched as he inhaled. Instantly, he turned toward me, his eyes locking on my throat. My heart pounded in my chest. I could feel the blood rushing through my arteries. And I had no doubt he could sense it all, too.

A snarl ripped its way out of Alice’s throat, a sound like nothing I had ever heard from her before. Rosalie and Emmett instantly fell into crouches as well, growling just as loudly. Jasper and Edward maintained their composure, but still shifted out into guarding positions, while Esme fell back beside me. Carlisle remained in the lead.

Laurent’s eyebrows shot upward with visible surprise. “But what’s this?” He caught my scent, and his eyes widened. “You brought a snack?”

“She’s with us,” Carlisle said firmly.

“But she’s human.”

“Yes. As I said, she is part of our family.”

Laurent stared at me for a long moment, his gaze flicking back to James. “How interesting. It appears we have much to learn about one another,” he said smoothly, with a seemingly earnest smile. His gaze flicked to me, and back to Carlisle. “We should still like to accept your invitation, if you will allow us some time to get things...settled. And of course we will not hurt your human girl, or otherwise hunt in your range.”

James snarled, Alice hissed back, and Laurent shot his coven’s tracker a sharp look, quieting him for the moment. Carlisle cleared his throat.

“Of course. If you have some method of contacting one another, I believe we could show some of you to our home, while the rest recover from their surprise,” he offered.

“Yes, Jessamine and I carry prepaid cell phones. Some of these human innovations are quite useful. Jess, Eleanor, if you two feel quite well, perhaps you could accompany Carlisle and his coven?” Laurent suggested. Eleanor nodded, still smiling slightly, though she seemed a little tense. Jessamine, her eyes still on Jasper and Alice, nodded distantly as well. “Superb. You can call to direct us later. I look forward to getting to know you all better.”

“Likewise,” Carlisle agreed. Laurent practically sketched a bow, then looked significantly at the redhead twins, who spoke quietly at James. At last, they sped off, leaving only Jessamine and Eleanor on the field.

“Y’all know-” Eleanor began, only to shut up as Jessamine held up a fist, cocking her head and listening. Finally, the blonde nodded, and the tall brunette spoke again. “This isn’t over. You need to take your human and get the hell out of here. Frankly, with James on the hunt, you may just want to throw her over completely, it’d be easier.”

“That is never going to happen,” Alice growled.

Jessamine looked at her, her face seeming to fall for just a second before she forced it back into a neutral expression. “She’s your mate. Isn’t she?”
“Yes,” Carlisle interjected, before anyone else could speak. “But she has also become very dear to all of us. Giving her to James is not an option.”

“Ain’t gonna be a matter of giving her to him, James is gonna take her, first chance he gets. You don’t know what he’s like. Once he has his eyes on some juicy piece of prey, he’ll stalk ‘em for years, let ‘em loose just to hunt ‘em down again, run ‘em ragged ‘til they can’t run no more,” Eleanor said. “I’ve seen him hunt other vampires just for the sport of it. Hell, I’ve caught him sizing me up, more than once. Jess and I’ve been talking about leaving for a while, but we’re worried that’d just start the chase. Once he’s got his eye on you, you’ll never be safe, not as long as he lives.”

“Then this is your chance,” I said, gulping slightly as every eye, golden and black and red alike, turned to me. “Uh...hi. Look. Fight with us. Maybe we can take James down, together.”

Eleanor snorted. “I like your spirit, but it ain’t as easy as that. James’s mate, Victoria? She’s got the power to sense traps in the making, to anticipate attacks before they come. Victor, well, like Laurent said, he can resist the abilities of others, so any fancy powers you lot have ain’t gonna do much good. He can even shield others, a little bit, though it’s not reliable. And the rest of the coven is tight. Laurent’s mated to Victor, who’s utterly devoted to his big sister. Laurent might like to pretend he’s in charge, but James has got Victoria wrapped around his little finger, and that means he’s got the other two in the palm of his hand. There is no chance of getting them to come in for anything less than a fair fight, and they’ll do their best to make it unfair as soon as they can.”

I glanced at the others. “We already have a plan to give them a fair fight. Or as near as we dare.”

“You saw this coming?” Jessamine asked Alice.

“We saw something like this coming. I didn’t expect you,” Alice replied softly.

“We’d welcome your help,” Carlisle added. “If you’d care to give it.”

Eleanor and Jessamine exchanged a look, then Jess sighed, nodding as she stepped forward. “Let’s talk about this plan.”

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Though Jasper was still halfway furious with Alice, he stuck to his part in things, agreeing to escort her wherever the hell they were going, just in case James decided to go after her. Jessamine and Eleanor joined them, partly by their own choice, partly at Alice’s insistence, as she didn’t trust vampires who hunted humans to keep me and Carlisle safe. We shared a tearful goodbye at the field, though Rosalie and Emmett didn’t allow us to linger.

When we split up, Rose carried me back to the road, where there was some massive sport utility vehicle parked off to the side, painted in some kind of forest camo. She secured me in the back, Carlisle and Esme flanking me and Edward in the third row behind us. Emmett grabbed the passenger seat, and Rose drove the lot of us to my place, where I could see dad through the kitchen window, sitting at the table with Callie, his hands clenched tight around a beer bottle.

As soon as I went inside, dad looked up, visibly shaken. “Bells. What the actual hell have you gotten into?”
“I’m sorry, dad. I really am, I’m sorry we’re mixed up in this, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now…” I went to him, dropping into the chair beside him and taking his hand, while Esme hurried upstairs to get some of my clothes. “I didn’t know where to start. But I just - this is the right thing. We are taking out a really bad guy. And the Cullens, all of them, they’re good people. You said you’ve seen how happy Alice makes me, but you have no idea. I have to go, I have to do this, but I promise, I will be back, as soon as I can. If I have any say in it at all.”

“The hell you will,” he replied, downing the last of his beer and slamming the bottle to one side. “You think I’m gonna let you run off into the face of death? My little girl? I’m coming with you.”

I already had my mouth open, ready to protest, but my brain just seemed to shut down at his words. I flapped my jaw uselessly for a few seconds before I found speech again. “What? No.”

“It’s really not going to be safe for you, Chief Swan,” Rosalie interjected.

I looked to Callie, who shrugged, while dad rose to his feet and gave Rose a level look. “Rosalie. You’re a good kid. I like you, even if you are some kind of vampire. But you are going to have to beat me to a pulp, throw me in some windowless cell, and eat the goddamned key if you want to try and stop me, and even then, I will find some way to get on your ass and follow you. You are talking about my daughter. I’ll admit I can’t stop any of you from this foolishness, but I’ll be damned if I let Bella face it alone. I’m getting my shotgun and I’m coming with you. And don’t tell me it’s not safe, ’cause if it’s not safe for me, it sure as hell isn’t any safer for Bella, and here you are taking her anyway. Don’t be a hypocrite, kiddo.”

I sprung to my feet, tears in my eyes as I grabbed dad’s hand, bringing his gaze back to me. “Dad. If you die - because of me…”

“Bells, if you die for any reason at all, I won’t know what to do with myself,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “I really won’t. Being away from you all that time you were growing up was hard enough. I can’t lose you forever. I will lay down my own life fighting first. That’s the least a father should do for his little girl.”

Rosalie looked to the others, one by one, even Esme as she came back down the stairs, dressed in a full set of my clothes. Finally, she sighed. “Well, I’m not about to beat up Charlie. You can come with us. Though that shotgun’s not going to help much.”

“If it distracts any of those assholes for even a split second, I have to imagine that’ll help,” dad replied firmly, stepping out of the room. “Be right back.”

I looked frantically to Rose, my vision blurred with tears, my voice strangled. “So we go now, right? You’re not actually going to let him come with us.”

“No, Bella. I really am. Soon as he’s back, we’re gone,” she said firmly, grasping my shoulders and locking eyes with me. “You have no idea how lucky you are to have him. A father who will give his life for yours, no matter what, fight tooth and nail for you. I can’t be the one to tell him he can’t fight. Any of you want to do it?”

She looked up at the others, and Esme, Carlisle and Emmett all shook their heads slowly. Edward hesitated, but Rosalie shot him a fierce glare, and finally he nodded, looking away.

“I know exactly how lucky I am,” I whispered, sniffing loudly. “That’s exactly why I can’t lose him.”

“We will keep you safe. I promise,” Rosalie told me, meeting my gaze once more. “I swear to you,
we will keep you both safe, or we will go down fighting.”

“Okay,” dad announced, before I could say anything more, coming back in with his shotgun and a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. “Let’s get going.”

I tried not to pay much attention to where we were going. I tried to read, to listen to music, to nap, but none of it really stuck. Dad borrowed my cell phone as we sped along the roads, calling the police department and the school, making some excuse about a family emergency. Then, seeing my restlessness, he told me stories, as many as he could, of my infancy and childhood. He reminisced about trips we’d taken together, even though I was hearing most of these details for the first time. He talked about growing up in Forks, his friendships with Billy Black and Harry Clearwater, his own time in high school. He even talked about my mom, a little, though I could tell it pained him.

The roads we traveled grew more isolated. The sun moved across the sky, behind the clouds, the light shifting gradually as we did. At one point we went off the road completely, traveling across rough wilderness, Rosalie maneuvering the immense SUV carefully among the trees. I had no idea how it was even possible, but she actually managed to drive through a forest, though I swore I could hear her cursing very quietly now and then during particularly tricky maneuvers, and once I heard an ominous cracking sound.

Gradually, I suppose, I was lulled into a false sense of security. I believed the trees all around us would actually shield us from the threat of James and his coven. I believed that even if they did attack, they couldn’t possibly overcome the massive death machine Rosalie was driving. I began to believe I really would be safe, that I really was protected and we’d make it wherever we were going. Part of me even started to think maybe James had gone after Alice instead, and at any moment she’d call and tell us it was all over, that she’d taken the enemy coven out. I worried for her, but I stopped worrying for myself.

That was a mistake.

One moment, we were emerging from the forest into a clearing, and Rosalie was just starting to breathe easier. Day had turned into night, but I thought I could see lights through the trees in the distance. She turned toward them, and suddenly there was a tremendous booming noise, and the whole world turned upside down and went black.

I came around to the sound of insistent dinging. Dad and I lay inside the overturned SUV, our backs against the roof and the main chassis above us. He was unconscious and badly battered, and I thought I could see blood oozing behind his ear. I touched him, even shook him, very gently, but he wouldn’t wake. All around us were thunderous cracks, sharp yells, the sound of stone or metal screeching and tearing.

The windows of the SUV had all shattered, and a couple of the doors had been flung open. I bit my lip, then crawled from the wreckage, holding back a sharp gasp as my side burst into pain in the process. But I made it out, and at last I took in the scene all around me.

Carlisle had taken on Laurent, and they seemed evenly matched. Neither one appeared to have tired
just yet, nor had they gained the upper hand. Victor was visibly beating Edward back toward the treeline, grinning broadly as he did so, though Edward managed to land a punch or two regardless. Victoria was facing off against Emmett, keeping him locked in a stalemate. Every time he tried to get past her, she was back in his face; every time he tried to strike her, she dodged incrementally out of the way. His frustration was obvious, particularly whenever his gaze turned to Rosalie.

Rosalie was fighting James. And it wasn’t going well.

The jacket she was wearing earlier was long gone, and her shirt was badly torn. He had ripped one of her arms off at the shoulder, and he was gleefully using it as a club to smack her across the face. Her eyes widened as she saw me, and she gestured for me to get back in the SUV, but it was too late: James glanced over his shoulder, his red eyes gleaming in the twilight, his face split into an enormous, hungry grin. Before he could move toward me, Rosalie socked him hard in the stomach. He staggered, briefly, then turned back on her and grabbed both her legs, pulling them apart, and I realized, in a sickening instant, that his goal was to pull her apart. To tear her in half as Emmett and I watched helplessly.

Emmett fairly roared, coming to the same realization, and he rushed Victoria at once, but she threw him off, keeping him from getting to his mate. Carlisle and Edward tried to get around their own opponents at the sound, with no better luck.

Everything seemed to fall into an eerie, silent stillness. The world around me seemed to be in slow motion, nearly frozen in a perfect moment of clarity. I saw what was coming. I remembered the story of the third wife of Taha Aki. I felt the limits of my own power. And I knew what I had to do.

A length of twisted, jagged metal had been thrown from the SUV in the crash. It lay at my feet. I scooped it up, and I cut into my own arm. There was pain, but it didn’t matter. My flesh tore. The blood flowed out. I watched for a second in sick fascination before I looked up at Rosalie and James.

He had already turned away from her, the hunger on his face sharpening. He had torn off one of her legs completely, but I’d stopped him from doing anything worse, and he dropped the limb carelessly on the ground as he began to speed toward me. Rosalie moved to literally put herself back together, but I knew it would take too long. Carlisle, Edward and Emmett all tried to get free of the vampires they were fighting, but I knew they wouldn’t succeed.

James was coming.

No one was going to stop him.

And I was going to die.

He crashed into me, and I felt bones shattering in my body as he shoved me to the ground. Sweet venom fell from his slavering mouth, spattering on my skin. He held me tight, ready to strike - and I grabbed him, and I pulled.

I pulled at everything he had, everything he was. I tore his tracking ability out with my mind, letting it rip along my nerves and out into the earth. I grabbed, again and again, and my brain felt like it was about to explode, and my nerves were alight with unspeakable pain, but still I ripped it out and sent it away, again and again, chunk by bloody chunk. He screamed, and I saw his skin flush, heard his heart beat, saw the red of his eyes grow muddy and brown, saw his features shift from indifferent to ugly, his nose twisted and his skin pitted. My own screams of agony joined his. Blackness fluttered at the edges of the world.

I heard another inhuman screech, and saw Victoria breaking off from Emmett at last, racing toward
us. The second her guard was down, he caught her, breaking her in half across his knee, and then Victor was screaming her name above the wind. I smiled, shoving a shocked and weakened James away from me. I thought I saw an angel coming for me, her beautiful face wreathed in a halo of gold, but before the light could take me home, I fell into a complete and utter darkness.
Sensation returned first: a burning, tearing pain that I could feel, somehow, in every individual cell, in every single atom of my body. I was on fire, and every lick of flame was itself a star, roaring with impossible heat. Then, from somewhere far in the distance, I heard a faint, sweet voice.

“Come on. Come back to me, my heart.”

Something cold and damp slid against my forehead, and the flames were extinguished there. Better still, cool liquid seemed to cascade from there in every direction, washing out the pain in its wake. I still felt more aware of my own body than I had ever been before, but I was no longer in agony, and slowly, I began to feel the world beyond my skin. The fingers stroking my hair. The weight of someone beside me. The flutter of a second heart beating in time with mine, and the gentle, rhythmic breathing of my companion.

I opened my eyes to see a woman gazing back down at me, her lips curling into a tender smile. It was the woman I’d seen sleeping beside me every time I visited the seaside cottage in my dreams, but now her eyes were open, and they were a deep, lush green, like a thriving forest of impossible age. Now that our eyes had met, everything seemed to be falling into place. This was familiar, achingly so. My mind protested that all the details were wrong, that this couldn’t possibly be, but the great shout of my heart drowned it out. I reached up, my own fingers stroking the warm skin of her cheek.

“Alice?” I asked, my voice cracking.

She laughed, a perfect, chiming sound that tugged at my core. “Only in the sense that you are Bella, sweetheart. Or Cassandra.”

I shook my head slowly. “I...don’t understand. Where are we? What is this place?”

I pushed myself up to a sitting position, looking around. I was in the bed in the seaside cottage, of course. I should have expected that much. Dee was sitting on a chair near the foot of the bed, staring at me, unblinking, and October was lazing on the pillow beside me. The various mementos I had seen here before, photographs and clay figures and various trinkets, still held their proper places all around us. The sunlight filtered through some of the windows, though there wasn’t much light, now, and the sky was tinted orange and red. I could smell the salt air coming off the water, the wet sand along the shore, the rich fertile earth and green growing things deep in the forest. And all of it, every bit of it, felt like coming home.

“You have been mine before,” the woman - Alice, or whomever she was - said softly,

How long ago I may not know:  
But just when at that swallow’s soar
Your neck turn’d so,  
Some veil did fall - I knew it all of yore.

I turned to look at her, feeling a deep, yearning ache in my heart, in my very soul. When I spoke, it was at the barest whisper. “Please. I really just...don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry. It is terribly unfair,” she replied, taking my hand and bringing it to her lips, brushing a
kiss across my knuckles. “I am Alice, and more than Alice. You are Bella, and Cassandra, and more than either. We are the greater truths, inside the lesser. And this place, my heart, is a threshold.”

“Greater truths. A threshold…” My eyes widened. “…are we dead? Is this...death?”

“No. Well. Yes.” For the first time since I’d arrived, she seemed slightly flustered. “It’s a moment between. A place where you can choose. Come with me. Please?”

She stood, and slowly I stood with her. Then she led me out the door. The cats rose from their resting places and jumped to the floor, following us outside. The sun was setting over the water, and there was a sailboat, all graceful lines and painted wood and gilded edges, tied at the dock. There was a figure on the boat, but for some reason I couldn’t see them clearly. I glanced over at the forest, where someone had cut a path, lit by lanterns hanging from thick branches. I could see a figure down the road a bit, but they, too, were indistinct.

“What am I choosing?” I asked, looking back to her. “Alice - or - what should I call you?”

“Alice will do, if you like,” she affirmed quietly. “The rest hardly matters anymore.”

“Can you tell me what happened? To the old world, to the people there - what went wrong with the ritual? How did we end up here, where is everyone else?”

She held up her hands, her lips quirking slightly as she tried not to laugh. “One question at a time! I can’t explain everything. Some of it I don’t even know. And really, I shouldn’t be dawdling…”

As her voice trailed off, she glanced out at the water, biting her lip, then looked back to me, a glint in her eye. “What happened? You tried to fix everything in one sweeping act, or near enough, and the world was already close to shattering. If other forces hadn’t been moving against you in that moment, maybe it would have worked. You would have gone back in time as you intended. But the bombs dropped and the barriers came down, and the world and everything in it would have died, except for one thing. For a moment, just a moment, those of you who were already drawing on the power of life itself, those of you who had your entire covens feeding power to you, those of you who were prepared to warp the fabric of space and time connected to the infinite. And a moment was all you needed.”

I stared at her for a long, silent moment. “Are you saying I did all this? I sent myself - and Callie - to Twilight World?”

Alice smirked. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“You created Twilight World.”

I choked on my own breath for a moment, sputtering and gasping, bending over as I tried to get back to breathing normally. Alice helpfully thumped my back. Finally, I recovered enough to croak a low, flat, “What.”

“Not deliberately, as such. And some of it came from other sources. It wasn’t just you. But everything that was in your mind at the moment you gained access to the infinite just added up to...well, Twilight World,” she explained. “You wanted to go back to a time before everything went to hell. You wanted the power to change things. You wanted a second chance at saving the world, at life...at love. And, honestly, you’d just reread the first book. That part was just bad timing.”

“I created the world,” I repeated quietly. “So none of that was real? Everyone and everything just
popped into existence when Callie and I dropped in?"

Alice sighed. “No. How to explain...everyone in that world is real. Everyone there has a soul. Someone who lived, and died, on the world you knew before. People who lived long ago, people who lived right alongside you, people you knew, people you never met...perhaps a few newborn souls as well. But the world you helped create, and every other world born when your world died, is populated with real people. They all have real histories. You grew up as Bella Swan. Callie grew up as Tara Chen. And then, one day, your old lives reemerged.”

“Then...then why don’t I remember being Bella Swan? Why did either of us even get our old memories back? How could all that time pass before we even arrived? What was the point?” I groaned, rubbing my forehead. “I swear I’m going to give myself a headache.”

“We really don’t have time to go into it. All I can say is that all magic has a price. You paid more than some,” Alice said. “The memories you’ve lost, not only of your old life but of your childhood in this world. The side effects of your power. Your broken connection to magic itself.”

I felt something twist in my gut as I looked up at her again. “It really is gone, then? Forever?”

She smiled softly. “Forever is a long time. It’s hard to say. Your magic seeded this new world. The same thing happened with the others who went wherever their own hearts called them, spinning new worlds around themselves. You are part of the world you created. The power you once possessed now acts as its beating heart. Perhaps, in time, you’ll separate. You’ll leave the seed you planted behind, and rediscover your own link to magic. But it may take lifetimes.”

“Then...how did Callie keep her magic?”

“She didn’t do what you did. She followed in your wake, because what she wanted was to stay with you and make sure you were all right. She paid her own price. But she’s not bound the way you are.”

I nodded slowly, looking down at my bare feet for a long moment, my toes wriggling in the sand. Then, taking a deep breath, I met Alice’s eyes once more. “And...us? Who are we to each other? I don’t quite remember you, and...I really think I would.”

Alice’s grin turned faintly rueful, and she turned to gaze out at the water again. “You lived long enough to learn that, sometimes, there’s a certain mercy in forgetting. But I suppose you’ve forgotten that, too.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I said, stepping forward and putting my hand on her shoulder. “Why would I want to forget you? If you came back as Alice - you must have loved me, right? Didn’t I love you?”

“Yes, we loved each other. And lost each other. A long time ago,” she replied, turning back to meet my gaze, her eyes glistening faintly with unshed tears. “That’s the part that you wanted to forget. And you did. But you also wanted me back, my heart, and I...well. I suppose you weren’t the only one who wanted a second chance. I hitched my soul to yours, darling, and now it’s time to decide where the both of us will go.”

Something seemed to shift all around us, like the whole universe had let out a breath I hadn’t noticed it was holding. The figure in the forest and the figure on the boat began to move, walking toward us, coming into focus gradually, with each step. I looked from one figure to the other, then to Alice, shaking my head in confusion.
“What is this?”

“The choice,” she replied, stepping away from me and walking several paces off before turning to face me once more. The figures moved to either side of her, and snapped, abruptly, into crystal clarity.

The figure from the forest stood to her right, and it was me, or rather it was me as Bella Swan. Her skin was pale, and it glittered in the fading sunlight coming off the water. There were dark circles under her vividly red eyes, but apart from that, her features had shifted, only slightly, but enough to transform my visage utterly. This version of myself was impossibly beautiful, and I knew I would remain that way forever, if I would only choose to become this.

The figure from the boat stood to Alice’s left, and it, too, was the face and the body I had come to know these past few months, but this version was human. There was still a rosy tone to her skin, her eyes were still brown, her features slightly imperfect. But there was a sense of longing in her expression, and she kept looking to the boat and the horizon beyond. Her hand kept reaching for Alice, though her fingers only grasped air. If I chose to become her, I had a feeling I would be leaving this life sooner rather than later.

I looked to Alice. “This is it?”

“This is it,” she repeated, spreading her hands. “You’re one moment from life. One moment from death. Rosalie’s venom is burning through your cells, but it hasn’t transformed you yet. Choose your humanity, and it kills you, and I die with you because I am not letting you go again. We go on to...whatever comes next. Choose to return to life, and you become a vampire, and I’ll be with you for as long as we can make that existence last.”

I chewed on my lip, looking between the figures again. Their eyes met mine, and both of them stopped fidgeting where they stood, slowly reaching both hands out toward me. I hadn’t wanted to become a vampire so quickly - I still wasn’t sure I really wanted it at all. There was a part of me that had still hoped to bear a child, now that I had the chance. I would miss eating and drinking, going out in the sun, enjoying a freedom of movement that vampires had to forfeit. I would never sleep again, or dream. And while Alice had said I might, someday, find a way to renew my connection to magic, that was no sure thing, and who knew how long it would take?

But how could I choose to go? How could I leave behind Callie, and Rosalie, and Charlie, all the people I loved or had come to love in my time in Forks? How could I tear Alice away from her family? How could I leave so much suffering in my wake?

A half-forgotten melody began to play somewhere in the back of my mind, and I smiled as the familiar song began to come back to me, my resolve strengthening with each passing second. I met Alice’s eyes, and my smile turned into a wicked grin. Though she said nothing, she beamed in response, as radiant as the sun, and her green eyes glittered like emeralds in the gradually dimming light.

I looked to each of the figures in turn, then, slowly, extended both my hands as I walked toward them, singing. “*Our roads may be golden, or broken, or lost...*”

Both of my alternate selves turned to face me as I approached, gradually grinning to match me, and their voices abruptly joined my own, finishing the lyric. “*But we’ll walk on them willingly, knowing the cost.*”

My left hand grasped cold stone. My right hand grasped warm flesh. Out on the horizon, the sun brightened, and the light and heat washed over us all, and I could do nothing but laugh as I began to
burn once more.

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I couldn’t tell how much time was passing, as I lay there in the burning dark. I couldn’t see. I could hear nothing but distant voices. My world was agony. But I could feel something, beneath the burning: my heart, beating as fast as a hummingbird’s in my chest. It seemed as though it was on the point of bursting at any moment. But somehow, despite the pain, despite the rapid pulse of my heart, I knew I would be all right. I adjusted, cell by cell, moment by moment, and my heart continued to beat, and the rhythm slowly began to feel normal. The pain slowly fell away. And at last, my metamorphosis was done.

My eyes snapped open. I gorged myself on sweet, cool air. And in an instant, Rosalie was at my side, staring down at me, her dark amber eyes wide, her lips slightly parted in shock. She had moved so quickly that, once, I would have seen only a blur. Now I could track her every movement, no matter how small, no matter how fast. I could see the subtle colors that tinted her pale skin, the hints of blue and violet that still lived behind her otherwise inhuman eyes. She was wearing a sleeveless top, and though her arm had been reattached, I could see a faint ring of silvery scars where James had torn it off.

“Bella,” she breathed. “How...how is this possible? How is any of this possible?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, sitting up. As my weight shifted, I felt another weight in the bed beside me, and I looked over to see Alice laid out at my side. Her eyes were shut, and she was breathing, deep and even, as though asleep. No: she was asleep. I could see her eyes twitching beneath their lids, the telltale sign of rapid eye movement. She was dreaming. The dark circles were no longer there beneath her eyes, and color had returned to her skin.

I looked back to Rosalie, my own eyes widening, my hummingbird heart seeming to beat impossibly faster. “What’s wrong with Alice? What happened? Where are we?”

“Denali. We’re in Denali, that’s where we were taking you. She collapsed - from what Emmett and Jasper said, it happened around the time you started seizing. They brought her with them when we gave the all clear, but she’s been sleeping ever since. And changing. We had no idea what was happening, and now...” She shook her head. “You should be a vampire. You should have changed. I mean, you did, but - not like this.”

“You bit me,” I realized, recalling Alice’s words in my dream, and she nodded. “And then I had this dream...Rosalie, what’s...what do you see when you look at me? If I’m not a vampire, what am I?”

“I don’t know. You’re still warm, and your skin is glowing rather than glittering, but - it’s so faint, I’m not sure humans would even see it. Your heart is still beating, but so much faster than it should be. And...” She bit her lip, then hurried from the room, returning a moment later with a hand mirror. “See for yourself.”

I frowned, taking the hand mirror from her and looking at my reflection. I was still recognizable as Bella Swan, though perhaps Bella Swan after a makeover. Like I’d gone upstairs in some dorky teen comedy as the nerdy outcast and come back down as a gorgeous supermodel. She was right, my skin did seem to be glowing faintly, not at all like the opalescent shimmer I could see in Rosalie’s skin now, even without natural sunlight. And my eyes...my eyes were no longer brown. They were the
same shade of blue that I’d seen in my dreams.

“That was my eye color,” Rose added quietly, as I gazed at myself. “When I was human.”

I put the mirror down. “That might explain it. Or part of it. But so much has happened, so much is happening, and I never realized…” I stopped, shutting my eyes and forcing myself to focus. “I think I’m a hybrid. That’s what I chose. Not vampirism. Not humanity. But something in between.”

“Chose? When did you choose? How did you choose?” she asked. “What’s a hybrid?”

“Right, I only told Carlisle - I’ll explain as much as I can. Later, when we’re with everyone. Where is everyone, Rose? Where’s dad? Is he okay?”

Rosalie’s face fell, and she looked away. “He’s...Charlie was hurt very badly in the wreck. He’s stable, for now, but he’s in a coma. Carlisle’s been taking care of him, along with Edward and Esme, and Kate...Kate has been helping. The others have been alternating between watching you and Alice, watching James, or hunting.”

“Dad’s…” My voice broke. “Dad’s in a coma? Is he going to recover?”

“You’re going to need to talk to Carlisle. Soon,” she replied. “Like I said, he’s stable for now, but Carlisle’s managing his care.”

“I will. Right now, or -- Alice.” I looked over at my girlfriend, sleeping beside me, recognizably a hybrid herself, now that I knew what I was looking for. I wasn’t entirely sure how that had happened, though I had my guesses. Gears were turning in my head...and something else locked into place. I looked back up at Rose. “What do you mean, watching James? He’s still alive?”

“You turned him human, Bella,” Rosalie said, her voice somewhere between awe and shock. “We have no idea how, but...you did. And we’ve been debating what to do with him.” Her lips pressed together in a firm line.

I frowned again, but nodded. “Right. I guess that would...complicate things.” My gaze drifted to Alice again. “...have any of you tried waking her?”

“Of course we have. As soon as she stopped writhing in agony, at least,” Rose told me. “She hasn’t responded to her name, to alarm clocks, to air horns, to Emmett roaring as loudly as he could, to any amount of shaking we felt safe trying. None of it.”

I turned to her, my chest aching in need. Whatever was happening with dad, whatever we decided to do with James, I couldn’t imagine any of it without Alice beside me. It felt as though the love I had already harbored toward her had grown, suffusing my whole being, though somehow it hadn’t crowded out the deep, abiding affection I still felt towards others.

“Alice. Come back to me,” I whispered urgently, taking her hand and squeezing it. Her skin was soft now, her fingers pliable in mine. I didn’t know if either of us would feel that way to a human being, but we matched one another now. I leaned down, capturing her lips with mine, savoring the sweetness of the kiss, brief as it had to be. “I don’t have time for poems or - or anything, I just...I need you.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and instead of gold, they were now the same lush green I had seen in my dream. That felt wrong, somehow, on one level, and at the same time, it seemed completely right. Her cheeks flushed, just a little, as she smiled and murmured softly in response. “My heart.”

“My soul,” I echoed automatically. I couldn’t be entirely sure where it had come from, but it felt
right. We kissed again, for just one perfect heartbeat, and then we rose from the bed to face our future.

*****

My gut was twisting as Alice and I walked hand-in-hand to the guest room where dad had been laid up, and it felt like my heart was in my throat. I stopped and shuddered at the closed door, not sure I could face what lay on the other side, and Alice squeezed my hand before opening the door for me.

I had no idea where or when or how Carlisle and the Denali had gotten all that medical equipment. Monitors, IV lines, a full hospital bed. All I knew was that my father was laying in that bed, and surrounded by the equipment - not to mention four vampires - he looked still, and small, and frail. Carlisle and Edward were speaking quietly by his bedside when we entered, while Esme was checking on some equipment, standing very close to a woman with long, straight blonde hair - Kate, I presumed. Her eyes were locked on dad’s slumbering form, and even by vampire standards, her face looked pale and gaunt.

“Bella! Alice, what on Earth...oh, God, I’m just so glad you girls are awake,” Esme said, rushing toward us the second she spotted us, pulling us both into her embrace. “You must tell us what happened, but...later. Much later.”

Carlisle and Edward came to join us, confusion and fascination written all over their faces, though their expressions were very grave. Carlisle met my eyes and spoke quietly. “Bella. It’s good that you’re awake. Did Rosalie tell you about your father’s condition?”

I swallowed, nodding, looking over his shoulder at my dad’s slumbering figure. Kate had taken his hand, though she shot a glance in my direction and gave me a respectful, if shaky, nod. Even so, she didn’t seem to be in any hurry to let go.

“She told me some of it. Not everything. I see now why Kate’s been helping,” I replied, my gaze meeting Carlisle’s again. “She mated on him, didn’t she?”

“The moment she saw him,” Esme agreed, looking back over at her. “The poor thing’s been a wreck. They haven’t even had a chance to speak yet, she’s just - completely lost.”

“You should know that the prognosis isn’t good. I’ve done what I can to keep him stable, but he’s on the edge,” Carlisle told me, putting one hand on my shoulder. “He still has some brain activity, he’s still breathing on his own, but...I don’t know if it’s going to last. I don’t know how to bring him out of this. I can’t tell you when or if he’s going to wake up. You’re the only family he has here. I didn’t want to act without speaking with you, but if we’re going to make any decisions, we should make them as soon as possible. I’m sorry to put this on you when you’ve already been through so much, but this is where we are.”

“I...give me a minute,” I said quietly, looking to my father’s bed. The others parted, nodding, and I walked over to him, taking a seat across from Kate and taking his other hand in mine. Alice stuck with me, putting her arm about my shoulders, her lips grazing my hair. Tears began to well in my eyes - it seemed that hybrids could still cry, at least. I sniffed sharply and blinked them away, shaking my head.

“Hey, dad,” I whispered. “I don’t know if you can hear me. All the stuff I’ve read says you can. I
just - I want you to know I’m sorry. I didn’t want to get you mixed up in this. God, I should have known you wouldn’t just let me go. You didn’t even get to fight for me the way you wanted. This is all my fault, and now - now I’m taking your life away from you. One way or another. Either you change, forever, or...or I let you die.”

Kate hissed, sharply, almost involuntarily, and I felt Alice stiffen beside me. The blonde’s golden eyes met mine a second later, her expression apologetic, though she still looked deeply pained. It all seemed horribly unfair. She hadn’t even really met him, but thanks to some ridiculous luck-of-the-draw mystical bullshit, she could no longer imagine life without him. And I knew, if I chose transformation for him, he’d reciprocate. The bond would be locked. They’d probably be ridiculously happy together. I didn’t even know if I liked Kate yet. I didn’t know if it was fair to make that choice for him, either.

I had no idea what he wanted, and no way of asking. A thought occurred to me, and I looked frantically to Edward, but he shook his head before I could give voice to the question.

“His consciousness is submerged, Bella. Even if I pushed into his mind, even if you enhanced my powers to allow it - assuming you could - I’m not sure it would be enough to reach his rational self,” he replied. “I might be able to speak with him in his dreams, but I can’t be sure he would be thinking clearly. I’m sorry.”

My gaze fell back to my father’s face, and I shook my head slowly. “No. Of course not. That makes a kind of sense...and of course it couldn’t be that simple.”

I lapsed again into silent thought, trying to find a loophole, something that would lift the burden of this choice from my shoulders. All along, I could hear his soft, even breathing, and the beating of his heart. I would never hear either, ever again, no matter which path I chose. We’d never again share fish fry, or taco night, or steak and potatoes. Even if he lived, as a vampire, his best friend would turn him away, and no matter what Leah said, he’d undoubtedly be unwelcome in La Push. He wouldn’t even be able to go out in public on a sunny day. However it had happened, whatever Alice and I had, it still afforded us the benefits of humanity. If only... 

My eyes widened, and I turned to Alice. “I’m going to sit here, holding his hand, for the next three days, and I’m going to try to guide his transformation into a hybrid. Will that work?”

Alice blinked back at me, her eyebrows shooting upward, and then her green eyes grew faintly unfocused as she searched the future. “Only if you’re here the whole time,” she said at last. “In contact with him. You can talk, you can eat, but you’ll have to keep your focus and you cannot let go. No matter what. His pain is going to spill over to you, but you have to hold on.”

“That sounds incredibly gross. And unpleasant,” I said, cracking a very faint smile. “Let’s do it.”

Kate’s eyes widened, and she glanced frantically between us. “What? What’s going on?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I think the upshot is that Charlie is going to live,” Carlisle said, stepping forward. “What do you need, Bella?”

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“Someone’s going to need to bring me food. Actual, human food, hybrids can still eat it - I can, right?” I asked Alice, who nodded vigorously. “Or you can bring me blood in a pinch, but honestly, I’d rather have human food if you can get it. No live animals. And someone’s going to need to start turning my dad - not you.”

I looked over at Kate, half-risen from her seat, and she stared wildly at me for a moment before speaking. “It’s tradition to turn one’s mate, if possible, and I have had plenty of practice controlling
myself with humans…"

“I’m sorry, but I really want Carlisle to do this. I don’t want to take any chances. I really don’t mean any offense, but his track record is spotless,” I told her firmly. She frowned, but nodded in agreement and sat back down. Another idea was tickling the back of my brain, but there was no time to explore it, not now. “Carlisle, if you’d be willing?”

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “In fact, I prepared a syringe of my own venom in case you chose to turn him. Unfortunately, we only have the one, so I’ll still need to bite him personally to ensure the transformation begins. You may want to close your eyes for that part.”

I bit my lip, but shook my head in response. “No. I did this. I’m choosing this. Seems like the least I can do is watch.”

“Very well. Edward, please fetch the syringe. Esme, will you let the others know what’s going on?” Carlisle asked. The pair of them nodded, leaving the room, and I cursed my new awareness of time, my enhanced perception of movement and speed, because now there was nothing to do but wait, and the seconds seemed to crawl by like days.

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Dad’s heart still beat. His chest still rose and fell with each breath. Bandages covered the spots on his arms where Carlisle had bit him, so gently he had seemed more like a father kissing a boo-boo than a vampire sinking his teeth into flesh. It had still been agonizing to watch, and the giant needle Carlisle and Edward had used to inject more venom directly into my father’s chest hadn’t been any easier to deal with. But as I felt the venom wash through him, beginning the transformation, I had greater concerns to occupy my mind.

The virus within the venom wanted to change him completely. It was persistent, insidious, resilient. It attacked from every angle, and I had to work very carefully to counter its efforts, not enough to resist it entirely, but enough to integrate the vampire and human DNA without allowing either to overpower the other. On top of that, it felt like flame was tracing its way through my veins once more, licking at my flesh from the inside. It was nothing compared to the agony of transformation, but all my nerves had already regenerated from that particular trauma, so I felt it keenly, with every second.

I didn’t speak for the first twelve hours. I just clung tightly to his hand and concentrated, setting up chains of logic in my mind, seeking out the path to victory and trying to push my way past the pain. The others managed to bring me human food - just bread and water at first, which made me wonder exactly how James’s imprisonment was going. Soon, though, they were bringing me improved fare, not to mention sweet, blessed caffeine. Mountain Dew, Red Bull, caffeine pills, I took anything that might keep me going. I didn’t dare stop. I didn’t dare shut my eyes, even as Alice fell asleep next to me, drooling onto my shoulder until Esme collected her and took her off to a bed.

Charlie’s screaming and thrashing made everything ten times worse. He would shout and swear and cry until his voice went out, shake and toss and turn until there was no energy in his muscles, and then he’d grow still and quiet for a time, an hour, maybe two, until the venom at work in his system brought him back to health and it started all over again. It was agony, magnified by the reflected pain I was feeling and the knowledge that it was just a fraction of what he was going through. It must have been absolute torture for Kate, but she refused to leave his side. Even without looking up, I
could sense her constant presence, keeping vigil over us both.

Gradually, I settled into a rhythm, and I pushed most of the pain back behind the walls of my mind, and once I was sure I had everything in hand, I let the world seep back in. Dad’s voice had given out a few minutes before, and Kate was sitting deathly still as she watched and waited. She started slightly when I abruptly looked up and gave her a somewhat strained smile.

“Hi. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I told her.

“No, I’m not scared. Just - surprised. Have you done all you needed to do?” she asked in response. “I thought you would need to sit here the whole time.”

“I do. But I’ve got the hang of it now, assuming there aren’t any surprises, and I’m pretty sure I’ll feel them coming if there are.” I looked back down at my father, and reached blindly for my half-finished soda, bolting the rest down. “Two and a half days of this to go. Just don’t let me drift off.”

“I won’t.” She lapsed into silence for a moment, wrapping her arms around herself. “Thank you. For agreeing to save his life. Even if I still don’t fully understand how you’re going about it.”

“Has Carlisle told you about my power?” I asked, and she shook her head. “I have the ability to modify the powers of others. Somehow it allowed me to turn James human, and...I think it’s what allowed me to become a hybrid rather than a vampire. Normally, hybrids can only be born, fathered by male vampires on human mothers. The mother generally doesn’t survive. But her child keeps some of their humanity. They can pass more easily as human, and human food can sustain them.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. Except in stories, and...I had always assumed those were actually tales of immortal children,” Kate said, a shadow passing over her face. “Children turned into vampires before they could reach adulthood. They’re wild, uncontrollable. The Volturi forbade their creation long ago.”

“Your mother created one,” I recalled, and when she gave me a sharp, surprised look, I smiled sheepishly and lied. “Alice has told me stories.”

“That’s a very personal story,” Kate said, a little stiffly, glancing away for a moment before sighing. “But I suppose it’s good you know something of our history already. Especially where the Volturi are concerned. They’re not to be trifled with. I don’t know how they’ll react if they ever learn of this hybrid business.”

I shuddered, turning my own gaze firmly to my father’s face. “I’m in no hurry to find out, believe me.”

We lapsed into another uncomfortable silence for a few minutes before Kate spoke again. “These hybrids. They have all the powers of a vampire?”

“Most of them. Though...if I recall correctly, female hybrids don’t have venom in their saliva. Male hybrids do. I doubt we’re quite as strong or resilient as a full vampire, either,” I admitted. “But I’m pretty sure female hybrids can bear children, and I bet male hybrids can father them.”

Kate swore, I thought, in Russian, or some similar language. “Children! More hybrids?”

“I’d assume. I’m not sure.”

“How did you learn all of this? Carlisle can’t have known, he hasn’t said a word about any of it in all the time we’ve known him.”
I hesitated, glancing back up at her. “It’s a very long and complicated story. And sort of personal.”

“You know my personal stories,” she pointed out, leaning forward. “And we have time. And...I would very much like to focus on something other than this. Please.”

I was already starting to smile ruefully at her first statement, but as she went on, my smile faded. At last, I nodded. “I can’t tell you everything. Mostly because I still don’t know - or understand - everything myself. But - maybe you can help me sort through it all. This is the story of one world’s death, and the birth of another…”

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Kate, needing time to process, had returned to stock stillness by the time Alice came back, fully rested, showered, changed, and carrying a full shopping bag as well as a tray loaded high with steaming slices of pizza. My stomach growled at the sight of it - apparently using my powers like this consumed a lot of energy. Or maybe I just needed a ton of fuel to keep going no matter the circumstances. I hadn’t been a hybrid for long, and it hadn’t exactly come with a user manual, so I couldn’t be entirely sure.

“Don’t tell me we can get delivery all the way out here. Aren’t we in the middle of Denali National Park?” I asked.

“And in a highly illegal and generally inaccessible settlement, to boot,” Alice replied, smirking. “So, sorry, it’s really not delivery. Just oven-baked frozen pizza. Be glad the girls set up an actual kitchen, honestly, because Eleazar and Carmen sure didn’t. It still tastes pretty good, though.”

I grimaced, picking up a slice and tearing into it nonetheless. “When we get back to Forks, I’m taking you out for real pizza.”

“What, like Domino’s?”

“Okay, I know I eat trash, you don’t have to call me out on it,” I complained, sticking out my tongue.

“What? You seemed perfectly happy with it the night Callie showed up!” She giggled, starting to lean over and put her arm around her shoulders.

I pulled back. “Don’t, I’m disgusting.”

“You’re only going to get worse. And I don’t mind. I can shower later,” Alice replied, pouting at me until I relented, allowing her to set the tray across our laps and wrap her arm around me in earnest. She made a show of sniffing my shirt and making a face nonetheless. “Ugh. And you are definitely going to shower for a solid two hours when this is all done.”

“Gee, thanks,” I remarked dryly. “Hey, has anyone called Callie? Or Leah? Let them know we’re alive, at least?”

Alice nodded. “Rosalie talked to Leah when she called Esme to come join us, and I talked to Callie myself after I got some rest. Sorry, we don’t get cell service out here, and the girls don’t have a cordless phone, otherwise I would have put you on with her. Callie said to tell you she’s really glad we all survived, and she supports your decision with Charlie, but she can’t deal with sparklepeen and it’s officially never going to happen now.”
Luckily, I wasn’t trying to swallow at that exact moment, and I was able to simply freeze, my mouth stuffed with pizza, until my brain rebooted and I finished chewing and swallowing normally. “Alice? Were you trying to see if hybrids can still choke?”

“Maybe! I mean, you choked in a dream, Bella. If anyone can do it, it’s bound to be you,” she replied, with a soft, chiming laugh. “Don’t shoot the messenger, that’s really what she said.”

“Of course it was. Remind me to thank her later.” I looked sidelong at Alice, until her green eyes met mine.

“What?”

“Just...the dream,” I said softly. “You remember it? I mean, you really were there?”

“I was. And I do. But I don’t...understand everything the way I did,” she replied, some dark veil of frustration clouding her eyes. “I remember everything I said to you. I know what I felt. That we’d been together before, in some other place, some other time, before we were separated. That this world, this life, was our chance to reunite. That I loved you more than anything, and it wasn’t an accident, it wasn’t even really blind fate, it was something we chose, or would have chosen. But anything I left unsaid...it’s gone. I’m sorry.”

I smiled, though it was bittersweet at best. “You did say that, sometimes, there was mercy in forgetting. It wasn’t the first time you’ve said something like that to me, either.”

“I suppose,” she replied, giving me a crooked smile in return. “But it’s still frustrating that I can’t remember.”

“I suppose no one ever just gets all the answers handed to them. And we do a lot of cheating as it is. Maybe the universe just wants us to work somethings out for ourselves,” I said. “Whatever happened before, whatever this bond between us is...we have each other. And a chance at a new life, in a new world. A chance to do everything differently. From what you did say to me, it sounds like we’re pretty lucky to have that.”

“More than lucky. This bond between us...when you chose, you chose for both of us.” Alice looked at her hand, at her arm, at the skin that was slightly darker than mine, now, and suffused with a soft, healthy glow instead of an alien shimmer. “I can eat. Drink. Survive without blood. I can go out in the sun. There’s no part of your life I can’t share, almost nothing we can’t experience together. That’s a gift. Maybe the most precious gift you could have given me.”

“I didn’t really understand what I was doing,” I said quietly, leaning in close, brushing my lips against her cheek. “But however it happened...I’m glad it worked out this way. Because I do want to share everything with you. Now and always. I just wish...”

My gaze flicked over to Kate, but when I looked back to Alice, opening my mouth again, she put her finger to my lips to silence me. “Ask me when we’re alone, my heart. There are a lot of choices ahead of us.”

I shut my mouth and nodded. Just then, my father’s pain spiked, as his nerves finished regenerating, and I winced at the flames flooding up my own arm, and the strangled cry that ripped from his throat. Kate woke at once, going to his side, running her cold fingers over his scalp and murmuring gently to him. Alice, alarmed, grabbed my arm.

“Are you all right? Can you bear it?” she asked urgently.

“I can,” I replied, through gritted teeth. “Just...very unpleasant. Is it always going to be like this?
When I use my power?"

She bit her lip, glancing away for a moment before nodding. “It depends on how you use it. Yes. Sometimes. I don’t see it causing permanent damage, not anymore, but...you will suffer.”

“Because I chose to be a hybrid?”

She gave me a rueful, crooked smile. “I can’t see futures that are no longer possible. So who knows? No sense crying over spilt milk,” she replied, leaning over to kiss my cheek. “Can you still eat? And drink? You need to keep your strength up, and Rosalie got some Ben & Jerry’s on her supply run, for dessert.”

“I can manage eating and drinking. Might be too distracted for ice cream for a few hours,” I told her, grabbing another slice of pizza with a shaky hand. She promptly plucked it from my fingers, tearing off a piece and bringing it to my mouth.

“I’ll feed you. You just focus on Charlie.”

I nodded, flashing a strained grin and accepting her help as I turned my efforts back to guiding my father’s slow, inexorable transformation, trying to ignore the fresh pain cascading through my body.

*****

Alice stayed glued to my side throughout the next few hours, as dad writhed in torment and I did my best to stay strong and steady for him, though the odd whimper did escape my throat with his pained cries. I was barely conscious of the others moving in and out of the room. Rosalie stopped in to confer with Alice, removing the ice cream while she was at it, and she asked me some things, but I could only just manage automatic yes or no responses. Carlisle came in multiple times to check on dad’s condition. Esme brought water and insisted I drink it, rather than limit myself exclusively to soda and energy drinks, and she stopped to offer solace to Kate, whose moods during these episodes were wild, leaving her frequently angry or distraught. I saw two unfamiliar blondes come in to speak with Kate, too - Tanya and Irina, I assumed. Even Jasper visited, and though he couldn’t do much for my pain, he did his best to improve my mood as well as Kate’s.

The hours passed. The episodes of utter agony grew longer in duration, the intervals between them grew shorter. Alice broke out the ice cream again during that first sweet lull after whatever our last meal had been, and as much as I enjoyed being fed spoonfuls of Half Baked, I took infinitely more pleasure from the look of childlike delight on her face as she tasted ice cream for the first time ever in her nearly-perfect memory. As dad’s next episode hit, she fought to stay awake, trying her best to stay with me, but eventually Esme pulled her away, ignoring her incoherent, half-asleep protests. The next episode seemed to last forever, though in reality, the sun had been setting around the time of the last lull and it still hadn’t risen by the time dad’s voice gave out and his nerves stopped registering pain, for the time being.

Hybrids could sweat, it turned out, though I wasn’t sure if I was actually perspiring or if it was some form of venom. I was pretty sure I had actual tears and venom-free saliva, so maybe it was just normal sweat. Regardless, I really hoped it was just a symptom of my extreme duress, and that I wasn’t going to perspire regularly. Sweat had definitely been near the top of my mental list of Things I Would Not Miss About Being Human. I really hated the thought of Alice seeing me when I was this gross, but she hadn’t turned up yet, and I assumed she was still sleeping. I hoped she was still
sleeping.

Jessamine was here.

My pain-addled brain registered that fact almost incidentally, at first. I was sweaty, the pain was receding, my throat felt dry and a little raw and I could use a drink, Kate’s eyes were very nearly black so it was probably a good thing there were no humans leaking delicious blood in this room, blood actually sounded tasty and I wasn’t sure what to do with that, and oh yeah: Jessamine was here. When that thought fully penetrated, my head swiveled toward her position in the open doorway, and my gaze snapped at once to lock with her red eyes.

“Is it all right if I come in?” she asked, in her soft Southern drawl. There was something very Jasper-like in the tense set of her shoulders, the way she shifted her weight just a little, the visible discomfort written all over her face. He was a good head taller, but it wasn’t hard to believe they were siblings.

I wondered, idly, if Jasper and Alice had made up yet, but then I shook it off in favor of addressing the vampire standing in front of me. “I suppose it is. What do you want?” I asked, before wincing at my own slightly harsh tone. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that to come out the way it did, though - yeah, actually, what do you want?”

“I’m not sure I know,” she said, walking over to take the chair Alice had been sitting in hours before, pulling it a couple feet away and turning it so she could face me. Kate tracked Jessamine’s every move with her eyes, her lips twisting in a half-snarl, but Jess wisely kept her distance from dad’s bedside. “I suppose I just felt we ought to talk.”

“Because of your history with Alice?” I guessed, and she nodded curtly. “Uh...okay. Sorry, I just - honestly, I wasn’t expecting you to even come up here once she was safe. I sort of figured you and Eleanor would be in the wind.”

Jessamine sighed, pushing a lock of hair from her eyes and tucking it behind her ear. “To be honest, I’m more than a little tired of drifting, and so is Eleanor. And I can hardly turn my back on Jasper. Do you have any siblings?”

I blinked. “That’s...sort of a complicated question, but the short answer is no. Just - friends who feel like sisters. For good and ill, sometimes.”

She gave me a bemused look at my answer, one perfect blonde eyebrow arching, but she smiled faintly as I went on. “I suppose I understand. Eleanor has been just that sort of friend to me.”

“Oh! You’re not mates?” I asked.

Jess burst out laughing. “No! Sorry, no, that’s just - Eleanor’s wonderful, really, but I don’t think that would ever work,” she replied, waving her hand. As her laughter subsided, she glanced vaguely away, her lips forming a slight pout. “And against my better judgment, I think I’ve been carrying a torch for someone else for a long while.”

“I’m not sure I know,” she said, walking over to take the chair Alice had been sitting in hours before, pulling it a couple feet away and turning it so she could face me. Kate tracked Jessamine’s every move with her eyes, her lips twisting in a half-snarl, but Jess wisely kept her distance from dad’s bedside. “I suppose I just felt we ought to talk.”

“Because of your history with Alice?” I guessed, and she nodded curtly. “Uh...okay. Sorry, I just - honestly, I wasn’t expecting you to even come up here once she was safe. I sort of figured you and Eleanor would be in the wind.”

Jessamine sighed, pushing a lock of hair from her eyes and tucking it behind her ear. “To be honest, I’m more than a little tired of drifting, and so is Eleanor. And I can hardly turn my back on Jasper. Do you have any siblings?”

I blinked. “That’s...sort of a complicated question, but the short answer is no. Just - friends who feel like sisters. For good and ill, sometimes.”

She gave me a bemused look at my answer, one perfect blonde eyebrow arching, but she smiled faintly as I went on. “I suppose I understand. Eleanor has been just that sort of friend to me.”

“Oh! You’re not mates?” I asked.

Jess burst out laughing. “No! Sorry, no, that’s just - Eleanor’s wonderful, really, but I don’t think that would ever work,” she replied, waving her hand. As her laughter subsided, she glanced vaguely away, her lips forming a slight pout. “And against my better judgment, I think I’ve been carrying a torch for someone else for a long while.”

“Oh.” I swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable. “Is that...what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No. Yes. In a manner of speaking,” she replied, the false starts tumbling from her lips as she turned to face me once more. “You and Alice are mates, aren’t you? The bond has fully formed?”

“It’s definitely mutual now, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said, shivering a little as I reflected on the way my love for her had only grown since my transformation. She was always in my thoughts, now, and I knew on some level I was always in hers, that we were locked in each other’s orbit. I didn’t know if it was the nature of the bond, or the revelations from our shared dream, or a combination of
both, but I couldn’t remember ever feeling so deeply, so keenly for anyone.

Jessamine’s eyebrows shot up again. “It wasn’t mutual before?”

“No. Yes.” It was my turn for false starts, now. “I loved her. Our relationship was just - still new. And it wasn’t as intense as what I feel for her now. Now our bond is locked in.”

“I see.” She leaned back, shutting her eyes briefly and sighing. “Yes, well, I thought as much. And regardless of what you felt before, it was clear from our meeting in Washington that she was completely bonded to you. I suppose it’s only fair that she found someone else.”

“I’m...sorry,” I said, a little awkwardly. “I mean, I’m sorry you’re going through this. I guess - it kind of makes me wonder why you still wanted to be around her.”

“I still care about her. Even if her heart belongs to another now,” Jessamine replied. “More to the point, I love my brother more than anything in this world. I thought I’d lost him. I don’t want to lose him again. And he’s made it pretty clear he’s staying with the family he’s found.”

My eyes widened as it all clicked. “You’re coming with us. You’re going to live in Forks - do you really think that’s a good idea? They told you that you can’t keep drinking human blood, right? You cannot hunt humans down there.”

“I know. So does Eleanor. We’re both going ‘vegetarian,’ as they call it,” she said. “We won’t be moving down there right away. We’re going to stay here in Denali for a while, learn to feed off of animals and exercise more control around humans. Jasper and I will come up with an explanation for the sudden arrival of his twin sister.”

I let out a long breath, trying to wrap my mind around the idea of my girlfriend’s ex permanently living in her household. “Right. Right, yes. Uh. We already have a Jessica. You might want a new name so it doesn’t get confusing.”

Jessamine’s nose wrinkled. It would have been sort of cute if my brain hadn’t been setting off alarm bells. I knew my bond with Alice was tight as hell, I knew jealousy wasn’t rational, but this was still her first love we were talking about, and there was a pissed-off, possessive animal in my brain who did not like this one bit.

“I suppose Jessamine is a bit old-fashioned anyway,” she said, as the rational part of my brain tried to beat the hissing animal part back with a metaphorical stick. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“Uh, Missy?” I blurted out, while the jealous beast in me cheered at the thought of telling her she could go straight to hell, missy. “Sorry, just seems like a very Southern Belle kind of name - I think it’s short for Michelle or Melissa or something - oh, we don’t have a Madison. Heh. I guess I’m sort of stuck on the Ms.”

She gave me a curious look. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Good. Just...sort of have to keep my focus, actually,” I replied, glancing meaningfully at my father.

“Oh, yes. Of course. I shouldn’t trouble you any further,” she said, rising from her seat. “Bella...I know this is going to be very awkward for you. For all of us. But Jasper really does mean the world to me, and I do still care about Alice, and...I think I’d like to be her friend again. Nothing else, of course. Which means I hope you and I can be friends one day as well.”

“That might take a while.” I winced a little as the brutally honest words spilled from my mouth, and
my rational mind wrestled the animal part away from the microphone. At least the beast hadn’t gone with her first choice, which had been something about hell freezing over. “I would like that. There’s just - a lot to adjust to.”

“For both of us,” she agreed, with a gracious smile. It faded a little as she stepped forward, but she was still smiling pleasantly enough to send a chill down my spine as she spoke again. “That said, if you ever hurt her, I will be very interested to learn exactly how much damage a hybrid can take.”

I swallowed, but met her blood-red eyes nonetheless, nodding solemnly. “Jessamine, if I ever do anything to hurt her, I expect you’ll have to get in line. And I don’t really see myself fighting back, no matter who’s doing the punching.”

Her smile widened, and seemed to reach her eyes. “Good answer. Talk to you later, sugar.”

With that, she left the room, and I let myself breathe normally once more. I heard a low, throaty chuckle, and looked over at Kate to find it was coming from her. I thought she’d finally lost her mind until she met my gaze, smirking slightly through the stress still written on her otherwise perfect face.

“I’ll say this for Forks: it certainly doesn’t sound like it’s going to be boring,” she remarked.

I let out a small, breathless laugh of my own. “No. No, never that.”

*****

“Oh, Kate announced, abruptly, somewhere toward the end of the third day. “I think I’ve figured out my take on things.”

I looked up at her with wild eyes, my vision briefly interrupted as Alice wiped away the sweat dripping from my brow once more. Dad and I had been in pain for a solid twelve hours. It was building and building, and felt like it would never stop, though some deeply buried, rational part of my brain insisted we must be close to the end. His heart was nearly beating in sync with mine, and he was regenerating so quickly that there was no longer any respite for him.

“What things?” I growled, matching her volume to be heard above dad’s cries of pain.

“Your things! Or thing,” Kate called back. “From everything you’ve said, this is some kind of reincarnation. It doesn’t matter who you were before, or what world you came from. These memories you’re carrying are just the last remnants of that life. You’ve been reborn here, now, as Bella Swan, and that’s all that matters. All that should matter.”

I stared at her for a long moment, as dad screamed. “It took you until now to come up with that? You’re telling me this now?!”

“I thought it would be a comfort!”

“It would be! Great pep talk! But now?!”

“If Charlie’s transformation has been anything like mine, he’s heard a great deal of what everyone around him has been saying, these last few days,” Kate explained. “That means he heard the explanations you gave me. He’s heard your conversations about your other life. All the secrets you’ve been keeping from him - he knows now.”
I blinked, then looked back at my father, wracked with agony, my eyes widening as I absorbed what she was saying. “Shit!”

“No! Bella, this is what I’m trying to tell you, what I’m trying to tell both of you! It does not matter,” she said firmly, grasping my arm across the bed, while her other hand wrapped around my father’s and squeezed. “Take it from someone who has lost her beloved parent, a parent she never even knew until adulthood, yet loved as deeply as any faithful daughter could ever love her mother. It does not matter that you lost who you were before you remembered this deeper truth. It does not matter that you have had to find your way to loving and cherishing your father. You are a woman who would do anything for her family. Look at the family you have around you now. Charlie, if you can hear me, look at the daughter who found her way back to you, look at the love she bears for you and for those around her. If you truly are the man worthy of my eternal love, if you truly are a man worthy of hers, you will never, ever doubt that this is your Bella.”

And then, as though Kate’s words had been a magic spell, everything stopped.

The pain vanished. Dad’s screams fell into silence. He dropped back to the bed. I could hear his heart beating, in perfect time with mine, but for just a moment - a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity - he was still.

And then his eyes snapped open, completely unchanged from their former hue, and he sucked in a deep, ragged breath, filling his chest. His gaze flicked first to Kate, and they both started to smile...and then he turned, and looked at me, and his smile grew.

“Bella,” he breathed.

My eyes filled with tears, and I let out a choking sob as I answered, feeling very small all of a sudden, and weak in the knees. “Daddy.”

He reached up, grasping my arm as he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, chuckling softly. “You haven’t called me that since you were five. Not sure I care for it,” he remarked, though he pulled me into a hug nonetheless. “I think we’re going to have a lot to talk about.”

I wrapped my arms around him, squeezing tightly. “I think so, too.”

“Yeah.” He pulled back, setting both hands on my shoulders and looking into my eyes. “But you know what, kiddo? I love you more than anything. So it’s going to be all right. You hear me?”

I wasn’t sure if there was a hybrid equivalent of ugly crying, but if there was, that’s what I was doing. I could scarcely nod. My chin was quivering, tears were flowing, I was coated in sweat or venom-sweat or whatever it was, my clothes were stained, and I was completely disgusting...but it was perfect. I’d done it.

For that one shining moment, all was right with the world.

Chapter End Notes

The poem quoted in the cottage, in this chapter and Chapter 20, is "Sudden Light" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The song Bella quotes when making her choice is "Wicked
Girls" by Seanan McGuire, one of my personal favorites. You may find it on the album of the same name, available from CD Baby or filk dealers, except when it isn't, and there are fanvids and other such media online.

The story now has a TV Tropes page under As Dreams Are Made On. There is a direct link from the official Tumblr, twilight-adamo. Please feel free to add to the page, link it from others, and toss a fanfic rec on the Twilight page if you feel it's deserving.

Not much this time. One more chapter to go, two if you count the epilogue (as I probably should), and then I put this book to bed, and the story continues with Brave New World. Thank you, as always, for reading.
My transformation had eaten up three days of mindless agony. On top of that, I’d spent three more days guiding my father’s transformation, experiencing the echoes of his pain, exercising my power without a moment of respite. I had been running on caffeine and sheer determination the whole time. I hadn’t had a wink of sleep. I hadn’t had a shower or a change of clothes. I hadn’t been able to sit down and really savor a meal. I’d scarcely had any time with the girl who had turned out to be the love of my multiple lives.

It had been worth it. One look at my father’s beaming face had confirmed that. But I was still beyond done. I wanted an entire day under the hottest shower I could possibly get, then I wanted to sleep for about a week, and then I wanted to lock myself in a secluded bedroom with my girlfriend - preferably with catering already thoughtfully provided - and I didn’t want to come back out as long as either of us could still walk straight.

But there was too much to do, and my dad and I would be expected back in Forks sooner rather than later. So I got the hot shower, which didn’t last a day, though Kate and her sisters had a big enough water heater that it did last a remarkably long time. I got some pajamas that more or less fit. And I got to sleep for a solid eight hours before anyone woke me, though Charlie insisted I sleep alone, with a rather pointed look, and Esme, Carlisle and Alice all backed him up.

Alice promised to make it up to me later, and I really was exhausted, but I was still surrounded by traitors. And hypocrites, if the way Charlie and Kate kept looking at each other was any indication.

I was tired enough that I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep the second my head hit the pillow. I woke the next morning to the sensation of Alice’s lips against mine, her hands roaming across my belly and sides, and I hitched my arms about her waist with my eyes still shut, returning the kiss without a second’s hesitation. When I opened my eyes at last, I found I was staring directly into hers.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” she murmured, shifting to lay kisses along my jawline.

“Wrong princess,” I replied, nipping at her ear. “Not that I mind waking up this way.”

“Hey, you woke me with a kiss. I’m just returning the favor.”

Her fingers found my breast, and my breath hitched slightly, my voice coming out a half-octave higher. “That was really more of a Snow White situation. True love’s kiss bringing my beloved back from death and all.”

She pulled back, looking at her own limbs as I pouted at her. “Yeah, my skin’s a couple shades darker than yours, and I haven’t even tanned in at least eighty-plus years. Who are you calling Snow White?”

I sat up, tossing my hair back over my shoulder. “Is this our pillow talk now? Debating which Disney Princesses we are?”

“You started it,” she replied, leaning in with a grin.

“You called me Sleeping Beauty,” I protested, darting in for a quick kiss.
“You argued.”

I made a face at her, then grabbed her and pulled her back down to the bed to me, prompting her to squeal in surprise. She soon recovered, though, and overpowered me to straddle my waist, her small hands grabbing my wrists and pinning them above my head. She gazed down at me, hunger in her newly green eyes, her tongue running lightly over her teeth...and then she sighed, forcing her gaze skyward.

I took the hint, grimacing. “They’re probably all waiting for us, aren’t they?”

“They’re definitely all waiting for us,” Alice amended. I groaned loudly, and she giggled. “Sorry, baby. If it’s any consolation, your dad’s making breakfast. Scrambled eggs...lots of scrambled eggs...plus bacon, sausage, and chocolate chip pancakes. It sounds pretty amazing, honestly.”

“Dad’s pretty good with breakfasts,” I said, my stomach growling at the thought of it all. I smirked, a little sheepishly. “And I guess I could use some. Okay. Self-control. We still have it, right?”

“Totally.” She leaned in, capturing my lips again, our chests brushing together oh-so-deliciously as we kissed. When we came up for air, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes heavy-lidded. “But we should probably get going before we really test it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, a little breathlessly. “Yeah...wait. Hang on. We’re alone.”

She arched one dark eyebrow, looking around slowly. “You’re only noticing this now?”

“I mean - I’m going to turn Rosalie into a hybrid.”

Alice gave me a level look. “Now?”

I grinned back at her. “No time like the present. And it’s not like we can do anything else right now, right?”

“Right. Well, good job killing the mood,” she replied, sticking out her tongue before concentrating. Her vision grew distant for a moment, and then she shook her head. “ Doesn’t work. It doesn’t look like you can do that to someone who’s already a vampire.”

“Damn. Okay - wait, all right, I’m going to turn Rosalie human.”

“You are not putting yourself through three days of torture again so soon,” Alice protested at once. I gave her a pleading look, and she sighed, peering into the future again. Her eyes widened for a moment, then quickly darted back and forth before she let out a long breath. “Well you’re not doing it now. Maybe some other time.”

“Why?” I asked. “What did you see?”

“It knocks you out.”

“What?”

“For a week, in Rosalie’s case. I have no idea if that’s consistent. You seem to be okay when you wake up but...you are still out cold for a full week, so I don’t love it, and if you insist on doing it, we’re going to have to think about timing. You can’t just turn vampires human right and left by wishing it, sorry.”

I grimaced. “That actually is disappointing. It could have come in handy if we go up against any
dangerous covens.”

“Yeah, okay, easy there, General Patton, we get along fine with most other covens,” Alice told me, before giving me a sidelong look, her eyes narrowing slightly in suspicion. “…anything else you want me to check?”

“I mean, a lot,” I replied, giggling as she scowled at me again. “Okay, okay. I’m guessing that if I can’t turn a vampire directly into a hybrid, I probably can’t turn a hybrid directly into a vampire…oh! I’m going to try turning myself human.”

Alice’s eyes abruptly widened, and she grabbed my shoulders, her jaw dropping at whatever she saw. “No.”

“But-”

“No attempting to use your powers on yourself, Bella, not ever, promise me,” she hissed, locking eyes with me.

“I - I won’t. I won’t, I’m sorry, I promise,” I said, trembling a little. “Alice, what did you see?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even want to remember it. Forgetting really can be a mercy,” she muttered, getting up. “Um, you’re close to Tanya’s size, she left some clothes for you in the dresser. You might need to roll up the pant cuffs and sleeves a little. See you in the kitchen?”

Borrowing clothes from another of Alice’s exes wasn’t a very appealing notion, but I didn’t have a lot of options, and I was too rattled by Alice’s reaction to comment on it. “Sure. Yeah. Are you okay?”

She flashed me a quick, plastic smile. “I will be. I swear. See you soon. Love you, Bella.”

“I love you, too,” I murmured, and her smile grew slightly more genuine as she ducked out of the bedroom.

*****

I grabbed a quick shower and changed before heading to the kitchen. Just as Alice had warned, Tanya’s limbs were a little longer than mine, and she was a little curvier to boot, but the fit was close enough. By the time I arrived at the table, dad was just starting to shovel food onto plates.

“Perfect timing, kiddo. Grab a chair,” he said, pulling me into a brief, one-armed hug.

I hugged him back, grinning as I took my seat beside Alice, who still seemed a little tense from our earlier conversation. “Sir, yes, sir,” I replied, giving my girlfriend a sidelong smile. “So. Did I miss anything important?”

She relaxed a little, smiling softly at me. “Not a great deal. Eleazar would like to get a look at your powers later, but he felt it would be rude to examine you without asking. Oh, and he’d like to take a look at Charlie, too.”
“Right. We’re going to have to have a long talk about that,” I said, letting out a puff of breath. Alice looked askance at me, but I was already moving on. “Wait, Charlie? Is that just wishful thinking, or…?”

“Eddie can’t read me,” dad announced, setting plates piled high with eggs, sausage, bacon and pancakes in front of each of us before serving himself and sitting down. “He seems all out of sorts about it. Apparently I was always pretty quiet, as he puts it, but now there’s nothing. I’m just still wrapping my head around the fact that telepathy...hell, all of this...is real.”

“Wait - I think I remember that. Edward could never read your thoughts clearly in the books...maybe that’s where the Bella in the text got her mental shield. Maybe you have the same power, at least to some degree,” I realized aloud. “Count yourself lucky, I’m apparently an ‘exceptionally loud broadcaster’. Oh, uh...right.”

I flushed a little as I realized I’d just referenced a topic we hadn’t really discussed, as yet, and dad cleared his throat. “Right, yeah, speaking of long talks. Though I surfaced enough while you were talking to Kate to hear most of it,” he replied. “So...instead of remembering your actual childhood, you remember this whole life in some other world where all of us are just...fictional characters?”

I bit my lip. “Yeah. I’m sorry, it’s not something I wanted to keep from you, but - I didn’t know what was happening at first. I mean, in the beginning, I was worried I’d replaced your daughter, somehow. How could I even begin to talk to you about that? Especially when I didn’t have any idea how to make it right?”

“Bells, you can tell me anything. You always could. Though...maybe I didn’t make that clear enough to you. And maybe you wouldn’t have remembered.” He looked down, briefly, then reached across the table to take my hand. “But if you’d asked...hell. You might not have remembered what it was like to be my kid, but you were still her, the whole time, and it’s not just that you were good at bluffing or had inside knowledge from these books of yours or anything. Every time I looked at you, I just saw Bella. The way you moved, the way you acted. I wasn’t around you much when you were growing up, not after you and your mom left Forks, but I was around you enough. You were pure Bella, the whole time. You still are. This is just...kind of a wrinkle on top of all that. But I agree with Kate. You’re still my daughter, and it’s not your fault you don’t remember growing up with me or your mom. I love you just the same.”

My eyes welled with tears, and I wiped them away with my free hand, sniffing. “Damn it, you’re making me cry again. I love you, too, dad. I should have been open with you from the start. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, it all worked out pretty okay, right?” he asked, giving me a crooked grin, though his eyes seemed to glisten slightly as well.

“More than okay, I hope,” Kate said, slipping into the kitchen and wrapping her arms around dad’s shoulders from behind, kissing the top of his head.

His cheeks reddened, just a little - he was clearly still an easy blusher, even if it was no longer ugly or splotchy - but he grinned back up at her. “Hell, I’m not complaining. It’s a lot to get used to, but something tells me I’m going to love every second.”

I glanced over at Alice, sharing a small smile with her, before turning back to Kate. “Hi again, Kate. Where were you?”

She dropped into a chair beside my father, her fingers trailing across his arm and shoulder. “Your father had to sleep, and I hadn’t really been pulling my weight on guard duty. I was watching over
our prisoner."

My mood soured slightly, and I looked away, biting my lip. “Right. James. One more thing we have to deal with.”

“I’m sorry. That really isn’t ideal breakfast conversation, is it?” Kate said, a little sheepishly.

Dad shot her a reassuring glance before turning to me. “How about these books of yours? You told Kate not everything was exactly the same?”

“Uh - no. No, it’s not. You definitely weren’t mates in the books, for one thing. I’m not sure you ever even met,” I said, shaking my head to clear it, eager to get off the subject. “Alice was straight, and in love with Jasper. Bella, the other Bella, fell in love with Edward, and they were both...pretty different. Leah was a shifter, but not the alpha. And Eleanor, Jessamine, that Victor guy...they didn’t exist at all. Though there is something weirdly familiar about them.”

My brow furrowed slightly, while Alice giggled, tugging at my hand. “It’s still really hard to imagine Jasper and I ever forming an actual couple. We’ve always known very well what we like. Abortive marriage attempt aside.”

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty hard for me to imagine you ever liking guys at this point, too,” I replied, smiling over at her and lifting her fingers to my lips to kiss them, dismissing all thoughts of Eleanor and Jessamine for the time being. “Don’t think I’m not grateful for the change.”

“You’re both showing remarkable restraint for newborns. Especially mated newborns,” Kate offered. Dad froze, briefly, pausing in his chewing, before slowly resuming. “I’m not a newborn, I’ve been through this before. Though being a hybrid is certainly novel,” Alice said.

I flushed a little. “Believe me, I’ve been...easily distracted. But I’ve also had a lot of other things on my plate. And being a hybrid probably helps. I’m not as jumped up as a normal newborn would be.”

“Hey, we should probably discuss how we’re going to handle things back in Forks,” dad interjected.

“You mean sleeping arrangements?” Kate asked, with a coy smile, laughing softly as he blushed again.

“Oh. Oh, man,” I said, feeling my cheeks heat as well. “Uh, no offense, but I’m not sure I want to be in the house while you two are, uh, um...Alice?”

“Having sex. If you’ve had it, you can say it,” she supplied helpfully.

I squeaked. “Not to my father!”

Dad cleared his throat again, putting down his fork and knife and shutting his eyes. “Yeah, well, that’s not what I was talking about anyway. Bella, we’re both recognizable, but we still look different. Like we’ve had plastic surgery or something, except I’m not sure there’s a surgeon on the planet who could do this stuff. Not to mention you and Alice have totally new eye colors for some reason, and I don’t know if that’s too easy to explain.”

Alice frowned in thought. “That’s a good point. It’s not something we generally have to deal with. Most newborn vampires don’t stick around their communities, and...it’s not common for anyone from a vampire’s human life who does meet them to survive the experience.”
I sighed, raking my fingers through my hair. “And we probably can’t put it all down to proper rest and clean living.”

“Not after a week, and probably not after I told everyone we were going out of town for a family emergency,” dad pointed out.

“We could try some makeup, at first, to bring you more in line with your human appearances - it wouldn’t be a perfect match, but I might be able to get close,” Alice offered. “Then we could gradually adjust it to reflect changes over time, until we finally dropped it altogether. Eventually we will have to leave Forks and take on new lives anyway.”

“Right,” dad said, looking down at his plate. “Something else to get used to. Here I sort of thought I’d be there ’til the day I died.”

I felt a pang of guilt, and a shared longing - not just for Forks, the town I’d come to love, but for Boston, which I’d loved just as deeply a lifetime before. I reached out and took his hand. “I’m sorry, dad.”

“No - no, kid, you did what you had to do to save my life. Don’t apologize. I’m grateful. I’d never want to leave you, even if it does mean leaving Forks someday,” he replied, looking up at me and giving me a bittersweet smile. “Besides, your mother always said I should get out, see the world. Maybe she was right.”

“We won’t have to worry about it for a while yet,” Alice said, glancing between us. “Our eye colors may be a more immediate concern. We’ll have to ask Carlisle, but I don’t think there’s any medical condition that could explain changes like this. As long as we’re still in Forks, or around people who already know us as Alice Cullen and Bella Swan...well, I’m not really sure. Colored contacts are an option, perhaps, but it will depend on the content of our tears. Venom dissolves contact lenses after a while. And it may be difficult to match our old colors, especially for me.”

I worried my lower lip with my teeth. “We should loop Callie in. Maybe she’ll have some ideas.”

Dad shook his head, sipping his coffee. “Vampires, werewolves, witches...this really is a lot to get used to.”

I gave him a small, slightly crooked grin. “Welcome to a brave new world, dad.”

*****

After breakfast, we made our way out to the shed where James was being held under guard. Jasper and Edward were the only ones actually guarding him at the moment, but every single person in the Denali settlement joined us as we walked across the yard, guest and full-time resident alike.

“Bella,” a woman with long, curling blonde hair called, offering me a reserved but warm smile as she walked toward me. She was a little taller than me, with longer limbs, and a shorter but decidedly more muscular woman with darker blonde hair followed behind her. It wasn’t hard to guess who they were. “It’s so good to finally meet you officially. I’m Tanya, and this is Irina. Of course you already know Kate. Welcome to Denali. How are you holding up?”
“Thank you. Ah - well enough, I guess,” I replied, glancing to the shed and biting my lip.

“That’s good. I’m sorry, this must be difficult for you,” Tanya said softly, putting a hand on my arm. “It did seem only right to wait until you and your father could offer your input before dealing with James, but...to be frank? It seems a little cruel, as well.”

“Maybe, but I know it was kindly met.” I looked back at her, glancing between her and Irina. “What do you think we should do with him?”

“Kill him,” Irina said bluntly. “If it had been my call, we would have done it already. We can’t let him go, can we?”

Tanya sighed. “I’m sorry, but I have to agree. He’s a murderer, many times over, and he shows no remorse. Eleanor and Jessamine have made his cruelty very clear. He hunts and kills for sport, not just survival. And he’s aware of the Volturi. If we let him go, he could cause a great deal of trouble for us, and he’ll almost certainly try to become a vampire again and seek revenge.”

“He’s said as much, in fact. So what are we to do? Keep him locked away the rest of his natural life? It seems kinder to kill him quickly,” Irina added.

“Who said we want to be kind?” Alice said, very quietly, beside me. I looked over at her, and her face was grim, her eyes dark and dangerous.

“I can’t say I like either option.” Dad folded his arms and gazed at the shed as he spoke. Kate wrapped her arm about his waist, resting her head on his shoulder and gazing up at his face. “I’ve dedicated my whole life to the law, and now...we’re taking it in our own hands. Not that we can turn him over to the courts.”

Carlisle spoke next, as we all clustered near the door to the shed. “The closest thing we have to a court of law would be the Volturi. They wouldn’t normally intervene in a dispute between covens, unless one or both had done something forbidden, or risked exposing our existence to humans, so they would be apathetic at best. And under the circumstances…”

“They will be very, very interested in the powers you have all displayed. Particularly you, Bella,” a man interrupted. He was tall and clean-shaven, with black hair and brilliantly gold eyes, and his otherwise pale skin had a very faint olive cast, fainter still than Laurent’s. A rather shorter woman with a similar skin tone and a kind, gentle expression stood beside him, her long black hair unbound and drifting on the wind. “Please forgive the interruption. I am Eleazar Castillo de Alcántara, and this is my wife, Carmen. I understand you already have some passing familiarity with us.”

“I do,” I said, my tone and expression guarded, though I tried to smile warmly at both of them nonetheless. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person. I’m surprised to hear you say such things about the Volturi - I understood you were still on good terms.”

He hesitated, exchanging a glance with Carmen, who took it as a cue to speak up. “We are,” she replied. “Good but distant terms, because it is very unwise to anger them. That doesn’t mean we’re unaware of their hunger for power, or their drive to recruit vampires with unique abilities.”

“They’ve repeatedly invited Edward and me to join,” Alice murmured, though she gave me a sidelong look. “But I’m sure you already knew that.”

“Yes. But let’s discuss it later,” I said, a little tersely. Edward gave me a questioning look, and I shook my head tightly, turning my gaze firmly to the shed door and focusing my thoughts on James. Jasper nodded, pulling the door open.
And there he was.

I hadn’t seen him clearly before, as I tore his vampirism away and drove myself down into the darkness. I’d only had a vague impression of ugliness, a brief glimpse of a couple of his features. Now, in the sunlight, I could see him just fine.

He had been utterly forgettable as a vampire, probably because even venom could only do so much. Now, he was as ugly on the outside as he had always been on the inside. His eyes were beady and bloodshot, his nose large and lumpy, his skin pitted with scars. His chin was sharply pointed, he had a pronounced underbite, and there was something ratlike in the way his eyes darted back and forth, glaring at us. He was huddled in a thick blanket, and he looked utterly pathetic. I knew I’d had my own share of flaws in my old life, that I had hardly been some perfect beauty, and I didn’t want to judge him based on his appearance - but I already knew he was a truly horrible person. His human visage revolted me, and at the same time, it felt like rare, cosmic justice.

“If you haven’t killed me by now, I know you’ll never do it,” he hissed, his tone mocking. “So what’s the verdict, Your Honors? Life in prison? Dumping me in the middle of nowhere and hoping I never find my way back to any of you? What can you actually bear to do, I wonder?”

I looked to Alice, one of his earlier victims, even if she didn’t remember, and she looked back at me with nothing but concern for me and anger toward him, taking my hand. I looked to my father, who could have been killed at the hands of James and his coven, and he stared straight ahead, his jaw working uncomfortably. It had all worked out for the best, sure, but that was in spite of James, not because of him. And I knew he would go on to hurt others. I knew he would come back for us.

I just didn’t really want to give voice to my decision. But dad couldn’t seem to find his voice, either. I knew, deep down, that it fell to me.

My eyes found Rosalie’s. She gazed back at me without judgment, with nothing but affection in her golden eyes. But I could see that she understood.

She sped through the door before anyone thought to stop her, and her hands were on either side of James’s head as the first reactions rose from our small crowd. I stood stock still and watched, unblinking. James’s eyes widened in surprise, his mouth began to open…

And Rosalie twisted sharply.

There was a soft crack, and his lifeless body slumped to the ground, his head bent at an unnatural angle and the light leaving his eyes. Rose tugged the blanket up above his head, covering him, then looked to me.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said softly.

“No,” I replied, finding my voice once more. There were tears dripping down my cheeks. I hadn’t noticed them welling in my eyes. I sniffed and wiped at my face. “Let me help.”

Rosalie nodded, while Alice squeezed my hand, and dad turned to face me. He didn’t look angered, or shocked, or disappointed. I might not have been able to bear it if he had been any of those things. There was worry. And there was relief. And there was, under it all, still love.

“Bella…” he started.

“I’ll be back soon,” I promised, backing away, letting go of Alice’s hand as I went to join Rosalie. “We both will. We have a lot of other stuff to talk about.”
He swallowed, then nodded. “Okay.”

Rosalie started to lift James’s body, but I stopped her, picking him up myself. He was so light, and his limp corpse felt like it was all skin and bones. With my new strength, he hardly seemed to weigh anything at all. Rose watched me, then stepped in close, putting my arms around my shoulders, pressing a sisterly kiss to my temple. “You did the right thing, Bella.”

“I know. It’s just...it still doesn’t feel great.”

“I’d be worried if it did,” she replied, as Emmett handed her a pack that smelled faintly of gasoline. He nodded at me as he did, and though he didn’t smile, the skin around his eyes crinkled sympathetically. “Ready to go?”

I swallowed, hard, but nodded, and then we were off, speeding into the wilderness.

*****

We found a place to burn James’s body until it was nothing but ash and bone fragments, which we scattered far and wide, well away from the settlement. Someday, perhaps, someone would find some piece of him, but Rosalie was confident that it would never be traced back to us. I had to stop a couple times for dry heaves, but either hybrids didn’t vomit or I didn’t actually feel sick enough to expel my breakfast.

At long last, we finished. Victor, Victoria, Laurent, James, they were all gone. None of them would ever cause any more trouble for us. Irina would never know what she’d missed with Laurent, and he would never break her heart, though perhaps his bond with Victor had already made those developments unlikely. Victoria would never probe the boundaries of Quileute territory or recruit her army of newborns. We were free. We were safe. From everyone except the Volturi.

As we made our way back to the settlement, my mind turned away from thoughts of James, and everything I had done, to the fallout of altering the course of events. Really, it was just a way to distract myself from the looming threat of the Volturi, and the difficult discussions that lay ahead. Overall, I thought we had changed things for the better. Irina would live. Laurent’s future victims would live. Everyone Victoria had victimized, everyone who had ended up dead because of her actions, they would live. It all seemed perfect.

Except…

“Oh,” I breathed, as something occurred to me.

Rosalie looked over at me, coming to a stop on the perimeter of the Denali settlement. “Oh?”

“Sorry, just - unintended consequence. There’s a girl. Someone Victoria was going to turn into a vampire as part of her revenge plan, but - that’s not going to happen now.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Rose asked.

“Yeah, I mean, it would be, she won’t die now, except...she was almost part of your family. Our family. She surrendered, she had control. And she’s a runaway,” I recalled. “I don’t know when
she’s going to show up. Maybe she won’t. But I don’t know if living on the streets as a human is
going to be any better for her.”

Rosalie sighed, but she gave me a fond smile. “You really do have to save everyone, don’t you?”

I smiled back, if a little weakly. “As many as I can.”

“Fine. Do you know what she looks like? What’s her name?”

“Uh...dark hair, I think...like fifteen or something...sorry,” I said, as Rose gave me an exasperated
look. “But her name’s Bree. Bree Tanner. She’s going to wind up in Seattle, eventually.”

She sighed again, shaking her head, then pulling me in close, her arm about my shoulders as we
walked back to the sisters’ house. “I guess no one said saving everyone was going to be easy. Don’t
worry. I have an idea.”

I looked up at her, starting to smile again. “Good idea?”

She snorted. “Like I have any other kind.”

*****

With James dealt with, we all assembled in the sisters’ living room for a general meeting. It was a
little cramped, with everyone gathered there, and there wasn’t enough seating, but luckily a few
people volunteered to stand, and we even managed to arrange a call with Callie, Leah and Sam. It
took no time at all for Callie to offer a solution to the problem of Charlie, Alice and I all looking
different from the people the town of Forks already knew.

“Glamours. They’re pretty basic spells, and I can put them on any jewelry you’ll keep near your
face. Necklaces, earrings, facial piercings, you name it,” she explained. “We can adjust them over
time before dropping them altogether, and I have photos, so I can even match the special snowflakes’
original eye colors.”

“Hey,” I protested mildly.

“What? You got big dramatic eye color changes, that is some kind of fairy tale princess bullshit,”
Callie returned.

I stuck my tongue out, though I knew she couldn’t see it. “Mm, yeah, love you too, miss you.”

Her voice softened slightly. “I’m really glad you’re okay. Did I mention that part? Because it’s really
good to hear your voice.”

I shut my eyes, letting out a long breath, and nodded. “It’s good to hear yours, too. That was a close
call.”

“Too close. Never again.”

“Yeah, um, about that.”
“Cass…” There was a definite note of warning in her voice.

“Bella,” I reminded her.

She sighed. “You’re right. Sorry. Bella…”

There was the same note of warning, but I grinned nonetheless. “Better.” My smile faded as I looked up and around the room, taking everybody in. “So…I don’t think any of you are going to like what I’m about to say. But it has to be said. And we’re going to have to do something about it.”

For the first time, I let my defenses drop completely. I let myself think about the Volturi, about the threat they represented and the tactics they’d use, without any kind of pretense, without any attempt to distract myself. Edward immediately started, looking at me with wide eyes, and Alice’s eyes widened as well, a split-second later. The others mostly looked somewhere between confused and apprehensive, to varying degrees. Except for Eleazar and Carmen, who just looked resigned.

“This is about the Volturi, isn’t it?” Eleazar asked, very softly. “We’re going to have to disappear.”

“It is. And you and Carmen are, yes, for certain,” I told him, grateful that he’d already taken the mental leap, and didn’t seem entirely opposed to the idea.

“What?” Tanya demanded. “What about the Volturi? Why would anyone have to disappear?”

“Better question, what are the Volturi, and why did Callie just start cursing like it’s going out of style?” Leah asked. Sure enough, I could hear her swearing up a storm in the background, and my name - not to mention a few very unflattering descriptions - came up more than once in her rant.

Carlisle took it upon himself to explain. “The Volturi are the rulers of our kind, insofar as we can be ruled. An extraordinarily large and extended coven led by the triumvirate of Aro, Caius, and Marcus, each of whom have lived for thousands of years. They set our laws - which are few - and act to punish violators and protect vampires from discovery.”

Dad frowned. “What exactly are these laws? Obviously most vampires don’t have a problem with murdering people for food, even though you’ve all made it clear that’s not necessary.”

“It can take a great deal of willpower to follow our diets, and many vampires try to do something to ease their conscience. Please don’t judge them too harshly,” Carlisle replied. Dad grunted, clearly dissatisfied, and he went on. “Our laws are as follows. First and foremost, on the whole, humans may not know of our existence, unless they can be trusted completely, in the judgment of the Volturi themselves, to keep our secrets. As a rule, only humans who are due to be turned - and, generally, are already the mates of existing vampires - or humans who serve the Volturi directly are allowed as exceptions to the law. In practice, there are probably other humans unknown to the Volturi who are aware of our existence, but violators are harshly punished.

“Second, it is forbidden to turn any human who has not yet mastered self-control into a vampire. To be on the safe side, this means that most vampires are turned in late adolescence at the earliest. Children, when turned into vampires, tend to lash out repeatedly and kill indiscriminately, and are a severe threat to humans and vampires alike. They also risk exposing our kind. We call children turned into vampires ‘immortal children,’ and if discovered, they and their makers are generally destroyed, as are any others who act to protect or hide them.”

Tanya and her sisters all looked down at that, and Kate leaned heavily into my father’s arms. He rubbed her arm consolingly, kissing her temple lightly, though I could see some lingering uncertainty in his eyes. Carlisle gave them all a sympathetic glance before he went on.
“Third, all Children of the Moon - the original, European werewolves - must be destroyed on sight, and it is forbidden to shelter them or have any friendly contact with them. This is Caius’s law, specifically, but the others have given their assent, and it is enforced as strictly as any other Volturi law.”

“Wait, hang on,” dad interjected. “So we’re not supposed to be nice to werewolves? At all? Except Leah and her friends are werewolves, aren’t they? So how does that work?”

“We’re not European werewolves,” Leah replied. “Though I have to wonder if those guys are as bad as your Volturi say...but anyway, we have the ability to become wolves, thanks to our own tribal legacy. It’s different. ...right?”

Carlisle hesitated. “That...is very difficult to say without consulting the Volturi themselves.”

The room exploded into rapid, agitated conversation, and even with my enhanced senses, I had trouble following it all. I tried to speak up, but couldn’t quite get a word in edgewise until, at last, a shrill whistle carried across the phone line, and the room fell into silence.

“Thank you,” Callie said. “Jesus Christ, okay. Guys, you’re forgetting you have two people in this meeting who have read some really stupid books that explain exactly what happens when the Volturi find out about a whole bunch of stuff. Bella, you want to take this?”

“Uh, yes. Thank you,” I said, before letting out a long breath and looking up at the others. “Bearing in mind there could be further changes I’m not aware of, when the Volturi do eventually find out about hybrids and Quileute shifters, it eventually turns out okay. They accept that the Quileute shifters maintain control in their wolf forms, are not nearly as dangerous as the Children of the Moon, and generally don’t pose as much of a threat and can be allowed to live.”

Leah snorted. “Yeah, real fucking generous of them.”

I grimaced. “Isn’t it? Anyway, hybrids take a little more convincing, but uh - Alice kind of shows up in the nick of time with a fully grown hybrid she found in South America, and he turns out to be calm, collected, and generally not a problem. So the Volturi rule that hybrids are safe as well. But I have to emphasize that it only works because our family assembles an entire army of witnesses, who also happen to pose enough of a threat, collectively, that the Volturi are motivated to find a peaceful solution if they can. They’re not happy about it, the entire incident leaves them aware of a number of vampires with very interesting powers, and the books don’t go on to explain what happens in the years that follow. In the text, even Carlisle and Siobhan, of the Irish coven, admit that they may have to face the Volturi again eventually, and even bring about their downfall.”

“Our own mother was killed by the Volturi, for creating an immortal child,” Tanya said quietly, looking to each of her sisters as she spoke. “We were spared only because we had no part in it. I bear no real love for them, but their laws are not unfair, and we do need some kind of order. Aren’t corrupt politicians just as common in human governments? Does it really matter, as long as they do not truly abuse their power?”

“Define truly abusing their power,” I returned. “Because they’re already abusing it. It’s just a matter of degree. From everything I’ve read, they will not hesitate to generate trumped-up charges against entire covens just to destroy them, if they pose a threat or if any of their members are of particular interest to Aro. If anyone in the coven is targeted for recruitment, they’ll conveniently claim the new recruit threw themselves on the mercy of the Volturi, which was granted. And look at the power they already have: a tracker who can find anyone he’s ever met, anywhere on Earth. A vampire who can break bonds of friendship, shattering covens in an instant, and form new, false bonds as well. A vampire who can make anyone feel content, whose very presence is literally addictive. And Aro
himself can read your every thought, your every memory, with a mere touch. Does this seem like the kind of power that should be in the hands of anyone remotely corrupt? Eleazar, you know them best. Is anything I’ve said false?”

He looked down at his lap, and Carmen took his hand, squeezing tightly. He shot her a grateful glance, and then, at last, looked back at me, before sweeping the room with his steady, solemn gaze. “No. It is not. I have seen them break covens, on false or exaggerated pretexts. Before I left, I was often used to identify prospects for recruitment, and though Aro no longer contacts me often, he has asked me now and then for new leads. I have given them to him, because I felt I had no other choice, because it is only by his mercy that Carmen and I have been allowed to lead our lives apart from the Volturi. But I know what he has done. What he’s capable of. And I am ashamed.”

“No, old friend, don’t be ashamed,” Carlisle told him. “We have all bent our knees to the Volturi, at one time or another. We all saw problems with their conduct, and we did nothing.”

Tanya shook her head, her blonde curls flying. “We can still do nothing! They’re too powerful. There’s no defense against Jane, against Alec, against Chelsea, against virtually any of them! Perhaps, as Bella said, we can make a direct conflict a risky prospect for them. But we’re talking about rebellion, and I don’t see how we could hope to overthrow them. We might kill some of them. But not many, and not the key figures. Even discussing it is dangerous.”

“They will break our family,” I said, very quietly. “Maybe not right away. Maybe not for a decade or more. But Edward and Alice are already tempting prizes for them. My father has a shield that - if I’m right - can resist even Aro’s power, even Jane’s, even Alec’s. And me? I have the ability to change the powers, even the very natures, of others. I can guide a human’s transformation into a hybrid rather than a full vampire. I can strip someone’s powers away. And it’ll knock me out for a week at a time, apparently, but I can make a vampire human again. Eleazar, is there any way Aro will pass up a shot at that kind of power? That he will ever allow me to exist apart from the Volturi?”

Eleazar shook his head. “No. You will not be safe from him. The moment he learns of your existence, you will never be safe from him again.”

“And that means none of the people around me will ever be safe, either. And Alice and I could just...give up. We could surrender ourselves. But once the Volturi have me, if Aro uses me cleverly - and he will - they will become unstoppable,” I said, looking around the room. The Cullens looked stricken at the thought of losing me, as did dad and even Kate. Eleanor, Jessamine, Tanya and Irina looked distinctly worried. Eleazar looked guilty, and Carmen was murmuring gently to him. “I don’t want to be modest, but this power will change everything. And I’m sorry, but I can’t get rid of it, I can’t even make it less effective, I apparently can’t modify my own abilities at all. I don’t want to live in a world where the Volturi can do whatever they want, completely unimpeded, because they will never be defeated.”

“And no one’s taking her out of this world, either,” Alice growled, glaring daggers, her fingers clenched tightly around mine. “Just in case anyone was thinking it.”

There was silence for a long moment, until, at last, Irina spoke. “All right. I’m willing to overthrow them. But how can we do it? Several of them are still difficult to impossible to overcome.”

“That’s not necessarily true. We can reach out to other covens, gather people with powers just as formidable. They are out there,” I said, before looking over at my father. “And in the books - like I said, the fictional Bella’s shield protects her from a number of the abilities you’re worried about. In time, she even learns to extend that shield around others. If dad really has that power, even if it’s not as strong...I can enhance it. Alter it. And we can prepare for a hard fight.”
Dad looked startled at first, but, gradually, he began to smile. “Well...I guess that’s something. Eleazar, maybe you’d better take a look at my power sooner rather than later.”

“And mine,” I added, flashing him a small smile as well.

“Of course. Let’s begin with what you’ve already guessed,” Eleazar said, turning to look at my father and concentrating. He frowned deeply, and his brow furrowed slightly for several seconds. “Curious, my own gift is slightly repulsed...but it does feel like a shield against mental powers. And there is...potential.”

I grinned, relief washing through me at the confirmation. “That gives me enough to work with, I think. What about me? Anything else you can tell me?”

Eleazar turned to stare at me, beginning to concentrate - and then, abruptly, his eyes widened and he nearly flew from his seat, grabbing Carmen and dragging her to the doorway. He didn’t say anything I could catch, merely letting out a long, rapid string of emphatic Spanish. Even with weeks of high school Spanish behind me, even with my heightened senses and altered perception of time, I could only catch every tenth or twentieth word.

My eyes widened, and I started to stand, only to drop back into my chair when he flinched. “What? What is it?”

“He’s - half-swearing. Half-praying,” Alice said, staring at him. “I’ve never seen him like this.”

“Eleazar. Please, tell us what’s wrong,” Carlisle pleaded, shooting me a reassuring glance and stepping cautiously forward.

Eleazar shook, as Carmen stared up at him, but he fell silent at last and eventually found the will to speak once more. “Whatever that is, inside of her,” he said, his voice trembling and his English heavily accented. “You cannot let the Volturi have it. It is alive. It - it eats at the world. In the wrong hands, it is the end of everything. God help you, Bella Swan. God help us all.”

Everyone stared at me. I scarcely knew what to say myself. At last, dad cleared his throat, standing and turning to face Eleazar. “Are you saying something’s wrong with my little girl?”

“No. No, not her,” he replied, though he looked warily back at me nonetheless. “But the power she possesses is...I have never seen anything like it. I only know it is a great and deadly thing, and must be mastered, or else it may master her. What you toy with - it is very dangerous. Until you know it, until you can truly call it your own, I don’t want you to even think about using it on my wife or me.”

“Oh...of course. I won’t,” I agreed, fairly rattled myself at this point.

There was silence, again, for several moments, as we all just looked around the room around one another. At last, Callie spoke across the phone line.

“So...whatever the hell just happened, I think we can all agree that this is not the kind of power the Volturi can ever get their hands on, and those corrupt bastards have to go? Not that I’m completely in love with the idea of Bella throwing herself into a goddamned vampire civil war.”

“Carmen and I will depart. Immediately,” Eleazar agreed. “We will keep moving, for as long as it takes, to ensure that we cannot be intercepted easily. We will check in when we can, but I don’t think we can easily organize any meetings or dead drops until the time comes to act, whatever form that action takes.”

Tanya stared at me for several seconds, her expression unreadable, and then she looked to each of
her sisters in turn. At last, she nodded. “The Volturi must be stopped. They have been allowed to run rampant for too long, and we cannot permit it to go on. I vote we rebel.”

“Hell, yes, I’m up for a fight,” Eleanor said, scarcely sharing a glance with Jessamine, who just nodded curtly. “We both are. I don’t know about all the rest of it, but I’m done being pushed around.”

“Anyone who threatens my daughter is going to have to go through me,” dad added, his jaw setting firmly.

Kate squeezed his shoulders and looked up at the others, her gaze clear and proud. “And anyone who threatens either of them will have to go through me.”

“Agreed,” Rosalie spat, fists clenched, as Emmett nodded.

Even Esme, usually so kind and gentle, had a glint of determination in her eye, and a grim expression on her face. “We’re not going to let anything happen to any of you.”

Jasper and Edward murmured their assent as well, and Carlisle let out a long breath, looking around at all of us.

“All right,” he said, his gently paternal voice ringing with finality. “We’re all officially traitors.”

*****

Alice and I lay on the roof of Eleazar and Carmen’s newly abandoned home, gazing up at the clear sky, as we had all those weeks ago. It felt like a lifetime ago, now. The stars seemed so much brighter, now, and I swore I could see more of them than I ever had before. Alice held me close, and she was warm, now, and soft, and she would no longer chill me to the bone if we lay here, exposed, for hours. Even the lingering Alaskan cold didn’t seem to bother me.

It should have settled all my nerves. The gentle, constant light of the stars above. The rhythm of her heartbeat, matched so perfectly to mine. The soothing sound of her deep, even breathing. The feeling of her arms around me, as I lay with her, my head resting against her chest. And it was a comfort.

But so much had changed, in just the last week, in just the last day, and I just couldn’t let it go.

“Alice,” I said, very quietly, my voice shaking slightly.

Her nimble fingers ran through my hair, caressing my scalp. “What is it, love?”

“What Eleazar said. About how this power was...dangerous. How it could master me,” I said, swallowing hard.

She cut in at that moment of hesitation. “Don’t worry about it. You’re - powerful. We knew that. He probably just hadn’t seen anything like that before and he freaked out.”

“But the first time I used this power, it was an accident. What if it is...alive, somehow? What if it really is dangerous?” I asked, looking up at her face. I could see her perfectly, even in the low light.
She wouldn't look back at me. Her gaze was turned firmly skyward, and her jaw twitched as I spoke. “I mean, have you looked?”

“I can’t see things if they’re not possible yet. Or at all,” she said tersely. “And I’m not going to go searching for something that’s not going to happen.”

“No. Alice, baby, no, you can’t just ignore this,” I said, sitting up and turning to face her fully. She pushed herself up as well, but still wouldn’t look me in the eye, not until I cupped her chin with one hand and turned her face toward me. “Look at me. This is too important. We can’t just hope it will go away.”

“I haven’t seen anything!” she snapped, shaking her head vigorously. “And if it was something that important, if it was you, if it was going to happen, it would hit me like a ton of bricks, okay? I wouldn’t even have to look, it would just come. So - it’s fine. It’s not an issue.”

I bit my lip. “Not yet.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

I pulled her into my arms, and realized, in that moment, she was trembling. Tears fell against my shoulder as, very quietly, she began to sob. “Alice…”

She sniffed loudly, shaking her head again. “No. We just found each other, I just got you back, I will not lose you.”

“I’ll work on it. Whatever it is, I’ll talk with Callie, and I’ll keep consulting you, and we’ll all work the problem together,” I told her. “But ignoring it won’t make it go away. Eleazar has a lot of experience with supernatural abilities. I don’t think sheer power would leave him that shaken.”

“You don’t know,” she mumbled.

“No. I don’t.” I turned to kiss her temple. “But we have to take it seriously.”

“Okay.” She sniffed again. “Don’t tell me you were about to ask me to kill you or something if you start losing control.”

I swallowed, glancing away. “No. If it comes to that - I won’t make you do that,” I promised.

“Don’t think Rosalie’s going to do it either.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Just...if it comes to that...forgive her. Forgive anyone who has to do it. Please.”

“No one’s going to have to do it,” she insisted, pulling back and meeting my eyes again, wiping the tears away. “No one. Because we are going to work the problem, and we are going to take it seriously, and we are going to solve it. We’re going to gather our forces and take the Volturi down and make this miserable world better. And then you and I, Bella Swan, are going to live happily ever after until the end of our days.”

“Okay. You’re right. That’s exactly what we’re going to do,” I agreed, cracking a small smile. “We have our work cut out for us.”

“The war’s not going to start tomorrow. Or for months, yet,” she said. “And whatever we decide to do about your powers, we have tonight. So just...be with me.”
She leaned forward, very briefly, to whisper that urgently into my ear, her breath warm and sweet against my skin. Then she laid back on the blanket, opening her arms, her eyes glittering and her lips parting in invitation. I grinned, leaning forward until I lay on top of her, our legs tangling together as we kissed, and very soon, the world beyond the pair of us drifted completely from our minds, and nothing else mattered.

Above us, the stars twinkled away in the endless void, keeping their eternal vigil, but they were no longer frozen, and time still passed for us all. Below us, the world spun ever forward, turning inevitably toward dawn. Inside me, a living power twitched and writhed and curled around my soul. Half a world away, the Volturi schemed and plotted, and somewhere, a pair of vampires ran away through the wilderness. Destiny would come to meet each and every one of us, and not even Alice could wrap her mind around the whole of it.

But those were problems for tomorrow.

Tonight was ours.

Chapter End Notes

Only the epilogue left to go now. I hope to have it up soon. Again, don't worry: even after this particular story ends, there is so much still to come.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Two months passed in relative quiet, and spring came to Forks in earnest, and I soon found a reason to scale back on the glamours Callie had so thoughtfully provided. I was a late bloomer, and I hadn’t been entirely done with puberty at the time of my transformation, so becoming a hybrid meant hitting one last, dramatic growth spurt soon after we returned home. I didn’t quite regain the height I remembered from my previous life, but I did shoot up three inches, and my figure filled out a little more. I wasn’t a bombshell like Rosalie, or Leah, or Emily, or Tanya, but combined with the other changes Rose’s venom had made to my body, I could turn my share of heads, even if I only had eyes for Alice.

That wasn’t the only change I noticed as the weeks passed. As my roots steadily grew in, I found my hair was no longer brown. I’d wondered if that might happen, given the change in my eye color, but I’d half-expected it to come in blonde, like Rosalie’s. Instead, I found myself looking at roots the same shade of red I’d seen in my recurring dreams. Somehow, though I wasn’t a perfect match, I had grown closer to the idealized version of myself from those visions. The choice I’d made had altered me and Alice irrevocably. It just didn’t make a lot of sense to me. I’d always been fond of red hair, but I’d had to dye mine, in both of the lives I could remember. And I was quite certain my eyes had never been blue, nor had I ever especially wanted them to be - Alice’s deep green eyes were far more striking and appealing to me.

There were still deeper mysteries in play that I could not begin to fathom.

Unfortunately for Alice, it seemed she had been done growing at the time of her own transformation. She was overjoyed to find she could grow her hair out, of course, and she seemed very pleased with her darker complexion and the altered hue of her eyes. But for all her melodramatic pouting and snarky complaints about an unjust and uncaring universe, she did not grow another inch, and generally remained exactly as she was. I knew she was largely joking about her discontent, but I still took the hint, and made it a point to remind her every day exactly how beautiful she really was.

Kate came down from Alaska with us, while her sisters, along with Eleanor and Jessamine, remained behind to demolish the Denali settlement and hide the evidence. She and my dad were virtually inseparable, and to some degree, it was adorable watching them get to know one another beyond their immediate mating bond, as they lit up in delight at each new discovery. At the same time, though, they could scarcely keep their hands off each other, and though the Cullens promised to help soundproof the upstairs rooms in our house, it could not happen fast enough. They weren’t really confining themselves to dad’s bedroom, either, which made coming home from school something of a crapshoot.

It only took a couple days for dad and I to reach an understanding, as we agreed that what we each did with our respective partners was none of the other’s business, and it made the most sense for me to go stay with Alice for the time being. We’d get together regularly for family meals, we’d still spend lots of time together, but in the interest of family harmony, my general sanity, and dad’s peace of mind, it was best if we had a little space. Alice and I pretty much took over Pine Cottage after that, as she was hard at work on ideas for our prom dresses, and all the Cullens emphatically agreed that we could probably use a place of our own for the time being.

Kate made herself scarce during her first few days in Forks, avoiding human contact as we all seriously discussed long term plans. Eleazar’s remarks on my powers still left me shaken, but I didn’t
want to deny Kate the chance to turn human and then become a hybrid if that’s what she chose, and Alice repeatedly checked the future and assured me she saw no problems. I also spent a good deal of time meditating, at Callie’s suggestion, trying to get in touch with the root of my own power and gain mastery over it. I wasn’t sure if it was working, but I was able to relax, a little, and I found some solace in the fact that I’d done everything I was planning before and the world hadn’t ended.

Spring break hit, and we decided to bite the bullet. I pulled Kate’s vampirism away from her, carefully leaving her power intact, and dropped into a dark and dreamless coma for the next five days. I’d already argued to Carlisle that the genetic material of a venom donor could potentially alter a hybrid’s DNA, and it seemed like a bad idea for a sexually active couple to be turned by the same vampire, and he’d agreed, gathering venom from Jasper to facilitate Kate’s second transformation. By the time I woke, we were ready to begin, and I spent the next three days guiding her change, while Alice watched over me, my dad fretted over both of us, and Rosalie popped in now and then to observe, a look of longing on her face. It wasn’t much of a vacation, really, but the look on Kate’s face when she woke - not to mention my dad’s - made it all worth it. Kate made her formal debut among the human population of Forks, and though news of her abrupt engagement to my father rocked our little town, most of the locals seemed to like her, with the obvious exception of Billy Black.

Just as I’d feared, Billy hadn’t taken my father’s change very well, and had reacted just as poorly to the fact that he’d formed a mating bond with a vampire - even if she had become a hybrid, and had chosen to drop blood-drinking completely in favor of human food. I didn’t have all the details, but I did know they had one especially nasty argument in which my name had come up, and afterward dad had stopped speaking to Billy altogether. I still hoped Billy’s attitude toward the Cullens and myself might improve eventually, and that perhaps he and my father would reconcile, but for the time being, it didn’t look very likely. Luckily, dad still had Harry Clearwater to go fishing with, and the Clearwater family in general stuck with us. Most of the pack - Jacob Black included - remained friendly as well, despite the decidedly mixed opinions of the elders.

I did get one answer to my lingering questions, not long after we returned to Forks. As I was telling Callie everything that had happened, in detailed, I got to Eleanor and Jessamine, and she started laughing out loud. It turned out that I had read the gender-swapped version of Twilight, Life and Death, that had been released for the series’ tenth anniversary, and I’d apparently shared more than a few of my thoughts with my best friend, including my distaste for several of the more unconventional names, including Beaufort, Edythe (with a Y! And an E!)...and Jessamine, Jasper’s female counterpart. Callie remembered the names of most of the other main characters, and Eleanor had been Emmett’s. Given what Alice had said in our shared dreams about my thoughts influencing the creation of this new world, I didn’t think it was a coincidence that elements of everything I’d read from and about the series seemed to be present, and I had a feeling there were still more alternate Cullens, for lack of a better term, out there waiting to be found, and if, somehow, even some of them had chosen to abstain from feeding on humans, or could be persuaded to do it, the prospect of finding more possible allies was certainly enticing. We scarcely knew how to begin seeking them out, but we had names - Carine, Earnest, Archie, Royal, Edythe (though I secretly hoped she’d chosen a more conventional spelling for her name, over the years) - and at least a little time to search.

But, for the most part, things just...continued. Edward continued courting Angela, slowly but very sweetly, and she gradually became a more frequent fixture at our lunch table. Callie continued going out with Leah, but neither one of them would give me a straight answer as to how serious it was, and honestly, it really wasn’t my business. Jessica kept studying magic with Callie, joining us for lunch and for various private meetings and meditation sessions, and gradually, whenever it was just the inner circle, she began to ask pointed questions about Edward’s intentions toward our mutual friend, and when exactly he planned on telling Angela everything. Though Edward and Angela’s feelings for one another had clearly grown stronger, none of us really had an answer for the second part of
the question - Edward least of all - and so we were left to agree in principle that we needed to come up with a plan.

The year wound to a close, and I found my classes were a lot easier. I didn’t feel any smarter, per se, but my perceptions had expanded, and it was a lot easier for me to retain and retrieve information. That, in turn, made it easier to make connections between everything I was studying. Spanish, biology, and even trigonometry just came more easily to me. It wasn’t enough to give me straight As across the board, but my grades had already been decent, and now they were truly good, and I had high hopes for further improvements. I was also fairly sure I’d aced my SAT, though it would take a little while to get the results. I didn’t think I’d be going to college right away, given the impending war with the Volturi. Though Alice didn’t want to hear it, I wasn’t sure I’d survive to attend college at all. But we still planned to finish out our senior year at Forks High, making our preparations as quietly as we could until the time came to move in earnest, and it was good to have options, and my personal options seemed to be expanding day by day.

And then, at long last, it was time for prom.

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Most of us in the know had decided to get ready at the Cullen house - even Leah, despite her repeated, strenuous objections to the stench, which really didn’t carry much weight now that we were more or less all friends. Of course, Alice couldn’t help needling her by offering to make her a tailored tux, and Leah had promptly replied she’d smell better if she wore hot garbage, which had set off a round of playful sniping that had lasted weeks. So by the actual day of prom, Leah was loudly leaving the room and even the house to ‘get some air’ every time she saw Alice, making sure to hold her nose as she did, and Callie and I were both getting tired of it.

We still had a few hours to go when Rosalie finished doing my hair, gathering it up into an elaborate array of curls, with trailing ringlets to frame my face. With that accomplished, we decided to put my dress and makeup on pause, and she brought me down to the living room to show me a set of blueprints on her laptop.

“Wow,” I breathed, looking them over. Bedrooms, an indoor basketball court, a heated indoor pool, a rec center, offices, a dining room with an attached kitchen big enough to feed a couple hundred people at a time, easy...it was all there. “So this is really happening.”

“Once we finish cutting through the bureaucracy, at least, and line up plenty of qualified hires. Edward and Alice will both be involved in the vetting, don’t worry,” she told me. “The Cassandra Reardon and Carolina Green Memorial Center for Vulnerable Youth. Has a certain ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Still not sure how I feel about being memorialized when I’m not dead,” Callie said, from where she sat off to the side. She was already in her dress, a vaguely Grecian-style sleeveless number in blue, with silver accents and a thin silver belt looped about her waist. She’d cut her hair short, and the teal streak she’d put in had been replaced by a deep blue that closely matched her dress, and her red lips and winged eyeliner were on point. “But at least you’re using the power and wealth of the vampire elite for good. I guess we can put off eating the rich. For now.”
Rosalie snorted. “Like you wouldn’t break your teeth if you tried.”

“I think it’s sweet. It’s a way of paying homage to the people we were,” I interjected, before the argument could continue. “We can’t go back to who or what we were, but we can carry the memory with us. And our legacy really will help people.”

“It does feel good. Knowing we’re building something to protect children who need it,” Rosalie remarked, gazing at the blueprints again, then clicking over to the artist’s concept of the facade, a welcoming brick structure surrounded by a lush garden. “Who knows? Maybe the Reardon-Green Foundation won’t stop with Seattle. Maybe what we’ve started will spread.”

Callie smiled, faintly, but I could see she was a little troubled. “Let’s hope we’re all around to help it grow.”

I tried to give her a reassuring smile, and opened my mouth to reply, but a soft chime from Rose’s computer distracted me. Without thinking, I glanced at the screen, spotting the IM notification in one corner.

Eleanor

Hey sexy. What’re you wearing?

My eyebrows shot upward, and I turned my gaze slowly to Rosalie, who scowled at me and shut the laptop with a snap.

“Don’t start,” she said.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have looked, I just - was that a joke? Or…” I bit my lip, searching her eyes.

“Was what a joke?” Callie asked, and Rosalie and I both shot her pointed looks. “Sorry, geez, okay, none of my business, I guess. Even if neither of you bothered to do that freaky vampire-whisper thing.”

Rosalie sighed. “Emmett knows. And...is actively participating,” she told me, her voice very even.

“That - you can do that?” I put my hands up as Rose shot me a mild glare. “I’m not judging! Whatever makes you two - or three - happy. You’re all grownups.”

“I have clearly missed out on some really juicy gossip,” Callie muttered.

Alice walked in then, putting her hands on her hips and smirking. She hadn’t changed yet, either, but she had done her hair and makeup, and she was gorgeous as always. “Exactly how long do you three plan to sit around in here like useless lumps?”

Callie scoffed. “Hey, I’m good to go, and I pretty much have to be a lump if I don’t want to mess up my makeup.”

“It’s your own fault for getting ready so early,” I said, in a singsong voice.

“Well excuse me for wanting to be the hottest chick in the room for once,” she fired back. “You all look like slobs next to me. Don’t you arch your eyebrows at me, I’m right.”

“Sure you are, dear,” Rosalie assured her, in a deeply patronizing tone.

The front door opened, and Leah walked in, immediately spotting Alice and plugging her nose again. “Whoops. Thought I smelled something rank outside. Damn, maybe I should just get changed
in the woods.”

Alice made a point of sniffing the air, before looking around in exaggerated confusion. “Did someone just let in a wet dog? It’s not even raining.”

I exchanged a glance with Callie, then Rose. We were all agreed. Something had to be done, and I wasn’t going to take any comments from the peanut gallery on this one. I knew hybrids smelled just fine to Leah and the other shifters, and I knew they smelled perfectly fine to me, so my girlfriend was exaggerating her part of things, too. I was tired of the game. We all were. Figuring Alice would stop me if I was about to go boom, I put my hand on Rosalie’s arm and pushed my mind in.

I had come to understand biochemistry somewhat better, and for all their differences, vampires were still alive, still biological beings, and still had chemical processes. The variations in eye color meant there were obvious distinctions between vampires who fed on human beings and vampires who fed on animals. All I needed to do was draw them out and make a few tweaks, and, while I was at it, maybe make some very minor adjustments to Rose’s own perceptions, so that ‘wet dog’ smell they all complained of registered as something else. In a moment, I’d finished my work and withdrawn, and turned to smile sweetly at Leah.

“Oh, Leah, I’m so glad you’re here. Rosalie’s trying a new perfume and she wanted to be sure it wasn’t overpowering to any shifters who might visit,” I lied.

Leah’s gaze flicked over to me, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. Behind me, Alice giggled, which just caused her eyes to narrow further. I continued to beam guilelessly at her. Finally, looking between me and Rose, she stepped forward.

“Don’t see how any perfume can overcome the stench, but fine, I’ll bite. Metaphorically. Emmett better not be waiting to jump me for this,” Leah muttered.

Rosalie grinned. “Don’t worry, he’d probably just think it’s hot.”

Emmett pounded down the stairs, ducking into view with a huge, goofy, open-mouthed smile. “What’s hot? What’d I miss? Did you do hotness without me?”

Leah looked up at him, then smirked, leaning in so close her lips were practically on Rosalie’s neck. She inhaled deeply, and instantly her smirk dropped as she snapped back. “What the fuck?”

“Awesome, it works,” I said, getting up and moving to Emmett, putting my hand on his arm next. “From now on, as long as these guys stick to eating animals, they won’t smell all sickly-sweet. I went with kind of a muted petrichor scent. The smell of dust after rain. Not quite human, but not repellent, I hope?”

“Uh, no, it’s better,” Leah said. “...only if they keep eating animals?”

“If any vampire I’m altering like this drinks human blood, they’ll smell just as rank to you as they always did,” I assured her. “Oh, and I’m making some tweaks to your perceptions, too. Sorry I didn’t ask before, Rose.”

“No, it’s all right.” Rosalie rose from her seat, grasping Leah’s shoulders and leaning in close, her eyelashes fluttering as she breathed deeply. “Oh, you smell much better. Like sea salt, with a hint of...is that lilac?”

“Fuck,” Emmett whispered, as I worked on him; the tweaks came easier now that I knew what I was doing. He grinned so wide I was half-convinced his face was going to split in two. “Are you two gonna bang? Can I watch?”
Callie cleared her throat. “Girlfriend, right here.”

“Oh, is that what you two are?” I smirked at Callie, then turned my attention back to Emmett, made the mistake of glancing down, and wrenched my eyes up again, grimacing. “Emmett Cullen, please do not get hard while I’m touching you.”

“Hey, it’s not like I can help it,” he protested.

Rosalie smirked at him, then at Callie, then pressed a soft, brief kiss to Leah’s neck before pulling back and smiling prettily. Leah looked faintly shocked, and Cal looked slightly disgruntled. I finished with Emmett, yanking my hand back and scowling at his unrepentant grin, and Alice came over to loop her arm about my waist.

“Nicely done, but I really do prefer it when you check with me before playing around,” she murmured.

I smiled down at her, reaching over to take her free hand. “I knew you’d catch me if I was about to fall.”

She swung around to face me, leaning up to give me a sweet, lingering kiss. “Always.”

I held Alice close for a moment, then let her go, stepping back. “Okay, I’m going to repeat my trick with the rest of the vampires in the house, and I hope that puts an end to any and all assholery and general hostilities on both sides.”

I looked pointedly at Alice, who pouted, and then Leah, who rolled her eyes and snorted. “Buzzkill.”

I gave Leah a level look, drawing myself up, tall and proud, and tilting my chin. “That’s Captain Buzzkill to you.”

With that, I turned on my heel and made my way upstairs.

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After I’d made my adjustments to the rest of the Cullens, we finished getting ready, and piled into the stretch limo we’d rented for prom night. Alice had worked her magic on both our dresses. Hers was clearly inspired by a tuxedo: a strapless white bodice that clung to her figure, with black buttons down her chest and stomach, paired with a frothy black skirt that came above her knees in the front while dipping to mid-calf in the back. There was a red sash about her waist, mimicking a cummerbund, and she’d taken a cue from Leah and used a red bow tie as a choker. Since Leah herself was in much the same outfit she’d worn to the spring dance - she’d traded her tank top for a dress shirt, but she’d left the top few buttons undone, and the edges of her black bra were faintly visible when she shifted - this had resulted in a fair bit of teasing, though both Leah and Alice reined it in before it got irritating again.

As for me, I’d gotten the full princess treatment Alice had promised. My dress was a purple hue that drew out the faint traces of violet in my eyes, and my makeup had been carefully designed to do the same, making me feel a little like a young Elizabeth Taylor when I looked in the mirror. We’d dropped the glamours for tonight, figuring the lighting would be low and most people would be too
busy to notice or care, and we could explain them as colored contacts if anyone got nosy. A corset hugged my torso tightly, clinging to my waist and pushing up my chest, displaying some notable but tasteful cleavage. The sides were inlaid with gold embroidery in fine, delicate curls, accented here and there with tiny rose blossoms and seashells, and wings of ruffled purple fabric swept out from the front and looped around my upper arms, leaving my shoulders bare. My skirt was full and layered, and the top layer was translucent, exposing the traces of golden glitter beneath that sparkled when the light struck them. Alice had even worked seashells and pearls into a small tiara made of delicate silver wire, placing it atop my head while reminding me that a princess was nothing without her crown.

It should have been ridiculous. It was ridiculous, really. But it was still sort of thrilling.

The boys, of course, were in tuxes and black tie, though the tuxedos were personally tailored to each of them, and they all looked damned good. Rosalie was showing off as usual, in a red dress with a plunging neckline and a slight high up one side, and though Alice had assured me that Forks High didn’t really impose much of a dress code at school functions, I was pretty sure they’d be tightening those rules up after tonight.

We stopped at Angela’s house on our way to the dance, and all piled out as the Webers insisted on another round of photographs, snapping a few group shots along with the endless pictures of Edward and Angela standing at the base of their stairs. Compared to Rosalie in particular, Angela’s dress was positively demure, a blue halter dress with a flowing mermaid skirt, and though it left a little of her back bare, it wasn’t too daring. Mrs. Weber looked faintly disapproving when her gaze fell on Rose, but she didn’t say anything, and she and Mr. Weber - not Reverend, as he’d pointed out gently when I’d mistakenly used the term - were both friendly and welcoming on the whole, even with two gay couples in the mix. Angela’s little brothers, nine-year-old twins named Joshua and Isaac, were both loud and clearly a bit of a handful, but sweet and endearing nonetheless, and obediently stayed out of the shots until Angela dragged them both in for one last picture, smiling with genuine love for them both.

At last, the Webers saw us off, and we made our way to the hotel the prom committee had secured for the dance. There’d been rumblings of using the gymnasium again, but the budget had allowed for something fancier, and the committee had convinced the school administration to go along with it. Frankly, I was relieved - I liked Forks High well enough, but it was good to see everyone outside the halls of the school for once, and even with the numerous teachers attending as chaperones, it felt like we could cut loose a little.

The prom committee had decided on a Vegas theme, which meant some old lounge standards were mixed into the playlist, and a small set of slot machines rang against one wall, while a few teachers manned casino tables. It all used tokens, of course, which we could exchange for the usual lot of cheap carnival prizes, and we were each given little bags of tokens when we presented our tickets at the door.

There was photographer manning a photo booth off to one side as we entered the ballroom, and a handful of couples were lined up to get their pictures taken in front of a painted, stylized backdrop of downtown Las Vegas at night. I spotted Jessica standing in line with Mike, dressed in a hot pink low-cut number that clung to her like a second skin, and I waved at her, drawing her attention. She positively glowed as she beamed back at me, waving emphatically in return, and I quickly gestured at my chest and shot her a thumbs up, earning a grin and an emphatic nod.

“So. What shall we do first?” Alice asked, her arm curled around mine. “Get in line for a photo? Play some slots? Oh, I think there’s an opening at the craps table.”
“Blackjack’s more my game, honestly,” I murmured softly. “But let’s not, not just yet. Care to dance?”

“Why, Isabella Swan,” she replied, smiling up at me. “I thought you’d never ask.”

The current song, some modern pop ballad, faded out as we reached the floor, and I heard brass, strings and piano joining together in a familiar intro. I laughed as I swept Alice into my arms, taking the lead. It was too perfect. I couldn’t stop myself from singing softly to her as we began to move across the floor.

*Out the tree of life I just picked me a plum
You came along and everything’s starting to hum
Still, it’s a real good bet the best is yet to come*

*The best is yet to come and babe, won’t it be fine?
You think you’ve seen the sun, but you ain’t seen it shine*

*Wait ‘til the warm-up’s underway
Wait ‘til our lips have met
Wait ‘til you see that sunshine day
You ain’t seen nothing yet!*

Alice laughed gaily as I spun her out and twirled her back into my arms, the other couples parting slightly around us. As soon as I held her close once more, she snuggled in, gazing up at me adoringly, and her high, sweet voice joined mine, very quietly but perfectly audible to my ears.

*The best is yet to come and babe, won’t it be fine?
The best is yet to come, come the day you’re mine*

*Wait ‘til your charms are right for these arms to surround
You think you’ve flown before, but you ain’t left the ground*

*Now wait ‘til you’re locked in my embrace
Wait ‘til I draw you near
Wait ‘til you see that sunshine place
Ain’t nothing like it here*

*The best is yet to come and babe, won’t it be fine
The best is yet to come
The best is yet to come, come the day you’re mine*

The music under the vocals built, exploding in a riotous conclusion, and a few people around us applauded. I looked around in surprise, then quickly ducked my head back towards Alice. “Okay, well... everyone is staring now, so that’s awesome.”

“Let them,” she said, beaming up at me, moving in to kiss my jaw softly. “I don’t care. You can do *that* any time you like.”

“I can embarrass both of us in front of all our friends?”

“Stop,” she protested, with a little groan, but her eyes sparkled as she pulled back, setting her hand against my stomach. “You can sing to me. You can dance with me. And someday, God willing, you’ll get over these insecurities and you’ll be *just* as shameless as I am.”
“Mmm. That might take a while,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss her softly, carefully lowering my voice still further, until only she could hear. “And let’s stop before I get to Rosalie levels of shamelessness.”

“It’s a damned good thing I love you.” She laughed, shaking her head, and she met my eyes once more, smiling tenderly. “My heart.”

I smiled back at her, drawing her in close while keeping our eyes locked. “My soul.”

And that, for the moment, was all that mattered.

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THE END

Chapter End Notes

At last we come to the end of the story - but don't worry, there are sequels to come. To avoid causing any more breaks in the flow, author's notes for this are posted to the story's official Tumblr, twilight-adamo dot tumblr dot com, and I will be following the same practice for new chapters of the sequels. Thank you so much for reading.
**Author Alert: These Our Actors**

**Note from the Author:**

I promised over on FFN that I would add an update to *As Dreams Are Made On* when the sequel is available. It makes sense to do the same here. While I still don't expect to begin *Brave New World* for a while, I have decided to begin an occasional side project. *These Our Actors* will present vignettes from the Tempestverse written from the perspectives of other characters. The first chapter, Quil, is up now. Rosalie will probably get her own chapter next. I don't have any kind of update schedule for you - I'll be writing as inspiration strikes, between work on other projects, as was my original intent with *Brave New World*.

As for *Brave New World* itself, it's shaping up into a more coherent narrative. I still plan to start posting this summer. There will be one final update to *As Dreams Are Made On* when that happens.

*These Our Actors* can be found under my author profile. I hope you enjoy these glimpses into the minds of everyone who isn't Bella Swan.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!