Eternal Sun

by cheshire_carroll

Summary

**MOONRISE SEQUEL**

Bella's engaged, Hermione is married and the threat of Victoria is no more. For once, the lives of the Swan sisters are calm. And then Bella is literally handed a death sentence when she falls pregnant with a vampire human hybrid and the Darker side of Hermione's world rears it's ugly head when Lucius Malfoy breaks out of Azkaban with one plan and one plan only- to destroy her, the person responsible for bringing him down, and everyone she loves.

Set during Breaking Dawn and post-Deathly Hallows:

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Prologue

PROLOGUE:

Jacob’s POV - note: this will be the ONLY Jacob POV in the book.

Two Months Ago...

I wasn't sure why I went to Bella’s crazy ass sister's wedding to the fortune telling bloodsucker. Maybe I was curious. Maybe I was a masochist. All I know, is that afterwards I felt sick. That I had to retreat to the forest where I had to fight the hot taste, as a red haze washed over my eyes and a trail of warmth slid down my back, leaving me wrestling to keep my shape together while my body tried to shake apart.

They'd both been so happy. So overwhelmingly happy. And Hermione's face had started to flicker in my mind, until it was Bella standing there, Bella laughing and crying and so, so in love, looking so, so beautiful in white.

But I'd coped. I'd managed to keep myself together. That was, until I'd heard the conversation between a young man, a few years older then me, with red hair, talking to Harry. "Best bit about this whole situation is that Alice isn't going to change Hermione." He'd grumbled. My whole body had stiffened at that. "Be nice, Ron." Harry had sighed. "What?" the redhead, Ron, had then protested, "You did DADA with me-there's a reason there aren't more vampires. Changing muggles is bloody difficult- the vampires kill 'em more often then not."

That's when I'd left- it was either that or phase in front of everyone.

I tried shoving the words away, but they were still there, scratching themselves into my brain, the pain of it so strong that I could barely breathe.

It didn't matter so much that Bella'd chosen someone else over me. That agony was nothing at all. That agony I could live with for the rest of my stupid, too long, stretched out life.
But it did matter that she was giving up everything- that she was letting her heart stop and her skin
ice over and her mind twist into some crystallized predator's head. A monster. A stranger.

I would have thought there was nothing worse than that, nothing more painful in the whole world.

But, if he killed her...

Again, I had to fight the rage. Maybe it would be good to let the heat change me into a creature
who could deal with it better. A creature with instincts so much stronger than human emotions. An
animal who couldn't feel pain in the same way. A different pain. Some variety, at least.

But I couldn't, because right now there would be others running, patrolling, and for once I just
wanted to be alone. I cussed Leah under my breath, wishing she'd shared with the rest of us how
she blocked us from her thoughts.

I had to believe that Bella would survive. But that required trust- a trust I didn't want to feel, a trust
in that bloodsucker's ability to keep her alive.

She would be different, and I wondered how that would affect me. Would it be the same as if she
had died, to see her standing there like a stone? Like ice? When her scent burned in my nostrils and
triggered the instinct to rip, to tear...

How would that be? Could I want to kill her? Could I not want to kill one of them?

I sat there, in the forest, until the night had almost turned to day.

Going home was probably a bad idea, but I was hungry and I couldn't think of another plan. I made
a face as I pulled my arm through the retarded sling and grabbed my crutches. If only Charlie
hadn't seen me tat day and spread the word of my 'motorcycle accident'. Stupid props. I hated them.

Billy was still asleep when I walked into the house. I wished he wasn't. Because then maybe he
would have gotten rid of the letter, sitting oh-so conspicuously on the door-matt.

I couldn't stop myself, couldn't help stooping down and yanking it up. It was a thick, ivory
envelope, made of some stiff, heavy paper. Expensive. Too fancy for Forks. The card inside was
the same, too done-up and formal. Bella'd had nothing to do with this. There was no sign of her
personal taste in the layers of see-through petal-printed pages. I'd bet she didn't like it at all.
I ignored the invitation, my eyes instead being drawn to the thick ivory paper folded in half with my name handwritten in black ink on the back. I didn't recognize the handwriting, but it was as fancy as the rest of it. For half a second, I wondered if the bloodsucker was into gloating.

And then I flipped it open.

_Jacob,_

_I'm breaking the rules by sending you this. She was afraid of hurting you, and she didn't want to make you feel obligated in any way. But I know that if things had gone the other way, I would have wanted the choice._

_I promise I will take care of her, Jacob. Thank you— for her— for everything._

_Edward_

I was running before I registered I was moving, my clothes strewn out behind me like a trail of crumbs— as if I wanted to find my way back. It was almost too easy now to phase. I didn't have to think. My body already knew where I was going and, before I asked it to, it gave me what I wanted.

I had four legs before the invitation hit the ground, and I was flying.

The trees blurred into a sea of black flowing around me. My muscles bunched and released in an effortless rhythm. I could run like this for days and I would not be tired. Maybe, this time, I wouldn't stop.

But I wasn't alone.

_So sorry,_ Embry whispered in my head.

I could see through his eyes. He was far away, to the north, but he had wheeled around and was racing to join me. I growled and pushed myself faster.

_Wait for us,_ Quil urged. He was closer, just starting out from the village.

_Leave me alone,_ I snarled.
I could feel their worry in my head, try hard as I might o drown it in the sound of the wind and the forest. This was what I hated most- seeing myself through their eyes, worse now that their eyes were full of pity. They saw the hate, but they kept running after me.

A new voice sounded in my head.

*Let him go.* Sam's thought was soft, but still an order. Embry and Quil slowed to a walk.

If only I could stop hearing, stop seeing what they saw. My head was so crowded, but the only way to be alone again was to be human, and I couldn't stand the pain.

*Phase back,* Sam directed them. *I'll pick you up,* Embry.

First one, then another awareness faded into silence. Only Sam was left. *Thank you,* I managed to think.

*Come home when you can.* The words were faint, trailing off into blank emptiness as he left, too. And I was alone.

So much better. Now I could hear the faint rustle of the matted leaves beneath my toenails, the whisper of an owl's wings above me, the ocean- far, far in the west- moaning against the beach. Hear this, and nothing more. Feel nothing but speed, nothing but the pull of muscle, sinew and bone, working together in harmony as the miles disappeared behind me.

If the silence in my head lasted, I would never go back. I wouldn't be the first to choose this form over the other. Maybe, if I ran far enough away, I would never had to hear again...

I pushed my legs faster, letting Jacob Black disappear behind me.
Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE:

Bella's POV:

Present time...

No one is staring at you, I promised myself. No one is staring at you. No one is staring at you.

"Bella, everyone's staring at you." Hermione's amused voice washes over me. I groan, out loud, and twist in the seat to shoot her a half-hearted glare. She raises an eyebrow at me, from where she's sitting in the passenger seat. "What?" she says, her voice oh-so innocent, "look!"

Biting my lip, I do as she says, not having anything better to do as I sat waiting for one of the three traffic lights in the town to turn green. I peeked to the right where in her minivan, Mrs. Weber had turned her whole torso in my direction. Her eyes bored into mine, and I flinched back, wondering why she didn't drop her gaze or look ashamed. It was still considered rude to stare at people, wasn't it? Didn't that apply to me anymore?

Then I remembered that these windows were so darkly tinted that she probably had no idea if it was even me in here, let alone that I'd caught her looking. I tried to take some comfort in the fact that she wasn't really staring at me, just the car.

My car. Sigh.

I glanced to the left and groaned, again. Two pedestrians were frozen on the sidewalk missing their chance to cross as they stared. Behind them, Mr. Marshall was gawking through the plate-glass window of his little souvenir shop. At least he didn't have his nose pressed up against the glass. Yet.

The light turned green and, in my hurry to escape, I stomped on the gas pedal without thinking- the
normal way I would have punched it to get my ancient Chevy truck moving.

Engine snarling like a hunting panther, the car jolted forward so fast that my body slammed into the black leather seat and my stomach flattened against my spine. "Crap!" I gasped, as I fumbled for the break. Beside me, Hermione's reaction was slightly less contained.

"For the love of Merlin, I knew I shouldn't have let you drive this! What the ruddy hell was I thinking?" she shouted, gripping the sides of her seat so tightly her knuckles turned white.

Trying to keep my head, I tapped the brake lightly. The car lurched to an absolute standstill anyway. I couldn't bear to look around at the reaction. If there had been any doubt as to who was driving this car before, it was gone now.

With the toe of my shoe, I gently nudged the gas pedal down half a millimeter, and the car shot forward again. Cringing slightly, I looked at Hermione who was glaring at me. "Sorry?" I offered. She just glared harder.

I finally managed to reach my goal, the gas station. Honestly, if I hadn't been running on vapors, I wouldn't have come into town at all. I was relying solely on Hermione for most things these days, like Pop-Tarts and shoelaces, to avoid spending time in public. Unfortunately, she'd refused to go get petrol for me this time, telling me I needed to learn to just ignore the attention.

Hermione exits the car, relief clear on her face, and moving as if I were in a race, I follow her out, get the hatch open, the cap off, the card scanned, and the nozzle in the tank within seconds. Of course, there was nothing I could do to make the numbers of the gauge pick up the pace. They ticked by sluggishly, almost as if they were doing it just to annoy me.

It was stupid to be so self-conscious, and I knew that. Besides my mom and dad, did it really matter what people were saying about my engagement? About my new car? About my mysterious acceptance into an Ivy League college? About the shiny black credit card that felt red-hot in my back pocket right now?

"Um, hello?" a man's voice called out. I turned, and then wished I hadn't. Two men stood beside a fancy SUV with brand-new kayaks tied to the top. Neither of them was looking at me; they both were staring at the car.

Personally, I didn't get it. But then, I was just proud I could distinguish between the symbols for
Toyota, Ford and Chevy. This car was glossy black, sleek, and pretty, but it was still just a car to me.

"I'm sorry to bother you two, but could you tell me what kind of car you're driving?" the tall one asked. I turned to Hermione, desperately, but she just smirked at me, leaning back against the car door. Hoping I wasn't turning too red, I answered the best I could.

"Um, a Mercedes, right?"

"Yes," the man said politely while his shorter friend rolled his eyes at my answer, and I could see Hermione shaking with silent laughter in my peripheral vision. Some sister. "I know, but I was wondering, is that... are you driving a-

"Mercedes Guardian? Yes we are." Hermione interrupts him, and the urge to glare at her intensifies. The two guys' reverent expressions as they stared at my car gave me the feeling that they would get along well with Edward.

"They aren't supposed to be available in Europe yet," the man said, his voice filled with wonderment, "let alone here!"

"Well, what can I say?" Hermione smiles at them, sweetly, "it pays to have connections." I try not to blush at that, cursing her internally.

"Do you mind if I take a picture with it?" It took me a second to process that. I try not to gape.

"Really? You want to take a picture with the car?"

"Sure- nobody is going to believe me if I don't get proof."

"Um. Okay. Fine." I swiftly put away the nozzle, and made to creep back into the front seat while the enthusiast dug a huge professional-looking camera out of his backpack. Hermione instantly threw out an arm, halting my movements.

"Are you sure you should be driving this car?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.
"You're my sister, you should be supporting me." I grumble, even though I agree with her completely.

"Bella, I'll support you in anything you want to do," Hermione sighs in exasperation, "except drive." I glare at her, and put my hands on my hips.

"I'm going to learn to drive this car, even if it kills me!" I growl, before proceeding to determinedly push away her arm and yank open the car door, sliding into the driver's seat. I refuse to let this stupid contraption beat me.

"At least wait until I'm out of the car before letting it kill you- I don't want Alice holding me responsible for messing up your face today of all days." Hermione sighs as she slides in the passenger seat, "not forty-eight hours before the wedding." I cringe slightly at the thought of the day after tomorrow.

The wedding.

My wedding.

In just two days I would go from being Isabella Swan to Isabella Cullen. Jesus Christ.

"Hermione, why did you take Alice's last name?" I ask, in a half-hearted attempt to distract myself.

"Because Hermione Granger-Swan-Cullen sounds ridiculous." She answered, promptly. Seeing my confused look, she sighs, and closes the book. "I'm a Swan and a Granger. It's who I was born to, and who I grew up as. I couldn't just choose one of them. So I chose my future."

"Right." I mumbled.

"Hey," the tall man called, cupping his hands to the glass in an effort to peer in. "We're done now. Thanks a lot!"
"You're welcome," I called back, and then tensed as I started the engine and eased the pedal- ever so gently- down...

No matter how many times I drove down the familiar road home, I still couldn't make the rain-faded flyers disappear into the background. Each one of them, stapled to telephone poles and taped to street signs, was like a fresh slap in the face.

The HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY? posters were not Jacob's father's idea. It had been my father, Charlie, who'd printed up the flyers and spread them all over town. And not just Forks, but Port Angeles and Sequim and Hoquiam and Aberdeen and every other town in the Olympic Peninsula.

He'd made sure that all the police stations in the state of Washington had the same flyer hanging on the wall, too. His own station had a whole corkboard dedicated to finding Jacob. A corkboard that was mostly empty, much to his disappointment and frustration.

And Charlie was disappointed with more than the lack of response. He was most disappointed with Billy, Jacob's father- and Charlie's closest friend. For Billy's not being more involved with the search for his sixteen-year-old "runaway". For Billy's refusing to put up the flyers in La Push, the reservation on the coast that was Jacob's home. For his seeming resignation to Jacob's disappearance, as if there was nothing he could do.

And he was frustrated with me, for taking Billy's side.

I wouldn't put up posters, either. Because both Billy and I knew where Jacob was, roughly speaking, and we also knew that no one had seen this boy.

The flyers put the usual big, fat lump in my throat, the usual stinging tears in my eyes, and I was glad Edward was out hunting. If he saw my reaction, it would only make him feel terrible too.

So in an effort to distract myself, I turn my attention to my sister, who's warily watching me drive.

"So... married life. What's it like?" I ask, chewing on my lip.

"What part in specific?" she asks, the gleam in her eye telling me that what she's thinking is most likely not recommended for those underage. I can't help but blush slightly.

"You know, living together. Sharing a house. What's it like?" Hermione bites back a smile as she leans back in the seat, relaxing slightly, but one hand still cautiously holding out her wand, ready to
cast some kind of charm in the "likely event I'll crash"- her words, not mine.

"It's the best," she finally answers, sounding honest. "Everyday I wake up and go to sleep next to the woman I love."

"And you spend all the time in between with your head buried in your books." I remark. Hermione grins wickedly.

"Or buried between Alice's legs." My cheeks instantly flame red and she laughs, before speaking again. "Believe it or not, Bella, I do have work to do."

"Well what are you working on?" I ask, trying to control my blush.

"Getting a Mastery in Alchemy." Hermione replies, instantly. I frown.

"Uh, what's alchemy?"

"It's sort of the Magical equivalent to chemistry," she explains, "it mostly concerns the processes of magical transformations, transmutations, combinations and creations. It combines several different subjects, such as Potions, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Transfiguration-"

"And why do you want to get it?" I interrupt her, not really understanding her explanation. My curiosity, however, is instantly spiked when she smiles.

"That's a secret."

"What?" I ask, surprised.

“I’m not telling you yet- I’m not telling anyone.” She says.

“Well now I’m curious.” I sigh as I reach out to turn on the heater- I'm getting a bit cold. Instantly, jazzy music booms through the car at an agonizing volume- dammit, I hate this car. I can't find anything.
Hermione, eyes widened in horror, claps her hands over her ears- I'm very much tempted to do the same and only the fact that if I let go of the wheel we'll crash is holding me back. And barely, at that. "SWEET MOTHER OF MERLIN! TURN IT DOWN!" she shouts, over the booming. "OR BETTER YET- TURN IT OFF!"

"I'M TRYING!" I shout back, pushing a few different buttons on the dashboard, trying to figure out which one turns off the radio. I do manage, to my relief, but somehow also succeed in turning on the windscreen wipers. "Oh crap!" I swear, and the car swerves, almost running off the road in my distraction.

"That was a tree by the way. Try not to hit them- they make lousy hood ornaments." Hermione yells, face pale, already beginning to mutter charms under her breath. I manage to pull up on the side of the road, about a mile from our house now, and I scowl at her. She scowls back, and then, just as only sisters can do, we both start laughing. Hysterically.

"Oh god!" I gasp for breath.

"Bloody hell!" she splutters, "I swear to Merlin, my life just flashed before my eyes!"

"Mine too." I agree. "I really hate this car."

"It's better then your old monstrosity." Hermione shrugs, and I narrow my eyes at her. It was very, very convenient- too convenient- that my truck would wheeze its last wheeze just weeks after Edward and I had agreed to out lopsided compromise, one detail of which was that he be allowed to replace my truck when it passed on.

Edward swore it was only to be expected; my truck had lived a "long, full life" and then "expired of natural causes". According to him. And seeing the glint in Hermione's eyes makes me even more certain that it wasn't natural causes that had caused the death of my beloved vehicle.

Seeing my suspicious gaze, she widens her eyes innocently. "What?"

"You know what." I grumble, and her lips quirk into a smile.

"I should probably drive the rest of the way." She says, and I sigh, and undo my seat belt, sliding across to swap seats with her.
The remaining portion of the drive goes (somewhat annoyingly for my pride) smoothly, and as she parks in the driveway, I have to pause for a few seconds, preparing myself mentally to go inside the house, where Charlie would be waiting.

My poor dad had so much to deal with right now. Jacob-the-runaway was just one of the straws on his overburdened back. Not only was one of his barely-a-legal-adult daughters about to become a Mrs., but his other one had moved out of home and in with her girlfriend who also happened to be her wife- not that he knew that.

"Are you coming in with me?" I ask Hermione, hopefully.

"I've got a few minutes," she says, checking her weird watch, "then I'm off to babysit Teddy, so Rosalie and Emmett can go hunt." Sighing in relief, I hop out of the car, and let Hermione lead the way up to the house.

"Dad?" I call out, as I step inside the house, after my sister. "I'm home! And Hermione's here!"

"Hold on, Bells, stay right there."

"Huh?" I asked, pausing automatically, turning my head slightly to give Hermione a surprised look. She shrugs.

"Gimme a second. Ouch, you got me, Alice." Alice?

"Sorry Charlie," Alice's trilling voice responded. "How's that?"

"I'm bleeding on it."

"You're fine. Didn't break the skin- trust me."

"What's going on?" I demanded, hesitating in the doorway.
"Thirty seconds, please, Bella," Alice told me, "your patience will be rewarded. Hermione, make sure she doesn't come in."

"Humph." Charlie adds. I glare at Hermione as she goes to grab my arm, and she shrugs, letting it fall back to her side. I start tapping my foot, counting each beat, but before I get to thirty, Alice says, "okay, girls, come in!" Moving with caution, I rounded the little corner into our living room, Hermione close by my heels.

"Oh," I gasped, "Dad. Don't you look-"

"Silly?" Charlie interrupted.

"I was thinking more like debonair."

"Looks like someone's been reading dictionaries." Hermione teases me softly, even as Charlie blushes. Alice takes his elbow and tugs him around into a slow spin to showcase the pale grey tux.

"Now cut that out, Alice. I look like an idiot."

"No one dressed by me ever looks like an idiot." Alice states, confidently.

"She's right dad- you look fabulous! What's the occasion?" I ask. Alice rolled her eyes.

"It's the final check on the fit. For both of you. Or did you forget what the day after tomorrow is?" I peeled my gaze off the unusually elegant Charlie for the first time and saw the dreaded white garment bag laid carefully across the sofa. Crap.

"I have to go, sorry," Hermione speaks up, blowing Alice a kiss. "Duty calls."

"I'll see you later, love." Alice beams, before my sister exits the room, leaving me to my fate.

"Go to your happy place, Bella. It won't take long." Alice promises, seeing the expression on my face. I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes. Keeping them shut, I stumbled my way up the
stairs to my room. I stripped down to my underwear and held my arms straight out. "You'd think I was shoving bamboo splinters under your nails," Alice muttered to herself, as she followed me in.

I paid no attention to her. I was in my happy place.

In my happy place, the whole wedding mess was over and done. Behind me. Already repressed and forgotten.

We were alone, just Edward and me. The setting was fuzzy and constantly in flux- it morphed from misty forest to cloud-covered city to arctic night- because Edward was keeping the location of our honeymoon a secret to surprise me. But I wasn't exactly concerned about the where part.

Edward and I were together, and I'd fulfilled my side of our compromise perfectly. I'd married him. That was the big one. But I'd also accepted all his outrageous gifts and was registered, however futilely to attend Dartmouth College in the Fall. Now it was his turn.

Before he turned me into a vampire- his big compromise- he had one other stipulation to make good on. Edward had an obsessive sort of concern over the human things that I would be giving up, the experiences he didn't want me to miss. Most of them- like the prom, for example- seemed silly to me. There was only one human experience I was worried about missing. Of course it would be the one he wished I would forget completely.

Here was the thing, though. I knew a little about what I was going to be like when I wasn't human anymore. I' seen newborn vampires firsthand, and I'd heard all my family-to-be's (or where they already family, because Hermione was married to Alice?) stories about those wild early days. For several years, my biggest personality trait was going to be thirsty. It was going to take some time before I could be me again. And even when I was in control of myself, I would never feel the exact same way as I did now.

Human... and passionately in love.

I wanted the complete experience before I traded in my warm, breakable, pheromone-riddled body for something beautiful, strong... and unknown. I wanted a real honeymoon with Edward. And, despite the danger he feared this would put me through, even though Hermione and Alice had been having sex for months now, he had agreed to try.

I was only vaguely aware of Alice and the slip and slide of satin over my skin. I didn't care, for the
moment, that the whole town was talking about me. I didn't think about the spectacle I would have
to star in, much too soon. I didn't worry about tripping over my train, or giggling at the wrong
moment or being too young or the staring audience or even the empty seat where my best friend
should be.

I was with Edward in my happy place.
Chapter Two

CHAPTER TWO:

Hermione's POV:

"Who's adorable?" I cooed to the baby on my lap. Little Teddy Lupin was almost a year old now, and Rosalie and Emmett had been raising him for around two months, ever since his grandmother Andromeda Tonks had committed suicide. Teddy loved them both to pieces, and already called them momma and dada. His accent was adorably mixed, a touch British, a touch American.

Teddy meant the world to Rosalie and Emmett- especially Rosalie. She was never away from him for more then an hour at a time- the time when she was hunting. With Alice occupied with Charlie, this was the first time pretty much any of the Cullens had managed to get away from Alice long enough to get a bite to eat this week (no pun intended) and I was babysitting.

Teddy looked up at me with big blue eyes, as his hair changed from bushy chestnut curls to bright, bubblegum pink spikes. "You really are your mother's son, aren't you?" I laughed, nuzzling his head. Lately he'd taken to copying the hair of everyone he came across, from his momma's waist length golden tresses, to Edward's messy bronze locks.

A knock on the door had me standing up, balancing Teddy on my hip, and striding towards the sound. Alice and I had moved in together when we returned from our honeymoon. Esme and Carlisle had bought us the house as a wedding present, a small English Brick-style home on the outskirts of Forks. A simple single story, the bricks were red with vines curiously crawling over the outside walls. The garden, though small, was filled with flowers colored in every romantic hue that bloomed over their red-bricked boundaries.

The first thought that hit me when I saw it was that it was like looking into a sappy fairytale. Beside me, Alice had squealed in delight.

The living room was my favorite place in the house- except the bedroom, of course, and it was the first room you see when you enter the house. Alice designed it, with Esme's help, and it's perfect. Filled with lively furniture of comfortable tan leather couches, colorful rugs over the bare wood floor, and walls lined edge to edge with shelves upon shelves of books, my favorite place to sit was
under the enormous window that flooded the cozy space with sunlight.

I opened the door to my sister. Bella had basically been glowing this morning in the car, despite her stubborn protests that she was upset about the whole wedding deal, so I was surprised to see her eyes were red and puffy. "What is it?" I demanded, moving aside to let her in.

Her long hair was tousled and her cheeks and nose were bright pink from the cold wind, and she was shivering slightly as she stepped inside. "I hope it's warmer for the w-w-" Bella couldn't finish her sentence, she was blushing too hard. I rolled my eyes- her wedding was in two days and she still couldn't even say the word 'matrimony' without rivaling a tomato in color.

"It will be, don't worry," I assured her, closing the door behind her. On my hip, Teddy concentrated his eyes on Bella, and his bubblegum pink spikes turned to mimic her straight brown tresses before switching back again. "Alice planned it, after all, and she can see the future."

"Yeah, I know, I just..." Bella chewed on her lip, looking at me with anxious eyes.

"You're just freaking out." I surmised, leading the way back to the living room. Bella trailed after me, looking lost even in the familiar place. "Is that why you're upset? Did the whole final fitting upset you?" I ask her, gently, and she closes her eyes as she shakes her head.

I watch a single tear make its way down her cheek, and my concern grows tenfold. "Bella, what is it?" I demand.

"It... it's Jake." She whispers, refusing to open her eyes. Understanding washes over me- no one has seen Jake since he received his invitation. He'd phased into wolf form then disappeared. Although Bella had pleaded, Sam had forbidden the Pack from telling any of us where he was.

"I'm sorry, Bella, I can't find him for you," I tell her, apologetically. Those sort of locater spells just haven't been invented yet, which I consider lucky- Voldemort would have found Harry, Ron and I in a second if they did exist.

"I know no spells can find him," Bella said, turning her face up to look at me, opening her eyes. She looked miserable, and my heart panged for her.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked her, softly.
"To... to ask for a favor." Bella whispered, "I want you to talk to Leah." My eyes widened as I stared at Bella. I hadn't thought of that- because of the Occlumency barriers I'd put up in her mind, Leah was immune to Sam's orders. Thing was, the same barriers meant that she couldn't hear the Pack's thoughts, only direct speaking.

But, I mused; Seth would know. And Sam's order wouldn't stop Seth from telling his sister where Jake was.

"Okay," I nod to Bella, standing up. "I'll ask her."

"Thanks," Bella sighed in relief.

"But I don't know what knowing his location will do to help, Bells." I continue, "I mean... what are you planning to do with it?"

"I don't know," Bella admitted, her lip trembling slightly, "I just... I need to know." I nod.

"Then I'll do my best."

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I'm bouncing Teddy on my hip as I walk up to the Clearwater's house. He's tugging on my hair, his own now bubblegum pink again, and sucking on the bushy curls. "Annoying little rascal." I tell him as I knock on the door, and then try to tug the saliva-coated strands out of his mouth.

Seth opens the door, the gangly teenager looking as cheerful as ever. "Heya Hermione!" He greeted me, happily, "come to see Leah?"

"Yes. Is she home?" I ask, stepping in. Teddy eyes Seth curiously, and Seth cocks his head slightly, his nostrils flaring, as he examines the baby.

"He... he smells... like wolf." Seth said, his voice confused. "Like one of us, except... different."
My eyes widen slightly, and I turn down to give Teddy a surprised look.

"I never thought about that." I remark, "that his smell would be different. His father was a true werewolf," I add on for Seth, "a Child of the Moon."

"He smells older. Not physically, just… ancient." Seth says, still staring at Teddy.

"Strange," I muse, running a hand through Teddy's hair, "I hope you don't mind if I ask more questions later, but Leah?" I repeat my previous question.

"No, she's on patrol, but she'll be back soon." Seth answered. "Can I hold him?" He then asked, still staring at Teddy.

"Suit yourself, but I'm warning you- he eats hair." I caution the teenage shifter, before gently placing the almost-toddler in his arms. Seth holds him, carefully, smiling down at him.

"What's his name?"

"Teddy." I answer.

"That's really cu-" Seth starts to say, but the front door bursts open with a loud crash, interrupting him, and we both spun around to face a fuming Leah as she stormed into the room and started loudly cursing Sam in amazingly colorful terms. I beamed at her proudly when she threw in a few "bloody's" and "sodden's" along with the all-American "mother-fucking sonovabitch!"

"Uh, Leah?" Seth spoke up, when she finally paused for breath, "there's a kid in the room."

"What?" Leah asked, spinning around to face her brother and taking in the little boy in his arms for the first time. I watched her entire body freeze, her chest stilling, as she stops even drawing in a breath of air. Her whole body has just locked in place as she stares at Teddy.

"What the-" Seth frowned, "Leah?" I couldn't help the smile that crossed my face as I finally recognize the look of rapture on Leah's face.
"Looks like someone just found their imprint." I say, trying not to start bouncing up and down in excitement- Seth doesn't have the same restraint.

"Oh my god! Really? Hold him Lee!" He urges his sister, crossing the room in a few steps to push baby Teddy into his frozen sister's arms.

"Fuck," Leah breathed, shaking her head from side to side, "fuck."

"You okay?" I ask, walking over to her and placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah... never been better, actually." She smiled, her lips trembling. "What... what's his name?"

"Theodore Remus Lupin. But everyone calls him Teddy. He's named after his birth-grandfather and his birth-father." I tell her. Leah stares down at Teddy, her expression reverent.

"Would you like a few moments?" I ask, prepared to step outside. Leah shakes her head.

"No, it's okay. Does he say anything?" I cringe slightly, my mind finally connecting a few dots. Oh dear. Oh dear. Teddy's momma is not going to be happy about this.

"Momma and dada, mostly, but a few other things." I tell Leah. "I should also probably mention something."

"What?" Leah asks, absently, gently tucking a bubblegum pink curl behind Teddy's ear.

"Um, Teddy's parents died when he was a few months old, and his last living relative killed herself two months ago. I'm technically his legal guardian, but... well, Rosalie and Emmett are raising him. As his parents. They're the ones he calls momma and dada." Leah looks up at me, shocked.

"What? He's been raised by vampires!" she just about shouted. Teddy's face crumpled and he began crying. "Shit!" Leah swore, her expression going from shocked and angry to concerned. "Shit, what do I do? How do I make him stop crying?" She pleads, anxiously shifting the infant from arm to
"Just relax. Talk to him soothingly." I instruct her, "well, that's what Rosalie and Fleur tell me to do when a baby cries, anyway." I add.

"Um, good baby, good baby, don't cry," she coos, "Leah's here. I won't let anything hurt you." Teddy's sobs slow to the odd sniff, and Leah looks up at me relieved. "Why did you come here?" she asks, holding Teddy to her chest, sneaking adoring peeks down at him.

"To ask for a favor." I admit.

"You want to know where Jacob is?" she asks, turning to flash me a small smile.

"Yeah." I admit.

"She can't tell you. Sam forbade us." Seth pipes up.

"Actually... his orders don't work on me," Leah informed her little brother, before turning back to face me. "Tell Bella not to worry. Seth told me he's coming back home. He'll be here in time for the 'happy day'." Her face twisted slightly at the last two words, and I rolled my eyes at her, and she shrugged, an innocent look on her face.

Before I could say anything else, my phone started ringing, and I fished it out of my pocket. "Hello?"

"Did you learn anything?" Bella demands over the line.

"You're not very patient." I comment.

"Please don't mess around, just tell me- do you know where he is?" My sister pleads.

"No," I lie to her, "the Pack doesn't know. He's in wolf mode, sticking to forests. They know he's somewhere up near the Canadian border, but that's as specific as it gets."
"Oh." Bella's voice is quiet, her disappointment evident.

"I'll be here for a while, Leah imprinted on Teddy." I tell her, "see you later Bells."

"Rosalie will not be happy." Bella comments, before she ends the call.

Understatement of the bloody century, I think dryly.

"You lied." Seth frowned at me, puzzled, "why did you lie?"

"Two reasons. First, he might change his mind, and it would crush her if he did. Second, I don't know if he's coming back to actually go to the wedding or anything, just that he's returning to Forks. I don't want her to get her hopes up. If he does end up going to the wedding, then good for her. If he doesn't, what she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Guess it makes sense." Seth mumbles.

"Looking forward to the big day?" I ask him.

"Will it be as cool as yours and Alice's wedding?" He asks, perking up slightly.

"That was a bonding ceremony," I correct him, "and I don't know about how cool it will be, I've never gone to a normal wedding, but it'll definitely be different."

"I hope there's fireworks, at least." He pouts.

"Bring some just in case." I suggest, before my phone goes off again. "What now?" I mutter, before answering. "Hello?"

"You better not be the reason I just got a vision of fireworks going off during the reception," Alice warns me, over the phone. I wince slightly, and mouth 'busted' to Seth, who laughs silently.
"No idea what you're talking about." I say, in as innocent tone as I can manage.

"Then why did the fireworks just disappear?" Alice asks, her voice now smug. I roll my eyes.

"Was there any reason for this call, other than to shower me with wild accusations, oh lovely wife of mine?"

"Just reminding you that you were supposed to be at the house for your final fitting fifteen minutes ago." She says, and I can hear her laughing over the phone as I swear.

"Bloody hell! Um, it's Bella's fault, I promise!" I tell her.

"Liar. She told me she sent you to La Push twenty minutes ago. Plenty of time for you to go, ask where the mutt is, then come back ready to help me finish putting up the decorations, I need to do your final fitting, then we need to get ready for the bachelorette party."

"Calm down Alice." I interrupt her. I realize almost instantly that this is the wrong thing to say.

"The wedding is in two days, Hermione!" She shrieks over the phone. I wince, and pull the phone away from my ear. "Everything has to be perfect! Now get your cute little ass back here right this instant!" With that, she hangs up.

"Merlin," I groan, "she wasn't this bad for our wedding."

"I thought it was a bonding ceremony." Leah interrupts with a smirk.

"Shut up." I glare at her, before sighing. "Reckon you could take care of Teddy for a little while?" I ask, already knowing Rosalie will kill me, but not sure when the blonde will let Leah see her imprint again.

"I think I can manage." She replies, her face and tone instantly softening as she looks back down at the child in her arms.
"See you later, then." I say. Well, actually I'll see her sooner, rather then later- I'll be back basically the second Rosalie finds out.

Rosalie's not going to talk to me for weeks, I lament.

Alice is waiting by the front door of the Cullen mansion, where Bella's wedding is being held, a stormy look on her face. "I couldn't say this in front of Charlie, but you look really sexy in that uniform." I smile at her, and she glances down at the trim outfit she's wearing, her expression instantly softening.

Alice adores her new job as a fashion assistant at some fancy brand in Port Angeles. She finally looks old enough to be taken seriously, much to her relief, and her days of repeating high school are over.

"You always know how to make me stop being angry at you." Alice sighs, before blurring over to hug me. I lean into her embrace, enjoying the feel of my soul-mate pressed against me. "I love you." Alice smiles.

"As I love you." I reply.

"You two are so sappy." Emmett snickers, as he strolls out of the house.

"Ignore him." Rosalie smirks, as she glides out after her mate, "he once told me I was the loveliest rose in all the land."

"That was supposed to be our secret!" Emmett exclaims, turning to shoot Rosalie a horrified look, as Alice and I start laughing.

"There goes your street cred." I tease him, and he pouts at me.

"Meanie."
"As much as I hate to break this up," Rosalie interrupts our bickering, rolling her eyes, "but where is my son?" Her voice swells with pride and happiness as she calls Teddy her son and I shift uncomfortably, not exactly sure how to break the news.

"Er, well, you see... LeahimprintedonTeddyandshe'slookingafterhimrightnow." I mumble.

Three pairs of eyes stare at me with confusion, and I cringe. "Leah imprinted on Teddy and she's looking after him right now." I tell them, and then I resist the urge to slam my hands over my ears.

"What?" Rosalie shrieks- loudly.

"Oh boy." Alice mutters under her breath, and I agree with her- oh boy.

"You are joking. Tell me you are joking." She orders me, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"I... I'm sorry?" I say, as I take a few steps backwards, away from the furious vampire.


"Five more minutes?" I suggest, weakly. The glare she gives me convinces me otherwise. "Okay. Back soon." I vow, apparating back to La Push. Seth jumps up in shock as I appear in their living room, but Leah just smiles at me, even though her eyes are sad.
"Four minutes. I'm surprised. I thought the blonde banshee would have you back here in two."

"She only found out a minute ago." I told her, and she laughs, softly, before handing Teddy to me. Teddy gives her a toothy smile, and waves his little hand at her.

"Ba lee-la." He giggles, and I translate his baby-speak to 'bye Leah'.

“Bye Teddy-bear." She coos back at him, and then I apparate back. Rosalie snatches Teddy out of my arms with a scowl.

"He smells like mutt now!" she scolds me, before turning and blurring into the house, presumably to go wash her son. Emmett smiles after them both, affection clear in his eyes.

"Life's never simple for us lot, is it?" he asks Alice and I, conversationally, before wandering after the two, at a much more relaxed pace.

"No," I agree with him, even as he disappears from my view, "no it's not."

"Well, let's get busy!" Alice announces, after a short silence.

"Let's get busy." I agree.
Bella's POV:

I remember- vividly- Alice breaking the news I was having a bachelorette party. She just mentioned it, so casually, like it was common knowledge, leaving me spluttering and gaping.

"No! I am not having a bachelorette party!" I'd protested- loudly. Alice just rolled her eyes at me.

"Don't be ridiculous Bella, of course you are. And it's not just for you- it's for your sister too. And me. We didn't have one, you know."

The argument continued like that for about thirty seconds, before Alice told me point blank it was happening even if she had to get Hermione to put me in a full body bind to get me there.

Alice was really embracing the whole "my soul-mate's a witch" thing- her wizard lingo was right up there with Hermione's.

So, with poor grace, I'd resigned myself to the inevitability of the party, which was how I found myself standing miserably in a Ginny's living room. Harry and Ginny lived in a simple, yet elegant house, a Tudor style three-floored manor, with a tower and a slate roof. There was a large flower garden, an orchard, and what looked like some sort of sports field, with three large hoops on opposite sides, hoops almost twenty feet up in the air. It had been in Harry’s family for several generations, apparently.

The living room was old-fashioned in architectural design, furniture included, yet the whole space had been transformed into something extremely modern, and hideously decorated with male genital shaped balloons, and crude posters of naked, posing males and females. Two giant cakes, one shaped like a male genit- screw that, one shaped like a massive penis and the other shaped like a pair of knockers.
The only people I knew more then just from the passing or through Hermione, were Maggie, Leah and Alice- Rosalie had been invited, but she declined, wanting to spend time with Teddy instead. There was no real surprise there- Rosalie officially loved Hermione, and because of that didn’t mind me anymore, but she spent nearly every second she could with her new son.

The other guests were Luna, Ginny, Fleur, Audrey, and two girls I'd never seen before who were introduced to me as Lavender, who was apparently Ron's ex-girlfriend and Parvati Patil, two of Hermione's dorm-mates during her Hogwarts years, and fellow members of the DA.

Unlike me hiding (sulking) in the corner, Hermione was the life of the party with her glowing look of pure happiness, and her bright smile stretching from ear to ear.

The difference in Hermione from when she first moved in with me and Charlie to now is astronomical. And absolutely worth this horrible ordeal known as a 'hen's night'.

"You feeling as awkward as me?" I heard a melodious voice beside me say, and I jumped slightly, swearing as I spilt champagne on the dress Alice had forced me in for this occasion. "Sorry." Maggie apologizes, grimacing slightly.

Maggie looks beautiful, clad in a white sundress with her long, red curls bouncing free and her golden eyes shining brightly. She's so, so beautiful, I muse. Will I be as pretty as her? There's a part of me that begs for that answer to be yes. I want to be beautiful. I want to feel like I belong at Edward's side.

"You okay, Bella?" Maggie's voice breaks me out of my thoughts, "you're looking a little deep in thought there." I blush slightly, realizing I'd just been staring at her, not saying anything.

"S-sorry," I stammer, and she gives me a small smile.

"Calm down, a mhuirnín- your heart's beating almost as fast as a rabbit's!"

"I'm just..." I hesitate, looming for the right word as I fiddle with the hem of my dress.

"Hating this?" Maggie supplies, dryly. I crack a small smile.

"Pretty much."
My gaze sweeps over the room again, and I watch as Hermione twirls Alice around, laughing, before planting a deep kiss on her lips.

Then the doorbell rings, and a wicked smile crosses Ginny's face. "Oh no," I mutter, "this cannot be good."

I was right.

My jaw dropped as an incredibly handsome man, even more stunning than a vampire, walked in. He had to be a Veela, with his silver-blonde hair, deep blue eyes and flawless creamy skin that seemed to glow like moonlight. And, I realize with a gulp, he's looking straight at me.

"Bonjour belles dames," he purred, in the sexiest French accent I've ever heard, before he raises his hand and flicks his wrist. Music fills the room, a sensual, pounding beat that has me realizing what exactly this man is here to do.

I cannot believe they hired a stripper.

...actually, I can.

Ginny's suddenly behind me, pushing me forwards, and onto a chair that's appeared out of nowhere. If I wasn't in such a state of shock I would have fought back, but by the time my brain started functioning normally again, she'd already forced me to sit down on and cast a spell of some sort traps me there.

"I'm going to kill you!" I moan, as the male Veela rips off his shirt, revealing a chiseled chest. "Holy mother of god!"

The man is suddenly grinding against me, and I start feeling dazed. He smells amazing, he looks amazing, and his body is all perfection.

Soon he's down to nothing but an extremely tight, extremely revealing leopard-print thong that leaves nothing to the imagination. I gulp, trying not to stare. I don't exactly succeed, and my cheeks are a flaming red.
Looking me straight in the eyes, the Veela licks his lips, and a rush of heat travels through me. I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed when the music stops, and the dance finishes. I sag in the chair my breath escaping my mouth in shallow pants.

"Oh my god." I mumble under my breath, over and over. The spell on the chair seems to have dissipated, and my body's so floppy I almost slide off it, and have to quickly grab the sides.

Maggie is suddenly next to me again, her arm around my waist supporting me, her eyes as wide as coins. "Mháthair naofa thuas, Bella, is he not the most handsome specimen you have ever seen?" she sighs.

"What about Jasper?" I protest, glad for her support as my legs still feel like jelly. Maggie snorts.

"My Jasper is my anamchara, but that Alphonse... if my heart still beat, I'd be telling it to be still!" She sighed, happily, before releasing me and gliding over to where the Veela was dancing with some of the other women.

I assumed that 'Alphonse' was the name of the Veela, and resigned myself to the fact that not only was I alone in my misery now, but I was also extremely aroused.

Damn it.

Hermione walks over to me, a smile on her face. "Merlin, Bella, you looked so horrified it almost wasn't funny...only almost though." I balled my hands into fists and made a growling sound in the back of my throat before turning and storming away from her.

"I hate you!" I called back over my shoulder.

"I love you too, darling." Was her ever-so cheerful reply.

- After Alphonse left, it was present time. At Alice's instruction, we all had to sit in a circle while everyone watched me unwrap present after present. I was already feeling dazed, and Alice's present didn't help.
"You bought me underwear." I stated in disbelief. Alice didn't seem to understand just why I was so incredulous and swelled indignantly, completely taking it the wrong way.

"I didn't get you just any underwear! I got you the best of Bordelle!" I blinked, not recognizing the brand, and Alice pouted at me. Hermione wrapped an arm around her.

"It's actually a good thing she doesn't recognize Bordelle, sweetheart. If she knew how much they cost she'd throw a fit." She comforts her mate. Ginny speaks up before I can say anything- like demand just how much these tiny pieces of lace and silk with tiny crystals actually cost.

"I got you some knickers too, Alice," Ginny says with a cheeky grin.

"You bought my wife lingerie? Should I be worried?" Hermione teases Ginny who laughs.

"It's more a present for both of you."

"Well Alice in knickers is a gift." Hermione smiles. My cheeks are burning, and the scandalous lingerie on my lap isn't making it any easier.

"Open eet already!" Fleur urges, as Alice eyes the gift, wrapped in gaudy pink paper. She gives a wicked grin and opens it tantalizingly slowly, before looking at it slightly puzzled. It’s Hermione who recognizes what they are.

"Edible panties?" she asks, her eyes wide. "Oh my god!"

"It's not quite Bordelle's gold filigree, Swarovski crystals and silk, but I can tell you right now-Harry and I enjoy them very much." Ginny states, smugly.

"Oh god, kill me now!" I moan. "I can't deal with this anymore!"

"Here, open this." Audrey speaks up, with a soft smile, her voice a touch awkward. "I promise it's not s-sex related." Hearing her stammer slightly and seeing her pink cheeks makes me feel better
about my own awkwardness and flaming red blush. I give the gentle, timid witch a grateful look,
before accepting her present, peeling away the shiny silver paper and promptly gasping.

"Oh Audrey!" Audrey blushes and looks down at her hands as I gaze reverently at the framed
photograph. The image was captured at Hermione and Alice's bonding ceremony/wedding, and it's
of Edward and I. We smile and wave at the camera with our spare hands, before Edward turns and
kisses me softly.

The moving photographs of the Wizarding world always drew me in, but this...

Tears actually prick in my eyes and I have to blink several times before looking up and giving
Audrey a smile that trembles slightly. "Thank you. Really. I love it." I tell her.

"I'm very glad." She replies, softly, her cheeks still pink.

After the exchange of gifts and eating of the cakes, the next stop on our itinerary was Las Vegas.
We got there via portkey, and before the night was out, they'd dragged me to a bar, a strip club and
then another bar. I decided, very quickly, that the only way I was going to survive the night was to
get drunk. Really, really drunk. Which was why my voice was so slurred when I stumbled over to
Ginny, near the end of the night.

"Gin-eee!" I slurred, a beaming smile on my face.

"Bellaaaa!" Ginny cheered back, clunking her glass into mine, causing it to slop all over my dress.
"Oops!" she giggled. For some reason I found that hilarious, and started laughing hysterically.

"Hey... hey Gin-Gin... how much did the lingerie Alice bought me cost?" I slurred.

"Dunno... 'round 3000 galleons." She giggles.

"How many dollars is that?" I frown, the word 'thousand' sobering me slightly. Ginny thinks for a
few seconds before groaning.

"I dunno! I'm too pissed to figure that out! Ask me when I'm sober!"
The rest of the night was kind of... foggy. I do know that it was around three in the morning before the males are called to come and collect us. All of the witches are too drunk to apparate or catch a portkey, and seeing as we're currently in Las Vegas, the drive back to Forks would take hours.

Harry is the one who apparates me to the Cullen Mansion, and being the gentleman that he is, he doesn't complain when I throw up all over him.

From there, I think Esme was the one who gave me a quick shower- Edward, of course, was too much of a nineteenth century gentleman- and then Edward tucked me up in the bed in his room. I remember snuggling up next to him, and pretty much passing out straight away.

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When morning comes, it greets me with a hangover worse then the one I suffered after the graduation party. "Have mercy!" I plead to some kind of deity, yanking the covers over my head to block out the sunlight pouring through the window. What the hell had I done to myself? I wondered, bleakly, as my head pounded ferociously.

"Bella?" A musical voice asked me.

"G'way!" I moaned, and Edward chuckled before pushing something under the duvet.

"Hangover potion, my love." I immediately sat up, letting the duvet pool around my hips, and let out an agonized cry, even as I ripped the top off the phial and chugged it down as quickly as I could. The headache vanished, pretty much instantly, and I flopped back down on the bed.

"I'm never drinking again." I tell him, mournfully, and he chuckles, before sliding into the bed next to me.

"So how was the party?" he asked. I glared at him.

"I don't want to talk about it." He looks amused.

"Should I be worried about this Alphonse?" My cheeks instantly flame red.
"Edward!" I'm ashamed to say my voice is almost a whine, "what happens at a bachelorette party stays there! As in, you never, ever bring it up! Ever! Ever!" Edward gives me an amused look.

"My apologies, love, Maggie's thoughts were just... very occupied. Jasper was supposed to take me for a bachelor party with Emmett, but I'm not sure Maggie's going to let him leave their bed for the next few days." I can't help blushing again, and I bury my face against Edward's cool chest, letting his icy temperature cool down my burning cheeks.

He gives a soft sigh as he rests his forehead on the top of my head. "I'll miss that."

"Miss what?" I ask, my voice muffled slightly.

"Your blush." This, of course, just made me blush harder.

The day was a whirlwind of activity, and I made it a point to stay out of Alice's way. Maggie and Jasper were nowhere to be seen, as per Edward's prediction, and I kept blushing whenever I thought about what they were most likely doing right now.

The general awkwardness I was feeling wasn't at all helped when Edward came across the lingerie Alice bought me, though it did prompt me to ask him how much it cost in American dollars.

"Around eight thousand." He'd said, after a moment, and I'd let out a small moan.

"I'm going to kill them both."

Night came quickly. Much too quickly. Of course it would, when I was wishing it wouldn't. As the sun sank and the moon rose, I was too agitated to do anything, and ended up retiring to bed early.

Edward joined me, and we curled up on my small bed, intertwined as much as it was possible, considering the thick afghan I was swathed in like a cocoon. I hated the necessity of the blanket, but it sort of ruined the romance when my teeth started chattering.

"I miss you already." I sighed, as I watched the numbers on my clock go by.
"I don't need to leave. I can stay..."

"Mmm." I quite liked the sound of that, but, "no, no. It's your bachelor party. You have to go." I sigh.

"Bachelor parties are designed for those who are said to see the passing of their single days. I couldn't be more eager to have mine behind me. So there's really no point." He countered.

"True," I mused, a smile crossing my face, twisting around so that I was facing him. Our lips met, and I pressed my tongue against his glass-smooth lip and he sighed. Hi sweet breath washed- cold and delicious- over my face. He started to pull away- that was his automatic response whenever he decided things had gone too far, his reflex action whenever he most wanted to keep going.

"Wait," I said, gripping his shoulders and hugging myself close to him. I kicked one leg free and wrapped it around his waist, locking myself against him. "Practice makes perfect." He chuckled.

"Well, we should be fairly close to perfection by this point, then, shouldn't we?"

"But this is the dress rehearsal," I reminded him, "and we've only practiced certain scenes. It's no time for playing safe." I thought he would laugh, but he didn't answer, and his body was suddenly motionless with stress. I thought over my words, and quickly realized what he would have heard in them.

"Bella..." he whispered, but I interrupted him.

"Don't start this again. A deal's a deal."

"I don't know. It's too hard to concentrate when you're with me like this. I- I can't think straight. I won't be able to control myself. You'll get hurt."

"I'll be fine."
"Bella..."

"Shut up." I told him, sternly, before pressing my lips against his to stop his panic attack. I'd heard it before. He wasn't getting out of this deal. Not after insisting I marry him first.

He kissed me back for a moment, but I could tell he wasn't as into it as before. Worrying, always worrying. How different it would be when he didn't have to worry about me anymore, I mused. What would he do with all his free time? He'd have to get a new hobby.

"How are your feet?" he asked.

"Toasty warm." I answered, without pause.

"Really? No second thoughts? It's not too late to change your mind."

"Are you trying to ditch me?" I ask, in mock-outrage. He chuckled.

"Just making sure. I don't want you to do anything you're not sure about."

"I'm sure about you," I tell him, firmly, "the rest I can live through." He hesitated again, his face turning back serious.

"Can you?" he asked quietly. "I don't mean the wedding- which I am positive you will survive despite your qualms- but afterward... what about Renée, what about Charlie?" I sighed.

"I'll miss them." Worse, that they would miss me, but I didn't want to give him any fuel. I also didn't voice my hopes that Hermione would be able to work out some sort of spell, or something, that would make me look like I used to, so that I could still see them, after a few years when my Thirst was... manageable.

"Angela and Ben and Jessica and Mike."

"I'll miss them, too." I smiled in the darkness. "Especially Mike. Oh, Mike! How will I go on?" He
growled, and I laughed, but then was serious. "Edward, we've been through this and through this, more times then I can count. I want you, and I want you forever."

"Frozen forever at eighteen." He whispered.

"Every woman's dream come true," I teased.

"Never changing... never moving forward." I frowned.

"What does that mean?" He answered slowly.

"Do you remember when we told Charlie we were getting married? And he thought you were... pregnant?"

"And he thought about shooting you," I laughed, "admit it- for one second, he honestly considered it." He didn't answer, and I repressed the urge to sigh. "What, Edward?"

"I just wish... well, I wish that he'd been right."

"Gah!" I gasped, spluttering loudly.

"More I wish that there was some way he could have been. That we had that kind of potential. I hate taking that away from you, too."

"Edward," my voice was stern, "I know what I'm doing."

"How could you know that, Bella? Look at my mother, look at my sister. It's not as easy a sacrifice as you imagine."

"Esme and Rosalie get by just fine. If it's a problem later, we can do what they did- we'll adopt." He sighed, and then his voice was fierce.
"It's not right! I don't want you to have to make sacrifices for me. I want to give you things, not take things away from you. I don't want to steal your future. If I were human-" I put my hand over his lips.

"You are my future. Now stop. No moping, or I'm calling your brothers to come and get you. Maybe you need a bachelor party." He smiled at me sheepishly when I removed my hand.

"I'm sorry. I am moping, aren't I? Must be the nerves."

"Are your feet cold?" I tease.

"Not in that sense. I've been waiting a century to marry you, Miss Swan. The wedding ceremony is the one thing I can't wait-" he broke off mid-thought. "Oh, for the love of all that's holy!"

"What's wrong?" I asked, not worried- he seemed angry, not scared. He gritted his teeth.

"You don't have to call my brothers. Apparently Emmett and Jasper are not going to let me bow out tonight." I laugh.

"Have fun." There was a squeal against the window- someone deliberately scarping their steel nails across the glass to make a horrible, cover-your-ears, goose-bumps-down-your-spine noise. I shuddered.

"If you don't send Edward out," Emmett- still invisible in the night- hissed menacingly, "we're coming in after him!"

"Go!" I laughed, "before they break my house." Edward rolled his eyes, but he got to his feet in one fluid motion, then leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"Get to sleep. You've got a big day tomorrow." I snort.

"Thanks! That's sure to help me wind down." He chuckled.
"I'll meet you at the altar, love."

"I'll be the one in white." I sighed. He chuckled again, and then suddenly sank into a crouch and vanished, launching himself out of my window too swiftly for my eyes to follow. Outside there was a muted thud and I heard Emmett curse. "You'd better not make him late," I warned, knowing they could hear. And then Jasper's face was peering in my window.

"Don't worry, Bella. We'll get him home in plenty of time." I was suddenly very calm, and my qualms all seemed unimportant. I sat up awkwardly, still tangled in my blanket.

"Jasper? What do vampires do for bachelor parties? You're not taking him to a strip club, are you?"

"Don't tell her anything!" Emmett complained from below. There was another thud and Edward laughed quietly.

"Relax," Jasper told me- and I did. "We Cullens have our own version. Just a few mountain lions and a couple of grizzly bears."

"You should have told Alice that," I grumble, and he chuckles.

"I don't think anyone but your sister could get away with that." I laugh.

"Have fun, boys." Jasper winked and dropped from sight, and I lay back against my pillows again. It was completely silent outside, and I sighed. This was my last night in my room. My last night as Isabella Swan. Tomorrow I would be Bella Cullen.

Despite the whole marriage thing being a thorn in my side, I had to admit- I did like the sound of that.
Bella's POV:

I woke up before dawn, and spent the next few hours pacing nervously around my room, trying- and failing- to distract myself with a book, and finishing packing up all the belongings I wanted to take with me.

As soon as Charlie got up, I went downstairs and made him pancakes. I was much too keyed up to have any interest in eating breakfast myself- instead I sat bouncing in my seat while he ate.

"You're picking up Mr. Weber at three o'clock." I reminded him.

"I don't have that much to do today besides bring the minister, Bells." Charlie said, amused. "I'm not likely to forget my only job." I scowl.

"That's not your only job. You also have to be dressed and presentable." He scowled down at his pancakes and muttered the words "monkey suit" under his breath. There was a sudden brisk taping at the front door.

"You think you have it bad," I said, grimacing as I rose. "Alice will be working on me all day long." Charlie nodded thoughtfully, conceding that he did have the lesser ordeal. I ducked in to kiss the top of his head as I passed- he blushed and harrumphed- and then continued on to get the door for my sister-in-law.

Alice's newly shoulder-length hair was pinned back, giving her pixie face a very business-like expression. She dragged me form the house to the car where Hermione was waiting with barely a "Hey Charlie!" called over her shoulder.

As soon as we were in her Porsche, she appraised me, while Hermione smirked at me from behind her back. "Oh hell, look at your eyes!" she tsked in reproach. "What did you do? Stay up all night?"
"From about three o'clock onwards." I admit. She glowered at me.

"I've allotted so much time to make you stunning, Bella! The least you could have done was take care of the raw material!"

"I'll cast a glamour, Al." Hermione tells her irate girlfriend.

"And no one expects me to be stunning," I add, "I think the biggest problem is that I might fall asleep during the ceremony and not be able to say 'I do' in the right part, and then Edward will make his escape." They both laughed.

"I'll throw my bouquet at you," Alice assures me.

"Thanks." I smile. Hermione laughs, again, and starts the car engine. I flop back in the seat, closing my eyes, trying to relax. I failed, and ended up glowering groggily out the windshield until we were almost to the house. "Is he back yet?" I asked, as we pulled into the driveway.

"Don't worry, he'll be there before the music starts," Alice assures me, "but you don't get to see him, no matter when he gets back. We're doing this the traditional way." I snorted.

"Traditional!"

"Okay, aside from the bride and groom." Alice concedes. We pulled up the driveway, the three miles once again wrapped up in hundreds of thousands of twinkle lights, though this time she'd added white satin bows.

"Waste not, want not." Hermione comments, seeing the direction of my gaze.

"Make the most of it," Alice tells me, "because you're not seeing the inside decorations until it's time." As she oulled into the cavernous garage north of the main house.

"Since when is the bride not allowed to see the decorations?" I protested.
"Since she made the mistake of putting Alice in charge." Hermione answers. Alice scowls at her, before turning to me.

"I want you to get the full impact coming down the stairs." She clapped her hand over my eyes before she let me inside the kitchen. I was immediately assailed by the scent - orange blossoms, lilac, freesia and roses. Alice didn't uncover my eyes until we were in the oversized bathroom of her old room. I stared at the long counter, covered in all the paraphernalia of a beauty salon, and began to really feel my early morning.

"Is this really necessary? I'm going to look plain next to him no matter what."

"No one will dare call you plain when I'm through with you!" Alice glowered, pushing me down into a low pink chair.

"Only because they're afraid you'll go psycho pixie on them." I muttered. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, hoping I'd be able to nap through it. I did drift in and out a bit a little bit while she masked, buffed and polished every surface of my body. Hermione vanished early on, and it wasn't until after lunchtime that she returned, Rosalie by her side.

I almost wanted to cry when Rosalie glided past the bathroom door in a shimmery silver gown with her golden hair piled up in a soft crown on top of her head. She was so beautiful it made me want to cry. What was even the point of dressing up with Rosalie around? Beside her, Hermione looked almost as stunning, dressed in an identical shimmering silver gown, her hair done in a Grecian style, with large knots of curls high up on the back of her head.

"They're back," Rosalie informed us, and immediately my childish fit of despair passed. Edward was home.

"Keep him out of here!" Alice snapped.

"He won't cross you today," Rosalie reassured her. "He values his life too much."

"And his manhood." Hermione adds, helpfully.
"Something he's going to need tonight." I go bright red, prompting the others to laugh.

"Esme's got them finishing things up out back. Do you want some help? I could do her hair." Rosalie offers. My jaw fell open and I floundered in my head, trying to remember how to close it. I'd never been Rosalie's favorite person in the world. And then, making things even more strained between us, she was personally offended by the choice I was making now. I guess having Teddy had mellowed her out, made her less resentful of being what she was.

"Sure," Alice said easily. "You can start braiding. I want it intricate. The veil goes here, underneath." Her hands started combing through my hair, hefting it, twisting it, illustrating in detail what she wanted. When she was done, Rosalie's hands replaced hers, shaping my hair with a feather-light touch.

"Where's Teddy?" I asked, and she smiled, her face shining.

"With his dad. Emmett's helping him practice walking down the aisle." Teddy, now just a bit over a year old, had begun walking, and just in time- Alice had made him the pageboy, despite the fact he could only walk about six steps without help.

Hermione had vanished again, and I closed my eyes. Voices started drifting up, and my heart thumped in my chest. Oh god. Alice had to support me when I stood up so that she could ease the dress over my hair and makeup. My knees shook so badly as she fastened the long line of pearl buttons up my back that the satin quivered in little wavelets down to the floor.

"Deep breaths, Bella," Alice said, "and try to lower your heart rate. You're going to sweat off your new face." I gave her the best sarcastic expression I could manage.

"I'll get right on that."

"I have to get dressed now," Alice said, ignoring my jab, "can you hold yourself together for two minutes, or should I call Hermione?"

"I think I'll manage... think being the operative word." I sighed. She rolled her eyes and darted out the door, returning before I'd taken two hundred breaths. She was wearing the same dress as Hermione and Alice, the silvery material flowing over her graceful form like a waterfall. "Alice, wow!" I breathed.
"It's nothing," she dismissed, "no one will be looking at me today. Not while you're in the room."

"Har har." I sighed.

-

I met my parents in the corridor outside Alice's bedroom. Charlie was standing awkwardly, while Hermione scowled at the floor, pointedly not looking at a nervous looking Renée, who couldn't look in her direction.

The minute she saw me, though, Renée let out a squeal and rushed over. "Oh honey, you're so beautiful! Oh I'm going to cry!" She said more, but I ignored it, instead throwing Hermione an apologetic look over Renée's shoulder. She rolled her eyes at me.

"Oh goodness! I almost forgot!" Renée exclaimed, suddenly. "Charlie, where's the box?" Charlie rummaged in his pockets for a minute, and then produced a small white box, which he handed to Renée. Renée lifted the lid and held it out to me.

"Something blue," she beamed.

"Something old too. They were your Grandma Swan's," Charlie added, "we had a jeweler replace the paste stones with sapphires." Inside the box were two heavy silver hair combs. Dark blue sapphires were clustered into intricate floral colors atop the teeth. I went red.

"Mom, Dad... you shouldn't have."

"Alice wouldn't let us do anything else," Renée said, "every time we tried, she all but ripped our throats out." A hysterical giggle burst through my lips, and Hermione rolled her eyes at me- again. Alice stepped up and quickly slid both combs into my hair, under the edge of the thick braids.

"That's something old and something blue," she mused, taking a few steps back to admire me. "And your dress is new... so here-" she flicked something at me. I held my hands out automatically and the filmy white garter landed in my palms. "That's mine and I want it back." Alice told me. I blushed. "There, a little color- that's all you needed. You are officially perfect." With a little self-congratulatory smile, she turned to my parents. "Renée, you need to get downstairs."
"Yes ma'am." Renée blew me a kiss, shot Charlie and Hermione awkward smiles, which neither returned, then hurried out the door.

"Charlie, would you grab the flowers, please?" Alice asked. While Charlie was out of the room, Alice hooked the garter out of my hands and then ducked under my skirt. I gasped and tottered, Hermione having to catch me to support me, as Alice's cold hand caught my ankle and she yanked the garter into place. She was back on her feet before Charlie returned with the three frothy white bouquets. The scent of roses and orange blossom and freesia enveloped me in a soft mist.

Rosalie- the best musician in the family next to Edward- began playing the piano downstairs. I started hyperventilating. "Easy Bella," Hermione murmured, appearing in front of me. She smiled gently. "You'll never forget this day, I promise."

"Okay." I nodded, weakly, taking a deep breath, willing myself into composure. The music slowly morphed into a new song. Charlie nudged me, gently grasping my hand in his.

"Bells, we're up to bat."

"Okay." I squeaked. I let Charlie lead me from the room, following Alice and Hermione, whose arms were linked, and were smiling at each other. I concentrated on the idea of Edward waiting below to get my feet to shuffle forward.

The music was familiar. Wagner's traditional march, surrounded by a flood of embellishments. "Go Alice," Hermione told her wife, "That's your cue." Alice nodded.

"Count to five and follow me. Bella after Hermione goes, count to five and follow her." And then she began a slow, graceful dance down the staircase.

"Jesus. I'm going to trip and break my neck." I mumbled, and Hermione laughed, softly.

"You're such a worrywart. Count to five." And then she was also moving, sweeping forwards, not quite as graceful, but still stunning. I took a deep breath, and a sudden fanfare trilled through the soaring music. I recognized my cue.

"Don't let me fall, Dad." I whispered. Charlie pulled my hand through his arm and then grasped it tightly. One step at a time, I told myself, not lifting my eyes until my feet were safely on the flat
ground, though I could hear the murmurs and rustling of the audience as I came into view. Blood flooded my cheeks at the sound; of course I could be counted on to be the blushing bride.

I carefully avoided looking anywhere, but the altar, concentrating instead on Edward's face. His eyes were a buttery, burning gold; his perfect face was almost severe with the depth of his emotion. And then, as he met my awed gaze, he broke into a breathtaking smile of exultation.

Suddenly, it was only the presence of Charlie's hand on mine that kept me from sprinting headlong down the aisle. The march was too slow as I struggled to pace my steps to its rhythm, but mercifully the aisle was very short.

And then at last I was there. Edward held out his hand. Charlie took my hand and, in a symbol as old as the world, placed it in Edward's. I touched the cool miracle of his skin, and I was home.

I could barely concentrate, could barely listen. The words of the minister washed over me. I barely took in the moment when Edward gracefully retrieved the rings from the little pillow an excitable Teddy was holding. I barely noticed it as he slid the band onto my finger. I barely even realized it was time to say the binding words until Edward gently squeezed my hands. "I do," I managed to choke out, in a nearly unintelligible whisper, realizing for the first time that I was crying.

When it was his turn to speak, the words rang clear and sincere. "I do," he vowed. Mr. Weber declared us husband and wife, and then Edward's hands reached up to cradle my face, carefully, as if it were as delicate as the white petals swaying above our heads. I tried to comprehend through the film of tears blinding me, the surreal fact that this amazing person was mine.

His golden eyes looked as if they would have tears, too, if such a thing were not impossible. He bent his head toward mine, and I stretched up on the tips of my toes throwing my arms- bouquet and all- around his neck.

He kissed me tenderly, adoringly; I forgot the crowd, the place, the time, the reason... only remembering that he loved me, that he wanted me, that I was his, and that he was mine.

- 

The wedding flowed into the reception party smoothly- proof of Alice's flawless planning. It was just twilight over the river; the ceremony had lasted exactly the right amount of time, allowing the sun to set behind the trees. The lights glimmered as Edward led me through the glass back doors,
making the white flowers glow.

Things slowed down, relaxed, as the mellow August evening surrounded us. The little crowd spread out under the soft shine of the twinkle lights, and we were greeted by the friends we'd just embraced, but this time there was time to talk, time to laugh.

Seth and his mother, along with Billy, were the first to congratulate us. Leah was also here somewhere, but she was most likely over with Hermione somewhere, still not my biggest fan.

After Seth waved goodbye and wheeled Billy toward the food, Sue keeping one hand on each of them, Angela and Ben were next to congratulate us, followed by Angela's parents and then Mike and Jessica.

Behind my human friends, were my witch and wizard friends, Ginny, Fleur, Harry, Audrey, and their partners, even Molly, Arthur and George had come. After them were my new cousins-in-law, the Denali vampire clan.

I realized I was holding my breath as the vampire in front- Tanya, I assumed from the strawberry tint in her blonde curls- reached out to embrace Edward. Next to her, three other vampires with golden eyes stared at me with open curiosity.

"Let me introduce you to my wife." Edward smiled, after deftly maneuvering himself out of Tanya's embrace. It was the first time Edward had said that word since it was officially true, and he sounded like he was going to explode with satisfaction. The Denalis laughed lightly in response. "This is Bella."

"Welcome to the family, Bella," Tanya smiled, reaching out to gently take my hand, "we consider ourselves Carlisle's extended family, and I am sorry about the, er, recent incident when we did not behave as such. Can you forgive us?"

"Of course." I said, breathlessly. "It's so nice to meet you."

"The Cullens are all evened up in numbers, now. Perhaps it will be our turn next, eh, Kate?" she grinned at the blonde vampire behind her.

"Keep the dream alive," Kate said, with a roll of her golden eyes. She took my hand from Tanya's
"I'm Carmen and this is Eleazar," she introduced herself, and the male vampire next to her, "we're all so very pleased to finally meet you."

"M-me too." I stuttered. Tanya flanked at the people waiting behind her- Charlie's deputy Mark and his wife, their eyes huge as they took in the Denali clan.

"We'll get to know each other later. We'll have eons of time for that!" Tanya laughed, as she and her family moved on.

- 

All the standard traditions were kept. I was blinded by flashbulbs as we held the knife over a spectacular cake. We took turns shoving cake in each other's faces; Edward manfully swallowed his portion as I watched in disbelief. I threw my bouquet with atypical skill, right into Ginny's hands. Emmett, Jasper, Harry and Hermione all howled with laughter at my blush while Edward removed my borrowed garter, which I managed to shimmy down nearly to my ankle- with his teeth.

And then when the music stared, Edward pulled me into his arms for the customary first dance; I went willingly, despite my fear of dancing- especially in front of an audience- just happy to have him holding me. He, thankfully, did all the work, and I twirled effortlessly under the glow of a canopy of lights and the bright flashes from the cameras. I hoped that one of the photographers was a witch or a wizard, so I could get some moving pictures.

"Enjoying the party, Mrs. Cullen?" Edward whispered into my ear. I laughed.

"That will take a while to get used to."

The music changed and Charlie tapped on Edward's shoulder. It wasn't nearly as easy to dance with him- he was no better at it then I was, so we moved safely from side to side in a tiny square formation while Edward and Esme spun around us like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

"I'm going to miss you at home, Bella. I'm already lonely without my two girls." He sighs. I spoke
through a tight throat, trying to make a joke of it.

"I feel horrible for leaving you to cook for yourself- it's practically a criminal negligence. You could arrest me." He grinned.

"I'll survive the food. Just call me whenever you can."

"I promise." I told him.

It seemed like I was danced with everyone, including Hermione, but I was happiest when I was back in Edward's arms.

I felt like I was floating, dancing with him, and then he suddenly stiffened, and turned automatically in the other direction, as if someone had called his name. "Oh!" he said. His brow furrowed for an instant and then smoothed out just as quickly. Suddenly, he was smiling, a brilliant, brilliant smile.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A surprise wedding gift."

"Huh?" he didn't answer; he just started dancing again, spinning me the opposite way we'd been headed before, away from the lights and then into the deep swatch of night that ringed the luminous dance floor. He didn't pause until we reached the dark side of the huge cedars. Then Edward looked straight ahead into the blackest shadow.

"Thank you," he said to the darkness, "this is very... kind of you."

"Kind is my middle name," a husky, familiar voice answered from the black of the night. My hand flew to my throat and if Edward hadn't been holding me, I would have collapsed.

"Jacob!" I choked as soon as I could breathe. "Jacob!"
CHAPTER FIVE:

Hermione’s POV:

Alice and I spun around, gracefully, Alice leaning her head against me. It was like a scene from a fairy tale, the moon, the stars, the flowers, the satin...

“Amazing job, Alice!” Ginny was suddenly in front of us, beaming. “You absolutely have to help me with my wedding!” Alice looks like if she could blush she could. Harry looks slightly nervous, at Ginny’s side.

“Magnifique!” Fleur announces, sweeping over. By her side, Bill looks uncomfortable, his nostrils flaring. Werewolves and vampires are natural enemies; I can understand his discomfort.

Alice is basking in the praise, and it makes me smile. My smile fades, somewhat, however, as the Denalis make their way over, and my grip on Alice’s hand tightens.

“Um, Harry! Let’s go get some cake!” Ginny announces, following my gaze.

“Zat eez a good idea,” Fleur agreed, folding her arm in Bill’s, and tugging him after the retreating Ginny.

“Some Gryffindors they are.” I grumble, under my breath, before fixing a neutral expression on my face as the Denalis stop in front of us.

“You must be Hermione,” the tall, strawberry blonde one said, with a smile.

“And you must be Tanya.” I reply, my voice short. Her smile wavers.
“We would deeply like to apologize for our actions, when you were facing the army.” This is the older looking female, with a hint of olive to her chalky complexion, and dark hair.

“I think a better description would be your complete and utter lack of action,” I snap, and Alice squeezes my hand gently.

“Hermione,” she says softly, but I shake my head.

“You don’t just abandon family,” I hiss between clenched teeth, then pause and take a deep breath. “I can’t be here.” I mutter, letting go and striding over to the table containing rows and rows of flutes of champagne and fancy finger-foods. I grab a champagne, downing it in one long sip, then pick up a pastry thing to nibble on.

“Not a fan of the in-laws?” A voice speaks up from beside me, and I spin around to face Leah. She’s looking amused, and I scowl at her.

“They sodding abandoned us when we needed them most! A few pretty words isn’t going to make up for that!”

During the War, all of us, we fought fiercely for each other, casting aside petty grudges and differences- and none of us were hundreds of years old like these vampires, who were certainly old enough to know better. They’d sentenced the Cullens to death, because of one vampire they’d known for what, a year? And this was after decades- centuries, even- of friendship.

Family, they called themselves.

Liars.

Leah raises her hands up in a surrender gesture, easily reading the expressions on my face.

“Hey, I agree with you! No need to bite my head off!” I sigh, and resist the urge to slouch against the table, worried that if I do I’ll end up knocking it, and sending champagne spilling everywhere.
“Having fun?” I ask. She pulls a face.

“It stinks.”

“Thought you’d be used to the smell by now.” I comment.

“Believe me, it’s not something you get used to in a hurry.” She mutters.

“Any word on Jacob?” I ask, and her mouth quirks into a slight smile.

“He arrived a few minutes ago. He’s dancing with Bella now.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised, turning and peering around the garden, looking for a white dress— the easiest way to spot Bella—Edward is twirling Rosalie around, in the middle of the dance floor, but I can’t see Bella anywhere, or her dance partner.

“Over there,” Leah motions to a cluster of cedars, and I start heading over in that direction. Leah easily keeps pace with me. “What’s the plan?” she asked.

“Spy on them,” I answer, promptly. I finally spot them, hidden in the shadows, and I wait, watching them dance. Jacob’s positioned her hands over his heart, and they’re swaying together. Bella’s face is radiant.

I stand there, watching. They seem happy, chatting away, until suddenly Leah stiffens beside me, and I watch Jacob’s expression bulge in a kind of confused horror. “Shit,” Leah mutters, beside me.

“What is it?” I demand, hurrying forwards.

“Ow, Jake! Let go!” I hear Bella say, and my vision flashes red as I see him shake her.

“Jacob’s not happy about her banging Mr. Fang while her heart’s still beating,” Leah explains, easily keeping pace with me. Edward suddenly appears beside them, and his voice is sharp as a razor.
“Take your hands off her!” I can hear snarling, and I duck down, hitching up my dress and pulling out my wand.

“Jacob, you’re losing it!” Leah snapped, “You’re hurting her! Let go!” Jacob is frozen in place, and I point my wand at him.

“Protego!” A shimmering shield is conjured between the two, pushing him away from Bella, throwing him to the ground. Instantly, Edward lifts Bella, moving her several yards away, tensing in front of her. Jacob stumbles back to his feet, his eyes flashing dangerously at Edward.

“I’ll kill you!” his voice his so choked with rage that it was a low whisper. “I’ll kill you myself! I’ll do it now!” I acted quickly, slashing my wand through the air.

“Stupefy!” A jet of red light hits the trembling shape-shifter, and he slumps to the ground, unconscious. Two enormous wolves emerged from the shadows, eyeing me warily. I kept my wand out in case they reacted violently, but they didn’t, merely bracing themselves between the unconscious Jacob and Edward, not aggressive, just protective.

Alice is beside me, I didn’t even notice her arrive, and her arm is wrapped around my waist like an iron vice, her eyes narrowed dangerously at the wolves.

“I’ll get him out of here,” Leah states, and despite the gravity of the situation, I have to hold back a laugh at the comical sight of Leah hauling Jacob up over her shoulder, her supernatural strength at work. “See you later, Hermione, Alice… Bella, Edward.”

She waves, with her free hand, her only genuine smile aimed at me. I smile back, and watch as she disappears into the darkness, the other wolves following. The brown wolf paused for a moment, turning to face Edward and Bella, eyes hostile. “I’m sorry,” Bella whispered, her face drawn and pale. Edward gave a sharp, cold nod, and the wolf melted away into the shadows.

Bella turns, clinging to Edward, and he rubs her back. “All right, let’s get back.” He coaxes. Bella shakes her head, wildly.

“Just Jake-“

“Sam and Leah have him in hand. He’s gone.”
“Edward, I’m so sorry! I was stupid—” Bella wails.

“You did nothing wrong—“

“I have such a big mouth!” She continues, ignoring him, “why would I… I shouldn’t have let him get to me like that. What was I thinking?”

“Don’t worry,” Edward reiterates, touching her face. “We need to get back to the reception, love, before someone notices our absence.” Bella shook her head, wildly.

“Two seconds,” she pleaded, “give me two seconds.” I crossed over, closing the short distance between us, and wrapped my arms around her.

“Bella—“ I begin, but she interrupts me, shaking her head.

“I’m an idiot, Hermione.”

“Don’t be daft! You are not that thick, Bella.” I growl, “he’s the bloody moron!” She gives a shaky smile.

“It sounds so strange when you go all British on me.”

“’ello governor!” I say, in the thickest, most obnoxious English accent I can manage. This time she manages a watery laugh, and I give her hand a quick squeeze. “It’s your wedding, Bells. Enjoy it.” I tell her, sternly, before backing off, to give her and Edward some time to talk, before they go back out to meet the throng.

Alice walks beside me, her expression downcast. “I can’t believe that just happened!” she lamented.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, the wedding’s still wonderful.” I assure her, correctly guessing where her misery is stemming from.
“I spent so long making this perfect, and then that mutt just came and ruined everything!” she wailed, and I laughed, pulling her into my arms, and planting my lips on hers.

“He ruined nothing,” I say, pulling back. She reaches up, grabbing the back of my neck, and tugging my mouth back down to hers.

- 

We danced together and ate cake- well, I ate cake, until it was time for Alice to drag Bella upstairs to get changed. I waited with everyone else at the bottom of the staircase, knowing that Renée would be upstairs to help Bella change, and not wanting to see her. I’d managed to avoid her most of the wedding, and I didn’t plan on that changing any time soon.

Bella looked beautiful as she just about floated down the stairs. Her hair was loose and wavy, and she was wearing a beautiful blue dress. I watched Edward lead her through the crowd, and followed her, as they made their way to Charlie.

He was leaning awkwardly against the wall, behind everyone else- the reason why was abundantly clear, from the red rims around his eyes. “Oh, Dad!” Bella burst into tears, throwing herself into his arms. He patted her back awkwardly.

“There, there,” he mumbled.

“I love you forever, Dad,” Bella blubbered “don’t forget that!”

“You, too, Bells,” Charlie replied. “Always have, always will.” He kissed her cheeks, then gave her a stern look. “Call me.”

“Soon,” Bella promised.

“Go on then,” he said, gruffly, “don’t want to be late.” The guests cleared, making a path for the happy couple, and Edward shielded Bella, rushing her to the car as the rice storm began. I leaned against the wall next to Charlie, pretending that my eyes weren’t damp.
“Bella married… weird.” I said. He gave a strained laugh, and wrapped an arm around me.

“Like you wouldn’t believe, kiddo.”

The car was decorated with flowers and streamers and ribbons and half a dozen brand new designer shoes. Bella stuck her hand out the window and called out, “I love you!” to the porch, waving enthusiastically. My eyes met hers and I smiled, waving back, before the car disappeared up the driveway.

The official story was that they were driving to the airport, but in actuality, the car would be parking a couple of miles up the road, where I’d set up a Portkey to take them to their destination—an island that Carlisle had gifted Esme. Isle Esme, it was called.

“Have an amazing time,” I murmured under my breath.

“They will.” Alice assured me, appearing beside me. Charlie jumped slightly, startled by her sudden appearance, but other then that, he took it in his stride. I lifted my spare arm, the one not hugging Charlie, to wrap around her shoulders, pulling her close.

In this moment, I felt loved. On top of the world.

Like nothing could go wrong.
CHAPTER SIX:

Bella's POV:

Once the world stopped spinning, I blinked, once, twice, taking in my surroundings. I was on a beach, with silvery white sand glowing pale in the light of the moon, and tall, waving palm fronds. Over to my left was a short dock, constructed of wooden planks, bleached into whiteness by the moon. I could hear the lapping of waves against the shore, and the rustling of the palms in the breeze. The air was warm, moist and fragrant- like the steam left behind after a hot shower.

"Where are we?" I breathed, in amazement, turning around slowly, and kicking off the awful stilettos Alice had forced me into, which her sinking into the sand.

"This is Isle Esme," Edward said, his smile radiant as he looked down at me. I blinked.

"Isle Esme?"

"A gift from Carlisle- Esme offered to let us borrow it." Edward explained.

"A gift? Who gives an island as a gift?" I just about squeak. Edward laughs, lightly. I look around, a slight frown on my face. "Um, do we have clothes?"

"Hermione brought everything here yesterday," he assures me, before pulling me up into his arms. I laugh.

"Aren't you supposed to wait for the threshold?"

"I'm nothing if not thorough." He says, with mock-solemnity. Cradling me in his arms, he carried...
me along a pale sand pathway, through the dark vegetation. For a short while it was pitch black in
the jungle-like growth, and then I could see a warm light ahead. It was about at the point when I
realized the light was a house- the two bright, perfect squares were wide windows framing a front
door.

A sudden stage fright struck me, and my heart thudded audibly against my ribs, and my breath got
stuck in my throat. I felt Edward's eyes on my face, but I refused to meet his gaze, staring straight
ahead, but seeing nothing.

He didn't ask what I was thinking, which was out of character for him. I guessed that meant he was
as nervous as I suddenly was.

I found myself wishing that I'd asked Hermione more questions, about what to expect, about what
would happen.

As he stood up onto the porch, Edward looked down at me again, waiting until I met his gaze,
before he stepped through the threshold. He carried me through the house, both of us very quiet,
flipping on lights as he went. My vague impression of the house was that it was quite large for a
tiny island, and oddly familiar. I'd gotten used to the pale-on-pale color scheme preferred by the
Cullens; this felt like home.

I couldn't focus on any specifics, though, not with the violent pulse beating behind my ears making
everything a little blurry. And then Edward stopped and turned on the last light.

The room was big and white and the far wall was mostly glass- standard décor for my vampires.
Outside, the moon was bright on the white sand and, just a few yards away from the house,
glistening waves. But I barely noticed that part. I was more focused on the absolutely huge white
bed in the center of the room, hung with billowy clouds of mosquito netting.

Edward set me on my feet, and I continued staring. A bead of sweat dewed up on the nape of my
neck, and I found myself walking forwards to reach out and touch the foamy netting, needing to
make sure everything was real.

Edward's wintery fingers caressed the back of my neck, wiping away the drop of perspiration. "It's
a little hot here," he said, apologetically, "I thought... that would be best."

"Thorough." I murmured, under my breath, and he chuckled. It was a nervous sound, rare for
"I tried to think of everything that would make this... easier." He admitted. I swallowed loudly, still facing away from him. How in god's name had Hermione done this? I wondered, desperately. How did any bride do this? "I was wondering," Edward said slowly, "if... first... maybe you'd like to take a midnight swim with me?" He took a deep breath, and his voice was more at ease when he spoke again. "The water will be very warm. This is the kind of beach you approve of."

"Sounds nice." My voice broke.

"I'm sure you'd like a human minute or two... it's been a very long day." I nodded woodenly, and his lips brushed against my throat, just below my ear. He chuckled once, and his cool breath tickled my overheated skin. "Don't take too long, Mrs. Cullen."

I jumped a little at the sound of my new name, and his lips brushed down my neck to the tip of my shoulder. "I'll wait for you in the water." He walked past me to the French door that opened right onto the beach sand. On the way, he shrugged out of his shirt, dropping it on the floor, and then slipped through the door into the moonlit night.

I had to remind myself to breathe, and I stumbled towards the closest suitcase, this one sitting on top of a low, white dresser. I hoped it was mine, and when I opened it I was relieved to see it was, easily recognizing the familiar bag of toiletries- though that was all I recognized. I hadn't seen a single one of these articles of clothing before in my life.

Alice, I sighed, internally.

As I pawed through the neatly folded piles, it came to my attention there was an awful lot of sheer lace and skimpy satin in my hands. Lingerie. Very lingerie-ish lingerie, with French tags.

I didn't know how or when, but someday Alice was going to pay for this, I vowed.

Giving up on the suitcase, I grabbed my toiletries and went into the bathroom. Opening the bag, I was slightly surprised to see a piece of parchment, neatly folded over. I pulled it out with trembling fingers, and smoothed it out.

_Bella, my sister's neat script read, stop freaking out. Everything's going to be fine. Relax and enjoy yourself. If you need it, there's a Calming Draught in here._
I repress the urge to moan, and instantly start sifting through the toiletries until I locate my razor. I took the time to carefully shave my legs, brush my teeth, and comb my hair, still wavy from the braids. I splashed cold water on my face and the back of my neck, which was feeling feverish. That felt so good that I washed my arms as well, and finally decided to just give up and take a shower. I knew it was ridiculous to shower before swimming, but goddamn I needed to calm down, and a nice shower was one reliable way to do that.

When I was done, I grabbed a huge white towel off the counter and wrapped it under my arms. Then I was faced with a dilemma I hadn't considered. What was I supposed to put on? Not a swimsuit, obviously. But it seemed silly to put my clothes back on, too. Plus I didn't even want to think about the things Alice had packed for me.

My breathing started to accelerate again, and my hands trembled- so much for the calming effects of the shower. I started to feel a little dizzy, apparently a full-scale panic attack on the way, and ended up drinking the Calming Draught Hermione packed.

The minute I drank it, a sense of ease washed over me, my panic melting away. It was Edward out there. The man I loved unconditionally, irrevocably, and to be honest a touch irrationally. There was no reason to be nervous.

I almost felt like I was gliding as I walked out of the bathroom, past the suitcase full of lace, and the big bed. Out the open glass door onto the powder fine sand. Everything was black-and-white, leached colorless by the moon. I walked slowly across the warm powder, searching the darkness for the man I loved.

He wasn't hard to find. He stood, his back to me, waist deep in the midnight water, staring up at the oval moon. The pallid light turned his skin a perfect white, like the sand, like the moon itself, and made his wet hair as black as the ocean.

I took a deep, steadying breath, and let the towel fall, walking out into the white light that made me look as pale as he did. I couldn't hear the sound of my footsteps as I walked to the water's edge, but I guessed that he could, though he did not turn.

He didn't turn until I stepped in, the water warm as a bath, and walked over to him, placing my hand lightly over his cool hand, lying on the water. "Beautiful," I whispered, looking up at the moon.
"It's all right," he answered, unimpressed, turning to face me. He lifted his hand to cradle my face, and smiled down crookedly at me. "But I wouldn't use the word beautiful- not with you standing here in comparison." I half smiled, and raised my free hand, placing it over his heart. He shuddered the tiniest bit at the warm touch. "I promised we would try," he whispered, suddenly tense. "If... if I do something wrong, if I hurt you, you must tell me at once."

I nodded solemnly, keeping my eyes on his. I took another step through the waves and leaned my head against his chest. "Don't be afraid," I murmured, "we belong together."

I was abruptly overwhelmed by the truth of my own words. This moment was so perfect, so right, there was no way to doubt it. His arms wrapped around me, holding me against him, summer and winter. It felt like every nerve ending in my body was a live wire.

"Forever," he agreed, and then pulled us gently into deeper water.

I was still damp from the ocean as he laid me down on the bed, when he mapped my body with his lips, his tongue. The sum of small acts began to unite us, building; I'd never felt more loved, more beautiful, then I did right now, under his touch, in his arms. He moved his mouth back to mine and we kissed again and I kissed him back with more fervor than I had before. We were kissing and kissing, my hands running slowly up into his bronze hair and down over his shoulders and along his strong arms and around to his back, holding his gorgeous body against my own.

The pain as he entered me was sharp, and it made me cry out, but it didn't last for long, and then we were moving together, fitting perfectly. It was messy, and the noises I was making were almost embarrassing, but I was so far past being able to feel that sort of emotion at that point- everything, all of it, was absolutely perfect. I wrapped myself around him as he made love to me, allowing myself to be carried.

We fit together perfectly, like corresponding pieces, made to match up. The flush of my skin, against the coolness of his; fire and ice, somehow existing together without destroying each other.

In the blissful aftermath, I felt like my body had been reduced to jelly, my limbs weak and floppy. I didn't try to think, to speak, just let him hold me, drifting off into a sound sleep.
The sun, hot on the bare skin of my back, woke me in the morning. Well, late morning, maybe afternoon, I wasn't sure. Everything besides the time was clear, though; I knew exactly where I was- the bright room with the big white bed, brilliant sunlight streaming through the open doors, the clouds of netting softening the shine.

I didn't open my eyes. I was too happy to change anything, no matter how small. The only sounds were the waves outside, our breathing, my heartbeat...

I was comfortable, even with the baking sun. His cool skin was the perfect antidote to the heat. Lying across his wintry chest, his arms wound around me, felt very easy and natural. I wondered idly what I'd been so panicky about last night. My fears all seemed silly now.

His fingers softly trailed down the contours of my spine, and I knew that he knew I was awake. I kept my eyes shut though, and tightened my arms around his neck, holding myself closer to him. He didn't speak; his fingers moved up and down my back, barely touching it as he lightly traced patterns on my skin.

I would have been happy to lie here forever, to never disturb this moment, but my body had other ideas. I laughed at my impatient stomach. It seemed sort of prosaic to be hungry after all that had passed last night. Like being brought back down to earth from some great height.

"What's funny?" he murmured, still stroking my back. The sound of his voice, serious and husky, brought with it a deluge of memories from the night, and I felt a blush color my face and neck. To answer his question, my stomach growled. I laughed again.

"You just can't escape being human for very long." I waited, but he did not laugh with me. Slowly, sinking through the many layers of bliss that clouded my head, came the realization of a different atmosphere outside my own glowing sphere of happiness.

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was his tense jaw, and I propped myself up on my elbow so I could see his face. He was staring at the frothy canopy above us, and he didn't look at me as I studied his grave features. His expression was a shock- it sent a physical jolt through my body. "Edward," I said, a strange little catch in my throat, "what is it? What's wrong?"

"You have to ask?" his voice was hard, cynical. My first instinct, the product of a lifetime of insecurities, was to wonder what I had done wrong. I thought through everything that had happened, but I couldn't find any sour note in the memory. I couldn't think of any part that would
make him look like this- so severe and cold.

What had I missed?

His finger smoothed the worried lines on my forehead. "What are you thinking? He whispered.

"You're upset. I don't understand. I thought you, you know..." my voice trailed off and I blushed, unable to finish the sentence out loud. His eyes tightened.

"How badly are you hurt, Bella? The truth- don't try to downplay it."

"Hurt?" I asked, surprised. He raised one eyebrow, his lips a tight line. I made a quick assessment, stretching my body automatically, tensing and flexing my muscles. There was stiffness, and a lot of soreness, too, it was true, but that was to be expected, and the most prominent sensation was the odd one that my bones and become unhinged at the joints, and I had changed half-way into the consistency of a jellyfish. It was not an unpleasant feeling.

And then I was a little angry, because he was darkening this most perfect of all mornings with his pessimistic assumptions. "Why would you jump to that conclusion?" I demanded. "I've never felt better than I am now."

"Really?" he asked, his voice hard, "look at yourself, Bella. Then tell me I'm not a monster." Wounded, shocked, I followed his instructions unthinkingly, then gasped. What had happened to me? I couldn't make sense of the fluffy white snow that clung to my skin, and I shook my head, causing a cascade of white to drift from my hair. I pinched one soft white bit between my fingers. It was a piece of down.

"Why am I covered in feathers?" I asked, confused. He exhaled impatiently.

"I bit a pillow. Or two. That's not what I'm talking about."

"You... bit a pillow? Why?" I asked.

"Look Bella!" he almost growled. He took my hand- very gingerly- and stretched my arm out.
"Look at that!" This time I saw what he meant. Underneath the dusting of feathers, large, purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin of my arm, trailing up my shoulders, down my ribs. So lightly that he was barely touching me, Edward placed his hand against the bruises on my arm, one at a time, matching his long fingers to the patterns.

"Oh," I said. I tried to remember this- to remember pain- but I couldn't. I couldn't recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did...

"I'm... so sorry, Bella," he whispered, while I stared at the bruises. "I knew better than this. I should not have-" he made a low, revolted sound in the back of his throat.

"I am more sorry than I can tell you."

"Well I'm not sorry!" I burst out, indignantly. "I'm... god, I can't even tell you! I'm so happy! And that doesn't even begin to cover it. Don't be angry. Don't. I'm really f-"

"Do not say the word fine." His voice was ice-cold. "If you value my sanity, do not say that you are fine."

"Well screw your sanity then!" I exclaimed, "Because I am! I am fine!"

"Bella," he almost moaned, "don't."

"No. You don't, Edward!" I snapped. His gold eyes watched me warily, as I glared down at him. "Don't ruin this," I told him, "I. Am. Happy."

"I've already ruined this," he whispered.

"Cut it out!" I snapped. I heard his teeth grind together. "Ugh!" I groaned, "why can't you just read my mind, already? It's so bloody inconvenient to be a mental mute!" His eyes widened a little bit, distracted in spite of himself.

"That's a new one. You love that I can't read your mind."
"Well not today," I snapped, "because all this anger would be completely unnecessary if you could see how I feel right now! Or five minutes ago, anyway. I was perfectly happy. Totally and completely blissed out. Now- well, I'm sort of pissed, actually."

"You should be angry at me."

"Well I am. Does that make you feel better?" He sighed.

"No. I don't think anything could make me feel better now."

"That!" I snapped, "that right there is why I'm angry. You are killing my buzz, Edward!" He rolled his eyes and shook his head. I flopped back on the bed and groaned. "We knew this was going to be tricky. I thought that was assumed. And then- well, it was a lot easier then I thought it would be. And this really is nothing," I brushed my fingers along my arm. "I think for a first time, not knowing what to expect, we did amazing! With a little practice-" His expression was suddenly so livid that I broke off mid-sentence.

"Assumed? Did you expect this, Bella? Were you anticipating that I would hurt you? Were you thinking it would be worse? Do you consider the experiment a success because you can walk away from it? No broken bones- that equals a victory?"

I waited, letting him get it all out. Then I waited some more, while his breathing went back to normal. When his eyes were calm, I answered, speaking with slow precision. "I didn't know what to expect- but I definitely did not expect how... how... just wonderful and perfect it was." My voice dropped to a whisper, my eyes slipped from his face down to my hands. "I mean, I don't know how it was for you, but it was like that for me."

A cool finger pulled my chin back up. "Is that what you're worried about?" he said, through gritted teeth. "That I didn't enjoy myself?" My eyes stayed down.

"I know it's not the same. You're not human. I was just trying to explain that, well, for a human, it doesn't get much better then that." He was quiet for so long that, finally, I had to look up. His face was softer now, thoughtful.

"It seems that I have more to apologize for. I didn't dream that you would construe the way I feel about what I did to you to mean that last night wasn't... well, the best night of my existence. But I
don't want to think of it that way, not when you were-

"Really?" I interrupted him, my lips now curved into a smile. "The best night of your existence?"

"It was more. It was everything. That doesn't change the fact that it was wrong. Even if it were possible that you really do feel that way." He said, softly.

"What does that mean?" I ask, indignantly, "do you think I'm making this up? Why?"

"To ease my guilt. I can't ignore the evidence, Bella. Or your history of trying to let me off the hook when I make mistakes." I grabbed his chin and leaned forward so that our faces were inches apart.

"You listen to me, Edward Cullen. I am not pretending anything for your sake, okay? I didn't even know there was a reason to make you feel better until you started being all miserable. I've never been so happy in all my life- I wasn't this happy when you decided that you love me more than you wanted to kill me, or the first morning I woke up and you were there waiting for me... Not even when I heard your voice in the ballet studio"- he flinched at the memory, but I didn't pause -"or when you said 'I do' and I realized that, somehow, I get to keep you forever. Those are some of the happiest memories I have, and this is better than any of it. So just deal with it."

With that, I slid off the bed, standing up, and putting my hands on my hips, scowling down at him. "Now I'm going to have a shower and I expect you to join me. At least to get all these bloody feathers out of my hair." I announced, before spinning on my heel and storming to the bathroom.

Bloody vampires.
Hermione's POV:

After the hectic few days before the wedding, it was a relief to actually wake up in Alice's arms with my pixie vampire relaxed and calm beside me, not vibrating with barely contained excitement. "Morning," I say, sleepily, and she smiles at me, dreamily.

"It was such a success, wasn't it? I just know it was! Everyone loved it!" I laugh at the enthusiasm in her voice, and shift slightly, so I'm resting my head in the crook of her neck.

"Yes thanks, I slept well." I tease her, and she pouts.

"What? I'm excited!"

"I could tell." I remark, somewhat dryly. Alice giggles, bouncing up and down slightly. I groan- so much for the not vibrating with excitement. "Merlin, you're like a toddler on a permanent sugar high- where in Godric's name do you get all that energy?"

"Can we do something fun today? Pretty please?" Alice begs, pouting slightly. I roll my eyes.

"Toddler. Sugar high." Alice giggles again, before moving so she's on top of me, faster then I can blink. Her icy lips trail from my throat, lower, and a familiar, hollow throbbing causes me to groan slightly.

"Alice!"

"What?" she purrs, licking her lips, "don't want to have some fun?" The throbbing increases tenfold
as I look into her smoldering green eyes.

"Let me at least get a hangover potion first, sweetheart." I say, squirming so I'm in a sitting position, Alice basically straddling me, and flicking my hand in the direction of the bathroom. A potion soars over and I catch it, downing it with a grimace.

Feeling the slight pounding in my head leftover from the many glasses of champagne I'd had last night fade, I tossed the phial onto the bedside table, ignoring the slight clattering noise, and turn back to face Alice. "So, where were we?"

Alice grins and opens her mouth, only to be interrupted by the shrill ringing of the doorbell. "Seriously?" I groan, and Alice shifts off me, pout increased tenfold.

"We could pretend to not be home?" she suggests. I seriously consider it for a moment, and the doorbell starts ringing again, twice as loud, and I groan.

"Amplifying charm," I explain glumly to Alice, before rolling out of bed, half stumbling over to the closet, grabbing a dressing gown I'd bought the other day, much to Alice's frustration- it was floor length and fluffy, colored bright pink with white spots. It was incredibly cozy, and incredibly unfashionable.

She gives it a dark look, even as she flounces out of the room, over to what had been a spare bedroom, but Alice had converted into a massive closet- the one in our bedroom, apparently, was not up to scratch.

I make my way to the front door, knowing Alice will join me in a few moments, and open it to greet the irate witch standing on my doorstep. "Morning Ginny." She scowls at me, hands on her hips.

"It's nearly twelve o'clock, Hermione." She snaps.

"And?" I ask, confused. Ginny swells up indignantly, in a manner that reminds me of her mother.

"And don't you remember what you promised to do?" I shift uneasily.
"Um... no?"

"I'll give you one hint," she snaps, before thrusting her hand in my face, showing me her engagement ring. I groan.

"Oh, I'm sorry Ginny, I was going to ring you, postpone this until another time-" I start to explain, but she interrupts me.

"If you don't want to go look at wedding cakes today, like you promised me, then just say it, don't start making excuses!" she huffed, glaring at me.

"I don't want to go look at wedding cakes this weekend." I instantly replied. Ginny glared at me.

"Well too bad!"

"Don't you have a job or something?" I ask, irritated. Ginny's job, a recent thing post her graduating Hogwarts, was as a sport's writer for the Daily Prophet. Already, I'd been hearing good things about her talents in turning the Prophet into the new standard in sports reporting. My phone went off then, and, hoping for a miracle, I fished it from my pocket, hitting answer.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Cullen?" The voice on the other end asks. The voice is smooth, and slimy, the sort that sends shivers up your spine, shivers which I push away.

"Uh, speaking," I say, after a second of confusion- I still expected to be called Miss Granger, or Miss Granger-Swan.

"I'm ringing in relation to your inquiry into the acquirement of two rare items," the voice said, and excitement flared up inside me.

"Have you managed to locate either of them?"
“So far I have been able to locate one of the items. Would you like to arrange a meeting for later today?”

"Yes," I respond instantly, "does Diagon Alley work?"

"I'll book a private room in the Leakey Cauldron for one o'clock," the voice states, "tell the barkeep you're meeting with Mr. Smith."

"Okay." I respond.

"I'll see you then." 'Mr. Smith' replies, before the phone goes dead.

Ginny is still glaring at me, but Alice has appeared, and she's eyeing me with a curious expression.

"Who was that?" she asks.

"I'll explain later," I tell her, not really wanting to go into my slightly shady deal with 'Mr. Smith' in front of Ginny. Both give me suspicious looks and I roll my eyes. "It's called a surprise for a reason, Alice." I tell her, "I never got you a wedding present, after all." Her expression immediately brightens.

I turn to Ginny, giving her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, but I really have to meet this person. Are you going for a muggle cake, or a magical one?" I asked, "because if you're going muggle, I'm sure Alice will be able to help you."

Ginny's scowl melts away slightly, and she gives Alice an assessing look. "How good is your French?"

"Perfect," Alice assures her.

"Excellent. We're going to France." Ginny smiles, "apparently they make some of the most divine wedding cakes in the world."

"Oh they do," Alice immediately assures her, "I mean, obviously I haven't tasted them, but they
look fabulous. I wanted to order one for Rosalie and Emmett's fifth wedding, but nobody else wanted to," She pouted at that.

"Maybe because none of you could actually eat it, sweetheart?" I suggest.

"Oh hush you!" Alice scolds me. Ginny then frowns slightly.

"Right, that reminds me- you're a vampire."

"That was very impressive of you, Ginny." I say, and she rolls her eyes at me.

"I mean, I forgot she can't go in the sun without lighting up like a disco ball." Alice's eyes went blank for a second, and then she smiled.

"I checked, it's overcast. I'll be fine." She then pouts slightly. "And I prefer the term sparkling like a diamond. It sounds more enchanting." Ginny laughs.

"Wicked. Today's going to be fun."

"I need to get dressed- enjoy France, you two." I tell them.

"Actually, I'm going to pick up Luna first, and Alice still has to get dressed," Ginny says, checking her wristwatch a gift from me, to her. I bought one for Arthur the next day, he was so enraptured by the 'strange muggle time-measuring device'. "I'll be back in twenty minutes." She states, before twisting and disappearing. Alice turns to me, a sly smile on her face.

"We should shower together- saves time." She states. I laugh, nodding.

"Sounds perfect, treasure."
I stride into the Leakey Cauldron, dressed in a pencil skirt, white blouse and blazer, stockings and black heels. My expensive-cut travel cloak, dark sunglasses covering my face, and hair charmed straight, shoulder-length and black, gave anyone looking at me the impression of a perfectly anonymous business woman.

"I'm meeting with Mr. Smith," I tell Tom, the barkeep, my voice carefully crisp and charmed lower and huskier then my real voice.

"Of course," Tom smiles, directing me to a back room. I resist the urge to shiver slightly as I walk in, feeling the power of the wards wash over me- nobody would be able to eavesdrop on this room.

'Mr. Smith' was dressed almost identically to me- professional and expensive. As Tom backed out, shutting the door behind him, I took off the sunglasses and placed them on the table, sitting down across from the light-haired man.

"You have the payment, I assume." He states, raising his eyebrows.

"Two hundred galleons to add to the one hundred galleon deposit," I reply, coolly, pulling out a bulging pouch and sliding it across the table.

'Mr. Smith' smiles at me, greasily, pocketing the pouch and then rising to his feet, producing a small velvet pouch that he slides across the table. "For you, Mrs. Cullen." He states, bowing slightly, before striding out of the room.

"Bloody hell." I mutter under my breath, exhaling noisily. I let the tension flow out of my body as I grabbed the pouch and shoved it into the pocket stitched to the inside of my cloak.

'Mr. Smith' was a wizard one could hire, for the right price of course, to procure information and items. A private investigator, of sorts. 'Mr. Smith' cost a fortune, but he was the best- Fleur had helped me get in contact with him, he occasionally worked for Gringotts, acquiring different treasures for the goblins. He was, quite conveniently really, very up to date with the advances of the muggle world, hence the cell phone.

I'd hired him to help me find two separate items- one being a very special ring, the other The Codex- the lost journal of Nicholas Flamel, the creator of the world's only Philosopher's Stone, and one of the most prestigious and sought after texts in the entire Wizarding world.
A text that could hold the secrets to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone. If you wanted to live forever with your vampire bride, the Philosopher’s Stone was one way to do it.

I apparated back home and went straight to my study, removing the charms altering my appearance, then opening up the manila folder.

Alice arrived home, nearly two hours later, and skipped into my study. "Are you ever going to tell me what all this research is about?" she asked, as she slid moved the copies of Theoretical Thaumaturgy and Advanced Arithmancy to the side of the middle of the desk, so she could perch on the edge, her curious eyes flicking over the pages and pages of writing in front of me.

"Are you ready to have this discussion?" I asked her, softly, and her eyes widened.

"Y-you mean... that discussion? The one we've kind of been avoiding because we're both terrified of it?" She asks, nervous.

"Yes. That discussion." I smile without humor, and she bites her lip.

"We have to have it sooner or later, I guess." She murmurs. "Okay, let's do it."

"Alice," I begin, "if I thought it would work, I'd ask you to Turn me. But the thing is, there's no record of any witch or wizard ever been Turned," I hesitate for a second, "Alice, I have no idea how vampire venom would react to my blood, to my magic. I have no idea if my body will accept the change, or fight it. Muggles, their bodies can't fight the venom, but the magic in mine can. Alice... there's a very real possibility that vampire venom being introduced into my bloodstream would... would kill me."

Alice's entire body is frozen, her face a mask of horror. "No..." she whispers, shaking her head from side to side in denial, "no, no, no... I can’t lose you!" I lean forwards, grabbing her hand.

"I don't know that for a fact, Alice- it's only conjecture from texts I've read. But there's more then one way to live forever, that's what all this is about," one of my hands releases her, to gesture to the books and papers scattered around me, "remember what I told you about my first year, about the Philosopher's Stone?" Alice nods, somewhat jerkily. "I'm going to make one, Alice. I don't care
how long it takes, I'm going to do it."

"So... today? That's what you were doing, a-and you didn't want to say it in front of Ginny?" Alice asked, nervously.

"It’s related," I say, before digging around in my pocket and pulling out the velvet pouch. "But I didn’t lie. Today I did get you that wedding present. It's a few weeks late because, well, it took a few weeks for Mr. Smith to find it."

"What is it?" Alice asked, her dark, slender brows drawing together in confusion, as she looks at the box.

"Have you got time? Because it's kind of a long story." I tell her. She bobs her head up and down.

"All the time in the world for you, my darling one." I smile at her, warmly, before starting.

"Vampires have been around for almost as long as the human race," I say, going straight into 'lecture mode', "muggle mythology never managed to pinpoint the true origin of the so-called vampire 'myth', but wizards know for a fact that the first ever vampire was born out of sorcery in Ancient Egypt, created by Khayu-Neheb, a wizard. He created the vampire as a weapon to destroy his enemies, but he made a mistake- vampires were supposed to be beasts that could be trained, they weren't supposed to retain their human intelligence. And they also had other faults.

"The potion he'd created, responsible for Turning a human into a vampire, caused the body crystallize, freezing it in time, but that crystallization also meant that the vampires, well, sparkled under the sun. Like diamonds. Something very inconvenient if you lived in a country that was mostly desert, and you needed a weapon that blended in. So Khayu-Neheb created a series of charms wrought with heka-khase, a form of Ancient Egyptian magic that's mainly forgotten. Most of these charms are lost, due to the fact with the advances in magic, vampires were considered too vulnerable to be of any use, and magical folk lost interest in them, but a few remain. Including this one."

From the pouch I produce a carved wooden ring-box. I open it and Alice stares, wide-eyed, at the ring inside. It's a single band of gold that looks as ancient as it is, though with a few charms I'm sure I can make it appear more modern. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs are engraved around both the inside and the outside.
"What does it do?" Alice asked, eyes shining. I smile, gently lifting it out of the box and sliding it onto her finger, then standing up, still holding her hand, and apparating her outside, to Edward and Bella's meadow, where the sun is shining with gusto. Alice gasps, staring down at herself, and I grin.

"Like it?"

"I'm not sparkling!" she breathes, "holy crap!" I laugh.

"Glad you like it, it cost us a fortune." Alice giggles, and spins around under the sun, her pale skin remaining just that, with no sparkles dancing off her. She blurs over, pulling me into her arms, and spinning me around with such gusto I almost throw up. "Bloody hell Alice!"

"I'm not sparkling," she giggles, planting a kiss on my cheek. I laugh, again, then tug at her finger.

"Take it off, I miss your sparkles." She pokes her tongue out at me, yanking her hand out of my hold, and hiding it behind her back.

"Never!" I smile, before my face goes serious.

"I love you Alice, and we're going to make this work. I swear to you, I'm going to make sure that we'll be together always." Alice's arms wrap around me, and she snuggles up against me.

"I know you will, my heart."
Chapter Eight

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Bella's POV:

I paced up and down the bathroom, my hands balled into fists at my sides. Edward had ended up
joining me in the shower, mostly to pick the feathers out of my hair, and then tell me that he
wouldn't make love to me again, until I was Turned. I didn't know what to feel- angry? Upset?
Disappointed?

All of the above?

I'd be hurt too, if I didn't understand him so well. He was so terrified of hurting me, so terrified of
what he was, that he couldn't bring himself to trust, well, himself.

I fished through the bag of toiletries, looking for a hairbrush, and came across what looked like a
tub filled with some sort of cream. Frowning, I picked it up, turning it around in my hand to try and
figure out what it was. I started blushing when I caught the label, scrawled on in Hermione's tiny,
neat handwriting- Bruise Paste.

I unscrewed it, and slathered the paste all over my skin, hoping that it would get rid of the bruises,
otherwise they'd be worse tomorrow, and that certainly wouldn't make things any easier.

After brushing out my hair, I dressed in an unfamiliar white cotton dress that concealed the worst
of the bruises, then padded off barefoot to where the smell of eggs and bacon and cheddar cheese
was coming from.

Edward was standing in front of the stainless steel stove, sliding an omelet onto a light blue plate.
The scent of the food overwhelmed me. I felt like I could eat the plate and the frying pan, too, in
that moment. "Here," he said. He turned with a smile on his face and set the plate on a small, tiled
table.
He sat down across from me as I started scarfing down the hot eggs. They burned my throat, but I didn't care. "I'm not feeding you often enough." I swallowed and reminded him,

"I was asleep. Besides, I'm a grown woman, I don't need you to feed me. These are really good, by the way," I added, "impressive for someone who doesn't eat."

"Food Network," he chuckled, flashing my favorite crooked smile.

I ate everything, even though he'd made enough for two, before pushing the plate away, and looking up. "So, what's the plan for today?"

- My entertainment became the number one priority on Isle Esme. We snorkeled- well, I snorkeled while he flaunted his ability to go without oxygen indefinitely. We explored the small jungle that ringed the rocky little peak. We visited the parrots that lived in the canopy on the south of the island. We watched the sunset from the rocky western cove. We swam with the porpoises that played in the warm, shallow waters- well, again, I did, but when Edward was in the water, the porpoises disappeared as if a shark was near.

I wasn't an idiot, I knew what was going on- he was trying to keep me busy, distracted, so I wouldn't continue to badger him about the sex thing. Whenever I tried to talk him into taking it easy with one of the million DVDs under the big-screen plasma TV, he would lure me out of the house with magic words like ‘coral reefs’, and ‘submerged caves’ and ‘sea turtles’. We were going, going, going all day, so that I found myself completely famished and exhausted when the sun eventually set.

I drooped over my plate after I finished dinner every night; once I'd actually fallen asleep right at the table and he'd had to carry me to bed. Part of it was that Edward always made too much food for one, but I was so hungry after swimming and climbing all day that I ate most of it. Then, full and worn out, I could barely keep my eyes open. All part of the plan, no doubt.

But exhaustion didn't get in the way of my attempts at persuasion. I refused to give up- I tried reasoning, pleading and grouching, all to no avail. I was usually unconscious before I could really press my case far. And then my dreams felt so real- nightmares, mostly, made more vivid, I guessed, by the bright colors of the island- that I woke up tired, no matter how long I slept.

About a week or so after we'd gotten to the island, honestly, it was hard to keep track of time here, I tried a new angle- I took to wearing some of Alice's lingerie collection to sleep in at night. I wondered if she'd seen a vision of why I would want such things, and then shuddered, embarrassed at the thought.
I’d started out slow, with innocent ivory satins, the bruises long gone, having vanished within twelve hours of applying the bruise paste, before moving on to purples and reds, with more lace then satin.

Tonight, I’d chosen one of the scarier pieces- the lingerie she’d given me at my bachelorette party. Bordelle, I think she called it. It was silky and lacy and embarrassing to look at even when it wasn't on, and I was careful not to look in the mirror before I went back into the bedroom, knowing if I did, I'd lose my nerve.

I had the satisfaction of watching Edward's eyes pop for a second before he could control his expression, and, a new sense of confidence washing over me, I spun around, pirouetting so that he could see every angle. "What do you think?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. "You look beautiful. You always do."

"Oh thanks," I huffed, climbing quickly into the soft bed. He put his arms around me and pulled me against his chest, but this was routine- it was too hot to sleep without his cool body close. I yawned, heavily. "God," I mumbled, "for as tired as I've been, and thanks for that by the way, you'd think I'd sleep better."

"What?" Edward sounded confused, "you've been sleeping like the dead, Bella. You haven't said a word in your sleep since we got here. If it weren't for the snoring, I'd worry you were slipping into a coma."

I refused to deign the snoring jibe with a response, instead concentrated on the other half of what he’d just said "I haven't been tossing? That's weird. Usually I'm all over the bed when I'm having nightmares. And shouting."

"You've been having nightmares?"

"Vivid ones," I sigh, "They make me so tired. I can't believe I haven't been babbling about them all night."

"What are they about?"

"Different things- but the same, you know, because of the colors." I explain.
"Colors?" he asks, and I can basically hear the frown in his voice.

"It's all so bright and real. Usually, when I'm dreaming, I know that I am. With these, I don't know I'm asleep. It makes them scarier." I admit. Edward sounds disturbed when he speaks again.

"What's frightening you, my love?" I shuddered slightly, my mind straying to my dreams of late.

"Mostly... the Volturi." I admit. He hugged me tighter.

"They aren't going to bother us anymore. You'll be immortal soon, and they'll have no reason." I let him comfort me, even as hopelessness washed over me. It wasn't me I was scared for, the nightmares weren't like that. It was Hermione that worried me. What the Volturi would do when they found out about her. What they might do if they found out what she was. Edward saw the desolation on my face.

"What can I do to help?" he asked, softly. I shook it off.

"They're just dreams, Edward."

"Do you want me to sing to you? I'll sing all night if it will keep the bad dreams away." He offers.

"They're not all bad. Some are nice. So... colorful. Underwater, with the fish and the coral. It all seems like it's really happening- I don't know I'm dreaming. Maybe this island is the problem. It's really bright here."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No. No, not yet. Can't we stay awhile longer?" I ask.

"We can stay as long as you want, Bella," he promised me, before he started humming under his breath. I fell asleep quickly.
The sun shone, bright and warm, above us as Edward opened my blouse slowly, twisting each button with his thumb and third finger, and then running his finger along my breastbone. When my shirt finally fell open, he caressed my breasts. He kissed my nipples, then moved his lips slowly down her stomach. He removed my underwear, and kissed just above my pubic bone-

I awoke in the dark, and it was with shock. The dream had been so very real... so vivid, so sensory... I gasped aloud, now, disorientated by the dark room. Only a second ago, it seemed, I had been under the brilliant sun. "Bella?" Edward whispered, his arms tight around me, shaking me gently. "Are you alright, my love?"

"Oh!" I gasped again. Just a dream. Not real. To my utter astonishment, tears overflowed from my eyes without warning, gushing down my face.

"Bella!" he said- louder, alarmed now. "What's wrong?" He wiped the tears from my hot cheeks with cold, frantic fingers, but others followed.

"It was only a dream." I couldn't control the low sob that broke in my voice. The senseless tears were disturbing, but I couldn't get control of the staggering grief that gripped me. I wanted, so badly, for the dream to be real.

"It's okay, love, you're fine. I'm here." He rocked me back and forth, a little too fast to soothe. "Did you have another nightmare? It wasn't real, it wasn't real."

"Not a nightmare," I shook my head, scrubbing the back of my hand against my eyes. "It was a good dream." My voice broke again.

"Then why are you crying?" he asked, bewildered.

"Because I woke up!" I wailed, wrapping my arms around his neck in a chokehold, and sobbing into his throat. He laughed once at my logic, but the sound was tense with concern.

"Everything's all right, Bella. Take deep breaths."

"It was so real," I sobbed, "I wanted it to be real!"
"Tell me about it," he urged. "Maybe that will help."

"We were on the beach..." I trailed off, pulling back to look with tear-filled eyes at his anxious angel's face, dim in the darkness. I stared at him broodingly as the unreasonable grief began to ebb.

"And?" he finally prompted.

"Oh, Edward..."

"Tell me, Bella," he pleaded, eyes wild with worry at the pain in my voice. But I couldn't. Instead I clutched my arms around his neck again and locked my mouth with his feverishly. It wasn't desire at all- it was need, acute to the point of pain. His response was instant, but quickly followed by his rebuff.

He struggled with me as gently as he could in his surprise, holding me away, grasping my shoulders. "No, Bella," he insisted, looking at me as if he was worried that I'd lost my mind. To be honest, it felt like his worries were founded. My arms dropped, defeated, the bizarre tears spilling in a fresh torrent down my face, a new sob rising in my throat. He was right- I must be crazy.

"I'm s-s-s-ory," I mumbled. But he pulled me to him then, hugging me tightly to his marble chest.

"I can't, Bella, I can't!" His moan was agonized.

"Please," I said, my plea muffled against his skin. "Please Edward?" I couldn't tell if he was moved by the tears trembling in my voice, or if he was unprepared to deal with the suddenness of my attack, or if his need was simply as unbearable in that moment as my own. But whatever the reason, he pulled my lips back to his, surrendering with a groan.

And we began where my dream had left off.

I stayed very still when I woke in the morning and tried to keep my breathing even. I was afraid to open my eyes.
I was lying across Edward's chest, but he was very still and his arms were not wrapped around me. That was a bad sign. I was afraid to admit I was awake and face his anger- no matter whom it was directed at today.

I carefully peeked through my eyelashes- he was staring up at the dark ceiling, his arms behind his head. I pulled myself up on my elbow so that I could see his face better. It was smooth, expressionless. "How much trouble am I in?" I asked in a small voice.

"Heaps," he said, but turned his head and smirked at me. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am sorry," I said. "I didn't mean... well I don't know exactly what that was last night." I shook my head at the memory of the irrational tears, the crushing grief.

"You never did tell me what your dream was about," Edward notes. I laughed nervously.

"I guess I didn't- but I sort of showed you what it was about."

"Oh," he said. His eyes widened, and then he blinked. "Interesting."

"It was a very good dream," I murmured. He didn't comment, so a few seconds later I asked, "am I forgiven?"

"I'm thinking about it." I sat up, planning to examine myself, but as I moved, an odd wave of vertigo hit. I swayed and fell back against the pillows.

"Whoa... head rush." His arms were around me then.

"You slept for a long time. Twelve hours."

"Twelve?" How strange. I gave myself a quick once-over, trying to be inconspicuous about it. I looked fine. Better then fine, really. There were no new bruises, and this time much less soreness between my legs.
"The inventory complete?" Edward asked. I nodded sheepishly. Obviously I hadn't been as discrete as I thought.

"The pillows all appear to have survived."

"Unfortunately I can't say the same for your, er, I can't really call them pajamas." He nodded toward the foot of the bed, where several scraps of $8000 dollar lingerie were strewn across the sheets.

"Alice is going to kill you," I laugh, softly, before asking, "were there any other casualties?"

"I'll have to buy Esme a new bed frame," Edward confessed, glancing over his shoulder. I followed his gaze, and was shocked to see that large chunks of wood had been gouged from the left side of the headboard.

"You'd think I would have heard that."

"You seem to be extraordinarily unobservant when your attention is otherwise involved."

"I was a bit absorbed." I admit, blushing a deep red. He touched my burning cheek and sighed.

"I'm really going to miss that."

I stared up at his face, searching for any sign of the anger or remorse I feared. He gazed back at me evenly, his expression calm but otherwise unreadable. "How are you feeling?" I asked, cautiously. He laughed. "What?" I demanded.

"You look so guilty- like you've committed a crime."

"I feel guilty," I muttered.
"So you seduced your all-too-willing husband. That's not a capital offense." He seemed to be teasing. My cheeks got hotter.

"The word *seduced* implies a certain amount of premeditation." I informed him.

"Maybe that was the wrong word," he allowed.

"You're not angry?" He smiled ruefully.

"I'm not angry."

"Why not?"

"Well..." he paused. "I didn't hurt you, for one thing. It was easier this time, to control myself, to channel the excess." His eyes flickered to the damaged frame again. "Maybe because I had a better idea of what to expect."

"I *told* you practice makes perfect." I say, smugly. He rolled his eyes. My stomach chose then to growl, and he laughed.

"Breakfast time for the human?"

"Yes please," I said, hopping out of the bed. I moved too quickly, though, and had to stagger drunkenly to regain my balance." He caught me before I could stumble into the dresser.

"Are you alright?"

"If I don't have a better sense of equilibrium in my next life, I'm demanding a refund." I grumbled. My stomach gurgled again. "Can you make eggs?" I asked, hopefully. He laughed.

"Do you know how many eggs you've gone through in the last week alone?" he asked.
"This place is totally messing with my appetite." I defended myself. And my dreams. And my already dubious balance. "I need the loo- meet you in the kitchen?"

"Meet you in the kitchen." He agreed, pressing a kiss to the top of my head, before exiting the bedroom. I smiled after him, before making my way to the bathroom.

I did my business, before searching through my toiletry bag for a new tube of toothpaste I'd run out. But before I found the toothpaste, I happened across something else that Alice, or more likely Hermione, had packed. I picked up the small blue box and stared at it in my hand for a long moment, forgetting everything else. Then I started counting in my head. Once. Twice. Again.

The knock startled me; the little box falling back into the toiletry bag. "Bella? Are you okay?" Edward asked through the door.

"Yes and no." My voice was strangled, and Edward's voice was automatically worried.

"Bella? Can I please come in?"

"O...kay?" He came in and appraised my position, frozen hunched over the sink, my expression blank and staring. He was next to me at once.

"What's wrong?"

"How many days has it been since the wedding?" I whispered.

"Seventeen." He answered, automatically. "Bella, what is it?" I was counting again. I held up a finger, cautioning him to wait, and mouthed the numbers to myself. I'd been wrong about the days before. We'd been here longer than I'd thought. I started over again.

"Bella," Edward's voice was urgent, "I'm losing my mind over here- what happened?" I tried to swallow. It didn't work. So I reached into the toiletry bag and pulled out the little blue box of tampons. I held them up silently. He stared at me in confusion. "What? Are you... getting your period?"

"No," I managed to choke out. "No, Edward. I'm trying to tell you that my period is late. Six days late." His facial expression didn't change. If I wasn't so terrified, I'd laugh. "I've never been late
before in my life!" My voice is rising, an edge of hysteria entering it. He didn't respond- he had
turned into a sculpture. "Oh god, the dreams," I mumbled to myself, in a flat voice. "Sleeping so
much. The crying. All that food. Oh. Oh. Oh."

Edward's stare seemed glassy, as if he couldn't see me anymore. Reflexively, almost involuntarily,
my hand dropped to my stomach. "Oh!" I squeaked, feeling the impossibility. I lurched out of
Edward's unmoving hands, stepping back to get a better look at my bare stomach. "I-impossible!" I
whispered.

I had no experience with pregnancy or babies or any part of that world, besides Teddy, but I wasn't
an idiot. I knew enough to know that this wasn't how it worked. I was only six days late. If I was
pregnant, my body wouldn't have even registered that fact. I would not have changed my eating or
sleeping habits. And I most definitely would not have a small but defined bump sticking out
between my hips, so obvious now that I was looking at it.

"Impossible." I repeated, because- bulge or no bulge, period or no period- and there was definitely
no period- there was no way I could be pregnant! The only person I'd ever had sex with was a
vampire, for crying out loud! A vampire who was still frozen with no sign of ever moving again.

"Edward," I grabbed his arm with the hand that wasn't resting on the bump on my stomach that had
not been there yesterday, "Edward!" When he still didn't move, didn't even respond, I staggered
into the bedroom, to where the shiny silver cellphone was resting on the bedside table. I rang
Carlisle's number with shaking fingers. He picked up on the first ring.

"Edward?"

"Um, it's Bella."

"Bella?" his voice was surprised now. "What's going on?"

"I-" I wasn't sure how to answer. Would he laugh at my conclusions, tell me I was crazy? Was I
just having another colorful dream? "I'm a little worried about Edward... can vampires go into
shock?"

"Has he been harmed?" Carlisle's voice was suddenly urgent.
"No, no," I assured him. "Just... taken by surprise."

"I don't understand, Bella."

"I think... well, I think that... maybe... I might be..." I took a deep breath. "Pregnant." As if to back me up, there was a tiny, impossible nudge in my abdomen. My hand flew to my stomach. After a long pause, Carlisle's medical training kicked in.

"When was the first day of your last menstrual cycle?"

"Seventeen days before the wedding."

"How do you feel?"

"Weird," I told him, and my voice broke. Another trickle of tears dribbled down my cheeks. "This is going to sound crazy- look, I know it's way too early for any of this. Maybe I am crazy. But I'm having bizarre dreams and eating all the time, sleeping all the time, crying and... and... I swear something just moved inside me just now!" Suddenly Edward was beside me, holding out his hand, his face white and hard. "Um, I think Edward wants to talk to you."

"Put him on," Carlisle said in a strained voice. I put the phone in Edward's outstretched hand and he pressed it to his ear.

"Is it possible?" He listened for a long time, staring blankly at nothing. "And Bella?" he asked, finally. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me to his side. As he listened, I held my stomach, unable to think properly, and let my thoughts wander. While I waited, a vision danced behind my eyelids. A tiny, beautiful little baby with Edward's eyes, green like they'd been when he was human- a tiny Edward in my arms. A sudden warmth shot through my veins, chasing the ice away.

"Yes," Edward said, suddenly, "yes I will." He pulled the phone away from his ear and pressed end.

"What did Carlisle say?" I asked, impatiently. Edward answered in a lifeless voice.

"He thinks you're pregnant." The words sent a warm shiver down my spine. The little nudger fluttered inside me, and a tear trickled down my cheek. "Don't be afraid," Edward was suddenly
frantic, his cold fingers wiping away the tear. I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't, that I was crying because I was *happy*, when he said this: "You'll be fine. Carlisle will be ready when we get there. We'll take care of this, and you'll be fine, you'll be fine."

"Take care of this? What do you mean?" I asked, confused. Edward pulled me against his chest.

"We're going to get that *thing* out before it can hurt any part of you."
Chapter Nine

CHAPTER NINE:

Hermione's POV:

"Molly invited you and Alice to lunch on Sunday." Rosalie told me as a greeting, as she arrived to
pick up Teddy.

It had been sixteen days since the wedding, and today was the first day that Rosalie had allowed
me to take Teddy to visit Leah again. "Mama!" squealed the excitable toddler, stumbling towards
her the best he could, at twelve months old. He gave up walking around three meters away, and
crawled the last stretch. Rosalie scooped him up and showered him with kisses. She then sniffed
him.

"You remembered to shower him," she nods in approval.

"Surely the wolves can't smell that bad." I said, doubtfully. Rosalie snorted.

"Oh you have no idea." She replied, before turning back to Teddy and cooing at him. "Did you
have fun today, my little man?"

"Yesh!" Teddy nodded, bouncing in her arms, before sticking his bottom lip out. "Mished mama." Rosalie smiled and kissed his blue hair.

"And mama missed her little man," she cooed, before turning back to me. "We're meeting at the
Burrow at six o'clock. Molly already made Portkeys for Emmett and I." She stated, before turning
and leaving, walking back over to her shiny red Mercedes.

I sighed before yelling out, "I love you Teddy!" then shutting the front door. "She obviously still
hasn't forgiven me." I mumble under my breath, before making my way to the study.
Alice wasn't due home for another couple of hours, so I decided to finish reading the book I'd started the other day.

A few hours later I huffed in frustration and slammed shut my copy of 'A Theory of Magic: The Mechanics behind the Mysterious, Alchemy Edition'. Every bloody book I'd read was proving to be exceptionally unhelpful and I was finding myself thinking longingly of the Hogwarts library.

Closing my eyes, I could picture it, the dark bookshelves- tall enough that you would have to be Grawp's size to reach the highest shelves... the ancient, yellowing pages of the more precious tomes... rows upon rows of stacks, enough to get lost in for hours... and the rope barrier marking the entrance to the Restricted Section.

The Library had been my place in Hogwarts. I went there a lot in my early years for peace and quiet, and later, when the War began and people started dying, I went there to fall apart, to cry alone when I could no longer fight the fear and horror.

Tears pricked my eyes now as a wave of longing and hopelessness washed over me. The library would never be a sanctuary to me again, just like Hogwarts would never be my home again. Not after everything that had happened there. Not after Dumbledore's death, the nights of researching Horcruxes and magic so evil my stomach rolled, not after the halls haunted me of those who had fallen... and not after I had taken lives.

Pushing those thoughts from my mind, I moved the stack of books away from me. Proven theory was going to be no help- here I was dealing with magic and knowledge the Department of Mysteries would usually cover, the deeper aspects of sorcery that go far beyond just incantations accompanied with a swish and a flick. This was magic along the same lines as Lily Potter's sacrifice. Magic that defied all its own laws. Magic which tied in with things such as ley lines, the power of the solstices, souls, blood, emotions. In other words magic as murky, woolly and unpredictable as Divination.

Magic that would make me live forever so I could always stand by the side of the woman, the vampire, I loved. The vampire who was prancing into my study, a huge smile on her face. "I got a promotion!" she sings, and I give her a smile.

"Congratulations treasure!" Her happy expression falters slightly.

"Just one of those bad days, Alice." She nods, and then scoops me up into her arms, ignoring my shocked spluttering, and blurs us into the living room, dumping me on the couch.

"We're watching a movie to cheer you up," she pronounces, zipping over to grab a handful and tossing them on the couch beside me, "choose one while I get the champagne."

"Which you can't drink." I remind her.

"You're the one who needs to get buzzed."

"Vodka will get me buzzed quicker." I counter, and she gives me an indignant look.

"We're celebrating! Humans drink champagne to celebrate! It's simple logic!"

"We've been invited to lunch at the Weasleys tomorrow." I inform her, and she scowls at me.

"Oh you're cruel."

"What?" I ask, "you have to meet the family at some point- I've met yours."

"But it's... it's... it's different!" she protests, "you met them as Bella's sister! I'm meeting them as your vampire wife, who most of them have only met once, and who was responsible for putting your life in jeopardy- again!"

"Alice, none of them consider going up against a couple of vampires jeopardy." I tell her. Alice scowls harder as the opening credits roll.

"Well that's just insulting!"
Alice was nibbling her bottom lip and picking delicately at the hem of her turtleneck. She looked beautiful and stylish, and I wrapped an arm around her waist. "Stop worrying." I told her, "it's just the Weasleys. Oh, and Harry, Fleur, Ginny, Emmett and Rosalie are all going to be here too."

Rosalie and Emmett have been unofficially adopted by the Weasleys as Teddy's parents these past two and a half months, and Rosalie has formed a friendship with Molly and Fleur, the three of them bonding over their love of children.

"But... it's like meeting the family!" Alice protests. "It's scary! What if they don't like me? I don't want them not to like me! I can't See them, so I don't know what's going to happen, and I don't like not knowing!" I wait until her mini-panicked-rant is over, before touching a hand to her cheek.

"Take a deep breath." I instruct her, "and calm down. Everything's going to be fine." Alice gives me a look that clearly states she doesn't believe a word I just said, then takes a deep breath and nods.

"Okay. Let's do this." I roll my eyes, thread my fingers through hers, and tug her after me, as I walk over to the door, not bothering to knock before opening it and stepping inside.

Fleur is the first to greet us. "Hermione! Alice! Eet eez so lovely to see you!" she exclaims.

"Hermione's here?" Harry's head pokes out of the dining room, and he grins, seeing me. "Hey love, hey Alice! Long time, no see!"

"You saw us yesterday." I laugh, giving him an affectionate look, before turning to Alice and giving her a supportive smile. "You're doing great." I tell her, softly, and she sticks out her bottom lip in a way that makes me want to lean forwards and bite it.

"Hermione! Alice! Welcome, welcome, welcome!" Molly gushes, rushing over and interrupting my dirty thoughts, pulling us into her arms. "Come, sit, sit! Dinner's just about to be served," she chats, and we follow her into the dining room, sitting down on two of the very scarce free chairs.

Everyone is here- Arthur, Percy, Audrey, Charlie, Charlie's current boyfriend, a large muscled, exotic looking foreign wizard called Dumitru, Bill, Fleur, Luna, Neville, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Ron's new girlfriend Romilda Vane, and even George, sitting quietly and looking thin but healthier then the last time I saw him, at my wedding.
Rosalie and Emmett are sitting over by Charlie, Rosalie bouncing Teddy on her knee, cooing at him, while Emmett listens to Charlie's stories about the dragons in Romania.

Alice watches entranced as the extravagant feast Mrs. Weasley has whipped up soars overhead, the dishes coming to rest on the table. "So, have you talked to Bella since the wedding?" Audrey asks us, in her quiet, sweet voice.

"No, they're a touch on the... busy side." Alice winces and pulls a face. "Not exactly something I ever wanted to see." Audrey's face goes pink.

"So, how's married life treating you?" Molly gushes to me. Ginny wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, behind her mother's back, and I have to fight not to blush as I realize her interpretation of her mother's innocent enough question.

"It's wonderful, Molly." I smile, and Alice nods beside me, her hand still holding mine tightly under the table. Ginny pretends to fan herself with her hand, pulling the sort of expression on her face that one usually sees during intercourse.

Ginny isn't quick enough to wipe the expression off her face before Molly turns around, and her mother lets out a scandalized gasp. "Ginevra Molly Weasley!" She just about shrieks. A panicked expression appears on Ginny's face, and she quickly blurts out,

"I'm pregnant!"

Her words had the desired effect of distracting her mother- they also caused everyone else at the table to stop talking, and turn to gape at her. And at Harry, whose face had gone a suspicious shade of red. "It's a boy." Ginny adds with a weak smile. "Surprise!" Chaos proceeds to erupt

"My baby girl's all grown up!" Molly exclaims, then she bursts into tears, a massive smile on her face, throwing her arms around Ginny. Beside her, Arthur's beaming, even as he makes several suspicious noises that sound like sniffing.

"Harry, you dog!" Charlie grins, thumping Harry on the back. "High five, man!"

"You're high fiving the guy who knocked up our sister?" Splutters Ron. Charlie shrugs.
"Eh, details. I’m going to have a nephew."

"Charles Weasley, you absolute scoundrel!" Molly sniffs, reaching over Ginny's shoulder to whack the back of her second oldest son's head.

"When did you find out?" I ask Ginny.

"Two days ago," Ginny admitted, quietly, so her mum couldn't hear, "I realized that I'd missed a visit from Auntie Flow, and a bit over a month ago Harry and I got, well, completely plastered and had sex without doing any contraceptive charms. A few spells later, and I learned that I've got a five week old son."

I shake my head, even as I smile. "Congratulations, Ginny. You're going to be a fantastic mum." Ginny looks nervous.

"God, I hope so!" She sighs, and I roll my eyes.

"Don't be daft, you're going to be wonderful."

"I'm glad one of us has faith." Ginny retorts, dryly.

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A little while later, after everyone's finished crowding around Ginny, congratulating her, I'm approached by Ron's new girlfriend. "So... hi Romilda," I smile, slightly uncomfortably, at the girl. Appearance wise, Romilda doesn't look like she's changed much since Hogwarts- she still has the same large, dark eyes, long curly black hair and prominent chin. But the air of arrogance she once carried around herself like a cloak was long gone, the fame-obsessed child she had once been now a thing of the past.

Romilda had fought in the Battle of Hogwarts, and a long silver scar down the left side of her face was proof of that. She had an air of seriousness about her, that hadn't been there before, and the tiredness in her eyes, despite her cheerful manner, that we all carried.
She was looking pretty tonight, dressed in close fitting bag pants made of brilliant blue Matelassé and tied at the waist with a red silk rope, and a white V-neck sweater that clung to her curves.

"Hi Hermione," she greeted me, cheerfully, "I didn't realize you were a lesbian. If I had, I'd probably have tried hooking up with you too, back when I was trying to snag Harry or Ron." I couldn't help my surprised laugh- Romilda's extreme boldness obviously hadn't diminished in the slightest. "Don't worry," she smiled, her face open and honest, "I'm over the whole fame-whore thing now. I mean, me getting together with Ron was a complete accident- we both ended up getting pissed in the same bar, and I woke up in his bed the next morning with basically no memory of the night before," she then leaned towards me, a cheeky grin on her face, "we've barely left the bedroom since."

Another bubble of laughter escapes me, and I take a good long look at the cheerful looking young woman. She raises an eyebrow at my blunt perusal. "You into threesomes, Hermione?" she teased.

"I think you and Ron will be good for each other," I smile, and Romilda grins.

"So I get your stamp of approval?"

"Consider yourself stamped." I nod. Ron makes his way over to Romilda's side, and throws his arm around her waist.

"Hi Hermione," he greets me, before turning to face his girlfriend, "having fun, Milly?" he asks, before planting a sloppy looking kiss on her cheek.

"Oh I am!" she giggles, before spinning and planting her lips on his. Having seen enough, I make my way over to the kitchen to see if Mrs. Weasley needs any help with the dishes. I pause in the doorway, seeing the Weasley matriarch completely absorbed in whatever Rosalie's saying, both of them leaning against the kitchen counter. Rosalie is cuddling Teddy in her arms, and both women are smiling.

Feeling a smile on my own face, I step backwards, leaving the two to it. I find Alice out the back, examining the gnomes with a bemused expression on her face. "Every time I think I'm getting used to your world, something appears to knock me off kilter." She says, thoughtfully.

"Every time I think I'm getting used to this world, something appears to knock me off kilter." I
smile, leaning up against her. She wraps her arm around me, and I return the gesture, holding her in my arms.

"It actually feels like everything might be alright. That we might finally be getting our happily ever after." I tell her, and her emerald eyes glow.

"I love you, my dear heart." She says, and I bend my head down to kiss her, only to be interrupted by Rosalie blurring out the door, up to us, an expression of worry clear on her beautiful face. I feel myself pale.

"What's wrong?" I ask, urgently. My eyes sweep around, "did something happen to Teddy?" I gasp, realizing the small toddler isn't in her arms.

"Molly's holding him," Rosalie says, shaking her head, "Teddy's fine. It's Bella." I make a strangled sound, and Alice actually has to support me as my legs go shaky, barely able to support me.

"What happened?" I croak, barely able to get the words out passed the lump in my throat.

"She's pregnant. With Edward's baby." My legs turn completely to jelly, and now Alice is forced to hold up my entire weight. "She just rang me- Edward is packing, getting ready to bring them home. He wants to get the baby out of her, apparently... apparently it’s dangerous. It's growing too quickly, and he thinks it could kill her. She rang me because- well, because she wants to keep the baby. Whether it kills her or not."

My heart thuds unstably in my chest, and Alice holds me tight as my magic starts crackling around me.

She wants to keep the baby *whether it kills her or not.*
CHAPTER TEN:

Bella's POV:

I sat on the bed, my knees curled up to my chest. My heart was thudding unsteadily in my chest, and I was gripping the phone tightly in my sweating hand. I stared sightlessly out at the ocean, my breath was coming short and sharp, and my thoughts were swirling haphazardly in my head. Confusion, fear, wonder...

Edward had briefly vanished, going off to deal with the cleaners, and I'd used that time to ring Rosalie. I wasn't going to 'get rid' of my baby! A thing! Edward had called my little nudger a thing! He wanted to hurt him. My beautiful baby! Rosalie was the first person who sprang to mind, when I tried to think what to do. Rosalie would never let anyone harm my little baby boy. Never.

The shrill sound of the phone ringing caused me to jump and my heartbeat to accelerate. Edward was by my side in an instant, face still blank. He gently tugged the phone out of my hand and pressed the answer, and put it on loudspeaker.

"Bella?" It was Hermione, and in an instant I knew that she knew, that Rosalie must have told her. Her voice sounded curious, with a hint of worry, but I could hear the undertones- she was panicking, something I wouldn't have picked up on if I didn't know her so well. "Something really weird just happened- you went all fuzzy in Alice's visions. Did you run into some shifters up there, or something?"

Relieved that she hadn't revealed my plans to keep my baby with Edward who, if he knew what I was planning, would probably perform the abortion himself before I had the chance to reach someone- meaning Hermione or Rosalie- who was strong or powerful enough to prevent him from doing so.

"Something... something happened," I tell her, my voice shaking slightly, "do you think you could come get Edward and I?"
"I'll apparate straight over." Hermione promised, then the line disconnected.

"Bella... sweetheart..." Edward's face was drawn, anxious, "are you alright?"

"No," I admit, and a tear slides down my cheek. Instantly, he's pulled me into his arms, hugging me close.

"Everything's going to be fine," he promises, before he attempts to smile, the effort strained by his worry, "maybe we can even go on a second honeymoon afterwards."

"Sounds fun." My voice was dull, unenthusiastic. A loud crack made me flinch slightly, and then Hermione was here, right in front of me, and I stumbled out of Edward's grip, into her arms. "I'm sorry Edward," I told him, feeling more tears well up in my eyes and start falling, "I'm so sorry!" He looks confused for about a second before comprehension dawns on his face.

"Bella no!" he shouts, moving a second too late as Hermione twists on the spot. The horribly familiar sensation of apparation washes over me, but as I land, unsteadily, in the large, open living room of the Cullen mansion, I don't have the overwhelming need to vomit- continuous exposure to the monstrosity that is apparating has numbed my stomach- to an extent, at least.

Rosalie appears next to me, and helps guide me over to the closest couch, while Hermione stands there, white as a ghost, staring at me. "H-Hermione... please say something!" I beg her, a sob catching in my throat. She promptly proceeds to explode.

"Bella... bloody hell, you are the- the biggest danger magnet I've ever come across!" she shouts. Her hair is crackling; the bushy curls even wilder then usual. "How in Godric's name do you manage to end up in these situations? You're as bad as Harry, except you somehow manage it without a sodding prophecy! How the- oh bloody hell, Bella, don't cry!" Her tone shifts suddenly, her face twisting from anger to concern as she rushes to my side, when I start bawling- loudly.

"Stupid hormones!" I manage to blurt out, mid-sobs, and Hermione hugs me tightly.

"Please... please Bella... tell me you know what you're doing," she begs me, tears welling up in her eyes, perfect copies of my own. I grasp her wrists with my hands, pulling them to my stomach, pushing up my loose white shirt as I did so. She sucked in a breath as I placed her palms over the already evident bulge.
"I know what I'm doing, Hermione. And I need you to make sure that nobody stops me from doing this." I tell her. Hermione shakes her head.

"Bella... you're asking me to kill you." Her face is even paler then before, verging on ashen. I shake my head at her, fiercely.

"I'm not asking you to kill me- I'm asking you to save his life!" She tilts her head slightly, a small smile curling her lips, despite the misery on her face.

"'His' life? What makes you think it's a boy?" she asks. I blush, even as my mind instantly flashes to the image of the green eyed little boy.

"I just... I just know. A mother knows!" I defend myself, before sucking in a surprised breath. Hermione stiffens, and I know she caught onto the same thing I did.

"A mother knows." Hermione repeats, softly.

"I'm a mother." I let out a shaky laugh. "I'm a mother." Hermione finally moves her hands from my stomach, reaching up and stroking my hair, her expression conflicted, before standing up and pulling out her wand. I flinch backwards, my eyes widening in horror as she points it at me. She scowls, a flash of hurt in her eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous, Bella! I'm making sure no one but Rosalie can touch you while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?" I ask, my voice rising in my panic.

"To get your husband." She says, before muttering a long string of Latin under her breath, moving her wand in a complicated pattern. I feel something warm rustle my hair, and then Hermione's twisting on the spot, vanishing with a loud pop.

Rosalie flits to my side, blankets and pillows in hand. "Where's Teddy?" I ask, feeling somewhat awkward, as she props me up and tucks me in. "And the others?"

"Teddy's with Emmett at the Weasleys," Rosalie says, fussing over one of the pillows, "Alice is
there too. Carlisle, Esme, Jasper and Maggie are giving us some space. After Hermione arrived, she told them on no uncertain terms that if any of them even touched you without your permission, she'd curse off their teeth. As none of them quite felt like feeding through straws, they decided to heed her warning and back off."

Despite myself, I start to laugh. "Oh god!" I gasp, through wild giggles, "the pregnancy hormones... they're insane!" Sadness flickers over Rosalie's face.

"Yes, Vera was much the same throughout her pregnancy." She says, quietly. My face falls.

"Vera?" I asked, confused. "Who's Vera?"

"Ah," Rosalie said, softly. "I've never told you the story of how I was Turned, have I?" she asks, quietly.

"No," I say, warily, sensing that this, Rosalie's history, is not going to have a happy ending. "No, you haven't."

Rosalie gives a soft sigh. "It's not a very nice story. Then again, none of our stories are. Carlisle always made a point of Turning us when there were no other options. I lived in a different world than you do, Bella." She says, "My human world was a much simpler place. It was nineteen thirty-three. I was eighteen, and I was beautiful. My life was perfect."

She stared at her lap, her expression far away. "My parents were thoroughly middle class. My father had a stable job in a bank, something I realize now that he was smug about— he saw his prosperity as a reward for talent and hard work, rather than acknowledging the luck involved. I took it all for granted then; in my home, it was as if the Great Depression was only a troublesome rumor. Of course I saw the poor people, the ones who weren't as lucky. My father left me with the impression that they'd brought their troubles on themselves.

"It was my mother's job to keep our house— and myself and my two younger brothers— in spotless order. It was clear that I was both her first priority and her favorite. I didn't fully understand at the time, but I was always vaguely aware that my parents weren't satisfied with what they had, even if it was so much more than most. They wanted more. They had social aspirations— social climbers, I suppose you could call them. My beauty was like a gift to them. They saw so much more potential in it than I did.

"They weren't satisfied, but I was. I was thrilled to be me, to be Rosalie Hale. Pleased that men's eyes watched me everywhere I went, from the year I turned twelve. Delighted that my girlfriends sighed with envy when they touched my hair. Happy that my mother was proud of me and that my father liked to buy me pretty dresses.
"I knew what I wanted out of life, and there didn't seem to be any way that I wouldn't get exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be loved, to be adored. I wanted to have a huge, flowery wedding, where everyone in town would watch me walk down the aisle on my father's arm and think I was the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen. Admiration was like air to me, Bella. I was silly and shallow, but I was content." She smiled, amused at her own evaluation.

"My parents' influence had been such that I also wanted the material things of life. I wanted a big house with elegant furnishings that someone else would clean and a modern kitchen that someone else would cook in. As I said, shallow. Young and very shallow. And I didn't see any reason why I wouldn't get these things.

"There were a few things I wanted that were more meaningful. One thing in particular. My very closest friend was a girl named Vera. She married young, just seventeen. She married a man my parents would never have considered for me—a carpenter. A year later she had a son, a beautiful little boy with dimples and curly black hair. It was the first time I'd ever felt truly jealous of anyone else in my entire life."

She looked at me with unfathomable eyes. "It was a different time. I was only eighteen, but I was ready for it all. I yearned for my own little baby. I wanted my own house and a husband who would kiss me when he got home from work—just like Vera. Only I had a very different kind of house in mind..."

It was hard for me to imagine the world that Rosalie had known. Her story sounded more like a fairy tale than history to me. I wondered—while Rosalie sat silent for a moment—if my world seemed as baffling to him as Rosalie's did to me?

Rosalie sighed, and when she spoke again her voice was different, the wistfulness gone.

"In Rochester, there was one royal family—the Kings, ironically enough. Royce King owned the bank my father worked at, and nearly every other really profitable business in town. That's how his son, Royce King the Second," her mouth twisted around the name, it came out through her teeth, "saw me the first time. He was going to take over at the bank, and so he began overseeing the different positions. Two days later, my mother conveniently forgot to send my father's lunch to work with him. I remember being confused when she insisted that I wear my white organza and roll my hair up just to run over to the bank." Rosalie laughed without humor.

"I didn't notice Royce watching me particularly. Everyone watched me. But that night the first of the roses came. Every night of our courtship, he sent a bouquet of roses to me. My room was always overflowing with them. It got to the point that I would smell like roses when I left the house. Royce was handsome, too. He had lighter hair than I did, and pale blue eyes. He said my eyes were like violets, and then those started showing up alongside the roses.

"My parents approved—that's putting it mildly. This was everything they'd dreamed of. And Royce seemed to be everything I'd dreamed of. The fairy tale prince, come to make me a princess. Everything I wanted, yet it was still no more than I expected. We were engaged before I'd known him for two months.

"We didn't spend a great deal of time alone with each other. Royce told me he had many responsibilities at work, and, when we were together, he liked people to look at us, to see me on his arm. I liked that, too. There were lots of parties, dancing, and pretty dresses. When you were a King, every door was open for you, every red carpet rolled out to greet you.

"It wasn't a long engagement. Plans went ahead for the most lavish wedding. It was going to be everything I'd ever wanted. I was completely happy. When I called at Vera's, I no longer felt
jealous. I pictured my fair-haired children playing on the huge lawns of the Kings' estate, and I pitied her."

Rosalie broke off suddenly, clenching her teeth together. It pulled me out of her story, and I realized that the horror was not far off. There would be no happy ending. I wondered if this was why she had so much more bitterness in her than the rest of them— because she'd been within reach of everything she'd wanted when her human life was cut short.

"I was at Vera's that night," Rosalie whispered. Her face was smooth as marble, and as hard. "Her little Henry really was adorable, all smiles and dimples— he was just sitting up on his own. Vera walked me to the door as I was leaving, her baby in her arms and her husband at her side, his arm around her waist. He kissed her on the cheek when he thought I wasn't looking. That bothered me. When Royce kissed me, it wasn't quite the same— not so sweet somehow... I shoved that thought aside. Royce was my prince. Someday, I would be queen."

It was hard to tell, but it looked like her bone white face got paler.

"It was dark in the streets, the lamps already on. I hadn't realized how late it was." She continued to whisper almost inaudibly. "It was cold, too. Very cold for late April. The wedding was only a week away, and I was worrying about the weather as I hurried home— I can remember that clearly. I remember every detail about that night. I clung to it so hard... in the beginning. I thought of nothing else. And so I remember this, when so many pleasant memories have faded away completely..."

She sighed, and began whispering again. "Yes, I was worrying about the weather... I didn't want to have to move the wedding indoors... I was a few streets from my house when I heard them. A cluster of men under a broken streetlamp, laughing too loud. Drunk. I wished I'd called my father to escort me home, but the way was so short, it seemed silly. And then he called my name. 'Rose!' he yelled, and the others laughed stupidly.

"I hadn't realized the drunks were so well dressed. It was Royce and some of his friends, sons of other rich men. 'Here's my Rose!' Royce shouted, laughing with them, sounding just as stupid. 'You're late. We're cold, you've kept us waiting so long.' I'd never seen him drink before. A toast, now and then, at a party. He'd told me he didn't like champagne. I hadn't realized that he preferred something much stronger.

"He had a new friend— the friend of a friend, come up from Atlanta. 'What did I tell you, John,' Royce crowed, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer. 'Isn't she lovelier than all your Georgia peaches?' The man named John was dark-haired and suntanned. He looked me over like I was a horse he was buying. 'It's hard to tell,' he drawled slowly. 'She's all covered up.' They laughed, Royce like the rest.

"Suddenly, Royce ripped my jacket from my shoulders— it was a gift from him— popping the brass buttons off. They scattered all over the street. 'Show him what you look like, Rose!' He laughed again and then he tore my hat out of my hair. The pins wrenched my hair from the roots, and I cried out in pain. They seemed to enjoy that— the sound of my pain."

Rosalie looked at me suddenly, as if she'd forgotten I was there. I was sure my face was as white as hers. Unless it was green. "They left me in the street," she said quietly. "They left me in the street, still laughing as they stumbled away. They thought I was dead. They were teasing Royce that he would have to find a new bride. He laughed and said he'd have to learn some patience first. I waited in the road to die. It was cold, though there was so much pain that I was surprised it bothered me. It started to snow, and I wondered why I wasn't dying. I was impatient for death to come, to end the pain. It was taking so long..."
"Carlisle found me then. He'd smelled the blood, and come to investigate. I remember being
vaguely irritated as he worked over me, trying to save my life. I'd never liked Dr. Cullen or his wife
and her brother— as Edward pretended to be then. It had upset me that they were all more
beautiful than I was, especially that the men were. But they didn't mingle in society, so I'd only
seen them once or twice.” Rosalie shook her head, and blinked back venom tears that she couldn’t
shed.

"Shallow as I was, I felt better when I saw my reflection in the mirror the first time. Despite the
eyes, I was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." Rosalie said softly, and she laughed at herself
for a moment. "It took some time before I began to blame the beauty for what had happened to me
— for me to see the curse of it. To wish that I had been… well, not ugly, but normal. Like Vera. So
I could have been allowed to marry someone who loved me, and have pretty babies. That's what I'd
really wanted, all along. It still doesn't seem like too much to have asked for.”

I was crying again. "I'm so sorry that happened to you.” I told her, through the tears. “I wish- I wish
you could have had that life you wanted.” Rosalie shakes her head, somewhat fiercely.

"No, don't be sorry for me, Bella. I may not have had the life I originally dreamed of, but I have a
son, now, a beautiful, healthy, loving son. I may not have given birth to him, but he's still my baby.
My handsome little boy." A smile crosses her face as she talks about Teddy, and I can't help
smiling in return. "I didn’t teach him to call me mama," Rosalie says, suddenly. Her face is bright,
shining. "I didn't teach him, he just started saying it." She looks down at me, her eyes softer then
they usually are when looking at me. "That's why I'm going to help you protect your baby. No
woman should ever be denied the chance to have a child."

"Thank you." I say, quietly, all traces of laughter now gone.

What feels like a blanket of sadness settles over me, and I wait for Edward to arrive, preparing
myself for his anger.

He was not going to be happy, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to help it.

I was going to keep my baby.
Chapter Eleven

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Hermione's POV:

Edward was pacing angrily, and the second he saw me, he blurred over, his face a mask of fury. "What were you thinking?" He snarled, the sound feral. Anger bubbled up inside me, but I forced myself to stay calm, forced myself to think of how terrified he was, how scared he was for my sister.

"I was just doing what she wanted me to." I answered him quietly. He let out an angry roar.

"But it could kill her!"

"We don't know that." My voice was shaking slightly, and it was getting harder to hold back my anger.

"What if she dies?" He demanded, "it will be your fault! You would have killed her!" My tenuous grip on my temper snapped.

"I didn't knock her up!" I screamed at him, hands balled into fists. "Didn't you think to use contraception?"

"Why would I?" He just about snarled back. "I'm a vampire! We're not supposed to be able to reproduce!"

This is the point where I burst into tears. Edward immediately looks horrified at himself. “Hermione, I-I’m so sorry,” he gently touches my shoulders. “Please don’t cry!”
I lean into him, burying my face in his chest. He pats my back, his movements stiff, as if uncomfortable, but he doesn't push me away at all. "I'm sorry," I sniff, "I just- why her? Why Bella?"

"I don't know," Edward's voice is agonized. "All I've ever wanted is for her to be happy."

I pull back and start wiping my eyes dry with my sleeve, when Edward hands me a handkerchief. I accept it, and just sort of look at him. "You don't even need a handkerchief. Why on earth do you have one?" I asked, bemused. Edward actually smiles a little.

"Your sister asked something very similar when I first handed her one too." He said. I give a watery laugh, using the square of cotton material to dry my eyes.

"We've always been alike. Both of us falling in love with vampires being one significant similarity." Edward smiles for a moment, before his expression turns tortured.

"What do I do, Hermione?" he pleads. "It's going to hurt her- it could even kill her. I can't take that sort of risk with her life- she means everything to me. Without her my existence is empty."

"You can't force her to abort the fetus," I tell him. "You know Bella- once she makes up her mind it takes a miracle to change it."

"Well we're going to need a miracle." He says. I hold out my arm and spin, apparating us back to the Cullen mansion. Edward blurs straight over to where Bella's curled up on the couch, Rosalie by her side. "Bella," he says, reaching out to touch her cheek, only to be stopped by an invisible wall. He shoots me a look of confusion.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't sure how you were going to react." I told him, lifting the barrier spell. Edward takes another step closer, and Rosalie lets out a fierce snarl.

"I'm not going to hurt... it." Edward says, slowly. Rosalie narrows her golden eyes at him.

"One wrong move," she warns, though she retreats slowly and lets Edward cup Bella's cheek.

"Bella..." Edward's voice sounds tortured again, and Bella refuses to look him in the eye.
“I need to go get my wife,” I tell the room. “Rosalie?”

“I’ll make sure Bella and the baby are safe.” The stunning blond promises, giving Edward a narrow-eyed look.

Alice is waiting by the backyard of the Burrow, and she immediately blurs over, from where she was standing anxiously by the back door. "Hermione," she sighs in relief, wrapping her arms around me.

"Oh Alice," I whisper, slumping into her icy arms, "treasure, what are we going to do?"

- 

"Okay. This is what we're going to do." I say, with a confidence I barely felt. I was sitting down at the large mahogany table in the Cullens mansion- a table that went mostly unused except for family meetings, of which this was one of.

Alice sat on my right, and Bella on my left, with Edward taking up the chair next to hers. Rosalie had put Teddy to bed, and she and Emmett sat opposite us, next to Jasper and Maggie, while Carlisle and Esme shared a seat at the head of the table.

And then there were the more surprising guests- Fleur, Harry and Ginny, all sitting on extra seats they'd conjured up, looking just as serious as everyone else. They may not know Bella that well, but she was family. And, perhaps the strangest guest of all, Leah, looking uncomfortable but appropriately concerned about the situation.

"Harry, I need you to give Bella a medical assessment," I requested of the healer-in-training. "Carlisle, Jasper, Maggie, do you think you could reach out to other vampires you know and subtly ask if they've encountered or heard of anything like our... situation. Bella needs twenty-four hour watching, so we'll need to either work out a schedule, or just make sure there's always someone there. Fleur, Ginny, Harry, talk to everyone in the Order, any contacts you think might have any sort of relevant information. I'll tackle the Ministry archives, Leah, could you to talk to one of the elders of the tribe, go over every single legend they know to see if this comes up at all? Basically... we need information. We need to know what we're preparing for."

Everyone nodded, and moved into action. It was nearly seven o'clock now, and the sky was a dark, inky blue, the moon only a sliver.
I hated, dearly, dearly hated, what my sister planned to do, but I had to respect her choice. After all, I had no other option.

-The baby was growing quickly. Far too quickly. Nine days had passed since Bella returned from her honeymoon and already she was confined to either a couch or a bed, unable to stand. Anything she ate wasn't staying down, and Carlisle had had to insert a feeding tube to keep her nourished, and a drip to keep her hydrated.

She looked terrible, too. Her skin was pale and waxy and the dark rings under her eyes rivaled those of her husband. And speaking of Edward, he was an absolute mess. I'd seen Edward happy, proud and in love. I'd seen Edward angry, arrogant and in pain. But now... now all he looked was beyond suffering.

I'd spent sleepless nights researching, investigating... currently I was sitting on the couch opposite Bella, with Alice curled up by my side. Bella looked sicker every day, weaker and more fragile. It took all my effort to try and concentrate on the book, and more then once I found myself reading the same sentence over and over.

Nobody has spoken for over two hours, something more then common over these past few days. As I stare, sightlessly, at the page, four hundred pages in to the dusty tome, and something finally jumps out at me. "I found something," I say, actually shocked. In an instant, Rosalie, Esme, Maggie and Carlisle are all in the living room, faces urgent.

"What did you find?" Esme asks, a look of hope on her heart-shaped face.

"It's a list of different 'creatures of near human intelligence' that have bred with humans," I trace the words with my finger. "Wow, okay, there's three separate cases here where wizards have married and had children with hags. That's... that's actually really horrid."

"What about vampires?" Bella asks, her voice as weak as she looks. I scan the lists with a sinking heart, flipping through the next few pages until I find the list I'm looking for.

"There aren't many cases where witches and wizards have married a vampire, and none where they're had children." I say, softly, before pausing, "there is a footnote here- apparently there've
been several cases of muggles and vampires having children... oh sodding hell." I whisper, my blood turning to ice.

"What is it?" Edward demands. I close my eyes so I don't have to see his or Bella's expression, my hand seeking Alice's.

"None of the mothers survived." I say, quietly. As I open my eyes, the first thing I notice is Edward's tortured expression; his broken helplessness.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head back and forth angrily, desperately. "There has to be a way!" Tears, warm and salty, slide down my cheeks as I slam the old book shut, with a touch more force then necessary, and angrily swipe at my eyes with the back of my sleeve.

"There is a way! There's always a way!" I hiss, though not at him. I rake my hands through my hair and give a shaky laugh. "I helped take down Voldemort, finding a way to keep my sister alive should be a piece of bloody cake!"

"Hermione," Bella says, her face soft, "I know you'll figure something out. You're not called the brightest witch of your generation for nothing. And, even if you don't, all I need to do is keep my heart beating long enough to be Turned."

"You say that like it'll be easy!" My voice cracks, and I rise to my feet so I can cross the room and crouch next to her. "Like it's so... clear."

"Because it is. To me." Bella said, firmly. I slump, burying my face into the blanket covering my sister so no one can see my expression. Because my face is covered, I don't see the vampires in the room sudden changes in expression, but I do hear the low, fierce growl that emanates from Rosalie, and I'm on my feet as quick as I can, wand in my hand, brandished before me.

"What is it?" I demand, looking around and seeing that Jasper and Emmett have joined the rest of us in the Living Room, Emmett holding a blue-haired Teddy in his arms.

"The mutt," Rosalie growls, her eyes flashing dangerously. Bella perks up beside me.

"It's Jacob?" she asks, eagerly. My jaw tightens as Rosalie nods.
"What do we do?" Esme asks, her expression worried.

"I'll answer the door," Carlisle says, his face calm, as he strides out of the room. I hear the door open and strain my ears, listening to the conversation. "Hello Jacob," Carlisle says, calmly, "how are you?"

"I heard Bella made it back alive," I hear Jacob's low husky voice state.

"Er, Jacob, it's not really the best time." Carlisle says, "could we do this later?" I was nodding in agreement, even though I couldn't see either of them, when Bella spoke up, her voice cracked and rough.

"Why not?" she asked, "are we keeping secrets from Jacob too? What's the point?" I shot her a glare, but she ignored me, "come in, please, Jacob!" she called out.

"Excuse me," Jacob's voice was tighter now, and then he was standing there, in the entrance to the living room, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. Even though I had absolutely no interest in the male specimen whatsoever, I had to admit that he was a very attractive boy.

Jacob looked shocked, horrified, as he stood frozen in the doorway. His eyes swept across the room, before they rested on Bella, his expression slowly growing more and more horrified. As he stared, Bella's skin turned light green, and I conjured up a bucket as Bella bent over and retched noisily.

Edward fell to his knees by Bella's side, his expression tortured looking, and Bella put one of her hands on his cheek. "Sorry about that." She told Jacob. The shape-shifter walked forwards, as if in a trance, falling to his knees beside her, leaning over the back of the couch across from Edward. "Are you alright?"

What a stupid question, I glowered, even as I kept my wand carefully trained on Jacob, ready to stun him in a second if he did anything to threaten either Bella, the baby or the Cullens. "What is it Bella?" Jacob demanded, wrapping his hands around her small fragile ones. Bella didn't answer, instead she bit her lip, her gaze meeting first mine then Edward's. Finally, she turned to Edward.

"Help me up?" she asked. Edward shook his head.
"Bella-"

"Please Edward." She said, softly, and Edward stood up and put his arm carefully around Bella's shoulders.

"No," Jacob protests, "you don't have to get up!"

"I'm answering your question!" she snapped at him, as Edward pulled her gently off the couch. The blanket fell to the ground at my sister's feet, exposing her torso, ballooning out in a strange, sick way. It strained against the faded gray sweater she was wearing, and Bella folded her hands tenderly around the bulge, cradling it.

It took Jacob a long moment to figure it out, and then his face sagged in disbelief and horror. I wasn't sure what was going through his mind then, but Edward's voice suddenly snapped over to Jacob, his lips pulled back from his teeth.

"Outside, Jacob." He snarled.

"Let's do this." Jacob agreed, standing swiftly. I moved, ready to intervene, when Bella lurched forwards.

"No!" she gasped.

"I just need to talk to him, Bella," Edward said, gently, as he helped her back down onto the couch, "don't strain yourself. Please rest. We'll both be back in just a few minutes." He promised her. Bella stared at his face, reading it carefully, before nodding, and turning to Jacob.

"Behave," she insisted, "and then come back!" I watched, uneasily, as the two left the room, then the house.

"You'll tell me the second you think something's going wrong," I murmur under my breath, knowing that all the vampires could hear me, but Bella couldn't. Alice dips her head in acknowledgement, and I turn my attention back to Bella. Her face is gray and she looks even more drained then before. "It might be time for the feeding tube," I say, and her expression turns
comically horrified.

"Oh god no! I hate that thing!" I can't help but smile slightly- here she is, carrying a vampire baby that's slowly but surely sucking the life out of her, bruising her, hurting her, and yet she blanches at the thought of needles and tubes. I sit on the couch beside her, and run my fingers through her thinning hair.

"You're a strange one," I tell her.

"Pot, kettle." She retorts, quickly, before her face turns anxious again. "Can you hear what they're talking about? Outside?"

"No, they've moved out of hearing range." Emmett answers bluntly. Bella gasps and everyone turns to give Emmett a dark look. I get back to my feet.

"I'll go keep an eye on them," I tell her, and she nods, thankfully. I leave the room, then the house, and place my wand on my flat palm. "Point me," I murmur, and the slim stick of wood spins on my hand, before pointing in the direction Edward and Jacob must have gone off in.

I walk swiftly, not really worried. Edward wouldn't hurt Jacob, and he'd be able to take down the younger boy, easy. The shape-shifters were good, but they were cocky. The Cullens had decades of experience- the Pack was only good for newborns and individual vamps, where there were at least two or more shifters. Plus, I couldn't hear any snarling or howling, so I had to assume everything was going reasonably well, at least.

I cast a disillusionment charm on myself so they couldn't see, hear or smell me approach, but by the time I'd reached hearing distance, all I heard was Edward saying, "I'm very much counting on that."

"Then we have a deal." Jacob just about snarled. My eyes narrowed as Edward nodded and reached out his hand to Jacob's, and Jacob shook it, a look of disgust on his face. Bloody hypocrite.

"We have a deal." Edward agreed. I narrowed my eyes further, and twisted on the spot as they started walking back, apparating back into the living room. Bella flinched slightly in surprise, but none of the other vampires said anything.
"Was everything okay?" Bella asked, anxiously.

"Fine." I assured her, "they weren't even yelling. Probably just plotting how to get you to change your mind, even though they both know that's bloody useless." Bella gives a hoarse chuckle as Edward and Jacob walk through the door.

"We're going to let Jacob and Bella speak privately." Edward stated.

"Told you," I nodded at Bella, who smiled weakly, before turning to fix the shape-shifter with a piercing glare. "Any funny business, and you'll be spending the next week vomiting slugs." I threaten him. He nods, his face hard. I turn to Bella. "I'll cast a silencing spell so you two have privacy." I tell her. She smiles again.

"Thanks Hermione."

"The things I do for you." I sigh, before turning and leaving the room, the vampires gliding after me.

"Are you really going to put up a silencing charm?" Alice asked, a cute frown on her face.

"Depends," I say, turning to Edward, "do you want me to?"

"I'd prefer it." He says, quietly, and I nod, pointing my wand at the room.

"Muffliato!"

"Ugh," Alice complains, rubbing her ears, "I hate that spell! It's so... buzzy!"

"Buzzy?" I ask.

"Like thousands of mosquitos." She says.
I start pacing, anxious about leaving Bella unattended, and Alice flits over to my side.

"Jacob would never hurt Bella." She says, firmly. I run a hand through my hair, sighing.

"I know, I know, it's just... I want to be with her." I admit.

"I think you need a break," Alice says, gently. "You're exhausted. When was the last time you slept?"

"About thirty hours ago," I admit, before giving a half smile. "There's no rest for the wicked," I inform her.

"Good thing you're not wicked then." She retorts. "Thirty hours is a long time for a human to go without sleeping."

"Fine. If I'm going to go rest, then you need to go hunt." I tell her, gently tracing my fingertips over the dark purple rings under her eyes. "How long has it been since you fed?" Alice pouts slightly at having the tables turned on her.

"A week." She admits.

"Seven days is a long time for a vampire to go without feeding," I inform her. "Go eat some deer, or something." Alice looked reluctant, but sighed, obviously deciding that going hunting was worth it for me to get some sleep.

"Okay, my heart, it’s deal." She agreed.

"While Bella is in a stable condition, perhaps Esme and I can accompany you." Carlisle smiles at Alice.

"In that case, I'm off to bed." I sigh, before turning to Rosalie. "If Bella asks, can you tell her that I'm just upstairs? Also, if she needs me, please come get me straight away. I don't care if I'm asleep or not." Rosalie nods.
"Of course, Hermione." I then turn back to Alice, and wrap my arms around her, pressing my lips to the top of her head.

"I love you." I tell her, "be safe."

"I promise." She vows, solemnly. Leaving her, I head upstairs to her old bedroom, the one we share when we stay at the mansion. I don't bother stripping out of my clothes, instead just collapse on the bed, and finally let the tiredness I was pushing away wash over me.

I was asleep in minutes.

And I didn't wake up until I heard the howling.
I smile, somewhat shyly, at Jacob as he makes his way over to me once the others have left the room. “I wasn’t really expecting you to ever talk to me again,” I tell him, honestly, “after... you know... at the wedding.”

“I didn’t exactly come over here to talk,” Jacob admits, sitting down beside me, resting his head against my legs. My heart quickens, and I inhale- sharply.

“You can’t attack the Cullens, Jake!” I tell him, voice frantic.

“You don’t think the Pack can take them?” he actually sounds insulted, and I glare at him.

“Maybe you could, but you’re forgetting the fact that we have Hermione and all of her magical friends!” I say, putting an emphasis on the ‘we’. Jacob notices and scowls, looking away, and I sigh, moving my hands to rest over my stomach. “Let’s not fight, Jake. I really don’t want to fight.” I tell him, softly. He gives me a tired smile.

“I don’t want to fight either.” Relaxing back into the cushions, I feel a weight lift from my shoulders.

“So what’s with the private talk?” I ask, “you trying to convince me to change my mind? Because that’s not going to work, you know.”

“Oh I know,” he snorts, “dyi-risking your life for the demon spawn? That’s pure Bella.”
“I like to think I’m not that predictable.” I say, with a slight frown. He lets out a bark of laughter.

“Then you’re delusional, Bells.” I stick out my bottom lip, then squeeze my eyes closed as my baby shifts around inside me, the pain spiking. “Bella?” I hear Jacob asking, his voice worried. “Are you okay? Do you need me to get Dr. Fang?”

“I’m fine,” I manage to get out, through gritted teeth, opening my eyes again to meet Jacob’s anxious ones, “just hunger pains.” The look he gives me tells me he knows that’s absolute bullshit, but to my relief, he doesn’t press it. I try not to sigh, and instead smile at him again. “Anyway, like I said before, I’m glad you came. Even if it wasn’t originally to visit me.”

He gives me a sort of half smile. “I’m not going to lie, Bells, you look hideous.” He states, bluntly. My lips twitch.

“I know. I’m scary-looking.”

“Thing-from-the-swamp scary.” He agrees. This time I can’t hold back my laugh.

“It’s so good having you here. It feels nice to smile. I don’t know how much more drama I can stand.” He gives me a rather pointed look, and I concede to his silent point. “Okay, okay, I bring it on myself.”

“Yeah, you do.” He agrees, “What’re you thinking, Bella, honey? Seriously!” I cringe back slightly in the face of his anger.

“Did he ask you to yell at me?” I ask him, in a small voice.

“Sort of,” Jacob grumbles, “though I can’t figure why he thinks you’d listen to me. You never have before.” I sigh. “I told you-“ he starts to say, but a flare of annoyance rises inside me, and I interrupt him.

“Did you know that ‘I told you so’ has a brother, Jacob? His name is ‘Shut the hell up’.”

“Good one.” Jacob admits. I grin at him.
“I can’t take credit- I got it off a rerun of The Simpsons.”

“Missed that one.” He comments.

“It was funny.”

We don’t talk for about a minute. I’m the one who breaks the silence. “Did he really ask you to talk to me?” I ask. Jacob snorts, and nods.

“To talk some sense into you. There’s a battle that’s lost before it starts.”

“So why did you agree?” I ask, ignoring the jibe. He didn’t answer and I sigh. “It’ll work out, you know. I believe that.” I told him. His face darkens instantly.

“Is dementia one of your symptoms?” He snaps. I can’t help but laugh, even though I can see that he’s so angry his body is starting to shake.

“Maybe. I’m not saying things will work out easily, Jake. But how could I have lived through all that I’ve lived through, and not believe there’s a happy ending in sight?”

“A happy ending?” He asks, skeptically.

“Especially for you,” I tell him, my voice earnest. I want him to believe what I’m saying, believe it for the truth that it is. “You deserve a happy ending Jake, and I know you’ve got one, waiting right around the corner.”

“What the hell are you babbling about?” Jacob asks me, obviously not understanding.

“Edward told me once what it was like- your imprinting thing. He said it was like A Midsummer Night’s Dream. A fairytale. And fairytales always have happy endings. You’ll find who you’re really looking for, Jacob, and maybe then all of this will make sense.” I tell him earnestly. His face goes dark again, and an actual growl slips through his teeth.
“If you really think that imprinting could ever make sense of this *insanity*—“ he inhales sharply, shaking his head, angry and incredulous, “do you really think that just because I might imprint on some stranger it would make this right?” He jabbed a finger at my swollen stomach, and my hands instantly moved to cradle the bulge, protectively. “Tell me what the point was then, Bella?” he rages, “What was the point of me loving you? What was the point of you loving him? When you die—” his words were a snarl now, “what’s the point to all the pain? Mine, yours, his! You’ll kill him, too, not that I care about that.” I feel myself flinch, my entire being shying away from the idea of hurting Edward. Jacob ignores my horrified reaction, and keeps going.

“So what was the point of your twisted love story, in the end? If there is any sense, please show me, Bella, because I don’t see it.” I sigh.

“I don’t know yet, Jake. But I just… feel… that this is all going somewhere good, hard to see as it is right now. I guess you could call it faith.” I say, softly.

“You’re dying for nothing, Bella! Nothing!” He almost shouts. I look down pointedly at my stomach, then back up at him. I don’t have to say the words, I know he understands. I’m doing dying for nothing, I’m dying for my baby. My little nudger.

“I’m not going to die,” I tell him, through my teeth, repeating what I’d said dozens of times before. “I *will* keep my heart beating. I’m strong enough for that.”

“That’s a load of crap, Bella. You’ve been trying to keep up with the supernatural too long. No normal person can do it. You’re *not* strong enough.” He takes my face gently in his hand.

“I can do this, I can do this.” I mutter, more to myself then to him. He’s wrong- I *can* do this. I *will* keep my heart beating.

“Doesn’t look like it to me. So what’s your plan? I hope you have one.” He says, bluntly. I nod, carefully not meeting his eyes, knowing he’s not going to like what I have to say.

“Did you know Esme jumped off a cliff? When she was human, I mean.”

“So?” Jacob asks, confused.

“So, she was close enough to death that they didn’t even bother taking her to the emergency room-
they took her right to the morgue. Her heart was still beating, though, when Carlisle found her and realized she was his mate…” I see the realization light on Jacob’s face.

“You’re not planning on surviving this human,” he says, his voice dull. It was only the despondent expression on his face that kept me from saying ‘duh!’

“I’m not stupid,” I tell him, keeping my tone even, “though I guess you probably have your own opinion on that point, though.” I concede.

“Emergency vampirization.” He mumbles.

“It worked for Esme. And Emmett, and Rosalie, and even Edward. None of them were in great shape. Carlisle only changed them because it was that or death. He doesn’t end lives, he saves them.”

I watch a shadow of guilt cross Jacob’s face, but it clears pretty quickly, and he starts begging. “Listen to me, Bells. Don’t do it that way.” He paused to take a deep breath, “Don’t wait until it’s too late, Bella. Not that way. Live. Okay? Just live. Don’t do this to me. Don’t do it to him.” His voice gets harder, louder, the longer he talks. “You know what he’s going to do when you die. You’ve seen it before. You want him to go back to those Italian killers?”

I cringe back into the sofa, at the thought of Edward going to the Volturi, and shake my head adamantly. “No. Hermione will stop him.” Jacob grinds his teeth.

“Remember when I got mangled up by those newborns?” he asks, obviously fighting to keep his voice softer, “what did you tell me?” He paused, waiting for my answer, but I didn’t give him one, mostly because I wasn’t sure which part of our conversation he was referring to. When it became clear I wasn’t going to answer, he forged on anyway. “You told me to be good and listen to Carlisle. And what did I do? I listened to the vampire. For you.”

“You listened because it was the right thing to do,” I correct him, “and I also said to listen to Fleur.” Jacob rolls his eyes.

“Okay- pick either reason.”

“It’s not the right thing now,” I say, softly, gently rubbing my stomach. “I won’t kill him.”
“Oh, I hadn’t heard the great news. A bouncing baby boy, huh? Shoulda brought some blue balloons.” He says, voice harsh. I can feel myself blush.

“I don’t know he’s a boy,” I admit, sheepishly, “the ultrasound wouldn’t work. The membrane around the baby is too hard- like their skin. So he’s a little mystery. But I always see a boy in my head.”

“It’s not some pretty baby in there, Bella.” He warns.

“We’ll see.” I retort, instantly.

“You won’t!” he snarls and I groan, aloud.

“You’re very pessimistic, Jacob- Hermione won’t let me die! You saw how she and Harry fixed up Leah, I will walk away from this!” Jacob looked down and breathed deep and slow, obviously trying to get a grip on his fury. I reach out to pat his hair, trying to reassure him. “It’s going to be okay. Shh. It’s okay.” He doesn’t look up.

“No. It will not be okay.” I wipe a tear from his cheek.

“Shh,” I murmur, again.

“What’s the deal, Bella?” he asks, still staring at the carpet. “I thought the whole point was that you wanted your vampire more than anything. And now you’re just giving him up? That doesn’t make any sense. Since when are you desperate to be a mom? If you wanted that so much, why did you marry a vampire?”

“It’s not like that,” I insist, “I didn’t really care about having a baby. I didn’t even think about it. It’s not just having a baby. It’s… well… this baby.”

“It’s a killer, Bella. Look at yourself.”
“He’s not. It’s me. I’m just weak and human. But I can tough this out, Jake, I can—“

“Aw, come on!” He interrupts me—loudly. “Shut up, Bella. You can spout this crap to your bloodsuckers and your crazy ass sister, but you’re not fooling me. You know you’re not going to make it.”

I glare at him, trying not to clench my hands into fists. “I do not know that. I’m worried about it, sure.”

“Worried about it,” he repeats through his teeth. And then the worst possible thing for this situation happened. Pain lanced through my stomach and I gasped, grasping it.

“I’m fine,” I pant, seeing his stare, “it’s nothing!” I then follow his stare, and realize that my hasty movement had tugged the sweatshirt aside, revealing the purple-black skin of my stomach. I yanked the fabric back down, but I hadn’t moved quick enough, and Jacob looked like he was going to gag. “He’s strong, that’s all.” I defend my baby.

“Bella,” his voice is cracked, terrified this time. I look up to meet his frantic eyes. “Bella, don’t do this.” He pleads.

“Jake—“

“Listen to me. Don’t get your back up yet. Okay? Just listen. What if…” he hesitates, and I push forwards.

“What if what, Jacob?”

“What if this wasn’t a one-shot deal? What if it wasn’t all or nothing? What if you just listened to Carlisle like a good girl, and kept yourself alive?”

“I won’t—“ I try interrupting him, but he just talks over me.

“I’m not done yet. So you stay alive. Then you can start over. This didn’t work out. Try again.” I frown, confused.
“I don’t understand… What do you mean, try again? You can’t think Edward would let me… and what difference would it make? I’m sure any baby-“

“Yes,” he snaps, “any kid of his would be the same.” My brain was too tired to figure this out.

“What?” I asked, confused, but he didn’t say anymore, leaving me to flounder through the memory of his words, trying to decipher a meaning. It took me nearly a minute to figure it out.

“Oh. Ugh, Please, Jacob. You think I should kill my baby and replace it with some generic substitute? Artificial insemination?” I was angry now, and my hands balled up into fists. “Why would I want to have some stranger’s baby? I suppose it just doesn’t make a difference, huh? Any baby will do?” My voice is scornful now, and raised loud enough that I almost don’t hear his next words.

“I didn’t mean that,” he muttered. “Not a stranger.” I leaned forwards.

“Then what are you saying?”

“Nothing. I’m saying nothing. Same as ever.”

“Where did that come from?” I ask, shocked.

“Forget it, Bella.” He sighs. I frown, suspicious.

“Did he tell you to say that?” I demand. Jacob hesitates before answering, giving me all the confirmation I need.”

“No.”

“Try again.” I warn.
“No, really. He didn’t say anything about artificial whatever.” I felt my face soften, my anger and indignation draining, as I sank back into the pillows. Exhaustion washed over me, and I stared off to the side, not really talking to Jacob at all.

“He would do anything for me,” I murmur, “and I’m hurting him to much…” My voice trails off, and a tear rolls down my cheek.

“You don’t have to hurt him,” Jacob whispered, and I can basically hear how much it disgusted him, having to beg on Edward’s behalf. “You could make him happy, again, Bella. And I think he’s losing it. Honestly, I do.”

I didn’t say anything, due to the fact I agreed with his statement one hundred percent, and instead I moved my hand in small circles on my battered stomach while I chewed my lip. A thought strikes me, suddenly, and I frown. “Not a stranger?” I murmur, noting Jacob’s flinch, “what exactly did Edward say to you?” I demand.

“Nothing. He just thought you might listen to me.” Jacob responds too quickly.

“Not about that. About trying again.”

My eyes lock onto his, and it suddenly hits me, exactly what he’s not saying. My eyes widen almost comically. Jacob was offering to be my baby daddy donor? And Edward had suggested it?

I think my mouth fell open a little. “Wow.” It was silent as Jacob stared down at his feet, unable to meet my eyes. “He really would do anything, wouldn’t he?” I whisper, shock radiating through me.

“I told you he was going crazy. Literally, Bells.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t tell on him right away.” I muse, trying to lighten the mood. I need time to process what was just said. “Get him in trouble.” When Jacob looked up, I was smiling.

“Thought about it.” He tried to smile back at me, but it was mangled on his face.

“There isn’t much you wouldn’t do for me, either, is there?” I whisper, suddenly, feeling like the
biggest, most selfish bitch on the face of this planet. “I really don’t know why you bother. I don’t deserve either of you.”

“It makes no difference, though, does it?” he states.

“Not this time.” I sigh. “I wish I could explain it to you right so that you would understand, so that everyone would understand. I can’t hurt him”- I point to my stomach- “any more than I could pick up a gun and shoot you. I love him.”

“Why do you always have to love the wrong things, Bella?” He asks.

“I don’t think I do.” I state, softly, and I can see the impact my words have on him. He clears the lump in his throat, trying to turn his voice hard again.

“Trust me.” He says. I don’t answer- I don’t need to. He starts getting to his feet.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I’m not doing any good here.” I hold out my thin hand, pleading.

“Don’t go.” He shakes his head.

“I don’t belong here. I’ve got to get back.”

“Why did you come today?” I plead, still trying to reach for his hand.

“Just to see if you were really alive. I didn’t believe you were sick like Charlie said.” I winced slightly, remembering the phone-call I’d made to my father.

“Will you come back again? Before…” I let my voice trail off.
“I’m not going to hang around and watch you die, Bella.” He says, voice harsh. I flinched at his words.

“You’re right, you’re right. You should go.” He heads for the door, not looking back. “Bye,” I whisper after him. “Love you, Jake.” I think he almost turned around, I really do, but he didn’t. He just kept walking away, out of the room. Edward was at my side almost the second Jacob left the room, and I rested my head against his shoulders, letting my tears soak into his shirt. Rosalie is a few feet behind him.

“Shh,” he murmured, rubbing his hand in small circles on my back. “Shh.”

“Wh-where’s Hermione?” I ask, after my tears dry.

“Sleeping. Alice is out hunting.” He explains, “Carlisle and Esme went with her.”

“Good,” I mumble, face still buried in his shoulder, “she needs to sleep and the others need to feed. You do to.”

“I’m not leaving you, Bella.” He says, firmly. I tighten my grip around his shoulders the best I can.

“Promise?” I whisper.

“Promise.” He says, firmly, pressing his lips against the top of my head.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

Hermione's POV:

I was asleep in minutes.
And I didn't wake up until I heard the howling.

I blinked, groggy from sleep, even as I groped under my pillow for my wand. "Wazzhappenin’?" I mumble, sliding off the bed and dragging myself out of the room. The howling is growing louder, and there's a certain edge of panic to it that fully wakes me up. I don't bother running downstairs, instead I apparate to the front parlor.

The front door's wide open and I can see Edward standing on the porch, flanked on either side by Emmett and Jasper, with Maggie a step behind her mate, her eyes sharp and flitting from side to side. "What's happening?" I demand, wand out. A second later, two wolves burst through the trees and onto the lawn, answering my question. I'm about to curse them, when I recognize who they are- Jacob and Seth.

"What's going on?" I repeat. Edward locks eyes with the russet wolf and snarls flatly.

"They want to kill Bella?"

Only two words really stood out:

Kill.

Bella.

Time slowed. Adrenaline rushed into my blood and I could almost feel my veins swelling to twice
their normal size. My body hummed with new energy and my heart's beat picked up its tempo as it pumped my chemical-filled blood throughout my body, loosening my muscles and warming me, preparing me.

Every movement was more graceful and more lethal, ruled by my battle-honed instincts. I was instantly moving forwards to stun the wolves, both of whom were taking hasty steps back. Jasper and Emmett, suddenly by my side, were baring their teeth and moving towards the wolves, and Maggie shifting so she was guarding the doorway, a long, unending snarl echoing from her throat.

"Guys- not them! The others. The pack is coming." Edward speaks up, his voice hard, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Emmett and Jasper rock back on their heels, but I don't lower my wand, keeping it firmly pointed at the larger of the two wolves- Jacob. "What's their problem?" Emmett demands.

"The same one as mine," Edward hisses. "But they have their own plan to handle it. Get the others. Call Carlisle! He, Esme and Alice have to get back here now."

A strangled gasp escapes my lips and I stagger slightly, at the same time as Jacob lets out an uneasy whine. "Alice!" I choke, my blood turning to ice as I remember just what Alice is doing, what I told her to do. She's hunting. Miles and miles away from here, away from protection. And there's a Pack of shape-shifting wolves who want to kill the Cullens and, by extension, her.

"They aren't far," Jasper assures me, quietly, sensing my panic. Emmett pulls out his phone, dialing quickly, and I take a few deep breaths to try and steady myself.

"Will you be in danger, Seth?" Edward asks the sandy-colored wolf, responding to something the younger boy thought. The wolves glance at each other before shaking their massive heads from side to side.

"Wait, what's he doing?" I ask. Edward gives me a glance that only lasts for a split second, but I can see the desperation and fear in his eyes- if I looked in the mirror, I knew I'd see the same look in my own.

"He's going to run the western perimeter." Edward explains.
"No," I say, shaking my head. I pull together the best plan I can, and back up the steps. "Everyone needs to get back in the house."

"What are you going to do?" Jasper asks, stepping backwards hastily, back far enough that he's standing in the doorway, next to his mate.

"I'm going to set up wards," I explain, "Heavy duty ones. You all need to be in a close perimeter, I can only make them cover so much land." Edward and Jasper exchange a glance, and then Edward nods.

"Everyone do as she says."

I turn to face the wolves. "You two need to come in too." I tell them. They exchange an uneasy glance but do as I say, hesitantly loping up the steps, onto the porch. Emmett and Jasper back away from them, noses wrinkling, obviously not comfortable with the close proximity. The wolves look equally as discomforted.

"They want to know if this is good enough." Edward speaks for them.

"Should be fine," I mumble. I could feel the eyes on me as I drew myself up to my full height. Taking a deep breath, I raised my wand and began to trace a complicated pattern in the air.

For nearly five minutes, I waved my wand and muttered a long string of Latin. I could feel the sweat on the nape of my neck, could feel the drops running down the side of my face and jawline, dripping off my chin. I knew that if I looked in a mirror, my hair would be frizzed up and standing out from my head, the bushy curls crackling almost from the magic use.

When I finally lowered my wand, I swayed, unsteadily, on my feet, and Edward had to catch me. "Is it done?" he asked, urgently. I nod, fighting against the darkness clouding over in the corners of my eyes as I sagged into his arms.

"It's up. None of the wolves can get through." I then turn slightly and give Jacob and Seth an apologetic look. "And I'm sorry, but you two can't get out." Seth gives a startled yelp, and Jacob growls. The brief flash of anger at his response gives me the strength to stand up straighter, and glower at the larger, russet colored wolf. "I can't work a sodding miracle, here!" I growl. "I barely managed this as it bloody is! I'm not a wards expert- what I learned, I learned on the run!"
"What about Alice and the others?" Jasper asked, "will they be able to get in?"

"Yes, of course- the ward keeps out shifters, not vampires." I assure him. As Jasper and Emmett disappear inside the house, I half-walk, half-stagger over to where Seth is sitting. He gives a soft wuff and licks my hand as I use his massive bulk to support myself.

I inhale, a shallow, shaky breath, and lean my head back against the wall. Please, I thought, incoherently, without any clear idea to whom I was praying to, begging to. Please...

I was aware of a physical throb, of every beat of my heart, every heavy, panting breath Seth gave. My clothing felt heavy, constricting, and without really realizing what I was doing, I was undoing the buttons of my jumper, tearing it off and throwing it away as feelings of desperation strangled me.

"I can't lose her," I said, aloud, my voice rising, gaining a note of hysteria. "I can't lose her too!" Seth whines and rubs his head against me, and I fall to a slump on the ground, hugging my knees to my chest. My wand, released from my tight grip, rolls a few feet away, but I ignore it.

I can hear Edward's voice over the roaring of blood in my ears, hear him thanking Jacob, but I barely register it. And then Rosalie's there, cradling a sleeping Teddy protectively in her arms, Emmett looming by her side. "Edward, what's happening?" she demanded, "what exactly is going on?"

Edward speaks in clipped, emotionless sentences. "The Pack thinks Bella's become a problem. They foresee potential danger from the... from what she's carrying. They feel it's their duty to remove that danger. Jacob and Seth disbanded from the Pack to warn us. The rest were planning to attack tonight, but Hermione set up a magical barrier of sorts to stop them getting through."

Rosalie lets out a vicious sounding hiss, holding Teddy closer to her. "What about the others?" she then voices the exact question I wish she wouldn't, "are they safe?" Edward pauses, glancing down at me, before answering carefully.

"They have Alice with them. They'll be fine."

"They're ten minutes away, tops." Emmett adds.
"Ten minutes?!" My voice is rising, the tone hysterical again, "do you have any idea how much can happen in ten minutes?! Their lives are in danger! Her life is in danger! She c-could be-" I can't finish my sentence, instead shudder. Rosalie gives me a sympathetic look, which I ignore. In an effort to distract myself, I latch onto another thought swimming around in my mind. "Where's Leah?" I ask, "did she... did she not d-disband?" I can't help the strong feeling of betrayal at the thought. That one of my best friends would side with the people who wanted to kill my sister was...

Seth gives a sharp bark, his massive head moving from side to side. "She doesn't know," Edward answers for him, giving a voice to what the young teen is thinking, "it's her night off. She has no idea what's going on." I can't help but feel relieved, though that relief is short lived.

"Dear Godric, Alice, where are you?" I whisper. Seth rubs his head against me, and I grab a handful of his fur, holding it tight. I don't realize I'm crying until Seth licks away the tears with his slimy tongue. I manage a choking laugh, raising a hand to wipe away the slimy saliva left behind. "That's gross," I hiccup, and he gives me a wolfy smile, his long, pink tongue lolling out the corner of his mouth, exposing sharp, white canines.

And then I hear the sweetest sound I've ever heard in my life. "Hermione!"

"Alice!" I just about shriek, using Seth to hoist myself to his feet, ignoring the slight disgruntled sound he makes, and stagger in the direction the voice came from. As the slim, dainty figure of my soul mate passes through the trees, through the wards, for a second they light up, revealing the shimmering dome of light protecting the house. Those on the porch seem entranced by the phenomena, but I've just got eyes for Alice.

I'm halfway down the steps when cold arms wrap around me, and I bury my face in silky black hair. I'm shaking; shaking and crying. "Oh Alice, my Alice, my dear, sweet treasure," I chant, and she makes soothing noises.

"I'm here, it's alright, I'm here," she repeats, over and over.

"I thought I might lose you." I choke.

"Never." She vows. I step back, running my eyes up and down her body, making sure she's uninjured, all in one piece. She raises a dark, slim eyebrow. "I didn't think now was exactly the best time, but I'm up for it if you are." She jokes playfully, in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood. I'm grateful, and I give a half laugh, half groan.
"You're insatiable, sweetheart."

"Completely and utterly so," she agrees, before wrinkling her nose. "But you definitely have to wash before I sleep with you. You reek of wet dog. What have you been doing, rubbing against one?"

"Seth is cuddly," I defend myself. Alice gives a weak giggle, reaching up and running her dainty hands through my hair. I lean forwards, letting my forehead rest against hers. "I never want to feel like that again." I whisper.

"And I'll do everything in my power to prevent it." She vows.

"Have I mentioned how happy I am you're safe?" I ask. She lets out another small, weak giggle.

"Only once or twice." A cold, wet nose nudges my cheek, and I look behind my shoulder to see Seth. He lets out a wuff-ing sound, jerking his head towards the front door. I notice that all the others are inside, bar Jacob who's pacing up and down the porch.

"You want to go inside?" I ask him, even as Alice wrinkles her nose. He dips his head up and down. "Do you have anything to change into?" is my next question, and he shakes his head. "We'll find something for you," I decide, before reaching out and grasping Alice's hand, intertwining our fingers. "Let's go inside. We're all safe now." I smile, relieved. She smiles back, a radiant smile, her green eyes sparkling like jewels.

"I'm so relieved, I'm not even going to complain about the wet dog smell." She laughs breathlessly.

Alice leads the way up to her room, only pausing to grab some of Edward's clothes for Seth to change into. We give him the privacy to phase back and change, then I help transfigure the clothes so they fit him right.

Seth wrinkles his nose and winces occasionally, the scent of vampires obviously affecting him more than his scent affected them. He keeps rocking back and forth on his heels, and I can see how visibly anxious he is. Wanting to comfort him however I can, I cast a Bubble-head Charm so he could breathe without inhaling the scent, which Leah described as burningly sweet.
"What's this?" he asked, bemused. He reached up to poke the bubble around his head and I couldn't help but smile at his child-like curiosity and wonder.

"Thought you'd appreciate some fresh air." I answer.

"Thanks," he says, giving me a quick smile, before resuming his anxious bouncing.

Despite my half-asleep state, I join Alice and we make our way down to the dining room, Seth trailing a few steps behind us. The Cullens, bar a sleeping Bella who still doesn't know what's going on- and I do not want to be the person who has to tell her in the morning- are all seated around the large mahogany table, and I join them, Alice sliding onto my lap so Seth can take her normal seat. He gives her a grateful look and she smiles back at him.

Carlisle speaks first. "We'd like to thank you, Jacob, Seth, for you have done us a great service tonight." He says in his calm, steady voice, "and at great personal sacrifice."

"I don't mean to barge in," this is Rosalie, her perfect face narrowed in a mixture of anger and anxiety, "but what the hell happened? What caused this?" Jacob shifts uneasily, and all our gazes snap round to meet his. He sighs, and hangs his head.

"It's my fault. I phased after... speaking to Bella. Sam and the Pack saw my thoughts, saw my memories of... it. They panicked, decided that the best thing to do was kill it. And Bella, well, she was the price they had to pay to rid the world of the monster growing inside her."

"The Greater Good," I muttered, sourly, at the same time as Rosalie snarls at the shifter.

"He's not a monster!" She growled. Jacob shoots her a dark look, but doesn't bother arguing back- he seems too shaken up. As Alice's fingers play with my hair a thought strikes me, and I swear.

"Sweet mother of Merlin, I'm such an idiot!" I curse, being careful to keep my voice low enough that it won't wake up Bella. "I'm such a bloody idiot!"
"Hermione, what are you talking about?" Alice asks, face concerned.

"Why didn't I put up shields in his mind? Why?" I demand, of no one, before letting my head fall forwards, my forehead hitting the hard wood of the table. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Hermione, no one thought this was a possibility." Esme says, in her kind, gentle voice. "It's not your fault, dear." I moan, lifting my head back up.

"Mad-Eye would kill me. Constant Vigilance. Where was my constant vigilance?"

"Baby, this isn't a War," Alice says, sharply, twisting around on my lap so she's looking straight into my eyes. "Repeat after me, this is not my fault. Say it, or I won't sleep with you for a week." I can't help my embarrassed blush and I glare at her as Emmett chortles.

"Thank you, Alice."

"You're welcome," she says, sweetly, "now say it."

"This is not my fault."

"Again."

"This is not my fault."

"That's right." She says, turning back around, a pleased grin on her face. I sigh and rest my chin on her shoulder. I won't admit it out loud, but I do feel slightly better.

"Hermione, can you tell us about the magical defense you put up around the house?" Carlisle asks.

"The wards. They're... protection." I try to find the words to explain. "Really strong magic, with a really specific purpose. They're not so different from the Unforgiveable curses, in a way."
"Aren't those, well, Unforgiveable? As in, illegal and Dark and dangerous?" Seth pipes up.

"Someone's been eavesdropping on my conversations with Leah." I remark, and he blushes slightly.

"That's not an answer, that's a deflection." Maggie states shrewdly, "Are these wards Dark magic?" I shake my head.

"When I said they were like the Unforgivables, I didn't mean it like that. I meant it like both require the caster to mean the spells. To create truly effective wards, you must want, deeply, to keep whatever, or whomever, it is you're warding safe. Just as you must truly want to control in order to cast an effective Imperius. How you really want to cause pain, in order to cast an effective Crucius," I look down at the table as a lump forms in my throat and I have to swallow around the sudden constriction, "just as you have to mean it, to want to kill with Avada Kedavra."

There's a short silence which Jasper breaks. "How long will the wards stay up?" he asks, ever the strategist.

"Before I have to reapply them? Around twenty-four hours. Wards are not my specialty." I admit, "Like I told Jacob, what I learned about wards I learned on the run, to protect Harry, Ron and I. Tomorrow I can call in Bill and Fleur. They're curse-breakers at Gringotts, top of their fields—basically, they specialize in breaking centuries old wards guarding ancient treasures. And to know how to destroy wards, you need to know how to create them."

"So they can make some kick-ass wards." Emmett summarizes.

"Basically, yes."

"Aren't we overlooking another solution, here?" Maggie pipes up. "Why doesn't Hermione just apparate Bella away from here, to somewhere safer until she can give birth?"

"Because all of Carlisle's medical equipment, the things we're going to need, are all here." Rosalie states.

"And Bella's in no condition to be moved anywhere." I add. "Car travel would be bad enough, but magical transport? I don't even know what the hell that would do. Once you pass the four month stage you're not supposed to even use the Floo, let alone Portkey or apparation."
"So we're staying here and Hermione's calling in the reinforcements tomorrow." Jacob summarizes. He turns to me, frowning. "Will Seth and I be able to pass through the new wards?"

"Most definitely." I assure him. “I didn’t mean to trap you, I swear it.”

There’s a long silence, which eventually Seth breaks.

"Can I borrow a phone?” he asks, hesitantly. “I want to ring my sister."

"My phone's upstairs in Alice's room," I tell him, as Alice stands then holds out a hand to pull me to my feet, "there’s nothing else we can do, so we may as well retire until the morning. Seth, just follow us.”

"Okay." He says, loping after us as I lean against Alice, letting her lead the way to her room.

Once in the room, I locate my phone where I left it earlier today, and toss it to Seth, before flopping down heavily on the bed. I go to pull my wand out of my sleeve, only to find it's not there. "Damn," I sigh, starting to push myself back up.

"What is it?” Alice asks, flitting to my side, expression anxious.

"My wand's downstairs on your porch." I tell her, a bit embarrassed. "I dropped it when I was... panicking."

"I'll get it," she assures me, before disappearing in a blur of white and black. Seth flops down on the bed next to me, dialing Leah's number on the phone. He puts it on loudspeaker, and it rings almost seven times before Leah picks up.

"This better be good, Glinda," she just about growls into the speaker, "I was having the best dream ever. It involved my own personal harem of hot guys, baby oil, abs that you could grate cheese on, and the biggest di-"
"Leah, it's Seth," Seth interrupts her, at the same time as I let out a snort of laughter. "There's kind of a... situation."

"Fuck," Leah groans, "okay, okay, I'm awake. What is it? Why are you calling on Hermione's phone, Seth?"

"The Pack decided to kill Bella." Seth states, bluntly. Leah lets out a low whistle.

"Double fuck. They find out about the baby bloodsucker?"

"You knew?" Seth asks, indignantly.

"I've known since Hermione did," Leah told him, "but I could hardly tell you, what with the whole Pack mental-link and all." Seth pouts, even though Leah can't see it.

"So, what happened? Is everyone alive and in one piece?" Leah asks, her voice anxious now.

"Jacob and I disbanded from the Pack," Seth says, again without the sugarcoating, "we beat the Pack to the Cullens and warned them and Hermione put up these ward things which are trapping the rest of the pack out."

"Triple fuck." Leah groans, "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Actually, you can't." I speak up, my tone apologetic. "You won't be able to pass through the wards. Tomorrow I'm calling in Bill and Fleur to set up some better ones, but for tonight you're stuck at La Push."

"Quadruple fuck." Leah swears, and I hear the sound of something crashing.

"Did you just smash the window?" Seth asks.

"No, the mirror." Leah says, grumpily. "Can you apparate me in, Hermione?"
"Again, sorry, but I can't. The wards will stop me." I apologize. There's a short pause.

"You're thesmarty-pants, what comes after quadruple?" she then asks.

"Quintuple. But don't even think about saying quintuple fuck. That lost its charm at 'triple'."

"Fine. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. That better?"

"No, it's vulgar." Alice says, distastefully.

"Crap," I jolt, spinning around to face my soul mate, who's leaning against the edge of the bed. "How long have you been there?"

"Since double fuck. You're extremely unobservant sometimes."

"Give me a break, I'm tired."

"Well, if you promise you're all safe, then that makes two of us," Leah says, "the minute you can get me, do. I'm going back to sleep."

"We're all safe, Lee." Seth promises.

"Good." Leah says, before hanging up.

"She's not a woman of many words." I observe, before biting back a yawn. "Shove over a bit, Seth." I order, and he scoots to the side, so there's enough room for Alice to curl up next to me on the soft mattress. "Wake me if anything happens, sweetheart." I tell her.

"I promise." She vows, and I pull the blankets up over us all.
"Night guys." I mumble. I think they say goodnight back, but pretty much the moment my head hits the pillow, I'm out of it, eagerly succumbing to the blissful darkness I've been longing for, ever since casting the warding spell.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

Bella’s POV:

As I drifted slowly from unconsciousness to consciousness, I stirred weakly on the bed I was curled up in. On either side of me, there were rails, flashing monitors and an IV strapped to my arm, pumping a white-ish liquid into my body. Around me, the furniture of the living room had all been dragged out of the way.

That wasn’t what confused me, though. I was weakening by the hour, and a little while after Jacob’s visit, Carlisle had had to resort to trying to feed me intravenously, the feeding tube no longer working, though I had a feeling this wasn’t doing much better.

No, what confused me was that where there had once been a glass wall, was what looked like metal. I blinked a few times, unsure of what I was seeing. “Edward?” I croaked, and in a second he was beside me, looking as exhausted as I felt, despite my hours of, admittedly restless, sleep.

“Yes, my love?” he asked, quietly. I tried to reach a hand up to gesture to the wall, but my body didn’t want to listen to me.

“Wh-what happened to the wall?” I croaked. He blinked, slowly, turning his head down so he didn’t have to look me in the eye. My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Edward!” I gasped, panic flaring through me, “what happened?”

“The Pack decided it was their duty to eradicate… it.” He says finally, reluctantly. I let out a choked cry, my weak hands fluttering to rest on my stomach, as if I could somehow protect my baby. I was so panicked, I didn’t even object to Edward using the term ‘it’.

“Is everyone safe?” I asked, “Is J-Jacob…?”
“Jacob’s fine. In fact,” Edward sighs, lifting his head up so his gaze meets mine again, “in fact he was the one who warned us. He broke off from the Pack, along with Seth, and I’m assuming Leah will follow.” I swallow back the bile threatening to rise in my throat.

“Was there a fight?” I whispered, before cringing back, afraid of the answer. To my relief, Edward shook his head.

“Hermione set up wards so the wolves couldn’t get through.” He explains, quietly. “Jacob’s annoyed, though, because the wards mean he can’t get out. She’s going to ask some of her friends who specialize in wards to come over and set up more specific ones, once she wakes up.”

I only hear half of what he says, most of my attention clinging to the part of his sentence that stood out. “Jacob can’t get out? You mean he’s in here?” I ask, eagerly. Edward nods, slowly, his dark eyes sliding down so they aren’t meeting mine again.

“Would you like him to come in? He’s just talking to Carlisle.” Edward explains, before suddenly his whole body stiffens, his eyes widening as he spins around so he’s facing the closed doors leading out of the giant living space, the doors behind which I assumed Jacob and Carlisle stood.

“What is it?” I ask, voice hoarse as ever, before coughing, trying to clear my throat.

“I’ll be right back, Bella,” Edward says, “I want to speak with Carlisle for a moment.” Edward says, before calling out in a slightly louder voice. “Rosalie, I think you should be here for this too.” Rosalie appears in a few seconds, entering from the doorway leading off to the dining room, her golden eyes suspicious.

“What is it, Edward?” I ask, eyeing him with no small amount of confusion. There was something suddenly different about him. The dead voice he’d been speaking in seemed… changed. Like there was a spark of something in it. Not hope, exactly, but maybe the desire to hope.

“Nothing you need to worry about, my love. It will just take a second,” he assures me.

“Esme,” Rosalie said, quietly, “can you mind Bella for a moment.” There was a whisper of wind as Esme flittered into the room, opening the doorway to reveal Jacob and Carlisle, whom she glided past.
Jacob looked tired and uncomfortable, with the same look of despair on his face that was on Edward’s. Guilt threatened to strange me, and I had to close my eyes and look away. I heard the door close, but I didn’t see it.

They took several minutes before entering the room, and I forced myself to open my eyes, pushing aside the exhaustion that was starting to creep through me again. It never seemed to go away, the heaviness, no matter how long I slept. Jacob’s face looked a mixture of horrified and disgusted, whereas the vampires, Edward, Rosalie and Carlisle, all looked… hopeful.

It was an odd, expression, really. Not one I’d seen for a while. “What’s going on?” I demand, my voice a scratchy whisper.

“Jacob had an idea that might help you,” Carlisle said, and I ignored the way Jacob twitched slightly and scowled, looking the exact opposite of pleased that his name had been brought up, “it won’t be pleasant,” he continued, “but-”

“But it will help the baby,” Rosalie interrupted, eagerly, her perfect face all lit up with excitement. “We’ve thought of a better way to feed him. Maybe.”

I couldn’t help coughing out a weak chuckle. “Not pleasant? Gosh, that’ll be such a change.” Rosalie smiled with me, her expression warm. Edward stepped around his sister, no humor touching his intense expression. He took my hand, the one not protecting my swollen stomach.

“Bella, love, we’re going to ask you to do something monstrous. Repulsive.” I took a shallow, fluttery breath.

“How bad?” It was Carlisle who answered.

“We think the fetus might have an appetite closer to ours than to yours. We thing it’s thirsty.” I blinked, surprised.

“Oh. Oh.”

“Your condition- both of your conditions- are deteriorating rapidly. We don’t have time to waste, to
come up with more palatable ways to do this. The fastest way to test the theory—“

“I’ve got to drink it,” I interrupt, before eyeing them all hopefully, “is that all?” They really thought this would horrify me? I wondered—why would it? “So who’s going to catch me a grizzly bear?” I ask. Carlisle and Edward exchanged a quick glance and I frowned. “What?”

“It will be a more effective test if we don’t cut corners, Bella,” Carlisle states.

“If the fetus is craving blood, it’s not craving animal blood.” Edward adds, his voice gentle.

“It won’t make a different to you, Bella. Don’t think about it.” Rosalie encourages, even as my eyes widen.

“Who?” I ask, confused, unable to help my eyes flickering over to Jacob.

“I’m not here as a donor, Bells,” Jacob grumbles, a put-out expression on his face, “sides, it’s human blood that thing’s after, and I don’t think mine applies—“

“We have blood on hand,” Rosalie speaks over him, and I turn my attention back to her, “for you—just in case. Don’t worry about anything at all. It’s going to be fine. I have a good feeling about this, Bella. I think the baby will be so much better.”

“Where’s Hermione?” I ask. She should be here for this. She’d been here for me every step of the way—barring conception of course—but I couldn’t see her anywhere.

“Sleeping,” Carlisle explains, “she was… tired after casting the protective spells. She and Seth are sleeping up in Alice’s room.”

“Seth’s sleeping in Alice's room?” I ask, confused, before discarding it—Hermione was fond of Seth. I think he reminded her of before-the-war Ron, in a way, with his appetite and eagerness. “Well,” I said, running a hand across my stomach, “I’m starving, so I’ll bet he is too. Let’s go for it. My first vampire act.”

Carlisle and Rosalie are gone in a flash, but Edward stays, holding my hand, his face blank again.
Dead. Our eyes met, and I could see the pleading, the hope he didn’t dare to feel, and I squeezed his hand the best I could, an admittedly pathetic effort.

Rosalie darted downstairs after a second, flying through the room like a sharp breeze, and into the kitchen. “Not clear, Rosalie.” Edward murmurs, rolling his eyes. I look up at him, confused, but he just shook his head, and I decided to let it go.

I turn to Jacob, my lips curling into a weak smile.

“This was your idea?”

“Don’t blame me for this one. Your vampire was just picking snide comments out of my head.” He says, obviously trying to sound gruff, but failing- I could hear the hope in his voice too, clear as day.

I smiled a little. “I didn’t really expect to see you again.”

“Yeah, me either.” He mutters.

“Edward told me what you had to do. I’m sorry.” I tell him, honestly.

“S’okay. It was probably only a matter of time till I snapped over something Sam wanted me to do.” He lies. I don't call him on it.

“And Seth and Leah,” I sigh.

“Seth’s actually happy to help. And Leah is besties with your crazy ass sister, it probably hasn’t even crossed her mind not to help. Not that she’s actually disbanded yet. It was her night off when it all… happened, so she didn’t know about anything until after it had all happened. I think Hermione and Seth rang her last night.”

“Oh.” I say, before grimacing. “I hate causing you trouble.” He laughs once, a bitter sound, more of a bark then anything, and I sigh. “I guess that’s nothing new, is it?”

“No, not really.”
“You don’t have to stay and watch this,” I tell him, quietly, knowing how much this is horrifying him. Stupid prejudice, after all, I knew for a fact that he ate animals while in wolf form- what difference was it that the Cullens just drank the blood? Honestly, it was ridiculous.

“I don’t really have anywhere else to go,” he asks, voice carefully blank, “not since your sister trapped me in the house.” I open my mouth to respond when Rosalie and Carlisle are suddenly back, Carlisle with a white plastic cup in his hand, the kind with a lid and a bendy straw.

Right- not clear. Looking at it, I had absolutely no clue what was inside. Probably for the better. Carlisle paused, the hand with the cup halfway extended. “We could try another method,” he says quietly, and I bit back a groan.

“Guys, please stop tip-toing around this. It’s just blood! Can everyone please stop making such a big deal out of this? I mean, how awful can it be?” With that, I reached out with shaky arms to take the cup from him and attempted to prop myself up on one elbow, but I could barely move my head.

Rosalie put her arm around my shoulders, supporting my head too, and I smiled at her, weakly. “Thanks.” I whispered, before my eyes flickering past her, at the barely veiled disgust on Jacob’s face.

“Don’t mind them,” Rosalie murmured, and I nodded the best I could, before lifting the cup up. Unable to help myself, I sniffed at the end of the straw then flinched in surprise, my face twisting slightly.

“Bella, sweetheart, we can find an easier way,” Edward says instantly, stepping forwards as if to take the cup, but I shake my head.

“Plug your nose,” Rosalie suggests.

“No, that’s not it,” I tell them, before toying with idea of mentioning the next bit, the true reason for my surprise. “It’s just that… it smells good.” Because it did. It smelt absolutely mouthwatering, and almost without my say so, my hand was moving the cup to my lips, and my mouth was latched around the straw.

“That’s a good thing,” Rosalie was saying eagerly, “that means we’re on the right track. Give it a try.” But I hardly heard her, because I was sucking on the straw as hard as I could, and suddenly
my mouth was full of the most amazing taste of my life. I couldn’t help my soft moan of delight, and both Edward and Jacob stepped forwards, mistaking the sound for either horror or disgust.

“Bella, love—” Edward starts to say, but I shake my head.

“I’m okay.” I tell him, quietly, “It… it tastes good, too. Like, really, really good.” Jacob’s expression is horrified, and I look away from him carefully, over to Rosalie who’s face is shining.

“That’s good,” the goddess-like being beamed at me, “a good sign!” Edward pressed his hand to my cheek, and I put the straw to my lips again, drinking the blood eagerly, enjoying the taste in my mouth, the warmth as it slid down my throat, and tingled through my body.

“How’s your stomach?” Carlisle asked, “Do you feel nauseated?” I shake my head, pulling back for a second.

“No, I don’t feel sick. I feel great! That’s a first, eh?” I can’t help a slight laugh. Already I feel different, feel stronger, like with each mouthful, energy is creeping through my body, reanimating my weak, almost lifeless limbs. Inside my stomach, I can feel my baby stirring, moving, and I shiver in delight. When I finish, I can’t help my satisfied sigh. “I did it.” I say, pleased, before tilting my head so I’m looking at Carlisle. “If I keep this down, will you take out the needles?” I ask, hopefully.

“As soon as possible,” he promises, “honestly, they aren’t doing much good where they are.” Rosalie strokes my forehead, and we exchange a hopeful glance. This one little cup of blood had made such a difference already- the all-consuming heaviness, the unshakeable tiredness and exhaustion… it was still there, but the strength, the life in my limbs, was stronger. I didn’t need Rosalie’s support as much anymore, and my breathing was easier.

The ghost of hope in Edward’s eyes had turned to the real thing. “Would you like some more?” Rosalie asked, and I slumped slightly, the euphoria washing away as Jacob’s face twisted further, despite how hard he was trying to hide it.

“You don’t have to drink more right away,” Edward was immediately saying, but I shook my head.

“Yeah, I know. But… I want to.” I admit. Rosalie combs her fingers through my hair, her expression gentle.
“You don’t need to be embarrassed about that, Bella. Your body has cravings. We all understand that.” Her gentle tone suddenly turns harsh as she adds, “anyone who doesn’t understand shouldn’t be here.”

I turned to the intended recipient of Rosalie’s anger, as Carlisle took the cup from my hand and promised to be right back. I examined him carefully, taking note of the slump of his shoulders, and rings under his eyes. “Jake, you look awful.” I state.

“Look who’s talking.” He snorts.

“Seriously- when’s the last time you slept?” I asked. He pauses, a slightly guilty expression on his face.

“Huh. I’m not actually sure.” I groaned.

“Aw, Jake. Now I’m messing with your health, too. Don’t be stupid.” He grits his teeth, but I continue on, ignoring his anger, “get some rest, please, there’s a few beds upstairs, you’re welcome to any of them.”

Jacob pulls a face. “Thanks, Bells, but I’d rather sleep on the ground. Away from the stench, you know.”

“Get Hermione to use a bubble-head charm on you,” I tell him, “endless supply of fresh air.” I add, seeing his bemused expression.

“Sabrina’s still sleeping.” He informs me. I snort.

“Sabrina the Teenage Witch. Good one. Original.” He shrugs.

“I’m tired. Sue me.”

Carlisle re-emerged from the kitchen with the next cup, which I eagerly sculled down. “How do you feel?” he asked, once I’d finished.
“Not sick. Sort of hungry… only I’m not sure if I’m hungry or thirsty.” I muse.

“Carlisle, just look at her,” Rosalie smiled, “this is obviously what her body wants. She should drink more.”

“She’s still human, Rosalie,” Carlisle disagrees, “she needs food too. Let’s give her a little while to see how this affects her, and then maybe we can try some food again. Does anything sound particularly good to you, Bella?” he asks. I can’t help my smile, as I turn to face Edward.

“Eggs.” I say, immediately, and for the first time in a long, long time, Edward actually smiles back at me.

And his smile is real.
Hermione’s POV:

I let out a happy sigh as I snuggled into the pair of warm arms wrapped around me. Something niggled in the corner of my mind, some fact or rather I should remember, but I was too comfortable to pay it much attention, instead focused on basking in the heat emanating from the body next to me, like sinking into a warm bath.

Wait, warm? Since when was Alice warm?

My eyes flew open as I gave a shriek, causing my companion to also lurch up, head turning from side to side, trying to figure out the threat. “Seth?” I gasped.

“Hermione?” he asked, relaxing slightly, and looking confused. Tinkling laughter made prop myself up on the pillows and turn to the entrance of the closet, where an amused Alice was standing.

“Should I be worried that my wife spent the night in our bed with someone else?” She teases.

“Alice!” I say, horrified, “Seth’s male! And, what, fifteen?” I say questioningly, turning to face the shape-shifter next to me.

“Fourteen, actually.” I turn back to Alice.

“See!”

“Hermione, I’m teasing you.” Alice rolls her eyes, before prancing over and bending over to kiss
the tip of my nose. As she leans back, I reach out to grab her and pull her back down for another kiss, but she dances backwards, an evil little grin on her face.

“Not in front of the children.” She admonishes me, and Seth and I let out identical groans, though probably for different reasons, mine being frustration, his most likely embarrassment. “Besides,” Alice continues, wrinkling her nose, “no offense Seth, but Hermione? You stink.”

I let out a long-suffering sigh, before biting my lip in worry. “How’s Bella?” I ask my wife, and to my surprise she beams.

“There was a breakthrough while you were sleeping, she’s doing much better.” I let out a sigh of relief as I pull myself from the bed. I then frown, slightly, at the stiffness in my limbs.

“How long was I asleep?”

“About twelve hours.” Alice shrugs, “you were really out of it.”

“Why?” I ask, confused. Alice suddenly looks worried, and she darts forwards again to lay a cool hand against my forehead, as if checking my temperature.

“Do you not remember what happened last night?” I close my eyes, straining my memory.

“I remember Jacob coming over… then we made that agreement, I’d sleep if you went hunting, then… oh bloody hell!” The last of my sleepiness vanishes as the events of last night hit me. “Stupid sodding shape-shifters!” I just about growl, “where’s my wand?”

Alice presses it into my hand. “Are you okay?” she asks, anxiously, “what are you going to do?”

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” I assure her, “I’m going to go get Bill and Fleur.”

“Okay. Be safe.” She says, wrapping her arms around me and hugging me tight. I smile, pressing my lips to the top of her head.
“What happened to ‘not in front of the kids’?”

“Seth’s hardly a child,” she dismisses, before pulling my head down to lock our mouths together.

“And on that note, I’m outta here.” Seth announces, bouncing down off the bed and hurrying from the room.

“Mm, and what about the smell?” I ask, as I pull back to grab a mouthful of oxygen.

“One of the advantages to being a vampire? Not having to breathe.” She smiles, her hands sliding up my sides, under my top. I let out a moan, before reluctantly pulling back.

“Wards first, then snogging. Or shagging. I’m not picky.” I tell her. She giggles, and kisses my nose.

“I look forward to it.”

- 

After dressing, I apparate straight to Shell Cottage. It's still night here, or rather early morning, and the half moon is glowing high up in the inky sky, casting a somewhat luminous glow over the small, white cottage.

Walking up the path of sand paved with rocks, I have to blink back memories, memories of being half-carried this same way, of my blood spilling onto the same path, leaving a trail of crimson amidst the white-gold sand. My mouth tastes like copper, and I take a deep breath and drag my eyes up so I’m looking squarely at the door, hurrying forwards to knock. My knuckles collide against the wood with a dull thudding sound, and, rubbing them, I stand back and wait. I don’t have to wait long.

“’ermione! Mon ange!” Fleur exclaims as she opens the door to Shell Cottage, blinking sleepily, “’ow are you! And ’ow eez Bella?” Her hands gently cradle her own swollen stomach, and her beautiful face is concerned.
"I’m good, but Bella’s still the biggest danger magnet I know besides Harry.” I sigh.

"Have you ever thought it might be you who’s the danger magnet?” Bill asks, as he lopes towards the doorway, an easy grin on his face. Like Fleur who’s dressed only in a very sheer looking silk nightie, Bill's also in his pajamas, eyes lidded, his hair mussed.

“Nonsense,” I say, with a roll of my eyes, “I’m not the one who’s got a Pack of wolf-shifters now out for her blood because she got knocked up with a vampire hybrid!”

“Mon dieu!” Fleur exclaims, face going pale, “’ow on earth did zat ‘appen? Zee last I ‘eard, zey were your allies.”

“Jacob paid Bella a visit yesterday, and after the Alpha of his Pack decided that the… ’baby' is an abomination that has to be destroyed.” The fact that I didn’t exactly disagree was left unspoken as Fleur and Bill exchanged worried glances, both looking completely awake now.

“How can we help?” Bill asked, turning back to me. “You came here for a reason, right?”

“Bill!” Fleur tuts, whacking the back of her husband’s head, “don’t be rude!” She then turns back to me, an apologetic look on her angelic face, “I apologize for zis imbécile.”

“Love you too, dear.” Bill grins, before ducking another head-slap. I can’t help the snort that escapes, but I quickly school my expression before Fleur turns back around.

"You are very welcome 'ere, anytime." Fleur announces. I smile, warmth tingling through my limbs.

“Actually, I did come here to ask for some help. I was hoping you two could set up some wards around the house- powerful ones. I did the best I could last night, but… well, I don’t have your training.”

“’Course we’ll help, ‘Mione.” Bill says, the expression on his face clearly stating that I’m an idiot for thinking otherwise, “you’re family.”
“Thanks guys.” I tell them, really meaning it. “I’ll meet you there. You know, give you time to change.” Fleur grins, mischievously.

"You don't zink I should turn up like zis?" She asks, smoothing down the sides of her nightie... or lingerie would probably be just as apt a name. I laugh, and lean forwards to give her a hug, before I apparate back to the mansion, this time into the living room.

Bella gives a short shriek as I appear, clutching the blanket to her chest, and glares at me. “I’m never going to get used to that!” I gape at her, stunned. “What?” she asks, drawing her brows together, “is there something on my face?” One of her frail hands flutters up to touch her cheek.

A smile threatens to break my face in half as I basically sprint the few feet between us, and drop to my knees beside the couch she’s curled up on. “Merlin, Bells, you look fantastic!”

Gone was the waxy ashen skin, the pale face, instead her cheeks were rosy, and she was sitting up by herself. “I know, right?” her voice is suddenly just as enthusiastic as mine. “Isn’t it brilliant?”

“Beyond bloody brilliant,” I sigh, relief burning in every bone in my body as I reach up to hug her as delicately as I can.

And when she hugs me back, for the first time in weeks I can actually feel it.

“Bella, mon chatton, you look so much better!” Is the first thing Fleur gasps as she appears in the Living Room, her whole face shining as she looks down at Bella. Bella smiles back, just as happy.

“Hi! Did you learn something about my baby?” She asks, eagerly. Fleur shakes her head, her expression saddening. “Non, I’m afraid. Bill and I are ‘ere to set up zee wards.” Fleur explains.

“Can you make them so I can actually get out?” Jacob snaps, as he storms into the room. He looks upset and aggravated. I doubt he slept at all last night, as there are bags under his eyes. Seeing him reminds me that it will probably be prudent to find out what sort of ‘deal’ Jacob and Edward made yesterday.
Just yesterday? I wondered; god, it felt like weeks.

“Be nice Jake,” Bella scolds the lovesick pup, and I hold back from rolling my eyes. Carlisle smiles warmly at the new arrivals, greeting them politely as he glides into the room, Alice by his side. She flits over to me, and wraps her arms around me, pressing her cheek up against my chest. I inhale her sweet, sweet scent and turn my attention away from my melancholy, the best I can.

“May I ask how these wards work?” Carlisle asks Fleur, looking curious. I hold back my smile, knowing just how much Carlisle adores learning about the Magical World. In a way, his manner reminds me of Arthur's enthusiasm when it comes to anything muggle.

“Of course,” Fleur smiled happily at the other blonde. “Per'aps Bill could do zee 'onors? My English eez getting very good, but I still struggle with some of zee more technical terms.” She apologizes. Bill gives his wife a smile, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Your English is practically perfect.” He tells her.

"Zank you, mon amor," Fleur smiles. Bill kisses her forehead, before turning to Carlisle.

"Wards are protection spells, that can be keyed to keeping out certain groups or certain people. If you cast them somewhere, around this room for example, with the amount of power needed to fully sustain them, they’ll stay like that until you remove them, until the power dissipates or until someone breaks through them,” Bill explains to an intrigued Carlisle, “the more powerful the wizard, the stronger the wards, and the stronger the wards, the more difficult it is for them to be broken.”

“What about area? Does the amount of magic needed change depending on the size of whatever it is you’re warding?” Carlisle asks.

“Definitely,” Bill nods, “in cases like these, where very large areas are being warded, it takes a great deal of magic to simply even set up the wards. But, at the same time, because none of the shape-shifters can use magic, it’s easier then warding the house from wizards- only magic can break the wards, and the wards Fleur and I are setting up, well- only someone with a lot of knowledge on how to dismantle wards would be able to get through.”

“Amazing,” Carlisle shook his head, golden eyes just about glowing with fascination. “Hermione mentioned something about your job as a cur-“
“Carlisle!” Esme scolded, drifting over to her husband and mate, “let them do their work before you interrogate them!”

“My apologies,” Carlisle smiles sheepishly, ducking his head slightly.

“Non, non, your curiosity eez perfectly acceptable, Monsieur Carlisle,” Fleur waves a hand through the air, gracefully. “We are very ‘appy to answer your questions.”

“Yes. After the wards.” I add, and Fleur shoots me a droll look. I hold my hands up in a surrendering gesture. “Or before. I’m not fussed. It’s not like we’ve got a pack of shape-shifters out there who want to kill my sister and one of the only things holding them back are my, admittedly lacking, wards.”

“You’ve made your point,” Fleur huffs, before pulling out her wand. “Bill?”

“Right behind you, dear,” he answers her cheerfully. Bella lets out a soft sigh as she watches them leave, hands threaded together.

“They’re so in love.”

“In the end, love is all of our mistresses, Bella.” I reply, also unable to help my smile at the sight.

“Would you have it any other way?” she asks.

“No,” I admit. Bella laughs, and I swear, I could listen to that sound all day. Her voice… the strength in it, the color in her cheeks- she looked like a whole different person, one who wasn’t on the brink of certain death.

This new look- you know, the whole ‘I don’t look like I’ve only got hours left’ look, suited her.

I could feel my eyes getting damp, and after blinking rapidly for a few seconds, I decided to make a hasty exit. Alice tried to follow me, but I stopped her, just needing some time to process
everything. Or, to be more specific, time to process it. The thing that terrified me- the hope I
couldn’t help springing up inside me as I saw just how normal Bella was looking, so healthy.

As each day passed, I’d been preparing myself more and more for what felt like the inevitable- the
death of my sister. That’s not to say I was taking her ‘diagnosis’ laying down, on the contrary I was
planning on fighting for Bella’s life right up till my own last breath. No, I hadn’t stepped back to
just watch her die, and I sure as hell had hoped with every fiber of my being that Bella would be
okay, ever since I learned what happened, but I’d never actually really, truly believed she’d make
it.

Well, for a few days at the start, maybe I believed, but when she started growing very sick, very
quickly, I’d hardened myself up to the reality. But now…

Now I had hope. Real, genuine hope.

And it was terrifying.

“Hermione,” the quiet, musical voice outside the door is not the one I’m expecting, but at the same
time it doesn’t overly surprise me.

I’m in Alice’s room, sitting on her old bed, hugging my knees to my chest. I might be rocking
slightly, but if I am, I don’t notice it. “You can come in, Edward,” I say, after several long
moments of consideration. The door opens slowly, and Edward steps into the room, a cautious look
on his face.

“I’m not exactly sure why I was the one sent to check on you,” he says, looking awkward and like
he’d much rather be back down at my sister’s side.

“Way to make me feel special,” I sighed, before flicking my fingers at the door, causing it to shut
by itself. I then mutter a quick string of Latin, putting up silencing wards. This conversation, I have
a feeling, is one that the others could do without hearing.

“What was that?” Edward asked, curiously. Edward, not unlike the rest of his family, was still so
intrigued by even the smallest amount of magic I cast, that it was enough to almost make me smile.
“Silencing and locking charms,” I explain, before fixing him with a piercing stare. “What deal did you make with Jacob?” I ask abruptly. My tone is very clear- I’m expecting the truth and lying or not answering is not an option.

He hesitates, for several long moments, his handsome, handsome face indecisive, before deciding to acquiesce to my demand.

“If Bella dies, then he’s going to kill me.”

“Ah.” I say.

In hindsight, this really shouldn’t have surprised me. I knew how strong the vampire mating bond was, I could feel it, in every single atom that makes up who I am. Having your mate taken from you would have to be… well, my all-encompassing fear for Alice’s life the previous night is a good example to how well I would have coped.

Edward frowns at me.

“’Ah’? That’s all you have to say?”

“Well what do you want me to say?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “You know how your death will affect your family, those who love you, your own sodding baby, hell, even I’ll be affected. Slightly. But if you’re stupid and selfish enough to go down that road, then go ahead. I’m not going to stop you.” ***

“You don’t understand!” He said, frustrated. I give a tired sigh.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Wrong?” he asked.
“I thought about killing myself,” I tell him, honestly. “In the aftermath of the War, with everyone we’d lost, with everything I’d lost, my… particularly unstable state due to trauma I’d suffered… I was struggling to see a reason to live. So I found one- I found Bella, moved to Forks. I fell in love. I thought there was nothing for me, only to find how wrong I was. I thought that with all the dead, I’d just be another footnote on a list of casualties, and then my friends, my family, my loved ones— they showed me how wrong I was, that I meant something to them, that what I brought to their lives was irreplaceable.”

I proceed to drag my sorry arse up out of the bed, and, with a small degree of difficulty, shift over so I can place my hand on Edward’s shoulder. “Remember,” I tell him, expression serious, "you’re not the only one who’ll lose Bella if she dies. If the… unthinkable happens, don’t make Alice, make your siblings, lose a sister and a brother… don’t make your parents lose a daughter and a son.”

I leave him there, his expression solemn, lost in his thoughts, returning back to the living room, back to Bella.

"Are you okay?" she asks, softly, as I sit down next to her, and I nod.

"I'm okay."

-

Time passes slowly, the only significant event being further contact by ‘Mr. Smith’. He hadn’t located The Codex, but he had found some unpublished work of Nicholas Flamel’s, which I had been more than happy to buy from him, and the time I spent with Bella, watching over her, gave me more than enough time to go through it as she slept.

Flamel’s work was enrapturing. His formulas, they were more than just numbers and symbols—they’re the bones of whole new spells, whole new enchantments, creations. This small leather-bound notebook contains some of the most powerful magic I’d ever gotten my hands on, and studying it alone didn’t just give me an insight into how Flamel’s mind worked, but was teaching me things I couldn’t possibly learn elsewhere.

But, even as I admired the astounding intellect of the man, my mind was already racing ahead, figuring out what I could fix, what I could improve, and how I could apply his methods to my notes in my creation of a Philosopher’s Stone. In more than one place, I could see endless repetitions that were full of unnecessary loops and subroutines. Surely I could tighten up the spell a little, eliminate a line here, add a more elegant phrasing there?
My quill scratched against thick, yellowing paper as I wrote, quickly. My theory, though suitable, would be difficult, I knew that. The repetitions, ingredients, runes, numbers, symbols, spell work… every part of the formula was in there, and for good reason.

The easiest way I was finding to work, was by looking at the magic as maths equation- I put a number or symbol here and it had an effect. Maybe too much effect, so I added a material component there, or subtracted a gesture here. Multiply, divide, manipulate –if I worked fast enough, who knew what I might accomplish before the inexorable laws of magic demanded that the equation be made to balance again?

I knew what Nicholas Flamel had accomplished- the creation of the Philosopher’s Stone. Now I just had to believe that I could to.

“What are you doing?” Bella peered down at the writing and pulled a face. “Wow, that looks awful.”

“It’s fascinating,”

“It’s confusing, you mean,” she corrects, smiling. I try not to wince as her smile stretches her skin tight over her protruding cheekbones, “it’s a complete mess of… messiness. It looks like something a toddler would draw.”

I can’t help but gape at her, soundlessly, for a moment, unable to believe that the person before me actually shared any of the same genes as my own, let alone shared the womb with me! Then again, Bella had been raised by the atrocious Renée. That was bound to drain more than just a few brain cells out of someone. Plus, I didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count the amount of times my klutz of a twin has hit her head after falling over.

“This here is brilliance, Isabella Marie Cullen!” I defend the work before me- loudly, “pure, unadulterated brilliance. Brilliance beyond anything either of us could ever hope to accomplish in our lives, a brilliance that surpasses Albert Einstein himself!”

“I get it,” Bella’s voice is annoyingly amused now, “it’s ‘brilliance’.” I scowl as she uses her fingers as quotation marks.

“Bella, there are people out there who would kill for the opportunity to lay their hands on this. It
cost me an absolute bloody fortune! Pay it the respect it deserves.” Bella frowns at this, and I reflect that revealing that small detail was probably not the brightest thing I could have done.

“Does having that book put your life in danger?”

“Journal,” I correct, "and it could if anyone actually knew I had it.” Bella shakes her head, her expression disapproving.

“What’s so important in that book that you potentially risk your life for it?” she demands.

“Bella, you know me better then that,” I frown, "my life is not at risk, I was careful of that. Brightest witch of her age, remember? And I need this to help me figure out how to make a Philosopher’s Stone!” Bella’s eyes widen.

“Wait- you’re trying to make a Philosopher’s Stone?” she asks, incredulously, “Why would you want to do that? You’re already rich!”

“Definitely Hufflepuff,” I mumble to myself, before giving Bella a flat look. “My wife is immortal, Bella.”

“You mean you aren’t going to be Turned?” Bella just about gasps. Her shock is so great that it’s almost comical, with her eyes wide as galleons, and jaw hanging open.

“Bella,” I say slowly, “I thought you realized- I don’t think witches and wizards can be Turned.” Her face immediately pales.

“What?” she whispers.

“We don’t know this for a fact, but it’s the most common theory in magizoology. Our magic is like… white blood cells, in a way. It attacks foreign entities in the body- sicknesses, diseases… poisons. Poisons like vampire venom. Vampires were created as weapons against other witches and wizards-“

“Wait, what?” Bella interrupts, “you never told me that!” I sigh.
“Can you let me finish one explanation before starting on the next?” She blushed slightly.

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“Like I was saying, vampires were created as weapons against other witches and wizards, so it’s a safe assumption that the venom, once introduced into our systems, would react the same way it does when introduced into a muggle’s system.”

“I thought you said it would kill you,” Bella interrupts. I scowl at her.

“Merlin’s saggy buttocks, Bella, let me actually finish speaking!” She gives me a contrite look.

“Sorry. Again.”

“Anyway, like I was saying before I was rudely interrupted- for the second time, I may add, we can assume that the venom would react the same way it does when introduced into our systems as it would a muggle’s. But that’s where the problem really begins- our magic would fight against the venom, not letting it merge with our bodies to fully Turn. Basically, in an attempt to save us, our magic would doom us, because it wouldn’t allow the complete transformation to take place. The venom would kill us without Turning us. Agonizing death. Quite the way to go, really.”

“So that’s why you need to create a Philosopher’s Stone,” Bella surmises. “Or you could save yourself the years of research and just create a Horcrux.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” I glare and she laughs, before wincing slightly. “What’s the matter?” I ask, instantly, concerned.

“Nothing,” she shakes her head, “so is that a fact? The whole ‘magic/venom internal war resulting in dead Hermione’ thing?”

“Were you not listening before?” I ask, shaking my head in exasperation, “No, it’s not a fact, though mostly because no one wants to try it. Why would we when we have the antidote? And then there’s the fact that there’s a possibility that if a witch or wizard is Turned into a vampire, they won’t be able to use their magic. That is every witch and wizards worst nightmare, Bella.
Worse then death.”

Bella slumps back on the couch. “I didn’t realize. Why didn’t you ever say something?” she asks, hurt.

“Didn’t want to worry you.” I admit. “Didn’t see the point in it. I’ve got a plan, after all, and I’m not called the brightest witch of my generation for nothing. My scores were some of the highest in Hogwarts history.”

“No need to boast.” Bella mumbles, and I laugh.

“It’s not boasting if it’s a fact.”

“Yes it is,” she rolls her eyes. I smile back at her, before turning back to the complicated formulae before me.

“Be quiet so I can get some work done.”

“Does that mean I can’t ask about the whole vampires created as weapons thing?” She frowns.

“That is absolutely correct. Ask some other time. Or, even better, you could open a sodding book.” I remind her, “I only bought half a dozen the first time we visited Flourish and Blott’s together.” She flushes.

“I kind of got… distracted.” She mumbles.

“Well, I suppose high school finals, vengeful vampires, newborn armies and then planning a wedding is distracting.” I admit. “But I’m still busy, so hush and let me research.”

*** Note: I’d just like it to reflect that these are not my personal views regarding suicide. I do not condone it, but I don’t think it’s cowardly or selfish or anything like that. I think it’s a tragedy, and a loss, and an act of desperation. I do, however, believe that in Edward’s situation, the character
killing himself would be an act of selfishness and cowardice, and I apologize in advance to anyone who disagrees with this assessment, but it’s what I believe to be true.
Bella's POV:

I'd spent a lot of my life bedridden— the unfortunate side effect of being the world's biggest klutz. And it never got any easier. It was boring and painful and I needed help with every little thing.

On the bright side, I feel so different from when I woke up this morning, so much better, that it's honestly a miracle. Unfortunately, that doesn't detract from the fact I still feel absolutely lousy. And, by the looks of it, so did Hermione. She'd only been pouring over the old journal for about an hour before her eyelids grew heavy, and she ended up dozing off, slumped against the couch.

For a long time, I just sat there and watched her. Partly because there was nothing else to do, but mostly because she looked peaceful. Vulnerable. The pure Hermione she was when she didn't have to prove herself to anyone, when she wasn't trying to keep someone alive. It was a rare sight. The ever-present crinkle on her brow of complex thought was gone, leaving her expression relaxed and obscenely lovely.

I thought of waking her, knowing that she'd want me to, that she'd start stressing about time wasted and all that, but I couldn't bring myself to pull her out of her sleep.

So instead I watched her face, the way wild curls of chestnut hair fell in tendrils near her closed eyes, her cheeks the resting place for dark eyelashes and her lips slightly parted. Even at rest like this her hair was untamed. Sleeping as she was, she looked so delicate, and yet she was the strongest person I knew. When she set her mind to something nothing would stop Hermione Cullen.

"The warding she did the other night really took a lot out of her," Alice said softly. I jolted, startled, unaware of just when Alice had entered the room, and how long she'd been standing there, watching me watch Hermione.

"Yeah," I agree, moving my hands to cradle my stomach. I go to shift, to push myself up into a more comfortable position the best I can with my still weak limbs, when a sharp snapping sound
breaks the silence of the room. For a moment I'm confused, puzzled at the sound.

And then the pain hit.

I couldn't help my shocked cry, or the tears that sprung to my eyes. The pain was sharp, almost blinding, and I realized almost instantly that at least one of my ribs was broken.

As I tried to control the sharp keening noises escaping from my mouth, my mind spun, shock and, ridiculous as it was, hurt filling me.

My little nudger had just broken my rib.

I was dimly aware of the blur of voices, could feel Edward's cold hands gently pressed across where the pain was worst, the icy coolness soothing, dulling the pain somewhat, and Jacob's hands were almost sweltering hot where they were holding mine, as tightly as he dared.

And then as Jacob's hands tightened further, they started to feel like manacles trapping my wrists in place, and suddenly Edward's hands on my stomach had a much more sinister feel.

"NO! STOP!" I shrieked, fresh tears leaking down my cheeks as the sharp inhale required made the pain in my chest flare stronger. "DON'T HURT HIM!" I screamed, trying to yank my hands out of Jacob's grip.

"Step away from her, you stupid tossers!" That was Hermione's voice, clipped and furious. "She thinks you're trying to hurt the baby!"

Jacob swears, and drops my wrists as if they burnt him, backing away. Edward is more reluctant to move back, but the cold hands vanish and then I'm trying to hold back sobs of relief.

"Shh," Hermione's hand is running through my hair, in soothing, repetitive motions, "they weren't trying to hurt the fe-him," she promises me, "they're just worried about you. One of your ribs is broken, love."

"It hurts," I whimper to her, as her warm fingers gently wiped the tears from my eyes, clearing my
vision. The fear, the anger, it's all melted from my body, gone as if it never existed. Jasper must be nearby, some part of me notes. And I'm glad.

"I know it does, Bella, love, but Carlisle and I, we're going to make it all better." Her accent is thicker, richer, as she soothes me.

"This is going to sting for a moment," Carlisle says, appearing beside me. I inhale sharply, fear filling me at the sight of the needle, and Hermione shakes her head in exasperation.

"Honestly," she mutters.

The morphine, once in my veins, works quickly, muting the pain to an almost unnoticeable ache. As long as I don't move, I can forget it's there. "Can you fix the broken bone?" Carlisle asks, and Hermione sighs, running a hand through her hair. She looks stressed again, all the peace, from before when she was sleeping, long gone from her expression.

"I don't know, well yes plausibly I could, but there's certain spells you can and can't use on pregnant wic-women," Hermione corrects herself, before shaking her head again. "But does that even apply here? Merlin, this is so...

"Messed up?" Maggie suggests, and I crane my head so she's in my line of sight. Jasper's arm is curled around her waist, and the handsome blonde gives me a small smile and nod as I send a wave of appreciation his way.

"I was going to say bollocksed, but I suppose that works." Hermione agrees.

"'S okay. Doesn' hur 'nymore." My voice is little more then a sigh, the morphine softening my words, making them slur together slightly.

"I'll go get Harry... and pick up Leah on the way back," Hermione said. Someone, probably Rosalie, groaned. Hermione ignored her. I heard the crack I'd come to associate with disapparation, and wasn't surprised when the spot where Hermione had stood was suddenly empty of anything but air.

Edward walked over to me, slowly, his every movement cautious, as if he was waiting for me to flip out and start screaming at him again. Shame made my cheeks burn, and I had to fight the urge
"Did you really think I'd do that?" Edward asks, lowly, as he sinks down on the floor next to the couch. His eyes are level to mine, and I have to look away.

"F'r a momen'," I confess. He deserves more then a lie. And he deserves more then a monster like me for a wife; a monster who honest-to-god thought that he was going to take my baby from me, with or without my consent.

He lets out a pained sound, and closes his eyes, resting his forehead against the edge of the couch. I reach out to run my fingers through his hair, mimicking the movements Hermione had been using on me, so short a time ago.

"I don' think I r'lly believed it," I tell him, wanting him to hear me, to understand, "was jus' panicking."

"I know. So was I." He mumbled.

"And me," Jacob's voice is husky, and the couch makes a complaining sound as he sinks down beside me, lifting my feet so that they're sitting on his lap. I wiggle my toes, glad for the warmth-they were starting to get kind of cold.

"We all were." I say.

"Including your crazy ass sister," Jacob’s mouth twitches slightly.

"Oh dear," I murmur. His smile widens, becoming something real.

"She leapt to her feet, wand spitting out sparks- look, you can see where they singed the carpet," he points out. I cringe at the scorch marks on Esme's expensive Queen Anne rug.

"I can't really blame you for thinking that," Edward says quietly, drawing the conversation back to where it begun. "I want to. I was planning to, at the start, to just take any opportunity I could..." I barely held back my shudder, and my hands, almost without my permission, moved to cradle my
stomach, in a futile attempt to shield my little nudger from his words. "I couldn't. Not anymore."
Edward says, quietly, inky-black eyes following my movements.

"Speak for yourself," Jacob is scowling, his face transformed into a bitter mask of anger as he
gazed down at Edward with contempt in his gaze. "You're a coward, what you're doing is a
cowardly thing to do."

A loud hiss echoes down from the top door, and suddenly Rosalie is in the doorway of the living
room, her sharp eyes boring into Jacob. If looks could kill...

"You wouldn'," I say, stubbornly, knowing that what I am saying is true. No matter how much
Jacob hates my little nudger, he'd never do that to me.

"I would," he retorts, angrily. I just shake my head.

Two loud cracks break the tense silence that settled in the room, and Harry's here, looking tired,
rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. Hermione looks little better, though Leah, who's
holding onto Hermione in a way that I knew that if Alice was in the room the small vampire would
probably growl, despite the knowledge that Leah is not only 100% heterosexual, but also 100%
spoken for, a soul mate of her very own.

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spoken for, a soul mate of her very own.

The three look around the room, obviously trying to gauge the situation. Rosalie is in a half crouch
in the doorway, ready to move to defend me and my little nudger at a moment's notice, Edward's
expression is bleak, tortured, and Jacob looks murderously angrily. So, nothing new really.

"Sam wants to talk to you, Jacob," Leah breaks the silence in her blunt, very Leah way.

"Fuck," Jacob swears, shaking his head from side-to-side, "fuck."

Fear ran through me. "What?" I just about squeaked. I tried to sit up, and even the morphine wasn't
enough to dull the brutal reminder that that probably wasn't exactly the best course of action
currently. I let out a hissing breath, collapsing back against the pillows, my hands moving up to my
chest.

"Here, let me fix that for you," Harry smiled at me warmly, and I gave him a thankful look, not
embarrassed even slightly as he pulled up my shirt, instead focusing my full attention on the
"He's waving a white flag. Says he wants a truce. Wants to talk." Leah explained, before grimacing.  
"Spouted some shit about having calmed down and talked to the other Elders, that they've decided  
that immediate action is in no one's best interest at this point."

"Translation- they've already lost the element of surprise." Jacob snorted.

"Yeah, plus mom, Billy and Emily chewed them all out good time. They're all waiting now for  
waiting until Bella's separated from the proble-baby."

"Killing her not something they feel comfortable with?" Jacob's voice is dark and I shudder  
slightly, causing both him and Edward to make small moves to comfort me.

"They're betting on Bella dying anyway," Leah states bluntly, ignoring the hisses that follow her  
statement, "and then they figure you'll be so mad you'll lead the attack yourself."

Horror licked through me when Jacob didn't immediately refute this statement, and it's not until his  
dark eyes meet mine that he sighs and looks back towards Leah. "I wouldn't have the opportunity."
He tells her, and my jaw tightens at Jacob's careful wording.

"Sam's real pissed," Leah grumbles, trying to hide behind her tough façade, but I can see the hurt in  
her eyes. From the way Hermione's hair's starting to frizz up, I know that she can see Leah's hurt  
too, and she's angry. "Chewed me out good and proper when he learned I knew about the baby  
already," Leah continues, "called me a leech-lover," here her eyes flashed angrily, and her outline  
blurred just the slightest. I knew it was taking a lot for her to stay human-shaped right now. A part  
of her still loved Sam, even with Teddy, and his comments would have hurt.

"What?" Jacob's voice is low, dark, venomous. "You knew about the abomin-the fetus?"

It takes a second for the penny to drop for me, and when it does I'm actually impressed with Leah  
standing her ground and not shrinking back- the look in Jacob's eyes is only just short of  
murderous, and if I could, I'd back off slightly. As it was, I couldn't help but flinch slightly.

"Calm down, mate," Harry warned, his grip on his wand tightening infinitesimally. "Don't do  
anything stupid." Jacob ignored him, and I could feel his body trembling under my feet. A low
growl streamed from between Edward's clenched teeth, and his body tensed, like he wanted to pull me up, away from Jacob, but he was too nervous too, not wanting to move me while Harry was checking for injuries.

"You knew that Bella was dying and you didn't think I'd want to know?" Jacob roared at Leah.

"Jacob-" I try speaking, but he wheels around, face furious, moving so that my feet are sliding off his lap, and he's on his feet.

"No, Bella! Just don't! You don't get to do this!"

"Don't talk to her like that!" Edward and Hermione shouted at the same time. Hermione's curls were just about crackling with energy around her head, and Alice was suddenly there, by her side, cold small, slim arms restraining my furious looking sister.

Unfortunately, no one's there to restrain Edward, who's risen into a crouch, eyes beyond fury.

"Stop!" I shrieked, but my words fell on deaf ears.

"This is all your fault!" Jacob hissed at my husband, brandishing an arm angrily in my direction, the violent movement making me cringe again. Tears sprang to my eyes again, and Hermione was struggling in Alice's vice-like hold, a long string of threats escaping from her lips, but Jacob and Edward only had eyes for each other, both of them growling, unending, feral, terrifying sounds.

"IMMOBULOUS! SILENCIO!" Someone shouted, and I almost started sobbing in relief as both Edward and Jacob were frozen in place and forcibly silenced. Harry's face was stern, and although he stood around half a foot shorter then Edward, and at least a foot shorter then Jacob, there was a sort of power swirling around him, one I could almost taste.

It was the sort of tingling of the senses that told me just who the most powerful person in the room was. This was one of the only times when I looked at Harry and saw the man who'd defeated Voldemort, the Darkest Wizard in all of existence.

Hermione sometimes surrounded herself with power like this. I remember she did it the first day she was here in Forks, down at the reservation. Paul called me a ‘fangbanger’ and she made her power just swell around her.
"I appreciate that we're all tired and tense and worried," Harry's voice was calm, and his piercing green eyes met Hermione's, "I'm talking about you too, Hermione, love," he adds. She glares at him, but she stops struggling in Alice's arms. "We've just had a scare. As Bella's regaining her strength, it appears that the baby's strength is growing too. This is something we're going to have to deal with. I've got some potions I can give you, Bella, but I think it's a safe assumption to say that we can be expecting more broken ribs."

I can't help a shiver at this, and Harry gives me a sympathetic look. "But, at the same time we can take this as a good sign. Obviously, blood is what Bella needs to sustain herself. She's stronger, healthier. Her heart's the steadiest it's been all week. Now take a page out of her book. You're both hungry, or Thirsty," Harry amends, nodding toward Edward, "and Jacob, you haven't slept for far too long. When I release you, Jacob you're going to eat a full meal then have a good long sleep. Edward is going to come with me, and I'm going to take him hunting, far enough away from the Pack that he won't be a danger. And you, Hermione, are going to do what you do best."

"Research?" My sister speaks up. It doesn't look like Alice is restraining her anymore, instead it looks more like she's hugging her, and Hermione's leaning back into her embrace.

"I was going to say keep a cool head in the midst of all the chaos." Harry says, dryly.

"That's certainly something that's helped us previously," Hermione admits. He chuckles.

"I'm not arguing that." He tells her, before swishing his wand through the air in a steady, slightly hypnotic movement. Jacob snaps his jaw shut, and eyes Harry warily.

"I'll fix you up something to eat, Jacob dear," Esme chimes up in her sweet voice. I turn my head, surprised, wondering at which point she had entered the room, along with what looked like pretty much everyone else- including Seth.

"Fine." He muttered, following the kindly, mother-hen vampire into the kitchen. Harry strode around the couch, over to Edward, with a quiet confidence, and held out his hand. Edward hesitated for a long moment, turning his gaze towards me.

"Go, Edward," I tell him, gently, smiling at him the best I can. He sighs and ducks his head down so he can kiss my forehead.
"I love you," he tells me, seriously, before accepting Harry's outstretched hand. They disappear in a heartbeat.

"How long do you think they'll take?" I ask Hermione who shrugs and turns to Alice.

Alice tilts her head, frowning. "I'm getting a lot of nothing." She mutters, before squinting hard at thin air. "An hour, maybe two tops." She decides, finally, "Edward will definitely be back by seven."

"Seven?" I ask, startled. "As in, seven at night?"

"Mm, yeah. Today went quickly didn't it?" Hermione murmured.

"All the drama," I respond, and she gives a half smile.

"Always with the drama."

"It's the life of a Swan." I sigh, moving my hands back to my stomach. A life of a Swan, and a life I wouldn't change for anything.
Hermione's POV:

Alice was correct. Harry dropped Edward off a few minutes before seven, as well as several different potions for Bella—bone strengthening ones, mostly, before returning to England.

With Bella looking less like she was about to drop dead any second, Edward and Jacob calm enough, Leah and Seth reunited, and the mansion securely warded, Alice and I decided to go home to spend the night at our own house for the first time since I brought a pregnant Bella back from her honeymoon.

As much as I'd missed participating in our... *other* activities, when we arrived back, I was too tired to do anything but stumble through the door and fall into bed. Despite my twelve-hour sleep and hour nap, I was still drained, and it didn't take long for me to slip back under.

I woke to the delicious feeling of Alice's fingers between my legs. For several long minutes I panted and moaned, until my finish washed over me like a wave of warm water. "Good morning," I whispered when my heart had resumed a normal rhythm.

"Mm," was Alice's only response as she held me tight. We laze together like that for several minutes, before I spoke up again.

"You know we have to get up soon, right?"

"No, I want to stay in bed with you all day," Alice pouted.

"As nice as that would be, we are expected back over at the mansion by ten."
"And who's brilliant idea was that?" Alice grumbled.

"Yours, actually." I laugh, kissing her forehead. She sighs.

"Damn."

"We can probably have a quick shower together," I suggest, with a smile.

"Perfect," Alice beams, automatically bounding right up off the bed, before grinning at me, "I like showering here much better. No need to worry about someone knocking on the door and interrupting us."

I stand up, and smile at my cheeky pixie. "And what exactly would they be interrupting?" I tease her.

"Me making love to you." Alice gives me a look as if to say 'duh!' and I can't help but laugh.

"Again? You just did!"

"I'll never get tired of making love to you," she announces, stubbornly. I smile at her.

"Well that's certainly a hypothesis I'm happy to test."

- 

After the shower, I walked over to my closet, a towel wrapped around my body, and another one around my hair. Seeing what I was doing, Alice danced over to me, already dressed in something short, tight and slinky.

"I'll help!" She said, enthusiastically, moving like lightning as she picked out a matching bra and pantie set, a knee-length black skirt, a salmon colored camisole and an expensive looking designer jacket. "It's perfect!" she announces, proudly.
"It's not bad," I admit, "but I intended on picking trousers." Alice pouted.

"But I like the skirt!"

"And I like denim. I'll wear the other stuff though." I compromised, hanging the skirt back in the closet and swapping it for a pair of dark jeans. Then, very abruptly, Alice tore away my towel and I let out a squeal at the rush of cold, hugging myself. "Alice!" I exclaimed. Alice gives me an innocent look.

"Yes?"

"Some warning please!" I huff. Giggling, Alice reached out to the towel in my hair and untwisted it until it fell to the floor. She smiled, running her fingers gently through my damp, limp curls. My hair was already starting to frizz near my temples and forehead.

"You smell like strawberries," she said, standing on her tiptoes to nuzzle her nose into my hair.

"That would be the shampoo," I smile.

"I could eat you up!" she growled, playfully, her hands sliding down my arms. I laughed.

"You're insatiable, sweetheart! Later, Alice, we have things we need to do today."

"And I'm one of them," Alice wiggled her eyebrows, and I laughed, again.

"Insatiable." I repeat. She grins and kisses me. Thoroughly. I let out a soft moan and my resolve started to drift away, only for our activities to be interrupted by a loud knocking on the door.

"Who's that?" Alice looks surprised, pulling back.

"I need to get dressed- can you answer it?" I ask, and she nods. "Don't open it without seeing who it
is though," I add, and she rolls her eyes at me over her shoulder.

"I wasn't born yesterday, dear heart... I was born last century, in fact." I can't help but laugh.

My laughter doesn't last long, though. Not when the sound of Ron's worried voice travels from the living room into the bedroom, and suddenly I'm rushing, not even bothering with the jacket, just rushing out to see what's going on in my jeans and camisole, wand gripped firmly in my hand.

Ron is standing just a few feet past the doorway, dressed in his deep-green, black-lined Auror dueling robes. With small slits in the sides and an open front, the robes allowed full range of motion for any sort of scuffle, and came complete with dark grey trousers with specialized pockets and a black shirt made of special fiber that was as good as any armor and breathed like cotton.

My heart stuttered in my chest as realization hit me- Ron in his Auror robes, on my doorstep... he'd come straight from work, straight from the Ministry. Something was wrong. Something had happened, something big.

"Ron?" I whispered. His face was pale, making all his freckles stand out. There was a certain look of helpless anger on his face. "What happened?"

Scenario after scenario flashed through my head, each more terrible than the last. I was on the verge hyperventilation when Ron spoke. "Lucius Malfoy escaped from Azkaban, approximately seven hours ago."

Lucius Malfoy. Death Eater, murderer, torturer, sadistic bastard and all round monster. And he'd escaped from Azkaban.

It was like my whole world had just grinded to a halt. Mouth open, heart pounding, I just stared at Ron in horror. I think he kept speaking, I couldn't tell. My chest was heaving, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. My stomach twisted up and I grabbed at my chest, my nails digging into the skin over my heart with enough pressure to bruise.

My heart was racing and I couldn't feel my face, couldn't feel my fingers, or my toes. Someone, I think it was Alice, guided me to the loveseat, where I curled up and waited for the panic attack to pass.
And then I coped the way I always did when I got too overwhelmed. My brain stopped processing emotions, like they were too frivolous to even think about, and instead concentrated on cold hard facts and cool calculations. When I lifted my head up to face Ron, my eyes were dry. "What happened?"

"Bribery, of course." Ron's voice was bitter, and I noted he was now sprawled out across the couch opposite me. Alice was perched on the arm of the loveseat, her cool, slender fingers running through my hair in a repetitive, soothing motion. "He paid off his guard."

"Casualties?"

"Three dead, five injured."

My lips pressed together into a thin, tight line. "Any leads?" This time Ron hesitated, but upon seeing the sharp look I gave him, he sighed and relented.

"Yeah, sort of. He left a... message." He said, reluctantly.

"Yes? Well? What is it?" I demand, not understanding his hesitation.

"Hermione..." Ron spoke slowly, his eyes suddenly everywhere but me. "He's after you."

The next ten minutes passed in a dream-like state. Ron was talking, explaining about different safety measures and how the Aurors were tracking Lucius down, that he wouldn't be able to do anything, that he wouldn't even know where I was.

And then he had to go, had to leave, go back to tracking down the slimy bastard.

As soon as he left, Alice wrapped her arms around me in a fierce, fierce hug and I clutched onto her, burying my face in the crook of her neck. "Oh Alice." I whisper, "Oh my Alice." Alice pulls back slightly, so her concerned eyes meet mine, her hands curling around my own.

"Tell me." Her voice is soft and gentle. Tender and caring.
"Yes," I agree, squeezing her hands tight. "Yes. But only once." Confusion flitters across her beautiful, perfect face, and then comprehension dawns in those green, green eyes.

"I'm ready to go." She says, and I give her a weak smile, before twisting on the spot, apparating us to the mansion.

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I sat down heavily on one of the couches, while Alice flitted about, gathering everyone. I only wanted to say this once, so I waited until all the Cullens were present, along with Leah, Seth and Jacob before starting.

"As you've all probably noticed, I don't talk about my past much," I begin, "I know none of the Cullen's in particular have an especially nice history, so you can probably imagine more then most my... unwillingness to talk about... before. I just never imagined our worlds could collide like they're just about to, and I'm sorry. So sorry." My voice cracks on the last word.

"Hermione, dear, none of us will blame you for whatever's about to happen," Esme says, gently. I give a bitter laugh.

"Better wait until you've heard the full story before you make any promises," I tell her, then I take a deep breath. "Everything started after I received my letter to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." I start basic, covering the simpler points of the school, and the formation of my friendship with Harry and Ron, before moving onto the harder bits.

"The first time my life was in danger I was twelve and, along with Harry, Ron and Neville, I managed to find myself face to face with a Cerberus, a gigantic three-headed dog with a hankering for human flesh. The first time I had to fight for my life I was also twelve." I looked straight ahead as I spoke, refusing to meet the eyes of anyone else in the room.

"I was trapped in a girl's bathroom with a twelve foot mountain troll fully intent on crushing me to death." I ignored the gasps coming from everyone but Bella and Alice, who had both heard this story before, "I had only known about being a witch for a month and the most impressive magic I knew was levitation and conjuring water-proof flames. Harry and Ron saved me. Harry distracted the troll while Ron levitated the club it was carrying over its head, knocking the vile creature out." Bella snorted, quietly, from the couch, where she was curled up.
"You left out the part where Harry stuck his wand up the troll's nose." She smiled, softly. I shuddered.

"I try to forget that part. It's gross and not all that dramatic." I tell her, trying to make a joke, before continuing my story. "The second time I had to fight for my life, again at age twelve, was when Harry, Ron and I were forced to race against a dark wizard to recover a magical object protected by several powerful enchantments called the Philosopher's Stone. If the dark wizard got the stone, he'd have been able to bring Voldemort back to life."

"Who is Voldemort?" Edward asked, frowning. I couldn't help shuddering, as I pictured the gaunt, skull-like face, lipless mouth and gleaming red eyes.

"Who was not is Voldemort." I correct, firmly stressing the past tense. "He was the Magical World's equivalent to Hitler, only maybe worse. Even now, most of the population is too scared to even say his name. People refer to him as You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Voldemort's original reign of terror was interrupted when a prophecy was brought to his attention. I would have been around two at the time. This prophecy was one foretelling his downfall." I clear my throat, ready to recite, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ..." Taking a deep breath, I reach out and grab Alice's hand, needing her support to finish this. "The prophecy was about Harry. And Voldemort killed Harry's parents then tried to kill him when he was two years old."

"How did he survive?" Esme basically whispered, breaking the shocked, uneasy silence that had settled over the room in the wake of my words.

"The curse backfired. And Voldemort should have died. Except he had found a way to cheat death, through an incredibly complex piece of Dark magic. He intentionally ripped his soul into six pieces, embedding each into a different object, creating what is known as a Horcrux. If you have a Horcrux, you can have your head chopped off but you won't die. You become a spirit, of sorts, trapped in the ether until you are brought back. Part of the ritual for creating a Horcrux, the main part, is murder. Killing someone rips apart the soul. And when Voldemort tried to kill Harry and the curse rebounded, a piece of his soul ripped loose and embedded itself into Harry."

I can see the confusion on their faces, and I sigh, and decide to skip ahead to Voldemort's resurrection in the hope of keeping it simple in order to not confuse them even further.

"Voldemort was resurrected at the end of my fourth year. By the end of my fifth year I had fought in my first real battle. I had suffered my first real loss, the death of man who was like family to me. I had suffered an injury that should have been fatal, and left me hospitalized for weeks. My sixth
year was filled with terror as Voldemort and his followers, known as Death Eaters, actively rose, killing, pillaging, torturing and generally creating terror and chaos. The only man Voldemort was ever scared of was Albus Dumbledore, the pillar of the Light. My Headmaster. My mentor. And at the end of my sixth year, Dumbledore was murdered during a battle. A battle in the halls of the one place that should have been safe. Hogwarts. Not long after that, the Ministry fell and Harry, Ron and I were forced to go into hiding. This was shortly after Bella moved here, to Forks. I wiped my parents memories and told Bella I couldn't contact her, and that there was a high chance I was going to die."

Bella let out a choked laugh, even as tears rolled down her cheeks. "I've never been more terrified in all my life."

"I know. And I'll never stop apologizing for having to do that to you. But I needed you to be prepared. Because I never actually thought I'd make it through the War alive." I told her, guilt weighing heavily on me.

"What happened next?" This is Emmett, the overgrown child looking unusually somber.

"What happened next was Harry, Ron and I spent a year on the run, hunting down Voldemort's Horcruxes. The Horcruxes... they weren't common knowledge. Still aren't- only a very select few know about them. It was... an incredibly difficult task. We not only had to figure out what the Horcruxes were, but where they were, how to get to them and how to destroy them, all the while staying hidden, seeing as we were the top three most wanted, with hundreds of thousands of galleons worth of prize money on our heads." I look down at my forearm and pull up my sleeve, showing them the scars that they had all seen, but only Alice really knew where they came from.

"At one point we were captured and taken to the house of one of Voldemort's most loyal followers. The Malfoys, or to be more specific, the patriarch of the family. Lucius Malfoy." I say, quietly, "Lucius was about to summon Voldemort to turn us over, when She noticed the sword we'd had with us. The sword was our weapon for destroying the Horcruxes. The sword was also supposed to be in Her vault. Her name was Bellatrix Lestrange. She was the sister in law of Lucius' wife." I shut my eyes, knowing it would be easier to tell this part of my story without having to look at anyone. Beside me Alice shifted, scooting her chair over so she could wrap her arms around me. She knew, more than anyone, how hard this part was for me to speak about.

"Bellatrix was a witch second only to Voldemort in power, cruelty, sadism and evil. And she was terrified of the fact we might have been in her vault." I basically whispered, "We figured out later it was because she had been tasked with storing one of Voldemort's Horcruxes in there, although she didn't know that it was a Horcrux, just that it was a treasured possession he'd asked her to keep safe. She tortured me trying to find out if we had been in her vault. I told her we hadn't, that the sword was a fake. The truth was, the sword in her vault was the fake, the copy." I open my eyes and look down at my hands, still refusing to meet anyone's eye.
"I was tortured for what felt like forever, before I was rescued. And a touch over a month later, the Final Battle was held. Most call it the Battle of Hogwarts. A lot of people died before Harry managed to kill Voldemort. The worst part was when Harry had to sacrifice himself, had to let Voldemort kill him. But he didn't stay dead, because in killing Harry, Voldemort only managed to destroy his last remaining Horcrux - the one inside Harry. But we didn't know this. We thought Harry was dead. And then, when Voldemort was taunting us all, Harry revealed he was alive and killed him." I take another deep, shuddering breath, before continuing.

"The weeks following the battle were spent rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, a process I was heavily involved in. Anything to distract myself from the grief. During the Battle I witnessed my friends, my classmates, people I liked and disliked, hated and loved, respected and loathed, being killed. Slaughtered. Slaughtered by people who laughed as they murdered." I shuddered, "one of those monsters was Lucius Malfoy. The wizard whose house I had been tortured in whilst he watched, the wizard who was eager to hand Harry, Ron and I over to Voldemort for the chances to get back in his good graces.

"But we made the mistake of not imprisoning him immediately. We moved him, along with his wife and son, to a secure ward at St Mungos to be kept until we had time to evaluate what charges we were going to place on them, him in particular. I was pushing for him to be charged for all his crimes at the full extent of the law."

"Why?" Carlisle questioned.

"Because he deserved to go to prison for the rest of his life! He murdered, tortured, kidnapped, maimed and fought beside Voldemort in countless battles, then used his money to bribe his way out of all his charges!" I hissed, my hands curling into fists, "he's one of the most prejudiced, sadistic, sycophantic sons of bitches that I've ever had the displeasure of meeting." Alice rested her hand on my shoulder.

"Deep breaths." She murmured, and I realized I was trembling. I closed my eyes and focused on inhaling and exhaling, until the trembling stopped.

"There was no getting out of it this time. He was going to be in Azkaban for the rest of his miserable life. I told him that myself. A day later he complained of terrible pains, and then killed the Healer attending to him, stole her wand, changed his appearance enough that he wouldn't be recognized and walked right out of there.

"I was the one who found him, hiding out in his villa in the Alps. We had a... confrontation that I came out on top of. I arrested him and was one of the main witnesses in his trial. But during the
process, I made a mistake. I let it become... personal."

"Personal?" This was Rosalie, perfect and poised as usual. "As in... intimate?" I cringe in disgust at the thought and Alice let out a loud, fierce growl.

"How dare you!" she snarled at her 'sister'. I grabbed Alice's hand and squeezed it, giving her a weak smile.

"It's okay, love. I worded that wrong," I tell her, gently, before turning back to Rosalie, "no, nothing like that. The reason I'm telling you all this is because... Ron informed me that Lucius escaped from prison seven hours ago and... and he's after me."

Silence. Seven statues stared at me with wide, unblinking gold eyes, the seven beautiful faces lined with stress. Except Alice, Alice whose face I couldn't see, because she was hugging me, rubbing my back, humming something softly, something soothing.

Bella ran a hand through her hair, looking pale and stressed. "God, Hermione... I thought you finally got to live out your life in peace, away from all that." She said, a tear rolling down her face. "And now this..."

"Bella, love, don't be daft. I will be living out my life in peace." I told her, standing up and hurrying over so I could kneel in front of her. I clasped her icy cold hands, almost as cold as a vampire's, in mine, and looked her earnestly in the eye, "I'm not worried about him escaping for myself, I'm worried about the people he'll hurt. Bells, I only told you about him escaping because I'm a firm believer in 'you're better safe then sorry'. But nobody from the Wizarding world apart from the precious few people I trust with my life, know I live here in America. And every single Auror in the Ministry is currently hunting Lucius down like the dog he is." I reassure her.

"Okay." She whispers, and I reach up, wiping the tears off her cheeks. She sniffs, and dashes at her eyes angrily with the back of her sleeve. "Damn pregnancy hormones are making me emotional." She mumbles.

"Of course it's the hormones." I tease her, gently, running a hand through her hair, "nothing to do with the fact you love me and you're an emotional sap."

"Hate you." Bella muttered.
"Love you too." I reply.

They have questions, I can tell, but I just want to get out of here, even if it's just for a short amount of time. Alice seems to sense my desperation, and tells them that we'll be back in an hour or two, that we need some more alone time. She purposefully ignores Emmett's snicker at that remark, and then we're apparating back to our house.

I make my way over to the couch, and sit down on it, heavily. And as my beautiful, sweet, loving, kind, gentle wife curls up beside me and tucks her head under my chin, I make a split-second decision that I know I'll probably regret later: I tell her the truth.

"I lied."

"What?" Alice looks up at me, surprised.

"I lied." I repeat, "I am worried. Terrified, actually. Lucius... he's dangerous. Very dangerous. And we are all in very real danger. If it wasn't for Bella's... condition, I'd leave, get as far away from all of you as possible." I say, honestly. Alice let out a growl, her eyes flashing. "Except for you," I quickly assure her, turning my head to press a light kiss against her cheek. "I'd never leave you. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't."

"You really think Lucius might find you?" Alice asked, softly, relaxing slightly.

"He's renewed the bounty put on my head during the War, the bounty for Undesirable No. 2." I answer her, staring across the room, "all the Death Eaters we didn't catch, all the Dark side's sympathizers, hell- even some witches and wizards just plain old down on their luck will try to find me so they can claim the reward. Sooner or later, one of them will."

"Then the solution's clear," Alice said, wrapping her arm around my waist and squeezing softly. "We find that son of a bitch before he finds you."

The roaring sound of the Floo from the living room has me leaping to my feet, wand drawn. "Stay here!" I order, but Alice gently grasps my arm.

"Calm down, sweetie, it's Harry and Ginny." I relax, letting my hand fall back to my side. "In here, guys!" Alice called out, and I slumped back down as two of my best friends walked in.
Harry's face looked strained, and Ginny looked pale, her usually fiery hair hanging in limp strands. Instead of glowing like she should be with her pregnancy, stress and worry was basically oozing from her.

"What is it?" I demanded, feeling the blood drain from my own face.

"Draco and Narcissa Malfoy's bodies were just found. It looks like Lucius got to them a few hours ago." Harry says, his face hard, grim.

"Oh god." I whispered, letting my face fall forwards onto my palms. Alice wrapped her arms around me, rocking me gently, humming softly.

“Draco’s wife Astoria managed to get away- she went straight to the Ministry. Apparently Draco got her out safely. By the time Aurors arrived at their home, Draco and Narcissa were gone, and there were signs of a fight. Their bodies were found an hour ago.”

"This was left at the crime scene." This was Ginny, her voice hoarse. And she hands me a piece of parchment, splattered with blood. I unfold it, moving robotically, and instantly recognized the flowing, elegant script.

To my favorite Mudblood,

By now I assume you have received my message. Your panic is delicious, even when I can't see it, but not to worry, I'll be seeing you soon enough. We'll spend some time catching up, and you can even introduce me to your filthy muggle sister.

Until then,

Lord Lucius Abraxas Malfoy

I stood there, staring vacantly at the parchment, trying to compose myself. Images of Lucius' previous victims flashed across my mind, except the victim's faces had been replaced with Bella's. Letting the parchment fall to the ground, I turned around and basically ran, flinging the front door open, scrambling out of the house, half collapsing on the cold concrete of the driveway.
This second panic attack in under an hour was just as bad as the first. A sharp pain bit into my chest and I struggled to suck in even a mouthful of air. Silent sobs escaped my lips, and soon there were more tears running down my cheeks. My face was hot and flushed, and my vision was starting to cloud as my lungs still stubbornly refused to take in any air.

Cold arms cradled me and soft lips pressed against my cheek, my forehead, my lips, my ear. "Breathe, dear heart, breathe." Soothed Alice, rocking me gently. I leaned into her, gasping and choking. "Breathe," she urged, "it's okay, darling one, I'm here. I'm always here."

I concentrated on the sound of her voice, on the melodious, bell-like chimes, not allowing any other thoughts in. My body calmed down, and I finally managed to take in a deep breath.

"Good girl, good girl," Alice murmured, kissing my cheek. I slumped against her, letting her cradle me.

This wasn't good. I turn to Harry.

"Show me." I whisper. Harry looked hesitant.

"Hermione... I don't know..."

"Show me!" this time I yelled, my tone verging on hysterical, and my magic flared out violently around me. He sighed and nodded.

"Okay."
Bella’s POV:

We were all shaken by Hermione’s news, and I couldn’t help curling into Edward’s side the best I could, wanting his protection.

“That poor girl,” whispered Esme, looking at the spot where Hermione had disappeared. “That poor, poor girl.”

“I knew she’d had it bad, that much was obvious… I just didn’t realize this bad.” Maggie looked troubled. Leah sighed, and exchanged a short glance with me.

“I did. Most of it, anyway.”

“Me too.” I say, softly. “Most of it. Not many of the finer details, though. And I didn’t know about Lucius Malfoy.”

“That son-of-a-bitch,” Leah snarled, eyes flashing dangerously. “If he so much as looks at her I’m going to tear him limb from limb from limb!”

“You’ll have to wait until I’ve finished with him,” Esme said, darkly. I blinked at the gentle, motherly vampire, shocked. Leah’s lips curved into a smile.

“I didn’t know you had it in you, mama-bear,” she said, and Esme, sweet, sweet, curled back her lips and let out a truly frightening snarl that raised the hairs up on my arms and the back of my neck.
“Nobody touches my children,” she growled.

“No one dares to, mom.” Emmett smiled over at her, though his smile was strained.

It was annoying, I decided, as all the vampires and the shifters turned to look left, out the window, suddenly, when you were the only one in the room without supernatural hearing and vision.

“What is it?” I ask, well, demand would probably be a better word.

“Howling,” Edward tells me, his eyes, now a buttery gold once more, narrowed, “about three miles out.”

“I told you Sam wanted to speak to Jake.” Leah says with a shrug. Jacob lets out a sigh, and hauls himself to his feet. He looks better rested after his sleep, and more sad then angry, though I’m not sure if that’s really an improvement.

“We should go,” he states. I frown, worried.

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“They won’t attack us,” Jacob assures me, with another tired smile.

“Are you sure?” I ask, doubtfully, and he nods.

“I wouldn’t go if I wasn’t.” Seeing my dubious look, he sighs, and a small bit of humor crosses his face as he strides over to me and holds out his pinky. “I pinky promise.” I can’t help my own smile as I reach up and hook my pinky with his.

“Good.”

“Should we come?” Seth asks, looking worried. Jacob looks like he’s deliberating for a few
moments, before he nods.

“You and Leah being there won’t hurt,” he decides. Seth looks relieved, and he basically trots after Jacob as my best friend heads out the door. Leah lopes out after them, slower and unenthusiastic.

“Are you comfortable, love?” Edward asks me, suddenly, distracting me from peering out the door worriedly, gnawing anxiously on my lip.

“Yes,” I say, a little too quickly. He gives me a look, as does about half the room, and I sigh, sheepishly. “Um... I could do with another blanket.”

“That wasn’t that hard now, was it?” he teases me, gently, brushing my hair away from my face as Esme darts upstairs, returning with several heavy quilts. I gratefully accept them, not realizing just how cold I really was until the heavy wool was swaddled around me.

“It must have been very hard for you,” Maggie speaks up, a sympathetic expression on her face.

“What?” I ask, frowning.

“When Hermione told you she couldn’t contact you. That she was probably going to...” Maggie trails off, not seeming to want to finish her sentence, so I finish it for her.

“Die? It was one of the worst days of my life.” I half-whisper.

“When exactly was it?” Edward’s face is creased in his upset.

“I was fifteen.”

“She mentioned something about her adoptive parents,” Carlisle suddenly speaks up. I’m not sure if he’s honestly curious, or just trying to provide a distraction, but either way I’m relieved.

“I didn’t know this until around a month ago, but she wiped herself from their memories,” I tell him. His eyes gleam.
“Why? With magic? How does that work?” he rapid-fired questions, and I couldn’t help a slight smile.

“Yes, she used magic, no I don’t know how it works and she did it to keep them safe from Voldemort,” I explain. "They think they’re Wendell and Monica Wilkins. They have no memory of being Mr. and Mrs. Granger and no memory of Hermione. They’re not dead, but Hermione's parents are gone.”

“Oh, the poor dear,” Esme says, face creased in sorrow, “and there’s no way for Hermione to undo the enchantment?”

“No,” I tell her. “But… they weren’t amazing parents. I mean, I think they did love her, in their own way, but they… they treated her like fine china; that is, they avoided too much physical or emotional contact.”

“That can’t have been easy for Hermione,” Rosalie said, her beautiful face both solemn and angry.

“No,” I sighed, “it certainly… shaped her. She’s not as trusting. She doesn’t open up easily, but when she does, she gives everything she has.”

“She’s a wonderful girl.” Esme agrees. I open my mouth to agree when the sound of the front door startles me. Edward lays a calming hand over my own and gives me an assuring look.

“It’s just Jacob, Seth and Leah.” He says, and I let out a quick sigh of relief, and I can’t help the smile that stretches over my face as Jacob walks into the room. I survey him quickly- he looks sad still, and strained, but otherwise uninjured.

“How did it go?” I ask.

“They just wanted to talk,” he mumbles, “no attack on the horizon.”

“How?” he demands.

“I’m hearing you more clearly now- it’s a matter of familiarity and concentration. Also, your thoughts are slightly easier to pick up when you’re in your human form. So I caught most of what passed out there.” He explains. Jacob looks a bit put out, but he covers it the best he can.

“Good. I hate repeating myself.” He grumbles. It’s at that moment that his stomach lets out a truly enormous growl, and I can’t help my giggle as two red spots appear high up on his cheekbones. “Shut it, Bells,” he scowls. I just laugh harder.

“There’s some left over pasta from last night in the kitchen,” Esme offers, “I can go get it, if you’d like?”

“Nah,” Jacob shakes his head, “I can go get it. Thanks.” He tacks on at the end, slightly uncomfortably, before heading out of the room.

“Do you believe her?” Leah asks, suddenly, and I turn to face her, confused.

“Huh?”

“Hermione. Do you believe her when she says it’s nothing to worry about?” Leah expands, looking slightly annoyed that she has to do so. I refuse to let her abrasive personality annoy me, and instead worry about what she’s just said.

“Not really.” I finally decide. “She’s very good at understating things, but… when I told her about Victoria, she was fine. Wasn’t worried in the slightest. But she was worried, before. Maybe even scared.”

“She hid her feelings well,” Jasper agrees, in his deep voice, “She always does. But strong emotions leak through, and,” he pauses, looking uncomfortable, “she was scared.”

“Crap,” I whisper. And then all the vampires and shape shifters are turning again, this time to face the doorway. “What is it?” I ask, confused, but they don’t have to answer, because the car peeling down the driveway is suddenly in my hearing range, and then the engine cuts. “Who is it?” I amend my previous question.
“Alice,” Edward murmurs quietly, as the front door flies open. “And she’s… upset.”

“Did something happen to Hermione?” I gasp, horrified.

“I’m going to kill her, that's what!” Alice just about shouts as she storms into the living room, in a blur of white and black. “Of all the stupid, idiotic- why the hell would she go there now?”

“What happened?” I demand, voice verging on shrill.

“Hermione went to England, that’s what happened!” Alice seethed, “Harry and Ginny came over and told her that Narcissa and Draco Malfoy are dead, and she made Harry take her to the crime scene!”

“What?” I gasp, “Draco's dead?” Images flash through my mind of the pale, weary young man I saw outside Flourish and Blotts, that time Hermione took me to Diagon Alley. Hermione had refused to talk to him, and the last I remember is the defeated expression on his face as he watched us walk away. And now he was dead.

“Lucius’ children?” Carlisle guesses, face grave.

“Wife and child,” I mumble, feeling dazed. Leah’s sharp voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Hermione went to England? Right when that psychopath’s hunting her?” she asks, incredulously. “I thought she was supposed to be the fucking brightest witch of her age!” I gasp in horror, that idea having not struck me until now.

“Language,” Esme scolds Leah, half-heartedly. Leah gives her an apologetic look- out of all the Cullens, Esme is easily the one Leah’s most fond of. Especially after the time she spent recuperating here, after almost been disemboweled by a newborn vampire.

“Sorry Mrs. C,” she says, before turning back to Alice, expression worried. “What else do you know?”
“She didn’t give me much time to act,” Alice admits, still pacing back and forth. “She asked Harry to take her—well, ordered him more like, apologized to me, and then they disappeared. Ginny stayed for a few minutes to apologize for the both of them, before disappearing too.”

“How bad is it?” Leah demands, “and don’t fu-freaking sugar coat it,” she quickly amends, shooting Esme another apologetic look, “I want the truth.”

“Bad. She’s had two panic attacks.”

“Shit,” Leah mutters, “that’s not good.”

I wondered if I looked as horrified as I felt. The last time I remembered Hermione having a panic attack was the night she told me about Bellatrix torturing her, though she’d probably had some since that she hadn’t told me about.

I opened my mouth to ask Alice for more information, when a horribly familiar sharp pain had me gasping. It didn’t hurt as much this time, I noted, as I curled up over the bulge in the center of my body. Whatever potions I’d been given definitely helped, but they didn’t change the fact that my little nudger had just broken another of my ribs.

“Bella?” Someone was asking, frantically.

“Give me a second, guys,” I panted.

“Bella, I heard something crack,” Carlisle said, his voice sounding anxious, “I need to take a look.”

“Pretty sure”—pant—“it was a rib. Ow. Yep. Right here.” I grimace as I uncurl slightly, pointing to my left side, careful not to touch. I chanced a quick look up at the faces around me, and tried not to cringe at the varying expressions of sympathy, horror and anger.

“Do we have any way to contact one of Hermione’s friends?” Edward asked, hovering anxiously.

“The Wizarding World is old-fashioned,” Alice answers for me, her face grimmer then before.
“Hermione’s the only person I know who has a phone, and hers is turned off.”

“Then I need to take an X-ray,” Carlisle said, his voice calm now, “there might be splinters. We don’t want it to puncture anything.” I took a deep breath, then winced- big mistake.

“Okay.” I agreed. Edward lifted me gently, and carried me swiftly up the staircase to Carlisle’s office.

I was right, it was one of my left ribs that my little nudger had broken, but there were no splinters, so Carlisle taped my rib up nice and tight and left it at that.

Alice was still pacing downstairs when we returned, conversing with Leah in low, terse whispers, and I eyed them suspiciously as Edward gently placed me on the couch, back where I was sitting before. “Are you hungry? Or Thirsty?” he asked. I hesitated, taking my attention off the two for a second, before replying.

“A bit… Thirsty.” I admit.

“I’ll go get something,” he murmurs, dropping a kiss on my forehead, before vanishing into the kitchen.

“Any updates?” I ask Alice and Leah, hopefully. Alice shakes her head and Leah shoots me a look that clearly states ‘does it look like we’ve had any updates?’ and I had to concede with her there.

I bite my lip, and try to convince myself that no news is good news. Needless to say, I fail. Edward returns and places the plastic cup with the lid and the bendy straw in my hands, and I drink quickly, unable to enjoy the wondrous flavor when I’m so anxious.

“She’ll be fine, love. She’s Hermione.” Edward murmurs.

“She’s been through way more dangerous situations,” Leah adds, though more for herself, then for me.

“I don’t know if that really helps, Lee,” Seth notes, seeing both Alice and I stiffen.
“What? It’s true. She has and she’s still alive and kicking so this’ll be a piece of fucking cake.” Leah snaps.

“That’s… equal parts horrifying and oddly comforting.” Alice says, after a short pause.

And then there’s a loud crack, and Hermione appears, face drawn, eyes red-rimmed and swollen. I open my mouth to say something, maybe to yell or maybe to just demand she come over so I can hug her, but then Alice grabs her arm and drags her away, upstairs.

There’s a short pause, and Leah breaks the silence. “Well, they won’t be leaving the bedroom for hours. Gotta love make-up sex.”

I go bright red.
Hermione's POV:

The crime scene looked remarkably similar to muggle ones, only these were Aurors dressed in deep green, black lined robes holding back the reporters instead of the boys in blue, and instead of yellow tape, shimmering shields of silver light protected the integrity of the crime scene.

"I was on call at St Mungos," Harry explains quietly as he leads us past the crowd control, "when I got here, there was nothing I could do, nothing any of us could do. They'd been dead for hours. So I came and got you." I nod, silently apologizing to Alice in my head for just disappearing as I follow him.

As several Aurors step to the side to let us through, I catch my first glimpse of the crime scene and I suck in a horrified breath, and have to remind myself that the crime scene had been secured, that there was no lingering danger about.

It was hard to do, though, when I was looking right down at evil.

The blood was dark now, almost brown like the caked earth on which it was spilled. It puddled in places, a sticky gloom that sent a putrid stench up in the air as it slowly decayed. Speckles of it had been splattered over mottled skin, now disturbingly white and bruised, deeply bruised. Narcissa Malfoy was lying on her side, legs only slightly splayed away from one another, bottom foot pointed.

She almost looked like she was dancing.

One arm curled over her chest to her other shoulder. The other was jutting in a straight line under her head, pillowing it gently. The dark blood had made a trail down her arm at some point, though the ground beneath the limb was devoid of all but a single drop beneath her middle finger.
Once brilliant azure irises now a faded blue, she was staring sightlessly up into the sky, almost as if she had been telling the heavens she was on her way. Her long, sleek coiled icy-blond tresses was gone, instead her head was framed by a halo of raggedly chopped clumps of knotted hair, yet another indignation that had been suffered upon her.

I crouched down close to Narcissa’s torso, surveying her body with a face forced into impassiveness. Her corpse had been split, cut almost completely in half, right at the life of the very last rib save only for a portion of kin and spine at her back that was still attached. Insides, from intestines to spleen, were spread out in the gap between the halves, open to the air and elements.

But it was the tear tracks, still discernible down the once beautiful woman's face that tugged me, that made tears prick at my eyes.

I didn't have to be a Healer or a Healer-In-Training to know that Narcissa's death had not been a quick one.

"And Mal-Draco?" I asked, quietly, just barely able to keep my voice from cracking.

"A few meters over there." Harry jerks his chin towards the other clump of Aurors.

"Is it just as bad?" I ask Harry, looking at him and silently pleading with my eyes that he tell me it wasn't, that it was over quickly and Draco hadn't suffered. Harry gave me a tired, tired look.

"Worse."

Bile rises up my throat, and I swallow several times, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill down my cheeks. "I... I think I'll take your word for it." My voice is hoarse, raspy, and Harry nods.

"I think that's best."

Taking several steps back, I let my gaze sweep over the scene. My stomach was fluttering and my heart seemed to putter, like it could stop any second. It brought on a heavy weight to my chest, and a tingle in my limbs which I recognized as foreboding. I swallowed it down harshly, telling myself not to jump to conclusions.
And then I look at Harry again, at the expression on his face, and I know that I wasn't jumping to conclusions, not at all.

This was just the beginning.

"Alice is going to be pissed." I state, dully, looking down at my coffee. We're sitting in a café, several streets down from the crime scene. I'm trying to settle my stomach, trying to think past the memory of Narcissa's body, perfectly preserved like a series of snapshots in my head.

The sick feeling still hadn't passed. Harry said we should wait until it had before apparating. I told him if we did we'd be here for days. He said we should at least get a drink before heading home. I'd agreed, and started to head towards the nearest pub, only for Harry to drag me away from, and instead to a café.

Not exactly the drink I was thinking of.

"Very," Harry agreed, "you'll be in the doghouse for this one." I groaned, dropping my head to rest on my palms.

I prided myself on my vast knowledge, on my ability to solve ciphers, puzzles, ace tests and such that placed me higher in intelligence levels then most. But right now, I was stumped.

What was I supposed to do?

The smartest thing, and the safest thing, would be to leave Alice and Bella, leave America, until Lucius was caught. By staying with them, I was putting them in danger. Very extreme danger. And that was the last thing I ever wanted to do.

But there was no way in hell I could leave Bella right now. Not when she was about to give birth to a baby vampire hybrid, a process that is not altogether pleasant to read about, if you're not into horror of course. Witnessing it was going to be even worse, but everyone was relying on my magic to keep Bella's heart beating long enough for her to get Turned.
"We need a plan." Harry states.

"Not just a plan," I shake my head at him, "a bloody good one, at that."

But I can't think of anything, and it looks like Harry can't either.

"Maybe the Aurors will catch him," Harry says, expression hopeful as we fork over our money, and head out the door and towards an alley to apparate from. I stayed quiet, quite uncharacteristically so, thinking what neither of us were saying in answer to the question.

Yeah right.

- 

Alice isn't at our house when I get back, so I apparate into the living room of the mansion, where a stony-faced Alice is pacing. "You!" she growls when she sees me. She marches over, grabs my arm, and drags me upstairs and into her room before releasing me. I grit my teeth, putting up a quick silencing charm, ready for the yelling, when instead her arms fling around me, hugging me so tight I have to gasp for breath.

She pulled back and opened her mouth, but I reached up and tangled my hands in her silky hair, pulling her forwards and proceeded to snog the living daylights out of my soul mate. Apparently, Alice had a very similar idea, as my own living daylights were nearly out by the time I realized that my body still required oxygen in order to maintain consciousness.

"I'm still mad," Alice grumbles, leaning her cheek against my chest as I gasp for breath.

"You should be," I admit, "I acted like a complete and total tosser."

"You just left me," Alice's voice is hurt, and she buries her face in the crook of my neck. I cling to her, resting my forehead against the top of her head, inhaling her sweet scent.
"I could never leave you, treasure," I whisper.

"Then why didn't you bring me too?"

"Because..." I searched for the most delicate way to put this, and Alice pulled back, out of my hold, eyes narrowing as she took in my conflicted expression.

"Why, Hermione? Tell me the truth," she demanded.

"Because you're a vampire," I blurt out. Her face is a mask of shock and hurt.

"And you're ashamed?" she whispers, looking and sounding like she's about to burst into tears. I gasp, indignantly.

"What? Bloody hell, Alice, of course not!" I exclaim, "I meant that there's a high chance you could be killed by one of the Aurors if they so much as catch a glimpse of you, or you could be captured and handed over to a magizoologist to be studied- you're the first of your kind, sweetheart- the first vampire to ever be bonded to a witch. The Ministry may not like that." In fact, I knew they wouldn't, stuffy old institute they were, and all that.

"Oh," Alice says, before looking down, a touch of embarrassment and shame mingling with the overall worry on her face. "Sorry I jumped to conclusions."

"And I'm sorry I didn't wait to explain before disapparating off with Harry." I reply. She smiles and steps forwards again, and we hug, tightly. And then her hands are dancing down my back, under the silky material of my camisole, and I raise my hands above my head to help her pull it off.

The exquisite feel of her fingers on my skin is intoxicating. Before Alice I had no idea there was so much to being with someone. This artful slowness. The intimacy of flushed skin against ice.

I could spend the rest of my life like this, but there was only so long I could hold off under her touch. Her lips touched my ear, her cool breath tickling the heated flesh. "I love you." She whispered and then moaned, arching her back, entirely lost to the sensations. And then she said my name, as if pleading with me or enticing me to feel the same. I was only all too eager.
One last movement and I was falling, drifting down, and her arms circled around me, catching me, holding me, even as she let out her own small sounds of completion.

As I became aware of my bearings again, I noted that we hadn't quite made it to the bed, and were instead sprawled on her floor. "Whoops." I note, and she giggles, nuzzling the crook of my neck.

"Whoops." She echoes. I smile for a few moments, and then my smile falls, a more serious expression settling on my face.

"Harry and I have a plan, treasure," I tell her, "and you're not going to like it. Not one bit."

As Alice and I made our way back down to the living room, Emmett was the first to speak up. "You know, I heard some very interesting sounds coming from your bedroom," he snickered. "I had no idea you were that kinky, Hermione."

Outrage crossed my face, and my cheeks turned bright red from intense embarrassment. "I cast the silencing charm myself! How could you have possibly heard-" I cut off abruptly when he burst out laughing.

"That's just hilarious! I didn't hear a thing, but thanks for sharing!" he chuckles. My eyes narrow dangerously, and my hair starts to frizz and crackle with magic.

"I'm going to kill you Emmett!" I seethed, brandishing my wand, and he took a hasty step back.

"Teddy bear, save dada!" he yelps, blurring over to Rosalie and lifting Teddy from her arms, holding him up as a shield. Teddy lets out a delighted giggle, even as Leah and Rosalie send Emmett identical scowls.

"Low, Emmett," I grumble, replacing my wand back up my sleeve, "low." True, I could still curse the spit out of him, but I did love seeing Teddy happy.

"Okay, fun time's over," Leah speaks up, turning her scowl on me. "What the fu-the hell were you
thinking going to England when you know a mad man's hunting you there? Was it even worth it?"

"I don't know," I admit to her, trying to be as honest as possible. "But I... I had to go."

"What was it like?" Bella asks, looking sad. I grimace, remembering when she crossed paths with Draco at Flourish and Blotts. I hoped that wasn't weighing too heavily on her mind.

"Awful," I admit, "horrifying."

"Did you... did you ever talk to Draco?" Her voice is trembling slightly, and my mouth turns down as my hopes of her having forgotten are crushed.

"No," I tell her, honestly.

"You should have!" her voice is reproachful, and I swallow my anger at her comment.

"I owe- I owed," I correct myself, "him nothing. He made his choices in life, Bella, and eventually he did his best to fix them, but that does not detract from what he did. I spoke at his Hearing, I helped get his sentence reduced to community service and a large fine. I didn't have to do that, but I did. It was more then he deserved."

The words taste sour in my mouth.

"Um, Bella broke a rib before. Can you heal it?" Seth pipes up, making a very unsubtle attempt to change the subject.

"What? Why didn't you tell me before?" I demand, stalking over to my twin and giving her an angry look. "Episkey!"

"Ow!" She gasps out, hands cradling her ribcage. I feel myself wilt.

"I'm sorry, Bells," I apologize, and she gives me a shaky smile.
"I'm good, I'm good," she says, "only hurt for a moment."

"I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"No harm done." She states, firmly. I give her a small smile.

"Thanks Bells."

"Now that this is all out of the way," Alice interrupts, "why don't you tell them about your awful plan." She scowls at me.

"You've made a plan?" Bella frowns, "should we be worried?"

"Yes." Alice says, at the same time as I say,

"No."

Bella gives us both a look, and Leah snorts. "Well, go on. Let's hear this masterful proposal."

"It's not- bloody hell, I never said it was a good plan, just a plan, and one that should work." I sigh, before flopping down on the couch next to Bella.

"Well? Spill!" Leah urges.

"There's a price on my head. I say we take advantage of that," I explain.

"I don't like this plan already." Bella frowns.

"It has to be better then any plan you've ever come up with." I scowl at her. She raises an eyebrow.
"At least my plans have never ended with a thirty foot plummet from the back of a blind dragon."

"At least my plans have never ended with me in a ballet studio with a murderous vampire." I retort.

"At least my plans have never ended with me stuck with cat fur and a tail for a month." Bella retorts, just as quick.

"At least my plans have..." I pause, trying to think of another good example, and unfortunately coming up with nothing.

"Ha! I win!" Bella grins. I scowl for a moment, and then inspiration strikes.

"What about when we were nine, and-"

"Okay, okay, we're both terrible!" Bella interrupts, her cheeks turning pink, "now back to the original topic."

"Yes, what's this plan that isn't a good plan but should still work?" Leah quotes me, sarcastically. "Although," she adds, thoughtfully, "I do want to hear about the blind dragon, and the cat tail."

"That makes the two of us," Emmett pipes up, before hiding behind Teddy again, the best a mountain of a man can hide behind a toddler, when Rosalie shoots another glare at him. I smile for a moment, then proceed to explain the, admittedly very rough, idea that Harry and I came up with, once I convinced him that the drink I needed was stronger then coffee.

"There's a bounty on my head and enough Death Eater sympathizers still out there that we can set up a fake meet."

"You plan to use yourself as bait to bring Lucius out into the open," Jasper frowns, "that's risky. How do you know that the sympathizer won't just serve you up?"

"We can either have Aurors watching, detain the sympathizer and use polyjuice or... take a few
"liberties with the law." I add the last option, somewhat reluctantly.

"And by that you mean...?"

"The Imperius Curse."

"Ah." Bella says, blinking. "Ah."

"Do you think the scumbag would really believe whoever caught you?" Leah argues, "He'd have to know it was a trap!"

"Not if we set it up right," I argue back, "I can be in a supposed safe house somewhere, guarded by Aurors, all official as possible. The sympathizer can break in, take down the guards and take me off. We'll fake trying to keep it out of the Prophet, get someone to leak it, so everyone knows. Then the sympathizer can contact Lucius. He'll be skeptical, but with the Aurors holed up in St Mungos pretended to be gravely injured, he should be confident enough to at least show up."

"I don't like it!" Alice repeated, stubbornly.

"Look, it's not ideal, I know, and I wish there was another way, but this is the best idea we've been able to come up with." I say, running a hand through my hair. Jasper looks on, thoughtfully.

"Your plan needs a few tweaks, but it could work," he states, calmly. "How soon do you wish to act?"

"I'd like to start putting things into motion tomorrow at the very latest." I tell him, "I want this to be over with as soon as possible, so I can be here with Bella. The closer to the due date, the riskier it'll be, being away from her." He nods.

"Summon who you need and we can work out the finer details," he says, clearly having slipped into his army major mode.

"I'll go floo them now." I say, grim-faced, rising up from the couch, and making my way to the bedroom upstairs that Leah stayed in, the one Esme installed the fireplace in.
The thought of being in close proximity to Lucius made my stomach crawl, but this was the best plan I could think of. It had to work. It would work.

Oh Merlin, I hoped it worked...
Chapter Twenty

CHAPTER TWENTY:

Hermione’s POV:

“I don’t like this.” Alice muttered, for the thousandth time.

“I know.” I replied, somewhat absently. My mind was occupied, whirring with possibilities, plans, back up plans...

“I really don’t like this.”

“Mm.”

Alice smacked my arm lightly and scowled. “Sorry.” I wince, rubbing over where my new bruise was going to form.

“You should be.” Alice grumbled, before sighing, and wrapping her arms around my waist. “I’m scared.” She told me, her green eyes wide and shimmery. My heart sunk.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” I told her, honestly, “I really wish there was another way, or a better plan, or something. Anything.”

We were standing out the front of the mansion, waiting for Harry’s signal that everything was ready for part one of the plan he, Jasper, Ron and I had spent the better half of this day concocting and going over with a fine-tooth comb.

Theodore Nott had been offered a year off his community service and a 5% decrease in his fine for his crimes during War to play the part of the kidnapper. Rita Skeeter would be the one to print the
news I’d been kidnapped from a safe house, and that the Aurors guarding me were in critical condition in St Mungos. Photos would be leaked of said Aurors, pretending to be in critical condition. Nott would contact Lucius and organize a meet. When Lucius arrived, I’d notify everyone by use of the DA galleon, and they’d apparate to the location and Lucius would be caught.

We’d planned for basically every contingency, from what I’d do if I couldn’t get my hands on the DA galleon, to if Nott double-crossed us. I felt as prepared as I’d ever be.

It was now around six in the evening, and the sun was starting to sink. It was one of those rare times when the basically constant heavy overcast was gone, and the sky was lit up in brilliant shades of pinks, oranges and reds. I was dressed in simple black trousers and a jacket, my hair was braided tightly, and my wand holster was strapped to my forearm.

My, for want of a different word, ‘battle ready-outfit’ was a severe contrast to the calf-length navy silk taffeta dress Alice was wearing, with its strapless, high boned under bodice and skirt gathered and swept in wide, unpressed pleats to the hem. I’d long since gotten used to Alice wearing the most extraordinary outfits for the most mundane of occasions, and I could tell this was one of the dresses she’d designed on her own.

I almost flinched when my DA galleon started heating up in my pocket. A rush of nerves flowed through me, and I took a couple of deep breaths. “Okay, okay,” I mumbled to myself, “I can do this.” I took another deep breath, and cleared my mind, not dissimilar to the Occlumency process, concentrating on nothing but the three D’s- Determination, Deliberation and Destination.

Holding Alice’s smaller hand in my own, I spun, and we disappeared with a loud pop, appearing at the co-ordinates Harry gave me earlier. The fake safe house looked more like a safe shack, then anything. It was a decrepit, falling apart wooden structure, surrounded by grunge.

Two Aurors, in their deep green, gray lined combat robes nodded respectfully at me from where they were, one standing at attention by the front door, the other making circuits around the shack.

“Miss Granger,” the closest Auror, the one by the front door, greeted me eagerly. “I’m Orius Brewster, it’s such an honor to meet you!”

“Just call me Hermione, Orius.” I tried to smile, despite the nerves in my stomach. I didn’t correct him about the ‘Miss Granger’ comment, as my marriage to Alice was still a heavily guarded secret- for her safety. Alice understood that me keeping the relationship under wraps and out of the public eye wasn’t because I was ashamed or embarrassed, but because I was protective of her.
Orius was a friendly looking Auror, a young one, maybe in his early twenties. He had tousled light brown hair, a bright smile and laughing blue eyes.

The other Auror; Auror Joe Brown- and there was definitely no invitation to use his first name- was much older, at least four or five decades so. He had shoulder length greying hair and a scowl that seemed permanently etched onto his olive spotted face. I wondered if he was related at all to Lavender?

He was the one who first spotted what Alice was, and in a second his wand was out, and pointed at her. “No!” I shouted, throwing up a shield in front of her. Alice let out a little gasp, green eyes wide, as the flames collided with my shield of shimmering light.

“That’s a vampire,” Brown snapped, gesturing at Alice, “I need to get rid of it.”

“She’s my friend,” I state, firmly, “there will be no getting rid of her. She won’t be here for long, Harry’s coming to get her in an hour or two.” Brown scowled at us both, before spinning around and marching off.

Alice let out a small, shaky breath, and her small hand grabbed mine, squeezing a touch harder then what was comfortable, but I didn’t wince or pull away- she’d had a fright. I would have had one too, had I not been expecting it. Instead, I just felt equal parts tired and pissed off.

“Let’s go in,” I mutter to Alice, hurrying over to the doorway of the falling apart shack, giving Orius a quick, strained smile as we passed him. Alice followed me soundlessly, letting me drag her along.

As soon as we were in the shack, I shut and locked the door, set up several privacy wards, and then wrapped my arms around her. She hugged me back, her body still half frozen from her shock.

“I never realized,” she told me, in a hushed, hurt voice, “I always thought you were exaggerating when you said that I could be killed on sight. I didn’t realize… didn’t realize you were being one hundred percent honest.”

“I’m sorry, Alice,” I tell her, sincerely, and she hugs me tighter, before stepping back slightly to cast a critical eye over our surroundings. It was not exactly up to Alice standards- no, not in the least.
"Home sweet hovel." she grumbled, examining the room we were standing in. It was dark, and the hole in the wall that was supposed to be the window was covered with a yellowing sheet of material. Barely two by two meters, the ratty couch shoved against the wall under the 'window' took up most of the space.

This was the first out of three rooms, though two of them- the bedroom and the bathroom- were only separated by a screen, so I wasn’t sure it counted as two rooms. “They seriously couldn’t find anything better?” Alice asks.

“It appears not.” I tell her, dryly, and she lets out a loud, long-suffering sigh, and I’m glad to see she’s cheered up slightly, if only because she’s probably imagining burning this wreck to the ground.

“At least we’re together, for now anyway,” she decides, “which room would you like to try out first?” She winked at me and, despite the tenseness of the situation, I couldn’t help but smile back at her.

"You have a one track mind, sweetheart."

"That's not true," she pouts, “I also spend a great deal of time planning and committing nefarious deeds.” This time I laugh aloud.

"I can't believe I think that is cute. You really have way too much sway over me."

"I should. I'm your soul mate." She reminded me, before yanking me forwards into a bruising kiss. There’s a sense of franticness to her movements, and I can tell from every touch, every caress, that she’s panicking, worried. Scared.

We end up actually making it to the bed, though mainly because we didn’t really want to touch anywhere else in the awful place, unsure of either where it had been or what, in fact, its purpose was.

Afterwards, Alice lays curled up next to me, like a small kitten, her slim, tiny fingers playing with the ring on my left hand, the expensive band that was a symbol of my love and devotion to the vampire in my arms.
A thought struck me, as I watched her, and I let out a soft groan.

“What? Are you hurt?” Alice immediately asks, sitting bolt upright in the bed, ring forgotten. I try not to swallow too hard at the side of an undressed Alice with pale blue sheets pooling around her hips.

“No, I just realized that I should probably not wear my wedding ring on my hand, in case…”

“Something goes wrong.” Alice finishes, gently, for me. “And Lucius gets away.”

“Exactly.” I agree, “and seeing the ring will give him more leverage.” Alice appears to think for a moment before unfastening something around her neck, so she’s holding, in her hand, a long gold chain.

“Here,” she murmured, gently easing the ring off my finger, and then she threaded it through the necklace, before fastening the necklace around my neck so that the warm ring of silver is resting of my heart.

“There,” Alice sighed, happily, leaning back against me. “All better again.”

“Mm,” I smiled and kissed her on the nose and she giggled.

There was a hesitant knock, and both of us dressed quickly, me tucking my ring under my sweater, before we made our way down to the front door.”

Our visitor turned out to be Harry, an apologetic look on his face as he swapped me Alice for a small pearl button. “It’s touch activated,” Harry explained, though mostly to Alice. I examined it, turning it over in my hands carefully.

“Standard activation?”

“Keyed to your touch and the code-word.” He confirms. I give him a small smile.
“Take care of Alice for me.” I tell him, ignoring her indignant ‘hey!’ at the comment.

“I will.” He promises, solemnly, though his eyes are twinkling. Alice scowls at the pair of us, and mutters something uncomplimentary under her breath. I give her a long hug, and we kiss deeply before Harry apparates her away.

I stand there, staring at the closed door, for several long minutes, before sighing and turning around, making my way over to the old torn couch and sitting down heavily. I pull out my DA galleon, and fiddle with the serial numbers so they read: PART2GO

And then I wait for the second half of the plan to be put into action.

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I don’t have to wait long. Several loud bangs and the sound of shouting break up the gloomy silence, and I know that Nott has arrived for the fake duel. Pulling out my wand, I dash out of the shack, ready to start ‘dueling’, when I let out a surprised cry, instincts kicking as a stream of violent purple rushes towards me, and I dive-roll away.

I’m back on my feet at around the same time as the spell collides and I gape at the damage it’s, at the deep gouges in the wood. I then turn to gape at the person who cast the spell- Auror Orius Brewster.

“Wh-what did you do?” I ask him, my voice verging on shrill. He doesn’t answer, just shoots another spell at me, this one a sickly blue color that I just manage to dodge. A bone-breaker curse.

“Get behind me!” Brown bellows, and as I conjure up a shield to absorb the next volley of spells Brewster shoots at me, I spare a second to quickly glance over at him, and my heart thuds unsteadily as I watch him dueling the man I recognize as Theodore Nott, the person who is supposed to fake kidnap me to take me to Lucius. The problem with that is that Nott is definitely not fake-dueling. And for some reason, Brewster is not fake-dueling alongside him.

Multiple cracks cue the appearance of hooded figures, their faces disguised, but their intent clear as they started fighting alongside Nott and Brewster.
Curses were flying everywhere - bolts of green, blue and red light flashing around me. And for a moment, I’m back in the chaos of the Battle of Hogwarts.

Like a horrific slideshow frames of memory flooded my mind, each scene more shocking than the last. Dead, dead, dead, so many dead and dying and screaming… and above it all was Voldemort, Voldemort laughing – laughing as the wizarding world fell to its knees before him – laughing as the future died in front of him.

“Granger! Get over here!” Bellows Brown, and I’m pulled out of my memories. Following his instructions, I twist on the spot, trying to apparate over to Brown, and let out a cry of frustration as nothing happens. I realize, abruptly, they’ve put up anti-apparation wards. Fear is starting to trickle through me- things are going very, very wrong.

Sweat begins streaking down the sides of my face, and my breath is harsh, burning my lungs. It’s seven against two, and we’re losing.

This realization hits me a second before a flash of green light strikes Brown in the chest.

“NO!” I shriek, horrified, as Brown’s body flops to the ground, as if some switch had just been turned off inside him. I back up, dueling frantically, blocking spell after spell, as all attention is turned to me, and the attackers press forwards, their spells steadily increasing in their viciousness, and I manage to cast a few curses of my own, but it’s painfully obvious that my best chance is to get the hell out of here.

Conjuring up the strongest shield I can, my hands dives into my pocket, searching for the button. A thrill of fear rushes up and down my spine as I can’t locate it, and only a second after a vibrant red spell slams into my chest do I realize that I put it in the other pocket.

The last thing I see, before the world goes black, is my wand, my one and only defense, falling to the ground. And I can hear the sound of laughter; eerie, dangerous laughter. Laughter that I’m not sure is really happening, or is an echo of a memory trapped in my head.

We’d planned for so many contingencies, but one of the Aurors double-crossing us had never even entered our minds.
Chapter Twenty-One

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:

Bella's POV:

When Harry apparated into the living room, a downright dangerous look on his face, his magic flaring around him, wild and out of control, causing the frames on the wall to shake, and one to fall to the ground, wood splintering, glass shattering, we all knew that something had gone wrong. Seriously wrong.

And then I saw the wand in his hand.

"No!" Alice let out a cry of pure anguish, recognizing the wand, same as I did. It was her wand. Hermione's wand. "She's alright, she's fine, she's alive, please!" she begged Harry, blurring over to appear in front of the raging dark-haired young man, "tell me she's okay- please!"

A loud whimper escaped me, and tears welled up in my eyes. No, no, no, no, no! This was Hermione! She was fine! She had to be fine!

"We don't know." Harry's voice is trembling with fury. "She's gone, one of the Auror's guarding her is dead, the other's in St Mungos, along with Nott."

"What do we do?" Alice just about screams in his face, "we need to find her! You need to find her! He could be torturing her as we speak!"

"You think I don't know that!" Harry shouts, his magic exploding out of him, sending Alice flying backwards, along with half the furniture in the room. I freeze in terror. I know Harry would never hurt me, but I've never seen him like this. Ever.

And then his face crumples, and he's crying, big, wet tears. Alice's small arms are wrapped around him, and the little pixie vampire is crying too, the tearless sobs of a vampire.
The sound of apparating fills the living room, and the wary Cullens, along with Jacob, Seth and Leah, form a half ring around me, while witches and wizards, half of whom I've never seen before, appear.

Some I recognize, like the Weasleys- including, to my surprise, a tired-looking but steely-eyed George, the Headmistress of Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall and Fleur, but others, like the tall dark skinned man in blue robes, or the light-haired witch with a square jaw, I'd never seen before in my life.

Fleur strides over to me, perhaps taking pity on me after reading the confusion and fear on my face. "Bella, mon cher," she says, with a strained sort of half smile, "meet zee Order of zee Phoenix."

I gape and take another look at the thirty odd people in the living room of the mansion. This was the Order of the Phoenix? "Zey are under strict instructions not to 'urt any of zee vampires 'ere."
Fleur adds, and a pang of guilt hits me when I realized the thought of the Cullens been in danger never even struck my mind.

The dark skinned man and McGonagall call the meeting to order. "Our mission," the man said, in a deep voice, "is to find Hermione. We do not know how much time we have, but we have to assume not long."

My heart leaped into my throat, and my stomach rolled. I was pretty sure I was about to be sick. "Aurors are going over every inch of every property we know Lucius owns," Ron said, face equal parts ashen and stony.

"All the magical traces left are been examined by Unspeakables," adds the dark skinned man.

Tears trickled down my face and I cradled my swollen stomach as I listened to them plan and brainstorm, but the fact of the matter was they had no idea how they were supposed to find her. My sister.

Fleur's expression was growing grimmer and grimmer, and eventually she cleared her throat- loudly- causing a lull in the noise levels in the room. "I 'ave an idea," she stated, loudly, "we use a blood ritual to locate 'ermione."
Silence, dead silence, filled the room, and then, "that's Old Magick, Fleur." Ron stated, his voice hard. Fleur tossed her head, her eyes meeting his angrily.

"And?" She demanded.

"And it's illegal! Old Magick has been outlawed ever since the Magical Extremities and Instability Act of 1781," Ron exclaimed, "and on top of that, blood magic’s not exactly Light Magic we're talking about here! It’s dark stuff, Fleur!"

"Zis could be our only chance to find 'er!" Fleur exclaimed, "zat malveillant abâtardi 'as our 'ermione and who knows what 'e is doing to 'er!"

Someone whimpered, and I wasn't exactly surprised to find out it was me. "Fleur-" Bill started, but was interrupted.

"Don't Fleur me, William!" Fleur exploded at her husband, and I noticed for the first time, that her blue eyes had turned completely black and... were her nails growing? "Je ne peux pas, je ne vais pas, laissez-lui faire du mal Hermione!" she raged, beginning to pace back and forth.

"I cannot, I will not, let him hurt Hermione," Edward translated for me, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered.

"Je vais pas rester ici à attendre quand je peux faire quelque chose!" Fleur's hands were starting to send off wisps of dark grey smoke, and I watched in horrified fascination as the back of her beautiful ragon silk blouse started to rip as something grew underneath.

"I will not just stand here waiting when I can be doing something," Edward continued to translate.

"Si aucun d'entre vous ont les testicules à le faire, alors je le ferai! Je ne vous laisserai pas m'arrêter!" Fleur spat, and her blouse fell to the ground as long, scaly wings exploded from her shoulder blades.

"Holy fuck!" Someone shouted- either Emmett or Jacob, or maybe both, and I stared with a kind of horrified curiosity as Fleur's beautiful face twisted into that of some kind of cruel-beaked bird mutation. Flames burned in her hands, and by all rights she should look ugly, but instead there was a sort of feral beauty about her.
I'd always thought of Veela as pretty, but I'd never thought of them as dangerous, not like a vampire. But seeing Fleur now? I knew I was wrong. There was something very dangerous about the emotionally raw Veela right now.

"Wh-what was that last thing she said?" I barely managed to whisper to Edward. He paused for a moment, obviously having to tear his mind away from the sight before us, to remember what the Veela said.

"If none of you have the, er, balls to do it, then I will. I will not let you stop me." He whispered, finally.

"Oh." I murmured.

"Fleur, love, calm down," Bill was coaxing his wife, "calm down. You don't want to hurt the baby." He'd pulled off his cloak and held it up to cover Fleur's breasts, exposed when her blouse tore. For a long, somewhat tense, moment, Fleur and Bill's eyes remained locked, and then the wings were receding, and Fleur's face was back to its beautiful normality. The fire was gone (I noted all the vampires relaxing slightly at that) and the wicked talons were gone, leaving only French tips behind.

"Oh Bill!" Fleur sobbed, half collapsing into her husband's arms. "Je ne peux pas la perdre, je ne peux pas perdre tout le monde!"

"Oh love," Bill soothed her, the best he could, "let's go outside for a moment, okay?" Fleur nodded, sniffing, and I watched as her husband led the beautiful Veela out of the room.

Edward's face looked tight and grave as he looked after her. "What did she say?" I ask him, "That last thing- what did she say?"

"She said," Edward paused, clearing his throat slightly, "she said that she couldn't lose her. That she couldn't lose anyone else."

"Why can't we use that blood magic stuff?" I asked, loudly, wanting to know the answer. The attention of most of the room turned to me, and I hoped I didn't look as terrified as I felt.
"Well, we don't have any of her blood for start," someone said, their voice thick with scathing. I hold my chin up higher.

"I'm her twin. We have practically identical DNA make-up." I inform them, and they scowl and mutter something. I'm about to ask again, when someone else spoke up.

"Hermione has told you about Dark Magic, yes?" The dark skinned man asked, in his deep, pleasant voice. I frowned.

"Um, not really. Not much." I confess, "but can't we make an exception, just this once? To save Hermione?" I pleaded. The man opens his mouth, but Harry shakes his head.

"I'll take this, Kingsley." He says, and the dark skinned man, Kingsley- holy shit, didn't Hermione say a man called Kingsley was the Minister of Magic? Wait, not the time... I thrust those thoughts away, instead turning my full attention towards Harry.

"Harry," I let my desperation fill my voice, "please... please!"

"Edward, Alice, can you help me carry her outside?" He asks the vampires near me, "that way we can have some more privacy."

Impossibly strong arms are instantly lifting me, cradling me, the heavy quilt still swaddled around me, protectively. I bury my face in Edward's shoulder until I hear Harry muttering a spell I've heard Hermione use before, many times. A silencing spell.

"Okay, we need to be quick," he said, instantly, conjuring what looked like a handful of bluebell colored flames which hovered in mid-air. Edward seemed to pull back from it, reflexively, as did Alice.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I need your blood," Harry works fast, transfiguring a leaf into a dagger. Hope flares up inside me.

"We're doing it?" I gasp, shock and relief filling me.
"We need to be quick." Harry says, grimly, before turning to Edward. "Can you handle her blood?"

"I can." Edward's answer is short, clipped, but Harry ignores it. Alice's face is shining with a forbidden hope.

"This will really find her?"

"Yes." Harry said, only pausing for a moment. "I need your blood, Bella," he said, and taking a deep breath, I accepted the blade with trembling hands, and dragged it along my skin, wincing as it sliced apart the fragile flesh. Harry grabbed my hand, pulling it forwards so the blood rolled off my arm and into the flames. It was Fleur who cast the spell, chanting in a harsh language that I didn’t recognize. "Krūv za da namerite krūv!" The most bizarre sensation washed over me as instead of leaking from the cut, it felt like my blood was being dragged out of it.

The flames flared red, the same color as my blood, and there was a flash of magic as the spell took hold. Fleur’s entire body went rigid and her irises turned a horrifying shade of crimson, of blood. And then she started stating directions, in a voice that was flat and monotone, with no trace of her accent present. "West Europe, Northwest Europe, British Isles, Britain, Wales, Anglesey, Tros yr Afon. She's at Tros yr Afon Castle, Anglesey Island, Wales!"

Then, for a long horrifying moment, the blood-colored flames seemed to grow, and I started to get dizzy as more and more blood started gushing from my veins, as if the fire was fueled by blood instead of oxygen- my blood.

"Bella!" Edward's voice was panicked, and he was trying to pull me away, but my arm was frozen in place, and the flames were starting to lick around the skin, searing it, causing the flesh to blacken and then-

-then I was tumbling backwards, and warm arms caught both me and Edward, supporting us, and sounds of horrified pain ripped from my throat as I gazed down at my arm in horror.

"Bella, Bella, Bella, Bella!" Edward and Jacob's voices swam together, both frantic and panicked. And then Fleur was there, kneeling before me, pregnant stomach and everything.

"Caro Sancta. Caro Sancta. Caro Sancta." She chanted the words at my exposed flesh letting her wand hover right above the large wound. The magic expelled from her wand strung into a silver
pattern across the skin, entwining with each other into an intricate web, slowly filling the charred, blistering burn wound. Fleur's chanting turned into a flow like a song and I watched the spell turn solid, to shifting colors and finally turning to flesh. It was raw flesh, pink and sensitive like a newborn's skin, but the gaping wound, ripped open by magic, and the horrendous burns from the Dark fire were gone.

"Her-Hermione?" I gasped, as soon as I could talk again.

"Zey 'ave gone to get 'er." She promised, "rest. Sleep. 'eal." I nod, weakly, and close my eyes, trying to ignore the Darkness lingering inside me. There was a blackness in my blood. I felt a thick, dark weight push through me with every hollow heartbeat. It pounded in my temples, ached on my forehead, sludged with freezing tendrils to my limbs and skin.

It felt wrong. Evil. And, as if the previous display hadn't been enough, I now had a very good idea of why, exactly, the Blood Ritual was considered Dark.

"For Hermione," I think I said it out loud, but at this point, with my mind swimming in and out of reality, I'm not sure.
Hermione's POV:

I let out a low groan as awareness slowly filtered back through my body. My eyelids felt heavier then lead, my body ached and my head was throbbing something fierce. What had happened? I wondered, trying to move, trying to sit up. That's when I noticed the ropes.

They were almost as thick as my wrist, and trapped my arms, painfully, behind my back. I was stuck in a kneeling position, and a loop of the rope tying my hands was similarly binding my ankles together. And they were tight. I couldn't feel my hands, the circulation having been cut off, and I was almost too squeamish to look around, not wanting to see the horrible purple color I knew they'd be.

Taking calming breaths, I turned my attention away from myself, and over to my surroundings. I was mostly surrounded by grey; grey walls, grey ceiling, grey floors. There were no windows I could use to tell the time by, only a single artificial light above my head.

The last thing I remembered before the sharp pain in my head was... my wand on the ground and the same low chuckling that I could hear now. Amused, aristocratic... dangerous. Fighting back the fear pounding in my chest, I turned towards the sound, ignoring the crick in my neck, to see him standing there.

Lucius Malfoy. He was thinner then I remembered, and his once glorious shoulder-length silver-blonde hair was stringy, greasy. The clothes he wore hung off his thin frame, and there was a certain look in his eyes that was new, that hadn't been there the last time I had faced him. A look that terrified me more then anything else.

Because that look clearly stated one thing- Lucius had nothing left to lose. "Miss Granger, what a delight." He smiled, a sick, sick smile that spoke of pain and suffering and revenge.
"Malfoy," I spit out, between gritted teeth. He laughs, once more, but the sound is without humor.

"I told you we'd be meeting again, did I not?" He grins, prowling around so he's standing in front of me. I scowl.

"You talk too much."

"And you don't?" he countered. His left hand slipped out of view for a second, before re-emerging, a slim ebony stick now held in his fingers. I couldn't help the fear that flooded me at the sight of the wand, and, without my permission, my body cringed away.

This made him smile, and then the wand was pointed at my chest and he was speaking. Every nerve in my body exploded in pain, a crawling, sharp, burning pain that had enough continuous variation that my mind could never become desensitized to it. It rolled through my body like a plague and destroyed all resistance, tearing down all barriers like tissue. I was screaming, screaming and thrashing in my constraints. Pain, so much pain, unbelievable pain. I screamed until I couldn't, and only then did he lift the Cruciatus Curse.

I was curled up on the ground, trembling fiercely. My trousers were soaked from when I'd lost control of my bladder and a stream of blood trickled from my mouth. I prayed it was over, but as I looked up and my eyes met his, I knew it had barely begun.

My world again burst into the same unimaginable pain, my body convulsing with it, thrashing against the hard floor. Nerves were flayed by the spell, burning raw under the power of the magic until all I seemed to know was the white flare of pain, until I was again lying there on the marble gasping for air and sobbing.

I didn't get much time for relief, before an invisible force dragged my up so I was kneeling again, and Lucius looked down at me, amused. "What's this?" he asked, reaching forwards and yanking the dainty gold chain around my neck with enough force to break it. My breath caught in my throat as I realized that during my thrashing the necklace had fallen out of my shirt, and I stared at the ring he now held, with a degree of horror.

His face twisted into an expression of glee as he recognized what it was that he held. "A wedding ring? Well, well, Granger, this is a surprise," he sneered, "is it still Granger?" he then pondered, out loud, before shrugging and chuckling. "No matter, it looks like there's a new player in our little game."
My breath caught in my throat, and I started shaking my head, wildly, ignoring the sharp pains the movement brought. "No! Don't you dare go near her!" I shouted, furious, heart pounding in my chest.

"'Her'?" Lucius smirked, before tipping back his head and laughing. "Oh this is going to be fun."

Anger filled me, white-hot anger, and it was like a sheen of red had been placed over my eyes. The ropes binding me tore, and then I was standing, arms free, legs free. I had a split second to enjoy the look of apprehensive confusion on Lucius' face, but then I was leaping towards him, knocking the wand from his grasp, my fingers curled like claws.

I raked my nails down his face, aiming for his eyes, and his foot crashed into my stomach, sending me flying down onto my back with a heavy thud, knocking the air from my lungs. I sputtered to catch my breath, but he was already on me, angry eyes piercing down like daggers, blood trailing down his face like crimson tears, while his long fingers wrapped tightly around my throat and squeezed.

My scalp tightened under his strong grip as the blood was cut off along with my breathing, and I struggled to fend him off with my small hands. Just as the dark clouds began to appear around the corners of my vision, he made a mistake and moved his weight to gain better leverage, exposing his ribs to my swiftly moving knee. One good hit was all it took to knock him off me, knock him across the room, crashing into the wall with a force that shouldn't have come from me. He let out a yell, clutching his side while I regained my footing and gasped for air, coughing and gagging.

Wherever my freak strength had come from, it was rapidly draining now, and after the torture I was in no match to fight the older, stronger man. As he rushed to the wand, to where it had landed across the room, I scrambled backwards. A stream of blue light that missed me by about an inch told me Lucius had the wand back. I dug my hands in my pockets, praying that he'd messed up, that he'd left my Portkey in there, but it was gone.

Oh Merlin, oh Merlin, oh Merlin! I chanted mentally, horrified. I would fight to my last breath, but I had a feeling that that moment wasn't exactly far off. And then a miracle happened.

The sound of apparating filled the cellar, and suddenly there were more bodies crowded in here. For a second or two, I could see Lucius' murderous expression, met his cold, cold eyes, but then he disappeared in a swarm of black smoke.

Warm arms lifted me up, someone pressed something into my hand and muttered 'portus' and then world was much too blurry. I was spinning, spinning, then I was sprawled over the grass in a very
familiar looking yard.

"Hermione!" Alice just about screamed in relief, blurring over to my side and pulling me up into her arms. My head lolled weakly, and I gave her a watery smile, before closing my eyes, and relaxing for the first time since the trap was set.

"Alice..." I breathed. My body ached, my mind was swimming, and shapes were dancing before my eyes. Alice rocked me gently, and I tried not to flinch as the movements caused pain to flare through me.

"Shh,' Alice half-cooed, half-coaxed, "shh, you're going to be fine, sweetie."

"Know I will. I've got you." I whisper, hoarsely, feeling waves of peace and calm and sleepiness roll over me, foreign emotions I know are the work of a certain blonde vampire. Part of me noted that I would probably be annoyed at this if I was thinking clearly, but I wasn't thinking clearly and I just couldn't bring myself to care, so I snuggled into my mate's arms and let myself drift away.

And I dreamed.

The décor of Shell Cottage left something to be desired, I noted, as my gaze flicked around the empty bedroom. When I was younger, before Hogwarts, before any of this, I'd read a book about sea dwelling creatures, and obviously some of the information had stuck with me, as my tired brain threw out the name of the various remnants which lined the walls.

It was odd how some things stayed with you.

I couldn't remember the name of the well meaning relative who'd given me the book, just that Jeanne Granger had passed it to me on my birthday, and that, as a young academic who was already reading Shakespeare, I wasn't that impressed by what I'd believed at the time to be a fairytale, a book of make-believe.

A spasm of pain flitted along my ragged nerves and I stiffened slightly.

Yes the décor was really horrible. Not a very kind observation perhaps, but I wasn't in a very forgiving mood.
In fact, I had never been so angry in my entire life. Not even at Renee, the mother who'd given me away, or Umbridge in my fifth year- hell, not even at Ron three months ago...

The cotton sheets bunched under me as I clenched my hands into fists and collected my thoughts, ignoring the twinge the action brought. Merlin's balls, I was so bloody angry.

Angry at myself- angry that I hadn't run faster, fought harder, tried to apparrate. Angry that we'd been caught in the first place and for the stupidest of reasons- one verbal slip had caused...this? It seemed preposterous. And I was furious with Harry and Ron- oh yes, they'd been concerned and sympathetic but they just expected me to be okay? After being tortured?

Pages of Dan Granger's medical journals slipped to the forefront of my mind. People who went through terrible ordeals were emotionally scarred for years later. They suffered panic attacks, hallucinations, phobias... they had numerous problems. I wouldn't just be okay.

A nearby lamp exploded and I breathed in to try and rein in my emotions. I was panicking and my magic was out of control. I could only imagine what a full-blown anxiety attack might do right now.

I focused on my problem as I would a homework assignment. If I could just pretend this was happening to somebody else, perhaps I would be able to function.

What would I do at Hogwarts?

Ah yes.

Look up the effects of the Cruciatius Curse.

Well there was the obvious. The pain caused by the Curse was enough to send people mad. It had in fact, Alice and Frank Longbottom being prime examples. Short term of exposure needed only a day's rest and a determinable amount of pain-relief potion, and rarely had any lasting effects. Repeated exposure was a slightly greyer area and generally patients were treated as needed.

However the spell kept up, without respite, for a great length time, and repeated over and over,
was a different matter. Often the victims broke bones or tore ligaments in their writhing. Others suffered subdural hematomas, went insane, or were tortured into paralysis and comas. In that respect I had been rather lucky.

I laughed quietly and it echoed emptily around the room.

Lucky.

That was the thing about the Unforgivable. The feeling that every cell in your body was on fire, it wasn't imagined. The curse actually caused the pain. It was real.

I hummed and twitched my fingers, as though rubbing out a mistake. That wasn't relevant.

Treatment courses...Not only would a continuous dosage of pain-relief potions for several months be completely necessary, but also Pepper-Up, muscle relaxant and bed rest. As well as that, the patient would be in pain for several weeks. There was no known antidote to the paralysis or insanity, those who suffered subdural hematomas usually died quickly, only about half of the victims who ended up in comas ever woke up.

My arm twitched and a spike of pain tensed my exhausted body. I didn't look down. I didn't need to. The sight of it, of the bloody wounds, was already seared into my brain, etched permanently onto my memory. And this...this was what made me truly furious. Because of what Bellatrix had done to me, I would have to live with the memory of how bloody scared I had been everyday. Because I had been scared. Terrified. I had no doubt that had Harry and Ron taken even just a few more minutes, Bellatrix would have lost interest and I would have been dead.

A dead witch walking.

Never had mortality been so close to me. I'd been through a lot in my seven years in the magical world, but never in all my "adventures" had I seriously been in a position where I was just waiting to die. Not even when the Death Eaters ambushed us in the Department of Mysteries.

I was the brightest witch of my age, but not that, nor any of the thousands of books I'd read, would have stopped Bellatrix from slitting my throat with that silver knife, or casting the spell that would have stopped my heart.
One Avada Kedavra was all it took...

My eyes fluttered open and a pitiful sound escaped my mouth. My head hurt, my body hurt and I knew this pain, this shaking. Darkness rose up once more, and I eagerly let it pull me back under, into another memory.

"The only good Mudblood is a dead Mudblood." Lucius smiled, a twisted smile. I felt my protective mechanism kick in, my ability to cut myself off completely from my emotions. In this state, sarcasm and underhanded remarks were my best friends, and the only thing that came out of my mouth. It may not be as loud or explosive as just releasing anger by yelling or getting physical, but dealing with Slytherins was different, deadlier.

And when used correctly it could destroy someone from the inside out, and I found that infinitely more satisfying than beating someone to a pulp. Though that did have its appeal.

"I thought you were smarter than this, Lucius," I scoffed, rolling my eyes, even as I kept my wand pointed firmly in his direction. He chuckled, prowling in a circle, forcing me to copy his movements, in order to keep him in my line of sight.

"Pray tell me, Mudblood, where I failed your expectations?"

"You could have escaped. Gone anywhere in the world. With your money and international connections, it would have been nearly impossible to track you down. But you couldn't let go of your wealth, had to surround yourself with your riches. You had to have known it would only be a matter of time before I broke the wards on your properties and found where you were."

"Maybe I wanted this," Lucius countered, his eyes glittering dangerously, "maybe I wanted you to find me." My heart beat a little quicker, but I refused to let my brief flare of fear show on my face.

"I can actually believe that," I agree, "because you need to feel superior. With everything else gone, this is the only way you have left to try and prove that you were more than just Voldemort's sniveling sycophant. By killing me before going into hiding, you're leaving your own mark in history. But there's a problem with that."

"A problem?" Lucius sneered, "pray tell me, where this 'problem' is?"
"The fact that you never were and never will be more than just Voldemort's sniveling sycophant. That's the problem." A shadow of fury crossed Lucius' face before he managed to wipe it clean of emotion.

"You've gotten better, Mudblood. Those emotions you hold so clearly for the world to see are undeniably Gryffindor, but the way you express them ... that's all Slytherin."

"At least that gave the Sorting Hat several possibilities for where to place me. Not like you. Your self-preservation is the only thing that got you into Slytherin, Lucius. You were too dumb for Ravenclaw, too cowardly for Gryffindor and too selfish for Hufflepuff. You really didn't leave the Hat with any option." I countered. Lucius' face flickered again, and I smirked, triumphantly.

"Enough with this," he spat, before a twisted smirk spread over his face, "let's dance, Mudblood."

And the first curse flew my way.

"No... no, no, no, no, no..." Icy hands stroked my sweaty, flushed skin, and I let out a pained gasp.

"I'm not an idiot." I told Harry, stubbornly. Lucius Malfoy was officially in custody, and I'd done a runner from St Mungos as soon as I woke up, not wanting to be there any longer than I had to be. Harry had found me within half an hour, and he was unimpressed.

"No, you prat, but sometimes you act like one." Harry responded, glowering at me.

“Lucius Malfoy is finished, that’s all that matters!”

“You went after him alone!” Harry exploded, “I know that since Bellatrix is dead, he’s the only one you can hunt down for revenge, but you could have died, Hermione!”

“It would have been worth it to see him dead!” I responded, with a ferocious glare.

“Hermione,” Harry suddenly hesitated, “he’s not dead. The Healers saved his life.”
“What?” I shrieked.

“He was still breathing when you brought him back. They fixed him back up. He’s going to sit trial, and he’ll be sentenced to rot in Azkaban. That’s what’s right, Hermione. That’s what we fought for- we’re the good guys. We don’t kill our enemies.”

Tears start running down my face, then. “I don’t feel like a good guy, Harry. Not anymore.” I tell him, my voice choked up. Harry sighs, and pulls me into his arms, his anger drained from him.

“Me either.”

My eyes flew open as I gasped, chest heaving. I could feel the pain firing through my nerves, but I ignored it. I ignored the room I was in, the room Alice and I shared at the Cullen mansion and I ignored my beautiful mate, who was sitting with my head on her lap, her hands running through my hair, over my face, stroking my neck.

No, I ignored all that and instead focused on pushing back the rush of memories.

If I wanted to keep safe, to keep Alice safe and Bella safe and the rest of my family safe, then there was one thing I had to do. Something I should have done a long, long time ago.

I was going to hunt Lucius down and this time I was going to finish him properly.

He wouldn’t be returning to Azkaban again.

A sense of not peace, but calmness flooded over me, and the panic, the anxiety, the fear... just drained. I rolled over, my body no longer protesting the movements, and when I closed my eyes, I fell into a deep, restful, peaceful sleep.

When I woke up again, this time I stayed awake. I noted that someone, most likely Alice, had changed me out of my soiled clothes, into fresh, clean ones. I also wasn't in the bedroom anymore, no, I was lying on the couch across from Bella, half propped up by a mountain of cushions, with Alice sitting on the ground, next to my head.
"Hey," she said softly, raising one of her tiny, slim hands to touch my cheek.

"Hey," I return, trying to reach out to touch her cheek myself, but I freeze, wincing at the sight of my arm, at the pattern of dark bruises left by the ropes. "Ouch." I mutter. Alice's face turns alarmed.

"Where does it hurt?" she demanded, hands fluttering anxiously.

"Nowhere," I quickly reassure her, "I was just making an observation." She pursed her lips, but didn't say anything else about it, instead leaned forwards to her cheek was resting on my shoulder.

"Never, ever do that again," she whispers, her cool breath brushing against my skin in a way that made my heart stutter.

"Okay." I agree, without really thinking, twisting so that I'm kissing her. First softly, a sort of languid, aimless kissing that gradually turned into something more urgent as the need grew in both of us.

Somehow, we managed to end up lying side by side on the narrow couch, Alice on top of me, my back flat against the backrest. But before it got the chance to go further, we were interrupted as I was reminded of the fact that we had an audience.

"Hem hem!" I wince slightly, painfully reminded of the horrible toad known as Umbridge, who was thankfully now rotting in a cell in Azkaban, before following the source of the noise, and glaring at Bella.

My annoyance drains quickly when I see her gaunt face, and I try sitting up, hurriedly, and Alice has to push me back down, gently but firmly.

Bella's face looks ashen again, and I could see a new, thick bandage wrapped around her forearm. Edward was standing, soundlessly, beside her, his dark eyes fixed on me, with an expression of relief in his eyes. "I'm very glad you're okay, Hermione." He said softly.

"Thanks." I gave a weak smile. Bella makes a small sound of pain as she tries to sit up, and slumps back heavily against the cushions she's propped up on.
"Hermione's awake?" I hear a voice say, and then Harry's striding into the room, a relieved look on his face, followed by Ron, Ginny, Fleur, George and Leah.

"How long was I out?" I ask.

"Only around an hour. Gave us enough time to get rid of all the hanger-on's." Leah shrugs, settling herself down on one of the single couches.

"By hanger-on's, she means the rest of the Order, who were frantically searching for you." Harry says, dryly.

"Imbéciles," Fleur seethes, with a toss of her white-gold hair, "zey were all utter imbéciles!"

"What did they do?" I ask, confused by the irate French woman.

"It's what they didn't do," Ginny's voice is carefully neutral, "some of us suggested using Old Magick to locate you."


"Hermione," Ron speaks up, after giving Fleur a look, "I know it's really soon, but can you tell us what happened?" I sigh, and nod.

"How far have you gotten?" I ask, not wanting to go over anything they've already covered.

"We just know that someone killed Auror Joe Brown and just about hospitalized Nott and Auror Orius Brewster." I make a growling noise.

"Wrong. Nott killed Brown while Brewster attacked me, and summoned five other attackers. I was caught by surprise," I admit, hanging my head slightly. I had failed Moody's most important rule-Constant Vigilance.
"Fuck," Ron swore, getting to his feet, "I'll be back, I need to make sure Nott and Brewster are restrained." He spins and disappears, and some of the tension in the room rises, and more people filter in... well, more vampires filter in.

Esme comes to stand next to me, giving me a warm smile. "I'm so relieved you're okay, dear." She says, and I smile back at her.

"Thanks Esme."

"So what happened after those wankers ambushed you?" Harry asks, face fierce.

"They apparated me somewhere then knocked me out. When I woke up, I was tied up in a cellar or something." I explain, "Lucius was there. We talked, he tortured me a bit, he talked some more, something weird happened and then you showed up." I frown. Now that the danger is over, I'm actually quite mystified. "Something really weird."

"What?" Harry prodded, as I stay silent.

"I got really furious and then somehow... somehow I managed to rip through the restraints," I explain, "I broke the ropes like they were... nothing. And then I threw Lucius across the room, into a wall."

"What?" Harry asks, surprised, "how the hell did you do that?" I shrug helplessly.

"I don't know! I just... did."

"May I offer a suggestion?" Carlisle speaks up, in his calm, steady voice. Surprised, Harry and I turn so we're facing him. "When you bonded with Alice, she gained several more... human characteristics. Perhaps you gained some vampire ones." He suggests. I blink. Huh. Super-strength.

"That... that could make sense."

"How do we test it?" Harry asks.
"Knife." I tell him, and he nods, summoning one from the kitchen, and handing it to me, hilt first.

"What are you doing?" Alice asks, nervously, eyeing the silver blade.

"Testing." I tell her, holding the hilt firmly then dragging the blade along the unmarked skin of my forearm, the one not tainted by the MUDBLOOD scar. Alice acts quickly, ripping the knife out of my hands, but the test is done, and I, along with Carlisle and Harry, stare curiously at the result.

The cut is shallower then it should be, my skin firmer, harder to split, then normal warm, soft human skin. But that wasn't the intriguing part, no- the intriguing part was the tiny cracks on either side of the cut. "Holy shit," Harry mumbled, and I agreed with him.

"That's... different."

"How could you not have noticed?" He asks me, incredulously, and I shrug.

"I've never been in any sort of position where it would come to my notice."

"Your teeth," Alice said, suddenly.

"What about them?" I asked.

"I didn’t think…” she pulls down the neckline of her top, revealing pale skin and…

"I don’t understand." Harry said, confused. But I did.

"That’s a bite mark." I said, oddly fascinated.

“| You bit me there, when we were making love.” Alice explained, “I... I thought it might be because of how I changed, but my skin’s still just as hard, it just looks less pale…” |
“I can’t even see anything.” Harry shook his head. “If you can see it, Hermione, that already means your eyesight’s better then mine.”

“That wouldn’t be hard- you have terrible eyesight.” I point out, feeling uneasy.

“I cannot see anyzing eizer.” This was Fleur, who was peering at where I could just make out the faintest of marks.

"Fascinating," Carlisle murmurs, having gravitated towards me.

“Before we test this further, can someone tell me how did you found me?”

“Uh, we followed Fleur’s suggestion.” Harry said, uncomfortably.

“What.” My voice was flat. Harry looked guilty but Fleur just drew herself up higher.

“I used an old Bulgarian spell,” she announced, “I do not regret eet.”

“Blood to find Blood,” I realize, sucking in a horrified breath, but before I can say anything there’s a crack as Ron reappears in the room- I can't talk about the use of Dark Magic in front of an Auror.

"What did I miss?" he asks.

"Nothing much. Are Nott and Brewster in custody?" I respond, instantly.

"They aren't going anywhere anytime soon," Ron promises, before settling back down in the seat he'd occupied before. "Okay, so what happened after the ambush?"

"They apparated her to Lucius," Harry answers for me, "he cursed her and she managed to get free.” My lips tighten slightly at the lie, but I know why he did it- Ron's an Auror. He has a responsibility to report everything he hears to his superiors, and the fact I appear to have some kind
of weird vampire thing happening to me would not go down well with the Ministry of Magic.

"And?" Ron presses, impatiently.

"She had a bit of a rough and tumble with Lucius and used her Portkey to get to safety." Harry lies without pause. Portkey? What-oh! Well that explains why Harry didn't apparate me back, I note. It's certainly the most plausible excuse for how I got out of there.

"And that's all you can tell me? Did you recognize any of your other attackers? Do you know where you were being held?Were there any other people there?" Ron continues with the questioning.

"No, no and no," I shake my head, "all I saw was the cellar, and I never heard or saw anything that suggested the presence of anyone else and the other attackers were wearing hoods." Ron sighs, and runs a hand through his hair.

"If you remember anything else, can you Floo me? I've got to go deal with a mountain of paperwork. Dealing with Brewster is going to be a nightmare, and the Daily Prophet is going to have a field day."

"Have fun," Harry snorts, and I give him a sympathetic look. He kisses my forehead, gives my shoulder a quick squeeze, then apparates off again. "He knows we're keeping something from him," Harry notes.

"He understands." I assure the dark haired boy, "he's not a jealous teenager anymore. He knows why we have to omit parts, and he won't push us."

"He really has grown up, hasn't he?" Ginny mused, a small smile on her face.

"Yes, now back to the original topic. Fleur, of all the- Blood Magic? Really? Do you know how dangerous that is?"

"Lily Potter used eet to save ‘arry’s life. I used eet to save yours.” Fleur says, firmly. I sigh, and turn to my sister.
"And Bella? Are you okay?" I ask. She gives a weak smile, holding up her bandaged arm.

"I've been better." I sigh.

"Okay, who else was at my rescue?"

"Me, Bill and George." Harry states. "George followed me when I took Bella outside, Bill did it for Fleur who would have come, except for the whole bun in the oven thing." I nod and lay back.

As the conversation keeps flowing, I pull away from it, letting my mind wander. Today shouldn't have happened. An Auror shouldn't have died, those two 'wankers' shouldn't have been able to get the drop on me, Bella and Fleur shouldn't have had to risk their lives performing an incredibly Dark spell and Lucius should be in custody.

We, and by we I meant I, had failed spectacularly today, and the result was a psychopathic murderer still on the loose, and a senseless death in what should be a time of peace.

And I was exhausted.

"Can we go upstairs and rest?" I ask Alice, quietly.

"Of course," she nods, wrapping an arm around my waist to support me as I stand up. She doesn't have to, I'm shaky from the torture curse, but not so shaky I can't stand on my own or travel short distances, but she wants to help.

"Are you okay?" Bella asks, anxiously, and I nod.

"Just need a rest." I tell her, and she nods, resting back on the pillow, face exhausted, her sweaty hair fanned out like a halo around her head. I push away the niggling fear that threatens to emerge-Bella is going to be fine.

We make it back to the bedroom, and then suddenly Alice's lips are on mine. Her kiss is a surprise. I wasn't expecting it, but I welcome it without hesitation. I push her back, just long enough to cast a quick, wandless silencing charm, and then I'm pulling her lips back to mine.
Her hands move from clutching my hips, under the loose sweatshirt I'm wearing, to moving up and down my body slowly, exploring my body with her icy hands. I clutch the back of her head, gasping, tugging at the ends of her black hair. Alice growls lightly against my lips, her tongue plunging into my mouth.

I groan.

Needing her.

She groans back.

Needing me.

She's not kissing my lips anymore, her mouth as moved to my throat, where she's kissing and sucking, and it's intoxicating. Her skin feels exquisite under my fingertips, her touch is inebriating.

The artful slowness, the heated intimacy... as our clothes scattered the floor, the moans of pleasure escaped us as we worked to please each other were delicious and empowering.

When we finished, when her fingers had drawn me out and her lips had worked me from my senses, we curled up together on the bed. I was a mess of sweat and her cool skin felt divine against my flushed body.

"I love you." I tell her, and she snuggles beside me.

"I love you more."

"Impossible," I tease, trailing my fingers along the curve of her jaw. I want this moment to last forever, this moment free from stress and fear and responsibility... just being here, with her, was... perfect.

But our escape couldn't last forever. Not when there were too many people relying on us, needing
us. Not when the people we loved were in danger.
Bella's POV:

I watched Hermione go upstairs, chewing on my lip, worried. "Don't worry," George Weasley says, from where he's sitting opposite me on the couch. He gives me a tired smile as I turn to look at him. "Hermione's the strongest person I know. She'll be okay." I try to smile back at the thin, tired man, but by the slight twitching of his lips, I'm pretty sure I didn't do a very good job.

I'm about to ask him if there's anything I can do to help her, when a sudden pain flares up in my arm, burning like ice. The cold spreads, settling over me like a blanket, and I can't help but shiver slightly, clenching my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering. "Bella? Are you okay?" Edward asks, anxiously, and I nod.

"I'm f-f-fine."

"Bella," Rosalie has a disapproving look on her face, "you know what Carlisle told you. Don't downplay anything, it doesn't help us take care of either of you." Worry twists inside me, and I cradle my bulging stomach protectively. I was confident that this alien cold must be some sort of aftereffect of the blood magic Harry used to find Hermione, and I didn't want to worry anyone, not when they needed to be concentrating on Hermione.

"Okay, I'm cold," I admit, "Could someone hand me a blanket?" Jacob rolls his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," he tells Edward, who's moving to get the quilt draped over the arm of the couch, just out of my reach. He lopes across to me sitting down beside me, leaning carefully against my side, letting his arm rest along the length of his, putting his other hand against my face.

His skin was so hot it burned, but it was a good burn, and I couldn't help but let out a happy little sigh. I knew Harry, Fleur or George could have cast a heating charm, but I couldn't help enjoying the feel of Jacob's body against my own. Besides, they all looked occupied, Fleur and Harry
standing in the corner, talking quietly, and George leaning back on the couch, his eyes closed. If it wasn't for the iron grip he had on his wand, I'd think he was asleep.

I scan the room, seeing who's still here and who isn't. Leah's vanished, as have Jasper and Maggie, but Seth is stretched out along one of the three-seated couches, eyelids drooping, Rosalie and Emmett are standing next to each other, Rosalie leaning against Emmett, who's wrapped an arm around her waist, Esme and Carlisle are also having a conversation, their lips blurring slightly as they talk too fast for me to hear, and Edward's sitting on the ground by my feet, being careful not to touch me and make me colder.

Then Carlisle is approaching the couch; his eyes on Jacob, not me. "A moment, Jacob?" he asks, in his friendly voice. I feel Jake stiffen beside me, and nudge him with my shoulder, silently trying to convey support or something.

"Yeah?" Jake says, reluctantly, slumping back against the cushions.

"I'm unsure how to word this," Carlisle is speaking carefully, "but my family needs to hunt. I understand that our previous truce is inoperative at the moment, so I wanted your advice. Will Sam be waiting for us outside the wards, ready to hunt us? We don't want to take a chance with hurting any of your family- or losing any of ours. If you were in our shoes, how would you proceed?"

Jacob looks a little thrown. "Er, it's a risk," he answers, after a short pause. "Sam's calmed down some, but I'm pretty sure that in his head the treaty is void. As long as he thinks the tribe, or any other human, is in real danger, he's not going to ask questions first, if you know what I mean. But, with all that, his priority is going to be the rez. There really aren't enough of them to keep a decent watch on the people while putting out hunting parties big enough to do much damage. I'd bet he's keeping it close to home."

As Carlisle nods thoughtfully, I can't help feeling proud of Jacob, who clears his throat uncomfortably, and continues speaking. "So I guess I'd say, go out together, just in case. And probably you should go in the day, 'cause we'd be expecting night. Traditional vamp stuff, you know. You're fast- go over the mountains and hunt far enough away that there's no chance he'd send anyone that far from home."

"I have a suggestion that could make that easier," George speaks up, eyes still closed.

"Yes?" Carlisle says, turning to face the redhead.
"Mm, a Portkey. I've never been to the mountains, but I can give you Portkeys that can bring you back here at a moment's notice if something goes wrong, like you're attacked."

"That would be very much appreciated," Carlisle smiles, and George opens his eyes to give a tired smile.

"If you grab me some buttons or something, it'll only take a few minutes."

"I've got some upstairs," Esme says, darting off out of the room for a few seconds, before reappearing, having moved so fast she was a blur. She's holding a container in her hands which I can tell from over here is filled with buttons of all different shapes, sizes and colors.

"Alice won't be happy," Rosalie smiles, leaving me to guess that the buttons belong to the fashionable pixie vampire.

"I'm sure she'll forgive me," Esme gives a tinkling laugh, handing the box to George who fishes out a handful and spreads them out on the expensive leather couch.

"Portus," he murmurs, pointing his wand at the first one, a pearly button the size of a ten-cent coin. The button glows a bright blue, before fading back to its original color. George repeats this six times on the other buttons, then pushes them in Carlisle's direction. Carlisle picks them up almost reverently, treating them like the finest of diamonds.

"Fascinating," he murmurs, studying them closely, before turning back to George, who has a slight smile on his face. "How do they work?" he asks, eagerly.

"Make sure it's touching your skin then say portus," George explains, before slouching back down on the couch, eyes closing once more.

"When do you think we should go?" he asks Esme.

"Tomorrow," the mother hen vampire replies, after a moment. "It's getting late, and Jacob said it would be safest to go during the day." Carlisle nods and hands out the buttons to those in the room, before exiting, presumably to go find Jasper and Maggie to give them their Portkeys.
The sudden sound of the phone ringing causes me to jump, jolting me from my relaxed state as Jacob's intense body-heat took away the cold everywhere but my arm, over where my arm had been cut, which still felt like it had been doused in ice.

"Hello?" Esme says, after darting over to pick up the phone. Her golden eyes widen in surprise as she listens to whoever's on the other end of the line. "Ah, yes, she- she's-" Esme stutters slightly, unsure what to say, and I give Edward a puzzled look.

"It's Charlie," he murmurs.

"Oh," I say, surprised. The urge to talk to my father hits me, and I can't help but wish I could hear his voice, but Esme's already hanging up the phone, leaving inside me a bitter disappointment.

"Who kicked your puppy?" I hear Hermione ask, and the disappointment quickly fades as I turn to my sister, eagerly.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her.

"Like I was hit by a lorry," she sighs. She walks over to the couch and sits next to George. Alice perches on her other side, arm curled protectively around her waist, and Fleur walks over to sit next to Alice, letting out a little sigh of relief as she sits down heavily on the cushions, her hands moving to her own swelling stomach.

"That's a truck, right?" I ask, still half caught up on what she just said before.

"Yes, Bella, a lorry is a truck. A trailer truck, to be precise." She says slowly, sounding annoyingly amused. I stick my bottom lip out slightly, which makes her smile grow. "So, what did I miss?" she then asks.

"Not much," Emmett answers her, with a roll of his eyes. "Everyone here is boring."

"We were discussing when it would be safe to go hunting." Esme gives a proper answer, shooting Emmett a scolding look, before turning back to Hermione, and giving her a warm smile. "Your friend George made us all Portkeys."
"Mm, you asleep George?" she asks, twisting around slightly on the couch so she's facing George and poking him in the arm.

"If I was before, I'm certainly not now, love." He comments, opening his eyes to give her a half-hearted glare. She pokes her tongue out at him, and he raises an eyebrow. "Really, Hermione? Right here?" Alice glowers at him, but Hermione and Emmett both start laughing.

"I don't get it," I whisper to Jacob, confused. He pats the top of my head.

"Poor innocent little Bella."

"I'm not that innocent," I protest, and then regret saying it, as any trace of amusement leaves his face.

"No," he says, narrowing his eyes at the bulge that is my stomach with enough menace that I fold my arms protectively over it. "No you're not. When's the due date for the little monster, anyway?" I smack the back of his head with enough force as I can muster, but he doesn't even blink. "I'm serious." He says, "I want to know how long I'm gonna have to be here."

I push away my hurt at his statement, instead focusing my full attention on the question, bringing to mind Carlisle's theory. "I don't know. Not exactly. Obviously we're not going with the nine-month model here, and we can't get an ultrasound, so Carlisle is guesstimating from how big I am."

"Normal people are supposed to be about forty centimeters there-" Carlisle continues my explanation, when I run out of words, touching the middle of my bulging stomach, "when the baby is fully grown. One centimeter for each week. Bella was twenty-eight centimeters this morning, and she's been gaining about two a day, sometimes more."

Jacob's trembling slightly, jaw clenched, and Edward turns away, hiding his expression from me. My eyes sting and I blink away tears, looking over at Hermione pleadingly, wanting to change the subject but afraid of speaking, because if I open my mouth I know I'll start crying.

Hermione gets the message pretty quick. "So," she chirps, in a bright, entirely fake sounding voice, "Harry, I haven't had the chance to yell at you yet for going along with Fleur's hare-brained scheme." Harry gives a sheepish look, from where he's standing beside Fleur, and quickly looks at his bare wrist.
"Wow, is it that time already? I gotta go- my wife's due to be having morning sickness -which, by the way, has a misleading name because she spends about half the day throwing up, not just mornings- right about now, so I better be off. Bye guys!"

"Harry!" Hermione shouts, but Harry's already twisting on the spot and vanishing. George lets out an amused snort and Hermione elbows him.

"'e eez right, you know," Fleur speaks up, letting out a loud, melodramatic sigh, "During zee first few months, more often zen not, I was vomiting all day. Victoire eez lucky I love 'er so much," Fleur rubbed her stomach.

"It's actually not called morning sickness anymore, experts refer to it as NVP, which stands for nausea and vomiting during pregnancy," Hermione lectures us, absently, still scowling at the spot where Harry stood a few moments ago, before sitting up straighter and spinning around to face Fleur. "Wait, Victoire?" she asks, eagerly, "you've thought of a name already?"

"Oui," Fleur gives her stomach a soft look, "seeing as we found out zat I was pregnant so soon after-" she pauses for a moment, "after eet, Victoire seemed zee obvious choice."

"It means victory, in French," Edward explained to me, seeing the puzzled look on my face.

"Oh," I nod, "that makes sense."

"What about you, Bella?" Fleur turns to me, "'ave you thought of any names yet?" My cheeks redden slightly as everyone's eyes are suddenly on me.

"Um, well, at the moment my favorite name is EJ," I mumble.

"EJ?" Edward asks, softly.

"Yes. Little Edward Jacob," I blush harder.

"What if it's a girl, though?" Hermione raises an eyebrow. "Got a back-up plan?"
"Well, I thought maybe... Elizabeth."***

“Elizabeth?” Edward asks, softly, face shining. I blush.

"Would that be okay?"

“Yes, it would definitely be okay.” He assures me.

"As long as the middle name’s Hermione.” Hermione adds, and I smile at her.

“Actually, I was thinking Carlie- Charlie and Carlisle.”

“Fine,” Hermione sighed, but her expression was playful.

"What would you name a baby?" I ask her, curiously.

"Psyche (SY-kee),” Hermione answers, without pausing even for a second, "Eirene (Ee-REH-nee) or Circe (Sur-see) for a girl. Romulus for a boy, in honor of Remus.”

"The girls’ names are Greek Mythology,” Alice says, curiously, "I thought you'd be more likely to go with Shakespeare, like your own name."

"Everyone always assumes that I was named after Queen Hermione from A Winter's Tale.” Hermione says, amused.

"You're not?” This is a surprised Carlisle.

"No, I'm named after Hermione, the daughter of Helen of Troy, or Helen of Sparta, whichever you want to call her. My mother adored Greek Mythology.” Hermione finishes quietly.
"Circe... the goddess of magic. That certainly fits." Rosalie comments.

"Mm, I like Psyche better," Alice muses, "goddess of the soul, mind and spirit."

"If I had a son, I'd name him Fred," George says, quietly. Hermione's eyes widen in shock, hearing him say the name of the twin he lost, but that's the only reaction she gives. "I'd also probably name a daughter Freddie." He gives a tired smile at that. "A final prank, naming a girl after him."

"I think that's perfect" I start to say, but I break off mid-sentence, sucking in a sharp breath as pain lances through me. In the same second, Edward had ripped the blanket out of the way. My body felt like it was convulsing, my back arching off the sofa. "He's just," I managed to pant out, "stretching." And then I had to keep my teeth locked together, because otherwise I'd scream. Oh god, oh god, oh god, I chanted in my head.

"Carlisle?" Edward calls out, in a low, tense voice.

"Right here," Carlisle says, but I shake my head stubbornly, breathing hard and shallow as my heart raced in my chest.

"It's okay. It's over. Poor kid doesn't have enough room, that's all," I defend my little EJ, "he's getting so big."

"Do you need one of the pain relieving potions Harry brought?" Fleur asks. I shake my head, before letting my eyelids droop. I feel tired, now. Woozy, almost, and definitely ready to fall asleep.

"Are you okay, love?" Edward asks, gently, cupping my face with his cold hands.

"Mm," I make a small humming noise. "Jus' tired."

"Go to sleep," he murmurs, stroking my hair. Then he starts humming my lullaby, and before I know it, I'm gone.
***Note: in this story, Bella isn’t Renée’s biggest fan, so I thought it wouldn’t make sense for her to want to name her daughter after the mother she’s not close to.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:

Hermione's POV:

In a mighty effort to distract myself from both the Lucius situation, the aftershocks of my exposure to the Crucius, and the fear I had for my sister, I did what I always did when I felt overwhelmed by something, by anything.

I researched.

Bella dozed while I plowed through book after book. Alice sat beside me, running her fingers through my hair in a soothing matter, occasionally giving me support as post-Cruciatus tremors ran through me.

But I was getting frustrated, frustrated and jittery, and more so with every word I read, every page I turned, every new book I picked up. And after reading yet another heavily biased and prejudiced description of vampires, I lost control of my temper.

Slamming the heavy tome shut with much more force then was actually necessary, I shoved it away from me, face twisted in a mixture of disgust and desperation. "I swear to Merlin if I read one more of those messed up passages, then I'm going to blow something up!" I growl. Alice wraps an arm around my waist, and I lean into her, accepting the silent support she's offering.

"Why do you always say 'Merlin', instead of God?" Rosalie asks, from where she's bouncing a giggling Teddy on her lap, in a not at all subtle attempt to either change the subject or distract me.

"Well for one, Merlin's real. He actually existed, way back in the medieval era, though the dates are unknown." I point out, and Edward snaps his head around to face me. His expression is somewhat shielded.
"You don't believe in God?" It was only a half question, more like a statement, and I return his guarded look with one of my own.

"If you mean the crotchety old gentleman with the obsession about peoples' sex lives, then no," I tell him, honestly, "nor am I happy with the amorphous, incomprehensible cosmic entity who created the Multiverse for reasons unknown and seems quite happy to let everything go to hell in a handcart without lifting a metaphorical finger! I'm not saying that you shouldn't believe in a God, or that there isn't a God out there - I would like to believe in something better, but," here I lost my calm mask and felt my expression darken, my jaw tighten, "I've seen too much to personally believe any god could allow some of the things I've seen... or done. This world doesn't fulfill any sort of plan."

"That's a very sad way to look at things," Edward murmured.

"I suppose it is. I agree. "I don't deny people their right to believe that something exists, it's just not my personal one. It wasn't fair that my world was in such turmoil because of one crazy lunatic and his delusions of grandeur. Not only that, but that so many Purebloods followed in his crazy visions was amazing and utterly horrific. I don't know how anyone who's lived through the devastation that is War can think that there's someone or something up there protecting us, no matter how comforting the thought of it is."

There was a short pause and then Alice, taking a page out of Rosalie's book, and in an obvious attempt to change the subject picked up the thick tome I'd thrown away and asked chirpily, "so what part of the book pissed you off so much you broke your cardinal rule of book care and treated the poor thing with a truly awful lack of respect?"

Turning back to face Alice, I pulled a face. "Try all of it. Here," leaning over, I flick through the pages; to the one I'd been reading before chucking the book across the room which, yes, did break my cardinal rule of always handling books like they were made of fine china.

"Well this isn't very complimentary of us." Alice grumbles, as her eyes dart over the page, reading the words faster then any human could hope to accomplish. My lips quirk into a sardonic smile, as the words I know she's reading flash in the front of my mind: **Vampires are among the darkest of creatures to walk the earth. They are, by their inherent nature, foul monsters that steal the lives of other purer beings to sustain their own.**

"Witches and Wizards aren't exactly fond of vampires." I tell her, somewhat unnecessarily, and she pouts, her puppy-dog expression absolutely heart-wrenching.
"But we're pretty!"

"Very pretty." I agree, unable to help but smile at that. "And not all of us think that way. When Remus taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, his lectures were much more sympathetic to a vampire's plight. It could be that his own condition had colored his view, but he always stressed that they were not just animals or creatures, they were human once." I sigh slightly, the corners of my mouth turning down slightly.

"He sounds like he was a wonderful man." Alice says, softly.

"The best." I agree.

Bella gives a loud yawn and stirs. The whole room turns its attention towards her as she blinks blearily, looking around. "How are you feeling?" Edward asks her, gently tracing her jaw line with his fingertips. His golden eyes are burning with worry, and Bella gives a tired smile, reaching up with bony hands to rub her eyes.

"Like I've been run over by a lorry." She says, her voice still thick with sleep, and I can't help but smile at her words. "I'm kidding," she quickly adds though, seeing Edward's tightening expression. "I actually don't feel too... bad. Just achy."

"Good achy?" Emmett quips, having entered the room, and he wiggles his eyebrows at her suggestively. Bella blushes bright red and Emmett roars with laughter as Edward scowls at him and Rosalie rolls her eyes, flicking back her beautiful mane of golden tresses.

"C'mere daddy. Your son wants to play with you." She tells her mate, standing up and gracefully handing over Teddy, pausing only to press her lips against her son's currently dark curls, then each of his cheeks where small dimples have formed. This seems to be one of Teddy's favorite looks, and it makes him appear to be a tiny little Emmett.

The minute Teddy's in his dada's arms, he smiles delightedly, waves his chubby little arms in the air and demands, "Up, dada, up!" Emmett, with a broad grin, gently throws little Teddy up into the air and catches him. Teddy's squeals of delight lighten the mood of the whole room, and even Edward manages a small smile.

I turn to glance at my sister and I see her looking at Teddy, a soft, gentle look on her face, and I don't have to read her mind to know that she's imagining herself in Emmett's place, her own little
angel bouncing in her arms.

Jacob chooses this moment to troop through the door, topless and looking drained. It's been about fourteen hours since he last slept, I calculate, and it certainly shows.

Bella's face lights up when she sees him, her mood instantly soaring. "Hi Jake." She smiles, and he gives her what I think he intended to be a smile. Needless to say he failed. Terribly.

"Hey Bells." Bella frowns at him.

"You look tired." She says, accusingly.

"Dead beat." Jacob admits, loping across the room.

"I'd like to beat you dead." Rosalie mutters, loud enough for even Bella, the lone little human of our bunch, to hear. Bella gives a little snort and I suppress a laugh, while Jacob sends Rosalie a scowl and flops down heavily on one of the couches, sinking deep into the chair.

"Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable?" Esme asks Jacob, in her sweet voice, as she flits into the room, her caramel hair bouncing slightly with her movements. "Cushions? Blankets? Any food or drink?"

"M good." Jacob kind of mumbles, obviously uncomfortable dealing with the motherly vampire. "Thanks." He quickly adds, as an afterthought. Esme gives him another sweet smile, before turning to Bella and I.

"How about you girls? Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"I'm kind of... Thirsty." Bella admits.

"Which kind of thirsty?" Esme asks, gently.

"The kind with a capital T." Bella admits, ducking her head down in embarrassment.
Esme nods and turns to me. "Hermione, dear?" she asks, "Do you feel like anything?"

"No thanks." I tell her, honestly meaning it. My stomach's so unsettled right now that in all probability I'd throw up anything I tried to eat or drink. Esme flits back out of the room, no doubt to organize Bella's O- and I try not to think about anything but what was happening right now, in this moment.

Swallowing a slight yawn, I lean back against the couch, and then have to clench my teeth slightly as jolts of pain dart through my body. At least the Cruciatus after-shocks are getting weaker, I comfort myself, with a sigh.

Bella reaches out with a skeletal hand, as if to brush it through my unruly curls, when Edward speaks up suddenly, in a puzzled tone.

"Did you say something?" He asks. He's staring at Bella, which made me frown slightly, confused, because my hearing wasn't even nearly as good as his, but I was pretty sure that Bella hadn't spoken.

Bella looks back at Edward, by her expression I guess equally as confused as I am. "Me? I didn't say anything." She tells him. Edward, in the elegant, flowing grace that all vampires possess, moves from where he's standing beside the couch, onto his knees, leaning forwards over Bella, his expression suddenly intense.

"What are you thinking about right now?" He asks, a hint of urgency in his voice, and my twin just looks back at him, blankly.

"Nothing- what's going on?" She asks, bewildered.

"What were you thinking about a minute ago, then?" He persists and Bella looks even more confused.

"About how Hermione once said that her hair was curly and mine wasn't because she always ate her crusts." I smile slightly at that, remembering my shy, blushing twin's question about why her hair was straight as a curtain, while mine was a mess of bushy curls, the first time we'd met, all those years ago.
"Say something else," Edward whispers.

"Like what? Edward, what's going on?" Bella demanded, her voice growing slightly higher. Edward's expression changed and then he reached out, slowly, and very lightly rested his hands against her huge, round stomach.

"The f-" he swallowed. "It... the baby likes the sound of your voice."

There was a short beat of total silence, then: "Holy mother of- you can hear him?" Bella just about shrieks. In the next second, she winced, expression, for an instant, turning pained. Edward's hand moved to the top peak of her belly and gently rubbed the spot where it must have kicked her.

"Shh," he murmured, "You startled it... him." Bella's eyes had turned wide and full of wonder, and she reached out with a trembling hand to pat the side of her belly.

"Sorry, baby." She whispered. Edward was listening hard, his head tilted towards the bulge. "What's he thinking now?" She asked him, her voice hushed, her face just about glowing despite the waxy skin that was stretched so tightly over the bones, that it was starting to resemble a skull.

"It... he or she, is..." Edward paused and looked up into Bella's eyes. His eyes were filled with a similar awe to her own- only his were more careful and grudging. "He's happy."

It was impossible not to see the joyous shine on Bella's face, the adoration and the utter devotion. Tears overflowed her eyes and ran silently down her face, silently down over her smiling lips. Something inside me, in my chest, tightened and I had to blink back moisture.

And Edward... Edward's face wasn't frightened or angry or burning or any of the expressions he'd worn since I apparated to Esme's island, what seemed like an infinity ago. Instead, he was marveling with her. With Bella. Marveling over the being developing inside her.

"Of course you're happy, pretty baby, of course you are," Bella crooned, rubbing her stomach while the tears washed her cheeks. "How could you not be, all safe and warm and loved? I love you so much, my little EJ, of course you're happy." Edward leaned forwards further, and laid his ear tenderly against her belly.
"He loves you," He whispered, sounding dazed, "he absolutely adores you."

I sat there, staring, pretending that I wasn't getting teary, and that there wasn't a lump in my throat as I took in the scene before me.

I didn't know how to react to this new development.

But apparently Jacob did.

Edward's face suddenly crippled with agony, and an instant later Jacob practically hurtled to his feet. All the heads in the room snapped towards him, and I sucked back a breath, seeing the look on his face, of disbelief, of betrayal, of loathing.

Seeing him stand there, trembling, looking ready to bolt, my hand moved quickly to my wand. But any actions I could have taken were proved unnecessary, as Edward was moving, to his feet, dashing across the room and to an end table standing there. Opening the drawer there in one swift move, he retrieved something out of it, hand moving so fast it was a blur.

He threw the object at Jacob, who seemed to react reflexively, grabbing it out of the air. It was a set of keys. Edward's face was hard as he looked at the much younger boy.

"Go, Jacob." He said. But his voice not harsh or hard like I expected. There was a hidden meaning in them that I didn't understand, and it looked like only Jacob did. "Get away from here."

Jacob left the house in a flash. Bella had paled again, and she looked at her vampire, a pleading expression on her face. "What's wrong with him?" She asked, and Edward returned to her side, kneeling back down next to her.

"He just needs some time." He told her, gently. Bella hesitated for a moment then nodded, face resigned, obviously accepting that there was nothing she could do in that instant.

Esme appeared, a slightly concerned look on her face as she glanced towards the doorway Jacob had just disappeared out of, before she walked over to Bella. She held, in her hand, the plastic cup with the straw sticking out the top.
"I heated it up." She said, voice gentle. Bella nodded, somewhat tearfully, and Edward helped prop her up on the pillows so she could start drinking. As I watched, I suddenly felt tired; tired and heavy and hopeless.

I let myself flop back, so I was slumped against the couch, only an inch or two away from Edward. Bella’s hand reached out again, as she transferred her grip to one shaking hand, and ran her bony fingers through my hair.

"You okay?" she asked, and I sighed, not bothering to pretend.

"I'm tired and sore."

"Why don't you just have a nap?" She suggests.

"Bells, do you have any idea how much time I've spent sleeping these last few days?" I ask her, a hint of incredulousness in my voice, even as my tired mind actually does run through the last few days, calculating how much time I've spent unconscious.

"Not as much time as I have," Bella pointed out, reasonably, "now shut up and close your eyes." She orders.

"Sir, yes sir!" I say, with mock enthusiasm, even raising my arm up in an awkward salute, but I do as she says.

Sleep doesn't come easy, though that might be in part to the awkward position I was in, half slumped against the couch, Alice still leaning against my side and Edward a few inches to my right.

But I did drift asleep, and for a while I dozed fitfully.

Then the inevitable nightmare came, the terrible memories stirred free by my recent suffering.

Her face is inches from mine, and I can see her violet eyes dancing in sadistic glee. "Let's have a little chat, girl-on-girl!" she cackles, and then she throws me to the ground. I can hear Harry and Ron speaking, but I can't make out the words, as they're dragged away. Terror floods my entire
being as I look up into that once-beautiful face, with its hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. Thin, cracked lips twist into a smile as she shouts, "CRUCIO!"

"Hermione!" someone shouts, and I scream in remembered pain, my back arching, but I'm not alone, cold arms are supporting me, long fingers stroking my head gently. I turn into the body, pressing my face into the crook of their neck, and I sob out my pain, my humiliation and my fear.

I clutch onto the person so hard that it hurts my hands, but I'm so terrified that they'll vanish and I'll be alone that I can't help it, and I just cling even tighter. But the body, the person, just strokes my hair, murmurs comforting things to me, and holds me until the panic fades.

When the last of the tears have worked their way out of my system, I release the death-grip I have on the person I now know is Edward. "I'm sorry," I tell him, in a voice that I know is raspy from crying.

"Are you okay?" he asks, softly, "Do you need me to call Alice?" Yes.

"Where," I pause and hiccup slightly, "where is she? Where's Alice?"

"She went back home, around a half hour ago." Edward says, his expression concerned as he looks down at me.

"Why?" I ask, confused, my mind still slow from sleep.

"She wanted to get changed. She said she’d bring you back a change of clothes," Bella speaks up, her face pale as she looks down at me, like I'm the fragile one here, like I'm the one who looks like more fragile then spun glass, daintier then fairy wings.

"Oh." I say, before hauling myself up to my feet, a movement which takes a Herculean effort. I scan the room to see who witnessed my... unraveled state. I was thankful to see that, apart from Bella and Edward, it was empty- a small mercy I assumed that the others had gifted on me, and one that I appreciated though I knew full well that every vampire in the near vicinity would have been able to hear my screams.

"Where's George?" I ask, absently, as I pull my wand out of my pocket. The handle warms in my grip, sending a comforting feeling through me.
"He left a few hours ago. Said something about needing to talk to Fleur." Edward answers.

"Okay," I nod, "I should be back in around half an hour. Ring if you need me, or if anything happens."

"Have fun." Bella gives a weak smile and I nod at her, acknowledging her words, before spinning on the spot, apparating to the house I share with the love of my life, my beautiful vampire wife.

As I appear in the living room, I'm immediately hit with the scent of fresh vanilla candles hit me. Alice adored them, I'd discovered within the first few days after we moved into our house, and as a precaution I'd cast fireproof charms all over the house seeing as she kept forgetting to blow them out, leaving the bloody things burning all day in every room.

"Alice?" I say, surprised she hadn't either sang out a greeting or come out to say hello when she heard me arrive. Frowning slightly when there was no response to my words, I speak a little louder. "Alice?"

Again, there's no response and a trickle of foreboding ran down my spine. Something wasn't right. My skin suddenly felt dry and prickly, as though something, some force, was buzzing across it at a low level of intensity.

"Alice?" I call out again.

Still no answer, and my stomach crawls. I search the house quickly, my eyes peeled for any sight of either my mate or foul play of any sort; my breath coming quicker and my heart beating faster with each empty room.

It was when I was searching the bedroom that something caught my eye, something resting on the duvet, throwing of sparkles of light where the sun hit it.

My heart dropped as I approached the bed, and my legs felt weak. Because sitting on the silken sheets were two slim shining bands of silver, embedded with a row of tiny diamonds that glittered like stars. And even though I couldn't see them, I knew there were words carved on the inside. *In Aeternum*.
Latin for *Forever*.

The rings Alice and I had exchanged at our wedding looked so innocent, sitting there. So innocuous. So beautiful.

But I knew what they represented. Because the last place I'd seen Alice's wedding ring was on her finger, before I went to sleep, a few short hours ago.

And the last place I'd seen my wedding ring was in the hands of Lucius Malfoy.
Bella's POV:

I shiver, looking at the empty space where Hermione had disappeared. I hadn't heard of her having a nightmare like that since she was still living at Charlie's. Maybe her recent encounter with Lucius Malfoy had stirred up the memories? I shiver again.

Edward takes this as a sign that I'm feeling cold, and he drapes another blanket over me. I appreciate the thought, though it doesn't do much. I haven't been properly warm since Harry used my blood for the spell to find Hermione and save her from Lucius Malfoy.

The cold I was feeling wasn't normal- it wasn't a chill from the outside that emanated from my skin, it was a deep aching cold from inside me, a sensation like ice was flowing through my veins instead of blood.

"Are you okay?" Edward asks, and I give a weak nod. He doesn't push it, simply leans over and brushes his wintry lips against my cheek. I smile slightly, feeling a warmth in my chest that combats against the icy tendrils seeping through my bloodstream.

Edward tilts his head suddenly. "Jacob's back." He says and I feel a bubble of happiness expand in my chest, and I turn to face the doorway. Around a minute later, Jacob walks through.

"Hey, Bells," he greeted me, "how ya doing?" Playing along with his pretense that the events from earlier never happened, I smile back at him.

"I'm fine." I answer, and he strolls over and plants himself on the couch next to me. I can't help but lean into him, leeching off his warmth.

"Jesus, you're freezing." He comments and I shiver- again- in response. Jacob shifts, turning to face
me, looking as if he's about to say something when he stops and he's just staring down at me, silently, an intense sort of look in his eyes. A part of me wants to look away but I can't, and then Edward's speaking quietly, his voice barely a whisper.

"Thank you."

I want to ask what Jacob just thought, but I don't, because I sense, somehow, that it's private. And then Jacob breaks our eye contact and looks down at his hands. They're shaking slightly, I note. Remembering Rosalie and Alice's earlier actions, I decide to change the subject, not bothering to be subtle.

"So," I say, brightly, "how was your day?"

"Great. Went for a drive. Hung out in the park." He answers, his voice just as fake and cheery.

"Sounds nice." I note.

"Sure, sure." He responds.

I'm searching for something else to say when I feel a pinching in my lower stomach and I pull a face. "Damn," I mumble, before calling out, "Rose?"

Rosalie glides into the room, takes in my expression, and then laughs softly. "Again?" she asks, and I nod somewhat sheepishly.

"I think I've drunk, like, a million galleons in the last hour." I tell her as she approaches. Both Edward and Jacob move off the couch, causing it to bend lift slightly without their added weight, and Rosalie moved to pick me up. "Can I walk?" I ask quickly, before I'm cradled in her arms, "My legs are so stiff."

"Are you sure?" Edward's voice is anxious and I nod, giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile.

"Rose'll catch me if I trip over my feet." I tell him, before snorting softly and adding, "Which could happen pretty easily, seeing I can't even see them anymore." Rosalie carefully sets me on my feet,
keeping her hands right at my shoulders. I stretch my arms out in front of me, wincing a little as I hear the joints pop, then I give a small sigh of relief. "That feels good," I say, mostly to myself, "Ugh, I'm huge." I add, under my breath, self-pityingly, as I look down at my stomach. Rose laughs softly, and I give her a rueful smile.

"All righty then," I say, mostly to myself. Ordering my stiff, mostly unresponsive legs to move, I go to take a step forwards, when the cup I had left on the sofa tumbled to one side, the dark red blood it contained spilling out onto the pale fabric. "Crap!" I groan, ducking down automatically for the cup.

But as my body had continued to reach, to stretch inside me, something had yanked the opposite direction. "Oh!" Was the only word that escaped my throat, before my eyes rolled up into the back of my head and my body stopped listening to me.


I think I might have fallen, but cold hands were cradling me. I tried to open my eyes, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of Edward's panic stricken face. And then I opened my mouth and screamed.

It wasn't just any scream. It was a blood-curdling shriek of agony. A horrible sound which I barely recognized as coming from my own mouth. The sound cut off as my vision clouded, and a burning sensation curled up my throat. I felt myself twitch and then my back arched convulsively, and I vomited up a fountain of blood.

As my body twitched and jerked like it was being electrocuted, I was bewildered.

The pain was bewildering. I couldn't make sense of what was happening.

My body tried to reject the pain, and I was sucked again and again into a blackness that cut out whole seconds or maybe even minutes of the agony, making it that much harder to keep up with reality.

I tried to separate them.

Non-reality was black, and it didn't hurt so much.
Reality was red, and it felt like I was being tortured.

Reality was feeling my body twist and flip when I couldn't possibly move because of the pain.

Reality was knowing there was something so much more important than all this torture, and not being able to remember what it was.

Reality had come on so fast.

One moment, everything was as it should have been. Surrounded by people I loved. Smiles. Somehow, unlikely as it was, it seemed like I was about to get everything I'd been fighting for.

And then one tiny, inconsequential thing had gone wrong.

Why had I reached for the bloody cup (literally) when I'd actually seen other, faster hands move to grab it? When I knew that a vampire was so much faster then me?

Because I was a moron, that's why. A complete and utter moron.

My body didn't seem to be able to make up its mind. At one moment darkness would take over, but then it would be washed away by a new wave of torture. I couldn't breathe- I had drowned once before, and this was different; it was too hot in my throat.

Pieces of me- bones?- shattering, snapping, slicing apart... More blackness. Then voices, this time, shouting, as the pain came back. "The placenta must have detached!"

Something sharper than knives ripped through me- the words, making sense in spite of the other tortures. Detached placenta- I knew what that meant.

It meant that my baby was dying inside me.
"Get him out!" I screamed to Edward. Why hadn't he done it yet? "He can't breathe! Do it now!"

"The morphine-" He wanted to wait, to give me painkillers, while our baby was dying?!

"No! Now-," I choked, unable to finish.

"Where the fuck is Hermione?"

"I can't get ahold of her or Alice-"

"-what about Carlisle?"

"His phone must be out of range. Emmett-"

"I'll keep trying. You help Edward, babe. Esme's got Teddy and-"

I lost track of the conversation again as black spots covered the light in the room and a cold point of new pain stabbed icily into my stomach. It felt wrong. I struggled automatically to protect my womb, my baby, my little Edward Jacob, but I was weak. My lungs ached, oxygen burned away.

The pain faded away again, though I clung to it now. My baby, my baby, dying... How long had passed? Seconds or minutes? The pain was gone. Numb. I couldn't feel. I still couldn't see, either, but I could hear. There was air in my lungs again, scraping in rough bubbles up and down my throat.

"You stay with me now, Bella! Do you hear me? Stay! You're not leaving me. Keep your heart beating!" Jacob? Jacob, still here, still trying to save me?

Of course, I wanted to tell him. Of course I would keep my heart beating. Hadn't I promised them all? Him, my husband, my baby, my sister?

"I still can't reach Hermione or Carlisle!"
"What about Fleur then? Or Harry?"

"None of them have phones!"

"What about Leah? Wasn't she with George earlier-"

"BellaBellaBella," I could hear Jacob moaning, his voice right by my ear, "Bella, you promised! You promised me and Edward and your crazy ass sister! You can't leave us- you can't leave me! Keep your heart beating!"

I tried to feel my heart, to find it, but I was so lost inside my own body. I couldn't feel the things I should, and nothing felt in the right place. I blinked and I found my eyes. I could see the light. Not what I was looking for, but better than nothing.

As my eyes struggled to adjust, Edward whispered, "Elizabeth."

Elizabeth?

Not the pale and perfect son of my imagination? I felt a moment of shock. And then a flood of warmth.

Elizabeth.

I willed my lips to move, willed the bubbles of air to turn into whispers on my tongue. I forced my numb hands to reach. "Let me... Give her to me." The light danced, shattering off Edward's crystal hands. The sparkles were tinged with red, with the blood that covered his skin. And more red in his hands. Something small and struggling, dripping with blood. He touched the warm body to my weak arms, almost like I was holding her. Her wet skin was hot- as hot as Jacob's.

My eyes focused; suddenly everything was absolutely clear. Elizabeth did not cry, but she breathed in quick, startled pants. Her eyes were open, her expression so shocked it was almost funny. The little, perfectly round head was covered in a thick layer of matted, bloody curls. Her irises were a familiar- but astonishing- chocolate brown. Under the blood, her skin looked pale, a creamy ivory. All besides her cheeks, which flamed with color.
Her tiny face was so absolutely perfect that it stunned me. She was even more beautiful than her father. Unbelievable. Impossible. True.

"Elizabeth," I whispered. "So... beautiful." The impossible face suddenly smiled- a sweet, deliberate smile. Behind the shell-pink lips was a full complement of snowy milk teeth. She leaned her head down, against my chest, burrowing against the warmth. Her skin was warm and silky, but it didn't give the way mine did.

Then there was pain again- just one warm slash of it. I gasped. And she was gone. My angel-faced baby was nowhere. I couldn't see or feel her.

No! I wanted to shout. Give her back to me!

But the weakness was too much. My arms felt like empty rubber hoses for a moment, and then they felt like nothing at all. I couldn't feel them. I couldn't feel me.

"Something's happening! Her heart-"

"Keep her heart beating! CPR!"

"Jacob-"

"I know, I know-"

The blackness rushed over my eyes more solidly than before. Like a thick blindfold, firm and fast.

Covering not just my eyes but also my self with a crushing weight. It was exhausting to push against it. I knew it would be so much easier to give in. To let the blackness push me down, down, down to a place where there was no pain and no weariness and no worry and no fear.

If it had only been for myself, I wouldn't have been able to struggle very long. I was only human, with no more than human strength. I'd been trying to keep up with the supernatural for too long,
like Jacob had said.

But this wasn't just about me.

If I did the easy thing now, let the black nothingness erase me, I would hurt them.

Edward. Edward. My life and his were twisted into a single strand. Cut one, and you cut both. If he were gone, I would not be able to live through that. If I were gone, he wouldn't live through it, either.

And a world without Edward seemed completely pointless. Edward had to exist.

Hermione. Hermione who had suffered more than anyone should, but still stood strong, still loved and loved with all her heart. My other half, my sister, my twin. She had seen so much death, too much death, and she'd almost broken. But with my help, Harry's help and, most importantly, Alice's help she'd managed to build herself back up.

But if I died... she could be shattered beyond repair. And that wasn't acceptable.

Then Jacob- who'd said goodbye to me over and over but kept coming back when I needed him. Jacob, who I'd wounded so many times it was criminal. Would I hurt him again, the worst way yet? He'd stayed for me, despite everything.

Now all he asked was that I stay for him. How could I deny him that one thing?

But it was so dark here that I couldn't see either of their faces. Nothing seemed real. That made it hard not to give up.

I kept pushing against the black, though, almost a reflex. I wasn't trying to lift it. I was just resisting. Not allowing it to crush me completely. I wasn't Atlas, and the black felt as heavy as a planet; I couldn't shoulder it. All I could do was not be entirely obliterated.

It was sort of the pattern to my life- I'd never been strong enough to deal with the things outside my control, to attack the enemies or outrun them. To avoid the pain. Always human and weak, I had
no magic, no special powers... the only thing I'd ever been able to do was keep going. Endure. Survive.

"Come on, come on, come on-

"Almost here- almost here-"

It had been enough up to this point. It would have to be enough today. I would endure this until help came.

I knew Edward would be doing everything he could. I knew that Hermione would be doing everything she could. I knew Jacob would be doing everything he could. They would not give up. Neither would I.

I held the blackness of nonexistence at bay by inches.

"Keep her heart beating-"

I felt myself slipping- there was nothing to hold on to... And then there was. A golden light flowed through me, a golden light that was penetrating the darkness, leaching away the pain, pulling me away from the red and the black that threatened to overwhelm me.

And then I could see their faces again in my mind, as clear day.


And Elizabeth.

And as I thought of her, I could feel something. Like phantom limbs, I imagined I could feel my arms again. And in them, something small and hard and very, very warm.

My baby. My sweet, precious little nudger.
I had done it. Against the odds, I had been strong enough to survive Elizabeth, to hold on to her until she was strong enough to live without me.

That spot of heat in my phantom arms felt so real. I clutched it closer. It was exactly where my heart should be. Holding tight the warm memory of my daughter, I knew that I would be able to fight the darkness as long as I needed to.

The warmth beside my heart got more and more real, warmer and warmer. Hotter. The heat was so real it was hard to believe that I was imagining it.

Hotter.

Uncomfortable now. Too hot. Much, much too hot.

Like grabbing the wrong end of a curling iron- my automatic response was to drop the scorching thing in my arms. But there was nothing in my arms. My arms were not curled to my chest. My arms were dead things lying somewhere at my side. The heat was inside me.

The burning grew- rose and peaked and rose again until it surpassed anything I'd ever felt.

And then I heard a voice, an angel’s voice, one, and I managed to make out words, just a handful, ones I could just string together.

"Please, Bella," Edward begged softly, "don’t die."
Chapter Twenty-Six

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX:

Hermione's POV:

As I looked down at the rings, nestled on the silk bedspread, one thought overwhelmed me. I was tired. I was so fucking tired. Exhaustion was nothing new to me; this was, this weariness that felt like it was smothering me. I felt like I might shatter. I was shaky and weak and my eyes ached. And my head ached. And my skin felt stretched.

Alice. Alice. Alice.

Lucius had Alice. He had the woman I loved, my soul mate, my wife, my everything. He had her and he could be doing anything to her. She could be... no, I couldn't think like that- I couldn't.

I took a deep breath and tried to detach myself from my emotions, to think objectively.

Where could he have taken her?

The answer that came to me was obvious.

Where else would he take her, but to the place where all this started. The place where all would finish.

The Malfoy's villa in the Alps was beautiful, I remembered. I pictured it as I closed my eyes, and twisted.

Destination.
Determination.

Deliberation.

The world squeezed and tightened around me, before receding, leaving me standing stationary, the air, startlingly cold, sharpening my mind, fighting back my weariness.

Like a photograph, frozen in time, preserved in amber, the sight before me was unchanged from the last time I was here.

Oddly idyllic, it looked like a scene from a Muggle Christmas card. Soft white snow coated the ground, trees stood tall, green and thriving, even in winter, something I knew to be accomplished by magic. Despite the chill to the air, the weak sunlight was oddly warm against my bare arms, and the wind was still.

The villa itself, large and majestic and picturesque. There was only one flaw in my beautiful surroundings. One blight against the beauty of the mountain.

Lucius Malfoy.

I could see him standing across from me, steel-grey eyes glinting malevolently. And I could see Alice a few feet behind him, bound by ropes of shining light, suspended a few feet above the ground. Her eyes were wide and horrified, and her mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear her voice. My heart wrenched and tears burned my eyes. I wanted to sprint forwards, towards her, but I knew better then to run forwards blindly.

"Revelio," I murmured, raising my wand, and the dome of the ward flared into existence, its surface racing with numbers and symbols. I ignored the formula displayed and twisted my wand as if it were a dial. The ward blurred then faded and Lucius clapped once, twice, three times; the sound slow and mocking.

"I see you remembered," he drawled. My body stiffened.

"It wasn't something I could easily forget." I say, through tight lips, "I did spend over a hundred
hours working out how to crack it.” Lucius chuckles, the sound low and mocking.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to get my little... message," his voice was careless, unworried, "I was starting to get bored." My jaw clenched.

"If you laid one hand on her-" I started to snarl, and Lucius's face twists in honest disgust.

"I would never lower myself to touch such a filthy beast," he interrupted me, his lips curling into a sneer. "Of course you filthy halfbreeds would mate on each other, like the animals you are. I guess filth has to stick together. The only good thing is you're both females- I shudder to think about you creating spawn with that thing."

"She's not a thing!" The words escape me before I can stop them, and I realize my body is shaking, shaking with anger.

"I was thinking about killing it before you got here," Lucius drawls on, ignoring my outburst and obviously enjoying the fear his words caused in me, the fear I was unable to help show on my face. "But I knew I wouldn't get any enjoyment out of it."

"Any enjoyment-" I let out an incredulous sound, "what a fucking joke! You love killing, you foul, loathsome, evil little cockroach!" A twisted smile covers his face.

"You're right of course." His voice is filled with a twisted glee that makes me want to scrub myself with soap and water until my skin is pink and tingling. "I do love killing. But vampires? They're no fun. One little words, and they're nothing but ashes scattered on the ground. There's nothing to see, nothing to enjoy. Not like Muggles and Mudbloods... there's just something about watching a body jerk and shake, violently and uncontrollably. To see muscles and body parts go into repetitive spasms, to see a soul unwillingly leave through a dying one's eyes. It's beautiful... and I'm going to enjoy watching you take your final breath."

"You're sick." I whisper. I can feel the urge to retch, feel the acid crawling up my esophagus. There's a madness present in the eyes across from me, a terrible sickness.

Dobby was right when he said his master was a "Bad, Bad Wizard".

"And you're a dirty Mudblood," he spat, "you make my skin crawl. You're an unnatural being that
is tainting the wizarding world, and you deserve nothing more than to face the consequences for
the fact that you have stolen magic and pretended you're a witch who has the right to use magic.
You don't."

"So how are we doing this?" My voice is flat, emotionless- the complete opposite to the emotional
chaos in my head. Alice must surely be able to hear my heartbeat, racing in my chest.

Lucius smiles without humor, wand in his hand, and he bends forwards slightly, a mocking bow, a
look of disgusted contempt mingled with cold rage surfacing on his suddenly feral-like features.

Wizard's duel.

I smile back, a short, sharp thing that flashes like a knife blade, steel myself and give a short bow
back, before raising my wand in a ready position. Lucius launched the first spell.

I twisted away and cast my own back. What followed next was a violent volley of spells and curses
that lit the open space, reflected off the glittering snow, in bright arrays of color. Summoned
objects were thrown and repelled and that swiftly evolved into conjuration and animation of
various objects. A cutting curse tore through my arm, but I didn't even flinch.

Panic raced through me as I felt my strength begin to sap. I needed this to be over, and I needed it
to be over quick. The vibrant colors of the curses were bringing back memories, pushing them
violently to the forefront of my mind.

Scenes from the Final Battle danced behind my eyelids. Curses flew everywhere- bolts of green,
blue and red light flashed around me. I remembered twisting and ducking and shooting off curses
of my own. Each snapshot more horrifying than the last. I saw a nameless Order member dragging
an armless sixth year Ravenclaw student out of danger; I heard Dolohov holler 'Carnificare!' and
saw Colin Creevey's head explode into a fine mist.

The last hour of battle was the worst; it was pure chaos, with curses firing from every direction and
not knowing if they were from friends or foes. It was like being sucked into the very deepest,
darkest pit of Hell; dust from the school rained down making thick white dust, while smoke from
the many fires mixed; people, Light and Dark fighters alike, fell from the rooftops and open
windows and towers all along the castle, some being pushed, or jumped, knowing they were
cornered and would soon die anyway. All around, I heard screaming and yelling, crying and cursing, and the telltale sound of bodies hitting all over the grounds and the roofs around me...

I was brought back to the present by a bloodcurdling scream, which turned out to be my own. I threw up the strongest shield I could and staggered backwards, looking down in horror. The shattered bones of my left wrist had torn through my flesh and skin, and now jutted out of my arm, accompanied by a spray of blood. I felt dizzy, looking down, and my head swam. The pain was unbearable, but I pushed it away the best I could, as a series of spells cast in quick succession thudded into my shield, causing it to waver.

The strength it took to keep it up left me, and I had to fling myself to the side to avoid the purple jet that shot towards me- I recognized it from the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. I'd survived it once before, as evidenced by the diagonal scar that stretched from my collarbone to my hip. But Dolohov had cast the spell nonverbally, which had weakened the spell significantly.

Lucius wasn't casting his spells nonverbally.

In a fit of desperation, I cast three spells in quick succession- one to the left, the second to the right, and the third straight on. Lucius stood there and laughed as the spells flew towards him, seeing only the first two which were off mark. The third curse was hidden in a blind sport created by the light of the first two spells, and it hit Lucius dead on, causing his skin to start sizzling.

Lucius stopped laughing.

We had halted our frenetic dueling, were eyeing each other warily. I couldn't feel my left hand properly anymore and blood was dripping down my arm, dribbling from my wrist, staining the snow beneath me... Lucius, fortunately, wasn't in much better shape anymore- despite having cast the counter-curse; the spell I'd hit him with had lasted long enough to leave burns, covering every inch of his skin, his before pale, smooth skin now red, inflamed and blistered.

My eyes fixed on Lucius, I pushed back my pain and lifted my wand, ready to cast, but Lucius was quicker, shooting a curse at me, giving me just enough time to cast a protego. The sheer force of the magic pushed me back several feet, but left me unharmed, and then a curse of my own was shooting from the tip of my wand.

And so we were dueling again, a furious firing of spells back and forth. Time seemed to alternate between slowing and allowing me to be able to take in all my surroundings, however much I didn't want to, or speeding up until everything was just a blur. Lucius lashed out, a whip of flame darting towards me. I dodged it with quick steps, slinging a bone-shattering curse towards him with a
violent slash of my wand. The fire whip faded away and I went on the offensive, casting a series of cutting hexes in quick succession, moving in a wide arc around my target.

A vicious curse took me in the shoulder, my blood spattering the snow, while my cutting curses left him staggering backwards. Both weak from blood loss, we stared at each other, and then we raised our wands as one.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" I screamed, channeling all my rage, my desperation, my hatred, into the slim stick of wood in my hands. A brilliant emerald beam soared out of the end of my wand, as at the same time Lucius cast his own curse, sending a stream of what appeared to be black fire my way.

He looked shocked when my spell hit him. For a moment he stood there, and then his body crumpled to the ground, his eyes blank.

That's when his spell hit me.

"NO!" I heard Alice scream and I looked down at myself in stunned disbelief. The world slowed around me, the noises fading, until all I could hear was the faltering beat of my heart echoing in my ears and all I could see was blood, blood, so much blood.

Pain... it always felt different.

And this time?

The liquid flow of things inside that should've been staying in one place.

A nauseating vertigo as all exterior support but the frigid cold.

Black swimming before my eyes, to the point I couldn't tell if they were open or not.

And the fiery inferno of pain that radiated throughout my abdomen.
Blood rush.

Giddy.

It was artful, in a way; I mused, as my legs buckled out from beneath me, the way my insides had become my outsides. The long ropes of my intestines were draped delicately down my front, as blood gushed at an alarming rate from the large tear that had once been my abdomen. I'd read that the small intestine was seven meters long. This was true.

It hurt. Hurt so much. Like someone had dug around my insides with a knife, then poured acid on the open wound then set it on fire. A strangled choking sound escaped my throat as I tried to scream, but instead a warm, thick liquid bubbled over my lips, dribbling over my chin.

Had to hold on– why didn't I have a wand?– help had to come– had to still fight– resist– I was falling– a liquidy thump.

Something had caught me, was cradling me, and I tried to move, tried to see, but my body wouldn't obey me. I couldn't so much as twitch a finger. The sluggish sound of my heartbeats had been drowned out by a dull roaring noise. For a split second I saw the fuzzy shape of Alice dominate my vision through sheer force of will but then the blackness washed back over, she was gone, and I'd stopped breathing. Realization struck me.

I was about to die.

Lucius had hit me with an entrail-expelling curse. A particularly vicious and extremely Dark spell that literally disemboweled a person. The receiver would lose consciousness in around thirty seconds, and be dead in a minute.

To think I'd survived a War, only to be killed by Lucius fucking Malfoy. If it wasn't for the fact I was dying, I'd be embarrassed.

I let my eyelids close, mostly because I didn't have the energy to keep them open any longer. I pictured Alice, my beautiful Alice, wanting her face to be the last thing I ever saw. I remembered the first time we met, the first time we kissed, the first time we made love, the day I told her I loved her, the day we got married, our honeymoon, and the look on her face whenever she saw me-like I was her eternal sun, her entire reason for existence; her raison d'être.
And then I felt a sharp, abstract pain in my left wrist and then my right wrist. I let out a surprised sort of sound, as fresh pain washed over me. A sharp, spiking pain. Then warm. Then too warm. Hot. Too hot. Burning. Burning like fire, razing over my skin, flowing through my veins.

I desperately tried to inhale, to scream, as the pain grew, but my lungs weren't working. A soft, cool mouth pressed against mine, blowing sweet-tasting air into my lungs, as hands pushed against my chest, rhythmically. Cracking sounds echoed in my ears, more pain in my chest, as my ribs were crushed.

It hurt, it hurt, I wanted it to stop hurting, why wouldn't it stop hurting?

"HermioneHermioneHermione," someone was just about chanting, "stay with me, sweetheart, I love you, stay with me, don't leave me baby, don't ever leave me!"

It was Alice's voice, my sweet, beautiful, precious Alice. With a strength I didn't even know I possessed, I managed to reach up towards the sound with my right hand, the one with no broken wrist. Icy hands curled around mine, wintry lips pressed against my fingertips, over and over.

"Alice," I managed to whisper.

"It's me, dear heart, it's me." Alice croons, and I think I smile.

"Good." I say. And then I start screaming.

I'd heard first hand accounts of what it felt like to be Turned into a vampire. I'd wondered, once or twice, whether it felt anything like the Cruciatus.

It didn't.

It was a whole different sort of pain altogether.

Experience at dealing with the torture curse let me slam up my Occlumency walls, disassociating my mind from my body, shielding myself from the worst of the pain. As the fire raged, I distanced myself from it the best I could and tried to make sense of the world around me.
I picked up on small things. Outside turned to inside, snow covered ground turned to a soft mattress, and the sticky blood was gone.

Keeping up my shields took almost complete concentration, and even then the occasional yelp or sob of pain slipped through my lips.

A witch or wizard's magic was tied to every part of their being. Our magic permeated us, was bound to us; interacting with every part of the immensely complicated system that was the human body. Or, rather, that's what it was supposed to do. Mine wasn't. It felt like all the magic had been leached out of every cell, every atom, of my being, and forced into a prison, right around where my heart rested.

I could feel it there, trapped behind a barrier, not shields like the ones in my mind, but a prison with walls as impenetrable and unbreakable as diamond. It was a whirlwind, raging against its prison, trying to move the immovable walls.

Alice never left my side. Sometimes I was more lucid, could manage a conversation with her.

"Wh-where are we?" I managed to pant out at one point.

"The Villa," Alice said, her voice strained. "I don’t know where we are, there are no phones, no floo powder and there aren’t any houses anywhere I can see."

"Am I going to die here?" I whimper. Alice made a choked sob.

"I don’t know." I faded back out of focus, fresh waves of pain tearing my attention away from her.

I could hear her voice, talking to me, hear the sound of her breathing, and practically taste her fear and panic and love, but I was too choked up. It was like molten ice, or freezing fire, an utterly unique sensation flowing along my veins. It seemed to have started at my wrists, and had now radiated outwards through my nerves, until it filled my entire body.

The only change came when the fire spread to my abdomen, the scorching flames seeming to knit together what Lucius had destroyed. And it burned.
It felt like an eon had gone by before the pain started to recede, starting from my fingertips, fading slowly, slowly, until only my heart was left.

Except my heart, encased in the diamond walls that trapped my magic, didn't burn. It couldn't. The fire razed angrily against the outside of the prison, the scorching flames trying to destroy the barrier from the outside, not unlike how my magic had been trying to destroy the barrier from the inside.

Except now it didn't feel like my magic was trying to pierce the seemingly impenetrable diamond-walls encasing my heart. It seemed to be reinforcing it.

It was a battle- the irresistible force, against the immovable object.

The vampire venom against my witch magic.

The venom had claimed my body, but my magic was protecting my heart. And as I lay there, two forces waging an eternal battle within me, I finally understood why vampire venom was such an effective weapon back in Ancient Egypt- unless my magic ran out, or the venom stopped burning, the stress on my heart would drive it to massive cardiac failure. An agonising, drawn out death. That was what I had to look forward to. And Alice was going to witness every second of it.

“Who are you, vampire?” A voice broke through my walls, a posh British accent, feminine. “How did you find this place?”

“Lucius Malfoy- he kidnapped me, brought me here to lure my wife,” Alice replied, her voice leaking desperation. “Please- my wife, Hermione, she’s badly hurt- you have to help her!”

“That’s Hermione Granger? The Hermione Granger? The War heroine?” Gasped the voice. Warm hands were suddenly touching me, cradling my face. “Oh Merlin!”

“Don’t touch her!” Hissed Alice, and the hands pulled back.

“I won’t hurt her, I promise- I owe her, my family owes her. I- I’m Astoria, Astoria Malfoy. Lucius killed my husband, Draco- I swear, I’ll help you, just tell me what you need,” the British woman,
Astoria, said.

“The magic police- I need you to get the magic police for me.”

“Police?”

“The people in the green and black robes, they solve crimes.”

“You mean the Aurors? I can do that- I’ll do it right now.”

Alice’s cold lips brush against my ear. “It’s okay, now, Hermione. Help is on the way.” She whispers.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:

Bella's POV:

Blistering flames, burning, burning, trying to stay still…

Eventually the burning changed. My body wasn't burning anymore- only my heart was. And it hurt.

It had picked up to an impossible rate, blazing hot as the sun in my chest as it beat at a furious new speed.

"Carlisle," Edward called. His voice was low but clear. I knew that Carlisle would hear it, if he were in or near the house.

Carlisle entered the room, Esme at his side. Their footsteps were so distinct, I could even tell that Carlisle was on the right, and a foot ahead of Esme.

"Listen," Edward told them.

The loudest sound in the room was my frenzied heart, pounding to the rhythm of the fire.

"Ah," Carlisle said. "It's almost over." My relief at his words was overshadowed by the excruciating pain in my heart.

"Wonderful," Esme sounded relieved, "Who should I fetch?"
"Jasper, definitely. Emmett too. And should we have Rose...?"

"Yes- keep the baby away." Agreed Edward.

What? No. No! What did he mean, keep my baby away? What was he thinking?

My fingers twitched- the irritation breaking through my perfect facade. The room went silent besides the jack-hammering of my heart as they all stopped breathing for a second in response.

A hand squeezed my wayward fingers. "Bella? Bella, love?" Could I answer him without screaming? I considered that for a moment, and then the fire ripped hotter still through my chest. Right. Better not to chance it.

"I'll go get them now," Esme murmured, and I heard the swish of wind as she darted away.

And then- oh!

My heart took off, beating like helicopter blades, the sound almost a single sustained note; it felt like it would grind through my ribs. The pain was enough to stun me, to break through my iron grip on the stake. My back arched, bowed as if the fire was dragging me upward by my heart.

I allowed no other piece of my body to break rank as my torso slumped back to the table.

It became a battle inside me- my sprinting heart racing against the attacking fire. Both were losing. The fire was doomed, having consumed everything that was combustible; my heart galloped toward its last beat.

The fire constricted, concentrating inside that one remaining human organ with a final, unbearable surge.
The surge was answered by a deep, hollow-sounding thud. My heart stuttered twice, and then thudded quietly again just once more.

There was no sound. No breathing. Not even mine.

For a moment, the absence of pain was all I could comprehend.

And then I opened my eyes and gazed above me in wonder.

Sharp. Defined.

The brilliant light overhead was still blinding-bright, and yet I could plainly see the glowing strands of the filaments inside the bulb. I could see each color of the rainbow in the white light, and, at the very edge of the spectrum, an eighth color I had no name for.

Behind the light, I could distinguish the individual grains in the dark wood ceiling above. In front of it, I could see the dust motes in the air, the sides the light touched, and the dark sides, distinct and separate.

They spun like little planets, moving around each other in a celestial dance.

The dust was so beautiful that I inhaled in shock; the air whistled down my throat, swirling the motes into a vortex. The action felt wrong. I considered, and realized the problem was that there was no relief tied to the action. I didn't need the air. My lungs weren't waiting for it. They reacted indifferently to the influx.

I did not need the air, but I liked it. In it, I could taste the room around me-taste the lovely dust motes, the mix of the stagnant air mingling with the flow of slightly cooler air from the open door. Taste a lush whiff of silk. Taste a faint hint of something warm and desirable, something that should be moist, but wasn't...

That smell made my throat burn dryly, a faint echo of the venom burn, though the scent was tainted by the bite of chlorine and ammonia. And most of all, I could taste an almost-honey-lilac-and-sun-flavored scent that was the strongest thing, the closest thing to me.
The TV downstairs had been muted, and I heard someone- Rosalie?- shift her weight on the first floor. I didn't realize someone was holding my hand until whoever it was squeezed it lightly. Like it had before to hide the pain, my body locked down again in surprise. This was not a touch I expected. The skin was perfectly smooth, but it was the wrong temperature. Not cold.

After that first frozen second of shock, my body responded to the unfamiliar touch in a way that shocked me even more.

Air hissed up my throat, spitting through my clenched teeth with a low, menacing sound like a swarm of bees. Before the sound was out, my muscles bunched and arched, twisting away from the unknown. I flipped off my back in a spin so fast it should have turned the room into an incomprehensible blur- but it did not. I saw every dust mote, every splinter in the wood-paneled walls, every loose thread in microscopic detail as my eyes whirled past them.

So by the time I found myself crouched against the wall defensively I already understood what had startled me, and that I had overreacted.

Oh. Of course. Edward wouldn't feel cold to me. We were the same temperature now.

I held my pose for a moment longer, adjusting to the scene before me.

Edward was leaning across the operating table that I assumed I had remained on, throughout the bizarre experience that had been my Turning, his hand reached out toward me, his expression anxious.

Edward's face was the most important thing, but my peripheral vision catalogued everything else, just incase. Some instinct to defend had been triggered, and I automatically searched for any sign of danger.

My vampire family waited cautiously against the far wall by the door, Emmett and Jasper in the front.

Like there was danger. My nostrils flared, searching for the threat. I could smell nothing out of place.

That faint scent of something delicious- but marred by harsh chemicals- tickled my throat again,
setting it to aching and burning.

Maggie was peeking around Jasper's elbow, her bouncy red curls swishing about her shoulders, with a happy smile on her face. That smile reassured me and then I put the pieces together. Jasper and Emmett were in the front to protect the others, as I had assumed. What I hadn't grasped immediately was that I was the danger.

All this was a sideline. The greater part of my senses and my mind were still focused on Edward's face.

I had never seen it before this second.

How many times had I stared at Edward and marveled over his beauty? How many hours—days, weeks—of my life had I spent dreaming about what I then deemed to be perfection? I thought I'd known his face better than my own. I'd thought this was the one sure physical thing in my whole world: the flawlessness of Edward's face.

I may as well have been blind.

For the first time, with the dimming shadows and limiting weakness of humanity taken off my eyes, I saw his face. I gasped and then struggled with my vocabulary, unable to find the right words. I needed better words.

At this point, the other part of my attention had ascertained that there was no danger here besides myself, and I automatically straightened out of my crouch.

I was momentarily preoccupied by the way my body moved. The instant I'd considered standing erect, I was already straight. There was no brief fragment of time in which the action occurred; change was instantaneous, almost as if there was no movement at all.

I continued to stare at Edward's face, motionless again.
He moved slowly around the table- each step taking nearly half a second, each step flowing sinuously like river water weaving over smooth stones-his hand still outstretched.

I watched the grace of his advance, absorbing it with my new eyes. "Bella?" he asked in a low, calming tone, but the worry in his voice layered my name with tension. I could not answer immediately, lost as I was in the velvet folds of his voice. It was the most perfect symphony, a symphony in one instrument, an instrument more profound than any created by man... "Bella, love? I'm sorry, I know it's disorienting. But you're all right. Everything is fine."

Everything? My mind spun out, spiraling back to my last human hour. Already, the memory seemed dim, like I was watching through a thick, dark veil- because my human eyes had been half blind. Everything had been so blurred.

When he said everything was fine, did that include Elizabeth? Where was she? With Rosalie? I tried to remember her face- I knew that she had been beautiful- but it was irritating to try to see through the human memories. Her face was shrouded in darkness, so poorly lit...

And Hermione- where had she been? With a small amount of shock I realized that I hadn't seen her or heard her even once during my last human hour, or throughout my Turning.

And Charlie? What would I tell him now? He must have called while I was burning. What had they told him? What did he think had happened to me?

Did Edward's blanket assurance cover all of that? Or was he just trying to calm me?

As I deliberated over which question to ask first, Edward reached out tentatively and stroked his fingertips across my cheek. Smooth as satin, soft as a feather, and now exactly matched to the temperature of my skin.

His touch seemed to sweep beneath the surface of my skin, right through the bones of my face. The feeling was tingly, electric- it jolted through my bones, down my spine, and trembled in my stomach.

Wait, I thought as the trembling blossomed into a warmth, a yearning. Wasn't I supposed to lose this?
Wasn't giving up this feeling a part of the bargain?

I was a newborn vampire. The dry, scorching ache in my throat gave proof to that. And I knew what being a newborn entailed. Human emotions and longings would come back to me later in some form, but I'd accepted that I would not feel them in the beginning. Only thirst. That was the deal, the price. I'd agreed to pay it.

But as Edward's hand curled to the shape of my face like satin-covered steel, desire raced through my dried-out veins, singing from my scalp to my toes.

He arched one perfect eyebrow, waiting for me to speak. I threw my arms around him.

Again, it was like there was no movement. One moment I stood straight and still as a statue; in the same instant, he was in my arms. Warm- or at least, that was my perception. With the sweet, delicious scent that I'd never been able to really take in with my dull human senses, but that was one hundred percent Edward. I pressed my face into his smooth chest.

And then he shifted his weight uncomfortably. Leaned away from my embrace. I stared up at his face, confused and frightened by the rejection. "Um... carefully, Bella. Ow." I yanked my arms away, folding them behind my back as soon as I understood.

I was too strong.

"Oops," I mouthed.

He smiled the kind of smile that would have stopped my heart if it were still beating.

"Don't panic, love," he said, lifting his hand to touch my lips, parted in horror. "You're just a bit stronger than I am for the moment." My eyebrows pushed together. I'd known this, too, but it felt more surreal than any other part of this ultimately surreal moment. I was stronger than Edward. I'd made him say ow.

His hand stroked my cheek again, and I all but forgot my distress as another wave of desire rippled through my motionless body.
These emotions were so much stronger than I was used to that it was hard to stick to one train of thought despite the extra room in my head. Each new sensation overwhelmed me. I remembered Edward saying once- his voice in my head a weak shadow compared to the crystal, musical clarity I was hearing now- that his kind, our kind, were easily distracted. I could see why.

I made a concerted effort to focus. There was something I needed to say. The most important thing.

Very carefully, so carefully that the movement was actually discernible, I brought my right arm out from behind my back and raised my hand to touch his cheek. I refused to let myself be sidetracked by the pearly color of my hand or by the smooth silk of his skin or by the charge that zinged in my fingertips.

I stared into his eyes and heard my own voice for the first time. "I love you," I said, but it sounded like singing. My voice rang and shimmered like a bell. His answering smile dazzled me more than it ever had when I was human; I could really see it now.

"As I love you," he told me. He took my face between his hands and leaned his face to mine- slow enough to remind me to be careful. He kissed me, soft as a whisper at first, and then suddenly stronger, fiercer. I tried to remember to be gentle with him, but it was hard work to remember anything in the onslaught of sensation, hard to hold on to any coherent thoughts.

It was like he'd never kissed me- like this was our first kiss. And, in truth, he'd never kissed me this way before. It almost made me feel guilty. Surely I was in breach of the contract. I couldn't be allowed to have this, too.

Someone cleared his throat. Emmett. I recognized the deep sound at once, joking and annoyed at the same time. I'd forgotten we weren't alone. And then I realized that the way I was curved around Edward now was not exactly polite for company. Embarrassed, I half-stepped away in another instantaneous movement.

Edward chuckled and stepped with me, keeping his arms tight around my waist. His face was glowing- like a white flame burned from behind his diamond skin. I took an unnecessary breath to settle myself. How different this kissing was! I read his expression as I compared the indistinct human memories to this clear, intense feeling. He looked... a little smug.

"You've been holding out on me," I accused in my singing voice, my eyes narrowing a tiny bit. He laughed, radiant with relief that it was all over—the fear, the pain, the uncertainties, the waiting, all of it behind us now.
"It was sort of necessary at the time," he reminded me. "Now it's your turn to not break me." He laughed again. I frowned as I considered that, and then Edward was not the only one laughing.

This was so unreal, so... unexplainable.

And thrilling beyond anything else I'd ever experienced.

I was a vampire.

Carlisle shifted my focus from my thoughts to the world around me as he stepped out from behind Emmett. He walked toward me swiftly, eyes only slightly wary, Jasper shadowing his footsteps.

I'd never seen Carlisle's face before either, not really. I had an odd urge to blink- like I was staring at the sun. "How do you feel, Bella?" He asked.

I considered that. "Overwhelmed. There's so much..." I trailed off, listening to the bell-tone of my voice again.

"Yes, it can be quite confusing." I nodded one fast, jerky bob.

"But I feel like me. Sort of. I didn't expect that." Edward's arms squeezed lightly around my waist.

"I told you so," he whispered.

"You are quite controlled," Carlisle mused. "More so than I expected, even with the time you had to prepare yourself mentally for this." I thought about the wild mood swings, the difficulty concentrating, and whispered,

"I'm not sure about that." He nodded seriously, and then his jeweled eyes glittered with interest.

"Tell me, what do you remember of the transformation process?" I hesitated, intensely aware of
Edward's breath brushing against my cheek, sending whispers of electricity through my skin.

"Everything was... very dim before. I remember the baby couldn't breathe..." I looked at Edward, momentarily frightened by the memory.

"Elizabeth is healthy and well," he promised, a gleam I'd never seen before in his eyes. He said her name with an understated fervor. A reverence. The way devout people talked about their gods.

"What do you remember after that?" Carlisle prodded.

I focused on my poker face. I'd never been much of a liar. "It's hard to remember. It was so dark before. And then... I opened my eyes and I could see everything."

"Amazing," Carlisle breathed, his eyes alight.

Chagrin washed through me, and I waited for the heat to burn in my cheeks and give me away. And then I remembered that I would never blush again. Maybe that would protect Edward from the truth.

I'd have to find a way to tip off Carlisle, though. Someday. If he ever needed to create another vampire. That possibility seemed very unlikely, which made me feel better about lying.

"I want you to think - to tell me everything you remember," Carlisle pressed excitedly, and I couldn't help the grimace that flashed across my face. I didn't want to have to keep lying, because I might slip up. And I didn't want to think about the burning. Unlike the human memories, that part was perfectly clear and I found I could remember it with far too much precision.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Bella," Carlisle apologized immediately. "Of course your thirst must be very uncomfortable. This conversation can wait."

Actually, until he'd mentioned it, the thirst actually wasn't unmanageable. There was so much room in my head. A separate part of my brain was keeping tabs on the burn in my throat, almost like a
reflex. The way my old brain had handled breathing and blinking.

But his question brought the burn to the forefront of my mind. Suddenly, the dry ache was all I could think about, and the more I thought about it, the more it hurt. My hand flew up to cup my throat, like I could smother the flames from the outside. The skin of my neck was strange beneath my fingers. So smooth it was somehow soft, though it was hard as stone, too.


He read the alarm in my expression and smiled encouragingly. "It's quite easy, love. Instinctual. Don't worry, I'll show you." When I didn't move, he grinned his crooked smile and raised his eyebrows. "I was under the impression that you'd always wanted to see me hunt." I laughed in a short burst of humor (part of me listened in wonder to the pealing bell sound) as his words reminded me of cloudy human conversations.

I did not expect that it would be so uncomfortable- like trying to squint through muddy water. I knew from Rosalie's explanation that if I thought of my human memories enough, I would not lose them over time. I did not want to forget one minute I'd spent with Edward, with Hermione, with Charlie. Even Renee. I would make sure those human memories were cemented into my infallible vampire mind.

"Shall we?" Edward asked. He reached up to take the hand that was still at my neck. His fingers smoothed down the column of my throat. "I don't want you to be hurting," he added in a low murmur. Something I would not have been able to hear before.

"I'm fine," I said out of lingering habit. "Wait. First..." There was so much. I'd never gotten to my questions. There were more important things than the ache.

It was Carlisle who spoke now. "Yes?"

"I want to see her. Elizabeth."
It was oddly difficult to say her name. My daughter, these words were even harder to think. It all
seemed so distant. I tried to remember how I had felt three days ago, and automatically, my hands
pulled free of Edward's and dropped to my stomach.

Flat. Empty. I clutched at the pale cotton that covered my skin, panicking again, while an
insignificant part of my mind noted that it certainly hadn't been Alice who had dressed me- she
would have had me in some silky atrocity.

I knew there was nothing left inside me, and I faintly remembered the bloody removal scene, but
the physical proof was still hard to process. All I knew was loving my little nudger inside of me.
Outside of me, she seemed like something I must have imagined. A fading dream- a dream that
was half nightmare.

While I wrestled with my confusion, I saw Edward and Carlisle exchange a guarded glance.
"What?" I demanded, anxiety thrilling through me.

"Bella," Edward said soothingly. "That's not really a good idea. She's half-human, love. Her heart
beats, and blood runs in her veins. Until your thirst is positively under control... You don't want to
put her in danger, do you?" I frowned, insulted. Of course I didn't want to put my baby girl in
danger!

But was I out of control? Confused, yes. Easily unfocused, yes. But dangerous? To her? My
daughter?

I couldn't be positive that the answer was no. So I would have to be patient. That sounded difficult.

Because until I saw her again, she wouldn't be real. Just a fading dream... of a stranger... "Where is
she?" I listened hard, and then I could hear beating hearts on the floor below me. I could hear more
than one person breathing- quietly, like they were listening, too.

And there was also a fluttering sound, a thrumming, that I couldn't place... And the sound of the
heartbeats were so moist and appealing, that my mouth started watering. That made up my mind- I
would definitely have to learn how to hunt before I saw her. My stranger baby.

"Is Rosalie with her?" I ask.
"Yes," Edward answered in a clipped tone, and I could see that something he'd thought of upset him. I'd thought he and Rose were over their differences- had the animosity erupted again? Before I could ask, he pulled my hands away from my flat stomach, tugging gently again.

"Wait," I protested again, trying to focus. "What about Hermione? She wasn't there when the birth... is she okay?" Carlisle and Edward traded looks and if my heart still beat, it would have sped right up in my chest. There was something they weren't telling me. Something about Hermione.

"There was... an incident." Carlisle chose his words carefully. I narrowed my eyes.

"What happened?"

"Bella, how about we hunt first-" Edward started coaxing, but I shook my head, fiercely.

"Tell me what happened to my sister!" My voice was lower then I expected it to be, with a menacing ring to it, a growled undertone. Edward and Carlisle exchanged another look before Edward sighed and nodded, before turning back to me.

"We don’t know everything." He said, and my body stiffened, a reaction to stress.

"What. Happened?" My words were short, clipped.

"Lucius set a trap. He used blood magic- similar to what Harry and Fleur used with you, to track her to here. Harry says there must have been some blood left on the floor of the cellar he kept her in when he held her... prisoner. As far as we know, rather then take on all of us, here at the mansion, he asked around Forks to find out where she lived, and waited there. When Alice arrived, he took her. When Hermione realized he had Alice, she went after him. They fought and she killed Lucius, but he hit her with a curse... it almost killed her. The only way Alice could save her was to inject her with our venom."

"But," I looked at him, confused, "I thought that the venom wouldn't work on a witch or wizard. That there was an antidote, because otherwise it would kill them." Edward stroked my arm soothingly as he continued his tale.

"Alice’s plan was to keep her breathing until she could get to a Healer and be given the antidote. Except… she couldn’t find a way to contact anyone, and she didn’t know where she was. It took
Astoria Malfoy visiting the Villa, yesterday, for her to get into contact with Harry and Ron. They gave her the antidote, but it isn’t working.” He said quietly, regret clear on his face.

"It isn’t working?” My voice was rising in panic. Edward ran a hand through his hair, his expression that of concealed worry.

"No, and no one knows why."

I take a few deep, unnecessary breaths. "I want to see her. Before we go hunting." My voice is firm, and this time no one even tries to object. And somehow this terrifies me even more.

Edward led the way, his arm never leaving its spot around my waist. Hermione was in the bedroom she and Alice shared at the mansion. She was soaked in sweat, her entire body trembling and shuddering, as her eyes looking blankly at the ceiling, her gaze unseeing. If Alice could cry, tears would be steadily streaming down her cheeks as she clutched onto Hermione's hand, the little pixie vampire's expression was so tortured.

"Oh Hermione..." I whispered, as her expression twisted into a snarl of agony, and an especially violent tremor ran through her. The memory of the burning of my heart was still so vivid, so fresh, and I shuddered with her, almost feeling the flames, burning so hot, so painfully, that I wished I almost wished I was dead. "How long has she been like this? What happened?" I demanded, my new bell-like voice shrill.

"Too long. She shouldn't still be in pain." Alice whispered, her face pale, "I spoke to Harry. No witch or wizard ever recorded has been Turned before. They have an antidote for the venom, but it didn't work on Hermione. He thinks it might be because it took so long for it to be administered.” A loud sob escapes her, the guilt heavy on her face, "He has no idea what's going to happen to her, nobody does!” She turned her tear-stained face to me, eyes pleading. "I had no choice- she was dying! She'd stopped breathing and her heart stopped beating! That son of a bitch cast some sort of spell that ripped out her insides! We were alone, in the middle of nowhere! I had no way to contact anyone!"

Alice sobbed harder, bowing her head over Hermione.

"It's not your fault, Alice." Esme whispered, her face drawn and tight, as she reached over and stroke Alice’s back.
"What did he do to her?" I demand, ignoring the burning in my throat as I stared down at my sister.

Carlisle gently lifted up the blanket covering Hermione's stomach, and I let out a furious snarl. The gaping wound was horrific- it was literally a hole in Hermione's stomach, all the innards you expected to see, the guts, intestines, veins, everything just gone, torn out, leaving an empty hole behind. It was unreal. I could see the flesh slowly knitting itself back together, small changes I wouldn't have picked up without my new vampiric eyesight, but still... it was horrifying.

Anger tore through me, pumping hot and fierce around my body. A stream of vicious snarls and growls escaped my throat, and Edward wrapped his arms around me, equally restraining and hugging me.

"Let's go hunting, love," he urged me, tugging me towards the window of the room. I barely listened to him.

"I'm going to kill him!" I screamed, thrashing, tearing myself out of his grasp. Automatically, I felt a wave of calm wash through me, and I turned to see Jasper in the doorway.

"He's dead, Bella. And you need to hunt." The scarred vampire said and I couldn't help but freeze as my gaze locked onto him. Jasper had been so still and silent that I'd taken no notice of him since he'd followed behind Carlisle. Now he'd moved again, to hover in front of Alice and Hermione, his eyes locked on my expression. Because I was the danger here.

I knew he would be tasting the mood around me, too, and so he must have felt my jolt of shock as I studied his face, looking at it closely for the first time.

Through my sightless human eyes, the scars left from his former life with the newborn armies in the South had been mostly invisible. Only with a bright light to throw their slightly raised shapes into definition could I even make out their existence.

Now that I could see, the scars were Jasper's most dominant feature. It was hard to take my eyes off his ravaged neck and jaw- hard to believe that even a vampire could have survived so many sets of teeth ripping into his throat.

Instinctively, I tensed to defend myself. Any vampire who saw Jasper would have had the same reaction.
The scars were like a lighted billboard. Dangerous, they screamed. How many vampires had tried to kill Jasper? Hundreds? Thousands? The same number that had died in the attempt.

Jasper both saw and felt my assessment, my caution, and he smiled wryly. I fought the urge to cringe away, fear flaring up in me. My every instinct was screaming danger.

"Bella, it's okay, it's okay; he's not going to hurt you." Edward soothed me, gently stroking my arm. I took a deep breath that was meant to be calming, then hissed, my hands rushing up to cup my throat, as the flames flared up. Breathing was a big mistake- it flooded my nostrils with the smell of Hermione's blood. It smelled... odd. Soothing, almost. I had a feeling that if I wasn't so Thirsty, it would barely appeal to me.

But I was so Thirsty it did appeal...

And it smelt mouthwatering.

As my head turned to lock onto Hermione, Alice turned up to look at me and she growled, a venomous growl, which surprised me enough that I fell out of my trance-like state. Frantic, I turned to Edward.

"Get me out of here!" I pleaded, and he gently grasped my hand, and pulled me towards the window.

"Let's hunt, my love." He murmured, and then we were soaring through the air, and landing three stories down in a crouch, and then he was leading me to the forest.
Bella's POV:

Hunting was... thrilling. Edward tried to do some sort of lesson at the start, but I was too impatient for it to be over, my mind so distracted by my possibly dying sister and my stranger baby.

Disaster had almost struck when I crossed the scent of two human hitchhikers, but when Edward broke my concentration, I turned and fled the other way, taking down several deer instead.

And now... now I was eagerly returning to the mansion, one thought preoccupying the forefront of my mind. My daughter. I wanted to see my daughter.

I'd just crossed the river when I heard the sound. A surprising sound- one I hadn't been expecting. A thudding heart.

Edward was beside me in the same second, his hands clamped down hard on the tops of my arms.

"Don't breathe," he cautioned me urgently. I tried not to panic as I froze mid-breath. My eyes were the only things that moved, wheeling instinctively to find the source of the sound.

Jacob stood at the line where the forest touched the Cullen's lawn, his arms folded across his body, his jaw clenched tight. Invisible in the woods behind him, I heard now a larger heart, and the faint crush of bracken under huge, pacing paws.

"Carefully, Jacob," Edward warned. "Maybe this isn't the best way-"

"You think it would be better to let her near the baby first?" Jacob interrupted. "It's safer to see how
Bella does with me. I heal fast." This was a test? To see if I could not kill Jacob before I tried to not kill Elizabeth? I felt sick in the strangest way- it had nothing to do with my stomach, only my mind. Was this Edward's idea?

"Don't worry Bella," I turned to see George, Leah a few feet behind him. Leah's expression was cautious, but George's was calm. I frowned, tilting my head to the side.

"I can't hear your heart," I say, surprised. "Or Leah's!"

"A spell," George explains, as he walks forwards slowly. The air in front of him seems to shimmer slightly, distorting, not unlike my strained memory of heat waves rising off concrete on a hot day. George points his wand at Jacob and mutters something. The same shield appears, but I can still hear his heart beat. I give George a confused look. He smiles gently at me. "That one's just to keep him safe if you lunge at him."

I nod, feeling calmer now, before I turned to give Jacob another confused look. Why was Jacob doing this? Why was he offering himself as a test to protect Elizabeth? It didn't make any sense to me. Even if our friendship had survived... But as my eyes met Jacob's and he smiled his familiar smile, and I was suddenly sure that yes, I didn't know how and I didn't know why, but our friendship was intact. His smile... it was just like before, when we were hanging out in his homemade garage, two friends killing time.

He was just my friend, the way it was supposed to be. Easy and normal. No strange... need.

"I gotta say it, Bells. You're a freak show." Jacob says, and I relax, falling easily into the old pattern. This was a side of him I understood.

Edward growled. "Watch yourself, mongrel." The wind blew from behind me and I quickly filled my lungs with the safe air so I could speak.

"The eyes are really something, aren't they?" My voice sounds like wind chimes, something I still need to get used to. I haven't had time to get a good look at myself yet, but I remember the startling red of newborn eyes.

"Super-creepy. But it's not as bad as I thought it would be." He notes, and I give a mock-scowl.
"Gee- thanks for the amazing compliment!" He rolled his eyes.

"You know what I mean. You still look like you- sort of. Maybe it's not the look so much as... you are Bella. I didn't think it would feel like you were still here." He smiled at me again without a trace of bitterness or resentment anywhere in his face. Then he chuckled and said, "Anyway, I guess I'll get used to the eyes soon enough."

"You will?" I asked, confused. It was wonderful that we were still friends, but it wasn't like we'd be spending much time together.

The strangest look crossed his face, erasing the smile. It was almost... guilty? Then his eyes shifted to Edward. "Thanks," he said. "I didn't know if you'd be able to keep it from her, promise or not. Usually, you just give her everything she wants."

"Maybe I'm hoping she'll get irritated and rip your head off," Edward suggested. Jacob snorted.

"What's going on? Are you two keeping secrets from me?" I demanded, confused.

"I'll explain later," Jacob said self-consciously- like he didn't really plan on it. Then he changed the subject. "First, let's get this show on the road." His grin was a challenge now as he started slowly forward. There was a whine of protest behind him, and then Seth's sandy-colored wolf body slid out of the trees behind him. He gave another nervous sounding whine.

"Relax, Seth," Jacob said, soothingly. "It'll be fine."

The wind was still now; it wouldn't blow his scent away from me. He got close enough that I could feel the heat of his body in the air between us. My throat burned in response. "C'mon, Bells. Do your worst." he coaxed. I stilled, unsure. "I'm getting older here, Bella," Jacob taunted. "Okay, not technically, but you get the idea. Go on, take a whiff."

I locked my muscles in place, hoping I could keep them frozen. I resolved that I would do at least as well as I had on the hunt. Worst-case scenario, I would stop breathing and run for it. Nervously, I took a tiny breath in through my nose, braced for anything.

It hurt a little, but my throat was already burning dully anyway. Jacob didn't smell that much more human than the mountain lion I'd snacked on, less then ten minutes ago. There was an animal edge
to his blood that instantly repelled. Though the loud, wet sound of his heart was appealing, the scent that went with it made my nose wrinkle. It was actually easier with the smell to temper my reaction to the sound and heat of his pulsing blood.

I took another breath and relaxed. "Huh. I can see what everyone's been going on about. You stink, Jacob." Edward burst into laughter and stepped back towards me, his hands wrapping around my waist. Seth barked a low shortle in harmony with Edward; he came a little closer.

"Look who's talking," Jacob said, theatrically plugging his nose. His face didn't pucker at all while Edward embraced me, not even when Edward composed himself and whispered "I love you" in my ear.

Jacob just kept grinning. This made me feel hopeful that things were going to be right between us, the way they hadn't been for so long now. Maybe now I could truly be his friend, since I disgusted him enough physically that he couldn't love me the same way as before. Maybe that was all that was needed.

"Okay, so I passed, right?" I said. "Now are you going to tell me what this big secret is?" Jacob's expression became very nervous.

"It's nothing you need to worry about this second..." I heard Emmett chuckle from behind me- a sound of anticipation. I would have pressed my point, but as I listened to Emmett, I heard other sounds, too. Seven people breathing. One set of lungs moving more rapidly than the others. Only one heart fluttering like a bird's wings, light and quick.

My daughter was just on the other side of that thin wall of glass. I couldn't see her- the light bounced off the reflective windows like a mirror. I could only see myself, looking very strange- so white and still-compared to Jacob. Or, compared to Edward, looking exactly right. "Elizabeth," I whispered. Stress made me a statue again. Elizabeth wasn't going to smell like an animal.

Would I put her in danger? "I'll make sure she's safe." George tells me and I nod, trusting him, though a small plea does escape my lips.

"Promise?"

"Promise." He smiles, "None of us would risk Elizabeth. I think you'll be surprised at how entirely she's already wrapped us all around her little fingers. She'll be perfectly safe, no matter what."
My yearning to see her, to understand the worship in his voice, broke my frozen pose. I took a step forward. And then Jacob was in my way, his face a mask of worry. "Are you sure, bloodsucker?" he demanded of Edward, his voice almost pleading. I'd never heard him speak to Edward that way. "I don't like this. Maybe she should wait-"

"You had your test, Jacob." It was Jacob's test?

"But-" Jacob began.

"But nothing," Edward said, suddenly exasperated. "Bella needs to see our daughter. Get out of her way." Jacob shot me an odd, frantic look and then turned and nearly sprinted into the house ahead of us. Edward growled.

I couldn't make sense of their confrontation, and I couldn't concentrate on it, either. I could only think about the blurred child in my memory and struggle against the haziness, trying to remember her face exactly. "Shall we?" Edward said, his voice gentle again.

I nodded nervously. He took my hand tightly in his and led the way into the house. They waited for me in a smiling line that was both welcoming and defensive. Esme was several paces behind the rest of them, near the front door. She was alone until Jacob joined her and then stood in front of her, closer than was normal.

Someone very small was leaning forward out of Esme's arms, peering around Jacob. Immediately, she had my absolute attention, my every thought, the way nothing else had owned them since the moment I'd opened my eyes.

"I was out just two days?" I gasped, disbelieving. The stranger-child in Esme's arms had to be weeks, if not months, old. She was maybe twice the size of the baby in my dim memory, and she seemed to be supporting her own torso easily as she stretched toward me. Her shiny bronze-colored hair fell in ringlets past her shoulders. Her chocolate brown eyes examined me with an interest that was not at all childlike; it was adult, aware and intelligent. She raised one hand, reaching in my direction for a moment, and then reached back to touch Esme's throat.

If her face had not been astonishing in its beauty and perfection, I wouldn't have believed it was the same child. My child.
But Edward was there in her features, and I was there in the color of her eyes and cheeks, and my
twin had a place in her thick curls, though their color matched Edward's. She must be ours.
Impossible, but still true.

Seeing this unanticipated little person did not make her more real, though. It only made her more
fantastic. Esme patted the hand against her neck and murmured, "Yes, sweetheart, that's her."

Elizabeth's eyes stayed locked on mine. Then, as she had just seconds after her violent birth, she
smiled at me. A brilliant flash of tiny, perfect white teeth. Reeling inside, I took a hesitant step
toward her. Everyone moved very fast.

Emmett and Jasper were right in front of me, shoulder to shoulder, hands ready. Edward gripped
me from behind, fingers tight again on the tops of my arms. Even Carlisle moved to get Emmett's
and Jasper's flanks, while Esme backed to the door, her arms clutching at Elizabeth. Jacob moved,
too, keeping his protective stance in front of them.

Maggie was the only one who held her place. "Relax guys," she chided them. "Bella's fine- she
wasn't going to do anything, she just wanted a closer look. You'd want one too."

Maggie was right. I was in control of myself. I'd been braced for anything-for a scent as impossibly
insistent- but I could smell nothing, and I knew that was George's doing.

I could handle it. I was sure.

"I'm okay," I promised, patting Edward's hand on my arm. Then I hesitated and added, "Keep
close, though, just in case." Jasper's eyes were tight, focused. I knew he was taking in my emotional
climate, and I worked on settling into a steady calm. I felt Edward free my arms as he read Jasper's
assessment. But, though Jasper was getting it firsthand, he didn't seem as certain.

When she heard my voice, the too-aware child struggled in Rosalie's arms, reaching toward me.
Somehow, her expression managed to look impatient. "Jazz, Em, let us through. Bella's got this."

"Edward, the risk-" Jasper said.

"Minimal. Listen, Jasper- on the hunt she caught the scent of some hikers who were in the wrong
place at the wrong time..." I heard Carlisle suck in a shocked breath. Jasper's eyes widened, but he
nodded just a tiny bit, as if Edward's words answered some question in his head. Jacob's mouth screwed up into a disgusted grimace. Emmett shrugged. Esme's face was suddenly full of concern mingled with compassion as she tried to hold on to the struggling child in her arms, and Maggie gave me a pitying look.

I cringed slightly at the memory of the hunt, of the sweet, delicious smell that burned my throat. If I hadn't have stopped... But I had, I reminded myself, ignoring Edward's story telling and the shocked gasps it brought as he revealed that I'd managed to leave the humans alive, instead concentrating on my perfect baby.

"Edward," I said, leaning around Jasper to see her better. "Please?"

Jasper's teeth were set; he didn't move.

"Jasper, this isn't anything you've seen before," Edward said quietly. "Trust me." Their eyes met for a short second, and then Jasper nodded. He moved out of my way, but put one hand on my shoulder and moved with me as I walked slowly forward.

I thought about every step before I took it, analyzing my mood, the burn in my throat, the position of the others around me. How strong I felt versus how well they would be able to contain me. It was a slow procession.

And then the child in Esme's arms, struggling and reaching all this time while her expression got more and more irritated, let out a high, ringing wail. Everyone reacted as if- like me- they'd never heard her voice before.

They swarmed around her in a second, leaving me standing alone, frozen in place. The sound of Elizabeth's cry pierced right through me, spearing me to the floor. My eyes pricked in the strangest way, like they wanted to tear.

It seemed like everyone had a hand on her, patting and soothing. Everyone but me. "What's the matter? Is she hurt? What happened?" It was Jacob's voice that was loudest, that raised anxiously above the others. I watched in shock as he reached for Elizabeth, and then in utter horror as Esme surrendered her to him without a fight.

"She's fine, Jacob," Esme reassured him. Elizabeth went to Jacob willingly enough, pushing her tiny hand against his cheek and then squirming around to stretch toward me again.
"See?" Esme told him, gently. "She just wants Bella."

"She wants me?" I whispered. Elizabeth's eyes- my human eyes, Hermione's eyes, Charlie's eyes- stared impatiently at me. Edward darted back to my side. He put his hands lightly on my arms and urged me forward.

"She's been waiting for you for almost three days," he told me. We were only a few feet away from her now. Bursts of heat seemed to tremble out from her to touch me.

Or maybe it was Jacob who was trembling. I saw his hands shaking as I got closer. And yet, despite his obvious anxiety, his face was more serene than I had seen it in a long time. "Jake- I'm fine," I told him. It made me panicky to see Elizabeth in his shaking hands, but I worked to keep myself in control.

He frowned at me, eyes tight, like he was just as panicky at the thought of Elizabeth in my arms. Elizabeth whimpered eagerly and stretched, her little hands grasping into fists again and again.

Something in me clicked into place at that moment. The sound of her cry, the familiarity of her eyes, the way she seemed even more impatient than I did for this reunion- all of it wove together into the most natural of patterns as she clutched the air between us. Suddenly, she was absolutely real, and of course I knew her. It was perfectly ordinary that I should take that last easy step and reach for her, putting my hands exactly where they would fit best as I pulled her gently toward me.

Jacob let his long arms stretch so that I could cradle her, but he made as if not to let go. He shuddered a little when our skin touched. His skin, always so warm to me before, felt like an open flame to me now. It was almost the same temperature as Elizabeth's. Perhaps one or two degrees difference. I gave a little frown at him and tugged until he did release her, pulling my baby to me, cradling her against my chest.

Elizabeth seemed oblivious to the coolness of my skin, or at least very used to it. She looked up and smiled at me again, showing her square little teeth and two dimples. Then, very deliberately, she reached for my face. The moment she did this, all the hands on me tightened, anticipating my reaction. I barely noticed.

I was gasping, stunned and frightened by the strange, alarming image that filled my mind. It felt like a very strong memory - I could still see through my eyes while I watched it in my head - but it was unfamiliar. I stared through it to Elizabeth's expectant expression, trying to understand what
was happening, struggling desperately to hold on to my calm. Besides being shocking and unfamiliar, the image was also wrong somehow—I almost recognized my own face in it, my old face, but it was off, backward. I grasped quickly that I was seeing my face as others saw it, rather than flipped in a reflection.

My memory face was twisted, ravaged, covered in sweat and blood. Despite this, my expression in the vision became an adoring smile; my brown eyes glowed over their deep circles. The image enlarged, my face came closer to the unseen vantage point, and then abruptly vanished.

Elizabeth's hand dropped from my cheek. She smiled wider, dimpling again. It was totally silent in the room but for the heartbeats. No one but Jacob and Elizabeth was so much as breathing. The silence stretched on; it seemed like they were waiting for me to say something. "What... was... that?" I managed to choke out.

"What did she show you?" Esme's voice was soothing.

"She showed me that?" I whispered.

"What was it?" Jacob asked. I blinked quickly several times.

"Um. Me. I think. But I looked terrible."

"It was the only memory she had of you," Edward explained. It was obvious he'd seen what she was showing me as she thought of it. He was still cringing, his voice rough from reliving the memory. "She's letting you know that she's made the connection, that she knows who you are."

"But how did she do that?" Elizabeth seemed unconcerned with my crimson eyes. She was smiling slightly and pulling on a lock of my hair.

"How do I hear thoughts? How does Alice see the future?" Edward asked rhetorically, and then shrugged. "She's gifted."

"It's an interesting twist," Carlisle said to Edward. "Like she's doing the exact opposite of what you can."
"Interesting," Edward agreed. "I wonder..." I knew they were speculating away, but I didn't care. I was staring at the most beautiful face in the world. She was hot in my arms, reminding me of the moment when the blackness had almost won, when there was nothing in the world left to hold on to. Nothing strong enough to pull me through the crushing darkness. The moment when I'd thought of Elizabeth and found something I would never let go of.

"I remember you, too," I told her quietly. It seemed very natural to lean in and press my lips to her forehead. Elizabeth was real and I knew her. She was the same one I'd fought for from the beginning. My little nudger, the one who loved me from the inside, too. Half Edward, perfect and lovely. And half me- which, surprisingly, made her better rather than detracting.

I'd been right all along. She was worth the fight.

"Haven't we experimented enough for one day?" Jacob asked, his voice a slightly higher pitch with stress. "Okay, Bella's doing great, but let's not push it."

I glared at him with real irritation. "Can you back off a bit?" I complained. Jasper shuffled uneasily next to me. We were all crowded so close that every tiny movement seemed very big. Edward hissed at him.

"Just because I understand, it doesn't mean I won't throw you out, Jacob. Bella's doing extraordinarily well. Don't ruin the moment for her." I glared at Jacob's anxious half-angry expression. His eyes were locked on Elizabeth's face. With everyone pressed together, he had to be touching at least six different vampires at the moment, and it didn't even seem to bug him.

Would he really go through all this just to protect me from myself? What could have happened during my transformation- my alteration into something he hated- that would soften him so much toward the reason for its necessity?

I puzzled over it, watching him stare at my daughter. Staring at her like... like he was a blind man seeing the sun for the very first time. "No!" I gasped.

Jasper's teeth came together and Edward's arms wrapped around my chest like constricting boas. Jacob had Elizabeth out of my arms in the same second, and I did not try to hold on to her. Because I felt it coming- the snap that they all seemed to have been waiting for. "Esme," I said through my teeth, very slowly and precisely. "Please take my daughter."
Esme held her hands out, and Jacob handed Elizabeth to her at once. Both of them backed away from me. "Edward, I don't want to hurt you, so please let go of me." He hesitated. "Go stand in front of Elizabeth," I suggested. He deliberated, and then let me go.

I leaned into a crouch and took two slow steps forward toward Jacob. "You didn't," I snarled at him.

He backed away, palms up, trying to reason with me. "You know it's not something I can control."

"You stupid mutt! How could you? My baby!" He backed out the front door now as I stalked him, half-running backward down the stairs.

"It wasn't my idea, Bella!"

"I've held her all of one time, and already you think you have some moronic wolfy claim to her? She's mine!"

"I can share," he said pleadingly as he retreated across the lawn.

"Pay up," I heard Emmett say behind me. A small part of my brain wondered who had bet against this outcome. I didn't waste much attention on it. I was too furious.

"How dare you imprint on my baby! Have you lost your mind?"

"It was involuntary!" he insisted, backing into the trees, "please, would you try to listen for just a second?" he begged.

"Why should I listen?" I hissed. Fury reigned in my head. It clouded everything else out. "She's just a baby!"

"You know I don't think of her that way! Do you think Edward would have let me live this long if I did? All I want is for her to be safe and happy- is that so bad? So different from what you want?" He was shouting right back at me.
"You tried to get me to kill her!" I shrieked back at him, and he flinched into himself, and my lips twisted into some sort of feral smile. "That's right- remember that? What did you call her again? The abomination! The monster! Remember that?" Jacob flinched again. "You're going to stay away from her," I hissed.

"I can't do that!"

"Try. Starting now"

"It's not possible. Do you remember how much you wanted me around three days ago? How hard it was to be apart from each other? That's gone for you now, isn't it?" I glared, not sure what he was implying. "That was her," he told me. "From the very beginning. We had to be together, even then."

I remembered, and then I understood; a tiny part of me was relieved to have the madness explained. But that relief somehow only made me angrier. Was he expecting that to be enough for me? That one little clarification would make me okay with this? "C'mon, Bells! Lizzie likes me, too," he insisted.

I froze. My breathing stopped. Behind me, I heard the lack of sound that was their anxious reaction. "What did you call her?" Jacob took a step farther back, managing to look sheepish.

"Well," he mumbled, "Elizabeth is kind of a mouthful and-"

And then I lunged for his throat.

I hit the shield protecting him with a loud ringing sound, like a gong, and shrieked wordlessly with rage. Jacob backed up several steps further, and I glared at him, my hands curled into claw, trying to pull together some semblance of calm. "We're going to set down a few ground rules here," I hissed at him. "Visiting hours, to start with."

"Bells-" he started to say, but I interrupted him.

"Don't push your luck," I warned him, voice low, "one word to Fleur, and I can have Elizabeth
behind a ward you'll never get past, or on the other side of the world!” Jacob paled and shook his head.

"You wouldn't!" He protested.

"Try me!" I growled. "You are not her parent! She is my baby girl! There is no sharing, she is mine, my baby, my daughter, and until she's an adult in body and mind, I am responsible for her!"

I then closed my eyes and counted to one hundred before opening them again and turning around. "How's Hermione doing?" I ask, ignoring Jacob. Nobody comments on the abrupt change of subject, and it's Carlisle who speaks.

"There's no change." He says, softly, and I nod. I count slowly to a hundred- again, feeling calm filter back through my body. I then walk over to Esme- and by extension, Edward and Elizabeth. I hold out my arms and after a moment of hesitation, my baby is returned to me.

I let out a happy sigh, and cradle Elizabeth to me gently. She presses her hand against my cheek, and an image is projected into my mind of me yelling at Jacob. Image is surrounded by an air of confusion. I gently stroke her hair.

"Mommy was annoyed," I tell her, and she smiles again. I smile back, my body flooding with warmth.

My perfect little angel.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE:

Hermione's POV:

It doesn't hurt as much anymore.

I feel tired. And heavy. I think my heartbeats might be starting to slow down, but I'm not sure. Is that a good thing? Is it a bad thing?

Thinking is hard. It's like my mind is a lake that I'm trying to swim through. Grindylows are grabbing me, tangling me, pulling me under, and I'm kicking and splashing, trying to get away, but I can't, and I'm fighting, fighting, just to stay on the surface.

My strength is waning. My mind is slowing. Idle observations dance across the front of my mind— I'm tired and heavy and the heat of the fire is starting to lessen.

The last one I'm thankful for. It makes it easier to think past the pain. Well, not think, my mind is moving too slowly for me to really think. It makes it easier to listen.

I can hear the voices of my family, surrounding the bed where I lay.

"Have you thought about taking her to St. Mungo's?" Bella asks. Her new voice sounds like wind chimes. I like it. It's pretty.

"That's our very last resort," Harry's voice sounds rough from lack of sleep, "if we do, the Ministry will put on her the creature list. She'd struggle to get any sort of job in the Wizarding world, and would be treated like a second-class citizen."
"But- but she's a war hero!" My sister protests, her voice as passionate as mine is when I'm talking about House Elf rights and S.P.E.W.

"Hermione Granger the witch is a war hero," Harry sighs, "turned to a vampire, she'd be regarded as an animal wearing the body of a war hero. And the knowledge that a vampire bit- or in the eyes of the Wizarding World killed- a war hero would anger people to the point that there's a high possibility it would lead to a mass vampire cull to avenge her."

"But that's wrong!" Bella's voice is shrill. Alice tightens her grip on my hand.

"Hermione will be fine. She has to be fine." My soul mate whispers, "because I don't know what I'd do if she wasn't."

"I don't understand," Bella's voice is frustrated now, "the rest of her is all... Turned, but it's like her heart's not even been touched!"

"She told me that the venom being introduced into her bloodstream could kill her. That the magic in her body would react, that it would fight the change." Alice's chiming voice is hoarse, like she's been crying, except that's impossible.

"I think she said something similar to me." Bella's voice is thick with fear, "that her magic was like white blood cells, in that it attacks foreign entities in the body- sicknesses, diseases and poisons. Poisons like vampire venom. She said that the venom would react the same way it does when introduced into a witch or wizard's system as it would a muggle's. But that the magic would fight against the venom, not letting it merge with their bodies to fully Turn. That- that in an attempt to save them, their magic would doom them, because it wouldn't allow the complete transformation to take place."

Bella has a good memory.

"Yes," Alice's voice is choked, "chances are the venom is going to kill her without Turning her." The agony in her voice cuts me deeper then a cutting curse.

No, Alice can't hurt like that, a part of me rebels. I struggle to find a foothold in my mind, something to grasp onto, to drag myself out of the whirlpool threatening to drag me under. I force my slow mind to work, and a shaky solution comes to me- if I want to survive this; something's going to have to give.
Having a purpose clears my head slightly, and my brain starts reviewing the facts. If I want to survive, either the venom or the magic is going to have to submit to the other.

Mentally steeling myself, I drop my Occlumency shields and have to smother the whimper that escapes my throat as the full pain hits me. I push down the automatic impulse to slam my shields back up again, and instead turn my attention inwards, to the barrier around my heart.

I can feel the magic dancing across it, the magic that still refuses to obey me, but protects my heart. Steeling myself for anything, I turn my attention inward and focus on my magic, on the diamond walls around my heart.

This process of seeing ones magical core was an exercise most Pureblood and Halfblood children learned before school to help visualize their magic. I concentrated hard, examining my magical core. The last time I'd done this, over three years ago, my core had been focused in my forehead, a swirling blob of light gold that leaked outside and into the surrounding area, eddying around me in great tendrils of color. But now it was centered in my heart, a brilliant emerald green color, trapped, confined.

I took a deep breath, knowing what I was about to do was one of the most perverted things a witch or wizard could do. Concentrating on the green, I counted to three then ripped.

A scream erupts from me as my magic tears violently from my heart, the diamond walls shattering into a billion pieces as my magic swirled around my body like an aura, reaching out and reacting negatively with many a stimuli.

My magic raged in the air around me, and I could hear the sounds of furniture breaking, windowpanes smashing. And that's when the venom started burning the only human part of me I had left.

My heart took off and the pain was enough to stun me. My back arched, bowed as if the fire was dragging me upward by my heart and a scream left my throat as I fought to push my magic out of me, into the air around me. It felt like electricity pulsing across my skin, while the fire attacked my heart. And then there was a final surge, followed by a deep, heavy thud.

Two stuttering beats, a flutter, and then a loud snapping noise as my magic cracked through the air, then slammed back into me with the force of a wrecking ball. For what feels like a small piece of eternity it’s like my body is being ripped apart, into thousands of directions, a pain even greater
then being burned alive. My mouth opens in a silent scream, the agony too great to even voice.

And then the pain's gone. My mind is clear. The exhaustion has faded into non-existence.

My mouth was dry and tasted like I had been snogging the cotton stuffing from my pillow. For a week. And then someone had lit said cotton on fire.

"Bloody buggering hell!"

I admit that my first words after that painful transformation could have contained at least a touch more coherency, but even the sound of my voice- sweeter, more sibilant, the accent so much more pronounced then before- sent me into shock.

I could see and hear the reactions my sudden words had caused, and I could just see Bella's face, dancing almost out of my line of vision.

"Bella, dear, you look positively adenoidal with your mouth hanging open like that." I tell my sister, pushing past my overwhelming confusion to tease her. Her teeth make a clicking noise as she closes her mouth.

"Hermione, dear heart, how are you feeling?" Alice's voice is barely a whisper, and I turn to face her, barely holding back from gasping as I take in her appearance.

"Like I can't wait to get you home to bed," I say, and I'm not even joking. She's the most beautiful being I've ever seen, and a certain unthinking pleasure washes through me with the realization that she is mine. She had a delicate elf-like beauty, with porcelain skin was so pale it appeared translucent; midnight hair that cascaded down to her shoulders and riveting golden eyes that were fixed on mine.

"Yep, she's fine," A huskier voice sounds from the corner of the room, gaining my attention. Leah is leaning against the wall, a smile on her face. The wolf-shifter is acting nonchalant, but I can hear the thick traces of relief evident in her voice.

A smile curves my lips as I stand up in a flowing movement, one swifter and more graceful then a human could ever accomplish. Half in a trance, I turn my attention towards the mirror that takes up almost a third of the rear wall, an expensive antique with a ornate silver frame of curling vines of
The reflection I see there terrifies me. I look so unlike myself, so dark, so savage, so... ethereal. Not to say I look ugly, oh no. This wild, predatory look suited me, made me look stunning, just like every vampire.

The dark hollows beneath my eyes made the glowing irises seem brighter, the prominence of my cheekbones made me look older. And then my hair, the chestnut curls were as wild and untamable as ever, yet richer, thicker and more vibrant, so full of life.

I looked different from the other vampires, from Alice even. My irises weren't the red of a newborn, rather they were an electric brown that seemed to shimmer with an iridescent glow, brighter then what should be possible. And my skin, while snowy white in appearance, was softer.

Almost in a trance, I held out my left arm, examining the silky smooth, pale skin, running the pad of my finger along it. My MUDBLOOD scar remained, but had faded, and even my now acutely sensitive touch couldn't feel any scar tissue.

Perhaps most astonishing of all, though, was the soft beating in my chest. There was no blood in my body, and my heart was crystallized over, yet somehow, somehow it was still fluttering, just slightly, the sound almost like a hummingbird's wings.

I should have been curious, my mind should have been racing, my perpetual curiosity raging inside me. But I wasn't. I just felt so... calm. I didn't know what the hell I was- the only thing I knew for sure was the fact I wasn't human anymore.

But I didn't care. I was alive.

Bella shifted slightly and the movement caught my attention. I turned to take in her appearance fully, not just a glance from my peripheral vision.

She made a stunning vampire, I noted. Fluid, even in stillness, her flawless face was pale as the moon against the frame of her dark, heavy hair- the identical shade of brown as my own. Her limbs were smooth and strong, skin glistening subtly, luminous as a pearl. And her eyes... they were a burning crimson- brighter then any I'd seen before, like a pair of rubies.
Her expression pinched slightly in worry as I stared at her, at my beautiful sister with her terrifying eyes, and I let my expression relax, my lips curve into a smile. "You're beautiful." I tell her. Her eyes are shiny as she smiles back at me, her glistening white teeth throwing off eight-colored rainbows.

I turn back to Alice and take one, two, three steps towards her, and then she's in my arms, and I'm in hers. We hold each other in the desperate sort of embrace. Alice is making sob-like sounds, her head burrowing into my neck, and waves of relief are near about drowning me as I inhale her sweet scent. I almost died. I almost died and that terrified me.

Even when we finally broke apart, Alice's hand was clamped around my wrist, and she didn't appear to have any plans of letting go, any time in the near future.

"You- you- what the hell were you thinking?" She demanded. "Going after Lucius like that, without any back up?!"

"Well, I can't say it went exactly to plan." I admit, and Leah raises an eyebrow.

"You actually had a plan?" she asks, doubt clear in her voice.

"Well, it was a briefly thought out plan, mainly along the lines of apparating to the Alps, rescuing Alice and destroying Lucius." I said, sheepishly. Alice glowers at me.

“So you made it up on the spot!” She accuses.

"It's not the worst plan I've ever had!" I protest.

"Yes, the blind dragon- you never actually got around to telling us that story." Leah interjects, "so, come on- spill." She ordered.

"The bank in the Wizarding World is called Gringotts," I start the explanation, more then just a touch eager to change the subject from my reckless actions, "It's a massive structure, mostly underground, run by goblins and filled with vaults guarded by enchantments and terrifying creatures."
"Like dragons," Leah surmises.

"Yes, like dragons." I agree. "Nobody had ever managed to successfully break into Gringotts before, and only Voldemort ever managed to escape with his life after his failed attempt. When we figured out that one of the Horcruxes was located in the Lestrange vault, we were... understandably apprehensive. But we'd rescued a goblin and we enlisted his help."

"This doesn't sound like it's going to end well." Leah notes.

"It didn't... and it did." I give a half laugh. "Things started going wrong with the 'master plan' right from the get-go. First we ran into a Death Eater who decided to accompany us, then the goblins at the desk figured out something was up within moments, and Harry had to use the Imperius Curse-one of the Unforgiveables, on two separate people, Travers- the Death Eater, and the bank teller, Bogrod. And then once we were actually inside the bloody tunnels, the Thief's Downfall splashed over us, washing away my Polyjuice disguise and the rather nifty transfiguration I had worked on Ron, and then we were all badly burnt by the gold in the Lestrange vault.

"Finally, at the culmination of our poorly-conceived plan, Griphook, the goblin working with us, scarpered with the sword, which we'd used as a bargaining tool for his help and also happened to be our only weapon for destroying Horcruxes, leaving us to the mercy of the other goblins and the summoned Death Eaters. We only managed to escape by hitching a ride on a pain-deranged, half-blind dragon- destroying large sections of the bank in the process."

Silence. And then, "you're right. That was a dumbass plan." Leah snorted.

"Things rarely ever went to plan, where Harry, Ron and I were concerned. We plan, we get there and everything goes to hell. 'Gang aft agley', and all that."

"'Gang aft' what?" Leah asks, looking confused.

"'Gang aft agley, you know- the best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men.' I expand.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." Leah informs me and I scowl, shaking my head.

"The American educational system if abysmal."
"Hey, I know what you mean!" Alice protests, before clearing her throat:

"But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,

In proving foresight may be vain;

The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,

Gang aft agley,

An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,

For promis'd joy!"

I give a small laugh, the sound like pealing bells, at the droll look Leah gives a smug Alice; it's a sound that cuts off rather suddenly when I spot the beautiful carved stick on the bedside table.

The bedside table and the bed seemed to be the only pieces of furniture that were still in one piece. The room was a mess, the furniture cracked and splintered, the windows shattered, glass spilling out over the floor, the walls crumbling, the plaster littering the ground with a fine white powder.

Ignoring all that, I walked towards my wand, the fluid, graceful movement of my walk surprising me. I loved this feeling, loved this effortless power of my own body and the keenness of my senses. Pushing away that line of thoughts for now, I picked it up my wand, a small smile on my face, expecting the flood of warmth as the wand reunited with my magic.

Nothing happened.

Panic started to trickle through me as I stared down at the wand in my hand with an expression that was nothing short of a horrified sort of terror. I remembered, so vividly, the first time I held my wand. I had felt it amplify something inside of me that I didn't realize that I had even possessed. I could feel my magic, as if it was the blood in my veins, coursing through me and filling me with
vitality. I tried to reach for that magic, tried to pull it, push it through the wand, but nothing.

I tried to feel for my magic, but there was nothing there but a faint tingle where my heart was thrumming gently in my chest.

"No!" I couldn't help my panicked whimper, "Reparo!" I chant, my wand held firmly in my hand. A warm tingle washed through me, and I could feel my magic reaching out, flowing through my body, up my arm, ready to do my bidding. And then it hit some kind of barrier. Horrified, I drew on more magic, pushing harder, gritting my teeth, but it wouldn't give way. I felt panicky, and my panic fueled even more desperate, frantic pushing, but in the end I had to lower my wand.

Nothing.

The full repercussions of what I'd done when I'd forced my magic out of my body hit me with enough strength to force a whimper from my throat.

"Hermione, what is it?" Alice asked, frantically, and I turned to face her, my whole body trembling like a leaf as I stared into her emerald green eyes.

"I... Alice, I can’t use my magic!"
Chapter Thirty

CHAPTER THIRTY:

Hermione's POV:

I bit back a groan of frustration, as I tried reaching my magic core, visualizing the magic stream down my arms, my fingers, to my wand... only for it to slip through my fingers. It was like trying to catch a fish in the ocean with my bare hands... before I became some kind of bizarre vampire hybrid, of course. That would probably be easy now.

I was sitting cross-legged in the garden of the Cullen Mansion. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since the completion of my disastrous turning, and subsequent horrifying discovery that I couldn't use magic. After hunting, talking with everyone- the Cullens, my witch and wizard friends, Leah and Seth, and enjoying some quality "bedroom time" with Alice, I'd made my way outside to work on accessing my magic.

Closing my eyes, I take slow, deep, unneeded breaths, clearing my mind. In this state of calm, I can clearly feel my magic, warm and electrifying inside me, can picture it, can taste it right on the tip of my tongue, but my wand stayed cold in my grip.

I let out a snarl of frustration, as I lose patience and try to access my magic again, only to have my wand not even spit out sparks. "Hermione?" I hear Alice ask, timidly, and I open my eyes, turning towards my mate.

Every time I look at her, she takes my breath away. She is perfection, pure and absolute perfection. Her glossy black hair reaches below her ribcage now, and splashes freely down her back like a sheet of liquid ebony. Her muscles were light but well defined, giving her a sleek cat-like air, and her eyes are brilliant jewels, the purest, most perfect green I've ever seen, and her beauty is otherworldly.

"You're staring," she murmurs, and I blink, surprised, realizing that I was frozen, drinking in the sight of the woman I loved.
"You are too." I retort, smiling, and she smiles at me, revealing perfect, glistening teeth.

"I can't help it, you're... stunning." I rise effortlessly to my feet, with an effortless grace that I'm yet to adjust to. Alice flits over so she's leaning up against me, and her soft gaze meets mine. "Are you still having trouble with your magic?" she asks, quietly. I sigh and nod.

"It's there, it's just..." I run a hand through my hair, frustrated, a part of me noting that this seems to be a habit I've retained from when I was human, "cut off from me."

Alice looks worried, and I can basically feel the guilt leaking off her. She blames herself for the loss of my magic, just like she blames herself for the nightmarish ordeal that was my Turning. "It's not your fault, treasure." I tell her, sternly, for the hundredth time.

"I'm that easy to read, hm?" she smiles, bleakly. I cup her face and kiss her, fiercely.

"You saved my life. Even if I can never use magic again, it will always be worth it." I tell her, sternly. I feel like shuddering as I think about the curse Lucius used on me.

I've seen the entrail-expelling curse used on someone else before, and it was horrible. Doge's stomach just exploded outward, it was like a Muggle grenade had been released inside him. His intestines curled from his body like snakes, his skin had paled to milk white, and his body had dropped bonelessly. He was dead in less then a minute.

Alice nibbles her lip, still looking so sad and conflicted.

"I still feel awful. Your magic... it meant so much to you. It means so much to you."

"But you mean more." I tell her, honestly.

"Aw, that's so sweet." I hear Emmett snicker, and I shift to glare at him over Alice's shoulder. He just snickers more.
"Shut up Emmett." Alice grumbles, not bothering to turn around. Her face then brightens. "At least the Occlumency shields are still working. Leah says hers are too. Edward still can't read our minds." She smiles happily. I smile back.

"Occlumency doesn't require a spell, it just requires magic and concentration." I explain, "Legilimency's different. Legilimency has to be cast. The Occlumency shields I built in my mind, in all our minds, will remain until I either die, or my magic is stripped away."

My voice turns somber at the thought, and I resist the urge to shudder. Alice hugs me tighter.

"Can you turn into a bird still?" Emmett asks, curiously, and I tilt my head slightly.

"I don't know, I hadn't thought of that." I admitted. "An animagus transformation doesn't require a wand, and I still have my magic I just can't access it... my body's also human enough to change so I should be able to Turn." Closing my eyes, I focus on the transformation.

I felt my body shrinking, my fingers fusing together, my nose and jaw elongating to a sharp point. My clothing disappeared at the same time as my eyes shifted along the sides of my head and feathers sprouted from my skin.

I let out a triumphant screech as I spread my wings, launching myself into the sky. I was different then before, I still had my vampire eyesight in this form, my lungs didn't require air, and my heart wasn't beating in my chest. And I was stronger. I could feel the speed I was moving at increase to the point where the world should be a blur around me, but I could still pick out every single detail. Another triumphant screech, and I angled my body back around, soaring over to Alice and Emmett, pulling up several feet above the ground then changing back, the smooth transition ending with me gracefully on my feet.

"I wish I could do that," Emmett moaned, with a pout. I rolled my eyes at him.

"Go play with Teddy or something. Preferably far, far, far away." Alice snipes, and Emmett's pout deepens.

"Are you saying you don't want me here?"

"Yes." Alice and I answer as one. He huffs, pulling mock-hurt expression.
"Fine then." He says, before disappearing back into the manor. Alice turns and gives me a cheeky grin, her eyes sparkling in mischief.

"You look really hot right now," she purred, her fingers dancing over the skin of my arms.

"So do you," I whisper. The autumn colored dress she's wearing is rippling and fluttering in the slight breeze, the silky curtain of her hair shining under the sun. I lean forwards and wrap my arms around her, pressing our lips together.

"You scared me to death, you know." She murmured against my lips. "Or more to death." She corrects herself, before clinging to me tighter, her lips moving with an intense passion. As her hand slides under the t-shirt I'm wearing, I wonder whether or not I should remind her that I can't perform any silencing charms anymore. When her hand cups my breast, I decide not to look a gift aethonan in the mouth.

It was soft and loving as we rolled on the grass together, our clothes scattered around us. We took our time, kissing every inch of each other's bodies, exchanging gentle caresses and deep kisses.

When we re-dressed, Alice wrapped her arms around me, making a slight purring noise like a content cat. "I love you." She said, her beautiful voice bell-like in its perfection.

"I love you too." I respond, as we walk into the mansion. Emmett's sitting in the lounge, in front of the TV. Teddy's on his lap, bouncing excitedly. A children's show is playing, and both Emmett and Ted look equally as entranced and entertained by it. Bella's sitting on a couch, further away, with Elizabeth on her lap. I frown for a moment, worried about having my sister, the newborn vampire, so close to my human godson, when I notice the shimmering around Emmett and Teddy, and realize that there's a barrier in place.

Hearing us enter, Emmett turns around and faces us, an evil smirk on his face. Beside me Alice stiffens. "Oh crap," she whispers, and I deduce that she's just figured out that there were no silencing charms up to prevent our vampire family hearing us making love.

"Yep." Emmett snickers. Alice groans, burying her face in her hands.

"Oh crap!"
"Yes, we've established the existence of excrement," Bella speaks up, sounding a touch annoyed, "do you mind not swearing in front of the children?"

"Sorry," Alice apologizes, half-heartedly, before basically fleeing the room, embarrassed. Emmett's shaking in silent laughter, and I give him a venomous look which does absolutely nothing to negate his amusement.

"Hermione, are you coming?" Alice asks, poking her head back around the door as I make no move to leave the room. She determinedly doesn't look at either Emmett or Bella.

"She certainly did, and several times, from what I heard." Emmett pipes up, and if Alice could blush I knew her face would be bright red.

"Stop talking!" I warn him.

"Why?" He counters, "don't want me to talk about how you had her go wild on the hippogriff, ride your broomstick, show you her Chamber of Secrets, let your basilisk to slither in, Whomp the Willow, visit your restricted section, let you stir her cauldron, take you to the Shrieking Shack, turn into Moaning Myrtle, duel with your wand, take a trip in your Forbidden Forest, make your mandrake cry-"

"Okay, first," I interrupted, "you've been hanging out with George way too much! Do you even know what any of that stuff means? Second, you do realize that half of those aren't even anatomically possible for Alice and I, right?" Emmett arches an eyebrow.

"What do you mean not 'anatomically possible'?" he asks, with a cheeky grin, "haven't you ever heard of a dil-"

"Shut up Emmett!" Four voices speak at the same time- Alice, Bella, Rosalie and myself.

"Never!" Emmett proclaims, before gulping slightly as Rosalie gives him a narrow look, moving her gaze deliberately from the toddler on his lap, then to Elizabeth, then back to him.

"Evil!" I mutter, before making my way over to Alice, following her as she walks towards the front
door. It's Bella and I's nineteenth birthday today, and despite the fact we're technically now eighteen forever, Alice is determined that we celebrate it, and has planned a rather extravagant party with plenty of gifts, including a house for Bella and Edward.

Yes, a house. Esme and Alice designed it- it's an adorable place, really, and the bedroom is my favorite. Before all of this- the wedding, the pregnancy, Lucius- I'd become involved in the decorating and charmed their bedroom ceiling with a spell similar to that used on the roof of the Great Hall at Hogwarts that mimicked the sky.

As Alice darted around inside the small house, putting up the finishing touches, I wandered into the bedroom and looked up at the ceiling. The sunset was literally cut right out of the sky, with streaks of dusky pinks, deep blues, and brilliant shades of orange and red.

I start thinking about casting the same charm on the roof of Alice and I's bedroom when the realization of being unable to access my magic hit me again, and a wave of grief flooded my body.

No magic... any witch or wizard's worst nightmare. My magic had been a part of my life since I was born, and I felt almost naked without it. Maybe Alice heard me make some kind of miserable noise, because she appeared beside me and wrapped her arms around me.

We stayed in that position for what seemed like forever, but was really only around ten minutes. The sound of Alice's phone broke us apart, and Alice fished the slim, sleek device out of her pocket, her eyes darting over the screen. "Elizabeth's asleep," she informed me, "time to go surprise Bella."

I heard Edward murmur "finally", as Alice we reached the Mansion, and Alice skipped into the lounge room. Bella was standing, cradling a sleeping Elizabeth in her arms, watching my niece as if she was the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

As Alice held out her hand, Bella seemed to automatically shift Elizabeth to her right arm so that she could open her left, and Alice dropped the key to the cottage into it. It was an everyday brass key, with an oversized pink satin bow tied around it.

"Happy birthday!" She squealed, and Bella rolled her eyes.

"No one starts counting on the actual day of birth. Your first birthday is at the year mark, Alice." She informed my wife, whose grin turned smug.
"We're not celebrating your vampire birthday," she informed my sister, "Yet. It's September thirteenth, Bella. Happy nineteenth birthday you two!"

"No. No way!" Bella shook her head fiercely and then shot a glance at the smug smile on her husband's face. "No, this doesn't count. I stopped aging four days ago. I am eighteen forever!"

"Don't bother arguing, Bella." I advise, an easy smile on my face as I watched Alice completely disregard my sister's protests as if they were nothing, and Bella's indignant, horrified expression as she did so.

"Whatever," Alice rolled her eyes at Bella's protest and gave a quick shrug. "We're celebrating anyway, so suck it up." For a moment Bella looked as if she was going to start complaining, then she sighed.

There was rarely a point to arguing with Alice.

Alice's grin grew impossibly wider as she read the acquiescence in Bella's eyes.

"Are you ready to open your present?" She sang.

"Presents," Edward corrected, pulling a long silver key with a much less gaudy bow, this one blue, from his pocket.

"Why is it just me?" Grumbled Bella, "Hermione's human birthday is today too."

"Yes, but Hermione's present is waiting for her at our house." Alice explains with a quick shrug. Bella sighs.

"Fine."

After a brief argument between Alice and Edward about whose present Bella should get first - which Alice won, no surprise there- Elizabeth was shifted into Esme's arms, and Alice started to
lead the way.

"Is it outside?" Bella asked, curiously.

"Sort of," Alice said, pushing her forward.

"Enjoy your gift," Rosalie said. "It's from all of us. Esme especially."

"Aren't you coming, too?" Bella asked, as she realized that no one had moved except her, Edward, Alice and I.

"We'll give you a chance to appreciate it alone," Rosalie said. "You can tell us about it... later." Emmett guffawed and I had to bite back my own laughter.

A confused Bella followed us as Alice led the way, through the forest. When we got close to the house, Alice covered Bella's eyes with her hands after a brief bickering with Edward about theatrics.

As Alice revealed the surprise, I couldn't help but smile too. Here it was, the culmination of our work. There, nestled into a small clearing in the forest, was the tiny stone cottage, lavender gray in the light of the stars.

Bella's eyes were wide as she stared, and Alice started babbling nervously.

"Don't you like it? I mean, I'm sure we could fix it up differently, if you want. Emmett was all for adding a few thousand square feet, a second story, columns, and a tower, but Esme thought you would like it best the way it was meant to look." Her voice started to climb, to go faster. "If she was wrong, we can get back to work. It won't take long to-

"Shh!" Bella finally manage and Alice pressed her lips together and waited. It seemed to take my twin few seconds to recover.

"You're giving me a house for my birthday?" She whispered.
"Us," Edward corrected. "And it's no more than a cottage. I think the word house implies more legroom."

"No knocking my house," Bella responded, instantly, as if on reflex, and Alice beamed

"You like it." Bella shook her head, and Alice's face glowed even brighter. "You love it!" She crowed, and Bella nodded. "I can't wait to tell Esme!" Alice was just about bouncing up and down.

I watched, amused, as Bella's face turned confused as she asked why Esme and the others hadn't accompanied them, and Alice tried to answer without lying, just omitting the part where everyone was expecting the two newlyweds to shag the whole night.

As she led me away, leaving Edward to give Bella the tour, before taking a tour of his own, Alice was bouncing up and down again. "Time for your present!" she said, gleefully, and I let her lead me back to the Mansion, then to the driveway where her car was parked.

The drive back to our house took less than ten minutes, and as I stepped out of the Porsche, I was immediately aware of the small crowd of people inside our house.

I dashed to the door at a speed which should have rendered the world around me to nothing but a blur, and burst in.

"Happy birthday!"

One by one, my family in all but blood came over to hug me, tell me how glad they were that I was okay, then press a gift into my hand.

Harry, Ron, Fleur, Leah, Ginny, George, Molly, Arthur, Audrey, Percy, Romilda, Neville, Hannah, Rosalie, Emmett, Maggie, Jasper and so many others.

It was less of a birthday celebration, and more of a 'thank god you're alive' party. It went on for several hours, before people started to leave. Only a handful of people stayed behind, my vampire family, Fleur, Bill, George and Leah.
“So tell us, Hermione,” Bill leans forward, “should we start calling you the Girl-Who-Lived? Surviving vampire venom... how did you do that? I worked in Egypt- it should have killed you. Severe heart failure, following up to a week of suffering.”

"My magic wasn’t letting my heart burn,” I nod, shuddering slightly, “something had to give- my magic or the venom, and the venom wasn’t, so... I made my magic give.”

"ow did you do zat?” An astonished Fleur asks.

“Did you ever do those magic core visualizing techniques when you were a child?” I ask, and she nods. “Well, I... I pushed my magic out of me. It was... it fought me, so hard. It was like a rubber band, it snapped back into me so hard I think if I hadn’t already been... well, undead, that it could have killed me. It destroyed the room I was in.”

Alice wraps her arms around my middle, resting her cheek on the crook of my neck. “So it’s definitely still in you,” she said, looking up at me hopefully, with her big, green eyes.

“I’m ninety-five percent sure.” I reply. “I swear that I can feel it, I just bloody can’t channel it.”

“Well, is there a way we can test if you can, you know, use it without channeling it?” Leah asks, with a frown.

“Well,” I say, slowly, my mind racing. "There's accidental magic. Magic that happens without using any conduit, or any specific incantations. The easiest way to test that would be... well, accidental magic usually manifests when a witch or wizard is in a life-threatening situation. I could always-"

"NO!” shouted Alice, her beautiful face suddenly furious. "You are not being stupid with your life like that!” That's when she started to cry again, great big tearless sobs that wracked through her tiny body and had me hugging her, alarmed. "I'm so sorry!” she wailed, "I made you lose your magic! I'm so sorry!”

"Alice, sweetheart, I'm glad you saved me. It was a stupid thing for me to say, I won't risk my life just for a chance to see if my magic can still be accessed,” I tell her, holding her tight, realizing what it must look like to my little vampire, that I'm willing to risk my life just for a chance to see if my magic still works, for a sign that this state of being unable to use it is just temporary.
"You don't 'ave to do zat anyway," Fleur spoke up, "accidental magic is based more on emotions then the situation. Feeling an intense emotion should be enough."

"If you let me, I can make you feel an emotion strongly." Jasper offered, and I nodded, gently tugging Alice out of her death grip on me. Taking a deep breath, I lowered my Occlumency shields and nodded to Jasper.

"It has to be a negative emotion. Do it."

A wave of fury rushed through me, blind rage entwined with deep hatred. A vicious snarl ripped from my throat as a red haze marred my sight. Rage pulsed through me, and I barred my teeth, head flinging from side to side as I tried to find the source of my anger.

And then, over on the mantel above the fireplace, the glass covering the framed painting Alice created during Art, back in that class we shared in Forks High, shattered, along with every other glass object in the room.
Chapter Thirty-One

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE:

Bella's POV:

Sex, I decided, was much better know that I was a vampire. It felt extremely different; it was infinitely more satisfying, more pleasurable and lasted longer- a lot longer.

Our second honeymoon wasn't like our first. Well, kind of second honeymoon. I liked to think of it as such. Our little house certainly felt like we were back on Isle Esme.

Our time on the island had been one of the epitomes of my human life. One of the very best moments of my existence. I'd been so ready to string along my human time, just to hold on to what I had with Edward for a little while longer. Because the physical part wasn't going to be the same ever again.

I should have guessed, after a day like today, that it would be better.

I could really appreciate him now—could properly see every beautiful line of his perfect face, of his long, flawless body with my strong new eyes, every angle and every plane of him. I could taste his pure, vivid scent on my tongue and feel the unbelievable silkiness of his marble skin under my sensitive fingertips.

My skin was so sensitive under his hands, too.

He was all new, a different person as our bodies tangled gracefully into one on the sand-pale floor. No caution, no restraint. No fear—especially not that. We could love together— both active participants now. Finally equals.

Later, when the larks outside started singing, Edward reminded me, from where our bodies were entwined on the floor, of my priorities. It took him one word.
"Elizabeth."

My mind started racing, racing much faster than my human mind ever could. What would my baby look like this morning? Would she be looking for me? Was she happy? Comfortable? Would she want to be with me, to let me cradle her in my arms?

Getting dressed was a chore, thanks to Alice and the closet that was bigger than the entire bedroom and filled, row after row, in garment bags, all pristine white. I threw on the first semi-reasonable outfit I found—some kind of blue dress with long sleeves, and I reclaimed the shoes I wore yesterday which, unlike my clothes, had survived the undressing yesterday, after the short tour of the cottage.

After Edward dressed, we darted through the hidden garden, leaped lightly over the stone wall, and hit the forest at a dead sprint. We raced back, and I was slightly miffed when he beat me.

Elizabeth was awake; she was sitting up on the floor with Esme hovering over her, playing with a little pile of twisted silverware. She had a mangled spoon in her right hand. As soon as she spied me through the glass, she chucked the spoon on the floor—where it left a pot in the wood—and pointed in my direction imperiously. Her audience laughed; Maggie, Jasper, and Carlisle were sitting on the couch, watching her as if she were the most engrossing film.

I was through the door before their laughter had barely begun, bounding across the room and scooping her up from the floor in the same second. We smiled widely at each other.

She was different, but not so much. A little longer again, her proportions drifting from babyish to childlike. Her hair was longer by a quarter inch, the curls bouncing like springs with every movement.

"Beautiful," I breathed, and she pressed a hand to my cheek. I winced—she was hungry. My throat burned slightly, but I shook it away and turned to Esme.

"How long has she been up?" I asked as Edward disappeared through the kitchen doorway. I was sure he was on his way to get her breakfast, having seen what she'd just thought as clearly as I had.

"Just a few minutes," Esme said, her voice soft and musical. "We would have called you soon. She's been asking for you," Esme paused and gave a light chuckle, "actually demanding might be a
better description. We didn't want to... er, bother you." Esme looked like she was trying not to smile. Maggie bit her lip and looked away, trying not to laugh. I could feel Emmett's silent laughter behind me, sending vibrations through the foundations of the house.

I kept my chin high. "We'll get your room set up right away," I said to Elizabeth. "You'll like the cottage. It's magic." I look up at Esme. "Thank you, Esme. So much. It's absolutely perfect." Before Esme could respond, Emmett was laughing again- it wasn't silent this time.

"So it's still standing?" he managed to get out between his snickers. "I would've thought you two had knocked it to rubble by now. What were you doing last night? Discussing the national debt?" He howled with laughter.

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself of the negative consequences when I'd let my temper get away from me yesterday. Of course, Emmett wasn't as breakable as Seth... I wonder if getting kicked between the legs has the same effect on vampire males as it did on human males?

Clearing my head of the slightly violent but still extremely amusing thought, I turned my mind to another question. "Where're the shifters today?"

"Jacob took off this morning pretty early," Maggie informed me, "Seth followed him out."

"What was he so upset about?" Edward asked as he came back into the room with Elizabeth's cup.

There must have been more in Maggie's memory than I'd seen in her expression. Without breathing, I handed Elizabeth off to my husband, my mate. Incredible self-control, maybe, but there was no way I was going to be able to feed her. Not yet.

"We have a visitor, by the way," Maggie piped up. I frowned slightly.

"A visitor?"

"Yeah, some weird old guy. A wizard. Hermione called him Mr. Ollivander- they're up in Carlisle's study, the old guy put up a silencing charm for privacy."
"Huh," I said, thoughtfully. Well, I had time to spare while Elizabeth was eating. "I'll be back soon." I smiled, before darting up the stairs to the study. It took seconds. I knocked on the solid oak door and Alice pulled it open.

"Morning Bella," she greeted me, a sly smile on her face, "have a nice night?" I rolled my eyes at her, before looking past to see Hermione and the old man. He looked... strange. He had eyes that reminded me of Luna's- large, misty and silver. His hair was white and whispy and he was wearing grey robes. His hands, I noticed, were shaking, but he didn't look afraid so I assumed he had some type of tremor. The same spells hiding his scent and heartbeat were up, which gave me a small sense of comfort.

"Bella, this is Garrick Ollivander. Garrick, this is my sister Bella." Hermione introduced us, and I took a second to sweep my gaze over her as I sorted through my human memories the best I could, trying to remember if I'd ever heard about this Garrick before. Hermione looked a touch happier then she had yesterday.

"Wait, Ollivander?" I asked, finally remembering, "as in the wand maker?"

"The one and the same," Ollivander said, in a soft, spacey voice that gave the impression he wasn't exactly all there. He was holding Hermione's wand in his hand, his twitching fingers running up and down the smooth wood.

"Um, without trying to sound rude or anything, but why are you here?" I asked, curiously.

"I asked him to help me," Hermione said, drawing my attention away from the frail, elderly man back to her. "I managed to access a small portion of my magic last night-"

"You did? That's fantastic!" I interrupted, beaming at her.

"But," Hermione said, loudly, and my smile fell, "it was accidental magic. Jasper used his Gift to make me angry enough that a small surge of magic left me. Afterwards I tried to cast a spell, but I still couldn't access the magic." She let out a frustrated noise at this.

"I think I know what the problem is," Ollivander spoke up, his thoughtful expression making him look less, well, loopy.
"Is it fixable?" Hermione leaned forwards, eagerly, her hands clasped together.

"There is a reason why goblins and merpeople and vampires, all magical creatures, don't use wands. They all have their own magic, but none of them can use a wand as a foci; wands are tailored specifically for witches and wizards."

"What about werewolves?" Alice asked, sounding a touch on the disgruntled side. "They can use wands, can't they?"

"That's because the werewolf condition isn't a state of being, it's a medical condition. The lycanthropy is a disease, not a state of being. Essentially, someone infected with lycanthropy is just that- a witch or wizard with a disease. The majority of their anatomy remains the same, just slight differences, like someone with dragon pox, for example, will suffer a permanent form of what I believe Muggles call 'chronic fatigue'. A vampire, however, is a whole different tale. Your entire anatomy has been changed- blood doesn't run in your veins, your heart doesn't beat, and essentially a majority of what makes up your body is crystalized. You, Miss Granger, are the first witch or wizard recorded to be successfully Turned."

"I... I get that," Hermione looks so fretful that her hair's frizzling. "I just... how does this help me? I don't understand what point you're trying to make!"

"The point I am making, Miss Granger," Ollivander said softly, "is that you are not a witch anymore. A wand will not work for you. But you still have magic, with enough practice and hard work I believe you will be able to use your magic again, but you won't be able to use a wand to do so."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You mean- wandless magic? I mean, I know a few small spells, but no one can use just wandless magic! It's impossible!"

"Not impossible, Miss Granger," Ollivander disagreed, "just difficult. Every decent witch and wizard can do wandless magic, but it is a branch of magic that is largely... feared. Without a focus tool, magic is so much wilder, less controlled. Undisciplined users have the capability of causing great damage to society. So wands were created, back in 321 BC."

"Yes, I remember the sign on your shop." Hermione commented. Ollivander smiled.

"Indeed, my ancestors were among the first to discover how to create a wand, but we also ensured
that we would not let the knowledge of wandless magic die out. With each generation that passes, we have become more and more dependent on wands. Today there are not even a handful of wizards and witches that possess enough power do practice wandless magic.

"And, Miss Granger, there is another reason why most wizards are so... well, to be crass, incompetent at wandless magic. To use a wand, magic requires nothing more than magical blood and the right words. When you use wandless magic you have to concentrate on your power in magic and also in your own will. No one who is not determined enough can do magic without a wand."

"So," Hermione said, slowly, "You think that, with practice, I could be able to use magic, but I have to learn how to do it without a wand."

"Indeed," Ollivander dipped his chin slightly, running his finger down her wand before passing it back to her. Hermione accepted it, looking almost tearful. "It will not be easy, Miss Granger. It can take decades for even the strongest wizard to master the art. The only others I know of, from this recent generation, are Albus Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Well that's... encouraging." Hermione sighed, "at least I have more then enough decades to master it." She sounded a touch more cheerful at that, before she focused her attention back on Ollivander. "Thank you, Garrick." She said, her voice burning with sincerity. "And please, enough of this 'Miss Granger' nonsense. I think that, after everything, you can call me Hermione."

A faint smile crossed Ollivander's face, and he gave a sort of bow to my twin as he stood. "I owe you and your friends my life. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you... Hermione." He said, voice serious. Hermione shook her head.

"It was Harry and Dobby who rescued you, not me." She disagreed, but Ollivander just smiled serenely.

"I will take my leave now. I wish you the best of luck. Just remember, a wand is a focus, an inanimate extension of a witch or wizard's will. Its nature helps us tap into our deeper resources. However, if our abilities match our will, then it is entirely possible to extend our magic and focus on our desire. And your abilities, Miss Granger, are more then a match for your rather formidable will. After all, one doesn't get labeled the Brightest Witch Of Her Age for simply passing school tests."

"Thank you, Garrick." Hermione said, softly, blushing at his words, and the wand-maker gave her another smile before he disappeared with a pop.
"What did he mean, you saved his life?" I spoke up, before I could stop myself. Hermione's body stiffened slightly- a vampire's reaction to stress.

"During the war, he was held captive for almost a year." She said, her voice carefully wiped clean of emotion, "he spent most of that time in the cellar at Malfoy Manor."

"Oh," I realized, "so when Dobby rescued the three of you..."

"He also rescued Garrick. Dean and Luna too."

"Luna?" I gasped, "The girl who was here before? She was captured?"

"Held prisoner for nearly two months." Hermione confirmed. "She was kidnapped to stop her father from publishing pro-Harry propaganda." I shivered slightly.

"Poor Luna."

Hermione nodded, expression troubled. "Poor Luna." She echoed my words. I was about to ask for more information on wandless magic when I heard Edward growl. I darted down the stairs, to the living room, Hermione and Alice close behind.

"What is it?" I asked, nervous. His expression is furious, the blackest fury rolled across his expression like storm clouds

"Jacob." He basically spits out the word.

"What did the dog do this time?" Alice asked, curling her lips back. She then blinks. "Urgh! What is he doing? What is the dog doing that has erased my schedule for the entire day? I can't see anything!"

I wasn't surprised when Hermione didn't tell her off for the derogatory remark. As well as the fact it would be hypocritical, I knew Hermione wasn't fond of Jacob. I wasn't sure what he'd done most
recently to upset her, but my sister got along with Jacob even worse than Edward did, which was really saying something.

Edward's hands balled up into fists and he snarled, "He talked to Charlie. He thinks Charlie is following after him. Coming here. Today."

Alice said a word that sounded very odd in her trilling, ladylike voice, and Hermione growled, a furious, abrupt (and more than just a touch shocking) sound.

"He told Charlie?" I gasped. No! Nonono! It wasn't safe for Charlie to know about vampires. This wasn't his world! It wasn't safe for him. And if the Volturi found out... "Doesn't he understand? How could he do that?"

Edward spoke through his teeth. "Jacob's on his way in now."

It must have started raining farther east. Jacob came through the door shaking his wet hair like a dog, flipping droplets on the carpet and the couch where they made little round gray spots on the white. His teeth glinted against his dark lips; his eyes were bright and excited. He walked with jerky movements, like he was all hyped-up about destroying my father's life.

Seth and Leah were following him, Seth looking nervous and Leah looking pissed off- I was glad that her scowl was directed at Jacob, not me. Leah could be incredibly scary. Looking back, the fact that she and Hermione had bonded almost instantly shouldn't have surprised me even slightly.

"Hey, guys," Jacob greeted us cheerfully.

It was perfectly silent.

"Charlie'll be here soon," Jacob said to me casually. "Just a heads-up. I assume Alice is getting you sunglasses or something?"

"You assume way too much," I spit through my teeth. "What. Have. You. Done?" Jacob's smile wavered, but he was still too wound up to answer seriously.
"Jasper 'n Maggie woke me up this morning going on and on about you all moving cross-country. Like I could let you leave. Charlie was the biggest issue there, right? Well, problem solved."

"Do you even realize what you've done? The danger you've put him in?" Jacob snorted.

"I didn't put him in danger. Except from you. But I've heard that everyone reckons your self-control is your power. Not as good as mind reading, if you ask me. Much less exciting." Really? I thought, surprised; that was new to me.

Edward moved then, darting across the room to get in Jacob's face. Though he was half a head shorter than Jacob, Jacob leaned away from his staggering anger as if Edward towered over him.

"That's just a theory, mongrel," he snarled. "You think we should test it out on Charlie? Did you consider the physical pain you're putting Bella through, even if she can resist? Or the emotional pain if she doesn't? I suppose what happens to Bella no longer concerns you!" He spit the last word.

Edward's words finally cut through Jacob's strangely electric mood. His mouth dropped into a frown. "Bella will be in pain?"

"Like you've shoved a white-hot branding iron down her throat!" I flinched, remembering the scent of pure human blood, both my hands moving to cup my throat.

"I didn't know that," Jacob whispered.

"Then perhaps you should have asked first," Edward growled back through his teeth.

"You would have stopped me."

"You should have been stopped, you-"

"This isn't about me," I interrupted. I stood very still, keeping my hold on my anger and sanity. "This is about Charlie, Jacob. How could you put him in danger this way? Do you realize it's death or vampire life for him now, too?" My voice trembled with the tears my eyes could no longer shed.
Jacob was still troubled by Edward's accusations, but mine didn't seem to bother him. "Relax, Bella-" he started to say, but Hermione interrupted him. Personally, I wasn't sure whether I was more surprised or impressed she'd waited this long.

She let out the longest succession of swearwords I've ever heard, unleashing a string of obscenities that seemed to be making full use of every single language she had any knowledge of. She made particular use of German, Russian and another language that I'd get Edward to tell me what it was, whose harsher tones lent themselves to her fury. Several vases around the room exploded, sending thousands of diamond shards flying. I clapped my hands over Elizabeth's ears.

"You," she hissed, when Jacob appeared suitably cowed, her eyes narrowing to thin slits, "are very, very lucky that I can't use magic right now."

"I didn't tell him about vampires!" Jacob interrupted, anxiously. If I wasn't so angry at him, I would have winced, and despite the massive pile of crap he'd just landed us all in, I was still fond enough of Jacob to quickly speak up before Hermione tried ripping his head off- interrupting Hermione when she was in this sort of mood... not a good idea. The word 'suicidal' comes to mind.

"What do you mean you didn't tell him about vampires? Charlie's coming here!" I demanded.

"Yeah, that's the idea. Wasn't the whole 'let him make the wrong assumptions' thing your plan? I think I provided a very nice red herring, if I do say so myself." My fingers flexed away from Elizabeth. I curled them back in securely.

"Say it straight, Jacob. None of us here have the patience for this."

"I didn't tell him anything about you, Bella. Not really. I told him about me. Well, show is probably a better verb."

"He phased in front of Charlie," Edward clarified, in a low snarling tone. If my heart still beat, it probably would have stopped at those words.

"You what?" I whispered, as Hermione let out a truly chilling snarl.
"He's brave. Brave as you are. Didn't pass out or throw up or anything. I gotta say, I was impressed. You should've seen his face when I started taking my clothes off, though. Priceless," Jacob tried to play off as unconcerned, but the stiffness in his body and the way his eyes kept darting towards Hermione, whose eyes promised an extremely violent, painful and drawn-out death, gave him away.

"You absolute moron! You could have given him a heart attack!" I screeched, remembering him telling me how Leah's phasing in front of her dad was considered the trigger for her dad's heart attack. Suddenly, Leah's anger at Jacob made much more sense.

"You wanker!" growled Hermione, lips curled back over her teeth, "you pusillanimous little wanker!" I tilted my head as I heard the unmistakable sound of a car, turning off at the top of the mile-long driveway.

"Crap! Is that him? Is that him?" My bell-like voice went high in my agitation. "Edward-

"I'll get you contacts," Alice darted off.

"Sit down," Edward directed me to the couch as Esme hurried off to find George. "You're recovering from a terrible, debilitating illness, after all." Elizabeth curled up on my lap, pressing her hand against my cheek to portray her curiosity.

"Don't be too still," Maggie told me, "don't actually breath unless George has put up his charms- if he doesn't get here before Charlie, then you'll just have to pretend to breathe."

"Move your body around," Carlisle added, "cross your ankles, shift to the side, that sort of thing." I heard the crunch of tires against gravel and panic flooded me, followed by a wave of calm, courtesy of Jasper. Breathing deeply while I could, I turned to Hermione, whose lips were still pressed together, her eyes sparkling with anger.

"Are you going to sit down?" I asked her, anxiously, as Alice darted back into the room, contacts in hand.

"No." Hermione said, her voice toneless. "I'll come back afterwards."

"What?" I asked, startled, but she was already gone, darting away in movements too quick for any
human to follow, but I could now see with ease. I heard Charlie's voice in the doorway, could hear Esme distracting him slightly, stalling him while Alice put in the contact lenses.

They were uncomfortable and my eyes kept picking up the minute scratches in them. "You'll be fine, my love." Edward gave my hand a quick squeeze.

"All I told him was you look a little more like Esme now, then Renee." Jacob added, quietly. I could hear Charlie's footsteps, and my whole body tensed, despite Jasper sending soothing waves of calm my way.

"Edward," my voice was barely a whisper as I asked the question nagging at the back of my mind, "what was that language Hermione was speaking?" Edward's mouth quirked in sudden amusement, and he answered me, quietly, as the door handle started turning.

"I’m not sure, but I’m fairly certain that was Third Era Galactic Common." I blinked, and would have asked "what?!", because that really wasn't much of an answer, but then Charlie was standing there, in the doorway of the living room, taking me in with wide, wide eyes.

I stopped breathing.
Chapter Thirty-Two

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO:

Hermione's POV:

"Hermione?"

Alice's voice is quiet, gentle, and I turn to face her. I'm in the forest, perched on the branch in a tree along forty meters high. Less then a week ago this height would have made me so sick I'd have to fight the urge to either vomit or faint. Now, now the height meant nothing, because I knew that my new body could plummet hundreds of meters in the air to the ground, and I'd land on my feet, fully intact.

"Why did heights scare you so much?" Alice asks, as if reading my mind, as she delicately perched herself on the branch next to me, wrapping slim arms around my waist.

"What makes you think heights scared me?" I counter, without any real emotion. Alice gave me a look and I rolled my eyes. "It was an... accident, when I was younger," I was terrified, I shut my eyes waiting for it all to end there was no way I'd survive a fall from that height. The wind howled around me as it dragged me back onto the ground, the impact of which would shatter every bone in my body and leave me a bloodstained indentation in the earth. My life was flashing in front of me, it wasn't fair it was so short, I didn't want to die yet- "if my magic hadn't saved me, I'd have died."

"Thank god for magic," Alice looks paler then normal, before she shakes herself slightly. "You don't seem to mind heights when you're in your bird form," she pointed out. A smile danced across my face, as I realized what Alice was doing. Providing a distraction.

Merlin, I loved this woman.

"An animagus isn't just an animal form," I try to explain, "it's similar to the shifters. When you're in
that form, the chemical make-up of your brain is different. Instincts are stronger, emotions are muted... and then there's the fact that I can rely on my wings not to fail me."

"Hm," Alice gives me a thoughtful look. "You ready to talk now?" she then asks, and I sigh and nod.

"Want to know what really says something?" I ask her, and she looks confused for a millisecond about the direction the conversation is going in, but she doesn't comment, just arches a slim, dark eyebrow. "Memory charming my parents to forget I existed was easier than explaining why they needed to leave the country."

"Oh, dear heart," she said, softly, and I give her a tired sort of smile.

"My parents... like I've said before, they didn't react badly towards my status of a witch, but it... it changed everything. They never were the most warm, affectionate parents, but before they knew what I was, what I was capable of, they at least made an effort... you know, there are spells that can turn someone's mind into a prison, making them hallucinate all their greatest fears over and over again until they are hearing smells, seeing sounds and smelling colors as their brains dissolve. There are spells that can literally turn someone's skin inside out, that can boil the acid in someone's stomach, braid together the nerves in their spinal cord or freeze the fluid in their eyes. I can- could do all that with the wave of a stick and a few fancy words."

"Not could, can," Alice corrected me, sternly, "you heard what Mr. Ollivander said. A wand is only a focusing tool. Before wands were in common use, most of the Wizarding had used potions, wandless magic, and Ancient runes. I know that you'll have no problem becoming fluent in whichever ancient language you'll need to, especially with all the extra time you're going to have on your hands now, and you already told me that you're skilled enough in Arithmancy to be able to translate spells and wand movements to runes." Her expression was fierce now. "One day you'll be able to do all that again." She vowed, and then paused, "well, hopefully not any of that per say..." I smile.

"Don't worry, love, I've never used any of those spells before in my life. I just spent an unfortunate amount of time combing through books on the Darkest Arts available to learn everything there was to know about Horcruxes."

I then sigh, and Alice snuggles me tighter.

"I'm sure Charlie wouldn't react like they did," she tells me, softly.
"You can't guarantee that, Alice. And... I'm not risking it, not yet anyway. I want to remember Charlie the way I do now. I don't want him to be different around me. Even though I'm different around him."

With the amount of emotion currently present inside me, I wasn't surprised when tendrils of magic leaked out and caused the leaves around us to rustle where there was no wind.

Wandless magic... if I wanted to use magic again, I'd have to do it wandless. That idea was... intimidating to say the least. Wandless magic was not easy. It was almost paradoxical, in a way, the feelings not unlike the act of pushing and letting go at the same time, like trying to move an object by hand without touching it.

The difficulty was rather obvious.

Part of accidental magic was instinctive - wizards and witches apparently grabbed for their magic when distressed. Like Fleur had explained, strong emotion- a fairly good indication of significant distress- roused the magic normally held in quiescent discipline by the wizard or witch. That's why Neville, all those many, many years ago, had bounced instead of getting seriously injured when he was tossed out a window by his dear old Great Uncle Algie. It was also one of the reasons why magical people were far less likely to die in an accident than muggles. And Quidditch played by wizards and witches was dangerous, if fun, while Quidditch played by muggles, if they could figure out how, would be fatal- I remembered reading that in one of the earlier chapters of Introduction to Magical Theory.

Anyway, getting back to the original topic, that was the first part of wandless magic.

The second part followed naturally. Normally, the wizard only calls magic when about to channel it into a spell. So there you have a furious or terrified wizard, pulling his magic up by the bucket loads, and not paying attention to it in the slightest. The magic, meanwhile, is active, and the control that normally molds it into concentrated energy patterns is gone. So the magic just continued to gather 'til even vague, unspecified desires could give it form. Or, more often, a target.

But before that point, that much magic- charged magic, active with anger or fear- concentrated in one place but with only the vaguest direction, usually had effects on the natural world around it.

The hardest part about all this was actually being able to use wandless magic without the emotion.
"You seem lost in thought," Alice spoke up.

"I am... sort of," I speak up, vaguely, only half concentrating on our conversation, the rest of my brain gladly fully occupying itself with every theory and fact about wandless magic I'd ever read, pushing Charlie from my mind.

"And?" Alice prompted.

"And?" I copy her, teasingly. She pouts and it's adorable enough that I lean forwards and nip her lip. Letting out a playful growl, Alice pounces forwards in retaliation, knocking me off balance. I immediately lock my legs around the branch as I tip over, making sure to pull Alice with me. She gives a small squeal as we end up hanging upside down together, Alice wrapped around my torso like a koala bear.

I kiss her, ignoring the fact we're dangling from the tree, before pulling back slightly to smile at her. "I love you Mary Jane." Alice looks confused for a second, before her expression clears and she giggles, getting my reference. Her eyes suddenly go unfocused, and worry pulses through me. That worry fades, though, when Alice lets out another giggle when her eyes refocus. "Everything good?" I ask, and she nods happily.

"Bella and Emmett are about to have an arm-wrestling competition," she explains, "Bella destroys his pride."

Surprised laughter spills from my lips for a short moment, and then my lips are busy as the movements from my laughter combined with the fact I'm still upside down causes my shirt to fall, pooling around my shoulders, fully exposing my breasts, clad only in a satin bra, and Alice proceeds to just about devour my mouth.

When we return to the mansion, nearly an hour later, our clothes are rumpled and my hair is a mess. Emmett, who's sulking while playing with Teddy, chortles when he sees us. Alice gives a little growl while I roll my eyes at the overgrown toddler and go to find Bella.

I'm relieved to see her face is shining. "I take it that things went well?" I say, and she immediately starts chatting, telling me about how Charlie loves Elizabeth- not that that surprises me, it's really impossible not to- and how he reacted really well to everything.
A heavily pregnant Fleur arrives at the mansion some time around four to discuss Ollivander's visit with me, and the conclusions the old wandmaker came up with. Alice perches on my lap as we do so. Of course, the conversation didn't last long, not with Elizabeth in the room, drawing everyone's attention.

"'ave you considered about 'aving a naming ceremony for zee beautiful ange?" Fleur asked, as she gently runs a brush through my niece's hair. Elizabeth's bronze curls reach past her mid-back now, and every time my mention of the possibility of cutting it to a more manageable length was met by horror from everyone but Hermione and Emmett.

"A naming ceremony?" Carlisle asks, looking intrigued as he always does when something new is brought to his attention.

"Oui," Fleur nods, the hand not holding the hairbrush drifting down to rub her stomach, "eet eez a magical ceremony zat eez a tradition in Pureblood circles," she explains, "and a beautiful one at zat."

"I... what do you think?" Bella asks, turning to face me.

"I've never witnessed one before," I muse, feeling myself light up at the idea of witnessing the traditional ceremony I've only ever read about. "I think it would be fun!"

"What do we have to do?" Edward asks, curiously- like father, like son.

"You need to choose a Magical godmuzzer and godfazzer, and eet 'as to be at night." Fleur explains.

"I can make Hermione godmother, right?" Bella asks, and Fleur nods, causing my sister to smile before turning to her husband. "You choose the godfather," she tells Edward, who looks thoughtful for a moment, before turning to his adoptive father.

"Carlisle? Would you be willing?"

"I'm surprised you felt the need to ask." Carlisle replies, giving Edward a warm look.
"What sort of other magical ceremonies are out there?" Alice asks, later, curled up beside me. "So far there's the bonding ceremony and now this naming ceremony?"

"Believe me, there are a lot of different magical ceremonies," I tell her, "Purebloods in particular have ceremonies they've practiced for generations- there's the ceremonies performed on traditional dates such as Yule, Imbolc, Ostara, Beltane, Midsummer, Lughnasadh, Mabon and Samhain, then there's different blessing ceremonies and ritual ceremonies... like I said, it's all very traditional. Most witches and wizards don't practice them, as its not exactly common knowledge out there- its mainly just been passed down through the old families."

"Like the Weasleys?"

"I've never actually witnessed any of the Weasleys celebrating," I told her, thoughtfully, "the ceremonies are sort of... like Wizarding religion. Not every Muggle goes to Church and prays and all that, just like not every witch and wizard practice the old ways."

"Why would you compare it to religion?" Alice asks, curious.

"Because it's a wooly branch of magic," I tell her, "like Divination except less completely and utterly pointless." Alice laughs at that, and snuggles closer.

"So are you excited about the naming ceremony? What will we need for it? I get to be there, right?" She questions me, not pausing long enough for me to really answer. I wait until she stops speaking, a sheepish expression on her face, before answering.

"There's a few things that we'll need to bring along, some of the stuff I'm going to have to buy... which reminds me, I've never taken you to Diagon Alley. That's a situation that needs to be remedied as soon as possible." Alice's eyes widen in excitement.

"I get to go to Diagon Alley?" She just about squeals, jumping off the bed and bouncing around like a squirrel on far too many Pepper-Up potions after being hit on the tail with a stinging hex. "Holy crap, I get to go to Diagon Alley!"
Alice watched from beside me with wide eyes as I traced along the brick wall with my fingers, tapping the bricks three times once I found the right place, having to work hard to force a tingle of magic to contact the bricks.

I let out a relieved sigh, glad that I wouldn't have to ask someone from the pub to come and open the entrance for me, as the brick wall hollowed into a hole, then dilated and expanded and shivered into a huge archway, revealing the long row of shops with signs advertising everything from live flobberworms, to the newest racing broom model, the Lightningbolt- no need to guess who the namesake for that was. Harry had been unbelievably smug when he learned about it.

There were merchants lining the cobbled pathways, and I gave a mental prayer of thanks for the modified version of the Bubble-head charm Fleur had placed on Alice and I, mostly so I didn't have to breathe in the scent of delicious blood. The scent of blood didn't make my throat burn with bloodlust, or the predator in me cloud my thoughts, like a bona fide newborn, that didn't change the fact that I had been Turned under forty-eight hours ago.

Harry had burst my ego very quickly earlier when I smugly pointed out the fact to him that I was a newborn vampire who wasn't particularly inclined to go on a killing frenzy, and he in return had pointed out that I wasn't actually fully a vampire, and Elizabeth didn't seem particularly inclined towards that killing spree either, and she was literally a newborn, less then a week old, though with her accelerated growth she really did seem so much older.

"This is... this is... it's unreal!" Alice breathes, stunned. I smile at her.

"Says the vampire."

"Oh hush you," she says, too distracted to really care about my light jab. Wearing the ring I bought her, what seems like years ago, but in reality was only over two months, she looks like a normal human. Well, not normal, she'll never be normal- an extremely beautiful, but very much not-vampire human.

To keep the ring out of sight, lest someone recognize it, Fleur had applied a glamour to it, at the same time as she applied a glamour to me so that I wouldn't be recognized- though personally I wasn't sure that anyone would be able to make the connection between my new, beautiful form and my human one with just a glance. Every time I saw my reflection I had to pause to actually take in and realize that it was me reflected there, not some beautiful, ethereal stranger.
I let Alice basically drag me into the Alley, her green eyes bright with joyful excitement, her head constantly rotating as she drank in everything the Alley had to offer. The wonderment on her face reminded me of Bella’s expression when she first saw the Alley, and my own face, over a decade ago.

Diagon Alley was, in essence, an alley. It had one main road made of a cobblestone street upon which hundreds if not thousands of witches and wizards tread daily. This road was inlaid with more roads, small branches that wove an interconnecting path. Alongside the road were large buildings that were spaced so close together there was barely any room between them.

These buildings were shops, stores that sold all kinds of goods that could only be considered magical. You could see everything imaginable, from shops selling cauldrons that could only be made for potions, to shops selling a vast array of different animals such as mice, toads, and owls, to bookstores, and clothing stores whose clothing looked like something out of the fifteenth century, stores that sold potions ingredients, anything and everything you could think of that might be sold in the wizarding world seemed to be here.

It was... well, magical.

"Can I get an owl?" Alice begs, stopping out the front of Eeylops Owl Emporium to give me a pleading look.

"Why are you asking me?" I ask her, slightly puzzled. When it comes to shopping, Alice will buy what Alice wants- this was a fact I had very quickly learned about my mate, which was why I was so surprised she’d actually stopped to ask for permission.

"You have the money," Alice says, giving me a look that clearly states 'duh!'. My willpower isn't enough to stop me from rolling my eyes. "I'll take that as a yes then," my mate says, brightly. Which was how, fifteen minutes later, we exited the Emporium with Alice holding a cage containing one of the most stunning owls I'd ever seen, a caramel-feathered beauty.

"If you call her Caramel, I'm getting a divorce." I inform her. She pouts, before cooing to the owl, who doesn't seem to mind the fact Alice is a vampire- around half the owls in the shop screeched and started fluttering around in panic whenever she got too close to their cages which earned us some very odd looks.

"I wouldn't ever do something that cruel!" Alice says, looking affronted, before cooing at the bird again. It gave me a smug look which made me glare back at it. "Besides, you're an Odette, aren't you beautiful?" The owl- Odette- gave a hoot of approval, bobbing her head, and I narrowed my
eyes at the avian Rosalie, who wouldn’t let me go near her.

Our next stop was the bookshop, Alice stopping outside to peer eagerly in the window. "Ooh, can I go in there?" she asked, enthusiastically, looking like a child in a toy-store.

"We can go in there- I’m not leaving you unsupervised around books on magic.” I inform her.

“What harm can a book do?” Alice asked.

"You’d be surprised. At Hogwarts there are sections of the library that the students can't access without teacher permission because there are books in the Magical World that can potentially kill a person.” I tell her, “I know about one that burned people's eyes out. And everyone who has read "Sonnets of a Sorcerer’ speaks in limericks for the rest of their lives. And there was a witch in Bath that had a book before it was confiscated by the Ministry that you could never stop reading! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed."

Alice looked sickened. "Suddenly I'm a lot less eager to go visit the bookshop." She said, eyeing Flourish and Blott’s warily. I laugh at that, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Don’t worry, treasure," I say, tugging her in the direction. "I'll tell you which ones not to touch."

Flourish and Blott’s was very different to a Muggle book store. Like most of the shops in Diagon Alley, it was far larger on the inside then it was on the outside, nearly three or four times bigger then it appeared. All around the shop were rows upon rows of books, organized categorically by subject; Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts and so on.

"What in the- oh this is priceless!" Alice said, sounding highly amused. I turned to see where she was looking and laughed, remembering Harry's mortification the first time he saw what Alice had just laid her eyes on.

In the History section of the bookshop was an entire section dedicated to the Great and Noble Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Saved-The-World. From here, I could see books with titles such as 'Harry Potter and the Dastardly Dragon', 'Harry Potter and the Murderous Muggle', 'Harry Potter and the Wicked Werewolf', 'Harry Potter and the Terrible Troll', 'Harry Potter and the Horrible Hag', 'Harry Potter and the Nefarious Nundu', and twenty six other books with similar titles. On a shelf above all these was an animated toy that looked nothing like him save for the scar on it's head that came complimentary when you bought one of the books.
Alice gleefully danced over, as fast as she could go while mimicking a human, and picked up the one titled 'Harry Potter and the Banshee's Breath', and opened it up, her eyes darting over the words faster than any human's could.

"This is... this is brilliant!" she laughed. Odette, who was still perched on her shoulder, let out a hoot of amusement. Having bought the entire collection and already read them, much to Harry's mortification, I knew it was a storybook about Harry traveling through Ireland and defeating a banshee. My pointing out the similarities in these books to Lockhart's had had Harry whimpering at the time.

Leaving Alice in the section, laughing over the books, I walked over to the other sections. I remembered my first visit here, and the amount of books I'd purchased.

I had been a bit disappointed to learn that there were no books on etiquette and how one was supposed to act in formal functions within the Wizarding World. When asked, the shop assistant who was giving me a hand had told me, "Sorry, but as far as I know there aren't any books on things like that. From what I understand learning etiquette and whatnot is learned through word of mouth. However, we do have a book on wizarding traditions." That particular conversation had ended up with me getting the book 'A Traditional Look at Wizarding Traditions'.

This time, I was browsing in particular for books on wizarding law, a section which contained everything from 'Magical Misdemeanors in the Modern Law' to 'Unforgivable Curses and their Legal Compunctions'. Alice wandered over to me, after around a quarter of an hour, and cast an eye over the large stack of books I'd already placed in my basket. Her interest was dragged elsewhere by a title that fascinated her, and she picked up 'The Dark Arts: A Legal Companion'.

"I've got that at home if you want to read it," I comment, absently, and Alice arches a dark, slim eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"My fourth year," I explained, "I purchased a large collection of books on wizarding laws so I'd not only know what the laws were, but also be able to find legal loopholes to use if I ever needed to break them." Alice gives me an incredulous look.

"Harry and Ron were such a bad influence on you, weren't they?"

"Incredibly so." I agree, not sarcastic at all.
They really were terrible influences.

It was when we were exiting the shop, and heading towards the next shop that had caught Alice's fancy- the Apothecary- that we ran into one of those terrible influences.

"Why don't you look every part the respectable wizard!" I teased. With an outfit consisting of black dress slacks, polished dragon-hide boots, a black silk button up shirt with a larger than average collar, black gloves and a long dark green cloak, for once Harry looked every part the wealthy young wizard he was. He rolled his eyes at me

"Very funny."

"I thought so too," I agree, before asking, "What are you doing here anyway? And dressed so nice?" I'm startled when Harry's face turns solemn.

"Listen, Hermione," He says, serious. "You too Alice." He added, "The day before I married Ginny, Arthur pulled me aside and said: 'Harry, you're like a son to me, and now that you are about to become a married man, I feel that there is something I should tell you about women.' I, naturally, went bright red and started stammering, after all, just because I'm an orphan, it doesn't mean I've never received The Talk. Anyway, instead Arthur just smiled and said: 'Don't worry Harry, not those things- there's some conversations a son-in-law just shouldn't have with the father of his soon-to-be wife. Besides, kids your age probably know more about that than I ever will. No, Harry, what I have to tell you is something you don't know, something I wish I had known myself when I first entered the blessed state of matrimony. There is one thing that I have learned from bitter experience, and I wish to Merlin that some wise older man had thought to tell me this before I married Molly'," here Harry paused, and both Alice and I leaned in, intrigued despite ourselves.

"'Whatever you do',," Harry said, actually shuddering slightly, as if remembering something terrible, "'do not ever argue with a pregnant woman. If she wants you to sort the spices in alphabetical order, you'd better start putting "basil" before "borage". If she wants you to paint a room purple, you paint it whatever hellish shade of purple she has her heart set on. And if she craves dragon sausage for dinner, then, by Merlin, you head down to Knockturn Alley and get her that dragon sausage.' Arthur lived through six of pregnancies, one of them involving Fred and George, so believe me, love, he knows what he's talking about!"

I wrinkled my nose. "Dragon sausage? Really?" I ask, disgusted.

Harry nodded. "Really. I figured that must have been when Molly was expecting Charlie. The point is, I'm here because Ginny has her heart set on ice-cream from Florean's. And I, the ever dutiful
husband, am here to get it for her, no matter the fact that I'm supposed to be in a formal meeting with the Wizengamot in under six minutes."

Harry runs a hand through his perpetually messy hair, and I can't help it- I start laughing. He scowls at me.

"Just you wait until you have kids!" He threatened, before making a rude hand gesture and heading off towards Florean Fortesque's, which was now run by Florean's daughter, Fiona Fortesque.

"Do you ever think we'll adopt?" Alice asks, doubtfully.

"Adopt?" I ask, surprised, "we wouldn't need to adopt. There are potions in the wizarding world that let two girls conceive."

"But we're vampires," Alice points out.

"I'm more similar to a vampire hybrid, like Elizabeth. My body isn't frozen, like a vampire’s typically is," I correct, taking one of her hands and pressing it against my chest, where my heart beat whispers against her palm, then move it down to my abdomen. “My magic will protect my womb,” I murmur softly, “the same way it’s protecting my heart, even now.” Alice's eyes take on a slight wondering look.

"So you think... one day... we'll actually have our own children?"

"One day." I agree, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her lips, "now let's go get the stuff we'll need for the ceremony."

- 

It was a clear, cloudless night and the stars were scattered across the inky blue sky. Above us was the moon in all its luminous glory, and the snowy-white skin of the vampires is glowing under its silver rays. Everyone is dressed in formal attire, all in blues, whites and silver, some of us in wizarding clothing, others in Muggle dress suits and silk dresses.
"Friends, family and loved ones, please join me in completing zee circle," Fleur said, in her lilting voice. Fleur is dressed in floaty silver robes that veil her slender shoulders, and drift around her body. Bella seemed a bit nervous as everyone closed in around her, Edward and Elizabeth, forming a circle with our hands.

"What bloodline does zis child come from?" Fleur asked as she waved her wand over Elizabeth causing blue smoke to form over the bronze head.

"Cullen." Edward said, voice serious.

"What given names do you bestow upon 'er?" Fleur asked as she waved her wand again, and this time yellow whispy strings appeared in the air, circling my niece.

"Elizabeth Carlie." Bella's voice trembled slightly, but she was smiling. Fleur touched Elizabeth's forehead with the tip of her wand and murmured a soft incantation in Latin. A golden glow erupted momentarily on Elizabeth's forehead and then it disappeared.

"What magical charms do you wish for 'er as 'er godfazzer?" Fleur turns to Carlisle.

"Love and protection." Carlisle says calmly, although his golden eyes are alight with excitement at the opportunity to be a part of the traditional ceremony. A wave of her wand and runes formed on the whispy blanket that hovered above Elizabeth. Fleur then turns to face me.

"What magical charms do you weesh for Elizabeth as 'er godmuzzer?" She asked.

"I wish for her friendship and wisdom." I say, softly, and I feel the magic reverberate through me, and I let out a small sound as my magic, largely inaccessible to me, rears its head, sending out a gentle pulse of magic to join the glowing runes flowing from Fleur's wand as my blessing is bestowed.

"On zis night of zee full moon we bestow zis child wiz zee name Elizabeth Carlie Cullen." Fleur says, "Welcome, Elizabeth."

"Welcome!" Everyone repeated after her, myself included.
The magical blanket of light, runes and smoke, all woven together with pure magic, fell from the air, wrapped its wispy self around Elizabeth, closed in tight around her and then fell through her skin. Bella leaned down and kissed Elizabeth softly on the cheek, which prompted the circle to break.

"That was amazing!" Alice murmured, from beside me, taking a few steps back with me to give Bella, Edward and the well-wishers some space.

"Rituals are always intense," I murmur back, before reaching out and gently touching the air in front of me. "I can feel the magic everywhere around us, can taste it."

"It's like an energy," Alice agrees, with a shiver of delight. "A blanket of something heady and... and magical!"

"So literate, sweetheart," I tease her gently, agreeing completely with everything she said.

And my heart aches with painful loss, at the tantalizing magic, so teasingly out of my grasp.
Bella's POV:

Elizabeth spoke her first word when she was exactly one week old. The word was Momma, which made my day. It probably would have been a little more special if she hadn't continued from her first word to her first sentence in the same breath- "Momma, where is Grandpa?", but I took what I got and George won five galleons from Emmett, well, the American dollar equivalent, anyway, due to his bet that she'd say 'Momma' before 'Dad', 'daddy', or some variation of that.

Elizabeth walked for the first time, fewer than three weeks later. She'd simply stared at Alice for a long moment, watching intently as her aunt arranged bouquets in the vases scattered around the room, dancing back and forth across the floor with her arms full of beautiful white and gold roses. Elizabeth got to her feet, not in the least bit shaky, and crossed the floor almost as gracefully.

I would have been terrified if it weren't for the advanced knowledge that her rapid growth was normal. Because she was growing rapidly- extremely so. At three months, my daughter could have been a big one-year-old, or a small two-year-old. But she wasn't shaped exactly like a toddler; she was leaner and more graceful, her proportions were more even, like an adult's.

By then, she could speak with flawless grammar and articulation, though she rarely bothered, preferring to simply show people what she wanted. She could not only walk but run and dance. She could even read.

I'd been reading from an old looking book of wizarding fairytales with a stained leather cover that Hermione had leant me with a nostalgic smile as she touched a funny symbol triangle symbol inked onto the page, to her one night, when Elizabeth reached up to touch my cheek, the image in her mind one of us, only with her holding the book. I gave it to her, smiling.

"There were once three brothers who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight." she read without hesitation, "In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and—"
By Carlisle's calculations, the growth of her body was gradually slowing; her mind continued to race on ahead. Even if the rate of decrease held steady, she'd still be an adult in no more than four years.

It seemed unfair, that I'd only have my child for four years before she was all grown and didn't need me anymore. And I was worried about the Jacob situation- it was just wrong that my four-year-old would be mentally and physically old enough for my best friend to pursue.

But I didn't allow myself to think like that, not often anyway. Instead I concentrated on the moment, the best I could, treasuring days where my family was all together, and the nights when Edward and I made love until the early hours of the morning- Hermione was right, all those months ago, the day after the god awful graduation party Alice threw; vampire stamina was amazing!

Speaking of Hermione, like everyone else, my sister adored Elizabeth, and Elizabeth adored her Aunty 'Mione- and she adored her Aunt

'Mione’s stories. To be honest, we all did, but Elizabeth was the only one who could really get away with asking for one, which she did whenever she could.

"Will you tell me a story, Auntie?" Was one of her earliest sentences, and Hermione was always happy to oblige. On this occasion, Elizabeth was three and a half months old, although she looked almost three now.

"Hmm," Hermione taps her lip teasingly. "What type of story, little ducky?"

"Tell me an adventure!"

"Well," Hermione started, after a moment of consideration, "when I was eleven-"

"That's not how you're supposed to tell a story," Elizabeth interjected, "it's supposed to start with 'once upon a time'!"

"Just for you, ducky," Hermione mock-sighed, "Okay... once upon a time, a very lonely little Muggleborn witch had no friends. She was too bookish and too bossy and no one liked her very much. But she worked hard- or at least, she thought she was working hard- to befriend a pair of silly boys. Just when she thought she was becoming friends with them, she overheard one of the boys saying some very... mean things to his other friends about her on Halloween. They were
laughing at her and talking about her behind her back—"

"That's not very nice." Elizabeth interrupted, with a frown.

"No it wasn't," Hermione agreed, "now hush you so I can finish telling you the story." She added, leaning forwards and tugging on the end of Elizabeth's plait. "The lonely witch cried for hours. Being a Muggleborn, she already felt the burden of being different and wondered whether or not she belonged there at all. She was clever, yes, but disliked and bullied, and was caught between sticking it out, showing them she wasn't weak, and writing her parents a letter and begging the Headmaster to let her go home.

"Little did she know, a terrible, gigantic troll had been let loose in the school. And the boys, the ones she wanted to be friends with, went to warn her. Unfortunately enough, the troll wandered its way into the very bathroom she was crying in. The boys, only First Years, very valiantly- and with quite a bit of terrified screaming- battled the troll and knocked it out with its own club. And from then on, the girl and the boys were best friends, because it turns out that there are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them." Hermione finished her story.

"Will you tell me more about Hogwarts?" Elizabeth asked, eagerly, looking at Hermione like she was some kind of goddess, squirming out of my arms so she could go and curl up on Hermione's lap. I pulled a mock-hurt expression which made her giggle, before turning back to face my sister, who wrapped her arms around her.

"Well, what do you want to know, little ducky?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Everything!"

"Hm, let's see... Hogwarts was built over a thousand years ago. There are four Houses, which are an old tradition handed down by the Founders: Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw and Godric Gryffindor. They built Hogwarts for the purpose of protecting and educating the young witches and wizards of Britain. Each Founder prized certain traits in their students, and those traits today are the basis of how the students are Sorted into their Houses."

“What is a trait?” Elizabeth asked.

“A trait is a quality a person has,” Hermione explained to my bright-eyed little girl, “like your
Auntie Rose is very caring, and Uncle Emmett is very silly.”

"What sorts of traits did the Founders like?" asked Elizabeth.

"Well- Gryffindor prized courage above all else, and today Gryffindor students are conspicuous for bravery. Rowena Ravenclaw was a scholar, and her favorite students were the most studious and intellectual. Helga Hufflepuff respected hard work and loyalty, and those are the trademark Hufflepuff virtues. And Slytherin- well, Salazar Slytherin was proud of his students' ambitions, and encouraged them to use their wits to achieve their goals."

"You must have been a Ravenclaw," Elizabeth decided.

"Actually," Hermione said, amused, "I was Sorted into the House where most members make important life decisions based on the fact that it-sounded-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time-and-besides-doesn't-it-look-pretty-when-it-explodes-like-that?" Seeing Elizabeth's confusion, Hermione elaborates. "The Hat put me in the noble and chivalrous House of Godric Gryffindor."

"You must have had lots of adventures," Elizabeth sighs, wistfully.

"Harry, Ron and I have definitely done a lot of stupid things over the years," Hermione agrees, "we've amassed quite the laundry list, really; running a gauntlet of traps and tests designed by our professors, chasing after basilisks and giant Gryffindor eating spiders, taking on a werewolf, aiding and abetting a criminal wanted for mass murder, taking on a dragon and merpeople, befriending a giant, leading an evil headmistress to be captured by the centaurs," here Hermione paused briefly, "I still get warm fuzzies thinking about that one," she muttered under her breath, before continuing, "creating an underground army, robbing a bank, infiltrating a corrupt ministry, and, of course, attempting the ritual known as dating. Nothing, of course, compared to deciding to take on the most feared wizard in history, but we did have an awful lot of sheer dumb luck on our side, which we needed because, as Harry is so fond of saying, we tend to plan, then get there, and then all hell breaks loose."

"Most feared wizard?" Elizabeth frowned, and Hermione looked like she was mentally cursing herself for letting that slip, before sighing.

"Ducky, love... Hogwarts, the Wizarding world, it isn't all fun and magic. When I was in school, there was trouble in the wizarding world. A very powerful, very evil wizard had gathered a lot of followers and wanted to force his ideas on everybody else. He used terror and violence to frighten people."
"You must have been very afraid," Elizabeth shivered, hugging Hermione tighter. Hermione gave a warm smile.

"There are a lot of monsters out there in the world, but I will always protect you." Hermione vowed.

"What monster scares you the most?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well," Hermione said, thoughtfully, "apart from Voldemort, of course... one of the scariest moments of my life was when I was twelve and a Devil's Snare, an extremely large plant with the magical ability to constrict or strangle anything in its surrounding environment or something that happens to touch it, attacked Harry, Ron and I. I haven't yet developed a phobia towards trolls, broomstick flying, three-headed dogs, chess sets, poisons, dragons, turbans, basilisks- or any other type of snake, diaries, Dementors, hippocriffs, werewolves, rats, forests, merpeople, centaurs, giants, vampires or people wearing white masks, but I still get all nervous whenever a plant moves too quickly, even if it just turns out to be the wind." Hermione looks almost embarrassed as she says this.

"You've really faced all those monsters?" Elizabeth breathed, looking morbidly fascinated. Hermione gave a grim sort of smile.

"And so many more."

"I really wish I could see Hogwarts," Elizabeth said, sadly. "Even if there's all those scary things, it sounds so..."

"Magical?" Hermione suggested, and my daughter giggled and nodded.

"Magical." She agreed.

"Well," Hermione said, slowly, "the Christmas holidays are approaching, which means most of the students will have returned home for the break... so maybe, maybe, we might just be able to go have a little peak."
Elizabeth's shriek of delight was almost as loud as Alice's from the other room.

On the day scheduled for the Hogwarts visit, we all met at the mansion. I was slightly surprised by what Hermione was wearing—she looked very pretty in a tight, pinstriped dress. A matching half-cape hung askance on her small frame, leaving one shoulder bare. The skirt stopped just before her knees, directing attention downward to her red heels. A red scarf was tied around her neck and her hair was loose, but neat.

"Did Alice dress you?" I ask, and she gives me a slightly annoyed look.

"Despite the fact we shared the same womb, Bella, I can assure you that we do not share the same abysmal fashion sense." I decide to take that as a no, Alice didn't dress her.

Accompanying Edward, Elizabeth, Alice, Hermione and myself on the visit to Hogwarts were Leah, Seth, Jacob, Rosalie, Emmett and little Teddy. Minerva McGonagall, as the Headmistress of Hogwarts, had created a Portkey for us, a long skipping rope that we all grasped with one hand, me grimacing in memory of the last few times I'd used one of the horrible contraptions.

The bizarre tugging behind my navel and the wild spinning made me glad that a vampire couldn't throw up, and when we landed I helped Elizabeth swallow the potion Hermione handed me, remembering having to take the same potion myself the first time I portkeyed. Edward looked extremely distasteful as he dropped the part of the skipping rope he was holding.

"It's not fun, is it, ducky?" Hermione said, sympathetically. My daughter pulled a face.

"It was icky," she complained, before brightening up and pointing over my shoulder. My heart pounding excitedly in my chest, I turned around to get my first proper glance at Hogwarts.

It took my breath away.

The only word one could use to describe the beautiful castle was Magical.
The walls of the castle were built of grey stone with many towers and turrets. Set in a valley area, the castle and grounds were surrounded by mountains, with a large Lake to the south of the main building that sparkled like under the sun. An actual, real live Giant Squid appeared to be sunbathing in the shallow water.

The huge main oak front doors of the castle faced the west, opening up to the sloping lawns we were standing on. Behind us was a deep forest with a decidedly malevolent air about it that extended around to the west of the Castle. I could see greenhouses and vegetable patches, as well as a stone hut with a turret of smoke, and a thick trunked tree with long thin leaves and heavy looking limbs that swayed as if alive. I wondered if it was the infamous Whomping Willow.

"Where are we located right now?" Edward asked, being the first to break the stunned silence.

"Scottish Highlands," Hermione replied, absently, most of her attention on the castle before us, drinking in the sight like someone dying of thirst. "Not far from Dufftown, in Banffshire, and Achintee, in Lochaber."

My knowledge in geography was sadly lacking, but her explanation seemed to make sense to Edward who nodded before falling back in awed silence. "You better turn off your phones," she directed us, her attention finally returning back to the group. "The magic will fry them otherwise."

Elizabeth's face was shining brighter than the sun as she took in Hogwarts. She skipped over to Hermione, leaving Edward and I in the dust, in favor of holding Hermione's hand. I couldn't help but smile at the image they made.

My sister led the way across the grounds and up a flight of stone steps and crowded to the huge, Oak front door. She raised her hand and knocked lightly and the door opened to reveal a tall witch dressed in emerald green robes with black hair streaked with grey and stern lines on her face. Stern lines which softened as the witch smiled, leaning forwards and hugging Hermione.

"It's been too long," Minerva McGonagall told my sister. Hermione's smile looked both radiant and wobbly.

"I know. I've missed you, and I've missed Hogwarts." She said, reaching a hand out to gently trace pale white fingers along the stone, closing her eyes as she did so. "It almost feels like I'm finally home." She whispered, so quietly that if I was still human, I wouldn’t have heard it.
As I stepped inside the doors, I could taste the magic of the castle, a sort of tingling on my tongue. Minerva led the way into what I guessed was the entrance hall, which was so enormous that it could easily fit the whole of my house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches, despite the early hour, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

Holding Elizabeth's hand, Hermione led us through another set of doors, into one of the strangest and most wonderful rooms I'd ever been in. Thousands and thousands of unlit floated in midair over four long tables. Despite the absence of students, the tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table. But most breathtaking, was the ceiling. "It's bewitched to look like the sky," Hermione explained, softly, seeing where all our reverent gazes were trained. It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, that it didn't just open up to the beautiful, all encompassing sky.

Elizabeth suddenly gave a cry of alarm, and I reacted instinctively, darting to her side and scooping her up into my arms in the space of half a second, before realizing what had startled her. My jaw near about dropped open as Hermione smiled widely.

"Hi Nick, it's been a while," she greeted the pearly-white and semi-transparent man, hovering before her. Wearing a doublet matched with tights and a particularly large ruff, I was sickened slightly by the way his head wobbled as he moved.

And did I mention he was semi-transparent? As in an actual, real live ghost?!

In my arms, Elizabeth seemed to have moved on from shock to fascination. "Are you a ghost?" she asked.

"Indeed I am," the ghost said proudly, "my name is Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington."

"Wait, you're Nearly Headless Nick," I say, recalling through the mud some of Hermione's letters from her earlier years at Hogwarts. Hermione shoots me a look of exasperation and the ghost's expression turns annoyed.

"Yes, well I prefer Sir Nicholas." He huffs.

"Nearly Headless?" Emmett asks, eagerly, "How're you nearly headless?" Hermione sighs and
"Déjà vu." As the ghost straightens up.

"You have all the sensitivity of a blunt axe," he says to Emmett loftily, before seizing his left ear and pulling. My hand clapped over Elizabeth's eyes as the ghost's whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge- a hinge made of half an inch of skin and sinew. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly.

"Enough, Nicholas." Minerva said, sharply, and the ghost swung his head back on before floating off in a somewhat sulky manner.

"That was brilliant!" breathed Seth, eyes wide. Hermione smiles at his youthful awe.

"Nick's the Gryffindor ghost," she explained, "all the Houses have one. They help point First Years in the right direction and all that, at the beginning of each year. Well, except the Bloody Baron. Everybody avoids him if they can."

"The Bloody Baron?" Seth asks and Hermione's eyes glitter slightly as she inclines her head. We all turn and a shiver instantly runs down my spine.

The ghost she'd gestured towards was horrible looking, sitting there with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. "Whoa," mutters someone, probably Emmett.

"How does someone become a ghost?" Edward asks, his expression extremely solemn. Hermione looks uncomfortable at the question.

"A ghost is a witch or wizard who chooses a feeble imitation of life after dying. They, well, they choose to stay behind, choose to leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, but very few wizards do pick that path. Instead they... go on." She says, softly. It's not exactly a very detailed answer, but she doesn't elaborate, and instead begins a tour of the magical castle.

Everything was so different, from the classrooms to the toilets. Some things were more normal looking such as the Transfiguration classroom, with rows of desks and bookshelves and chalkboards and desks, the only oddity being the large cages stacked at the front, some large enough to fit a lion, others a sparrow, and then there whereas others were beyond bizarre, like the
Potions classroom in the dungeon, which was gloomy and dimly-lit, with shadowy walls lined with shelves of large glass jars filled with slimy, revolting things, such as bits of animals and plants, floating in potions of varying colors.

Hermione kept up a running commentary as she went, the rest of us following her, gaping like "uneducated savages"- according to one of the portraits anyway, a lady dressed in light blue, ancient-looking robes fashioned from a rough fabric with runes were sewn into the white fur that wound its way around the brim of her tall, pointed hat in neat gold stitching. Because had I mentioned the portraits talked? And moved? Actually, literally talked and moved?

We managed to avoid any drama, minus Jacob getting his foot stuck in what Hermione informed us was the vanishing stair. It took him nearly five minutes to get free, and seeing Hermione's smirk as he did so, I had a sneaking suspicion that Hermione had chosen this specific staircase, out of the hundred and forty-two present, very specifically.

Elizabeth was intrigued by the Quidditch field, a bizarre oval with six hoops, all towering at least twenty meters above the ground.

"What's that for?" she asked, and Hermione pulled a face.

"Quidditch." She said in a rather sour voice.

"What's Quidditch?" Elizabeth asked in her sweet voice.

"A sport of high aggression and high danger, played, for the most part, by arrogant fools with no sense of self-preservation." Hermione answered promptly, before she paused, and continued less biting, "Some people seem to enjoy that sort of thing." I tried not to laugh at her expression. Emmett didn't bother, cackling loudly.

Our tour ended outside a pair of gold-colored doors. Inscribed above them were the words: We Will Never Forget You.

I swallow past the strange lump in my throat as Hermione stiffens and then takes a deep breath before gently pushing open the doors. My mouth almost drops open in amazement.

The room was huge and bright with hundreds of pictures, pictures filled with moving people,
covering the walls. Hovering in midair was a list of hundreds of names woven of silver ribbon, and beside each name two dates- the date of birth, the date of death.

My eyes were drawn towards one of the center pictures, where a crowd of people stood together, the smiles on their faces defying the lines of stress. There was Hermione, looking so different with her softer, human features, an air of fragility about her she no longer possessed. Her arms were wrapped around the waists of Harry and Ron, who were standing on each side of her.

"When was that taken?" I ask, pointing over at it. Hermione glances at the photo and her face softens.

"An Order meeting. I was seventeen, I think. It was before Harry, Ron and I went on the run." She answers, quietly, before turning to Rosalie, whose cradling Teddy to her chest. "Over here," she beckons, before walking over to the far side of the room, where a picture of a tired but happy looking man smiled at the camera, and standing next to him was a younger witch with bubblegum pink hair wearing a t-shirt that read 'Witches do it Diagon Alley', who was waving and winking at the camera.

"Who dey Erma?" Teddy asked Hermione. I smiled slightly at the nickname Teddy had bestowed on my sister. Unable to pronounce 'Hermione', he'd started calling her 'Erma' instead. I thought it was cute. Hermione had decided it was better then 'Hermy'. After that she'd muttered something about a grawp, but hadn't elaborated.

"They're your birth mother and father, Teddy." Hermione said, gently.

"Like-like Momma an' Dada?" Teddy asked, curiously, his hair turning bubblegum pink to match the picture of Tonks.

"Yes, darling," Rosalie answered gently, "just like us."

"Where dey den?" Teddy asked, an adorable pout on his face.

"They're with the angels now, darling." Rosalie smoothed the bubble-gum pink locks then kissed Teddy's brow.

"Why dey wiv da angels?" Teddy asked, puzzled.
"It was their time," Leah said, walking over to squeeze Teddy's hand. "My father is with the angels now too. So are your Momma and Dada's parents."

I heard the sound of the footsteps, clicking against stone, and the sound of a wet heartbeat, before the sound of knocking. I turned to see Minerva standing in the doorway, a shadow of grief crossing her face as she looked in the room before she hid it.

"There's lunch left over in the staff room for those of you who still need to eat," the headmistress said, "the password is ‘pacem’. Or you can call a House Elf, if you prefer."

"Staff room." Hermione said, instantly, and Minerva chuckled.

"Still on your SPEW campaign, then?"

Hermione groaned. "It's S.P.E.W.! Not SPEW!" She exclaimed. Minerva just laughed, shaking her head slightly as she turned and left.

Hermione led the way to the staffroom, stopping in front of a statue of two gargoyles. "Pacem." Hermione said, clearly, and I wish I could say I wasn't shocked when the gargoyles nodded before leaping aside. That would be a lie, though.

We entered the staff room and I looked around. It was a long, paneled room with mismatched, dark wooden chairs and a wardrobe made of dark oak. I was surprised when it started shaking slightly, and walked over to investigate it.

"Stay away from that!" Hermione's voice was sharp, and the suddenness of her order startled me. I made to step back, but not in time, and I watch in horror as the door of the wardrobe swings open.

For a second, a shapeless mist hovers in the air, and then I let out a scream at the sight before me, the bodies of Edward, Elizabeth and Hermione, broken on the ground, flames licking along their snowy white limbs, emitting a thick, oily purple smoke.

And then Hermione's pushed in front of me and the Boggart changes, swirling until it reforms into a monster.
The man, if one could call him that, was skeletally thin, with sickly white-grey skin and dark scarlet eyes with cat-like slits for pupils. He had a chalk-white face that resembled a skull, snake-like slits for nostrils, no hair and no lips. He wore a black cloak that swirled around his body ominously, and elegant black robes. Unnaturally long fingers, like spider's legs with long, sharp pale blue fingernails, caressed a wand of yew, in a manner that looked sickeningly sexual.

I didn't need Hermione's hoarse whisper to know who he was.

"Voldemort."

The monster opened his mouth and spoke, his voice high, cold and sibilant. "You will never be free of me," he hissed. Hermione made some sort of choked sound and the horrible being twisted his lipless mouth into some mockery of a smile. "You think Luciusss is the only one of my followersss who will want revenge? They will kill you and your preciouss family... you will never be truly sssafe..."

"R-riddikulus!" Hermione gasped out, thrusting out her palm, but nothing happened. Boggart-Voldemort laughed, the sound high and cruel.

"Sssilly mudblood... you will always be inferior... and you will die, just like your parentssss..." For a brief second Hermione's face showed panic, but then it settled on anger.

"RIDDIKULUS!" she shouted again, and this time an explosion of red light left her palm, hitting the imitation of Voldemort. The creature exploded in a pillar of flames, and high, pained shrieks echoed through the room for a handful of seconds, before the flames had vanished, and there was silence.

There was no sign of the thing.

Alice darted to Hermione's side and wrapped her arms around her. I became aware for the first time of Teddy's wails, and the distance between us- Rosalie had taken her son out of the room, and Jacob had done the same for Elizabeth. The rest of us just stood there, shocked, shaken.

"That was Voldemort?" Emmett's voice was... rough with emotion. Hermione nodded, the movement barely noticeable, seeing as her face was buried in the crook of Alice's neck.
"He can't hurt you anymore," Alice said, fiercely, "he's dead and the disgusting creature was lying! They were your worst fears, sweetie, not facts!"

"I haven't even tried to find my parents- what if the Death Eaters did find and kill them?" Hermione asked, her voice high, pulling away from Alice slightly and raking a hand through her hair in a stressed manner. Her brilliant eyes were bright with unshed tears, and her expression was panicked.

"Then we'll deal with that. We'll go find them and make sure they're alright, which they will be." Alice soothed, placing her hands on Hermione's shoulders. "Deep breaths, sweetheart." Hermione closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"Are you okay, love?" Edward asked me, placing a hand on my shoulder. I nodded stiffly, my sharp gaze not leaving Hermione. My sister straightened up, a determined look on her face as she seemed to push her emotions aside. I vaguely remembered through my human memories her mentioning something called Occluding.

"What was that thing?" Leah asked, uncertainly.

"A Boggart." Hermione said, her face still blank. "A magical shape-shifter that takes on the form of that which scares you most." She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again, looking calmer. "Right," she said, clapping her hands together, "let's eat in the kitchens. Oh, and who wants to see a unicorn before we leave?"
Hermione's POV:

Alice's expressions kept flickering between excitement and unease as she fidgeted beside me. "Calm down." I whispered, and she shot me a look that clearly stated her annoyance.

"I'm in the sun, in the middle of a street, surrounded by people!" she whispered, "I should be sparkling! But I'm not! I'm actually not!"

To understand her amazement and excitement, I reminded myself that for the past one hundred years, Alice hadn't been able to go in the sun in the presence of humans. Now, with her ring, she could, leaving her to fight her instincts screaming for her to get away from the sun's rays, and to bask in the joy of finally being able to do something she hadn't for decades.

It was our first day in Australia, after arriving in Perth last night, via side-along apparation with Harry. After spending the night at Crown Metrapol, which was probably the most expensive and luxurious hotels in the entire state knowing Alice, where we didn't exactly sleep, per se, but still definitely got our moneys worth out of the bed (and shower, hot tub, desk, wall and sofa) we were making our way towards the home address of Wendell and Monica Wilkins, as found in a yellow pages directory.

The weather was classic Australian weather; windless and warm, the sky without a single cloud, the blue veiled with a haze of light gold.

"I miss your sparkles." I mock-sigh, shaking my head, and she pouts at me before walking ahead. I watch as she sashays casually down the street, her hips swinging as though she's dancing to her own silent beat. Her heels click on the sidewalk as people- men, mostly- eye her appreciatively. Clad in skin-tight denim and eye-catching purple, my Alice looks young and beautiful and oblivious to the attention she's getting.
Compared to her, I feel... much less delicate and beautiful, but just as elegant and eye-catching. The clothes I'm wearing are a more modern type of Wizarding wear, designed for both casual use and for dueling, composed of a blue silk blouse over dark canvas trousers, combined with black high-heeled dragon-hide boots.

"Wait up!" I complain, as I speed up slightly. She turns her head back slightly to poke her tongue out at me, before continuing ahead. I roll my eyes and sigh. At around a hundred years of age, you'd think she'd have more maturity... you'd be wrong.

"Here it is," she announced, stopping outside one of the houses on the street. "116 Stoneham Road, Attadale."

Butterflies flutter around uncomfortably in my stomach as I cover the last few steps so I'm standing next to my mate, then examine the house before us. With the more traditional architecture, I recognize my parents' taste, and the pots canna lily plants, the big pink flowers, wide-open and radiant on bright crimson stems, displayed so proudly, were my mother through and through.

I knew, without even laying eyes on the occupants of the house, that the Wendell and Monica Wilkins inside were Helen and Richard Granger, the couple who raised me.

"Well, mission successful, let's get going!" I say, brightly, turning around, ready to walk back down the way we came. Alice's hand shoots out and fastens around my forearm, spinning me back around so she can give me a stern look.

"You'll regret it later if you don't even take a look, just to make sure," she warns.

"Yes, later- much, much later." I mutter, sullenly. Alice rolls her eyes.

"Come on, drama queen, it won't be that awful."

"Says you," I counter, but I don't resist as she leads the way to the front door of the house, her grip not even loosening slightly.

Alice raps on the door, using her knuckles instead of the traditional knocker, and a handful of seconds pass, nearly a minute, before a smiling woman opens the door.
I stop breathing, stiffening as I look at my mother- or, more specifically, at the baby in her arms.

"Can I help you?" Some part of my brain registers my mother saying. Alice speaks, which I'm glad, because I don't think I could say anything, even if I tried.

"Oh I'm sorry, we were looking for my aunt Cynthia, I think we might have the wrong address." Alice says, apologetically.

"Yes you do, I'm afraid," my mother says, apologetically, "only my husband and I live here- and our daughter, of course. Can you tell me what address you're looking for?"

"116 Sailing Road," Alice recites, "the taxi dropped us off here."

"Oh, you're one street over," my mother says, with a kind smile. "It's a short walk, Webb Lane, you can see it up there, should take you to Sailing Road, and then you just need to turn left and walk up a bit- you should be able to spot it."

"Thank you, Mrs...?"

"Wilkins, love." My mother smiles, "and you're welcome."

"You have such a beautiful daughter- what's her name?" I ask, suddenly. My mother looks a little surprised to hear me talk, seeing as I've stayed silent throughout the entire exchange between her and Alice.

"Oh, this is my little princess Ari." My mother smiles fondly at the child in her arms. "Well, actually it's Ariadne. The name's from-"

"Greek mythology," I interrupt, softly, "the daughter of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae of Knossos."

"Why, yes," my mother says, looking surprised. "Are you a fan of Greek Mythology, then?"
"Sort of. My name's Hermione, after-

"The only child of King Menelaus of Sparta and his wife, Helen of Troy." My mother smiles, "... but the gods gave no more children to Helen once she had borne her first and only child, the lovely Hermione, with the beauty of Aphrodite the golden." She quotes, before smiling again. "Wendell-that's my husband, my name's Monica, were thinking of naming Ariadne that. It's a beautiful name-your parents chose well."

"Thank you." I manage to say, and Alice wraps her arm around my waist, sensing I need the comfort.

"We better get going now. Thank you for the directions," she tells my mother, before she steers me away.

"Have a lovely day!" My mother calls after us, before closing the door.

"Are you okay?" Alice asks me, and I make a sort of choked sound that even I can't decipher. Alice reaches up on her tiptoes and gently kisses me, carding her hands through my hair. "You'll be okay," she whispers, "I love you- more then anything in the world. You have a family that loves you, adores you. You'll be okay."

"I," I pause, swallowing past the lump in my throat, "I know."

"Good," Alice says, before she grins, "now, I researched earlier and found three excellent- though questionably legal- beaches a reasonable distance from here that I think we should check out."

"Questionably legal? How come they're questionably legal?" I ask. Alice's expression turns decidedly wicked, and my eyes widen, before I groan. "They're naturalist beaches, aren't they?"

"Nudism, we all practice it." Alice winks, "some of us just wear clothes on top."

"Alice," I state, "You are two bludgers, a quaffle and a stadium of fans short of a full Quidditch match."
With finding my parents ticked off the list, we leave Australia, making our way back to Forks, via Portkey. As we walk into the mansion, Jacob, who is playing with Elizabeth on the floor, points at us. "Look Lizzie- Auntie Hermy and Auntie Alice are back!" He tells her. I choke on the awful abbreviation of my name and shoot Jacob a death glare.

"If I ever, ever hear that god awful version of my name again, I will slip you a potion that will permanently alter your anatomy mutt!" I growled. Jacob gulps slightly, and beside me Alice snickers.

"How did it go?" Bella asks, from her position on the couch, curled up on Edward's lap.

"Wendell and Monica are alive and well." I answer her. She raises an eyebrow.

"That's it?"

"That and we briefly visited a naturalist beach." Alice says, smugly. I try to elbow her, but she darts out of range, giggling.

"Ooh-lala!" Bella laughs. I growl under my breath, and stalk out of the room, into the kitchen, where George appears to be cooking something. I idly watched the pans and food flying through the air, eggs in a conga line waiting to be fried and sausages frolicking in a buttered skillet for a few moments, before turning to face George.

"May I ask why?"

"You may." He grins. I wait a few seconds, before realizing what he's done. I sigh.

"Why?"

"I'm going on a date." He informs me. My eyes widen drastically.
"A date?"

"Yes, a date." He confirms, solemnly. "A picnic breakfast, with a beautiful woman."

"Are you... joking?" I ask, uncertainly. He makes a huffing noise.

"No, I'm not joking. I... met someone."

"Here in Forks?"

"I was visiting the Church," George said, looking a touch on the sheepish side, "I... met her there. Her dad's the preacher."

"Wait, Angela?" This is Bella, who's suddenly standing beside me, her vampire hearing having easily picked up our conversation. "Angela Weber? You're going on a date with Angela Weber?"

"Yes, that’s her." George smiles. “Angela… her name means ‘angel’. Very fitting, I believe.” Bella looks astonished.

"Wow..."

"It's almost insulting that you sound that amazed." George points out, and if Bella could blush she would be.

"I- I didn't mean like that, it's the whole two worlds colliding thing-" she stammers, until George interrupts.

"It's okay, Bella," he says, "I was joking."

"Oh." She says, still looking embarrassed. "Well, I'm going to... bye." We both watch as she disappears back into the living room.
"Charlie's coming around later today," George remarks, as he turns back to his picnic preparations. I stiffen slightly. "You should talk to him."

"I know."

- 

I wait until the end of Charlie's visit with Elizabeth, to bring the topic up. He seems surprised when I ask him for a few minutes, as he stands up, ready to leave, but is more than willing to acquiesce. Bella, sensing my wish for privacy, picks up Elizabeth and, after giving Charlie a kiss on the cheek, walks out of the living room.

I concentrate, hard, on the tingling feeling of my magic, and murmur a privacy spell, quiet and quick enough so that Charlie doesn't hear or notice. I feel a thrill of victory rush through me when the magic leaves my body, and settles around the room like a blanket. That thrill, however, vanishes, replaced by nerves when Charlie turns to me.

"You said there's something you wanted to tell me?" He says, looking a bit puzzled. I nod, taking a deep, albeit unnecessary breath.

"Charlie, I... well, there's no easy way to say this but I'm... I'm a witch." There's a long stretch of silence, in which Charlie just stares at me, and I wish that I'd found a better way to break the news.

"You're a witch." He finally repeats, completely flabbergasted. "By witch, you mean...."

"I don't sacrifice animals under the light of a full moon, or anything." I say, biting my lip slightly as I watch the emotions flash across Charlie's face.

"But you can do magic?" Charlie says, before shaking his head. "Jesus," he mumbled, dragging a hand through his hair, a mannerism I felt oddly proud that he'd passed on to me. "Next you'll be telling me there'll be flying pigs!"

I decided now was not the best time to mention lacreethas, the tiny, winged, wild swines which inhabited the treetops in the Amazonian rainforest.
There's a long pause where neither of us say anything. Charlie just sits there looking... well, mind blown, and I watch him, in apprehension. I'm the one who breaks the silence. "Charlie, I can't take this anymore; talk," I plead, "Yell, scream, tell me to go away, just say something, anything."

"I don't know what you want me to say, Hermione." He says, quietly, "In these last three months, my entire outlook on the world has been changed. I've learned one of my kids has been changed into something not human and I can't know what because knowing would put my life in danger, one is a witch, I have a grandchild who isn't human and my best friend has a son who turns into a damn wolf and he knew about this crazy world and never told me; how do you think I feel?"

"I think you're scared, pissed, worried, and completely out of your depths." I say, softly. "I think you would give anything to have this not be real. Charlie... can you... can you handle this?"

Charlie sighs and stands up. "I don't know, Hermione... I- I'm going for a walk."

I watch him leave, my heart sinking. Alice appears in the room and wraps her arms around me. "It's going to be okay, dear heart." She says, softly. "He's coming back. He just needs to process." I nod, closing my eyes and breathing in Alice's scent.

"Okay." I whisper, not knowing what else to say, just knowing that the space in my chest where my heart once beat is aching unbearably.

He doesn't stay away for as long as I thought he would, returning to the mansion before a half hour passes. I watch him nervously, and am surprised when he crosses the room, so he's standing right before me, then wraps his arms around me, hugging me tight.

"So you... you're okay with it... right?" I ask, hesitantly, feeling vulnerable. He gives me a tired sort of smile.

"I'm... I don't know what to think about all this, but I'll never stop being here for you. For either of my girls."

"Thank you... dad." I said, quietly, ignoring Alice's whispered 'I told you so'. 
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE:

Bella’s POV:

There was only one shadow over the happiness that was my new life as a vampire, one distasteful task I had to complete. I needed to take a trip to Volterra. And it had to be a solo trip.

This was the only argument that Edward and I had gotten in since I'd become a vampire. The main point of contention was the "solo" part. But the facts were what they were, and my plan was the only one that made rational sense. I had to go see the Volturi.

Even freed from old nightmares, from any dreams at all, it was impossible to forget the Volturi. Nor did they leave us without reminders.

The Volturi needed to see that I was immortal, that the Cullens had been obedient to the Volturi's orders, and they needed to see this soon. They could not be allowed near Forks. There was only one way to keep our life here safe.

The only way to keep Elizabeth hidden, a secret from those monsters. Because she needed to be—the Volturi must never find out about her.

Even in the short time I'd known Aro, I'd been able to see that he was a collector— and his most prized treasures were his living pieces. He coveted beauty, talent, and rarity in his immortal followers more than any jewel locked in his vaults. It was unfortunate enough that he'd begun to covet Alice's, Edward's and my own abilities. I would give him no more reason to be jealous of Carlisle's family. Elizabeth was beautiful and gifted and unique, one of the very few existing of her kind. He could not be allowed to see her.

Alice did not see any trouble with my trip, but she was worried by the indistinct quality of her visions. She said they were sometimes similarly hazy when there were outside decisions that might conflict but that had not been solidly resolved. This uncertainty made Edward, already hesitant,
extremely opposed to what I had to do. He wanted to come with me as far as my connection in London, but I wouldn't leave Elizabeth without both her parents. Carlisle was coming instead.

We bought the tickets for Italy the day after Elizabeth turned three months. I planned for it to be a very short trip, so I hadn't told Charlie about it.

I was confident that everything would be fine, that the ordeal would soon be over and I could concentrate on my happily ever after. And then everything came toppling down.

I’d been hunting with Elizabeth and Jacob, who I’d allowed to accompany us in order to encourage my competitive daughter- Elizabeth wasn’t a fan of hunting, or animal blood in general. I’d spotted Irina, the third Denali sister, a stranger to me, yet upon spotting her in the distance, those golden eyes gave away her identity. Before I could say anything, do anything, though, Irina had fled.

Carlisle and Edward had not been able to catch up with her before her trail disappeared into the ocean.

They'd swum to the other bank to see if her trail had picked up in a straight line, but there was no trace of her for miles in either direction on the eastern shore.

I hadn’t been able to help but feel it was all my fault. She had come, as Alice had Seen, to make peace with the Cullens, only to be angered by my camaraderie with Jacob. I wished I'd noticed her earlier, before Jacob had phased. I wished we'd gone hunting somewhere else.

There wasn't much to be done. Carlisle had called Tanya with the disappointing news. Tanya and Kate hadn't seen Irina since they'd decided to come to my wedding, and they were distraught that Irina had come so close and yet not returned home; it wasn't easy for them to lose their sister, however temporary the separation might be. I wondered if this brought back hard memories of losing their mother so many centuries ago.

Sasha, who had been a mother to the three ‘sisters’, the same way Esme was for the Cullens, had been killed by the Volturi for creating an immortal child, one of the biggest sins a vampire could commit, punishable by death. The three sisters had only been spared because of their ignorance to the vampire child’s existence. Sasha had burnt in front of the three with the child in her arms, a little toddler. To this day, the sisters didn’t know who the little boy was and why he was so important to their mother.
Alice had been able to catch a few glimpses of Irina's immediate future, but nothing too concrete. She wasn't going back to Denali, as far as Alice could tell. The picture was hazy. All Alice could see was that Irina was visibly upset; she wandered in the snow-swathed wilderness—to the north? To the east?—with a devastated expression. She made no decisions for a new course beyond her directionless grieving.

Days had passed and, though of course I forgot nothing, Irina and her pain moved to the back of my mind, with the more important fact that I would leave for Italy in just a few days taking up a majority of my thoughts, and the thoughts of my family.

Of course, it didn’t stay like that for long.

Hermione was in England, attending a funeral, when Alice had the vision. The body of one of her Hogwarts friends, a Susan Bones who had been missing for over a year and a half, had been located during a raid on one of Voldemort’s old hideouts. She would be returning early tomorrow. Alice, out of respect for the wishes that only close friends attend—Susan had no family left—had agreed not to go.

Alice was unnecessarily tidying the already immaculate living room at the time, impatient for Hermione's return. I could see from the way her face fluctuated—aware, then blank, then aware again—that she was searching the future. I assumed she was trying to see through the blind spots that Jacob, Hermione and Elizabeth made in her visions as to how my trip to Italy would go until Edward said, "Let it go, Alice; she's not our concern," and I realized Alice must have been worrying about Irina again.

Alice stuck her tongue out at Edward and then lifted one crystal vase that was filled with white and red roses and turned toward the kitchen. There was just the barest hint of wilt to one of the white flowers, but Alice seemed intent on utter perfection as a distraction.

Staring at Elizabeth again, I didn't see it when the vase slipped from Alice's fingers. I only heard the whoosh of the air whistling past the crystal, and my eyes flickered up in time to see the vase shatter into ten thousand diamond shards against the edge of the kitchen's marble floor.

We were perfectly still as the fragmented crystal bounced and skittered in every direction with an unmusical tinkling, all eyes on Alice's back.

My first illogical thought was that Alice was playing some joke on us. Because there was no way that Alice could have dropped the vase by accident I could have darted across the room to catch the vase in plenty of time myself, if I hadn't assumed she would get it. And how would it fall through
her fingers in the first place? Her perfectly sure fingers...

I had never seen a vampire drop anything by accident. Ever.

And then Alice was facing us, twisting in a move so fast it didn't exist.

Her eyes were halfway here and halfway locked on the future, wide, staring, filling her thin face till they seemed to overflow it. Looking into her eyes was like looking out of a grave from the inside; I was buried in the terror and despair and agony of her gaze.

I heard Edward gasp; it was a broken, half-choked sound.

"What?" Emmett growled as he moved into my peripheral vision, his teeth bared while his eyes darted toward the window, anticipating an attack. Rose had darted to her feet, Teddy cradled protectively in her arms, a ferocious look on her face. “What did you see?”

There was only silence from Esme, Carlisle, Jasper and Maggie, who were frozen just as I was.

"What is it?" Emmett demanded, again, voice harsh in his upset.

"They're coming for us," Alice and Edward whispered together, perfectly synchronized. "All of them."

Silence.

For once, I was the quickest to understand— because something in their words triggered my own vision.

It was only the distant memory of a dream— faint, transparent, indistinct as if I were peering through thick gauze.... In my head, I saw a line of black advancing on me, the ghost of my half-forgotten human nightmare. I could not see the glint of their ruby eyes in the shrouded image, or the shine of their sharp wet teeth, but I knew where the gleam should be....
Stronger than the memory of the sight came the memory of the feel— the wrenching need to protect the precious thing behind me.

I wanted to snatch Elizabeth up into my arms, to hide her behind my skin and hair, to make her invisible. But I couldn't even turn to look at her. I felt not like stone but ice. For the first time since I'd been reborn a vampire, I felt cold.

I barely heard the confirmation of my fears. I didn't need it. I already knew.

"The Volturi," Alice moaned.

"All of them," Edward groaned at the same time.

"Why?" Alice whispered to herself. "How?"

"When?" Edward whispered.

"Why?" Maggie echoed.

"When?" Jasper repeated in a voice like splintering ice.

Alice's eyes didn't blink, but it was as if a veil covered them; they became perfectly blank. Only her mouth held on to her expression of horror.

"Not long," she and Edward said together. Then she spoke alone. "There's snow on the forest, snow on the town. Little more than a month."

"Why?" Carlisle was the one to ask this time.

Esme answered. "They must have a reason. Maybe to see..."
"This isn't about Bella," Alice said hollowly. "They're all coming— Aro, Caius, Marcus, every member of the guard, even the wives."

"The wives never leave the tower," Jasper contradicted her in a flat voice. "Never. Not during the Southern Rebellion. Not when the Romanians tried to overthrow them. Not even when they were hunting the immortal children. Never."

"They're coming now," Edward whispered.

"But why?" Carlisle said again. "We've done nothing! And if we had, what could we possibly do that would bring the entire guard?"

"There are so many of us," Edward answered dully. "They must want to make sure that..." He didn't finish.

"That doesn't answer the crucial question! Why?" Maggie demanded, frustrated.

I felt I knew the answer to the question, and yet at the same time I didn't. Elizabeth was the reason why, I was sure. Somehow I'd known from the very beginning that they would come for her. My subconscious had warned me before I'd known I was carrying her. It felt oddly expected now. As if I'd somehow always known that the Volturi would come to take my happiness from me.

But that still didn't answer the question.

"Go back, Alice," Edward pleaded. "Look for the trigger. Search." Alice shook her head slowly, her shoulders sagging. "It came out of nowhere, Edward. I wasn't looking for them, or even for us. I was just looking for Irina. She wasn't where I expected her to be...." Alice trailed off, her eyes drifting again. She stared at nothing for a long second.

And then her head jerked up, her eyes hard as flint. I heard Edward catch his breath.

"She decided to go to them," Alice said. "Irina decided to go to the Volturi. And then they will decide....."
“It's as if they're waiting for her. Like their decision was already made, and just waiting on her…”

It was silent again as we digested this. What would Irina tell the Volturi that would result in Alice's appalling vision?

"Can we stop her?” Maggie asked.

"There's no way. She's almost there. Even portkeys wouldn't reach her fast enough." Alice whispered.

"What is she doing?” Carlisle was asking, but I wasn't paying attention to the discussion now. All my focus was on the picture that was painstakingly coming together in my head.

I pictured the day I’d spotted Irina, pictured her poised on the cliff, watching. What had she seen? A vampire and a wolf-shifter who were best friends. I'd been focused on that image, one that would obviously explain her reaction. But that was not all that she'd seen.

She'd also seen a child. An exquisitely beautiful child, showing off in the falling snow, clearly more than human...

Irina... the orphaned sisters... Carlisle had said that losing their mother to the Volturi's justice had made Tanya, Kate, and Irina purists when it came to the law.

Just half a minute ago, Jasper had said the words himself: Not even when they were hunting the immortal children.... The immortal children— the unmentionable bane, the appalling taboo...

With Irina's past, how could she apply any other reading to what she'd seen that day in the narrow field?

She had not been close enough to hear Elizabeth's heart, to feel the heat radiating from her body.

Elizabeth's rosy cheeks could have been a trick on our part for all she knew.
After all, the Cullens were in league with werewolves. From Irina's point of view, maybe this meant nothing was beyond us....

Irina, wringing her hands in the snowy wilderness— not mourning Laurent, after all, but knowing it was her duty to turn the Cullens in, knowing what would happen to them if she did. Apparently her conscience had won out over the centuries of friendship.

And the Volturi's response to this kind of infraction was so automatic, it was already decided.

I turned and draped myself over Elizabeth’s sleeping body, covering her with my hair, burying my face in her curls.

"Think of what she saw that afternoon," I said in a low voice, interrupting whatever Emmett was beginning to say. "To someone who'd lost a mother because of the immortal children, what would Elizabeth look like?"

Everything was silent again as the others caught up to where I was already.


I felt Edward kneel beside me, wrap his arms over us both.

"But she's wrong," I went on. "Elizabeth isn't like those other children. They were frozen, but she grows so much every day. They were out of control, but she never hurts Charlie or Sue or even shows them things that would upset them. She can control herself. She's already smarter than most adults. There would be no reason…" I babbled on, waiting for someone to exhale with relief, waiting for the icy tension in the room to relax as they realized I was right. The room just seemed to get colder. Eventually my small voice trailed off into silence.

No one spoke for a long time.

Then Edward whispered into my hair. "It's not the kind of crime they hold a trial for, love," he said quietly. "Aro's seen Irina's proof in her thoughts. They come to destroy, not to be reasoned with."
"But they're wrong," I said stubbornly.

"They won't wait for us to show them that." His voice was still quiet, gentle, velvet... and yet the pain and desolation in the sound was unavoidable.

His voice was like Alice's eyes before— like the inside of a tomb.

"What can we do?" I demanded.

“Hermione.” Alice said, instantly, her voice rising in her hysteria with each word, each desperate pleading. “She- she can think of something! She will! She has to!”

“Ring her.” That was Rosalie. Alice’s cell was out of her pocket and in her hands in half a second, her fingers dancing over the keyboard. It went straight to voicemail.

“Hermione, you need to get home as soon as you hear this- I’m at the mansion, it’s an emergency!” Alice’s voice was thick with fear and misery.

“She must still be at the funeral,” Esme said, softly.

“I’ve got an idea,” Maggie said, suddenly. “Witnesses. Like Siobhan and Liam.”

“Would that work?” Edward asked bleakly, as the rest of us looked confused.

“Our friends, allies... we can call them all. If they'd just stand beside us, just long enough to make the Volturi hesitate. Bella's right, after all. If we could force them to stop and listen. Though that might take away any reason for a fight..."

"Yes," Esme said eagerly. "That makes sense. All we need is for the Volturi to pause for one moment. Just long enough to listen.”

“We’d need quite a show of witnesses,” Rosalie said harshly, her voice brittle as glass.
Esme nodded in agreement, as if she hadn't heard the sarcasm in Rosalie's tone. "We can ask that much of our friends," she said, softly, “not to fight, not to die, just to witness."

"We'd do it for them," Emmett said.

"We'll have to ask them just right," Alice murmured. I looked to see her eyes were a dark void again.

"They'll have to be shown very carefully."

"Shown?" Jasper asked.

Alice and Edward both looked down at Elizabeth. Then Alice's eyes glazed over.


"What about Peter and Charlotte?" Jasper asked half fearfully, as if he hoped the answer was no, and his old brother could be spared from the coming carnage.

"Maybe."

"The Amazons?" Carlisle asked. "Kachiri, Zafrina, and Senna?" Alice seemed too deep into her vision to answer at first; finally she shuddered, and her eyes flickered back to the present.

"Jacob's almost here," she said. Rosalie took a step toward the front door.

"I'll deal with—"

"No, let him come," Alice said softly. We were all silent as the door swung open, and Jacob loped in.
“What’s going on?” he asked. No one answered; we all just stared.

Jacob shook the wet from his hair and pulled his arms through the sleeves of his t-shirt, his eyes on Elizabeth. "Hey, Bells! I thought you guys would've gone home by now…” He looked up to me finally, blinked, and then stared. I watched his expression as the room's atmosphere finally touched him. He glanced down, eyes wide, at the wet spot on the floor, the scattered roses, the fragments of crystal. His fingers quivered.

"What?” he asked flatly. "What happened?” I couldn't think where to begin. No one else found the words, either.

Jacob crossed the room in three long strides and dropped to his knees beside Elizabeth and me. I could feel the heat shaking off his body as tremors rolled down his arms to his shaking hands.

"Is she okay?” he demanded, touching her forehead, tilting his head as he listened to her heart. "Don't mess with me, Bella, please!"

"Nothing's wrong with Elizabeth,” I choked out, the words breaking in strange places.

"Then who?"

"All of us, Jacob," I whispered. And it was there in my voice, too—the sound of the inside of a grave.

"It's over. The Volturi… they've sentenced us all to die."

“No.” We all turned to the doorway, where Hermione now stood, all wild hair, pale skin and glittering eyes narrowed into thin slits. She looked like a goddess of destruction and vengeance, wearing her lethality like a queen wore majesty- as if it was a birthright and nothing more.

Her gaze held none of the loving warmth she gave to those around her, but was replaced with the penetrating look of a soldier who had lived through an atrocity. “We’re not going to die- and if they try to destroy us, we will destroy them.”
We were all gathered around the mahogany table; the Cullens, the wolves, Harry, George, Bill and Fleur. The atmosphere was grim with the threat hovering above us.

The Volturi... vampire royalty. Watched closely by the Italian Ministry. Tolerated only because they kept the other vampires in line.

"The witnesses are a good idea," I said, my mind racing, making and disregarding plans in the span of several seconds. We’ll need to show that she’s growing.”

“Aro can read our minds,” offers Carlisle, “that will tell him everything he’ll need to know.”

“No,” I said immediately, “absolutely not.”

“Why not?” Edward asks, frowning.”

"Zee Volturi cannot find out about zee Wizarding World," Fleur spoke up, her eyes narrowed, "Zis must not 'appen."

Harry, Bill and I all shuddered at the thought.

“Well what do we do?” Asked Edward. “He’ll want to see the memories of Elizabeth, of the pregnancy, the birth-“
“Memory charms?” Suggests Harry.

“No- there’s too much we’d have to wipe.” Bill said, shaking his head. “And there’s no reversal.”

"The witnesses,” Alice speaks up, suddenly, "Tanya, maybe, or Kate. We know too much to let Aro read us, but what if he reads one of them."

"That... that sounds safer." Harry nodded.

"What if the proof that Elizabeth is growing, that she can control herself, isn't enough, though?" Jasper spoke up, grim and pragmatic. "Alec's Gift... do we know if Occlumency can protect us from that? The risk if it can't is..." He didn't need to finish his sentence.

Alec... while Jane made a person feel the worst pain imaginable, Alec made a person feel nothing. Complete sensory deprivation. He can selectively or completely block the senses of many people at the same time, allowing the Volturi to easily execute their opponents.

There was complete silence again, as everyone traded helpless looks.

"Bella's Gift," Jacob said, suddenly. "What if she can cover more people with it- that would protect us, right?"

"It... it could," Edward nodded, deep in thought.

“I don’t want my daughter there,” Bella says, suddenly, her face bone-white. “I don’t want her anywhere near those monsters.”

“Bella, my love, I don’t see how we can keep her away.” Edward says, gently.

“What about- what about polyjuice?” Bella spins around to face me, crimson irises wide and pleading. “They don’t know about you, Hermione- could you disguise yourself as Elizabeth?”
“I don’t know if polyjuice will work on her anymore.” Interjects Bill.

“But glamours will,” Harry says, slowly. “And we can make Elizabeth grow even faster if we use Hermione in her place- gradually making her older, so by the time the Volturi arrive she looks at least ten or eleven.”

“So we can keep her away from the fight?” Bella asks, relief clear on her perfect features.

“We weell get ‘er out of zee country. Take ‘er to England and put ‘er behind strong wards.” Fleur assures Bella.

"My parents would be happy to look after her," George adds.

"Rose, Emmett; Teddy will need to be kept away- I think we should send him to England,” I tell them. "And..." I hesitate for a moment, "and one of you needs to go with him. He's lost so many people, he can't lose any more.” Emmett and Rosalie shared one long look before Rosalie nodded.

"I'll stay with my son." She said, softly.

Everything was moving quickly, and looking across at my sister I could see that she seemed swept up by the rapidly forming plans.

But there was a problem, a flaw in our plan, in our reasoning, one which I wanted to point out, yet at the same time desperately didn't want to, in the wild hope that it wasn't true, it wasn't real.

Because if this wasn't really about Elizabeth, if my screaming instincts are true, and Elizabeth is just an excuse... how can we save ourselves? How can this end in anything other then an all out battle? A battle that not everyone would survive?

- 

While Leah and Seth went to talk to Sam; the Cullens started contacting their various 'friends', while Fleur and I worked on my glamour. An illusion wouldn't work, not with the keenness of a vampire's eyesight- the distortion created would be far too easy to see through. Instead, Fleur had to
painstakingly transfigure my features, Elizabeth sitting beside me, posing and giggling.

We kept my eyes, but subtly changed my bone structure, giving me the same higher cheekbones that both Elizabeth and Edward shared, as well as turning my chestnut curls bronze.

The final touch was to make me appear younger. It wasn't physically possible to change my height, even with magic, though, so instead Fleur attached a strong compulsion charm, interwoven with a confundus charm, to make anyone looking at me see me as shorter.

"I weell 'ave to reapply zee charms every few days," she said, "but zis weell do."

Alice was pacing around restlessly, looking frustrated, running her hands through her hair. "I can't See anything!" she said, "I need- I need to get away!" I pull our house key out of my pocket, mutter 'portus' and throw it to her. She catches it, and gives me a questioning look.

"That will take you to our house," I tell her, and she gives me a thankful look, before activating the Portkey and disappearing.

"When do I leave?" Rosalie asks. Rosalie looks like a mess- a hot mess, but a mess. She's holding Teddy to her, and her eyes are swimming with tears she can't shed as she leans into Emmett, who has his arm wrapped around her waist.

"Before the Denalis get here," Carlisle says, quietly, "I can't imagine Teddy will be well accepted."

Yes, a human baby being raised by vampires wouldn't be looked on positively by the rule-abiding Denali coven.

"Emmett should go with you, at least until we need him," Harry says, and Rosalie and Emmett trade looks, before both of them nodding as one.

"I'll go pack now," Rosalie says, handing Teddy to Emmett, then flitting up the stairs. Elizabeth tugs on my cloak.

"You look like me," she says, and I bend down and scoop her up.
"I do look like you," I agree. She giggles.

"You're dressed funny, though." I blink.

"Oh. Right." I say, looking down at the black dress-robe I'm wearing, the traditional robe made of heavy black material, and the black, silver-clasped cloak. "I should probably go change." I say, creating myself a portkey. I still can't apparate, but wandless magic seems to be coming to me with more ease than I thought.

I place Elizabeth back on the ground, and activate my Portkey. The sensation of spinning through space is even more nauseating as a vampire than it was as a human.

I land in the bedroom I share with my wife, and change quickly out of my robes and cloak, into a soft pink, fluffy dress. It's not my style, but seeing as I'm going with the whole 'little girl' look, it's suitable.

"You look adorable," Alice says, as she enters the room. I pull a face.

"I feel positively daft," I admit. She laughs and kisses my cheek.

"I can't kiss you on the mouth while you look like that," she says, seeing my questioning look. I blanch and nod.

"Oh Merlin, no!"

"What are we going to do about your British accent?" Alice asks.

"I can speak with an American accent." I tell her, my accent now clearly American. Alice's eyes are wide and I laugh. "Does that really surprise you, treasure? After all, I've already learnt four new languages after being Turned, changing my accent was no trouble at all- I just prefer my English accent."
Alice huffed, but her eyes glazed over before she could reply, and when they cleared again she was frowning.

"The Denalis should be here in three hours and forty seven minutes." She said. “We should return."

We Portkey back to the Cullens, and send all the humans, Harry, Fleur, George and Bill, away, and Rosalie and Emmett say their goodbyes.

A sudden realization hits me then, one that makes me feel sick, and I clear my throat, causing the attention of the room to turn to me.

"We... Alice needs to go." I say, ignoring the way my heart aches at the sound of that.

"What?" Everyone in the room looks at me.

"The Denalis know about Alice having a mate. What will they think if she's here, but her mate isn't? Besides," I forge on, determinedly, "Alice can't See properly with all the shape-shifters, witches and wizards. It makes sense for her to be away from us all. She can help better that way."

"Hermione-" Alice says, looking frightened, flitting over to grasp my hands in her own.

"Alice, I hate this, I truly do, but it makes sense." I tell her.

"It does make sense," Harry said, quietly.

"No!" Alice protested, shaking her head.

"It's not like we won't see each other," I tell her, strongly, "we can see each other every night. But the Denalis can't see you, they have to think you and your mate are gone. That way when Aro reads one of them, he won't be suspicious."

"I hate this!" Alice exploded, "I hate them! Those motherfu-"
"ALICE!" shout Esme, Bella and Rosalie at the same time, Bella's hands clapping over Elizabeth's ears, while Rosalie does the same to Teddy.

"I'm not going to apologize," Alice says, stubbornly. "they are-" seeing the stern look Esme is giving her, Alice rolls her eyes, "Sohn von einem Weibchen!" She says, cursing them in German instead of English.

I wrap my arms around Alice, inhaling the sweet scent of my mate. "I love you." I tell her. She rests her head on my shoulder, burying her face in the crook of my neck.

"I love you too," she says, her voice muffled. We kiss, and then I watch, my heart aching, as she leaves, with Rosalie, Elizabeth and Teddy.
Bella's POV:

The Cullens knew a lot of vampires.

That was a thought that was prevalent in my mind over the passing month. The Denalis, the Romanian Coven, the Mexican Coven, Maggie’s old coven the Irish Coven, the Amazon Coven... It was an uncomfortable feeling, always being in proximity to so many vampires, especially ones that drank human blood.

Stress levels were running high. Edward, Kate and Zafrina- one of the Amazon vampires who had a Gift for creating illusions- were teaching me how to use my shield. We hoped to avoid a confrontation, but we were still going to be prepared.

Hermione had, by now, officially taken over as Elizabeth. Seeing my sister looking so similar to my daughter was both confusing and a touch on the disturbing side, but I thought I was doing an admirable job coping with it.

Elizabeth, along with Rosalie and Teddy, were currently living in England. Elizabeth and Alice were located in Shell Cottage, with Elizabeth being cared for by Fleur and Bill, while Rosalie and Teddy were living in a house bought through money impossible to trace back to the Cullens. Emmett joined them when he could, via Portkey.

Even in the darkness that was currently our life, we'd still managed to find light. Ginny had graduated from Hogwarts, and she and Harry had moved into a house called Grimmauld Place together. Fleur had given birth to her daughter, a baby girl she'd named Victoire- Hermione had been named the godmother. I'd been invited to the naming ceremony, which was just as amazing as Elizabeth's.

The date of the confrontation crept up on us. I wondered if this was how prisoners on death row
felt, this sickly feeling of an unavoidable darkness that was impossible to escape from. More then once I considered asking Hermione to hide us, to take us away, so we wouldn't have to face the monsters, but I didn't want to spend the rest of my eternity running. Who would?

So I stood firm, determined to face the Italian ponces with the courage of a Gryffindor.

The day of the confrontation I wore the necklace Aro sent me around my neck, uncomfortable with how much it felt like a collar, but prepared to do whatever it took.

Whatever it took. For my friends, my family, for the ones I loved, there was nothing I would not do. I would sell my very soul, I would submit myself to an eternity of burning- if they were safe, happy, then any price would be worth it. And so I fastened the thick gold rope around my neck and felt the weight of the enormous diamond nestle into the hollow of my throat.

By the time the sun rose over the field, the scene from Alice's vision was complete. Edward and I held hands as we stared across the glittering white field, and neither of us spoke.

Through the early morning, the others gathered, their eyes bearing mute evidence of their preparations-some light gold, some rich crimson. Soon after we all were together, we could hear the wolves moving in the woods. Jacob was the only wolf currently standing with us.

I stood a few feet behind the front line made up by Carlisle, Edward, Emmett, Tanya, Kate, and Eleazar. Close beside me were Benjamin- a talented Elemental vampire, and Zafrina; it was my job to protect them as long as I was able. Should the meeting escalate into battle, they were our best offensive weapons. If the Volturi were the ones who could not see, even for a few moments, that would change everything.

Hermione was standing beside me, her hand in my own. She looked so perfectly innocent, appearing maybe eleven-years-old, and dressed in frilly, feminine clothes that were deceivingly sturdy, and underneath them she wore armor made of basilisk hide- so did I. So did all the Cullens. An extra line of protection, the scaled hide was thick enough, touch enough, that even deadly vampire teeth would not be able to pierce it.

The basilisk hide armor wasn't the only magical defense we wore. On each of our bodies was a Portkey, that once activated would transport us away, out of reach of the monsters before us. Mass-activated, it would take Hermione using the key-phrase to transport us all- our witnesses had no idea that the homemade, childish talismans the innocent little "Elizabeth" had handed out for "good luck" were anything more then the creations of a small child.
They were our last line of defense—flight.

The witnesses clustered to our left and right, some nearer than others—those who had declared themselves were the closest. I noticed Siobhan rubbing her temples, her eyes closed in concentration; was she humoring Carlisle? Trying to visualize a diplomatic resolution? I knew she and him and joked around about her Gift to will situations into the outcomes she desired. Although I didn't believe it, I hoped that her Gift just maybe could be real.

In the woods behind us, the invisible wolves were still and ready; we could only hear their heavy panting, their beating hearts. The clouds rolled in, diffusing the light so that it could have been morning or afternoon. Edward's eyes tightened as he scrutinized the view, and I was sure he was seeing this exact scene for the second time—the first time being Alice's vision. It would look just the same when the Volturi arrived. We only had minutes or seconds left now. All our family and allies braced themselves. From the forest, the huge russet Alpha wolf came forward to stand at my side.

Without risking a glance behind, Edward reached back to me. I stretched my arm forward so that I could grip his hand. He squeezed my fingers.

Another minute ticked by, and I found myself straining to hear some sound of approach.

And then Edward stiffened and hissed low between his clenched teeth. His eyes focused on the forest due north of where we stood.

We stared where he did, and waited as the last seconds passed.

They were here.

They came with pageantry, with a kind of beauty. They came in a rigid, formal formation. They moved together, but it was not a march; they flowed in perfect synchronicity from the trees—a dark, unbroken shape that seemed to hover a few inches above the white snow, so smooth was the advance. The outer perimeter was gray; the color darkened with each line of bodies until the heart of the formation was deepest black. Every face was cowled, shadowed.

Their progress was slow but deliberate, with no hurry, no tension, no anxiety. It was the pace of the invincible.
By my side, I could almost feel a sort of energy, a tingling, heady rush, rising from Hermione, her chocolate brown eyes fixed on the three figures in the middle.

I couldn't help counting. There were thirty-two of them. Even if you did not count the two drifting, waifish black-cloaked figures in the very back, who I took to be the wives-their protected position suggesting that they would not be involved in the attack-we were still outnumbered.

One vampire in the opposing force did not seem to belong to either party; I recognized Irina as she hesitated in between the two companies, her expression unique among the others. Irina's horrified gaze was locked on Tanya's position in the front line. Edward snarled, a very low but fervent sound.

"Alistair was right," he murmured to Carlisle.

I watched Carlisle glance at Edward questioningly, even as I strained my memory, trying to think what Edward was referring to.

"Alistair was right?" Tanya whispered.

"They-Caius and Aro-come to destroy and acquire," Edward breathed almost silently back; only our side could hear. "They have many layers of strategy already in place. If Irina's accusation had somehow proven to be false, they were committed to find another reason to take offense. But they can see Herm-Elizabeth now, so they are perfectly sanguine about their course. We could still attempt to defend against their other contrived charges, but first they have to stop, to hear the truth about Elizabeth." Then, even lower. "Which they have no intention of doing."

Ah. Alistair's declarations, his accusations, that the Volturi didn't care if we had broken the Rules or not- that all they wanted was to destroy us and claim the leftovers, the Gifted of us. I couldn't bring myself to be surprised that it was true.

The guard didn't stop until the wolves emerged. There were sixteen of them spaced evenly around us-seventeen total, counting Jacob. It was clear from their heights and oversized paws that the newcomers all were very, very young. I supposed I should have foreseen this. With so many vampires encamped in the neighborhood, a werewolf population explosion was inevitable.

The shadowed Volturi faces were still expressionless for the most part. Only two sets of eyes...
betrayed any emotion at all. In the very center, touching hands, Aro and Caius had paused to evaluate, and the entire guard had paused with them, waiting for the order to kill. The two did not look at each other, but it was obvious that they were communicating.

The bodies of the Volturi's witnesses leaned toward us, their eyes fixed furiously on Elizabeth and me, but they stayed near the fringe of the forest, leaving a wide berth between themselves and the Volturi soldiers. Only Irina hovered close behind the Volturi.

Aro's and Caius's clouded red eyes flickered across our line. I read disappointment in Aro's face as his gaze roved over our faces again and again, looking for one that was missing. Chagrin tightened his lips. In that moment, I was nothing but grateful that Hermione had made Alice stay away.

I barely heard Edward and Carlisle's hushed conversation until Carlisle stepped forward, squaring his shoulders and pacing ahead of our defensive line. I hated to see him alone and unprotected. He spread his arms, holding his palms up as if in greeting. "Aro, my old friend. It's been centuries."

The white clearing was dead silent for a long moment. I could feel the tension rolling off Edward as he listened to Aro's assessment of Carlisle's words. The strain mounted as the seconds ticked by. And then Aro stepped forward out of the center of the Volturi formation. The shield, Renata, moved with him as if the tips of her fingers were sewn to his robe. For the first time, the Volturi ranks reacted. A muttered grumble rolled through the line, eyebrows lowered into scowls, lips curled back from teeth. A few of the guard leaned forward into a crouch.

Aro held one hand up toward them. "Peace." He walked just a few paces more, then cocked his head to one side. His milky eyes glinted with curiosity. "Fair words, Carlisle," he breathed in his thin, wispy voice. "They seem out of place, considering the army you've assembled to kill me, and to kill my dear ones."

Carlisle shook his head. "That was never my intent."

Aro's shrewd eyes narrowed. "But how can your intent possibly matter, dear Carlisle, in the face of what you have done?" He frowned, and a shadow of sadness crossed his features—whether it was genuine or not, I could not tell.

"I have not committed the crime you are here to punish me for."

"Then step aside and let us punish those responsible. Truly, Carlisle, nothing would please me
more than to preserve your life today."

"No one has broken the law, Aro. Let me explain."

Before Aro could answer, Caius drifted swiftly forward to Aro's side.

"So many pointless rules, so many unnecessary laws you create for yourself, Carlisle," the ancient hissed. "How is it possible that you defend the breaking of one that truly matters?"

"The law is not broken. If you would listen."

"We see the child, Carlisle," Caius snarled. "Do not treat us as fools."

"She is not an immortal. She is not a vampire. I can easily prove this with just a few moments-" Caius cut him off.

"If she is not one of the forbidden, then why have you massed a battalion to protect her?"

"Witnesses, Caius, just as you have brought." Carlisle gestured to the angry horde at the edge of the woods; some of them growled in response. "Any one of these friends can tell you the truth about the child. Or you could just look at her, Caius. See the flush of human blood in her cheeks."

"Artifice!" Caius snapped. "Where is the informer? Let her come forward!" He craned his neck around until he spotted Irina lingering behind the wives. "You! Come!" Irina stared at him uncomprehendingly, her face like that of someone who has not entirely awakened from a hideous nightmare.

I watched, furious, as Caius degraded her, demanded answers of her. I watched as Aro finally hesitated, as he saw how "Elizabeth" had grown from the memory, now appearing as a ten-year-old child, rather then one of four or five.

"And so we have a mystery on our hands, it seems. It would appear the child has grown. Yet Irina's first memory was clearly that of an immortal child. Curious." Aro said.
"That's exactly what I'm trying to explain," Carlisle said, and from the change in his voice, I could guess at his relief. This was the pause we had pinned all our nebulous hopes on.

But I felt no relief. I waited, almost numb with rage, for the layers of strategy Edward had promised. They weren't planning on letting us live today. But we had weapons they did not.

"I will show you my memories." Tanya spoke, holding out her hand, taking a step forwards.

Aro hesitated for a moment. "I would rather have the explanation from someone more central to the story, my friend. Am I wrong to assume that this breach was not of your making?"

"There was no breach." This was Carlisle again.

"Be that as it may, I will have every facet of the truth." Aro's feathery voice hardened. "And the best way to get that is to have the evidence directly from your talented son." He inclined his head in Edward's direction, and if my heart could beat, it would be racing in my chest. "As the child clings to his newborn mate, I'm assuming Edward is involved." Of course he wanted Edward- he thought that if he knew Edward's mind, he'd hear all our minds, except my own.

This wasn't good. Despite all our planning, we hadn't planned for this situation. Aro was supposed to have read Tanya's mind, not Edward's, Edward's who held the knowledge of a whole new world, a world that the Volturi didn't know existed- couldn't know existed.

Fear, a terrible, terrible fear, gripped my heart as Edward turned to quickly kiss my forehead and "Elizabeth's", not meeting my eyes. Then he strode across the snowy field, clapping Carlisle on the shoulder as he passed. I heard a low whimper from behind me- Esme's terror breaking through.

The red haze I saw around the Volturi army flamed brighter than before, I could not bear to watch Edward cross the empty white space alone. I saw Jane smile as Edward crossed the midpoint in the distance between us, when he was closer to them than he was to us. That smug little smile did it. My fury peaked, higher even than the raging bloodlust I'd felt the moment the wolves had committed to this fight. I could taste madness on my tongue- I felt it flow through me like a tidal wave of pure power. My muscles tightened, and I acted automatically. I threw my shield with all the force in my mind, flung it across the impossible expanse of the field- ten times my best distance-like a javelin. My breath rushed out in a huff with the exertion.
The shield blew out from me in a bubble of sheer energy, a mushroom cloud of liquid steel. It pulsed like a living thing—I could feel it, from the apex to the edges.

There was no recoil to the elastic fabric now; in that instant of raw force, I saw that the backlash I'd felt before was of my own making—I had been clinging to that invisible part of me in self-defense, subconsciously unwilling to let it go. Now I set it free, and my shield exploded a good fifty yards out from me effortlessly, taking only a fraction of my concentration. I could feel it flex like just another muscle, obedient to my will. I pushed it, shaped it to a long, pointed oval. Everything underneath the flexible iron shield was suddenly a part of me—I could feel the life force of everything it covered like points of bright heat, dazzling sparks of light surrounding me. I thrust the shield forward the length of the clearing, and exhaled in relief when I felt Edward's brilliant light within my protection. I held there, contracting this new muscle so that it closely surrounded Edward, a thin but unbreakable sheet between his body and our enemies.

Barely a second had passed. Edward was still walking to Aro. Everything had changed absolutely, but no one had noticed the explosion except for me. A startled laugh burst through my lips. I felt the others glancing at me and saw Jacob's big black eye roll down to stare at me like I'd lost my mind.

Edward stopped a few steps away from Aro, and I realized with some chagrin that though I certainly could, I should not prevent this exchange from happening. It was almost physically painful to do it, but reluctantly I pulled my shield back and left Edward exposed again. The laughing mood had vanished. I focused totally on Edward, ready to shield him instantly if something went wrong.

And then Hermione murmured something, something so soft, even my enhanced hearing couldn't pick it up. For a millisecond Edward seemed to pause, before shaking his head minutely. His whole demeanor seemed to change as his chin came up arrogantly, and he held his hand out to Aro as if he were conferring a great honor.

Aro closed the distance without pause—and really, what did he have to fear? The hulking shadows of the lighter gray cloaks—the brawny fighters like Felix—were but a few yards away. Jane and her burning gift could throw Edward on the ground, writhing in agony. Alec could blind and deafen him before he could take a step in Aro's direction. No one knew that I had the power to stop them, not even Edward.

With an untroubled smile, Aro took Edward's hand. His eyes snapped shut at once, and then his shoulders hunched under the onslaught of information.

Every secret thought, every strategy, every insight—everything Edward had heard in the minds around him during the last month—was now Aro's. And further back—every vision of Alice's, every
quiet moment with our family, every picture in Renesmee's head, every kiss, every touch between Edward and me... All of that was Aro's now, too.

And most importantly, every single thing he knew about the Wizarding World, every tiny and major piece of information, was now cemented in the brain of the ancient vampire.

Hermione was going to be so furious.
Hermione's POV:

Wearing the body of a child felt strange. The complicated glamours woven over me were flawless, perfect, and I would be able to drop them at a moment's notice.

The confrontation seemed to be going our way, as surprising as it sounded. The Volturi had stopped, had listened to what we had to say- our show of force might have aided in that, but whatever worked.

And then Edward started crossing the field- Edward whose mind was filled with forbidden knowledge. Bella tensed beside me, and I had to fight the panic rising inside me. This was not good. Not good at all.

In the end, I could only see one solution.

It wasn't a good solution. In fact, it was a last resort. But the information in Edward's brain was too important to risk.

"Obliviate!" I murmured; quiet enough that not even Bella, whose hand I was clutching onto, would be able to hear. I internally apologized to her, to Edward, for my actions.

Obliviation, I had discovered, after my "mishap" with my parents, was largely... irreversible. The memories I had erased from Edward's mind, so many memories, memories of anything related to magic... well, chances were he would never get them back.

Slytherin and Gryffindor were normally pictured as opposites. But the truth was, they were, in some fundamental ways, quite similar.
Ravenclaws in battle would coolly plan the sacrifice of distant strangers to achieve an important objective, though that cold logic could collapse in the face of sacrificing family instead. Hufflepuffs would sacrifice no one, though it means they sacrifice an objective in its place.

Only Gryffindors and Slytherins were good at sacrificing those they loved. And I did love Edward. Our relationship had started off strained, but I did love him. He made my sister happy, he loved her, he loved my niece, and he even loved me.

This felt like a betrayal, a betrayal of the highest order, but I knew, I knew, that he would understand. And if he didn't...

Well, that was his problem.

Liar, my mind hissed, but I pushed the voice away, concentrated instead on the scene playing out before my eyes.

I knew my spell had been successful when Aro straightened, his eyes flashing open. When he did not turn to me, when instead his expression just remained curious, I knew my spell had worked. Later I would reflect upon the damage, right now I would focus on the present.

Aro seemed amazed, as he described to his "brothers" and the guard the truth of Elizabeth.

And then he asked, "Will you introduce me to your daughter?"

My Occlumency shields sprung into place, and I had to fight to keep my expression child-like, in a mixture of slight fear and curiosity.

Aro responded to Edward's unspoken question, as their hands were still joint. "I think a compromise on this one point is certainly acceptable, under the circumstance. We will meet in the middle." Aro released his hand. Edward turned back toward us, and Aro joined him, throwing one arm casually over Edward's shoulder like they were the best of friends-all the while maintaining contact with Edward's skin. They began to cross the field back to our side. The entire guard fell into step behind them. Aro raised a hand negligently without looking at them. "Hold, my dear ones. Truly, they mean us no harm if we are peaceable." The guard reacted to this more openly than before, with snarls and hisses of protest, but held their position. The vampire clinging to Aro's back, the one Eleazar had told us was a shield- Aro's personal one- whimpered in anxiety.
"Master," she whispered.

"Don't fret, my love," he responded. "All is well."

"Perhaps you should bring a few members of your guard with us," Edward suggested. "It will make them more comfortable." Aro nodded as if this was a wise observation he should have thought of himself. He snapped his fingers twice.

"Felix, Demetri." The two vampires I remembered from the clearing, back after the defeat of Victoria, were at his side instantaneously. The five of them stopped in the middle of the snowy field.

"Bella," Edward called. "Bring Elizabeth... and a few friends." Beside me, Bella took a deep breath. Her body was tight with opposition.

"Jacob? Emmett?" She asked quietly. Both nodded, and Emmett grinned. I almost rolled my eyes at him, but refrained. Together we crossed the field, Bella not letting go of my hand, Emmett and Jacob flanking us. There was a rumble from the guard as they saw Bella's choices- clearly, they did not trust the werewolf. Aro lifted his hand, waving away their protest again.

Felix and Bella traded some light banter, while Aro's eyes didn't leave me for even a millisecond. His milky red eyes were filled with greedy curiosity. A half human, half vampire child would be a jewel in his collection- he wanted 'me'- desperately so.

I was momentarily entertained by Jane's jealousy upon the knowledge of Aro's gift to Bella, the collar-like necklace that had me itching to tear from her neck and throw far, far away, but then I concentrated back on the dangerous vampire before me.

"May I greet your daughter, lovely Bella?" he asked my sister sweetly. Bella walked two slow steps forward, me by her side, and Aro met us, his face beaming. "But she's exquisite," he murmured to her. "So like you and Edward." And then louder, "Hello, Elizabeth."

"Hello, Aro," I answered him formally.
"What is it?" Caius hissed from behind. He seemed infuriated by the need to ask.

"Half mortal, half immortal," Aro announced to him and the rest of the guard without turning his enthralled gaze from me- it made me feel sick. "Conceived so, and carried by this newborn while she was still human."

"Impossible," Caius scoffed.

"Do you think they've fooled me, then, brother?" Aro's expression was greatly amused, but Caius flinched. "Is the heartbeat you hear a trickery as well?" Caius scowled, looking as chagrined as if Aro's gentle questions had been blows. "Calmy and carefully, brother," Aro cautioned, still smiling at me, that hungry, greedy smile. "I know well how you love your justice, but there is no justice in acting against this unique little one for her parentage. And so much to learn, so much to learn! I know you don't have my enthusiasm for collecting histories, but be tolerant with me, brother, as I add a chapter that stuns me with its improbability. We came expecting only justice and the sadness of false friends, but look what we have gained instead! A new, bright knowledge of ourselves, our possibilities." He held out his hand to me in invitation.

Making sure my shields were tightly in place, I gently pressed my fingertips to his. Carefully, ever so carefully, I took care to only show him the memories I wanted to. I showed him memories of my time as "Elizabeth", of genuine fear for the lives of my family, the aching in my heart as I thought of dear, dear Alice, my "aunt"... I showed him what he wanted to see, and then I pulled back, curling into Bella's side.

I hid my amusement when Aro wondered about 'guard dogs' and the wolves unfavorable reaction, then I let Bella tug me after her, back to our line of witnesses as Aro returned to his "brothers" to confer with them.

In hindsight I should have expected that they wouldn't back down. Once they had- and reluctantly in Caius's case- accepted the fact that "I" was not an immortal child, Caius instantly started on the wolves. Edward pointed out that it was impossible for them to be werewolves, seeing as it was the middle of the day, but Caius was still unconvinced.

And then he killed Irina.

It was so sudden. He raised his hand, and in it was a strange metal object, carved and ornate.
This was a signal. The response was so fast that we all stared in stunned disbelief while it happened. Before there was time to react, it was over.

Three of the Volturi soldiers leaped forward, and Irina was completely obscured by their gray cloaks. In the same instant, a horrible metallic screeching ripped through the clearing. Caius slithered into the center of the gray melee, and the shocking squealing sound exploded into a startling upward shower of sparks and tongues of flame. The soldiers leaped back from the sudden inferno, immediately retaking their places in the guard's perfectly straight line.

Caius stood alone beside the blazing remains of Irina, the metal object in his hand still throwing a thick jet of flame into the pyre.

With a small clicking sound, the fire shooting from Caius's hand disappeared. A gasp rippled through the mass of witnesses behind the Volturi. Our side seemed too aghast to make any noise at all.

Caius smiled coldly. "Now she has taken full responsibility for her actions."

I felt anger flare within me, lighting a fire that had no vent. A surge of magic rose, spilling out into the clearing, unnoticed by the Volturi.

"You son of a bitch!" This was Kate; furious, out of control Kate. Both Tanya and Kate tried attacking Caius before I managed to immobilize them with two discrete spells, refusing to remove them until Carlisle and Garrett had talked them down.

And then Aro talked to our witnesses.

His line of questioning became painfully obvious, very, very quickly. He was trying to ascertain that "Elizabeth" was a risk to exposure. I could appreciate the need for secrecy, any witch or wizard- I had just wiped a significant portion of memory from the mind of someone I loved in the name of secrecy. But this... this was out of line.

I could barely hide my disgust as Amun and Kebi fled- I hated cowards. Spineless worms... there was a special place in hell for creatures like them.

I watched Aro talk, watched him monologue, hating the feeling of powerlessness I felt. I could
destroy him in a heartbeat- I knew it. Whichever way this situation went, I would be going home tonight to be with my wife, my mate. The Volturi... the Italian Ministry would be very angry if they were destroyed, but I was a war hero, and the Volturi were "just vampires". There would be nothing they could do to me.

No, the problem was that with the destruction of the Volturi, who would keep the vampires in line?

That was the reason they were still here. That was the reason why they hadn't all been hunted down and destroyed- as awful, as hideous, as they were, they were kept the rest of the vampires docile enough to prevent The Secret from being exposed.

"Only the known is safe," Aro concluded his little speech. "Only the known is tolerable. The unknown is... a vulnerability."

As the three brothers held a silent counsel, around me, different vampires shared their love, their pain. They said goodbye without actually saying goodbye.

And then Bella straightened slightly. "Get ready," she whispered to us all, "it's starting."

"Chelsea is trying to break our bindings," Edward whispered. "But she can't find them. She can't feel us here..." His eyes cut to Bella. "Are you doing that?"

Bella smiled grimly at him. "I am all over this." She said.

I was impressed. Bella's shield had always been impressive, and she had trained hard to use it to cover more people then just herself. But I had no idea just how competent she had become.

It was almost with amusement that I watched the face of the guard- Jane in particular- as their attacks failed. There was panic, there was doubt, and it felt good.

The vote shared by the three brothers was little more then a charade.

Caius spoke with eager haste. "The child is an unknown quantity. There is no reason to allow such a risk to exist. It must be destroyed, along with all who protect it." He smiled in expectation.
Marcus lifted his uncaring eyes, seeming to look through us as he voted. "I see no immediate danger. The child is safe enough for now. We can always reevaluate later. Let us leave in peace."

"I must make the deciding vote, it seems," Aro mused. An expression of faux sadness covered his face. "Unfortunately, my dear friends, I must agree with Caius. The child is unknown, therefore is too much of a risk to allow to live."

Although action exploded on both sides, it was the ever-eager Felix who leapt forwards first, his target the wolves who stood on the outskirts of our group, the least protected, and it was Seth, poor, young Seth, who was closest. It was too late that I noticed the object in Felix's hand, ornate and carved, identical to the one that Caius had held.

It took less then five seconds for Seth’s body to be reduced to ash.

His body burst into flames after one.

He was dead by the third.

Dust by the fifth.

I stared in horror and utter disbelief at the smoking pile of charcoal colored dust that had, moments before, been a living, breathing young man, a teenage boy on the cusp of adulthood.

And rage filled me.

The flimsy barrier I was holding in place to keep back my magic crumpled under the sheer force of my fury, and streams of magic lashed through my body, wild and out of control.

I pointed my arm at the grinning Felix, so confident in his certain victory, so smug in his power. Our eyes met for a millisecond, and I thought, with all my strength and focus 'Incendio! Incendio! INCENDIO!'
What started as a simple spell, a curse, ended in a wild, out of control explosion of anger, a spinning, raging sphere of aggravated magic that I could just barely control. In a moment that seemed to stretch on to eternity, everyone just stared. I had only moments to act.

And then the world ended.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

CHAPTER THIRY-NINE:

Bella’s POV:

The Apocalypse, Armageddon, Judgment Day, Ragnarok, whatever one wished to call it, it felt like the end of the world to me. Dark, putrid, rotting magic filled the clearing and it felt like every inch of my skin was burning and freezing and melting, all at the same time. I think I might have been biting my own tongue to keep from screaming, but I couldn't be sure- it was just one small feeling among a massive sensory overload.

Eventually, the darkness in front of my eyes faded and the screaming pain that wracked my body and soul died down. I pushed myself up to my hands and knees, wondering just when I'd fallen face down in the snow. Not that there was any snow left. There wasn't even the grass under the snow anymore.

As I looked around, I realized that everything had been scorched. What was once a snow-covered clearing was now a stretch of bare, blackened dirt. Bare, except for the vampires all either crouched down or curled down on either side. Felix was dead, nothing but ash, and every member of the Volturi had been driven to their knees.

Hermione was the only one still standing. Her “Elizabeth” glamour had fallen away, leaving her tall and proud. Her hair was whipping around her face, and her chocolate brown eyes were tinted red- not the crimson, burgundy red of a blood-drinking vampire, rather a glowing ruby red, her pupils slit like those of a cat. Dark magic.

Her face was completely expressionless: a sharp, blank mask seemingly carved out of bleached bone. Even her feral eyes were not eyes at all, but inlaid glass. And then her face twisted into an almost sinister smile.

When she spoke, her voice was strange, like it wasn't her voice at all. “You are nothing,” she said, and her voice was calm, like they weren’t even worth her anger.

Her terrible, terrible eyes swept over them, over the guard, over the three brothers, before resting
on Caius. “You are a coward.” She said, and she extended a hand towards him.

Nobody moved as he burst into flames, his screams echoing through the field, a terrible cacophony of endless agony and terrible horror tinged with traces of disbelief.

It was Aro who broke the silence. “You… you are not Elizabeth.” He barely whispered.

Hermione laughed. “No,” she agreed with him, once the chiming sound ended. “I’m not.”

“What are you?” he whispered, and the expression on his face was almost reverent as he looked up at her.

“Would it be terribly clichéd of me to say your worst nightmare?” Hermione wondered. Another smile curved her lips, and her gaze turned to Jane. “Jane,” she says. How a single word, a proper name even, could become an insult was a mystery to me. Still, it appeared as if Hermione had mastered the art of insulting people by needing only to say their name- I was impressed.

“If there’s one thing I hate- really, really hate- it’s someone who hurts another person for the hell of it.” She said, conversationally. “Your life was forfeit the moment I witnessed you torture Bree.”

Jane let out a shriek of rage and leapt forwards. She was dead before she even crossed the halfway mark.

I looked up at Hermione, and for the first time, as I looked my sister in the eye, a tendril of fear trickled through me.

This wasn’t my Hermione. This ruthless, cold, icy monster, with gleaming scarlet eyes. The only time I’d ever seen her even slightly like this was when the vampire Riley Biers broke into our house, and she questioned him using the torture spell- the Cruciatius curse.

“What is your plan from here?” whispered Aro. Fear was clear on his face now, along with the reverence, and I wondered when was the last time he’d ever felt fear.

“You’re going to leave.” Hermione told him, simply. “You’re going to leave and you’re never
going to go near us again.”

Edward suddenly twitched beside me, and his eyes flicked away, over my shoulder.

Three vampires entered the clearing from the southwest. One was a face so familiar to me, it could have been my own. Alice, looking rather curious with an undertone of something I couldn’t identify, came to a stop beside Hermione. Two other vampires followed her.

One was a small olive-toned female vampire with a long braid of black hair bobbing against her back. Her deep burgundy eyes flitted nervously around the confrontation before her. And the other was a young man... not quite as fast nor quite as fluid in his run. His skin was an impossible rich, dark brown. His wary eyes flashed across the gathering, and they were the color of warm teak. His hair was black and braided, too, like the woman's, though not as long. He was beautiful.

And he had a heartbeat.

“I see I wasn’t needed here after all,” Alice spoke up, with her musical voice. “This is Huilen and her nephew Nahuel,” she introduced the two newcomers, as if without a care in the world. “Nahuel is another half human, half vampire hybrid. As you can see, there is no risk from him- or any other vampire hybrid. A pity you didn’t wait to see that. If you had, you wouldn’t be in the position you’re in now.” Alice then turned to face my sister, concern flitting over her pixie-like features. “Hermione?” she asked, softly. I answered Alice’s unspoken question for her.

“Seth is dead.” I said, and sheer, unadulterated grief flashed across the small vampire’s face, before she turned back to face the Volturi, fiercely.

“You monsters!” she hissed, “you all deserve to burn!”

“Alice,” I placed a hand on her shoulder, “help Hermione.” Alice shook her head slightly, and turned back to face my twin.

“Hermione, my treasure,” she said, cupping Hermione’s cheeks in her small hands, “come back to me, dear heart. I love you. It’s over.”

“It’s over.” Hermione echoed, before turning her gaze back to the kneeling Volturi- none of them had dared move. “Go.” She ordered them, “go and never return, or next time I will not be so lenient.”
None of them hesitated to flee, except Alec, who lagged behind, venomous eyes fixed on my sister. Aro’s hand closed around Alec’s shoulder, and he squeezed sharply. “We are leaving, Alec,” he said, in a clear order.

Alec’s eyes clearly promised that this wasn’t over, but he retreated with the rest of the Volturi.

Once they were gone, several minutes having passed, I turned to Edward, who was stiff by my side, staring at Hermione with a muted sort of horror.

“What is it?” I asked him. He turned to me, golden eyes bewildered, swimming with traces of fear.

“Bella,” he said, “who is she? Where is Elizabeth?”

“You wiped his memories,” I repeated, for the umpteenth time, as I stared at Hermione with a sort of disbelief.

Elizabeth was curled up on my lap, curious eyes taking us all in. Our witnesses, all of them keeping a wary distance from Hermione, kept coming forwards to look at her, curious to see the actual human-vampire hybrid.

“What else was I supposed to do?” My sister asked, looking at me like I was the unreasonable one, like I was overreacting. I gaped at her wordlessly for a few seconds.

Once the Volturi had retreated, Alice had dragged Hermione away, both of them disappearing in a flare of blue magic, to go do something I had no intention of ever knowing, as I highly expected a bed was involved… well, traditionally a bed was involved- Alice and Hermione didn’t seem to particularly mind where they made love as long as they were making love.

I had gone to England to retrieve Elizabeth, before returning to the Cullen mansion and explaining to Edward the best I could what had happened to him, and that yes- magic was real, yes- my sister was a witch, yes- I had a sister and yes- that sister was Alice’s mate.
After leaving me floundering for over an hour, Hermione and Alice finally appeared, Hermione looking much calmer, her eyes back to their normal chocolate brown, identical to my human ones, identical to those of my daughter, giving me a target for my anger and frustration.

“He can’t remember half of what happened last year!” I finally manage to snarl out at Hermione, who still looks annoyingly nonchalant, though she does seem apologetic.

“We can use a pensieve,” she informed me, as if stating the bloody obvious, like I was the unreasonable one. “Between us all, I think we can give him a fairly good idea of what he missed.”

“Argh!” I throw my hands up in the air, frustrated. Edward places a hand on my shoulder.

“I don’t mind, love,” he tells me, and I look at him considerate, an idea niggling at the back of my mind.

Zafrina and I had gone through a certain exercise, while trying to strengthen my shield, where I pushed the shield away from my mind.

“Can you hop off momma’s lap for a moment?” I ask Elizabeth, who looks at me curious, but does as I ask.

Remembering what Zafrina had taught me, every bit of advice she had given, I put my hands on both sides of Edward’s confused face and closed my eyes in concentration.

I hadn't done very well with this before, but I knew my shield better now. I understood the part that fought against separation from me, the automatic instinct to preserve self above all else.

It still wasn't anywhere near as easy as shielding other people along with myself. I felt the elastic recoil again as my shield fought to protect me. I had to strain to push it entirely away from me; it took all of my focus.

"Bella!” Edward whispered in shock. I knew it was working then, so I concentrated even harder, dredging up the specific memories I'd saved for this moment, letting them flood my mind, and hopefully his as well.
Some of the memories were not clear—dim human memories, seen through weak eyes and heard through weak ears: the first time I'd seen his face... the way it felt when he'd held me in the meadow... the sound of his voice through the darkness of my faltering consciousness when he'd saved me from James... his face as he waited under a canopy of flowers to marry me... every precious moment from the island... his cold hands touching our baby through my skin... And the sharp memories, perfectly recalled: his face when I'd opened my eyes to my new life, to the endless dawn of immortality... that first kiss... that first night...

His lips, suddenly fierce against mine, broke my concentration.

With a gasp, I lost my grip on the struggling weight I was holding away from myself. It snapped back like stressed elastic, protecting my thoughts once again.

"Oops, lost it!" I sighed.

"I heard you," he breathed. "How? How did you do that?"

"Zafrina's idea. We practiced with it a few times." I told him. He was dazed and I smiled. “Let me show you what you’ve forgotten.” I told him, and he smiled back at me, still dazed.

“I’m pretty sure this is much better than a pensieve.” He said, and then he fell silent, once more, watching, listening, appreciating this gift I’d given him.

Trumpets faded into a soft, yearning countermelody. Some kind of high-pitched instrument- flutes, maybe, took up the tune. The entire ensemble continued for another minute, then faded into pianissimo.

It had been three days since the confrontation with the Volturi. Three days in which I spent all of Elizabeth’s waking hours with her, and all of the hours she slept with Edward, letting him watch my memories, re-learn what he’d forgotten.

Until now. The inevitable. Something I’d been dreading, desperately so.
“We’ve all gathered here today,” Billy said, in a quiet voice that was thick with emotion, “to farewell one who left us too soon.” In my peripheral vision I could see Hermione gripping on to Alice like she was some kind of lifeline. Elizabeth’s arms were wrapped around my middle, her face pressed against my stomach. Sue was crying into a black hanky while Charlie supported her. Leah, poor, poor Leah, looked shell-shocked, as if still struggling to process the fact that her baby brother was actually gone.

As well as Hermione, five other witches and wizards were present. Out of them all, Fleur, Harry and George looked the most upset. That didn’t surprise me as they’d all gotten to know Leah’s little brother Seth over this last year.

A dry sob escaped me at the thought. A year. A single year. That’s all I’d truly had with Seth meaning anything outside of just one of the boys Jacob sometimes hung out with. I hadn’t been until Hermione came that I actually got to know the young boy, so vibrant with life.

I listened as Billy, as chief of the tribe, spoke about Seth, about his loyalty, his acceptance and fairness to everybody, no matter who- or what- they were, his kindness and his smile. And the way that when he loved, Seth loved with every part of himself. It felt like my heart was being ripped in half.

As a show of respect for the Quileute’s, out of the Cullens only Alice, myself and, of course, Hermione were present. Teddy was also present, and Leah was clinging to the solemn looking toddler, who although he was too young to realize what was happening, had picked up on the somber atmosphere.

Teddy’s hair was currently a mass of short dark brown curls like Emmett’s, though as he peered at Billy, at all the Quileute’s present, the curls straightened out and turned black, his pale, snowy skin- an imitation of his momma and daddy- darkening to a coppery russet.

I wasn’t worried about his actions- there was no one here who wasn’t aware of the supernatural, and everyone was too wrapped up in their grief to really notice the one small boy Leah was holding onto like a lifeline.

“Erma? Where Sef?”

“He… he’s up in the stars, Teddy.” My sister had choked out.
“Wif mum an’ papa?”

“Yes, with mum and papa.”

“Bu’… bu’ I don’ wan’ him to be in da stars! I wan’ him to come an’ pway wif me an’ my Lee-laa!”

Distracted by the memory, I barely realized Billy had finished speaking until I heard the gasps. Following everyone else’s, I turned my gaze to see a golden phoenix soar through the air. It let out a trill that made my heart ache and, along with the rest of the small gathering, I started following the magnificent bird.

The phoenix, who I guessed to be Harry, judging by the jewel green eyes, and his sudden absence from the small group who had gathered to farewell Seth, led the funeral procession along the path in the forest, to a clearing that had been temporarily transformed by Alice, Esme and Fleur into something out of this world.

Foxgloves and lupines climbed along the paths’ sides, fringed by smaller zinnias and morning glories. Further away, immense rosebushes and hedges stood tall and proud over the rest of the garden, rustling softly in the slight breeze.

The phoenix led us serenely towards the bushes and turned a corner. As we followed, rounding the curve, I heard someone gasp.

Rosebushes climbed all around us. Their flowers were every color imaginable, and even a few that were not: classic reds and sapphire blues and deep twilight purples. Some were frilled, some multicolored, some big and some delicate and small, but the branches were so closely intertwined they all seemed to grow from the same plant, all reaching for the sky, arching over everyone, exhuming their intoxicating scent.

The flowers surrounded a small stone square- no, not a square, more like a gently rounded oval. Moss and tiny, tiny flowers peeked up from between the natural stones. A single pedestal sat in the middle of the oval, and on it a black lacquered urn with traditional Native American designs, swirling in gold and greens and reds. Slightly to the side of the urn was a bouquet of flowers, a small floral garland of gardenias, roses, violets, geraniums, lilies and tansies, bound with a black silk ribbon. Behind the pedestal was a portrait.

My breath caught as I looked at it- it was like someone had just punched me. The captured image had been painted painstakingly by an artist of such immense talent I new it had to be a vampire- no
ordinary human could pay attention to such minuscule details. Seth was smiling his happy, goofy smile at us, his eyes bright and shining with happiness and laughter.

The trumpets were back, as were the flute-like instruments. They repeated their melody, swelling into grandiose heights and finally settling into a wistful, yearning piano. Everyone watched as Sue walked forwards and opened the urn with trembling hands. The ashes floated out, a delicate spiral that, for a handful of tantalizing seconds, seemed to coalesce into an outline of Seth, an arm raised in a wave, a farewell to us all, before disappearing, scattering in the wind.

I recognized this for what it was- the tragic end to this chapter of my life.

But now... now it was time to start something new. As a sobbing Elizabeth grabbed my hand tightly, I steeled my spine and raised my head. Life was unpredictable, but with my family by my side I was ready to begin this new chapter. This new piece of forever.
EPILOGUE:

Hermione's POV:

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

The sun streamed down, attempting to warm us the best it could with its feeble rays, but the heavy, cold air of London overpowered it with ease.

I've missed England.

It's been seventeen years since our confrontation with the Volturi, and twelve years since Alice and I decided we were ready for children.

We have three beautiful daughters, all of whom age at an accelerated rate, much like their cousin Elizabeth, and all of whom are able to survive on a mixed diet of blood and normal food. None of our daughters can use a wand to channel their magic, but I'd been teaching them how to wandlessly use their magic ever since their minds were advanced enough to learn, and I was confident none of them would have a problem managing the Hogwarts curriculum sans a wand.

Psyche, our eldest, is the perfect mixture of Alice and I, with her petite build, dark silky hair, startlingly vivid chocolate brown eyes and snowy white skin. She's as much of a bookworm as I am and as fashion conscious as her momma. She started Hogwarts six years ago, alongside Victoire, James and Leah’s daughter, Nova, and is going into her sixth year.

Minerva, or Minnie as everyone calls her, is starting Hogwarts this year. Minnie is just as tiny as her momma, with long dark brown hair, almost black, and green eyes. Our youngest is Emma Mary, named for both Emma Branden, my wife’s mother, and the name Emma Branden gifted on her firstborn baby daughter, Mary Alice.

Emma Mary's wild mass of curly chestnut hair, matched with her tiny frame and sparkling green
eyes, gives her a rather pixie-like appearance—besides her hair, little Emma Mary is nearly identical to what I imagine my wife looked like as a child, minus the slightly more vampiric features, of course, like the lily-white skin that seemed to glimmer almost in the sunlight, irises just too dazzling to be normal and the fact that the four year old girl didn't look a day younger then seven.

All our girls are witches, like me, and like their momma are Seers, though all in different interpretations of the word.

Psyche's Gift was more traditional in the sense of the word 'Seer'. She dreamed inconstant flashes of images, some familiar and some not, accompanied by an omnipresent whispering. Emma Mary's is less so; she doesn't speak prophecies, she doesn't have prophetic dreams or visions and she can't See the future. However, sometimes, she just knows things. Minnie's Gift, though, is the most unusual of our three- instead of the future, like Psyche, or the present, like Emma Mary, Minnie Sees into the past.

Alice likes to call our daughters the three fates, a reference to my fascination with Greek mythology, a result of being named after the daughter of Helen of Troy. Our eldest, Psyche, was named for Greek mythology too.

Crossing through the gateway of Platform Nine and Three Quarters somehow always feels a bit like I'm returning home. The bustling station, complete with screeching owls, complaining cats, pointed witches hats, old-fashioned robes, and so much more, is jam-packed.

"Do you think the others are here yet?" Minnie asks, nervously

Lily Luna Potter, Harry's youngest, is starting Hogwarts this year too, as well as Ron's youngest daughter Aria Weasley, and Fleur’s son, Louis Weasley.

"I can see red hair over there," Alice says, peering through the crowd on her tiptoes.

"Yes, that's Ron." I confirm. Emma Mary pulls us after her as she makes a beeline towards Ron, his wife Romilda and three children, Roselyn, Hugo and Aria.

"Hi Ron," I greet one of my oldest friends cheerfully, once we're close enough for him to hear.

"Hey Hermione." He greets me back, just as cheerfully.
"We have an announcement," Romilda spoke up. The tips of Ron's ears turned red as he turned to look at his wife, who was looking as stylish as always, this time dressed in a blue rayon dress with a full skirt. She had draped a red floral scarf about her shoulders and pinned a red flower behind her ear.

"You don't have to Milly," he protested weakly, but anyone who knew Ron could tell that he was pleased.

"Hermione, Alice, meet the new recruit of the International Auror Division." Romilda announced proudly, beaming at her husband. A huge smile broke over my face as Alice gasped.

I'd personally had very little to do with the Ministry outside of the occasional butting of heads involved with the creature rights issue- an issue that started, in my opinion, with the use of the adjective 'creature', but Ron had flourished as an Auror.

"Well done Ron!" Alice beamed at my now furiously blushing best friend, and I leaned over to hug Ron tightly.

"I'm proud of you, Ron." I say, softly. "You deserve this."

"Thanks, Hermione," he replies.

"Hermione! Alice!" Harry's voice rises above the bedlam of the platform, and my other best friend hurries over and throws his arms around me. "How's life?" he asks, once he's released me from the stranglehold.

"Same old, same old," I say, with a laugh, "I'm not sure if you heard, but Jacob finally got down on one knee."

Personally, I was surprised it had taken him so long to ask for his imprint's hand in marriage, especially seeing as they'd been dating for what seemed like forever. Bella and Edward hadn't exactly been what you could call 'over the moon' about Elizabeth moving in with Jacob a year ago, but Edward was extremely grateful for the Occlumency walls I put up inside the 'happy couple's' head so he didn't have to witness his daughter shagging the boy who used to chase after her mother, proclaiming his undying love and devotion for her.

Yes, maybe Jacob and I still haven't quite ironed out our issues. We're bound to one day- we do have eons after all, and I have stopped mentally referring to him as the amoebas. Or the
pusillanimous little pip-squeak. Or sorry excuse for a carbon-based life form. Well, mostly so.

“I can’t believe Teddy beat Jacob to it,” laughed Harry, "he and Leah could probably do a joint wedding with those two. Though Rose would probably try marrying him to Elizabeth instead.”

“Both her son and her niece ending up with shifters… poor Rose.” Alice laughs.

The train let out a loud whistle, and I kneel down so I can hug Psyche and Minnie goodbye. "Write to us lots," I tell them, sternly.

“Cross my heart.” Psyche smiles.

"I promise, mum," Minnie vows.

"And don't forget to have fun." Alice adds, as she gives our daughter a hug.

"We will," Psyche tells my beautiful, lovely mate, with a laugh. Minnie just looks anxious.

"Love you Psy, love you Min," sniffs Emma Mary, hugging both her sisters tight. "Don't leave me!" she wails.

“Don’t worry, jellybean,” I stroke Emma Mary’s hair, getting my fingers slightly tangled in the bushy curls. “They’ll be back for Christmas.”

That doesn’t do anything to calm her down, so Alice pulls a sniffling Emma Mary into her arms. One of her hands reaches mine, our fingers entwining, as we watch two of our daughters step onto the train along with Lily, James, Albus, Roselyn, Hugo, Aria and a windswept Nova, who has just arrived on time, Leah and her fiancé Teddy a few yards behind Leah’s daughter.

"I'm going to miss them," Alice says to me, softly, “It feels like I’ve barely gotten used to Psyche being gone for months at a time, and now Minnie is too.” I sigh.

"I know."
It wasn't an utopian existence, we had, in an utopian world, but I'd carved out my place. I had family I loved, friends I loved, a wonderful wife and three beautiful daughters. Dealing with Seth’s death had been hard, as was dealing the scars left by the bloodshed and horror of what was now commonly known as the Second Blood War.

I wasn't saying these seventeen years had been peaceful, because that would be a lie. There was trouble stirring in Wizarding Britain. Alice and I had talked about sending our girls to Salem instead, but despite everything, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was still considered the safest place in the world, despite the... incidents that had occurred, back in Nova, Victoire and James' first year. And Hogwarts... Hogwarts had always been, in a way, my home.

I’d learned to live for each moment as it came, to treasure the happy and the peaceful times, and to fight for them during the troubled. The world wasn’t a kind place, and there would always be something going on, but in seventeen years I hadn't been faced with any or wars or battles or life threatening situations. Nobody needed me to help save the world. In this moment I was in love, and I was loved.

For now, my life was good. And I would treasure each peaceful day as it came for the gift I'd learned it was. Because this life? This was worth fighting for.

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