

# Flashes

by  
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## Sulpicia

Slowly, so slowly that she almost did not notice it, Sulpicia began to hate the sound of her own voice.

It was a pretty voice. It was prettier than it needed to be to order servants to and fro, prettier than it needed to be to entreat her husband, prettier than it needed to be to instruct her children and stepchildren. And when she ordered or entreated or instructed, she was obeyed and catered to and attended.

Sulpicia could hardly forget that she was living a charmed life - her mother told her, every time the two saw each other. So lucky! So blessed! So fortunate! to have moved up so far in the world, to be seventeen and beautiful and married to a rich widower with only daughters and to have given him two sons as easy as breathing (*ha*, Sulpicia thought, when her mother first told her how *easy* her childbearing had been; there was no greater pain possible in the world, even if she'd gotten through the process with somewhat more alacrity than most). So lucky, so blessed, so fortunate, to have that husband's favor and love such that all she had to do was ask, and anything was hers -

But she still had to *ask*. She still had to draw breath (infinitely easier than giving birth, whatever her mother said, but still a step in the process) and *ask*. This was expected with servants, slow and stupid creatures; it was unremarkable with children, foolish and with no capacity to focus on others' patterns and habits. But her husband ought to have done better. Yet, however much esteem she'd bought with her two sons, her husband did not *know* her. He did not anticipate her needs, and she doubted he'd notice if she made a request completely out of character.

She tried it, one day - told him she wanted a pair of sandals so completely repulsive that she had not correctly identified them *as sandals* at first glance - and the next thing she knew, they were hers. No remark that they were unlike her customary footwear, that they were ugly and she was too beautiful to wear such unflattering things, that they were not fashionable and she was normally quite attentive to the current style. Just the sandals.

If she had to ask for everything, how could she get anything that she did not know *how* to ask for?

Sulpicia gave up testing her husband. He was hopeless, obviously. She made sharper and ruder demands of him, was shorter with the children, outright screamed at the servants. And she came to hate her voice, so miserably necessary, so inadequate.

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Aro was not, exactly, hunting. Or - not for food. He was looking, if idly, for specially gifted persons, for while he hadn't come into his own gift until turned, Marcus had known inklings of his beforehand and Chelsea had always had the full breadth of hers. Aro and Caius and Marcus - and Athenodora, when she bothered to participate in their council, though she was more often whiling away her time staring into space, thinking abstract thoughts, and tolerating Chelsea's prattle - agreed: that supernatural gifts were key to

realizing their ambitions. It would be untenable to match the Romanians' army in numbers. Overpowering them with magic was more likely.

The trouble was that the gifted were so *rare*. Marcus was an extraordinary find, Aro himself still more so. Chelsea magnificent. But they were not precisely suited to destroying enemies.

Aro still hoped that his young sister would prove to be gifted like him after her own change, but she was only sixteen yet, and he was wary of altering her so young. (The age gap was immense, but they *were* full siblings regardless of the cruel rumors about his father's failure to get his wife with child for twenty-three years after the firstborn: Aro had *checked* when it first crossed his mind to change his sister, with one cold finger brushed across his mother's cheekbone in the night, and while she was not a woman of perfect fidelity, the timing was not correct for Didyme to be the result of her indiscretion.)

At any rate, Didyme was still too young, although he would consider stealing her away sooner if she wound up betrothed. If he ever found out what happened to a bitten pregnant woman he would prefer that his sister not be the informant. She would have been married already, but their parents were dithering, holding out for better offers, because Didyme was quite lovely and sweet of disposition and ought to *have* better offers. In fact, only the dark gossip speculating on Aro's own unexplained disappearance fourteen years gone cast enough suspicion on the family's reputation to diminish the quality of her proposals. It suited Aro's purposes for it to be so, or he might have intervened somehow.

He spied on Didyme, once monthly, to be sure that she was in good health and not undergoing some emergency of constitution that would call for her prompt transformation. If he had to change her at sixteen (or bring her to Caius for the purpose, should he not trust his own control) he would. But, eighteen would be better.

He was not due to steal into Didyme's home - what once was his home too, fourteen years gone, though he barely remembered living there - and confirm that promising Didyme was not feverish or chilled or otherwise unwell for another week. And this allowed the coven to range away from Greece where she lived. Such exploration was how they had found Chelsea.

Such exploration was what put him in Rome when he found Sulpicia.

He was caught by the sun. Fickle clouds. He'd expected them to last longer, expected to be able to wade through crowds seeking telltale talented life-histories. And whatever the Romanians thought, it was in Aro's opinion a laughably dreadful idea to advertise oneself to the mortals. The red eyes might be written off as an odd malady, or overlooked entirely if he squinted and concealed his irises with shadows. The glittering skin in the daylight... unlikely to meet similar aplomb. More likely to prompt annoying attempts on his life.

So when the sun burst forth, the clouds swept away in a swift breath of wind, Aro ducked into the shade of a house to wait for the return of the cloud cover, or nightfall. (He mused that some kind of concealing cloak - with gloves and a hood - would be useful to have in situations like this. He would look into getting one, later.)

The lady of said house peered out the window at him, but he didn't look her way, preferring to lose himself in thought for as long as he needed to await the pleasure of the weather.

"Excuse me," she said, and he noted, distantly, that hers was a voice that had probably been lovely once, but had been filed ragged by discontentment. He went on ignoring her.

"Excuse me!" she said again, and reached out the window to tap him on the shoulder, as though he could have failed to *hear* her.

Her littlest finger brushed momentarily over the edge of his collar, and quite involuntarily, he pulled her memories into himself.

Human memories were easier than vampire ones to disentangle and comprehend. Before she had drawn her hand back to the windowsill, he knew her name, her family situation, her frustrated unclear desires, her favorite color and her hatred of her voice.

He knew her.

And before he even turned around to look at her face, he knew she was *his*.

It would have taken him longer to figure it out if he hadn't been with Caius and Athenodora both just that morning. Usually he spoke to Caius alone; he'd read his "brother's" mate, was acquainted with her, but rarely sought her companionship unless she came as part of a matched set with her husband. Still, the pair of them, Caius capturing the rapt attention of customarily fanciful Athenodora as she brought a smile to his otherwise dour face, were fresh in Aro's mind, and he recognized the *insistence* in his thoughts arcing over to Sulpicia as the same demand for companionship his covenmates shared. The same overarching instinctual keen.

He could lift her out of the house via the window, carry her off - who cared if anyone saw him? Stefan and Vladimir, lax and lazy overseers hundreds of miles distant, certainly didn't, and any *one* indiscretion would probably not bring torchlit mobs cresting over the hills - he could turn her, all without so much as a by-your-leave -

Yet... hm.

He looked at her, smiled rakishly. She stepped back and tucked the chilled finger that had touched him into her other hand, slightly openmouthed at the granite smoothness of his features, the darkened red eyes that might look brown without good light. "Who are you?" she asked. This was the question she'd had in mind from the beginning - who was this strange man lurking in the shadow of her house? - but the tone came out differently than she'd meant, curiosity rather than suspicion.

"Shhhh," he said, smirking, placing a finger over her lips.

She hated the sound of her voice.

Why inflict it on her?

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It was more than an hour before the sun retreated behind the clouds. The servants had the children, her husband was off somewhere doing something Sulpicia didn't know or care about, and she stood at her window and listened to the strange man.

She didn't need to talk. After a minute, she didn't want to, forgetting to be affronted at his attempt to silence her. He touched her presumptuously, constantly, adjusting her hair and brushing her cheeks and cataloguing all the ways their fingers could interlace, and she was entranced enough that she did not back away. His hands were cool, but they warmed up over time as he spoke in low, insinuating tones that made her spine tingle.

He told her, at the beckoning of her thoughts, his name, where he was from, what he was doing in Rome, and, when she began to wonder, what he was, what he could do. There was no point and no fairness in holding back from her (and he shouldn't like to oblige her to speak out loud, to insist on pressing a question, if she wanted some answer he could provide). She would know everything eventually. If, unthinkably, he bungled the elaborate seduction he had in mind, all would be made right by her change; he could be a little reckless if he wanted.

He was emboldened further still by her intense, albeit non-supernatural, attraction, simmering obviously through the hundreds of little touches he bestowed on her to update his record of her mind. He almost laughed at her when she wondered, a fleeting wild thought, if her husband would say *yes* should she trouble to formulate the request for permission to take this man as a lover -

"Don't ask permission," murmured Aro. "In fact, I want you to have nothing to do with your husband at all. I want you to be mine. Forget about him."

Sulpicia didn't think she could just -

Aro pressed a chilly kiss to the inside of her wrist, so gentle it was almost not there, and Sulpicia shivered. She could probably put her husband off for a day, two perhaps, claim to be ill and slouch about the house, say with her hateful and tired *voice* that she was too weak -

"Very good, my dear," Aro murmured, still holding her hand. "I believe... I shall see you this evening."

The evening? Why the -

"I need to tell my brothers," he said, moving his head close to hers, breathing shallowly - her blood should not interest him, that would be *one* way to bungle his plans for world conquest, certainly, if he mistook his mate for a meal - "about you, because I plan to take you away with me... but not this very minute."

How long until -

"Perhaps this evening." He kissed her wrist again, looked down at her through the window with smoldering eyes. "Perhaps." He could be patient. It was more rewarding to *entice* her than to let the venom do the work.

Belatedly, Sulpicia thought of her children.

"Your sons will be fine. Your stepdaughters are fine now, aren't they?" Aro said reasonably. "I suppose you *can* stay..." He was lying. He wouldn't permit her to stay if she wanted to with all her heart, let alone with this halfhearted misgiving. She, however, could not read his mind. Let her think she had the option; let her refuse it of her own volition.

Her husband *would* probably just remarry if she disappeared, Sulpicia granted, but she was vaguely unsettled about her sons nonetheless.

"Well, perhaps this evening you will have made up your mind," Aro said in a voice like silk and wine, and, under the new clouds, before the sun could change the angle of his protective shadow, he peeled himself away from her and slipped off into the city.

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Sulpicia took a minute to compose herself.

She sat, and stood, and walked from one room to the next, and poured herself a glass of wine the color of Aro's eyes, and sat again.

She went to where the servants were keeping her sons, and the younger one, just a baby, chose that moment to scream and scream and *scream*, and the older one pulled her hair and tugged at her clothes when she tried to pick him up. Her stepdaughters pestered her for attention when she went near them. If she ignored them they'd whine to their father later and he'd sigh and tell Sulpicia that it would be lovely if she'd take some time to get to know the girls. If she gave them the attention they demanded, sooner or later it would take a turn to resentment over the fact that she wasn't their mother and they would shriek at her with shrill accusations.

Sulpicia stared at her crying baby, longing to claw out her ears. She handed the toddler off to the nurse, and left the room again. She poured herself more wine.

Her husband was home early from... whatever it was he did all day. Sulpicia hadn't ever cared and saw no reason to start. She pretended illness, lounging and coughing until her throat really did feel raw. Aro wanted her to have nothing to do with her husband, and perhaps she would oblige him.

Her husband did not oblige her.

It was not violent, not dramatic, not even particularly *unusual* in anything but her uncommon level of disinterest. She didn't try to fight him off of her once she realized her ruse wasn't having the desired effect. Her mother's lectures about wifely duties replayed themselves in her head and she waited for it to be over with the same boredom of waiting for her baby to stop crying or her life to stop dissatisfying her.

Would Aro be cross with her? she asked herself, only after the fact. Would he refuse to take her away with him because she'd failed? It didn't occur to her to question whether that had been his original intention. If she were any judge of sincerity, it had, though why *she* had caught his eye she was unsure.

She noted that the prospect of Aro's abandonment - even though she'd only spent a little over an hour in his company - was rather frightening, and hugged herself and shivered and hated the thought of listening to that baby scream for one hour longer. Of staying with a husband who could *not* read her mind (and maybe he wouldn't care if he could, anyway) when she'd finally met a man who *could*, who, incredibly, wanted *her*, and he'd asked *one* thing of her and she couldn't -

Sulpicia cried exactly three tears, then wiped them away and waited by the window for evening.

She knew one moment of doubt about whether Aro would come back at all, but then returned to worrying that he *would* come, and would touch her just the one more time it would take to know that she hadn't done what he'd asked, and then leave without a word, and she would have to listen to that baby (and the next baby and the baby after that, because "one cannot have too many" appeared to be her husband's opinion) scream in her ears until one of them killed her coming out. (*Easy*, her mother said. *Easy*.)

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Marcus knew as soon as Aro strolled into their current hiding place that something had happened, and he laughed, deep and low. "You, too. Where is she?"

"Awaiting the evening with bated breath," said Aro, smiling asymmetrically. "May I see it, dear brother? It's a white ribbon like Caius and Athenodora's, isn't it?"

"A thinner one, without the layers from both directions - a *human*, Aro, who'd have thought it of you? - but yes, much alike," said Marcus, extending the nearer of his arms for Aro to brush their knuckles together. Aro regarded Marcus's memory of the new bond with pleasure. "Why did you leave her?" Marcus inquired.

"I was caught by the sun," said Aro, peering up at the descending brightness in the sky. "Besides, I *could* simply take her and turn her, as Caius did with his mate, but I'd like to *lure* her. I don't plan to wait long. Probably I will take her tonight."

"Will you want Caius to do the turning?" Marcus asked.

"I think so. I believe I could manage it, if I were fed immediately before, but it is a little delicate to trust to my guess," said Aro. "Where *is* Caius? And where are Athenodora and Chelsea, for that matter?"

"The happy couple," said Marcus with dry emphasis, "are elsewhere. Chelsea became annoying to me when she could not longer attach herself to them without intrusion even she could not render welcome, and I sent her away; no doubt she'll be back soon enough."

Aro shrugged, looking at the sun, and frowned. "You don't like her."

"Neither would you, if you didn't let her force it. There's nothing to like."

"We are going to need dear Chelsea," said Aro. "I may as well love her as she wishes to be loved. What's the harm?"

"It's up to you, I suppose," frowned Marcus. "So, what is our new sister-in-law's name?"

"Sulpicia," said Aro, tasting the word like sweet blood on his lips and smiling, "is her name."

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Aro returned minutes after nightfall, although Sulpicia didn't hear him coming and could barely see even his pale face in the moonlight. "Aro," she said softly, hating that she had to speak and having no idea what else to say, but hoping to come up with some explanation, some excuse, midsentence, that would make him take her away after all...

"Shh," he whispered, and he hopped in through the window as smoothly as taking a single step and pressed his finger to her lips.

She fell silent, looked guiltily at him, waited for the verdict.

Aro held quite still, and peered into the memories.

Then his arms were around her. "Worry not," he breathed in her ear. "Of course I will take you with me. Right now, if you like, my dear." Relief flooded her, and she opened her mouth to thank him. "Shhh," he repeated again, touching her lips with his thumb. "Just a moment while I take care of something and off we go, lovely one." He released her, and she waited in numb anticipation for whatever it was he was going to take a moment to do.

Aro stole out of the room, and Sulpicia heard one unheralded, sharp snapping noise, and in an instant Aro was back at her side with his arm around her waist and his cheek against hers. He was so cold.

Sulpicia wasn't sure what had happened -

"It was not your fault, precious Sulpicia," purred Aro, leaning to lift her off her feet entirely and hopping lightly out the window. "*He* took what is mine. *I* should not have left you. But *you*, no, you did nothing wrong." He kissed her throat and she sighed, smiling. "Never imagine that I will leave you forever," Aro went on. "I will do no such thing, my darling; I prefer to keep you, and I shall."

He left the house behind, carrying her at a leisurely walking pace.

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## Meetings

Brady tried not to look guilty while he waited for Addy and the witch she was bringing. He was thirteen, five years below Italy's minimum driving age, and even though he knew perfectly well how to drive, the license in his pocket was a forgery claiming that he was as old as he looked. *Stop it*, he told himself. *Of all things you're guilting yourself over a fake ID? Honestly. They would've sent someone older to pick 'em up if they had a reason to, and all the IDs are fake.* He looked at the clock on the dashboard. Either the flight was a bit late or the witch was giving Addy trouble. The latter seemed likely. A *helpful* witch with the power Brady had heard described wouldn't even need a ride to the compound. She and Addy could just walk wherever through the "hiding place" (how weird was *that?*) without anybody seeing them. An *unhelpful* witch with the same power needed to be dragged into the back of a van (that didn't sound sinister at *all...*) so Addy could focus on keeping her contained.

Brady decided, as he waited, that he didn't like the airport pickup job. The Volturi were still experimenting with what roles suited the wolves, as they'd never had any before and had suddenly come into rather a lot of them. Brady thought it was a little sad that the wolf ability to go about unnoticed in daylight had meant that the Volturi no longer needed to employ any humans, given what terminating such employment meant, but he tried not to dwell on it. They did have to eat. *We're the good guys*, he told himself, more emphasis on "we" than "good".

He heard the back of the van open, and slam, and Addy's voice say, "Home, please, thank you." Someone else was sobbing and making intermittent pleas in what Brady thought might be Spanish. Actually, he was pretty sure it was Spanish. The witch was from Mexico. Addy talked to her, much less weepily, in the same language.

Brady started the engine and turned on the GPS. He didn't look around at the vampire or the captive.

It wasn't too long a drive, although he was very careful to stick to the speed limit. He didn't want to get pulled over and find out how his few phrases of Italian - which were "where is the bathroom?", "may I borrow your telephone to call my friends?", and "I only speak English" - fared during a traffic stop. With his fake ID. In a country he'd lived in for about a month and didn't really know his way around. With a vampire and a witch who could disappear in the back of his vehicle.

A traffic stop would be just the thing to demonstrate that it was shaping up to be a really *splendid* day.

Alec was waiting in the garage when Brady pulled in. It was assumed - if untested - that he'd be able to pacify the witch so Addy could be free to do other things. As far as Brady knew, they were going to try that in the garage, and if it worked, Alec would carry the witch inside, as he was immune to his own power.

Brady hopped out of the driver's seat and slammed the door, nodding respectfully to Alec, who *looked* older than Brady *was* and *was* older than Brady *looked*, but was still so

short by comparison that Brady couldn't help feeling the elder. Still, Alec was formally his superior, if not his commanding officer at any degree of remove.

Addy managed to unlatch the van without losing hold of her prisoner, and emerged with the Mexican woman in hand. They didn't even flicker out of view as Brady had thought they might. Apparently the witch wasn't fighting anymore -

She lifted her head, and black hair fell away to reveal her drawn face, and she looked at Brady.

A storm of clichés presented themselves to describe the situation, but that was for writing bad poetry later. In the moment, the important bit was that the witch (he didn't even know her name, and suddenly that was an intolerable sin, not to know her *name*) was his imprint, and that made him personally, directly responsible for the miserable expression on her face, which made him a terrible person and he had to fix it *immediately*.

How was he supposed to do that when he had no idea what she wanted, couldn't speak her language...? She was looking right at him, she seemed vaguely hopeful somehow through the tears, and she said, in intelligible if brief English, "Help?"

Something went *clack* in the back of his brain as the need in her eyes cut through layers of conditioning like a sword through tissue paper, and of course he knew what she wanted, what "help" meant, Addy had *kidnapped* her and so she needed *rescuing*, and he fought through the suffocating guilt to summon up the will to phase.

Addy was surprised, but not - quite - surprised enough to drop the witch. Alec had his lips pressed together, summoning his power to control the situation, but it would take a couple of seconds to work.

Brady surged forward at Addy and sank his teeth into her shoulder, and then she *did* drop the witch, who disappeared, but to make sure she couldn't be followed, Addy had to be deprived of her power -

Brady flung Addy at Alec. They collided, and Brady distinctly saw Addy's chin hit Alec in the arm below his sleeve. That would be it, then.

The witch was safe in her hiding place and wouldn't trust Addy again. The vampires were both on their feet again, staring at him, taking a moment to figure out what had caused this mutiny, and they'd probably kill him. Brady didn't run. He'd been an accomplice in the girl's abduction to begin with, and as long as she was safe, it wasn't so bad to die for that.

He wished he knew her name, though.

Then, Addy and Alec both disappeared, and the witch girl, eyes far drier, was standing beside him with her fingertips buried in the fur of his shoulder.

"*Gracias*," she said tentatively, and Brady did know what that meant.

It meant that the world was set more or less right, again.

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Siobhan was livid when she realized that the Scots were poaching on her land.

The funny thing was, they might have gotten away with it, if they had been only a little careful. If they'd spread out their kills, or gone for the folks thereabouts who were dying of the runs anyway. But they were blatantly hunting people in clumps. Healthy adults, who Siobhan noticed missing when she passed through familiar villages checking up on the state of her domain, whose neighbors speculated about them in hushed tones, who went missing in groups of five and six and seven at a time like the intruders didn't even *know* Ireland belonged to *her*.

She made up her mind that their refined tastes were going to end them.

It didn't take her long to figure out how they were choosing their targets. They were working their way north, keeping coastal, striking about once a month. She fed heavily, farther inland, to keep her head around the humans of the likeliest subsequent village. And then she picked a surveillance point, high up with a view of all access to the settlement, and dug in.

The Scots came a week later, at dusk, in a tight pack of three. The leader was a little dark female who moved like a cat, and there were two males following her. Siobhan watched them approach at a leisurely stroll. Like they owned the place. From the way they walked together and looked around, they were none of them mates, just three singles. That would make it easier to leave one survivor to run home and tell tales. Whatever misinformation had led these infiltrators to believe it was clever to help themselves to *her* resources needed correction. Badly.

Possibilities twisted through her mind. Three was a challenge. A witch among them was unlikely - would probably have either covered their tracks better or been more blatant still. She could take out the female first, leave the males leaderless, take off one head, destroy the other male while the head watched, toss head and torso both into the ocean to float home, heal (maybe), and tell the story.

She wasn't very worried about the arrogant female leader. Siobhan had seen the catlike gait before, and it was usually a sign of overconfidence - it looked slick and self-assured, but it involved unnecessary motions, wasn't very efficient. Vampires who walked like that didn't know how to discard style for force in a pinch. If they couldn't beat you with flair they couldn't beat you at all.

Siobhan had forced herself to walk, maneuver, and fight in the most direct (not *obvious*, that would have gotten her killed - just *direct*) way possible until she'd beaten five territorial competitors who walked like that, and felt like she'd earned her flowing, smooth motion. She'd cleared out the rest of her island with panache, but the ability to fall back on brutal assaults and sheer power was there if she found a superior foe.

She put her quiet gait to use: as the Scots approached the slumbering village, Siobhan crept perpendicular to their path. She'd intercept them half a mile away from the outermost

house if they didn't notice her first - and, as her gait against the ground was quiet and could have belonged to a wild animal, they might not. Not through all the trees. Or they might split up, come at the village from several angles.

They did split, the female carrying on with her straight trajectory and the males fanning out to circle around. One, the smaller of the two males, came directly towards Siobhan. How convenient that she wouldn't have to fight the whole group together.

He walked to within a hundred feet of her, oblivious, and then she was on him and had his arms off and head wrenched from his shoulders in a second, and had made enough racket in so doing to attract the others' attention. The head bounced, and landed facing her, openmouthed in astonishment and staring but unable to cry out.

Siobhan stamped on his spine to shatter his torso into a few extra pieces, rendering it untenable for his covenmates to put him back together during the fight, and charged to meet the approaching female.

This fight was longer. The coven leader did know a *few* things about where to aim her fists and where to snap her teeth together.

But not enough.

Siobhan dispatched her in four seconds without collecting any scars, wondering where the third invader was. He wasn't reassembling his friend. He wasn't joining the fray. She didn't see him - she wasn't looking that hard, as she'd hear him coming if he got close enough to matter, and needed her eyes against the leader.

When the coven leader was in a heap of a dozen pieces, Siobhan pulled out her little box of lucifer matches and struck one, which she dropped unceremoniously into the pile. It went up instantly, pouring smoke into the night air.

Where was that third fellow? she wondered. Run off without even trying to help his coven?

She looked around, and, yes, there he was, standing roughly between her and the other male...

Ah-*ha*.

She hadn't gotten a close look at him from her prior vantage point. But it was plain when she saw him square on that this was the most delectable specimen of male vampiredom in the world, and the fact that she noticed this with such instantaneous certainty was a reasonably good sign that he was her mate. And vice-versa. He was probably a bit slower on the uptake (she'd made sure she kept the possibility in the back of her mind ever since she'd learned how these things worked, but had heard that others could sometimes remain ignorant of their own matings for days or *weeks*, and typically at least a couple of minutes). He was still too confused about why he didn't want to attack her to do anything at all.

"Name?" she asked casually, tossing her head and smiling.

He gulped, blinking with charming wrongfootedness. "Er - mine? Liam."

"Liam, be a love and help me explain to your friend here - the one not currently on fire - that Ireland belongs to *me*, and he had best go home and make this fact generally known once he's in one piece, if he cares to *be* in one piece again." She sidled up to Liam, placed one index finger on his collarbone and traced up his throat to push his head back gently, and leaned down an inch to kiss him. "You, though, I think I'll let stay," she purred.

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Ilario approached the park, along with Jacob carrying Elspeth on his shoulders, and ruminated on nothing in particular. He felt like he ought to be more preoccupied than he was with everything afoot. They were plotting rebellion. Gianna and Molly were at home, perhaps safe, but if Adelaide had found them the Volturi could do the same. Somehow it didn't seem real.

Maggie had someone with her. "This is Cath," she said brightly, sweeping her arm towards the taller woman, and Ilario dutifully looked at Cath. Then he looked at her some more. Then he went on looking at her, just to confirm that, yes, the hottest woman in the universe *was* standing in front of him, bedecked from head to toe in embroidery, carrying a parasol, wearing a clingy sweater that covered her arms all the way down to her fingertips but outlined her shape like that was all it was for, and toying with an auburn corkscrew of hair. With her other hand, she waved.

*Stop staring. Stop staring. Stop* - Ilario tried to tell himself, but his eyes weren't listening (of course not; they were eyes and not ears) and so he was still gaping at her like an idiot when she'd finished taking her measure of the werewolf and his half-vampire accessory, and turned her attention to Ilario. "Hello," she said.

Girls had hit on Ilario before. He wasn't an unusually gorgeous vampire, but he was *a* vampire, and pretty tall, plus there were the gold eyes; so women from work and occasionally at random other locations sometimes expressed interest. He'd never returned it. And if he had, he'd have needed to turn them down anyway, for an assortment of safety reasons. But he'd learned the signs.

If he was not *very* much mistaken, *the hottest woman in the world was looking interested*. Cath. Cath was *interested*. All he had to do was not... to borrow a term from Maggie's vocabulary... bollocks it up.

She'd greeted him. That at least authorized him to greet her back, didn't it? There were limited ways available to turn that into a mistake, really. He shouldn't be nervous about *just saying hello* - "Hello," he said - even when speaking to the hottest woman in the world. He took one step forward, just one, he certainly didn't spring forward to kiss Cath's very inviting smile...

"*Fuck*," said Maggie, and Ilario knew he had it bad when his first reaction was not *why is Maggie upset?* or *should we be swearing around a five year old?*, but rather *oh, what a good idea*.

Cath did not appear to share this response; she turned to her creation and asked, "What are you on about?"

"Brilliant timing, Cath, just brilliant," Maggie growled. "Couldn't have gotten this out of the way early on, could you..."

Ilario had no idea what Cath had just done which could possibly have been mistimed. If she'd arrived later than she'd agreed to, or something, surely Maggie would have complained earlier...? "Gotten what out of the way?" he asked, content to watch his sister-in-law through his peripheral vision so he could go on drinking in the sight of Cath at the center of his attention. Beautiful. Too beautiful. Too covered in embroidery...

"Aah," said Maggie, obviously not intending to answer his question, "was I this bad?"

Elsbeth piped up: "Yes."

Cath was not patient with Maggie's coyness. "*What?*" she exclaimed. Ilario wracked his brain for what knowledge Maggie and Elspeth might share, that would elude him - and Cath - so handily. Then he found that this process distracted him from imagining Cath with less embroidery on, and stopped.

"Oh, just drag my brother-in-law off somewhere where you can be by yourselves until the others show up," Maggie said grumpily, "and have a shag and talk about your futures and see if you can't solve the bloody Rubik's cube that is the mystery here, just come back with all your clothes on when you hear us welcoming the rest of the gang."

Ilario was *pretty* sure he knew what "shag" meant colloquially, from hearing random humans say it in context. But Maggie still occasionally demonstrated unfamiliarity with recent idiom, and *could* be talking about carpet or something even more unrelated to... that... (especially since he expected he could have interpreted *any* sentence as being germane to the same topic, with Cath standing right there). And he didn't want to make a fool of himself pretending to be able to read the annoyed little vampire's mind when he really wasn't sure, not in front of Cath, so when Cath asked him "Do you know what she's on about?" he said "No."

There was a silence, during which Ilario got in some really *quality* Cath-gazing, and then she said, "Do you *want* to go -"

"*Yes*," he said at once, without even waiting for the end of the sentence, because whatever arcane thing Maggie was using "shag" to mean, he had *not* misheard or misinterpreted the "be by yourselves" part of her advice, and that sounded like a very, very fine idea.

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## Niece

"Pardon me, I need you to repeat that," said Rosalie in a low monotone.

"I am, so, *so* sorry," blubbered the neighbor. Her little boy was balanced on her hip, clinging to her shirt and sucking on the lollipop she'd given him to shut him up. "I'm *so* -"

"Not that part," Rosalie snapped. "Tell me again from the beginning what *happened* to my *niece*."

"She -" The woman choked. "She wanted to take Mr. Goodbar into a little cluster of trees, and I let her - *I'm so sorry, Miss Hale* -"

"I don't care if you're sorry! Get on with it, tell me again, don't leave anything out," growled Rosalie. "Any detail could -"

"Rose," said Emmett, approaching and dropping his hands onto her shoulders. "She already told us, and the cops, everything she knows." He pressed his face into his wife's hair to hide the motion of his lips and went on, pitched high: "Carlisle called back. He left work and found the trail. It was definitely a vampire, but they went into the lake. This lady can't tell us anything useful, Rose."

Rosalie's hands clenched at her sides and she looked away from the humans, mother and son. "Fine," she said. "Fine."

The neighbor backed away, skittish on some subconscious level about being near an enraged vampire even if she didn't know it, and took her boy into the house next door.

Rosalie leaned back against Emmett. "The lake," she whispered. "How can we find her? Why did it have to be *today*, when *I* wasn't with her, that someone decided they wanted to steal her away...?"

"Don't blame yourself," Emmett said. "We all thought she'd be fine."

"I should have gone along. If I wore enough little Christmas-tree air fresheners a dog might put up with me. I should have at least gone to the *park* even if I couldn't get near the *dog* without it freaking out."

"Rosalie, you've been with Elspeth day and night continually for the last two months, and nearly that much even when we were in Denali. You couldn't go on forever without a break. This is only bad luck." She *could* have gone on forever without a break. *Emmett*, feeling neglected, had coaxed her to do otherwise, but she couldn't bring herself to blame him. She hadn't been obliged to *agree* when he asked her to let Elspeth out of her sight for one day. She could have said no, and if she had, they'd still have their niece.

She took a sudden step forward, and Emmett's hands fell away from where they rested. Spinning to face him, she said, "You have ten minutes to pack."

"Pack?" he asked.

"We're going to Tennessee," Rosalie said.

---

"I don't think this is a good idea," Emmett repeated, for the twenty-sixth time.

"Alice won't begrudge us this," Rosalie said. Her voice was high and tinny, keeping up the appearance of silence for the humans. "She loves Elspeth too. Besides, she and Jasper have been lying low more than long enough. They'll probably come back to Michigan with us after Alice finds the right blindspot. They're probably only still in Nashville because they can't think of a polite way to leave Peter and Charlotte." There was hope in her voice, but it was the resolute, dutiful sort of hope, unwilling to expire until every option was gone.

"That sounds really hard, Rose," Emmett said, "looking for something she can't see..."

"As long as we find her quick, there's only so far they can have gone," Rosalie said. "She can do it. And then we can find Elspeth and *end* whoever took her."

"I don't think this is a good idea, Rose," Emmett said. "If they're pissed off at us for showing up - I can't actually take Jasper, not in a real fight, let alone Alice, and -"

"Jasper and Alice aren't going to attack us," said Rosalie, picking up the Skymall magazine and flipping through it just to look occupied to the woman in the aisle seat next to her.

"I was going to say, even if they don't, Peter and Charlotte might," Emmett said. "I don't *know* if we can take *them* or not."

"I would have just called Alice on the phone but she didn't exactly leave the option open for emergencies," Rosalie hissed under her breath. "That leaves showing up where we expect they are most likely to be, which is Nashville, which is where Peter and Charlotte live, and yes, showing up in someone else's territory uninvited is dicey, but *Elspeth is missing* and Alice is our only realistic hope of finding her."

"I know," he sighed.

Rosalie moved the magazine to her left hand and rested her right on Emmett's knee. "This is as close as I get," she murmured. "I'm not going to give up just because some vampire jumped into a *lake* with her."

"We *could* adopt," Emmett said in response to the first sentence, but it was a tired, old conversation and Rosalie didn't feel like rehearsing it again. She just shook her hair out of her face and turned the page of the catalog.

"Even if we *were* going to do that, we couldn't give up on Elspeth," she said.

Emmett didn't have a rebuttal to that, and fell silent.

---

The greater Nashville area was big, and Peter and Charlotte had no permanent address. Wearing enough fabric to get odd looks for the summer weather, Emmett and Rosalie searched separately, moving as quickly as they dared to cover more ground and have a better chance of crossing a scent or finding a good vampire hideout where the precog might be.

Rosalie scrambled for her phone when it rang. "Emmett?" she exclaimed into the phone, waiting for him to tell her the intersection where she should find him *and Alice*, who would search her vision for blankness and tell them where to find Elspeth -

"Rose, this is Alice we're looking for - if she wanted to be found wouldn't she have met us coming off the plane, or at *some* time in the last few hours?" he said instead.

"Until we plan on going someplace she'll be, she doesn't necessarily know to expect us!" Rosalie half-shrieked. "Or she could be concentrating on looking for something else. She could have missed us that way."

"Okay, Rose," said Emmett, and Rosalie hung up, hissing under her breath. She knew he thought it was hopeless, but it still rankled. He'd have been the last person to give up if the kidnapper had been *present*, standing in front of him and shouting a challenge that could be met with violence. As it was, he was humoring her. Maybe he'd written Elspeth off as soon as he heard the trail ended at the water. He expected to come up empty, expected Rosalie to admit defeat after however many days or weeks and trudge home.

Rosalie stalked up the street with brisk steps, inhaling in little bursts to hunt for a vampire's scent that wasn't her own, and *focused*. She could focus. She'd killed seven men as a brand-new vampire without spilling a drop of blood, she'd gotten through medical school without anyone noticing one thing *off* about how she handled the stuff. If she could focus to the exclusion of blood, she could focus to the exclusion of her husband's fatalism. It did not *matter* that Emmett had already given up, as long as he covered his half of the territory: what mattered was that she had something she could do, and when she'd done it, she'd have Elspeth back.

Thirty hours later, she'd found nothing, and Emmett hadn't called again. Rosalie might tease later (after they had Elspeth safe and sound at home again) about expecting him to call her just to propose taking a break, checking into a hotel, and continuing to catch up with accumulated neglect. But whatever the family jokes said, he *was* capable of addressing other needs, and, finding nothing and no one, did not call.

She'd gone past the limits of the city itself, and was searching through nondescript suburbs and generic town centers. She wasn't *sure* how far from Nashville proper Peter and Charlotte ranged, if she and Emmett had already missed them and were only getting farther and farther away. She wasn't sure if they were still in Nashville at all, instead of having relocated to Memphis or someplace in Arkansas - or just having abandoned the maintenance of a territory altogether and beginning a strictly nomadic lifestyle. She wasn't sure if Alice and Jasper had elected to join the latter's old friends, rather than striking off on their own.

She wasn't sure, and until she found at least one of the people she was looking for, she wasn't going to get more sure.

So she jogged, and breathed, and *focused*, and, at hour thirty-one, she smelled vampire.

Rosalie called up the memory of the last street sign she'd read, noted the number on the nearest mailbox, and texted them to Emmett as she crept forward, following the scent. "Alice-Jasper-Peter-Charlotte?" she guessed in sequence, but Alice wasn't really her first guess; there wasn't any of the familiar citrusy tartness to the trail. But that was all right. Any of the other three should be able to tell her where to find Alice.

She approached the likeliest building, a ramshackle house missing all of its shutters and most of its paint where vampires might find a congenial hideout. "Alice? Jasper? Peter? Charlotte?" she called again. "It's Rosalie -"

A blond head peeped out of the attic window, on the side of the house shaded by ivy-choked trees, and peered down at her. "You're Rosalie?" she asked.

"Charlotte?" asked Rosalie, and when the pale yellow fluff of curls bobbed *yes*, she said, "Yes, I am. I'm looking for Alice, it's an *emergency* -"

"Oh honey," said Charlotte, drawing her eyebrows together and pursing her lips in sad sympathy.

"What?" asked Rosalie, looking around for human observers and deciding to risk scaling the side of the house.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," said Charlotte, and Rosalie was at the attic windowsill when the tiny woman said, "Alice... died."

---

Emmett arrived at Charlotte's hideout half an hour after the text, in a shiny car he'd probably driven off a dealership lot for a "test drive" to shave off transit time. Rosalie thought he might have called for more detailed directions, but he spotted the dilapidated house without trouble, let himself in, and climbed up to the attic.

"Alice is dead," Rosalie told him without preamble, staring into the dust that spun around in the air when he opened the door. That much Charlotte had managed to convince her of, with considerable effort.

"What?"

"Happened back in November," said Charlotte, wringing her hands. "Demetri an' Alec an' one we didn't know, burns like Jane, an'... another half-vampire, not your niece. Alice couldn't see 'em coming."

"Why would they kill her?" asked Emmett, dumbfounded. He reached for Rosalie without looking, and she caught his hand and squeezed it. "They - they wanted her to work for them. Why kill her?"

"Didn't explain themselves," Charlotte apologized, "Alec didn't even leave us sighted at the time."

"Then how do you *know*?" demanded Rosalie. "If you didn't see it happen, how do you *know*?"

"Jasper," guessed Emmett, and Charlotte nodded solemnly.

"He felt it," she said. "He's... not well anymore. Peter's looking after him, a ways east of here. We switch off, usually. Jasper sees things ain't there - us, even, but if one of us is there for real we can tell what's actual for him."

"He's seeing things?" Emmett repeated. "I've never heard of that in vampires..."

Charlotte shrugged helplessly. "Me neither, but he does, and can't tell when they ain't real. Picked a fight with some poor vagrant a month back thinkin' she was Bella, but we knew *she* was dead. The witch like Jane *bragged* about it, an' Edward too... Alice couldn't see that when it happened neither. Wolves."

Rosalie nodded, looking numbly at the attic eaves. "We knew that. Bella's father told us about the fire in La Push."

"We need to tell Charlie about Elspeth," said Emmett quietly.

Rosalie's head snapped around to look at him. "Not yet," she said.

"Without Alice?" said Emmett, gentle. Their hands were still linked, and he moved his thumb in circles on her palm like he always did when he wanted to calm her down. "Carlisle and Esme didn't have any luck searching the lakeshore or they'd have called us."

"I'm real sorry about your niece," said Charlotte. She said it like Elspeth had died.

Rosalie wrenched her hand away from Emmett, thinking to stomp her way to the corner of the attic and shout at them both for acting like Elspeth could just be *gone* one day, irretrievable, but instead she flung herself towards Emmett and let him wrap his arms around her. She didn't make a sound, just curled herself against him and willed him to somehow, impossibly, comfort her.

"We should go home," he murmured into her hair.

"Not yet," Rosalie said. There was nothing left that could help find Elspeth in Nashville, but that only made it the same as everywhere else, if Esme and Carlisle had been out of luck searching the border of the lake. But home had the essential disadvantage of being where Elspeth had gone missing.

"Okay," Emmett soothed.

"D'you want to see Jasper?" asked Charlotte tentatively. "...Maybe take him back with you?"

Rosalie was about to say yes, unconditionally agree to take her brother back, but there was something off about the request, and how Charlotte batted her eyes when she made it. "Why hasn't he found us on his own?" she asked. "If the Volturi have been and gone and let him live?"

"Er," said Charlotte, and she shuffled her feet. "...Off his diet, y'see."

"He's slipped up before," Emmett said, puzzled. "So have I. Why wouldn't he come back just because of that?"

"Didn't say *slipped*," said Charlotte. "Changed his mind, more. Doubt he's gonna change it back."

"Why?" asked Rosalie.

"Well, y'know how he first went veg, with the not wanting to feel what the prey felt?" Rosalie nodded, and Charlotte went on, "Now he figures that's better'n remembering what Alice felt. We've all been hunting together. I'm not out here to get food, I'm just here to take a break from the crazy. Jasper ain't such good company lately." She huffed a sigh. "Wouldn't blame you if you didn't want him back between the eatin' people and the crazy."

"How crazy are we talking here?" asked Emmett, clutching at Rosalie. She didn't think he was aware of it; it was a natural response to hearing about how his erstwhile brother was coping (or failing to) with his mate's death. She leaned back against him.

"Besides seeing things ain't there?" asked Charlotte. "When he's not doing that he's... I feel awful complaining about it because I know I'd be just alike if anything happened to Peter, heaven forbid, but I could count on my fingers the sentences he's spoken in the last five months didn't have something to do with Alice. Can't drop the subject. He ain't keeping control of the empathy neither. Sprays sad around near nonstop. I don't think he specifically *wants* us miserable, just can't understand why we ain't and tries to make us understand. We'd've ditched him if we didn't owe him so much, more'n likely."

"Carlisle would say we ought to bring him home if he'll have us," Emmett said dubiously, trailing off.

"And Esme would agree with him," Rosalie said, "but they're not here."

"If it helps, I doubt Jasper wants t'go anywhere," sighed Charlotte. "Like you said, he could've found you. He's stable enough to do that if he takes it into his head."

"He might just need a while longer away," Emmett speculated, glancing at Rosalie. "Back before you and me were turned, Edward went off and ate humans and came back after a few years." It was a weak comparison. Edward's issues were much more self-contained; Rosalie had listened to the story of his internal trauma with contempt, whereas she did sympathize with the circumstances that had driven Jasper away from the family and off the deep end. But it was the closest simile they could make.

"And I doubt he's easy to live in a permanent residence with while staying discreet, at the moment, or that the irresponsible empathy would be any help trying to... to go on with nothing to *do* about Elspeth anymore," Rosalie murmured. It wasn't that she didn't want to patch up her family. It was just so destroyed already that attaching a broken Jasper to it didn't sound like an improvement. "...We'll take your phone number and Peter's, and Jasper's if he has a phone?" she asked Charlotte, closing her eyes as though tired. "We'll keep in touch. If he gets better... hell, if he doesn't get better but decides he'd rather live with us again... we can go from there. But not today. I don't want to see him today."

"Fair 'nough," Charlotte said, not sounding like she'd had much hope of fobbing off her charge. They recited numbers. Charlotte showed them out of the crumbly house like she owned the place in all its disintegrating glory. Rosalie and Emmett got into his test-drive car.

"We'll return this to the dealership," Emmett said. It was phrased like a statement, but he was saying it to check for Rosalie's approval. If she fell in spontaneous love with the car, he was all set to buy it for her. He probably wouldn't raise more than a token objection if she wanted to steal it instead, or drive it off an embankment, or take out her frustration by ripping it apart with her bare hands.

"Yeah," she said, listless. "Dealership."

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They loitered in Nashville for two days, and then Rosalie said she was ready to go home, and they boarded another airplane headed back to Michigan.

She walked the shore of Lake Huron exactly once. Any hint of a scent was long gone - neither Elspeth nor the vampire kidnapper tended to shed dead skin or other debris that would hold the clue in place longer, the way a human would have. There was no point to the journey. She did it anyway, hearing her internal predictor of what Alice might say teasing her about being a masochist. But the walk didn't actually hurt. She didn't feel much of anything as she made the circuit, staring out at the water.

It was hard for Rosalie to be around Esme, who grieved, obviously and constantly, for her lost grandchild, departed daughter, and mad son. She'd been wretched after Edward and Bella had died, too, but this only piled on more bereavement still, leaving the woman a woeful wreck. Rosalie didn't have the patience for it. She should have identified more with Esme, who had similar regrets to her adopted daughter about the sacrifice associated with immortality, and had lost the same people as Rosalie, but Esme's anguish was so *passive*. She loitered around the house, bursting into fresh imitations of tears whenever an object reminded her of the absent child. She let Carlisle pet her and coo at her and try to cheer her up, doling out enough halfhearted smiles that he didn't assume he was having no effect. She waited, inactive, for the universe to bring her replacements. The way it had brought her facsimiles of children when her own real baby had died and she'd tried and failed to follow. Facsimiles like Rosalie herself.

Rosalie couldn't mourn that way, and it made her itchy to be near Esme when she was doing it. So Rosalie went around the lake, and then she packed up all of Elspeth's belongings

right down to the bath towels and the barettes and the panda-bear slippers and stowed the boxes in the basement. She personally tracked down every person who'd been on a boat on Lake Huron the day Elspeth disappeared and questioned them, even though the police had already done the same thing and come up empty. When she found the same nothingness they had, she dove *into* the lake and searched the floor of it for some dropped object that might be a clue. There were a lot of objects, but nothing that Elspeth had been wearing or anything Rosalie could identify as belonging to the abductor.

Emmett shadowed her during most of this, although she made her trip around Huron alone. He didn't talk much, waiting for her to tell him what she needed. She didn't talk much, finding that she couldn't come up with any needed thing he could provide beyond his consoling presence.

"I want to go to college again," Rosalie announced abruptly in mid-July.

"Where?" Emmett asked her.

Rosalie picked a big, anonymous school that she hadn't attended before, in a rainy climate. Emmett quietly made the appropriate bribes and recycled their old admissions essays to get the pair of them in at the odd time of year. They moved into an apartment near the campus and Rosalie signed up for a credit load so massive she needed special permission from the registrar.

Carlisle and Esme sold the Michigan house and moved to Prince Edward Island. Rosalie and Emmett visited them when school broke for Christmas, but otherwise only called on the phone and e-mailed on a regular, appeasing schedule. They stayed at school for the summer sessions.

In three years Rosalie and Emmett had both graduated with new bachelors' degrees, hers a double in electrical engineering and photography just because she hadn't done either before and his in French literature because he'd chosen at random. She'd managed, mostly, to sink the loss of her niece under a sea of other, shallower considerations, and when she and Emmett moved to the PEI house with Carlisle and Esme, she felt almost normal.

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"We could adopt," said Emmett.

It was a tired, old conversation, but it was one they hadn't had in a while, and one that was in every respect a *normal* part of how they were together, or at least how they had been. "No," she said.

"The Volturi *routinely* go decades without caring what we're up to. We'd have time to raise the kid," he said. Then he hesitated, and something that wasn't in the script passed his lips: "Especially now that we're not attached to anyone with a power they want to collect."

Rosalie ignored the insertion about their fractured family. "Raise them to adulthood, and then what? Hope the Volturi leave them alone until they're eighty-six and dead and buried, hope they leave *their* children alone, leave their *grandchildren* alone? We can't hide

what we are over that kind of time span. They'd know, and eventually the Volturi would notice, and that's a death sentence. And not the gentle kind, in their sleep of old age."

"Not if we turn them," Emmett said. "Death or *turning*."

"Death one way or death another." Involuntarily, her hand moved to rest over her sculpted, unchangeable abdomen. "They wouldn't have a choice, any more than I did, or you."

"We aren't dead," he murmured. "And I don't regret turning."

"I do," she said.

This was the part where he folded his arms around her and nuzzled the back of her neck. "I wish you didn't."

"Well, that's another thing I regret losing," she said. "The capacity to change. I'm not going to take it from a child. *My* child."

"Okay, Rose," he said into her hair. "Okay."

"I love you, you know," she told him.

"I love you too."

---

Rosalie never told anyone, but part of why she missed Elspeth was the dreams.

When she told Elspeth the right bedtime stories, then the images that came out of her hot little hand overnight were those same stories made - not solid, but *experienced* in a way that Rosalie couldn't do herself with a pen and paper or her own imagination. Rosalie selfishly cast herself as a mother in every tale that called for one, suggesting that maybe the character had yellow hair and smiling encouragingly when Elspeth said "Like you, Aunt Rosalie?". Rosalie invented for herself passels of children, one at a time or in batches, imagined them born the usual way from a human version of her who'd never been hurt, who'd gone on living the blissfully orderly life she'd been set up to lead.

And then Elspeth, in sleep, gave those fantasy children faces, and dreamed them cavorting around lawns and playing and laughing around a pink-cheeked, gray-haired dream-Rosalie, and the real Rosalie, still as a statue and as cold, got to watch.

Elspeth herself was not Rosalie's daughter. Rosalie couldn't claim her as such, and wouldn't anyway. Elspeth belonged to the lucky dead who'd made her from scratch, and knew it, and Rosalie was only a very attentive guardian.

But not attentive enough.

And with Elspeth went the dreams.



## Mimicry

Ritter Bauer worried about his littlest sister.

When Adelaide was two and Ritter fifteen, she was talking, but she didn't do it the way the four siblings between them had (seven, if you counted the ones who'd died as infants). Adelaide didn't struggle to pronounce things, and she didn't form new sentences, and she *never* repeated herself. Adelaide instead listened to someone speak - Ritter himself, or one of their parents, or another sibling, or someone who stopped at the inn the Bauers ran. She'd pick a word, she'd repeat it singular and clear and perfect and *exact* in a way no two-year-old should, and then she'd never say it again. She didn't cry if she'd spoken the word for some treat or toy and no one presented it to her. She didn't *mean* the words, only tasted them.

Ritter didn't point out to anyone how strange this was. And then Adelaide got the cough, and couldn't talk at all. During, or after.

It didn't seem to bother her, at age three or even later, that her throat was too damaged to form words. She developed an ad-hoc library of signs to communicate with the family, learned them quick and perfect (and *did* use those, instead of dropping them like she had her few spoken sounds). She heard perfectly well. She could be taught to do chores. She learned them fast, sitting watchful on a counter or a fence or a stool while someone showed her something, and then she'd do it herself, perfect and quiet.

She watched everyone, and Ritter watched her, the greedy pull of her eyes. She would turn up with inexplicable skills. When she was seven it was discovered that she could, somehow, sew gloves: she wasn't quick with them, but they were neat and perfect. The nearest glover admitted that he'd found her lurking in his workshop watching him stitch, but swore that as soon as he'd noticed her he'd sent her running along. When she was nine she materialized the ability to dance, any dance one cared to name, with or without a partner and graceful and smiling and perfect.

She slipped out more as she grew older, turned up everywhere from the blacksmith's to the old widow's henhouse. There weren't enough signs for her to explain herself. Ritter asked her to try anyway, to somehow account for her need to be everywhere and watch everything done, but she just waved him away, smiling a secret smile.

Ritter got married when he was twenty-three (Adelaide was ten) and his wife moved into the family inn with him.

Adelaide watched her.

Four days later, Ritter's wife turned up dead. It looked like an accident, like she'd fallen and hit her head in the stables.

Ritter asked Adelaide if she'd seen it happen, but she just shook her head, wide-eyed:  
*no.*

Ritter wondered if she'd ever had the opportunity to watch a clever assassin at work, and shuddered and put it out of his mind.

He remarried a year later, and the second wife didn't turn up dead and eventually he had his own family to deal with. Two years after that, the senior Bauer died, and Ritter took over the inn. Adelaide and a brother and three sisters still lived there, but Ritter didn't pay them as much attention as he had in the past.

Adelaide turned fourteen, and then she disappeared.

Ritter tore the town apart trying to find out who'd last seen his sister, and discovered that she'd been observed skulking about, following a traveling entertainer as he scoped out the best places to busk for coins.

Ritter couldn't leave the inn himself to look for his vanished sister, but he sent their brother Kaspar in the direction the entertainer had been seen to go. Kaspar was back a week and a half later with Adelaide perched behind him on the horse, smiling and carrying a fiddle that she could suddenly play (perfectly). Kaspar hadn't found the entertainer, but he'd encountered Adelaide, by herself, with the violin - like she was waiting for him to pick her up.

Ritter admonished her not to go on wandering away by herself - it was *dangerous*, he or Kaspar might not be able to find her if she went far. Adelaide listened, or seemed to. She went on leaving home by herself, but as though to oblige him, she played her fiddle nearly everywhere she went, duplicating birdsongs and everything drunkards at the inn belted out and once seeming to memorize all the sheet music in the church. This made her somewhat easier to find.

Adelaide was not an especially pretty girl, and while there were rude jokes swirling about town that her destroyed voice would make her an ideal wife, no interest was serious. She unnerved people, and could make a dreadful howling noise with her fiddle if she wanted someone to leave her alone (once she was bored with watching them, generally). She seemed uninterested in the prospect of marriage herself, shaking her head when Ritter asked. She didn't eat much, and inn patrons would throw money at her when she played music at home, so Ritter shrugged and decided to simply keep her where she was.

When she was sixteen, Adelaide was found holding the broken pieces of her fiddle and standing over a man's body. He was one of the local farmers, a burly, rough man, and it was generally agreed that a girl Adelaide's size - inclined a little to plumpness, but not tall, not strong - couldn't be responsible. She managed to communicate by pointing and signing that he'd been drunk, and fallen, and knocked her instrument out of her hands in so doing and hit his head on a particular rock.

Ritter didn't think of his first wife in this context until the following month, at which point Adelaide had disappeared again and returned (unaccompanied) with a piccolo. She couldn't, or wouldn't, explain where she'd gone or where the pipe had come from, but she played it as prettily as she has the fiddle, of course.

That was the last time Adelaide left town until she was twenty-one, and while Ritter wondered occasionally about his first wife and the drunken farmer, he mostly put it out of his mind. He had a lot else to think about, and Adelaide looked completely harmless, anyway. She did stare, but staring didn't hurt anyone. He'd never *seen* her hurt anyone, she only wanted to look around her and play music.

When Adelaide was twenty-one a pale stranger with black eyes and unearthly grace came to town. He stayed at the inn, but ate nothing Ritter could see, and slept all day, and spoke with a strange accent that disappeared over the course of the first night he was there. He said his name was Lutz Kirsch, but Ritter wasn't sure he believed him. It didn't matter very much, though; he was secretive and strange, but his money jingled properly.

Lutz Kirsch - or whatever his name was - had Adelaide's *undivided* attention.

*How* she stared at him. Ritter didn't think she was suddenly interested in marriage - she looked the same way at sheet music - but she was interested in *something* about the stranger for certain, as though she didn't dare blink. Occasionally she'd lick her lips in the oddest way. Ritter sometimes saw her sitting outside the door to Lutz's room during the day when the man was asleep, with her ear pressed to the door. He didn't pull her away, as she'd only go back when he wasn't looking and Lutz hadn't complained, but it disturbed him.

Lutz appeared to ignore Adelaide, until he'd been in town for two days, and then it was though he was as intrigued by her as she was by him. He let her teach him all of her signs, and then between the two of them they invented more, until Ritter couldn't follow the conversation - for Lutz was signing too, he could speak and she could hear but instead he was twisting his hands in the air for her to watch. She looked raptly, never seeming to miss a sign even though at least ninety percent of them had been invented an hour earlier.

"What are you saying to her?" Ritter asked Lutz once.

"If I wanted you to know, I'd say it to *you*," said Lutz with absolute contempt, and Adelaide smiled a fierce little smile.

Adelaide got up later every morning and stayed up later every night, "talking" to their dark-eyed nocturnal guest who never looked rested, and Ritter's sleep crept forward too as he kept an eye on sister and stranger, but then his wife complained and he resumed a more normal schedule. Kaspar was up nights anyway, to have someone available to take in odd arrivals.

"What do you like about her, anyway? Is she *interesting*?" Ritter asked Lutz, a few days later when he'd gotten up earlier than usual and Lutz was still awake. It hadn't occurred to him, before, that his silent littlest sister might be a good conversationalist, able to hold an otherwise bored man's attention for hours on end.

"More interesting than you," snorted Lutz.

"Look," said Ritter, "if you're - you know - you shouldn't be alone with her, all right? Flapping your hands at each other is fine, I guess, but make sure Kaspar is around or people will talk and I don't want to have to hurt you."

Lutz stared Ritter in the eyes, and said, "My designs don't resemble the ones you imply."

"Good. But still - I'll be checking in with Kaspar to be sure," said Ritter, not at all sure that he'd actually extracted a concession.

"Of course you will," said Lutz, looking away. He glanced out the window, at the vaguely pinkish approach of dawn, and then covered a yawn with his hand and retreated to his room.

Kaspar reported only conversations, endless inscrutable conversations, for the three further nights Lutz remained in the inn. Then on the last day of his stay, he left, during a cloudy midafternoon. Coin sufficient to cover the visit was left in the room he vacated.

Adelaide was gone too, when Ritter looked for her.

She left her piccolo behind.

Four other people were missing, too, the same day - the woodcutter and the butcher's eldest girl and a Jew from the north bit of town and the washwoman, all gone. Some people thought those four and Adelaide and Lutz were all victims of the same abduction, somehow.

Ritter thought differently, but he didn't know how to follow her anyway, or where to send Kaspar riding off to, and he had four children and a wife who thought Adelaide took up too much of his attention, and he had an inn to run, and he did have other sisters to worry about.

He put Adelaide and her strange, watchful ways out of his mind.

Ritter didn't see his youngest sister again until six years later, when he'd just got past his fortieth birthday, his (second) wife and his firstborn daughter were both dead of the fever that was going around, and the inn had half burnt down and been rebuilt on a substantial loan, which he was able - just barely - to pay down every fortnight as required. He almost didn't notice her. He was going back to the inn from the baker's, having adjusted the inn's regular order for bread. It was a bit past nightfall, and he saw a flash of white out of the corner of his eye.

When he looked around, Adelaide was standing at the edge of the road to the inn, smiling familiarly.

If she hadn't been smiling he'd never have recognized her, because her face had changed, and she had her hair tied up in complicated braids that wrapped around her head, and her eyes - he couldn't see the colors very clearly in moonlight, but they were darker. They used to be pale blue. She was more beautiful than she'd been, more self-assured in how she held herself. And she still looked twenty-one, not a bit like she'd been gone for half a dozen years. Ritter wondered if she'd died then, not just disappeared; if he was meeting her because he'd just now keeled over of a heart attack.

"Ritter," she said in a voice like an angel's, and then he was pretty sure he was dead, because Adelaide couldn't talk.

"How'd I die?" he asked, resigned, wondering if his sons would fight over the inn, with each other, maybe with Kaspar.

"You're alive," she said, moonlight glinting off her smile. "*I'm* only different, not dead."

"Where did you go?" he asked, vaguely dizzy.

"Switzerland," she said. "To start. I've been around rather a lot. And that's why I came back to thank you, Ritter."

"To thank me?" he asked.

"For being such an *idiot*," she clarified, still smiling that shiny smile. "You came closer than anyone else to *not* being an idiot, you know, but not close enough, and so I got through okay."

Somehow "you're welcome" didn't seem like the correct reply here. "Did that Kirsch fellow abduct you, or -"

She laughed, pealing and chiming, and Ritter realized - he'd never realized before - that when the cough took her voice it took her *laugh*, too, he hadn't heard it since she was *two*. She'd smiled so much and never laughed. "He made me better," she chuckled in a low voice, eyes some dark color reflecting the stars. "But he couldn't have, if you'd ever realized, when it was your wife or anyone after her. Who knows what might have become of me then?"

"Is he here?" asked Ritter. He wasn't sure what he'd do with the information. He wasn't sure what he'd do with any of this information. It just seemed like something to ask.

Adelaide shook her head. "I lost interest in him," she said, like she was explaining why she no longer played a certain piece of music. Ritter noticed there was a flute - made of glass, he thought, although it was hard to tell in the dark - hanging from a cord looped around her waist, and she wasn't wearing any shoes. "I don't know where he's gotten to now."

"And you're here to thank me," Ritter said slowly.

"Mm. We have other siblings, don't we?" she asked, tapping her chin in thought. "I don't want to see them, particularly, but I'm trying to remember. It's hard to make small talk when I don't know."

"A brother and three sisters between us," murmured Ritter.

She nodded once. "I should probably have asked Lutz to tell me when I was running about with him; he'd remember," she said. "Is there anyone you happen to want dead, as long as I'm here thanking you?"

Ritter thought of the moneylender and wondered if the debt would go away if he died. Probably not. "No," he said.

"All right, then. I'm going to Denmark. I'll most likely never see you again. Bye," said Adelaide with a silvery laugh. She loped away. She wasn't going too fast - Ritter could have caught up - but she didn't give the impression of exerting herself either. Like she was a soap bubble.

He watched her go, stunned. A bit of moonlight glinted off the tip of her glass flute, and music lilted after her.

---

Elsbeth's power tasted bubbly and sweet but with an edge, like watermelon soda with a twist of lemon. (Addy was always intrigued by the way that powers tasted like *food*, the usual kind, without being disgusting - if she'd sipped *actual* soda she'd have felt compelled to spit it out, but she could compare power-tastes to the smells of things humans ate and come up with reasonable descriptions.) It was a cleaner taste than the cloying artificial-grape slush of Alec's power, which it first displaced. It was peppier than Renata's smooth cream, tarter than Chelsea's flavorless saccharine. It wasn't as intense as the shock of *pepper!* that was Jane.

But it was complex and had potential.

Potential was *delicious*.

Addy didn't use the power for anything immediately. She had to help track down the stray witches, and watermelon soda wasn't helpful there. She *expected* to get the tasty hybrid back eventually, but there were other things to focus on. She did not *like* having lost Vasanti (tastes like chicken) or Dwi (butter) or Benjamin (garlic and olive oil and parmesan and basil... she wasn't sure which represented which element, if it did at all).

She borrowed Jane (*pepper!*) and gave chase. Demetri's power (red wine vinegar) would have been more helpful, but he was away doing... something... (Addy thought of rosewater and didn't know why). Jane's power would do the trick as long as she got within sight of the fleeing prisoners; it would pin them down until Alec caught up with her. Other guards would keep humans well back, leaning hard on the Volturi's network of influence.

Addy, and the other guards on their own hunts, brought back almost everyone, from Li-qing (sweet potato) to Sukutai (fruit punch). Razi (salt, just salt, very thematically appropriate as salt went *everywhere*, and so delicious) was *gone*. There was no fixing that. She'd never be able to sneak up on him again.

She did get her watermelon soda, though, brought back from Denali along with Edward (root beer) and Jasper (whiskey) and *Alice*, tasty useful *Alice* who tasted of frosted carrot cake.

With Edward's power, she heard Elspeth talking to herself, and herself talked *back*. It wasn't like listening to a human who was ill and heard voices. It was something different, something in the power. Something *new*.

Addy wanted to know what the addition tasted like, so when she had a chance, she paid the girl a visit.

It was definitely different. The lemon was sharper, and Addy thought she *almost* tasted mint, although not quite. Potential. Tasty, tasty potential.

When she had a chance, she tried the bit of the power that let her talk to herself.

Addy wasn't sure in advance how many bits her own magic would manifest as - two, one for her native power and one for the girl's? Just one, for the both of them or one or the other?

There were two besides herself (if that was the correct way to think of the division), and they both looked like Addy: one with a predator's smile and the other in the predator's clutches, limp and staring into space but not actually unconscious. Elspeth had names for hers, silly alliterative designations - Addy named the grinning cannibalistic power Adele and the listless abductee Aide, more fragments of her name. She liked taking it apart.

"I think I can guess," she said to them, in the void the power created for them to occupy. "Mine." She pointed at the standing Adele with the raptorial smirk on her face. "And my copy of Elspeth's." Drooping Aide.

"Yes," murmured Aide.

"Interesting," Addy said, with a grin to match Adele's. Adele's hand adjusted Aide's hair in an oddly possessive gesture - "Why are you clutching at her like that, when I'll trade her for something else as soon as I have reason?"

"She's not *ripe* yet," Adele purred. "She can be *better*. I think she can be like *Aro* - like the opposite of *Aro* - with *more control*, more *power*, just *think* how delicious." Addy half-expected Adele to lean down and lick her captured prey, but it didn't happen.

*Aro's* power had an incomparably rich flavor, like some complicated broth, bayleaf and carrot and beef and soy and onion and goodness only knew what else. But it was *finished*. There was nothing that could be added to it, it was a soup unto itself, it had been simmering in the kettle for thousands of years until its tastes were mingled and impossible to disentangle. He couldn't grow.

Elspeth *could*. The lemon could sharpen, the mint could wake up the flavor, the bubbly soda-taste could develop more zest, the watermelon could sweeten -

"Raspberry," cooed Adele. "Pomegranate. Honeysuckle. Cranberry. Who *knows* what else she could taste like. *Teach* her. I want to *taste* it."

Addy smiled - with her real lips, outside the mental arena where she met her magic - and dropped her hand away from her face.

Elspeth wasn't going anywhere, so Addy took her time, but she did exactly that. The hybrid girl was biddable enough when she'd been spooked (and that was easy enough to do). Spearmint gave the soda a magnificent cooling taste, and a layer of raspberry tartness developed just like Adele's first guess.

Addy didn't find cause to *talk* to the incarnations of her magic (native and appropriated) again, but she did look at them occasionally. Adele handled Aide like the latter was a large and fascinating doll, propping her up or slinging her over her shoulders or cradling her in her arms. Always with the avid, covetous grin.

Addy had other responsibilities: she needed to borrow the power from Marcus (champagne) to help Chelsea. She needed to borrow Pera's (some sort of glazed meat, maybe apricot on mutton) to keep an eye on the reclusive new addition. She attended a small confrontation in the Alps for which she brought Zafrina's illusion power (tofu).

But, regularly, she coaxed Elspeth and her accompanying beverage to greater heights of sweet-sour-cold-fizziness, adding new facets to the magic with dizzying rapidity.

Addy did wonder, once, if powers other than Elspeth's would behave the same way that Aide did, letting Adele manhandle them while they relaxed and gazed neutrally at nothing. She couldn't check, since those powers didn't offer the same affordance to inspect them that Elspeth's did. Still, Charles's truth-detection (mustard) or Pyotr's compulsion (potato chips) and Emel's control of metal (pickles) seemed - insofar as powers could have independent personalities - like they might not tolerate this. But then, when Elspeth spoke to her own Magic, it (she?) didn't act like Aide did either. Aide wasn't *just* a version of Elspeth's Magic wearing Addy's face.

Then again, no one was holding Magic hostage, while Adele never let go of Aide given the chance to hold her. Magic's behavior might change if something equivalent were going on inside Elspeth's mind.

Addy was *annoyed* when she had to flee Volterra. But none of the powers she was leaving behind - not the vanilla ice cream of Taamusi's freezing power, or Abdelmajid's marjoram x-ray vision, or Emere's invisible knife that tasted like celery - was *changing*. She could always remember those flavors, the way those powers stung her tongue when she took and wielded them. Elspeth's was *changing*.

Addy didn't want to miss it.

And then there was Maggie, whose power (supposedly like Charles's, but reversed; he detected honesty, Maggie detected lying) tasted like skim milk and didn't hold Addy's interest for more than a moment. And *then...*

Siobhan's flavor hit Addy over the head like an anvil, *bread*, warm and yeasty and crisp.

While intense, it was a plain taste, and Addy understood how someone who went around with something so *plain* might not notice it was there. Bread *carried* other flavors; one used it as a substrate for jam or cream cheese or peanut butter or tuna salad or leftover turkey, and Siobhan's magic didn't bring any of those items to the table by itself. Unobtrusively, it *carried* information about the world, turned it into a spread or a filling of something manageable. *Plan sandwiches*. So simple, so *useful*. Addy abandoned Elspeth's fruity soda without a second thought. *This* power would let her get it back, and more, if she played her cards right.

She found Nathan, a stroke of very fine luck, and his power was mixed nuts, shifting between almond and pistachio and cashew and acorn and pecan and more whenever she posed it a question. She did miss the bready magic, but she wasn't liable to forget the plan she'd put together with its help; nutty timing power would be better for actually enacting it.

And she sat back, and waited.

She couldn't regret, much, the loss of many of the guards. She knew those tastes. There was a certain degree of annoyance at the deaths of Afton (pinto beans), Corin (parsley), and Heidi (fondant icing), among others... but Elspeth and her lovely, blossoming power were alive, as were many others.

Including Bella.

Empress Regnant Isabella Marie Swan Cullen the Untasteable.

Addy *knew* the self-styled Empress was a witch, and if she stood close enough to Bella, she could *almost* taste it... but *only* almost, and unlike every other witch she'd approached in her life, touching Bella did nothing.

It was *outrageously* frustrating.

But Addy knew she had otherwise made out extremely well, and pasted a smile on her face and worked hard and made do with the available smorgasboard. When Harry the minor tracker (who she'd tasted before, at La Push before he died; he was a mild blueberry) got his power back, she wasn't especially interested. Didyme was new to her, though: chocolate. (Of course, chocolate - what else would an aura of happiness taste like?) And other witches crossed her path in the course of her duties as Imperial Factotum. She did a great deal of commuting, usually under the influence of Razi's salty magic, and there were new magics on a regular basis.

Elspeth went on improving, after she became willing to resume her lessons (either reduced coercion or increased age slowed her down, but she did get better), and soon the hybrid represented an enthralling array of sweet fruits (as well as mint and rhubarb, technically vegetables) all whipped into a bubbly potion of versatile power.

It took nearly thirty years before Bella was able (or willing - Addy didn't know how to distinguish the two) to let Addy in through her inner protection and sample that elusive shield.

Addy licked her lips.

It tasted of apple.

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## Forms

Form PRPR-1-ENG Preliminary Application for Turning  
Issued and processed by the Department of Public Relations on behalf of Her Imperial Majesty Empress Regnant Isabella Marie Swan Cullen of the Golden Coven

*If this is a medical emergency, you may opt for an Expedited Interview instead of completing this application. The PRPR representative on duty will assist you on request. If you are filling out this form on someone else's behalf, write your full name in the left margin, and otherwise respond to the questions as the other person would accurately reply.*

*All numbered questions are mandatory except those that do not apply to you on the basis of sex or other criteria specified. The veracity of your answers will be confirmed via appropriate magic. If you are not willing to undergo any available magical test regarding your answers to these questions (see Pamphlet 2-B, section 3, for a description of such tests) you may return this form incomplete and leave at any time.*

*If your situation is unusual in a way that this form does not cover, or it is ambiguous to you which answer to a question best suits you, there is space available to write on the back.*

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1. Full name:

2. Date of birth:

3. Do you currently have a witchcraft ability? (Check one.)

Yes (specify):

No

No, but I expect to have one as a vampire (specify reasoning):

I'm not sure, and would like to find out via a magical test as described in Pamphlet 2-B, section 5

I'm not sure, but am not interested in finding out

4. Do you have a preexisting relationship with any vampire(s), part-vampire(s), or werewol(f/ves)? (Check all that apply and write the individual's or individuals' name(s) in the space provided. If you are related to multiple supernatural persons through a single supernatural relative, you need include only the relative nearest to you; PRPR has genealogical data on file. For example, if your brother has become a vampire and now has one or more hybrid children, list only your brother, not your hybrid nieces and nephews. If, independently of family relationship, you are close friends with a relative several degrees removed, you may list them separately in that category. Relationships via marriage (i.e. in-laws) or adoption are relevant where they are the closest applicable, and may be included.)

Yes, a vampire has mated to me:

Yes, a vampire is a member of my family (specify relation):

Yes, a vampire is a close friend of mine:

Yes, a werewolf has imprinted on me:

- Yes, a werewolf is a member of my family (specify relation):
- Yes, a werewolf is a close friend of mine:
- Yes, a werewolf is my spouse or lover *but* I am not an imprint:
- Yes, a hybrid is in my family (specify relation):
- Yes, a hybrid is a close friend of mine:
- Yes, a hybrid is my spouse or lover:
- No, I do not have a preexisting relationship with any supernatural person.

5. **If female**, are you willing to carry a part-vampire to term? (Check one.)

- Yes, I am currently pregnant with my own part-vampire child (specify father):
- Yes, I am currently pregnant with someone else's part-vampire child (specify parents):
- Yes, I want to carry my own part-vampire child (specify father if already selected):
- Yes, I am willing to carry or have already agreed to carry someone else's part-vampire child (specify parents if already arranged):
- No, I do not intend to carry a part-vampire child.

6. Please check the option(s) that best describe(s) your desire to become a vampire, and **elaborate** on the back. If none of these answers is close, write your answer on the back. If you find it difficult to put your motivations into writing, you may ask the PRPR representative on duty to arrange a verbal and/or magical interview.

- Having greater capabilities appeals to me.
- Immortality appeals to me.
- I am dying, or suffer from a chronic illness/disability, which vampirism will fix.
- I would prefer to fall under the jurisdiction of the Golden Empire rather than my human society of origin.
- I am a vampire's mate, and want to join him or her.
- I am interested in joining my vampire friend(s) or family.
- Finding a mate of my own appeals to me.
- Other (specify):

7. Are you owed reparations from vampirekind? (Note: To apply for financial reparations, or reparations in other forms, ask for a copy of form PRPR-6-ENG. This question on this form only informs your likelihood of being granted permission to become a vampire yourself.)

- Yes, I have reason to believe that someone close to me was killed by a vampire before the Golden Coven deposed the Volturi (specify person, location, and date):
- Yes, I have reason to believe that someone close to me was killed by a vampire after the Golden Coven deposed the Volturi (specify person, location, and date):
- Yes, I and/or someone close to me was subject to involuntary relationship destruction (specify person, date, and other details):
- Yes, a member of my family was lost in the mnemonic blast (specify):
- Yes, I have been harmed in some other way by a vampire, hybrid, or werewolf (specify harm and date):
- No, I have not endured any significant harm that I can trace back to a vampire, hybrid, or werewolf.

8. What do you hope to do after becoming a vampire if your application is approved?

- I hope to live alone as a civilian vampire (specify location):

I hope to live alone with my mate, specified above, as a civilian vampire (specify location):

An existing coven (specify) has invited me to join them should my application be approved:

I hope to join a coven, but have not yet arranged to do so.

I am interested in working for the Golden Coven.

9. How did you come by your information about the supernatural world?

I was recruited by the Golden Coven's Research and Development Department.

I was recruited by another branch of the Golden Coven.

A vampire mated to me (specified above) and told me.

A werewolf imprinted on me (specified above) and told me.

I was raised with the information (specify circumstances):

A friend or family member (specify) told me:

I came across the information in an official capacity, such as by working for a human government which is in contact with the Golden Coven (specify):

I came across the information accidentally, such as by observing someone perform a superhuman feat when they did not intend to show me such a thing (specify):

I came across the information another way (specify):

10. Have you read all of the informational materials printed by the PRPR department?

Pamphlets include 1A ("Introduction to Vampires"), 1B ("Introduction to Werewolves"), 1C ("Introduction to Hybrids"), 1D ("Introduction to Witches"), 2A ("The Golden Coven"), 2B ("Magical Resources of the Golden Coven"), 2C ("Departments and Services"), 2D ("Golden Empire Law"), 3A ("Introduction to Supernatural History"), 3B ("Introduction to Supernatural History, Part II"), 4A ("Appendices"), and 4B ("Frequently Asked Questions"). If you have not read all of these materials, and wish to do so before completing and turning in this application, ask the PRPR representative on duty for copies. (Check all that apply.)

Yes, I have read all of the PRPR informational materials.

I have read some of the PRPR informational materials (specify):

My primary source of information about the supernatural world has been a person or several people (specify):

I would like to discuss the details of the supernatural world with a PRPR representative before continuing with my application process.

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*Turning in this form does not commit you to becoming a vampire. You may change your mind and elect to remain human at any time up until the moment at which you are anesthetized to begin the turning process. You, and only you, are responsible for the decision to apply to become a vampire. If you are being pressured into applying by someone else, **including** a vampire who is mated to you, tell the PRPR representative on duty and you will receive help. **Do not** become a vampire for reasons not your own.*

*If you are filling out this form on behalf of another person, be aware that they will be investigated to confirm their consent, without which no turning will take place. The Golden Coven regrets that we cannot make exceptions for people who are medically unable to consent; however, magical assistance makes it possible to secure consent from some persons who cannot be queried via ordinary means.*

*Adults are not considered by the Golden Coven to have the power to consent on behalf of their minor children, nor to withhold such consent (although parental opinions will be sought under normal circumstances regarding applicants under 18; note on back if there is a pressing reason to avoid this in your case). Note that, regardless of consent, it is currently opposed to Golden Coven policy to turn anyone younger than 14 years of age. You may apply as or on behalf of such a person anyway if your circumstances are highly unusual, but the application is unlikely to succeed. Turnings of persons younger than 17 are subject to more scrutiny than applications from individuals 17 and older, but are not directly ruled out.*

*Becoming a vampire is irrevocable. Becoming a vampire places you under the permanent jurisdiction of the Golden Empire, obliges you to obey its laws, and renders you subject to appropriate penalties for breaking those laws. (See Pamphlet 2D.) You will not be turned if, in the estimation of the Golden Coven, you are unwilling to comport or incapable of comporting yourself as a non-destructive member of vampire society.*

*If your application is denied, the rejection slip will include a statement about when or under what circumstances, if ever, you will be permitted to re-apply. You are encouraged to re-apply after the designated interval or event. Under certain circumstances, PRPR may be able to put you in touch with members of the supernatural community who may be able to help you improve your application.*

*If your application is accepted, turning is not guaranteed. Permission may be revoked at any time up until the moment at which venom enters your system.*

*If you have completed this application and are ready to continue the process, turn it in to the PRPR representative on duty.*

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"Wow," said Angela, staring at the form. "Um, wow."

"If you have any questions, feel free to ask," invited the ice-pale, dark-haired woman standing behind the counter in the office. "There's no hurry. We take applications on a rolling basis."

"Uh-huh," said Angela, blinking at the form.

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This was not what she'd expected to happen as a result of trying Bella's old e-mail address. It had been a gesture of sentiment, nothing else, a message sent into the ether: *I know you died, I know you won't read this, but our ten-year high school reunion is next month, and I thought of you.* It was a little odd to think of her, so long after the fact. Bella had been Angela's friend for about five months, that was all, and then she'd eloped over summer vacation, dropped out of school, and died in a fire on the Quileute reservation along with hundreds of other people -

Except.

*I probably should have told you sooner, but I have been soooo busy!* came a reply - a reply from a dead woman's e-mail address. *I'm actually alive. Had to fake my death. (Long story.) But not so important to keep secret anymore. Since I didn't graduate am I actually invited to the reunion? Also Edward and Alice. I'm not sure if Jasper and Rosalie and Emmett will want to attend theirs but if you know when it will be that would be good to know just in case. Thanks! -Bella*

Angela had stared at the message for half an hour, not knowing what to think. The writing sounded like Bella's, the same careless treatment of serious topics that Angela had found amusing when they were in school together.

It could be some awful joke. Bella's cousin or a friend from Phoenix or something, or an unusually articulate spam bot, with access to her account and an inclination to make fun of the dead at Angela's expense.

Or not.

Angela didn't personally *know* any of the Quileutes - they said they were real Quileutes, anyway, not random Native Americans from some other tribe - who'd moved back into La Push after its five year vacancy. But she'd heard rumors that some of them had been thought dead in the fire, just like Bella.

*How do I know you're really Bella?* she asked finally. The real Bella would not be offended by this question. And would come up with an answer.

*You know the spa that got built where my family (I mean the Cullens, not my dad) used to live?* the next message said. Angela hadn't personally seen the spa complex, but she'd heard of it. It was oddly placed, considering that it was so exclusive that no one who actually lived in Forks was allowed in and only seemed to be open two months out of every couple of years. Jessica (not exactly Angela's friend anymore, but they talked, sometimes; Jessica had a son in Angela's kindergarten) had gone up to it once while the lights were on. She'd been turned away by a snooty employee.

*I can so not afford that.* They were trading e-mails in real time at this point, and Angela would have switched to IM if she'd known Bella's screen name.

*Don't have to. I work there. You can just show up anytime, and tell someone who you are and that you're looking for me. They'll let you in :)*

*4pm tomorrow?*

*Sure,* said Bella's response, *just tell the lady on duty at the front office that you're looking for Bella and she'll show you where to go. See you soon!*

And so Angela hurried five-year-olds through fingerpainting and storytime and naps and counting and the alphabet, saw them all onto their buses, and then got into her little blue car and drove up to the spa.

The lady in the front office did not appear to have a chair behind her desk, which was strange. Her eyes were a rich gold (hadn't the Cullens had gold eyes, at least some of the time?), and she wore black hair in a long braid that contrasted with her frosty complexion. When Angela came in, the receptionist - it seemed the likeliest job title - waited for her to speak first.

"Er, hi, I'm Angela. I'm here looking for Bella."

"Of course," replied the receptionist with a tilt of her head. "This way." She stepped around the counter and beckoned with one hand, leading Angela down a corridor that stretched off to the right. There were various offices, some with nameplates (one said "HIH Elspeth Cullen" - Angela didn't remember an Elspeth in the Cullen family and had no idea what HIH stood for) and other designations ("Turning", what was that supposed to mean?). There was also an eminently normal "Copy Room", although Angela wasn't sure why a *spa* would need one. She didn't see anything very spa-like, but this was only one building of several.

Past all these offices was just a hallway, with windows looking out onto the grounds. They were pretty lush with plant life, although it was mostly the sort that wouldn't require much maintenance - trees and shrubs rather than grass that would need mowing or flowers that would need weeding. Angela supposed it would be expensive to have a gardener around all year when the spa was often closed.

Angela and the receptionist didn't encounter anyone in the hallway, but there were people flitting about behind the windows to the other buildings, uniformly pale people who moved like dancers just as the receptionist did. The air smelled like flowers, and a little shiver went up Angela's spine.

"So what does Bella do here?" Angela asked.

"She's... in charge," came the reply, and Angela gaped in confusion, but they were at the end of the hall and her guide held open the door, and there, in the amphitheater-sized room of the central building, was Bella.

Recognition was immediate, and then second-guessed. Yes, the woman - wearing, of all things, a *crown* wrought of gold on top of a perfectly ordinary jeans-and-t-shirt outfit - looked like Bella. *Except* Bella's eyes were brown (the crowned woman's were gold), Bella's hair was long (the crowned woman had a pixie cut), Bella's skin was pale but *flushed* and this person was bloodlessly white, and moreover, Bella should be almost thirty and this person was obviously a teenager. Bella had also not been quite that beautiful.

Angela decided that this was some relative of Bella's - a niece? Maybe Bella had an older sibling she'd never mentioned, who'd already moved away from home by the time Bella's mom had taken up with the baseball player, and the sibling had a kid who went around wearing a circlet and now worked for Bella at the spa (although the facility was *still* not particularly spa-like). Stranger things had happened.

The crown-clad woman watched Angela, who looked around at the others in the room. Edward - no, not Edward, Edward would *also* be almost thirty, was this secretly a *cloning* facility? - a guy who looked exactly *like* Edward Cullen was standing behind the girl who looked like Bella. There was a brown-eyed redhead girl, maybe eighteen or nineteen, standing between a man and a woman each in their mid-twenties who looked Quileute but not like any of the specific individuals Angela had seen prowling about town. Staring into space near the Bella-lookalike, although not as close to her as the Edward-lookalike, was a leggy brunette who didn't resemble anyone in particular, especially not with that vacant expression.

There were others in the room, standing or sitting on the floor (there didn't seem to be any chairs), some with laptops plugged into outlets in the wall, everyone but the redheaded girl and her companions with their eyes black or gold or somewhere in between and looking at Angela.

"Angela is here to see you, Your Imperial Majesty," said the receptionist, bowing to the crowned woman so deeply that her braid swept the floor.

"Thank you, Santiago," said Her Imperial Majesty (who in the *world* was called such a thing anymore, in the United States?), and the receptionist straightened up, nodded to Angela, and turned back into the hallway.

"I'm looking for Bella," said Angela again, slowly, unclear on what could possibly be going on and sticking to her script.

"I *am* Bella," said the too-young, too-pretty, wrong-eyed crown-wearing mystery woman. "I'm sorry if this is a shock, but, well, you weren't even sure I was *myself* via e-mail... I didn't think you'd believe anything more outlandish I wrote."

"I - bwah?" said Angela. There might have been something more befitting the situation to say, but Angela didn't know what it was.

"I would have offered to meet you at a restaurant or something, but I'm still not set to go wandering about in public, not here in Forks where everyone knows me," said Bella (*could* she be Bella?) "looking the way I do. In a few years it should be all right, at least on a local scale. But you're a friend." Bella (?) smiled, but uncertainly, like she wanted confirmation that Angela was her friend.

"Bella?" said Angela.

"Yes?"

"I feel like I should be fainting about now. I'm not sure how to do it. Do I need a fainting couch?" Angela said.

"If you do, I'm sorry, we're fresh out," said Bella, not quite laughing.

"Bella! Bella!" exclaimed a high, crystalline voice, and Angela watched Alice (or her lookalike, or her clone, or *whatever*) hurtle into the room impossibly quickly, "Bella, the coven in Cuba, they're going to - erm - should the human be here while I explain?"

"Elsie, if you would?" Bella said to the redheaded girl - come to think of it, her hair was just like Edward's. "Angela, Elspeth's job is to help explain things to people; she'll answer all your questions. I'm sorry, I didn't expect to have anything else come up this afternoon or I'd do it myself." She smiled apologetically, and the older (or not, who knew, Bella *should have been nearly thirty*) girl approached Angela and motioned towards the hallway. "What was that you said about Cuba, Alice...?" Angela heard behind her, as she numbly followed the redhead and the two Quileutes who seemed to be magnetized to her.

"So, er, you're the Elspeth with the office I saw?" Angela asked.

"Mm-hm. Oh, and these are Jacob and Kelly," Elspeth added, gesturing at the following man and woman. "They're my bodyguards, and if it's more comfortable, you can ignore them, though you don't have to. We can talk in my office."

"Right," said Angela.

Elspeth's office was neat and luxurious, with deep carpet and a dark-stained desk and several matching cushy green chairs. Angela sat in one, grateful that chairs existed in the strange alternate universe she'd found herself in; Elspeth chose one opposite Angela, and the bodyguards fell into place behind their charge. (*Bodyguards, thought Angela, I'm talking to someone who has to have bodyguards. I wonder if they have guns on them. I wonder if I'm in a room which has guns in it.*)

"There are four ways to go about this," Elspeth said, "or any combination of the four. You can ask me questions, and I can answer them; you can read the pamphlets I wrote up which explain most everything, albeit impersonally; I can explain in approximately chronological order starting from the first time you were misinformed; or I can magically impart a summary of all the relevant information to you, including a summary of why I'm able to do that."

Angela stared at her, unable to detect deceit, even about the magic part. Feeling as though her throat were very dry, she said, "I think I'll have a look at those pamphlets you mentioned." Pamphlets were very ordinary things. One could find them on any number of subjects. Angela had a vivid memory of sitting in her college's infirmary, staring at a pamphlet about safe sex and marveling that it was able to make the most arresting topics sound not worth the trouble. That was just the thing needed for this situation.

Elspeth smiled, and fetched a stack of folded-up booklets from her desk, and Angela began to read.

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Some hours later, Angela was sitting back in the front room with Santiago, having read a great many pamphlets and asked a great many questions and feeling remarkably unenlightened for it. She held a form, which purported to be her application to become a

vampire, which had a variety of perks... and several serious drawbacks. Angela's on-again off-again boyfriend-who-might-propose-soon would probably not approve. It would make teaching kindergarten prohibitively difficult for a lengthy adjustment period. It was not conducive to producing a kindergartener of her own someday without elaborate interventions like the ones that explained Elspeth.

Angela re-read the form several times, and then looked up at Santiago, who regarded her cordially. "No hurry, right?" Angela asked. "None at all - I can come back in a few years, maybe?"

"Of course," said Santiago.

"Right." Angela handed back the form, which she hadn't written on at all, and Santiago tucked it away into the counter. "I'll be going, then."

"Have a good evening," said Santiago. "Please don't be indiscreet with what you've learned; we aren't ready to go completely public."

"Right," said Angela. "No one would believe me, anyway."

Santiago inclined her head, and Angela left the building and got in her little blue car and drove home.

The next time one of her kindergarteners asked her if magic was real, she said *yes*.

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## Hybrids

(part 1)

Joham did not *actually* leave his firstborn in the Outback alone as an infant, but it was a near thing.

Throughout the winter of 1689 (not by the local calendar, but he wasn't sure if the locals *had* one), he'd been seeing several women, one from each of a cluster of nearby human communities. "Nearby" by his standards: he traveled between them during the day, visited his lovers at night. They didn't know about each other, as it was easier to coax them into bed when he played the part of a supernatural being uncharacteristically charmed by their beauty with eyes for no other.

He didn't always bother with the coaxing. But he was beginning to suspect that it would make his successful conceptions less likely to drown themselves or slit their throats when they became aware that they carried his children, or even before. The death toll from the pregnancies which *didn't* suicide (or get themselves killed by outraged fellow humans) were already in the dozens, but he persisted: surely if it was possible for them to conceive, it should be possible for them to bear. The children at two weeks along - as far as he'd seen any get - were not strong enough to live apart from their mothers, however promptly Joham arrived on the scene to tear them out of the dead womb.

But when he did take the still bodies out of their mothers, they were perfect little creatures save for being dead - vampire-like skin, but they would have breathed if they'd lived, their hearts would have beaten, who knew what else they might do? Who knew what marvels they'd have grown into?

Joham meant to find out, so: he left Pangari when dawn approached, promising to return to her in a few days. He spent the light of day traveling from where she lived to where Tathra lived, and came to her at dusk.

Except Tathra was, unaccountably, dead, with her belly ripped wide open, and beside her on the ground were several of her family, jagged scoops of their necks missing and surprisingly little blood pooling below the wounds.

Joham smelled the air, but there was no trace of any vampire having been in the place but himself. There were only the smells of blood (he controlled himself; he'd fed on his journey and there wasn't much left in these vessels anyway... but why? It hadn't *all* soaked into the ground...) and standard human odors of food and refuse and the like, and a sweet-spicy smell that was neither familiar nor important.

So a vampire couldn't have killed them. Humans killed each other sometimes, but not like this, not typically. And a wild animal seemed... unlikely.

He almost didn't examine Tathra's midsection more carefully. He would certainly have noticed if she had become pregnant, of course, would have noticed weeks ago.

Except perhaps he wouldn't, because the hollow of the tear was lined with the damply glistening shell he'd become familiar with. How in the world...?

Joham ignored a sharp pain in his ankle and studied the scene. The bodies appeared to have been dead for different amounts of time. Tathra first, this fellow (a brother? He hadn't bothered to ask about her family) after her, then the woman (her aunt, he thought); then the girl perhaps ten years old (maybe Tathra's niece?) was still warm. Something had killed that girl not an hour before his arrival. He was entirely baffled.

The pain in his ankle subsided. He looked at the ring of punctures while they healed, then put his foot back down; it didn't matter where they'd come from and they were recovering normally.

"-aaaa," said a baby's voice from the ground beside the dead child.

Joham stared at her: a healthy brown baby girl with gloss to her skin and blood on her lips. How had he *not seen* her? She'd been there the entire time, he realized, watching him, biting his leg, but... Still, she was obviously his. He broke into a broad grin. She copied him, smiling a toothy, red smile, and flung her hands up, crowing "Vwee!"

"Oh, my, indeed *vwee*," he purred, bending to scoop her up. "Now how did I miss *you*, you charming little miracle?"

"Ababababa," she said, fastening her warm little arms around his neck and clinging there. She didn't seem to have any trouble supporting her own weight, although he propped her up anyway.

"You have been *hungry*, haven't you," he marveled, surveying the destruction she'd wrought. "I'm just not sure how you escaped my noti..."

He dropped his arms to his sides, blinking. He wasn't usually given to talking to himself, and he wasn't grief-stricken over Tathra to the point where he'd sentimentally address her corpse. At any rate, whatever had killed her and her relatives, it wouldn't look good to the Volturi if he just fled the scene and it somehow led the local population to believe in blood-drinking monsters. It wasn't *Joham's* fault, or any vampire's that he could smell (some witch who concealed his or her tracks, maybe...?) but it could be Joham's downfall if the Italians caught wind.

He torched the building, and fled into the night.

He visited his other women in their customary order: one fell pregnant and died, one fell pregnant and was murdered by her father, one he killed accidentally while trying to get her pregnant (these accidents were becoming less frequent, but happened occasionally), and one he gave up as probably barren and had for supper.

Only after all of these events had passed, and he'd spent a couple of days in the wilderness taking a break from his lifework, did he notice the baby clinging to his back.

She'd evidently been continuing to feed herself - come to think of it, that might explain what he'd written off as a mistake on his part, although he hadn't thought much of the chunks torn out of Pangari's throat at the time - and was some inches longer than she had been, but she was the same child. "My word," he said to her, choosing the language Tathra had used. "What a peculiar magic you've got." It had to be magic, that was obvious. And a particularly insidious sort: he could now remember her attaching herself to him and hanging from his neck as he'd traveled, but at the time she'd seemed inconsequential. The humans had apparently been affected the same way. It would have been easy to lose her. But she'd apparently been motivated to stay with him, and successful at it to boot. "Aren't *you* smart. *Aren't you!* Now, don't you fade away again, I need to name you..."

It was a romantic notion, perhaps his only one, but he liked the idea of letting the deceased mothers of the large number of children he hoped to sire name them. In advance via idle conversation, of course, but it was easy enough to get his conquests to produce preferred names for a boy and a girl, and Tathra had been no different.

"You're *Allirea*," he said, touching his daughter's nose.

"Allirea," she repeated clearly.

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Father did not know that hybrids slept until he saw Noemi doing it.

Allirea had never known it was remarkable - she only tucked her hands under her elbows to lock her arms in place around his neck and let him carry her around, and then she woke up, and since she often clung to him and said nothing even awake, he never noticed the difference in retrospect. She'd assumed that he slept sometimes. Less than her, clearly, but she'd expected that he probably found a quiet place to lie down (on his front, she supposed, since she'd never been squashed) and nap every day.

Then Noemi fell asleep after a long day of chewing her way out of her mother and drinking three humans down for her first meal, and Father stared at her like she was doing something remarkable.

Allirea watched the baby, touched her downy pale hair and her pearly pale cheek. Noemi looked more like Father than Allirea did. And she slept and this was interesting to Father.

Allirea unfaded and looked at him quizzically. She didn't need to call his attention to her beyond that; he knew after fourteen years (however sporadic their interactions) that when she unfaded it meant she wanted to talk.

"Allirea, my precious, do *you* sleep too?" he inquired.

"Yes," she said. "Everyone sleeps."

"Vampires don't," he told her.

"You have *said* you do," she protested. She began listing occasions when he'd referred to waking up, or going to bed, or catching up on sleep, while she'd been eavesdropping.

"I was *lying*," he said gently. "Not to you, if you had ever asked of course you would have gotten the truth, but I have to lie to humans, you know that. You don't believe that I'm thirty-three years old, do you?"

"No," admitted Allirea. "But you *told* me you were not."

He kissed her scalp. She'd taken to shearing off all her hair when there were implements available; she didn't like to fuss with it. "I tell you now, vampires, including me, do not sleep. But it is a blessing indeed that you can. Do you dream?" he asked, sounding wistful.

Allirea nodded. "I dream."

She dreamed of being awake, mostly, only nothing she made was still there in the morning and nothing she'd learned was still true. Sometimes she had terrible dreams, where someone had seen Father do something he shouldn't have been able to do, and she couldn't make the fading cover him, and everyone looked at him and shouted and brought fire to kill him. Sometimes she dreamed about wandering around in the place she was from, by herself, with no Father at all because he hadn't come back for her or she'd let go while he ran. Sometimes she dreamed that they ate all the humans in the world and he starved and she had to eat bread that tasted sour and dry and sticky. She wasn't sure it was such a good thing to dream. But if Father wished to dream, she was lucky to do so. Allirea filed away this blessing with the others he'd told her she - and her new sister, now - had.

She had nothing more to say, so she relaxed and Father's eyes unfocused and slid away from her, and he looked at Noemi, and Allirea looked at her too.

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Noemi almost didn't get to meet Nahuel.

At the time Nahuel was born in 1853, Noemi was busily playing house with her vampire paramour - not "mate", but wasn't Father proof that mating wasn't strictly necessary? - in Warszawa. Noemi's childhood had been full of loving attention from said father and, sometimes, her sister, but she'd always found the running around the world between batches of potential-mothers-of-more-siblings *tiring*. Allirea could hitch a ride whenever she liked and never be told to get off their father's back, but Noemi'd had to run to keep up since she turned four.

So she'd broken a little rule - just one of Father's, which would get her scolded, not one of the Volturi's that could get her killed - and she'd let on to a vampire what she was. Jarek held the territory around Warszawa by himself, without the aid of a coven, which she found impressive. He was quite willing to let a fetching, *exotic* immortal like Noemi charm him into an explicitly temporary affair. Temporary because sooner or later, even if they never really *tired* of each other, Jarek or Noemi or both would find a mate. They agreed in advance

that this was to be accepted without rancor on both sides when the time came. He was charmingly reasonable about it, Noemi thought.

Father had sighed and paced and shaken his head at Noemi, but finally he'd agreed to leave her behind in Poland. "I will come here to look for you the next time I am near," he said to her. "If I do not find you here - if you have moved, perhaps - then we will work out something else to find one another." And they had decided on a series of landmarks to check, any one of which was unlikely to disappear soon, and signs that could be left near them to indicate updated locations. Father was gone as soon as his last Polish experiment choked on her own blood and died, a week and a half along.

Noemi found that stationary life agreed with her very well. She slept during the day, in Jarek's cellar hideout, and when it was too sunny for him to venture out he would stay in and hold her. At night she woke, and they hunted together, and played absurd games of hide-and-seek that sprawled across the entire city, and Jarek repeatedly lauded his good fortune at having found a warm and durable bedmate without having to wait for the whims of whatever controlled mating.

This last eventually resulted in Noemi becoming pregnant, which was alarming to the both of them.

"I hope I haven't killed you," Jarek said. "That is *not* what I was trying to do."

Noemi laughed, because he *was* funny, even when the situation could be deadly serious. "I feel healthy enough," she said, running a hand over her distended belly. "I'm stronger than a human. Maybe I can survive it."

Noemi stayed in the cellar, and Jarek brought her food enough to satisfy her increased cravings, and she continued to feel healthy (if a bit bloated). The baby (Noemi named it in advance like her mother had done for her, just in case: Kanimir if a boy, Jaromira if a girl) grew fast. Faster than Noemi had seen Father's other attempts at children do. But as long as she kept eating - especially first thing every evening when she woke up - she felt... fine. The baby didn't break her bones or rupture her organs or drain the life out of her.

Kanimir was born three weeks and two days after he was conceived. Noemi had warned Jarek about her kind's propensity for *chewing*, and when she felt the first stab of agony he tore her open as neatly as he could with his teeth. When Kanimir was safely out and wriggling happily on the floor beside his mother, Jarek held the edges of the wound together, Noemi panted and scrunched her eyes shut, and a jagged scab formed and started to scar.

Once Noemi could sit without opening herself up again, Jarek went out for more prey: for her, to recover, and for the baby. Kanimir was small and symmetrical and looked like he was made of porcelain. He had his mother's blonde hair, and black eyes that didn't change color when he fed.

Noemi's scar didn't go away, although it did get thinner and turn white. It was colder than the rest of her, probably the result of the venom Jarek had bitten in. She did return to her

original, svelte shape over several days. Kanimir's shell was apparently absorbed back into her body without incident.

The little family was very paranoid about letting Kanimir be seen for his first few years of life, when someone might have mistaken him for a full vampire - and an immortal child, based on his size. But he grew even faster than Noemi had. He was three when he finally looked fourteen: the cutoff age, beyond which it was permissible to turn. Anyone making the obvious mistake would not make it to the point of having the child executed for a capital crime.

It wouldn't be a hard mistake to make. Kanimir didn't have a heartbeat. He wasn't *cold*, like a vampire, but he did tend to hover around room temperature. He ate less often but more avidly than Noemi did, and had almost his father's grace and speed, albeit not strength. He slept - occasional, optional catnaps he could have whenever he chose in opposition to Noemi's rigid nocturnal schedule, the naps totaling no more than an hour a day.

Jarek was full to bursting with pride.

He wanted another.

Noemi... did not. She was pleased with Kanimir. He was a delightful child, always ready with a kiss for his mama and a new discovery about the world to cheer about. But even knowing that, for her, motherhood was survivable, she didn't want to repeat the experience.

Her relationship with Jarek didn't long survive the moratorium on lovemaking.

He didn't push the issue. He could have, but either lingering affection for Noemi, or fear of Joham, or some combination, prevented it. They went on living together amicably, and raised their child cooperatively, but ceased to be lovers.

Kanimir stopped growing when he was five and could pass for eighteen. In indirect sunshine, he glowed like Noemi; under high noon on a cloudless day there was a twinkly sheen to him like crushed white mica. He wore his hair long and went barefoot and tasted human food just once.

"Grandfather will want to know if you can or not," she coaxed, that having been the reason she'd had a pastry when she was six: to see if she could. "He will be back to check on me any year now; wouldn't you like to already know the answer when he asks?"

"If I can't won't it make me sick?" Kanimir asked, wary of the slice of bread she was holding. She'd eaten half of it to convince him of its edible nature, although she wouldn't want to make a diet of the stuff.

"It wouldn't even make your father sick," she said. "He'd only have to cough it up, he wouldn't be hurt. Go on."

Kanimir ate the bread, and didn't feel compelled to choke it up later, but never wanted to consume anything other than blood again. Noemi didn't push it; she'd leave that to Father when he returned.

Father returned to Warszawa when Kanimir was eleven. He found Noemi and Jarek and their son right where he expected to, and was thrilled to pieces with his grandson. "I knew," he kept repeating, after coming to understand that Noemi had given birth and looking at her scar, "I *knew* my children would be superior creatures. How marvelous. How *absolutely* marvelous." For several days he monopolized Kanimir, inquiring after every facet of his capabilities and development.

Noemi was pretty sure Jarek and Father had talked about her reluctance to have a second child while she was asleep, because Father never asked.

"I'm going back to South America," Father announced after he'd been in Warszawa for two weeks. He looked at Noemi, and at Kanimir.

"Why South America?" Noemi asked.

"I was there seven years ago," Father said. "I lost track of one of my experiments..."

"Lost *track*?" Noemi exclaimed. "Father!"

"I had others to look after, and by the time Pire's turn came up again she was gone. I suspected that she'd been killed by her tribesmen, you know how common that is..." Noemi nodded. "But it occurred to me recently that her sister, to whom she'd been very close, was *also* missing when I returned. There's something puzzling about that. I'm going back to make a more thorough search, in case there's anything left to be found."

The unspoken question was, *Will you join me?*

"I will come with you," Noemi said. She glanced at her son. He looked grown. He spoke and acted like a man. And of course she knew what it was to be adult at a young age. But she hoped he would come with her anyway.

Jarek was looking at their son, too, hoping to keep him in Poland.

"I will go, and then I will come back," Kanimir decided finally, and both of his parents had to be satisfied with that.

Noemi had crossed oceans before. The usual method was for Father to tow a boat with her on it, and a few humans tied up to eat on the way in case they didn't encounter any ships to hunt on. A larger raft was called for with Kanimir in tow, but otherwise the procedure was the same. They took the trip at a leisurely pace to let the untraveled quarter-human see the sights on the way, and stopped in France for Father to begin and kill off a round of experiments, and then they went across the Atlantic and landed on the wrong coast of South America.

They went across, slowing down and meandering north-south more as they got closer to the west edge.

One evening, Noemi woke up to find Allirea unfaded, a vampire woman in their camp separated from her limbs and guarded by Kanimir, and a half-vampire man shouting at Father.

"She did *not* attack first!" roared the strange man. "Allirea *picked us up against our wills* and took us here -"

"Allirea could hardly have stopped your aunt if she had struggled, Nahuel," Father pointed out. Noemi did not think this was a fair characterization, but kept silent.

"Let her *go*!" exclaimed the new hybrid, who Noemi tentatively identified as her half-brother. He lunged towards the flailing, detached parts of his aunt, but Kanimir batted him aside easily and Nahuel sprang back, growling.

"Do calm down. I am not planning to kill her," said Father. "Huilen was the first to make a *violent* move. Allirea was defending me; before that no one had been injured. I only want to talk to you, my son."

"I am no son of yours," snapped Nahuel.

"You are," said Father levelly. "If only Huilen hadn't made off with you I would have been there to see you born and would have raised you as my own; I have already apologized for the timing -"

"You killed my mother!"

"And gave you life," Father said. "A human, traded for a miraculous creature of incredible rarity and -"

Nahuel interrupted with an incoherent roar, and Father appeared to be getting less patient. "Don't you eat?" Noemi asked her brother quizzically.

"Of course I - that's not the point," Nahuel said. "I don't want to go with you. Let me put my aunt back together, and *leave us alone*."

"Please reconsider," coaxed Father. "You are one of only three like you! You belong with your sisters."

"*No*," snarled Nahuel. "I'm staying here with Huilen. *She's* my family."

"Won't you at least tell us how to find you, so we can visit?" Noemi put in. "Kanimir is going to live with his father in Poland when we return to Europe, but I will know how to find my son. I would like to know how to find my brother."

A tense conversation later, they were agreed on where Father, Allirea, Noemi, or Kanimir could leave a note and suggest a meeting time and place for Nahuel. He agreed to check it "periodically". Noemi suspected that he didn't intend for that to amount to anything frequent, but there was a glimmer of something in his eyes when he looked at how she

touched Kanimir's hair, or how proud Father looked when he placed his hands on Allirea's shoulders. She thought he'd probably look in more often than he meant to when he promised.

The family left Nahuel to reconstruct his aunt, and traversed the sea again (after a three-week stop in Paraguay for tourism - and more experiments, all failures). Kanimir parted ways from his mother and grandfather when they landed in Liberia: Father and Noemi continued inland while Kanimir traveled up the African coast to make his way back to Warszawa.

It was on this occasion that Noemi learned she could cry.

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## Hybrids (part 2)

The first time Allirea was away from her father for more than a day was in 1910. She'd always been afraid of losing him. He'd tear apart the Earth to find her again, of course - if she could stay unfaded long enough to let him remember that she was lost. She couldn't. Sleep, if nothing else, would end the constant expenditure of willpower that it took to remain noticeable.

But in 1910, she decided that it was safe to leave him. If she couldn't find him again where she expected him to be right away, she could go to Warszawa by herself and wait until he visited her nephew. Or to Nahuel's home in Chile, which Father also visited sometimes.

So, that winter, she unfaded and waited for Father's acknowledgement.

"Yes, my dear?" Father said, looking up from the game of chess he was playing with Noemi. Noemi cocked her head, also curious.

"I want to go somewhere alone," she said. "Tell me where you will be every month for the next several years so I can meet you there when I am done. If I want to take longer than that I will go to Poland and stay with Kanimir so you can find me."

Father didn't usually keep a schedule in advance, but he worked one out anyway, on the spot, and she memorized the plan, and he swore - to Noemi, so he could remember - that he would stick to that itinerary. And then Allirea relaxed, and the chess game resumed, and she hugged them both unawares and steeled herself to march out of the hotel room they were keeping.

She kept track of where she went, so she wouldn't become lost and unable to find any of the planned meetup points, but she didn't have a specific destination in mind. Eventually she wound up on a boat to Puerto Rico.

She didn't have anything planned for what to do with herself there. So she did what she always did: watched, without being watched herself.

People-watching without Father around was a different experience. He always told her and Noemi that humans were animals, food, experimental subjects, not the nigh-deific heralds of a new world order that the hybrids were. Allirea did eat in Puerto Rico, of course. But she also noticed other things, without Father there to act as a lens.

She noticed a man.

Orlán was *funny*, and Allirea, who almost never laughed, followed him around to seek that insidious humor. Inside of a week of first seeing him, she watched no one else. She slept next to him, though he didn't know it. When he cooked at his chef's job she tasted what he made, out of sentiment, even though it was all inferior to warm, sweet blood. And he made jokes, for his friends and his little brother and his nieces, and Allirea laughed.

She decided that she wanted Orlán to make jokes for *her*, so she let him notice her. Only when no one else was around, snippets of ten and fifteen minutes during most days. He was convinced he was imagining her, or daydreaming her, since he couldn't introduce her to anyone and never seemed to recall her existence for long - but that didn't stop him from talking to her. It didn't stop him from making jokes. And she laughed, and eventually she decided to kiss him, and she decided that Noemi had *not* been silly to go off and live with a man after all.

They enticed each other to bed over several weeks (she didn't mention that she'd been sharing his for a while already). Orlán was engaged, but Allirea was an unusually solid fantasy, so he thought that was all right. She didn't challenge the interpretation.

She considered eating his fiancée, but eventually decided against it. He would probably make very few jokes if he were in mourning.

Orlán was bemused, but accepting, when his daydream turned up pregnant and her belly swelled impossibly quickly.

He was less accepting when their son, who was *not* naturally prone to being intermittently forgotten, was born (with less violence than Allirea's nephew, via the standard procedure) ten weeks later. He did not accept that at all, and, confronted with Allirea's reality, wanted nothing else to do with her.

Allirea could still *watch* Orlán if she wanted. He could hardly stop her. She could even lift his spirits in spite of his preoccupation with his child out of wedlock, if she folded the baby into her own protection. When their son was forgotten like she was, Orlán would joke as he had before.

She faded into the background, and protected their son the same way as much as she could, until Orlán's wedding. Then she left town. She didn't want to watch him living with *her*.

But she did name the baby after his father.

Allirea was awkward in attempting to raise little Orlán. Whenever she relaxed for a moment, he thought he was alone, and cried. He slept, but at seemingly random times, and it was almost impossible for him to wake her up in the middle of the night when he opened his eyes and feared the dark or wanted food. When he learned to crawl, climbing and walking followed soon after, and she had to put him in what amounted to a cage before she went to sleep to prevent him from haring off into the darkness.

If she took him into a populated area, she had to fade him or unfade herself. Humans would try to grab her son right out of her arms if she did neither, because there was an *unattended child*, and they had to find his parents, of course. Especially because he was an unattended, *cute* child: he had thick black hair that curled when it got long, and though he didn't glow in the sun, he did have a healthy clay-colored complexion, midway between Allirea's nut brown and his father's deep tan. He wasn't the ethereal vision of beauty that a

vampire was, or the solidly healthy and even-featured specimen that first-generation hybrids seemed to turn out to be, but he was extraordinary if mistaken for a human.

Little Orlán drank blood quite happily (which didn't affect his brown eyes a bit), but he also enjoyed select human foods that Allirea was, at best, neutral about. She let him have them when he asked. They didn't do him harm.

It became easier to care for him as he learned to talk. He started with Spanish, but once he had a solid command of that at six months old, she taught him her first language to use instead, the Aboriginal tongue her mother had spoken. Orlán speaking Spanish sounded a little too much like his father and Allirea didn't like to hear it.

He was slower and weaker than her even as he grew up, and sometimes he forgot things - not random, background things, like the ones Allirea could forget, but occasionally even important things. He still had a better memory than a human, as far as she could tell.

When Orlán was ten and looked twenty, he stopped growing. He was tall, topping Allirea's five foot two by almost eighteen inches. He moved easily among humans, telling the right lies and hiding the full extent of his abilities. But he wasn't shy about demonstrating them, up to the limits Allirea guessed were safe and carefully instilled into his memory using the techniques that would let her admonishment stick when her existence didn't.

When he was eleven, he went into a town by himself, got a job fishing, and was gone for a week and a half before Allirea figured out where he'd gone. He came back to the house she'd built them in the safety of the middle of nowhere, blinked at her when she reasserted her presence, and apologized for scaring her, but he went back out when she dropped her unfading again.

Allirea thought about it long and hard, but eventually she decided to let him be. Carefully, she left instructions for how to find his cousin in Warszawa, or his uncle in Chile, and where he should leave a note when he decided to move somewhere new, so she'd be able to find him again.

Then she got on a boat to Portugal, and waited in Sintra for Father and Noemi, who arrived on schedule and were pleased to see her again. They wanted to visit Orlán, so they did, although Allirea hung back beyond what she needed to do to introduce everyone.

---

Allirea left them twice more: once in Uruguay in 1939, and once in South Africa in 1990 not long after Iseul was born. (Allirea was not especially fond of Iseul, at least compared to Noemi, and that time she left at least as much to get away from the excessively perky child as she did to enjoy herself in Cape Town.) Each time she left, she followed a man. An *unattached* man - she'd learned her lesson. Each time she eventually revealed herself, eventually made love to him, inevitably got pregnant, and bore a daughter.

Ella, the first daughter, was actually quite welcome to her father Camilo, who had the freedom to be eccentric that came with self-made wealth and wasn't much harmed by a daughter of mysterious origins or put out by the inconvenience of hiding her age. In order to

placate Camilo's sensibilities, Ella was raised entirely on human food supplemented with occasional pigs' blood. Allirea was able to leave Ella with Camilo - and with a mostly fictional explanation of why the girl would grow so fast and be so extraordinary - and so Ella didn't have the difficult childhood her brother had. She grew up surprisingly human in outlook.

In fact, Camilo was entirely able to manage their daughter, and everything else, without Allirea at all, which went a long way to disenchanting her with him. He was no happier when she was noticeable than when she wasn't. Allirea stayed in Uruguay, despite her lost interest in Camilo, until Ella was grown and in spite of the girl's alien identification with the animals around her. Allirea made sure that her second child had the same resources Orlán did to get ahold of her mother's side of the family. But Allirea herself felt superfluous, and so after her daughter turned ten, she went to Puerto Rico to update Orlán on his sibling status, and then met up with Father and Noemi in La Paz.

Siphiwe, Allirea's last daughter, was not such a pleasant addition to *her* father's life, but Allirea didn't have to raise her alone as she had with Orlán after being turned out of her lover's house. She brought baby Siphiwe with her to Namibia, where Father and Noemi and Iseul lingered, and convinced Noemi to live with her in South Africa and help until Siphiwe was ready to be on her own. Father wasn't thrilled with the geographical requirement, but in order to stay near his elder daughters he confined himself and Iseul to the southerly half of Africa for the next decade. Noemi and Allirea set up in Port Elizabeth, and Siphiwe grew up thinking of Noemi as as much of a mother as Allirea was - more so, when Allirea was faded.

Allirea's children all met each other once: in 2000, when Siphiwe was grown (and so was Iseul), Allirea declared an unprecedented family gathering, and got Father and Noemi and Nahuel and Kanimir and Iseul and Orlán and Ella and Siphiwe to congregate in Natal, Brazil, a reasonable geographic midpoint.

It was a lukewarm event. Father was excessively self-congratulatory about the quantity and quality of his descendants. Orlán didn't seem to like having sisters, and Ella, who'd had half-siblings on her father's side and hadn't liked them much, wasn't interested in developing new relationships of the same kind. Siphiwe hated travel and desperately wanted to go home, and Nahuel wouldn't stop worrying about having offended Huilen by attending the gathering. Kanimir was annoyed at Allirea (whenever he recalled her presence) for not inviting his father Jarek. Iseul took an immediate shine to her nieces and nephews and seemed oblivious to how annoying they found her.

But everyone was there, and everyone exchanged contact information and got to know each other and memorize their network of relationships, which was what Allirea wanted. That way, she could expect to find anyone in her family through anyone else, if she lost touch somehow.

Allirea faded out, and followed her father and sisters as they left Natal.

Iseul listened carefully to her father's repeated, insistent warnings about the Volturi when she was growing up. "The Volturi do not give second chances," he told her - told all his descendants. "They will kill even you, my miracles, if you are caught in violation of the law. You must avoid notice if you can. If you are noticed you must avoid angering them."

And so when Demetri found her in the street in Bayankhongor, and called her name, and she saw the black cloak... Iseul wanted to run. But she couldn't get away from a vampire, so she was polite to him and did as he asked, and then he called Jane and jumped out the window looking intent on something Iseul couldn't place.

Iseul huddled next to Noemi on the couch, worried about Jane's approach, wishing Father would return home sooner than planned. It would be no good to leave town hoping to avoid meeting the Volturi weapon; Demetri found them once and would have an even easier time finding them again. They would just have to be very polite to her and hope the Volturi didn't want to hurt them.

Jane did want to hurt them (although not damage them). She took exception to Iseul drifting off to sleep at six in the morning before she was done talking to them, and wouldn't even let Noemi try to wake her before resorting to her usual bludgeon. Sleep insistently clawed at Iseul from one direction and Jane's fire from the other. Noemi had learned to stay up past *her* usual bedtime with practice, but Iseul couldn't do it. When the little witch finally left with her companions at her heels, Iseul couldn't stop trembling, and she felt more tired than she ever had before, but it was almost noon and she couldn't make herself fall asleep at the wrong time.

And Father had been helpless. Strong, confident Father, who ushered in a race of gods, who was - her *father* - could do nothing about a little hissing teenager with fire in her eyes. He'd been afraid. For himself, for his children.

Iseul didn't like that at all.

After she got a morning's sleep, she felt better, but still unsettled, and the feeling didn't go away after another day, or a week, or a year. Father worried about her - it was unlike her - but he couldn't get at the source of her worry and she knew it.

Someone else could, though.

Someone *did*. Iseul heard it from Allirea, who she'd seen only once since Demetri had first visited them. Usually the absence hardly made a difference and certainly wasn't noticed, although it did seem to Iseul like she had trouble moving unnoticed through crowds more often than she had before. But when she realized her sister had been gone for five years save two "visits"... and picked up on the clues about what she'd been doing... she felt sick to her stomach.

But Allirea brought news, the most *interesting* news to have ever been current during Iseul's lifetime: the Volturi were gone. Well, most of them -

*Jane* was gone.

Iseul couldn't even manage to be upset about the new hunting laws when she heard.

---

Joham was mildly put out about the new regime, until it became clear that the new Empress had an agenda roughly compatible with his own. Some procedural changes would be required, nothing more. Her Majesty (and her charming daughter the princess) permitted him to outline an advertisement, which was then stacked in the PRPR waiting room to be skimmed at random or clipped to women's turning rejection slips if they ticked the relevant box on their application.

He wasn't the *only* vampire who was interested in having children, but he was one of a very, *very* few who had the practice under his belt to safely arrange it the old-fashioned way. That, with the fact that he was demonstrably willing and able to raise his children alone and didn't require ongoing participation from the mother, appealed to a niche - the ones who didn't like the idea of the medical procedure and the ones who didn't really want kids, just a bloodstream full of venom.

Still, most of them backed out after talking to him, although one wavered enough that she got as far as meeting his daughters before changing her mind, and one appeared set to go through with it until a vampire mated to her and got her through the screening process that way. Joham was patient, though. The new arrangement would be unlikely to lose any of his precious children once he got to the point of creating them, and would probably improve his rate overall.

It was eight years into the new system before he finally got his fifth child. The boy's mother declined to name him, or otherwise involve herself, and Joham had never been particularly creative, so he called the baby by his own name and withdrew his advertisement until Joham II was mature.

There was a reasonable number of half-vampires by then, and while the princess lived with the Golden Coven, Nahuel remained in Chile, and the Clearwater boy resided with his wolf siblings, other hybrids born under the new regime had happened to cluster near the capital site in Florida. Joham settled into a residence within the environs of the cluster, and Junior played not only with his sisters but with Marcus's daughters (how odd, that they were not princesses as they would have been if they'd been born only a decade earlier) and the others who lived nearby.

Joham Jr. matured and, unlike his sisters, was not interested in continuing to live with his father, although he didn't go far. Sipiwi eventually moved nearby, and Kanimir's five-eighths human twins when they were grown, and Joham resumed putting advertisements in the PRPR offices.

The volume of requests the office handled had gone up since his youngest's birth, and he got another taker within the year.

That one turned out to be his mate.

His mate, Lucy, had read the relevant pamphlets, and so when she was made aware of this, she was roughly familiar with the position the phenomenon put her in - which position was markedly different from the one she would have been in fifty years previous, and starkly in her favor given that she did want to be a vampire.

Lucy informed him that there was to be none of his characteristic behavior with anyone but her in the future. She informed him that she wanted *one* child, no more, as she didn't care for the idea of hers gestating in someone else's body and there was still no way for a human to manage two half-vampire pregnancies.

Lucy named their baby girl Athena, and Athena was his last child, but around him, the ranks of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren swelled.

Joham considered it reasonably likely that in a few hundred years, he would be an ancestor of every new child born.

He considered this satisfaction enough for his life's work.

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## Denali

"Guess who gets to play host to our cousins' problem," sang Tanya, sailing into Carmen and Eleazar's house.

"Our cousins?" guessed Irina, looking up from the go board she was sharing with Eleazar. He placed a stone and she looked back down.

"Would that they could," sighed Tanya dramatically. "No, they have a problem which has several bits and pieces and they sent one of the bits up here so they can deal with the others. His name's Laurent and he's not veg, but they think he may be curious."

Irina completed an eye with a new stone and looked up at Tanya again. "I suppose Kate's heard."

Tanya nodded. "Would've heard me on the phone. You need to come look at her latest drawing, by the way, it is *nice*. Why isn't Carmen back yet? Did she call?"

"Texted. Holdup at the DMV," Irina said.

"I didn't see that coming. We need to poach Alice," opined Tanya, crouching by the go board as Eleazar made another move. "Instead we get Laurent."

"Maybe he'll go away, when he discovers how boring we are," suggested Irina.

"Maybe," Tanya said. "Maybe he'll be interesting and we'll want to keep him around. Convert him to our hippie ways."

Irina shrugged, and placed a stone.

---

The Denalis were five when Laurent arrived. Irina stood with her sisters; Eleazar and Carmen were off to the left in front of their own house. Alice had dropped them a text with his estimated time of arrival and they wanted to be waiting.

Laurent came from the south, and slowed down when he saw them, approaching at a brisk walk a close-lipped smile and his hands behind his back. Not an open-armed *I have no weapons* posture, because nothing he could have been carrying was as dangerous as his limbs and teeth (even a flamethrower was only a serious problem for a disabled vampire), but *I am not brandishing my weapons*.

Tanya watched him approach through the trees, then glanced at her sisters and - she'd never found a satisfactory familiar term to apply to Carmen and Eleazar. Cousin was too distant, that was the Cullens who were her cousins; sisterhood was reserved for the trio who shared the loss of a mother. Stepsiblings, perhaps... She peered at the four faces, gauging their assessments of the stranger.

Eleazar was calm; Volterra had accustomed him to strange vampires coming and going. Carmen was drawing her equanimity from her husband but didn't have any of her own. Kate was humming with electricity, ready to strike down the visitor if he made a wrong move, but her posture was casual and people who weren't used to her wouldn't be able to tell. Irina appeared fascinated by Laurent as he drew closer.

Tanya looked back at Laurent, who was nearly to the clearing where they made their home. He was gazing at them intently out of chilly red eyes, evaluating Eleazar first, then Tanya herself, then sliding his eyes over to Irina.

Tanya watched Laurent's pupils widen, the deliberate smile soften - and then he moved on to Kate, and the expression on his face returned to where it had been, and then he sized up Carmen, and then he was in the clearing, hands still behind his back. He looked over at Irina again, who was staring down at her feet and shuffling them. Odd behavior for her.

Laurent spoke first: "Hello. You must be the Denali coven Carlisle spoke of. I am Laurent."

"We know," said Kate.

"Welcome," put in Irina, glancing up from her toes.

"Do tell me your name," said Laurent, addressing her. "Names," he added after a moment, glancing at Tanya. People tended to interpret her as the leader of the family, and she supposed if there was one, it was her, but there was rarely a situation where she needed to act in that capacity.

"I'm Irina," volunteered the sister by that name, and Laurent's gaze snapped back to her. "These are my sisters Tanya and Kate, and our friends Carmen and Eleazar."

"So pleased to meet you," murmured Laurent, eyes on Irina.

They were six.

---

"Come home," pleaded Irina into the phone.

"Come join me," returned Laurent's lightly accented voice from the other end, and Tanya winced. She was spreading mortar on a layer of rocks in the facade of the new, third house, building a home for Irina and her mate. She hadn't set out to overhear the conversation, but the windows weren't installed yet...

"I can't," said Irina. "I can't. I belong here. I - I'm a *vegetarian* - come *home*."

"I will come home to you," Laurent returned, "when I am done, my love."

Irina couldn't cry, but she could make a little sobbing noise, and Tanya's face twisted in anger at her new brother-in-law. She placed a stone and reminded herself that it would hurt

the rock more than her head if she clonked her skull against it. What was *wrong* with Laurent? He had no strong affection for his coven and he'd readily given up the idea of returning to them when he'd met Irina. But he'd taken less promptly to the idea of settling down in Denali. Tanya looked at the trowel in her hand and wondered if it was even worth building the new house, if he was going to be gone. What kind of vampire stayed with his new mate for less than a day before tearing off *alone*? Even if he didn't want to be a vegetarian...

Tanya repressed a shudder and spread another layer of mortar.

*I will not attack my sister's mate when he gets back. I will not attack my sister's mate when he gets back. I will not...*

---

"Tanya," called Carmen from the house next door.

Tanya paused her movie and flitted to the window to more easily talk. "What is it?" she asked, leaning out on the windowsill to see Carmen doing the same.

"We're getting another... tenant," Carmen said heavily.

"What, another?" said Tanya. "So soon? Laurent arrived just the day before yesterday."

"*This* one's a newborn. Laurent's old covenmate James made three, and two of them were impossible to control at all - Carlisle's beating himself up about having to kill them, but the risk was too much, they'd have exposed themselves and gotten *everyone* killed. This one's the best of the group, but they think he'd do better away from their town," Carmen said. "Jasper and Emmett are driving him up."

"What's his name?" Tanya asked tiredly.

"David Baxter," recited Carmen. "Do you think you or Kate will like him?"

"I hope I don't," said Tanya. "I have a date on Saturday."

Carmen half-laughed, half-sighed. "They'll be here with him in about a day. Jasper'll call you when they're getting close."

Tanya nodded, and both of the women closed their windows.

---

"*David! Calm down!*" ordered Kate, brandishing her right arm threateningly. "For the love of God, it's a *television*, you *know* what a television is, you *know perfectly well* that nothing in it is going to attack you. Stand up and stop snarling."

David hissed at her and backed up several feet without getting up from his crouch, and Kate groaned, lunged forward, and walloped him across the cheek. He jerked convulsively and rolled over on the carpet, then sprang to his feet and hissed again.

Tanya shook her head and put down the remote. She might have to switch to watching her films in one of the other houses as long as David was around, if he was going to react like that to every fictional growling creature. At least Kate could handle him easily. When Kate was gone, hunting or picking up men or running errands, Tanya and at least one helper were required to keep the newborn in line. A helper other than Laurent, who didn't stop hitting until his opponent was *down*, too disabled to resist a lit match, and it wasn't necessary to be that harsh on David.

"Come on, David," cooed Kate. "David. Stand all the way up. Arms at your sides, David..." Using his name repeatedly helped; the newborn gradually relaxed. "That's it, David, good. Can I get a smile?" she encouraged.

David managed a grimace. "Thirsty," he muttered.

"Okay, David, we'll go hunting," said Kate. "But *first* Tanya will go make sure there are only animals around. We don't want you to make a mistake, David."

"Thirsty," he hissed again, impatient, flexing his hands.

"Wait," insisted Kate, holding up her open hand again. It hummed with force. Tanya sighed and went out to scout for humans, and heard the crack of another blow as Kate subdued David once more.

"This would probably be easier if one of us *was* his mate," muttered Tanya under her breath to herself, sniffing the air for any scents too delicious as she hurtled through the forest. Finding none, she doubled back to where the seven lived. "All clear in the northeast quadrant," she reported when she was within earshot of the house she shared with Kate and now David but no longer Irina.

"David, see, that didn't take so long, did it?" soothed Kate. "Now let's go get some blood into you. Come along now, David." They passed Tanya on their way out, and although David growled at her he didn't attempt an attack.

---

"Edward, this is getting *ridiculous*," cried Tanya. "How many problem nomads and hissing newborns do we have to house before you'll find somewhere else to put them?"

"We didn't plan it this way," he said. "We *would* take him - there's a newborn at our house now too, you understand, we're not sending you *everyone* - but there's no way to get the man Bella's turned there safely. We're only on this continent because Gianna needs -"

"I know," Tanya sighed. "I understand. When are we expecting our new resident?"

She got off the phone with Edward a few minutes later and relayed the news.

"Joy," said Kate, looking at David out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting against a wall, which was better than crouching, at least. They'd just had to replace a banister that he tore off in frustration. "*Plural* newborns."

"Roughly my reaction, yes," Tanya said. "Bella's newborn is still turning as of now."

"Bah. We're putting this one in a different house. I don't want him near David too often," said Kate.

---

Harry made eight. He was more controlled than David by a long shot. Kate smacked him around preemptively when he paced too energetically or growled - often at his computer, which Carmen had given him as a hand-me-down and which he was using to keep in touch with... someone. It wasn't clear who, but he swore that he wasn't endangering the secret of vampire existence, so they let him have his privacy.

Harry got along well enough with Carmen and Eleazar, who were less prone to attacking him whenever he made a nonverbal noise, but Tanya rubbed him the wrong way somehow, Kate was too trigger-happy, Laurent's diet made him uncomfortable, and Irina had nothing in common with him at all. Once he was proven capable of being around humans he started going for long hikes through the park alone. He texted confirmations that he hadn't killed anyone every few hours, but was often gone for days at a time.

Then, he didn't come back, and the texts stopped.

Tanya waited until it had been almost three days, with Harry not answering his phone once, before she became worried enough to call Carlisle. Carlisle consulted Alice and Alice foresaw Harry running south, almost to Washington. At least he was safe, but Tanya wondered if he'd eaten someone and was running out of shame... but then surely he didn't think they'd reject him over that? They put up with Laurent when he was home. On Irina's behalf, but still.

It was nearly a day later when Harry called Eleazar and announced belatedly that he was reducing their number to seven, and disconfirmed her theory about his dietary strictness. Tanya couldn't manage to regret the eventuality. Harry would be fine on his own, and he hadn't fit in well with their household, and this way he was happier and so were they without anyone having to actually evict him.

David calmed down considerably when there wasn't another newborn around. Harry's power had made him effective at avoiding direct contact with David, but David still knew he was there.

Tanya decided to risk turning on her own television again, as a test of David's improvement, and was able to watch forty-five minutes of a movie before he freaked out and needed Kate to swat him down.

Tanya wondered why Harry had been so unusually controlled. Bella was odd, and the even newer member of the Cullen family, Ilario, also odd, but from what Tanya understood

they'd both known about vampires ahead of time. Surely Harry hadn't? Maybe Bella had talked to him while he turned, and that was enough?

She shrugged and took her movie to Carmen and Eleazar's house.

---

"You have to call Carlisle," shrieked Irina, hands clenched around Tanya's shoulders and shaking her sister. "Call him, call him, tell him to tell Alice to find *Laurent*, he's never, ever been gone this long, I'll be incoherent on the phone or I'd do it *Tanya you have to call Carlisle.*"

"Laurent's gone all the time, Irina..." soothed Tanya. "I'm sure he's fine."

"You called after three days when it was Harry!" Irina wailed. "Laurent's been gone for almost three *weeks* and he's never gone that long! He's not answering his phone! *Call Carlisle!*"

"Fine," said Tanya placatingly, peeling Irina's hand away from her shoulder and pulling out her phone. "Fine. I'm calling him." She dialed, and her cousin picked up. "Carlisle?"

"Tanya! It's good to hear from you," Carlisle said.

"Not a social call. I need to borrow Alice's sight again. Laurent has been away for sixteen days now, hasn't checked in, it's twice his previous record length of excursion. The phone thing isn't uncommon - it runs out of charge and he's not good at passing for human so he can get the use of an outlet - but the length of time is, and Irina's hysterical."

"Of course. I'll fetch Alice," said Carlisle. "Just a moment."

There was a pause, and Alice's voice came on the phone. "I'm looking, but... I can't see him..."

"What does that mean?!" cried Irina. "He can't be *dead*. He *can't*, we were supposed to have *forever*, he can't be *dead*, Alice..."

"I think he is, Irina. I'm so sorry," said Alice gently. If she was right, they summed to six...

"*No*," Irina yowled, twisting her hands in her hair. "No - no - Alice, you're not *working* so well lately, you're full of *gaps*, there's *gaps*, he's just got to have fallen in one of those, he's got to be alive!"

"I'm sorry," said Alice.

"Laurent," sobbed Irina. "My *Laurent.*"

"There, there," said Tanya uselessly, hanging up on Alice. She pulled Irina into a hug. "There, there..." It was a worthless enough phrase of comfort for lesser grief than this, but Tanya didn't have anything else to give.

---

"I miss her," murmured Kate. "Already."

"We could hardly have stopped her from looking for him, after Alice proved to be a dead end," said Tanya. "I just don't know how she's planning to find him. Sure, she knew he was going south, but the trail will be cold by now, he could have changed direction..."

"She's not here. You don't have to go on pretending that he's not dead," said Kate darkly. "She's not going to find him. She might find a pile of ashes. She might find whoever killed him, and die trying to get revenge." Kate shook her head ruefully. "I should have gone with her."

"David needs you."

"You and Carmen and Eleazar could handle him without me for a few weeks. I should have gone. She'll do something stupid. Maybe I should follow her now..."

"You're not hardly a tracker," said Tanya. "Where would you look for her?"

"I don't know. Where do you suppose Harry's living now? He never calls, never writes," asked Kate abruptly. "We barely even got to know him - I think we all underestimated him, he was more stable than we gave him credit for. We should have tried to draw him out more while he was here."

"He'd tell us if he was interested in us visiting," said Tanya, looking out the window, pensive. "It's been a high-turnover year, hasn't it?"

"Irina will come back," said Kate.

"Who knows when, though?" Tanya replied.

"Mother told us to stick together," said Kate resolutely. "Irina will come home."

They waited, the five of them.

---

David wasn't happy about four new vampires - well, he'd *met* them, but four vampires he wasn't well-acquainted with - moving into Irina and Laurent's old house. However, he was instantly taken with Elspeth, who made a round ten residents. He had an unprecedented run of good behavior, trying to prove to an overprotective Rosalie that it was safe to let him hold the baby. Rosalie wouldn't go so far as to leave the room Elspeth was in, whether it was David or anyone else playing with her, but she did eventually let David pick the child up and talk to her.

"Reminds me of my niece," he explained to Tanya, once, when she asked, not meeting her eyes. He shrank away from Tanya, slunk up to his room; he'd long recognized that while she didn't have Kate's unfair advantage, she was still his better if he turned it into a confrontation. But around Elspeth he didn't act like a newborn at all. She was in a third category apart from vampires, who were threats, and humans, who were prey, and he didn't have any instincts installed to deal with her.

Tanya herself was only a little interested in Elspeth. The girl started walking - toddling around everywhere with Rosalie trailing her tirelessly, and when she pestered Tanya instead of one of the nine other adults at her disposal, Tanya hid things and sent her to find them, deploying increasingly complex clues as Elspeth got smarter.

But Tanya spent more of her time commiserating somberly with Kate and Carlisle and Esme. They were pretty sure Irina was dead. They'd lost Edward and Bella. And the sisters - the remaining sisters - had Sasha's death in their memories too. Carmen and Eleazar did mourn Irina, but... as a *stepsister*. Rosalie and Emmett had lost a brother and a sister too, but... there was Elspeth, at least for Rosalie, compensating.

Alice and Jasper, of course, were gone, off on their own somewhere undisclosed, although Tennessee with old friends of Jasper's was suspected.

The comfort of sharing grief old and new wore off fast, and the Cullens wore out their welcome, and eventually they were nudged away from Denali and into one of their own homes, and then the coven was five.

Tanya and Kate, Carmen and Eleazar, and David. Five.

Tanya spent a fair amount of time out in the wilderness, climbing as high as she could go and staring out into the sky, and wishing.

---

The Denalis were still five when visitors began to pour in again, half a decade later.

Tanya felt sick at heart about the betrayal they were committing - of their cousins, of David even because Kate didn't yet feel sure of his loyalties and they did need one person with clear thoughts. And she wasn't going to soothe herself with beribboned words for it other than *betrayal*. But she was trapped, they were all trapped. The Volturi were too powerful to be opposed. There was no hope for Carlisle or anyone who followed his madly idealistic scheme.

It stung, like nothing else, that of all the people they learned were alive after having thought them dead, Irina wasn't among them. Why Edward, and not Irina? Why Alice, and not Irina? Why Elspeth, and not Irina...?

Tanya had moved Irina's things back into her old room in the middle house when the Cullens came to stay so the third house, built for Irina and Laurent, could be used for the guests. Apart from this relocation, nothing had been touched. Not one possession of Irina's had been discarded. Tanya dusted every day, except when Kate did.

Then Santiago and her wolves took David, who had stayed, who had become part of the family, who was her brother - stepbrother? - and she was only more trapped, and she often sat in Irina's room instead of her own. They were four, but surrounded, hemmed in by too many others, riddled with missing pieces that the intruders couldn't begin to replace.

Even as vampires of Carlisle's acquaintance poured in, taking up space, Tanya didn't let them spill into Irina's... storage room. The third house was open; let them use that. There were truly *spare* rooms in her and Kate and David's house, and in Carmen and Eleazar's, they could use those.

Tanya didn't realize Kate had mated to visiting nomad Garrett (and that made five again, while David was gone) until she caught the pair of them in Irina's room. They weren't *in flagrante delicto*, but that Kate had brought him there at all meant there was something more serious going on than her deciding to try the chillier end of the temperature spectrum in her choice of partners.

Kate apologized, not very sincerely. Tanya waved it off. Garrett seemed a tolerable sort. It could have been worse. It could have been someone who was going to go off on long, dangerous adventures, get himself torn to bits by wolves, and lead Kate after him and her sister both into death.

Garrett distracted Kate from worrying about David, which was good. There was no benefit to worrying about David, and Tanya's bad luck at having no mate to divert her didn't need to extend to her remaining sister. David would be returned to them once things... settled down. Then they would be six.

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David was released after Bella took over, after far, far too long, after being kept in a pile of fragments in Volterra - he took a long time to forgive them. Kate tore off into the woods, refusing to talk to him, the first time he got home and opened his mouth, so he ranted to Tanya.

"I know you're *sorry*, but what possessed you to tip them off?" he demanded. "Isn't our family worth more to you than that? Or am I even *in* your family? I know you didn't really volunteer to take me in, but I thought since then I'd -"

"You're our brother," said Tanya softly. "We're *sorry*, David."

"I know you're sorry," he repeated. "I just don't understand why. Even without knowing that Sasha was framed... didn't you blame them for killing her? For killing Irina?"

"We agreed not to get into trouble after Mother died," Tanya said tightly. "We thought they were *enforcing the law*, that even if the law hurt one of our own it was necessary, that as long as we cooperated we would be spared. We didn't know they were making it up as they went."

"You knew they were merciless, murderous tyrants," spat David.

Tanya bowed her head. "I won't defend them to you."

David stalked away, and Tanya was alone.

They were six.

For a while, anyway.

## Molly

"Now, what do you say if one of the other children asks you about your parents?" prompted Gianna.

"I say my mummy plays poker and my mamma translates books and they're *not* vampires," said Molly triumphantly.

"You don't tell them we're not vampires," Gianna corrected.

"But then how is it a secret?" asked Molly, looking up with big eyes. She swung her feet back and forth, kicking at the legs of the kitchen chair and making her sneakers light up.

Gianna sighed, and Maggie said, "Maybe we should just keep her home another year, register for homeschooling..." from upstairs, but Gianna pressed on.

"It's a secret because they won't *think* we might be vampires. What do you think the other kids' parents will be?"

"I dunno," said Molly. "They could be whatever. I could tell if they're vampires by lookin' though. And, and I could tell if they're wolves or mixed-ups by shakin' hands, because *warm*."

"So they could be humans, or vampires, or wolves, or *hybrids*. Could they be... elves?" Gianna suggested.

"Elves aren't real," objected Molly. "You said. They're in stories."

"The other children think vampires are like elves -" began Gianna.

"But your ears aren't pointy, and you drink blood, so you're not an elf," complained Molly.

"They think vampires are *only in stories*," Gianna said. "They'll think me and your mummy are humans, without any help, because they think vampires - and wolves, and hybrids - are *make-believe*, so they don't think we could be whatever. They think we're humans. You just don't correct them." Molly processed this while Gianna regarded her hopefully, and then the girl's lip started trembling. "Molly, sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"I won't be able to *bring* you, 'cause then the kids'll *see* you and then it won't be a secret!" Molly cried.

Gianna blinked. "It's okay if they *see* us," she said. "They can't tell by looking."

Molly appeared deeply skeptical. "Mamma, you're really pale and you don't eat food and you're super-fast and you have gold eyes."

"They'll think I'm a human anyway, just like the neighbors," Gianna said. "Remember when Mrs. O'Malley brought us a plate of cookies when we moved here? She didn't *mean* for

them to all be for you." Gianna accompanied this with a gentle poke to Molly's tummy, and Molly giggled.

"Okay," Molly said. "So I can bring you."

"You don't have to get to the school by yourself," Gianna said. "Me or your mummy will drive you there every morning. But we won't stay there - you'll go have fun and learn things with the other children, and then we'll get you in the afternoon."

"You're not going to *stay*?" exclaimed Molly in horror, and Gianna sighed and moved on to addressing a much more *ordinary* starting-school challenge.

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"Mum, I don't see why we're going to this... thing," said Molly, waving dismissively at the e-mail advertising a "hybrid convention" of sorts in Florida. It was the first of its nature, and haphazardly planned, but prominently featured a paragraph about having managed to rent a beach such that sparkly attendees could safely go out during the day. "You're not a hybrid. Mamma's not a hybrid. I'm not a hybrid."

"I'm tired of you complaining that you can't be honest with your friends, that's why," Maggie told her. "And I'm tired of waiting for Bella to finish rolling back the obscurity. There are some hybrid kids, they'll be there, it's an excuse for you to go meet some people your own age - well, sort of, I don't think any of them are *actually* thirteen and if they were they'd be adults - and make some more friends you can relax around. Nothing about this implies that you'd be unwelcome for being a human yet."

"Are Uncle Ilario and Aunt Cath going with Petra and Julian?" Molly asked.

"They haven't decided yet, but even if they don't go, it's a little different, Molly. Petra and Julian have each other to play with all the time."

"I hang out with them when we visit or they do," Molly pointed out. "And they live a lot closer than anybody I'd meet in *Florida*."

"Well," said Maggie. "In that case I'm just arbitrarily wasting three weeks of your time on a summer vacation in Florida, at the only sunny beach we can safely bring you to. What *ever* shall you do with such a horrid mother?"

"Oh, I can just bin you, I have a spare," said Molly, rolling her eyes, but she smiled.

---

Molly had not expected the convention to be *crowded*.

She had a Golden Coven password; she could get into the genealogical database that they maintained. She knew about Joham's kids (Noemi, Nahuel, Iseul, Joham Jr.) and about Princess Elspeth (whom she had *met*, albeit when she was two, but no one was impressed because everyone who might be impressed was not allowed to know) and Cody Clearwater.

She knew Joham had grandkids and great-grandkids, although she hadn't memorized the number. She knew Marcus had daughters. She was aware of a half a dozen other families with mixed children established since the Empress's takeover.

She had not been aware that when one put all of these individuals and their parents and spouses and siblings and children and miscellaneous extended family in a hotel, that the hotel would buzz with activity; that the halls would be full of *people* in twos and threes and throngs; that the beach, too, would be seething with them when she peeked out the hotel window.

Objectively it wasn't that many. Her school had more. When Uncle Ilario took her to the West End to see plays, the theaters - let alone Picadilly Circus - had far more. But *those* were *humans*, and that made it different, somehow. "Vampires" included her parents, her aunt and uncle, a handful of friends of the family who visited every year or two for miscellaneous holidays. "Crowds" included none of these people. Crowds were mundane and mortal and ran at ninety-eight-point-six degrees.

At first, it made Molly uncomfortable that everyone who looked at her could tell she was human. Then it occurred to her that *everyone* who looked at her could tell she was a human: people not "in on the Masquerade" were simply doing so more automatically.

She settled into the hotel room. She was sharing one with Petra and Julian, their parents in separate rooms to give the kids a home base from which to make friends without adult interference. Petra and Julian had handed off their luggage to Ilario and gone tearing down towards the water, bathing suits under their clothes, without even looking at the hotel. Molly took a few minutes to check out the room and, through glass, watch her cousins get into a splash fight. Then she peeled out of her clothes, slathered on three layers of sunscreen, shimmied into her brand-new bathing suit, and walked to the beach.

She didn't recognize anyone. She knew roughly who was supposed to be present, and she could guess, but she could only guess.

There were a few hybrids similar in apparent age to her. She saw a pair of golden-skinned girls with lustrous black hair, almost identical but not quite, sunning themselves glowily on a giant beach towel in matching swimsuits. They looked fourteen, were probably four. A younger boy - looked twelve, probably three - who could plausibly have been made out of polished maple wood was out in the water surfing expertly. Adults (various colors, but all with the sheen of hybrids or the shimmer of vampires) were sitting in the sand or wading with smaller hybrid children in the water.

Molly dug her toes into the sand and wondered what to do. This wasn't like going to school at the beginning of the year, when she could lean over in her first class of the day, and say "Hi, I'm Molly. What's your name?" and start a conversation about musical genres and how the upcoming coursework was *soooo drag*.

Julian had started excitedly talking to the boy on the surfboard, and Molly could just hear him over the waves: "Hi! I'm Julian! I'm not even a little bit a vampire but my mum and dad are vampires and me and my sister are adopted and we're gonna be vampires later when

we grow up! Can you teach me to do that?" The last was said pointing at the surfboard, and the boy, who introduced himself as Joey, agreed and ran off to get a spare.

Maybe it *could* be like leaning over in class.

Petra, generally more interested in the company of adults (who did not tease about chicken pox scars) than children, was talking to some hybrid woman under a beach umbrella, but Molly decided to go over to the golden maybe-twins. They had their faces turned towards each other and were whispering quietly. The one whose face Molly could see seemed like her entire countenance was designed to show off her huge teak eyes.

"H-hi. I'm Molly Trafeli," Molly managed, and the nearer girl sat up and the farther with the huge eyes peered around her sister. The sitting hybrid looked very like the other, although she had her hair cut a few inches shorter and her lips seemed set in a constant pout. Molly suddenly felt very ugly.

"Hi," said the one who'd sat up. "I'm Pleione Greco. This is my sister Corisande."

"You're Marcus and Didyme's kids," Molly said. This would have been a reasonable guess earlier, but the names clinched it. ("Greco" was not either Marcus or Didyme's original name, but they didn't come from a time when last names were assigned in a modern fashion, and had adopted Didyme's host body's surname and passed it on.)

"Yes," agreed Pleione. "We are. Where do you come from?"

"Ireland," said Molly automatically. "I - I mean my parents are Gianna and Maggie, they're vampires. Uh, that's my cousin and so is that," she added, pointing out Petra and Julian. Julian was not having much luck with surfing, and the boy kept catching him when he fell. "Do you know who they're talking to? I - I heard Joey's name but I don't know who that is. Can I sit here?"

"Sure," said Pleione, "of course you may." She scooted over, and Corisande sat up to make more room. Molly planted herself on their towel.

"Joey, the boy teaching your younger cousin to surf, is Joham's youngest," Corisande said. "He's the best of the lot, really, he's a friend of ours. But his sisters are respectively too solemn and too perky and his brother has such *temper*."

"Iseul does do nice things," Pleione put in. "She organized this convention, which I think is a nice idea. She's only difficult to be *around*."

"Mom likes her, though," said Corisande.

"And your other cousin is talking to Halina. She's Joey's grand-niece, Noemi's son Kanimir's daughter," Pleione explained. "She's five-eighths human. She has a twin brother, Nikolai."

"Do you know about everyone here?" Molly asked, head swimming with genealogy.

"Of course," Pleione said, and the sisters started pointing at and naming and describing everyone on the beach. There was Siphawe, Joey's niece. That nearly-human young man was another grand-niece, descended from Siphawe's half-sister Ella. There was Nahuel's vampire wife (*not* mate, nor vice-versa, they were careful to specify) and their quarter-vampire son from before she turned. This last seemed vaguely scandalous to the sisters, that there was a vampire married to someone not her mate, but they'd married before conceiving the child, expecting her to survive the pregnancy without the aid of venom and turning out to have miscalculated.

They described witchcrafts and life histories and personalities and proclivities. This one liked to visit their house to sit within Didyme's range and bask in the happiness; that one could sing at exacting pitches to shatter selected things with supernatural reliability; the other over there was an amateur marine biologist, using vampire capacities to dive unaided and investigate the deeps. ("A lot of sea creatures can't smell, and don't avoid vampires that energetically," Corisande explained.)

"Your turn," said Corisande when everyone on the beach was accounted for.

"Me?" Molly said, finding herself likely to be exceptionally dull.

"You and your cousins - tell us about you," prodded Pleione.

So Molly stumbled through a summary: uncle Ilario got cancer which prompted Mamma to go looking for vampires and find them; the Empress, before she was Empress, pulled Gianna out of Italy on the grounds of needing a surrogate mother for the Princess when the Volturi had tried to kill her; Mamma had talked the Cullens into saving uncle Ilario, and Mum had visited and mated to her, and then she'd given birth to Princess Elspeth and turned; and then she moved with Mum to Ireland. Molly explained how she'd come about: the donor who might be Mum's nephew at some remove, the stored egg, the hired surrogate.

She told the story of how uncle Ilario and aunt Cath had adopted Petra and Julian at ages five and three, and what she knew of their odd, gradual approach to disclosing to their children that they were vampires. (Petra was disposed to likening the revelation to finding out that there was no Santa Claus: "Nobody would tell me outright, they worried I'd tell our social worker, but a few people - Aunt Gianna and Aunt Maggie, mostly - went suspiciously quiet sometimes, and the evidence just accumulated. You wouldn't believe how silly I felt when I finally got up the nerve to ask Mum if she was a vampire, though, especially since I wasn't sure it was that as opposed to a dozen other things.")

"Have you ever met your surrogate?" Pleione inquired when Molly ran out of things to say.

"No," Molly said. "Not so I'd notice, anyway, I think she got to hold me once when I was born. Why? Do you know yours?"

"Just mine," Corisande said.

"I wanted a sister, and Mom and Dad said we had to wait until someone would agree to have her for us, since mine had already turned and moved to Japan and couldn't well do it again," Pleione explained, "I was five months old, and Noemi took me out shopping for clothes because Dad can't go out in public at *all* yet and Mom can't go out when shops are open, I got away from her. Before she caught up with me I'd cornered a human lady and told her all about how I wanted a sister and needed somebody to have her for us."

"Oh, wow," giggled Molly, hand over her mouth, and Pleione smiled.

"So then," Corisande continued, "the Golden Coven did some damage control with the lady - they keep the nearest capital partly-staffed year round because there's so many of us living around here, but it was full-staff with Alec and Princess Elspeth and everybody at the time. And she said that was all very interesting and wanted to know if she *could* do what the cute little girl had asked."

"So she did," Pleione said, "and I got my sister." Corisande beamed brilliantly at Pleione. "The lady's name is Andrea. She lives in Arkansas now but she visits us sometimes, like an aunt. Our other aunts - and uncles - live in Italy and they're hard to visit."

"Cool," said Molly. "My uncle used to live with us, but he moved out to live with Aunt Cath when they met. I was two. We see them about every couple of months."

"Tell us about that, your aunt and uncle," prompted Pleione, so Molly told them the (suspiciously sanitary) story she had of the meeting in Ireland, Aunt Cath's original relationship to Mum, and the pair's prompt establishment of a residence once the revolution was over.

By the time all the requisite stories had been swapped, the sun had gone up and over its highest point and dropped a considerable way towards the horizon. Molly's parents had arrived on the beach, but not interfered (*they don't have to, they can hear everything from all the way over there if they listen*, Molly reminded herself, but she was grateful for the space anyway). Ilario and Cath were near them, watching Petra (now deep in some discussion with Noemi) and Julian (still trying valiantly to understand Joey's attempt to teach him surfing.)

The conversation had turned to music (Pleione and Corisande liked dreadful old rock, and Molly was trying to correct this error) when the sun set. Mum and Mamma still kept their distance, until the first time Molly yawned, and then Mum appeared at the edge of the blanket.

"About ready to turn in?" she asked her daughter.

"Muuuum," complained Molly.

"I go to sleep in ten minutes anyway, Molly," Pleione said.

"I'll be up just another hour is all," said Corisande.

"I can come get you in the morning when I wake up if you like," Pleione volunteered, and Molly nodded enthusiastically and let Mum lead her up to the hotel.

"Poor child, facing three weeks on this incredibly pointless beach with nothing to do and no one to talk to," said Mum mirthfully.

"I'll never survive it," Molly deadpanned. "Child abuse, this is. I shall die of boredom unless you illegally turn me *right now*."

"Into bed with you," snorted Mum. "Don't wake your cousins, they're already down for the count."

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"Maaaaaamma," pleaded Molly. "Please, oh, please, let me go. Just for a month. Plei' and Cori say their parents don't mind."

"Marcus and Didyme aren't used to having a human staying in their house," said Mamma edgily. "Didyme I'll believe is safe, but..."

"But it's not the *same* with you and Mum along and us staying in a hotel," complained Molly.

"Honestly, Molly, I don't see why having a sleepover of any length makes any sense with your half-vampire friends anyway. They can't exactly stay up late with you. We can go to Florida again this summer, but *we*, collectively."

"I've *met* their dad," Molly entreated. "He's weird, but he didn't even look at me funny."

Mamma's lips became a thin line, and she said, "No. I do not want you staying overnight in his house."

"Mamma," began Molly again, but it was no good.

Mum was no help. "You could ask Pleione and Corisande if they want to share your hotel room," she proposed, which *was* a good idea, but sixteen-year-olds were ever less than amenable to such things when thwarted.

"Why doesn't Mamma think Marcus is safe?" Molly asked.

"Your mamma worked for the Volturi when she was a human," Mum reminded her. "Marcus is the last surviving member of the ruling triad. He's retired to Florida with his mate and kids, sure, but that doesn't change the fact that he was in power while those in power decided to kill her."

Molly grumbled. "Maybe Plei' and Cori will move out before the summer," she announced loudly, even though this wasn't necessary to make her voice carry to Mamma's ears as well as Mum's. "Plei's seven and Cori almost is, that's grown for them, they might."

"As long as you're not staying with *Marcus*, that's fine, sweetheart," Mamma called.

Pleione and Corisande had no plans to move out of their parents' house, as it turned out. Although Pleione had acquired a part-time job lifeguarding, they didn't have adequate money to live on their own, and Marcus and Didyme weren't so eager to see them go as to fund the expedition. Molly took a while to get over her itchy resentment about Mum's idea, but finally proposed sharing a hotel room, and this went over well with the sisters and meant that Molly would be allowed to make the trip alone.

So when summer came, Molly's parents put her on a plane and she flew to Florida for the fourth summer in a row.

Pleione and Corisande met her at the airport. "Don't tell him I told you," Corisande said as soon as greeting hugs had been exchanged, "but I think Joey has a *crush* on you."

"Positively limerent," said Pleione, who had literally memorized the dictionary the prior autumn over a dull weekend.

"Does he?" asked Molly, surprised, as they proceeded out of the terminal and into the parking lot. (Pleione had a drivers' license which claimed she was seventeen.) Molly and Joey had been in touch (he'd gotten her screen name, "ultravioletcolorblind", from Julian) but while he'd been friendly she'd thought it was just that. "He... does *know* I'm planning to be a vampire, right? In like four, five years? I don't really date."

"He's probably doodling "Joham Trafeli Jr." all over his journal," teased Corisande. "Wait, where does the "Junior" go if he takes your last name? Does he still count if he doesn't match both names with his dad?"

"No idea," said Molly. "Um, Joey's great, but... I *am* gonna turn. I'm already scheduled to get eggs gotten out next year. I don't want to wind up like Nahuel's ex-wife."

They piled into the car, Molly riding shotgun and Corisande behind her while Pleione drove. "Maybe you'll turn and then you'll realize "Oh, me oh my, Joey is my one true love,"" Corisande crooned.

"Maybe I'll turn and then I'll realize "Oh, me oh my, Joey's *dad* is my one true love,"" scoffed Molly. "It's pretty random."

"Don't tell Joey - or his dad - I said this, but, ew," whispered Corisande.

Molly shrugged. "We'll see, right? I can't think of anybody I hate so much that I'd rather not be a vampire than risk falling in love with them."

"So you're not gonna ask Joey out?" Pleione asked.

Molly shook her head. "If *he* asked *me* I might go out with him - casually, *just* for fun, and no goodnight kiss because *venom* - but unless he does, less awkward all around to pretend I have no idea."

"You're so honest, though, Molly, do you think you can not let on?" Corisande said.

"Okay, so I grew up with a lie detector," Molly said. "But she doesn't detect mere incompleteness, and I had to learn to systematically lie by omission so I could go to school when I was five."

"Fair enough," said Pleione.

Joey didn't ask Molly out, although he did hang around her and the Greco girls more than he had in prior summers. "My dad is going to start seeing about having another kid, once I'm seven," he said, once when they were walking along the shore.

"Looking forward to it?" Molly asked.

Joey shrugged. "I don't know. I love my dad and my sisters, and even Nahuel when he shows up, but I kind of wish my mom had wanted to be my *mom*. And whoever Dad gets to be the mom of the next kid will more likely be like my mom than not. It's sad."

"You've *met* your mom, right?" Molly asked.

Joey nodded, looking pensively at the water. "I was two, and she dropped by the Florida capital to get the paperwork to turn her grandma - my great-grandma - I don't think her family knows about me. She stopped in to visit for about an hour. It was sort of weird, because my only memory of her was from when I was born, and she was really, really dark, and now she's just a little olive. I didn't recognize her on my own; Dad had to tell me who she was."

"You could try getting in touch with her family," Corisande said. "Especially your great-great-grandma who's a vampire now. The Golden Coven database'll tell you who she's related to."

"The great-great-grandma, *maybe*, if her application even got approved, which I don't know about," said Joey, sighing. "The others - I'm not Princess Elspeth, I can't show up on somebody's doorstep and claim to be their nephew or their grandson and expect anyone to believe me."

"When the Masquerade is down for good?" Pleione asked.

"Then. Yeah," said Joey.

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The Masquerade, as it was called tongue-in-cheek, had been slowly deteriorating for most of Molly's life. The Golden Coven had inherited Volturi influence over major institutions worldwide, and were steadily reducing the degree to which this influence was based on deception. They were allowing unprecedented amounts of disclosure, albeit strictly through personal, one-to-one channels for immediate family and dearest friends of supernaturals. The turning rate had been permitted to rise sharply once a sufficient number of slaughterhouses were discreetly converted into blood-harvesting facilities that any vampire could visit for a fresh meal. Hybrids were born by the dozen annually, and their human relatives were allowed to know everything. Some entire *towns* were in the know - the little

beach town where Pleione, Corisande, and Joey lived contained plenty of informed humans. Forks, WA had collectively figured out the wolves from La Push and the "exclusive spa" by 2021. Most of Volterra and the villages nearest the Québec capital had been let to do the same with their local shapeshifters.

This was not as explosive a revelation as one might think. In a population that size, of course some loon started a website entitled "THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT VAMPIRES!!!" (which contained as much as 35% real truth). But this loon had to compete with all of the other loons, who were writing websites about mermaids or dragons or unicorns. The vampire website was interpreted as a project of deadpan epistolary fiction, or at worst the ravings of a sincerely delusional author. Official sources - the ones that might be taken as something other than random loons - were tied up with ancient baggage about the Volturi and could be leaned on. The temptation to make a great and efficacious attempt to be taken seriously, given the Golden Coven's technological and magical resources to track down anyone who crossed them, was kept to a minimum.

Molly was impatient.

The idea, as she understood it, was to just go on telling people at the same slow rate: no massive media campaign, no grand speech delivered by the openly sparkling Empress at the UN, no giving all of the world's governments a coordinated green light to inform their citizenry. Everyone would be told one at a time, by someone trustworthy who had the resources to prove it. Everyone would be sworn to secrecy barring approved circumstances, and the missteps would be easily absorbed by the larger conspiracy. And someday this would just happen to achieve total information saturation, quietly, without a fuss, without provoking anyone into starting a war or demanding any sudden policy changes.

Molly had tried to tell someone once. When she was twelve, she'd cornered her best school friend Vera, extracted a promise of belief and secrecy backed by a threat of self-mutilation should it be broken, and said, "My parents are vampires."

Vera considered this, and then her mind went straight to the gutter. "Oh my god *ew*. I did nooooooot need to know that. *You* did not need to know that. Did they *tell* you or did you walk in on them or what? *Ewwwwwww*."

"That's not what I *meant*," Molly protested, and she was able to convince Vera that far - Vera decided on a more PG-rated interpretation where Molly's parents were metaphorically sucking the life out of her - but Molly never tried to explain it to a human friend again.

Not *as* a human, at any rate.

---

Molly turned twenty. She had eggs in a Golden Coven freezer, a turning application that had been approved when she was nineteen but that she could defer for any amount of time, and a budding anxiety disorder.

"I'll forget everything," she wrote to the Greco sisters. "I'm afraid I'll forget everything and everyone. I have a journal but it'll be like reading a *story*, won't it?"

"We'll tell you everything," Corisande promised. "We remember every word of every conversation we've ever had. Your moms too. You'll know what happened."

"But I won't *remember*."

"You'll remember some," said Pleione. "Enough."

Molly talked to her mum. "My throat will hurt *all* the time."

"They're working on that in R&D," Mum said. "Carlisle says the new synthetic prototype is, and I quote, *almost drinkable*."

"I'll want to eat people," Molly said.

"You won't eat anyone," Mum said firmly.

Molly wrote to Joey. "I feel stupid for not being excited about it," she said. "I've wanted and expected to be a vampire my whole life."

"It's not stupid," Joey assured her. "There's legit stuff to be scared over and you didn't have to think about it when it was all far off."

"But I'm going to do it anyway," Molly said.

"The Golden Coven will be down here next month," Joey said. "Are you going to come here or wait for them to go to Greece or Norway so you're closer to home?"

"Florida probably," Molly said. "So I don't have to explain to my human friends why I can't see them, when I'm new."

"It'll be good to see you," Joey said. "Athena will be happy you're visiting too. And Lucy'll probably throw you a party."

She talked to her mamma. "Three days."

"Oh, sweetheart, you're going to have it easy," soothed Mamma. "It won't hurt a bit, Alec will help you. And Princess Elspeth and Zafrina take it in turns to show interesting things to the people who turn at capital facilities, so you won't even be bored."

"I'll be stacked up like a log with a bunch of other people," shuddered Molly.

"Not conscious. You'll be out first. The stacking is just so Alec can cover everyone efficiently," Mamma said. "I know, it doesn't sound very pleasant compared to going to the beach, I understand, but it's so much better than it was, and it was worth it even *then*."

She talked to Petra.

"I can't wait until it's my turn, seriously," Petra said. "You're *complaining*? Want to trade ages? You can wait another two or three years and I'll hop on a flight to, what is it this week, Australia? and let them turn *me*."

"I felt the same way when I was seventeen," Molly said. "It's just the immediate prospect feels different."

"Whatever, you're crazy, Mo-mo," said Petra, deploying the nickname that only she ever used. "I'm not gonna think any differently when I get approved. I'm not even going to sit on my permission slip for a couple months like you've been doing, I mean really, you could have already got the turning and the adjustment period over with and be applying to uni now if you'd been quick about it."

Mum bought Molly a plane ticket.

---

There were thirty other people in Molly's batch to be turned. They sat in an auditorium-style room without any windows, fidgeting and looking at each other; nine people were accompanied (and cooed over and petted) by mated vampires. Two of those, and one lone woman, were heavily pregnant with hybrids and had been wheeled in.

Princess Elspeth, with her little circlet nestled over her hair, strode in with a guard of three wolves following her, and stopped behind the podium at the front. The princess said, "Welcome, everyone," (*hi, Molly! I remember you!*, she added silently to Molly) "to the pre-turning briefing. As most of you know, I'm Princess Elspeth Cullen, and I run the department of public relations. In three days' time, unless you back out in the next few hours - *which you are absolutely free to do, each and every one of you, should you wish* -" (the princess shot a look at each of the vampires in the room and their mates) "you will all be vampires."

Molly clutched at the stack of papers in her hands. "The turning process itself, as we do it under non-emergency circumstances, is painless," the princess went on. "Those of you who are pregnant cannot be completely anesthetized until after the babies are delivered, but afterwards, everyone will be put into an induced coma and injected with venom. Anyone who has supplied us with a loved one's venom for this purpose will be turned using that." Molly had brought a vial of Mamma's with her and handed it in to Santiago earlier. "Otherwise it will be sourced from a Golden Coven staff member. Once that is underway, you'll be moved from the medical bay to the turning room, arranged space-efficiently, and preemptively put under Imperial Anesthetist Alec's anesthesia so there will be no gap in the pain relief. Assuming none of you wake up from the coma before or after the average time of thirty hours, you will have a little over forty hours of consciousness without any normal sensory input. As you might expect, this is *boring*."

A few people in the audience tittered at that, and Princess Elspeth smiled, adjusted her crown, and continued. "Accordingly, I and Imperial Illusionist Zafrina will be taking it in turns to entertain you during those forty-plus hours. We've both seen and therefore memorized an assortment of movies - she does visual illusions only, and so will be accompanying hers with subtitles in all applicable languages. Mine will include sound, which you will hear in your native tongue even if the film isn't originally in it. You each have a packet which includes a list of options and you're invited to check off any you'd like to see so we don't show them at random, but since you all need to be watching the same thing, you may not see all of the ones you select and will see some you didn't choose. In

addition," the princess went on, grinning as though to herself, "at or around the 50-hour mark, your entertainment programming will be briefly suspended and Imperial Messenger Dwi will relay any messages your friends and family have left for you since you arrived. You'll be able to have brief conversations *if* those friends or family are conversing with Dwi in real time, but please, don't hold him up too long; he needs to get to everyone.

"After you're done turning, you will be removed from the area of Alec's witchcraft and will wake up immediately. I will warn you - and repeat the following safety instructions for you - before he does that, so you won't be surprised. *Please* do not attack Alec; even if you don't actually harm him, you could cause him to lose his concentration on his power, and not everyone will finish turning at the same time. Please do not attack anyone else, either. Newborn vampires are greatly improved, but *not* rendered perfectly controlled, by advance warning about the nature of vampires. You *will* find yourself moody and overly emotional with more violent tendencies than you are accustomed to until you have gotten used to being a vampire, possibly until you're no longer a newborn.

"This capital site has a one-mile tunnel to a Golden Coven-owned slaughterhouse. It is possible to dispense edibly fresh blood via beverage machines installed in the tunnel without needing to share air with the humans who operate the facility. Although you may or may not choose to eat immediately, you are advised to do so as soon as possible. The slaughterhouse operates at a steady rate twenty-four hours a day, and we have arranged for there to be a particularly high volume of animals processed the day you're scheduled to wake, so there should be no gap in availability. There are clear signs indicating which way the tunnel is from the turning room.

"It is *strongly recommended* that you remain here in the capital for one to six weeks, depending on your personal acclimation, before attempting to depart. Imperial Newborn Handler Jasper and his assistants will look after you for as long as you choose to remain, although if you do stay *longer* than six weeks, you may be asked to pick up minor Golden Coven work. Because we're in Florida, we *may* also receive a visit from Didyme Greco, an occasional Golden Coven consultant who possesses an aura of happiness newborns tend to find extremely soothing, but we cannot guarantee her presence. Any possessions stored with my department for safekeeping while you turn will be released to you as soon as you're done, but please be careful with them; it will take time to become accustomed to your new strength. I can take questions now."

One of the pregnant ones who had a vampire with her wanted to know if she could have a minute to hold the baby before going under. The princess said that would be fine as long as the C-section went normally and someone held its head so it couldn't bite her. Someone else - who appeared to pose his question in Spanish, but Molly dizzily found him comprehensible anyway and suspected princessly involvement - wanted to know if his vampire sister would be allowed to hang around in the capital while he was acclimating. Elspeth said yes to that too. (Molly looked at the princess's mouth while she answered, and thought she might be actually *saying* "sí", but only heard "yes".) Molly tried to think of a question - she had to have one, it couldn't be that *simple* - but none came to mind.

Princess Elspeth and her wolves led everyone to the medical bay. There were only five beds, so everyone except the three pregnant women, two vampire mates, and two people

Elsbeth pointed at sat in the waiting room and paged through the booklet of movie options. Molly circled a few things, mostly recent stuff she'd wanted to see and hadn't gotten around to. As an afterthought she added a couple that she'd seen before and liked, and wanted to remember properly when she woke up.

Molly finished going through the packet, handed it over to the woman wearing a nametag that said "Imperial Illusionist Zafrina" when she came in and asked for them, and waited her turn.

Then one of the doctors - no one Molly knew - poked her head out of the bay, and crooked a finger at Molly, and Molly watched her feet move as she proceeded shakily in.

There were needles, and then there was nothing.

---

Molly felt a moment of terrible panic when she woke up unable to feel her body, even her own breathing or which direction was down, and her entire sensory experience consisted of the eponymous musical number from "Singing in the Rain". Then she remembered where she was, and what was going on, and calmed down - had her heart jumped, even as it made progress towards its last beat? had she inhaled strangely even while disconnected from her body? - and watched the movie. She hadn't seen it before, and was fairly confused for having missed the beginning, but then "Casablanca" came on and she managed to lose herself in the plot enough that she almost didn't miss having a body. The next movie was silent - shift change - with subtitles marching across the bottom of the "screen".

Movies helped, but the long hours without a break to get up and stretch her legs - to reassure herself that she *had* legs - were pretty mind-numbing. And as predicted, Molly found that she had extra mind to numb. It was fascinating, although not enough to make up for the limited entertainment the films offered - she could almost feel her brain moving in quick little ticks, counting off time for her as the minutes piled up. She couldn't remember when exactly she was supposed to get messages, though Mum had promised there would be some (and she did, she found, remember *that*: she knew who she was, who her parents were, who she was expecting to see when she opened her eyes. Or *were* her eyes open, and merely unseeing...?)

The messages from home came in: a detached, monotonous voice read her notes from Mum and Mamma, from Uncle Ilario and Aunt Cath and Petra and Julian, and then said, "There are a Pleione and Corisande, and a "Joey", here to speak with you."

"Tell them hi!" Molly thought, trying to direct the thought at Dwi without really knowing how to go about it, and a conversation of sorts - made strange by the fact that everyone's words were rendered in the same voice - ensued, but there wasn't too much to say, and after Molly's friends had promised to be present when she woke up, the conversation ended and a showing of "The Last Battle" began.

Ten more movies later, and Elspeth's voice sounded in Molly's head: "Hi, Molly! You're all done. Alec's got you out of the stack and you're propped up against a wall in the

turning room. Your friends are waiting right out the door for you. Once you get your senses back you may be very startled and have the impulse to lash out, but please don't attack anyone, especially Alec, and if you do property damage that we can't fix with staff witches, you do need to pay for it. If you want to have a drink right away, just follow the signs. Alec is going to place you outside of the field of his power *now*."

And then -

Sensation *slammed* into Molly. There was a hot burning taste like alcohol in her mouth - venom and thirst - she suddenly knew where all her limbs were and that Alec had his hands on her shoulders, and she pulled away and he *pushed* her (in the direction away from his power? There was the stack of people, behind her if she turned her head, sharp in light and shadow and color, so yes, he'd only been pushing her away from where he was still blanketing the room, but he *pushed* her, she ought to bite his nose off - or - not - bad idea. Don't bite his nose off.) She didn't stumble, she got her feet back and gasped for unsatisfying air, smelled something warm and multilayered with promised flavor and her throat smoldered -

"Molly," called Pleione's voice from the hallway. "Molly, won't you come out?"

Molly sniffed the air. More burning, lingering scents of humans, and the sweet near-floral scent of Alec, who was watching her and had his arms up ready to defend if she attacked (*he's expecting a fight, give it to him!* said something in the cheap seats in her renovated brain, and she clenched her fists but didn't advance) and a spicier, not-food, not-foe smell. (*Hybrids*, said a memory, dim but there.)

Molly carefully laid her palm on the door that led from the turning room, and pushed.

Light from the hallway struck her eyes in eight colors (*have to change my screen name*, she thought with a hysterical inward laugh) and there were Pleione and Corisande and Joey.

"Good morning," said Molly, blinking rapidly and peering at the faces. Joey was looking at her hopefully, and she returned the eye contact, not sure what she was checking for - but on inspection that was just Joey, not The Most Important Person In The World, and she gave a minute shake of her head, pretty sure that she'd have noticed *something* different about him besides amazing visual clarity if he were her mate. Joey sighed and shrugged and Corisande giggled.

"Good morning," Pleione returned. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel like while this is probably still an improvement on the natural method, suddenly having vampire senses probably seems a lot more fun for the first ten minutes if it's replacing mind-destroying agony instead of a romantic comedy," Molly said.

This made all three half-vampires giggle, and then Corisande said, "Do you want to go get breakfast?"

"Nng," said Molly, nodding and drawing her eyebrows together. She looked for signs, and saw a large arrow labeled *BLOOD* (with a red teardrop symbol), and followed where it

pointed. She was forty strides down the hall when she realized she was going too fast for her friends to keep up, but they'd be able to catch her when she stopped for *food*, so she left them behind.

The hall smelled of vampires all the way along, but there was no one currently at the beverage machines. Molly grabbed a plastic cup, accidentally crushed it, took a second more carefully, and pressed it against the dispenser. She let it fill up to about an inch before she snatched it back and gulped down the contents - *bleah*, but it washed the venom away - and then she let more pour in, filling the cup to the brim.

By the time the hybrids were done jogging to the end of the hall, Molly had finished four cupsful of blood (and dissolved the rim of her cup to the point where she had to replace it with yet another, although she supposed the plastic was still cheaper than having to wash actual glass on a regular basis). She filled a fifth and stepped back to let her friends get their own. "Usually I'd rather hunt for seagulls," commented Pleione, "it's fresher, but this *is* convenient, when we're here anyway."

"I'm not at all ready to try hunting yet," said Molly, shaking her head and trying to find a way to sip from her cup of blood without getting too much venom on the flimsy plastic. It still tasted terrible, but it was slowly, steadily whittling away at the craving and the pain, so she kept drinking until she felt like she'd spill if she tipped over. "Okay. So now I'm a vampire. What next?"

"Doesn't PRPR have a pamphlet about that?" asked Joey, raising his cup of blood in a toast and tapping it against Corisande's. "Titled just about exactly that: So Now I'm A Vampire, What Next?"

"No, I think newborns are considered too simple-minded to tolerate anything more than minimalistic signage," said Pleione, pointing at another plaque on the wall at the end of the hallway, which read *NEWBORN QUARTERS* and pointed down another corridor around the corner.

"Are you done eating, Molly? Want to go see the accommodations?" asked Corisande.

Molly looked at the thin film of blood remaining at the bottom of her cup and did not feel motivated to replenish the supply. She could also hear urgent footsteps, vampire feet on stone approaching from the direction of the turning room. "Let's go," she said, tossing the third and final destroyed cup and getting out of the next newborn's way.

---

After five torturously cooped-up weeks in the newborn quarters, during which Molly only got into three altercations and lost limbs on just one occasion, the Golden Coven moved house to Greece. Newborns (from Molly's batch and eight subsequent - there had been a few leftover from Brazil when she'd turned, but they'd all gone during the stint in Florida) who weren't ready to leave custody shared an airplane with Alec. He continually fogged an area immediately around himself in case any of them went for him, and was ready to expand it if they started fighting with each other. Jasper sat at the other end of the plane, pouring calm

into the air and looking too dangerous to touch; his assistants were dispersed throughout the cabin. Molly made it across the ocean without attacking anyone or provoking anyone into an attack, and decided that on arrival she'd try leaving and, if that went well, swimming home.

She asked Jasper about it, and he said, "Swing by the PRPR office after sundown, after we see visitors. There aren't any humans still there by that hour, but the smell clings to the place. See how you do."

Molly took the advice. Standing in the waiting room, forcing herself to remain calm and sip water, inhaling smoke and ambrosia, she managed not to drop into hunting mode.

She called home, and Mamma answered. "Molly, good evening! How was the trip to Greece?"

"Uneventful, thank goodness," Molly said. "I heard one of Jasper's helpers saying that one time a newborn clawed his way out of the airplane, landed in the Atlantic, and had to have a team of people go in and grab him before he made landfall and ate someone. Nothing like that last night."

"Oh, that's good," said Mamma.

"I was thinking I'd start for home tonight," Molly said. "By water, I don't think I want to be in a commercial airplane yet. I memorized the maps. One of the pamphlets lying around said that they'll mail my stuff after me if I ask and pay postage so I don't have to worry about waterproofing my computer."

"We'll expect you, sweetheart," said Gianna. "Be careful."

---

"Hey, Crazy-Eyes," said Julian, when he and his family next visited Molly and hers. "How delicious would I be?" Aunt Cath took her son aside for a very stern discussion regarding how remarks about his deliciousness were not only *cruel* but also *dangerous*, and Molly fidgeted in her chair uncomfortably and watched Petra eat a sandwich. Petra stared back, envy in her eyes.

"You're prettier," Petra announced, after a few minutes.

"...Thank you," said Molly.

"I heard it would make us prettier but I've never actually met someone before and then seen them after, I mean I saw photos of Dad but he had *cancer* before," Petra said softly. "I'm glad it's true."

"You look fine, Petra," said Uncle Ilario, and Petra sighed.

The next weekend, Molly brought her computer, full of university applications, up the street to Vera's house. They had decided that these would be less miserable to fill out

together, and it was overcast, so Molly didn't have to cancel or demand that Vera come to her.

Vera did not fail to notice Molly's bright crimson eyes, decolorized skin, or newfound loveliness. "Yikes, what kind of crazy plastic surgery did you get in Florida?" Vera asked as soon as she opened the door to receive her friend. "Is it that new thing I heard they were doing with I-can't-pronounce-it-azine? Only I don't remember that having a bright-red-contact-lenses side effect."

Molly pulled her sleeve across her nose to inhale air with as little Vera in it as possible, and said, "The craziest. You wouldn't believe me."

"Hey, I'd believe you," protested Vera. "You've never lied to me."

"Not technically, I guess," sighed Molly. She glanced at the huge birdbath in the front yard. "Does your dad still want that moved like you were talking about last week?"

"Yeah, he - Molly? Molly, I don't think you can -"

Molly picked up the birdbath with one hand, moved it to the spot on the corner of the patio where Vera had described her father wanting it, and set it down. "So, um," said Molly. "I'm a vampire."

"Oh," said Vera faintly, looking at the birdbath. "That so. Um, good for you. That's nice."

"Can I come in?" Molly asked.

"Yeah. Um. Don't bite me," said Vera, standing out of the way, and Molly shook her head and crossed the threshold.

---

In 2035, a human Molly didn't know and didn't meet at a vampire-related event recognized her species for the first time. She was walking to her apartment from work (back-end web design, or rather 10% back-end web design and 90% goofing off to hide her productivity speed from her boss), and a human man she'd never seen before stopped on the opposite sidewalk, looked her over, and then crossed the street. He left a margin of a few feet, but was clearly addressing her when he asked, "Hey, are you a - you know?"

"A you-know?" Molly inquired archly, but she did stop to talk to him.

"You *know*," he insisted, looking at her eyes and gesturing. He looked around furtively at the people milling around on the street, and opened his mouth again, but Molly held a finger to her lips.

"If *you* know, you might choose to whisper it *very* quietly," she proposed in an undertone.

"*Vampire*," he muttered under his breath, looking away.

"Walk with me," she said, tossing her head and beckoning, and he trotted after her. "Where's your info from?"

"My cousin Pat," he said. "Pat says his wife's niece is one, told me what to look for, but that was months ago and you're the only one I've seen."

"You didn't feel like going to Norway to get pamphlets?" Molly asked.

"Norway, is that where I'd have to go?" he asked, shaking his head. "No. I didn't really believe Pat but then there you were, with the parasol and the sweater past your fingertips in July and the gold eyes and the paleness like the dead - are you technically? Dead?"

"I don't feel that way," she said.

"No heartbeat. ...Right? I let Pat go on for a bit before I told him I didn't believe him..."

"Trees are alive," she said.

The man, whose name he eventually disclosed as Cadan, followed her home and sat in her living room for hours, peppering her with questions and smacking himself in the forehead when he asked if she had any food in the fridge. (She did, but it was a certified-barely-drinkable synthetic blood imitation, kept in case of conditions preventing her from hunting or visiting the Coven slaughterhouse eighty miles west. This answer set off another round of questions.)

Night fell, and Cadan fell asleep on her sofa partway through a question about Molly's enhanced hearing, and she took the decorative throw blanket off the back of the couch and put it over him.

She'd been standing by the sofa for six hours watching him sleep before it occurred to her that this wasn't at all normal behavior.

---

"Now, what do you say if one of the other children wants to know why you'll look seven in six months when you only look five now?" Molly asked.

"I'm *fast*," said Brian. "Mum, I remember real good, I don't have to practice."

"And if this answer doesn't make them give up asking?" prompted Cadan. "It's not practice, we're only checking."

"Then I say come over to my house after school for cookies and my mum and dad will tell you," Brian recited. "And then you give them cookies and you tell them. Because the Empress isn't going to give a speech at the U.N. or anything," he added in an uncanny imitation of Molly's mannerisms.

Cadan laughed and ruffled Brian's hair. "All right then. You're sure you want to walk? You do have to *walk* the entire way. I saw you jumping into trees the other day in broad daylight; the neighbors might have too."

"So?" asked Brian.

"We wouldn't want to run out of cookies," said Molly, and this got the appropriate reaction of horror from her son, who seemed to be the only hybrid in the world with a sweet tooth (although Molly did have to double the eggs in each batch of dough for maximally effective bribery).

"I'll walk, really, the *whole* way," Brian promised, and then he put his bag over his shoulder and set off. "Bye, Mum! Bye, Dad!"

## Second Chances

Leah didn't need to hear it again.

"Lee-lee," pleaded Sam.

"Do not *fucking* call me that," snarled Leah. She was biting the inside of her cheek so hard she tasted blood, and pressing half-moons into her palms as she fought to hold her shape. "Do *not*, not now." Her ring was filmed over with dust from where she'd thrown it to the ground, glinting halfheartedly in the sun. She'd already shredded the calendar with *November 8* circled in red. She didn't need to destroy herself, too.

"I didn't do it on purpose. I never," Sam said, and the terrible thing was that she *believed* him, she *remembered* the sea-change that had twisted his brain beyond recognition as though it had happened to *her*, and it made her want to hurl. She knew he hadn't chosen to imprint on her cousin. Practically her sister, close enough to be, but every memory of a summer alongside Emily when they were little was sour now.

"I know," she growled, struggling with the rage that had come with the touch of Bella's cold hand. *Not like this. Not like this. Control. Turning into a wolf will not help, just like it didn't help Dad...* But her anger had nowhere else to go. It seethed and roiled and burned and she just wanted to explode out of herself and run nowhere, kill something, scream it all through sharp teeth into the world that *did this to her*.

Sam was mercifully quiet while she pummeled the instinct down, kept her limbs smooth and her nails blunt and her ears round.

Then he ruined everything.

"Don't blame Emily," he begged her.

Of course it was all about *Emily* and *Emily's feelings* now. Of *course*. He could have said "forgive me" like it mattered if she did, or "I'll try again to change it" like it was worth the attempt, or "it's my fault, I should never have looked at any girls besides you knowing this could happen", like he could make anything different by admitting that. But no. "Don't blame Emily."

Leah burst out of her skin and bolted out of the village as fast as gray paws and the fuel of raw wrath could take her, and Sam didn't try to follow.

---

Marcus didn't need to be told.

He could see it. He'd been looking right at the ribbon when she (couldn't think it). He'd been looking, and it - snapped. He'd never seen it happen before, but the meaning was (unthinkable) unmistakable.

By the time Aro returned to the group to tell the particulars, the life had drained out of Marcus like the ribbon's injury was his, like he was bleeding from it (like he could). He heard the story Aro delivered, and pulled out of his stupor long enough to deliver violence to the perpetrators, and then - stared at the ribbon again as it wavered in the air, torn edges intersesting the flames of the murderers. It didn't catch. It wouldn't burn.

It was going to be there as long as he was.

"Brother," Aro said in low tones, fingers a vise around Marcus's wrist. Marcus had barely noticed his own hand extending towards the fire where her murderers burned.

Marcus didn't turn to even look at Aro. "You lost her too. If anyone could understand -" he whispered, but no one could understand. Aro's connection to his sister had been a lovely thing, glossy purple twined with orange and gold, but it wasn't the same and it would be gone with her (don't think it) anyway. Only the ribbon remained.

"I understand," said Aro, gesturing at where his hand clutched Marcus's arm. "But this isn't the way. Let Chelsea help you."

Marcus knew that, the day before, this suggestion would have merited some derisive comment.

This fact, compared to other facts about yesterday he could dwell on, was not interesting.

He didn't answer Aro, and at length the mindreader pulled him away from the flames and towards the witch who made the light her plaything.

As expected, she could do nothing about the ribbon. So what she could do was not important.

---

Pera didn't need Brady.

That was the expert opinion of the Volturi who'd investigated, and so they killed him, right in front of her while he howled her name, and Chelea played cat's-cradle with the air and Pera felt nothing except repulsed by the smell.

She'd liked the way he smelled, before.

Then Heidi came by the hallway, leading mesmerized humans behind her, and Pera crept towards the vision of loveliness even though she was drenched in the beige of unhidden things. But while Pera felt compelled to approach, she didn't need to unhide, or listen to Heidi's question, so she drew near Heidi, and then shot a hand forward to grab and enfold the nearest human in white and drink down the red. And another. And another.

She brought them back out, when they were dead and drained, and then hid herself again.

Heidi left. Pera followed her (hidden) and watched everyone else take their meals, and then Heidi released the mesmerizing power when the last human was gone, and Pera was free to go where she liked.

She found Aro, and touched his hand. His power was one that did work from sepia to white (at least on her), and he noticed her presence at once, and told her where to find the room she'd been given.

She went there.

It had some minimal furniture in it, and a new computer, which she booted up. She reset all the preferences and chose a password and found a more attractive desktop background and then she didn't know what to do.

So she stood, and waited.

It was easy to do nothing.

Eventually some people visited her room and she was told to hide them, and she did, and they came back some days later and she was told to unhide them, and she did.

She didn't exactly have anything else to do.

---

Leah didn't know how to ask.

In the end she didn't need to formulate a sentence. She just went up to Chelsea, head bowed, hands clasped behind her back, and said, "Chelsea - could you -"

"Oh, I was wondering if you were going to ask," Chelsea said, and her thumb sliced down through the air. "There you are. Better?"

It *was*.

Leah held her breath and gave Chelsea a hug, and then barely restrained herself from dancing out of the amphitheater, because it was *better*. It didn't *hurt* anymore. Sam was with Emily, of *course* Sam was with Emily, and it didn't *hurt*.

Leah's lingering problems with uncontrolled phasing evaporated overnight. She stopped picking fights with her brother, stopped goading her alpha into ordering her down, stopped bullying the puppies. Sam wasn't even there - he'd run off with Jacob - but if he had been, she could have been phased at the same time as him, and she wouldn't even have *twitched* when he thought of Emily.

Sam did show up, and Emily, and their baby, later on, and Leah welcomed her cousin-slash-sister like she always should have and didn't bat an eye when Sam called her Lee-lee. It was only a nickname. It didn't hurt.

---

Marcus didn't know how it happened.

But it *had*.

The ribbon was proof enough, and the way she looked at him.

"Didyme," he said, and she beamed and stepped into his embrace.

---

Pera didn't know how to start over.

She didn't know how to do *anything*, anymore; all her initiative was drained away, a casualty of Chelsea's relentless, extended manipulations, so *careful*, layer upon layer of redundancy and reinforcement to make sure she didn't leave because they had no other way to hold her. There was nothing real left; it was all paper-mache Chelsea had built up over the ruins of what she'd had before.

But there he was (all of a sudden, materializing like a bright light in a dark cellar, looking around desperately, but not speaking, staying silent).

And all Pera could think was, *what if they kill him too?*

She didn't know if she'd make this more likely, or less, by reaching out and touching him and hiding him with her power.

She'd done that with Brady too, and she'd had a few years and then they'd killed him, and she didn't care - she *didn't*, no matter how numb and wrong the place where caring should have been felt. She didn't care, except that she didn't know what to do after he'd died (did they have to do it in front of her?) and it was easy to do nothing. If she started over again, and they killed *this one too...* then... what?

She hid him anyway.

Razi knew her name, and he said he loved her, and he told her what was next, and she followed him away from Volterra without a second thought.

---

"So you're, what, the Imperial Matchmaker?" Leah asked the half-vampire bouncing in the chair across from her.

"Oh, oh no, it's not an *imperial* title. I just do this for fun!" Iseul replied.

"Fun," echoed Leah with a frown, glancing around at the office space. It wasn't really in the Florida capital, but it was close, not far from what was supposedly a vibrant community of hybrids. Leah'd never been before. She'd been in a holding pattern in La Push: *Do what Becky says and play the strong, competent, experienced beta wolf. Don't neglect Seth or*

*Cody. Visit Mom and Dad once in a while and try not to gag on the smell. Go see Emily and Sam and Paige and the boys once a week for brunch. Get up in the morning, find something to do, do it, go to bed.*

Finally Emily, who thought *everything* wrong with any single person was the direct result of singlehood, had shoved a pamphlet in Leah's face (why was it always *pamphlets*?) and an airline ticket with it.

"Yes, it's so *much* fun," enthused Iseul obliviously. "I've been doing it for *years* and I'm really good at it! So. Tell me something about what you're looking for."

And Leah sighed and rambled about what she'd loved about Sam, and how it'd hurt when he'd left, and the fact that she hadn't even *really* wanted to go consult a matchmaker imperial or otherwise but her cousin had just about forced her, and how she didn't dare look twice at a wolf or a vampire and all the humans she knew were trying like mad to *become* vampires...

"Sounds like you need a *hybrid* boyfriend!" said Iseul. "Like me! Only a boy!"

Someone who was like Iseul, only a boy, didn't sound that appealing, but Leah said, "Hybrid works, I guess. You guys don't imprint or mate or anything?"

"Nope, we sure don't. And neither do wolf girls so this should work! Now hmm," said Isuel, tapping her chin and appearing to go through a mental filing cabinet of prospects.

"Just so you know, it's going to really hurt your limited aura of legitimacy if you try to set me up with someone who's related to you," Leah said, smirking.

"Really? Okay, I can cross out Nahuel and Joey then I guess," Iseul said, miming drawing lines through the air. "How much do you care about age?"

"Uh, I'm going to be really spooked by the idea of dating anybody less than half my age," Leah told the matchmaker. "I'm 42, I guess you can't tell."

Iseul frowned. "Except for people related to me - and your brother, who you probably don't want to date anyway and if you did you wouldn't need my help - I don't think there *are* any hybrids boys that old! Oh dear."

Leah ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. "I was mostly joking. If all the non-jailbait are -"

"They're not *jailbait*," corrected Isuel, wagging a finger. "Her Majesty worked it out that hybrids count as grownups when we stop growing, in the hidden laws."

Leah didn't like that term for clandestine amendments to human governments' regulations (she usually called them "leech loopholes" even though plenty of them applied to wolves), but she shrugged, conceding the point. "If all the hybrids ages 21 and up are on your family tree I guess I might as well meet them anyway."

"Great!" crowed Iseul. "Now, let's see. Kanimir's taken. Joey's too young. But there's my brother Nahuel, and my nephew Orlán." The half-vampire gave the werewolf a considering look, and said, "Nahuel was married before."

"What happened?" asked Leah, as Iseul obviously meant for her to do.

"They had a baby boy - Marco is grown up now and he lives near here - but his mommy almost died having him and they had to turn her," Iseul said gravely, "and she and Nahuel stayed married for a little while, but then she mated."

"Oh," said Leah softly.

Iseul perked up, solemnity falling off her instantly, and said, "So I'll call my brother and tell him he should come have lunch with you! It'll be so cute!"

Leah rolled her eyes, but gave Iseul a nod.

---

"So you're going to have a kid?" Rino asked his sister, alternating between looking at his laptop's camera and looking at the display on its screen. "How does that work?"

"Well, we can only do it with help," Didyme explained. "We've lodged a request with the Golden Coven that they connect us with anyone who might be willing to carry a baby for us."

"Oh, okay," said Rino. "Well, you need to bring him -"

"Her," interrupted Marcus.

"Huh?" Rino asked.

"We can choose, and have chosen to have a girl," Marcus said, looking steadily into the camera on his end, and Rino considered turning off his monitor; he still wasn't comfortable with his brother-in-law, even at a distance.

"Right, her, you need to bring her over here to meet the family in person," Rino said. "At least once."

"Of course we will," said Didyme.

"So you have a gender picked out, do you have a name?" Rino asked.

"Pleione," intoned Marcus.

---

"So you're going to hide her mate too, once they've tracked her down and she's been brought in. There's no telling when that will be - she's running from us and she's got herself shadowed from Alice, one way or another," Razi said. "We might just wait until she can't

stand being unhidden while her mate's hidden and turns herself in. If that doesn't happen, I'll be called out to take her down when they've figured out where to send me, but we have until then." He nuzzled Pera's throat.

Pera's life was surprisingly little changed in its basic content. She moved around more, following the Golden Coven. She ate animals instead of humans, and later, she ate synthetics. But she still waited in her room (wherever that was at any given time), and hid and unhid people as she was directed.

Razi himself was all the difference in the world.

He worked irregular hours, going on quick missions for the Coven all over the world, but when he was done with one - or sometimes when he felt like a break in the middle of one - he came back to her. He brought her things - shells from every beach on Earth, a diamond he'd stolen centuries previous and stashed in Antarctica, photographs of *everywhere*. He sometimes reported the Coven's instructions to her, because this was generally preferable to hearing them from the Empress or whoever else might have delivered them, but he didn't *expect* anything of her. He only loved her, and she loved him back.

It was easy to be with him, and no one was planning to kill him, and if someone did try - well, they'd have a hard time of it, with her talented mate.

This time was better. (Sometimes the imperial wolves gave her nasty looks when she went about unhidden, like it was *her* fault she didn't miss Brady, or her fault that he'd died, but she ignored them.) This time it was safe.

A second chance.

## Kirsten

Kirsten was almost three whole years old.

Fast cold people came to the village, and so Kirsten's mommy left her with her daddy and turned furry (Mommy was soft when she was furry, but she didn't stay to let Kirsten snuggle in her deep coat this time) and ran off.

Daddy told Kirsten that the fast cold people were bad, and that Mommy was going to chase them off with the other wolves. He held her tight and wouldn't let her down off his lap to play blocks and run around.

They waited a long time, and Kirsten fell asleep because she didn't have anything to do, and when she woke up a fast cold person was holding her with one arm and her daddy was also asleep and he had juice spilled on his neck even though he didn't spill stuff usually because he was grown up. Kirsten didn't think he was interesting anymore. And he didn't let her play blocks or run.

"Hello, puppy," said the pretty cold lady who was holding her. She had dark red eyes like the color of roses. "You're awake, good. Is it your mom who's a wolf?"

"Yeh," said Kirsten. "Blocks?"

The lady picked up the net bag that held Kirsten's blocks and carried the girl and the toys out of the house. "What's your mom's name?" the lady asked.

"Mommy is I-ris-Coo-per," recited Kirsten, and then she started on her address, because if she got lost she was supposed to tell a grownup her parents' names and where she lived but she skipped her daddy because he wasn't important any more.

"Just her name'll do," laughed the lady. "IRIS!" she yelled, still walking. They were out of the village. There were a lot of people lying around even though it was the middle of the day.

Kirsten's mommy came out of the woods. She had her fur on, black on top and white on her tummy and the front of her neck. "Your daughter?" the cold lady asked. Mommy nodded, and the lady said, "She's coming with us. Smells right."

"I taked a bath," said Kirsten. That meant she didn't smell at all. That was why people took baths, so they wouldn't smell.

The lady ignored her. She walked into the woods and Mommy went with them. They waited with a bunch of the other furry people and the cold people brought more kids from the village a few at a time. Kirsten curled up in her mommy's white tummy fur and went to sleep again and when she woke up, her mommy wasn't furry any more and was holding her in her lap on a plane. Kirsten knew it was a plane because she had a picture book about planes at home.

The bag of blocks was under the seat in front of them, but none of her books were. So Mommy had nothing to read to her. Kirsten looked out the window and watched clouds and towns and trees. They looked very small.

---

Kirsten was three, and she'd had her birthday in the middle of the air, which she thought was very funny. She lived in a new place. It was under the ground, and all the windows were in the ceiling. They were called "sky lights" and Kirsten liked that name for them. There were three kinds of people in the place: wolves, like her mommy, and puppies, like Kirsten, and "vampires", the cold people. The cold people were in charge of the wolves and the wolves were in charge of the puppies.

Mommy specially was in charge of Kirsten. Most puppies didn't have somebody specially in charge for them - just Kirsten who had Mommy, and Bar-tho-lo-mew who had Miz Vivian, and Lise and Sarah who had Mister Shawn, and Todd who had Miz Danielle *and* Mister Geoffrey. (*Two* parents seemed like an awful lot to have. Kirsten thought Todd must be very greedy.) Todd was *almost* Kirsten's age, but not quite, so he was a baby, and Lise and Bartholomew were even littler and Sarah was an *itty-bitty* baby. Kirsten mostly didn't play with them. She played with the girls who were her age but lived in the "North" section that meant they didn't have anyone specially in charge.

Sometimes Mommy had to go on work trips to punish bad vampires. (The vampires who were in charge of the wolves were good police vampires and the wolves were helping.) When she did, Kirsten lived in North with her friends. Grownup wolves like Miz Eve (who was *nineteen whole years old*, which was very impressive even if it wasn't as old as Mommy who was *twenty-one* and *soooo old*) read her and the other puppies story books and played with them. Miz Eve was very good at not just saying "because" when Kirsten wanted to know "why". She sometimes let the kids win when they played tag, too, even though she was really fast. And Kirsten could play blocks all she wanted.

She liked the new place with the sky lights.

---

Kirsten was four, and she was not happy.

Miz Eve could not read her story books or play with her or answer "why" anymore. This was because bad vampires hurt her so bad that she couldn't get better, even though wolves were really good at getting better.

Kirsten did not like bad vampires.

Once she asked her mommy if bad vampires might ever hurt *her* when she was trying to punish them, and Mommy took a long time to answer, but then she said, "Don't worry about that, Kirsey," and so Kirsten didn't, because Mommy was always right except about vegetables. Mommy was *never* right about vegetables. She thought they were for *eating*.

Mister Albert was Miz Eve's brother. He was very sad about her being gone and cried all the time. Kirsten got her mommy get permission to take her Outside (it had a Capital Letter because going Outside was Important and Exciting and Un-Common) and when she was there, she picked a flower. She held it very carefully and brought it back into the village, and then she gave it to Albert, and he said thank you, and Kirsten felt very important.

---

Kirsten was seven, and she no longer thought that Todd was just greedy. Something else had to be going on.

Trent and Miles and Ken and Shawn were all wolves and they had all "imprinted", which was what it was called when they each met a lady and then stared at her all the time with a dopey look on their faces. So Maria and Esta and Delanna and Camellia lived with them and there were new small puppies. (Camellia hadn't had hers yet but she was going to.)

All of those new puppies had a father *and* a mother (Lise and Sarah had a stepmother, which was also a kind of parent).

Kirsten asked her mother about this and Mom seemed to think it was a strange question. She said that most people had two parents.

"Did I have another one?" Kirsten asked.

"Yeah," said her mom. "He's gone. Don't worry about it."

Kirsten did worry about it anyway, a little, but then they had assembly (Alpha Rachel was talking about how good the wolves did against bad vampires in Mongolia) and then she stopped just like Mom told her to.

---

Kirsten turned eight, and there were a lot of new people at her party. Not just new puppies or new imprints - those were usual, they happened a lot - but new *wolves* who were already grown up. (With new puppies and new imprints, too, including a girl and a boy who were "half-vampires". Mom said that the two of them together did not make an entire vampire, even though Kirsten was *sure* the fractions were right.)

They were interesting, but Mom told Kirsten not to stare and not to pester, so she didn't and just watched. They seemed nice. Elspeth was the half-vampire girl, and she had pretty bright shiny hair, and she visited the puppies sometimes and could make movies appear in Kirsten's brain - not just regular movies with trailers at the beginning and credits at the end, but movies of anything at all. It was better than books. (Sometimes it *was* books, illustrated while Elspeth read them. Kirsten could read by herself, but it was more fun to let someone else do it.) Elspeth lived with Jacob who was an alpha like Becky and Rachel, even though he was a boy, because he was their brother.

The new imprints besides Elspeth weren't from Italy like most of the imprints that were already there, or even dark brown like Amanda, who was not Italian but from someplace

called Canada. One of them was a blonde lady - Kirsten didn't remember seeing any of those before except on TV - and the others were Native American like her and Mom. Kirsten had only fuzzily remembered that there were such things as Native Americans who didn't turn into wolves when they grew up.

"*Most* Native Americans don't turn into wolves when they grow up," Mom said when Kirsten asked after an assembly. "We're special."

"I wanna activate," said Kirsten.

"Soon enough, Kirsey," said Mom, but she looked unhappy. "A few years."

"You don't want me to?" Kirsten asked. "I'm supposed to. Puppies grow up to be wolves."

"It just... happens so young," she said. "Twelve or thirteen. So young, and then you're grown overnight and out on missions all over the world..." Ashleigh had just barely activated and she'd shot up a foot and a half and gotten all muscley and mature looking. Ashleigh wasn't even five years older than Kirsten.

"I wanna be *furry sometimes*, and *tall*," Kirsten says stubbornly anyway, "and run fast," and Mom sighed and sent her to bed.

---

Kirsten was still eight, and she didn't *want* to move to Québec.

"I wanna stay, we can stay, we're allowed," she whined. "You said before we were gonna stay."

"That was before I knew there was a Québec option," Mom said. "I can do a desk job, and there will be other puppies there for you to play with so it's not like you're losing all your friends, and - well, the locals will probably speak *some* English and I can always run into the next province if they don't -" (Mom was not good at Italian. Kirsten could speak it but didn't usually.) "- and we're going, Kirsey, that's all."

"*But I don't want to*," howled Kirsten.

They went anyway. Québec looked a lot like Kirsten's home village from the inside, but it was emptier. Only Nina, Calvin, Laurel, Albert, Danielle, Geoffrey, and Vivian and their puppies (Nina and Calvin and Laurel had all picked puppies to be "theirs" even though they didn't have any before) came along with Kirsten and her mom.

Mom asked her if she wanted any of the North puppies to be her sister or brother, before they left, but Kirsten said no, because she didn't like any of them *that* much. Mom didn't decide to adopt one anyway. So that was something, even if Kirsten didn't get to decide where they lived.

Learning French was harder than learning Italian, but they were sort of similar, and by the end of the year Kirsten had mostly forgotten Italian and learned French instead. Mom brought her along to translate when she ran errands.

Kirsten decided that maybe Québec was okay.

---

Kirsten was thirteen. The Golden Coven came to Québec for a month, and she stole into their section of the offices, and shuffled awkwardly at the door leading to Benjamin's. She'd met him before when he built the capital five years before, but that wasn't why she picked his office - any vampire would do and he was just the first one she'd seen. He noticed her, blinked at her, and said, "I guess you're about that age. You can come in if you like."

Kirsten tiptoed in, stretched out her hand and touched Benjamin's, and then turned and ran away at top speed because she had just remembered that she really *liked* her shoes.

She got back to her room before anything happened, feeling peculiar all over like there was a surprise party waiting for her on the opposite side of a door and she had to figure out how to open it. She kicked off her shoes, then made sure the *real* door that led to her room was locked and peeled off everything else, and she sat in the middle of the floor. She closed her eyes, and imagined the surprise party, and mimed reaching out and *pulling* the stuck door out of its jambs.

*Floof*, went her new copper-brown fur, and everything in the room looked half its size and she could *hear everything* and *smell more than everything*, and her head was full of the phased pack's voices - *Hi Kirsten! Good to have you aboard!* mingling with tactical muttering between a group on the ground in Saskatchewan entangled with someone's idle thought about pancakes overlapped with groggy grumbling about how panting was not efficient at its job.

Mom came back to their quarters from her workday before Kirsten had figured out how to get herself defloofed, and Kirsten couldn't unlock her door without thumbs and didn't want to break it down (even if there was no room to really move in her room), so when Mom called her for dinner, Kirsten could only bark.

"*Kirsey*," said Mom, exasperated, and she managed to jimmy the lock open through some unclear process involving a library card. "Well," she said when the door finally stood open. "Look at - look at you."

Kirsten looked in the mirror, and her face was - well, it was a wolf face, obviously, long snout and whiskers and big black eyes and perky ears - but she thought she looked like *herself*. She certainly didn't look like anyone else. The fur was shaggy - she'd need a haircut - and unique in color. There weren't many exact duplicates, but it got more likely all the time, and she liked the old-penny warmth of her coat.

"Well," said Mom, because Kirsten couldn't really talk, "let's see if we can talk you down... it's easier after the first time..."

Mom eventually gave up on walking Kirsten through the process verbally, and the rest of the pack was too busy or distracted to do it, so Mom went in to her own room and padded out in the black-and-white shape that still towered over Kirsten's new form by several feet. Telepathy was *strange*, and Kirsten was a little weirded out by all the stray thoughts she kept catching that Mom or whoever else hadn't meant to share (and *more* than a little weirded out by the idea that they could hear all of hers too). But it was effective, and eventually Kirsten dropped back into her more familiar self.

Mom phased back too, and nodded. "There," she said, and went to get dressed again. "We'll get you fitted for a magnetic uniform while you work on control," she called. "I'll tell Calvin. Brown looks nice on you."

Brown. Jake's pack. Kirsten was in a *pack*. She grinned to herself and started to pull on her shirt, then thought better of it and wrapped an old blanket around herself instead.

"I'm going to have to get new clothes, aren't I," she said.

"Yeah," Mom said, poking her head into the room again; she was good at getting dressed fast, out of long practice. "You'll grow out of what you have. You could give the stuff in good condition to Winifred." Winifred was Laurel's adopted daughter, close to Kirsten's size and a year and a half younger.

"I'll do that," said Kirsten. She looked in the mirror again. She didn't look very different *yet*, but it was going to happen, fast. She wondered how tall she'd get.

---

Kirsten was fourteen, and a Québécois man was hitting on her.

He didn't *know* she was fourteen. And she was not allowed to tell him (and he wouldn't believe her anyway, she was six feet tall and stacked and she'd learned to sway when she walked and she looked like she belonged in a triathlon). So she told him he smelled bad (he did, a little, but only because she had a sensitive nose; someone within his own species wouldn't have noticed) and he left her alone.

She stayed in the capital more after that, until she got older.

---

Kirsten was seventeen, and she tripped and fell into a job.

Until she was eighteen, she was entitled to be part of the Empire pack on her mom's behalf, but if she wanted to stay after that instead of switching to a civilian pack and moving out, she had to be doing something useful. Still, that was *eighteen*, not seventeen, and she hadn't set out to have a job.

It was just filing work. When the Coven was out of town, Nina kept the PRPR office in Québec open anyway, and Danielle *had* been helping her, only Geoffrey had finally imprinted (on a sweet girl half his age, she was barely twenty) and so Danielle was leaving to

make things less awkward. Todd, their son, had already signed on to the mobile branch of the Empire pack and didn't need to go anywhere, at least. Nina was overwhelmed with scanning and e-mailing and filing to do with Danielle gone, and the copier kept breaking and there was a difficult applicant in the lobby.

So Nina had gone into the back room of the PRPR office and phased and "yelled" *Help! I'm drowning in work!*, and Kirsten happened to be in wolf form at the time, and she said she'd do it.

Fifteen minutes later, she was sorting turning applications into alphabetical order by name and putting them in their correct folders while Nina dealt with the human and then fixed the copier. The next day, Kirsten showed up again.

Kirsten didn't have any strong feelings about filing. There wasn't anything else in particular she wanted to be doing for a career. Most days, she could get away with going to the office for an hour to give Nina a lunch break and another hour in the evening to help her catch up; she was only there from opening to close when there were a particular lot of things to do. She had no shortage of time to make her little matchstick models and watch every horrid thing on TV and play pickup soccer with the rest of the pack and go running.

Running on four legs was *amazing*. She was so *fast*, and never got tired of the feeling of earth kicked up under her claws and screaming air chafing her ears. She came home when she was done with a run windblown, simultaneously hyper and exhausted. She made time every night without fail. Winifred came with her sometimes. Sometimes Mom did. Very occasionally someone else would feel like it. Usually she went by herself, distant voices shouting about everything in a filtered-away back corner of her mind.

---

Kirsten was twenty-two, and she was standing at her father's grave.

The La Push wolves had made a vast memorial, rows upon rows of stones bearing the names of the dead. The graves weren't empty, but they did contain ashes mostly at random, as those didn't last in distinct heaps with the wind and rain over years. Kirsten could be standing over the buried cinders of a house or a curtain or a loaf of Wonder Bread. Most likely a house, some blackened plank of wood that had survived intact enough to be picked up and interred on his behalf.

But the name on the stone was her father's: "Jerry R. Cooper". The inscription was for him: "Lost life, lost love. Our honored fallen." That one was the same on all of those graves. Then it said "Survived by his wife Iris K. N. Cooper and his daughter Kirsten J. Cooper." The ones who'd died without near wolf relatives were blank on that line. The Volturi had only left the wolves and their children alive. The entire tribe of Quileutes were wolves and puppies now.

*Lost love* was the bit that held her eyes. Kirsten didn't know if it was meaningful to talk about two-year-olds loving people; she'd *met* two-year-olds and they mostly seemed messy and loud. She knew that *anyone* (well, anyone without a perfect memory) who lost a parent

that young would forget them after a while. Adding Chelsea (well, Addy) on top of that was just overkill. But Kirsten couldn't help feeling injured anyway.

Her mom had made the trip a year ago, and didn't want to talk about it when she came back, which was understandable. Kirsten had gotten one very abrupt summary of the Coopers' marriage: "We were dating. I got pregnant. It was an accident, but I don't regret you, Kirsey. So, we got married. It was all right, I guess, but then he died. And... Chelsea. Any questions?" and Kirsten hadn't asked any; she didn't think her mom wanted her to.

Kirsten looked at the marker, and then sighed and turned to go back to the La Push guest house.

---

Kirsten was thirty-four, and she was legally disqualified from the Olympics (on the Coven side, anyway - who knew if the testers on the Olympic committee would find anything suspicious swimming around in shapeshifter blood) so this was the next best thing.

The Empress's brother (or something - Kirsten wasn't actually sure how that worked), Emmett, had organized it. Wolves and hybrids and vampires were all going to congregate in the Forks/La Push area and compete in miscellaneous contests from swimming to gymnastics. They had to have separate divisions for a lot of things - soccer had to be played with two feet, not four, because it was too easy for a claw to puncture a ball, and so the wolves couldn't play with the vampires but could play with some of the hybrids - but there were a few that were mixed. Wolves could race with vampires.

Kirsten won the marathon, beating even lightning-quick Leah from the La Push contingent and a blurrily swift vampire from some tropical island, and got second in one of the shorter races, and her team won the wolf soccer tournament: she got three little circle-stamped pins, in yellow gold and white gold and rose gold. (Solo win, solo second, team win.) Then she sat in the stands and watched floor routines and ice skating and a ridiculous thing with a set of a *dozen* uneven bars instead of the usual two that went so fast she could barely follow it when the vampires went up. Santiago performed a dance that Kirsten dearly hoped someone was recording. Gwyn - in Kirsten's pack, but the mobile branch - had one nearly as lovely, as a pair with a hybrid boy Kirsten didn't know.

Most of the attendees and participants hung around socializing after the events were over. Kirsten found Emmett and asked if there was going to be another one and he said he was thinking of making it a biannual event. She grinned and thanked him and he congratulated her on her pins.

---

Kirsten was forty-nine, and she was looking at her old room in Volterra. It still looked familiar, even though it was full of the possessions of five-year-old puppy twins who were pretending to be repulsed by the fact that a *giiiiirl* had once lived in their room.

She didn't impose on the Italian pack's hospitality long, but she'd wanted to look at the place one more time. She remembered not wanting to leave it, feeling desperate to stay.

Just a room. With a skylight.

---

Kirsten was sixty, and she finally joined the mobile branch of the Empire pack. Well, branches. There were enough of them that there was rarely a reason to keep them together any more. She stuck it out for a year, spending her time half in transit (usually artificial, not her own legs churning under her) and half on the ground pinning fleeing vampires. She was fast, and good at catching them, and didn't feel guilty about helping the way she might have if the Volturi had never been overthrown (this time the targets *were* actually bad vampires, who'd done something more along the lines of "kill humans" than "tell secrets"), but she didn't like it.

She transferred back to the stationary branch again - well, one of them, as there were now permanent packs in half the capitals, but she'd always stuck with Québec - and filed things and ran.

She *loved* to run.

## Immortal

*"Are you sure you want the whole thing?" the princess asked. "It's not all... nice."*

*"All of it," said John. "Mine, which I really do think I could have handled right away, thanks for making me wait for weeks - and hers, and what's there from everyone else who ever even looked at her. I can hold the memories now, I got through your stupid newborn orientation program, I'm not going to flip out and wreck the architecture - I need what's left of Anne."*

*The girl sighed, and said, "Give me a second to sort out who all saw her, it was a long time."*

*John waited, and closed his eyes. He could barely call Anne's face to mind. Turning into a human had loosened all the memories he'd gone in with, and turning back into a vampire had bleached everything he'd held onto, leaving faded whispers. He knew he'd had a daughter, he knew her name, but her face was almost gone.*

*"All right," said the princess, "here goes..."*

---

John had to eat ten people in two hours or less to be able to visit his child up close for ten minutes without feeling like she was in danger from him, but that wasn't so hard. It was a little easier than eating just one or two, sometimes. It always felt *wasteful to just* kill anyone who spotted him while he was filling up. And it was better than before: when he'd been a newborn he hadn't dared try no matter how much he drank.

Anne seemed half made of pale hair, which was darkening a little as she grew. It tumbled over her neck and the arm she tucked under her head when she slept. He had to come in the night, because Anne spent her days in a crowded kitchen running spoons of leavening back and forth and stirring overstretched stews and scrubbing pans, and then he could only perch on the manor's roof and listen. She slept in a packed servant's quarters, but at least the other servants were asleep too.

He wasn't pleased about what had happened in his daughter's life, since his creator had turned him and killed his wife so Anne didn't have anyone to provide for her. He *wanted* to, but he didn't think England *had* that many humans in it, that he could safely keep Anne with him and not hurt her. And if he brought her coins, to leave in her shoes or under her pillow, everyone would think she'd stolen them, and she'd be turned out into the rain.

So she worked in the manor kitchen for her turnips and her pallet, and John quietly picked off anyone who he overheard threatening her with a rolling pin. (The master's wife thought he must be getting the cooks pregnant and packing them off in secret with stipends, as three had vanished without explanation in the last year.)

Anne's breath wheezed out of her as she shifted in her sleep.

John, who'd been reaching his hand out to brush some of her fringe out of her face, froze.

She drew in a new breath, ragged and thready, but then she puffed it out normally and he relaxed. One odd breath, that was nothing...

There was a rasp, again, some rough edge to the way air was passing through her throat.

He ground his teeth, but she was most likely fine. Perhaps she'd been one of the people he'd heard coughing that morning and she'd gotten herself a little hoarse. That was probably all.

John was gone before the servants woke, but through the whole day (his extravagant predation, his clean-up afterwards, his journey back to the manor to scale the wall under cover of ivy and listen) he worried about that soft wheeze.

After the household settled down for the night, he stole in again.

Anne had evidently gotten up and done her work that morning - her shoes were moved, she had a new cut on her hand from a knife too big for her to handle - but working didn't seem to have been a good idea. She was pale and even with half her face hidden by hair she looked drawn, and thinner than she had the prior day.

And she was wheezing with every breath.

John waited another week before she got so sick that he was more afraid of *not* turning her than of turning her, and then he stole her out of the manor, gorged himself on half a hamlet until he felt like he'd pop, and carefully, carefully bit her.

---

Anne didn't see it when her father died, but she knew it was happening. She wasn't stupid. She knew when Alec draped that blanket of nothing over her he was hiding the sound of breaking flesh and screams. She just didn't know if *she* was going to die too. Papa had told her that he'd committed a crime in making her. ("But you are my precious little girl, so I did it anyway. They'll never find us if we're careful.")

They were careful, but the Volturi found them anyway.

Anne thought it was probably her fault. She got angry, or sad, or even *happy*, and couldn't contain herself. She screamed or howled or whooped. She destroyed trees, or fought her father off when he seized her and begged her "be still", or she forgot she was a vampire and tried to go into a town and watch a minstrel. She ran around in broad daylight without checking for witnesses, she fed when she hungered without leading her prey away - but she was *mostly* careful. She only made mistakes *sometimes*. It was just hard. If the world were fair she wouldn't have to die just because it was so hard.

So it was probably her fault, but she couldn't shriek or kill or cry, because of Alec.

She didn't die, and she went on not dying, and the waiting was worse than the numbness.

---

There were seven. Muhammad looked eleven but was really twenty, and Anne looked nine and really *was* (for another month, anyway), and Ermengarde looked six and was twelve, and Lyyli looked four and was eleven, and Isaac looked three and was five, and Vasili looked two and was *sixty-four*, and Joshua looked less than a year old and was eight. Anne was the newest. The others had been there for months or years already.

They had a web of rooms, underground beneath the palace the Volturi lived in.

Anne wasn't sure why they were allowed to live. She heard the grownup vampires talking about killing other immortal children, sometimes, but her and the other six were just left in the rooms.

With supervision, always. Grownups took turns watching them, and by the time Anne had been there a week she'd learned how to put her fingers back on with spit and pressure (and learned not to try the same thing on Isaac, because she'd left scars on his wrists by accident and he'd screamed and kicked and been punished *more* for that, and she was only trying to help).

By a month along, she was *much* better at being quiet even when she was angry, and she had stopped asking if maybe her father was alive somewhere, too, because the grownups didn't like it when she asked that. (Ermengarde still asked about her mothers. She wasn't as smart as Anne, and hadn't learned not to even though she'd been there for half her life and her mothers were obviously not going to come get her.)

The grownups wanted her to learn other things too, but it was harder. She *remembered* everything they said, just fine. Word for word. But only when she was trying to remember those things, which was never when she was trying to tunnel out of the rooms for rage and cramped stir-craziness. Never when she got so *mad* at Muhammad that she *had* to try to tear his throat out (even though it didn't work last time, or the time before that, because he had better reach than she did and was bigger). Never when she was just *bored*, bored out of her *skull*, because she wasn't allowed to go anywhere or do anything - the grownups brought books sometimes but only when everyone had been well-behaved for a while because books were *expensive* and they didn't want the children wrecking them. So Anne took four years to have enough time with books that she could figure out how to read her first language. No one helped her.

One of the grownups was called Aro, and he could read minds with a touch. He came in to the room sometimes, but only when everyone was - rarely - calm at the same time, and he'd stroke a finger across Anne's cheek and she had to fight herself not to try to bite through his hand (which would not work because of his attendant) nor fling herself away when he reached for her (since that would get her head wrenched off or her ribcage shattered for her insolence, because Aro was *important* and it was necessary to *respect* him).

When Anne had been in the room for eight years, Aro took Vasili away.

Vasili didn't come back.

No one would tell her what had happened to him.

Anne couldn't remember that the grownups had told her *don't fight, be calm, don't damage the walls or the floor or the ceiling, use words, don't shout, eat neatly* fast enough when it counted, but she *could* remember that there was a missing child, and this kept her unsettled enough that she had time to bring the rules to mind.

Usually.

---

Anne remembered everything, but sometimes she thought she *must* be forgetting something, because her life blurred together in a long dull smear of sameness.

She read, or remembered what she'd read before. One of the grownups brought a set of dice and she gambled for pebbles with Muhammad, and sometimes Ermengarde (who cheated). She tried, futilely, to teach Lyyli more than her thousand-word vocabulary (which the little girl could translate into twelve languages, but seemed unable to otherwise expand, though Ermengarde could manage the trick with some difficulty). Anne picked up and cradled Joshua, who could move around but not that well and usually couldn't stop people from handling him, and she pretended she had grown up and had a baby. She curled up in a corner and wished she could sleep. Sometimes she thought about one of her vaporous human memories, the one which involved a church, and tried to reconstruct the practice of prayer in case it helped. (Muhammad did that occasionally too, but differently.) It didn't usually help. Anne thought it might be because she was a vampire, and vampires were not supposed to pray.

She missed her father, but she was pretty sure he was dead.

In 1384 something changed: someone different was given the job of watching the children.

Jane was scarcely more than a child herself. She was Muhammad's height and as flat-chested as Anne and more delicate-looking than Lyyli.

Anne never figured out if she was as fragile to the touch as she looked, because whenever one of the children so much as *twitched*, Jane burned them.

Anne spent two years crouching in an alcove, hugging her knees and *fearing* and doing nothing else... Except every couple of months when her desperate thirst overcame the terror that she would eat her meal in a way somehow displeasing to Jane, and she finally bolted down some blood, drinking and drinking until she *did* annoy Jane, by making a sound or spilling or putting the corpse down too carelessly.

Jane left, to no one's disappointment, and life slid back into normalcy, but Anne had long stopped trying to pray.

---

In 1703, a new grown-up came and looked at the children. He had gold eyes and pale hair, and didn't really look anything like Anne's father, but he made her think of him anyway. He watched them, and picked up Isaac and then Joshua, and let Lyyli sit on his lap until she tried to bite him (and even then he only pushed her away before she struck, he didn't hurt her). He talked to Anne, a little.

She wanted to talk to him - he was new, and less frightening than most of the grownups - but she couldn't say much. The supervisors were still there, and she knew Aro was standing just up the stairs to listen, and she still got in trouble if she ever mentioned John. So she didn't say, "They killed my father, they hurt me when I forget the rules, please can you take me away somewhere?" Jane was still part of the guard, she knew, so she didn't say, "Jane is *evil*, can you kill her, please?"

She told the stranger her name (and learned his: "Carlisle Cullen"). She said she liked playing dice, and spoke fourteen languages (even if English had gotten to be very different since she first knew it).

Anne did take one little risk: she asked Carlisle if he ever prayed.

He said yes, and so Anne tried it one more time after he'd gone, but still nothing happened, so she didn't bother after that.

---

In 1754, Aro - followed by his attendant, and by Jane - took Muhammad out of the room.

Then they came back for Anne.

Jane smiled a sharp little smile at Anne, and Anne followed rather than suffer her wrath.

It turned out not to matter much, either way.

---

*"Are you okay?" the princess asked.*

*"I'll be fine," John lied.*

*The princess didn't challenge the falsehood. "Is there anything else you want while we're here?"*

*"Aro's death," growled John, "from every angle you have."*

*She didn't bother asking if he was sure. She just sent the memory of the fire.*

---

John had been a vampire again for three years before he was finally confident in his ability to visit... his son, in a manner of speaking... without being a danger to him.

He'd been corresponding with Nino since teaching himself Italian, and every letter from the boy dredged up an implanted memory of Anne. It was a gentler method of processing the memories than locking himself in a room and forcing his way through them all in chronological order. That still didn't mean it was entirely pleasant. But John eventually found himself looking forward to the letters, scratched out in bad handwriting and decorated with stickers Nino accumulated from his schoolteachers and with his allowance. He started planning to go for a visit to Nino and the boy's grandfather.

Then the grandfather died.

He'd been offered turning, but kept putting it off, and putting it off - who would take care of Nino? not his mother, certainly - and it wasn't even age-related, it was a car crash, but that didn't make the man any less dead.

So: who would take care of Nino?

John called the airline and got his round-trip ticket turned into a one-way.

---

Nino was almost ten.

It half-killed John to look at him, because he didn't look a thing like Anne, but he was the same age, close to her height, and he called John "Papa".

"I want to be a vampire too, Papa," Nino said one day.

John crushed the glass of water he was holding and failed to restrain a hiss.

"When I'm older," continued Nino.

"When you're older," echoed John, softly.

John picked up the shards and mopped up the water, and got another drink for his son.

## Staying Human

Pire knew her lover was an angel, whatever Huilen said. Only an angel could be so beautiful and speak so sweetly. Of course Huilen thought he was a *Libishomen*, but *she'd* never seen him.

"Sister," Huilen said. She only called Pire "sister" when she was going to lecture. "Sister, you must have nothing more to do with him. I'm telling you he's no angel. He'll hurt you. He may turn you into one like himself, a demon -"

"He may turn me into an angel," said Pire lightly, smiling.

"He may turn you into a *corpse*. Is your arm better?" Huilen asked, peering at the tender spot above Pire's elbow where he'd gripped her too hard.

"Yes, nearly," Pire said. "It wasn't so bad. Angels are very -"

"He's not an *angel!*"

"He is very strong," amended Pire, shrugging. "I've never been too badly hurt."

"I can't lose you, sister," Huilen said. "Refuse him when he next comes. Send him away. He'll hurt you worse. He'll change you. You must stay alive, stay human."

"I think I'd like to be an angel, Huilen," said Pire. She paused, and after a long silence, she added, "I think I'm carrying his child."

---

David didn't know what was happening. This *didn't* happen, strange pale men didn't break into houses and truss the occupants up and gag them and *bite them in the neck*.

The only reason he didn't think he was dreaming was the *pain*. That much pain should have him bolt upright in bed drenched in a cold sweat, or at least screaming in his sleep so much that he'd have woken the family next door and they'd have called the cops with a noise complaint. He didn't have any clue how he could even remember the neighbors through the burn. Something in his head was changing, making way for thought.

That scared him, more than the pain - the pain was awful, but had ceased to *frighten* him after his clock had indicated that it had blazed on for a day and a half. As far as he knew, no poison lasted that long only to then prove fatal. He didn't expect to die, although he might have preferred to. But the change in his head... that he didn't know about.

He thought he might be changing into something else. Something less than human. Something like the monster that had broken into his house.

So he fought the change, with every part of himself that wasn't trying to scream in spite of the gag. *Stay human*, he begged himself, even as sound upon sound poured into his ears, and the windowless basement became visible around him when he could force his eyes open,

and his twisting in his ropes gathered more strength with each spasm. Even as his mind bloomed with speed and space. *Stay human.*

He didn't manage the feat.

---

Kim looked at the stack of paperwork in her hands, eyes watering.

*Dear Mrs. Kim Connweller-Cameron: You have been approved for turning. You may choose to exercise this option on your own recognizance without restriction. However, due to the nature of your connection to the werewolf community, we advise that you carefully discuss your decision with Mr. Jared Connweller-Cameron, and, at your option, your children and other wolf and puppy friends and relatives. You (and any such friends and relatives) may opt to schedule an appointment with HIH Princess Elspeth Cullen (through the Golden Coven website) to receive detailed sensory information about the olfactory and instinctual issues that may trouble you if you should opt to turn. Disclaimers about the incommensurability between wolf impinging tendencies and vampire mating habits are attached.*

*We hope that these cautions do not unduly dissuade you from immortality, although you are entirely free to choose on this or any other basis to stay human. The Research and Development Department is working twenty-four hours a day to develop ways around these and other challenges facing the supernatural community. You may defer your turning approval for any length of time, and, again, your approval is not contingent on permission from your husband or any other person.*

*Sincerely, the Golden Coven Department of Public Relations*

Kim looked at the picture on her desk: her. Jared gazing at her. Two beaming sons waving at the camera.

She flipped to the disclaimers, and recognized some of the names from the case studies, especially Pera and Brady. (*But Pera's happy now, isn't she, even if Brady's dead and would be miserable if he'd lived?* said some part of her traitorous brain.)

Chewing on her lip, Kim locked the paperwork in the bottom desk drawer. Then she logged onto the Empire website and signed up for the R&D newsletter, and went home for the day, to her family.

---

Mike found out about vampires when the rest of Forks did - which was a fair amount of time after the first of his neighbors had. People who he'd known in elementary school came into the family sporting goods store, chattering about how glad they were to at last discuss in public the spa that wasn't a spa and the people who weren't people.

He barely remembered Bella. She'd been in town a grand total of five months and he'd never even gotten around to asking her out. Apparently since then she'd turned into a

vampire queen, not that Forks could advertise this and get more funding for the high school that'd had a hand in producing her. On the other hand, he did remember the rest of Bella's family (apart from the freakish daughter he'd seen all of once), and was less surprised than he should have been to find out what they were.

It was a while before actual vampires started showing up in Newton's Olympic Outfitters. They bought most of the same things human customers bought, except for much of the camping gear (they didn't eat - except blood - or sleep, he'd heard, so that made sense), and shoes, which they didn't seem to like. If Mike was a little edgy around them, well, that didn't change the color of their money, and he served them like he would anyone else. His mother put in a custom order for Pyrex canteens, and those sold very well. Mike put up a "No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service" sign up on the front window and the vampires started turning up in cheap flip-flops, undeterred.

People talked in the store, about all topics under the sun. Mike overheard everything from the intimate details of eating disorders to surprisingly non-furtive confessions of adultery, which gossip was why Jessica still took him out to lunch on alternate Tuesdays even though she was elsewhere married and her husband didn't like the habit. Still, Mike was surprised when he took out a box of jerseys to put on hangers only to hear a couple in the next aisle urgently discussing the pros and cons of becoming vampires.

It wasn't the last time he heard something like that, either. Forks was one of a handful of cities in the world that could be reasonably called Vampire Central. This was good for the town's economy - Bella and her crew bought local when it was convenient, and preferred suppliers in the know; Mike fielded huge orders for standard-issue Imperial Enforcer backpacks and lighters. But he didn't like it.

He'd take the money, sure, especially when the vampires decided to have Freak Olympics not far from Forks and he was inundated with werewolves who wanted matching basketball jerseys and halfbreeds asking him about ice skates.

But even as the freak to normal person ratio crept up over the years, Mike never went to the "capital", never collected his own stack of papers, never mailed it in and hoped. He preferred to stay human.

---

Petra hated her scars. Her dad told her no one really noticed them, but he was just *wrong*, and she was reminded every day at school. (Two boys in her year in particular had a comedy routine, where one would call for a pox upon something and the other would drag her towards whatever it was. This had gone on until she'd broken one's nose and lunged at the other, and gotten suspended.) Her mother told her she was lucky the disease hadn't killed her. Julian pointed out that they might never have gotten out of their birth mother's house at all if Petra hadn't turned up to kindergarten covered in untreated spots without having so much as been told not to scratch.

Petra thought her mum was the most beautiful person in the world, and had from the first minute she'd seen her. She didn't learn until she was nine that Mum had *heard* her,

whispering to Julian that she hoped the pretty red-haired lady took them home, and that this was why she and Dad had done exactly that.

Once, when Petra wasn't supposed to be awake, she heard her parents talking about the scars. "She's a pretty girl, but I know they bother her. Will they go away if she turns?" Dad had asked.

"Of course," Mum said. "I was born in 1731. I don't credit the high standards of healthcare and hygiene at the time for *my* complexion, believe me, love."

"You're beautiful, Cath," said Dad, and from there Petra had firmly stopped listening, because that sentence always turned into things she didn't want to overhear. In the morning, she didn't remember that Mum had claimed to have been born in 1731, but she *did* remember that, supposedly, there was a way to make the spots go forever.

When Petra was twelve, she knew exactly what the way was, and that she had to wait six years unless she had a medical emergency, and that she would be grounded for the rest of her unnatural life if she manufactured such an emergency.

Petra's cousin Molly was three years older than her, and turned when Petra was still seventeen. (She *agonized* about it. Petra didn't understand at all: with that permission slip in her hands, how could Molly stay human one minute longer than she had to?) Petra badgered her parents into arranging for a visit as soon as they'd hear of putting their human children near their newborn niece, and got an up-close look for herself. And yes: Molly hadn't been as marked-up as Petra, but she'd had a few specks from picked-at acne, a mole, and they were gone. Molly was lovely. Petra ached to follow her.

The instant she turned eighteen - Petra stayed up until four in the morning to make it the *very instant* - she submitted an electronic application for permission to turn. Then she collapsed into bed, woke up six hours later to her mother trying to coax her into the dining room for her birthday brunch, and didn't get to check her inbox until after her entire party had been and gone.

*Dear Miss Petra Trafeli: You have been approved for turning...*

Petra whooped and raced down the stairs to tell her parents.

Half a week later, Alec pulled her out of her batch, and she whipped her little mirror out of her pocket.

She smiled at herself.

---

Julian applied when he was eighteen, but he didn't fly to a capital right away when he got his approval, like his sister had. He didn't wait a few months like his cousin had. He deferred, and deferred again, and went on deferring.

Finally, when he was twenty-five, Petra turned up uninvited at his flat and sat him down. "Julian, just how old do you want to *get*?"

"Dunno," he said.

"You're not going to *stay* human, are you?" she asked, full of horror. "You can't, what if you get hit by a car or something in the middle of nowhere and you can't even do an emergency turning before you die?"

"No, I'll probably turn eventually, just... Hit by a car? Not bloody likely, is it?"

"Something could happen too fast for someone to get to you and help," Petra insisted. "It doesn't matter if it's a car or not. The Coven's in India right now, you should be on your way."

"You're just mad I -"

"This has nothing to do with you looking older than me," said Petra frostily. "This is your *life* we're talking about. You're the only little brother I have. Come on. Twenty-five's a fine age, the wolves look twenty-five. You even look older than Mo-mo. Go to India. Try some authentic curry before you go in."

"I dunno..."

"*Julian*," said Petra, exasperated. "What are you waiting for? Are you going to be *that* devastated over losing the taste of curry?" He shook his head. "Well, what then?" Petra demanded.

Julian sighed. "There's... this... girl."

Petra waited.

"She's a wolf."

His sister winced, but then shook her head. "Julian, so help me, do not *literally die* for a girl you - have you even met her in person? I don't smell any wolf on you at all."

He chewed on his lip. "No, not exactly in person."

"India, Julian," said Petra. "No more waiting. This is ridiculous. I cannot go to the baby brother store and get another one just like you. Think of Mum and Dad."

"Right," said Julian, and he changed the subject. Eventually Petra left.

Julian took his acceptance slip out of his files and looked at it, then put it down and started composing a letter to the wolf girl.

Kora was not a superstitious person and didn't have much of an imagination such that it could run away with her. She did not believe in vampires the first time she heard someone blatantly talking about them in the middle of a restaurant: they were probably discussing a book or a game. She did not believe in vampires the first time she found a website claiming that they walked among normal people and sparkled in the sunlight (of all things). She did not believe in vampires when her aunt the crazy cat lady disappeared for a week and came home raving about vampires and how they couldn't make her give up her pets.

It was a little harder to ignore Beth sitting on her doorstep.

There was no reason she should remember Beth. She'd spent all of two days with the girl, who'd appeared, then vanished without explanation. But something about the girl had stuck with Kora. Beth had practically *glowed* with noticeability, and hadn't faded since.

"Beth?" said Kora. The girl on her doorstep was well-preserved for - what would it be, twenty-four? - but not unrealistically so, for a value of "unrealistically" that already allowed Beth to be *that* symmetrical and shiny.

"It's actually Elspeth," corrected Be- Elspeth. The sentence hit with force, not in an unpleasant way, but it woke Kora up a bit: *this is the way the world is*. Elspeth had done the same thing before but not so strongly. "You remember me. I wasn't sure you would."

"You're memorable. What are you doing here?" asked Kora, glancing around. She lived on a nondescript suburban street, thirty miles from the town she'd grown up in. She couldn't think of any reason for Elspeth to be visiting. There were a few American Indian-looking people milling about, casting frequent looks in Elspeth's direction, but the place was otherwise deserted. There wasn't even a car Elspeth could have arrived in.

"I remembered you too," said Elspeth. "And I'm going on a sort of... tour of places that I went when I was a kid, so I was nearby, and I thought I'd look you up. What have you been up to?"

Kora wound up inviting Elspeth in (the Indians turned out to be with her, but they stayed politely outside, albeit prowling about Kora's house) and talking to her for nearly two hours.

And when *Elspeth* said vampires were real, Kora couldn't very well ignore her.

Elspeth gave her a little folded-up sheet of paper with some addresses on it, for if she wanted to learn more, and then she had to be on her way. "I can bump you up the queue if you want to be a vampire," Elspeth said. "But you don't have to. You can stay human."

"I'll think about it," said Kora noncommittally. Elspeth hugged her, and then left, trailing Indians (werewolves!) behind her.

Quil quit his wolf when Claire was twenty-three. It was a bit early to do it, but he wasn't sure if it'd take him a few tries or not, and he didn't want to be younger than her. In fact, he did slip up and phase once, a week after the first time he tried to quit.

"What happened?" Claire asked him when he told her. "You haven't phased by accident for as long as I can remember."

"Panicking about the imprint, I think triggered it," he said. "I'm worried I'll quit and then, after it's too late to change my mind and phase back again, it'll be gone. We've got, you know, old stories that say it won't, but... nothing from anybody we *know*."

"I don't think it could ever be gone," said Claire. She added a peck on the temple. "Not ever. You don't have to quit if you don't want, though, Quil. It'd be fine with me if you stayed a wolf forever, or wait a bit. I'll be the envy of my bridge club, or whatever it is old people have in fifty years."

"I don't want to be the test case for what happens when a wolf outlives his imprint," he mumbled into her hair. "I'm already an example in more pamphlets than I like, and that horrible little booklet about Golden Empire law and precedent."

"That one's my idiot parents' fault," said Claire, patting his knee loyally. "It's up to you, anyway."

"I'm quitting," he promised. "This time I'll manage to stay human."

---

## Resurrection

"I told you, it only works for young vampires. Even if you found a "donor", even if Grandpa cleared the ethics..."

"You could resurrect her as she was early on, then turn her, then send her the rest of it," Tanya said to Elspeth.

"And Laurent?" Elspeth said. "I don't have him backed up. I can't bring him back for her," Elspeth warned.

"Send her the rest of it, up to before she met him, then," Tanya said. "She'll forget a few months of her life, that's all. She'll still be *herself*. Elspeth, I want my *sister* back!" Tanya leaned forward over the desk a little too far and the wolves standing beside the princess tensed. The vampire composed herself and stepped back.

Elspeth chewed her lip, and said, "If you clear it with Grandpa Carlisle or with Mama, and you find a donor who is really, truly willing according to Dad or Addy with his power... and no putting advertisements in our paperwork, that seems like it would send a bad message... then.. okay. I think."

"Right," said Tanya, turning on her heel. "I'll see you when I've done that, then."

---

"I will not have you preying on the mentally ill," Carlisle said. "Presuming it is in fact my call, I have to say no. I'm sorry, Tanya."

"The mentally ill?" inquired Tanya.

Carlisle put his computer to sleep and turned to give her his full attention. "Anyone who agreed to the procedure would be, by definition, suicidal," he said. "They need help, not a convenient death."

"Not necessarily," Tanya inserted swiftly. "Could be someone already terminally ill who doesn't personally want to be a vampire but doesn't mind handing her body over to someone who would. Could be someone who's depressed but for non-chemical reasons that aren't likely to change. Could be someone who wants something I can give her - money for a charity, expensive medical treatment for her kid, something like that - and will trade her body for it. Could be someone who thinks her *immortal soul* will go straight to Heaven if she moves out to let my sister in." She leaned a little on the phrase "immortal soul". That was one way to get Carlisle's attention, at least.

Carlisle considered this. "No preying on the mentally ill," he repeated. "And don't make some poor woman choose between giving up her body and getting care for a loved one - that's just cruel, not to mention coercive."

"Otherwise?" asked Tanya.

"I will ask Edward to *check*," Carlisle said warningly. "And there could be defeating factors I haven't thought of. I will veto you if necessary, and I don't expect Bella to overrule me on this."

"Understood, dear cousin," she replied.

---

"I don't think I understand what you're asking," the patient said. "I've heard of donating your body to science, but..."

"It's a little like that," Tanya said. "It's even experimental, in a way. Similar things have been done, but nothing *exactly* like this. My sister was centuries old when she died and the others were much younger."

"Centuries?" the human asked in wonder.

"So what would happen is my cousin, with the power I mentioned, would overwrite you with the first few years of my sister's life," Tanya pressed on. "Then she'd turn into a vampire again so she could hold all of her memories, or most of them rather..."

"And this would cure me?" asked the woman in the bed, waving weakly at the signs of cachexia.

"Turning would cure your *body*," said Tanya.

"Mm," sighed the patient. "I don't suppose they'd just let *me* turn into a vampire, would they?"

---

"So *one* person didn't want to help," Kate said, her head in Garrett's lap while Tanya paced. "It could take dozens. Hundreds. Don't be discouraged. I'm sure I can find more people who look enough like her."

"This would be easier if Carlisle weren't looking over our shoulders," growled Tanya. "I could have lied. Could have said there was no way she'd be allowed to turn as herself."

"Or they could have actually rejected her, and then she'd probably have agreed," Kate said. "Here's an idea, ask a lot of people really fast, they'll *have* to reject a few then."

"Have you *met* Carlisle? He'd reject me out of principle if Edward said I'd done anything of the kind."

"Well," said Kate, sitting up and pulling her computer onto her knees while Garrett put an arm around her shoulders, "let's look at some more patient records, shall we?"

---

"This isn't working," Kate said after twelve months of unremitting failures. "The Golden Coven *loves* turning the terminally ill. It's basically a shoo-in once we do the work of finding them and telling them about, what's the technical term? "Things"? I don't think we're going to find anyone in the magical intersection of "too squicked about vampires to want to be one themselves" and "willing to turn into someone else and then a vampire". What's our next best bet?"

"Nobody we'd find in large concentrations in easily searchable places," said Tanya. "At this point I'm half-tempted to stand in Times Square and accost random blonde women."

"Elsbeth isn't going anywhere," Kate pointed out. "We *could* try that."

"Every day we fail is another day without our sister. Another day she has to miss."

There was a silence, and then Kate said, "...Mother was backed up, too."

Tanya restrained a shriek of frustration. That should have been a *good* reminder, *good* news, that there was hope even for Mother, but it sounded only like a sentence to more fruitless, heartrending labor. More faces to look at who might resurrect her family, only to refuse, again and again.

"I'll keep looking through hospital records," Kate said. "For both of them. That'll be my job, and Garrett will help. You try people-watching, or... whatever else. We have forever, Tanya. We'll find hosts for them both, I know we will."

Tanya nodded, more out of politeness than agreement.

---

"Why're you chained to a tree?" Tanya asked. She knew the answer, but it couldn't hurt to let the lady rant.

Rant she did: a solid fifteen minutes of diatribe against a corporation that wanted to bulldoze the forest of which her tree was a part.

"Are you worried they'll just go ahead and knock down your tree?" Tanya asked, keeping her voice light, but only with difficulty.

"They can't," said the environmentalist defiantly. "They'd kill me if they did and the law protects people where it doesn't protect *innocent trees and animals*."

"Well, they *could*, they'd just need to have a fall guy do it," Tanya said. "But they'd probably get a lot of negative press anyway, and might have to stop there... If you could only save the forest by letting them bulldoze you, would you?"

"W-well," said the tree-lady uncomfortably, "they're not actually *going* to bulldoze me. They're trying to bargain with my fiancé now, he's in my same organization..."

Fiancé. That didn't bode well. Tanya wrapped up the conversation without mentioning word one about vampires or her sister.

---

"Carlisle, when you said "the mentally ill"..." Tanya began wheedlingly into her phone.

"I meant it," Carlisle said.

"But I mean did you mean just *depressed* people, or does it apply to people with... with permanent amnesia, or incurable dementia, or something like that?" she asked.

There was a long pause, and then Carlisle said, "If you can find someone with one of those conditions *who can meaningfully agree*, then... indeed that's not what I meant. I will have Edward *check*, though, Tanya, we can't just help ourselves to any -"

"Consenting mentally ill folks who aren't clinically depressed are fine, got it, thanks."

---

"My children don't visit me anymore," said the woman in the wheelchair. Her hands twisted at the ends of her arms erratically and Tanya couldn't tell if the lopsided expression on her face represented her emotional state or not. She didn't make eye contact.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tanya lied.

"Ungrateful little bastards," snapped the other suddenly. "No, no, I don't mean - no. They just don't want to *visit their own mother* - no. I don't mean that."

"You remind me of *my* mother," Tanya said in soothing tones. The odd expression and movements aside, the patient could have been the same woman, less a dose of venom.

"Did she have Huntington's too?" asked the twitching human, awkwardly pawing some of her hair out of her face.

"No. She didn't," Tanya murmured. "But she looked a lot like you. I wonder if I could... if I could ask you a *huge* favor..."

---

"I don't know if this is even going to *work*," Elspeth said.

"You look stupid!" shouted the host at the princess, face twisting into a rictus of some unnamable feeling. "What are you, playing dress-up, you're a grown goddamn woman, what the hell are you doing wearing a crown like that's any kind of normal -"

"I don't know if turning would even cure the illness, regardless of whether the memories take in the *first* place," Elspeth said, ignoring the woman in the wheelchair.

"Of course it'll cure the illness, it cures everything, it's *magic*, your grandpa cleared her to have consented, go on," said Tanya, gesturing impatiently. Kate laid a restraining hand on her sister's shoulder.

"I don't know if a brain with this kind of accumulated damage can hold implanted memories," Elspeth said. "I have literally no idea what will happen if I try it. It would be irresponsible."

"Don't tell me you're competing with Carlisle for the title of most sanctimonious -" began Tanya furiously, but Kate charged up her hand a touch and zapped Tanya. It was barely enough to hurt, but it stopped her midsentence. "Please," she said, starting over. "If Carlisle approved it, I'm sure it's fine, don't you think?"

"I don't," said Elspeth, shaking her head slowly. "Grandpa doesn't know as much about how my powers work as I do. I think he's right that your, um, friend here is capable of agreeing to donate herself. I don't think he knows better than me about whether it's a viable donation."

"Elspeth," cried Tanya, "just *try*, she said you could try..."

Elspeth shook her head implacably. "I'm sorry."

---

"You can't start a *website* asking for a donor, that's completely not allowed," said Kate incredulously, peering over Tanya's shoulder at the rapidly accumulating code. "Besides, what will it say, 'sell me your body'? That's *extra* not allowed."

"Elspeth won't let me put ads in her pamphlets. I have to do *something*. The Internet is full of random people of every description. I'm sure *someone* would be up for it, I just need to find her. Them, if we're lucky." She fed a photo of Irina and a drawing of Sasha into the scanner.

"But how are you going to get away with it? Either people visit the site, and the Golden Coven cracks down and you get hidden for some number of years, or nobody does and it doesn't work."

"*Look*," snapped Tanya, "talk to me when you care more about putting our family back together than you do about leading a peacefully uninterrupted life of constant fornication with Garrett, all right?"

Kate stepped back, hurt all over her face, and fled the house before Tanya could take it back.

---

Tanya wished she could get drunk. She couldn't get drunk, so she got laid.

It was easy, mechanical after millenia of practice, and even simpler in an era where no one would try to stone her to death if she outright propositioned someone in the wrong person's hearing. She was lovelier than the stars, she was pretty as a picture, she was hotter than the sun (or so they thought until they touched her) - compliments tumbled into her ears, weightless and repetitive and of no interest.

She allowed herself a few days' respite, and then she went back to work.

---

She decided to try jumpers. *Most* of them were probably chemical in etiology, but some of them could be life-circumstance types - addiction, financial ruin, death in the family (ha) - anything that might get past Carlisle's moral compass and Elspeth's practical concerns. She paced along the Golden Gate Bridge under an umbrella, pretending to wait for someone.

After six months, she'd wrestled down a dozen people from the edge of pitching themselves into the Bay, and was reasonably sure that all of them would get a veto from her cousin, who was becoming less and less dear to her by the week. Even if any of them *had* looked like her sister or her mother, which none of them did.

Kate came looking for her - having left Garrett at home - after would-be suicide number twelve proved unsuitable. "Come back to Denali," she said without preamble, speaking softly. "There are too many hospitals for me and Garrett to keep track of, even if Eleazar and Carmen help. We might miss someone. Come home."

Tanya followed her away from the bridge, huddled under her umbrella.

---

"How much money did you say again?"

Tanya repeated the figure. It wasn't her entire savings. It wasn't even half. She could be talked up, and only started low so her family wouldn't be brought back to a life of want. But it was enough to turn the average human's head.

"That's a lot of money," commented the girl, scratching at her bare scalp. "What's the catch?"

Tanya explained the catch, as it were, and the girl listened. "This is the part where you ask if you can just turn into a vampire yourself," Tanya added dully.

"I don't know," said the girl. "What's the catch of *that*?"

Tanya listed every drawback she could think of: the thirst and the yet-appalling taste of permitted drinks. The newborn instability. The fear and loathing of nearby animals. The disqualification from most sporting events. The inability to go out unrestricted in daylight. The loss of sleep and dreams. The likelihood of spontaneous mating, and how it had gotten her sister killed in the first place.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound so grand," the girl said. "I don't think I want that. But your sister will?"

Tanya lifted her head, nodded once.

The girl yawned hugely. "It's a lot of money. Dad could keep the store..."

---

"Are you ready?" Elspeth asked, wearing an expression of awful trepidation but pressing her hand to the girl's forehead.

"I think so," came the reply. "I wrote up all my letters to everyone... and if you wait any longer I might die and then Tanya has to find someone else..." She yawned again, fluttering her eyelids.

"You remember killing how many millions of people? This one's willing, that's got to be something," Tanya whispered under her breath.

"I didn't actually *do* it any of those millions of times," Elspeth muttered back. She regarded the tired, dying woman a moment longer and said, "I'm getting Addy."

"Well, do it quick, then," Tanya said, and the princess slipped out of the room and came back with the copying-witch, who had no qualms whatever about taking Elspeth's power and touching the cancer patient's cheek and... replacing her.

Elspeth looked away, but when Addy had gone, she took a deep breath and turned back to the wheelchair. She held up a mirror.

Irina blinked.

---

"A *thousand* years?" asked Irina, peering at her sisters sleepily. "That's... that's such a long time. Why don't I remember it?"

"The princess could only give you a few years to get you into a new body," Tanya said. "She'll send you the rest once you're turned again. That'll be tomorrow. We need to hurry, because your body is sick."

"Oh," said Irina. "All right. I'm tired. That's strange."

"Go ahead and sleep," said Kate.

Irina drifted off, and Tanya filled glass vials with venom.

---

"I don't feel quite like *myself*," complained Irina. "Everything's there except the months you told her to skip, now, but it's like I'm not fluent in the language of my own brain."

"Elspeth said that would go away over time, or at least it did for John and Didyme when she refreshed their memories," Tanya promised.

"I can't believe Mother is dead," Irina said. "It doesn't seem quite real, even though I remember that too."

"We'll get her back," Tanya said. "Eventually."

---

The first thing Sasha wanted to know was: "Did you girls stay together?"

"Yes, Mother," they chorused.

It was close enough to true, anyway.

---

## Sue

Sue did not know that her husband had even been hurt until he was halfway to Vancouver.

Seth, looking like he'd grown an inch since the previous night, slunk into the house looking miserable and wearing someone else's clothes. (*Sue* would never let her boy wear such ratty jeans.) "Mom," he said, "um," he went on, and then he stopped, making half-gestures with his hands to illustrate words that wouldn't come.

"Spit it out," said Sue tiredly over the crooning radio. "Where's your father? Didn't you and Leah take him somewhere to see something an hour ago? Don't tell me you built another deathtrap of a treehouse..."

"No treehouse," whispered Seth. "Mom..."

"What?" asked Sue. She got up to take an apple out of the fridge.

"Dad... got... *hurt*," choked Seth.

"What happened?" asked Sue. She put the apple back and turned her gaze on her son, who stood trembling (*and when did he get that tall?*) in the doorway.

"He got hurt *bad*," sobbed Seth, "and it was an accident, it was, don't blame her, please, she didn't mean it, I *know* she didn't, but he got hurt, and Bella -"

"Bella? Charlie's kid? She's here? Did she hurt your father?" asked Sue sharply. She liked Charlie, but she didn't know about his kid. What she'd seen of the girl involved an unhealthy obsession with notebooks. She'd probably turn into an obnoxious reporter or something.

"No," said Seth emphatically. "Bella helped him... sort of..."

"Where is your father?" Sue demanded, tapping her foot.

"On his way to Alaska," Seth whispered.

---

The truth came out, over hours of explanation: Bella, and the Cullens, and all the old legends, and wolves and Rachel and Leah and *Harry*, Harry savaged and dying and *turning* into the kind of monster Sue once had nightmares about. She wondered if she was having a nightmare about them now - except in nightmares, the monsters were present. In nightmares they chased and bit and snarled, they didn't pour venom into one's husband while one was mixing cupcake batter and then drive him to Alaska.

Leah was still in wolf form, unable to "phase", for hours after the - Sue decided to call it an accident. Everyone said it was an accident, it was a wolf thing, it was dangerous to provoke them, it wasn't Leah's fault. Sue would have thought it was just Leah duping her

little brother to avoid getting in trouble ("oh, I can't control myself, it's the wolf inside of me that did this") if it hadn't been for the fact that Rachel and some half a dozen other people backed up the story.

Sue didn't attempt to speak to Leah herself when the girl - taller too, though less dramatically than Seth - slunk back into the house the next day in Rachel's shirt and Marilyn's khakis. She didn't know what to say to her daughter. All her usual threats and punishments and the like had been losing force with the girl anyway, and they were out of proportion to the severity of the crime. Sue couldn't call Charlie, summon him in his cop car, tell him to take her child away. Not because she wouldn't, but because she couldn't very well have Leah prosecuted for a crime under the circumstances. What would she tell the man? "Good morning, Charlie, my daughter turned into a giant gray wolf and nearly slaughtered Harry. Yours is turning him into a Cold One (yes, that's the same thing as a vampire, and she is one of those) to save his life."

Not likely.

And - save his life? Was he going to be *alive*? Cold Ones were *undead*, monsters, savage death-dealing beasts less than human in everything but the ability to kill, it had taken magic to fight them off when they'd preyed on the tribe forever ago...

She wasn't sure if her husband was alive or dead.

---

If Harry were dead, Leah had killed him.

Leah and Sue hadn't spoken two words to each other since the - accident. Until finally the dam had burst, and they had shouted at each other all morning. Then Leah had stormed out of the house, doubtless to seek comfort in her fiancé's arms. (Fiancé. Ugh. She was too young, but Sue didn't disapprove of *Sam* per se, and that had limited her ability to prevent the early race to marriage.)

Leah came back in time for dinner - neither turning into a wolf nor killing (?) her father had made a dent in her appetite, and she and Seth both ate ravenously - and soon enough she and Sue were shouting at each other again.

The shouting went on, and on, and Leah phased *in the house*. It was the first time Sue had seen it from Leah (she'd seen Rachel do it, great fluffy cross between a wolf's shape and a polar bear's color and a Clydesdale's size that she was). Leah was smaller than Rachel, but she was still a toothy roaring creature tall as a horse and bristling gray, and Sue was for an instant terrified of her daughter.

Leah did lunge, but then she snapped herself back, pulled the fur back in through her skin and then she was Sue's baby girl, crying on the floor among the shreds of the ninth set of clothes she'd destroyed, and this was not a *murderer*.

But no one else's claws had hurt Harry...

So, he was not dead.

But he *was* a vampire. Sue didn't expect to find laws on the books about what that meant, but was he still her *husband*? Did she want him to ever venture close to her or her (their?) children again? Certainly the children shouldn't visit *him*. He was dangerous - so was Leah, for that matter, and maybe even Seth if something provoked him enough - it wouldn't end well.

But he was alive.

---

Harry started writing.

It was different. Even in writing he was different - he made no more typos, he wrote blindingly fast and replied near instantly when she answered (tersely and with misgivings, but she wrote back). His messages were long and full of awkwardly restrained expressions of affection. Plainly, *he* thought they were still married.

He didn't say much about the place Bella had taken him, until Sue asked, but then it came spilling out: they were *hitting* him, all the time, to keep him "under control", and one had magic like a Taser that she flung around indiscriminately too. There was no one besides the sisters (except for the married one, and the "married" bit was only a guess on Harry's part, they were practitioners of deplorable morals that made Sue shiver with distaste) and the one sister's husband (?) and the other "newborn" and Carmen and Eleazar to talk to. Carmen and Eleazar were better than the others, Harry told her, but he missed his home, his wife -

Sue wasn't sure if she was his wife.

But she answered his letters, anyway.

Sue wrote about how she and Billy were cooperating to keep Charlie from the truth, and how much she hated it. She wrote about the wolves, and how the tribe was changing around them, and how Seth and Leah were holding up. She sometimes wrote nothing but monosyllabic responses to his questions, but he always seemed impossibly thrilled to hear from her. He'd never been a neglectful spouse, but Sue felt like she had his attention in a way that she'd never sustained before.

So when he wrote, she wrote back.

---

Sue did not like that it took her daughter's fiancé abandoning her for the pair of them to have the first civil, honest mother-daughter *talk* they'd managed in years. That, *and* the rude betrayal of Emily. But Leah needed support, and her father wasn't there - he wrote, but there were times when words didn't do the trick, and the mother-daughter talks were accompanied by bowls of ice cream and hugs and occasional sappy movies that Leah liked (or was masochistically drawn to) and Sue tolerated.

And Sue heard volumes about Sam, and how Sam was such a *good man*, and how he never *meant* to imprint, and how all Rachel's demands hadn't moved him but that could only be because he was *incapable*. Except, Leah went on around a mouthful of rocky road, that she didn't think if he'd *really* loved her as much as he *possibly could*, he would have imprinted on anyone else; if he'd loved her *enough* he would have imprinted on *her* if anyone at all. Leah vacillated between calling down curses on his head and wishing for his love again with a speed that gave Sue whiplash.

And Sue listened to Leah wail about Emily, who had stood by her to begin with in opposition to the force that had taken over Sam, who had been a *good* nigh-sisterly cousin, who had been *so supportive*...

Up until the moment Emily wavered and Sam was there to catch her and push her over the fence. Up until the moment she decided she wanted arbitrary, fairy-tale love and devotion from one mystical creature more than she wanted the hard-earned sisterly affection she already had from another. Sue listened to her daughter call her niece every foul name in the book and some she was sure Leah was inventing on the spot.

Sue listened, and occasionally she spoke brief, quiet sentences about Harry, and Leah nodded and used them as springboards into her next tirade or parade of misery.

When Leah was out on one of her long, furious four-legged runs, Sue informed Seth that he was not allowed to date, *ever*, until and unless he imprinted.

Seth just nodded once, wide-eyed, and crossed his heart.

---

*I'd like to visit you, Harry wrote, if you're willing.*

August sunshine glared on the computer screen, and Sue squinted to read it, but that was what it said. Harry wanted to visit her.

The e-mailing had been like their initial courtship through the honeymoon, except long-distance, all over again. And *that* had wound up with Sue pregnant before they really had enough money to afford Leah. But those loose vampire women Harry lived with never got knocked up, did they? (And why was she imagining that there would be anything of that nature if he visited, anyway? He could walk near a human without killing; but he might not be able to even touch her. More likely they would talk face-to-face and that would be the whole of it.)

*Get Rachel's permission. Otherwise, I'm not sure the wolves wouldn't kill you if you came onto tribal land, she wrote.*

*I don't want to have to clear it with Rachel just to see my wife, he sent back. Or my coven, for that matter. What about the old cabin?*

When it came down to it, nor did Sue like the idea of Rachel having to know about every moment she spent with her husband (no point in pretending he wasn't, anymore). They

worked out some logistics: she'd need to bring a change of clothes, to prevent their wolf children from smelling him on her; he'd need to pretend to his "covenmates" that he was only going for a long walk; he'd have to choose his route carefully to avoid exposure. All for a very short visit before he'd have to turn right around and go... "home".

He was adamant that yes, he *was* willing to spend a full day in transit just to see her for a couple of hours, so he did.

The look on his face when he first saw her was - really something. Sue compared it to the way the wolves with imprints looked at those. It wasn't the same. It had that *intensity*, but not that shock of newness: Harry's was the look of a profoundly devoted married man, not a permanently infatuated wolf. She knew he was one of the monsters from her nightmares, but with that look on his face she couldn't bring herself to fear him.

They didn't have a lot to say. They'd covered most of the content of the *new* features in their lives through writing. Anything less novel they already knew. Mostly, Harry mentioned things he couldn't *quite* remember, and Sue filled it in for him - exact details about their wedding. Leah's first word ("cake"). The pattern of the wallpaper in their kitchen. The way Seth had babbled with delight at his first day of school. The lyrics to "their song".

He touched her once - he brought his hand up under hers, not holding it exactly for fear of crushing it but letting her rest it there. And he looked at her rings, which she'd somehow never gotten around to taking off even when she *wasn't* sure they were still married, and then he looked up at her and smiled.

Then he had to go.

Sue went back to the house, washed her hands before crossing paths with any wolves, and quietly pined.

And when he came back a day and a half later, having checked in with the Denali vampires, she suggested that it might be safe if he just held very still while *she* did the touching.

---

It was amazing they were never caught before she got pregnant. Even timing things so he arrived in the wee hours of the morning and Sue could shower right after without arousing suspicion, someone might have noticed, but no one was paying her that much attention.

Then she realized she'd missed a period, and had a bewildering bump on her stomach, and an explanation for all the omelettes and French toast and frittatas she'd been fixing came to mind... and she called Harry to make him turn around.

He'd been baffled. He'd stopped short of accusing her of infidelity, so she denied it on her own initiative: "This is not a human baby," she told him. "Too fast. I was on time last month and now I'm *showing*. I couldn't get into some of my pants this morning. I think it was your second visit..."

"Does anyone else know?" he asked, after a stunned pause.

"No, but it won't be long before they figure out something's up, and I'm going to have trouble getting around soon," she said. "I'm not going to tell anyone what's going on. I don't dare. They'll want to hurt him."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Harry promised. "My phone is dying; I'll be there as soon as I can, love."

---

Half the tribe wanted her baby dead.

Her *baby*. Leah and Seth's little brother (she was sure it was a boy, and she'd been right with her first two). Accidental, but so was Leah. Babies were not *disposable*, whatever politicians and legislators liked to argue about these days. She was not going to let anyone harm her son.

Or rather, she wouldn't if she had any ability whatever to stop them. She was not much able to get into and out of bed, let alone defend herself and the child if it came to physical confrontation.

Then Bella showed up, and Bella thought Sue was *allowed* to keep her baby (oh, how *generous*, that she was *allowed*) but still felt entitled to call Sue an idiot in her own house, in front of her children, for not wanting a stranger to reach in with instruments of death to destroy her *baby*. This when that slip of a girl was only seventeen and had never been and would never be pregnant herself. Sue helped herself to practical advice about diet, and when the interfering little chit crossed the line, a well-placed threat about talking to Charlie (who already suspected something) shut her up quick.

It was a strange pregnancy. She'd had the usual cravings with Seth and Leah, but never for blood, which tasted mysteriously delicious when Leah brought her the stuff from various wildlife. When she wasn't sucking down as much blood as they could get her (and damned if it didn't feel *bizarre* slurping down a mug of red liquid that had been coursing around in Charlie's veins minutes earlier), she was devouring eggs and everything else that was brought to her. When she wasn't bringing it back up again.

The broken ribs hurt when she breathed, but she could live with that. Each new one didn't add that much to the discomfort after the first, and it wasn't like suddenly changing her mind about keeping the baby would make them heal overnight.

"Cody," she said once, testing out the name.

"Huh, Mom?" asked Seth, who was sitting with her when she thought of it.

"Your little brother. I'm going to call him Cody," she said. "Your father can pick a girls' name in case I'm wrong." And then she passed out, and woke up to find that the clock had advanced by three minutes and several people were standing over her anxiously.

---

Bella's idea of a c-section had seemed so clever at the time.

Mid-turning, Sue wanted to crank back the clock and undo every decision that had made her more likely to survive to experience it.

Except the decision to keep her baby. *Cody*..

But if he could have killed her coming out, like every other half-vampire had... that would have been an improvement.

She screamed, and it didn't help, and she went on screaming anyway, and the burn raged on.

---

When Sue's heart stopped and the pain was finally over, she was in Harry's arms, and thought of nothing else for a good three seconds. And then she said, "Cody."

"Leah and Seth have him," soothed Harry. "I'll go fetch him out here right now if you like."

Sue nodded, and he kissed her brow. "Don't go anywhere," he cautioned, and was off like a flash.

She waited. Experimentally, she performed a backflip. It should have been exhilarating, but there was no dizzy urgency to the change in equilibrium - she was just aware that she was temporarily upside-down. She didn't repeat the test; instead she looked around at the cabin. It was halfway decent; Harry had been busy while she was gestating with fixing the place up to be livable. There was no question of vampires living in the village itself. The house belonged to Leah now, and Seth.

Harry was back in no time (nine minutes, six and a half seconds) with Cody in his arms. The little boy looked older than he should already - slimmer than a human baby, more like a miniature toddler. But he was her boy, that she'd given so much for, and she scooped him right up. He poured out heat and giggled and said "Ma" like he knew the sense of the syllable.

"Hello, Cody," purred Sue.

---

"Mr. Clearwater, Mrs. Clearwater," panted Quil, carrying a bewildered Claire under one arm and standing naked in their doorway, "vampires. Volturi. They got everybody except imprinters. We're making a run for it, you have to -"

"Leah and Seth?" Harry interrupted, clenching a hand over Sue's shoulder.

"Not imprinters," said Quil, clutching urgently at Claire. "We're *going*, I just wanted to warn -"

"Take Cody with you," said Sue abruptly, picking up her son and thrusting him at Quil. The wolf tucked the hybrid under his other arm, but looked at her in confusion. "What are you standing there for? *Go!* Get him somewhere safe! Harry -"

"Leah and Seth," said Harry grimly, and they ran towards the village in perfect sync.

---

*Cody is safe*, Sue repeated to herself over the low scream of pain from every disassembled part of her body. *The wolves have Cody. Cody is safe...* But she didn't know about Leah or Seth, and Harry was *not* safe, and she... was halfway to dead.

*But Cody is safe.*

There was fire, and then she knew no more.

---

Sue woke.

She was staring in a mirror, at a face that was not as white and smooth as it should have been (it looked like someone had covered her in makeup, which wouldn't stick, so she had no idea why they'd do it), but it did look like her, for the most part.

Standing over her was a girl, with almost metallicly bright orange hair and inappropriately large eyes set in a naturally anxious face. "Where am I?" Sue demanded.

"Volterra, Italy," the girl told her.

So Sue was a prisoner, but they didn't have her restrained - she shot a hand up towards the girl, intending to knock her head from her shoulders. A brown hand caught hers in midair and she tried to wrench free, but he was stronger than her, which didn't make sense - she was a newborn - was that *Jacob*?

"Jacob?" she asked. In Volterra? She tried again to pull her hand out of his grip, and he let her. She sat up warily.

"I did just tell her she's in Volterra, and the last thing she remembers is being taken prisoner by the Volturi," rambled the girl. "She doesn't know who I am and probably didn't notice right away she's not a vampire any more. If I'd been, say, Noemi, and worked for the bad guys, it would have been reasonable..."

One couldn't *un-turn*... "Not a vam- *what?*" She looked at her hands. They were darker than they should have been too. Not as dark as she'd been before she turned, but not vampire pale either. Weakly tanned white human hands. Without makeup smeared all over them. She

pulled in a breath. The air wasn't full of the smells it should have carried, and it felt *needed* in a way it shouldn't have, unless. *Human*. "How is this possible?"

A man sitting in a bed across the room said, voice cracking with stress, "I'm told we're Italian now."

"Italian? Who are *you*?" Sue asked him.

"I'm Harry, I think. They tell me you're Sue." He peered at something he was holding in his hand. He didn't resemble Harry to speak of, except a little around the eyes.

"Of course I'm Sue." Who else would she be? She turned to look at the other occupants of the room. "Leah? Seth?" she breathed. They were familiar. Just as she remembered. "And..." She knew that young man, from somewhere, but...

"Cody," he murmured. Tears trailed down his cheeks. "I'm Cody, Mom."

She didn't let her eyes flicker away from his face. That was her *son*? All grown? He'd been a little boy...

"Someone," said Sue, "had better explain all this to me from the beginning."

---

"Do you want to turn again, once we stop moving around long enough to do it?" Harry asked her in a low voice. It wouldn't stop the vampires from hearing, but it would stop them from thinking they were invited to do so.

"I don't know," she sighed. "Maybe. Maybe not. I only did it because of Cody, the first time... and the pain..."

"The pain won't be a problem in the future," Harry said. "Alec will be handling that."

"Mmm. I don't know. What do you think?" she asked.

"I miss being able to feel people at a distance. They think the power will come back if I turn," he murmured. "And near as I can tell, all our children will live forever and think choosing to stay human is a lot like committing suicide. Being a vampire wasn't so bad, it was just... other things that made it hard."

"Mmm," said Sue.

---

Turning was much easier, the second time.

---

## Esme

Esme didn't even *like* climbing trees, which was why it was so absurd. Well, as absurd as a broken leg could be. It would have made more sense to have hurt herself falling down the stairs or being kicked by a horse, but out of a *tree*?

She'd been fetching down Mrs. Chester's cat, or trying. Mrs. Chester had a bad knee and couldn't even get up the ladder, so she'd held it for Esme and Esme had gone up - and then the blasted cat had hopped up another branch too high to reach from the ladder, and Esme had climbed into the tree, and then it had collapsed under her. An absurd way for a sixteen-year-old girl to injure her leg.

She would have been more upset about it if the doctor hadn't been so *handsome*.

Esme hadn't met Dr. Cullen before; she was only at his office instead of Dr. Brown's because Dr. Brown was away visiting his mother. So Esme's parents had taken her all the way to Columbus, and -

Dr. Cullen looked like a god. Not like *the* God, who she couldn't help but imagine as old and bearded and not particularly attractive, but *a* god like Jove (who her father occasionally swore by, to avoid taking the Lord's name in vain) or Apollo. Shining and perfect and unreal.

Esme knew it was ridiculous to read anything into the kind look in his eyes or the gentle way he touched her when he set her broken bone. He was a *doctor*; doctors helped people and had to be good at soothing patients and hurting them as little as possible; he was just a good doctor, that was all. But her heart fluttered under her ribs, and she did stare, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Your leg will be all better in just a few weeks," Dr. Cullen said. "Trust stronger trees with your weight in the future, all right?" She nodded, and he *smiled* at her and lit up the room with it, and said, "There's a girl."

Esme's father helped her out of the hospital, but she turned back to look at Dr. Cullen. He was watching her too, and there was something odd about how he held his face, like he was in pain but trying to hide it. She heard the first half of a word from his mouth, but he stopped himself, and then her father told her to look where they were going and she faced forward again.

Esme made her way back to Columbus one more time, two months later, half-baked excuses for seeking Dr. Cullen again bubbling in her mind to be stammered through were she challenged. She wasn't sure herself why she was looking for him, only that she wanted to. But she couldn't find him.

"He's moved away," said the hospital's receptionist when she asked.

Esme went home, disquieted, and didn't seek him out again.

Charles Evenson was her father's best friend's son, but Esme didn't know him well. Her parents talked him up at every opportunity, and he was all right to look at, and supposedly he had good connections and was going to go far in his career.

Her father hadn't suggested outright that she marry Charles, but she thought he was going to. And the doctor who still visited her dreams sometimes had been gone for six years, so she supposed she might as well, if that was what they wanted of her.

"I'm thinking of moving West," she said over dinner one night, picking at the cornbread on her plate. "And teaching."

"Not respectable," said her father, shaking his head. "It's still wilderness out there. Not a good place for you to be living alone. No, you'd best stay hereabouts."

"And not alone, either," her mother put in. "Your friends have all married by now. Susan and what's-her-name even have little ones on the way, haven't they?"

Esme nodded, because they did. And she envied them a little. She liked babies, liked children - that was why being a schoolteacher appealed.

"I've invited Charles over for dinner tomorrow," her father went on, peering at her from under bushy eyebrows and waiting for arguments. She never did argue with him; why would he expect it?

"That will be lovely," Esme said. "We can serve pie."

Charles did come over, and they did serve pie, and he insisted on taking her for a walk after that, and held her hand. She didn't see any reason not to let him; everyone approved of him and it would be easier to go along. Her parents wanted what was best for her.

Charles proposed to her a week later, and she accepted.

It took him almost a month before he started hitting her.

---

Esme was horrified at herself for becoming used to the pain: she became practiced at nursing splits in her lips, bringing down the swelling in a black eye, sorting through her wardrobe for the right dresses to hide the bruises. He was too easily distracted to carry on attacking her until she became seriously injured; it was never too much worse than a dark spot of tenderness on her arm or a stinging flush on her cheek.

She told her friends that they were saving up to fix the floorboards in the kitchen, so full of snags and warps that she couldn't help but trip. All the time. However carefully she walked.

She didn't get used to the shouting, though. No matter how many times her husband called her a worthless whore, or cursed his father for not having the discernment to steer him away from such an inadequate wife, or wished her dead so he could replace her with

someone younger, someone prettier, someone quicker to obey when he snapped orders - that never got easier to hear. Charles had a snarling, rough voice that demanded fresh attention every time, impossible to tune out.

She went to her parents, once, and started to hint. She wasn't sure what she expected them to do, but she thought they'd be more likely to be able to do something than one of her friends.

"Sometimes I think no matter what I do, Charles will never be happy with me," she said.

"Nonsense," said her mother. "If he's not happy with you, there's something more to do. Your only responsibility right now - until you have children, anyway - is to be a good wife to him."

*Children.* Children in that house? With that man? Esme touched her belly without meaning to, willed it to stay empty. No one she would love as much as her baby, if she was ever unlucky enough to have one under these circumstances, ought to be under that man's roof.

"Don't go around complaining about your husband behind his back, whatever you do," said Esme's father. "He's got his career to look after; last thing he needs is his wife starting gossip."

Esme didn't talk much for the rest of the visit. She went home. She listened to Charles tell her that she was a waste of space and he wished he could keep her in a kennel outside and out of his way. She received a new welt on her shoulder. She did not start gossip.

---

He was drafted.

He was overseas, in the army.

He was finally, finally *away*.

Esme bought a thick rug and put it in the kitchen as her explanation to her friends about why she no longer "tripped" on the still-unremodeled floor. She put new wallpaper up and fixed the molding in the bedroom and re-shingled the front side of the house. She started going to church regularly again. Joined a sewing circle, got to know her neighbors, tended a garden, pretended when she had to that she was the lonely Mrs. Everson who missed *him*.

She had a year and a half of welcome solitude.

And then he was back.

---

Esme deliberately spilled caramel sauce on her fluffy kitchen rug, and tossed it out.

---

*No*, she thought, staring at her clean, bloodless hands, a week past when they should have come up red. *No. No, no, no, no, not here. Not here.*

He didn't know yet. That was the only sliver of hope, that he didn't know.

If she could only think of somewhere to *go*, he might never know he'd fathered a baby.

---

Concetta was Esme's second cousin on her mother's side. Esme had met her once, when she was eleven and Concetta ten, and they'd gotten along. Concetta had two very important qualities: she lived all the way in Milwaukee, and she was not married.

Esme turned up on her doorstep without notice and begged a place to stay.

Concetta took her in without asking too many questions, but then Esme's aunt and uncle came by, recognized Esme's clothes in the spare closet, and were sure to report their missing niece's whereabouts to her parents.

Esme fled further north, and didn't tell Concetta where she was going. If she was lucky, Concetta wouldn't have noticed her pregnancy and couldn't betray that information either.

---

Esme didn't like to wear the rings, but any war widow would. (She *wished* she was a war widow, and then hated herself for wishing something that implied any death, even *his*.) So she left them where they were on her finger, and learned to conjure a few tears on demand when someone asked about him, but she gave a false forename for her fictional dead husband (the same she intended for her baby, if it was a boy: Thomas) with a variant on her married last name ("Everett") and pretended to have no information about where he'd been serving or in what capacity.

She taught school. Sixteen little faces watched her while she described sums and spellings and states.

And then, right on time, she delivered a baby boy, called him Thomas "Everett" "Junior", and fell heedlessly in love.

He didn't look *anything* like his father. Thomas was all Esme: in the eyes and the shape of his mouth and the pertness of his nose, in the way he smiled when she tickled his belly, in the way he scrunched up into a ball when he slept. He was *hers*. And Charles had been out of her life for nearly a year, an awful memory and nothing else - and maybe he'd never find her after all.

---

Thomas coughed, and coughed, and he *couldn't stop*, no matter how many teaspoons of the druggist's syrup she coaxed down his throat, no matter how many hours she spent rubbing poultices into his shaking chest. He couldn't *stop*.

He was only four days old when he did stop, and Esme felt like she'd died along with him.

Cradling the lifeless little body in her hands, she walked to the cliff outside of town.

She didn't hesitate at the edge; she wasn't looking at her feet anyway, to know when it was near.

She just walked.

And then she fell.

---

*Pain*, oh so impossibly much *pain*, so absurdly much, so much, so -

---

Esme opened her eyes, and saw the face of a god, and felt his arms around her.

"I remember you," she breathed. That face, and her baby's, were the only ones she could fix clearly in her mind.

"And I you," he murmured, crushing her tighter to his chest. "Esme."

---

A vampire. It was an odd sort of thing to be; she didn't suppose it was too awful, but it was *strange*, and took so much getting used to. She listened to Carlisle, and his companion (pretending to be a brother-in-law) Edward, as they explained what it meant to be what they were. They taught her to hunt, safely away from people (was she not a person anymore? she wondered; Edward heard her and said that *she* was most certainly a person. She didn't think to wonder until much later why he emphasized the pronoun.) It was strange the way Edward could hear her thinking, but he was benign about it, and she grew not to mind within a few weeks.

Carlisle made arrangements behind the scenes for her to be pronounced officially dead, and then leaked the information back to her second cousin through some appropriately subtle channel. She didn't dare be present when her parents came to visit the empty grave beside her son's in the Ashland graveyard, but Carlisle watched them do it and came back to tell her that they did grieve for her.

Charles came to have a look at the supposed resting place of his wife and child, later. Esme did dare to be present, hiding in the long evening shadows.

Later, wiping blood off her mouth and sobbing tearlessly into Carlisle's chest, she wished she hadn't, because *one instant* of wanting a man dead was enough to kill him, as she was now.

---

"I, Esme Anne Platt Evenson, take you, Carlisle Cullen, to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward. For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; to love and cherish until the end of time. Today I give to you me; with all my heart I make this pledge to you..."

---

"Leaving? But Edward, where will you go? We'll come with you," said Esme. "There's no need to -"

Edward shook his head, and she stopped, looking searchingly at him and wishing she could read *his* mind, understand why he wanted to leave. She masqueraded as his sister to others, but thought of herself as more his mother, for all that she was *really* only six years his senior. "Geographically maybe you could. I'm leaving in more ways than that. I'm not content with this... *diet* Carlisle has us on. I want to try something else."

Esme's face might or might not have betrayed how stricken *that* made her, because the thoughts alone would have explained how Edward turned away from her and hunched his shoulders, and ran too fast to follow into night. He did pause, just within her hearing, and said, "Not at random. I can sort out the people like Charles from everyone else." And then he took off again.

But Esme didn't let a day go by without wishing she'd been strong enough to resist even *that* thirst, and so this was scarce comfort.

Her keenest worry was not for the strangers, the evil people Edward proposed to consume - but for her son, whom she wanted to shield from guilt lest it consume *him*.

---

Six years in one place was pushing it, but Esme didn't want to move a moment before they had to, didn't want to make it all difficult for Edward to find them again if he ever wanted to return home. He'd departed after two years in the city, and so she and Carlisle carefully orchestrated their lives to minimize the number of people who'd notice their ageless faces over the subsequent years: he changed jobs at year three, they avoided meeting the neighbors, they switched churches twice, he started bleaching his hair to be more white than blond at the temples at year five.

And after four years away, Edward did come home.

He *was* full of guilt, so remorseful that it came pouring out of his face whenever he turned it to Esme like she could read his mind after all, but she gathered him up in a hug

anyway, because he was her son, and home. He needed to heal, but there was scarcely anywhere better to do it.

They moved again as soon as they found a new place to go, and set up in Rochester.

---

Two years after they arrived in Rochester, Carlisle brought home Rosalie.

"What were you thinking, Carlisle?" Edward asked incredulously, between the poor girl's screams and pleas for death. "Rosalie Hale?" They knew everyone in the town, more or less, or at least Edward did. Maybe Rosalie wouldn't have been first on Esme's list either, if things had been different - but didn't Edward have a sense of smell - couldn't he tell what kind of death Carlisle had saved her *from*?

"I couldn't just let her die," murmured Carlisle. Esme went to his side; Carlisle wasn't speaking for Edward's benefit and it was doubtful that Rosalie could manage to pay attention even if she heard, so he must want Esme there, want her to be part of the conversation. "It was too much - too horrible, too much waste."

"I know," said Edward, looking away from all of them.

"It was too much waste. I couldn't leave her," Carlisle said. Too young, too much of her future lost, and she hadn't even chosen it like Esme had -

"Of course you couldn't," Esme said, stroking Carlisle's arm.

"People die all the time," Edward pointed out. "Don't you think she's just a little recognizable, though? The Kings will have to put up a huge search - not that anyone suspects the fiend. What are we going to do with her?"

"That's up to her, of course," Carlisle said with a sigh, and Esme knew a flare of pride in her husband, that he would adhere to his principles whatever choices others made. "She may want to go her own way."

Rosalie's heart was beating faster and her intermittent screams were dying down to choked whimpers. Esme wondered idly if Edward might get over his dislike for her and come to love her; he seemed so lonely sometimes, though he professed contentment with singlehood. (Carlisle had indicated that it didn't work that way - that if Edward were going to fall in love with Rosalie he'd have done it already - but he'd also said that it wasn't well-understood. She could wonder.)

Esme touched the girl's hair - such pretty yellow hair, even all tangled - and then backed away, to let her have some space in which to finish. *A daughter. A daughter a little like me, even if we look nothing alike...*

---

Emmett took so well to being a vampire that Esme had hopes for him to make it indefinitely without ever slipping, without having to carry her guilt or Edward's. (Rosalie might have felt guilty about the lives she'd taken, but didn't seem it.) But it was through Emmett that Carlisle was prompted to explain about *singers*. Esme didn't know what it could be like for a person's blood to smell doubly, triply as appetizing as others', but if it *did*, there was certainly little room to blame Emmett. She comforted him after, both times. Rosalie was good for him, but not in a motherly sense at all, and Esme thought Emmett liked to have a mother too.

---

Alice and Jasper arrived abruptly, and if Esme had been asked the day before whether she'd welcome strangers who invited themselves into their home, she'd have said no. But Alice was so *cute* - and so willing that Esme be the mother she'd never had or couldn't remember - and Jasper so calming to be around, and the both of them so mannerly. They were folded inextricably into the family within a week and Esme couldn't imagine them leaving.

---

Esme could not have been more thrilled in the first moment it was suggested that Edward might have fallen in love with the Swan girl. Said Swan girl could have been anyone at all and Esme wouldn't have been less pleased; she was just glad that her first (first remaining) child no longer had to be the odd one out. Bella's personal qualities were not necessary to endear her to Esme. The fact that she was a charming and clever girl was only a bonus. And then a *grandchild*, miracle of miracles, an honest-to-goodness *baby*.

The only moment at which it became relevant that Edward had bestowed his heart on Bella and not someone else - someone else more contented, someone else more stable - was the moment Esme's family splintered before her eyes.

She grieved for Bella anyway (in spite of the last Cullen addition's lack of seniority, she counted her as part of the family) but wished - in odd moments, tucked into the corners of her sadness - that Edward had followed someone who wouldn't have led him into the flames of the Volturi's wrath. She never quite wished that Elspeth had never been born that she could not have been taken, but once she came close, and berated herself silently for an hour.

She wept (insofar as she could weep) aloud, to let Carlisle prop her up while she mourned. He was strong even alone, but more marvelously so when relied on. The reserves of inner fortitude he could call on to protect *Esme* were immeasurable. Carlisle himself did better for having Esme depend on him, and she wanted the comfort for herself as well.

Privately, though, she wondered if they could all be living together as happily as before if only someone not *Bella* had caught Edward's eye.

But all was forgiven when she learned that her children were all (almost all) alive.

---

## Captive

She was so full of *questions*, all vibrant curiosity. Edward would have preferred to sit in silence, or something close to it. Whenever he spoke in answer, he had to pull in air to do it with, and whatever agent of chaos had invented Bella had given her the most outrageous scent in history. He looked at her notebook, through his peripheral vision, wondered if she'd be frightened off if he proposed writing his answers instead? Reducing the danger, but drawing her attention to it...

Better not to suggest it. He *would not* hurt her - not her of all people - chaos's intent be damned. The fire in his throat was unanswered and would *stay* that way.

He focused on her questions, devoted his full attention to answering them (and, privately, marveling at her insight). No, he did not know what Jasper did exactly when affecting vampires; no, he was not aware of Alice having a time limit but couldn't call to mind anything she'd predicted more than a few months in advance; no, he didn't know exactly what sort of power Bella had or how it related to the silence of her mind...

Edward wondered what her thoughts would sound like, if only he could hear them. It was a safer wondering than the one about her flavor. Her mind would be like her voice, probably, warm mezzo-soprano charging up and down every pitch on the scale and broadcasting sharp wit or casual flippancy or insistent curiosity.

She wanted to know about the Volturi. About the effects of human blood on vampires (Edward stayed as clinical as he could, and tried not to focus on the bright blush under her near-translucent skin or the steady rhythm of her heart). About vampire cosmetic properties and vampire biology and social structures.

"Do *most* vampires pair off like your family has, or is that a vegetarian thing?" Bella inquired.

He almost panicked. Only almost. Instead he looked her right in her softly brown eyes and said, "It's reasonably common for vampires to marry. Not universal."

"How long does that usually last? On average," asked Bella.

*If you ever lie to her, it will end badly*, Alice had said... Alice was worth trusting...

From up the stairs, Alice's thoughts reiterated: *Do NOT lie to Bella. Not even about this. See!* And Edward listened through her mind's eye, accustomed to the badly-mixed senses by long practice. The look on possible-Bella's face, when she inevitably learned the truth, was intolerable: she (blurrily) looked betrayed, horrified - he tuned his sister out with a wince, the expression passing over his face too fast for Bella to catch.

"Until one of them dies," he said, biting his tongue to hold back the misleading truth *as long as they want to*. Bella would not appreciate being misled. "In every case I've heard of."

Bella blinked. "After that, do they often remarry?"

"Never," he murmured. *How could they? Supposedly, every one of them loves their mate as much as I love you. Are you imagining I could move on if something happened to you, that I could do anything short of go to the Volturi where my family might not dare intervene and beg them to help me follow you?* But he didn't speak that thought. She was going to make the inference or ask the question herself: don't *push* her, Alice said; go *slowly*, Alice said.

Bella processed this assertion. "How many vampires have you heard of - in enough detail that you'd know if they were exceptions?"

"Thousands," said Edward, "if one includes second- or third-hand cases. Counting them would take a short while, if the ballpark estimate isn't what you had in mind?"

"Ballpark is fine," Bella said faintly. Her heartbeat was speeding up, and there was a distant dazed look on her face, but otherwise she didn't betray the shock or disgust he'd have expected. He was sure she'd figured it out, nevertheless. "So! About those Volturi..."

He made no protest about the new subject.

In the back of his mind, he prayed that if, one day, she had to be afraid of him, it wouldn't be about *that*. Let her hate him for being a monster, fear him for wanting her blood, object to his driving habits - but if she had to send him away from her, let it be for some reason other than that he loved her and could never stop.

---

*Well, that worked out well, didn't it?* Addy commented. *She never did leave you at all. Loved you till the day she died.*

Edward produced a mental approximation of a snarl, forced back into the moment composed of pain and the absence of Bella. *You have all my memories. You can rifle through them at your leisure. Why are you listening in on me while I replay them? You've made it clear I'm not likely to convince you to kill me, and I have no other use for your company. Why?*

*Bored, she thought back. Only so many times I can run through the same menu without getting that way, and I don't have an assignment pending. I'm not just listening to you, anyway, don't be so self-centered; everybody's thinking of happier times, except Alice, who's watching happier places. Or, not so much happier, I suppose. Her mate's less disassembled than you lot are, at least. I'm not doing it to annoy you. You do tune me out mostly... until I think about Bella without mirroring your own thoughts.*

*I can tune everyone out, until they think about Bella,* Edward returned. *You know why.* Through Addy's eyes he watched a quarter of his wrist twitch blindly towards another of the same and start gluing back together. They'd feed him in seven, maybe eight days, and then the pain would go away for an hour while Alec kept them docile. Then it would only be Bella's absence and Edward's helpless self-loathing about *what* they fed the captives plaguing him.

Addy usually ignored the thoughts he didn't formulate as replies, and no differently on this occasion. *So, I've been neglecting you for days now. Tell me: are you going in sequence from the time you met her, again, or skipping around - highlights, best-of, greatest hits...?* inquired Addy. *Marathon of every time she smiled at you, back-to-back with no commercial breaks? Do I get to make a request? Freebird!*

*Skipping around*, he answered. Talking to Addy wasn't entirely voluntary, done this way. She'd hear whatever he thought whether he decided to answer her or not, and unlike his family he'd never developed the skill of refusing to think of something. *Nothing systematic. And no requests.*

*Aw, I was only joking about Freebird, I know you're all about art music*, came Addy's laughing reply. *Or relive your honeymoon again. You can't be bored of it already; you've only run through it, what...*

*Ninety-four times* Edward answered unwillingly. It was twelve days of concentrated, unadulterated Bella. Twelve days untroubled with the politics and travel and family squabbles and similar interruptions to what should have been an easy, happy life. (Until that damned phone rang.)

If he walked through that indelible memory, or any other, in real time, and concentrated very, very hard, he could forget the physical pain (which was never as bad as turning, anyway). He could almost forget, too, that the woman he remembered was dead.

*Or your daughter*, suggested Addy. *You never think about her except in terms of Bella.*

*Why would I?* he thought. *You took her from me. I'm not even clear on why. Didn't want to round out a hat trick of torture making me miss her too? Uncharacteristic.*

*Just thoroughness. That's hardly uncharacteristic. Your feelings on the matter were irrelevant, I'm sure you recall. Oh - I don't remember if anyone even notified you when we learned some news*, Addy thought lightly. *Elsbeth's been missing from home for years now. Eleazar called us on his cousins' behalf, asking if we'd heard anything, but we didn't know where she'd gotten to either.*

*I don't care*, Edward said.

*I know*, Addy sang. *Just making conversation.*

---

Edward couldn't see, his ears were fractionated into uselessness, and his nerves were reporting only confusion and pain.

But he could hear.

No doubt his brain was in - no, he didn't have to guess, one of the wolves was looking right at him. Brain in nine pieces. But somehow it functioned. And he could listen through others' senses and know what was going on.

Other wolves were looking at Bella, also - he wanted to scream, but that was impossible - also scattered. Their pieces were mingled together, bending and quivering. Bella's mind was silent as ever and Edward didn't know if he was glad of it or not. If he'd been able to hear her, he would have been with her - in some small way - at that moment.

If he'd been able to hear her, he would have been listening to her scream.

It was hard to keep hold of the present moment, taken apart, but he kept time by the thoughts of others. Wolves, thinking in twin choruses linked by the alphas, thoughts sterilized with Chelsea's cauterizing cuts. Fewer than there would have been: the wolf called Jacob who'd called Bella was away safely with some others. Vampires: Jane and Alec. Afton and Chelsea. Demetri. Aro and Renata. *Addy*, the new element in the coven, the one he'd misunderstood until too late. The reason they didn't want to kill him but had no qualms about killing Bella.

Harry and Sue, the couple Bella had helped, were already dead; Edward couldn't hear them, but he could see their ashes and pick up the knowledge of who they were from the wolves.

And then Addy drew closer, to sort out the pieces of him and his mate, and Edward heard: anticipation, and hunger. She might want to keep Bella alive too. She might have enough pull to manage it.

Addy laid a hand on part of Bella's arm, and then when it repelled her gift, she hissed furiously and hurled the piece against a tree. The sharp edge of it lodged in the wood, where it quivered. "No!" she snapped.

"No?" inquired Aro, following Addy with his bodyguard in tow.

"Immune to me *too!*" snarled the copier. "Ugh. Do *I* have to sort them? It's like biting down on tinfoil - here -" She touched Aro's hand, imparting the sensation.

"I can, if it's so disagreeable to you," said Aro lightly, every inch the monarch condescending to assist a subject, and Addy played her part too, but there was a flare of something else - blackmail? That didn't make sense - Edward couldn't read it deeper than that, as it wasn't on the surface.

Aro couldn't affect Bella any more than Addy could, but his failures were not uncomfortable; he separated the parts of each, telling them apart by whether he could read thoughts from them or not.

*Not Bella!* howled Edward as loudly as he could with no intact mouth. *Don't kill her, please, don't kill my Bella -*

Aro ignored him.

The two vampires were sorted out in minutes, collected in boxes. "This one is our shield," Aro said, handing a box to Afton. "Dispose of her, please, she'll be of no use and has

demonstrated that she is a danger. And this, Addy, is for you." He handed the box that contained Edward to her.

Edward focused tightly on Afton, wishing he could do anything else but watch his wife die. But he couldn't close out the stream of input, and Bella compelled his attention even at the end. He ignored Addy's glee over his flavor (root beer), ignored what Aro said to his minions and the wolves, and just - heard -

Afton poured Bella into the pit they'd made to protect the wolves from smoke. He struck the last match out of his box.

And he tossed it in after her, and leaned in to make sure she'd caught, and Edward despaired.

There was Elspeth, still - Carlisle and Esme and Rosalie and Emmett had Elspeth, safe, she was safe, she had Bella's eyes -

Afton wasn't watching Bella burn anymore. Once he reported to Aro that her death was underway, no one gave her a second thought. A pocket of rage burst open in Edward's mind, but soon burned itself out and was replaced by despair.

Addy thought, quite deliberately: *Hi! I'm Addy. I'll be profiting from your imprisonment. Yum. Ooh! Forgot to Chelsea you. Not likely to be important, but...*

His connection to Bella was safe, that he knew. Nothing could touch *that...*

*Right*, Addy thought, *can't do a thing about that. But we can do everything else.* "Chelsea!" she called aloud.

"Coming," called Chelsea. She appeared at Addy's side. "Will you do it, or should I?" *No*, Edward thought, before Addy lost his power and couldn't hear. *No. No. I'm already in a thousand pieces and my mate is dead, I can't go anywhere, you don't have to do anything more, I'm as destroyed as it should be possible to be, no, no -*

"I will," Addy offered, paying no attention to what he wailed at her. "I don't think he likes you very much. Or me, but it bothers you."

Chelsea nodded fervently, touched Addy's hand, and then went back to her ongoing work with the wolves, cutting and pulling and weaving. *NO*, thought Edward again, but she could no longer hear. *No, not my daughter, no, leave me something, just something!*

Addy hovered a hand over the box, and waved it left to right. Edward felt the threads tear like paper against her skin, all in series:  
ElspethCarlisleEsmeJasperAliceRosalieEmmettTanyaKateIrinaCarmenEleazar... *There*, she thought. *And now to put you on the plane.*

Edward scabbled mentally for the lost connections, more out of duty than emotion, but whenever he recovered a wisp of one, Addy waved her hand again and it was gone.

Eventually he stopped trying and his thoughts went back to making circles around Bella.

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*Interesting choice.*

Edward did his best not to reply that he'd visited the memory specifically to remind himself that he hated Addy and shouldn't be chatting civilly with her. At least he tried to avoid thinking of it on a high enough level that she'd hear.

He revisited his honeymoon again, instead.

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On to Luminosity series

# Metafiction

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Radiance is created with no commercial intent or gain. Stephanie Meyer owns all things that she owns, completely, wholly, and tautologically. I intend to write fanfiction, not to be a bad stealing-type person who is bad and evil and stealing and a person.