

Luminosity

by

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You don't have to make a hundred mistakes for everything to disintegrate around you.

One will do.

One wrong risk, one misplaced trust, one careless guess is enough to destroy the one thing you can least afford to lose.

But I'd never had any reason to imagine that my disaster would befall me at the time when I was most unexpectedly safe.

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Forks

Here is how I decided to live with my father in Washington.

My favorite three questions are, *What do I want?*, *What do I have?*, and *How can I best use the latter to get the former?*

Actually, I'm also fond of *What kind of person am I?*, but that one isn't often directly relevant to decision making on a day-to-day basis.

What did I want? I wanted my mother, Renée, to be happy. She was the most important person to me, bar none. I also wanted her *around*, but when I honestly evaluated my priorities, it was more important that she be happy. If, implausibly, I had to choose between Renée being happy on Mars, and Renée being miserable living with me as she always had - I wouldn't be thrilled about it. At all. But I'd send her to Mars.

Mars wasn't in the picture, but my new stepfather Phil's travel schedule was. I'm a minor child; one isn't permitted to leave those unattended for too long. And so when he went from city to city, Renée stayed home, with me.

She was not happy.

Renée loves me, but she loves Phil too, or she wouldn't have married him. (I wouldn't call her the world's most self-aware person, but marriage is something she takes very seriously, since her divorce from my father. She was careful this time around.)

What did I have?

Lots of things - but the relevant one was: another parent.

And so, to let Renée follow Phil and be happy, I moved to the town of Forks, Washington - to stay, where I'd previously only spent summers.

It's a significant flight from Phoenix to Forks. A significant two flights and a drive, actually. I stocked my carry-on luggage with books to read and spiral notebooks to fill. I made a habit of carrying notebooks, and pens, everywhere. If I pinned my thoughts onto paper, they couldn't escape later. Without that kind of enforcement, they were liable to morph into versions of themselves that were more idealized, more consistent - and not what they were originally, and therefore false. Or they'd be forgotten altogether, which was even worse (those thoughts were *mine*, and I *wanted* them).

I wrote a lot, whenever anything remotely unusual or challenging happened. Once a week or so, I typed it all up, so I'd have a searchable archive. Originally I'd had to write down everything I could come up with in order to be more or less sure that I wasn't fooling myself more than was strictly necessary; after a few years of practice, I mostly

trusted myself to remember my actual thoughts and not the fictionalized ones my brain preferred to provide. By the time I moved to Forks, the notebooks were more of a comfort object, which I mostly used for things I might need to refer to that were too important to leave to memory.

My father, Charlie, met my second plane in Port Angeles, hugged me with one arm, and helped me get my suitcases into his police cruiser. Once I'd buckled my seatbelt, in accordance with the law it would have been too ironic not to obey in a cop car, Charlie began the drive to his house - my house, too, I supposed. He told me he'd found a good car for me, a cheap one.

I *had* wanted a car. Not just to have a car - I didn't care about cars very much as objects - but to have autonomous mobility around town, and to avoid dependence on Charlie for rides, as he a) had other things to do with his time and b) drove a conspicuous vehicle. That he'd found me one for myself was a sign of attentiveness, trust, and spontaneous generosity: he knew what I wanted, thought I'd be responsible enough to have it, and offered it to me without any social obligation to do so whatever. I felt a rush of gratitude, and immediately thanked him warmly. He looked a little embarrassed; I relieved the awkwardness by asking after the details of the car and providing a concrete topic.

He'd already bought the car, which was actually a Chevy truck, for me as a homecoming gift - that was good if the car was adequate because it'd save me the money, but bad if it wasn't, because its gifthood made it harder to replace. I wanted to like the car. It was from his friend Billy Black, who'd become disabled recently and couldn't drive it any more. That reduced the odds that it was a lemon if he had a reason like that to get rid of it, which was important because I knew nothing about fiddling with the innards of engines. Although Charlie did admit to me, after a little prodding, that it was an *old* truck. *Very* old.

Charlie's a quiet sort. After our car talk was over, we observed that the weather was damp, then ceased to speak; I observed, silently, that the damp weather characteristic of the area did lead to some very nice, verdant scenery. I liked that, although the moist prerequisites weren't as pleasant. I decided that it would be useful to develop a taste for wet weather, and pulled out my notebook *du jour* to note that if I saw a way to do that, I should.

We arrived at his house. The truck was a solid red thing that I found strangely appealing. I wrote down that I should think about that - I wouldn't have guessed from a description of it that I'd have liked it, and that meant there was something I didn't know about my aesthetics - and then took it for a test drive around the block. It ran, loudly, but the radio worked and could drown out the engine noises. When I pulled it back into the driveway, Charlie had already hauled my bags inside and up the stairs to my room. I told him I loved the car, and then he stayed out of my way while I unpacked. As soon as I'd stashed the contents of my toiletry kit in the house's single bathroom, my next priority was to fire up my laptop and e-mail Renée, letting her know I'd made it safely and coming up with a short list of remarks about the weather, Charlie's good health, my new (old)

truck, and my mixed feelings about the school I'd attend the following day, starting in mid-January no less.

I didn't need to be very detailed in my note to Renée, but the upcoming half-a-year of school was significant enough to warrant some heavy duty scribbling. Out came the spiral notebook. I wrote without dwelling on the words or trying to edit. If I decided that what came out of my brain was too terrible to be recorded, I could set the page on fire - *after* I had seen what was on it for myself.

I was used to a huge school with the resources that were the privilege of densely populated districts. I was used to being able to disappear in a sea of people. I wasn't used to Fork's student population three hundred and fifty-eight, counting me. I had to enter in the middle of the year. Everyone else already knew each other - moreover, everyone else had known each other from earliest childhood. Forks was one of those towns where a few people left and almost nobody ever turned up. I'd been born here and I'd spent the odd summer month here, but Charlie didn't live close to any families with kids my age, and I'd certainly never attended school here before. I was only sort of native, and wouldn't know any of my classmates.

Towns this small were also the natural habitat of gossip. If Charlie had mentioned to any of his friends or fellow police officers that his daughter was coming to stay for good, everybody in Forks who wasn't too young to have acquired language yet was also party to the information. I couldn't disappear: everyone would know who I was just by process of elimination, even if my resemblance to my father wouldn't do it.

My novelty would probably get me some attention and interest, though. If I were prepared for it, and acted friendly and excited to be there instead of self-conscious and beleaguered, I could probably make some friends on my first day and get their help navigating the school. I decided to psych myself up to make the most of the opportunity on the drive over to the school; friends in an unfamiliar place would be good. Full stop.

It rained a lot in Forks. Around midnight, it quieted to a light patter and I was able to fall asleep; by morning, it was just thick fog. I pulled on some nice, but not uncharacteristic, clothes - to make a good impression on my classmates that wouldn't be undercut by my next outfit - and went downstairs for breakfast. There wasn't any reason for Charlie to say anything while we ate our cereal, and so he didn't.

I reacquainted myself with the house. It had been months since I'd been there, but almost nothing had changed. In fact, almost nothing had changed since my mother had stormed out of the place, baby me in tow: the cabinets in the kitchen were still the same sunny yellow she'd painted them, for instance. I had never quite had the temerity to ask Charlie if he just hated redecorating, or if he wasn't over Renée yet. My suspicion was the latter. The pictures on the mantelpiece included a wedding photo and the pair of them in the delivery room right after my birth. The latter I could explain the same way as the

procession of my school photos in a neat chronological row, the former not so readily.

I wasn't sure I could get to the high school as quickly as the distance suggested I should. There was fog *everywhere*, and I'd never driven in Forks before, only in and around Phoenix, so I didn't have a good sense of the road quality. I put on my raincoat over my knapsack as soon as I'd finished my breakfast, and left early. I raced from the house's door into the dry cab of my truck as fast as I could and roared down the street.

The school didn't look very much like a school. It was a group of brick buildings clustered together just off the highway, nestled in among trees and shrubs and connected by stone paths. (I considered it a poor design choice that the paths were not covered, and was glad of my coat.) I parked in front of the first building I rolled up to, which was conveniently labeled "Front Office". There weren't any other cars there, even the staff I'd expect to show up early, so I was probably going to have to move to some fog-obscured lot elsewhere on the campus, but whoever staffed the office would be able to direct me to it.

The office was a riot of awful color - green potted plants, repulsive orange-and-grey carpet, a rainbow of papers and plaques on the walls, and, behind the counter at one of three desks, a redheaded woman wearing purple. I walked up to the counter, encouraged my face to smile, and said, "Excuse me. I'm Isabella Swan. I -"

Her face lit up when I said my name, and she interrupted me. "Of course! I have your schedule right here, and a map of the school." She pulled them out of a tall, messy paper tower on her desk. It would have done less than no good to let the third sentence I spoke to this woman be a rebuke for the interruption, and even less good to fume about it indefinitely without taking action to prevent its recurrence. I did *not* like being interrupted as I tried to communicate, and my relentless attacks on this button had done no good; it annoyed me, every time. But I could make the annoyance *brief*, with a little work.

While the secretary marked all the routes I'd need to follow for my schedule on the map in highlighter, I went through my mood-zapping routine. Some people counted to ten, but that only made explicit the natural diminishing intensity of emotions over time and forced the waiting period. My way took a little longer, even after I'd pruned the process from a notebook-eating timekiller to a streamlined mental process. When I was done, though, I was not annoyed anymore.

The short version was just to review what I *knew* about my annoyance, and confirm to myself *that I knew it*. I *knew* that the woman had not caused it maliciously: she did not know me, did not know about this trigger, had no reason at all to try to irritate me, and was even now being supremely helpful. I *knew* that it did me no good to be annoyed: the emotion was not *pleasant*, it did not make me more *effective* at getting any of the things I wanted, and I did not *prefer* to be annoyed when interrupted. (It wasn't that I had a general desire to never be annoyed. I would have considered it appropriate if she'd shoved me for no reason or if she'd taken a personal phone call instead of doing her job when I walked in. But I had tried repeatedly in the past to eliminate altogether my dislike of interruptions, and that I'd so attempted was not *consistent* with wishing to be annoyed

about this unspecial interruption in particular.)

Long practice at excising just this sort of reaction made it come loose more easily than some moods might have. But my annoyance was the ascription of motive to the secretary, glued down with entitlement and habit. If the motive were recognized to be nonexistent and the entitlement dissolved and the habit *fought* as a thing in my brain that I did not welcome, they ceased to trouble me.

The lady finished with her highlighter and gave back my map and schedule. She expressed a hope that I would like it in Forks, and told me the way to the correct parking lot; I thanked her sincerely and was on my way.

My aged truck didn't stand out as it would have if I'd driven it to the school in Phoenix. Except for one conspicuously shiny Volvo, the cars in the parking lot (which had filled up a bit by the time I got there) were old models. I parked, pocketed my keys, and found my location on the map. From there I followed the path of the line of highlighter to building three, and hopped out of the truck to join the swarm of teenagers.

My first class was English. Everything on the reading list was something I'd covered in school already. I'd probably be able to update old essays and spend my reading time on something else. I had no chance before class to introduce myself to anyone. Luckily, after the bell rang to end the class, a dark-haired boy who'd sat next to me leaned over.

"You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?" he asked. All the heads from our region of the classroom swiveled around, which, given that I needed to correct my appellation, was just as well.

"Yes," I said, "but I prefer 'Bella'. What's your name?"

"I'm Eric," he said, sounding quite friendly. "Where's your next class?"

I checked. "Building six. Government."

"I could show you the way. I'm headed for four, it's not far off," he offered. I smiled at him with a nod, and we collected our jackets from the hooks by the door. Eric set the pace along the crowded footpath and asked, "So, this is a lot different than Phoenix, isn't it?"

"Very," I agreed. It was great that I knew someone's name now and that he seemed helpful, but there wasn't going to be a lot of time for an entire conversation about Phoenix v. Forks between buildings three and six.

"It doesn't rain much there, does it?"

"Just three or four times a year," I said.

"Wow, what must that be like?" Eric mused.

I guessed that if he'd never left Forks, it *wouldn't* be obvious, a little like how I only knew about snow via the televised winter Olympics. "Dry, bright," I told him, "less greenery, more xeroscaping, fewer raincoats, more sunglasses."

He looked like he might have been confused by the word "xeroscaping" - we exactly weren't in a place famous for its rock gardens and cacti - but said only, "You don't look very tan."

"Skin cancer isn't among my hobbies," I said with a half-smirk. That had been off the cuff, but once I got out of the rain I planned to add it to my list of ways to learn to like Forks's weather: reduced risk of awful tumorous death. I didn't fancy dying at all, so crossing off likely causes was a plus. If I somehow eliminated them all, I'd be immortal. Eric smiled faintly, like he was pretending to get the joke, and escorted me to the door of building six.

"Well," he said as I hauled the door open, "good luck. Maybe we'll have some other classes together." He gave me a hopeful smile.

Government was followed by Trigonometry and Spanish. Trig was notable for the teacher's request that I introduce myself to the whole class. I ought to have expected something like that, but it caught me off guard and I stammered my way through some very basic facts - my name, my preferred nickname, that I was from Phoenix, and that I was "going to sit down now is that chair okay?". I sat, produced my notebook, and wrote *cure fear of impromptu public speaking* under my to-hack list right after *learn to like rain (cancer is bad!)*.

In Trig, I met a girl named Jessica Stanley. She was tiny, with innumerable black curls and unstoppable chatter. She came with me to Spanish, as she was in the same class, and then invited me to sit with her and her friends at lunch. I went with her even as Eric spotted me from across the cafeteria and waved. By this point I'd met enough people to be running out of memory slots for new names, and I couldn't keep track of who I was sitting with, pleasant and worth remembering though they all seemed. I wanted to write down names and descriptions for them all. I refrained: I'd been cured of that particular hypergraphic urge when a classmate of mine in the eighth grade had looked over my shoulder, been confused by my description of her as "wee", and thrown the notebook into a lavatory puddle.

Everyone wanted to know how I liked Forks. I told them honestly that it was good to get more time with my dad, that the rain took some getting used to, and that everyone I had met was very helpful and polite. They were pleased with this assessment, especially the part where the rain comment gave them a hook into the world's most usual conversation topic. While Jessica and several of the others at the table traded half-remembered fragments of unreliable meteorological knowledge, I looked around the room where I'd be taking my midday meals for the next several months. That's when I saw

them.

"They" were simultaneously completely unlike and obviously a group. They all sat at one table, but no two looked similar at a glance. There were three boys and two girls. One of the boys was the approximate size, shape, and menace of a bear; he looked like he was planning to go to college on a weightlifting scholarship, or like he'd done it a few years ago and was only sitting in a high school cafeteria for kicks. His dark curls contrasted with the bright honey mop on his neighbor, a lean, muscular, and vaguely leonine boy. The last boy was wiry, and looked younger than the other two, more like an actual high school student than a professional athlete. His hair was untidily bronze in the light, reddish-brown in less flattering shadow.

The two girls looked as opposite as could be while still both being white, female, and able-bodied. The tall one could have been a statue of Aphrodite with gold leaf caked onto her long, styled hair. She didn't look college-bound so much as Hollywood-bound, or maybe Paris - she'd do well anywhere that being decorative was a job skill. The other girl was littler and spindlier than Jessica. Her black hair was short, pointed away from her head in all directions, and gave her a pixie look.

But apart from the variations in size and hair color, they were all alike. They were paler than me, pale like marble, or ice - all just the same shade. And their faces were all the same. I had a momentary impression that they'd been drawn by a cartoonist who only knew how to sketch a single sort of face, but that wasn't right: they *would* be recognizable by face alone - but it would be hard. Not because they had anything that registered as family resemblance; they didn't. Rather, because the easiest thing to think about when looking at any of those five faces was something along the lines of "*Pretty!*". It occluded the individual character of the features (a sharp chin on the pixie, a few faint scars on the lion). They were too stunning, to the point where it took me a second look to notice that each had dark circles under their eyes, as though they were all *very* tired.

The pixie got up and moved like a gymnast towards the trash can, where she discarded an unopened soda and an equally unmolested apple. None of the five were eating, now that it occurred to me to look.

The conversation among my table-mates about the weather lulled, and I took the opportunity to ask, "Who are *they*?"

Jessica looked where I was looking, and then the youngest-looking boy made eye contact with her for just a moment - then, his black eyes flicked over to me, and then they went back to staring at nothing in particular. Jessica giggled, embarrassed, and told me, "That's Edward and Emmett Cullen, and Rosalie and Jasper Hale. The one who left was Alice Cullen; they all live together with Dr. Cullen and his wife."

The younger boy was disintegrating a bagel as she said this, picking it to bits; I didn't see any of it making its way to his mouth. "Which ones did you say were the Cullens?" I asked, tempted to make a remark about the *pretty!* but restrained by the

impression that it would be rude. "They don't look related," I said instead.

"Oh, they're not," Jessica informed me. "Dr. Cullen is really young, in his twenties or early thirties. They're all adopted. The Hales *are* brother and sister, twins - the blondes - and they're foster children. And they're all *together* - Emmett and Rosalie, and Jasper and Alice, I mean."

"Foster children? How old are they?"

"Jasper and Rosalie are both eighteen," said Jessica, "but they've been with Mrs. Cullen since they were eight. She's their aunt or something like that."

"That's nice of Dr. and Mrs. Cullen to take all of them in like that," I observed.

"I guess so," said Jessica, but she sounded disapproving, like she didn't care for the doctor or his wife. "I think that Mrs. Cullen can't have any kids, though," she went on. I noted - mentally only - that Jessica was not, until further evidence accumulated, the person to trust with any personal information I might want to confide.

I kept stealing glances at the lovely family; it was hard not to, even when all they did was stare at the walls, mutilate food without eating it, and sit. "Have they always lived in Forks?" I asked, expecting the answer to be yes simply because everyone in Forks had always lived in Forks - but *these* people, if I had noticed them, I would have remembered, and it was such a *small* town...

"No," said Jessica, sounding like she expected the Cullens and Hales to seem un-Forks-like even to a newcomer. "They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Alaska."

In a city, two years' residency didn't mean "newcomer" anymore, but in Forks, it did - so that meant I wasn't the only one. That was comforting, in a way; I'd found the attention useful, but I had no reason to expect anyone else new to move to Forks until I graduated from high school, and it would be convenient not to have to bear *all* of the scrutiny allotted to Forks's novelty. And it was unsettling, in another way, because they were sitting with each other and no one else, and Jessica seemed a fairly typical student and didn't care for the family. That didn't bode well for my eventual integration, although I seemed to have gotten a good reception so far. Perhaps it was the Cullens' and Hales' own choice to set themselves apart and that was all I was seeing.

I looked back at their table one more time, and the younger boy looked at me again. He was so beautiful it was *distracting*, but as far as I could tell despite that, he looked... expectant? Frustrated, maybe? Something he'd wanted or thought likely wasn't happening. "Which one," I asked Jessica, pulling my eyes away from him and making polite eye contact with her, "is the boy with the reddish brown hair?"

"That's Edward," she labeled him (and now I had identifications for all five: Emmett the bear, Jasper the lion, Rosalie the Aphrodite, Alice the pixie, and Edward, the one who expected something to happen with or to or near me that wasn't). "He's gorgeous, of

course," Jessica went on, "but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She made a sniffing noise, and I had a mental image of her flinging herself at him only to receive some genteel but firm rejection.

The image was amusing on one level, but sad, and so I chewed on my lip to avoid smiling. Then I looked at Edward again; my eyes just drifted there naturally, as though he were a bright red object on a background of gray or the only moving item in a still visual field. If I hadn't been right in the middle of talking to Jessica, I would have pulled out my notebook and written on my to-hack list, *Learn to quit staring at pretty people*. He wasn't looking my way anymore, though. A few minutes later the four of them remaining at the table since pixie-Alice's departure got up and left. Even Emmett-the-bear was coordinated and precise when he moved; watching the group walk together was eerie.

I risked lateness to my next class, Biology II, in order to linger with Jessica and her friends, hear their names a few more times, and - it turned out - get an escort to the correct building from Angela, who kindly reminded me what she was called en route after discovering that I was bound for the same class as she. The class was held in a room dominated by two-person black-topped lab tables like those in science rooms everywhere. Unluckily for me, Angela already had a lab partner. There was one unassigned student in the room, though, towards whom the teacher obligingly brought me. Sitting next to the empty chair that was to be my home in Biology for the rest of the school year was Edward Cullen.

I walked towards the empty chair. This was going to be *awkward* until I cured my tendency to stare at him every fifteen seconds. I hoped that the class would be on something new and unfamiliar that would be easy to attend to.

As I approached, he looked at me. Not an expectant, puzzled look like in the cafeteria. He looked *enraged*, and he looked it *at me*. I automatically flinched away from the threatening gaze and promptly tripped over a book in the aisle. Barely catching myself on my new lab table, I regained my footing, and gingerly sat in my chair. I was scared out of my *wits* - enraged people were *dangerous*, might hurt me, I didn't have even a *clue* what provoked him or how to stop doing it and calm him down so he wouldn't snap and do me harm. There were eighteen students in the class besides us, plus the teacher - *surely* if Jessica hadn't thought to mention any rumors of violent scandal, he was at least controlled enough to avoid exploding in front of numerous witnesses. Until I figured out what was wrong with him, I just needed to stick to groups when he was around, that was all. I tried to control my trembling as I resettled myself in my seat.

The class was on cellular anatomy. I'd covered it already, and the teacher's presentation style wasn't enthralling enough to hold my attention with a terrifying distraction just to my left.

Edward hadn't looked at me like that in the cafeteria, and no one else was reacting to

me the same way. I hadn't spoken a word to him - could he be offended that I hadn't introduced myself? Was there some cue to do so that I'd missed? Did I smell weird? I tilted my head to bring a lock of hair near my nose; it smelled like my shampoo, sort of fruity, quite clean. Was he allergic to fake strawberry scent?

I peeked, hoping for more clues. He was holding himself absolutely rigid - if he was breathing, I couldn't tell - and up close, without his older brothers next to him, he didn't look so young and slight at all.

He glared at me again, his black eyes full of unadulterated hate. I scooted my chair an inch away. If he could have disintegrated me into my constituent atoms with a stare he'd have done it. I made up my mind to try to change classes - or at *least* lab partners. I looked at the girl who shared Angela's table and wondered if she'd take a bribe to accept Edward Cullen as her new neighbor. Or were the partners assigned? Would I need to convince the teacher? Should I offer to clean glassware -?

The bell rang and I almost jumped out of my skin. I wanted to run home with a notebook and write the fear and confusion away and make the back of my neck stop crawling. Edward got to his feet, facing away from me - he was *tall* - and was first out of the room.

I stayed put for a moment. I wanted to collect myself, and I wanted to give him a good head start to whatever not-near-me place he was headed for. I inhaled deeply, held my breath for a moment, and then let it out. I tried to call up my mood zapping routine, but I didn't have enough information to really believe that I *oughtn't* be afraid. There was probably no genuine danger, but there *could* be, and part of my brain wanted to keep the fear in case it was importantly motivating later in a high-speed chase across campus. Spooked I would remain until, one way or another, the hazard was moot.

"Aren't you Isabella Swan?" asked a boy's voice.

I looked up. The speaker was marvelously nonthreatening, at least as far as I could tell (*swell*, I thought, *am I going to suspect all my classmates are axe murderers now? This boy is no more or less likely to attack me than he would have been if I'd met him in Government this morning, and then I felt quite safe and I was right to feel that way, so I should feel safe about him now.* My emotions grudgingly obeyed this logic.) The speaker was a *marvelously nonthreatening*, cute, blond boy, his hair coated in product and coaxed into rows of little spikes. He was smiling at me, friendly, not infuriated or filled with loathing.

"Yes," I said for the tenth time that day, "but I prefer Bella." I smiled back at him.

"I'm Mike," he said.

"Hi, Mike. It's nice to meet you."

"Do you need help finding your next class?" he asked eagerly.

"It's gym," I said, nodding and getting to my feet with a little help from the lab table.

"That's my next class too!" He seemed thrilled about it, easily made happy by the small coincidence. I tried to soak his glee up and cheer myself. Mike talked all the way to the gym building, which was easy on me. Apparently he'd lived in California until he was ten and considered this a reason to commiserate with me about sunshine's local scarcity. He had noticed me in English too, but hadn't had a chance to introduce himself because Eric had beaten him to it.

My relaxed role of listening to Mike's pleasantries came to an abrupt end as we entered gym class and he said, "So, did you stab Edward Cullen with a pencil or what? I've never seen him act like that."

"I have absolutely no idea what might have happened to provoke him," I said at once, trying to sound categorical but not like I'd been coached by a lawyer. "I never spoke to him."

"He's a weird guy," Mike told me, hanging back instead of veering off to the boys' locker room. "If I were lucky enough to sit by you, I would have talked to you."

The sentiment about conversation was nice... the word "lucky" set off a little alarm bell. It wouldn't do to be entangled in a more than friendly way *immediately* after moving to Forks. I smiled at Mike and walked into the girls' locker room. The gym teacher found me a uniform, but didn't make me participate in the day's activity, which was volleyball - a good thing, as I bruised very easily and didn't want to walk around all week with black and blue forearms. Or, almost as likely with my brand of grace, veer into one of the posts holding up the net and wind up sprawled on the floor bleeding.

After gym was over, I was done for the day. I made sure I'd gotten all of my little paper slips signed by the relevant teachers, and then headed for the front office to turn them in. It was cold outside, and I rushed into the colorful little building. The door had shut behind me before I realized that in addition to the secretary I'd met that morning, the office also contained Edward Cullen. My luck was such that he didn't notice, or ignored, my entrance; I moved near the wall, waiting for him to finish his business and free up the receptionist. They appeared to be arguing. A few sentences later, I realized he was trying to get her to move him out of our biology class to some other class, any other class. He had an oddly smooth voice - I wondered if he always talked like that or if he was just trying to convince the secretary by turning up the charm. I wondered, crazily, if he sang.

Between the timing and Mike's evaluation of Edward's hostile behavior, it seemed impossible that the attempt at transfer didn't have *something* to do with me. But then - what did I want? I wanted *never* to be looked at that way again. Good riddance if he wanted another class, good luck to him.

The door opened again, letting a waft of frigid air into the office. A girl ducked

inside, dropped a note into a wire basket on the counter, and slipped out again. And as the door shut behind her, Edward turned around slowly and *stared* at me with hateful eyes. "Never mind," he said curtly to the receptionist. "I can see that it's impossible. Thank you so much for your help." And then he disappeared out into the cold.

"How did your first day go, dear?" the receptionist asked kindly. She hadn't seen Edward's expression and apparently couldn't tell I was shaking in my boots.

I considered lying, considered telling the whole truth, and finally said, "I met a lot of nice people."

I stalled in the office after I'd turned in my paperwork on the pretense of re-lacing my boots. If Edward wanted so badly to avoid me I wasn't going to give him any trouble. By the time I arrived at my truck, the parking lot was almost deserted. I drove home, resentful and confused.

By the time I got done with it, my notebook was going to regret the day its component trees had sprouted.

Good Things, read my notebook.

Eric, Jessica, Angela, Jessica's other friends, and Mike are all friendly. Classwork looks easy (poss. exception trig (work with Jessica? (is she any good at math.?))), def. exception gym (break a toe or something? look up attendance rules (cut as many of the worst days as possible) check up on provisions for alternate requirement fulfillment (is this one of those schools where you can just write an essay on the history of soccer.?)))).

Things To Fix, said the next section.

What is Edward's DEAL? See Exceptions re: classwork above. Jessica poss. untrustworthy w/ personal info. Mike too friendly too soon.

I looked at the first Thing To Fix. I looked at it some more. I had no idea. My brain generated hypotheses, but none of them were plausible enough to be worth having thought of, let alone following up on. Edward was *not* an experimental robot programmed to make scary faces at girls from Phoenix when they got within ten feet of him. Edward

was *not* a rabid anarchist who thought police officers and their families all deserved to die. Edward did *not* believe that he could stare holes through my skull and thereby learn more about the brain and earn higher marks in Biology.

That didn't tell me what his deal *was*, but I decided that I didn't have a way to make progress on that question at the moment. And he hadn't gotten out of the biology class, either. I drew a little arrow towards "*What is Edward's DEAL?*", and at the other end of the arrow I wrote "Discuss issue with bio teacher, request lab partner change." If Edward had found every other science section full, I'd surely find the same thing, but that didn't mean I had to sit *right* next to him. And if "he looked at me scarily" wasn't moving to the teacher, I could say instead that I was new, didn't know all the class procedures, and would rather have a lab partner who was more willing to spend time bringing me up to speed on things like lab report formatting. So I wouldn't have to bother the teacher with too many questions, of course.

I moved on. *Talk to Jessica about trig, I wrote. Talk to gym coach about how I probably have an inner ear problem and that's so a medical excuse and make vague insinuations about lawsuits or something if I crack my head open and BEG "forget" my uniform a lot, and find some non-sports chore the coach is responsible for and offer to help with that to make up for it. Maybe cleaning gym equipment or doing paperwork or something? Or come up with less risky alternatives?*

Don't write thoughts in notebooks around Jessica unless plausibly taking class notes. Talk to her only about non-private things.

And Mike... That was a stumper. There wasn't anything obviously the matter with Mike; I couldn't very well tell him "you're not my type because you're too cute and don't make me fear for my life". My reasons for preferring to dissuade him were entirely about myself. I hadn't yet begun to scratch the surface of what I wanted out of dating or romance or anything in that department. And it seemed like a uniquely hazardous thing to uninformedly test by experiment, both for myself and for anyone else involved.

I hadn't had to address the problem of how to delay, though, because in Phoenix I hadn't *had* anyone like Mike being puppyish in my direction. Immediately after moving also seemed like a uniquely bad time to try to pair off, when I was still getting acquainted

with everything around me and my judgment could be off. And I didn't know *why* Mike was interested - actually, I was only guessing that he was in the first place, although it seemed like a good guess - so I didn't have any known personality trait that I could tone down for the purpose of making him lose interest. He hadn't said anything explicitly, though, so I decided it was safe to simply wait and see if any good strategies turned up.

Wait and try not to be encouraging, I wrote.

I did homework - in other notebooks - for most of the rest of the afternoon. The disadvantage of starting at a new school in January was that I didn't get to ramp up slowly. I managed to get to bed at a reasonable hour anyway, but although it didn't rain that night, it was windy, and I tossed and turned for some time before I managed to get to sleep.

The Cullens

On my second day of school, I spent most of the morning dreading lunch. Mike sat with me in English and whisked me away to my second class before Eric could step in - Eric's disappointment was concerning - but to the general population I was less the center of attention. The classes were no more or less interesting than they had been the previous day, and that meant there was very little to distract me from the hamster in my head running endlessly over and over *What is Edward's DEAL?* At lunch, we'd be in the same room again, and he might... Okay, I felt dumb panicking that he might *glare* at me, when I put it in words. But he *might* and it was not *pleasant*.

Jessica and I walked together to the cafeteria, where Mike spotted us and steered us towards his table (to Jessica's obvious delight - that was something to write down later). Jessica's other friends, including Angela, found us there and collected around us. Once settled in and looked around, I found that Edward's four siblings were at their usual table. Edward was not.

He didn't show up for the duration of the lunch period, and I practically had a spring in my step by the time Angela, Mike and I headed to Biology. I gave them my spiel about wanting a lab partner willing to help, augmented by a "and now Edward is *absent!* What am I supposed to do?" Mike took this opportunity to turn up the useful tidbit that Edward, as well as the other Cullens and the Hales, actually missed a fair amount of school - on nice days the family were outdoorsy enough to skip classes for hikes and camping trips. I got Angela's permission (and Mike's unspoken disappointment) to try to swap lab partners and work instead with her; she guessed that her current one wouldn't mind.

The switch went pretty easily. I didn't even have to recite my entire speech to the biology teacher before he perfunctorily asked Angela's partner if she'd be okay to sit with Edward, got an apathetic shrug, and made the rearrangements. Sitting with Angela was pleasant. She was quiet - a bit like Charlie, speaking if there was cause but not fighting silence like a hated foe. Once, she asked me a question about how the material we were looking at compared to the similar content I'd covered in Phoenix, and we had a murmured exchange that, being topical, went unpunished by the teacher.

I hurried to gym, ironically, and found the coach and recited a litany of excuses: I had the balance of a toddler - a *drunk* toddler - and the bruising potential of an overripe nectarine and I promised to practice yoga out of a book at home on a soft surface every day if I could please, please, please be excused from volleyball and nearly everything else.

Understandably, the coach wasn't impressed by my yoga promises, but said I could take a mat and put it in the corner of the gym and do the exercises there during classes where I could be officially monitored. I would still most likely fall a lot, but onto something yielding and not into any innocent bystanders. I could live with that. I was less happy about the coach insinuating that maybe we should have official Yoga Fridays and I could lead them if I was so into the practice. I wasn't actually *good* at yoga. It was just not

as likely to send me careening into walls as volleyball. Perhaps she would forget about it; I didn't see a way to discourage the plan at that exact moment without making my promise to pursue the exercise seem less credible.

I had also "forgotten" my gym clothes, as emergency backup volleyball avoidance, and so I sat out for the second day in a row, but with my alternative arrangement in place I planned to be equipped the next day. It would have been embarrassing to flunk gym.

After school, I needed to make a grocery run: when I was at Charlie's, food was my domain, due to his lack of skill at or interest in cooking and tendency to forget that he needed to eat. On my way out of the campus lot, I noticed the two Cullens and Hale twins who'd attended school that day getting into their car: it was the shiny Volvo. Of course. It would be just silly if they had looks and not money too.

Grocery shopping wasn't a very mentally taxing activity, and so I spent most of the trip actively trying not to dwell on Edward. There was no good reason for me to be doing so, especially not after an entire day where he had not even appeared. That meant I was dwelling on him for *bad* reasons, and those weren't likely to go away and quit bugging me until I ferretted out what they were. What bad reasons would be prompting these thoughts?

Well, first, to get it out of the way, he was attractive. Very. Not in how he acted - just visually and in terms of what I'd heard of his voice. That had to be tweaking something on a subconscious level; I wouldn't necessarily have felt less threatened if an ugly boy had scowled at me the same way, but I wouldn't have been so self-conscious about it. I probably would have figured that it was his problem. Which was a hint that it *was* his problem, and I shouldn't consider it evidence that I'd done anything wrong. Edward was just a bizarre guy who'd taken an arbitrary dislike to me where no one else had, and he'd chosen to express it in the form of hostile staring. The fact that he was pretty made this no more or less likely.

Second, it was unexplained. That made it nigglingly mysterious. It only helped to care about mysteries if there was a sensible route towards solving them available, though. Now that I thought about it, it might be safe to ask one of his siblings...? None of *them* had looked at me at all strangely. Of the four I guessed that Alice, the smaller, less runway-model-looking girl, would be most approachable. I didn't have information about any of their personalities, but appearance was to some extent a personal choice, and so in the absence of better ways to tell it wasn't worthless to guess based on how she looked. However, I decided it would be better to put that possibility off until and unless Edward pulled something worse than glaring at me.

Third, it felt risky. I had no strong reason to believe it was *actually* risky. Driving my truck in the rain to and from the Thriftway for eggs and bread was probably more likely to kill me than Edward, just based on how many people died in car accidents and how many people were slain by inexplicably provoked classmates on an annual basis. But

an angry face on another person was more the sort of thing I was wired to fear than a lump of metal under my direct control. The brain was evolved to work out social problems, not to worry about the relative danger of controlling vehicles on wet pavement.

I'd run through all these thoughts by the time I wheeled my cart to the checkout. They helped. Simply *observing* the thought processes that led to some intrusive notion was so useful; I was confused about the fact that others never seemed to do it. Renée's ability to worry was limited only by her attention span. Charlie, if he had the tendency of dwelling to begin with, was subtler about it. I didn't see signs of the ability to consciously shut down pointless woolgathering in any of my peers. I supposed I should actually ask some - later, after I had closer friends in Forks who wouldn't find the one comment enough to consider me weird, instead of so early in their formations of impressions.

I went home, made egg salad so dinner would already be done whenever Charlie got home, and replied to Renée's e-mail that had arrived while I was at school. Then I occupied myself by writing down as many of the things I'd decided to write down as I could remember. When I'd exhausted them I got started on my math homework. I heard Charlie come home some hours later, and went down the stairs so we could eat together.

"Bella?" he called when he heard my footsteps.

"Welcome home!" I replied, leaning into view at the bottom of the stairwell. "Egg salad's in the fridge."

He served himself a generous helping, looking appreciative, and I scooped out a small plateful for myself. When he went back for a second portion, he asked, "So, how did you like school? Have you made any friends?"

"Sure," I said. "I have a couple classes with a girl named Jessica, and Angela's my lab partner in biology; I sit with them and some of their friends at lunch. And I also met a boy named Eric and one named Mike - they're friendly." I didn't mention Edward. There was nothing worth involving Charlie in, and anyway, he was clearly hoping for positive news, of which there was no shortage.

"That must be Mike Newton. Nice kid - nice family. His dad owns the sporting goods store just outside of town. He makes a good living off all the backpackers who come through here."

I'd never asked Charlie much about the people of Forks, but now that I thought of it, I supposed he must have met many of them. It would be likely less fruitful, but also much cheaper, to ask *him* rather than Alice - obliquely, of course. "Do you know the Cullen family?" I inquired.

"Dr. Cullen's family? Sure. Dr. Cullen's a great man."

"I meant more the kids - they stick out some at school, I was curious."

Charlie surprised me with a medium-sized speech about how the Cullen kids had

surpassed all of his expectations since they'd moved into town, never gave him a speck of trouble, were unfailingly polite, and all went on regular camping trips as a healthy family bonding experience. He seemed to be reacting more to some background hum of gossip, like what I'd heard from Jessica, than to anything I'd said. Apparently he was upset that the locals felt the need to make unkind comments about the Cullens when Forks was so lucky to have such a fine doctor in residence. I nodded along as he talked; the only one of the family I'd "met" had not made such a splendid impression and I couldn't honestly chime in with verbal agreement. But if my father the police chief found the family so clean-cut and worthy of praise, that was some evidence in favor of the danger being imaginary. Most violence came with priors. I felt a bit better.

Edward was not in school for the rest of the week. I settled into the routine of school: English with Mike and Eric sitting on either side of me, competing for my attention during the moments before and after class. Government, Trig, Spanish, lunch, biology, and yoga in the corner of the gym. I discovered to my surprise that I *liked* yoga; it was easy to think during the languid motions from pose to pose. I wasn't doing anything complicated, mostly just stretches and so on - and I avoided standing postures so I would be less likely to topple over - but the teacher didn't complain, just looked my way periodically to make sure I wasn't goofing off during class. The group I sat with at lunch, led by Mike, made plans to take a trip to La Push Ocean Park in a few weeks - an unfamiliar sort of beach, but a beach, and I decided to go.

By Friday I started to suspect that Edward had dropped out of school or something. The mystery was compounded, not relieved, by his absence, and the small town failed me with its lack of plausible gossip. This was odd, given that asking Jessica could yield information of the most personal sort about everyone else; I encountered more rumors about drinking problems and scandalous pregnancies and business trajectories than I could keep straight. Why shouldn't she be able to report on Edward?

I *really* didn't think I was horrifying enough to cause *anyone* to drop out of school altogether. I tentatively concluded that he'd looked at me horribly simply because my timing was bad and I'd arrived the day before some unwelcome event took him away from Forks.

The weekend was tranquil. Charlie worked most of it; he'd gotten into the habit of spending every day on the job when the alternative was puttering around an empty house, and typically took off only when there was urgent fishing to do. I went to the library, found it pitiful, and added a plaintive note about that in my new e-mail to Renée. Later I'd have to go to some larger settlement, Olympia or Seattle, and spend all day in a good bookstore, spending the money I would have blown on a car if not for Charlie's gift - on books, and on gas for the truck, because it got awful mileage and I needed to budget separately for that expense on a trip that big.

On Monday, it was cold. People in the parking lot greeted me by name; in the cases where I knew theirs, I did the same, and otherwise I just smiled and waved and offered a

more generic hello. I was comfortable. It was nice. The classes were mind-numbing, but I was pretty pleased with the student body.

After English, it turned out to be snowing, and I stopped to marvel when I walked out of the building, staring up at the descending wisps of cottony precipitation. Mike thought this was amusing. "Haven't you ever seen snow before?"

"On TV," I said. Mike laughed. Then a ball of slush hit him in the back of the head. I tracked its path and noticed Eric hurrying away, in the wrong direction for his next class. Mike bent down and started collecting his own snowball.

"See you at lunch," I told him, moving away briskly. I thought snow was pretty, but I suspected my affection for it would be destroyed if I had to encounter it in the form of crossfire.

The snow - first of its kind for the calendar year - was the talk of the school all morning, which would have made more sense if it had been snowing in Phoenix. Nevertheless, I didn't find it hard to muster enthusiasm, since it was genuinely novel to me. I managed to avoid the hurtling snow missiles between all of the buildings I was obliged to travel to; Jessica, walking with me to lunch, thought my caution was silly, but didn't attack me with a frozen projectile herself. Mike caught up with us near the cafeteria doors, laughing as melting ice destroyed his the painstaking spikes in his hair. Jessica drew him into a discussion of snowball fight tactics as we headed for the food and I habitually glanced at the Cullen's table.

There were five people there.

I must have been distracted for longer than it seemed to me, because Jessica pulled on my arm. "Hello? Bella? What do you want?"

For him to go be gone again, I thought. *Or for an explanation at least.* "Just a soda," I said aloud. "I'm not really hungry."

"Are you okay?" Jessica asked.

"I think so," I said. We waited in line, got our food and beverages, and headed for our table.

Mike was very concerned about my health, and kept asking if I was sure I was all right. I considered faking an illness and skipping Biology in the nurse's office. Bad idea, I decided. I couldn't do that forever, and it wouldn't get me any closer to understanding what was going on. I would just stick close to Angela and ignore Edward as much as I could. But I couldn't resist looking over once, to make sure he wasn't glowering at me.

Edward wasn't looking at me at all, and he was laughing - the entire family was. The boys all had snow in their hair, and Emmett was shaking his head to fling it out towards the sisters. Alice was using her lunch tray as a shield. It was picturesque, and I looked a little more intently, trying to figure out where the fury I so strongly associated with

Edward had gone. Without it he didn't look half so predatory.

"Bella, what are you staring at?" Jessica asked.

And just then, Edward looked over and made direct eye contact with me.

I ducked my head immediately, caught, but I was sure he hadn't looked as full of rage as he had before. Just curious again, as he had been the last time this had happened in the cafeteria instead of the biology room. Were his attitudes determined by the *room*? How bizarre would that be?

"Edward Cullen is staring at you," Jessica giggled.

"He is?" She probably would have mentioned it if he'd started looking murderous again.

"Yep," she teased.

"Please stop looking at him," I said. I turned towards Mike's conversation in progress - elaborate snow-enhanced battle plans - and kept my eyes to my own table for the rest of the lunch period.

When Mike and Angela and I left the cafeteria together to head to Biology, the snow had turned to rain, and all of his weaponry was in the process of melting. He, and most of the other students, groaned. I was relieved not to have to fear snowballs between classes, and although I did miss the decoration, I hadn't fancied trying to drive home in my very first snowfall.

I was glad that I had changed lab partners and that I didn't have to sit right next to Edward after his absence. Especially since he had a brief, bizarrely heated exchange with the teacher about the new seating chart before finally taking his place next to Angela's former neighbor. I couldn't hear most of it, but his tone was incredulous, and the girl he was to share his table with was closer to the front of the room and looked vaguely offended. And then Edward stared at me again. Not angrily. Just frustrated, as the first time.

I turned my attention to the lab when the teacher finished setting up and told us to start identifying the phases of mitosis on our microscope slides. Angela and I worked well together; we alternated checking the slides first and then checked one another's work, with her making one error that I caught and, as far as we could tell, none on my part. While she copied our answers onto the sheet, I glanced around the room. One of the pairs had a book open under the table, trying to hide the forbidden reference from the teacher. Mike and his partner kept swapping between two slides, comparing them. Edward was staring at me again, and his lab partner was gazing into space; either they'd completed the assignment before anyone else, or they had both decided to ignore it completely.

His eyes were dark gold. I was sure they'd been black before. I hadn't written it

down and *could* be misremembering... but I was *sure* they had been black.

I looked away again. Angela's handwriting was very tidy and so she was doing all of our recording, but she had noted in the margins who identified which slides first and the one mistake that I had caught so the credit was shared appropriately. I smiled and murmured to her that I appreciated it, and she smiled warmly, thanking me in turn for spotting the misidentification.

The teacher came around and noted everyone's scores. I was able to just barely overhear that Edward and his partner had gotten full marks: speed, then, not abandonment. Angela and I, plus one other pair, did equally well; everyone else had something missing.

There was a brief hubbub as equipment was put away and the teacher recorded our scores in his grade book, and then collective focus turned to the transparencies he used to explain the lab. I zoned out a little, mostly just staring at the bright rectangle at the front of the room with pictures of cells in it. Sometimes I checked to see where Edward's attention was. Every time it was on me. I wondered if the teacher noticed. The fact that he consistently turned out to be staring at me only made me more tempted to check repeatedly. Finally I made a face at him - trying to convey something like, "*What is your DEAL?*" with my eyes - and he turned towards the front of the room for the rest of the class, body language tense but his visual focus off me.

Edward raced nimbly out of the room when the bell rang. I'd half suspected that he'd lurk on the route to gym and accost me when I walked by, demanding whatever secret he found so frustrating. I stuck close to Mike. "That was awful," Mike groaned. "They all looked exactly the same. How'd you do so well?"

"I'd done it before," I said. "With fish, not onion, but it's the same idea."

"Lucky," commented Mike, and then he started griping about the departed snow.

I stuck to a simple set of four poses during my yoga session to leave me more focus for thinking. I decided that unremitting staring was probably a significant enough act of harrassment that, if I thought I needed it, I could get faculty attention about it. I resolved that Edward had two days to cut it out or I'd try to speak to Alice, and if that didn't turn up anything, he had a week and I'd speak to the biology teacher, and if that came to nothing, I'd wait another week and involve Charlie. Charlie's approval of the family would not, I was sure, stand up to my complaint, especially when I could probably get the also-approved-of Mike to back me up. After two more weeks of staring, if it got that bad, Mike would notice something. He was attentive enough. (I still needed to think of something to do about *that*, but it was a secondary problem.)

After gym, I went to my truck, hopped in the cab, and ran the heater to warm my hands so I could comfortably grip the steering wheel. After a minute I started to poke along out of the lot. On my way out, I spotted Edward and Alice standing near the family Volvo. It looked like they were arguing. They weren't loud enough for me to have heard

them, even if I'd cut the engine and rolled down a window, but it was clearly intense.

I'd never even had a bizarre intermittent staring match with *Alice*, so in all my vanity, I couldn't conceive of the conversation being about me. There was nothing she knew or thought about me to argue for or against. I continued towards home.

The next morning, I drove to school as usual, parked, and got out of my truck. Not at all as usual, when I shut the truck door and turned around, I found that Alice Cullen was standing beside me.

"Hello," she said chirpily. Her eyes were the same gold that Edward's had been the previous day. "My name is Alice Cullen."

"Hello, I'm Bella," I said, automatically, politely, and then I remembered to be confused. "What -"

"Oh, look," said Alice, seizing my arm in a friendly but inescapable grip and pulling me towards the front left wheel of my truck, and then past it. She pointed at the tire. "Snow chains. That was smart! I thought you were from Phoenix and it never ices there."

I hadn't put the chains there, and I was surprised I hadn't noticed them before I got into the truck that morning. I supposed that explained why I hadn't had a terrible time driving to school in all the glittering frozenness. "My dad -" I started to guess, but Alice was still hauling on me and it made it hard to form sentences. It was outrageous, how strong she was in spite of being so tiny. "Hey, um -"

"Look," she said again, dragging me farther and farther away from my truck, "all these people have lived in Forks all their lives and half of them don't chain their tires." Finally she seemed to think that, four parking spaces away from the Chevy, we had moved far enough, but she maintained her hold on her arm. I expected to find my skin painted with bruises later.

"Alice," I said, but before I could ask her to please release my arm, a dark blue van skidded across the parking lot and collided with the back corner of my truck.

The truck was sturdy. It made an awful noise, and I lost some paint, but I didn't doubt it would work later.

I would have been standing in the path of the van if Alice hadn't pulled me away.

Alice no longer seemed to find it necessary to hold my arm in her vice of a hand, but I decided that if she'd found it appropriate in the first place she wouldn't mind my clinging back just a little bit. She was little and bony but didn't sag under my attempt to seek support. I made a small burbling sound.

"Chains on tires in icy weather are *such* a good idea," said Alice sagely.

I wobbled in place, wrapped around Alice's unprotesting arm and trying not to fall over. Between the ice and the fact that I'd just nearly been trapped between a truck and a van, it was a challenge, but eventually I found enough footing and mental stability to let go of her. "Aaaaaaugh," I said. My voice was strangely devoid of emotion, considering. It should have been exhibiting relief, or stress, or confusion, or gratitude, or some combination of those things.

I supposed Alice deserved to hear the last one spoken aloud. "Thank you," I added to my ineloquent exhalation.

"For what?" she said. "The compliment about the snow chains and how smart that was? You're welcome!"

It seemed obvious that she was playing dumb, somehow, but I couldn't fathom why. The van hadn't been anywhere in sight when she'd started pulling me away from the truck; there was nothing for her to play dumb *about*. "For pulling me out of the way," I said. "If you hadn't, the van would have squished me."

"That was lucky!" she said cheerfully. "Hey, I'd better get to my class. I'll see you at lunch, Bella!"

Alice danced away, her grace untroubled by the ice. I blinked at her a couple of times, and then tottered towards the blue van for the ritual exchange of insurance information.

Tyler Crowley was the van's driver; I recognized him from my Government class. He'd gotten a few small cuts, but looked mostly okay; without any humans in the path of his out-of-control car, he'd mostly focused on slowing down and hadn't careened too crazily. By the time I'd written down all the details, Charlie had arrived - apparently the school secretary had called emergency services. He was worried about me at first, but I reassured him that I'd been standing "all the way over there" and that my truck was "just fine, thanks for the chains by the way" and that my witness's remarks were "all written down right here" (I tore a page out of my notebook) and that I was "going to go to class now, I don't want to get any later, love you, Dad".

I was late to English, but after explaining the car accident - with Alice edited out, the implication being that I'd wandered autonomously out of harm's way - I wasn't in trouble. Mike and Eric overheard the story. Mike seemed to decide the best reaction was one of exaggerated compassion, making sure I was okay, did I need help touching up the paint on my truck, etcetera. Eric went with something more along the lines of "wow, Bella had a cool adventure", which would have been the pleasanter of the two if it hadn't made everyone in the class lean in and want me to tell all about my cool adventure.

Tyler was back in school by the time Government started, and he apologized

profusely about the minor scratches to my car. His face was covered in bandaids that stood out brightly beige against his brown skin and it was fairly silly-looking. I waved off the apologies; he hadn't caused the ice, and if he'd had any choice about where to aim his van at all, my truck was a good target, sturdy thing it was.

The minor accident - or "cool adventure" - was the talk of the school all morning. Jessica seemed morbidly fascinated by the fact that I could have been killed if I hadn't been some twenty feet away before Tyler had even lost control of his car. She kept talking about it all the way from Spanish to lunch. I was just about to ask her if she could please stop describing my gruesome counterfactual death when, right outside the cafeteria doors, Alice appeared at my elbow.

"Hello, Bella," she said.

"Hi," I said. I blinked. Alice was not quite as aggressively mysterious as Edward, but she was *puzzling*. At least she didn't scare me. Jessica looked put out by her arrival.

"I'm going to go in and sit down, Bella," said Jessica after enough of a pause to be awkward.

"Okay," I said over my shoulder, still facing Alice. "Later, Jess."

Jessica went inside, and I looked back at the tiny girl who had saved my skin that morning. She was smiling at me like she was dying to tell me what I would get for my birthday but had promised not to. We stared at each other for a bit.

"Uh," I said. "Thanks again for getting me out of the way earlier..."

"You're welcome!" exclaimed Alice. "Do you want to sit with me at lunch today?"

"You - and your, uh, siblings?"

"Hmm," said Alice, furrowing her brow. "No, I don't think that would be a good idea. Just me."

I spent two seconds debating whether to ask her *why* or not. I decided it would be rude and that I might get clues if I sat with her anyway. "Sure," I said.

My usual tablemates looked puzzled when I walked in with Alice, and I gave them a look intended to convey "I don't know what's going on either, I'm just going with it". They continued to look puzzled. I suspected that most, if not all, of the content of my meaningful looks was lost in translation. I'd catch up with them later and use words instead.

Alice bought a sandwich and a bottle of apple juice. I took a soda, a banana, and, as it was Taco Day, a tortilla full of fixings, and then we found an empty table. I opened my drink and partially peeled my fruit. Alice didn't touch her purchases.

When I'd finished my banana, I said, "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I forgot that this kind of sandwich has mayonnaise on it," she said at once. "I don't like mayonnaise."

It was a tuna sandwich. I wondered if there were any commercially available tuna sandwiches without mayonnaise. "Why don't you get a different one? You never opened it, I bet they'd let you trade it right back," I said.

That one stumped her for a moment. Then she said, "I'm not that hungry anyway. I can just have a snack when I get home in a couple hours."

Uh-huh. "What about your juice?"

"I only like juice with food," she said.

"I'll trade you my soda if you want, I don't care," I offered.

"No, thank you," Alice said firmly.

I turned my head a bit to look at her from another angle, as though that would help. "Don't like soda?"

"I don't. Sorry," she said with an apologetic smile.

"What *do* you like to eat?"

That threw her a bit. She stared at me blankly for a second before she said, as though at random, "Grapes. Love grapes."

"Is that all?"

She pouted a little, as though disappointed that naming a fruit wasn't enough to turn off my curiosity, and started reciting a paragraph's worth of food items. They were all consistent with her manifest preferences (no mayonnaise, no soda, nothing she could have easily gotten from the school cafeteria), but she sounded like she was reading her grocery list. My past experience with talking extensively about food preferences tended to involve people going on about the little details. If they liked cheese, they'd mention in an aside that Camembert was only worth eating from a particular creamery. Chocolate lovers would have a story about which shop gave out a free sample of which truffle. Fans of quiche would take a moment to dispel the myth that it was difficult to make. Anyone who brought up potato salad would also have a longstanding recipe rivalry with a neighbor. At a minimum they'd specify that the pot roast was to be "the way Grandma makes it". Alice didn't include anything like that; she just listed generic things. "Cauliflower. Pomegranates. Salami. Biscuits. Pistachios. Chickpeas. Licorice. Polenta."

I let her rattle on for a bit, and then held up a hand. "Okay. Very well-rounded diet."

Alice grinned at me.

Lunch with Alice was very awkward. Whenever I made up my mind to say something she spoke first, with some innocuous non-sequitur. Occasionally it was interesting - she had perspectives on the personalities of some of the teachers that I could imagine being useful - but just as often it was entirely apropos of nothing. I was treated to a six-minute description of the mishap-filled shopping expedition that had yielded the boots she was wearing; she told me about the weather in Alaska; she listed the colors and locations of the stains she'd gotten on herself when she learned to tie-dye.

I wondered if she was actually insane.

I decided to ask her if she might know what Edward's deal was, and before I opened my mouth, she said, "Did you know that in Korean -"

"Alice," I said, talking over her, "can I ask you something?"

Her eyes got very wide. She stared at me. She appeared to be desperately wondering if there was a polite way to say "*no, you may not*" and coming up blank. Finally she nodded once.

"On my first day here, your brother Edward looked at me very angrily, in Biology and again after school, and then he was out of school for a week, and yesterday he wouldn't stop looking at me in class like he was frustrated about something I'd done even though we've never spoken; do you know why either of those things might be?"

Alice gazed, gold-irised, into my eyes. A confusing mix of expressions I couldn't follow crossed her face, and finally she said, "I don't think I should discuss Edward's personal business."

"Because," I said, frowning, "it was kind of concerning to me. I had actually decided that if he didn't stop staring at me, I was going to treat it like a harrassment issue. It doesn't feel very safe. And it's distracting."

Her hands were under the table, but her shoulders moved like she was wringing them. I heard a rocky scraping noise and guessed that she had a pebble stuck in the sole of her boot that was scratching up the linoleum. "I... don't *think*... that he will hurt you," she said.

There were so many more reassuring ways she could have uttered those exact words.

"I would consider it a personal favor," I said, slowly and carefully, "if you'd tell your brother that I don't appreciate being glared at like I killed his dog, or scrutinized like an unsolved Rubik's cube, while I am trying to do my schoolwork or while I am trying to eat my lunch. I think it would be better for me and him and everybody involved if he cut it out before I involve a teacher, or the principal, or my father, who you probably know is the police chief. I have never done anything to antagonize Edward whatsoever."

"I know you haven't," Alice said quickly.

"Good. I hope he knows it too," I said, trying to sound earnest.

"He does," she assured me. "I'll, um, talk to him about it." And with that she got up and fled, leaving her untouched mayonnaise-tainted sandwich and sealed bottle of juice on the table behind her.

I moved back to my usual lunch group with my taco and soda. My friends wanted to know what the deal had been with Alice, but I honestly had only fragments of likely-misleading clues, and the topic soon fizzled out as they lost interest in exotic speculations. The topic turned to the upcoming beach trip. I sat through this part of the exchange silently except for the necessary noises of assent and enthusiasm, and thought about the Cullen family.

I was trying to avoid excessive notebook use in school, around Jessica in particular - her tendency towards indiscriminate gossip wasn't showing any signs of being a fluke - and so I couldn't organize my wisps of thought visually, as helpful as it would have been. I closed my eyes, adding a feigned tired sigh, and tried to make an imaginary sketch of the mystery.

The Cullens were rich. Dr. Cullen was, well, a doctor, and by Charlie's account a very good one. If he had worked at a better-paying hospital for some years, and saved *very* much more carefully than most people were capable of, then that might explain it alone. But they were a young couple. Medical school took a long time. It seemed... not impossible, but unlikely, that there would have been not speck of a murmur about it if Dr. Cullen had been a child prodigy who'd graduated medical school when he was fourteen, or something. As far as I knew, Mrs. Cullen didn't work. They had five children to feed (they *had* to eat, in spite of how Alice had acted and the fact that I'd never seen one of them do it - were they concealing outrageously restrictive food allergies or a religious dietary requirement that embarrassed them for some reason?) and clothe and keep in trendy school supplies, plus a house.

Were there any really big hospitals in Alaska that could have paid Dr. Cullen a great salary? It wasn't the *least* populous state, but it was way down there, spread out over the largest area. If there was an expensive research clinic or something in Anchorage, I supposed I wouldn't have known about it, so it was possible that Dr. Cullen had spent several years living cheap and only two years ago suddenly cut his income, moved to a small town, and started providing his children with a shiny car and sizeable clothing budgets.

It was not impossible that the Hales' parents had left the Cullens some money in their wills. Or that when the Cullen children were adopted, they came with monetary bonuses to help with their care (and I didn't know how long those three had been in the family, except that it was longer than two years). Or that they were wealthy independent

of the doctor's income for some other reason. But that, too, seemed like something I'd have heard a rumor about. There was little to no way that a resident of Forks was a lottery winner or the heir to a diamond cartel or a trust fund baby or something similarly dramatic and pecuniary without it being branded on their forehead forever by public chat. Jessica had proven able to divulge astonishingly personal things.

They all bore *weird* visual similarities. The pale skin, the incredible beauty. But they were not, supposedly, genetically related, except Jasper and Rosalie, who had only hair color in common (none of them looked like *family* - they looked like they took the same dance classes and wore the same full-coverage white makeup and had been handpicked from the same modeling agency). I knew it was hard to adopt children - if the Hales were Mrs. Cullen's niece and nephew, that did some explanatory work, but Edward, Emmett, and Alice were from some other source. Didn't it take years of paperwork and waiting to get a child? I supposed it was faster if one was willing to take an older adoptee - but then, it was slower if you wanted a white kid, one without developmental problems. (This was evidence in *favor* of the hypothesis that Alice, and possibly Edward, were insane, which would have made them easier to adopt. I didn't know about Emmett. But they all did well in school and largely kept to themselves and Charlie thought they were model citizens...)

And it was known that Mrs. Cullen couldn't have children of her own. Since her husband was a doctor, that *might* have turned up earlier than it would in most couples, but my impression was that fertility testing didn't customarily enter a conception attempt until considerable trial and failure.

The timeline just didn't shake out naturally. I was placing a lot of faith in Forks's rumor mill, but it was a very good one. I guessed that Dr. Cullen was thirty-five at the *very* oldest. He was supposed to look a decade younger than that. If he'd finished high school when he was sixteen, say - he probably could have skipped a grade or two back in elementary school without that making its way to my ears - and gotten through med school in an accelerated seven-year program so he had his doctorate at age 23, and raced through whatever licensing hoops were in his way at age 24, and was such a miraculous boon to medicine that he'd *immediately* gotten his super high paying job in Alaska -

And by then the Hales would have been living with Mrs. Cullen. I didn't know when Dr. and Mrs. Cullen had gotten married, so they might not have been living out of the doctor's pocketbook until later. (But what was Mrs. Cullen doing before they married? If she had job skills, they'd never made it into the town consciousness.) But that left Dr. Cullen eight years racking up the big bucks. Not enough time for really high-yield investments to pay out. Was he living like a graduate student that entire time, surviving on ramen and store samples, only to start living like a king a little later on when he'd have to mostly eat savings to do it? When did the other three kids come in? If he'd been saving like a Scrooge during this period, why did they act so *used* to their nice things? Alice's story about her boots hadn't held any of the earmarks of being a gleeful once-a-year splurge, and I was sure they'd cost at least two hundred dollars, though she hadn't named a figure.

What about school loans? I guessed if I was factoring into the story that he was a

brilliant doctor commanding an immense salary, he could also have been a brilliant student commanding a full-ride scholarship...

The bell rang.

Edward seemed to be *following* me to Biology. This was a slightly silly impression to have even given everything that had happened: we were both starting from the cafeteria, and were both headed for the same classroom. But he was walking right behind me, and seemed to be matching pace awfully precisely with me, Angela, and Mike. I couldn't speed up with all the ice on the paths - so I slowed down, claiming to my friends that I felt liable to fall. This was entirely credible, as I did fall down a lot even on surfaces not encrusted with slippery substances. They slowed down with me.

Instead of going around, Edward slowed down too. It did not seem likely that this was a coincidence or that he felt a deep and abiding need to keep off the grass.

What had Alice *said* to him, anyway?

We arrived at Biology after what seemed like a very long trip to have squeezed into only three minutes. Angela and I sat at our table, Mike slid in beside his partner, and Edward walked through the door a half a step behind us. He hesitated, like he wanted to go on following us - me - but instead plopped into his chair. He held himself very stiffly but didn't turn around to look at me.

Biology progressed in perfect ordinariness. Mike and I walked to gym, which ensued with no unusual happenings. It wasn't until I walked out of the gym building that Edward Cullen appeared at my side and said, "Hello, Bella."

I jumped, startled. My feet came down on the ice and immediately sheered off in opposite directions. I went down, scrunching my eyes closed and emitting a squeak. But where I expected my head to crack on the ice, there was silence. I opened one eye.

Edward had caught me neatly, and it must have looked to bystanders like we were in the middle of a very oddly timed ballroom dance. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Please let go of me."

Edward stood me back up. He didn't seem to have any trouble with moving me around any which way he pleased, nor with avoiding balance challenges himself. "Thank you," I said, but I narrowed my eyes a little bit. I waited for him to talk next. He was the one who had greeted me; presumably he had a reason. I started counting to five in my head; if he hadn't gotten my attention by the time I reached it, I was going to continue towards my car.

"Alice told me you were upset by my... staring... earlier," he said in that smooth voice (if they made voices out of caramel, this would be one of them), looking into my

eyes steadily. His were still gold. "I wanted to apologize."

"Oh," I said. It wasn't very helpful of me, but I didn't feel charitable; I wanted to see what he'd say without prompting.

"I'm sorry," he said, after an awkward pause, apparently having realized that saying he wanted to apologize wasn't quite actually apologizing.

"I accept your apology," I said. I'd gotten into the habit of saying that instead of "it's okay" when I was fourteen, having noticed that I often wanted to accept apologies for things that were not really *okay*.

"Thank you," said Edward.

"You're welcome," I replied.

There was another pause. I began counting to five again.

"Would you like me to walk you to your car?" he offered when I'd reached three. "I noticed you seem to have some trouble with the ice."

"No, thank you," I said.

This seemed to surprise him. "May I ask why?" he inquired after a moment.

I considered the pros and cons of various answers. Eventually I hedged my bets: "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes," he said immediately.

"Because I'm liable to ask very intrusive personal questions of you if I spend time with you socially, and I prefer to avoid situations in which I'm especially likely to be rude." And then, because it would have put the lie to my statement if I'd done otherwise, I turned and picked my way across the ice towards the parking lot.

Of course Edward couldn't let me walk away; he loped beside me, one long easy step to six of my careful ones. "Why would you ask intrusive personal questions?" he asked lightly.

"Because there are a number of things about you - your family in general, actually - that don't add up," I said, deciding that if he kept following me after what I'd told him, he wasn't entitled to special rudeness-avoiding care. "You are distractingly mysterious."

"You like solving mysteries?"

"I like the nonexistence of mysteries. Mysteries mean I've missed something," I said shortly.

"Interesting," Edward murmured softly. "What's missing about me?"

He seemed to want to keep me talking. That was potentially useful. I stopped - carefully, on a salted patch of sidewalk - and turned to face him. "If I tell you what's missing, will you fill in the gaps?"

"Probably not," he said, smiling in a manner that he probably thought was roguish.

"Then I have no incentive to answer your question," I said, and I continued to walk to my car.

Edward's face fell, and he kept following me. "What?"

"The only reason I'd mention to you what's confusing about you would be if I thought you'd demystify things for me," I said briskly. "I don't enjoy having my curiosity abused to no end. If I thought it was fun to muse aloud about things that confuse me, I could talk to one of my friends or parents instead. In the reasonably likely event that you're hiding something on *purpose*, then telling you what's off about you will only help you cover things up better - and I've got no motive to help cover up a secret I'm not in on, since I don't know if there are adequate reasons for it or not."

He kept following me until I got to my truck, although he didn't come up with anything else to say during the brief journey. "I suppose I'll see you tomorrow," I said as I pulled open my cab door.

"Of course," he said. "Tomorrow."

I hopped into the driver's seat and went home.

I pulled into the driveway, let myself in, and started a pot of lentils boiling, because they were impossible to overcook as long as I added water periodically, and so would be hot and ready to eat whenever Charlie got home.

I pulled out my notebook and wrote for a solid forty-five minutes. My hand was cramping up by the time I was done. All the confusing tidbits, all the erratic pieces of behavior, everything I'd heard from Jessica and other sources. I tapped the eraser end of my pencil several times around the bit where I'd written about Alice's lunch behavior. Her timing was *strange*. She'd interrupted me just *before* I'd asked any awkward questions, and I was sure I hadn't *looked* like I was going to say anything. I'd recorded video of myself thinking and writing before, just for kicks - my emotions were readable, but if I closed my eyes and skipped to a random point in the video before re-opening them, I couldn't tell whether I was about to write something or not until my arm actually moved. And I'd been the one *in* the video.

And then there was the bit with the van, in the morning...

I thought of a crazy idea.

I thought of a very cheap test.

That was the only kind of test worth doing on a crazy idea. If one was wise, one didn't bet one's life savings and firstborn child on something this silly. But it would cost me less to perform *this* test than it would cost to expend the willpower on avoiding it, now that I'd thought it up.

I shut my notebook. I shut my eyes.

I *made up my mind* that, when Charlie got home, I was going to tell him all about my suspicions of the Cullens.

Fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang.

The Reveal

When the bell rang, I was at the stove, giving the lentils a stir and pouring in a little more water. I left the spoon in the pot and went to answer the door. It was Alice.

"Hello, Bella," she said.

"Hello, Alice," I replied. "Can I help you?"

"May I come in, please?" Alice asked.

I thought about this. Charlie wouldn't likely object to my having her over; although I didn't have any classes with Alice, she was a peer in some sense, and he swore up and down that she and her family were the ideal sort of people. Besides, if I was ever going to figure out the answers to my questions, it would probably involve talking to some Cullens at some time. I stood aside and waved Alice into the house; she pranced inside.

"Want some lentils?" I asked idly, gesturing at the pot on the stove. "They're sort of related to chickpeas, I think."

"I already ate," said Alice. "Thank you very much anyway."

I nodded and sat down at the kitchen table; Alice did the same. "So," I said. "What's up?"

"Be patient with me, please," Alice said, looking pained. "I have a lot to tell you and I've never had to explain it before and it's *really complicated* and my family is going to be angry at me, but there's no other way, I *looked*, there's really not. You've got to know, and sooner's safer than later."

"I, um, register a general approval of knowing things rather than not, and of safety," I said. "Do you think you're going to be able to explain what you want to explain before Charlie - I mean, my dad - gets home?"

"Yes," said Alice confidently. "He won't get back until after eight. The basics won't take longer than that. You're going to want extra proof, but we can meet some other day and take care of it. So, uh, first - I can predict the future."

I nodded slowly, inviting her to go on. My crazy idea was looking less crazy. If Alice believed of *herself* that she could predict the future, *and* I'd independently thought of it - it was still wildly unlikely, but she was willing to let me test it, apparently, and that sure was *something*.

"Here," she said, passing me a folded sheet of paper. "It's the weather for the next week. I know that weather reports are sometimes right and that Forks is easier to guess than anywhere else, but weather's easy for me, and I put everything down to the minute. I can do physical events like that with no trouble. I can tell what people are going to do if

they've made their decisions - if they might do any of several things I get less clear images, but not nothing - but minds can always change. So weather's one of the best tests."

I unfolded the sheet of paper. It specified heavy rain until 11:09 that evening, after which brief sleeting was called for, and then a subdued drizzle would dominate the night. She'd thrown in a rainbow for Thursday morning. I folded the paper back up. "Dice?" I proposed.

"Cards would be better. How you shake the dice matters, but once you shuffle cards they stay put," Alice said. "I can do better than chance with dice if you prefer them, though. Oh, but you have a dice cup. I can do perfectly with dice too that way."

I got some of both from the cabinet under the stairs and offered Alice a sheet of paper. I shuffled the deck several times and she filled her page with predictions, writing rapidly and with perfect penmanship. Then I took the paper and flipped through each card in succession.

She got them all right. I didn't bother repeating the cards right away; time was limited and I already had more information than I could readily explain. Charlie indeed owned a dice cup, which Alice said would let her get all of the dice perfect as long as I hid the cubes under it for a moment after shaking them. She was right sixteen times in a row, at which point I swept the dice out of the way and planted my elbows on the table.

"How do you do it?" I asked.

"I honestly *don't* know," said Alice. "I've been able to as long as I could remember. I focus on people, or things, and the possibilities show themselves in visions. No audio, but I'm okay at lipreading; they're not always very clear, and it gives me headaches to focus on really indecisive people."

"As long as you can remember is - how long?" I asked. "You're, what, my age? A year older?"

"I'm at least a hundred years old," said Alice evenly, maintaining steady eye contact.

"What? Wait - at least?"

"I woke up in 1920 with no memories and looked about as old as I do now. I think I'm physically nineteen, but if I look old for my age - I mean, the age I was when it happened - then I could have been born as late as 1905 or so," she said.

"And when you woke up you could see the future," I said. I wasn't sure if I was playing along or if I really bought the rest of the story along with her casino-busting tricks, but even if she were playing with me, outright lies were a change of pace from

cryptic eccentricity.

"Yes," she said. "I'm not - none of my family is - human. But I'm the only one who can't remember being one. We're not sure what happened to me; I can't see the past the same way I can see the future. The rest of them know more about where they came from."

"And so you are a...?"

"Vampire," said Alice, wincing a little. "Please don't freak out."

"I... really *don't* think I want you to prove that to me," I began carefully.

"No, nonononono," said Alice, her eyes flying open very wide, "we don't drink human blood. Not my family. Animals only. Although it wouldn't be smart for you to watch us eating them, either."

"Okay... That's why you guys never eat anything at school?"

Alice winced. "I know it's kind of conspicuous. It's not physically impossible for us to swallow normal food, but it's really, really unpleasant. And we can't digest it, so it just all comes back up later."

"Charming mental image," I remarked. "Is that why you all look like you're made of chalk, too?" Alice nodded. I asked, "Did you ever consider wearing makeup?"

"They don't make the stuff to stay on our skin," she said, holding out an arm. "Go ahead," she added.

I laid my palm on the back of her hand. She felt like a piece of rock. Cold, smooth, unyielding rock. I nodded.

"It'd all rub off as soon as we touched anything," she said, putting her arm back down. "So before you ask, most of the myths are false. We do drink blood, but have no unusual relationship with bats, no aversion to garlic in particular over anything else you might eat, don't sleep in coffins - or at all, actually - can't turn into smoke, and aren't harmed by sunlight. Although sunlight does make us kind of conspicuous, so we avoid going out in it in public. That's why we pick places like this to live - cloud cover. A stake through the heart would be impossible - there's no way you could drive a piece of wood through my eye, let alone my ribcage - and decapitation's only an issue if we don't get everything reattached in a hurry. We can catch fire, though, so please don't try that one. We are very fast, agile, and strong, and have very acute senses."

Alice decided to illustrate this last sentence by getting up, jumping into the air, and landing on one hand, which she used to support herself with no visible effort. "One comes to have more vampires than one had before by taking a human and adding venom. Easiest way to get that is from a bite, but according to Carlisle, if I cried into an open wound I could turn someone that way too. The process is not fun. I can't remember mine, and wasn't there for any of the others', but I am told that it takes three days and is emphatically

not fun. You can't undo it. Afterwards we don't age. We have to move around a lot so people don't wonder about that too much."

I stared at her.

She pushed off the ground, did a little flip, and landed on her feet, then sat back in her chair. "Questions?"

"Did I actually summon you here by deciding to go to Charlie, or was that a coincidence?" I asked.

"You summoned me, sort of, but please don't make too much of a habit of that," said Alice. "When *that* firmed up we all flew into a panic. It would be a huge problem if police started investigating us. We'd have to move. Probably abroad for a while just to be safe, maybe split up."

"Is this all of you, or are you split up from some others now?" I asked.

"This is all of our family. We have some friends up in Denali, and a few acquaintances scattered around elsewhere," Alice said.

I nodded. "Uh... why wouldn't it be a good idea for me to see you eat?"

"Because when we hunt we're not thinking very clearly," Alice explained. "Humans smell a lot more appetizing than animals do. If we're hunting, and a human wanders by - we might be able to pull back, I know Carlisle - our father, Dr. Cullen - could at least, but there'd be more risk than there is just attending school with us."

"And attending school with you is... how much risk, approximately?" I asked. A little shiver ran up my back.

"With me - not much," Alice said soothingly. "Or Rosalie or Emmett. Jasper has more trouble than most of us, but we look out for him - if I saw him losing it I'd get him out of the building in plenty of time."

She hadn't mentioned Edward. I looked at her pointedly.

"Edward is... very controlled," Alice said. "Normally I wouldn't think he'd ever be a danger."

"Normally," I prompted.

Alice winced. "Um. Will you promise that you won't flip out and run away and never talk to Edward again?"

"I will promise no such thing!" I exclaimed. "If Edward's going to drain my fluids

like I'm a Cadbury creme egg I *really think I ought to know*, whether or not this will cause me to do something that will hurt his *feelings*."

"I really really really don't think he will!" shrilled Alice. "I don't see it - not anymore - but you're right, you should know. Um, humans smell very tasty. And some humans smell... tastier... than... others. To... specific vampires."

I dropped my head into my hands. "Right. And I smell very, very yummy to Edward."

Alice nodded. "You should put more water in your lentils," she said. "They'll burn soon."

I went to the sink to fill up a cup. "Why," I asked, "did he come back to school? I realize it's a *hassle* to move, but if he's likely to lose it around me, why didn't he just stay wherever he went that week he was gone? I think my *life* ought to be worth some hassle."

"He went to visit our friends in Denali," supplied Alice. "He came back because... It's complicated. We missed him - especially our mother Esme. And he... is curious about you."

"Wants to know what I taste like with dijon mustard?" I asked scathingly, returning to my seat.

"Ew," said Alice, wrinkling her nose. "No, I mean - I'm not the only one with a power. Edward - and Jasper - have them too. Edward can... read minds."

I stood up so fast my chair fell over. "*What in the name of everything decent and sane is he doing around people?*" I screeched, pulse racing.

"Bella! Bella, please! Calm down!" begged Alice. "It's not as bad as you think!"

"How could *reading minds* be anything other than a *flagrant and unconscionable* violation of privacy that everyone around him has every reason to expect?" I cried. I'd been worried someone would steal my *notebook*, would make my thoughts public in that condensed and encoded form. (I'd once considered actual code - some simple cipher to make the writing opaque to a casual observer - but I hadn't managed to develop one I could read fluently. It was a tradeoff.) It had never crossed my mind that anyone would be able to wander by and casually pluck them directly from my brain.

They. Were. *Mine*.

I was evaluating escape plans - ways to get to Phoenix, ways to get my grandma to take me in, ways to get anywhere but near the mindreader - but Alice rushed through a series of placating sentences: "Bella, he can't read *you*. You're completely opaque to him. You're the only one he's never been able to hear, but he can't, he really can't, Bella, it's *okay*."

I decided to provisionally act as though I believed her - there was no way I could be out of Forks for the long term in the hour remaining before eight o'clock anyway - and forced myself calm. I picked up my chair. I sat in it. I folded my arms. I frowned at Alice. "And everyone else?"

"In the family we're all used to it, we don't mind, it's useful sometimes," said Alice earnestly. "Like, he can see what I see - honestly, if he couldn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. He's very trustworthy - if he reads something we don't want shared he keeps it to himself. And Edward thinks other people - humans - are *boring*. He tunes them out ninety-five percent of the time. He can't turn it off entirely, but he doesn't have to *listen* any more than you have to concentrate on what people are saying at a crowded party."

"Right," I said grudgingly. "This has what to do with him being *curious* about me?"

"He won't go into much detail... but he's really frustrated that he can't read you. I'm not sure why, he thinks everyone else is so boring. But he's been watching you through other people's eyes -"

I recoiled again. "Alice, those are my *friends*. I *care* if Edward has been *reading their minds without permission*. That's not *okay*. It's also not okay for him to *eavesdrop* on private conversations."

"I'll tell him that you - I'll remember when he's nearby that you said that," Alice promised.

"Is that likely to matter?" I asked skeptically.

"Actually, yes," said Alice.

That was surprising. "Why would he care what I think of what he does?"

Alice wrung her hands, and now I realized that the stony scraping noise I'd heard at lunch was her *hands*, not a pebble in her boot. "I'm spilling the beans *so much*," she moaned.

"Didn't you come here specifically *to* spill the beans?" I asked. I got up to add more water to my lentils and stir them again.

"Only *most* of them. So you wouldn't... poke around too much. When I decided to come talk to you, the future where you talked to your father *did* go away. I don't see us moving anymore," she said defensively as I re-took my seat.

"Well, yes, I have no plans to send Charlie to annoy a pack of vampires who could pop him like a water balloon to cover their tracks," I said.

"We wouldn't hurt him..." said Alice uncertainly.

"I'm glad of that. I still wouldn't send him after you. Suppose you didn't hurt him, just startled him with one of your super-strength tricks or something, and he shot to subdue, and noticed that you are made of *rock*? And then he tried to go to the media? Do you let him go? Do you put him under house arrest in a bunker in Nunavut for the rest of his life and send forged notes to his friends claiming that he's Patient Zero of the chartreuse death plague and under quarantine at the CDC? Or do you have a snack? Suppose he followed you really persistently, thought you were up to something big, and ran into one of you stalking a delicious bunny? Snacktime? Would Charlie look better or worse than the bunny after that?"

"Um..." murmured Alice. "If he tried to go to the media, *we* wouldn't have to hurt him. There are other vampires - who *do* eat humans - and some of them take it on themselves to keep us a secret from humans."

I clonked my head on the table. "Right. How long do I have to live, dear helpful Alice?"

"Actually..." said Alice with great reluctance.

I sat up instantly. "I - dear lord, did you *genuinely* put my life in danger by telling me this? Are the vampire masquerade organizers going to swoop into Forks under cover of night and snuff me because you didn't want to *move*?"

"I don't see that!" squeaked Alice.

"*What do you see?*"

"*You're going to be a vampire!*" she shrieked.

I sat back.

I blinked.

Alice peered up at me through her eyelashes, looking a thousand times more fragile than she really was.

"Well," I said. "That's something. Turning is a get-in-on-the-secret-free card? No awful death?"

Alice nodded mutely.

"When?"

"That I don't know," she said. "It *will* happen... but I don't know when. You don't look a lot older in the visions I've had of it, though, so - soonish?"

Soonish. Incongruous sort of word to attach to the timing of my impending

vampirization.

I looked at the clock. Charlie would be home in half an hour. "I have a few more questions left," I said.

"Right," murmured Alice. "Fire away."

"One: What does Edward care what I think?" I asked. Alice grimaced; apparently she'd been hoping I'd forgotten that. "Two: What's Jasper's power? And three: Who are the vampire masquerade organizers, and what else pisses them off?"

Alice made a small, unhappy huffing noise at having to answer these, but apparently saw that I wasn't going to let it go if she kept evading. "Edward *likes* you," she said, getting the first part over with in three reluctant words. "Jasper can sense and affect moods in the people around him - it's not a mental effect, just physical, things like pulse rate. The "vampire masquerade organizers" are called the Volturi. They live in Volterra, Italy. We have to keep our secrets, which means that if we create new vampires they have to be kept under control and we can't be conspicuous ourselves. Inconspicuousness doesn't usually mean avoiding feeding on humans, it just means doing it discreetly - most vampires move around a lot so they don't kill too many in any one place."

I inhaled deeply, then let out a tired sigh. "I have a lot to process," I murmured. "I'll let you know when I think I've ground through it all. By some more conventional means than deciding to out your family."

"Thank you," Alice said wryly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye," I said absently, staring at the bright yellow kitchen cabinets as though if I did it hard enough I could count our plates. Alice let herself out.

At 11:09, it sleeted, and a few minutes later it began to drizzle slowly.

I did not sleep well.

I cut English the next morning. Just didn't go. I'd drop by after school to hand in my homework. I was at home, abusing my notebook.

STUFF I know

- Cullens (& Hales) are weird in many ways. (See last page.)
- Alice exhibits freaky abilities consistent with telling the future (van , interrupting-w/o-interrupting, showing up yesterday, CARDS & D) CE, weather so far (keep checking that)). No other hypotheses.

STUFF ALICE SAID

- Cullens & Hales are vampires.
- Vampires have superpowers, drink blood, are "conspicuous" in sun, are made out of humans (not fun), don't age.
- Some have extras: Alice can see the future (seen evidence of this), Edward reads minds (not mine), Jasper messes with (physical) components of mood (do not want).
- I am extra gummy smelling to Edward.
- Edward likes me. (WTF. This sort of thing did not happen in Phoenix. Worth cutting Govt. too to figure out general plan for this & Mike & Eric??)
- Lots of vampires around. Most eat people. Cullens & Hales (& their friends? didn't specify) don't.

- Bad idea to be around hunting vampires.
- Vampires sorta ruled (unclear on govt. system) by vampires called Volturi in Volterra, Italy. Volturi like secrets & kill to enforce rules.
- I will be a vampire. "Soonish". (!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

I drew arrows between things, circled key words in red, scribbled phrases and punctuation in the margins so small that I couldn't read them, and finally tore out the page and copied just the important parts onto the next sheet more neatly.

Then I turned the page again and thought of experiments.

I couldn't come up with an ethical way to test Jasper's special ability without letting him use it on me. Which I emphatically did not want to do. Enlisting an informed outside party would spill the family's secret if it was true; using uninformed outsiders would wrong them; using one of the other vampires would be a test of their acting skills, not necessarily Jasper's mood-altering mojo. After a moment's consternation, I decided to skip that test. I didn't think Alice would be lying or mistaken about Jasper's power *and nothing else*. If my other results all pointed at "yep, magical vampires", I'd take the specific claim about Jasper as part of the package unless I discovered that there was some ulterior motive such that Alice might have chosen that particular supernatural claim to fabricate. For safety reasons, I also did not invent a test for the "drink blood" claim. I came up with some relatively inexpensive tests of several of the other statements. They would not be Absolutely Conclusive; I didn't expect to publish anything in a journal, though, I just wanted to be sure that I wasn't reading way into a few little quirks.

1. Get a vampire to pick up something very big. Maybe a fallen log from the woods or a boulder if one can be found. (Fear damage to truck - not designed to be lifted)

2. Find a wide open space and a spot with a good view of it, measure it, get a vampire to beat the world sprinting record running it in plain sight. Or send one from several miles from my house to retrieve something from

in my house.

3. Quietly murmur things far away from vampires & test if they heard. (Not Alice, or Edward who can read Alice.)
4. Write things and hold them up to far away vampires & test if they read. (As above.)
5. Find out Edward's range. Write numbers, show them to a different vampire, have Edward sit in mindreading range but out of (vampire!) earshot & eyesight where he will write down what he reads in the other vampire's mind.
6. Look at a vampire in the sun.
7. Continue checking Alice's weather predictions. (All good as of morning 01/26/05)

I closed my notebook and looked at the clock. To make it to Government in time, I didn't have to leave for another four minutes, but if I went promptly I could drop off my homework at English first instead of waiting until the end of the day. I decided not to skip another class just to figure out why I was suddenly all kinds of popular with the opposite sex. I packed up my things and left.

The teacher didn't seem to care about my poor attendance and accepted my homework with only a small sigh, no ominous remarks about penalties for lateness. I went to my next class, and the two after that, without incident, and then came lunch.

Alice popped up next to me as I approached the door with Jessica again. "Hello, Bella!" she said in her characteristically musical voice. "Do you want to sit with us

today?"

"Okay," I said. I needed to present my test ideas.

"Bella," said Jessica, with an edge of a whine to her voice. Uncharitably, I thought *Aw, poor Jessica, the vampires are stealing your shiny new friend*, but I shoved that thought in a back corner where it wouldn't do any harm.

"Right, we were going to figure out when to study for the trig test," I said, turning to Jessica instead of impolitely continuing to face Alice as I had the previous day. I didn't think that was why she didn't like that I would be sitting with the vampires, but it was a kinder assumption, and it was a plan we'd actually had. "Uh, call me after school and we'll pick a time then? My plans are kinda," I made a wild gesture, "and I don't think I could nail down a spare couple hours now anyway. Okay?" I smiled apologetically.

"Okay," said Jessica in an automatic sort of tone, and I widened my smile a bit before following Alice to the vampire table. Halfway through the trip across the room, she remembered that I needed food and she needed props, and we detoured to fetch them, then resumed course.

Alice told me that I could whisper without interfering with her family's ability to hear me, while preventing any other humans from getting an earful; the vampires would speak loud enough to hear but choose moments when no humans were nearby to speak. Alice announced that this wouldn't happen to break up the flow of conversation much.

I wound up sitting at a corner, across from Edward, next to Alice. On Alice's other side was Jasper, who sat opposite Rosalie, and Emmett between her and Edward.

"Jessica is going to demand an explanation later," Edward murmured to me when I sat.

"Did you read her mind to find that out?" I asked, carefully cooling the hostility in my voice, and he started to nod, then glanced at Alice and stopped.

"Alice said she'd tell you," I said carefully, "but I should probably tell you myself. That is incredibly not okay. I understand that to whatever extent you can't help it, well, you can't help it, and I can't actually *verify* to what extent you can't help it and will give you some benefit of the doubt. But *please* don't, not on purpose, not my friends, not when it's not even important."

"Jessica's not much of a friend to you," he muttered. "She thinks some very unkind things."

"Who doesn't? Don't *check*," I added hastily.

"Angela," he answered anyway. "From memory, at least."

"Great, yay for Angela, but I think unkind things about Jessica occasionally too and

it doesn't mean I'm not much of a friend to her, I hope," I said. "She has flaws, I have flaws, there's lots to go around, sometimes people will notice them, and unless she chooses to act on her thoughts in ways that harm me, I'm not going to act on her thoughts in ways that harm *her*. Especially since I shouldn't even have access to that information. Her thoughts are *hers*. What kind of policy are you advocating, anyway? Weren't you considering *eating* me, the first day I was here? What an unkind thought, surely I should shun you."

Edward winced terribly, and Emmett chuckled. Jasper cracked a smile but didn't make a sound. Rosalie looked bored and Alice conflicted.

"Speaking of magical powers, Jasper, I never want to be on the receiving end of yours except in the unlikely event that I explicitly, verbally request help. Alice didn't make it sound involuntary - right?" I said, turning to the blond boy.

"It's voluntary," he confirmed, looking wary. "But I'm not sure I can promise that."

"If you can't promise that, then I need to find some other way to protect myself," I said firmly. "It is possible, but unlikely, that you will prefer whatever I come up with."

"Some emotional states aren't safe," Jasper said. "If you're flailing around hysterically near something sharp and also near Edward..." He trailed off as Edward made a small growling noise.

"Then..." I considered, wondering what he thought the obvious consequence of this situation might be. "Then I'll start bleeding and smell even more delicious and I'm a snack?"

"Right," said Jasper. "You'd want me to calm you down then."

"I'd want to *be calm* then," I said. "But not to be *made calm*. The reason I'm asking you to leave *my* emotions alone, instead of telling you to stay away from my friends and whatnot, is that I can deal with my own and most people can't. If I start flailing hysterically near something sharp and also near Edward, you can warn me that hysteria is dangerous to me at that time. You know, using words. I do *have* a self-preservation instinct; I would not *choose* to be hysterical if it would likely get me killed. Although," I said, turning back to Edward, "it may be that *you* should avoid simultaneously being around *me* and sharp objects."

"Edward *is* a sharp object," rumbled Emmett. He looked a lot more lighthearted than the other vampires.

"Point," I acknowledged. "Uh, no pun intended. But anyway, Alice, you see me being a vampire, definitely, not a corpse?"

"Yes," she said, "but even a very solid vision can change, if someone makes an unlikely decision."

"So it is something to be sure I'm sane about, but not something to rearrange my life over," I decided. "I wear a seatbelt; but I don't walk to school."

The vampires actually looked confused by my analogy. "Car accidents are a fairly common cause of death among us fragile folk," I reminded them, and comprehension dawned. Of course. If a vampire got in a car accident the worst case scenario - the only scenario worth worrying about - would be catching fire, and comparatively few accidents had that feature, in spite of cinematic embellishment making it look like cars were just *begging* to burst into flames on impact.

"Anyway," I said. "I find myself pretty much taking what Alice said at face value, given the available snippets of evidence. However, as she predicted, I would like a little more proof. I've got a list. Two tests require somebody other than Edward or Alice to be valid tests of the things I'm looking for, and one is specifically of Edward. Can't compel participation, but I would appreciate it."

"What've you got?" asked Emmett. I took out my notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to the large vampire. Edward leaned slightly to look at it.

"We're all going to do them except Rosalie," reported Alice. Rosalie sniffed.

"Aw, Rose," said Emmett. "Don't want to pick up a tree?"

"Or even let Bella admire you in the sun?" asked Edward in a low voice.

"No," said Rosalie, "I don't. You don't need me anyway; the four of you can satisfy her curiosity doing whatever tricks she likes if that's how you want to spend your afternoon."

"And Carlisle and Esme," added Alice. "They'll be there. But not this afternoon. We're doing it Thursday. There'll be a little sun around four p.m."

Rosalie snorted and Emmett rolled his eyes. I had a moment of unkind speculation about the depth of that relationship. But for all I knew they'd been together for seven hundred years and there were vast reams of subtext I couldn't detect; at any rate, I had no reason to act on information about their love lives, so it didn't bear investigation. "Tomorrow?" I said. "I guess that works; I need to study for trig with Jessica this afternoon."

Alice nodded. With the important orders of business out of the way I took a bite of my macaroni and cheese, then started peeling my orange. The macaroni had flecks of bacon in it. I wondered if vampire taste sensations were anything like human ones - I'd have to ask a non-Alice vampire about that. It would be sad to give up normal food.

Lunch ended, and I - flanked by Edward - caught up with Angela and Mike. Mike gave Edward an annoyed look, which Edward responded to with a tight-lipped smile and

narrowed eyes. None of us talked on the way, but I suspected we all had different reasons: Angela didn't mind silence, Mike didn't want to talk to Edward, Edward didn't want to talk to humans who weren't me, and I knew all of that and didn't want to oblige anyone to talk. We arrived at Biology and went to our respective seats.

The class was, as usual, something I'd done before - the syllabus indicated we'd get to some fresh material in the next unit, which I hoped would be interesting, because Biology was increasingly tiresome as we went over more and more that I already knew. It occurred to me to wonder why the vampires were in high school. They moved a lot - did they have to repeat high school over and over again? Or did they just do this occasionally, and at other times spend their days pretending to "homeschool" and secretly pursuing whatever interested them?

The latter would make more sense. I could see attending high school anew once every thirty years or so to get an update on the state of education - they would always need to be able to pull off having attended high school *recently* - but even if that was the goal, it would make more sense to go to college repeatedly and at least choose a different major each time. There was no reason the vampires couldn't pass as youthful college students, especially at a large, prestigious school that would tend to attract prodigies. Maybe they liked continuity more than I would have guessed, and preferred to segue into college with genuine secondary school histories. (Living as they did there had to be a source of forged records, of course, but they might not use them for absolutely everything.)

While the teacher talked about ribosomes I started speculating pointlessly on what sort of knowledge they must have acquired over their lives. Alice had hinted at knowing Korean. I couldn't think of any other clues, so I made things up to entertain myself, fabricating long lists of languages they'd speak and cities they'd explored and skills they had mastered and books they'd read and performances they'd attended - there was so much to *do* with life as soon as you took off a few of the bars off the cage.

The thought of how much time would be freed up by the mere lack of a need for sleep was staggering. Not only the time spent sleeping, but also the time preparing for sleep, waking up from sleep, ensuring the comfort of the place in which one might sleep, managing threats to the peaceful environment such that one might sleep, and dealing with the interruption to any long-term pursuits due to sleep. That, and there was little to no risk attached to anything they could do that didn't call for sunbathing. No reason not to skydive.

I was warming up considerably to the idea of joining their ranks. Three days of "not fun", a loss of my love of bacon, and the introduction of a temptation to slurp up the fluids of those around me notwithstanding, I wanted immortality and *real* twenty-four-hour days.

Matchmaking

Edward gave me a vaguely meaningful look, catching my eye as I left the biology room to go to gym. I wasn't sure what the meaning was supposed to be - perhaps if it was important he'd find me after school. As Mike and I walked towards our final class, looked like his brain was chewing on itself - I didn't envy him a bit - but he still didn't say anything. I decided that it was a priority to politely deflect him. I wasn't actually sure how reliable the vampires were about not eating people, especially since Alice had been worried, and goodness only knew how Edward would react to whatever he caught of ongoing teenage boy thoughts from Mike about a mutual crush.

Maybe I could set Mike up with someone else. If he liked me, that was some clue about his type - slender but without any visible athleticism, brown-haired, brown-eyed, symmetrical-ish but not particularly striking, that was me. I thought about the girls who sat with the group at lunch. Jessica seemed plausible; she was dark like me, little and cute and fairly popular. I didn't see them settling down and having five kids, but it wasn't hard to picture them going to watch a movie. I'd try to suggest him to her discreetly while we studied trig.

Eric was less obvious. While I started my yoga, I paired him in my head with others. There was Angela, but she'd made vague murmurs about liking some unidentified boy, and I didn't think from how she described him that it was anyone I'd met (even after I corrected for the fact that he was being described by a girl who liked him). I supposed Lauren might work, although I wasn't sure Eric deserved her - he was fairly nice, and Lauren was the least pleasant individual I'd yet encountered in Forks unless I made very broad inferences from what I'd seen of Rosalie. But she *was* pretty - had a sort of haughty class to her bearing and well-proportioned features. Her coloring wasn't like mine, at the moment, but she dyed her hair different colors from time to time and with any luck I could time my attempt for a week when she went dark. I wasn't sure if she'd have him, but she complained enough about being single.

I felt a little guilty about planning all this matchmaking more for my convenience than for the happiness of its objects. Upon noticing this guilt, I also noted that my brain was trying to rearrange its estimations of the couple quality to justify it: *Jessica and Mike would be cute together*, said my brain, *it's not like they couldn't work out, they're already friends, aren't they? Jessica didn't mention him in her list of top ten boys she wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole... And maybe Lauren is only girl-mean, and would be nice to a boy like Eric...*

I entered my next pose too fast, yanked something in my leg that wasn't meant to be yanked, and promptly moved to a more comfortable sitting posture to massage the discomfort away. Mike jogged over after perfunctorily soliciting teacher permission. "Are you okay, Bella?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Nothing broken, nothing dislocated, just an unhappy leg."

"You're sure? Do you want me to help you to the nurse?"

"If you could tell the teacher I'm going to just sit for the rest of class, that would be great," I told him, "but I don't think I need medical help - it'll be okay by the bell."

Mike nodded obediently and trotted off. He reminded me a little of a golden retriever.

He'll only be less happy if you let him simmer in his crush like this, said my brain. It's in his own best interest for you to send him away, and as long as he hasn't said anything yet, it would only be needlessly hurtful to address it directly. Set him up with Jessica for his own good.

I shook my head to myself, just a little, to put my next thought out into the world where it couldn't reshape itself like fog. (Taking out a notebook during gym might have made the teacher suspicious about my leg.) That wasn't why I wanted to put Jessica and Mike together. Even if it was true, it wasn't why I wanted to do it. Even if it contributed, and made me want to do it more than I would have, it wasn't necessary or sufficient. I had no doubt that if I'd wanted Mike for myself, I'd never have dreamed about sending Jessica after him because they'd be cute. I was sure that if Mike hadn't liked me, but had instead been pining after someone else implausible like Rosalie, I wouldn't have bothered with juggling his love life to make sure he wasn't marinating in unrequited attraction. I just didn't want his attention, and so I was trying to send it somewhere else. I refused to lie to myself about the nobility of the decision, even as it firmed up on my list of plans.

What sort of person am I? It didn't matter if I could make up flattering reasons for my choices. They had to be the *actual* reasons I made those choices, or they simply *didn't answer that question*. If I'd let myself believe the pretty justifications for it all, went along with the self-aggrandizing delusion, I'd be mistaken about the one topic I most adamantly refused to be mistaken about:

Inside Bella Swan's skull, who's driving this thing?

Edward caught up with me on my way to my truck. I limped only a little, and he didn't comment on it - I speculated that he'd seen the event through Mike's eyes and didn't want to let any evidence of that slip. "Jessica's forgotten that she's supposed to call you," he told me. That put a ding in my speculation. Maybe he'd seen the event and noticed that I didn't want help.

"I guess I'd better call her, then," I said. "Trig is so important for later life."

Edward chuckled, then grew more serious. "Why did you switch lab partners?" he asked softly.

"Because the one I was assigned looked at me like I'd recently killed his puppy, and then wasn't even in school the next day while I was still getting used to things, and Angela

and her previous lab partner didn't mind the switch," I replied.

"I'm very sorry I looked at you that way," he said sincerely.

"I don't understand why your wanting to have me for dessert would make you look *angry*," I said. "Help me figure that one out?"

He grimaced - he seemed to do that a lot, and it didn't do much to help his attractiveness, not that he needed help there. "I was angry that you were... straining my control. That you were making me less the person I try to be."

"The kind of person who doesn't poke straws into people during school."

"Right. No straws." He laughed ruefully. "It didn't make any sense to blame you. You didn't do anything. But it felt like you did."

I nodded. "That explains the anger. But before that you were looking at me weirdly too - like I was confusing. What was up with that?"

We'd reached my car by this point, and Edward looked pleased - maybe that I'd asked another question instead of hopping right in and rumbling away? "The fact that I can't read your mind," he said. "It's never happened before - that I noticed. It actually did take me a while to pick up on it with you, simply because I wasn't trying until I noticed that everyone in school was thinking about you. I wanted to know what all the fuss was about, and... couldn't tell."

I wasn't sure if Alice had told Edward - or thought near Edward - that she'd told me that he liked me. I elected not to bring it up on this occasion. "I guess mindreading is something you get used to after a while?"

"I couldn't do it, before," he said. "Carlisle realized what was going on before I did; I kept replying to his thoughts as though he'd spoken them aloud."

"Why do some of you have extra powers and some not?" I asked.

"We aren't entirely sure. In my case and Jasper's, at least - we can only guess about Alice - it's similar to strengths we had as humans. I was very good at reading people. Ironically, now that I have my abilities to rely on, I think I've deteriorated at reading faces," he said wryly. "Jasper was a leader, very charismatic - he could calm a crowd or rile them up even before he turned."

I nodded. "I'm having a little trouble guessing what would produce Alice's ability, if your trend isn't just a coincidence. Good pattern recognition? Extensive physics knowledge?"

Edward shrugged. "I don't know. At any rate, just because Jasper and Alice and I are the flashiest talents doesn't mean the others don't have unique abilities. Rosalie kept her beauty. Emmett's the strongest. Carlisle has an amazing ability to resist blood - he can

practice as a physician without a trace of discomfort. Esme brought with her the ability to love passionately."

"When I'm a vampire, will I be able to turn invisible?" I suggested. "Since I'm mentally invisible now?"

Edward growled a little in the back of his throat. "You don't have to be a vampire," he said. "Alice's visions are *never* certain. There has to be a way for you to stay human."

"Two things," I said. "First, there doesn't have to be such a way. The universe is *allowed* to be the way it is, even if the way it is, is a way that winds up with me being a vampire. Second, I kind of like the idea. I'm not sure when a good time will be, but it sure sounds like it comes with a *lot* of perks."

"No," said Edward. "Bella, any of us would rather be human -"

I started at him incredulously, and he cut off midsentence. "What? Okay, Alice said that the three day initiation process or whatever it is is "not fun". I could buy that it is sufficiently not fun that you wish it hadn't happened to you, don't think it was worth it. It'd be a little hard to believe, but not impossible. But why in the world would you want to go *back* once you've already been *through* that part? I don't know how old the rest of you are, but you realize Alice would be dead by now, right? Humans *generally* don't live to be a hundred years old. Whatever it is she misses about being human, *she wouldn't have it anymore anyway*. And there's nothing to love about being dead."

"Ask Rosalie what she misses," said Edward darkly.

"What will she tell me?" I asked.

"Her answer," he muttered.

I opened my truck door.

"Bella," said Edward coaxingly. I supposed he wanted me to stay.

"Nope," I said. "I don't want to have cryptic conversations. If that's the only kind you can have right now, I'm going to go home and call Jessica. See you tomorrow!" I said. I hoped I'd managed to inject enough cheer into my voice that I didn't sound vengeful. That wasn't the point; I didn't want to get back at Edward for being mysterious, I just didn't want to put up with the mystery because it was unpleasant. It would be nice if eventually he decided to stop being vague and unhelpful around me, but even if he didn't, I would still get more of what I wanted by leaving when his remarks took a turn for the uninformative.

Edward didn't try to follow my truck. I parked in the driveway, let myself into the house, and phoned Jessica. She admitted that the plans had completely slipped her mind,

but agreed that I should come over after dinner to study. I whipped up a sauce and started marinating the night's salmon in it. Fish cooked fast enough that it made more sense to start it after Charlie got home. I set a timer to remind myself to preheat the oven sufficiently far in advance, then did my homework for the day.

When I'd finished that, I took out my notebook and preserved my important insights for the day, notably the bit where I wasn't noble or generous for trying to set up my friends with each other. My timer rang while I was in the middle of wondering why Edward wouldn't want me to be a vampire. There wasn't an obvious motive. If he liked me, he ought to want me around; even if he thought he'd get sick of me, it wasn't a given that I had to stick with the Cullens for the rest of my eternal life. If I was turned, as an added bonus, I would no longer smell like food and he wouldn't have to constantly fight temptation in order to have me nearby safely. Perhaps there were some consequences to sanity that Alice hadn't mentioned, which I hadn't picked up on yet. (Although in retrospect I thought I had adequate explanations for their behavior, it didn't escape me that I'd considered Alice and Edward to be possibly crazy.) It did seem unlikely on the face of it that three solid days of "not fun", or a sudden inability to recharge with sleep, would have *no* ill effects. I'd have to inquire a little more carefully. But I shut my notebook and went to turn the oven on.

Charlie's timing was good: he arrived just as the beep indicating correct fish-baking temperature sounded. I put tinfoil on a baking sheet and fish on the tinfoil and the entire thing in the oven while asking him about his day. Forks did not have much in the way of crime. Charlie mostly caught speeders, and the occasional out-of-towner hiking buff who thought it'd be fun to cause trouble while away from home. Accordingly, his day had been uneventful. When he was done describing it in all its uneventfulness, I told him that I'd sat with the Cullens and Hales at lunch - he seemed happy about that. The ritual exchange of daily activity information complete, I started to sauté spinach; it went fast, and I wanted to time it to finish when the salmon did. Charlie turned on the TV to watch a few minutes of some sporting event until the oven timer rang.

After we'd finished eating, I called Jessica again to let her know I was on my way and confirm the best route to her address. It was only five minutes away, in the next neighborhood over. We studied, and after we'd reviewed most of the material, I said, "Jessica, thanks so much for helping me with this. Math's my worst subject apart from gym."

"Thanks," Jessica preened.

"You're a really great person, you know." The compliments sounded weird in my head. But I knew that was only a fact about my head. Compliments did not sound weird to the people who received them unless they already suspected ulterior motives. At any rate, I wasn't lying. Whatever Edward said, Jessica had reached out to me and provided very valuable companionship - and trig help. "I'm lucky to have you as my friend."

Jessica almost purred. "You're a sweetheart, Bella."

"How come you don't have a boyfriend?" I asked innocently.

Jessica pouted. "Nobody's asked me out in... oh, a couple of months."

Bullseye. "Who asked you then?"

"Daniel White," she told me. I didn't know him by name, although I probably would have recognized the face. "But I turned him down."

"Why's that?"

"I dunno, he's too... I don't like his voice," she said. I was pretty sure that whyevery she'd rejected Daniel, she had no idea and was making this up on the spot.

"Maybe you should ask Mike out," I said. "He's got a pretty nice voice."

"What?" Jessica seemed startled. "Well... I guess he does." Mike sounded sort of soulful and low when he spoke, like a country singer or something. Now that Jessica had gone and identified "voice" as a relevant criterion, this was very likely to work in his favor. "But I don't ask guys out except when it's the girls' choice dance."

"Huh? Why not?" I asked, feigning confusion. "It's the twenty-first century."

"Well, yeah, but..." She trailed off, considering. I didn't say anything for fear of spoiling what I guessed was a useful train of thought. "He does sound nice, doesn't he?"

I nodded, smiling encouragingly.

"Well, I might, I don't know," she said, tossing her curls. That was probably the best I was going to get this soon. I nodded again and pretended sudden distraction by a cosine.

I sat with my human friends at lunch on Thursday, after Alice caught me at the door and promised to call later about "hanging out". Jessica didn't ask Mike out, but she did sit next to him and keep up a conversation that was more with him than the rest of the table.

Angela asked me if I'd seen the rainbow earlier. I had. I was starting to think that the demos of the vampires' powers planned for after school were pointless; I already had an awfully strong expectation that they'd be exactly as Alice had described them, and so I didn't anticipate that the tests would *teach* me anything the way tests ought. It almost reminded me of the "experiments" science classes did - the book would tell you a procedure to follow, and if you got a different result than the book said, what that meant was *you set it up wrong*, not that you'd learned something revolutionary about physics or whatever. I actually *liked* science, but not repetition - the things they gave students didn't even approach the possibility of surprise afforded official replication studies.

What I *was* looking forward to was getting to the edge of what the vampires knew

about themselves, and joining them in learning more fine details. Maybe they had a combined age of many centuries, but there was a vast hypothesis-space, and I didn't have reason to guess that any of them had unusually experimental dispositions. For example, I would have been willing to bet money that they'd never checked whether Edward's range was affected by magnets or whether Alice could be thrown off by someone who kept being distracted while trying to make a decision.

I wondered, briefly, if Jasper's power would work on me even if he tried it. I was uncommonly good at moderating my own emotions. If he tried to calm me when I *chose* to be angry - or, more likely given the circumstances such a trial would take place in, when I chose to be *really creeped out* - how well would it function? If he really only affected non-mental things, I might be just as susceptible as anyone. But I was skeptical that purely physical intervention could exert as much fine control as the vampires had hinted he had. Also, I had the impression that his power worked on vampires too. They didn't have heartbeats to change - what *was* he messing with, when he adjusted vampire moods?

Why couldn't Edward read me? How far ahead could Alice see? In what ways, if any, were her visions useful even when they depicted futures that wouldn't be? What powers would *I* have as a vampire? Did vampires ever have duplicate special powers? What others were there in the world? Did their standard-issue abilities like strength and speed vary much? (Edward had said Emmett was the strongest of the family, but not by how much or how common variations like that were.) How did eating humans as opposed to not affect their psychology, their physiology, their powers? How did turning work? Why did their eyes change color? What made them all so pretty? How did they manage to be flexible without shedding rock dust everywhere, with their skin the way it was? Did their hair grow? What were the social customs of vampires in general, and how did the family I knew differ? How had the Volturi come to be in charge and who worked with them? Why would humans smell more appealing than other species - what was it about our blood?

There was so much to *wonder* about. Sitting in Biology instead of racing out with a truckload of notebooks and investigating vampires for a sleepless week straight was like forcing myself not to scratch a terrible itch when I had perfectly good fingernails. I took the risk of pulling out the notebook I had on me and writing down my questions, which helped a little; at least none of them would get lost, and when I had the chance, I could follow up on them. Angela didn't seem curious, but Edward must have heard my pencil scratching and been able to tell it was me, because he swiveled around to look. He took in the picture of me and my notebook in a swift glance, then turned around again.

Biology came to a merciful end. I tried not to think of more questions about vampires during gym, given the increased suspiciousness and physical awkwardness of notebook use from Child Pose. I was partially successful: I dreamed up only variations and extrapolations of the questions I'd already written down, which I expected to reconstruct when I next looked at my notes even if they slipped my mind first. When gym ended, I paused to scribble down useful keywords like "koinophilia??" and "evolution?!"

and "(& fingernails)", then proceeded out the door to head for my truck.

Edward caught up with me again; I sensed a pattern in the making. "Hello, Bella," he said.

"Hello, Edward," I replied.

"What do you write in your notebooks?" he asked.

"I make a habit of not sharing that information," I said.

"Hmm," he said. "Why shouldn't I walk away because you're being cryptic?"

"Go ahead, if you like," I said, shrugging. "I want not to tell you about my notebooks more than I want to talk to you. I'm going to see you again in like an hour for the are-you-guys-kidding-me check, unless Alice was mistaken."

He didn't seem to like this answer, so I continued, "Besides, I didn't say, "Hey, Edward, you should make a decision based on something I wrote in my notebook," and then refuse to tell you what I'd written. Whereas you apparently think I should find something about Rosalie informative to what I choose to do with my life, but won't tell me what it is - and you *didn't* justify this with something like Rosalie preferring you not share her personal information with me."

"She probably would," he said.

"Then you shouldn't tell me her personal information. It might even be why you *didn't* tell me, for all I know. But you didn't say so then. And if you knew you weren't going to tell me, there was no reason to bring it up. There might have been a reason to talk to Rosalie, and ask *her* to talk to me, or for permission to tell me yourself. But no reason to mention that the information *exists* if you won't give it to me and aren't even sure I can get it from the right source."

He looked a little nonplussed. "I'm sorry."

"I accept your apology." We arrived at my truck. I opened the door.

"Leaving again?" he said.

"I don't know how long to expect to be doing science to you guys, so I want to get home and make sure my dad will come home to a sandwich. I suppose if you want to you could join me, since we're headed to the same place later." I shrugged again. I was trying to look nonchalant, but I was starting to be a bit uncomfortable with the fact that Edward had a crush on me. It would be so *complicated*, at least until I was a vampire. In no small part, this was because he craved my blood: he could apparently keep the craving under control in normal social circumstances, but I didn't know how his restraint would hold up

with significant physical contact.

And if - after I did a lot more thinking - I decided I wasn't interested, I wasn't sure if I would be able to get rid of him.

He got into the passenger seat while I tried to conceal the alarm this notion yielded. I pulled out of the parking lot and onto the highway, trying to postpone further consideration until I wasn't in control of a moving vehicle. It would be much safer to wonder if I was free to make a choice while holding a jar of mustard instead.

I did not get us - well, myself - killed on the way to my house. Edward complained about my obedience to the speed limit; I didn't talk. He followed me into my house and took a chair while I busied myself with sandwich ingredients.

I had no ability whatsoever to act in self-defense if Edward, or any vampire, decided physical confrontation was in order. It would be a less even fight than me versus a housefly: those things were hard to catch. The vampires were all so much faster than me that I'd be about as hard to hit as the side of a barn. This would be true even if I were not the reigning champion of the World Clumsiness Cup. It did not only apply to situations in which a vampire decided to kill me: I was just as vulnerable to any scenario in which one decided to restrict my movement, injure me, take my belongings, or otherwise help him or herself to anything whatever.

Assembling Charlie's sandwich was calming, and I started making a second one when I was done with the first, half for that reason and half because I knew he could probably eat two. With a slightly cleared head, I reasoned to myself that I was actually in more or less this position with most humans, too. I *was* World Clumsiness Champ, not particularly strong, or fast, or able to walk across flat and stable surfaces. I did not have any reason to expect to walk away triumphant if, say, Mike or Eric decided that they wanted to fight me.

I started making a third sandwich, to wrap up and take with me for dinner, on the assumption that the vampires wouldn't have any normal food. *I* was vampire food. If a "regular" vampire saw me hanging out with Edward, they'd assume he wanted his supper kept warm for later and that was the only reason I had a pulse. And this fact made Edward more dangerous than Mike or Eric.

Other facts that made Edward more dangerous were his unaccountability, his undeflectability, and - ironically - the fact that I wasn't sure I *didn't* want him back. He was unaccountable because, if something went pear-shaped and I went home, telling Charlie would accomplish nothing: my father was as vulnerable as I - this wasn't true of any human, at least not predictably. He was undeflectable because he could read minds: if I'd tried to send Jessica after him (ignoring for thought experiment purposes that I was pretty sure she'd tried herself and been turned away) he'd see that in her thoughts as soon

as she made her first insinuation, and realize what was going on.

And because I couldn't say for sure that I wasn't interested and wanted him gone, I didn't *want* to do something drastic like skip town in the middle of the night and move to Thailand. That might protect me from all the nasty dangers associated with being a vampire's object of affection; I suspected it would at least make me *hard* to follow, albeit perhaps not impossible with enough money and magic. It might make me not worth pursuit, if I did a good enough job of it. But I couldn't avoid those dangers while keeping the perks.

"Think you've made enough sandwiches?" he said wryly from his chair in that honeyed voice. I looked at my hands and noticed that I'd absently taken a fourth pair of bread slices.

"Oops," I said, putting the bread back. "Yes, I've made enough." I put Charlie's two sandwiches on a plate under plastic wrap in the fridge, then bagged the third and put it in my knapsack. "I suppose we can go to your place now and meet up with your family."

"Not yet," he said. "Carlisle will be at work for a bit longer, and wanted to meet you before we started. We'll be there in plenty of time if we leave in half an hour, even obeying the speed limit." He made a scoffing noise with the last phrase.

"You do know my father's a cop," I pointed out, sitting down.

"Yes, I know. I seem to recall that you wear a seatbelt, too," he said.

"I'm beginning to think that I wouldn't be very happy about it if I let you drive me anywhere," I said.

"I'm probably a safer driver than you," he challenged. "More experience, better reflexes."

"And a worse collision if you do crash," I said, "if you go at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. This is beginning to be the sort of argument that can only be settled with math, though, and I'm saving my tolerance for math up for trig homework later."

"I should probably take us to my family's home, though," he said.

"Are you going to go a hundred and fifty miles an hour? Given that Alice sees me not-dead, I think I'd rather accept whatever additional risks are associated with me driving than experience the terror."

"If you think you're immortal already, why would you be terrified?" he asked, sounding unhappy - still about the fact that I expected to be a vampire, or about the shallower present issue? I couldn't tell.

"I'm not entirely perfect about only having emotions that make sense," I said. "Anyway, I *prefer* not to travel at a hundred and fifty miles an hour in a car whether it is actually dangerous to me or not. I prefer not to do things that would scandalize Charlie; I prefer not to do things that would make onlookers believe themselves to be in danger; and I kind of like the scenery around here. The fact that I would be terrified to travel at a hundred and fifty miles an hour makes me more effective at arranging not to so travel by automatically reminding me to slow down if the speedometer drifts too far right, which means that keeping the fear makes me better at getting what I want."

This speech appeared to leave Edward nonplussed again. "You're an extraordinary person, Bella," he said after a silence.

"Thank you." Renée was always insistent that compliments were gifts to be accepted and that it was rude to turn them down, however silly they were; I agreed and made a consistent effort to put the theory into practice. I'd gotten over the fact that I had a lot in common with my parents when I was fifteen. There were well-established and robust mechanisms ensuring that I'd resemble them, and when I wasn't in the middle of a fit of teenage angst, I loved my parents and knew there were lots of worse people to take after in the world. This didn't mean I didn't work on excising their worse qualities - Renée had a flightiness that I consciously opposed in myself, for example, although I had so little trouble doing so that I thought perhaps I just took after Charlie in that department. (He was a steady, responsible sort.)

"You're welcome." There was another silence. I wondered if it was challenging to talk to Edward just because I knew that he liked me and he didn't know that I knew (I thought). It was good for other reasons that he hadn't spit it out, though, for the same reason that it was good that Mike and Eric were silent on their analogous issues; it gave me more time to think.

He was too *gorgeous*. That was the word Jessica had chosen when I'd first asked her about the Cullens, and that was precisely the right one, although it had many equally serviceable relatives such as *beautiful* and *yummy*. I'd noticed that much even back when I thought he hated me; it would have been hard to miss. He had a voice to match. I'd only be deluding myself if I tried to pretend that it didn't make my eyebrows jump a little when I'd noticed he was rich.

Yes, yes, shallowness ahoy, but it mattered more to be *correct* than to pretend myself deep. If I tried to convince myself that I found Edward interesting for *deep* reasons, it would lead down a path of feedback loops and foolish reasoning that *could* literally kill me. I would be more likely to take stupid risks with Edward if I fancied myself up to my eyebrows in transcendent romantic adoration. I would be less likely to behave like an idiot around him if I recognized that he was a hot (well, cold), rich guy who sounded like an angel and had sexy superpowers and that these things were not irrelevant to me.

Taking a step back from all of these admittedly relevant facts, I turned to more practical thoughts: none of the qualities on that list were unique to Edward. The

combination wasn't unique to Edward. The combination wasn't even unique to Edward *among people I knew*, although his brothers were both taken and neither similarly approximated what I considered my "type" except for the fact that I'd never dated. Edward was not the only person interested in me, even as of the previous week and a half. If he had other, rarer personal traits that would also appeal to me, I didn't know about them yet.

At any rate, there was simply no call to rush anything. We were both going to live forever. And once I was a vampire, too, I'd be better able to separate the part where maybe I wanted Edward from the part where maybe I didn't have any other choice.

"Time to go," Edward said after a very, very long conversational lull.

"Alice said she'd call," I pointed out.

Edward grinned. "I'm the phone," he said.

Oh. "I see. You can drive if you promise not to speed."

"I actually thought we'd go on foot. It would be hard to get your truck to the spot Alice sees us at, so we couldn't drive all the way there anyway."

"I don't actually know how far away your house is -" I began, thinking to protest on behalf of my knees and feet and other parts easily made sore and inspired to rebellion.

"Too far for you to walk," cut in Edward, and I made a small huffing noise, but he *was* telling me something I wanted to know, and I could always inform him later that he shouldn't interrupt me. "At least if you wanted to get there today. I'll take you."

"You propose to *carry* me a distance of several miles," I said skeptically. Of course he could physically lift something of my size and run that far. But could he carry *me* like that - picking me up and hauling me around, putting me awfully near his nose - without wanting to take a bite just a bit too much? It didn't sound very comfortable, either.

"I'm faster than your truck, Charlie would be as scandalized as could be if he knew that you're associating with vampires anyway and it won't get any worse if you let me cart you around, I can avoid any easily frightened onlookers, running very fast is not illegal, and the scenery at our destination is nicer than anything you'd see from the highway," he said, smiling patiently. "Besides, then we can skip the part of the tests where you have to find a good vantage point to watch us run an interesting distance."

These things were likely all true. "Are you sure that this won't make me extra likely to arrive needing a visit to the Red Cross's juice and cookies table?"

It took him a moment to piece that together, and then he looked solemn. "I *won't* hurt you, Bella," he said softly.

I closed my eyes, screening off some distracting and irrelevant input about the color of his eyes (gold, still). "I am aware that you do not *prefer* to hurt me, that you know it would be wrong to hurt me, and that you will try not to hurt me. I'm also aware that when I was seven I did not prefer to steal, and knew it was wrong, and tried not to, and still wound up with Renée's bake sale contribution half on my face and half in my stomach, because chocolate is very delicious. And I'm aware that you find me *very delicious*."

I opened my eyes again. Edward was looking at me sadly, hurt by my mistrust. "Alice doesn't see you dead," he reminded me.

I frowned to myself, retrieved Alice's weather predictions from my pocket, and confirmed that it was misting just like she'd said to expect for this thirty-four minute period of Thursday afternoon. I folded up the paper again and put it away. "So I'm given to understand."

"Is there anything else I can do to help you feel safe?" he asked.

This was a fair question. And the obvious answer, *don't eat me*, was silly: if he ate me, I would not be afraid anymore. "Let me think," I requested, and he nodded.

I thought. Edward already knew about the notebooks, so I supposed I could write without giving up information I wanted to keep to myself, but decided against it. First, it would be a poor choice to needlessly tease him with the fact that the notebooks were for my eyes only. Second, I'd heard of a trick where even a human could guess what was being written: one gave someone a big squeaky marker, looked away, and told them to write a number from one to ten, and listened for duration and number of strokes of the pen. It was a lot better than chance, and I guessed that vampire hearing could probably distinguish all the letters of the alphabet if the vampire in question cared to try. One trait I did not ascribe to Edward was the tendency to scrupulously avoid picking up on information that was available to him.

"How often do humans smell extra tasty to vampires in general?" I asked.

"Not often. You're the only one, for me - I've been a vampire since 1918," he supplied as I opened my mouth to ask. "Emmett says it's... happened... to him twice, since turning in 1935. One stronger than the other. No one else I know. But," he added reluctantly, "neither of Emmett's were as strong as you."

"Did Emmett eat his two?" I asked baldly, and Edward nodded slightly, frowning and not looking at me. "And have you, Edward, personally ever eaten a human?" I was actually not sure what the answer to this would be. If Emmett belonged to the family and had eaten at least two people, Edward could too; clearly they did not eject relatives for small lapses like murder.

He hesitated. Just a little too long.

"I'm going to drive," I said. "Alice or someone else can meet us and carry me over

the tricky section." And I got up and stalked towards my car.

Vampires 101

There was no point in hating, resenting, or even shouting at Edward, or Emmett, or any other Cullen family vampires who had slipped up in the past. It would not bring any victims back to life. To the extent that any of them thought much of my opinion, they could guess it. Adding strident yelling wouldn't be a significantly greater deterrent. And I didn't even know if it was *reasonable* to expect perfect behavior from vampires. How many were there in the world? It didn't matter very much. "Most" vampires ate humans. And all vampires were made *from* humans, most of whom were not actionably inclined to murder. Something about the transition - something I didn't know much about - turned humans into blood-drinking killers most of the time, and the Cullens, plus their friends from Denali, were doing their best to avoid it. They could not be turned back into a less bloodthirsty species. All that was left was damage control. I took a quick assessment of myself and determined that even if I'd had the ability, I hadn't the stomach to do the family in to protect future victims of unknown number.

There *was* a point in seriously assessing whatever factor made it happen, and determining whether or not I could handle it, before *I* turned in my mortality. I had to ask them about that. I considered starting with Edward, but it would be too awkward - Alice seemed safer to start with.

Edward obliged me with details anyway after we'd been on the road for a minute. "Left up here," he murmured. "It wasn't... *as* bad as you might be thinking," he said.

"I didn't have a specific body count in mind," I said levelly. "Was it just one?"

"No," he said. "No, it wasn't. But - I know you don't like that I can read minds, but I can, and that let me be selective in some ways." I made a skeptical face, although I didn't take my eyes off the road. Edward continued. "When Carlisle turned me, at first, of course I could read him. His perfect sincerity. I understood immediately why he lived the way he did. It was hard, but for almost a decade I had a perfect record. And then I decided - I'm not going to pretend to you that I snapped and in a fit of passion did what I did. I decided to experiment with a different way of life. But I was selective, like I said. I went to big cities, found some truly evil people. I told myself that if I happened to run across a murderer stalking a girl down an alley, and I saved her, then surely, I wasn't so terrible. It was only a rationalization. I'm still a murderer. But..." He paused, awaiting my reaction.

"Oh," I breathed. That was... that was better. He seemed to think it was *worse* that it had been a conscious choice instead of a moment of failed control. I didn't agree. This was partly because it made me safer. If he decided to eat humans again, well, I was a little more *appealing* than some potential victims, but I was appealing in an impulse way more than in a deliberative way. If I wasn't in a room with him, and he mulled to himself that he really preferred to go back to munching humans, it would be more likely that he'd hie himself off to another big city, find another suitably depraved victim, and eat them instead. He knew I had family - in particular, Charlie could make things inconvenient; even a dead cop who went abruptly missing or dead-with-no-blood-left could get the

attention of other police. And I suspected that Alice would be at least annoyed with him if he ate me.

So I was likely to be safer from him than I'd thought. It would still be foolish to tempt impulse too rashly. For example, I still did not think it would make sense to have him carry me at high speed when the wind would waft extra-concentrated Essence of Bella right into his lungs.

"So after a little under five years of that," said Edward guiltily, "I went home to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me back with open arms. Like the prodigal son. It was far more than I deserved."

"That actually makes me feel considerably safer," I said honestly. I was about to ask why he didn't make a habit of going on with the Batman routine sans complimentary beverages - at night, perhaps, when he didn't have to sleep and for the thematic appropriateness - but then I realized. That would be conspicuous. To *eat* humans was fine, and the Volturi apparently cared not a whit for selection algorithm. To tie them up and deposit them unbloodied with lists of their crimes pinned to their shirts, at the doorstep of the local police department... would probably put a dent in the collective vampire artifice.

Edward looked bewildered. I clarified: "I feel safer in comparison to when I didn't know the details. Not in comparison to when I didn't realize you'd killed anybody at all."

"You're a very puzzling girl, Bella Swan," Edward muttered. "Take this exit. Must you drive so slowly?"

I was going precisely the speed limit. "I don't think my truck could take much more, honestly," I said. "Perhaps I should have let you drive, given that - since you do have the better reflexes between the two of us."

"I think that would be worse. I like to drive fast," said Edward, grinning slightly. "It's not quite as awful to be driven slowly as it would be to drive this pokey thing myself."

"All right, then I'm the designated driver," I said.

"Next time you should just let me run you there."

I wasn't aware of plans for a next time, but I supposed the way things were going I'd visit the vampires again eventually. "I'm not sure you ought to pick me up, even with the feeling safer bit," I said. "If you run, that'll just blow my scent in your face unless I ride piggyback - and I'm not at all confident I could hold on piggyback at high speed."

"Did Alice tell you during Vampires 101 that we don't actually have to breathe?" asked Edward.

Oh, that was interesting. "You don't breathe?"

"We do," he corrected. "We can smell, which requires breathing, and we talk, which requires air. But if we don't care to do either of those things, it won't harm us to simply stop breathing." He paused. "That's how I managed the first day you came to Biology. As soon as I got ahold of myself I didn't breathe until the class ended."

"And this wouldn't make it any harder for you to run?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Air isn't fuel to us the same way it is to humans."

"Perhaps, then, although I have to admit it doesn't sound comfortable." That part would apply to his siblings just as much, though. "But if you were doing that we couldn't be having this charming conversation about how you can do that."

That got an outright laugh, which added charming color to the sentence "pull in at the big house there". I rolled up the driveway, admiring the home. It was indeed big. I'd noticed that we'd actually left Forks proper, having bridged the Calawah River and continuing north through scarcely marked roads. A good chunk of the drive had been through very thick forest. I wondered if the vampires had had to clear a lot of trees to make driving possible. The ride was surprisingly smooth; they probably didn't care to jostle their pretty car every time they drove to school. The house itself was a faded white, with graceful architecture, and when I got out of the truck I noticed that the entire south wall was one enormous window: just glass. The effect was very striking.

"Do you like it?" asked Edward, shutting the passenger behind him after he hopped out. I nodded, smiling. "Esme has a fondness for architecture," he said affectionately.

"She built this house?" I could see it now - a vampire easily lifting beams, pushing nails into their proper places by tapping them like piano keys, cutting glass by stroking it with one of those stony fingers.

"Restored it," Edward said. "She likes to fix up old historical places. But there's a lot of her in it." He cocked his head slightly. "Here she comes now," he went on. "Bella, it looks like it's time for you to meet my parents."

Carlisle and Esme exited their house, closed the doors behind them, and then - having no reason to hide their speed - appeared before us, from thirty feet away, too quick for me to follow their paths. When they stopped, Carlisle had an arm around Esme's shoulders and she had one around his waist; they looked very picturesque indeed.

The good doctor looked like his biggest problem in life was probably having nurses and patients hit on him. He looked like he was in his twenties - his *early* twenties. The only way I could imagine him ever passing for thirty-five would be by living someplace for fifteen years and betting on the sheer unbelief of the people around him. He was blond, his skin the same chalk color as the others, and his eyes were black - not gold. I needed to ask what that meant - it probably wasn't random. He wore a warm, paternal

smile, which he turned on Edward first before looking at me.

Esme looked a little older, and that probably helped with the subterfuge, but she was still clearly young and lovely. (Did no one ever turn octogenarians? Or did the turning process cure wrinkles?) Her hair was a dark reddish blond - sort of butterscotch - and she had topaz-colored eyes, darker than the golden color on Edward but not as black as Carlisle's. She was roundish - not heavy, but huggable-looking (which I knew wasn't accurate) and several inches shorter than her husband. Everything about her face - heart-shaped and every bit as pretty as Alice's - made her look motherly; it didn't surprise me that it was the role she occupied.

"Welcome, Bella," said Esme in a warm, loving voice to match her appearance. "We're so glad to finally meet you." I felt comfortable at once - no Jasperish sorcery, just my lie detectors going completely quiet as they listened to Esme express that she was pleased to have me at her home. I smiled back, nearly grinning, and thanked her.

Carlisle extended his hand for me to shake. "It's good of you to come," he said. "I understand we'll be demonstrating various features of the species for you?" He had a kind, soft voice, which I imagined helped greatly with his bedside manner.

"That's the plan, although I'm beginning to think they're redundant," I admitted. "I'm pretty sure you're all actually vampires who actually have superpowers and will be able to pick up any heavy object I happen to point out to you, plus everything else my list calls for. I mostly haven't canceled just because you were all led to expect the tests to happen, and so I don't feel like an idiot in the unlikely event that you later turn out to be stage magicians with poor circulation."

Carlisle laughed. "It's no trouble," he said, "and it will give us a chance to get to know you better. Alice has informed us that you're going to be part of the family."

I wasn't sure if he meant that Alice thought I'd be a vampire, or that she had recently seen me marrying Edward or something like that - and with Edward standing right there, I couldn't ask. So I just smiled back at him and said, "Where are we headed?"

"The clearing where we play baseball," Edward said. "Emmett, Alice and Jasper are already there." He paused, and then said, "Esme, would you carry her?"

I had not expected that. We'd discussed the fact that he didn't need to breathe - was there some other reason it was dangerous that he'd only just thought of? He'd been all for the idea minutes earlier. Esme didn't look like it made a lot of sense to her either, but she looked to me for confirmation, and I nodded. She took two steps toward me and then scooped me up gently in her arms, one behind my back and one under my knees. It wasn't as uncomfortable as I would have thought, although I wouldn't have chosen to sit that way while trying to read or otherwise relax.

Esme looked to Carlisle, who nodded, and the three vampires took off.

Esme was fast. And she didn't even seem to be pushing herself. The impression I had of her gait was that it resembled a jog more than a run, even as she moved through the trees so fast that they blurred around me and wind forced me to close my eyes to the indistinguishable color. But her strides were very level - I bobbed up and down a little bit, but overall found the experience less physically exhilarating than a typical roller coaster. On a mental level, it was *really* cool that a vampire was carrying me through the woods at high speed. I'd expected to be terrified, but Esme was calming. Perhaps that was why Edward had asked her to be the one to carry me.

After about a minute and a half of gently whizzing along, Esme came to a halt and I opened my eyes. Carlisle, Edward, and Esme, who was still holding me, all stood at the edge of a clearing about twice the size of a baseball stadium. (I had seen one of those up close while Phil had been attempting to bond with his future stepdaughter.)

Emmett, Alice, and Jasper were already present. Alice skipped up to me, grinning, and Esme put me down. "I think it would be most impressive if I were the one to pick something heavy up," Alice said brightly. "Since I'm smaller than everyone else. Want to go hunting for a good log or do you just want me to tell you which one you're going to pick?"

I didn't really want to go hunting for a good log. It was wet out, and I didn't care very much anymore about doing controlled tests. "Lead the way," I told Alice, and she traipsed back into the forest with me following. It was difficult to pick my way through the thick undergrowth, and I was glad I was in unfavorite pants.

The log was a monstrosity. The tree that had died to create it must have been many times older than me. I gave it a kick; it was sturdy, not particularly rotted, and didn't budge a bit with the force my human leg could offer. It was satisfactory. I stepped back - I thought Alice could pick up the tree, but I didn't think she could prevent damp debris from falling off of it as she did, and I didn't care to have to pick it out of my hair.

Alice sauntered up to the log, found a good spot in the middle to lift it from, and hefted it high above her head in a single motion. Leaves, bits of bark, and droplets of moisture rained down around her; she shook her head back and forth so fast that her face was a blur, shaking off most of it. Then, just to top it all off, she started doing a little Celtic-ish dance while carrying the dead tree. It was a reasonably comical sight. Tiny Alice - two inches shy of five feet, her limbs a fraction of the diameter of the log she was holding, leaping about and kicking the air as though unburdened and also the star of Riverdance. I laughed, and Alice tossed the tree into the air, swept herself into a curtsy, and caught it as it fell. Then she swiftly dug a hole in the dirt with one foot - I winced on behalf of her shoe - and *planted* her log, root end first, in the ground. It sank quite a bit deeper than the hole should have allowed, and stayed in place once she let go.

My mouth was hanging open by the end of her performance, and Alice smirked at me. "Cross off test one?" she asked smugly.

I managed to get my jaw closed, and nodded at her. I followed her back to the clearing. "Edward is fastest," said Alice, "and it's pretty flat here, so we probably don't need to put you up a tree so you can see."

Wordlessly and with the edge of a smile on his face, Edward walked into my field of vision, spread his arms as though to simply remark that he was present, and then spun 180° like a top and was at the far edge of the field in a moment. Once there, he paused long enough to be visible and just barely recognizable, waved, and was back at my side before my vision had completely refocused.

"Wow," I breathed. I was beginning to think that the only reason Alice hadn't seen me calling off the "experiments" on account of uncuriosity halfway through was because they were just that fascinating to watch. I didn't want to know what would happen, I wanted to *watch* it happen. With a pang, I realized this made the entire exercise considerably more like what Rosalie had called it - "tricks". But Alice had seemed to be having fun, at least. It was at least possible that they thought it was amusing to show off to someone who didn't find their abilities commonplace. At any rate, none of them had complained much about Rosalie's declining to participate, so I had to conclude that they were all there of their own free will.

Edward smiled at me. It was somewhat dazzling, and I found that I needed to check my list of tests to find what was next. It was the vision and hearing ones - not as spectacular, but impressive in their own right. I explained the protocol, and Jasper volunteered silently for the first: he raced to the opposite edge of the clear spot - staying in sight - almost as fast as Edward had done. (I wasn't sure if my impression that he went slower was due to my having been told that Edward was faster, or due to Jasper deliberately going under his top speed, or due to my actually having the ability to detect a difference in vampiric levels of rapidity over short distances.) I muttered under my breath a series of digits that I'd invented and memorized earlier: "two, five, two, one, eight, eight, zero, three, nine, four, two, three, seven, one, five, six, zero, four. All done."

Jasper zipped up to me, took my list of tests and my pencil deftly from my hands, and wrote "252188039423715604" next to the third description. He returned the objects and went to stand next to Alice.

Carlisle obliged me with the vision test, reading from across the field handwriting so tiny that I could barely make it out with my eye right next to the paper.

Emmett was Edward's source of information for the mindreading test. The range of mental hearing was a few miles for familiar "voices" like Emmett's, if they were being deliberately sought, and so Edward simply went back to the Cullen house in order to attend to the various things I showed his brother. As with the other tests of senses, Edward returned to the group and reproduced everything with perfect fidelity.

"Do vampires," I wondered aloud when I'd heard Edward's verbatim recital, "have perfect recall? Is that another one of your things?"

"Yes," said Edward, "but only of memories we form as vampires. It's very hard to hold onto human experiences."

"That must be *nice*," I said with an envious moan, checking off #5. "Alice, when can we expect sunshine?"

Alice said serenely, "Right... about... now." As she spoke the last word, she pivoted and shoved Esme a few feet forward; Esme, though she looked startled, still kept her footing and managed to look graceful in her trajectory. It took her right in the middle of a single sunbeam that broke the clouds overhead.

Esme, posed with perfect stillness once she noticed the sun and realized what Alice had done, shone with brilliant color. No longer chalk - she was crushed diamonds, each speck of her skin throwing light from a thousand facets. She'd been beautiful. Now she was spectacular. I could barely take my eyes off her.

Esme looked at me and smiled. "It's a pity Rosalie wasn't here," she said, as the sunbeam was obscured by encroaching clouds and the gem sparkle faded. "That's one thing she does like."

I could imagine. It would be implausible to be as gorgeous as Rosalie without developing at least a little vanity. Edward's comment about letting me admire her in the sun made more sense now - I enjoyed a brief mental image of a golden-haired statue of a goddess showering everything around her with tiny rainbows.

Yep. I was leaning towards liking the idea of being a vampire again. I could probably not eat anybody. Vampires were *so cool*.

With all the tests complete, the vampires decided - too rapidly for me to have any input - that it was time for us all to retire to the drier, more comfortable location of their house. Esme waited for another nod from me before lifting me into her arms again and taking off after the group.

She put me down on the porch, which was a wide and well-furnished affair that wrapped around the entire first floor. I was the last through the door (Edward held it for my benefit). The entire interior of the house was done in white: the walls, the carpet, the furniture, almost all the decor. Little shadows and flecks of color, here and there, stood out brightly. I'd walked into an enormous, high-ceilinged hall - it had to have been several large rooms originally, with walls and floors knocked out. From the south wall, made entirely of glass, I could see the river flowing by not far from the building.

On my left, a raised part of floor, just one step up, held a grand piano. Beyond that, I saw the open door into the kitchen - I supposed houses in general came ready-made with kitchens and there was no strong reason to rip it out of the house, especially if they might sell it and move later. The dining room was screened off from the front hall with a low, curving wall, over which I spied a table surrounded by eight chairs. I supposed it wasn't

that odd that they'd have an extra, given that seven was an odd number and would make the furniture look asymmetrical arranged around the rectangular table. The vampires all took off their shoes, which were covered with mud, and I followed suit, dropping my knapsack next to my sneakers.

I saw a wide, swooping staircase, and looked up. It led to a landing, visible from the ground floor through its railing, but the halls on either side were hidden by walls. They wound in a semicircle, leaving the main hall room for its vaulted, high-beamed ceiling. I'd seen three stories total from outside, and supposed the rooms on the third floor were stacked on top of the ones from the second. It looked like they didn't jut up against the glass wall - the far point of the staircase, which extended beyond the horseshoe of higher stories, admitted enough room for someone to walk between it and the giant window.

"Want a tour?" Edward asked in my ear. Suddenly distracted from my admiring gaze at the house, I jumped just a little, then tried to cover it by turning to look at Edward. He seemed to have been enjoying my appreciation of the architecture.

"All right," I said. After I'd agreed and Edward was gliding towards the stairs with the expectation that I'd follow, it occurred to me that invitations like that *might* mean, "Do you have an interest in looking at this pretty house?", but might *also* mean, "Are you interested in me, as a person of the opposite sex, such that you are willing to be conducted around this pretty house by me?" I was not sure which he'd meant. I still hadn't gotten all the time I needed to think about that. Why did I have to go to school? Why did school have to assign homework? Why couldn't Charlie cook to save his life? Why did I have to *sleep*? The day after tomorrow would be Saturday and I'd have some unclaimed time, but what if I had to make a decision *before* then about something I hadn't given enough thought?

I must have had a ridiculous look on my face when I thought this, because when Edward looked over his shoulder to confirm that I was following him, he looked concerned. He stopped in his tracks, waiting for me to catch up. "Bella, are you all right? I know we must be a lot to get used to..."

"No, I'm fine," I said at once, and I sped up a little to prove it. "It *is* a lot to handle, but I think I'm adjusting to it okay. Let's see the house." And I started marching up the stairs.

"Bella," said Edward, catching my shoulder. I stopped and turned around, and, of course, fell off the step and directly onto him. He caught me just as before, and set me down on my feet on the ground floor.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

I thought about this. "I'm sure I don't want to discuss it right now," I said finally.

Edward looked disappointed. It was really a strange expression on him - he made it

seem more like he was *wronged* than, say, *foiled* or *unlucky* as some disappointed people appeared. I supposed he wasn't used to having to wait until people wanted to talk about things before he got to find out what they were. It probably didn't feel fair, from his end, but I was grateful in the extreme for my privacy. "What do you want?" he asked.

"To see the h-" I began. My stomach growled; I looked at my watch, which identified the time as seven-thirty. "To eat my sandwich," I corrected, "and then to see the house later." I went over to my knapsack, pulled out my wrapped-up dinner, peeled it open and took a big bite.

"You're welcome to have a seat at the dining room table," Edward invited. I, concerned with the possibility of getting crumbs on the nice white carpet, went where he directed and sat. He took a chair beside me. I didn't see any of the other vampires; they must have scattered elsewhere through the house while I'd been in the middle of blinking or otherwise paying insufficient attention.

Edward sighed - this had to be for effect, if vampire breathing was only for the purpose of speech and smell. "Alice told me a lot about you," he murmured, "but I'm still constantly surprised."

I looked up from my food. "What did she say?" I hadn't known Alice that long - I wasn't sure where she'd have gotten a good read on my personality unless... Oh, of course. If she felt like it, she could see how I'd react to all kinds of possible situations, when my tendencies were consistent enough that I wouldn't deliberate about it too much before doing something.

"She told me not to interrupt you," said Edward. "I slipped up once there, and I'm sorry. She told me that if I ever lied to you it would end badly. She told me that it wasn't safe for you to have secrets kept, because if you knew something was missing, you'd look for it until looking got you killed."

I nodded slowly; that all sounded about right - although if I knew that a secret would kill me, I thought I could leave well enough alone, I didn't believe I'd do the same with a secret of unknown hazard. "Alice is pretty smart," I said.

"She is," laughed Edward wryly. "And she told me to go slowly."

I froze, my partially-finished sandwich halfway through my mouth. "Well," I quipped, "you were the one who did the speed test."

"That's not what I mean," he said in a low voice.

I hadn't thought it was. Now I knew that he knew that Alice had told me that - my head spun. But I still didn't want to talk about it. I needed to think, I needed to think when Edward wasn't *there* being beautiful and solicitous and possibly thirsty. "You know," I said, "I have a huge list of questions about how vampires work. I take it you're going with

Alice's advice on not keeping secrets?"

Edward nodded slowly, keeping his eyes fixed on mine. I broke eye contact, popped the last bite of my sandwich into my mouth, and crossed the room to retrieve my notebook. From it, I started reading off questions. Edward looked frustrated, but did his best to answer them.

He didn't know some of them. He didn't know what it was about vampire physiology that Jasper controlled; he didn't know why he couldn't read me; he didn't know whether or not Alice had a time limit (but noted that he'd never heard of a vision more than a few months in advance); he didn't know what power I had but suspected it would be related somehow to my unreadability; he knew the procedure but not the mechanism of turning.

The things I learned were fewer than I'd hoped. Alice could "get to know" people through visions of futures that wouldn't happen, because they displayed their personalities even in such unreliable visions; that was fairly obvious, and Edward had no less plain applications. Although exact duplicate powers were unheard of, there were some that were similar - for instance, one of the Volturi, a fellow named Aro, was a mind-reader like Edward, but limited in range to those he physically touched, and broader in scope to the point of learning "every thought you've ever had in your life", as Edward put it. (Edward could only read current surface thoughts, not draw out specific items he wanted to hear.) Strength and speed in vampires were correlated with the same abilities in human life, and varied similarly, but with a longer right tail on the distribution. Eating humans made vampires physically stronger, but mentally weaker, in the sense that if they did it they were less likely to be able to resist continuing to do it except inasmuch as it relieved thirst.

Eye color depended on diet. One that had recently fed on a human had burgundy-colored ones. Feeding on animals resulted in the gold color I'd seen more of. With breaks between meals, these colors changed over time. A hungry vampire had black eyes - that helped explain why Edward had been especially perturbed on my first day of school; he'd been without food for a while. A brand-new vampire's eyes were bright blood red; the color faded over a year or so, faster with animal blood than human.

Not all vampires were pretty. However, prettiness, like other traits, was intensified by the turning process - and vampires looking for someone to turn *would* preferentially turn attractive humans. This also explained the spread of ages the Cullens exhibited. (And selection effects like that helped explain why I would ultimately be a vampire: empowered as I was to resist Edward's mindreading, I was likely to turn up an interesting power as one of the undead, and I could easily imagine vampires picking over the human population looking for talents like that.) I was a little confused by *Carlisle* having chosen who to turn on the basis of prettiness, but couldn't think of a polite way to ask - I'd get individual backstories from each of the others later and try to put together a pattern myself.

Vampires were made of cells, not rocks, and their strength matched their rigidity pretty neatly - vampires felt as malleable to each other as humans did to other humans. They weren't brittle, just tough, like steel cables. Accordingly, they bent, as opposed to breaking or grinding themselves to powder, when they moved around. Vampire hair did grow, albeit slowly - it wasn't much different from human hair, and broke sometimes, so if it didn't grow at all, a vampire Carlisle's age would necessarily be bald.

It was uncommon for vampires to live in groups that resembled the Cullens. The theory was that eating animal blood "civilized" them - the other family-style assembly of vampires that the Cullens knew about, their Denali friends, also abstained. (Apparently the in-joke was to call vampires who didn't eat people "vegetarians".) "Normal" vampires lived in small groups called "covens" - two, three, sometimes four. They were likely to travel a lot rather than settling down and enmeshing themselves in human civilizations. However, pairing off romantically was not limited to the Cullens - a lot of vampires did it.

Edward had never heard of a vampire couple breaking up.

Edward had never heard of a vampire surviving the death of his or her mate and then finding another one later.

Edward had heard of quite a few vampires.

Oh *yikes*.

I went right to the question about the Volturi, trying not to be too overt about my reaction to *that*.

The Volturi were a coven of five: three male vampires and the wives of two. (The third used to have a wife, but she was dead. And, of course, had not been replaced since then.) The wives were not public figures - only the males, Aro, Caius, and Marcus, were the active face of the Volturi. (Aro was not the only one with an extra power; Marcus apparently "saw" relationships between people.) Edward was fuzzy on their earlier history, and suggested that I ask Carlisle if curious about that. The doctor had apparently had spent some time among their guard (a considerably larger extension of the coven, including many vampires handpicked for promising talents).

Edward speculated that humans smelled tastier than other species because vampires had been humans in the past and survived most effectively on the same blood that had sustained their prior existences, but he wasn't sure.

I took copious notes. There was so much I had to think about and process already, and I was just adding more. I wondered if it would be best to forego the tour, but decided that I was already there and ought to have a look.

The first floor contained the hall I'd seen, the kitchen I'd gotten a peek at, the piano dais I'd noticed, the dining section I'd sat in, and also a bathroom, some communal offices

for things like household bookkeeping and investment portfolios, and a seating area around a large flatscreen television and several computers.

The second floor included the suite Carlisle and Esme shared, with their studies and Carlisle's library as well as another bathroom. (I was briefly puzzled about why the vampire bathrooms had shampoo and soap in them. They were clearly not trying to blend in for surprise visitors, or they would have included toilet paper. Then I realized that even without the habits of sweating and shedding skin that we humans had, vampires could accumulate dirt from their environments at normal rates.) Besides the suite were Rosalie and Emmett's room, which I didn't get to see as Rosalie didn't want to be disturbed, and an adjoining pair of rooms shared by Jasper and Alice.

I noticed along the wall in the hallway floor that there were a lot of photographs, and paused to look at some of them. I saw a wedding photo - an old photo - for Carlisle and Esme. There was also a wedding photo for Alice and Jasper - so they were married, then, and not just "together" as Jessica had artlessly put it. And Rosalie and Emmett had six. In each, they stood against a different backdrop, and Rosalie wore a different dress. I wasn't sure why anyone needed to get married six times, but I suspected that dresses were a motivating factor. Besides the wedding photos, I also noticed a series of family portraits. Carlisle and Edward were alone together in the first one - interesting. Edward had been earliest. Esme appeared in the next. Rosalie was the next addition, followed by Emmett. Then, it seemed, Alice and Jasper had arrived as a pair.

On the top floor was a library - or Edward called it that; I peeped inside and saw fewer books than Carlisle had in his personal library. There were more computers there, and some broad tables accompanied by chairs. I asked whether it was really much of a library, and Edward grudgingly told me that it was more like their preferred venue for document forgery and computer cracking and the like. This didn't faze me particularly; it was inevitable that they'd need skills and the wherewithal to pull them off in order to persist unaging in a human society.

Also on the top floor was Edward's room. It jutted up against the south wall, and accordingly shared part of the enormous window. It was late enough to be dark, but I knew in the daylight the view would be spectacular indeed.

Edward's room had its own closet and bathroom, like Rosalie and Emmett's. Unlike the entire rest of the house, it wasn't decorated in white: his carpet was gold, and he'd draped the walls completely over with darker golden fabric. The only furniture was a black leather sofa, a desk, and a desk chair. He had his own computer (how many computers did they need? I'd counted fourteen, and I hadn't even looked in all of the rooms) and shelves upon shelves of CDs. Apparently, he was a music buff - I wondered if he was responsible for the piano in its place of honor on the ground floor.

"Is that the whole house?" I asked.

"There's a basement, which I can't think of a safe way to get you into," he said. "It's meant to be difficult to access if you aren't a vampire. There's also an outbuilding we

converted into a garage."

I didn't have a strong enough interest in cars to want to hike - or be carried - to an outbuilding distant enough that I hadn't seen it. "I'll skip the garage," I said.

"Very well," said Edward. "What's next?"

"I think I'm about ready to go home," I said. "Charlie might worry."

Edward offered to take me home, and while I knew he could just run back to the Cullen house and therefore there weren't vehicular logistics issues, I declined. I wanted to think. I wanted to think without Edward nearby. I wanted to think alone, secure in my truck where no one could hear me, as I talked aloud to compensate for the fact that I couldn't write while driving.

Edward walked me to the door, bade me a polite goodbye accompanied by a freezing touch to my arm, and watched me as I got behind the wheel and pulled away from the vampire house.

Charlie was embedded in the couch, watching a sporting event I didn't bother to identify, when I got home. He yelled his gratitude for the sandwiches as I ascended the stairs, and I called back that it was no trouble.

It was late. I had school in the morning. Most of my homework wasn't done. And I had more "vampire stuff" to work through than I had ever had of any kind of work all at one time.

I weighed my options, but finally decided that cutting English twice in so short a time frame would be bad, and I slept.

Edward

I hurried through Friday trying as hard as I could to avoid more *vampire stuff* to process. I stuck to my human friends, finding someone to walk with between each class and sitting with them at lunch. During lunch I made homework buddy plans with Angela that involved me driving her to my house immediately after school. (Angela lived near enough to walk between school and home, and wouldn't leave a car behind that she'd have to fetch later.) When I met up with her right after gym, it successfully deterred Edward from catching up with me (I caught a glimpse of him in the parking lot, and his expression said that he certainly *would* have).

Angela hopped into my truck and we rumbled down the highway and to my house. I fixed us celery sticks and plopped some dip into a bowl, and then it was several hours solid of homework. At least ostensibly. Angela subscribed to the "work next to each other" theory of group studying, and didn't look over my shoulder. I finished everything that was due on Monday so it wouldn't hang over my head on the weekend. But after that, I pulled out my personal, non-school notebook, and thought in plain sight.

I had reasonably strong evidence that vampires "mated for life", so to speak. I didn't know if they ever engaged in casual friends-with-benefits arrangements, but from what Edward had said, if they actually went so far to fall in love, there they stayed. Alice had said only that Edward "liked" me. But she had a strong motive to avoid spooking me and sending me out of Forks on the next plane. She'd asked me to promise not to stop speaking to her brother, and she'd approached me before I'd made any mental threats to go to Charlie about the family - she'd approached me at the first available opportunity after I'd decided to treat Edward's staring as a harrassment issue. (Well, she had also saved me from Tyler's van, but that was the sort of thing that would have likely turned up in any future-peeking she did about me.)

I wasn't sure if this particular aspect of vampirism "worked" with humans like me. But... If I would be easy for Edward to forget about, if I were just an arbitrary human who caught his fancy, there was no reason for the vampires to have any collective interest in me at all. There would be no reason for Edward to follow Alice's guidelines about what would set me off. There would be no reason for him to put himself through the ordeal of being around my super-yummy self. There would be no reason for his family to trouble themselves to welcome me. There would be no reason for Alice to see me eventually becoming a vampire. He would have every motivation in the world to go chew on elephants in Kenya or otherwise be not-here until I graduated and went off to college.

If Alice saw me as her future sister-in-law, though... eternally and vampirically bound to Edward...

Yes, then I could see Edward's family rallying around him, glad that the odd one out of their number had at last found his eternal bride - just add venom. I could see them graciously agreeing to satisfy my curiosities - which would have been dismissible at best and a death sentence at worst for anyone else. I could see Alice focusing on me, thinking

of what I would do if Edward pursued me any of a hundred ways, coaching him...

I uttered a quiet curse. Angela looked up and I thwacked my trig book in plausible annoyance. She politely told me that her father was a minister and she'd be much obliged if I didn't swear at triangles around her, then looked back at her English essay.

I was suddenly reminded of something I'd written - at least a year and a half ago, I thought. That meant it would be in my computer, with my compiled and archived older thoughts, not in my notebook. I got up and fetched it; Angela wasn't curious, and I supposed she expected I'd be typing up my essay.

I tried a few too-generic keywords, searching through my logs and turning up a lot of redundancy. Finally I typed the phrase "romance novel", and my word processor took me directly to the correct section. A little under two years previously, I'd been the beneficiary of my great-aunt's sudden conversion to Catholicism and her disposal of her "sinful" book collection. She'd actually given the volumes to Renée, but Renée left them lying about, and I'd been bored one afternoon.

At a first glance, it was bewildering that women read the things. The formula, at least of the type my great-aunt had preferred, was not one that my fifteen-year-old self had found appealing. My first writings about the novels complained that they all put their heroines in helpless situations - often, they were chased by some relentless hero who could not, if it came down to it, be deterred. My great-aunt had liked fantasy romances in particular, and it was not at all uncommon for the male leads to be various types of supernatural creature with unusual mating habits such that they were committed to attaining the heroine from the moment they spotted her.

My original notes about this trend were scoffing, contemptuous. I'd thought the women in those books were all idiotic ninnies for "giving in". I thought the authors were backwards and sexist for writing situations like that.

My next relevant entry was about a month and a half afterwards. I'd happened to acquire the soundtrack to "The Beauty and the Beast" (I had a soft spot for the story due to name similarities), and noticed that there was a similar pattern. Belle was, of course, trapped in the Beast's castle. If she annoyed him, he certainly had the capacity to do her immense harm, and he frightened her with this power.

What he couldn't do was exercise this option one *iota* more than she cared to forgive, without sabotaging himself.

Beauty and the Beast was an unusual story of the pattern in that there was an explicit result the Beast wanted and had to earn by getting Belle to love him. The romance novels tended to leave that embedded in a way that was too subtle for me to get at first. In the fairy tale (as retold by Disney with singing tea services, of course), love was the prerequisite for the Beast to be debeatified. In the novels, love was the goal itself.

What Belle and the other heroines had was absolute power over whether their romantic interests got to win the prizes they were after.

The *only* way the Beast could get what he wanted - and it wasn't even a sure thing - was to throw himself into becoming who *Belle* wanted and doing what *Belle* wanted. He *needed* her; *she* was merely under his power. If there had been no time limit, if he could have kept her stuck in his castle forever, all the roaring and destruction he could bring to bear wouldn't become any more effective. He couldn't win by coercing her into saying certain words or performing certain acts; he had to win by making her feel a certain way.

As a romance trope, where the entire point of the book was for the couple depicted on the cover art to be together in the end, this pattern was subject to a certain condition. Specifically, there could not be any non-personal reason for the heroine to reject her suitor. His personality was malleable - she could ask for whatever she liked, holding all the cards as she did - but if he happened to be poor or ugly or otherwise objectionable in some less readily addressable way, the book would a) make a worse wish-fulfillment story for the target audience, and b) feel implausible.

It was a very strange feeling, to have landed in a romance novel.

Because unless I was very much mistaken, I had acquired for myself a vampire who had one chance at love, inexplicably me; who knew that he could only get what he wanted if I was happy; and who was most definitely *not* poor, ugly, or otherwise objectionable.

Angela completed her essay, and asked to be driven home. I closed my laptop and managed to get her to her house without driving us into any trees, despite my mind's insistence on continuing to reel. I thought I knew the situation; I just didn't know what I *wanted* out of it, and that was a very uncomfortable thing to not know.

I drove home alone, frowning at the road.

Charlie had returned from work by the time I pulled into the driveway. I blew into the house, put a pot of water on the boil, and made spaghetti; I didn't have the energy for anything complicated. There were meatballs in the freezer and jars of sauce in the pantry. I threw everything together once the pasta had cooked, brought Charlie his plate in the family room, and ate mine at the kitchen table.

Exactly one minute after I'd finished my helping of food, the doorbell rang.

"I got it," I called to Charlie, and I went to answer the door, expecting one or another of the vampires. I was right. It was Alice.

"Your future went all *dizzy*," she said, accusation in her voice. She spoke softly enough that there was no way for Charlie to hear her over the television. "I have an awful headache. Can I come in?"

"Fine," I said, standing aside. They weren't going to let me think alone very much, were they? I supposed that was why Alice saw me going "dizzy". My only plans right now were to make up my mind. But that was exactly what muddled her visions.

I showed Alice up to my room, and sat on my bed. She took my desk chair, spun it around to face me, and planted her elbows on her knees. "Edward's going out of his mind," Alice said baldly.

"You know," I said, "until yesterday I didn't think he knew you'd told me that he "liked" me."

Alice winced. "He didn't, until yesterday. I'm usually fairly good at avoiding thoughts I don't want him to catch. I slipped up."

"I do need *time* to think things through, and make decisions," I complained. "I don't like to issue snap judgments about anything important. I have to figure out what I want, and make sure that I approve of the reasons I have for wanting it, and pick the best way available to get it, and I prefer to do this in writing, but I don't like to write too much with anybody around, and so I have to wait until I'm alone or near somebody who thinks I'm taking some other kind of notes and won't look. I was going to block out all Saturday to do it. You couldn't wait?"

"Edward couldn't wait. He *begged* me to talk to you," said Alice. "Begged. Bella, I think he *would* have given you lots of time, all the time you wanted, he probably would have told us all to stay away from you and give you plenty of space, but - oh, you should have seen him the day you switched lab partners!" she exclaimed. "He was practically in a panic. He thought he could take off for a week and you'd be right where he left you, waiting for *him* to sort *his* thoughts out. But you didn't. He went back to school and found out that you were trying to get away from him and couldn't stand it - you're smart, I know you've figured this all out, I saw you writing it." She waved a hand.

With a sharp shock, I realized that Alice's power wasn't necessarily more ethically innocuous than Jasper's or Edward's. "Alice," I started hotly.

She shook her head, causing her short black hair to fly around. "No. Sorry to interrupt, but no. Later. Later, we will have that conversation. Promise. Right now, we will talk about Edward. You figured it out, you're very smart, be proud of yourself, *please* don't run away someplace inaccessible just because the situation is horribly awkward."

"Am I allowed to say *anything*, or are you just here to plead for Edward's sanity?" I asked, perturbed.

"I just want to stick to the topic. You can talk," Alice huffed.

"What do you - or Edward, or anybody - expect me to *do*?" I inquired, spreading my hands helplessly. "Does he really think it's going to *speed things up* to not give me Saturday to get my head straight?"

"No. I don't think *he* even knows what he wants to happen here. He thinks I'm going to pick magic words that will magically make you *magically* decide that you're *magically* in love with him. Jasper was on edge all through lunch today, picking up Edward's mood when you didn't sit with us, it was awful." Alice shook her head disgustedly. "I told him, *I told him*, that he needed to go *slow*."

I took a very deep breath. "What's it *like*?" I asked. My voice came out soft and earnest where I'd been expecting exasperation - that was interesting.

"I don't think I'm typical there," Alice frowned. "I'd been a vampire for almost twenty-eight years when I started seeing Jasper in my visions. I knew just what to expect. I waited for him in a diner, and he showed up, and I walked right up to him and said "You've been keeping me waiting a long time," and he ducked his head like a good Southern gentleman and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am." And then I held out my hand and he took it and we were... whole. Emmett has a better story," she said. "I think he'd prefer to tell it himself, though."

"I'm right, then," I said, "that it doesn't matter if I'm a human or a vampire, it works the same way?"

"It works the same on Edward," Alice said. "You're still human in every way." She paused. "You know, if you get turned, it *will* work on you. It'd be very convenient," she pleaded.

"If I get turned? I thought you were sure about that?"

"You were about to figure out the part where as soon as you turn, the falling in love part is symmetrical," grumbled Alice. "That'd unmake your mind right there until you figured out Edward, and *that* could go any which way as far as *I* can see."

"But when I'm turned, I had the impression that there was an adjustment period. I probably shouldn't do it on a school night, for example," I said wryly. "I was thinking maybe summer - I could tell Charlie I'm going to tour Europe or something while I work on conquering my baser impulses."

"Well, the adjustment period is usually longer than that," said Alice. "Although, when I *did* see you crystal-clear as a vampire, you had newborn colored eyes and there were a couple of images of you being around humans. Carlisle thinks you might adjust better because you're expecting to be turned, can go in a little prepared, and none of us were. So a summer might work for you - but you might need a backup story about having suddenly been accepted to early college somewhere."

"But upon being turned, I'll be just as smitten with Edward as he is with me?" I asked.

"Right," said Alice. "I mean, if not before - but yes, at least by then."

I drew my knees up to my chest and rested my chin on them. "I don't know what to

think about that."

"I *know*," grumbled Alice. "It's making my head hurt to keep looking at it."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. I liked Alice, and didn't want to give her headaches, but I didn't see how I could think any faster.

"I saw you and Edward together after you turned," cooed Alice coaxingly. "You looked so happy. I saw Jasper following you around all the time, just to soak it up, he likes to be around happy people."

I turned my face down, hiding it against my jeans. "I barely know Edward," I whispered.

"He's not going to push you to get turned," Alice said, surprising me. "He still thinks you'd be better off as a human. Even with the lack of fated togetherness. He just wants... he wants you *around*. You know, I think he might even settle for it if you just wanted to be his friend - as long as he got to spend time with you. He can't tolerate being away from you for long before he starts getting very annoying. He *paces*." She wrinkled her nose. "I mean... given that he thinks you should stay human and that you are very, *very* fragile, his best-case scenario probably looks like being just friends from a spectator's perspective anyway."

Right. Man of steel, woman of Kleenex.

"You still don't see me dead?" I checked. "I mean, not of unnatural causes?"

"Still don't see you dead," Alice confirmed. "With a heartbeat or without, you're walking around as far as I can see."

I considered this. It was not that much to ask. I didn't have any spite for Edward, let alone enough to drive him up the wall when the remedy was easily enough at hand. "I will," I said, "be Edward's friend, for the time being. And I will think."

Alice nodded. "I'll let him know." And she got up and glided out of my room to let herself out.

On Saturday, Edward visited.

He arrived shortly after Charlie and I had split the last of breakfast's blueberry pancakes. Charlie answered the bell and seemed pleasantly surprised to find Edward on the doorstep. He invited the vampire in without even consulting me, though Edward mentioned that he was here to see me ("to study for Biology", he said).

"It's a pity you weren't here in time for breakfast," Charlie remarked as Edward strolled into our house. Of course Edward had probably been parked outside, listening to

Charlie's thoughts until the food was all gone. Or hiding far away, someplace with a direct line of vampirically-enhanced sight in through our window.

"I had breakfast earlier," Edward said smoothly. His eyes were still gold, so I supposed that was probably true. "Bella? Where is the best place to study?" He lifted his prop of a knapsack and tilted his head inquiringly.

"My room," I said shortly, and I showed him up the stairs.

"I'm going to go fishing, Bells," Charlie called as I went up the stairs. "I'll be home late."

"Okay," I hollered back.

I sat on my bed. Edward took my chair, as Alice had during her visit.

"I somehow don't think you really want to study Biology," I told him.

"You're right," he grinned. I wasn't sure if he could tell that I was in a poor mood and was trying to fix it, or hadn't noticed.

"I do that sometimes." I had questions pending, anyway - I might as well ask the one applicable to Edward while he was around. "So... want to tell me the story of how you became a vampire?"

"If you like," he said, although it sounded like he didn't prefer to tell the story. "It was in 1918. I was seventeen, dying of the Spanish influenza. My parents were already dead - Carlisle could change me without anyone noticing, there were so many victims of the outbreak. I was the first one he added to the family..." - I'd guessed that, from the portraits - "but he found Esme soon after. She'd... fallen from a cliff."

I frowned. "So he saved your life. You don't *have* to be mortally ill or injured to turn, do you?" Of course, this was the obvious impetus to turn someone - clearly it could save an otherwise unsalvageable life. But if it was necessary...

Edward shook his head. "That's the only way Carlisle does it. He wouldn't take anyone's mortal life from them if they had one to live. But no, it's not strictly necessary."

"So Rosalie and Emmett, too? They were dying?"

"Yes," said Edward. Then he looked puzzled. "I know Alice told you about how she doesn't know what happened to her when she was human, and I guess if Carlisle had turned her it would be reasonable that he'd have told her something about where she came from, but how did you know that Carlisle didn't turn Jasper?"

"I'm guessing," I said. "From the portraits on the second floor of your house - Jasper and Alice arrived together, didn't they? If Carlisle turned Jasper and not Alice, it would be a huge coincidence for her to show up close enough to his turning that they'd show up in

the same picture. Also, it would be peculiar for him to turn up at the diner full of humans where he met her, if he were new at the time."

Edward nodded. "Perceptive."

"Thank you."

I heard the door to Charlie's car slamming, and I leaned to look out the window. He pulled out of the driveway and headed out - presumably to pick up a fishing buddy or two before going to try and catch dinner.

"My turn," said Edward lightly, and my head turned back towards him automatically.

"Your turn?" I asked, confused.

"For a story," he said, smiling faintly. "Why don't you tell me about how you came to move to Forks?"

I was briefly nonplussed by this request. It wasn't a particularly interesting story. "My mother remarried," I said. Edward, to his credit, didn't interrupt me with some guess about my not getting along with Phil. "He's fine," I said, in case he was thinking it, "but he plays baseball for a living, and has to move around a lot. Renée couldn't travel with him because she had to be home with me most of the time, and that made her unhappy, so I decided to come and live with Charlie."

"You care about her a lot," he murmured.

"She's my *mom*," I said.

"Tell me about her," Edward invited.

"She looks a lot like me, but with shorter hair..." I began.

There was no further pretense of taking turns - the conversation proceeded organically. Edward was fascinated by the smallest details about me (he wanted to know about my decision to do yoga instead of conventional gym; he wanted to hear all about the classes I'd taken in Phoenix; he wanted to learn about my extended family; he wanted to memorize my favorite color; he was curious about my taste in movies).

I didn't get caught up in *quite* so many minutiae about him - but that was largely because Edward was more than a hundred years old. He knew his birthdate, unlike Alice - they were probably the same chronological age, though she'd been turned two years later - and also unlike Alice, he remembered being human. That added up to more than a century of material, and once he caught the trend of what interested me, he catered to it - there was no need to dwell on tiny things like favorite color with all that to talk about. He

handpicked topics from his vast available supply the very best stories of traveling around the country and the world, learning everything from how to fly a plane to foreign languages. At first, he seemed hesitant to go on talking as long as was necessary to do justice to some of his memories, but I made every effort to look as rapt as I felt. He still asked me questions when something he was curious about came up - wanted to know what my favorite flowers were when he mentioned a botanical garden, things like that - but he did more of the talking than I did, overall.

It really should have occurred to me that Edward would be *interesting*.

He hadn't just seen and done dozens of amazing things - he had a wonderful way of telling them. Apparently his pre-turning ability to read people had not been *completely* supplanted with mindreading and made rusty from disuse, and he rapidly picked up on what had me on the edge of my seat and what left me cold, adjusting accordingly. By the time my rumbling stomach announced that it was time for lunch, rather than a continued description of the Great Barrier Reef around which a vampire could safely dive free of equipment, Edward had figured out how to have me hanging off his every word. His beautiful voice didn't hurt - but I was pretty sure I'd have been thrilled to read his stories in an e-mail, too.

"You're hungry," he said, pausing in the middle of explaining how little octopi cared to be near vampires.

"A bit. I'll just go down and get some carrots and ranch; I'm sure Charlie will bring home more fish than I know what to do with and I should make sure I have an appetite for dinner."

Edward let me finish my sentence, although as soon as I said *carrots* it looked like it was very hard for him to do so. "You could let me take you out to lunch," he said quietly.

"You don't think it would look a bit odd for us to walk into a restaurant and have only one of us eat?" I asked. I didn't bring up the financial imposition. (It would be ridiculous and probably insulting. If they hadn't already thought of sending Alice and a spare thousand dollars to toy with Wall Street, they should all have been set on fire for stupidity: they had to be many times richer than they looked. Also, Edward was from 1901, and accordingly I felt no obligation to haul out modern rights and responsibilities for my gender that didn't happen to suit me.) I didn't protest the suspiciously dateilke nature of the invitation, either. I'd agreed to be his friend, and friends sometimes had lunch together; and five solid hours of continuous, un-awkward conversation had done a lot to push me towards the "okay, give it a shot" plan.

"Not enough to cause a problem," he assured me. "If you're worried about it, we can order two things, and you can have half of each and bring the rest home. I can always take a bite or two if the waitstaff do get suspicious, but it's unlikely. You really have to act a *lot* stranger than what passes for normal to get serious attention."

That was a good plan. My stomach gurgled again. "I don't know any good

restaurants around here."

"What kind of food do you like?" Edward asked. Oh - right. Perfect recall. He didn't need to *eat* to know what was to be had, he only needed to have heard of the choices, in speech or in thought.

"All kinds," I said, "but right now I think I'm in the mood for Italian."

"There's nothing worthwhile in Forks," Edward said, "but there's a nice place in Port Angeles."

"That's an hour away," I said.

"Not if you let me drive," Edward said, "in a car other than your truck, fast."

I gritted my teeth. "Let me think," I said.

He nodded, and watched me; I shut my eyes.

What were my *real* reasons for preferring not to speed, and did they apply?

Well, Charlie *would* be scandalized. Why did that matter to me? I trusted Charlie's judgment in general... he was level-headed, not rash, those seemed like good qualities. "Don't speed" was the essence of being unrash. But only because it was dangerous, physically and legally - when a human was behind the wheel. A human who couldn't psychically detect things like road rage and didn't have extranormal reflexes. Charlie didn't know that Edward wasn't one of those, and I didn't know how that knowledge would change his reaction. It was still illegal. But the only *good* reason to have a speeding law was the danger. It was... not very dangerous with a vampire behind the wheel, and not very likely to get us in trouble with the law with his mindreading. But...

"What," I asked, "would you do if, in spite of everything, we *did* crash?"

"Claw open the roof of the car, grab you, jump out, and then bang up the car enough that no one would notice the suspicious part of the damage," he told me at once. "It would actually be safer for you *not* to wear a seatbelt. I could snap one, but it'd take me an extra moment."

The people who skipped seatbelts in the expectation of being "thrown clear" were morons. But Edward's scenario seemed plausible. Any others involved in the crash would probably be too distracted to see anything unusual about our departure from the car.

My only good reasons to say no to the *driving* part were not applicable. Accordingly, if I were to say no, it would have to be for other reasons, and I had none.

"Fine, then, lunch in Port Angeles," I said.

"Really?" Edward asked.

"Really. Are you going to just run to your house and get a fast car?" I asked.

"I can do that," he said slowly. I wondered why the reluctance, and then he answered my unspoken question. "Or *we* could run there, and then you wouldn't need to wait for me to bring it here to pick you up."

"All right," I said. *That* transportation issue had already been resolved to my satisfaction. "Hold your breath if you need to." I got up and exited the house, hearing his quiet footsteps behind me as I went.

Once we were outside and I'd locked the door, Edward looked at me questioningly - to make sure I was ready, I guessed - and I nodded to him. He picked me up very carefully, the same way Esme had. "Comfortable?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I breathed. I was not uncomfortable, but I *had* underestimated how I would react to Edward picking me up. Maybe he'd been hesitant to suggest it and had asked Esme to carry me on Thursday because he was trying to follow Alice's instructions about going *slow* with me...

And then he took off, and the colors around me became lightning streaks retreating into the distance.

Esme *had* been jogging. *This* was a run.

I turned my face into Edward's chest and tucked my arms in close to my body, trying to reduce the surface area exposed to the whistling, humid wind. I didn't believe he was running flat-out. I'd watched him practically teleport across the vampires' baseball field, and I didn't think I was quite sturdy enough to deal with that much safely. But it was very fast.

In an odd way, it was pleasant to be so securely held at such a high speed. It was poking some subconscious reptile-brain piece of me, I guessed, some part that wanted a protector and wanted to be sure that protector would suffice in extreme circumstances. The reptile-brain piece did not have the sophistication to realize that its would-be protector was also causing the extremity of the circumstances. It just noticed that I was going abnormally fast, and that a person it had other reasons to like was holding me nice and tight, preventing the speed from bringing me to harm.

And this was accompanied by a nice, warm feeling that quite compensated for the whooshing wind.

In only a few minutes we were at the Cullen house - or rather, in the forest near it. A white outbuilding, painted to match the main house, was nestled among the trees, with a smooth dirt track leading from it to the road connecting their driveway to the highway. I

estimated that it would hold a dozen cars - there were three doors, each with room for the adjacent passage of two cars, but the building was deep enough that it could be the same on the other side. Edward put me down on my feet, and let me hang on his arm for a moment while I reassured myself that my legs were not too wobbly to work. Upon confirming that they functioned normally - which is to say, that I was only four or five times more likely than a normal human to fall on my rear - I stood up unsupported.

Edward reached into his pocket and presumably pressed a remote for one of the doors. The middle one on our side peeled open to reveal the familiar Volvo that the Cullens drove to school. Beside it sat another silver car, bearing a logo with wings - a vampire would have been able to read its text from my vantage point, but I couldn't, and I didn't know cars. "Volvo, or the other one?" I asked Edward.

"The other one," he said, sounding amused by my designation. I approached the car, and he appeared at the driver's side door in the blink of an eye to unlock it and get in before I arrived. I sat down, closed the door gently to avoid harming the likely-valuable car, and consciously reminded myself not to fasten my seatbelt. The interior was comfortable and fancy.

I closed my eyes for most of the ride, and brushed out the running-induced tangles from my hair with my fingers. Once Edward was done accelerating, and when we were not in the middle of a curve, I couldn't feel the speed much; I didn't want to see it either. On the highway, he picked up storytelling right where he'd left off with the coral reef.

Edward got us to Port Angeles in twenty minutes without crashing or even having to swerve. I didn't hear any sirens, which was good (it hadn't occurred to me to ask whether his policy was to stop for cops or to simply *outrance* them) and he found a parking space immediately, possibly with the help of mindreading.

The restaurant was an intimate, warmly decorated establishment. Awnings sheltered the interior from what little sunlight filtered through the clouds, and it was mostly illuminated by candles. I wondered if this was the nicest Italian place in town or just the one Edward most wanted to take me to.

We received our menus after we'd sat down at our little table in the back corner. I scanned it, trying to pick two things - I eventually decided on a pasta primavera entrée and minestrone soup. I thought I could probably finish the whole bowl of soup and a third of the pasta, which would have to do for alleviating odd looks. Edward received my whispered ordering instruction with a nod, and faithfully reported my soup request as though it were his own when the waiter wandered by.

My bread basket and glasses of water for each of us arrived promptly, and I took a sip from mine. Then I glanced around the restaurant; it wasn't very crowded. "I know you don't like food," I murmured to Edward, "but what about drinks - water?"

He blinked. "You know, it never occurred to me to try drinking water?" he said wryly. He picked up his glass and took a swallow, then set it down again, smacking his lips thoughtfully.

"Verdict?" I asked. "You know your usual diet is ninety-five percent water."

"Somewhat warmer water," said Edward, a little absently, looking at the glass. "It doesn't taste like anything. It doesn't seem to affect my thirst either way. I suppose it'd contribute to the disguise if we were seen drinking water occasionally."

"Considerably," I speculated. "It never occurred to any of you?"

"I'm sure at least one of "us" in *general* tried it at one time," he said, avoiding the word "vampire" - either he'd noticed someone listening, or thought there might be a spectator with my same mental opacity. "I don't know about my family, but I doubt it."

"Huh." I wondered what other things they'd simply not tried. "Do you want to taste the broth of my soup?"

"No, the soup is for you," he said. "If it seems appropriate to try more liquids I can do it without helping myself to your lunch."

I shrugged and took a roll, which I buttered. "Tell me what happened after you found the shark," I said encouragingly, trying to get him to pick up his story where he'd been at the end of the drive.

"You don't think I've talked too much about myself for an entire year?" he asked wryly.

"It's interesting," I said. "You've got fewer constraints and more time than... than most people, and you use it well."

"Well," said Edward, "why don't you tell me what you would want to do with all that time and without all those constraints?"

I bit into my roll. "Why don't you want me to have that?" I asked quietly, after I swallowed it.

He looked pained. "This is a bad place, I think," he said. "I'm - I'm trying not to keep secrets. But this is a bad place."

It really was, I supposed. "In the car, then," I said.

"All right," Edward replied, softly.

Souls

My soup was tasty. The pasta was all right, although the cook took the idea of "al dente" more seriously than I preferred. My estimates about my appetite proved basically accurate, and when I'd finished eating and gotten a box for the remaining food, Edward paid the bill and we left the restaurant. "It's a nice place," I said.

"I'm glad you liked it," he said heavily - nervous about having to tell me why he didn't care to have me immortal? - and unlocked his car. I got in; he waited for a gap in traffic, then ducked into the driver's seat and pulled out.

"So," I said.

"Right," he sighed, taking the exit onto the highway and rapidly getting up to speed. "I'm not expecting you to understand this."

"Try me," I said peevishly.

"First," he said, "can you tell me about your religious leanings?"

This didn't make a lot of sense. "Why is that relevant?"

"I'm asking this first because otherwise I'm not sure how to present my position," he said.

"I don't think about religion much," I said. "Renée tries out new churches like some people try on shoes. She never made a habit of bringing me along."

"What do you believe about souls?" asked Edward, and I had an inkling of where this was going.

"Edward, if you're going to tell me that I have a soul because I'm a human and you don't because you're a vampire, that's a *ridiculous* objection. What is it that you think souls *do*? What functionality do you think you *lost* back in 1918? You can clearly think, so if you're right about who's got a soul, then souls don't do that. You can make the decision to not slaughter everybody around you even when they'd be delectable, so if you're right, souls don't handle moral reasoning. You've got memories, so your soul wasn't storing those for you until it left. And it would be remarkably *original* theology if you said that the soul was responsible for making humans breakable and slow and weak and mortal, but if that's what souls do, I'm not sure why anybody would *want* one."

"What about an afterlife?" Edward murmured.

"What about it? Suppose there's a God," I humored him. "Suppose there's a God and he likes to stash dead people in afterlives appropriate to them when they die. Why would a soul be called for? If for some reason one *were* essential, why couldn't you just be

issued a new one if something unfortunate happened to your first one? This is God we're talking about. He isn't going to run out of ectoplasm to make souls out of. He's not going to forget who you are because you don't have your soul attached. Or maybe that's not what you mean," I said. "Maybe you mean vampires automatically go to hell, when you play with matches a little too much - but think about that, really. You didn't hold a flamethrower to Carlisle's head and demand to be changed, did you?"

"No," Edward murmured.

"Right, you were delirious with the flu, most of the way to dead. Scarcely in a position to be held responsible for anything you did. But let's say that you're destined for hell for something you didn't do anyway. If that's the sort of thing that can get you damned, I'm probably already in trouble for having divorced parents, or for having eaten non-kosher baby food, or something like that."

"*You* won't be delirious with the flu," Edward said darkly.

"You're right. I won't. But I thought you were talking about a property of vampires in general, not just willfully turned ones," I said. "Right? No fiddling around with your theory while we're in the middle of a conversation about it, please."

"...Right."

"Now when Carlisle turned - let's not use you as an example. When Carlisle turned Esme, she had just fallen off a cliff and was dying. At that time, she had a soul, right?"

Edward made an awful face. "Okay, okay," he said. "Never mind about souls."

I sighed. "Do you actually no longer believe that turning into a vampire makes an important thing called a "soul" evaporate, or do you just not want to think about Esme being someone who lacks an important thing called a "soul"?"

He was silent, and I sighed heavily and closed my eyes again to avoid looking at the whoosh of trees to either side of the highway.

Edward dropped me off at my house. "Have a good weekend, Bella," he said tightly. I'd pushed him a little too far - he'd remained silent throughout the rest of the drive back from Port Angeles even when I tried to get him to resume telling the story about the shark. He drove away with no mention of the possibility that he might come in and continue talking to me and no attempt to make more plans. I practically flounced into the house and up to my room.

I gave myself a little shake. I hadn't screwed anything up permanently. I was literally *incapable* of screwing things up permanently with Edward. The worst I could do would be to die of old age out of spite.

That didn't mean I should abuse this freedom. (In particular, it would be very foolish of me to die if it turned out there was no good reason I ought to.) But it did mean that it wasn't very productive of me to fret about things I'd already done.

Bringing up Esme had clearly been the sticking point, but he hadn't seemed very comfortable before that, either. It was probably a touchy subject. If I thought souls were important and that I didn't have one I probably wouldn't want to talk about them at all, I guessed. He'd only felt it relevant because it was part of why he wanted me to stay human.

I wondered if the other vampires believed the same thing as Edward, about souls. I wrote down that I should ask them this. I also wrote, while I had my notebook out, that Alice had promised we'd have the conversation about her powers "later".

Once I'd written this down, I felt strangely... blank. I'd been looking forward to a nice, empty Saturday to do my thinking with. Then my hand had been forced on the decision all that thinking was *for*: Alice had shown up and cornered me into agreeing to be friends with Edward. (And this was shaking out to mean that I agreed to go out to lunch in a cozy Italian restaurant in Port Angeles with Edward on his dime after listening breathlessly to his exciting stories for hours on end. No wonder Alice had found my concession satisfactory.) All I had left to do was ask more questions, not process existing knowledge. And I'd gone and done all my homework.

Well, maybe I wasn't completely out of things to mull over. I could probably kill at least an hour producing an updated approximation of how I felt about Edward.

But I didn't really want to write that sort of thing down until I'd dealt with the fact that Alice could see me writing anything I decided to write. Would she be able to read things I wrote if I typed them, with a box over my keyboard and a blanket over the monitor and my head? My spelling would suffer, but not irretrievably. She only *saw* things, visually, so that should do it unless her vantage point was so flexible that it could be between my face and the screen - but it called for a test. A *real* test, where I only had a guess, not an expectation.

I wrote that down. (If Alice saw *that* and had the afternoon free maybe she'd show up and we'd conduct the experiment right away.)

I tried to push the problem around in my head without writing anything. It was hard - I kept not trusting conclusions I'd gotten to and having to backtrack and reestablish them. My independence from my notebooks, which I'd thought so well-honed when I first arrived in Forks, was not solid enough to hold up to serious problems. My unaided brain was fine for little things. But thinking back, I'd needed three pages to decide to leave Phoenix at all. I frowned to myself. This was a problem.

Wean self from notebooks, I wrote under my to-hack list. I crossed off the line about looking at pretty people: I was pretty sure they didn't mind. And then I spent my

afternoon thinking kind thoughts about rain.

Clouds, I thought, will help me hide when I am a vampire.

I did not see any vampires on Sunday.

I got lonely (Charlie had to work), and so I called and convinced Angela, Jessica, and even Lauren to all join me for a movie. There were no proper theaters in Forks, so we all piled into Jessica's mother's car and drove to Port Angeles. The theater we found was still showing the Phantom of the Opera movie, which Jessica badgered us all into seeing.

Lauren complained about the movie selection, citing the "incredible lameness" of musicals, but went in with us instead of buying a ticket to something else. When we walked out, she was swooning over Gerard Butler, talking over Jessica's attempt to claim all the credit for the movie's highlights. I dismissively told her that he looked like a grown up version of Eric. This was a blatant lie (the coloring was right, but nothing about their features matched), but it seemed like a convenient way to have her thinking about Eric without thinking that I was after him myself. I couldn't tell by looking at her if this had worked.

We got lunch, wandered around the city, and stopped in a few stores to admire articles of clothing, to justify the trip with more than just the one movie. Angela bought a sweater and Jessica succumbed to the temptation of a pair of heels. I considered buying a ruffly red blouse, but eventually skipped it. Lauren tried on everything she saw but didn't want to make any purchases.

We ran out of steam at about five p.m. and decided to go back to Forks instead of getting an early dinner in Port Angeles. I made fried fish - Charlie had our freezer packed from top to bottom with fish from his Saturday trip - and then baked a pan of brownies just to have something more to do. If I had been a vampire, I wouldn't have needed baked goods to occupy myself. If I'd been a vampire, I could have run all the way to Port Angeles, doing gymnastics on the way without putting a foot wrong, and bought that blouse and run back. If I'd been a vampire, I could do all the thinking I wanted to do in my *head* where it was *safe* with my vampire total recall supplanting my notebooks. If I'd been a vampire, I could have just been stuck like Edward, stuck *with* Edward, and wouldn't have needed to do so much thinking in the first place.

I frowned to myself as I took the brownies out of the oven and immediately cut one for myself, letting it cool faster on a plate of its own. I shouldn't *not want to think*; that seemed bad. I caught myself trying to amend the thought and quickly muttered to myself, "I don't want to think about whether I want Edward and don't know why" too quietly for Charlie to hear and too indistinctly for Alice to be likely to be able to read my lips. It wasn't as good as writing, but it moved the idea from my vague memory of my own thoughts into my slightly more reliable auditory storage.

I ate my brownie slowly and pondered. Dealing with Edward did show signs of being the single most momentous decision of my life. I had thought it was a big deal when I moved out of Arizona for Renée's sake, but changing residence didn't hold a candle to changing species and acquiring a mate-for-life. I was *seventeen*. Renée talked constantly about how she'd gotten married too young, and she'd already been twenty when I was born very soon after the wedding. (I was only barely not a honeymoon baby. She took great care to emphasize that she did not regret having *me*, but I'd found it surprisingly easy to come to terms with the fact that if my parents had been smarter, I wouldn't exist.) Renée had drilled into my head that marriage was something mature and smart people took seriously, something that was not good or sane to rush into, something that she swore up and down not to prod me about until I was at least thirty.

Edward had not presented me with jewelry of any kind, let alone an engagement ring, but from what Alice said, my merely being turned would drop me into something a good deal *more* serious than a marriage. Renée's rash action had only landed her a daughter and the need to spend time with a divorce lawyer and, likely, some emotional turmoil.

Edward was already stuck, but I didn't have to be. If I got myself stuck, and it was a bad idea, I could *never* undo it unless I had some quality no other mated vampire known to Edward had ever had.

I considered the possibility that he was lying about what he had and had not heard of. (I had finished my brownie by this point, and was muttering to myself freely in the relative privacy of my room. As an added layer of precaution, I buried my face in my pillow.) He had been prepared to go to some trouble to avoid it in other situations, after Alice's advice. And it didn't seem like he had any reason to believe that I'd find the prospect of an unbreakable commitment *more* enticing than a merely intense and magically propped-up one. No motive. Probably wasn't a lie, then.

I wondered by what mechanism vampires were stuck. Edward had been quite capable of becoming cross with me and ending our day together when I said something he didn't like. He wasn't physically prevented from leaving my side. He wasn't limited exclusively to positive emotions towards me. I wondered what he would do if I told him I never wanted to see him again and that he should go away. I didn't want to test that - that much I knew - but it would be useful information to have. What happened if vampires *tried* to break up?

I was going about this the wrong way, I decided. The effect was probably more to do with the selection process. Edward had been around for quite some time and it took him that long to find me. There were too many vampire couples running around for it to be a matter of finding one's One True Soulmate out of all the world - there were just too many people. There had to be a pool of possible soulmates that only narrowed to one when that one was encountered.

I didn't know if most vampires met their fated beloveds after they'd both been turned, like Alice and Jasper, or when one was human, like Carlisle and Esme. If it was

the former, then whatever it was that narrowed down the potential candidates probably correlated with something that was likely to get those candidates turned into vampires, too. That held with *me*, at least - I had my mental privacy (a million thanks to whatever quirk had given me that) and humans with promising talents were commonly turned. If it was the latter... then I could only imagine a lot of vampires who ate humans and didn't take the time to introduce themselves first were going to wander alone forever, but that was beside the point.

If it was the latter, and not every coven had an Alice to give them instructions and assure them that vampirehood was in their target's future, then I could only imagine that most humans selected in this way were turned against their wills. Most vampires thought nothing of slaughtering people left and right; leaving their only shot at having companionship up to the wayward affections of the human companion would not be the sort of thing they'd opt to do when they could just take a bite.

But it was hard for them to stop when they hunted. Probably, turning instead of killing was also hard... Carlisle had turned Edward, Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett. He was the one with the extra, special ability to resist the lure of blood.

And there were supposed to be a lot of married vampires, not just among the Cullens.

So most likely, vampire couples typically met as vampires and were symmetrically attached from day one.

Drat. No readily available precedents to anchor on. Unless the Cullen couple I hadn't learned as much about - Rosalie and Emmett - had a story relevant to the situation.

And I was back to having questions to ask, not previously acquired information to turn over in my head.

I sat with the vampires at lunch again on Monday. I wasn't sure, as I approached the cafeteria, whether they'd welcome me, but Alice flitted by and murmured that I could join them, and so once I'd collected my food I took the empty chair at their table. All of them had bottles of water; Jasper sipped from his constantly, making it look like a nervous habit, and every now and then, one of the others would take a swallow as well.

When I got there, Rosalie was dominating the conversation, monologuing about how she was not happy with the photos on her current passport and driver's license and planned to major in photography in college so as to be able to get better pictures. (I assumed she left off the phrase "this time around" only because we were in a room full of humans, and relied on stereotypes of blondes to save her from someone remembering that people, even photographers, generally didn't take their own ID snapshots.)

Emmett told her, "But it's your turn to go to medical school next, Rose."

"I've already been," she grumbled. "Why don't you go? Or Alice? There's no reason it has to be just me and Edward taking turns. Anyway, I think Carlisle can wait a little longer."

"Wait, what?" I put in eloquently. Rosalie rolled her eyes and looked away, somewhat vacantly, apparently not wishing to be part of any conversation in which I participated.

Edward answered my question. I'd avoided looking directly at him since I'd sat down, unsure how or when he wanted to pick back up being "friends". But when he spoke, my head turned automatically, and he didn't appear upset, just interested in satisfying my curiosity: "Carlisle needs updates on how medicine is advancing, every now and then," Edward said. "He returns to medical school himself sometimes, but to reduce the chances he'll be recognized by a colleague, I've also been twice and Rosalie once, to update him. She graduated summa cum laude from Columbia," he added, glancing at his sister; I guessed that he had hoped to flatter her back into the conversation by mentioning this achievement. I thought I saw a flicker of a smile on her face before she resumed staring out the window.

"Reading journals won't do?" I asked blankly. I wondered, but didn't ask, why Rosalie hadn't mentioned Jasper.

"Carlisle has to be able to seem like he's fresh out of med school," Alice put in. "He reads journals, too, but they don't necessarily say much about what they're saying to new students straight out of pre-med."

"Makes sense," I acknowledged. I considered offering to go next, but I wasn't even a vampire yet, let alone an acknowledged fixture of the Cullen family who could do such things as go to medical school on Carlisle's behalf. Being a doctor wasn't my life's ambition, but it sounded like something I'd like to get around to with forever to spend learning anything I liked. "How do you deal with being around blood? I assume you have to be around blood in med school."

"I held my breath," said Edward, "and didn't go to work thirsty."

Rosalie tossed her hair and didn't answer; I wasn't sure if that meant that Edward's reply held for her as well, or if she just didn't feel like sharing.

"So," I asked, as the topic dwindled to a halt, "where did your last names come from?"

"Cullen was Carlisle's last name as a human, and he kept it," Edward said. "I didn't always use it - at first, I used to pretend to be his brother-in-law, a younger brother to a fictional dead wife, and I used my original last name, "Masen". I pretended to be Esme's brother when she joined us and used her maiden name, which was "Platt", for some time. When Rosalie arrived, she preferred to keep her real last name, "Hale"; then to explain ourselves we started using the template you're familiar with, where Esme and Carlisle are

adoptive parents to the rest of us, so I took the Cullen name. Emmett did the same when he arrived, and so did Alice, but Jasper took advantage of his and Rosalie's similar coloring and pretends to be a Hale."

"I suppose it would be awkward for you four to present as unmarried couples if there weren't at least two last names between you," I mused, waving vaguely at Alice, Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie. "Even given that you advertise you're adopted. Still, why use real names? Surely that would make it easier to follow you if anyone got suspicious? You could just make things up."

"Rosalie is attached to her name," said Edward. "And Carlisle has used his for more than three hundred years without anyone successfully following him. Although we may need to change policies as computers start leaving more easily discoverable traces in more places."

I nodded. "Your first names are all real?"

There were four nods and one, "I think so," from Alice.

"You don't remember that either?" I asked, turning to the little vampire on my right.

"It *feels* like "Alice" is my name," said Alice. "And it felt like my name when I woke up. I just have no way to be sure. I don't have a guess about a last name, or a middle one."

"I should probably learn all your full original names at some point, but if I try to do it all at once I'll never remember," I said. "How's the water working out for you all?"

"I can't believe we never thought of it," laughed Emmett boomerily. "Makes us look that much more natural."

"It helps. I noticed my first day here that none of you seemed to be eating anything."

"You're unusually observant," remarked Edward. I thought for a moment that this was a compliment, and then I realized that he probably knew just how much other students did and didn't notice.

"Well, I probably wouldn't have thought much of it, but it was *really* conspicuous that day I sat with Alice," I said. "I guess you don't normally pull aside random humans and sit down with them, though."

"Not likely," hissed Rosalie under her breath; I barely caught it. Emmett nudged her with his elbow.

The middle of the cafeteria is not the correct place to ask an impolite vampire what her problem is, I reminded myself, and Alice neatly diverted the subject to the reception of the vampire family by Forks's residents in general. Some had made an effort to be friendly - Esme had been invited to a garden party, things like that - but they had no close neighbors, did not initiate social plans of their own, and Carlisle was sure to be merely

cordial to his co-workers and those he encountered as patients. Over time, as usual, people stopped going out of their way to befriend the vampires.

"Charlie thinks the world of you all, you know," I commented. This seemed to elicit surprise - even from Edward. "You didn't notice?" I asked him, confused. "Even when you showed up at my house - he wasn't thinking anything like that? I don't *think* he lied..."

Edward blinked, then gently smacked himself in the forehead just softly enough to avoid making a telltale noise audible to nearby humans. "Of course," he said. "Of *course*."

"What?" I asked, quite bewildered.

"Bella, I'm sorry to say that I always thought of your father as a man who simply didn't think very much," said Edward. "I typically don't get words from him - just some images, some feelings, all a bit vague. I couldn't tell what he thought of the family at all even when I was standing right next to him. But with your complete inaudibility - it must be genetic, that's all. I imagine he thinks as much as anyone and I simply can't make it out clearly. I wonder what your mother sounds like! What combination would have created you and your silent mind?"

"Oh." I frowned. "You thought he was stupid?"

"No," Edward said quickly, then he winced and amended. "Not unusually so. I didn't give it much attention," he pleaded, trying to backpedal. "I'm usually not *trying* to listen to anyone."

"When would you have met him before, anyway?" I asked.

"We actually do buy food," Alice said. "To keep up appearances. Mostly nonperishables we can save up and dump at a food drive in Seattle around the holidays. It would look odd if we just never turned up at the grocery store; someone would notice. And we're around town to buy other things, sometimes - lightbulbs, clothes, car parts, music, that sort of thing. At least one of us has probably encountered any given person who lives here, though we rarely chat."

"Just the car parts? Is one of you a mechanic?" I asked.

"That would be Rose," said Emmett, chucking his wife under the chin affectionately. She smirked, more than smiled, but did acknowledge the gesture and turn to face the table again.

It was an incongruous image, the vain model elbow-deep in engine oil, but I didn't tease - I wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't eat me, for one thing, and for another, it only sounded silly for bad reasons.

The lunch bell rang. Edward escorted me to biology, any traces of annoyance over

the souls thing having evaporated, and then diverted course to sit in his own seat while I joined Angela.

I was starting to regret having switched lab partners by the time I was a quarter of the way through the class. Angela was nice and didn't drag me down in the grades department, but she was not one for talking in class - and anyway, if I wanted her to hear me I would have to speak up enough that I'd risk being heard. And we were *still covering cell anatomy*. If I'd had a way to trade my mitochondria for the chance to never hear the biology teacher drone on about them ever again, I might well have done it.

How much worse must it be for Edward? He had several times more relevant education than the man proposing to teach him about cells. He hadn't even forgotten anything since the last time he heard it; I had to admit, however grudgingly, that every seventh or eighth thing that came up in the lecture was something I might have missed if it had appeared on a pop quiz. And yet he was, apparently, in high school voluntarily. Maybe he just found it easy to think about other things.

I wondered what he was thinking about. Coral reefs and sharks? Portuguese verb conjugations?

Me?

What was I going to do about the souls thing anyway? It was really a problem if Edward thought souls were important and vampires couldn't have them. For one thing, I didn't think it would be good for his self-esteem. Clearly, he could love and admire Esme and the other members of his family. But on some level, this was hypocritical. How could he care for vampires and find humans in general "boring", as Alice had put it, while simultaneously thinking us mortals to be possessed of some spectacular commodity that outweighed every vampire advantage all by itself and ought to be preserved even at the cost of life itself? It would be as though I decided that the objective content of moral worth was the color yellow, and then went on sacrificing bananas and eggs and squash so that Charlie could eat well because, even though he was not yellow, I preferred to *act* as though he were more important than the yellow things to which I'd assigned primacy.

If Edward really believed as he claimed, why hadn't he executed Emmett the first time he'd eaten someone, or at least tried? If it were more valuable to live as a human than as a vampire, then any vampire who was a danger to any human ought not to exist, intent or no. Dangerous dogs were executed even though no one held them morally culpable, simply because they might hurt humans, a more valued species.

Edward might believe in souls, might believe they were important, might believe vampires had none - but he did not *act* this way - except when he was trying to decide what advice to give *me*.

There were several ways to explain this.

One: Edward was not actually in love with me. He'd fooled his entire family

(including Alice's visions of us being *so happy*), or had gotten them in on it, and was carrying on an elaborate subterfuge for unclear reasons, but didn't want to have to keep it up for all eternity, or deal with fallout after I turned and was not magnetically drawn to him. Implausible in the extreme - too complicated, and no sensible motive in sight.

Two: Edward did not realize that he didn't act like he believed what he said about souls. This was more likely - in particular, it explained why he'd find it uncomfortable to talk about Esme as a soulless creature, because it would expose the disparity between his words and behavior. It was also not incompatible with other explanations.

Three: Edward had difficulty balancing selfish and selfless motives. While he genuinely believed it would have been better *for Esme* if she'd died at the bottom of the cliff, he thought it was better for *him* that she be an immortal vampire who could remain a part of his family forever - now that his own soul was unsalvageable, anyway. Thinking about how glad he was that she was alive made him feel bad about himself, but the magical vampire love thing made him more enforceably concerned with what he thought was best for me for my own sake. This seemed plausible, although it relied on an assumption I wasn't sure I could support about how vampires worked.

Four: Edward thought I would snap and kill people if I turned, and the souls thing was a gentler way of advising me to stay human than saying "Bella, love, I think you're likely to be a murderer." But he had gone to some trouble to avoid lying to me.

I mulled this over, writing indecipherable shorthand in my notebook as a reference ("*Lying, Confused, Selfish, Snap*" - I hoped Alice wouldn't be able to make sense of that if she saw it). The only way to figure out which it was would be to talk to Edward more, but I suspected some combination of two and three.

Biology dragged on.

Gym was a little better than Biology. (I almost laughed out loud wondering what I'd have said if I'd been told back in December that I'd think that.) Edward was on my mind, but at least not in the room tantalizingly unadjacent.

After I'd dragged myself through an hour of yoga poses and left the gym, Edward appeared beside me right on schedule. "Hello, Bella," he said warmly.

Had he *completely* forgotten the conversation on Saturday? "Hello, Edward."

"Would you like to visit us again today?" he invited.

"I don't see why not," I replied. "Unless you're still upset about the souls thing and you're just a very good actor."

"There's no reason to talk about it," Edward said.

"There is," I said, "if you don't want me to be a vampire for reasons I don't understand. I ought to have all the information before I decide - headaches for Alice or no - right?"

"Bella," he said pleadingly.

"I'm sorry I brought up Esme as an example. Would it be easier if we talked about someone else? Rosalie?" I suggested.

Edward frowned. "I don't want to argue with you."

"It doesn't *necessarily* have to be a fight," I said. "But maybe - I don't know, do any of the others agree with you? I could talk it over with someone else."

Edward was silent, looking somewhat brooding. "No," he said finally, "but Carlisle's familiar with my views on the matter."

"Will he have a while to talk to me about it today?"

"Most likely," grumbled Edward.

"You don't sound happy about it," I said. "Why?"

"I was hoping to keep you to myself all day," he said with a faint smile. "Even though I said 'us'."

"You still owe me the rest of the story about the shark, so you'll get at least some of my afternoon," I reminded him. We arrived at my truck. "Are you going to ride with me to your place?"

"You could let me drive," he said.

"The way you speed, you'd break the poor thing even without crashing. I *like* my truck."

"I can keep it slow, for the truck's sake," Edward laughed. "I'm not sure I can promise it won't break down, though. This thing's not likely to last out the year. It might choose today to die."

"Well, lucky me," I said, walking around the front to get to the passenger seat, "I can't be stranded with you around."

"It is an advantage," Edward acknowledged, sliding into the driver's seat and holding out his hand for the keys. I dropped them into his palm and he started the engine.

After I had gotten the shark story - and three more - out of Edward, Carlisle came home. Esme flew to the door to greet him as he came in. They looked and acted more like

newlyweds than a long-married couple, and it was cute to watch from my vantage point at the dining table.

"Bella, hello," said Carlisle after Esme had flitted up the stairs to return to whatever she'd been doing. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thanks," I replied cheerfully. "Hey, if you have a bit, I wanted to ask you something."

"Oh? I don't have anything pressing to do," Carlisle said genially. "We can talk in my office if you like."

I got up and followed the doctor up the stairs. I thought I might have heard Edward say something, but it was too low for me to make out; if it wasn't my imagination, he'd surely intended the utterance for Carlisle, who didn't visibly react.

Carlisle's office was cozy, and he gave me his undivided attention once we had both taken seats. "What did you want to ask me?" he inquired.

"Did Edward tell you anything about the conversation we had on Saturday - about souls?" I asked.

"No," said Carlisle, furrowing his brow. "What happened?"

"Apparently he thinks vampires don't have any souls, and that they're important," I said. "I just don't see how that could be. All of the things humans can do that might be what souls handle, vampires can do too - you can think, you have memories better than mine, you can do moral reasoning. I said as much and Edward mentioned the idea of an afterlife. Even if I grant for the sake of argument that that's in the picture, and it's hardly a trivial assumption - *why* would he believe that vampires have a different afterlife situation than humans? Are there vampire ghosts floating about as cautionary tales that he didn't mention or something?"

"And," I went on, knowing Carlisle would have no difficulty keeping track of my questions, "he doesn't want to talk about it any more, even to answer those questions. I upset him on Saturday when I brought up Esme as an example. If it's really better for a person to be a human and eventually die than it is for them to live potentially forever as a vampire, it *would* follow - mind, I don't agree with this - that it would have been better for Esme if you'd let her die instead of turning her. But Edward doesn't seem to think so. He only doesn't want *me* to be a vampire. He said you wouldn't turn anybody who had a life to live, at least under normal circumstances. I don't know who Alice saw turning me back when she saw clearly; it might not have been you. But if I stay human, I *will* eventually die, because that is just something humans *do*, pretty darn reliably. And if I'm *not* going to stay human, there's no obvious reason to wait until I'm dying of something to turn me. Edward's basically saying that he wants me dead so I can keep my soul, and doesn't have a coherent explanation of why I should be willing to die to keep it."

Carlisle took all this in fairly calmly, although I'd gotten reasonably animated

towards the end. "I take it you aren't a religious sort," he said.

I shrugged. "I can tell a nest of bad logic when I see one, religion or no. Charlie's Lutheran but doesn't go to church, and Renée's flavor of the week is Episcopalian, I think. I don't think I'm anything."

"Well, there's a lot of myth and legend that holds that vampires are damned in exchange for our immortality on earth," said Carlisle. "Bad logic or not, it's hardly an uncommon view, if you start from the premise that vampires exist."

"Is that what Edward thinks, then?"

"No, actually," he replied. "Edward doesn't believe there is any afterlife at all for our kind."

"But he thinks there is one for humans. Does he think there's a deity orchestrating everything?"

"He's never put forth an opinion on that for sure, one way or the other," Carlisle said. "You probably noticed that his is a vague sort of belief."

"A deity would make less sense. There's no reason to *automatically* obliterate vampires - involuntary ones, willing ones, nice ones, mean ones, ones that lived for ten years and ones that lived for a thousand, all indiscriminately - instead of providing an afterlife. You haven't *all* killed people, have you?" I asked.

"We have not all killed people," Carlisle agreed.

"So no deity sane enough that Edward or anybody else could guess at its reasoning would take vampires, as a group, off the guest list for the afterlife," I said. "If it does, then it's acting so arbitrarily that it might just as easily boot you for owning white socks. You can't base decisions on something like that, even if it were true."

"You seem very open to the possibility of religions having some things right, for someone who 'isn't anything'," Carlisle observed.

"Not that long ago, I discovered that vampires exist," I pointed out. "It's making it seem more likely that something about how I evaluate supernatural claims is off, so I'm trying to be more careful. Anyway. A force of nature doesn't need to act for reasons," I continued. "So it could do something mean and pointless like not letting vampires have an afterlife if there were one available. But the problem with that hypothesis is that because you can't reason from *motives* about the impersonal laws of the universe, the only way to know what they do is to watch them doing it. I don't suppose Alice can see souls as they float off to their final destinations?" I guessed.

"She cannot," Carlisle confirmed.

"Edward can't read the minds of dead people? Jasper doesn't get mood readings off

corpses? None of the Volturi or anybody have empirical data on what happens to vampires, or humans, once they pass on?"

Carlisle shook his head. He was a good audience - inserting facts where I needed them and otherwise letting me think aloud.

"Is there *any* observation that *anyone* has plausibly claimed to make *ever* indicating that an afterlife exists and that vampires don't get in?" I inquired, and Carlisle shook his head again.

"Then that leaves us with a few possibilities consistent with vampires losing the ability to go to an afterlife," I said. "There is a deity sorting souls which dislike vampires, and it acts so inscrutably in so disliking that there's no way to follow its reasoning and be sure to get good results by acting in ways it likes. Or, there is a law of nature governing the afterlife which prohibits vampires from getting in, which nobody has any way of observing, and which we therefore have no reason to believe exists. Am I missing something?" I asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Carlisle said.

"And neither of those situations leaves me with a good reason not to become a vampire," I concluded. "In either case, there's just no information. A deity, if one exists, either acts for consistent reasons that our minds can approximate, or it can't be tracked in such a way that there's potentially efficacious things we can do to try and please it. A naturally-arranged afterlife, if one exists, either admits vampires or doesn't - for that matter, it either admits *humans* or doesn't - and there is absolutely no way to tell. And furthermore, there's no reason to believe that an afterlife of *any* kind exists, given that there are no observations of it and the universe in general doesn't seem like someone sane is running it. And all of that means that the only criteria on which I should base my decision about becoming a vampire on are how my *life* - the part spent kicking about on Earth with my eyes open and my brain running - will be as a vampire or a human. And that seems to come firmly down on the side of vampire, with the whole immortal and superpowered thing. There are a couple of disadvantages, but none worth literally dying to avoid."

I heard Alice's voice from down the hall hollering, "Thank youuuuuuuu," in relieved tones. Apparently my future had snapped back into place.

"You've given this a lot of thought," said Carlisle.

"Most of it just now," I said. "It helps to have an audience - usually I write, and that does the job, but if I *just* think, I wind up revising things so they're pleasant instead of trying to make sure they're true."

"I'm glad I could help." He sounded very genuine when he said it - he was really pleased to have been able to serve as a sounding board and fact-checker for my thought process.

"Yeah, thank you," I said brightly. "Now I just have to figure out how to explain this to Edward so he doesn't avoid the topic like the plague or continue to complain about me wanting to be a vampire. Although I suppose he heard this entire conversation, unless he left the house and got out of thought range or is tuning you out."

Carlisle nodded. "I somehow doubt that he did leave," he said.

"I guess I'll go see. Thanks again," I said with a warm smile.

And I left the office and descended the stairs to see what Edward thought of the entire mess.

I tiptoed down three stairs, foolishly hoping to sneak up on Edward and get a clue of his reaction before he noticed my approach, and then I realized this was stupid - I couldn't possibly walk quietly enough that he wouldn't hear from any point in the house. So I clomped down the stairs normally, and when my view of the first floor came to include Edward, I found I needn't have bothered to tiptoe even if it would have hidden me. He wasn't making any effort to conceal his body language - it screamed tension. His hands were clenched in his hair and he was bent forward with his elbows planted on the table. I couldn't see his face, but guessed it was in some contortion of displeasure.

"Edward?" I murmured.

"Hello, Bella," he said, just loud enough for me to hear. I reached the bottom of the stairs and walked towards him. When I retook my chair, he murmured, "There's no convincing you, is there?"

"If I'm missing some facts, or I made a bad inference somewhere, please, tell me," I replied. "I realize there are drawbacks to being a vampire, but... unless you're missing something *huge* in your informational brochure... none of it looks worth dying to avoid. And that's what it *would* be to stay human. You know that."

"There's no need for it to be *soon*, though," he said. Apparently he'd either been convinced by my exchange with Carlisle, or considered *me* so entrenched in my existing reasoning that he'd given up attacking it. "You could wait. Finish high school, go to college."

"What's the advantage to doing that while human?" I asked. I could see *disadvantages*: if I waited too long to turn, I'd be stuck looking like a cougar forever once I wound up inevitably-vampire-married to Edward, who'd been turned when he was seventeen and would stay that way. Some cause of death Alice couldn't predict well in advance could get me - an indecisive murderer or something. I would have imperfect recall of the experiences I accumulated during those years (or even, depending on what had caused Alice's amnesia and how common it was, none at all). The Volturi could discover and get annoyed with my continued status as a human in-the-know, and force the

issue at a time not of my choosing.

Surprisingly, Edward didn't deflect the question or answer with floaty vagueness. "Timing," he said. "You *might* be able to safely return to high school after only a summer to adjust - you might not. And "not" is the sort of thing that we would find out for sure only if you actually killed someone, so pushing it wouldn't be wise. In particular, you'd need to avoid your family. Even after we were sure it was safe for you to be around humans, the change would be very noticeable. You'll look different, you'll move differently, you won't want to eat human food or go out in the sun publicly - all of these are things that people who know you would pick up on. If anyone got inquisitive enough to find something out, we'd need to turn them, too, whether they liked it or not, or hide them from the Volturi well enough to keep them from getting killed - impractical, you should know."

"That it?" I asked, when he seemed to have finished.

"That's all I think you're likely to find swaying," he said.

I frowned - that wasn't a good sign regarding Edward's own opinion of what was and wasn't worth consideration - but chose to put off pressing the issue. "Okay," I said. "How does this timeline sound? You and I make it known that we're an item, for setup purposes - tomorrow, perhaps, I'll tell Jessica and she can tell the whole school. We finish out the school year as the showiest, most sickeningly inseparable couple in the universe."

I closed my eyes, envisioning how the rest of the scenario would play out, and went on. "We let out that your family is going on vacation to Europe for the summer and I go along. Carlisle already looks *suspiciously* young for the age he's claiming - you couldn't have planned to stay here much longer; I expect you were going to split once you got out of high school. We could really go to Europe, or someplace else, depending on how curious Charlie seems and accordingly how likely we are to need to verifiably prove it - he's the most likely point of failure here, since he has the most interest in my personal life and the most resources to poke around with. As soon as we get wherever we go, you turn me and I start adjusting - I'll be "sick" for three days, if anybody asks.

"I can keep in touch with my family by e-mail and phone. Maybe I'll get a webcam with a really terrible picture and use it in a room with bad light so they can see me without noticing I'm suddenly even paler and have different colored eyes. And then I tell them we've eloped and I'm going to take a super-long honeymoon-cum-gap year. That should be long enough, since Alice saw me with newborn eyes near live humans without being in the process of sucking their blood. Then I enroll in a college someplace really inconvenient for either of my parents to travel to, maybe in Australia, with a forged high school transcript if necessary, and keep up with the electronic communication. We send them photos where we're really tiny figures in the background, and/or where we touch up the images so I look suitably pink and we both look the right non-seventeen age."

I opened my eyes. Edward looked some awkward combination of impressed,

hopeful, and despairing. "Well?" I said.

"You're going to tell the entire school that we're an 'item'?" he said.

"If I'm going to turn, it's going to happen eventually," I said. "And it lends plausibility to the rest of the story. I can't tell Jessica the entire slew of details if I want her to live."

"It's interesting that you're so eager to be a vampire yourself, but you don't want to change everyone you know, too," Edward said slyly.

"That's not it," I said. "It would be wonderful if Jessica and Angela and Charlie and Renée and everyone else could all live forever. But I'd need to *inform* them of what that would entail before I did it, to satisfy my conscience. I can't assume they'll agree with me. And if I informed them, and they *didn't like* the idea, then they'd have to be hidden from the Volturi forever, or they *and* I would be killed for breach of masquerade. I'd be risking my life to force anyone I told into a choice between untimely death or potentially unwanted vampire life. Do I have that about right?"

Edward nodded, looking disappointed that he hadn't actually found a chink in my logic.

"Alice could probably see that I would like the idea of becoming a vampire, before she told me the whole story," I said, excusing my own case. "And I think it *would* be a good use of time to see if she can check the likely reactions of a handful of favorite people, although I can already guess that Charlie and Renée would probably say no. But I *also* suspect that if this coven suddenly tripled in size, the Volturi would take that as some kind of power grab. I certainly don't want them to think we're challenging them, or about to. So even that, it wouldn't be safe to overdo."

(I didn't want the Volturi to *think* I was trying for a coup. I might want to actually commit one eventually - they seemed overfond of the death penalty and excessively dependent on secrecy. But Edward was not immune to Aro, their mindreader - and I might well be. Any such plans I might develop had to stay safely in my head, initial steps concealed by other overt reasons, until they were just about ready to spring into existence.)

"The one thing left that I don't think I know," I said, "which might be relevant, is the concern of Rosalie's you alluded to. Do you think she would be willing to share it, or let you tell me?"

"Perhaps," Edward said, looking suddenly hopeful. "I'll go speak to her." And he got up and disappeared up the stairs.

The Future

Edward was gone for about fifteen minutes, and I passed the time by writing out the plan I'd devised, with some trivial embellishments. I knew Edward would remember it all perfectly, but I didn't want to have to consult him every time I wanted to check up on a detail.

I was scribbling a list of possible Europe and non-Europe destinations in the margins of my notebook when Edward and Rosalie came downstairs. She looked disgruntled but basically peaceable, and Edward held his features carefully neutral. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and watched her approach me, and then went back up - I supposed at least one of them thought it was a two-person conversation. Rosalie's high heels ticked regularly against the tile as she walked towards me and sat down.

"Edward said he didn't tell you about what led to - this," Rosalie said softly, gesturing at her perfect, white face. I nodded. "It's not a nice story," she said. "It doesn't have a happy ending. I'm going to keep it short."

It had been 1933, during the Great Depression, and Rosalie had been eighteen and living in Rochester with her parents and two brothers. And beautiful. Even as a human she'd been beautiful. The Depression didn't affect her family very much - her father had had a secure banking job, and Rosalie was quite able to traipse about town in pretty dresses imagining that the poor people she saw had brought their fates on themselves. She made her own life sound like a fairy tale - she was the lovely, happy princess, who wanted certain things and had every reason to believe she'd get them. Accordingly, one day the son of her father's employer began to court her. She went on at some length about the lavish wedding planned to end their whirlwind engagement, and about his habit of sending her a bouquet of roses every day so her house overflowed with them and she always smelled of their petals.

Rosalie experienced one pang of envy: a friend of hers had married young, at seventeen, and a year later had a baby boy, adorable with dark curls and dimples. They were not as sheltered from the economic troubles of the world as Rosalie's family was. Rosalie's parents would never have dreamed of letting her marry a man like her friend's carpenter husband, while they approved of the banker's son. But Rosalie's friend had the pretty baby, the happy marriage. So Rosalie amused herself with mental images of her own fair-haired children playing on the wide lawns she'd have surrounding her house soon enough.

The way Rosalie told it, it sounded almost rehearsed, like she'd thought a lot about all of the details and knew just how she preferred to describe them, the exact best intonation and vocabulary. Everything sounded floaty, and far away, memorized as much as remembered.

She implied, but did not quite state, the unhappy ending she'd promised.

But I was able to piece together the events well enough.

Her fiancé and several of his friends had gotten drunk, found her walking home alone from her friend's house, and gang-raped her, leaving her injured enough to be dying.

That was how Carlisle had found her, broken and bleeding in the middle of the street under the unseasonable April snow. He'd brought her home and turned her - over, Rosalie said, Edward's *objections* (he thought she was too recognizable, Rosalie explained on his behalf; and if they'd met socially, I doubted he'd have been favorably impressed). Between her screams (which she informed me did nothing about the pain of the transition), they were able to explain what she was becoming; and finally, she finished, and finally believed them.

Rosalie then chose this moment to tell me, "You know, my record is almost as clean as Carlisle's. Better than Esme's. A thousand times better than Edward. I've never tasted human blood." She sounded proud.

"Almost as clean...?"

"I did kill them," she said, complacently, and I knew at once that "they" were her attackers, and I could feel no ill judgment towards her. "But I was very careful not to spill their blood. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist that, and I didn't want any part of them in me."

She described their deaths in a bit more detail than I thought necessary, though I didn't try to stop her. She went over how she saved her fiancé for last, hoping he'd hear about the deaths of his friends and live his last days in fear. Considering she'd found him in a windowless room with doors like a bank vault's and two armed men guarding him - whom she'd also killed - this seemed to have been effective. She had stolen a wedding dress to wear for the occasion, to be theatrical about it. But there had been no blood, and no feeding.

I now had reason to believe that *all* of the Cullens except Carlisle had killed humans before. Was he the only exception? It would be consistent with the statement "we have not all killed people" if only one had abstained. Maybe the Denali coven had better records. But there *was* Carlisle, and neither Rosalie nor Edward had *indelicately* killed. And I had been seen to adjust well, in Alice's visions. I might be all right. If I did not feel *sure* I would be all right, once I was a vampire and knew the scope of the thirst, then I would simply avoid humans in the flesh.

"I hope I'm not frightening you," Rosalie said, after concluding her elaborate description of her seven murders (the fiancé, his four friends, and his two guards).

"Thank you for telling me your story," I said. "I don't think I have a good reason to be afraid of you, if that's what you mean."

Rosalie nodded. "Do you understand why I think you should stay human?" she

asked.

I thought about her story, and what relevance she might think it would have. Surely she had less reason than anyone to value the vulnerability of humanity, which featured heavily. She didn't seem to regret her homicides, for which I could hardly blame her either. And so...

"Vampires can't have babies?" I concluded tentatively. And so Rosalie would never have her precious blond children playing on the lawn...

"Right in one," she said softly. "Do you know where Emmett came from? I saved him from a bear that was mauling him, and carried him home to Carlisle - I didn't think I had the self-control to turn him myself, without killing him. He has dark curls... and dimples... just like my friend's little son. I didn't want him to die. I hated this life, and I was selfish enough to ask Carlisle to save him anyway. And I was lucky. Emmett is everything I would have asked for, if I'd known myself well enough to ask for the right things. And he needs me too. *That* part... I will admit, it worked out better than I could have hoped. But there will only ever be two of us. We'll never sit together on a porch somewhere, gray-haired, surrounded by grandchildren.

"You're young, Bella," she said suddenly, intensely, switching modes from the nostalgia for things that never were and could never be. "You don't know what you'll want in a decade. Two decades. Ten. It is *rash*, rash in the extreme, to make such *permanent* choices now. Do you understand? You have everything I want - I would trade *everything* to be *you* and have your choices, and you're choosing *wrong*!"

I nodded, slowly. I had never wanted children very much. They'd seemed like a vague, future possibility that might manifest if certain other events fell into place in potentially pleasant, but optional, ways. But Rosalie *was* right that however well I knew myself now, I did *not* have reason to believe that I knew what I'd want in my twenties or my thirties - whether I spent them human or not. And apparently becoming a vampire did close off an option that *many* women wanted, and chose to exercise, and if they happened not to have it through some medical misfortune, would often spend thousands of dollars to -

Oh.

There was an *obvious* solution.

"Carlisle's a doctor," I said. "He can harvest some eggs before I turn, and freeze them. Then, later, when I'm ready, if I want children, I can hire a surrogate. You're right, Rosalie, I don't know how I'm going to feel later about the idea. You're right that I'm young, and I really *hadn't* thought about it and I should have and I'm so glad you shared your experience with me to help me realize that it's important. Part of having a choice the way I do is that I can also make a *plan*, and I can plan to still have resources I might want, later. And someday, maybe, I'll make you an aunt."

Rosalie looked completely bowled over. I didn't know why. She'd been to medical school - granted, I didn't know how recently, but surely with three doctors in the house they did sometimes discuss advances in medicine from the *seventies*. The existence of the technology couldn't surprise her that much. Maybe no one ever took her advice, and that was what puzzled her? Maybe because I *didn't* have to lose the capacity to have children with vampirism, she resented me?

And then Rosalie lunged forward and before I could shriek or fall off my chair in shock or fear, she hugged me.

It was a tight hug, but careful - I didn't think I'd have any bruises later. Puzzled, but no longer frightened, I hugged her back. She was cool and unyielding, but somehow managed to be pleasant to hug anyway.

"Thank you," she whispered in my ear.

"You're welcome," I said, scripted, automatic, confused - what was she thanking me for? She let me go and sat back, her eyes alight with some strange pleasure.

"Will you let me help?" Rosalie asked. "With the eggs. I can't - I *can't ever* have my own - but if you let me help - Bella, please -"

"Of course," I said. That would probably be more comfortable than Carlisle anyway, for certain parts - I didn't know *exactly* what egg harvesting involved, but if it were less intimate than the average gynecological exam, that would constitute a surprise.

Rosalie hugged me again, a little tighter, a little faster. She released me again, smiling so beatifically that it made me wonder how I'd ever thought she was beautiful *frowning* when it was possible for her to look like *that*. "Thank you," she sighed, and then she got to her feet and flew up the stairs.

It took only half a minute for Edward to return once Rosalie had gone. He walked down the stairs as slowly as a dawdling human, looking preposterously confused. When he got to the table and sat down, he still looked bewildered. "How did you *do* that?" he marveled.

"Do what?"

"You're Rosalie's new favorite person. I didn't listen to the conversation - I put on music and tuned her thoughts and your voices out, I thought it should be private - and now her thoughts are all over the place thinking about synthetic hormones and *baby clothes*, and I don't know what happened, but she adores you and she's happier than I think I've seen her in the last decade - or two. What did you *do*?"

"I didn't expect her to react that strongly," I said. "I just listened to her story and thought her concern was important to think about, so I thanked her and said I'd get

Carlisle to harvest some eggs before I turn, and she asked if she could help, and I said yes, and then she went upstairs. There were," I added as an afterthought, "hugs."

Edward made another one of *those* faces - full of confused, mixed-up feelings all fighting over the curve of his mouth and the angle of his eyebrows. I thought I could detect impressedness and frustration, but I wasn't sure of either, and there were at least a couple other emotional combatants. "You are nothing short of astonishing, Bella," he told me.

"Thank you," I said. "Is there anything else I should know?"

He looked heavenward, thoughtful and silent. I waited patiently for him to marshal his arguments.

"You know that you'll lose all your interest in human food, and that animal blood tastes comparatively terrible," he said. "You know that you will be thirsty *all* the time - that your throat will burn, constantly, forever, urging you to drink. You know you might not be able to see your family in person for years, if ever. You know it will probably interrupt your plans for school and that *one* mistake in your control near a human means murder. You know if you decide to use those eggs you won't be able to carry your children yourself. You know you'll have to move around every few years to avoid detection. You know you'll be seventeen *forever* - you won't know how you would have grown up, how you'd have matured. You know you have to follow the Volturi's laws, whether you like them or not, or they'll kill you. I don't think anyone's told you, but you might have guessed, that perfect vampire recall makes it comparatively much *harder* to remember human experiences. You know that *I* believe that in becoming a vampire, you'll permanently lose the opportunity to *truly* live forever, instead of merely living until you catch fire or are broken into tiny enough pieces that you can't reassemble yourself. You know that turning consists of three straight days of incredible pain - during which, I should add, it's very common that the turning person begs for death." He reminded me of these things in a near monotone, wringing the emotion out of each word with great effort, as though he thought emotions must be meaningless to anyone who wanted logic to hold a superior place in decision-making.

"*You* know," I replied, when he was done, "that if I never turn, I'll die. You know that I could catch the flu. Or fall off a cliff. Or be attacked by five all-too-human monsters. Or be mauled by a bear. I could suffer brain damage and never be myself again. I could lose the use of all my limbs in an accident or go blind or have a genetic disease that will pop up in my twenties and slowly -" Edward looked like I was stabbing him in the throat with every clause. "You know I'm *vulnerable*," I said, summing up instead of listing more horrible fates that could befall humans. "And if the Volturi ever find out that I exist, they will kill me - and probably your entire family - if I'm not a vampire or obviously on the fast track to becoming one. I *already* have to follow their laws whether I like it or not. I *already* face the loss of everything there is to love about being human - whenever something happens to me. And it could be any time; I don't *necessarily* have gray hair to look forward to." I took a deep breath. "I have notes on most of my experiences. I can read them when I'm a vampire and remember them almost as well as I

do now. I've lived too far away to see *one* of my parents at every given time for the entire span of my life that I can call to memory - making it both at once will be a little worse, but only a little. I know that your reasoning about the afterlife is, as far as I can see or you'll explain or Carlisle can translate, *bogus*."

I paused for a moment, thinking, and said slowly, "Carlisle's never killed anyone. You, and Rosalie, have never killed anyone on *impulse* - and I genuinely *don't* think I'm going to calmly decide to murder humans. What kind of body count are we looking at for Emmett, Alice, Esme, and Jasper?"

"Jasper's is easily in the thousands," said Edward harshly. "He spent eighty years as a non-"vegetarian" vampire. He only came to join us later, after he met Alice. Alice's count might be similar to mine, or worse; she didn't see joining our family until the late forties and until then she was only haphazardly struggling towards living on animals via her own conscience. Emmett's killed the two humans I told you about, and slipped up a half a dozen other times. Esme's only made one mistake."

"And your Denali friends?" I asked implacably.

"All have eaten plenty of humans. Their family came to the vegetarian lifestyle independently of us," Edward said. "And they're each considerably older than Jasper, or even Carlisle. I wouldn't be surprised if any one of them had eaten more people than all of our family put together."

I pursed my lips. "But Carlisle *never* slipped up, and *never* decided, outside of a fit of thirst, to kill, the way you or Rosalie did."

Edward nodded.

"Did Carlisle," I hypothesized suddenly, "know that vampires existed before he became one?"

Edward looked startled. "Yes," he said, blinking. "He lived during the mid-1600's. His father was an Anglican pastor and enlisted his help killing witches and werewolves - and vampires. He was turned by a vampire he successfully trapped - he killed two other men and ran off with a third; Carlisle thinks he was too thirsty to think straight and didn't mean to turn anyone, but Carlisle was already full of venom and hid in a root cellar full of rotten potatoes so his father wouldn't find him. When he was done turning he was so repelled by what he was that he tried to kill himself several times - jumping into the ocean, that sort of thing - but of course that's very hard for vampires to do. He avoided humans and eventually discovered he could live on animals."

"Did any of the rest of you, or the Denali coven, even suspect that vampires might exist beforehand? Skip Alice, I know we have no information on her," I said. I seized my pencil and jotted down *witches*, *werewolves* for follow-up questioning later.

"No," said Edward, after thinking for a moment.

"So," I concluded, "the odds do look very bad if you sample out of all vampires ever. The only one with a perfect record is Carlisle. Who is also the only one we know of who had any idea what was going on before he was bitten. I have *lots* of notice. In fact, I'm in a position to make a deliberate, non-emergency *choice*. Alice saw me adjusting *unusually* well - and that's consistent with the hypothesis that vampires who knew what to expect are the ones who don't have to act like "normal" vampires. Who can anticipate and counter the instincts that make "normal" vampires treat humans like snacks."

I went on, to address the last, most fearsome point. Truthfully, I wanted to edit it out of my model of vampirism altogether. Forget about the "not fun". Pretend to myself that the three days were merely *boring* in some way - paralysis, not pain. But this would not be honest. I could not expect to make the *best* decision if I pretended the pain did not exist, when it did.

"Does it seem to you, in your experience," I said, "that vampires experience *damage* - mental trauma, flashbacks, phobias, phantom pain, anything like that - which is *best* explained by the pain associated with turning, as opposed to preexisting conditions or other aspects of being a vampire?" The part afterward - the part that could last forever - that was what mattered most. If everyone escaped truly unscathed...

"No," Edward almost whispered. He had to think about it, but came up empty.

"Is there a good medical reason why I should be conscious when I'm shot full of venom?" I asked. "I realize that most methods of knocking me out won't necessarily last three days, but perhaps I could skip part of it. Or painkillers? Put me on a generous morphine drip?"

"I don't see why that would interfere," he said quietly.

"If I beg to die while I'm turning, will you actually kill me?" I asked. "Or even if I don't? Get me dead and zipping off to heaven quickly, before it's too late -"

"*No!*" roared Edward violently. "No." He repeated it more gently, as though hoping to erase his previous utterance and replace it with the moderated version. "Bella, I *don't* want you dead. I want you to live. I just want you to live - *properly*. Human."

"I can't go on doing that forever," I murmured. "And every day I walk on fragile legs and look out on the world with soft eyes and fend off danger with weak arms, I run the risk of death. I am susceptible to attack. I can be hurt. I can be killed. Unless you're right about the afterlife - and you know I don't think you are - I can be *destroyed* - lost forever, *irrecoverable*. If you don't want me dead, you should want me armored. Edward, I am so unsafe."

He dropped his face into his hands. "I want you to live," he mumbled.

"I *want* to live," I replied, quietly, firmly. "I love being alive. I love the world and being in it. I want to see and learn *everything*."

He looked up, dropped his hands. Then he lifted one and touched my face. His palm was cool against my cheek, and smooth. "I could never kill you, Bella," he said. "I couldn't." Only one emotion was emanating from him as he said it - he *needed* me to believe what he said, he *needed* me to feel safe with him. He poured every ounce of sincerity he could into his words, begging me with his silken voice to believe them.

I had an instant's impulse to make a remark about how he was all too eager to *let* me die, if only at the hand of old age - but I wasn't sure he was so eager, anymore, now that I'd forced his emotional conflict over the problem to the surface. Maybe he had romanticized death by old age in some way he couldn't with injury or sickness. But I couldn't stay safe from the latter, less idealized trips to the grave while I was human. They were facts of human life.

And so I picked up my hand, and touched Edward's cheek in a symmetrical gesture. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath.

"Edward," I said, "will you help me live?"

Edward nodded.

Jessica was thrilled to pieces about the opportunity to gossip when I told her, between Trig and Spanish, that Edward and I were "an item" (I decided to use those exact words). I injected enough squeal into my voice to give credibility to the "sickeningly inseparable couple" demonstration I'd be giving for the next several months. Jessica wanted every possible detail about our date on Saturday, excruciating precision about how we'd spent Monday afternoon, and rather intrusive levels of insight into how I felt about him. I placated her with tidbits - named the restaurant we'd been to, said I thought his sisters and parents liked me at least and left her to ruminate about what this implied about his brothers - and then pretended interest in weather-related Spanish vocabulary.

After Spanish, Edward sidled up to me while Jessica and I walked to lunch. "Bella," he said, in his most charming tones, and he offered me his arm. I linked elbows with him, and then turned my head just a bit to wink at Jessica, who looked about ready to explode from excitement. She broke into an outright run and careened headlong into the cafeteria. "Mike! Lauren! Angela!" I could hear her calling out before the door shut behind her. I could still make out her strident voice, but not individual words.

Edward and I continued at a more sedate pace. "Is she telling everybody who's got ears, just as planned?" I asked.

"You want me to check?" Edward asked.

"Listen, don't read," I said. "She's yelling in a semi-public space; whatever she's saying isn't meant to be private."

"Yes, she's telling everyone," he confirmed. "You'll sit with us today?"

I nodded. "I should probably sit with Jessica and the others at least, say, once a week," I said. "I don't want to completely fall out of the circle."

"I suppose I could join you at their table," he proposed. "Imagine the stir."

"Jessica would have fun with that," I agreed, and we reached the door. "But today I think I should let her gossip without breathing down her neck."

"Agreed. And Rosalie wants to talk your ear off about the drug regimen she's going to put you on," Edward said. "Will you visit again this afternoon?"

"Only if I can expect to get some homework done at your house," I laughed. "I had to stay up a bit late last night getting everything for today finished. Somehow when I go to that house I find myself occupied by talking to all the nifty people who live in it." Edward made a show of buying my lunch for me, which made Jessica eep from two tables away. We sat together at the vampire table. Edward unlinked elbows and draped his freed arm ever so casually over my shoulders. He looked smug, somehow, when he did it. I supposed this made some sense. I was still... sort of... pretending for the benefit of the humans watching us; Edward didn't need to pretend, he only needed to act on his reality. And I could well imagine that he'd like that.

"Bella!" exclaimed Rosalie once I'd sat down. "I ordered everything you need. The hospital here didn't have it all but it wasn't hard to get and it's on its way and you can get started on Friday or Saturday. The whole thing will take a few weeks. I made Alice look and she said you don't need to worry about any complications, but I printed out a pamphlet for you of everything anyway, here." She shoved it across the table at me. "Will you be able to keep the meds hidden from your father? You have to go on the Pill first and then there's some injections you need to self-administer and I don't think he really needs to know what's going on. And we're going to need to do some blood tests - well," Rosalie winced, "*Carlisle* should probably do the blood tests, to be really safe, but I will be able to handle most everything else. Like the ultrasounds. Those I can do."

She was *very* excited about this. "Friday, sounds good," I said. "Charlie doesn't go through my stuff. I don't think he'll find anything - Alice?" I asked, turning to the littlest vampire.

"Looks clear," Alice said after a moment. Rosalie sat back, smug, and closed her eyes. Alice added, "I don't see any *complications* but that doesn't mean you won't get side effects - you won't need to miss school or anything, and probably no humans will be able to tell anything's wrong if you're careful."

"And a good thing the going is to be so smooth, too," murmured Edward mirthfully. "Jessica has just expressed the opinion that she thinks we're going to have at least six children."

I choked on my soda. "Jessica," I said, after recovering the ability to breathe and

dabbing my face with a napkin, "has exceeded all expectations as a fountain of exaggerated gossip. I'll need to buy her a very nice birthday present."

"I think she's partly motivated by the desire to get Mike Newton to stop fixating on you," Edward said. His tone was light, but I thought I heard his teeth grinding a little. "I couldn't help but pick up her memory of the conversation where you tried to set them up - that *was* what you had in mind, wasn't it? She doesn't seem to have quite noticed that you were doing it on purpose, but it was clear enough to me from the words you used."

"Yes," I admitted. "That was the idea. How's it working?"

"As well as I suppose could be expected. She's still hoping he'll make the first move, though."

"Of course," I sighed. "Well, the original point was to deflect Mike - mind, he might be cute with Jessica, but that wasn't the important part. And Jessica's handling that just as well without taking him off my hands directly, I suppose. Making it known that I'm off the market."

"So I'm a little confused," Emmett said. "Are you and Edward *actually* 'an item'," (he made exaggerated air quotes to accompany the phrase), "or are you just telling everybody that because it's part of your plan? Which is a cool plan, by the way. Think we should go to Scandinavia or something? They say Finnish is hard to learn. Bet I'm fluent first, Rose." He jostled Rosalie with his elbow and she smirked.

"You're good at languages because you have the mind of a child, Emmett," Alice said, so brightly that it took me a split second to notice that this was not quite a compliment. Emmett took a little longer, but just a little, and then he tossed the pasta salad that was his prop for the day at Alice's face. She wasn't even looking in his direction when she picked up her tray to shield herself from the projectile.

"Scandinavia might work," I said. "We can go look at fjords."

"Hey, answer my other question," protested Emmett. Alice produced a napkin and smeared off the mayonnaise that had coated her tray, then wiped the pasta salad bits back onto their original plate.

I huffed. "It's important to the plan that, by the time I have to tell everyone we've eloped, it seem characteristic of us," I said. "That's why I told Jessica the way I did."

Emmett considered this for a second, then realized that it wasn't an answer to his original inquiry either. "Hey..."

Edward's arm, still around my shoulders, squeezed me protectively. "You don't need to make up your mind now," he murmured to me, and he shot Emmett a look. The giant vampire - the more I looked at Emmett, the odder it was that he could pass for a high-schooler; did people think he'd repeated grades or what? - grumbled but didn't push it.

It was good of Edward to deflect his brother - even though Edward must have been dying to know my answer too. It couldn't be comfortable for him - none of this could. I wished, suddenly, that *I* could read minds - his in particular - to sift through the knots in his head that caused those overcomplicated faces he made. He wanted me alive, he wanted me human; he wanted me to love him, he wanted me not to be put on the spot about it; he wanted to follow Alice's instructions to go *slow*, but he was having plenty of fun participating in our showy exhibition of public affection... On some oddly timed impulse, he lifted his hand from my arm and stroked my hair. I could barely feel the cold of his fingertips against my scalp. He was very gentle, very careful - how hard was it for him to touch me without hurting me? Was fine motor control lost with the acquisition of super-strength? It didn't seem like it, but he was so timid...

"You're not squeamish about needles, are you, Bella?" Rosalie asked suddenly.

"Uh - I'm a little squeamish about *blood*, but not needles per se. I should be able to handle the injections, I think, and I can close my eyes while Carlisle does the blood tests. I think. I'm not sure." I hesitated, then said, "If I'm wrong, then I *might* want Jasper to help -"

"No," said Edward at once. I looked up at him expectantly.

"That wouldn't be a good idea," said Alice softly. Jasper was scowling, and he took an angry swig from his water bottle. Like he was an alcoholic, and he kept drinking his surrogate liquor, knowing with every taste that it wasn't what he wanted...

"*Oh*," I said. Okay. No broken human skin near Jasper. That must have been why Rosalie hadn't suggested he be the next to go to medical school...

I resolved, again, for the thousandth time, that I must *never* slip up as a vampire. Never. *Not once*. Maybe there were good reasons that even Alice and Emmett hadn't acquired degrees in medicine. Only Carlisle's perfect record, Rosalie's bloodless murders, Edward's unbroken control... those were the only histories that preceded the ability to tolerate proximity to blood, and there were so many ways humans could be made to bleed.

"How do you manage as well as you *do*?" I asked, trying to make my voice gentle and the question general, to avoid hurting Jasper. "People must get paper cuts, fall down and scrape their knees open, pick at hangnails a little too much - if nothing else, a good fraction of the girls are going to be having periods at any given time." The last bit made Emmett snigger; Rosalie rolled her eyes, but there was a flash of envy on her face. I regretted mentioning in front of her that every human female in the school had something she desperately wanted, and had lost.

"Alice and I can give some advance warning, before the smell hits," Edward murmured to me. "Alice can often get information far enough ahead of time that we can make sure not to be hungry on the wrong days. Not always," he said wryly. I remembered: his eyes had been pure black the day I'd first arrived. "We don't come to school in hunting mode. And we can get away with suddenly leaving class, sometimes -

our grades are all perfect in spite of our skipping school on sunny days, and so we get a certain amount of leeway." He coughed - this had to be solely for effect, to signal what a gentleman he was, but he did it anyway - and continued: "The last item you mentioned isn't as much of a problem as you might imagine. That blood is... "dead", in a way. It's only a little worse than normal."

That seemed a little *convenient*, but since Jasper didn't seem to have a history of devouring high schoolers during their time of the month - or any other time - I took his word for it. And I decided to ask Alice or Esme *privately*, later, if there were any particular products that would do a better or worse job of making me unlikely to be the latest slip-up in the remaining months I needed to spend dealing with that issue.

"So," Emmett said cheerfully. "Squeamish about blood, Bella? How do *you* deal with..."

Rosalie kicked him, and I made a face. "Doesn't seem to be your day to get your questions answered, Emmett," I muttered.

"Seems not," he said, agreeably enough. "It's funny, though, you want to be a vampire so bad and you're scared of blood."

"It's the smell I don't care for," I said. "Like rust, and salt - I don't imagine it smells like that to any vampires, even ones who used to hate blood."

"I wonder if that *would* help, though," mused Alice. "I see you near humans without even looking like you *want* to eat them, with bright red newborn eyes - and I heard you guessing about it yesterday, and that makes some sense, but even Carlisle avoided humans early on. What if blood still doesn't seem appetizing to you, later?"

"Well," I said, "when I'm a vampire, I will definitely tell you all about how my thoughts on blood change, Alice."

She got what I meant, and scrunched up her face. "Nope, I'm wrong," she said. "You describe it like you sense it normally, for a vampire."

"That's weird," I muttered. "Not weird that I'd react normally - weird that you can see things like that. I mean, now that we already know, I'm not likely to bother taking a minute to describe it to you later, am I? But you saw it anyway."

"Being psychic would be *so* much less useful if no one could use the information," Alice said, opening her eyes. "Maybe I'm just seeing what would happen conditional on my not telling anyone. I don't see you having that conversation with me *anymore*, since the possibility that I didn't tell anyone no longer exists."

"But you must often look at things having already firmly decided to share what you see," I began, and then the bell rang. I ate my banana on the way to Biology, having been distracted enough by the conversation to barely pick at my lunch.

Witches and Werewolves

I wondered, during Biology as the teacher nattered on interminably about cell walls, how much it was going to hurt the Bella-and-Edward-are-Together Show that I'd changed lab partners. Angela and Mike at least knew I'd done it deliberately. I didn't know what they thought my motives really were - Mike at least had seen the way Edward had first looked at me.

And it would be just *like* Mike to jump to conclusions about that, decide I was in an abusive relationship, and think I must need *him* available to turn to... I hoped Jessica would distract him enough. If Mike had *any* sense - or, if he lacked sense in certain possible ways - he wouldn't be thrown off by a sappy public image: there was no actual reason it couldn't coexist with dreadful mistreatment behind the scenes.

It wouldn't just be annoying to me if Mike got too nosy - he could get himself killed or have to be vamped, if he found anything out. (Although... just what surveillance mechanisms did the Volturi have, anyway? Did they have an Alice-equivalent among their guard, or something less effective? If someone bugged the Cullens' house while they were all out, saw some things, figured others out - could they go to the grave never telling, without being hunted down?)

I crossed my fingers. I didn't think this would accomplish anything, but it was a way to put my hope out in the world without writing anything down, and I knew what it meant whereas Alice would likely be puzzled. Although perhaps, I reflected, I should warn the vampires anyway - but Mike hadn't shown signs of being insufferable about it, let alone dangerously inquisitive. Yet. I'd make Wednesday my sit-with-the-humans day and check in... or I could let Edward, just him, know, and get him to spy...

I made a face, tilting my head forward first so my hair would get in the way of Angela or anyone else noticing. Edward had such a *convenient* power. It was just outrageously tempting to ask him to use it when I wasn't even sure of its necessity. Alice had been right - show me a mystery and I *would* poke, poke, poke at it until I figured it out or I was *dead*. I bit my lip: I would not ask Edward to invade Mike's privacy based on vague concerns that I could probably check up on without needing any telepathy at all. I valued *my* privacy so much - it would be the absolute height of conceit to assume Mike's was less important.

On that subject, it was about time for me to pin Alice in place long enough to see about getting myself some notebooky privacy, too. I'd visit that afternoon and try to catch her then - but after that, homework, definitely homework. Negative academic attention - from teachers or from Charlie - was the last thing I needed.

I supported my chin with my hand, let jargon about cell anatomy wash over me, and wondered what fjords looked like up close.

I did get Alice to conduct a quick experiment with me as soon as I got to their house. Although vampires could see in the dark, she didn't have the ability to move her vantage point quite as she pleased. She *tended* not to see things as though she were peering out from under beds or behind picture frames. It was more like she was standing, at her normal height with her normal visual acuity (except for uncertainty-induced blurriness), in whatever place she looked at.

It wasn't *impossible* that she would be able to see what I typed if I put my keyboard under something opaque and turned off my monitor, but it almost certainly wouldn't happen by accident, and she promised not to try for those visions outside of dire emergencies. (I made her specify, in this promise, that "dire emergencies" were those where she could see likely futures in which the situation was explained to me and I agreed that she had to look at the writing. I wasn't sure enough about Alice's judgment, this early on in our acquaintance, that I was prepared to leave it entirely up to her.) So I could type in privacy, and if I draped a thick blanket over myself and pressed my nose right up against the backlit screen, I could re-read later in privacy, too.

The notebooks were not as easy to address. I touch-typed, but if I tried to write longhand without being able to see, I wound up with illegible scribbles that meandered all over the page. And if I ducked under a blanket that was thin enough to admit lamplight, it would also be thin enough that a vampire could see through it pretty effectively. They had a better-than-human ability to separate out the noise of an intermediate layer of material from the objects behind it. A vampire would have no trouble telling what was going on behind a screen door, even a painted one with a distracting picture on the near side, as long as there were enough intact little perforations. A human would see the screen and stop there and ignore anything spotted through the holes.

So I decided to continue writing anything private in confusing personal code, and use my computer more, when it was available. This plan had the weak point of relying on my shifty, wobbly memory to fill in the gaps that the shorthand inevitably left, but it was only for a few months - after that, I expected to need no notebooks at all.

After I'd had this discussion with Alice, I set up at the kitchen table and did homework, only half-concentrating on the worksheets and the index cards for my presentation in Government. Edward sat with me. He was good about not *doing* anything to distract me; he only watched. No one could hold still like a vampire. But he still had that property, whatever it was, that made my eyes slide towards him; whenever he shifted position to better have a look at what I was doing, my ears perked up to listen.

He was sitting close enough that I could smell his breath - it didn't smell like a human's breath at all. It didn't smell *wet* in the same way - it was almost floral. That was *peculiar* - it had to be the venom I was smelling, but why would it smell like lilacs? Or not lilacs - I wasn't sure what flower to compare it to. Something nice, anyway. But why? It wasn't as though vampires needed to *attract* prey. They just needed to catch someone alone, somewhere inconspicuous, and once they did that, the result was already overdetermined by their power and speed. Vampires were certainly ridiculously

overengineered, and I couldn't wait to play with all the new abilities...

With effort, I wrenched my attention back to the rectangle of cardstock I was trying to transfer notes to. *The executive branch*, it said already in my awful handwriting. I made a small grumbling noise and completed the sentence. Perfect recall was going to be mine in a few short months. And I was learning pointless things I wouldn't remember in two weeks, let alone a hundred years, because I was seventeen and that meant I had to go to high school and spit back the right information in the right format at the right time.

"Don't they assign *you* any homework?" I asked, pulling out a new index card.

"I can do it at night," he said. The unspoken reason was *so I don't have to lose any time with you*. I was learning to read Edward's face and tone fairly well, at least when his feelings were expressed one at a time, not in a tangle.

"I can't be that interesting to watch. I *am* me and *I'm* bored out of my skull," I muttered, writing a note on the new index card.

"You're the one who wanted to do homework," he said lightly. "I'm not bored, though, Bella."

What had put me on Edward's list of possible soulmates? I took another card and almost wrote that question on it instead of the presentation note that belonged there. I stuck my tongue out at the card, wrote the correct note on it, and then pretended not to know what to write on the next one. What was it about me? He couldn't have known instantly, or he would have acted differently when he'd first seen me. So it probably had nothing to do with my looks. That was comforting, on some level.

I'd thought it correlated with the potential for extra vampire powers, which correlated with actually being turned, to explain how many vampires seemed to pair off without eating their mates first. Or possibly beauty, which was another selection criterion. I didn't think of myself as pretty, and didn't trust my parents' evaluations to the contrary a bit. But even if Edward's feelings could be explained away by magic, Mike's and Eric's couldn't, and it was pushing it to speculate that they'd only been interested because I was new. So maybe I was pretty.

I wrote the next note, pulled out another card, and sighed. I was probably decent-looking enough to make a pretty *vampire*, at least - I was looking forward to that for so many reasons, and that was a trivial one, but it still existed.

I wrote a note. I grabbed a new card. I hated Government. I normally felt neutral about it - the material was undertaken laboriously slowly, but at least it was new to me, and the teacher was reasonably competent. But why did it have to assign me a presentation when I wanted so badly to have time to think? I supposed the teacher had no way of knowing - and *shouldn't* have had any way of knowing - when these times were.

I wrote another note. I had a little stack of fifteen cards after I added it to the pile. That might be enough. Dealing with my impromptu public speaking issues was on my to-

hack list anyway; going on sparser notes would be a potentially useful step towards that. I was rationalizing, of course - I just wanted to be done with homework. But I really, *really* wanted to be done with homework, and so as long as there was some way it could be made not to bite me in the rear later, I might as well give in to that want.

"Right, I'm done," I muttered to myself, and started putting school supplies away.

"What would you like to do with the rest of your day?" Edward asked, smiling. I looked at him. Radiating from his face was the undiluted desire to see to it that I got exactly the Tuesday I wanted. It was gratifying, mostly - and still a little weird, but I was getting used to it.

"So," I said, sitting back in my chair and recalling a note to myself from the previous day, "witches and werewolves, hm?"

"Witches and we- Oh. I mentioned those when I told you about Carlisle," remembered Edward. "Well - yes, they exist. There are actually two kinds of werewolves that I know about, and every witch is different."

"Besides two kinds of werewolves, witches, and vampires, is there anything else mythical that I should know about?" I asked.

"Not as far as I know," said Edward. "But I might not have seen everything. Anyway, witches. That's the technical term for a human with a power - the kind that turning into a vampire generally intensifies."

"I didn't know witches were the sorts of things that would have technical terminology about them," I said, and then I sat up suddenly. "Wait a minute, that would make me a witch, wouldn't it?"

"It would," agreed Edward. "Although you wouldn't have been the sort of witch that used to be burnt at the stake if you'd lived earlier - your power seems only to protect you from mine, and maybe others. It doesn't seem to do anything otherwise detectable."

"Were you a witch? Jasper?"

"I don't think either of us would have qualified. Extra vampire powers don't *have* to be preceded by witchcraft. My ability to read people and Jasper's charisma proved useful, but were quite natural when we were human. Alice was probably a witch, but we don't know."

I nodded. "And the two kinds of werewolves? Do they have other names, to tell them apart?"

"The Eurasian variety," said Edward, "are sometimes also called Children of the Moon. They're much closer to myth than the other sort. Silver won't do anything - that's a

human myth to make it sound to one another like they'd have a fighting chance, if they ran into one. But they do infect humans by biting, and change during the full moon. They're fierce, solitary creatures in wolf form, not at all the sort of animal you'd want to meet."

"Are they normal humans during the rest of the month?" I asked.

"I think so. I haven't actually encountered any of them. They're extinct now, or close to it - Caius doesn't care for them a bit and had them hunted down. I only know what Carlisle's told me, and he learned it all from the Volturi."

"Hunted to extinction with, not silver, presumably - what?"

Edward tilted his head back a little and laughed. "With members of the Volturi guard, of course. I'm sure there were casualties on their side. Werewolves - either sort - can give vampires a run for our money in a fight. But a transformed Child of the Moon isn't very intelligent. That is, they're smarter than normal wolves, but they don't retain their human intellects. A group of vampires bent on hunting one down could accomplish it. Especially if they managed to work out who it was as a human. Then it would be quite easy." He kept switching tenses - I supposed that made sense when talking about the traits of a species that might or might not be extinct.

"Okay. What about the other kind? Where do they live?" I prompted.

"Not far from here, actually," Edward said, "but I doubt there are any of them left, either. We were here seventy years ago and met a pack of them. They don't like vampires, but we were able to convince them we didn't prey on humans, and made a treaty - we stay off their land and don't bite anyone, and they don't attack us unless we're on their turf. But it takes vampire presence to activate the genes that let them shapeshift. The pack that was active seventy years ago is likely all inactive now, or dead. And we haven't been close enough to their land to trigger any new changes."

"Where do you mean by 'not far from here'?" I asked, aware that vampires might easily conceive very differently of distances.

"The Quileute reservation, La Push," Edward said. "They probably still tell the stories, even if the actual wolves are all gone now."

"That's *quite* close," I said. It was just over a half an hour away - driving like a *normal* person. "I know some people from La Push."

"You do?" Edward asked, looking interested.

"Charlie's old friends with a guy from there called Billy Black. He sold Charlie my truck. I used to play with Billy's daughters sometimes, Rachel and Rebecca, when I was little. I've been out of touch with them lately, though. I think they had a younger brother. I can't think what his name was, though."

"I don't know either," shrugged Edward. "They might be descendants of one of the

wolves we met, though - same surname."

"So how do the - do they have their own name besides "wolves"?" Edward shook his head. "The Quileute wolves, then, how do they work?"

He explained. They were indistinguishable from normal humans until the gene was activated by vampire presence. Wolves were quite fast and strong enough to kill vampires, at least when they worked as a pack. They also healed with extraordinary rapidity, and retained some of these powers even in their human forms. When the gene woke up and did its work, a gradual buildup of emotion eventually provoked the first shift, which, while potentially dangerous to people around the wolf (as they expanded quite a bit in size very rapidly) was not harmful to its subject. Shifting continued to be provoked by lost temper until more practice managing both shifting and temper accumulated. After that, it was possible to "quit one's wolf" and go back to being a relatively normal human. A Quileute wolf who *didn't* quit, also didn't age.

"What makes you so sure the ones you met seventy years ago aren't still alive, then?" I asked.

"They have secrets to keep, too," Edward said. "If they're alive, they've probably faked their deaths and moved away. The tribe council likely knows, or at least has enough details to recognize the events if anyone should activate now. But arbitrary Quileutes, like your friends, almost certainly think of the wolves as mere legends."

I nodded, and sighed, dropping my chin onto my arms where they lay folded across the table. "Why - *why* - don't people want to be immortal? Why don't people *care* that everyone is dying? Why do they want to cure *some* deadly things like cancer and malaria and then the Quileutes had a *cure for aging* handed to them on a silver *platter* and they gave it up? Is everyone in the world but me *actually suicidal* and I just never noticed because they aren't all taking razors to their wrists?"

"It's natural," murmured Edward.

"Cancer's natural."

"Cancer isn't inevitable," he said.

"Neither is *aging*!" I cried, sitting up and gesturing emphatically at Edward. "You're going to be seventeen forever. *I'm* going to be seventeen forever once we've got everything sorted out."

"What, do you want to turn everyone into a vampire?" asked Edward.

"I told you already, I can't. I can't turn everyone or it'll be entirely counterproductive," I said, folding my arms and resting my head on them again. "The Volturi want to be immortal, I suppose, but they don't want to *share*, do they?"

Edward reached out to stroke my hair. It was a soothing, regular motion.

"I'm tempted to find Rachel and Rebecca's phone numbers. And their brother's. And call them all up, and demand that they come visit right away, and have *you* all sitting there when they show up, so they can live forever - it wouldn't be as bad as turning them without permission, I think, since if they were *insane* and decided they *didn't* want superpowers and the chance to live forever they could quit their wolves. If they were *insane*," I growled.

He kept stroking my hair. I closed my eyes and tried to calm down, concentrating on the cool, careful touch. "Is there," I asked, after having managed some success at this task, "any reason I *shouldn't* collect all the Quileutes I can, here on "your turf" where you're allowed to be, and activate them?"

"Immature werewolves are dangerous," Edward said softly. "The connection between their transformations and their tempers means the latter is unstable until they learn control. They aren't *as* likely to kill as newborn vampires, but it is not out of the question, and injuries wouldn't be surprising."

I inhaled as deeply as I could, held the breath until it hurt, and then let it out slowly. "We could set up a werewolf summer camp," I said. "Put them someplace away from anyone who can't heal like they can, help them..."

"The presence of vampires would *not* help them. They instinctively see us as enemies," Edward said. "Vampires and Quileute wolves do not smell pleasant to one another or serve as comforting presences for one another."

"Jasper," I said, desperately. It was a sign that I was very serious, wanting to bring in Jasper... "He could activate them, then help them stay calm until they could do it themselves, until they were safe."

"Maybe," said Edward, surprising me. He was still petting my hair. "That might work. But the Volturi don't know about the Quileutes, I think... and are unlikely to come to know about them, unless Aro reads one of us, which might not happen for centuries if we fly under their radar. At least, as long as they remain as unobtrusive as they presently are."

I swore. Edward did not, apparently, share Angela's philosophical dislike of strong language.

And then I swore again. "Edward, you said the treaty is that you won't *bite* a human. And seventy years ago, if you were rounding, could have been after Carlisle turned Emmett. He's the most recent turning. Was it?

"Yes," he said. "Does rounding count as lying? I don't understand."

"Have any of the slip-ups in the family been since then?"

He shook his head, slowly.

"Will it break the treaty if you turn me? Even if you don't do it here?"

Edward was silent. "Technically," he said. "Yes."

I thought quickly. "Does the treaty say *bite* - that exact word?"

"It does," he confirmed. His hand had stopped moving over my head and was resting on the back of my neck.

"Can you turn me without actually biting me? Alice said something about crying into an open wound..."

"She did? That's a bit of a fanciful way of putting it. We *have* venom in our eyes... but we don't really *cry*. You'd have to collect it over a long time, and get it into the bloodstream indirectly. I can't think of anything less efficient. The mouth is the better source."

"But it doesn't absolutely have to be a bite. You could fill a syringe and inject it, maybe."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that would work."

"All right," I said, letting out another sigh. "So if I figure out a way to activate some wolves without getting the Volturi's attention, I won't necessarily have a war on my hands over my having been turned."

"Ambitious, aren't you," he remarked in a soft, almost admiring tone.

I lifted my head, and he drew his hand back to the table in front of him. "It shouldn't *be* ambitious," I said. "It shouldn't be uncommon or special or rebellious or anything like that to want people to live. If I were holding down a job and giving half my income to oncology researchers or something, I wouldn't be *ambitious*. Altruistic - plenty that - but not *ambitious*."

"You know, if you keep saying this sort of thing, eventually I might agree with you," Edward said lightly.

"I can't help but see that as a good result," I said, fussing with the end of my sleeve. "It looks from here like you don't have any sound reasons for believing the way you do - just tangled-up emotions that won't let you hear what I'm saying as though I'm talking clear English. If I can get through to you in spite of that by saying that death is bad a lot, well, then, I guess I'll say it a lot. Death is bad. Death is bad. Death is bad."

"It really bothers you, what I said about souls," he observed in a low voice.

"It did, I guess, at the time. Now I'm just sort of *generally* bothered by *everyone* who

wants to tolerate death like it's their annoying-but-harmless old uncle who comes round every Thanksgiving and without whom the family would be incomplete, or something. It's not harmless. And there's no ineradicable reason it has to exist at all."

"Let's talk about something else," said Edward, breaking eye contact and frowning.

"I'll dole it out in small doses, if you need me to, but I'm not apt to quit," I warned him. "Ask Alice. You'd have to stay away from me entirely to avoid hearing about it."

"I could never stay away," he said, looking back into my eyes. "I thought at first that I should... but Alice was right, when she told me I wasn't strong enough to do that."

"Good," I whispered.

I got home late - well after Charlie had already given up on a fresh dinner and microwaved himself some leftovers. "Hey, Bells," he said when I let myself in. He turned off the TV and turned half-around on the sofa to look at me. "Where were you?" He didn't say it accusingly or as though he were disappointed; he didn't think I'd been spraying graffiti on buildings or knocking over mailboxes, and wasn't upset that I hadn't been home to cook one night out of the week. He was taking an interest in my life.

I had taken a little time to think through how Charlie modeled me, and accordingly, what the best way to convince him that I was plausibly going to elope with Edward in the summer would be. And so I had a script ready.

"Oh," I said, with an absent sort of smile on my face, "I was with Edward."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "Edward Cullen?"

I nodded rapidly. "Yes, you met him on Saturday when he came by..."

"Studying Biology again?" asked Charlie, although he didn't sound like this was his first guess.

I shook my head, carelessly letting a lock of hair fall into my face and then tucking it behind my ear again. "We did some homework," I said slowly (well, between the two of us, some homework had gotten done), "but mostly we were just *talking*..." I let my eyes fly wide open, and said, "I mean, I'm friends with his sisters. I hung out with Alice some too, that was the first thing I did when I got to his house."

"I see," muttered Charlie. And he didn't pry. I hadn't expected him to. But I thought I'd pretty effectively planted the idea. Charlie would probably grill Edward a little bit the next time he was by the house to pick me up for some outing. Sometime during the ensuing week I would have to casually drop the word "boyfriend" in Charlie's earshot - possibly on the phone to Jessica or Angela.

I smiled brightly at him, promised that there would be dinner at dinnertime on Thursday, and trotted up the stairs.

Sort-of-pretending with Edward was more fun than it had any business being.

He was imaginative about it, never indulging the temptation to repetitiveness that could have given us away. He snuck up on me between classes one morning, dipped me, and planted a kiss on my forehead. He joined me and my human friends at lunch when I sat with them instead of the vampires, sending Jessica into such paroxysms that I thought she might need to be carried off to the nurse. He walked me from the cafeteria to the science building every day, linking arms or holding hands or putting his arm around me. He did all of this with a proud, smug expression on his face, to the point where onlookers must have thought he'd landed a movie star or a supermodel if they looked only at him and not at me.

He sent a perfect little paper airplane towards me during Biology, timed so the teacher couldn't see - but Angela could, when it made its landing right on my open textbook. She didn't lean over and demand to see the note written on it, but I showed her anyway, with a not-entirely-affected grin on my face: he'd transcribed flowery poems onto the sheet before folding it up. Angela smiled and patted my hand in a supportive, friendly manner. I folded up the paper into a square and kept it in my pocket.

I was not quite so creative, and found it much easier to play the part of the infatuated girl swept off her feet. I giggled more than I was accustomed to giggling, and leaned towards him when he touched me - which was whenever I was within arm's reach. I accepted and often wore his jacket. (He wasn't bothered by the February chill, and only owned the jacket for aesthetic and disguise reasons; but it was a visible token of his affection I could put on.) I spent a lot of time looking up at him through my eyelashes, admiring the planes of his face and trying to seem adoring.

There was one omission: I hadn't quite had the temerity to ask about the finer points of vampire venom as it applied to kissing, and without that information wasn't prepared to attempt to kiss him on the lips. He was quite free with them elsewhere: my neck and forehead and nose and cheeks and the top of my head and my fingers did not lack for attention. But the longer he went without taking that liberty, or even asking if he might, the more I suspected that there must be some risk of premature infection associated with it - and so I let it lie. I was quite suffused with affection as it was and in a few months I would not be at any such risk.

Away from school, it was different - although depending on how one counted, it wasn't necessarily any less romantic.

Edward *was* the reason for the piano on the dais. Rosalie also played; actually, all of them *could* play, the way anyone with perfect recall living in a piano-occupied house would pick up the skill. But Edward was the musician. He *composed*. He wrote a song for

me. I suspected it might be about some more specific subject than me, Bella Swan, in my entirety - but he declined to specify, and I didn't press the subject.

He took me out to lunch most weekends. He knew I wanted to be home to cook dinner for Charlie more days than not, but when I consented to be whisked away in the evenings, whisked I was. He lingered at my house after taking me home from these outings. Charlie approved quietly of Edward, who called him "sir" and behaved very deferentially. There were fewer flagrant displays of couplehood when we were there, but Edward did an excellent job of making it look as though he *wished* there were more. That might have been for Charlie's benefit - or not.

Whenever I was within arm's reach, he touched me, with or without an audience. I went about dressed more warmly than the weather called for to be comfortable with the chilly caresses. He was always gentle, always cautious, forever moving my hair out of my face or stroking my cheek or kissing the back of my neck. He acted as though he was taking advantage of a rare, prized opportunity every time, but he did it so often that it didn't feel that way to me. I felt like half of a comfortable, longstanding couple - and I *liked* it, far more than I'd have expected if I had been polled in the fall. It was easy, it was soothing. My parents were neither of them very cuddly people - and Charlie less so than Renée. I wasn't used to much physical contact beyond handshakes and, sometimes, hugs on special occasions. But it was nice to have - to have *without* having to awkwardly say, "Hug?" to a relative before he or she got on an airplane or any similarly forced direct request. I could just sit next to Edward and lean on him if I felt like it, and get a kiss in the part of my hair as a bonus.

Not all of the shivering I did had to do with the winter *or* Edward's low body temperature.

Valentine's Day was a Monday. Edward managed to leave a small item at my seat in every one of my classes, including the mat in the corner of the gym where I did my yoga - he must have ducked into the classrooms between bells to leave them. By lunch, I'd acquired two thematically appropriate packets of candy, a sparkly bracelet that... *probably* wasn't covered in *rhinestones*... and a CD accompanied by a note stating that it contained recordings of Edward's compositions. I slipped the bracelet over my left hand. When I arrived at the vampire table for lunch, Edward's eyes rested on it for a moment, and he had a look of satisfaction on his face when he looked up at me. "I wasn't sure if that was going to be too much," he said.

"It's beautiful," I said. "It's entirely too much, I would have told you not to buy it, but I'm not planning to give it back." I jangled it on my wrist a little. "No more jewelry, though, or Jessica will have a stroke. The candy was delicious and I can't wait to listen to the music. Thank you."

"No more jewelry *ever*?" he asked, like he was asking permission to do something far more self-indulgent than shower me with gifts. My right hand was occupied with stabbing a fork into my meatloaf, but he took my left hand and clasped it in both of his.

"Nothing remotely this nice for the next two months," I said, "at least." I tilted my head to one side and quickly looked at Alice's and Rosalie's ears: neither had them pierced. "If I get my ears pierced, will they heal closed when I turn?" I asked.

"If you're not wearing earrings at the time, they will," Rosalie said. "If you have earrings in, they might stay. But then you have to count on that being in fashion for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"True. I've done without this long. And there are clips and magnets - I guess magnets would rely less on the earlobe being easily compressible."

"I have loads of magnet earrings," Alice said. "I just don't wear them to school much because once about twelve years ago I got into a very annoying conversation with someone who thought that if I liked earrings enough to wear them every day, I ought to go get my ears pierced at her aunt's parlor, and she wouldn't leave me be. It's not that hard to fix up a regular earring to attach with magnets, if you know how. I'll show you sometime."

After lunch, Edward did not run ahead of me to biology in order to leave a gift at my table - he must have done it before lunch. I unwrapped it; it was a hair clip. It was very nice, but made mostly of wood, so I supposed it might not technically count as jewelry (and at any rate he'd put it there before I'd said to hold off on more.) I gathered my hair together and pinned it back; Edward heard the clip snap closed with a soft *tok*, and looked around to smile at me.

At gym, it was just a note: it said that, as I read it, he was installing a stereo in my truck. I laughed softly and put the note into my bag. His last class was Spanish, and the teacher knew perfectly well that he was fluent (in fact, better than she was); he had de facto permission to cut whenever he pleased.

The stereo, which was so perfectly installed that it looked like it had come with the truck apart from being a hundred times newer than everything around it, was well equipped to play my new CD. Edward readily played whatever songs I liked whenever we were at his house, but it was nice to have them in a portable form.

A disturbing thought occurred to me, as I drove home - to do my schoolwork without Edward's distracting presence before meeting him at the Cullen house, as had become my habit.

With as little history experiencing and labeling romantic emotions as I had, I might not even be able to tell when I stopped pretending.

I was not able to start my homework as soon as I'd expected. When I got home, Billy Black - and his son, a teenager now, whose name I couldn't quite call to mind - were

there. I thought at first that it was simply a visit to Charlie. If Billy couldn't drive, it would only make sense that he'd enlist his son to cart him about occasionally - was the boy old enough to drive? I knew he was younger than me, but wasn't sure how much. He looked about fourteen or fifteen, but might be sixteen. I didn't play with boys as a ten-year-old girl, whatever their ages, when there were girls like his sisters handy, so the fact that I didn't recall him clearly was no clue. With Billy in the passenger seat, perhaps still licensed to drive even if no longer physically capable of it, the kid could probably play chauffeur with only a learner's permit.

Billy and Charlie were watching a game on TV, but whatever it was didn't interest the younger Black, who was sitting in the kitchen and appeared to be doing his own homework. He looked up and offered a friendly smile when I walked in. "Hi, Bella!" he said.

Well, that made it awkward that I didn't know his name. "Hi," I replied cheerfully, dumping my bookbag on the kitchen table and sitting down to be sociable. "I'm afraid I don't..."

"I'm Jacob," he supplied, interrupting me; I gritted my teeth, told myself that if he'd known me well enough to avoid that, I would have *known* his name and he wouldn't have needed to do it.

"Hi, Jacob," I said. "Sorry about that. I know who you are, but I mostly remember Rachel and Rebecca." And even them, I hadn't seen much after I managed to make my distaste for fishing sufficiently clear. That was Charlie's primary reason for bringing me to visit, was to instill his love for yanking ichthyoids out of the water into his child on large joint excursions.

"Yeah, it's okay," Jacob said amiably. I hoped suddenly that Edward would not approach the house, looking to see where I'd gotten to. I wasn't sure if I could politely excuse myself now that I'd gotten into a conversation with Jacob. If I didn't turn up after a reasonable homework-doing period of time had elapsed, Edward might wonder what had happened. I didn't have a plan yet for safely dealing with Quileute wolves, which Jacob could quite likely become if he hung out with vampires at all. "Billy was hoping to talk to you," the maybe-future-werewolf went on. "I think he's really invested in this game, now, though, so would you mind hanging out until it's over? I don't know if you were planning to go anywhere."

"Usually I come home, do my work," I gestured at Jacob's own textbooks, "and then hang out at my boyfriend's house for a few hours before dinner." I unzipped my knapsack and retrieved the brick that was my Trig book. "I don't know how long the game's going to be, but I can hang back a little. Might want to call my boyfriend, though, so he knows what's up." I said the word "boyfriend" twice quite deliberately. I didn't want to have to play matchmaker again. There was no reason to expect Jacob in particular to need deflecting, but since he didn't go to my school and hadn't seen the flagrant display of the last couple weeks, it seemed prudent.

"Okay," Jacob said.

I took out all the other materials I'd need to do my homework, then got up and dialed the phone. Jasper picked it up; I recognized his low, controlled voice. The Southern accent he employed privately was practiced away in case I was someone else. "Cullen residence," he said.

"Hi, Jasper," I said. "It's me. Can I talk to Edward?"

Edward's voice replaced Jasper's immediately. "Hello, Bella. What is it?"

"Ch- Dad has some guests over," I said, remembering half a syllable into Charlie's name that he preferred I not call him that, and that he was within earshot. "Remember I told you about Billy? It's him and his son Jacob. I'm going to stay and be sociable, and make sure they eat a nice dinner. I might not be over today at all. So please don't be alarmed and come wondering what the holdup is." *Please don't come and activate the wolves*, I meant, and hoped he'd understand.

"Do you think you'll be able to come over at all today?" he asked. "It is Valentine's day..."

"I know it's Valentine's day, I really wanted to come over," I said, sounding too clingy even to myself - I saw Jacob make a face out of the corner of my eye. "You didn't have anything planned that depends on me being there today in particular, did you? Chocolates taste just as good on the fifteenth."

"It's all right," Edward said, soothing even over the phone - there might or might not be reservations or plans in place, but he clearly didn't want me to fret over them. "Oh, and Bella - Billy may well know about us, and about Quileute wolves. If he hints about it enough that you think he does, and you're talking to him alone, it won't put anyone in additional danger for you to speak freely."

"Do you think that's likely?" I asked. I wondered suddenly what Billy was even doing here - usually Charlie went to the reservation. Jacob had said he wanted to talk to me. Was he going to say something about the vampires?

"Possibly," Edward said. "Will you call me after they've gone and let me know what, if anything, happens?"

"Of course," I said.

"I'll see you tomorrow, at the latest, then," Edward said.

There was a pause, where it sounded like he was thinking the words *I love you* very hard and not saying them because Alice had said to go *slow* - and I said, "Yes, tomorrow. Happy Valentine's Day!" and hung up.

Had Alice been *specific* about the meaning of "slow"?

"His name is "Edward"?" Jacob asked, sounding like he didn't much care for the name.

"Yes," I said, flipping my math notebook open and finding the assigned problem set in the text. "Do you or Billy have any food issues I should know about?"

"I'm not sure if we're staying for dinner, actually," Jacob said. "If we do, Billy's diabetic, don't feed him anything too loaded up on carbs but otherwise he's not that careful about it. I'm not picky."

The game ended, and I heard the TV power off.

"Bella," said Billy, rolling into the kitchen. "It's good to see you again. Could I trouble you to join me for a walk, or are you very busy?" He looked at my homework.

"I've barely started," I said. "I'd be happy to go with you."

Charlie and Jacob got Billy's wheelchair over the single front step with some effort, and then I stepped out after him. "If you could just push me around the block," Billy asked politely; the roads were in poor repair and couldn't be easy to navigate for him on his own.

I took hold of the handles sticking out of the back of the chair and propelled him down the driveway at a steady pace. "So," I said, "what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Charlie tells me you've been spending a lot of time with the Cullens," he said without further preamble.

I maneuvered him around a pothole. "That's correct," I said.

"You probably don't know this," Billy continued, "but the Cullen family has an unpleasant reputation on the reservation."

"I'd heard something about that, in fact," I said. "It seems to me that more than enough time has passed and it really should have died down by now." If Billy didn't know the details, if he were just warning me away from an outcast family, this would sound like I was siding with Charlie and thought they'd proven themselves worthy. If he did, he'd know I was talking about the seventy years since the vampires had last come to Forks.

"You seem well-informed," Billy said slowly. I wasn't positioned to see his face, but he sounded like he was speaking too deliberately - trying not to mess something important up.

"Oh, I'm sure Charlie talks all the time about how I will poke and poke at an unanswered question that happens to strike my fancy, until I know the answer," I said lightly. "I know all *kinds* of things."

"Mmm. Does Charlie know all kinds of things?" Billy asked, probing.

"I find he doesn't have at all the same attitude towards mysteries," I said. "I also find that he finds me trustworthy in general and has respect for my judgment. And I find that some people are very, *very* attached to their secrets, and might not care for the people who stumble across them."

Billy was silent for a minute; I pushed him around a car parked on the street, undercorrected for the slope, and narrowly avoided steering him into the gutter. "Sorry," I said.

"Don't worry about it," Billy said. Ironically, I was less clumsy piloting the chair than I was walking about in its absence - it gave me something to hang onto. "You're probably right about Charlie," he said after another pause. "What are *you* going to do about the... secret-keepers?"

"If you can't beat 'em," I said cheerfully, "join 'em."

Billy went rigid where he sat. "Bella," he said warningly.

"I know the details. Believe me, I do. And I know about the treaty," I went on, after checking for neighbors out strolling - there were none. "It's got some very specific language in it, which leaves a handy loophole for me to hop through. I'll be just fine, Billy."

He was gripping his armrests and his knuckles were white. "*Bella Swan*," he said again. "You have no idea -"

I bit my lip, fighting the urge to cut in and tell him that I had a very *good* idea indeed, but words failed him and after a few seconds I said it aloud. "I've been filled in to my own satisfaction on the important parts. I'm not sure how much *you* know," I said. "Edward said you might know about his family, and about, well, *yours* - but didn't specify the level of detail. Anything I can fill you in on, to put you at ease?"

Billy swiveled his head to look at me, incredulity on his face. He turned back around without saying anything.

"I'd actually like to talk to you about... your own sort," I said. We had somehow gotten into the pattern of using indirect words and it was difficult to be the first to break it. "It sounds like there've been some old skills lost. I think that's sad - I'd like to help you get them back, if you're willing."

"I'm too old," Billy murmured, and I couldn't make out the emotion behind it - did he want to be a wolf, as I thought sane, and feel sad that he couldn't? Was he glad to be

safe from my machinations? Perhaps he'd *been* a wolf, seventy years ago, and kept it long enough to look only a little past fifty now - and now either regretted it or felt he'd had good reasons to quit.

"Not everyone is. Jacob," I suggested.

"You don't know what you're playing with, Bella," Billy said warningly.

"I've told you several times that I know quite a bit. But I'm not planning to do anything very soon that directly concerns you," I said. "Or anything that involves uninformed parties ever. I'm not going to show up in the night and restore all the old Quileute traditions unexpectedly. Everyone needs to make their own choices. I've picked out one for myself, and I hope you understand that."

We'd gone full circle around the block. I pushed Billy up the driveway and then opened the door so less accident-prone persons could haul him over the step.

The Blacks stayed for dinner; Billy kept giving me strange looks, but didn't say anything else hinting while Charlie and Jacob watched. I baked fish, and then made small talk with Jacob over our respective homeworks for about an hour, before I finished my work, decided I'd put in enough of an appearance, and escaped to visit my boyfriend.

Coven

The next month was nearly uneventful.

On the first Thursday in March, Edward and I cut Biology together: he warned me that the lesson plan involved blood typing. Although he remarked that hanging around me as much as he did, he had probably developed the ability to tolerate *other* blood just fine even if it were exposed to the air, there was no sense in taking the risk with as much of a pass to skip as he had. And I would likely have passed out - which I explained to the teacher the next day, in apologetic tones that avoided me detention.

The subsequent Saturday, my human friends and I took our planned trip to the beach. I wanted to invite Edward along - with Mike and Jessica finally having declared themselves mutual significant others, and Eric and Lauren vaguely wending that way, it looked a little couple-y apart from Angela. But Edward wasn't allowed on Quileute land, and First Beach was in the relevant area.

Some Quileute kids turned up while we were there; Jacob, among them, made a beeline for me. I complained conspicuously about Edward's absence after greeting him. This prompted Jacob to tell me "scary stories" about the Cullens, once he realized that it was that particular Edward whom I was dating. They added no factual data to my supply, except for the tidbit that it remained against tribal law to kill wolves. I did get him to flesh out the cast of characters a little: Jacob *was* descended from tribal elders, and pointed out others on the beach who also had interesting ancestry. I was pretty sure they could all become wolves under the right conditions, assuming the genes had stuck around. What I didn't know was whether this was a good sampling of young-enough Quileutes - it was possible that potential wolves hung around together more often and that was why this group had arrived together.

On the thirteenth, a Sunday, I visited the vampires' baseball field again, this time to watch it used for its customary purpose. The Cullens all liked baseball, but because a vampire hitting a ball with all of his or her strength was very *loud*, they elected to play only when there was thunder nearby to cover their activity. Constraining game dates also by the desire not to be rained on where they played, this left them with precious few appropriate days, but Alice was well able to predict them in advance. Edward picked me up at my house to convey me there (by car most of the way, and carrying me himself from the house to the field).

As the resident psychic had predicted, the field was completely dry while Forks proper was deluged in torrential rain and illuminated by lightning. I sat on the grass, beside Esme, who refereed while the others played, leaving even teams of three. Vampire baseball was about what I'd expected: too fast for my eyes to follow. I mostly enjoyed the expressions on the players' faces when they were still between moments of action - variations on frustration and triumph. Sometimes they heckled each other, coming up with reasonably creative insults (although I had no way of knowing if they were original to this occasion). Esme and I chatted idly when she didn't need to call out declarations of safety

and outness.

Fifteen minutes into the game, Alice froze in place between first base and second. Emmett tagged her out, actually knocking her over with his momentum. She hopped to her feet again, looking frustrated and shooing Emmett and his protests away. Edward, in the outfield, flashed in closer, to stand by his sister. "Alice," he murmured. I saw their lips moving, and I knew the other vampires could hear what passed between them, but I couldn't. She was seeing something and he was watching it and it alarmed them both...

Edward appeared next to me. The others approached more slowly, forming a loose semicircle. "Bella," Edward said, "there are three other vampires, not our friends, in the area. Alice saw them before but they firmly intended to head north without getting very near, until they heard the game and could tell it wasn't thunder. They're curious. I can't travel as quickly carrying you as I can alone. Even if I could, your scent would still be on the field, obviously new, and the last thing we want is for them to start hunting you." He said all this barely slowly enough for me to keep up with the words, and as soon as he'd finished informing me he turned towards his family and they began talking very rapidly. I caught a handful of the words.

"...thirsty?" said someone's voice, possibly Esme's. Edward shook his head - I *thought* at that question - and that seemed a small relief.

"Only three..." scoffed Emmett.

"How soon?" I thought this was Carlisle. The answer contained the number "five", but I didn't catch the unit - minutes were most likely, I judged...

"Everyone," said Carlisle over the hum of agitated chatter, and the others quieted. "Let's just continue the game. Edward said they are simply curious."

"Esme, you catch," Edward said in a hard voice. "I'll call." She didn't protest, and flitted over to her place. Edward positioned himself in front of me, looking furiously into the distance, at the direction I guessed the other vampires would approach from.

"Is there anything I can do to smell less obvious?" I asked.

"Take your hair down," Edward said, growling under his breath - clearly anticipating a fight. I pulled it out of my ponytail and shook it down over my face. I huddled as small as I could under my coat. *Look undelicious*, I told myself, but I didn't know how to do that. If it came to a fight, the Cullens would win, I thought - by the numbers - but there could be casualties. Someone could die. *Edward* could die. I looked up at him, peeping through the gaps in the curtain of my hair, and knew he'd do it without hesitating if it would save me.

I clamped my lips down on the words I wanted to say, provoked by the danger - it was not a good time to have that conversation; it would be dramatic, but not clever, and I didn't want to be dramatic if it would put anyone in more danger...

The game proceeded tensely. The batters all bunted, not wanting to send anyone running after a ball that careened out of the field as most of the solid hits did. The outfielders stalked the edges of the clearing, paying less attention to the game.

And then the other vampires arrived. There were three: a nondescript male with sandy hair entered the clearing first, then fell back to let a darker-haired, more muscular man with an odd olive hue to his chalky skin take the lead. Last to arrive was a woman with brilliant orange hair, which was long, curly, and full of forest debris. All of them had feral, catlike gaits, obviously predatory, and wore backpacking outfits but no shoes.

Their eyes were a dark wine red.

Carlisle approached them with his arms spread non-threateningly; Emmett followed slightly to his left and Jasper on his right. It was a small comfort to notice that the leader of the unfamiliar coven was just Jasper's match in size, and dwarfed by Emmett's great bulk. I wasn't sure how much that mattered, but it looked like it did. The visitors (I kept forcing myself to choose alternatives to the word "enemies" in my mind - they hadn't yet proven themselves that, not so directly) dropped into more casual poses, and the olive-palored leader smiled, showing off bright and even teeth. Between stabs of fear, I had a vague intellectual interest in watching the covens meet; it was the sort of thing about vampire behavior I'd need to know later - if I didn't die then and there.

"We thought we heard something interesting," the dark-haired one said. "I'm Laurent; these are Victoria and James." He indicated the flame-haired woman and the ordinary-looking man beside her. Victoria and James exchanged a look; I had the sudden intuition that they were mates, with Laurent either without one of his own or separated therefrom.

"I'm Carlisle. This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Alice, Rosalie and Esme, Edward and Bella," Carlisle said. He waved towards us in vague groups, avoiding drawing attention to individuals. I was momentarily surprised that he included me in the family - but of course he didn't want to pick me out as a mere future in-law for Laurent's benefit.

Laurent took in the baseball equipment. "Do you have room for a few more players?" he asked, sounding friendly and inquisitive. I wondered if I looked suspiciously unvampiric, crouched under my jacket when no vampire would have been bothered by the cold. None of them had yet tried to eat me. I tried to hold still the way I could if I were inedible.

"Actually, we were just finishing up," Carlisle said, matching Laurent's tone, sounding vaguely regretful as though he'd have liked nothing more than to have a catch with the anthropophagic creatures standing before him. "But perhaps another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We're headed north," said Laurent, "but were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time." Except for their dinner.

Dinner probably made terrible company, though, gibbering and begging for its life, and that was if you paused to let it talk...

"This region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves," said Carlisle. Laurent's coven looked relaxed and casual; I wondered if Jasper was leaning on them, and decided to thank him fervently if he were.

"What's your hunting range?" Laurent inquired, tone casual. The question didn't assume *outright* that the Cullens hunted humans - they had to have seen the gold eyes, but did they know what that meant?

Carlisle described the environs of Forks, covering the La Push area in his claim even though the Cullens didn't venture there, and then said, "We maintain a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours near Denali."

"Permanent?" asked Laurent, looking interested. "How do you manage that?" Had they still not noticed I was human? My scent was supposedly strong on the field - the wind had been wrong, but if they would supposedly have smelled me even if I were *gone*.

"It's rather a long story," Carlisle said, and then he invited them to their home - I had no idea what he was thinking. There was no way for me to get out of that field without revealing human clumsiness or being implausibly carried. Was he planning to take them there in a splintered group while Edward circled around via some other direction with me? Did he think he had Laurent intrigued enough to avoid hunting me as long as there was information to be had? Laurent *did* look curious - James and Victoria less so.

Laurent said the invitation was welcome. Carlisle then put in a request that they not hunt in the Cullens' range, on the grounds that they needed to stay inconspicuous. Laurent agreed readily; his coven had just eaten. (I restrained a shudder.) And then as Carlisle began to say something else, a breeze wafted by me in exactly the wrong direction...

Edward went entirely stiff and James was suddenly, as though under a strobe light, posed facing me in a hungry crouch, teeth bared, nostrils flaring wide.

Edward snarled like some sort of animal, not the harmless little grumbles I'd heard the vampires make - it was a threat, full of menace, a declaration that Edward was prepared to kill if James took one step too close. I had so many reasons to be afraid: *My boyfriend can sound like that. Those vampires might kill me. They might kill Edward. He might kill them. If they have friends and he kills them, they might find us...*

"What's this?" asked Laurent, clearly astounded. He didn't seem to have caught my scent as strongly as James - and Victoria barely reacted at all except to fix her attention on her mate - but he clearly knew the situation now.

"She's with us," Carlisle told them, aiming the statement more at James than Laurent.

"You brought a snack?" Laurent asked incredulously. His foot moved forward.

Edward's lips curled back, showing all his teeth, and he let out another, more ferocious snarl.

"I *said*," corrected Carlisle sharply, "she's with us."

Laurent was dumbfounded. "But she's *human*." He didn't sound hostile - but nor did he make a move to check James, who still looked ready to pounce. Emmett shifted position a little, and James slowly straightened up, but went on staring at me - Edward didn't budge.

"It appears we have a lot to learn about each other," Laurent said, trying to defuse the hostility. If Jasper was using his talents, they were not as effective as I'd imagined.

"Indeed," said Carlisle tightly.

Laurent went on. "But we'd like to accept your invitation. And, of course, we will not harm the human girl. We won't hunt in your range, as we said."

James looked at Laurent unbelievably and then glanced to Victoria, whose eyes were flicking from face to face without settling in any one place for more than a moment. She looked edgy, but not very interested in eating me - if I was reading her right.

Carlisle looked steadily at Laurent, and then said, "We'll show you the way." And then he called Jasper, Rosalie, and Esme to join him and the foreign coven. They formed a line that blocked me from view. Alice appeared at my side as soon as it was clear he didn't want her with the larger group; Emmett fell back more reluctantly and kept his eyes on James as he backed towards us.

I was still sitting on the grass, rigid with fear. Edward picked me up without ceremony and clutched me so tightly that it was almost uncomfortable, but it was better than huddling in my coat. The four of us were off through the forest. Under the trees, it was pitch black; not even the tendrils of cloud-filtered sunset that had lit up the field were visible through the leaves. Edward normally seemed exhilarated when he ran, but not this time - he was running off pure rage. I wondered how difficult it had been for him to avoid attacking James the instant my species had been revealed.

We reached Emmett's gigantic Jeep, and Edward tossed me into the backseat. Emmett slid in beside me, Alice took the passenger seat, and Edward was starting the engine.

"Where are we going?" I asked in a low voice, when I'd found where my vocal cords had gotten to.

"Away," said Edward tightly. He sounded like he didn't want to answer me, he was just mechanically answering me because I had to be answered. The speedometer was overtaxed by the crazy velocity he was undertaking. I couldn't tell where the car was hurtling in the dark. "We have to get you far away from here. Now."

"Why?" I asked. "That doesn't make sense; Laurent said they wouldn't hunt in your range, it's safer for me to stay here."

"James won't abide by that agreement," said Edward tightly, forcing each word through his throat with immense effort. "He's a tracker."

Emmett reacted to this word considerably more than I did, going stiff in his seat. Alice seemed to recognize it too. I said, "A what?"

"He's got a power," Edward said. "Hunting is his passion, his obsession. And he wants you in particular. You're the most irresistible sort of prey - a single vulnerable element in a large coven of protectors. He's committed to the hunt now and he can't be stopped unless we kill him."

"Then why run? If he'll follow me wherever I go until he's dead or I am," I said, "then it will come to a fight, won't it? There's got to be some advantage to having it out on your turf. Or do you mean he'll stop when I'm turned and you need to put me in a bunker in Alaska where I can be hidden for the three days it'll take me to vamp up ahead of schedule?"

"He's no match for us, Edward," Emmett said. He sounded like he relished the possibility of a fight.

"The female, she's with him," Edward said. "And if it turns into a fight, their leader will go with them, too."

"There are enough of us," scoffed Emmett.

"I'm sure you could beat them," I said, "but I'm not sure you could do it without casualties. Edward, *will* he lose interest if I'm turned? Is that the plan, or were you just thinking I could live the rest of my life on a series of airplanes until there's a chance to put me on a space colony or something?" Edward didn't answer. Perhaps he didn't know - his brand of mindreading picked up only surface thoughts, and could leave gaps like that.

Alice said, "I don't see him attacking. He'll try to wait for us to leave her alone."

Edward growled. "It won't take him long to realize that's not going to happen."

"If he finds it interesting to hunt protected, vulnerable people, what would be the point of waiting until you left and then finding me at home or someth-" I choked on the rest of that word. "Charlie. If he crosses my scent anywhere in town he'll find Charlie."

"She's right," said Alice.

"And wouldn't it be *interesting*," I said, "wouldn't that make it so much more fun for James, if he had my father hostage and had me desperately working against you to get

away from my protections in exchange for Charlie's life?"

Edward snarled again; I started to fear for the structural integrity of the steering column.

"So we'll pick him up," Emmett said. "If James is still waiting for us to leave her alone, that's safe, isn't it?"

"Turning Charlie isn't part of the plan!" I cried. "If we grab him, even if you manage to fake being human perfectly, the choices are still run forever or eventually fight James. And you don't think he'll come quietly, do you?" Charlie was far more closely tied to Forks than I was. He had a job he loved, longstanding friendships he cared about, he was on the Quileute reservation *all* the time...

Edward clenched his jaw. "The coven has visited the house. Laurent is still there, talking to Carlisle; James and Victoria looked around a little, and excused themselves," he reported. He was driving quickly but I supposed his family's minds might still be just in range. "They claimed to plan to continue their original route, and headed in the correct direction as far as Carlisle could see, but could easily have doubled back. Laurent is expressing an interest in visiting the Denalis."

"Look," I said. "We're going about this in a completely confused way."

"What's your idea?" asked Alice.

"I don't have one yet. Hang on." I took a deep breath.

What do I want?

I wanted to live. I wanted Charlie and all of the Cullens to live. In - I had to admit to myself to have the *best* chance of getting what I wanted - roughly that order. It felt awful to realize that I wouldn't die for Charlie, and I hoped never to be in a position where that was actually the tradeoff, but I knew *Charlie* would insist that I be the one to live if it did come to that, which was something of a salve for the guilt.

I felt less terrible about preferring myself to the Cullens. Edward, probably even more so than Charlie, would fling himself into any danger if it would give me a better chance. I half-suspected that he was sufficiently emotionally vulnerable that he literally could not live without me - that if I turned up dead he'd calmly douse himself in napalm, hoping, in his confused theological muddle, to somehow join me. The others were friends - Alice in particular was a good friend - but I simply hadn't known them that long. Also, they would not want Edward to feel compelled to napalm himself either.

If everyone's life were assured, I wanted everyone involved to have mutual knowledge of that survival. I wanted to stick to my original plan - finishing out the school year, dramatically eloping to Europe, and bringing my parents and friends into the fold one by one in any case where Alice said we could do it safely.

What do I have? And the sub-question, What do I know?

Edward's absolute top priority was my life - but he was susceptible to bad reasoning about what that meant and would not necessarily be easy to bring into an agreement about how best to secure it. Emmett was itching to fight. The other Cullens, as a group, were prepared to treat me as a member of the family and would probably defend me as well. There were seven of them; even split up in two groups, each half was at least an even match for Laurent's group.

James was a tracker whose purpose in life was to pick interesting targets and commit himself absolutely to getting them. At least under the condition where I remained human, he'd follow me until at least one of us was dead. He probably didn't know about Edward's and Alice's powers, although he might have an inkling of Jasper's. He *had* seen Edward's display in the field, and could likely figure out that there was an eternal vampy soulmate thing going on there, and knew that Edward (and by extension the entire family) thought he was a threat to me. Victoria had his back, the typically devoted vampire mate. Although apparently hunting was not her own hobby, or Edward would probably have been able to pick up similar intentions from her. Laurent was not personally hostile, but would take his coven's side in a confrontation.

As far as the Cullens were concerned, money was no object. I did not think it was *possible* for me to come up with a plan that didn't involve the outright purchase of a small country, which could tax their finances irrecoverably. As long as I got a Cullen, at least one of them, on board with whatever plan I invented, I could freely call for financial expenditure.

What is the best way to use what I have to get what I want?

Wild plans spun to life in my mind and I tried to sort them, dividing plausible from untenable.

At least one of two things *had* to happen in the reasonably short term, unless Edward was wrong about James's implacability: James had to die or I had to turn. Turning might not be a guarantee of deterring the hunter, but it would make me less vulnerable if he got through my protectors. (I did not expect to emerge into vampirehood equipped with expert fighting skills, but at least I wouldn't so closely resemble a melting marshmallow in texture and menace.) The process would take three days, but it might be possible for the vampires to move me while I was incapacitated.

"James hunts alone?" I asked Edward.

"Yes," he grunted. He was still driving absurdly fast. I had no idea where he was going.

"Alice, can you see if Laurent and Victoria are really going to Denali?"

Alice closed her eyes; I saw her in the rearview mirror, concentrating. "Laurent is,"

she said finally.

"Laurent's really only with them for convenience," said Edward. "I said he'd stand with them in a fight, but that's if they were all attacked together..."

"Someone should call the Denali group and ask them to keep Laurent occupied for a while if they can," I said. Emmett had a cellphone on him; he flipped it open and dialed a number, murmuring a summary of the situation and request to the friend on the other end once he was answered. "Where is Victoria going?" I asked Alice.

"It looks like she's going to sort of... loiter, north of where Carlisle said our hunting range was," Alice reported. "And wait there for James to contact her or come back."

"She'll wait alone?" I confirmed. Alice nodded. "How long will James wait for me to be left by myself before he'll change plans?"

"Maybe... two days? Three? He hasn't decided yet," she said.

"What would happen," I said, "if, in that time, you *kidnapped* Victoria?"

The car was filled with another hubbub of vampires talking too fast for me to follow, and I frowned, annoyed. Was it a good idea or not? If there was anything James cared about more than getting me dead, of course it would be Victoria - if we had a little leeway of time, five of the Cullens could go get her while two at home still left James outnumbered if he made an unexpected early move on me. And then there'd be leverage over James, or bait, depending - if I'd missed something important I wished they'd tell me. I listened harder. The words I did catch were names - Cullens and the other coven's members - and that told me almost nothing.

"Hey," I said. "I don't really appreciate being left out of a conversation like this."

"Sorry, Bella," said Alice. "We like your idea. We were discussing strategy - who should stay to watch you and who should go get her, and how to hold her once we have her, and then what happens next."

"Is there a way to hold a vampire short of, you know, actually holding her?" I asked, miming grabbing a wrist and hanging on.

"Not really - not without powers we don't have," said Emmett. "But two could do it, especially if Jasper's one."

"With Laurent out of the way, that leaves five more of us to split up between making sure he doesn't free Victoria and making sure he doesn't get you," Edward muttered. "If Jasper and, let's say Esme, hold Victoria, and Alice and I watch you, and Emmett, Rosalie, and Carlisle confront James in a group... One of them would have to stay on the phone with Alice so she could direct them. Or maybe Alice should go and Rosalie or

Carlisle should stay with you..." He fretted, but he wasn't as obviously full to bursting with terror on my behalf and fury at James as he had been before. This was planning, not despairing flight.

"Where are we going?" I asked pointedly.

"Oh." Edward frowned and started to slow down. "I was driving to the airport. I suppose we should take you home. You can tell Charlie you want Alice to sleep over; I'll go in through the window," he suggested. The Jeep slowed enough to allow him to execute a safe U-turn.

"That works," I agreed. "How are we going to keep Charlie from getting taken hostage when I have to go to school? Should I fake sick?" Alice saw that as long as I got good long vampire hugs for a few minutes before telling Charlie I didn't feel well, I'd be easily cold and clammy enough to get him to let me stay in. She'd be able to stick by me openly by getting Carlisle's "permission" over the phone and protesting that I shouldn't be left home alone while Charlie was at work. Edward, of course, would be hiding.

"Should we even keep Victoria alive?" Emmett asked. "That's two fighters she'll tie up just by being kidnapped. I think we should kill her. Grab some hair first to prove we got to her, and maybe hang on to her long enough to ask personal questions and have Ed pull the answers so we can "prove" to James that we've got her someplace. But then - I mean, we're going to have to kill James, you know. She's not gonna put up with that. Sooner's easier than later."

Edward and Alice seemed to consider this a fair question. I felt a little queasy plotting Victoria's death. I knew she was a murderer, and probably had no realistic chance of ceasing to be one, and that she probably *wouldn't* nonviolently tolerate her mate's death, which was likely necessary for self-defense... but Victoria hadn't *personally* done anything to me *yet*, or even formed the intention to do so, and that seemed to put it on different footing. I didn't bring it up. *I want to live*, I told myself. And it was true: my discomfort over orchestrating Victoria's execution didn't compare to the sick fear I'd felt when James had looked at me like a delicious beverage.

Whoever she'd have eaten next probably wanted to live, too.

Edward drove less manically towards my house. Emmett called his wife while we were on the way, uttered some overdone mush to Rosalie so she'd have a good excuse to get out of Laurent's earshot, and then summarized the plan to her. We got to my place at about ten, and I bounced in, arm-in-arm with Alice, pleading with Charlie for a sleepover and leaning very hard on my limited acting skills. Alice was much better at it than me, and jabbered about painting our nails, and how she couldn't *wait* to braid my hair because hers wasn't long enough and Rosalie and Esme wouldn't let her do theirs, and she just *had* to dish dirt on her boyfriend to someone who didn't live in their same house and - Charlie finally waved us upstairs, overwhelmed by girly excitement. Alice followed me up the

stairs with a gleeful squeal that I thought was probably uncalled for.

When we got to my room, Edward was waiting there - pacing. "Will you face one wall long enough for me to change, please?" I asked him pointedly. He sighed slightly and obediently looked at the door to my closet. I hopped into my pajamas gratefully - I kind of wanted a shower, too, but I wasn't sure Edward would tolerate me spending that long out of his line of sight until he'd calmed down a bit more. It could wait. If the vampires had a problem with how I smelled, it wasn't with the fact that I was gross. My outfit of the day had dirt on it from where I'd sat in the field, and it was covered with the sweat that apparently came with the immediate fear for one's life. I dumped it into the hamper.

As soon as Alice saw that Laurent had left the Cullen home, she called Esme and asked for an overnight bag (which was to contain a number of non-overnight-bag-ish contingency items, like several thousand dollars cash, in case we had to bolt). Esme was obliged to make two minutes of small talk with Charlie about how her silly daughter had spontaneously organized the sleepover without thinking to pack anything, ha ha, and she'd just take this upstairs and be on her way. She dropped it off with us, gave Alice and Edward each a kiss on the forehead, patted my hair, and then went out again. To go help kill Victoria.

I hoped Victoria wouldn't kill any of them.

Five vampires, including Jasper, should be enough to take down one who had no power or one so inconspicuous that neither Alice nor Edward had caught it. Should. And if they didn't die, but were merely torn to parts, they could be put together again - she wouldn't have the chance to grind them up into powder or the materials to set them on fire -

It hurt to think about it. I got into bed and buried my head in pillow. Alice stood by the window and Edward by the door, unsleeping, watchful, as I effortfully nodded off.

Edward and Alice were my near-constant companions for the next three days, which I spent entirely in my own room or five feet down the hall in the bathroom. (Edward glared at Alice when she suggested that perhaps I did not need to be accompanied to the bathroom when her sight was clear of James, and thereafter she went with me; I got accustomed to it after a while.) They hid when Charlie was nearby; luckily, he didn't go through my stuff.

On Monday, very early in the morning, Edward briefly traded his guard duties with Carlisle in order to enact Emmett's idea of retrieving personal information from Victoria without her enthusiastic cooperation. He was back a couple of hours later, grim but looking marginally more comfortable with the state of the world and its population of hostile vampires. Victoria had had a phone, but not a number with which to call James: he was supposed to call her first. So there was no immediate use for her as bait to lure James

into a trap. She'd only be useful as a way to throw him off balance when the time to fight came.

Esme and Rosalie trailed my father as he went about his work, in case James tried for him. Carlisle went to work as usual and let out that all his children had some illness that he'd troubled to make medically plausible.

James was indecisive. The tenth time Alice growled to herself about headaches, I started to suspect that he somehow knew about her power. If he were such a great hunter, why would he make such fragile plans, and discard them so readily? It was thwarting *us*, and rather neatly, but it could only slow him down with most targets. Maybe he didn't care about being leisurely as long as he got to destroy his prey in the most elegant way possible.

But Alice did keep seeing fairly stable flashes of his immediate plans, too near at hand to conceal with indecision. And from these she was able to conclude, on Tuesday morning, that he was in Arizona.

Extracting this information from Alice was like pulling teeth. I knew she'd seen something, because she and Edward made faces at each other the way they did when he was reading her mind and he was talking too softly for me to hear *anything*, even an excessively rapid babble.

"Why," I asked, when I'd finally prodded her to give up this information, "didn't you want to tell me that James is in Arizona? It would be better if he were in Siberia, but relative to, say, Seattle, Arizona's pretty good."

"Because your mother lives in Arizona," Edward said reluctantly.

"Yes," I said, "but she isn't there *now*. She's in Florida, with Phil." One thing that was very easy to do without leaving my room (along with the homework that Angela brought me every day, forcing me to look convincingly sick) was keep in touch with Renée by e-mail, but the vampires didn't spy on my correspondence, apparently.

"*Oh*," said Alice, and she looked like she felt very silly.

"Then why would James be there?" asked Edward, flinging his hands up.

"I don't know," I admitted, and I didn't. Of course it could have something to do with Renée, but he might have other tasks in his life that he wanted to accomplish. That involved going to Arizona, when he'd been headed north from Washington before... and which he wanted to do while his mate waited for him (so he thought)... and that didn't make sense after all. Maybe he *thought* Renée was there, and would leave when he found she wasn't. I tried to think whether there would be any way he'd be able trace her to Florida. Perhaps his tracking powers wouldn't be deterred by airplanes, but neither of my guardians knew. There was no one she'd leave a note for. Evidence of Phil's occupation was scattered around the house, though, and could let a clever person determine his whereabouts - and hers by extension. It was a lead. More of a lead than I wanted James to

have.

"Is he going to be in Florida?" I asked Alice, apology in my voice for the probable headache. "Or stay in Arizona for very long?"

She scrunched up her face, looking unhappy. "I... I see him in Florida. Yes. I can't tell where exactly, but... there's a sign. He's going to be in Florida."

I sucked in air through my teeth. "We need to get a detail on my mother."

"We're already too split up," fretted Edward.

"My *mother*, Edward," I snapped. "If someone might be trying to get Esme in order to hurt you, and she weren't a vampire herself, you'd want her protected."

This was inarguable. Eventually it was decided that Alice belonged as close to James as possible, to give that group the best chance at killing him and rendering all the guarding unnecessary. The same argument applied to Edward, really, but he refused to leave my side, so instead Jasper went with her. Emmett went too, as the physically strongest fighter. They left on Wednesday morning, which Alice promised would still put them in Florida before James's arrival.

When Carlisle wasn't at work, he hung around near my house. When Charlie wasn't at work, so did Esme and Rosalie. But during the day, it was me and Edward.

I could not help but notice that, by the time Wednesday afternoon rolled around, Edward's eyes were awfully close to black.

"You need to hunt, soon," I said. "Tonight, when the others show up."

Edward gritted his teeth. He had never liked being away from me and the fact that James wanted me dead wasn't improving his ability to function without me right there, visibly intact. But I couldn't come hunting with him, and if he got hungrier, he'd be nearly as much of a danger. So Edward slipped away in the night, taking the time to tuck me in first.

Besides, James was far away, in or on his way to Florida, being chased down by three vampires jointly four times his size.

And so of course it came as a complete surprise when he captured me anyway.

I was asleep when he nabbed me. I assumed, when I awoke and noticed I was tied up in the backseat of a moving vehicle driven by James, that there had been chloroform or something of that nature involved - or I would have woken up in the process. What I couldn't figure out was how James had gotten past Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie. I also

wasn't at all sure why he'd taken me alive.

As it happened, he hadn't gagged me, so I spent ten minutes forcing the mind-numbing terror into the background to let myself ask questions. *If he wanted me dead I'd be dead, I told myself. I'm not dead. He's going somewhere. He won't kill me until he gets there. Dread is not useful in any way, shape, or form.* I repeated the sentences to myself, letting them march across my mind in a loop, and tried to find a comfortable way to lie on the seat, which proved impossible. So did completely ridding myself of the fear. It was far too appropriate to the situation to be dismissed so easily. I could just barely shove it aside enough to let me think around it. And utter sentences, or parts of them, although they shook like gelatin.

"How...?"

James smiled. I was arranged at such an angle that I could see the rightmost corner of his mouth turn up. "Hi there, Bella," he said. "I *bet* you're curious. I'll tell you all kinds of interesting tidbits while I kill you. I'm planning to send your boyfriend the videotape, and it'll be more interesting that way. But I have no interest in repeating myself."

My brain flew into action.

I want to live. I have the power of speech. How can I get what I want?

And then I spoke the words.

"You don't know?" I asked, feigning surprise. I didn't have to conceal the terror in my voice - the lies I'd spun in a panic to protect myself didn't call for me to pretend to be invulnerable or to have a deathwish, so I could still act as fearful as I was insofar as that didn't interfere with speech. But I did need to overlay other things on top of that. "About the reward? But there's no other reason to kidnap me," I prodded, when James didn't say anything.

"What are you talking about?"

"Wait a minute - why did you *think* they were keeping me around?" I asked. "Didn't that seem kind of weird?"

"Not your boyfriend, then?"

I made a little snorting noise. "You thought that because he snarled at you? No, that would have been much pleasanter all around, I'm sure," I said. The wobbling of my voice between real fear and fake contempt made for an interesting effect. "He just wanted to turn me in undamaged to the Volturi, to get the reward."

"Mm-hm." James wasn't buying it - quite - but I wasn't done.

"They didn't tell me much directly - no reason to," I said. "But they talk around me. Not much choice since they never let me alone - I don't know how you got past them. They said I'm a *witch*, that the Volturi like turning witches. They got on the phone with someone with a funny Latin name - Caius, I think - and made a deal that they'd hand me over to those Volturi people."

"What were the Volturi offering?" James asked, starting to get curious.

"Let me think if I can remember the exact words... It was *something* about immunity from the rule about keeping themselves secret," I mused. "I guess they really like having a permanent settlement and wish it were... more permanent? That it would be okay for people to notice they don't age? They were talking all the time about how they'd have to make sure the word didn't get out too far, that it could just be the one town. But they still *really* wanted it. Enough to give me to the Volturi people. They had to wait a few days before taking me to Italy because the other two they didn't talk to on the phone, Aro and another Latin name guy... Marcus or something?"

James gave a slight nod, more invested in the conversation now. "Aro and Marcus," I continued. "They were out of their city dealing with somebody who broke some rule. The Volturi must be really powerful, huh?" I marveled. "I mean, those people who had me trapped, I would have tried to run away but there would've been no way I could do it. And there were seven of them. I don't know how you got me out, I mean wow. I can't imagine what would scare them, but they sure wanted the Volturi's permission before they did anything." I paused, for effect. "Wow. I bet the Volturi will be *pissed* if they can't have the witch they wanted after all. Maybe they'll kill all of them. Serves them right," I spat. The unspoken implication was that James, too, would be at the risk of Volturi wrath if he were responsible for the loss of the desired witch.

It was a bluff. An outrageous bluff concocted in too little time and too much adrenaline. But he *knew* I had every motivation to lie like a rug, and *already* planned to kill me and *already* had the means to do it. Anything I could tell him that didn't make him kill me sooner or slower was a potential improvement.

I would have backed off in a heartbeat if he'd shown any inclination to be annoyed with the fact that I was talking, or with the likelihood that I was telling tales. I wanted to set myself up as the useful object that could be destroyed *or* redeemed for valuable cash prizes, and I wanted him not to accumulate enough hate to pick the first option out of spite. It would be worse than useless for me to annoy him, or at least to appear to be the *source* of his annoyance or emotionally precious to that source.

But James wasn't annoyed. He'd gotten his target. He could have gagged me and hadn't. He could have told me to shut up when I started talking, and didn't.

The Volturi were the only group I could think of that could *definitely* kill James and might *not* kill me besides the Cullen and Denali covens. And James knew about *them*. I had not memorized any meeting places or things of that nature into which I could hope to lure him to good effect. And so I was hoping that the Volturi really *did* like witches. And

that my witchy power was extensive enough that I could prove my claim to their mindreader.

"The Volturi have never done anything like that before," James remarked.

"It seems weird," I said. "I gather they've been running the vampires for, like, thousands of years." I was trying to sound a little stupid, too stupid to be deliberately tricking James. I wished I hadn't used the word "gather". I went on, more carefully, "Maybe they think the secret's all gonna go to hell anyway, since technology's getting so, you know, high-tech, and it's harder to hide. And they want to get more witches first so when it goes to hell they get to stay in charge."

James was smart enough to put this poorly worded supposition together. "Then it's not much of a reward, is it?"

"I guess. Those people who had me before really wanted it. But I mean, if you're immortal, I guess a hundred years or whatever isn't that long? I dunno. It could take that long for the immunity to be useless. It sounds like a long time to *me*."

"Was that the only reward the Volturi had on offer," he asked, "or did those people ask for it specifically?"

"I'm not sure. I know they were talking about how they already had plenty of money, and didn't need more," I said. "I don't know what all else the Volturi were offering... I don't know what they have."

"Mm."

"Hey," I said, "are you a witch too?"

He smirked. "Just a bit."

"Have you ever met the Volturi? What are they like?"

"They don't normally like to be disturbed," he muttered. "More trouble than it's worth to just go visit them..."

"Oh," I said, and fell silent. Needed to give his mind time to work.

There were a few things he could be thinking, and many of them worked in my favor. He could fear the Volturi, and want leeway within their rules as a valuable prize. He might admire them, and want to curry favor for its own sake. I could imagine that it would make hunting more interesting if victims knew he was coming and could try to resist him, although non-vampire resistance was unlikely to be particularly entertaining.

I decided - for the time being - *not* to mention Victoria. That would make him angry. I needed him curious, ambitious, risk-loving, not angry. And I didn't know how narrowly his taste for drama was beating his taste for blood, that he could calmly drive me around.

Anger could not tip that balance in a good direction.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked after a few minutes.

"The airport," he said.

"Seattle?" I asked. "Or one of the little ones?"

"Seattle." The short answers didn't seem to be good green lights for continuing to chat, so I dropped my head onto the car seat and tried to fall asleep. I didn't quite manage it, but I did sort of half-doze until we got to the airport.

I was just able, in spite of being tied up, to cross my fingers.

Volterra

I wondered, as I started to see signs for the airport out the window, how vampires got through airport security. It seemed unlikely that security scanning machines and the like would react normally to them.

By the time I was on the jet that James picked out, I still didn't know how the Cullens would manage, but James did it by sneaking us into the baggage compartment. He killed a man to do it. He didn't eat him. I wasn't sure if he was full, or thought it would be too obvious, or didn't want to drop into hunting mode and accidentally turn me into dessert; but he just clobbered the guy over the head with a suitcase and then arranged the scenario to make it look like the corpse had accidentally dropped the luggage onto his own head. No blood.

I spent the duration of the murder crouching inside the luggage cart that James's victim had been driving. I knew James would at least hurt me, and likely kill me, if I tried to escape - and besides, the only people who I'd find useful rescuers wouldn't be confused by my hiding place. They'd be able to smell or hear me anyway.

Traveling in the baggage compartment of an airplane was not fun. I complained softly of hunger and thirst, and James was able to find a packed lunch and water bottle with his superior sense of smell. From the look of the bag he retrieved it from, it had been intended as a carry-on and just barely exceeded the size limit. He didn't look thrilled about having to feed me, but didn't complain about it either.

I ate it, and it tided me over until the plane arrived in New York, where we had to change flights. James didn't kill anyone this time. He stole a long hooded coat from someone's garment bag to hide under (dawn was underway on the east coast) and loosened the latches on the door to the belly of the airplane; when we were a hundred feet off the ground, he kicked the door open casually, seized me, and fell gracefully to the ground in a hail of instrument cases and upholstered sacks and cardboard boxes.

James did not run with concern for my comfort. My ears were ringing with wind. I knew vampires could move outrageously fast, and supposed that the ground crew might be distracted by the luggage rain, but it still seemed an awful risk. Maybe he was betting on the fictional Volturi reward being retroactive. He leapt into the baggage hold of the next plane. I couldn't see anything - he moved too fast - but he didn't seem to have attracted the attention of anyone who wanted to investigate the rapid dark shape hurling itself into the airplane.

This airplane had a caged dog traveling in it. It hated James and yowled at him constantly. It seemed to irritate him, so he opened its cage, strangled it, and then stuffed a luggage strap down its throat in case anyone should happen to wonder at its death.

I wondered when I would start going into shock. Probably soon. I really ought to be in shock. Perhaps I was, and hadn't noticed. I didn't know what shock was like.

"Where are we going?" I dared ask, hours into the second leg of the trip, after he'd found me another snack and an entire case of fancy bottled water somebody was bothering to import.

"Italy," he said shortly.

The plane landed. Not one to repeat himself in making an exit, James hid the pair of us in a corner. When the baggage handlers noticed the dead dog, and started yelling at each other about it in rapid Italian, he walked right out behind them, me in tow.

He broke into and hotwired the first fast-looking car he found in the airport's parking lot.

And then we drove.

"How *did* you get through them to me?" I asked timidly, sitting next to the vampire in the driver's seat.

"Well, it helped that I know the little one's secret," he said, as though letting me in on a joke. The little one - Alice? I'd *suspected*...

"Her... secret?" Still playing dumb. Until he got me to the Volturi he could decide to kill me at any time.

"Yes. She has visions, you see, of the future. A long time ago this would have gotten her burnt at the stake... in the nineteen-twenties it was an asylum, shock treatments, that sort of thing. She was the only one who ever got away from me. She had a protector, just one, but he made her safe, not like yours. I *was* surprised to see her with that lot, though. Anyway, she can be fooled. They're only visions, not knowledge. Did you know there are a lot of interesting sets to visit in Hollywood?" He grinned to himself. "Indecision throws her off. I told my Vicky all about it, that I'd tell her when to jump in, that she should just wait. I only made up my mind to do things I wanted her to see - everything else I dithered about even while I was doing it."

I nodded slowly. If I lived through this, I wanted to be able to tell Alice where she'd come from.

But he was done talking about Alice. "That, and Sunday night, I nibbled on some of your neighbors a bit. Hope you weren't attached to them. I tied them up and gagged them so they wouldn't attract any attention with their screaming, but I don't imagine that held them for long once they woke up and noticed how very, very thirsty they were..."

He looked so *smug*. So that was how he'd distracted my three watchers. He'd turned a confused bunch of newborns loose in the neighborhood, a time-release threat, and *they* would have made themselves an obvious, immediate danger to me and Charlie and

everyone else in Forks. He would have known when to expect them to finish turning.

It might have been sheer luck that Edward had needed to hunt on the same night. James hadn't given any indication that he also knew Edward's power - but he was clearly an old, experienced vampire, and might have bet on being able to take on one or two defenders in a fair fight, with a flailing newborn coven and a false lead to Florida distracting the rest. Sheer luck, that he'd found me entirely alone - but skill, that it had even been possible.

Did he actually believe my nonsense about the Volturi, or was he pretending in order to lull me into a false sense of security?

I didn't poke at it. If I acted like he might not believe me, it would only bring to mind the possibility that I was not to be believed.

"Wow," I said instead. "You're really good at this. If they'd made me like them, you wouldn't have wanted me anymore? Like that little one?"

Idiot! I screamed at myself, silently in my head. Idiot! Idiot! You did not really prioritize! You would not have been significantly less useful at self-defense if you were in the middle of turning and then James wouldn't have wanted you and it would be over already. You'd be a vampire by now, you'd be the other one that got away, you knew that every other detail but your own survival was of secondary importance. But you didn't get them to inject you with immortality juice because it wasn't a guarantee and you thought you had your bases covered even though you knew you were dealing with something deadly and powerful that wanted you ended about which you had limited information...

"Right," he said, unaware of my internal self-castigation. "Well, the Volturi will still want you that way, but originally I only thought you'd be an interesting meal. I'd have been very irritated with them for taking away my fun, of course." *But then all his targets would have been fighters in their own right, with a chance, not dividing their attention and flying all over creation trying to protect three separate squishy humans...* "I killed the one who changed your little friend." *But the Cullens mostly come in pairs, and if I were a vampire by now then all of them would...*

It would not make sense for someone as uninformed as I pretended not to ask... "You said my neighbors were screaming?"

"Oh," James chuckled. "Yes. It's an intriguing process. You're sure the one with the reddish hair's not a bit too fond of you? I could send him a tape of that after the Volturi get it started."

I shivered. "I don't think he likes me at all. None of them do. They were going to sell me to the Volturi, just like you. They'll be mad at you about stealing their reward, I guess, if that's what you want?"

"Makes things interesting that way," he said, still smirking.

Idiot! I wailed in the unbroken privacy of my own mind.

Volterra was beautiful, in the way that any city occupied by vampire royalty that might be either death or salvation would be beautiful.

James started muttering to himself about how, exactly, to track down the Volturi, once we were in the city. He abandoned the car and followed the heavily shadowed alleys between the tallest buildings, sniffing the air. Eventually he caught some promising odor and led me - assuming that I'd follow, despairing of escape - down a sloped tunnel-like alley which ended in a brick wall. There was an open grate in the pavement - it looked like a sewer drain.

"Down there," said James. "Jump."

"I'll break a leg and then you'll have to carry me. I might actually die from a fall," I said, "if it's deep enough and I land wrong - and I'll probably land wrong."

James groaned, picked me up, and hopped down into the hole without arguing further. "I hope you're worth all of this," he mumbled to me, setting me on my feet. He inhaled deeply. "You've got quite a flavor, you know. Better be worth not getting a taste..." He stalked off into the darkness. I followed him by sound, tripping frequently; he eventually got annoyed and lifted me again. I didn't protest. I didn't want to crack my head open under a city in Italy, not when I was *this* close to heroically bluffing my way out of certain death.

We came to a large grate with thick, rusting bars of iron. Part of it had been cut away and replaced with a thinner grille, which hung on hinges and looked like a door of sorts.

James pushed this little door open with his foot. It opened into a large, stone room, the far side of which was dominated by a heavy wooden door. James had to put me down to pull it open; it was immensely thick.

Past this door was a fluorescently lit, unremarkable hallway. Pale walls and gray carpet. Since I'd be able to navigate that, James put me down, and I stepped forward out of sheer curiosity without even looking to see if he wanted to go with more caution.

It really was just a hallway. But there were vampires in it.

There were two of them, tall but otherwise indistinct under black shrouds, at the far end of the hall in front of what appeared to be an elevator. I wasn't actually *sure* that they were vampires until one of them spoke. The words were, naturally enough, in Italian. But his musical, perfectly precise voice definitely belonged to a vampire.

James replied in the same language, gesturing at me with one thumb. I caught his

own name, but no other words stood out to me. The conversation continued, becoming faster and more heated, until finally the shrouded vampire who hadn't spoken cut in with an English sentence, directed at me: "Are you a witch?"

I shook off the sensation that I was Dorothy Gale of Kansas, and gulped, and said, "Yes."

"And your power?" inquired the vampire, from beneath her hood.

"I don't have a name for it," I said, stuttering slightly. I could not blow this or I was certain I'd be killed. "Um... m-mental privacy, I guess. It's sort of a... meta-power."

"That is testable," she announced. "You will come with me. Both of you." She moved her head slightly, making it clear despite the hood that she was talking to James as well. "Stay here," she told her counterpart. He nodded.

I followed the female vampire into the elevator, as did James. She touched one of the buttons, and it began to convey us upward. I felt the urge to ask her name, but this was not quite the social situation that it would have been with only humans involved. She shrugged the hood of her shroud off; she was as ice-skinned as any vampire, with the same burgundy eyes James had, and long black hair.

The elevator opened into a cozy, sophisticated, windowless reception area. The walls were decorated with bright landscapes, and deep green carpet covered the floor. Behind the mahogany counter in the room's center sat a woman - a *human* woman, with green eyes and too much vibrance to her tea-colored complexion to be a vampire. She was in her early twenties and pretty, but not eternally so. That was not in line with what I'd been told of the Volturi's approach to secrecy. At all.

"Buon giorno, Santiago!" the receptionist said brightly to the vampire woman. That was a phrase I could at least guess at. Just a greeting. If it specified time of day, I didn't know - I had no sense of time left after the trip, not having had a chance to look at a clock. It was probably Thursday, or early Friday, I thought At least in Pacific time. I didn't know Italy's time zone.

"Buon giorno, Gianna," replied the vampire - Santiago. Her tone was neutral. James seemed as confused as I was by the presence of a human, but didn't comment. I followed Santiago and James as they went around Gianna's desk and through a pair of wooden doors.

We went through a perfectly ridiculous maze of halls upon doors upon antechambers upon stairs, and finally, what I thought was two floors above ground level, we reached what appeared to be our final destination. It was an immense, round room. There were no artificial lights, just slits of windows letting sunshine in, and the only furniture were a number of massive wooden chairs, placed at irregular intervals near the walls. There was a drain in the middle of the room. This did not make a lot of sense on a second story as an entrance or exit, like the one in the alley apparently was, but I didn't get the opportunity to

speculate.

There were a small handful of vampires in the room. Most of them wore ordinary-looking street clothes, but the man who took notice of our presence wore a cloak like Santiago's. The hood was down, and I noticed as soon as I looked at him that he was not typical of the vampires I had met. His skin was the customary white, but translucent, like onion or frosted glass - not like the marble of any given Cullen or Santiago or James. His eyes *were* red, but with a milky cast over them, as though he had cataracts. He didn't seem to have impaired eyesight, but I supposed he could have had considerably inferior visual acuity compared to other vampires without looking myopic to me. He wore his black hair long, and it blended into his shroud.

"Santiago, you've brought us visitors," he said, sounding for all the world like Santiago's dotty uncle who was only too pleased to have strangers to welcome. He spoke in a soft, airy voice, just enough for me to hear, and floated forth in a cloudlike drift. Where Alice moved like a ballerina, this vampire moved like a soap bubble. The other vampires in the room drifted to cluster near him. Some stood ahead of him. They left his view clear, but were prepared to get in the way if James (or, I supposed, I) should decide to attack. The rest coalesced behind him, peering over each other's shoulders.

Santiago bowed deeply to him. When she straightened up, she moved forward with one white hand extended. He placed his palm over her knuckles and closed his eyes. A moment later, they broke the contact and Santiago backed away. "Interesting," murmured the onion-skinned vampire.

That one would be Aro, then.

I glanced at James. He looked like every passing second made him feel more strongly that this had been a bad idea. But he didn't speak up as Aro regarded him - and, intermittently, me - with a look of calm thoughtfulness on his face.

"I'm afraid," said Aro beatifically, "that you have been misinformed, James."

"Misinformed about...?" James asked, clearly wrong-footed by Aro's statement.

"This child," Aro said with a wave in my direction, "may well be a witch. That remains to be discerned. But we have not spoken of her with the coven you mentioned to Santiago. Nor have we made a practice of offering permission to violate rules in exchange for the capture of even so lovely a jewel."

James was starting to flick his eyes between all the vampires in the room, of whom there were really quite a few.

"You have been lied to," Aro said, with a sorrowful look on his face that had to be faked. "Rather cleverly, it would seem. My dear," he said, turning to me and tilting his

head inquisitively, "was that story your invention?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice in that moment.

"Before we decide how to proceed, I should like to investigate your witchcraft," said Aro, holding forth a pale hand.

I took six careful steps forward, resisting the temptation to look back at James, and placed my fingers against Aro's. His skin felt nearly normal for a vampire's, in spite of its unusual appearance - hard, but more brittle in texture, and colder than most.

He closed his eyes.

And then he opened them again.

"*Fascinating*," he breathed. "And one more test... Jane, dear one?"

He was addressing a physically young vampire, the shockingly beautiful planes of her ivory face all the more startling given that she looked perhaps fourteen. "Yes, Master," she cooed. Jane looked at me and smiled like a little angel. Nothing happened. I blinked at her, nonplussed - I didn't know what she was meant to have done - and her face twisted into an awful mask of hate. She made a sound like an angered snake.

"Santiago, my pet, won't you fetch my brothers for me?" Aro said, ignoring Jane's livid expression and soft hiss. "I believe they will be intrigued to learn of our new guest."

Santiago bowed again, and then she turned about with a swish of her cloak to retrieve - presumably - Marcus and Caius, who I surmised were not present in the room already. James let out a small snarl, which startled me enough that I whipped my head around to look at him like a scared rabbit.

"James, my friend," said Aro soothingly. "It won't do for you to hold a grudge against our charming little witch. She was clearly acting in self-defense, as any reasonable person would. I should not like to have to decide a fight between the two of you. I'm sure you realize that while she would lose on her own merits, there is one thing you were *not* lied to about." Aro stretched his paper skin into a broad smile; it did not tear with strain. "We are very pleased with the acquisition of witches. Perhaps you have a talent of your own, that let you capture this charming young lady away from her guardians?" he guessed. "Will you show me?" And he held out his hand again. I shuffled away, wanting it to be possible for some Volturi guard member to intervene if James lunged for my throat.

James approached Aro unwillingly, obviously conscious of all the eyes on him. The Volturi were accustomed to being obeyed. They reacted to disobedience with violence. James did not have time for inventive stunts with newborns here: if he fought, he would lose.

The vampires' hands touched. Aro hummed to himself in thought while he absorbed

James's memories.

"You took a very serious risk with those new children you made," tutted Aro when they'd dropped their hands.

James shifted edgily. He looked like he wanted to drop into a combative crouch and kept thinking better of it a fraction of the way through. "I knew the coven would control them," he muttered. "If they hadn't been there at the right time, I'd have killed the newborns while they were incapacitated with the change before taking the girl. They wouldn't have exposed us."

"Mm," sighed Aro, tipping his head back to scrutinize the ceiling and clasping his hands behind his back. "I suppose that in such a small town it may have seemed a reasonable risk to take." James nodded dumbly.

I had turned to face the door whence I'd come, and so I saw the entrance of two vampires who had to be Caius and Marcus, flanked by Santiago. James turned to see who'd arrived. The two new arrivals had Aro's same papery, fragile-looking skin and the same cataracts over their red eyes. One had similar long, black hair; this one had a bored, detached expression. The second had hair as white as his face, and looked annoyed by everything his eyes landed on.

"Marcus, Caius," Aro exclaimed in a jovial tone that didn't respond to the others' visible emotions at all. "We have received such a lovely surprise."

Aro summarized for his "brothers" the events from James's perspective in his lilting, fanciful sighs. He skipped over trivialities like the deaths of the baggage handler and the dog; apparently James had covered those up to his satisfaction. Caius spoke little - brief clarifying questions - and Marcus not at all, although at one time he got up from the thronelike chair he'd gone to sit in to brush his hand against Aro's and communicate wordlessly. Soon the explanation was complete.

"And, dear child," Aro said to me, turning his gaze in my direction with a soft smile, "perhaps you could tell us the actual sequence of events leading up to your coming to visit us?"

I inhaled deeply. If I were very, very lucky, Alice would have seen where I was and the Cullens would already be on their way to retrieve me. The only way to have our stories straight was if I told the truth - *only* the truth, not necessarily *all* of it, although major omissions of facts that could be obtained other ways wouldn't be wise. And of course the Volturi were probably not accustomed to having to learn things by being told of them out loud, so I had to expect they'd check up on me out of caution.

I stumbled through a synopsis, stuttering at every third word. Partway through, my vision swam and the vampire woman standing behind me had to catch me to prevent my collapse - the stress, inadequate food, and insufficient sleep were catching up with me. I

managed to retake my feet and continue the story.

I had met the Cullen coven in Forks when I moved there. I'd gotten suspicious of them, although I hastened to add that most people wouldn't have my resources in connecting the dots and no one else suspected a thing. They'd sort of adopted me into their family. There were plans in the works to turn me at the beginning of the summer, where I could be zipped away from home without arousing suspicion. Which, I mentioned again, the Cullens were very careful about. James's coven had run across us while we were out as a group. He, with his habit of hunting interesting and well-protected targets, had fixated on me, which the Cullens' talents had detected. I explained the plan of action, how they had set it into motion, and the point of failure. I mentioned that my father was a cop, and had the resources to make a fairly extensive and inconvenient network of people curious if anything happened to me that I wasn't around to explain. But I was clear that I definitely wanted to become a vampire as soon as I could do it without arousing curiosity. (It would have been smart if I'd gotten started turning on Sunday night when that could have saved me from James; now that I was under the Volturi's power, it would be no additional help. They could destroy vampires without much expenditure of effort, and it was entirely up to them whether I or James lived.)

I scrupulously avoided bringing up Victoria.

"Thank you, dear," said Aro, having listened with calm attention to my entire haphazardly arranged narration. "We will now discuss our decision," he announced, seeming to direct his voice particularly towards a small vampire who couldn't have been more than fourteen when he was turned. In fact, he looked like Jane's twin - only slightly darker blonde hair and thinner lips differentiated their faces, although the boy's range of expressions seemed to be more neutral. He neither beamed nor scowled.

The Volturi remained silent for a few moments, and I wondered if I was just unable to hear their voices as they reverted to their inaccessible pitches and speeds, but then I realized what they were waiting for. James's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell like a ragdoll to the floor. The fourteen-year-old immortal boy was gazing at the tracker with a cold steadiness that unnerved me.

Then the child's red eyes slid up to look at me. I stood trembling, but didn't experience whatever was causing James to lie limply on the stones. If the boy was exercising his power against me, I was immune to that one, too.

"Hmmm," Aro murmured. "It would seem that we cannot maintain our privacy in the typical manner. But, my lovely, you seem to be in some distress anyway. Perhaps you would prefer not to witness this when you could be sleeping."

Sleep. Sleep sounded good. I was still in my pajamas, an old t-shirt and soft flannel pants, from when James had taken me from my bed. Did vampires have beds? Maybe that receptionist, Gianna, lived in their compound and I could borrow hers... I nodded, wobbling again.

Aro inclined his head. "Oh," he said. "One question. What is it that happened to James's mate, Victoria?"

"Dead," I whispered. James was still on the floor, unresponsive, and didn't hear or couldn't react.

"Mm," sighed Aro. "Santiago, dear one, won't you see to our guest's needs?" He waved at me dismissively.

I started to fall again, but Santiago whooshed across the room to break my fall, and then I passed out entirely.

I woke up under a fluffy duvet, snuggled in a bed more comfortable than my own. The room had a small window at the very top of the wall, which let in enough light to tell me that it was daytime - although I didn't know what day, at this point - and show me the contents of the room. Apart from the bed, there was a spindly wooden chair, which held a change of clothes. Under the chair was a basket with a lid. There were two doors into the room: one was closed, and one was open enough to reveal the little bathroom.

On top of the outfit was a handwritten note. *Please help yourself to anything you need from the bathroom, and these clothes, and the food under the chair. When you're ready, Santiago is waiting outside for you. There is no danger and no hurry.* The note was signed "Gianna" - apparently she knew English. It was the most welcome piece of paper I'd ever seen in my life.

I took a long, hot shower. I brushed my teeth. I blew my hair dry. The shampoo and other items were all labeled in Italian, but I guessed by packaging and the odd linguistic cognate which things were what, and got gloriously, spectacularly clean. I felt more alive and lucid than I had in days.

Gianna had left me a blue t-shirt and a gray, swishy skirt. I was normally a pants sort of person, but Gianna was taller than me, and if these were her clothes, it made sense: the skirt would be more likely to fit than a pair of jeans. I put them on and checked myself out in the bathroom mirror. I looked basically normal. I could have been getting ready to go to school. School couldn't have seemed farther away.

I opened the basket under the chair. Little cellophane bags of snackfood, an apple, a dinner roll, a candy bar - easy, quick food that would have been fine at room temperature while I slept. I ate all of it, even the oversalted chips, and then put the apple core and other debris in the chip bag and discarded it in the bathroom's wastebasket.

I approached the other, closed door. Gianna had written that there was no danger. I didn't know for sure if that was true - but I'd been left to sleep, safely, given the chance to clean up and have breakfast. That didn't seem like the sort of treatment that would precede an execution without notice. I was, it seemed, actually witchy enough to hang onto my life. And related to an annoying enough profession to keep my heartbeat until a time of

my choosing.

I pushed open the door. Santiago, in her cowl, was indeed waiting outside the door. "Hello, Bella," she said. She was the first person to use my name since I'd arrived. I supposed Aro might have told her; he could have gotten it from James, who had heard me introduced. Still, it was a little surprising.

"Hello, Santiago," I said. "Uh... thank you for your help." Her eyes were still burgundy, although they deepened to black around the pupil - I was talking to a thirsty vampire murderess and I still felt stupidly, profoundly grateful for her presence. Aro was vaguely creepy; but Santiago had a professional demeanor that made her feel predictable and safe. I was not designated food, and therefore she would not eat me.

The Volturi were killers - but they were *lawful* killers. They could be bargained with, reasoned with. I'd made a good call in luring James to them.

"I'm to conduct you to the hall," Santiago told me.

"Okay," I said, and she turned without further explanation and led me through the maze that was the Volturi compound. Eventually, once I was starting to wonder if I didn't need to go back and sleep for a couple more hours after all, we reached the same round room full of vampires I'd been to before. "*La tua cantante!*" one of them was exclaiming as I entered - it sounded like Aro.

There were different vampires in the hall this time.

By the time I registered that I ought to look twice at the faces off to the left, I was already swept up in Edward's intense embrace. "Bella," he whispered in my ear, holding me to him so tightly I was challenged to draw breath. "Bella, Bella, my Bella, you're *alive...*"

"Did they tell you I wasn't?" I asked, winding my arms around him and leaning my head on his shoulder. "I'm fine. I had a bad day, or two, but I'm fine. How long have you been here?"

"Hours!" he growled. "They wouldn't let us see you..."

"I was sleeping. I really needed it. They could have let you in to check on me, though," I frowned.

"Ah, but Bella, my dear," said Aro. He was sitting on one of the chamber's thrones, hands folded, expression benign. "They might have disturbed your rest. And, of course, we had much to discuss. It has been too long since we have had a visit from our old friend Carlisle and his coven."

I looked over at the other Cullens who had arrived: Carlisle and Esme were there,

but not the remaining four. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting," I told Edward, looking up at him. "I didn't see any way to get in touch with you that wouldn't have been too dangerous until I finally got here, and then I basically told my story and passed out."

"Don't be sorry," he said, squeezing me tighter. "I am so glad you're safe. I can't believe I was so irresponsible -"

"Hey," I said. "It was my suggestion that you hunt, and if you hadn't, you might have died trying to fight James off. Nobody we like is dead. That is a good thing." I glanced at Aro. "Uh... What happened to James?"

Aro tilted his head. "You needn't worry about him anymore, dear Bella," he said smoothly.

"They didn't like his stunt with the newborns," Edward muttered in my ear. "And didn't think they could control him as a member of the guard - and they already have a better tracker."

I nodded faintly and leaned against Edward for comfort. There had been more deaths than I liked, even if I had no reason to care for James or his mate and hadn't known the baggage handler. Or the dog. "What happened to the newborns?" I asked in a soft voice.

Edward twined his fingers in my hair. "Two are dead," he said, voice full of regret. "The third was sufficiently under control that we're trying to bring him into the family, but it's going to be hard for him. He didn't have the warning you do. The others are at home now, supervising him. I don't think you knew any of them." He listed some names, none familiar - the one who was still breathing was named David. "They weren't able to kill anyone else," Edward assured me before I asked, "before my family got to them."

"Is it safe for me to be around David?" I asked. "If it's not..."

Edward winced. "I thought of that. We aren't sure what to do."

"Maybe you'd better turn me early," I sighed. "We'll think of some story..."

"On top of the story we're already trying to cook up to explain your disappearance?" Edward asked. "And the disappearances of the three legally dead? That's a lot of stories, Bella."

I frowned. "Right. It will smooth over better if I'm there in obvious good health, fit to be seen in public. Uh..." I wracked my brain. "Do the Denalis live in a more remote location? Would they take him?"

"It's a good idea, Bella," Edward soothed, cool fingers resting on the back of my neck. "We'll ask them. But I think it's time we got you home now."

"Okay." I relaxed into his embrace. I was tired of holding myself up. "Oh. There's one thing I'd like to do first - if it's okay." I glanced over at the Volturi, who had

witnessed our entire conversation with expressions ranging from mild curiosity to bemusement to morbid fascination. (I became more convinced that most vampires did not first meet their mates as humans. I wouldn't have been such an interesting sight otherwise.) "I want to talk to Gianna, and thank her." *And figure out what in the hell she's doing here*, I didn't add.

"Of course. Santiago," said Aro with a small, flicking gesture. Santiago bowed again, turned, and led me, Edward, Carlisle, and Esme into the maze.

"Did you meet Gianna?" I asked Edward in a low voice. To let me walk, he'd released me from his hug, but we were holding hands.

"I noticed her. We weren't formally introduced," he murmured. "What are you thanking her for?"

"She left me these clothes, and some food, and I think I was sleeping in her bed - I don't know why else there would be a bed in here, unless there are other humans involved."

"Just her," he said.

Santiago showed us to the room I'd slept in. Gianna was inside, changing the sheets. I motioned for Edward and his parents to hang back while I went in; Santiago swooshed away up the hall without prompting, apparently expecting us to be able to find our own way out when we were done.

"Gianna?" I said. I wasn't sure if her spoken English was as good as her writing.

"Hello, Bella," she said, turning a pleasant smile on me. "I've put your clothes in the wash, but they aren't done yet. Do you want me to send them to you in America?" She had an accent, but it was faint and pleasant, and didn't make her hard to understand at all. She chose words quickly and confidently, so I assumed she'd been working with English for some time, even if it wasn't her native language.

"No, thank you," I said. "Uh, do you want me to send you these?" I tugged at the skirt, which swished around my ankles.

"They're yours," she said, patting my arm. "I hope I found you enough food. I usually eat out, and only had a few snacks around."

"It was perfect, I came to thank you," I said. "Thank you, for the food, and the note, and the clothes, and the bed - it was just what I needed to wake up to after the trip I had."

"It was no trouble at all," she assured me.

"Is this - uh, looking after human visitors - what you mostly do here?" I asked. It felt like an intrusive question, only a hair more polite than "What the hell are the Volturi

doing breaking their own laws by having you around?"

"No, guests like you are very rare," she said, not looking offended at all. "I'm the human representative when the Volturi need to send someone into a context where one of their guard would be too noticeable - anything outdoors in the daylight, where they can't go cloaked. I handle the laundry. When I'm not doing that, I sit at the reception desk - you saw - but there aren't many receptionist tasks to do. It's light work." She tossed her hair with a cheerful smile.

"How do you even get a job like this?" I asked. "They can't advertise in the classifieds, Wanted: Representative/Laundress/Secretary for Vampire Ruling Coven, and get serious answers..."

"They don't," she laughed. "I believed all the legends, when I was a little girl. They tell a lot of vampire stories in this town. I never quite stopped thinking they were true. And one day I decided to go searching for them. I found what I was looking for." Her smile was genuine, but closed, somehow. She didn't want me to ask too many questions about that. She didn't want to tell me what would make her go on a vampire hunt. She didn't want to share the story of how she'd convinced them to hire her and not kill her.

I nodded slowly. "I need to go home," I said, "my father's probably absolutely frantic - but I just wanted to thank you. Um, if you have an e-mail address or a phone number... We're probably the only two humans in the world who hang out with vampires all the time," I offered, as a rather pathetic excuse to keep in touch with her. I was mostly curious - and a little afraid for her life. She hadn't been eaten so far; she certainly might be later, if the Volturi tired of her. "We should talk more."

Gianna had a tiny notebook in the pocket of her leaf-patterned skirt. Clearly, a woman after my own heart. She wrote down an e-mail address on it, and a phone number complete with country code, then handed me the detached page. "I can't always answer the phone," she said. "I keep irregular hours and I sometimes have business unexpectedly. I get to a computer every three or four days. But I'd like to hear from you, Bella."

I smiled at her. "Well, thanks again. Um, bye." And then I turned to go back to Edward.

"Bye, Bella," called Gianna.

Edward put his arm around my shoulders after I'd pocketed Gianna's contact information, and the two of us, followed by Carlisle and Esme, made our way out of the compound.

Once we were out of doors, and in the car the Cullens had rented to get around Volterra (with a sufficiency of window tint to let them be unobtrusive), Edward handed me a phone. "Come up with a better story if you've got one, but here's our idea," he said. "The illness you were faking sometimes causes sleepwalking and erratic circadian rhythms. You wandered onto the bed of someone's pickup truck, curled up there, and

were driven all the way to California without waking up or being noticed, since you pulled a tarp over yourself to keep warm. When you woke up in a parking lot all alone, you found a gas station, borrowed quarters, and called me right away because you were embarrassed at the prospect of asking Charlie for taxi money. Carlisle was in town for a medical conference and I told you so, and sent him to pick you up. You just met up with him and you'll be home in twelve hours. You are also over your disease now."

It was a convoluted, ridiculous story, but I didn't have any other way to explain why I'd disappeared from my bed, been gone for two days without contacting my parents, and was about to return safe and sound. I dutifully took the phone, dialed home, and recited the lies to Charlie. He seemed incredulous, but I put Carlisle on the phone, who confirmed it all (including the humbug about sleepwalking) with such a serious and honest tone that I was half-inclined to believe him myself. I took the phone back and told Charlie that, no, I didn't have the license number of the pickup truck. He uttered a few fussing, fretting sentences, but wasn't in a position to actually do anything. Finally, he let me off the phone with a gruff, "I love you, Bells."

"I love you, too, Dad," I told the phone. "I'll see you soon." And then I flipped it closed. "I wish I could tell him everything," I sighed, putting my head on Edward's lap. The no-seatbelts precaution made it a lot easier to move around freely in the car.

Edward stroked my hair and said nothing.

The way Cullens got onto airplanes was this: accepting pat-downs after they made the scanning machines go absolutely haywire, complaining vaguely of having "weird bioelectricity". When that didn't quite work, outright bribery in large denominations. And, apparently, flirting with the security officers. Esme made awfully compelling doe-eyes at one portly fellow, accompanied by a flutter of Italian. He stammered at her a little and waved her through, then looked hurt when she joined an indulgent Carlisle and kissed him.

I was much easier to get through security: Edward had found my passport in my room before leaving for Italy and the security equipment didn't so much as blink a light at my passage. And the plane rides, spent in first class and in Edward's arms, were much more pleasant than my other recent experiences with aircraft. Particularly since I was welcome to any food I wanted from what the Cullens received, and therefore had not one, but four miniature cheesecakes. There was, however, a tense moment when I described for him the tests Aro had undertaken of my witchcraft.

"He told *Jane* to try -" sputtered Edward, looking angrier than I'd ever seen him except when he'd been roaring at James.

"It didn't work," I hurried to say. "Nothing happened. She looked really upset about it. Why, what does she do?"

Edward's teeth were clenched so tightly I thought he might split a molar. Carlisle explained for him. "Jane's talent is a sadistic one," he said in a soft voice that carried to my seat and no farther. "She can cause pain. A purely mental pain, but a disabling one. She is limited to one subject at a time, and is restricted to victims in her line of sight, but she's feared nonetheless. You are very lucky to have proven immune."

"Oh," I breathed. Lucky indeed. I loved my witchy talent very much. "Uh, and the boy who looks like her - I didn't get his name? He doesn't work on me either," I said.

"Alec," said Edward, finally relaxing his jaw enough to talk. "He is Jane's biological twin. And his power is the opposite of hers in many ways. He's anaesthetic where she is torture - he turns off all senses, even proprioception. He can affect several at a time and doesn't need to look at all of his targets, but his power moves slowly."

That was consistent with what I'd seen. "James fell over when Alec looked at him," I remembered. "I guess it's hard to stand up if you can't feel where your legs are." Edward nodded with a sort of grim satisfaction.

"What does 'la tua cantante' mean?" I asked him, changing the subject from what grotesque powers I was protected from.

"It means 'your singer'," Edward said. "That's what the Volturi call someone who smells the way you do to me - they think of it as your blood singing for me."

"That's kind of gross," I remarked.

"A little," laughed Edward. "They think it's a waste that I haven't eaten you. They consider singers the ultimate delicacy. And Aro said he'd never have believed there was a singer so powerful if he hadn't smelled you in my memories."

"He read you." My stomach turned a little. I didn't like the idea of Aro spying on Edward... or me, through Edward's eyes. I'd been careful not to drop hints of my plans for world domination, but I wasn't too pleased with the notion that Aro now had a full complement of memories of Edward kissing me, Edward leaving me gifts, Edward carrying me through the woods, Edward guarding me for days at a stretch. I hadn't liked Aro before; now I liked him less.

Edward nodded, looking somber but not nauseated. "It's his standard means of communication for anything complicated. Marcus rarely speaks at all, preferring to simply transmit to Aro and let him do the talking."

"I'm glad my mind is safe," I murmured. "I wish yours were."

Edward kissed the crown of my head. "I'll admit it chafes at me a bit that *I* can't read you," he said. "But I'm glad you prefer it that way, since it doesn't seem there's any way around it."

"It's good there's no way around it," I said. "If there were, then Aro could decide to

coerce me into dropping the shield. Since I can't drop the shield, he knows there's no point in threatening me or anything - it won't do any good. It's to my advantage not to be able to turn it off. Even if I wanted to let *you* in, just having that ability would be bad."

Edward looked thoughtful. The conversation lulled, and then turned to other subjects: the Denali coven and speculations about how they would get on with David; whether Laurent was still with them and how, if at all, the news of his coven-mates' destruction could be broken; James's knowledge of Alice's origins, and the development of a plan to send her to the region where she'd woken, to search for herself in asylum records. (I didn't like to think of Alice locked up in a psychiatric hospital, especially not in the early nineteen hundreds. She was so bubbly, and seemed to take so much joy in things, that it seemed unreasonably cruel. And, on top of that, her visions were *true* - or, at least, were in her vampire life. I supposed they could have been hallucinatory when she was human.)

Norway

After entirely too much travel, I arrived back home in Forks, alone in a car with Carlisle. Esme and Edward had gotten out and were running home to prop up my preposterous story, although Edward had promised to come by and see me soon.

When I got in the door of my house, it was almost ten p.m. (Friday) local time, and I was even about the right amount of tired. Charlie was waiting up for me, and engulfed me in a tremendous hug when I lurched through the door. "Bells, you're home! I missed you."

"I missed you, too, Dad," I said with a watery sort of smile.

"I called your mother," Charlie went on, and I winced; "she's expecting you to get on the phone with her tomorrow, but I convinced her to leave you be tonight."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Why didn't Dr. Cullen warn us that you'd sleepwalk ahead of time?" he asked, looking over my head at Carlisle, who was sitting in his car in the driveway. Carlisle waved, smiled, and drove off, having confirmed that I was safely home.

"Uh, it's a really rare symptom," I said. "I guess he didn't think it was worth worrying us about."

"Hmph," Charlie said. "Well, I'm glad you're better. You've looked under the weather for weeks."

I hadn't thought Charlie had noticed - Rosalie's drug schedule, and the fortunately-complete-before-I-was-kidnapped egg extraction surgery, had left me a little less than my best, but no one had commented. Well, Edward had commented, mostly to see if there was anything he could do for me, but he knew what was going on - no humans had said anything about it.

"I feel fine now," I assured him. "Just kind of tired - lots of travel."

Charlie nodded, patted me on the head, and released me from the hug. "Get a good night's sleep, Bells," he instructed, and I nodded.

When I got up to my room, Edward was already there.

"Your father would have turned me away if I'd gone by the door," Edward explained. "But I did say I'd drop by."

"Soon, you said, not immediately," I laughed softly, not wanting to alert Charlie to the fact that I was having a conversation.

"Immediately is soon," he countered, pulling me into another hug. He smelled so

nice. All of the vampires did, although there were variations - Esme reminded me of vanilla, for instance. I leaned on him sleepily and inhaled.

"I'm tired," I announced.

"All right," he said, kissing my forehead. "I'll leave you be to rest; James isn't after you anymore, thankfully, so you don't need constant supervision."

"You could stay anyway," I suggested, half conscious, and then Edward tucked me into bed and I was out like a light.

I woke up still in the clothes Gianna had given me. Edward was lying next to me, on top of the covers that I was tucked under; I could feel his arm around me. Through the blanket, I could barely tell that he was cold.

"Morning," I yawned, burrowing my head a little deeper into the pillow. It was Saturday, nobody was trying to kill me, and I could lounge in bed all day if I wanted to.

Interestingly, my exciting week didn't prevent life from going back to normal. Or rather, what had become normal in recent months. After Emmett and Jasper went on a road trip to truck David up to Denali, I was able to resume my visits to the Cullen house. Alice decided that she needed to plan my wedding - "after all," she explained, "even if you decide not to actually get married when you tell everyone you are, you'll have to send home convincing photos, so that means decorations and cake and clothes!" She had a point, and I turned over the responsibility over to her after securing veto power over anything I found absolutely tasteless.

Gianna took ten days to reply to my first e-mail, which I sent the Monday after my return. It had been a brief thing - "I'm home safe, how are you, thanks again for the clothes, what's up in Volterra". I was fishing for tidbits with which to start some more substantial exchange, and from there I hoped to segue into asking the questions that really itched at me.

Dear Bella, her reply began. Apparently she was in the habit of treating e-mails like letters.

I'm glad you got home okay, and I hope everything continues to go smoothly for you. I'm doing fine. Today I finally found out why Santiago goes by a man's name - it's not her name at all, it's the city she's from. She didn't tell me her real name, though, and I try not to ask too many questions in a row, because it makes them suspicious. Maybe I'll find out the next time I talk to her. But she seems to prefer to go by "Santiago", so I'm not sure how useful that would be. I have heard that Carlisle, from your coven, lived with the Volturi long ago. Perhaps he knows. Sincerely, Gianna"

This read to me like either an out-of-place bit of dwelling on Santiago's name - I hadn't even known it wasn't a girls' name - or a subtle direction to go to Carlisle, not

Gianna, for info on the Volturi. That was all well as far as it went. (And it might also mean they were reading her mail.) But Carlisle had lived in Volterra before Gianna had even been born, and it was her I was most interested in learning about.

Dear Gianna, I wrote a few days later, following the convention she preferred. I asked Carlisle and he says Santiago is a more recent addition to the guard, so he doesn't know her name. During the entire time he was there, in fact, no one new arrived. So he only knows a few things about how they normally bring in new people. Apparently they go out of their way to add witches, or rather vampires with extra talents, but not everyone in the guard has one. How do people without extra talents get admitted to the guard?
Sincerely, Bella

We went back and forth at a snail's pace - short, oblique e-mails every week or two. It was frustrating. I eventually gave up on figuring out the details of how Gianna had come to work for the Volturi or whether she expected to join them one day. I settled for newsy personal exchanges. We both stuck to innocuous information that her bosses wouldn't care about: I never told her if Jasper came close to slipping up in public or anything about Quileutes. Gianna would mention if she traveled internationally, but never specified city and only sometimes told me the country. She often told me in glowing terms about her favorite restaurants in Volterra, which was the very safest of topics and was frequently mouthwatering to read.

Edward offered me once to tell me what he'd read off Gianna's mind when he'd been nearby. I asked how much he'd listened to, and it wasn't much - enough to answer a fraction of my questions but not all of them. He hadn't heard enough to know whether Gianna had a good reason to be cagey, and that was the part that made me refuse. I had no idea how often Aro read her, or how little it would take to turn her into a snack. If the Volturi were reading the correspondence, and I accidentally hinted something I'd learned from Edward, they could think she'd spilled the beans some other way. Refusing information was *hard*, but it was the sort of thing I'd need to be able to do if I was going to spend any time with Edward.

The school year plodded on. Despite my weeklong absence and increasing restlessness about the unstimulating work, I went on pulling good grades. I was able to contain the story about my departure via pickup truck - among my classmates and teachers the blanket explanation for the entire five days was "Bella was sick".

Edward and I continued brandishing our relationship at anyone who wandered past. If anything, we had gotten more over-the-top. I started talking about rings - in the abstract - with Jessica, and by the following afternoon, the rumor was that Edward had already proposed.

He hadn't. In fact, ostentatious couplehood aside, nothing had changed except that Edward had started staying overnight most days - lying awake next to me and listening to me (apparently) talk in my sleep. I made him tell me what I'd said, every morning after

the one on which he informed me I'd been mumbling. It was usually names, Cullens and family members and classmates. Sometimes it was incomprehensible fragments like "don't the cake" or "prawns, where the rainbow is".

When his nighttime visits had been the only change by the end of April, I was pretty sure he was disobeying Alice: he wasn't going *slow*, because he wasn't *going* at all.

We had been dating for *months* and he still hadn't told me he loved me.

I knew perfectly well that he *did*. That was the thing - I'd have been in a far different sort of situation if Edward hadn't fallen for me.

I'd been informed that the Denali sisters brought random human men into their beds all the time (previously to eat them in the style of the praying mantis, lately just to have fun and send them home alive, albeit bruised). They didn't rearrange their lives around those men, because they didn't love them. But when Laurent had shown up, he and one of the sisters, Irina, had been magnetically drawn to each other, and then no more soft and warm boys for her - a rather significant lifestyle change for one of the inspirations of succubus myth. If I'd just looked like a good time, while also being Edward's "singer", he'd have left town. It wouldn't have been worth the risk of my exsanguination (and the ensuing investigation into my death).

And even if that hadn't been the case, Edward was *really obvious*. The way he looked at me just *screamed* that he loved me. The way he touched me, the presents, the way he zipped about making sure that everything I wanted was in place whenever I expressed preferences - everything. It was the plainly missing piece every time he spoke to me.

And he wouldn't say it.

The traditional way to elicit a profession of love was to offer one oneself. I was sure that would get him to reply in kind. But I wasn't sure it was true. I suspected it... but didn't know how to be sure.

I was tempted to just wait another month, get turned, and then have a magical guarantee that I wouldn't be lying. But it didn't *just* bother me that it had gone unsaid - it bothered me that there was something this significant that I didn't know about myself.

I didn't want to be witnessed at this particular exercise, so I found a thick quilt to cover me and the laptop. I picked a Tuesday afternoon when Jessica had canceled our study plans, and so Edward didn't expect to monopolize me. I ensconced myself in my room and typed.

I put my thoughts right after the long, thorough diary entry I'd made about the days I'd spent in James's control. (Unpleasant as it had been, I didn't want to forget about it entirely when my human memories were occluded by newer, sharper vampire ones: therefore it had to be written down, where I could read it later and retrieve everything

about the description with perfect fidelity.)

Thinking about whether I loved Edward was unfamiliar and difficult. It was like I was wading through mud. Laboriously, I typed. I certainly at least *liked* Edward. I enjoyed his company - he went to considerable lengths to make sure that I would - and I was attracted to him. I didn't know how that added up to love, if it did, or if there was something else that was supposed to be involved. Was there anyone I could *ask*?

The vampires were all out. They were all cases of love at first sight or close to it (beforehand, for Alice), which I definitely *hadn't* experienced. Their recognition of the state wasn't likely to be informative to me. I didn't really want to have a conversation with either of my parents that would throw my planned elopement into doubt, and their marriage had ended in divorce anyway (although things seemed to be working out for Renée and Phil so far).

I wondered if any of my human friends from school would be useful. Jessica and Mike were still together, but they had a fractious and not particularly intellectual relationship. Being Jessica's boyfriend meant being Jessica's status symbol and her designated source of makeouts and free dinners, and not much else. Angela *had* eventually gotten together with the object of her affections, a boy named Ben. Their relationship seemed more like mine than Jessica and Mike's. Angela and Ben were content together, and did small things to make each other happy, and seemed secure in their mutual affection.

The "secure" bit seemed important. That was possibly the thing I liked most about Edward - he was *safe* in the way no one else ever could be. He couldn't get sick of me. He couldn't cheat. He couldn't hurt me - well, accidents were possible, but only accidents. He couldn't even *want* to do any of those things. He'd protect me with his life, if that was what it took; he was resisting temptation I couldn't even comprehend in order to be near me, and he did it perfectly every time.

Being with Edward was peculiar in many ways, simply because he was a vampire, but in a sense, it was uncomplicated.

After I'd gotten this far I started feeling vaguely uncomfortable about picking the subject apart by myself. It seemed like it might be Edward's business, how I felt about him, and it was uncommonly challenging to plow through this mess - someone to talk to might help.

I poked at my keyboard for a few minutes more, disconsolate about my inability to sort things out myself. I wished I'd dated more - well, at all - in Phoenix, so I could say, "Oh, this is *different*, these feelings are stronger/dissimilar, they're more intrusive/altruistic/abstract/frequent/full of sex/*whatever*, aha, perhaps I am now in love." No such luck. I'd spent my time single. I'd focused on the more diverting schoolwork offered by AP classes, the endless rotation of Renée's new obsessions, and books. Even the romance novels were unhelpful: the characters didn't act like any real human beings I'd met at all, and if I wasn't prone to comparable dramatic exhalations about my

uncontrollable ardor, it didn't mean anything except that I wasn't meant to be watercolored on the cover of a mass market paperback containing borderline porn.

The prospect of talking to Edward about whether I was in love with him or not sounded extremely awkward. It would probably hurt him, I'd probably trip over my tongue a lot, and it might not even lead me to a definite conclusion. I could just put it off, just a bit longer.

But Edward was, above all things, *safe* to talk to. That wasn't true of anyone else, and I wasn't getting very far on my own -

And I wanted to hear him say it.

I did my homework, reassessed my intentions for another minute, and then called Edward. He agreed to come over as soon as I told him Jessica had canceled and asked if he'd like to. Minutes later, he was at the door, buttering up Charlie with gentlemanly formality and then slipping upstairs to me.

As soon as he crossed into my room, his arms were around me and his lips planted on my forehead. "Hello, Bella," he said, drawing his face back an inch to look me in the eye.

"Hi, Edward," I said, simultaneously soothed to see him and anxious about having the conversation I was about to prompt.

He noticed, of course. "Bella, what's wrong?" He pulled me to sit next to him on my bed, one arm around me and the other holding my hand.

I dropped my head onto his shoulder. I decided to start with him instead of myself, my motivations somewhere between wanting to work up to it and wanting to simply put it off. "Do you love me?" I asked.

"Yes," he said at once, in a low murmur.

"You never say it."

"I didn't want to push you," Edward sighed. "You'll let me hold you, you'll let me spend more time with you than I would have dared to ask for - I don't want to do anything that would jeopardize that. It's already so much more than I deserve."

I picked my head up and stared at him. He met my gaze calmly. Did he really think that? That I was "letting" him be near me? That my permission was a fragile thing he had to tiptoe around? How could he think that?

"Edward, I love you," I said, and I knew as I said it that it was true.

There was a silent moment, and then Edward was kissing me, and I had just enough time to think *oh, I guess we can do that after all* before my brain shut up and let me enjoy

myself.

Kissing Edward was a lot like everything else about being with Edward - sweet and easy. I had no idea how to be any good at kissing, but there wasn't any need for me to be. It just worked. The conflict between kissing and breathing meant I eventually had to pull back to inhale another lungful of lilac-scented air. Then I kissed him again. On my second attempt I discovered the useful habit of breathing through my nose.

He was still cold, but this reminded me more of ice cream than anything unpleasant. In one way, it was good that it hadn't come up that this activity was safe until April. The weather was warming up a little, leaving me comfortable even snuggled up to my vampire boyfriend as long as I had a hoodie on.

"You know," I said after a break several minutes later, "I'd been under the impression that there would be some venom-related issue. I should have *asked*, I suppose."

"Really?" he asked. "How long ago could this have happened if I'd mentioned that it was safe? Although it would be a bad idea for you to open your mouth," he acknowledged, furrowing his brow. "In case you had a cut or something."

"Months ago," I told him, and he looked at me incredulously and then kissed me again. A few minutes later, I said, "So as long as I'm kicking myself for not asking about *this*... Alice implied once that it would probably not be safe while I'm human to..." I made a vague gesture.

"She implied correctly," said Edward, making another one of those complicated faces. Impatience? Sorrow? Frustration? It was hard to disentangle.

"But Emmett makes enough lewd remarks that I surmise that *afterwards*..." I trailed off.

Edward nodded again, smiling slightly. "Emmett and Rosalie were very hard to be around for the first decade after he joined us," he said, wrinkling his nose. "I couldn't stand to be within five miles of them. Esme and Carlisle kicked them out - nicely, of course. Esme built them a house."

I giggled. I couldn't help it. "I'm going to *love* being a vampire," I predicted ecstatically, and then I kissed Edward.

April ended, and May began. School wouldn't end until mid-June. I decided to ask Charlie's permission well in advance to go on the tour of Europe with the Cullens, to give him more time to get used to the idea. I didn't think he'd refuse, and he didn't, although he made me swear up and down to keep in regular phone contact. I agreed readily. There was

no good reason to cut off my family just because I was going to turn into a vampire.

Plans for the trip came together. We were, in fact, going to start in Scandinavia - Norway, to be specific. The Cullens just up and bought a house there - a big fixer-upper for Esme to play with in the middle of nowhere, where I'd be unlikely to run into any unsuspecting humans by accident while new. Houses in poor repair weren't that much of a problem for vampires who didn't get splinters, urgently need working plumbing, require creak-free places to sleep, or require electricity to see in the dark or maintain a kitchen.

Plans for my transformation, also, took form. Edward and Carlisle discussed, with very serious expressions on their faces, whether it would be a better idea to induce coma or just flood me with morphine before injecting venom. (Edward was already collecting it. I vaguely liked the idea of it being him who changed me, even with a syringe acting as intermediary.) Coma was eventually settled on, although they didn't know how much of the process I could sleep through with the transformation eating up the intrusive barbituates.

Emmett wanted to tell me his story before I changed - it was his opinion that my change would resemble his more than anyone else's. He had, after all, been found and loved by Rosalie before she'd brought him to Carlisle - and she'd been there when he'd turned.

He'd been mauled by a bear, that I knew. When he had started to lose hold on consciousness, he'd heard what he'd thought was another animal, fighting with the original bear over his carcass. It was Rosalie, of course, making short work of the creature and picking up Emmett to rush him home with her. He'd felt like he was flying, and managed to open his eyes - and then fought to keep them there, transfixed by Rosalie's face.

He'd thought she was an angel, had been confused when she didn't take off into the air - "And then she brought me to God," he related, laughing. This impression of Carlisle (reasonable, I supposed, given that Emmett had lost a *lot* of blood, and had already taken Rosalie for an angel) led him to believe, when the transformation was underway, that he had been sent to Hell. But, he said, Hell wasn't so bad because his "angel" stayed with him - every time "God" came to see how he was progressing, Emmett had feared she'd be taken away, but she never was. In spite of the sensation of hellfire, he considered his fate merciful overall. And reacted, when it was over, surprisingly well to the whole "now you're a vampire" situation. Although (he chortled, somewhat inappropriately) he had some trouble adjusting to the Cullens' lifestyle.

When Emmett had finished telling me his story, I thanked him, and went straight to Edward. "When I'm turning," I said, "will you stay with me?"

"Yes," he said. He didn't hesitate, but it sounded like it was difficult for him to say the word.

I winced. "I know I'll probably be awful to be around, once I come out of the coma,

screaming and crying and everything, but... it sounded like it helped Emmett."

Edward nodded, and pulled me into a snug embrace, which I leaned into gratefully. "I'll stay with you," he promised.

"And Rosalie said she could hear what you and Carlisle were saying to her, during..."

"I'll talk to you," he said, understanding what I meant. "It might help keep you distracted."

"And if it feels like fire..." I said, putting a hand against his cheek. "You're pretty chilly," I pointed out, feeling sheepish. "Has it been tried? Keeping turning people cold?"

"We haven't tried that, no," he said slowly. "It's not actually heat, you know, only the impression of it."

"Could it hurt to try? I'm sorry, I'm sure this is going to be as awful for you as it will be for me, but..."

Edward shook his head. "I'll hold you while it happens," he murmured, lacing his fingers through my hair.

May ended, and June began.

The school year began wrapping up. Final exam study guides were distributed. Yearbooks were sold. Summer plans were discussed with animated expressions of jealousy or sympathy, depending. My advertised trip to Europe with the Cullens elicited such dire looks of envy that I considered telling everyone that I also expected to spend three days being tortured by burning vampire venom. But of course that was a strict secret.

I told Gianna, though. Part of me hoped the Volturi *were* reading her mail and would be reassured that the date was set and I wouldn't go much longer as a human-in-the-know. I didn't tell her the address of the place in Norway, but I did mention that we'd be "just a bit north" of her and mentioned that my first meal was probably going to be moose.

Final exams marched by. End-of-year parties were held, and Edward and I showed up to some of them. Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper, all in senior year while Alice and Edward were juniors like me, graduated. We went to watch them, and I wondered how many times each had worn similar caps and gowns, listened to similar valedictorian speeches, walked across similar stages. I asked Rosalie, later, and she said, "Me? Ugh, too many times."

"Why do you keep going to high school? College would be more interesting,

wouldn't it?" I inquired.

"It is. Had a bit of a problem with somebody actually *calling* my imaginary high school alma mater once, though, so now I just sit through a year or two of this," she gestured in the direction of the school building, "and go with a partially real transcript."

Saying goodbye to Charlie was difficult, but familiar. I'd left him for long periods of time after comparatively short visits every summer I could remember - it was just usually fall, not summer, when I did it. This time, I knew something he didn't: that I might not see him in person again for years - if ever.

I hugged him an extra time. It was all I could do.

The Cullens put cloths over everything in their house and garage, protecting it from dust, and then loaded three rental cars with bags and cases and boxes. I asked how many houses, full of furniture and hard-to-transport possessions, they had scattered around the world.

"If you leave out the ones that we're renting out, and include the one in Norway," said Edward, "twelve."

I whistled. He laughed and kissed me. We were sharing a car with Alice; Carlisle and Esme were in another, and Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie shared the last. (I suspected that Jasper was not in our car because it would be challenging to share such an enclosed space with me for that long. Soon, there would be no such problem.)

We arrived at the airport, slipped through airport security with minimized suspicion, boarded our airplane - first class again - and flew to Norway. Our flight itinerary had several hops, finally ending in the Bergen Airport. All of the Cullens had learned Norwegian for the occasion to interact with airport personnel, although Alice informed me that their accents were terrible for the time being, having been learned only from books and limited recordings. I stayed silent and let them speak for me. There would be plenty of opportunity to learn the language far more efficiently later.

The house was a big wooden thing. Esme looked like she was in love with it as soon as we drove up in the rentals we'd gotten in the city. (Rosalie planned to go shopping for cars later on, but rentals were faster to obtain compared to the nice sorts of cars the Cullens liked.)

While Carlisle prepped a place for me to do my turning and unpacked the necessary equipment to render me comatose, Edward scooped me up and ran me out to the coastline nearby so I could have a look at the view.

The fjords were beautiful.

When Edward got Carlisle's mental message that everything was set up, he murmured in my ear, "Whenever you're ready, Bella."

Was I ready? I leaned on Edward and thought about it. I was pretty sure *being* a vampire would be excellent. I was afraid of the process.

Three days, minus the duration of the coma.

"There's no way to stop it once it's started, right?" I asked. If I could commit, now, to sticking it out, if I'd come through it whether I liked or not, whole and psychologically intact... that was fine. If there was some chance that I could beg and plead until Edward couldn't stand it anymore and undid the progress, then it would be for nothing.

"No," he told me. "Bella, you can back out now, if you want. I promise I won't let anyone resent you for it. It's entirely up to you. If you want to wait, or change your mind, we can really just go on a tour of Europe with your heart still beating. You don't have to do this."

"I *want* to be a vampire," I said. "I'm just not... totally unmoved by the steps I have to take to get there."

He kissed my hairline. "You don't have to do it," he repeated.

"I'm going to," I said firmly. And then, with less confidence - "You'll stay."

"I'll stay," he promised. I looked into his eyes. He would stay, because I'd need him, even though every time I so much as flinched it would hurt him too.

I knew I had recently been uncertain, because I'd written it down, but *how* had I not known I'd loved him?

"I'm ready, then," I said, "as I'll ever be."

Edward picked me up, held me tight, and brought me back to the house. I ate a square of chocolate - the last time any human food would taste good to me. I let it dissolve on my tongue slowly, and then I went to the room Carlisle had selected as the site of the transformation.

I kept my eyes closed throughout the entire procedure while Carlisle drugged me into unconsciousness. I knew that once I fell asleep, Edward would plunge a vial of venom into my heart, and more into major pulse points - the more venom there was, the faster the change would be over with. I slipped away into darkness.

I awoke in flames.

Newborn

The pain was *nonsensical*. For the first moment of consciousness, my brain examined the sensation and rejected it as obviously preposterous: it was not the sort of thing that happened. There could not *be* that much agony all in one instant. My nerves were obviously sending defective reports which could be safely ignored.

But the fire was more persistent than that, and apart from the first split second, I was very aware of what was happening.

It was everywhere - there was no refuge, no cool place to focus my attention and escape. My eyes were cooking in their own fluids, my blood was boiling in my veins, my skin was baking and browning and turning to ash, my bones were dissolving in acid, my lungs were turning every shallow breath I compulsively swallowed into superheated plasma, my organs were twisting and roiling in a bath of magma.

I tried to jerk my body away. It was purely a reflex action - there *was* no "away" - but I was in no condition to fight the impulse. Dimly, I recognized that I hadn't moved. My muscles worked. Even in their screaming, melting contribution to my anguish, they would tense and release when commanded. I could twitch my fingers, but not flail myself across the room in a vain attempt to escape the burn.

Edward.

He was holding me, as he'd promised - keeping me still. He'd been right after all - the coolness might as well have not been there. There were no bands of reduced scorching where his arms wrapped around my body. But I knew he was with me.

The pain didn't diminish at all. It would have more than consumed the brainpower I'd had available - before. But the change was well underway, and there was more room in my head...

There was just a little corner of space left, somewhere in the back of my mind, that I could use to think.

"*Time*," I demanded, biting out one syllable before clamping my jaw shut again, and hoping he knew what it meant.

"You slept through the first thirty hours and fifteen minutes," he whispered in my ear at once. I focused every bit of attention I could on his voice. I wasn't sure if I was hallucinating or not when I thought I could hear more nuance to it - were my ears already improved? They were part of the conflagration with everything else. Ear-shaped furnaces on either side of my head. They could pick up sound anyway - and his voice was tense, miserable, but committed. He hated that I was in pain. That I was awake to hear what he said. But he *would* stay. "It's a quarter after four in the morning. Thursday. It should all be over at ten p.m. tomorrow if you're on time - you might be faster with all the venom in

your system." He spoke through gritted teeth.

Tomorrow. Over tomorrow.

But not yet.

I burned.

It took almost a full hour after my awakening before I truly wanted to die.

This desire was almost as alien as the pain had been. (Now the pain was familiar, which meant only that I could individually dread each of the thousands of minutes that remained of my torment.) I had never previously wanted death, my flippant remarks to Edward about what he'd do if I begged to die notwithstanding.

But nothing was worth this. I couldn't do anything in a millenium that would be worth another hour, even if it would then end. I couldn't do anything with the rest of eternity that would be worth the dozens that actually remained.

At five o'clock in the morning on Thursday, I hoped with every fiber of my wracked and broiling being that he had lied when he'd said he wouldn't kill me, even if I begged.

I begged.

Choking on the words, hating the air that I formed into pleas, I asked to be killed.

"No," said Edward, sounding like he was in as much pain as I. Impossible. "Bella, no. It will be over soon. Tomorrow."

I hissed. Somewhere along the line I'd acquired vampire sounds, or at least that one. "*Please*," I screamed.

"No." I thought I heard him moving; maybe he was hugging me tighter. I couldn't tell. Everything was fire and agony; nothing as trivial as Edward holding me was worth sending a message through my fried and shattered nerves. I didn't want him to hug me unless he was doing it to crush me to bits, to end it, to make it *stop*...

I emitted a wordless wail.

Time passed. I begged for death, intermittently, but Edward always refused. Sometimes his denials were weaker or tireder than others, less resolved, and then I thrashed and cried and sobbed. Maybe if I hurt him enough with my pain he'd want me to stop, want to let me have the only thing I could remember ever wanting.

There was no such mercy. He didn't wrench my head free of my shoulders, didn't plunge his hand past my ribs to remove my inflamed, still-beating heart. He wouldn't kill

me.

After a few fruitless tries to convince Edward to salve my pain, I started calling for others. Alice, Carlisle, Esme, Jasper, Emmett, Rosalie. I could hear footsteps when they came. I heard each of them say no. Alice added a reassuring description of myself in the future, whole and strong and a vampire. "You're going to be beautiful," she promised before she left. Edward sighed in relief, when she said it. Some pretty vision. Not pretty enough to be worth this.

But when I called Rosalie, she hesitated for just a moment after I asked.

Edward *roared*. Had he been that terrifying when he'd snarled at James? It might simply have been my hearing, more powerful with each passing minute of conflagration, picking up some layer to the sound I'd missed before. But I knew what it meant. *She'd thought about it*. She'd considered killing me. Emmett's blessed angel, truly, perhaps to deliver me -

"Rose!" I screeched, seized with hope, convulsing in Edward's grip. "Rose Rose Rose Rose Rose Rose -"

"NO!" howled Edward. "Rosalie, get out of this room. I'll tear you to pieces if I hear that thought ever again, I'll do it - *go*."

"*Rooooooooooooose*," I moaned. But her swift steps were receding. I thought I might have heard her leap out of a window.

"Bella," said Edward. He was speaking very fast - I could keep up now, though it took most of my spare mental capacity. "Bella, please don't ask any more. I'm begging you. I can't stand it. I'll do anything you want but let you die. *I can't do it*. Anything else."

"Can," I fought to utter several different syllables in a row, bereft of the chance Rosalie had almost offered, "can, you, break, my, spine."

"What?"

"It... will heal. But I'll - feel - less - till - then," I gasped, and then helplessly I screamed again. "Maybe," I panted.

There was a still silence for a quarter of a second. (Durations of that length were becoming acutely important to me, and agonizingly distinct.)

Then there was a tiny sharp pinch at the base of my neck, and everything from my shoulders down went limp and blissfully numb.

I breathed, still, and I could hear my own heartbeat, but there was no sensory information from anything below the break. Edward's medical knowledge to the rescue - he'd known just what to sever. My neck and head burned still, unimproved, but the loss of torso and limbs was such a dramatic relief that I felt as though I'd been plunged into a tub

of ice water.

"*Oh*," I sighed.

"It won't last the rest of the transformation," Edward warned. "And I can't do it again. Once it heals, it has to stay that way, or you might not come through properly."

"How long?" I asked softly.

"I don't know. Maybe a few hours."

A few hours. A few hours in which only my throat and face and scalp and skull would be razed by the venom. But it was something.

I wished I could sleep. But I would never sleep again.

I was nearly lucid until my spine healed. I was able to open my roasting eyes and look at Edward's face, drawn and haggard with concern but still beautiful. I could emit complete sentences with only a few extra pauses for difficult, unrelieving breaths.

"I'm sorry," I huffed, "for asking."

He bent to kiss my blazing forehead. "I forgive you." He didn't repeat the plea that I not do it again, after the lower part of my body was back. Maybe he knew I wouldn't be able to resist.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you," he told me, looking intensely sorrowful. No "too". He'd never appended the word. Once I'd asked him why - I tried to conjure up the answer - it was too difficult. No memories were still clear through the haze of pain. I doubted I could remember my parents' names. I'd written everything down...

Two hours, thirty-four minutes, and sixteen seconds after the break, my spine welded itself back together and I was plunged back into the unrelieved full-body agony.

Once again, I screamed.

I could feel my mind becoming more capacious. It was like a fractal pattern, slowly sprouting new nodes. I came to have an ever more nuanced appreciation for each individual lash of fire that flayed my body, and every moment of the experience was indelibly recorded in my crystallizing perfect record of my vampire life. But the little space in the back of my head, which wasn't focused on the pain, also grew.

Edward talked to me. I clung to his voice like a lifeline. I could still barely feel his arms around me, or the occasional kisses he touched to my skin, and I kept my eyes

clenched firmly shut, but I could hear him, better with each elapsing hour. He gave me tips on controlling my thirst once it came. He read off Alice's weather forecast for the next month. He recited books. He promised me, over and over, that I had been right, that I would love being a vampire, that Alice saw it, that her vision was solid as rock, that everything would be fine and that he loved me and that it would be over soon.

I tried to believe him. Tried to believe that there was some way that, on the other side of the pain, there was something worth it all. Tried to believe that, after I came out of the kiln, I'd have been fired and glazed to such a sheen...

At eight in the evening on Friday, I felt my toes and fingertips cool ever so faintly. The fire receded languidly, taking its time. But as it pulled back from my extremities, it collected in my heart and my neck. The centers of my pain folded in on themselves until they were worse than ever, and even my newly cool extremities didn't quite compensate. My heartbeat fluttered faster. My throat ached. "It's almost over, Bella," Edward whispered. "Almost over."

I hadn't even finished changing, and I was already thirsty. Before I might have been boiling - now I was clearly devoid of liquid. My parched throat demanded relief. I knew what Edward had meant when he'd speculated that *some* vampire must have tried drinking water. Anyone who came out of the transformation alone, confused, far from sweet-smelling humans, would find it the logical thing to try.

The flames continued to pull inward, up my limbs, millimeter by millimeter. My throat didn't get any worse or better after the initial dry burst, but my heart did, as more and more of the agony drew towards it. Every beat came sooner after the previous one. It was vibrating like a hummingbird's wings.

The intake of pain sped up as my pulse did. It was as though the doomed organ was trying to escape, to beat its way out of my ribcage, to drill a hole through something and thrum away from me. My limbs were entirely comfortable, but I couldn't pay them any attention as the heat raced towards my frenetically pounding heart. It contracted and constricted, assaulting my last living organ as it thudded in panic.

By this time I was thrashing, unable to avoid the reflexive attempt to escape the pain in my chest. I keened an awful, shrill noise. Edward held me, and I couldn't get far. But then my heart skipped one beat, and spasmed one final time and released forever - and the pain was gone - and my pointless lunge in a random direction actually broke Edward's grip.

My limbs automatically arranged themselves beneath me as momentum carried me. I crouched low to the floor, fingertips splayed out to touch the wood. My balance was absolute and certain. My muscles were unprotesting: they would hold me in this pose for a hundred years if I cared to remain still. I noticed that I wasn't breathing, and pulled in a lungful of air. It smelled mostly of Edward, a scent I recognized instantly, although just as promptly I discarded all my earlier analogies to flowers - I knew no flower would smell like that to my newly precise nose. It didn't relieve a lack of oxygen, because I didn't need

any such thing, but it conveyed information, and my breaths settled into a natural rhythm to tell me what was in the air around me.

"Bella?" murmured Edward, his voice tentative but filled with awe.

I opened my eyes.

I was facing the wall. But it took me a moment to realize that it was a wall I was looking at, because I was captivated instantly by the beauty of the sight. My eyes drank in every detail of the woodgrain with perfect clarity. I could see each splinter, detect every subtle change in the color of the wood, see each divot and patch of wear and uneven stain. It was intensely lovely, and I stared.

"Bella?" Edward said again.

As soon as I decided to get up and face him, I was on my feet, looking his way. My body responded to my commands with delicious obedience. It swiftly composed itself as I wished it composed. It didn't pitch me in a wrong direction, or let any part dawdle, or catch on invisible obstacles, or protest at any motion. I noticed as I whirled around that the turn didn't blur my vision at all: the boards in the wall spun past without losing any definition, even when they passed into peripheral vision. My change of posture was so fast that I'd had only a tiny fraction of a second to notice this advantage, but I was more than quick enough to pick up on it anyway.

Edward was spectacular.

I had been staring at the *wall*, thinking it pretty; I'd spent months as a human, looking at Edward, finding him appealing. Insanity. I'd seen only his shadow. With *these* eyes, he was like some kind of deity, radiant and sculpted. Like nothing I'd ever seen before. I enjoyed a moment's skepticism that even Rosalie, even seen with this new and astonishing sight, would be the aesthetic equal of the vision that was Edward.

I took another deep breath, tasting the air. Still mostly Edward. There was an unsatisfyingly damp, but alluring, smell under that, which made my throat itch and burn - myself as a human, having left traces? I tried to ignore it, and succeeded at shoving the thirst and the distracting odor into a little-used back nook of my expansive mind. I smelled more pleasant wafts from the direction of the door, heard more breathing than just mine and his. I turned my head twenty degrees to bring the others into my field of vision without losing the stunning sight of Edward. All of the Cullens were there, clustered together, looking at me with anticipation.

All right, Rosalie *was* still the most beautiful person in the world, I grumbled inwardly - and then I noticed the light glinting off Alice's teeth, exposed in a self-satisfied grin. The light bounced into my eye in a spectrum of *eight* colors, the last dazzlingly novel.

"No one told me," I said in a voice like the bells Charlie liked to nickname me for, "that we can see in *ultraviolet*."

When I spoke, it sent the others into a flurry of conversation and excitement. I could quite easily track the threads of their discussion: Carlisle wanted me to tell him everything I could remember about the transformation, to know how much help the coma and the broken spine had been. Alice wanted to put me in nicer clothes and get me in front of a mirror.

Edward thought I ought to hunt immediately to relieve my thirst (I wished he hadn't said that; it brought what had been a minor discomfort to the forefront of my mind, turning it into a consuming need, and I had to spend a fair amount of effort wrestling it back to the niggling irritation it had been).

Jasper (I took a moment to be bowled over by his scars - so clear! They'd been unobtrusive, faintly raised crescents before - now they stood out, his most obvious feature, and told some instinct I'd sprouted that this was a dangerous fellow, to have survived so many fights, to have killed every enraged vampire who'd laid teeth on him) kept flicking his eyes in my direction nervously. Wondering when he'd have to intervene to calm me, perhaps. Emmett was laughing, sounding fraternally proud of me.

Rosalie had an apologetic look on her face - maybe she felt bad about having thought about killing me when I'd asked her. I would have to make sure she knew that I didn't hold it against her. I'd literally begged for it - and I *normally* did prefer that people act as I requested, so if her disposition to do so had gone a bit far, it wasn't the worst sort of vice. Esme was just gazing at me maternally. Part of her family now, for all time - I liked the idea of her filling that role, while Renée was necessarily distant.

While I didn't have trouble processing this information as it came in, it did fill up more of my mind than I wanted to have occupied with it. I wanted to look at the beautiful world, to smell the exquisite scents, to dance with my new docile body, to read every file on my computer, to hear what music sounded like with vampire ears, to learn Norwegian, and to take advantage of my being durable enough that Edward could touch me without that vigilant gentleness.

"Excuse me," I said, and then I smiled to myself, enjoying the timbre my voice had acquired. It was musical. Perhaps I could sing, now - I'd been hopeless at it before.

Seven pairs of eyes twitched over in my direction. "What is it, Bella?" Edward asked solicitously.

"I wasn't unbearably thirsty until *you* brought it up," I said. My irritation about that flared up, and Jasper leaned forward, but I shot him a look and - I was fairly sure without help - forced it down. My thirst was clearly not behaving normally, and so Edward couldn't have known what would set it off. It receded, although slowly. More room in my

head meant more room for emotions to bloom and take over suddenly, it seemed. Once Jasper had stood back, I looked in Edward's direction again, smiling without meaning to as I watched his flawless face pull into a chagrined frown. "If you think it's a good idea to hunt soon, I'll do it anyway, but I think we have time to give Alice what she wants first," I went on. "I assume you have an outfit in mind?" I asked, turning to the smallest of the vampires.

Alice nodded rapidly, still wearing a broad, thrilled grin. "Come on," she urged, and she led me past everyone, out of the room and up the rickety stairs. Esme hadn't gotten to this part of the house yet - or perhaps she was waiting for parts. We reached the room that - to judge by the décor - Alice had chosen for herself. (As in the Forks house, Jasper was presumably a co-occupant, but his personality was not evident in the layout or objects.) Alice presented me with a sapphire blue silk dress; when she shook it out, I learned the lush smell of the fabric and the unique sound of its rustling.

"Alice, this is nothing like anything I'm liable to wear when I choose clothes for myself," I pointed out.

"Please, just this once?" Alice said coaxingly. "You only get to see yourself for the first time once. It should be in something pretty. It's just exactly your size - it won't fit anyone else. Too short for Rosalie and too long for me and too small for Esme. It's all yours. Please?"

I sighed and held out my hand for the dress, when I heard someone approaching up the stairs. I turned my head just enough to catch the sight in my peripheral vision: Jasper. He looked edgy, expecting something to happen.

"I'm about to change clothes, Jasper," I told him, a little annoyed - I clamped down on that emotion as soon as I noticed it, to prevent it from swelling and taking over the better part of my new and improved brain. "I'd rather you not be present, if that's okay." Sarcasm tinged the words. I really did not prefer that he follow me. I felt a snarl rising in my throat, but, with the help of the instinct that made Jasper's scars scream *danger! don't challenge him!*, I restrained it. That would only justify his nervousness.

He ground his teeth a little. "I would feel better if you had hunted," he muttered.

"I would feel better if people stopped bringing that *up*," I snapped, touching a hand to my throat. My skin was as cool as any vampire's now, I supposed, but I was the same temperature as myself - it felt normal to me. Only in temperature, though: it was incredibly smooth, and although I knew I'd have no trouble pressing my fingertips into my neck, I could tell that I was tough as rock to any non-vampire assault. "It makes it unpleasant. It's fine when I'm thinking about other things."

He frowned, still staring at me. I rolled my eyes, counted to ten lightning-fast in my head, and then shut the door on him. Alice giggled. "It's okay, Jazz," she called through the door. "Bella is *just fine*, I promise."

I changed into the dress. It was fitted quite tightly, although the zipper was long enough that I could get it on without ripping it. I found I was very sensitive to how much tension I put on the fabric: I could always stop short of damaging any fibers, even though it would be nothing to my strength to tear the dress to shreds. Or the house, or a fjord. Interestingly, the hardness of my skin hadn't sacrificed any tactile sensitivity. It was improved with all my other senses. I could feel each thread of silk individually gliding along my hand when I picked up a fold of the skirt and let it fall.

"The *sensations* are so amazing," I breathed to Alice, and then I looked at the lightbulb in her room, marveling at the color. I picked up the pleat of my skirt again, let it brush my knuckles. "The silk is wonderful. Ultraviolet is beautiful..."

"*You're* beautiful," gushed Alice. "Come on, come on, Esme got you a mirror, it's in the room you changed in. Go down and have a look!"

I opened the door and, with a pointed look at Jasper, glided down the stairs. I couldn't wait to do something really cool with all my grace and speed and power, but it was new enough that even descending to the first floor was interesting. I stepped lightly. I was only a little heavier as a vampire than I'd been as a human, but much more capable of distributing my weight according to the strength of each step. My ears and my bare toes picked up enough information to tell me which places were best to place my feet.

The house smelled strongly of wood, of some kind, but I didn't know enough about woods to identify the type. It might be several kinds, I decided with another breath. I reached the bottom of the stairs - I hadn't rushed; large steps or sudden movements would stress the silk dress. I re-entered the room I'd spent the last three days in, noting the differences in the air between rooms - the circulation was different, the smells were confined in different ways, the small sounds of the house and the breathing vampires echoed differently.

"Bella," Alice prodded, rousing me from my enjoyment of the acute sensitivity to my surroundings.

"Bah, fine," I said, and I located the mirror and went to stand before it.

Oh. I really *was* beautiful. Every bit as lovely as Esme, or Alice, although I doubted anyone would confuse me with either. In fact, I was almost unrecognizable. My hair was the same: brown, a bit past my shoulders, and very messy from all the thrashing about I'd done. I combed my fingers through it carefully while I continued to inspect myself, enjoying the soft feel of the strands and the efficient dexterity I could bring to bear.

My eyes were bright crimson. The color wasn't intrinsically unpleasant, but it still didn't seem like a *good* color for eyes - it meant I was full of human blood, albeit only my own. "How long will my eye color stay this way?" I asked softly, addressing the question to the room while I attended to my hair. Alice danced up the stairs and returned with a

hairbrush, which she put in my hand; I switched without pausing.

"A few months," soothed Edward. "Animal blood will change the color faster than human blood would. They'll go amber, then gold - then they'll be like ours."

The word "blood" made my throat flare up again, and I frowned a little. I continued to examine the features reflected in the mirror. I supposed I still looked a *little* like myself - although memories of looking at my human face were hard to retrieve, even though I had only a few minutes of vampire memories to push them aside. But I thought the top lip was still a little too full to match the lower lip, as before. That was something. I tilted my head, turned to look at my profile. Alice laughed pealingly.

I heard Edward sigh.

I was facing him as soon as I'd registered the sound, hairbrush frozen at the nape of my neck. "What?" I asked.

"I'd been hoping, just a little, that after your mind became more similar to my own, I'd be able to read it," he admitted. "Yet here I am, mystified as ever."

I chuckled. "I don't think that's how it works. My power is supposed to get *better*, not work *less*." I pursed my lips in thought. "I wonder what I can do now. There's so much I want to try. *So* much."

"Such as?" Edward prompted, and I knew what he was hoping for. He wanted me fed. He imagined that I was swallowing a hot poker with every passing moment. I laughed again, sounding like music to myself, and gave him half the answer he wanted.

"I want to go outside," I said. "Are there any humans nearby I might accidentally run into?"

Edward listened for a moment - I'd never have caught the pause if I hadn't thought as fast as I did - and then shook his head. "The place is deserted within my range. You may wish to stick close to the house, though."

"Let me try something," I said, and then I pranced upstairs, returned Alice's hairbrush to her vanity, picked up the clothes I'd discarded, pressed my shirt to my face, and inhaled gingerly.

The lingering scent of a human no longer human was probably the safest exposure test possible.

Thinking deliberately about the flavor of the air, inhaling it so directly - it was the least pleasant thing I'd encountered since my last heartbeat. My throat erupted in flames; a fluid that wasn't at all wet (venom, I presumed) coated my tongue but did nothing to soothe the thirst.

I would have tasted *delicious*. I tried to imagine what I must have smelled like to

Edward, and failed.

I was tempted to leap off the landing to get directly to the first floor and plumbing, but wasn't sure how sturdy the house was; I went as quickly down the steps as I dared. Between vague recollections from humanity of the house's floorplan, and my superior sense of smell, I located the bathroom - it bore a faint hint of the fruits and flowers and chemicals that dominated the aroma of shampoo and soap. I filled my hands with water and drank it.

It was not quite absolutely tasteless, as Edward had said when he'd first sipped a little. I could detect minerals in it. But it was close enough: it tasted like water, without having any of the thirst-quenching properties it had had when I'd been human. It didn't cool the heat in my throat. It did rinse away the venom, though, which I liked: it felt more sensible to feel thirsty when my mouth wasn't full of fluid. One swallow of water got rid of the excess produced by my whiff of my shirt.

Edward had followed me up when I'd buried my nose in my sleeve, and then to the sink. "What exactly are you trying?" he asked, when I'd taken a second sip of water and turned off the tap.

"Controlling myself," I explained. "Better to do it now, when there's no one edible to attack, right? The water's interesting," I said, waving at the faucet. "*Everything* is interesting." I grinned at him, then launched myself towards him to fling my arms around him in a hug. He smelled marvelous. Felt the same temperature as me - no longer icy.

"Um," he said, "Bella, *ow*."

I was momentarily confused, and then I put my hands behind my back. "Sorry. Don't know my own strength," I laughed. I twirled around, my dress flaring out around my knees with a soft whisper. "Oh, I love everything, it's amazing. I love *you*," I added, and I hugged him again, more gently. My turn to be careful.

"I love you," he murmured, sounding amused.

"I'm sorry I was so obviously miserable while I was turning," I said solemnly, leaning my head on his shoulder again. "I'd say I didn't mean to hurt you, but, uh, at one point I was actually trying to provoke you into killing me. I'm sorry about that. I feel *awesome* now," I promised. I didn't need to rest my head - my neck would never tire, it could hold my head and a few large rocks without any trouble for all time - but it was good to be close to him. Warm (warm!) and safe and comfortable.

He stroked my hair once, then put his hands on my face, lifted my chin, and kissed me. No further cause for caution. I could open my mouth, he could pull me to him as tightly as he liked without doing me harm -

And we were standing in the middle of the hallway. Emmett snickered from the stairwell. "Get a room!" he called.

I let an annoyed puff of air out through my teeth. "Do we," I asked Edward pointedly, "have a room?"

Edward looked uncomfortable. Probably he wanted me to hunt before anything else. "Esme converted an outbuilding into a cottage for us," he said slowly. "I think you'll like it. It'll be more private than a room here."

"Great! Let's go see it. I still want to go outside. Maybe eat a moose," I added, to placate Edward.

Edward led me by the hand out the door. I gasped at the landscape when I saw it. I could pick out each leaf - the *veins* on each leaf - of every tree within visual range, which was quite a lot. The colors were so bright, so intense. The wind carried smells towards me - plants, soil, a touch of the ocean. I didn't catch anything by scent, sound, or sight that I could identify as an animal. I remembered the dog that had hated James, vaguely - vampires had lived in this house for three days. All the wildlife was probably long gone from the immediate vicinity.

But the plants couldn't move a bit. I dashed up to the nearest tree trunk and stroked the bark, giggling at the weak roughness of it. It didn't pose any threat to my skin. It felt a bit like it would have been good to scratch an itch with, if I'd had any itches. I looked down at my dress in annoyance. It wasn't a tree-climbing outfit. But there would be time to race all over the three dimensions of the landscape later.

I twirled around to look at Edward again, grinning widely. "Okay, which way?" I asked eagerly.

He pointed, still with that vague discomfort, and then suddenly wore a playful smile. "Catch me, if you can." He took off.

Even to my recalibrated estimations, he was fast. But I had newborn strength working for me. If I just pushed off from the ground as hard as I could, perhaps I could make up for the fact that I likely wasn't as quick as Edward. I dug my shoeless left foot into the ground and kicked myself into the air.

My dress split up the sides all the way to mid-thigh: too snug to really run in. "Ugh," I said, landing some thirty feet away and stopping there rather than chase him. He wouldn't have gotten far enough away to miss the sound of the tear or my annoyance. And indeed, he reappeared next to me a second later.

"I need to change if I'm going to do *anything* interesting," I muttered. "But all my clothes would still smell like me and I don't want to be distracted while everything's still new. Do you think I could borrow something of Esme's?" Her clothes would be only a little loose on me - perfect for active pursuits.

"I'm sure she won't mind," Edward said. "I'll wait."

I went back in, found Esme by the distinctive sound of her footsteps on the top floor, and picked my way up the stairs without doing further damage to the dress. I asked her for jeans and a t-shirt, which she provided; I ducked into a bathroom to swap outfits.

Esme's new study, where I'd found her, had a large window that could unlatch. I eyed it speculatively for a moment, then opened it up and dove out. With no difficulty, I righted myself in midair, landed on the balls of my feet, and threw my head back and laughed. I felt omnipotent. To make up for my earlier constraint, I promptly shimmied up a tree. From this vantage point, I spotted Edward on the other side of the house. He was watching me, one of those mixed-up expressions on his face. I flipped myself off the treetop, spinning around three times in midair and landing on one hand. Everything remained clear, not a touch of blur, as I hurtled towards the ground. I understood at last how vampires never hit trees or got branches in their faces as they ran through closely spaced trees. I pushed off the ground with my hand and landed on my feet again.

Looking at a landscape where everything is accessible was a different experience from simply taking it in visually. If I liked the look of something, I could *go* to it - no matter what was in my way. If I wanted to tunnel through the dirt and down through the bedrock, I could do it. If I wanted to leap into the sea and swim across the Atlantic Ocean, I could do it. If I wanted to travel by brachiating through trees without ever touching the ground, I could do it. I laughed again, exhilarated. Then a bar of sunlight struck my arm, and I looked at the opalescent play of color, enthralled. Ultraviolet glints were among the complement of hues. I decided that ultraviolet was my new favorite color.

The ground around the house wasn't well-kept, yet, and it was full of rocks and sticks and thorny weeds. They were meaningless unless I chose to think about them. They couldn't hurt my feet. I jogged easily around the house to meet Edward, and, wanting to share my utter joy, hugged him again.

"That way, right?" I asked, after I thought I'd had enough hug to last a minute or two. I pointed the same way he had, and then with a wink I threw myself into the trees.

Edward was much faster than me. I could cover as much ground with one stride as he could with one, as long as I pushed horizontally instead of wasting momentum on airtime, but he could pump his legs blindingly fast and take more than three times as many steps as I could. He caught up with me, overtook me as though to simply prove he could, and then let me catch up to him so we could run together. I laughed again. I couldn't help it. I was going faster than I'd *ever* gone outside of an airplane or a car: Edward couldn't go top speed while carrying me and wouldn't have done it while I was human anyway. The scenery was full of rich color, it smelled marvelous, and I could see it all with miraculous clarity even as I raced past it as fast as I could. The wind pulled at my hair and whistled past my ears.

In no time at all we'd come to a little wooden cottage nestled in the trees, looking for all the world like it had been appropriated from an illustrated fairy tale. My hands flew to

my mouth as I gasped in delight. It was the most adorable building I'd ever seen. Esme clearly had picked up on my taste.

"You like it," said Edward, sounding pleased.

"I *love* it," I exclaimed, flying forward to go inside.

"Bella," called Edward.

I stopped short of the door and turned. "What? I want to look at our *house*!" I almost squealed.

"Are you sure that's all you want to do?" he asked me in a patient voice, and my throat blazed again. I gritted my teeth.

"It's not that bad when I'm not *thinking* about it," I said plaintively. "I was all excited about the house and now I'm thirsty again." I put my hands in my pockets and mentally poked at the sensation of thirst, trying to make it fade into the background again.

"I'm sorry," he said regretfully. "But I *really* think you should eat something, soon. I smell a wolf," he coaxed, invitingly. "Carnivores taste better than herbivores."

I closed my eyes and inhaled, trying to find the scent he'd mentioned. There were a thousand to sift through, but eventually I caught something from the north that I thought might be a wolf. It smelled wet, and sort of unappealingly hearty. It wasn't as delectable a bouquet as my old clothes had. Not remotely. If humans smelled like succulent, perfectly ripe fruit, the wolf was like unseasoned and undercooked barley that had gone slightly off - but still food. What would herbivores smell like, to be less pleasant than that? Something with mold on it? I sighed heavily, perked up my ears to aid my location of the animal, and took off into the trees.

Hunting the wolf was messy. I chased it a few miles up, loping after it slower than I had to be, too full of nerves to spring. Eventually I did attack, and immediately I regretted borrowing clothes: they'd never be fit to wear again. For all that the beast's claws and teeth did nothing but make an unpleasant noise against my marble surface, they were still quite capable of shredding ordinary denim and cotton. I was veering close to indecent by the time I'd gotten enough blood out of the wolf - some down my throat, some onto Esme's outfit - that it stopped struggling.

The wolf's blood was unappetizing. I thought back to the square of chocolate I'd had before turning: I knew I'd liked chocolate, but even the memory of it held no appeal anymore. Even tangy, unpleasantly musky wolf blood was better than anything humans made a habit of eating, now. And it *did* soothe the thirst, even when I was thinking about it. It didn't completely eliminate it - it would never go away entirely - but it was easier to push it into the unobtrusive corner of my mind, and less raw and insistent when it crept

out and bothered me.

"Happy?" I asked Edward, raising one eyebrow and turning to my supervising boyfriend. "Delicious wolf, om nom nom - can I go look at our house?"

Edward's eyes lingered a little on the tears in the clothes. I smirked and posed for him; he blinked rapidly and looked me in the eye. Just a little disappointing. I was all sturdy and indestructible now; there was no particular reason he had to fight the temptation presented by my newfound gorgeousness.

"Are you sure you don't want something else? A moose? There are moose," he prodded.

"Why do you want me to eat so much so soon?" I asked. "Yeah, I'm thirsty, but I'm going to stay that way for all eternity and might as well get used to it, right? The entrée took the edge off. I can check out the salad bar and the dessert cart tomorrow. Besides," I added suggestively, "we have a *room* to which I believe we were told to *get*."

Edward pursed his lips together. There was a silence; I waited expectantly for his answer. "You're not acting at all like a newborn," he murmured.

"We knew I'd be extra-special," I pointed out. "Alice is pretty good at noticing that kind of thing. I'd be filling up more enthusiastically if there were anyone around I might hurt, but you said there wasn't. I mean, let me know if someone wanders by, but it's still my first hour of being a vampire! There's so much to do!" I waved my hands at the forest around us. "Everything is *beautiful*! I can do anything I want and not fall on my face! I can hear for miles around!"

"It's not just that you aren't as thirsty as you should be, or rather that you don't want to eat as much as you should," Edward said, choosing his words carefully. How often had he picked through his vocabulary like this without my having noticed, the hesitations too brief to register to human ears? "It's that you're too... rational. Even things other than thirst usually can overwhelm newborns. Mood swings are - *almost* universal."

"Oh, I have been kind of moody," I said.

He stared at me incredulously. "No, you really haven't. You should have heard what Jasper was thinking. He has more experience with newborns than any of us - he knows how you're supposed to work. But you've been reining in errant emotions with the self-possession of a vampire decades old, not minutes."

"I mean compared to how I was when I was human," I clarified. "I don't have any newborns handy to measure myself against. It's like there's a lot more room for emotions to expand, and if I let them get too big, they're hard to put back where they belong - I mostly managed at first because I *really* don't want Jasper to mess with my head. But if I just don't let them get bigger than they could have when I was human, then they're much *easier* to deal with, because I have more resources to use to handle them. Also, there's so much to distract me," I exulted, making another expansive gesture. "If I fill up all the

space in my head with happiness and beauty that's hardly dangerous, is it?"

Edward listened to this speech with some amount of astonishment. "I can read minds, and it took me years to get that kind of clarity about how the vampire psyche works," he murmured.

"I can read *my* mind, even if you can't," I said, self-satisfied. "I know what I want. Right now, moose is *not* at the top of the list. I promise you'll be the second person to know if it makes it up there."

"What *is* at the top of your list?" he asked, spreading his hands in a defeated sort of gesture.

"You," I sang, and a flash of discomfort crossed his face again. I was confused. I had just drained a wolf. Evidently my earlier conjecture had been wrong or incomplete. "What's wrong?" I asked. "I'm remodeled and reinforced for our mutual convenience. I love you. You love me. We have," I added, "a house. And I *saw* you peeking," I teased, waving at the rips in Esme's poor destroyed shirt. I probably couldn't have walked out in public without getting arrested, sunshine notwithstanding.

Edward mumbled something. I actually couldn't make out the words - apparently vampires could mangle language so thoroughly that even other vampires couldn't decipher it.

I propelled myself to his side in a flying leap and wrapped my arms around my neck, pressing in close. "I didn't catch that," I purred, finding that I could actually *purr*.

"We aren't *married*," he muttered, just barely clear enough for me to comprehend.

Self-Control

I boggled at him.

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "I was born in 1901."

"Riiight," I sighed. "And the fact that it's not 1901 anymore leaves you unmoved?" I wriggled against him, just a little. He took a very deep breath.

Edward laid his palms against my cheeks and kissed me - carefully, chastely, not at all like the passionate delight in the hallway. I tried to follow his face with mine when he pulled back, but didn't fight against the steady pressure of his hands, even though I could have easily knocked them aside and tackled him. If he wanted to be married first and I couldn't talk him out of it - well, Alice was planning a wedding anyway. I could be a *little* patient. Maybe. If I absolutely had to.

I looked at his darkened gold eyes, which smoldered at me. A fresh bolt of desire struck me, and I couldn't restrain a sad little whine. Oh, this was going to be hard.

"Trust me," he said with a wry smile, "if the fact that you *exist* leaves me unmoved - well, it doesn't, but I suspect the difference isn't relevant for your purposes - then the date isn't going to do anything."

"I can't possibly convince you?" I pleaded.

He bit his lip, looking apprehensively at me. "I'd really rather you didn't try," he said.

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm not sure if you can... but *if* you can... then that would be contrary to my current preferences." His eyes were almost *quivering* - like he wanted to look down, but caught himself before doing it every time. His wobbly gaze stayed locked on my own eyes.

My eyebrows knitted together. I was pretty sure I could resist the impulse to knock him over and have my way with him. Could I avoid even trying to *encourage* him?

"I've been waiting and *waiting* for *this* day, so it would be *safe*," I complained, "and you're *springing* this on me. You never said "oh, by the way, Bella, unless we *actually* get married instead of just pretend, you will be obliged to live like a nun". I am not pleased with this surprise." I deliberately attended to the feel of the wind, the smell of the forest, trying to distract myself from said displeasure - it would be very embarrassing to throw an outright tantrum at so inopportune a time.

He gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry. I truly am." He passed his thumb gently over my

cheekbone, which *did not help*.

I pouted, and then closed my eyes and gradually forced my face into a more neutral, less coaxing expression. "Okay," I managed. "I'll do my best. I'll... I'll learn a lot of languages and read all my computer files and clear the area of moose and I will *try* very *hard* to *wait*." My jaw clenched a little. I'd probably need to avoid spending too much time even *near* Edward to obey his wishes. Maybe I'd fling myself into wedding planning and oust Alice. She'd be irked, but it wasn't *her* wedding.

Suddenly, Edward dropped to one knee before me and took both of my hands in his, clasping them together. I stared down at him. "Edward?"

"I want to do it properly," he said in a low voice, and freeing one hand, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little black satin-covered box.

"How long have you had that?" I gasped.

"Since my mother died. It was the one my father gave her," he murmured.

"How long have you been carrying it around in your *pocket*?" I clarified.

"Since you said you loved me," he said, looking up at me with those bronzed, darkening eyes. My lips parted slightly in shock. "I was waiting for the right moment," he explained, a little sheepishly. "I'm sorry it's this moment, instead of some candlelit setting where I haven't just offended you by having failed to communicate... but I have to ask, Bella," he said fervently. He didn't physically tremble with anxiety, but I could hear it in the cadences of his voice, that perfect voice...

He flicked the box open with his thumb. His mother's ring was a thing of ensnaring beauty, and my eyes locked onto it, watching the light catch fire in each tiny diamond latticed against the golden oval. The band was thin, delicate, barely enough to support the net of gems.

"If you don't like it, I can get you something else," he told me. It sounded like he found it very urgent that I like my ring, as though that could be an important deciding factor.

"I like this one," I said at once, and he smiled in relief and plucked it from the box.

"Isabella Swan," he whispered intensely, still gazing up at me, still holding my hands in one of his. I was suddenly and acutely aware that I was standing ten feet away from the corpse of an exsanguinated wolf, wearing torn jeans and a barely decent t-shirt, and spattered all over with blood. He didn't seem to care. "I love you. I will love you for every moment of eternity. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

There was nothing else to say -

"Yes."

Edward slid the ring onto the correct finger, beaming up at me more brilliantly than I'd ever seen. His smile was full of ecstatic victory. When the ring was in place, fitting perfectly, he bent his head forward and kissed it. And then he was on his feet instantly, arms around me, pulling me towards him with force that would have destroyed a human but that only felt secure and perfect and *right* to me. I hugged him back, careful as I could stand to be with my newborn strength; if I squeezed him too hard, he didn't complain.

He kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me - I heard a quiet purr in the back of his throat. I resigned myself to the fact that this would be all I'd get until my ring had a companion. But it was still wonderful - still more than what I could have had unturned, when he'd had to exercise so much caution. I drank in the kisses greedily. All of forever wouldn't contain enough of them.

We moseyed back to the house - the main house, not our little cottage. He had expressed a desire to carry me across the threshold in the traditional manner, and I'd said, "Oh, well, as long as I'm waiting for everything else, may as well wait to see the house *too*," and he'd looked too thrilled for me to take it back.

When we got to the yard, Alice was waiting for us. I thought her grin would split her face open. "*Bella!*" she cried. "Come inside and try on your *dress!*"

Had someone delivered it? I sniffed the air - there was a mouthwatering scent that might have been the remnants a brief visit from a human during my first hunt. Convenient timing, that he or she was gone. I took a fraction of a second to fight the urge to follow the lure, to hunt down its owner. I hoped it wouldn't cling to my wedding dress - that it had been wrapped up in plastic or heavily starched or something, enough that it would smell only like itself.

I'd spent a couple of hours, as a human, paging through bridal magazines with Alice so she wouldn't veer completely into left field when trying to select elements of the event. I'd pointed out elements of dresses I liked and didn't. But I wasn't prepared for the sheer perfection that was my own white gown.

Alice had it displayed in the front hall on a dressmaker's dummy. It had to be custom made. There wasn't a thread out of place or a bead I didn't approve of. Everything I would have wanted in a dress, if I'd decided to spend a month designing one, was there. A triangle of crisscrossing ribbons pointed down the low back. It had a wide strap over the right shoulder and left the other bare; there were no sleeves. The drapey, shimmery fabric gathered at a rosette at the left side of the waist. Rows of round, crystalline beads, glinting in every color up to and including my new favorite, bordered every carefully placed fold and edge, and clusters of them, rose-shaped, spiraled out from the rosette to a radius of a

foot and a half. The skirt looked like it would be ankle-length on me - I had made it clear to Alice that I did not approve of long dragging trains that would inevitably get dirty. It didn't have bulky extra layers or come with a jacket: it was clearly a *summer* wedding dress, for all that I could have crossed the Sahara in an anorak without experiencing discomfort.

"Alice, it's gorgeous," I declared, and she smiled broadly at me. I noticed that Edward hadn't followed me in, suspected superstition about viewing the dress, and added in a louder voice that I meant to carry outside, "Edward! Just how likely is it that you're going to avoid seeing what it looks like in Alice's head until - when will it be, Alice?" I inquired.

"Next week," she reported, entirely chipper. "Wednesday. I thought at first you'd ask Carlisle to perform the ceremony, but then you were going to decide that it'd make it look to your parents less like you suddenly eloped. So the official story is that you're bringing only me to witness and getting a court official to handle it, although really of course we're all going. To Ukraine, by the way, because we know your parents know how old *you* are and it would be easy to look up minimum age laws, but we can tell them Edward's just turned eighteen; his Forks paperwork has an early June birthday on it if anyone looks. I rented a plane so you don't have to be cooped up with humans."

"Who is it who flies?" I asked.

"Edward," Alice told me. "Emmett started, but he ate his instructor and we had to run."

"Such charming family anecdotes we have," I said, grimacing. "Edward, I really am very skeptical that you can avoid learning what this dress looks like until Wednesday! I'll give you a hint! It's white!"

I heard a low grumble from beyond the front door.

"It's not the dress itself you are traditionally not supposed to look at, anyway," I said reasonably, "it's me *in* the dress *on* the day of the wedding. Come in, please?"

The door opened, and in meandered Edward, looking oddly long-suffering. "You are the most persuasive creature on Earth," he murmured.

"I don't think anyone's told me that before," I said thoughtfully. I sifted through misty recollections. "I need to read my notes; I don't like having to think so hard to remember things that happened when I was human. Alice, do I have to actually try on the dress? I'm sure if you ordered it, it fits perfectly."

"Please put it on? For me?" pleaded Alice. She looked at me with huge eyes.

"Are you sure this isn't the most persuasive creature on Earth?" I bantered to Edward, pointing a thumb at his sister.

She laughed. "You'll try it on."

I tilted my head, wondering about the flimsiness of Alice's predictions, and her face fell. "Oh. Maybe you won't." She looked so sad - and then suddenly she lit up again - and then she looked annoyed at me. "Stop changing your mind!" she demanded. "I can't use aspirin, you know!"

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll try it." I picked up the display dummy by the neck, carried it up the stairs, and headed for Alice's room again, since it was her request and I'd agreed to stay out of my cottage until Edward could carry me across the threshold. He was full of silly old-fashioned preferences like that - but they added up to a certain aesthetic about the whole thing that I could learn to like, I supposed.

It was part of Edward; he wasn't going to stop being from 1901 no matter how much I rolled my eyes. If I pushed him into breaking or giving up a superstition or a cultural more from his origins, he might bend, he'd absolutely forgive me - but I didn't *want* to abuse his willingness to make me happy like that. It would be immature, it would be *wrong*, to traipse about running on every whim and every desire except the desire to make Edward happy simply because he'd settle for anything I threw his way.

And so, I reflected, as I shut Alice's door behind me, I'd be patient.

As patient as a newborn vampire could be.

Even a vampire has a little trouble reaching a zipper right in the middle of her back. But eventually I got dressed without making up my mind to request Alice's help, and so she didn't appear. I turned around in front of the full length mirror that Alice had set up in her room since I'd last visited it. The dress fit perfectly, and I liked the look of me in it, although I could have easily tolerated waiting a few days to admire myself if it hadn't been for Alice. I liked the look of practically everything. Colors were more vivid, textures were not only tangible but *visible*, sounds from miles away could catch my ear with distinct edges and timbres, everything bore its own smell -

The clothes I'd changed from when I'd put on the ruined blue silk were still in Alice's room, and unlike Esme's clothes, they weren't ripped. (Such a track record I had with garments already. It was lucky that Alice would consider it an immense personal favor to her if I asked her to pick me up a few things.) However, they still bore my old human scent. I put the wedding dress back on its mannequin and picked them up.

Bella-the-human smelled unbearably appetizing. My thirst flared to life as I moved the outfit through the air, wafting it towards my nose. All my control over myself was poised to snap; it held only because the desire had no direction. There was no Bella-the-human present to spring at, to tear open, to desiccate of life.

I had smelled only *traces* of humans. My own clothes and the dissipating presence of whoever had delivered my dress. In neither case had there been an enticing heartbeat, a

telltale sound of needful breath, or anywhere near the intensity of fragrance a live, present human would put out. I wasn't sure what I would do if I met one - what I *could* do.

I didn't think I could get all the way to Ukraine without meeting one. If nothing else, Alice had implied that the service would be conducted by a human. I didn't think the Cullens had any vampire friends there with the authority to officiate weddings that they'd just conveniently neglected to mention.

I could hear Alice relating the story now, to some inquisitive future addition to the family: "Oh, we're all married. Except Edward and Bella. She ate the justice of the peace, and we had to run."

I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth. I brought my shirt up to my face. I took a deep breath.

What do I want?

Blood. That wasn't even difficult to acknowledge. I'd known to expect it, and it manifested itself with a desperate intensity that overrode any discomfort with the notion.

But not *just* blood. I wanted other things. I wanted to make it through my wedding without slaughtering any defenseless Ukrainians. I wanted to avoid the Volturi with conspicuous mistakes. I wanted things unrelated to blood - to be with Edward, to see the world, to learn things, to find a way to activate wolves and turn vampires as a life-preservation measure on a large scale without getting anyone killed or pissed off.

I didn't *want to want* blood.

The problem was balance. My obedient, responsive vampire body didn't care all that much what I wanted to want. That wasn't the sort of impulse that called for my arm to extend or my foot to twist; no physical act would manage it. My muscles would seize what I *wanted seized*, even if I hated the fact that I wanted it - unless I could contradict that first want with another, stronger, object-level preference.

I breathed again. So luscious - and worse for Edward, far worse - and he'd resisted, hadn't swallowed the succulent blood from my dying body even given every opportunity. What had *he* wanted, more than that taste? More than the relief from that aching burn in his throat, fueled with every breath he took while I was near?

That I be alive, and happy, and not still and empty on the ground, of course. Once he knew me, once he loved me. But not at first. What had held him back when first we'd crossed paths? Why, after sitting through the most agonizing biology class of his life, had Edward not offered to escort me to my next class, led me astray, taken me out to the woods, and drained every drop?

Perhaps I ought to inquire.

I put on my tantalizing clothes, infused with insistently ambrosial Essence of Bella,

and went to locate my fiancé.

Edward was still in the front hall; I could hear him talking to Alice before I'd gone down enough stairs to see either of them. He was confirming some detail about his own wedding outfit, using unfamiliar words that must have been technical tuxedo-related terms.

They heard my footsteps, although I walked very softly. "Bella!" exclaimed Alice, once my toes touched the first floor. "Do you like your dress?"

"It's perfect, Alice," I assured her. "Is there anything else I need to do in that vein?"

She shook her head. "Everything's all set. There's not going to be cake and only a few flowers that I can get last-minute from a place in Ukraine. It can't look for the pictures like you planned this ahead of time, and we can't eat a cake."

"You mentioned a cake, earlier," I recalled, with some difficulty. "When you first asked to plan things..."

"It was possible then that you'd have gotten married, or taken pictures to make it look like you did, while still human, and *you* could have eaten a cake," Alice explained. "Now you can't. Well, you could swallow pieces of cake, but you wouldn't like it. So we're skipping that." She sighed. "It would have been fun to go shopping for a cake, though..."

"Actually, speaking of shopping," I said. "My clothes all still smell like... me. I can live with that... but I'd rather not have to do it twenty-four hours a day. And it looks like I'm going to be destroying them pretty fast, so I'd feel bad about borrowing more from Esme. I was wondering if you'd mind going into town and getting me some things."

Alice was already nodding by the time I was halfway through the third sentence. Her grin was entirely too manic. I continued: "Normal clothes. That blue dress *was* pretty, but if I'm going to destroy things I'd rather destroy jeans and stuff, you know?" She pouted at me, and I rolled my eyes. "Why do you like putting me into such fancy clothes, anyway? You don't go around in evening gowns all the time yourself."

"I mostly just like buying them," she admitted sheepishly.

"Start a charity where you donate prom dresses to deserving high schoolers, or something," I proposed. "But I want pants and shirts and whatnot - you know what I wear." She was still pouting. "They can be *nice* pants and shirts and whatnot," I conceded, laughing a little, "if you *really* want. But I don't expect to attend a cocktail party any time soon."

"Okay, fiiiine," she grumbled, but there was a glint in her eye. "I'll be back in a few

hours." And with that she was out the door.

I turned to Edward.

"Let's go look at the fjords," I said. He nodded in assent, and we ran to the shore.

Fjords were more beautiful when they weren't stark, inaccessible features of the landscape.

I was outrageously distractable, really. Having intended only to go to a private location to ask Edward potentially awkward questions, the first thing I did when confronted with a sheer cliff as a vampire was to swan-dive off of it, whooping with laughter all the way down.

I landed in the water, where I quit breathing. Inhaling water wouldn't do me harm, but it would mean I'd have to cough it up before I could breathe air normally again. I was less buoyant than I remembered being as a human; however, it was easy to stay at the surface of the water as I preferred just by kicking. I stroked easily over to the cliff and climbed up it, grabbing every handhold surely and scooping out my own when I felt like it. The rock came away easily when I clawed at it. It felt a little like packed brown sugar - stiff, but readily yielding to pressure from my hands.

I reached the top in about six seconds. Edward was smiling indulgently at me. I swung myself up over the side and, soaking wet, lay down on the cliff edge in the sunshine to dry off. I looked up at him. "Oh, right," I said. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?" he asked, sitting down beside me and picking up my right hand.

"How did you avoid killing me, the first day we met?" I asked.

Edward's hands tightened around mine, and he didn't seem to like the question much. "Why do you want to talk about that?"

"I have to know how to handle being around humans. You're the only one who's encountered a singer without killing - and that's having tasted human blood before - so your control is probably what I should be trying to emulate. I'll talk to Rosalie, too, since she was a newborn when she killed those people without eating any, so that's something. And Carlisle. But I wanted to start with you."

He nodded slowly, appreciating the sense of the request, and closed his eyes. "I didn't get a whiff until you walked in front of the vent in the classroom," he remembered. "For the first half second or so I was just... reeling. It was like nothing else. And then you looked at me. That saved you - that I suddenly had to remember that you were a person - and I could see my face reflected in your eyes. I looked like a monster. A monster I didn't

want to be, that I was anyway."

Edward paused, reflecting. "You mentioned that in a vampire mind, there is room for emotions to expand, but that as long as you catch them before they do, they aren't very hard to deal with. When I first realized what you smelled like, my thoughts were too full of murder too quickly for me to control them, or do the sane thing and hold my breath. The only reason I didn't attack you instantly was because I was trying to come up with a way to do it without extending the collateral damage outside the students and the teacher in the one classroom. I was trying to choose a route to go by while I killed them all that wouldn't let anyone see me coming with enough time to scream. The need to destroy evidence is deeply ingrained - I'd been following that rule for long enough, consistently enough, that it managed to stick. The more people I killed, the harder that would be to do.

"Someone closed a folder, on the opposite side of me, and I got one breath of air that wasn't full of your scent," he continued. He seemed to be shedding some of his discomfort with the story as I looked up at him, undisturbed, undamaged. "It gave me a second in which I could think clearly. I didn't want to disappoint Carlisle, to kill a room full of children, to destroy everything my family stood for, to undo a lifetime's worth of denial just because a stranger with horribly desirable blood had wandered into an unlikely town. I stopped breathing. It was the scent that was the problem - I could remember it, and perfectly, but I didn't have to add to the temptation."

I asked, "Was that all? Getting ahold of yourself for a moment so you could hold your breath?"

He shook his head. "I fought my way through that hour by focusing on everything but imagining how you'd taste. I - This part is hard to talk about."

"Tell me," I insisted.

"I hated you," he admitted, sounding like he was confessing sins to a priest. "I can barely imagine, now, but I did - if I hated you, it was at least something to think about that didn't bring me closer to killing you. I imagine Rosalie will tell you something different. But she only killed, didn't drink, and hatred helped her draw that line. I didn't want you dead, exactly. I only hated what you caused in me. I thought I hated you, but really, what I hated was myself."

I nodded, accepting - I knew he loved me in this moment; if he'd hated me for something I hadn't even *done* before we'd spoken a word, it didn't hurt me very much.

"I was impatient for the hour to end," Edward continued. "At this point I was imagining I'd get you by yourself, at least not kill so *many* - but Mike Newton was aware of you, he would have paid attention if I'd led you off somewhere. So I made up my mind to wait two hours, cut my last class - hid in my car. I was planning to go to your house after school; I knew your father wouldn't be home until later."

Right, I had a father - I really should get to the computer soon, send him and Renée

e-mails, maybe tell Gianna my news...

"When you weren't right there, and I could breathe air that didn't smell like you," Edward continued, "I was saner, I could think more clearly. I thought perhaps I could just avoid you without fleeing, that I shouldn't have to rearrange my life, or disappoint Carlisle and hurt Esme. I'm still not sure if it was lucky or unlucky that Alice saw nothing. She was focused very carefully on Jasper that day, on his short term choices. He'd had a hard moment at lunch. And so when I'd been certain I'd kill you, she didn't see the aftermath.

"I tried to change out of the biology class," he went on. Even telling this story, about how he'd almost excised himself from my life and cut off the universe of wonder I now inhabited, his voice was beautiful. "It turned out not to be possible - and then you walked in. That office is very small, kept very warm - I couldn't not smell you, if I inhaled. I used the last of my air to excuse myself and bolted. The others were already in the car; once I had Alice's attention she saw one of two futures. You dead, or me, driving north, alone.

"I went north. Close to where the Denali family lives. I didn't actually visit them, although Tanya found me and we talked very briefly before I went back to Forks."

"Why did you go back?" I asked.

He was silent for a few seconds. Then, slowly, he said, "We have perfect recall - not eidetic memories. We can call up what we noticed in the past, flawlessly - things that pass without notice are lost."

"Why do you *think* you went back?"

He considered, no doubt sifting through all the thoughts he'd noted at the time. "I think I wanted to prove myself to my family," he murmured, "and to be the kind of person who wouldn't need to run."

I interlaced my fingers with his. "If that's what you wanted, nice work," I said, gently. He still looked like the topic wasn't one he preferred, but his example was valuable, and if I didn't learn to handle myself, lives were in danger. Maybe not next week. If I had to, I could ask a Cullen to call in some old favor from a Denali, ask them to fly in and perform my ceremony far away from any humans. Posing, for photographic purposes, without Charlie prone to recognizing the face on the "minister". But eventually, I'd have to be near humans, have to *not* sink my teeth into their throats.

"Mm," he said, noncommittally. "Anyway - when I went to biology after coming back, and you'd changed seats, and when I heard the thoughts of the people you'd told about how I looked at you - I panicked. I could barely form sentences to ask the teacher about it. I think I attributed it to curiosity at the time, although I know better now. I had wanted to talk to you. It drove me up the wall that I couldn't hear what you were thinking, that I had to guess.

"I think I loved you already, then. I couldn't stand the idea that I might have mishandled things badly enough that *you* would hate me. That *you* would take steps to

avoid me. Disappointing Carlisle and Esme would be terrible, but they would forgive me, I knew that - you, I had no idea. You could have disappeared entirely and never thought about me again and I couldn't bear the possibility when it confronted me like it did. I was rationalizing my reaction to that. I imagined you to be a suitable proxy for the average newcomer to Forks, that if you found me off-putting I wasn't doing my acting work properly. But if you'd been anyone else, some other singer, I think I'd have welcomed the avoidance.

"Alice realized you were significant in more ways than the scent of your blood, that afternoon. I think you might have seen us arguing in the parking lot after school. She knew you'd be her friend, her sister - she loved you already. She was certain that there was no way I'd be able to stay away from you. If you left somewhere, I'd follow. If I tried to leave myself, I'd always return. And of course she knew I loved you - that was interesting, hearing it from Alice before I was aware of it myself. But she also knew that even if I couldn't stay away, I could be rejected. The word she used to describe you was "prickly"."

"*Prickly?*" I giggled.

"That's what she said. That there were thousands of futures where I ruined everything with some small mistake - a lie, an interruption, a secret just a little too tantalizing, an advance just a moment too soon. She said there was just barely a chance that you would tolerate me." He related this with a faint humor. "If I toed the lines she laid out. I tried, very hard. I don't think I got it exactly right, but I guess I was within tolerances." He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my ring. "Albeit at one time Alice's visions went so wild that I begged her to intercede with you on my behalf."

I remembered that, in broad strokes; I couldn't call any specifics to mind. "And the rest is history," I said, knowing there would be notes in my computer.

"More or less," he acknowledged.

We talked for a few more hours, and then I decided it was time to try moose. Edward hunted with me, this time, and he had much better table manners: not a spot of blood anywhere on him. He'd even managed to keep it off his face, or maybe he'd used a swatch of fur as a napkin or something. I was just as spattered, and my clothes nearly as torn, as I had been with the wolf. I looked down at myself in exasperation.

"How do you do it?" I asked. I felt a little sloshy with blood; moose were very big. I'd drained mine, but I most definitely didn't want seconds.

"Practice," he said. "You'll get better at it over time. There's no special trick to it."

I sighed. "I'm going to go through so many clothes. Maybe I should start carrying peroxide with me when I hunt, so it won't stain..."

"Alice is completely thrilled to serve as your personal shopper while you can't go into town," Edward promised me. "Even when you tell her to stay away from the satin and organza and lace. And you aren't going to hurt our finances by being a messy eater. Don't give it a second thought."

"All right, I'll just try to avoid wearing anything I'm particularly attached to, then," I said. "It's lucky that Alice's taste is a bit off-center from mine. Unless she's really agonizing over every item and checking up on my reactions, I probably won't fall in love with her entire shopping trip."

"Esme knows your aesthetics better, I suppose," said Edward. "Judging by your reaction to the house."

I nodded. "You've got a pretty good sense of my musical tastes, though," I said. "I want to hear music, like this..." I waved at my ear. And then I stomped on the ground. "I keep letting time escape without reading my files! I keep being annoyed that I can't remember things, or that they're too difficult or dim or blurry, and I have a *solution*, and I keep being *distracted*, and what good are twenty-four hour days if I can be distracted for half of them by how pretty *colors* are?"

"Well, then, perhaps that should be next," Edward said reasonably.

"I have to get clean, I'm covered in blood and moose spit and moose hair," I growled. "Why do we not just open a butchering facility? Those usually slit the animals' throats anyway and drain the blood, don't they? No one would care what happened to the blood afterwards. We could just drink it."

"We've considered it," Edward said, and he put his arm around my waist as we started walking back to the house. "It could be done, but one of us would have to be on site to retrieve the blood without arousing suspicion by asking a human employee for it. That means staying in one place as long as we want to use the facility, or at least within a close radius. Since we like to live fairly close to humans most of the time, that's untenable."

That seemed like a solvable problem, if I thought about it - but no, I had other things to do, and all the time in the world was suddenly looking like *not enough*. "Ah," I said, setting the problem aside for later, if the annoyance of hunting ever grew to the point where it was the best thing I could be doing.

Back at the house, I showered, changed into one of the serviceable outfits Alice had brought home for me, and then I unpacked my computer. Someone, probably Esme (responsible for whipping the house into shape) or Jasper (resident electronics guy) had already set up Internet.

I composed e-mails. One to Renée, apologizing for my incommunicativity: "I've been the sickest I've ever been," I said, not entirely untruthfully. "But Norway is amazing.

I absolutely love it here. We're going to Ukraine next." *Foreshadowing*, I thought, and I chuckled softly to myself. Charlie got an almost identical message.

Gianna was the other person I wanted to contact. And she got more information. Maybe, with me a vampire, she'd think I was an appropriate audience for more details. I told her I'd turned, that it had sucked but afterwards everything was awesome, that I was going to get married on Wednesday.

Then I read my entire folder full of compiled notes and diary entries. This took me about five hours; I could read nearly as fast as the computer could page through the document for me. Once I'd read through it all, I effortfully forced myself to retrieve as much as I could directly from memory to attach to each line from the documents. That took twelve hours. When I had finished all of this, my parents had both e-mailed me back with requests for pictures of fjords, and Alice had e-mailed me pictures of fjords. I attached the pictures to my replies to Renée and Charlie, yelled a thank-you to Alice, and then shut my laptop.

I found Rosalie lounging on a towel. On the roof. She was sunning herself; she couldn't hope to tan, but she could reflect tiny rainbows and set up a mirror to look at herself. I wandered around the house, wondering if she'd used a ladder or if there was a trellis or something, but found no convenient way to climb up. I might actually have been able to make the jump, but would probably have reflexively caught the roof's edge if I'd just barely missed a neat landing. So instead I climbed a tree and sprang from that vantage point towards my sister-in-law-to-be.

"Hi, Bella," said Rosalie, glancing at me as I landed on all fours beside her. Her face was neutral, so I didn't know if she still felt bad about having considered killing me, but I decided to bring it up anyway just in case.

"I wanted to let you know that I don't blame you for what happened while I was turning," I said, arranging myself into a sitting position and hugging my knees. "Please don't feel bad about it, whatever Edward says. I *did* ask."

Rosalie regarded me evenly. "I don't think he told you all of it," she said, finally. "But I'm not going to, either."

Well... that was frustrating. But I did have other things to talk about with Rosalie, and did not want to spend the next thirty minutes running around and kicking things, so I told myself that Rosalie probably had a good reason to want to keep this to herself, whatever it was; that if I ever decided it mattered very much, Edward thought I was the most persuasive creature on Earth and knew all about it; and that regardless of the detail I'd missed, I was now alive and a vampire and in fine fettle.

Once I'd managed to get that emotion under control, I said, "There was something else I wanted to talk to you about, too." And I explained my project to learn from the best about how to prevent myself from eating anyone.

Rosalie's reply was more or less what I'd expected. She had hated the men she'd killed - well, not the guards, but they were protecting the one she'd hated most of all. She had not wanted to accept their blood as fuel. Rage and contempt and loathing had overwhelmed her thirst.

"What about the people you'd have passed on the way to them?" I asked. "They lived in Rochester, it's not a tiny rural community."

"I was very single-minded," she told me. "I didn't focus on little sensations and tasks like you've been doing - I only wanted to do one thing. The other humans *were* tempting, but the death I wanted to deal for its own sake was *urgent*."

Interesting. That was useful. If there was just something that I couldn't bear to *interrupt*, maybe I could ignore humans whose consumption would distract me from completing it.

That seemed to be all the wisdom she had to impart. I thanked her, and tumbled gracefully off the roof, spinning three times and landing on my feet without a stumble.

Carlisle was in his study, reading. His door was open, so I went right in, and he put down his book. "Hello, Bella. What is it?" he asked, looking at me in a very paternal manner.

I couldn't think how to feel about that. I *had* a father... on another continent who I hadn't grown up with and who I wouldn't be able to see in person for months, if not years, if *ever*. I supposed I could start thinking of Carlisle as my father-in-law, just a little in advance.

Come to think of it, hadn't Rosalie had living family when she'd been turned? Had she simply cut them off? What about Emmett? Edward's parents had died in the same plague that had nearly killed him - but Esme's? Carlisle's relatives were surely long dead by 2005, and given the origin story I already knew for him, I didn't think they'd have received him well after he was a vampire. I didn't know about Jasper. Alice still had plans in the works, yet untouched, to dig up her origins from the information I'd funneled her from James, but she wouldn't remember any kin she found.

But Carlisle was looking at me expectantly, and I filed away those questions for later. "I'm trying to pick up tips on how to not eat anybody," I told him.

Carlisle's story began with self-revulsion and a series of suicide attempts, which he described in low, calm tones entirely unsuitable for tales of jumping from heights, trying to drown, and even seeking death by starvation. That last was what had led to the epiphany: he'd gotten thirsty enough that a passing herd of deer had compelled his feeding, and he'd found that they could sustain his life. Finding this preferable, he'd exercised sheer strength of will to gradually develop what amounted to an immunity to

the temptation of human blood.

I stared at him. That was no help at all. I *loved* being a vampire. I couldn't look at my moonlit skin with disgust, I wasn't repulsed by my speed and power and beauty. A solution to the bloodlust that relied on self-directed speciesism was not the one for me.

I thanked Carlisle anyway, and made my exit.

On Monday, it was decided - Jasper the lone holdout against unanimity - that it was a good idea to test my ability to hold up around actual humans in a lower stakes situation. Demonstrating my lack of control, if it was going to be a problem, was better handled under friendly circumstances and not in a courthouse somewhere in Ukraine.

Various ways of getting a test human to the house without arousing any suspicion were considered: requesting missionaries, ordering pizza, hiring a repairman for the master bathroom's sink. (It really *didn't* work, although Esme was capable of fixing it and had it on her list of improvements.) Eventually it was decided that none of these were sufficiently anonymous if things did... go wrong. The address of the last known destination of the deceased, should I eat our visitor, would be on record.

Until Jasper mentioned it, no one considered the possibility that I'd lunge for the human and be restrained successfully. I was stronger than any of the others, even Emmett, in my newborn year. While it was feasible to restrain newborns anyway, the techniques known all involved things like ripping their arms off. (Jasper's mood alteration could help, and I authorized him to use it if I looked dangerously lunge-y, but it was not powerful enough to even slow me down if I got going.) I was all for whatever newborn-wrangling tricks were available as an alternative to murder, especially since detached vampire limbs could be put back. But Edward snarled when Jasper made the suggestion. I couldn't calm him down until all of the others promised that I was not to be dismembered.

"Edward, do you think I am going to try to eat my experimental subject?" I asked testily.

"No, of course not, love," he said soothingly, switching instantly into reassurance. He patted my hand.

"Okay, so if I'm not going to try to eat him or her, then it doesn't matter what would happen if I did try, right?" I said reasonably. I wasn't so confident in myself, and wanted the precautions so that I could be stopped in the worst case. But if he was convinced I was perfectly self-controlled, then I could reason the same result out of him.

Edward scowled at Jasper, who must have been thinking some unapproved thought. "Bella, I have to listen to them thinking it, if they're planning to do any of those things," he said. "I have to *see* it -"

I remembered his roar at Rosalie. "So get out of range, don't watch," I said. "I don't

want to kill anyone. If I have to spend four seconds without one or both arms to not kill anyone, then that is *better than killing someone*. If you can't stand being aware of that happening to me, then don't. But it is too important that I leave our visitor alive."

Edward hated the idea, but with the situation presented this way, he reluctantly acknowledged that, in fact, it *was* a poor choice to increase the risk of my killing my first sapient snack. He didn't protest further while Jasper told the others how to incapacitate me if I went for the human's throat.

The discussion returned to the provenance of the guinea pig. Eventually, we agreed that Alice should run out to a highway and pretend to need a ride home. She invented an elaborate little story about how her car had been stolen, full of narrative filigree and affected sad faces, which would probably convince anyone who stopped for her in the first place. Alice was the right choice for the job because she could see who was coming and reject cars with more than one occupant, keeping the scale as minimal as possible. She was also small and cute and could look helpless more readily than most of us.

A small part of me was screaming that this wasn't right, that if I *needed* to do a test than I oughtn't do a test, that I couldn't risk some stranger's life just so I could have my wedding a particular way and participate in society a little sooner, that it could wait -

It could wait, that was certain. I could continue to live in the middle of nowhere in Norway for a decade without ever seeing a human, if I liked. I could ask a Denali vampire to fly in and perform the ceremony. For that matter, I was pretty sure I could wear Edward down if I had to.

But in order for me to ever safely walk into a human society - if I wanted to go to college, or buy my own clothes, or have a proper tour of Europe instead of just the uninhabited parts -

Then I needed to do something like what I was doing. I couldn't just drive into Oslo and get out of the car and *then* discover, oops, I'm going to massacre that traffic jam full of tinned treats. Meeting one human in an isolated location, surrounded by more controlled vampires who would keep me in check if need be, was the safest way to test my limits.

The timing was still not forced. It didn't have to be this day. But Alice was as certain as she ever was of anything that I would be okay, and that decided me. Alice was never perfectly reliable, but at her surest, she *was* more likely to be right than guesses based on how long I'd been a vampire. She'd thought Emmett was all right, going to the last flying lesson his instructor ever taught, and he'd been past the newborn stage. If she thought I was all right now, then doing the test now wasn't significantly less safe than doing it in 2015. Since there were small reasons of convenience and preference that made me want to join the world sooner rather than later...

I closed my eyes and focused my thoughts on my strategies.

Edward's: hate the monster that feeding would make me, refuse to be that creatures. Focus on everything but contemplating the taste. I had voluntarily cut culinary pleasures out of my life in exchange for the benefits of vampirism, and must not dwell on the loss. Must hold my breath. (Although I should take one small breath, when I thought I had hold of myself - I didn't know if I could get through all the vows in one lungful of air.)

Rosalie's: Urgently, intensely want something that wasn't compatible with drinking the human's blood. I was good at that sort of thing. What did I want...

I wanted to see my mother again. I knew it was only an outside chance that I'd be able to do it under the best circumstances - she'd know at once that I'd changed, when she saw me, and that wasn't safe for either of us - but if it ever became possible, I wanted to be able to go to her. If I ever ate anyone, even less than a week after turning, I'd never trust myself around any humans I cared about. Same with my father. If there was any possibility that they could be part of my life, properly, then I wanted to preserve that chance.

I wasn't too keen on the possibility of having my arms ripped off. I'd like to avoid that.

I wanted whatever hapless person Alice brought home to return to his or her family tonight, with no idea that they'd been in danger. I focused on imaginary characteristics of the person, knowing they were fictitious but finding them helpful anchors. Maybe she'd bring a mother of four, on her way home from buying the vanilla she needed to make her eldest a birthday cake. That vanilla needed to go in that cake and if I ate the poor lady, it never would. In fact, even if I didn't eat her, and she just saw something incriminating, she might not be safe - although if she didn't tell anyone, maybe it would be okay. But I shouldn't think that, shouldn't give myself leeway like that: she must not even *see* anything remarkable about my behavior.

I wanted a perfect record. Jasper had a hard time even with intact humans - everyone except Carlisle was iffy around exposed blood. If I failed this time, then it would be harder every occasion in the future. Getting it right every time was really the *easiest* thing to do, no matter how hard it seemed once there was a living breathing human standing in front of me.

I wanted control of myself. I wanted to, without Jasper's emotional help or physical restraint, to behave in the fashion I *chose* to behave. I wanted freedom from my instincts except when I endorsed their directives.

Was that enough? I cast about for other things to add, anything that could bolster my resolve.

I didn't want to disappoint my family.

I'd started, tentatively, to think of them that way - my parents-in-law, my sisters, my

brothers. My fiancé. I knew how they managed Jasper, I knew that they loved him in spite of his need to take such care. But I didn't want Edward to look at me the way Alice looked at Jasper when they were among humans. I wanted to be able to race around the world without needing to be babysat or worried about, without avoiding population centers.

I sucked in a breath and conjured a vivid mental image of the Cullens - *my family* - huddled around me, talking over each other in their eagerness to congratulate me for controlling myself so young, all of them full of pride and excitement. The smug grin Alice would wear, the vicarious fraternal joy in Emmett's laugh. Esme's warmly expressed delight, twin to Carlisle's quiet approval. Rosalie's wordless, wry acknowledgement and Jasper's envy. Edward's radiant admiration.

I wanted *that*.

"Alice is on her way," whispered Edward.

Esme fetched me a pair of brown contact lenses. "It's not quite your own brown, but they won't know that," she assured me quietly. "The contacts won't hurt but they will be annoying - there are imperfections in the lens and you'll be able to see them. They'll dissolve after a few hours but will last long enough." I popped the little hemispheres into my eyes, interested to discover that I no longer had any impulse to flinch away from objects approaching them. Little flaws in the contacts drew my vision and my eyes refocused disorientingly; I blinked. I could see past them well enough to function, although I wouldn't want to try anything fancy with them in. Esme also handed me a water bottle.

Everyone tensed up, waiting for the human, ready to take me apart if I made a wrong move.

I held my breath.

Alice was saying something in Norwegian, outside the house. I hadn't started learning the language yet except a few phrasebook entries, having been too distracted by everything. I presumed she was trying to invite the person who'd picked her up in for a beverage or some similarly plausible. A voice - a man's, thin and lively, tried several times to demur, but she insisted.

The door swung open and she pulled him inside.

I looked at the human, blinking a few times in a reflexive attempt to rid my eyes of their obstructions. I could hear his heartbeat, his breath. The sounds signalled "food" - but weren't that unlike the pulse or panting of a non-human animal. The speed was a little different, but those things varied between species anyway. Without the smell, it was like he was something in Tupperware in the fridge - clearly edible just based on the package he came in, but not demanding that I pounce on him.

He's a person, I reminded myself. Before I took a breath, I used a little of my air, to ask Edward at a pitch the visitor wouldn't hear, too fast for him to see my lips move: "What's his name?"

"Nils," Edward replied, similarly unobtrusively. Okay. The not-to-be-eaten man had a name. Hopefully that would make it easier. Alice showed Nils into the kitchen, poured him a glass of water and one for herself. They made awkward small talk in Norwegian. He looked curiously at us, Alice's strangely still and silent relatives; Emmett, the clown, waved at him.

I made full use of my immensely parallel brain to fix in my mind his name, my competing desires, and everything else I could use to hedge out the thought of drinking Nils's blood.

I sucked in a tiny wisp of air.

It was like inhaling flames. My throat erupted in heat and thirst. Venom filled my mouth, coated my tongue, demanded to be used for its incapacitating purpose against my natural prey. It hurt, I could have swallowed a hot poker and felt no worse, and the relief was *right* there, pulsing through the human's arteries - *Nils*, I forced myself to think, *he has a name, he probably has a loving family, I don't want to eat him, I don't want it* -

I brought my water to my lips too fast, heedless of the need to act human while near one. Holding my lungs still, I washed the venom away. It replaced itself, but more slowly, and I took another gulp to clear it. My throat wasn't cooled at all. It still felt flayed and charred and in need of the balm that I could only get from one source.

I want to get married on Wednesday in Ukraine, I screamed at myself desperately. I want to see Renée and Charlie. I want Nils to go home to his loved ones. I want to be in control, I want to be perfect at this, I want my family to be proud of me. I want that more than this, more than this, more than this, I can't have them both, I don't want the blood enough -

I let another tiny gasp pass my gritted teeth.

Like swallowing molten iron. The desire for soothing blood flooded my senses; I didn't quite experience tunnel vision, but everything except the experience of my parched throat was irrelevant, passed without notice - not significant enough to be embedded in my perfect recall. I had my thoughts and my thirst. That was all.

I do not want to eat him -

Oh, insinuated the charming little voice of vampire instinct, *but everything is set up to make it safe for you to have a sip. No harm will come to you if you just taste, it will taste so good, you know they will all forgive you, you know you might have to communicate with your family over the Internet only anyway, it will hardly change a thing... You know you want it...*

A little whining sound squeaked out of me, but I hadn't moved from my seat. Nils was starting to look very uncomfortable; he clearly wanted to leave. I took another swallow of water and rinsed away the latest welling of venom. I took another breath of air.

Fire, again. But I knew what to expect with this breath. It was not getting *worse*. And I hadn't eaten him yet. I couldn't relax - but, holding myself rigid and fighting my urges with every passing moment, I could hold still. I could avoid leaping across the room at Nils and *don't think about the taste* preventing him from going home to his family.

Alice stopped urging him to stay. He put his water glass in the sink and started making his way towards the door, looking uncomfortably at us.

One more useful test, to see if I could not only be in the same room as a human but have a wedding performed by one. Which would involve uttering words, and looking pretty in pictures rather than tortured and struggling. I finished off the water in my bottle, filled my lungs with scorching air.

I smiled at Nils, monitoring every facial muscle that I had control over to make the expression natural-looking instead of a forced grimace. "*Farvel!*" I said. One of the phrasebook bits - "goodbye".

"*Farvel*," he replied, looking no less puzzled. He let himself out. I heard every one of his footsteps as he made his way to his car. I heard his heartbeat, rapid with nervousness. I heard his car door open, and slam, and his engine start up.

I waited to relax until I couldn't hear the car anymore. Everyone else waited to relax until I did.

As soon as I sighed with relief and settled into a more neutral standing position, Edward enveloped me in an intense hug. "*Bella*," he exclaimed. He sounded just as dazzled by my performance as I'd imagined.

I leaned into him and inhaled his soothing non-food scent. "I'm okay," I breathed, confirming it to myself as much as to everyone else. "I'm really okay."

Honeymoon

I did not eat anyone on the way to Ukraine. We left early, so I'd have time to fill up on animal blood as soon before the ceremony as possible. While the others checked into a hotel in town, Edward rented a car and drove me to a sufficiently human-free forested area in the middle of the night, scouted ahead to make sure that there wasn't anyone about while I waited in the car, and then gave me the go-ahead. I ate two elk, a lynx, and a wild boar. (I found I liked the boar more than I had other animals, for some reason. It had the same icky tang to it that they all did, but I was able to interpret it as being more like yogurt or sour cream than actual spoilage, to borrow a human food analogy.) By the end of this feast I felt bloated and sloshy with all the excess blood - I felt like doing anything but eating.

In the hotel, there were smells of humans everywhere, but I didn't have to get close to anyone. I focused on the way Edward's hand felt in mine as we made our way back to our rooms in the wee hours of the morning, and did not devour the night doorman, or any of our neighbors. The traces the humans left in the room made the air dry and thirst-inducing, but it was like Death Valley in the summer, not the interior of an active incinerator. Unpleasant, but tolerable, almost ignoreable, especially when I was so full.

We didn't sleep or ever urgently need the bathroom, so we were in two adjacent rooms instead of spreading out over several - a girls' room where Alice and Esme and Rosalie (mostly Alice) fussed over me, and a guys' room where the others stayed.

I heard Emmett and Jasper badgering Edward into having a bachelor party at around three a.m. I furrowed my brow, wondering what they'd do, but then shrugged to myself. It wasn't like Edward would look twice at anyone else, even if they *did* hire strippers for some unfathomable reason. He was *all* mine. I purred quietly, contemplating this fact.

Alice apparently knew better than to drag me to any human-filled place for a bachelorette party I did not want, but she insisted on curling my hair. She piled it up in a cascade of elegantly ironed ringlets on the top of my head, secured with about six pounds of bobby pins. Most makeup was impossible, since nothing would stick to vampire skin if we didn't hold our faces in perfect stillness to avoid cracking paint or dislodging clingy powder. But mascara *was* usable - eyelashes, like other hair, were unaffected except for growing more slowly. Alice pleaded with me to let her dab a little bit on. I thought it looked silly, gilt on the lily of my new face, but let her do it. Maybe it distracted from the sleepy shadows under my eyes. (I never felt tired - just looked like I could use a night's sleep, like all of us vampires did.)

Once I'd been pinned and painted to her satisfaction, she smoothed down her own dark spikes. Then she braided up Rosalie and Esme, coiling the expertly woven plaits into buns affixed to the backs of their heads with more bobby pins from her endless supply.

Edward and the others of his room left for our appointment first, so I could get into my dress after he was out of mindreading range and reduce the risk of his silly

superstition bothering him.

Alice, ever eager to organize fancy things, had set everything up. We were meeting an official who'd conduct the service in a picturesque empty steppe, as well as a photographer - the open air would help me tolerate proximity to the humans. I had a bouquet, and so did Alice, Rosalie, and Esme (my bridesmaids - well, technically, bridesmatrons, not that anyone ever used that word.) Alice had gotten them dresses, too. Gold - like the eyes I hoped to achieve through a scrupulous "vegetarian" diet. I was wearing brown contact lenses again to avoid spooking our celebrant.

There was no aisle, but Alice had scared up a privacy screen thing from somewhere, and set it up in the middle of the grass. With Edward and the human standing some twenty feet away, the rest of us huddled behind the barrier so we could emerge as we were supposed to. The bridesmaids and groomsmen (neither Edward nor I had designated a specific maid of honor or best man) went first, pairwise: Esme and Carlisle, Rosalie and Emmett, and Alice and Jasper. I heard the photographer's camera clicking as he caught snapshots.

My father was not present, and I'd declined to have Carlisle walk me down the "aisle". That meant I was alone. I was brimful with nerves - *"aaaaaah I'm getting married what would Renée say"* - but nerves were not thirst. Anything but thirst was good. I took a deep breath of relatively human-free air, shielded from their scents by the screen. I took one long stride past its edge and turned towards the place where I would be wed.

Edward looked stunning. He was so supernally, exultantly happy - I'd seen him smile like that *once* when I'd agreed to marry him, and there it was again, and there was nothing else in the world, not even the warm heartbeats of the photographer and the celebrant.

I managed not to break into a run. I took long, but measured, steps towards him, feeling my face split into a grin of my own. In what seemed like an age, but was really seconds, I was in my designated place, on the side where my bridesmaids fanned out. Edward took my hands in his.

The service was in Ukrainian. I'd read through a phrasebook, again, and memorized what I'd need to say when, but the recitation - whatever the local equivalent was for "We are gathered here today..." - entered my ears without my comprehending more than the occasional word and our names. It would have even if it'd been in English, most likely; my eyes were fixed on Edward, my mind was full of Edward, I was listening to him breathe and clutching his fingers in mine. The celebrant was beneath notice.

I said my lines when cued. They used up my air; I drew in another breath, focusing on Edward's scent over the humans'. Glee over my imminent marriage chased out the impulse to dart to my left and bite into the man's jugular.

Edward spoke his own piece with triumphant emphasis. I lifted my hand when it came time, and he added the wedding band to the engagement ring: a delicate torus of

gold, also his mother's, thin and slight enough to tuck under the wide lattice of diamonds. It, too, fit perfectly.

The celebrant, all but forgotten in my rush of euphoria, said the words that I knew were Ukrainian for, "You may kiss the bride."

Edward pounced on me as though it didn't matter if the humans saw his improbable speed, as though no one was watching at all, as though the only things in the universe were me and him and the fact that it was now time for us to be kissing. His old-fashioned restraint was properly obviated in matrimony; and I was safe to kiss; and I clutched at him with just enough caution to avoid gouging holes in him but he didn't protest, just held me tighter -

Emmett. Of course Emmett would *whistle*. Edward and I broke apart, matching growls in our throats too low for the celebrant to hear. The human looked indulgent, like he saw this sort of thing all the time. He had no idea. Humans would explode if they felt like this. *Edward* looked about to explode, so suffused with victory and satisfaction was he. I might burst myself. I'd loved him human, if anything humans felt deserved the word, but not like this. No heart also burdened with the task of beating could take it.

I kissed him again; I couldn't resist and he didn't try.

Eventually we had to interrupt ourselves again, to stand in photographer-dictated arrangements. We photographed every possible combination. Me and Edward, me and all the bridesmaids, Edward and all the groomsmen, me and Alice with and without Edward (for recipients of only partial truth), the entire wedding party together, each pair of the others.

The celebrant and the photographer had arrived separately, in their own cars. They bade us goodbye and were on their respective ways, the latter with a promise to send all the photographs in both physical and digital formats as requested. (Edward translated, bending to whisper against my ear, and almost before he finished his sentence I spun in his arms to kiss him again.)

When they were gone, there was no human anywhere in view. I plucked my contacts gently out of my eyes and dropped them on the ground, then turned back to my husband.

"Dance with me," I whispered to Edward, and then we spun, full of grace, placing our feet in flawless rhythm on the steppe, whirling in sync like figurines in a music box.

We had almost two perfect weeks before disaster struck.

For our honeymoon, Esme loaned us her private island off the coast of Brazil. It had been a gift to her from Carlisle, but stood empty most of the time. The small airplane that Edward had rented to get us to and from Ukraine couldn't be trusted to get across the Atlantic Ocean without a stop, and I didn't want to spend an overnight flight in a

passenger jet full of humans. We could have swum, but it would have taken a long time.

So Edward took a passenger flight and I went in his luggage. He was nervous about the plan, thinking I might have some bad associations with traveling in cargo holds, but it was a very different situation. I was in a giant suitcase, with books to read (quite able to see them in the dark), not in need of food or water or sleep or fresh air, not squishy enough to be made uncomfortable by lumps under me or weights over me, not crampable by awkward poses. Most importantly, I wasn't the captive of a creature with many times my strength who was taking me to Italy whether I liked it or not.

The suitcase was searched at every stop - of course; I'd make any x-ray machine they put me through go haywire - but we'd prepared for that eventuality. I held perfectly still, didn't breathe, kept my eyes closed, and had a tag around my wrist that labeled me (in Norwegian, English, and Portuguese) "*Untitled: Mixed Media*. 2004. Anonymous artist." I could feel hot, damp hands poking at me, fumbling for the tag. I heard them zip up the suitcase again. The time I was investigated during our stop Stateside, I heard some confused mumbles about why such a pretty statue was being transported without any packing peanuts and in the same bag as a set of assorted language primers and a box of contact lenses. I didn't think this inquisitiveness would go anywhere untoward. I probably wasn't even the strangest-looking thing they'd seen that month.

Edward picked me and our other bags off the carousel in Rio de Janeiro; in the suitcase, I popped my contact lenses in. I was finally unpacked after he'd rented a car and stashed the other items in the trunk; he let me out at a moment when no one was looking and I unfolded myself into the passenger seat. Promptly, Edward kissed me, which was not at all unwelcome.

Eventually we remembered that we had somewhere to be and he drove to the docks. He found a place to stash the car which would let him leave it there for the extended duration he wanted, and then we divided our belongings between us and I followed him to a sleek white boat that floated among other, clunkier craft. I didn't know how to drive the thing, but I watched Edward pilot it skillfully out into the water and picked up on approximately what he was doing, under what circumstances, and how the boat reacted.

The trip took just under an hour. The sun came up soon after the lights of Rio were pinpricks in the distance - no one could see us. I watched my skin shimmer as I lazed idly in the boat.

Isle Esme came into view. It was a tiny island, a low beach trailing out into the water on one side and swaying palms on the other. Our boat drew up to the bleached wood of the docks, where Edward tied off. He swung our bags out onto the planks and then scooped me into his arms.

"This is Esme's island, not ours," I pointed out. "You don't *have* to carry me over this particular threshold."

"I'm just being thorough," said Edward gallantly, positioning my weight over one

arm and scooping up the trunks with the other. I shrugged and didn't protest as he carried me up a winding path to the island's house.

It was a big, pale house, with all the glass and white carpeting characteristic of Esme's preferences in architecture. I imagined Carlisle bringing Esme here for the first time, presenting her with a tumbled-down ramshackle toy, and her setting to work outfitting it with everything she wanted. Edward took one final triumphant stride through the wide-open front doors. "Here we are, Mrs. Cullen," he said, savoring my appended name like it was a piece of candy. Candy made out of blood, I amended in my head as the analogy floundered. He set the suitcases on the floor.

"Are you planning to put me down?" I asked mirthfully.

"Hmmm," he said, in mock thoughtfulness. "Not just yet, I think." I let him carry me through the house - it was rather large for such a small island - and into a big white room with a big white bed. Everything was lit by late sunrise that streamed in through the glass eastern wall.

I smirked at Edward, raised an eyebrow, and lifted my left hand to let the twin rings flash.

Among the enhanced vampire senses is touch.

Eventually, a few days later, we had to hunt. Well, I did, constant newborn thirst working against me - Edward could have waited another week. He suggested going to the mainland, but I didn't want to take any unnecessary risks with being near humans if I didn't have to, for all that he said I was handling them brilliantly for my age. Instead, we swam, looking for aquatic lunches. I ate most of a killer whale, finding the giant creature's supply of blood a little too much to consume in one sitting; Edward polished it off for me and then added a small basking shark. Hunting underwater was interestingly different, and the whale was even tastier than the wild boar had been (as animal fare went). Edward assured me when I mentioned this that they were probably available near Norway as well, having a wide range of habitat.

And then we went back to the island.

We didn't have to breathe, we didn't have to rest, we rarely needed to eat.

Being a vampire was very... *very*... nice.

Edward promised me that it wouldn't bother Esme that some of her furniture would need replacing. We arranged to be out, swimming around in the warm water, when the cleaning crews came through to pick up the remains of feather pillows and the splinters of

bedframes.

Twelve days after we'd arrived on the island, several things happened.

First, my new cellphone rang. Alice had flung it at me after we'd stopped in Norway after the wedding, and promised to keep my parents off my back as long as she could. I told her that if they became truly panicked she was to give them the number, if she really had to. And so when it rang, I growled and interrupted what I was doing to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hello. Can I speak to Bella, please?" growled Charlie's voice.

Of course. I sounded different. How had I not thought of that? I tried to adjust the pitch and harshness of my voice, tried to remember what I'd sounded like before it had been turned into chimes. "It's me, Dad."

"*ISABELLA MARIE SWAN!*" roared Charlie, apparently willing to accept the faked voice as my own.

"Isabella Marie Swan *Cullen*," I corrected him. "Alice was supposed to tell you -" How would I have felt about this if I were who Charlie thought I was? Embarrassed, I guessed, but with a Renée-like enthusiasm for my new direction in life - though Charlie could never know how permanent this change in course would be.

"I didn't want to talk to Alice!" shouted Charlie. "I wanted to talk to *you!* You - you - you - *eloped!* You're seventeen!"

"Yeah, we had to go to Ukraine to get married because of that - Dad, I knew you'd never give us permission, but Dad, we're so happy, please forgive me," I pleaded. "*I'm* so happy."

Charlie growled incoherently into the receiver for a few minutes, and I listened half-patiently for him to formulate another protest. Finally he said, "Your mother has never even *met* Edward."

"We'll try to find a chance to visit her soon," I promised. If I put it off till the winter, bought her tickets to Norway, and broke the heater in the house, I could perhaps have an excuse to bundle up enough that my changes wouldn't look so visible. Then Renée would be cold, but none the wiser - maybe. Or maybe Alice would see her understanding, accepting, turning -

Charlie was ranting again. "It's astonishing, you know how Renée feels about early marriage, but she was talking about how you're an "old soul" and know what's best. I was expecting her to lay into you, but she's apparently content to wait for you to call her. But *I* want to know if you're coming home."

"I'm in the middle of my honeymoon, Dad," I told him. "And then there's the rest of the tour of Europe. That wasn't made up."

"What about after that?" he insisted.

"I don't really know, Dad," I admitted. "I was thinking I might want to go to college early, with Edward."

"Oh, Bells," sighed Charlie, voice full of unaccustomed emotion.

"You'll be okay without me," I encouraged waveringly. "You were okay without me before."

"I already miss you," he said.

"I miss you too, Dad," I choked, unable to cry. "I love you."

"Love you too, Bells," he sighed. "Have... have a good honeymoon."

"I will," I promised.

"I love you," Charlie said again, and he hung up the phone.

Edward hugged me as I flipped my cell shut. I sighed. "I assume you've already tried every form of makeup in existence and there is nothing that would make me look human," I said.

"Not if you want to move around," he said regretfully. "Anything that sticks, cracks. Anything that doesn't crack, won't stick."

"What about a thin layer of Sculpey or something..."

Edward shook his head. "Stretches unnaturally under stress. You could cover up everything but your face with clothes, but there's no way anyone you've met before would believe you suddenly prefer to wear a burqa."

I growled, and Edward petted me soothingly, and after a few minutes I permitted the distraction and we were back where we had been.

Second, my new cellphone rang again.

A less than coherent snarl escaped my throat as I sat up and lunged hatefully for the device. "Hello?" I said as musically as ever.

"Bella," said a woman's voice, quietly, urgently. Familiar, but not instantly placed - I must have known her only as a human - who was she? I thought about who Alice might

have agreed to put through to me, who the voice sounded like -

"Gianna?" I asked incredulously. "What is it?"

"Bella, I'm so sorry to ask, I hate to do it - but can you send someone to Italy?" asked Gianna in a thin whisper.

"I don't understand - why?"

"I think they're going to kill me, Bella," she murmured. And then the call suddenly cut off, leaving static in its wake.

I looked at Edward.

"Did you hear that?" I asked him quietly, and he nodded, looking grave.

"I don't think we can save her, Bella," he told me. "Her days were numbered anyway. I thought they were going to keep her longer than this, maybe until next year, but they were never planning to *keep* her like she hoped." He guessed, correctly, that under the circumstances I would waive my discomfort with hearing Gianna's thoughts in the hopes of learning something that could help - even though he clearly didn't have much confidence in the possibility.

"I need to try," I told him. Gianna must have precious few contacts outside of the Volturi. She knew I'd become a vampire, but didn't know I was an uncommonly controlled newborn, one who could most likely avoid devouring her. If she could have gotten ahold of anyone except me, surely she'd have tried. But it seemed she expected me to ask a family member to go. But she could have made that request through Alice. What was going on?

I decided to call Alice.

Alice called me, and I picked up. "Hi, Bella," she said. "Did Gianna call you?"

"Yes," I replied. "She thinks the Volturi are going to kill her, I don't know how to help -"

"You're going to get another call," said Alice. "Aro sent you a letter here in the Norway house - and a present - I didn't think it was a good idea to keep him waiting for your answer so I phoned them and told them how to reach you. They want to meet you in person. They were going to come here, but I said you'd go to them. I see a lot of futures where Gianna lives, so you *can* get her out," she promised. "But... I'm having some trouble seeing exactly how. The Volturi know what I can do, so they *might* be blocking me on purpose, dithering, but I can't tell. You need to go to Volterra alone," she continued. "You *will* be fine on the flight outside of a suitcase, just fill up first and turn your little fan on if you want to breathe."

"Why do I have to go alone?" Not that I loved the idea of having Edward there,

readable, full of honeymoon memories...

Alice said, "I don't know. But you go alone in every future where Gianna lives that I can see." She sounded frustrated, and like she had a splitting headache. "Maybe you won't think of whatever it is you think of, if Edward's there? But I'm guessing."

"Okay," I sighed, trusting.

"Santiago's going to call you," Alice said, and hung up abruptly.

Third, my new cellphone rang *again*. Santiago's voice was easier to recognize, with advance warning. "Hello," she said, formal in her tone.

"Hello, Santiago," I replied, and I just barely heard a surprised little noise when she noticed the glassy, lyrical quality my voice had taken on. No reason to hide it from her - reason to flaunt it, actually. "What can I do for you?" I asked, speeding up a little, making it clearer that I really was a vampire.

"Aro requests the honor of your presence at your earliest convenience," she replied. "He regrets the interruption but is eager to meet you early in your new life."

"I'm packing as we speak," I said, watching Edward scowling as he folded strewn things into neat squares and piled them into suitcases. "I'll be there in perhaps a day."

"We are aware that you are a newborn, and remind you that it is strictly forbidden to hunt within Volterra," she added.

"There's no need to worry about that," I told her. Let her draw her own conclusions, assume I'd be coming with a contingent of guardian Cullens. "That or other exposure."

"Very good," she told me. "I will see you soon." And with that, she closed the phone.

"Go eat something," muttered Edward. "I'll finish packing."

I caught his hands in their flurry of activity, brought them up to my lips and kissed them. "I'll be fine," I promised.

He looked up at me with troubled eyes, then freed his hands to cradle my face and kiss me. I broke away apologetically after a minute, and went to stock up on food.

Alice made my travel arrangements; I arrived at the Rio airport to find flights booked all the way to Italy. Edward saw me off with immense reluctance, and I inhaled only as much as I had to to talk to personnel. (I'd spent the boat ride and the drive to the

airport drilling myself in Portuguese and Italian, enough to get through the trip. The little Spanish I remembered from high school was surprisingly helpful.)

I had to visit the airport and airplane lavatories occasionally to change my contact lenses. I spent the journey reading my language primers - there were Italian ones among them; I'd gotten a wide selection - and muttering supersonic practice sentences to myself. I didn't walk off the plane in Rome fluent in the language, but I thought I'd be able to communicate in an emergency.

In my bag, besides the supply of lenses and the books, was a large sum of money, a shiny black credit card in my name, a forged American passport and drivers' licenses for several countries with my new face affixed to them, and various other necessities. I'd bought a bottle of water at one stopover, but I was full enough of orca blood that I rarely found I wanted it except when I had to breathe several times in close succession.

It was close to midnight when I got to Italy. I rented a car at the airport, flipped through a map on a rack at the facility while I waited for them to drive it out to me, and set out for Volterra.

Parking was hard to find, but eventually I stashed the car at an exorbitantly overpriced garage, rolling my eyes and waving my rings at the lot attendant who tried clumsily to flirt with me. I understood about two thirds of the words, but his leer was quite plain.

I vaguely remembered the route James had taken to get to the grate that led to the Volturi compound. But it had been daylight, and I had been human. I wandered the mostly deserted streets, trying to find a familiar starting place. After a fruitless half hour, I started sniffing the air, trying to find a trail of vampire scent without getting hit by a faceful of human temptation. It took only minutes before I got a hint of the characteristically cool and sweet aroma. Inexpertly, I followed it, until I found the same hole James had jumped me down into. I took out my contact lenses, which made it instantly easier to see the darkened passage.

I leapt easily into the tunnel and followed it, up to the grating, through the door and into the hallway. Only one guard was stationed at the elevator door - no one I recognized, unless I'd gotten a very brief glimpse of him while human.

"I'm Bella Cullen," I told him.

"Come with me," he replied, and I went towards the elevator, trying to conceal my apprehension. If he noticed it, he didn't comment.

I knew as soon as the elevator doors opened again that Gianna was in the room. I spotted her a split second later, and once she saw me, her expression was one of sheer terror. She shut her eyes.

"Gianna, it's me, Bella," I said, momentarily puzzled, and then I realized she might

know full well it was me - and know full well I was a newborn.

She opened one green eye, still trembling with fear.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I told her. "It's okay."

Gianna let out a huge breath. I clenched my teeth a little, but I wasn't *very* thirsty, and I'd been getting all kinds of practice at not eating people. Gianna was, if anything, less appetizing than the average random stranger: I had extra reason not to eat her.

The Volturi guardsman looked nonplussed. I wondered if this was how they'd planned to kill Gianna - bring the newborn past her, have me tear her to pieces in a fit of ill control, call it a crime, pin it on me, use the leverage for - something? But he recovered, and led me into the maze. I made what I hoped was a reassuring face at Gianna. She, bewildered, tilted her head and watched me go.

The guard led me through the maze much more swiftly than I'd gone as a human, and the stairs and labyrinthine halls didn't seem as arduous to pass through as they had before. In no time we were in the circular chamber I'd seen before.

Aro - as well as Marcus, Caius, and assorted other vampires - were all there. I flicked my eyes around, memorizing the faces for future reference. I recognized Santiago, Jane and Alec, and three familiar ones for which I had no names. Two vampires I didn't recognize were also present. "Hello," I said, with a curtsy to Aro - there was no reason to put on an arrogant display. I was probably going to have to provoke him one way or another during this conversation. If I had any leeway, I wanted to keep it.

"Bella, my dear," said Aro, with barely detectable uncertainty in his voice. He was staring at my eyes; I could imagine him thinking that yes, that was newborn red, but where was the crazed bloodlust? "I'm surprised that you come alone."

Did I have a good explanation for that, besides that Alice had said it was a good idea? Not really... "It was me you sent for, wasn't it?" I asked innocently. "My coven doesn't revolve around me."

"Of course," said Aro, agreeable. "I had originally planned to visit you at your new home..."

"I'm glad I could spare you the travel."

"Mm. I largely hoped to confirm that you'd been turned, according to law. I see that you have. Immortality would appear to suit you very well." He was looking me up and down, with admiration or something close to it.

"I have, just as I said I would be," I told him. "No humans suspect anything odd

about my disappearance and I'm going to make sure it stays that way."

"That's good to hear." Aro paused. "I am impressed that you left Gianna unharmed."

"I'm full," I said, mostly truthfully - I had nearly finished my entire whale alone, in preparation for a human-filled trek between continents, and while I no longer felt like I'd ooze orca blood if poked, I wasn't particularly empty either.

"In fact, in general you seem like a... unique... newborn," he continued.

"My mind is protected," I reminded him. I didn't think this was actually the reason I had such control, but it was something he already knew, which *could* have plausibly stretched in that direction if I didn't have other information.

"That's true. And it remains so?" he inquired. "From your mate?"

"Yes."

"And from me?" he asked, holding forth a hand.

I didn't pause as I raised my ringless right hand to touch his. With enhanced senses, I could feel that his skin really was different from other vampires'. He wasn't as smooth, and I thought I could detect something like pores - a commodity which I lacked. I wondered if makeup would stick to *his* skin.

Aro let his hand fall, a small frown on his face. "How curious. Have you noticed any change in your power since you joined us, apart from your uncommon clearheadedness?"

"None," I replied. Of course, I'd been distracted, and I had *lots* of new powers to try out that were easier to figure out.

"Hmm. Still... Do you have any interest in joining our guard, dear Bella?"

How to get out of that without getting into any trouble... "I don't think my mate would like to do that, and I must stay with him," I said. That was probably plausible. Vampires never broke up, Edward had never been interested in joining the Volturi. If there were any reason to refuse them, it would be "my mate would be upset". And without Edward here, Aro had to take my word for it, even if Edward would have reacted differently (perhaps in response to someone's thoughts).

"I thought that might be the case," Aro sighed. "Well, I have no reason to keep you here longer... I'd intended Gianna as a gift for you," he added, raising an eyebrow. "Are you sure you don't want her before you go? It's truly baffling, the way your coven has rejected our natural diet..."

I thought fast - what attitude was he trying to elicit, with this "gift"? What did he *expect* me to do? "Oh, may I have her?" I asked, innocently, pleased - childlike. It was easier to act, as a vampire; all I had to do was hit on the emotions I needed, encourage

them to bloom in the fertile ground of my distractable mind.

Aro's face broke into a broad smile. "Of course, child." *Bingo*.

"I'm so glad. I'd like to take her with me," I said.

His grin faltered. "Take her with you?"

I let my eyes go very wide. "I'm not going to eat her. My mate would be disappointed." This was probably not actually true, but at least he *should* be disappointed in me if I ate someone.

"But then what do you mean to do with her? I'm afraid you can't just... release her into the wild," said Aro, waving a hand. "She knows too much."

"Oh, no, that isn't my plan at all!" I said. "I'll bring her home with me, of course."

"Are you hoping to turn her?" guessed Aro. "And add her to your coven?"

There was an edge to his voice, so slight that I might be imagining it. But I guessed that the correct answer was *not* anything he would interpret as: "yes, I seek to expand my coven's influence, when we are already the largest coven in the world apart from your own even *not* counting our extended family in Denali, and have values antithetical to yours, by poaching your secretary and turning her where you were about to let her die". I would have to want Gianna for something specific, something that only she could do...

"I need her to bear my children," I told him.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Aro, after a silence of almost four seconds. I had managed to surprise him.

"Before I was turned, since I had plenty of warning, one of my sisters extracted some eggs," I explained. I didn't really want to discuss anything this personal in a roomful of Volturi - but Aro already knew it; he'd read Edward after my surgery. "I'll eventually want to use them - at least one. I could hire a stranger to carry the child, but then I couldn't keep a very good eye on her, because it would be very difficult to closely associate with a human without giving myself away. But Gianna's perfect. You've made an exception for her knowing all about us yourselves *already*, so of course it's okay for her to realize what's going on. I can keep her at home with me and make sure she's taken care of."

"I... see." My situation as regarded the possibility of children was probably unheard of among vampires. There was no precedent, no "legal" grounding, to forbid me this. It *would* mean more vampires eventually - I had no credibility whatsoever if I claimed I was planning to have children and then *let them die*. But it would be over a time frame that would look less alarming than just turning Gianna right away, if I played my cards right.

And Aro had already, very clearly, offered me Gianna. I waited, unblinking, with the cutest, most innocent smile I could muster on my face.

Marcus slid across the floor towards Aro, and they touched hands for an instant. Aro glanced to Caius, who looked like he'd eaten something that disagreed with him. Deprived of Alec's ability to keep me out of their deliberations, Caius didn't speak either, just went to Aro and communicated by thought transfer as well. I waited while Aro thought. His eyes were closed, his face completely composed and neutral.

"My dear," said Aro after half a minute, assuming an almost avuncular smile, "I said you could have Gianna, and have her you may. If that is the use for her that suits you, far be it from me to deny you." Like I was a four-year-old who'd gotten a nice toy and only wanted to play with the box it came in. I hoped Gianna didn't hate my plan, was willing to go through with whatever needed to be done in order to placate the Volturi -

"Thank you," I said, bowing again.

"We shall have to send you visitors, in a year or two, to make sure that you are pleased with your gift, of course," Aro went on. "I would hate to discover that I'd offered you a present that you didn't like. The same goes for the objects I sent to you in the mail. I hope they will meet with your satisfaction." How... lovely. A deadline on my reproduction. I managed to avoid crossing my fingers, hoping for Gianna's - and Edward's - willingness to tolerate the situation. I put off thinking about how I liked it myself. There was no safe way to back out at this point.

"I haven't seen them yet, but I'm sure your taste is faultless," I said diplomatically, "and that I will treasure them always."

"I dearly hope so, although a treasure like yourself would outshine anything I could offer."

How long were we going to keep up this ridiculous exchange of pleasantries? *Tell me to take Gianna and go, already...* "You're too kind," I fluttered.

"Not at all, lovely child. As long as you are here, is there anything else you should like to have?"

"I should hate to impose. I'm only glad that I could reassure you as to my compliance with our law." That might count for something, identifying the law as my own. I was rapidly finding that one of the most convenient uses for perfect recall was the ability to keep my own subterfuge straight.

"Well, then, I shall delay you no longer in your return to your mate and your coven," said Aro genially. "The sun will be up in only a few hours. I shouldn't like to keep you for so long that you would need to tarry here for an additional day."

"My thanks," I said, with one more bow. "Until next time."

Aro nodded, agreeing, "Until next time."

I followed the route I'd taken up to the chamber, backwards, without help - although Santiago ghosted along behind me, presumably for some combination of purposes including supervising my behavior and taking up the underground guard post.

Gianna was still at her desk. She looked around when I approached; Santiago swept past me into the elevator without looking back.

"Hello again," I said, trying to sound nonthreatening.

"H-hello, Bella," said Gianna tremulously.

"It's okay," I promised. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to take you home with me, okay? You're going to be fine."

She stared at me, at my red eyes.

"Would you feel better if I put contact lenses in?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "*I am not going to eat you.*"

"Where are we going?" she asked in a small voice.

"Norway. My family's there. We don't eat humans," I promised her. "Come on, I'm sure Alice booked us a flight, I don't want to miss it. What do you need to bring?"

"I - not much - passport, clothes," Gianna fretted. She didn't get up from her seat.

"Do you want me to help you pack?" I prodded.

"They're not going to kill me?" she asked in a small voice.

I winced. "Uh... Aro gave you to me, as a "present". I think he thought I'd kill you, before, but I didn't. And I'm not *going* to kill you. And my family is not going to kill you. We'll do our best to keep you safe. Please pack your things. Come on, I wouldn't need you to pack if you were going to be food, would I?"

Whether she accepted this logic or the sheer repetition just finally sank in, Gianna got to her feet and managed to walk out of the room on wobbly knees. I waited, seeing no reason to continue to frighten her.

Gianna took only eighteen minutes to pack. She came back with one, small suitcase - either she didn't have much or wanted to bolt and leave a lot of things behind. "Ready?" I asked her when she wheeled her bag into the entryway. Gianna nodded mutely.

"Is there a better way out than that?" I asked, pointing at the elevator door. She nodded, and showed me through locked doors (to which she had a key, and which she

locked behind her) into a part of the compound I'd never been to before. It looked like some kind of art or history museum, complete with velvet ropes and an information desk, but Gianna seemed in a hurry, so I didn't linger over this oddity. We passed through the darkened, deserted museum in a couple of seconds and out into the streets of Volterra.

I was a little turned around, but after a moment recalling and adding up all my twisting travels, I figured out where we were in relation to my car. I put a new pair of contact lenses in and led Gianna along.

She followed me without speaking at all; I could hear her heart beating too quickly, and wondered if she was okay. But I didn't know how to ask after her condition without risking spooking her further, and she was at least capable of following me where I led. I got her into my rental car and drove us back to the airport.

Ambition

As I'd expected, Alice had gotten us both booked and we were soon on our way to Norway. "Are you okay?" I finally asked Gianna, as the plane took off. I kept my voice low enough so that nearby travelers wouldn't hear.

"I'm fine," she squeaked, sounding less than fine.

"Gianna, you are not in danger," I reminded her. Then, "Flying is the safest form of travel."

That got a choked, sob-like giggle out of her. "Do you really think they'll let me live, after deciding to kill me?" she asked in a breathy whisper.

"That depends on why they decided to kill you," I said. "It could have been that they have something against *me*, and thought it'd be useful if I ate you, since then they could be offended and have something concrete against me."

"Maybe," Gianna murmured.

"How did you know they wanted you dead?" I asked.

"I hear more than they think I do. Not everything, but... I heard Chelsea and Santiago talking..."

"Who's Chelsea? And remember to keep your voice down. I can hear you just fine."

"One of the guard. She - her power is a little like Marcus's. He sees relationships; she can weaken them or build them up. They use it to keep the guard unified, to divide covens they punish. I heard Santiago asking her to... break the one between Santiago and me. I didn't know there was anything to speak of. None of them were my *friends*. Santiago was more cordial than most of them, I suppose. But the only reason I could think of to break anything that might have been there was, would be if I was going to die, and Santiago didn't want to care."

"Did you hear what Chelsea said?" I asked.

Gianna shook her head. "She was too quiet. But I went out for lunch and called you. Your coven-mate, Alice, let me through. I don't think they know I did it, or that I heard Santiago."

"Probably not." I paused. "Uh, there's a complication with how I got you out, that you should know about."

Gianna went stiff in her seat. "What?" she asked in a small voice.

"I had to explain why I wanted to get you out, I needed to have some *use* for you. Aro said I couldn't just let you go off by yourself because you know too much. I wasn't

going to eat you, and that didn't leave me a lot of options." I required another lungful of air, but the scents of humans had almost stopped bothering me. I sipped from my complimentary water anyway, just to be safe - it would be a long flight. "I, uh, told him that I need you to be the surrogate mother of my child or children."

She stared at me. This was an entirely reasonable reaction.

"My sister harvested some eggs before I turned," I explained. "I wasn't planning to use them soon. Actually, I didn't have any concrete plans to use them at all, I was just hanging onto them in case I wanted them later. But they exist, and it was something I could say, that would explain why I'd need a live human around who knows about us. But Aro said he was going to check on me in a year or two to make sure I'm "pleased with my gift". So that means that unless you really hate the idea, or my husband does, or we think of a great way around it..."

"No, that's fine," said Gianna. "I'll help you."

I hadn't expected such ready acquiescence.

"Can I ask you a favor?" she asked tentatively, after a pause.

Ah. "What is it?"

"...Do you know why I was with the Volturi to begin with?" she asked.

"You wouldn't tell me," I reminded her, and she flinched. I was starting to think that she'd been very thoroughly trained to obey vampires and the fact that I retained continuity with my human self, whom she'd given the runaround, was throwing her off. "If you're willing to share now, I'd like to hear it."

Gianna ducked her head. "What I did tell you was true. They tell a lot of vampire stories in Volterra." She paused. "I believed them... and so did my brother. Ilario. He believed more than I did. He wanted to be one himself. He looked for them, but never found them, and then he got sick. He's going to die. The doctors said there was nothing I could do, but he told me that there was - and I did it - and I found the Volturi, and I knew they'd never help my brother themselves once I realized how they are, but I thought perhaps they would -"

She'd started crying partway through this recitation. I could fill in the rest of it myself. If the Volturi had "kept" her, she could have turned her brother - or tried, anyway. Gianna probably didn't know that syringes worked, and I didn't think even *I* could manage to administer venom by mouth without flipping out and devouring the human I'd meant to save.

I wanted to offer Gianna a tissue, but I didn't have any; she sniffled for a minute, and then collected herself. "Gianna," I said, "do the Volturi know about Ilario?"

"Aro's read me," she said quietly.

Well, then -

Wait. *Did* that necessarily mean that he knew about her brother? He could absorb a lifetime of memories with one touch. But vampires had *perfect recall*, nothing more or less than that. Could he *process* a lifetime of memories that quickly? I'd spent hours and hours just re-reading *my own notes* and integrating them with my memories. That sort of thing wasn't the work of an instant. Would he have bothered to spend a couple of days analyzing Gianna's? Even if things she'd forgotten with her imperfect recording weren't accessible to him either, it'd be a richer set of stuff to take in than my notes and hazy, blocked human memories. I was almost sure that he wouldn't bother with the far longer period of time it would take to deal with more complex, better-remembered, and *longer* vampire histories.

This probably boiled down to a very significant limitation. I'd need to check with Carlisle and Edward, to confirm or disconfirm. Aro *might* just have an astronomical mental capacity incomprehensibly greater than that of every other vampire. He *might* be quite capable of assimilating hundreds of years of sleeplessness where every last sixteenth of a second was packed with sense data and thought, all in a mere moment. And capable of doing this without toppling over as though affected by Alec's power, cut off from the present and his own experiences by the foreign additions.

But *probably*, he could only find memories he *looked for* - memories he *knew* to look for. Either he had to plan to seek them before touching his target, so he could catch them as they flashed by; or he stored them all as they came in, and then could investigate them at his leisure. The first would be less dangerous, because it meant that only a fresh read could get him information he didn't yet possess. But even the latter was importantly different from his simply knowing everything his targets knew.

Edward might not know. He (and Alice and Jasper), despite their extra senses, didn't have any spare room in their heads relative to the baseline vampire. If Edward was listening to Aro's mind when Aro took in someone's thoughts, it probably sounded like a compressed blur - he'd get a couple of images, could probably swipe anything he was particularly trying to see, but wouldn't be able to distinguish between the possibilities unless Aro ruminated on his limitations in Edward's range.

This was unlikely to mean that Aro hadn't learned about Ilario. If he'd read Gianna, the most obvious motivation was to discover why she'd looked for the Volturi and whether she could be trusted. Her brother was clearly relevant, the sort of thing he'd have dug up.

But it could mean that my private moments with Edward were safe unless he was some kind of silly voyeur. It could mean that he didn't know about the Quileutes. It could mean that I could plan the Volturi's downfall with the help of others, given certain precautions. It could mean that *he was less powerful than he thought we believed him to*

be.

"Then he probably knows," I told Gianna. My own head was still the *safest* place to hide information. Gianna didn't need to hear this, not yet. "But there may be a way for us to save your brother anyway. You say he wants to be a vampire?"

She nodded. "Very much. I don't think he knows all the details - but I'm sure he won't care."

"And he *believes* in vampires," I pressed. *Oh, but Aro, of course we had to turn him - he knew too much - you know how much respect we have for the law -*

Gianna nodded again.

"Okay. I think we can do this. But we've got to check in with my family first."

"*Thank you,*" she said fervently.

"Do you want to be a vampire too?" I asked. "After Aro's been convinced that I wanted you for the reason I told him?"

Gianna thought. "If my brother were already safe, and didn't need me to be one..." *Say yes, I thought at her uselessly, yes you do...*

She seemed really stumped by the question. "I mean," I said, "not like one of the Volturi. I'm sure my family, or our friends in Alaska would take you in." I still needed to *meet* the Denalis. Perhaps there would be time for that soon.

"What is it *like*?" she asked.

"Oh, I can't even - it's amazing," I said. "The transition is..." I mulled over the word choice, too quickly for her to catch it. "*Not fun*. But mine was better than most and we could do the same things for you. And being a vampire is the most marvelous thing. Did you know we can see ultraviolet? And everything feels and looks and sounds and smells so intensely." She flinched when I said *smells*. "And," I went on, "the evidence suggests that if you know about vampires beforehand, if you're expecting to become one before you start turning, then it's easier to control yourself, have the full use of your rational faculties to start with and not slaughter humans. I'm not magical like that - I have a power, but that isn't it. I just had warning."

"Oh," she said, a fascinated glint in her eye. "It's as wonderful as it looks? The way you move, and sound..."

"It's more so. A hundred times more so. My experience might be a little better than most," I allowed, "because I turned with my mate already waiting for me, and that isn't likely to happen for you. But even without Edward - yes, better than it looks." *And turning is worse than it looks*, my conscience hissed at me. *Nothing can look that bad,*

there's only so much volume you can get out of one pair of lungs when you scream...

"I think I would want it even if Ilario didn't need me," said Gianna, speculative. "But I will help you first, with a child, if it seems like that makes the most sense. Will your sister be willing to take eggs from me as well?"

"I'm sure she will." I wasn't, but I was sure I could convince her or get Carlisle to do it. My conscience prickled. "Uh, Gianna... It's *worth it*. It really is. Eternal life alone is worth it, even without the added bonuses, which are themselves awesome. But while you're turning, it won't feel that way. No matter how much you believe it now. There's nothing you can imagine that's enough to prepare you. When I said "not fun", that was a flippant reference to how my sister Alice described it to me before I turned - she can't remember her own turning at all. She was going by secondhand information. I remember everything about mine except the beginning, because Carlisle put me in a coma first. And it's not going to feel like anything could be worth it, while you're in the middle of it."

Gianna went still and quiet. "I don't know what to think about that," she said after a silence.

"It's worth it," I told her again. "And you'll get it easier than me. We'll put you in a coma too and as soon as you come out of it, a broken spine will cut off most of the pain - I didn't think of that until hours after I woke."

This had probably not been a clever thing to say, I decided, after looking at Gianna's expression. The pinch to my neck was so laden with positive associations of relief and mercy in *my* head, and I didn't think of the injury the way any given human likely did. In Gianna's mind, "broken spine" was probably very high on the list of things least pleasant to experience. I had memories of two hundred fifty nine thousand, one hundred and twelve seconds which each would individually place higher on that list than anything I would have been capable of experiencing with fully human mind and nerves.

"But we won't push you into anything you don't want to do," I said reluctantly. *But on the other side everything is beautiful and you can keep it all forever...*

"If Ilario's going to do it, then I will too," she said, and that sounded firmer than her previous statement.

I grinned at her.

The rest of the flight was mostly small talk, tidbits about our respective lives that had for whatever reason not made it into our e-mails. Gianna was 23; Ilario was her only sibling, and two years younger; their parents were alive but irretrievably senile; she'd found the Volturi ten months previously (I was briefly startled to realize that Gianna had known vampires for longer than I had, when I felt like I'd known them forever).

Edward picked us up at the airport. Rosalie had gotten around to buying at least a

few cars, apparently, because the sleek black thing he drove was definitely not a rental. I wondered if she'd grabbed one for me - she'd asked me what kind I wanted and I told her I had no idea, and was willing to leave it up to her expertise. She wasn't quite as pleased as Alice with permission to buy me a new wardrobe bursting with chiffon, but she'd seemed to find it a compliment.

I hadn't yet directly taken much frivolous advantage of practically unlimited financial freedom, although Edward had troubled to make it very clear that, as his wife, I was entitled to it as much as he was. He'd informed me in no uncertain terms that I shouldn't hesitate to whip out my shiny black credit card if I saw something I liked. ("But if you need more than a couple million dollars at a time," he'd said, "let Alice know so she can spook her stockbrokers first.") Mostly I'd deferred various purchases to people with a specialized interest in making them. Now that I was moving around in the human world without much trouble it was probably time for me to take a more personal interest in my possessions.

Conversation during the drive between the airport and the house was limited; I did want to talk to Edward about my insight on Aro and the condition of Gianna's release, and he like everyone else in the family needed to be informed about Ilario. However, the first conversations were best kept between the two of us to start with, and the second would be more efficient with everyone there.

He drove fast, of course, and it didn't take long for us to reach home. The cars were living outdoors for the time being, but I could see the skeleton of a garage going up. The house itself looked completely refinished - fresh paint and sanded surfaces and new window glass. Esme had been busy over the last couple of weeks. We brought Gianna into the house, gave her a purposeless little room with a bed in it on the first floor, confirmed that someone had brought in some groceries for her to feed herself and generally deal with human needs, and let her alone to settle in. It was surprisingly unceremonious - having Alice around took a lot of the oomph out of significant lifestyle changes.

When Gianna had shut the door to her new room and could be heard unpacking, I turned to Edward. "I believe," I said, "that you've got a threshold to carry me over."

"I believe I do," he agreed.

I spent four minutes running around in our cute, tiny cottage, inspecting everything and exclaiming over it. Edward had already seen plenty of the place, in Esme's mind and Alice's, and didn't need to investigate so thoroughly; he watched me with a fond and indulgent look on his face. Alice had been in the house before, and moved all my clothes old and new into a closet that was almost half as big as the entire rest of the building. Edward's were relegated to a corner of the crowded walk-in, pushed there by my inordinately large collection; she was not quite so fond of buying men's clothes. She had not been able to *quite* resist buying me posh swaths of dress-shaped silk and satin, but

there were only half a dozen of the most impractical numbers. The rest of it was more discreetly upscale.

It was a compact home, so in short order I'd seen everything and returned to Edward's side.

Simultaneously, we said, "We need to talk."

"What's your thing we need to talk about?" I asked Edward.

"It's kind of a long story - what's yours?" he said.

"I have several," I replied. "One is that I thought about something that might constitute a limitation on Aro's power, besides my immunity. It might or might not have already occurred to you. The second is about what I had to tell Aro to get Gianna out, and what we need to do about that. And then there's a favor I want to do for Gianna. Why don't I start one of mine, and then it'll be your turn?"

Edward nodded, and I related the thought processes and dialogue that had led up to the situation with Gianna. "So," I concluded after the explanation, "unless we have a brilliant alternative plan, Gianna needs to have, or be noticeably pregnant with, my child by the time Aro investigates us, on some unspecified date on the order of a year or two from now. I guess that's probably enough time to find a sperm donor." I winced apologetically. "I didn't have a chance to consult you, or time to think of anything else I might want a human for that Aro would find plausible."

"And how do you feel about that?" asked Edward. He was carefully looking neutral about it - probably trying not to pressure me either way with his own feelings.

I hadn't stopped to consider this in any detail. I took this invitation to do so, and thought.

When I'd said to Aro that I needed Gianna to bear my children, I had been motivated by the need to get her out, to save her. Now that she was freed but would be checked up on, any comparatively weak opinions I had about child-rearing were close to irrelevant for purposes of what I would do. I didn't *hate* the idea so much that I'd let Gianna die to avoid it. I didn't *love* the idea so much that I'd demand her participation even if I found a way to bail her out for free. But there was a reasonably wide range of possibilities between those two extremes, and Edward - as well as I - wanted to know where I was on the spectrum.

I wasn't thrilled about the sperm donor part. Some stranger's child. But Edward had gone and become a vampire before collecting gametes had been medically realistic, so that meant that (sooner or later) I needed to figure out how I felt about having children without the chance that they'd have his hair or his nose or something.

I supposed a pair of vampires who never needed to sleep would have a leg up in the

parenting department. I was only seventeen, but it wasn't like I was getting any older. With twenty-four hours in a day, and each second sufficient time to actually accomplish something, I didn't find the prospect of adding childcare that terrible of a time sink. So maybe it'd take me two or three times as long to learn Farsi when that came up on my list - wow, an entire week and a half per language, the horror.

Kids were typically cute, but varied in personality as much as adults did. The odds were pretty good that my own would be similar to me in at least some ways. Paging through descriptions of donors would be another level of control. There were plenty of people with adversarial relationships with their parents, but I'd gotten along all right with mine, and they'd gotten along all right with theirs. If there was any genetic correlation, there would probably be no serious issue there.

I wondered what it would do to a human child, to have vampire parents. Among other things, we weren't warm and huggable. I supposed we could wear fluffy coats or something, if that seemed important. In most visible ways, we could pass for human, though; we'd be likely to raise a *quirky* kid, but probably not an outrageously bizarre one unless we were very incautious. It might be wise for Edward and I to live alone with our child in case a scraped knee set Jasper off. For that matter, I would need to test *myself* around fresh human blood before I could be sure of mothering a human baby safely.

The timing wasn't ideal. We wouldn't be the first couple to wind up with a honeymoon baby - or the nearest artificial equivalent - but a child would restrict us in some ways. For example, if I decided I wanted to spend a year living in the Mariana Trench for no particular reason, that would not be something I could do with a toddler. After fifteen or twenty years, though, my offspring could likely be left more or less to his or her own devices. And I didn't think I'd run out of child-compatible things to occupy myself with in that time.

The fact that Edward and I wouldn't age and the child would could get awkward. We looked a bit young to be parents to an *infant*, let alone an eight-year-old or a teenager. That would just mean that we'd have to teach him or her to call us by our names and pretend to be our niece or my sibling or something in public, though.

And I could show Charlie and Renée their grandchild. That wouldn't be a problem as long as we found a way to be away ourselves at the time - drill the kid on airport procedures, send them to Washington or Arizona, let the relevant grandparent pick them up. It might be, in some small way, compensation for the fact that there might never be a way for *me* to see them again face-to-face.

"Well," I said finally, having spent about forty seconds to fully mull over all those thoughts, "it's sooner than I had in mind, but I kind of like the idea of having at least one."

"That's good," said Edward in relief, touching my face, "because I found out after you left Rio that it may be possible for vampires to have children."

"Does Rosalie know?" I asked immediately.

Edward winced. "Not *female* vampires," he said. "At least not that I discovered."

"Spill," I insisted.

"After I saw you off to Italy," said Edward, "I went back to the island to leave a note for the cleaning crew, so they would know that we weren't going to be there as long as planned. They were there when I arrived, but one of them had brought her cousin to help, who's familiar with a lot of local legends and had a good guess of what she was looking at as soon as she saw me. Since all she'd heard about who was using the island was that it was a young couple, the first thing she thought when she saw me without you was that I'd eaten you." He smiled wryly. "I explained that you were my wife and had been called away prematurely, and her *next* thought was that you were *pregnant* and rushing home."

"She still thought I was human at that point?"

"Right - but I didn't understand how she could think it anyway, when for one thing I'm a vampire and for another you wouldn't have been showing after only twelve days."

"It didn't occur to her that a lot of humans cheat on their spouses?" I asked dryly.

"Didn't cross her mind just then, at least, which was curious," Edward replied. "I managed to convince her I wasn't going to hurt her, or you, and I got her talking. The Ticuna Indians, of which she was one, have legends about vampires who seduce young women - and their stories say that pregnancies can result."

The vague plans for raising a human child evaporated in my head. We could have *our* child. I felt my face spreading into a much less ambivalent smile...

"But," said Edward (I froze), "the pregnancies are supposedly unnaturally rapid. That was why she'd thought twelve days would be enough to notice. Start to finish, it takes about one month - but you can imagine the toll that takes on a human body, going from zygote to infant nine times faster than normal. She didn't know of any stories where the mothers survived. Not least because the children aren't at all typical."

"Not typical how?"

"That, she didn't know much about. But if there are stories about half-vampires, there might be actual half-vampires, somewhere - South America would be a good place to start. I wanted to come straight home to meet you and discuss it before investigating any further."

"If it'd kill Gianna..." I said uncomfortably.

"These are *old* stories," he told me. "Perfectly ordinary pregnancies were dangerous then - no modern medicine. And vampire venom can do some amazing things. When

Esme was found at the bottom of the cliff, she was brought directly to the morgue, because they didn't think there was a chance they could save her - but her heart was beating, and Carlisle turned her and now she's fine. None of us were in such good shape - you were the only one in perfect health. I know Gianna was hoping that the Volturi would turn her anyway."

"She was, but not for the reason you're thinking." I told him about Ilario, barely clinging to life. "Now, I asked her, and she said she'd still like to be a vampire even if he didn't need her help to turn, and she said she'd be willing to help us out with surrogacy - but I don't know if she'd sign on for pregnancy-on-rocket-powered-roller-skates that's believed to regularly kill people just because we *might* be able to save her with venom at the end of it."

"Of course if we determine that there's no way that's safe for her to carry a half-vampire, she shouldn't," Edward assured me. "But it seems worth investigating." There was a trace of something in his voice that he was trying not to make too obvious - perhaps it really mattered to him that our child be biologically his own but he knew that it would do no good to press the issue if I thought it would be at the expense of Gianna's safety.

I nodded. "I think it's safe for us to take six months to research and decide," I said. "Even if Aro checks in after just one year and we wind up going with a slower-developing human baby, she'll show by then."

"I agree," Edward said.

"Is there going to be any trouble dealing with Ilario?" I asked.

"I don't think it would be wise to have him and Gianna in the same place when he's first turned," said Edward. "Unless he adjusts like you - which he might, if your theory is correct - then it wouldn't be safe for her."

"So should Ilario go somewhere else, or should Gianna?" I asked. "And where to? The Denalis have already got David, and he's *not* unusually well-adjusted - Gianna can't go there. Ilario could after he's turned, but it's not obvious how we'd get an uncontrolled newborn to Alaska safely."

"It might be necessary for the family to split up temporarily," Edward said. "We'll discuss it with everyone."

I frowned, not quite happy with that idea. But if Ilario managed as well as he might, didn't eat his equivalent of Nils when tested, then it would amount to some of us taking him on a couple weeks' vacation in some remote area and then bringing him back. Fair enough.

"And my last thing," I said.

Edward had barely any idea how Aro's power worked. Aro didn't think about it explicitly himself, at least not in range. "When he's decided to find something in particular, and I listen, I can always catch that thing," Edward said. "But the rest of it is too fast. It doesn't spend enough time as a surface thought for me to read it. If there's a different way he retrieves absorbed memories and personal memories, I can't tell the difference when he remembers things."

"So that doesn't narrow it down," I said. "It looks like there are three possibilities. That he's as powerful as he wants everyone to think, or that he stores but doesn't automatically process everything from his targets, or that he has to know what he's looking for in advance."

Edward nodded. "I can't believe I never thought of this before - he has no reason to leave the Quileutes alone; by rights he'd want to obliterate them in case the activated version of the species ever resurfaces. But the most recent occasion wasn't even the first time he's read one of us since we encountered them seventy years ago."

"That means we can probably rule out the first, then," I said. "But is there a safe way to tell between the second and third?" We thought. The problem was that, of things that made suitable test topics, there were very few that we thought we'd *like* it if he came to think about them. It would be safe to make oblique references to werewolves and read his thoughts about them *if* the last hypothesis were true, because he'd assume that we were talking about the Children of the Moon and wouldn't have any special reason to go poking around the next time he read a Cullen. But if the second one were the case instead, then bringing up werewolves could lead him to dig up exactly the memories that would send the Volturi guard on a killing spree in La Push.

And in fact, if Aro ever had cause to discuss werewolves or a related topic with his own coven, this could happen at any time *anyway*... if Caius expressed skepticism that they'd truly driven the Children of the Moon extinct, if someone in the guard had a penchant for horror novels and discussed them over a shared supper, if Aro developed an interest in Native American culture...

I didn't say that out loud.

Instead, I said, "Edward, do you trust me?"

"Absolutely." This was not, as he used it, an emphatic form of "yes"; it was a description of his trust. It was absolute. And I needed no less.

"I want you to stop thinking about this, and not to bring it up with anyone else," I said. "And I may need to travel or use medium-large sums of money unexpectedly, alone. I want you to avoid thinking about that or talking about it any more than you have to. I might need you to pretend to our family that you're on a trip with me so the others don't become curious. I might ask weirder things unexpectedly without being able to explain."

Edward understood - not all of it, but enough. My mind was still the only place

where things could definitely go on without risking Aro's knowledge - if he merely happened to be *idly curious* about the wrong thing, even the third and safest type of scenario was dangerous. It wasn't as though anyone he chose to ask for a handshake could refuse to be read without falling under immediate suspicion. There was no reliable safeguard but my own contrary witchcraft.

Edward and I went back to the main house. Carlisle had gotten Ilario's information from Gianna and was already in the process of getting him transferred to his new private specialist practice in Norway. Carlisle had begun a new job at a hospital in the nearest town, but he was working as a surgeon, not an oncologist. So the practice was fictional, and so was the clinical study which Ilario was invited to participate in. But Gianna's help let the process go much more smoothly. She got on the phone with her brother when he had a lucid hour, said the magic words, and soon had him demanding to be sent north.

Rosalie arranged to pose as Carlisle's medical assistant - she had the knowhow to pull off the role and, unlike Edward, wasn't among the witches that the Volturi desperately wished to collect. Her presence in Volterra wouldn't attract undue attention. She hied herself off to Italy to pick up Ilario, seeming unresentful - maybe she was happy to help Gianna because Gianna was planning to bear the first, and possibly last, baby the family would ever have.

It was decided that after Ilario arrived, but before he started to turn, Edward and I would go with Gianna to the house the Cullens kept in Québec. In theory, Gianna could have gone alone - she was an adult, she could drive, etcetera - but she thought it was better to stick with me, in case Aro checked in early to make sure I hadn't "released her into the wild". Since it suited my purposes to be in North America, I didn't put up a fight.

After these things had been set into motion, Alice insisted that I be presented with Aro's other presents. Her eagerness should have tipped me off to the nature of the things, but at least they were far less creepy than the gift of a human being. One was a box, but no typical box: it was made of ancient wood, inlaid with gold and mother-of-pearl that lay flush with the surface. It was also dotted with gems in a rainbow of colors - small ones, but so many that the entire box glittered. Inside the box was the other gift. Alice said that it was one of the few objects in the world that wouldn't be outshone by the priceless box itself: a golden chain, woven into rope that could coil around the throat and clasp there. Attached to this necklace was a diamond about as big as my eye - not just the visible portion, the entire thing.

Carlisle identified this item as one of the crown jewels pawned by John of England in the thirteenth century.

Yeesh. Was this an attempt to get me interested in joining their guard? It didn't seem like practical combat gear, so I couldn't see the ornament being presented as a message of "join us and you will get more old shiny rocks". I'd *met* some Volturi women - they wore cowls or sundresses, they weren't dressed to go to the Oscars or like they'd just committed

jewel heists.

I put my box and necklace in my cottage, on the shelf above the dresses I had no plans to wear. Just to be contrary to the Volturi in a safe way, I put on the bracelet that Edward had given me on Valentine's day.

And then, faced with a moment of downtime that wasn't on an airplane, I called my mother. She was surprisingly even-keeled about my having eloped, telling me that I had good judgment and she was sure Edward was a wonderful "boy, I mean man". She wanted to be visited, but thought (luckily) that we ought to have time to be newlyweds first. That bought me time. I told her, in my artificially low and scratchy voice, that I loved her and was thrilled to be married, and thanked her for her vote of confidence.

The next day, Ilario showed up, wheeled in by Rosalie. He looked awful - it was impressive that he'd managed to survive as long as he had, although I supposed vampire-related hopes might have helped. It was one of those cancers that leave one with a couple of months to live, that rare individuals sometimes managed to hold up under for longer - but not well. At least not in Ilario's case. He had no hair, he slept most of the time, he had to be fed via tube. The trip had not done him any good either. He was able to confirm that he really and truly wanted to become a vampire; he was able to smile weakly at Gianna - and that was all he had in him for the day.

Carlisle didn't have any more coma drugs. There hadn't been enough warning about Ilario to get them, and the little hospital he worked at didn't keep them on hand. But Carlisle did have plenty of morphine on hand. I watched, out of curiosity, as painkillers and then two syringes full of clear venom were injected. Gianna was out of the room at this point - no one wanted her to have to hear her brother scream.

Ilario didn't scream. In fact, he didn't do anything. He held perfectly still, though I could hear his heart beating steadily. Had the morphine eliminated the pain as effectively as my coma had? If so, and if it lasted longer than thirty hours, it should be the new gold standard for humane turning in the future - I'd have to ask him about it later.

Since Ilario wasn't in obvious, heart-wrenching pain, we let Gianna in to hold his hand, and to tell him - in case he could hear - that she loved him. Then we had to leave to catch our plane to Canada.

On the trip, Gianna slept most of the way, and Edward taught me French. It was faster learning with a conversation partner than out of a book, and while I still wasn't fluent in *any* of the languages I'd started learning, I had smatterings of a whole bunch of them. I'd be able to find my way around in Québec.

But I didn't plan to spend much time there.

We arrived. The Cullens had the usual complement of cars at the house, so instead of renting one, we took a taxi. Once it had dropped us off, Edward popped out to the

grocery store to get some food for Gianna and I started pulling white cloths off of furniture. There were no beds in the house, but I found a sofa that looked like it might be reasonably comfortable for her, and I picked it up and moved it into the bedroom that looked like it normally belonged to Rosalie and Emmett. While she settled in, drowsy from the travel, I went out of her earshot to make a call.

The phone rang once, twice, three times.

And then Billy Black picked up the phone.

"Billy, this is Bella," I said, not bothering to disguise my voice.

"*Bella?*" he asked. "Are you... what are you?"

"A vampire. The treaty, though, says "bite", not "turn", so I hope this isn't going to cause any friction in the friendship between my family and yours." This was wryly said - "friendship" had never been the exact word. The wolves of seven decades ago had considered vampires their natural enemies, and the Cullens were barely suffered to live.

"Why are you calling me?" Billy demanded.

"Is anyone listening to this conversation on your end?" I inquired.

"No, Jacob is out with his friends..."

"Okay. Now, as you probably know, my family aren't the only vampires in the world..."

I explained, as succinctly and comprehensibly as I could, the danger that Aro posed. Billy listened in silence until I came to my conclusion: "Assume for the sake of caution that he's got the more dangerous of the two forms of mindreading. Right now, if it occurs to him that you exist, he'll realize through Edward's memories that you're all inactive - vulnerable. *One* vampire could get the drop on you and murder everyone in La Push without anyone having time to activate; a handful more could track down absent tribe members like Rachel and Rebecca and mop them up too. The Volturi have over a dozen at their beck and call. They would not consider it a big hassle to make you *extinct*, and they'd want to do it, because if you ever wake up again, you'll be a threat to them."

"And what do you want to do about that?" Billy asked guardedly.

I said, "I want to wake you up."

Edward didn't take very long at the grocery store, and while I was in the middle of coaxing Billy into giving me more information about Quileute wolf legends as he knew

them, I had to cut off so he wouldn't hear anything. Edward brought the grocery bags in to Gianna, who began to put their contents away according to an organizational system that suited her; then he came outside again.

He walked up behind me, wrapped his arms around me, and kissed the back of my neck. He was holding two sheets of paper. "I don't know what you're up to," he told me in a low voice, "or what you're going to need, and I know it's best that I don't know. And if you had to ask for contacts or resources later, I'd have details, however vague - so I made you a list of everything I could think of." He handed me the list. He had very small handwriting, and had filled five marginless columns on both sides of each sheet with names, addresses, and phone numbers - each accompanied by notes on who their usual contact person was and what they did. He'd also bought me an atlas of Quebec, which would see me a fair part of the distance until I got where I needed to be.

I scanned both items quickly, memorizing everything on them without regard for whether I expected any given entry to be useful later. The atlas first, and then I handed it back to him; then the handwritten note. It was quite a list: private investigators, black marketeers, sources for forgeries, computer hackers, officials of various stripes in the Cullens' pockets by bribery or intimidation who could cut through assorted red tape and help cover up slips. They operated from dozens of cities, scattered around the world but mostly concentrated in the northern half of the United States. Once I'd seen it all, I shredded it, tearing it up into confetti even a patient vampire couldn't reconstruct. I let it scatter in the wind and then turned in Edward's arms to kiss him. "Thank you," I murmured.

"I hope it helps. I hope you know what you're doing," he added wryly.

"Not really," I said. "But I know enough to think it's the best thing I *can* do."

He didn't love the answer, but didn't press.

"I need to go," I said apologetically. "I'll be back - uh - later. You have my number."

Edward handed me the keys to the car he'd taken shopping. I kissed him goodbye and got behind the wheel.

I headed southwest and called Billy, confident that my brain wasn't going to be overtaxed by driving and talking on the phone at the same time.

"Sorry about that," I said when he picked up the phone. "For security reasons," (I felt ridiculous saying that) "I need to keep everything out of my husband's earshot. You were in the middle of telling me why I *shouldn't* pick up Rachel from Spokane on my way to activate werewolves, even though anyone who got into your house and looked at your stuff could tell that she's your daughter and therefore carries the gene and would be part of a complete extermination project, and even though she's smack dab between me and La

Push unlike her Hawaii-dwelling twin."

Billy didn't answer me for a while, although I could hear him breathing. Finally, he said, "Because the women never became wolves."

"Why's that?"

"They simply didn't have the magic," said Billy, which meant *I have no idea*.

"Okay, let's think," I said, which meant *I'm going to think aloud so you understand where my conclusions came from*. "We *do* know that wolves are activated when they're young or not at all, right? How young?"

"Under twenty-five," he said, "as far as I know."

"And in those days, did Quileute girls under twenty-five years of age tend to wander around in places that might contain vampires to activate them?" I asked. "Either before or after the tribe had a pack of protectors capable of keeping such vampires far away from villages?" He didn't answer, which I took to be a no. "Is it possible," I continued, "that they just never had the opportunity to activate?"

"Perhaps," grumbled Billy.

"So it would seem that it at least *bears testing*," I said, "for me to pick up Rachel. If nothing else, a Volturi committee sent to destroy your people isn't going to care if your stories say she can't activate. They'll guess that she carries the gene anyway and could pass it on to a son, or that the stories are wrong, or that she might think it's a little funny that her entire family is dead and investigate a little too closely. Just because she doesn't come home when you ask her to visit doesn't mean she won't talk to me - and I can prove most of what I have to say, and get her where she has to go."

I was uncomfortably aware of how patronizing I was being, but this was Billy's *daughter* I was trying to save, and he was being astoundingly uncooperative. I went on: "The Volturi *do not care about human life*. They kill people - vampires, humans, European werewolves - *all the time*. On a daily basis for food. When they are annoyed or feel flouted or need to put on a show. It would not come as *anything resembling a surprise* if I learned that at least some of them do it for no reason other than personal entertainment. Whether she can turn into a wolf or not, Rachel isn't *safe* from them. They won't *ignore* her if they find out you exist. She'll be as safe as I can make her if she activates, and the next best thing if she's at least among a bunch of people who I *can* activate. *Tell me where to find her, Billy.*"

He mumbled an address and a phone number.

"Thank you, Billy. I'll see you in about a day and a half." I flipped my phone closed.

Rachel

I drove, and drove, and stopped for gas, and bought new maps, and drove. I wished I could have taken a plane, but that would have left traces it would be all too easy for inquisitive Volturi to track. I paid for my purchases in cash, wearing sunglasses and stopping earlier than I needed to when I hit an area with cloud cover or heavy shade. The car was nice and fast but not visibly interesting, as far as humans' reactions informed me. Unless Alice was looking at the wrong things at the wrong time, I wasn't leaving easy evidence.

When it was a sensible hour for humans to be awake and attending to their electronics, I called Rachel's number. She picked up on the first ring but sounded tired. "Hello? Who is this?" she asked, predictably not recognizing the number.

"It's Bella - remember me?" I asked. We'd last played together when I'd been ten and she'd been twelve; she probably wouldn't notice the change in my voice. I didn't bother disguising it.

"Uh, Bella... Swan?"

"I actually just got married a couple weeks ago," I said. "It's Bella Cullen now."

"Cullen? That name sounds kind of familiar." Rachel had gone to college early, and rarely went home; she would never have encountered my family during their most recent stay in Forks. But of course the name was known in the stories she'd heard growing up. "Huh. Wow, you're what, two years younger than me? That is *young*. Even Becky waited till she was eighteen to get married. But congratulations. So, um, why are you calling?"

Apparently Rebecca had started calling herself "Becky"; that was good to know. "I'm going to be in the area in a few hours and I have something awesome that I want to show you," I said.

"Uh... Bella, don't take this the wrong way, but if you're a missionary or an Avon lady or something like that..."

"No, absolutely not. I'm not selling anything. I have no religion to share with you. But if I tell you what I want to talk about when I'm not physically present and capable of proving it, you'll never believe me. Can I buy you..." I flicked my eyes to the clock, guessed my arrival time. "Lunch? I'll be in Spokane at about eleven thirty. We can go wherever you want and all you have to do is listen to me tell you a really crazy story while you take gratuitous advantage of my wallet, and then specify exactly what tricks you want me to do to prove what I will tell you."

"Um, okay... do you know the seafood place four blocks from campus?"

"Give me the intersection and I'll find it. Do you want me to pick you up, or meet

you there?" I asked.

She named streets and said she'd meet me. "If this is a religion or a sales pitch I am making you buy me lobster," she promised, and then she hung up.

I bought an atlas outside Spokane, found the intersection, and was there two minutes early, which left me enough time to find parking. Fortunately, it was a cloudy day; I didn't have to take care to make sure that the route between my spot and the restaurant was shaded. (I'd bought an ugly, crushable, and broad-brimmed hat, and a pair of gloves from a clearance rack, in Montana. That would have to do if I needed to go into the sun. But for the time being they were stuffed into my purse.) I popped fresh contact lenses into my eyes. They were just barely tinging orange around the edges - not close enough to any human color to pass.

Rachel was there. In my computer, I'd had exactly three photos of my childhood self with the Black twins, and that was the beginning and the end of what I knew about what Rachel and Becky looked like. (Mercifully, they were fraternal twins, and I'd labeled one of the pictures with which was which.) But it wasn't hard, even with several years between the present and our last photo op, for me to pick out the nineteen-year-old Native American woman who looked like she was waiting for someone.

"Rachel!" I called, going up to her at a plausibly human pace and waving. "Hi! It's good to see you!"

She gave me an appraising look, that mix of aesthetic enjoyment and simmering envy that reasonably pretty women sometimes gave supermodels and vampires. "*Bella?*" she asked, incredulous. "Wow, you look great. And..." She took a breath and got an embarrassed, repulsed look on her face. "No offense, but you're kind of wearing a *lot* of perfume. I'd tone it way down if I were you."

Come to think of it, Rachel didn't smell human-typical to me, either. She was the least appetizing person with a heartbeat I'd encountered since turning - closer to the wolf I'd eaten for my first vampire meal than to any humans. Probably this was just a feature of the species. A race of werewolves that were historically the natural enemies of vampires wouldn't think I smelled pleasantly of freesias and honey, and I wouldn't react to one of them with the desire to approach more closely and sink in my teeth.

Well, that meant I could probably activate her. "Sorry if it's bothering you. Did I keep you waiting long?"

She shook her head. She had her hair just barely long enough to look fluffy, and it bounced with the motion. "I just got here. Let's go sit down."

The restaurant wasn't crowded, which was good - I didn't have to extra attract attention by asking the hostess for a more private table at which to have this conversation.

"You look tired," Rachel said. "Were you driving through the night?"

"Yeah, I was," I said, not that this had to do with the darkness under my eyes. "I'm pretty good at pulling all-nighters, it's just not good for the looks."

"No, don't get me wrong, you really do look great, just like you could use a nap," Rachel backpedaled. She scanned her menu with half her attention - the other half kept her glancing up at me repeatedly. She definitely sensed that something was off. And she kept sniffing the air uncomfortably. "And maybe you should take your nap on the beach on a nice day. So, uh, I could kind of go for lobster even though you haven't tried to sell me anything yet - is that...? Or I could get the halibut, that looks nice..."

"It's completely fine," I promised her. "Go ahead and get anything you want. And if I try to get one penny out of your purse you can stab me with a fork."

Rachel chuckled darkly and summoned the waiter. I ordered the halibut she'd mentioned, in case she wanted some, and a glass of water. When he'd gone to put in our orders, she asked, "So what's the crazy thing you wanted to tell me so bad that you're buying me lobster?"

"You've probably heard most of it already," I said earnestly. "Do you remember any of the stories from your tribe about..." I paused dramatically, just for the hell of it. "Wolves?"

"Yeah, there's a bunch," Rachel replied. "Wolves, and spirit warriors, and cold ones, and all that junk. Why, what about them?"

"Can I see your hand for a sec?" I asked, holding out mine.

"What, are you going to read my palm, or something?" she joked, but she held out her hand. I held it just as though fortune-telling were what I had in mind, but all I'd wanted was to let her notice my body temperature. Her own was unusually warm. No one would send her to the hospital if she popped a thermometer under her tongue, but she ran a bit hot.

Rachel jerked her hand back, and I didn't try to stop her. Clutching at her chilled hand with the other, she stared at me, eyes round with shock. "Bella, I don't *believe* in cold ones," she said, with a vaguely didactic tone that didn't match the fear on her face.

"You don't? Oh, okay, then," I said.

She blinked at me, put her hands in her lap, blinked again, and said, "I really don't."

"That's fine," I repeated.

"Vampires don't exist," said Rachel.

"So I've been told," I said agreeably.

There was a silence. I smiled at her pleasantly, and she looked at me, at all the telltale features. The pale skin. The dark circles under my eyes; my eyes themselves, which were ringed with the faint lines of my contacts. She inhaled shallowly, deliberately, detecting the "perfume". Perhaps she was thinking about my voice, how clear and chiming I sounded.

Our drinks came, my water and her iced tea. She clutched at her glass and had a sip, almost spilling. There was no protocol in her memory for what to do when a vampire took her out for lobster.

I took a swallow of water. Although Rachel didn't smell *tasty*, that didn't shut down venom production - if anything, it had gone up a bit, perhaps in preparation for a fight. That, and there were the waiter and the other diners. The air had some kick to it.

The food arrived.

"If you want any of this, you can have it," I said, gesturing at the halibut and the sides accompanying it. "I'm not hungry."

"Bella, those stories are all fictional," Rachel said. "Imaginary. Made up."

"That may be," I acknowledged. "On an entirely unrelated topic, did you know that there are a lot of fictional stories in which the Earth is populated by creatures called 'humans'? I understand it's a popular genre."

Rachel gaped at me. She didn't even touch her lobster.

I waited patiently, and eventually the steam wafting up from her plate overrode her shock. She started dipping bites of crustacean into butter and mechanically chewing them. But except for the minimum attention to keep lobster juice from dribbling down her front, she was focused on me.

"Your eyes," she observed, a quarter of the way through her plate, "are brown."

"I'm wearing contact lenses," I told her, and fished the box out of my purse to show her.

She looked at the box of cosmetic lenses like it was a horrible spider, and started eating faster. She finished all of the easily accessible lobster, although delicate work with the pick could have gotten more out of the shell. "You said *Cullen*, right?" she asked, starting on her asparagus.

"That's my married name, yes," I replied. "My husband's name is Edward."

"And how old is *Edward*?" asked Rachel, pronouncing the name with some distaste.

"Older than I am. Looks remarkably well-preserved, though," I told her. She swiped one of my halibut fillets as I'd invited her to do and plunked it into the tartar sauce it had come with. "Did you have breakfast?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did, I'm just... really hungry all of a sudden..." muttered Rachel, sounding as puzzled by her appetite as I was. She ate the fish and took another piece. From across the table, I thought the warmth emanating from her was getting hotter...

I didn't have any information to the effect that activation came with enhanced appetite. Perhaps it had never seemed important to mention it next to the "turn into a giant wolf" part. Or she was just hungry for no particular reason. It seemed very *fast*.

But better to err on the side of caution.

I reached into my purse, peeled out a hundred dollar bill, and laid it on the table. "Rachel, we need to get out of here now."

"Huh?"

"We are in the middle of Spokane and you are exhibiting a peculiar symptom after having spent some time hanging out with... me," I said. "Let's *stop* being in the middle of Spokane. Right now."

Rachel looked at me like she'd been punched in the stomach. Like *I* had punched her in the stomach, maybe - shocked, hating that she believed but believing anyway, she couldn't have been more distraught if she'd learned that her father wasn't or that her twin was dead or something equally horrible.

I failed to check one twist of guilt, but the need to *get her someplace safe* was stronger than the need to apologize for what I had already done, and it wouldn't *kill* her -

"Rachel, *we need to go*," I said. And finally, she got to her feet, looking woozy. She managed to follow me to my car without my having to carry her, and sat in the passenger seat without even looking at the seatbelt. I didn't bring up her bad safety habit, just pulled out and wove through traffic as fast as I could. I ran four red lights, taking I-90 back the way I'd come at speeds even Edward would approve of. Rachel shook in her seat, sweating, but not transforming. Maybe the process took a while and she was only in the beginning stages.

I crossed the state line into Idaho and drove into the national forest, where I pulled over and abandoned the car. I pulled Rachel by the hand into the trees, but she stumbled, and I was desperate to get her out of sight. Keeping my ears open for hikers or forest rangers, I picked her up and fled into the deep woods.

I found a place that didn't look or smell like humans had visited it much - at least since the last rain, which didn't mean much, but it was something. Rachel looked sick, but not deathly ill. Her heart was beating fast, but not faster than healthy ones beat under stress. She was breathing oddly, but not more oddly than she had when she'd only been trying to avoid my "perfume". She sat on the ground cross-legged and held onto her ankles, looking vacantly at a tree.

"How do you feel?" I asked, after we'd been in the chosen spot for two minutes without speaking.

"I had a class this afternoon," she said faintly.

"You take the summer semester?"

"Don't like going home," she said. "Reminds me of Mom..."

I'd known that Billy's wife was dead, although for some reason I'd never processed the translation that his children were motherless. "How do you feel?" I asked again.

"Wrong. Too - too something. Alone," Rachel said.

"I'm right here."

"I know you are," she snapped. "You asked me how I *felt* and I'm *telling* you, not about whether I knew you were *there*!"

"Well, what do you mean, *alone*?"

"It's - it's like - It's the way I always thought I'd feel if something happened to Becky," she whispered. "In stories, not the true stories, other ones, there are magical twins who know how each other are feeling, know if anything's gone wrong - and we don't have that, once Becky broke her arm falling down the stairs and I was out climbing trees and didn't know until an hour later. I didn't feel anything. But I pretended I did and this is how I pretended it would feel if she *died*," Rachel whined. The words came out of her in an unfiltered rush.

"If you tell me her number, I'll call her right now and make sure she's all right," I offered softly.

"Are you going to do this to her *too*?" snarled Rachel. "What's *wrong* with you? You knew this would happen, didn't you? *Bella, what the hell, I had a god damn class this afternoon.*"

"There are other vampires," I said quietly. "The last time they found out about a species of werewolves, they wiped them out. I wanted you to be able to defend yourselves. As far as I know, Becky is alive. I want her to stay that way, and you, and

your brother, and everyone else I can get to."

"Your solution to the existence of vampires who don't like werewolves is to *create werewolves*?" Rachel demanded incredulously. The excess heat was really pouring out of her; I definitely wasn't imagining it. It was like being next to an open oven.

I repeated my spiel about how little it would matter to the Volturi if she were active or not. Rachel listened, but didn't look impressed. She just glared stonily at me when I ran out of disparaging things to say about typical vampire ethics and the lack of protection being inactive would offer her. I tacked on, "I hear that when you shapeshift regularly, you won't age. You can live forever."

"Like *this*?" she asked miserably. "You want me to live forever feeling like I've got a few big holes in me?"

"Maybe it'll go away when you properly transform," I said encouragingly. "Or when there are more wolves. I think you're supposed to come in packs; that could be all it is, that you don't have a pack yet."

She whined and slumped forward. "Leave me alone."

"I don't think that's a good idea - you might be disoriented when you transform, or it might take a long time and I might have to bring you food, or -"

"I said leave me alone!" howled Rachel, and then she exploded.

The transformation was insanely fast. Only vampiric visual processing let me catch any detail. Rachel disappeared in a cloud of cream-white fur, which whooshed outward for a radius of a couple yards in all directions. Shreds of cloth were forced away from her, leaving tatters of her clothes dangling from nearby twigs and strewn on the ground. The fur pulled in as though vacuumed, farther some places than others, and formed the shape of a wolf. But no ordinary wolf: she was at least six or seven times the size of the Eurasian one I'd eaten in Norway. She was the size of a bear - a *large* bear.

Too fast for me react, she shot a paw forward and clobbered me across the face.

Deep gashes opened across my cheeks; my right eye was put out of commission and my field of vision shrank by a third, losing depth. Pain sliced through astonishment -

Rachel was snarling and pulling her foot back, and my mind was a war zone between the urge to kill her and the instinct to flee. Between the wounds and the shock and the fact that she smelled much more strongly than she had, smelled *dangerous*, like an *enemy*, there was no room for me to wonder if she could be calmed down. If she only planned to hit me once. If she'd actually intended to do it at all.

I bolted.

And Rachel gave chase, and *she was faster than me* - but even with one eye unresponsive, I was still smaller, nimbler, better able to get through the trees without running into them. I heard small branches snap off in her coat as she pursued me. They slowed her down enough that I was able to keep ahead of her.

I hadn't even picked a direction when I'd taken off. Nine seconds into the chase I recovered a little presence of mind, added up all the clues about our location, veered right, and led her deeper into the woods - the last thing I needed was to encourage her towards downtown Spokane. She followed, crashing through brush and growling.

Gradually, as the cuts in my face pulled themselves closed, my ability to think crept back to me. At first I only applied this to running away more effectively: I could turn on a dime even at top speed. She had a wider turn radius and more weight to add inertia, so I zigzagged and she fell behind a little at a time. I could afford to quit pumping one arm and prod my damaged eye. It was healing too, although the vision hadn't started to return. I reminded myself that vampire venom was supposedly the only thing that would leave a scar.

I started yelling her name, over and over. "Rachel! *Rachel!*" I hollered at her. I thought I heard her slow a little, and though I didn't let up on my own pace, I added, "Calm down!"

She slowed to - relatively speaking - a jog. I dared to look over my shoulder, and somehow she appeared puzzled, with liquidy black eyes standing out in confusion from her eggshell-colored fur.

Indistinct light made it through my hurt eye as it glued some of its connections back together. I risked halting my run, and instead I scrabbled my way up a tree. Rachel didn't look like she'd be able to climb, and I could fling myself to another treetop without being too easy to follow, if she became hostile again or tried to knock over my perch.

She slowed to a brisk trot, and approached my tree. She paced around it, sniffing, and finally sat.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. She was very fluffy. If she'd been a lot smaller and less toothy, she'd have made a popular stuffed animal. I began to be able to see the edges of shapes with my right eye.

She scratched a branch out of the fur on her neck with one hind leg and made a whining noise.

"...Can you *talk?*" I asked her, adjusting my hold on the branch I clung to.

Ponderously, she shook her head from side to side. She made a little grumbling sound.

"Then I guess I can't very well ask you why you swatted me," I said. "Or much of anything. I suppose I could make guesses, and if I can't figure it out, we can go through the alphabet and you can spell it?" She made a laugh-like snorting sound, and her tail wagged once.

"Okay, nod or shake your head for the usual reasons, and, uh, bark at me if it's close but partly wrong or incomplete?" I suggested. She nodded, and so I started guessing. "Do I smell revolting? Like something you've instinctively got to fight?"

She nodded again, emphatically, then stuck out her tongue in a remarkably humanlike expression of disgust.

"So it helps that I'm up a tree, I'm guessing? Harder to smell me from up here?" She nodded once more, repeated the laughing sound. "Is that the only reason you attacked me?" It wasn't. "Are you pissed off that I activated you?" She was, but that wasn't everything. "Still feel like you've got a few big holes in you?" She barked.

My vision resolved to its normal acuity in the injured eye, and I blinked twice. My contact lens from that eye was completely gone, and the other was about halfway through dissolving; I plucked it out and flicked it away, not in Rachel's direction. "I really didn't expect you to transform that fast," I said apologetically. "I was told it was a gradual sort of thing - I figured I'd be able to drive you all the way to La Push before anything happened."

Rachel sat back on her haunches and put one forepaw on top of the other in the air. Trying to mime something? "Do you think it's because I touched your hand?" I guessed. "That could be it, could speed things up." She nodded. The last of the pain in my face faded, everything having knitted to its proper smoothness.

My phone rang.

I apologized to Rachel, and she waved a paw as though to graciously permit me to take the call. It was Alice. I held the phone to my ear.

"Bella?" she asked, panicked. "Is that you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Alice. What is it?" I asked.

"What the hell happened just now?" she asked. "I can't see you *at all*."

"Really?" I asked. "I'm fine, I promise. You didn't panic Edward about this or anything, did you?"

"No, I tried you first, I'm glad you're okay - what *happened*?"

Seventy years before, Alice hadn't been part of the Cullen family...

"Maybe it's a new development of my power," I suggested. Blatant lie. I didn't think it was any such thing. The timing was too convenient for it to be anything but Rachel. "You can't see me at *all*?" I decided that after I hung up the phone, I'd ask Rachel to stay put and run a mile or so away, then back.

"Not a bit - no, wait, I'm getting something now. You'll be in the woods, somewhere... It's just a flash, you're running and stopping and turning around and disappearing again."

"I guess it doesn't work consistently, at least not yet," I said. "I'm not *trying* to be invisible to you too, Alice, promise. But I'm okay and you shouldn't panic or worry anyone else."

"Okay," Alice said uncomfortably. "Wait, now even that flash has gone!"

"I'm fine, Alice," I told her again. "I have to go." Reluctantly, she bade me goodbye and I put the phone back in my pocket.

"Sorry about that," I said to Rachel. "I think your species is invisible to my psychic sister."

Rachel uttered another wolfy laugh. Then, abruptly, her form contracted and she was human-shaped again, standing naked in the middle of the woods. "Ack!" she yelped.

"Hey, you did it!" I said approvingly. "Uh, I packed some clothes, they're in the car - you're taller than me, but better than nothing until we can get you to your place?"

"I don't think I had better go home, or to a store. What if I phase again?" Rachel asked. "I don't have it under control, at least not now..."

"Okay, fair enough," I said. "I can pick up some things for you. What do you need?" She gave me a rundown of how to find her room and what she wanted from it, and - given that she seemed liable to go through a lot of clothes - a summary of new items she wanted purchased. I told her my best estimate of how long the two-way trip, the pickup, and the shopping would take all together, and she went on a small rant about how she wanted to be able to do her own shopping, and how this was stupid and didn't make sense, and how she'd had a *class*. Mid-sentence, she "phased" back, disintegrating the plant she'd been using for cover and reattaining her puffy cloud of fur. She snorted.

"I'm going to stay up in the trees, just to be on the safe side," I told her. "Follow me to my car - but stay back from the road, I don't think we want reports of polar bears flying around - and I'll get you an outfit for when you change back again, and then I'll drive into town and get you your things." She whined, but followed.

When we got to the clearing where she'd originally transformed, she barked at me several times and started sniffing around. I watched from the trees rather than jumping

down or continuing to my car. Eventually, she found her purse. The strap had been destroyed, and it hadn't done much good to the rest of it to be thrown into a tree at such high speed. Rachel growled at it, but then picked it up in her teeth and flung it in my general direction.

I caught it, and looked inside to see what she was trying to show or give me. It contained a wallet, a phone, her class schedule, keys, gum, a pen, two band-aids, a package of tissues, and similar purse-dwelling items. "Is it just the keys you wanted me to have?" I asked, rattling them.

She shook her head, barking. "I don't know what you want me to do with this," I said. "Uh, does it start with an A...?"

Spelling in this way was tedious, but eventually she got me to spell "TELREGESTARIMDROPINGSUMMRCLASES". I wasn't sure if she normally had bad spelling or just found it difficult to keep track of letters the way we were communicating - or deliberately skipped some for efficiency reasons. The schedule was probably necessary to give credibility to the notion that I was entrusted with this task. "Okay, I'll stop at the university and take care of that," I told her. "I'll tell them you're deathly and contagiously ill and can't sign things yourself, how's that?" She nodded approvingly.

I swung myself from tree to tree and finally reached my car. Fortunately, it hadn't been towed or vandalized. In the trunk, I found my suitcase where I'd left it, and took out an outfit that might fit Rachel in spite of her being half a foot taller than me. I left it in a bush well out of human sight from the street, called her towards it so she could find the clothes, and then got in my car to make the trip.

Rachel's roommates weren't home, so I didn't have to endure awkward explanations while I went through her stuff and got what she'd asked for. I did leave a note on her door so they wouldn't think she'd been robbed - "Rachel is very sick & asked me to get her stuff. Call her dad to confirm if you want.". I added Billy's phone number.

Her place wasn't far from campus, and I found the registrar's office. They gave me trouble about dropping her classes for her, and I found it necessary to threaten them with the prospect of having to clean up vomit if Rachel were obliged to come in in person. Yes, I said, she was contagious; yes, she would be too sick for too long to catch up in her classes; yes, they could send her e-mails to get this information directly if they wanted but she might not get back to them for a while because it's hard to type while doubled over with stomach cramps and trying to keep toast down. Eventually they put in the drop requests, noting for me that it would be a hassle but not impossible for Rachel to get her enrollments back if she got better.

I hit up the nearest clothing store and got some of everything Rachel had described, walking out with enough bags that some people were looking at me funny for bringing

them to my car without stumbling.

When I got back to the forest, Rachel had managed to turn herself human-shaped again and was wearing the clothes I'd loaned her. They didn't fit well - she was much taller than I was, and had ropy muscle where I had undefined smoothness. In fact, I almost thought she might have grown over the past several hours. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, an illusion of the ill-fitting clothes, or a werewolf thing; I didn't think she'd know either, so I didn't ask.

"I don't think we'd better put you in the car," I said consideringly. "I don't care about it, but I'm not sure what it'd do to you if you phased inside it - and it'd be just about the most conspicuous thing you could do, if there were anybody else on the road."

Rachel nodded, tight-lipped. "So, what, then? Do I live in this forest forever?"

"I originally intended to bring you to La Push," I reminded her. "Remember, you're supposed to come in packs. That's where you'll find the rest of yours - I strongly suspect that it'll fill in a few of those big holes. If your school won't let you finish your degree long distance, I'll personally pay your tuition someplace that will. Or I might be able to get rid of the threat to your species sooner than I think I will, and then as soon as you've got your shifting under control you can get back normally."

"Stop saying 'your species'," said Rachel. "I'm a human being."

I blinked. "What would you like me to call the group of people who, like you, can turn into giant wolves, then?"

"We can be werewolves, but I'm still human," she insisted. "*My* heart is still beating."

"Okay, but if you aren't a species of werewolves, what are you? It's not like you have a disease, or registered as a member of the Werewolf Party."

"A tribe, I guess," she said, shrugging.

"But not every Quileute's going to be able to shapeshift, unless your dad was wrong about the age maximum. Even ones who are young enough might not have the right gene."

"Look, whatever, just - I'm human. Period," said Rachel, folding her arms, and then she destroyed the borrowed clothes in a burst of fur.

"This," I said, "is going to be a challenge."

I went to a public library, got on the Internet, and found someone selling a horse trailer. The car I was using had a hitch, although it didn't look like it had been there

originally - Rosalie must have added it for some reason. I bought the trailer, and a futon to lay on the bottom and make it comfortable and a curtain to prevent anyone from seeing inside, and Rachel traveled in there. It was cramped and dark, but not in danger of bursting open if she phased. She grumbled, and then halfway through grumbling turned into a wolf, but got in and let me close it up after her.

Throughout the trip I could hear and feel her phasing back and forth - the soft *whoosh* and the way it changed the weight of the vehicle were very distinctive. I called Billy on the way - he answered on the first ring. Waiting anxiously by the phone?

"Hey, Billy," I said. "Rachel and I are on our way. Your old stories are wrong."

There was a silence, and then a husky whisper: "She's changed, then?"

"Yep. And took a swipe at me, but I'm all better now and she hasn't been obviously out of control since, except she keeps shifting back and forth at random. Our guess is that it happened so fast because I touched her hand - but that's good, now I can just go down a line and give everyone a high-five and we'll be all set. I want to fly Becky in from Hawaii, though. We'll probably have to bring her husband into the loop."

"The treaty still stands, and doesn't allow you on our land," Billy said. "You can't come here to activate anyone."

"Someday, I will need to actually read that thing," I said. "Doesn't it allow any provision for exceptions?"

"Well... yes," he said. "The chief of the tribe was specified to have the authority to allow Cullens on the reservation."

"And who is that?" Talking to Billy was like pulling teeth - he made me work for every piece of information, and it left me impatient.

"That was seventy years ago. Now we are goverened by a council of equals... except..."

"Except?" I insisted. "Come on, talk to me, please."

He sighed heavily. "Tribal law says that the alpha of the pack is the chief."

"So I guess that's Rachel, until there's more wolves? Or will she get to stay alpha?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I told you that women never transformed before," said Billy.

"Aren't you *on* the council?" That much I knew from talking to Charlie. "You can probably hazard a reasonable guess about how tribal law *you* interpret applies to *your* daughter."

He *harrumphed* to himself. "Jacob..."

"He's a child," I said.

"He's not that much younger than you."

"I'm going to be seventeen forever. I can be seventeen and a kid forever, or I can be seventeen and an adult forever. I pick the latter. Jacob's what, fifteen? And still growing. He can be a kid without it being an eternal sentence."

"*You* haven't finished high school either."

"I'll borrow Rosalie's notes and textbooks from senior year sometime and memorize everything in them," I replied. "I'll probably go to college once or twice or thirty times when things have calmed down in my life a bit. Anyway, is there any reason to prefer Jacob as chief over Rachel, or maybe joint chiefhood between the twins, other than the fact that Jacob is a *boy*?" Billy didn't answer me, so I took that as a *no*. "Rachel was first," I said. "If for some reason she wants to hand over being-in-charge-ness to someone else that's her business. If, due to some mystical mojo, the being-in-charge-ness visibly floats to Jacob or whoever's next in line for it once there are more wolves, well, I don't think it's very efficient to argue with mystical mojo when there's so much else to do. But if tribal law says pack alpha's the chief, and Rachel's a one-girl pack, that says to me that she's chief *now*."

"You are a very exasperating girl," Billy informed me.

"You are *welcome* for my thinking of your family's safety when I could have just lived in idyll with my husband in our fairytale cottage in Norway and forgotten you existed," I said brightly. "You are *welcome* for my caring about fairness to *all* of your children and not just the one who has chromosomes traditionally associated with nifty magic."

Billy didn't say anything.

"I'm going to drive first to the Cullen house in Forks," I told him. "Then once she's capable of talking I'll ask Chief Rachel for permission to go on the tribe's land. If she says yes, you'll see me soon. If she says no, I'll invite everybody who might be able to activate over for a little turning-into-giant-wolves party and hope none of them take off my head with an energetic swat. You are *welcome* for my willingness to put up with newly awakened werewolves clawing chunks out of me in exchange for your and their safety."

I was being obnoxious, and I knew it - maybe there was someone who pushed my buttons less than Billy who knew just as much, that I could talk to instead. Rachel was fine; maybe once she'd gotten accustomed to her powers and re-read all the old legends she could be my contact person among the Quileutes.

"Oh - and don't tell my father that I'm in town, please," I added. "I've been keeping in touch with him by phone. But I look different, even with contact lenses in, and he'd

need an explanation. I am going to try to find a way to initiate him into the mysteries, but I want to do it carefully and with certain sorts of help."

"I'm not going to tell him," said Billy darkly. Maybe he thought Charlie would be disappointed in me or something? I didn't ask; I didn't want to extract another six unhelpful sentences out of the man one at a time before learning his motives. I did trust him to keep my father in the dark when he said he would, and that was all I really needed.

I drove up to the Cullen house. It was fuzzily familiar, like everything I'd seen only while human. I parked the car in front of the house because I lacked a remote for the garage. Then I let Rachel out of the trailer.

She walked out bipedally, wincing as she inhaled. "Pah, you really do smell pretty awful - I mean it's not your fault, I guess it's a vampire thing, but it's like it's burning my nose."

"If you have any clever ideas for what I can do to stink less, let me know," I said. "I called your dad on the way. He said that the alpha of the werewolf pack is the chief of the tribe. Cool, huh?"

"Wait, what? We actually have werewolf-based laws on who's chief?" asked Rachel incredulously. "That's really bizarre. I don't want to be chief anyway, I don't like coming home, that's *why I took summer classes*..."

"I'm sure you'll have the hang of phasing by the time the fall semester rolls around," I said. "This is the best place for you to be until then, though. But I don't see why you should have to live at La Push itself if you don't want to. You can use this house if you want." I waved at the family home, assuming I was as entitled as anyone to dictate its use while it stood empty. The property was surely in Carlisle's name, but the family moved its resources around between members freely. It had come in very handy for me - when I'd wanted Ilario turned, for instance, the coven had pulled together to arrange that, even though most of them had no personal stake in his welfare. Eventually someone else would need something accomplished for which I'd be useful and I'd step in. In the meantime, there was a house.

Rachel looked at the house, then went up and tried the door. It wasn't locked. Without anyone to monitor the place, there was no way a lock would stop even a human thief. (There was a security system, but not one that connected to an agency and beeped when the door opened - vampire senses beat anything like that, and vampire power beat any armed goons such companies sent out. When the place was devoid of inhabitants, it contained expensive furniture but nothing readily stealable, and we tended to have houses too far out in the wilderness to be popular targets for vandalism.)

"It smells like vampires in here," announced Rachel loudly.

"Really, still? We've been away for weeks now."

She nodded, and then phased - just her nose was through the door, so she didn't injure the frame in so doing. She backed off the patio and flopped down onto the lawn, rolling her eyes.

I couldn't resist: "You're so *fluffy*," I told her.

A wolfy laugh and a wag of a tail - and she was a naked girl again. I fetched her an outfit. "Maybe you should take up wearing togas or something, that might survive a shift," I proposed. "I'm not going to break the bank buying you clothes, and it's the least I can do, but there'd be fewer scraps of fabric to pick up."

"We'll see how long it takes," she said, pulling on the clothes. "I was trying to practice on the way - I *think* I got from regular to wolf on purpose once but it could have been a coincidence."

"Nice," I said. "So here's the thing about you being chief..."

I explained the treaty - or what I knew of it - and that I needed Rachel's permission to go onto Quileute land.

"You really think that more wolves will fix the... holes?" she asked, a forlorn expression creeping onto her face. She'd been able to act rather *impressively* normal, considering, but the discomfort was apparently still there.

"That's my best guess," I said. "I'd also like you to give me the go-ahead to fly Becky in and activate her. Even if she wants to go on living in Hawaii once she's been brought up to speed, she'll be safer with the ability to turn giant and toothy."

"Who put those Volturi leeches in charge, anyway?" growled Rachel, and then she phased, still growling.

"They put themselves in charge, I think. They have some very powerful allies. I'm working on it, though," I promised her. "So is it okay with you if I visit the reservation?" She nodded. "And if I fly Becky - and her husband if she wants to bring him - up here?" She nodded again.

"Well," I said, "I think we can avoid being seen if we go this way..." I pointed. We ran.

Rachel phased less than a minute into the trip. "I can double back and get you some towels or something from the house," I offered. "People are probably going to come have a look at you, and it'd be faster than getting into an entire outfit."

"Right, that's good," she said, and then she took a deep breath - either to psych

herself up or to get a good whiff of me, I couldn't tell - and popped into wolf form, probably deliberately.

I fetched two towels - most of the things like that had been packed, but there were a few left in the bathroom on the top floor. I also detached a curtain that I vaguely remembered Rosalie disliking and brought that, and picked up all the bags of clothes and the ones I'd gotten from her place.

Rachel was human-shaped again when I got back to her. "I think I've *almost* got the hang of this," she said. "It helped that I sort of knew it was coming before it happened. I can only imagine trying to check myself into a mental hospital if one day I'd walked downwind of a random vampire and transformed a week later having no idea what was going on."

"Yeah," I laughed. "Want these now, or are you trying to phase back?" I held out a bag.

"Trying to phase back - or I will when I'm done talking. I feel... really, *really* full of energy. I actually don't think I'd get *tired* if I just walked to the rez like this. Maybe not if I walked all the way back to Spokane. But it's faster on four legs." She paused. "I'm *glad* that you are a girl. And married and everything. This would be super awkward otherwise."

"No kidding," I said. "Just another reason why it's good I started with you and not Jacob."

"Oh, lord, Jacob," moaned Rachel. "He's got the gene if I do, doesn't he? Ugh. Little brothers. Be glad you're an only child... Half the pack is going to be boys."

"You're Alpha," I pointed out. "You can boss them around. Tell them to turn around and stare at a tree." I wanted her to like being a wolf, if possible. Her safety was the *first* reason I wanted her activated - her possible use as an ally in a fight with the Volturi, if it came to that, was my second. If she resented me, it would be harder to secure her help.

"Hm," she said speculatively. "Maybe it's worth being chief just to make my brother do what I say occasionally." She didn't sound serious, so I laughed, and she smiled at me. "Okay. Trying to go wolf now."

"Wait a sec," I said, and she glanced at me curiously. "Based on who'd be descended from past werewolves, what kind of pack size do you think we're looking at? And how do you want to handle telling and activating them? I mean, no hard feelings, but you tried to take my face off - I'd rather avoid situations where anybody will succeed at that with me or a - non-magical person. I like having a face. And you know better than I do what might have kept you calm to start out."

"Let me think," she said. "There's Jake, he's fifteen now, the Clearwater kids are eighteen and thirteen..." She went through more names, coming up with a couple dozen Quileutes between twelve and twenty-five who she'd expect to have the gene. "I'm not

sure if you should activate the really young ones, though," she added. "I mean, they kinda shouldn't be getting into any fights. And if this is going to be a *thing* you'd need to make another trip in some years to activate the ones who are really young now anyway."

"You're the boss of them," I reminded her. "They can still stay home and play video games instead of trying to kill bad vampires even if they're activated."

"I guess. Now I feel like maybe I should be worrying about parental consent or something."

"How's this for a plan," I said. "I hang back in the middle of the woods. You go in - on two feet, if you can hang onto it, and you're getting better at it all the time. You talk to anybody you need to talk to, get any permission you need - and I just stay put and shake hands with whoever you bring me and then you take them someplace else before they go *floof*." I added a gesture to symbolize the explosion of fur that was the human-to-wolf transition. "All at your discretion about who knows what and who I meet. You're handling everything *really* well and you know everybody there better than I do - and you can make judgment calls in person without accidentally floofing *everybody floofable* just by being there, like I would."

Rachel giggled manically at the term of art "floof". "That sounds good," she acknowledged. "And after that's dealt with I'll call Becky and see if I can get her to come up. Plane tickets are expensive from Hawaii, though..."

"I've got it covered," I told her. "Don't worry about that or anything else that can be solved by throwing money at it. I have a psychic sister, remember? She can't see *you*, but you aren't the CFO of a publicly trading corporation, either."

Rachel laughed again. "Okay. So I guess I should get dressed and see if I can avoid floofing for a while, instead of running there."

"Up to you, Chief," I teased, and she snickered. I handed over the clothes.

"Keep cracking jokes," she added. "I think it helps - if I'm right about how it seems to work, I go like this when I think things are funny and I go wolf when I'm pissed off, even a little."

I obliged as best I could, although I hadn't read any joke books since turning, and most of the material I could produce on demand without situational prompting was Emmett's brand of off-color insinuation. Accompanied by anecdotes for context, this seemed to suit Rachel well enough, and she didn't burst out of her khakis.

Rachel was reasonably familiar with the woods around the reservation, and pointed out where she wanted me to wait before I'd even caught the scent of humans other than her. I stood by the landmark rock she'd indicated. "Oh, and Rachel," I called after her.

"What?" she asked.

"If there's anybody who you aren't sure about having the gene, but who you'd want to activate if they did, you may as well bring them by. I'll be able to tell by smell without having to give anything away except the part where I'm a weird girl standing in the woods waiting for you to introduce me to people."

"I smell funny to you, too?" she asked, sounding nonplussed. "Huh. Okay. I think I thought of most everybody, though. Although I guess there've been some rumors about the Calls..."

"I don't know the Calls, but it doesn't cost me anything to shake hands with them."

"Just the one. It'd be the son, not the mom. Nobody knows who his dad is - she showed up from the Makah reservation, pregnant, people assumed she'd left the father there but she never got child support or talked about a dead lover or anything. So I'll bring her kid - last, though. He's Jacob's age, I think they're friends." I nodded. "Anyway," she said, "if anybody changes faster than I did and goes for you before I get them where I have picked out, lead them that way - there's a sharp dropoff, not that it'd be hard to get out of, but it'll at least provide a clear border. I don't want some fifteen-year-old racing into the village without thinking and taking his mom's arm off because she grounded him or something. And you can get around in the trees pretty good - well enough that you'd be tricky to catch, if you keep your wits about you."

I nodded again, and she turned and walked out to retrieve her packmates, one at a time.

She brought Jacob first. I heard them talking a mile away - he was incredulous that she was even *there*, let alone claiming to be a werewolf. He was also having trouble keeping up with her long, tireless strides.

When they reached my rock, he was saying, "Raych, if this is some kind of joke... uh..." He stared at me. It didn't look like he recognized me. His hair was very long. I wondered suddenly if Rachel's fluffy coat was related to her fluffy haircut. If so, Jacob was going to need to visit the barber or he'd look like a cross between a wolf and a mop.

"Hey, Jacob," I said.

"Do... I... know you?" I hadn't put any contacts in; my eyes were their brilliantly crimson selves, albeit with the encroaching orange at the border of the iris. And of course my face was too symmetrical and smoothly planed to belong to my human past.

"We've met," I said. "I'm Bella."

"Bel- Charlie's kid?" He gaped.

"The same," I said. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell him I was here, though. He's

not informed of... things."

"*Things* - is that what you call it?" he spluttered. Rachel bristled.

"Sure, why not? Come, join us, be a Thing," I said, hoping to crack her up and delay the need for a new outfit. She smirked and didn't phase. I held out one white hand to Jacob. There was a long pause.

"Jake, kiddo, you can smell her from where you are, right? You're gonna activate whether you touch her or not, this just speeds it up so I can stash you in the ravine and go get Leah," Rachel said.

Her brother stared at me with horrified eyes. I looked back as benignly as I could, still holding my arm forth - it wasn't going to get tired or anything. Eventually he reached out, touched one knuckle with one fingertip, and pulled back as though burned. "You're *cold*," he said.

"If you're trying to tempt me into saying you're hot, it's not going to work," I replied. *Keep Rachel laughing.* She did, a little, although she looked nervous once Jacob had touched my hand.

"Eheheh," said Jacob, flicking his eyes to his sister. They walked towards the ravine, Jacob occasionally looking over his shoulder to throw me incredulous glances.

I could hear all the way to the ravine, and I listened as Jacob complained incredulously of the shivers - but not, interestingly, of the emotional discomfort Rachel had described. It took him almost forty minutes to shift, going by when I started to hear barking. Two voices yelped and yowled at each other - so at some point she'd phased too. The "floof" noise was too soft to carry that far, so I didn't know when.

I didn't hear signs of fighting; there were no snarls or pained howling. I waited for her to return, amusing myself by snapping a chunk of rock off of the boulder I stood near and inexpertly sculpting it into a little replica of wolf-Rachel with my fingertips.

I was just scratching in the fur on the tail when the white wolf trotted back. She looked *happy*. I blinked at her curiously, and held out a bag of clothes.

Very deliberately, or so it seemed to me, she phased and accepted the proffered bag. "Did you know we're *telepathic*?" she asked me. Then she furrowed her brow, puzzled at something. "...In wolf form?" she added, apparently having just noticed the absence of her newfound power.

"I didn't," I said. "Big holes in you all sewn up?"

"Yup!" she replied. If she'd had a tail at that moment it would've wagged. "All gone. Although it is sure weird sharing my head with my little brother." She shook her head, laughing softly. "So I guess I'm the only one ever has to live with that. I'm half tempted to stop here, just the two of us - but Leah'll think this is cool, I bet. And her fiancé is on my

list too, and her brother, she'll want to bring them in. Jake filled me in on that. Hope Leah and Sam don't saturate the mental soup with too much *mush*." She paused. "No pun intended. Anyway, I'm going to go get her. Hey, neat little statue. Is that me?"

"Who else would it be? I don't know what Jacob looks like when he's wolfy."

"Sorta rust-colored, and my god, his fur, it's so long!" Rachel said. "Not as big as me, at least not yet, but he's a kid, he'll grow. I told him to hang out in the ravine and then if he phases back quick enough, he can coach Leah and so on, and I can just keep making trips instead of hanging out through the whole process every time. I'll want those towels and the curtain, though."

"Sure thing," I said. And she grinned at me, making only a little face when she inhaled vampire-scented air, and trotted back to the reservation.

Leah Clearwater, who had the sort of eyelashes that other women medicated themselves to get, was skeptical. But she followed Rachel into the forest readily enough, shook my hand with only the barest hesitation, and complained about my stench only fourteen times between meeting me and getting shaky enough to want to quit talking. I heard her yelling, "Oh, for crissake, Black, put some clothes on!" at Jacob when she arrived at the ravine, and Rachel offering her brother a towel. Apparently he'd dewolfed but not left his place. Rachel turned around as soon as she'd gotten them set up, and then went to retrieve the younger Clearwater.

Leah's little brother Seth was thirteen, and a pleasanter child one could not hope to meet. He didn't make one remark about my temperature, odor, or supernatural weirdness, just introduced himself as polite as could be, thanked me for helping him "either let my sister play a really elaborate practical joke that'll make a good story later, or turn into a werewolf", and traipsed off to join the others. When Rachel doubled back, she reported that Leah-the-wolf was gray.

Leah's fiancé was a man named Sam Uley, a solid, somber sort who seemed only to be playing along because Leah had already gone with Rachel. He accepted a handshake, grimacing but not commenting when he touched my skin, and proceeded to the phasing location with resigned exasperation. I finished my sculpture and picked up a large fallen branch to try working in wood instead; Rachel swung by en route to find another pack member and told me that Seth's wolf form was sandy-colored.

It was at this point that her efforts met with less success. She came back alone and told me she was going to risk sending Jacob to get Quil Ateara and Embry Call, and Leah to get two girls named Marilyn and Olivia. It was in more or less this way that the rest of the pack came through, and through some combination of luck and Rachel's trick of humor, there were no sudden phasings in the middle of the village (although Rachel did need to go into Billy's house and get some of Jacob's clothes so the boys could do this looking less ridiculous than they would have just wrapped in towels). I promised Jacob as

he walked by that I'd replace any of his possessions that got ruined.

In all, I activated twenty-six wolves, fourteen female, twelve male. (Embry turned out to be one after all, leading to considerable gossip punctuated by occasional floof-induced sentence truncation about who his father could be.) It was after dark by the time the last was brought through. Rachel had a list of nine more people, including Becky, who weren't living on the reservation but were still under the twenty-five-year-old threshold and could be expected to have the gene.

"Are we sure that threshold is true?" I asked when she gave me this list. "I mean, some of the other stories weren't true. Every girl we tried was able to activate, and that wasn't supposed to happen at all."

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I guess I could carry Dad out here and see if you can get him to turn into a wolf. He already knows everything."

"I guess you could ask," I said dubiously. I'd agreed to leave this up to Rachel, and I had only a few weak objections to trying to activate Billy. He wouldn't exactly be worse off if his wolf form were disabled too; the fact that I had some trouble getting along with him personally wouldn't become significantly more of a problem if he were one of the pack. "Would you mind waiting until tomorrow? I want to call my husband, and hunt, and buy plane tickets for all these people." I waved the list of absent Quileutes.

"Yeah, sure, we could use a rest anyway," Rachel said. "I'll ask Dad tomorrow. Have fun, uh, hunting." She paused. "What is it you usually eat?"

"Me personally? Killer whales, when they're handy," I told her.

"Right, bag a tasty whale, but go easy, because you are what you eat," she snickered. "See you in the morning. I'm going to stay out overnight - I don't want anybody breaking their furniture phasing in the middle of the night, in case that's a thing that happens, so we're camping. You might wanna avoid the ravine. Sam and Nina and Paul are having some extra trouble getting ahold of themselves and it wouldn't surprise me if one of them went for your throat."

"Traditionally, I'm the one who goes for the throat."

She laughed. She looked so much better since the pack had ceased to be a solo act - she was practically radiating health and power, and that excessive heat seemed more like a glow than a fever when it accompanied a smile. "Okay," she said, "I'm gonna floof and go to bed. Still love that word, by the way." She got out of her clothes, safely away from the eyes of her packmates, and (entirely deliberately) adopted her white-furred form. I watched her lope off into the night.

Clearwater

It wasn't far from La Push to the coastline. Leaving items like my cellphone that would be harmed by the saltwater onshore, I dove into the water and looked for lunch. I didn't find any killer whales, so I had a harbor seal instead. It wasn't nearly as good, but it filled me up. When I'd emerged from the water, I called Edward, told him that I expected to be away from Québec for at least a couple more days but that he shouldn't worry, and asked after Gianna.

"She's okay," he said heavily, "or at least - well, *Gianna* is fine, but worried about her brother. The morphine didn't do what we thought. Not long after you took off, he started screaming. Carlisle broke his spine, but it's healed now. And he was able to say that the morphine didn't help - that it interacted with the venom somehow, and paralyzed him instead of actually dulling the pain. You can imagine how horrified Gianna was, and Carlisle's decided to start keeping barbituates on hand at all times so that we can do it the way we did with you every time in the future, even on no notice."

I sucked in a breath of sea air through my teeth. "*Eesh*. Yeah, good plan. Ilario's nearly done now?"

"Yes," said Edward. "Nearly. They'll keep me posted - I asked them to call my phone instead of yours when possible and let them assume that your carrier has spotty reception here. At least, I think that's what they assumed - I can't be sure from this far away. Gianna has been informed that you prefer, in spite of your control, not to be around humans when you don't need to and are out hunting most of the time, so she isn't going to let anything slip. Alice did try calling you once, and told me that your power is developing in an interesting and inconvenient way," he relayed, with some mirth.

He hadn't asked for anything about where I was at, and I was grateful. It had begun to wear on me to be away from him for so long. He could probably hear the ocean through the phone, but he could have asked for more precision about my location - or my project, or whether I was with anyone, or what I'd been using my shiny black credit card for lately - and I wouldn't have been able to resist telling him. It *ached* that I couldn't safely share it all. A little itchy feeling that I must be being too paranoid, that *no* danger was so great that it should stop me from telling Edward everything, prickled in my mind. Only the notion that Edward's own safety could be on the line if Aro got hold of the wrong information let me hold my tongue.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I promised him, not addressing the substance of his statements. "I love you, you know."

"I love you," he murmured into the phone.

"You never say 'too'," I observed. "Why not?"

"I got into the habit when you were a human," he said. "If I said 'too', it would make it sound like my love and yours were comparable, when I was quite convinced that

you couldn't love me as much as I loved you."

"That's... very silly, but probably not inaccurate," I said. "Humans don't have a lot of space in their heads. I love you more now than I did then."

I heard a smile in Edward's voice as he said, "Do you want me to start saying "too" now, then?"

"No, don't, it's cute this way."

"Very well," he laughed. "When you come back and when Ilario is ready to be in the same house as Gianna, what do you want to do next?"

"I'd like to meet the Denalis soon," I said. "They didn't come to our wedding, and they're extended family, aren't they?"

"We do tend to consider them so," Edward acknowledged. "I'm sure they'd be happy to have us visit."

"Great. But don't schedule anything yet. I don't have a firm timetable."

"Of course, Bella." I felt so *accommodated*. I'd told Aro that my coven didn't revolve around me, but in some sense, since I'd entered their sphere of attention, it *had*. Bella asked to see vampires doing tricks; Bella wants us to perform egg extraction surgery on her; Bella has been targeted by an unstoppable tracker; Bella needs to be picked up in Italy; Bella has rendered it necessary that we move to Norway; Bella's turning; Bella's a newborn; Bella's a special snowflake; Bella needs a test human; Bella's getting married; Bella needs a private South Atlantic island on which to honeymoon; Bella wants to rescue a human she met once; Bella wants to throw in the human's brother; and now Bella's gallivanting around without telling anybody what she's up to...

I hoped someone in my family would want me to do them a favor soon. Ideally when I wasn't up to my neck in werewolf stuff, and able to help.

"And then we can go looking in South America for half-vampires," I told Edward - he, at least, I could do *something* for. He'd seemed to like the idea of having children that were really *ours* - and I did too, if only we could expect Gianna to survive. It was worth a while prowling about the Amazon Basin or wherever hints led us.

"Whatever you like, love," Edward murmured.

I had nothing else I needed to do until regular business hours would let me reserve airline tickets for inactive Quileutes by phone.

I kept Edward on the phone for a long time.

I had failed to arrange a rendezvous point at which Rachel would be able to find me, so I stayed put on the beach, hoping she could follow my scent. Failing that, she'd be able to dig up my phone number, as I'd called her to invite her to lunch.

No phone call proved necessary. Rachel, flanked by six of her pack in a V with three per side, found me. They walked together in a coordinated, wary-but-confident motion; Rachel, Seth, and the girl I recognized as Marilyn wore smiles but the others were serious and stone-faced. "Hey, Bella," said Rachel. "Me and these six are the best bet at convincing the people on the list I gave you to show up on the rez anytime soon. Oh, and if you want to throw money at a problem, it'd be kind of handy if you could order us thirty assorted pizzas and have them delivered to Dad's - Jake and Embry have enough of a handle on themselves to ferry 'em out to the ravine. Everybody's starving." Seth's stomach growled, backing up her statement.

"Sure. I'll take somebody grocery shopping later for a longer-term solution to sudden werewolf appetite, too, if you want," I said agreeably. "How are we doing the plane tickets thing?"

"We've got four cellphones between us - Seth, Brady, and Linnie don't have their own - so we're going to call our respective people and let you know and from what airport and at what time to buy tickets for as people get convinced," she said.

"Sounds good." The mini-pack dispersed somewhat, so they wouldn't talk over each other; I could hear the voices on the other ends as werewolves stumbled through requests for visits and haphazard prevarications about winning tickets in imaginary contests. I ordered pizza. It was a little tricky to convince the fellow who answered the phone that yes, I said thirty, yes, I *meant* thirty, yes, the number that was represented by a three followed by a zero. Seth was waiting for someone to loan him a phone, and listened to me try to put in my bulk order with an amused expression. Eventually I got the pizza guy to accept my credit card number and agree to bring thirty pizzas to Billy's house, although he said there would be a wait.

"How come you have so much money?" Seth asked.

"I married into a family of vampires with good investment strategies such as "be hundreds of years old" or "have precognition", " I told him.

"Is it nice being a vampire?" he asked.

"I love it," I said. "Turning into one's not fun, though. You guys have it much easier."

"Thanks for helping," he said earnestly. "Those Volturkeys sound pretty bad."

"I don't like 'em much," I agreed. "They were useful to me one time, and some law over vampires is better than none, but I think we can do better."

"You're a nice vampire," Seth informed me, as though he genuinely thought I might need to be reassured on this point. Perhaps he'd been exposed to too much popular culture in which immortality was something to be angsted about.

"Thank you, Seth," I said.

"You're welcome!" he said, and then Rachel was finished convincing Becky to fly up and handed him her phone.

"So I'm guessing she'll fly out of Honolulu?" I asked Rachel. "I wasn't paying close attention to the conversation. What's her married name? When should I book her flight for?"

"Her and her husband are both coming," Rachel said. "Rebecca and Caleb Euta. I told her I won a small lottery and I can cover her lost wages if she takes a few days off - we might actually have to promise that kind of thing to a few people, I hope it's okay. And book it for three p.m. our time, today, or as soon after as you can."

"I don't even have to *warn* Alice unless I want a million bucks very suddenly," I reassured Rachel. "I can cover lost wages. I can put people up in hotels. I can buy you all thirty pizzas every day."

"Okay, good," she said. "Pizza's on its way?" I nodded. "Also good. I could eat a horse."

"I'm sure if one were around, you could take it down, and probably digest it just fine in wolf form too," I pointed out. "Although you'd be more likely to find deer or something than horse."

"Point. Still, one life-changing thing at a time. I don't want to learn to turn into a wolf and then start eating raw meat less than twenty-four hours later."

"Fair enough. I'll book Becky's flight." I called a few airlines, eventually finding one that would give Becky and Caleb both seats on an upcoming flight on short notice. Oddly, I didn't have to throw a surcharge in - I supposed if they had empty seats so soon before takeoff, they'd go to considerable lengths to fly with those seats full for cheap instead of empty for nothing.

By the time I was finished with that, two more werewolves had finished and needed me to buy flights from Florida and Ohio. I did that, noting between calls that Marilyn was having difficulty convincing her person - apparently an elder cousin - to agree to suddenly visit. I finished the third airline booking and caught the girl's eye. "Can I help?" I mouthed to her.

"Hang on," she told her cousin, and she put her hand over the phone. "His girlfriend's in trouble with Immigration and he won't leave town. I don't think you can fix that."

"Well, don't know till I try," I said. "Where are they located?"

"Albuquerque," she said. I quizzed her for more details, mentally scanning the list of contacts licit and illicit that Edward had given me. There weren't any local to New Mexico - too sunny; we'd never live there if we could help it and wanted to go out during the day. I could probably have managed to get the authorities to leave the girl alone if I'd tried federal law enforcement, but thought it would be potentially conspicuous, depending on how watchful the Volturi were.

"I guess I can make a separate trip to visit him," I said. "But then he'd be activating all by himself... do you know if your telepathy has a range limit?" Marilyn shook her head, solemn.

I growled to myself, which caused Marilyn to phase. She whined, annoyed; Rachel had brought a few changes of clothes along, and when she noticed the strawberry-blond-furred wolf she waved her behind a rock and left the clothes there.

I picked up Marilyn's phone and handed it to Rachel. "Sorry," she said to the absent Quileute, "Marilyn had to run all of a sudden - she may call you back later." She flipped the phone closed and put it in her pocket. "Don't growl," she told me. "Even I jumped a bit when I heard it. We're all *managing* to override the whole "you smell like cyanide and evil, minty flowers" thing, but make it easy on us, please."

"Sorry."

Rachel waved a hand, not particularly upset, and moved on. "If we can't get this one guy to show up, we can't get this one guy to show up. You can get him in the next wave when more people have gotten old enough. Although if you wanted to stick around until his girlfriend's situation is resolved..."

"We have no idea how long that will take. Maybe I should leave you a bottle of venom or something. If anything besides a real live vampire will trigger a transition, that should be it. But be careful with it. If it gets into a regular human's bloodstream it causes turning - I have no idea what it'd do to one of you. And it needs a glass container. It'll eat through most anything else."

"What do we do with it?"

"Smelling it might do the trick all by itself, though probably slowly - it's at least ninety percent of why you think I stink, I bet. Failing that, a drop of it on *unbroken* skin might be safe - but I'd want to try it on somebody's little toenail, first, so it can be chopped off smart quick if it turns out I'm wrong."

"Okay. I'll send someone to bring you a glass bottle. We'll be careful," she said.

Marilyn's cousin was the only person who absolutely couldn't be persuaded to visit

La Push. I bought the rest of the plane tickets, and then simply handed Rachel all the cash I had in my wallet so she didn't need to run smaller purchases by me.

The pack devoured their thirty pizzas, and I was sent on a grocery run (alone, lest a werewolf companion phase in the middle of the store) to buy simple food in large quantities that could be stored unproblematically in the ravine and didn't need to be cooked. I went a ways afield for the trip, to reduce the risk of being recognized, and bought the store out of chips, candy, jerky, bottled juices and energy drinks, Hostess snackfoods, and similar packaged crap, as well as some fruit and bread. "Throwing a big party," I told the clerk, when he looked at me in bewilderment. I still had the horse trailer attached to my car, which made it a lot easier to fit everything.

I drove cautiously into La Push, but no one seemed to be around, so I risked unhitching the trailer and dragging it out into the woods by hand rather than trying to drive through the trees. Jacob and his friend Embry were waiting at my rock to be food ferries once again, and although they didn't phase as I passed them sacks of munchies, they didn't seem to love being around me, either. I didn't risk aggravating them by trying to strike up a conversation.

I hung out at my rock, waiting. Rachel brought me a rinsed lemonade bottle and I started collecting venom. I was able to exercise some control over the amount I generated - just concentrating on the right scent memories did it. It didn't take long to have it half-full.

Later, Rachel swung by again. "Jacob thinks, and on reflection I agree, that Dad wouldn't want to be the first older person to try activating. Leah and Seth volunteered to ask their father and they're talking to him now."

"Okay," I said.

"I want to see how it works, so I'll hang out if you don't mind."

I spat more venom between my teeth into the lemonade bottle. "I don't if you don't. Cyanide and evil minty flowers, though."

"Yeah. It seems to bother some of us more than others. Seth barely minds at all - and his sister's on the other end of the spectrum. I'm about middling, seems like. What do we smell like to you?" She sat a few feet away from where I was standing.

"Like wolves," I said. "But not in an earthy pleasant way."

"Have you, y'know, *eaten* a wolf - a regular one?"

"Yeah, but I didn't care for the flavor. Wild boars are better. And killer whales are best. But tastes vary. My husband prefers mountain lions."

"This is all pretty wild," remarked Rachel, crossing and recrossing her legs until she found a comfortable position on the forest floor. "I don't think I'd be too surprised right

now if I woke up in the hospital in Spokane and found that I'd hurt my head and been having really screwed-up dreams."

"I thought you were having fun with it now that you've got wolfy company?"

"Don't get me wrong, there's good bits, and I don't want to get picked off in my sleep by an evil Italian vampire who wants to make sure my family stops existing, so I'm glad you showed up - but it's so *crazy*. I'm Alpha in a pack of twenty-seven - and I can *magically back that up* if I want, I just found that out really early this morning. Paul and Sam got into a fight while they and I were all wolves and I thought at them to stop and *they stopped just like that* - I have some kind of super commanding mojo going on, I could hear the order echoing funny in all our heads. They were halfway *bowing* to me before I told them to cut *that* out."

"Uh, wow," I said. "...With great power, comes great responsibility?"

Rachel snorted. "Yeah. I am going to have to be super careful about using that. I don't know yet if it works out of wolf form. But even if it doesn't - *holy crow*, Bella, *I personally have mind-control powers over a small army of almost thirty telepathic werewolves*. I'm reeling just a *tiny bit*."

"Your power's more interesting than mine," I volunteered. "I don't even get to decide whether to use it."

"Huh?"

"Oh, some humans - regular ones - have a little bit of magic," I said, pinching the air to indicate the quantity. "Different powers that do random things. Those are called witches. I was one. Turning is supposed to intensify everything, especially witchiness, but so far my power's the same as it always was. I'm immune to some other witch powers - my husband's, and the mindreader Volturi's, and some of their guard."

"Freaky. Is that the deal with your psychic sister?"

"Yeah, she's a witch too, and so's her husband - he's like an empath. My parents-in-law and my other brother and sister are just your boring, everyday, bog-standard vegetarian vampires."

"Bella, dunno if you noticed, but you have a weird family," remarked Rachel.

"Yep," I laughed. "Oh, I hear Leah and Seth bringing their dad." I listened. "Um... It sounds like they're fighting."

Rachel sat bolt upright. "Fighting? They're having a fight with Mr. Clearwater?"

"Leah is; sounds like -" Before I could finish the sentence, Rachel had sprung to her feet and phased midstride to plunge into the woods towards the arguing father and

daughter.

I didn't follow. I had an idea of what worried her - she thought Mr. Clearwater would anger Leah to the point where she'd phase and possibly injure him, and wanted to be on the scene to avoid that. My presence wouldn't make it any easier to keep Leah in her skin, and if she did hurt her father, I still didn't know how I'd do around fresh human blood.

And so I listened.

Rachel was taking long, swift strides. Mr. Clearwater's voice was saying, "Young lady, now you listen to me, if you -"

Leah interrupted him: "No, you listen to me! I can go wherever I want! I don't need your permission to breathe!"

"Your brother is only thirteen years old! You can't just take him out camping overnight without telling me where you're going to be! Do you have any idea how frantic I was this morning? Your mother thought I'd have a heart attack, she was worried sick herself -"

"Seth is fine! Look, he's in one piece!" The in-one-piece boy was making quiet, non-word protestations, trying to calm his family. "You used to trust me with him - you just don't like that Sam was with -"

"And there's another thing! You're too young to be engaged -"

And there was a soft, cottony *floof* -

And a furious snarl -

And screaming.

Mr. Clearwater was howling with pain. I heard Seth phasing, and then I could barely decipher the sounds - three voices barking, one or two wolves tackling a third, snapping jaws and high yelps.

The man's shouts were rapidly weakening.

I picked up my lemonade bottle, took and held a deep breath, and ran.

It took me only a couple of seconds to reach them. When I got there, Rachel had Leah pinned; Leah was a smaller, medium-grey wolf, cringing under presumable mental chastisement by her Alpha. Seth was in his own sandy-furred wolf form not far from

them, lifting and dropping his forepaws at irregular intervals as though he wanted to run somewhere but couldn't quite understand where. And a bit beyond him was his father.

Mr. Clearwater was an absolute mess. I realized as I looked at him that when Rachel had swiped at me, that had been *restrained*: I was tougher than a human, sure, but this heap of barely-breathing meat had not received one swat to the face, he'd been *savaged*. Blood flowed in rivulets away from his body. I very, very carefully did not inhale.

His heart was still feebly, irregularly beating.

"The hospital's twenty minutes away if you floor it," I said. "He won't make it that far." And then, conserving air, I held up the bottle of venom. "Only chance."

Seth whined. Leah craned her neck from her prone position to see what I was holding, and yelped, but I couldn't discern the meaning. Rachel stared me down; I met her gaze, holding quite still. "He'll die," I said softly.

Mr. Clearwater made a gurgling sound and Seth wailed, pawing at the ground. Rachel got off of Leah, who rolled onto her front but didn't stand, instead bowing her head towards the white wolf. There was a pause that lasted entirely too long.

I considered, but rejected, the plan of saying that if I started turning him and they changed their minds, they could always kill him later. Instead, I used the last of my air to say, "I think I can save him. But it's up to you."

Rachel hesitated for another half-second. Mr. Clearwater's heart faltered, and I grimaced. Finally, her big white head dipped and rose: a nod.

I was at the man's side instantly, found a big puncture wound next to his heart, and poured the venom in. His heart thudded as though electrocuted, and one of his arms - apparently the only limb that he could still move - jerked wildly. A high keen of pain shrieked out of his mouth. I would have broken his spine, but didn't know if he could take much more punishment before even venom wouldn't save him - I didn't know what to break well enough to aim precisely. At any rate, it looked like some of his nerves were cut off anyway.

I had no breath left. I swept away an swath of forest debris and scratched in the dirt, instead: *I'm out of air. I can't risk smelling his blood.*

Rachel read the message; I assumed the others could see in her thoughts what I'd written. I cleared the words with a pass of my hand and wrote, *It is not safe for a newborn vampire to be near humans. I need to take him to my family's friends in Alaska.* Rachel read it, nodded, and I replaced the writing several more times. *It will take him three days to turn and then he'll be a vampire. Did he already know about us, like your dad?*

Rachel picked up a paw and wavered it in a so-so motion - so he'd probably learned all the stories but not believed them. *Vampires who didn't expect to turn, or at least know it was possible, are not as self-controlled. I'm very unusual. He will probably not be able*

to safely come near humans for at least a year. Our friends have phone service and Internet access and you can keep in touch that way. I will need to tie him up and wrap him in a blanket so no one sees him through my windows, because he will try to thrash around and he looks awful.

Leah whined miserably at that, and Rachel shot her a look; the gray wolf hunkered even lower to the ground, ears flat against her head in submission or guilt or both. Seth looked anxious. *It's terrible, but when it's over, it's over - he'll be fine*, I promised in writing. *I need rope or something like it, and a path no one's looking at to my car so I can bring him to it.* I spat a mouthful of venom into the emptied bottle and set it on the ground. *I'll leave you this so you can activate Becky and the other out-of-towners without me here.*

Rachel nodded. I didn't see anyone running to get me what I'd asked for, but she'd probably sent a mental order to another wolf or two. I wrote, *It's up to you what you tell his wife, but he will probably want to contact her, which will be less of a shock to her if she knows. Text me, don't call, if you have to communicate something in the next three days. I won't want to breathe with him in the car. If your phone can't do it buy one that can; I'll send you more money as you need it.* Rachel nodded again. *Is there anything else I need to be here for before I get him out of here?* She shook her head.

I carefully lifted Mr. Clearwater off the ground, clamping one hand over his mouth to stop his moans of pain from carrying to anyone not in the know, and ran for my car. I saw only werewolves on my way: Embry and Jacob on lookout and Marilyn waiting by the passenger door with a convenient hank of rope and a fleecy comforter. I took them from her without speaking, tied Mr. Clearwater's wrists and ankles together behind his back, rolled him up in the blanket, and put him in the backseat; he bled a little on the fleece, but I could already see his wounds getting shallower as the venom percolated through his system. I slammed the door and got into the driver's seat.

I had no idea where in Alaska one would find Denali, nor where in Denali the coven lived. I texted Edward for directions (telling him to direct me there from Seattle) as I hurtled southeast to route around Puget Sound. He replied in installments, and asked if I wanted him to warn the Denali family that I was en route; I said that I'd appreciate it and told him to also warn them that I was bringing another newborn.

Edward said he'd let the necessary border crossing agents know that I wasn't to be troubled, through suitably convincing channels. I hadn't even thought of the difficulty of getting a mid-turning Mr. Clearwater into Canada and then from Canada into Alaska and experienced a surge of gratitude for my husband's support.

He also asked if I wanted him to meet me there. *Gianna can't go*, I wrote back. *David would try to eat her. You shouldn't leave her unattended.* He replied with his acquiescence and asked if there was anything else I needed, which there was not. *I love you*, I concluded my last message. He wrote back in kind, and then my phone went into

my pocket.

I had to stop for gas after only forty miles. Luckily, the gas station was under heavy clouds and almost deserted. I closed the door behind me as quickly as I could after getting out, and took a few breaths of fume-scented air. Only the barest whiff of blood, from dried drops clinging to my sleeves where I'd picked Mr. Clearwater up, heated the air: it was tolerable. I filled up the tank and hoped the other patron of the station thought I was splattered with paint. It was fortunate that my shirt was dark brown: it looked damp, but not necessarily bloodstained.

I got back in the car and used my lungful of air to talk to Mr. Clearwater. "I'm Bella, Charlie Swan's daughter," I told him. "I'm a vampire. You're turning into one. Your children are werewolves. Leah lost her temper and hurt you. This was the only way to save you. I can't talk much because if I smell your blood I may also hurt you." Mr. Clearwater made a confused wailing noise, but I had no more words.

A few hours later, I decided to try opening my window, sticking my head out, and getting a breath of bloodless air that way. It worked. With clean air in my lungs, I said, "Mr. Clearwater, I'm taking you to Alaska. Some vampires my family is friends with live there and they will take care of you. Being a new vampire is hard, especially if you aren't prepared for it, and you will need help." I stuck my head out the window again, and kept talking. I gave him the rundown of vampire ins and outs, and got him up to speed on the status of the werewolf pack.

My car was waved through the border when they read the license plate and I continued through British Columbia. I continued talking to Mr. Clearwater with outside air, trying to keep his mind off the pain as much as possible. "Please don't tell my friends that you are from a tribe of werewolves," I told him. "It's safest if they don't know." I explained Aro, then repeated myself in case he hadn't been able to follow the entire justification for secrecy through the burning. "Tell them that you're from Forks, that I know you through Charlie, that I ran into you in Seattle while you were there bringing your thirteen-year-old to the Space Needle - don't give them Seth's name unless you can't avoid it - and I tagged along, that you were hit by a car, and that I turned you to save you from your injuries."

It took only two days to get as far as Fairbanks, and Mr. Clearwater wasn't done turning. I didn't want David to kill him, so instead of continuing directly to the coven's home, I parked on the edge of the Denali National Park to wait.

Nobody was liable to interrupt us, so I unwrapped his blanket and untied his ropes. His eyes were scrunched shut. His clothes were still torn and covered in blood, but his wounds were all smoothed over, not even pinkish. The color was mostly drained from his skin - melanin dissolving, blood converting to vampire fuel. He was slightly ecru, that was all. I pulled up a misty memory of the olive-like hue to Laurent's skin, and wondered if the off-white tinge was because Mr. Clearwater was not finished turning or because he was Native American. I looked completely bleached, but I'd started out pale and

Caucasian.

By my estimation, Mr. Clearwater was in his late forties or early fifties, but the transformation was rearranging his features and smoothing out his complexion: it took at least a decade off his apparent age, an effect that I hadn't noticed so much with vampires who'd been turned young or at unknown ages. I could actually see him becoming more symmetrical. A time-lapse movie of his face would have shown his nose tilting out of its crookedness, his left eye drifting south to match the right, puckers and lines in his skin fading into flush smoothness with the surrounding skin.

It occurred to me that I didn't remember his first name. He was one of Charlie's friends, and I had to have heard it before, but I'd always referred to him as "Mr. Clearwater" in writing and couldn't conjure up a human memory of learning his full name. Presumably that wouldn't be something he'd forget, though, and he could tell me when he finished turning.

He was surprisingly quiet. I'd screamed more than he had even with my abbreviated consciousness. He didn't talk, either. Just occasionally whimpered.

I could still hear his heart beating, so he wasn't dead and didn't have to die. I waited, not breathing.

As dawn broke on the last day of Mr. Clearwater's turning, I got a series of texts from Rachel: all of the far-flung werewolves except Marilyn's cousin had arrived, and droplets of venom on unbroken skin "hurt a little but didn't injure them and now they're all floofed". She reported that Becky was black, "like Sam - so far I'm the only white one, although Nina's kind of pale yellow".

The twins didn't seem to share the Alpha power. It remained with Rachel. They were considering trying to somehow deliberately split the pack in two so as to make it more manageable. Becky's husband Caleb had been brought into the loop with considerable astonishment, but since I was willing to cover lost wages, his main protests about staying at La Push for a time involved the inferior surfing opportunities, which no one, even Becky, took very seriously. (I did have to confirm that it was fine with me if I had to go on covering his surfing instruction money for a bit longer than expected in case he lost clients.)

Sue Clearwater, Leah and Seth's mother, had been told about her husband's situation and was reacting as though he'd died - that didn't bode well for a later happy reunion.

It occurred to me to wonder whether there was any reason that Mr. Clearwater would, as a vampire, find that his wife was also his supernatural mate. There didn't seem to be any strong reason why he *would*. It was only charitable to assume that they loved each other, but it would be in an entirely human way - and I knew human things dissolved quickly when the mind was barraged by even a few seconds of ultra-clear vampire

sensation. I knew human love could evaporate under lesser pressures than that, and could occur more than once in a lifetime.

Neither of the elder Clearwaters had, so far as I knew, the unusual beauty or witchcraft that seemed to correlate with being turned under the traditional way of things. That meant that if my hypothesis about what created vampire mating bonds was in the right ballpark, it would be extremely unlikely for Mr. Clearwater to be drawn to Mrs. Clearwater the way Edward had been drawn to me.

I was half tempted to say to myself, "But if Sue really loves him, she'll just be glad he's alive!" But according to Rachel, she was acting like he *wasn't*, as though a heartbeat or being above room temperature were somehow more important than the ability to move around and think and talk. And anyway, even if she'd been willing to consider her vampire husband a living creature, it was all too common that real love wasn't as selfless as the fictional kind.

Even Edward, the sincerity of whose affection I had no cause whatever to doubt, had been driven to what was, on reflection, fairly rash behavior in order to be around my human self. Had Alice simply saved me from Tyler's errant van and then evaporated from my life with her family, then I, untouched by magically enhanced emotion, could have finished high school, gone to college, married some arbitrary human when I was at an age more pleasing to my parents - perhaps without even remembering that Edward existed. I might have been happy, in the way that humans could be happy. But Edward had wanted to be *with* me, could not but panic at the notion that I might do without him. And so he'd braved my singer's blood, swallowing flames with every breath for the privilege of talking to me.

I tried to think about the situation in reverse, and my imagination failed me. I couldn't imagine Edward as a human, wayward and fickle. Couldn't imagine him willing and able to forget about me. In the entire time I'd known him, it was so core to his personality that I was his top priority. I didn't know how to construct a mental image of him with some other motive driving him. He'd been human, once, had spent many years managing reasonably well without my having even been *born*. But I failed to picture it. And he framed it, when he spoke of those times, as if his life prior to meeting me had just been a drawn-out and unusually elaborate waiting period. Like I was his reason to exist in the first place, and I'd just taken my sweet time getting there.

Somewhere in the world, I expected with sadness, was Mr. Clearwater's reason to exist -

And she probably wasn't Sue.

I could only hope that he'd still love his children the way he should. I had better hopes for this - I hadn't stopped caring about my parents, after all. They weren't as strongly featured in my thoughts anymore, but I didn't think that their reduced centrality in my life needed further explanation beyond my international change of residence,

assorted globetrotting, and new marriage.

But it would be clear soon enough what changes beyond the obvious I had wrought. The sun crept higher in the sky.

Mr. Clearwater's heart was beating faster.

I opened all of the windows in the car: his blood had long since dried, and wasn't even as interesting as a live unbleeding human, but it was still better to get fresh air into the enclosed space where he was about to wake up.

I reviewed what Jasper had said on the subject of handling newborns. Don't let them get their arms around you, don't go for the obvious strikes because that's all they expect, let their own momentum wrench off an arm and they'll be distracted enough by pain that you can pin them -

I was a newborn too, and would therefore have some advantage over most wranglers thereof, but having some strategy was rarely amiss.

Mr. Clearwater curled up in the fetal position, moving slowly to clutch at his heart, but only a quiet moan betrayed the enfolding pain in sound. Why wasn't he screaming? Was it because he was old, did he just have a stoic personality, was there some interaction with the werewolf gene -

His eyes flew open, blazing red, and his body unfolded and propelled itself through, not an open window, but through the door itself. He left a ragged hole. The door didn't cling to him, but it was pulled from its frame and clattered to the ground; Mr. Clearwater ran headlong into the woods.

He was, of course, vampire-fast, but he wasn't making good use of his strength to get the most distance out of each stride. I caught up to him and kept pace rather than trying to tackle him and risk provoking him into fighting me. "Mr. Clearwater!" I yelled. "Hey!"

He looked around, grimacing, and then faced forward again and kept running.

"Mr. Clearwater, please stop," I said. "I can help you." He didn't slow down. "There might be humans in the park, if you run into one you could hurt them," I pleaded.

He scrambled up a tree, and I followed. "You can't outrun me," I said. "If you don't hold still -" He flung himself thirty feet to the next branch and I kept chasing him. "*Mr. Clearwater! Stop!*" Was this normal newborn behavior? Had something gone wrong? A drop of lemonade in the venom, a reaction to the werewolf gene...?

When I heard non-animal-like rustling, I didn't have time to indulge his flight any further. That could be a hiker he might run across and kill. I propelled myself directly at him, knocking him out of the air between trees and to the ground. I used a branch to

swing away immediately after impact, not wanting to trigger any instinct he might have to grab me and squeeze. I dropped to the ground beside him.

"Mr. Clearwater," I began one more time, and then he was off again. I had no patience left: I sprang at him, pushing off from the ground with all the power I had, and tackled him. I managed to get *my* arms around *him*, and although I had no intention of crushing him to powder, I could hold on more than tightly enough to hold him still. I managed to sort of fold him up, his knees to his chin, so I could prevent him from kicking me or trying to push me over. He wasn't going anywhere. "Mr. Clearwater," I repeated. "Please say something so I know I didn't find a way to turn you while somehow *leaving your brain behind*."

He stared up at me out of confused vermilion eyes. "...Bella?" he managed. His voice was a smoother, lower version of the one I'd heard chastising Leah.

"That's me. How do you feel? Are you okay?" I asked encouragingly, slightly relaxing my hold as he'd shown a sign of sanity - and then he twisted suddenly, springing his shoulders away from his legs like a backwards bear trap and catapulting himself away. He took off at a run again, in the direction of the rustling. I couldn't *smell* a human, but we were upwind of the area - I chased him, trying to circle around and drive him the opposite way. "HEY!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, hoping the hiker or whoever it was would hear me, "I saw a *bear*, if anybody can hear me *run*, I think it's mad!" Not that it'd help a human much to run from a vampire. *I should have driven the rest of the way to the Denali's house as soon as I heard his heart speeding up!* I chastised myself. I managed to circle to Mr. Clearwater's left and drive him away from where I'd heard the sound.

It wasn't until I knocked him down again and was struggling to get him into another bear hug without being deprived of a limb that I noticed the rustling was *following* us.

Very fast.

I felt a hand clap me on the back, not hard enough to hurt but enough to tell me that it was no human hand, and I saw bright sparks running over Mr. Clearwater's skin. He convulsed as if Tasered, breaking my grip but making no further attempt to run. He cringed on the ground and looked up. I risked taking my eyes off him to see who'd joined us.

Denali

"How are you on your feet?" asked the vampire woman. She was gold-eyed - one of the Denalis, then, not some random nomad. Her platinum blond hair was pulled back into a long ponytail.

"It's nice to meet you too. I'm Bella." I hadn't received any detailed descriptions of the Denali coven - I remembered that there were three original sisters, and a mated couple who'd joined them together, and that Laurent had wound up mated to a sister called Irina and then there was David, but I couldn't determine who of four possible women I was speaking to. I didn't remember receiving a rundown of any witchcraft that the coven possessed.

She reached out and poked me in the shoulder, gently; nothing happened. "You're something, Bella," she told me. "I thought it was just your brain that was all locked up safe."

"And who might I have the honor of being poked by?" I inquired testily.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Katrina, you can call me Kate. Is this your newborn?" she asked, peering at Mr. Clearwater, still curled up on the ground and staring at her.

"Yes - what did you do to him?"

"Zapped him. I was trying to get you too, to be honest. Edward said you were a special one, but he's your mate, he'd say you were special if you'd tried to pulverize his head. Couldn't be sure that you hadn't just got into a normal newbie scuffle with this fellow. What's wrong with him, anyway? He should be up by now. I can only down people for a second."

"I don't know. I can't even tell if it's normal newborn behavior. I'm the only one I've ever met, and Edward wasn't just being a doting husband when he told you about me."

"I've had to knock David around some, but he gets right up," said Kate.

I still didn't want to tell the Denalis about the werewolves, but I had plenty of credibility to claim complete ignorance. "I didn't bite him," I said. "He was beat up pretty bad. I spat some venom into a bottle and poured it into a wound. Would that do it?"

Kate *hmm*ed and looked at Mr. Clearwater. "Not sure. Never tried it that way. But you weren't bitten either, right?" I nodded. "Maybe he's got some witchy sense you're blocking and he's scared of you in particular?" she suggested. "He calmed down when I showed up."

I backed away, to no discernible reaction from Mr. Clearwater - but then he'd already quit fleeing at Kate's arrival. "What's his name?" she asked me, tipping her head

to look at the crouching vampire from a different angle.

"Mr. Clearwater," I said. "He's a friend of my father's - I probably knew his first name at one point but I can't call it to mind now. I ran into him in Seattle when he was there to take his son to the Space Needle, and then he got hit by a car and I turned him - I didn't think he'd make it to a hospital."

"Mr. Clearwater," said Kate in a soothing voice, "can you tell me your full name?"

"...I'm... Harry," he said, flicking his eyes between me and Kate warily. "Harry Clearwater."

"Can you tell me why you ran from Bella, Harry?" asked Kate.

"She's..." He plainly didn't have words to express whatever concept he was using. He settled for, "She's *wrong*." I didn't protest; Kate was having much more success getting clear sentences out of him than I had.

"Am I wrong?" asked Kate. Harry shook his head, although he didn't look satisfied with the answer. "What's wrong with Bella?"

"There's nothing there," said Harry. "She's not - a *person*."

Kate furrowed her brow. "This sounds like something witchlike to me. We should take him to the house, and see what Eleazar makes of him."

"Fine by me," I said. "What does Eleazar do?"

"He's got a meta-power, like yours. He can tell what somebody does without having to ask them or watch them do it," explained Kate. "Maybe he can tell us why Harry here thinks you're 'wrong'." She offered Harry her hand, and he took it and got to his feet - not that it was necessary, assuming he was physically normal, but it was a gesture indicating that his panic was just about me and not something fundamentally broken about how he'd turned.

Kate led me and Harry through the woods. We didn't run, just strolled. "So why'd you start yelling about a bear?" Kate asked me over her shoulder.

"I heard you and thought at first that you were a human - I didn't want Harry to run into you and eat you."

"Considerate of you." She led us to a cluster of three houses, all made of stone but otherwise different: one huge, obviously ancient home of grey rock, one somewhat newer one in a beige color, and one that could have been finished the previous week in white. She directed us to the second house; my guess was that the original coven built the grey structure, added a new house for Eleazar and his mate when they'd arrived, and only a

short time ago put up the white manor for Irina and Laurent.

An olive-tinted, dark-haired vampire was sitting in the front room of the beige house, reading a book. For a moment I wondered if he was Laurent with a haircut, but Kate greeted him: "Eleazar," she said. "Bella and this newborn, Harry Clearwater, are here. He seems to sense something strange about Bella, and I thought you might inspect him and see what that could be."

Eleazar set down his book and looked at Harry, frowning with concentration. Harry fidgeted uncomfortably, and kept looking at me, still unnerved, but apparently Eleazar didn't share my disconcerting characteristic. "Interesting," said Eleazar after several seconds. "It doesn't surprise me that a shield like Bella would block him. His power isn't unlike Edward's in scope; he senses people. If I were him I would be quite alarmed to see a face with no detectable presence behind it. It reminds me of what Carlisle has said about his acquaintance Alistair, although I haven't inspected him."

"Edward didn't freak out and bolt when he realized I was inaudible," I said.

"Yes, well, Edward's power works via the sense of hearing - he doesn't use his ears, but he does experience the thoughts he picks up as though they were sound." This I'd known - Edward had told me that Carlisle had noticed his mindreading before Edward had, because Edward kept replying to thoughts as though they'd been spoken. "Harry gets his information on another level - it's about recognition, not sensation. Like seeing someone familiar and identifying them." Harry nodded emphatically, apparently finding Eleazar's explanation satisfactory.

"At range?" I asked, and Eleazar nodded, still looking steadily at Harry - I guessed that concentration was required for his power to operate.

"Maybe a better range than Edward's. It may differ for vampires and humans, though," allowed Eleazar. "A number of powers do."

"Okay. So, Harry, we know why I don't seem like a person to you, but that's just because I involuntarily block stuff like that," I said placatingly. "Please don't be scared of me. I'm totally a person." Harry looked at me uneasily, but nodded. I turned to Eleazar. "You called me a "shield" - does that have some special technical meaning? What are you getting from me?"

"Nothing, now," said Eleazar. "As soon as I said it you started blocking me, too."

"I didn't do it on purpose," I said. "I have no control at all - and this is the first I've heard of it ever lapsing. Edward doesn't hear stray thoughts on alternate Tuesdays or anything."

"My power requires concentration to work at full strength, and I was focusing on Harry, not you," said Eleazar, as Kate led Harry away on a tour of the house. "It's possible that I got through your shield only with my sense's indirect form, or only because I was thinking about how Harry's power relates to yours. I might get more information the next

time I'm not paying attention to you or the next time I watch you shielding against someone I can examine normally. I'll let you know if it happens. At any rate, "shield" is a classification the Volturi use to describe defensive powers."

I sat on a chair opposite Eleazar and leaned my elbows on my knees. "I'm immune to Kate," I said, "and Edward, Aro, Jane, Alec, and apparently you and Harry. But not Jasper or Alice. I thought I had the pattern of it until Kate couldn't knock me over. I could *see* the current she was generating when she zapped Harry. That's not a mental thing. And Jasper's ability to work on me confuses me too."

"No two powers are the same," said Eleazar, "because no two witches *think* the same way."

I blinked. "Are you saying that I think of Kate's Taser like a mental phenomenon and not Jasper's empathy?"

"Not necessarily - it doesn't sound like you do, at any rate," he replied. "But I think Kate thinks of her power as operating on the nervous system in particular, which is electrical; and Jasper has always described his ability as relating to things like pulse and muscle tension and hormone levels."

"So you're saying Jasper works on me because I don't think of his power as mental *more than* he thinks of it as physical, and vice versa with Kate?"

"Something like that," Eleazar agreed.

Possibilities were bubbling up in my mind. "If I manage to teach myself to think of Jasper as operating on a mental level, could I add an immunity to him?" I didn't mention the analogous Kate possibility; even if my resistance to her shocks made no *sense*, I had no interest in shedding layers of shielding, even against an ally. I would just have to avoid thinking too hard about how *absurd* it was to consider electrical shocks a mental power.

"I would imagine you could, although I'm at something of a disadvantage trying to guess how you might develop," he told me wryly.

"Can you give me any tips - general ones - on how witches can improve over time?" I asked eagerly. I did *like* my power - it was essential to some of what I was doing - but I *had* been disappointed that I hadn't turned into a vampire and discovered that I could also become invisible or something similarly spectacular. I hadn't woken up *better*.

"Kate used to be limited in where she could project her current. She could only radiate it from the palms of her hands. She expanded it with practice - sheer use of the power. She got into the habit of keeping it active all the time."

"Mine is already active all the time," I grumbled.

"I refined my detection very slowly - not through continuous exercise, but by learning how to concentrate on it. It was most difficult while I was a new vampire,"

Eleazar went on, "and was more distractable. I've been able to cut down on the time it takes me to inspect someone."

That was more promising - *if* my power was controllable by a mental state which I just happened to be in *all the time*, learning to intensify or manipulate that state could let me gain control over fine detail. "Anything else?" I asked.

Eleazar pursed his lips. "Most people don't trouble to develop their powers, or if they try, they fail. I suppose Chelsea improved over time... but that was likely another case of mere practice. She is very busy."

"The Volturi guard member who breaks and bolsters relationships?" I asked, recalling Gianna's mention of her. Eleazar nodded. "I don't know if I'm immune to her or not."

"I would be very surprised if you were not; Chelsea thinks of her power as operating on a similar wavelength as Harry's, the instinctual realization of another person as friend or foe... Do you know if Marcus can see relationships you are involved in?" Eleazar asked.

"I don't, but Edward might have seen. I *think* Marcus was in the room when he and Carlisle and Esme picked me up from Italy, although I don't remember for sure, and as far as I know I didn't gain any new shielding when I turned. What would you make of that, either way?"

"I'd conclude more about Marcus than about you from that information. My prediction, though, is that he'd be able to manage it - I believe his understanding of relationships is derived from a human talent at reading body language, rather than from anything more abstract. If he can't see your connections, then I've misunderstood the basis for his power." I nodded. Eleazar named more members of the guard, who I hadn't met: "Afton? Corin? Demetri? Heidi? Renata? I suppose if you're alive you didn't test Renata..."

"What do they do?" I asked, after having shaken my head at each name.

"Renata is Aro's personal bodyguard. She's a shield, somewhat like you," he said. "Anyone trying to attack either her, or anyone within a few meters who she chooses to defend, will be diverted. She stays quite near Aro nearly always, and will protect Caius and Marcus as well if there is a need. They find themselves going in another direction without realizing it, not remembering what it was they wanted to do - it's a very disorienting sensation for a vampire, to lack a clear recollection."

I could imagine. "Well, I didn't try to attack anyone in the compound, so I don't know about Renata. What about the rest from your list?"

Heidi, Eleazar said, mesmerized - she was as beautiful as Rosalie, but could turn her allure to hypnotic effect. Eleazar noted when I asked that it wasn't a sexual attraction that she projected. Otherwise, he speculated, it would be overridden by mate bonds (which

were also impermeable to Chelsea) and wouldn't function on paired vampires. It was just aesthetic intrigue, leading those she targeted to follow where she led so they could continue to look at her. The Volturi used her as a hunter: she brought them takeout, so to speak. "Hunting is illegal within Volterra itself, except when Heidi brings in humans to the Volturi's own compound," he explained.

Demetri was the tracker whose skill had rendered James unnecessary to the guard. But Eleazar thought that where James's scent-oriented power had served well in finding me, Demetri - otherwise infinitely James's superior - might be baffled. He followed thoughts, some unique quirk of the mind that he could trace wherever it went - and I might well be invisible to him.

Afton was Chelsea's mate, but his power was unrelated to hers. He could manipulate the inertia of his own body, as Eleazar described it: unless his opponent had an extra advantage that gave a boost in a physical fight, like Alice or Renata, he was nigh-unbeatable. He could add force to his blows, and check misplaced momentum, with better finesse than even the best-trained normal vampire. Eleazar thought that Afton might win in a sufficiently lengthy footrace with Edward, who was the fastest vampire of whom he was aware. I had no reason to expect to fare well against this power.

Corin was the person that the "shield" category was named after. His power wasn't so comprehensive as Renata's, and worked on a different level. He could throw up invisible barriers near his person that would repel any physical assault, but these barriers had limited area, took focus to create, and didn't move once he called them up except when purposefully dismissed or simply abandoned by Corin moving too far away. He could also only make one at a time. In practice, Eleazar summarized, this was like having an actual *object* shielding him, albeit an invisible one that could vary in precise shape, phase into and out of existence, and teleport. I didn't expect my own shield to be able to do anything about Corin either. I speculated that Edward could beat Corin up, on the grounds that Edward would know where the shield was by reading Corin's mind and would be fast enough to get around it before it could be moved; Eleazar agreed.

I asked Eleazar to tell me more about the categories. "They're haphazard groupings," he cautioned. "Thinking too much in terms of them isn't the best way to make predictions about what a given witch will be able to do. That said, the Volturi classify powers as one of six types: shields, weapons, illusionists, sensors, trackers, and pullers, to use the English terms. There's some overlap between categories, to the point that the only reason trackers have their own is that there are tactical differences in their powers' use. For example, Jasper's power has a sensory component, and if all he could do were detect others' moods, he'd be a sensor - but because he can adjust emotions as well, he'd be classified as a puller. So called because they "pull" the world around them in ways that suit them."

"So I'm a shield, Jasper's a puller, I'm going to guess you and Edward are sensors?"

"Yes, and Alice too - although I've never seen anyone else at all like her, whereas many other powers have similar counterparts in several witches, like Edward and Aro or

Harry and Alistair. Kate is a weapon. You might think Jane would be too, but she's categorized as an illusionist, as is her twin. James and Demetri are trackers, obviously - I'd class Harry as one as well."

I nodded. "So if I've got the hang of this, I'm immune to all illusionists as far as we know, but it's a mixed bag for every other group, if your guesses about the guard are right."

"Yes, that's what it looks like. I wouldn't expect any power to line up evenly with those divisions, though, Bella. They're convenient inventions, not natural categories. You might meet an illusionist who can get through your barriers."

Kate re-entered the front room, having finished showing Harry around. "I hope you don't mind, Eleazar," she said, "but I offered Harry the green room. I don't want *two* newborns in the main house, and I doubt Irina and Laurent would appreciate sharing their living space so early on. Harry seems less wild than David, anyway, and you shouldn't need me around to knock him down on a daily basis."

"David's that hard to handle?" I asked.

"He's a newborn," said Kate, shrugging, and then she glanced at my eyes. "A regular one, I mean. Do you want to meet him?"

"Yes, please," I said. "I want to meet everyone before I go."

"Come on, then, we'll let Eleazar get back to his reading," said Kate with a smile, and she waved me along to follow her out the door.

We went to the main house, and Kate showed me in. Two women, one as pale as me with strawberry blonde curls and one olive-tinged with black hair, were playing chess on a checkerboard-patterned table. A man who I presumed was David was pacing before a picture window. When I walked in, he spun around and dropped into a crouch, snarling at me.

I looked at him, nonplussed; I could *detect* the little instinct jumping up and down in the back of my mind saying *unfamiliar vampire! likely threat!*, but it didn't seem important. I'd known he would be there, and Kate and the other two were present and known to be friendly.

David seemed totally owned by his instinct, though, and none of the other women were surprised by his reaction. Kate motioned for me to stay put and approached him slowly. "David," she said softly, "this is Bella. Remember that we told you Bella was coming? You've met Edward. She's his mate."

David looked like he was fighting with himself, like he wanted to run from me or bite my head off. But eventually he straightened up and, with only a slight grimace, said

"Hello, Bella."

"Hi, David," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

This bland introduction out of the way, and David apparently unlikely to attack me, Kate turned to her sisters. "This is Carmen, Eleazar's mate, and this is Tanya," she told me, identifying first the dark chessplayer and then her fairer counterpart. It looked like Carmen was winning, but I hadn't thought about chess since turning and wasn't confident I remembered the rules. She did have more pieces on the board, though.

"It's good to finally have a chance to get to know you," said Carmen, looking away from the game. "We've heard some of your story, but we aren't in very regular contact with your family; we only know the basics. It's such a pity that it wasn't possible for us to come to your wedding. So tell me - how did it happen that you brought a newborn?"

"We're going to be Newborn Central at this rate," commented Tanya playfully. David started pacing again, like a cat plotting revenge on some innocent woodland creature. "I hope the one you brought is less of a handful."

"He seems to be. He doesn't like Bella much, though," joked Kate. She summarized what Eleazar had said about Harry's power, and repeated the fake story of how I'd come to turn him.

I watched Carmen and Tanya play chess, and answered questions about myself, picking up the corresponding information from them. The three original sisters, Tanya, Irina, and Kate, were all about a thousand years old - calendars had been iffy at the time of their origins, and they hadn't bothered to individually tot up every hour they remembered experiencing and figure it out that way. They'd been turned by a woman named Sasha, the mother of the coven in the same way that Carlisle fathered the Cullens.

"Oh, where is she?" I asked, and immediately regretted it - the wince on Tanya's face and Kate's hiss told me that this was not a pleasant story. When Kate made that noise it spooked David and he *yowled*, backing into a corner and cowering - evidently he was a little afraid of her, which only made sense, if she was in charge of keeping him contained and had to resort to her weaponry often.

"David," sighed Kate, "it's nothing to do with you..."

While she soothed him, Tanya began to tell me the story, in clipped tones. "The Volturi executed her and our brother, Vasilii. Her for turning him, and him simply for being what he was."

"What he was...?" I asked.

"An immortal child," murmured Carmen, and Tanya looked away, letting the less emotionally involved person take over. "There were many of them, at one time. Vampires would turn children barely more than infants. And of course they could not grow, could never mature or learn to control themselves. They could destroy towns with temper

tantrums, they were impossible to keep from human notice, and secrecy was no less important then. The Volturi exterminated them. But it wasn't a simple matter, because they were so beloved - you've seen, of course, how the transformation affects adults, how things intensify, but can you imagine the protective instinct generated by a cute two-year-old who's been changed in that way? Entire covens would die to protect their immortal children, the vampire population was diminished immensely in the course of the destruction."

"Why did Sasha turn Vasili?" I asked, puzzled. "And how did the coven survive when the Volturi came for her?"

"We don't know why she did it," Carmen said. "She kept him a complete secret - to the point that the sisters were held ignorant and therefore blameless, and spared punishment."

"Wait, *what*? She managed to keep an immortal child secret from *her own coven*? I thought they were uncontrollable," I said. "It's not as though he'd sleep sometimes and she could put in appearances that way - how could she supervise him without being conspicuous about it?"

Tanya hissed at that, which interrupted Kate's attempts to calm David; Kate muttered something about wishing Jasper could have taken charge of him and hauled the newborn out of the house altogether. "We don't know," Carmen said. "We have no idea where Vasili came from, or why Sasha turned him, or how old he was when they were found, or how he was kept a secret."

"And nobody noticed that she was gone a lot or - I'm sorry," I said to Tanya, who swiveled her head around just enough that she'd be able to see me out of her peripheral vision. "I've been rude - I have this flippant streak, it's not that I don't feel for your loss. I'm so sorry."

Tanya pursed her lips. "We weren't as tightly knit a coven then," she allowed. "It was before we became vegetarians... living on animals seems to improve the ability to form close bonds. We traveled together in the sense that we would usually be within a few miles of each other at any given time, and touched base occasionally. We didn't live in houses like this where we could see one another out the windows."

I nodded. Then, wishing to get away from the hurtful topic, I said, "So what about you and Eleazar, Carmen?"

"We joined the coven after the sisters adopted vegetarianism," Carmen said. "He was a member of the Volturi guard -"

"*What*?" There had been clues - he'd kept referring to the Volturi witchcraft classification system, but for all I knew that was a standard thing, it didn't necessarily mean that he'd worked for them any more than all librarians were personally students of Dewey. He could have just visited them to learn all about their powers - Carlisle had

visited, but not actually *joined the guard*. My mental image of Carlisle's time in Volterra had me thinking of him as something like a war correspondent, not an enlisted supporter *for the bad guys*. I'd simply lumped Eleazar into the same bag. Now I was picturing that gentle, patient person in one of those cowls, drifting across a floor to touch Aro's hand...

"He was a member of the Volturi guard," repeated Carmen slowly, puzzled. "They found it useful that he could identify witches and potential witches with less guesswork. He wasn't one of their warriors, if that's what you mean..."

"Oh! Oh, I see," I said, letting my eyes fly open. I pretended that this was all that had bothered me about the notion. Carmen was *definitely not* the place to seek ill judgment of Eleazar. "It was just... I was surprised that a former guardmember would join a coven with the history you just told me about as concerns the Volturi."

"We developed a very healthy respect for the law," muttered Tanya.

"Anyway," said Carmen, looking at me a little strangely, "he wasn't entirely happy with them. He understood the importance of having and enforcing rules, and felt he was working towards the greater good. But he wanted to leave with me, when we met, and he did. Eventually we met Tanya and her sisters." Carmen gestured at the blonde, who'd relaxed somewhat once we were off the topic of her mother and secret brother. "And never looked back. We like living this way; it suits us."

I nodded slowly. I wondered just how hard it would be to get the Denalis' support in my project of deposing the serial killers. Maybe Edward would have insights, but I would need to wait until the last possible moment to ask - although perhaps I was being paranoid, perhaps the Volturi missed momentous events going on all over the world all the time. Perhaps Aro was nearly as dotty as he often seemed, perhaps he only gave crown jewels to people he didn't suspect of crimes, perhaps he'd never read Edward again. Perhaps he had the least hazardous possible form of mindreading, and couldn't learn anything he didn't already suspect.

And perhaps caution *still* made sense, no matter how much I wanted to run to Edward and tell him everything as fast as my lips could buzz and beg for help.

Fleetingly, I missed Rachel, who could know everything because if she were ever found, an unsalvageable part of the jig would already be up... but it wasn't really Rachel I wanted. She was a friend, maybe over time she'd be a great friend. But she wasn't *mine* the way Edward was.

I would finish meeting the Denalis, and then I would *fly* to Québec, because Harry had busted a door and bled on the interior of my car and even if he hadn't flying was *faster* and I *wanted my Edward*.

Note to self: It is not fun to be away from Edward. It is not good for your psychological health to be away from Edward. Do less of that.

There had been a silence of a full second, long enough to be awkward for rapid vampires. "Do you want to meet Irina?" Tanya asked.

"Yes," I said at once, "please. Her and Laurent - I've technically met him, but I remember so little about it..."

"Oh," Tanya said, getting up, "Laurent's not here right now. He's used to being a nomad; he's in and out a lot. Irina's gotten settled over time and usually doesn't go."

In light of the note I'd just made to myself, this was... odd.

"They're... Edward told me that they're mates, not just..." I didn't know how to bring up the "succubus" thing gracefully. But I had *definitely* been given the impression that it wasn't just a case of Irina trying out a not-so-warm-and-soft boy toy for a novel diversion.

"Oh, they are," Tanya assured me hurriedly as she led me out of the main house. "It's obvious, the way Irina reacted - I don't know Laurent as well, obviously, but these things always match up from what I've heard. But he's... I'm not sure, actually. Some kind of introvert maybe, although he'd been with a coven... Anyway, he isn't here, but Irina is, and I'm sure she'll be glad to meet you."

I nodded slowly. "When is he expected back?"

"Any day now." His departures were measured in *days*? It wasn't a matter of popping into the Yukon for an afternoon occasionally? It didn't surprise me that he *could*. I didn't understand why he *would*. Was he activating a tribe of Inuits who turned into giant owls, supposing it was safer if his mate didn't know?

We reached the newest house. Irina was in it, draped over an armchair listlessly. Her hair was blonde like her sisters', silverier than Kate's straw-pale and more desaturated than Tanya's strawberry, and shorter than either - it hung just to her chin. There was an actual turntable record player on an end table, which had a record spinning in it - nothing I recognized, just something gently instrumental. "Hi," said Irina, twisting her posture so she wasn't looking at us upside-down. "You must be Bella."

"That's me," I acknowledged. "It's nice to meet you, Irina."

And then, really, there was nothing to say, because Irina had no metapowers to give her useful information, and I'd already poked at the family's old abcess enough, and there was no newborn convenient to punctuate our interaction at irregular intervals.

I sat down, even though this was pointless, even though my feet would never hurt and my knees would never creak and my legs would never sway if I wanted to stand still for a month. Tanya stayed put, but helpfully said, "The newborn that Bella brought us is called Harry," and then the sisters had a trivial question-and-answer session about the new member of the family. I ducked in now and then to fill in details that Kate hadn't repeated in Tanya's presence, but couldn't keep my attention on the conversation. Three or four

times a second I would remember that Edward existed, and while this was true and important and good, it was hard to think around.

What was *wrong* with Laurent? I'd been away from *my* mate saving lives and I'd had to do it alone because I had a power that *Laurent did not have* which meant I could keep secrets at a level inaccessible to others. Also, Edward existed. What was wrong with *Irina*? Why wouldn't she insist on coming along on these trips of his? And Edward existed.

The door opened, and Laurent came in.

The first thing I noticed about Laurent was that he looked just like my (feeble, human) memory of him said he should look.

The second thing I noticed about Laurent was that he looked *exactly* like my (powerful, vampire) information said he *had* looked.

As he crossed the room, eagerly, with just enough restraint to leave the furniture intact, and embraced a joyful Irina, I processed this information.

His eyes were still entirely red.

He'd come to Denali months previously. I'd been a vampire for several *weeks*. And *my* eyes had a thin ring of orange around the edges already.

It was not, quite, damning evidence. For all I knew, a long-term human diet took longer (much, much longer) to be diluted than the mere starting supply of blood coloring a newborn's eyes. I could easily learn this information from Edward, who probably had occasionally consulted mirrors after swearing off the murder of murderers and would be able to tell me how long it had taken him to get his gold. In case I was wrong, I didn't even need to pose a question that made me sound unduly suspicious; I could be all proud of my orange, start a general conversation about vampire eyes. I had the wherewithal to check.

In the meantime, it was rather *extremely* dodgy.

To be fair, no one had as good as told me that Laurent had changed his dietary habits. I'd assumed it would be a prerequisite for joining the coven, that he'd do it for Irina. But Irina wasn't likely to be any less influenced by him than he was by her, and the taste of human blood was supposedly an overwhelmingly powerful sensation. It wouldn't have astounded me if he'd *slipped* once, twice, more, if his new family had forgiven *that* - but if he was gallivanting off on long trips without his vegetarian mate, for days at a time, that screamed calculation...

But I said nothing, I pasted a smile on my face and waited for Laurent and Irina to finish their hug that could probably have crushed coal into diamonds, I politely

reintroduced myself when he'd set her back down on the ground and turned his attention to me.

Laurent, too, received the mostly-fake story of Harry; he too expressed his enjoyment in meeting me; and once, I saw Tanya flick her gaze to his eyes, frown infinitesimally for a sliver of a moment, and abruptly bring up an obviously recurring tease about Irina's choice of music playing equipment.

Also, my brain reminded me helpfully, Edward existed.

I had met all the Denalis, there were no further mysteries or werewolves that I needed to poke at or activate in this time zone, and I wanted to go.

I made my excuses. I ducked into Carmen and Eleazar's house to (carefully, avoiding anything that might cause alarm) bid Harry goodbye and make sure he had all the contact information he might need. I ran out into the wilderness, called around to a few airlines, and bought a flight to Montréal that I could just barely make.

I forced the busted door of my car onto its hinges, clamping metal onto more protesting metal until I thought it would stay put during the drive to the airport. I folded down the ragged edges of the hole as best I could. The window was a loss, but having a rear window missing wouldn't get me pulled over. I inspected my handiwork, decided it would have to do for the upcoming drive, and started out.

I sped. Near the airport, I waited for a moment when the highway was deserted before steering off the road; the car rolled over several times, acquiring enough damage to cover the strange hole and finger-shaped crush marks in the door. I kicked it a few more times for good measure after worming my way out, then ripped off the license plates and other identifying tags, which I buried under a small tree that I picked up and replanted.

I did feel slightly odd about deliberately destroying a functional car that could have just been cleaned and had the one door replaced and then been fine. Overriding this uneasiness was the fact that I felt very strongly that I needed to be in Québec sooner rather than later. I couldn't think of a nice way to give the Denalis such a damaged object as a gift - "Here, take the car that the newborn I just saddled you with took a chunk out of because I don't want to drive it home". Rosalie was not on the correct continent to fix the car, and auto body repair wasn't a skill I had. I had no realistic intention to pick the thing up from any shops I could leave it at in Alaska. And if I just abandoned it at a junkyard or somewhere else, however anonymous I rendered it first, the nature of the damage as it had been would be transparently unusual to anyone getting a decent look.

My clothes were something of a mess at this point. I didn't exactly look bloodstained and like I'd just suffered a car crash - but I did look like I'd gone a bit too long without a change of clothes and possibly like I'd obtained my current set by stealing them from their previous hobo owner. I found a dismal little store, bought a new outfit (clothing retailers were going to learn to recognize my credit card number on sight), put in new contact

lenses, and proceeded on foot to the airport.

Once in the building, I promptly wished that I'd hunted more recently, but I didn't need to breathe much after checking in and getting through security via typical awkward "I have weird bioelectricity" rigmarole. On the plane I held my breath, pretended to nap, and moved my shoulders occasionally to make it look to the flight attendants and my neighbors like I was drawing in air.

I seriously considered stealing a car when I got off the plane in Québec City. I could note the plate number, get Jasper to look up the pertinent details with his computer hacking skills that might as well have been a second witchy talent, and mail its owner a fat check later, and it would be so much faster than bothering with a rental, which I would have to return later... I didn't have a way to pick a car that wouldn't be urgently needed when its owner arrived to use it.

Somebody else might be trying to get home to *their* Edward.

Or need to go to work or something like that, but my brain was very insistent that everything be about Edward. I gritted my teeth and tolerated the rental process, stumbling through it with inadequate French until the clerk let on that he knew English. There was not enough attention left in my head to be annoyed with his delayed language switch. I wanted to go, and it could not in any way make that happen faster if I were to chastise this inconsequential human for poor customer service.

I drove as fast as I could without running an unacceptable risk of being pulled over. (I wasn't like Edward, with a built-in police scanner...) I hadn't learned to read the traffic patterns and note the sort of slowing that came with a cop car in the area.

It was dark when I got to the house. As soon as I opened the door I could hear Gianna snoring. I didn't give her another thought beyond that for the next seven hours, which I spent *not* a thousand miles away from *my Edward* who not only existed, but was also every bit as pleased to see me as I was to see him.

Gianna was an early riser; I heard her getting up and starting to move around only a few minutes past dawn. Then she called her brother, who she spoke to in Italian that I could half-follow; I asked Edward and he translated the rest. It was easier to learn the language listening to a naturalistic conversation in it, and Gianna didn't mean for the conversation to be private if she was having it in the house.

It sounded like Ilario was handling vampirism better than Harry, but a little worse than me. Alice hadn't yet given the green light to test him near a human, but had indicated that she'd deem it safe "real soon now". He talked to Gianna at some length about how easy it was for the world around him to distract him, how strange hunting was and how unpleasant animals tasted. He had nice things to say about the portion of my family still in Norway.

He was dealing with some minutiae about getting his possessions and paperwork handled in Volterra - Carlisle had found it necessary to let out officially that Ilario was dead. However, Ilario was hoping that he could go back to living in Italy once he was shown capable of tolerating human presences, probably not in Volterra proper but possibly near Rome. He'd been informed of Gianna's agreement to serve as a surrogate mother, but wanted her to join him there after this service had been discharged.

"Speaking of that," I said, leaning on Edward and interrupting his translation, "it probably won't be long before we can send Gianna to Norway again and then run around South America looking for half-vampires."

Edward smiled and kissed the crown of my head. "Is that what you want to do next?"

"Since I already met the Denalis, yeah, that seems to be next," I said. And that reminded me of Laurent, and his eyes. "Hey, have you noticed anything different about me?" I asked, attempting to sound perky and proud of myself.

"Hmm," said Edward, placing his hands on my face to move it into a convenient location for inspection. I laughed while he made an exaggerated show of peering at my features, and then he said, "Of course I saw your eyes, Bella. You're right on schedule. They'll be completely gold in just a few months."

I grinned, kissed him, and said, "Is it the same schedule for vampires who ate humans first and then stopped?"

"Considerably faster, actually," said Edward, and my lips compressed. "I'm sure you've noticed that your eyes don't go black. Well, you haven't gone long enough without hunting to really see them go *black* - that takes a week or two and you've been very careful - but they don't darken, because you're a newborn and still using up the supply of your own human blood. A black-eyed vampire who eats an animal will immediately turn gold-eyed; a non-newborn who has eaten humans and has the burgundy colored eyes, who then switches to an animal diet, might take a few days."

Yep.

Laurent was killing people. The Denalis all knew it, with the possible exception of David and likely exception of Harry (however temporary these exceptions might be). They weren't doing anything about it. They might or might not be aware that I knew.

Now, what was I going to do about that?

Quickly rifling through my information, I decided that there was little or no risk associated with telling Edward about Laurent. The Denalis had made no attempt to swear me to secrecy. The Volturi would certainly not care if Laurent was eating people as long as he covered his tracks, which he likely was, so there was no special danger from them if

his transgressions became known.

Finally, a problem I didn't have to attack without Edward.

"But I saw Laurent at Denali," I said. "His eyes were still red."

Edward stilled, then held me a little tighter. He didn't look shocked, just protective. The information was not alarming to him - but he realized it might be so to me.

Then again, Edward classed his meta-killing, the slaughter of murderers, on approximately the same moral level as picking an arbitrary person off the street for no special reason and eating them. I tilted my head back to look at his face - yes, there was that familiar guilty look, begging my forgiveness like I was a divine being of some kind. If I judged Laurent aloud now, without assuaging that, he'd think I was classing them together.

"I don't think he's just slipping up," I went on, and I described the indications that he was planning extended hunting trips. "And he doesn't have a convenient way to make sure he's only eating people who were about to hurt someone." I snuggled closer to Edward. "I suppose it's *possible* that he's doing some kind of detective work and trying to find unsavory targets that way, but it doesn't seem likely..."

"You're right," said Edward heavily, "it doesn't."

"David might have no idea, and Harry almost certainly doesn't, yet," I said. "But the others have to know. *They* all still have gold eyes, so unless I came at a really odd time and they're *omnivorous* or whatever the euphemism would be for a mixed diet, it's just him. Why are they putting up with it?"

Edward spoke slowly, measuring his reply. "There's a few possible reasons... First, there's essentially no way they can *control* Laurent. You can't put a vampire in prison. It wouldn't be any significant deterrent to try to fine him or anything. The only way to make a vampire act, or not act, against his will, is by violence or the threat of it."

"Kate could take him," I said.

"I'm sure Kate alone, or any two or three of the others, could take him in a fight," Edward agreed. "But it's not a live option even if we assume they have no qualms about harming Laurent himself. If they hurt Laurent, they hurt Irina - possibly literally; she might back him in a physical confrontation. You remember how I reacted when Jasper was trying to talk about manhandling you during your first exposure to a human? That was when you were *demanding*, in so many words, that Jasper be allowed to rip your arm off if it would save "your experimental subject" and I barely managed to tolerate it. And I'm not sure what I would have done if he'd *actually* had to injure you. Laurent wouldn't be likely to reason with Irina in that way, so to attack him they'd have to contend with their sister as well."

"Okay," I said, "so they won't fight her to defend humans they don't know, but why

is *Irina* tolerating it? Why isn't *she* getting him to stop? He'd have to listen to her."

Edward chewed on this question for a couple of seconds. "Well," he said, "the second reason is that the Denalis don't see vegetarianism in quite the same way we do. It was Tanya's idea to call it that, actually, and I think she considers it analogous to the plant-eating version practiced among humans. That is, it's a personal lifestyle choice, perhaps with a moral dimension to it, but nothing worth introducing social strife about."

"David and Harry -" I began in horror. David's eyes had been pale orange, but...

"They'll raise their children, so to speak, as vegetarians," Edward assured me, squeezing my hand. "I don't think you need to worry about David or Harry being encouraged to drink human blood any more than Ilario is now. They won't be stopped if they decide, on their own, to leave and join the ranks of typical vampires - I wasn't stopped either, for that matter - but if they stay with the coven, they aren't likely to. And Irina's probably not going to return to the practice herself. But she doesn't have enough of a motivation to evangelize that she'll risk relationship strain to argue with Laurent about it. If she did, she probably ran out of impetus months ago and they've settled into an uneasy compromise at this point."

"He's killing *people*," I said. "Not pigs and chickens and cows, *people*. That's not a *lifestyle choice*, that's dead mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and sons and daughters -"

Edward was not happy. I sighed. "Not that I'm saying that you should go *back* to the vigilante-justice-and-fast-food habit," I said, smoothing his eyebrow with my thumb, "but it's different. I really do think it's different. If I thought Laurent were capable of distinguishing good and evil people, and choosing to eat only the evil ones who were about to abduct children or set fire to orphanages or whatever, this wouldn't be the most thrilling information I could learn - but there are plenty of higher priorities in my life than stopping killers from being killed. If Laurent's eating bad humans, though, it's by coincidence."

Edward nodded mutely. "The third reason," he said softly, "is that there are a *lot* of vampires in the world, and just because Laurent lives in Denali now, it might not seem to the sisters and Eleazar that they have more of an obligation to control him than they have to control any vampire outside the family."

I realized that I probably sounded hypocritical to Edward, complaining about Laurent, because he didn't know that I was laying groundwork to overthrow the Volturi and thereby end a number of objectionable diets. I tried to think of a way to stop sounding like that without giving anything away. "Eleazar mentioned a friend of Carlisle's named Alistair," I said abruptly. "I assume he's not a vegetarian either and Carlisle calls him his *friend*."

He nodded, confirming this fact. "Well, insofar as Alistair has friends. He's the most misanthropic individual I've ever met, and he can stand to have a visit from Carlisle - his

closest acquaintance, as far as I know - about once every hundred years. There are letters a little more frequently than that. I believe they last wrote in 1982."

"Are there any other friends of the family I should know about?"

Edward listed them: Jasper's old covenmates Peter and Charlotte. An Irish coven, an Egyptian one, one that lived in the Amazon Basin, solitaires Garrett and Mary and Randall in North America and the pair Charles and Makenna in Europe. "We've *met* others, of course," he said. "Chance meetings like our encounter with Laurent and his old coven. But those are the ones with whom we have some ongoing acquaintance. In fact, I think Rosalie and Emmett were thinking of going to Ireland soon to visit Siobhan and her coven - it used to be just the mated pair, Siobhan and Liam, but they've added a member recently."

"And these are all... non-vegetarians."

Edward nodded solemnly. "Vegetarian vampires are very, *very* rare, Bella. Vampires in general are merely uncommon."

"Has *any* effort been made towards deliberately convincing anyone who eats people to stop eating people? Or is it all a matter of waiting for them to show up by themselves - your return, Carmen and Eleazar showing up on the Denali's doorstep, Alice seeing herself and Jasper join up with us and doing so?"

"There have been some gentle attempts," Edward said. "They haven't met with much success. You don't *know* what human blood tastes like, Bella - it's not a small thing to ask someone to give up, when they've already decided that they accept the cost in human life."

"*You* know what it tastes like," I said. "Esme knows what it tastes like. Alice knows what it tastes like. Emmett knows what it tastes like." Jasper was a bad example, so I did not bring him up. "Tanya and Kate and Irina and Carmen and Eleazar know what it tastes like."

"Yes," Edward said heavily, "we do. Why do you think it makes it so much harder to resist, when you have that knowledge? Gianna's downstairs right now. I *know what she would taste like*. It takes a toll, whenever I'm around a human, that I have to know, that I don't need to merely *imagine* like you."

"How could it taste *that good*?" I asked, flopping dramatically backwards onto the floor. The house was irregularly furnished like other Cullen homes, and we were not in a room equipped with a bed - they had aesthetic purpose, which was why Esme's island had them, but were not necessary for comfort during sleep or at any other time. Gianna was lucky that there was, for some reason, one four-poster in Alice's room here.

"To give you an idea," said Edward, "before our wedding, I asked my brothers what to expect about the honeymoon, and Jasper's exact words were "second only to the taste of

human blood". Emmett did not disagree with him."

I stared at him incredulously. "So you're saying that Jasper and Emmett think human blood is better than sex. Than *vampire* sex, not the human kind. And Jasper's never even run into a singer."

Edward nodded.

"What's your opinion on this issue?" I asked archly, striking a pose. "Don't feel like you have to lie to spare my feelings."

My husband's eyes raked appreciatively over me and he said, "I wouldn't have to lie to do that even if you were easily offended. I'm not sure what I would answer if I'd ever tasted *your* blood, though."

"I wonder if Irina and Laurent would be inclined to cast votes," I said. "Or any of the other friends of the family who have the relevant information."

"Well, I suppose you could ask them," he said, but his attention was clearly no longer on topic, and I didn't feel like dragging him back towards it right then.

Europe

A few hours later, Gianna announced loudly that she was running low on certain food items and needed either permission to take one of the cars or for Edward to bring her to the store. She didn't know I was in the building, apparently. Edward sighed, made himself presentable, and went down to give her a set of keys. While he supplied directions to the grocery store and counted out some Canadian dollars for her, I stared at the ceiling and thought.

Assuming I managed to get rid of the Volturi, the power vacuum *would* need to be filled or things would only get worse. Vampires were, as a group, violent creatures: force unto intolerable pain or death was the only viable threat and the only realistic means of resolving conflict, and this had to be delivered by more vampires. (Or, I supposed, werewolves.) There wasn't a vampire economy I could corner, influencing its participants to behave themselves thereby. There wasn't a significant vampire *society* in which reputation was reliably important - the only social connections that reliably mattered to arbitrary vampires were mate bonds, impermeable to the vicissitudes of crime and punishment and not possessed universally anyway.

If I had about half a dozen of Alec, and they worked for me, something could be set up to work like a prison, without the only options for keeping order involving actions that were themselves repulsive. But I didn't know where to find half a dozen of Alec, let alone how to get them on board with careers as prison guards for a vegetarian vampire regime.

At any rate, I wasn't sure if I could beat the Volturi in a stand-up fight even if my coven, the Denali coven, all the friends of the family, and the entire pack of Quileutes fought at my side. I was the only one immune to Jane and Alec, the weapons - well, technically, illusionists - of the guard, and I was not so personally puissant that I could expect to defeat them all by myself. I needed more allies, ready to call into place when they accumulated critical mass. In all probability, I wouldn't be able to move until Gianna had had my baby and said baby had gotten to be old enough to sanely turn - until then, the child would be a terrible vulnerability that my attempt at rebellion could ill afford. So I had a while to think about where to get six of the anesthetic witch twin, and other details of my intended administration.

It was a bitter leisure. *Murders* were going on every day, all over the world, at the hands and teeth of hidden but otherwise unchecked vampires. And, at an even more staggering scale, people were dying for more mundane reasons. People like Ilario, except without his convenient connections and massive stroke of luck, were falling prey to disease. Age and injury and human-originated violence claimed more. Perhaps not all of these dying humans would want the rescue of vampirism, but they could not even be *offered that choice* under Volturi law. I could only pluck a few from the maw of oblivion, here and there, based on *excuses* and *chance*.

It occurred to me that I hadn't checked my e-mail in far too long, and I found my computer. I was looking at my e-mail inbox when Edward had finished teaching Gianna

the phrases of French she'd need to buy groceries and returned to the second floor. He didn't look over my shoulder, just peered into the room to see what I was doing and went elsewhere. I heard the piano's trilling notes as he played a sonata to occupy himself.

I had several e-mails from both of my parents, which I scanned first and then replied to together rather than individually addressing each of Renée's dozen three-sentence news updates or Charlie's four giant rants/expressions of affection. I gave them both good-sized replies, telling them what little I could about what I'd been up to and padding with nostalgia and inquiries about their lives. Since they had no reason to expect me to be all that interesting, they were unlikely to find the limited disclosure odd. In most people's lives, having "started to learn Norwegian" would be the most momentous event of an entire month, let alone week. (I didn't mention Italian, French, Portuguese, Ukrainian, or anything else on my list. Humans did not normally try to learn that many languages at once.)

Rachel had also sent me several e-mails, which I didn't think were urgent because she hadn't texted, but which I opened with some trepidation anyway.

One was an update on Sue Clearwater. After a lot of long, loud conversations with her daughter, Sue had apparently come to the conclusion that if Harry was *dead*, then Leah had killed him. This was not an acceptable thing to have happened. Sue didn't want to live in a world where her daughter had killed her husband. And so she'd decided that Harry was not dead - but progress beyond that was slow in coming, Rachel reported. Sue seemed agnostic as to the question of whether vampirism dissolved human marriage, had no clear opinion about whether she ever wanted to see Harry again, was adamant that Leah and Seth should not attempt to visit him (thankfully - I didn't want the other Denalis learning about werewolves yet), and was not one bit happy about the entire mess. Rachel added as a footnote here that Leah was grateful for my rescue of her father and that Seth still thought I was a "nice vampire".

The next e-mail was what Rachel saw fit to relay to me about Harry's electronic correspondence with his children. He did not like Denali very much, and had trouble getting along with everyone in the coven except Carmen and Eleazar (so it was lucky that he was in their house). This was exacerbated by the fact that the sisters and Laurent interpreted any display of significant emotion from a newborn as reason to become wary and occasionally violent, trying to keep things from spiraling out of control. But Harry did not lack for a source of significant emotion: he missed his children. Also, he seemed more interested in soothing Sue's discomfort than I would have predicted. Maybe she was supposed to be his mate after all. I didn't know quite how that would manifest given that they'd never been in one another's physical presence since he'd *started* turning, let alone opened his eyes, but if it turned out to be the case, I supposed I'd find out.

There was then an e-mail stating that the pack had finally, as a group, gotten sufficiently controlled that Rachel had authorized breaking camp and going back to living full-time in the village. The entire tribe was cleared to know the secret, but under strict instructions from the tribe elders and Chief Rachel not to share it elsewhere. (The elders now included Sue Clearwater, who had taken her husband's place in his absence, and

would likely retain it even if he moved back to the reservation due to his being a vampire.) Rachel had not run out of money, but anticipated doing so in relatively short order and wanted more; I called Gianna, asked her to pick up envelopes and stamps while she was out, and looked up the French words she would need to purchase those things. I replied to this e-mail saying I'd get a check in the mail.

And then, after that, I read her latest message. It was about Sam, Leah's fiancé - but no more. There was one tribe legend I had not happened to hear. Werewolves were supposedly prone to "imprinting" - which was something like a unidirectional and more psychologically unique version of vampire mating. And Sam had gone and imprinted on Leah's second cousin Emily, who had come for a surprise visit from the Makah reservation where she lived. This was apparently not infrequent; growing up, Leah and Emily had been close as sisters.

Through their shared thoughts, everybody in the pack knew exactly what had happened to Sam. Rachel described it as being like the sudden extinction of the sun: "like there's no other light or warmth in the world except from her," she'd written. "Being in Sam's head is really weird because he has everybody in the pack half in love with Emily just because he's so anchored to her. It wasn't like that before when it was him and Leah, and that was already plenty."

However, a unique ability among the pack members - Leah included - to empathize intimately with his change of heart didn't prevent it from becoming major drama. Leah was inconsolable at the betrayal, especially on top of her father's sudden absence due to her having lost control, and was staying out of wolf form as much as she could manage to avoid having to run across Sam's thoughts.

Emily had been brought into the know: imprinting overrode even Rachel's echoey Alpha commands for secrecy, and Sam had told his imprintee everything the moment he laid eyes on her. This did not impress her. Emily's loyalty was to Leah, and she didn't show any inclination to accept Sam's mystically acquired devotion. She was crashing at the Clearwater's house to help comfort her cousin, since most of Leah's other friends were in the pack and had trace amounts of sympathy for Sam.

The other wolves were not thrilled about this development. Or at least, most of them weren't. A couple thought that imprinting would be romantic or something and looked forward to it eagerly, although legend had indicated that it was a rare phenomenon even among wolves. But Becky was terrified, as were the handful of other wolves who had significant others and hadn't imprinted on them. The only way to prevent imprinting, according to the corpus of stories available, was to not see the person on whom one would imprint. A few of the pack had accordingly moved out into the woods to camp out again, thereby avoiding most visual contact with humans.

Rachel speculated that with everything going on, I might want to "stay far, far away from Leah - she doesn't really hate you, and she's still grateful you saved her dad, but you're kind of turning into the herald of all things awful in her life the way she thinks of

it". Since I had no immediate plans to go to La Push, this was fine.

I sent Rachel another reply, asking for more information on how imprinting worked as it became available, and then I went downstairs to listen more closely to Edward's music.

The following Monday, Alice's vision of Ilario's resistance to human scent shored up. She brought home a human to waft under his nose, and then escorted her out again unharmed, although Ilario had been considerably twitchier and dependent on water during the exercise than I had with Nils. He didn't want to risk Gianna until he was surer of himself, so he started going on excursions with Alice and Jasper in (sparsely) populated areas of Norway. No one died. That Thursday, Edward, Gianna, and I flew back to Europe.

"I'm going to need to apologize to whoever that car belonged to," I remarked softly during the flight. Oddly, Edward hadn't asked at all about what had become of it.

"It was mine," he said. "It's all right; it was hardly a favorite. I thought you'd want something inconspicuous."

I told him the story of how the car had come to be wrecked, and he didn't bat an eye, just approved of my careful destruction of evidence. Sheepishly, I said, "I'd offer to replace the car, but it's not like any of the money I've been throwing around is *mine* in a meaningful sense; I didn't earn any of it." I had written Rachel a rather *large* check - just a low enough figure to fly under Alice's threshold of stockbroker terrorizing.

"It *is* yours," Edward said firmly. "You're a part of the family. You're my *wife*. Alice handles the investments because she's uniquely qualified and it amuses her. Carlisle holds down a paying job because he loves practicing medicine and it's hard to do it for free in most places with decent cloud cover. But it's shared out among all of us, and you mustn't feel awkward about using it."

"Well, I know *you* think I should throw it around, but I haven't really done anything to pitch in - I don't just mean that I didn't show up with a wad of cash in my pocket, I mean at all."

"Bella, when I turned you, we were prepared for the possibility that you'd be unable to do anything more sophisticated than growl and hunt for the subsequent decade," said Edward.

"A decade? Does it sometimes take that long?" I asked. "I thought it was a year."

"Usually it's a year, but it varies," said Edward. "It would have been surprising, but less surprising than the reality, if you'd still been acting like a newborn in 2015."

I thought of David, pacing and frightened, and was alarmed by this possibility,

obviated for myself though it was. "Well, even so," I said. "I'm not going to be careful about money if it's as unnecessary as all that, fine, but I feel like I should make it known that I want to be useful if I can."

Edward kissed my forehead and murmured in my ear. "Bella, my love, you don't know how glad our family is to have you. Leaving aside my own supernaturally good luck for the moment - you are Alice's best friend. You are a hope for Rosalie, a role model for Jasper, Esme's pride and joy. Emmett loves your sense of humor and Carlisle admires you. *Useful* - you're *priceless*."

Of course Edward had to tell me I was marvelous, but he also had to tell me the truth. I basked in the compliments and snuggled up for the long flight.

Ilario did not eat Gianna when we got her home, although he didn't like to be in the same room as her for very long at a stretch. He developed a habit of zipping between rooms at high speed, so he could talk to her without breathing the air she occupied. She was so overjoyed that he was healthy and had what he wanted that she didn't seem to mind the part where he craved her blood so much that he couldn't comfortably breathe near her.

By the time we finished carrying luggage out of the car in which Esme had fetched us, Emmett and Rosalie were debating whether to visit the Irish coven by swimming or by catching a plane. (Emmett thought swimming would be more fun, whereas Rosalie cited time and the difficulty of packing for a sea journey.) I announced an interest in acquainting myself with the coven, which caught Edward by surprise, although he didn't protest. Edward was indifferent to modes of transportation, which left me to break Emmett and Rosalie's tie. I voted apologetically for swimming, which *would* be interesting, wouldn't have me choosing between muteness and a throat full of fire en route, and would mean that the trip wouldn't have to be postponed so I could hunt first. Rosalie rolled her eyes and asked us to wait for ten minutes so she could buy a swim cap and preserve her hair from the ravages of saltwater, and I used the time to find a more swimming-friendly outfit than what I had on somewhere in my giant closet. Eventually I located an actual bathing suit, but I didn't really want to go gallivanting around Ireland in one, so I just wore normal clothes in fabrics that probably wouldn't look terrible after a few days in the ocean.

We all put our handheld electronics in redundant plastic bags, dove off the nearest fjord, and started for Ireland. I was actually able to outpace the others: in water, strength was a significant enough factor in rapid movement that my newborn arms could pull through the water more efficiently than Edward's. I swam ahead, and when I happened upon a luckless orca, I ate it; they caught up to me during this process and thereafter I kept pace.

Edward decided to teach me sign language so we could talk while swimming underwater. It had the convenient feature that I didn't need to learn an accent, that being

the factor of language learning least affected by vampire memory and cognitive speed (though those still helped). When I had the alphabet mastered, he could continue teaching me words and grammatical conventions without needing to fall back on English.

By way of vocabulary practice, he told me about the coven we were going to visit. Siobhan was the leader, and as far as she knew she was the oldest vampire who lived in Ireland full time. She was some eight and a half centuries old. Liam was newer, having turned in 1800. Siobhan had not turned him - he'd been created by a Scottish coven making an excursion to Ireland, and traveled with them until a later excursion saw them run into his mate. She'd extracted him from the coven, and made her disinclination to otherwise share the space clear, by (with Liam's help) killing one of the Scottish vampires and chasing off the other.

Maggie was a little over 150, and had been turned after emigrating to escape the Great Famine by an English vampire. Her creator, who had been solitary until turning Maggie, had been motivated by a suspicion about Maggie's witchcraft potential. This had proven correct. Maggie could tell when people were lying. Homesickness had eventually led Maggie to amicably part from her covenmate and return to Ireland in 1982. She'd managed to completely miss the existence of Siobhan and Liam until ten years later. Then they'd run into each other while simultaneously trying to take advantage of the cover that an IRA attack could provide for feeding. This had nearly turned into a fight: Liam wanted himself and Siobhan to go on being the only vampires in Ireland. Maggie would likely have run to England, enlisted the help of her former covenmate, and fought for the territory, but Siobhan had wanted to add her to the group.

My first thought was that of course Liam would do what Siobhan wanted if she had the stronger preference, but Edward said that Siobhan was a witch, too. According to him, she could *will* plans to pan out. Siobhan herself did not consider this a talent for anything other than good strategy, and I thought the example of Maggie's inclusion in the coven was a weak one - Siobhan hadn't needed to sway anyone but *her own mate* to make it work, for crying out loud. Edward didn't have more examples ready to hand. While he'd met Siobhan before, she didn't tend to discuss or think about situations that could be cases of this power, and so he was taking Carlisle's word for it; Carlisle considered the instance of bringing Maggie into the coven the quintessential one, and hadn't thought of any others while in Edward's range. I was curious enough to ask Carlisle about it later, but for the time being I was skeptical.

While our route was only about eight hundred miles (plus course corrections as needed, vertical or lateral, to avoid boats), swimming was slower than running, and we spent almost half a day in the water. Rosalie had wanted to land near Edinburgh and run across the larger island, then swim the Irish Sea to get to our destination, but Edward thought it would be too hard to avoid notice by boats or onshore observers in Edinburgh given the time of day - we probably could have managed it at night.

Instead, we got out of the water near Ballycastle, and then, careful to avoid humans, followed Emmett, who'd received instructions on how to find the coven. They moved around, because non-vegetarian vampires staying in one place for too long eventually

attracted notice. However well-hidden the bodies, missing persons were recorded; but two in greater Belfast followed by three near Cork and one in Limerick plus two in Galway and then a gaggle of tourists in Dublin didn't form a pattern in the minds of investigators who didn't suspect vampires.

I wondered how many missing persons worldwide were *just* missing, and how many were vampire food.

The Irish coven were outside a town called Maghera in Northern Ireland. I hypothesized that the top bit of the island was a better hunting ground than the rest of it because casualties were liable to be chalked up to sporadic religious violence, but I didn't speculate aloud. Emmett ranged ahead when we approached the designated area to find them and explain that there were four of us, not two, and to give them fair warning that I had newborn eyes but was not typical of newborns. He came back, gave us the go-ahead, and led us into the wooded area where the other three vampires waited.

Siobhan was a brunette, with a short and well-maintained haircut. She was *very* tall and broad, and she moved forward to greet us with an undulating smoothness that I considered trying to emulate before deciding that its impressiveness depended on her size. I wondered if she could beat Emmett in a fight and was unsure. She was barefoot, like the others, and they were all dressed in simple outdoor wear.

Her mate, Liam, followed close behind, a grimly noncommittal expression on his face. He didn't make any aggressive moves, but I was inclined to watch for them anyway - I had the impression that he wasn't happy about the visit. He was only a little shorter than his mate, which made him about Emmett's height. As vampires went, he wasn't particularly attractive; he was more like Harry and David, who'd been turned for reasons unrelating to appearance. Or, I supposed, James, who wouldn't have looked unusually lovely even in a crowd of humans (or so I'd written; vampire vision might have revealed something else). His hair was a shade lighter than Siobhan's, and cut similarly to hers.

Behind the pair followed the newest member, Maggie, who was about my size and had a smiling face wreathed in springy red curls. Except for the telltale wine-colored eyes, she seemed very likeable. She was also the first to speak, in a perky Irish accent. "Hello! It's good to finally meet you!" She was addressing everyone but Emmett, who she'd encountered moments before, but she seemed particularly interested in me - probably because of the Super Newborn thing. When my eyes were finally gold I could expect to get less (although not much less) attention among the general vampire population.

"Yes, it's been some time," acknowledged Siobhan, similarly accented. I wondered for half a second why vampires would speak any language with an accent, and then mentally kicked myself for assuming that sounding American meant *lacking* an accent.

"We're not usually in Europe long enough to make visits," apologized Rosalie.

"But aren't you all living in Norway now?" inquired Maggie. "Why is it just the four of you?"

"There's another newborn at home," explained Edward. "He's nearly as controlled as Bella, but not quite. It's better to leave him with supervision." He omitted mention of Gianna, without whose presence a smaller contingent of babysitters would have sufficed to soothe Ilario's worries about slipping and eating her. I supposed that our hosts would be no less likely than any other vampires to think it was strange and suspicious that we kept a human around, and I wasn't exactly motivated to disclose the details of why she was still human.

"That explains Jasper, and by extension, Alice," said Siobhan, "but what about Carlisle and Esme? The only reason I've met any of you at all is through Carlisle."

"Carlisle is still new to his job in Norway, and prefers not to ask for time off so soon," said Edward. This was *true* - I supposed it had to be, if Maggie was to be present - but not the whole story, of course.

"Well, perhaps they'll pay us a visit soon," said Siobhan.

Rosalie nodded, and there followed quite a bit of catch-up conversation: the latest developments in our coven and theirs. Rosalie and Emmett had taken Edward's hint about leaving Gianna unmentioned, and they didn't know that I'd left Québec during our trip at all. Edward had successfully kept that a secret. Bearing in mind the topics I should not mention, I chatted away with the others. It was much easier to conduct small talk with family present - or maybe it was just Edward.

It was interesting, the way we stood. There was, as ever, no reason to sit - and no chairs that might feel neglected if we didn't, since we were in the middle of the woods. So we were all on our feet. The Irish vampires were in a loose V with Siobhan at the hinge, standing closest to us. Our contingent stood in a line, but clearly divided in half; Emmett had his arm around Rosalie and I was holding hands with Edward, and there was about two feet between my left foot and Rosalie's right. I wondered why Siobhan and Liam weren't touching. They'd been mated longer than we had, which might explain it all by itself. I wondered how we'd have arranged ourselves if the entire family had been present.

The conversation split into numerous simultaneous threads, as statements prompted more than one possible response. We could all hear each other, easily filtering each voice from the others, and keep track of where everyone was looking by virtue of unblurry peripheral vision, so this wasn't as difficult as it would have been for humans.

Maggie was mildly curious about vegetarianism, and wanted to know if we'd tasted human blood. She seemed equally entranced by Rosalie and I, who had not, and our husbands, who had, and interspersed her incredulous questions with remarks to herself about how it was "all really true, *huh!*"

Meanwhile, Rosalie had convinced Liam to break his stony silence by talking about

cars, which he liked, and Emmett was trying to persuade Siobhan that they should spar. (Apparently Edward and Alice "cheated", fighting Jasper got old after a while, and the others weren't usually in the mood.) I was rather interested in acquiring at least a cursory understanding of how to fight, but I could propose this to Emmett (or Edward or Jasper) any time; he probably didn't often have the opportunity to match up with Siobhan.

Eventually she relented, silencing Liam's protest with a look, and they got some distance and sprang at each other. I watched out of the corner of my eye, still keeping up with Maggie's questions about whether I wasn't *just a little curious* about how humans tasted, etcetera.

"Aren't you curious how animals taste?" I asked, finally, as Siobhan knocked Emmett to the ground and he leapt to his feet to attack again.

"Not really," said Maggie, wrinkling her nose. "They smell terrible."

"I can't say eating humans sounds like something I'd enjoy, either," I said.

"But they taste great!" Maggie enthused.

"So I'm told," I said. "But you can't be *constantly* in the process of swallowing their blood. You've only got so much room. Inevitably, you spend more time not eating than you spend eating, and you would still have to do that even if they marched by you in a convenient line and you didn't have to hunt them or conceal evidence. According to the experts," I tilted my head towards Edward, "eating human blood makes it harder to *not be eating* at any given time between meals. So I'm making the non-eating parts of my life more comfortable by forgoing some extra yumminess when I eat."

Maggie blinked at me, and Liam actually let out one low *ha* of a laugh. "That's something," he put in. "Carlisle's all about *compassion* and *respect for human life*, and you have an actual reason."

"I'm a big fan of compassion and respect for human life *too*," I said, "but if those things mattered to you, you'd already be vegetarians. It's not like you've been living in ignorance of the fact that we can live off animals and were only waiting for this information before swearing off a human diet; you've known Carlisle for a while."

"But *how* do you resist?" exclaimed Maggie. "Perhaps that's a reason to do it, but *how*?"

"Don't you ever go someplace where you can't eat the nearest human *right then*? Walk into some town where there's 50 of them in one place, and you'd have to either kill them all, which would be conspicuous, or kill only some of them, which would also be conspicuous?" Of course they had; Maggie nodded. "So you can clearly refrain from eating humans," I said. "You don't need me to tell you how."

Maggie looked vaguely puzzled, but then asked about how animals tasted, which was promising; Emmett even shouted a remark about the superior flavor of ursine

creatures in between being used to knock a tree over and successfully depriving Siobhan of one of her feet. Liam clenched his teeth very tightly at that, but Siobhan (while evidently in considerable discomfort) just picked her foot up off the ground without even yelling and attached it to her ankle again. After about a second, during which Emmett graciously did not pounce, the injury knitted, and then she was in motion again.

"I like killer whales best," I put in, when Liam had relaxed marginally. "Hunting in the water is fun - the whales are designed to move in the ocean, and while I can do it, it's not what I'm best at. So there's an element of challenge that there isn't to hunting land creatures. Of those, though, I liked the wild boar I ate once."

"Coyotes," supplied Rosalie shortly, half-smirking.

"There's all kinds of variety," said Edward dryly. "Mountain lions, here."

"I'm really looking forward to being able to go about in public without contact lenses," I said.

"I just tell everybody I have weak veins in my eyes and they keep bursting," said Maggie. "Or I say that the red is because of contacts anyway. Or I make up something in fake Latin like "*iris crimsonus*" and act like I'm really sensitive about it if anyone gets curious. I ask them if they know what it means, and if they know it's not real Latin then I kill them." She shrugged.

"Sunglasses," said Liam shortly.

"I've done sunglasses before," I acknowledged. "Useful things, but anytime we'd be outside so anyone would notice, *sunglasses* are a bit odd."

"More fake Latin," advised Maggie. "You have a condition that makes your eyes really sensitive to light. I think that might actually be a real thing."

I sort of liked her, in spite of the part where she killed people. I was beginning to see how my family could have acquired red-eyed friends. It didn't take the same personality, in a vampire, to kill people that it did in a human. A human who murdered was opposing culture and instinct, risking social censure and societal repercussions from every angle. A normal human had to be put in an unusual context like war, or subjected to enormous stress, before becoming willing to kill.

A normal *vampire*, though, was fitted with a different set of natural impulses. Was normally lifted entirely out of their human context and could not safely continue human relationships (and would be most likely to form new relationships with vampires who already ate people). Did not face significant danger in the process of hunting, as long as they were careful. Had been *put* in the sort of context that might make a normal human turn dangerous, complete with a label that generally meant "killer" and the ability to live up to it with impunity.

I was the luckiest vampire in the world. I'd walked in with my eyes open, kept hold

of my original ties, and landed in the laps of a family that didn't eat people. Carlisle was the impressive one who'd managed it with no help, no precedent, no support, no ability to write home to his human relatives.

But at any rate, the personality types of killer vampires weren't the same as killer humans. Maggie was a perfectly likable person. And when someone saw through her fake Latin, she killed them, that was all.

I was very tempted to make the entire conversation about converting Maggie, to retrieve it from the tangent it began to drift off on about some *real* Latin that Edward helpfully produced from his medical school days. Maybe the next human Maggie met wouldn't die of excess education. I decided against it. It could just as easily make things worse, and she was already *curious*, which was something.

Eventually Emmett invited me to join the brawl without prompting, and I agreed. He knocked me around, but more gently than he had Siobhan. I tried not to rely too much on my excessive strength, which would be gone soon enough. Instead I learned which instincts were useful and which to suppress, a few things about distinguishing feints and genuine attacks and how to dodge, and fascinating tricks with leverage. Siobhan also took a turn, and her style was noticeably different from Emmett's - he was playing, and she was doing something more like parkour.

It was fun, and although periodically it hurt rather a lot, I had the sensation that I was learning very efficiently. Learning to fight by sparring wasn't linear, like reading a book and (however quickly) absorbing each word in sequence. The rapid immersion in combat let me engage almost all of my mind on the same task. Every sense had something to tell me about my partner and my environment; all of my muscles could be doing something useful; I needed to model my opponent's strategy and think of a move that he or she hadn't thought I'd make, often stacking up levels of obviousness quite deep and still sometimes being found predictable. It was wholly engaging.

All of this bothered Edward immensely, and after Siobhan clocked me across the ear hard enough that it stopped processing sound for a few seconds, he quietly asked me to stop. I went back to his side and he gathered me into a hug. Rosalie snorted.

"Aw, but she's good at this," protested Emmett.

"Later," said Edward tightly. "Not here."

"Siobhan's got a different style..." I said.

He gritted his teeth. "I know," he said. "So does Jasper. You can practice at home if you like." I wondered if Siobhan had thought something in particular, or if he just didn't trust her. Liam looked relieved that she appeared to be done, though, and she went back to stand by her coven with a shrug. Maggie looked briefly wistful.

I tilted my head at her, inviting her to explain this. "Oh," she said. "Just, I wish *my* mate would hurry up and find me."

"If you don't ever leave Ireland, are you very likely to run into him?" I inquired.

Maggie considered this. "Her," she corrected absently. No one, even my husband from 1901 with oh-so-traditional values, reacted to this. I decided to inquire about that later. "Well, I traveled more before I joined this coven," she said at last. "And I didn't find her then either."

I couldn't resist. "Maybe you ate her."

Siobhan rolled her eyes, but Maggie looked genuinely horrified. "What? That couldn't happen."

"Of course it could," I said. "I was human when I met Edward. Not only that," I added with relish, "I was his *singer*. It's lucky that he had so much practice *not eating humans*. Otherwise I would have been toast. Delicious, dead toast."

Maggie looked scared. I wasn't sure if that was good or not, so I backed off a little. "You most likely haven't met her yet, though." I hesitated for a beat, letting the redheaded vampire calm down, and added, "But that doesn't mean she's a vampire."

"Nnng," whined Maggie.

Rosalie chuckled darkly and threw in a barb of her own: "Emmett was human when I found him, too." She paused. "And absolutely *covered* in fresh blood."

"Esme was human when Carlisle met her," put in Edward; I wasn't facing him, instead studying Maggie's face, but I heard a smile in his voice.

Eventually Maggie announced, "Well, maybe I'll just eat men," which was not really the solution I'd had in mind, but at least she'd found the possibility compelling. Siobhan sighed but didn't have an interest in encouraging Maggie to be an equal-opportunity predator, and Liam had lapsed into silence again.

The conversation turned to other things, and after about two days, we were done visiting. Siobhan graciously allowed that we might spend a while touring Ireland before going home. So we ran from place to place on the island for a bit, looking at the major attractions. "This part I can tell my parents," I remarked. "Ireland is totally a normal part of a tour of Europe."

"If you want, we can look at more of Europe before we go to South America," offered Edward.

"Let's go to Wales and England and Scotland on our way home," I decided, "and then I want to hang out there for a while, just like a week, we've spent so little time

actually *with* our family. Then South America."

Of course he had no problem with this, and so while Emmett and Rosalie swam directly back to Norway after they'd had their fill of Ireland, Edward and I swam east and he spent five days showing me around. He'd been there before, but most of his knowledge came from Carlisle, who'd been born in London. None of the specific locations that had been important to Carlisle's human life were still in their original form, but it was interesting to wander around the city with this information. I wondered if Chicago, Edward's birthplace, would feel similar if I went there.

We were wandering the streets of Glasgow (me in contact lenses) when I decided to ask Edward why Maggie's correction hadn't elicited a reaction. "Given that you're from 1901, and have used this as an excuse to have outdated values before," I said. I kept my voice high and fast; passing humans wouldn't notice anything but a couple looking into each other's eyes and walking together.

"Well, first of all," laughed Edward, "my outdated values, as you call them, apply to *me*. It's not my business whether anyone else obeys them. You haven't heard me complaining about the conduct of the succubus triplets - I suppose it's down to Tanya and Kate, now - have you?"

"That's true," I acknowledged. "And second of all?"

"Second of all, vampires in general don't have much choice but to be relaxed about that in particular," he said. "There's simply nothing to argue about. Just like with Laurent's eating habits, the choices are permission or violence. There's no legal policy to argue. No social pressure or ethical argument that could ever practically compete with the mate bond. You might have noticed that vampires don't go in for organized religion or, even in opposite-sex couples, have children, so the traditional arguments are moot anyway. There's no reason for anyone to go to the trouble of trying to keep a vampire away from her mate, even if the mate's also a woman. It would be very troublesome and have no point."

"Okay," I said. "But apart from the fact that you aren't going to fight Maggie to the death over it, do you have 1901-shaped feelings on the matter?"

Edward shrugged. "Not really. It wasn't something I gave any thought to as a human. That was hardly the hot-button issue at the time. When I was turned, everyone was busy thinking about the Great War - World War I - and the flu pandemic. So I didn't enter the vampire world with preconceptions on the subject to set in stone. It's not my cup of tea, but then, you are the only cup of tea in the world for me." He picked me up by the waist and spun around, then set me back down on the sidewalk; some watching humans *awwwed* at the display of affection.

I decided this was satisfactory. And then an unrelated question occurred to me: "Am

I immune to Maggie's power?"

That brought Edward up short. "I don't know. You didn't lie to her, as far as I know..."

"I didn't," I confirmed. "Unless sarcasm or speculation or just being mistaken counts...? How sensitive is she?"

"Not very," he said. "While it's possible for someone very good at controlling their thoughts or very immersed in their duplicity to lie to me, and she'd catch most such deception, I'm more effective overall than she is. She doesn't detect anything at all unless someone deliberately states something they want her to believe which they think is false. If they don't know she's listening, or they're confident they're right, or they think she'll notice that they're uncertain or making a joke instead of trying to share definite information, nothing happens."

"So if I'm immune to her she wouldn't have noticed," I said, nodding to myself. "I wish I'd thought to test it there."

"Do you expect to need to lie to Maggie?" Edward asked, and then he shook his head. "You don't have to answer that."

"It's okay," I said. "I don't expect to need to lie to her, but it would be interesting if I found out that I could, or couldn't. I want to know more about how my power works, so I can make it get better. If I didn't start out immune to Maggie, learning how to develop that would be useful practice. I guess I'll just work on hedging out Jasper to start. Not because I expect to *need* to, just because I want to know how to improve." I tilted my head curiously. "Have you gotten any better at reading minds since you turned?"

"Not in the way you probably have in mind," he said. "Since I can follow familiar voices at greater range, it did improve in the sense that I could hear Carlisle from one mile away to begin with and two later and almost five now, but I'm not any better at hearing new people I meet. And it's still just surface thoughts as it's always been."

"Have you tried to work on that at all?"

"Not really. I do have some qualms about invading people's privacy," he said, smiling faintly. "In cases where need overwhelms those concerns, the level of discernment that I started with has been serviceable. I did try a little to hear something from you, but failed utterly, and you've made it clear that you don't want me to succeed - so I stopped working on that."

"Fair enough," I replied.

Hybrid

It was more than a week into the month of August when we swam back to Norway. When I checked my e-mail, there was a small heap of messages from my parents and Rachel - and, interestingly, one from Angela. I was so surprised to get an e-mail from her that I opened it first. It was sweet and postcard-like. She was still in Forks for the summer, and wanted to make known her hopes that I was having a nice time in Europe. I replied and told her what I could about Norway, Ireland, the U.K., and Italy, and mentioned - since unless Charlie had told everyone, she didn't know - that I had eloped and likely wouldn't be returning to school in the fall. I sent her three wedding photos that Alice had Photoshopped to make me look pinker, and asked her if she'd do me the favor of notifying Jessica and our other friends.

Then I tackled the e-mails from my parents - more of the same, really, but I dutifully compiled the recent tourism data for their reading pleasure. Renée was mostly adjusted to life in Florida, where my stepfather had gotten signed earlier in the year. She missed Phoenix but liked Jacksonville pretty well, and was already cycling through the locally available diversions and hobbies. She and Phil were still getting along very well.

Charlie, meanwhile, was starting to worry about Harry. Since he obviously could not be told what had really happened to his friend, and yet could also not be invited to the funeral that he'd expect to attend if Harry were dead, he was being fed a confused jumble of vague misinformation.

I'd turned the Denalis' latest addition in mid-July; it was becoming awfully suspicious that in the weeks since, Harry had supposedly been visiting his aunt in Nashville, then become too sick to receive visitors but not sick enough to be in the hospital, then become well enough to go and see a cousin Charlie had never heard of who lived in Toronto. All of these plane tickets, of course, being paid for by the visited relatives; the Clearwaters were not especially wealthy, although Leah and Seth now had some access to pack money I'd supplied. Charlie didn't appear to suspect foul play - Billy and Sue both were making sure of that - but he was very confused.

I assured Charlie, in my e-mail, that Harry was probably just fine and there was no reason to worry - but I didn't know what long-term solution would work. If Harry were reported as a missing person so he could be declared legally dead later, Charlie would certainly look for him, and could run into wolfy or vampiric things that he shouldn't see yet. Short of torching the Clearwater house while Sue and the kids were out of it and Harry was supposedly inside (to eliminate the need for a body), there was no other obvious way to give Charlie a satisfactory story. I toyed with the arson idea, but it would be too obviously staged if the family rescued their belongings first, and not all of those objects were likely to be of the easily replaceable variety. They would be unlikely to go for the idea.

Next I opened the e-mails from Rachel. Two more wolves had imprinted. One, a teenage boy named Jared, had fallen instantly for a classmate of his who'd turned out to

have a longstanding crush on him, so that was all sweet and convenient. Less sweetly, Quil Ateara had imprinted on Emily's two-year-old niece Claire, another Makah. Emily was still staying at the Clearwater house to comfort Leah, and had agreed to babysit Claire from that location, which was how Quil had gotten a look at her.

Rachel added, hastily, that Quil was *absolutely not* sexually interested in the toddler, which was the only reason he still had all of his face attached. Apparently imprinting wasn't necessarily sexual. The pack was assuming that when Claire grew up, she and Quil would be as happy together as Jared and his imprint, but for the time being he was absolutely content to serve as a older brother figure. Rachel confided to me that he let Claire boss him around very indulgently, never tiring of her.

Leah had, at first, thought that this might mean that Sam could come to think of Emily as a *sister*, so that Leah could have her fiancé back. Emily and Rachel had been all for this plan, and so Sam, supernaturally obedient to his imprint and his Alpha, had tried. Rachel didn't doubt the sincerity of his attempt. But he'd failed; he was still *in love* with Emily.

In a brief message, Rachel informed me that everyone in the pack was growing like a weed. "Everybody fifteen and up looks 25 years old and on our way to the Olympics," she told me. "The younger ones look about five years older than they really are already, and they're catching up, and even the kids are completely *built*. Wolf form sizes still vary by age and size in human shape - I'm not the biggest, just the prettiest and the one who can boss everyone around."

Rachel's next e-mail said only, "I think Emily is wavering."

The next message said nothing more of Emily, Sam, or Leah, just told the stories of more imprintings. One boy I hadn't met, who'd been flown in during my drive to Denali, had apparently picked up on the Makah pattern. His name was Victor, and he was really enthusiastic about imprinting. He and two like-minded friends had actually run north all the way to the Makah reservation, while Rachel was asleep and unable to order them to stop. There, they'd wandered around looking at girls until Victor had imprinted on one.

Thus freed from his obligation to keep the pack's information contained, he told her everything (complete with a phasing demonstration) and actually convinced her to visit La Push and live with him until school started, although she would be obliged to go back home and finish her last year of high school in September. The other two hadn't imprinted during the excursion, and Rachel had resorted to Alpha commands to prevent any more of that kind of foolishness. This hadn't prevented one other wolf from (accidentally) imprinting on a Forks girl, who I didn't recognize by name or description.

It did not escape Rachel's notice that all of the wolves who had imprinted were male. "The dominant hypothesis," she'd written in her latest missive, "is that we imprint on people who'll be able to pass on the werewolf gene."

And all the female wolves had stopped having periods.

Rachel passed this information to me clinically, but I could imagine that it wasn't being taken with such calm by all of the female half of the pack. With menstruation had gone the ability to have children - or so they strongly suspected. I could guess *why*, biologically, this would be the case. It would not do a fetus any good at all to be subjected to violent transformations between shapes. Small children with the gene couldn't activate; presumably they also lacked the ability in utero. Miscarriage would be inevitable. Male wolves, on the other hand, would be perfectly able to sire offspring. None of this was likely to ease the blow to the girls.

I promptly wrote back. While they couldn't safely carry children, that wasn't necessarily a reason to suspect that all of their eggs were non-viable. Secrecy, including from my own family, was still important, but in a few years I could be in and out of medical school and equipped to personally do for the pack what Rosalie had done for me. (If, in that time, discretion became unnecessary or impossible, then one of the existing Cullen doctors could handle the task.) Individual wolves who, for some reason, valued the ability to bear their own children more than the ability to never age could quit their wolves. At that point, they would probably pick right up where they'd left off, reproductive capacities and all.

While I wrote my reply to Rachel, another e-mail appeared. This one, surprisingly, was from *Harry*.

He wanted to know how I'd become sure that I could handle being around humans. I sympathized with his impatience - not only had he been thrown into vampire-hood without warning, he wasn't getting along well with most of his coven. So I summarized all the tips I'd collected, my self-tests with my old human-smelling clothes, and the trial we'd devised with Nils. I gave him Alice's e-mail address and a summary of her power, and suggested that he ask her to see if he'd be safe to try. Given a green light from her, all that would be needed would be for one of the longstanding Denalis to take David safely away and another to bring in a Nils-equivalent.

I also recommended he get in touch with Ilario, whose contact information I realized I did not have. I poked my head out of the window, asked Esme - the first person I saw - for his e-mail address, and added it in an endnote to my reply to Harry. I reminded him not to tell Alice or Ilario that he was Quileute, and further advised that he not even use his last name with them lest Edward pick something up and recognize the family.

Before I hit "send", it occurred to me that everyone in my family but Edward thought that I'd spent my entire detour to North America simply hanging out in Québec, less the time it had taken me to encounter, turn, and transport Harry. They'd assume he was Canadian. The Denalis and Edward thought that I'd brought Harry up from Seattle, which was still off, but too close for comfort. The Denalis knew Harry's last name but not what it meant; everyone in my own coven would know who the Clearwaters were except Ilario and maybe Alice and Jasper.

If Harry started e-mailing people other than me and his fellow Quileutes, some informational cross-contamination would happen. It was already likely, if one of the Denalis called him "Harry Clearwater" in correspondence to my family or mentioned where he'd come from, but there was nothing I could do about that without *telling* them to keep it on first-name terms, which was a greater risk than just crossing my fingers about that leak.

I didn't have to make it worse, though. I deleted my last paragraphs. Instead, I wrote that Harry should look for solitary hikers with someone's supervision, and very firmly make up his mind that he would immediately tell *me* if he slipped up and ate someone, and that *I* would resolve that if he told me of this event, I would...

I tried to think of something flashy that Alice would definitely tell me about if she saw me doing it, which she'd definitely see if it was to happen. Eventually I decided that if Harry killed someone, I'd pick a fight with Ilario. I didn't think we were likely to squabble otherwise, so I would probably not get a false signal. But it was the sort of thing Alice would notice and try to head off if she saw it, while not being sufficiently bizarre behavior for a couple of newborns that I would be obviously faking. I explained to Harry that if Alice gave me this warning, I'd warn him in turn that his test wasn't going to go well and he should put it off. *Then* I hit "send".

My e-mail thus taken care of, I went to locate Emmett and get another fighting lesson.

Emmett started getting cocky after a couple of hours of flinging me into treetops and making Bella-shaped impressions in the ground, so I quit reining in my strength. I was trying not to depend on it, since it wouldn't stay with me, but it was available for the time being as a tool to wipe Emmett's smirk off his face. I grabbed him and, holding him too tightly for him to escape, stuck him into the dirt headfirst, all the way up to his knees. This made a spying Alice snicker.

Emmett lost no time in wriggling his way out of the ground, but he was absolutely covered in soil and looked perturbed. "I'm a newborn," I reminded him sweetly.

"Arm-wrestle him!" cried Alice. "I'll get you a rock to use as a table, hang on!" She zipped off into the woods and came back with a boulder four times her size. "Here!"

"What's the point? I'll win," I said.

"Will not," challenged Emmett.

"Emmett, that's ridiculous. I've been a vampire for less than two months. I'm sure you'll be able to beat me at any contest of strength you care to name this time next year, but now?"

"Come on," he goaded, getting into arm-wrestling position with his elbow on the

rock. I rolled my eyes and clasped hands. Alice counted down, and Emmett started pushing.

I could definitely *tell* that he was pushing - he probably could have shoved his arm shoulder-deep through solid granite with the force he applied. But my arm didn't move. It wasn't hard to keep it still. Vampire muscles didn't react to physical challenges in the same way. While there were things too heavy for us to pick up, attempting to lift them, or slightly lighter objects, did not cause *strain* or any sort of fatigue. So I sat there, looking innocently at Emmett, as he gritted his teeth and pushed harder. My arm still didn't move.

We'd collected more spectators; an amused Edward had come to the yard, presumably following someone's thoughts, and Rosalie and Jasper were looking out two windows of the house. Ilario peered out a window and then left the house to watch from a better vantage point. "Let me know when you're ready for me to break this rock with your forearm," I told Emmett mildly.

He pushed even harder, but I compensated automatically. "Rrr," he said.

"This isn't nearly as fun as sparring," I complained. "Do you really want to sit here all day? Just tell me when you're done, and then I'll win. But since you wanted to do this, I'd hate to deprive you of your fun before you say so... not that I can tell what you see in this activity..." I tilted my head, looking curiously at our joined hands as though trying to figure out what might be interesting about them.

Edward laughed, and Alice giggled. I was being a little mean, obliging Emmett to say he wanted to lose before allowing the contest to end, but the look on his face was so much fun. I blinked at him patiently.

Suddenly, Emmett grinned and let his arm go limp all at once. Unprepared, my arm slammed forward and drove his into the rock, but on his terms. I laughed with everyone else.

"Want to try me?" Ilario asked me.

I had not spoken to Ilario at all since he'd turned, and only a handful of sentences before that. I'd left right after he'd been injected, and stopped in Norway only briefly to drop off his sister - who monopolized his time - before jumping into the ocean and swimming to Ireland.

"Hm," I said. "You're newer than I am - how much does that matter?"

Jasper, resident newborn expert, opened his window and hopped out, falling twenty feet and landing neatly. "Very little," he said. "But it's not nothing. Either of you could win, but I'd bet on Ilario."

Ilario was a tall, skinny guy, not particularly burly, but I hadn't brought special physical prowess into my vampire life either. Unlike with Emmett, who I'd known I could beat, I was honestly curious about the outcome. "Sure," I said. "The rock is a little beat up

on this side..." I turned it over, pressing it into the ground so it wouldn't wobble, and put my arm in place.

Ilario walked up, eyeing my arm appraisingly, and took hold of my hand. Alice counted again.

The difference was immediately obvious, and my arm twitched backwards half a centimeter before I brought more power to bear and held my own. Ilario looked very focused and calm as he pushed my hand.

I decided to just go all out, and forced my arm to push as hard as it physically could. Ilario matched me, and then some; my arm leaned, bit by bit, towards the rock. Clearly he was stronger than I was, but that didn't necessarily mean he'd win... I relaxed my arm for a fraction of a second, and it shot towards the rock, but Ilario reduced the strength of his attack in response, and just before my knuckles hit stone, I pushed back with maximum power and had our arms perpendicular to the rock before he reacted and stopped me cold. It was back to a near-stalemate in his favor.

"Not going to fall for that again," laughed Ilario, good-naturedly.

"No?" I didn't have any more tricks, and I sighed as he forced my arm down to the rock, millimeter by millimeter. I didn't let go like Emmett had, and so the back of my hand just brushed the boulder very lightly, and then he'd won.

"Congratulations," I said; he extracted his hand and I swept a little rock dust off of mine. Jasper nodded to himself and Emmett looked pleased.

Other than the arm-wrestling, my week of downtime in Norway was pleasantly uneventful. I got to know Ilario, who was a pleasant fellow, very careful and deliberate in his choices and protective of Gianna. I spent a lot of time with Edward in our cottage, dined exclusively on killer whale, and got to be conversationally fluent in Italian. I explored the countryside around our house, sometimes with Edward or other family, sometimes all by myself.

Harry e-mailed; I opened the message nervously, worried that Alice had missed the tussle I would have to provoke with Ilario in response to a tragic failure. But Harry had successfully gotten within ten feet of a hiker, with Carmen along to check his movements, and not done the man any harm. He thanked me for my help. In a P.S. at the end of the message, he apologized for having acted so afraid of me; via e-mail no one seemed like a person to him, and so I didn't stand out as scarily in the remote medium.

I kept abreast of the goings-on in La Push. Paul imprinted, too, on one of Rachel's roommates. The roommate been unimpressed by Billy's inventions about Rachel's illness, and had driven all the way across the state to investigate - apparently she was very nosy. Paul's imprinting meant that all of her curiosity was satisfied, of course, and since she

wasn't taking the summer semester, she was staying with him for the time being.

Rachel was nervous about what would happen when school started up again for Paul's imprint and the Makah visitor who Victor had found. She didn't think that either boy would hold up well without his imprint. Claire, too, would eventually have to return to the Makah reservation; her parents, while moderately neglectful, were not complete absentees. They'd expect Emily to return her charge eventually, and then Quil would be alone. For her own part, with no way to hand off Alpha responsibilities to someone else, Rachel was arranging with her school to do everything long-distance come autumn. She might need to go to Spokane to sit exams at the end of each semester, but could otherwise expect to keep up while based in La Push.

I found occasion to ask Carlisle what evidence beyond Maggie he had for Siobhan's witchcraft. It wasn't impressive at all. In fact, that was the strongest example he had. Every other case gave Siobhan lots of time to lay complex groundwork. I announced that I was in Siobhan's camp as far as the nature of her talent: she just planned well. Until she and Eleazar were in a room together and he said otherwise, or she pulled off something more impressive than getting Liam to put up with a new covenmate, there was no reason to consider her a witch. Carlisle smiled agreeably and said that this was fine, which frustrated me, but didn't seem worth having a long argument over; I went and watched Esme pour cement in the basement instead.

After a week at home, as specified, I was ready to go to South America and hunt for half-vampires. I informed Edward of this, and he happily booked us tickets. A few hours later, we were flying over the Atlantic again, hoping to find out if our potential child was mythical or possible.

"I confess I have no idea how to go about looking for half-vampires," I told Edward, in Portuguese, as we walked away from the airport. I'd spent the trip studying the language, since we had no textbooks handy on any other tongues that the obscure tribes we could wind up talking to might use. Using translators would be ill-advised, given the sensitive nature of our search, but we could hire one to teach us a few words without explaining what they were for and use them to elicit images in people's minds that Edward could examine.

"I don't have much experience with it either," he replied in the same language. "That's why we landed in Manaus instead of Rio. I thought we could start by finding the Amazon coven and asking them if they know anything. Humans who believe in vampires might not want to talk to you and me, although if we dead-end with the Amazons we could try coming back with Gianna and getting her to ask for us."

"Oh, that makes sense. Tell me about the coven?" I invited.

The Amazons were three women, all unmated, who formed an unusually close coven and were rarely seen apart. Zafrina, the leader, was an illusionist. Though limited to

vision and unable to affect other senses, she was still very powerful, and could compose entire scenes to supplant whatever input one's eyes would normally supply. Edward expected me to be immune to this talent. The other two, Senna and Kachiri, were not witches. All three of them were on the order of five hundred years old, as they reckoned it. They'd been turned separately, departed from their creators separately after maturing, and then found each other a few years later.

While they were not the only vampires in South America by a long shot, or even in Brazil, they did have more or less undisputed run of the Amazon River and its environs. Edward assured me, though, that Zafrina was sufficiently confident in her ability to turn a fight to her advantage that they could afford not to attack intruders on sight, even unexpected ones. (They did not hold with modern technology, and could not have been called ahead of time.) They'd recognize him and be willing to be introduced to me, and if they couldn't or wouldn't help, they'd let us leave peacefully.

The rainforest was not a location notable for its transportational infrastructure, so we were on foot, with a modest amount of luggage carried in backpacks and wrapped in plastic to keep the rain off it. The constant rain had the effect of making it very difficult to track by scent. We could smell things that had been nearby recently, but figuring out where the coven had been and which direction they'd gone since was near-impossible.

It took us two very scenic and damp days before we finally found them, during which time I improved my Portuguese considerably and learned to identify a wide variety of native wildlife. I also ate a jaguar, which was okay. When we located the three women, they were in the middle of eating. Edward caught the scent first, and warned me to hold my breath; I was still untested with regards to the smell of fresh human blood. He didn't look terribly comfortable himself, either, and quit breathing once he had the direction; he signed, to avoid using up air, that he was pretty sure that the blood was from the Amazons' prey.

The humans in question were all dead by the time we got there. Each of the three Amazons appeared to have bagged one of her own - by their outfits, I thought they might have been loggers or something like that. The coven, for their part, were all dressed entirely in hide and leather, just vests and pants. They had elongated limbs and features, like average people as seen in a funhouse mirror - elegant tall faces, willowy limbs and digits. All of them had braided black hair past their waists and a slightly beige hue to their pale skin.

One of the women lifted her head from the throat of her quarry to look at us, and I was surprised by the fact that I did not feel physically queasy. Apparently that was a sensation vampires did not experience, because the dead men were one of the most disturbing things I'd personally laid eyes on. Harry Clearwater's mangled body was in the same ballpark. Actually, he'd been torn up worse, whereas these men were missing most of their necks but otherwise intact. But *Harry* was walking around healthy as a horse, and the loggers never would again. I found it unhelpful to speculate that they had been killing

endangered species. Endangered species, however photogenic, did not *think*. Their deaths did not warrant vengeance. Even if they did, that had not been the motive.

Edward noticed my discomfort and put his arm around me. The woman who was looking at us said, "Edward Cullen. How surprising to see you." She spoke English, although it was accented - my guess was that she didn't practice the language often. "And I take it that you have found a mate."

"This is Bella," said Edward, nodding. "Bella, this is Zafrina, and that is Senna and that's Kachiri." He pointed out the two who'd ignored our approach.

I attempted to smile, and succeeded, although I kept looking at the corpses. Kachiri finished hers and looked over her shoulder at us, and then Senna followed suit.

The men were already dead and couldn't get deader, and I did need to know if I could handle blood... I took a small breath.

It was about ten or twenty times worse than when the blood was neatly contained in a human; my throat instantly combusted, praying for drink. Venom gushed into my mouth. I summoned the instinct to fear the three women, identifying the dead as *their* prey which I couldn't safely take, and held very, very still, caught between the terror I was using and the thirst I'd invited. Edward's arm, still around my shoulders, squeezed. I didn't know if I would have been able to leave the blood unconsumed if it hadn't belonged to the Amazons. Rational thought wasn't efficacious against the thirst; the best I could do was pit one drive against another, fearing for my life at the hands of the coven if I drank the blood that the pain in my throat told me I *needed*.

I swallowed the venom, and it was instantly replaced; it didn't matter that I'd stopped breathing. I closed my eyes and turned towards Edward, who wrapped his arms around me comfortingly. "I'm sorry," he said to the Amazons. "She's very controlled for a newborn, but hasn't been near human blood before. Please excuse her."

I had been *near* human blood before, but this was faster to explain, and anyway, I'd known not to inhale near Harry while the blood was fresh... and those men were dead, and our *friends* the Amazon coven had killed them... and even if the loggers had been driving some tree extinct, they didn't deserve to die... *and they smelled so good* and I wanted to fight Kachiri for her dead man and suck out whatever drops were left in his veins and cool the burning in my throat but I thought she might kill me if I tried and *I* didn't deserve to die either -

Edward said, "It looks like you've finished eating. If you could dispose of the leftovers, it would be easier for us to talk to you; we have some questions."

"Very well," said Zafrina, agreeably enough, and I heard the three women picking up their respective beverage containers and racing off into the forest with them. I didn't know what they were going to do to cover up their involvement in the deaths; I didn't think I'd like it if I got the answer. That didn't keep my brain from wildly speculating.

Drop the bodies into piranha-infested waters? That would probably work well. Fling them into some slash-and-burn farm that was in the middle of the "burn" phase? Risky... I was so parched. I wished I'd brought a bottle of water. I wanted blood. The jaguar had been too long ago. My throat smoldered.

They came back after about thirty seconds. "We can go somewhere else, if that would be more comfortable for your Bella," offered either Senna or Kachiri; I hadn't heard either speak and wasn't looking, still burying my face in Edward's shirt. I felt him nod, and he picked me up, accurately judging me too affected by the blood and the murder to want to move around under my own power. I might just take off and find someone full of blood that smelled *that good* and make the burning stop.

Edward followed the coven through the forest with me in his arms. I opened my eyes and watched plants whiz by, then closed them again. Eventually we'd arrived at the Amazons' venue of choice. It was a section of rainforest, much like any other.

"Bella, there's none of the scent here," Edward murmured to me. "You can breathe."

I breathed again, and set my feet on the ground, where they held me up quite satisfactorily in spite of my ongoing distress. No one seemed to expect me to talk, which was good. "What did you visit us about, then?" asked Zafrina.

Edward related the story of what he'd learned after our honeymoon had been cut short from the Ticuna Indian woman who'd heard of half vampires. "Bella had some eggs taken from her before she turned," he told them. Then he had to explain what eggs were to the scientifically uninitiated coven. "The upshot is that if half-vampires are possible, a human woman could bear a child that is both mine and Bella's," he concluded.

"I've never heard of this truly happening," said Zafrina skeptically. "Of course there are stories, but there are stories about anything and everything; only a handful are true."

"It may be a fruitless search," acknowledged Edward. "We're prepared to devote some time to investigating anyway. We know the Ticuna have legends about half-vampires; who else might know something?"

Zafrina listed a half-dozen tribes; Kachiri chimed in with a few more, and I concluded that it was her voice that had offered the change of location. Senna was quite silent. Zafrina remarked, after about ten peoples with half-vampire stories had been suggested, "It surprises me that you, golden-eyed still, would let a human die to get your child."

"No," I said at once. "Not if it will kill her. We want to find out if there's a way she could live through it."

"Ah, she speaks," said Kachiri. "But the stories never say the mother lives."

"But the stories are old," I said. "Medicine has gotten much better. Forty years ago, my eggs couldn't have been harvested as they were. Perhaps the last half-vampire born is

two or three hundred years old, and his or her mother could have been saved with something that was invented since then. We only need to find out what killed her to make a good guess about that."

"If she existed at all," said Zafrina.

"As I said," said Edward, "it may turn out that we're looking for something that isn't there. But we want to try. Are there vampires that live closer to the tribes you mentioned, who might talk to us and might know something more concrete?"

Kachiri gave the usual stomping grounds of two vampires, both of whom traveled alone and would be therefore unlikely to attack the pair of us, although she didn't vouch for their helpfulness, and remarked that she and her coven had only met each briefly. They'd run into each other, come to an agreement on their respective territories, and then never noticeably encroached again.

They had nothing else useful to tell us, so Edward courteously caught them up on the latest Cullen family news and then excused us.

I fought the mental image of those dead men into the farthest recesses of my mind, and followed him as he took off at a run through the rainforest.

One would expect, even given no detailed information, that it would be very difficult and time-consuming to find nomadic vampires one has never met who are not trying to be easy to find in a continent as large as South America. One would be absolutely correct. We tromped around the suggested locations for almost three weeks. During this time, Edward filled in the large gaps in my Spanish, so I could get along in the non-Brazil countries. We went sniffing in uninhabited areas for vampire scents and passed through population centers for Edward to catch thoughts of suspicious disappearances.

Finally, we ran into a vampire who could have been one of those Kachiri described, in the middle of the Chilean Andes.

She was a small, nervous-looking woman with a long black braid and the same off-white tinge to her skin that seemed common to vampires made of non-white humans. We caught just a glimpse of her from a distance before she disappeared over a mountain, apparently spooked.

"Did you get her name?" I asked Edward as we followed the path she'd taken over the rocks.

"No," he said. "If I keep her in range it's sure to come up..." He ranged a little ahead of me, pitting his speed against the other vampire's familiarity with the territory and head start. "Huilen!" he shouted, after a few seconds. That was presumably her name; he continued in Spanish. "Huilen, we don't want to hurt you! We just want to talk!"

She paused, clinging to a mountain peak, ready to escape if we made any threatening moves. I caught up to Edward.

"Please talk to us," I called in the same language. Since she'd stopped, I thought she probably knew Spanish.

"How do you know my name?" she demanded in a high, clear voice that carried easily through the mountain air.

"Come talk to us and we'll explain," I replied.

"I can hear you from here," she said.

"You'll run away again as soon as you aren't curious anymore," I retorted. "Please come here. We won't hurt you."

Huilen crept down the mountain cautiously; Edward and I held still. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Edward," he said, "and this is my wife Bella."

"And how do you know my name?" she asked again. Edward explained his ability, which made Huilen even more nervous, although she didn't run away again. "What do you *want*?" she said when he'd finished accounting for his knowledge.

"We're trying to find out if half-vampires exist," I said.

Huilen stared at us, and then Edward said abruptly, "Who was that?"

She hissed, and turned to run, but Edward chased her; I followed, but Huilen was scrambling over the mountains with practiced efficiency and Edward was charging after her very fast, so it was all I could do to keep them in hearing distance. "Huilen, wait!" pleaded Edward. "We don't want to do you *or* him any harm! Please!"

She didn't answer him, just continued to clamber over the terrain at high speed. I wondered what Edward would do with her if he caught her. I saw them going diagonally over a slope off to my left, and I pushed off from the ground with all four limbs, leaving gouges in the rock and hurtling towards them. I landed in front of Huilen and she veered right, but the course correction was enough to let Edward get around and cut her off. She stopped again and shrank into herself, making a small noise.

"Huilen, we don't want to hurt you, or... Nahuel? Nahuel. But it's important to us to find out about half-vampires," said Edward. "Why are you so afraid?"

"Your eyes," she murmured. "They're - what are you?"

Patiently - whether because he was truly patient or because Huilen's thoughts were providing satisfactory information - Edward explained that we *were* vampires, but did not

eat humans. Huilen seemed only a little surprised by our animal diet, although it struck her as odd that this would affect eye color.

"Why do you want to know about the demon's children?" asked Huilen harshly. The way she said it, it was as though she had some specific demon in mind, and specific children.

"When I was human," I said, approaching, "eggs were taken from me. We have a human friend who has agreed to bear my child, but we want to know if the child could be Edward's too."

"Your *friend* will die," spat Huilen.

"We would like to meet your nephew, Huilen," murmured Edward gently. "And hear the whole of your story."

Huilen's nephew Nahuel was definitely not a vampire. His skin was a richly saturated brown, dark and warm, and his eyes the same. He wore his hair like his aunt's, braided, but it was a bit shorter. He had vampirically perfect symmetry, and was quite beautiful, but he didn't move *quite* so gracefully, and while I didn't see him run or lift weights, my estimation was that he would not be *quite* so fast or strong either. But it was close.

The real giveaway was the heartbeat. Nahuel's heart thrummed at a speed I'd never heard a human's manage, although it was slower than mine or Harry's had been at the final moments of our turnings. He was also warm, about the same temperature as a werewolf, and smelled somewhere between human and vampire - not like food, but pleasant.

He lived in a tiny house high on a mountain, which would be difficult for humans to access but not impossible. It was not too far from there to the city of Santiago de Chile, whence the vampire who went by "Santiago" apparently hailed.

Huilen didn't live with Nahuel anymore, although she had raised him and visited frequently. "My sister is dead, of course," she explained, sounding angry. "She was so pretty. Our parents named her Pire, for the snow on the mountains. But she was *too* pretty, and the *Libishomen* wanted her for himself." I assumed the unfamiliar word was a legendary term for vampire. "She told me in confidence that an angel had taken her for his lover and I knew it was no angel - she was covered in bruises, I suppose he didn't take any care with her. I warned her, as if the injuries weren't warnings themselves, but she didn't listen - like she'd been bewitched. And she told me she was carrying his child."

"This was how long ago?" asked Edward, studying Nahuel's youthful, lovely features. The half-vampire blinked back at him mildly.

"A hundred and fifty years, give or take," supplied Nahuel. His voice was clear and gentle. "I grew very fast, but stopped when I was seven. Haven't noticed any change

since."

"Amazing," Edward murmured. "Do go on," he added to Huilen.

"I knew everyone, even our parents, would want the child dead and Pire with him, if she were found to be carrying the demon's spawn, and I couldn't lose her," explained Huilen. "I went with her into the jungle, I hunted animals for her and she drank their blood ravenously, and she was still weak and her child hurt her from the inside, breaking bones. I thought perhaps if I nursed her well enough she could live, and then the demon's child could be destroyed without harming her." Nahuel didn't have any visible reaction to this description of his fetal self.

"But Pire died anyway?" I murmured.

Huilen nodded. "She did. She lost so much blood, and was so weakened to make him grow so quickly, and he had broken so many of her bones. But she loved her child. She named him Nahuel - after the jungle cat - and her dying wish was that I care for her son. And I told her I would. But after he ripped his way out, through the hard shell that had grown around him in her womb, and I lifted her from her body, he bit me. I crawled into the jungle, and thought I would die. When I was finished turning, he was sleeping, curled up beside me."

"So you're venomous," Edward said, looking back to Nahuel. "And you sleep."

"I do, and I am," confirmed Nahuel. "My sisters have no venom, but I do not know if that is due to gender or to chance."

"You have *sisters*," exclaimed Edward.

"Three," said Nahuel, "as of seventeen years ago. The other two are older than me. But their mothers died as well. My father considers himself a scientist, and thinks he's breeding a master race; I'm told that more of his experiments have died in... attempting to conceive... or during their pregnancies, than have managed to bring to term. My sisters travel with him, but I already had Huilen for family, and was not interested in going with him when he came looking for me several years after my mother's death."

Edward nodded, crestfallen at the implied death toll. It yielded a pessimistic prognosis for an attempt at our own half-vampire child. I took his hand and folded it in mine. Seventeen years previously, medicine had been fairly modern. If Nahuel's father had had any interest at all in keeping the newest sister's mother alive, and it was the sort of thing that was reliably doable with 2005 technology, it could most likely have been managed then. And Joham was a vampire, and could have turned the mothers if that would have saved them and he'd wanted them alive. Maybe he didn't care, but he wasn't there to ask.

I asked, but Nahuel couldn't speculate as to how much care the recent crop of "attempts" had gotten; Pire had been abandoned altogether once pregnant, but that might or might not have been a special situation, as she was with Huilen instead of isolated.

Nahuel rarely had any contact with his father, whose name was Joham but whose location and contact information were unknown.

The three sisters were from various parts of the world - one Aboriginal Australian, one Swiss, one Korean. Nahuel had heard of failures from Mexico, Iceland, Ghana, Nigeria, China, Tibet, India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Russia, and didn't think that Joham and the sisters had bothered to mention *all* such deaths. So Joham clearly had no geographical pattern that we could use to predict his movements. There was no realistic hope of finding him and getting more information before Aro came to check up on Gianna.

We quizzed Nahuel a little more on his biology, just out of some masochistic interest in knowing what could have been. He obliged us readily enough. He was not as strong, fast, tough, sensorily gifted, precise in movement, roomy-minded, or possessed of perfect recall as a vampire. In physical power, he was behind an average vampire by the same amount that a vampire was behind a newborn; it was similar for the other physical abilities. His mind had space in proportion to his senses and capacities, as ours did. He could remember anything he *chose* to remember and might or might not forget things otherwise.

I winced when he remarked casually that he could survive on either human food or blood - human or animal - but found his aunt's diet the most pleasant. Huilen's eyes (of course) were murderous burgundy.

Nahuel sounded like he was acting on a much milder preference than her, though, somewhere between a human's "I really enjoy bacon, and I don't like tofu at all" and a vampire's "only human blood will quench my desperate, maddening thirst". I was mildly repulsed, which he appeared to notice.

I debated with myself whether I ought to try to convert the pair of them, or at least Nahuel. It felt very *awkward* - they hadn't expressed the interest that Maggie had. Part of me thought that it would be ungrateful and rude of me to have badgered Huilen into taking us to her nephew's home and dragged a painful story out of them, only to then disapprove of their dietary habits. Part of me thought something along the lines of, *people are dying, if there's any chance you can stop it then you must tolerate arbitrary amounts of awkwardness because there is no embarrassment you can feel that it's worth someone's life to avoid.*

While Edward accumulated information about Nahuel's eldest sister's witchcraft (she could divert notice away from herself, apparently - becoming not invisible, but uninteresting), I let these parts of myself fight it out. If what I really wanted to do was minimize death, I ought to kill Huilen then and there. Even if I convinced her to become a vegetarian, she was not overwhelmingly likely to go on forever without ever messing up.

And she could be killed, if I attacked. If it came down to it, however insane he thought I was being in my assault, Edward would be on my side. Just as Irina would have been on Laurent's against her own sisters if they'd kicked up a fuss about his killings.

Edward's mindreading and my newborn strength made the fight almost risk-free on our end, even if Nahuel was factored in. Neither the hybrid nor Huilen was any sort of witch, and she was small and he was weak and slow compared to us.

But I didn't want to kill her. That seemed like an incorrect thing to do.

I thought about it, and decided that this wasn't *just* a matter of wanting to keep my hands clean of death. I had no queasiness about the mental image of personally destroying, say, Aro, in the likely event that this proved necessary. I could probably even bring myself to execute his mate, since she'd been in one of the best possible positions to affect the direction of the Volturi out of anyone save the three rulers themselves, and had done nothing. (And because if I had to kill Aro, it would amount to a mercy killing to send his wife after him.)

But Huilen was, incredibly, frustratingly, not an *evil woman*, even if she'd killed a hundred people or more in every one of the hundred and fifty years she'd been a vampire. *Evil* women did not adhere to the dying wishes of their sisters, from across the memory-thinning wall of turning, to bring up their nephews. An *evil* Huilen would have strangled the sleeping oxygen-dependent baby who'd curled up beside her while she turned. Or she wouldn't have taken Pire into the jungle and helped her in the first place - she'd have let their village kill her sister and gestating nephew, washing her hands of the mess.

If she really wasn't evil, though, she shouldn't be *murdering people*. Huilen's death would be dreadful, but her victims weren't evil *either*.

Damn the awkwardness, full speed ahead.

There was a lull in the conversation after Edward established that Nahuel had spent one month in the womb from conception to messy, deadly birth. Huilen was grimacing again, displaying clear misery over her sister's loss.

"It's strange to me," I said quietly, "that you feel so strongly about Pire's death, but you both kill humans for food."

"*She was my sister*," growled Huilen.

I held up my hands, palms forward, in a calming gesture. "I understand. I would feel more strongly about it if one of my family were killed than if it were only a stranger, too. But of course strangers tend to have families too." It was difficult to restrain my flippancy. I would really need to look into that and find a way to force myself to be serious, if I were going to make any kind of habit out of vegetarian evangelism. "Huilen, I understand it's not common knowledge that full vampires can live on animal blood - but Nahuel, if you *know* that *you* can eat animal blood or even humans' food..."

"I can; that doesn't mean I like it," he said.

"Maybe you could rob blood banks or something," I said. My family didn't do this (or even legally buy blood, which doctors such as Carlisle could do) because drinking *any*

human blood would make it harder to resist killing for more. It would be the equivalent of an alcoholic keeping beer in the fridge to make it less likely that he'd rob a liquor store if he got a craving.

But it might work differently for a half-vampire (he'd tried animal blood and human food long enough to know that they sustained him, for one thing, which I didn't think vampires had a history of doing on their own save Carlisle). And Huilen was *already* killing people. If they started drinking blood without murdering to get it, they might develop opinions of themselves that were more consistent with vegetarian diets, and move in that direction on their own. Maybe.

Or at least they wouldn't be *first* up against the wall when the revolution came. They'd have a little warning.

Nahuel looked vaguely interested by the suggestion, as though he might try it the way he'd tried other nutritional regimens; Huilen, less so. I let the conversation drift away, frowning to myself.

We visited with the hybrid coven for a few more hours, picking up minutiae we couldn't use about Nahuel and sharing trivia about ourselves. Edward seemed inclined to count them among our non-vegetarian friends as we departed. This was reasonable enough, considering that "non-vegetarian" wasn't a disqualifying feature. It seemed to make him feel better about having learned that Gianna couldn't hope to live through a half-vampire pregnancy.

I let Edward continue to teach me to be a polyglot as we went to the nearest airport, but my mind wasn't on linguistics. I was thinking about death.

It had to go.

"It's a reasonable assumption that Joham wasn't trying to keep the women alive," Edward said tentatively, during the flight to Norway. "If he's trying to breed a master race, he could consider it a sign of bad genes or something, if one doesn't survive..."

"Possibly," I said. "Maybe even probably. If it mattered to him *that* much that they were dying, he would have called off the "experiment" hundreds of years ago. But we don't know how to find him and check. We can *stall* for a few months, and see if he visits Nahuel in the available window of leeway and is willing to talk to us. But we can't tell Gianna we want her to carry a kind of baby that no one has ever lived through carrying unless we have some *good* information that says *she* will be okay."

"You're right," sighed Edward.

"I think it's safe to delay until January, maybe even February," I said, patting his

arm. "Just in case. Maybe you could look for him without me along, so Alice could be of more help?" Texts and e-mails from Rachel were frequent enough, and apparently affected my decisions enough, that there were still irregular blank spots in my future that Alice couldn't see. She'd been unable to provide advance directions regarding our hunt through South America, or it wouldn't have taken us half of August and the first week of September to conduct the search.

"Maybe," he said, although he didn't sound very hopeful.

I was tempted to say something about how being a vampire was better anyway, and a human child could turn into a vampire adult one day where a hybrid most likely couldn't and vampires had various advantages over half-vampires. That was just sour grapes. Edward had wanted - and I had wanted - *our* baby. Of course we'd love the stranger's child. But it wasn't the *better* outcome. Half-vampires weren't *deficient* in some vitally important way. So what if I could beat Nahuel up if I needed to - he was still unaging, still stronger and faster and smarter than a human, and there were hints that he didn't have the vampire struggle with blood, which was an advantage. Besides, half-vampires could be witches like the eldest sister, and good witchcraft could balance any losses in other areas.

So instead of inventing that reassurance I leaned against Edward, exchanging comfort that didn't rely on rationalizations.

Maggie

When we arrived back in Norway, Gianna's egg-harvesting surgery had been and gone; hers were in the freezer next to mine. I went up to one of the computers in the bank of shared ones, rather than running to my cottage to boot up my laptop. I had another heap of e-mails from my parents and Rachel, and one reply from Angela saying she'd relayed my news to everyone and they all wished me well.

Rachel had sent an e-mail that was very depressing. Emily and Leah had gotten into a fight. This was all it had taken to push Emily teetering over the edge of the fence she'd been sitting regarding Sam. She ran straight to his arms, leaving Claire in an eager Quil's care for a couple of days. (Claire had spent one week home with her parents before being farmed out to her Aunt Emily again; this hiatus had made Quil very miserable but didn't appear to do him physical harm, and he perked up again when she returned.)

Leah was enraged. She picked fights with anyone and everyone - her brother, often, but everyone in the pack had gotten into at least one tussle with her except Rachel (who could order her to stand down) and Sam. Fast healing prevented this from being too much of a danger, but didn't make the doubly betrayed Leah more pleasant to be around. When Sam went wolf, she de-wolfed. At all costs she avoided sharing his thoughts. She stayed otherwise isolated from everyone except her mother, who was undergoing a loosely comparable distress.

Rachel had nominated Leah to test the pack's range, and Leah had run all the way to Canada (but not near Denali, thankfully). There was no noticeable delay, static, or loss of fidelity to the telepathy. Moving away wouldn't free her from the torment. Even if she scrupulously avoided direct mental contact with Sam, she couldn't help but get it secondhand from the others in the pack.

I thanked Rachel to keep me posted and reminded her to let me know if she or the pack needed anything. I couldn't think of anything helpful to do about the Leah/Sam/Emily mess except to feel vaguely guilty. At least with the evidence stacking up that only male wolves could imprint, Becky's marriage was safe - unless the other accumulated stresses of activation and the move and her husband's departure from his career fractured it themselves.

I wrote my obligatory replies to my parents, but had no new European countries to tell them about; I told them we were in Norway and in the process of deciding where to go next. I confirmed for Charlie that I didn't plan to go back to Forks - or for that matter the United States - and attend high school in the new school year.

Inbox unburied, I scanned my mental list of projects. I figured it was a fine time to start building an immunity to Jasper, to see if I could expand my power that way. I closed my eyes and tried to shift my thinking.

I'd been *told* that he operated on a physical level. Breathing, pulse rate, maybe hormones. But he could work equally well on vampires and humans. (He tended to get

better *results* from humans, but that was because their emotions were weaker and more malleable, not because he worked extra-forcefully on them.) Vampires had no pulses. Vampires could quit breathing at any time. I hadn't found either of these things to be major components in my experience of emotions. If we had hormones at all, it wasn't clear how they'd work - with no bloodstream to carry them, what would make them work?

From what I'd been told, Jasper didn't work *overtly* on any of these physical signals, either - he didn't say to himself "now I will calm this target's heart rate" or "more dopamine is called for here". He sensed and manipulated emotions *directly*. While he thought of it as *functioning* on a physical level, that wasn't how he interacted with his own power.

So it was rather strange that I wouldn't be immune to him to start with. It was probably a very borderline thing, and the very unconsciousness of what I did was likely working against me. Perhaps if I just concentrated...

My emotions are part of my mind, I thought. As much as my conscious thoughts, which Edward cannot hear and Aro cannot read. As much as my sensory experience, which Jane and Alec cannot alter. As much as my status as a person, which Harry cannot detect. Considerably more than my electrical systems, which Kate cannot overload.

I repeated this to myself several times, and then the door burst open. I opened my eyes, and a horrified Jasper was standing at the threshold.

He was looking at me rather like Harry had - like something about me was *wrong*.

"Did it work?" I asked mildly.

"Bella, what in the hell did you do?" demanded Jasper. Edward appeared behind him and shoved past to stand between us, and this was a little alarming, because it seemed to indicate that there might be some danger to me *from Jasper*, which Edward had heard.

"Well," I said, flicking my gaze between Jasper and Edward, "it didn't make *sense* that you could detect my emotions, so I just... thought about that for a while."

Jasper was looking at me like I was some kind of grotesque vampire-shaped robot occupying the uncanny valley of personhood. "I can't feel *anything* from you anymore," he almost gagged. "It's like you're a hole in the air."

"I'm sorry if it makes me hard to be around..." I was looking at Jasper's scars. He looked very, very scary when he was mad. To have that many scars, a lot of vampires had tried and failed to kill him - the same number that must have died, or nearly, in the attempt.

"Turn it off," Jasper demanded.

"I'm not sure if I can," I said honestly.

"Jasper, *calm down*," said Edward in a soft, dangerous voice.

"It was bad enough when it was only you, Edward!" exclaimed Jasper. "Don't think I've forgotten how much that infuriated you - and then Alice started losing her - and now I can't get one *hint* of emotion off her - we rely on our powers to keep ourselves *safe*!"

I was tempted to make some snide remark about how my power was doing a great job of keeping *me* safe, but I didn't actually feel that way; sure, Jasper couldn't magically detect my feelings anymore, but he hadn't been a danger to me before, and now he well might be. I kept my mouth shut and let Edward handle it.

"This is *Bella*," Edward reminded Jasper in a level, cool voice, still interposing himself between us. "She is my *wife*, she is *your* sister, you don't need to keep *tabs* on her or be able to manipulate her emotions to defend us. She is *one of us*."

"She's still a newborn," said Jasper, but he was grasping at straws.

"She's no ordinary newborn, you *know* that," said Edward forcefully. "Calm. Down. Now."

Jasper snarled. Where was Alice? Why wasn't she there, reining in her husband? He listened to her - was Rachel about to e-mail again, was I blacking out the entire room? I darted my hand out and quit the program; neither Jasper nor Edward was facing in a direction that would have let them see my mail, but it would have appeared in my peripheral vision. Neither reacted noticeably to the action.

Sure enough, a tense four seconds later, Alice popped up behind Jasper. "Jazz," she said reproachfully, touching his arm.

He relaxed marginally, but didn't look at her. "Turn it off," he said again, hissing under the words.

"I don't know if I can," I repeated.

"Try," insisted Jasper.

I braced myself, and shook my head.

Even Alice looked a little surprised at that, although Edward seemed to have expected it. "Why?" asked Jasper tightly. "Bella, I can't even - it's like you're a *robot* or something, I'm not getting flat affect or something neutral like that, there's just *nothing*. You disappeared."

"I understand," I said, quiet. "But I'm trying to *expand* my shield, not diminish it. Besides," I added cautiously, "would you believe me if I tried, and then told you I

couldn't?"

Jasper growled at me, and Edward's hands clenched. Alice danced from toe to toe, looking nervous. "Jazz, honey," she said, tugging on Jasper's arm. "This isn't worth a fight."

He took one long step backwards, then turned away and let Alice lead him down the stairs and out of the house. Edward didn't relax until a second after I couldn't hear them anymore. Then most of the tension drained out of him and he turned towards me, dropping down on one knee so he could hug me where I was sitting at the computer.

"I didn't realize he'd react like that," I murmured, winding my arms around Edward.

"I didn't either," Edward said. "Or I would have warned you when you first mentioned it. But I should have guessed. He's very sensitive to the climate of emotion around him, and he's never found anyone he couldn't get a signal from... some people are more or less resistant to the active half of his power, and he might have tolerated it better if it were just that, but there's no variation save for you with the passive half."

"It's like Harry," I said, "but worse - I don't *live* with Harry."

Edward stood up and kissed the top of my head. "You don't technically live with Jasper, either. We have our own house."

I nodded and got to my feet. "Do you think he'll get used to it?" I asked, going with Edward out of the computer room and downstairs to head to our cottage.

"I think so," he soothed. "Alice will help. She was frightened when you first blanked out of her visions, but she took it much better than Jasper is after she confirmed that you were safe."

"But she can still see me sometimes," I said.

"That's true," said Edward, a little troubled. "I don't understand why that should be... everyone else you block, you block consistently."

"Hm," I said. If I pretended to speculate, I might give something away about the real reason behind Alice's spotty vision. I could have tried to add her to my immunities, but she was far too useful - if she could never see me at all, I lost a huge well of information. And I really *didn't* know if I could turn my shield, or part of it, off.

Edward speculated for me. "I suppose only some visions you feature in heavily involve your thinking and its consequences," he said. "I haven't noticed a pattern like that in what Alice does and doesn't see, but then, I can't tell what you're thinking."

I shrugged. Then my phone rang.

"Hi, Bella!" said a cheery, Irish-accented voice when I answered the phone.

"Maggie?" I asked, bewildered.

"That's me! I've been trying to call you for a week now!"

"I was in a place with lousy reception," I said. The jungle was nothing if not that. I'd been able to keep my phone charged via occasional stops in cities with publicly available electrical outlets, but that didn't mean anyone had been able to actually reach me without leaving a message.

"I would have called Carlisle or somebody instead but I figured if you weren't answering there was probably some stuff up with your coven," she said.

"It was just me and Edward who were away; everyone else was home," I said. "But we're all here now. What is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Well," Maggie said, "I want to visit."

I blinked, and Edward, who could hear both sides of the conversation easily enough, did too.

"You want to visit?" I said. I didn't think I'd misheard, but it was a hard convention to break: when astonished, confirm astonishing fact.

"Yeah!" said Maggie brightly. "Just me, not Siobhan and Liam."

"Uh, Maggie, we really can't have people going missing near where we live," I said.

"No, that's fine," she said. "I ate a badger last week, and I think I've got the hang of it."

"It's not quite that simple," I said. "One badger, when you've been eating humans for more than a century, doesn't mean you're a vegetarian overnight." Truthfully, I thought she was practiced enough to cover her hunting even if she went back to eating humans. But Gianna was still living with the family.

"Well, I won't hunt any humans in *your territory*, anyway," said Maggie. "That's just obvious. I can go to Sweden or something when I'm hungry if I decide animals aren't for me. Which I guess they might not be, I mean, badger blood, ick, but it wasn't *that* bad and it definitely wasn't my mate, right?"

"Right," I said dubiously. "Um, well, I can't really *stop* you from visiting, but... uh... Maggie, I have a... a pet human." I didn't know how else to summarize the situation believably to someone who thought of humans the way Maggie appeared to. "You can't eat her. I don't know if I can trust you around her."

"You have a *pet human*?" asked Maggie, squealing over this quaintness the way I'd expect Renée to exclaim about someone having a sugar glider or a domesticated fox.

"She's not really a *pet*, but she lives here and Aro basically gave her to me and I'm not allowed to let her go, and... it's a really long story," I said. "But she is *absolutely not for eating*, and I don't know whether I can expect you to *absolutely not eat her*."

"I will *absolutely not eat her*," swore Maggie. "Up till the badger I was doing really well at the only eating men thing, too! It's like, women don't even look like food anymore, you know what I mean?" She sounded so pleased with herself. "It's two whole layers of not eating your human. So I'm not going to hurt your pet, Bella, it's okay!"

"All right," I said, shrugging. I'd give Ilario a heads up, but he practically supervised Gianna all the time anyway; he wouldn't be significantly inconvenienced by serving as her bodyguard. "I'll let the others know that you're planning to visit, then."

"See you soon, Bella!" said Maggie.

I hung up the phone. "That," I said, "is going to be interesting."

Ilario was on high alert the moment I told him Maggie was coming. He bristled when I said that I'd described Gianna as my "pet human", although Gianna herself didn't seem that bothered - it was a step up from the Volturi, at any rate. But Ilario said he'd keep a close eye on Gianna and make sure Maggie didn't try to eat her.

"If," I said, "something does happen - I don't think it will, Ilario, but *if* - you have *got* to hold your breath. I got a whiff of human blood in the Amazon and it was... I wasn't ready for it. You're not ready for it now. Fight Maggie off of Gianna if you have to until someone comes to help, but *don't breathe*." He accepted this instruction solemnly.

Edward found Jasper and Alice for me and told them, giving the empath some more time away from my unsettlingly non-emotional presence. I informed Carlisle, Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett. Carlisle seemed impressed that I'd gotten a non-vegetarian to go so far as to try eating an animal, although I wasn't sure how much of it was my own doing and how much of it was Maggie's native curiosity. Emmett was disappointed that Maggie was coming alone, as she wasn't as interesting a partner for sparring as Siobhan.

Maggie arrived on a Tuesday, having swum most of the way and climbed up the nearest fjord. Her curls were still wet when she found our house. Rosalie was up on the roof and the first to see her coming, but everyone knew by the time she entered the yard, and I was waiting to greet her; Ilario was with Gianna, indoors.

"Hi, Bella!" said Maggie with a great big smile. Her eyes were a bright gold, as expected if she hadn't eaten any humans since her badger. She'd probably eaten an animal more recently, though, as the gold was quite light and not darkened with hunger - so it was possible it had gone badger, human, some other animal. There was no way for me to

be sure.

"Hi, Maggie," I replied. "Uh, welcome to our home."

"This is a big house," she remarked. "I guess there are a whole lot of you. Does your pet live here or do you put her someplace else?" She peered around with more physical movement than was really necessary, turning her head to look at things that she could have seen peripherally and standing on her toes for negligible improvements in vantage point. It made her look exciteable, maybe a few years younger than she physically was. (When she held still and I corrected for vampirism, I guessed she'd been twenty-five when turned.)

"She lives in this house," I said. "Edward and I actually have our own cottage, that way." I waved in the relevant direction. "Everybody else is based here, including Gianna. That's her name."

"Gi-an-na," said Maggie, tasting the word. "Pretty. I want to hear your long story about how you got a pet human! It's so weird, I've never heard of anybody keeping one before."

I was beginning to regret that description very much. "She's really not a *pet*," I said. "It's just that I'll be in trouble with the Volturi if she goes off by herself, so she lives here for now."

"I want the story anyway," said Maggie implacably.

I told it to her, although I skimmed on the exact reasoning behind why I'd chosen to designate Gianna as a surrogate mother; better to let that sound to outside parties like a deeply held desire instead of a way to save Gianna's life. I'd cozied up to the idea of having a baby over time, but when I'd first said it, it hadn't been my favorite plan ever - but Maggie didn't have to know that. Even if I wasn't immune to her power, she couldn't detect lies by omission.

The Irish vampire was absolutely tickled by the entire thing. "So cute!" she cried when I'd signaled the conclusion of the explanation.

I decided it was wise to check whether Maggie could tell when I was lying, with something that no one, even my family, would be able to call me on. "She mostly looked scared, not cute, when I told her I was bringing her home," I said. "But once I got her calmed down it took her just twenty minutes to get packed." It had been eighteen, but Gianna hadn't timed it and wouldn't remember that precisely if she had.

Maggie didn't so much as twitch. "That's a long time," she pointed out.

"For a human it's not. I think she left some things behind, she was in such a hurry to get out."

"The Volturi must sure have scared her," cooed Maggie. Like she was talking about

a kitten, who could be soothed with petting. Although I supposed a kitten wouldn't find a vampire's petting to be soothing at all; animals hated being around vampires.

"Yep," I said. "That'll happen when people you can't effectively oppose plot your death."

"I want to meet her," said Maggie decisively.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea..." I began. I hadn't explained about Ilario's fraternal status; as far as Maggie knew our coven consisted of four mated pairs, one miscellaneous newborn of unknown provenance, and one pet Gianna.

"I told you I wasn't going to eat her!" interrupted Maggie, and I gritted my teeth.

"Don't," I said, "interrupt me. That's a good way to seriously annoy me."

"Oh," said Maggie, eyes open very wide. "I'm sorry. But I'm not going to eat her, really. Why else would it be a bad idea?"

"Because Ilario - that's the newborn - probably wouldn't like it. He's very protective of her," I said. "And he knows you are not a lifelong vegetarian. He barely trusts himself around her, and he's never eaten a human since turning back in July."

"Are they mates, or whatever it is when one's a human?" asked Maggie. "Like you and Edward before you turned?"

"No, he's her brother," I said. "He was dying, and she wanted him saved, so we brought him up here and turned him."

"Awww," said Maggie, obviously finding this outrageously adorable. "But she's yours. Aro gave her to you, not him. So I can meet her if you say so, right?"

I dragged a hand through my hair tiredly. "She's not *really* my *pet*," I said. "I don't boss her around or anything."

"Then her brother shouldn't either," said Maggie reasonably. "Why don't you ask *her* if she'll meet me?"

This... I had no ready objection to.

I heard Alice inside, asking Gianna if she wanted to be introduced to Maggie; of course my conversation had been audible to everyone except Gianna herself.

I heard Gianna dithering, and Maggie - fidgeting, swaying, head-turning Maggie - went completely still.

Gianna finally said, "All right, then," and Ilario grumbled and Maggie smiled -

My pet human, closely followed by her brother, walked out the back door -

And Maggie just stared.

Gianna rapidly became self-conscious under Maggie's fixed attention, and blushed, taking a little half step to get behind Ilario. Ilario stared Maggie down, growling in the back of his throat.

Maggie's gaze flicked to Ilario and became a perturbed glare. She leaned to try to see Gianna around him, but he got in her way, and she made a whining noise. Then Maggie whirled to face me.

"I'll fight you for her," she said.

There was a second's silence as everyone processed that. More family exited the house to get a closer look at the proceedings. "Um," I said eloquently. Ilario hissed.

"Or you could just give her to me if you don't want to fight," wheedled Maggie.

"Not wanting to fight is... only part of the problem with me giving her to you," I said. Maggie didn't appear to fill in the blanks herself, so I explained. "I know I used the word 'pet' when I first told you about her, but I really shouldn't have, it was just a shorthand for the long story I *just* told you about why she lives with us. Which story, you'll remember, includes the part where I am not *allowed* to let her leave. Conveniently, she hasn't been inclined to try, but both I *and she* could be in a bad place with the Volturi if they show up and find that I'm not at least sort of supervising her. Even if she actually belonged to me, and I was comfortable doing whatever I wanted with that, there's Ilario." I pointed him out. "He's kind of attached to her. I don't think he likes the idea of you taking possession of his sister much. He probably wouldn't stop Gianna if *she* tried to leave - I'd need to do that myself - but unless she says otherwise he's acting as her protector."

Ilario hissed at Maggie again, confirming this guess.

"But I want her," said Maggie, as though nothing I'd said had sunk in at all.

The entire population of the house was scattered around the lawn at this point, watching things unfold. Edward turned to Alice. "Was I this ridiculous?" he asked her.

"You were worse," said Alice placidly.

"Huh?" said Maggie, looking their way.

Alice just smiled, the picture of innocence; Edward strolled around Ilario and Gianna to stand next to me.

Gianna peeped around Ilario's arm to look at Maggie; predictably, this meant that Maggie could see her too, and they held eye contact for a few seconds. Gianna was mostly confused, green eyes blinking more rapidly than usual; a flush gradually returned to her cheeks. Maggie's hands crept up towards her own face, where they clasped under her chin to accompany an expression that was half enraptured longing and half... anxiety of some kind, maybe just unfamiliarity with the situation. Or she was confused *about* wanting me to give her Gianna, however certain she was on the fact of the matter.

"I don't understand," said Gianna softly.

"You're so *pretty*!" exclaimed Maggie, addressing Gianna directly for the first time. Gianna's blush got darker, and Maggie started shifting her weight from foot to foot, perhaps restraining an urge to rush forward and pick up the object of her interest. She looked back to me. "I'll take good care of her," she pleaded.

Ilario was beginning to look confused himself. He turned his head marginally to be able to see Gianna, a dubious expression on his face. "Refresh my memory," he said slowly, in Italian, "as to how... exactly... *this* works. I *thought* she was trying to get permission to drink your blood, but..."

Gianna shrank away from her brother, taking two steps backward. Maggie didn't seem to understand Italian, but when she saw Gianna leaving the sphere of Ilario's protection, she held out her arms eagerly as though expecting Gianna to run straight to her. She didn't; instead she backed towards Carlisle and Esme, who were close to the house. Ilario didn't move a muscle once she started inching away from him, just stood there looking stunned.

Maggie dropped her arms. "What's going on now?" she asked, sounding lost.

Ilario spun in place and stalked out of the yard, passing me and Edward on his way out. "Look after my sister," he said through gritted teeth as he went.

"I didn't tell him," Gianna said frantically. Rosalie and Emmett had not-so-gently encouraged Maggie to join them for a walk, and Alice and Jasper were looking for Ilario to calm him down, while the rest of us talked to the resident human inside. "It - it honestly didn't seem to matter, I wasn't seeing anyone and wasn't looking, I didn't want to make some kind of huge civil rights issue out of my relationship with my *brother* if I didn't have to - so - he didn't know."

"He was surprised," acknowledged Edward. "I think he'll get over it... but this wasn't the best way for him to find out."

"It's not even as though I had a secret girlfriend all along and he caught us together!" cried Gianna. "I'd never seen Maggie once before today!"

"I don't think Maggie meant to hurt you, sweetheart," soothed Esme. "She didn't

know."

"That said," I put in, "we need to figure out what to do about her. And Gianna, that's mostly up to you."

"But I don't know," said Gianna. "I don't know hardly anything about her - she just showed up - I mean, she's beautiful, of course she is, she's a vampire, but she also talked *about* me while I was standing right there like I was the family dog or something. And she used to eat people, she might do it again..."

"She is new to vegetarianism, and for that matter to thinking of humans as people," said Carlisle gently, "but if anything can keep her on course, you can, Gianna."

"That's a hell of a responsibility to put on her," I said. "Gianna, if Maggie kills people, *she* kills people - not you. She ate her first animal without knowing you existed; if she eats her eight thousandth human *after* knowing you exist, that doesn't make you any more guilty for that death than for the last seven thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine. Or however many." Gianna nodded mutely; Esme patted her on the back with an encouraging smile.

"That said," I went on, "if you want to be with her, or give it a try, or whatever, it still has to be here or at least compatible with me and Edward tagging along - I've had to visit the Volturi without extensive advance planning for it twice now. If I run into them again unexpectedly during the next ten months, I don't want you or me or anybody dying over you moving to Ireland when you're supposedly my "gift" from Aro. It was one thing to leave you behind while we went to South America, surrounded by people the Volturi know are our coven and at our known address; sending you off with Maggie would be something else entirely."

"I understand. I'm not planning to run away," Gianna said. "I've heard them conducting "trials" before... I don't want to be the defendant."

"And I, for one, am going to cast a solid *no* vote on tolerating a non-vegetarian in the family the way the Denalis are putting up with Laurent," I said. "This is not as sticky a situation as that: Gianna's a human and not subject to the same impulses. She won't fly into a rage if something happens to Maggie. Right?" I asked, looking to Gianna. "If I go outside and find that Maggie's kidnapped some Norwegians and is snacking on them and some are still alive and salvageable, it's okay with you if I have to attack her to make her quit?"

Gianna nodded, although she looked a little queasy.

"So... if Gianna decides to "give it a try" with Maggie, you propose that we de facto add Maggie to the family until she slips up?" asked Edward.

"Not "slips up"... anyone can do that. It's awful and we should avoid it. But once it actually happens, then it's not necessarily a great predictor of future behavior in vampires who've already eaten humans, which Maggie has. If she *decides* to eat humans again, then

that's it."

Edward nodded. "The good news is that Maggie is very trustworthy once pinned down to a commitment. Her power didn't come out of nowhere - she has a solid respect for the truth and prides herself on honesty and keeping her promises."

"That's a relief," I said. "But this is all *if* Gianna decides she's up for it. You don't have to, Gianna," I told her. "You're free to accept or reject Maggie - now, or later, or whatever you like. I'm not entirely sure what will happen after you turn if you don't see her once you're a vampire, but at least for now, the ball's in your court - on turning as well, for that matter, although personally I still recommend it unless you *really* don't care for Maggie. But you don't *have* to."

"Thank you, Bella," said Gianna in a low voice.

Edward and I went looking for Maggie. She was still with Emmett and Rosalie, who were standing nearby looking respectively amused and bored while our visitor sat on the edge of a fjord staring dejectedly at the water.

When we approached, Maggie perked up at once and sprang to her feet. "What'd she say? Can I talk to her?"

"She hasn't decided yet," I said levelly.

Maggie actually hopped up and down in frustration. "This isn't fair! It's not supposed to be *complicated*! When Siobhan found Liam she didn't have to work hard to convince him to leave his old coven and even fight them off, let alone to be with her at all! Why'd she have to still be a human? Can't you just turn her and make it simple?"

"Not now, I can't," I said. "She can't carry a baby if she's a vampire, which I already *told you* she has to do if Aro's going to be kept from dealing some extra death. Anyway, that's her own choice too, if she wants to turn. She's liked the idea in the past, but if she decides she doesn't care for *you*, then she might decide against it specifically for that reason."

Maggie threaded her fingers between her brightly orange ringlets and moaned. "But she's supposed to be mine! Why shouldn't she want me? Aren't I nice?"

"That's been my impression, but Gianna's entitled to her own."

Emmett and Rosalie were moving off now that Edward and I were there to chaperone. Maggie flopped onto her back, as though about to make an angel impression in the rock. (I decided to see later if that was something I could do practically or if it would be inefficient.) "I don't know what to do!" she wailed. "I can't just *not have her*, that's not okay at all."

"You might want to ask Alice for help," I suggested. "Edward needed instructions on how to approach me, and that worked out. But even if she gives you guidelines and you follow them all perfectly, I can't *guarantee* you that Gianna will be interested."

"Well, where's Alice, then?" asked Maggie gamely.

"Back at the house, now," said Edward. "She left Jasper and Ilario to talk by themselves."

Maggie ran towards the house, but Edward got in her way. "Gianna hasn't made up her mind yet," he said. "I wouldn't advise you to show up where she is until that's changed. Alice is on her way here."

Maggie pouted, but stomped her way back to the edge of the fjord to wait for Alice. The little spiky-haired vampire arrived a few seconds later, and said, "So, I don't believe we've been properly introduced! I'm Alice, and it's nice to meet you, Maggie."

"Nice to meet you too," said Maggie. "What do I have to do?"

"First of all," said Alice, "don't eat anybody. Gianna is quite forgiving, but that *also* means she'll forgive Bella if you eat someone and Bella kills you, and then where would you be?"

"...Dead, presumably," said Maggie, flicking her eyes in my direction. I actually doubted I could beat Maggie in a one-on-one fight to the death, since she was a lot older and more experienced than I was and that could overwhelm the advantage of newborn strength, but of course I wouldn't be alone if it came to that.

"Right, and then that wouldn't be at all conducive to you and Gianna living happily ever after," said Alice reasonably. "So don't eat anybody. And you really need to work on the thing where you talk about or to Gianna like she's not a person. You've got way more leeway than Edward had when he was trying to court Bella, but it's not infinite. Don't act or talk like Bella owns Gianna. Don't act like the only obstacles to you carrying Gianna over the horizon to have your way with her are Bella or Ilario or any of the rest of us - what Gianna wants has to matter to you too. Get on Ilario's good side if you can or at least make a sincere effort. Gianna cares what he thinks, and he's only going to stay unsettled by the revelation he got today for a few more hours, tops."

Maggie hadn't been present for Gianna's explanation of how her brother had reacted, so I had to explain that when the redheaded vampire protested confusion. Then Alice picked up again with more tips.

"You will have to be *very careful* with her upon being actually allowed to touch her," Alice said. "You haven't had to handle any creature with a heartbeat intending to let it live before, at least since you turned. But you know they're very easy to hurt. Problem is, it actually matters - to you, even - if you hurt Gianna. She's fragile. Don't break her."

"Of course I'd be careful!" cried Maggie.

"In more than half the futures where she decides to give you a chance, she winds up with a broken bone or worse inside a week," said Alice flatly. "In ninety percent of futures where you injure her enough that she bleeds, you kill her." Maggie's jaw dropped. "This isn't a simple matter, Maggie," Alice continued relentlessly. "You can never *stop* being careful. You have to always, *always* pay very close attention and exercise very careful control. *One* slip is enough to damage her. Two in close succession is enough to kill her *at your own hands*."

Maggie whined. "I don't want to hurt her," she whispered.

"Then you have to be careful, constantly, without exception," said Alice. "If you want to pet her hair, you have to make sure you don't crush her skull. If you want to hold her hand, you have to make sure you don't shatter her knuckles. Et cetera. Even if you don't get to the point of injury, you can cause her pain *very* easily, so it's not like handling a flower of a piece of paper or something that will be fine as long as you don't cause any visible damage. You cannot, in a burst of affection, hug her as tight as you possibly can."

Maggie hung her head. "I understand."

"Future's solidifying a bit in favor of her being okay," said Alice. "Not all the way, though. It should go without saying that if you seriously hurt Gianna, Ilario will do his best to kill you and he will have help."

"Well, and he should, if I hurt her!" exclaimed Maggie. "I won't I won't I won't I *won't*."

"That's better," said Alice, and Maggie brightened a little. "I think that's enough *don'ts*. She's going to like it when you sing," Alice supplied with a smug little grin.

Maggie beamed. "I can sing. I can sing all the time if she wants. I know enough songs to fill up a whole year without repeating myself."

"And I foresee cuteness if you let her teach you Italian," Alice said.

Maggie nodded eagerly, waiting for more, but that was apparently it for common threads among Alice's happy visions; the tiny psychic shrugged.

"You can't leave with her," I told Maggie. "If Gianna says she wants you around, Esme's the person to ask about rooming arrangements."

Maggie looked desperately at Alice. "What's she going to *say*?" she squeaked. "I didn't know any of this before, I just looked at her and - and my brain was full of exclamation points. I didn't even know what was going on, let alone what to do about it. I don't think I made a very good first impression. Is she going to want me to go away forever? I don't know if I *can*!" She wrung her hands. "What if she says I have to go away and I can't even do that and then Ilario kills me and then later she's a vampire and it turns

out that she can't ever love anybody but me? Then she'd be alone forever and she'd be sad!"

"And you'd be dead," I added helpfully.

"That too!" said Maggie. "But I don't know how I could just go home to Ireland when she's - she's *right there*."

"Edward, any tips?" I asked, glancing at my husband.

"Well, it took me longer to realize what I was dealing with than it's taken Maggie," he chuckled softly, "and I had a sister to send to intercede with you on my behalf."

"But if you know anything that could help," Maggie pleaded. "I can't think of anything more important than making this work."

He pursed his lips. "When I've had to be away from you," he said, addressing his statement to me but obviously intending that Maggie hear, "what helped me tolerate it was knowing that you were all right. I... didn't do well when I didn't know that." Alice nodded emphatically; I supposed he'd been dramatically out of sorts when I'd been kidnapped.

"I could occasionally call you and let you know Gianna's safe, even if she wants you gone," I told Maggie.

"That would be... better than not..." said Maggie unhappily, apparently reluctant to positively label any state of affairs where Gianna wanted her gone.

Alice and Edward both jerked their heads up simultaneously, and Maggie startled with a small *eep* noise. "She's made up her mind," announced Alice.

Gianna teaching Maggie Italian *was* very cute.

"How do I say, "I love you", in Italian?" Maggie asked Gianna, trying to sound innocent. Gianna was sitting on a sofa with her feet tucked under herself, using one of my textbooks to give structure to the lesson. Maggie was lounging on the floor in front of the couch, gazing up adoringly at an increasingly pink-cheeked Gianna.

Ilario, standing relatively unobtrusive guard in the corner of the room, furrowed his brow uncomfortably while Gianna stammered through the sentence. Maggie ignored him. She just grinned at Gianna and repeated the words.

Maggie was trying to get Gianna to say "you're beautiful" in Italian when I heard Carlisle's phone ringing in his office, and him answering it. Tanya's voice was on the other end. "Carlisle," she said, "Harry's gone."

I was up the stairs in a flash to listen to this conversation. "Gone?" asked Carlisle. "How did that happen?"

"We've been trusting him to hunt on his own, ever since he ran into some human's trail while he was hunting with Eleazar and managed to hold his breath and run," she said. "He's been going on his own most of the time. But he's been gone for almost three days now and isn't answering his phone. We don't know what the matter is - if he's hurt someone and is ashamed to come home, or if he just decided to leave, or - what. Can Alice see?" Tanya asked.

"I'll ask her," Carlisle said, and he brushed past me in the hall to find Alice. She was located in short order, with me following, and he summarized the situation for her.

"I can see him... but not far," murmured Alice. "He's... I guess he hasn't decided something very significant about what he's going to do when he gets into Washington again. He's going south, though."

I went to the room with the computers and e-mailed Rachel.

Rachel took an hour to answer my e-mail. "If you're right about what blanks out your sister's vision, then we have to expect that he's coming here," she agreed in her reply. "I've warned Sue, and the pack. I'm not sure how well he'll do with not attacking us, even if he's been okay with humans, but we're sticking to groups of four and five for the time being and think we can probably pin him if he's hostile. Please come out here as soon as you can to help keep things under control, though. We have to sleep and if we wind up pinning him we run a risk every time we need to change guards."

I wrote back, asking if Sue had appeared to know anything about his approach; the

answer was quick: "I couldn't tell, but it's possible. She refused to be accompanied by wolves as a precautionary measure and wants to go about her business normally."

I sent her another message: "I'm going to buy tickets and I'll get there by tomorrow, but Harry might arrive before me. However, he's been demonstrated safe around humans. I don't think you need to worry about Sue - it's wolves who might be a problem."

I bought tickets. During that process, there was no further substantive content from Rachel, just "see you soon". I logged off, found Edward, dragged him to our cottage, used up the hour and a half that I didn't need to make my flight on time, and then told him, "I need to leave again."

He sighed. "All right."

"Can I ask you to pretend we're going to explore Scandinavia together? I'll be the one to tell Maggie. I tested her earlier; unless she's got an amazing poker face and doesn't care as much about the truth as you say she does, I'm immune to her. I should be back in a few days, and then we can really explore Scandinavia for a little while and I'll have all the right stories to tell. And I'll be able to keep in touch by phone. So you know I'm all right."

Edward nodded. I packed, and he put some things in a suitcase too so he could go running around in parts nonlocal to give me cover. We went to the main house, and distributed the news, with all false statements that Maggie could hear carefully uttered by me and not Edward. I made it clear that I was trusting everyone to keep Maggie from taking Gianna away from the house, and no one contradicted me about the needfulness of this restriction. Then Edward and I went to the garage.

Rosalie had bought me a car, which I'd managed to have no occasion to look at since it had come to reside in our garage. It was dark green, streamlined, and sat low to the ground, but otherwise wasn't the sort of flashy vehicle screaming wealth that most of its neighbors were. However, Edward drove me to the airport in one of his cars instead, kissed me goodbye, and then drove away to explore Scandinavia - alone.

I did not enjoy my flight. Anticipating the loneliness of being without Edward made it kick in faster, apparently. I felt a moment's regret at having ever activated the wolves, or at least at having done it when I had - they'd been unharmed, in fact completely unnoticed, by the Volturi so far. If I hadn't started activating them until later, then my life would be a lot simpler at this time and nobody would have died. Of course, the nature of the threat the Volturi posed to the wolves was such that I couldn't have predicted the timing in advance, and earlier was safer for the tribe - just inconvenient for me.

I didn't bother with a car once I landed, I just ran. I'd looked at enough atlases to find a mostly unpopulated route from memory. I arrived at the reservation in the evening on Friday, where I discovered the tribe in chaos.

I could hear the barking and growling well before I saw anything, but to hear Rachel tell it, scuffles between wolves were not at all uncommon. A combination of emotions running high and reduced consequences due to fast healing meant that *somebody* got scratched up a bit nearly every day, and Alpha orders only did so much to counter wolf tempers. I could tell that there were more than a couple of wolves involved, but fights would vary in scope like everything else.

I was in no way prepared, when I arrived, for the *war* that the wolves were waging amongst themselves.

No one seemed to be actually out to kill. There were drops of wolf blood (mercifully undesirable to me), splattered around on the dirt and vegetation and combatants, but no one had been injured badly enough to be out of commission. I did a quick count: all thirty-two of the giant pack were involved in the fracas. Before I could try to figure out who was on whose side, the wind wafted past me and carried my scent towards their battlefield.

The majority of the skirmish died down as nearly everyone stopped what they were doing to look at me. One nearby wolf lunged to snap at me but checked himself halfway through the attack - or possibly was stopped by Rachel commanding him to leave me be.

Rachel, the only entirely white wolf in a crowd of multicolored furs, shot a dark look at one of the black ones - that would be either Sam, Becky, or a wolf I couldn't recognize by coat - and walked towards me. A wolf with striking ochre fur trotted a few steps into the forest and came back with an outfit for her, from some stash of clothes they kept among the trees. Rachel stalked off behind cover with it, assumed human form, and came back into view a few moments later decently clad. She had grown a *lot*. I was pretty sure she cleared six feet in height, and as she'd said, she looked like she was on her way to the Olympics. And not for figure skating.

"So..." I said. "What's all this, then?"

"It's a very, very long story," Rachel said stiffly.

"I'm immortal," I said.

She laughed once, a bit sharply. "Of course. Okay, so, ballpark, how long would it take you to do some combination of running and swimming between here and Denali?"

I mentally stitched together the various maps I'd looked at and did some quick estimating. "Maybe twelve hours. It's not that densely populated a coast, and if I did it at night... cars are only faster over developed routes where there are highways."

"And you wrote me that this Tanya vamp only bothered to call your father-in-law when Mr. Clearwater had been gone for *three* days, right?" Rachel prodded.

"Right, that's what she said. Why?"

Rachel laughed hollowly. "Yeah, that's about what I thought. I don't think this is the first time Mr. Clearwater's been down this way."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Is somebody hurt? Did he -" Rachel shook her head, and I stopped, tilting my head.

"Don't think he ate anybody," she said. "Or if he did it wasn't anyone we know and nobody's made a fuss over the missing yet. But Mrs. Clearwater... is, uh..." Rachel gritted her teeth. "We *think* she's *pregnant*."

I was fairly dumbfounded by this. "Oh," I said.

"I mean... she *looks* pregnant, and she seems to think she's pregnant, and she's been eating really strangely and acting weird. But it's too fast," fretted Rachel. "Even if he'd visited back in July when you turned him it's *too fast*."

"It wouldn't have had to be July," I said. "A week or two ago would have done it, although you're right that his most recent departure can't be the first."

"Wait, you knew this could happen?" exclaimed Rachel.

"Half-vampires are possible, yes," I said. "Living mothers of half-vampires, as far as I know, are *not*. Like you said - too fast. It doesn't slow down. The entire pregnancy lasts a month, start to finish, and if the mother lives that long she dies when it's birthing time. I have to get my father-in-law - or at least my husband - out here now, and save her while there's still a chance."

"You'll probably have to talk to Mrs. Clearwater about that," said Rachel ruefully. "She's not really cooperative."

"Explain?"

"Before we figured out she was pregnant, we all thought she was maybe *sick*, but she wouldn't go to a doctor - flat refused. Then we figured it out while you were still in transit and told her that you've got doctors in your family and a regular one wouldn't do because we have to be all secret-secret, but a vampire doctor would be fine - and she still flat refused. I knew she wasn't, like, a huge fan of abortion, but she *really* does not want one, one bit. Maybe if you tell her it's going to kill her that'll be another story."

"I'll talk to her," I said. "What were you all fighting about?"

"Whether to force her," said Rachel quietly. "I mean, listen, we didn't know what the hell it was going to turn out to be, it could have been some unstoppable monster or even just like a newborn vampire is supposed to be when it doesn't know to expect turning, something we'd have had to kill anyway - right? And, uh, some of the others wanted to

kill it whether Mrs. Clearwater liked it or not, to be safe."

She paused. "We... figured out how to split the pack. Becky seems to be Alpha of *that* half now. She balked when I Alpha-voiced everybody that Mrs. Clearwater's in charge of her own body, and everybody who agreed with Becky answers to her, now, not me. I can still hear Becky's thoughts and vice-versa, but the non-alphas can only hear within the... sub-pack, plus relays when me and Becky are both wolfed. Anyway, it's kind of a major issue, and we aren't very pacifistic critters at the best of times. So there's been a lot of fighting and you walked in at one of the worst times.

"I'm hoping you can get Mrs. Clearwater to see sense," she continued, "and then it'll just be like we split the pack on purpose, like we were trying to, but if you *can't* get her to see sense, I don't want to have to hold her down while you get your husband to do the doctoring."

"Frankly, I'm in your camp," I said. "It's not an unstoppable monster, and not even as bad as a regular newborn vampire. Might or might not even be venomous. I think Sue'd be a fool to go through with having it, since she'd die. But in so doing she wouldn't be unleashing hellspawn on the world." The black wolf, who Rachel had looked daggers at before, growled. "What do the Clearwater kids think?"

"Leah was on the fence until somebody had an excessively gruesome mental image of what forcing Mrs. Clearwater to have an abortion might look like, and now she's with me. Seth's in my camp too," Rachel said.

I nodded. "Well," I said, "take me to Sue."

Leah and Seth de-wolfed and came along too, following Rachel in silence.

My guess, when I saw Sue, was that she was almost two weeks pregnant - the equivalent of being mid-second-trimester.

Her guess, when she saw me, was apparently that I was a vampire doctor there to strap her to a table and forcibly cut her baby out of her, because she made a very abortive attempt to flee. I supposed I looked different enough that she didn't recognize me personally, and wouldn't know what Rosalie looked like. When she tried to get up, Leah ran over and seized her hands. "Mom, calm down," she said. "Don't hurt yourself."

"I told you no!" Sue cried, but she didn't try to fight Leah - it would have been pointless; the wolves were considerably stronger than humans even without their fur on. "I told you *no*!"

"I'm not a doctor," I said, "I'm Bella." She relaxed a little, although she still looked at me suspiciously. "However, I strongly advise you to let me *get* a doctor. You aren't going to live through this if you insist on continuing. It's happened before, half-vampires exist,

but their mothers *don't*."

"It's up to me," Sue said stubbornly.

"I don't dispute that for a moment," I said. "It's entirely up to you. I won't even tell anyone who doesn't already know, if you don't want me to. But honestly? Sue, you are an idiot. No one has ever lived through this. An overwhelming majority of women who've tried didn't even carry to term."

"How do *you* know so much about it, anyway?" she asked.

I summarized the story I'd gotten from Huilen and Nahuel. "My husband and I thought that we could have *our* kids," I said. "We've got a surrogate lined up and everything. But we weren't going to ask her to *die* just for that - and you and Harry *already have two children*."

"And we *wouldn't* if I'd killed *Leah* because *she* wasn't convenient," spat Sue.

I looked over my shoulder at Leah, who shrugged; apparently her accidental status was not news to her. "Be that as it may," I said, "*this* one will kill you."

"You can't be sure of that," she said shiftily. "Harry would have died, but..."

I blinked at her. "You didn't know *I* was coming, or you'd have known I wasn't a doctor. Is Harry nearby? Did he say he'd turn you after you give birth? It's - well, it *would* be the best shot you have, but I highly doubt that Harry can turn you safely."

"*You* turned *him*, and you're new," she said. Her stomach rumbled. "Seth, dear, will you make me some more scrambled eggs?" she asked her son apologetically, and Seth nodded and ran to the kitchen.

"I held my breath and poured venom into an existing open wound," I said. "I don't doubt that you'll have one hell of a wound when your baby *chews its way out of its shell*, but it'll be in the middle of your abdomen, nowhere near the heart. The shell might interfere with getting venom into your bloodstream properly. I mean, it has to contain venom somehow, or the venomous half-vampire I met would have turned his mother before *he* was born. She died instead. And it is *ridiculously* hard for vampires to handle humans safely without experience and control that Harry doesn't have, so if he tried to create another wound for the venom, that could kill you all by itself."

By the time I finished this speech, Sue was looking at me speculatively. "Well," she said, "thank you for that information."

I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead. "Sue," I said. "Sue, this is crazy. I flew out here away from my family because I heard Harry had gone missing from Denali and I wanted to help control the situation. If you ask me to hang around for another two weeks and turn you so you can have this baby of doom with a sliver of a chance of living -" I shook my head, about to offer to find a syringe in the Forks house somewhere and fill

it with venom that someone else could administer, but Sue spoke.

"Away from your *family*, hm?" Sue asked craftily.

My eyes flew open. "You *wouldn't*."

"Just because I won't kill my baby to do it doesn't mean I don't want to live, Bella," said Sue in a falsely kind voice. "It's already getting very difficult to keep your father in the dark, especially now when everything would be ruined if he visited me in person. Billy's been running interference, but I have to get on the phone with him sometimes too. He's not a stupid man."

"Sue, you aren't just threatening to *embarrass* me if you bring in the possibility of informing Charlie," I said frantically. "It's not that, if it were that he'd have known months ago. There are vampire *laws*, breaking any one of them is punishable by death, the lawmakers have their eye on me and it wouldn't surprise me a *bit* if they were covertly observing Charlie to make sure I haven't let him in on anything. And it's not just me who'd be in trouble, they'd kill him too."

"Aren't we paranoid," said Sue smugly.

"It's not *paranoia* when *my species is ruled by a mind-reading mass murderer*," I said. "With similarly spooky people in his employ!"

Seth came back in with a huge plate of scrambled eggs, and Sue scarfed them down, which prevented her from talking for a couple of minutes. "You realize you're going to have to drink blood if you hope to live through this," I said. "The baby's sucking up blood and if it can't get it from your diet it'll just get it from you."

"Leah," said Sue lightly. Her daughter made a truly awful face, but I heard her go outside and turn wolf, presumably to kill something and get its blood for her mother.

"You don't need me here," I said. "I can find a hypodermic in the family house in Forks, most likely - Carlisle didn't bring all of his medical stuff with him - and fill it with venom. That's how my turning was done."

"But you've *met* a half vampire, and his aunt who told you about how he was born," said Sue. "If I'm going to live through this, I need an expert, don't I?"

"Then let me call my husband," I said. "He was with me the entire time, when I met them, and he's a doctor -" Sue scowled. "He won't make you do anything you don't want to!" I protested. "But he'd know better than I would how to take care of you, just in general!" I was really hoping that he'd hear something in Sue's thoughts that would let him convince her to give up on the have-a-half-vampire project. But the other remarks were also true.

"No," she said. "No doctors. What if you're wrong about what he will and won't do?"

I don't know your husband."

"Rrrgh!" I said, not quite growling, just too exasperated to bother with language.

Seth's scorching hand patted my arm. "Please help my mom," he said in a small voice. He looked older than I did at this point, but he was acting his real age, which just squeaked him under the threshold of the ability to get things by being cute and innocent.

"I'm trying," I told Seth. "Mrs. Clearwater, I am *really* quite sure that my husband isn't going to assault you, especially not if I tell him otherwise."

"Well, I'm not," Sue said.

I gave up. "Fine," I said. "Fine. Where is Harry?"

"I don't know exactly," she said. "He was heading back to Denali and then I called him and told him I'm pregnant and he said he'd turn around. He's presumably still on his way."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you even manage to safely -" I began. Seth giggled manically and Sue frowned.

"I do mind," she cut in, and I decided that I'd been rude enough that she deserved to interrupt me - just the once. "But I assume you already knew about those tarts Harry's had to live with up in Alaska."

"Tanya and Kate?"

"And Irene or whatever her name was, for all that she's apparently settled down since her heyday," sniffed Sue.

"Irina," I said. "You know that for the first several hundred years they never went in with a plan to leave the humans alive, right?"

"I said," Sue said coldly, "that I *do* mind."

I sighed. Evidently she'd been left unharmed (at least directly) by the experience, though. I'd assumed from the first time I'd heard about the succubus sisters that it was a matter of gender that they were able to leave their toys alive after becoming vegetarians while Edward had no such expectation. Since learning a few more things, I was half-convinced that he'd only been covering for his concerns about extramarital relations. Or that they'd at least been a significant factor. Anyway, there was nothing of practical import to be found along this line of inquiry.

Leah chose this moment to return with a large bowl full of animal blood - elk or something like it, I guessed, although my experience with the land fauna of the Pacific Northwest was limited. Leah herself was covered in little red dots. Extracting the blood had apparently been messy. Sue accepted the bowl and, with rather impressive aplomb,

sipped from it. Apparently pleased with the flavor, she drained the bowl.

"It probably wants human blood, you realize," I said. "Nahuel said he can live on animal blood or even food that humans eat, but he's an adult and can consciously decide what to have for lunch. The baby can't do that, and may or may not continue to siphon off what *you* need to stay alive unless you give it human blood via your diet."

"And where do you propose we get that?" she asked testily.

I held up my hands. "For your purposes it doesn't have to be enough to hurt its source. But I can't extract it and neither can Harry. I'm sure there are any number of tribe members you could ask."

"Most of them are in favor of *killing* my baby," Sue said. "I don't think there will be many volunteers to donate blood to keep him healthy."

I assumed she was just guessing on the gender and decided it wasn't worth nitpicking. "Or," I said, "you could let me call my husband - hang on now, let me finish - doctors can buy blood. I don't have to tell him what it's for. He trusts me implicitly. I can probably get him to tell me what I need to do and say and what papers I need to have forged to buy some blood. He'll think that's a little weird but he won't ask awkward questions. And it'll come in a sealed up package and I'll just have to leave the building while you drink it."

Sue looked skeptical. "What kind of husband is it that you have that you can call him up and get him to tell you how to buy human blood - which you shouldn't be drinking - without explaining what it's for?"

I bristled, and almost hissed, but I didn't want to provoke Leah or Seth into phasing with a threatening noise. That was *my* Edward she was... sort of vaguely implying a mild insult towards. Which was not nice, but it didn't really call for hissing either. "Remember," I said, "my species is ruled by a mind-reading mass murderer. You know, the entire reason why I activated the pack in the first place. I'm the only person I know of in the world he can't read. My husband knows that it's safer if he doesn't know everything. And he *trusts me*."

Sue pursed her lips. "I'll let you try that if it looks like I need more than I can get from people in the tribe. Rachel, would you mind being the one to ask around? You'll be more likely to get agreement than most people who might try." Rachel had been standing very quietly, watching the conversation.

"Of course, Mrs. Clearwater," she sighed.

"If that's all," I said, "I'll be leaving for a bit too. I need to tell Edward I'm okay and how long I'll be gone, and then I want to hunt." I looked at Rachel. "I don't think I'd be very helpful at keeping the fighting to a minimum, but if you can think of something useful for me to do, let me know. I may as well help out as long as I'm going to be around

for two weeks."

Sue had no objection, so Rachel and I left the house: her to pretend to be from the Red Cross, me to find some way to tell Edward that I was going to be gone for two entire weeks.

Less, if Sue died.

I called Edward. We talked for about an hour, getting sappy over how terribly long a span of time two weeks was. Then I found and ate a killer whale, and wandered the beach for a couple of hours. Seth found me at about three in the morning, and said that his dad had arrived.

Harry did not look like a happy vampire when I went to talk to him. He was hanging out in an old, secluded shack in the woods near the reservation, to avoid provoking wolves in Becky's pack. The building smelled enough like Sue that I guessed this was where she'd met her husband.

"Hey," I said by way of greeting. Harry shifted position uncomfortably, still unable to discern that I was a person - and having plenty of other reasons to be unhappy besides that - but he waved. "How much did Seth already tell you?" I asked, as the young werewolf departed.

"Most everything," said Harry hollowly. "You really think she'll die?"

"The odds aren't good," I said honestly. "I know of four live half-vampires and ten who didn't make it to being born, have reason to believe that I haven't heard of all the ones who didn't make it, and have never heard of one whose mother lived. That having been said, it *is* likely that Sue has a better chance than any of them did - even without accepting a doctor's help, which would make me far more optimistic than I am. I think the other hybrids' father didn't care at all about their moms, and didn't try to look after them or turn them when they gave birth."

"But you still think she should abort," Harry said.

"Yes," I said. "It's an insane risk to take even with the available possibility that she'll live. This isn't just a little dicey, it's something that literally no one has ever lived through. But she won't. She won't even let me tell Edward anything, far from letting him show up with the relevant tools."

"I didn't know it was possible," murmured Harry. "I thought... I mean, the Denalis never had to bother with... anything."

"The Denalis of whom you speak are all three of them female," I said. "It's different the other way around, although I didn't know that for sure around when I turned you. It didn't occur to me that it'd be information you needed, but in retrospect I wish I'd

mentioned it." I sighed. "I'm so sorry."

"I missed her so much," Harry said softly. "And she was only getting harder to remember as time went by and I couldn't stand it, that I might forget her, that she might not want to see me again - and I knew I shouldn't just run from Denali straight to her immediately, that I wasn't safe, but after I was able to be around a human without killing him the only thing left was to convince her to see me. And then almost two weeks later she finally said she'd meet me here, and I was making regular visits, but I guess I stayed too long this time because the Denalis noticed and called... but it's good you're here."

"You should call the Denali of your choice and say you've decided to move out and live on your own," I said. "That way they won't expect you back. Since you've demonstrated to them that you're safe around humans, they won't have any interest in tracking you down."

"I should," muttered Harry. He took out his phone and dialed Eleazar's number. "Hello," he said, when the ex-Volturi picked up. I quit breathing and held perfectly still, to avoid making noises which Eleazar would hear.

"Harry?" asked Eleazar's voice.

"It's me," Harry said. "It occurred to me that you'd wonder where I'd gone... I decided to move out. You know I've been having trouble getting along with Laurent and Irina and Kate and Tanya and David... I thought it would just be best if I left. I haven't eaten anyone. I'm not going to start. I just want to live by myself now."

"Well... all right, Harry, if that's what you want," Eleazar said reluctantly. "But know that you're welcome back any time, and that if you need anything, you can call us."

"Thank you," Harry said softly. "I'll let you know if my phone number changes. Thank you for letting me into your home, and please pass on my thanks to Carmen as well. Goodbye."

"I will," Eleazar promised. "Goodbye, Harry."

Harry clicked his phone closed, and I started breathing again. It was mildly uncomfortable not to, just because it deprived me of a sense, although I had plenty of practice from my habit of underwater hunting and resorted to holding my breath more readily than my family tended to. Harry said, "I should have thought to do that as soon as I'd been gone longer than they were used to."

"I'm kind of surprised that they didn't get curious about twenty-four-hour-plus departures earlier," I said.

"I told them I was just exploring, that I liked to be alone," he said. "It's a big park. And they knew I wasn't that fond of most of the group."

"Fair enough," I said. I heard someone approaching the house on two feet at a

relaxed walk; probably Leah or Seth with some news or question.

"Please don't let my wife die," Harry said suddenly. "I don't know how I can do without her. And Seth is so young, he can't lose his mother."

"I will do everything I can short of assaulting her to keep her alive," I said. "But she's not letting me be as helpful as I'd like. Maybe you can do a better job of talking her into letting me bring Edward in."

"She's very stubborn, Sue is," murmured Harry.

And that was the end of that conversation, because at that moment, the door slammed open and there stood Charlie.

At first, we all just stared at each other. There *was* a chance, however remote, that Charlie would not recognize me or Harry - especially not in the dark; it wasn't even four a.m. and I had no idea what would have possessed him to go wandering through the woods at such an hour. Supersonic and fast, I told Harry, "If he doesn't recognize us pretend we're lost and don't speak English."

Charlie shot that plan to hell immediately - "*Harry?*"

I was almost offended that he'd recognized Harry and not me, but of course he had reason to think Harry might be anywhere at all, whereas last he'd checked I'd been in Norway playing newlywed truant. Also, this was apparently Harry's shack.

"...Hello," said Harry.

"Harry, is that you?" demanded Charlie. "What are you doing here? What's up with your face? Billy and your wife have been giving me the runaround - and who's this?" He gave me a closer look, and I held very still, trying to avoid projecting any mannerisms that would make me look familiar. "Are... you..."

"Charlie," said Harry, momentarily distracting my father from his attempt at figuring out what was going on with me. "Please trust me. It's not good for you to be here. Please go home, go to bed, and wake up and think of it like a dream."

"Hell no," said Charlie, and a little candle-flame of hope in the land of metaphors winked out. "I could have let it go if you disappeared for a week and wouldn't explain, but Harry, I haven't gotten a verifiable story about where you've gotten to since July! Billy and Sue contradict each other, they contradict themselves, you're always sick or visiting relatives or running some mighty long errands, and I just don't buy it for nearly two months straight, my friend. And Sue hasn't let me drop by and check in on her for the last couple of days either. Her kids chased me off when I tried last night - I swear Leah looked like she might bite my head off."

"Charlie, I'm fine," said Harry. "I'm completely fine. And that's all you need to know, and it is very important that that be all you know, and I think you should go home and go to bed now."

"Not that simple anymore," Charlie said. "I have co-workers. Sometimes I mention stuff to them. I told 'em I couldn't get ahold of you, end of July. Came up again in conversation last week. *I* was willing to trust Billy and Sue pretty far, but they're not the other cops' friends. And cops start wondering what's going on when somebody goes missing that long and his wife and a friend of the family are running interference. This is me wandering around every place you might be hiding at an ungodly hour of the morning so on Monday, Rick doesn't ask me "hey, did your friend Harry turn up yet" and I have to say "nope" and he has to launch an investigation."

I failed to restrain a curse word.

Charlie looked at me again.

"Young lady," he said, and my still heart sank, "I don't care what freaky stuff you've gotten into - keep a civil tongue in your head."

"And you got here how?" Charlie asked me, about an hour and a half later.

"I flew," I said.

"You can *fly*, too?!"

"On an *airplane*," I said. "Are you *absolutely* sure you aren't being followed or tracked at all? You haven't noticed any weird, pale people hanging around, there haven't been any unexplained disappearances in a radius of a hundred miles besides Harry...?"

"Not that I've noticed," muttered Charlie. I thought he might be disappointed that I couldn't fly. "But if it's a... you seriously call yourselves "vampires"?"

"That's the English term, yes, for immortal creatures that drink blood," I sighed. I'd been explaining Things You May Not Have Known About The World 101 to Charlie since it had become clear that his cooperation would be necessary to keep the secret from exploding any farther beyond its current straining boundaries. He was so uncomfortable with the concept that I thought if only he'd stumbled across something he shouldn't have seen five or six weeks ago, he'd have blocked it all out of his mind and done the cover-up on request without needing to know details. As it was, the runaround he'd gotten was not letting him feel satisfied with partial explanations.

"If a vampire's following me, I wouldn't necessarily have noticed," Charlie said.

"There's nobody else within a couple of miles, anyway," said Harry quietly. The edge of the inhabited part of the reservation was four miles away from the shack, and

Harry's range seemed to be about three miles, irrespective of whether he knew the people he was sensing or not. The shack itself had unclear origins but had been a haunt of Harry's since he'd been a kid; Charlie had been there once before, when Harry had been trying to generate interest in repairing it for some purpose or other that neither of them recalled.

"So you weren't followed *here*," I said, "at least not closely. That's good. I might have been overcautious; goodness only knows how many people the Volturi would *like* to have an eye on, but they've only got so much staff to spread around. But Dad, that doesn't mean you can talk about this to anybody. *Not anybody* except Quileutes, they're okay, and certain individuals they've had no choice but to tell. If enough people find out, it will cause a big enough stir that the Volturi will *definitely* find out, and definitely intervene."

Charlie nodded slowly. "What about Sue?" he asked finally. "Is she all right?"

I bit my lip as Harry struggled through an explanation. Charlie's expression grew darker as he heard the story of her pregnancy, the wolves' split, and Sue's refusal to let me so much as ask Edward how to get human blood. "Would it help at all if I talked to her?" he asked quietly.

"I'm going to try, when she's woken up later this morning," Harry said. "I only got here a few hours ago. If I can't, you're welcome to give it a shot - but I don't think she's going to budge."

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Charlie, looking at the ceiling. It was hard for me to guess how much he could make out in the little moonlight filtering in through the windows. My night vision wasn't something I'd ever written about extensively before turning.

"You look tired," I said.

"A bit," he admitted. "I have tomorrow off, though, so it won't do me so much harm to pull an all-nighter."

"You have to sleep, Dad. You're not a vampire," I said. "Yet."

"Oh-ho-ho no, Bells," he said. "That's - not - no."

"It'd be safer," I said. "In a wide variety of ways."

Charlie shook his head. "Bells, I know you don't take after me this way, but I put down roots. I can't disappear from my life."

"Okay, well - think about it," I said. "Now that you know and you can't un-know... offer's on the table. Say the word and I'll do it."

"Not likely, Bells."

"I guess I can just send you the un-photoshopped versions of my wedding photos," I

sighed.

"That," Charlie said, "will be good enough for me."

Harry, Charlie, another attempt by me, a plea from Rachel, Leah's badgering, and Seth's puppy eyes did nothing to persuade Sue on any count.

However, the fact that she could no longer threaten to tell Charlie on me meant that I didn't have to wait for her to agree to anything -

Which meant that I was pacing around in her backyard arguing with myself about whether to go against her wishes or not.

An important consideration that I was wrestling with was how much of my desire to call Edward and get him to come was *just that*. Honestly, I *did* hate keeping secrets from him. It didn't feel right. The fact that Charlie didn't seem to be under surveillance wasn't making it feel any more urgent. I hated being away from Edward for more than a few hours at a time.

In an attempt to separate out what of my feelings was about *Edward* and what was about *getting Sue medical help*, I contemplated calling Carlisle instead. Carlisle had more medical expertise. If I told him what was going on, he'd probably take the time off work and show up and help Sue. He couldn't read her mind and find an argument that would convince her to accept what she *most* needed, but he was a charismatic and pleasant enough person that he might have a shot at it anyway. I ignored for the purposes of the thought experiment the fact that Edward could read *Carlisle's* mind, and therefore bringing Carlisle into the picture would be two people learning about the wolves and the Clearwaters' predicament, not just one.

I found, predictably enough, that I was less enthusiastic about calling Carlisle. Or, when I tried another substitution, Rosalie. I just wasn't as keen on hauling them into the situation. Partly, I felt less entitled to their time - while they'd really be coming for Sue, not me, the entire issue was ultimately my own fault since I'd activated the wolf who'd mauled the man I'd had to turn who'd knocked up his wife with a dangerous baby.

I decided that was silly, disregarded it, and identified the other reason I didn't feel much like phoning them besides their mere non-Edwardness. If I had to bring in someone other than my very own Edward, then *I* wasn't personally handling the situation. It wasn't just that I wasn't entitled to ask them for help. If I told them I felt that way they - well, Carlisle at least, perhaps not Rosalie - would think I was being silly and that of course I could ask for whatever I needed.

Edward, on the other hand, felt and acted like almost an extension of myself. I didn't even think he'd dispute the description. If I got *Edward* to help me with something, it still felt like I had accomplished the something - I had this impression about my ability to keep

my whereabouts secret even though he was covering my continent-hopping.

With all of this sifted out, I came to the conclusion that I didn't *actually* think it was important to force medical interventions on Sue that she wouldn't accept when offered. It was also beginning to look like she was not capable of being convinced. I'd known that earlier, really, or I would have sided with Becky and I would have found some way to physically prevent Sue from telling Charlie anything when threatened. (For instance, it would not have been at all difficult to take away her phone, and her kids had already started chasing him off from attempting to visit her in person.) So, no Edward. Or at least no physical presence of Edward.

I called him again.

Delivery

Sue got worse.

Every day, she was visibly more pregnant, and not just to vampire eyes. I hung around in Harry's shack when she drank her human blood, and so did he. As I'd suspected, werewolf blood was not palatable to her revised sense of taste; she was able to palate the blood of inactive carriers of the gene, like Billy, but preferred standard humans' offerings. Charlie was the first donor, stuck and inexpertly drained by a wolf in Rachel's pack who'd spent a few months in nursing school before droppping out. Someone in Rachel's pack would come let us know when it was all safely consumed and we could be in the room again, but there wasn't much to be done.

Sue didn't move around much. She was getting thinner and spindlier everywhere but her belly, which became huge - too huge. She was constantly hungry. Mostly she wanted eggs, but we made her eat anything that we thought might help - spinach, assorted meat, anything loaded up with starch and sugar for quick cheap energy. She was usually hungry, so it wasn't too hard to make her eat. Between meals, she drank a constant stream of juice, and occasionally puked.

The baby started breaking her ribs. It was hard to tell, without any fancy medical equipment or knowhow, whether any given *snap* was a new rib or an already broken rib fractured in a new place; we stopped counting, after a while.

She decided to name the baby "Cody".

Since she was quite confident that it was a boy, she let Harry unilaterally pick a backup girls' name, which he did with some obvious mixed feelings; he settled on "Maya". I commented that they sure liked names with four letters, and he nodded, but his mind was entirely somewhere else.

It should have been a cute and touching thing to learn that, yes, Harry really was supposed to be with his wife forever - but "forever" was looking to be cut short. Sue sometimes just outright lost consciousness. It was only for a few minutes at a time, but it never failed to send Harry into a panic. Even when she was awake or in a normal sleep, he wasn't in good shape. He paced the house. He gingerly held Sue's hand, terrified of injuring her and giving her overtaxed body more to keep up with. He made appeals to every non-wolf on the reservation who Rachel couldn't convince to donate blood, succeeding only once but redoubling his efforts every time she passed out again or made a face at a bowl of animal blood.

There wasn't really much for me to do to help her. I told Harry absolutely everything that Nahuel and Huilen had told me, and had no further expertise available. Sue was adamant that I not go home - if baby Cody-or-Maya was going to chew its way out of its shell, it might serve to have a vampire present to get that part over and done with faster so Sue could get started turning. Wolves' teeth and claws were sharp enough to cut vampire skin, and could probably break the shell, but they didn't have the necessary dexterity in

that form to do it carefully.

I searched high and low in the family home in Forks, and eventually did find a kit with medical equipment. I didn't recognize most of it, but found a few syringes that looked like the ones Ilario had been turned with. I took them and then had nothing useful to do until the baby of doom decided to come along. Mostly I loitered, wished Edward were there, and let Seth distract himself from his mother's plight by telling me all the pack drama.

"Sam's in Becky's pack now, so I think Leah's feeling a little better about being a wolf," he said one afternoon. We were wandering along the beach. "He took longer to decide than most of us, but I think maybe he was just being nice to Leah, going with Becky." I hadn't spoken to Becky or anyone in her pack since arriving. They were sticking to the half of the reservation that didn't contain the Clearwater house, having come to a very uneasy agreement about letting Cody/Maya live given that he or she wasn't doomed to be hellspawn.

"Well, I wouldn't expect his imprinting on Emily to make him *hate* Leah," I said. "Heck, Becky split the entire pack by countering the Alpha voice over a disagreement with Rachel and I don't think they hate each other. Regular love isn't *as* powerful as the magic kind, but it's something."

"I don't think Sam does hate her, but Leah feels like it," said Seth.

"Wouldn't all the mindreading you guys get up to simplify this question rather a lot?"

"There's a lot of us. It's a little easier now that there's only half as many, but there's a lot to keep track of, and lots of echoes. Leah didn't like to listen to Sam at all, so she didn't try to check whether he hated her, I guess."

"How do you feel about imprinting?" I asked him. "It's, what, five of the guys who have done it now?"

"Yeah," Seth said. "I don't think I want it. It seems to mess stuff up."

"Jared's didn't," I pointed out, naming the boy who'd fallen for a classmate with a preexisting crush on him.

"No, his didn't," acknowledged Seth. "But all the others did at least a little. Sam was just worst."

"What about the guy who fell for the girl from Forks?" I asked. "What'd that do? I didn't get a lot of details."

"Her dad is kind of racist," said Seth. "He doesn't like that she's dating him because he's not white, and she can't tell him why she's doing it, so he thinks it's to annoy him."

"Yikes. I hope her boyfriend can keep from ripping her dad's head off."

"It's been close, once," Seth said seriously. "It's really hard for some of us to keep our cool. We're supposed to protect human life, that's the point of us, but then we get all this temper."

"Is it getting easier over time?" I asked.

"Yeah," Seth said, "and we can all heal really well and Rachel's been smart about making sure that when we're having a hard day we're away from people who aren't in the pack. I'm handling it okay, better than some people."

I nodded. "You seem pretty mellow in general. You can even stand being around me and the scent of evil, minty flowers."

"It's good that I can, because now my dad's a vampire too and my mom's... going to be," said Seth, troubled again. The point of this walk had been to *distract* him...

"I'm hoping I can eventually convince my dad to turn," I said, instead of speculating as to how a half-vampire would smell to a werewolf.

"How come?" asked Seth.

"Well, he can't be one of you guys, and he can't be a half-vampire, and humans - regular ones - are -" Bringing up human mortality seemed like a *bad* conversational topic to the kid with the dying mom, for all that she might have a *better* chance of escaping it than my less-dramatically withering parents. "Just not as awesome."

"I do like most things about being a wolf," said Seth philosophically, and then he added, "Want to race?"

He phased, and we raced up the deserted beach - I won by a hair. Rachel was faster than me, but also faster than most wolves.

When I next stopped by to check on Sue, she was worse.

She was worse every time I looked at her, and it managed to surprise me, every time.

"How about this idea," I said to Sue, after I'd been kicking about the reservation for a little over a week.

"If it involves calling your husband, the answer is no," Sue said sharply.

"It doesn't," I said. "Or doesn't have to, anyway. But Nahuel was born not just *healthy*, he was *ambulatory* - he lived for three whole days without any help or care *at all* in the middle of the *jungle* and was perfectly unharmed when Huilen was able to move

around again. You're out of human blood donors who can safely give you more to drink, you're passing out all the time, you have goodness knows how many broken ribs - if it gets your spine or manages to detach the placenta, he could wind up killing himself."

"I'm listening," said Sue guardedly.

"C-section," I said. "One big cut, pull the baby out shell and all, and then start turning you because even if you magically stopped being pregnant right now I'm not sure how you'd hold up long term, as weak as you've gotten. I don't have the resources to put you in a coma, but that won't make turning ineffective, just more unpleasant. Me or Harry can break the shell - holding breaths as necessary with plenty of warning, instead of maybe being surprised by it chewing its way out and making the room smell like your blood while we're inhaling. The baby will be premature, but it should be okay."

"I've been pregnant for three weeks now," Sue said, "out of a pregnancy that's supposed to last a month. That's not just a little bit premature, that's like inducing labor in the second trimester."

"At the *end* of the second trimester, and - we don't know how these things decide that it's time to start gnawing on their moms," I said. "We *do* know that Nahuel was not just a *little* more advanced than a human infant when he was born. We *do* know that your midsection is big enough to hold a pretty good-sized baby, or two - we aren't talking about extracting something two inches long without well-defined internal organs. Since there's plenty of care available for your baby, if it turns out to need it - it doesn't have to find its own food in the middle of nowhere or anything - I honestly think that it would be safer for both of you to operate now rather than deliver it in an emergency later."

Sue looked at me suspiciously, and then the baby kicked her again. One more tiny snap.

She winced.

"Fine," she said under her breath.

The logistics were these:

I would perform the cut, with a scalpel pilfered from Carlisle's medical kit. Harry didn't think he could manage to wield the implement against his wife, even for its beneficial purpose. Syringes - full of Harry's venom, not mine - were at the ready on her bedside table. When I'd pulled out the shell with the baby in it, I was to break it, while Harry would inject her. I'd described for his benefit what I'd seen of Ilario's turning, and he knew where to aim.

"There's no anaesthesia for the surgery," Harry fretted, while I was dousing the scalpel in rubbing alcohol for a probably-unnecessary sterilization.

"Harry," I said. "You're going to *turn* her. If you're going to worry about having no anaesthesia, at least worry about *that*, not a *cut*." He nodded morosely.

Their children were going to hold onto her arms and legs so she didn't thrash too far and throw off my aim. After she was shot up with venom, we'd move her to the shack to finish up the transformation without human prey nearby. She had all the advance information, so there was every reason to expect her adjustment to be as smooth as mine. Better than Ilario, who'd learned that vampires really *were* real when he was barely capable of keeping his eyes open; better than Harry, who'd known all the myths but placed no stock in any of them until the moment his werewolf daughter sprang.

There was every reason to be optimistic, but the mood as we assembled in that close little room that stank of ill health was a dim one. Still, Leah dutifully took hold of her mother's ankles and Seth grabbed her wrists. I clutched my scalpel, Harry had a syringe in each hand, and we waited for Sue to give us the go-ahead.

I held my breath.

In the back of my mind, some little voice was screaming, *This is not the way of things! You are not a doctor! You don't know what you're doing at all! You could kill Sue - you could kill her baby - Harry's never been near human blood at all since turning, what if he reacts to more than the smell and holding his breath won't do? What if - what if - do a safer thing -*

But this *was* the safer thing, even if it had me holding a knife, even if it had me acting instead of waiting.

And I hushed that little voice, and looked into Sue's eyes.

"Go," she said.

I had no idea what I was doing.

It wasn't *hard* to cut her open, but I was trying to do it with the sharpness of the scalpel more than the brute force that would have let me pry her open with my bare hands, and it wasn't a balance I was familiar with. It *was* hard to ignore her labored breathing, her periodic screams, Seth's small whine, and the sudden notion that if anything would cause a werewolf to phase uncontrollably it *might* be witnessing their mother inexpertly carved up by a vampire.

I'd found time to borrow a computer and look up whatever I could on C-sections, which told me more than I needed to know about the etymology of the term and less than I needed to know to get a half-vampire out of Sue.

The scalpel wasn't sharp enough to cut the shell, so that told me where to stop, at least. I made a big crescent-shaped incision, not expecting to be able to get something

roundish and nigh-indestructible out of a straight line. When I set down the instrument and tried to grab the shell, trying to hurry, and yanked, Sue's entire body jerked up with it. The shell was *embedded*. I'd let up the pulling soon enough to avoid breaking her spine, but it couldn't have been good for her already splintering ribs.

She howled again, and I could hear Leah grinding her teeth. I picked up the scalpel again and tried to cut away more flesh from the shell, but it was no good, it was stuck on all sides. Sue's heart started stuttering, and there was blood everywhere.

If I couldn't get the shell out, I had to open it while it was still attached.

"Breathe, Mom," pleaded Seth, his eyes screwed shut.

My hands were *strong*, but they were not *sharp*.

My teeth were *sharp*, but they were in my *mouth*, and there was so much blood, and I *knew* that one taste would be the end of Sue.

I reached over her, pried Harry's mouth open, and ripped one of his canines from his gums.

While Harry hissed with pain, I swiped his tooth over the shell, then rinsed it in the alcohol I'd used to sterilize the scalpel and handed it back to him. He put it back in his mouth before any of the non-vampires in the room had even figured out what I was doing, and then there was a break in the shell that I could force my fingers into and lever open.

Inside was a tiny, warm baby boy with a heartbeat like a buzz, in a bath of viscous, clear fluid that smelled a lot like vampire venom. Sue started gurgling.

I reached in and picked him up. With my reserved air, I told Harry, "Now." The fluid stung my skin a little, but dried quickly when exposed to air and didn't seem to have done any permanent damage.

Harry lifted the first syringe and thrust it into Sue's heart.

Cody bit me with his full complement of teeth the moment after his mother started howling at the burn of the venom, even as Harry picked up the second syringe and emptied it into the secondary pulse points. She didn't need to keep still anymore, so Leah and Seth let her go, and Harry was holding her instead. He told her that he loved her, but couldn't talk much - until her blood was all dry he couldn't replenish his air without leaving her side.

The bite hurt - a *lot*. I jerked Cody's face away from my arm reflexively, and Leah must not have liked the way I was handling him, because she grabbed him from me at once. I rubbed the tiny double crescent wound on my wrist, which was whitening and puffing up with the scarring venom. There was not going to be any way to hide that. I'd at

least have a while to think of stories.

"Leah, he's -" I began, but Cody had already chomped on her thumb. She dropped him.

Leah screamed, which, for someone who had just been bitten by a venomous creature, was normal. Her thumb was turning green, which was not normal.

It was only to be expected that werewolves would react differently to vampire venom, and not in a good way. I didn't wait to see what would happen if the substance spread: I seized Leah's hand and pinched her thumb off.

The severed thumb fell to the floor and Leah phased, snarling; the nightstand fell over and a lamp broke when she wound up with a hind leg in the wrong place. She was missing a digit from the paw corresponding to the one with the injured thumb, but it was healing over rapidly, and was not an abnormal color. She only narrowly missed stepping on her baby brother, who didn't appear to have been injured by his fall one bit and was happily staring up at her furry neck. He picked up the thumb, put it in his mouth, and then discarded it, uninterested. A burst-open sleeve from Leah's shirt drifted down and landed on his face, and he giggled.

Seth, who'd witnessed the entire sequence of events, had the presence of mind to drag Cody away from Leah by his feet, preventing him from biting again. Leah panted, whined, and finally got herself furless again. She grabbed the less bloody of the two pillows on the bed to cover herself with (the blankets being complete losses). Seth, leaving Cody burbling happily on the floor, ran to get her replacements.

Sue was not nearly as quiet a turner as Harry had been. She screamed, wordlessly, incoherently, possibly even ignorant of Harry's presence.

I was already going to have to explain one scar, and at least Cody's bites wouldn't leave me permanently deprived of any extremities. I picked up the baby - one hand under his head, one under the rest of his body, positioning him in a way least likely to present a chewtoy target. I carried him out of the blood-soaked room, and downstairs to the bassinet that Seth had pulled out of the attic the day before, where I placed him. Leah followed me down the stairs, having gotten herself dressed. Seth went past us, murmuring, "I'll let everyone know how it went."

"Can you breathe here?" Leah asked me in a low voice.

I took a small taste of the air, testing it. The smell was faint - just a few droplets of mostly-dry blood on myself and the little of it that wafted down the stairs. In a pinch, the fact that Sue was Harry's mate ought to let me pull in self-defense instincts the way I had in the Amazon Basin. "If I have to," I told her. I heard Harry, presumably with Sue in tow, leaping out the window to carry her to the less inhabited shack.

"Dad isn't going to want to leave Mom while she's... for the next few days," Leah said. "I'm, uh, missing a thumb, now. I don't know if I heal well enough to grow it back,

especially since it looks like it's healing to a stump. So I don't think I can really handle Cody until he learns not to bite people. Same with Seth. And if he bites somebody who's not a wolf they'll just... like Mom."

"Right," I said, beginning to guess where she was going with this.

"Can you... babysit my brother?" she asked tentatively. "Just until Dad can take over."

"All you have to do is keep away from his teeth," I said. "He's pretty durable - more than you are, almost as much as I am. I doubt you're going to hurt him if you handle him strangely to avoid getting chomped. Besides, I'd need to avoid getting bitten too." I pointed out my new scar.

"The risks are different," insisted Leah. "You grabbed Dad's tooth right out of his mouth without explaining - he could've bitten you."

"If I'd used mine, I would've been too distracted by the pain to make the cut carefully until it healed and made it hard to put the tooth back. I didn't have enough air to explain my idea so Harry could do it with one of my teeth. Anyway, he didn't bite me."

"But you *are* in way less danger from a Cody bite," Leah said.

"Remember the part where Nahuel lived on his own in the jungle for three days until Huilen could take care of him? You could just leave him in the bassinet and feed him blood or infant formula or whatever you decide to give him, with a long miniature ladle or a baster or something, and count his toes once in a while for contact. In three days Sue'll be turned and his parents can take care of him, and in a week or two he'll be talking and you can tell him that there is No Biting Allowed."

Cody chose this moment to fall asleep. He was a rather cute baby, really. He already had a thin dusting of black hair, and he was standard Native American colored, not Harry's ecru. "Please," said Leah. "I'm missing my *thumb* - I mean, thank you for getting it off, otherwise it'd probably be my whole arm or I'd be dead or something - but there's only so many amputations I can take."

"If you do it right you shouldn't need anything else amputated," I said. "I want to go home to my husband. I want to go home to my husband *a week ago*."

"Damn it, can't you ever do anything that's *unambiguously* helpful?"

I took a moment to flip through what things I'd done impacted Leah's life and how ambiguous their helpfulness might have seemed. Activated her - and her fiancé, who'd dumped her for her favorite cousin as a result. Saved her father from the injuries she'd inflicted - by turning him into a vampire and sending him away from home. Delivered her baby brother - by turning her mother, too, when Leah found vampires particularly unpleasant to be around. Saved her from some unknown green fate when Cody bit her -

by removing her thumb.

So I could see why Leah might find my help a little... mixed.

But that *didn't* really explain why she wanted me to babysit.

"I do tend to leave complications in my wake," I said. "But that doesn't make me a great choice for a nanny. Neither does the fact that I'm going stir-crazy over my husband being on another continent."

"I'm worried Seth's going to try to pick Cody up if nobody else does, and I don't want him getting fanged to death," Leah said. "If one of us *does* get bitten, and our parents aren't here, and you aren't here, we don't have a lot of really fast, clean options for getting the gangrene off."

I threaded my fingers through my hair. This was fair. Knives existed and werewolves were pretty fast, but there would still be a few extra seconds of spreading venom, and some precision sacrificed if they hurried. "Seth isn't stupid," I said.

"But he's a kid," said Leah. "Which means he sometimes acts stupider than he is. Do you really think he's not going to try to put his old baby clothes on Cody, even if it means putting his hands too near those teeth?"

I could see Seth doing that. "So what you really want me to do is stop Seth from trying to babysit Cody, rather than babysit Cody myself."

"Well, you could do it by making Seth unnecessary," Leah said.

"Leah, I want to go *home*. I want to say goodbye to my dad, buy plane tickets, and go try to find a way to tell my husband that we can possibly have our own baby without killing our surrogate, without explaining about Cody in particular."

"Wait, what? You're going to do this again?"

"If the surrogate, who wants to be a vampire anyway, agrees, I'm going to do it again, yes - surrounded by well-equipped doctors who know what's going on with anaesthetics all ready to go. Old, experienced vampire doctors, who have the advance expectation of the C-section and the knowledge that the shell's attached to the walls of the uterus and whatnot."

"Okay..." said Leah. "So you won't help?"

"If *helping* here means spending more than another half hour or so not taking steps to go home, and it's not a real emergency - sorry, going to have to say no," I said apologetically. "If *helping* means giving you a couple hundred dollars for baby stuff, or answering a couple quick questions about vampires or half-vampires, or killing a couple elk and harvesting their blood for your baby brother so you don't have to more of that for

a couple days, that's fine, that's quick, but that's not what you seem to want."

"I do have one question," Leah said.

"Shoot."

"What's... Dad wouldn't tell us anything about what turning was like. And now Mom's in the middle of it. What's happening to her?" Leah paused. "Do I even want to know?"

"You probably don't," I said. "It's not something you'll need to prepare for yourself, obviously. But remember - when it's over, it's over. In a few days she'll be fine, it's not the same as if the same sensation were somehow inflicted on someone who was all human throughout. Beyond turning her into a vampire it's not that much of a life-altering experience. In a few more days she'll be fit for mortal company - your dad will be able to bring Cody to see her sooner than that; he doesn't smell like food or like a danger the way Billy or you would, respectively."

"He does smell sort of nice," Leah agreed absently, looking at the sleeping baby. "Like fruit, maybe."

"Well, if he smells like food to *you*, that's way less dangerous than if he smelled like food to either of your parents," I said. "The sorts of provocations that make a wolf go berserk aren't the same ones that affect a young vampire."

"What's he smell like to you?" asked Leah.

"Why are you stalling me? You have, or can get, my e-mail address," I said. "They have Internet in Norway."

Leah seemed stumped by this question. Finally, she said, "Rachel's been the one keeping in touch with you on behalf of the whole pack."

"That doesn't mean you can't too, if you feel like it," I said, shrugging. "I would need a lot more pen pals before e-mail would start to take up a significant chunk of my time - I can read a screen of text almost instantly and type a few hundred words per minute. Although I'm sort of puzzled about why you'd want to talk to me at all. Rachel told me to stay far away from you because I was a "herald of all things awful in your life", after Sam imprinted."

"That's exactly why I want to talk to you," she burst out. "After Sam imprinted, I couldn't talk to anybody in the pack, because they were all basically on his *side*, as if I couldn't feel what he felt about Emily too and as if everyone else couldn't feel what *I* was going through. Even Seth! But I could talk to Emily. But then we had *one stupid fight* about her borrowing my *shampoo*, of all the things we could have fought about, and she ran to Sam and we're only starting to carefully be acquaintances and we're never going to be best friends again, ever. So I talked to Mom, but that wasn't that great to begin with because *I* was the reason *her* husband was gone in the first place, and then it turns out that

she's been seeing him in secret for weeks, and now they're going to be hunky-dory forever. Who am I going to talk to? Somebody too old to phase? Somebody who hasn't got the gene who doesn't really *get* things even if they have them explained fifty times?"

"So... I'm outside the situation enough that you can talk to me, but close enough to it that you don't have to keep awkward secrets or talk across gaps of understanding?" I filled in, tilting my head.

"Yeah. It's just barely enough to make up for the stench you've got."

"I also have a phone," I said. "I presume you can't smell me through it. But you shouldn't call it - you won't be able to tell when I'm alone. If you don't like e-mail, I'm willing to call you once a while to talk. But not in the next day, which I hope to spend mostly on a series of planes, if you don't mind. I really, *really* want to go home."

"Is it like when the guys have to go a while without their imprints?"

"Sort of," I said, "but it goes in both directions. So not only am I standing here kind of inclined to curl up in a ball and whine because Edward's not here, I *also* know perfectly well that *he* is in *Scandinavia* feeling the exact same way and I don't *like* that. He doesn't even understand *why* I had to leave him alone. He's just trusting that it's something very important that he can't know about. Are we done? Can I go?"

"Sure," said Leah. "Sorry."

I did not feel that I needed any further permission from Leah to leave.

Seth and I passed each other while I left his house. I asked him if he knew where Charlie was, and he directed me to Billy's house. I walked right in without knocking - the door was half-open - and announced that I was leaving.

"So soon, Bells?" Charlie asked, while Billy looked at me with a guarded, but not hostile, expression.

"Yes, I'd really like to get home," I replied. "I'm sure some crisis or other will come up here that calls for my presence soon enough, and if nothing else, now that you know what the story is I may be able to visit just to visit - but for shorter periods, at least until Edward gets in on the secret one way or another and I can bring him along."

"Is that healthy, to be so... attached to him?" Charlie asked. He'd been caught up on the fine details of vampire psychology over the previous week, but still asked questions like that sometimes. I half expected him to ask if I'd ever tried to stop being a vampire.

"That's not really a useful question, since the attachment's not going away," I said, "and I wouldn't wish it away, if it could."

"Fair enough," sighed Charlie. "Keep in touch, Bells."

"I will."

I gave Billy a cordial nod, which he returned, and then went back outdoors, where I called Edward to find out where he was. This check-in turned, predictably enough, into a long conversation during which I ran all the way to the airport. Once there, I booked tickets to Helsinki and caught my plane.

Edward met me at the airport in Helsinki. The next six days were spent in a lovely, if rushed, tour of Scandinavia; we hit all the major tourist attractions and a few minor ones so I could account for having been gone as long as I had. I learned bits and pieces of Swedish and Finnish. I was able to go about in public without contact lenses, as my eyes were entirely amber: an unusual color, but not one unheard of in humans.

Edward noticed, stared at, and kissed the small bite marks on my wrist, but didn't ask.

Our travels went in a loosely westerly direction, and finally we drove up to our home. I wore extra-long sleeves to at least postpone the rest of the family's discovering that I had been bitten by a small venomous creature. There had been no good way to hide it from Edward, but nobody else inspected me with such regularity and thoroughness.

The first thing I noticed when we approached the house was the singing. It was Maggie, crooning something in Gaelic. She had a splendid voice; I could understand why Alice had predicted Gianna would appreciate it. When I got out of the car and looked, the Irish vampire - still gold-eyed - was sitting on a picnic blanket with Gianna in the backyard. The human was eating a sandwich, and looking at Maggie with considerably less ambivalence than she'd displayed when I'd last seen them together. The blush was still present, though. Maggie was entirely unselfconscious (not to mention incapable of blushing), and seemed confident in her voice and glad to be entertaining the object of her affection.

It was all so cute that I almost could have missed the patchwork of bruises spotting Gianna's skin.

I hadn't tried to handle any humans since becoming a vampire except Harry, who'd been starting to turn before I picked him up, and Sue, who I'd had every intention of grievously injuring to begin with. I didn't really know how hard it was, but it didn't seem like it could be *that* difficult - couldn't Maggie press too hard *once*, calibrate Gianna's fragility, and then back off enough to avoid the injury?

It didn't look like that was what had happened. The contusions were of a variety of ages - some hours old, still dark, and others yellowing. I didn't see any casts, splints, or even bandages, so the damage was limited, but there were so *many* bruises. I hadn't gotten one from Edward while I'd been human, that I recalled. Then again, I'd been clumsy enough that I'd been accustomed to having a variety of small injuries that I didn't

necessarily remember getting... but I hadn't looked like I'd been *painted*.

However, the fact that Maggie was not quite gentle enough with Gianna didn't seem to have prevented them from growing adorably close or caused Ilario to break Maggie into gravel, so I decided that it wasn't any of my business. Maggie finished her song, then briefly deigned to pay attention to Edward and me. "Welcome home!" she called to us.

"Thanks!" I called back.

That was all Maggie had in her attention span for persons not Gianna, and she started another song. This one seemed to be in English, but it was so archaic, heavily accented, and full of regionalisms that I could make out about one word in three.

We checked in with the others of the family; everyone could have heard the car pulling up and seen us out the window or heard me speak to Maggie, but it was polite to speak face-to-face. I also had an interest in seeing whether Jasper remained distant and cool towards me. Harry had become less disconcerted by my unrecognizability. I hoped that it wouldn't cause a more lasting rift between me and Jasper.

Jasper was edgy, but not obviously upset. More tellingly, Edward seemed calm in talking to him, so he couldn't be thinking daggers at me. Alice complained good-naturedly that I'd gone invisible for longer than ever while away: "More than a week! But only when you weren't with Edward, for some reason," she said. "Maybe you're influenced enough by his decisions that it sheds light on what you're going to do, when you're together?"

I should have thought of that.

Alice couldn't see what *I* was doing if it involved wolves, but if she looked for *Edward*, and we weren't together, she'd find him easily. I could only be glad that she didn't make a habit of supervising him twenty-four hours a day and would assume that we were together during most unobserved hours - she'd probably already seen a suspicious amount of Edward all by himself wandering Scandinavia as though alone. Which he had been.

Damn Harry's carelessness. He could have announced to Eleazar in August that he wanted to move out to an unspecified location, and then Tanya wouldn't have called Carlisle and Alice wouldn't have looked for him. He could have *asked* someone, anyone, me or any other Cullen, whether it was safe for him to make love to his wife as though he hadn't just been turned into a vampire. If he'd gotten Sue pregnant anyway, I'd still have needed to travel to help out, but I would have had better information and timed accordingly - once I'd had the C-section idea I could have planned to be there for only a day or two.

Alice didn't seem suspicious, though, just gently teasing. I laughed, made a joke about how I couldn't concentrate on keeping my shield up nearly as well with Edward around, and excused us to our cottage.

When we got there, I said without preamble, "I think we might be able to safely have a half-vampire baby."

"What? How -" Edward began, and then he shook his head. "What can you tell me?"

I bit my lip. I *hated* not being able to tell him things. Hating that in and of itself, when it was in my power to tell all, was dangerous. So I hated Aro, instead. Once he was out of the picture I wouldn't need to.

I almost wished that Edward would just demand an explanation of me, making it so hard to keep the assorted secrets that I could judge it not worth the trouble. Or that he'd stumble across something, as Charlie had. But if I truly wished that I might as well spill all the beans - and that wasn't the best thing to do. I already had a little itch of worry in the back of my mind about the danger Charlie had walked into, although the wolves would look out for him if they could. Better not to add a similar one about Edward.

"I had an idea," I said, which was true. "Caesarean section - early in the pregnancy. Gianna probably couldn't expect to live through a whole month, but she could likely manage three weeks or so, especially if we turned her right after. And Nahuel was a really healthy baby when he was born. He had nobody taking care of him for three days and he was fine. A preemie half-vampire would probably be no more vulnerable than, say, a full-term or slightly early human baby, and would catch up quickly, as fast as they grow."

"That sounds sensible," said Edward, lighting up.

"One thing that has me worried is all those bruises, though," I said, as it occurred to me that they could in this sense be my business. "I'm guessing Maggie hasn't broken any bones or anything, since Gianna wasn't taped up that I could see, but having a lot of extra healing to do while trying to carry a half-vampire is... I don't know how it'd interact, but it couldn't be in a *good* way."

"I haven't been keeping up to date on that," Edward said. "But some of the bruises did look new, so if Maggie's getting more careful, it's not happening very fast. It's something we'd need to discuss with Gianna at least, and Maggie too, most likely."

"She'll probably need human blood to drink during the pregnancy," I said. "Nahuel can live on whatever if he decides to, but fetuses don't have that kind of volition..." I went on walking him through all the steps, including the possibility that the shell would only be vulnerable to vampire teeth and that it could grow attached to the uterus. I didn't pull in any evidence that I could *only* have gotten from Sue, although some of the mental leaps were a little tenuous and I had to frame everything with uncertainty. It wasn't obvious if Edward connected the dots (the blinking neon dots labeled "connect me!"), but he didn't mention it if he did.

Night fell, and Gianna was presumably asleep, so we put off bringing the subject up

with her until the next morning.

Expectations

Maggie proved very displeased by the idea.

"Let me get this straight," she said indignantly, after we failed to get Gianna alone and explained to both of them at once instead. "*Bella* said something dumb to Aro under pressure, which means *Gianna's* in danger if she doesn't have *Bella's* kid. Nowhere in this does it say that the kid has to be *Edward's* too. Not if that's going to hurt my Gianna."

"Maggie," said Gianna, "they think I'll be safe - and it means I'll turn sooner, too..."

Maggie softened at once when Gianna spoke, turning to the Italian woman and carefully taking one of her hands. "Baby, I want that over with soon too, but you might not make it that far!" she said. "Nobody has before! This is an *experiment* they want to try. You're not a guinea pig, baby."

"I said I would help," Gianna murmured.

"You didn't know when you said so that they'd ask you *this*! Enough people die having normal babies - *my* own mother did."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but that was more than a hundred and fifty years ago," I said. "Carlisle, Edward, and Rosalie are all doctors. We can have all the advance notice we could possibly need. Every advantage that Nahuel's mother didn't have - or yours, for that matter. If things take a turn for the worse before the three-week mark we can do the C-section earlier than planned."

"I'm getting Ilario, he'll back me up," said Maggie fiercely, patting Gianna's cheek once and then rushing out of the house to look for him.

"I take it they're getting along, then?" Edward asked mildly.

"He'll leave me alone with her as of last week," Gianna said.

"And that hasn't changed since you're... kind of black and blue?" I asked. "It's not really my business, I'm sure if there were something seriously wrong it would have been noticed and addressed before now by Ilario if nobody else - although if I'm wrong please tell me. But if you're getting hurt often it would probably make a pregnancy, any pregnancy, riskier."

"Actually," Gianna said, "Ilario was the first one to give me a bruise. He was upset about something Maggie said. I don't remember exactly what it was, but he grabbed my hand and pulled me away from her. She didn't try to play tug of war or anything. He just squeezed too hard. And then she fussed over me so much that he decided she's no more likely to hurt me than he is. So he thought it would be hypocritical of him to keep spending time around me himself without letting Maggie do it. She's always more upset

than I am when I get hurt, anyway."

"Still, there are a *lot*..." I mused.

Gianna shrugged, looking down and blushing again. "She gets carried away, but she stops whatever she's doing right away when I say "ow". The first time it happened she offered to quit touching me at all so she wouldn't get carried away anymore, but... I said she didn't have to do that." She squirmed slightly.

"Right, um," I said, having wandered into territory that was even less my business. If Gianna was covering up something serious, Edward would know about it and tell me, and he was silent. "She's obviously very concerned with your safety, so that might wind up being what happens anyway for a few weeks - or months if we have to go the human baby route."

"I could mention that to her," Gianna said lightly.

"Might help," I allowed.

I heard Maggie and Ilario's footfalls as they approached us. A few seconds later, they were there, Maggie promptly sitting back next to Gianna and carefully putting an arm over her shoulders while Ilario stood.

"Let me get this straight," Ilario said, and there ensued a conversation very similar to the one we'd had with Maggie, minus the part where Gianna was addressed as "baby" and the part where someone's mother had died in childbirth.

"I understand you're both worried about me," Gianna said when this segment of the exchange wound down, "but isn't it my decision?"

Maggie bit her lip. "Baby, you don't know what it'd do to me if you died. I don't think even I know what it'd do to me, and I already can't stand to think of it. I know it's up to you, but it affects more than just you."

Gianna patted Maggie's knee. "But I think it sounds survivable. Also, it gives more of an explanation for why I'm going to be turned. The Cullens have a history of turning dying people - but not people who've just given birth to a human baby once and are fine."

"Aren't I sufficient explanation?" protested Maggie. "Bella wasn't dying, she was just Edward's."

I said, "That'd be sufficient explanation if *you* had run into her all by herself a year or two ago before she met the Volturi. Now, they think she belongs to me, so *I* need a credible reason to turn her. If simply thinking that people ought to be vampires instead of humans when they're willing were a reason the Volturi would accept, I could have just said that in Volterra."

"You should've let me fight you for her," Maggie said. "That would be credible."

"I don't think it would have helped the situation at all if Aro found that I'd put her up as stakes on a fight," I said dryly, "since you challenged me on my home turf while you were alone and I had my whole coven present, and clearly didn't have to wager her - or lose."

"Oh," said Maggie, hanging her head.

"Maggie," I said. "I have every confidence that Gianna will be okay as long as we do a C-section at or before the three week mark, then turn her."

The Irish vampire looked up at me. "You really do believe that," she murmured.

I debated whether to tell her that I was immune to her power. I decided that she'd find out sooner or later, or at least suspect it - and it'd be a show of good faith. "I actually think I'm immune to your power," I told her sheepishly. She frowned. "Edward, you tell her," I said.

"I think Bella's right," he said confidently. Maggie scrutinized his face - I wasn't sure if this was habit, an actual way to focus her witchcraft, or just for effect.

Maggie looked over at Gianna. "You're sure you want to do it this way, Gianna?" she asked softly.

Gianna nodded, then glanced at her brother, who looked uncomfortable but didn't speak.

Maggie looked at Edward and me, fixing us with fierce glares. "If she dies," she said in a flat, cold voice very unlike her usual demeanor. She didn't finish the sentence, letting the threat trail off into thought.

"If you tried, no matter how justified you were, you'd die too," Edward said softly.

"If she dies," Maggie said, "then I wouldn't care if I did."

Permission secured, it was time to deal with the the complicated technical stuff. I wasn't deeply involved in this part. I had no relevant expertise and my biological contribution was already in a freezer. It was mostly Edward, Rosalie, and Carlisle, ordering assorted equipment which trickled into the house in boxes over the next few days and then beginning work.

Meanwhile, Maggie redoubled her efforts to leave Gianna undamaged, and the bruises slowly faded. The attempt wasn't without its mistakes, but Gianna could have picked up the same level of injury by bumping into things all by herself, and was disinclined to adopt a hands-off policy with Maggie. I didn't want to risk re-igniting

Maggie's opposition to the plan by requiring more of a sacrifice from her.

Edward kept me in the loop on the general shape of the process. Rosalie had taken far more eggs from me than were normally removed in a harvesting procedure, since I'd had no expectation of needing them in their original state. As a result, they had some leeway with the raw materials, and were creating several embryos, most of which would go right back in the freezer to be used later in case we found a second surrogate and wanted a second child. This also meant that we had an opportunity to pick the gender we preferred.

"Well," I said when presented with this, "if there's a bunch to choose from, why stop at gender? Let's get Alice and have her look them over, and tell us about them in detail."

So we found Alice, who pranced into the room, closed her eyes to concentrate, and promptly said, "Ow!"

"What's wrong?" asked Jasper, who'd followed close at her heels. Edward, who didn't need to ask, groaned.

"They take after you, Bella," laughed Alice weakly.

"You can't see them?" I asked. "That doesn't make sense. You could see me perfectly when I was human; they shouldn't have inherited that immunity if they inherited any of it at all."

"Not a thing," Alice said. "I can't even tell which are the girls and which are the boys. I'm sorry, I wish I could help."

"Can you see around them?" asked Edward. "If we decide on one can you look ahead a few months and see *us*...?"

Alice tried, but then winced. "Nothing that depends on them, either. Oh, boy, this is going to be fun."

I sucked in a nervous breath. "I guess we're flying blind, then - or rather, with what we can find from the genes alone. That's gender and what else?"

"Carlisle's already looked at one of them, but while he's fairly confident that that one was a female, she had twenty-four pairs of chromosomes - which means anything known about human genes could be completely off-base," Edward said.

"Humans have twenty-three, right?" I asked, and he nodded. "Has Carlisle ever taken a vampire cell apart and looked at it?"

"We've got twenty-five pairs," Edward said. "So it makes a bizarre kind of sense. Anyway, Carlisle could *guess* what the other genes on the embryos' chromosomes might mean, but it would be just that - guesswork."

"I guess it's still more choice than most parents get," I sighed. Alice and Jasper left the room, the former rubbing her temple. Jasper threw a suspicious look at me over his shoulder. We'd avoided crossing paths very much since I'd added his witchcraft to those I blocked. There hadn't been another dramatic confrontation, but when we did pass each other in a hallway or have reason to exchange information, he was definitely less friendly and more willing to assume that I was acting in bad faith.

Edward frowned at his departing brother but didn't comment on that subject. "Indeed," he said instead, turning back to me and taking my hands in his. "So, my love - son or daughter?"

"Do you have a preference?" I asked, and he shook his head. "I suppose the evidence we have available suggests that a girl will probably not be venomous," I said. "That seems like a plus." I supposed I could have covered for my existing bite mark by having a son and plausibly being bitten once thereby, but I wasn't confident I could manage the concealment for that long anyway. Emmett would be suspicious if I suddenly lost interest in sparring, and that would inevitably push my sleeve up my arm unless I made obvious and equally peculiar efforts to prevent it. I really needed to figure out how to explain it. Ran into an immortal child in Sweden while not with Edward? But then what would I have done with it after receiving the bite? Found some baby brother of Nahuel's in Finland someplace, whose mother swore me to secrecy? That could work. Got into a fight with a vampire midget?

"True," he said, fortunately and maddeningly oblivious to my thought process as always. "So, a daughter, then?"

I nodded slowly. Everything was coming together very fast, and while it was still necessary and I still liked the idea, it was also intimidating. Picking a gender was much more emotionally *real* to me than being vaguely aware that strange pieces of medical equipment were being carried into the house. "I guess we should start thinking about names," I said, "since we won't have as long as human parents to think of them."

We left the room where the embryos that included our future daughter rested, walking together out of the house and into the yard. "I don't know anything about your opinions of baby names," Edward said.

"Likewise," I replied. "I feel like we should - one way or another - name her after somebody. I'm a little concerned that as the only half-vampire in a large coven of vampires she'll be... disconnected, somehow. A meaningful name might help her feel grounded. I'm making this up completely, of course; my parents picked my name out of a baby book because it sounded pretty and I haven't felt particularly un-grounded."

"It's still a place to start," Edward said. "I was named after my father. I don't remember a lot about him, but I have his name, which is something."

"I didn't know that," I said. "Okay, what was your mother's name?"

"Elizabeth," supplied Edward. "Actually, I think Isabella is a variant on the name Elizabeth, too, but the source I heard that from might not be reliable."

"So maybe another Elizabeth variation," I said. "Especially if that turns out to be right." I ran through the other names we might want to incorporate into our daughter's. "You know," I said, "it really *seems* like there should be a way to portmanteau "Renée" and "Esme". The vowels are so similar. But there's just no way to put them together in a way that sounds like a name and not a Pokémon."

Edward laughed. "I think it would mean a lot to Rosalie if her name were wedged in there somewhere. A middle name would do," he suggested.

"I think it'd also make sense to honor Gianna. She's helping us out in a *really* major way. "Annarose" for a middle name?"

"That's perfect."

We went to our cottage, and I pulled out my laptop and looked up names derived from "Elizabeth" on the Internet. There were a *lot*, including, as Edward had said, "Isabella". I pruned out those that were just different spellings of the base name or my own version, and the obvious nicknames like "Liz" that our daughter could plausibly choose to go by no matter what variant we landed on.

"Look," I said, smirking. "*Buffy* is a nickname for Elizabeth."

"I think we should rule that one out," Edward said seriously. "It could prompt the wrong sorts of guesses if people notice anything different about her."

I nodded, deleted it from the list of possibilities, and then started removing other names for increasingly minor reasons, mostly aesthetic. I removed "Libby" and its near cousins, which I sort of liked, at Edward's direction; he'd known someone who went by that name and had found her an unpleasant person. After a while, we had a short list: "Babette", "Bettina" and a few similar names, "Elspeth", "Ilsa", "Lisel" and other spellings thereof, and "Lilibeth".

"I'm tempted by Lisel," I said, "but I think I like Elspeth better. It's uncommon without being unpronounceable, nor so novel that it risks sounding much more out of place after a hundred years than it does now."

"Elspeth Annarose it is," said Edward.

Carlisle picked out a female embryo for us, and Rosalie did the honors of actually implanting it. The others were frozen. We were warned ahead of time that the rates of pregnancy for in vitro techniques were low, but the following day Gianna was absolutely certain that the first try had taken, and she made herself a large plate of eggs for breakfast.

Puking began shortly afterwards.

Maggie insisted that Gianna shouldn't have to cook for herself in her condition, bought a large stack of cookbooks so she could make Gianna's food herself, and burned a few omelettes trying to get them right. At that point Ilario took over, rolling his eyes at Maggie as he expertly poached a new batch of eggs; he actually knew how to cook, having done some of it in his human days, and kept his sister supplied with whatever she wanted for her solid food while she ineffectively protested that she wasn't *that* impaired.

There was plenty of human blood in the fridge that Carlisle had purchased, too, which Gianna drank out of opaque cups with lids so she didn't have to think about it too hard. Carlisle, who was taking a lot of time off work and pretending that he was looking after a sick Esme to excuse it, fetched her these beverages and did the dishes. Maggie, Ilario, Jasper, and myself left the house for safety reasons while the scent of blood was in the air, and everyone else at least gave a wide berth.

I e-mailed Charlie and told him the whole story; Rachel got the truth too. I told Renée that *I* was pregnant (as of early July, moreover); I planned to take an inordinate number of baby pictures and dole them out to her at a rate that would make Elspeth appear to age normally.

After I'd reminded the wolves of my existence with this e-mail, Leah sent a conversational sort of note, sounding me out for ongoing correspondence. She was an irregular pen pal and had poor spelling, but I wrote her anyway, telling her what had my attention in a newsy sort of way and making polite inquiries about her. I was informed that Sue's turning, adjustment period, and assumption of her share of the duties of infant care had gone without significant hiccup. Cody was growing as fast as expected and was already talking in complete sentences (his first words had been "Seth, can I have a wolf ride?", which request Seth had obliged). Relations between halves of the pack were cordial, but sadly distant.

Gianna did not lack for attention during the ensuing weeks. Maggie fussed over her, obsessed; she rearranged her hair several times a day for lack of much else helpful to do, and sang constantly. Ilario mostly stood in the corner of Gianna's room, looking stoic, when he wasn't cooking something. Edward and I, plus Rosalie, were mostly interested for the Elspeth's sake rather than in Gianna herself, who didn't lack for caretakers anyway. This still had us hovering around the bed where she spent most of her time resting, trying to make sure she had everything she needed.

The one problem it turned out we were least prepared to handle was Gianna's fluctuating temperature. It had never occurred to me to read anything into it when Sue instructed her children to hug her; now I wondered if she'd been using them as sources of warmth. When Gianna felt too warm - which did happen, although less often - Maggie could snuggle up to her and that worked fine. When she was cold, though, turning up the heater or giving her blankets worked too slowly for comfort. Electric blankets were purchased, but Gianna seemed to find them vaguely unsatisfying. Eventually we settled for keeping the house warmer all the time, and Maggie's cuddling efforts were called on

more frequently.

All told, Gianna held up better under Elspeth than Sue had under Cody. Probably, this was because twenty-three was a more convenient age at which to be violently pregnant than forty-two. In spite of that favorable comparison, and Gianna's better care, Elspeth started doing damage a couple of weeks in. Several ribs were casualties, and Gianna went on painkillers - taping them up, I learned, was not actually a treatment for them, which made me feel better about Sue's neglected fractures. Gianna did not lose consciousness except when properly sleeping.

Without giving this comparison away, though, I could only do so much to soothe Maggie and Ilario. Both were in states of constant worry by the end of the first week and wanted Elspeth's birthday to be as early as possible. They were agreed that far, but could not so readily come to an agreement on who was to turn her, each preferring to do that task themselves.

Gianna was prevailed upon to settle their argument - which consisted mostly of Maggie gesturing wildly and ranting (half in Gaelic) while Ilario regarded her impassively and occasionally uttered a monosyllabic denial. It was an odd role for Gianna to have fallen into, since she hated confrontation and would obviously have rathered it if Maggie and Ilario invariably agreed on everything. Still, she ultimately came up with a compromise they both accepted - Ilario would administer the venom, but it would be Maggie's.

We planned to deliver Elspeth on October twenty-first, if nothing required us to operate earlier. It was exactly three weeks after the implantation date, when I knew and everyone else suspected that this would be safe enough for Gianna and Elspeth both. I suggested the tooth-ripping-out plan so no one had to risk tasting Gianna's blood, and volunteered a canine of my own which Edward could use to open the shell. He was leery of trying to do delicate surgery while distracted by my discomfort, though, and Rosalie readily offered to loan a tooth in my place. My role would instead be to lift Elspeth out.

On October thirteenth, Edward remarked that my birthday had been a month prior, and I hadn't mentioned anything about it. He asked if I was just not counting birthdays anymore. I'd been in La Push on the thirteenth of September - but in all the excitement even Charlie had forgotten the significance of the day, and he (and my permanently scatterbrained mother) had both sent me belated e-mails of well wishes. I'd noted the date when it had passed, but not seen fit to announce it to anyone. "What's the point of counting them?" I said. "So I'm chronologically eighteen now - but I'm going to be physically seventeen for all time, and I'll use mostly forged documents to demonstrate my legal status anyway, and I no longer find birthday cake appetizing."

"That was my guess," he said. "No presents, either?"

"You can get me presents if you want, but there's no need to use my birthday as an excuse," I replied. I smiled. "Or as a restriction."

"So acknowledged," he laughed. "I've been thinking we'll need to celebrate birthdays and half-birthdays for Elspeth, while she's growing still - it still won't be as many as most people get, over the course of a childhood, but..."

I nodded. Elspeth had become the primary topic of conversation between Edward and I; soon we would be parents. If everything went according to plan.

In the next room over, Gianna failed to keep her juice down.

A little over a week before Elspeth's artificial due date, Tanya called Carlisle again.

I wasn't near enough to hear the call on this occasion - I was with Edward in our cottage - but the subsequent morning I heard the news. Laurent had been gone for seventeen days - more than double his previous record excursion length. He wasn't answering his phone, hadn't been for the past week, hadn't called to check in with Irina once in that time. While the very fact that he didn't bring Irina on his trips meant that he didn't want to be witnessed partaking of his unethical food, or doing whatever else it was that made him take so long, she was out of her mind with worry and wanted to prevail on Alice again.

When Carlisle had passed on the message, though, Alice had come up completely blank.

"No," she said when I asked her about it, "not like you - it's subtly different."

"What are the different kinds of blank you can get?" I asked.

"There's four," Alice said. "There's you, there's Elspeth, there's Gianna-while-pregnant-with-Elspeth, and there's Laurent - all different. Your future looks like Swiss cheese. Sometimes it veers off into patches I can see, sometimes when you're in the middle of a hole I can't see anything about you, but a lot of your futures are normally visible. Elspeth *per se* is just not there. I can't see her at all and that casts shadows on everything she affects, so I can only see the big obvious regularities that she can't change. Gianna's mostly in a shadow like that, but I can see around Elspeth in a limited way and get possible futures of Gianna's that don't directly involve Elspeth. But it gives me a killer headache to try, so I've been doing it only when Maggie or Ilario badgers me into checking that I can still see Gianna alive in some futures. And Laurent is..." Alice bit her lip. "He's not there to see. It's not like trying to look for someone invisible like Elspeth, because he doesn't cast any shadows. It's like trying to look for a person who doesn't exist in the first place. I think he's dead."

Irina had heard this suspicion before I had, of course - "How's Irina taken it?" I asked Alice quietly.

The little vampire shook her head. "I can't even imagine what she's going through. She's insane with grief, of course, but she's still got a sliver of hope that Laurent isn't

really dead and something else is interfering with my vision. She does have a point that a lot of things seem to be foiling me lately."

"Have you tried looking for people who turned out to be dead before?" I asked.

"Several times," Alice replied. "They *were* all humans, though, so... But I still think that Laurent's somehow died."

"What exactly does it take to kill a vampire?" I asked, pacing. "Is it the sort of thing that could remotely happen by accident?"

"Not likely," said Alice. "Possible, but not at *all* likely - he'd have to be caught in a very serious explosion, to be unable to escape or put himself back together."

"Has anything like that happened in a plausible radius of Denali?"

"He's been gone long enough that "plausible radius" means "anywhere on the globe"," Alice pointed out. "If he was in Gaza and got in the way of a missile, or near that volcano in El Salvador, for instance, and he wasn't paying enough attention to get to safety, he could have been killed that way. Or taken apart thoroughly enough that he's still incapacitated, but then I'd expect to see him put back together and going home."

"But you don't think that's what happened."

Alice shook her head. "It's way more likely that he got into a fight with another vampire, and lost. I've never heard of any vampire dying in a natural disaster, I just know it's theoretically possible."

"How densely populated by vampires is North America?" I asked. "I realize he could have gone anywhere, but at least we know he started in Alaska."

"Mmm... since the Volturi cleaned out the newborn armies in the South, not all *that* densely, but you can definitely find us in population centers and roaming around."

"Ballpark population on the continent?"

Alice thought. "More than a hundred, fewer than a thousand, if I had to narrow it down I'd say something like three or four hundred. Mostly in big population centers, because you need more territory to be inconspicuous if the area's rural."

"How territorial and inclined to fight are average vampires?" I asked. "I've only met the Volturi, friends of the family, and Huilen, who was alone when Edward and I showed up. Plus Laurent's old coven, but I was human then, and don't remember them too well."

"Laurent's old coven is the closest to normal you've met, considering that Huilen's in contact with her nephew..." Alice trailed off, closed her eyes, and then opened them with a small gasp. "Oh, how strange," she exclaimed. "Elspeth doesn't take after you - or perhaps she does, but that isn't why I can't see her. I can't see Nahuel either, any more

than I can see Elspeth."

My eyes flew open very wide. "It's a species thing."

She nodded emphatically. "I can see Huilen... but only about as much as I can see you. It's Swiss cheese. Huh, I wonder why your immunity works that way."

Because I'm only invisible to you when I'm being acted on by another invisible species. "Maybe only a bit of my brain has the hang of being invisible and you see me when other bits are in charge," I said, affecting uncuriosity with a shrug.

Alice frowned, her brow furrowed. But she didn't pursue that topic. "Anyway, your standard vampire wanders around - or lurks in a big city where a lot of people can go missing without it being big news. Eats every three, four days, one or two people at a time, or lies low for as long as a couple of weeks if one of their meals gets too much attention. They usually steal stuff; maintaining legitimate funds is too much of a hassle under those limitations. About a third of them travel alone, another third in mated pairs, last third in covens of two or three, rarely four or more, which may or may not include mates."

"Doesn't quite answer my question," I said.

"Lone vampires are more likely to avoid confrontations," Alice said. "But if we assume Laurent was alone too, he'd run some risk of provoking one if they just didn't like the look of him or felt like getting into a fight... some think of combat, even lethal combat, as recreational. Pairs and covens will stake out territories and are pretty likely to attack anyone who won't clear off when told to. Less likely to attack an individual for fun, though, because without the individual being a witch, the odds are in the group's favor to the point of being unsporting. And I don't understand why Laurent wouldn't just get out of other vampires' way if he ran afoul of one - but I'm not sure why he'd have to leave home for so long to begin with anyway."

"He was eating people," I reminded her. That information had filtered through to everyone in the family.

"Even so. Denali's remote, but it's not *that* remote," mused Alice. "I'm sure he could get to enough potential feeding grounds that there'd be no reason for him to spend more than twenty-four hours round trip each time."

"He might have eaten a few people each time he went out, and needed to spread it out," I said, and with a sinking feeling it occurred to me that there was one exceptionally dangerous location that was a twenty-four hour round trip from Denali.

But if Laurent had gone *there*, he wouldn't have made the return journey.

"Bah," said Alice. "You wandered into one of the holes in the cheese that is your future again."

"Huh," I said, feigning surprise. "Anyway, I guess there's no way to find out what happened to Laurent, is there?"

"Not really," Alice said regretfully. "I see the future, not the past."

I patted her shoulder, pursing my lips sympathetically, and excused myself.

I had an awkward question for Rachel.

Rachel was actually not *sure* if wolves had killed Laurent.

I know it wasn't anyone in my pack, she wrote back. I checked. But things are rocky enough between me and Becky that I haven't communicated with her much - mostly about practical things like who's on duty doing lookout where so the packs don't have to run into each other. We've been tending to fight, which really sucks. Turns out the non-alphas can move between packs however they want, and she's collecting the hardcore anti-vampire wolves and they're just barely not going after Harry and Sue and Cody. If you know where he would have been I can tell you if my guys were there then.

But I didn't know - it was only a wild guess. *Can you ask her directly?* I wrote back, and attached a description of Laurent.

She didn't get back to me for two days after that, and I occupied my free time hovering near Gianna, discussing parenting with Edward, and wondering what I would even *do* if I learned that Becky's pack had killed Laurent.

I still didn't have the answer to that question when I got Rachel's reply. *Promise me you won't hurt my sister for killing your friend,* was all she wrote.

He wasn't my friend, I wrote back. *If he was near you guys, he was probably going to kill somebody in La Push or Forks, maybe even Charlie - I just wish they'd been able to capture him instead of killing, because if Irina ever finds out, then there's a potential small war on your hands.* I explained the relationship between Irina and Laurent and the reason the other Denalis had tolerated his lifestyle. *If Irina figures out what happened to her Laurent...*

I didn't really know Irina well. The only vampire I'd ever met in my life who'd lost a mate was Marcus, who I had never seen utter a word or do anything but wander around, touch Aro's hand, and stare into space. I didn't know how long ago his mate had died, or what he'd done when the grief had been fresh. The next most available source of information I had was to imagine Edward dead.

Every fragment of my self refused to let me imagine this in any detail. It was the only intolerable concept in the world. I could imagine being flung back into the agony I'd felt when turning, though it had been incomprehensibly tortuous. I could imagine my own death, though I loved being alive and hoped to cling for it for all time. I could imagine

Gianna miscarrying, little Elspeth failing to survive, though I felt more attached to my daughter-to-be with every passing hour.

But Edward *had* to exist, or something was fundamentally wrong with the universe.

Filled with unreasonable panic, I restored the original names in my mental scenario and gradually forced my rebellious mind to calm. If *Irina* found out who had killed *Laurent*. That was the hypothetical at hand. *My* husband was safe, *my* mate had not been killed by a pack of anti-vampire wolves, *my Edward* was mine for all eternity.

I wrote, *If Irina figures out what happened to her Laurent, she will kill whoever killed him or die trying. The rest of her coven might help her.*

I sent the e-mail, and I went to soothe the ruffles in my thoughts by finding Edward.

"What happened to Marcus's mate?" I asked Edward, some time later.

"Didyme? She died," Edward replied. "Less than a year after Aro turned her - Marcus met her right after she became a vampire. Marcus wasn't with her at the time of her death, so he didn't see the specifics, but Aro found the coven of vampires who'd killed her, and he and Marcus destroyed them together. She was Aro's sister," Edward added, as an afterthought.

"Aro seems to have borne up under the loss a lot better than Marcus," I observed.

Edward nodded. "I've never heard Aro thinking about Didyme at all. Marcus thinks of almost nothing else, so I picked it all up from him. Aro did love her, but... it's not the same. It's like Ilario and Gianna, as opposed to Maggie and Gianna. Ilario is her brother, and that's a very human sort of relationship. He loves her, he'll do everything in his power to protect her, but he could eventually move on if she died. Maggie's in a different position."

"Irina must be going through hell," I said, pulling Edward a little closer. *Mine, mine, mine* - I knew my brain was being taken over by spooky mate bond magic. I'd signed up for exactly that when I'd said I was ready to turn. And if I hadn't, then I would have eventually died of the disease of mortality, and then Edward would have lost me, and then *he* would have gone through hell and I would be dead and have no Edward, and that would not be satisfactory at all. Much better for us to be both immortal and together. Albeit a little nerve-wracking when I considered the chinks in our undeath.

"She's still not convinced that Laurent is dead," he said, stroking my hair. "She has some hope."

"How long can she go on hoping that? If he doesn't come home, and doesn't come home, and goes on not coming home..."

"Not forever," admitted Edward. "Maybe longer than you'd think, though."

Because anything, even throwing oneself into an increasingly crumbly and obvious lie, would feel better than that sickening black hole of grief that I could not bear to contemplate. But Irina was *living* it. Whatever she *thought*, her worst nightmare - or close enough as to make no difference - was reality. I was concealing that all-important information from her.

Because if I didn't, she'd die and might take a wolf or two with her.

Would Irina rather die, if she found out what had happened to Laurent? Probably she'd rather kill Becky's entire pack first - maybe Rachel's too, maybe the whole Quileute tribe, who knew how widely she'd assign the blame - but after. If she wreaked all the vengeance she wanted, somehow picked off wolves one at a time until they were gone without losing her own life, what would she want to happen next?

I was sure I knew the corresponding answer for Edward. I'd been able to figure that much out even before I'd turned. He had the tragic self-sacrificing streak; he wouldn't want to live in a world that didn't contain me. Irina, though, I wasn't sure. Would she consider her life worth living anymore? Could she even consider the question?

I wondered suddenly what would happen to wolves whose imprints died. Their human, *mortal* imprints, afforded no special lifespan or unusual resilience. Maybe that was why the tribe didn't contain any hundred-year-old holdovers from the last pack; maybe they'd all imprinted and quit their anti-aging regimen of periodically turning into giant wolves, so they wouldn't have to outlive their loves by long. When little Claire caught up to Quil, would he abandon his other form, turning physically thirty and forty and fifty with her, so he wouldn't have to be young while she was old, alive while she was dead? Was Jared already trying to get himself under control so his age-matched girlfriend wouldn't rush by him?

How could I make sure that this disaster never, *ever* befell *me*?

I decided that I was not going to continue flying off to La Push whenever there was a hiccup with the pack. Rachel was a smart cookie and could handle her stuff, with long-distance consultation and funding handled via the Internet. I didn't need to be physically present, especially not with Harry and Sue and Cody nearby to be resident venom sources if they wanted someone turned. (Rachel had mentioned, in a pre-Laurent-revelation e-mail, that in order to keep the peace with Becky's pack, Harry and Sue and Cody were living in the shack full-time. Harry was fixing the place up to be a fit home. Leah and Seth still lived in the family's house on the reservation. But they were still within spitting distance.)

But simply being *present* wasn't necessarily enough to fend off the specter threatening my peace of mind. I would need to be present and *effective*. I had some advantages against some of the foes I might have to face eventually. But these were known to those very foes, and if I were the only one left standing while Alec caused my

family to fall senselessly to the ground around me, then I'd just be one vampire, not very good at fighting, to be targeted separately by some non-mental attack while my helpless brothers and sisters and in-laws and *Edward* were unable to defend me.

And then they - *he* - could be destroyed. That hurt. It hurt to think about it so much that I wanted to think about anything else, or not to think at all - just to snuggle closer to my gloriously alive Edward and pretend that our "immortality" was *invulnerability*. But it *wasn't*. Neglecting that fact wouldn't make it less factual. Edward *could* be taken from me. I *couldn't* defend him against every threat the world might throw at us.

Not okay.

I wondered about the limits of my shield. What might I eventually be able to add to it? Becoming immune to Jasper had been *easy*. I'd practically just repeated a mantra to myself. The first mantra I'd even tried. Was that a coincidence, just a feature of Jasper's power existing close to the line between what I did and didn't block? Or was my witchcraft very extensible?

Just how much could I immunize myself to, if I tried?

There was probably some limit, and I'd need to be able to cover for that with some competence in physical combat. I'd avoided sparring since getting my scar. I didn't have any clothes that I normally wore which could cover my wrist in even the most casual mock fight - sleeves were mobile sorts of things. I still didn't have a *good* story to explain it. But it was possible that Elspeth would be venomous, and then I could claim she bit me. The sample of half-vampires numbered five, so far - four of whom were half-siblings. It wasn't guaranteed that my daughter would be like the other female hybrids before her.

In less than a week, I'd find out if that was a viable cover story. Until then I wore long sleeves when around anyone other than Edward.

And then I'd have *motherhood* to take up a huge chunk of my time.

At least Elspeth would sleep nights.

The sheer ferventness Maggie applied to her anxious writhing over Gianna's condition was impressive. It made Elspeth's birth nearly anticlimactic. While Maggie held her breath and Gianna's hand, and Ilario fidgeted nearby, Carlisle administered some heavy-duty anaesthesia and a sedative. Edward cut down to the shell; Rosalie handed over a tooth and he cut through the shell with that and gave it back to her. While she rinsed the blood off it and let it re-adhere to her mouth, I pried the shell open, and there was Elspeth.

My baby.

I grinned from ear to ear and thrust my hands into the liquid to retrieve her. She opened her mouth, and I had a sudden idea - I leaned my arm in such a way as to present

the inside of my left wrist for biting, and obligingly, she fastened her teeth onto the correct location. She wasn't venomous, but the fluid my arm was immerse in was *like* venom - it could explain the scar, and I didn't expect anyone to experiment with the stuff to check my story. "Ow," I muttered as I picked her up, because she *did* break my skin. But I felt the wound healing smooth, and she apparently didn't think I tasted good, because she didn't bite me again when I cradled her close. Carlisle handed me a blanket and patted me on the back, and I wrapped her up.

Gianna had held up so well through the procedure that Carlisle was able to put her in a coma before Ilario administered Maggie's venom. Maggie's release of tension was palpable - Gianna was out of the woods, and after some unconsciousness and some mindboggling torment, she would be fine. Unbreathing, Maggie assumed a protective position, holding her turning mate like she was made of glass. Ilario discarded the syringes and started pacing while Carlisle cleaned up the blood.

And I was a mother.

Elsbeth had my eyes. Not my amber vampire eyes, gradually lightening with every meal I had - the brown ones I'd sported when human. The shade exactly matched the photographs I had from my first seventeen years.

This didn't escape Edward's notice. As we left the room where Gianna lay, he remarked on it. "I admit I missed your eyes," he said. "I'm glad they weren't lost completely."

"She has your hair, though," I told him, once we'd gotten far enough away. She did: the same bronze-red-brown. Just a little fuzz of it. A question occurred to me while I stared raptly at our daughter. "Can you hear anything from her?"

"Not yet. I've never been able to hear a baby less than two months old, and usually it takes six - I'm sure she'll be far faster than that, unless she's got her mother's brain, too," he said wryly.

"The bit where Alice couldn't see her turned out to be a fluke," I said. I touched Elspeth's nose and she expelled a small puff of air with a *pah* sound.

"But as you pointed out, that wasn't something you had while human," he replied, grinning involuntarily at the baby.

I nodded. "Oh," I said, when we were out of earshot of the main house, "if anybody asks..." I shifted Elspeth in my arms and pointed at the torn sleeve that revealed part of the scar on my wrist. "I got this when Elspeth bit me. She's not venomous but the amniotic fluid was close enough."

"Understood," he said. "If Maggie asks?"

I considered what he could say to her. "I don't know the really fine points of what

she'll notice and what she won't. Can you just say, "Elspeth bit her"? She *did*, after all."

"Not in response to a direct question about your scar," he said, "not when I know the scar predates Elspeth. The statement has to be something I believe to be true in context, not just in isolation."

I exhaled a breath through my teeth, petting Elspeth's hair as I did so. She was very warm. "She'll never buy that you don't know where it's from. Ugh. If Maggie asks you... *a baby half-vampire* bit me. I trust she can be allowed to extrapolate incorrectly."

Edward's eyes widened, but he nodded. "Can I hold her?" he asked after a moment. I handed Elspeth over, missing the heat and the vital thrum of her heart immediately.

The look on Edward's face was indescribably paternal as he cradled our child. "She's perfect," he murmured.

"I know," I said, gloatingly.

"Oooh," said Elspeth, with an uncannily toothy smile for a newborn infant, and we arrived at our fairytale home in the woods to try to interest her in non-blood comestibles.

Little Witch

I read Elspeth's mind before Edward did.

This was mostly a coincidence: he was on an errand in town with Jasper at the time, out of range. They were trying to find a purveyor of forged documents so that Elspeth could be freely moved about the globe. Edward had to be along to help find such a person - existing contacts in Norway were thin on the ground. Jasper was there because his preferred method of handling such business relationships involved the application of artificial fear to discourage excessive inquisitiveness. I didn't care for that part, but I had other things on my mind and was still vaguely avoiding Jasper.

Meanwhile, Alice and I were having a photo shoot, taking pictures of Elspeth in different outfits against assorted backdrops so that when Renée could begin to see baby pictures, they'd seem to cover a couple of years of first-time-parent scrapbooking, not the few months it'd take her to rocket through infancy and toddlerhood.

"Um," said Elspeth, which was the sound she usually made when considering whether a proffered food item was acceptable to her. I'd been drawing on my residual knowledge of cooking to keep her fed; there was no real kitchen in the cottage, just an old fashioned fireplace with a pot hanging in it, so I did all the cooking in the main house and brought the food out to her. (Gianna had woken from her coma and I didn't particularly want Elspeth listening to her screams.) Elspeth did not much care for food - that, or my cooking was just not as good now that I found none of the ingredients appealing and could scarcely remember any part of the skill. Still, she would reluctantly eat copious amounts of things that passed muster once we'd coaxed her into trying them; she needed the fuel to grow as fast as she did.

"Are you hungry, Elspeth?" I asked her, swapping her sweater for a silly ruffled dress that Alice had bought her. We were taking most of our pictures indoors or against the backdrop of the plain sky, so the season wouldn't be readily detectable, and Alice - who I'd given relatively free rein with the just-for-show outfits - had selected items for all weathers.

"Um," said Elspeth again, and she placed her hand on my cheek.

The feeling was like running through a memory in chronological order, but it wasn't *my* memory. Too fuzzy to be post-turning, too complete to be pre-, and too painless to be from the middle of the process. Also, I was *in* the memory - my face, as it looked to those around me. After a moment, I realized: though I had no idea how or why, Elspeth was showing me her perspective on her own birth. The visuals were all there, although they didn't interfere with my real vision. It didn't come with sound or any other sensory tracks. There was just the picture of me leaning in and then Elspeth's vision wheeling to show the rest of the room.

And then the picture focused in on the blood from Gianna's cut.

"Ummmmmm," elaborated Elspeth, putting her hand down. *That* was the sound she made when she had tasted a food and it appealed to her. As much as *food* food ever did, anyway.

"Elspeth," I said, "in our family, we do not drink human blood. The rest of us have to drink animal blood, but you don't have to do that. You can eat regular food." I didn't talk baby-talk to her; it wouldn't do any good to get used to that when we expected complete sentences back in just a few days.

"What's going on?" asked Alice, sounding lost and holding a flowery hat.

"We've got ourselves a little witch," I said, tickling my daughter and smiling. "A little witch who thirsts for human blood, but we will not be encouraging bad habits, no we will *not*." Elspeth giggled, apparently in spite of herself. Then she made a remarkably mature sort of face, one that would have looked like a disappointed authority figure on anyone but my two-day-old child.

"What'd she do? Is she telepathic?" asked Alice. "You acted like she'd asked you for something."

"Sort of. It was all visuals, no sound, no words - her own memory," I said. "But I definitely had the impression that when she remembered the bit about Gianna's blood, she wasn't asking after her auntie's welfare."

Alice chuckled. "Can I see if she'll show me something?" she asked, holding her arms out.

I gave her Elspeth, who didn't appear to know what she was meant to do. Eventually Alice took her hand and laid it against her cheek, the way Elspeth had done of her own accord when trying to communicate with me. "Ooh," said Elspeth, apparently comprehending, and Alice's eyelids fluttered while she processed the offered memory.

"So now you have three sources of vision," I said. "How's that working out for you?"

"Just a bit dizzying," murmured Alice. "She's very insistent on the blood thing. Maybe she thinks I'll give it to her if you won't."

"Ah, no you don't, Elsie," I said, retrieving her - and the intended hat - from Alice. "There will be no begging favors from others if you get a no from me."

"Pah," said Elspeth, disgruntled, and she tried to pull the hat away from me, but I got it onto her head and arranged her in a photogenic pose so Alice could snap the picture.

When Edward got home, not long after the photos for the day had all been taken, he noticed Elspeth's "voice" at once. He leapt into the cottage with a grin on his face that momentarily disrupted my ability to think, plucked Elspeth from her perch on the chair

we'd last posed her in, and spun around once, holding her at arm's length. Alice slipped out to give us family time.

"Ee!" was her pleased response to this treatment, and when he brought her in closer, she planted her hand on *his* cheek, too, so before I could explain what was happening he was also the recipient of a memory.

He looked much less surprised than Alice had been, or me - either Alice had been thinking about it or Elspeth had, coherently enough that he'd expected it.

"What's she showing you?" I asked.

"The last time she saw me," he murmured. "She recognizes me."

"Lucky you," I laughed. "She was begging me and Alice for blood, earlier."

Edward's face changed, a moment after I said the word "blood". "Oh, that does seem... hm." He blinked. "If she dislikes human food *that* much..."

"She's two days old," I said. "This is, for her, old enough to express a preference. Doesn't mean she's also old enough to be given charge of her own diet. If she wants to hunt animals for herself when she's old enough to do that, I'm not going to stop her. That'd be kind of hypocritical. But let's not rule out the possibility that she's just being a baby and has yet to develop a taste for what she's offered."

"I suppose," he said.

"Ummm," said Elspeth insistently, patting his cheek.

"There's mashed potatoes," I said, gesturing at the fridge we'd moved into the house to store Elspeth's food. I had cooked for the day in the early morning, before she woke up, so during her active period I wouldn't be distracted by putting together the meals. "She hasn't tried those yet."

Edward dutifully retrieved the tub of mashed potatoes, warmed them up in the microwave that had also been added to our dwelling, and offered Elspeth a forkful. She frowned at the starchy item, but disdainfully parted her lips and consented to taste it. Instead of making either of her typical noises, she placed her hand on Edward's cheek. He gave her another bite of the food.

"She approves?" I inquired, going to stand near them.

He nodded. "As much as she does of anything she's tried. I'm getting that as much from my talent as hers, though. It's a little tricky to decipher what she wants from the images alone."

"She doesn't have a lot to work with, if all she's doing is transmitting her own memories. But maybe she'll grow into more versatility," I speculated. "Interesting that she

should be sticking to visuals while you work with an auditory channel..."

"I can see images from other peoples' minds," he said, "it just feels like I'm hearing them. Almost like synaesthesia."

"But I didn't feel like I was hearing Elspeth's memory." She was wolfing down potatoes, barely chewing them - she'd seemed to have a preference for softer foods, despite her vampire-piercing set of chompers. Possibly because she could swallow it faster and get the chore of eating over with.

"Maybe if you were aware of your shield, it would look visible to you," Edward said.

"How heritable is witchcraft, anyway?"

"Where there's data, it suggests that it does run in families... but it's skewed," Edward said. "For instance, Alec and Jane are biological twins and powerful witches, but if only one of them had had a talent, it's unlikely we'd ever have heard about the other."

I nodded. "But you said Charlie's thoughts are indistinct to you. That's sort of related to what I do."

"It is. And Aro's sister was a witch, after she turned - according to Marcus's memories, he turned her on the suspicion that Didyme's talent would be as useful as his own."

Elspeth finished the potatoes, having swallowed them nearly as fast as Edward could bring the fork to her mouth. Her quick metabolism was already burning them for fuel; there was no visible protrusion in her belly. "What did Didyme do?" I asked Edward, plucking her from his arms selfishly to cradle her. He looked at the pair of us with a pleased gleam in his eye.

"She had an aura of happiness," he said, plainly not thinking very hard about the topic of conversation as he reached out to stroke Elspeth's cheek. "Couldn't turn it off, couldn't direct it, couldn't do anything with it but project it everywhere she went. She had a lot of admirers, actually, but Marcus was the only one whose interest she returned."

"That sounds pleasant, I suppose, but not that useful by Volturi standards," I mused. "How'd Aro react to that?"

"I haven't heard Marcus dwelling on it, and as I said, I've never caught Aro thinking of her," said Edward, still distracted by our baby's smile. Elspeth blinked at him with her mesmerizingly brown eyes. "She's so beautiful," he murmured.

I handed her back to him. "One of these days I'm going to stop thinking I'm the center of the universe," I teased.

That broke his stare; his eyes flicked up to meet mine. "She's half you," he said.

"With your eyes - your old eyes. Can you blame me?"

"Not a bit. I'm awfully pleased with her too, you know. Just - you take very readily to fatherhood," I said. "I knew it appealed to you, but watching it happen is something new to integrate into how I think of you."

He leaned over and kissed me, then returned to staring at Elspeth. She stared back, obligingly enough. I chuckled, then asked, "How did the errand go?"

"Well enough," he said. "We found a fellow in Oslo, and got Norwegian papers claiming that Elspeth is a year old. There are more on order, which will be finished in a few weeks, claiming two, three, five, seven, ten, thirteen, and sixteen, on the theory that this will cover enough ages to get along with during the time we're likely to spend here. That being limited by Carlisle's ability to pass for his supposed age at work, of course. Jasper's competent to add home-taken photographs as she approaches those apparent ages. He was working on the one-year-old version when I left him."

Elspeth could probably pass for a smallish one-year-old already. She was roughly *baby-sized*, but slimmer, more alert, and toothier than any brand-new human in the world. If I had to explain her tininess to someone confused about her claimed yearling status, I supposed it wouldn't even be a lie to claim that she was born prematurely.

"I feel like she ought to be getting some social interaction with people outside the family, at least once she's talking," I said. "But it's not safe to give her any real continuity, is it? Someone would notice. She'd either like the people she met and miss them, or not like them and not get much out of having met them."

"It's a big family, love," he pointed out. "Especially if Maggie and Gianna - and Ilario - stay. It might do for the time being." Ilario's original plan to go with his sister and live near Rome was not meshing well with Maggie's affection for Ireland. There had been other topics looming larger in their minds, of late, but there had still been occasional spats about it. I expected Gianna to be made tiebreaker or the engineer of compromise once she woke up, and it might be that she'd split the difference by announcing that she wanted to remain in Norway. They weren't at all unwelcome, although it would make our group kind of unwieldy.

I kind of wanted to invite Charlie over, but even Edward didn't know that he was in on the masquerade. Charlie had been sort of passive-aggressive about this in his various e-mails, lamenting that he didn't get to hold his new granddaughter. I might need to find an excuse to bring her *there*, in spite of my prior resolution not to run to La Push at the drop of a hat anymore. Maybe she could make friends with Cody, too, and have a peer of her own species. I didn't really want to take her to Chile to meet Nahuel. He was nice enough, but as far as I knew he had no plans to permanently abandon his preferred diet, and that wasn't the sort of influence I hoped to bring into her life. I didn't want anyone in Elspeth's life to normalize murder in her hearing until she had something resembling critical thinking faculties.

Elspeth put her hand on Edward's cheek again. "She wants you to read to her," he announced. "Interesting... it was an image of when you read to her last night before she went to sleep, but there was a feeling attached to it, not just the picture."

"*That's* a request I'm perfectly happy to oblige," I said, and I plucked the top book off the stack of reading material I'd raided from Carlisle's library, accepted Elspeth from Edward's arms, and began to read.

The subsequent morning, in the wee hours when Elspeth was still asleep, I went up to the main house to whip up a few more batches of miscellaneous food. I could hear Gianna from a mile away. I could hear Maggie too, singing brokenly, trying to soothe the unsoothable, but Gianna was far louder.

I tried to ignore it, just focused on the oats I was boiling and the chicken I was trying to overcook until it would be soft enough to suit Elspeth, but Gianna was hard to hedge out.

I was halfway through stirring syrup into the oatmeal when she abandoned wordless screaming for some very underhanded *wordy* screaming.

"If you love me," I heard Gianna cry, her voice already taking on the glassy quality of a vampire's. "Please, please, if you ever loved me."

"Baby," whispered Maggie, breaking off the song.

"It hurts, it hurts," sobbed Gianna. Her spine - which Carlisle had broken as soon as she came out of the coma - had healed hours ago. "If you love me you'll make it stop."

That was low, really. I'd begged to die too, but I hadn't impugned the quality of Edward's love when he'd refused. Maggie whined, deep in her throat. "It's mostly over," she said, frantic. I could hear Gianna thrashing around, Maggie trying to find purchase and hold her. Was Ilario even in the room, or had he left, unable to tolerate the spectacle? "Baby, you're almost done, I promise, I promise -"

"Make it stop," Gianna begged. "I never asked you for anything - anything - this is the one thing I want - if you love me -"

Maggie sounded like she was trying to cry, but she couldn't, of course. "I love you. I love you so much, my Gianna, and I can't kill you, I could never, I wish I could make the hurting stop right now any other way but I can't, baby, but I love you, please, you have to know that. It's almost over." Then, a quaver in her voice that I barely detected, she sang again, and Gianna gave up on arguing and just howled.

I gritted my teeth a little. The screaming was bad enough, but I also knew what it signified, and that was worse. It was all well and good to know that Gianna would wake up a glorious immortal and return in joy every moment of misery she was causing Maggie

now, and get back every one she was enduring by fire herself. She was still suffering.

I packed up the sweetened oatmeal. Gianna was hyperventilating. I pulled the chicken out of the oven, and replaced it with a pan of assorted vegetables to roast. Gianna started repeating Maggie's name, over and over and over, too fast and desperate and strung together to sound like she even intended to start a complete sentence. Maggie was too distraught by this to go on with her song, and she interrupted it again, repeating Gianna's name in turn.

I couldn't turn off my ears; if I was going to be in the house, there were no earmuffs in the world fluffy enough to prevent me from hearing everything they said. I busied myself with the transfer of the chicken from its roasting pan to a more portable container, trying to ignore the strangely intimate exchange of pain upstairs.

"Bella," said Gianna's voice, suddenly, interrupting the litany of "Maggie, Maggie, Maggie".

"Huh?" murmured Maggie.

"What?" I said. They'd hear me as well as I'd hear them, at this point - the remaining enhancements Gianna would get to her hearing weren't so great that she couldn't already hear me from a flight of stairs away.

"No, *no*," Maggie pleaded. "Baby, don't do this to me, please -"

"Bella," choked Gianna. "I helped you. *Help me*."

"I won't kill you," I said.

"Baby, please stop," Maggie begged. "Ilario said no and I said no and Bella said no and everyone's going to say no, please don't ask, baby, I know you want to live, it's just the -"

"*I want to die*," Gianna screamed.

There was a silence, a pause, and it occurred to me to wonder how that statement, so bald and certain, would affect Maggie. Not a request or an implication, just a fact.

Spoken to Maggie, who *knew* lies when she heard them...

Gianna wasn't lying -

There was a sound like fingernails on a chalkboard and Gianna's breath caught and I was up the stairs and through the door without bothering to open it. I pried Maggie off of Gianna, breaking the redhead's wrist in my haste with an unrestrained application of newborn strength.

I seemed to have been just barely in time. There were cracks running along the

surface of Gianna's skin, where Maggie had squeezed her, but she was basically intact, still breathing, her heart still forcing envenomed blood through her veins. Maggie let out an incoherent sob but didn't try to fight me; it had been a moment of weakness against her mate's demands, then, not a concerted change of opinion.

The cracks knitted; Maggie's wrist healed. "Should've let her," gasped Gianna. "Please. Please."

"Maggie, do you need to be somewhere else?" I asked. Gianna didn't have the power to hurt herself; she'd be fine left alone, physically, and the emotional succor Maggie had to provide was clearly not going to do her any good.

"I can't, I can't, I can't, I hurt her, oh God, I didn't want to hurt her, I *can't*," Maggie wailed.

"Maggie," whispered Gianna, but the named vampire shut her eyes tightly.

"Yes," Maggie told me. I picked her up and carried her out of the house, away from the screaming.

I didn't worry about the vegetables in the oven. If they were going to catch the house on fire, Alice would see in plenty of time. Maggie didn't try to get me to set her down, she just curled up inwards on herself and made keening noises.

I put her on the edge of a fjord, and she sat, mostly upright, hugging her knees and burying her face. "Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome," I said, although the stock response seemed inadequate to the situation. "Are... you... okay?"

"Ilario is better than me," Maggie said in a monotone, unlike her usual lively voice. "He wasn't sure of himself, so he left, that was better for her, not so risky, I wasn't sure and I stayed because I wanted her to need me but she doesn't, she needs anybody *but* me, I was weak, I hurt her, I knew it could happen, it happened before..."

"Before, it was a series of accidents," I said. "After, a response to a sincere request - albeit a request you should have seen coming. It's not like your ultimate plan was ever to cause her harm."

"I didn't ask to die, when I was turning," Maggie murmured. "I asked if it would be over and she said yes and I believed her because it was true."

"It's not just a matter of believing it," I said.

Maggie clenched her hands in the fabric of her pants. The denim strained, but she didn't tear it. "If I leave now," she said, "if she never sees me once after she's done, do you

think she has a chance to find somebody better than me one day? Who wouldn't have t-t-
tried to -" I'd never heard a vampire stutter before.

"I have no idea," I said. "And even if she could, it might take long enough that Alice couldn't see it. You couldn't be sure." I didn't have the details of how Sue had felt about Harry between his turning and hers except the obvious behavioral evidence. Let alone how she'd have fared if he'd died while she was mid-change, and that was the nearest template I could have extrapolated from.

"What if I died? Would that do it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Besides, how would you manage it?"

"Ilario," she said. "I could find him and tell him what happened and I could just not fight back..."

"And then what if it doesn't work and she wakes up and she's in Irina's position from the get-go because you've gone and gotten yourself killed trying to free her up for somebody "better"?" I asked.

"You're right," Maggie mumbled. "But she deserves better."

"She'll forgive you," I said. "She can't not."

"I know, and that makes it worse. If I hurt her before she could have sent me away and protected herself and now she won't even be able to do that, at least if I see her, and who am I kidding, I can't stay away forever if I'm alive, I'm not that *strong*, if I were then I could be with her *now*..."

"Once she's a vampire it's unlikely you'll be in a position to hurt her," I pointed out.

"That doesn't mean I never did," Maggie said. "I *did*."

"Do you need me to stay here with you to keep you from doing something stupid like provoking Ilario?" I asked.

"No," said Maggie. "I'll just... wait here, I guess. Will you ask someone to stay with Gianna, please? She shouldn't have to be alone. It doesn't have to be you, you've got a baby to take care of - maybe Jasper, if he can help her at all with his power, but he probably can't, it's not that strong - Esme?"

"I'll find Esme and ask her," I agreed.

"Thank you," Maggie murmured, and I gave her a useless pat on the head and left her at the edge of the fjord.

I stopped at the house, turned the oven off, and went looking for Esme. I found her in the garage, chatting with Rosalie while the latter tinkered with the engine in a giant red car that I figured probably belonged to Emmett.

"Hello, Bella," Esme said warmly when I let myself into the building. Rosalie lifted a greasy hand from the car parts to wave at me.

"Hi," I said. "Esme, Maggie can't stand to be around Gianna anymore, and Ilario left just a few hours after she regained consciousness. But Maggie doesn't want her to be alone and asked me to ask you to stay with her for the last few hours."

"Of course, Bella," said Esme. There was no possible universe in which Esme would refuse a request like that; she was just the sort of creature that went about comforting the distressed, and didn't resent her nature, either. She patted Rosalie's hair - braided into a blond pile on her head to keep it out of the way - and flitted past me to go to Gianna.

I nodded to Rosalie and turned to go, having nothing in particular left to say, but she stopped me - "Bella."

"What?" I asked, turning back.

"Do you think - not today, maybe not this week, but soon - do you think I could babysit Elspeth?"

I blinked. I was used to the idea that Rosalie was thrilled to be involved in Elspeth's creation and birth, and that had been helpful. I was a little puzzled by the offer - or rather, the request - to be involved in her care. "We don't have a lot of other pressing obligations..."

"I understand. I... know you don't *need* me to do anything," said Rosalie, pursing her lips. "She sleeps and you don't, we aren't any of us going to school this year, there's not much going on in general except Gianna's turning, etcetera - but if you ever wanted to go travel with Edward for a while again, just the two of you, I would be *happy* to look after her."

I considered the offer. Elspeth was growing fast, so outrageously fast - every moment I had with her was precious, even more than if she'd been human. Yet I had no grounds to confine that argument to myself and not extend it to her other relatives. Rosalie only had so many days to play with Elspeth-the-baby, too.

Also, this would give me cover if I needed to go abroad again: I'd "let" Rosalie hang onto Elspeth while Edward and I "got some time to ourselves". I *hoped* that I wouldn't need to make another significant trip again, but it wasn't out of the question.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "Thank you. You know, you could come with Alice to the photo shoot in a couple hours - we should really have more pictures with everybody in the family, not just me and Edward and Alice. Just because I don't want her around the

main house until Gianna's up and about and not so shouty doesn't mean everybody else has to be left out."

"I will," Rosalie said.

I smiled at her, then went back to the main house to fetch the roasted vegetables and purée some fruit into a smoothie for Elspeth. Then I started poaching some eggs. Nice, balanced diet. Esme was already doing her best to calm Gianna, who found her suicide-by-vampire tactics far less effective against non-Maggie individuals.

I brought all the food to the cottage, fridged it, and went into the spare room that held Elspeth's bed. Edward was watching her sleep, unwilling to leave her unsupervised for even a moment, but on this night he was holding her hand, pressing it to his face, and had his eyes closed.

"Bella, you have to see this," he murmured, very softly, so as not to wake her. He motioned me closer with his free hand and put Elspeth's palm against my cheek.

I could see her *dreams*.

I gasped involuntarily, not enough to wake her, as "remembered" colors and forms and faces floated across my mind. Peaceful, mostly meaningless, mesmerizingly lovely. Edward's face and mine were the most prominent in the dream, but everyone else she'd ever met made at least one appearance. Even Gianna, sedated and inattentive, as Elspeth had last seen her, was featured once. Between faces, random hues faded into each other, spun into and out of arbitrary shapes.

"It's amazing," I whispered to Edward, and he grinned at me, then went around to the other side of her bed to try the other hand. This worked well enough. We held still, absorbed in Elspeth's dreams, until dawn started poking through the window and she woke up with a comical yawn. She noticed us leaned over her and, before reasserting control over her hands, she pushed at us the image of ourselves, with a little smugness attached. I imagined her saying, *Ah, attention, just the way I like it.*

"Do you think it'll delay her talking, that she can do this?" I asked, picking up Elspeth to get her fed promptly. She did as much growing in her sleep as she did during the day and consistently woke up hungry. "Oatmeal, in the fridge."

Edward microwaved the food and I grabbed a spoon. "It could, but I doubt it'll slow her down by *much*. She seems to mostly understand us, anyway, and we can always ask her to start using words if it becomes an issue."

Elspeth reached out her hand to me and I bent my head to "listen": she showed me the picture of Gianna's blood, again. "No, no blood," I said. "Breakfast today is oatmeal. You haven't had it before. You might like it." I stood back up while Elspeth made a pouty face at me. "You'll look out for whether she's actually not feeling well as opposed to just

wanting it for the taste, right? It's not *impossible* that her dietary needs are different when she's growing than they will be when she's an adult, but she's seemed healthy, just petulant."

"All I'm getting is the petulance part," he assured me. He took the oatmeal out of the microwave, and Elspeth huffed a small sigh as its non-blood smell steamed through the room.

"Speaking of what you pick up on," I said, giving the oatmeal a stir, "why were you so enthralled by her dreams? They were new to me, of course, but wouldn't you have been able to hear them regardless without her projecting them to you?"

"Actually, I can't hear dreams," he replied. "They either don't count as "surface thoughts", my theory, or they're too different from any mental activity *I* can do since I don't sleep, which is Alice's hypothesis."

"Does Eleazar have an opinion?" I asked, scooping up a taste of oatmeal to offer Elspeth and listening to her hum to herself as she contemplated its flavor.

"Never occurred to me to inquire," Edward replied. "At any rate, dreams are supposedly hard enough to remember while still human - I have no recollection of the process at all, myself - so it was very novel to be able to see Elspeth's."

"From what I wrote down, most dreams are much more complicated than that - although probably not in anything resembling Elspeth's age range. How did you get the idea?"

"She was making sounds in her sleep - not talking, but it was close enough to the way you used to mumble to yourself," he said. "And it seemed worth a try."

"Ummm," sighed Elspeth, and I gave her more oatmeal. She consumed it with a despondent and long-suffering expression.

Rosalie arrived to the photo festival as promised; the grease was washed from her hands and her hair was down again. Emmett came too; Elspeth, who had plenty of motor control, clung to his head like it was a crow's nest in one picture.

The look on Rosalie's face, when she had her turn to hold Elspeth and pose, was glowing, proud, a heart-piercing smile - with a twinge of sorrow. She was either trying to forget that Elspeth wasn't her own baby, and not quite succeeding, or she was reveling in aunthood and distracted by something else, related or un-. I glanced at Edward, looking for cues; he was calm, so I didn't worry about it.

Alice got a few shots of Rosalie holding a parka-clad Elspeth, and then directed the costume change and the handoff. When the baby had left her arms, Rosalie's face assumed its default expression: lofty, neutral, introspective. Rosalie's expression normally said,

you'll have to do better than that to get my attention. That might have been what made her happiness so arresting when she displayed it, come to think of it. I was looking at her while I thought of this, and noticed a quiver of her eyebrows - very subtle.

Rosalie wasn't paying attention to me; she was watching Edward pose for his pictures with Elspeth. I walked into the frame after Alice was satisfied with the batch, and then there was a nuclear family shot, and then Edward walked off, Elspeth got a new outfit, and I took a picture with her by myself.

It was an intricate sequence of tasks, but we all moved quite fast and Elspeth was durable enough that we didn't have to dress and re-dress her like she was made of soap bubbles. (She could certainly be harmed if we were *really* careless, but avoiding it wasn't that hard and didn't slow us down that much.) All told the taking of photos was an operation of fifteen minutes. Alice danced away when the last snapshot was in her camera, to upload them all to her computer, and get versions of them that made me look pink and brown-eyed 'shopped for my ignorant family.

Rosalie lingered, even as Emmett left.

"...Do you want to give her her morning snack?" I asked. We fed her five times a day, which wouldn't be that strange a feeding schedule for a new baby if we weren't giving her giant portions of solid food. Although it would be arguably stranger if she was getting a liquid diet, because in her case that would take the form of blood. "See if she likes eggs?"

"I'd like that," said Rosalie, lighting up. I handed her Elspeth. She followed us into the house, and, with Elspeth in one arm, she warmed up the eggs. Rosalie seemed immensely gratified when they got a positive reception; I supposed I should have guessed that eggs would be Elspeth's favorite food, given their appeal to Gianna during the pregnancy - and Sue during hers, for that matter. It was a small thing, and it made Rosalie immensely happy, so I refused to let myself resent the fact that Elspeth's first eggs hadn't come directly from my hands or Edward's.

Elspeth ate her half a dozen eggs with reserved gusto. Part of me wondered where she *put* all her food. She was maintaining a high body temperature and growing, so I supposed it would make sense that she'd eat like a werewolf (invariably ravenous), but the wolves were a whole lot bigger than her. After Elspeth was informed that the sixth egg was the last, she promptly beamed up at Rosalie and planted her palm on the blonde's cheek. "Aww," said Rosalie, melting. "She's so polite."

"Has she found a way to say 'thank you'?" I asked.

Rosalie nodded, just a little, not dislodging Elspeth's hand. "Just replaying what happened, with a feeling attached," she cooed, rocking the baby slightly.

I had the most peculiar feeling that *I* was somehow being intrusive by hovering over Rosalie while she held *my* daughter. I looked over at Edward, who was standing just

behind me, a thin frown spreading across his face. There was no obvious way to demand that Rosalie hand Elspeth back and leave without being rude - and setting a bad example for manners seemed worse than just letting Rosalie loiter a bit. I put the egg container back in the fridge to keep it out of the way; I'd wash it later while something or other was cooking the next morning.

"Aren't you darling," cooed Rosalie. Elspeth smiled smugly.

Edward said, "Gianna's going to be done turning in less than a minute."

"Oh, we should all go look in on her," I said. "Elspeth ought to get properly introduced. Gianna did her a very important favor, after all." I paused. "Someone should also let Maggie know."

"Rose, would you run and tell Maggie, please?" asked Edward, holding out his arms for Elspeth. "She's sitting on the edge of the fjord nearest the main house." Rosalie looked regretful, but handed over our daughter and went to inform Maggie. Edward and I, Elspeth in tow, made a beeline for the main house; we slowed down when we could hear Gianna's last, piercing screeches, waiting for them to die down before we brought impressionable ears any nearer. (Elspeth's hearing was not as keen as ours and Edward assured me that she didn't hear a thing.)

We arrived at the room where everyone was congregating last, just after Rosalie and Maggie. Gianna was on her feet, gazing out the window, tall and whole and perfect. The barest tea tint remained to her skin; she was Ilario's exact match in coloration. Behind her was everyone else in the coven, Ilario at the front of the group. Maggie stood off to one side, cringing in expectation of some terrible retaliation for her bad judgment hours earlier.

"Gianna?" said Ilario softly.

Gianna spun on one foot, took in the assembly of us with one sweep of her eyes, and fixed her gaze on Maggie. Her newly crimson eyes lit up with pleasure.

"Well..." said Maggie. "Well, look at you, baby."

Gianna flew forward, enveloping Maggie in a hug. For the first time I consciously noted how much taller Gianna was than her mate. Maggie was pretty little, but when I'd compared her to Gianna as a human, the known difference in strength was more salient than mismatched stature. Maggie squeaked when embraced, and Gianna blinked and released her, having made the same mistake I had the first time I tried to hug Edward as a newborn.

Simultaneously, the two of them said, "Forgive me?" Presumably Gianna wanted forgiveness for how she'd asked to die, and Maggie wanted it for listening to her.

It occurred to me that Ilario still didn't know what had happened while Gianna was turning, and would have no idea why Maggie would need forgiveness, unless he thought

it was about her having left Gianna while she turned. I supposed if he saw fit to make a fuss about the event at this point, if he even learned the information, then Gianna would inevitably make it not worth his while to attack Maggie.

Gianna and Maggie grinned at each other, giggling softly over the concurrent utterances. After a moment, Gianna looked up at the rest of us. "...Good morning," she said. Etiquette was silent on the way to greet a group of vampires who were there to watch one newly be a vampire. "Oh my! Is that Elspeth?"

I nodded, taking her from Edward and holding her up so Gianna could get a better look. "Elspeth Annarose Cullen, in the flesh," I said.

"Oh, she's so cute," said Gianna. "Hello, Elspeth. You've gotten much bigger."

"Say hi, Elsie," I prompted.

Elspeth waved at Gianna, smiling toothily, and then stretched out her hand, wanting to communicate by memory transfer. Cautiously, aware that Gianna *was* still a newborn and that Elspeth's blood, while not very appealing, *was* present, I stepped forward to enable this. Gianna looked politely puzzled by the baby's intentions until she had begun conveying the desired information. "Oh, she knows who I am," Gianna said, beaming.

"She's very smart, especially considering she's three days old," I said. Elspeth dropped her hand and I re-settled her in my arms.

"You should hunt, baby," Maggie said, wrapping herself around one of Gianna's arms. "Edward, is the place clear?"

He checked, and nodded, and Maggie urged Gianna out a window and into the woods. Ilario followed them after a moment's deliberation.

"I'm glad that's over with," I said. "Well, Elspeth, do you want to have a look around this house?"

Elspeth planted her hand on my face and replayed the quick journey in through the front door and up the stairs that she'd already undertaken, with an attached feeling of incompleteness and curiosity. "I'll take that as a yes," I said.

That was my last peaceful day.

Scatter

The phone call came the next morning. I was with the whole family, posing Elspeth for more pictures against the backdrops available in the main house. While Esme took her turn I picked up the phone unthinkingly, and froze when I saw the identity of my caller. Before I could invent an excuse to take the call privately, Jasper had seen the name.

"Jacob Black," snarled Jasper. Would he know the name? The surname certainly, but - I remembered a snippet of a paragraph from my notes, read and attached to memories early in my second life. Jasper had answered the phone first when I'd called Edward to tell him that Jacob was at Charlie's house on Valentine's Day. He'd have been near enough to hear the entire conversation. He would know who Jacob was - Billy's son. A Quileute. He'd know enough to be furious that I was in secret contact with him.

Edward's head snapped up and he was across the room in a moment to interpose himself between me and Jasper. The phone rang again, and everyone else was holding still, waiting to see what was going on.

If Jacob was *calling* me - not texting, not relaying a message through Rachel, not sending an e-mail - then it was *urgent*. He would know as well as Rachel or Leah the protocols for getting ahold of me. Or at least it had *better* be urgent, because if it wasn't, I was going to *kill* him. I flipped the phone open, trusting Edward and Alice to keep Jasper under control while I dealt with the emergency. "What?" I snapped.

"Bella," said Jacob, "you know that bloodsucker Becky's gang killed a while back? His mate was here sniffing around, and we couldn't catch her when we found her - she went into the water and we lost the trail. And she *snitched* on us to the Volturi and now there are some scary damn leeches who've got near everybody lying on the ground blind and deaf and sorta paralyzed. I peeled off my own pack, same way Becky did, and was able to get everybody with an imprint to follow me and they didn't knock me out, somehow. Nobody else managed to get away and we had to leave them."

"Where are you?"

"We're making a run for it, eastward - we've got Cody too. Harry and Sue were going to try to save their other kids last I saw. We couldn't stop to get your dad, he's still in Forks - mine's still in La Push. Everybody just grabbed their imprints and we're on the run. Lucky they were all around and nobody tried to go for the Makah rez because that would've been suicide. We need backup right the hell *now*. The leeches were talking about doing experiments on the pack so they're not killing them right away but I don't want to count on that for long."

"A young-looking boy, dark blond hair...?" I asked.

"He's one of 'em, yeah, and a girl who could be his twin sister and a couple of big skeeters, seem to take orders from the girl," Jacob said. I could hear wind rushing past; he was probably riding one of the escaped wolves, only in his own human form so as to be

able to talk to me.

"You got away when you split off your own pack?" I said, uncomfortably aware of the fact that everybody in the room was staring at me. "When the boy - he's Alec - when he knocked out one from a pack did it carry over to everybody?"

"I think so - it looked like Nina went first, only she was screaming, not just collapsing, I think that might have been the girl and not the boy because she had this sadistic grin on her face. And then Becky's whole pack was down howling bloody murder, and then Rachel got too close to "Alec" and we were out too, but I broke off. Raych gave me an excuse, she Alpha-voiced me so I'd have something to disobey. And it was like all the guys with imprints had enough motivation or something to get gone with me and nobody else did. I guess once we were up, we were out of there too fast for the leeches to catch us."

I ground my teeth. It sounded like both Jane and Alec could echo their powers through an entire pack via telepathic relay, and only Jacob's split had let anyone get away at all. "I'll do what I can. Will you be able to answer this phone if I call you later?"

"I'll give it to Kim to hold," he said, naming one of the imprints. "You'll get her if you call again."

"Anything else I've got to know?"

"Last I saw everybody was in that big field a ways up from the ravine," he said. "One of the big bloodsuckers was baiting us, weaving in and out of the rez, trying to get us all in one place to attack him as a group, and damned if it didn't work. I don't know if they'd be able to move all those wolves or not, but that'd be the first place I'd check. Also don't know if we're being chased now, but have to guess so. Handing the phone to Kim now. I'm slowing down Jared too much." Jared was the wolf who'd imprinted on Kim. I heard the sound of Jacob giving away the phone and leaping off Jared's back, phasing midair.

"Bella?" said a girl, presumably Kim. She was quavery. "Are you going to be able to help us?"

"I'll do what I can," I promised. "I'm in trouble too, though, if they've got captives - even if they don't say anything in spite of Jane, Aro could show up at any time and he'll get any information he wants. Probably I could not be more on their hit list than I already am now, even if I'd killed Aro's wife. But I'll do what I can."

"Okay," said Kim in a small voice. I snapped the phone shut.

Everybody was still staring at me.

I had missed a gaping, *obvious* security flaw. Of *course* Irina wouldn't try to personally destroy thirty-one wolves even if she found out that they were responsible for Laurent's death. *Of course* she was not that stupid. Even if she were *suicidal*, revenge

would take priority over getting herself dead in a hurry, and the way you kill someone more powerful than you is to get someone more powerful than *them* aboard. *I'd done it myself* - I'd brought James straight into the Volturi's lair when I'd needed him dead and didn't have the power to kill him - *why* hadn't I expected the same of Irina?

And now all hell had broken loose, and several of my most necessary allies were looking like they'd never forgive me for unleashing it.

I was expecting an infuriated accusation from Jasper, but it was actually Carlisle who recovered the ability to speak first.

"Bella," he said, every inch the gravely disappointed father figure, "what have you done?"

That broke the silence; suddenly everyone was yammering to everyone else. Esme, still holding Elspeth, brought Ilario, Gianna, and Maggie up to speed on the werewolf matter. Edward's rapidity of speech was overtaxed as he defended me from simultaneous accusations from Jasper, Rosalie, and Emmett. Alice tried to see something and then clutched her head and squeaked, which distracted Jasper, but only made him angrier at me when she whispered that everything was in shadow.

I wanted to hide. I wanted to run to my fairytale cottage and be with the smaller, less difficult part of my family. Edward was busy. I thought of asking Esme for Elspeth, but in the current climate of the house, there was no safer place for a baby than Esme's arms - no one would attack Esme, Esme would not attack anyone. Me, on the other hand - I might be less safe.

"You woke up the *dogs*?" Rosalie was shrieking.

"You knew who had killed Laurent, and you said nothing?" Carlisle asked. He wasn't shouting, just exuding dismay. How had he made the connection between what Jacob had said and Laurent's death? Some contact I wasn't aware of between him and Irina or other Denalis? Didn't matter. I wasn't getting out of this room without telling them all everything anyway. This was not the time to figure out what secrets I could and couldn't salvage.

"When did you even find the time to -" Emmett began, and then he looked at Edward, who stared him down. "Ed, did you *know* -"

Jasper wasn't talking. He was hissing, curled protectively around Alice as though he thought I'd attack her. She'd quit yelping, having stopped trying to use her vision, but she wasn't making any move to calm down her husband - she was just staring at me, uncomprehending.

Esme, to her eternal credit, was trying to soothe Elspeth in between catching up the three who were not aware of the full Cullen family history. Elspeth wasn't crying, but she

was clearly bewildered and displeased by the shouting that was going on around her.

"I -" I began, trying to answer any of the many questions aimed at me, but words beyond that wouldn't come. "I..."

"We need to get out of here," Maggie said fiercely, turning to Gianna and Ilario. "We had no part in anything Bella did; we're safe from the Volturi if we cut and run now. Siobhan and Liam will have us - especially since we're not competing for their prey. I asked earlier. Let's go, *now*, before we're complicit in anything."

The siblings nodded, and Ilario shot me a dark look and Gianna an apologetic one as they left the room after Maggie.

Esme turned to face the middle of the room, where I stood. She didn't look angry - but she did look afraid. I'd endangered her family. The guilt was crushing: how could I hurt Esme, of all people? As if I hadn't done enough to the Quileutes? If I hadn't activated them, Laurent might have killed three or four people in the area, gotten in and out in a few days, gone home to Irina, the Volturi wouldn't have found them or at least not so *soon*. And now Esme's loved ones - *including me*, including *Edward* - were all in likely danger.

The questions died down. I located my voice - it had sunk to somewhere near the pit of my stomach - and tried to answer them, one at a time, over the tingle of fear from Jasper's hisses.

"I - I - I -" So this was how Maggie had stuttered: lots of room in the vampire brain, lots of room for huge and crippling emotions, enough to let them displace peripheral functions like language. "I activated Rachel in July. And most of the others. Harry's a Quileute too. His daughter hurt him and I had to turn him to save him -" I stammered, ineloquently, through the Cliff's notes of the secrets I'd been keeping. I had to double back several times to explain my motivations, about Aro's witchcraft and Sue's pregnancy and the like, and even when I offered these feeble justifications it sounded almost as though I'd been acting randomly. Jasper growled at me (to an answering snarl from Edward) when I mentioned that I wasn't immune to Alice, never had been, I just fell into werewolf-derived shadows on a regular basis. Alice looked hurt, still made no move to restrain Jasper, but she wasn't snarling herself.

When I'd run out of things to say, events and explanations both, silence settled over the room. Edward didn't relax at all.

"Maggie was right," said Rosalie, breaking the quiet. "The smart thing to do, the safe thing, is to cut and run. Bella's painted a great, big target on herself but *we* can prove to Aro that we weren't involved."

This wasn't how I'd wanted it to go, I didn't want to be like the Denalis' mother, sacrificed as an example to my family so they would develop a *healthy respect for the law*

-

"Rose," said Edward. "Rose, you're not like this -" I could tell as he said it that he

didn't believe it. She *was* like that, exactly like that, and she had every right to be, she didn't need to let her second life be broken to smithereens the way her first one had because I was playing Secret Agent Vampire behind everyone's backs.

"Edward, you *weren't* like this," she snapped. "Go get yourself executed with Bella while she tries to save the mutts she made, fine, your prerogative, but don't expect us to live with the mess she's created." She paused. "Don't drag Elspeth into it either."

"No," I said, suddenly. "No, of course not. I can't bring Elspeth there."

"I'll take her," said Rosalie readily.

I nodded, rapidly. "I got the wolves into this, I'll have to do what I can to get them out, I'm the only prayer against Alec and Jane - but I should go alone. The rest of you should stay out - Rose, if I can ask you to look after Elsie even now..." Rosalie was nodding impatiently. "Here would do, I suppose, or you could go to ground in one of the other houses or Denali..."

"Bella," said Edward. "Bella, I can't leave you."

"I can't bring Elspeth there," I repeated. "Can you leave *her*? Our daughter?"

"Don't go, Bella," Edward pleaded, recoiling from the choice presented. "You don't have to go."

"I've gone and painted a target on myself, like Rosalie said," I murmured. "The Volturi are going to come after me at this point whether I go to them first or not. But if I go and I take out Jane and Alec somehow - and realistically I'm the only person who can do that - and the wolves are there and they get up and fight, then there might be a chance."

"Go with them," I said to Edward, gesturing at the rest of the family. "Wherever. Look after Elspeth."

"Bella, do you seriously think they'll leave Edward alone?" asked Rosalie scathingly. "They know perfectly well he's your mate. If you survive the head-on fight the very next thing they'll do is grab Edward and use him as bait."

I looked up. My brain was kicking into overdrive. I could not screw this up. I had to be *right*, I had to be *careful*, if Rosalie was willing to tell me when and how I was being a moron then I had to *use* that resource in order to be less of a moron. "Would they do that with Elspeth, too?"

Rosalie didn't seem to have thought of that. "...Maybe." Esme tightened her hold on my daughter.

I thought. I was still thinking when Alice spoke.

"Jasper," she murmured, "we need to go. Not with everyone else. The bits I can see,

the bits that aren't shadowed - they're going to use this as an excuse to try to collect me. Aro's never wanted anything else as much as he's wanted a precog. A criminal in my coven is just the pretense he needs. We have to run and keep running until it's obvious we've cut contact and there's no excuse to try us with the others."

Jasper nodded once, jaw clenched tightly, eyes narrow. They got up and left; I heard Alice's car starting up. They didn't discuss where they were going - of course; they probably weren't even thinking about it while Edward could hear. If we could find them, then that wouldn't be a plausible severing of contact. Alice had said enough that no one who loved her would try to find her, and that was all she could safely say.

The room was beginning to look rather empty.

How could I keep my husband and daughter safe?

I didn't even need to ask myself *what do I want?* - it was too obvious, the sole consuming thought in my head. Edward needed to be safe. Elspeth needed to be safe. Both of those things had to happen before anything else could attain a shred of importance.

What do I have?

I had Edward - and that was half the problem. His very attachment to me was making him vulnerable. If it weren't assumed by everyone who knew word one about vampires that we would be together, then he could go somewhere with the others, hole up and wait for the Volturi to clean up my undesirable self.

Rosalie, and Esme and Carlisle and Emmett, might abhor what I'd done, might be forced to write Edward off as a lost cause they'd have to pinch off the family in order to salvage anything. But they *did* want to protect Elspeth, and that was more plausibly doable. The Volturi didn't have the same ironclad expectations about my relationship with her. There wasn't the same kind of precedent for half-vampire children.

Could I *hide* her? I couldn't think of anyone to hide her *with*, and while she might *survive* if I just dropped her off in the middle of nowhere, she wouldn't understand the need for concealment and would eventually give herself away - not to mention that it was hardly what I had in mind when I thought of the word "safe". The Volturi had the resources to track down anyone I could trust her with, from Renée to Gianna. That held if I flung the definition of "trust" as far as it could go and considered leaving her with distant acquaintances like the Chilean coven. I couldn't leave her anonymously at an adoption agency or on someone's doorstep. She grew too fast, she'd be too obviously nonhuman to anyone taking a close look. Exactly the kind of oddity that the Volturi liked to stamp out with lots of death.

So: if the Volturi wanted her, they could find her. Whoever had her needed to either run from them forever or be armed with a way to make them uninterested in kidnapping

or hurting her.

Or she needed to spend so little time there that they never got around to looking.

"Bella," said Edward.

"*I'm thinking*. It takes long enough to get to America from here that the best way to hurry *isn't* to rush the thinking part," I said, but anxiety betrayed the fact that I didn't feel so confident.

What *else* did I have? I was still a newborn, still a shield, might be able to kill or at least interrupt Jane and Alec long enough to get wolves up and fighting, before the other handful of Volturi on their team tore me to bits, if I got there before reinforcements from Volterra arrived. Rachel's pack and Becky's, minus Jacob and the five imprinted wolves he'd peeled off, *maybe* plus Harry and Sue if they weren't already dead, could probably kill off the handful of vampires that Jacob had described. After that we could regroup; without their favorite illusionists the Volturi would be at much more of a disadvantage against the wolves.

So I might live long enough to be able to retrieve Elspeth from a temporary hiding place without heavy duty defenses, if there were one that wouldn't delay me too much to leave her at.

I couldn't *count* on being able to go back for her. But I'd already established that she could be found wherever I put her. So that meant I had to leave her with someone who could hang onto her if necessary, and that someone had to have a way to convince an angry Volturi guard to leave her alone if one came knocking.

The Volturi's top priority was containing information. They were probably limiting their sphere of destruction to La Push, not extending to Forks. Charlie *might* be ignored for the time being, while the Volturi contemplated the wolves. If he turned his siren on he could be streaking away from Forks like a bat out of hell, difficult for even a vampire to keep up with, and he could bring Elspeth along. If I died...

Charlie couldn't fight off a vampire. His limited version of my shield might offer some sort of defense against the same things I was immune to, but ultimately he was human, helpless unless the Volturi had another reason to leave Elspeth - and Charlie - alone. He wouldn't be able to drive the getaway car if he was in the middle of turning, and I couldn't wait around three days for him to finish. She - and possibly also he - would be bait if (when) caught. He had to sleep, he couldn't run forever.

So Charlie was out.

Maybe I was dwelling too much on how I'd get her *back*, and not enough on how I'd make her *safe*.

"If you go to Denali," I said softly, indicating Carlisle and Esme, Rosalie and Emmett, "and you take Elspeth, and I make it *impossible* for you to contact me... and I

swear never to come for her... then they can't use her as bait."

Edward swallowed. "But..."

"Edward has to come with me, because they will never, ever believe that we'd cut ourselves off like that... they'd know that if they got him, they'd get me too, and they'd be right," I whispered. "But Elspeth's another story. I *can* leave her if... if that's the only way she can be kept safe, is to be away from me. Between you four and the Denalis you can make the Volturi at least ask a few questions, before they try to attack. They need excuses to wipe out covens or they lose their aura of legitimacy, and they don't have one for any of you. The only weak point is making sure Elspeth can't be used to find me. So I have to be unable to receive threats. No contact. Like Alice and Jasper. Even if I live through this in the short term. Until and unless the Volturi are all *gone* or so scattered as to be no threat, I can't see her."

"Bella," whispered Edward.

"Please have a better idea," I said. "That's the best I can do."

"We could just run. The three of us. You'll never be in time to save the wolves anyway."

"I might be there in time," I said. "But you're right. We could run. Until they caught us. And they *would*. You aren't immune to Demetri - hell, we don't even know for sure if I am - and he's met you, he can track you down anywhere on Earth. But it might take him long enough that Elspeth wouldn't be a baby anymore, and then she'd be obviously in cahoots with us, and they'd just kill us all three. You and I might be done for unless we manage to singlehandedly wipe out the Volturi, but Elspeth has a chance if we leave her - and it means she won't be caught in the fight at La Push itself."

Edward's face was frozen into a mask of dread. But slowly, he managed to nod.

"Fine," said Rosalie tightly. "We go to Denali, you go to your deaths, but Elsie's safe with me. With all of us," she added.

"There has to be another way," said Carlisle, and Esme nodded fervently.

"There doesn't have to be another way," I said. "If there is one, if you think of one, please, *please* tell me - but there doesn't have to be. The Volturi *can* be too strong to fight, too evil to dispense mercy."

There was a heavy pause, and then -

"I... I guess we need plane tickets," said Esme. "I'll... go buy them." She handed Elspeth to me.

I turned to face Edward, standing close, so we could both hold her at the same time. Elspeth held up both little hands, touched our faces, showed us ourselves and how

miserable and afraid we looked, and wanted to know why.

I had no idea what to tell her.

Esme bought tickets. We collected our documentation. I raided a petty cash location - there was money stored all over the house, in various denominations; I helped myself to a wad of American dollars in case I did manage to get out of La Push alive. Edward pocketed half.

There weren't flights from Norway to the States so often that it would have been worthwhile to simply leave immediately. There was a little time before we needed to go to the airport. I fed Elspeth, as much as she would swallow - I didn't want her hungry around humans and tempted to try to bite them, and even though we could all give her our airplane food, it might not be as much as she'd want. I put on my Valentine's bracelet.

Edward pulled a little paper packet out of a hiding place in our cottage. "I was going to give you this tonight, after Elspeth was asleep," he said. "But..."

I unwrapped the packet. It contained a locket. I flicked it open; it already held pictures - one from our wedding, one of Elspeth. I closed it, put it on, and tucked it into my shirt, and kissed him.

Time was up. We went to the garage and piled into a car; the other four were in another. We were on the same flight over the Atlantic and would split up when we had to change planes.

Elspeth definitely picked up on our collective mood and kept sending us pictures of ourselves during the first leg of the journey, wanting to know what was wrong.

"We're going to let Grandma Esme and Grandpa Carlisle and Aunt Rosalie and Uncle Emmett take you to see some friends in Alaska," I whispered to her, "but me and Daddy can't go, and we'll miss you."

That explanation seemed to suffice for her. She slept through most of the flight.

At the airport where we had to change planes, I almost backed out. Almost clung to Elspeth when Rosalie reached out for her, almost said we *should* run, *should* hope to keep away from Demetri forever, *should* abandon the wolves and take Elspeth and not endure this loss *now* when it could certainly be put off until *later*. I re-checked all my logic in a flurry of desperation. But I still couldn't think of a way to hide her, couldn't think of a way to thwart the Volturi tracker indefinitely, and was still sure that I'd been sentenced to death and Edward with me for the crime of being my husband. Elspeth had as much of a chance as she could get, in Denali. If something came up that *really* changed that

situation, well, I knew where she was.

I took a deep breath, and, forcing myself not to tremble, let Rosalie take her. "I love you," I whispered to Elspeth, and Edward echoed my words. Edward and I handed our phones to Carlisle, to make us impossible to contact in that direction. Impossible to threaten.

Edward hugged his adoptive parents, each in turn. I didn't try. It was my fault there needed to be a goodbye. My fault the family was splintering.

Their connecting flight was earlier than ours. They walked away, with Elspeth peeping over Rosalie's shoulder and waving forlornly, and Esme looking back every few moments, despairing. They disappeared around a corner.

We had time to buy new phones - we left the airport and did that, then went back in. I texted Jacob, giving him my new number and telling him our expected arrival time in case he wanted to be part of the cavalry. There was no answer before we boarded our second plane.

Elspeth's absence felt cold. I didn't *need* warmth. I could live in the vacuum of space, if it came to that. But I *missed* it, I missed *her*, her heartbeat and her quick little breaths and the heat when I held her. The play of color in her dreams. I sat as close to Edward as the airplane seats allowed, wrapped myself up in his presence and tried to offer back what I could to him.

My baby was five days old, and in five days she'd become so important. *Could* we stay away from Denali? What mattered was really if everyone else *thought* we could, I supposed, and no one else could look into my mind and feel the cold.

We talked, a little: quiet discussions of tactics. If the Volturi had backup there before we arrived instead of just the twins and the two others Jacob had seen, we would do thus and such; if Jacob's pack didn't show, that would have this other implication. I paid just enough attention to memorize the new information and dredge up relevant tidbits about the wolves. Most of my mind was on our daughter and how cold it was without her.

I said that to Edward, when there was no other contingency plan to invent - "It's cold."

He nodded. He knew what I meant.

I pulled my locket out of my shirt and touched the side of it that held Elspeth's picture. *She's safe, safe as I can make her*, I told myself. *That's what's important. I've always known that it's more important that my loved ones be alive, that they be happy, than that they be near. That's why I don't live in Jacksonville with Renée and Phil right now, attending twelfth grade and keeping notebooks and being human and being single and childless.*

Single and childless. No state had ever seemed so distant. Edward was part of me,

attached, inseparable, essential; Elspeth was part of me, carved out of my heart and secreted away for safekeeping, leaving an unhealing wound in her wake. The Florida-dwelling high-schooler I could have turned into, with one different choice, was not me. She just would have gone by the same name. Or maybe she'd have people calling her "Izzy" by this point. Who knew.

"I had such delusions of grandeur," I murmured. "I was going to build up the population of wolves over years and years, collect allies, work on my shield, take over the world. Convert everybody to vegetarianism, turn humans as fast as we could handle them, cure death."

"I love you," said Edward. I put my locket back in my shirt.

"I love you," I replied.

There was nothing left to say.

When we got off the plane, I checked my new phone. There was a message from Jacob - or from his phone, anyway. Someone else had probably typed it. *Jake fazed n says Rchl n Beky have smthg rong w/ thm*, it said, *unanmus not 2 go bak n risk it b/c nowere safe 4 imprins 2 hide*. I dialed the number, hoping to get more detail; there was no answer. I tried four times and gave up.

"That's six wolves out of the picture, whether they got run down or something else happened that no one's picking up," I said. "And depending on what the 'something wrong' is, maybe the other twenty-five as well. Those girls they took have families, too - if they make a fuss about their daughters being kidnapped that means a bigger coverup job for the Volturi... just how many people did I get killed?"

"If the Volturi kill people, they kill people, not you," Edward said, and I knew he was copying what I'd said to Gianna about Maggie earlier. It was unhelpful. So many people, dead or about to be -

"They've probably wiped out everyone on the Quileute reservation," I said. "But there's only one Quileute imprint; that won't keep it contained even if they explain everyone on the reservation going missing. Three Makahs - including a toddler! - and a girl from Forks are the others; they can get that information easily from any wolf. What are the Volturi going to do, wipe out the entire population of the Olympic Peninsula to keep people from investigating those disappearances in a way that implicates the supernatural?"

"There are more immediate concerns," Edward said.

I pushed my hair out of my face, staring at the phone, willing it to ring; it didn't, so I put it in my pocket. "Right. Anything could be going on with Rachel and Becky - Jane could be hurting them, it could just be that extended sensory deprivation via Alec is

interacting strangely with their telepathy - either case, I might be able to get them up and in the fight if I can take out or at least distract the illusionists."

"If we get close enough for me to hear their thoughts, I can probably figure it out without us getting near enough that they'll notice us," Edward said.

"Right," I said again. "If the wolves are out of commission... if I can't get them up even if I get the witch twins out of the picture... *then* we have no chance in a stand-up fight, *then* we run and hope they take a long time to catch us."

Edward nodded once.

We headed west.

"Do you want to check on your father?" Edward asked, as we passed close to Forks.

"Yes," I admitted, "but... we shouldn't."

"We don't have to do anything that will leave a trace," Edward said. "His thoughts aren't *quiet*, only indistinct - we just need to go through town and I'll be able to hear him."

"Even if he's okay, you still might not find him. Jacob's pack could have warned him and he could be running away, or he could be out of town for some unrelated reason. We don't have time to check really thoroughly. I'd be more worried if we went through town and you didn't hear him than I am now."

Edward nodded. "After, then."

"Right. If there's an after."

"We can run if the wolves aren't able to help," he reminded me. "There will be an after. I won't *let* you die."

We went past Forks, and I was glad I couldn't cry.

We slowed down when we were within a few miles of the field where we expected to find the center of the action. Edward crept forward several paces ahead of me, listening. When he stopped, I stopped. We were only a mile and a half from the edge of the field - barely out of earshot for noises the volume of ordinary voices.

"I hear Aro," Edward said.

"He's the most familiar voice there?" I asked, feeling compelled to whisper even though I heard nothing besides ordinary forest noises.

"Or close enough. Some of his familiarity is borrowed from people he's read,

including me."

"What are you getting from him?"

Edward closed his eyes and focused. "He's reading someone. It's very fast, I can't quite... I think it's one of the wolves, maybe Rachel." A minute of silence passed as he waited for Aro to finish reading his target. "Yes, that was Rachel. The wolves are all alive, but Chelsea's there - and someone I haven't heard of, a new witch. I don't hear all the details but the new witch is doing the same thing Chelsea does. The wolves are... with the two of them working in concert..."

"We're dead," I said. Chelsea alone was enough to hold the Volturi together against fractious vampire instinct; she and another vampire with a comparable power could probably turn the wolves' loyalties. The imprinted wolves would have had stronger outside claims on their devotion than witchcraft could fabricate and would have been able to pull away given the freedom of Jacob's third pack. Not so for the others. Jacob had mentioned Jane, Alec, and two "big skeeters". For the timing to work, Chelsea, and possibly also the new witch, had probably been hiding until after he left. They were resources too important to risk until the illusionists had done their damage.

"They don't know we're here. I can listen a little longer, maybe find something that will help us hide," Edward said. "The group that was here to start was Jane, Alec, Afton, Demetri, Chelsea, and the new witch - oh, her name is Addy. Aro, with Renata, arrived fairly recently and he's checking Chelsea and Addy's work before the wolves are allowed to wake. Now he's reading Becky." Demetri and Afton would be the "big skeeters", then, most likely.

"If Demetri is there and the wolves are the Volturi's new best friends, shouldn't we be running as fast as we can so we have more of a head start when they start looking for us?"

"Bella, they might *not* want to kill us," said Edward, full of hope. "They think the wolves are *useful*, they're going to make them a sort of outer guard - they might not blame you for activating them."

"Do you really think so?" I breathed. I didn't want two large packs of wolves added to the Volturi's arsenal, but if it meant that the arsenal wouldn't be turned on me and Edward -

We could have our lives back, we could have our daughter back -

"It's not a sure thing," he admitted. "But it's possible."

"Keep listening," I said.

After a moment, Edward said, "Harry and Sue are dead." Of course they were. They wouldn't have liked what was happening to their children, they'd have tried to intervene, but they had no fighting experience whatever. They could have been brought down at

range with next to no effort, dismantled and incinerated at leisure. "So is everyone else who lived on the reservation - except a number of children who carry the gene and are too young to activate," he went on after a pause. "They're going to bring them to Volterra and torch the village."

Of course they were.

"Can you hear anything about us?" I asked. "Do they want us dead, do they want to give me a medal, do they think we're beneath notice, what?"

"I can still hear only Aro," Edward said. "He's... giving Alec the go-ahead to release one pack. Rachel's. They're going to make sure that they're sufficiently under control, that they don't need a little more tweaking from Chelsea and Addy."

"Check how, exactly?" I said, leery of the possibility that this could involve sending wolves running in formations all over the area that might intersect with where we were standing.

"They're calling it good if the wolves will sit and stay when told," said Edward, disgustedly. "And phase on command. That's all they need to get them to Italy safely; Chelsea and Addy can go on working with them indefinitely."

"And... the wolves are taking this how?"

"I can't hear their thoughts - they're following the orders, but I don't know how they feel about it. We could go closer..."

"Not until we have some idea of whether we're on death row or not," I said.

"Aro's reading Rachel again," Edward reported. "Now he's giving the go-ahead to wake Becky's pack. They're behaving similarly."

"Did you get anything from his read on Rachel?" In the midst of so many things to be concerned about, I didn't have much to spare for her, but I was *somewhat* upset about her approximate enslavement by the Volturi.

"Not much... but... it sounded like Chelsea managed to twist their loyalties in large part by directing their native dislike of vampires at you," he said regretfully. "She doesn't spin affection out of thin air, she needs some resources to work with; I surmise Addy works similarly. It sounded like - mind, it went by very fast, I've certainly missed bits - like the Volturi have set themselves up in the wolves' minds as a necessary check on the general vampire population, to prevent rogue vampires like you from causing damage."

"Splendid. Just splendid. So the wolves all hate me and they're working for the Volturi to help them necessarily check the vampire population - are they thrilled at the honor, do they wish the last few months were all a dream so they could live normal human lives, or what?"

"The impression I have is one of the entire mess being a dirty job that someone has to do. But it went by extremely quickly, it was harder to follow than a normal read - a dozen minds all going by at once through hers - I can't be very precise."

"Did Aro tell Chelsea and Addy to use that angle where I'm a dangerous rogue, or did they pick it on their own, or was it the only one available? That could be a clue about how dead we are," I suggested.

"I haven't heard about that. Aro, at least, isn't thinking of us at all right now. He's considering how best to deploy the wolves."

"How long are they going to be standing around in that field?" I asked.

"I don't know. They *aren't* aware that we're here, or Aro would be thinking about it," Edward said. "We can move in a little and I should be able to read the guard members, if not the wolves."

Part of me wanted to say no and demand that we turn tail and run. There were only two of us, versus eight vampires (mostly witches) and twenty-five wolves. If they *did* want us dead, we needed as much distance as we could possibly get between us and Demetri, who was *right there* and could be ordered to hunt us down at any moment. And then he could point and say "thataway" and we would be toast.

On the other hand, if they *didn't* want to kill us, if Demetri *wasn't* particularly interested in finding us, then we could go to Denali and get Elspeth. And that was possible. They were using the wolves, after all.

I was so cold.

"Okay," I murmured. "But quietly. And sign language."

He signed back, "All right."

We crept forward, one step at a time, waiting for someone else to cross the border of Edward's hearing.

Ashes

"I hear the guard now except for Addy," Edward signed to me. We were just barely more than one mile from the field. Only the fact that nobody was raising their voice kept us from being able to listen directly to their conversation. Only thick tree cover kept us from being able to see them, up to and including the whites of their eyes. And vice versa. I held very still, moving only my hands to reply.

"And?" I asked.

"They don't want to kill *me*..." he signed. "Aro's still hoping to recruit me. They haven't gotten to the subject of you yet."

"Well, if they're hoping to recruit you, then that does limit what they can do to me," I answered. A hot flare of hope lit somewhere in my chest.

Edward nodded, a guarded grin spreading across his face. Then it disappeared.

"What?" I signed, alarmed.

"Run," he whispered, his hands unavailable to communicate silently because he was grabbing my hand and pulling me away. I couldn't keep up with his top speed, but he wasn't about to leave me behind.

"I'm slowing you down, we should split up, he can't track me and can't catch you -" I started to say. I didn't know why we were running, what he'd heard, but before I'd had a chance to try to convince Edward to let go of my hand and take off in another direction, we were tackled from behind.

I snapped my head around enough to recognize Leah's wolf form. She was the fastest wolf, faster than me, maybe not faster than Edward but he'd been trying to keep pace with me, and we could have fought off one wolf together but the others caught up almost at once.

Leah and at least one other wolf snapped their heads towards me and I flung out my one free hand to try to defend myself. I couldn't tell if I'd done any damage because I was in pieces an instant later. My ears stopped working. My eyes were unresponsive. I couldn't inhale to see if my nose was working. That was just as well because I couldn't have processed any sensory input through the shattering pain.

The pain, all by itself, wasn't as bad as turning, although it was in the same class. But it wasn't only pain: my proprioception was desperately confused. It was insisting that every direction was down. I sort of thought that I might be able to move some of my muscles, but the input from them was unclear, fuzzed out in comparison to the sharp awareness of the damage - I could try to twitch a finger but I didn't know whether I'd managed it or what the finger might be touching. I couldn't do anything, couldn't help -

Edward - was he okay - had he gotten away? - he could outrun them if only he'd leave me behind, but he never would...

The sensations apart from the pain were impossible to interpret, and my sense of time was shot to hell. I could have been in a heap moments later or scattered across a football field the following week, still in the mouths of several wolves or -

There was a sensation I recognized: I was on fire.

That was as bad as turning.

I couldn't scream. Couldn't flail around. There was only pain and dizziness and terror and *I was going to die* and what kind of shield could represent itself as protection for my mind if it was going to let my mind cease to *exist*, the mind was not *safe* without the body -

I felt something - something that wasn't pain. I couldn't be *healing*, not shattered into a hundred fragments and burning, but I *felt something*, like I was under a blanket that hugged my surface - my shield? Manifesting in some form I could detect only *now*, when it would die with me?

I tried to pull it in, willed it to put out the fire, *come on, shield, if you want my mind safe you have to let it have someplace to live - the mind is not safe without the body* -

The shield sucked in closer to me and the fire was out and I was violently rearranged into my normal shape. The pain didn't fade at once. I was still broken along all the original fracture points, though the shards of my body had been forced flush with their neighbors. My eyes and ears didn't return to me immediately. But those wounds knitted, though they went sluggishly. A lot of the venom had burned out of me. There was enough left that I *could* heal, though.

I didn't try to move. I didn't want to dislodge the rearrangement my shield had provided. But I could look around when my vision came back. I was in a deep pit, on top of a heap of ashes. Harry and Sue, I guessed.

Maybe Edward. Maybe he'd been killed first and I was lying on top of his ashes. I recoiled from the thought. They hadn't planned to kill him; perhaps they truly hadn't, perhaps he'd only pulled us away from the field because they were going to kill *me*, he might be alive -

One of my ears started working. Sounds echoed crazily between the walls of the pit, reaching my ear in a distorted timbre. "- my matches," grumbled a man's voice I hadn't heard before. "Damn wet climate. Go ask Jane if she has a lighter, will you?"

"Didn't think we were going to kill this one," said an unfamiliar woman.

"Doesn't surprise me. You'd get it if you had a mate," said the man. There were

footsteps, receding and then approaching again.

Edward thought I was dead - they all thought I was dead - reasonable enough given that I'd been broken into a hundred pieces and set on fire - they'd wanted to control him but that plan had been shot to hell when they'd killed me -

I tried to move, I had to do something, I had to save him, *he* had no shield.

I dragged my left arm close to me, and felt the snug blanket of my shield shift with it, but I was fragile. Deep fissures ran along my skin; if I applied any pressure to the limb it would break again. I was dangerously low on venom; it might not be able to get me whole even if I didn't worsen the injuries. I couldn't even get out of the ash pit.

"Here's your lighter," said the woman.

"Thanks, Addy, you're a peach," said the man.

There was a crackling noise. My Edward, on fire, I couldn't *move* - "In the pit?" asked Addy.

"Pit was to keep the smoke away from the wolves, they're gone now, no point," he said. I didn't know whether to be glad of that or not; I couldn't bear to watch him die but I couldn't bear that he was alone, that he thought *I* was dead. I might as well be. *Edward, Edward* -

"Dunno how well the wolf thing'll work," Addy said skeptically. I wanted them to shut up. I didn't want to listen to this, I wanted the silence back, I wanted to have no idea what was going on around me when what was going on was that *Edward was dying* -

"Don't think you and Chelsea did a good job of it?"

"We did a fine job. She's fun to work with," Addy replied. "And the wolves are interesting material - so interwoven; tweak one thing and they all change. But I mean things like the way that black one passed out when it smelled the smoke from those newborns. Biological stuff. Are they worth the complications?" My lungs regained their integrity; I was sure I could have taken a breath. I didn't. They'd hear me. They'd probably only ignored the sound of my arm moving because it could have been part of the fire that was supposed to be consuming me. I willed it back. Willed the flames to spring into existence again, trade this pain for that one. But I wasn't a pyrokineticist, I was a shield. That was the only reason I was alive.

Edward would have wanted me to live.

The cracks in the arm I could see were getting shallower. The physical pain, at least, was at a manageable level. The hollow, dead feeling in my chest wasn't the sort of thing the venom would ever heal.

But Edward would have wanted me to live.

I lay there, inert, listening to the crackling and popping of the fire as it widowed me. Listening to Addy and whoever the man was make small talk over his smoldering remains.

"Aro thinks so," the man said.

"Of course. And he knows more about the matter than I do," Addy said. "Still, it seems to present a logistical challenge."

I wanted her to die. I wanted whoever she was talking to, to die. I wanted Aro dead and his "brothers" dead and their wives dead and every person who had ever peaceably wandered the halls of their compound *dead* including me because Edward was gone and I couldn't stand it and if I were dead I wouldn't have to.

He would have wanted me to live.

"Do you think the coven will be a problem?" the man asked.

"No, I doubt it -" Addy began. "Coming, boss!" Some gesture of Aro's I hadn't been able to hear, maybe, calling them away.

Footsteps receded.

There was silence.

Edward would have wanted me to live.

I remained still.

The visible damage, at least, healed.

My thirst did not care that I was alone. It came anyway, the insistent burn in my throat.

I watched the sun rise, and watched little diamonds dance across my smoothed-over skin. All that, and the only scar on me was the bite mark on my wrist. But the trauma and recovery, if it could be called "recovery", had taken a lot out of me. If I didn't get blood soon I wasn't sure exactly what would happen, but it wouldn't be conducive to my health.

I hadn't heard anything, all night. The Volturi had been and gone, the wolves with them. No one had even looked into the ash pit. I could safely climb out and hunt, now.

Edward would have wanted it.

I pulled myself into a sitting position. I felt brittle, but not achy or tired. I could

move around. I was in adequate shape to kill an animal.

I climbed out of the hole, slower than I needed to go. I looked around at the dewy field, down into the pit where Harry and Sue had been carelessly dumped. Any humans who wandered through this place and found the greasy ashes would think it was from a barbecue or something. No one would mistake it for a grave.

I kicked a little dirt over the ash, but couldn't muster any enthusiasm for a serious burial. "Harry," I said. "Sue." Just their names. Acknowledging that I knew they were there, or that the transformed matter that they'd once inhabited was there, anyway.

Then I dared to turn around.

There was a heap of ashes in the middle of the field, indistinguishable from the ones I'd been lying on.

I couldn't say his name. It wouldn't come to my lips.

I approached the pile, silently, and touched the ash. It wasn't even warm anymore; I'd been waiting for nothing in the hole in the ground long enough that they'd cooled. I picked up one sliver of charcoal gently.

I wanted to put it in my locket. I didn't have my locket anymore - or my rings, or my bracelet, or my clothes, or my wallet, or my hair. My shield had saved me from the fire, but not my possessions, and hair didn't heal as flesh did. The jewelry at least might have fallen off when I was originally tackled. I wandered in that direction, cradling the piece of ash in my palm.

I actually did find the necklace. The clasp was broken, but the chain was mostly intact and the charm was fine. I tied the chain around my neck, and opened the locket to put the ash between the pictures.

Elsbeth...

I wanted to look for the rest of my jewelry. The rings, at *least*, the physical evidence that Edward had existed, that he'd loved me, that he'd been mine. But finding the locket had taken long enough and I was unbearably thirsty.

I listened. The forest was relatively clear of wildlife - sensible, given how many vampires had been swarming around the place over the last who-knew-how-long. I didn't know what day it was. I'd lost all the cues of time when I'd been in fragments. It was still autumn, at least. But I heard some elk, at the borders of my hearing, and I chased them down and killed three and drank them dry. The taste of herbivores was rancid but I was past caring. I needed the burn soothed. Strength flowed back into my limbs as I absorbed the blood. Too little, too late, but I was physically back to normal apart from being bald.

I noticed, when I'd filled up, that I could still feel my shield. It hadn't ranked as a significant sensation when I'd been thirsty, but now that I thought of it there was a definite layer of *something* wrapped around me. I touched my arm, but my fingers didn't detect anything - it was some second layer of "feeling", then, like the second channel of hearing Edward had...

My train of thought derailed at once. I made an involuntary choking noise and coughed up a droplet of sour blood. Would it be like that forever? Every thought leading to Edward, every thought of Edward throwing me into fresh grief? I couldn't function that way. That wouldn't have mattered - but Edward would have wanted me to *live*, to be *alive*, not just to fail to be a heap of ashes. I knew he would.

"*I won't let you die...*" I could remember his voice so clearly. So honeyed and certain.

I wished with all my heart that he'd loved me less, enough that he could have run without me. He could have gotten away. They hadn't *planned* to kill him, he'd said. They wouldn't have needed to if he hadn't been too distraught over *me* to ever be recruited. The fact that I had been able to survive the attack only made it more appalling that he'd lost his life that way. But even if I'd been completely burnt, he could have been fine. If he'd loved me less.

I went back and looked for my rings. I found the bracelet first; one of its diamonds poked out from under a leaf. Some of the silver pieces were slightly munched. It was less flexible than it had been. But I put it on anyway, and kept looking.

I found my engagement ring first. The ring part had been bent out of shape but the lattice of gems was all right. The wedding band was nearby and looked fine; I put that on, but didn't dare try to tap the other ring into shape. I'd find a way to get it repaired professionally. For the time being I threaded it onto the locket's chain.

I couldn't find Edward's ring anywhere. I searched every inch of the forest in a plausible radius of where we'd been caught, I followed the path from there to the field, I shut my eyes and forced myself to feel through the pile of ashes. It wasn't there, even in the form of a melted lump of gold. I didn't know what could have happened to it. Had one of the Volturi bothered to steal it while leaving mine untouched? Why? What would they want with it? I retraced all my steps, looking for disturbed soil where it could have been stomped into the ground, going through heaps of discarded foliage one needle at a time. Nothing.

While I probably *could* have paced back and forth stark naked in the woods looking for the ring for the rest of my life, it didn't seem like the kind of *living* Edward would have wanted me to do. I was beginning to think that I was forever going to have to motivate myself to do anything that way. That I would never be able to accomplish tasks that I couldn't somehow make *about Edward*, about what *Edward* would have wanted.

What about Elspeth?

Everyone thought I was dead - or if they didn't now, they would soon enough, when the news got out. That gave me a measure of safety. And her as well. No one would be looking for me, and she would not be sought as bait for a trap intended for a dead woman. She was safe in Denali.

If I went to get her, then my in-laws would know I wasn't dead. That would eventually get back to the Volturi. Then, I wouldn't just need to lie low, I'd need to run, and Elspeth could be in danger. I had ample evidence that my protections weren't worth a damn for anyone else. It hadn't done anything for Edward.

I wanted her, I wanted to try to fill the hole Edward's death had left in me with our daughter, I wanted to cradle her close and let her warm me up, I wanted to stroke the hair that was so much like his, I wanted to see her father's face in her dreams again. I wanted her to know that she was only half-orphaned.

But I *needed* her to be safe.

I had lost more than I could stand to lose. If Elspeth died, I didn't know if I would be capable of going on, even given what I knew Edward would have wanted. She was the last living part of him, and she had to go on breathing.

I wandered towards the village, where supposedly everyone was dead or kidnapped and everything burned. Everything was. Charred husks of homes crumbled around me as I walked through the deserted reservation. I went farther, towards Harry's shack. It was intact, or at least as intact as it had ever gotten to be from its original tumbledown state. There were some clothes inside. I took an outfit of Sue's. She wouldn't need it and no one would miss it. She had a small collection of scarves. I wrapped one around my hairless scalp. Between the baldness and the now-constant feel of my shield clinging to my skin, I felt terribly strange.

I wondered why the village wasn't crawling with cops, suspecting arson. Charlie should have been there, prowling the area, trying to figure out what had happened. Maybe the Volturi had intervened with some police connection and the destruction was officially a natural disaster. Maybe I'd been in bite-sized chunks for a few weeks and all of the detective work had been and gone. Maybe Charlie was dead.

Charlie didn't approach the importance of Edward or Elspeth, but I could check on *him*. He wouldn't notice me if I hid well enough. I could stake out his house for a while and see if he was going about his life normally.

I wondered if Carlisle and the others would bother to tell my father I was dead. Would it make him safer or less safe to believe that? I couldn't keep in touch with him; if there were actual *evidence* in his inbox or phone call history that I was alive then that could be found one day. But if he simply *thought* I was alive, on the grounds that no one had told him otherwise, that might be fine. Unless he started digging around to find out

why I wasn't answering my phone or my e-mail.

Renée was probably in less danger than Charlie either way. She wasn't a cop and couldn't get the same kind of attention if she became inquisitive. I supposed I could go to Florida and skulk around her house, to see if she went on crying jags or otherwise indicated that she believed me dead.

Such a trip turned out to be unnecessary. At nightfall, I went into Forks and climbed Charlie's next-door neighbor's chimney. I hid behind it, pressed between the bricks and the shingles and leaning just enough to see Charlie's house. His cruiser wasn't there. I didn't see my old truck, either. I didn't particularly care. It'd be noticed if it went missing, so I couldn't exactly take it. I'd travel faster on foot anyway.

I waited several hours, half an eye on Charlie's empty house. The rest of my mind was on Edward. On my memories of him. It was like chewing on broken glass to think of them, but I couldn't stop myself. I needed Edward, and if all I could have were memories, then that was what I'd take.

"Edward, do you trust me?"

"Absolutely."

I bit my lip, almost hard enough to pierce the skin. I considered doing that on purpose - it would be distracting, at least, and my *own* venom wouldn't scar - but then Charlie's police car pulled onto the street. He was driving it, so he was alive, at least for the time being. He did look bereaved... but then, Billy and Harry were dead. They'd been his best friends. Their deaths alone could do that.

He parked in the driveway and went inside. I heard him put something in the microwave. Then he picked up the phone and dialed it. I could faintly hear the beeps; by their pitch, I knew it was Renée's number.

I wasn't close enough to make out Renée's half of the conversation; I jumped lightly from the neighbor's roof onto the ground and darted immediately into a shrub with a good angle to his window, so I could see what Charlie was doing as well as hear. I was wearing long sleeves and dark colors, but that didn't mean nobody could see me if they were looking the wrong way while I wasn't behind cover.

"Anything?" Charlie asked.

"No, she didn't answer the phone today either," Renée said. "What makes you think she was in the fire? She didn't say anything to me about visiting you - did she just not mention it or -"

"It... might have been a surprise visit," Charlie said carefully. "There are friends of the family in La Push she might have stayed with so she could surprise me." He was

trying to convince Renée that I was dead without going into the evidence. He'd evidently not looked at the field with the vampire ashes, because he could have seen me in the pit, but even I hadn't known what vampire ashes looked like until I saw them. So the absence of the correct kind of ash in La Push proper wouldn't necessarily have tipped him off. But the sheer destruction, my lack of contact, and the fact that he knew I was up to my neck in the mess with the wolves would have.

"Do you know yet who might have set the fire? It *was* arson, wasn't it?" Renée asked.

"I think so - but the scope of it was - well, the case has gone federal. I'm not supposed to touch it. Even if the feds hadn't taken over, since Bella might have been in it, I might have been considered too close to the case."

"How can our little girl be gone?" asked Renée in a small voice.

"Well, we can't be sure," said Charlie. There was no hope in his voice, he was just trying to calm Renée. "Can't be sure at all. There's nothing recognizable in the ashes. But..."

"And you haven't been able to get in touch with our *son-in-law*? Or his family?" asked Renée, and I almost wailed aloud from the stab of loss at hearing Edward mentioned, but I held my tongue.

"He's as impossible to get hold of as she is," Charlie said. "I tried his sister, Alice, I had her number, but there's no answer from her either. I don't know how to call anyone else."

"Bella was *pregnant*," wailed Renée.

"One second," said Charlie in an unstable voice, and he put my mother on hold and turned away from the phone and brought both fists down on his kitchen table, a scream of rage boiling up from somewhere deep in his chest. He lifted his hands and curled them into fists in his hair, then struck the table again, making noises of frustration and grief. He knew Elspeth had been born already. He'd seen her baby pictures. He knew he was a grandfather. He'd never be able to tell Renée that she was a grandmother already, that she hadn't lost that chance when I'd "died". He had no way to get in touch with his granddaughter. He didn't know if she was alive.

I was a little tempted to show myself. But oddly, Charlie's pain didn't strike me as deeply as it would have a month ago. I didn't like it, but it was safer this way. The impulse to comfort him was shallow. The need to prevent more of my family from dying was deep. My parents had to think I was dead. Everyone did.

Charlie exhausted his need to yell and hit things. He took several deep breaths, picked up the phone again, and said, "Sorry about that."

"You'll call me if you hear anything else, won't you?" Renée said.

"Of course. Of course," said Charlie. "I have to go. Goodbye." He hung up without waiting for her to answer, and stood as still as a human could, swaying faintly and staring into space.

He swore under his breath, got his dinner out of the microwave, and started forcing food down his throat.

I crept out of the shrubbery and disappeared into the woods.

I had nowhere in particular to be. Nothing in particular to do. I could go anywhere except a few hazardous locations. It was a pity that those were the only places I wanted to be - Denali, where my daughter was. Volterra, where a lot of people I wanted to kill were.

I walked toward Chicago. Edward's birthplace. I didn't bother running - there was no hurry. On sunny days I stayed put in uninhabited areas, to reduce the odds of being noticed as too glittery by some human. I took in a lot of scenery. I ate animals unfortunate enough to cross my path. I happened to pass through a town one evening and notice costumed children wandering door-to-door for candy; thereafter I was aware of the date, irrelevant though it was.

I thought of Edward several times a minute, flipping through every memory I had of him, as though I could fix them more securely in my heart by rehearsing them. I forced more detail out of the fuzzy human recollections than I'd bothered with when I'd first gone through my notes. Every last time he'd touched me. Every single kiss. Every word he'd spoken. Every expression that had crossed his face.

Elsbeth occupied my thoughts, too, but I did less remembering and more speculating: what would Rosalie feed her today? Where would Carlisle take her on her one-month "birthday"? Did she talk yet or was her witchcraft slowing her down? What was her voice like, when she uttered words? Did Emmett toss her into the air to make her laugh? What would Esme see now, if she watched her dream? Did she get along with Tanya and Kate and Carmen and Eleazar and David? Was Irina still there, or had she broken off from the coven? Which house was she living in, which room held my baby when she slept...?

I needed money to get my ring repaired and to replace the chain of my locket and repair the bracelet. It was also limiting my movement that I didn't have any shoes; I didn't need them for comfort, but their absence did attract attention. That made the shoes a more urgent problem than the ring. The lack of hair - new growth just barely fuzzing back into existence - was already more oddness than would be ideal; I was glad for Sue's scarf.

It was November. Anyone would remark on my lack of shoes. I found a five dollar bill on the ground in a town in Idaho that I passed through, and used it to buy cheap boots

from a thrift store.

A week later, I stopped at a random, medium-sized town in Montana, on a snowy afternoon. I knocked on a few doors in a suburb, offering to shovel driveways and sidewalks. I looked seventeen; it was a plausible occupation, requiring no ID, as long as I didn't knock when I "should have been in school". One old lady worried over my lack of a coat. I told her I didn't need one, that I'd keep warm doing the shoveling, but she insisted that I take her granddaughter's old parka, and I did, not wanting to argue or get more attention over my unseasonable attire. I shoveled snow until it got dark and people stopped answering their doors, accumulating just under a hundred dollars in the process.

At the very end of November, I got to Chicago. I didn't know exactly where in the city Edward had grown up. I walked up and down every street, half-expecting one block to feel different, like *him*, but it was all just unfamiliar urban landscape. Eventually I'd covered everything that could reasonably be called "Chicago". No place felt unusual.

I shoveled more snow. I didn't visit any home twice. I picked a jeweler's when I'd saved up enough money. They replaced the chain, and were able to slightly improve the bracelet. The ring wasn't as good as new when they finished with it, but at least it was wearable. I had both of my rings back, the rings he'd given me. My hand felt better.

I walked to Florida. As I went south, I had to be more careful about when I was in public - there was more sun - but I got there eventually. I was in Jacksonville by Christmas.

I went to my mother's address, in the middle of the night, but there was no car in the driveway and I couldn't hear anyone breathing inside. They were probably visiting Phil's family for the holiday, or maybe some of my extended relations. That was good. She should be with family.

Renée had e-mailed me all the information I'd need to get into the Jacksonville house when she'd moved there. "Just in case," she'd written. I took the spare key out from under the flowerpot, let myself in, disarmed the security system, and wandered around in the dark.

Renée had a desktop computer and hadn't brought it along on her Christmas vacation. I knew the password to her e-mail - it was "Isabella!!", always had been, she wasn't security-conscious at all and didn't care if I could see her messages anyway. Especially now that she thought I was dead. I logged in and looked at all her correspondence with Charlie over the last couple months. Apparently Carlisle *had* eventually gotten in touch with Charlie. That was good; that meant that Carlisle was okay. The Volturi hadn't killed everyone I'd ever associated with out of spite. Renée didn't get the real story, naturally. But she'd been thoroughly convinced that I was dead. Apparently they'd held a funeral for me in Forks, and Renée and Phil had gone, but no Cullens had attended. Charlie thought it was disgraceful that they hadn't shown up. I couldn't blame them, though.

I wondered if they'd had a funeral for Edward.

I shut down the computer, turned the alarm back on, locked the door behind me, put the key away, and walked north.

I had no other locations I wanted to visit at all. I wandered completely aimlessly. I hunted when I was thirsty, and just like Edward had said I would, I got neater over time. I shoveled driveways when I needed money to replace my clothes, and to save extra cash in case I couldn't think of any replacement work for warmer months. Mowing lawns would do on cloudy days, but unlike snow, grass wasn't persistently accompanied by cloud cover.

I remembered Edward and wondered about Elspeth.

It occurred to me in mid-January that I didn't really know what Elspeth might be doing. She might not be in Denali anymore. Carlisle was unharmed by the Volturi, or he wouldn't have been able to contact Charlie. They could probably move around freely. Maybe they were living in one of their own houses by now. I'd only seen Norway, Québec, and Forks, but there were more. I knew where they were. I supposed I'd need to steer clear of those towns. They could buy a new house, but I was unlikely to stumble on it.

I walked up the east coast. There was a Cullen house in Maine, but it was in Farmington, not close to the ocean; I felt safe enough wandering along the beach. I ate a number of killer whales. Edward had shared the first orca I'd ever eaten.

I walked into Canada. It was easier to cross the border unnoticed on foot than in a car, or rather, it was easier to do it without Edward looking out for me and pulling strings to make the border agents ignore me. I crossed Québec without getting too near the house there.

I was in Winnipeg when I noticed I was drifting very definitely northwest. The direction of Alaska.

I was cold all the time. My shield, hugging me day and night without pause, was not comforting; it was just a reminder that I was alive while Edward was not. I wanted my warm child. A reminder that he'd left something behind.

But I couldn't have her. I shouldn't let myself even get close to Denali, not when it could put her in danger even if she *wasn't* there. I turned south and took a meandering route towards Dallas.

I got to Dallas in late March. I was starting to be able to think about things other than my dead husband and lost daughter for more than a few seconds at a time. I went into libraries and bookstores when I passed them, flipped through and memorized random books and newspapers and magazines. I people-watched. I window-shopped, and gingerly

doled out the cash I'd saved from shoveling snow - I acquired a nice, durable backpack and slowly filled it with spare clothes, and a canteen to fill with water. I agreed to take photos for strangers. I visited landmarks and eavesdropped on conversations and wished Edward was with me.

I allowed myself four hours per day of dwelling on him and our child, and other than that, I just traveled and tried to be alive. Like Edward would have wanted.

I was passing through Tennessee when I found Jasper.

Things Left Behind

I was wandering through the vicinity of Nashville, taking an uninhabited route to avoid being seen in the sun. I was starting to get a little thirsty, and my necklace and rings were on my locket chain, where they were less likely to be damaged by the one-sided fight between me and a coyote if I happened across one. When I went over a shallow rise, I saw him, clearly a vampire, from a few hundred feet away.

It took me longer than it should have to recognize him. He was alone, for one thing; no Alice. His outfit was nothing like the style that had been typical of Jasper before. When he was facing away from me, the hair was enough to make him look Jasperlike in spite of that - it was a little shaggier than I'd last seen, but the right color and type. But when he turned around, having heard my approach, his eyes were red.

Figuring I'd been mistaken, and this vampire merely resembled Jasper, I stepped forward. I would have needed to run from Jasper before being recognized, lest he get in touch with the family and let them know I was alive. A stranger, on the other hand, I could interact with in relative safety. I hadn't encountered another nomad in all my wandering, but imagined it was customary for me to find out what this vampire's territory was so I could keep out of it or arrange to peaceably pass through.

By the time I was close enough to see the web of scars on his face, and understand that it wasn't just some doppelganger, it was too late: he'd had the chance to see through my new hairdo.

"Bella," I heard him growl.

"No," I lied, and then I turned to run. I had a head start and I retraced the steps I'd taken, so I wouldn't be caught off guard by strange terrain. It took him almost twenty minutes to catch me. But catch me he did.

He took my arm off, easily, still the consummate handler of newborns. Holding it hostage, he sprang back. "Bella," he said again, keeping out of my reach as I lunged for my limb and hissed at the pain.

"Give it back." I looked him in the eye - what had he and Alice been *doing*? What would have possessed them to return to eating humans?

Where was she?

"No," he drawled, voice full of his native Southern accent. "I could use some news from home and you don't seem so inclined to give it."

"I don't have any. Give me my arm." I looked at the limb, trying to use vision instead of confused kinesthetic sensation to make it attack him; it just flailed wildly. I couldn't even tell if I was really controlling it or if it was just twitching on its own.

"You're looking rather well," he said. His tone was somehow harsh and languid at the same time. "The cancer patient look suits you."

I launched myself at him, trying to grab my arm away. I actually managed it, through some fluke or just the power I could still put behind a leap, and I took off one of his hands off in the process. I ran again once I was clear, licking the severed edge of my arm so it would seal properly and attaching it back to my shoulder. I flung Jasper's hand away, hoping to distract him, and kept running.

From what I could hear, he wasn't even going after his hand. He was just chasing me. "Bella, dear sister," he called. "It's only me, Alice isn't here to stop me now." What was *wrong* with him?

Where was Alice?

I asked him that: "Where is she?" I yelled, over my shoulder.

That stopped him in his tracks. "You don't know?" he asked, barely loudly enough for me to hear over the wind in my ears.

I stopped too, and looked over my shoulder. "No," I said.

"She's dead, Bella," he said, sounding so lost that it was like he wasn't a powerful, leonine fighter missing a hand and covered in proof of his ability to take me apart. "Alice is dead."

The news hit me harder than I would have guessed. Alice. My sister, my friend - dead. Little, happy Alice, dancing wherever she went - dead. Just like Edward.

"*How?*" I asked.

Jasper started to lope towards me. "Volturi," he said, the lonely timbre receding from his voice as he returned to whatever mania had possessed him before I'd asked about her. "Had one of Nahuel's sisters with them to block her vision, and a witch I've never seen before who works like Jane." He sounded comfortable and casual by the time the sentence was over, in spite of the fact that there was no pleasant way he could have learned that the witch was similar to Jane. Something was definitely wrong with him. Some defense mechanism against dealing with Alice's death, spiraling out of control to make him unstable.

"And Alice?" I whispered, backing away from him. That was two new, powerful witches with the Volturi, Addy and whoever Jasper had seen. Maybe the sister of Nahuel's they'd recruited was the witch one too. Maybe this embarrassment of riches was why they'd been willing to kill my Edward, and Alice, who they'd wanted so badly.

The pain flashed back onto his face, but he controlled it again - or it disappeared of its own accord. "Alec knocked me over, deprived me of all the usual senses, but that doesn't cut the empathy," he murmured. "That works just fine... well, not on you, dear

sister... but otherwise just fine... and I felt... Alice... die." Except for the pauses, he could have been discussing any neutral subject, commenting on my scarf or something.

I kept backing up; he kept moving forward. He didn't seem to be paying any attention to what had to be an awful pain in his wrist, where his hand should have been. "Why are your eyes red?" I whispered.

"Because I've been eating people, dear sister." He practically *purred*.

But that was obvious, that he'd been eating people, didn't he understand why I'd ask...? "But why? Alice -"

"Don't say her name!" he roared, suddenly all violence and fury. "You have no right to say her name. *It's your fault*. They had no excuse until you stepped out of line, *dear sister*, they had no way to separate us from the group to make the attack feasible until you forced us to scatter, *dear sister*, you have *no right* -"

"Okay!" I cried, and he calmed again, all the rage drained out of him like someone had tipped him over and poured it out.

"To answer your question," he said conversationally, "I was originally able to stop eating people in the first place because, wouldn't you know it, they don't really like to be eaten. They tend to have strong feelings about it... not pleasant ones... Well, when I knew there was something else to be done, I was all too willing to try to leave that behind, although of course it was difficult. Dear. Sister. But now I find meals a pleasant respite."

"You..."

"If I feel *their* pain, you see," he murmured, creeping forward as I scrambled back, "if I focus on *their* terror, think about *their* despair... I don't have to remember *hers*. Dear, dear sister."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Oh, don't be sorry," he said. "There's really no point. I can't tell, you see. And besides... I'm going to kill you."

I would have died immediately if Jasper had been in his right mind and had both hands. But he was short a weapon, and his onslaught was clumsy and desperate. His attitude and his stance and his strategy shifted chaotically as he lunged and struck, and while it made him unpredictable, it sacrificed all of his follow-through.

It was only April; I had almost two months left of newborn strength. Jasper seemed stronger than Emmett - I remembered that drinking human blood conferred an improvement there - but I was stronger still, and I could commit to my attacks.

I could, at least, until Jasper started talking again.

"Did you even love him?" he said, launching a kick to my head that turned into a mere acrobatic maneuver halfway through its journey when he changed his mind. I rolled away, kipped up, and then realized what he was talking about and found myself so stunned by the question that I couldn't dodge as he landed a solid punch to my sternum with his attached hand.

I flew through the air; he was waiting when I landed and stomped on my knee, breaking my leg in half. I screamed and scrambled for the lost leg, and Jasper chose to forego continuing to divide me from myself, instead saying, "Because if you did love him... you'd be like me, now, wouldn't you?"

"You're -" *I shouldn't be talking to him, I should be focusing on surviving.* I picked up my leg, spat on it, and fused it back to my knee, then sprang to my feet and ran again.

"Alice didn't see it... too many wolves," he said, sprinting after me. "But we heard about it... you know, before they killed her because of you... Edward is dead, or did you somehow not know? Did you abandon him?"

"No!" I shrieked.

"But you seem to be doing so well, Bella," Jasper snarled. "Of course, I can't *tell*, not really, but I'd think, if you loved him, that you'd be in more or less my boat... or you'd be barely awake, like Marcus... or you'd be focused on revenge, like Irina... but no, you're fine, you're in the middle of Tennessee... *hiking*."

"I'm not *fine*!" He caught up to me again, pushed himself into the air and aimed a foot squarely at the middle of my back. I had enough forward momentum that it didn't actually injure me, but it threw off my gait and I went tumbling forward down the slope I'd been following.

Jasper stood at the top of the hill, watching me recover my feet. "I can't tell," he said, shrugging, "like I said." Then he was after me again. I spun to connect a fist with his face as he approached. I missed his head, but caught the shoulder of his good arm. It came off. He didn't make any effort to retrieve it, just kept advancing; he was on me again in an instant, compensating for his rebalanced body well enough to land a kick at my throat.

My neck cracked but didn't sever, and he stopped, *again*, to taunt me while I gurgled and healed. The knitting wound was slower than the others - I'd had to reattach an arm and a leg in the last minute; I wasn't made entirely of venom. "Now," Jasper said, "I know he loved you. And you felt something for him... I think... before I lost you. But did you *love* him? Really? Or are you immune to that too, dear sister?" He darted towards me to do more damage, when my neck was half healed, but I pushed at him with both hands and one foot and he went hurtling through the air. He skidded when he landed, not bothering to get his bearings again until my neck was glued whole and I was up and running again.

If Jasper ever got the presence of mind to pick up his lost appendages and seriously

attack me without pause, I was dead. I needed to do something clever. He'd been reacting very strongly to Alice's name; it might throw him off enough that I could reason with him. "Alice wouldn't want me dead!" I yelled.

He stopped in his tracks, and I glanced over my shoulder to gauge his reaction. The lost, forlorn look again. "She loved you," he said. And then his face twisted with hate. "And you *betrayed* her. *She loved you.*" He gave chase again; I kept running, with enough of a start that I guessed he'd catch me again in four minutes.

Damn my ambition. I hadn't been born accidentally immune to Jasper, I'd *chosen* it -

Could I turn it off? I could feel it, now - it had responded to my volition when I'd added the immunity, and when I'd been dying - maybe - if I just wanted a little *hole* in it, he'd be able to feel my presence the way he was used to. He was raving enough that I might be able to convince him that it was a case of mistaken identity.

I didn't know how to make it *make sense* for Jasper to feel me, but maybe it didn't need to make sense. Or maybe it didn't need to make a *specific* kind of sense.

He *had* been able to feel my emotions before, after all... I visualized my shield getting thinner, letting my emotions seep through. I didn't actually know what Jasper's range was, but he was catching up anyway; if it was working, he'd notice when he crossed it. I thought I could feel the press of my shield getting lighter or changing temperature or something - it wasn't *quite* like feeling a normal object, I didn't know how to map all the sensations onto metaphors (or functions) yet.

"What..." Jasper stopped again. "You're... but you look like... *wait* -"

He was not only confused about who I was, he was also willing to quit attacking me for that reason? That was better than I'd hoped. If I could pass off the entire conversation... I ran through it again in my head. I hadn't *definitively* given away my identity, he'd said all the names first... although I'd need one hell of a story to cover my appearance *and* gold eyes *and* a few of the things I'd said. If he really wasn't sure, though, I might be able to get out with no complete story at all, and leave him to fill in the blanks with the next most believable thing.

"*Wait*," Jasper said desperately. "I'm sorry, you're not her - you only look like - she's dead, you look like someone I used to know, but she's dead too, I've been seeing things, I'm sorry. Peter and Charlotte will - they've been helping -"

He *had* lost his conviction that I was myself. Being rumored deceased was helpful. "What are you even talking about?" I yelled. "Jesus! I was just going to ask if I could go through your territory! And then you called me "Bella" and you took my damn *arm* off! The hell is your problem? And you've been eating *people*? Is that seriously normal? I mean, yeah, they smell awesome, but I thought my creator was pulling my leg that vampires actually went around killing them." Had to cover the confusion about the red

eyes. The red in his eyes was at least a different *sort* than newborn red, although it was still a foolish mistake I was pretending to have made. "But, you know, not pulling my leg completely *off* like *you*. Thanks for the tip about us not really being immortal, though, I thought that word meant we can't die, I'll be more careful about talking to strangers now." That should explain why I'd asked "how" about Alice's death.

"I'm sorry!" he yelled. "You look like someone I knew, but she's dead -"

"Are you going to attack me again if I stop and talk to you?" I demanded.

"No, I won't, I won't," he said, and I slowed.

"You look a lot like her," he murmured. "A lot. But maybe you don't. I've been seeing things, things that aren't there... Maybe you don't really look like her."

"This... Bella person?" I said, stopping a safe distance away. "Your sister? Man, I don't know about *her*, but I know I don't look one bit like *you*."

He nodded. "Uh, look - I'm with a coven - you can talk to them about the territory thing - they're in -"

"No offense, man, but I don't think I want to hang around," I said. Or leave more reliable records of my face, in Peter and Charlotte's minds. It was a stroke of bewildering luck that Jasper had been hallucinating enough to think I was really someone else. It was not going to hold with his friends. "Just tell me which way is out of here and go get your hands back on and take a chill pill."

"Did... did you lose someone? It doesn't make sense unless..."

"You're not my freakin' therapist," I said. "It's not your business that my boyfriend is - not your business." *Act, act, act, live, live, live* -

"I'm sorry. Uh - go - that way - Nashville's the only major city my coven claims, just stay out of the area and you'll never see me again - I'm sorry -"

"Toodles," I said, in the most uncharacteristic farewell I could think of, and I bolted.

I got out of the Nashville area without meeting Peter or Charlotte, and continued north once I had safely detoured. I thanked my lucky stars that my identifying jewelry had been tucked into my shirt, and I didn't dare take it out again until I'd crossed the state line.

Jasper's accusations had shaken me, and when I was out of his coven's range and had coaxed my shield back to its normal strength, I tried to consider them. Of course if Jasper couldn't sense an emotion from me, that didn't necessarily mean it wasn't there... but did he have a point, however poorly derived? *Could* I be immune to the full force of the mate bond? It was the *sort* of thing I found myself impervious to. I felt like I'd been more

powerfully connected to Edward than I'd imagined possible, but I didn't have a true basis for comparison. Edward would have, if he could read my mind, but he couldn't.

And... I *was* holding up better than Jasper. He was *hallucinating*, he'd lapsed his vegetarianism, his mood and demeanor swung wildly all over the map from moment to moment. I *was* functioning better than Marcus. He was practically a zombie, after centuries without Didyme. And I was less obsessed with revenge than Irina. While I did want the Volturi dead, I'd already wanted that before they'd killed Edward.

In short, I was *coping*. I thought about Edward every single day, and hadn't managed to scale back my allotted four hours daily of dwelling on him and Elspeth, but I was having a life without him.

But the answer that Jasper had thought of - that I just didn't *really* love Edward, that I was somehow protected from that too - didn't feel right. I'd had to drag myself around by telling myself he'd have wanted me to live; I'd acquired more momentum over the months since, but the basic motivation was still the same, if I looked at it.

Maybe there was some other explanation for why I was - effectively - managing. Irina's behavior was the least bizarre of the three examples - and she, unlike Jasper or Marcus, wasn't a witch. Jasper had apparently *felt* Alice die. I allowed myself a shudder at how awful that must have been. Marcus saw relationships - had he watched his wink out? Would that be a more affecting experience than mine, where I'd only had to *hear* myself widowed?

And there was Elspeth.

For all that I thought it was idiotic for anyone to count having children as a kind of immortality on a par with the *regular* kind of immortality...

It wasn't *nothing*. Elspeth was alive, might well live forever if she hadn't inherited my hubris, and she was Edward's daughter. Half him. Even if I couldn't see her, at least not until every threat were somehow extinguished in spite of the fact that the Volturi had at least two new witches and two packs of werewolves... she existed.

I was cold. But I knew *why* I was cold, I knew *what* I was missing, and that warmth hadn't gone out of the world, she was only far away.

Elspeth deserved to *have* a mother, a mother who wasn't a gibbering mess or an apathetic lump of misery, even if she couldn't be raised by that mother. Even if she had to think I was dead for the rest of her eternity.

I kept walking.

I was passing through Michigan when I found her.

I heard her voice first. I knew it was her before I even processed the word she'd spoken. There was no mistaking it, even though I'd heard only the syllables she'd deigned to utter when she was days old.

I froze in my tracks. Michigan? There were no family houses I knew about in Michigan. They'd bought a new one, then. Moving around more to cover for Elspeth's growth. How big would she be now? *I should run, I should jump into Lake Huron and swim to Ontario, I can't be here, they can't know* -

But what if she said something else? What if she spoke again, and I missed it?

The word she'd said was "puppy". That was... odd. Vampires, at least full ones, couldn't be around animals without the animals going out of their minds trying to get away; that was fine when we were going to eat the creatures anyway, but it would be a suspicious pattern of behavior to inspire in pets. Why would she be around a puppy?

Was my daughter *unsupervised*? Were they leaving her by herself, that she'd found a dog that wasn't barking its head off about the presence of vampires?

I listened more carefully. There were at least two people with her - heartbeats, at human speed. I'd entrusted my daughter to my in-laws and they were leaving her with a *babysitter*? Why were they not with her, in one combination or another, every minute of the day? What were they doing that was so important that they'd hand off my baby to someone else? One of the humans was an adult - a woman, it sounded like - the other a child.

Elspeth said something again: "Can I walk the puppy in the forest?" It wasn't really a forest, just a cluster of trees in a park, barely thick enough to obscure vision. If I ran six steps forward to its edge I might be able to glimpse her. I barely, *barely* stayed put.

"All right, Elsie," said the woman, and my daughter laughed with glee, and my heart would have stopped if it had been running. More footsteps, a dog's and a little girl's...

She was coming closer. I should run. If she saw me, if she smelled me, if she had any inkling that I was here, she could tell anyone about it, could tell my *neglectful* erstwhile siblings and parents-in-law about how she'd run into me. After she got home from her day with the *babysitter*.

But my body was obedient to what I really wanted, and I *wanted* to see my child again. She walked closer still.

Then the footsteps stopped. I heard her sniffing the air. The dog was sniffing, too, and started to whine.

"Mama?" said Elspeth.

Every thought of running away evaporated.

I could not, *could not* leave. Not now. Not anymore.

"Mama?" said Elspeth again, and she was getting closer. She was having to fight the dog to do it; I could tell by listening that she was stronger than it was, but it was very determined not to approach nearer. "Silly puppy," she said, and I thought I heard her hook the leash over a branch to make the animal stay while she investigated.

She pushed branches aside, and I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't move, and then she came into view.

"Mama!" she exclaimed. She looked like a tall five-year-old, maybe a skinny six-year-old. Her hair - *that* hair, exactly the shade, bronzed and brilliant - fell in waves to her knees. Her eyes were still that same brown that her father had loved so much. Someone had put her in a spring green outfit with daisies on it. She was the most beautiful thing in the universe.

I didn't think the human would have been able to hear her speaking to me. She rushed forward, jumped into my arms as they folded around her automatically, and planted her hand on my face.

Memories flooded past. Everything. Every instant of her childhood stolen from me, I could have it all back. I'd never be able to put her down, never be able to tell her to keep me a secret and send her back to the babysitter and the other child with the dog. I was going to have to steal her away; there was nothing else I was strong enough to do.

"Elspeth," I whispered, interrupting her. There were too many lost minutes for me to make them all up standing in a park some insufficient handful of miles away from her ostensible caretakers.

"What, Mama?" she replied, leaving her hot hand on my face but halting the flow of shared memory.

"Can you show me what happened right before you came to the park, please?"

She beamed at me and did exactly that.

The woman and her little son were the Cullens' next door neighbors at their current residence. They had a dachshund, which Elspeth found fascinating, but which the regular vampires had to pretend to be allergic to. The neighbor lady had offered to bring Elspeth along on the dog's walk, and Elspeth had begged to go, and they'd seen no harm in it: she was smart enough to keep her extraordinary qualities to herself, and to stay quiet about the oddities of her relatives.

The human was starting to wonder at how long Elspeth had "walked the puppy in the forest". "Elsie?" she called. "It's almost time for our picnic!"

"Mama, come to the picnic?" asked Elspeth eagerly.

"Elspeth, I can't. I need to take you away from here." I was hugging her close to me, and she was snuggling up, and she was so warm, *so warm* -

"Away to the place you went?" Was that seriously how they'd explained my supposed death to her? That I'd "gone away"?

"Yes," I said, saving the complex explanation for later. "Are you ready to go?"

"The puppy is stuck."

"The neighbor will find the puppy and get it unstuck." Finally, my feet at last were willing to move, now that she was in my arms. The human was meandering towards the cluster of trees. If I bolted, now, and got into the water as soon as I could to disrupt my trail, and it took the human even a couple of minutes to give up looking and contact one of the Cullens, then I had a shot at evading detection. Unless... "Elspeth, did you ever meet a vampire man named Demetri?"

She shook her head, and showed me every male vampire she'd ever met, including Edward, but remembering him didn't hurt as much as it would have without her right there. Edward, Carlisle, Emmett, Jasper, Ilario, Eleazar, David, that was all - apparently if a contingent of Volturi had visited the family they'd been all women. Demetri hadn't met her. We couldn't be tracked.

I clutched at Elspeth and I ran.

I needed to cut off our trail. But Elspeth needed to breathe, which made sustained, discreet underwater travel challenging. No one who would be looking for me was a tracker. Without any witches to help them, the family was limited to scent and traditional detective work to follow me.

After even a few minutes for the trail to cool, scent alone wouldn't be enough to identify *me* specifically, although they'd know *a* vampire was involved. The distinguishing features of a person's scent evaporated much quickly, so they'd only be able to tell my species, not recognize my person. I could confuse my trail to the point of untrackability in a sufficiently crowded area. But the crowds could be questioned later, and might remember us. Water would really be best if we could manage it. My backpack was fortunately waterproof; I'd considered that an important feature when I'd bought it, considering my penchant for aquatic food.

"Elspeth, sweetie, do you happen to know how long you can hold your breath?" I asked.

"A whole minute!" she bragged, sending me the relevant memory.

I didn't pull any oxygen out of the air I inhaled. If we both held our breaths, and I carried her in one arm and dove underwater, we could stay underwater for two minutes at a time if I gave her my air. That wasn't enough time to get out of visual range from a speedboat if someone on it spotted us and knew which direction to go, but it *was* enough time to get far enough away to confuse anyone who thought we were human. I could pop up in unpredictable locations and be unfollowable. All they'd be able to tell, if they were questioned later, would be that we'd been in the lake.

I'd avoid spending too long in the water - I just needed to break my trail, and then there would be thousands of miles of coastline on which I *could* have emerged. By the time they found the specific beach we'd come out on the scent would be long gone.

I clung to uninhabited areas so I could run instead of walking until I got to the edge of the water. "We're going to swim across this lake," I told Elspeth, after confirming that there was no one along the stretch of coast I'd found. I explained how we were going to stay underwater, made sure she knew to poke me if she needed air early, and dove in.

I managed to stay out of the paths of boats for the entire trip across the lake. The swim took four hours, but Elspeth was very patient about it, and looked fascinated by the fish we passed. We climbed out on a beach in Ontario, and it was already after dark. "I'm hungry, Mama," Elspeth informed me.

"Okay, Elspeth, I'll get you something to eat," I promised. "I need to figure out where we are first."

"I never got to hunt with you before, I'm excited," she announced.

"You've been hunting?" I asked, blinking.

She showed me. They'd been feeding her animal blood. Or rather, taking her along on hunting trips and letting her get it for herself, which she'd become capable of months previously. I *was* annoyed that my dietary regimen had been thrown out the window once I was out of the picture, but on the other hand, wild animals were free and human food wasn't. I didn't have access to deep pockets full of ancient fortune anymore. It was probably better, all things considered, if she hunted for food.

I ran along a highway, slowing to a walk whenever I heard a car coming, until I arrived in a town. I found a convenience store that was open, read an atlas with one hand to avoid having to put Elspeth down, and identified an area that was unlikely to be inhabited where she could hunt.

"You have to put me down so I can chase stuff," she pointed out when we'd arrived.

I didn't want to let her go. But she did need to eat, and if she was accustomed to bringing down her own food... I set her on her feet. She ran lightly ahead of me, and I jogged behind, just keeping her in sight.

Elspeth drained two raccoons and a small deer, then announced she was done. She

had good table manners, which was a relief, because replacing her clothes every time she ate would have gotten very expensive and I only had a few hundred dollars left from snow shoveling.

She didn't protest at all when I scooped her up again. She fell asleep in my arms as I ran, heading nowhere in particular except away from the lake.

It occurred to me to feel bad for Carlisle and Esme and Emmett and Rosalie. They wouldn't know what had happened to Elspeth. I also worried vaguely about the neighbor who'd taken her to the park being suspected of having something to do with it. But there was no way to let it be known that she was okay, that the neighbor was innocent, without making my survival an even more obvious hypothesis than it already was. I had to stay "dead". If she just vanished without a trace, any nomadic vampire accustomed to helping him or herself to interesting live curios could have been the culprit. If she kept in touch with her grandparents and aunt and uncle, on the other hand, that sharply narrowed the field of suspects.

Maybe when she was older, there would be some workaround. She could claim to have escaped a captor or something, once grown, without being young enough that they'd insist on her coming to live with them again. Elspeth's adulthood was only a few years away. They could fret over it for that long. My *parents* had to think that *I* was dead for longer, possibly forever.

In the meantime, I had my daughter, and I could keep her, and she was warm in my arms.

On to Book Two

Radiance

Luminosity is created with no commercial intent or gain. Stephenie Meyer owns all things that she owns, completely, wholly, and tautologically. I intend to write fanfiction, not to be a bad evil stealing-type person who is bad and evil and stealing and a person.