

Radiance

by
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Liar

It's not that I'm a *bad* liar, it's just that I'm so good at being honest that people notice when I stop.

"I'm *sixteen*," I insisted. I'm five and a half. But still, there was no reason I shouldn't be believed. If I'd gotten him to *guess* my age he'd have said sixteen or at least something close to it. I *knew* I looked it. But he'd had to corner me into actually stating it, and it wasn't true.

I might have been able to get away with it if I hadn't been dumb enough to say true things to him first. Like I said - I'm not a *bad* liar. But when I'm telling the truth, I can make myself understood and believed really well. I can't even turn it off until I start lying. Then whoever I'm talking to is all *she had such an honest air about her a minute ago and now it's gone, so she's got to be pulling my leg*.

He regarded me with skepticism. "No ID, nothing doing."

"My wallet's with Izzy," I told Kora apologetically. That one came out believable, just barely. I own a wallet, and Mama had it, and "Izzy" is on the very short list of names I could use for her without losing the compelling power of truthfulness.

"It's okay, Beth," said Kora. "We can go somewhere else." I hadn't needed to claim to be *named* "Beth". I'd told Kora "you can call me Beth", which was true. She could. It's close enough to my real name that I can react normally to it, at least.

"Fine," I sighed, abandoning the attempt to enter the community pool and following Kora away. "Ugh. Why exactly do children under sixteen have to be accompanied by an adult over twenty, anyway?" If it'd been cloudy I would have asked Mama to come help me get in. She's a *fantastic* liar, and she could have charmed that guy into believing she was old enough to supervise me and Kora even though she looks barely older than me. (She's actually twenty-three, but she doesn't have ID either.) Or she could have just convinced him that I was sixteen. But it was sunny, and she was sitting in the library where I'd met Kora, waiting for me. She wouldn't leave until dusk.

"I'm sorry, I would've suggested something else if I knew you left your wallet with your sister," Kora said. "Do you want to go back and get it?"

I shook my head. The wallet exists, but it doesn't have anything in it. Mama holds onto it only so I can make the claim I'd just made. "If I tell her about this she'll just lecture me. She barely let me go with you in the first place."

"Stop me if I'm out of line, but - she's just your *sister*, why do you have to do what she says?" asked Kora.

I have a very, very carefully chosen web of out-of-context truths prepared to answer this question. "Izzy is very protective of me," I said. "I lived with Grandma and Grandpa

right after Daddy died, because Izzy didn't think she would be able to take care of me. Since that changed, she tries really hard to make sure that she does a good job. I don't want to mess anything up for us."

Mama has gotten *slightly* less paranoid over the years. When she first picked me up, we traveled constantly. I didn't sleep in an actual bed for a year and a half after leaving Grandma and Grandpa. I'd go to sleep in Mama's arms and wake up in a town a hundred miles away. Or not in a town at all. She'd gotten scared a few times and steered clear of civilization for months at a stretch. Once we'd gone down the entire Rocky Mountain range without seeing a soul. Lately we would sometimes stay in a town for as long as a month, if things went well, and she'd let me spend time with people I met like Kora.

Kora nodded. "We could just go to my house," she offered.

"That would be great!" I said. "Unless - do you think your family will mind?" I'd met Kora only that morning, when we'd reached for the same book, and we'd been hanging out for only a couple of hours. It didn't surprise me anymore when people like her invited me over. In making myself understood, I tend to make people feel like they've known me longer than they really have. But if I act like I'm not surprised, people think I'm taking them for granted. Fortunately, I can always ask questions as long as they don't imply things that aren't true.

"They won't care," scoffed Kora. "But my mom is *so* going to want to braid your hair."

Mama won't let me cut my hair. She'll trim the ends when it gets floor length - and it *does*, it grows like bamboo - but she won't really *cut* it. I have the most ridiculous head of hair in the world. Waves and waves and *waves* of fine bronze growing so thick that my scalp's almost invisible.

It's really inconvenient. I once tried to convince Mama to let me keep my hair at least just waist-length by pointing out how memorable it made me, but if there's anything that can effectively beat Mama's paranoia, it's her neuroses. She's got lots. I think most of them are because of Daddy's death, but since that happened when I was a week old, I don't really know for sure. The hair one definitely is. I've got exactly his hair. Since he didn't wear it down to *his* ankles, I'm not sure why *I* have to, but that's Mama's rule. Meanwhile *her* hair is as short as any boy's. (She used to have it longer but it burnt off and it grows very slowly.)

"It's fine with me if she wants to braid it," I said. "She's a hairdresser or something?"

Kora talked about her family, and herself, and the town, and how glad she was that school was out, and every other topic under the sun while we walked to the house. A perk of people feeling like they know me really well after I talk to them for a bit is that they feel like they have to reciprocate. It feels like it's not balanced, or something, until they tell me all about themselves and what interests them. The less talking I do, the fewer lies I have to attempt: *The airline lost our luggage. We're in town staying with friends for the*

month. I don't need to be in school, I'm homeschooled. It was destroyed in a house fire. I'm sixteen. This is my sister, Izzy, Ysabeau, Marie, Isobel, Billie. My name is Beth, Lizzie, Elsa, Ilse, Anna, Rose... Any name close enough to our real ones, first or middle, that I could say it with conviction.

I went to Kora's house, and we played Monopoly with her brothers Lyle and Andrew, and I let her mom braid my hair and pin it to my head, and I stayed for dinner and ate enough that Lyle teased me about my appetite, and then Andrew asked me out.

And it would have been *nice* to say, *Sure, I'll go get some ice cream with you.* It would have been *nice* to let a boy buy me dessert and maybe kiss me. Even if I could only be in town for a month, even if I couldn't tell him anything much, even if I was really five and a half years old. But Mama would have had a fit. I was just glad she hadn't seen him ask. She can be very scary when she wants.

"I have to go meet up with Izzy," I said instead. "She worries."

Kora said she'd meet me in the library again the next day, and Andrew hinted that he might be there too and winked at me. I was going to have to tell Mama about him. She'd be upset if he showed up the next day and I hadn't let her know. She'd tell my lies for me and send him away. *Beth is too sweet to tell you this, but she has a boyfriend back home in Santa Barbara, or something. Maybe Beth is shy about it, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't let it go any further or bring it up with her, but she's gay.*

You'd think I'd be worried about how good a liar Mama is. I'm not. My witch power is to make myself understood, and I can do that by touching people and *showing* them what I mean or how I feel, or by just letting my power pick my words for me so they get across how I need them to. But I can use it indirectly to learn things about other people, too. It says something about a person, that they'll understand *this* explanation and not *that* one. That *this* analogy will make sense to them, or that *this* word should only appear if I mean *that* idea. If I have a lot of time, I can learn a lot about somebody without having to actually speak to them at all.

Here's what I know about Mama. She's honest with *me*. She trusts me to keep our secrets to myself. And she loves me, a *lot*. I've never met somebody where I could have honestly said to them, "You love that other person as much as my mama loves me."

But she loved my daddy more, and she's never going to be able to find somebody else to be my stepfather, ever. She says that's normal for vampires, but I didn't learn to do this with my power until after my first birthday, so I don't know directly if it applies to Grandma Esme and Grandpa Carlisle, or Aunt Rosalie and Uncle Emmett. I've only met vampires besides them and Mama when I was less than a month old, and I can remember them, but not a lot *about* them except what Mama tells me. (People don't really *introduce* themselves to small babies.) But I believe Mama.

She's not sure if I'll have the same thing, one day, by meeting the right person.

If I'm going to, though, it would be nice if I could let somebody like Andrew buy me ice cream first.

Mama was waiting outside the library when I got there. It had just closed, but after sunset, so that was all right. "Did you and Kora have a good time?" she asked. We started walking towards the motel where we were staying. Back when Mama was still making all our money by shoveling snow in the winter and mowing lawns on cloudy summer days, we usually camped out if we stopped moving at all. That was fine even in extreme weather because neither of us gets overheated or bothered by cold. But when I was two she found data entry work online. She saved up for her own computer, and uses wi-fi in public places to do the job, and gets paid via Western Union so she can buy everything in cash. Since then I usually sleep in inexpensive hotels.

"Yes," I said. "I couldn't get into the pool, because the attendant didn't believe I'm sixteen and we didn't have someone twenty or over with us, so we went to her house and played Monopoly." I hesitated before finishing. "She has two brothers. The older one, Andrew, asked me out, and I said I needed to come meet you. He might come to the library tomorrow with Kora."

"Hmm," said Mama. She switched to a higher pitch, just within the range of my hearing and outside humans'. She can go too high for me to hear, but there wouldn't be any point. "If he does, I'll just tell him you've got a boyfriend. I think it's safe to reuse the one we came up with when we were in Beulah, except this time he'll need to live in Santa Barbara like we're pretending to."

"Okay," I sighed, emulating the same pitch.

"Is something wrong, Elspeth?" Mama asked.

"Well... would it be so bad if I went out with him? Andrew seems nice. I don't mean I'd see him seriously, of course I can't do that because I have to pretend I'm human and that wouldn't be fair, but he could've taken me out for ice cream, couldn't he?"

"You know my reasons," Mama said.

These are Mama's reasons: One, I'm chronologically five and a half. Looking and feeling like a teenager doesn't change that - or at least Mama doesn't think so. I've met *human* five-year-olds, and I agree that they aren't nearly mature enough to be dating anybody, but *I'm* not a human, only half. In less than two years I'll be as grown up as I'll ever get.

Two, a date is more likely than a friend to notice the little giveaways that make me seem non-human, especially my temperature and the near-vampiric solidity of my skin. It'd be even worse if I ever fell asleep around a human. I control the flashier uses of my power fine when I'm awake, but anybody who touches my hands when I'm sleeping will see my dreams whether I would have invited them to do that or not. That's why I can't

have sleepovers with any friends I make, and why I can't even *think* about having more than ice cream with a human boy, or be out among humans when I'm tired. This reason I mostly agree with, but it doesn't mean anything about dates that are entirely during the daytime while I'm quite awake.

Three, Mama doesn't know if half-vampires have mates the same way vampires do or not, and she thinks that if we do I'll be glad I waited when I find mine. I'm not so sure she's right about that. She's adamant that she doesn't regret Daddy having been the first and last person she was ever with, and that's fine. But I might *not* be a sort of creature with one true mate in all the world. I don't *feel* like I'm that sort of creature. I don't think I should have to wait forever to even have ice cream with a boy just in case I am *and* in case I'm the same as Mama about how I'll feel when I find whoever it is.

I already told her all of this, though. The problem with my power is that I can't just keep rehearsing the same arguments over and over and hope to get somewhere. My mama *understands* me - she just doesn't *agree* with me.

"Mama," I said, thinking of something I *hadn't* expressed before, "you think it's all right for humans to date *each other*, don't you?"

"Of course, Elspeth."

"But you were a human when you met Daddy." Mama's face did the thing it always does when I mention Daddy: she looks very sad for a moment and bites her lip, but then closes her eyes and breathes a little and has whatever expression she had before. She's never asked me to stop mentioning him, though, so I do, whenever it makes sense. "If you'd dated humans before that, it would have been okay, since you were one too. Any human *could* be a vampire's mate. So it isn't reasonable to say that just because I *might* have a mate out there one day, I have to wait for that. Andrew *might* meet a vampire lady next year and she could turn him and they could be mates, but it would be fine if he dated some human now - why shouldn't he go out with me instead?"

We arrived at the motel. Mama was thinking about what I'd said. While I unpinned my hair so it would be comfortable to sleep on, she said, "Elspeth, there are many, many humans and comparatively few vampires. Most vampires meet their mates when they've both already turned. It's *possible* for a human to be a vampire's mate, but not at all *likely*. On the other hand, apart from you, I'm only aware of five other half-vampires, one of whom is only a little older than you. That's a tiny number, and the fact that none of them - so far as I know - have found mates doesn't mean that they won't, or that you won't."

"Mama, I know all this," I said. There's me and Cody Clearwater, and Joham's children Nahuel and Allirea and Noemi and Iseul, and that's it. And Mama never even met the last three, she just heard about them from their brother, so we can only guess about regularities of half-vampires as a species. "But I'm not saying that I'm sure I *won't* find a mate. I'm saying that even if I was sure that I was *definitely* going to find one in 2035 or something, I don't necessarily want to never go on any dates before that. I *know* I can't be

serious with a human, but why does it have to be *serious*?"

Mama pursed her lips. "I confess *I* don't see the appeal of things *not serious*... but then there are the Denali sisters." I remember only a little about Kate and Tanya. Their other sister, Irina, wasn't in Denali while I was there; we don't know where she is. Mama's told me about them the way she's told me everything else about her life and the people in it. I had to look up "succubus" myself, though. "Their habits indicate that even ordinary vampires... hm."

"I only want to go for ice cream and things like that," I wheedled. "I'm not going to marry Andrew. I'm not going to try to stay up until three in the morning talking to him and risk falling asleep. I'm not going to tell him any secrets. I'm not going to try to keep in touch with him after we leave. I might not even actually *like* him after we have an actual conversation." I yawned. It's very hard for me to stay up late. Mama shooed me to bed; I climbed in under the covers with one hand sticking out. She likes watching my dreams and I don't mind. That way she can tell me what I dreamed about it, in the morning when I can't remember anymore.

"I'll think about it overnight and tell you what I've decided in the morning," Mama said.

"Okay," I said, yawning again, and I fell asleep.

"No boys until you are *at least* seven," Mama said when I woke up.

"What'd I dream about?" I asked, extricating my hand.

"Boys," said Mama, wrinkling her nose. "You're five years old, Elspeth."

"And a half."

"You are young enough to think that the "and a half" is worth mentioning," she said. "Maybe no boys until you're actually sixteen."

"Mama," I pleaded.

She shook her head. "If Andrew is at the library today, I'll tell him you have a boyfriend; if you're asked about it, use the story we came up with in Beulah." We'd been in Beulah for a week when I was four and looked fourteen. I thought making up an imaginary boyfriend was fun, then. I named him "Otto Perkins" because I liked the sound, and invented all kinds of silly quirks so he'd sound like a real person if people asked questions. Mama turned Otto into a burdensome fiction standing between me and ice cream. I don't even *like* ice cream, really, not the taste of it. I like blood. But it's the principle of the thing.

"Yes, Mama," I sighed.

I'm a morning person. I'm usually awake before sunrise. Mama doesn't sleep at all, of course. I hunt first thing every morning, and usually get a few smaller animals because they're easier to find close to or *in* towns. Squirrels and pigeons in particular aren't hard to come by, no matter where I go. A bunch of those is enough to keep me from being too hungry the rest of the day, and if I don't find enough I just eat the meat as well as the blood. Humans don't seem to like raw meat except for fish, but there's nothing obviously special about fish that I can see. When things happen like Kora inviting me over for dinner, I'll eat more. It doesn't seem to matter much, what I eat or how often; my body just burns up everything I put into it like I'm a furnace. I guess I turn it all into hair.

Mama and I went to the library as soon as I was done with my hunt, and since there were no clouds, she waited in the spot that the building would shade when the sun rose. That way she'd be able to get in without anyone seeing her in the sunlight, which makes her sparkle. I just sort of glow. Once a person asked me if I was radioactive, but I'm pretty sure he was joking. Generally humans seem to think that I have a really nice complexion and that's all it is.

The library didn't open until an hour later. Mama told me stories, at the safe, high pitch. She reads a lot faster than I do, reads all the new releases in every library we visit, and sometimes recites books to me when we have spare time like this. I had already heard everything about her and our family that she knew by the time I turned four. Before that it was more autobiographical.

When a librarian let us in, I picked a book to read while I waited for Kora. Mama set up her laptop and started working. She can type a hundred times faster than she does when she's working - she only goes slowly because people might see her and she's paid by the hour.

Kora and Andrew showed up at about ten, after I'd finished my first book and started another one. Mama got up, tapped the boy on the shoulder, and quietly put him off. Kora said she wanted to go see her friend's band play, and invited me along, but it was at half past eight: too late for me to be out.

"I can't," I said. "I have a sleep disorder." This was close enough to being true that it wouldn't come out wrong. "So I have to be in bed really early every day."

"Oh," said Kora, disappointed. "That must suck. Well, let's at least go to the park and feed the ducks. I brought some bread from home." We started towards the pond.

Her brother caught up to us. "Beth, your sister is *seriously* terrifying," he said. He sounded scared enough that I wondered if Mama had actually threatened him.

"She can get like that," I said. "But she won't hurt you."

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes, I'm sure. Why? Did she say she was going to?" I didn't think she'd go that far, but she could make it seem like she had. If she leans in and makes the air around whoever she's talking to get cold, and lets a little hiss into her voice, and doesn't blink... yeah, Mama can be scary.

"Well... no," he admitted. He didn't mention my imaginary boyfriend. She probably asked him not to. "But... wow. She raised you?"

"For the last five years," I said. And then, though I knew I shouldn't, I said, "Are you coming with us to the park?"

"No... I think I'm going to go home," Andrew said, still a little shaken despite my reassurances. "Bye, Beth, sis." He popped a salute and managed a half-smile before turning down a cross-street.

"She didn't seem that scary to me," said Kora skeptically.

"She's usually not trying."

We fed the ducks, and Kora told me about how she was going to get a kitten from her cousin who bred cats, and how she was signed up for soccer camp and it would start in three weeks, and how she was learning to drive but she was scared to go above twenty miles an hour and her father had gotten frustrated with her and she wouldn't get another lesson until Tuesday, and how she missed her best friend who'd gone to Cape Cod for the summer, and how she thought she might be developing an allergy to tree nuts but her family couldn't afford to send her to an allergist and make sure so she was just avoiding almonds for the time being.

I listened, and made the right noises in the right places, and wished I could ask her if she wanted to trade places.

I love my mama. I don't regret the day she found me - or I found her, depending on how you look at it. And I know that once I saw her she had to take me away or risk her life, because my grandparents and my aunt and uncle have to think she's dead so the Volturi will think she's dead. They tried to kill her; they'd try again and do it more carefully if they knew they hadn't succeeded.

But...

It's not like there's anything seriously wrong with Mama's parenting. She's paranoid and neurotic and perpetually grieving and won't let me go out with boys, but she loves me and takes care of me and everything she does is oriented around making sure I'm safe and comfortable. It's not like I fetishize "normalcy" or "humanity", either. Kora's life sounded appealing when she talked about it, but in sixty or seventy years Kora will be dead. Sooner if she's unlucky or reckless. My daddy's death was a tragedy, and *he* was a hundred and four.

But Kora gets to go home to an *entire* family, and if something happened to *her* dad,

her mom might eventually remarry and be happy again. I guess what I wanted wasn't so much *Kora's* life, as the life I had until I was four days old and my parents had to leave and one of them had to die. I don't especially want a stepfather; I can't imagine Mama being happy with one. But I would like *a* father.

I couldn't have been normal, exactly. I grow too fast, and later I'll stop growing entirely. But Daddy's family is rich, and that goes a long way towards covering for being strange. Mama can accumulate cash, and we haven't exactly *hurt* for money since she got her data entry job. But she has to stay off the grid and she daren't risk using any of the family contacts for things like forged documents. So we can't get too enmeshed in anything. I can't go to soccer camp with Kora because I have no address, no ID, no immunization records, and no way to get any of them doctored up for the purpose.

Kora and I got lunch. I had enough pocket money to pay for a burger. After that, we went back to her house, and she got out her soccer ball and taught me how to play. I kept myself in check, deliberately tripping and missing the ball more often than she did and making sure not to kick it completely out of her yard. Eventually the younger brother, Lyle, brought a friend out and we played boys-against-girls for the rest of the afternoon. I was invited over for dinner again, and stayed and ate and excused myself once it was dark and went to the library.

Mama found me before I got there; I was six blocks away. She already had all of our stuff that we'd been keeping in the motel room, packed up into her backpack and ready to go. She was frowning, and kept looking around like she expected something to drop out of the sky and attack us. "We need to leave earlier than planned, Elspeth," she said.

Runner

"What? But Mama, I like this town - I told Kora I'd be here until June -" This wasn't the first time Mama's ever had us drop everything and leave, but it never gets easy. *Easier*, sure - not *easy*. And I really liked Kora, more than I usually like the people I latched onto.

"There isn't time to argue," Mama said firmly. "I have all our things. We need to go, now. Come on." She started out - east - and I followed. She can't pick me up and run in a populated place because she doesn't look strong enough to do it. But she *can* drag me by the hand, if I refuse to go with her; I tried that once when I was two and a half.

"*Why* do we have to go all of a sudden?" I asked. "What happened?"

"I smelled a wolf. Just a trace, but whoever it was will certainly have had the chance to notice our scents. We're going to Iowa City, we'll stay overnight, and then we're going to Peoria, where we will also stay one night, and then, unless I see anyone familiar or smell wolf again, we can find another town to stay in longer."

"Who was it?" I asked, jogging after her. We don't usually go to cities that big. They are more likely to have vampires in them, since humans are thicker on the ground and it's less obvious if one goes missing occasionally. Mama prefers towns big enough to have libraries, but only just. The sunnier the area, the bigger a town she'll risk. I guess she thought the wolves would stay out of cities or something.

"I don't know," she said tightly. "I can't tell one from another by scent alone, and I certainly didn't risk following the trail." We got out of (human, nighttime) visual range of the town. She turned around and picked me up so she could start running. Even carrying me and all our stuff, she's faster than I am. "They might or might not be directly hostile, depending on the pack, but we can't take the chance."

"Oh," I said. It makes me especially sleepy when Mama carries me, and I wasn't up for much more conversation than that. I nodded off.

When I woke up, I was in midair, and my ears were full of wolves snarling and Mama shouting.

It was still dark, and I was terribly groggy. I landed on the ground, slid, and blinked, trying to figure out what all the noise was.

"RUN!" Mama screamed. "*RUN!*"

There is one rule that Mama has that's very, very strict, but which I never actually had to follow before.

When she says *run*, I have to leave her and escape by myself if I can.

I did.

The rest of the rule is that I am supposed to go in a random direction as long as I can possibly stay awake. I am supposed to gradually make my way to New York City or San Francisco, whichever's closer, however I can. We have a rendezvous point in Central Park and one in Golden Gate Park, each of which I've seen once. I am not supposed to worry about her, because worrying will not help keep me safe, and she will have better chances if she thinks I am safe.

If I get stuck, or I'm in some kind of danger I can't get away from without help, or if someone finds out what I am, I am supposed to call Grandpa Carlisle rather than keep trying to meet up with Mama. (If he doesn't answer the phone I am supposed to try Grandma Esme, and Aunt Rosalie, and Uncle Emmett, and everybody in the Denali coven, and the Irish coven starting with Gianna, the lady who gave birth to me, in that order. This is in case someone has changed their number or has their phone turned off. If I can't get hold of any of those people I am allowed to try Grandpa Charlie.) If I go to the rendezvous point every day for a month and she doesn't get there, I am supposed to call for help then too.

I have a story memorized about how another vampire, not Mama, kidnapped me and was finally killed by a coven that decided to let me live. I am supposed to tell Grandpa Carlisle and the rest of the family this story instead of telling them that I was with Mama. I am supposed to pretend to be traumatized and refuse to show any of the memories from that time. It's possible that she could live through some things that would still keep her from meeting me in the right park, so it all still has to be a secret as long as that doesn't put me in danger. If I ever meet the Volturi named Aro, I am supposed to throw an absolute tantrum and beg not to have to be near him on the grounds that he killed Daddy. If I have to let him touch me anyway, then I am supposed to deliberately send him all the memories of the months of my life before Mama found me in case this can confuse him.

If they find out that Mama is or might be alive anyway, I am supposed to tell anyone who asks absolutely everything, and do whatever I have to to keep myself alive even if it means helping the Volturi find and hurt Mama. If I can, I am supposed to avoid the guard members named Chelsea, Addy, and Jane, and anyone else who is very likely to hurt me or make me think differently.

I'm not so sure about the part where I'm to cooperate with the Volturi, but I understand the part about running. Mama is very tough. She explained to me how she survived when the Volturi tried to kill her. She might be able to do the same thing again, although she hasn't had a need to try it twice.

But I can't expect to hold up in a fight against even the stupidest, weakest vampire in the world. I can't escape from one who wants to catch me, either, but they *might* let me go if I try anyway, because that means I'm not trying to be a threat.

I didn't get a great look at the wolves, but running away I definitely heard at least three of them, all barking at the same time. Mama stopped screaming once I ran. I couldn't tell if she wasn't able to scream, or if she didn't see any need to bother after I was away.

I ran, and ran, and kept running, and twenty minutes later when I thought I would trade my left arm for the chance to curl up in a ball and sleep, I noticed that a wolf was chasing me.

That was not part of the plan. I might actually be able to beat *one* wolf in a fight - maybe - if I'm not tired. Their advantage against vampires is only that they come in groups and work together well, so one of them isn't as dangerous even to someone who is not a proper vampire, like me. But I wasn't supposed to fight, I was supposed to run. I can't really outrun wolves either.

Being tired also makes it harder to run.

I was tired. I hadn't been going at top speed to begin with, and steadily slowed down from there, and I almost hit a tree. When I dodged it, the wolf was there to meet me.

It was *huge*. Mama told me all about werewolves, and how big they can get, but it's different seeing one up close. I only got a split second to look at it before it planted both paws on my front and shoved me into the tree I'd just gone around.

I don't know if I hit my head on the tree wrong, or if my need for sleep just picked that moment to force me unconscious, but I was out like a light.

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that Mama wasn't holding my hand. She *always* did, even if we were running, no matter what, I'd always wake up with one hand in hers.

After that I noticed a lot of things in a row: *somebody* was holding me, carrying me someplace, but not Mama, or a vampire at all - too warm, and with a heartbeat. By the light filtering through my eyelids, it was past sunrise; I'd slept late. I didn't feel injured, although I could have started that way and healed overnight.

I opened my eyes.

Looking down at me was a boy. He looked about sixteen or seventeen, and Native American with long hair tied back in a ponytail. *Probably a wolf*, was my first thought, but no - in the sun, he was faintly glowing. Just like me.

Cody Clearwater.

"Hey, you're awake," he said.

"AAAAAAAH!" I said. Sure, the last Mama heard was that Jacob's pack took Cody with them when they ran, but anything could have happened in that time, including the Volturi getting the third pack and Cody with them.

I tried to twist myself out of his grip but he held on. "Hey," he said. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

"*Let me go!*" I yelled. I drew on my power to make it convey how scared I was. If he didn't want to hurt me, he might not want me to be scared either, and if he did want to hurt me, it wasn't going to get worse if he knew I was afraid. "Please please let me go -"

"We have to keep running," he said. "The kept wolves are after us. If I put you down will you follow me?"

"The *who*?"

"I don't know what you know - okay, there's good werewolves and bad werewolves, and I'm with the good wolves, and some bad wolves found you and that vampire you were with back there, and some good wolves and me were there too, and," he huffed, "it's kind of hard to deliver exposition and run at the same time, so can I maybe ask you to just trust me? We're seriously like five minutes from camp and it's safe to stop there."

"Okay," I said meekly. My stomach rumbled.

"We've got food," Cody said encouragingly.

"Food-food, or blood?" I asked. He'd been carrying me around for goodness only knew how long; he had to have figured out that I was a half-vampire.

"I mean food-food. If you want blood you have to catch it yourself. You venomous?" he asked.

"No."

"Wolves'll be able to share prey with you, then, if you drag them back to camp once they're dried up. I can't do that. Have to eat my own leftovers." He winked at me.

"Will you put me down, please? I'll come with you," I said.

He tossed me into the air, and I was able to come down on my feet and keep up with him. "Nice landing. So what's your name?"

Did he not know? "What's yours?"

"Cody Clearwater. Look, I'm really *not* going to hurt you, and I'm already pretty sure you're Elspeth Cullen, but I'm trying to be friendly here instead of all creepy with the "I know who you are, wooo" crap."

"I'm Elspeth," I sighed. "And I knew who you were too. Wooo."

He laughed. "Up there," he said, pointing at a completely nondescript area of forest. I was pretty sure we were still in Iowa.

I followed him. He could have hurt me when I was knocked out, or asleep, or whichever I was, if he'd wanted. I'd need to go to New York eventually, but stopping for food and to get my bearings would probably help. "There's nothing here, Cody," I said.

"How do you think we're still all alive, with the kept wolves running around?" he asked. "Pera hides us. Pera! Pera, it's Cody and a friend!" he yelled at the apparently empty trees.

"It's not just that I don't see anything," I said, "I also don't hear or smell anything. I haven't tripped over anybody, either."

"Pera's good," he agreed, going a few feet forward to try again. "Problem is the hiding goes both ways. Except Pera herself, everybody she hides can only see other hidden people. So I have to get close to her in particular, not just any random person, and she doesn't have very good hearing. She might even still be asleep. *Pera!*"

Cody disappeared.

I considered whether to run for it. I could go on to New York alone, maybe. After a minute's thought, I'd actually gone so far as to take two steps. If Pera's power would hide me from everyone and vice versa I'd *never* be able to find Mama until Pera let me go, and I wasn't sure I could trust her. But then Cody came back into existence.

"Welcome, Elspeth," said a woman. She was standing right next to me, one hand out like she'd just touched my shoulder. "I'm Pera." She looked sleepy and Hispanic and in her late twenties, or early thirties. I saw a few tents set up that hadn't been there before, presumably hidden the same way, and heard snoring and breathing and heartbeats. Between two of the tents was a chocolate-furred wolf, lounging on the ground.

"It's... nice to meet you," I said hesitantly. "Um, can someone please tell me *what is going on?*"

"Sure," said Cody. "It's safe here. Oh, and I promised food." He tossed me a granola bar from out of a paper grocery bag that was hanging from a branch.

I unwrapped it and ate. "So," I said. "My explanation?"

"Right," he said. "So, like I said, good wolves and bad wolves, where "good" means "don't want to eat your face" and "bad" means "might want to eat your face". I've been calling the bad wolves "kept". They work for the Volturi..." He trailed off. "Feel like telling me how much of the backstory you already know, so I can skip the parts that'll be repetitive?"

"I will if you'll tell me what you already know about me," I said.

"You're Elspeth Cullen," said Cody, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. "Your grandfather Charlie was a good friend of my parents before they died. Before *your* parents died, your mom was the one who activated the pack. She also turned my dad when my sister hurt him, delivered me when I came along, and forgot to warn anybody about a vampire from Alaska named Irina, who tipped off the Volturi about wolves existing when Becky's pack killed her mate. The Volturi showed up, Jake split off this pack and warned your mom, she and your dad showed up, Rachel and Becky and their packs had been completely brain-fried by a couple of the guard, and your parents both died. You were someplace else at the time, I'm going to guess your parents' coven, but who knows. And now, for some reason, you're in the middle of Iowa with a vampire - she a relative of yours maybe?"

"I know who the Volturi are, I know how wolves work, I know about the twins' packs working for the Volturi, I know what happened to my parents," I listed, not mentioning *what* I knew about Mama's status. I finished my granola bar and Cody threw me a bag of popcorn.

"Okay. So, Pera here is Brady's girl," Cody said, pointing at Pera. "Brady was with Becky's pack, back before your parents and mine were killed, and he was a kept wolf for almost a month. We - Jake's pack and imprints and me - were on the run that entire time. We're pretty sure the only reason we didn't get killed or captured was that the Volturi figured they could take their time and get us later. But then they brought in Pera, 'cause they like collecting witches and she's one hell of a witch."

"Thanks ever so," said Pera, in heavily accented English.

Cody grinned at her. "So," he went on, "before they could fry Pera's brain or turn her into a vampire, Brady laid eyes on her and poof, she's the center of his universe, you know how this works. Pera wants to *not* be fried or bit, so Brady defects packs, joins Jake's, and they get the hell out of Dodge. Where by "Dodge", I mean "Volterra". They find us via telepathy and since then we've had it way easier, courtesy of Pera being excellent."

"How would the Volturi have caught Pera in the first place?" I asked, puzzled, between bites of popcorn.

"They've got some hell-of-a-witch-es too," Cody said.

"I was betrayed by someone who I had thought was a friend," Pera said gravely. "I do not believe she could have captured me if I had been on my guard and had not trusted her."

"That part's a long story," said Cody. "Later. Anyway, when we're hidden we can't see or talk to anybody who *isn't*. Well, Pera can see everybody, but they can't see her when she hides. It can make a person kind of stir-crazy to have such a limited social

circle. So sometimes Pera unhides a few of us because we don't want to start killing each other. Problem is that Demetri can tell *where* we are, and if anybody unhides while he's lurking with a pack of Volturi or kept wolves, we've got trouble. The good news is that they don't usually bother to stake us out, and they only use small teams for the purpose because they don't want to tie up large portions of the guard."

"But they were staking you out yesterday?" I surmised.

"Looks that way," Cody said. "Me and Jake and Jared and Victor unhid to scope out the area and what should we find but a few kept wolves. They're the ones attacked you and your friend."

"What happened to her?" I demanded.

Cody winced. "Uh... by the time any of us got on the scene she was... already in bits and on fire. The kept wolves ran off all by themselves - the smoke'll knock wolves out if they breathe it - and Jake and Jared chased Demetri. Victor and I went after you because we could tell by the scent you were a halvesie and I wanted to see who you were, but when Victor caught up to you and nabbed you you *fainted*, so we figured you were scared of wolves and he went to join up with Jake and Jared and I carried you this-a-way. Those three will be back any minute now - Any news, Quil?" he asked the chocolate-furred wolf. The wolf, apparently Quil, shook his head. I supposed he was in wolf form to serve as a walkie-talkie.

"Oh," I said. If everyone had run from the scene at the time Cody described, Mama was probably alive. Being on fire would hurt terribly, of course - but she could live through it. She would meet me in Central Park. I just needed to go there.

"Are... you okay, about your friend...?" Cody asked, leaning in. He looked concerned.

"I'm fine," I said. "I wouldn't call her my friend."

"What would you call her?"

"Marie," I said. Mama's middle name was her alias of choice only about a third of the time. But that was more often than any other single one. Jacob's pack - and the imprints and Cody - seemed to be against the Volturi. But that didn't mean I should tell all the secrets.

"...And?" said Cody.

"What?" I asked.

"Want to tell us what you were doing in the middle of Iowa with Marie?"

"Traveling. I need to go to New York City. I can find family there," I said. "Um, I

guess Pera will have to unhide me for me to do that..."

A Native-looking woman's head poked out of one of the tents. "So help me," she said, "if all this chat wakes the baby again, I will sic Victor on you all when he comes back."

"Good morning to you too, Maureen," said Cody dryly.

Pera said, "Really, it is *very* early. I would like another few minutes of sleep before they return and I have to hide them too. Perhaps you could take your conversation elsewhere." She went into one of the tents; Maureen zipped hers back up too, and it was just me and Cody and Quil and a lot of tents in the woods.

"Let's go for a walk and talk," Cody suggested, and I followed him.

"So... explain Pera's power to me," I said. "The tents were hidden, but I saw the same trees before and after she hid me. So the *trees* couldn't be hidden."

"Wow, you go right for the tricky questions. I've lived with Pera most of my life and I barely understand how she works. Hmm... Okay, so you have the hiding place. That's where we are now. And you have outside, which is where we were before she hid us. Outside is where people normally receive their mail. Objects and plants and animals, on the other hand, usually exist both in the hiding place and outside, for some reason."

"But the tents..."

"Pera can touch stuff to make it exist only in the hiding place, and that's what happened with the tents - we didn't want someone stealing them or something. This also explains why we *have* tents, and food, and stuff. Sorry to inform you that you've fallen in with a pack of thieves. Pera just walks into places and hides whatever we want so we can walk out without it being noticed. If we pick things up without them being hidden first, people outside can see them floating - disappearances are easier to time so nobody sees it happen. I mean, the Volturi can't get much more out of our blood than they already are, but there's no sense leaving collateral damage by letting bystanders see too much."

"I guess that makes sense." Hiding all the time like that would make it difficult to pursue any sort of gainful employment. I've never stolen anything and I don't think Mama has either, but she gave me explicit permission to mug humans for money or their phones or whatever I needed if I ran out of pocket money on the way to a rendezvous.

"You think so? It confuses the hell out of me," he laughed. "Anyway. Pera can see, hear, and generally sense hidden things and outside things both, all the time, but she can only physically interact with stuff that's wherever she is. Except she can touch things in either place to hide or unhide them. She's hidden now, and she could hear me when I was unhidden. So I wandered around yelling "Pera, hey, Pera" until she woke up and poked me to hide me. Then I explained and she hid you too. You could walk into the nearest

town and it'd be the spookiest thing you ever saw. Cars driving themselves and whatnot."

"Are our clothes hidden?" I asked, looking down at myself. I was a little scruffy from all the flinging that had happened to me overnight. "And are clothes on people outside invisible to hidden people?"

"Yeah. We're not sure why that happens. Anything that's really *on* your person, not just in your hand or whatever - like something that would stay put if you went completely limp and were levitated into the air - will come with you when you hide or unhide, and isn't in both places like other stuff."

"What would happen if someone or something went from the hiding place to outside while it was in the same place as something outside? Or vice versa?"

"Don't know," Cody said frankly. "Pera avoids that because she's pretty sure it couldn't be good. If I'm asking her to hide me, and she doesn't do it right away, I walk a few steps forward in case I'm intersecting something or somebody."

I nodded. "Okay. That's interesting. It's amazing she can do so much while she's human."

"Yeah. We all owe her our lives about a thousand times over."

"I do need to go to New York," I said, after a silence. Mama would surely be long gone from where she'd fallen by now, on her way to the park to wait for me. "It's not *so* urgent that I have to go *right now*, but I feel like I should be clear that I'm not... joining the pack, or anything. I really appreciate that you picked me up. I wouldn't have wanted to get gotten by the kept wolves. And it might make sense for me to hang out for a while if that's okay, at least until they and Demetri are gone. But - eventually, as soon as it's safe, I need to go to New York." I could put off setting out, if that would make the trip safer. Unlike me, Mama doesn't have a one-month limit on how long she's supposed to wait. She'll be worried if I take forever to get there, but she told me to take the safest route even if it's slower.

"That's okay," he said. "We move around a lot. Just to make it inconvenient for the Volturi and the kept wolves, so they have to haul out Demetri every time they want to know where we're at. And to avoid hitting places too hard with all the theft. I don't think anybody'd mind escorting you, as long as you're not in a hurry."

"Really? They're... I mean, you seem like a nice bunch of people, but why would you want to escort me halfway across the country?" I asked.

"Because I like you," he said, grinning. "You're the only other half-vampire I ever met, I kind of want to keep you around."

"And you're in charge of where the pack travels?" I asked skeptically.

"Well, no," Cody said, frowning. "I don't mean to give that impression. But we don't

usually have any place in particular to go, so if you suggest one no one's liable to kick up a fuss. I'll just say, "Hey, Jake, let's take Elspeth to New York City where she needs to go" and he'll say "Sure, Cody, that sounds fine to me," and then next time we break camp we'll go in that direction and so on."

I nodded slowly. "So... this sounds like a fine plan to me," I said, and Cody grinned broadly. His smile changed his whole face, like he had a very limited version of my power: he could communicate *I am happy*, impossible to disbelieve or misunderstand. Traveling with the pack would certainly be easier and safer than trying to stretch the money in my pocket across half a dozen states. Mama would approve.

I'd just need to keep quiet about the details.

Newcomer

"Want a rundown of who's who in the pack, or would you rather let them all introduce themselves?" Cody asked me.

"How many people are there?" I asked.

"Eight wolves total," said Cody, "six imprints, four squirts, and me."

"Eight wolves?" I asked. "I thought it started with Jacob, Jared, Victor, Quil, Sam, and Darren, and then I guess you explained Brady when you explained Pera - who's number eight?"

"That's Zachary," replied Cody. "He wasn't activated in the first wave, and he wasn't in La Push when the Volturi started kidnapping and killing people - nobody could get him to drop by for a visit. He was in Albuquerque. We got to him before the kept wolves did. Jake made me lick his nose so he'd activate."

I giggled. "I think I know about all the imprints..."

"Might know their names, but what's that without the color commentary?" asked Cody lightly. "You met Pera, she's Brady's girl like I said. "Pera" is short for "Esperanza" and she's from Mexico and she taught everybody Spanish, but except for the shorties and me and Brady, they suck at it. The other wolves can't even borrow Brady's fluency, because wouldn't you know, they're only telepathic when they can't talk. I guess he can understand stuff for them when they're all wolves, but they can't speak more than a few phrases really."

"So you know English and Spanish and what else?" I asked.

"Smatterings of Quileute - nobody in the pack really *speaks* the stuff, but we have a few words. About six sentences worth of French that Thea remembered from high school. You?" he asked.

"Fluent in English, Spanish, American Sign Language, Norwegian, Portuguese -" Cody was looking at me strangely. "Marie taught me all the languages she - ever learned," I said, carefully dancing around the tense problem with *knows* versus *knew*. "Italian, French, Ukrainian. Conversational but not really fluent in Finnish and Swedish and Gaelic."

"Don't be surprised if the parents and Quil are all over you to teach their spawn and imprint, respectively," said Cody, impressed.

"You said there are four... children?" I asked. I assumed that was the meaning of "squirts" and "spawn".

"Yeah. Maureen and Victor have a toddler and a newborn, Ruth and Natalie. If you

want Maureen to love you forever, offer to babysit. She's a great mom but her kids are a handful. And Sam and Emily have Paige, and Darren and Thea have Noah - those are almost a year old each, born really close together."

"But Claire's young too, right?"

"Technically she's older than you or I. Isn't that weird?" he remarked, shaking his head. "Yeah, Claire you could almost mistake for one of the anklebiters. But she's an imprint, and she bosses her Quil around like he's a stuffed animal. Emily's her aunt and I got Claire to call her "Auntie Em" and Emily still hasn't trained her out of it, it's really cute. Emily's Sam's imprint, of course."

"Sam used to be engaged to your sister, right?" I asked. I hadn't encountered anything that disconfirmed the version of history Mama had told me, but it was good to check.

Cody sobered when I brought up his sister. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah, Leah and Sam used to be engaged. And Emily's her cousin and they were really close until Sam imprinted. I know more about my sister from them than from anybody else. Or at least how things were with her before... stuff happened. I include myself in the category of happening stuff," he said, a little of the original frivolity returning. "That's me, I'm a happening guy."

"I can tell," I said, smiling a little. "Do... you prefer if I not bring up your family?"

He shook his head; the motion was energetic enough to toss his ponytail over one shoulder. "No, it's fine. My parents are dead vampires, my brother and sister are kept wolves, and that's... not going to get any worse if you talk about it."

"Okay," I said, but I changed the subject anyway. "Jared and Kim are together, right?"

"Right, but Kim hasn't got the baby-crazies, or not yet," Cody replied, "so it's just the pair of them. It was sort of funny. Maureen decided she wanted a baby, once we were pretty sure we were safe hiding with Pera. Ruth got born, delivered by a midwife that Pera hid and Victor bullied into helping. And then suddenly Emily and Thea wanted babies too, like it's contagious."

"But not Kim, or Pera," I said. Quil was out of the question; his imprint was seven years old. And human. Mama had explained to me how this was supposedly not something to be concerned about, and I *did* believe her, but it would have been more convincing if Quil had an actual girlfriend in addition to his imprint, which he apparently didn't. His options *were* nonexistent, though, under the circumstances.

"No, not them," Cody said. "I was basically raised by the whole pack, but Kim did more than anybody else. So she either hated the experience and never wants to be a mom for real," he said with a self-deprecating smirk, "or I was such a fantastic child that she thinks no human baby could ever compare and she'd be inevitably disappointed." I

laughed, and he added, "I think Pera might want kids, but there's no good way to tell if that'd interfere with her witchcraft, and, well, having a kid is a little dangerous. Maureen and the others can take the chance for themselves, but we'd all be in serious trouble if Pera were in a bad way. I mean, if she were even just laid up for a couple of weeks, there goes our inconspicuous theft. I haven't actually talked to her about it, but that's what I think's going on."

"That's sad," I said quietly.

Cody nodded. "We rely on Pera a *lot*, and it's sort of hard on her. She never unhides, either. Do me a favor and be her friend, at least till we get to New York? You're the only new person she's met in a long time."

"I'll try, but - why doesn't she ever unhide?"

"Mmm... okay, I'll tell you her story since she hates telling it," Cody said. "So Pera's nineteen years old and hanging out in Mexico, living her life, practicing witchcraft in her spare time, right? And this vampire lady finds her and says "nice to meet you, I'm Del, I'm a vampire, I can copy powers, would you object terribly if I copied yours because it's new and interesting?" Pera never met a vampire before that, she didn't know what to think, but she let Del copy her power and they hung out and were basically friends for a few weeks. Del's actually the one who helped Pera be as skilled a witch as she is now. They practiced together and bounced ideas off each other and stuff. Before Pera met Del she could only hide herself, not other people and certainly not objects."

"Del was the friend who betrayed her?" I asked.

"Right in one. Del got bored after a few weeks of being friends with Pera, and left, and Pera went back to hanging out in Mexico and living her life etcetera. And then skip forward six years, Pera's twenty-five and still hanging out in Mexico, and who should come knocking but Del. Pera *trusted* Del. But as soon as she let Del touch her to copy the power again, Del's like "gotcha, I work for the Volturi now and I'm taking you to them so they can brainwash you and turn you into a vampire." And since they had the same power then, Pera couldn't just hide to get away. She's human; without the hiding advantage she couldn't do anything Del didn't let her do."

"So Del brought her back to Volterra, and Pera wasn't bothering to hide since it wouldn't help, so Brady could see her," I murmured.

Cody nodded. "Del did the whole supervillain-reciting-the-evil-plot thing on the way to Italy from Mexico. So Pera knew about the wolves and she was able to react pretty fast once Brady started giving her *imprint face*."

"Imprint face?"

"You'll see it when you see a wolf and his imprint together. It's pretty distinctive. It's this look they get in their eyes, really focused and intense and tender. Says, *you are the center of the universe and I worship the ground you walk on and your wish is my*

command and I will defend you with my life. It'd be corny if they weren't so *sincere* about it. I'd compare it to vampire mates, but I do remember my parents, and they didn't *stare* at each other like that. So either it's different basic stuff, or vampires just don't have the face to go with it."

"Huh. So Brady gave her "imprint face", and then - let me guess. She told him she wanted out, and he defected packs and she hid him and he was able to clobber Del well enough that they could get out?"

"Close. Everybody was unhidden at the time, Pera told Brady what she wanted, and he threw Del *at* another vampire. Her copying thing is involuntary - whenever she touches a witch, she gets their power, she doesn't have to do it on purpose," Cody said. "It was still really lucky that he was able to catch her off guard, though. So she lost Pera's power and got someone else's, and before she could get it back, Pera hid herself and Brady. Del couldn't touch Pera to steal her power again, so the rest of the trip to join up with the pack was pretty simple."

"It was? It doesn't seem like it would be," I said. "Demetri could tell where they were - even if the Volturi couldn't directly capture them, couldn't they down their plane or sink their boat or whatever?"

"They didn't think of that until they'd already snuck onto a plane," said Cody, "and it landed okay and the pack was there to meet them and get hid too. We think the Volturi were hoping to find some way to get Pera still, and didn't want to kill her. Since then they've tried a few times to do us in that way - they set trees near us on fire and stuff. But we've always been able to get to safety in time. Wolves are fast."

That made sense. The Volturi put up with my aunt Alice not working for them for a long time, because they thought eventually they could get her to change her mind. When that didn't work, they killed her. But Pera was able to keep herself and the whole pack pretty safe.

"Is Pera the only witch in the pack?" I asked.

"Unless one of the midgets grows up and learns to shoot lasers out of his or her eyes, yes," Cody says. "Far as I know there are no witch wolves, and the imprints are all basic humans, and I'm the least interesting half-vampire you'll ever meet."

"There are only six of us," I pointed out. "You could still be very interesting."

"Well, there might be a whole colony of half-vampires in Bermuda or something and we wouldn't know, right?" he said. "But if they're there, I guarantee you, every one of them is more interesting than me. Fascinating bunch, the hypothetical Bermudan half-vampires."

I giggled. "Where do I fall in this interestingness spectrum?" I asked.

"I'm interested," he said. "Come on, I've been telling you the ins and outs of

everything to do with my dull and boring self and social circle, you tell me something."

I wanted to. I *really* wanted to.

Mama says that powers depend on and interact with how their witches think about them. In a way, Mama's power and my power and Daddy's are all opposites of each other. Mama keeps her mind to herself, and that's how she likes it. Daddy could read everybody else's (except Mama's).

I can share mine. I *want* to.

I *want* to tell everybody I meet everything. I want everybody to know who I am and what I'm like. When I was really little, I could sort of do that. I could show my family memories, and later I learned to attach feelings, and a couple of months later I could show them things I'd only imagined. I still had to be discreet with the neighbors, but at least there were a few people I didn't have to keep secrets from. It seemed to plateau there.

I think the only reason my power got any better after that was because Mama picked me up and suddenly I had only one person I could be totally honest with. My power sometimes seems like a second person living in my head, and that second person wants to talk to more people, tell them more things, hide less, share more, misdirect less. It's like it was throwing variations of itself at me, hoping to find something I could use with people besides Mama safely.

I plateaued again when I was four, and got the hang of letting my power pick my words so people wouldn't misunderstand me. That's something I can use with anyone. Have to, actually, unless I lie outright. But it still doesn't cooperate all that much when I'm holding back or using a nickname or leaving things out.

"Elspeth?" said Cody.

"Oh - sorry," I said. "I'm trying to think of - of what to tell you."

"Take your time," he said, sounding amused. "It's such a weighty question, after all."

Why *shouldn't* I tell him everything? Pera could hide him from the Volturi. He didn't want to hurt me. He was friendly and helpful and nice and the only person of my own species I'd ever met. Why *shouldn't* I just reach over and put my hand on his face and let him have it and not be cooped up inside myself? I wouldn't see Mama again until I got to New York or even longer if I got there first, she was always my outlet for this but she wasn't *there*...

The second person in my head was kicking and screaming and demanding attention. *I want to talk to someone*, I could imagine her wailing. *I'm so lonely. It doesn't count if you do it with words, I want to show things to someone, I want to do it right.*

"I'm a witch," I said softly after a lengthy silence.

"Yeah? What kind?" asked Cody.

"This kind," I said, and I touched his cheek.

Cody wasn't used to it like Mama was. He hadn't spent a solid month watching every memory of my early life go by like she had when she was catching up. He hadn't watched all of my dreams for the past five years. He didn't have quite a vampire's processing speed.

I tried to start gently, not dropping him into the middle of my life without explanation. I offered up stuff I can remember from when I was a baby. That isn't a secret from anyone, really. So sharing it *might* have suffered the same limitations as when I did something sneaky like going by "Anna", which is part of my real name but not all of it. But it didn't, I could feel it. I wasn't holding back, I was just starting at the beginning. I'd pretty much decided that I wasn't going to hide from Cody, even if Mama wouldn't have approved.

"Wow," Cody gasped. I almost pulled my hand away, afraid I'd upset him somehow, and the second person in my head merrily sent that concern to Cody too. He put his own hand up to hold mine in place. "Not saying to stop," he managed, "just wow."

"I could slow down," I said, "if you need me to. Or tone it down a little -"

"This is fine... This is *amazing*."

"Stop me if you need to," I whispered. "I haven't done this exactly this way before."

"I - don't even know what you're doing," he admitted.

"Showing you the abridged story of my life." Mama hadn't wanted the abridged version, when she'd found me. She'd wanted every single waking second, all its detail intact. It had taken as long to share it with her as it had to live through, but there was less to see then and we spread it out. I didn't expect to be transmitting to Cody for the next five and a half years, though, so I was letting my power decide what it most urgently wanted me to share. It was fast-forwarding, compressing similar moments into summaries, glossing over repetitive bits as needed.

Even so, it was averaging ten minutes per day I recounted. By the time I'd gotten to the part where I was on the plane to Alaska from my birthplace, the sun had gotten quite a bit higher in the sky. Cody's stomach grumbled loudly.

I let my arm fall to my side, and he let out a little breath as though he'd been holding it. "You didn't eat anything," I said. I was pretty hungry too. My popcorn and granola bar had only taken the edge off. Solid food isn't as satisfying as blood, weight for weight, and I hadn't had much.

He shook his head a little, to clear it more than to communicate. "That," he said, "is true. Not that I couldn't have forgotten about it for another couple hours to keep watching - and hearing and whatnot. You're obviously the *most* interesting half-vampire I'll ever meet. Wow."

I grinned, thrilled at having gotten to finally let my power do what it was supposed to do and at getting such an appreciative reception. I wished I could purr. I didn't have the same vocal equipment as a vampire, and couldn't, but it would have been so appropriate. I said, "I guess we should probably hunt, huh?"

"Guess so," he said, but neither of us moved.

We stood there, alone together in the forest, and then suddenly Cody leaned forward and kissed me right on the mouth.

It was a swift, impulsive thing, and he seemed to change his mind three-quarters of the way through, because he pulled back with a sheepish look on his face and mumbled, "It seemed called for."

"It... it did?" I asked, not sure what to make of the kiss at all. I wasn't sure if I should be thinking *ha, a boy kissed me and Mama's not here to say he can't!* or *where did that come from?*, or maybe just a nice all-purpose AAAAAAAH!.

"Yeah. I'm..." It sounded like he was about to say he was sorry, and then decided that would be off-putting or untrue. "I won't do it again if you don't want. It just... seemed to make sense."

"I - I - I should probably have warned you before I -" I motioned with the hand I'd used to send him memories. "It can make people think they know me better than they do, even if I'm not using it at full strength. People like me more than they have reason to, and -"

Cody shook his head. "I liked you before that."

"No, there *is* no before that," I said. "If I'm talking, I'm either lying through my teeth or there's at least some of *that*. Sometimes I even feel it if I'm just... making facial expressions, or something, but it's harder to keep track of then."

"Then," said Cody, "*that* is part of the *you* I like, isn't it?"

I blinked. Then I decided to kiss him.

I was not *quite* so quick about it, but I did break away soon. I was awfully hungry. Cody had a big, goofy grin on his face when I pulled back. "Let's hunt," I said, vaguely aware that I was smiling in a probably-silly way too.

We took down a pair of deer and drank up. We split the meat from his kill, since the wolves couldn't eat anything with his venom in it. My deer they could eat, since I was

venom-free, and a couple of the wolves had a taste for raw meat. "Darren especially," said Cody. "He's gone as long as a week at a time without eating anything we got from a store. I'm not sure if that's because he actually likes eating deer for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or if he's just especially guilty about all the stealing, but he'll probably call dibs on the food."

"Fine by me," I said. I made to sling the deer over my shoulders, but Cody picked it up first.

"I got it," he said, grinning. "I'm surprised enough that you managed to get fed without messing up your hair; carrying a deer on your back all that way would definitely break your hot streak."

I tossed my hair; heavy waves of it flounced into the air and drifted back down. "It's probably full of snarls. You just can't tell because it's so wavy to begin with that it all looks like part of the normal texture. It's really annoying, actually."

"If you don't like it, why don't you cut it?" he asked, adjusting the deer and striking out for camp with me at his heels. "Not that I advocate the plan. Even if it's really full of snarls it's pretty awesome hair."

I was momentarily paralyzed by the question. Yeah, I'd decided to tell him everything and damn Mama's rules - but if I brought up Mama when I wasn't ready to have a couple hours of conversation and show-and-tell about her, it would be really awkward; he thought she was dead, after all. Would he mind very much if I saved it for later? Could my power put up with a few more incomplete weasel-sentences after having been promised honesty?

"My hair is like my daddy's," I said. It felt normal for a true but partial statement.

"Well, you could keep it in a braid or something if it gets in your way, even if you don't want to cut it. I braid my hair sometimes and it's only a little past my shoulders," Cody said.

"Sometimes I do," I replied. Mama actually braided my hair for me more days than not. But when we went to a town we planned to stay in for a while, I always started presenting myself with my hair down and then changed a few days later. Over a month *I* don't grow noticeably too much, anymore, but my hair does; switching styles a few times makes that less obvious, or at least Mama thinks so. That's why I had my hair down, two days after coming to Kora's town. "But I'm not good at braiding my own hair because I can't see what I'm doing."

"Bet you Kim'll braid it for you if you ask," Cody said. "Everybody's probably awake by now."

"That would be nice of her."

We jogged back to the cluster of tents, where indeed everyone seemed to be up and

it looked like the three unhidden wolves had returned. Cody said, "Hey, all, this is the lovely Elspeth Cullen, world's most interesting half-vampire. Elspeth, let me connect some names to faces for you..." He pointed at the nearest woman, the only white person in the place besides me. "That's Thea. Staring at her is Darren - hey, man, want this deer? Certified free of vampire juice, here you go - and spitting up on her shoulder is their little Noah. Sam and Emily are over by the rock, trying to get Paige to say "dada". You saw Quil, but he was furrier at the time; that's Claire sitting on his shoulders pretending he's a spaceship. Victor and Maureen are chasing Ruth over there, and looks like Kim is holding Natalie for them, and Jared is the one next to her tying his shoes - I guess they just got back, or he forgot to put on shoes again. Zachary's there with Brady and Pera, boring them with... Zach, dude, are you seriously talking *again* about football? When did you even see a game to talk about? And last, but not least given that he's Alpha and everything, is Jacob Black, head of the pack... Jake? Jake, what's..."

I caught up to Cody's introductions, looking at and memorizing each face, and finally looked at Jacob. Like all the wolves, he was a big guy - six foot seven, at a guess, and made of muscle, and looked twenty-five even though I knew he was really at least four years short of that. It was subtle, but everyone oriented themselves around him: he was clearly in charge, and the pack, wolves in particular, were ready to drop what they were doing and obey him if he said *jump*.

Jacob wasn't giving any orders, though.

Jacob was staring at me.

With a look that said, *you are the center of the universe and I worship the ground you walk on and your wish is my command and I will defend you with my life*.

Leader

"Jake," said Cody. "Jake, man, don't - Jake -"

"*Elspeth*," said Jacob. He said my name like I'd never heard any word spoken, ever, some blend of worship and need and possessiveness. He *stated* it, like it was a fact all by itself: *Elspeth exists, and that is supremely important*. His eyes were so *soft*, like he was about to cry with happiness.

I stared back, but my face was less *imprint face* and more *deer in headlights face*. I didn't know how to react at all. I'd never spoken a word to Jacob in my life, and he was *staring* at me like... like all of the other wolves looked at their imprints.

What was this supposed to mean for *me*? I was hidden. I'd stay that way until Pera unhid me. She was in the pack too, she was part of the flow of people around Jacob identifying him as the boss. If *he* wanted me to stay, would she ever let me go? But I had to go! I could travel with them for a while, but I needed to meet up with Mama!

And then I wondered about the other women, and little Claire, scattered around the camp and looking at me and Jacob to see what we would do - were they free to go? Pera was, obviously, except that her absence would cost lives; she might not *feel* free, being so necessary. And Claire was a child (but where were her parents? I remembered she was a Makah; *their* tribe hadn't been wiped out...) Maureen and Emily were also Makah. Thea's family in Forks, some troop of blondes like her, would probably be alive too.

I'd never given any of this a second thought when Mama first recited their names for me. We didn't know if Jacob's pack was alive, or if they'd been captured by the Volturi, or *what*. Mama never heard from them again after they left La Push for good. Puzzling over the moral issues of scooping up two-year-old Claire and bolting hadn't been an important task, then.

I'd fallen in with thieves; had I also fallen in with kidnappers?

Mama told me that wolves hate to be without their imprints. They can technically do it, if they have to, but they wouldn't choose it.

But she also told me that wolves care very much about their imprints and will do what they need, be what they need. If anyone there had been kidnapped, it was because they weren't safe at home. So maybe I just needed to explain that I would be quite safe with Mama.

Would he believe me? We *had* been attacked by kept wolves...

My brain was running in circles; I'm not very well designed for thinking things out by myself. Usually I would bring problems to Mama and she would help me. But Mama wasn't there. I didn't know what to do without her.

Jacob said, "You look so afraid, please don't be afraid... I'm not going to hurt you, Elspeth..."

I spun around and ran.

Nobody chased me immediately, although I heard voices bubbling up and talking over each other the moment it was obvious what I was doing. I didn't go far. I had to be able to find my way back unless I wanted to be the equivalent of a ghost forever, wandering around in the "hiding place". But I needed to be by myself for a little bit and tackle the new, terrifying problem of *how to make decisions without Mama*.

I look sixteen, I mostly act sixteen, but I'm *five* - and a half - and Mama has always been in charge since she found me and I've never seriously rebelled. I liked kissing Cody but I would never have done it *first*, not without getting Mama to actually change her rule about boys. As soon as I thought of that I was ashamed of having kissed him even *second*. Mama said I had to wait until I was *seven*. I didn't *know* if she'd make an exception for a boy my own species and my own real age, because she wasn't there to ask.

I didn't know what she'd say about Jacob either. I had *no idea*. It was terrifying.

It meant I had to decide all alone, or try to get help from people I barely knew who had other interests in the problem besides making me safe.

Mama likes to talk about priorities. She told me once, "You can only have one top priority." I'm her top priority and that means I can trust her to look out for me no matter what. *Anything* else she cares about that competes with me being okay will not be addressed until I am okay.

I don't know a lot about anyone else's priorities.

I don't even know a lot about *mine*. I never had to. Mama thinks it's important for people to know themselves, what they want and what they have and how they're going to make the first thing happen with the second thing. But I didn't see the need much while I was little and she decided everything. I had what Mama got for me. I wanted "what was best", and Mama knew what that was, and she made sure I had it.

I stood in the forest, staring up at the sky where it peeked through the leaves, and I wished for my mama.

She would have thought about the problem and then she would have done what needed doing. Whisked me away, or hugged me and petted my hair until I felt better and sent me along to join the pack as Jacob's imprint, or - or *something*. She might have needed time to ask for more information or mull something over or get me to show her my feelings on the matter, but she would have thought of something and done it.

The only reason it didn't hit me so hard before was because I have rules about what

to do when Mama says to run, all lined up ready to go when I needed them. But then Jacob had to *complicate* things. How would I get to where I needed to go and take my leave with him being all *imprinty* at me so I couldn't leave without hurting him, even if he'd let me go?

I knew it wasn't really his *fault*. Imprinting is involuntary. But it left me with a problem and no Mama there to fix it for me.

I sat under a tree, still squinting up at the sky. I heard footsteps, and turned to look, expecting Jacob. But it was Cody.

"Hey," he said awkwardly, sounding tired. Without the bouncy confidence he'd shown before, and in comparison to all the wolves I'd just seen, he looked thin and small, even though he's two inches taller than me and before I'd have said he was more *wiry* than *skinny*. "Are... you okay?"

"No," I said.

Cody sat down, at a comfortable ninety-degree angle instead of right next to me or facing me directly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes," I said, trying not to cry. "But... but the person I want to talk to isn't here."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" he asked tentatively.

"I hate being alone," I said. "I just - I had to - he was *staring at me* and I didn't know what to do -"

Cody nodded. "Jake's... a good guy," he said. "I respect the hell out of Jake. Like, if you'd met him before I was born he would have had little devil horns and smoke would have come out of his ears, that's how much hell I respected out of him." I laughed in spite of myself. "Who do you want to talk to?" Cody asked.

"My mama."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Didn't, uh, didn't lift a ouija board the last time we raided a Wal-Mart," he said.

"She isn't dead," I said, leaning against the tree bark and closing my eyes.

Cody blinked. "Beg pardon? Brady brought us up to speed on what the Volturi were saying and doing while he was a kept wolf, when he defected. They killed my parents *and* yours."

I didn't want to talk anymore. Leaving my eyes closed, I held up my hand, offering to show what I was too tired to tell.

He hesitated, but eventually he took my narrow hand in his broad one.

Aunt Rosalie, smiling guiltily as she held me, while Grandpa Carlisle explained that Mama and Daddy had "gone away" and would not be back, but that I didn't have to worry and would always be taken care of...

Walking through the park with the neighbor lady and her son and their dog, leading the dachshund into the trees, smelling something familiar and flowery, walking forward, leaving the animal behind, seeing Mama and knowing that Grandpa was wrong...

Mama explaining why Grandpa had said what he said, explaining about her shield, telling me that this was why I must run without thinking of going back for her if she said to, and I knew without her saying so that she wished Daddy had run when he'd had the chance...

Mama showing me the bench in Central Park where I should check for her, once every day, until the month was up, if I did have to run; Mama telling me all the phone numbers she had so I would know who to go to for help if she couldn't be there, and the worry on her face when she told me the numbers were old but I should try anyway...

I let my arm fall and my eyes open. Cody had an absent, almost *awed* expression. "She's alive," he murmured.

"I think so," I said, anxious. "If it doesn't work twice, or if someone went back to check on her before she could get up and run away... but she's probably alive. That's why I have to go to New York."

"Do you think..." Then he frowned and shook his head. "I guess it would only be her, she has the shield."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry your mom is alive," he said, half-smiling. He held up a hand when I opened my mouth to correct him. "I know that's not what you meant."

"I'm used to her being in charge of everything," I said. "I don't know what to do without her. I thought it would be... maybe not easy, but straightforward, to just find her again if we did get separated. And then you said the pack could escort me and I thought that way it would be easy, *too*, and now it's not that, and it's not straightforward anymore either."

"Jake's a good guy," Cody repeated, slowly.

"But I don't know him. And he doesn't know *me*, either! I've never spoken *one word* to him, or shown him *one thought*, or *anything*, and *what if he won't let me leave with Mama or even try to find her?* I need her."

"Whoa, whoa," said Cody. "He's not - I don't think he's going to do that. I mean, he'd

probably rather if you and your mom *both* stuck with us, yeah, but - he wouldn't keep you prisoner."

"Have any other imprints ever wanted to leave?" I asked.

"I... don't think so," Cody said, frowning.

"What would happen if one did? Kim, maybe," I said, naming the only adult imprint without a baby or essential witchcraft. "I - I guess since she's Quileute she probably has no close family left to go home to, but if she wanted to leave anyway?"

"Jared would... he'd want to go with her," said Cody slowly. "He'd want to go wherever she went. But he'd try to convince her to stay, first. They'd be easy pickings alone. You won't have that problem, though, your mom will be with you, she's done fine at keeping you safe this long and the Volturi aren't after you in particular. Probably not even now. Wolves don't see well enough in the dark that the kept ones could have recognized her, and by the time a see-in-the-dark vampire showed up she wasn't... really... recognizeable."

I nodded. "What if... Suppose Pera could hide and unhide people without touching them, from any distance, and *she* wanted to leave, by herself, and only help remotely. It'd be safe for her to go. Would Brady let her?"

"I... don't..." Cody was unsettled by the question. "I can't imagine her doing that. She's happy with Brady."

I pulled my knees up to my chin. "But you think that Jacob imprinting on me won't change anything, and I can still go meet Mama in Central Park and leave with her?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it doesn't change anything," Cody admitted. "...I know I keep saying this, but Jake's a good guy."

"Why did you follow me out here, instead of someone else?" I asked.

"Uhhh... Jake thought you'd be more comfortable talking to me," said Cody sheepishly, "since we were talking before and... since you ran away when you saw him."

"Does he know that you kissed me?" I murmured.

"I was hoping to avoid having to tell him that," said Cody. "It would be so awkward that auks would go extinct with envy. He'd either be pissed because you're *his* imprint or disgusted because we're technically five. Or both."

"This is too hard," I said, burying my face in my knees. "I *am* five! I'm *five* and I want Mama to be in charge."

"If you want," Cody said, "I can go back and tell everyone about your mom so you

don't have to explain."

"But I'm good at explaining things," I said.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you should *have* to do it if you're all scrambled in the head about... stuff."

"That's nice of you," I said. "But I really do hate being alone. If you could stay... it helps."

Cody fidgeted. "I think Jacob's going to get nervous if he doesn't hear anything back."

"Oh," I said.

"...But he might also be mad at me if he finds out I left you alone when you didn't want me to," Cody said, digging the heel of his hand into his forehead. "Ugh. Everybody else imprinted *before* I was born except Brady, and I didn't *know* Brady until he joined our pack. I don't know how to figure out what Jake would want, anymore."

"What did he say?" I asked. "When he sent you."

"Said, 'Cody, please make sure Elspeth is all right. She seems to trust you,'" Cody reported. "But I don't know if that means *make sure* as in check on you and tell him what's up, or *make sure* as in help you be all right."

"I'll be okay if you need to go ask," I said.

"All right," said Cody, sighing and giving me a sad look. He ran lightly over the forest debris and soon I couldn't hear his steps anymore.

I was alone, and I really *didn't* like it.

I wanted Mama, but she wasn't there. Cody would do, but he was gone too. Given twenty minutes I could have gotten to be good enough friends with any non-Jacob person from the pack that they'd be fine. But I couldn't go get one of them without running into Jacob, and he would *not* do, because I didn't know what to do about him.

In a fit of creative desperation, I pressed my hand to my *own* cheek, and tried to send something to myself.

I saw double, for a moment. Then, under my real vision, I saw-as-though-remembered a mirror image of myself, standing opposite me in a blank place of no color at all.

For a moment, I couldn't tell which of the two of me I was, and then I decided that

was a silly question, because I was clearly both of them. I just had the world's best apparatus for talking to myself.

I tried to actually say something to myself, but it didn't seem to work. I supposed that might make sense. When I'd first started showing things when I was a baby, it only worked for pictures, not for sound. Maybe there would be a progression like that with showing myself things.

It had just occurred to me to try talking to myself in sign language when I heard Cody jogging back towards me. I put my hand down and the blank place with two of me in it disappeared.

"Talking to yourself?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow at the motion of my arm while he sat back down.

"I was trying," I said, and he laughed, "but it didn't work quite the same. Which kind of 'make sure' did it turn out to be?"

"Second kind," he said. "Far as Jacob's concerned, if you should happen to want me around, I am to follow you to the ends of the earth and depart only at your whim."

"I don't need to go to the ends of the earth," I said. "Only to New York."

"Then I am to follow you to New York," said Cody, "Alpha's orders."

I tilted my head. "Everybody does what Jacob says, don't they?"

"He's the boss," agreed Cody. "It's only wolves who *can't* disobey him if he gives an order. The Alpha voice only works within the pack proper. Me and the imprints just know he's good at being in charge."

"Did you tell him about Mama?"

"Mentioned it, but he said he could wait for the whole story if you needed company," Cody said. "I know she told you all the facts about imprinting, but... I've grown up around imprinted wolves, I know pretty well how they tick. You don't need to be scared of him, Elspeth. He'll look out for you, first of everything. He can't not."

"That's what my mama does, is look out for me first of everything," I said. "I don't think Jacob wants to be my *parent*."

"Well... no," said Cody. "That would... not be likely."

"I'm five," I said again.

"*You* kissed *me*, too," Cody pointed out. "Do you want to be five or do you want to be sixteen?"

"Even normal sixteen-year-olds aren't deciding things for all eternity," I said. "I'm not my mama. I don't think I *want* to let an older man sweep me off my feet and then never look twice at anybody else until the stars burn out. Just the other day I was asking Mama for permission to let a boy take me out for ice cream when I expected to leave town in less than a month and never think about him again. I don't want to be *done* yet."

"Oh," said Cody softly. "And now, whatever you do, even if you go out for ice cream five thousand times with five thousand people... it'll all constitute "keeping Jacob waiting". Because he'll wait, forever..."

I nodded. "All my choices are horrible to somebody."

"Well," said Cody, "I think *Jacob* would probably say that you should take care of yourself and let him handle his own issues."

Something in the way he emphasized Jacob's name sounded odd. I looked at Cody, and he looked away, pensive for some reason. "Would *you* say that?" I asked.

"I'm of two minds," sighed Cody. I waited for him to explain; eventually he met my eyes. "On the one hand," he said, "you should be able to have ice cream with anyone you want with whatever level of seriousness you want. Or - or deer. I liked you myself, remember - still do if I'm honest - and then this *happened*, and now it's confusing and it's got to be worse on your end because it's not just one possibility closed off for you, it's all of them made way more difficult."

I nodded, and said, "And on the other hand?"

Cody waved his left hand, once, as though to designate it "other". "This hand's the one that's thinking about Jake, who is a swell guy and who I'd like to see happy, and this hand is also doing some pondering about what happens to the pack if you leave and he's got to *handle his own issues* and still be Alpha."

"Does... he really have a lot to do?" I asked. "I mean, Pera hiding everybody is the best possible defense, and I haven't got the impression that she needs much micromanagement..."

"It's not just defense," Cody said. "I mean, he's essential when a few of us unhide if there are kept wolves or vampires about. He's the best fighter by a long shot and the Alpha voice is the only thing that can override a couple of dangerous instincts, in emergencies, plus he coordinates everyone's movements. But if he couldn't lead, then we *could* just quit unhiding until he was up to scratch again. The real biggie would be order in the pack, day-to-day."

"People fight?" I guessed, skeptical; what I'd seen had looked so peaceable.

"Like you wouldn't believe," said Cody fervently. "Early on, before we had Pera, there wasn't much, because it was just running, running, running, all the time. Maureen and Thea had their purses on them when we first escaped and Zachary had enough

warning to grab his wallet, and we ate out of their savings accounts. The wolves went in shifts and slept while riding on whoever was awake so we didn't have to stop moving for more than a few minutes to grab food. So there was this all-consuming panic and an obvious common enemy. Infighting only got bad once everyone got used to the idea that we were safe while we hid."

"What happened?"

"A lot of things happened. This was years ago, Jake was still only fifteen even though he looked almost like he does now. He wasn't comfortable throwing his authority around. He didn't want to be an Alpha, he'd only done it because it was the only way to not be attached to his sisters' packs anymore and escape. He'd spend a lot of time in wolf form, trying to talk to them."

"Right," I remembered, "Alphas can talk to each other..."

Cody nodded. "If they want to. It's not automatic, like it is within the pack. And Rachel and Becky weren't really interested in talking to him anymore. But he kept trying, and trying, getting more withdrawn, and things started to fall apart."

"Like how?" I asked.

"Kim and Thea would have the most amazing fights, screaming at each other to wake the dead even if the dead were wearing earmuffs. Once Thea threw a shoe and clonked Kim on the head with it, and the next thing you know, Jared and Darren are at each others' throats defending their lady-loves. Claire would get on Emily's nerves sometimes, and Emily would snap at her and Claire'd get scared and run to Quil, and Quil would try to tell Emily off and Sam would threaten to perforate him for suggesting that Emily's anything less than the most perfect aunt in the universe to Claire. Zachary would make off-color jokes and they'd offend Maureen and she'd tell Victor to teach Zach how to behave like a civilized person, which apparently in Maureen-secret-code-language means "take half his pelt off". Pera was kind of shell-shocked over having been kidnapped by the Volturi and then escaping, and she didn't speak more than ten words of English, then, so she kind of rebuffed Kim when Kim tried to be friends and then Brady was fighting with Jared over that. Those were the major themes, but almost every combination of people except wolves with their own imprints, and Jake, would be fighting sometimes."

"I suppose," I said, "that you were a neutral party throughout all of this."

"I was three, four months old, what could I have been doing?"

"Even I was talking by then," I said, "and I was delayed for weeks compared to you because I could..." I tapped his cheek. *Do things like this instead*, I finished.

"You are ceaselessly amazing," Cody declared. "Anyway, I really did stay out of it for the most part. Feel free to seek second opinions if you want, but all my memories are of wandering away for a bit when it got loud and fur started flying. Sometimes I played

with Claire; we were about the same size, for lack of a better word, then."

"So then what happened?"

"Well, one day Jake didn't go off to try to talk to Becky and Rachel. He didn't make a production about it, he was just in the camp from the time he got up to bedtime, no fur on. There weren't any fights that day. Whenever it seemed like there might be one, Jake would give whoever was picking it a look. It's not like he was staring anyone down, daring them to try to start an argument under his nose. Nobody stopped dramatically in midsentence because they were scared he'd intervene. It just... didn't happen."

"...Is that it?" I asked, having expected something more cinematic.

"No, of course not, that was only the first day. The next day, Jake slept in a bit, and Thea took Kim's hairbrush and from there everybody got into a combination shouting match and wolfy war. It was awful. Claire was wailing her head off a safe distance away. Quil was dividing his time between trying to comfort her and trying to bite Darren's head off. Pera had learned some English and she was threatening to unhide everyone and let us all die or get brain-fried for all she cared, and Maureen was pulling out the racial slurs over that. Brady went straight for Maureen without even trying to go through Victor and Victor nearly killed him. That kind of thing, flying every which way, I was up a tree for most of it."

"Jake slept through this?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't think so. I think he was waiting to get out of his tent until all the adults was involved so he could address everyone at once without anyone virtuously claiming innocence. He walked out and just said, "Cool it." I can't tell when he's using Alpha voice and when he's not, but I'm pretty sure he was just then, because all the wolves stopped *dead*, and the girls quit screaming soon after. Then Jake said he wanted to talk to everybody, one at a time, privately, no exceptions, and that he expected everyone he wasn't chatting with to behave themselves in his absence."

"That's thirteen people if he included Claire," I said. "How long did it take?"

"Fourteen, counting me, and it took the entire rest of the day and a chunk of the night. He gave everybody at least an hour; a few people got more. I don't know exactly what he said to anyone but me."

"Why were you on his list, if you weren't involved in any of the fights?" I asked.

"He said he was catching up on all his responsibilities and just because I was "acting more mature than all the teenagers in the pack put together" didn't necessarily mean I had nothing going on that needed to be addressed," said Cody. "I think he was collecting a complete list of grievances so he'd know just what everybody was fighting about and could deal with it. I wasn't very articulate then, of course, so I was saying things like "Thea yells really loud" and "it makes Claire scared when Quil fights the other wolves and sometimes she hits me because she is scared and I'm scared she might hurt her

hand". He chuckled to himself.

"So," Cody went on, "after he had talked to everybody, it was late - I was already asleep, I can barely keep my eyes open past sunset. Jake sent everybody else to bed. I think he stayed up all night, though, because I was up at four-thirty in the morning and he was hanging out, wolf-shaped, in the middle of camp staring into space. I sat with him for a while, but he didn't phase, so I didn't try to carry on a conversation and eventually went off hunting.

"Once everybody was up, Jake started making announcements. He had a list of things we needed to get so nobody would feel like they had to steal each other's stuff. He had rules about what language was and wasn't appropriate. He talked about how everybody had better be nice to Pera because she was saving all of our lives constantly on a daily basis. He told Quil it was Quil's job to swoop Claire away from Emily *before* Emily got fed up with her - since Quil can't get fed up with her. He Alpha-voiced all the wolves about fighting, and said if they felt like their imprints needed defending they should come to him about it and he'd sort it out. He told all the imprints except Claire that it was immature and ridiculous for them to resort to violence-by-proxy and if they couldn't handle their disagreements by themselves without shouting and throwing things, they could come to him instead of fracturing the pack over it."

I said, "And then everything calmed down?"

"Not just like that. But Jake enforced everything he said he was going to. Perfectly, every single time. Eventually fighting wasn't normal anymore," Cody said. "But he still has to make himself a visible presence, has to be in the middle of the pack ready to crack down if someone starts up again. I don't like to think what would happen if anything happened to him."

"Wow," I said.

"Like I said," Cody sighed, "he's a great guy."

Silence ensued.

After a minute, Cody said, "Are you okay?"

"I guess so," I said. "I think I'm going to put off making any really weighty choices until I get to New York and find Mama... but it's not that weighty a choice just to go back and... and let Kim braid my hair."

"Kim wanted to be a hairdresser," Cody informed me, hopping to his feet and offering a hand to pull me up. I accepted it and stood, and then he extricated his hand, an uncomfortable look on his face. "She knows a lot of kinds of braids," he said weakly.

I nodded solemnly, and folded my hands behind my back. We walked back towards the cluster of tents.

Guesser

Jacob lit up to rival the sun when he saw me step back into the circle of tents. He didn't get up from where he was sitting, or try to usher me closer. Apparently he was settled on a strategy of letting his skittish imprint settle down alone. I felt his eyes on me, though, while I drifted towards Kim. She was finishing an angled French braid in Pera's hair.

"Hullo, Elspeth," Kim said to me gently when she'd finished putting the tie in place around the end of Pera's plait. Pera wandered towards where the food was kept and took a bottle of juice. "Do you want me to do your hair, too?" asked Kim.

"If you wouldn't mind," I said. "I can't reach well enough to brush it properly on my own, even, let alone braid it..."

"Of course," Kim said. "You just stand there and I'll look after it, all right?" She started carefully brushing out the ends of my hair and working her way up.

It was soothing, mostly. Kim isn't Mama, but Mama's not the only person who ever does my hair, either. Grandma Esme used to sometimes, and Aunt Rosalie, and occasionally humans like Kora's mother do too. So it wasn't too strange to let Kim tease the tangles out and twist strands into a thick, orderly rope. I closed my eyes and thought of nothing.

I have a lot of hair, and braiding it takes a long time, especially for a human. Thinking of nothing had just begun to become itchy boring when Kim snapped an elastic around the end of my braid and said, "There you are, then, Elspeth."

"Thank you," I said politely, opening my eyes.

Jacob hadn't moved an inch from where he'd been when I showed up. I wasn't sure if he'd even blinked. He was just gazing at me, steadily and with a faintly awed smile on his face.

I turned away, and cast about for something else to do. I considered the bag of munchies, but I wasn't really *hungry*, only *bottomless*. There were conversations going on around the camp. I listened, trying to see if any of them were such that I might join.

"Daphne's probably old enough to activate now," Zachary said wistfully to Quil.

"Maybe she's friends with Brooke," suggested Quil, sounding sad. I wasn't sure who they were talking about, exactly, but my best guess was relatives of theirs the Volturi had kidnapped for possessing the werewolf gene. I didn't want to intrude on that conversation.

It hit me, not for the first time, but a little deeper: everyone in the pack was *damaged*. I'm used to Mama being damaged. Technically I lost someone too. But I've only got a few days' worth of memories of Daddy. I don't think of him very often, since

Mama ran out of stories to tell. It doesn't exactly *hurt* for him to be gone (or not often, anyway). But any of the wolves could have relatives in Volterra, in magically enforced service to their natural enemies. Any of the wolves *or* imprints would be bereaved, or had simply been torn from family back home when evacuated.

The four babies weren't really damaged the same way, I thought, but the way the pack lived was certainly an *odd* place to bring up a child.

Cody turned out okay, though.

I listened for other, safer conversations. Emily was attempting to interest Claire in a book which Claire thought had "not enough pictures", while Sam held Paige and looked on. Maureen was nursing Natalie and telling a raptly attentive Victor about what she wanted to do the next time the pack stopped in a town; Ruth played with a battered teddy bear at her feet. Thea was chasing her little Noah between the trees.

Brady and Pera had stolen off a ways for a little privacy, but I could just spot them kissing. I did some mental math and realized that Brady would have been *thirteen* when he imprinted on her, and she'd have been twenty-five at the time. That seemed nearly as questionable as Quil and Claire, for all that Brady had been the one to do the imprinting. Perhaps the kissing part was a recent development.

I scrunched my eyes shut for a moment, and tilted my head back to look at the sky. Eventually I grabbed an empty lawn chair and sat next to Kim. The pack sure had a lot of stuff. I supposed that they didn't need to move too fast anymore, and the wolves would be able to carry plenty as long as they could go at a sedate pace. How long would it take me to get to New York, if I stuck with them? Maybe we could sneak onto a train or something.

Kim said conversationally, "So I hear Bella is alive after all, but Cody didn't explain in any detail. Will you tell me the story?"

"I'll show you, if you like," I offered, and she nodded, curious. When I'd done that, and Kim had exclaimed over how remarkable it was, Maureen shoved by to demand a look at my witchcraft too. Soon I had a double line of wolves, imprints, and Cody, one line for each hand, who wanted to see what I had to show them. I rotated through them all with the summary of my explanation of Mama's survival, and when no one wanted to be done with the show, I shared things almost at random. It was delicious, to have an audience and no secrets to keep.

Jacob didn't join either line, although he half-stood once when it was clear that everybody except the babies was lining up. Then he changed his mind and sat back down. Waiting for me to come to him, I supposed, even though I was letting every person in the pack have a look and it wasn't really a *special* thing.

Even when he had sat back down, he had that faint, happy look on his face. *She's*

here, she exists, that's enough, was my guess as to what the smile meant - but my guess wasn't necessarily any good. I didn't know him.

I would probably need to talk to him eventually, about going to New York. He *was* in charge, after all.

"This memory is in Chinese," complained Thea, occupying my left hand. "I can't understand it."

"It's Swedish," I said, pausing the display. "What we're saying isn't important, I'm just showing the scenery. It's a pretty sunrise."

"But I don't understand it," she said. Jared, standing at my other hand, rolled his eyes.

"Well, I could leave out the sound, if you want," I said. "I'm fast-forwarding and the conversation was already too fast for a human to follow, anyway."

"Make it in English," Thea insisted.

"I... hang on a sec," I said, dropping my hands and thinking. "I haven't tried to translate a memory before. I might be able to do it but I have to think." It seemed like it should be possible. I'm all about making myself understood, after all: Thea can't understand Swedish, so I should be able to send her non-Swedish if I'm really doing what I think I am. Something like the way I summarized, when I showed Cody an abridged autobiography earlier... "Okay, I'll try," I said. I put my fingertips back where they'd been and rewound the sunrise conversation.

It wasn't all that interesting, only Mama telling me about what she'd been doing between nearly getting killed and running into Uncle Jasper. (Mama wavers on whether she wants me to think of him as an uncle or not, but I usually do.) She'd been doing such dull things that she could talk about it in the incomplete Swedish she had, so it had been an opportunity for me to practice. I didn't *translate*, exactly, not into English, but I sent the meanings of our words along with the senses and the feelings that were already attached to the memory. Thea seemed satisfied.

I was a very new and shiny amusement for the pack. They kept me occupied showing random things all morning and into the afternoon, and at last Emily wanted to know if I could teach languages that way. Everyone else drifted off to other activities. I fiddled around for a couple of hours, holding my palm to her cheek while she reported on my effectiveness patiently.

"I don't know if this is getting me through the material any *faster* than drilling with Pera does," mused Emily, while most of the pack were rummaging through the food supply for dinner, "but it seems like it'll *stick* better. Everything you send is so vivid and... and it feels *true*, but I don't know how much sense that makes for vocabulary words..."

"I know what you're talking about," I assured her. "It's harder to forget things you

really believe."

Emily nodded. "You're a charming girl," she said. "Jacob..." She trailed off, and eyed me uncertainly. Maybe she'd been about to say something like *is lucky to have you* or *chose well* (as though he *chose*). "Nothing," she said. "Do you go to bed as early as Cody does? We'll need to... figure out some sleeping arrangement, before you need sleep. We don't have an extra tent, so there will have to be some squeezing."

"I'm usually asleep an hour or two after sunset." I counted seven tents, which looked like they'd hold two or three people, maybe four small people. "How are you arranged now?" I asked.

"All the pairs together, parents share with our children, and Jacob and Zachary and Cody are tripled up in the green one," Emily said. "Perhaps Jacob will put Jared on night watch - we need someone looking out for things like fire or other attacks that can still harm us even while we're hidden, before Cody wakes up and takes over by default," she explained. "And you could share with Kim. That wouldn't be too crowded, at least."

"That sounds fine," I said. "It doesn't look like rain, though, so I could just sleep outside..."

"Nonsense," said Emily briskly. "It's about Jared's turn anyway."

She couldn't *possibly* have missed the subtext that I *prefer* not to sleep in a tent with a non-Mama person, so I shrugged, supposing she had some reason to insist. If I were in a sleeping bag then I probably wouldn't disturb Kim with dream leakage.

"You'll want to ask Jacob about the watch schedule, before you need to go to sleep, though," suggested Emily. *That* would explain why she wanted me in a tent, if she thought I ought to talk to him.

She wasn't being even slightly subtle, so I went ahead and said, "There isn't a reason I have to check that myself. You only want me to talk to Jacob."

Emily sighed. "I don't understand why you aren't. What's stopping you?"

"I... I don't know what to say to him. He could have gotten in the line," I said defensively.

"He's giving you space because you are so *obviously* terrified of him," said Emily. "And you have no reason to be. You know he won't do you any harm. There's nothing standing in your way." She reached her arm behind her, and Sam was suddenly at her shoulder as though summoned by the gesture. She touched his hand, patted it twice, and I looked up and watched him bend to kiss her hairline. Emily put her arm down, and Sam left, just about glowing with satisfaction as he plucked Paige from where she'd been resting in Kim's arms.

In a low voice, Emily said, "I didn't understand, at first, what I had - what Sam gave

me. I only thought that he had betrayed Leah. For weeks, I thought I was somehow being loyal to her, by hurting him. If I had your power, I would show you how much I regret it. Sam forgives me, of course. But I did hurt him. Jacob doesn't deserve to be hurt, Elspeth." And her eyes said, *Please don't ruin our community by rejecting our leader.*

I cringed, and glanced over to Jacob. He was still looking my way - but when my face turned towards his, the faint smile disappeared and he snapped his eyes to Emily. He frowned at her, looking disappointed in her conduct.

Oh, of course. He was too far off to hear a quiet conversation, but guilt would be all over my face, announced by magic if nothing else. Jacob would not approve of Emily making me feel bad, even on his behalf.

Emily looked at Jacob and pursed her lips, then tossed her hair and got up to join Sam and their daughter where they stood without another word to me.

I sat, tucked in towards myself as much as I could be without actually curling into a ball.

I heard quiet voices, just too soft for me to hear, and then someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up, and it was Cody, avoiding eye contact.

"Jacob wants to know," he said, "if there's anything that I or anybody can do to make you feel better."

"I just want to go to New York and find Mama," I said.

"I'll let him know," Cody said. "You can take your time. It's okay." He sighed, and went over to Jacob.

Maureen brought me one of her daughters (Ruth, the older one) and said that if I had nothing to do I could talk to her in Spanish. That kept me occupied until Ruth asked how to say "mother", and then yelled "Madre, Madre!". Maureen didn't understand that, until Pera tapped her on the arm and sent her to pick Ruth back up.

When the sun set, Cody went to bed first thing. Jared was put on night watch once others started drifting to their tents, and Kim told me so and invited me to sleep in her tent, but I said I would prefer to sleep under the stars. She gave me a sleeping bag and a pillow and I found a mossy spot, far off from the conversations of people who could and did stay up later than me.

I tossed and turned, and finally slept, to have my first night full of dreams that no one could see.

I woke up the next morning to darkness and quiet. But I wasn't the only one awake -

I could see Cody, who'd apparently already sent Jared to bed. He was pacing.

"Cody?" I whispered, sitting up.

"Oh, morning, Elspeth," he said, also quiet enough to leave the sleepers asleep. He paused midstride and pivoted to look my way, though it looked like he was focusing on something over my left shoulder. "Sleep all right?"

"Fine," I said, and it was close enough. I wasn't physically uncomfortable, at least. I tried to grasp at the fading threads of dreams, but they wouldn't stick. That night's worth was lost, then, and I couldn't even tell Mama about them later.

"We're breaking camp to start for New York today," Cody told me.

"I'm glad." I climbed out of my sleeping bag and rolled it up into its case. "How long have you been up?"

"Couple hours. Do you s'pose Joham's kids have this kind of weird sleep schedule? Early to bed, early to rise, to the point of absurdity?" he asked idly, but he sounded distracted.

"I don't know," I said. "That wasn't one of the things my parents asked Nahuel when they visited him, or Mama would have told me."

"I suppose it varies, anyway, I seem to be a few hours ahead of you." He scratched the back of his head. "Want to hunt?"

"You haven't already?" I asked, surprised. "Yes, I'm hungry."

We hunted together in silence. Sticking close to camp for night watch purposes, we found no large game, and instead consumed rabbits and half a flock of crows between us. "The early bird gets eaten by the early half-vampires," he remarked offhand, plucking a wayward feather out of his hair. He didn't seem to have much attention on our surroundings.

I nodded at the comment on the birds, and said, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said.

I peered at him, and he shrugged and jogged back to the tents. I followed, but slowly.

No one else woke up for the next hour and a half. In that time I tried to work out on my own what might be bothering Cody, because I thought something was, even if he wouldn't tell me.

Here is how I use my power to learn things about other people.

It takes a very, very long time. It's completely indirect. There is some guesswork. There are always gaps. I can't just call up my power and point it at someone and learn who they are.

First, I make a guess about the thing I am trying to learn. Then, I think of something about myself that is like my guess. And then I figure out how I would explain that part of myself to the person, and see if the explanation refers to things about my guess. If it is, then my guess was close to right.

It's confusing, and it took me a long time to figure out. Here's how it might work. Suppose I go back to Kora's town and find her, and she seems sad. I figure out as much as I can without any magic and I decide that my best guess is that she misses her best friend who is out of town. The closest thing I have to that is when I miss people who I have had to leave behind - people like Kora.

So I think about how I would tell her the way I feel about that. If I wanted to say to Kora, "I miss my old friend Raine as much as you miss your best friend", then that would mean *saying that will make Kora understand something true*, because that is how my power works. Then I would know that my feelings about Raine and Kora's about her friend are the same.

But it would *not* make sense to tell Kora that. I'm never going to see Raine again, and Kora's friend will come home, for one thing. I knew Raine for a much shorter time and we were not as close. And that is the biggest problem with using my power to do this. It only works if I make a correct guess, and I can only make a correct guess if I have something that's sort of like what's going on for the other person.

That is how I missed what was wrong with Cody.

The others in the pack got up almost in unison, even Jared, who had only had a couple hours' of sleep. After they ate breakfast, we packed up all the things in the camp. Zachary showed me how to break down a tent, and how to lash a batch of them to Sam so he could run without dropping anything.

Zachary also offered to let me ride on his back - all of the other imprints rode their own respective wolves, but no one suggested that I go with Jacob. I thanked him, but I decided to go on my own feet, like Cody did. I carried a few of the sleeping bags. I need sleep, but it's on a rigid schedule; in the middle of the day I don't get tired no matter what I do. I kept up with the wolves as we ran, listened to imprints shouting conversations at each other over the wind, and took in scenery. Once or twice I came up with new guesses about Cody, but I couldn't verify any of them.

Since we were hidden, we didn't need to avoid populated places. We ran along the edge of a highway for most of the day, and it did indeed look like the cars were driving

themselves; even weighed down with cargo and riders, the pack could keep pace with slower traffic in the right lane, and I went alongside a station wagon for a bit peering in through the window. At noon, we stopped so the wolves could eat without detouring to hunt, and then piled them back up with stuff to carry and moved on again. We were in Illinois by nightfall.

To my surprise, we didn't stop in an empty place and set up tents. Instead we went into a town, and found a hotel. I asked Cody about it. He seemed to have something else on his mind, but explained, while we waited for someone to open the door so it wouldn't appear to swing wide of its own accord to unhidden people. "We only camp out sometimes," he said. "Sometimes we find unoccupied houses, or hotels with empty rooms, and we haunt them a bit. It's nice to have running water, and even if something we do is seen, it would be sort of hard to have the Volturi after us more than they already are. I mean, I guess it's technically possible, we could kill one of their wives or something," he mused. "But anyway, yeah, we're in a hotel for the night."

"How do we get into rooms?" I asked.

"Pera hides the door, unhides whoever's going in, they walk right through it, she unhides it, and they open it for us from the inside," said Cody.

"Clever," I observed, wondering where his jokes had gone. The door to the hotel creaked open, and the pack jostled through it; I was sure that this made the door appear to stick open for an unnaturally long time, but no one was likely to figure it out.

The hotel had enough empty rooms that I got my own. I helped myself to the running water. And then, before I went to bed, I decided to give up on figuring out Cody, and try my new tool for figuring out myself.

I sat on the bed, put my hand on my face, and put myself back in the blank place with two of me. I tried the idea of signing at myself, and was very disoriented to find that only one of me did it. *Hello*, that one signed, and I "saw" double: the one whose hands were still saw the one who greeted her, and vice-versa, no longer a perfect mirror.

I put my hand down. That was really *weird*. And if I didn't give my selves names, I was going to get dizzy trying to think of which did which thing. But I didn't know what to call them. Not that I was short of names - any pair of aliases would have done, or just "One" and "Two" - but I didn't know how to tell them apart so names could stick. "*The one who said hello*" and "*the one who didn't*" weren't really differentiating features.

I put the puzzle aside for later, and went to sleep.

"Elspeth!" came Sam's urgent voice from outside the room's door. "Elspeth, are you there?"

I sat up and looked at the clock in the room. It was not quite five a.m. Sam was on

night watch - even in a building, there were possible avenues of attack the Volturi could use, or some other reason to move. But if it was an emergency, wouldn't he have forced the door down...?

"I'm here," I called, and I hopped out of bed to open the door. "What is it?"

Sam's face was drawn and worried. In the hall behind him, Jacob was pacing, and Pera was looking around groggily. "Elspeth," said Sam, "Cody is gone."

Brother

I looked at Pera. "You unhid him?" I asked.

She nodded, sleepily. "He came through the door between our rooms, and woke me," she yawned, "said it was important, I unhid him and went back to sleep. I didn't think about it." I tried to think if Cody had put any special effort into getting the spot adjacent to Brady and Pera's room. I couldn't remember; it hadn't been worth paying attention to at the time.

Sam said, "He didn't come to let me know I could go to sleep at his usual time. When I went to check on him, his window was open and he was gone."

"Did he... leave a note?" I asked, although if he had, they probably wouldn't have been this alarmed. Depending on what the note said, anyway.

"Nothing," said Sam.

"Why did you wake me up?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"To make sure you were still here," murmured Jacob.

Pera said, "I was half-asleep. I might have forgotten, if he had asked me to unhide someone else too. Jacob wanted to check."

I shook my head. "He didn't even wake me. Where would he go?"

"No idea," said Sam.

"Are we going to try tracking him...?" I asked.

"Can't, while we're hidden and he's not," Sam said. "That's the other reason we woke you up. Our noses aren't good enough for serious tracking when we're not wolves, and we're in the middle of town so we can't exactly track Cody that way, but you look human. If Pera unhides *you*, you could see if you can follow him."

"O-okay," I said, "but I'm not very good at tracking. I've never really done it before."

"That's all right," Jacob said, soothingly. "But if you're willing, it's worth a try."

I nodded. Jacob offered to go with me, but I said I could do it myself; I didn't really feel up to a long awkward walk through town with him.

I followed Sam to the room Cody had been using. There were a lot of scents, layered on top of each other - I was pretty sure it was a smoking room, for one thing - but Cody's, left before Pera had unhidden him, was the one that smelled most like my own, with a layer of sweet venom like Mama's breath on top. I leaned out the window. There was a

small courtyard he could have easily jumped down to, and a whole town he could have wandered through to cross his trail with every human's. "Okay," I said, turning to find that Pera and Jacob had followed, "unhide me and I'll see what I can find. I'll come back when I lose it, or if I find him."

Pera touched me on the shoulder, and she and both wolves disappeared. I gulped, and hopped out the window.

I was able to follow the trail farther than I would have guessed. It meandered through town, and fizzled out in a parking lot at the opposite edge of town. Losing it there, I turned around to go back and report on my findings, but then I smelled wolf.

I didn't know how to tell who it was, but I'd been with Jacob's pack all along, so it couldn't have been any of them. Even if someone had followed me, I shouldn't have smelled him while he was hidden. That meant a kept wolf had been nearby.

Gingerly, I followed *that* trail. It led from the parking lot down the block. There was a spot of sidewalk where the scent was thicker, like the person who left it had stood there for a few minutes before moving on, but it was a nondescript place. Just a square of concrete between a Starbucks and a trash can. And it wouldn't take a few minutes to throw something out.

I peered into the trash can anyway. There was a yellow legal pad there, sitting on top of the usual detritus. It was upside-down, but on the cardboard backing, I could see written in black marker, "HEY CODY PLEASE HEAR US OUT".

I picked up the pad, and read.

The first page also said, in the same marker, "HEY CODY PLEASE HEAR US OUT". I turned to the next one.

There were three sets of handwriting. The one that most resembled the capital letters started off. "It's just me (I'm Seth!) and Leah, Cody. We just want to talk to you," it said.

Neater, more angular writing followed. "You never sent me any messages through the alphas." I guessed that was Cody.

"Rachel wouldn't pass anything along," said someone with loopier penmanship, probably Leah. "We only just got permission to try to contact you." (This sentence was circled.) But we missed you the whole time, Cody-kiddo."

Cody wrote, "Chelsea wouldn't let you."

Seth: "Yes she would. She's not a monster. I mean, she's a vampire, but not a *monster-monster*. She's actually pretty nice."

Leah: "I don't know what kinds of stories Jake and company have been telling you about Chelsea, but let me tell you one. I don't think I would have ever gotten over Sam

without her help, and I say "help" advisedly. I didn't technically *need* to be over Sam just to join up with the Volturi. I asked her to help me, and she did, and I feel better."

The medium didn't give me any impression of time passing, but Seth's writing next said, "Cody? Are you there?"

Cody wrote, "I'm here."

Seth: "You aren't going to wake everybody up and have them attack us, are you? We're really here alone. Demetri pointed the way, but he's not here."

Cody: "There were more than two wolves last night when we were out."

Leah: "Those were some of Becky's, not us, and they weren't even here for you, they were here about a coven in Omaha with a different guard. Us and Demetri just got here. It's a coincidence that Becky's bunch ran into your group."

Cody: "What do you want?"

Seth: "We want to bring you with us. You're family."

Cody: "Why now?" I guessed that this might have been when the sentence above was circled. And then, "But why did you get permission now?"

Leah: "Vampires take a while to get impatient, but Jake's pack is starting to annoy them. They're going to get creative. I asked Chelsea to appeal to the higher-ups for me and she did, and we were allowed to come try to get you out first. You're a free agent, no imprint, no alpha voice in your head. You were only a baby when they took you, Cody-kiddo."

Cody: "If Jake hadn't taken me, the Volturi would have killed me."

"No!" Seth wrote. "They wouldn't have. You're not a human, and you didn't attack them, so they wouldn't have hurt you any more than they hurt the pups that came with us back then. Oh, "pups" are the kids who can't activate yet. But some of them have gotten old enough since."

Cody: "I don't want to help the Volturi. Not to hurt Jake's pack or do anything else."

Leah: "That's fine. We won't even ask you to touch Aro - you don't have to tell us anything you don't want to. We just want you out of the way before things get iffy. Out of the way as in not involved, not as in on our side. Will you come with us? Please say yes."

Seth: "And hurry. Someone might wake up and see you writing this."

Cody: "I need time to think. And someone may be up soon."

Leah: "When should we come back?"

Cody: "We're going east. We'll probably stop in a town. Get Demetri to tell you which town and wait in front of a Starbucks, there's bound to be one. I'll find you if I want to go with you."

Leah: "Okay, Cody-kiddo. We love you."

Seth: "Me too!"

That was the last line of writing. Clutching the yellow legal pad, I jogged back to the hotel.

Everyone was awake - although they mostly looked unhappy about it - by the time I got back to the hotel. Pera re-hid me as soon as I got to the correct hallway, and I handed over the yellow legal pad to Jacob, averting my eyes. "I found it in a garbage can," I murmured. "Outside a Starbucks. Cody's trail went cold in a parking lot nearby, and then I smelled a wolf and followed that there. I think they were standing around for a while."

Jacob read it, and the others crowded around him, trying to get a look at it too. I held out my hands: "I can show two people who don't want to wait," I offered. Kim and Jared stepped forward and I showed them the memory of what I'd read. Meanwhile, Jacob's expression grew steadily darker, and some of the color left his face.

When everyone knew the contents of the written conversation, there was a short silence, and then everyone was talking at once. I made out Pera's stammered apology, Darren's demand to know how the kept wolves could have known when to catch Cody alone, Kim's sob about the abandonment, Emily's wispy murmur of fear, and Zachary's confusion about why the legal pad had been so easy to find.

"Hush," said Jacob, and there was a little steel in his voice - just barely enough. "One at a time." Everyone quieted, and he turned to Pera first. "Pera. This isn't your fault. On any other day, if Cody had suddenly wanted to be unhidden, it would have been for a good reason. You don't need to be our gatekeeper. Please don't beat yourself up." She pursed her lips unhappily and turned towards Brady, who willingly gathered her up in his arms to comfort her.

After that Jacob went around the circle of people in an orderly manner, asking them to repeat their questions and comments as necessary. "Darren, remember that they *did* spend some time with Cody when he was very young; they'd know his sleeping patterns and might have just gambled on them remaining the same. Kim, I don't think Cody wanted to hurt you or any of us. It's... natural that he'd miss his brother and sister, and would want to go to them if they could offer any plausible way he could do it safely. Emily, I don't think we're in particular danger from Cody's absence. They can already find us wherever we go. They're already neck-deep in witches. The risks are what "creative" ideas they're impatient enough to try, and this way we at least have some warning. Zach, my guess is that they had the pad on them while they waited outside the coffeeshop in

case Cody arrived hidden and wanted to write to them. When he showed up unhidden, they tossed it. It was careless, but this is definitely Cody's handwriting; even if they faked it somehow, they had his help. I think we can safely assume that it's what it looks like." He quelled more nervousness, professed ignorance on a few more details.

Then he turned to me, gazing steadily into my eyes. "Thank you, Elspeth," he said.

"You're welcome," I murmured, avoiding the temptation to flinch away from his too-enraptured, too-focused face.

Quil, who had been whispering translations of the events in simpler language for Claire's benefit, asked, "What's next, Jake?"

"Well..." Jacob began, but I must have twitched, because his attention flicked right back to me. "What is it, Elspeth?"

"Cody knows Mama is alive," I whispered. "Cody knows where she'll wait for me. I don't believe that they won't read his mind. Even if Aro really doesn't do it, Del could copy Aro and do it for him."

Jacob stared at me, his face full of horror. And then a grim determination settled over his features, and he turned back to Quil to answer his question.

"We're continuing to New York," he said. "As fast as we can go."

I tried to protest that the entire pack didn't have to cater to my needs, and that I could go by myself to find and warn Mama.

I wasn't very good at it.

A few people seemed willing to take me at my unbelievable word, and let me go to the city alone while the pack made its own defensive maneuvers. But Jacob wouldn't hear of it. It was *obvious* that what I really wanted was company, and a chance of getting to Mama first or fighting off anyone who wanted to hurt her. And as long as that was obvious, and Jacob had the power to see that I wasn't alone and defenseless, he would do it.

"Mama probably isn't even *in* New York yet," I said. "She'll be at least a couple more days."

"Then we can beat her there," Jacob said, "if we hop a plane."

It took a few hours of running to get to the nearest airport. I was rather worried that such a large group of people sneaking onto an aircraft might cause issues of weight tolerance, but they'd apparently managed the feat before without crashing. We went around the apparently-deserted security stations, not wanting to set off any of their

devices, and found a flight bound for LaGuardia. We wove around eerily self-propelling suitcases and levitating bags, but once we were on the plane we could sit in whatever seats we wanted as long as we sat forward of the seatbelts. Mostly we accumulated in first class, although Claire preferred to clamber around on the seats in coach (probably alarming anybody who noticed the way she'd jostle everything she touched, but on an airplane there was always another passenger or turbulence to attribute the motion to. "Invisible seven year old" was low on the list of possibilities.)

I borrowed Ruth, as an alternative to sitting alone. Maureen yielded her readily, and I showed the toddler storybooks and scenery and music and whatever else she asked for. Ruth was two years old, and simple and easy to please, and she didn't stare at me like I was the center of the universe or like my decisions were of immense importance to her community holding together.

Eventually Ruth tired of me and asked for her daddy. Victor sat down next to me to take her. "How're you doing, Elspeth?" he asked, bouncing Ruth on his knee to make her giggle.

"I'm okay, I guess," I said. "...Victor?"

"That's my name, but shh, don't tell anybody, it's a secret," he said with a smile.

"You're the one who imprinted on purpose," I remembered.

He nodded, casting a fond glance at Maureen where she was nursing their younger daughter. "Much as one can, yeah. Noticed there had been a couple of Makahs, thought their rez would be a good place to look for my own imprint. Worked for me. Not for Albert or Collin, though - they came with me to try the same thing but I was the only one to imprint."

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

Victor considered the question for a moment, as though it had been impertinent to ask, and I was about to apologize when he said, "Well, I suppose it's not really a *secret*. I am - or was, it's confusing - gay. Nothing wrong with that, or so some sources'll tell you, but..." He shrugged. "It *was* hard. I'd been in the closet but once I activated and there was telepathy flying all over the place, I couldn't be, not in the pack. Nobody gave me a hard time about it, exactly, Rachel wouldn't have it, but I never got to choose whether to tell them, and I figured it was only a matter of time before somebody let it slip to my parents, who - great folks. They were great folks. But they'd have taken it hard. And I figured, well, if *anything* will fix it, imprinting's supposedly to make sure the werewolf gene gets passed down, that kinda limits the pool, and I could tell how strong it was for the ones who'd found their girls already."

"So you found Maureen," I murmured.

"Yep," Victor said, sounding pleased with himself. "Worked like a charm. She's the best thing ever happened to me." I glanced at Maureen, who was sitting close enough to

hear, and she had a very smug expression on her face.

"What's it like?" I asked. I almost didn't want to know. Almost preferred to be ignorant of what I was costing Jacob by my twitchiness.

But only almost, and so Victor hesitated, but didn't refuse me an answer. He closed his eyes, remembering, and said, "It was like everything that tied me to the world, all my relationships and cares and worries, released me, and instead there was Maureen, my one anchor. A stronger anchor than all the old ties put together. The heart of the world, that everything else revolved around. It was the most beautiful experience of my life. The symmetry of everything is clear when you see what's in the middle of it all." He looked at Maureen again, and she preened, adjusting her short hair behind her ears. Clearly she had found it very welcome to discover that she was so vitally important.

"What if... things had been different, and she hadn't loved you back?" I murmured.

Victor raised a sympathetic eyebrow. "Worrying about Jake? Well, here's what would've happened. I would have gone home. Would have been prepared to wait for her, forever, in case she ever changed her mind. Would have thought of her always, wished for her always. But... it wouldn't've killed me, and I could've built the rest of my life back up again. And I would never have wanted her to feel like she had to do anything she didn't want. I'm hers to keep, not the other way round."

"You wouldn't have wanted her to feel like she *had* to," I whispered, "but you wanted her to *want* to."

He considered this, seeming puzzled by the phrasing, but then shrugged and nodded. "Nothing magic about that," he pointed out. "Every Joe Normal high schooler getting ready to ask his crush to prom wants her to like the idea."

I nodded, slowly. Maybe I was overthinking things. But it was hard not to be reminded of how *not normal* the situation was when every time Jacob looked at me, it was painfully obvious that he'd walk in front of a bus if it'd make me happy.

Five-year-olds are not supposed to have that kind of responsibility. Even sixteen-year-olds are not supposed to be able to ask people to fling themselves into traffic.

Nobody is supposed to be able to do that.

How did Mama handle it? Mama, how did you do this? Please tell me what to do, Mama, I don't know what to do...

Victor got up, Ruth perched on his shoulder, and sat beside the center of his universe.

I turned around to peer over the back of my seat, and asked Emily if I could hold Paige.

I hate being alone.

The plane landed, and we followed the last few rolling suitcases onto the jetway and into the terminal. Mama almost certainly would have traveled on foot, and while she's fast and doesn't sleep, she is not as fast as an airplane. We would probably beat her to Central Park.

We ran through the city, and into the rectangle of green, and I led the way to the correct bench. Pera saw no vampires at all, or kept wolves, when we arrived. I showed her what Mama looked like so she'd recognize her.

"I guess I'll try to stay on your schedule, so we don't miss her if she shows up at six in the morning," said Pera.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm sorry I wake up so early."

Pera shrugged. "I was up early this morning. I'll go to bed tonight when you do, and you can wake me when you wake if I am still asleep then. It will be enough sleep."

She was as good as her word, and while we camped out in the park, she followed my schedule and kept an eye out for Mama - or other vampires, or wolves, who might be there for the same reason.

I talked to Jacob, a little, while we waited. We didn't directly address the fact of his imprinting. He never asked me to show him anything, or otherwise arrange for us to touch, and I didn't offer. But it was possible to work around the subject, within the limited medium, and have a conversation.

"So you've been to New York before?" Jacob asked me, after we'd been sitting near my rendezvous point for a short while and it was nearing dark.

"Of course," I said. "Mama showed me this place so I would know where to go if we were separated."

"Is that all you did here?" he asked.

"Pretty much," I said. "It was before Mama got her job, so it would have been too expensive to stay in a hotel. That meant we couldn't stay overnight; you can't really camp out in a city unless you're hidden like this. Also Mama is pretty sure there are vampires around here, although we didn't meet any. Big cities are likely to have them because there are so many people that a few can go missing without attracting attention."

"You guys avoided other vampires?" he asked. I nodded. "Why?"

"If they were anyone Mama knew, they'd find out she was alive, and it could get back to the Volturi. And people she didn't know might have attacked us." I paused. "Or

both. We never go to Tennessee because my uncle Jasper lives there, and when Mama ran into him - before she found me when I was six months old - he had gone crazy. He attacked her. She only escaped because he was too crazy to fight seriously, and she managed to convince him that she was somebody else and he was hallucinating."

"I didn't know vampires hallucinated," said Jacob.

"Mama's never heard of it happening to anybody besides Uncle Jasper," I said. "She thinks it might have happened to him because he's an empath sort of witch, and he had to feel his wife die."

Jacob shivered. "Nice family history you grew up with."

"Mama doesn't keep secrets from me," I said. "That means some of the stories I heard weren't very nice. I like it better this way. When I lived with Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Rosalie and Uncle Emmett, they didn't tell me hardly anything. Even though they thought Mama was dead they didn't say so. They didn't tell me about Daddy, either."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Cody was almost a year old before we really explained to him what had happened with his parents and his brother and sister," Jacob murmured.

"What did you tell him? He must have asked."

"Well, he remembered his parents handing him over, demanding that we take him away," Jacob said. "I think the phrasing Kim used that we all picked up was that they hadn't asked us to bring him back yet. And she used to tell him that Leah and Seth were "working" in Italy without being specific about it. When he learned to ask more specific questions he got more specific answers. And he'd overhear us talking, sometimes - kid has good ears."

"What does Claire know?" I asked, wrenching the conversation away from Cody. I couldn't sort out how I felt about him anymore. Maybe I could have understood it if I'd had any brothers or sisters, or if I'd been raised by my relatives and not Mama for my whole life. Was it only that, that he missed Leah and Seth? Was that why it had taken so little, such unenforceable assurances, before he would skip off and leave no note behind?

"Not a whole lot," admitted Jacob. "I... I don't think she remembers her parents. As far as Claire's concerned, the pack is the whole world."

"Why wouldn't you ever go back to Washington, and at least write messages, even if you didn't want to risk unhiding?" I asked.

"So you're acquainted with your grandpa Charlie, then?" asked Jacob. "Send him Christmas cards?"

I got up and walked over to where several pack members were playing cards and asked, stiffly, to be dealt in. I ignored Jacob calling after me, "Wait, Elspeth, I didn't mean

- Elspeth, I'm *sorry* -"

I got his *point*, of course - contact, even the possibility of it, meant turning people into potential hostages - and once I thought about it I understood why they couldn't just pick up and hide Claire's parents and integrate them into the pack. The parents would have relatives they wouldn't want to cut off, too, who would in turn have relatives, and the pack needed mobility that depended on its wolf-to-human ratio. If they couldn't run away, fast, when a Volturi guard set their campsite on fire, they would die.

But he didn't have to say it that way, about Grandpa Charlie. I know Mama hates that he has to think she's dead and I'm missing. And Grandma Renée doesn't even know that I was born in the first place.

I didn't understand *why* he'd said it like that. What would make it seem like a good idea?

"It's your turn," Thea said, elbowing me in the side, and I played a card and was confused.

I didn't try to talk to Jacob after that, and he let me be. It took two nervous days before Pera saw anyone.

"Elspeth," Pera said, as soon as I got back from my hunt the morning of the third day, "your mother got here a few minutes ago. She's sitting on the bench right there," Pera pointed, "but there are people nearby."

"Why didn't you send someone to find me?" I exclaimed.

"She doesn't look like she's going to leave," said Pera. "And I have seen no other vampires or wolves, only her. I would have hidden her, if joggers would stop going by every half minute," Pera sighed.

I contemplated how to tell Mama to go somewhere less visible, and finally I just put my hand roughly where her face would be if she sat where Pera had claimed. "Tell me if she blinks," I said. *Mama, it's me, please blink twice if you can hear me*, I attempted to send, wondering if my power would cross the divide between hidden and unhidden like Demetri's could.

"Nothing," Pera said.

"Drat. The joggers aren't looking close enough to see me writing if I write to her, are they?"

"No," said Pera. I fetched the yellow legal pad, tore a clean sheet out from the back, and was then stumped by my lack of a pen. Pera could tell what I was frowning about,

though, and found one in her purse for me. I scribbled a note for Mama.

Mama, it's me. I found Jacob's pack. They are all safe from the Volturi because they have a witch with them who can hide them, and she hid me too, which is why you can't see me. Please go someplace where no one is looking, but where the (human) witch will be able to touch you, so she can hide you and we will be able to see each other.

Pera took the note when I'd finished, and trailed it through the air while she unhid it so it would appear to be carried on the wind. It was seized out of the air by an invisible hand - Mama's - and gave Pera a papercut. Pera drew in a sharp breath. "Is your mother -"

"She won't hurt you," I promised, "not even if you're bleeding - but I should warn her in the note so it won't surprise her." It's impossible to avoid human blood reliably if you're going to be around humans. They're very fragile. Mama has very good control and always has, but it would be better not to startle her with the scent. It *does* smell awfully yummy even to me, but I've always been on my best behavior about it and never try to drink it.

I grabbed another page. *The witch got a papercut and it's bleeding a little bit, just to warn you*, I wrote, and I handed the page to Pera, who unhid it and handed it to Mama. Mama had apparently gotten up from the bench and begun to hunt for a hiding place, but she plucked the second note out of the air too. Pera followed Mama, and I followed Pera, and finally we were in a space that Pera deemed not visible to humans in the park.

I noticed the wolves, some in human form, some not, clustering behind us, and Brady shifting from paw to paw nervously. They'd overheard, and obviously wanted to be present when a vampire entered their hiding place.

Pera reached forward and Mama, completely bald but otherwise whole, sprang into place -

And immediately lunged for Pera, teeth bared, thirst in her dark eyes.

Prisoner

I grabbed Pera's arm and pulled her away, but I'm not fast enough to get prey out of the path of a vampire, and I think Mama might have killed her. Two things prevented that. One, Brady - and the other wolves - leapt forward as soon as Mama moved, and two, Mama checked *herself*, jerking away from the attack. The wolves were on her an instant later.

"No, don't, don't hurt her, just hold her, I don't know what's wrong, *don't hurt her*," I shrieked. I couldn't see past the huge furred shapes, but I distinctly heard an awful screeching noise... "*Don't hurt her don't hurt her don't hurt her* -"

A grey wolf with white frost to his fur was knocked out of the press of the pack against Mama. That was Brady, I knew, but I didn't see who'd pushed him aside. He snarled, but didn't get up.

A few more wolves stepped back, until there were only four, each pinning one of Mama's limbs with his forepaws. Rust-brown Jacob had her right arm, Victor's ochre paws covered her left, inky-black Sam and chocolate Quil held a leg each. It didn't look like Mama was broken, or if something had been fractured, it had knitted at once. Mama looked stunned, and wasn't breathing.

"What happened?" I asked her in a small voice.

"*Singer*," she choked on too little air, and didn't breathe again.

I turned to Pera, who was cowering against a tree. Brady whined, but must have been commanded to stay down, because he didn't get up and go to her. "Pera, you have to unhide her," I said. Pera shuddered ungracefully, and clearly didn't want to get anywhere near Mama as her witchcraft required. "Just do it, then it'll be safe," I pleaded.

Emily approached Pera and helped her up, gently leading her towards Mama. Pera gingerly touched one of Mama's feet, poking out from beneath Sam's claws, and Mama vanished and the four wolves tipped forward a few inches onto the ground.

Brady phased. Usually the wolves would trot off behind cover with a set of clothes to do that, but they weren't always careful, and I wasn't stunned or scarred for life by it after a few days living with the pack. "What," he growled, "was *that*?"

"I didn't know," I promised, "I couldn't have, and she couldn't either - but um - vampires sometimes find that a specific person smells much better than others, and Pera was bleeding already... that's what a "singer" is, a person like that. She didn't *mean* to hurt you," I said, turning to Pera, who was still shivering, and staring at something I couldn't see - probably Mama.

Zachary had trotted over towards where the clothes were kept, and he flung a pair of pants at Brady, who put them on and went to wrap his arms around Pera. She leaned on

him and didn't speak; he murmured comfort in her ear.

"Please unhide me," I said, walking towards Pera. "I have to talk to Mama and -"

"No," said Jacob's voice from behind me.

I turned around slowly, bewildered, to see who he was looking at, what other comment he'd responded to, but he was looking right at me.

"What do you mean, *no*?" I asked, incredulous.

He shook his head slowly. "Elspeth, she just attacked Pera. I was willing to believe she was safe on your say-so, but she just *attacked Pera*. Nobody unhides until she's gone."

I stared at him, waiting for this pronouncement to turn into a terrible, badly-timed joke. I searched for humor somewhere in his expression, and found none. He was only sad - but firmly resolved anyway.

"She's my mama," I whispered. "She's safe. She raised me for five *years*. It's only the singer -"

"And what if you smell a little too much like Pera, after hanging around her all this time?" asked Jacob softly, his voice full of sorrow. "What if she hurt you, Elspeth?"

"Mama will *never* hurt me," I shouted.

"You said she wouldn't hurt Pera, either," Brady growled, and I turned to look at him over my shoulder. He looked like he wanted to kill somebody. Mama, probably.

"There was no way to *know* that Pera would be her singer," I said. "They're so rare - Mama's only ever heard of *three* before -"

"But it means her control isn't perfect, and I will *not* have you in danger," said Jacob. "Not even if you hate me for it." He sighed. "You can write to her, of course, I think that will be safe enough."

"My *mama*," I whispered. "She's my *mama* -" I whirled around, daring to hope that Pera would disobey Jacob. She could. It was within her power. But there was no mutiny in her eyes.

I turned back to Jacob, forcing my power into an almost-visible channel of pleading, but while he still looked terribly sorry to trap me, he didn't budge.

There's only a couple of things I can do that vampires can't, but one of them is cry.

I didn't let myself cry for long. I could at least *write* to Mama. I found the pen and

the pad of paper, again, and started scribbling. *Mama, are you still there?* I held up the pen, loosely in my palm, so she could take it if she was.

The pen lifted out of my hand, and the pad with it, and Mama wrote back in her precise round letters, *I'm still here. Is everyone safe? Can you stop hiding?*

We're all safe, I wrote, with a glare in Jacob's direction. *The singer is the same witch who hides and un-hides people. Jacob will not let her unhide anyone while you're here because he doesn't think you're safe. Even me. He imprinted on me*, Mama, I added belatedly, wishing I could just *send* her things instead of having to write. Writing is even worse than speaking aloud.

Mama took the pen, but there was a significant pause before she wrote anything. *Apart from not being free to unhide, are you safe, Elspeth?* she wrote, finally. *They aren't hurting you or harrassing you or otherwise mistreating you apart from that? Jacob isn't pressuring you at all about anything related to the imprint?*

Besides that, no, I scrawled back. I have very bad handwriting, and being upset wasn't doing anything to improve it.

Let's continue writing in a tree, where humans will be less likely to see the odd behavior of this pen, she wrote. The pen and paper appeared to float towards and up into the branches of a large, thickly-leafed tree, and I followed. Once Mama found a place that suited her and had given me a few seconds to sit within reach of the writing implements, she wrote, *Do you think there is any chance you can convince Jacob to change his mind, or the witch to let you free without his permission?*

I don't know. Maybe. Not soon, though.

Please tell me everything that's happened since we were separated, Mama wrote.

I wrote, haltingly and messily and with the liberal use of margin notes and arrows, about how I had spent the last five days and what I'd learned. I couldn't see Mama reacting, and I hated it, not knowing how she was taking anything I wrote, not knowing if she was disappointed in me for telling all the secrets or for kissing Cody, not knowing if she was angry at Jacob or at Cody or at Pera, not knowing whether she would frown at my summary of the Clearwater children's dialogue or smile at my listing of everyone in the pack.

Eventually I brought her up to speed, as best I could without being able to show her anything, and she plucked the pen out of my hand and wrote *You've had quite a week, Elsie. And I'm not at all convinced that you're safe with the pack as Jacob suggests. Not with the Volturi impatient and willing to get "creative". If his motive is really your safety, and it probably is, he can be convinced to let you go.*

I wrote, *What do you think they'll do?*

I don't know for sure, she replied. *It's obvious that the Volturi haven't been trying to*

kill the pack members. That wouldn't be difficult. Things like setting the trees on fire are easy to escape, if it's only a few trees. They could have timed it differently so the camp would be ringed with fire and harder to escape. There has been nothing stopping them from attacking with poison gas or just getting hold of a bomb and setting that off. They've probably been trying to keep Pera alive, and have only harrassed the pack to try to tempt them into giving up.

That hadn't occurred to me. There were really a lot of indirect, object-based attacks that could go from outside into the hiding place. The fact that the pack was alive - with no casualties - after half a decade *did* seem to mean that the Volturi hadn't wanted them dead. *Do you think that's the sort of thing they'll try now?* I asked.

Maybe, maybe not. There are other things they could try; I doubt they'd give up a gift like Pera's readily. Send Heidi wandering by and lead Pera where they want her, maybe, since you said Pera can see people whether they're hidden or not. The only reason I can think of why they wouldn't have tried Chelsea already would be if Chelsea can't work across the divide, like you. Perhaps Heidi can't either, but that seems less likely.

But Chelsea can't work on imprinting relationships any more than she can on vampire mates, can she?

She can't work on the wolves. I'm given to understand that it has no effect on the imprints themselves, who would accordingly be vulnerable. Did you notice some effect?

No, I wrote. I don't think anything happened to me.

Then it's unlikely that anything happened to the other imprints either. Chelsea should be able to work on them as well as anyone else. Perhaps she has to see who she's affecting, or something like that. I wish I could ask Eleazar. The pen paused in its path, tapped twice on the pad, and then wrote, You are almost certainly right about Cody being likely to have his mind read, and that means my survival is going to be known to the Volturi. As long as that's the case, perhaps I may as well tell the family. In any case, we should get out of New York. They'll know to look for us here if we're at all interesting to them.

Why would they want Cody? I wrote. *They probably didn't just suddenly decide to let his brother and sister talk to him to be nice.*

Probably not, Mama agreed. My best guess is they didn't want the pack to be able to turn Pera. Her power could expand considerably if she turned. Even if it was the same, she wouldn't need sleep - or die of old age or minor injury or illness. It could make them permanently, actually safe, instead of just temporarily inconvenient. Also, if she died she'd be forever unavailable to the Volturi. Based on how long they waited before killing Alice and your father, they can be patient, but Alice and your father were vampires. Cody was the only venomous person in the group. It was strange, reading Mama's writing about Daddy without the sadness I associated with it. Her penmanship didn't falter, but I could

imagine her face.

Should I show this conversation to Jacob? I frowned to myself, resentful of him and inclined to petulantly deny him my presence. But if he could be convinced to let Pera unhide me, then that was more important than punishing him for having refused in the first place.

Yes. You might also mention to him that I was a singer, and survived. Control is possible. If Pera had not had a papercut, or if I'd been expecting her to be a singer, I wouldn't have attacked. There is absolutely no danger to you if you unhide, even if you smell as much like her as is physically possible. I will never hurt you, Elspeth.

I know that, I wrote, a mulish expression on my face. *Jacob's just being dumb. I'll go show him this.*

I hopped lightly down from the tree and stalked towards the alpha wolf. I thrust the pad under his nose, glaring at him.

He didn't visibly react to my hostility except for a twitch at the corner of his mouth. He took what I offered, and skimmed the writing. "Heidi?" he asked, when he got to her name.

"You don't know about Heidi?" I asked. "If nothing else I'd have thought Brady would have told you all about who works for them..."

"I didn't meet the whole guard," Brady said, an edge of a growl in his voice. He was still cradling Pera, who was behaving more like a rag doll than a powerful witch. "Just a handful of them. I'm sure there are plenty I didn't hear of. I never met Del until she showed up with Pera, for instance."

And even if one of them had heard of Heidi, they didn't have perfect memories. "Heidi usually works as the Volturi's hunter," I explained. "She's pretty. *Magically* pretty. People will just follow her around, so they can keep looking at her."

Brady drew in a sharp breath between his teeth and placed a hand over Pera's eyes. She didn't protest, just leaned against him more and shivered. I was beginning to see why her power was based around hiding. Jacob said, "I'll reconsider letting you unhide when we've gotten out of New York. In the meantime -" The pad of paper was suddenly ripped out of his hands. *RUN*, Mama's writing appeared across it, and then the pad appeared to shred itself. Confetti fell on the grass. My heart leapt into my throat. *I am supposed to run - but I'm supposed to run to here -*

"I hear something," murmured Pera.

I turned around, eyes wide, but had no chance to see anything before Jacob barked out, "*Split!*", and then there were several swift *floof* noises and Jacob actually picked me

up by my shirt in his *teeth* and flung me onto his back, and we ran.

They caught us anyway.

Heidi wasn't involved. It was nothing particularly fancy at all. Mama was right about how easy it would have been all along.

There were nets, first, shot out of the sort of net-shooting gun that I thought only existed on TV. The nets were made of knitted links of metal that couldn't hold the werewolves, but *could* slow them down long enough for what must have been the smoke of a burnt vampire to knock them all out. There were more than enough nets, probably to compensate for our invisibility, and I was knocked off Jacob's back with the force of the one that caught me in the back. I clawed at it and couldn't tear it. But with concerted effort, I could bite through individual fibers of the net, one at a time, slowly. I nibbled at it as unobtrusively as I could, trying to ignore the unpleasant tang of the metal.

I couldn't tell how many Volturi were involved in the capture, but it had to be a lot. I saw Pera trying to hide the net one piece at a time to get through it the way she'd get through a hotel door. Surprisingly, no one interfered with this, but once she'd gotten a hole in her net big enough to get out and she unhid, I had no way to see what happened next - except that it didn't involve saving us. Del, I guessed, and not to be thwarted by a suddenly imprinted wolf this time - but Del wouldn't be able to unhide *me*, because I'm a witch and her power is involuntary and works by touch and so does Pera's -

Someone noticed I was chewing a hole in my net, and must have guessed where my head was located by where the hole was growing, and I felt a pain bloom in the back of my neck and fell unconscious.

I think I was knocked out until the time at which I'd naturally sleep, and then I slept, because otherwise I don't know how I got all the way to Italy without waking up. When I woke, I was in a strange sort of cell.

There were a usual number of walls, made of a usual sort of stone. But they were all sufficiently concave that I couldn't bite into them, or at least not readily; the floor was the same, which made it kind of uncomfortable to sit on because I kept sliding into the middle if I didn't pay attention and brace myself in a corner. There was a door, and it had a tiny square of a window that let in a beam of light, but it had a little sign on it that said "Warning: High Voltage" in Italian, and I wasn't quite ready to call its bluff until I had a better idea of my situation.

Other than that the room was very boring. I seemed unharmed, and nobody was actively threatening me, and Mama -

Mama had either gotten away or she hadn't, and it had already happened, and I

wasn't supposed to worry about her because that would not help.

I worried anyway, I couldn't *not*. So I paced as best I could on the sunken floor, and I nervously picked at snarls in the inches of my hair past the braid's tie, and I tried to figure out what actual physical action corresponded to "twiddling one's thumbs" because I wasn't sure, and then I ran out of ways to worry and I just sat down and let myself slide into the bowl that was the floor of the cell.

I was lonely. The stranger in the cell with me didn't *count*. I grumbled to myself and eyed the door, but I couldn't tell without touching it if it was really electrified, and I wasn't ready to risk it yet.

I was hungry, but there was nothing to eat. I was bored, but there was nothing to do. I leaned back against the rock, put my hand against my face, and tried to talk to myself.

I didn't make any progress. I could sign at myself, greetings and the alphabet and random words, in the silent blank place, but it still made me dizzy not to know why *this* one was signing and *that* one was not. What distinguished me from myself? What let me break into halves like that? I gave up in favor of another round of pacing, and then I sat down again to watch dust motes float through the shaft of light that pierced the room.

I was really *uncomfortably* hungry. My record for how long I'd gone without food before was thirty hours. And *that* happened when one of my temporary friends had been even more of a morning person than me and had decided to visit me at my hotel room at six in the morning, so I couldn't gracefully leave to hunt and had to wait until he was ready to get lunch at a restaurant with very slow service. I didn't do it on purpose. I don't like being hungry at all.

I thought perhaps there was a guard outside the cell. Except for the since-healed strike to my head, I hadn't been injured any further. Whatever they wanted might not preclude feeding me. Giving the maybe-electric door a considerable berth, I called, "Excuse me! I'm hungry!"

"One sec," hollered a man's voice from the hallway. It had the smooth glossy sound I associated with vampire voices. I waited, and not quite a minute later, the little window was shaded by the vampire's face. "I'm gonna open the door," he said. "If you try to get out, I'll break your legs off and keep 'em." He didn't say it like it was a dire threat worth issuing with gravitas in a deep voice. It was simply what he planned to do if I tried to get out.

He opened the door (he was wearing rubber gloves, I noticed, so either they cared about the bluff or the door was really electrified) and shoved in a white-faced, trembling teenage human.

"Wait -" I said, but the vampire closed the door. "Wait, I don't eat *people* -"

"I'm not going to bring you a damn gazelle," yelled the guard. "Eat him or don't, I don't care."

"What about human food...?" I asked, rather lost. I didn't think I'd snap from hunger and hurt the human, but it didn't seem likely that they'd haul him out of the cell and turn him loose if I didn't, either.

"He's a human, he's food, I'm not the pizza guy, shut up," snarled the vampire.

I quieted. "Do you speak English?" I murmured to the human. He didn't answer me, so I guessed Italian next - I didn't *know* I was in Italy, but it was a good guess, and he'd probably been caught locally. He nodded. I went on in Italian. "I'm not going to hurt you, but I don't know how to get either of us out of here. My name is Elspeth. What's yours?"

"...Carlo," he said, eyeing me. "The, the beautiful angel led me into the tunnels, but..." He looked afraid, but there was a glazed look in his eyes like he was still dwelling on the memory of what Heidi looked like when she turned her power up. I assumed the beautiful angel was Heidi, anyway. "She is so lovely, how could she do this?" he moaned.

"That's her job," I murmured. "She gets people to follow her, by being pretty, but she's a hunter, not an angel."

"But she shone like a jewel, like a *seraph*! Her hair silken strands of mahogany!" exclaimed Carlo dazedly. I wasn't sure if his failure to get the point that Heidi's prettiness didn't make her a good person was more to do with her power or his personality, or some combination of both. I was treated to an overwrought description of Heidi's every feature - he claimed her eyes were "amethyst", which was an odd choice for a contact lens color; maybe half-melted blue ones showing a little red through? - and after a few minutes he started screaming, which was a bit odd.

I peered at him. He looked like he was in pain, but I hadn't hurt him, he hadn't touched the door, I would have heard if he'd hit himself against the stone of the cell... I supposed he could have had a heart attack, but that didn't seem likely in someone his age. The drops of his blood perfuming the air didn't have any scent of disease on them. It was peculiar, really. The *only* thing that had happened to him since he'd started his description of Heidi was that the stranger in the cell had sunk her teeth into his neck and started sucking his blood.

"What's wrong?" I finally thought to ask, but he seemed as confused as I and just gestured jerkily at his throat. A few seconds passed, and he stopped screaming. I touched his wrist and checked his pulse. He was definitely dead. Maybe he'd had a heart attack after all. It wasn't *impossible* for teenagers, and he was under a lot of stress. That wouldn't have anything to do with his neck, though - as far as I know. I'm not a doctor.

I puzzled over this for a few seconds, and then abruptly, the stranger in the cell stopped being unimportant. I swiveled my head and looked at her.

Fader

She was nut-brown, lithe and broad-featured with dark hair shaved so close to her head that I couldn't determine its texture. She sat like a wild animal, clinging to the curved stone on the side of Carlo's head where his neck wound was and looking ready to leap or run or fight. There was a little blood on her lips, which she licked off as she returned my gaze with dark, considering eyes, but she hadn't gotten any on the drapery pale green wrap she was wearing. I thought the outfit looked vaguely Indian. But "drinks blood" plus "not pale" meant "half-vampire", and that *probably* meant one of Nahuel's sisters, and one of them would be Korean and one Swiss and -

"...Allirea?" I guessed quietly, and she nodded once, expression unchanging. The Aborigine sister, the witch who could make herself seem irrelevant, which would explain why I hadn't noticed her until she decided to show herself. I sifted through recent memories. I'd definitely *seen* her. But she hadn't been important then. I would have paid attention to individual grains of grit in the corners of the cell before paying attention to her. Trying to focus on the memories of her from before she'd shown herself felt difficult. They weren't worth remembering, and things that I didn't decide were worth remembering could be forgotten - I didn't recall if she'd been in the room with me when I'd woken or if she'd come in with Carlo - "Did *you* kill Carlo?" I asked, frowning, trying to think through mud.

"You were not going to eat him," shrugged Allirea. She had an Australian accent and a matter-of-fact tone. I was mildly surprised about the accent, because I knew she would have been born before Australia was colonized by English-speakers and there was no reason she should have that accent and not another. "He was not going to shut up."

I had a vague idea that I should be upset about that, but surely *nothing* Allirea had done before letting me notice her was at all important; it was just clutter in my thoughts, she hadn't done anything worth noticing then, that was all. I pushed the useless notion away. "Is the guard going to be upset if he hears me talk to you?"

And then she wasn't important anymore, and I sighed and wished the blood didn't smell so good. I picked at a loose thread on my sleeve. I wondered how long without food it would take me to get really impaired by hunger.

Allirea faded back in, and I blinked at her. "You didn't answer my question," I recalled vaguely. Well, an answer my question *would* have been worth remembering, and I didn't remember it, so she hadn't.

"Saeed!" she yelled.

"Allirea?" asked the guard incredulously. He peered through the window. "The hell are you doing in there?"

"Demetri will be angry with you if I tell him you put me here," she said flatly.

"I didn't put - did I?" said the guard, presumably Saeed. "If I put you there it's only because you were fading, I didn't *mean* -"

"Demetri will not care," she said, her voice frosted with an imperious tone. "You are not a witch, you are not a useful fighter, you are only a minor guard of little use, and no one will object if he kills you. But perhaps I will not tell him, if you do something for me."

"What do you want?" asked Saeed suspiciously. "I can't let the prisoner out, that would *definitely* get me killed..."

"You do not have to let her out," said Allirea, waving a hand. "But I would like you to go away for two hours, and let *me* out when you come back. Obtain for her something that humans eat while you are gone," she suggested. "Oh, and take this away." She shoved Carlo's corpse, the knuckles of her hand into his shoulder; I was disturbed by the inert way he flopped back to the floor.

Saeed muttered to himself, but opened the door with his rubber gloves, picked up the dead man by the nearest arm, and tossed him into the hall. It was more of the same dark stone that made up my cell. The angle was wrong for me to see other doors, if there were any. He shut the door, and I heard him dragging Carlo off to whatever fate awaited drained humans.

Allirea waited patiently, perched on the sloped floor, until he wasn't audible anymore. "Saeed is not very attentive. He is a poor guard, and would not have been likely to pay mind to our conversation even if I faded in and we spoke loudly. But now he is gone. I have been observing you. Did you know that your dreams leak out of your hands when you sleep?"

"Yes," I said uncomfortably. "Why have you been, uh, observing me?"

"Chelsea has not touched you yet," said Allirea. "She is very busy with the new wolves, who must be molded as a unit. So -"

"Are the wolves okay?" I interrupted. Allirea hadn't done anything hostile, so she might tell me, and I was worried about the pack too, although they were a distant second compared to Mama.

Allirea shrugged. "The puppies are in the nursery with the others, the wolves and the women are being seen to by Alec and Chelsea. While Alec is still there, there is something I need help with. Will you help me?"

After sparing a moment to wince at the idea of Chelsea working her witchcraft on the pack, I blinked at Allirea's request. "I don't think I can do very much. I'm in a prison

cell."

Allirea waved a hand as though this were trivial. "I can shelter you in my magic enough to let you walk out with me when Saeed returns to let me out. If my plan works, we will be able to escape afterwards."

"...*We* can escape?" I asked, confused. "You and me? Why would you want to leave? It sounded like Demetri was your mate."

She leaned forward, sudden intensity sparking her eyes. "*I* am *his* mate," she snarled. "But you and I, the hybrids, the master race, do not have those ties, those obsessions, those insanities. Only wolf men, and vampires, have that parasite in their minds. Like *Demetri*." She spat his name. "And this means that I cannot fade from his notice, there is no magic that will let him ignore me, no distraction that will let him deem me unimportant, no plea that will make him leave me alone, and he can find me anywhere, track me to any corner of the earth, and he is faster than me and stronger. The Volturi value him and will not be deprived of his service for the sake of my will or my sanity, and so while I can threaten *idiots* like Saeed with his wrath and make good on the threat if I am willing to play the part of the wronged mate for a while, I am no freer than you are. I could walk out, yes, pass unnoticed through the front door and run wherever I liked, but he would find me and think I meant only to play a game with him and he would pick me up and laugh at my screams and claim his *prize* and carry me back to Volterra. I run away often. He *finds* me, always. This time I want to kill him. I will give you anything it is in my power to give if you will help me *kill him*."

A very ugly scenario spun into view in my mind, and I thought of the sickening sounds of a laughing vampire and a screaming girl who couldn't convince him that he wasn't welcome, that she didn't feel the way he did, that it wasn't symmetrical and fated and perfect. Trying to avoid imagining any finer detail of that - *that*, which I could vaguely understand I had only escaped by the sheer luck that Jacob was not a psychopath, which Allirea could not *possibly* deserve even if she killed people (and she probably did) - I said instead, "Master race?"

Allirea calmed a little and shrugged at me. "It is what Father calls us. His purpose in conceiving me and my sisters and our brother. We are born, not made; we have the recourse of sleep; we can survive on different foods if we must; we can bear children."

That last was startling. "We can -?"

"By humans or vampires, either," said Allirea, twisting her mouth into a grimace. "Perhaps by wolves, but that I have not tried." I shivered at the implications that she'd "tried" with a vampire - probably a specific vampire. "I have three, by humans, and they are much like us, a little slower perhaps. I managed to kill *his* children before they were born, my small revenge, but Noemi once took a vampire lover - not a mate, only a momentary interest - and her son is also quite like us, a little faster, less willing to eat plants and other repulsive items. We do have time to talk about these things," she added,

"but first I want to know if you will help me."

"I've never killed anyone," I said meekly. "I - I don't think I can. Not just because it's killing someone, but he's a *vampire* -"

"We can kill vampires, given the opportunity," she assured me. "Teeth and matches and the element of surprise. That last is my weapon. Anyone other than *Demetri* may think me unimportant even as I take them apart - though Renata can turn me aside without knowing I am present, and Marcus can see me coming by the threads of relationships that are only half-me, and even I find Adalheid -"

"Heidi?"

"She goes by that, yes. Adalheid is too beautiful to kill, and I am not immune to Chelsea anyway or I think I would have managed to slaughter the whole of the guard for their crimes of inaction against me. But my plan does not call for you to try to kill Demetri, not by yourself. The trouble is that I think your power fights mine. I've tried to fade you, while you were asleep, and could not shelter you from notice half so well as I can others. Do you know how to make your... *self* stop *announcing* itself so loudly?" she asked. "If you don't I can kill Saeed and we might escape that way..."

"It calms down when I lie," I said. "The less truth in something I say - about myself, not just about anything necessarily - the less it works. Like - "My name is Jennifer, I'm from Memphis." Did that tone it down enough?" I asked. "I'm not Jennifer and I've never even *been* to Memphis."

"It helped," said Allirea. "Probably enough to get us out without my having to kill Saeed. You will need to mutter lies constantly, though."

"If... if you're not immune to Chelsea, how can you still hate Demetri?" I asked, drawing my eyebrows together in puzzlement.

She drew in a hiss through her teeth. "She needs something to begin with, material to sculpt her products out of. With Adelaide's help she -"

"Adelaide?" I asked.

"I do not call her by her *ridiculous* nicknames," said Allirea derisively. Nicknames? *Addy*? I guessed silently, thinking of the witch by that name Mama had told me about. *Del*? *If they're the same person...* "Nicknames are for children. When *Adelaide* helps, when she copies Chelsea and they work together, they are much more powerful than Chelsea alone, but there still must be a seed of something to coax it into bloom. I had a week to learn to hate Demetri before I was ever near Chelsea, and there are no seeds. I have made *very sure* that there are no seeds, because more than anything I am terrified of becoming *attached* to him and losing any hope of revenge or freedom."

"Oh," I said. My head was spinning with all the new information, and with the necessity of forcing down awful thoughts about Allirea and Demetri, and trying to think

of sufficiently false things to say that they'd suppress my witchcraft and let Allirea hide me for her plan - "What's your plan?"

"Alec is holding the wolves and their women while Chelsea works on them," Allirea said. "You are not one of the wolves, who must be handled as a group, and you are not a weak and easily-molded human, so you are set aside to be separately handled. While Alec does work there, though, he does not watch over the witches in the dungeon. Often they are kept in pieces, but it has come time to feed them, and for that they must be whole, though not necessarily awake. Adelaide has borrowed Alec's power, and is keeping them unconscious while they are fed, which is a tedious process. Adalheid must bring extra prey, make several trips far afield. The guard given the task of feeding the witches must satiate themselves as much as possible so they can handle the blood without drinking it themselves. The witches' food must be extracted from the prey, the food poured into the witches' mouths by funnel and -"

"Wait, *what?* Witches in the dungeon?" I asked incredulously, interrupting the gruesome description of how to feed an unconscious vampire.

"With Adelaide, it is not necessary to win a witch's allegiance before he or she can be useful to the Volturi," said Allirea. "Even a witch with no seeds of loyalty for Chelsea to coax into flower can be copied. So of course such witches are broken into fragments, and allowed to heal and feed under Alec's - or Adelaide's - supervision before being broken again. But *now*, they are whole, and not watched by Alec himself, and with *your* help there will be a jailbreak."

"I don't understand what I can do," I said.

"Suppose," said Allirea, "that I go into the dungeon, faded as far as I can fade, and I tap Adelaide on the hand. She will copy my power and lose Alec's, and the witches will wake. But then she will be able to fade and, unnoticed, break the witches into pieces again. She will borrow their powers in place of mine as she does so, of course, but these are powerful, prized witches, and Adelaide is more than clever enough to use the surprise my fading will give her to put them all down in the right order."

I was starting to see. "But my power is completely harmless."

"Precisely," said Allirea. "I will fade *you* as much as I can, and you will mutter lies to force your loud power down, and *you* will tap Adelaide on the hand. She will have no advantage over the witches at all. At least some of them will escape their confinement, and freshly fed, they will have the strength to break out and scatter."

"And you're hoping that... one of the witches will be glad we did this and want to help you with Demetri?" I asked, finding the plan ingenious but not really clear on what purpose it served beyond freeing the prisoners.

"No," Allirea said. "I cannot plan on that; Chelsea has been unable to make these prisoners loyal to the Volturi, but she has cut every other tie she can, and that would not

leave them sociable enough that I expect their gratitude."

"Then why do you want to do this?"

"What I expect is that when Demetri gets back, his next task will be to search for the escaped witches *before* he is permitted to look for me," said Allirea viciously. "I run away often, after all. I am always found and brought *home* again. I can be left waiting for him to retrieve me - but the secret of the witches in the dungeon is one the Volturi have tried hard to keep. It improves their reputation, when every coven that has seen Adelaide reports on her as bearing a different terrifying power. It maintains their facade of authority, when they are still rumored to kill those who defy them and leave lie those who obey their laws, rather than this half-death inflicted for greed and not justice. And so it will be very urgent that the witches be found and brought back, and Demetri is the tracker."

"So this is to give you a longer -"

"No," said Allirea, and her voice was alive with a strange glee. "Not entirely. Time is important, but not all I want. *You* must know vampires. Vampires who could help me. Or who would at least be defensive when Demetri turned up in their territory, alone because he has never needed help to capture me, and looking for someone that they do not acknowledge to be present. They might kill him."

"*Oh*." It was an elaborate plan, but if Allirea could fade me well enough to let me walk out of my cell, she could probably do it well enough that it would be safe for me to try her plan.

And I *do* know vampires.

I am supposed to call for help, if I run into trouble I can't handle on my own.

Being captured by the Volturi and likely to be Chelseaed at any moment seemed like it might be that sort of trouble.

"I'll help you," I told Allirea, and she gave me a savage grin.

"*Remember*," Allirea said for the tenth time, "you will not be able to think of me when I fade, and I can only shelter you while I am doing so for myself. You must form these plans without me there to remind you, you must mutter the lies to *yourself*, you must intend to walk past Saeed and by the path I described to the dungeons without waiting for me to *show up*, you must walk in as though alone and touch Adelaide without remembering quite how you are able to do it. You must *mean* to do all this enough that you actually will, when you cannot remember what lets you."

"I understand," I said, for the tenth time.

"Repeat what you will do," she insisted.

"When Saeed opens the door, I start muttering lies under my breath and don't stop," I recited. "I walk right past him, and go briskly but not at a run to the door at the end of the hall. I open the door, go down two flights of stairs, turn right, open the third door on the left, and walk in, staying *behind* the part of the room where the witches are so I don't walk into the field of unconsciousness. They won't notice me and I should accept that and not try to get attention in any way. I wait until the guard feeding the witches feeds the last one. Before he starts breaking the witches again, I touch Adelaide. There will be pandemonium but I have to keep muttering lies. Then I will be picked up and carried out of the compound and out of the city, and this won't seem important and I shouldn't try to stop it. I should keep up with the lying until I remember why I'm doing it."

"Good," said Allirea, letting out a breath. "Say it again."

I rolled my eyes and repeated the instructions again. "I can remember things I think are worth remembering just like you can," I told her.

"Even a vampire would have some trouble with this," Allirea said. "Saeed is only going to be able to let me out because he has years' worth of experience being punished by Demetri every time he ignores this sort of intention. It is not your *memory* I affect, not directly. Only your judgment about what is worth remembering. You will remember all the instructions, but you must fully intend to carry them out and be comfortable with forgetting *why*."

I frowned, but repeated the plan again, resolving as firmly as I knew how to take each step.

After the two hours Saeed had been told to spend out of earshot, I heard his footsteps - soft clunky noises of rocky vampire feet on the stone floor. He opened the door and threw me a paper bag with a grease stain on it - my food - and I was supposed to be lying, but I was *really hungry*, and I couldn't do a lot of lying with my mouth full, and eating seemed like a higher priority. I opened the bag and popped something that looked like a croquette into my mouth. But I did need to walk out of the room and I needed to start muttering lies first. For some reason. "I'm a polar bear," I mumbled with my mouth full, and I climbed out of the bowl of the floor and past Saeed, who seemed to be trying and failing to fix his eyes on me.

"I was born in Panama," I lied under my breath, and started for the door at the end of the hallway, briskly, but not at a run. I didn't really have a reason to go at that speed, but I didn't have a reason to go at any other speed, either, so it would do. I ate another croquette. "I spend my free time figure-skating. I've never been to Michigan in my life. I can't swim." Down one flight of stairs, I started on another. Maybe this was the way out? I didn't know why I'd have the layout of the Volturi compound memorized, though. Mama hadn't explored the whole thing, let alone told me about it all. There were windows, out of which I could see a sunny sky. "I've never met a werewolf before, it is dark outside, I

have six legs -" Down the second flight of stairs.

I turned right. It seemed like a sensible direction to try. If I still couldn't remember what I was looking for when I got to the end of this route I could always try another, I reasoned. "I won a hot air balloon race last week. I have nine thousand pairs of shoes..." I reached the third door on the left, and turned the handle. "I'm a paraplegic. My name is Tamara. I work in accounts receivable..." I giggled, and then had the idea that might not be wise to giggle when I was supposed to be keeping up with the lies. "I didn't just giggle," I announced softly, and surveyed the room.

The room was about thirty feet long and half as wide. At the end near the door, facing the rest of the room, stood a plump vampire woman in a flower-patterned skirt and a T-shirt from the Associazione Volontari Italiani Sanguine. I nearly burst out laughing, but instead told myself severely, "That is not even a *little* funny." Her eyes were burgundy, and sat in an innocuously bored-looking face. She had her brown hair in a careless bun, and if I'd seen her walking down the street in some more normal context with normal-colored eyes, I would have suspected she was a housewife. Given her actual location I thought she was probably Adelaide. "I'm a stockbroker," I murmured, moving carefully along the wall behind her so I wouldn't get in the way of the Alec-field she projected.

The other vampire moving about in the room, wrapped up in a Volturi cowl with the hood shadowing his face, was taking some care to keep out of the way too. He was hugging the walls as he walked. He held the funnel through which he was feeding the prisoners, and the container full of blood he poured through it, with long tongs. I glanced down at the witches.

None of them had any clothes on. That made sense, since they were just going to be shattered into tiny pieces which couldn't wear clothes again - or rather they would be if I didn't have my plan - I was pretty sure my plan involved the witches not being broken into tiny pieces. I wasn't too disturbed by that, after a few days living with the wolves and their occasional carelessness. "I am *deeply offended* by all this nudity," I said.

What *was* disturbing was the lifeless way they were laid on the floor. They had their eyes open, glassy unseeing red or black stares pointed in no direction in particular. Most of them had their hair in patches, a casualty of the frequent breaking and rebreaking. "There's nothing horrible about that at all," I whispered. I looked away again; the one witch's face I'd looked at closely was enough to tell me that I didn't like to watch them. I counted feet instead, and there were sixteen pairs of feet in two rows, facing towards the middle of the room. "I'm a zookeeper who works with pandas," I murmured. "I burst into flames in the sunlight, I run a flea circus, I'm going to run away and *join* the circus, I'm *not* running out of ideas for things to say - I'm ten years old, I'm eleven, I'm twelve -"

I continued counting up, mechanically, and bolted down a croquette every five sentences while waiting for the guard feeding the witches to finish. He was nearly through, only one more witch to pour blood into - the same one I'd looked at, with an olive tinge to his skin and a square jaw, nearest the door. I was claiming to be seventy-six when the last of the liquid was tipped into his mouth. It looked like swallowing was a

reflex that Alec's power didn't affect.

I was supposed to do something, when the last witch was fed. I had this memorized. I consulted my memory, still counting. The guard put down the container that had held the blood and the funnel, and picked up what looked like a long-handled *saw*, except its teeth were real teeth - vampire teeth, I supposed, sharp enough to incapacitate a vampire at a distance so the guard wouldn't fall prone like the victim. I shivered and tried not to wonder who the teeth had belonged to. He hefted the saw, looked to Adelaide for confirmation -

I remembered what I was supposed to do and reached forward to touch Adelaide's elbow.

Pandemonium, as expected, broke out.

Adelaide made a choking sound, and there was a flurry of movement from the witches as they sprang into alert postures. The guard's saw was knocked out of his hand and I had to duck it as it went flying, and there was a horrible screeching as he was ripped apart by vengeful witches. Most of them bolted for the door, but one man *vanished* and two were cooperating on grinding the guard to dust first. All of them had the sense not to touch Adelaide, who looked very confused and was no faster than they were. She reached out for one, but he kicked her in the stomach and she hit the wall behind her, and her shirt got in the way of a power transfer.

I said I was eighty-five, and then glanced over at the witches who remained. The two who'd dismantled the guard dropped the last fragments and raced out of the room after the others. One was just standing there, staring into space nearly as glazedly as if he were still affected by Alec's power.

I stopped in the middle of the word "eighty-six", and spluttered, and looked again at his face. At the color of the patches of hair he had left. At his *face*.

"Daddy," I said, and that was not a lie, and Adelaide spun and looked at me.

Daddy looked at me too, red-eyed, and absolutely indifferent.

Father

"*Daddy*," I said again, sure that he would react if he would only *understand the word*, if he would make the connection that *he* was my *daddy* and therefore *I* was his *daughter* and he should not look at me like that, like he didn't care, like I could be *anybody* -

He shrugged, and rolled his eyes, and looked at Adelaide. "I don't suppose you'll kill

me now," he said to her, tonelessly.

"Perhaps," she said, like she was dangling a tantalizing treat in front of him. Then she fixed her attention on me. She had *presence* - more than she'd had before. She announced herself, her personality was leaking through the edges of her harmless housewife appearance with the ironic t-shirt. It might be my power, but it was my power with the weight of a much older person with more varied experiences behind it. There was more *to* her. Greed and sharp curiosity emanated from her, and a lazy annoyance directed at the departed witches, but most of all there was just *depth*, the sense that here stood a person who had many years of history and accumulated knowledge. *Will I shine like that when I'm a hundred? A thousand?* I wondered dizzily.

Adelaide smiled at me, not exactly *threateningly*, but there were *edges* to it: her indulgence would cover me for the time being and when it ended so would I. "Aren't *you* interesting," she purred.

Dimly, I recognized that if I was interesting, something had gone very badly wrong. I was not supposed to be interesting. Had that had something to do with the nonsense I'd been whispering to myself...? That didn't make sense. People who said nonsensical things were at least *slightly* interesting. "No ma'am," I said, cowed. There wasn't a point in trying to get away. Even with my harmless power, Adelaide was a vampire and could catch me in an instant.

"I think you are," Adelaide murmured, boring into me with intent eyes. "I was going to have a look at you after the witches were fed... I suppose you knew your father was here?"

This was the part where I was supposed to be picked up and carried away by... someone... and that wasn't happening, and *why* would Daddy want Adelaide to kill him? Why wouldn't he want to run out of the city at top speed and find Mama -?

Daddy's eyes flicked back to me with the first sign of interest they'd shown.

Adelaide noticed. "What is it, Edward?" she inquired. "I know Chelsea and I were very thorough. She doesn't matter to you."

There was one thing Chelsea couldn't break, though -

MAMA IS ALIVE, I screamed in my head as hard as I could. I could see Daddy's eyes widen, and Adelaide said, "Come here, Edward, don't annoy me or I'll decide not to kill you," and she held out her hand -

Daddy took three steps toward her, then whirled with blinding speed and caught me up with one arm around my waist and knocked the wind out of me and followed the other escaped witches out of the dungeon and he was so fast, faster than Mama, just like she said -

And he didn't care about me a bit.

He only wanted me to lead him to her.

But this was part of the plan, I supposed, that I be picked up and carried somewhere, and I was, so I let it happen.

Somehow, we didn't run into anyone on our way out of the compound. Probably Daddy listening for and avoiding thoughts, and with the other witches escaped too everyone would be in a panic and spread thin trying to contain them. Daddy nodded once when I thought of this.

We were not as lucky outside the compound - there were humans everywhere and it was full daylight. I guessed that he didn't care about secrecy anymore. The worst thing that could happen if humans saw a vampire streaking through Volterra would be that the Volturi would try to capture him again, to put back in the dungeon or just kill, and he didn't plan to let that happen with Mama alive. (He nodded again.)

With Mama *probably* alive.

"What?" he snapped. I winced. I had only a handful of memories of his voice, and it had sounded different then. But then, he'd loved me then.

Mama *might* have gotten away, in New York, but I didn't see... but surely someone would have thought of her within Daddy's range if she'd been *seen*, let alone caught...?

He pursed his lips, but seemed to accept that as evidence for her survival.

"*She* loves me," I tried. "I'm *her* daughter."

He glanced down a little, probably to look at my eyes that Mama says are like the ones she had before turning, but then paid attention to where he was going again with a small shake of his head. "You aren't *her*."

"Where are we going?" I asked after a moment. We were almost out of the city, and the shouts of confused humans were thinning. I wondered what they'd think of us.

"I'm trying to catch up with Alice," he said.

"Aunt Alice is alive too?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. She was in the room with me and I could read her, so Chelsea gave up on trying to cut off my affection for her, but I didn't have any way to communicate *back*. I was working on convincing Addy to relay messages to her for me when you sprung us. Alice might or might not help. She's still the best chance of finding Bella if you don't

know where she is, although Alice will want to find Jasper first."

"He's in Nashville, with Peter and Charlotte," I said.

"I know." He blinked. "How do *you* know?"

We were out of the city and into the countryside. I put my hand on his cheek and showed him the time Mama told me about meeting Uncle Jasper. A look of intense sorrow and focus took over his features, like what he saw hurt him but pulling away from it would hurt more. "How do *you* know?" I asked.

"Alice saw him, of course." He frowned. "She *ought* to have seen Bella when that happened - and then I'd have *known* - but by then she was occasionally looking elsewhere, trying to practice the vision sharing she's learned to do on other subjects -"

"Vision sharing?" I asked, blinking.

"There isn't a lot to do in the dungeon," Daddy said dryly. "More so for Alice than me; I could have two-way conversations with Addy, if no one else, and I can listen to many voices where Alice sees only one thing at a time. She learned a new trick. But Jasper didn't hold up very well, and the visions weren't helping." He sounded... *unimpressed* by me. Like he thought that even *with* Chelsea's interference he could have properly cared for some other, better daughter if she'd shown up, who knew more and could have guessed about Alice without help. I searched his face, hoping he'd contradict the thought.

He rolled his eyes at me again and I shrank in towards myself. I didn't *like* this, I didn't *like* that Chelsea could just reach in and *steal my father's love*. Things weren't supposed to work that way. "Mama's not going to be happy with you for acting like this," I coaxed.

"Look," said Daddy impatiently, "it *does* matter to me that you're Bella's daughter and that she loves you, and I'm going to look after you for her until we find her again because that's what she would want, and Bella is stronger than I am and in the same position of course *she* would have continued to love you, but *I* am not immune to Chelsea. At the time what she did was even a mercy. One less person to agonize over. Alice can't see you anyway."

"Why did the Volturi try to kill Mama, instead of putting her in the dungeon too?" I asked.

"Addy couldn't copy her when she tried," Daddy said shortly. "They had no way to control her, and they didn't need *my* cooperation, not with the setup you saw." He shook his head a little, and his face shone with admiration. "But she was too strong, too committed to life. I should have known."

"It's just her shield," I said. "It's a power, like mine or yours, it just let her stay

alive."

"Powers reflect the people who have them," he said implacably. "You, for instance, *demand attention* even while I am trying to catch Alice and slowed down by *your* weight."

"I'm going to show Mama *everything*," I snapped. "Every last thing. I can't make you love me but you don't have to be *horrible* to me! You're still my *daddy*!"

We were well into the countryside. "Alice!" hollered Daddy, and he scowled at me, probably because I'd make him invisible to her. I felt a hot tear creeping down my cheek. Why did I even *do* that stupid jailbreak? Why bother? When I'd... somehow... gotten past Saeed, why hadn't I just left the compound by myself and gone for help that *hadn't* had *this* done to them? I could have probably got to Ireland under my own power, even if none of my phone numbers worked, and then I could have tried to find Gianna and Maggie and Ilario and gotten new phone numbers if nothing else, and then I could have called Grandpa Carlisle and he would have bought me a plane ticket and I would have been wherever they were living in less than a *day* and nobody would have been the *least bit* horrible to me.

I felt a sudden fear for what Mama would be like, with Daddy back in her life.

Did she love me because I was *her* daughter?

Or because I was *his*?

Would she have any use for me with this *jerk* around being *magically bonded to her*?

Daddy didn't react to my thoughts this time, not even to roll his eyes. I looked ahead, and thought I saw a sparkling shape hurtling away from us, but we were gaining. "Alice!" I shouted, wondering if I'd be harder to ignore.

Either I was better at getting attention or we'd just gotten closer in the past second. Alice turned her head, but didn't stop running.

"They'll use wolves! I'm better at noticing those coming than you are!" bellowed Daddy. "I'll help you make it to Jasper if you'll help me find Bella after that!"

Alice still didn't stop, but she slowed down a little, and let us catch up. She looked confused when she got a closer look at me. "Elspeth?" she guessed, neutrally. She had almost no hair left. Otherwise she looked just like I remembered her, only without the smile. She wore a fiercely determined frown instead.

"Yes," I said, wondering if Alice would be any nicer to me than Daddy. I wasn't sure what attitude Chelsea left behind after severing a relationship. I might just be seeing how Daddy acted towards strangers, and maybe Alice was nicer to strangers than him. I couldn't remember Mama having much to say about how Daddy acted towards people he

had *no* connection with - the closest would be Gianna and Ilario, and Mama had been *there* then and they'd been under the family's protection.

"Keep back a little," she told Daddy. "She'll get in my way. But we can work together." He fell behind a few paces, but was close enough to talk, if there was anything to talk about.

"Where are we going?" I asked for the second time.

"I was *going* to make for the west coast and swim for it, deep enough that I'd be impossible to chase with wolves," said Alice with a twist of annoyance in her voice. "I'm not sure what to do with you. Maybe I should go on my own after all."

"Perhaps I can help," said Allirea.

I noticed, for the first time, that she was running alongside us. She was faster than me - I couldn't have kept up with Daddy, even at the reduced speed I forced him down to.

"Hello, Allirea," said Daddy. "I've been aware of you - intermittently - but obviously haven't had the chance to introduce myself. My name is Edward Cullen."

"The mind-reader," said Allirea. "Then you know what I want, and what I can give you for it."

He nodded once. "Alice," he said, "Allirea's power is to fade from notice. It extends to anything that she's doing. If she carries us on an airplane in luggage, no one will pay attention to any of us as long as we're hidden from sight - she could conceal one of us most of the way in plain view, but not all three, especially not Elspeth. She's sincere about the offer if we help her with what she wants. She wants Demetri killed and can't do it herself, because her power doesn't work on him. We'll probably need to do that anyway, when he catches up with us - although I think the top recapture priorities will probably be Benjamin and Li-qing, maybe Dwi, not us."

"Fine," said Alice, and they veered right, heading north to what was presumably the nearest airport. She glanced over her shoulder at Allirea. "*I remember you*," she said with a little hiss.

"I did not go there willingly," Allirea said, calmly. "Demetri was ready to drag me back if I tried to run. I could no more escape than you could see me coming."

Alice glanced at Daddy, and he nodded, and she accepted the excuse. She at least trusted Daddy, even if she didn't particularly care about him anymore. He cared about her, though, probably second-most out of everybody after my mama.

I was much farther down the list.

We waited for Allirea outside a town while she went in to steal suitcases, and clothes for Daddy and Alice. She was back in a few moments. They got dressed, and Alice as the second-strongest and second-fastest carried the suitcases, and we continued to the airport.

I didn't try to chat any more during the run to the airport. No one else did either, after Alice had described to Allirea where we needed to fly. When we got there, we hid behind a van in the parking lot and everyone but Allirea got into a bag. Alice was small enough to fit into a backpack if she scrunched up, which she did; Allirea slung the bag over her arms. Daddy and I were each in wheeled suitcases. I remembered Mama telling me the story of when she'd traveled that way. Allirea left my suitcase unzipped enough that I could breathe easily, but I still thought Mama had probably been more comfortable this way than I had.

"Remember," Allirea said firmly, "you are stowing onto an airplane. You must not get out of your suitcases. You will get where you need to go." She repeated that a few more times.

Then I was trundling along the ground in my bag, probably being pulled towards my plane by a baggage handler or something, and I didn't remember getting the label that would send me to the right place, but maybe Daddy had taken care of that after I'd gotten in my suitcase and couldn't see what was going on...? I stayed put and was glad I wasn't claustrophobic.

I smelled the stale odor that airplanes have, and I waited and listened to people talking, and eventually I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was still in the suitcase, still on the airplane. I had no idea what time it was, or how my sleep schedule was responding to all the excitement and changes in time zone. Someone had slipped a lot of little packets of peanuts into the bag with me while I slept, though, and I had just enough maneuvering room to open them and shake them into my mouth one bag at a time. They didn't taste very nice, but in sufficient quantity they were filling, and I was hungry.

The captain announced that we were approaching the Nashville International Airport, and it occurred to me to be scared of Uncle Jasper. Mama had described him as being absolutely out of his mind, and she'd noticed him being wildly moody - *she* wouldn't have caught it if he were also using his empathy erratically, since she was immune, but *we* could. I didn't really like the idea of being made to feel random things by a mad vampire. Maybe I could stay back, or maybe he'd get better instantly when Alice went to him.

And once we found Jasper it would be time to look for Mama, and I didn't know where she was.

There were two obvious places we could look for Mama:

One was with the family, whom she might have contacted on the assumption that

Cody would reveal everything to the Volturi anyway. (I didn't think he'd already done it. If he had, somebody would have thought of Mama near enough Daddy that he'd hear, and if *any* thoughts would get his attention, it would be ones about Mama. Cody himself must not even be within a mile of the main compound, I decided. It would be too much of a coincidence for him to have thought of her *not once*, even with a lot on his mind as he probably had. They might keep him and the wolves out of the way so Adelaide could have a clear view of the place when she borrowed Alice's power.)

The other was the rendezvous point in San Francisco. She could be hoping that the pack would have gotten away, and me with them, or that Jacob would at least have sent me ahead alone my own for safety. And then, if she'd not contacted the family, she would probably wait there for me, because the New York point was blown. I had *not* told Cody about the Golden Gate Park one. I didn't remember even telling him there *was* one besides the one in Central Park.

I decided that Mama was probably more likely to get hold of the family than to just wait in San Francisco. With their help she could have someone ready to meet me there - Aunt Rosalie, maybe - but could also get help against the possibility that I had been captured by the Volturi. Which I had, but she wouldn't have expected me to get *out* again. And she *definitely* wasn't expecting Daddy or Aunt Alice.

I wasn't sure where Grandma and Grandpa and Rosalie and Emmett were living, though, since they'd surely moved at least once since I'd last been with them. They called their residences "permanent" and often retained the houses for a long time, but tended not to *live* in them for more than four or five years even without a rapidly growing half-vampire child.

Mama wouldn't know where they were either. She would have tried all the old phone numbers, but unless one of them was the same as it had been before, she wouldn't get ahold of them. But even without that, she could have gone to Denali, which really *is* a permanent residence. I tried to estimate how long it would have taken her to get there on foot from New York, but eventually gave up; it would depend too heavily on how careful she thought she needed to be to lose the Volturi contingent. She might be there already, she might be on her way, she might be heading for California instead, I couldn't know.

I supposed I could just let Daddy be in charge of figuring out how to find Mama. Whether he liked it or not, he was my parent, and I'd spent the last while wishing for a parent to be in charge.

I wasn't sure I liked the idea anymore, though.

Even after we found Mama, having Daddy back could make her really *different*, and that scared me. Mama hadn't been Chelseaed - probably *couldn't* be Chelseaed - but with Daddy around, I wouldn't be her top priority anymore. With Daddy around, her life wouldn't revolve exclusively around making me safe and happy. With Daddy around, she would be *Daddy's wife* before being *my Mama*.

Then again, the only person whose *indelible* top priority was me was... Jacob, and I still wasn't very impressed with him.

Mama had almost certainly gotten away, and could have taken me with her if he hadn't *trapped* me because he didn't understand how vampires work.

Then I wouldn't have found Daddy and Alice, but I was having a hard time being very pleased that I had.

Maybe Mama would make everything better.

Or maybe it was time to grow up.

The plane came in for a bouncy landing. My suitcase was pulled out of the plane, and I waited for some sign that it was time to get out.

By the sounds around me, I guessed that I was in the Nashville airport parking lot at the time I remembered Allirea existed. "You can come out now," she said, and I nudged the zipper on my bag out of the way and unfolded with a very welcome stretch, shedding staticky peanut wrappers as I stood. The vampires' bags didn't start partly open, so even though they were faster, I was out first. I watched Alice pop out of her bag in a tremendous hurry, and she hauled Daddy out of his when he wasn't quick enough to suit her.

Allirea readily abandoned the suitcases, and Daddy picked me up like he would have picked up a sack of vegetables and followed his sister out of the parking lot. "Keep *back* with her," snapped Alice. "I have to *see* - my Jasper, my *Jasper* -"

Daddy fell behind obediently enough, and Alice shot forward.

Between the two of them, Alice and Daddy were able to avoid our being seen by any humans, although there was some leaping between rooftops involved. Alice ran like she was possessed. We lost sight of her occasionally, although she reined herself in before ever getting out of Daddy's mind-reading range.

Jasper was sheltering from the daylight in a warehouse that stank of human blood, presumably from the last hunt. Alice hurtled towards her mate, but stopped short. I wondered if he was so convinced she was dead that he might have attacked her for an imposter, had she continued and tried to give him a hug. As it was, he stared. "No," he said. "Not again - I was getting better - *Charlotte, Peter, help* -"

"Jasper," she whispered. "I'm alive."

"*I felt you die*," he said, twisting his hands in his mane of unkempt hair.

Daddy stepped forward, setting me on my feet. "Addy," he summarized. "Copies

powers. You saw her when she was "wearing" Jane's, but she can copy anyone - except Bella -"

"You're dead too!" shouted Jasper, whirling on Daddy, but he only looked away from Alice for a moment before turning back to her and continuing to stare.

"She copied *you*," Daddy said. "She faked Alice's death for you with your own power."

"You're dead, both of you, dead -" He didn't even glance at me. "*Alice* - I kept seeing things, and then they stopped, but it's back again -"

Two vampires who I guessed were Charlotte and Peter jogged to his side and stared incredulously at Alice.

"Tell me," Jasper whispered. "Tell me you can't see her -"

"I can see her," said Peter quietly, frowning at Alice and knitting his dark eyebrows. For some reason, he was wearing a suit; trim and urbane, he looked like the diametric opposite of crazed Jasper. Charlotte, all in denim, was Alice's height, though her riot of frizzy yellow-rose curls stood in contrast to my aunt's patches of limp dark hair. She nodded at her mate's statement, wide-eyed.

Jasper glared at Peter. "You're probably a hallucination too," he accused. "That's happened before, you being a hallucination."

"Jasper," Alice murmured. "That's my fault, I'm sorry - I learned to share visions, but I didn't know how to help you understand them - I'm so sorry."

Jasper just stared at her, pained disbelief written all over his face.

I decided to be useful. "She's alive," I said firmly.

It is very hard not to believe me when I say true things. Jasper blinked, spared me a half-second's glance, and then took a step forward to cradle Alice's face in his hands. "Alice," he said.

She looked up at him, and smiled cheekily. "Jasper."

Doctor

Once Jasper was convinced that Alice was really there, he clung to her so tightly and so desperately that I wondered if he was sane enough not to hurt her, even believing she lived. They were murmuring to each other, but I couldn't make out the words, and they probably weren't any of my business. I kept my distance. Charlotte peered at me, curiosity gleaming in black eyes.

"Are you *Elspeth*?" Charlotte asked me, as though she was asking if I was a sasquatch.

I nodded. Charlotte didn't have Daddy's and Alice's excuse of having been force-fed. I'd never met a *friendly* deliberate-person-eating vampire before, only vegetarians and Volturi and their prisoners. But I wasn't a human, and she wouldn't eat me, and Mama had met friendly person-eating vampires before and even gotten one to stop eating people... I decided it would be okay to talk to Charlotte. And she was *really* a stranger, not someone who *ought* to be family and wouldn't act like it, and that was something I felt like I needed in the absence of a real friend. "You must be Charlotte," I said.

She nodded and tiptoed closer to me, not blinking. I felt like a museum piece. "Y'know, I wouldn't've believed you were real if Alice 'n Jasper hadn't mentioned you *before* he went bonkers and she seemed prob'ly dead," she said. She spoke in such a casual drawl that I decided she had to be affecting it deliberately. "You're nifty. Say, there's this one time where Jasper was babbling about seein' Bella but then he made up his mind she weren't real, or real but not Bella. That really her?"

"Yeah," I said. "He tried to kill her."

"*What*." That was Daddy, cold anger taking over his face instantly at the idea that Mama's life had been in danger.

Jasper hissed and backed up, ushering Alice behind his back as though to shield her even though she wasn't the one Daddy was mad at.

"Did you try to kill my wife?" Daddy demanded, stalking in Jasper's direction.

"She got away!" I exclaimed. "He didn't try very *hard*, he was completely out of his *mind*, she got *away*, Daddy!"

Daddy didn't approach Jasper any closer, and Jasper didn't try to answer the question - or not out loud, anyway. He could be thinking an answer. Daddy let out a small hiss and looked to Alice, who was peeking under Jasper's arm. "Alice," he said. "We had a deal. Where is Bella?"

Oh, I thought, of course, I'm not with Mama, Alice will be able to see her. I didn't need to speculate about where she'd go after all.

"Looks like... Canada, maybe Saskatchewan or something, but I'm guessing from plants, there aren't any signs," said Alice, wrapping her arms around Jasper's waist. "She'll be in Denali in a couple of days if she doesn't stop or change her mode of transportation." Alice paused and wondered aloud, "Why is she bald?" Daddy's eye twitched.

"Did she try calling the family?" I asked.

"I don't see her doing it, so she's not *going* to, but I can't tell you whether she *did* already," said Alice. "Is the reason she's bald something that will make Edward angry? Because if so, go right ahead and *don't* mention it."

I nodded, clamping down on my thoughts as best I could. "Do the Denalis expect her?"

"Nope," said Alice. "They're going to be *very* surprised - barring interference from us, of course. Kate's going to try to knock her over as a test - *it won't work, Edward, calm down*. I guess we could beat her there, if we take another plane, but I can't... think... how we got on the first one..." She furrowed her brow. I couldn't quite figure out how we'd managed it either. The process had been pretty trivial, no *significant* obstacles to anyone noticing us and objecting to our stowing away.

"I helped," said Allirea, fading in. Jasper, Peter, and Charlotte all startled.

"Will you *stop* fading out when it's not necessary?" demanded Daddy.

"That is my state of rest," Allirea replied. "It requires effort to fade *in*. I will expend that effort when it is necessary but not otherwise. I can get three, perhaps even four of you onto an airplane," she went on, "but six will be difficult, if these will join us." She nodded at Peter and Charlotte.

"Alice, can you see Carlisle and Esme?" asked Daddy. "Where are they? Is it a house we know the numbers for...? You never looked at them while we were -"

"Well, I was a little *busy* watching *Jasper*," she snapped. She closed her eyes. "No, it's a new house. Either that or Esme *completely* remodeled the Montana place and knocked down most of the trees outside. I think it's a new house." Jasper ruffled her hair fondly and she purred, then went on, "Carlisle's at work. Hospital is called... aha, they're on Prince Edward Island."

"Do you see the *hospital's* number written down anywhere?" Daddy asked impatiently. "We could have him paged - without getting ahold of him there's no obvious way to get plane tickets -"

"Tickets? So these two will join us?" Allirea asked, tilting her head. "Why?"

"I agreed to no such thing," said Peter, sounding taken aback. "Edward, what are you thinking?"

Daddy smirked. It was not a nice smile at all. "The Volturi have *vastly* overstepped their bounds."

"If you're trying to pull us into an open rebellion because they tried to kill your wife -" Peter began.

"Tell me, Peter," said Daddy scathingly, "what *exactly* do you think kept Alice away from Jasper for more than *five years*? I thought Bella was dead; Alice didn't have that problem. You don't think she was spending all that time sunning herself on the beach without a care in the world?"

"No..."

And then Daddy explained where he and Alice had been, and Jasper, clutching at his mate like she could be perfectly protected if only he held her close enough, let a truly awful snarl erupt from his throat, making the air buzz with anger. I felt a little alien flare of it in myself, and wondered if he was letting his empathy push it into the world accidentally. Or on purpose.

Peter was backing away, and Charlotte trotted to his side, but Jasper twisted his head about to look at them. "*I am calling in my favor*," he said.

"I, I think we may've more than repaid you these last years," volunteered Charlotte, dancing behind her mate. "Weren't a picnic, y'see -"

"I would have done the same for either of you if it had *been* either of you," said Jasper implacably. "*That* was because we are friends. *This* is because *I am calling in my favor*."

"Jasper," Peter began.

"Peter," mocked Jasper, fury in his eyes. "They tortured my *Alice* for five years to have the use of her power when she wouldn't work for them. If they'd done that to Charlotte -"

"For the love of God, don't *say* such things," cried Peter. "And I haven't a favor to call anyway and Charlotte's no witch!"

"I have," said Jasper. "Alice is. I'm calling it. I will *have* your help in getting revenge on those who hurt my Alice."

"What favor...?" I asked blankly.

"Oh - oh," said Charlotte helplessly. "He - he let us run away, when I was near done being a newborn, Elspeth." She gulped. "When he was s'posed to kill me, he let me go with Peter."

"I don't quite follow..." I said.

Jasper cut in. "It was once commonplace, especially in the South, to settle disputes between covens by creating armies of newborns. I was turned for that reason, and kept on by my creator to manage newer vampires because of my gift. Peter was one who lasted a bit longer than most; by and large I was obliged to destroy the newborns as they came to the end of their strength. Peter was helping me with that task one night, but he didn't like it when I called Charlotte over, and he told her to run and followed after her. I didn't chase them," he said. "Our creator wasn't happy with me at all, but I let them go. Five years later, they came back for me. I left with them, because I was beginning to think my creator would turn on me, and Peter *said*..." Jasper turned to look at Peter. "He said that I had saved their lives, that they owed me, that if I needed anything above and beyond the normal support and companionship of a coven I was entitled to a favor. And I didn't call it in, and then I found Alice and we left to join the Cullens, and I still hadn't called it in, and then we came back, and now I know what I want, Peter."

Peter passed his hand over his eyes and sighed. "Damn you, Jasper, all right."

"The hospital's number, please, Alice," said Daddy, "and your phone, Charlotte, if you don't mind."

Daddy started to dial the number, then handed the phone to me at the last minute. "Perhaps you'd better talk to him," he said. "It would probably cause a delay if Alice or I had to personally explain to him what Chelsea did. You're unaffected - and haven't spent the last several years insane." I took the phone and finished dialing, though my fingers felt numb.

"Souris Hospital," said a human woman's voice, mechanical and bored. "How may I direct your call?"

"I - I - I need to speak to Dr. Cullen, please," I said. "I'm - tell him it's Elspeth. Please."

"Dr. Cullen is with a pati- Doctor?" said the woman. "I thought you were down the hall with Mrs. -"

"May I have the phone?" asked Grandpa's voice, firm but full of gentleness even in his hurry, and I imagined he'd heard my name from farther away than he should have let on and abandoned his work lest I hang up and never call again.

"I can transfer her to your office," offered the human, and Grandpa said that would do, and she told me, "One moment please," and a moment later he was actually *on* the phone.

"Elspeth?" he asked softly. "Is that really you?"

"It's really me," I said. And then words came out of me in a great rush, and every sentence was accompanied by the *relief* of the secret's death. I had grown up so *smothered* by secrets, even when I was very small and only had to pretend in front of neighbors, there were always things to hide or omit or just *lie* about and I hated that, it wasn't *natural*, and in spite of everything I could not completely regret the events that were letting me *tell tell tell* every bit over and over to everyone I loved.

I told Grandpa that Mama had taken me, not some unknown kidnapper. I told him how Mama had survived, how we'd lived together in hiding. I told him how we'd been separated and how I'd found Jacob's pack and what had happened there and about Pera. I told him about Cody's departure and our trip to New York and how we'd been caught. Allirea faded in long enough to let me explain how I'd escaped, how I'd found Daddy, and how we'd caught up to Alice and stowed away on a plane to Tennessee and found Jasper. It was such a long story, and it was so *good* to tell it all; my magic was practically purring with contentment somewhere in the back of my mind.

Grandpa listened to it all, and asked only the briefest of clarifying questions, sounding stunned but capable of handling it. I drank in the quiet noises of sympathy he made at the right places, just like when he'd been the one to comfort me when I was little and I broke one of my toys or got my hair caught in something and cried.

"And... and I guess that's it, mostly," I finished. "Um, we want to find Mama, and Alice says she's on her way to Denali, and she doesn't have a phone, and Allirea can't get all of us onto a plane - Peter and Charlotte are coming too." Peter grumbled to himself and Charlotte patted his arm.

"Do Jasper, Peter and Charlotte have ID that will get them onto a plane?" Grandpa asked. I looked at them, and Charlotte nodded. I passed on the answer. "I'll buy tickets for them, then, and Allirea can get you and your father and aunt on the flight in her way. We'll meet you in Denali. It... it'll be good to see you, Elspeth. Is your father there? Can I speak to him?"

"He... he..." I didn't know how to tell Grandpa this part without hurting him. "Chelsea..."

There was an awful silence.

Daddy rolled his eyes.

"I see," said Grandpa quietly. "Alice too?"

"Yeah," I whispered. "Um, Daddy still cares about Alice because she was right there and he could read her, and Mama of course. And Alice has Jasper. But... but that's it."

"I see," Grandpa repeated. "Of course. Are you all right, Elspeth?"

"I think so," I said. "It'll be good to see you too, though, Grandpa."

I heard keys tapping. "I've found you a flight that leaves in three hours. What last names are on their papers...?"

Charlotte took her phone out of my hand and concluded the business end of the travel plans on behalf of her coven. I heard Grandpa politely inquiring after her and Peter's motivations for coming along, and she muttered darkly about Jasper and revenge and favors and open rebellion. Grandpa's reply sounded mostly nonplussed, but he finished buying them tickets, and gave her the flight information. Charlotte snapped the phone shut.

Allirea went on another spree of theft, and brought back suitcases for the people she'd fade and colored contact lenses for those she wouldn't. It was really sort of weird to wait for her while she was faded. I knew I was waiting for something, and I remembered deciding to wait for her, but she didn't seem important enough to justify waiting all by herself, so I thought I must have had some other, more significant reason that I just couldn't call to mind. The others stood around and talked quietly about trivial things, and occasionally said something similar: "What is it that we're waiting for again...? I guess the flight isn't for a while yet..." Then Allirea came back and faded in, and I realized how dumb that had been, but it didn't stop her from doing it to us all again once we'd gotten into our suitcases and she faded out. But as before, I let myself be carried along and remembered thinking that it was all taken care of.

I fell asleep partway through this flight, too. When I woke up, I heard noises that made it sound like we were in the middle of changing planes - beeping vehicles and competing televisions and boarding instructions. There was an assortment of food in my bag, probably from the airport rather than the plane: a sack of donuts and a couple of plastic-wrapped sandwiches and three bananas and a bottle of juice. I gobbled it all up, hungrier than usual after so long without a proper drink of blood and only peanuts the day prior. I was pulled onto the new plane, where the captain announced a flight to Anchorage. Mama had made me memorize a map of Alaska once, in case I ever needed to find Denali by myself, and I guessed that it would be our last stop. We could have flown on to Fairbanks, but it wasn't all that much closer to the park and we'd make better time skipping the last hop.

Sure enough, my suitcase rolled out of the plane at Anchorage. I remembered Allirea existed, got out of my suitcase in the corner she deemed unobtrusive, and followed the group out of the airport.

We went through town at a jog, and broke into a flat-out run once we'd cleared the population center. Eventually Daddy decided we weren't going fast enough, even though Alice said we'd be sure to beat Mama by a good half a day at least and he couldn't possibly *miss* the Denali vampires, and so he picked me up and we went faster. I guessed he just hated moving any slower than he could be moving towards the place he'd see her again.

I wondered why he didn't just ask Alice to send him to meet Mama along her route, and Daddy said under his breath, "I think she might be annoyed with me if I left you alone with a madman, your forcibly estranged aunt, and two lifelong unapologetic non-vegetarians. And if I brought you along on an excursion like that, Alice wouldn't be able to see where we'd meet her, and you change my speed quite a bit."

"You could make up your mind to go at the speed you go when you carry me, only alone," I suggested.

He laughed hollowly. "No. I couldn't."

My invisibility to Alice made me think of something. "Alice," I said, peering over Daddy's shoulder at her where she ran hand-in-hand with Jasper, "you *can* see the Denali houses and the family, right? They aren't blanked out? I was just thinking that maybe the Volturi would expect us to come here..."

"It's clear," Alice said. "Visible, with only the designated people there."

Daddy said, "The Volturi know you haven't been in contact with the family since your mother found you. They know I grabbed you, and they could guess I'd strike a deal with Alice, but they don't have a reason to expect us to go to ground with family you haven't seen in years and we don't care about particularly any more. The only reason we *are* going to see them is Bella."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "Even if you don't care about them, they still care about you, and you know that, and know that you could expect to get help if you asked for it, even after explaining. Why would you pass that up?"

"They'd expect Alice to find her mate and stop there, since he was with a stable coven she could readily rejoin," Daddy said. "They're probably extremely confused about me. I didn't behave at all as they would have guessed." I remembered Daddy asking Adelaide if she'd kill him, and shuddered in his arms. "They may assume I'm in Tennessee for the same reason. But when I move up to the top of the priority list, they don't need to *guess* where I'll go, they can have Demetri lead the way."

"And you will kill him?" asked Allirea, fading in.

"I'm not going to go to any trouble to leave him alive," said Daddy, baring his teeth. "If nothing else, he stole my wedding ring."

"What?" I asked, bewildered, remembering what I'd heard about his ring. "Mama said she couldn't find it when she found her jewelry - when I was littler I used to think that meant you were alive -"

"Don't be ridiculous, Elspeth. I'm alive, yes, but my ring being missing is hardly a clue. Why in the *world*, if I had the opportunity to go back for my ring before she went looking, would I *leave Bella's jewelry behind*? She wanted my ring; didn't it occur to you that I'd have taken hers likewise?" He shook his head. "Demetri took it. He picked up

Bella's rings too, but Allirea wouldn't have them, so he dropped them again."

Allirea snorted. "He thinks it is because I did not want *secondhand* rings, or wanted a ceremony of some kind. He will never believe the truth, so I have been frustrating him by pretending to have self-contradictory tastes in jewels and festivities."

"I wonder if he'd believe me if I just *told* him that you want him to leave you alone," I said.

"Perhaps. That seems to be something you can do," said Allirea neutrally. "I would have settled for that, before. Now I want him *dead*. I would not object if you chose to explain first, so he would know why he will die."

Since I'd originally suggested that I serve as a messenger in order to reduce the need for death, I didn't comment on that.

I decided I was glad to be a member of a species that didn't have permanent mates like full vampires. Mama seemed to have liked the bond. She seemed to want it for me, or at least seemed not be too upset about the prospect. But it *did* things to people, it *messed* with them. I didn't like the idea of being capable of the agony that had driven Jasper crazy (was he still crazy? I couldn't entirely tell), or left Daddy with the deathwish. I didn't like the idea of being so dominated by the perfect fantasy that I wouldn't be able to notice a reality like Allirea staring me in the face. (When she was noticeable, anyway.)

I wondered how Jacob was doing.

Then I wondered what had happened to Cody.

"Daddy," I began, about to ask him if he'd picked up anything.

"I don't have much," he said, annoyed. "They keep the wolves - and your friend Cody, I guess - a couple of miles from the compound. Yes, you guessed the reason, they wanted Adelaide to be able to see the future inside the walls."

"Doesn't Allirea interfere with that?" I asked.

"Not when she's faded out," said Daddy. "Or at least, not as far as I could ever tell. Faded in, she casts as much of a shadow as you do."

"I don't know whether she actually doesn't interfere when she fades out," put in Alice, "or if it just doesn't seem important that she does."

"Elspeth," said Allirea suddenly, "what is your mother's full first name?"

I remembered that Allirea didn't approve of nicknames. "Isabella," I said.

"She prefers to be called Bella," put in Daddy.

"Nobody's called her that in five years," I replied. "I don't think she'll mind if..." Allirea faded out again. "If she gets called something else." Nobody would be likely to call her anything else, except me if I counted, but I'd already called her "Mama" in Daddy's hearing, so he couldn't be upset about that. If he was, it was an awfully delayed reaction.

Daddy clenched his jaw. I wasn't sure why. That something about her had changed since he last saw her? That I'd dare claim to know something like that about her? I'd spent more time with her than he ever had. I'd called her more names and she'd said *my* name more times -

There was a twitch in his eye. I decided not to think things like that while being carried by a possessive mind-reading vampire. It wasn't really *his* fault that he'd been Chelseaed, and if I were being nice I had to assume that she was what let him be jealous of his own *daughter* over time spent with his wife.

"Alice," I said, "will we be there before Grandma and Grandpa and Rosalie and Emmett?"

"By a little bit, yes," she replied. "I suppose they had to arrange to take time off, or something." She wrinkled her nose. "Esme is going to try to hug me. I realize she means well, but what part of "Chelsea got me" is too complicated for her to understand? In what way does that not imply not hugging me?"

"You could just let her," I said softly. "It would make her feel better."

"I'm going to," Alice said, "much good may it do her. Edward's not. Edward is going to *pace*, as though that will accomplish *anything*."

"Mama would probably not mind if you left me with the Denalis, and went to meet her," I told Daddy quietly. "They're sane and vegetarian and not especially estranged. You don't have to pace."

He looked... surprised, maybe, or gratified. "Thank you," he said after a moment.

"You're welcome," I mumbled.

Soldier

When I first went to Denali, I was five days old. I learned to walk in the front hall of the white house that Irina and Laurent used to live in, which was used as a guest house for the time I spent there. Carmen taught me to hunt for rabbits in the park. Eleazar looked at me consideringly and announced that I was "special". David had a jigsaw, and after he convinced Grandma that I couldn't possibly cut myself on it, he taught me to make my own puzzles out of doodles on cardboard. I swiped pastels from Kate's art supply kit to do that, and she chased me around the yard without really trying to catch me when she found out. Tanya found it amusing to hide small objects - sometimes my puzzle pieces - around the center house and send me on scavenger hunts.

This was where my hair got long enough to braid, and where Rosalie first pinned it up. This was where I spoke my first words, and where Grandpa first answered them. This was where I read my first book, and Emmett first handed over my bedtime story to let me finish it myself. This was where I celebrated my first monthly "birthday", and Grandma first lit a candle to mark the occasion.

This was the one place I'd lived longest. Four days in my birthplace Norway, four months *here*, a month and a half in Oregon and a month in Michigan, then five years in constant motion.

When the three buildings, still familiar, came into view, I should have felt like I was coming home.

I didn't.

It was partly the company, I decided. I was traveling with five people I barely knew, and that would have offset the comfort of any place we could have gone.

But it was also that I didn't *have* a home, unless it was in Mama's arms dashing from place to place. A few months at a time was a good chunk of my life, but still not all that long, and we'd always been guests in Denali. Even though the Alaskan coven lived secluded enough that my growth could have been hidden from humans indefinitely, and it would have made some sense for me to grow up there, they were only ever *extended* family.

By the end of the fourth month, Rosalie and Tanya had started bickering, and Eleazar and Grandpa would occasionally have solemn, quiet arguments on topics way over my head that lasted for hours and left them both politely exasperated. Kate "accidentally" brushed against Emmett while charged up one too many times, Carmen started hinting that I might be tired of the scenery and stagnation was not good for a growing mind, and soon we were packing our things to end what was emphatically just a long *visit*.

I had cause to be glad, later, that it wasn't home to me.

David was standing outside in front of the houses to receive us; I recognized him from a long way off despite the utter nondistinctiveness of his appearance, average in every dimension. I flung myself out of Daddy's grip when I saw him and ran over for a hug. He looked slightly bemused, but he smiled. "Elspeth, I presume," he said, patting my hair.

"Mmhm," I said, grinning.

"Good to see you, coppertop. You went and got bigger while I wasn't looking," he accused. "Hey, all," he called over my head, and started pointing at unfamiliar faces to confirm their identities. "Jasper and Edward I recognize. Peter? Charlotte? Good to meet you. Oh, Alice, Kate wants a private word with you about something. She said to tell you she's by the tree you thought looked like a stork."

"Private?" asked Alice uncomfortably, leaning on Jasper, who wrapped her up in his arms and didn't look inclined to let her go.

"That's what she said. Also why she's so far away," David added, with a nod in Daddy's direction. "I don't know what it's about."

"Where's everyone else?" Daddy asked.

"Carmen and Eleazar are hunting - they wanted to stick it out and be here to meet you but they heard some bears coming through and didn't want to miss them, it's been all small game for the last few months, run of bad luck. Tanya's... in town, plying her trade," David said with a glance down at me.

"I'm five and a half, I know what a succubus is," I said, trying to sound grown-up.

"Do you now? Right. Tanya's off being succubus-y," David said. "So I'm Mr. Meet-and-greet. Alice, are you going to go talk to Kate or not? She seemed to think it was important."

"Well..." Alice looked up apologetically at Jasper, who leaned over her to kiss her on the forehead. "She does realize that I'm probably going to be within five miles of Edward again at some point in the future, right?"

"I'd bet on it. If I had to guess what it is, she wants to apologize or something - maybe she wrote off a clue about what the Volturi were doing?" David suggested, shrugging. "And wants to apologize but doesn't want an audience while she does it? I'm just making that up, though."

"All right, then," sighed Alice, and she twisted in Jasper's arms to receive his very enthusiastic send-off before dancing off between the houses and into the trees. Jasper

tensed up and looked like he was forcing himself to stand still rather than follow her, but Peter clapped him on the shoulder and that seemed to help.

Daddy made a grumbling noise. I thought that he might be annoyed that Alice had left before telling him where to go meet Mama, and he caught my eye and nodded before scowling at a perfectly harmless shrub.

"Holding up okay, coppertop?" David asked me, glancing sympathetically between me and Daddy. "I heard Tanya talking to your granddad. Sounds like you've had a rough week-and-change, huh?"

I nodded emphatically and hugged David again. He chuckled and hugged me back. "Should've dubbed you 'hug-bug' instead of 'coppertop'. Were you this snuggly when you were a titchy thing? I guess Rosalie carried you practically everywhere you went and you always had your arms 'round her neck when you weren't 'talking' to her. Hey, do you still do the thing where...?" He patted his face, and I put one hand on his cheek.

This thing?

"Yeah, that thing," he laughed. "Man. I know I'm approximately a cousin, is all, and it couldn't have hit me as hard as it did your grandad and grandmother and aunt and uncle when you disappeared, but I missed you. I ever tell you that you reminded me of my niece?"

"I would've visited, but..."

"Yeah, I know." David waved off the apology I tried to begin. "It's all right. It's good you were with your mom."

I smiled sheepishly at him. Jasper said, "David, do you have any idea how *long* Kate wants to speak privately with Alice?"

"Relax, the tree is six miles away, Alice probably isn't even there yet," said David affably. "I don't think it'll be that long. Sheesh," he added, elbowing me and speaking in an undertone, "vampires with mates, huh?"

"Uh-huh," I agreed. Although to be perfectly fair to Jasper, he *had* only gotten to be with Alice for a few hours after a separation of several years during which he believed she was dead but in fact she was being tortured and exploited. It was probably sensible for him to be a little clingy. Mama would probably be the same way, later.

"I guess I'll just have to go around with a blindfold on if I ever want to travel without risking it," David said dramatically, resting the back of his wrist on his scalp as he flung the opposite arm out. Then he laughed and ushered me into the center house, suggesting that I looked like I could use a change of clothes and would probably fit into Kate's. "Now that you're so tall, you weed, you. She won't mind. Bet you anything that after their chat she gets Alice to buy her a dozen more outfits, as a first step in reconstructing the

friendship," he said.

I found Kate's room by memory and browsed the closet, humming to myself and taking plenty of time. I felt more relaxed than I had in days; even on the airplanes, with nothing urgent to do, I'd been cramped and bored and anxious.

David was a little bit different than I remembered him, but he'd been a newborn then, still. So he'd been all edgy and tended to drop into instinctive behaviors at any provocation. Even then, he'd been mostly okay around me without other people around. I wasn't a threat or food, which meant he didn't have many instincts about me and could just have a personality instead.

Some fifteen minutes later, I'd just gotten into a borrowed blouse and a pair of Kate's jeans when I heard Daddy yelling my name.

I ran to the nearest room with a window that showed the front yard - Kate's studio, which was just across the hall from her bed-less bedroom - and tried to figure out what was going on. I opened the window to hear better what Daddy was saying; I hadn't made out anything but "Elspeth" and a lot of unclear shouting.

"- traitors!" Daddy was roaring, crouched threateningly towards David, who had his hands up and was backing away slowly. Daddy jerked his head up to look at me. "Elspeth, get down here, we need to go, *now*." Peter and Charlotte seemed to be holding Jasper, who was struggling mightily; I heard Charlotte murmuring "you can't win, you can't, stay back -"

I hopped out the window and looked at David, who was open-mouthed in astonishment. "I didn't *know*," he said. "*I didn't know* -"

Daddy seized me around the waist and took two steps at a run before Allirea suddenly reasserted herself. "Wait. Is Demetri with them?"

Daddy actually *stopped*. "No," he said. "Can you kill them *fast enough*? Without them getting away with Alice?"

"Kill *who*?" I exclaimed, at the same time Jasper shouted, "*Over my dead body does anyone risk Alice* -"

"Who the hell are you?" David cried, boggling at Allirea.

"Allirea's a half vampire who can make herself seem inconsequential," I filled him in. "Daddy, *who* would she be killing?"

"Wolves," Daddy said. "*Ten wolves* and their handler Santiago and our *traitor cousins*. On their way here, *rather quickly*, so if this isn't going to work we need to go."

"That won't make her able to touch *Kate*," cried David. "Kate's always charged up -"

"Eleazar might see you, too," I warned Allirea. "He senses *powers*, I don't know if you can make that fade with everything..." I forgot who I was talking to. "Else," I said, just to complete the sentence.

"What the *hell* are we still standing around for?" Daddy muttered, and he took off, me still in tow. "Yes, David, you can come, you were an idiot but you didn't betray us on purpose. Jasper! They won't kill Alice! She's too valuable, but *you aren't*, do you want to run in and get yourself killed and do *that* to *her*? She'll be able to tell if you're alive! Keep your head and we might be able to get her out again!" Jasper calmed down marginally, and Peter and Charlotte let him go, and he caught up to us.

We bolted to the Denalis' garage, where David tore the door off rather than wait for it to crawl open. He grabbed the keys to a station wagon off their hook on the wall. I was thrown summarily into the backseat, Jasper on the other side; Charlotte and Peter climbed into the cargo area while David took the wheel and Daddy rode shotgun. "Rosalie modded this for me, back when," David muttered, and he gunned the engine and I got to know, for the first time, what Mama meant about vampires driving like maniacs.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "Are we going to find Mama -?"

"Can't, we don't know quite where she is and without Alice can't find out," David said regretfully. "We've got to go to the airport, head off Carlisle and the others before they walk into the trap."

"They'll expect that, you fool!"

"Look, Edward, I realize we weren't great friends even *before* you had all your natural affections surgically removed, but there's no call for that," said David, hurtling along the highway. *Yeah*, I thought, and Daddy glanced over his shoulder at me, annoyed. "I think we can get to the airport in time to meet them as they land -"

"And what if their plane is late," said Daddy, "and we waste half an hour letting them catch up? We should look for Bella. The only way to protect her now is to get her close to Elspeth, so they won't be able to use Alice's power to track her down." When he said that, Jasper scooted as far away from me as the confines of the car allowed. "Demetri is probably still tied up with other witches for now. Once we find Bella, we can worry about people they might *not* be actively trying to kill."

"I could call the airport, and ask them to give the Cullens a message," Charlotte proposed, and everyone fell silent in awe of her sheer common sense, or at least that was what it looked like to me.

"Do that," said Daddy. David rattled off the number, and took an exit at Daddy's direction. "How, *how* am I going to find Bella..." he muttered.

"Elspeth, hon, do you have any *range*?" Charlotte asked, not calling the airport right

away. "Can you talk to her at a distance...?"

"No," I said regretfully. "All my best stuff has always been limited to touch - I can do some things with speech and body language, but that's no good if she can't see or hear me."

"Alistair," said Daddy, sounding desperate.

"Won't work," Jasper said. "Even if the man *had* a phone, even if you *had* the number for it, he wouldn't answer it, and he doesn't have the range to point you in her direction from *England*, and Bella is probably immune to him anyway."

Daddy growled in frustration. "Maybe we should turn back; we could at least pare down the wolves, they might cut and run rather than sticking around to wait for Bella."

"Ten wolves," said Peter. "Ten, Edward. Plus Santiago and probably the four Denalis including *Kate*." Charlotte had apparently finished composing a message to leave for Grandpa and the others, and dialed the airport.

"I don't understand why they'd do that," murmured David. "I just... don't understand."

"Right, it's incomprehensible," said Daddy. "The Volturi burned Sasha in front of them, then killed Irina too, and all this without raising a more than a peep from Kate or Tanya; Eleazar worked for the guard for years and left amicably; *who could have predicted* that they *wouldn't* be interested in facilitating or even keeping mum about a revolution on the mere grounds that our beloved ruling class has been storing *fragments of witches in the basement* to let Addy copy them?"

"Wouldn't Kate be worried, and Eleazar...?" I asked.

"Eleazar's basically redundant next to Adelaide herself," snorted Daddy. "And if they ever decide they really want him back, there's plenty for Chelsea to work with there. Kate's electricity is touch-based. Even as gravel she could keep enough current to be really inconvenient to copy, and Adelaide couldn't use the power against witches anyway. Both of them are worth more to the Volturi as allies, even partial allies, than complete prisoners."

"Where are we going?" I asked again, when Daddy told David to make a turn.

"My best guess about where Bella would be by now," Daddy said. "I gave her driving directions to Denali years ago. She might be using the same route, or part of it, rather than working out a new one."

Charlotte hung up on the lady at the airport, who'd agreed to pass on the message "don't go to Denali, there are wolves around and your law-abiding friends won't shoot them; run and call Charlotte instead" when the family's plane landed. I thought it was a good way to get the warning across, without giving the human messenger enough

information to hang herself with. I just hoped Grandpa didn't do anything like going into Denali and trying to reason with his old friends. It would be very much like him.

"Edward," said Jasper, "did it occur to you that if you bring Elspeth to Bella to protect her from *Alice*, in the same action you make her vulnerable to *Demetri*?"

Daddy's hands clenched in his lap. "She's already on her way to Denali," he breathed. "We have to find her first - Demetri is at least *busy* now -"

"They can't use Alice right away either," said Jasper, sensibly enough, although there was a crack in his voice. "She won't help them; they have to get her to Addy first, and Addy is probably helping retrieve witches in whatever order you think they'll use just like Demetri is. So you're thinking that the wolves will wait at Denali to catch Bella, *and* they'll be waiting for us at the airport if we decide to go there, *and* they'll be escorting my wife to wherever Addy is so Bella needs Elspeth right now? If I were Santiago, I wouldn't trust the Denalis farther than I could throw them even now. I'd keep all my pet wolves in one place for safety, and stick by my new allies to make sure they were clear on who they work for."

"What do *you* think we should do?" growled Daddy.

"Elspeth," said Jasper, "you said a wolf imprinted on you?"

"Yeah..." I said, unsure what that had to do with anything.

"Jasper," said Daddy, "Bella would *never* want -"

"Bella isn't *here*, Edward. Okay, Elspeth," he said, leaning forward to see around the obstacle in the seat between us and fix red eyes on me. "Here's the thing. I'm not a wolf expert, but I did pick up on how serious the imprinting stuff is when I heard about the first run-in the family had with them. It's not just that whichever wolf is *your* pet won't hurt you. *None* of them will, or at least they'll hesitate."

"That's not true - Brady attacked Maureen -" I reached over and showed Jasper the memory of Cody telling me that.

Jasper watched it, but then said, "I think the kid telling you that story was either exaggerating for dramatic effect to impress you, or he misinterpreted whatever the Brady pup was trying to do. He might have just been trying to knock Maureen over, or startle her. Because if he'd actually *hurt* her, him and Maureen's wolf would have had to fight to the death. The Volturi have yours. They probably want to use him, which entails having *you* around to handle him, and I'm sure all the wolves they've got know what you look like now."

"...So... your plan is..."

"We cancel the message to our folks. We go back to Denali. You go in with us and you *get in the wolves' way*," Jasper said. "Move quick enough that they can't knock you

over without injuring you, and they won't be able to stop you. Between the five of *us*, we can at least hold our own against the other five vampires until our backup shows, and that's if they all fight us - some of them might stand down, especially Carmen and Eleazar, maybe Tanya. We save Alice, which, incidentally, will let us find *Bella*, without this hit-or-miss approximation," he concluded, glancing at Daddy. Daddy twitched.

"That had not occurred to me," said Allirea, sounding impressed as she faded in. "You believe that you can handle... What is the electric witch's entire name?"

"Katrina," I supplied, as Daddy rolled his eyes.

"Oh," said Jasper. "You exist. That will help. Yes, if Kate's your concern, we can likely manage her - she's not a *good* fighter, apart from the shocks, and against a few decent combatants who can trade off she'll be in manageable bits soon enough. Eleazar can barely fight at all."

"Fine," said Edward, nudging David, who took the next opportunity to illegally U-turn on the highway and head back to Denali. "Charlotte, call your friend at the airport."

"Change the message, don't cancel it," added Jasper. "They should come in ready for a fight, not expecting a welcoming party."

Charlotte dialed obediently and told the messenger her revision: "careful in Denali, there are wolves around and your law-abiding friends won't shoot them, and Charlotte's about to be too busy to answer the phone". The lady at the airport sounded very confused, but promised to tell this information to the pale people Charlotte described.

"Does it matter if they're not in Jacob's pack?" I asked. "They're probably not..."

"Shouldn't," said Jasper.

"Do you really think our little coppertop can interfere with *ten* wolves, well enough to put the rest of us on even footing, without getting hurt?" asked David skeptically.

"With Allirea in there helping, yes," said Jasper. "Unless you've been up to something remarkably interesting in the last five years, David, I remain the person in this car with the most combat experience."

I thought I heard David mutter something about how *he* was the only adult in the car with his entire brain working, but nobody rose to the bait.

He drove us back to Denali, and we all hoped that Jasper was right.

He was wrong.

Here is how Jasper was wrong:

He thought he could fight, while Alice was hostage.

He couldn't.

A couple of wolves held her, and whenever he tried to throw himself into the fray, a claw would pierce or a paw would swipe, and Alice didn't scream, but it didn't matter, because the injuries themselves made a metallic *screech* and he would turn his head, every time, to see what had been broken or damaged, and try to go to her - but that would distract him long enough for someone else to get a blow in, usually Kate.

He thought Eleazar *couldn't* fight.

He could.

Eleazar isn't a *warrior*, but he is a *vampire*, and Allirea isn't, and nobody thought to *stop* Eleazar while he wasn't actively attacking anybody *important*. She was sabotaged by her own power advertising her presence, and I would have thought it was ironic if I'd noticed she was there at the time.

He thought the wolves couldn't hurt me.

They *couldn't* -

But Santiago could. She realized what was going on with her wolves (it actually worked quite well for half a minute, all of them leaping back when I ran in front of them), so she broke my legs and tossed me to a smallish brown wolf with a cream belly to be pinned down. The wolves who weren't pinning people were in the fight for good after that. And then it wasn't much of a fight anymore.

I didn't have a good view and I could barely hear, with the wolf's dinner-plate paw planted on my ear and forcing my head to the ground, and my legs *hurt*, I could barely even make sense of it, I'd never had anything *broken* before, I hadn't *really* taken Saeed seriously when he'd threatened, and they just *kept hurting*. It wasn't the instantly healed flare of accidentally biting my tongue a little; it wasn't the sudden burst that led to nothingness like when I'd been chewing my way out of the net and someone had hit me over the head. It hurt and it went on hurting and then after that it *still hurt*, and even if I'd been pinned facing the fight, I wouldn't have been able to see a lot through the tears prickling my eyes.

Mama, change your mind and turn around, it's not safe, I thought, wishing I had range. *Mama, come save me. Mama, run for your life. Mama, it hurts, I need help.*

Mama, I don't want to be a grownup yet.

Welcomer

I didn't keep track of time while I was under the wolf's paws. I just lay there and hoped my legs would be okay. I knew I could heal fast, but I didn't know how much the ability extended or how smart it was - would my hard skin make it impossible to set the bones without more damage? What if they healed wrong and I couldn't walk again? What if Santiago didn't know anything about half-vampires and broken legs would be fatal for some obscure reason that nobody could predict because we're so rare...?

There was more screeching from broken vampires, more barking and shouting from the fighting wolves, all muffled by paw-pads on one ear and soil on the other, and finally I heard a muffled woman's voice: "Let her up, Brooke."

The paws lifted, but I didn't move, and I screwed my eyes shut. Chilly vampire hands seized my legs one at a time and twisted them and pushed, and that hurt more than the *breaks* had, and I screamed and the wolf who'd been holding me whined.

"There, now," said the woman, and I opened one eye, and it was Santiago, businesslike even as a divot in her neck healed bright white and scarred. "Don't do anything foolish like trying to walk, and that should heal in a day or two, you won't even need casts. Brooke, you're her wheelchair, understand? Go get in uniform and pick her up."

The brown-and-cream wolf nodded once, trotted away, and walked back on two quieter feet. The "uniform" turned out to be a black sleeveless dress-like thing, held together with snaps and velcro that might let it survive a few phasings without tearing. She looked sort of like Quil, same curve to the lips and eyebrows, but even though all the wolves looked the same age she had a younger glint in her eyes. A little sister, maybe. I didn't ask, I just closed my eyes again and let her pick me up.

"Hey, Elspeth," murmured Brooke in my ear, adjusting me in her arms. "You let me know pronto if I jostle you wrong, okay? I don't wanna hurt you. We're just gonna take you home with us, and it'll be okay, all right?"

I made some whining noise, which could have been taken any which way, and stretched my neck just enough to look at the battlefield.

Heaps of vampire bits and shreds of clothes everywhere. Kate was reattaching one of her fingers, Eleazar was staring at what had to be the least interesting item on the ground there, while Carmen smoothed his hair. Tanya was looking away, standing stiffly and holding her arm on while it healed. Some wolves were limping, and one human-shaped one was applying some kind of suction device to a wound on another's shoulder - maybe removing poisonous venom.

Santiago surveyed the damage and frowned thoughtfully. "Harriet, Danielle, Iris," she said finally, "you three get the witches into boxes. We're taking all of them this time, I

don't know what ever *possessed* Addy to leave the empath behind." Three wolves ran off and came back as girls with heavy wooden boxes; they carefully picked up pale shining fragments as Santiago directed and dropped them into the containers. "Wendy, torch the other -"

"Not David," pleaded Carmen. "Please, he's family. We could have argued him around if he hadn't needed innocent thoughts to trick Edward. He'll give you no trouble from now on."

Santiago pursed her lips and eyed Carmen, sizing her up. "He fought us," she pointed out. "Daphne will be out of commission for days from that bite." She inclined her head towards the smallest wolf, the white one with the nasty chunk out of her shoulder and bloodstains pinking the fur on that leg.

"But she's alive," Carmen said. "We can control David."

Santiago looked at Carmen speculatively, and said, "Fine. Wendy, torch the other *two*. Note," she went on, glancing back to the other vampires, "that I'm not the ultimate authority here. My decision can be overridden. But for now, you can keep him." A light brown wolf loped away, and came back in uniform with a lighter in hand. Santiago pointed her to the two piles that I guessed were Peter and Charlotte.

I closed my eyes. "TheywereonlyhereasafavortoJasper," I blurted.

I almost expected to be ignored, but when I peeked, Wendy looked my way, and then at Santiago, and I continued. "They didn't want to come. They only owed Jasper because he helped them a long time ago. If you let them go they'll give up and go home, you've already *got* Jasper and he can't ask them for anything anymore, you don't have to kill them."

"We would be willing to keep an eye on them," Carmen put in swiftly.

"What are you, the Denali Reform Institute for Vampires Who Were Only Criminals That One Time And Might Be Good Now?" asked Wendy in a snide undertone.

"Wendy," said Santiago sharply, and the wolf ducked her head apologetically and mumbled something. Santiago looked back at Carmen. "I'm not confident in your ability to handle all three of them alone. Keep them in pieces, all three, and I'll get in touch with an answer on which, if any, may live before they're liable to starve. If I find you've let them reconstruct themselves before hearing from me or one of my superiors *it will not go well with you*, do you understand?"

"We understand," murmured Tanya.

"Do you care what we do with her?" Eleazar said, pointing downward.

"Who?" asked Santiago blankly.

"I'm pointing at someone," he said. "Do you care what happens to her?"

Santiago peered briefly in the direction his finger was aimed. "Don't waste my time," she said, and Carmen looked confusedly at her mate. Santiago then turned to the three wolves who'd collected bits of Daddy and Jasper and Alice. "Did you get everything?" she asked, and they nodded in unison. "Good. Let's get ready to head out, girls."

The wolves who were still wolf-shaped phased and got into uniforms, and the whole ones put slings and bandages where they needed to be on the damaged ones. "Santiago," Wendy asked after putting her lighter away, "what about the other Cullens on their way here?"

"Why, our allies will receive them as welcome guests, of course," said Santiago, nodding to an uncomfortable Tanya. "And tell them that we must have captured their friends and family at the airport, because they never arrived and David, who went to meet them, never came home. And keep the pieces of David and the other two properly secreted away, because they wouldn't care to find out what happens if they don't. And encourage the rebels to use their home as a base of operations. And send us," she continued with a graceful twist of her hand, "a list, of every far-flung friend and acquaintance that Carlisle and his coven can bring here to help, and every one who he cannot. And do us the kindness of letting us know where we can find the disloyal in convenient, manageable groups, as when they go hunting or recruiting."

The Denalis were silent, and Santiago prodded, "Isn't that what you'll do? I highly recommend it," and Tanya nodded. Santiago looked at her, and then said, "Harriet, perhaps you should get another box for David. We can look after him in Volterra."

Carmen bit her lip, Tanya clenched her fists, Eleazar turned away, and Kate bowed her head, but no one protested while Harriet fetched a fourth box and gathered David's twitching shards into it, piece by piece. "Now then," said Santiago, when that task was complete. "I think it's time we went home, girls."

Santiago and the wolves had a big military-type helicopter, which Danielle piloted. Brooke held me and sat on the edge of a row of seats so no one would nudge my legs accidentally. They still throbbed, but by the time the helicopter lifted off into the air, the pain was starting to ease marginally. "We're gonna get you home to Jacob," Brooke promised. "He'll be so happy to see you! He was completely frantic, our pack and Rachel's had to absorb his wolves temporarily because he was com-*plete*-ly out of control. I wonder if we're gonna have to permanently reorg once he's better," she mused, pursing her lips.

"What's going to happen to me?" I asked, hating how squeaky I sounded.

"Oh, oh Elspeth honey, you're gonna be okay!" Brooke said. "I promise! Don't be scared! You're an *imprint*. You're an *alpha's* imprint. That makes you so special, you have

no idea, you are looking at a *really nice* setup. You get to live in the village and you don't even have to work or anything like we do, you just have to spend some time with Jacob so he's not, you know, I'd make the swirling-my-finger-around-my-ear gesture but I'm not supposed to put you down."

"Village?"

"Mm-hm. That's where the wolves and the imprints and the puppies all live," Brooke explained. "And Cody, that's where they put him too, but he's in East with the Clearwaters - except I have no idea where any of us are gonna wind up after the reorg if there is a reorg, it's kind of complicated."

"East?" Brooke sounded like she was trying to be informative, but she wasn't very good at it.

"The village has four sections, East and West and South and North," she replied. "They've got nicknames but *I* think we should call them by the *proper* names that Santiago and Felix and Afton and Corin use." She nodded smartly, looking very proud of herself for this. "East is for Rachel's pack, and West is for us - we're Becky's. The pack members who don't have imprints, I mean. Boys with imprints, from whatever pack, live in South, and the puppies, if they don't have families to live with, live in North."

"You keep saying 'puppies'..."

"The kids who can't activate yet," Brooke said. "That's just what we call them, since they're not just ordinary kids, but they aren't wolves *yet*, either. From the reservation back when, or who were picked up since, or who were *born* since. Every now and then one grows up enough and goes *floof* and then somebody's got a new packmate. Ashleigh just joined up with Rachel's crew last month. We had a party for her."

"Why," I asked, glancing at the rows of girls, all in the same uniforms with short haircuts and athletes' shapes, "are there only girls here?"

"We're a field team," explained Brooke. "We're not going to spontaneously imprint, so it's safer to have us running all hither and yon - 'hither and yon', isn't that funny? Afton says it all the time." She said Afton's name like he was her favorite teacher, or wise general, or something. "The boys who aren't imprinted stay home, so if they see some girl she's right there where Chelsea can look at her and bring her into the village. And the boys who *are* imprinted are supposed to be making puppies." She giggled. I wondered how old she was.

"It doesn't... bother you at all, that Chelsea does what she does?"

"Yeah, like *that's* a big deal in the grand scheme of things," scoffed Brooke. She tilted her head self-consciously. "I don't think I'm any good at talking about the 'grand scheme of things' and making it sound right. Corin does it better. Anyway, Chelsea's on our side. We're like cops! Magical wolf cops who stop vampires from going on huge rampages and turning everybody they see and destabilizing the world by being all chatty

about it! We've already got Alpha orders from an Alpha no one picked because she was just born that way, and the boys have imprints which are totally random, there is so *much* wacky brain magic flying around in our heads that I'm glad at least *some* of it is directed by a *person* and not the *forces of the universe*." She frowned. "Corin does the "forces of the universe" thing better too. He's got a really *grand* way of talking, you know? You'll see when you meet him."

"Is Chelsea going to do anything to me?" I asked nervously.

"Probably a little," Brooke predicted. "I mean, you ran away the one time, and that was really hurtful to Jacob, and he's important. So she'll want to make sure that you can be happy in the village and not want to run away anymore. But without Chelsea, you'd still have to stay in the village, you see? You'd just need to be under guard all the time. It's better her way because you get more freedom of movement. And maybe you wish we didn't need you, but that's not *Chelsea's* fault, it's just that Jacob imprinted on you."

"But I don't *want* Chelsea to do anything to me," I said. "Doesn't that matter? To you or her or anyone?"

"Well, you know they'll never trust you alone like that, but I guess you could ask," said Brooke. She looked like she wanted to shrug, but this might have jostled me, and she was keeping quite still to avoid that.

"How old are you?" I asked, finally.

"Fifteen," said Brooke brightly. "I activated three years ago."

She would have been nine or ten when the Volturi swept into La Push. Nine or ten when they killed her family. Nine or ten when they took her to Volterra. Nine or ten when Chelsea made her not care about who she'd lost and twisted her to look up to the leaders they provided.

I wanted to be sick, but I can't actually throw up. (I tried once when I went out for brunch with a bunch of human friends and they all got food poisoning, except me, and I thought it was conspicuous.)

"Are you okay, Elspeth?" Brooke asked. She had large, dark eyes, full of concern that was probably genuine on some level. "Did I hurt you? It's a little choppy today, usually Olivia drives the helicopter but she got injured in Omaha so Beatrice took her home early."

I didn't answer her. I pretended to fall asleep instead, and after a while I really did.

When I woke up, I was on an airplane instead of a helicopter, and a different wolf girl was holding me. "Wha?" I said groggily.

"Brooke's sleeping, I'm Quinn," she said. "We only took the helicopter to the airport and then we switched to the plane, if you're wondering why it got more beige around here all of a sudden."

"Oh. Where are we now?" I heard wolves chatting with each other - such *normal*-sounding conversations, about somebody's baby and somebody else's knitting project and some third person's idea for a vacation to Rome.

"Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. Do you need food? We've got food in here," Quinn told me.

"I could eat," I admitted.

"What do you eat?" she asked. "We've got all kinds of stuff."

"Anything, I'm not picky - assuming you mean regular food."

"Yeah, I mean regular food. Iris!" called Quinn. "Would you bring something for Elspeth to eat over here?"

Iris, presumably nearest the food, fetched an assortment of things and I started with an apple. I was glad my arms weren't broken; at least I could feed myself. My legs were feeling better too, although they still ached faintly.

"We'll be in the village in six, maybe seven hours all told," said Quinn. "Word from home is that you and Jacob get a suite - two bedrooms, he insisted, just like Brooke's brother and his seven-year-old - in South. There's plenty of extra room in the village since they were planning all along to have a growing population. So they don't even have to dig out a new home for you, which is good, because Addy's busy."

"It's... underground?" I asked between finishing my apple and accepting a tub of chicken salad.

"Yeah. But it's nice," she assured me. "Carved out of bedrock, not, like, dirt. And we have plumbing and electricity and Internet and good ventilation, there's skylights in most rooms - with one-way glass at the top, so anyone who wanders over us thinks there's just a lot of mirrors set into a field for some reason. I think it might be passed off as an art installation or something, actually, I haven't been up top to look for a placard. We get in through tunnels a ways from the village itself."

At least I would be imprisoned in a *nice* place.

I didn't make any more attempt at conversation; eventually Quinn struck up a chat with Iris about Iris's plans to redecorate West's lounge. I thought about ways to escape the plane. But even if I got away from Quinn in spite of my hurt legs and managed to leap out, I'd land in the ocean and eventually drown if I was left to my own devices. If I waited until we were overland, Santiago could easily follow me to the ground, catch me there,

and find some less humane way to transport me to Italy.

Maybe I could get Jacob to help me escape, like Pera had done with Brady.

Maybe Chelsea really would leave my brain alone, and then I'd be able to think straight about what to do at my leisure.

Maybe Mama wouldn't be fooled at Denali, and she'd run away and think of a way to save me.

Maybe I would just live under a rock for the rest of eternity, prevented from even *wanting* to leave.

I finished my chicken salad, and before I started on the carrots Iris handed over, I put my hand on my face. *I love my mama*, one of me signed at the other of me. *That's true. Remember that, okay, me? No matter what.*

For the first time, the other me answered. *It's true*, she signed in reply. But that was all she said.

The wolves slept in shifts. By the time the plane landed, Quinn had handed me back over to Brooke, who'd since woken. We transferred from the plane to a bus. Brooke took this opportunity to tell me the village rules.

"You'll probably be allowed Internet. Puppies aren't except supervised in lessons, since they don't know how to follow the rules about being secret properly, but imprints all have it, but they might not be letting Claire, but you're more mature than her, even though you're younger. So you'll probably be allowed it. Food and your room are free, but you get some money for other stuff. It's denominated in euros but you can get some of it in dollars if you want something from America, or whatever other kind of money if you want something from someplace else. If you want more money you can do a job. You probably can't be on a field team, but you could babysit or teach puppies their lessons or cook or run errands outside - if they decide you're okay to let out, I mean, that'll probably depend - or whatever. If you have a problem with anybody you're supposed to go to your alpha first - but in your case that'd be Jacob so maybe he's not so impartial, so you might get told to go to one of the vampires first thing."

"The ones who are usually there are Santiago, Corin, Afton, and Felix?" I clarified.

"They're in charge - they take field teams out and basically run the place - but I don't know about "usually there" so much. They don't *live* with us, they live way down the northwest tunnel in the main compound. At least one of those four is there part of every day. And Chelsea visits once a day, during the assembly. You have to go to those, everybody who's home during an assembly is supposed to go."

"Does anything happen during an assembly *besides* Chelsea doing... her thing?" I

asked.

"Yeah, of course," said Brooke, sounding surprised that I'd ask. "People - Rachel and Becky usually - make announcements about stuff, and since the village was started we've come up with traditions, except I guess it's a little silly to call things five years old traditions, but they'll be traditions in like, I don't know how long it takes, fifty years? But there's a few people who play instruments or sing - Gwyn dances! She got Santiago to teach her, Santiago is *really* good but doesn't perform usually - and sometimes they'll do that. And we have birthday parties if it's someone's birthday, and if somebody's marrying his imprint that happens during assembly too, and there's activation parties when a puppy gets old enough to phase. There was a funeral once, too," she added soberly.

"Who died?" I whispered.

"Eve Greene. She was one of Rachel's. Her brother Albert still is," said Brooke. "Bad vampires killed her in the field, three years ago. Albert named his daughter after her when she was born last year."

"Oh."

Brooke's natural cheer reasserted itself after a moment, and she went on. "In South quiet hours are from ten at night to eight in the morning. Everybody knows English but a lot of us are at least working on Italian - most of the puppies know both - and some people have some other language, to get along in other countries. Most people do their own laundry but a couple of the puppies will do it for you, for pocket money, if you want. Huh, I don't know what else you need to know, I moved in so long ago. You'll pick it up."

I didn't ask her any more questions, and after a long digression about how she was saving up her money to buy a new loveseat for her room but might change her mind and blow it all on a private stash of candy instead, Brooke finally fell silent.

In spite of the descriptions Brooke and Quinn had provided of the village, I'd worked myself up to the point where I honestly expected it to be a forbidding and dank network of cellars.

It wasn't. It was quite dry, and full of natural light, and while the stone itself was pale beige, a lot of the walls were painted - some flat colors, some murals, including some that were probably by puppies. Most of the doors had handmade signs on them, including names - Brooke pointed out her door to me on our way, and it turned out that she shared it with Daphne, the small wolf who'd been bitten. "You have to earn a single room," sighed Brooke. "I like Daph', but she snores. I roomed with Catherine before, but when Daphne activated there was a whole room shuffle and Harriet moved into a single for totally *owning* a bad vampire *by herself it was amazing*, and I got Daphne. She'll probably be sick for a week," added Brooke sadly. "Bites are *not fun*. I only got one that bad one time before, but I had a nip on my ear once too, and Afton had to clip out a notch to keep it

from spreading. But then Embry told me my notch was cute. Embry is *dreamy*," she confided in a whisper.

Brooke walked me around the entire village so I'd learn my way around, on the grounds that Jacob was still sleeping. ("Alec had to put him under for a while because he was so worried about you," Brooke said, "and that messed with his sleep patterns a lot. He'll probably even be excused from assembly this evening.")

I watched children playing hide-and-seek in a brightly furnished playroom in North. ("The nickname for it is Nursery if you're being nice and "Norphanage" if you're not," Brooke explained.) I spotted Ruth there, and she recognized me and waved. ("Even puppies with parents play there a lot of the time; they just don't live there," I was informed.) In the halls, coming and going every which way, were wolves, in and out of uniform - there were white uniforms as well as black, which I guessed were linked to pack - and in and out of fur. All the halls and doorways and rooms were more than spacious enough to fit wolves.

I spotted more faces I recognized in South - Quil with Claire on his shoulders, Victor in deep discussion with a white-uniformed fellow, Emily carrying Paige into the room labeled "Sam, Emily, & Paige Uley". They all greeted me, but didn't seem especially interested in pausing to chat or even asking why I was being carried. I wondered if Chelsea had snipped their interest in me, in case I couldn't be retrieved and they had to make... some kind of alternate arrangement for Jacob.

I saw Cody's name next to Seth's on a door in East. Leah had a single, across the hall - "Leah is Rachel's first beta," Brooke said. "Betas are second-in-command and can take over if the alpha is asleep or sick or hurt. Rachel and Becky both have two - Leah and Vivian, and Olivia and Harriet."

A lot of the tour was like that, just names, cascading after each other. I filed them all away in my memory. Once I'd been introduced to the South laundry room, I asked Brooke, "How many people live here, anyway?"

"Hmm," she said. "There's nineteen of us in Becky's pack if you don't count the wolves from Jacob's that we're borrowing. And nineteen in Rachel's, also not counting Jacob's. Jacob and his are eight more wolves and seven more imprints counting you, but Esperanza doesn't live here yet, and she might not later either, since they're gonna turn her but Chelsea has *lots* of work to do first, since if she wants to leave after they turn her it'd be *really* hard to stop her. I dunno what the plan is there. But let's count her. And Jacob's pack brought three puppies -"

"Three?" I interrupted.

"Three," said Brooke. "I didn't learn their names yet. Sam has one, and Darren has one, and Victor has one, right?"

Natalie. I bit my lip. "There was another one. Victor has two daughters."

"Well, I guess I could have just not noticed her," offered Brooke, although she seemed more confused about my distress than about the possibility that an entire baby had gone missing. "And our pack has two imprints and nine puppies, and Becky's has three imprints and nine puppies, and there are twenty-one orphan puppies in North."

"Two imprints had *nine* kids in *five years*?" I asked.

"No," said Brooke. "Iris and Danielle already had their kids - one each - before they activated. The imprints in our pack only have seven between them. Iris still lives in West with us, not in South like boys with imprints, but she has a room for her and her kid. Danielle's married to another wolf, from before activating, but he's in Rachel's pack so if he ever imprints there's not so much drama, and they live in South together. A couple of Rachel's other wolves had kids before too. Like, Shawn had two kids before he activated, and then later he imprinted and had two more, and Vivian has one. So let's see..."

I did the arithmetic. "An even hundred, if you count me and Pera, and not Victor's baby," I murmured.

"Oh, hey, cool, round number," enthused Brooke.

A bell, signaling the time for assembly, rang just as Brooke had finished walking me through the halls of West. "Ooh," she said, walking more briskly; she probably would have jogged if it wouldn't have risked bouncing me uncomfortably. My legs were mostly healed, but I still didn't like the idea of sharp movement.

Rachel - who still wore the fluffy haircut Mama had described - announced that once her brother was deemed fit for duty, all of his original wolves would be returned to him except Zachary, whom she was retaining in her own pack. For gender balance purposes, she and Becky were each planning to transfer two female wolves to him; girls were invited to volunteer but would be chosen from on high if no one did. The next female activations were also planned to be assigned to Jacob.

"For the time being," Rachel said, "everyone will stay in the rooms they have now, although new uniforms are in the works - brown, to keep up with the fur color theme." She winked at the audience. "When things have settled down up in the compound and Addy has the time, she's going to carve out a new wing that we'll probably call Southeast or something similarly unimaginative, because everyone knows we *always* call the wings by the appropriate cardinal directions." Most of the white-uniformed wolves - clustered to one side of the hall in which the assembly was held - chuckled. Brooke pouted virtuously. I noted that even the people not in uniform seemed to have a lot of black or white in their outfits, depending. I wondered if I'd be going around in brown a couple of weeks later.

Then Rachel announced my presence. She summarized who I was - "You guys remember Bella Swan-subsequently-Cullen, right? The first wave knows who I mean!" There was some scattered laughter. I didn't know what they thought was funny. "Elspeth's

her half-vampire daughter. She's got a long fascinating story that leads up to my baby brother imprinting on her, so she's one of us now. I expect everybody to welcome her the way we welcome every new imprint, and not to pester her while she's settling in. You can talk to anyone else in Jacob's pack and learn whatever you need to know - or talk to Cody, who's bunking with his brother Seth in case you've forgotten. And Elspeth," said Rachel, addressing me directly, "you'll need to see Chelsea personally after assembly, okay? Okay." I shivered, but Rachel had already moved on. She introduced a group of children who sang lispingly, and then it seemed to be over.

Brooke carried me towards the only vampire in the hall, a tall, elegant woman in a blue sundress. She had dark blonde hair with gray streaks in it at the temples, gathered into a ponytail - she must have been getting on a bit by the time she was turned. Or she colored it that way on purpose. Or she'd grayed early. I didn't know why I was bothering to speculate about her hair. It was probably her least important feature, considering. "Hello, Elspeth," she said. "My name is Chelsea. I'm so sorry we didn't have a chance to meet the last time you were in town." She had a vaguely pleasant smile on her face.

"I - I - I -" I needed to ask her to leave me alone, find some credible way to promise to stay in the village without tampering, and I was too terrified to spit it out. "I -"

"I'm sure Brooke has shown you everything you need," Chelsea went on, "but of course you can ask anyone here for help finding anything you might have trouble locating. Your suite already has some basic furniture in it, but it's all hand-me-downs. You and Jacob should work out what you want in your suite together. He's not going to have any significant work occupying his time to start out."

"I -"

"You look nervous," she observed. "I don't mean to frighten you. I really do want the best for everyone here, yourself included. I promise that whatever terrible stories you've heard about what I do, it's not so bad. You didn't feel a thing, did you?"

"What?" I managed.

Chelsea tilted her head, the same mild smile shaping her lips.

"I wanted to ask - Brooke said maybe if I asked - *please don't* -" I exclaimed in a panic.

"Too late," said Chelsea, expression perfectly calm. She lifted a hand and brought her first two fingers together with a faint clicking noise, twice. "Snip, snip."

Villager

Chelsea wasn't done with me immediately. The "snip snip" part was fast - bolstering the relationships she *wanted* me to have took longer. Brooke stood patiently, cradling me, while I tried to rally my scattered thoughts and think of something to *do*.

Seeds. Chelsea needed "*seeds*" to do any more damage, to work in the opposite direction - and why hadn't I felt anything, surely this should *feel like something* - where did I hear the thing about seeds? That didn't matter, I'd heard it, it felt like reliable information. But what counted as a seed? If I felt sorry for Brooke, would that be enough for Chelsea to make me think Brooke was my best friend whose loyalties I should adopt as my own and who I couldn't bear to betray? If I missed Cody, was that enough for her to erase the notion that there had been anything about his abandoning the free pack I should disapprove of? Just how did she *work*? How did I make the seeds go away, if I even could?

It still didn't feel like anything. I couldn't even tell what was happening, or how quickly, or where it was too late and where I still had a chance to interfere if that was even possible. Chelsea just looked at me with that unchanging, soft smile, and murmured inanities about how Jacob and I would be responsible for keeping our suite clean, and how I could submit requests to the cafeteria staff if I wanted specific dishes, and how I was to be allowed internet but would need to pay for a computer on my own if I didn't want to borrow other people's...

A couple of minutes went by with this one-sided small talk. "I think that will do," Chelsea said. "To begin with, at least. Brooke can take you to Jacob."

I did want to see Jacob. I felt bad about running off without him. He had to have been out of his mind with worry, and while I felt helpless in a lot of ways, I knew I was the only person qualified to make him feel better. Brooke smiled at Chelsea, then ducked her head politely - I had the impression that she'd have bowed, if she hadn't been trying to carry me comfortably - and turned to take me back to South from the assembly room.

"Do you think he'll be awake?" I asked Brooke. We turned into the hall where my and Jacob's suite was. We were right next to Quil and Claire on one side, and Albert Greene - the one whose sister had died - and his imprint and daughter on the other. Across the hall were Jared and Kim.

"By now, if he's not awake yet, you can wake him. Can you get the door? My hands are full," she teased, and I reached out and turned the handle.

The door opened into a small living space, with more doors leading to a bathroom and two bedrooms. All the doors were open, and I could see Jacob, sprawled sleeping on top of a crazy-quilt. "Jacob?" I said.

"Bwuh?" He yawned hugely and opened his eyes, then broke into a huge grin.

"Elsbeth!" He hauled himself to his feet and walked around the little table in the living area, but then brought himself up short. "Why is Brooke carrying you?"

I decided that no good could come of setting him at Santiago's throat. If nothing else, he'd get torn to bits if he tried to go after her for revenge. I didn't expect it to happen again and I was nearly healed, anyway. "There was a fight. I got in the way, and my legs were hurt, but they're almost set right. I should be walking just fine in the morning," I said, which was all true and would probably not get anyone killed.

"Here, you can hold her," Brooke offered, and Jacob carefully transferred me from her arms to his. I thanked her, and she smiled at me perkily and left us alone.

"How're you doing?" Jacob asked, softly.

I sighed a deep sigh. "It's been a very long ten days. I guess it should calm down from here, shouldn't it?"

It did.

The next day was the first of June. When I woke up, I tentatively put weight on one foot, then the other, and found myself in normal working order. Jacob was still asleep. In fact, everyone was still asleep, with the probable exception of Cody. I let myself out of the suite and wandered the halls. It was peaceful, although I got lonely soon after leaving the suite. Not wanting to be alone, nor inclined to wake anybody up, I veered over to East in case Cody was out of his and Seth's room.

He wasn't when I passed the door, but it opened in response to my footfalls and Cody stepped out. "I thought that might be you, O world's most interesting half-vampire," he said softly, and then he smiled and held his arms forth for a hug.

I hugged him readily. "Good morning," I said. "What is there for early birds to do around here?"

Cody showed me where in the cafeteria the midnight snacks were kept. "But if you can, it'd be a good idea to start actually eating three meals a day," he said. "A lot of the social life around here seems to happen at mealtimes, which feels weird to me even though I know it's perfectly ordinary, because we didn't usually have *meals* back when we were meandering around in the hiding place. So far all I've managed is to eat light when I wake up and then eat again at lunchtime, but I'm working on it."

I nibbled on fruit and crackers to imitate this pattern; he'd already had his breakfast, but sat with me and talked about being with his siblings again. "I got older, and I look like I got more older than I did," he laughed. "They look exactly the same as they did when I left - well, maybe Seth is a little more filled out now. But sometimes Leah'll call me "Cody-kiddo" or Seth'll pull a goofy face, and it's like I'm a month old again asking for wolf rides. Got one, too, for old time's sake, my second day here. Seth careened through

the halls like somebody set his fur on fire and this could be solved by running very fast. Public safety warning: being on fire cannot be solved by running very fast."

I giggled. "Are you doing any of the jobs?" I asked.

"Yeah, actually, or - sort of," Cody replied. "It's unconventional... I'm now the designated guy-who-turns-people-who-need-turning. Vampires have *way* more trouble than we do controlling themselves around blood. Even old, well-fed vampires, compared to halvesies even just my age or yours, are a little more likely to bite and then *swallow*. So it's safer to have me do the job."

"Really?"

"No, I'm kidding," he said, grinning at me. "Silly goose - they're all about the highly medicalized turnings now, syringes and whatnot. Plus I'm not sure I'd like to be the one to chomp Pera and she's next on the docket. Her and Brady are actually *in* the compound right now. They aren't taking any chances. She's really important."

"Where are they going to live after she turns?" I asked.

"I don't think that's been decided yet. I guess she'll probably hang around here part of every day - maybe even help run the village - but sometimes, especially when Brady's asleep I bet, she'll be up in the compound with the other vampires. I guess it depends on how her turning affects the imprint, though."

"You think it would?"

"Might. I don't think any werewolf would imprint on a vampire in the *first* place, you know? Given that they supposedly imprint on people who'll be able to have their kids?" His sentence lost some of its momentum in the last clause, and he gave me an awkward look.

"It turns out half-vampires can have kids, actually," I said. "At least with vampires or humans. Noemi has at least one kid, with a vampire dad."

"Oh, huh," Cody said. "If you only know about the one kid of hers, how do you know that humans can work as the other parent?"

I blinked. "I just heard it somewhere. And it makes sense, doesn't it? Anyway, *are* you doing a job? Since you're *not* the official venom dispenser?"

"No," he said. "I've thought about it. Leah's a beta, and Seth's not imprinted so he's one of the tunnel guards, keeping an eye out for humans who find their way in through one of the entrances. So they both work, but I don't know what I want to do, and it's not like I *have* to get a job if I don't want. I can just live off the state," he added with a roguish wink. "Retire at age five. What about you?"

"I have the impression that 'imprint' is actually considered a job all by itself, but as

for what I'll *do*, I don't know," I said. "I guess I'll settle in and see if I naturally fall into anything. Maybe something with the children."

"Don't call them that," advised Cody. "They think 'child' is only for young *humans*, and they'll be insulted and correct you." He imitated one of them: "I'm not a *child*! Childs grow up and be *humans* but I'm *not* gonna be one of those, I'll be a *wolf*, so I'm a puppy, okay?" Dropping the impression, he said, "A couple imprints are holding out on the terminology, but the ones who are, all speak Italian most of the time, so they don't even use the exact word 'child'."

"*Bambini*," I informed him.

"Right. I'm working on Italian, a little. You *can* get along with just English, in the village - not that *you* need to, polyglot whiz. There's only four Italian imprints, and the puppies are all being brought up bilingual. But if I ever want to be able to go look around topside, I'd rather not be one of those obnoxious Americans trying to make myself understood across a language barrier by speaking loudly and slowly."

"Who's teaching you?"

"Seth. He's pretty good with it - he goes up top sometimes, although he has to go with somebody to be sure he doesn't run off into the sunset with an imprint instead of bringing her home. He needs to bring a partner when he guards the tunnels too."

"Do humans get in often?"

"I don't know exactly how often, but there's an entrance that goes up to the back room of a pawnshop, and Seth told me that last month a couple of teenagers got past the proprietor - he's human, but he knows some things - and went down. Seth and Albert, who was with him, caught them."

"What... happened to them?" I asked, softly.

"Well, they got caught right at the ladder that leads down from the pawnshop, so Seth and Albert were all 'hey, you can't be down here, this is private property', and the humans didn't see anything, they just went right back up and the pawnshop guy chased them out with an old candlestick."

"*Oh*," I said, relieved. "I was worried they'd have been eaten, or something."

"Not if they don't see something they shouldn't," replied Cody. "But if they *do* see something they shouldn't - or if they won't leave when they're told to - or if they pull a gun on the guard, Seth said that happened a couple of years ago - then, yeah, that's the only way." Cody sighed. "I mean, the vampires do have to eat. People who know too much are the obvious menu item, right? I guess they could just kill them without eating them, but that would be a waste - and the Volturi aren't going to run a private, secret prison at their own expense just because some people sneak into the back room of a shop and ignore all the bright red signs saying to keep out and then won't even leave when

they're told. Right?"

"Right," I said. I don't eat humans myself and don't plan to start, but if one is *going* to eat humans, one has to pick them out somehow. My mother used to justify my father's history of human-eating by pointing out that he could read their minds and choose evil ones. Trespassers aren't quite in that category, maybe, but compared to random people off the street it's probably better.

Peter and Charlotte probably ate random people off the street, and same with the Irish coven, and Huilen and Nahuel and probably Nahuel's sisters. And all told, when I think about it, I don't think I've *ever* been informed that whether somebody has eaten or currently eats humans is a great way to figure out if they're nice or not. Vampires are just people-eating creatures, and even most *vegetarian* ones at least *used* to eat people. My mother was all set to eat Pera, even though she'd never eaten anybody before.

Poor Pera was scared out of her wits. I decided to apologize to her after I saw her next, since it was partly my fault she'd been attacked like that. Pera's one of us.

I was back in my room by the time Jacob woke up, with a book I borrowed from the library in North. The library is really there for the puppies' lessons - Brooke told me, during the tour - and so it mostly has kids' stuff, but there were some things I never read before, and anyone in the village can borrow a book from it if they want. If I want more interesting books I'll need to buy them. Vivian, from Rachel's pack, handles payroll and allowances for the whole village (Brooke told me that too, I'm so glad for Brooke, without her having told me everything I'd be so lost), so I decided to go to her and ask for my allowance, after talking to Jacob about what to put in the suite.

Jacob was hungry when he got up, so we went to breakfast, and I had the tiniest possible helping of scrambled eggs to try to get used to eating on everyone else's schedule, even though I was mostly full from eating in the early morning. We were there before most of the crowd. Brooke came over and sat with us, and said she was going to volunteer to move to Jacob's pack, to be in the same pack as her brother Quil. She said that almost all siblings are in the same packs as each other, but one exception is Darren, Grace, and Ian. Darren's still in Jacob's pack and Grace might volunteer to move, but Ian's a boy so he can't offer to move with her. But they might give him special permission to transfer, she said. Brady's brother might do the same thing.

Quinn came over and sat with us too, and I found out that she's Sam's cousin. I asked her if she would change packs too and she said she might, and then we speculated for the rest of the meal about who from Rachel's pack besides Grace would be moving. Brooke thought it might be Ashleigh, since she had only just joined her pack and might not be attached to them yet, but Quinn thought it would be Vivian, since she's Jared's sister. Jacob said he didn't think Vivian would move, because she's a beta, but he might try to trade Jared for Ian if Grace moved into his pack, so all the siblings could be together. We all thought that was a good idea. It was like a soap opera, with so many *names*, but at least

I could remember them all. Jacob kept calling Quinn "Gwyn", by mistake, just because their names rhyme.

I felt pleasantly lightheaded all through breakfast, and I wasn't sure why. I couldn't remember feeling *quite* like that ever before, except maybe when I was very small and lived in Denali. I walked with Jacob back to our rooms, and there were people everywhere, coming to have a later breakfast or leaving the cafeteria ahead of us. I didn't recognize everyone yet, but they all smiled at me when we passed, and I knew I'd learn who everyone was soon enough.

Then it occurred to me.

I had a *whole village* full of friends, and I could tell *anybody* I met *anything* at all.

Every single person who walked by me in the hall and smiled was safe to talk to. Or show anything I wanted to show. I didn't have to keep *any* secrets, not one, from anybody I'd be likely to see in the next *month*. Everybody could know my real name, and where I really came from, and what I'm really like, and what I really *am*, and I didn't have to hold back or evade or leave out key sentences.

I wasn't allowed to leave, yet, but in the most important way, I was *free, free, free*.

As soon as I thought of this, I felt something a little strange in the back of my mind. It was like my *magic* itched. I decided that this was probably because I'd left things out when I told Jacob about how my legs had gotten hurt. Since I was walking just fine, I went ahead and filled him in when we got to our suite.

"I didn't tell you the whole story about how my legs got broken," I said. He looked at me attentively, waiting for me to go on; I considered words, but finally I just put my hand out, and showed him.

"David bit Daphne," he observed slowly, after the memory was through.

"Yes," I said, frowning. "I don't know if he *knew* it was poison to wolves, but really, there's no creature venom is *good* for, let alone *biting*. He was really trying to hurt her. Daphne's only thirteen!"

Jacob shook his head slowly. "You were going very fast. I'd *rather* Santiago got you out of the fighting without hurting you, but from what you saw that might not have been possible, or one of the wolves could have done it herself... but I'd rather you weren't fighting at *all*, and that part wasn't Santiago's fault."

I nodded. "If I hadn't been involving myself because of that stupid plan Jasper thought up, Santiago wouldn't have hurt me a bit. And then she set my legs right away. I was just afraid you'd be furious with her for breaking them in the first place, so I didn't tell you yesterday. I'm sorry."

"I know she's not going to do it again," he assured me, and he reached out and I

hugged him. "You know," he added, "that's the first memory you've ever shown me."

"Oh, wow, you're right," I said. "How strange. Do you want to see something else?"

"Of course," he said, so I touched his cheek again and began to show him the story of my life.

Chelsea doesn't affect moods directly.

She doesn't have to.

I had a lovely day. I spent the morning showing memories to Jacob and then joined him for lunch. We sat with Cody and Seth and Leah, and Seth was sweet and Leah nearly as funny as Cody. I went next door to meet my neighbors. Albert's imprint was home with their baby Eve. The imprint's name is Amanda; she's Canadian, and was in Italy as a tourist when Albert saw her. She wears her hair in miniature dreadlocks and works in the cafeteria during the dinner shift and has a bookshelf full of mystery novels. She loaned me a stack of those, and her laptop.

I went and got my allowance and picked up Jacob's for him, too, and we spent the afternoon shopping on the borrowed computer. He wanted to replace his tacky quilt, and I needed more clothes. Even though I could have asked any girl I happened to run into in the hall and been invited to borrow something out of her closet, I'm too thin to wear anything that will fit a wolf, and the puppies are too small. The only imprint close to my size is Thea. I tracked her down - she was in North with Noah, letting her son play next to a couple of other puppies - and asked her if I could borrow something, but she told me that she'd ordered clothes online that hadn't arrived in the mail yet, and was borrowing what she had on herself. I tried Amanda next, and she's shorter and plumper than I am, but she let me have her skinny jeans and a couple of t-shirts and a nightgown, which I thought would work well enough until a shipment of my own showed up.

I was halfway through parceling out my allowance on clothes when Jacob wanted dinner, and I went with him, and we sat with Brooke and Quil and Claire. It was nice that Brooke finally had her brother back, and Claire took to her very promptly. Claire had been in the puppies' lessons most of the day, and chattered happily about how she was good at cursive and it was curly and she wanted to make a new sign for her and Quil's room in script.

Being a social creature is *hard*. Figuring out who likes you and who doesn't, and who wants to help you and who doesn't, and who *you* like and don't, and what *you* want to do for others and what you don't, and keeping track of which of your friends get along with each other and which don't - it's exhausting and it's difficult and it's almost impossible to get right every time.

Chelsea makes it easy.

Some people are more than friends. There are wolves with imprints, and the two wolves who are married to each other. There are brothers and sisters, and cousins, and parents and children, and aunts and uncles. There are roommates, and packmates, and people who were friends before there even *was* a village.

But everybody is *at least* friends. Every single villager. Chelsea made it happen.

And everything follows from that.

Assembly was a couple of hours after dinner. Iris's daughter Kirsten turned eight, and we all sang for her. And I thought, *Just think, if I had gotten away when I wanted to, I would have missed Kirsten's birthday, and that would be awful.*

Becky announced that Brooke and Quinn would be leaving her pack to go to Jacob's, and Rachel announced that Gwyn and Grace would be doing the same, and all three alphas and the four transfers got in wolf form to make that happen smoothly. And I thought, *If Santiago and the field team hadn't been there to take me here when I went to Denali, I wouldn't have gotten to see Jacob finally have girls in his pack, and then who would tease him?*

I did tease him, and he laughed. Then Becky announced that Miles's imprint, Esta, was pregnant with their fourth puppy, and was due in November. That was it for assembly, and I caught Esta's eye on the way out and asked (in Italian) what she was going to name the baby. She asked if I had any suggestions, and told me that the ones she already had were called Prima and Venitia and Luzio, and since those are all Italian names, I said I liked Marietta for a girl or Pietro for a boy, and she liked my ideas. And I thought, *If I weren't here, I wouldn't have gotten to help name Miles and Esta's baby!*

But I was there, and so I got to help her pick names, and I got to tease Jacob about government regulations around equal-opportunity employment, and I got to be there when Kirsten blew out her eight candles.

Back in South, I gave Amanda her computer back, and spent the evening with a mystery novel in one hand and my other hand on Jacob's face, sending him more of my life story. I wasn't doing any fancy compression or translation, and it was all real memories and not composed hypothetical situations, so I could do both at once. I was four chapters into Amanda's book when I yawned hugely and wanted to go to bed. I told Jacob that he could watch my dreams, if he wanted - "But don't stay up all night watching them," I cautioned. "You need sleep too." He promised, and so I changed into the borrowed nightshirt and then he tucked me in and folded up my hand in his. He looked so happy, and I was sorry all over again for leaving him alone when he needed me.

And I thought, *If I had abandoned the pack with my mother when she wanted me to, Jacob would be going out of his mind with loneliness right now. And then what kind of friend would I be?*

I decided, in the moments before I fell asleep, that in the future I would be a *good*

friend.

And then I yawned again, and closed my eyes.

In the village, we only hear a little, every now and then, about what's going on in the compound.

Chelsea doesn't speak to us much when she comes to assembly - she'll always smile, of course, and answer anyone who talks to her first, but we all know that if Afton is there she'd rather be talking to him and if he isn't she wants to rush home to him as soon as she's done with her work.

Afton, on the other hand, is very talkative, but not so much about what's happening up the tunnel. He tells stories that are centuries old, or made up entirely; or he'll make general remarks about how this or that aphorism is true or misleading or meaningless. Or if Chelsea is around he'll come up with new ways to say how much he loves her. Everyone loves Chelsea, but he's hers first, and they're really sweet together.

Santiago is too businesslike for much chat. The most she ever opens up is when she gives Gwyn dance lessons. I asked to join in on those, and Santiago said I should learn from Gwyn first until I was closer to her in skill level and then she'd see about including me in the class, so I started meeting Gwyn three times a week after lunch when she wasn't too busy with work to dance.

Felix talks, but only to the wolves and only about fighting and strategy. He organizes tournaments and lessons and things like that, and he's gone with field teams more than the other three who ever take them out. He's very passionate about his work, and very good at it.

Corin's just plain cryptic. If it's possible to answer a question without actually *answering* it - by saying something about the Fates or the cycle of history or something else grand like that - then that's what he'll do. If it's not, he might not answer at all. It's not that he's not nice. He'll *do* things for people - he let puppies climb on his invisible shield, once, and it was the cutest thing - but he's just not a good source of *news*.

This meant that when I got to *go* to the compound, I was very excited about being able to bring back news to all my friends.

I'd been in the village for one week when Addy came to ask me up to the compound. I was in my room, peeling the sticky labels off my new shirts, and she knocked on the door. Jake answered it, and wrinkled his nose. (Wolves who've been here for a long time have gotten used to how vampires smell, but Jake got here only a little before I did.)

"Hello, Jacob," said Addy. "Is Elspeth home?"

"Sure. Elsie?" he called.

I poked my head out of my room. "Addy!" I said. I'd picked up the nickname from

the other villagers, who told me she didn't prefer to go by her full name. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if you could help me with something," Addy said. "I've thought of a useful application for your power."

"Oh, okay," I said, holding out a hand so she could borrow it, but she shook her head.

"It involves sending to witches," she explained, "so I can't do it myself, since that part of what you do requires touch. Why don't you come up with me to the compound, and I'll explain on the way?"

"All right," I said. "How long will it take?"

"No more than a couple of hours." I hugged Jake goodbye and followed her out and down the hall, to the tunnel that led to the compound.

"I didn't hang onto your power very long when I had it," said Addy, "but it was interesting, very interesting. I would have come by to discuss it with you earlier, but I've been busy bringing back all of the witches who escaped. I'm sure you remember them."

"Yes," I said. "Are they all back now?" On the one hand, even if I didn't care personally about any of them, it was still very creepy. On the other hand, I couldn't honestly say that if they were all set free they wouldn't try to hurt some of my friends, and revenge doesn't sit right either.

"Most of them," she replied. "The fellow who teleports is a bit difficult to catch. I think you'll like my idea for what you can do to help. How much do you know about what Chelsea does?"

I almost reached for her, then remembered not to displace whatever power she was borrowing and just summarized instead. "She can cut relationships or build them up but to do the second thing she needs something to start with. Seeds."

Addy nodded. "The reason the witches had to be kept in the dungeon the way you saw, instead of joining the guard, is that there wasn't enough for Chelsea to work with. Before I came along, that meant that they didn't help us defend ourselves or keep order in the vampire world at all. Afterwards, well, you saw. But it would be much safer and better for everyone involved if Chelsea could work with them. And the witches would be happier too, I'm sure you can imagine."

I could imagine that. "Where do I come in?"

"I'm not sure it will work," she cautioned, "but I think you might be able to plant enough "seeds" that Chelsea can do the rest. It will only help with some of the witches - anyone with a mate, for instance, we need to handle with more care - but it may do for some of them, and even that would be a huge favor." She smiled at me.

"What do you think I should do specifically?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm going to borrow Edward's power and have Chelsea there, and let you know how it goes while you experiment," Addy replied.

"Okay."

"That's Benjamin," said Addy, pointing at one of the fragmented heaps. "He actually does have a mate, Tia, but the good news is we have her, right over there." More bits and pieces. "She's not a witch, but he's more than valuable enough to make it worth keeping her, if - and only if - they'll work for us." I felt sad about the two of them, especially once I learned their names, and almost said something, but then the feeling disappeared. If they weren't in bits, they might be trying to hurt me or my friends. Chelsea was standing silently behind me and Addy. Maybe it was her, helping me concentrate.

Addy touched a chunk of rubble from another pile. If I looked at the smithereens closely, I could see them twitching, and occasionally two of them would draw close to each other and they'd knit along an edge. It was kind of gross, and I closed my eyes; Addy said, "Go ahead and say hello to Benjamin, then, Elspeth."

I reached out blindly and laid my hand on some unidentifiable surface of a piece of Benjamin. "I - I don't know if I can make it work any old place, I usually touch people's faces or sometimes hold hands," I said.

"I'll let you know if he gets your message," promised Addy.

Hello, Benjamin, I sent - "He wants to know who you are," Addy murmured - my name is Elspeth. Tia's alive, she's right here and I can see her. "Tell him you can pass on messages from her, let him draw his own conclusions about how - tell her you can talk to him for her," Addy instructed. I put my other hand on the other pile, still holding my eyes closed. Tia, I'm Elspeth and I can pass on messages to Benjamin for you if there's something you want to say. "She wants to tell him..." Addy said something in a language I didn't know, and I passed it on word-for-word. Chelsea made a quiet, intrigued noise.

"This is tricky, I need Marcus," murmured Chelsea at one point, and she swirled out of the room, black cloak swishing behind her. She returned a few moments later, leading a brittle-skinned, glassy-eyed Marcus by the hand, and he looked at the piles of vampire I was touching and sighed and spoke to Chelsea very softly. He looked unhappy and didn't seem interested in the proceedings, but I was still slightly in awe - Marcus is one of what amounts to three kings of the entire nonhuman world.

Chelsea piped up, "Offer him revenge on Amun? We have reason enough to destroy him anyway, for hiding Benjamin's gift..."

"Should I say all of that?" I asked.

"No, just the first part, and to Tia too," clarified Addy. *The Volturi are willing to offer you revenge on Amun*, I told them, although I wasn't sure I liked that part... Addy said, "Elspeth, Amun deliberately hid Benjamin from the Volturi for many decades and spent that time trying to mold him into a weapon. I'll give you three guesses why." He planned to use Benjamin to attack us...? "Yes."

The bottlenecked conversation proceeded steadily, if slowly and awkwardly. Chelsea and Marcus talked to each other quietly - or maybe he talked to her and she talked to herself - and Addy told me what to say, sometimes in languages I knew and sometimes not.

My magic itched again, so I clarified quickly to Benjamin and Tia exactly how I was managing to relay their messages. Addy frowned without commenting on my unauthorized disclosure. "Why don't you show him the wolf village, Elspeth," she suggested. "Tell him that's the most significant thing I've used his power for since the seventeenth century, none of the mayhem and destruction he's worried about."

I gave Benjamin a virtual tour of the village. *I live here, it's nice*, I editorialized, swooping through a compressed view of the tour Brooke gave me when I first moved in. *Addy borrowed your power to dig it out, and says it's the biggest thing she's done with it since the seventeenth century*. "What happened in the seventeenth century?" I asked aloud.

"I visited Egypt, met Benjamin and his coven, borrowed his power, and there were assorted adventures that involved toying with the Nile and attempting to fly," said Addy. "I'll show you later, if this works."

That sounded exciting; I'd never been on the receiving end of one of my shared memories, but Addy could do exactly what she said. I kept passing messages. Finally, Chelsea said, "*Ha*, I've got it - just barely enough - Marcus, help me see what I'm doing -" and she closed her eyes, and her fingers twitched at her sides.

Addy smiled. "You can stop now, Elspeth," she murmured. "I'll take you back to the village. We'll try with someone else after seeing how this sticks."

I bowed quickly to Marcus - Quinn had told me that this was the polite thing to do if one saw one of the three Volturi or their wives, and I hadn't done so earlier only because I had my hands occupied. Then I followed Addy out of the room.

"Can I please see Pera and Brady before we go?" I asked.

"Mm, I'm not sure if you want to see Pera," said Addy. "She's turning at the moment. Brady can't bear to leave her, but he's not having a pleasant time of it."

I blinked. "Why isn't Alec helping her?"

"That's not customary," Addy replied. "Caius believes that the full experience is part of what makes vampires' witchcraft tend to improve after turning. Exceptions might be made for non-witches - though we don't often turn those ourselves; they come to the Volturi in different ways - but not for someone with a gift as valuable as Pera's. She'll be fine, though, don't worry. We've all been through it and come out all right."

"Why does Caius think that?" I asked.

"Jane is the best evidence by far," Addy replied. "Do you know what she does?" I nodded. "What might surprise you is that her power is very much like your own."

This confused me. "But she has range, and only projects pain..."

"Her power became much more formidable when she left her humanity behind her. But Jane's witchcraft has been exactly the same in what it does for her entire life," said Addy with a thin smile. "It did not change its nature when she became a vampire. What she does is project pain that *she* has experienced, just as you most readily project memories of your own life. Before she turned, this was limited to scraped knees and stubbed toes and the like. Since then, she's become one of the most powerful weapons the Volturi have, and the most widely feared. If I were human yet, and copied her power, I wouldn't be her equal, but because I turned normally too, I can wield it just as she does. It is unlikely, but not outside the realm of possibility, that Pera will find herself improved in some way for an unaided turning."

"I've been able to get better at what I do, and I've always been the same species," I said.

"Well, we don't have quite so much to go on regarding hybrids like yourself. I do think you are intriguing, though," said Addy. "I'd like to get to know you and your power better. I have something of an interest in witches, as you might imagine."

"Of course," I said.

Addy smiled at me, and said, "If you'd really like to have a peek at Pera and Brady..."

"You're probably right about it being a bad idea, but I really miss them," I said sheepishly. "And Pera might not come back to the village right away - there are imprints and puppies who smell like food."

"That's true," acknowledged Addy. "Up this way. I'll even let you try to take Pera's mind off what's happening for a few minutes," she offered, and I grinned at her while she led me up two flights of stairs.

The screaming was audible from a fair distance, and fluctuated as we approached between piercing wails and lower sobbing moans. I winced in sympathy, but Addy had said I might be able to help, and so I pressed on.

Pera was lying face-up on the floor of a fairly ordinary room, halfway between her human brown color and the olive cast to some vampires' skin. With another scream, she arched her back, knees and elbows pushing her off the floor while she leaned her head back and stretched her mouth open as far as it would go. Brady knelt beside her, nearly as much agony on his face as hers, though he didn't scream. He was holding her hand, and tears were continually renewing twin lines down his face while he whispered fractions of sentences to her. He looked like he hadn't slept in a couple of days and didn't plan to sleep for a couple more, and he didn't even glance in my and Addy's direction when we walked in. He was transfixed by Pera and she barely seemed to realize he was there.

I approached her quietly. "I'm going to see if I can help," I murmured to Brady, and he spared me a split second of eye contact before returning his stare to his imprint. I knelt and reached for Pera's face, which was already chillier than it would have been while she was human, and tried to decide what to send.

Eventually I settled on the same memory of sitting on the beach and watching the sunset that I'd shown back when Thea induced me to learn to add translations to sendings. I didn't translate for Pera, I just focused on the peace of the evening and the beauty of the sunset. Something in her breathing changed, but she didn't talk or otherwise acknowledge me; I glanced at Addy for feedback.

"Try something that's not a memory," said Addy. "One of your hypothetical situations, as devoid of content as you can make it. It's very hard to concentrate on positive things while in that much pain, but she might find it easier to accept something... empty."

I thought of the blank place with no color that I talked to myself in, subtracted myself from it, and pushed that at Pera. She relaxed, letting her spine conform to the floor again, and Brady made a small noise as there was a pause in her screaming. "Yes," Addy said. "Very nice. You may go on for... three minutes, and after that you should be getting home."

"Why only -" began Brady.

"It wouldn't do to anger Caius, you understand," said Addy, inspecting her fingernails. "I believe we can get away with that long of a respite." Brady whined in the back of his throat, but asked no further questions. I sent Pera the blank place until Addy said, "Time is up. Come along, Elspeth."

I pulled back, and a groan forced its way out of Pera's throat and through her teeth. "Please," she choked. "Please. Please."

"Please," echoed Brady.

"Could we *ask* Caius -" I said, flexing my hands to stop myself from reaching out and offering Pera comfort without permission. She was one of us, but Caius was one of the three *in charge*, if people didn't obey him everything would fall apart, he had to be

obeyed within the compound more than anywhere else - but we could *ask* perhaps...?

Addy looked at me speculatively. "I will be interested to see if you can convince him," she said. "Why don't we see how that goes?" She crooked a finger at me, and I scrambled to my feet to follow her out.

Caius was in a round hall I hadn't seen before, although from the slitted windows and the wooden thrones, I thought it was probably the room my mother had mentioned meeting the Volturi in. I didn't know how to match names to all the faces, but Caius was recognizable by description. I bowed to him, and Addy made a little curtsy of acknowledgement, as we entered the room.

"What is it?" asked Caius bluntly from his seat. He was in second chair from the left, which was a short distance from the only other occupied seat on the far left. That one held an onionskinned vampire woman with a dark cascade of curls and a haughty expression, who, at a guess, I thought might be Caius's mate Athenodora. Addy caught my eye and nodded. *Should I say it?* I thought, recalling that she still had my father's power. She nodded again.

"It's about Pera," I began. "I wanted to ask permission to send her something soothing, to make it easier for her to turn - or permission to ask Alec to knock her out, he'd do it more thoroughly -"

"No," said Caius, and he looked at Addy and raised one white eyebrow. She smiled enigmatically at him. I ducked my head, not daring to push further.

"Oh, well," said Addy lightly. "Come, now, Elspeth, let's bring you back to your wolf."

Allowing myself a small sigh, I followed her out of the hall.

The next day, Addy visited the village again, just after I left Jared and Kim's. I'd been there to get Kim to cut my hair. It had come time to trim the ends, and in the absence of a compelling reason to do *just* that, I had her lopping off the mass of waves at a point in the middle of my back. "If I decide I don't like having it shorter, it'll grow back down to my ankles in about six months," I reassured her when she was reluctant to help with such a dramatic change. So she tied my hair up at the ends, scissored her way across the designated point, and handed me a detached bronze ponytail.

I thanked her and gave her a few euros - she was making her living as the village's barber, largely taking the place of Geoffrey's buzz-cutting service and Shawn's overenthusiastic stylings. Then I opened the door, only to find Addy standing there, poised to knock. "Oh, hello," she said, smiling at me. "What a charming haircut. Do you have some time?"

"Of course," I said. "Just let me toss this..." I held up one finger, and Addy waited

for me in the corridor until I'd been and gone to the lounge trash can to discard the hair. "Do you want me to talk to another witch?" I asked.

"Not yet. We're still waiting for Benjamin and Tia to heal, and we'll see how they do once they're up and about before repeating the experiment," she said. "No, I only wanted to talk to you - or perhaps not talk." She winked at me and held out her hand.

I clasped hands with her, and Addy shut her eyes for a moment. "So interesting," she murmured. *Do you know, Elspeth, that your power is expanded in more different directions than any other I've copied? I don't mean to say that it's undergone more total improvement; that honor belongs to Aro, or perhaps Benjamin or Pera, depending on how one measures. But you have learned to do more assorted things with it than any other witch I know of.*

I didn't know that, I answered.

I'll show you a sampling.

And I was swept away on a tide of remembered sensations that were realer than reality and full of senses I had no names for.

The *detail* in the memory was too much to take. My real vision whited out, the quiet village sounds faded into static, I lost the pressure of stone on the soles of my feet, while my brain tried to process the crisp, high-fidelity overload of vampire senses. I might have made some noise; I couldn't tell. The colors alone threw me into confusion - what *was* that extra one? Was that ultraviolet? I always imagined some sort of whitish-purple when I tried to guess what it would look like, but it wasn't anything like that. There were sounds higher and fainter than my real ears could ever take in. Richer smells pouring thickly into my imaginary nose, piled on top of each other without losing nuance. Prickles of feeling along felt-as-though-remembered skin, describing shapes and textures underfoot and all the way up with precision that thundered into my mind too quickly to process as *information*, let alone *feeling* -

There was pain, too, a demanding dry burn scrubbing my throat raw, and the heat lurched and yearned at some of the layers of scent, and the scents were warm but they would cool the thirst, they *needed* to cool the thirst, *it was very important* that those scents turn into flavors and cool the thirst, and yet somehow the sear of unsoothing venom over the parched need for drink was marked "familiar", the urge was present, always, and managed, always -

And then on top of all that, beyond impressions that mapped onto senses I knew, demanding my attention before the colors resolved into objects or the sounds coalesced into meaning -

Something like taste, but not quite. More like the sensation of drawing food into my mouth, obeying but not satisfying the instinct to eat, chewing but not swallowing, only

holding it - *what?* - there, turning it over with my tongue - but not *my* tongue - *whose* memory was *this*?

Abruptly, the intrusive excess disappeared. I was sprawled in an ungainly heap on the floor, staring up at a ceiling that looked faraway and blurry. "Ah," I breathed.

"I didn't know that would happen," said Addy, peering down at me and keeping her hands behind her back. "Have you ever done that by mistake? To a human, perhaps?"

I shook my head, mute.

"Really?" she asked with some surprise. "The difference between the complexity of the experiences should be similar..."

"I don't know," I panted, knitting my eyebrows at the strange sense of loss. The air held smells, but they were no longer key tools; they were just footnotes to the primary senses. Which were in turn also diminished, flattened by comparison - there was a *missing color*, not just absent in the environment but literally invisible, and I *wanted* it; there was an entire register of informative little noises, up high, and I had no way to detect them; the stone I lay on had character and give and pores that I couldn't feel under my hand. "No one ever fell over, or described anything like - that."

"How strange," said Addy.

"Whose memory was that?"

"Mine," she told me. "I'm very curious about what just happened, Elspeth; why don't we go settle somewhere comfortable, in your room, and try again?"

I sort of staggered into my suite, and Jake caught me when I nearly fell over again, frowning between me and Addy. "What happened?" he asked.

"A minor magical mishap," said Addy. She looked at Jake, tilted her head, and said, "Perhaps we'd best let you rest, Elspeth, before investigating more."

"Okay," I said, grappling with the lingering urge to charge across the hall and bite Kim in the neck. I leaned on Jake. Addy smiled at me and then turned on her heel and left.

Sender

"A minor magical mishap?" repeated Jacob when Addy had gone.

"She borrowed my power," I said, "and showed me one of her memories, but it was - too much, and I don't know if it was because she's a vampire with really powerful senses, or what. That didn't happen to any imprints *I* showed stuff to, and they're human, and Addy's right that it should be about the same either way..."

"Can you show me what she showed you?" he suggested. "Maybe we can figure it out."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "It's really intense and I think I want to eat Kim now."

"You know you're not going to eat Kim," said Jake. "Here, I'll sit down first. Go ahead."

My hand trembled, but I held it to his face, and offered up the second-long experience. His eyes unfocused and he held his breath, but he didn't topple off his chair, and when the memory was over, he said, "That was sure something. Definitely a hop, skip and a jump up from your stuff. I wonder if it's just because of the extra sense, that... taste that wasn't a taste? The rest of it was seriously dense, but I don't think it could have knocked you over. You don't seem to have anything like that. Unless you're leaving stuff out, your power doesn't feel like anything to you."

"Sometimes it does," I said. "Just not often."

"Really? Can I see?" I sent him the little itch in my magic that had begun to trouble me. "Gah!" He made a bewildered face. "Okay, that's weird. It's like a really *insistent* hunch that something's wrong, except it's not a hunch... or anything else but itself. When does that happen?"

"I don't quite have a pattern for it yet," I said. "It never happened before I move in here. Usually I can make it go away if I tell someone something that I've been leaving out - the first time it happened, I went to let you know how my legs got broken."

"Huh. Well, on top of all the rest of that memory, I think the sense you don't have might have done it. Maybe the next time Addy wants to experiment, you can get her to show you some non-witch vampire's memory? I'm sure she's touched Aro before, and that would give her lots to choose from."

"That sounds like a good test," I agreed.

"Addy's probably used to acquiring new senses and handling them all the time," Jake speculated. "Since that's what she does naturally. Maybe she figures out what she's got and how to use it by the non-taste taste."

"Maybe. I'll ask her next time," I said. Jake smiled and petted my newly shortened hair - which was starting to float up into a voluminous puff, relieved of half the weight that had pulled it down. "She's probably better equipped than anybody to help me figure my magic out. And that itch especially."

The next morning, before Jake got up, I tried to distract myself from hunger long enough to have breakfast with everyone else. I attempted to invent a new form of solitaire with the deck of cards Quinn left behind after we hosted the pack poker game. I read a chapter of a novel. I visited Karen, who had the night shift in North and was there to look after wakeful puppies if they got up and wanted glasses of water or hugs. She whispered and I sent, to avoid disturbing them, but conversation soon fizzled out, and I hugged her goodbye and wandered away.

I went back to my room, and leaned my face on my hand, and talked to myself again.

"Who are you?" one of me signed at the other.

"I'm me," the other replied.

"What part of me?" asked the first.

"I'm my magic," replied the other.

I jerked my head up, startled, and the blank place disappeared.

I could talk to my own magic?

I thought about this, and then decided it was awesome and pressed my palm to my cheek again.

"Why do you itch?" I asked my magic.

"I don't want to lie," Magic replied. "I won't help you do it. When you try I'll try to stop you."

"You never itched before, though."

"You never lied to *yourself* before," Magic said, "and that's worse."

"What am I lying to myself about?" asked the me-who-wasn't-magic. "Me" for short, I decided.

"You're making excuses for our new friends. You're refusing excuses to our old friends. You're justifying how Chelsea makes us feel even though you know she did it and could have done it to make you like almost anyone."

"I don't understand," Me said. "Of course I know what Chelsea does. But everything I've said about all our friends - past and present - *is* true."

"You're *leaving things out*," Magic said. "For example: *Yes*. David was trying to hurt Daphne. *Yes*. Daphne is thirteen. *But*. She is still a wolf, still dangerous, and she was attacking David, and he didn't *know* how old she is. We know that. If we didn't care about David *or* Daphne, that would still matter - perhaps we'd blame both of them or neither - but Chelsea tipped the scales, opposite from how they were before. So now you care about making Daphne look innocent because she's our friend, and don't mind if you have to do that by rationalizing at David's expense, because he isn't our friend anymore. But it's not that simple. And you *know that*."

I dropped my hand away from my face.

I felt very complicated all of a sudden.

Jake woke up shortly after that, and I distracted myself all day. I ate an enormous breakfast, loading and re-loading my plate until Jake started joking that I'd turned into a wolf overnight. I went to North and played with the puppies. I practiced dancing. I finished my book and started another one. I got into an hour-long argument with Grace and Quil about whether it was technically piracy for me to show people movies I'd seen, as long as I'd paid to see them in the first place. Brooke asked me for Portuguese lessons and gave up after ten minutes. I learned that Miles played piano and had one in his family's suite, and he taught me "Chopsticks" and a couple of scales. I did everything but think about how I was *leaving things out*.

I was very, very afraid of what would happen if I put them back *in*.

It's *nice* in the village. That's the thing. It really is comfortable and fun and pleasant. Chelsea alone wouldn't hold all of the villagers in some awful pit; at best she could make them leave in *groups*. The compound's different - set up for sleepless vampires, not wolves and select humans and the odd hybrid - but nice in its way for them.

Chelsea *can* hold a lot of us in a nice place like the village, because there will always be at least one person who wants the easy, happy life for *itself*, and Chelsea can make sure that no one can bear to leave that person behind or hurt them by tearing them away.

I was pretty sure that I was that person.

I didn't have to run from place to place without a permanent home. I didn't have to tell anyone my name was "Beth". I didn't have to be restrained in my use of magic.

And I didn't *have* to leave.

I could just stay. I could stay forever. I could learn to dance, and look after puppies,

and read a lot of books, and let Jake dote on me, and research my power with Addy, and paint a new mural in the hall every few months.

If I just left a few things out, when I explained this decision to myself.

My magic itched.

"You had some very weird dreams yesterday evening," Jake told me over breakfast. I concealed my surprise by taking a large bite of my waffle. "Are you okay? I think maybe you should ask Addy to hold off on researching your power - at least beyond her copying it herself and using it as much as she can without your help."

"What did I dream about that makes you think it was Addy's fault?" I asked. "Did I have weird dreams the first night after she came by, too?"

"Well, no," he admitted. "Not the part that I watched, anyway. They were just... it's not like they had weird *content*. Same faces as always, villagers and vampires and whatnot. But the feelings attached were really unsettled, kind of sad and scared - and you used to have happy dreams. Are you not happy anymore?"

The way he asked the question made it really awkward to answer. He felt personally responsible for my happiness; if I told him "I'm fine" he'd know I was lying, but if I told him I wasn't fine there would be no way to put him off finding out what was the matter.

If I just told him, what would he do? Jake was the only person I could *definitely* count on, who would *definitely* put my interests first. So he might be safe to talk to. Aro didn't exactly show up at assemblies to check for seditious thoughts. And Addy could hear my thoughts from the compound, if she borrowed my father's power; it didn't seem that much *more* likely that she'd notice something amiss if I told Jake.

"There is something," I said. "I'd rather talk in private, though."

"Okay," he agreed, placated, and then stole a corner of my waffle. "Mm, chocolate chip."

Gwyn came and sat with us, and she and I spent the rest of breakfast planning to put on a small dance performance together at an assembly in a week's time. "Santiago says she'll come watch," Gwyn said. "And she'll decide then if you can start coming to my lessons. I think she'll let you. You're learning a lot faster than I did when I started."

I didn't have to *feign* excitement about that, exactly, but I did have to fight to make sure that was the dominant emotion on my face.

Jake and I went back to our rooms, and he said, "So - what's up?"

"I'd rather you didn't tell anybody else," I began, and he held up a hand.

"Hold it right there. By "anybody else" do you mean *anybody* else? The pack..."

I felt like a complete fool. Involuntary telepathy in wolf form with the rest of his pack - why had I forgotten? Maybe just because the pack were all my friends, and even if I *knew* I could get in some kind of trouble if an extra-loyal wolf knew of my unsettled thoughts, I couldn't *feel* it, I couldn't *quite* mistrust my friends. Jake might want to keep secrets for me if I needed him to, but he *couldn't*, not unless he scheduled his phasing for when Quil, Sam, Brady, Jared, Victor, Gwyn, Brooke, Grace, Quinn, and Darren were *all* on two feet. Which he wouldn't even be allowed to do, since the alphas had to telepathically coordinate field teams from safety at home, and his wolves were already in training to go out into the world and need his management.

Jake noticed me drooping, of course, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Hey," he said. "I'm sorry. If you need somebody to tell secrets to, you're not out of luck necessarily - just can't be me, if you don't want them going farther. I'd try, but I'm not that great at policing my thoughts. You could talk to Kim, or Amanda, or any of the other imprints - or one of the vampires - I don't know what it is, so I don't know who'd be best, but not *everybody* around here is telepathic."

I nodded, but tempting as it was to talk to Kim or Amanda or another imprint, there wasn't the *surety* there that they had my best interests at heart. Of course they liked me (*Chelsea made them*, I thought - but Kim had liked me at least a little before, and even without Chelsea I'd found that people liked me more than they "should"...). But Kim had Jared, and Amanda had Albert *and* baby Eve, and if they thought I was threatening the village somehow, then what would they do?

I'm going to turn into such a paranoid, I sighed inwardly, and Jacob pulled me into a hug. I snuggled up. I couldn't talk to him about my problem, but that wasn't the only comfort in the world.

I developed a habit of spending the time between dinner and assembly talking to myself. Jake called it "meditating", which I don't think is *customarily* done with one's hand on one's face while conversing with one's magic, but it was as good a word as any.

Magic is more frustrating that I would have expected a splinter of myself to be if I'd been asked before I "met" her. As a whole, I'm generally in favor of truth-telling, I prefer it and everything, but she's *fanatical*.

"If you'd work to make me sound honest even when I'm not, or let incomplete true things sound just as good as complete true things, it would really help sometimes," I told her.

"No."

"Why not?"

"That's not how I work," Magic said.

"But you've changed how you work before!"

"Not like that. I'm here to be truthful."

I spent two days arguing with her about that. She didn't budge. She was, she said, a power intended for the exclusive service of truth and honesty and disclosure and other things that meant "Elspeth cannot lie, dissemble, keep secrets, omit facts, or otherwise be less than perfectly transparent with magical help".

The advantage was that when Magic said something, it *was* true to the very best of my knowledge, whether my revised social network let me like the truth or not.

The disadvantage was that this had me chipping away at Chelsea-induced perceptions of my "old friends" - and my family - to the point where she started giving me odd looks and standing closer to Jacob's pack's section of the assembly room every evening. She didn't say anything, and I didn't receive stern warnings from any of the higher-ups, but Chelsea could definitely detect that I needed more "maintenance" than most of the villagers.

Addy was gone from the village for a week before she came to see me again. She chose a time when Jake wasn't home - he was practicing coordinating field operations with the pack, and I wasn't supposed to be in the room in case I distracted him, so he was in an empty dorm room over in West. Addy barged in without even knocking, while I was busy composing word problems for the older puppies' math tests as a favor to Paul. I'd heard the footsteps but didn't know they were hers until she opened the door.

"Hello, Elspeth," she said. "Do you have a while?"

"Yes," I said. "Um, Jacob thinks that the reason I was so overwhelmed by your memory was because you have an extra sense that I don't, and the reason I wouldn't have knocked humans over when I sent to them is because my power usually doesn't feel like anything."

Addy cocked her head to the side, intrigued. "That could be. Did you think of the obvious test?"

"For you to send me a memory you got from Aro - you have touched Aro before, right?" She nodded. "Something from Aro that belonged to a vampire who wasn't a witch, or whose power didn't feel like anything at least."

"I can do that," Addy said. "You may want to stay seated anyway, though." I nodded, and she placed her fingertips along my cheekbone. "You're learning to dance, aren't you? Santiago's moved you into her classes with that wolf child?"

"Gwyn. Yes," I said. The performance had gone over well and I was scheduled to join Gwyn in getting lessons directly from Santiago the next day.

"You speak Spanish?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"Then you'll like this."

The first thing I do, when the pain is over, is stand. The second is mourn the loss of the effort of standing. I worked for the ease I had, I worked for the grace, I worked for the balance and the strength and the precision, and now it's not even just as natural as blinking, it's not even just as simple as breathing - I've become omnipotent through no work of my own, and my feet will point and lift me up without complaint, my arms will fly through the air without strain, and what can the work mean now? The pain in my throat is terrible, if dwarfed by the agony that just left me, but it's an afterthought to the loss of meaning. Am I still a dancer?

The mourning lasts a third of a second. And then I extend my hand to the man who took my work from me, and he accepts it, and we dance. Perfect footfall after perfect footfall, weightless catches and spectacular leaps and lightning-fast spins. He has what he wanted. I'm a miracle.

I have lost my work, and gained my art.

"She was a dancer before she turned," I murmured, when Addy took her fingers away from my face. "Even before. Who was it who made her?"

"An admirer of her work, who wanted it immortalized and had the wherewithal to arrange that," Addy said.

"She didn't think her real name," I grumbled. "Once I realized who it was, I was hoping she'd think it during the memory. Nobody knows it!"

Addy laughed. "She did think her name a few seconds later, but I wasn't sure if you'd care to see her first feeding. If you're so curious, Santiago's real name is Tamara Morales. Don't call her that. Or mention that I told you. I take it the experiment is a success? Non-witch vampire memories are within tolerances for you?"

I nodded. "And I think it might be partly just a matter of practice, too. I might be able to handle witch memories if I were used to memories like Santiago's first."

"Hmm," said Addy, smiling widely but showing no teeth. "What else might you

like..."

I leaned forward eagerly, and she touched my face and sent.

- the last arpeggio, and they all applaud. It was some dozen counts of fraud to be permitted to perform here, but this sort of thing can't be arranged just by killing the right people -

- up and up and up! This is the way to climb a mountain, unencumbered, really feeling the thin air without the troublesome tendency to die of cold or falter from lack of oxygen. I wonder for a few moments if I could live here all the time, if there are enough climbers to sustain me; it's not like they don't die often on the trek already -

- he thinks I'm some sort of angel, maybe, glittering like an opal, but today I decide to let him live where any other day he'd simply have been out of luck; if he tells, who will believe? -

- the animals all run away from me, of course, so zoology is out, but I can still study plants, and in no time I've developed a reputation in the department for being willing to go on any field team under any conditions to collect specimens or just see sufficiently interesting trees -

- that's the last book in the library, I think the clerk who's been here the last several days in a row thinks I'm some kind of obsessive-compulsive who needs to turn every page without reading anything, before I can calm down -

- the last time I went to Paris was, oh, at least fifty years ago, and then I wasted my time on culinary tourism, sampling food that I can't believe I ever found appetizing next to real flavor. This time I want clothes - do I smell silk? -

- trying to decide on a pen name. Should I come up with an entire legal identity just for the author to go with the piece, or submit it anonymously? Maybe I could tell him that I wrote it, see if he'll believe that his rabbit editor could produce work like this -

- graffiti is the highest form of art, I think, because its transgressions are real, not hypothetical. I've been at it for years, but this stuff - "spray paint" - I think I like it -

- haven't gone near my son for a decade; I have control enough to be a little choosy about who I go near, who I kill. But I can't resist watching him graduate college, so I go, and look at him, he looks just like me - just like I always will - I wonder if I should ask her for a favor, to let me be a father to my son ten years too late? Would she do it? I haven't the strength to manage it alone, not without killing him -

- checkmate! It'd be an exaggeration to say I've solved chess, but no geriatric chump (a fraction of my age) who I meet in a park is going to beat me. I look just old enough that they don't think I'm some hotshot prodigy, just young enough that old men who've been

doing this all their lives think they can defeat me with experience, but I've been the best chess player in the world since their great-great-grandparents were in diapers! I take his money - just my stakes, not all of it - and don't even kill him; he's a playmate, not a meal -

I lost track of time completely while Addy showed me memories, three steps removed from their origins, of all manner of spectacular things. I remembered being dozens of people, Volturi and just assorted vampires who'd passed through and had cause to let Aro read them. I remembered seeing the bottom of the ocean and the tops of the Alps, traveling through the desert and the jungle, visiting cities and deserted wildernesses. I remembered not just dancing, but painting and sculpting and singing and - once - fighting a pitched battle, although the pain of that was far enough removed that I didn't exactly *suffer* from it any more than I suffered to remember experiencing pain of my own. Sometimes the verbal thoughts hurtled past in language too archaic for me to decipher or in languages I didn't know at all, but there was more than enough else going on to hold my interest.

When Addy pulled her hand away, the bestowed visions went away so all I saw was the same thin wide smile on her face. I felt a little dizzy, but I thought it was more from exhilaration than excess. "Wow," I said, which seemed to sum up the situation.

Jake had apparently come in at some point while Addy was doing our show-and-tell, but he was just sitting at the table watching. "Having fun?" he asked me wryly. "It's nearly dinnertime."

"Yeah, that was definitely, definitely fun," I said, grinning at him and then at Addy, who blinked once in acknowledgement. "I could eat - Addy, when will you be back to try witch memories again?"

"Tomorrow, most likely," she replied. And then she touched my face one more time, but instead of a memory, she sent, *I know the contents of your little meditation sessions. I had time for half a gasp before she went on, Don't worry your head over it. Until and unless you actually try to leave, I'm not going to interfere. I'm a student of witchcraft. If you can learn to beat Chelsea, well, wouldn't that be interesting?*

I stared at her. "Elspeth?" said Jake.

"Just a sec," I murmured.

Aro, Addy continued, daren't annoy me too badly. In the unlikely event that he learns of what's going on, you will still be quite free to experiment so long as you don't attempt to actually leave, or induce anyone else to do so.

I blinked, and Addy brought her arm back and folded her hands. "I'll see you tomorrow, Elspeth," she said, and got up to go.

Seeder

I went to assembly, and tried to feel something while Chelsea hovered behind the back row of villagers in our pack's section. But there was nothing, no sensation, no *perceptible* change in my dispositions.

I did notice that I always felt happier and cozier right after an assembly. That was part of why I did my "meditating" right *before* each one - it was just too hard to pick at that secure, warm feeling of being surrounded by all my friends when it was fresh. So I let myself go to bed with that just as snugly fastened as Chelsea could make it, and only when it had nearly a day to wear off on its own did I start poking at it.

It *did* wear off on its own, a little - as far as I could tell for something that felt like nothing. Magic told me that a major effect of Chelsea's witchcraft was to influence who I made excuses for, so I took inventories of how I was inclined to explain or condemn various people's behavior in various situations. I felt more neutral at lunchtime than bedtime. But on its own, without the people from my old life actually there to build new relationships with me, neutrality was all I ever approached.

It occurred to me to wonder whether I really wanted to be anything other than neutral. Being surrounded by friends was happy and cozy - *and that was exactly my problem*. If it weren't happy and cozy, then Chelsea wouldn't be so good at keeping the village penned up.

My relatives, on the other hand, never brainwashed me, but raising someone from early childhood could be almost as effective, and it would be awfully lucky if I'd just happened to be born into a perfect family who I really ought to consider faultless. So it might be that I shouldn't be all happy and cozy with them either.

Neutrality is very lonely, though. And I hate being alone.

I didn't explain to Jake what was going on, since I wasn't prepared for the whole pack to know, but I did start spending more time with him. Regarding me, at least, he was impervious to Chelsea. Ultimately, my choices were to hang around him or abandon him, and even if some of the affection on *my* end was fake, it still seemed like a mean thing to do when he was completely innocent.

I taught him to waltz, and when Daphne invented a ball game to be played on wolfback we gave that a try, and he told me stories and I showed him memories, and we always sat together at meals, and every evening he watched my dreams for a few hours before he went to bed. Jake was absurdly happy. That made me happy, too - and guilty, because it made it so much more tempting to stay put, and whenever I thought of doing it my magic itched.

I asked Magic one day, "What if I just *like* it here and want to stay? Why do you

have to badger me into trying to leave?"

"We can make up our mind to stay if you decide that you want to live here, *without leaving anything out* when you tell yourself why," said Magic implacably.

And that, I didn't know how to do.

"Benjamin and Tia are still doing well," said Addy a couple of days later. She'd started dropping by daily, but usually just showed me a handful of her more innocuous memories for practice and then left. I was starting to get used to the sensation of tasting magic that she experienced when she copied a power (which was always, because she could only get rid of one by replacing it with a different one), and I could often even keep my eyes open and look at things that were really present while she sent along the experiences. "We've decided that Chelsea's work based on seeds you plant is no less stable than the ordinary variety."

"It's been almost two weeks," I said. "Did it really take that long to verify?"

"No, but it seemed wise to be cautious," said Addy. "If we got cocky and asked you to seed all of the witches at once on the grounds that Benjamin and Tia were acclimating, and we were wrong, I'm sure you can imagine the chaos."

I looked down. "You want me to seed the rest of them?"

"And their mates, where applicable," said Addy. She touched one finger to my chin and tipped my head up. "Elspeth, I said I wouldn't interfere with your meditations until you tried to leave, but I'm sure you can understand that it wouldn't take *me* reporting the behavior to get you in trouble, if you do something suspicious like refuse the job."

"I thought Aro didn't dare to annoy you too much?" I asked, wondering for the first time why that would be exactly. Addy wasn't immune to Renata; she couldn't attack Aro directly even if she borrowed some useful combat power, and while some long-distance witchcraft might help, Addy would still be outnumbered enough to have no chance at escaping with her life.

"And vice-versa, I'm afraid," said Addy lightly.

"You said if Aro found out -"

"Then you would remain free to experiment," said Addy. "Because *that* is - how interesting, the way your power interacts with honesty - that is what I want from you. I have no way to improve on borrowed powers by myself, you see. If I want the improved version of some ability, the witch who has the ability natively must master the new aspect. I believe you heard the story of how Pera was initially captured? We'd been acquainted some years before, which is how I got close enough to grab her, and I helped her develop her witchcraft for that reason; it's so much more useful now. Aro does not

dare annoy me to the point of depriving me of your capacity to expand your power, so I suppose it *is* fair to say that you aren't going to die. But he knows exactly how little it would annoy me if, for example, you were to prove dangerous and needed to do that experimentation under... let's say, Jane's supervision."

I stared at her.

"Do you understand, Elspeth?" Addy asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"Well then," she said with a broad smile, "why don't we go introduce you to Zafrina?"

"I can't lie to her, not by magic," I told Addy while I followed her through the tunnel to the compound.

"I know. You don't need to," Addy replied. "Chelsea just needs seeds, not full-blown adoration. And the hard part with Zafrina is already mostly done; she has no mate, only 'sisters', who don't miss her anymore and who she doesn't miss. She's very lonely right now, Elspeth, and you're going to fix that for her without telling a single lie. You only need convince her that things aren't as one-sided as they seem."

Chelsea met us at the mouth of the tunnel, and Addy asked me if I knew anything about Zafrina already.

"A little. She's from the Amazon coven and does visual illusions," I said.

"That's right," said Addy. "And once she knows you're there, that means she'll be able to communicate with you directly, by sending you an impression of writing. I'll still coach you, of course. However, I should warn you that she could be hostile at first, and might try to scare you off with distressing illusions. Closing your eyes won't help. So I actually recommend that you keep your eyes closed. That way you will know that anything you see is something she's showing you."

"Okay," I murmured.

I went to the dungeon with them, and Addy pointed at a heap of rubble, and I shut my eyes and reached out.

That day, I seeded four witches including Zafrina, all unmated.

After the illusionist, there was Charles, a truth detector. I remembered my mother describing Maggie to me, who was the opposite - and to hear Addy describe Charles's

power, considerably less powerful. Charles could tell the difference between *kinds* of truth, and wouldn't be thrown off by sarcasm or misdirection. Essentially, he was only convinced that he was hearing something honest if the person talking to him was forthright enough to keep Magic happy - which made me probably the only person who could talk him into letting seeds sprout, even leaving aside the part where he was in pieces and difficult to speak to. "But," said Addy cheerfully, "even if you aren't *absolutely* transparent, your power does help you sound honest as long as you aren't truly lying! I think that will close the gap, should you happen to feel that you would be *most* effective by telling him less than absolutely everything. If it doesn't work, we'll come up with a new strategy."

It worked. Chelsea laughed.

Then there was Dwi, who - like Zafrina - could talk back without going through Addy. "He's a bit like your father," Addy explained when she pointed out his pile among the rows of them. "Except he has no range limit and goes in both directions - and only picks up and sends voluntary communications. He's a useful telephone, more or less - who works underwater, in silence, regardless of whether there's bars in the area or not." She laughed. "The wolves work nearly the same way, except that they can't speak in the form that lets them have the ability, and only talk to others in their packs, so Dwi's power is faster in emergencies. We *could* talk to him ourselves, but he wouldn't believe us and is particularly unfond of me - you, he'll have a harder time dismissing like that."

Li-qing was last for the day ("I wouldn't want to worry your wolf, and I'm sure you don't either," said Addy, "so four will do until tomorrow,") and she had what Addy described as "minor gravity control". "That is to say, she can designate a new direction as "down" within a limited range," Addy explained. "It's a fun one."

I felt sick to my stomach after we were done, and Chelsea humming happily to herself while she made little finger-twitches to accompany her work didn't help. Addy escorted me back to the village.

Jake asked me what was wrong, when I walked in.

"Tricky day at work," I murmured, and he hugged me.

Addy was back after breakfast the next morning, caught me in the hallway, winked at Jake, and led me by the hand up into the compound again. I listened in silence while she told me who I'd be seeding during the walk through the tunnel. "Alice and Jasper - you know them - I'd start with Jasper if I were you, he really rather approved of the Volturi before he thought we'd killed Alice. Go ahead and roundly blame all of that on my study of witchcraft; we can fix up his attitudes towards *me* later once he's thrown in with the Volturi as a group. I'd have grabbed him too and he'd never have needed to despair of her if only it hadn't been so tempting to try his power to fake her death. It was a marvelous piece of work - and he never suspected! I think Alice will follow easily once he's in hand."

I nodded once, concentrating on breathing and walking and the fact that soon there wouldn't be any more witches in the dungeon to seed and I could get on with - whatever I wanted to get on with.

"Next," said Addy, "you can see about managing Hao and his mate Kazuo. Kazuo's not a witch, but he shouldn't be hard to handle either, and Hao's a telekinetic. Limited, though. I worked with him for a solid six months back in 1805, and he's still stuck on small, inanimate objects in a limited range that he can see. Very dexterous, though. Ask him how much art he's going to get done as-is. Plus there's the mate angle, of course, you remember working with Benjamin and Tia."

I did remember that. I hadn't seen them since. I hoped they were comfortable.

"And then Sukutai, the walking - well, "slightly quivering" at the moment - perfect camouflage witch. Herself, anything she touches - she can fix it up to have whatever color she likes. You'll be able to tell who she is all by yourself; she likes to stay brown instead of being pale like the rest of us, although she can't do a thing about the sparkles. She's got a mate too, Okey. He's not a witch, and his color from Sukutai has worn off, but I'll point him out."

"Is that all for the day?" I asked softly.

"Yes, that will do," Addy replied pleasantly.

She watched and gave instructions, and Chelsea smiled and fluttered her hands, and I seeded.

There were two more days of seeding.

I listened attentively when Addy told me about who I was helping to brainwash, feeling like it was somehow better if I at least knew their names.

"Emere's from New Zealand," said Addy. "No mate. You know the drill. Her power is like Corin's, but she has an invisible knife, not a shield. Quite sharp enough to hack up a vampire if that's what she chooses to do with it, although she's fairly nonviolent considering. Taamusi melts or freezes water - I tried and tried and *tried* to get him working with vapor or at least steam, but it didn't work, most witches are so constrained - and he has a mate Valdis, whom you will also need to seed."

I nodded once.

"And then you will finish up by working with Pyotr. He doesn't have a mate. His power is unwieldy even at the best of times - he can't make it work at all, four times out of five, and I can't discern any regularity to it, which is frustrating - but when it does work, he's dangerous indeed. Compulsion. If he's functioning properly and he tells you to do

something, that's what you shall do."

I looked at her hand on my wrist, pulling me along the tunnel, and permitted myself to think that I knew a little about how that worked.

The last day, I seeded Vasanti and her mate Mehul. They were both witches, but Mehul's power was minor enough that he wouldn't have been worth capturing on his own; he had slightly better hearing relative to an average vampire. Vasanti, on the other hand, was the only vampire in the world known to be non-repulsive to animals. They would willingly approach her - liked her, in fact, and would tolerate other vampires in order to be close to her as long as there weren't too many of them. And at her option she could possess one animal at a time, perceiving its senses as additions to her own and controlling its body like an extension of hers.

After that pair were two last, unmated vampires: Abdelmajid, who could see through solid objects, and Emel, a woman who could control metal the way Benjamin could manipulate earth and stone. Emel was last, because the teleporter Razi was still at large. "I caught Razi in the first place much the same way I did Pera," sighed Addy wistfully. "I got him to hold still and talk to me while I had Alec's power, and he needs his proprioception to jump from place to place so once I'd managed to knock him down he was all set, but now I'd never be able to keep him in sight long enough. He may be a permanent loss."

"Where is Pera, anyway?" I asked. "I would have thought she'd be in the village sometimes."

"And why would you think she would that?" asked Addy, smiling.

"To visit Brady..." I blinked. "I... haven't seen Brady since two weeks ago, while Pera was turning. Is he living up here with her? Wouldn't that make Alice less useful?"

Addy just smiled at me.

I noticed that I did not *miss* Brady.

I let Addy take me home, and curled up with Jake on our sofa and tried not to cry.

Addy was back the next day while Jake was managing his pack on a field mission I was trying not to think about.

"I think it's time to see what new things you can learn to do," she told me.

I didn't answer her, just blinked.

She tilted her head, smiling at me. "You do realize, I hope," she said, "that while I like to keep witches around to borrow after they've hit their limit, this is entirely for utility

purposes. None of the witches you've seeded is *interesting* anymore, with the possible exceptions of Pyotr and Alice; they're only *useful*. Are you useful, Elspeth?"

"I - I -" I stammered. "I did the seeding -"

"Yes, you did," agreed Addy. "You did a very nice job. And now the only witch we still have to keep in pieces is your father, who is uncontrollable because his mate remains at large and even if we *had* her, Chelsea wouldn't be able to work with her. I'm sure we will acquire more witches in the future, but Dwi will be able to *talk* to them, and while he won't be as convincing as you, it's very unlikely that there will be another challenge like Charles. Are you *useful*, Elspeth?"

"Jake..."

"Brady..." purred Addy.

I shuddered. "Jake's an alpha," I said.

"So are his sisters. We made do with two packs for five and a half years, Elspeth."

I drooped. "What do you want?"

"Since you are only slightly useful," she told me, "I would like you to be interesting. Learn new and exciting things. Figure out the limits of what you can already do, and push them. I'll help you if you should slow down, of course. I do have a history of being good at helping witches improve."

A chill ran up my spine.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

Where itchy magic hadn't done the trick to make me want to leave the village, stark terror did. It was no longer particularly difficult to peel away the snugly comfort of induced awe and respect and affection for the vampires who lived in the compound, although I retained what I thought was a justifiable level of sympathy for the other villagers. But I had no way of knowing when Addy had my father's power and when she didn't; and whenever she did, she could tell what I was up to - what I was *thinking*. She'd know if I decided to jump from my bed to the skylight and climb up to break through the glass at the surface. She'd know if I talked my way past the tunnel guards and intended to make a break for it once past the pawn shop. She'd know if I talked Jake into digging us out. And if she thought she wouldn't be able to research my power otherwise, she'd have every motive to turn me in.

As unwelcoming as the village had become, I was pretty sure my life could get worse.

I had no reason to believe that the Volturi wouldn't kill Jake if he protested at my treatment, so I had to make sure there was nothing (that he could see) about my treatment to complain about. I had to do what Addy wanted. I had to make it clear to her, to anyone else curious enough to investigate, that I was staying put and didn't need to be taken away from him.

Chelsea could non-lethally separate me from any of my friends *except Jake*.

If I misbehaved, he would die.

I catalogued how my power had progressed so far, hoping to collect ideas for what to try next. The first thing I ever did was transmit visual memory. Later I'd attached feelings. Dreams had started leaking out of my hands at some point - it could have been earlier than it was discovered, although not by much, if my parents hadn't held my hands while I slept before that night. I'd added senses to my shared memories, one at a time, and learned to construct hypothetical situations (tagged as such when I sent them to prevent me from lying with them). I pared down the hypothetical situations to just words so I could talk silently. My power started leaking on its own into my normal speech, adding credibility to my true statements depending on just how true and complete they were, and prompting me to say things in ways that my audience would understand. I taught myself to confirm guesses about other people in a horribly roundabout fashion. More recently I learned to summarize and translate memories, and in just the last few weeks I'd been talking to my own magic.

"Do you have any ideas for what to learn to do next?" I asked Magic one evening.

"I don't like this!" she fumed. "You're lying to Jake!"

"If I tell him what's going on he'll make trouble and he might die!"

"You're *lying* to *Jake*!"

"I have half a one-track mind, apparently," I signed at her. She didn't laugh; she never did. "Magic, I need to know what else you can do! I *need* it - that's *true*, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said obstinately, "but -"

I pulled my hand away from my face. I didn't know what Addy would do if I told her my magic wouldn't help me be interesting because it was unhappy. I didn't really want to find out. But I'd learned to do new things before my power became a personified truth-obsessed sub-agent of me, so maybe I didn't need Magic's willing cooperation. I started brainstorming.

Addy checked up on me (in person) a couple of days later, while Jake was playing poker in East with some other wolves. She'd sent me an e-mail at my village account telling me to arrange to be alone. It had been a difficult task to convince Jake that I was okay to leave alone, since try as I might I wore my heart on my sleeve and *everyone*, especially Jake, could tell I wasn't very happy, but eventually I persuaded him to go. I had

a list written up for Addy, which I pushed across the table at her when she walked in. I avoided making eye contact.

"There's no need to be so upset, Elspeth," said Addy in what I could have chosen to interpret as a friendly voice. "I'm not at all impatient yet." She scanned my list. "Compression and speed... hm, you could be a little backwards Aro, wouldn't that be interesting? Range... that's good if you can manage it, especially since a lot of people who acquire range after starting with none can keep training it up a fair distance. You've crossed out "weaponize the disorientation effect", why's that? I'd find it very interesting... you can save it for later, though, if you prefer. Learning to talk to your magic via means other than sign language... not very useful, but it's something, I suppose, and we've established that you don't need to be *particularly* useful."

"Yes ma'am," I muttered.

She raised an eyebrow at me and smiled. "And have you made progress on any of these things yet, Elspeth?"

"No ma'am."

"You don't actually have to call me "ma'am", you know," she said gently. "I'm perfectly happy to be called Addy, or Del if you prefer."

"If you want," I said, looking away. "Addy."

She drummed her fingers on the table. "This is really more fun when my research partner is fascinated by learning about his or her power, too. I'd rather be working *with* you to achieve something interesting, but you went and balked at the seeding work, and I had to break out the leverage." Addy sighed. "Why haven't you started working on these things?"

"I'm stalling," I said, knowing perfectly well that she'd be able to detect it if I wasn't upfront with her. "As long as there are still things I might be able to learn, and I don't completely refuse to work with you, you'll keep me safe, right?"

Addy laughed. "I can be patient, Elspeth, but while you don't need to spend all of your time on this sort of thing - that would be suspicious-looking, wouldn't it? - I would like you to get on with it. Is that understood?"

I looked at my knees and folded my hands. "Yes, Addy," I said.

Weaver

I started working with Addy up in the compound instead of in my room. Every day, she came and walked me up the tunnel and into some unused room, where we worked on some part of my power until she announced we were done for the day and escorted me home. She actually paid me for my time, as well as the seeding, so I could at least tell the villagers that it was my job.

I still didn't like it. But I was as susceptible as ever to the freedom of having no secrets, and - for my safety and others' - Addy was the only person for whom I had no secrets. (Technically my father could hear everything either of us was thinking too, but he wasn't in a position to do anything, and I didn't have a way to talk to him without being noticed, let alone a way for him to talk back.)

Addy and I made a habit of conversing only by sending - for privacy and, she said, for practice - while we worked. We started by trying to add range.

You already have range, in a way, she said conversationally, insofar as your power will carry with your voice - or hand signs or body language. What you need to do is learn to think about your witchcraft as something that can persist beyond you, as it already can. Let's start by releasing you from the dependence on your hands as the mechanism for sending.

She had me talk to her by standing barefoot on her toes, and when that worked after forty minutes of trying, she had me try it by touching elbows. I finally got a wisp of a *Testing... testing...* through to her out of my elbow after half an hour, and then she called it a day.

"I wish you could tell me what's wrong," Jake said softly when Addy dropped me off at home.

"I wish I could too."

Addy was actually a good teacher, and since I couldn't get away with any more stalling than she felt like permitting me, I made progress alarmingly fast. She wanted to let me get used to being able to use non-hand body parts to send before trying to work on range beyond touch, and over the next five days I worked mostly on sending faster and denser. *There's no intrinsic reason why what you share should be in real time, Addy said. Especially not when you send memories instead of things you invent on the spot. You already have the entire memory, start to finish. Let's start small. Pick a five-second block of memory - something simple - and see if you can get it across to me in four seconds. The entire thing, though, not a summary.*

I didn't really know how to go about trying that, but I sighed and touched her hand and tried to pick something out. I settled on five seconds I spent staring in fascination at an old grandfather clock in the Oregon house when I was four months old: simple,

innocuous, and definitely the requested length. I sent along the memory with a little extra *shove*, from the same region of my mind where I felt my now-constant itch of magic.

Four seconds later, it was over, and I winced. I didn't like getting everything so fast when my interestingness to Addy was dependent on there being more left to learn.

Very good, Addy said, mental voice full of approval that was all the more unsettling for being sincere.

I shaved my time down to a half-second over the next few days. Magic complained, when I meditated after five lessons on speed, that she didn't like being "pushed around". I told her that if she wanted to tell me how to send memories quickly some other way, that would be fine with me, but reminded her that Addy was not safe to annoy, and losing an ability I was working on just because Magic didn't like it would probably annoy her. Magic didn't have anything else to say on that topic and spent the rest of the evening guilting me about lying to Jake.

"Why do I even do this anymore?" I asked rhetorically, dropping my hand from my cheek when Jake walked into my room to tell me it was assembly time.

"Am I supposed to know?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

"No," I sighed, and clung to his arm while we walked to our regularly scheduled brainwashing.

"You'll let me know if there's anything I can do to help you," Jake said, "right? Even if you can't tell me what it's helping with or how?"

"If I think of something, I'll tell you," I promised.

"But I might suspect you of misusing the opportunity if you say "hey, Jake, it's very important that you wear a pineapple on your head and waltz around the room for three hours straight," or something," he teased.

"You'd probably do it, though," I said, smiling just a little bit.

"Probably," he agreed, grinning at having successfully coaxed me into a smile.

Chelsea was still making a habit of standing in our pack's section. We were wearing a lot of brown, in keeping with the custom of matching the uniforms and alpha fur colors, but I didn't think she was standing with us because we matched her sandals.

I avoided looking directly at her - pretending that I thought, like everyone else, that she was just Our Friend Chelsea attending the assembly as always and unremarkable wherever she chose to stand. I let the announcements of the day wash over me as Rachel and Becky announced them - Elena's first birthday and Joel's fifteenth, the awarding of a single room to Marilyn for heroism in her last field engagement out in the Philippines, a

trip planned for people with topside privileges to go to Venice for a few days.

The warm, cozy feeling bubbled up inside me - not Chelsea's direct handiwork, but a consequence. But it could only get so far without the freedom from secrecy I had when I first arrived, and I tumbled gratefully into sleep shortly after Jake and I went home.

The next day Addy wanted to turn me into a weapon. *If you can work fast - and you have consistently cut your time as we practice - you might be able to act and react quickly enough to disorient an attacker, perhaps even a vampire attacker once you've practiced enough*, she suggested. *Unfamiliar witchcraft sensations are the obvious choice. Your itch, and whatever else you can pile into the same sending.*

Will you send me more witch memories, then? I asked. *I only know what the powers feel like through your own memories of copying them, and that's different since it all goes through your power. The other witches must feel things directly; they can't all taste their powers.*

Fair enough, said Addy. *Any place in particular you'd care to start?*

I hesitated. *Chelsea*, I said.

Interesting choice, Addy remarked. *I'll need to translate this one; it's from around 295 B.C. and they didn't have any languages that you're familiar with then.* And she placed a finger on my forehead and pushed a memory at me.

I can never think of a good analogy for what relationships feel like. Maybe it's because they're all different. The ones emanating from Marcus are mostly like... perhaps cotton thread. Soft when loose, almost sharp when taut, full of little fibers fuzzing out but contributing to a longer twist of connection. Then there's the exception, glaringly obvious and impregnable no matter how I might hack at it, like a million threads coiled together for strength and then encased in diamond for good measure.

Master Aro wants me to keep Marcus with us - Marcus is essential; I can only grope around in the dark for relationships, not see them, not piece together all the details of how they work in motion. I can flail around and cut, I can seize loose tendrils and moor them where they belong and coax them into growth - but I can't see what I'm doing, and in the long term, that would render me ineffective at the scale Master Aro has in mind for the future.

That diamond-wrapped rope was pulling Marcus away from us, and all my work - on him and on Didyme - wasn't holding him, or rather them. He didn't love us enough to stay if it would suit her to be elsewhere. Master Aro and Caius weren't brothers enough to him; Athenodora and Sulpicia not sisters enough; I not friend enough.

Everyone must love me.

(I'm terrified that one day I will meet someone who lashes me to him with the same unassailable connection, and he will try to pull me away from Master Aro, and I will have no choice but to follow and every dream of glory will die so soon after our coven's creation! I'm indispensable. I made sure of that when I killed my cousin. Master Aro knows why I went back to that miserable hamlet and drank her, of course, and he didn't like it, but now she's dead and I'm the only cutter and weaver of threads in the world, and Master Aro can never be rid of me if he wants to achieve his ambitions. I'll be quite loyal to his plans as long as I'm guaranteed my place, and he knows that.)

But now Didyme is a memory (along with the coven who killed her, the fools - someday every vampire on the earth will know that it's a death sentence to trespass on our interests this way). She cannot wonder aloud if perhaps a quieter life in the north would be more to her taste, and she cannot lead him away by her diamond leash, even though it will always be there connecting him to the dead woman he loved.

Now, I can pull the drooping cotton tighter still, fasten Marcus to Master Aro and to Caius and to Athenodora and to Sulpicia (I was afraid, too, when she came along and caught Master Aro's eye so effectively, but she liked the picture of the queenly leisure he promised her, and will not entice him out of the group). And to me, of course.

Everyone must love me.

So I turn my hand at the end of my wrist, feeling along the invisible threads, and I let my fingers spread, and the string turns and grows and tightens.

Marcus looks at me with dim black eyes. He knows exactly what I'm doing, but I am not Didyme, and that sharply limits how much he can care about it.

Within that limit, though, he'll love me.

Everyone must love me.

I work for some hours, to be quite sure that Marcus won't slip off in a moment of our inattention and provoke the nearest nomad into putting him out of his misery. We must be too close to him for him to let us down. We must be too important to him for him to despair in loneliness. Cotton writhes in my trembling hands.

Finally, I think I've done enough for a short time; Marcus is at least tied enough that he can hunt alone and be expected to return to us. I tuck an errant strand of his hair behind his ear, and hold out my arms for a hug, which he provides dutifully before turning to find his dinner.

"Chelsea," Master Aro says, approaching from my left after Marcus has gone.

"Yes, Master?" It pleases him to be called that. I am the first subordinate of the Volturi, the first who isn't one of the brothers or their wives, and so I am the first to use

the title for him. I don't care, particularly. Being in charge isn't as important as being essential. We could more easily lose Caius than me; I remain unsure why Master Aro made powerless Caius a part of the brotherhood to begin with, but there he is.

Most of the relationships stretching out from Master Aro feel like glass, spun into some improbable thin spikes or rods. The one that links him to Sulpicia is completely unlike glass - it feels warmer and has none of the brittleness; I could try to crush it and it wouldn't even dent.

"I feel that I do not have the luxury of grieving for my sister," Master Aro says evenly. "There is too much to do, and now that revenge has been taken on Didyme's killers, there is no value in continuing to lament her death. I would like you to assist me."

"Yes, Master," I reply. I find the thin tube of glass that used to point towards Didyme, crook my finger, and shatter it.

Master Aro relaxes considerably. "Thank you, Chelsea," he says.

I bow. "No thanks are necessary, Master."

He smiles slightly. "You have done me a significant service. I am unlikely to forget it, however much a matter of course it may be."

"Of course, Master." As long as he's standing there, I bend my thumb to catch the glassy tendril of gratitude - a bit more robust than I would have guessed, not that I have any way to measure precisely - and melt it into the spine of glass that points in my direction, bolstering it strength. Just because he is my Master doesn't mean that he shouldn't love me.

Everyone must love me.

Addy ended the memory there, and I fought the urge to twitch my fingers and see what the relationships floating around her felt like; I didn't have that power independently. She smiled at me. *Will that do for Chelsea, or would you like another sample?*

Another would be good, I said. This was more fun and less nerve-wracking than gradually running out of ways to work on my power.

This is from about 100 BC, she informed me.

I hate human towns. They're convenient places to find meals - although even for that purpose I'd prefer a longer, more pleasant rural hunt. That's the only virtue of habitation centers. The places are lousy with filth and vermin, and the air is hot with the smell of their blood, and that would be quite enough to make the towns unpleasant, but that's not

what makes me hate them.

Human towns are full of people, and none of them love me.

It's not worth the effort to fix that, really. The humans are food or annoyances or useful sources of clothing, not subjects or friends or even stimulating conversationalists. I used to take over every miserable fief I passed through, spending a few hours to make the weak and easily sculpted humans worship me like a goddess for several days before I became bored and started eating them. I have more important tasks now - I'm indispensable to Master Aro! - and it's not a good use of my time.

But it still aches, all those humans rushing from place to place and never sparing me a second thought.

I'm only here for the trinkets Sulpicia wanted. She's amused by sending me on errands; I remain the only Volturi subordinate, as Master Aro wants to be very selective about how he grows our coven and no one except me has passed muster thus far without being the mate of one of the brothers. My core task is far more important than fetching toys for her, but it does not take up all of my time, and besides, every task I perform for haughty Sulpicia lets me entwine more of her dependence on my servitude into her love for me.

It's a few moments past dusk, but there are enough lamps and candles burning that even humans can see a little, and some of them are still out and about. There are two boys, fighting with pathetically well-telegraphed punches and ineffectual kicks over something or other. There is really no point to humans except as food; it's almost charmingly futile, the way they build their disgusting towns and form their trivial societies. Humans are clumsy and weak and ugly.

Well, one of those boys isn't ugly, really. And there's something about how he fights. His opponent is tough, and holding his own, but there's some - weight to the handsome boy's blows that doesn't seem normal. Some lightness to his body when he dodges.

I stand in the shadows and watch the better-looking boy - he's probably nearing twenty, not quite a boy anymore, even though anyone who hasn't gone gray seems that way to me at my two centuries of age - skillfully pummel the ugly one until he yields. There is definitely an uncanniness to the way the comely one moves.

I follow him as he leaves.

He's headed home, apparently. He jogs - again the unusual momentum, more than a human should be able to put behind a stride! - through the towns, and I follow at a brisk walk. He's interesting. Perhaps the oddness in his motions is an extra ability, manifesting early as my gift did. Perhaps that will mean Master Aro will let him join us.

I want him.

I want him to love me.

Everyone must love me, but this young man in particular.

He arrives at home. It's a large family; the object of my interest has one living parent, to judge by their chatter, and six siblings, all younger than him.

He loves them and not me; I can tell, crouching outside his house in the dark and clenching my fists to feel the relationships coiling out from him like strips of leather. Perhaps if I take them away he will leave his house again, and then I can catch him and make him love me. I need him to love me.

Cut and cut and cut, and he's untethered. I hear the cheer in his voice falter; the leathery lines try to spawn themselves back, thin shadows of the originals but still not acceptable. Cut, cut, cut. Come out, come out, come out.

Eventually he does. I hear the excuse - he has a charming, rough voice. They let him go without protest, suspecting nothing. He walks back towards the center of town, and I push my hood down and step into his path. I'm beautiful - part of the package - and there's enough moonlight for him to see it. He stops.

"Hello," I say, leaning towards him. My hands flex. His admiration is just barely solid enough to grab hold of. Pull, pull, pull.

"Hello," he faintly gasps.

"Tell me your name," I purr.

"Afton." He's staring. That's good. Pull and pull and pull - and those other threads are still trying to grow back! I destroy them all again. He's mine, I want him.

"It's so lovely to meet you, Afton. I'm Chelsea." I'm still purring. It's not a sound I've had much use for in the past. He warrants it. Pull and cut and pull and cut...

"Chelsea." He's tasting my name, he knows that I'm very important and that my name is therefore important as well.

I want to keep him. He's mine. "Afton, will you wait right here for me, for just a few minutes?" I implore him. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be back very soon."

"Of - of course." I touch him, for the first time, my fingers threading through his messy brown hair to touch his scalp. He's very warm, and shivers at the touch but doesn't pull back. "I'll wait for you."

I force myself away. I'm far, far too distant from my last hunt to be sure of his safety if I try to preserve him now. I need to feed first, to completely gorge myself.

Those threads are back again.

Cut, cut, cut, and I know exactly who will be my food.

It's hard enough to force his last sister's blood down my throat that I'm confident I'll be able to leave him alive. I swallow as much as I possibly can, wipe a drop off my chin, and fly at top speed back to the spot where I left my Afton. A sweep of my little finger takes care of the last feelings for the dead family up the road; I shouldn't like him to be distressed. I reach out and pull him towards me.

"Chelsea," he murmurs, confused.

"I want you," I whisper into his ear. "I want you to be mine. Do you want to be mine, Afton?" He hesitates. My knuckles dig gently into his back and I force all the power I can into the one leathery rope that I've allowed him. "Won't you be mine?" I don't even care if Master Aro says later that I can't have him. I want him, and I'll have him even if I have to trade the chance to be part of the Volturi's planned conquest for it.

"Yes," Afton says, and carefully, ever so carefully, I sink my teeth into his throat.

The memory ended and I made some kind of strangled nonverbal noise.

Well, sent Addy. *Didn't you think it was interesting?*

I guess it was that, I said, shifting in my chair. Um, can you avoid showing me anybody eating humans, in the future? Just skip those parts or pick memories that don't involve it?

I suppose, she replied, tilting her head. If you really prefer. You do realize that those people died more than two thousand years ago? They don't benefit from your squeamishness at all.

I know. Just - you know, if you don't mind - skip those parts. I didn't like - or maybe I liked too much - the intense recollection of a flavor I wouldn't allow myself that probably wouldn't even taste all that good to my half-human tastebuds.

Very well. Now, see if you can combine your magic's itchiness with my sensation of witchcraft and Chelsea's into one sending...

I didn't manage that trick that day. Addy didn't seem particularly discouraged, and brought me home to Jake after I'd been trying to wrap up all three magical sensations into one package for an hour. Jake hugged me and patted my hair; it had grown down my back since I'd cut it. "You don't look so great," he said. "Actually, you usually seem worse right

before and after you visit Addy..."

I tried, frantically, to think of a way to misdirect his attention that wasn't technically lying. "It just feels cozier here," I said. It did; the four-room suite I shared with Jake was just about the only completely comfortable place I had available to go to. "But I can't just stay at home all the time."

"Well, I guess not, that wouldn't be good for you," he agreed reservedly. "Or at least, in general staying home all the time isn't good for people, but..."

"I think it would be worse if I didn't go with Addy when she asked," I said firmly, and that was quite true. My magic itched, but its cooperation in making me believable was automatic. Jake nodded and relaxed.

"Let me know if there's anything you need from me," he reminded me.

"I will, Jake."

We went to dinner, and then I meditated and chipped away at Chelsea's fabricated "threads" that she would feel pointing away from me and towards the vampires in the compound. I didn't mind caring about the villagers. That was fine. But I did *not* want to be one of the people who Chelsea used to indulge her bottomless need for love. I did *not* want to look forward to working with my *friend Addy*. It was an unhappy, ineffective sort of rebellion, but the only one I had.

We went to assembly.

I could feel Chelsea's eyes boring holes into my back, and wondered what kind of texture threads she was trying to pull out of me.

Teacher

I didn't have any luck with sending along all the witchy sensations the next day, either.

Maybe, I said after an hour of trying, you should send me another memory of Chelsea's. All the relationships felt different and maybe with more to draw on I could figure out what the common features are, and maybe that would work better. It was a transparent attempt at varying the exercises.

Hmm, said Addy, raising an eyebrow at me. No, I doubt that will help. Perhaps it's something to try later, when we run out of low-hanging fruit. Try it again - compose the sensations into one of the hypotheticals, and then try to subtract the "hypothetical" tag, it reduces the impact too much.

I'm sick of this, I've been doing it for the past hour, I complained. I didn't like making progress, at least not quickly, but I didn't like being bored, much, either.

Addy tilted her head. *And you'd rather be doing something else?*

Yeah.

Well, Addy replied, smiling thinly, there is another idea for how you could develop your power into a weapon which will probably be easier to arrange.

What?

Yes, this will break up the monotony for you nicely, said Addy, and suddenly I didn't like the sound of her mental voice one bit. Do you remember how I said your power was similar to Jane's?

I twitched away from her outstretched hand. "No, nonono," I said. "I'll try again with the -"

"But you were so bored," Addy said. "And don't say you won't complain again; I really can tell, whether you say it or not."

"But - please -"

"It will be easy," she said pleasantly. She extended her hand again, tapped me on the nose. *All you have to do is find Jane, mildly annoy her, spend perhaps a second or two acquiring your ammunition, and poof.*

Please, please, no, I begged her.

Look on the bright side. The only way I get to find out whether this works is if you successfully try it on me, you know, she responded. Now, Elspeth, either you may go and

find Jane yourself, and provoke her only as much as you must in order to get a reaction from her that lasts a few moments, or I can go find her, and pat her on the head and come back and make sure it really sinks in.

Do I have to actually annoy her, or could I maybe just ask -

Addy laughed aloud. I suppose you could ask, and she'd probably oblige you. Aro did that once, just out of curiosity. Just the once. But that would be a rather suspicious request to make of her, don't you think? You haven't spoken to her before, so it isn't a matter of learning more about your close personal friend Jane. And the story of your childish reaction to your injury in Alaska - oh, don't look at me that way, Elspeth, you're five years old and permitted occasional childishness - has made the rounds throughout the guard, so I doubt Jane will believe you're deliberately seeking out her unique experiential offerings on their own merits. No, I recommend that you simply walk into her room without knocking. That should do the trick.

I shivered. What if she wants to know why I'm there?

Tell her I sent you to fetch her for me, if she bothers to ask. If she comes to ask me what's going on, I can replace your power with hers and then tell all sorts of lies, and then you can go home for the day and recover.

I leaned away from her hand again, and paused to think. Addy allowed me fifteen seconds in which I came up with nothing, and then she said, "Go on, then."

"Yes, Addy," I murmured, and I got to my feet and went to Jane's room.

I knew the layout of the entire compound; there was a map on the wall of the lounge in West. I'd been there long enough to memorize it during Esta's baby shower. So I had no excuse for taking forever to find Jane's room, and Addy knew it. I walked, slowly but steadily, down the flight of stairs and down the hall. I took a right, and the first door on the right was hers.

She had to have heard me coming - at least if she was *in* her room, which she might not be. If she wasn't, maybe Addy would let me put this off or skip it altogether. I opened the door.

I saw a pair of brilliant burgundy eyes and then all I could do was scream.

It might really have been only a second or two. I couldn't tell. I was *burning*, I was not meant to *hold* that much pain, and that was all there was, wherever I tried to fling myself and escape there was only more fire, I knew I was screaming but couldn't even hear it over the anguish pouring over me like liquid iron.

Jane blinked, and it stopped.

I was on the floor, limbs sprawled crazily as though I'd been seizing, looking upside-down at Jane's angelic, calm expression, which made her seem as though she not only bore no responsibility for the torture but was also politely puzzled about why I had been making so much noise in the first place. Her dark blonde hair dangled above my face as she leaned over me. She looked so young - she looked younger than *me* - and so innocent. Like a porcelain doll.

"Knock," she said.

I successfully interpreted the word, agreed with the instruction enthusiastically, and nodded my head rapidly several times. Jane reached out, seized the neck of my shirt, and picked me up and set me on my feet with one hand. I wobbled but didn't fall.

Jane's room was decorated mostly in warm colors. She had carpet that matched her eyes, a lot of knickknacks made of gold, a cherry wood wardrobe, and pale orange upholstery on her sofa set. This made her slight figure, dressed in the black cloak of the Volturi, stand out like a blot of ink against the bright background. She looked at me expectantly from under her hood. "Well?" she said.

"Uh," I replied. I had a brain somewhere but seemed to have misplaced it.

"What," she said, "are you doing here? What do you want?"

"Um-um-um-Addysentme," I said, finding it exceptionally urgent that Jane get what she wanted without delay.

"And she didn't tell you to knock?" asked Jane, skeptical.

"No, she didn't." I reached for the wall to steady myself. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I will never ever ever walk in without knocking again. I'm so sorry."

Jane nodded to herself. "Well, I suppose I shall go see what Addy wants. You run along."

I bolted. Behind me, I heard Jane chuckling softly.

I went straight home, unaccompanied. Seth and Karen, guarding the tunnel, stopped me, and I told them that Addy told me to go home. This was only a slight stretching of the truth - she *had* said I should go home and recover, it was just that she hadn't quite specified whether I had to check in with her first. I forced myself to interpret her instructions as permitting me to flee home to Jake without her escort, and managed to convince the wolves to the point where they let me lurch past Karen without trying to catch me.

When I got to my door, I almost knocked. It took me three seconds of focusing very hard on my breathing and the fact that this room was *not* Jane's before I managed to turn

the handle without foolishly rapping my knuckles against the wood.

Jake wasn't home yet. I slumped into the armchair and closed my eyes, hoping that my internal clock would spontaneously rejigger itself to let me sleep instead of being so miserably conscious. Of course no such thing happened.

Why did Jane *exist*? Could she perhaps be made to stop existing? How much of a chance would Jake have at killing her before she or someone else tore him apart, if I asked him to? Would he go, or was Chelsea thorough enough that he'd find a reason not to hurt one of Our Friends?

A couple of seconds later, the fact that I cared about Jake reasserted itself, and I decided that I should probably not send him into a nest of evil vampires who only slightly valued his life and tell him that one of them tortured me.

I went into our bathroom and looked in the mirror. There was a wild look in my eyes and my hair was mussed, but I didn't otherwise appear hurt. I combed my hair, and braided pigtails into it for good measure, and then went and flopped on my bed to try to relax.

When Jake walked in, I had my face buried in my pillow and couldn't see him, but I heard him open the door well enough. I startled badly enough to accidentally fling myself off my covers and onto the floor. "Elspeth?" he said. "Are you okay?" He walked up and helped me off the ground, hugging me in greeting as long as he was there. "You don't usually roll off of the furniture in excitement when I walk into a room."

"Eep," I squeaked. I wasn't fine, he'd smell a lie a mile away if I told him I was fine, but he had to *believe* I was fine, I would be so completely lost without Jake if they took him away and that meant he had to think I was okay because if he thought otherwise it would only make me *less* okay.

Jake put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me back a few inches to get a good look at my face. I tried to look normal, but my lip trembled and there was a little too much moisture in my eyes. An expression of severity and displeasure took over his face. "Elsie, what happened?"

I flung myself forward to go back to the hugging part, which involved less scrutiny and more warmth, but he just repeated the pushing gesture and stared into my eyes. "Elsie," he said. "I'm - I'm going out of my mind just a tiny bit wondering what's gotten you so jumpy and sad all the time. You dream like you need to be on Prozac and you look like you're afraid of your shadow and you won't tell me anything, and - and geez, Elsie, I'm here for *you*, that is the *point* of there being a Jacob Black in the world is for *you*, will you *please* let me help?"

"I can't," I sniffled. "I can't. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm -"

"Shh." He let go of my shoulders and I pitched forward again to be held; Jake started swaying back and forth. "Shh-shh-shh. You don't have to be sorry." A heavy sigh blew

past his clenched teeth. "Can I have a *hint*, or... you don't have to, you don't have to do anything you don't want to, but -"

"Sometimes... the stuff Addy wants me to work on... is hard," I choked. He waited patiently for me to go on, and I collected myself for a couple of minutes, but couldn't think of anything else true I could tell him. Jake sighed again.

"Maybe you could take a day off, or two - a week?" he suggested. "You're obviously not feeling well, everybody else gets sick days."

"Maybe. I don't know. I'm not actually *sick*," I said.

"Can it hurt to ask?"

"Probably not," I admitted. *But only probably*, I thought.

Asking Addy for time off, when she came to collect me the following day, did not literally hurt. It didn't even figuratively hurt. It didn't get me any time off, either.

"Nonsense," Addy said when I tentatively suggested that I could skip a day. "You're in perfect health. I'm already being rather gentle by scheduling only a couple of hours of work each day. Did you know that when I found Benjamin, way back when, we did nothing *but* play with the elements for a solid week and a half? Come along, now."

I followed her, bizarrely inclined to resent Benjamin, and we settled into our practice room and she extended her hand; when I didn't touch it right away she seized my wrist and held it.

Go ahead and try the weapon Jane gave you, invited Addy, a crafty little smile on her face, and I scowled and did exactly that. Send and *push* -

Addy yanked her hand away from my arm and clutched at it like I'd burned her, but after a momentary hiss, she smiled. "There you go," she said pleasantly, and she took hold of my hand again. *Not as potent as Jane, but promising, certainly.*

I could just zap you until you leave me alone.

Addy laughed at me. *Elsbeth, I am considerably faster than you, I am considerably more accustomed to pain than you, and now that you have this power, so have I. If you wish to turn this into a fight, you will lose, and would even without the threat of my sharing your secret with the others. Shall we spend a few seconds seeing precisely how long it would take me to subdue you? Do you think it would be amusing to invent an excuse for your wolf when you come home looking that run down? Or shall we get on with our day?*

I attempted to glare at her, but had a suspicion that it came off as more of a pout. She

smiled brightly and went on, *Let's go back to the range exercises*. Then she released my hand, and waited patiently.

I shut my eyes and bit my lip and wished I could convincingly fake the attempt, but I couldn't. I pointed my hand at Addy, imagined it as an antenna of some kind, and thought as hard as I could about that memory of the ticking grandfather clock in Oregon.

Forty-five mind-numbingly boring minutes later (which were nevertheless mercifully empty of torture), Addy's face lit up with a bright grin. "I saw that," she exclaimed. "Marvelous. Do it again."

I forced another few seconds of clock-ticks through the air at her, and Addy smiled serenely. "Now add in the audio and other components. Take your time," she added generously.

Over the next hour I gradually grouped together the entirety of the minutes I'd spent staring at that clock, folding in all the senses and feelings. It was exhausting, albeit only mentally - I didn't want to sleep, so much as stare blankly into space. When the memory was complete, Addy tapped me on the nose to update her copy of my power. "Mmm," she said happily. She scooted her chair back a foot. "Again."

It was faster to get the extra twelve inches of range than it had been to get the first one, but I was completely drained once I'd managed it after thirty minutes of work. Addy finally acknowledged that I needed a break; she touched my nose again, and I sat, and looked at my shoes, and tried to relax.

"You can practice that on your own at home, I think," she said after a few minutes. "I think you should try to add at least a little bit of range every day without fail; if you skip days it runs more risk of sticking and becoming fixed. Oh, I wish I'd met more witches so young..."

"Is that why you won't let me have time off?" I asked.

"Yes. Generally, the newer someone's power is, the more flexible it's seemed to be, but I met one witch who worked every day on an arbitrarily scalable feature of his craft - he was a telekinetic, but worked on a larger, less tidy scale than Hao, and upped his weight tolerance. By the time I met him, he was only increasing it by about a gram a day, but it was still going up and he was three hundred years old."

"Is that what you did before you joined the Volturi? Just went all over the place looking for witches to borrow and... help?" I didn't like using that word for what she was doing with *me*, but from the sound of things people like Pera and Benjamin had enjoyed a pure benefit from Addy's acquaintance until she moved to Volterra and started rounding up her old friends.

"Pretty much," she said cheerfully.

"What made you decide to join the Volturi?" I asked.

Let's practice while we have this conversation, she sent without touching me, and I was suddenly glad that there was no longer a reason I had to hold her cold hands in order to do the work she wanted. The cold didn't bother me, exactly. For a long time everybody I touched was a vampire, all the same temperature. But since moving into the village and starting to need comfort on a regular basis, my source of comfort became Jake, who ran a couple of degrees warmer than me and *much* warmer than a human, let alone a vampire.

Then I thought of Jane and how her eyes *burned*, and decided that temperature per se was irrelevant and I just didn't love touching Addy.

What made you decide to join the Volturi? I asked again in the approved way. Fatigue started to reassert itself, but ranged communication was getting easier.

Oh, I avoided it for a long time, replied Addy, a sigh in her mental voice. *Slipped under the radar. They found me while I was traveling with Joham and his daughters.*

Noemi and Iseul aren't witches, right? Is Joham?

No, he's not, she said. *Anyway, a delegation of the Volturi showed up, looking for some half-vampires to learn more about them, and they had several witches along whose powers I'd never tasted before. I knew the Volturi had great witches among them and did want to learn about their crafts, but I'd avoided actually seeking them out because I thought it would be dangerous - and then they were right there, irresistible. I touched Jane -*

You could just show me this, I pointed out.

I'm not going to do that. She didn't explain why, just continued the story. *At that point Jane noticed me, and you've seen how lightly she takes her power, but I fought back instinctively; at that point they were a little too curious about me for me to escape notice. I decided to make the best of the situation - at least as a member of the Volturi guard I would get to sample some of the most carefully handpicked witches in the world. And it's been an interesting few years, and I've collected most of my old friends and some highly interesting prizes that Aro's had his eye on, so now I have a great deal of choices at my fingertips. But it's so static, now; there's not a one in the guard whose power is still changeable as far as I can tell. You, though, Elspeth, you're growing all the time.*

I nodded slowly.

Let's go back to the speed tests, and see if you can send a compressed memory from here, instructed Addy, and I groaned out loud.

I lurched home an hour later, Addy at my shoulder, and flopped into Jake's arms when he got up at my entrance. Holding me up, he said, "Addy, I'm worried about Elspeth

_"

"But Jacob," Addy said. "Do you want her power to atrophy? It will, you know, if she doesn't practice it. She could be more limited than she has to be, forever, based on a decision she made to avoid doing her homework at age *five*. Don't you want what's really best for her, not just what's easiest?"

It was the exact right thing to say to make Jake back off, and he frowned solemnly and nodded once, still cradling me.

"But it's such a blessing that she has you," Addy went on lightly, "to look after her." Jake smiled tentatively, and Addy gave a little wave, spun on her heel, and left. *Watch yourself*, she warned in my mind through the door.

"Did she actually assign homework?" Jake asked me.

"Yeah," I murmured. "Range practice. Can I do that when I'm done snuggling, though, please?"

"Of course," he said soothingly, and petted my hair.

The next day, Addy and I sat in opposite corners of the room to practice range and speed. She believed that I could eventually be a true "backwards Aro", only ranged and selective - he had no choice but to absorb the entire memory of anyone he touched, whereas I could define beginnings and endpoints to what I wanted to share and send only that, only to my desired targets. *In fact, that may be your limiting factor here*, Addy said, after I'd just barely squeezed a half-hour hunt into two seconds. *Aro's beginning and end points are perfectly, automatically defined: birth and the moment at which he absorbs memory. You need to define your points deliberately, and you're accustomed to sifting along memories in real time, to decide as you go whether each second is something you want to offer or not. Let's break that habit once and for all. Send me everything.*

What?!

I think you know exactly what I meant, Elspeth, replied Addy. *Try to send me all of your memories from your earliest up to this moment. Here, if it will make it easier...* She got up and crossed the room to take my hand and place it on her face.

I don't want - Something in Addy's expectant smile stopped me. I might get out of doing this right away, but it would be replaced by something I liked less and then suggested again later. *Everything?* I asked, forlorn.

Everything. Selectivity is holding you back. Don't be so shy; do you realize how many thousands of people's memories I have in my head? You have done nothing so unique and shocking in the past five years. This is not about me invading your privacy; I could do that by borrowing your father's power and asking embarrassing questions. This

is about helping you break through your limitations.

I took a deep breath, bit my lip, and pushed.

Addy staggered away from my hand, and her eyes unfocused and her jaw went slack. She didn't fall, but for two full seconds, she wavered on the spot. Then, slowly, she straightened up and blinked, closing her mouth and looking very impressed.

That, she said, should you ever be particularly desperate, is a more effective weapon - at least the first time - than your variant on Jane's power. She held her hand out to me. Try it again, let's see if it works twice.

On the second try, Addy recovered much more quickly; I barely saw the dip of her posture before she caught herself and smirked. *Vastly diminished efficacy. Only a few seconds of the thoughts were new, of course - this will, I expect, be a matter of delay between uses rather than a simple situation where it's only effective against a given target once.*

And then the world went dark and silent and airless, as though I'd ceased to have a body, and I was completely alone with my thoughts.

Helper

The darkness pervaded everything. I couldn't feel my limbs, I couldn't tell if I was breathing, I didn't know if my eyes were open. No pain, no comfort, no warmth, no cold, no up or down, no plain taste of nothing in my mouth, or even the buzz of my own heartbeat. Nothing at all.

I wondered how long it would take me to go insane.

Alec, I guessed, but while it seemed likely that this was what it felt like (didn't feel like, rather) to be under his blanket of sensory deprivation, I didn't know why he'd be doing it to me.

Unless somehow - presumably without Addy's help - the Volturi were aware of my tinkering with Chelsea's work (I felt a moment of profound stupidity for not trying to get Addy's help directly with that - hadn't Chelsea been looking at me suspiciously for long enough that I ought to have asked? Wouldn't it be in Addy's interests, at least as she stated them, for Chelsea's suspicions to never get to the point of action as long as I wasn't trying to escape?) and had decided to kill me.

If they were going to kill me they would kill Jake too -

Jake. He was out of range, of course he was completely out of range, I'd only just acquired *any* range at all, but maybe I could learn *very fast*. Maybe if I regretted stalling enough, or felt stupid enough for asking about *time off* when I might *need* more useful powers later, then I would be magically saved, allowed to time-travel to the past and be more diligent and better and faster. *Jake! Jake! JAKEINEEDHELP* -

My power gave no feedback. If it was working I couldn't tell. We'd never worked on how to target people I couldn't see - in fact, I didn't even know how I decided to send to someone I wasn't touching; I hadn't thought about it at all. I could be accidentally calling for help to Sulpicia, or some random human in Volterra, or someone else similarly unlikely to benefit me.

I decided it would be safer to keep trying - to assume that everything I tried failed and then think of what the next thing to do would be. If shouting for Jake *hadn't* worked, what would be the next plan? Images were easier, I'd been doing *images* since I was a *baby*. Memories were easier than made-up pictures. I screamed a visual of myself, the most distressed expression I'd ever seen on my own face in a mirror, and then did it again, and again, ignoring the building tiredness.

Suppose that hadn't worked. What would be the next thing to try? Talking to someone more nearby - *Addy, are you still there?* Did she still have my power, or -

Memories crashed down into my mind.

- *she'll take care of the kids, right? Oh, god, the kids, what if - seriously, vampires? -*

- *I didn't do it, there's been some mistake! -*

- *the ball is flying through the air, I'm not going to catch it, they'll win and everyone will laugh at me -*

- *it hurts, why did they hurt me, why don't they understand? I'll show them, I'll make them stop -*

- *hail Mary, full of grace -*

- *hm, I don't have that much - Pietro! Pietro, I need more flour! -*

- *the oats are doing well this year, but the turnips -*

- *well, your daughter has a face like a mule's! -*

- *Spices, exotic spices from the Orient! -*

- *he thinks I could become a master one day! That's it, that's the inspiration I needed to work twice as hard -*

- *pain fire burning it hurts it hurts what do you mean three days it hurts -*

- *Didyme, my Didyme, my Didyme, how I miss you -*

- *this dress itches, how am I going to keep from scratching in front of all of Father's friends and on such an important day -*

- *everyone must love me -*

- *but Ma, I think I'm in love with her! I can't stop thinking about her -*

- *I am never having another baby ever again as long as I live god damn this hurts why does anyone do it twice -*

- *I take the flowers and smell them and it's so romantic, except now there's a bee on my nose -*

- *I'm tired, it has been such a long day, do you really need me to deal with this right now or can it wait till morning -*

- *I don't know how to swim! Help! Someone help -*

- *lay a hand on my mate again and I will destroy you so utterly that the ashes of the ashes of the ashes of your ashes will burn, so help me -*

- I love you. I will love you for every moment of eternity. Will you do me the honor of marrying me? -

- medical school, really? Mum, of course I'm happy for him -

- they say he is a great man, but I know him for a conqueror and a killer -

- I hate this uniform, I hate the way people look at me in this uniform, I hate the way I feel in this uniform, I hate its very buttons, why -

- an accomplished lady must be, among other things, competent in the art of conversation -

- claim this land in the name of -

- knit one, purl two -

- cereal again, I'm such a lazy ass, I should at least buy eggs and scramble them once in a damn while -

- welcome to Italy, miss, and enjoy your stay -

- I think you could eventually learn to hide other people as well as yourself, if you tried -

Fragments of memories competed for my attention, displacing each other in random sequence. I heard familiar voices and strangers, recalled places I recognized from my travels and ones I'd never seen in my life, watched thoughts march past in a hundred languages that had all acquired eerie familiarity, saw arbitrary snatches of life histories play out in vampire clarity and human blur.

It was almost a day before I was lucid enough, and had gotten sufficiently accustomed to procesing the memories, that I could shove them aside and look at my surroundings in the present.

Later, I asked Addy what happened, and she showed me:

Vastly diminished efficacy, I report. Only a few seconds of the thoughts were new, of course - this will, I expect, be a matter of delay between uses rather than a simple situation where it's only effective against a given target once. It hadn't been disorienting at all to touch Aro, even the first time, and receive a much larger payload of memory; but that was a benefit of *his* power. Very convenient, how he can store memories so neatly, even pruning redundancies when he reads a person for the second time, without his being consciously disturbed by any items he doesn't choose to examine. It's a wonderful power -

and completely *still*, doing only the exact same thing at all times; however he may flutter about envying Edward's range, he didn't work on his talent when it counted.

His power is a little like mine, actually. Both of us automatically helping ourselves to something of those we touch. Both living mostly vicariously. And to be honest, my *native* power hasn't changed since I turned and acquired it in magical form in the first place, but given what I can do, that's a technicality; there's a witch born every minute and one turned every month or so.

Before I have a chance to discourse further on the nature of witchcraft with my pupil, though, the dead, dark blankness of Alec's power creeps over me and I have other things occupying my attention.

Aro *daren't* attack me. He might have considered it before; in fact, I'm sure he has. But I've given Elspeth *range*! I can advertise what he'd rather have kept between us to anyone nearby, even through Alec!

Just in case Aro really *is* that stupid, contrary to all evidence, I'll -

The child is shouting for her wolf. By the current taste of her power, she *can* aim for him without seeing him, although I doubt she has the strength to make the signal carry that far. But I probably fell on top of her when Alec hit us, and she's still more oriented towards touch; I'm getting copies of everything. It really is a delicious power, and not as harmless as it first appears.

Hm -

One of my questions is answered: Aro *isn't* that stupid. Caius is that *ignorant*. Dwi's voice chimes in my mind. [Caius feels there is reason to mistrust you, and with the witches of your collection all assimilated into our coven save one whom Aro can make use of more directly, you have lost a considerable portion of your usefulness. Do you have anything to say in your defense on either count?]

Damn it all.

Caius knows nothing; if I tell him, it would certainly do Aro harm, but take all my leverage away from me; the anarchy that would result might not be any more kindly disposed to me than Caius apparently is. Where *is* Aro? Perhaps Dwi will tell me - [Caius? Did he make this decision alone?]

[Marcus agreed to the plan.]

Marcus will say anything to make intrusive people go away and leave him to his pining; that's meaningless. Aro's out of town, then. What would have triggered Caius to act at this most inopportune time, when I can't blackmail my way out of it? [May I ask what prompted the choice? The witches have been up and about for a week and a half.]

There is a pause. The screaming girl is trying images now. Dwi tells me, [Chelsea

has been noticing odd disintegration of Elspeth's attitudes towards the coven for some time now, but thought nothing of it until she spoke to Jane, who had also noticed odd behavior in the girl and believes you to be responsible for it. They brought the matter to Caius in Aro's absence. Do you have anything to say for yourself?]

[I would like the chance to speak to Aro, even if only through you, before -]

[Caius anticipated that request and has refused it. He suspects that you have some sort of unusual hold over Aro, and expects that Aro would be glad to have you gone even if he'd argue for your being spared given the chance.]

Well, I can't fault Caius's inductive powers. That's more or less exactly the case. [Why is Aro out of town?]

[A disruptive coven in Nicaragua may have an interesting witch in it, whom he might pardon. Chelsea is with him.]

The girl has another idea - *Addy, are you still there?* -

[Dwi, I imagine you don't like me much anymore, but we were friends, once,] I say, ignoring the child as a plan forms. [I have nothing else to say, but I want to ask you to let me know who's going to kill me, and when. I won't feel anything and I can't bear the thought of suddenly winking out of existence without knowing, Dwi...]

A moment's pause, and he said, [Saeed is going up with the saw. He'll start... now.]

And in that moment, I slam *everything* into *everyone* the hybrid girl's power will let me touch.

Alec's cloud of insensibility evaporates and I'm free. I'm on my feet in an instant; Saeed is listing limply to one side, and the saw clatters out of his hand to the floor, having left only one stinging nick under my chin. I don't know how long this will last, but I do know I probably didn't get everyone in the compound. If I'm lucky, I got everyone who knew what was going on. Time to make a break for it.

There's a window I can go out by; I can only care so much about the sunshine right now, but that's not what makes me hesitate. Elspeth, caught when I deployed her own weapon with my greater force, is even more insensate than Saeed. I'm not *done* with her yet. She'll slow me down, but -

Her wolf bursts through the door, wild-eyed, and takes in the state of the room. One of her screams must have reached him. He rushes to her and picks her up, a growl in the back of his throat.

"Peace. I don't want her harmed," I say, as quick as I think he'll be able to comprehend me. Her power won't let him waste time doubting what I say. "They might. You and she need sleep and I don't - I'll help you get away." I could kill him, but it would take longer than I might have before the incapacitated vampires come out of their fugues.

Or I could blast him with the memories too, but I'm *not* sure that they'd be able to take his attention from his imprint - more than likely, mated vampires I've caught in the push are only so caught because their mates aren't in immediate danger.

I spin and throw myself out the window, and hear him following. I don't need to look behind me. He has nowhere to go; he'll follow me as long as I reassure him periodically that I'm not planning to hurt his girl.

I break into and hotwire a parked car, managing to do it without any humans noticing the shimmer on my hands or face; the wolf and the child go in the backseat, with her curled vacantly his arms while she makes confused noises. "Best defense is to stay in *crowded places*, full of humans with cameras," I say. "I don't think the Volturi are likely to be desperate enough to make a public scene, not when they can negotiate with me at any time through Dwi once they've recovered. It was difficult enough to pass off this May's jailbreak as a mass hallucination while only needing to kill fourteen people. Do you still have your pack or have they been moved already?"

"Uh, I'd have to phase to find out..."

"No room for that in this car. Very well. Let me think." I drive through Volterra, at a snail's pace, but there are plenty of people milling about with cellphones, and I can put up enough of a fight - and so can the wolf - that we cannot be apprehended *fast enough* to prevent all possible onlookers from snapping a picture and sending it to a friend impossible to identify or track down.

"What *happened* to *Elsbeth*?" the wolf demands rudely, all out of patience. "Why is she - half-conscious?" The girl is mumbling words occasionally, but most of them aren't in English, so I can see why he wouldn't recognize them for what they are.

I send him a summary the simple way, avoiding the need to verbally compose a story. That shuts him up while I maneuver around the city. I need to decide where to go. My old friends are all either the new members of the Volturi guard, dead, or nomads nearly impossible to track down. The wolf's friends are all in the village. My pupil's friends are there too, and her *former* friends are, at least mostly, congregated in Alaska with the Volturi's reluctant spies, where they will be picked off for their disloyalty as it's convenient.

I would like nothing more than to find some *isolated* place to take the child and her pet. It might even work for a time. Demetri isn't in Volterra, he's off pursuing the inconsequential hobby or whatever it is that takes up so much of his time; he's gone as often as not, and he usually doesn't carry a phone on those excursions. For some reason he prefers not to be interrupted while he's away on his trips. But he'll return eventually and will be sent after us if they have any interest in our retrieval. I am excellent in a fight, but the feeble imitation of Jane that Elspeth has acquired won't let me hold off a team of memory-blast-immunized Volturi fighters on my own. Even a handful of allied vampires - witches or not - would give me a chance.

Briefly, I regret not finding Dwi and taking his power before departing. It would be handy right about now. I could use it look up minor witch friends from long ago, too inconsequential in their powers for the Volturi to want them, and find out where they are and get them to join me.

I think I've gotten five miles away from the compound. Edward will no longer be able to divulge my thoughts to Aro if he should investigate the captive's memories.

Edward's power let me keep some tabs on what's going on in Denali. The Cullens have been busy collecting friends and allies. Last I heard, the Alaskan coven was playing host to not only their cousins, but also Zafrina's ordinary sisters Kachiri and Senna, an English friend of Carlisle's called Alistair with a minor power, and three powerless American nomad singles called Garrett, Mary, and Randall. A poor showing, but then, they probably could have gotten better attendance if the Volturi and I hadn't gone around snapping up all the best witches and their mates -

"How long is Elspeth going to be like this?" the dog demands.

"I have no idea," I tell him, polite in spite of his ill breeding. "Probably twice as long as the vampires in the compound I managed to get in the blast radius. She has a lot of memories to process, you understand. Every person Aro's ever touched, their entire life story from birth to the last moment he's come into contact with them - plus Aro himself, of course. He *alone* is nearly 2,500 years old, the other two Volturi and the two living wives and Chelsea similar, the entire rest of the guard at several centuries apiece *at least*, and the hundreds of thousands of humans Aro's eaten over the years to boot are good for another few decades each. And every random vampire who *used* to belong to the guard, or has ever passed through their hands, or who Aro investigated before having them executed, plus most of the wolves and imprints from your village, plus -"

"I get it! It's a lot!" the wolf snaps. "How long will it take her to *deal* with it?"

"I told you, I don't know. Longer than a few minutes, obviously. She sent me five and a half years once and I was inattentive for a couple of seconds, and I'm a vampire and she's not; extrapolating, she *could* be like this for the next couple million years, but somehow I doubt the results are *quite* that cumulative."

He makes an almost endearing whining noise when I say the word "million", but I don't think it will really be that long. If I did, I would have abandoned her in the compound; she'll be rather uninteresting to me comatose. Even without Aro's convenient automatic storage and sorting, there is no call for her to absorb the memories I gave her in real time. I *will* leave her and the wolf behind if she isn't better in a week - or if I really need to - but I suspect she'll recover quicker than that, at least partially. Sleeping may help her. That will be interesting to investigate.

I sift through her memories - is there anyone who might help her, other than the doomed rebels in Alaska? Someone with a known address? Hmm. The Irish coven is a possibility. They don't have a known address, and in fact they range over the whole

island, but the vegetarian faction - Maggie and Gianna and Ilario - might have a permanent residence under their real names, if they take after the Cullens in that regard. I haven't heard of them migrating to Alaska as part of the rebellion, but Gianna gave birth to Elspeth and might feel something for her.

The three of them, possibly in addition to Siobhan and Liam, would give enough numbers that I and Elspeth's dog could probably defeat or escape the size team liable to be sent after us once Demetri returns. Four or five people, maybe half a dozen - sending large groups away makes Chelsea nervous and leaves her with too much to do too quickly on their return. They're unlikely to send wolves. It's too easy to use Elspeth as a shield, whom the wolves won't dare touch (...although what if her wolf died first? Then would she have that protection?), and anyway I highly doubt that any of the wolves have already been hit with the deluge of memory, so they'll remain vulnerable to that.

"Where are we going?" the dog wants to know.

"Ireland. A coven likely to be friendly to Elspeth lives there, and may be findable."

I *do* like the way this power makes me so believable.

I drive to the airport, locate an airplane headed for Ireland, and get us into the cargo hold, obtaining dinner on the way. The wolf looks away and clutches at his girl, but I really don't care; I'm not going to turn into a softhearted swill-drinker just because I'm traveling with this creature.

"Are you," I ask him, "planning to try to feed her solid food? She can probably swallow. I doubt she can chew."

He shudders. "I'll get her animals."

"You know, just out of curiosity as to what would happen, one of the guards tried feeding a captive witch under Alec's power animal blood once. She wouldn't swallow it. Apparently you need a fair amount of willpower to manage the diet; it's not the sort of thing that will happen by reflex. Elspeth might be different in that respect from a vampire, I suppose. Or she might be lucid enough to swallow deliberately. Or not."

He doesn't like this, but I wouldn't like him delaying her recovery by putting off feeding her what she needs until it's sufficiently painfully obvious. "We'll see," he says, looking worriedly at Elspeth.

"I wonder if she'd find *you* palatable."

"Huh?"

"You, Jacob Black, werewolf, possessor of blood that smells rancid to *me* but doesn't to *her*. I wonder if she would drink it. I'm not saying you must make the experiment; that's not the sort of curiosity I am particularly insistent about indulging. But I do wonder."

"Well, she's not going to need food until tomorrow morning," he says stubbornly. His company is very tiresome; I don't make any further attempt at conversation. I start rummaging through the luggage in the cargo hold, looking for anything that might be useful, and obtain a pair of sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat, and lacy gloves that will provide incomplete coverage for my arms. It will be dark by the time we land, but this is easier than pulling off a burglary from a store once we're there.

Elsbeth is still murmuring. A while later, she quiets, and her wolf holds her hand, watching her dream. He looks troubled. Eventually he starts yawning, and looks at me suspiciously.

I roll my eyes. "I want her alive, and have no particular reason to want you dead, not when you'll help keep her alive and make it inconvenient for your fellow wolves to attack her. Go ahead and sleep until we land. I'll wake you when it's time to go. With any luck there will be a safe place to go to ground once I've found her friends, and you can get more sleep."

"Okay," he says suspiciously, and he finds a less-uncomfortable place in the hold to stretch out with Elspeth under one arm and sleep.

I sift through my memories, mostly copied ones, to see what I know about Ireland and what strategies might work best for tracking down the coven. Eventually I recall a fellow with access to enough of the records of the Republic of Ireland that he will, if nothing else, be able to narrow my search to the island's northern tip if he finds no data on the family I seek. He is almost certainly still alive; the latest memory I have involving him is only eight years old and he was just in his forties at the time. It's hard to say whether he'll be cooperative, but that part I can probably arrange if necessary.

The wolf gets a total of two hours of sleep, and then I wake him and get us out of the airplane. I manage to avoid killing anyone, this time - which is good, because a mysterious airport-located death would let the Volturi find us without waiting for Demetri's availability - and I help myself to another car and take us to Cork. The wolf nods off again.

My contact is not pleased about being awakened, but he accepts without irksome curiosity the statement that I am "a friend of Tom's". (He has never heard me speak truth, and so the inaccuracy does not stand out.) Being a friend of Tom's, apparently, is enough to convince him to help me without any need for threats or pressure, beyond the mention of Tom's name. (Tom is dead, but this fellow doesn't know that or need to.) He has a work computer at home and can access the relevant records immediately, and finds an address in Wexford to match the names I give him. I change cars to make following me harder - the wolf has to be woken for this purpose, but falls back asleep readily - and head out.

Elsbeth wakes up when I stop the car a few blocks away from their address, before the wolf does, and she seems to actually see what's in front of her.

"Where are we?" she asks blearily.

"The Trafeli household," I inform her. "It's so convenient that you're conscious. Let's see if they're kindly disposed towards you."

Recaller

- your leg will be all better in just a few weeks. Trust stronger trees with your weight in the future, all right? There's a girl -

That was my grandfather Carlisle's voice. It took me a moment to identify it because it was how he sounds to himself, not to others, but when I recognized the girl he was talking to as a younger, human Esme, I realized. I know this story -

- you know, Elsie, I met your grandpa years before I ever turned? It was the oddest coincidence that we ever saw each other again -

That was one of my memories. That was my grandma, telling me something, when I was four months old.

- I was sixteen, you see, and I'd broken my leg -

I know what that's like - I, Elspeth, that's happened to *me*, my legs have been broken before -

- is that her? It's been ten years, but she's still... God above, she's dying, they're taking her to the morgue, what are they doing? Her heart is still beating! Save her, you fools...! No, they're right. They can't save her. I can. -

That was my grandma he was saving. He left her, back when he'd finished treating her leg, because he thought she should have a human life. But...

Where am I?

It was dark. I was somewhere where it was night. I thought I was sitting on Jake's lap. Were we in a car?

- what would my father, my real one, not Carlisle, say if he saw me now, elbow-deep in engine grease? But I like this, I know how to fix the car, I can make it whole and make it run. I could build this car from scratch if I wanted to. I know enough about how it works that I could take scrap metal and make a car. Not much consolation for the fact that I can never make a life. I can never make a little happy child who will play in the front yard and get tired and come in and want supper. But I can make this car run, and I can give it fuel -

That was my aunt Rosalie...

Why was I in a car?

Addy was sitting up front -

- "Try it again!" I'm so sure we can fly, really fly. That's one power I've never found.

No telekinetic or gravity-tweaker or other miscellaneous witch can really, truly fly, but maybe Benjamin can manage it, and if he can, so can I. He laughs - I think he may be having as much fun as I am - and collects the air and jumps, but we must still be missing something. He can throw himself through the air for significant distances, and it is better than jumping. But he can't finely control that much air. He's catapulting himself, whipping up a wall of wind to push and then having to let it go when it gets big enough for the job. He's not flying. I want us to fly. I gather some air of my own; it could still be a matter of focus or creativity, not of a fundamental growth in the power...

That was Addy. I had... a whole *lot* of memories in my head. Did she do that?

"Where are we?" I asked, finding my voice difficult to work, but managing three syllables.

"The Trafeli household," Addy said. "It's so convenient that you're conscious. Let's see if they're kindly disposed towards you."

Trafeli -

- "Gianna Trafeli, sir," I tell him. Is he a vampire, really, truly a vampire? That's what I was looking for, but it's so strange to have found it! And... and rather terrifying... but my brother needs help and there's only so much the doctors can do -

I don't remember much - or rather I don't *personally* remember much - about Gianna. You could count the number of times I saw her on one hand, although I guess I spent a few weeks I can't remember in very close quarters with her. But the first twenty-three years of her life were just - there, if I wanted them and even if I didn't. Just as easily called to mind as anything that ever happened to me, except for the part where she was human the last time Aro read her and had forgotten a lot.

But she might help. "She's - they're - here?"

"They are," said Addy. "Well, a ways up the road and around the corner; the car is stolen, you see, and when it's found I'd rather it not be right in front of our destination. Wake your Jacob and we can be on our way."

"Jake," I said.

- "Jacob Black," my Jasper snarls. Really? Well, of course really - but why would a Quileute be calling Bella? That is what the name means, isn't it, that was the surname of the alpha family? Or it's a coincidence - or - oh no - did she - Edward's noticed something he doesn't like about my mate's thoughts, and he's standing between my Jasper and his Bella. But I don't understand yet what's going on, I can't see, Elspeth's in the way over there and something else is blocking me too, I can't see -

"Nnng," said Jake. "Elspeth! Are you okay?"

"I think so?" I murmured. "The memories are still - popping up - but I can... be here,

too, if that makes sense."

"Good," said Addy. "Let's be on our way, shall we?" She got out of the car, and Jake picked me up and followed her. "The fellow who gave me this address indicated that Maggie, Gianna, and Ilario all live together at number 220 up ahead." She pointed. "And have for the last two years."

- *"You're so pretty!" Maggie exclaims, and Bella obviously doesn't know quite what to think. Well, not "obviously", not by my standards, but she's waiting, watchfully, as the situation unfolds, and doesn't answer the Irish visitor when she speaks again: "I'll take good care of her." I wish I knew what Bella was thinking, I wish I could read her - but no, I shouldn't wish for that, not when she doesn't -*

Jake carried me almost half a block while I processed that memory. "What was it?" he asked, when I pulled out of it and blinked and looked around.

"My father's memory, of when Maggie met Gianna."

"You have your dad's memories? I guess that makes sense." Jake paused for a beat. "Also potentially awkward."

"Well, it isn't like he's here, so I don't see how - it's -"

"Wait, never mind, don't think about it," Jake said, but it was too late, and I shrieked.

"Jake, I *remember* my parents' honeymoon! How could you make me think of that? I could have gone on forever without ever bringing it to mind -"

"I'm sorry!" he yelped.

"Ugh! Ugh!" But there was no getting rid of it. It was already there before he mentioned it, I just hadn't consciously processed it. "Ugh. Just *never bring it up again*. Quick, ask me about something else so I can deal with a totally unrelated memory."

"Where was Addy in 1857?" asked Jake swiftly, and Addy chuckled.

"Prague, mostly - a *date*, please -"

"Fourth of July," he said. "Noon."

- *Miklos isn't back yet. He said a quick lunch. Why is it I don't just turn all the witches I find, so they won't need to take so many breaks? Yes, yes, low profile, and I don't care very much if they go on to die of old age after I'm through with them. Some of them might get greater powers as vampires, but most of them wouldn't, or if they did it would only be a case of thinking faster and they wouldn't surpass me with the copied version. And anyway, I'm not interested in babysitting newborns for a year until they can focus on things more complicated than blood. Such as, of course, magic. More efficient to*

learn what I can from Miklos, teach what I can, bid him goodbye, and find my next pupil -

"Here we are," said Addy.

It was a cute house, nestled snugly between two others and painted white with flower-filled window boxes in front of each firmly closed pair of curtains. It looked as quiet in the pre-dawn darkness as its neighbors, but if vampires really lived here, they certainly weren't asleep.

It's probably best that you knock, Addy sent to me.

You can put me down, Jake, I said, and he did, and I walked up to the house.

My knuckles had barely touched it when the handle turned and the door swung open. There stood Gianna.

She was quite tall, and looked down at me with a polite, distant expression in her black-edged golden eyes. "Can I help you?" she asked quietly.

"I hope so," I said. "I'm Elspeth."

Her eyes went very wide. "Elspeth! What are you doing here? Who are these people?"

"These are Jacob and Adelaide," I replied. "We -"

"Come in out of the street," Gianna said. "Come, come. All of you. But if *you*," she added, pointing a stern finger at Addy, "even *think about* harming my daughter, I will kill you. My mate will be able to confirm whether you have thought about doing so or not. I recommend that you avoid it." Daughter? She didn't mean me, did she...?

"That's the heartbeat upstairs?" inquired Addy. I listened for that, and heard it - a human's heart, slow compared to mine - and realized that Gianna must have somehow had or adopted a daughter of her own recently. "Relax. There is so much prey in the world *without* guardians; it's not my sort of entertainment to go after the better-protected kind."

Gianna nodded once, clenching her jaw, and we went inside with her. Maggie and Ilario were at the foot of the staircase, and looked on as we filed in. Jake appeared to take in the uniformly gold eyes, but seemed edgy anyway and put his hand on my shoulder protectively.

"Elspeth?" asked Maggie. "What is going *on*?"

I opened my mouth, but Addy was creeping towards Maggie, licking her lips. Maggie backed up, edgily. "I won't hurt you," said Addy, and it was true, and this seemed to impress Maggie more than it would have affected anyone else. She stayed put, and

Addy got close enough to touch Maggie's arm. "Mmm."

"What are you doing?" Maggie asked.

Addy took a respectful step back. "I copy powers by touching witches," she said. "I was curious about yours." She pursed her lips, then turned around and tapped my cheek.

"Okay," said Maggie, "and *what is going on?*"

"Addy, you know what's happened over the last day and I don't, could you explain, please?" I asked.

Addy nodded, took one moment to add her memory of my incoherent reverie to my massive collection, and then - to judge by their facial expressions - sent a summary to the three other vampires. Maggie had a pleased look on her face, like she was viewing unusually attractive artwork of some kind - I guessed she just really liked truth, and the boost my power gave it was nice for her.

"I'm glad you're not in Alaska," I said, when it looked like Addy was done, "but *why* aren't you in Alaska?"

- I like this place. It's remote - less temptation. I do agree with my sisters that it's about time we stopped killing the men who we take to bed with us, but it's going to be a hard adjustment. There's lots of wildlife here, and I suppose we can stay as long as we like, if we're not going to be taking humans for our food. No one will miss the occasional bear -

"Elspeth?" said Jake.

"Sorry. Did my question get answered while I was out of it?" I asked sheepishly.

"No," said Maggie. "Anyway, to answer you, we have a child. A young, human, extremely vulnerable child. It is *not* worth it to us to get involved in the Cullens' rebellion."

"How did that... happen?" asked Jake awkwardly, glancing at the three vampires.

"Wow, you're nosy," Maggie said.

Gianna looked fondly at her mate, but answered him. "I had some warning before I turned. So when we decided we wanted children, some of my eggs were on ice. We saved up to hire a surrogate and a donor -"

"I *think* he might be my lots-of-greats-grand-nephew," put in Maggie. "I did some genealogical poking around. This is all on the theory that my sister-in-law didn't cuckold my brother, of course, which is dubious, the hussy. I never liked her and Brian was too good for her."

"- and Molly was born. She turned two last month," Gianna finished.

"Oh, Elspeth, you might want to know," Maggie said. "After we heard from the Cullens that your parents were dead - we know they're not *now*, of course, or at least probably, but we thought they were then - when we went up to Norway to get the eggs out of the freezer, as long as we were there, we destroyed Bella's and the frozen embryos. Didn't want somebody ill-intentioned taking them and growing you a brother or sister who could be used for nefarious purposes. So, uh, sorry, I guess? You're an only child forever."

Jake squeezed me, but I didn't have much reaction to the news. I'd never even thought about the other eggs and embryos in the freezer. "That's okay," I said.

"Anyway," Ilario said, speaking for the first time, "we distanced ourselves from Bella's rebellion-mongering when she did it then, and that's worked so far. We don't want to get on their bad side -"

Behind me, Jake growled threateningly.

"Calm down," Ilario said, flaring his nostrils and looking like he didn't care for Jake's smell. "We don't necessarily have to turn you in to avoid their enmity. In fact, if we're lucky, it will never cross their minds that we exist. You just can't *stay* here. There's a selection of food in the fridge, for Molly. Help yourselves -" He gestured at me and Jake - "to some breakfast, and be on your way. You might have better luck with Siobhan and Liam," he added.

Addy's eyes widened at those names. "Siobhan," she murmured. "Do you know where we can find them?" I consulted my memories. My own were sparse on Siobhan - my mother had mentioned her, but didn't think she was a witch. My father believed -

- *"Siobhan and Liam are old friends," my father says. Well, I call him my father in my head, and he is something like one to me. Didn't he - in a sense - give me life, if that's what this is?* I can tell you're distracted, Edward, *he chides silently, knowing I can hear him.* I can reply to this letter saying that we'll postpone our visit, if you prefer...

"No," I tell him. "I think Esme would like to see Ireland. Now is as good a time for the journey as any." He smiles. He always smiles when he thinks he has the chance to make Esme happy. I wonder, not for the first time, if he would have ever changed me if he hadn't spent the seven years prior lonely for her, having seen her the once and left her behind (only to find later that the normal life he left her to was rife with pain). He wanted companionship, and thought her life needed to be left alone; mine, he could save. If this is salvation -

He thought she was a witch. I pushed the memories away.

"They should be in or near Omagh for the rest of the week, but beyond that we don't know," Maggie said.

I tiptoed over to the refrigerator and got myself some applesauce and leftover chicken, which I nibbled on cold. Memories - of chicken, applesauce, and nothing relevant at all - floated up and I let them; I drifted in and out of conscious presence. Humans had different taste sensations from me. Even people who didn't especially care for applesauce in particular had been enjoying it more than I did; to me it was just one of a thousand flavors of unpleasantness. Filling unpleasantness, at least. I toyed with one of Aro's meals' recollection of the flavor, trying to enjoy the fruit the way she had.

"You know," Gianna said to me quietly, "I was very sad when I heard you'd disappeared. We're in touch with the Cullens - they loaned us a fair amount of money when we were just getting started, though we've all got jobs now -"

"Baby, I don't have a job," laughed Maggie. "I have a game."

"She trounces people at poker for a living," Gianna explained, smiling faintly. "Anyway, your grandparents let us know what had happened. We thought you were dead for five years. I'm glad you're okay, Elspeth."

"Thank you," I said, feeling awkward; I covered it with another bite of chicken. Jake decided that I was safe enough to leave for a minute while he looked for breakfast of his own.

"Poor Bella," murmured Gianna. "I wonder where she is. Carlisle and the others were expecting her to show up, even after they were told *you'd* been captured." She motioned at me.

"I wonder," said Addy, "why she's not in Alaska. Alice saw her heading there, or claimed to. I suppose Alice could have been lying, but why? Or I could have missed it, if the Denali vampires reported her to the Volturi when I wasn't paying attention..."

"What?" exclaimed Maggie.

"Oh," said Addy. "Kate, Tanya, Eleazar, and Carmen are reporting to the Volturi. Who have David hostage. Did I leave that out of my summary? I didn't mean to."

- *"Master, not her," I plead for the fallen beauty.*

"A witch?" inquires Aro, looking speculatively at her where she fell under Alec's blanket. I hope she isn't too frightened.

"...No, Master, but not a threat either. Her covenmates were the careless ones. She's new, there's still the brightness in her eyes..." Such beautiful eyes, but I don't remark on that part. "They didn't teach her properly. I'll take responsibility for her." And he looks at me, and looks at Marcus, who sighs and touches the back of his hand, and then Aro shrugs and nods in Alec's direction and the beautiful one slowly pulls herself off the ground -

Gianna's eyes were very wide, and I snapped out of Eleazar's memory of meeting

Carmen. "Elsbeth, when you said you were glad we weren't in Alaska..."

"I mostly meant I'm glad you were here when we came looking, but I..." I left out the word *guess*. "I'm also glad you're not getting spied on for the Volturi."

Gianna looked at me for a long, still moment. "Elsbeth... did Chelsea..."

"Yes," I whispered. "I... I kind of worked out a way to fight off part of it... but only the part where she builds up new relationships, not the part where..."

- *snip, snip* -

"Oh, poor child," sighed Gianna, and she looked about to hug me, but thought better of it.

- *"Esme is going to try to hug me. I realize she means well, but what part of 'Chelsea got me' is too complicated for her to understand? In what way does that not imply not hugging me?"*

"You could just let her," I said softly. "It would make her feel better -"

I put down my spoon and held out my arms toward Gianna for a hug, and she embraced me.

Jake and I nearly cleared out the Trafelis' refrigerator between us. Maggie and Gianna and Ilario quietly bickered about whether there was any safe way to tip off my relatives about their cousins' deception. None of the three of them seemed able to stay on a single side of the argument.

"Calling them now, there's no way to be sure that the Denalis won't hear," said Ilario. "We *don't want* Volturi attention. Molly -"

"The Volturi have completely lost their restraint," said Gianna. "Completely. They've gone from a stabilizing force which enforced laws - albeit harsh ones, albeit partially according to whim - to an unstoppable power seeking more power at any cost."

"If they don't remember we exist, if we keep quiet..." murmured Maggie.

"They're not waiting for *excuses* anymore. Following the rules - *which we aren't* anyway, Molly is two but she's not *stupid* and she's *human* and she won't be two forever - isn't a guarantor of safety," growled Ilario.

"But they have no reason to be interested in us," Gianna said. "Maggie's a witch, but not a *very* powerful one -"

"She's completely redundant with and inferior to Charles," Addy inserted.

- *this fellow doesn't get it, he's still lying to me. The air is dead between us without one single prickle of truth. "Run that by me again?" I say, languorously. It's a new thing I'm trying, culling the dishonest from the population by letting prey go if it doesn't reflexively lie to me upon being questioned about whatever topic I happen to think of. This one's not likely to make it. He'd probably be more forthcoming if he knew what I'm doing, but that wouldn't be a fair test. Anyone will sing like a bird if they know you'll be able to figure out whether they're doing so, and know you'll kill them if you don't. I suppose it could have given him the creeps that today's question is "do you have any children?"* -

"They've got so much manpower now, though," Ilario hissed. "Wolves and *all* those *witches*. They can afford to divide their attention, to punish little infractions, to tighten their hold."

"It's not like we can turn Molly *now*," Maggie said. "That's against the law too. I don't remember the exact cutoff age..."

"Fourteen," said Gianna. "And it's only that low because of Jane and Alec. And that is still *too young*; I'm not having our baby turned that young unless she pulls an Ilario and gets cancer. But yes, if they decided to notice us, and decided to punish us, her life would be forfeit."

"What if," Maggie whispered, "they notice the trend where vegetarian covens seem to cause a lot of trouble for them, per capita..."

"What would we do," asked Ilario, "call Carlisle and say, oh, by the way, your *family*, your *trusted cousins*, they're traitors..."

"He'd believe *me*," said Maggie. "Or Elspeth."

"Or me," put in Addy.

"Yes, or you," said Maggie. "Being believed isn't the problem, it's having a plan."

"Do the *Cullens* have a plan? Or are they just sitting in Alaska, congratulating each other about being willing to make a stand?" Ilario muttered.

"They haven't been sending regular status reports," said Gianna. "For fair enough reasons. But my suspicion is that they're just trying to... gather witnesses, or something, and wait for the Volturi to come to them and hope that all the watchful eyes will be enough to prevent a massacre."

"Carlisle's so idealistic," sighed Maggie. She snapped her head up and looked at Addy. "Did you know I was a witch before you got here?"

Addy blinked. "Sort of, sort of not - I had the information stored but hadn't looked at it. If you're asking if I can tell whether someone is a witch by getting close to them - the answer is that I can make an educated guess at range but I have to touch them to make

sure."

"Well," said Maggie, "I know a lady who might be a witch, or might just be one hell of a good planner, but either way, she would be handy right about now."

Mediator

Right after Maggie said that, everyone's head jerked up at the sound of a yawn and, soon after, the pitter-pattering of little feet.

Gianna flew up the stairs, Maggie close at her heels. "Molly dear," cooed Gianna. "Want to have breakfast in bed today?" I could imagine that they would be hesitant to bring her into the kitchen where, among others, Addy sat - although I did wonder how many vampires would eat little two-year-olds even if they *didn't* have vampire parents protecting them.

"Mamma no," said a high, indistinct child's voice.

- *"Mama?" I say again, even though I'm sure. It's the exact flowery-Mama-smell. I remember it right for sure. She's finally back! The puppy is unhappy. "Silly puppy," I tell it, but it still doesn't know not to be scared of my mama, so I put its leash on a tree so it will stay there while I go and see Mama. Yes, there she is, through the trees! She has almost no hair now. That's silly. But she's still my mama, and she picks me up when I run over to her. She's been gone a long time. I better show her all the stuff she missed -*

"It'll be fun," urged Maggie. "We could bring you a tray with eggs and sugar toast and orange juice and app -"

"I ate all the applesauce," I murmured under my breath.

"- a banana," substituted Maggie swiftly.

"Want to down, Mummy," said Molly.

I heard Gianna's sharp whisper, quiet in my ears but not intended for me - "Adelaide, if you even *look at her the wrong way...*" The threat trailed off, and Gianna's voice resumed its pleasant coo. "Okay, darling. We have some... friends over. They're down in the kitchen." The three came down the stairs, Molly in Gianna's arms.

- *home... in Mama's arms, dashing from place to place -*

Molly was cute as a button, wearing a blue nightgown patterned with sheep and little bunny slippers. She took strongly after what I remembered human Gianna looking like - similar green eyes, but the hair and the skin each were a shade lighter. She leaned easily against Gianna's shoulder, looking at the visitors in her house with innocent curiosity. "Hi friendth," she lisped.

"Hi, Molly," I said. "I'm Elspeth."

"Ethbef," attempted Molly. The look of motherly adoration on Gianna's face was -

- *Mama is so glad to be back! She's a snuggly mama* -

- was adorable. Maggie looked -

- *Mama's going to take me away with her. She missed me lots* -

- looked fiercely protective. Addy was smiling peaceably, hands dangling at her sides nonthreateningly, but neither mother relaxed much. "Unclario!" squealed Molly when she spotted her uncle. Jake laughed quietly at the portmanteau.

"And that's Jacob, and this... is Adelaide," said Maggie stiffly, pointing them out for Molly.

"Jacob and Adalady," repeated Molly.

"You can call me Addy," invited Addy, and Molly pronounced that much more readily; Gianna frowned, but only a little.

"Sugar toast!" said Molly, pointing at Ilario, when the introductions were finished. He gently ruffled her hair and retrieved a slice of bread from the cupboard to turn into toast. Meanwhile, the conversation resumed at a speed and pitch inaccessible to Molly; I held Jake's hand and translated in silence when I realized his hearing was only a little better than a human's in two-legged form.

"We don't keep in very regular contact with Siobhan and Liam," Maggie explained, peeling a banana for Molly. "Especially since Molly came along. They... we really don't think they'd hurt her, but there's just no such thing as *sure enough*, not with Molly on the line, and even I have to get out of the house if she needs a band-aid put on because of my history."

"So you can't get hold of them?" asked Addy, frowning.

"We have a general idea of where they are most of the time, and they have our address, and they do *own* telephones but usually don't have them turned on. We see them about twice a year and tip them off if we think there are other vampires on the island. Since," she said, with a pointed look at Addy timed for when Molly was turned away, "it is their territory. I mean, there is that one fellow who lives the Isle of Man who we think sometimes sneaks over here to hunt but who they've never managed to catch. But us three are the only other vampires besides Siobhan and Liam technically allowed."

- *"Are you really the only vampire in Ireland?" I inquire. "It's such a massive territory. No coven? No competitors carving out their own sections?" I've been around much of Europe, and everywhere I've found others of what I must now call my own kind, I've found feuds and territory disputes and the creation and breakage of alliances great and small. The Volturi were refined and civilized, after a fashion, even in violence. But Siobhan's life sounds... genuinely peaceful, at least most of the time. Her borders are clear, at least, not like the dividing river that had two covens at each other's throats over*

boating prey.

"None now," Siobhan says, "unless I miss my guess badly. There were several others before, though never so many as in your home country. I managed to divide them up and take them down or drive them out, depending on how stubborn they were. Occasionally there are... visitors... who come here to hunt, and I do not tend to chase them over the water if they come in and go out expeditiously. Not visitors like you," she clarified. "I've never met one like you before, restricting yourself to animals. Of all things..." -

That wasn't mine, it was Carlisle's again; it was getting easier to tell during a recollection whether I owned a memory or not, instead of the dreamlike feeling that I *was* whoever I remembered being, that I'd experienced right after the blast...

"It's very impressive that Siobhan's been able to keep the place to such a small vampire population," remarked Addy. "There are, what, thirty or forty vampires between England and Scotland and Wales? I imagine some of them swim abroad occasionally for more varied hunting, but it's much more densely populated by the undead."

"Something like thirty or forty, yes," said Maggie, "though I think England's got more than its fair share compared to, I don't know, Belgium. Actually, I'm not sure if there are any vampires in Belgium. There's probably at least one."

"Honey," said Gianna.

"Right," Maggie said, "Ireland. Just us and the other two. Actually, that's one reason I think Siobhan *may* be a witch, though she definitely doesn't believe it, so it'd have to be a subtle power - can't be making a buzzing noise in her head like mine does, or anything like that. And she definitely *is* good at making plans that wouldn't necessarily need magic to work."

Molly crunched her sugar toast. "Mummy th- sing?" she asked, correcting her lisp with some effort, and Maggie began crooning beautifully in Gaelic - which language, I realized after a moment of dizziness, I had all the resources necessary to understand fluently beyond the conversational level I'd previously had. Apparently I didn't have to explicitly process the memories of language-learning in order to use them; they must have been stored differently somehow, I decided.

"So all you know is that they're in or near Omagh," I whispered, trying to be inaudible to Molly like the vampires, "and have no way to pin it down. How can we find them?"

"We can try their phones," said Gianna, "it's just not guaranteed to reach them. We can try tracking by scent once in the neighborhood. One of us will need to stay home to look after Molly."

"You should probably do that," Ilario said to Gianna. Maggie was still singing, but she nodded a little.

Gianna dipped her head to press her cheek into Molly's hair. "I want to stay, but -"

- *"We're going to let Grandma Esme and Grandpa Carlisle and Aunt Rosalie and Uncle Emmett take you to see some friends in Alaska," Mama says. I don't know what a laska is. Maybe they have nice food there? Do we have to go to the laska to get me nicer food from our friends? "But me and Daddy can't go, and we'll miss you." I don't know why Mama and Daddy wouldn't be allowed in the laska. But they'll miss me so that's okay. They're supposed to miss me if I'm not there because I'm important -*

"Of the three of us you're worst in a fight, and most likely to be able to talk your way out of a Volturi execution, if it comes to that," Ilario said gravely. "We'll rearrange ourselves on Siobhan's say-so if she has a better idea, but for the time being it makes the most sense."

Gianna nodded, and caught Molly's toast in midair when she dropped it. "Ilario, would you try calling Siobhan and Liam?" she asked.

- *"Carlisle, how did you meet Siobhan and Liam?" I ask during the swim across the Atlantic. Esme is ahead of us, futilely trying to play with a pod of dolphins that won't have anything to do with vampires.*

"After I left Volterra, and decided to venture to the New World," he says, "I stopped briefly in my homeland, where I first encountered Alistair, and - most likely to get rid of me after I'd overstayed my welcome - he informed me of Siobhan's existence. It didn't take me long to find her, and she believed me when I described my intention to move on to America, so she didn't take much issue with my being in her territory. We kept in touch, even more frequently than I do with Alistair - that being due entirely to Alistair's preference for nearly unbroken solitude, of course. Liam I met in 1823 -"

Ilario turned the egg he had scrambled out of the frying pan onto a plate, deposited the food in front of Molly, and pulled out his phone. Siobhan didn't answer, but he tried Liam, and got a response. "Ilario?" said Liam's low, rumbling voice. "What is it?"

"Complicated," said Ilario. "Very. Maggie and I need to meet you, and bring some... people." He settled on the catch-all term after a momentary pause, maybe to deal with the fact that Jake, Addy and I were three different species. "It's somewhat related to the Cullens' activities, although I don't know how aware you are of those..."

"Only vaguely. We heard them out, but when Siobhan heard the precise nature of the Volturi's behavior, we agreed not to go."

"Yeah..." said Ilario. "We need to get together and talk."

"We're not in the middle of anything here," Liam said. "We could go to Wexford -"

"No, we'll come and meet you," interrupted Ilario. "Gianna will stay home with Molly. Just tell us where to go."

"We can meet you halfway in Dublin if you like," suggested Liam, and Ilario agreed and they worked out an intersection and hung up.

Maggie, Gianna, and Ilario each had a car, but Gianna's was tiny and Ilario's in the shop. We piled into Maggie's station wagon, with Ilario in the passenger seat and me wedged between Jake and Addy in the back, and set off - after Maggie and "Unclario" both had a lengthy farewell with Molly and Gianna. Maggie attempting (with mixed results) to tear herself away from Gianna was almost indecent to watch. It was full daylight by the time we got on the road, but with all the windows closed, that didn't make the vampires glitter.

I thought about Molly and her family, and about me and mine.

- *snip, snip* -

I had been terrified. I'd wanted to *beg* her to leave my affections intact. I'd wanted very badly to care about... It was even hard to remember who exactly I'd been so very desperate to love. Eventually I pieced together a list: my mother; my father; my grandparents, at least the ones I'd met; my aunts and uncles - but maybe not Jasper; the Denali cousins - although on reflection I didn't think even my pre-Chelsea self would still like Kate, Tanya, Eleazar, and Carmen after what they'd done; maybe my human friends; maybe, on some distant basis, friends of the family like the Irish vampires or the Amazons.

I could remember loving... *some* of the listed people. I had clear memories of it for my mother, Carlisle and Esme, Rosalie and Emmett, all five Denalis.

I could remember *assuming* that I *must* love the others, that it would be only natural and appropriate, that it would be *strange* if I didn't. But thinking of it after Chelsea, when it would in fact *not* be strange if I didn't love the father I barely knew, the aunt I'd scarcely met, the distant friends-of-friends I'd never encountered...

I wasn't sure I'd ever much cared for those people in the first place.

But what had never existed, Chelsea couldn't destroy.

I *might* one day to be able to meet my mother's parents, and explain to them who I am, and have this all go precisely the way it would if Chelsea never touched my relationships. I never met that set of grandparents. Maybe Chelsea found nothing to cut, between me and them. I didn't know because the last time Addy had touched Aro was before Jake's pack was originally captured, and so before Chelsea had ever worked on me; I didn't have any memories later than May 26 that weren't Addy's own.

That didn't help with the people I knew I did once love, though. With them there had definitely been some kind of loss. I didn't know what to do about it.

I leaned on Jake's arm, and put my hand on my face, and tried to "meditate".

The good news was, Magic finally made a "sound" instead of signing, and it wasn't even difficult to make it happen.

The bad news was, she was screaming.

"What?" I asked. "What is it?"

"*I don't know what I know!*" she yelled. "We know all this *stuff!* But we don't have a way to *find* it when it's important instead of other stuff that doesn't matter! How can we really tell the truth?"

I was somewhat nonplussed by her strong reaction, since I hadn't noticed any oddity in how my power functioned - I'd been using it as normal since "coming to" earlier that morning. "So why aren't you acting glitchy?" I asked.

"I have to give us my best guess, but I want a *better guess*," she whined. "We know *so much stuff* and we could be using it to tell better truths with but we can't handle it all, there's *too much*..."

"Well, I do seem to be pulling up memories that are at least sort of relevant to whatever I'm talking about," I said. "So maybe it's not that bad."

"I don't think that's how it's working," Magic said. "There's at least a million years of stuff! Uncountable amounts of stuff! Why would we be getting mostly memories from people we *know*? It's not just about relevance."

"We've been mostly talking about people we know," I pointed out. "And most of the memories are from a really long time ago. Humans Aro ate in the year 3 aren't going to have known much that's important unless we're trying to talk about them in particular, right?"

"But until we sort through it all *I don't know if we're missing anything*," she wailed. "I'm only supposing that I'll think of the right things. I don't know when to itch."

"You were already itching all the time," I said. "If you're confused enough to stop, that's kind of good, I think."

"But -" Magic cried.

I put my hand down.

"You usually meditate longer than that," observed Jake.

"My magic is upset," I said. "She's worried that I can't tell the whole truth if I don't have all the memories processed - like I'll miss something that Clarus said back in 89 B.C. and this will constitute lying by omission because I technically know all the things Clarus remembered about his life when Aro killed him."

"Was that an actual person Aro ate or did you make him up as an example?" Maggie asked.

"He was an actual person," I said. "He had a wife and four children and one granddaughter and he was a potter and - I *really* can't think off the top of my head that there's anything about him that's going to be important for me to remember if I'm talking about anything other than Clarus himself. Or maybe ancient Roman pottery."

"Maybe that shouldn't be your magic's job, figuring out what the whole truth is?" Jake suggested. Then he made a puzzled face, like he wasn't sure if what he'd just said had made any sense, but it gave me an idea. I had two of me: maybe I needed three.

That left the question of how to make there be that many of me, but a moment's thought had me putting *both* of my hands on my face at the same time.

And then there were three.

I experienced a momentary confusion while I tried to work out which of me was which, but it was much shorter-lived than the puzzlement before I figured out Magic's role. The third self was there for a reason: she was supposed to handle my massive store of memories. I named her - not very creatively - "Memory". "Hi," I said to her.

"Hello," Memory said, but she didn't just *say* it, she pulled up one of the millions of recollections of someone I remembered saying the word. There was no shortage; she'd probably be able to talk that way for the next few years before repeating herself unless she wanted to use very specific jargon or something. The one she'd picked was my father's memory of one of the times my mother had said hello to him, before she turned. Her voice had been very different before.

I couldn't think of anything else to say *to* Memory. If I came up with clever ideas for how to use or manage the store of extra knowledge in my head, she'd be the person to talk to, but none came to mind. Instead I looked over at Magic. "Is that better?" I asked hopefully.

"...Yes," she said reluctantly, "but it's not *completely* better."

"If I have any more clever ideas for how to deal with the memories that will be better, now I have Memory to handle it," I said. "Do I have any ideas besides making her exist in the first place?"

"No," admitted Magic. "I don't."

I put my hands down in my lap. Jake was looking at me quizzically. "Talking to

yourself in stereo?" he quipped.

"Talking to myself and my other self," I said. "There's three of me now. I made a new one to help with the memories."

Jake laughed. Addy looked intrigued. "I wonder if you could have arbitrary numbers of sub-selves," she mused, tapping her fingertip on my ear to catch up with the new development in my power.

"I don't know. I only have so many hands," I began, but Addy interrupted me.

"I keep telling you," she said, "you shouldn't think of your power as being intrinsically based in touch. You have range for everything else now; why not this?"

"Because I'm always in the same place as myself?" I suggested. "I don't see how range even *applies to talking to myself*."

Addy nodded thoughtfully "Try taking off your shoes, then, and -"

"*Or what?*" I demanded. I *had* wished that I'd worked faster to improve my power, when I'd fallen under Alec's, but making new sub-agents didn't seem to have gotten *harder* as I added more, so if I found myself in a situation where I needed to put my feet together and thereby make Elspeth #4 appear, I could probably do it in a hurry. And Addy's power - or "leverage" - over me was gone. She *could* attack me directly, I supposed, but Jake, Maggie, and Ilario were all there to back me up if she turned it into a fight, and I knew she didn't want me dead or even too alienated to work with her. From the look on her face when I snapped at her, she was thinking of the same things and had come to the same conclusion.

"Elspeth?" said Jake quietly. "Is there something I should know?"

"You should know that it would be a bad idea to phase in this car," I said tightly.

"Elspeth," he said again, folding my thin hand in his broad one. "What was that about?"

"Don't phase," I said, and picked a starting point and an ending point (well out of the way of Addy's blast), and showed him.

Jake's head lolled for a couple of seconds, but then he blinked rapidly and sat up straight again. "I think I got that, whatever "that" is, but I don't have an extra me to help process it. Can I get the short version? What exactly would be making me phase here?"

"Remember when I said some of the stuff Addy wanted me to do was hard?" I asked in a monotone.

"Elspeth," warned Addy. "Is this the time?"

"I think so," cut in Jake, frowning at her. "I'll work it out myself if I have to, but it sure sounds like something I'd want to know, even if I wouldn't *like* knowing it much."

"Remember," I said, since that was the closest verb in English for calling up an implanted memory, "when I met... Jane?"

Jake's eyes closed, then flew open and he snarled. "*Don't phase in the car,*" I reminded him firmly.

He maintained his hold on his shape, but only barely. "The *hell*, Addy! You sent Elspeth to go *get herself tortured* because she *said she was bored*?"

"I really don't think this is the time," Addy said coolly, eyeing the door on her side.

"Wait," said Maggie, "*what*?"

"I'd send it to you but I don't want you to lose control of the car," I said.

"Ilario can take the wheel for a couple seconds," Maggie said, and he leaned over to guide the car along the highway. "Now: *what*?"

I sent along the information; Maggie made a squeaky noise and waited for a moment before taking over the task of driving again, and then I gave Ilario the memories for good measure. "Jesus!" exclaimed Maggie. "Wow, I've killed a lot of people, but I never coerced a five-year-old into provoking somebody into torturing her so I could get my jollies playing with her power. Most Evil Person In The Car Award goes to Addy."

"I notice nobody is considering it a remotely extenuating circumstance that I volunteered to be the test subject for the *result* Elspeth extracted from the exercise," said Addy testily.

"You're not five," said Ilario. "...Why are you even in this group, exactly?"

"Do you think Elspeth and her wolf could have gotten this far without me?" asked Addy. "Do you think you can afford to shed numbers, considering the project you have in mind, just because I am unusually committed to my research? I'm still borrowing Elspeth's power, and even if I weren't, Maggie, you could tell if I lied to you - ask me whatever you like about my *current* loyalties or *future* intentions and you'll have answers that I think will be satisfactory. Maggie, as you say, you've killed a lot of people. You happen to have stopped. Should we kick *you* out of the group on those grounds anyway? It isn't though I have a vast collection of five-year-olds in my back pocket who I plan to send marching to Jane."

Jake growled under his breath and put a protective arm over my shoulders. Addy rolled her eyes.

No one said anything for the next twenty minutes, when Maggie murmured, "Almost

there."

Planner

Maggie parked us in an underground lot. It was quite sunny out in Dublin, so rather than climb the stairs to the street and find Siobhan and Liam, she phoned and told them where to find us. We all got out of the car, and I kept a restraining hand on Jake's elbow, not wanting him to start a fight even if it would probably come out in our favor. I had no suction-device, and a lucky bite could kill him even if Addy lost. He looked daggers at her, but she stayed a respectful distance back and he didn't phase.

"Can't go wolf anyway," muttered Jake, leaning down to speak in my ear, although all the vampires could certainly hear him anyway. "If I still have a pack, and any of them are wolves at the time, they'll hear me thinking and I know where I am. Don't want to make it easy for them to report that we're in Dublin."

We waited for a couple of minutes, trying to look casual to the gazes of humans who passed through the garage to retrieve their cars or drove in to park. A couple of them looked twice at us - we made an odd group - but no one tried to interact with us. Addy kept her eyes closed in case anyone was capable of discerning their color in the dim fluorescence from a few yards away.

Siobhan and Liam came down the stairs into the lot. I recognized them at once, from Carlisle's memories and my father's. For a moment I thought those were the only people whose memories I had who'd ever seen Siobhan and Liam, but that wasn't quite true - Aro had gone to the "trial" of a Scottish vampire from Liam's former coven, and read him and then had him executed upon determining that he wasn't useful enough to keep around or safe to let free. That vampire contained the only memories I had of Siobhan and Liam *fighting*, all out, not just sparring for practice or scuffling for dominance. Liam was okay at it. Siobhan was terrifyingly powerful.

I tried, but I had no way to figure out whether Aro had ever accessed any of the memories available to him about the Irish vampires. He hadn't dwelled on them, or there would have been at least a minute or two of memories of him *planning* or *musings* or something; but he could have thought about them, had no special reaction, and not put down anything I could remember beyond the copied memories themselves.

"Hello," said Siobhan, seeming to aim the greeting mostly at Maggie. Addy was looking at the huge woman with a fascinated, almost hungry expression. Siobhan glanced at Addy, then held out her hand to shake her former covenmate's, and Maggie moved to clasp it. Before they touched, Addy darted forward to seize Siobhan by the wrist and then spring away. She was out of the parking lot and up the stairs in a fraction of a second.

I thought I heard her cackling.

"What the -" Siobhan began. Ilario chased Addy into the stairwell, and Maggie sprinted after them, muttering something I didn't quite catch that might or might not have

been family-friendly, plus a warning to her brother-in-law about sticking to the shade.

"What was that?" asked Liam, looking edgy, like he was considering running after the others.

"Addy copies witch powers by touching the people who have them," I murmured. "She... here, I'll show you, if that's okay -" I started composing a summary in my head.

"Show us?" asked Siobhan.

"I'm Elspeth," I said, and that got a stunned reaction from both of the pair, but sufficed to explain what I was talking about, at least. "It's faster my way, if you don't mind -"

"Why don't you 'show' me first, then we'll see about Siobhan," suggested Liam, suspicious. Jacob shifted his weight behind me, and when I glanced up, he was locking eyes with the other man, not quite hostile, but implacably announcing allegiance. Liam looked back at him with a distasteful frown.

"Okay," I acquiesced, and a few moments later Liam frowned and nodded, and Siobhan made a "get on with it" gesture and I gave her the summary as well.

Just after that had been sent along, Ilario and Maggie jogged back down the stairs. "She jumped off the quay," snarled Maggie. "Nobody saw her do it, but that's where her scent ended. And once we started *asking* if anyone had seen a lady fling herself into the river, of course, *we* had so much attention that there's no way we could have tried to follow her at any speed without getting noticed."

"I don't even *have* a power," Siobhan said.

"I think you must," I said. "Addy must have tasted it. If she hadn't I think she would have stuck with us and said she was just checking."

"How could I not have *noticed* being a witch?" asked Siobhan. "People - your grandfather mostly - have been insisting that I am for hundreds of years, but don't you think *I* would be able to tell?"

I shook my head; Memory supplied me with a few cases of witches Addy had met who hadn't been aware of their powers, and I was dimly aware of the availability of more examples if I wanted them. "Some powers don't feel like anything, or usually don't. Mine usually doesn't. A lot of witches don't know what they are, or think it's a non-magical knack or something. I'm sure Eleazar could have told you if you'd ever met him, but you didn't."

"My word," said Siobhan.

"I'd like to get out of this car park," said Maggie, glancing at a passing human family on their way to their minivan. "It doesn't seem the best place to talk. Siobhan, is that old

hotel still...?"

"Yes," Siobhan said. "Can we all fit into the car?"

"I'll sit on Jake," I said, and with that, and Ilario moving to the middle of the backseat so Siobhan - a hair taller than even Jake - could ride shotgun, we managed to squeeze in.

"It's very odd," murmured Liam. "I have a lot of questions, but as soon as I think of them clearly enough that I could ask, I realize I already know the answer."

"Elsie's handy like that," said Jake proudly. "So... Where are we going?"

"Abandoned hotel," said Maggie. "Nice place to hide out in while a vampire in Dublin. Out of the way, lots of big shade trees 'round it, collects squatters nobody's going to miss, so - uh -"

"Is there any chance the squatters could be allowed to live today?" I asked solemnly. Siobhan and Liam's eyes were darkened, but not black.

"If it matters that much, I suppose," said Siobhan, shrugging. "We can climb in through the back to the part above the wrecked staircase; there's never any humans in that section. Liam and I *do* need to eat, though, so you can only make so many requests that we put it off before we ignore you; do you want to spend one on the folks camping out in the hotel?"

I kept silent, and Siobhan turned her head to look at me appraisingly. Liam sighed. "Did you inherit the moralizing from - well, I guess Carlisle's not your *biological* grandfather and Edward never seemed to think he had the high ground on the subject - or from your mam, maybe? She managed to convert Maggie, rather more effective than Carlisle..."

"I don't think it's the sort of thing I particularly had to inherit," I said softly. "If I went back in time and asked your parents they probably wouldn't be in favor of eating people, would they?"

"S'pose not," said Liam negligently. "Are we having hobo for lunch or not, dear?" He addressed Siobhan with that comment, and she looked at me again.

"If not them, who?" I wondered, not making eye contact. "How do you pick?"

"Generally depends on who'll go missing with the least fuss," Liam said. "Anyone who's already lost or cut off from other folks - or dying, occasionally there's a good accident or some of the less repulsive diseases. Got to lie low, you see. Haven't a stable address and a legal identity like Maggie and company have got themselves, mustn't make anyone too curious. Oh, and mustn't form a pattern. Can't kill half a dozen streetwalkers in a row with the same hair color or initials or what have you within spitting distance of a

single city, or they start babbling about serial killers and then everyone gets very excited."

"You are serial killers," I pointed out.

"I suppose," Liam said, "but we're not the human sort. Not trying to rid the world of some particular type, or bitter about our childhoods, or whatever it is that motivates that lot. Just thirsty. Oh," he added, "and people on drugs are not so toothsome. We avoid those when it's convenient. Usually can tell by smell. That's all I can think of for in general; other than that we could nosh on anybody."

There was a silence, and Siobhan announced, "We'll clear out the hotel the usual way, Liam. All else being equal it would be best not to do anything this complicated on an empty stomach."

Ilario, Jake, and I followed Maggie into the upper stories of the hotel through the back way Siobhan had mentioned. Siobhan and Liam went in through the front. I covered my ears and asked Memory to give me something loud, and spent the minutes we waited remembering a metal concert that Heidi had once attended. (She had later encouraged some of the audience to follow her into the bus she used to bring prey back to Volterra, but I concentrated on the music.)

Siobhan and Liam climbed up the elevator shaft and joined us after a short while, eyes newly bright. Jake squeezed my hand, which *was* comforting, but I felt... almost unwilling to be comforted. Like I should have said something clever or done something heroic, such that I wouldn't need it, so if I needed it, that was because I'd failed. I didn't pull my hand away, in case Jake was the one who needed it.

"So," said Siobhan, pacing around the hotel room. It was breezy from the broken window we'd come through, and everything inside was moldy and water damaged and faded beige and blue. Jake seemed uncomfortable, and kept prodding the half-collapsed bed with his foot as though he thought it might become a suitable place to sit given enough kicks, but the vampires and I were all reasonably comfortable standing. "Elsbeth, is there anything pertinent left out of your summary?" Siobhan asked.

"I don't *think* so," I said. "But I don't know what might be pertinent."

"People," said Siobhan, "players or potential players in the field, their resources, their abilities, their skills, their motives, their needs, their personalities, what will and won't surprise them. Constraints on what we can do, places we can go, that sort of thing."

I spent the next couple of hours listing and describing every person in the Volturi guard and what I could remember on my own or from the blast about the allies my relatives were accumulating in Denali. Intermittently I'd pause to answer Siobhan's occasional clarifying questions - everything from "how willing is Vasanti to send the animals she possesses into danger?" to "do you see any patterns Adelaide didn't in Pyotr's compulsion?" to "in a toe-to-toe physical fight, is Renata actually any good without her

power?"

"Depends on if the animal is a long-term pet or not," I told her about the Indian witch. "I don't know what she's gotten since she was let out of the dungeon, but in the past she's usually kept some birds and rats and other random animals that she's gotten attached to around all the time, and those she likes to keep safe if it's convenient. Others she doesn't care - she'll make mice feed themselves to her other pets, sometimes."

"No," I concluded after a long search through Pyotr's memories, "it seems just about random. Sometimes it'll work on a person and then not, sometimes it'll work for a specific command and then not, I don't see any connection to time of day or location or whether he says it with a different accent or even anything he's thinking about when he gives the order. It does only work when he means for it to, so he doesn't compel people by accident, at least." Siobhan asked me if I had memories for anybody he'd bossed around before, and I shook my head; he hadn't been one of Addy's original pupils and spent his entire time in Volterra in pieces unable to talk to anyone. When Addy had borrowed his power she'd avoided using it against any of the Volturi, so I didn't have information from that end about how it worked in her hands either.

"Hard to say, but I don't think so," I said of Renata's fighting capabilities. "She can't turn her shield off, so nobody's ever actually been able to attack her. She can hit people who can't hit back just fine. I think she'd be confused by someone who could go after her without getting turned away."

There were more questions. I consulted Memory to get her to sift through what I knew and extract short answers from long life stories. Siobhan asked about things I never would have considered even slightly relevant - "how many teeth on that saw?" (thirty), "what part of New Zealand is Emere from?" (near what's since become Christchurch) - along with likely useful things - "does Jane have any direct combat ability?" (almost none), "where do you think your mother is?"

"I don't know," I said, regarding my mother. "I don't think she ever actually arrived in Denali. If she did, Addy never heard about it, and she spent a lot of downtime with my father's power and would have probably noticed - from him if nobody else - if someone was thinking they'd found her. But she *was* heading there when Alice saw her, and I don't think Alice lied. My father would have noticed."

"So somehow," said Maggie, "Bella changed her mind - knew *to* change her mind - and turned around instead of going to Denali, but where would she go?"

"Or she got there and knew what was going on before anyone noticed her," said Jake. "Smelled the field team, maybe, if she came in from the right direction at the right time."

"That sounds plausible," said Siobhan, nodding in Jake's direction without quite looking at him. "But while Bella is *currently* not in the Volturi's possession immediately or remotely, Alice *can* see her. If her capture is a priority and Bella isn't aware that Alice

is alive, she's a loss unless we get to her first. Where would she go, Elspeth?"

"I don't know. She might have gone to Volterra looking for me but she had long enough to do it; that would've been noticed. I guess she could be in San Francisco waiting to see if I make it there on my own somehow, or trying to meet new allies to help her who aren't in Denali."

"Allies like who? Existing vampires in North America? Would she try turning an army?" prodded Siobhan.

"I... I don't know. She's turned someone before to save his life. I don't know if she'd do it to attack Volterra. Especially since she probably doesn't know my father's alive. But she might be doing something like that if she can find volunteers. She *might* have gone to see her parents or her friends from high school or something. Her dad knows about stuff and her mom and stepdad don't, or didn't."

"Do *we* have any allies we can scrape up?" Maggie asked. "Cath might help if I asked. She might get other Brits to pitch in on her account. Anyone else?"

"Cath is...?" Jake asked.

"Catherine. She turned me," Maggie said. "We still get on - less since Molly, but still. Calls Swindon her own, has to at least be on speaking terms with the Bristol coven and the Londoners and the ponce in Oxford, I know she's friends with the lot who prowl around the Isle of Wight and thereabouts, and that twit in Cardiff she once had for a penfriend..."

"So a fair chunk of the U.K. vampires," summarized Liam.

Maggie nodded. "Via Cath. Maybe. Anyone else who's not already in Denali or all Chelseaed to bits in Volterra who likes at least one of us?"

Jake said, "The Makah tribe, or at least the families of the Makahs who live in the village, but they're all human."

"That can be fixed if need be," Siobhan said. Jake frowned, and she shrugged. "Or not if needn't be. But I try not to plan things by pretending I don't have options I have. Newborn armies in general are worth thinking about, Makah or no. What else?"

"Are there still Children of the Moon?" asked Liam. "Or are they all really extinct?"

"Caius didn't stop hunting them until he was as positive they were gone as could be," I said. "He *might* have missed one, he knew he couldn't be completely sure, but it didn't seem likely at all unless it was a mutant that could control itself during the full moon and left no evidence. Even if there was one like that back when the hunt was on, it would be dead by now - it would either have bitten people and they would have made themselves obvious or it wouldn't have and they'd have died out that way. There's been no sign of

them."

"Who else do we need to worry about?" asked Maggie. "Addy? Where's she swimming off to?"

"She's got a few dozen old friends, all around the world, with powers minor enough that the Volturi left them alone. She might be looking for one of them," I said. "Or she could just be striking off on her own. Or going back to Volterra hoping to make some kind of deal."

Siobhan was still pacing, occasionally running a hand through her short hair, usually touching Liam's arm or back briefly when her path took her near where he stood, all with an intent expression and her eyes focused on nothing. "What else? Who else?"

"Molly's a weak point," Ilario muttered. "Can't turn her, she can't help, and realistically Gianna and Maggie and even me will do whatever it takes to keep her safe." Maggie nodded, looking troubled.

"Good to know. What else, who else?"

"The Denalis didn't seem to really *like* working for the Volturi," I said. "If we could get hold of David so they didn't have to worry about him, and maybe find some other thing to push them, they could defect. Then it would be safe to talk to the other people who are in Denali with them now. Also I think David would help."

"Or the Denalis could just be tricked into passing false information, if we had a way to talk to the Cullens and sundry others without tipping them off," Ilario said. "Even without David in hand."

"Who else?" asked Siobhan.

"Peter and Charlotte are..." I leaned my face on my hand to ask Memory if I knew anything. Addy had heard the news: "They're alive. In Nashville. The Volturi decided they weren't a threat and let them go home. They *probably* want to stay out, but also probably couldn't hurt to ask them."

"The other wolves - and the imprints and the puppies - get visits from Chelsea nearly every day," said Jake, "but take that away and wolves'd be natural enemies with vampires." He glanced around at the vampires who were all looking at him quizzically, since he was a wolf and standing right there and not attacking them. He sputtered for a moment and went on. "I mean, *I'm* with Elspeth," he clarified. "I go where she goes. If she goes and hangs out with vampires so do I. Other wolves could work with specific vampires too. Rachel and Bella were pals for a while. But I mean that it might be possible to get the packs aimed at the Volturi. Who are vampires. And who most of the wolves have no non-Chelsea reason to like. What I'm saying is if you put a wolf and a vampire in a room together and there aren't special circumstances going on there's going to be a fight, and we know what the special circumstances are there and maybe could get rid of them."

Maggie whispered too low for Jake to hear, "You are so lucky to have such a formidable intellect in your corner, Elspeth." I didn't dignify that with a response. "Here's a thought," she said, more loudly. "Are we going to bother hiding from humans?"

"Hm," acknowledged Siobhan. "Depends. Good to keep in mind as a possible constraint to drop, though, given that the Volturi are still the only enforcers."

"Demetri won't be off on his personal project forever," I said. "When he's done with it - he's typically been gone for a week or two before, and he left Volterra two days ago - he'll be able to find us. Where should we be when that happens - what's the staging ground?"

"Good question," Siobhan muttered. "What else?"

"Elspeth, is your resistance to half of Chelsea's power communicable?" Ilario asked. "To wolves, to the Volturi, to anyone?"

I blinked. "I don't know."

"Try me," said Jake.

"You're not a great test," I said. "The mere fact that I don't like the Volturi anymore would carry a lot of weight with you that it wouldn't for anybody else."

"I'm better than nothing and I'm here," he pointed out. "It'll at least give you a chance to practice on somebody easy, right?"

"Do you even actually still like Chelsea and so on?" I asked. "Even now?"

Jake blinked. "Chelsea? Sure, sure. Everybody loves Chelsea. Chelsea's great."

I shuddered, clapped both hands on his face, and tried. I didn't know exactly what I was doing, just the result I wanted, but that was more or less how my power functioned anyway since I couldn't normally feel it as it worked. *Don't lie to yourself*, I thought, although it wasn't part of what I sent, just the theme. *Don't leave anything out. Don't make excuses for her. You know what you need to know.*

Jake closed his eyes, and looked like he was listening to something intently. "Ng," he said after a moment, and I jerked my hands away to wait for him to explain the noise. "That... was... weird. Was Chelsea always that *insanely creepy*? Why does she *smile* like that all the time? Seriously weirds me out."

I smiled faintly, and he returned a lopsided grin. "That's promising," murmured Siobhan. "Wouldn't like to count on it too heavily, though - I don't think most people would hold still for it... What else?"

"I don't know how the Volturi that Addy caught in the memory blast are going to react to the memories," I said. "They almost *definitely* won't go through them in the same

order as me, and they're probably all faster than me at it even without a Memory to help. There's a lot of room for something unexpected to pop up that they'd know and use that I don't or can't."

"It's possible that you should blast some or all of us," Siobhan said, "as a defensive measure against Addy doing it later if nothing else, but I'd like to hold off on anything that might put us out of commission for that long until we have downtime." She closed her eyes for a long moment and said, "...Why didn't Aro dare to cross Addy, Elspeth?"

Why didn't -

I fell into a nest of memories.

Mourner

- I might as well make the best of this unfortunate meeting. Damn my greed! Damn Jane and that delicious weapon she wields, that irresistible power pouring off of her so enticingly that I left my safety. It wasn't worth the taste. But Aro's nearly as appealing... I want to see what that flavor is like. I'm too insatiably curious; it'll be the death of me one of these years. The only saving grace is that they don't know exactly what I can do yet. So far as he knows, I'm another Jane, a second lash of fire to tuck into his arsenal. He doesn't know what he'll give me when I touch his hand. So I do.

He'll know what I'm about soon enough. What is he about? How can I make this work for me?

I glance at the vampire world's three kings and two queens, once Aro releases my hand. Why are there only two queens? Aro must know, and now so do I. I have a look -

-- My sister's magic is worthless. Absolutely worthless. Worse, she herself is not the stabilizing factor for Marcus that my precious Sulpicia is to me, or Athenodora to Caius. Our wives will be queens; they long for it. His wife would rather be a bit of dandelion fluff, floating about the world trailing her absurd aura of happiness after her and taking her mate along at the expense of my every ambition. Chelsea, prize though she is, essential scissor and spinner, would not long manage a large coven working blind. Weaknesses she could not see would grow on the insides of those threads she pulls. Attractions too wispy for her to catch alone would form to external, unwelcome persons. We would fall apart. That cannot happen.

Marcus is essential; Didyme threatens his role; Didyme must go.

I do love my sister. I could arrange to fix that now, but I shouldn't like Chelsea to, upon later finding a mate of her own, abscond with him in the night in fear of my doing him harm. Not that I wouldn't do him harm, if he occupied Didyme's wretched position in the same story re-enacted with my very necessary dear Chelsea. But I wouldn't like her *anticipating* it.

So, loving Didyme, I must nonetheless do away with her.

Poor sister. If only Marcus were willing to help Chelsea in working with you, that you could be more tightly bound to us. If only Marcus painted for you a more lovely picture of the sovereignty we will share, that you might know some fraction of our aspirations in your own heart. If only Marcus had more force of personality, that you would have been swayed by his dreams instead of he by yours.

It will be my mercy to him, that he will never learn that he could have saved you.

You are easily led away. You trust me now the way you trusted me when I judged you old enough and ready to be one of us. Then, I suppose it hurt for longer than it will

today. (I will make your death instant if I can.) But you walked away from the first "death", as I meant you to do. I did want to see what ability you might turn up with. Magic may run in the blood, but capriciously, clearly - your power is only hastening your death, chasing away my apprehensions at destroying you and replacing them with indifferent euphoria.

You are easily led, and easily secluded, and easily killed.

I read your last thoughts, one more day of them to pile on since the last time I embraced you, and you do not even realize what I have done.

A coven of two is nearby. They will deny everything. Of course. That would be only natural; what else would they do? I'll take their thoughts, declare them guilty, Marcus and I will fall upon them in revenge - oh, lost sister, if it had been those who took your life I truly would kill them in revenge! - and Chelsea will do her work. Marcus will be on hand to help her.

Ah, beloved sister. We will build such a kingdom. Your sacrifice will be not in vain

--

- *How very, very intriguing.*

Aro is looking at me with considerable interest. I produce what I hope is a beatific smile, and catch his hand again. I know, I think at him, knowing quite well that he'll listen to my new thoughts when I try to communicate like this, something that you wouldn't like me to say aloud. But there is no reason for us to be enemies. Why don't we see what we can work out that suits the both of us? I glance speculatively at Caius and his Athenodora. Then over at lonely Marcus.

Aro, to his credit, does not let the mask of cordial, fascinated pleasure leave his face, and it's customary enough for him to freeze in place like this when he's reading someone. Yes, he replies, after a moment of amusingly frenzied calculation, do let's -

"Elspeth?" said Jake, waving his hand in front of my face.

"Didyme," I said.

"What about her?" asked Maggie.

"That's what Aro didn't want Addy to tell anyone," I breathed. "How Didyme died. Aro killed her."

"He did?" asked Siobhan, sounding mildly stunned. "That's... It would certainly fracture the Volturi if they all knew. I'm not sure if it would actually destroy them for that to get out; a lot of the guard are loyal to Aro personally, aren't they?"

"Yeah," I said, "Renata included."

"And plenty have no mates to worry about. How badly does Chelsea need Marcus?" Siobhan asked. "How much can she do on her own, given the scenario where he makes a fuss, gets himself killed, and no one else wants to make a commotion about it?"

"Every time somebody's managed to leave the Volturi it's been when or just after Marcus was called away for a long time," I murmured, thinking of Eleazar's departure with Carmen and a few similar cases. "When him and Aro and Caius all go off to deal with something in the field, even if Chelsea stays home, somebody can break loose. Usually they let them - they never wanted to make it really obvious that joining them is supposed to be a one-time decision. I'm not sure how long it would take for it to fall apart more deeply than that... Give me a minute."

I closed my eyes and spun through moments Memory presented as representative: Eleazar and Carmen extending their regrets to Aro and striking off on their own; Chelsea listening to Marcus say that she could handle the villagers without him because there were no vampires in it, and eventually compromising on a bimonthly schedule; Marcus watching the coven move about the compound with brilliant trails of light connecting them in myriad colors rich with meaning, but always returning his eyes to the shredded white ribbon that should have stretched from him to Didyme.

Looking at Marcus's memories since her death was *painful*. He was always staring at that ribbon. Even if his eyes pointed some other direction, even if he was trying to concentrate on someone's gleaming ultraviolet enmity or dimming particolored friendship, the torn pale half of a mate bond had some corner in his vision and more than that of his attention. On the rare occasions he managed to really think about something else, it would twist as though ruffled by a breeze, and he'd be drawn right back into grief.

I looked back farther, to before he'd met her, trying to get accustomed to what his power did and figure out how heavily Chelsea depended on it. The difference was palpable. Marcus had apparently always been melancholy and a little inclined to brood, but he'd been *distractable* before Didyme entered and exited his life.

And the streams of light that he saw between people were excellent distractions. They were endlessly fascinating, supernally beautiful, flecked and striped and inscribed with every possible color and intensity and shape. He hadn't originally known what the features of the relationships he saw *meant*, and had to learn them the way he'd learned to read. But a vampire brain and lifespan (and some work with Aro, who could, given time and the chance to touch the people involved, confirm or deny Marcus's hypotheses) afforded him plenty of opportunity to figure out the code.

Marcus could see both directions of a relationship as long as one person was within sight and the other within range of the first, that range proportional to the strength of a relationship.

Mate bonds, he could see no matter how far apart the mates were.

He'd seen his and Didyme's ribbon snap and her half evaporate. He'd been staring right at it when she died. I flinched away from that memory and went earlier again.

The white ribbons that represented mate bonds were unusual in their color, but also their simplicity. Usually, mates had the ribbon and then separate, more multicolored beams to display anything else they shared on top of that. It was those intricate ones he read for anything complex...

- "Marcus! I'd like you to meet Chelsea. What a lovely coincidence that we have happened upon her hometown at the same time as she was visiting it."

"Hello." I don't need to open my eyes to look her up and down; the light is bright enough to my extra sight even through my eyelids, and the light is more important than what sort of nose she has or anything of that nature. The light... is lurching unnaturally. "Chelsea, if you don't stop that I'm going to kill you."

She jumps. "I wasn't doing anything..." It's a poor lie. But she does stop. The light stills, except for a perfectly natural shimmer of yellow in reaction to my threat.

Aro laughs at us. "Brother, I think she's worth more alive than dead. Get to know each other. I think you'll be spending a lot of time working together." I hear him walk off. The girl he's brought in stays put.

"You sculpt the light, then?" I ask.

"...Light?"

"I suppose you probably don't see it that way. Relationships. You can affect them directly."

"Oh, the threads - yes. I can. I don't see them at all, only feel them, though." That explains the clumsiness. "Aro - Master Aro, I mean - said that you see them. More clearly than I can feel them. Am I to call you Master Marcus?"

"I don't care. And I'd have to guess that my sight's clearer than whatever it is you do, if what you tried back there was at all representative. No finesse. You're how old?"

"Forty-three."

"Not from when you were born, from when you were turned, girl."

She gulps. "Two. How did you know...?"

"And you can't affect your relationships... or not the halves of them that exist in your

mind, anyway. Can you even tell they're there? Untidy, conflicted mess. And it's obvious. You couldn't have been an immortal for forty-three years and still be nursing anything like that little love-hate relationship with your... father, yes, that'll be him, I've never seen that shade of mauve anywhere else. It would have dimmed by now if you'd been among us long, or brightened if he'd turned too. But no, there it is. He was hard on you, and you resent him, but at the same time you haven't killed him yet - probably can't make up your mind - you admit he was instrumental in making you who you are and... Is he looking after your... niece? You've a dead sister who left a daughter behind?"

I open my eyes just in time to watch her jaw fall open. "How can you..."

"Plainer," I say, "than the nose on your face." I shrug. "I wouldn't have seen the bit about your family if we weren't in their town. They're close by. Hmmm... and your... is that a cousin? She just died, it's fading quickly... did you kill her?"

"Yes," she says, a defiant twist of black darkening the nascent coil of light between us.

"I don't care," I say. "Why do you think I would?" There's a lot of dark green speckled with clusters of pale pink specks there, glowing erratically - she's impressed with me. In spite of herself.

She starts to smile, just a little. "She was like me, or close to it. When Master Aro explained what he wanted of me I decided that she had to die. I don't want to outlive my value." That explains the brown patterning on their relationship. I'm starting to think it's characteristic of Aro, to back people into such corners so they need to resort to more drastic securing of their positions than they would normally bother with.

"And did she have your disagreeable habit of pulling the strings of anyone she was introduced to?" I ask.

"I don't know. You're right, I can't feel detail at all. I can't see what I'm doing, let alone what she was doing." She swallows, sways a little, and a cyan wire wraps around our shared strand of light. Supplication. She acknowledges me as an authority - albeit not as much as she does Aro - and she has some hope that I'll be a benevolent one. "Marcus..."

"What do you want?"

"I do have some sensation," she says, an unpleasant wheedling note in her voice. "Don't... don't you like me at all?"

"Is there something to like?" I'm really not sure what Aro means to do with her, although I imagine he has some design in mind; it would be rather unlike him not to.

Chelsea makes an unbecoming noise. "Master Aro warned me that you might not let me make you love me," she murmured.

Some of the thinner rays in gray and eggshell to persons I can't identify now make more sense. They look almost characteristic of what I've seen when one person tolerates the presence of a second they don't actually like for a steady source of admiration or compliments or similar. She has no fine discernment at all, but she knows what she likes, certainly. She likes... whatever it feels like to her when people are fond of her.

"As I said," I reply, "if you do that to me I'm going to kill you. Good day." I go to find Aro, meaning to ask him just what he has planned for this girl -

"Marcus is good," I summarized, pushing Jake's hand away from where it was waving in front of my face again. "He's *really* good, when he's on his game. Chelsea's learned in her millenia, but she still needs his help for anything that will hold up for long. I'm not *sure*, but I give it maybe a month or two without Marcus's help before the Volturi start fragmenting into more normal-sized covens and individuals - some of them probably fighting each other before scattering - even if none of the others were particularly upset over Didyme." I shook my head in disbelief. "I didn't realize while I was there what a big deal he is, because he didn't come to the village much. But the village is wolves and humans, not vampires - way better suited to living in big groups. Vampires don't usually hang out in bunches of more than, like, four or five at a time, if they aren't vegetarian."

Maggie whistled. "Okay, wow. So it made sense for Aro to worry that Addy would tell on him."

I nodded. "But..." I frowned. "If Marcus finds out about what Aro did, they could just keep him in pieces like they used to with the other witches, *if* they have Addy's help. My father's the only one they're still holding that way -"

"You seem so concerned for his welfare," said Liam dryly.

"I hate it that they ever did that to *anyone*, but I only know how to undo Chelsea's work in the one direction," I said stiffly. "Anyway. Now that Marcus has the memories - I think he does, anyway, he was probably close enough to get caught in the blast - he *will* eventually find out how Didyme died. The only reason he might not realize it immediately is that *she* didn't know, and if I were him I'd look at her own memories first, not at Aro or the coven he pinned her death on. That means that the Volturi are either going to fall apart - eventually - or get Addy back in the coven. Unless they find another way to replace Marcus or get a better version of Chelsea before they splinter."

"Which doesn't seem likely," said Siobhan, although she was looking at me for confirmation. I had the strange sensation that I had somehow turned into an *authority figure*, which made me feel a little like I was perched somewhere very high, and also liable to fall off of it at any time. I like attention. I don't have any experience with *responsibility*.

"...Probably not?" I said. "There was Chelsea's cousin but she died thousands of

years ago. They haven't found anyone with a similar power to her or Marcus since, that they know about. And they went back to Chelsea's hometown a couple decades later and checked out the rest of her family just in case, too. Chelsea didn't like that. But they didn't find anything."

Siobhan nodded. "Okay," she said. "So the Volturi are either doomed, or they're going to get Addy back, or something very unlikely is going to happen - but even doomed they can be very destructive on the way down - and then what? They haven't been doing an admirable job *lately*, but they *did* keep our species in check for a couple millenia. The threat of them, and their actual enforcement when a problem cropped up."

"Power vacuum," murmured Maggie.

"To an outrageous degree," said Siobhan. "As the news gets out we'll have immortal children and newborn armies and daywalking and uncovered feeding. Humans have been able to kill us given sufficient dedication and numbers since they discovered fire - nowadays, I give it six months or less between our existence being public knowledge, and them developing some contraption that will let them kill us as easy as we kill them or they kill each other."

"Bright side: an incentive for somebody to invent lightsabers," said Jake. Nobody laughed; he sighed.

"This is *serious*," said Maggie. "There are a lot of covens who would just *love* to turn the first couple dozen people they see and train them up into an army and send them after their enemies. It's happened. Within my lifetime, even, though I've never seen it. I *have* personally seen a woman who desperately wanted an immortal child and *only* didn't go kidnap someone's primary schooler and turn him because she knew the Volturi would find out sooner or later and kill them both." She shuddered, probably thinking of Molly. "I *myself* have had to be way more restrained and cautious than I would have bothered with if there weren't consequences."

"Sure, sure, sorry," muttered Jake. He looked at Siobhan. "Given any thought to the thing where humans might not *want* to kill you if you didn't treat them like snacks?"

"It's crossed my mind," said Siobhan gravely, giving him a chastising look. "Do you think *you* could turn into an enormous fanged creature in the middle of this city and be welcomed as a harmless puppy if you took care to mention that you don't dine on humans? Do you really think that I could swear off human blood this hour and be acknowledged thereafter as a valuable member of society who they shouldn't burn to ashes?" She aimed her thumb at Ilario. "This fellow hasn't eaten anyone in his *life*. He's still a vampire. He'll be tarred with the same brush as any of us. Humans. Are. *Stupid*. They're stupid in different *ways* than vampires - you can't, for instance, predict what a human is going to do based on the information that he or she is married, and can't expect that all of their large-scale alliances will fall apart without magical help. But they are still *stupid*."

"What about Elspeth?" Jake asked, troubled.

Siobhan eyed me consideringly. "Safer than me, probably safer than you. She looks cute and harmless, doesn't turn into anything more intimidating, she's never killed anybody and she can *prove* it just by saying so... all things considered I think she could be okay in a world without our secrets. Anyway. It's *everyone's* problem if the Volturi collapse, which is now a very, very serious risk. That should help with collecting help, at least." She started pacing again, having paused in place while I wasn't paying attention. "What else?"

"I feel like I should ask," Maggie said, "Siobhan, are actually going to *help* us, or do you still want to stay out of it like you told Carlisle?"

"Is there," said Ilario dryly, "a coherent *us*?"

"I don't know," said Siobhan frankly, seeming to cover both questions with one response. "I'll admit: my priority is the status quo on this island. Ireland is mine. It's been mine for centuries. I'm not ready to give it up. I'm also not convinced that the Volturi being completely dismantled would be a good thing, although the aforementioned status quo does depend on their witch collection project being toned *way down* before they find out I exist - which is as inevitable as Marcus finding out who killed his wife. What do *you* lot want?" I blinked rapidly, reminded uncannily of my mother, though she and Siobhan looked nothing alike. "It would help if I knew where we can cooperate before trying to work out how we're going to do that."

She was looking at everybody but Liam, and none of us seemed to know who should go first. Finally Maggie said, "I want my family safe. Molly needs a stable place to grow up, and Gianna and I need a stable place to raise her. And Ilario."

Ilario looked amused by this comment, so I guessed that it might be some kind of in-joke between him and Maggie rather than real dismissal. "Similar here," he said. "Maggie, you might want to remember that the Volturi tried to have Gianna killed, back when."

"Right, I don't like them much," agreed Maggie. "But they didn't succeed. If they're some kind of necessary evil for letting us bring up Molly without incident, I'll put up with them existing."

Siobhan nodded, and looked over at Jake and me.

"I want Elspeth safe and happy," said Jake.

Siobhan waited a beat, then said, "And?"

He blinked. "Uh, I guess the Volturi are..."

"One sec," I murmured, and I turned around to put my hands back on Jake's face and repeat the deprogramming trick with all the other Volturi. After I thought I'd been as thorough with each of them as I had been with Chelsea, I dropped my arms to my sides.

"Better?"

Jake made a weird nauseated face. "If you wanna call it that. Ugh. And I was only there for a little over a month... my *sisters*... Okay, with Elspeth safe and happy, I want those leeches..." He glanced around at the vampires, all waiting for him to finish uttering the slur. "...ders of the supernatural world *gone*. I guess some of the guard could get moved into a new administration or something, that's a lot of maybe-potentially-good witches to toss after the bad, but it can't go on like this. I want the wolves independent of or at least equal to the vampires, not a private conscript army."

Siobhan nodded, and looked at me. "Elspeth? What do you want?"

"I don't know," I said.

Torturer

Siobhan didn't seem too concerned about my reply, and shrugged. "Can I assume for my purposes that you're on board with your wolf's preferences?"

"I guess," I said. "I mean, what he said sounds good."

"What he said includes you being happy," Maggie pointed out. "If you don't know what you want how's he going to manage that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, there are the obvious things. I wouldn't be very happy if I died or anything. Or if Jake did. But I still haven't sorted out how I feel about all the people I knew before I met Chelsea, and..."

Siobhan waved a hand. "Right. I mostly just need to know what projects you will and won't help with in exchange for what incentives, not all the details of your psychology. Let me know if that changes substantially from the obvious, okay?" She sped up her pacing. "Are Jane and Alec loyal to Aro personally, or do they stand a substantial chance of defecting after Marcus learns about Didyme?"

"Give me a minute," I said, and closed my eyes again.

- my throat is burning. Just my throat, though, so that's... better... but I'm so thirsty - "Water," I say, expecting a dry choking noise, but I sound like a bell. I think of standing, and I stand, without any time passing between the one and the other.

"It's not water you need, dear one," says the man. I recognize him. I've seen him before. He used to stand in dark places, and watch me and my brother. It was strange. What is he doing here?

"It's not...? What happened?" Still the bell, still the thirst, what does he mean water won't help?

"Don't worry, lovely," he says. He's so pale. I'd think he was dying if he didn't hold himself so tall. "What you need is just there. Help yourself." He motions behind me.

It's some... people, tied up and gagged. Recognizing them is like trying to find something small I dropped in a murky lake. There's something off about how I remember things, but I know...

I don't like those people. They're from my town. They didn't like me, or my brother, and they -

I breathe in, and taste the moisture in the air, and fall on them like some kind of demonic creature, just like they said. They said me and Alec were witches, they said we

made deals with the Devil, they said that's why I can make them hurt and he can make them sleep, but I never did anything with the Devil and neither did he... I think. It's so hard to remember.

It tastes so good. The burning fades away, mostly. It tastes so good and it makes the hurt stop. Water wouldn't do that.

It's over in a few seconds. Just a few seconds. I don't know how I could tell how long it took, but I could. And it was fast. I'm fast. I never was before, I never could run away when they wanted to hurt me... I could now. I could run away from anyone.

I look down at my hands. They have blood on them. And they're very, very white, where they aren't red. Just like the man. What happened to me?

I turn around and look at him again. I'm fast as blinking, fast as a heartbeat. I don't... have a heartbeat anymore. What happened to me?

"Dear one," says the man. He has such a nice smile. He likes me, I can tell, not like... them. "How do you feel?"

"Better." I lick blood off my lips. It's so good. I tasted blood before, when they hurt me, and it didn't taste like this. What happened...?

I hear somebody screaming, and turn my head that way. It sounds familiar, but it's hard to remember.

"That's your brother," says the man. "Don't worry, dear one, he'll be quite all right. He got a bit of a later start than you. His injuries were not so great as yours, and I thought perhaps he could be allowed to grow a bit older first. But he took a turn for the worse and it was necessary to intervene."

"I... don't understand." I touch my neck, right under my chin, where the burn is already building up again. Thirsty. How can I still be thirsty? My skin feels so smooth. I move my head and there's no hair brushing my neck. I have clothes on, but they're not mine, and they're too big. What happened to me?

"What's the last thing you remember?" the man asks.

"They were saying we were... witches..." I whispered. "They blindfolded me and I couldn't stop them, and Alec was too slow... and there was fire..."

"Witches," repeats the man. "Interesting. Dear one -" I like that he calls me that, nobody ever called me a nice nickname before, except when Alec calls me Sister - "I am so terribly sorry that I was not able to rescue you before any of that happened. I had intended to wait until you and your twin were eighteen or so, at least, before I changed you. Unfortunately, it was only the most fortuitous coincidence that I was here in time to save your lives at all, and it was necessary to make you immortal at once to avoid losing

you entirely."

"You saved me?" I ask.

He nods. "You're very special, you see. And your brother too. You have a unique power."

"I can make people hurt the way I do," I say, but he must know that, and he nods. "It didn't help."

He smiles. "You did mention that they blindfolded you. You need to see who it is you mean to harm, don't you?"

"Yes." Sometimes I almost thought I saw the harm, even. Like a lightning bolt. It used to be the best way to make people stop hurting me. I could make them feel it too. I was the one who spat out teeth and nursed cuts and limped and couldn't see out of swollen eyes - but the hurt I could make them feel just the same.

I don't hurt now except the thirst.

But I can remember it, the burning.

"Dear one," says the man, "some people with special powers find that after they've changed, they're more powerful than before. I wonder, is there anyone you'd particularly like to try that out on? Someone who hurt you?" He's smiling still.

"I don't remember who..."

He leans towards me. "I have a power too," he says. "With one touch, I can learn all about a person. When I saved you from the fire, I learned all about you, dear one. And I remember who it was who took you from your home to burn you."

"You do?" I don't think I want to remember all the things that happened before. I don't think I liked them very much. But if he remembers them, that's all right. He can tell me who I wanted to hurt.

"Yes." He smiles. "Dear one, I have had my eye on you and your brother for some years. I was very, very angry when I found that someone had tried to do away with you. In fact, I nearly killed him. But then I thought, perhaps you would like him saved for you? Perhaps you should be the one to exact revenge? Would you like that, dear one?"

"Where is he?" I look up at the man, and he smiles and pats me on the head - I have no hair at all; did the fire burn it away? Will it come back? - and he leads me through the village. My brother screams again but we aren't going to him, we're going to hurt the person who hurt us. Nobody should hurt me, ever, and if they do, they should hurt.

He's tied up and gagged, like those people I drank. He looks at me and he's very afraid; I see him shaking and his eyes are rolling in his head. I could kill him. But I don't

think that would last very long.

I look him in the eye, and I share my pain -

"Jane is definitely, solidly loyal to Aro personally," I said. "Alec..."

- The first thing I see when I open my eyes is Jane. I know her immediately. She looks different - her hair's been almost completely singed away, her eyes are bright red, her summertime tan is gone and she looks like she's made of porcelain, but it's her. "Sister."

"Brother," she says happily. "You must be thirsty. Look there, Master has saved you some -"

I don't wait for her to finish her sentence; I've already taken a breath and spun round to see what she was pointing at and devoured it. Oh...

She's smiling girlishly, when I'm through and I turn around to look at her again. She looks happier than I've seen her in years. "Sister, what's -"

"Oh, it's the most wonderful thing," she says, and whatever has happened, whoever she's calling "Master," whyever she's smiling - it must be all right, if Jane is happy -

"Also loyal to Aro, but only because of Jane; if she could be pried loose somehow he'd follow," I said. "Both of them were his from the start - hasn't changed since. Chelsea's not under orders to make it otherwise. She gets her instructions from Aro and he doesn't see a reason to make anyone *generally* loyal if they're already *specifically* loyal. The twins *like* everybody else in the coven, but they only answer to him. The closest thing to breaking away either one has ever done was when Jane realized that Aro's the one who turned her with all that implies, and then he made it up to her pretty fast by choosing that time to ask her if she'd knock him over just once out of "curiosity". That was satisfactory to her... sense of justice."

"That's one way to put it," muttered Jake.

"Well, "her sense that anyone who treats her like less than an untouchable princess needs to burn" takes longer to say," I said.

"Is it just me," said Maggie, "or would it be really, *really* useful to have Bella around nowish? I have literally no other clue how anybody's going to deal with the twins and Renata."

"It's not just you," said Siobhan, "but we don't know how to find her. Elspeth, did you have no way to get in touch with your mother at all in case of separation?"

"No. She doesn't have a phone or a regular e-mail because she never wanted anyone to be able to keep track of her at all. Her work made her accept an e-mail address, but it only takes internal mail, it'll reject anything from a different server -" Siobhan was staring at me like I was a complete idiot. "What?"

Siobhan smacked herself in the forehead; it made a loud clunky noise. "Tell me who she worked for," she growled, "and I will *arrange* to send mail from the *right domain*, Elspeth, if that's all that's standing in the way of our *writing her a damn letter*."

Maggie said, "Okay, point that we can write to her and this really should have come up in conversation forever ago, but is she likely to be checking her work e-mail?"

"No, but it's a hell of a lot better than flying to San Francisco on a wild guess and *wandering around in case she's there*," Siobhan said. "Elspeth -"

"Right, right," I muttered, and I rattled off the name of the company and my mother's e-mail address with them.

"I guess on the bright side, you didn't, say, tell your dad how to get ahold of her because you'd have just been thinking "oh I can't e-mail her" the entire time you were around him," Jake said encouragingly, "so that means the Volturi can't communicate with her."

"They have Alice," said Siobhan, "they don't need Bella's e-mail address."

"They've had Alice since two weeks ago," I said. "And unless they hid it from Addy for some reason, they don't have my mother - one sec -"

- *"I told you, Aro," Alice says, "I can't see her. It's always been spotty with her."*

"But my dear, I thought that was only due to her association with the wolves, not an intrinsic property of hers," Aro says. "Addy, are you finding the same difficulty?"

The headache that always builds when I use Alice's precognition on anything difficult is forming behind my eyes; I try to ignore it and focus harder on the one who got away. In two senses of the word. I cannot stand that Bella is still alive, that we didn't manage to kill her when it looked like we did. I've never been more frustrated in my life than when I could almost, almost taste the power in that girl, almost reach out and make it mine - and find my mirror blocked completely by a heap of rubble. Practically no one can use their powers without the sense of location and lack of pain that is so neatly taken away by thorough breakage. Otherwise we could never have held onto a man who can teleport. Some can use their powers whatever number of pieces they find themselves in. Apparently Bella can. Can use it against me - that was like biting down, hard, on something that inexplicably wouldn't yield to my teeth. I almost expected my jaw to hurt,

after I touched her.

I wish she'd died when we tried to kill her. I wish. I wish I could find her now, or that Alice could, so she could be hunted down and made to die properly this time and not go on existing as a mockery of my life's purpose.

But I'm not getting anything but a headache. "I can't see anything either," I reply. "Her... shield might have improved recently, or it could just be a coincidence in the first place that she was associating with wolves regularly at the time it developed this aspect."

"She could have found a half-vampire, besides Elspeth," Alice said. "The wolves are all in the village, right?"

"Yes. I believe we would have other means of detecting her presence if she were there," Aro says dryly. "Very well, I will have Joham contacted and inquire about the whereabouts of his daughters. There is no obvious way to rule out the possibility that she has located some other hybrid unknown to us, though." He frowns. "Keep checking for your erstwhile sister every hour or so, please, Alice my dear. She may not keep continual company with whoever is blocking you, if indeed that's the case. It seems unlikely that she is deliberately flouting you, as she has no way of knowing that you are alive."

"She did somehow change her mind about going to Denali," Alice points out.

"Yes," Aro acknowledges, "but that could have been any number of things. If your head bothers you too badly, do let Alec know that he's to serve as your analgesic while you do your prophesying." He pats Alice's cheek, looking avuncular, and she perks up a little at the opportunity to avoid the discomfort.

I have a less complicated way to avoid my headache: I take his statement as a dismissal, and go to the dungeon. It looks very empty with only Edward in it. I poke the heap of fragments with my foot; the headache and the flickers of foresight disappear and my head is filled with second sound.

Right on cue, he "speaks" to me, aware of the moment at which his power pushes Alice's away: Please, please, don't hurt Bella, please, whatever you have to do - you could credibly threaten to hurt or kill Elspeth even if Bella wouldn't believe you'd really kill me, she might do what you want if you try that, I know Aro wanted her added to the guard once, he only changed his mind when you couldn't - please, please, not my Bella -

I don't have any fondness for your Bella, I remind him.

She found a way to let down her shield for Jasper when she needed to! he tries desperately. Use Elspeth, make her do that for you too, you can get all the damn taste of her shield you want. God, she'll be furious with me for suggesting threatening her daughter, but Bella has to live, I spent five and a half years believing I lived in a world where she didn't, I can't do that again, my Bella has to live. Addy, you could never live with yourself if you let Bella die without trying as hard as you could to get the chance to copy her... the one power you failed to borrow when you tried... He's trying to be

tantalizing, but he'd say anything if it gave his shield wife a better chance of survival.

Still... what would it taste like...? -

I snapped myself out of the memory, unwilling to spend more time listening to my father trying to get me hurt so the Volturi could control my mother. It was strange... on the one hand, I didn't love him, wasn't sure I ever had, and could only feel so betrayed by it. And it should have been predictable. He was a vampire with a mate in danger. Even without Chelsea, he might have wanted to trade me in for her, although I wasn't sure. But on the other hand I'd never mentally lumped him in with "the bad guys", either.

"Elspeth?" asked Jake, looking concerned for me. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head - to clear it, not to answer him. "Alice can't see my mom," I murmured. "At least not since the last time Addy heard anything. It's either something new about the shield, or my mother is spending all her time with a half-vampire or a wolf the Volturi don't know about. They got ahold of Joham and his daughters were with him and didn't know anything about it, and Nahuel was at home when they called and didn't know anything either. All the wolves and Cody are in the village. And I know it's not me."

"Is something wrong, Elspeth?" Jake prodded gently in a low voice.

I didn't feel like constructing sentences; I pushed the memory at him. While he processed that, Maggie said, "Well, can you think of any other place she'd get a half-vampire or a werewolf?"

I thought. "I guess there might be somebody like Embry whose mother *didn't* move to the Quileute reservation," I speculated. The vampires looked at me blankly, so I explained: "Embry turned out to be a wolf, but his mother was a Makah, and everybody had assumed his dad was one too who she left behind. If she hadn't moved, Embry would be an inactive wolf on the Makah reservation right now and his mom would be there too, and still alive. There might be somebody like her, who really did stay put with her wolf kid; my mom would be able to tell by going to their reservation and sniffing around."

"Interesting," said Siobhan. "That still leaves the question of why she would have changed course since Alice saw her heading for Denali, though..."

"So write her an e-mail already," said Maggie.

"It's still light out," said Siobhan. "Give it an hour, then we'll get hold of a computer and I'll see what I can -"

"That *bastard!*" shouted Jake suddenly.

"Who?" asked Maggie.

"Edward!" he fumed. "He was -"

"Jake," I murmured. "If somebody wanted to kill me and you thought you could save me by suggesting that they threaten - one of your sisters, or somebody -"

"Are you making excuses for him?" exclaimed Jake. "You're his *daughter!* That makes it his job to look out for you, not your job to be the sacrificial lamb so he doesn't have to wallow in *even more self-loathing than usual* - did you pay attention to that *whine* in his 'voice'? Is that guy for real? Is -"

I wanted him to stop, and without thinking, I flung another memory.

One of my father's, from when he thought my mother was dead.

It was just a second long, so Jake reacted immediately. "Augh!" he said, flinching; tears popped up in the corners of his eyes. "Elsbeth, what'd you do that for? That was the most depressing thing I've ever thought of in my life."

"That's why," I said. "I don't like what he did. I don't like it *at all* and I'm not just making excuses. But I can't just say 'oh, my father must be a horrible person then' and let you rant about him, because I have *all* his memories up until... ummm, May twenty-second - and he's a person, just a person, and he loves my mother so, *so* much, and - and - I at least *used* to love her, too. She had to make a *rule* for me to follow that I was *required* to cooperate with the Volturi and let them hurt her if that would keep me safe. I must have loved her enough to *need* a rule like that, I must have loved her enough that I would have given myself up for her once, I must have loved her enough that my dad's idea would sound pretty swell to me -"

"It's a terrible idea," said Jake.

"I don't like it, I *said* I don't like it, but I gave you just one second of what it felt like to be my dad when he thought my mom was dead - I have years of that in my head - maybe he's being weak or a bad father or something, but he just doesn't want to feel *that* ever again, can you blame him? Do you want to repeat it? I've got lots more. Lots," I said in a rush. "It's like after Jane burned me I wanted to do anything she said, just to make sure she didn't do it again - he just doesn't want to think my mom is dead again. I can't tell you exactly what he was thinking when he said that, beneath the surface stuff his power could pick up when Addy had it, because the last time Addy touched Aro was before that day - but it's pretty obvious -"

Somewhere in the middle of this torrent of words, Jake's expression of anger at my father melted away and was replaced with unadulterated "imprint face". He reached out and pulled me in for a hug, and I leaned in. "Stuff is complicated," I mumbled into his shirt.

"Stuff is like that," he said quietly.

There was a silence, and then Jake sneezed. "Mold," he muttered. Maggie laughed awkwardly.

"So," said Siobhan, after another second of silence elapsed, "what else? Elspeth, any more convenient communication methods you neglected to mention?"

"She doesn't have a phone, doesn't have an address, doesn't have instant messaging or anything like that... I'm sorry I didn't mention her work e-mail before but I really, really don't think there's anything else," I said.

Siobhan nodded and glanced out the window. It wasn't sunset yet, but clouds were starting to roll in in some numbers. "Liam," she said, "go get a computer and find a way to e-mail Bella. Come back once you've managed it, with something that can receive a reply from her. And then we wait."

Collaborator

Liam obeyed his mate silently, leaving the hotel by the window.

Siobhan started pacing again as soon as his footsteps could no longer be heard. "Elspeth, I want you to poke around in your memories and see what, if anything, could be a deciding factor in turning the Denalis away from the Volturi. Ilario, get your sister on the phone and keep her posted. Maggie, get ahold of Cath, and ask her and any vampires she *trusts* to meet us tomorrow night in... let's make it near Belfast, in that one park, but tell her to have everyone to come well-fed, please, I don't want them hunting in my territory. Jacob, you and Elspeth need to sleep tonight, I presume. You could look around in the hotel and see if any rooms are still adequate for the purpose; I wouldn't know, not having slept in several centuries. I don't know how much or how often you like to eat, but I expect you could get Maggie to spot you some money for food, if you want to pop out for a bite."

"You don't carry money?"

"Not usually," Siobhan said.

Maggie dug around in her pockets and found a green bill, which she handed over to Jake. "That," she said, "is a loan, not a present."

"All of my money is in a drawer in our suite in the wolf village in Volterra," said Jake. "I really don't know when I'm going to be able to get it."

"No big *hurry*, I'm not gonna break your kneecaps if you don't have it back with interest by Tuesday, but it's still not a present," Maggie said. "I've got a kid to look after. She goes through shoes like nobody's business; I'd think she was putting them through the woodchipper if I didn't know better."

"I think my grandparents will probably cover it later if everybody lives through this and it's a problem," I said, "don't worry." Jake nodded, squeezed my shoulder with one hand, and went off to see if there were any acceptable accommodations in the building. Maggie and Ilario got out their phones and called Cath and Gianna, respectively, but they kept their voices down and I was able to tune them out to think.

I closed my eyes, and wondered what could affect the Denalis' loyalties. I had memories from Eleazar and Carmen, but they weren't recent - Aro had last read them shortly before Eleazar left the Volturi to follow his mate. I had Irina's, too, and those were much more up-to-date - they went up until just a couple of days before she died. (I knew the circumstances of her death from other perspectives. She'd turned the wolves in to the Volturi on the expectation that they'd wipe them out, and when she went to La Push and found that things had gone differently, she'd launched what amounted to a kamikaze attack and been summarily executed.) Kate and Tanya had last been read when their mother Sasha was killed, to prove their innocence of Sasha's crime of creating an

immortal child Vasili...

And Sasha had been read, too...

- *"I don't believe this. Corin finally agrees to sign on with you, and so you've become his personal army? He can't kill me himself even with his ludicrous invisible shield blocking a few of my slower shots, so he finds a bigger attack dog to finish his vendetta with me? Doesn't he realize that I could have involved my daughters at any time since I turned them, and he'd have been finished? His entire coven put together couldn't stand up to my little Katie!"*

Aro, smiling for some reason, lets me rant; his bodyguard, at his shoulder, gives no impression of being interested in the proceedings at all, but her power is watchful enough; I can't just wrench the man's head off his shoulders. "Yes, your little Katie..."

"Don't tell me Corin's joining the guard is contingent on killing my daughters, too," I said. I'm trying to snap at him, trying to hang onto some pride, but I can't keep all the horror out of my voice. My girls, my Katrina and Irina and Tanya. "Has he ever even met them? I've kept them away from the territory border."

"He hasn't," said Aro. "Which presents me with a... conundrum. Particularly given Katrina's gift. It's not quite of Jane's caliber, but still..."

"You can't have her," I spit.

"Dear lady, I doubt this is the right time for you to be making pronouncements like that," says Aro. "If I wanted Katrina very badly I would have her already. No, as I said, she's not of Jane's caliber; I don't need any of your children, even the one with the lightning touch. And in fact Corin did not request their deaths, only yours. The conundrum is that I wouldn't like to lose the chance to ever welcome Katie into my coven, should I need her later. And this means you cannot disappear without explanation, and I cannot announce precisely why I'm having you killed. If I did either of those things, your daughters might... complain... and that would be the end of them, I fear."

My daughters and I together could have destroyed Corin and his coven - or former coven, now - but the three of them against the Volturi - I shudder to think. And they would try. I have such loyal children, but - "The last news I received said you still had Chelsea."

"Well, yes, she could solve the immediate problem of allowing your talented Katrina to outlive you by more than a few days," says Aro. "But under the circumstances we are now discussing, my darling Chelsea would have a challenge on her hands to create the inroads necessary to leave open the option of adding Kate to the family later. I don't have any other reason to leave them alive, you understand, beyond that hope. I have some interest in leaving intact your witch daughter's impression of the Volturi as dispensers of justice."

"And God forbid Chelsea should be challenged," I snarl. "It would be so inconvenient. Perhaps you should give up the entire project as a fool's errand."

"My dear," says Aro, "it is already quite decided that you are going to die. The only question is whether you will do so in a way that necessitates also killing your children or not. Specifically, you could die mysteriously and hope that they are poor detectives... you could die openly for the reasons I have described to you, and hope that they are not as vengeful as you think they are... or..."

"Or what?" I hiss.

"Or some pretext could be devised, to explain your demise to your daughters without leaving them any grounds to object." He smiles at me and I wonder if I could get through his bodyguard's power by launching myself at him from sufficiently far away... no, probably not. If nothing else, she could knock me out of the way before I reached him.

"Such as?" I ask warily.

"I'm sure you're aware of the practice of creating immortal children, which we're in the process of stamping out..." -

"I thought of something," I murmured, and Siobhan's gaze sharpened with interest. "Oh boy, did I ever think of something. One minute..."

- The child really is cunning. I really might have created one for myself, if I'd known how precious and lovely a human toddler could become when turned; I've heard of immortal children before but never seen one with my own eyes. He has dimples when he smiles at me.

"Here you are," says Aro, picking up the boy with desultory briskness and pushing him into my arms. I'm not sure if I could stop myself from cradling the child if I had some reason to shove him away. Some instinct is demanding my affection, like the motherhood I thought I'd found with my girls. This little creature is distilled innocence, exudes an undeniable need for protection; in a moment he's more a child to me than my daughters. I can't look away from his round eyes, almost glowing, like rubies. No wonder entire covens would die to protect their angels, if they're all like this... "I've kept a few, for research purposes, in the hopes that we can learn a way to make them safe; my coven has enough numbers to control a small number of the immortal children. We can spare one to act as a prop for your funeral."

"You're going to kill him," I said flatly. The little one puts his arms around my neck and mumbles nonsense words against my shoulder, untroubled; I smooth his hair. "This baby, you're -"

"I see you find him captivating," says Aro. "That should help you play your part convincingly. Yes, of course we're going to kill him. I would offer to let you trade him back in exchange for one of the others I've kept on hand, but I think you'd find they have the same effect. I will not ask you to choose between them."

I hold the boy tighter. "What is his name? What language does he speak?"

"Latin will do, if you want to talk to him," Aro says. "He's picked up some of it since we brought him here, although not beyond a two-year-old's command of the language, of course. He answers to Vasilii. I'm not sure if that was his original name or if his creator assigned it."

"Vasilii," I repeat.

Vasilii leans back to look at my face and puts his hand over my eye, then touches my hair, then giggles. "I would suggest," Aro says, "that you convince him to call you "Mommy" or something similar before your daughters arrive to watch the trial. For the sake of appearances, you see."

"Yes," I murmur -

"The sisters' mother, Sasha, was *framed*," I said. "I don't know how much that will bother Eleazar and Carmen - it'll at least throw Eleazar for a loop, though, he didn't know, he joined the Volturi later and never got filled in - but it will *definitely* get Tanya and Kate's attention."

"Get their attention, or actually turn them around?" asked Siobhan, gazing at me intently.

"I don't know."

"You probably know all of these people better than anyone on the planet except Aro, Adelaide, and possibly the people in question themselves," Siobhan objected.

"I have memories, but I'm not a precog like Alice, I can just guess from patterns of behavior I remember," I said. "And there hasn't been anything like this that happened to them before, at least not that Aro read before late May. If you want my *guess*, they might be willing to stand against the Volturi if we tell them - er, maybe if *I* tell them - that Sasha was framed, but I'm not *sure*. I wouldn't bet my life on it unless all the other bets on offer were worse."

"Of course you pick the best bet you can get, that's so obvious as to be not worth stating," said Siobhan. "But you don't get to refuse to bet. That's just letting other people, who might or might not like you, pick the game on your behalf. The question is: *How good* is this chance? Would you rather bet your life on your ability to convince the

Denalis that the Volturi are bad news, or... say, a coin flip?"

I blinked. "Why would I ever bet my life on a coin flip?"

Siobhan sighed heavily. "If the next best alternative was betting it on a lottery ticket. Let's try this another way. Kiddo, if you were airdropped in Denali and got out the words "Aro framed Sasha" before anybody had the chance to wrap you up, apply postage, and ship you back to Volterra... *and for some reason*, one or more of the Denalis *didn't* promptly say to themselves "oh, we don't like the Volturi anymore, let's come clean about our subterfuge to our cousins and friends and collaborate on a plan to deal with the cataract-eyed emperors in Italy"... who would be the one or more still on the Volturi's side? Why would they be the holdouts? What more would it take to convince them?"

This sounded familiar somehow. After a moment, I matched it up to what I'd been doing while under Alec's sensory deprivation. With no way to tell whether anything I was trying to get help had worked or not, I'd started assuming everything I did had failed and moved on to another plan. "Is this anything like that?" I asked, pushing to Siobhan a summary of the concept.

She considered. "A little," she said finally. "Except in this case, you're not going to *try* just waltzing into Denali to make your announcement before you figure out how it's likely to go wrong. You're going to figure out how it's likely to go wrong, we'll patch that problem, and then we start over again."

"And we do this how many times?" I asked.

"Until the only problems we find have patches worse than the holes themselves," said Siobhan. "However, I can't be sure how much of my ability to make this work is due to... magic, which I apparently have... so take my strategies with a grain of salt. They work for *me*, but I don't know what to expect if you go off and try to plan things yourself."

Maggie flipped her phone closed and plucked Ilario's out of his hand so she could talk to Gianna. Ilario said, "Speaking of how you apparently have magic, Siobhan - what about Addy?"

Siobhan started ticking off fingers. "Could be going nearly anywhere, her motives aren't *directly* opposed to ours, and while she could be a combat threat if she joins up with the Volturi again, they're already so overwhelming in magical force that we should really, *really* avoid confronting them in direct combat terms *anyway*. Overall, I don't think she's the best place to focus our energies right now, at least not when we could all waste a couple of weeks just *locating* her."

"Addy has e-mail and I know the address," I piped up, not wanting to be scolded later for not mentioning this.

"And if she wanted us to know where she was going," Siobhan said, "she probably wouldn't have run away laughing her head off and *jumped off the quay*. She has the

address of the house in Wexford; Maggie, if she looks, can she get your landline's number with that?" Maggie, still mid-conversation with Gianna, nodded. "If she wants to be in contact with us she can be," Siobhan said. "Forcing it would be, maybe not a waste of time, but at least something to put off until we've exhausted other productive things to do."

"More to the point," said Ilario, "she has the address of the house in Wexford, which means that if she wants, she can physically turn up at the house in Wexford. Gianna's completely dismal in a fight - is Molly in any - any danger?"

He, Maggie, and Siobhan all looked at me. I pursed my lips and thought. "I don't *think* so," I said carefully, tempted to claim not to know but suspecting Siobhan would scold me if I did. "She was telling the truth about not preferring to go after guarded prey... she doesn't eat kids normally, most vampires don't... I *think* she's probably going to avoid touching anyone she's not absolutely sure isn't a witch until she's done with your power, Siobhan, which could take a while, and she's not a hundred percent accurate trying to tell that sort of thing at range, so she might not want to risk it with Molly... and if she took her hostage that would only get her three really reluctant allies, she can probably get more help and more *enthusiastic* help somewhere else... so I don't *think* she'll want to hurt Molly."

"Maybe I should go home, just to be safe..." murmured Maggie, still holding Ilario's phone; Gianna had gone to attend to some need of Molly's. "Me and Gianna could hold off -"

"I don't think even you *and* Gianna *and* Ilario could beat Addy in a fight, Maggie," I said. "Especially if she went in with a power that's helpful at all - even though it'd only last until Maggie managed to touch her. It's not that she's interested in it particularly, but she's copied witches with fighting powers and wanted to try them out, and she's almost a thousand years old. Siobhan could probably beat her one on one, but..."

"Do you not think me and Gianna and Ilario could beat up Siobhan if we ganged up?" asked Maggie, sounding surprised.

I blinked. "Um, I remember Siobhan actually fighting all-out, and I'm not even *slightly* tempted to say anything besides *hell no, not even without Liam helping, not even if Siobhan started out missing an arm.*"

"You have memories of that?" Siobhan asked.

I nodded. "The guy you let get away from Liam's old coven got in trouble later and Aro read him. He thought you had to be some kind of witch for sure - I guess he was right, but I wonder if your power applies in a fight?"

"I really wouldn't know," Siobhan said dryly. "I'm also older than Maggie and Gianna and Ilario put together a few times over, and probably a fair percentage of their combined weight to boot, and Maggie has noted that she's weaker since switching to an

animal diet."

"The point is you are *really really scary* when you want somebody to die," I said, "doesn't matter why that is." Siobhan shrugged, conceding the point. "Um, Denali... if I just went in and announced it... I *think*... Kate would be the most likely to hold out."

"Kate, really?" asked Ilario, as Maggie's attention returned to her phone call with her mate. They were getting worse and worse at holding off on the mush.

I nodded. "Eleazar knows firsthand what my power does; he'd be even less able to doubt something true I said than anybody else. And as far as I can remember he's attached to thinking of the Volturi as good guys. That's got to be already wearing thin. If it went away completely and he couldn't believe it anymore, he'd be against them really solidly. Carmen only ever passively influences him, she doesn't try to argue with him if he's made up his mind about something - and she doesn't like the Volturi all that much in the first place. She'd be tempted to keep cooperating with them for David's sake but she'd obey Eleazar if he disagreed... and Eleazar's a nice person, but he *was* a Volturi for a long time, and he's... *used* to making sacrifices, even though he hates it. I think he *might* give up David if he were convinced the Volturi are bad and that there was no way to save him. Tanya was closest to Sasha and is closest to Carlisle now - I think she'd be especially angry about the frame job and especially willing to throw herself on her cousins' mercy for the betrayal."

"But Kate," said Siobhan.

"But Kate... would *hate* the idea that Sasha was manipulated like that for *her* sake. Kate likes being a witch. She likes being powerful. She throws it around sometimes, she can be smug. I think she would really, *really* hate it if she found out that her being a witch had hurt someone she loved. Even if her witchcraft isn't the reason Sasha *died*, it's why she was backed into the corner instead of just being killed on the spot when Aro caught up with her, and Sasha was really proud. If Kate weren't a witch then Aro wouldn't have bothered to make a deal."

"So she wouldn't be happy about it," said Maggie, "but according to you neither would Eleazar, right? What's the difference?"

"Kate is better at ignoring stuff she doesn't like," I said. "...I'm basing this all on a read on Kate that's almost a thousand years old, and what Irina saw, and the way these people acted around me when I was a *baby*. They could have changed -"

"Not much," said Siobhan. "These are vampires we're talking about. We can learn things, we can adapt to technology and changing borders and alliances, we can find mates... but the kinds of things you're talking about rarely change, once we turn. The basic personalities are stable. If Kate was the sort of person who was good at ignoring stuff she didn't like a thousand years ago, I'll bet you any sum you care to name that she still is."

"You don't carry money," I said, confused.

"Well, obviously, in the *staggeringly* unlikely event that I lost this bet which you'd be an idiot to take, I'd need to take the wallets off my next several meals," said Siobhan. "Anyway, go on."

I said, "I think Kate would figure I was telling the truth as I saw it. I don't think she's *so* good at ignoring things that she could *outright* ignore or disbelieve me if I was trying to convince her of something I know with this much certainty. But she could find some way to spin it so it had nothing to do with *her*, and I don't know how she'd do that, but it *could* wind up with her still on the Volturi's side. I could talk until I was hoarse about every perspective I have of the whole fiasco, tell her what Aro was thinking and Renata and Caius and anybody else who was involved, show her Vasilii's memories of meeting Sasha for the first time... and *then* she might have no choice but to come around... but she wouldn't let me go on that long."

"Blast her," said Maggie shortly, having bidden Gianna a reluctant goodbye so that their daughter could have her mamma's undivided attention during the bedtime routine. "That's fast, isn't it?"

"It's fast because there's no picking and choosing about what to send," I said. "And giving Kate too much could be as bad as giving her too little since she could distract herself with stuff that was easier to deal with."

Siobhan nodded, looking mildly approving - I decided this was probably about my usefulness rather than Kate's habits. "Okay. So Kate's a problem. How do we patch the problem that is Kate?"

I felt the temptation to pace, to imitate Siobhan. I kept still and closed my eyes again instead. "I *could*... just blast her, I guess. That'd at least put her in a position where she couldn't tip off the Volturi for a while, and then she'd be the *lone* holdout against everyone else in the house. She'd hate being the reason her family got into trouble, too, and might go along with it just so she wouldn't have to tell on them. She..." I yawned hugely.

"How much does being tired affect your thinking, Elspeth?" asked Siobhan, glancing at the dimness outside.

"Some," I said. "I don't know. How do you tell?"

"By testing it in less weighty circumstances than these," Siobhan said. "Jacob, are you back yet?" she called loudly.

"Don't have to yell," I heard his distant voice grumble. "On my way, just these stairs -"

"If you can't jump it, the banister will hold your weight," Siobhan said, a bit more quietly, "and you can climb up the destroyed part that way. Or you could go around and come in the same way we did the first time."

"I've got it, I've got it..." A moment later Jake was back with us, carrying a bag of what was probably food. "Hey, Elsie. Tired?" I yawned again, and he picked me up in his free arm and carried me away. "I found a couple rooms that didn't have anything more obviously awful in them than dust. Had to force the doors, but that should be okay. Just us and the friendly vampire mascots of the emerald isle in this building. And vengeful squatter ghosts, but I'll keep 'em off you, okay?"

"I don't think you'll let vengeful squatter ghosts get me," I agreed. Jake climbed another flight of stairs with me in tow, put me on a bed, and tucked me in. It took almost no time for me to fall asleep.

Sister

I woke up the next morning quite alone. The bag of food Jake had brought in the previous night was on the floor next to my bed; I ate most of it but left a respectable breakfast for him in case he hadn't set aside any of it when I wasn't looking. Jake had presumably found some other place to sleep. I supposed he wouldn't be up yet, but I found the vampires in the same room we'd been in to begin with when I looked. Liam was back from his excursion.

"Morning, Elspeth," said Maggie. "Sleep well?"

"I slept fine. Did anything interesting happen overnight?" I asked, looking particularly at Liam.

"No response from your mother, at least not yet," Siobhan said, "but Liam told her how to get in touch with us, so that could change at any time. Once your wolf is up I want to leave for Belfast, in case any of Cath's friends show up early or try to grab dinner on their way in - in fact, if you could get him now, before sunup, it'd be easier to get from here to the car without risking someone driving by and noticing us. He doesn't have to drive; he can sleep in the car if he needs it."

I nodded and went looking for Jake; he was snoring just a few doors down from where he'd put me. "Jake," I said, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Bwuh," he said groggily.

"Wake up," I said, "we're going to Belfast. You can sleep more in the car."

"Bwuh," he repeated, sounding like this was intended as a not-very-verbal acquiescence, but he didn't actually move.

"I *can* pick you up if I have to," I said. "Think of how silly that would look. I bet Maggie would laugh at you."

Jake hauled himself up to a sitting position and out of bed, and looked at me blearily. "I know you're stronger than you look, but I still can't *really* get that you could carry me around," he said. "I'm like four times your size. You're *little*."

"And you're a giant, but I have superpowers," I said. "Well, I might accidentally clonk you against a doorway, but you can heal, right?" I asked cheekily. "C'mon."

"You're in a good mood," he remarked, ambling after me back down the hall to where the vampires were hanging out.

"I feel pretty optimistic, with Siobhan helping," I said. "And probably at least some of the English vampires and probably everyone in Denali if Siobhan helps figure out how

to get the coven not interested in being the Volturi's spies anymore."

"I guess. I'm going to be all nerves around the big vampire shindig, though," he muttered. "Not that I could actually, you know, *win* against any number of them without a pack backing me up, but I'd feel better for no good reason whatsoever, if you stood behind me once we're there. Personal friends of the lady who gave birth to you are one thing; distant acquaintances of said lady's sire-in-law are another."

"Why would any of them want to hurt me?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, you don't smell like food to them any more than I do, I guess, but maybe one of them wants to see if half-vampire could be an acquired taste? I really don't want to think about that. Are you okay standing behind me just on the grounds that I'd be less irrationally terrified, or would I have to be rationally terrified first?"

"Well, I want to see what's going on," I said. "I could sit on your shoulders, would that do it? And then if somebody looks at me hungrily you can phase and I'll already be sitting on you and you can carry me away."

"Fair enough," he said. We rounded the corner to rejoin the rest of the group, and Siobhan impatiently crooked a finger. We piled into the car with some difficulty, and Jake promptly fell asleep.

Siobhan occupied me during the drive talking about the Denalis. "You said last night that Kate was the weak point, since she's likely to want to ignore you and find a way to interpret things that doesn't make Sasha's death her fault," she prompted.

"Yeah," I said. "I said that. I was tired but I still think that's probably the most likely way it would go wrong."

"So," Siobhan said, "how do we fix that?"

"Shouldn't you be the one coming up with plans, since your plans are magic?" I pointed out.

"I would, if I had your memories, and I *will*, after you blast me, which I'm increasingly confident you should - but I need to be alert for the meeting, and can't be sure I'd recover from a blast in time. I probably should have asked you to do it last night before you went to bed. But in the meantime, we should have at least a *rudimentary* plan, however much it suffers from being non-magical or of reduced magicalness, which draws on the best available source of information about the Denali vampires, namely you." Siobhan sounded vaguely contemptuous when she talked about magic, but continued. "We need this rudimentary plan in case something happens to you, or me, such that you *can't* blast me later; we need this rudimentary plan so we have something more coherent than Carlisle's "lets all sit in one place and pat each other on the back for being so *rebellious*" inclination when we decide what new information is worth gathering and what resources are worth acquiring in the short term; we need this rudimentary plan so we don't

sound like idiots to Cath and her friends tonight. So. How do we fix the problem with Kate? If you need your train of thought refreshed, you were in the middle of saying -"

"That I could blast her. I remember. Is there something wrong with that idea, that we need another one?"

"A few things," said Siobhan. "It's kind of an aggressive behavior. Her family and friends might not like it and could take exception. Also, in case it hasn't occurred to you, she's currently sitting in the middle of a large gathering of friendly vampires, many of whom haven't met one another before. I'd be kind of surprised if Carlisle's gathering hadn't yielded at least *one* new mated pair. She could be half of it; we wouldn't know. That's a wrench in the works of any plans we make that assume Kate is single. It's also probably overkill. Also probably not the most *precisely targeted* solution you can come up with."

"Is precise targeting that important?" I asked. "I mean, I might not have thought of the way Kate would *actually* behave, so -"

"So you want to nuke her brain with everything you have in case something sticks? If you didn't think of the way Kate will actually behave, the solution is to think of the way Kate will actually behave, or at least a menu she's likely to choose from. If you can come up with a plan that will work *no matter what* - that *doesn't* rely, one way or another, on us having an accurate prediction - please, enlighten me." I didn't say anything, and Siobhan continued, "Now, maybe you were thinking of the fact that it's a good idea to minimize how bad the worst-case scenario is, and that's a factor. But blasting her is probably not the best way to do *that*, either, because it could make a lot of people very angry, and *if* it backfired, we'd have a very knowledgeable electric witch who didn't much care for us on our hands."

"Right," I said.

"So how do we -" Siobhan began again.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking." Kate... I had comparatively few memories *from* her. She'd been a vampire for shy of fifty years, when Sasha's trial occurred and Aro read her. Her life had consisted of a lot of material that I would not have been allowed to see in theaters even if I could convince the ticket taker that I was sixteen, mostly, with occasional dollops of less deadly play and conversation between her and her sisters and her mother. She hadn't had to confront many inconvenient truths during that time, and I couldn't remember being a subsequent Kate.

So I watched her through Irina's eyes, instead -

- "Hey," Kate says, dropping lightly next to us in our current meeting place. "Huh, all three of us here at once? There's something new. We've been here a week and this is

the first time none of us got caught someplace else by the sun."

"I just got back myself," I say. "Tanya, on the other hand, has been lazing about all day."

"It's not lazing," says Tanya. "I've been thinking."

"What've you been thinking about that's worth skipping a hunt?" Kate asks. "Mm, I had myself the most delightful blacksmith not an hour ago. There was this entire subtext-laden conversation during which he accused me of being fairy folk and I picked up some iron to prove I wasn't, and he said "lovely one, if you are not fey, you are surely an angel"... I think he knew I wasn't one of those earlier than some catch on. Didn't affect the flavor, though..."

"I was thinking about... men, I guess. Do you ever think about going back to the same one twice?" Tanya asks.

I blink. "Tanya? Tanya, honey, we can't really do that. They die. I mean, if you're into that now... well, it'd surprise me, but..."

"Well, that's my point," Tanya says. "They die. Why do they die? Because we decide to kill them. I guess I don't know about you two, since we haven't tried sharing one since the fiasco in Berlin, but I haven't accidentally shattered a pelvis or even cracked a collarbone in a few decades. They could walk away, after, if we wanted."

"Then... who would we eat?" asks Kate, tilting her head. "Doesn't it seem inefficient to partition the hunting like that?"

"Oh, I think I see what you're getting at," I say to Tanya. "Until we kill them they're reusable. Like your blacksmith with the pretty compliments, Katie, you could have left him alive and visited him as many times as you wanted. Maybe he'd have thought of something else charming to say."

"I think he knew what I am, though," Kate reminded me. "We don't want to get in trouble! We all agreed we would stick together and not get in trouble after Mother..."

I bow my head, and so does Tanya. But Tanya looks up again and says, "Well, we could leave the ones who don't figure it out alive. It's usually pretty obvious when they notice, right? I mean, mine tend to start saying things like "succubus!" and whatnot, when they notice, as though this could be new information to me; those I could go on eating... There are probably even ways to make it harder to figure out. I bet a good soak in a hot bath could warm us up long enough to -"

"Long enough to selectively kill the best ones," Kate giggles.

"Well, the men themselves are also rather warming," I say. "Niiiiice and warm. Oh, or we could make them take us to comfortable places with good fireplaces, keep the room very hot... And if we didn't kill them, if we got really good at not needing to kill them, we

could pick out practically anybody! It wouldn't have to be just people we can seduce quickly so no one sees us, or just people no one will notice missing too soon." I pause. "Tanya, are you bringing this idea up so we can go back to Russia and give you another chance at having that prince you fancied but couldn't get because -"

"No, he'd be old now," Tanya scoffs, but then she looks thoughtful. "He might have aged gracefully, though, he'd look distinguished with a little silver in his hair..."

"Ooh," says Kate, "and if he lived, it wouldn't matter who saw you go into his room... well, except his wife, I guess she could be annoying... because there wouldn't be any body that people would be looking to explain!"

"There would be a body, just a live one," Tanya purrs, "and such a fine -"

"Your interest in Russian royalty aside," I say, "this is kind of interesting. All kinds of novelty would open up."

"Novelty and repetition at the same time," says Kate. "Neat." -

- "Okay, look," Kate says, "I went along with it when you said that maybe we shouldn't kill all the men we go home with, and sure, that's worked out or I think one of us would have given up on it in the last forty years, but this? You've gone around the bend, sister. And I can't get used to your eyes like that."

"No, listen," Tanya says. "Please take me seriously, you owe me that, don't you? Katie -"

"Don't "Katie" me," Kate says. "You had lots of good practical reasons indicating that we shouldn't necessarily eat in bed, and I went along, didn't I? This isn't practical at all. This is... I don't know what this is."

"We were human once too," Tanya says. "Katie."

"Irina, back me up," Kate insists. "Have you ever gotten near enough an animal to smell it? That's not food, that's poison -"

I don't have time to speak. "It's not poison!" says Tanya. "I waited until I was sure before I told you, I've been drinking it for weeks, did you really think I wanted to go to Uzbekistan for two months on my own just to see if I could convince anyone there to marry me? And I'm fine."

"You're weak as a kitten," says Kate. "I was watching when you sparred with Irina, you're usually matched up evenly, but today she pins you like you're some two-year-old with no training? The animal blood's not good for you. Maybe it didn't kill you in small quantities, but what if you waste away? Irina, back me -"

"I would have noticed if I were wasting away!" Tanya shouts. "Okay. I'm not as strong. That's true. But I'm just as fast - and I think my head is clearer, I think I'm thinking better -"

"Right, this is a sign of clear thinking," scoffs Kate. "Spontaneously deciding to experiment on yourself so you don't 'have to' drink human blood, like it's some awful burden, that's high-quality, clear thinking there. I should knock you over and have Irina bring me a human and see if some decent food clears your head..."

Tanya doesn't respond normally to the threat. She'd usually crouch, or at least hiss. I know her, I know Kate, this is their thing - Kate takes offense at something Tanya says, suggests using her witchcraft, Tanya pretends to be up for a fight, then they laugh...

No crouch, no hiss. Tanya just looks sadly at our sister. "Think about it," she pleads. "I'm... I'm going to go not kill a guy." And she runs off. Just as fast as normal, like she said.

"Irina," says Kate, "you didn't say anything."

"I couldn't get a word in edgewise," I say. "You kept interrupting each other."

Kate shrugs. "True. Do you think she'll be okay?"

"I... I think she might be okay," I say. "Already. Did you notice she didn't hiss at -"

"Of course I noticed," Kate says. "Weird. This not-eating-people thing has really changed her. Definitely not safe. I just hope she comes back to her senses soon. I like both my sisters the way we've always been," she says, grinning at me.

I don't say anything.

"You're not taking her seriously, are you?" Kate asks me. "I mean... animals? Really? When we can go on eating all the yummy, nutritious human blood we -"

"You remember the man in Sarkand that I -" I interrupted.

"Yeah," Kate interrupted back. "You were seeing him for almost a month, he would have been hard to miss."

"He had a very close family," I murmured. "He would have been sad if they died."

Kate looked at me quizzically. "You didn't eat any of them, did you? I don't think I did. Did Tanya -"

I shook my head. "I don't think anybody ate any of his relatives. But I wouldn't have wanted him to be sad. I liked him."

"...Well, then, I don't understand your point. Isn't it good that no one ate his family?"

Kate said.

"Yes," I said. "My point is that I cared if he was sad, and he cared if things happened to them, and... it's not crazy to care about humans. Tanya's not crazy, Kate, she's just extending it a little farth-"

"Shut up," said Kate.

"Katie -"

"Don't 'Katie' me," she hissed.

"But -"

"No, not 'but'! Irina, listen to yourself! While you were seeing the fellow in Sarkand I know for a fact that you ate three people that month. And that's just that month. If you agree with Tanya, that's like saying that was wrong, like you did something bad. It wasn't wrong. We haven't done anything wrong. We're all nice people. Our mother didn't raise bad people. It's okay. We're all okay. You didn't do anything wrong, Irina, Tanya's just being silly."

"Ka-"

"Shut up." I open my mouth one more time, and she smacks me hard across the cheek, and the lightning arcs through me and I'm on the ground with a gasp. Kate's already gone. I don't know where to. I don't try to follow her.

I ate two people that month. Kate ate three -

- "Dear God," says Kate.

"I don't think he's listening, Katie," I say. "Evil soulless damned creatures and all -"

"Ugh, don't say it, I can't bear it," she says. "Don't say 'evil'. We weren't, were we? Really, were we? I mean, yes, p-people died, but..."

"We didn't understand," I say, trying to be soothing. I don't know what made it hit her, I don't know why it happened today instead of yesterday or a year ago when Tanya first rejoined us after Uzbekistan... but it's today. I haven't seen Kate since last week. Tanya's been on iffy terms with her. I've had to be the mediator - I'm sort of wending towards Tanya's diet, but sometimes I treat myself, sometimes I slip up, I don't have her willpower, or not yet. They'll both talk to me. "It's still hard, for me, you know -"

"I can't bear it," says Kate again. "How do you? How do you say 'yes, Tanya is right, we must not kill humans, they are nearly as valuable as us, if we kill someone's sister it is almost like if someone killed one of us, if we kill someone's mother it is almost

like - like - "How do you stand it?"

"...I'm not sure what you're having trouble with here," I admit. "If you're asking how I resist the blood you should talk to Tanya, I'm still not very -"

"I'm asking about the guilt, how do you live with the guilt? How do you walk around believing that you've killed people and that was wrong, that you probably won't be able to stop yourself from doing it again and that will be wrong?"

I shrug. "I don't worry about it that much. I think you might be overthinking things. I'm still doing better than most vampires, right? Even if I mess up a little? It's, you know, a lifestyle choice. We did the one thing, we're doing this other thing now, Tanya's good at it, I'm okay at it, you can see how you are at it or not. I still love you either way. I think Tanya does, too. I think she'll eventually talk to you again even if you decide to go on eating people. I mean, it's hard to see how she could blame you all that much... humans are really tasty, animals are really not. She's being petulant but it's obvious she misses you; she'd talk to you again eventually no matter what."

Kate shakes her head slowly. "You think she'd get over it?"

"Yeah," I say.

She stares into space. Then she shakes her head again and adjusts her hair. "I want to move," she says abruptly.

"Like where? Ooh, we could go to Greece -" I begin. We've been doing this awkward dance where Kate or Tanya says they want to go somewhere, and I propose it like it was my own idea to the other, so we can still stick together like Mother wanted.

"Nowhere we've been before. I want to get out of Europe and Asia entirely. I want to go to... Let's swim to the New World," she says. "Let's start over, there."

"By start over, you mean..."

"I'll eat the damn animals, Irina," says Kate, and then her face scrunches up as though she would cry, and she flings her arms out and hugs me. No electric charge. I hug my sister back -

"I think," I said, "I have an idea, but I don't know if we can pull it off."

"Do tell," said Siobhan.

"Kate was the last of the sisters to become a vegetarian," I said slowly, keeping my eyes closed, waiting for Memory to push something at me that invalidated my idea. "She couldn't handle the guilt that would come with admitting to herself that she'd, well,

murdered a lot of people -"

"Wimp," said Maggie smugly.

"- and so she ignored it," I said, ignoring Maggie. "And went on eating people for a year. But when she finally changed her mind, it was when Irina assured her that she still loved her, and thought Tanya would eventually talk to her again even if Kate didn't change her diet. So I *think* that maybe, if we had some way to be sure that everyone would promise to forgive Kate for working with the Volturi, she'd follow Tanya and confess to Carlisle."

"Well, Carlisle's a convenient person to have in charge of the matter, then," said Siobhan. "He'd forgive her for anything. I would only be *somewhat* flabbergasted if he'd forgive her for killing Esme. The man is some kind of alien. And Esme will follow him, and the two of their children who are in Denali have the depth of a petri dish apiece and can't hold grudges with any substance, and the others there aren't her *personal* friends, they aren't *family*... That leaves you, Elspeth. I imagine you still count in her mind, wouldn't you?"

"Probably. My parents might, too, and Alice and Jasper..."

"Alice and Jasper aren't likely to throw off something like this. They're working for the Volturi far too explicitly to have a leg to stand on if they complain about Kate, Chelsea or no Chelsea. What about your parents, Elspeth?"

"My father... is a little like Carlisle. Well, not in how he *thinks* about forgiveness. Carlisle is more about always hoping that people will grow and improve and stuff, and my father is... actually kind of depressed, in nearly every memory I have of him where he wasn't with my mom, and some where he was. He doesn't like himself very much. He doesn't think he's in a position to judge anybody for a moral failing and forgives by default so he can be more like Carlisle. I don't know if my mother would *actually* forgive Kate, but she'd probably be willing to pretend to, or would consider it completely irrelevant. Technically Gianna used to work for the Volturi, too, and so did I, for that matter. I don't think she'd give Kate that hard a time about it."

"Excellent," said Siobhan. "And you really believe all that? I can't tell when you decorate your sentences with all those hedges."

I blinked. "Yeah."

"Excellent," Siobhan said. "Now, if you were dropped in Denali right now and you managed to get out the words "Aro framed Sasha, but we'll all forgive you if you stop working for the Volturi right now, guys," what would be the most likely way for this to fail...?"

I groaned.

Lover

Siobhan didn't let up for the entire ride up to Belfast. During the two hours in the car, we established the following:

According to Addy's best and most recent information, the Denalis were communicating with the Volturi by text and e-mail, easier to keep unobtrusive in a group of vampires than voice calls. This meant that if I managed to make an entrance when Kate, Tanya, Eleazar, and Carmen were all in the same room with me, they wouldn't have a chance to contact the Volturi without being spotted trying to do so.

David was being kept in much the same way as my father: in bits most of the time, fed occasionally under Alec's supervision. (It occurred to me to wonder if David would find his susceptibility to human blood affected by what they were feeding him, since he'd never eaten it before, but wouldn't be able to taste it while Alec was keeping him senseless.) Chelsea hadn't bothered to cut his ties to his family, mostly since the promise of his safe and relatively unharmed return was helping to keep them in line, but she'd been doing some minor work to "improve his attitude" about the Volturi themselves so he wouldn't be a likely liability in the future.

The Denalis had originally agreed to help the Volturi when David was home, safe, and intact, so his return wouldn't *necessarily* change their minds, although it would help if we found a way to pull it off. The fact that we were more kindly disposed towards him than the Volturi was also a point in our favor... but the fact that the Volturi had proven willing to release non-threats like Peter and Charlotte was a point against.

Siobhan thought to ask if I thought David would forgive Kate; I had almost no way to figure that out, since Irina had known him only briefly before her death and all my other reads were from before he'd even turned, but based on my own childhood I hazarded the guess that he probably would.

At any rate, David was always under some guard; even if we could get into the compound undetected, we currently didn't have a way to prevent the guard from shouting to alert everyone, and then we'd be toast. It would probably have been possible to extract him, and my father, immediately after the memory blast permeated the compound, but I'd been semi-conscious, Jake hadn't thought of it, and Addy hadn't had any reason to bother.

Even if it turned out that I couldn't un-Chelsea people other than Jake - which Siobhan labeled "unlikely, but worth coming up with contingencies for" - I thought Alice would be a possible weakness in the Volturi's group cohesion. In the past she'd identified people as friends based on how she foresaw herself interacting with them - she'd turned up with Jasper at the Cullens' house in 1950 and had acted very familiar with everyone immediately.

This didn't quite match how she'd acted on the way to Denali, but I thought I had it

figured out when I looked at the playful nature of her memories from sixty years ago: she'd found it fun to waltz in and toy with her future family when they didn't know who she was or what she could do. When they expected her, and there was a mismatch in their feelings about the upcoming meeting, that had just unnerved her (I guessed, anyway, since I didn't have her memories from that recently). Still, Alice's historically demonstrated ability to act like friendships that didn't exist yet were real was a potential resource, if we could make any such friendships certain enough that they'd pop up on her radar.

Even with Memory filtering through what I'd been blasted with to push forward relevant stuff and help me skim over repetitive parts, it was time-consuming to assemble all this information. By the time Maggie announced "Welcome to the site of the Meeting of the Vampires of These Isles!", that was all I'd come up with. Jake woke up with a start at her announcement.

"These isles?" he said. "Vague much?"

"Atlantic archipelago," said Liam, "UK and ROI, Anglo-Celtic Isles, Pretanic Isles -"

"Aren't they called the Bri-" Jake began.

"Ah-ah-ah," said Maggie, "it would be an inauspicious way to start your day if you provoked Siobhan into perforating your face. Trust me, I had that argument with her in 1993, and do not recommend that you repeat it."

Jake blinked, but fell silent. I said, "How many people are we expecting?"

"Cath said she'd invite the Isle of Wight coven - that's a mated pair and their creator - and also the Cardiff bint, and the London coven - one pair, two singles - and the two in Bristol, and the fellow from Oxford, and I don't think the Leeds pair will *come* but she said she'd ask, and she also said she thinks that the Cardiff bint will want to bring a friend from Liverpool and for some reason Cath *trusts* Cardiff Bint enough to let her bring a friend. Cath also said something about asking the covens from Glasgow and Edinburgh - that's four groups technically, ten vampires total, but they're all right friendly with each other and share the space - but I don't know if we expect them or not exactly. She'll ask but doesn't think she can bring the Newcastle bloke. And if she can manage all this without the Manchester brothers hearing and insisting on tagging along I'll eat a *sandwich*."

"So..." I said.

"So it *could* just be Cath, but assuming the likeliest folks show, probably at least ten, maybe as many as thirty apart from her. There's a bunch of vampires around over there, it's a bit close-knit, word will get 'round. Oh, especially if our dear Newcastle thinks it's

news. Can't stand to share his space with a *coven*, but he gets lonely, he's the gossip."

"There are only fourteen in Denali," I whistled. "Total. Counting the... you know... spies. What's Carlisle doing wrong?"

"Well, for one thing, Carlisle's made everybody travel a lot farther," Maggie said. "For another, he told them what his meeting was *about* first. I just asked Cath to call a meeting, I didn't mention the mutiny thing. Guarantee you at least half of them will hie home when that bomb gets dropped. Maybe we can get rid of Cardiff Bint that way."

"What," I asked, "did the vampire from Cardiff ever *do* to you?"

"She's a pathological liar. I can't stand to listen to her talk, and it's not just the accent which I know for a *fact* she plays up on purpose, it's the little alarm bell in my head ringing and ringing and ringing and *ringing*," said Maggie, shuddering. "Every time she says anything! Don't believe a word out of the Cardiff Bint."

"Okay," I said. Maggie found a good place for us to park and stopped the car.

"All," said Maggie, addressing the car, "this goes against some of my principles, but... *don't* tell any of our visitors about Molly. Not even Cath. Cath knows I'm a vegetarian living with my mate and brother-in-law in a permanent residence. She doesn't know about my daughter. And I love Cath and she's my friend and I wouldn't trust her anywhere near Molly and that goes double for everyone she brings with her today... so don't go advertising it, right?"

"Uh," I said.

"They're getting here at night, Elspeth. If you're still awake for *any* of it, and if your wolf lets you talk to any of them, I think you can manage to keep the topic away from my child for half an hour or so, can't you?" She was trying to sound withering, it sounded like, but she mostly succeeded at seeming insecure.

"It'll itch," I said.

"They don't know you, they won't think you're acting unusual," Maggie said. "Just avoid them if you can't deal with it. Also, us sparkly people oughtn't risk getting out of the car this close to humans while it's sunny, but I don't really want to smell wolf all day long in an enclosed space. Maybe he could go... do... something. Elsewhere. And come back later."

"I'm not going to leave Elspeth here," said Jake.

"Take her," said Maggie.

"Just a minute, I'm not done -" Siobhan began.

"Give the girl a break!" said Maggie. "Honestly, I've *met* you, Siobhan, it's not like

without Elspeth you are going to have an empty brain for the next eight hours. You're going to be thinking and strategizing and concocting and all that whether she's here or not, and then later as soon as you say the word, just to top it all off, she's going to share with you *literally* everything she knows. Do *you* want to inhale this smell until dark? Wolf, take Elspeth, go wander around sunny Belfast, I'll loan you another hundred euros if you want."

"I have some left from yesterday, thanks," Jake said, opening the door and scooping me up from off his lap. "Back around sunset."

"Later," said Maggie.

"No," said Siobhan, "*wait*. Take somebody with you, at least - Ilario, you go with them, just cover up. Some of the other vampires might come in early, dressed to daywalk, and I'd rather you not risk trouble with them just on account of being unfamiliar species. They might not stop long enough to let Elspeth explain."

Ilario reached into the glove compartment, obtained and put on a pair of gloves and a sun-shielding hat to prevent him from giving himself away outside, and slid out of the car, shrugging. "Bye," Jake said, and slammed the door after Ilario had emerged.

"Do you know your way around here?" Jake asked Ilario, setting me down on the ground. We started walking away from the park, towards the nearest buildings.

"Not really," Ilario said. "I spent a grand total of thirty-eight days wandering around Ireland as a nomad before Carlisle gave us the money to buy fake documents and a house. Didn't get to Belfast in that time. I've looked at a *map* before, but that will only tell me what streets we can expect to find, not what's on them."

"Did you ask him for the money?" I asked Ilario.

"No, actually," Ilario said. "He offered. And a good thing, too. It didn't seem to work very well having all five of us in a coven. Probably something to do with Carlisle's theory that vegetarians form large groups more easily."

"Irina thought that was why Laurent wanted to spend so much time away from Denali," I murmured. "Because it was already a five-person coven without him."

"Could be," Ilario said. "Anyway, Carlisle offered us the money, and we said sure, and we bought a place. The Wexford house you saw is our second, actually; we moved right after Molly was born."

"Why'd he give you money?" Jake asked, peering into the pocket of his jeans where the leftover cash from Maggie rustled.

"I'm not sure," Ilario said. "It seems like odd timing. Alice was their primary generator of income and she'd left them quite recently - in fact, we all thought she was

dead by that point. But they had a lot left, I suppose, and they're generous people."

"And they thought my parents were dead," I said.

"Yes, they did," Ilario said. "You think that had something to do with it?"

"Well, maybe," I said, shuffling through Carlisle's memories about Esme happily restoring an old manor house and intending to give it to Rosalie and Emmett after their wedding, and a few more recent examples of my grandparents talking about how they'd set up my parents in the event that they wanted to live on their own for a while. "You and Gianna and Maggie were almost their family for a while... and they were expecting to buy my parents a house at some point, so they could have a place of their own. That didn't wind up happening. I mean, there was the cottage near the Norway house but that wasn't as private as they had in mind for the long term, and then I came along, and then... Well, I think maybe they gave you money to buy a house with because of that. But I'm not sure."

"It's plausible," said Ilario. "I didn't ask. Gift horses and all that."

"Hey, Elspeth," Jacob said, "does that look like lunch to you?" He pointed at a restaurant.

"That looks like a building to me," I replied, "but it probably contains something that looks like lunch."

"I'll wait for you out here," Ilario said, parking himself on a bench. "I don't think any of our visitors are going to find you inside a restaurant."

"See you," said Jake, leading me by the hand into what turned out to be a buffet. He portioned out some of the money from his pocket to pay our way, and we filled up plates and bowls.

"Jake," I said, "does it bother you that people keep calling you..." I glanced around, and judged that I wasn't going to be inaudible to the nearest humans if I made sure Jake would be able to hear me. *My wolf?* I finished, expecting to sound like I'd trailed off.

"Not really," he replied. "I mean, I guess they could use my name, but failing that it makes sense. There's worse things they could call me. There's no word for the opposite of "imprint", right?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. I guess "imprinter" or something like that..."

He shrugged. "Not a very good word."

There was a silence. I nibbled on my salad. Then I said, "Can I show you something?"

"Always," he said, setting his fork down.

- *"I've grown up around imprinted wolves, I know pretty well how they tick. You don't need to be scared of him, Elspeth. He'll look out for you, first of everything. He can't not."*

"That's what my mama does, is look out for me first of everything," I say. "I don't think Jacob wants to be my parent."

"Well... no," says Cody. "That would... not be likely."

"I'm five," I say again.

"You kissed me, too," Cody points out. "Do you want to be five or do you want to be sixteen?"

"Even normal sixteen-year-olds aren't deciding things for all eternity," I say. "I'm not my mama. I don't think I want to let an older man sweep me off my feet and then never look twice at anybody else until the stars burn out. Just the other day I was asking Mama for permission to let a boy take me out for ice cream when I expected to leave town in less than a month and never think about him again. I don't want to be done yet."

"Oh," says Cody softly. "And now, whatever you do, even if you go out for ice cream five thousand times with five thousand people... it'll all constitute "keeping Jacob waiting". Because he'll wait, forever..." -

Jacob looked nonplussed; after a moment his eyes focused again. "Did I do something that made you feel -"

"No," I said at once, and he relaxed. "Nothing at all. But I'm sort of confused about what you *are* doing, and thinking, so I thought I'd ask." *I'm chronologically younger than Claire, but I look sixteen. Does the imprint magic know that I'm five? Does it care? We both know it's magic, why would magic care how old I am?*

"Also," he said, "Cody kissed you? Were you okay with that?"

I blinked. "I had mixed feelings about it at the time but eventually decided it was okay. About how old I am and..."

"Well... believe it or not," said Jacob, keeping his voice down so the people at the next table wouldn't hear, "I never even thought about it being romantic at all, even though all the others except Quil do. It's weird... it's *hard to think about*, my brain keeps wanting to do something else. So I don't know if that's like the imprint "caring" about how old you are, or something else."

"You never thought about it at all?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "Quil's kind of the same, come to think of it. Claire got the idea pretty early that she was going to grow up and marry him, and she'd say stuff like "when I grow up and marry Quil" and he'd look at her like she said "when I grow up and move to

Mars", like, it's not an actual physical impossibility, but he wasn't going to start packing for Martian weather anytime soon. That's about what his thoughts sounded like, when she'd say things like that while he was a wolf, too."

"That's weird," I said.

"I guess. Did you get any of this pasta thing? It's really good," he said, picking up his fork again and indicating a dollop on his plate.

I stared at him.

"What?" he said.

Why would that happen with me? I asked. *It's not about whether the imprint wants to be the wolf's girlfriend beforehand, or Sam couldn't have fallen in love with his fiancée's cousin when she wasn't in favor of that. Actually, I think that would have ruled out all the imprints except Jared and Kim. And it's not about physical age, because Thea was fifteen when Darren imprinted on her, right? Younger-looking than I am now. And -*

"This is really, really hard to think about," said Jake, scrunching his eyebrows together. "I'm sorry, but can we have the conversation in smaller chunks or something? Is it urgent? I thought we were comfortable."

"We are," I said, and that was true. "I'm just trying to figure out *what* we are."

"You're my imprint," he said, "and I'm your wolf. It doesn't *have* to be patterned after anything else, does it?"

I decided that made sense, and stole some of his pasta. Jake laughed and took my fruit salad.

After we were done abusing the buffet, we went and rejoined Ilario, who had waited quite patiently. He conducted us on an impromptu tour of the city according to his map-derived knowledge of the layout, which included most of the major landmarks. When it was close to evening, we started heading back towards the park.

I rode on Jake's shoulders for the last few blocks. Only one new vampire had arrived by the time we got there, equipped with a parasol and a sweater with extra-long sleeves which would have let her get to the park unidentified as a vampire. "This is Cath," Maggie announced brightly, gesturing. I'd never heard Maggie refer to Cath as her mother, just her creator, but actual family relation would be visually plausible. Cath was a few inches taller, a little willowier, and her ponytail of auburn ringlets a few shades darker than Maggie's bright orange, but they were somewhat similar in their faces - smiling, at least, they had the same round cheeks and happy eyes. Same eyes apart from the color, anyway.

Cath waved politely, wrinkling her nose only the slightest bit when a breeze carried Jake's scent in her direction. She seemed curious about me, but didn't try to engage me in conversation, and then she looked at Ilario.

"Hello," she said, sounding surprised by him for some reason. Maggie blinked, and glanced over at Ilario; I did too.

Ilario appeared quite transfixed. "Hello," he replied, shifting his weight and taking a step forward.

"*Fuck*," said Maggie loudly.

Cath looked at her, perplexed. "What're you on about?"

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

"Gotten what out of the way?" asked Ilario, still looking at Cath like he was hypnotized.

"Aah, was I this bad?" Maggie asked rhetorically.

"Yes," I remembered aloud.

"*What?*" demanded Cath.

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

"Do you know," Cath asked Ilario, "what she's on about?"

"No," Ilario said.

There was a pause, and then Cath said, "Do you *want* to go -"

"*Yes*," blurted Ilario, and a couple of seconds later they were not within visual range anymore.

Jake blinked. "That was weird," he said. "Is it customary for vampires to be caught so off guard? I knew what had happened when I imprinted. And it was obvious about them just by looking; can't they *tell*?"

"I knew what was going on when I met Liam," said Siobhan, ambling up to our cluster from the car. "Well, I say 'met'. It was more like 'noticed in the middle of setting his covenmate on fire'. But in any event I recognized the phenomenon."

"I was roughly that confused," Liam said. "But *Siobhan* had *planned* for it, you

see..." He nudged her affectionately with his elbow.

Siobhan laughed. "Maybe that was it. Anyway, Maggie, you have no basis to complain about the timing. You could have introduced Cath to your new family any time."

"I did bring Gianna over to meet her!" Maggie whined. "But Ilario took work shifts that weekend so he didn't come along! That's his own fault he didn't meet her then."

"Is it likely there'll be other pairs today?" I asked, folding my arms on top of Jake's head. "Or have the others who are visiting all met each other already?"

"Second thing," said Maggie. "Everybody there has run into everybody else at least once. Specifically to check for mating, actually - whenever somebody turns a newborn on the island who's not their *own* mate, it's the unofficial custom to introduce them to everyone within the next decade or so, to avoid *badly timed mishaps* - like, no offense Siobhan, what happened with Liam."

"No offense taken," said Siobhan. "Ah, look, there are the three from the Isle of Wight..."

"*Ilario Trafeli*," Maggie hollered, "*get your pants on and be hospitable on behalf of Ireland* -"

"Shush!" called Cath from far away, but in a few seconds she and Ilario were presentable and back in the main part of the park to welcome the three newcomers.

I was just barely awake through the entire trickle of British vampires into the park. After Cath and the three-person Isle of Wight coven, we received a single representative from the four allied Glasgow/Edinburgh covens; the "brothers" Maggie had mentioned from Manchester; the "Cardiff Bint" and her Liverpudlian friend; a pair and two singles from London; sisters from Bristol; a lone vampire from Oxford; and a fellow from the Isle of Man who had not been invited, only heard about the proceedings from the Newcastle gossip (who declined to attend). It was when consensus was reached that this would be the sum total of attendees that I slumped over Jake's head in an undignified flop and slept.

When I woke up (curled up on the backseat of the car, with my head in a sleeping Jake's lap), most of the same British vampires were still hanging around in the park, but there were two other vampire visitors who had not been expected at all.

Traveler

I'd never *met* them, but I recognized them from the Volturi's memories - and their own, though they were thousands of years distant: Stefan and Vladimir, the previous rulers of the vampire world, deposed by the Volturi. They were a pair of small men, no taller than me, Vladimir with ashy pale hair and Stefan with dark brown. Other than that they were very much alike, looking out on the world through narrow burgundy eyes, and each with a less pronounced version of the powdery complexions shared by Aro, Caius, Marcus, Athenodora, and Sulpicia. Since the most recent recollection I had of them, though, they'd shed the flimy cataracts over their eyes.

I had no idea what they were doing in Belfast, but they were standing around with the British and Irish vampires peaceably enough, so I opened the car door, closed it gently to let Jake sleep, and gingerly approached. They were both wearing black, conservative clothing that wouldn't look too out of place in the modern day, but resembled more ancient styling. "Good morning," I said.

"Ah," said Stefan. "She wakes." His voice sounded dusty and light.

"Every morning," I replied. "Why are you here? How did you know about the meeting?" I glanced around at the other vampires who were still in attendance; it seemed that overnight, our visitors from Cardiff, Oxford, Liverpool, and Manchester had all gone home. We still had the covens from the Isle of Wight, London, Bristol, and Manchester, the Scottish representative, and the Manx vampire, plus the Romanian newcomers. And Cath, who was hanging on Ilario with her arms looped over his shoulders and looking at him in a way I could only describe as *gooey*.

"One hears whispers," said Vladimir, negligently waving a hand. He spoke as lightly as his covenmate.

"We are here to witness the downfall of the Volturi," Stefan put in.

"And help, if we can," Vladimir said.

"Oh, how nice," I said. "But who told you where to find us?"

"Give up, Elspeth," said Maggie, sounding implausibly tired. "They're not telling. I did confirm that they're only here because they loathe the Volturi and want to assist or at least watch the proceedings, and that they don't particularly want to hurt any of us, and that they're not interested in ruling the world again with the state it's gotten into. It was probably only the gossip from -"

"Newcastle," I finished, nodding. "Did you not hear about the gathering in Denali?" I asked the Romanians.

"We heard," said Stefan. "We were not interested."

"Carlisle - do you refer to him as your grandfather?" Vladimir said, and I nodded and he went on. "Your grandfather cannot have any honest hope of winning in a direct confrontation against the Volturi, operating as he is."

"It would not be likely to go well with him even if his coven had not taken so many losses to the Italians' corresponding gains, although then we might have attended in case we were mistaken..." Stefan continued languidly, pursing his lips.

"But as it is, he can only be hoping to die publicly and tragically and arouse sympathy or paranoia in those who did not stand with him," said Vladimir.

"If he managed that," Stefan said, "we would help whoever massed a more plausible effort... but it seems we do not need to wait for the Volturi to get around to crushing him."

"It was particularly vindicating to learn of his cousins' betrayal," remarked Vladimir. "I do not know how often the Volturi remember us..."

"Caius usually remembers you exist once a year on the anniversary of the day you were defeated," I said helpfully.

Vladimir blinked at me, unimpressed. "Fascinating."

Stefan cut in. "At any rate, we have no desire to remind them without a significant chance that they will be defeated. We think this gathering, or what it leads to, might provide that."

"Most particularly due to the involvement of Siobhan, whose possession of a gift we are told has been confirmed recently," Vladimir said. "It was mere speculation before."

"Well, that's smart," I said. "Not getting attention, I mean, since Aro only left you alive because he thought it would be harmless and funny -"

Stefan growled softly, and Maggie said, "Elsbeth, maybe quit with the color commentary."

Vladimir nodded graciously once in Maggie's direction, then looked back at me. "We've heard something of your exploits," he said, "Elsbeth. You've broken out of the Volturi compound *twice* now, haven't you?"

"I had help both times - the second time I wasn't even lucid -" I demurred.

"Still," said Stefan loftily, "an impressive achievement. And you can reverse some of the web-witch's damage..."

"Chelsea? Only in myself and my - my wolf - so far," I said.

"Nevertheless, a tool," murmured Vladimir. "We did not have a resource like

Chelsea in our day... we were obliged to manage things... differently."

"I know," I said. The Romanians had ruled by elaborate political finesse and intimidation, mostly. They'd controlled several manageably-sized, geographically far-flung covens of soldiers, who got along well enough to work together temporarily in a crisis but otherwise had little to do with each other. These covens weren't all satisfied with the situation, but they had a coordination problem on their hands if they ever wanted to overthrow the kings, and never managed it. That had taken the Volturi - armed with Alec and Jane.

Stefan and Vladimir themselves had migrated around a network of castles. It was actually something of an exaggeration to claim that they ruled the entire vampire world; they rarely went as far as the Americas, and only occasionally checked on Africa. (Australia was known to vampires then, who undertook nothing particularly hazardous in attempting to swim wherever they wished and visited a lot of islands before industrialized human civilization did; however, no vampires had settled on the island that early on. In fact, from what Memory pieced together for me, Joham would probably have been among the first vampires to spend any appreciable time down under. It was where he first started trying to father half-vampire children, although he moved on later.)

However, the Romanians never bothered with enforcing most of the rules the Volturi had invented - in fact, they publicized their natures to the local humans instead of relying on secrecy - and so they rarely had much ruling to do, apart from quelling territory wars that got out of hand and threatened to destroy the surrounding human infrastructure. (Said infrastructure being necessary to keep the food supply relatively stable, of course.)

When it was called for, though, they were also formidable combatants. Witches had been harder to come by back then. Addy had noticed an uptick in the witch population over her own lifetime; she attributed it entirely to population growth and extended lifespans giving witches more chance to crop up and more chance to live to discover their gifts. But during the Romanians' reign, they'd been almost unheard of and were rarely worth tactical consideration. Brute force and the vampire equivalents of martial arts were the typical tools.

At a guess, unless they'd deteriorated somehow since their defeat, either of the two could beat Siobhan in a fair fight - despite neither having witchcraft, neither being more than half her size, *and* the disadvantage their brittle skin conferred.

The skin condition was... strange. The top layer of skin had "died", I remembered from their memories and the Volturi's when they'd investigated the phenomenon, and while it wasn't any easier to make it come off than it was to remove chips of normal vampire skin, once it *was* broken it wouldn't heal back properly. That also meant that if they lost extremities and reattached them, the outer skin wouldn't knit, leaving a sort of scar and introducing a weakness at the fracture point. Vladimir had discovered this when he'd been temporarily deprived of a toe. They didn't know why it happened, but all my memories showed it only on the Romanians and the Volturi, no one else. The cataracts (cosmetic only, causing no deterioration in vision, but they hadn't attempted to discover if

it made eye healing more difficult) were similar - but to look at Stefan and Vladimir now, apparently reversible.

While Memory sorted out all this background information, the Romanians lost interest in me and stalked off to listen in on a conversation going on between several of the Brits. I turned to Maggie. "Did I miss anything else interesting overnight?"

"I saw you looking about and taking roll, so I won't repeat the list of who's gone and who's stayed," Maggie said. "I made the ones who went away all tell me they weren't going to head for the Volturi about it. They could change their minds but not soon - if they were *that* changeable they couldn't have said it without at least wobbling a bit to my hearing. Actually Cardiff Bint told me she was going to head straight for Italy and she was lying like a rug, but it comes to the same thing, I suppose. Everybody still here is agreed on ousting the Volturi if we can pull it off, and our Scottish friend has called his coven and they're calling the other covens and should be here all nine in less than an hour from now. No e-mail from your mum, at least not yet. Siobhan has decided we can't risk trying to get David or Edward out of Volterra, so the next step'll be to get you safely in touch with the Denalis and seeing if you can bring them around without having David there."

"Okay," I said. "How are we going to do that?"

"Talk to Siobhan about it and we can all find out," Maggie said. "She's waiting for some info from you."

I made a grumbling noise. "When do I get to blast her?"

"She was saying something about how it would be most convenient to do her recovering on the way to Denali, presumably on an airplane since you and your wolf can't swim it and probably neither can a comatose Siobhan," Maggie replied. "We're probably going to all go there rather than hauling the folks there over here, not least because the Denalis will probably be most useful if they keep up appearances with the Volturi for as long as possible and suddenly flying to Ireland would not accomplish that. Plan may or may not involve Ilario calling Carlisle and pretending that he changed his mind and wants to join up. It'd be him over Siobhan and Liam, who we don't want the Volturi considering involved until it can't go any other way, and over me and Gianna who - you know and Carlisle know why we turned him down the first time."

I asked, *Did Ilario tell Cath about Molly?*

"No," Maggie muttered under her breath, "but he's come damn precariously close a couple times. God, I wish I'd rescheduled the last time I'd visited her so he could have come along then. Look at them. Bloody disgusting."

I glanced back over at the happy pair. *I* thought they were sort of cute, albeit maybe to excess - Ilario kept adjusting Cath's hair, which made her giggle every time he did it,

and they didn't seem to be able to go for five consecutive seconds without kissing, which made their attempts at conversation very sporadic. Cath looked up at Ilario like she was vividly contemplating hauling him off somewhere private, again, and the rumpled state of their clothes and the fact that Cath had a couple of twigs in her ponytail made me suspect that she had failed to resist this impulse a few times overnight.

I looked back at Maggie. "You realize that you were pretty far gone when you met Gianna, too."

"Yes, I know, but I didn't *hang* on her like that," grouched Maggie.

I diplomatically refrained from pointing out that she'd suffered from practical limitations due to Gianna's human fragility. "I'm not even sure why you're so annoyed by this," I said. "You like Cath. You like Ilario. Why wouldn't you like them together?"

"I *like* Cath," muttered Maggie, "but."

Is it about Molly? I guessed. *I realize Molly's very vulnerable, but there's not actually a reason for any vampires to hurt her unless it's to get at you or Gianna, or Ilario. Hardly any of them eat children, just for reasons of blood volume.*

"That doesn't stop me from worrying," Maggie answered. "And Gianna... I called last night and she said she was happy for them, and I hauled Ilario away from Cath long enough to make him talk to her too, but for a long time all Gianna had in her life was Ilario. And now she can't remember most of it. She wrote a few things down, but that's just stuff like what year she lived in which apartment, not the little day-to-day stuff that life's mostly made of. I don't want her to lose her brother."

"Did he lose his sister when you came along?" I asked.

"No," Maggie said. "But maybe he did when she turned, after she was mated to me like I was to her and she started forgetting... I'm not sure."

Something occurred to me. "Aro read Gianna, while she worked for the Volturi," I said. "I don't have *everything* from when she was human, since she left, but most of her memories, before it had a chance to get overwritten with vampire ones, he read. And that means I can give them back to her."

Maggie blinked at me. "You're a *genius*," she crowed, lunging forward to hug me. "I don't know if Siobhan would give us the few hours it'd take to haul you to Wexford and back and do that now - but they'll keep, right?" I nodded, and Maggie hugged me tighter and then let me go, a grin on her face.

"What's that like, anyway," I asked Maggie, "barely remembering being human?"

"Bit odd," Maggie conceded. "I know the major things. I know my mum died when she had my little brother, and I assume I was sad but I can't remember what it felt like. Maybe that's because I was four, though. And I know I didn't at all like my brother's wife

when he got married later, but I can't really *remember* what her name was - I learned it like I'd never heard it before, when I found my family in that one book doing my genealogy research. I know I was eldest of three and fought with my sister all the time but I can't remember her face. I know I loved my da until he died, though I can't recall what killed him or what particularly I loved about him. I know I went to England to get away from the famine but not how I felt about that. I think I worked in a laundry or something tiresome like that once I got there. Cath told me about how she found me. Some bloke was chatting me up while I was at market one day, and he told me he wasn't married and that was a foul lie and I called him out on it. Cath was watching the street from up in a flat she kept while she worked on one of her vast overcomplicated embroidery projects. Doesn't like trying to sew homeless; gets her supplies all messy. Anyway, she thought I was maybe a witch, tracked me down later, bit me right on the neck without much ceremony and stuffed my mouth with a skein of yarn while I changed to keep me from bothering her neighbors overmuch. I woke up and she had lunch ready for me. Same bloke who'd been chatting me up, actually, she thought I'd find that charming - but she had to tell me who he was after I ate him; I had no idea."

"But some things stick," I said. "You've got the Irish accent still."

Maggie coughed and said, in flawless Received Pronunciation, "I can put on any accent I like." Then, sounding like she was from the middle of Kansas, she added, "But it's true, I woke up from the turning and talked as I always had. That's how I sound when I'm not paying any attention, and how I usually choose to sound. I didn't unconsciously pick up a Swindon-appropriate accent just because I was "brought up" there."

"Your usual accent suits you," I said, and Maggie smiled merrily at me.

"Elspeth!" Siobhan called from across the clearing in the park. She was standing close to the vampire from the Isle of Man. I trotted over.

"Do you know who Nathan here is?" Siobhan asked, indicating the man with her. He was blonde, and also the only vampire I'd ever (personally) seen maintaining facial hair - he had a tidy little mustache. (Memory was able to inform me of a handful of other vampires with beards or mustaches or both, and one who kept sideburns, but they were surprisingly few - Memory suggested that the pattern was that they did not wish to deal with the inconvenience of getting blood in their whiskers, which were more difficult to clean than a shaved face.) "Via any of your absorptions, I mean, I know you heard the greeting when he showed up here."

I blinked. "No, I don't seem to. I just know from last night that he's the Manx."

"You can tell," Nathan said, "because I have no tail." I giggled and he smiled roguishly.

Siobhan frowned. "Well, nonetheless," she said, "he's just admitted to hunting in

Ireland on occasion, and he isn't taking my threat to kill him very seriously. You're a little hard to dismiss, Elspeth; do me a favor and tell him your honest assessment of how likely I am to be able to do that."

I looked at the smiling mustache-wearing vampire. "Are you any kind of witch?" I asked Nathan.

"Oh, no," he said, "not at all."

"Liar!" yelled Maggie in our direction.

"What kind of witch are you?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Nathan said, grinning. "I'll tell you this - I've been hunting in Ireland at least once a year for the last hundred, and Siobhan's never caught me, and I still dared turn up at her gathering."

"It could be important," I said. "Don't you want to help? Maggie said everyone here agreed to help."

He shrugged. "I want to help, but I don't think telling you this would do that."

"Siobhan makes magic plans," I said. "How can she plan around you being a witch if she doesn't know what you do?"

"I wouldn't like her to plan around it," Nathan chuckled. "It'd interfere." He winked.

I glanced between him and the frowning Siobhan. "Well," I said, "I don't know how you've avoided getting caught this long. But if you're going to help, and Siobhan not killing you relies on her not knowing what your witchcraft is, you're probably in trouble, because Eleazar from Denali can sense witch powers. And we might also run into Addy again, and she can taste them."

"Well, when the time comes, then I guess I'll be in trouble," he said mildly.

Siobhan rolled her eyes and made a shooing gesture at him. "Get gone," she muttered. He ambled away and started whistling, although he didn't go far and she didn't seem to mean for him to. "I *knew* he'd been to Ireland uninvited, I just could never quite manage to be where he hunted when he was... Anyway. My current plan is that Ilario be peeled away from Cath long enough to phone Carlisle and announce a desire to join the Denali resistance. He asks to be met at the airport by the people there we actually trust, namely your grandparents or aunt and uncle. He brings you with him, and me. You'll blast me once we're on the airplane so I spend the downtime usefully coming out of my coma. And possibly others will be on the same flight, probably Cath who won't like to leave Ilario and your wolf who won't like to leave you and Liam who can look after me while I'm living thoroughly in the past. We should go in the cargo hold, since getting ID on short notice would be intractable."

I nodded. "Everybody else swims and runs over?" I guessed.

"Let me finish. Ilario asks to be met at the airport. Carlisle or Esme or Emmett or Rosalie or some combination show up to meet him, and, surprise, you're there too. You tell them the whole story. Spend the flight composing a good summary to throw at them in an instant, maybe. They give us more up-to-date information about what's going on with their cousins, and help think of a way get the four of them all in one place at one time without the opportunity to drop a note about it to the Volturi."

"One problem," I said. "If the Volturi hear from the Denalis that Ilario's joining up..." *That might put Molly in harm's way*, I finished silently, mindful of all the vampires milling about.

"Mm," said Siobhan. "Very well, then, we get Cath to call; she doesn't share that property. She says she heard from Maggie, *she* wants to help, etcetera etcetera, and wants one of your relations to meet her at the airport because Maggie has such nice things to say about them but she has never met the others and would prefer to see as familiar a face as possible. Any problems there?"

I couldn't think of any, and shook my head.

"You work your magic - literally and figuratively - on your cousins," Siobhan continued. "And from there we'll need input from your family to figure out how to proceed, but I'll be there - blasted, moreover, so you won't need to be consulted so often, I'm sure you'll be pleased to know. Meanwhile, all the Brits and the Manx interloper, and our Romanian additions, and Maggie, are waiting here - it wouldn't work so well to have them all in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean when we decide we, say, want to launch a full frontal assault on Volterra, unlikely though that is. They wait here, and can sneak onto airplanes or jump into the sea or whatever else needs doing when the time is right."

"You're going to let them all wait on your island?" I asked.

"By 'here' I mean the *general* vicinity. I think they should probably be located closer to London. It's got more air traffic to hitch rides on, with the added benefit of not being - as you say - on my island," Siobhan said.

I nodded slowly, examining the plan. "I think that works... as far as it goes. It's a big blank spot after we get the Denalis on board, assuming we even succeed there..."

"That's because there are fourteen people in Denali, and some of them you weren't able to tell me much about," said Siobhan. "I'll consult them and figure out how to plan for them once we're there. I'm not likely to suddenly come up empty." I nodded. "One more thing," Siobhan said. "If I'm not out of my coma by the time we land in Alaska, I want you to try to bring me out of it. Transmit some of what you did with your 'subagent' - I realize that's probably at least partly dependent on your magic, but you were able to de-Chelsea your wolf pretty effectively without having tried it before. You can clearly use your power intuitively for novel purposes at least some of the time. It's worth a shot if I'm

taking too long. Understood?"

I nodded.

Over the next half hour, the Scottish representative's coven and their allies arrived; Jake woke up; Siobhan explained the plan to everyone present; Cath was successfully induced to (briefly) disentangle herself from Ilario and make a phone call while everyone was very quiet; the phone call went as smoothly as predicted; everyone except for her and Ilario and me and Jake and Siobhan and Liam made for the water to swim back to Britain and make their way to London; and the six of us got into Maggie's car to go to the airport, Liam in the driver's seat so Siobhan could close her eyes meditatively beside him. (I sat on Jake's lap again, which meant that technically Cath did not *need* to sit on Ilario, but she didn't appear to find the middle of the backseat as appealing.) We stopped for a few minutes to pick up enough food to tide me and Jake over for the day, then wound up parked a couple of blocks away from the airport.

It was cloudy, so the vampires just carried instead of wearing the emergency hoodies and gloves stashed in the car's trunk. We snuck into the belly of an airplane with surprisingly little fanfare and no death at all. Ilario checked which flights were which on his phone so we knew which aircraft to get in, and then we just made a run for it. Without phasing, a surefire attention-getter, Jake was much slower than any of us. Siobhan convinced him to let Liam carry him, citing danger for me if his pace got us noticed.

Once the hatch to the cargo hold was closed, Siobhan looked at me and said, "Go ahead, then."

I scrunched my eyes shut, let everything in my mind blur together into one solid packet to fling all in a single go, and blasted her.

Granddaughter

Siobhan's eyelids fluttered and she toppled off her feet, but Liam caught her and settled her gently on the ground. "It took you a day?" Liam asked me.

"Almost, including a night's sleep," I said, "but I'm not sure if sleeping made it faster or slowed me down. I did come to right after I woke up, though."

Liam frowned and brushed some of Siobhan's hair out of her face. Siobhan started mumbling words in various languages, sometimes imitating their sources closely enough that I could figure out exactly what memories she was thinking of. Jake, whose sleep schedule was more flexible than mine, was able to nap. I spent most of the plane ride listening to Siobhan babble, mostly because it made it easier to ignore Cath and Ilario, who were off behind a stack of suitcases making ill-fated attempts to be discreet.

Ilario had managed to find a plane that would carry on to Alaska after an overnight in Chicago. I was asleep during the plane's downtime, but since some of the luggage was continuing to Fairbanks, there was enough to hide behind; nothing disastrous happened. Partway through the second leg of the trip, Siobhan sat partway up and looked around.

"Still on the plane," she muttered. "What time is it?"

Liam told her, and she nodded slowly. Her eyes rolled around in her head a bit; when I frowned, Liam said, "You did that too, when you didn't close your eyes outright and were looking at a memory."

"Allirea," murmured Siobhan. "Elsbeth, *why* didn't you tell me about... oh. You probably couldn't..."

"Huh?" I said. "I sent you everything. And even before that I told you everything important."

"My point exactly," said Siobhan.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Siobhan pursed her lips and closed her eyes. "Elsbeth, how many children does Joham have?" she asked, slowly and carefully.

"Three," I said.

"And their names are, from oldest to youngest...?"

"Noemi, Nahuel, and Iseul. Don't you already *know* -"

"Is Noemi the eldest child in the family?" Siobhan asked.

This question threw me for a loop. When the answer didn't come to me immediately, I mentally tried out possible responses - "no" and "yes" both felt wrong. "Kind of" felt closer, but still not correct. "I..."

"Don't hurt yourself," Siobhan said mildly. "Is Jacob awake?" I shook my head, since Jacob was sleeping (with unusually few snores) on top of a garment bag in the other end of the hold, and Siobhan said, "Cath, Ilario, your attention please -"

"One sec!" cried Cath shrilly. A couple seconds later they appeared at the edge of their luggage barrier. "What?"

"Elspeth's about to behave very strangely, but ignore her," Siobhan said. "There is a half-vampire called Allirea, who..." I started zoning out, picking at a loose thread in my sleeve, while Siobhan said a lot of things that didn't matter. I worked on my summary composition a bit, although it was mostly done. Ilario kept looking at me strangely.

"Is the wolf affected?" Cath asked when Siobhan seemed to be finished.

"There's no way to tell without asking him, since the memories I have wouldn't necessarily contain the information if she'd been near enough to him before - the only people I have memories for between today and May 26 are Adelaide and Elspeth. But he should be awake soon enough," said Siobhan. "All the Denalis have certainly met her. The Cullens and their other allies may or may not have done so, depending on whether she is still in Denali. What Elspeth saw when Santiago and the wolf pack captured her indicates that Eleazar resists the effect, at least partially, so he should be able to tell us if we ask him directly, but he might not have enough of a resistance to remember her independently if she's left. She has no reason to stay - has reason to go, in fact. Her habit when running away from Demetri is to board airplanes at random. If nothing else, we'll be able to ask the people at Denali if *Demetri* has been by."

"Who?" I asked, bewildered.

"Allirea," said Siobhan, raising an eyebrow.

"Not important," I said, confused. "Don't... don't you know that?" There was so much to do, so much Siobhan should be making magical plans about, and she was wasting time...

"Liam," said Siobhan, turning towards her mate and ignoring my question, "I want paper. See if you can find any to take out of the luggage. Allirea is clearly not on this airplane or I'd either notice her or be unable to have this conversation. However, we *could* encounter her at any time after landing, in which case I'm going to want a written note to make sure I follow through with what I have in mind."

"What's going on? Are you okay, Siobhan?" I asked. "I didn't really stick around to see how the Volturi recovered from Addy's blast, I don't know if vampires react differently or something -"

"She's fine, Elspeth," said Liam dryly, starting to rummage through bags. Cath patted me on the head twice and chuckled, then seized Ilario by the wrist and disappeared with him again. I blinked, but decided whatever was the matter with Siobhan couldn't be that bad if Liam wasn't worried. When his search uncovered a toiletry kit, I borrowed a passenger's hairbrush, putting it back when I was done teasing the tangles out of my hair. I really needed it. Siobhan kept muttering to herself and to Liam, but nothing she said was important.

Cath called Carlisle when we'd landed. He hadn't expected her to buy a ticket - she was between legal identities at the moment, which turned out to be another advantage to having her call instead of Ilario - and told her that she could find him and Esme waiting in the parking lot. It was dark in Fairbanks, and that plus a mad dash had us quite safely away from the airplane and headed for my grandparents. Siobhan talked to Jacob briefly about something that they seemed to think was important, but I was focused on other things.

I was apprehensive about meeting Carlisle and Esme. I figured I could let them hug me if they seemed inclined to, but beyond that I didn't know at all how to behave. Should I call them "Grandma" and "Grandpa" still? Their adopted children usually called them by name. They might not take it badly if I did the same, except that I hadn't before, either when I was little or when I'd been on the phone with Carlisle from Nashville.

I had Carlisle's memories, up to the day he'd gone with Esme and my father to pick up my mother from Volterra. I poked at them, trying to use them to reconstruct what Chelsea had taken, but it didn't help much.

It gave me plenty of material to *admire* and *trust* Carlisle. He was a strong, dedicated person, surpassing anyone else I could so much as remember hearing of in self-abnegation, having not only independently committed without misstep to vegetarianism as a newborn, but also having left his mate while she was human out of the belief that it would be best for her. Carlisle wasn't the only vegetarian in the world, but he *was* the only vampire who'd been able to do the second thing. It hadn't worked out so well in practice... Esme had gone on to marry a man who'd turned out to be abusive. She'd run away from her husband once she discovered she was pregnant, not wanting to raise a child in that household, only for the baby to die of a lung infection soon after he was born, and then in despair she'd jumped off a cliff. I noted with some bemusement that my father had made it sound to my mother like Esme had simply *fallen*, accidentally, without mentioning either the fact that it was a suicide attempt or the reasons behind it. He hadn't wanted to taint my mother's opinion of Esme, and suspected that a nearly-successful suicide attempt would offend the sensibilities of anyone so enthusiastic about eternal life. I wondered what my mother would think of that. But regardless of the fact that Esme would have been better off if Carlisle had swept her away when she was sixteen, his intentions and self-control in refraining were still unparalleled.

And knowing all this wasn't the right *kind* of thing to restore the way I used to feel

about my grandfather. He was supposed to be special to me, his only grandchild, in a way that had nothing to do with his status as an upstanding moral person or anything else the memories I had could tell me. He was supposed to be special to me because he was my father's father, because he'd played a part in bringing me into the world, because he'd helped bring me up when I was little.

Because I'd known all of that when Chelsea had gone *snip, snip*, though, feelings wouldn't *attach* to those facts any more. I didn't know if they ever would, but sifting through Chelsea's memories (and, gingerly, Marcus's) didn't leave me optimistic. Regeneration was possible when she'd snipped something once, twice, half a dozen times... but threads stopped coming back, for the most part, when they'd been destroyed over and over again on a daily basis for as long as I'd been in the village.

Anything new I came to feel about Carlisle would probably be exactly that - new.

The six of us - Cath and Ilario in the lead - approached the parking lot, and I saw my grandparents. They turned to meet us, and I saw their eyes widen. "You... must be Cath..." said Carlisle slowly, "but... Ilario? Siobhan and Liam? And..." He was staring at me in disbelief.

"It's me," I confirmed softly, knowing he'd recognize my voice from the phone call once he heard it.

Carlisle blinked twice. Behind him, Esme made a quiet noise of confusion. I noted that they were both black-eyed, hungry. "I see there is much to discuss," my grandfather finally managed, sparing a silent Jacob one quick glance before looking at me expectantly. Siobhan gave me a nod.

I pushed out the finished summary to bring my grandparents up to speed on why we were there, the reasons behind Cath's subterfuge, the Denalis' betrayal and what I hoped would reverse it, and everything else they were likely to need to know.

"With Elspeth so convenient," Siobhan said, "there is *less* to discuss, but still *some*. Specifically, we need to get your cousins to listen to us without having the chance to contact Volterra. Oh, and I have a question for you Elspeth wouldn't have been able to include in her summary. Are you aware of the existence of a half-vampire named Allirea?"

"I've heard the name mentioned..." Carlisle began.

"Good, then she's not there anymore," said Siobhan. and then I yawned while she prattled about something irrelevant. I was beginning to worry a little about the quality of plans she generated while so weirdly obsessed with trivialities. I started paying attention to her again after a few more sentences: "- could have left the quarter-vampires some failsafe method to contact her for help. Since we need all the help we can get, I'm going to try contacting them once we've spoken to your cousins, especially Eleazar. Based on the timing involved, it's also *possible* we can find Bella that way, but no promises."

"They lied to us," Esme said faintly. "They told us our children and granddaughter never arrived, they told us - they *lied* -"

"Can you," Siobhan asked sharply, "forgive them, assuming they are sincerely sorry? If necessary I can get Maggie on the phone to confirm anything they say, if that will help -"

"Of course we can," said Esme at once. "Of *course*. They're family." Carlisle nodded in agreement, jaw set firmly, though he looked troubled.

"Good," Siobhan said, "because that's probably important, at least for Kate. I know almost nothing about how you've been arranging the guests in Denali. What's the best way to get the sisters and Carmen and Eleazar all in one place without giving away that more people than Cath have arrived ahead of time?"

"We've been hunting together," Carlisle said. "Often not all of us at the same time, but it wouldn't be unheard of. We can bring Cath to Denali, and the rest of you can wait somewhere for us. Oh - Kate has found a mate..." - Siobhan looked slightly smug when he said that, probably about having anticipated the possibility - "and he's been attempting to change his eating habits, so he's liable to join us."

"Who is he?" asked Siobhan."

"Garrett," replied Carlisle. "Do you know who -"

"Yes," Siobhan said; I remembered too, from what Addy had heard about the attendance in Denali. Garrett was one of the American nomads acquainted in some way with the Cullens who'd agreed to come join the enclave when asked. "All right. Cath, you go with Mr. and Mrs. Cullen and act as though you're the only one who showed up -"

"Don't I smell a bit too much like him?" Cath asked, pointing her thumb at Jake. "From being in the same cargo hold for ages?"

Esme sniffed. "We'll stop somewhere where you can take a shower, and get you a new outfit," she said.

Cath looked down at her clothes - heavily embroidered, drapey linen - and sighed. "Oh, all right, but I'm not getting rid of these, I'll stash them somewhere, I spent a long time on the hardanger in this blouse." With a glance at my grandparents' eyes, she said, "This won't take long all told, will it?" Her hand darted out to clutch at Ilario's as she said this. "Getting the whole hunting party put together and on your way, I mean?"

Carlisle glanced at their joined hands, and said, "Tomorrow afternoon, at the latest, we'll hunt. I hope that will be satisfactory."

"I'll live," sighed Cath, looking dreamily into Ilario's eyes. "I guess." He leaned down and kissed her. Siobhan coughed and asked Carlisle for directions to a suitable waiting place, which she received; then, we all stood around awkwardly for half a minute,

waiting for Cath to be ready to leave with Carlisle and Esme. During this time I took a few steps forward and exchanged hugs with each grandparent, mostly because I didn't think I'd enjoy looking at Esme's face if I let them go without. Esme petted my hair. I remembered she used to tie ribbons into it, when I was little.

Cath hauled herself away from Ilario with visible effort, muttering something about not wanting to have taken too long if someone looked up the flight we'd taken and noticed it was on time, and followed Carlisle and Esme to their car. Ilario swayed on the spot, watching them as they drove away.

"Tomorrow afternoon at the latest," repeated Siobhan, looking appraisingly at Ilario. "Come, now, we need to be ready for them when they go hunting, and it could be sooner than that."

We just walked, until we got far enough away from the airport that we could break into a jog (for me and the vampires) and a flat run (for Jake). Speed wasn't so essential that anyone had to carry my wolf. He still didn't dare phase without an emergency calling for it, lest he have a pack remaining that would give away his location, or he could have kept up with the vampires even carrying me. "Next time we go somewhere don't tell me where," he muttered.

"Won't help; you'll still have information we don't want them to have," commented Liam.

Jake frowned. "I... don't actually *know* how long I'd have to go without phasing to quit my wolf."

"It varies," I chirped. "At *least* a few weeks, though. You're okay for now."

Jake nodded, but still looked worried. "How do you know?" he asked after a moment.

"My father and Carlisle and Rosalie - I have memories from all of them that cover the time when they first lived near Quileute land. They met your great-grandfather Ephraim Black, he was the alpha then, and the other wolves who were around at the time, and learned most of how wolves tick," I said. "What they knew at the time, anyway - there was some misinformation. Like, they didn't think girls could be wolves, but that's probably just because girls with wolf genes didn't happen to meet vampires much."

"Huh," said Jake. "It always did seem sort of strange to me that the legends wouldn't mention *any* wolf girls. There are tons now."

I thought. "The ones now were all activated by touch," I said. "It seems a lot faster and more consistent that way. Just being around a vampire doesn't seem to always do the trick... my father always thought it seemed like even in wolf-gene families, it looked like the ones who were more emotionally volatile activated. That might have kept girls from activating too, if they were less likely to get mad enough *and* less likely to be around

vampires?"

"Makes evolutionary sense," Ilario put in, "from what I've heard, if it's harder for women to activate."

"That too," I said. "Since girls can't have kids while they're activated. But it seems like if a vampire actually touches an inactive wolf the activation's pretty automatic, so..."

We ran in silence for a minute, and then Jake said, "Why did the old pack quit their wolves?"

"I don't know about the generation of wolves before yours," I said. "My family left the area first. The ones they heard about from before that would tend to quit so they could age along with their imprints, when they had imprints, or they'd die in fights with vampires, or they'd just mellow with age and not want to be wolves anymore. Why?"

"I'm just thinking about whether I would ever decide to quit," Jake said.

"Would you?" I asked. "If you quit you age and die like a human, you know."

"I know," he said. "I guess I probably won't." He paused. "Unless something happened to you, maybe. But we'll make sure that doesn't happen."

"Unless something..." I didn't like the idea of Jake deciding to slowly kill himself on account of me. I didn't like the idea of anything dreadful happening to me, *either*, but it seemed like him dying too could only make it worse. "You shouldn't even if something *does*."

"I don't know," Jake said. "Do you have any memories about what happens to imprinted wolves without their imprints?"

"No."

"Mm," Jake said.

Siobhan said, "I'll just mention now that it would be the height of foolishness to deliberately involve Elspeth in any physical fighting that includes full vampires and phased wolves, and anyone who finds her to be an actual threat worth lethally addressing outside of that context will be someone she hasn't memory-blasted yet and can therefore incapacitate more than long enough to make a run for it. She may actually be the single person most likely to survive this entire mess."

"Good," said Jake softly.

There was more silence, and then Ilario piped up, "Do you think it will really take them until *tomorrow afternoon* to get to us...?"

My grandparents, aunt and uncle, and four cousins and new cousin-in-law arrived at the mountain peak Carlisle had described at noon. Cath wasn't with them, which visibly deflated Ilario, but I'd told him and Siobhan had told him that he couldn't expect her - it wouldn't make sense for her to join the vegetarian hunting trip, even if she *did* plan on changing her diet for him (which he hadn't *asked* her about in the handful of actual sentences they had exchanged, anyway). She wasn't thirsty, and her eyes proved it; and anyway, years of knowing a vegetarian Maggie hadn't converted her, so a sudden change before she announced to the Denalis that Ilario was her mate would be strange-looking and might have prompted a memo to the Volturi.

They spotted us as soon as we spotted them, of course, and it would be an understatement to say that the Denalis were startled. Emmett and Rosalie were obviously flabbergasted, too, but took in the situation with less alarm and more bemusement. I couldn't hear what was being said from so far away, though I assumed the vampires could - but I saw the effects, namely that the Denalis were coaxed to approach. Carlisle had a comforting hand on Tanya's back, and Carmen and Eleazar were clinging to each other, and Kate was lagging behind skittishly despite encouragement from Esme.

"...okay, it's okay," I finally heard Esme saying as they drew nearer. "We understand, Kate, but it can't continue -"

"Katie," said a man I'd never seen before who I assumed was Garrett, "I *don't* understand." He had sandy hair in a ponytail and his eyes shone dark gold as he looked at his mate with concern. Tanya, near them, seemed to shrink into herself and let the scrutiny fall on Kate rather than attract attention to herself.

"I didn't dare tell you," the witch whispered to Garrett. "I didn't dare. You're always talking about revolution, revolution is in your *bones*, you still have the uniform you wore *during the revolution*, how could I expect you to accept what had happened? I was already in it before you came here, I didn't *dare*, and then... David is a brother to me, Garrett -"

"Can I just state now," said Emmett, "that I have less than zero idea what is going on?"

"Elspeth!" called Carlisle. "If you wouldn't mind -"

I tried, but Emmett and Rosalie didn't react like they'd received my summary. "I don't think I have that much range for summaries yet," I called back.

"Elspeth, is that really you?" exclaimed Rosalie, jogging ahead of her hunting party. "Oh, my word, you've gotten so big -"

Everybody I was standing with had at least a foot on me, so I didn't feel very tall, but I *had* grown significantly since Rosalie had last seen me, so maybe it wasn't silly of her to say it. "It's me," I acknowledged. Rosalie broke into an outright run, threw her arms around me, picked me up, and spun me around before setting me down again, beaming all

the while.

"How -" she began, and I sent her the condensed version of events, including Emmett as a target when he crossed within a plausible distance. Rosalie blinked; Emmett said something that didn't sound like a word.

Emmett reached me, pulled me into a familiar bear hug, and then turned to look back at cringing Tanya, dawdling Kate (trailed by her confused mate), and sheepish Eleazar and Carmen.

The vampires started all talking over each other, too many conversational threads for me to keep track of. From what I did catch, everyone was spending a surprising amount of time talking about topics that didn't matter at all. Rosalie spent most of the conversation with one hand on the back of my head, and Tanya tentatively touched my cheek at one juncture. Occasionally Siobhan asked me to announce something so it would be more compelling, and I obediently recited various facts and opinions. Jacob kept back the entire time, wrinkling his nose and keeping a suspicious eye on Garrett and Kate in particular.

It took about half an hour for everyone to simmer down, for all the explanations and reassurances and incredulity and anger and expressions of forgiveness and hugs and Ilario's repeated interruptions inquiring about Cath's well-being to all be over and done with.

"Well," said Emmett finally, "dunno about the rest of you, but I could use lunch."

"Not thirsty," said Ilario. "We'll go to the houses and -"

"Elspeth," said Siobhan suddenly, "you and Jacob need to stay here."

I was confused for a moment, and then understood. "Alice," I murmured. "She might look; the place can't be blacked out until it's all right for the Volturi to know."

"Right," Siobhan said. "Me and Liam and Ilario and Cath all make sense to have there. And a casual look won't have her reading lips closely, so as long as there's nothing suspicious to see, we can talk freely - but you and Jacob need to camp out."

I looked at Jacob, who seemed mostly relieved about not having to crash in one of three crowded houses full of vampires, and then back to Siobhan. "Okay," I said.

"We can bring you sleeping bags and so on," said Esme, patting my shoulder. "You'll be all right by yourselves, won't you? It's not too cold or -"

"We don't get cold," I reminded her. "We'll be okay. Jake would probably like some food, though I'm happier hunting."

"We'll bring you plenty to eat," Esme promised. She hugged me again, and then so did Carlisle and Rosalie and Emmett and Tanya and Eleazar and Carmen and even (gingerly) Kate, and with that, Jake and I were left by ourselves on the mountain for a

time.

Esme came back just before nightfall, with sleeping bags and food and similar camping amenities. She helped us get set up, thanked Jacob graciously for looking after me, gave me another hug, and then departed reluctantly. I went to sleep soon after, muttering something about how sooner or later all the time zone jumping would probably catch up with me.

Shortly after I woke up, I noticed that we had company.

Mother

I knew the feel of that hand on my hand. It disappeared when I sat up, but when I turned my head, there was the familiar face.

"M..." I stammered, but decided it was ridiculous to choke on calling my own mother what I'd always called her, Chelsea notwithstanding. "Mama."

"Good morning, Elspeth," she said, softly, warmly. She sounded perfectly normal, but there was a strange sparkle in her eyes. Not exactly happy, but like she'd been fumbling around for something for a long time and finally caught an edge of it. She'd apparently been watching me dream, and I couldn't think why I wouldn't have noticed her holding my hand instantly on waking instead of a second later. I decided it was just a familiar sensation, one I'd woken up to daily for five years and wouldn't necessarily react to at once.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me? What's going on?" I asked, rapid-fire.

"Long, long story," she said. "Are *you* all right? What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm fine," I said. Lazily, I summarized at her. I glanced over in Jake's direction. He was sleeping soundly, sprawled half in and half out of his sleeping bag. "Your turn," I prompted, after she'd blinked a couple of times.

"Where do I need to pick up from?" she asked. She was looking me over minutely, as though I could be concealing some terrible wound that she wouldn't have noticed already and that I would have been able to lie about when I told her I was fine.

"I know you were running to Denali as of May 30," I said. "And that you didn't arrive."

She nodded. "Well, I met - you see -" She nodded her head over her left shoulder, like she was pointing out something in that direction.

"Huh?" I said.

She stared at me for a moment, then got to her feet, spun a quarter-turn to her left, and shouted... apparently not at me... "Will you *unfade*? This is ridiculous. I can see you whatever you do, Elspeth is harmless, Jacob is asleep. What earthly reason -"

"It is my state of rest," said Allirea, and I did a double-take as it occurred to me that she'd been standing there from the beginning.

"Well, guess what *my* state of rest is? It's not shielding *you* from your *stalker*. It would be very relaxing to just stop trying to do that. Do you want me to? Don't play

mind-games with my daughter," my mother snapped.

"Are you shielding me now?" Allirea asked, shifting from foot to foot edgily.

"I was until I was so rudely distracted by your concealing your existence from someone I was trying to have a conversation *about you* with," my mother said sharply. "I managed to keep you under shield during the entire plane ride here, though, so you can wait a little while before getting paranoid again. Stay. In. View. Please."

"...So you've met," I said, blinking and looking between my mother and Allirea.

"Yes, we've met," my mother said, sighing tiredly. "I encountered her on my way in towards Denali. Eleazar was taking her out hunting - she couldn't walk yet then, she'd been beaten up pretty badly in the fight where you last saw her, and he was the only one with a prayer of keeping track of her, so he was babysitting. To summarize what was actually a long and awkward encounter during which I learned that Eleazar - along with his mate and sisters - were traitors, it wound up with Allirea inspiring me to try to shield someone else. Specifically, her. My power doesn't work *flawlessly* against Eleazar's, but it's some protection, and combined with hers covering me, we were both sufficiently unobtrusive that I was able to pick her up and carry her away before I lost my hold on the shared shield."

"Yes, and she still cannot maintain it for long," said Allirea snidely.

"And you can't shield *me* when you *sleep*," my mother hissed at her, "*that* was a fun little crisis, wasn't it -"

"That was not my fault!" exclaimed Allirea. "You insisted on choosing the flight, you never specified that we would be flying east, of course I fell asleep early!"

My mother rolled her eyes. "At any rate," she said, "we've been traveling together. Allirea insists on being almost constantly on airplane after airplane in order to throw off Demetri, since I can't maintain my shield around a second person for long. But we've been wandering around for well over a month now, and my ability to cover her seems to have thoroughly plateaued, and it's *still* not reliable enough that we can just walk into Volterra and get your daddy out, so we thought we'd try the family houses, but found nothing. So we came back here. If nothing else, I could probably hold off Eleazar and Kate just barely long enough to let Allirea take out Tanya and Carmen, and then it would be a near-even fight and we could get out if we had to - it wouldn't be a guaranteed death sentence like getting caught half-shielded in Volterra - but we smelled wolf on our way in from the airport."

"Jacob," I surmised.

"Exactly," she replied. "So we followed the trail, and... here you are." She stretched out a cold hand and brushed some hair off my face. "You cut your hair..." She sounded disappointed.

I nodded, ignoring the tone of the statement. "Why didn't you just let Demetri find you," I asked, "and then kill him?" This seemed like the obvious thing for Allirea to demand.

"I couldn't take him in a fight, he's much too skilled and doesn't rely on his witchcraft the way, say, Kate does," my mother said. "And Allirea has to be quite physically close to someone to fade them, so it wouldn't help quite enough that he oughtn't be able to notice *me* through her power. I could get in one good hit from concealment before he threw me forty feet away out of sheer reflex and she lost the ability to keep up, and then I'd be done for or at least no longer able to shield her."

"Oh," I said. "Well, you're... in luck, I guess. You don't have to beat up the Denalis."

"So it would seem," my mother agreed.

"I would like to know what is going on too," Allirea said, and I absently sent her the same summary.

"You shouldn't go to the Denalis' houses," I said. "Allirea will block Alice, or at least might, Alice isn't sure how that works with her... and they don't want to look suspicious, at least not yet, so you shouldn't even go alone, Mama. I expect somebody will visit me today and you can talk to them then if you want."

My mother nodded, then frowned suddenly, with the unfocused look in her eyes that told me she was reacting to a memory I'd sent and not something she was actually looking at. "Chelsea..." she murmured.

"I warned you," said Allirea. "I did warn you."

"I know you did," said my mother absently. "Elspeth, sweetie, remember when I told you that I had never killed anyone and have a general policy of not killing anyone?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm going to try very, very hard to make an exception," she said abruptly, hands clenching with a grating sound at her sides. "Possibly several. But at least one."

I wriggled the rest of the way out of my sleeping bag and sat hugging my knees. "Tell Siobhan," I said. "Chelsea's not very good at fighting." She nodded and started pacing. "Allirea told you about my father, right?" I asked.

"Of course I did," said Allirea. "I am not *stupid*. If Isabella had ever found out some other way that I knew her mate was alive and I had not informed her, just how long would I be likely to live?"

My mother's jaw clenched and her eyes pressed closed. Her hand went to the locket around her neck, which she flicked open; the piece of ash she kept there tipped out into

her palm. "She told me," she agreed. "I suppose this is... from Irina?"

"Yes," I said, piecing together Aro's memories and what I'd been told about my mother's own observations of the day in question.

She looked at the ash a moment longer, then put it away in the locket again. "I suppose I could give it to her sisters," she muttered.

"They would probably appreciate that," I said.

"He thought I was dead, didn't he," she said after a moment. "All this time he thought I was dead."

"Until I told him different," I said. "I think at some point you must have become immune to Marcus, or he would have been able to see the mate bond whenever he looked at... Dad... which he couldn't. That probably happened without you noticing after you became a vampire, since Marcus could see your relationships when you were human."

"Mm," she replied distantly, biting her lip the way she always did when she was distracted by something that made her unhappy.

"Do you want me to show you -" I began.

"Yes," she said at once.

"Let me finish," I said, and she frowned apologetically. It struck me all of a sudden how *young* she was, and how much younger than that she looked. She could have claimed me as her twin sister and anyone would have believed her if they didn't know better. Seventeen forever, like my father. It was easier to see when I wasn't so *accustomed* to her anymore, and when the part of me that automatically conferred her an assumption of respect and maturity had been carved away with everything else Chelsea had felt like cutting.

She waited expectantly for me to finish my question, so I did. "Do you want just *my* memories of when I was talking to him, or *his* memories too up until May 26 of this year?" I asked her. The summary would explain why I had those, and why it wouldn't take me 110 years to give them to her. "They're mostly pretty unpleasant - he's usually unhappy - especially the last five years. I could just send January through late October of 2005. That's where most of the happy parts were," I warned before she answered. Those months had been the period of time where my parents had been aware of each other's existence. Before that they hadn't met. After that they both thought the other was dead.

She kept chewing on her lip, gingerly. "This trance-like thing it induces will take me how long to recover from?"

"I don't know," I said. "Siobhan got a full blast and was up and about after fourteen hours. But I don't know if it actually takes less time to process a century than a couple

million years. She definitely didn't consciously process everything during that time."

She closed her eyes. "Start me with the good parts version," she said finally. I picked a beginning and an ending for my father's memories, and isolated the clump of my own, and sent them along. My mother reeled for a couple of minutes, but didn't fall, and finally murmured a perfectly lucid "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said politely.

"Do I still need to be unfaded?" complained Allirea.

"I think," I said before my mother could say yea or nay, "that you need to be unfaded so anybody who might come to visit me - especially Siobhan - isn't diverted by your power. You might be able to take breaks as long as Mama warns you when someone's coming ahead of time; she can hear better than us. Siobhan especially has to be able to plan with you in mind, since her plans are magic, and if I remember right she'll be able to remember you whether you're faded or not until and unless she interacts with you faded. Right?"

"Yes," said Allirea.

"Siobhan's not a -" my mother began, and then she scrunched her eyebrows together. "Oh, I suppose she must be. This is different, having everything transmitted all at once instead of in real time..."

"Oh," I added, thinking back to one of the few snippets of Allirea-related conversation I'd bothered to remember on the airplane, "she was thinking of contacting your kids, Allirea, to see if they had a way of getting in touch with you. She probably thinks you'd be very important to have around, if she was going to such lengths to try that..."

"It would not have worked anymore, anyway," Allirea said, looking away.

"I know. She probably thought of that during one of the parts where I wasn't paying attention," I speculated, recalling something from the swath of memories I'd disregarded before -

- He will find me. I know eventually he will find me. I am not swift enough. I would stow away on a space shuttle if I had a way to live in a vacuum, but I don't, and I would not prefer death to being dragged away with him... or at least not yet. Perhaps I will think differently, later.

So, he will find me. I could not force myself to stay awake to escape nightmares of the ordinary sort, as a child. I cannot hide from this one either, not for long.

But I do not have to make it easy, and I do not have to encourage him to involve my

children. That would be exactly the sort of thing he would do: imagine that I should love nothing more than to bring them into the hell he has created for me. Better to cut them loose. Better to make it look to all appearances like I care nothing at all for them. After this once, I do not have to visit them, do not have to let him find me simply by waiting at the correct airport before I have even set out. Do not have to tempt him to kidnap them, too.

They will not miss me, at least.

I hope I can get to each of them in time. If I am clever, he will never realize that I have children at all. He will never think that these cities are important to me. He will never cross these thresholds.

My eldest, my son. In San Juan I find his house. I walk right in. I hug him without him noticing that I am there; I kiss his hair without him being aware that there is anything of moment going on; I peel the delicately-labeled emergency contact information so carefully stripped of attention-diverting detail off from the wall. I tear myself away.

My daughter, my middle child. She lives in Montevideo, but she is not in her new home when I arrive. She moves so often, how will I find her later when it is safe, if it is ever safe...? She is married, pretending to be human, she has children, precious bright-eyed little ones of her own. I do not know what she means to do when she is too obviously young. She has never tried this experiment of settling down like this before. But she has made me a grandmother. I want pictures. There are pictures of them, everywhere, that I could take - and then he would catch me with them. Then this would be for nothing. He would assume that because I want pictures of my grandchildren I must want my grandchildren around me. And I would. But not with him. I excise my nameless self from her address book. I leave the pictures where they are.

My baby, my littlest girl, only twenty years old. She is in Port Elizabeth. No tempting family photos stare at me from her walls. I pluck her phone right out of her pocket, delete my number, put it back. I hold her. She stands in place, finding it unimportant that she is unable to walk away until I let her go, and then she proceeds with her business.

I am so tempted to tell her that I am here, and why, and what I have done. But she would not remember it anyway. She may think of me occasionally when I unfade for the odd hour to speak to someone besides him. But she must not know to find me in Volterra. I will not have her there, not at any price.

I kiss my baby's forehead once, and run again.

He catches me as I come off the plane in Greece -

"Stop," said Allireia, and the way she said it made it sound like she'd said it a few

times and I'd only just heard. "Stop, stop."

I snapped out of the memory. "Hm?"

"I do *not* want you to look at anything about me," she said flatly. "I could *make* you stop if I faded, but Isabella would object. So I am asking. Please stop. Let it be."

"I'll try," I said, pushing the memories away. They weren't exactly tempting - not the recent ones, anyway. The ones from before she'd met Demetri were more pleasant, but I had plenty of stuff to look at that wasn't hers.

"I realize you didn't *volunteer* to accept all these memories," my mother mused, "but considering that you've got them, was it really best to offer them all up indiscriminately to Siobhan -?"

"If I hadn't given her *all* of them, then among other things she wouldn't know about Allirea," I pointed out. "I'd have just subconsciously left her out. And she can use them better than I can even apart from that, to plan stuff magically. We kind of need Siobhan, given Addy having her power."

My mother contemplated this for a moment, then shuddered as though shaking off a film of water. "You're right. Privacy concerns were shot to hell when Aro stole those memories in the first place, anyway..."

"And more so when Addy blasted everybody within range of the compound," I said.

"You know," she remarked next, "I really should have *guessed* that Sasha was framed. It didn't make sense. I *commented* that it didn't make sense when I first heard about it. But it didn't seem important at the time... and even if I'd thought of it I wouldn't have had a way to verify the guess."

"Fi' more minutes," came a mumble from Jake's sleeping bag.

I turned around. "It's okay, you can sleep," I said.

"Five -" Jake said, then he blinked and looked blearily at my mother and Allirea. "Ng?" He sat bolt upright, not taking his eyes off of them. "Bella? And who the hell are you?"

"This is Allirea," said my mother.

"The one Siobhan was talking about?" Jake asked, and I nodded. "Uh, nice to meet you, and what in the world are either of you doing here?"

My mother repeated the explanation she'd given me, and then said, "I hear someone coming - two someones - Allirea, do *not* fade."

"How long do you expect me to do this?" Allirea hissed, her voice starting to sound

strained, although I couldn't tell if she was faking it or not. (I couldn't help but remember that she sometimes did that, though not always.)

"If you become absolutely unable to hang onto your noticeability, you can find someplace where you won't affect Jacob or whoever's visiting, go there, take a break, and come back when you're ready," my mother allowed, and then my grandparents came into view over the side of the next mountain.

My mother was off like a shot, flinging herself into Esme's arms without hesitation and then pivoting to embrace Carlisle too. "I *missed* you," I could just barely hear her sob from that distance, and then all three of them were exclaiming each other's names repeatedly, and my mother was babbling her story and her excuses for dropping out of their lives and her desperate apologies.

I was jealous.

Chelsea had never attacked my mother's relationships. She couldn't feel them in the first place. Even when my mother had been human and had a less comprehensive shield, even when Marcus could view all the streamers of light spraying away from her at his leisure, Chelsea could feel nothing from her at all. Chelsea had entertained the hypothesis that my mother simply didn't care about anyone at all for a solid minute and a half before admitting that she was really and truly blocked.

And so my mother got that reunion, she got the hugs that were *meant* on both ends, she got to be really glad to see them instead of vaguely awkward about feeling obligated to feel things she didn't feel. She didn't have to apologize for being Chelsea's victim, over and over.

Of course, when I thought about it, I realized that if the Volturi had captured me and found me shielded just like her, they probably would have killed me like they'd tried to kill her (and I was significantly less difficult to kill even if I supposed myself to have her shielding). Even Jacob wouldn't have been worth the inconvenience; Addy hadn't been making up the expendability of individual wolves. Brady had died simply because it turned out that Pera didn't recognize him as her mate and they didn't want him hanging around fruitlessly fawning after her.

So maybe it was better that I didn't have my mother's power after all.

But as she led her in-laws towards us I still felt a *little* jealous.

Jacob seemed to sense my discomfort and he laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You okay?" he asked.

"Mostly," I said. My mother introduced Carlisle and Esme to Allirea, who was starting to look very uncomfortable with all the attention she'd been forbidden to shed, but she spoke to them politely enough, and then asked me to explain to everyone the situation with Demetri so she wouldn't have to say it aloud again. I obliged. Esme promptly decided that Allirea needed a hug, which Allirea tolerated with surprising grace, although

she didn't return it.

"If you can remain in sight, so to speak," Carlisle assured her, "we should be able to protect you if he arrives here."

"Actually," I said, "it would be really convenient if Demetri disappeared sooner rather than later. He doesn't stay in touch with Volterra while he's... looking for... Allirea, and he left less than a week ago and is often gone for two or three weeks at a time. That, *and* he *always* spends the entire trip blocked out for Alice because every move he makes is under her shadow. They won't have any way of figuring out that he's dead unless they try having Dwi contact him, and Dwi is a purely voluntary telepath - getting no answer could be interpreted as Demetri just not wanting to be interrupted. Or just not liking telepathic communication - that's why the Denalis were talking to the Volturi by e-mail instead of via Addy borrowing Dwi. There would be a long delay before anyone in Italy knew what had happened if Demetri showed up right here and... and got killed."

"Can others initiate conversations with Dwi?" Allirea asked. "That was never clear to me."

"No, he has to be listening for a message from a specific person first, they can't just get his attention," I said.

"How good a fighter is Demetri?" Esme said anxiously.

"Good," I said. "But not exceptional. He's practiced but not especially talented. Siobhan could take him out easy. Liam could do it. Kate could too. You and Grandpa and Mama together, maybe, but I'm not sure, and at least one of you would probably be hurt." I left Jake out because I didn't want him dying of a stray vampire bite. All the wolves' advantage was tied up in coordinating with each other so well that vampires had no time to bite anyone, but Jake was alone.

"I require a rest," Allirea murmured, and she ducked around to the other side of the mountain.

"Unfade before yelling if you need help, or anything," my mother said loudly, "so people besides me can notice it."

"Who are you talking to?" I asked her.

"Never mind, Elspeth," she sighed, "it doesn't matter," which seemed true enough, and then she hugged me. She gave Jake an appraising look, as though about to consider thanking him for looking after me the way Esme had the day before. Eventually she said, "I'm glad Elspeth has had someone to rely on through all this." Jake dipped his head politely, but she kept looking at him in a vaguely frustrated way that seemed familiar somehow, although I'd never seen it myself. I pinpointed the look after a moment's thought: this was the look she gave somebody when she wanted my father to read their mind and alert her if anything untoward was going on. They hadn't worked out an actual *code* around this, but he'd figured it out over time and never been steered wrong by

interpreting it that way. I wasn't sure why she was making that face without him present. Maybe realizing he was alive was reactivating old habits.

Jake has been absolutely wonderful to me at all times and there is nothing creepy going on between us at all, I reassured her. Her face relaxed and she turned back to Esme and Carlisle. She insisted on being caught up on what she'd missed in the last five years that I hadn't been able to impart to her when she picked me up.

Carlisle was halfway through an anecdote about Rosalie's ultimately doomed attempt at opening an auto body shop of her own when all three vampires suddenly stood at attention, hearing something I couldn't.

And then, as I abruptly remembered Allireia again, something I *could*:

A helpless, enraged, desperate shriek that I remembered hearing from the inside a dozen times.

Stalker

I was slower than the vampires, but I went around to the other side of the mountain anyway when they bolted to see what was going on. Jake jogged after me, having a little more difficulty with the terrain but gamely trying to keep up with me. I didn't slow down for him.

Demetri *hadn't* been in Volterra when Addy had issued her blast. That meant, in theory, that I could knock him out for more than long enough to let the others destroy him. But Addy's suspicion about mated vampires kept me from trying that immediately. She'd thought that vampires would likely snap out of their trances if their mates had been in danger. Similar was her brief consideration about blasting Jacob so she could kidnap me. I was inclined to trust Addy's judgment about what a power she was borrowing could do. And it would be entirely characteristic of Demetri to interpret three vampires attacking him on Allirea's behalf as a threat to Allirea.

So I stayed my hand on the big gun, to break it out in a case where conventional methods didn't work - if it didn't knock him out, it would give him an *advantage*. I hung back, clinging from an outcropping of rock. But I could see.

Allirea had screamed as soon as she saw Demetri, and when I got a look at the scene, she was hiding behind Esme, who kept between him and his mate with a fiercer look on her face than seemed to belong there. Demetri kept his eyes on Allirea, but peripheral vision is good in vampires, and he wasn't having any trouble paying attention to my mother and grandfather as they circled him. "I'm not here about you," Demetri said, holding up his hands in a gesture that looked peaceable but could turn into a brutal throw if someone ran at him. "Even though you're really supposed to be dead," he added to my mother, "that's not my errand and I didn't come here to take care of that. I just want my mate and then we'll be on our way."

"Not going to happen," my mother hissed.

Demetri didn't waver. He stood poised and sharp-jointed, like a drawn sword, and kept his narrow eyes fixed on Allirea. "Is this some kind of payback you've arranged about *your* mate?" he asked my mother in a low, careful voice. "Please. You can't keep my Alli the way they're keeping him, it'd kill her, please don't hurt her. I *would* trade you. If I had him on hand to offer for her I'd -"

"It's not about that," Carlisle said, while my mother made an incoherent snarling noise. Behind me, Jake caught up, and stood warily at the ready. "If you will listen to us -"

"No outcome of this encounter that involves me *not* leaving with my Alli - both of us intact - is acceptable," said Demetri flatly. "If you don't want to try to wedge me into a deal about Edward I don't know what you're about. You're thickheaded, Carlisle, but you

can't expect me to abandon my mate to our enemies, can you? Be reasonable."

"On the contrary," said Carlisle, "Allirea's own wishes are important to us, Demetri, and you have an impairment in understanding them -"

"She plays little games," Demetri said, a fond smile tipping up one corner of his mouth. "Alli, I wish you'd found someone else to involve... I think this lot thinks you were serious, someone might get hurt if you don't explain to them... Precious Alli, the *puzzles* you set me. I wonder what the catch is this time."

A ferocious hiss erupted from my mother's throat suddenly as something caught her eye. "*That*," she roared, "is *Edward's wedding ring*."

Demetri glanced briefly at his hand. "Is that my hint? If I give you this, you'll let Alli go? I'm sure I would have figured that out eventually. Peace," he said, and no one sprang at him when he worked the gold band off his finger. "I can get another. We can get a matching set, Alli my love, we can stop at a jewelry store on our way home, you can pick out anything you like. Try as I might I'm still not sure what you mean when you explain what you're looking for in rings..."

"Give it *here*," demanded my mother in a dangerous voice, and Demetri tossed her the ring. "Elspeth," she said, "catch." She tossed me not only my father's ring, but also the other jewelry she kept on the chain around her neck. I plucked it all out of the air, strung the recovered piece onto the necklace with the rest, and slipped it over my head so it wouldn't be lost.

There was a beat, and then Demetri said, "Well? What am I missing now? Alli -"

Almost too softly for me to hear, Allirea spoke for the first time since her shriek. "How many times," she murmured, "must I tell you not to call me that?"

Demetri looked like he hadn't heard her at all. Her words just slipped past his understanding and landed somewhere else. Peering into his warped memories, even *I* could almost believe that Allirea was only playing, only teasing, only having a bit of fun -

- Tracking is so much easier when I look for someone I've met. Then I can just follow the pull, let it lead me across the surface of the earth towards my target. If the target's not moving fast I can even do some careful triangulation and pinpoint them. But that doesn't mean I'm not a fair tracker without my advantage. I'd probably never have developed the advantage without the skill, anyway. So when Aro says "we've heard tell of a fellow called Joham who, we are informed, has been siring half-vampires, and we would like to find him and his girls", I don't say "is that so?", I say "yes, Master" and hop to.

A little asking around - I know rather a lot of people - and I'm on my way to where he was last seen by anyone I'm on speaking terms with, following his description west. I

catch up with him in Mongolia, going the last forty miles mostly by scent. Not Joham's scent, I've not met the man and wouldn't want to follow some arbitrary vampire halfway across China and lose my real quarry, but the odd fragrance of half-vampires that I learned in visiting his son. Sort of spicy, sort of fruity, but quite unique. I like the smell.

Predictably, given how I'm doing my work, I find one of the girls first. She's a slip of an Asian thing, quite young in demeanor - this'll be the youngest, Iseul. She's surprised when I call her by name and acts confused when I ask to meet her father and sisters.

"Sisters?" she asks, enunciating strangely. Maybe she's not familiar with this language? Should I switch? No, she'd ask if she needed to speak in some other tongue. English is usually a safe bet, and she repeated the word and she isn't staring at me bewildered and jabbering in Cantonese or whatever her native speech is.

"Yes, and your father," I reply. I loom over her a bit. Titchy creature.

"I can take you to our current home..." she says, backing up a step to look me in the eye.

"Please do," I say, and she takes me at a dawdling publicly-acceptable pace to an apartment. The spicy-fruit aroma is all over the place, and drawing in thoughtful breaths I can separate three flavors of it - the little one's, and her sisters.

Iseul goes in ahead of me, and promptly hugs in greeting a girl who must be the middle sister, the one with the Swiss mother - the blond hair and the blue eyes give that away. Noemi, she was called. Sitting on the couch by the window, a book in her hand, is the eldest. "Allirea" was her name, I remember. It's a pretty name for a pretty girl. She's got her feet tucked under her and looks up at Iseul and me when we come in, but Iseul ignores her completely. Some kind of sibling rivalry there? There aren't any hints from Noemi's body language. "Father will be home soon," Iseul says to me, and begins explaining my presence to the white sister. She's still ignoring pretty Allirea. So is Noemi. Why is that?

I was told that Allirea was the witch, one who could divert notice from herself, but if she were doing that, surely I wouldn't be able to see her either? There she is, plain as day, perfectly simple to focus on. Actually, easier to focus on than anything else in the room. Her prattling sisters fade into the background. I'll notice if they try to run off - I need to speak to the family entire - but I don't have to pay attention to them. I'm curious about the dark one with her book.

Allirea looks up at me, makes eye contact, and flinches. How strange.

"I'm not here to hurt any of you," I say. "Or your father. I just needed to find you because the Volturi are interested in having a half-vampire join our organization, and your brother wasn't interested." I look at Allirea. If she's not getting along with her sisters, maybe she'll be the one. I think I'd like that.

"I think you mean "either of you", not "any", Mr. Demetri," Noemi says in a helpful

voice. *"I made that mistake often when I learned English -"*

"No, I mean "any", there's three of you." I point at Iseul, Noemi, and Allirea, and Allirea shrinks in towards herself. She looks panicky. Maybe her power is misbehaving, and she's not trying to hide, she's only accidentally blinding her sisters to her presence...?"

Suddenly the both of them turn their heads towards her. "Allirea!" says Noemi, as though surprised. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

I am quite confused now.

"He can see me," says Allirea, a quaver in her voice. She must be nervous about her power malfunctioning, although if she's putting it that way it must be a matter of failing to cover me, rather than mistakenly covering her sisters.

Or maybe it just doesn't work on me for some reason. I wonder why that would be. I haven't been trying to track her with magic, so my advantage shouldn't be counteracting hers.

Her sisters twitter to each other excitably, a thousand times more irrelevant than she could ever be. Am I really the only person who can notice her at all times? Does everyone else really ignore her? But she's so arrestingly exquisite.

Wouldn't it be something, if she were my -

Ah! Now it makes sense. I open my mouth to say something about it, but Allirea says, "Stop looking at me!"

I'm confused again, but I close my eyes, and her sisters trail off midsentence as though they've forgotten what they're talking about. Perhaps she's hidden herself again. Why would that be? I hear the window opening, and then closing, and soft footfalls. She's off to do something, I suppose. And not used to having to let her family know when she comes and goes.

I open my eyes again, and sure enough, she's gone, but I know how to find her. I open my phone, call Jane and give her the family's address while I follow the pull of my power out of the building. I don't really need to stay in this apartment personally now that I've found who I was meant to find. In both senses of the phrase.

I flip my phone closed. A dim human memory floats fuzzily into my consciousness. Most of its details have been lost. But it's a memory of my older brother, telling me some advice that I think I found very useful between hearing it and undergoing my change -

"Girls like to be chased," my brother drawled.

I smile. It makes perfect sense, doesn't it, that I'd find a mate who likes to be chased?

-

I blinked and pulled myself out of the memory. The *expectation of being loved back* was woven into the mate bond.

It wasn't *as* deep as the rest of it. My father never really *expected* my mother to love him back while she was a human, he only hoped, for instance. But that was against plenty of background knowledge about how humans work as opposed to how vampires work. Demetri didn't have any background knowledge like that about half-vampires. He didn't know, on any level whatsoever, that she wouldn't automatically react like his mate, and so he just acted as though she *would*.

Most vampires confronted with a human mate just turned, or got someone else to turn, the mate in question, like Chelsea had, or like Rosalie had, but that wasn't an option with Allirea.

Presented as he had been with a mate who didn't love him automatically and couldn't be made to, and no prior expectation of that misfortune... he could despair or fall into delusion, the latter infinitely more comfortable.

So Demetri *did* sort of have an *explanation* -

I snapped back into the present. Allirea was still cowering behind Esme, saying nothing. Of course she wasn't saying anything - he never listened. No amount of begging, running away, trying to bite his head off, or kicking and screaming made a dent in his fantasy world where she was *only playing*.

The vampires were still circling each other. No one was eager to make it a physical fight. The odds were too well-balanced, and as far as Demetri knew, Esme might hurt *his precious Alli* before he could stop her, if he attacked.

"It is difficult, but it *is* possible," Carlisle said, "to live without your mate. I have done it -"

"Your mate is right there, Carlisle," said Demetri. "Standing between me and mine. You clearly didn't do it very *long*. But I suppose if I could believe it of anyone it'd be you. Did you regret it? Leaving her?" he challenged.

I knew the true answer to that, and I knew Carlisle wouldn't lie, not about that, even if it would be the better thing for Demetri to believe - "I did," Carlisle said gravely. "But the circumstances were different. Esme did not *ask* me to leave. It was a judgment I made on my own."

"Alli's only *joking*," said Demetri, smiling and rolling his eyes a little, like he was trying to explain that Santa wasn't real to someone in their twenties who really ought to know better. "She does this all the time, we have our little globetrotting game."

"Half-vampires do not have mates," growled my mother, "or if they do, they have

them in a way that isn't symmetrical to the way vampires have them." Her eyes were flickering over Demetri's stance, looking for a gap that wasn't there. He exhibited excellent form.

"Nonsense," said Demetri easily.

I sent to my mother: *Is it actually tactically valuable to convince him that Allirea hates him? I might be able to do it - I'm not sure - but if I can I have no idea what he'd do at all. Blink once if I should try it, twice if I shouldn't.* I could have had my grandparents cast votes, too, but if I was honest (and I generally am), Esme had no tactical prowess at all and Carlisle's idealism was only suited to more obvious problems than this. Carlisle would have to be facing down someone who was not plausibly "just misguided" before he'd really apply himself to the task of making them dead.

There was a long pause during which my mother didn't blink at all, and then, distinctly, my mother's eyes shut and opened. Once.

I touched my cheekbone, checked in briefly with Magic, and pulled up all my tendency to attract attention and all my forceful truth and all my certainty that the memories I had from Allirea were true.

I sucked in a deep breath, and spoke clearly:

"Allirea hates you," I said. "She wants you dead. She's been terrified of you since the first time she saw you. *She's not playing. She never has been.*"

Demetri's eye twitched. "No," he said, but it sounded like a question.

"Yes," I insisted. "She runs away because she doesn't want to be with you. She begs you to leave her alone because she can't stand being around you. She tries to kill you because she wants you to die. She pushes you off of her because she hates it when you touch her. She's not playing. She never has been."

"No," said Demetri again. He looked shaky on his feet, but he didn't quite drop out of his stance, and neither my mother nor Carlisle found an opening to attack.

"Yes," I said again, loudly. "She hates the nickname and wants to gouge out her ears every time you say it! She doesn't want a ring because the idea of marrying you makes her *sick*! She lives in fear that you'll take it into your head to hurt the people she loves! She's spent long hours considering suicide because it's looked like that would be what it would take to get away from *you*! You've gotten her pregnant twice and she ran to her father to get him to help her abort both times even though normal surgery was impossible and her metabolism is too fast for painkillers to work and he had to do it by punching her in the stomach, because she couldn't stand the idea of having *your* children! And it's a miracle it was only twice considering the number of times you -"

An incoherent roar exploded out of Demetri, and he wasn't a drawn sword anymore,

he was a fired arrow - aimed right at me.

My mother was on him as he flew past, but he kicked her off and she went flying through the air. Jake vaulted over me to get in the way and phased with a heedless snarl, rusty fur exploding out from his body and standing on end with rage. Carlisle couldn't catch up to Demetri before Demetri reached Jacob.

I decided it would be a bad idea to just stand there, and clambered up the mountain while Jake (and, after a moment, Carlisle) fended off attacks from Demetri. Demetri fought like he was possessed, but he wasn't trying to hurt Jake or my grandfather so much as get away from them and go after me.

I flung myself off the peak of the mountain and landed beside Allirea. "Please -" I began, but she got the idea and folded her arms around me, making it almost impossible for Demetri to attack me without hurting her. Esme stood her ground in front of us.

The motions of the fight were too fast for me to follow in detail. I saw the broad strokes: Jacob struggling to maintain his purchase on the rocky slope while he tried to crush some convenient part of Demetri in his jaws. Carlisle attacking conservatively, attempting to restrict Demetri's movement more than actually injure him. Demetri whirling with desperate but precise ferocity. My mother landed downhill and quickly righted herself, sprinting back up into the fray.

I was terrified that Demetri would bite Jake. I *needed* Jake. "Look!" I hollered at the top of my lungs. "She's protecting me! She could hide from everyone here except my mother and you, she's not in any danger from me or Esme, we aren't threatening her one bit, and she's trying to shelter me anyway! She wants you to lose! Allirea hates you! It's not a game! She was telling the truth every time! She was *really* afraid when she screamed, she was *really* trying to hurt you when she bit you, she was *really* trying to escape you when she ran -"

"NO!" bellowed Demetri, and the shout reverberated off the scenery. I wondered if we were close enough to the Denalis' houses that he'd be heard. "NO!"

"Yes," I insisted. "It's true. You know it's true."

Demetri launched himself towards me again, but Jake caught his leg in his teeth and wrenched it off with an earsplitting screech. The leg went tumbling down the hillside when Jake spat it out, but the change in momentum gave Demetri the chance he'd so far lacked to pull close to Jake and sink his teeth into the fur on my wolf's neck.

Jake let out an unwolflike scream of pain and staggered and collapsed, and rolled like a ragdoll down the mountain. *My wolf, my wolf, my* -

- *"Daphne will be out of commission for days from that bite."*

"But she's alive." -

- *"She'll probably be sick for a week. Bites are not fun... clip a notch out of my ear to keep it from spreading..."* -

- *applying some kind of suction device to a wound on another's shoulder - maybe removing poisonous venom* -

I broke Allireia's grip, surprised Esme enough to dodge her abortive grab for my shoulder, and chased my wolf downhill.

"ELSPETH!" my mother shouted, but didn't she have the scar to prove that she could survive being bitten, the baldness to prove that she could survive being powdered and ignited? She didn't need me. Jake did.

- *"I wonder if she'd find you palatable."*

"Huh?"

"You, Jacob Black, werewolf, possessor of blood that smells rancid to me but doesn't to her. I wonder if she would drink it -

I felt a hand come down on my shoulder with crushing force, stopping me in my tracks. Demetri. I didn't even need to look around. I let out a screech, and blasted him.

Not with everything.

Just with the last five and a half years of Allireia's life.

"Pay attention when I tell you things," I hissed at him, and his hand fell away from my shoulder, which was probably broken, and I left him to the vampires and ran. My wolf, *my wolf, my wolf.*

Jake's fall was broken by an irregular jut of rock. He landed bitten side up and lay there, eyes open, heart still beating, still breathing, but not moving. I leapt on him and fell to. No biting - no *more* biting - just pulling tainted blood out of his veins. I ignored the taste. It didn't matter. I spat it out instead of wasting time swallowing. Pull out a mouthful of blood. Spit. Pull. Spit. *Until the evil smell goes away, until the blood splatters pure red on the rocks instead of with droplets of clear, until my wolf is okay.* My mouth was full of loose fur. Jake panted and whined. His heart kept ticking, but it shuddered and sometimes beat double.

Distantly I heard a screeching noise again, and people arguing. Nearer, footsteps. Carlisle.

"I think that's enough," he said, and I stopped. The smell of venom wasn't completely out of Jake, but what I hadn't gotten had enough time to spread that I could never get it out of the wound. It didn't heal as fast as it should have. A mouth-sized gash should have been scabbed over, should have looked weeks old already. Wolves with their

super healing... "Your shoulder," Carlisle said.

"Set it. It'll heal," I murmured. I was gently poked and prodded, and then shoved abruptly into alignment and held that way for a moment and released. It hurt, but didn't I remember worse? Didn't I have high-fidelity memories of a hundred turnings in my head? Hadn't Jane burned me, hadn't Santiago broken my legs? Wasn't my wolf possibly dying in front of me? I ignored the screaming of my shoulder.

"Don't use the arm," he instructed, softly, "until it feels completely better."

I nodded, once. "Jake," I said.

"I don't think there's anything else to do," Carlisle said. "You thought very quickly."

I blinked at the wound in Jake's throat. It wasn't leaking more blood, but it was still raw, open, new. The venom that was left wasn't leaving him any spare resources to close it as quickly as it should have been closed.

"Demetri," I said.

"You threw him off long enough that Bella took off his other three limbs," Carlisle murmured. "Allirea wants to kill him, but -"

"So let her," I said.

"Elspeth -" began Carlisle.

"Let her," I repeated. "How many more people would he have to hurt and kill before you'd be willing to let him die? Let her."

"Elspeth," he said again.

I got up, carefully leaving the arm attached to the hurt shoulder limp and uninvolved in the process. I squeezed Jake's forepaw gently, and walked up the slope again.

"Demetri," I said.

"*It's not true*," he was wailing, propped up against a stone with only a head and torso in his possession. "Illusionist. You're an *illusionist*, it's an illusion -"

"That's just a word," I said, looking at the dense clouds overhead. "Eleazar made it up to classify witches, he didn't find it written in the stars. It's all true. I *can't* lie with my power. It doesn't like it."

"Lies," choked Demetri.

"No," I said. "If it was a lie, though, Allirea wouldn't kill you, would she?"

"Precious Alli," he breathed. "My precious Alli, please, tell me it's not true..."

Allirea rose from her crouch behind Esme and went around her, walking with measured steps towards Demetri. Her face was perfectly calm. He looked up at her with a manic, confused hope in his eyes, and then Allirea said in a controlled, level hiss, "All of it is *true*."

He looked at her blankly, trying to ignore her the way he had a thousand times before, and then Allirea turned to Carlisle and Esme. "You will have to kill me to stop me from killing him," she stated.

Esme turned away. Carlisle put an arm around his wife, and looked sadly at Allirea, and said nothing. My mother was collecting the severed limbs from where they'd landed downhill.

I walked back to Jake, and knelt beside him, and combed my fingers through his fur, and ignored the screeching noises, and ignored the crackling sound of the fire.

Tender

Heavy smoke rolled down the hill, but not near enough for Jake to breathe much of it. I sat near his head and attempted to fan away what little of it wafted towards us. Esme offered me her cardigan, which made a more efficient fan, and Carlisle approached soon after.

"No stitches," I muttered to my grandfather, waving the sweater through the air with my good arm. "It didn't help when Santiago tried it with Eve, the venom melted them and then there were just more holes in her to heal and she died anyway. He shouldn't phase back if he can avoid it. Because of the body mass to venom ratio. Embry phased once after getting bit and nearly died on the spot and didn't have the energy to phase back again and..." I paused for breath. "But if there's a way to get the fur out of the wound, if you have scissors or something, that's good. If you have painkillers that's good. They've had some luck with blood transfusions but there's no one else here with blood except me and I don't know what half-vampire blood would do, they never had a chance to try it with Cody and probably wouldn't have dared anyway because he's venomous, but it's a last resort, I suppose, if he takes a turn for the worse. He'll sleep a lot if he's lucky. He won't want to eat but he's got to. Meat. He's an obligate carnivore in this form. Don't bite the animals, they can't have venom in them. And water, he needs lots to drink. At least he isn't going to get infected or run a fever beyond his normal body temperature..."

During this babble, my grandparents were joined by my mother, who refrained from trying to hug me while I was fanning the smoke away. "Carlisle, maybe you'd better go fetch your med kit," she said, and he nodded, and went. "Esme, something for Jacob to eat and drink, maybe? Elspeth, I can do that," she offered as Esme left too, indicating the cardigan. "You shouldn't move around too much with your shoulder." Her voice was brisk, but anxious. She wasn't ready to relax.

I handed the sweater over and let myself drop to the ground again while she carried on blowing the smoke away. I remembered Pera, turning, and I put my hand on Jake's face under his scarcely-open eye and sent him nothing. *Until Carlisle is back with something for the pain*, I explained. A little of the motionless tension drained out of Jake. His breathing evened out some.

"Elspeth," said my mother, still fanning the air with Esme's cardigan, "is his pack going to -"

"Jake," I murmured, "open your eyes once if you've still got packmates, twice if you don't." His eyelid rose once, fell, and rose again. "His sisters can talk to him but only voluntarily," I murmured. "They can't even tell he's phased if he doesn't talk to them. We're okay. But - but how did Demetri catch up with you and Allirea?"

My mother's jaw clenched. "I don't know," she said.

Allirea drifted down the mountain towards us, a serene expression on her face.

"Your parents-in-law are gone, Isabella, and Elspeth has already seen me fade, and it does not look as though her wolf will notice me either way; do you object if I relax now? I am as good as my word - you enabled me to kill him, so I will continue to help you as best I can. Although I would like the chance to visit Montevideo at least and see as soon as possible if I can catch up with my more restless child."

"Let's figure out how to answer my daughter's question first while she can still remember you exist," my mother replied, "since your existence *just might possibly* be relevant thereto. Then I want to talk to Siobhan before we start planning flights to Uruguay or anywhere else."

Allirea shrugged. "You did not shield me constantly. He may have noticed that we were going to airports near houses belonging to your family and anticipated that we would be near here soon, and then when you dropped the shield, he was able to follow us more precisely."

"Or he could have gotten in touch with somebody from Volterra and picked up a clue from how they talked about Eleazar's behavior that Allirea was here," I offered. "He doesn't - didn't - usually get help, but he might have been stumped when he couldn't track you the usual way consistently."

My mother frowned. "The second possibility is somewhat worrying..."

"As long as Allirea was faded during a conversation like that, anybody Demetri talked to would have written it off as him being obsessive about his weird hobby if he mentioned anything about her," I said. "She probably shouldn't actually unfade too much, Mama, it'll give them the chance to remember her..."

"Fine, Allirea," sighed my mother, "go ahead."

"Who are you talking to?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," muttered my mother. The fire up the mountain died down to a low smolder, and the smoke started thinning out; she kept fanning it away regardless, untiring.

"Oh," I said. "Mama... are we going to find Grandpa Charlie and Grandma Renée, and tell them we're alive, after all this is over?"

"Assuming that we can in fact tell them that," she sighed, "yes, I think so. Is Jacob likely to be all right?"

"Probably," I said, closing my eyes and continuing to offer him the soothing nothingness. "Probably. If he can stay put and keep food down. But he can't fight and shouldn't move or phase for the next few days." I wasn't sure, but I thought he might have fallen asleep. I kept the sending ongoing anyway - I didn't want him to wake up from suddenly unmuted pain if I could help it - but made a mental note to check in with him later, make sure that it didn't keep him from sleeping well by shoving aside normal

dreams or anything strange like that.

"Well, we'll talk to Siobhan and see what she has to say about that," my mother replied softly. She paused. "You've gotten very attached to him."

"He's mine," I said.

"Clearly." She didn't sound judgmental, exactly, although that was the nearest adjective I could come up with. She sounded like she wanted to be judgmental but knew perfectly well there was nothing to judge me (us) about. "He probably saved your life."

I nodded, and my shoulder twinged.

"I'm glad you have him," she decided. "There was a split second, when Demetri kicked me away - I thought you were going to die, Elspeth. It was as if..." She paused, thinking, and asked, "Do you have Harry and Sue Clearwater's memories, by any chance?"

"Yes," I replied, although I'd never had cause to think of them before. "Up until a couple of minutes before they were killed."

"I'm curious if... Well, I thought you were going to die, and for that split second I think I might have traded Edward for you if that had for some insane reason been an option on the table." She hesitated again to measure her words, then proceeded. "I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. Either way I would have regretted it for the rest of my life, actually, so that may be irrelevant. But I might have done it. Some interaction between the fact that I was already a vampire when you were born and didn't lose half your childhood in a fog, and the fact that you're Edward's daughter too, and for all I know the fact that I'm immune to Chelsea is in the mix - my point is that I love you, and you don't have a way to remember directly how much, and I imagine at this point looking at Edward's memories of the five days we had you would be a little soured for you. He could have behaved better when he met you, Chelsea or no, though I can't say I'm not just bewildered that anyone lets her - look at me, saying "lets her" like anyone *lets* her, but that's what it looks like to *me*, so I'm not a good judge of whether he could have really behaved better or not." She sighed. "The next obvious thing to look at, to understand, would be Harry and Sue, *if* it's the same, which I'm not sure of. But it might be. They stayed to fight - they each *let* the other stay to fight against hopeless odds - but not before they sent Cody away to relative safety."

"I know you love me, Mama," I said, looking away from her and fixing my eyes on the stark landscape.

"I know you know *that* I love you," she said. "I'm not sure if you know how *much*. I don't know if you meant to include it in the summary or not, Elspeth, but I did notice a distinct undercurrent of wondering how I'd balance you and your father. I am *not* incapable of putting other things ahead of him if - if I have to. In a perfect world I wouldn't have to. But I don't live in a perfect world, I never have, and in all likelihood I

never will. So if I have to prioritize, I *can*. I may have mentioned once or twice that I consider this an important skill. And just because now I know he's alive, he does not *automatically win* in *every* contest. I'm a mother, too, not just a wife. If you need anything from me, you can ask." She looked at Jake, and said, "If you'd rather depend on him, now, I... will understand."

Detachedly, I supposed that "will understand" was, coming from my mother, a confident version of "try to understand" rather than a rephrasing of "do understand". She was pretty sure that if she tried she'd succeed, so she didn't bother with the weaker word "try", but she hadn't tried *yet*.

A few seconds went by without either of us talking. The only sounds of import were the whoosh of Esme's sweater, and breathing, and occasional popping and crackling from the diminished fire up the hill. "Should I look at Harry or Sue first?" I asked.

"Either," she said. "I'm not sure... I didn't keep in touch with them much after Cody was born. Harry might have some complications around his feelings because Cody could have killed Sue, and they wouldn't have been really in a position to get to know their son until he was three days old. Some combination of the two, and the most charitable interpretation you can muster of your own first days from your father's perspective, I suppose."

I shrugged my good shoulder. "I don't know if I can look at them in full and do this at the same time," I said, pointing my chin at where my hand rested on Jake's face. "I know what happened when I think about it, though. Harry and Sue... hm. I don't think they loved Cody more than Leah and Seth, which probably had something to do with what they did. They might've run if it hadn't been for their wolf kids."

"The odds were still impossible," my mother replied. "They were newborns, which can be an advantage, but not enough of one with Jane there, or Afton."

"Afton got Sue," I said distantly. "Jane and Demetri got Harry. They waited to burn them until Aro got there and decided there was nothing he wanted from them and no one who he'd provoke by killing them. More than they were already provoked, anyway." I blinked away some mist in my eyes. The fire, uphill, finally came to a complete stop, and my mother stopped fanning and tied the sweater around her waist. "Chelsea cut off Leah and Seth from them first. Leah... I think Leah *genuinely* would like Chelsea all by herself, just because Chelsea helped her about Sam."

"I could see that," my mother murmured. "Do you happen to have Sam's..."

"No, he got out of La Push with Jake's pack, and if Aro's ever read him it was since Addy's last update," I said.

"Don't interrupt me, Elspeth," she said, without heat.

"I knew what you were going to ask."

"And you knew that I wouldn't like it even so."

"Sorry," I sighed. "Why did you want to know if I had his memories, anyway?"

"I remember he was trying to see Emily as a sister, for Leah's sake," she said, looking between me and Jake thoughtfully, "and had no luck."

"I have most of *Leah's* memories, and Rachel's, and some of the rest of the wolves," I said. "They heard some of what Sam was thinking around the time he tried that. But it's sort of fuzzy. Wolf memories are much more like human memories than like mine or a vampire's. I just have impressions and some unreliable verbatim stuff. But they thought Sam was definitely trying. Except nobody was clear on what it would mean to try, exactly, to see an already-romantic imprint as a sister." I tilted my head. "I told you there was nothing creepy between me and Jake. It's true. I asked him about it and he said it was hard to even think about." Carefully, wary of stemming the flow of blankness from me to Jake, I offered her the memory of the conversation.

She watched it, closing her eyes. "All right," she said eventually. "I suppose at this point the only thing to do is wait and see... at least he's not liable to turn out like Demetri. That, at least, was never a complaint I heard about any imprinting wolves."

"...Killing people?" I asked, this being the only obvious misdeed of Demetri's besides simply working for the Volturi, which Jake had already spent time technically guilty of. "Yeah, I don't think Jake would kill anyone unless it was to defend me or -"

"Never mind. There's Esme," my mother said.

When I looked, I could just see my grandmother approach with a couple of Dall ewes slung over her shoulders. "Allirea," my mother called, and I noticed the other half-vampire sitting by Demetri's ashes, looking calmer than I'd ever seen her before. "Elspeth, can you see her now?"

"Allirea? Yes," I said. I debated whether to wake Jake up to offer him the food or not. The sheep wouldn't get any fresher. But he'd only just gotten to sleep.

Eventually I just backed off on my projection of nothingness to see if that woke him, and he woke of his own accord, a low whine in the back of his throat. "Jake, you need to eat something," I murmured. "Esme brought you some sheep." Esme came to a graceful stop near us, and set the animals down nearby. I pulled my good hand off Jake's face and reached for the nearer sheep. Esme leaned in to help, but I shook my head. "Don't, I can do it. This way the food part won't smell like a vampire." She'd brought down both sheep bloodlessly, quite intact except for snapped necks, and her scent adhered only faintly to the wool. I pulled the carcass nearer, bit it in the throat, and drew the blood out of it so it could be butchered with less mess, and then, working a little slowly with only one arm free, worked away some skin and pulled off a chunk of meat. "Jake," I said, offering it to

him, "you do need to eat."

He made a whuffling noise, not pleased with this prospect at all.

"Please, Jake," I said. "For me?" It was manipulative and sappy and it got him to open his mouth. I repeated this process, painstakingly coaxing him to swallow most of the first sheep, before Carlisle finally returned with his medkit and a few gallons of water.

"Siobhan insisted that I tell her what had happened before I left," he said to explain his delay, and he shooed me away and gave Jake morphine and trimmed away the fur near the wound with a small scissor. When Carlisle was done fussing with that, Jake let me pour one of the gallon jugs into his mouth a little at a time, grudgingly finished the first sheep, and then went back to sleep, looking more comfortable.

"Why do the Denalis have jugs of water lying around?" asked my mother.

"Carmen took up drinking distilled water in place of tap water, and the others followed suit. They find the flavor, or rather lack of it, pleasanter, so now they buy it by the gallon and keep it on hand. Bella..." My mother turned to look at him. "Siobhan is nothing short of ecstatic that you have managed to find us, but she's confused about why you and Allirea would not have simply shielded each other, walked into the Volturi compound, and slaughtered anyone you found inconvenient. If you rescued David and Edward, the four of you could have likely opposed Demetri successfully if he caught up to you later."

"Because I can't keep up my shield over her consistently," my mother replied, rueful. "*Sometimes* I can keep it up for an hour or two, but more often it lasts a minute and then I drop it. I can't do it distracted, which I most certainly would be in Volterra, especially with Edward on the line. The mental fatigue stacks up awfully over time and the longer I keep it up, the harder it is to start again after I finally let go. Allirea's tricks to let her stay unfaded over long periods of time when she has to were mostly unhelpful, so I'm flying blind."

"Why didn't Siobhan follow you here?" I asked Carlisle.

"Dares not risk seeing a faded Allirea before she has to," Carlisle said. "Bella, she recommended that Elspeth blast you as soon as is feasible. Your ability to notice Allirea under all circumstances could prove essential at some point - it may eventually be necessary for Siobhan to operate in the same area as Allirea while the latter fades - and given that, you should have all the information you can get."

"Mm," said my mother. "Is there any reason not to do that now?" she asked.

No one thought of anything, and I said, "So shall I, then?"

My mother cast a look up the hill at Allirea. "Are you going to stay put while I'm out of it, or should we ask Eleazar out here to babysit you?" she asked.

"I would *like* to go to Montevideo, but I will not run away," said Allirea, not sounding particularly offended by the suggestion that she might. "You helped me. I told you that I would help you if you helped me."

"Why Montevideo?" Carlisle asked.

"My daughter," murmured Allirea. "I borrowed a phone, during my trip with Bella, and called her house, and the person on the answering machine was not familiar, so she has probably already moved. If I went there in person I could look in more detail for her trail."

I wondered why Allirea couldn't call her other children and get the middle daughter's contact information, but my copies of her memories provided the answer as soon as I wondered - none of the three got along with the other two, and typically they pretended to be only children rather than acknowledge their half-siblings. This estrangement was helped by the fact that their parent in common was usually impossible to remember.

"Well," my mother said, "all right then. Elspeth, have at it," she sighed.

I took a deep breath, and hit her with everything I had.

She looked at me expectantly.

Nothing happened.

"Elspeth?" my mother said.

"I don't understand, I tried it," I said.

She looked at me sternly. "Elspeth, I *can* still tell the difference between what it sounds like when you tell the truth and when you don't. But I'm very puzzled about why you'd choose right now to lie."

"She sounded truthful to me," said Esme.

"And me," said Allirea, and Carlisle nodded.

My mother stared around at the other witnesses, stricken. "Then... Elspeth, send me something, anything."

Testing, I offered.

"Say when," she added, after a moment.

"I did it already," I told her. I reached my good arm towards her, and she bent to touch her cheek to my fingertips. *Testing*, I sent again. "Did - did that work?" I asked.

"No," my mother said, and then she straightened, spun, and kicked the side of the mountain with a growl of frustration, gouging a hole in the rock with her bare foot. "Now my shield thinks you're a threat. Probably because the blast would have been incapacitating."

"Can you open up deliberately, as you did with Jasper...?" asked Carlisle.

"I don't know. Maybe," my mother said, grinding her teeth. "That's the only time I've ever managed the trick of *letting* someone through - Elspeth's always been an exception, I didn't have to *allow* her to communicate with me before - and I was somewhat desperate the last time I saw Jasper. When I shielded Allirea, it was like I was splitting my shield into two layers and getting her under the outer one - the inner one still protected me *from* her. I'm not sure if I was doing that, or something else, when I was flailing around trying to let Jasper read my emotions. I'll try it..." She bit her lip and closed her eyes in concentration. "I've got you," she murmured, sounding strained. "Quick, before I lose it."

Testing, I sent again. "Did -"

My mother let out a breath, scowled, and shook her head. "Nothing." She clutched at her forehead with one hand, emanating frustration. "I recognize Siobhan's expertise in the matter, but I'm not *quite* getting the impression that my life depends on letting Elspeth blast me, so I don't see how I can muster the desperation I used to give Jasper a way through."

"It's powered by desperation?" I asked. "That's weird."

"That seems to be the common thread between the situations when it does something unusual," my mother replied. "Well, that or the way it was when I added immunity to Jasper in the first place, which I did while sitting calmly in the Norway house puzzling over the inexplicable fact that such an immunity did not come factory-installed. When I was immune to *Kate* of all people, it just defies common sense... But yes, I was desperate when it reassembled me from flaming scraps, and I was desperate when I let Jasper through, and I was desperate when I ran into Eleazar and Allirea and she gave me the idea to try to share my protection."

"I mean that's *weird*, as in, most witch powers are not even sort of like that," I said. "If they're dependent on the witch's mental state at all, they're usually relying on something purely emotional rather than anything like *desperation*, which is more about circumstances. I would expect it to be more about something like fear, or anger... My point is that as long as you don't have a really good understanding of how you manipulate your shield, isn't it safer to assume that it's more like other powers that have triggers instead of perfect responsiveness to the will?" I was talking very technically, pulling a lot of the phrases directly from how Addy talked to herself in her more scholarly moments.

My mother looked at me blankly. Carlisle said, "Where are you getting this notion, Elspeth?"

"From Addy," I replied. I paused a moment, and said, "Mama, I think I have to be your Addy."

Tutor

"Perhaps Eleazar should... tutor me," said my mother, sounding uncomfortable.

"I have a lot of *his* memories, too, up till he left the Volturi, and after that, I don't think he would have spent much time coaching witches besides Kate. And Irina remembered most of him teaching Kate, from eavesdropping on them," I pointed out.

"...Siobhan?" she suggested.

"Does not wish to be personally introduced to Allirea before it is absolutely necessary," said Carlisle, "and neither she nor you should visit the houses while there is value in letting... Alice believe that everything is as it was." He said his erstwhile daughter's name like a sad sigh.

"Allirea could go somewhere else and Siobhan could come out here..." said my mother, looking up at Allirea.

"Siobhan needs to be gathering information and planning stuff with it," I said.

"Planning stuff," muttered mother. "Right."

"We should probably go home," said Esme. "Actually, what we should do is go into town and buy you some cell phones, if you don't already have them. That will let us keep in touch without conspicuously leaving the house so often."

"I have mine," said Allirea, reaching into her pocket and dangling a phone from her fingers. She hesitated, then said, "I am going to call my son, as long as I must be unfaded... my little girl will be asleep at this hour..."

"I don't have a phone, and neither does Jake," I said. "Mama?" She shook her head.

"Three phones, then," said Esme. "We'll take care of that for you." She reached out and patted my hair gently, making me feel like I was four months old again, and then hugged my mother again.

"Thank you for getting the sheep and water for Jake," I said to my grandparents, and Carlisle smiled weakly, and the pair of them turned to go. Allirea, uphill, listened to her son's answering machine inform her that he was not home.

"Go ahead," said my mother, facing in the direction of the mountain's peak and apparently not talking to me or Jake, and then she turned back to me. "So...?"

"Addy usually starts by tasting the power she's coaching," I mused, "but even if she were here she can't copy you... That's actually why they tried to kill you, back then," I said. "If she could have copied you, they would have figured out some way to put you in the dungeon with Dad... the immunity to Alec would have been a complication but you

could have been physically held down and force-fed or something. But she couldn't, you blocked her. Actually it *really* pissed her off and she might try to kill you if she sees you again. Unless you learn to drop your shield for her and then actually do it, I mean. Anyway, so even if she were here she'd have to skip that step. What does your power feel like to *you*?" I asked.

"I cannot describe to you how unnerving it is to hear you say things like that so calmly," she said.

"I've seen lots and remember more," I said. "What does it feel like?"

"Like... a blanket, or a skintight suit, or something, everywhere," she said, looking away. "All the time. I couldn't feel it before it pulled me together in La Push, but since then it hasn't gone away. It doesn't interact with other tactile sensations, though, I can't feel the shield that's over my arm on my fingers if I do this." She clasped her forearm in her hand.

"Does it vary at all?" I asked.

"When I let Jasper through it was like it was thinning, or getting cooler," she said. "And when I shield a second person it's like the outer half of it peels off to cover them. I can feel it at a distance, but it's under tension when I push it away like that. It reminds me of what I think I remember it feeling like to try to pull myself off the ground by one hand as a human - I can do it for a little while, but eventually my hands give out. Except it's not my *hands*."

"So it has a shape, it moves through space to cover whoever you cover?" I asked. "Do you feel the edges that aren't touching anyone - like if you shielded me, would you feel anything from over here?" I reached out to a point on the imaginary line between my good shoulder and my mother's opposite elbow.

"It has a shape, it moves through space," she said, "but the more area it covers the harder it is - I didn't have a lot of cause to practice that while Allirea was fading me, because she outright requires physical proximity, but sometimes - and that's just going to confuse you right now, isn't it."

"Hm?" I said.

"...It has a shape and moves through space and it's more difficult to cover more volume," she said, sighing, "so if I shielded you again I wouldn't have the surface pass through *there*; I'd pinch off the area between us to have less dead space. The thinnest point would be something like this." With one finger she described a circle about eight inches in diameter halfway between us. "I'm *aware* of the edges, I suppose you could say I feel them, but with much less definition than the edges that cling to whoever I protect."

"Can you do two people at once?" I asked.

"I haven't tried before," she murmured, and she closed her eyes and frowned,

breathing oddly as she concentrated. "*Gah* - yes - but it's hard and I lost it almost at once - and - there was something - Elspeth, I think Jacob was mistaken, he has at least one packmate, get him awake and phased *now* before he thinks or dreams something compromising! If he hasn't already -"

I dropped to my knees beside Jake and jostled him as urgently as I dared, given his wound. *Phase, phase, phase, Jake, phase*, I sent. *Phase phase phase* -

Jake peeled one dark eye wearily open and contracted in size, his fur vacuuming itself into nothingness and leaving plain skin behind. It was more obvious this way that he was in bad shape - a lot of the color was out of his normally bright, coppery complexion, and his sedated, miserable expression was easier to read on a human face. The wound occupied a good quarter of his neck, but without fur in the way, I could tell that it had at least started to pull closed at the corners in a couple of places.

My mother offered him Esme's sweater to replace the clothes he'd destroyed when he went wolf, but between the venom - suddenly a significantly greater proportion of his blood volume - and the morphine - the same - he was in no shape to take it himself. I pulled it out of her hand and draped it over him to placate her preference for his modesty, although I didn't care, he didn't have the higher brain functions necessary to care, and I didn't think my mother was offering it for her *own* sense of propriety so much as a continued desire to parent me. It wasn't worth arguing about. I pressed my hand to Jake's cheek and sent him nothing, and his eyes fluttered closed again.

"What was that about?" I asked my mother in a low voice.

"I didn't notice when I had only one other person under the shield," she panted, "but I can feel the people I cover, little points of warmth - and there were more than yours and his, when I added him. When I only shielded Al- when I only shielded you, it felt warm, but I figured it was just how it felt to stretch the shield. But when I included Jacob it was different, the warmth had a *division* - three divided points, to be exact, but one of them wasn't the same as the other two and I don't know how. The only thing that would be, I think, would be if my shield covers his packmates the same way Jane and Alec's powers were able to propagate through the pack. There was an extra point of heat. Maybe the other person wasn't wolf-shaped when you asked him before, or Jacob didn't notice him or her for some reason, I don't know, but there was *someone else there*."

A chill ran up my spine. "What if it wasn't that? What if - if Pera's here, standing near Jake, or something? But "near" in not quite the same way?"

My mother winced at the name, probably remembering the smell of her blood or something. "Does that seem likely to you?" she asked.

"...No," I admitted, after some thought. "Whether she followed me or you or Demetri, there wouldn't be any reason for her to be still hanging around by herself at this

point. If she were only here for recon there'd be no reason for her to still be standing there; she would have left once it was clear we were staying put. And there'd be even less reason for her to be hanging out if she were here to hurt us. She would have attacked or sent a larger force after us by now. She's still a newborn and since she can hide and unhide herself and anybody else she likes at will, she could pretty much kill an arbitrary number of people who weren't *absolutely spectacular* fighters all by herself, and... that's us. And *that's* assuming she wouldn't come with other fighters hidden too. Especially not now that we've gone and discussed the possibility out loud. That was stupid. I should have sent the idea instead."

"Right," murmured my mother. "So probably not Pera, probably a packmate of Jacob's."

"Probably," I said. "Practically no other powers go through to Pera's hiding place anyway." I smoothed Jake's hair as he fell back asleep. "Okay, so you can shield an entire pack of wolves if you shield just one. That could be useful to know."

"Very," she said. "Especially if you turn out to be able to deprogram the other wolves as you did yours, and they're willing to fight against the Volturi." She closed her eyes, probably remembering the massacre at La Push. If she'd been able to shield the packs from Jane and Alec then, they might have had a chance.

"Are you limited by distance?" I asked. "Try shielding just me, and then back away a step at a time."

She screwed up her face in concentration, balled up her fists at her sides, and started backing away from me step by deliberate step. I noticed Allireia, watching us from her perch several yards up the mountain. When my mother had gotten about twenty feet distant, she lost it with a great gasp for air. I wasn't sure why she would gasp for air to use a power that had no obvious connection with breathing, but she did it; maybe a habit leftover from humanity. "Hang on, I'm going to try to establish it from here," she muttered. "There... got you..." Allireia waved at me. My mother dragged one foot behind her and leaned onto it, and then cursed.

"Is the distance itself making it harder, or do you just need a break?" I asked.

"Need a break," she said, walking up to me and Jake again. Perhaps symbolically, she sat down on a rock. "This is exhausting."

I nodded. "Like I said before, it's *very* unusual for a power to be fueled by desperation or anything like it. Powers that require a mental state are uncommon in the first place. More often you see them responding to exertion of will - like Jane - or a condition like touch - like Aro - or they're just a continuous effect - like Marcus, or like most of yours. But Addy's seen a few."

"What were those like?" asked my mother tiredly.

"There's Heidi, there's Abdelmajid, there's Razi -"

"Details, not just names, please."

"Heidi's a weird one," I said, picking over my memories from her with bemusement. "Her power doesn't work on *herself*. In fact... she doesn't think she's beautiful at all. To herself she looks about as pretty as the average human, although even with her power turned all the way down she's objectively in Roaslie's league. But to other people's eyes, she gets more enchanting the more insecure she feels about her looks. Weird," I said again. "She's trained herself to go into and out of the state practically at will. She used to have almost no control at all and it'd fluctuate wildly depending on how much she cared about the opinion of whoever was looking at her, and how her hair was behaving on a given day, and stuff like that."

"Hmm," said my mother. "I'm almost certainly immune to Heidi. If I insulted her appearance in the middle of a battlefield would she be insecure enough about that that she'd blind everybody else with her magical beauty and I could go around taking down anyone else I liked?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe," I said. "She doesn't usually get negative comments on her appearance. It'd be too obviously false. But you're a good liar."

She nodded. "Abdelmajid?" she prompted.

"He sees through stuff," I said. "But he has to be calm to do it. When he's anxious at all, it cuts down on the thickness of what he can see through. Like, if he's completely, absolutely calm, he could see all the way through this mountain like it wasn't here -" I tossed my head to indicate the heap of rock we were sitting on. "That'd be about his limit. If he were really preoccupied, he could see through a sheet of paper - and he has a bad habit of looking through people's clothes - but nothing more than that. And there's everything in between. He has a breathing exercise he does if he needs to look through a thick wall or something."

"And who's Razi?"

"A teleporter," I told her. "The Volturi had him for a while, in the dungeon, but he got away during my first jailbreak and they couldn't catch him again. He's like the opposite of Abdelmajid and jumps from place to place when he's scared or distracted. In order to stay in one place he needs to be really absorbed in whatever he's doing - but he can jump wherever he wants, so sometimes if he's agitated but doesn't want to go far he'll just go an inch to the left and an inch to the right over and over."

"Interesting," she murmured. "How did the Volturi hold him?"

"He can't pick a destination when he doesn't know which way is up," I said. "His power won't send him to a random place without him selecting one even if he's feeling, you know, *jumpy*, but he's just naturally disposed to think of someplace else he'd rather be

when he does feel that way."

My mother looked up at the sky, and said, "Are all the unusual behaviors of my shield likely to be run by the same emotion?"

"Yes," I said. "The basic shield - what it's like when it's not doing anything - probably is too, but in the background more."

She blinked once, slowly, and then said, "Elspeth, do you have any way to get in touch with Razi? He could be useful and might help - in general, not with my shield in particular."

"No - well, Dwi could talk to him, but Dwi works for the Volturi so I don't think Razi would answer him now. Razi didn't have a coven, doesn't have a mate, and never owned a phone or used e-mail. And he was pretty sure that a neighbor of his would have moved into his territory once he was gone, so he probably wouldn't have returned there."

"Of course," she sighed. "My shield works against what it works against without any attention or prompting. It worked to hedge Edward's mindreading out before I knew mindreading was possible. How could that be?"

"Well," I said, "my best guess is that it has to do with how you would have thought about mindreading if someone had told you it was going on. I don't currently know of any witches whose power is to fly, but if I met one there's some way I would feel about that. There was already some way you were inclined to feel about having your mind read before you got within range of Dad."

"Terrified," she murmured. "But I was scared of Jasper's power, at once, when I heard about it - and wasn't immune to it at first."

"*Jasper* doesn't think of his power as something to fear," I said, pulling up Alice's memories of conversations with him, since I didn't have her husband's own recollections of anything. "He *can* use it that way, he even does sometimes, but mostly he thinks of it as an extension of his charisma. But Dad has always felt intrusive listening to other people's thoughts. He does sort of think of it as something that it would be reasonable to find scary."

"Explains Kate," my mother said after a beat.

"Yeah," I said. "Kate thinks she's scary. Jane *revels* in being scary. Eleazar got a partial look at your power, when you first met him, right? Almost like you didn't immediately think it would be that big a deal, and then -"

"And then I noticed all the inferences it let Eleazar make about Harry..." she murmured. "Eleazar can still *partially* detect me, though."

"He's pretty strong; it *could* be a matter of him just incompletely overpowering you," I said with a shrug of my good shoulder. "He also doesn't think of it as something harmful

himself. Anyway, I can't *know*. I can't read your mind, and neither can anybody else I remember who's tried. But I think your shield probably runs on fear. Were you scared about being knocked out for a few hours when I was about to blast you?"

"Yes," she said, unwillingly, tipping her head down again to look at me instead of the sky.

"But the first time you encountered my power I was the least scary thing ever: a tiny baby," I said. "And I stayed harmless and stayed harmless and then suddenly I wasn't, so now I guess your shield thinks I'm scary."

"I'm not afraid *of you*," she said. "And I wasn't particularly afraid in the moment I first developed an immunity to Jasper."

"Well, it's not all that specific, or I'd still be able to give you harmless sendings," I said. "But I could be totally wrong. This is the sort of thing Addy can taste directly, so I don't have a lot of interview techniques to go on and I'm making it up based on patterns in witches she's looked at before. But it seems like an okay guess, doesn't it?"

"Why wouldn't I have developed my own genuine immunity to Alice when I was afraid of her spying on my... extracurricular activities?" she asked after a moment's thought.

"Because your extracurricular activities didn't take place in your head?" I guessed. "Your power definitely isn't to be protected from *everything* that scares you, but it *might* be to protect you from mental witch powers that scare you. *Plausibly*-mental witch powers or death," I added, thinking of Kate, and my mother's two brushes with trauma that would have killed any other vampire. "I think maybe your immunity to Kate could have something to do with the fact that when she zaps people they lose control of their bodies for a moment - convulsing and falling over and stuff. It's not quite like she outright possesses them, since she can't control how they flail around, but it's close enough that your power might interpret it the same way."

"I'm not sure I think much of this theory," said my mother. "But I suppose it bears testing - if I could think of a good test, anyway."

"Well, the test would be if shielding a number of people for a long time got easier when you focused on something scary, especially something scary that you could otherwise prevent," I said. "But I don't think you should shield Jake again unless there's some kind of emergency, if you can't hedge out whoever the packmate is, because it would look bad for the packmate to suddenly be intangible to Chelsea's power or invisible to Marcus or whatever. So just focus on me for now."

"I have plenty to be *anxious* about, but there's nothing *immediate* here to be afraid of," she said. "I was briefly alarmed about the possibility of Pera being here, but I think you're right that it's too unlikely to worry about."

"I suppose I could attack you or something, but I'm not very threatening, especially

since I can't blast you," I said. "And Jake would have a hard time threatening a houseplant right now." I shrugged my good shoulder. "Maybe we can figure something out with Kate? She could threaten to zap me... maybe after I'm healed," I added, looking at my bad shoulder and frowning. "In the meantime maybe work on the distance exercise again?" She stepped back to a distance of some twenty-five feet, closing her eyes and sighing. "I don't know what getting Tased with a broken shoulder would - Mama?"

My mother was staring past me; I looked around but couldn't figure out why. "Is something wrong?" I asked, speaking up over the meaningless murmurs coming from behind me.

"Elsie, come here," my mother said, slowly and carefully, without moving from her vantage point, but her voice trembled.

"I don't want to wake Jake," I said. "Why -"

"*Elsbeth Annarose Cullen* -" she began shrilly, and then suddenly I noticed Allirea crouched over me with her mouth open near my throat, and I let out a startled *eep*.

"I was helping," announced Allirea, standing up from her crouch and folding her arms as she spoke to my mother, whose eyes were wide and furious. "If that helped, then you do not need to let Katrina electrify Elsbeth. Isn't that preferable?" she inquired.

I looked around at Allirea. "You were threatening me to scare her?" I asked. "That sounds... like a really dangerous thing to do. For you, I mean."

"I would not have really harmed you," said Allirea. "I have no wish to, and Isabella would certainly have killed me if I had, although I was close enough to you that I could have managed some amount of injury before she would have gotten me away from you. But look," she said smugly. "I am completely faded, and you are speaking to me, and Isabella has not yet lost hold of her shield."

"...It *did* feel easier," admitted my mother slowly, still looking daggers at Allirea but not moving to take revenge for the scare. "And it feels stable now."

"Can I affect Elsbeth if we are both under your shield?" Allirea asked.

"Let me check," my mother said.

"Check what?" I asked.

"Yes, apparently," my mother said, as Allirea flared into importance again beside me. "How odd. Unfade," my mother told Allirea, "I hear someone coming." I didn't notice any difference in Allirea. Over the next mountain, my grandparents came into view.

Hunter

Esme distributed phones, and Carlisle recited a litany of phone numbers for us to memorize: every phone-bearing person in Denali and everyone in Britain whose number Cath had provided. We didn't program the numbers into the phones in case they were somehow lost - "it's not a terrible risk, but Siobhan thought that as long as we can just memorize the numbers, we should," Esme explained.

I did program Allirea's number into my phone, but I labeled it "Emergency" - not because Allirea would be the best emergency contact, but because that way I would be able to actually *call* it in an emergency.

"Siobhan wanted you to call her," Carlisle told me. "She should be clear of the house by now, so... Alice shouldn't present a problem."

I dialed Siobhan's number. She picked up immediately. "Elspeth, I need you to go to Biloxi," she said without preamble.

"...What?" I asked, failing to immediately figure out why I would need to be sent to Biloxi.

"James, 1920...?" Siobhan said. "Do I need to spell -"

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "No, I think I get it, one sec -"

- My Vicky, she knows me. She knows just what will strike my fancy. A neatly buttoned up loony bin, secure as can be, hard to get into and out of undetected... yet full of nibbles no one is likely to truly miss. Full of nutcases who were squirreled away here in the first place because their families didn't want them. The orderlies and the analysts and what all might be in a tizzy, but try getting the cops excited about a dead snack in a place like this. As long as my lunch is obviously a dead mental patient, not an escaped mental patient, they'll just pin it on another lunatic. Challenging hunt - simple coverup. Ah, my Vicky, she gives such lovely presents.

I smell two things, approaching the madhouse:

First, dinner - lots of it, crowded in close and warm and only a little soured with bughouse drugs (my Vicky picked me an institution that prefers flavor-preserving treatments like electroshock, my lovely Vicky knows me) - and one dessert. I don't think she's one of those "singers" I've heard about, or not quite...but she does smell delectable indeed. I've made up my mind to sink my teeth into whoever's leaving that trail the instant I breathe it in. There's no trail of her leading away from the place, so she's cracked, not a shrink or a nurse or anything of the kind.

Second, a vampire - not me, and not Vicky.

And that scent is laid down thick. This other vampire didn't just pop in here for breakfast and scurry off. This other vampire didn't just pass through the courtyard on his way to visit New Orleans and eat wayward Mardi Gras partiers. (Mm.) He's here every day. He's been here every day for a long time.

...Why?

What is a vampire doing here like the inedible trinket in a box of Cracker Jacks? As a patient he'd be found out right away. The Volturi would be on this place in a blink. Is he working here? Or maybe prowling around unofficially? I don't smell a hunt on the premises. He's not sneaking maniacs onto his plate.

Is he going to get between me and my treat?

Wouldn't that be interesting?

I double back to my Vicky and thank her for the most fascinating present I have ever in my life received. Whatever the hell he's doing there, he's bound to give me an interesting time swiping my crazed confection off the dessert cart -

- I stake out the place around nightfall, hiding up in a tree, and watch personnel go in and out. The vampire hasn't been found out yet, so obviously he's on the night shift in this sunny weather. I spot him going up to the door, picking him out by gait first of everything. He's brazen as my Vicky showing off her shinies in the daylight to some morsel she's about to slurp up, but the humans aren't going to notice how nice and even he walks, how he smells like coconut and blood, how he's too pale and too pretty. Or they'll notice, but won't know what it means.

Nobody mentions his eye color when he goes in; they just call him "Dr. Carver", tell him good evening. Probably he's passed it off as some condition. Or he eats light, takes a couple days off, goes to work black-eyed. Didn't see him from that angle. But he works there. They know him.

I wait. He comes out of the building again before dawn. (Red eyes.)

And he smells of my sweetmeat.

He doesn't reek of her, and the other kooks have rubbed off on him some too. I'm sure he didn't have her for supper. But he did spend more time with the morsel than with any of her fellow fruitcakes.

This is no pediatric psycho ward. If my nibble were his mate, he'd have turned her already, without fear of the Volturi and their vendetta against immortal children. If he were going to eat her... why wait? She's not the newest bat in the belfry, the smell of her hangs around this place too heavily for her to be recent.

He left himself a good hour between quitting time and sunrise. Once he's well away, I climb down my tree, slide some shoes on to look presentable, and go in to investigate.

"Excuse me," I say to the first person I see - a nurse. "My name's James Carver. Is my brother here?"

She flutters her eyelashes at me. Vicky'd probably kill her for that if Vicky were here, but she's not. "Dr. Carver is your brother? I don't believe he's mentioned you."

"Yeah, brothers. Well, most people can tell, on account of the..." I wave at my eyes. Red.

"Oh, I didn't realize that ran in his family," she says. "I'm afraid you've just missed Dr. Carver. He's gone home."

"Shucks!" I'm just toying with her now, playing my role. "I was going to meet him here! He was talking about his patient in his last letter - been talking about her for some time now, but I've just got no memory for names, can't quite recall what he called her, might have had an E in it? - anyway he thought she was an interesting case study. I'm working on a book," I add.

"He's been particularly interested in Miss Brandon's case," the nurse tells me, raising an eyebrow.

"A B in her name, that was it," I say, snapping my fingers, "There any chance I could meet Miss Brandon now rather than waiting 'till my brother's back tomorrow? Only my wife's not well, I'd have stayed with her if I hadn't had this trip planned so long but she didn't want me to jeopardize my book to fuss over her, and I'd like to make all my observations quick and get home to her."

"I'm not sure..." The nurse wavers, looks at the ring on my finger, the earnest expression I'm putting on.

"I'll just be in and out, lickety-split," I promise. "I don't need to interview Miss Brandon tonight or even wake her up if she's sleeping. Just have to get a first impression of her to introduce her case in the book." And in fact I don't plan to eat "Miss Brandon" right now. That would be too easy, and too obvious to the people who look out for this sort of thing. But I do intend to learn where her room is, and leave a trail of my own for "Dr. Carver" to find. Let him make this interesting. I don't know why he's so interested in Miss Brandon if he's not going to eat her and she's not his mate, but maybe he'll make me work for my dessert.

Miss Brandon - "What's her first name? Did it have an R...?" "Mary, she's Mary Alice Brandon" - is a tiny restless tidbit. She's asleep when we go to her room, a miserable windowless cube in the basement, but wakes up soon enough, eyes unfocused.

"I'll let you be, I've got other errands," says the nurse. "You can show yourself out,

I'm sure, Mr. Carver."

"Of course," I reply, my attention on Miss Brandon.

"It's you," Miss Brandon says. "Please - please don't -"

"What is it you think I'm going to do?" I ask her, amused.

"You want to kill me," she says, "but you're not going to do it today..." She fumbles her fingers through her hair, which they've shorn very short, probably to make her easier to wash. She sounds lucid, for a loon. And the statement about me is quite uncanny. But she might be a paranoid who thinks everyone wants to kill her. "I can't see..."

"It is dark," I drawl. Maybe Carver is interested in her for her entertainment value, although I imagine she'd get old after a while.

"I won't remember," she says, blinking wide eyes. "Sin."

"Sin?"

"Little sin. I won't remember," she says again, sounding less and less lucid, "one way or the other. You won't kill me today, can I sleep, please?"

"Be my guest," I reply, smiling. I back out of the room as she slumps back down into sleep, and let her be -

- "I thought you would fight me for her, maybe move her someplace harder to sneak into!" I shout at Carver. He's standing over little Miss Brandon. She's halfway through changing, already undelicious, barely even screaming. "I thought you'd make it an interesting challenge! I didn't think you'd haul off with her and turn her!"

"You were wrong," he says. "Here she is. Do you still want her?"

"No," I snarl.

His lip curls up. Just a little too smug -

"Those ravings of hers..." I say.

"What about them?" Carver asks. "You did notice she was in a sanitarium -"

"Yes, I noticed she was in a damn sanitarium. She's a witch, isn't she? An unbalanced witch, but still magic and not just mental. She told you where to go to avoid me long enough and told you I wouldn't want her if she were changed!"

"I have to object somewhat to your giving her all the credit," he says. Too smug, too smug by half, he's barely even watching me for an attack. "It does take work to decipher

what she says. She only sees, doesn't hear... she's thrown off by unmade decisions... often there are too many pictures for her to keep track of and she experiences dreadful headaches... I wanted to fully study how her power functions in its current form before turning her, but you've forced my -"

I throw myself forward, and he dodges and runs, but I chase him down and tear him apart.

He goes down easily. I don't even think about springing back and running and fetching my Vicky to help. He was counting on my wanting Miss Brandon only for her blood, and it's true I don't want her any longer... she's safe from me now... but him, him I am all too happy to kill.

I burn him.

I watch the witchy crackpot change. It's like she doesn't even notice the pain. She talks, sometimes - about "sin" and how she won't remember. When she's nearly done, I hide out and watch her. If she notices me, well, I can handle one newborn alone; if she doesn't, well, let her be, and who knows what she'll do, but I don't care anymore. My dessert's gone.

She opens her eyes, and it's like she's never seen the sun before -

-That's the sun.

I don't know how I know that.

I see a man. One day I will meet that man. I don't know where or when or how, but I will meet him one day, and we will love each other. I think I already love him. The vision goes away and I don't know how to make it come back, but somehow I can remember the face I saw anyway, all scars and blond hair. His eyes are red and I don't know why.

I don't know who I am.

I think my name might be Alice, or have an Alice in it. I think that's an okay name. Alice.

I don't know where I am.

I get up and look around, but I don't see any clues. It's a woods. It could be any woods. I think I feel very strong and very thirsty.

I don't know what I'm comparing myself to. I don't remember being weak or being without the pain in my throat.

I'd better go this way. If I go that way, someone will see me, and I'll be in terrible

"Okay, I don't think I understand after all," I said to Siobhan.

"Do you remember when your mother told Alice about what James told her?" Siobhan prompted. "And what Alice thought of that?"

"Alice was thinking she'd look herself up and figure out where she came from," I said. "She never got around to it."

"Elspeth, Alice is currently one of the most unanswerable strengths of the Volturi," said Siobhan. "Even when we can *block* her, that blocking is noticeable. We need Alice away from the Volturi's side and on ours. She's been Chelseaed to hell and back. But think about when Chelsea *fails*, Elspeth, you're a clever girl."

"Chelsea can snip relationships with dead people, people you've never met in person, people who are right there or far away - just about the only thing she can't do is mates, but I don't see how Jasper would be any easier -"

"Chelsea cannot snip your relationships with people who *you don't know exist*," said Siobhan, exasperated. "If you had a sister wandering around, and you didn't suspect that she existed, Chelsea wouldn't be able to affect how you would react to that sister upon meeting her."

"You think Alice has living relatives and doesn't know it," I breathed, finally making the leap.

"Exactly. Now, the tricky part is getting ahold of Alice and her mate in such a way that you can deprogram them and we can give her a relative to latch onto so she doesn't stick with the Volturi out of inertia - but the *easy* part is for you, invisible to Alice as you are, to go to Biloxi and look Alice up and see who there might be."

My head was spinning. The *usual* means by which the Volturi shed guards was death (like Demetri) or the discovery of a mate (like Eleazar). But on a handful of occasions, guards had learned that they had a child or grandchild or sibling unbeknownst to them, and - presented with a family that Marcus couldn't see coming and Chelsea couldn't have taken from them - decided to depart. Losing a particularly valuable witch this way (who'd abandoned the guard to be with his son, depriving the Volturi of his invisibility power) in 1602 had been the last straw for Caius, who'd called for more stringent relative-finding procedures - partly to check for heritable witchcraft, and partly to kill or controllably snip away stray kin.

They had not bothered with this for witches in their dungeon.

I *expected* that they would have started up with it after my seeding had left their

prisoners up and about and capable of meeting such relatives.

But they wouldn't know where to look for relations of Alice's.

Alice's own memories provided no significant clue to where she'd come from - when she retraced her steps a couple of years after turning, to figure out where she'd been created, she'd found the place, all right - hundreds of miles west of Biloxi. Dr. Carver had moved her there, trying to buy her time in their escape from James.

My mother had later told her what James had said, but he hadn't named the city or even the exact year in the twenties. It would have been tiresome detective work to find out *which* hospital Alice had come from, knowing only the fact that she had woken up with an American accent, *might* have "Alice" somewhere in her legal name, and was in an asylum at some point between 1920 and 1929. I peeked, and noted that when my mother had begun explaining all of this information, Alice had actually balked at the implied tedium before even learning that *James* had been the source of the information. She'd never followed up later, either. It was a reasonable guess, but not one she'd bothered to make.

Aro had *James's* memories. But Aro had no reason to think James and Alice were connected. He'd only read the tracker to determine whether he was witch enough to bring into the guard, troublesome enough to kill. He'd relied on Santiago's memories about what James had said to apprehend the basic situation between the tracker and his captive... he'd chosen to read James merely to determine the nature of his witchcraft... he couldn't read my mother, from whom I'd heard the story... He certainly *might* be able to figure out whence Alice by idly browsing through James's exploits of a century previous, but with so much else to look at, he wasn't likely to find the information that way.

"Elspeth?" said Siobhan through the phone.

"Right, right," I said. "Alice, relatives, Biloxi. But - but I can't go. Jake is sick -"

"Did you get some food and water into him?" Siobhan asked, knowing as well as I did all the accumulated information about how to care for a bitten wolf.

"Yes, but then he had to phase..." I explained what my mother's power had shown her and how we'd determined that Jake still had at least one packmate, who had presumably been out of wolf form when I'd first asked about it.

"He's going to be fine, Elspeth," said Siobhan impatiently. "Eve is the only wolf who ever actually *died* of vampire bites, or even failed to make a full recovery eventually, and she had three bites, not one. He's not the first wolf to take one bite and have to wait out the sickness in human form. Do you think I can send *Allirea* to Biloxi? I'll take her help in a pinch, but I don't want to send her on a long-distance mission and rely on her loyalty to see that she ever comes back instead of running to her father and sisters, or her kids, or just off by herself where nobody can look at her. Do you have another half-vampire or werewolf up your sleeve? Can you suggest another person who will be able to explain to

Alice's granddaughter or nephew or whoever you find this entire mess, believably, and get him or her to travel to Alaska to participate in the next step?"

"No," I sighed, smoothing Jake's hair again. "My shoulder is still broken..."

"You can walk, and it'll be healed soon enough," she replied.

"Do I have to go alone?" I asked softly. "Jake can't travel."

"No. You shouldn't go alone," Siobhan said. "You should take a non-witch vampire or two with you, to look out for you while you sleep, help you find Alice's relatives, and fend off unexpected threats. Any preferences?"

The non-witch part ruled out my mother, so I didn't waste time feeling guilty about finding the idea of bringing her awkward. I considered my grandparents, but decided Carlisle was probably an important rallying point for most of the local allies and shouldn't be running hither and yon. Especially the Denalis, who I decided against promptly - I didn't know how sure to be of their changed loyalties. I considered Kachiri and Senna, who I remembered through their captured sister Zafrina's eyes. I considered Carlisle's various friends who I remembered through his history. I spent all of two seconds considering Cath and Ilario.

"Rosalie and Emmett?" I suggested finally. "They have legal identities so they can fly normally. I can borrow someone else's, maybe, or go in a suitcase if there's a way to get me through the x-ray machine safely." My aunt and uncle had been familiar, but not cloyingly so - they were aware of the rift, even if they were only so aware because I'd gone missing from their lives for five years.

"You're a minor," Siobhan said. "You don't need ID to fly domestic. They *can* ask for proof of age, but they don't have to. I think if *you* tell them you're underage, they'll let you by. If it comes up, you *are* legally an American citizen just because of your parents - I suppose someone could make it into a fight over paperwork, but in case you thought being born in Norway made a difference..."

"Oh," I said. "Okay. I did know about the citizenship thing. I grew up in a series of libraries and read a lot of Wikipedia."

"So you did," said Siobhan after a moment to retrieve the memory. "All right. Rosalie and Emmett have agreed to go with you. We'll get you tickets - probably for tomorrow - and send you on your way."

"Should we get in touch with Peter and Charlotte as long as we're there-ish?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so. They're not witches, and *might* report us to the Volturi just so they can stay out of things. If we decide the thing to do is bury the enemy in bodies, better to do it with a newborn army than with a couple of people who would rather not be involved and feel beholden to one of said enemy more than any of us. We can reconsider

it if we successfully pull out Alice and Jasper. *However*," she said thoughtfully, "perhaps you should fly into the airport near them, so as to have a plausible explanation for the trip, and then drive the rest of the way. Alice won't be able to see you, but if you travel legally there's a trail of records."

"Okay," I said. "What should I do if I find a relative of Alice's? Bring them to Alaska?"

"Tell them everything, answer their questions, ask for their help, and then call me," she said. "The plan could change a lot between then and now. We might need them in Alaska or Britain or Italy or in an inaccessible bunker in Antarctica. We might need them turned or human. Keep in touch, is the upshot of all this."

"Antarctica?"

"An example of a place where one might build a relatively inaccessible bunker. I don't have plans for one; my point is that I don't yet know what to do with Alice's relative or relatives if and when you find one, and you'll just have to call me after the fact for an update. Go ahead and spend the rest of today looking after your wolf, and get a good night's sleep, and in the morning you and your aunt and uncle will fly out."

"Okay," I said.

"When Jacob wakes up next, if you can get him to tell you anything about the packmate, let me know immediately," Siobhan said. "I don't think, under the circumstances, that he'll have sent them anything they can use. Not as loopy as he's got to be under the venom and the painkillers, and not with as much cover for incriminating notions as his habit of watching you dream can provide. But I could be wrong, so - as I said."

"Right," I said, and Siobhan hung up.

My mother was looking at me sadly. I blinked at her, then shrugged my good shoulder and turned my attention back to Jake, still sleeping.

A few hours later, he woke up again, and I gave him more water and some of the non-sheep food that we had, and got him to blink me a confirmation that he didn't know who his packmate was or whether they'd heard anything. My mother was on the phone with Siobhan, going over the limitations of her shield and how she could be deployed in a fight, so I just relayed this information aloud, assuming that Siobhan would hear me. My mother nodded.

After dark, I found a way to lie down that didn't put pressure on my shoulder, tucked my hand into Jake's, and drifted off. The last thing I noticed was my mother gently taking my other hand.

Genealoger

When I woke up, my mother promptly released my hand, not making eye contact. "Couldn't make it work," she murmured. I felt sorry for her, a little - I didn't care if she wanted to watch my dreams, but it obviously mattered to her that she no longer could. Sometime overnight she'd taken back the jewelry she'd tossed me during the previous day's fight; she was wearing her rings, her bracelet, and her locket with my father's wedding ring strung onto the chain. Rosalie and Emmett were nearby, with three packed bags, waiting for me.

"Morning, early-bird," said Emmett. "All set?"

"We have enough time before the flight for you to hunt, if you like," Rosalie said, "or we can stop and get you something on the way."

I didn't feel like trying to kill anything while I had an injury, and I'd gotten more used to human food over the past month and a half. "Let's just get something at the airport," I said, sitting up and gently prodding my shoulder. It was tender, but as long as I didn't crazily windmill my arms I thought it would be all better by the evening.

I looked at Jake. He was still fast asleep. I smoothed his hair again, and sent him a summary of where I was going and why so he wouldn't be confused when he woke up with no one but my mother nearby. He didn't stir, but I assumed it would be there for him to remember when he woke up and wondered where I was.

I followed Rosalie and Emmett out of the mountain range to where they'd parked a car - I didn't know if it was hers or one of the Denalis', but I hadn't seen it before. She drove, and the pair of them engaged me in gentle conversation about how each of us had spent the five years following my "disappearance" (as Rosalie kept calling it - I had a hard time thinking of myself as having disappeared).

I had Rosalie's memories up until the day she'd been to Volterra to retrieve Ilario from his sickbed. Demetri had noticed her, "invited" her to the compound for a brief visit, and conducted her to Aro, who read her, all in the time it took the hospital to deem Ilario ready to travel. The Volturi had let her go without incident or subtext-laden conversation, although Aro had pressed a jeweled hairclip on her. It was a fairly routine check - which left me with recollections of most of my aunt's life, and through her eyes, a majority of Emmett's too.

Emmett found this fascinating. He kept asking me for numbers of various memory types - how many times did I remember getting married, how many firsthand perspectives did I have on the fall of Rome, how many authentic Sanskrit accents could I do, how many books I now had memorized, how many instruments could I now play if I got my hands on them. I couldn't answer most questions like that without at least a few hours to look for the answers. "Lots," I tended to answer each such question, or sometimes

"several", followed by a few examples, which he seemed to find just as satisfactory as a numerical answer.

Rosalie wanted me to settle a long-running argument between her and her husband about whether or not she had in fact seen Elvis in a department store in 1960; she'd told Emmett she had, but he was skeptical, and on inspection I was pretty sure he was right. "It *did* look like him," I said when Rosalie pouted at this pronouncement, "but I think Elvis was across the country at the time, so it was probably just someone else." Rosalie did not ask me to arbitrate any other disagreements, and subsequently only wanted to hear things I knew from the memories of an ill-fated race car factory employee Aro had once eaten. By the time we arrived at the airport, Rosalie had a lot of outdated corporate espionage on Lamborghini.

We got onto our airplane with little fuss, after stopping to buy me several sandwiches and bags of snackfood. I nibbled through these absentmindedly between my turns in our ongoing conversation, which had begun to revolve around art history and how "unbelievably cute" it was that I remembered a lot of it. Rosalie teased tangles out of my hair. Emmett informed me that I'd been loaned some of Kate's clothes, again, which were in the suitcase they'd packed for me.

"Do either of you actually know how to go about looking up Alice?" I asked during a lull in the conversation.

"Don't you have lots of memories of how to find stuff like this?" teased Emmett. "Elspeth, Genealoger Extraordinaire!"

"I have *too many*," I said. "From all over the world over thousands of years of history. I could probably pick out the ones that will most likely be applicable to 2011 Biloxi if I thought about it all day, but it would be easier if one of you had an idea of what to do."

"Well, first, I think we should see if the hospital is still there," said Rosalie briskly.

"I can find the building," I said. "Or if it's gone, the place where it was."

"Then, if it's still a hospital," said Emmett, "we talk or intimidate or sneak or trick our way into their records... but they probably don't have ninety-year-old patient lists with convenient next of kin listings."

"Then why go there at all?" I asked. "If they probably don't have records, I mean."

"If it *does* have records, that's the obvious place to find what we're looking for. If it doesn't, then we need to find a genealogical library, or church records, or talk to people in a nursing home who might have known the family, or something like that - how well do you know your way around Biloxi, Elspeth?" Rosalie asked.

"Modern Biloxi? Not at all. And even in 1920 James didn't explore much," I said.

"So we'll need to consult someone for directions to places like that anyway, and may as well try asking at the hospital, if it's a hospital," said Rosalie. "The nursing homes in particular they could probably tell us how to find."

"That makes sense," I said.

"You can do your honesty voice claiming Alice is your aunt, right?" asked Emmett. "She's not too alienated or too non-biological or anything?"

"Honesty voice, is that what you call it?" I asked. "Yeah, I can, but I think I look too young to have an aunt who was born a hundred and eleven years ago. And we also don't know for sure if she had any siblings or was ever married before, and if she didn't and wasn't she couldn't have a niece of *any* age."

"Genealogy is a fuzzy business," Rosalie said. "You can say that you're *pretty sure* she's your aunt, and let people assume you *mean* great-aunt or great-great-aunt. It's possible she was an only child, but not very likely, and given the time scale we're looking at here, no one is likely to call you on it."

Emmett looked between me and Rosalie speculatively, and said, "I think we'll say you're our niece, Elspeth, on Rose's side, and that Alice is Rose's great-aunt and your great-great-aunt."

"Me, why not you?" Rosalie asked. "You've got the dark hair."

"Alice is a teeny person who probably had a teeny family, and I'm not even slightly teeny," said Emmett. "Besides, for all anybody knows you could dye -"

"I do *not*," said Rosalie grumpily.

"I know you don't," laughed Emmett, placating her with a peck on the cheek, and we continued hammering out the details of how we'd present ourselves in trying to justify our interest in Alice's background.

The plane landed. Rosalie bought a car ("I've had my eye on this model for a while... there's no place to put it after we're done with it, but I know a charity with an arm in Nashville that'll take it and then I can get another one later," she said, sounding vaguely disdainful of rented cars in general), and I slept through the drive. By the time I woke up we were in a hotel. Or rather, Rosalie and I were in a hotel, and Emmett was already out and about learning his way around town.

"Couldn't you have been nocturnal?" sighed Rosalie, looking out at the brief remaining darkness that was letting her mate go out and about sans elaborate disguise.

"Our sleep schedules are pretty random, I think," I said. "Noemi is outright nocturnal. Cody gets up and goes to sleep a couple hours before me. Iseul can stay up

later than I can. And Nahuel gets up at noon every day."

"How do you know?" Rosalie asked, tilting her head and looking amused.

"I met Cody in person. And my parents kept Nahuel talking about how the species works for a while, while they were trying to figure out whether they could have me or not," I replied, unsure why this would be amusing.

"Oh, hmph," said Rosalie. "I thought you would make a confused face and not know how you knew that."

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

Rosalie pursed her lips in thought, and said, "How many *grandchildren* does Joham have?"

"Four, unless Nahuel... has... wait..." I scrunched my eyebrows together, wondering where the extra three came from, and Rosalie laughed, giving me a careful hug that avoided my shoulder even though it had no remaining signs of injury. "Huh?"

"Ah, you look all grown up but you're still such a cute kid," laughed Rosalie.

"...Thank you," I said uncertainly. She ruffled my hair, smiling, and then ushered me down to the hotel's cafeteria for breakfast. Emmett joined us soon enough, and the vampires sipped water while I ate off three plates for the sake of appearances.

Rosalie's comment about my schedule aside, the fact that most places we could go for information were not open in the middle of the night meant that they'd come equipped for daywalking and expected to do some of it. By the time I finished eating, there were enough clouds that they didn't need coverage even outside the car, but they did stash their sweaters and gloves and hats in the trunk while I directed us to the lot that had held Alice's sanitarium.

It was not a sanitarium anymore, and the building hadn't even been converted - it had been knocked down entirely, and the area now appeared to be part of a trailer park. "Well, that's disappointing," remarked Emmett.

I participated very little in the rest of the hunt - I recited facts and shared memories when my aunt and uncle asked me, and I followed them around when they left the car to cast my precognition shadow over our activities, but mostly I fretted about Jake and tried to distract myself from unproductive worry by processing recollections of interesting events. Rosalie and Emmett didn't seem to mind my disengagement. Emmett remarked, in a voice he might have thought too low for me to hear, that while the research project wasn't as good as getting to pulverize some Volturi, it was better than milling around Denali waiting for someone to have an idea or for the guard to get around to wiping them out.

Rosalie flipped through stacks of compiled genealogical data at the library with a

sourly envious expression on her face, doubtless looking at all the arrows pointing from parents to their broods of children and wishing for the millionth time to trade what Carlisle had given her for never having needed in the first place. "This lady seems to have been so popular that all three of her sons, and two of her daughters, named one of their girls Mary Alice after her," she muttered. "That must have been a confusing family to belong to. I bet it was a family joke or something after the first couple... No wonder some of them would have gone by middle name and our Alice would have woken up forgetting her first name. Only that means we have three Mary Alice Brandons to sort through... ah, no, it's four, this one married a fellow adopted by another branch of the Brandon family and got the surname that way..."

I remembered that I was - sort of - named after my mother and my (biological) paternal grandmother. Bored anyway, I looked through what I'd been blasted with about the latter. I had a handful of memories about her: moth-eaten, paper-thin impressions that had survived her son's turning, and a few vivid hours from Carlisle.

My father remembered his mother as a pleasant background fact about the world he'd lived in until age seventeen. She cooked, she scolded him when he misbehaved, she dispensed suitably embarrassing hugs in front of even-more-vaguely-remembered friends, she fretted about his intention to join the army as soon as he was able and fight in World War I. Then they both came down with the Spanish flu and rendered that plan moot. That was how Carlisle had encountered my father in the first place...

- Mrs. Masen is hurting her chances, trying to nurse her son. I thought he would go quickly, like his father - Edward Masen, Sr., who I never saw wake - but no, she's up and at the boy's side, looking after him through her own illness, whenever I happen by that part of the vast grid of beds makeshift and otherwise. I start spending more time in that corner, trying to attend to her son so she won't feel she needs to. I become a little less careful about hiding my speed, a little more willing to stay through the times I should pretend to be sleeping when I think it will pass without notice. There are many other things for my colleagues to pay attention to than my late hours and rapid work, and the patients are generally too delirious to notice, or be believed if they do.

I come in after sunset, after a day of pretending to sleep and having nothing to do but dream, insofar as I can dream, of Esme. I can only hope the plague has spared her part of Ohio, or wherever she's living now, if she's moved. (Let her have moved. One of these years I won't be able to go on alone anymore, and I will look for her, but let her have moved, let her be impossible to find, let her escape this fate...) If I left Esme behind to lead a normal, happy, human life, only for her to fall victim to this devastation exclusive to humans (she would be only twenty-two, now! so young!), then no protestation of having left for her own good will measure up to the loss... I must not dwell on Esme. It will do her no good.

When I can emerge, I check on Elizabeth Masen and her son first. I'm attached to them, with their matching green eyes and bronze hair, her obvious self-sacrificing care

for her child, his tenacious grip on life through a severe case of the illness. There have been so many patients, an endless march of them, all worth attachment, but I avoid it when I can, or the job would be too heartbreaking. I've failed in that, here. Perhaps the loneliness is catching up with me in more ways than the obvious. Elizabeth does vaguely, distantly resemble Esme, I suppose, though I'd never mistake one for the other. I think Esme would be a devoted mother like her. I hope she gets that chance. (Another thing I would be tempted to take from her.)

Elizabeth's not at her son's side, but in her own bed - I've been telling her over and over to stay there, but read it as a bad sign anyway. And I'm not wrong. She's taken a decided turn for the worse, her fever is out of control, she's too weak to fight it off anymore.

She glares at me, when I approach, and sounds stronger than she looks -

"Save him!"

I take her hand, knowing that anything will feel cold to someone so feverish. "I'll do everything in my power," I promise.

"You must," she says, and she clings to my hand tightly enough that I wonder if I wasn't mistaken, if she doesn't have the reserves to pull through... Hard, emerald eyes bore into mine. "You must do everything in your power. What others cannot do, that is what you must do for my Edward."

I know a moment of fear - she knows, she must know something! Why else would she ask that, if she didn't know me to be inhuman, if she didn't know that I have resources others lack...? How could she know? Some supernatural trick, like what Aro calls "witchcraft"?

She releases my hand, her arm falls onto the sheet, and she lapses into unconsciousness.

I've considered making a companion for myself. Considered it for decades, actually, although most sorely tempted seven years ago... just one person in the world who I would have no need to hide from, who I could in good conscience keep as a companion instead of an occasionally-visited, ineffectually-entreated friend at a distance. But I have never been able to justify making anyone like myself.

Elizabeth dies less than an hour after making her demand.

Edward is not far behind, I know.

Could she truly want a life like mine for her son?

There's something about his face, even in fitful, fevered sleep. Some goodness shining out of it. His mother had every right to be proud, to be protective, to - perhaps - die of a disease that needn't have killed her, trying to help her son. If I had ever had a

son, I would have wanted him to look something like that...

Whim, of all things, drives me. I wheel Elizabeth into the morgue, and then turn around and come back for Edward. No one stops me, no one checks him for breathing, for a pulse; there aren't enough eyes or hands to keep track of half the patients who aren't already in the morgue. No one else living is there. I steal him away out the back door, and go across rooftops to take him home -

"Elspeth," said Rosalie, jostling me out of my reminiscence. "I think we have a good idea where to go next. One of the Mary Alice Brandons was listed as dying in 1920 - the others all lasted another decade apiece except one who died when she was two. Had no kids, *but* had a little sister, born in 1909 when our Alice was eight, died in '86, but had one daughter in 1940, who's still alive - Alice's niece, if I'm right."

"Names?" I asked, getting up to follow her to the pay phone outside the library. It had a phone book, which she flipped through to the white pages. Emmett pulled faces at his reflection in the nearest window.

"The sister was Cynthia..." Rosalie began.

- little sin -

Little Cyn, maybe?

"née Brandon, married name Patterson, the daughter's Genevieve Lydia Patterson, never married. Genevieve would be over seventy, now," Rosalie said, frowning. "There wasn't a death date written for her, but if it was recent there wouldn't be. I hope she lives by herself."

"We'll try one of the cousins if Genevieve is dead?" I guessed.

"I suppose, but the farther away in the tree we have to go, the less likely it is to help. We'll hope Genevieve's okay," said Rosalie. She peered at the phone book. "Your honesty voice works on the phone, right?"

"Right," I said.

Rosalie pointed out the only Genevieve Lydia Patterson in the phone book. "Call her up. Tell her you think she's your aunt Mary Alice's niece and ask if you can visit with your aunt and uncle, to learn more about the family," she directed. "There are enough Mary Alices in the family that at worst she'll think you mixed our Alice up with one of her cousins. You're a cute, harmless, trustworthy little girl who's related to her and she's a childless spinster - I doubt you'll have trouble getting her to meet us. Then we spring the exciting "surprise! vampires!" bombshell as gently as possible and hope it doesn't give her a stroke."

I pulled out my phone and punched in the number, anxiety creeping up my spine, but my voice didn't shake after the ringing stopped and a woman's voice said "Hello?"

"Can I speak to Ms. Patterson, please?" I asked.

"Speaking. Who's calling?"

"My name is Elspeth," I said. "I - I'm doing a genealogy project. I think you might be related to my aunt Mary Alice Brandon. If you're Genevieve Lydia Patterson and your mother was Cynthia -"

"Oh my," exclaimed Genevieve. "I am, and she was. I didn't think Aunt Alice had family of her own before she passed, though."

"It's very complicated. Would it be possible for me, and my aunt Rosalie and uncle Emmett, to meet you?" I asked.

"My goodness. I have dinner with my book club today, but after that I don't see why not, I suppose," she fluttered. "My goodness. Did you find me in the phone book?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you have my address," Genevieve said. "But I'm telling my cousin Hattie's boy I'm having visitors and giving him all your names, so you know," she added in a warning tone.

"Of course," I said. "When would it be okay for us to visit you?"

"Mmm... eight?" suggested Genevieve. "I think I can dig up all the family photo albums and things like that by then! Oh, this will be fun, I haven't looked at those old boxes for years."

"Great. Thank you, Ms. Patterson," I said brightly, and we exchanged farewells and I closed my phone.

Genevieve lived in a small white house and kept a small white dog out in her yard, which stayed as far away from Rosalie and Emmett as it could when we walked up to the front door. (We had killed the afternoon reporting on our progress and making general chit-chat with our Denali contingent. Siobhan was delighted that we'd located a niece, but didn't stay on the phone long, only saying that she wanted another call as soon as Genevieve was caught up on what was going on.)

I rang the doorbell, and Genevieve answered the door. She was the most little-old-lady-like little old lady I had ever seen in my life: five feet tall, wispy snow-white hair, a face covered in smile-wrinkles, and a spindly, scrunched frame. She seemed able enough, though, ushering us in with enthusiastic gestures and shutting the door behind us. Her

eyes lingered a bit on Rosalie. "You look like you could use some sleep, Mrs..." She trailed off, waiting for a last name.

"Hale," supplied Rosalie.

"And you too, Mr. Hale," said Genevieve, assuming that they'd share a last name based on their introduction as my aunt and uncle. "And you'll be Elspeth, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said. "But... I didn't tell you the entire truth about why we're here. You see, we *do* think you're my aunt Alice's niece..."

"I looked at the family Bible," mused Genevieve, "and I just don't know how that can be, although I imagine you could be some sort of family. The Bible has Mary Alice in there, and if they left *her* in when she was sent off to die in a mental hospital, I don't think they're hiding any other siblings, are they? How else would I be your aunt's niece?"

"Alice didn't die," I said carefully, leaning hard on my magic, and Genevieve's eyes went wide. "She was released from the hospital by someone who worked there, but didn't know where she'd come from, or how to get home. She was eventually adopted by another family - um, Aunt Rosalie's parents. That's how she's my aunt."

"Me oh my," said Genevieve after a silence. "That's quite a story."

I heard the front doorknob twist, and the door pull open, and Rosalie and Emmett sprang to their feet too fast, and Genevieve gasped -

"Quite a story," agreed Alice's voice, softly.

"Mrs. Whitlock!" exclaimed Genevieve, getting up and shuffling to the door, leaving me and Rosalie and Emmett frozen in astonishment. "I wasn't expecting you tonight! Come in, come in. You too, Mr. Whitlock."

"Mrs. Whitlock?" I repeated. That was Jasper's last name from when he'd been human. I supposed they might have ditched the "Cullen" and "Hale" names, no longer needing to masquerade as an unmarried couple adopted separately by the family. I listened, and did hear another person breathing, besides Alice and Genevieve. Alice and Jasper both, then, and anyone else too far off for me to hear or holding their breath...

"Elspeth, Mr. Hale, Mrs. Hale, this is Alice Whitlock," Genevieve introduced brightly, leading Alice into the room with Jasper trailing warily behind them. "And her husband Jasper Whitlock. Alice, Jasper, these are -"

"We've met," said Alice delicately. Her posture was relaxed, but I knew that she didn't need to be in a combative stance to fight circles around -

Anyone she could *see*. So, if I were casting enough of a shadow, we might not automatically all die if she or Jasper decided to attack. Unless there were other Volturi lying in wait outside. Which there might be. I shivered.

Alice caught and held eye contact with me. I noted with some mild relief that her eyes were dark gold, and so were Jasper's... but that didn't necessarily signify any other break from the Volturi. Nobody would care if a couple eccentric vampires in the guard wanted to dine on animals. The fact that they did want to would have been more inspiring, if it weren't for the fact that Alice had started down the path without Cullen help and had no reason to consider vegetarianism equivalent to being a member of the family. I couldn't assume that their gold eyes meant anything more than a continuation of that independent habit.

"Oh, you know each other! My goodness!" said Genevieve, making an effort to sound pleased, but the fact that this was not a friendly chance encounter was obvious, and her voice was strained.

"Yes," Rosalie said, eyeing Alice and Jasper uncomfortably. "...Ms. Patterson, how did you meet Alice and Jasper?"

"Why, they're doing research on my mother - they're doing a project for a museum exhibit on the history of women in the armed forces," explained Genevieve. "Mother was an army nurse."

"Oh," said Rosalie, flat-voiced. "That's lovely."

"Isn't it?" said Genevieve, anxiously looking between Alice and Jasper, and me and Rosalie and Emmett. "I... I wasn't expecting you, Alice, Jasper. You said you would next

come tomorrow morning."

"Something came up," Jasper muttered, exchanging a calculating look with Emmett.

"I don't understand," Genevieve said.

"Elspeth -" said Rosalie.

"Don't," interrupted Alice.

"Why not?" I asked. I wasn't sure what Rosalie had been about to instruct me to say, but Alice seemed to at least have a guess.

"Don't *what*?" asked Genevieve.

"Because they'll be able to find out where we went, and check," said Alice. "Don't."

Genevieve was still bewildered, but with a decent guess of who "they" were, I surmised she meant that knowledge of what was going on would be dangerous for Genevieve. At least Alice was still capable of wanting Genevieve not to be murdered for knowing too much.

"They don't *know*?" Emmett asked.

"What is going on?" exclaimed Genevieve, starting to look a little shaky. She lowered herself into her chair, gazing around between her five visitors with unnerved eyes.

"It's all right, Genevieve," soothed Alice, not taking her eyes off my group. "Perhaps we should discuss our own topics somewhere else, rather than continuing to impose on your hospitality. Rosalie? Emmett? Elspeth? Is that agreeable?"

"The little island due north of here," suggested Emmett, not letting her choose the location. "Should be empty."

"Very well," said Jasper. "Good day," he added to Genevieve.

"I don't understand," pleaded the old woman.

"Please don't worry about it, Genevieve," I said, and I followed the vampires out of the house. I wanted to tell her it was okay, but she wouldn't have believed it. I didn't.

We made our way to the little island, awkwardly. None of us wanted to drop our guard, so we left our car where we'd parked it and traveled on foot, shifting configuration from defensive formation to defensive formation every three steps but never making an openly hostile move. Rosalie and Emmett made sure that neither of the others had a clear path to me, and Jasper and Alice seemed to be silently arguing over who got to protect the

other. I didn't notice any sign of (other) Volturi.

A quick swim halfway across the Black Bay later, we were on the designated island. (I was reminded of the time my mother conveyed me across Lake Huron when she first found me, although this time I made the trip under my own power; Rosalie and Emmett kept pace with me and hung close, and Alice and Jasper kept pace with *them* but swum a hundred feet off to our left.)

When we'd all pulled ourselves out of the water (Emmett shook himself off like a dog, and Rosalie carefully wrung her hair out), Emmett said, "So, again: They don't know?"

"I'll tell you that story if you tell us - let's make that, if Elspeth tells us - what you're doing here," Alice said.

"Go ahead, Elsie," murmured Rosalie, shifting to interpose part of herself between me and a flinty-eyed Jasper, but leaving my view clear.

I coughed, and, so Rosalie and Emmett could keep track of what I was saying and warn me if I veered into indiscreet territory, summarized verbally. "James's memories have a bit about you in them," I told Alice. "That told us where to look. We were hoping that we'd find Genevieve or someone like her, and would be able to convince you to leave the Volturi with her help, since you wouldn't know she existed and Chelsea couldn't have done any snipping." This was technically the entire story, without mentioning that "we" prominently included Siobhan.

Alice looked at me consideringly, and moved one of her longer patches of hair out of her face. "They don't know," she confirmed finally, "because the last time we saw any of them, they were all comatose."

I stared. "You weren't there when -"

"We hunt separately," explained Alice. "We came back and everyone in the compound was lounging on the floor, muttering. We checked in with the village and they were all fine, there, but those of the Volturi who were there were barely conscious."

"...So you decided to go to Biloxi? As is the obvious and natural reaction to finding your coven lying around on the floor for no clear reason?" asked Emmett.

Alice frowned, and Emmett winced, probably at the failed tease that would have been lobbed back to him with equal wit if it had been six years earlier. "No," said Alice. "We checked in with the village, made sure they were all okay for a few days in case whatever-had-happened took a while to go away if ever it did, and then we went on vacation to Madrid, on the assumption that someone would call when everything was back to normal."

"And then what?" Rosalie asked.

"Then, someone did call," Alice said.

"Addy," I guessed suddenly.

Alice nodded once. "She had the same general idea as you... only earlier, I suppose... and so as long as we were on vacation, we decided to come to town and look into my roots. We found Genevieve, obviously, and you heard the cover story we gave her so I could learn more about my sister and... myself. And just like it played out in your scenario, when a call from Volterra did come, we didn't answer it. I suppose Demetri will finish with whatever he's doing eventually and come find us. I don't know how long that will take - he's never visible on his excursions."

She sounded ambivalent about this, like she didn't really care on net if Demetri ever came knocking or not. I glanced at Rosalie and Emmett, who looked nonplussed, and said, "Why'd Addy call you?"

"I'm not sure," said Alice. "At the time we didn't know she'd broken with the Volturi - for all we knew she'd just been out of the way, like we were, when everyone in the compound fell over. So when she told me what had happened in Volterra and that I could go look for relatives in Biloxi, I took it as an instruction and went. But then Afton left a voicemail warning me not to touch her - or failing that, to have Jasper touch her if she managed to take my power - on the grounds that she was on the run and they didn't want her to be a precog."

"Huh," said Emmett.

"Did that earn me whatever you were leaving out of your story?" Alice asked me pointedly.

Rosalie looked hard at Alice, but didn't nod or shake her head; Emmett was frowning stonily. I wasn't sure what to do.

Then it occurred to me that my roundabout way of learning about other people was potentially a *lot* more useful, with a million years of memories in my head instead of five and a half.

"One sec," I said, and closed my eyes and started looking for good guesses.

Possibility: Alice and Jasper were really still working for the Volturi. Someone else - one of many candidates - had happened across James's memories and determined their relevance. Alice and Jasper were plants, waiting for me and whoever I was working with to show up, as part of the plan Santiago had mentioned where small groups from Carlisle's rebellion would be drawn out and picked off in manageable clumps.

Possibility: Alice and Jasper were working directly for Addy in some elaborate scheme, which I would have to be Siobhan to figure out because Addy still probably had Siobhan's power.

Possibility: Alice and Jasper were exactly as they appeared - they'd wandered off while Chelsea was asleep at the wheel, and weren't strongly inclined to go anywhere in particular except for the part where Alice was interested in hanging out with Genevieve.

I cradled my face in my hands, and conjured up Magic and Memory, and said to them, "Hop to."

"By "one sec", did you mean something like "half an hour", or perhaps -" Jasper began sarcastically.

"Shush," I said. "I'm thinking." *I need a memory of an old friend, out of touch recently, who shows up to turn a former ally over to a powerful master...*

- "Del! Is that you?" says Pera, appearing. I've been looking for her for a while now, but she's hard to find. I never expected to need to find her again. But no, of course I had to go back and hunt for her, there's no way I could get away with not digging up and dragging home every one of the most powerful witches I've ever met who're still alive. Caius is very curious about how Pera will react to turning. Frankly, so am I. Her power was one of the more extensible, and I think I was helpful to her. She was much more flexible afterwards than before. Once I've seen her, I draw on the chewy saccharine taste of Chelsea's witchcraft and snip away all of her connections, save the one twist of plastic wrap linking her to me. I'll be relatively able to hang onto her once I've got her, but if I'm lucky, she won't try to run off at all - ideally she'll have no one to run to. "I didn't expect to see you again," she says, opening her arms up for a hug.

I smile and gently hug her, and taste the tangy, metallic hiding power displace the oversweetened one, and watch a sepia tone tinge everything in view: these things are "outside", and if I saw anything tinted white instead, those would be hidden things. She doesn't seem to have hidden anything nearby. "Hi, Pera," I say. "How have you been?"

"All right," she says. "What brings you here? Did you think of something else to try?"

"You could say that..."

"What do you mean?" Pera asks. "Oh, let's hide, I don't like being out in the open like this for long when I don't have to be."

She changes her sepia color for white, and I follow. I can wait a little while before springing the news on her. I'm not in that much of a hurry -

"Well," I said to Magic, while everyone watched me to see if I was done thinking, "would it make sense to use that story as an analogy to what Alice and Jasper are doing?"

If I compared those things, would it make them understand something true?"

"No," said Magic.

"Next guess," murmured Memory, "someone participating in an intricate scheme at the behest of a third player on the gameboard rather than either of the obvious two..."

I watched a memory from early in the Romanians' rule of the vampire world, where they'd been fighting another coven for dominance and assumed that a certain vampire was allied with them. When she'd proven that this wasn't the case, they'd trusted her, only to come perilously close to defeat when it turned out that she was a spy for an unrelated coalition taking advantage of the instability in the area. Magic rejected this analogy, too.

My own memory of when me and my father had caught up to Alice after the jailbreak out of Volterra served as a proxy for the third: historical allies, out of familiar contexts and without most of their original ties, but with compatible goals and complementary skills. Even a parallel possibility of partial verification existed - my father had been able to read Alice's mind, and Alice was able to tell when I told the truth.

"Yes," said Magic, "this sounds about right."

"Good," I told her, and I let my hands fall to my sides. "Rosalie, Emmett, I think they're telling the truth." I paused, thinking, and added, "I think we should call Siobhan."

After getting the go-ahead from Siobhan to send summaries of everything to Alice and Jasper, I was attentive, but mostly not a participant, in the ensuing multi-way conversation. Maggie got on the phone when Siobhan wanted her to verify Alice and Jasper's claims more directly. They, and the four vampires with me, and various other people from Denali, all formed an enormous conference call with as many as a dozen of them talking in parallel at any given time. It was more than I could do to keep up with most of it.

Siobhan made a point of telling me that, no, it was not a waste of time for me to have done my version of a check on Alice and Jasper's loyalties when I could have called Maggie: the mere fact that Maggie was involved was significant information, and with Dwi in Volterra, spy-versions of Alice and Jasper could have instantly and undetectably relayed that information.

Siobhan was nearly as stumped as I about Addy's motives, though. "I'm not clear on what she wants," she remarked. "I doubt highly that she's working for the Volturi. But she must know that they're on borrowed time without her help, until Marcus finds out about Didyme." She then went on an extended rant about how much easier everything would be if Marcus used e-mail, owned a phone, or otherwise were at all possible to get hold of from a distance.

"Siobhan," said Alice dryly, "I can still share visions. You remember that I

accidentally made Jasper think he was hallucinating by trying to communicate to him that I was alive, a few years ago."

Everyone went quiet for a moment at that, and then Siobhan said, "Right, I'm going to write the words "Aro killed Didyme" in large letters on a piece of paper over here. This piece of paper will definitely continue to exist well into the future, so you should be able to send a vision of it to Marcus, have I got that right?"

"Yes," said Alice. "This may take me a while. I've never tried sending a vision to anyone besides Jasper."

"Let us know - no, *show* us, if you can, what happens," urged Siobhan.

"All of you? I don't know if I can share with multiple people at the same time, and once something isn't in the future anymore it's no longer a vision and I can't share it," Alice said. "I'm not Elspeth."

"Show Elspeth, then," said Siobhan, "and she can reproduce it for us, later."

I had a lot of Alice's memories, so I thought I would be pretty well able to handle and sort out the visions she threw at me. I was *mostly* right. I wasn't fooled like Jasper had been by the sight-without-eyes. I was able to deal with the still slides shuffling past at high speeds like a flipbook for a long sequence of events, or scrolled sideways between possibilities. I knew to expect the dizzy blurring in uncertain spots, the wild shifting of vantage point, the unmoored sensation of having no sure idea when something was to happen unless the picture contained an accurate clock. I could draw on long years of practice piecing together disparate, incomplete, out-of-order pictures into coherent narratives. I'd acquired her ability to read lips.

The thing that made receiving the shared memories an unpleasant experience was that, unlike every memory I had of Alice's foresight, I didn't have the sense of *control*. It was the difference between piloting an airplane in turbulent weather, and being sucked up bodily into a tornado.

But though I promptly felt sick to my stomach, I was able to put together what Alice showed me.

Marcus was standing, as he always stood when he had nothing else to do, in the dark in his private room in the Volturi compound - staring, I knew, at the torn ribbon twisting in absent wind. Then there was a picture of him with his hands plastered to the sides of his head as though he might crush it between his palms, mouth open in shock or an inaudible scream - later (?) his eyes unfocused, his arm propping him up against the wall as though his legs had lost the power to hold him, maybe reviewing the memory that Alice's shared vision had prompted - sideways, he burst out of his room in a single explosion of motion, forward one image and he was in the throne room, forward another and he was hurling himself at Aro, forward another and he was halfway across the room,

turned aside by Renata -

Sideways again, another possibility, he will pause and think, he will find Chelsea and speak to her, urgent warnings about the safety of the source of love she relies on so heavily, she will run to find Afton, the two of them will be in a car, the two of them will be in a car in Switzerland -

Sideways, he finds my father in his pile of rubble in the dungeon -

Images shred into nothing, possibilities disintegrate or fall into the past. Marcus will howl into the darkness of his room - someone will come running, it will be Chelsea/Alec/Santiago/Sulpicia -

It's Chelsea, he tells her everything, he has let her make him love her very much over the years and he has no better friend, she screams and runs -

It was Alec, and Marcus told him nothing, because Alec and his twin have ways of inspiring compliance and they're only children, they have no mates, maybe they never will (the picture disintegrates, that will not happen now, Alec must have made some decision that would prevent it because *sideways* -

Marcus will scream) and Santiago will come to him, the ever-professional guard, and he tells her it was nothing and she goes and he hurls himself against a wall, enraged -

Sideways, Sulpicia comes to the door. Marcus kills her. Marcus strikes her head from her shoulders and her limbs from her body and every particle of her from its neighbors until she's a scattering of fine, swirling dust, by the time Santiago comes running for the screeching sound Sulpicia is unrecognizable, and he has a match on him and he lights up the room without bothering to leave it himself, because she is the only way he can make Aro know that same pain, that *white ribbon, torn* -

Disintegration, that possibility is gone -

Sideways, Marcus didn't scream, he found Chelsea. Marcus wanted to borrow her computer. Chelsea bowed politely, Chelsea's fingers twitched, Marcus's eye twitched but he took the laptop and brought it back into his room, and there, he will send an e-mail to Carlisle/Rachel/Caius, it will be in English, it was Latin, it's about the rebellion/who the wolves are really loyal to and whether they will obey him against Aro/whether Athenodora might be vulnerable -

Upstream, Marcus disbelieves the memory, he babbles to himself, lips moving in silent whispers in a hundred languages saying anything but that this murder he remembers happened -

Sideways, he pulls out his match, strikes it, touches it to his cloak sleeve, stands in place and calmly goes up in flames -

Sideways, Marcus will simply leave his room, and kill everyone he sees, until finally

Afton/Jane/Alec/Benjamin/Li-qing/Pyotr/Pera overwhelms him -

Sideways, he finds Pyotr, and orders Pyotr to order Marcus to *forget*, over and over, until the command sticks and Marcus has no choice but to let the knowledge slip from his mind -

Sideways, Marcus got up, walked out the front door in broad daylight, ignored the cowed others following him and shouting, kept walking, walked and walked until Jane/Alec/Heidi/Chelsea/several of them managed to force/entice him home -

Sideways he goes looking for Sulpicia on his own, she's not under Renata's protection the way Aro always is -

Sideways he goes looking for Renata, asks to borrow her, finds Benjamin, quietly tells Benjamin to set Renata on fire from a distance so her shield won't be in effect -

Or he tries the same thing with Emere and her invisible knife, or he gets the saw with vampire teeth and gives it to Hao and tries the same thing, or he found Taamusi and asked him to freeze all the liquid in Renata's body so she will shatter and be of no hindrance, or he (disintegration)

He'll find Dwi, or he'll borrow a phone, and he'll get hold of the rebellion in Denali -

"*Stop!*" I shrieked, and the whirlwind of predictions came to a halt. Alice looked at me, puzzled. "That was -" I looked down; I was on my knees on the ground. "That was more possibilities than is usual."

"Yes," agreed Alice. "Too much?"

"Without being able to steer myself, yeah," I said. "Maybe even with - did you share the writing with him yet, or -"

"No, not yet, I just made up my mind to do it so I could look at what would happen," said Alice. "But that's sure a lot of possible reactions - he has almost no constraints on how he'll react, except that Sulpicia will be in serious danger and Renata almost as much."

By this time, it had been dark for some hours, and I got to my feet, just in time to lurch in Rosalie's direction and fall asleep in her arms.

Viewer

I woke up in our hotel room again, tucked into bed and in the company of the same four vampires.

"Oh, you're up," said Rosalie when I opened my eyes. "Good morning. Siobhan talked Alice and Jasper into letting you try to de-Chelsea them like you did with your wolf. He's okay, by the way. Choked down some more food late last night, otherwise mostly sleeping. He woke up and was lucid enough to talk for a bit a few hours ago, so Bella told him where you were and that you were safe and so on and he seemed to take it all right."

"That's good," I said. "Are we going to go back to Denali soon?"

"Siobhan didn't say," said Emmett. "We're supposed to call back after you try fixing Alice and Jasper."

"Oh," I said, and I climbed out of bed and walked over to Alice, holding out my hand. She took it, and I tried, just as I had with Jake before. *I'm so sorry I seeded you. I was wrong, please don't think what I let her make you think...*

Alice didn't visibly react, but Emmett prodded, "So, pseudo-sis, what's your up-to-date opinion on... say... the Volturi's in-house brain-scrambler?"

"Chelsea?" asked Alice, sounding vague, and scrunching up her nose as she placed the description. "She's... well, if she didn't exist I'd probably still be gravel, but I think that's the nicest thing I can think of to say about her unless I went into her value as a go opponent, in which capacity she'd be pretty easy to replace."

"I thought you were a chess girl," remarked Rosalie.

"Only when I have Edward around to play. Anyone else, I have an unfair advantage, playing a game I'm that familiar with. Give me long enough and I wouldn't want to play go with anyone besides Edward, either." She tilted her head. "Are we going to get him out?"

"Do we want Bella to let us live?" asked Rosalie, raising an eyebrow. "Maybe Elspeth could give you a run for your money at chess. You can't see her." Alice shrugged. "Anyway, that seems to have... partially... worked. Jasper?"

I dropped Alice's hand and took Jasper's, repeating the procedure. He was similarly noncommittal about the Volturi when Emmett asked. It wasn't clear to me that this was an actual improvement - they hadn't gone back to Volterra when called, after all, so Chelsea had clearly been wearing off some anyway - but Rosalie dialed Siobhan's number and reported a "success, not a resounding success, but a success".

I took out my own phone to join in the call without having to piggyback on Rosalie's. "What's next?" I asked Siobhan. "Did I miss anything while I was asleep?"

"Just generic catchup and speculation. You're the only one with all of the memories besides me; you're useful to bounce things off of, and I wanted to know how much effect we can expect from you deprogramming people besides Jacob before committing to a next action. Everything has been fairly quiet, and with Demetri dead and the Volturi not

knowing it, we can afford to bide a little time. As to what's next: next, I try adding various subtitles to the piece of paper Alice may show Marcus, to narrow down his possible reactions so we can make a more precise -"

"Ah!" cried Alice.

"What?" Jasper asked. "What is it?"

"Marcus..." she breathed. "He's..."

"What?" asked Siobhan.

"Show me," I suggested, and braced myself for the vertigo.

Marcus was -

A pile of wreckage in the dungeon -

"Why?" I exclaimed.

"Why *what*? What's going on?" demanded Siobhan.

"Marcus is in the dungeon in bits, next to my father and David," I said. "Why?"

"I don't know!" snapped Alice. "I see the future, not the past!" Everyone else began to mutter in low voices, some over the phone, some in the hotel room, but I focused on Alice and Siobhan's voices. "And in the future as far as I can see, he's a pile of rocks like the other two!"

"Wait..." Like my father. Like my father, whose uncontrollability hadn't made keeping Addy around a priority because simply by touching him Aro could - "Alice, look at *Aro* - show me -"

Aro was standing in his throne room, sighing sadly, patting Chelsea's hand - he's speaking to Caius - sideways he confers with Renata, gravely, he will thank Santiago for something - sideways he collects the entire guard, delivers a speech - he's dictating an explanation for Corin to deliver to the wolves - he's placing an apologetic kiss on Chelsea's forehead, looking fatherly - sideways, he shifts to stand, and his hood falls away from his head, and -

And he is wearing, around his neck, a choker made of wire which presses against his throat -

A single, whole, filmy red eye.

"Oh my word," whispered Alice. "As long as they leave his eye intact, can it -?"

"It must," I murmured. "Normal vision no - normal vision the eye needs to be physically connected to the brain - but Marcus can see relationships with his eyes closed, why not with his eyes detached...? And if that hadn't worked they could accomplish the same thing by just taking his head off entire, he wouldn't be much danger that way either."

"Ew," said Rosalie. "Also, that is bad, bad news."

"If that works and Aro was willing to try it, why didn't he do it a week ago, after the compound was first blasted?" Siobhan demanded. "Why wait?"

"He was away at the time, or Caius wouldn't have ordered Addy executed. He wouldn't have come back until the day after or the day after that..." I said.

"That's still about a week ago," said Siobhan. "This is a *weighty* decision, but it's a straightforward one. Marcus had a certain risk of learning about Didyme's death on any given day and a certainty of learning it eventually; and there was a relatively fixed risk of any cover story associated with neutralizing Marcus getting that information out early. Chelsea in particular is the one he needs to be concerned with. Alice said her visions indicated a tendency for Chelsea to panic and try to run away if she learned of it. Now, Chelsea wasn't in the compound at the time. She was in Nicaragua with Aro. But *Afton* was in the blast and she'll believe anything he tells her, so she could still find out in a way that she'd have to take seriously if he stumbles across the memory or if she has him confirm someone else's statement. Or a shared vision. And then she could panic and try to run away."

"Right," I murmured. "Chelsea is... I guess you could call it "addicted"... to being loved... and without her mate she would basically be unable to function. She might get hit even worse than Marcus did, I'm not sure. To the point where I don't think Aro would dare hurt Afton, actually, since Chelsea *is* essential to the operation, but that wouldn't stop her from freaking out."

"I think we may have to revise our opinions of what Aro would and would not dare," growled Jasper.

"He can't use *Chelsea's* power by proxy," I said. Jasper shot Alice a nervous look. "Or Alice's, really," I added reassuringly. "Her power would be so much less useful with the steering under her own control -"

"I'd buy that it took Aro twelve hours to come to a decision and act. Not a week," said Siobhan. "And last night, Alice saw Marcus standing in his room, reacting to the shared vision she'd planned to give him like it was *news*. She never actually sent it."

"Maybe Aro didn't exactly come to a decision. Marcus - or someone else who would have told Marcus - could have just come across the information overnight by chance," said Alice, "and then Marcus could have gone nuts and gotten himself dismantled for his trouble, and now he's an eye in a necklace and scree in a dungeon."

"Maybe," muttered Siobhan, "but then whoever told him would certainly have been found out by now, and I have some doubt that Marcus could have been incapacitated before managing to shout something suggestive. Alice, check the others in the guard...?"

Alice closed her eyes, and after a minute, she said, "All present and accounted for and physically contiguous except me and Jazz, Marcus, and Demetri."

"And Addy," I said.

"And Addy," Siobhan muttered. "Addy sent Jasper and Alice away... Alice? Can you see her?"

"No," Alice said, "and I couldn't see her when she called me, either. She's probably with a half-vampire or a wolf."

"Does it have to be a *half*-vampire?" I asked suddenly. "Noemi has a quarter-human son, can you see him?"

Alice shook her head, slowly. "No..."

Siobhan muttered something unimportant, then said, "Alice, you and Jasper checked the wolf village - did you take attendance, or ask if everyone was there?" Jasper shook his head, muttering a negative.

"Even if they had," I said, "that wouldn't necessarily have done the trick; people are often away from the village on errands for more than just a day or two and that's nothing unusual, I wouldn't expect anybody to mention it as a worrisome thing. The day the blast hit, Shawn was in Venice, just him and Lise and Sarah while Camellia stayed home with her toddlers... And Nina and Olivia would have made their grocery run later that day. And Addy would know all that as well as I would."

"So there was an opportunity for Addy to kidnap or entice away a wolf," summarized Siobhan, "which Alice can't check up on directly, or Addy could have the company of Noemi, Iseul, Noemi's son, or... some other hybrid. But still... why would Addy have notified Marcus? Or, for that matter, arranged for Alice and Jasper to desert?" Jasper didn't seem to like the word "desert", probably an artifact of his military background (I wondered if he was technically an *actual* deserter, not having returned to duty after being turned into a vampire...) but he didn't protest out loud.

"Is she trying to be helpful?" asked Rosalie. "It's certainly a *strange* way to demonstrate it, but the effects..."

"The effects include the fact that any chance we had of *directing* Marcus's reaction to finding out about Didyme are gone," Siobhan pointed out. "That *could* be accidental, since however it happened it didn't involve Alice, but I'm not going to count Addy as an ally just yet."

"Fair enough," said Rosalie. "What *is* she trying to do? If she's got your power,

shouldn't we assume that she's *succeeding at it*?"

"Or at least making progress," acknowledged Siobhan. "She *could* be trying to render herself necessary to the Volturi again, and it's only a matter of her bad luck that Marcus turns out to be... usable... without his acquiescence *or* hers."

"We're relying on someone with Siobhan's power having bad luck?" asked Jasper dryly.

"My power is not *good luck*," snapped Siobhan, "it's good *planning* if it's anything. If Addy did communicate with Marcus somehow, then we shouldn't assume on that basis that everything turned out exactly the way she wanted it by chance - we should assume that she has adequate *contingency* plans to recover from any misfortune this result represents. *If she was involved at all*, which we do *not* know, since nearly forty people were blasted with those memories *including Marcus himself*. Marcus could have found the information without help, reacted in one of several ways that caused him to be disassembled without leaving anyone else knowing too much for their own good, and become a prisoner that way. He could have been informed by one of the guard, who Aro forgave for some reason. Or Aro could have preemptively attacked on the understanding that Marcus would *eventually* find out, although that leaves us with the puzzle of why Aro would have waited for a week."

"Addy might have gotten rid of your power by now," I pointed out.

"I doubt it," said Siobhan. "It's possible, but seems unlikely to me. I tend not to stick with single plans start to finish - I revise on the fly to react to new information. If she could "taste" that, then she'd hang onto the power until she was done accomplishing whatever it is she wants to accomplish. She's fairly good at not changing powers by accident."

"Her plan could *require* her to change powers," suggested Emmett.

"That would be a very drastic thing to try," Siobhan said, "since she doesn't have any good way of getting at me to replace the planning power if she needs it again. She might do it anyway, but it'd probably be when she was confident in being near the end of her plan or after putting in motion some series of events that would let her have access to me again. I don't know what she's aiming at, but I doubt the current state of the world is it, so my guess is that she's still holding onto my power."

"Do you suppose," Rosalie said, backtracking to the prior topic, "that whatever Aro did to get the rest of the guard to accept Marcus being deposed just took a week to lay groundwork for?"

There was a silence, and then Siobhan said, "Plausible. Without knowing the official story, it's hard to guess how hard it would have been to swallow, but plausible. Marcus *was* one of the three kings for more than one millenium and it wouldn't be trivial to undo his status all in one go even if everyone understands that Aro is really in charge."

"So," I said, "what's next?"

"Alice," said Siobhan, "have a look, please, at what Chelsea would do if you just shared the vision of my piece of paper with *her*."

"Show me," I added, even though I was growing to hate the experience of watching a shared vision, because I wanted to be able to relay everything to Siobhan later in case she was able to pick up some detail from the full vision that a verbal description would leave out. Alice closed her eyes again...

Chelsea will watch, and tip her head to the side ever so slowly, and her smile will falter and disappear, she's drawing her limbs in towards herself like she's cold, she whirls round and goes to (blankness)

"Afton's in the village, or something, I can't see past that because she'll only react so much without him," Alice reported.

"Try again in half an hour," Siobhan said. "I want you all in the car on your way to the Nashville airport now that Elspeth is awake, though."

I started collecting the clothes I'd brought into my suitcase, and Alice said, "But Genevieve..."

"Call her and make something up about why you've got to go, once you think she'll be awake," said Siobhan. "You weren't telling her the truth to begin with, why start *now*? You can come back and tell her anything you like after this is all over."

There was a silence, and Alice said "Fine," and then the conversation turned to trivialities such as how Alice and Jasper would get on the plane (they had ID forged on their behalf in Italy, but the Volturi were aware of it and would be able to notice where they were going) and where we were going (Denali, but only because Jake couldn't be moved; as soon as he was well enough to travel, and, ideally, the local purveyors of forged documents had filled rush orders for all the undocumented vampires, we would fly out to Heathrow and join the British contingent).

"Wait," said Alice, while we were halfway out the door of the hotel room. Siobhan was still on the phone. "The Volturi can track our ID, like you said. They might wait until they're sure Demetri isn't coming back, but even if they do, this whole mess might take longer than that. And *we* didn't fly into Nashville. We flew into Gulfport-Biloxi International."

"And?" said Siobhan. "Are you worried someone from Volterra is going to put the pieces together and harm your niece? You didn't tell her anything."

"But she *is* the only person on the planet I still care about besides Jasper," said Alice. "They could turn her into a hostage."

Siobhan sighed. "Go ahead and extract her," she said, "and bring her with you, but I

don't think you had better bring her to Denali proper, not if you're going to leave her human. Put her up in a hotel in Fairbanks. I should probably tell Bella to bring in her parents and stepfather and any extended family she has alive, too..."

"I think she'll say no," I predicted, as me and the four vampires arranged ourselves snugly in Rosalie's new car. "The Volturi can't contact her - as far as they know, she's alone with no phone and an e-mail she's not going to check, and it'd be reasonable to bet she's immune to Dwi, so they can't contact her that way. There's no way for a hostage notification to reach her, so there's no reason to take her parents or stepfather or any other humans she cares about."

"I'll tell her regardless," said Siobhan, "but duly noted. Alice, give me your niece's full name and we can go ahead and add her to your flight. You have enough leeway that as long as you get her to go with you in under an hour you won't miss it." Alice recited the name, and we drove to the little white house.

"My goodness," said Genevieve when we rang her doorbell. "Another unexpected visit! Come in, why don't you."

"I'm sorry to bother you so early, Genevieve, but it's important and might be urgent," said Alice, going inside as the rest of us trailed after her. "Elsbeth, if you'd do the honors - one of those convenient summaries?"

"I'm not sure how it works on humans," I said warningly. "It might be better if I just said it in words..."

"I beg your pardon?" said Genevieve. "Humans?"

I puzzled for a second over how to start, and then simply said, "Genevieve, me and Alice and Jasper and Rosalie and Emmett *aren't* humans. They're vampires and I'm a half-vampire. But we aren't here to hurt you - we're here because you're Alice's niece. She's your mother's older sister -"

"But she's so young!" exclaimed Genevieve.

"Vampires don't age," I said. "Alice was nineteen when she changed and still looks it even though it was ninety-one years ago."

"Vampires are only a story..." said Genevieve weakly.

"I know it's a lot to take in, and I'm sorry to have to spring it on you so abruptly," I said, "but because you *are* Alice's niece, and the vampire world is gearing up to be at war, it's not safe for you to simply stay here. Someone might hurt you to get to her. We need to take you with us to Alaska."

"I can't go to *Alaska!*" exclaimed Genevieve. "What about Snowflake? What about

the crocheting workshop I said I'd teach? Or the -"

"We will pay to kennel Snowflake if you have nowhere else to put him, for as long as necessary," put in Alice. "Everything else has to be second to your safety. The people we are dealing with are not going to leave you alone just because you didn't do anything."

"I have a dentist appointment a week from this coming Friday..." Genevieve said.

"And with any luck you will be home in time to keep that appointment, but you need to come with us to Alaska first," I said. "You can tell everyone you've just decided to take a vacation, can't you?"

"But I can't go to Alaska... And you can't be vampires, vampires aren't real." She didn't sound frightened or anxious, which was probably Jasper's doing, but she did seem quite adamant on those points.

"You must, and we are," I said.

"But I - I can't."

"At what point," whispered Jasper, pitched above Genevieve's hearing and sped up too fast for her to parse even if she'd heard the words, "do we just pick her up and leave with her whether she likes it or not?"

"I don't think we can do that," trilled Alice back. "Hard to get an unwilling woman onto an airplane without threatening her, and I don't want to do that..."

"If we can't convince her..." replied Jasper.

"If we can't convince her she'll just have to stay here," said Alice tightly. "I'm not going to drag my niece unwilling onto a plane to Alaska."

"Genevieve, please," I said, hoping to render that argument moot. "We aren't lying to you. You are in real danger because you're related to Alice, and we want to help. Is there any way we can prove to you that it's true?"

"What about the rest of my family?" Genevieve asked. "Hattie and her -"

"I don't think they'll be hurt," I said. "They're more distantly related, or not related to Alice at all if they're on your father's side of the family. And we're in a hurry and can't stop to explain all of this to more people. Please, Genevieve, how can we convince you to come with us?"

It took a lot more repetition and pleading, an impromptu demonstration of Emmett's superhuman abilities in the form of plate-juggling, and an exacting comparison of Alice's face with the one surviving photograph of human Alice that Genevieve had, but eventually we coaxed her into the car with us. (Alice sat on Jasper's lap to make room.) Genevieve called her cousin Hattie about Snowflake the dog and then packed a bag with

our help. I spent the rest of the car trip to Nashville gently explaining to her the same basic concepts over and over. It was surprisingly difficult to make it sink in - she didn't think I was lying, but once advanced the opinion that I was "a very imaginative girl" and suggested that I'd perhaps "read this in a book somewhere and then forgot where you heard it".

Alice and Jasper parted ways with the rest of us when we got to the airport, so they could sneak on while we rode conventionally. Rosalie took a detour to give away her car. She looked regretful when she rejoined the group. Genevieve slept through much of the flight, while I amused myself with browsing my stored memories and chatting about nothing in particular with Emmett and Rosalie. During the second leg of the flight I fell asleep, too, only to be awakened at our destination.

After the dreary trip, and a reunion with the illicit passengers, we set up Genevieve in a hotel in Fairbanks under the assumed name "Jean Baker". Alice wanted to leave someone to guard her, but Genevieve insisted that she would be fine without a "nursemaid", and that as long as someone would come and tell her when it was all right to go home again, she could simply enjoy a vacation in Fairbanks on her own.

"Not going to turn her?" Emmett asked Alice on the way back to Denali.

"She's not dying," said Alice. "She's only old."

"Bella wasn't dying either," Emmett pointed out.

"I know that," Alice replied. "But no, I'm not planning to turn her. I don't think she'd like the idea, considering, do you?"

"No," admitted Emmett.

I split off from the vampires part of the way to Denali - they were going to the houses, and I was going to see Jake up in the mountains. He was asleep when I arrived and didn't stir when I sat nearby. I was mildly surprised to find my mother still hanging around nearby, since there was no longer a reason to keep the Denali houses visibly innocent of features that would attract Volturi notice, but I supposed she was just keeping an eye on Jake, and she said, "Sure, why not," when I suggested this. This seemed like a strange way to phrase the answer, but I decided that whatever was causing her to do so wasn't important.

Plotter

Siobhan called my mother on the phone to ask about Charlie, Renée, and Phil, and as I'd predicted, the answer was no - in my mother's opinion they were all safer where they were. From there, it turned into a more general conference call on strategy.

"I don't want to launch an offensive until Jake is better," I said. "It's only another three days and he should be on his feet. Can we wait that long?"

"It might take that long just to decide what to do," Siobhan said, "depending. Volterra is a very well-defended target. I suspect the best way to go in will be through the village. They communicate with the compound, but not in real time. If Alice takes attendance of the guard, we can pick a time when the village is full of nothing but wolves who won't attack Elspeth and harmless imprints and puppies. We can't be sure all the wolves will be home - especially if Addy has one with her - but if everybody who'd normally serve as a handler is within Alice's sight in the compound, then we can be sure that there's not a large field team absent. Then Elspeth can deprogram everybody there, ideally discreetly enough that no one gets in touch with the vampires. From that point on, though, it's far less obvious."

"What's stopping Jane and Alec from taking down all the wolves as easily as they did in La Push?" asked my mother. There was a beat, and she said, "Me?"

"Ideally, but you're still not reliable enough that I'd like the plan to hinge on it," Siobhan said. "If you could guarantee a continuous shield over anyone, then there would be absolutely nothing stopping you and Allirea from walking in the front door and assassinating everybody you didn't like and stopping to paint each other's fingernails halfway through. But if you go in and you *slip*, Marcus's vision - now inconveniently attached to Aro - will notice Allirea's relationships. Brightly colored shiny arrows pointing right at someone we would really like to leave *alive*."

I blinked, confused, and looked over at my mother, who frowned to herself. "I'm practicing," she announced, as I recalled Allirea's existence and retroactively parsed what Siobhan had said, "but I still feel like I could lose it at any time. The only risk of detection for Allirea in there is Marcus's sight, though, now Demetri is gone - if she could stay on the *other side* of Aro...?"

"He could turn around suddenly for an unrelated reason, and she's not fast enough to get out of the way," Siobhan said. "We'll go with something like that if we *have to*, but we're not under enough time pressure at the moment to call for abandoning attempts to find a better choice. The Volturi don't have Alice or Demetri. Our generous hosts have been e-mailing them innocuous status reports consistent with everything being quiet and not worth swift action over here. And Aro has just instituted a fairly massive alteration in the power structure - or the ostensible power structure - which will take everybody a little while to get used to, where by "get used to" I mean "be repeatedly nudged into accepting by Chelsea, who herself will have to become accustomed to using Aro's help instead of

Marcus's". I don't expect anything to fall on us over here, or in Britain, in the next few days."

"Unless Addy does something else," Alice put in, dialing in to the conversation. "What is she after? If she was hoping to intercept me and Jasper in Biloxi she was mysteriously late to the gathering..."

"I don't think she's directly opposing the Volturi, or she'd have stuck by us in Ireland even after discovering that I am apparently a yummy magical treat," said Siobhan dryly. "But what she did with you two isn't the work of someone trying to get back into their good graces, either."

- I'm indispensable. I made sure of that - Chelsea's thoughts, not Addy's, but still...

"She doesn't have to make them like her," I said abruptly. "She just has to make it impossible for them to function without her. Caius only moved to attack her when the witch dungeon was almost empty. Before that she was too valuable. If she can peel off more of their witches, then they'll have to make a deal with her if they want to go on like they have. She wasn't really thrilled about working for them to start out, but it's better than letting them kill her."

"Fits," mused Siobhan. "So we should expect her to be trying to peel off more witches from the guard so they can be re-imprisoned for her to copy after she renews her affiliation, but Alice's inability to remember her past made her an unusually easy target..."

"Chelsea wasn't blasted, but she could confirm the story about Didyme by asking Afton," I said. "And she would have been easier to get ahold of than Marcus. Addy could have just called her. Why wouldn't she?"

Siobhan thought. "Chelsea might well panic to start with," she said finally, "but she could potentially be reasoned with. She *has* gone to some trouble to make sure the Volturi need her - and unlike Marcus, they can't keep Chelsea around by having Chelsea bind her nice and snug to everybody else in the coven, so threatening Afton really would be the opposite of productive. Unless they replaced her with Addy, who they couldn't really expect to hold onto either at this point."

"Who else might the guard lose?" my mother asked.

"Anybody from the dungeon is probably vulnerable to poaching. The original guard is more solid - more time for Chelsea to do her work, and they volunteered to begin with," Siobhan said. "I can think of an avenue to get Hao and his mate out... possibly Vasanti and hers..."

"Pyotr's probably chafing about staying in one place for so long by now," I put in.

"Pera might have usable cognitive dissonance," Siobhan added. "Actually, if we can *possibly* get Pera on our side, or at least off theirs, before anything comes to blows, that would be very, very good. We have *no defense* against her, not even Bella, and her power

has become even harder to deal with than before since she turned."

I hadn't looked at that yet, but of course it was the sort of thing Addy had kept track of -

- *"Welcome to the world of the immortals," I say cheerfully, after Pera's up and about and has been determined mateless and has been fed for the first time. A snip from Chelsea and a swat from Afton later, and the potentially annoying wolf is a thing of the past. I'm pleased on Pera's behalf that the imprint didn't yield a vampire bond in the opposite direction; I can't imagine trying to kiss anything that smelled like that, mate or no. Repulsive. "Have you noticed anything interesting about your power yet?"*

"I haven't tried it yet," she says listlessly, looking at her hand. The mood could be a problem; I'll borrow Jasper's power and try to work on that. I got along well enough without the empathic ability before, but I keep thinking of reasons to use it now that it's so convenient.

There's a fleck of blood on Pera's knuckle; that's probably what she's looking at. She'll learn to eat neatly in time. It occurred to Heidi to ask if Pera wanted normal fare or if - due to her unusual origins - she might prefer to hunt for animals on her own, but the smell of Heidi's dazed followers was enough to let Pera forget about any old misgivings regarding vampire diet. She didn't even ask Heidi for one of the mesmerized prey animals following her about the compound - she just seized the nearest and pulled the both of them into the hiding place to eat undisturbed, and then another and another disappeared for similar treatment. She was calm after the third, and reappeared, and brought the remains back outside to be disposed of. This I heard of from Heidi, not from Pera herself. From Pera, I want to know about her power.

"May I?" I extend my hand, and she looks at it, and at me, and finally blinks once and lets our fingers brush just enough to make the transfer.

The taste is familiar, tart and coppery, but it's definitely stronger - and it was strong before. There's an edge of sugar in there now, like molasses... mmm. There's no visible difference from how her power made the world look when she was human - just the sort-of-visible sepia subtly decorating everything. "There's something new there," I coax. She used to enjoy playing with her ability. "What do you think it might be?"

"I don't know. I can already hide anything I want," she says, looking out the window.

"Anything you touch," I remind her. "Maybe you have range now? Try hiding me without touching me again...?"

She turns her face towards me, eerily bright eyes staring, but nothing happens; my hands don't go whiter than they already are. "That's not it," she says, shrugging.

I have more ideas - mostly recycled from back when I first met her, when she was

nineteen and excited about meeting someone else who could do magic like her. Things she hadn't been able to learn to do then. Can she hide pockets of air? Can she find another level of color under the white or over the brown, farther outside or more deeply hidden? Can she hide a wall - something she couldn't previously manage, probably because she thinks of walls as parts of buildings...?

And she tries what I recommend, and tries hiding a wall, and voila - the beige gives way to the pale hidden cast. Unhidden, we could walk through it now. "Huh," she murmurs. "Parts of things."

"That's marvelous," I tell her encouragingly. "Think of how useful that will be. Can you do it to a person?"

"Only one way to find out," she said, and I laugh and tell her she'll owe me twenty euros if I can't reattach my pinky for some reason, but I let her hide it.

It turns white, and, cleanly severed from the rest of my hand, falls twitching to the floor.

"Barely even hurt," I mutter, hiding myself and picking up the finger. "Too quick and nonviolent to be very uncomfortable..." I lick it, attach it, and am somewhat relieved when it knits normally. "But potentially very useful to us."

"Yes," she agrees. "Potentially -"

"I'd really rather *not* die by having my head hidden while the rest of me stays put, out of all possible ways I could die," I said.

"It probably would be less painful than some of its competitors, and you wouldn't see it coming," Siobhan said reasonably, as my mother said, "*What?*"

"I know, but just the image of it is really unappealing," I said. "Oh, Mama, Pera's learned to hide parts of stuff or people instead of entire stuff exclusively, that's what we're talking about."

My mother looked nauseated, but shook it off and said, "So can we "poach" her, then? Has she got a niece in Mexico we could fetch?"

"She's got family, and if there were any new additions - including nieces - born in the last five or six years that she didn't realize existed, there would be potential to find a Genevieve-equivalent," Siobhan said, "but the Volturi weren't unaware of where she used to live as was the case with Alice; we're not going to find anyone they missed. I'm not sure *why* - Addy never figured out the reason and everything else we have on her is out of date - but Pera's not happy in the compound in spite of everything Chelsea did. Not being sure why is a major impediment to poaching her."

"They did kill Brady," I said.

"She doesn't care," Siobhan pointed out. "They snipped her first."

"I know, but they didn't replace him with anybody, so there's still a gap where he was. She's got friends - I mean, as far as Chelsea can make people be friends with each other, which admittedly is pretty far - in the compound, but maybe she liked having a boyfriend, or having someone be very devoted to her, or something."

"Maybe," said Siobhan. "Doesn't leave a poaching avenue open, though. We can't exactly invite her to a speed dating event and fill it up with single rebel vampire males, thereby guaranteeing that her and her new hubby will be eternally loyal to the cause." She sighed, and said, "Okay, let's think about Pera in the background and work on other problems at hand. Elspeth, the obvious failure mode of dropping you into the wolf village to deprogram the Volturi's guard dogs is that while they won't hurt you, they don't have similar qualms about holding you down, which they can do. That would free up their fellow wolves to sound the alarm, which would be bad. That means you shouldn't go alone - your only effective self-defense against a number of wolves trying to *restrain* you is blasting them, which robs us of the chance to have them on *our* side. That's forty-five fighters, not counting Jacob, that I'm not willing to write off, especially given the chance that Bella will be able to protect them from Jane and Alec for a useful amount of time. So, you need to go in with help."

"But any help I go in with, the wolves *can* attack," I said. "Wouldn't that just turn it into a fight, which could get loud enough that someone would call in the Volturi?"

"That's why you go in with Allireia and one other person, who Allireia can fade," said Siobhan. "The wolves won't attack them, and they can run interference to prevent alarm-sounding and haul wolves off of you. You should also start with imprints where possible, since they'll be able to influence their respective wolves. Do you *need* to touch people to deprogram them?"

"I haven't tried it without," I said. "How could I tell without someone else to try ranged deprogramming on?"

"Eleazar," proposed Siobhan.

"Beg pardon?" said Eleazar's voice, faintly through Siobhan's phone rather than one of his own. "I don't think I have the precision that would be necessary to learn whether Elspeth can -"

"You're probably still carrying around some of what Chelsea did to you from when you belonged to the guard," Siobhan said. "Elspeth, care to come pay us a visit at the houses? This is a bit much range to deal with for a test."

"I can do that," I said. "One sec. Let me wake up Jake real quick, so he knows I'm back in Denali." Siobhan made an assenting noise, and I nudged Jake gently in the arm. He'd rolled onto his back since first landing in place, and the gash in his neck looked

better, although still too new and red. "Jake," I murmured.

His eyes flew open when I addressed him, and they locked onto my face automatically, although he still looked faint and unfocused. "Elsbeth," he rasped.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm back from Biloxi, all in one piece," I said, picking up his nearest hand to clasp it. His fingers closed gently - or maybe just weakly - around mine. "I'm going to go up to the houses now, but I'll be back soon."

He blinked one long, slow blink, and I said, "You can sleep," and his eyes closed and stayed that way. I extracted my hand, smoothed his hair back off his forehead, and then looked at my mother. "Which way is it?"

"Straight that way," she said, pointing, "call someone if you get lost."

I nodded, touched Jake's cheek for a moment of sent nothingness, and then took off down the mountain and around its neighbor. I wasn't as quick or nimble as a full vampire, but I got around easily enough and didn't have to take many detours from the straight path.

I arrived at the houses without having to call anyone, and repressed a shiver when I saw the place where I'd interfered with wolves until Santiago broke my legs. Siobhan and Eleazar were both standing outside, waiting for me - I heard a hubbub of voices from inside each of the three houses, including what sounded like some potentially violent fights.

At my visible consternation, Eleazar said, "Non-vegetarians without the benefit of Chelsea's coordination aren't accustomed to sharing such a small space. We're doing our best to keep it under control." Three mansions didn't seem all that small to me, but there were enough non-vegetarians that at least some of them would need to share a house.

"The benefit of Chelsea's coordination, hm?" said Siobhan.

"Well, she does allow an otherwise impossible coven size," Eleazar said. "I always appreciated, as a member of the guard, that we didn't spend any of our time bickering for dominance or plotting against one another." He sighed, eyes rolling skyward. "Life has become very complicated recently. I suppose given the nature of the matter, more input from Chelsea would not necessarily be an improvement here."

"Speaking of input," I muttered, "I'm sort of curious about whose idea it was to tip off the Volturi in the first place, when you heard we were coming," I said, trying to keep the rancor out of my voice.

"Does it matter?" he asked. "We're all terribly sorry, Elspeth - your family has already received apologies, except for your father, but if you'd like one for yourself from

each of us, we -"

"Not especially," I said, "I just want to know."

Eleazar shook his head slightly. "This isn't what you're here for, is it?"

"Carmen," I guessed.

"Kate. Can we proceed with what we're here for?" he asked, frowning.

"Go ahead and rattle off your opinions of all the other Volturi," prompted Siobhan.

Eleazar did. He sounded sort of like Carlisle in his willingness to see good in all of the people he discussed, although there was less of an idealistic tint to his excuses for the rulers and the guard. Carlisle would have described everything in terms of the possibility of improvement and redemption, acknowledging the assorted crimes of the Volturi while insisting on their ultimate potential to become better people. Eleazar spoke more of practical necessity, how it would only make sense to expect so-and-so to do such-and-such - what else should a newly turned Jane have done, besides go with the man who had in point of fact just saved her life? what else should Heidi do with her power, given that the Volturi weren't going to stop eating humans and needed to stay discreet about doing so? what else should Afton have done, when turned, than join his mate's coven and participate in her dream...?

By the time he was finished similarly explaining the ill behavior and expressing his lingering fond personal feelings for everyone who'd been in the guard at the time he left, I was wondering if this was the kind of thing deprogramming would work on at all. It didn't become less predictable and expected for a fourteen-year-old girl who'd just been rescued from certain death by a man kinder to her than practically anyone else she'd ever met, to start working for said man. If that was truly the basis of Eleazar's sympathies...

"Go ahead," Siobhan prompted me, when Eleazar wrapped up his defense. He closed his eyes.

I cast about for a mantra like the one I'd thought to myself when trying this for the first time with Jake, or later with Alice and Jasper, and came up blank at first. I wasn't sure if I really needed one, though, and shouldn't expect to have time to think up a unique entreaty for every wolf I unbrainwashed when the time came. So I simply thought of what Chelsea did and how much it was at odds with truth, and *pushed*, the way I had when Addy had pushed me to develop range with the most basic of my powers.

Eleazar made a startled face, like his train of thought had been derailed, and his mouth opened slightly without making a sound. I left off the pushing, and leaned back on my heels, while Siobhan peered at him. "Hm?" she inquired.

"Being fourteen with a troubled past isn't... *actually* an excuse for cold-blooded torture," he murmured, looking away.

"Cold-blooded?" I said.

"It's metaphorical cold, it can also be metaphorical blood," Eleazar said distractedly. "Siobhan, if you're satisfied with the results of the experiment, I would like to be with Carmen now."

"Go ahead," said Siobhan. Eleazar turned and went into the gray house to find his wife, probably to discuss the shift in worldview with a more sympathetic audience.

"Alice and Jasper didn't react that strongly," I said.

"Did you do anything different?" asked Siobhan.

"Yes," I said, and I described the pushing used to gain range and the mantra-like thoughts I'd had running through my head previously, "but I don't see why that would make such a marked difference."

Siobhan tilted her head. "Eleazar has other connections in the world," she observed after a short silence. "A close coven and - historically, if not so much currently - close cousins. But Alice and Jasper had only each other, and Alice had just found Genevieve. I wouldn't have been able to predict in advance which way that would affect the results if you'd asked me ahead of time, but it doesn't seem unlikely that the relationships your deprogramming *doesn't* affect would have an impact on how violently the deprogrammed ones would disconnect. There are other factors, too - Eleazar's had those affections implanted in his mind for a long time. They could have ossified or something like that, and snapped with more force when taken away. I don't pretend to know. You'll probably get yet another type of reaction from the village wolves. But at least you don't have to touch them to get it."

I sent Memory on an errand through what I had from Chelsea, checking for any tweaks she'd made to the other Denalis. "Chelsea snipped Carmen away from her old coven," I reported. "I don't know how to undo anything in that direction... and it wouldn't help, anyway, they're dead now."

"If you think of a way to rebuild what Chelsea destroys, that would be useful, but I think we can manage without it," Siobhan said. "Unless you had something in mind to do here, or need to pick something up, you can go back to your wolf now."

I bobbed my head and turned to go back the way I'd come, up into the mountains and back where my mother waited near my wolf. As I approached, my mother must have shielded me, because I noticed Allirea.

"Still practicing?" I asked.

"Not that it does any good to shield Allirea at the moment, and I daren't cover Jacob while one of the Volturi might notice his packmate's sudden immunity," sighed my mother, "but yes, I'm trying to get the hang of keeping the shield up. It would make everything a lot easier." She glanced at her fingers. "I mean, when will I find the

opportunity to paint my nails if not in the middle of a well-shielded coup in the Volturi compound?"

I laughed tiredly; a look at the sky indicated that it was about my bedtime. I yawned, and told my mother goodnight, and then tucked one of my hands into Jake's and lay down. "If you want to try the other thing," I offered in a mumble, flopping my opposite arm out in my mother's direction. Cold fingers pressed into my palm as I fell asleep.

Hider

In the morning, I woke up to find my mother already on the phone discussing something with Siobhan.

"I kept Elspeth shielded all night," my mother said. "And she's still under it now. But if I extend the shield to cover Allirea, *that* part of it snaps back when I lose hold of my concentration for so much as a tenth of a second, and I still haven't managed to let Elspeth back through my *inner* shield at all. I'm not sure, but I think I could keep Edward shielded the way I can Elspeth - like the shield is reacting to my personal affections somehow. Good morning, Elsie," she added, glancing down and letting my hand go. I wondered if she'd been holding it all night in spite of the fact that she could no longer see me dream.

"Good morning," I said. "If you can't get around that limit on the shield, maybe it should be a priority to go in and get Dad out? Allirea might be able to get into the dungeon through the window and get him - and David, and maybe even Marcus if we want him - out. Then you can shield Dad and that's two people Jane and Alec and so on can't touch, which is worse than everybody on our side, but better than just one."

"Alice looked," said Siobhan, "and Marcus's other eye isn't in bits, it's sitting completely whole on top of the rest of him. We're not sure if Aro did that because he managed to think of a contingency plan regarding Allirea, or just because he figured he might as well, but without Bella able to shield Allirea, Allirea can't get the prisoners out of the dungeon undetected."

My mother's mouth was a grim line, but she evinced no surprise; this had been discussed overnight, apparently. "Damn it," she muttered, "I've *managed* to keep a shield over Allirea for hours at a time before... I just can't *count* on it..."

"Yes," said Siobhan, "you've said that repeatedly. Also, to catch Elspeth up, we have repeatedly gone over the fact that Addy might be willing and able to cover Allirea with your power if you knew how to open up your inner shield and let her copy you but you can't even let Elspeth in; we have repeatedly remarked on the fact that it would be very useful if there were a dozen of you; and we have repeatedly observed that you would probably have better control of your shield generally if you weren't trying to operate without ready access to your mate, in what you have repeatedly observed is a catch-22."

"Mama," I said, "besides me and Dad, do you like the others in the family enough to reliably shield them?"

"I haven't tried it yet," she said. "I'm reasonably sure I could do Carlisle and Esme, although maybe not as well as you. Rosalie and Emmett would probably be easier than Allirea, but I don't know by how much. I think I remember Jasper trying to kill me a little too vividly to protect him effectively before getting good general control. Alice... I don't know. I haven't talked to her much since you got back. I imagine she's different than she

was before."

"Why haven't you tried it yet?" I asked.

"Because I keep trying to keep Allirea covered, except for right now because if I cover both of you you'll forget her," my mother said. "If I can pull it off - well, we have repeatedly observed that if I could shield Allirea reliably there would be no problem at all. It's seemed like the best area to focus my efforts." She sighed. "Maybe I should give up on that and concentrate on something else, like trying the rest of the family."

"I have a question," said Tanya's voice from Siobhan's end of the phone connection. It was quiet enough to be difficult to pick out, so I pulled out my cell and dialed in. "Let's assume we win - we kill or poach all the Volturi and the wolves, and we have a party to celebrate. Then what?"

"Good question," said Siobhan.

"Because I don't want to rule the world," Tanya said. "I think Kate would feel the same way, and Eleazar and Carmen, and while I haven't gotten to know Garrett that well yet, I think it would grate on his eternally-fixed revolutionary sensibilities. I think Carlisle would work in theory, but I imagine it'd fall apart in practice, and his kids are follower types, except -"

"Me," murmured my mother.

"I guess you're not a follower," Tanya agreed, "but if Edward doesn't live -"

"Don't say those words in that order," my mother hissed. She visibly brought her temper under control, and then said, "Please. If something dreadful were to happen... then I would probably not be in good shape to rule the world. I managed a very limited sort of life believing him dead, but it didn't involve anything so grandiose, and I couldn't have handled it if it had. But right now Edward is *alive*, albeit in... conditions I don't want to consider any more than I already have... and he may remain that way."

"So, you want to be queen of the world?" Siobhan asked my mother.

"It's crossed my mind before, but Tanya also has a point," my mother ground out. "Who else could do it? The power vacuum will need filling."

"I *could*..." mused Siobhan.

"You'd be good at it," I put in.

"Thank you," Siobhan said. "But I don't really have an interest in the world. I'm mostly concerned with Ireland. I suppose I'd *take* the queen of the world job, if I had to in order to prevent worldwide chaos..."

"Do we know anyone else who makes a decent backup?" my mother asked. "The

Romanians are out, I think..."

"They don't even want the world the way it is now," Siobhan said, "according to Maggie, who thought to check. Too many witches, too much technology. They're only in it for revenge against the Volturi about losing their reign in the first place."

Names were tossed back and forth, mostly for completeness rather than any sense of plausibility. "Would you," Siobhan asked my mother during a lull, "enforce vegetarianism?"

"If I could figure out a way to do it," my mother replied evenly. "But it would be very difficult."

"Not if Pera lived and would work for you," I said.

My mother blinked. "That... would... work," she acknowledged, "if Pera herself were willing to go vegetarian... a hidden vampire couldn't eat anyone, although I suppose they could still wreak assorted havoc and rob blood banks."

"Elspeth," said Siobhan, "I'm not sure to what extent this already went without saying, so I'm going to say it: deprogram Pera if you *possibly* can. The only people she *plausibly* would not be able to singlehandedly defeat are Allirea - who would have her at a standoff that one of them wouldn't know was happening - and Kate, who she might not be able to affect fast enough to avoid being thrown to the ground by the charge. Even Renata's shield might not understand a light tap on the head as an attack."

"I will," I said. "If I *see* Pera I'll do it right away. My power doesn't go through hers, though, so if she's hiding I can't. I tried to send something to Mama before while I was hidden and she wasn't - before Mama blocked me out, I mean - and it didn't work."

"You shouldn't discount the possibility that your power will go through Pera's *with regards to Pera herself*," cautioned Siobhan. "It might not. But consider that Pera can see and hear and so on people who aren't "where" she is - she might get transmissions via your magic as well."

"I guess I can just periodically try to aim at her whether I spot her or not," I said dubiously.

"What would be more useful," my mother said, "would be if she'd instantly fall for one of the unmated guys who are with us - that's, let's see, Alistair, Randall, seven of the Brits who are still in Britain, and the Romanians?" When she said Alistair's name, someone - possibly Mary, one of the American visitors - laughed one loud *ha*. I shuffled through Carlisle's memories to dredge up the fact that Alistair was a complete misanthrope. I wondered how he was putting up with being in such a crowded area for so long. It was interesting to imagine him with a mate.

"Alice can check that, can't she?" I asked. "If they cooperate, I mean, each of them

could decide one at a time to walk into the Volturi compound...?"

"If they decided to just walk in," Siobhan said, "Alice would probably see them getting killed, possibly before even crossing paths with Pera."

My mother said, "Not if they went in announcing that they were there to sell us out, or went in with one of the Denalis after some preliminary e-mails were lobbed back and forth."

"Wait," I said. "Alice was pretty much mated to Jasper - I'm not sure about the other way around - when she just saw a vision of him. Maybe Alice should just show a vision of Pera to all the single guys we have on our side?"

"That would work if I could see her," Alice piped up.

"You can't see Pera?" asked my mother, bewildered. "Like a half-vampire or a wolf?"

"Not exactly... I can *look at* her," Alice said. "I'm not blocked outright. But she's invisible. I can tell you where she is - it's the second room from the left on the third floor of the building, that's where my vision centers when I try to see her - but just like I don't see in, say, infrared when I use my precognition, I don't see through to her hiding place, any more than I could if I were standing right there."

"She must unhide sometimes," said Siobhan. "To stay in touch with the others and let Chelsea work on her, if nothing else. They wouldn't have turned her if they weren't pretty sure they could control her. Keep an eye out, Alice. If Elspeth shows memories of Pera to candidate mates, that *might* work where applicable, but we can't count on it, since unlike with yours there's no precedent, and anyway most of the single males on our side are in Britain and out of her range, whereas you have... no limit, is that right?"

"None I've run across," Alice confirmed. "I nearly drove Jasper bonkers from Italy while he was in Tennessee," she reminded us guiltily. I heard a mumbling attempt from Jasper to protest at this description, probably to soothe her guilt over her more active part in his sanity impairment.

"It's a near-certainty that Pera will unhide at *some* point in the future," my mother said. "Can't you get even a blurry look at that - even if you don't know when or where or whether she'll be standing on her head at the time?"

"It's very blurry," Alice said. "I don't think I'd recognize Jasper that blurry if I didn't know who I was looking at - someone who's never seen Pera before is probably not going to discover that she's his mate based on this mess."

"Liam, call Maggie," Siobhan said, and I heard beeping as her mate did as she asked. "So she can distribute the information over there so no one is caught too off guard by the visions when we figure out a way to do this." Liam's voice - and barely audible replies from Maggie - threaded their way through the phone, but I tuned them out to hear the

conversation I was actually having.

"So if Eleazar or someone decides to e-mail Volterra," my mother said, "with... what would be a good excuse for a Denali to escort a vampire into the compound?"

"I don't think a Denali escort would help," said Siobhan, "since David is still there - it would be too plausible that they'd be there to try to bust him out, and Aro would insist on a read before they got anywhere near Pera, and then the jig would inevitably be up. I'm not sure there's any way to have such a person get in to see Pera before letting Aro touch them, in fact."

"Are any of the Brits witches?" my mother asked.

"Nathan, the one from the Isle of Man, is," I told her, "but he won't say what it is that he does."

"That's obnoxious," my mother pronounced. "Is he planning to enlighten us at any point in the future?"

"Unclear," said Siobhan disgustedly. "I'm somewhat tempted to pick up everybody here, consolidate in Britain, and throw Eleazar at him. Alice, can you see by any chance...?"

"No," Alice said. "He hasn't made up his mind about it yet, I guess."

"Speaking of picking up and moving everybody," my mother said, "I think Carlisle, Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett are the only people with current paper identities. Or, I have a legal identity I could still pass for, but I'm legally *dead*. That leaves a lot of people to sneak onto an airplane or even two of them. If we're going to want to mass in Britain or whatnot *soon*, it's probably about time to start sending the rest of us running east."

"Jake is legally dead too, like everybody else from La Push," I said, "and can't be moved yet unless we *really*, really have to take him somewhere. And it would be hard to sneak him onto a plane in his condition, too."

"Maybe we should just get Carlisle to *buy* a plane," grumbled my mother. "Might not be able to get around all of the security that way, I don't know, but it seems like it would help somehow."

"I know how to fly one," I volunteered.

She looked at me, inscrutable, and then said, "Of course you do."

"So do Tanya and Randall and me, and Alice could probably figure it out via precognition alone," said Siobhan. "We aren't short on pilots. I'm not sure buying an airplane would help, though. But we might indeed need to wait until Jacob is able to move under his own power - that or get him a wheelchair and papers, and the papers might take

longer than his recovery."

Jake chose that moment to groan and open his eyes. Squinting against the sun, he mumbled, "Elspeth."

"Here I am," I said, putting my phone away and picking up his hand. I looked around for food - I'd been too distracted by the conversation with my mother and Siobhan to eat yet - and started alternating between coaxing him to swallow nibbles from the stash of fruit and bread and junk food, and getting a few bites myself.

"Pera! I see her!" exclaimed Alice, distant through Siobhan's phone and my mother's. "She's going to unhide in a minute, I can see -"

"Well, quick, show her to somebody who might like what he sees," Siobhan prompted. "As many as you can show before the vision is past."

"All right," said Alice. There was a tense silence, except for me and Jake chewing, while we waited to see what happened.

"Blast!" Alice said after a couple of minutes. "Lost it. I got Randall and Alistair, and Nathan, and then Pera changed her mind or she unhid and then hid again and doesn't have concrete plans for when she'll reemerge."

"Just keep an eye out," Siobhan said. "So you can catch her when she next decides to pop up. Randall! Alistair!"

I couldn't catch their replies; presumably they were too far away to carry through the phone loudly enough for me. Guessing that, my mother tucked her phone between her shoulder and her ear and signed, "Both of them said no, it's not them." A moment later, the twice-transmitted voice of Maggie wisped through, and my mother added, "It's not Nathan either."

Somehow I suspected that Maggie had editorialized more than that, and I wished I'd heard, but I settled for the facts of the matter. "What happens if we can't find Pera a mate, and she can't be deprogrammed while she hides, and I don't spot her unhidden? What then?"

"Are we sure Pera's straight, just as an obvious thing we could be missing?" my mother asked.

"I guess she could have lied to Addy, but it doesn't seem likely," I said. "She was with Brady before he died. But what if we don't find her a mate and can't deprogram her?" I repeated.

"Good question," muttered Siobhan. "And definitely worth spending time on given the immense problem for us that Pera is currently set up to be. Let's both of us look through what Addy remembers of Pera, see if we get any ideas. You take the first half of

the original visit, I'll take the second, more efficient that way."

"Mm," I agreed around a mouthful of granola bar. I closed my eyes and thought:

- It's a perfect accident that I find her. I'm here passing through this town, hunting, on my way to follow up on a rumor about a mysteriously accurate fortune teller who's based further north. Nine times out of ten, those are nothing at all (although I suppose it is mildly interesting how they manage to convince everyone they're something when they're not), and the remaining one of ten is usually such a minor power, so faintly tasted, that they're not worth the effort it takes to find them, but I look them up anyway. Just in case. Professional curiosity.

The girl doesn't expect anyone to be able to see her, apparently, when she appears. It is very dark, but of course that doesn't impair me a bit. Apparently she knows what she can do, but not about vampires. So when she pops into view, and the tantalizing hint of tartness twinges in the back of my mouth under the spicy tracker power I'm still carrying from Hector, I definitely notice her. Hm. To introduce myself and hope she doesn't vanish again, or to touch her without a by-your-leave, and learn to follow her...? Forget the fortune-teller, this is perhaps the most interesting witch I've encountered since Benjamin. What exactly is she doing...?

I leap down from the roof and brush a fingertip over the tip of her ear before she can react.

Everything goes brown. I can still see color normally - the moon is still silver, the witch girl I've just borrowed from is still black-haired and her shirt still pastel orange, it's all still there - but overlaid on top of it is a transparent sepia.

With an impressive reaction time, for a human, the girl turns herself whitish in place of the beige. She doesn't run, but she straightens herself to peer closely at me, frowning. (She can't see very well in the dark.) The white means she's somewhere else. I could walk through her if I wanted; I can taste it. She doubtless expects me to think she's vanished completely. She's gone to the same place she appeared from to begin with.

"I can still see you," I whisper conspiratorially, in Spanish.

She jumps nearly out of her skin and bolts. I whiten myself too, and follow her at an amble. "I can outrun you," I tell her.

She looks so frantic, and doesn't slow her attempts to flee. "My name's Del," I call after her, using the nickname I've switched to for this area. It's not that they can't pronounce "Addy", but the sounds don't spill quite naturally from the Spanish-speaking mouth, while "del" is already a word they know. As a name in the local tongue, it's innocuous enough to be silly - better than something off-color and not as profound as some meaningful noun. I'll take it. "What's your name?" I invite. She's not yet gotten the

idea that she can't run away.

I chase her for four minutes and then she can't run anymore. I suppose she doesn't usually have to run; usually she can hide and stay put while everyone around her would think she'd evaporated into thin air. Or maybe that's a usual amount of time for humans to be able to run? I haven't had occasion to learn. At any rate, she stops, and I stop too, beside her. "What's your name?" I ask her again.

"Who are you?" she asks, fearfully, panting.

"I told you, my name is Del," I repeat patiently. I've met witches who took longer than this to be willing to talk to me, so I'm not discouraged yet.

"No, I mean - why are - who - how -"

"I'll answer more questions if you tell me your name," I encourage her.

"Esperanza Ortega," she murmurs.

"Mind if I call you Pera?" I ask.

"No... I guess not. How...?"

"Well, you know how you hide... here?" I ask, my skills in any language inadequate to describing the white space in contrast to the brown space. Or, I could probably compose a neologism in my native German, but she wouldn't understand it.

"And you can too," she murmured, almost glowering at me.

"Not always," I corrected, and I explain myself. I've delivered the speech several times before, although usually the witch I'm talking to will interrupt me to ask questions. Pera doesn't. She's a meek little thing, and it takes her the whole explanation to decide that I don't wish her any harm (I leave out the details of my diet; I'll feed when she sleeps) and finally relax.

"You want to help me?" she asks. That's exactly what I said, and exactly the case, but she wants it reaffirmed anyway.

"That's what I do," I tell her, "I find people like you, and teach them to do more -"

"I see Pera again," I heard Alice cry through my mother's still-open phone.

"Quick, then, get the rest of the Brits," said Siobhan. "You know who they are, don't you? Maggie's told them all by now to expect -"

"Got -" Alice started muttering names, and I dialed my own phone into the conversation so I didn't have to listen to everything secondhand through my mother's. She

finished the list of finished shared visions, a few seconds spacing each of them, until she finally announced the last Brit.

"Liam, call Maggie back," Siobhan instructed. We waited, edgily, for the response to bounce back from Europe.

Through my own phone, I could hear Maggie just barely well enough to make out her reply when she'd finished asking around: "The one Londoner says she's a right pretty bird but he doesn't fancy her *that* much," she said. "Others are all less keen on her still. Bloke with the awful Glaswegian accent says he doesn't care for the olive tinting to her - want to bet he winds up mated to somebody who's got it or'll get it when she turns? - but no, this is a dead end."

"Damn," said Siobhan succinctly.

"My thoughts exactly," said my mother. "And Alice can't see ahead of time if anything Elspeth can do will work..."

"Pera's skittish enough that she might not fight for the Volturi if it comes to that, even if she's been willing to stay with them so far," I volunteered. "She might just run."

"But fighting us poses approximately zero risk to her," my mother said, confused. "If she just hides herself, and then hides bits of enemy combatants..."

"She doesn't necessarily know that it's safe for her to do that," I pointed out. "She doesn't know what kinds of witches we might have accumulated - heck, even *we* don't know what Nathan does yet. And she might not be calm enough to think of it anyway, once a fight started."

"Best case scenario, though," my mother said, "isn't if she runs, it's if she helps us."

"Well, I'll try deprogramming," I said. "I don't know what else we can do."

"When are we going to Volterra, anyway?" my mother asked. "That's been sounding like the plan, but with no timeline."

"I'm not sure," Siobhan sighed. "When we have a better idea of what we'll do there, I suppose. Starting with Elspeth and Allirea tunneling into the village and deprogramming the wolves is a good first step, but we don't have a clear idea of what's next. We can't take too long getting things done once we get the ball rolling, because the half-vampires and wolves need sleep and the village does communicate some with the compound."

"Jake should be ready to walk around tomorrow, or the next day," I said, "and once he's up the super-healing will work faster and he'll be in fighting condition within twenty-four hours."

"We need to figure out how to get everyone to Europe..." mused Siobhan. She and my mother and everyone else with something to say began one of those many-layered

vampire conversations I couldn't keep track of. I pocketed my phone, on the supposition that my mother would tell me if anything requiring my input came up again.

Jumper

"Elspeth," coughed Jake.

"What?" I asked, leaning in.

"Th' other wolf," he said, and took a deep, difficult breath. "Quil."

"You think that Quil is the wolf who was still in your pack when you phased?" I asked, to confirm.

"Mmhm." His eyes closed again.

"Interesting," murmured Siobhan, interrupting the overcomplicated conversation about travel to address this information. "It's hard to know if there's more than one remaining packmate... but if they had several who hadn't been moved to one of the girls' packs yet, I think we could expect them to have been watching for Jake to phase in shifts, so he would have noticed a second presence as soon as he phased, instead of afterwards. It's probably just Quil."

"Why would they leave just one, instead of two who could trade off on surveillance?" my mother wondered.

"Maybe they didn't," Siobhan murmured. "Quil has an imprint. If he has some reason to believe Claire is threatened, he could defect on his own, just like Brady did on Pera's say-so five years ago."

"Jake," I murmured, touching his shoulder. "Jake, can you remember anything Quil was thinking? I know you were asleep, but if there were odd dreams or anything..."

"Claire," Jake whispered, cracking one eye open. I felt bad about waking him - until his healing routed from his system the last of the venom I'd failed to remove, and got to work repairing the direct damage it had done, he was going to be in significant discomfort while awake.

"What about her?" I asked.

"Don't know..." His eyes fluttered closed again and I let him drop back off, glad that he wasn't an insomniac or in too much pain to sleep.

"Of course Quil was thinking about Claire one way or another," my mother said. "She's his imprint. I'd be infinitely more surprised if he managed to think about something else. What would possibly threaten Claire, though? The Volturi don't have any reason to hurt her. She's a seven year old girl."

"She's eight now," I murmured. "Her birthday is the sixth of July..."

"Eight, then" said my mother, "there's no significant difference."

"If she turned up with significant witchcraft they might want to turn her...?" I proposed skeptically. I'd seen no hint of any unusual power from Claire when I'd been traveling with Jake's pack before our capture. "But not that young, and I'm not sure if Quil would take her away from Volterra rather than let them do it anyway. Brady didn't kick up that much of a fuss over Pera. He didn't like it, but they didn't have to keep him unconscious or anything."

"They wouldn't turn her that young - *unless* it was exceptionally useful withcraft and she were dying," Siobhan said. "Like Jane and Alec."

"It doesn't fit," I said. "If Claire were dying, Quil would want her turned rather than *dead*, wouldn't he?"

"No," coughed Jake, waking again, and I wondered if we'd better move somewhere else so our talking wouldn't disturb him. I decided after a moment's thought that he'd probably prefer to have me present even if I was going to make noise.

"Really?" my mother asked skeptically. "Being a vampire is a fate worse than death according to Quil?"

Jake had worn himself out, and didn't answer; I speculated in his place. "For a little girl, maybe," I said. "Especially if she's not *definitely* dying."

"I think we're veering a little too far away from the information we actually have," Siobhan said. "Alice, can you catch an image of Claire when she's not affected by wolves, or does Quil hover too much to allow that?"

"Uh, hang on," said Alice. "...I've got a look at her sleeping, alone in her room. She looks fine to me."

"There goes that idea," my mother said. "I suppose there could just be a gap in the schedule, if they have a schedule, of who keeps an eye out for Jacob?"

"Possibly," I said. "So there could be two, and Jake phased between when the one went off duty and Quil took over..."

"Or Addy found out a way to poach him that we haven't thought of and he's trying to get in touch with Jake," said Siobhan, "or something else is going on. We don't know, and have no good way to get more data. Let's get back to the issue with Pera. We don't have a mate for her handy. We can't guarantee that Elspeth will be able to deprogram her. She has no Genevieve-like relatives lurking in Mexico that the Volturi have plausibly overlooked. And she could singlehandedly kill us all with the exception of Allirea, anybody Allirea shields, and maybe Kate. Discuss."

"Somebody could e-mail her and offer to bribe her outright," I said. "Doesn't have to be someone known to be affiliated with the resistance - we could make a dummy account

or something, or pretend to be another person altogether."

"She probably has weaker connections to the guard than most," mused Siobhan, "because she's hidden so much of the time and Chelsea can't work on her incidentally throughout the day like she can with everyone else... so something like that might work."

"Razi," my mother said, naming the teleporter witch who'd escaped the dungeon for good. "Pera could sneak up on him and take him apart and bring him home, especially if Demetri were still alive - she's probably the only way he'd ever get recaptured. He'd be a believable source for a bribe offer. But what would he - or anyone - offer? The Volturi aren't cagey with their vast fortune when they're trying to keep their guard happy..."

"Alice, can you see Razi?" Siobhan asked abruptly. "I wrote off the possibility of getting him to help us before, because we had no way to find him, but even though he never managed to develop the ability to take passengers for all Addy's trying, he would be *outrageously* useful..."

"Sure," Alice said. "Plain as day. He's all over the place, though. He's in Shanghai - aaaaand now he's underwater someplace - that's France or at least someplace that has French on the signs - a boreal forest of some kind - the man cannot hold still, I'm going to get dizzy - is that Tasmania?"

I heard a pen scratching. "Does his moving around mean that you can't share a vision with him?" Siobhan asked.

"What are you writing?" my mother asked, as Alice said, "I don't think so."

"A description of Pera's power - I'm leaving out Demetri's fate for the time being to make it sound more threatening - and an offer to let him join us and a statement of where we are," Siobhan said.

"Razi doesn't have a mate," I remembered. "Maybe *he'll* wind up mated to Pera. He hasn't met her yet."

"We'd better hope he winds up that way *after* agreeing to join us, and not before, if that's the case," Siobhan said gravely. "Bella, is there anything you think I should add to the note?"

"Tell him he can contact us by writing something so Alice can see it, in case he has further questions," my mother proposed.

"Now that is one way to go skydiving..." Alice muttered, presumably observing Razi teleport himself somewhere high above the ground. He usually didn't let himself hit bottom. "Say when."

"When," said Siobhan.

We waited, silently, and then Alice said, "He's -"

"Hello," said Razi's voice from Siobhan's end of the phone connection, wary, but cordial.

"Welcome," said Siobhan. "Elspeth, would you like to join us to help catch our guest up on what's been going on?"

"On my way," I said, hopping to my feet and taking off down the mountain with a brief wave in my mother's direction. I kept the phone open and held to my ear in case more was said while I was en route.

"Who's Elspeth?" asked Razi suspiciously.

"Elspeth is a half-vampire witch whose power involves being able to communicate very quickly and understandably," Siobhan said.

"You might remember me from when you escaped from the dungeon," I said. "I was there."

"I didn't notice you," he said. "As soon as I had my senses back I got out."

"I caused it," I said. "By replacing Addy's power."

"Thank you," said Razi. It seemed like an awfully terse - albeit sincere-sounding - thing to say under the circumstances, but Memory informed me that Razi wasn't the type to attach extraneous words just to make the same basic message sound more context-appropriate.

"You're welcome. I'll be there in a couple minutes, and then I can tell you - or show you - whatever you want to know," I said, beginning to compose a summary in my head that carefully excluded pictures of Pera in case it was necessary to save that possibility for later.

"I look forward to it," he said, with the strange discontinuous ripple in his voice that meant he was flickering from place to place mid-word.

I turned up at the houses soon after. "Which house are you in?" I asked into the phone.

"Over here in the gray, Elspeth," said Siobhan, from the middle house of the three, and I ducked inside it; Siobhan and Razi were both in the large front hall, along with Alice, and the two American nomads Mary and Randall. I heard footsteps shuffling around up the stairs, and spotted Liam through the open door into the next room, where he kept an eye on his mate and the newcomer. Razi was swapping locations every second or two between the corner of the colorful rug and a spot three feet to the left of it. He'd

shaved off what patches of hair his time in the dungeon had left him, presumably for a more even look than the patches of what had previously been a long head of black hair, and he had his arms folded and a skeptical look on his face.

"Hi, Razi," I said. "Do you want me to tell you anything specific, or just hit you with a summary of everything important straight off?"

Siobhan was looking appraisingly at Razi's less-than-comfortable body language and location-jumping, and said to me, "Why don't you just start with the part where we don't wish him any harm."

"We don't wish you any harm," I obliged. The teleportation slowed down a little, although he didn't relax his posture at all. "We just want your help. We don't like the Volturi, and want them to go away, and we figure you don't like them either, and would also want them to go away." I copied his style of speaking deliberately, remembering that he tended to become impatient with more roundabout ways of talking.

"Approximately correct," he said. "I don't dare jump into Volterra, though. I could land someplace where Alec is projecting a field, or close enough to Jane that she can knock me down, or something with one of the others who were in there with me - I have no idea what they do - could happen."

"With people helping you, the situation wouldn't be irrecoverable if something like that happened," Siobhan pointed out. I had the impression that she was mimicking his style too.

"What, specifically, do you want me to do?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," she said. "Elspeth, go ahead with the summary."

I looked to Razi for confirmation, and he nodded once, and I flung the condensed version of who was who and what information we had at him.

Razi disappeared, and I opened my mouth to make some displeased sound, but Siobhan held up one finger. "Give him a minute. He could just be going someplace more comfortable to process everything."

Sure enough, thirty seconds later, he popped back into place, newly damp and with a bit of seaweed clinging to his shirt. "You lead an interesting life," he told me.

"Recently, yes," I agreed.

"Want in?" Siobhan asked.

"I'll bail on you if it goes badly," he stated, twitching six inches to the right.

"I wouldn't expect you to die for a failed attempt at a coup when you could just as easily escape to the middle of the Gobi Desert," said Siobhan derisively, as though he was

stupid to have bothered pointing out anything so obvious. "I just want you to try to help make it go *well*, and not turn on us outright."

"Do we have a plan?" he inquired archly.

"About a quarter of one," Siobhan said. "Elspeth here can reverse some of what Chelsea does - the generative half, not the destructive half. Also, she's a wolf's imprint, and so wolves won't attack her. That means she can in theory enter the wolf village and deprogram them safely."

"Won't they be expecting that?" Razi asked, twitching to a spot behind me and then back to his original location.

"I learned to deprogram people after leaving Volterra," I said. "They don't know I can. They do know wolves won't attack me, but since that doesn't prevent the wolves from attacking anyone I bring with me, or holding me still, or telling the vampires I'm there, it wouldn't normally be that dangerous without the deprogramming on top of it."

"Then what?" Razi said.

"Do you know who Allireia is?" Siobhan said. "It just occurred to me that with Bella too far away to shield her, Elspeth will have neglected her existence."

"Huh?" I said.

"Case in point. Well?" Siobhan said.

"Haven't heard of her," Razi said. "Why would Elspeth neglect her existence?"

I rolled my eyes as Siobhan prattled to Razi about trivialities, again. I understood that we didn't need to feel too hurried, but it was such a waste of time even so. I watched Mary and Randall play backgammon, in a variation that seemed to be mostly about who could best get the dice to fall favorably via assorted methods of cheating. Alice was sitting at Tanya's harp, looking at it but not playing; as I observed she reached out and turned a page on the sheet music sitting on the nearby stand.

"Elspeth," Siobhan said.

"What?"

"We're done talking about boring, unimportant things now," Siobhan told me dryly. "You can stop zoning out."

"Oh," I said. "Good."

"So apart from what I just discussed, and possibly Kate," Siobhan told Razi, "Pera is basically unstoppable."

"Wait," I said, "we have somebody besides Kate who could fight Pera?"

Siobhan rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter, Elspeth. Anyway. Razi, even you could be in deep trouble if Pera snuck up on you and separated your head from your body. Since it's possible that Elspeth won't get any chance to deprogram her, the other thing we thought of was figuring out in advance via Alice if Pera will find a mate on our side, so we can plan around that. Nobody we've already signed on is a candidate, but..."

"You want me to have a look at her?" Razi asked. "I suppose if she's my mate, at least that way I won't need to add "paranoia about a witch who can behead me on no notice" to the list of things that make me want to risk trying to teleport to the Moon..."

Siobhan nodded. "Alice?"

"Can't see her just now," Alice told her.

Siobhan frowned, then looked at me. "As long as Alice can't do it, might as well give your communication style a try," she said. "If it doesn't work we'll have Alice try when Pera's about to be visible again... if it does we'll have learned something new."

"Hold on a second," Razi said. "If Elspeth shows me Pera, and my reaction is something on the lines of "this woman is lovelier than the stars and I wish to spend the rest of my eternal life with her", what is it precisely that you want me to do after, presumably, dropping myself into her room and getting the reciprocal response? I can't teleport her here. How's she supposed to get out?"

"She can do that by herself if she wants," Siobhan said. "She just has to hide and... walk out. They were very, very careful about turning her, because after doing that it became impractical to have Addy physically control her, and now they don't even *have* Addy."

"Speaking of which, do you know where Addy is so I can at least mildly injure her before she takes my power and escapes?" Razi said. "I owe her for putting me in that dungeon."

"We'd like nothing more than for you to displace the power we think she has now, which is mine," Siobhan said with a sigh, "but we don't have her whereabouts. She's blocking Alice with a half-vampire or a wolf."

"Damn," he said. "Anyway. Let's have a look at Pera," he said, looking back in my direction.

I offered him a purely visual memory of Addy's, for the benefit of vampirically clear vision and because of the fact that she was my only source of memories of Pera as a vampire. In theory, human Pera would have had the same effect, but it seemed like a better idea to present her in her current form.

Razi tilted his head at a peculiar angle and quit flickering. "Where is she?" he asked

in a low voice.

"Is she -" I started to ask.

"Obviously," he said snappishly. "Where is she?"

"Hang on, Alice," muttered Siobhan. "Are you planning to bring her back, Razi, or run off with her by yourself and forget about helping us with the Volturi?"

"Show me where Pera is," Razi said insistently to Alice, who shook her head once, and Siobhan frowned and dialed what sounded like Maggie's number. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I'm calling my lie-detector friend," Siobhan said. "Convince said friend that you're going to do your best to convince Pera to come here, let Elspeth deprogram her, and help us - again, I don't expect her to do anything other than flee at top speed if things go seriously south - and Alice will show you where your mate is so you can go fetch her."

"Hello?" said Maggie's voice, and Siobhan recited a condensed version of the Razi-related events, while the teleporter fumed and began jumping around the room again.

"How do I know this isn't some kind of trap for her?" he demanded.

"How would we trap her?" I asked, bewildered. "Kate has a kind of *defense* against her, potentially, but no offense."

"If you got her to unhide and Allirea was there - ugh, never mind, you wouldn't understand," he snarled, red eyes flashing as he appeared standing on top of Mary and Randall's backgammon game. Randall hissed at him, annoyed, and Razi jumped back to his spot on the carpet.

I blinked, puzzled, by this statement - I had an awful lot of memories about what it was like to have a mate, in spite of lacking one of my own, so I thought it was reasonable to imagine that I *would* understand. But I let it go, and said, "Not only do we not have a way to hurt Pera, we wouldn't want to if we didn't have to. My mother wants to be queen of the world and use the hiding place as a kind of jail for vampires who break laws, as an intermediate step between letting people off with a warning and the death penalty."

Randall and Mary looked up at that. "How would the prisoners *hunt*?" exclaimed Mary, shocked.

"That's actually kind of the idea, is that they would have to hunt animals or at least only drink blood that nobody died to produce," I said. Randall shuddered, and looked like he might lodge some complaint, but Razi interrupted.

"Tell me where she *is*," he snarled at Alice, appearing inches away from the tiny precog, and Jasper rushed into the room, a blur flashing down the stairs to stand near Alice and growl menacingly. Razi's hostile body language diminished, presumably as a

result of Jasper practicing his empathy, and he flickered away from Alice.

"Here," Siobhan said, offering Razi the phone. "Tell her."

He snatched the phone out of her hand and brought it to his ear in one continuous motion. "Hello," he snapped. "When I find Pera I will attempt to talk her into joining this little group and its efforts to destroy the Volturi, with the "deprogramming" that implies. Satisfied?" He thrust the phone back into Siobhan's hand; Maggie's little voice trilled out of it a confirmatory response.

"Close enough," said Siobhan. "Elsbeth, hit him with our contact information - Razi, you seem to be in a hurry, so I won't bother you about obtaining a phone of your own today. You can just swipe one or teleport into somebody's house with a landline if you need us. But that means we'll have to ask Alice to show you a note if we need to get ahold of you."

"Fine," barked Razi as I sent him everyone's phone numbers. "Fine. Just show me where -"

"Go for it, Alice," Siobhan said.

Alice closed her eyes. "There -" she started to say, but Razi was already gone.

After a beat, Siobhan said, "Well, that was convenient."

"Now he's invisible too," frowned Alice.

"Of course he is," Siobhan replied, letting out a breath through her teeth.

"Do you think he'll bother to stop back here, or just escort her?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Siobhan said. "He has enough information to gather that we'll be able to notice his hiddenness, so he might assume there's no reason to check in if she agrees to come here. At any rate, Elspeth, you can go back to your wolf now unless there was something else here you wanted to accomplish."

"This will make getting everybody onto a plane easier," I observed. "Pera can just hide us and we can walk right on."

"That's *if* Razi succeeds - if he doesn't change his mind entirely," Siobhan said. "We have cause for optimism, but there are still wild cards, including Pera's suggestability. And the fact that we still don't know what Addy is up to. That said, yes, our transportational woes will be effectively over with Pera on our side."

"Are we invincible if Pera decides to help us?" I asked.

"No," Siobhan sighed. "Their witches are better equipped to fight her than the few we've got. If Benjamin figures out where Pera is, he may be able to set her on fire by

setting some object near her on fire. Vasanti's animals, like animals in general, are going to be in both the hiding place and outside, so Vasanti will be able to keep track of her. We don't know if Corin's shield or Emere's knife will go through to the hiding place, but they might. Li-qing's gravity adjustments will probably be just as able to catch Pera in midair as anyone else. Pera will be able to hear Pyotr if he commands her to do something whether she's hidden or not. Emel could at least inconvenience Pera with shaped metal getting in the way of whatever she was trying to do. And we don't know if Marcus's sight can observe people in the hiding place, but I would be surprised if it *couldn't*, especially as long as the hidden person has relationships with unhidden people. No. We are not invincible. We are not even slightly invincible. But we have a fighting chance, now."

Timer

Cowed somewhat by the many ways we could still be slaughtered even with Pera's help, I excused myself meekly and ran back to the mountain where Jake was recuperating.

When I got close enough, my mother shielded me again, which I noticed because I was abruptly able to notice that Allirea was perched on the mountainside eating an orange. I wasn't sure why she'd do that in favor of hunting an animal, even if my mother wasn't permitting her to eat humans the way she normally would. It could have been sheer laziness, I supposed, since fading didn't work on animals and they would run from her if chased.

My mother still had her phone out, sitting open on the rock next to her, so I assumed she'd heard everything, and I just waved at her in acknowledgement before settling beside Jake again. He was sleeping, albeit more fitfully than before; I touched his cheek and attempted to calm him with another blank sending, to decent effect.

"Will you let me braid your hair?" my mother asked in a low voice.

"It's still braided from when I did it on the plane ride," I said. Since I'd gotten it cut I'd been able to braid it myself, although it was threatening to get too long for that again.

"There are wisps coming out all over the place," she said, sounding like she was fighting to keep her voice even, "and the strands are mismatched..."

"Fine," I said, shrugging, and turned away from her. She knelt behind me and undid and re-plaited my hair, more slowly than I remembered, but it was easy enough to ignore since she was pretty good at not pulling it.

She twisted the elastic around the end of the braid when she'd finished. "I don't dare try to parent you," she murmured, quietly enough that I wasn't sure if she meant me to hear at all. "I don't dare claim any closeness, because of what she did to you, and because I don't dare do anything that might drive you away more... but I can't *forget* that you're my daughter, I can't pretend that you're some arbitrary girl who's signed onto the cause... and I don't know what that leaves me."

"Well, you get Dad back, if we win," I said. I didn't have much of anything *against* my mother. I didn't want her to feel bad. But making her not feel bad in the way she wanted would involve some form of subterfuge. While her shield's current state meant that I might be able to pull it off without Magic being able to give me away, it still wasn't my strong suit or something I wanted very much to practice.

I didn't know *how* to undo Chelsea's work the other way around. It didn't feel like the sort of thing that fell under my bailiwick. There was nothing particularly untrue about her destructive tendencies - I didn't think I could make myself love my mother again just because I once had any more than I should expect to bring people back from the dead just

by pointing out that they had previously lived.

She ran her palm across my hair, once, and then let her hand drop to her side. "That's something," she muttered ruefully.

"He's your mate," I pointed out, unnecessarily. "Isn't that supposed to make it more than just something?"

She took a step back from me, and I turned my head to look at her; she was staring skyward. "Maybe it'll be different when I see him," she said finally. "*You're* right here."

"Well," I said, "you can kill Chelsea."

"Believe me, that's my intention. Somehow I doubt it's going to be like fairy tales in which slaying an evil witch causes all of her ongoing effects to evaporate, though."

"Yeah," I said uncomfortably. "Probably not. Chelsea's cousin had a power sort of like hers except she dealt more with negative relationships, and what she'd done didn't go away that Chelsea could detect when she died."

Still looking up at the sky, my mother said, "Maybe we're wrong and her work does depend on her continuing to live. Maybe you'll learn to undo it..."

"Maybe," I said dubiously.

My magic itched, but I didn't tell her anyway, that I wasn't sure if I *would* exercise that ability that way given the chance.

After a silence, my mother said, "Am I going to need to kill Afton too, do you think?"

"Probably not you personally," I told her. "He's too good in a fight and you've only been a vampire for six years and change, I don't think you could kill him if you tried. But yeah, if Chelsea dies he won't exactly stand for it, and if you're going to kill her he'll probably need to be out of the way first. Actually, killing him might make her somewhat Marcus-like and make it a lot easier to do."

"The variation in how vampires cope with the loss of mates is... strange," she observed.

"I think you had it about right when you conjectured that it was connected to witchcraft," I said. "Marcus is practically a zombie mostly because he can still see his half of the mate bond. It *looks* like a torn white ribbon, but he knows it means his mate is dead. And he has to stare at it twenty-four hours a day. The few times he's managed to look away from it for a second, he's been much more typical in his reaction - which would be sort of like Irina. She was focused on revenge above everything else but she was able to be basically sane about it. I mean, up until the point where her plan backfired and the people she wanted dead were instead collected by the Volturi except for the ones who

escaped altogether. Then she did something very stupid, running at the contingent of Volturi who were in La Push all by herself, but up until that point she was mostly functional."

"And Jasper felt Alice dying, for all that this was apparently a fake by Addy..." my mother said.

"Yeah. Well, and part of the craziness you saw was because Alice was sharing visions with him and he didn't know how to handle them or what they were, but a good chunk of it was Addy's stunt," I said. "And since she can only share visions while she's having them, and what she was primarily trying to communicate was that she was alive, this involved a lot of images of her lying on the floor of the dungeon under Alec's power staring blankly into space. Or in little bits. So there's that. But I'm pretty sure that what Addy did had an effect too. You just *heard* what you thought was Dad dying is all - I mean, I'm sure it was horrible, but it wasn't like feeling it directly, or staring at evidence of it all the time forever."

"Right," she murmured. "And you think Chelsea's power will make her react with unusual intensity if Afton dies?"

"Like a combination of regular mate death, and the worst kind of drug withdrawal," I said.

"Drug withdrawal," my mother mused. "How does that work?"

"I'd offer to show you, but..."

"Right," she sighed. "Right. I am working on it."

We lapsed into silence, and I thought about Chelsea and her addiction -

- He's almost ready. His heart is speeding up. Soon it will stop and he will look at me with new eyes.

He must love me. There has been no change in the twist of leathery-feeling admiration that I spun out of the original seed since I bit him. That's not enough. I want him to adore me. I want him to need me. This isn't enough. I figured out yesterday that he must be my mate or I wouldn't want him so much. That means that I'm supposed to be his mate, too, doesn't it? He's supposed to be mine. But there's no impenetrable diamond, not yet. There's nothing particularly durable about this string. I could cut it if I wanted, leave him with nothing at all - his other connections have stopped trying to grow back.

I don't want to do that. It's inadequate, this thin little tendril of rope, even though I've poured more work into it than anything else I've ever crafted and don't know how to pull it any tauter or force it to grow any bigger. It's still not enough. He must love me. More than this. Where is my diamond link to my mate...? I can't feel the half of it

extending out from myself. I can't feel any of my own relationships. It must be there, I suppose Marcus would see it if he looked, but I ought to be able to feel Afton's, but I can't tell and I don't know what to do to make sure everything is as it ought to be when Afton doesn't feel diamond-ly towards me - he must love me, why hasn't it happened yet...?

Did I - no, it's impossible, but - did I ruin something, interfering with the relationship before he turned - no, that can't happen, that's not how it works, it must simply not kick in until his heart stops. That's what it must be. I haven't ruined everything. This must be normal, is all. Why would a vampire mate bond exist before he's completely a vampire? I shouldn't worry.

I'm worried.

I'm terrified.

I wish one of the others had needed to turn their own mate, so I would know what happens. Then I would know this is normal, and only to be expected, and that Afton will love me properly when he's through changing...

I do know that. He must love me, that's all. He must.

His heart beats faster, louder, it's humming so fast and there is still no diamond love coiling itself around me -!

And then where the next beat would have been is silence and there's still nothing -

This morning I caught him a couple of humans to relieve the thirst that will come with his newness. They're tied up nearby. He attacks them instinctively without even looking at me. He didn't even look at me, and there's still nothing out of the ordinary between us when my fingers twitch impotently through the air, this is as much as I know how to do and it's not enough and he must love me!

And then the humans are both dead and drained and he does look at me.

He stares at me.

He gazes at me and it snaps into place, all at once, a sudden rightness in the universe.

"Chelsea," he says, like my name is a prayer, and I can feel it, I can feel it all around me like an embrace, he loves me, he loves me, he loves me, he loves me, the air is singing with it...

Everything I created before, every thread I poured myself into bolstering, was a faint squeak of a prelude to this. He's mine. It worked after all. Mine mine mine mine. I needed him all along and didn't know it and now he's mine, properly mine, and he loves me he loves me he loves me.

"Afton," I say, beaming at him and holding out my arms -

"Bella," said Siobhan's voice through my mother's phone, still lying open on the ground. My mother snatched it up and held it to her ear.

"What?" she asked.

"Razi dropped by for about four seconds. He and Pera are going to get on a plane to join us here so she can hide everybody and get us to Europe safely," Siobhan said. "They should be here tomorrow afternoon, by which time it should be reasonably safe to move Jacob. Bella, Pera still doesn't like you due to the thing where she was your singer and you almost ate her, so don't antagonize her."

"Noted," my mother replied. "Should I apologize to her, or just avoid interacting with her as much as possible?"

"You're going to have to get a bead on her preferences on the matter yourself when she shows up," Siobhan said. "Four seconds wasn't long enough for Razi to go into a lot of detail about Pera's current attitudes towards you. Anyway, Pera's iffy on actually participating in the fight after we finish traveling, but she's willing to hear us out en route to Europe, and Razi says he's still trying to talk her around."

"Sure, they're *talking*," I heard Tanya say skeptically. "That's sure what *I'd* do if I'd just found my mate and we were invisible to everyone around us and had more than half a day of an airplane ride ahead of us during which there was nothing in particular we had to do."

"All right," said Siobhan, and I suspected she was rolling her eyes, "so he's probably only *intermittently* trying to talk her around, but he did have verbal information to convey about her when he dropped in, so there is at least some conversation happening."

"Speaking of mates," my mother said, "there should probably be some contingency plan for if someone on our side winds up mated to someone on theirs. I assume not everybody we're calling an ally has already personally met every member of the Volturi guard."

"You assume correctly," Siobhan said. "I don't think we should wait to find that out until we launch an offensive. I think Elspeth should show everyone working with us a slideshow of the current guard - since we know from our experiment with Razi and Pera that her method works as well as Alice's, and more comfortably - once we're all massed in London. Then we can use those pairings, if applicable, to pry off a few more opponents from the guard the way we just did with Pera. As long as we're ready for the possibility and they aren't thinking about it, we *should* be able to avoid having it go the other way."

"Such as how?" my mother asked. "Nobody else we're working with can teleport in,

and nobody else with the Volturi can get privacy right away so effectively."

"I'm aware of that," Siobhan said. "The obvious thing would be to have the half of the pair we've got to stand in some easily recognizeable place, like under the Eiffel Tower, and get Alice to send their mate an image of that. At some time when they aren't about to touch Aro, moreover. We can give our half a sign to hold - "come here alone and don't tell them where you're going" or something. Then Elspeth can be hiding nearby and deprogram the Volturi in question when he or she shows up."

"Presumably I'd have to be well away from the Eiffel Tower when Alice did the shared vision?" I said.

"Yes," Siobhan said. "You and Jacob both. How is he doing, by the way? Do you anticipate any issues with getting him onto a plane?"

"I think he'll be okay to get picked up and moved tomorrow afternoon," I reported. "I wouldn't want to make him walk anywhere, but I can carry him."

"Good," said Siobhan. "And he should be fine by the time we land in Heathrow. Let's go back to the question of what we're going to do in Volterra itself - operating under the pessimistic assumption that we don't succeed in doing any further matchmaking."

"When Alice says that everyone who should be in the compound is, me and Allireia and a vampire who Allireia fades go into the wolf village, by breaking a skylight or something," I said, "and I deprogram everybody while Allireia and whoever make sure they don't trap me or pass a message to the compound. Right?"

"Right," Siobhan said. "Pessimistically, let's assume that deprogrammed wolves etcetera want nothing to do with our fight, and either evacuate entirely or hole up in the village. They won't be able to attack anyone in your contingent between your imprint status and Allireia's fading, so if they were hostile you could get a message to us, so we don't need to be concerned about the possibility that they'll turn on us anyway - we can just steer clear if going to the village would be liable to provoke a fight."

"If I'm the third person in that group," my mother said, "then Allireia and I could *start* the attack - without a nail-varnishing break - and see how much we could get done before my shield snapped, or without going anywhere that Marcus's eyes are pointing."

"How are we supposed to know when that happens and you need reinforcements?" Siobhan asked. "Alice can't see anything Allireia's near, even if you left Elspeth behind in the village."

"If the wolves help," I said, "they could have Rachel or Becky wait nearby - not doing anything suspicious to the Volturi, just standing within earshot - and she could phase and tell Jake as soon as she realized what was going on. But Allireia would have to unfade briefly to let her know to do that."

"That's not a terrible idea," Siobhan said, "but assumes wolf cooperation beyond just

Jacob, which we aren't assuming for the moment."

"Wait one moment," said my mother suddenly. "Aro is wearing Marcus's eye to use it as a prosthetic vision device. What makes us think he doesn't have some part of - of Edward on his person? Isn't he keeping Edward as a mindreading antenna? Wouldn't that be the best way to do it?"

"That's possible," Siobhan allowed. "Unlike the eye, which needs line of sight to be useful, it wouldn't matter if he were wearing such a piece of Edward under his sleeve or something, so Alice might not have seen... what's your point?"

"My point is that just like Demetri could notice Allirea whether she faded or not," my mother said, "Edward can probably notice me whether or not Allirea is fading me. If Aro is constantly reading him, that means he might be able to notice thoughts about me - even if it's only Edward reading Allirea thinking about me, since he can't hear my thoughts directly. And unlike with Marcus's eye, we can't prevent that just by avoiding line of sight. If my shield slips, then no matter where we are in Edward's range, this is a risk."

There was a silence, and Siobhan said, "Alice? Can you have a look at that?"

"Only if I spy on Aro changing clothes in the future to see if he's got any Edward-bits on him tucked under the cloak," Alice said.

"This is somewhat important," Siobhan said tightly. "Your sense of propriety is somewhat less so."

After a pause, Alice said, "Yeah. Half a thumb, tied to his forearm."

My mother shuddered, and Siobhan swore quietly. "That's a lot of ifs, but we can't rule any of them out," she said. "If Bella slips... If Edward can notice Allirea's thoughts even when Allirea is faded, should they concern Bella... if Aro can notice Edward's noticing, even when they concern a faded Bella via a faded Allirea... but we can't rule it out."

"Can we ask Pera to go in and get Edward - in his entirety - out first?" my mother asked. "I'm aware we can't wait for his reassembly before proceeding with the attack from there, since his disappearance will certainly be noticed, but at least he could be taken away as a weapon from the enemy."

"If Pera helps beyond getting us onto an airplane," Siobhan said tiredly, "we can ask her. If she *doesn't* -"

"Maybe we should wait until we know if we have her help before trying to come up with something clever to do on the contingency that we don't," said my mother.

"Now that Pera is absent without leave, we should step up our timeline a bit," Siobhan said. "The Volturi are not stupid, and if they decide to put some kind of plan into

motion, they *don't* have to wait for a day and a half until an airplane has departed from Italy, flown to Alaska, and then flown back again before they can get started. Okay. Supposing we have no Pera and no wolves other than Jacob, what do we do?"

"Alistair is a tracker, right?" I asked. "He can tell where various people are. If he were the third person, he could go in with Allirea, keep his sense on the lookout for Aro, not be particularly inclined to think about my mother, and let Allirea kill a bunch of people before running into anyone who can notice her." I didn't remember a great deal about Alistair, in spite of him styling himself Carlisle's friend, but I was familiar with the basics of how his power (mostly deployed to let him stay far away from his fellow persons) worked. His power was a lot like Harry Clearwater's had been.

There was a pause while my mother and Siobhan thought that over, and then Siobhan said, "Okay, that's our current default steps one and two. Elspeth, Alistair, and Allirea, latter two faded, break into the village, deprogram the wolves and imprints and pups, and then Alistair and Allirea go into the compound together with Alistair executing a planned pattern of announcing Aro's location even though he won't be able to remember that Allirea is there. However, I'm *somewhat* concerned about Alistair's reliability. Do we have any other ideas for the case where he absconds in the night rather than follow through with anything so risky?"

"I resent that," snapped Alistair's voice in the background.

"If you resent it, feel free to prove my suspicions unjustified," retorted Siobhan. "I invite you to do so. I'd like nothing more. In the meantime, I'm the one with magical planning powers, so if I feel inclined to plan for you running off, I'm not going to ignore the impulse just to spare your feelings. Elspeth, Bella - more ideas?"

"Nathan might have some valuable ability," I said. "But I don't know how to plan for that when he won't tell us what it is."

"Hang on," Siobhan said, "I have another call. Liam, love, you call Bella to keep the line open -" Various beeping noises later, I could hear Siobhan answer the new call through Liam's phone and my mother's, and patched into the conversation myself to be able to hear. "Hello."

"Siobhan!" said Nathan's voice cheerfully. "I have the notion that this is a good time to tell you what it is that I do. What d'you think?"

"The only way to improve on this moment would be via the irresponsible use of time travel, Nathan," Siobhan deadpanned. "Is your power that, by any chance?"

"Nah, I wish, that would be keen," he replied. "Close, though!"

"Well," Siobhan growled, "out with it."

"Supernaturally good timing," he said cheerfully. "If I'm considering doing a thing, I

know when would be the best moment to do it."

There was a moment of quiet, and then Siobhan said, "And what, pray tell, made *this* rather than a week ago Wednesday the best moment to share this information?"

"Haven't a bloody clue," he said, still cheerful. "I don't get reasons. Just times. But I'm always right. I know when would be best to come visit your island and when would be best to swim home again. I know when's best to dodge, when's best to strike, when's best to do anything I set my mind to really. Couple awkward limits to it, though. F'rinstance, doesn't help me think of especially clever things to time brilliantly. If I want to know the best time to set myself on fire, my power will oblige, but that wouldn't make it any less liable to kill me."

"How could there be a best time to set yourself on fire?" I asked.

"Not rightly sure," he told me. "Told you - I don't get reasons, just times. The other limit is that I need to have roughly the right time scale in mind to get the most useful answer. If I'm thinking that I want to visit Bath sometime this week, I'll know the best time this week, but if I'm thinking I want to go sometime this decade, I'll know the best time this decade, which isn't likely to be this week. That's gotten me into trouble once or twice. Anyway," he said, "maybe you lot can tell me - why was this the best time for me to share my secret with the group?"

"Well, we'll be there with Eleazar anyway in a little over a day," I said.

"And we're currently trying to figure out who gets to be in the team that first enters the compound," said Siobhan, "and Nathan, I think you get the job."

Driver

"I've got a job now?" asked Nathan, laughing. "That's an improvement over sitting around waiting for you to call and say 'jump', I s'pose. What's my job exactly? I hope you're not going to ask me to just knock on the castle door. Remember what I said about how my power will go right ahead and tell me the best time to set myself on fire but -"

"But if you do something fatal at the best time it will probably still be fatal, I understand," said Siobhan. "No, knocking isn't part of the plan. What we're going to do is send you, Elspeth, and Allirea into the wolf village. Allirea will stick close to you and keep you faded, and your job will be to prevent wolves from sounding the alarm or trapping Elspeth before she's deprogrammed everyone there. Since Allirea will be faded herself, you won't be able to pay attention to her, but apparently you're used to doing things without knowing exactly why you're doing them *anyway*, which seems likely to help you follow through on a plan that calls for you to coordinate with her. As far as you'll be concerned, you're Elspeth's bodyguard who everybody, including Elspeth, will mysteriously overlook."

"All right..." said Nathan.

"Don't hurt the wolves if you can avoid it," Siobhan went on. "And *definitely* don't hurt the imprints, or the kids. You shouldn't need to, for one thing. You'll have every advantage in the world to tie them up if they won't hold still voluntarily - we'll send you in with a mess of rope or equivalent. That won't hold a determined wolf but it could give Elspeth the time she needs. The imprints are harmless but after everything settles down you *don't* want to have hurt one. The puppies are harmless too unless one chooses this day to activate, in which case it's just another wolf to deal with."

"And then what?" he asked.

"Then, you - and Allirea will follow you, but you won't know it - go into the compound via the entrance. You will choose optimal times to knock out Volturi you come across. You're not going to be able to attack Renata or the people she has directly covered, and you'll only catch Heidi with her power off if she's behaving abnormally today, but everybody else, take 'em apart. Don't set anyone on fire. Just break them. We'll sort out later who lives, who dies, and who gets to serve a sentence in the hiding place if Pera helps, after the fact. Breaking them will be enough for the rest of us to pour in and take care of Renata's charges and Heidi - or for Bella to do that, rather."

"And you lot will know when to pour in how?" Nathan asked. "Do I go in wearing a wire, maybe, and give word at the right time? I suppose you won't pay attention to me until Allirea lets up on her trick - I'll have some keyword or something to tell her when and know when to say *that*, maybe, and then she can back off and I can talk to you?"

"That works," Siobhan agreed. "One question regarding your power - and you might

not know, we might have to have Eleazar look at you - but: best timing for *whom*?"

"Me, presumably," Nathan said. "I don't have a history of working in groups. Don't know how much it'll cover the rest of you. Is it a worry that I'll move around too fast for Allirea to follow?"

"No, I think if your power can handle Allirea at all, it'll keep you at an acceptable speed," Siobhan said. "You're not protecting her - she's protecting you. I'm more concerned that you'll find the *best time* to do something completely unhelpful, like volunteer to join the guard or run off by yourself."

"Well," said Nathan, "I did know when to call you and give you the info, didn't I? So one way or another the power knows I'm working with you. I'm not sure what else you want me to do to prove I'm on your side. I guess you could bribe me with goodies for after we win or something... in fact, feel free... but I'm all for a win for Team Us."

"Fair enough," murmured Siobhan. "I still want to show you to Eleazar and find out what he makes of you."

"Fine by me," Nathan said affably. "Hey, can you tell me what's going to happen after we win, by any chance? What kinds of goodies might I get bribed with? Do we all get to vote for president?"

"Current working plan is that Bella becomes queen of the world," Siobhan said. "Other configurations are also possible; we're not sure yet. Anyway. We'll be in London day after tomorrow, Nathan, and then we can inspect and experiment with your good timing. In the meantime, this would be a good time to -" There was a click as he hung up, and Siobhan said, "I could have seen that coming."

"I'm going to hang up now too," my mother said, and she did. She gave me a significant look, and I also closed my phone.

"What?" I asked.

"It just occurred to me," she said in a low voice, "that anyone who doesn't want me to be in charge after the rebellion, such as anyone who wants to go on eating humans with impunity, *has a strong incentive to see that Edward doesn't live through this.*"

"Or just you," I said.

"I'm a more challenging target," she said, starting to pace and throwing Allirea a suspicious look. Allirea's black eyes looked back calmly. "I'm ambulatory, I'm shielded from several types of attack, and it requires significantly more attention to get me killed than it would to kill most people. Edward is still in bits in that dungeon, as vulnerable as it is possible for a vampire to be."

"...Yeah, he is," I said, not at all sure why she was telling me this. "Is there

something you want me to do about that?"

"Renata would have gone with Aro and Chelsea to Nicaragua, wouldn't she?" my mother asked. "She wasn't blasted."

"Right," I said.

"If I point that out to Siobhan, and you volunteer to help, she might send you in to knock out Renata once Nathan and Allirea have done everything they can, instead of having you hang back in the village," she said. "Everybody on our side - that is, everybody who might have the information that I'm in the running for Queen and that this would most likely mean murder becoming illegal for vampires - *hasn't* been blasted yet except for Siobhan herself. That means that if you get into the compound when most of the guard is broken, and knock out Renata, you can also protect your father from anyone who might choose that time to harm him. David's there too, but I don't think anyone has an incentive to hurt him except insofar as it might be hard to tell him and Edward apart in their current state."

"But Siobhan eats people herself," I said, "and is blasted so I can't stop her from doing anything if she decides to do it. And Allirea could walk right by me. And Addy could show up and I can't blast her either."

"I'm trusting Allirea on this one," my mother said, although the wary look on her face suggested that "trust" was a strong word. "I think she's sufficiently cognizant of the fact that she can't fade from *me* that she wouldn't involve herself in harming my mate. Also, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but since she knows I won't put up with her killing humans she's not even bothering to hunt for sheep or anything else available around here. She's just eating normal food. I don't think she's that attached to the pseudo-legality of murder." She was talking like Allirea wasn't there, which after a moment's thought I decided could just as easily be deference to Allirea's own preferences.

"What about Siobhan and Addy?" I asked.

"Siobhan had every chance to make a bid for world domination or to come up with a better idea than me ruling the world," my mother said. "I don't rule out the possibility that she's concocting something behind my back, but since I don't currently have the resources to oppose her if she decided she wanted to take command, and she ought to know I know that, she'd probably have said something. She might be angling for some kind of dispensation. I might even have to give it to her. But I don't *think* she'd kill Edward even if she didn't want me to be queen; she has other avenues open. Anyway, if she tries it, there's common knowledge of the fact that you can't stop her. You wouldn't need to try to get in her way. As for Addy... I have no idea what she's doing, but I'd expect her to have a little extra trouble getting into the compound during or after the fight. She'd have to convince quite a few people to help her out before she got as far as the dungeon. I'm not counting on that."

"Addy could already be there," I said.

"Not in the compound," my mother said. "Alice would have noticed either Addy or a blank spot. She'd hide better in the village, but if she's *there*, Nathan will be able to kill her on your group's way in - she'd take his power, but that'd just evenly match them without third party interference, and he'll have Allirea's help."

"Should I tell Siobhan about this," I said, "since you don't think she'd be the one to worry about anyway and it's probably not a good idea to surprise her? I don't mean on the phone where anybody could overhear, I mean..." I tapped my temple with one finger. "Privately."

My mother thought for a minute, then nodded. "When you have a reason to be within range of her anyway. Don't make a separate trip for it."

"Okay," I said.

"I was a little concerned that I'd have to convince you," my mother admitted.

"I don't want murder to be legal any more than you do," I pointed out. "And if something happened to Dad you wouldn't be able to rule the world, and I don't think any other vegetarians are ambitious enough to try it. I can't do it. I'm five, so I don't think vampires in general would take me very seriously even if I were otherwise all set to go. And my major defense mechanism only works once per person, and we still don't know how well the coma holds up versus lethal force."

"Right," she said, biting her lip a bit and turning away. "To be fair, I'm twenty-three and I'm not sure if that's old enough to be taken seriously by the crowd we're talking about here, either. I hope Pera decides to help us... even if only after the fact and not during. What can you tell me about her?"

"She's very... skittish, I guess you could say," I said. "I'm afraid she's really going to resent you for trying to eat her. But she forgave everybody in Jake's old pack for how things were before he stepped up to the leadership role... or at least I think she did. She interacted civilly with them and hid and unhid them on demand, anyway. I might get some leverage for having done the blank sending painkiller thing while she turned," I conjectured. "Although it might only be enough to compensate for the fact that I told her it was safe to unhide you..."

"I should have held my breath," my mother muttered. "Shouldn't have inhaled. Had no particular reason to inhale. It's a *habit* and I did it anyway, I didn't even think of the possibility of a singer... at least she's turned now."

"She probably can't remember that very clearly, at least," I volunteered.

"Probably. But she still knows it happened. You saw me pull back, right? You can tell her I did? I don't think I would have actually eaten her even if it hadn't been for you

and the wolves."

"I can tell her you did, sure," I said. I tilted my head and looked at my slumbering wolf. "I wonder if she still looks at Jake as an authority figure. He bossed around a pack with her in it for five years."

"Does Chelsea cut that kind of thing?" my mother asked.

"Only sort of. If she were obeying Jake because she liked him or even just respected him as a person, Chelsea would have gotten rid of that, definitely. If she were obeying him because he's an alpha, then no - but probably she's not identifying herself as a pack member anymore. Anything left would be just leftover habits, that she could break if there were cause."

"Safe guess," my mother sighed. "I guess we'll see."

The following afternoon, my mother got a text message; she read it, then turned the phone towards me to show me what it said. It read, "Pera + Razi are here. P won't hide you. You + Allirea travel A's way; Elspeth should take Jacob to houses to hide."

The next text had the flight information for the chosen airplane. My mother sighed heavily, touched my hair for a moment, then said, "All right, then. Allirea, go ahead and -"

I scooped up Jacob carefully, and, stepping gently so as not to wake him, trotted across the mountains and down to the houses. I didn't see or hear anyone, so I wandered around, calling, "Pera? Pera?" on the assumption that she'd hide me soon enough.

After a few seconds, all of the vampires who'd congregated in the Denali houses flared into existence around me, Pera closest with one hand on my shoulder and the other on Jake's forehead. She danced back a couple of steps when we were both in the hiding place, making a strange huffing sound that was presumably her attempt to clear her nostrils of Jake's wolf smell. Razi, who looked every inch the protective mate, popped into place beside her and clasped her hand in his.

"All set?" Siobhan asked. "Do you want to drive Jake to the airport instead of running, Elspeth? That'd probably be faster than you carrying him, although you'd need to be unhidden to avoid an apparently driverless vehicle careening down the highway and getting unwanted attention."

"I think I would actually prefer that," I said. "I've never driven a car before, but I do remember how..."

"You can take the blue one from our garage," said Tanya. "Keys are on the wall. We'll follow you and Pera can rehide you once you find a place to park."

I nodded, and Pera audibly quit breathing to tiptoe forward again and unhide me and Jake again.

I took my wolf to the Denalis' garage, found the blue car, and got him to wake up enough that he could sit up in the passenger seat, let me buckle him in, and flop against the door to drop back off to sleep. The wound on his neck looked no worse than a scrape by this point, but he was likely to be pretty groggy until we reached Europe. I slid in behind the wheel, mentally poked Memory, and pulled out of the garage.

I couldn't tell, but I assumed the vampires were close on my tail as I got onto the highway and headed for the airport. I tried to avoid speeding overmuch. I didn't have a license on me, and rather suspected that Pera would hide and eat (or allow someone else to eat) any cop who pulled me over, instead of letting the situation unfold more conventionally.

I got all the way to the parking lot without police attention, and a moment after I cut the engine, my door and then Jake's opened as though by the intervention of poltergeists, and we were hidden again. I picked Jake up, locked the car in case Tanya wanted it again later, and followed the nearly two dozen vampires to the airplane.

"Do you see Bella?" Siobhan asked Pera, once we were all on the flight, scattered throughout the cabin in clumps. I sat Jake in a window seat; he woke up long enough to mumble a complaint about legroom and then close his eyes again.

"No," said Pera, "and I can still think about her, so I think she must be in the cargo compartment." She paused again, and said, "Wait, why wouldn't I have been able to think about her?"

"Think about who?" I asked.

"Never mind, Elspeth," said Siobhan, rolling her eyes. She turned back to Pera. "And you never mind too."

Tanya laughed. "No, this is fun," she said. "Hey, Elspeth, y'know your dad?"

"We've met," I said, puzzled.

"Is he single?"

"No..."

"Let her be," murmured Kate uncomfortably. "You know she'll remember it all once Bella's not being... what *did* happen to her, again?"

"Never mind, love," Garrett told Kate, pressing a kiss to the part of her hair.

I blinked, but shrugged off the oddity, leaned on Jake, decided it would be unwise to let an inflight magazine appear to "float" in front of goodness only knew how many

humans, and closed my eyes to skim memories instead.

I didn't hit on anything particularly germane, mostly just amusing myself by processing remembered books and shows, but also getting myself up to speed on the guard we were about to attack.

It occurred to me that we'd talked about Renata mostly as a obstacle, rather than as a person, so I looked at what I had of her, but on inspection our prior inattention was justified: she was just staggeringly boring. I'd done more noteworthy deeds in the past two months than she had in the past millenium. She'd been scooped up by the Volturi thirty-six years after being turned by an unremarkable vampire, who she'd followed around hunting and scrabbling for territory and then abandoned without a second thought when offered the prestigious position of Aro's bodyguard. She had astoundingly little going on in her head for a vampire - she gave herself over to her senses more fully than most, swimming in sights and sounds and smells and textures and, when applicable, the flavor of blood, rather than pursuing anything more complicated. It would have been dangerous for any other vampire. It was a pretty newborn-like mindset, usually compensated for in actual newborns by the extra strength. When the strength wore off, the mentality was dangerous. But it wasn't dangerous for *her*, because all the dangers it could have exposed her to were flawlessly turned away by her witchcraft. (Jane and the like could still hurt Renata, but joining the Volturi had rid her of that hazard except for early moments when Aro wanted "testing" done.)

I thought about Sulpicia and Athenodora, the living Volturi wives. They were somewhat more interesting than Renata - they had hobbies, at least, they read books and talked and painted and played instruments and had recently ventured onto the Internet. But they were very solitary creatures except for their respective husbands and each other and Chelsea, the latter having insinuated herself into their small social circle regardless of whether she would have found natural welcome there. Athenodora and Sulpicia were considered serious vulnerabilities (justifiably so) and as such did not leave the tower to venture into a world full of people who didn't care for their mates. Caius didn't depart often, either, but Aro often found himself necessary on various field assignments due to his power.

I killed a good hour and a half just *looking* at Heidi through various people's memories. The effect was muted in recollection, so I didn't trap myself in an infinite loop of watching her forever because she was *just that beautiful*, but the aesthetic overload was still compelling. From Heidi's own perspective, she looked pretty, felt less so, and had mostly agreed to join the guard in order to get carte blanche to use her power on large groups. Before that, the threat of retaliation from the Volturi themselves had confined her to uninhabited areas most of the time. Imperfect control over her power could easily have her accidentally mesmerizing and having to cover up entire crowds of humans, which was conspicuous enough to get her into trouble. She'd turned up in Volterra and presented herself as a candidate for the guard when it occurred to her that they would probably not get her in trouble if she were useful to them.

After some time, earlier than I had the previous night because we were flying east, I

fell asleep, holding Jake's hand as usual.

I woke up on a different plane, and discovered that Jake was alert. What had looked like a scratch on his neck before was completely gone. "Morning, Elsie," he said, sounding tired but lucid.

"Morning," I said. "You're up early."

"Some combination of jet lag and having slept almost continuously for a week, is my guess," he said. "Siobhan caught me up on what's going on. She said apparently the plan is for you to go into the village with the one vampire from the Isle of Man, and I asked if she was seriously sending in just the two of you, and she said yes, but made air quotes and rolled her eyes, so... do you know what that's about?"

"No... The idea behind sending me in is that the wolves won't attack me," I explained. "And Nathan has a witchcraft power that gives him good timing, so he's not in that much danger either... he can dodge and stuff." The explanation didn't feel complete, but it seemed like a recipe for bad results to mess with Siobhan's magical plans.

"I'd feel better about it if I were going in with you," Jake said, frowning.

"Well, think about it like this," I said. "The reason the wolves won't attack me is because I'm your imprint. But they can attack *you* if they feel like it. And if you died, then I wouldn't be your imprint anymore."

Jake paled a couple of shades, and nodded. "I'll go where Siobhan puts me. Got it."

We landed at Heathrow, and Siobhan exchanged a series of texts with Maggie (voice calls being unworkable due to the inaudibility of hidden persons) to determine where the British contingent was located. I wasn't sure why this required several texts, but Siobhan told me not to worry about it. Jake was able to move under his own power, and could have kept up even with me on his back if he'd phased, but Siobhan - sensibly enough - deemed this a poor idea. We went at his top running speed on two legs instead. When we arrived, Pera hid everybody there, rather than unhiding us ("Tactical reasons, Elspeth, and can you stop asking questions until you know why I told you to stop, please?")

Nathan and Siobhan were promptly engaged in a lighthearted (on his part) and exasperated (on hers) conversation about something unimportant. I killed time listening to Cath catch up with her assorted friends, most of whom seemed more than a little irked at her for getting them involved, especially since the ultimate plan didn't rely much on ordinary non-witch vampires and, except for Nathan, any of them could have stayed home. The London coven in particular weren't thrilled about sharing their territory. Ilario said something irrelevant that mysteriously calmed them all down.

After we'd been one excessively large group of vampires doing nothing in particular for about fifteen minutes, Pera made a little shrieking noise, prompting Razi to leave off the small talk with the Scottish vampires and appear at her side. "There they are!" she

exclaimed.

"My mother and Allirea?" I guessed.

"Yes, they're right there, but I told you, Siobhan, that I didn't want to *hide her* -" Razi petted her hair, making soothing noises.

"So unhide me, Liam, Elspeth, Jacob, and Nathan, and keep an ear out for further instructions," said Siobhan tiredly. "It's time to hammer out the last details... and get started."

Infiltrator

Once Pera had unhidden the smaller group, Allirea spoke first: "How long do I need to be unfaded?" she asked.

"Until I'm safely out of the way or hidden again," Siobhan said. "We don't know yet whether Bella's shield will prevent your power from "infecting" me and shouldn't count on her shielding abilities anyway, especially since I'm not Elspeth or Edward. Elspeth, did you deprogram Pera yet?"

"No," I said. "I probably should have done it on the plane, but she seemed occupied."

"Fair enough. Pera, please hide Elspeth again for a moment to let her do her job," Siobhan said. "As long as you won't occupy the same space as Bella." The configuration of people around me shifted again, and I looked at Pera, tilted my head, and ran through the now-familiar push of de-Chelseaing. Pera twitched, and Razi, who still had his arms around her, held her a little tighter, but she didn't say anything, and then reached out and unhid me again. I began to suspect that it would become very tedious to swap between the hiding place and outside whenever I needed to interact with a different set of people just because Pera didn't want to share a dimension with my mother. Siobhan asked when I reappeared, "All done?"

"Yeah," I said. *Oh, and... I sent Siobhan my mother's concerns about incentives to do my father harm. I forgot to tell you that before because I forgot my mother existed when Allirea was fading her, and when Allirea was asleep I guess I was too.* It occurred to me that I'd also agreed to relay some information from my mother to Pera, namely that the former had tried to stop herself from killing the latter, but I was otherwise engaged at the moment, so I made a mental note to do it later.

Siobhan didn't react visibly beyond glancing at my mother. "You'll also," she said to me, "need to show the Volturi to everyone who hasn't seen them already and doesn't already have a mate. May as well start with Nathan, since he's already outside with us."

"Set me up with the girl of my dreams," invited Nathan, grinning and spreading his hands.

"Just women?" I asked. "Pyotr is -"

"Stick to the females, please," Nathan laughed. "There might be a *best* time for me to explore the alternative, but no *good* time." So I showed him Heidi and Renata and Santiago and Emel and Emere (skipping Li-qing because of her own preferences), and then, supposing it was better to be safe than sorry, included Jane despite her young physical age. "First lady on that list there is *very* attractive, but no, none of them are making my unbeating heart swoon and compose poetry," he reported. "Sorry."

"Well, same deal with the rest of our friends, Elspeth," said Siobhan. "Pera, once more,

please..."

I was hidden again, and went through all eighteen single vampires, from Tanya to the Romanians, sending images of candidate Volturi. No one reacted to the "slideshow" as though they'd just seen their mate, and Pera unhid me so I could relay this to Siobhan.

"Drat," said Siobhan, succinctly. "But at least we won't be caught off guard by someone who's supposed to be working for us spontaneously falling in love with the enemy."

"Did you show David to anyone?" my mother asked. "It wouldn't exactly be a disaster if we had his mate here with us and found this out during the coup, since he's not a Volturi, but it'd still probably be better to know sooner rather than later."

"I didn't, no," I said. "Pera -"

I was hidden again, and offered everyone who was single and attracted to men a memory of David, but again there were no takers. "I've seen David before, Elspeth," Tanya pointed out when I carelessly included her. "He's lived with us for about six years. I would have noticed."

"Sorry," I said. "Pera, if you'll unhide me again please..." She tapped me on the shoulder and I was back outside with my mother, Jake, Siobhan and Liam, and Nathan. "No mate for David," I said.

"Should we consider the possibility that Addy's going to wind up with somebody by the end of all this," my mother asked, "or do we have reason to exclude the possibility?"

"Addy's borrowed Alice's power," I said. "The first vision Alice ever had after she turned was of Jasper. I think if Addy had a potential mate walking around today, she'd have seen him in a vision when she first touched Alice."

"I don't think we can count on that," Siobhan said. "For instance, that would fail trivially if Addy's mate were - as an example - Nahuel. She wouldn't be able to get a vision of him, and yet we know the species combination to be possible." Allirea hissed quietly. "And we don't know whether Addy would necessarily have gotten such a vision even in the case of another vampire being the mate in question; Alice is a sample size of one. However," Siobhan continued, "I don't think it would be a good idea to *actually* wind up with Addy mated to anyone we're hoping to make use of. She has my power; that's just handing her a tool she can probably use as well as we can, and we still don't know what she wants. So what I'd *like* is to borrow Alice -" Alice appeared, mildly confused - "and have her and Elspeth try to figure out whether any of our friends would be interested in Addy *without actually so interesting them*. But, Pera, we can't actually do that, because Alice cannot see things that Elspeth is involved in, so while your proactive un hiding of people whose names I mention offhand is appreciated in concept, it is not called for in practice."

"I *could* do that one myself if I could see Addy, but she's still blanked out..." groused Alice.

"And I'd say go for it, if you could, but you can't," Siobhan said, tapping her foot. "I don't think we have any angle to figure out Addy-related mating avenues without actually showing her to everyone. The question is whether it's safer to do so or not."

"What would you do if we did have Addy's mate in our merry band," my mother commented. "keep him safe at home so he doesn't foul things up? We don't know where Addy is, so he couldn't really gallivant off to find her, on any reasonable time scale..."

"That's roughly what I'd do, with the possible exception of Nathan," Siobhan said, "Nathan being our only unmated witch and one of the most important individuals to our current plan of attack, unless you count Allirea and Elspeth."

"*Should* we count Allirea and Elspeth?" my mother asked. "As unmated witches, I mean, not as important to the plan. I suppose they've both seen everybody already, but we don't know exactly how half-vampires work. They might or might not be a "first sight" situation, for one thing. We only have guesses based on Allirea's case..."

"And on Elspeth's case," Siobhan pointed out. "Chelsea never detected anything out of the ordinary in Elspeth's feelings towards Jacob. It's a standard one-way imprint. So we know half-vampires don't mirror wolves - for that matter, we also know full vampires don't mirror wolves, or Brady would still be alive - and we know half-vampires don't mirror vampires. If they do something, it's not something we can use, because whoever our resident hybrids would be attached to wouldn't be attached back to them in turn. In any event... I think we've got to risk letting at least Nathan have a look at Addy, Elspeth. Better to know now and re-work the plan with Alistair or Bella in that role after all than to get a nasty surprise later. Hop to. I'd like to get this phase of the prep work out of the way. I'm not being theatrical about it, but the idea of weaponizing mating *does* make me *rather uncomfortable*." Liam touched her shoulder and she lifted her hand to clasp his fingers there.

Alice, who hadn't been rehidden yet, looked a little queasy at having it put that way herself. Then she disappeared back into the hiding place. My mother seemed comparatively unconcerned when I looked her way.

"Go on then," prompted Nathan, "let's see if I'm destined to be with... Actually, shouldn't finish that sentence, as if I *am* I imagine I shall regret it." I showed him Addy, and he tilted his head, then shook it. "The t-shirt from the Italian equivalent of the National Blood Service is witty. But the girl is not sonnet-prompting."

"Let's check everybody else, too," Siobhan said, and I was pulled into the hiding place and blanketed everyone there with the same image, to no enthusiastic reply, and Pera unhid me again. I shook my head in response to Siobhan's questioning look.

"Okay then," said Siobhan. "We won't find ourselves unexpectedly serving as matchmakers for Addy."

"What's next?" I asked.

"Next," Siobhan said, "unless I am very uncharacteristically mistaken, we go to

Pera hid everyone except my mother and Allirea again, and we went back to the airport and piled onto another airplane, this time headed for Italy.

I ran through the plan in my head, over and over: when Alice said everybody was going to be in the compound (and, consequently, not in or within hearing distance of the village), Nathan and I would break a skylight to get into the wolf village. He would... somehow... (I had to trust Siobhan about this part)... be able to singlehandedly make sure that in addition to being unable to attack me, the wolves would also not trap me or get word to the compound. We'd both go in with our phones open and connected so Siobhan could hear what was going on. After I deprogrammed everybody in the village, Nathan would go on ahead and... somehow... (Siobhan knew what she was doing, right?)... break practically everybody in the Volturi guard, probably excepting only Renata, her immediately protected charges, and Heidi. When it got to that point... well, Siobhan hadn't told me yet if I was supposed to go in, blast Renata, and stand guard over my father. I sent her the question, in yes-or-no-format pieces, so she could nod and shake her head without divulging the details to anyone else on the plane, and she confirmed that I should do that - after she sent me a message telling me to do so.

Sometime after all of that, we would decide who lived, who died, who ruled the world.

"You're shaking," Jacob murmured in my ear.

"This is going to be really *big*," I mumbled.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But then we can stop running all over creation." He hesitated, then said, "I'm pretty sure you know this, but be *careful* in the village, okay?"

"They can't hurt me," I said.

"Well... I can't imagine hurting anybody else's imprint, either, if I knew she was an imprint, but I'm not sure about sending you in with just Nathan keeping them from calling in the vamps..."

"Siobhan thinks he can do it," I said.

"Yeah, I know." He sighed. "Assuming we win, what do you want to do - after?"

"Dunno," I said, leaning on him. "Stop running all over creation, I guess. I've moved around a lot. I'm tired. Maybe my family would let us go back to where I was born, in Norway? I bet they still own the house..."

"Elsbeth," said Carlisle, from a few rows back, "that would be fine with us."

"And then we could just live there," I said. "Maybe."

"I wonder if I'm going to come out the other end of this with a pack to take care of," Jake mused.

"You don't sound excited about the prospect," I said.

"I'm not. I stepped up when I had to. I didn't *want* it. The first time I alpha-voiced someone... It's not nice stuff. Takes their will away. They *can't* disobey unless they defect packs. And that wasn't much of a choice when it was a choice between my pack or being a kept wolf in Volterra. I swore I'd never do it, early on, but I'm... I wasn't a good enough leader to hold everybody together without it. I managed, with, and I don't think anyone resented me that badly for it, but... if I'd been *really* born to lead a pack, like my genes think I was, I would have been able to do it myself."

"Do Rachel and Becky like it?" I asked.

"More than I do. I don't know if they *like* it like it. I guess we'll have a Wolf Convention after the dust settles and figure out, you know, the fate of our species."

"Well, don't worry," I said, "I'll stick with you even if you have to go somewhere totally random to run your pack again."

He gave me a half-smile and patted me on the head. "Glad to hear it, Elsie."

After some time, we landed.

I stood in what looked for all the world like a labeled, innocuous, but puzzling art installation: a field in the Tuscan countryside, full of semi-regularly arranged mirrors.

Minding my proximity to the "mirrors" - I didn't want to be spotted through someone's ceiling before I was ready to be noticed - I questioned Siobhan's decision to send me into the village completely by myself. I distinctly remembered a lot of discussion going on about how if I went alone, I'd be safe from direct wolf attack, but *not* immobilization and summoned vampires. Yet there I was, preparing to smash in a skylight and drop myself into my former home without any backup. I decided that I'd best deprogram everybody very *briskly* to compensate for this. I'd tried doing it from the field, but had no way of knowing whether it worked until I actually went down there. I didn't have data indicating one way or the other that eye contact or closer proximity was necessary. The experiment with Eleazar only told me that I didn't need to physically touch my targets.

I found the skylight that would drop me into the central playroom in North, where I could expect to land in a cluster of puppies and imprints and where the initial noise caused by my home invasion could be attributed to a pup knocking over something fragile. That, I thought, should prevent anyone from a neighboring room from being too alarmed too soon. I flattened myself against the grass and looked at the mirror. I didn't want to just smash it open

- that would have broken glass raining onto anyone standing under the window and could hurt someone. Addy had created the village's physical infrastructure, though, with Benjamin's power to move the earth and stone and Emel's to work metal pieces. I knew how the skylight was installed.

I dug my fingers into the soil at the edge of the mirror and pried it up as carefully as I could, and then, not giving anyone a chance to react to the noise, swung my legs down into the angled hole and slid.

I landed half on top of the Stross twins and my knee clipped a rather pregnant Esta in the arm; the boys screeched and Esta yelped, but they didn't seem to be injured. I scrambled off of them, pushed myself to my feet and spun around to take note of who was in the room, and hit all thirty-five occupants with a single concentrated strike of deprogramming.

"*Elsbeth?*" said Esta in her heavy accent, unbelieving.

The other adults in the room were Amanda, my former neighbor, her wolf Albert, and Kim without her Jared. Albert handed his daughter abruptly to his imprint and phased in an explosion of coal-gray fur, snarling low in his throat, but he didn't make a move against me. I knew he could be getting in telepathic contact with someone, but it wasn't likely; wolves weren't usually in that form during the day...

"I'll explain later," I said, and I danced through knee-deep confused puppies of assorted ages to peep into the girl orphans' dorm, then the boys', where I was able to catch another two and five little ones respectively in the deprogramming wave. I ducked back into the playroom, hearing no breathing or heartbeats from anywhere else in North, and found my way briefly blocked by Albert, but I ducked past him, finding him unaccountably slow to respond when I wove around and out the door.

Albert was in Rachel's pack; if he'd talked to anyone it was one of hers - so I went next to East, wrenching open door after door to find familiar face after familiar face, furred or otherwise. Ashleigh, dark silver and not grown yet but willing and able to yip at me... Gregory, too stunned to phase, standing there while I waved my hand in an unnecessary gesture to accompany my work... Joel and Ian, knocking over their Parcheesi board to turn into black and blonde quadrupeds and bark... Marilyn, chasing me down the hall slower than she could run, fearful of doing me harm...

Cody.

Cody and Seth, in their room, watching an old Batman movie which played on in the background even after I yanked their door open, and Cody *could* hurt me, he wasn't a fettered wolf or a harmless human, but I could blast him if he tried. But he didn't, he just stared, and I met his eyes for a moment and then moved to the next door, and the next, the word *truth* gradually turning meaningless as I repeated it over and over in my head. Karen, Embry, Laurel, Ken, Leah, Calvin, Vivian, Zachary... the others would be in South if they were home, and I didn't know whether to think all of Jake's old pack had gone back whence

they came... where was Rachel?

I hurtled into the outer hallway that encircled the village, made a right turn, took a moment to marvel at the fact that no one was chasing me, and burst through the entrance into the South common room. The door to the laundry was propped open and Danielle was there with a basket of towels on her hip, the entire Jarvis family was mingling with Sam and Emily and Paige, Miles was teaching his eldest Prima how to find the drawing program she liked on the communal computer. I stayed put just long enough to take attendance and push *truthtruthtruth* at everyone there, then flung myself through the opposite door into the dorm hallway.

I blew through South, ignoring the impulse to pause at *my* old room - my and *Jake's* old room - for longer than the split second it took to confirm its emptiness. Our names were still on the door... I made eye contact with every wolf, imprint, and puppy in the section, deprogramming in ones and twos and threes and ignoring the confused yells of my name, and then raced up the corridor to West.

There was Rachel, sitting with her sister in the West common area. They phased in the same moment when they saw me, black fur and white, but neither moved. I flung the newly well-practiced deprogramming at them, made a mental note to double back and talk to them when I'd gotten everyone, and moved on.

I found most of the wolves I hadn't seen yet in the dorms of West, and raced into the cafeteria to check there for the handful I'd missed. They were all there, getting snacks, and I flailed my arm in their direction as though physically flinging enforced honesty in their faces. I wished briefly that I could have just dropped into the cafeteria during a mealtime when everyone was eating and done it all at once, but Alice had noticed a vampire missing from the compound during or shortly after each such time, and having to run around a bit was worth the leeway on lag time between deprogramming the village and assaulting the compound.

I wished Siobhan had explained exactly how I was supposed to do that second part while the place was crawling with Volturi.

I jogged back to the West common room where I'd last seen the sister alphas. They were still both wolf-shaped, one fluffy and pale and one sleek and dark. "...Hi," I said.

Rachel contracted into her human shape and picked up the white uniform that had burst off (intact, thanks to the magnet-based fasteners) when she'd first transformed. Pinching it into place over her shoulder and down her left side, she said, "What in the hell are you doing here, Elspeth?"

"Um..." I considered telling her I was from the insurgency and there to help, and then decided that it was a bad time to let my mother's sense of humor manifest in me. "I learned to undo some of what Chelsea does. I came here to do that."

Rachel blinked at me. "Okay... thanks, I guess, although your entrance left something to be desired... and?"

That was encouragingly non-hostile, so I said, "And me and some other people are going to overthrow the Volturi."

"Uh... huh," she said. "Where do we fit into this?"

"That's... why I deprogrammed you, so you wouldn't, you know, help the Volturi while we did that," I said, feeling like a terribly inarticulate poster child for the cause.

"Right," said Rachel. "That makes sense. But I mean after you do that, assuming you can - who knows, maybe you can - what becomes of us? This isn't just a matter of making sure we don't consider the Volturi our close personal friends. They also, you know, employ us, and own the village we live in, and preserve enough secrecy that we don't get shot at by spooked random humans, and arrange things so it's feasible for us to go about our lives while legally dead."

"Well, um," I said, "someone else will fill the power vacuum and you'll work it out with them, I guess? It'll probably be my mother. She likes you. She'll figure it out."

"Your *mother* is going to singlehandedly fill the power vacuum left by the *Volturi*," echoed Rachel skeptically. Becky, still phased - relaying our conversation to the other wolves? - snorted as derisively as a wolf could.

"Well, with help," I said. "But she'll probably be the one deciding things. I don't think she'll leave you in the lurch."

"...Okay," said Rachel, "so... what are we supposed to do while we wait to hear about that?"

"Nothing, if you don't want to do anything," I said. "You can just wait here. I'm going to need to go into the compound and help in a minute, though."

"You know," Rachel said, "I went for a while thinking you had *not* inherited your mother's tendency to parasail into other people's basically satisfactory lives and unapologetically jostle them."

"Well, um," I said, "...I'm sorry?"

"At least you aren't doing this on your own, if I understand you correctly."

"I'm not," I said. "Except this first part." My phone buzzed, and I peered at it. There was a text from Siobhan. *Go in and blast Renata now*, it read. "I need to go meet up with the others," I told Rachel.

"...You're not going to do anything monumentally stupid, are you?" she asked.

"I guess that will depend on whether anybody builds a monument to it," I said, struggling and failing to remember why Siobhan thought this was a good idea, let alone why my mother had agreed to tolerate it. They were both smart people and neither of them wanted me to die, so... "But it should work."

"I don't want to listen to Jake screaming in my head forever if it doesn't," said Rachel. "Be careful, kiddo."

"I will," I said, and I turned and ran along the corridor that led to the Volturi compound.

Breaker

My footsteps echoed weakly in the long hallway between the village and the compound. I could have made the run in under a minute, but I was reluctant to sprint, so I went at nearly Olympic slowness instead - peak human speed, no more. When I got to the last hundred feet of tunnel, I slowed further still, wondering at the fact that no vampires from the compound had heard me coming and moved to intercept.

I stepped around the last corner, and saw the basement entrance, covered in snowdrifts of vampire fragments.

I couldn't tell who anyone was; although shreds of hair among the rubble gave me clues, there was no way to be sure from that alone. There were at least two, maybe three people's worth of pieces scattered haphazardly around the room. I gawked for a moment, then tiptoed through the mess and slipped up the stairs.

There were pieces everywhere. I saw more on the next floor, and the next, in chunks of increasing size as though someone had come via the same route as me and been in more and more of a hurry as they went. There was someone's hand, minus a pinky but otherwise intact, scrabbling around in the debris blindly; I shuddered.

I wished I could just let out an ambient blast, like Addy had twelve days previously, but that ran the risk of hitting anyone on our side who'd gotten within range, and Siobhan had told me in no uncertain terms that I was to hit only *Renata* (and Chelsea, if I happened to spot her in something other than a thousand pieces, but that was not likely since she didn't have any unusual protection from physical attack, and a lot of that had obviously been going on recently). I'd managed to communicate with Jake prior to my second escape from Volterra without laying eyes on him, but that use of my power had proven to have better range than the memory blast, as Addy had shown, or Jake would have been caught in that too. I had to actually *find* Renata.

When I climbed past the ground floor, I was able to hear the sounds of ongoing fighting. Awful screeching noises as vampires were torn limb from limb, incoherent snarls and screams of fury and a high flutelike shriek that I was sure belonged to Jane.

I went up and up stair after stair, dread mounting somewhere behind my collarbone, and burst through the open door into the throne room.

There was still more rubble in the huge circular room, but it was also full of whole and whole-enough-to-move vampires. I saw about half of the insurgency (no Jake, he was away to make sure that my imprint status couldn't be abruptly revoked) - I couldn't tell at a glance how many missing were scattered on the floor and how many had abandoned the cause at the last minute. In the center of the room was Renata in the center of a shifting ring of crouching, protected Volturi: Jane, her face a mask of fury; Alec, stoic yet wide-eyed; Aro with the necklace holding Marcus's eye to the nape of his neck; Sulpicia, trembling, not seeming to know what to do with her hands; Santiago, poised to dance her way into a fight as soon as

someone got close enough; Chelsea, looking lost and waifish without her Afton; and -

beauty incarnate.

My brain overloaded. I stared. She was just ideally put together, art defying reality with her resplendent perfection, ornamenting the world, too enchanting to be real... I took a step forward...

I heard my mother's voice shouting my name, and I stopped in my tracks and blinked, and there was Heidi, lovely but not overwhelming, in a combative crouch hissing at a cluster of rebels who were drifting her way. My mother growled wordlessly and the group - Emmett, Kate and her new mate Garrett, and Eleazar - snapped out of the spell abruptly and scrambled back. My mother, perched on the back of one of the huge wooden thrones with her face screwed up in concentration, was not looking directly at me, but I would be within her peripheral vision.

"*Keep* that damn shield *up*, Bella!" roared Siobhan.

"I can't!" my mother snarled. "Not forever!"

Siobhan, a quarter of the way around the circular wall to my right, was shielding Liam's eyes from Heidi's spell, and had her own tightly shut. I saw Maggie hiding behind one of the other thrones, protecting herself via more mundane means from Jane or Heidi or some combination of the two. "Elsbeth, blast Renata and Chelsea *now*!" Siobhan cried.

I looked Chelsea right in her miserable, pleading red eyes, and obeyed.

They each dropped like a stone.

And then everyone was shouting, and Jane *screeched*, and Renata howled in pain and stood up again and swatted Jane across the face.

Jane hissed and burned Renata again, but only for an instant, and then she hit Chelsea too, then they were an intact circle around their shield again.

Siobhan swore loudly and my mother shouted over the din of snarling and hissing, "Elsbeth, *run*!"

I bolted.

I went to the witch dungeon, hoping that my father at least, and David too for preference, were close enough to intact that I could put them back together and add help to the fight. My mother should be able to shield her mate, and shielded, he'd have a fighting chance against the circle, if Jane couldn't burn him and Alec couldn't knock him out and Heidi couldn't entrance him... in straight combat Santiago could hold her own against him,

her skill to his mindreading, but if my mother could fight and shield him at the same time -

The door into the gray, dim dungeon was already open. Marcus's eye was perched on top of one tidy heap. Tufts of David's brown hair and an isolated curl of my father's bronze served to identify the other two consolidated piles, which were about halfway to healed according to what I remembered about the timing on the care and feeding of captive witches. I saw an elbow with a few chips out of it, a foot short three toes, a complete lower jaw, the front half of a shoulder. A freshly scattered fourth person, probably the day's guard on the dungeon broken by insurgents on their way in, was mostly in the hallway with a few bits in the dungeon. I fell to my knees on the smooth stone, beside my father's component parts, and started the puzzle, moving as fast as I usefully could.

Knuckle to hand, that sharp piece to that section of arm, half the attempts I made were mistakes and wouldn't knit together when I held them flush and then I had to find where the piece *really* went. That icy hemisphere was from an eye, there was most of the rest of it, those went under the pieces of the left orbit that I'd assembled, that didn't work, I didn't have the right eye socket yet, that was his knee and went *there*, the ankle connected to the shinbone, this would be a *terrible* time to start singing -

As he came together I paid more attention to broad structure than to the contiguity of his surface. The little pieces prickled my hands to handle, though there wasn't enough venom coating their surfaces to really do more than that. Once his cold hands were working and had a line of contact to his brain he could help with his own reassembly - even without his eyes, he'd be able to look through mine - I found the fifth finger of his right hand and pressed it into place. I fixed the corresponding wrist, filled in a gap in the arm, connected his neck to the base of his skull, found a large chunk from the crown of his head and half-flung it where it belonged. I pieced together his shoulder and the arm twitched in the first possibly purposeful motion it had made since I'd arrived.

With that arm in something like working order, I focused on his spine, collecting vertebrae and half-guessing, half-remembering the order they belonged in. His working arm was groping awkwardly but rapidly through the pieces it could reach, squeezing them together at the right edges and finally shoving a complete pelvis against the end of the spine I'd put together. I started work on his other arm, making sure I had a view of everything he could reach so he could use my vision.

When his second arm was intact except for the half-thumb Aro was wearing, I started picking through the tinier pieces to complete his eyes. I found what turned out to be the left socket, and put it in the correct place on his face, and looked for suspiciously rounded pieces for the eye itself. I finished the eye, put it under his brow, and started placing dry, almost venomless teeth into his jaw, drawing on the training of a dentist Aro had eaten once.

He'd put his own ribcage and its contents together by the time I finished that, although he hadn't moved from his prone position; I busied myself with his left leg. He found part of his neck I'd missed, put it where it belonged, and, weakly, drew breath. Just the once, like he was testing his lungs, and then he stopped.

After shy of six minutes, he was finished except for the stolen part he'd need to take off Aro and a couple of smaller bits that I thought might have been kicked into the hallway when the guard had been taken apart. I didn't know how to figure out which belonged to him, at least not quickly, and it was only a toe and a wedge-shaped piece of his thigh, nothing he would need urgently. He sat up, but was eerily still, and I wondered if he had the strength to move and fight immediately - he would have been fed the subsequent week if the normal schedule had been followed, but he also wouldn't have needed to get up at any point. He took a shallow breath. "Blood," he mouthed, barely producing sound.

I got up and ran to Vasanti's room. I didn't know what animals she had at the moment, but there would be some of them, and they would contain blood, albeit maybe not enough. Some of them would be in cages or otherwise restrained and couldn't have scattered during the initial assault. I found a mazelike network of tubing full of rats, a ten-foot terrarium-dwelling python, a pair of hooded hawks tied to perches, and a small dovecote with half a dozen pigeons in it. I tore a tapestry off of her wall, broke the birds' wings so they couldn't fly away, bundled up all the animals in the weaving without much caring if they got hurt in the process, and ran back to my father.

He drained the snake first, moving carefully as though afraid he'd disintegrate, but once he had that first mouthful of blood he visibly sped up. He ate everything except the last three rats, which he left scrabbling around in the wad of fabric, and then he tipped himself up to his feet and was gone in a burst of motion.

I sat beside David's pieces and began to solve the second puzzle.

David couldn't read my mind, but I sent him a stream of what I was looking at so he could help me once one of his arms was repaired. I spent what mental capacity I didn't need to seek and combine pieces, or share my eyes, on composing a summary of what was going on outside the dungeon. When he was together, he ate the three rats my father had left behind, but didn't immediately get to his feet. "Coppertop?" he whispered, when he could, looking at me and around at the room with Marcus's fragments and the few guard bits, and out into the hallway with more white and pale olive twitching debris.

I pushed the summary at him, and he shook his head slowly as though to clear it. "Can I help?" he asked, wheezy.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what's going on except as of fifteen minutes ago, and you didn't get much to eat..."

"I got enough," he said. "You go somewhere safe, Coppertop."

"But -" I was thinking of the fight with Demetri, how I'd been able to help even without blasting, but I couldn't think of any truths I could throw at the Volturi that would so much as slow them down. Even deprogramming them wasn't likely to help. They were hemmed in by people who saw them as a group, and had little choice but to work together. They also had

some non-negligible *real* reasons to like each other that wouldn't evaporate if I deprogrammed them.

"Go," he said. "Go to the wolves, or outside, or - go."

He took off, towards the throne room, and I stood there in the dungeon beside the quivering fragments of Marcus for a moment, and then I went.

I didn't bother to run. No one was getting out of the throne room until the fight was decided one way or the other. I walked briskly down the hall, intending to re-join the wolves and maybe get a head start on explaining everything to them.

When I was halfway to the stairwell, someone I did not expect to see blurred around the corner, zipped up to me too fast for my reflexes to be of any help, and seized me firmly around the middle, pinning my arms.

"Addy?" I said, flabbergasted.

"So sorry to disappoint," she purred in my ear, "but you are absolutely right."

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I asked, trying ineffectually to break her grip. My arms slid around in their sleeves as I squirmed, but I couldn't even twist around to try to bite her. Kicking at her knees with my free legs wouldn't do anything beyond wear out my sneakers.

"Holding you still," she said. "I'm not planning to hurt you." She'd borrowed my power as soon as she'd touched me, and that sounded true, but... "I'm just going to hang onto you so your friends don't hurt *me*. They need to hear me out."

"What are you going to tell them?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, you don't expect me to spoil the surprise, do you?" she said. "You'll hear what I have to say when everything's calmed down in there."

"What's happening?" I asked. "Do you know?"

Addy tucked her free hand into her pocket and said, "Your mother's keeping your father shielded." This didn't sound true, but I couldn't think why it wouldn't be... "And he's managed to pull Jane away from Renata and fling her to the others to take care of, so that's the little torture device done for... and the same with Alec; he wasn't fast enough to anesthetize anyone before they took him apart... and your mother had to break Heidi herself, although the Romanians helped her some, with their eyes closed... Santiago got one good hit in against your father when he got too close to her reaching for Sulpicia. He probably could have taken it and been up to fight again under normal circumstances, but he's not in such fine shape right now in spite of your clever idea to feed him Vasanti's pets. So he's healing, slowly, while your mother tries to shield everyone else long enough to let them bypass Renata. She'd go in herself but *Chelsea* could break her, let alone Santiago, so shielding from

a safe distance it is. She's not having much luck, but she'll manage it eventually, and the Volturi have no offensive power left. The intermittent shielding *does* mean Chelsea hasn't been able to get a secure enough grip on anyone's threads to do any cutting so far. I'm sure you'll be pleased about that."

"You're... lying..." I said, not accusatory, just puzzled.

She blinked at me. "Oh, no, not a bit," she said, pulling her hand out of her pocket and tapping me gently on the nose with her index finger. "Wasn't lying," she repeated, and she wasn't.

"Then why...?"

"You were looking for this?" she said, showing her teeth in a smug smile and pulling out of her pocket... a toe.

"Is that my father's?" I asked, staring at it.

She pocketed it again. "Who else? I'll give it back. I don't know where that other missing piece went, by the way. I think your "kicked out into the hall" theory was right about that. He'll find it eventually, I'm sure."

"He didn't tell me you were here... he'd have noticed..."

"Well, I sincerely don't wish you harm," she said brightly, "so I'm sure that wasting his energy on telling you I was here took a backseat to rushing to his mate's aid."

"...Oh. How were you invisible to Alice?" I asked.

She pulled a phone off a holster attached to her belt loop and dangled it from her fingers. "Guess how many wolves obsessively update their Twitter feeds," she said, almost singsong with self-satisfaction.

I stared at her, my head twisted around my neck as far as it would go to let me look her in the eye. "*Twitter feeds*," I repeated.

"I don't have to *interact* with a wolf to be blanked out," she lectured. "I have to have my actions *affected by* a wolf. Your mother noticed that, back when she was in contact with the wolves from across the world and giving Alice headaches. And you know as well as I do that they're allowed Internet access. It lulls a little during the local night, but there's always someone up late with a screaming puppy who has nothing better to do while rocking her than log on and type *the baby will not go to sleep again omg this is the last kid I swear*. If too long went by without anything new to read I was prepared to call Joham's grandchildren or something, but it didn't prove necessary."

"And it affects your actions when Trent is up with Chiara and posts that she won't sleep?" I asked skeptically, squirming again. She didn't relax her iron hold around me.

"That was Ken and Ken Junior, actually, but that's neither here nor there," Addy said. "Anyway, I wasn't watching the updates for my personal entertainment, I was doing it specifically to foil Alice. I made a variety of trivial but highly visible decisions based on the number of words in each message. And then, when they went unusually quiet, and the one post that did go up was Leah writing that she heard barking from North - phrased to make it sound to the outside world like she heard her neighbor's dog making a fuss, of course, but I knew what she was talking about - I risked approaching a little closer."

"How did you avoid my dad and Aro noticing you?" I asked.

"There I had to take a calculated risk," she said solemnly. "But I figured I was pretty safe hiding among the blast victims."

"...The who?" I asked, picturing amputees who'd stepped on mines or something and not finding this enlightening.

"Elsbeth," said Addy patronizingly. "This compound is in a city. Humans *live* in cities. I wasn't really *aiming* when I busted us out of here, I'm sure you remember. I caught about fifteen human-type people in the radius, not just most of the Volturi. And it turns out humans do not recover at all well from the experience. And six of them were not readily turned into prey - intrusive family or too much publicity or something, I suppose. So the blast victims are in a hospital not far from here, babbling their little heads off about how beautiful Beijing was in 1142 and how ripe an opportunity for unrestrained feeding is presented by this Herr Hitler's new and exciting policies, and most of what they're saying isn't in Italian in the first place. They can't let much slip that's actually damaging - anyone who actually walks into the castle at their urging can be eaten or politely thrown out for trespassing or Heidi can show them out or Pyotr can order them to leave and keep their mouths shut as many times as it takes. And of course it wouldn't be at all unusual for one of them to be thinking *rather* a lot like me, so I gambled on it sounding natural enough if I hid among them until I was all set to dive in. I got the timing very neatly, apparently, although it was close. I climbed the wall and let myself into the dungeon, found the guard already dispatched for me, borrowed your father's toe, and hid out down the hall to listen in on what was going on."

"Oh," I said, badly wrong-footed.

She reached her free hand into her pocket again. "Oh, lovely!" she exclaimed. "Your mother's done it, apparently... I can't read anyone on your side, she's got the shield up nice and steady, but Renata is in just precisely the sort of pain I would expect if she'd been smashed up good and proper. Siobhan made short work of Santiago after that, and the Romanians ganged up on Aro and Tanya and Kate took Sulpicia. Chelsea's missing her hands, so she can't do anything, and now your mother's monologuing at her. I'll send you a copy of what Chelsea's thinking of that when she's done, if you like."

"...Thanks?" I said uncertainly.

"You're welcome," she said blithely.

"Are you going to explain *why* you did all this?" I asked. "Or why you sent Alice and Jasper to Biloxi, or why you ran away in Dublin if you're not actually out to get us?"

"When everyone's listening," said Addy, "like I told you. Why repeat myself?"

"Okay," I said, since there was nothing much else I could do but talk to her, "how did you know about the blast victims? You didn't find out about them before you left us behind in Ireland."

"You're right, I didn't," she said. "Leah tweeted the human news story about it. Or, well, she didn't tweet it directly, but she had enough suggestive remarks in her feed that I was able to find it on my own and figure out from there what the deal was. Aha, your mother's all done monologuing at Chelsea. Want to see? I got it via your father, so it won't be as high-fidelity as the memories from Aro, but it should do."

"...Sure," I said.

She touched my nose again - "Boop!" she said - and showed me.

- my hands my hands - fire - Afton! They mustn't burn him, no, no, no nononono not my Afton I need him kill me first kill me first if we have to die kill me first

She's not burning my Afton, she's just holding the lighter...

doesn't dare, with her friends on the floor too? might catch them in the fire?

He loves me

"Chelsea," she says, I couldn't feel anything off her, it's like she doesn't love anyone, like she can't, like she's a ball of hate that walks and talks and has the mindreader loving her like that anyway. And now my hands are gone and I can't feel anything, I can't even feel my Afton, but I know my Afton... but it's hard now that I can't feel it to know... but he loves me. He loves me, that doesn't just go away, even without my hands... right? But I can't feel it, I can't...

I don't answer her.

"Do you have any idea what you did to me?" she says, but I didn't do anything to her, I could never feel her, she's not even there, how could I do anything?

Her mate, she's holding him up with the other arm not holding the lighter (how can she have a mate, loving no one?) whispers in her ear, rests his head on her shoulder (I want my Afton)...

"Do you have any idea," she snarls, taking a step closer, clutching her mate (it's not fair) "what you destroyed? What you have casually ruined for everyone around you for

thousands of years now? I'm given to understand that you put a lot of stock in love. You want everyone to love you, is that right?"

"Mmhm..." My wrists hurt, I want my hands back, I want to feel my Afton with me even if we're going to die, he loves me, doesn't he? He loves me...

"No one really does," she hisses. "You can't create that. The closest you have is Afton, and even him you could not leave alone, you couldn't just turn him and wait for it to happen on its own like any other vampire would have done. And because you don't have the real thing, I can't show you quite what you did to me. I literally do not know how to hurt you that badly. You ruptured my family. And I think I am vindictive enough, I am vengeful enough, I am pissed off enough that I would do the same thing to you. If you had one. You don't. And that really ties my hands."

"Me first," I say, "kill me first, me first, not my Afton -"

"My daughter doesn't love me anymore, you bitch!" she screams. "My husband doesn't love our daughter! If you had your way he wouldn't love me either, you utter plague on the world! And I don't think you would understand that even if I torched your mate in front of you. I don't think you can be made to understand that, because I'm the only one who feels it, and I can't get that hurt into your head out of mine for the same reason I'm not a third direct victim of your fucking around with my family."

"Me first," I whisper, "me first, not my Afton -"

She hisses and reaches forward and the fire touches my chin and catches, and it hurts it hurts, but he loves me -

"I think it's time to go up and say hello," said Addy with sickening cheer, and she hauled me along the corridor towards the throne room.

Executioner

Before Addy got me all the way to the throne room, we were met in the hallway by my parents - my mother still half-supporting my father, who was covered in shallow fissures along his skin that hadn't healed yet and leaning his head on her shoulder. The piece of his thumb that Aro had taken was back where it belonged. Behind them, fanned out in a nicely intimidating V, were Siobhan and Liam, Jasper, Tanya and Kate and Garrett and Eleazar, Nathan, and Maggie. I heard the voices of the others who'd made it through the battle intact, back in the throne room.

"Unhand my daughter," my mother demanded.

Addy let me go without further ado, and I stumbled a step and then crossed the distance; my mother put her free arm around my shoulders. And then Addy gave me - and to judge by the slight shifts in posture from everyone else except my mother, all of us - a summary of the answers to her remaining mysteries.

"Addy, my mother's immune to my power now," I said helpfully, before even unpacking the sending, "she didn't get that..."

Addy blinked. "Oh, well then, I suppose I'll have to resort to the use of language. How inelegant." She coughed, for effect, then said, "Bella, you're welcome."

"And what," said my mother, quietly, "am I welcome to?"

"Alice and Jasper," said Addy, ticking off fingers. "Stefan and Vladimir. Nathan." She ticked off the entire hand, then pointed at Nathan.

"*She* sent you?" Siobhan asked, turning incredulously to him. "Why didn't you mention that?"

"Time wasn't proper," he said easily, smiling.

"If you knew Nathan, why wasn't he in the dungeon with all the other useful witches you'd met?" my mother wanted to know.

"We hadn't met," Addy corrected. "I *suspected* him when I thought about it, via very indirect mentions in Carlisle's memories and Edward's regarding Siobhan's coven's long-term suspicions that someone from thereabouts been poaching in her territory. The Isle of Man was on my way out, so I stopped in, *he found me* -"

"It seemed like a good time to go for a walk along that road," reminisced Nathan. "And wouldn't you know it, I was right again."

"I'd assumed you'd heard about the meeting from the fellow in Newcastle," said Maggie indignantly. "I knew Cath didn't invite you!"

"You assumed, but you didn't ask," Nathan said. "But come on. Would you have trusted me if you'd known Addy sent me? But I'm trustworthy. I was helpful, wasn't I? I did half the work!"

"You were," my mother said, still fixing her gaze on Addy and holding me and my father close on either side of her. "And Stefan and Vladimir?"

"Them I didn't contact directly," said Addy. "An old friend - she's got a minor tracking power, nothing compared to Demetri, the Volturi didn't want to bother with her - lives near their area. I told her, she told them, I take it they showed up."

"They did," murmured Siobhan.

"And I assume you know about how I got Alice and Jasper peeled off, although I wasn't sure how to get them to rendezvous with you," Addy went on, "so good job finding them anyway!"

There was a silence, during which Addy smiled brightly at the dumbfounded collection of vampires facing her, and finally, my mother very carefully said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, as I said," Addy replied. "I imagine your next question is why, if I'm so helpful, I didn't just stick with Siobhan and company. Is that right?"

"I'd think you read my mind," my mother said dryly, "except that even with my husband's toe in your pocket, you can't do that. Give that over, by the way, it's not yours."

"I'll swap powers if I touch it, and I'm still using this one," Addy said in a very reasonable tone, "for everyone else's benefit, if not yours. Maggie's not comprehensive enough to notice all the little deceptions I could conceivably throw in. If I toss it over can I borrow Elspeth again for a moment?"

My mother examined that request for barbs, then finally said, "Eleazar, would you go take it out of her pocket and bring it here, please?" I supposed she picked him because Addy wouldn't want to touch him; his power would displace mine without giving her any notable advantage. Eleazar broke formation and moved carefully forward, and reached into the front pouch on Addy's sweatshirt while she stood there innocuously with her hands up and a cocky smile on her face. He retrieved my father's toe and handed it over to its owner, who leaned down carefully to hold it in place for longer than it should have taken to reattach. My father straightened up and Eleazar went back into his place in the V.

"Anyway," said Addy once the transfer of the toe was complete, "I was hedging my bets. Not gonna lie. There's three reasons why I can't do that..." She pointed at me, at my father, and at Maggie. "If I'd worked overtly for your side, and you'd then lost, I'd be a fugitive at best and ashes at worst. I left Volterra on bad terms in the first place, had my leverage rendered pretty much moot, and was generally wanted dead - that being why I ran off to begin with. Rescuing your daughter in the process, incidentally, Bella. In fact, the only way I could expect to live through a Volturi victory would be if they were weakened enough in the witchcraft department that they needed me to cover their gaps. So I had a double

motive for taking Alice away from them, although I did *hope* they'd find you. I would have convinced more of their witches to leave but didn't have an angle."

"...Thank you," said my mother again, not blinking. "And now you're here because?"

"Here to welcome our new golden-eyed overlords," said Addy promptly.

My mother blinked, and said flatly, "You're looking for a job."

"I've always been very clear about my motives," said Addy earnestly. "I want witches to taste - new, interesting, varied powers to train up and play with. I can understand how my past behavior would be... unsettling... to the point where you wouldn't like me to be running around where you can't keep an eye on me. I managed to hide from Alice for a while, but I didn't have a good way to predict whether you'd have Demetri after the dust settled, and even if you didn't I couldn't hide from Alice *forever*. But I can potentially get what I want, or most of it, *while* you keep an eye on me."

"Unsettling?" said my mother. "You sent my daughter to *Jane*. You were complicit in Elspeth's imprisonment and Edward's - in fact, you were essential to Edward being worth imprisoning *and torturing* in the first place. When you left the Volturi's sphere of influence you abandoned the rebellion against them as soon as you had something useful to take with you. You have killed... oh... how many people now? with no *hint* of being even *vaguely* open to the possibility of stopping. And now you want me to *hire* you while you have that *smug look on your face*?"

"Are you going to kill me because I have a smug look on my face?" asked Addy lightly. My mother didn't answer, and Addy said, "I taught your daughter to expand her power in ways that have helped her immensely. I carried her out of Volterra when I didn't have to bother. I sent you five allies, two of which at least you found valuable and the other three of which you could have found so if you'd gone with a different plan. I showed up here today instead of making you hunt me down. And, yes, I have a smug look on my face, because I *know* how smart you are, and I *know* how smart it would be for you to keep me in your back pocket and *use* me. You've got a mindreader. You've got a lie detector. You can turn *me* into someone who cannot effectively tell a lie by asking your daughter to poke me. It wouldn't be difficult to keep tabs on me, and it wouldn't be too much trouble to keep me happy."

My mother stared at her, ground her teeth a little, and said, "You want to do something useful?"

"Mm-hm," said Addy.

"Find a piece of Vasanti, take her power, and go out and bring in some live nonsapient food for Edward and David and everyone on our side who was broken. If you set foot out of Edward's range - I trust you're aware of how far it extends - then I will have you killed, no further negotiating," my mother said.

"Yes ma'am," said Addy, winking. "Or, do you have a title picked out yet?"

"I don't. Shoo."

"Oh, one more thing," Addy said. "You didn't burn Chelsea's hands with the rest of her. For the next two weeks or so I'll still be able to take her power by touching them; after that, parts that size will be starved to death. If there's anything you're regretting not having the chance to fix that requires her, I mean. Anyway. Vasaaaaanti..." She turned around and picked her way through the debris, looking for a piece of the animal-charmer.

My mother watched, a stricken look on her face, as Addy rounded the corner in her search.

A chilly feeling crept up my spine and tingled at the back of my neck.

We repaired our broken comrades, mostly victims of Heidi's lure who'd been drawn into close range before my mother had been able to shield them for the moment it took to lurch away. Alice had sorted everyone in the throne room, friend and foe, into heaps during the conversation in the hall. I didn't directly piece anyone together, because I wasn't as fast or precise as a vampire, but I broadcasted blankness to everyone in pain while they were reassembled. Alice moved on into the hall to consolidate all of the other Volturi parts from where they were scattered throughout the compound.

My mother put together Esme, no less rapidly than the people she worked next to, but there was a distant, distracted look on her face. My father, still covered in little cracks and trying not to move much, sat next to her with one hand on her knee. He was murmuring something to her.

I took a step closer, to hear what he was saying. "...if you want," I caught.

"I think I do," my mother murmured back. "I know I do, really, but I feel like I shouldn't."

"I don't mind," he told her. "What Chelsea left behind isn't natural either way... but it could be *better*, even so..."

"You didn't handle Elspeth very well, you know," she muttered back to him. "Even with what Chelsea did to you... you could have done better."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, Bella. If you want me to let Addy undo it I will."

"But it's not really *undoing* it, that's the problem," whispered my mother. "It's not like Elspeth's deprogramming that really does *only* undo what was done. It's building something new where something old was permanently destroyed."

"I don't want it," I said softly.

My mother glanced up for a moment to look at my face, then turned back to Esme, half-finished, and continued putting her together. "Then you don't have to take it," she said quaveringly, almost under her breath. "...It might not stick, with you, anyway."

"It might," I said, "I still care about Jake and the villagers, which Chelsea did, but... I just don't want *more* of that in my head than I already have. Like you said - building something new where something was permanently destroyed, not undoing it for real - and if I'm going to have that again I want it to be natural."

My mother pursed her lips tightly and nodded. "Think about it," she said tentatively, "because you can't change your mind after Chelsea's hands die and Addy gets rid of the power... but if you don't want it you don't have to take it."

"I'll take it," said Jasper gravely from where he was working on Randall. "I think Alice will too... we're... very alone, at the moment."

"Anyone who wants it," my mother said, "can have it when Addy gets back. She's behaving?" she asked, looking into my father's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "She has a herd of deer and a couple of boars following her now - and some pigeons she couldn't shake off - and she's on her way back. I haven't heard anything untoward."

My mother nodded. She completed enough of her work that Esme was able to sit up and finish the rest of it herself, and shifted a foot to the right to start work on Carlisle. Her face was solemn, and preoccupied, but calm.

"Alistair left after all?" I asked, not noticing him coming together under anyone's hands.

"Offered to stay behind with Jacob and Pera and Razi," my mother said, "and we decided it would be safest to take him up on that, rather than bring another body into the fight when he didn't want to be there."

"I should call Jake and tell him he can come in..." I pulled out my phone and dialed. Jacob answered and, after a brief exchange during which I repeatedly confirmed that I was uninjured, he said he was on his way and Alistair would follow.

"Elspeth," said my father after I'd hung up the phone, and when everyone on our side who'd been damaged was reconstructed and no longer needed the blank sending, "would you go show Marcus what's happened? He may have a reaction worth noting, but at the moment he doesn't know anything except that Aro was looking at a lot of people who have no obvious reason to be here."

"Should I bring his eye back to the rest of him?" I asked.

"It rolled under that throne," my mother said, pointing.

I picked up the eye gingerly - it was smooth and dry and cold, not very eyeball-like, but it was still an *eye* - and carried it to the dungeon, which was now empty of anyone but parts of Marcus. I put the eye with the rest of him, composed a summary, and sent it over.

Addy passed me in the hall, leading deer and wild boars behind her single file to their doom, and waved. Her eyes were a brilliant gold. Show of good faith, I supposed. I waved back, and waited. A minute later, my father, looking much improved, and my mother, no longer propping him up, entered the room.

"He wants to kill Aro himself," my father murmured.

"I'm tempted to keep Aro disassembled for use - via Addy and Elspeth, he's a very good way of getting large volumes of complex information from one person to another - but I think recent events have demonstrated the long-term non-viability of that imprisonment strategy," my mother said. "If we decide to kill him, and I think we have to - even with Pera's help on our side, which we still can't count on, he's too much of a threat... The only issue I can think of with letting Marcus light the match is whether Marcus will make a nuisance of himself should he be permitted to heal."

"Should I pass that on?" I asked her, and she nodded, and I did.

"He'll work for us, he'll do whatever you tell him," my father reported slowly, "if you let him kill Aro for what he did. He worked for his mate's murderer for millenia... he'll promise a lot for revenge. But as far as I can hear, he's sincere."

"He wouldn't be unusually difficult to subdue if it came to that," I said. "He has almost no practice fighting - he's basically done *nothing* since Didyme died but help Chelsea work, and she died relatively early in his life. And his power doesn't help in combat. Plus he has the dead skin - he's going to be absolutely covered in scars when he's put back together. It won't heal on the surface. Those will be points of weakness."

My mother pursed her lips and thought. "It'll probably disappoint Stefan and Vladimir," she said. "I suppose they should be able to content themselves with Caius, Athenodora, and Sulpicia, though."

"Probably," agreed my father. "And Jane, if you aren't going to try keeping her..."

"I don't think keeping her would work very well," I said, shuddering.

"The Romanians can have Jane," my mother said darkly. "Is it possible to salvage Alec?"

"If you let Addy snip him away from his sister," I said.

My mother frowned, but nodded slowly. "I'll consider that... it's better than killing him, if only marginally... well, let's put Marcus together, shall we?"

We got him in one piece, although he still looked like a wreck. Unhealed lines along his skin radiated from every point of impact that had taken him apart in the first place, leaving him looking like a jigsaw puzzle even when he was complete. But he sat up, and climbed with difficulty to his feet, and bowed to my mother and then to my father and then to me with no trace of irony.

"This way," she said, and we showed him into the throne room. "There -"

"I can see," said Marcus raspily. "All too well. I know which pile is his."

"Should we keep a piece?" Addy asked, from the portion of the throne room where she was keeping the remaining couple of deer calm in spite of the other vampires. "It won't be able to read anyone itself with his brain gone, I think, but I'd have a couple weeks able to read non-witches."

"Do you care either way?" my mother asked Marcus.

"No," he murmured, eyes fixed on the pile, and Cath, who was nearest - and had newly gold eyes, I noted, probably having deigned to feed on one of the animals after being reconstructed - picked up what looked like Aro's knee and stepped away from the pile.

My mother gingerly handed Marcus her lighter, and he did the deed swiftly and without discernable enjoyment of any kind. I thought there might have been a grim satisfaction around the corners of his eyes, but it was hard to read *any* expression on the scar-webbed face. Aro burned, and Marcus turned back to my mother, returned the lighter, and bowed again.

"Someone - Cath - find clothes for everyone, but not those awful black cloaks," my mother instructed, noting that a great many of the vampires in the room were naked. Cath zipped out of the room to obey. "Marcus, help yourself to one of the deer Addy brought us. Don't touch her." He drifted towards the animals and fed. "Elspeth, deprogram him in case there's anything left after what they did to him."

I did, but Marcus looked up after finishing his deer. He looked strange - subdued glitter under the evening sunlight falling on him through the narrow window, craquelure complexion, gold bleeding into his dark eyes as I watched. "At first, the only thing that told me that Aro did not mean to do me a favor," he said quietly, "was the fact that he left one of my eyes in the dungeon, where it could see the ribbon."

I blinked, then understood. If Aro had worn both eyes, or put the second one somewhere else entirely, Marcus wouldn't have had to look at the evidence of Didyme's loss. Marcus might have done that to *himself* - torn out his own eyes, let them die, permanently severed himself from his agonizing power - if his ability to see relationships hadn't been the entire reason he was obliged to stick around. But once it occurred to Aro to just wear one of the eyes, there would be no reason for that. The rest of the disassembly could have been some kind of subterfuge to explain the sudden change of Marcus's status to the rest of the world.

If Aro hadn't left the second eye there, Marcus might have considered it a relief, on the whole.

(Peeking at Marcus's memories, I saw that he'd asked for permission to take out his eyes once Addy had joined the guard, and been refused on the grounds that Addy was still new, was too busy copying anyone and everyone, might find a mate and leave at the drop of

a hat, needed her own relationships manipulated and couldn't very well help Chelsea there, and was less experienced in assisting Chelsea anyway.)

"That's how I found the... relevant memory," Marcus added quietly, and he gritted his teeth. The corpse of the deer he'd eaten slumped to the floor as he stood. "I didn't know why else he would do that, if not to help... and so I sought, and found, the memory of my wife's murder, but could do nothing about it." My mother nodded. Marcus spread his hands. "What would you have of me?"

"Sit tight for now," she said. "If you really want to take your eyes out and put them somewhere else, go ahead, just don't lose them or let them die. When Cath gives you clothes, put them on. There has been too much incidental nudity in my life recently." She ran a hand over her scalp, like she wanted to adjust her hair, but there was barely any new growth since the last time she'd been set on fire. (My father twitched when I thought that.)

My mother pointed at several of our comrades. "Find boxes or bags or something and move all the Volturi from where they are in the compound and collect them here. And someone eat that last deer so Addy can ditch Vasanti's power and take Alec's. I don't care to *torture* anyone when it's not necessary."

The people she'd pointed at left to bring back scattered guard. Cath returned with enough clothes for everyone naked, the outfits pilfered from assorted closets. Marcus put his designated outfit on and then departed silently, presumably to tuck his eyes away in a safe nook. My mother looked on as Volturi accumulated in the throne room. Garrett ate the deer and Addy switched powers, waiting at the ready to anesthetize the assembled when they were all in one place. At last Mary and Randall carried in the last two - who it was they brought, I couldn't tell - and stood back to let Addy do her work.

"Elspeth," my mother said, "deprogram all of them, and we'll go case-by-case on the potentially salvageable. With Aro gone, we can summarily write off Sulpicia. Is there any reason to keep Caius and Athenodora?" I deprogrammed all of the Volturi as she asked, and was about to weigh in on the subject of Caius and his mate, but Siobhan spoke first.

"They're not witches, Caius is loyal to Aro dating back to before Chelsea, and they're symbols of the old guard," Siobhan said. "That last means that if you *could* turn Caius it would make it easier to get some of the other guard, but not significantly more than it will be with Marcus... and he'd be hard to turn."

My mother nodded once. "That last also means I wouldn't trust them imprisoned in the hiding place... even if Pera would make up her mind in a positive direction about whether she'll serve as warden for the new order. They'd have too much potential to rally support for a resurgence of the Volturi." She sighed and passed a hand across her eyes. "Stefan, Vladimir, would you like to do the honors? And Jane, too. Jane... needs to go. Leave Alec."

The short, ancient vampires nodded eagerly, undisguised glee in their eyes, and produced matches from their pockets, obtained before the assault had begun. They threw them from a safe distance into the relevant piles, directed by Alice, who knew which person was which. Four more fires were soon crackling away busily.

I heard footsteps too heavy to be Marcus's drifting gait, and went out to meet Jake and usher him away from the smoke.

"Elspeth," my mother called after me as I leaned into my wolf's open arms, "why don't you go to the village, show-and-tell the other wolves and the imprints and children what's happened - be careful about being age-appropriate for the little ones, please, and... turn in for the night? It's... almost your bedtime."

I wasn't sure whether to say "Yes, Mama" or "Yes, Your Highness", so I simply nodded and went with Jake out of the compound.

Negotiator

"So do I call you "Princess Elspeth" now?" Jake asked, elbowing me in the ribs as we went down the stairs towards the tunnel to the village.

"I'm not sure," I said. "My mother might not wind up calling herself "queen". And there are fiddly technical details about who's a princess and who isn't, in various systems of nobility, so I might not count even if she does."

"She rules the world now," Jake said. "She can declare you a princess if she wants. And invent her own monarchy to technically make you one if she has to."

"Well, we beat the Volturi," I said slowly, "but it remains to be seen if she can hold onto the power... especially since she's not likely to be popular with vampires who want to go on eating people, and won't have access to Chelsea's power forever. Maybe even some of the people who helped us in the rebellion wouldn't like the idea of her being queen when they think about it."

Jake dropped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me a little closer. We reached the mouth of the tunnel and started along it. "That might put you in danger, if people are trying to get at her..."

"That's probably one of the billion things she's trying to figure out now," I said.

"I'm not sure if I dare go to sleep," he said, only half-joking.

"Tonight will probably be safe," I opined. "We'll be in the village overnight and someone would notice and make a fuss if a random vampire tried to come in, and word won't have gotten out everywhere for a while. Tomorrow my mother will probably have an idea about how to deal with the problem. And we're not going to be out of my father's range."

We got to the border of the village. Leah and Collin were both standing watch, in wolf form - representatives of Rachel's pack and Becky's respectively, to propagate information instantly through the population if something happened. They didn't growl at us, but they didn't stand aside, either.

"Hi, Leah, Collin, and whoever else is listening," I said, vaguely sheepish. "Um, we won. Can we come in so I can tell everybody about it?"

Rachel, in uniform, appeared between the two wolves a moment later; Becky turned up shortly after her sister. "Can you," Rachel asked, raising an eyebrow, "elaborate at all?"

"Sure, um," and I hit both alpha women with a quickly improvised summary, on the theory that they were both adults and, outside of wolf form, wouldn't telepathically leak anything to the younger wolves. Leah and Collin made mildly puzzled faces, presumably about being left out, but didn't otherwise react.

"Your room is still open," said Rachel after a couple of minutes. "You're going to be out for the day soon, aren't you? You can crash there."

"Thank you," I said.

"We need to decide what to do next," Becky murmured.

Rachel nodded, once, and gave Jake an appraising look. "We all do."

Jake tucked me into my old bed. "Won't be able to catch a front row seat to Elspeth's Brain Theater tonight," he sighed, "have to go wolf to telepathically confer with the extended relations about everything, but I can stay here by you in case something does happen. I'll be up all night anyway, most likely."

"Okay," I yawned, and I relaxed, burrowing into my pillow.

The next morning, Jake was still sitting by my bed, still awake (if slightly droopy) and still wolf-shaped. He was making faces, insofar as he was able, reacting to the conversation.

"Can I get caught up?" I asked. Jake nodded, but instead of shifting to explain what was going on to me, he got to his feet and led me through the village to the assembly room. Many of the wolves were there, although some of the younger ones and all of the imprinted men were absent. Also in attendance were both of my parents. My father appeared to be feeding my mother a rapid-fire summary of everything the wolves thought so she could follow what was going on, in place of a cumbersome mechanism where the wolves phased and unphased to think together and communicate.

"So what'd I miss?" I asked, going up to my mother and father.

"Almost nothing," my mother said, manifestly frustrated. "We've got more factions here than we have feasible packs, and one thing they can mostly agree on is that packs should stick together... so the opportunity to split up is limited. At about two a.m. we narrowed it down to four different things people wanted to do, and Leah had the reasonably clever idea of trying to turn Embry into a fourth pack leader since one of the three likely candidates for his unidentified father was Billy Black, which would *presumably* mean he could be an alpha like Rachel, Becky, and Jacob, but it didn't work."

"What are the four groups?" I asked.

"A bunch of them want to stay here, minus the military operations," she said, ticking off a finger. "I'd be willing to maintain their budget as reparations, and I don't have anything else in mind for the village structure, so that would be fine with me. A bunch of them want to go to La Push and rebuild the old Quileute town. Potential legal awkwardness, but also fine; we can co-opt the contacts the Volturi had to make things go smoothly with human authorities, and I intend to start peeling back the masquerade in general. A few of them have a taste for beating up "bad vampires" and want to be a branch of my military, wherever I wind up installing myself. I'm not going to complain about that. And a few of them want to

travel the world, sort of like Jacob's pack was doing before, which is... problematic, without Pera accompanying them, without routine larceny, and considering how much I expect to rely on Alice."

"Well, you're queen of the world; can't you just say that the first three things are fine and one alpha can take a pack to do each of them and ban the last one?" I said.

"Actually, I decided to call myself Empress Regnant, in a fit of self-indulgence," my mother said. "And I'm contemplating a gold-based theme for the rest of the necessary terminology - you know, because of the eyes. Golden Coven, Gold Empire, etcetera. Anyway. I don't want to push the wolves around like that until I'm confident we can't find a consensus of some kind."

"What are the alphas thinking?" I asked.

"Becky thinks I should rule out of Volterra, so a single pack can cover the ones who want to work for me and the ones who just want to live here," she said, "and thinks that this single pack should be Jake's, so she and anyone else who wants to join her can go to La Push. The trouble with that is that I'm not enthusiastic about ruling from Volterra, although I'll cave on that if I need to. Rachel's personally inclined towards wandering the earth but is willing to head a pack anywhere necessary if we can just work out what they're all supposed to do. Jake wants to stick with you, and I'd like to keep you close by us unless you have some overwhelming objection."

"I don't, I guess," I said, putting a hand on Jake's shoulder. My hand sank into rusty brown fur halfway up my forearm. "It's probably safer. Who besides Rachel wants to wander the earth?" My father listed a handful of wolves, all unimprinted. "What exactly do they want to *do* while wandering the earth?"

"I have the same question," my mother muttered. "I'm not interested in funding something that inconvenient. They have no plans for supporting themselves if they want anything they can't hunt for, let alone plans for remaining inconspicuous in accordance with a *gradual, non-panic-inducing* demystification of the supernatural to the general population."

"Is Pera going to help you?" I asked, an idea forming.

"Jasper calmed her down enough to let her consider the idea," my mother said, "after Addy... helped... him and Alice and your daddy with Chelsea's power. She'll work for me, but she doesn't want to interact with me directly any more than she has to."

"Addy copied Chelsea's power? Does that mean she was done with Alec's?" I asked.

"It means that we've got Alec working for us, although Addy did need to snip him away from Jane, and now he's anesthetizing the remaining bits and pieces while I'm here so Addy's freed up to do other things," my mother said, not making eye contact. "Anyway, yes, Pera's helping, is willing to at least attempt vegetarianism, and can be deployed but is not to be invited over for the Christmas party. What's your idea?"

"Well," I said, "you're going to need to start enforcing the vegetarianism thing. You can get the news out by just having Dwi, or Addy borrowing his power, tell everyone we're collectively aware of that there's a new regime in town, and wait for it to spread by word of mouth. But that doesn't handle *enforcement*. Pera could hide the wolves and travel with them, and they could back her up and scout and stuff looking for anybody breaking the rules while they run around, but they wouldn't have to actually be military-ish because Pera can take apart anybody she wants all by herself. You could pay them to do that, and Pera wouldn't have to be around you and they'd get to travel inconspicuously and with economic support."

My mother tilted her head thoughtfully. "It's an option. The problem is that I was hoping to keep Pera local to wherever we wind up so she can hide people I need to sentence to prolonged imprisonment but don't want to kill. Or my justice department sentences to prolonged imprisonment. I haven't decided yet how I'm going to organize internal affairs."

"The cohort that wants to travel isn't particularly interested in doing enforcement even on that level, anyway," my father said.

My mother chewed on her lip a little, then shook her head. "This hasn't gone anywhere significant in the last several hours, I imagine the wolves are all very tired from their all-nighter, and I've got more Volturi to sort through and an administration to organize. Let's pick up here in, say, ten hours after you guys are all caught up on sleep?" She gestured expansively at the groggy wolves. Rachel and Becky both nodded, and the packs dispersed. Jake nudged me affectionately in the back with his forehead, then trotted off himself.

"Want to come witness the historical moment?" my mother asked me, and I shrugged and followed her and my father out of the village.

Alec was in the throne room, sitting on the chair that used to belong to Caius. Every now and then he turned his gaze from his still-dismantled former covenmates to the throne, as though to confirm that he was really sitting in Caius's chair, but he always returned his attention to maintaining the knockout aura over the prisoners a moment later. His eyes had gone gold - Addy must have made another trip in to bring animals overnight - but otherwise he looked like I remembered, albeit having sustained some hair damage. Deceptively youthful, a distant and neutral expression on his face, very like a calmer and thinner-lipped Jane. I skirted the cluster of pieces to avoid falling in myself.

"Hi," I said to Alec, helping myself to Athenodora's chair. "...How are you doing?"

"I guess I'm okay," he said in a low voice.

"Really?" My mother walked into the middle of his affected area, unhindered, and picked up a piece of someone, which she brought over to Addy and poked her with before tossing it back where it had come from. I thought it was probably Dwi, whose power would let Addy carry on bidirectionally telepathic conversations with the remnants of the Volturi to determine who could and could not be salvaged.

"I guess," he repeated.

"How did my mother convince you to work for her?" I asked.

"What else would I do?" Alec said.

"What do you mean? Whatever else, as long as it didn't involve killing people," I said.

"If I said no when she asked me to work for her," Alec said, "maybe she'd let me go - maybe, if I convinced her and her mate I would eat animals and not make trouble - but someone else would recognize me eventually and want to hurt me. I was almost as feared as Jane."

"You could protect yourself, though..."

He shook his head, keeping his eyes fixed on his old covenmates. "Jane was fast with her power. I'm not fast. A coven coming from several directions could get me if I were on my own. Or one person who was quick enough or good enough at hiding or had a power that could get around or through mine." He glanced my way. "And I don't think your mom - I mean, um, Her Imperial Majesty? I'm not sure what I'm supposed to call her... I don't think she'd want to send me out to go off independently with covenmates who could keep me safe. I'd be a threat that way. She might look the other way if those Romanians wanted me dead, or something. If I work for her she'll keep me safe."

"Oh," I murmured.

"And even if nobody would want to hurt me," he said, "I don't have any practice being on my own. I never have been."

"Jane," I said.

"Her," he agreed, "but not just her, after we turned. The whole coven."

"Some of them will probably help us, like you," I said. "And you can make new friends too."

"Probably," he said. He sighed. "I let Addy make me not miss Jane. I got the option. It was... easier, I guess, and missing her wouldn't bring her back, and if I want Her Imperial Majesty to trust me it was probably the safe bet... But I miss missing her."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said. I could think of possibly-similar cases to compare against, but it would be faster to let him explain.

"I'm not sure I do either." He pursed his lips, then said, "I don't think I know how not to be a twin. A non-dominant twin. I don't know what to do with myself if not follow Jane around and help her and make her happy."

I had the oddest temptation to ruffle his hair - he still had most of it, and there was plenty to ruffle - but I refrained; I knew he didn't like people other than Jane to touch him. (I

wondered how long that would last without Jane around.) "Maybe you'll find a mate soon, or something," I suggested.

"I don't think so," he said, lacing his fingers together and leaning his elbows on his knees. "I think we're - I think I was turned too young. It's been a long time."

"Stefan and Vladimir are both way older than you and were turned as adults and they've never found mates," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. I'm not going to count on it, though. I've met lots of people." Then he looked at me again and tilted his head. "Am I supposed to call you Your Imperial Highness, or something?"

"I'm not sure if I'm even technically a princess," I began.

"You can be a princess, Elspeth," my mother said, interrupting her exchange with Addy to call across the room to me. "Imperial Highness would be the style, but you don't have to go by it if you don't want to. And Alec, outside of formal contexts to be specified in the future, you can call me Bella."

"Call me Elspeth," I told Alec.

"Okay," he said, nodding once. He turned back to his work.

I got up and walked over to where my parents were standing with Addy. "Were any other titles picked out?" I asked.

"Addy has invented for herself the title "Imperial Factotum", and your daddy is an Emperor Consort," my mother said. "That's all, at least so far."

"Where's everybody else?" I asked.

"Scattered throughout the compound," my mother replied. "A few of them went out and about overnight but they're all back now. The ones who haven't eaten their first animals yet are still not pleased about the close quarters. Alistair will probably return home soon to get away from all the people, and I expect to shed most of the other Brits that way too - they're not as close to the core group. I'm not yet sure who all will stick around as part of the new administration beyond that."

I nodded, and then I had an idea. "Mama, I want to go visit the blast victims and see if I can help them somehow."

"Are they likely to let you into the hospital?" she asked. "Also, I'm not sure if you should go wandering around Volterra by yourself. If Jacob weren't asleep I'd send him with you, but he and all the wolves are in bed, and it's broad daylight..."

"I could bring Cody," I suggested. "He'd be awake, and he isn't sparkly."

"The point isn't company, it's safety, and Cody's less useful in a fight than you are... That said, everyone who might attack you while we've got everything buttoned up here hasn't been blasted yet, since the former Volturi aren't going anywhere and I'm keeping an eye on Addy. And if we do lose control of things here somehow it would be better for you to be out of harm's way anyway." She bit her lip and looked at me, scrutinizing. "Take your phone, check in every half an hour or so," she said, "but go ahead. If they don't let you in, come back and we'll try something more elaborate after sundown."

"Thanks," I said, and went to find the hospital.

Addy hadn't told me exactly where the blast victims were, but there was only one plausible facility within my father's range even if I assumed all the thoughts in question counted as familiar voices. I walked there, pushed open the front door, and waited in line for the receptionist. When I got up to her desk, I said, "Excuse me, I heard that there were six psychiatric patients with unusual symptoms here. I'd like to -"

"I'm sorry, miss, but we've had an awful lot of gawkers here trying to see them, and unless you're related to one of them, I can't let you in to visit," she said.

"My interest is... professional," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I'm not a relative, but I'm not some random person off the street who wants to stare, either. I've seen symptoms like theirs before, although not so prolonged."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You look seventeen."

"You're more than a decade off," I told her.

"Oh, my. Um. I'm sorry. You're a psychiatrist?" she asked.

"I remember med school like it was yesterday." Magic twinged, but didn't outright itch; this was back in the familiar territory of out-of-context, misleading truth, and she was a little cooperative there, if not completely so.

The receptionist blinked at me, and said, "Let me call down Dr. Valenti."

I talked my way past Dr. Valenti, too, who let me into the room where they were keeping the six blast victims during the day and stood in the doorway to supervise.

They were four men and two women, and while they all seemed physically fine, no two of them were speaking the same language, and most of them didn't seem aware of their surroundings, instead slouching in their respective chairs and reciting the inner monologues of vampires (only vampires, no humans - I wondered why) read long ago. The two who were awake enough to notice my entrance were one of the men - who started shouting angrily in Old English, using mannerisms that I identified as belonging to a long-dead vampire named John killed six years after his creation for turning an immortal child. They even looked alike. Also apparently lucid was one of the women, who didn't speak at all, but looked at me with troubled, dark eyes. She looked familiar too, but then, nearly everyone did, with all the

different faces I remembered to compare to. Since she wasn't talking, I turned to the other "awake" patient.

"Hello," I said, switching to Old English to address the man, and conveniently avoid Dr. Valenti being able to effectively eavesdrop. "Do you know where you are?"

"Finally! No one here will speak a sane language!" he exclaimed. "And there are arcane devices everywhere! I have tried to learn what they are saying, but I cannot hold the memories properly! And besides that, I am *weak* and *slow* and have been eating *food*! Some witch has done something to turn me into a human! I demand that this be fixed immediately!" Dr. Valenti made an intrigued sound and stared, but didn't interrupt.

I blinked. "Who are you?" I asked the blast victim slowly, almost asking who he *thought* he was but deciding that was unnecessary and rude.

"My name is John," he said. "Who are you? You don't look like a vampire with those brown eyes, but not quite human either..."

"My name is Elspeth. Do you remember anything unusual happening, about two weeks ago?" I said.

"I was telling that bastard Aro to stay the hell away from Anne," he said, referring to the immortal child the vampire he thought he was had been executed for turning - his actual daughter, who'd been dying of the flu at age nine when he bit her. "Then I was in some kind of delirious stupor for - I don't know how long; I can't count time normally anymore - but some kind of stupor, several days at least, but then I looked in a mirror here and remembered who I was and noticed I'd been turned human!"

"So you were confused about who you were until you looked in a mirror?" I asked slowly.

"Yes, I was. As though I could have been any of a thousand people, but had to check. But it was obvious once I saw."

I looked at him. He didn't look *exactly* like John, even exactly like John had been as a human. His hair was different - John had worn it long - and he had better teeth (although not as good as a vampire's teeth), and his skin was a shade darker. But the facial features were close enough that I could imagine that a mind with no idea who it was would latch onto the identity.

But I could think of half a dozen other people Aro had read who looked at least as much like the man in front of me as John had. Five humans, and one vampire who'd been read at the age of a hundred and was - as far as I knew - still alive. I wasn't sure what would make John's memories be the ones to stick, while the human memories and the other vampire's didn't. "Do you remember anything else?" I asked. "Besides being - yourself?"

He - I decided to call him "John" in my head for lack of a better idea; he certainly wouldn't answer to whatever name his body had come with - shook his head. "Nothing else."

Even my own memories won't stick properly. I know I used to have a perfect memory - but I'm forgetting things -"

"Things from when you were a vampire?" I asked.

He nodded, a concerned frown twisting his face. "Some of them. Not *important* things, not like Anne or my own name - they keep calling me "Benito" for some reason here, if I'm following what they say well enough to figure that out - but some things. Do you know someone who can turn me back?" he asked. "Or where Anne is? Is Anne okay?"

"...Maybe we can get you turned, um, back. I'll need to talk to, um, the Empress Regnant." Anne had died in 1754, one of the immortal children Aro had kept around in the hopes that they could be controlled, but had been disposed of with the rest when he gave up on the project. Magic itched at me, but I didn't want to tell him before he understood what had happened to him, and I wasn't sure what that was myself.

"The who?"

"The Volturi were overthrown, um... yesterday," I said, finding it remarkably awkward to talk about such momentous events on such a short time scale. It was so much easier to talk about revolutions that happened centuries past. "Now there's an Empress instead. I'll talk to her about you."

"They're gone?" he asked, blinking. "All of them?"

"Aro and Caius and their wives are," I said. "Marcus is still alive -"

I felt a hand on my arm, and turned to see the quiet female patient, who'd gotten up and crossed the room to approach me. Her eyes were wide, and there was a trace of a smile on her face, in contrast to the lost, watchful look she'd worn earlier.

I realized who she most closely resembled. Who she would have thought she was, if she looked in a mirror.

Speaking Hellenistic Ancient Greek, Didyme asked, "Did you say *Marcus*?"

Survivor

I stared at her. She blinked at me expectantly, looking hopeful.

"One second," I said to John, and then I switched to her chosen Greek. "Yes, that's what I said. Um..."

"Just how many languages do you know?" Dr. Valenti asked me from the doorway.

"A *lot*," I told him in Italian. "Hang on a minute, please." I turned back to Didyme and resumed speaking Greek. "...What about him?"

"You do mean Marcus of the Volturi, and not some other Marcus?" she clarified, sounding very earnest about it.

"Yes..."

"Can you tell me how to find him?" she asked urgently. "I don't know where I am or how I came to be turned human, but I've been... here, wherever this is... for more than a week now, and I don't know the language, and I need to find my husband. And my brother," she added as an afterthought. "I was with my brother when whatever happened, happened."

Didyme had never realized who killed her. She'd thought they'd been ambushed, and at least until the moment Aro set her aflame, she had never suspected her brother...

I had no idea what the correct order to disclose information to this woman was. I didn't even know *whether* she needed to be updated on Didyme's details.

"Hey," said John, "I can't understand you like that. Any chance we've all got some language in common?"

"You don't," I said. "You never learned Early Latin, and that's the only other language she picked up."

"Wait, how do you know that?" he asked. "Are you a witch? With the power to speak any language, or something?"

"It's complicated. I'm a witch but not that kind."

"Did she use to be a vampire too?" he asked, gesturing at Didyme.

"She's like you," I hedged, "but she spent less than a year as a vampire so language learning wasn't her top priority." I could have projected translations to either or both of them, but I didn't want to risk scrambling their brains with more applications of my power beyond what had already happened.

"Do you know where Marcus is?" Didyme asked again. She'd been killed before the coven set up permanent shop in Volterra.

"Yes," I said, pinned down by the direct question, and she lit up. I didn't feel like I remembered it felt to be within her aura of happiness, but like her brother, Didyme hadn't developed her witchcraft until after turning. It seemed like the power hadn't accompanied the memories. She still had a cheering presence, but it couldn't dissolve the awkwardness of the situation. "I know where he is, but I can't just take you out of here like that. This is *super complicated*. Wait a minute while I talk to that guy." I would have said "doctor", but psychiatry wasn't easy to discuss in either dead language; I turned to John and told him to wait too.

Switching back to Italian, I asked Dr. Valenti, "What are their names?"

"Those two are Benito Bianchi and Paola Greco," he said. "What languages are they speaking? How could they have learned them? They were both monolingual Italian natives until July 4. You said you've seen this kind of thing before? Is that how you learned to talk to them?"

"He's speaking Old English and she's speaking Ancient Greek," I told him. "My experience with this sort of thing is definitely related to why I know the languages. I've seen similar, but not identical, presentation. I'll need to consult with some of my colleagues. I might want to arrange for the patients to be moved to another facility, where they can get specialist treatment. Were they all identified? Are their families accessible?" It was weird speaking as though I had authority to a guy who was probably at least six or seven times my age and had an advanced degree, but I didn't think I'd get anywhere by talking meekly, and unlike most of the people I interacted with on a regular basis he wasn't my physical superior. (Also unlike most of the people I interacted with on a regular basis, he probably wasn't accustomed to considering violence a first or second resort to solving differences of opinion, which made the physical superiority thing less relevant.)

"Yes, we know who they all are," Dr. Valenti said. "Do you want their files?"

"If I could just look them over briefly," I said, "that would be perfect."

"We're thinking some kind of environmental cause," he told me, leading me out to where they kept their documents, "because they were all near the same area at the time. Two of the less aware patients are brothers..." He went on about the circumstances under which all of the blast victims had been discovered, and I paid the minimum amount of attention to be able to replay the information for everyone else later; I paged through the files with similar intent.

I'd known from what Addy had said about the blast victims that the ones left alive were only left that way because they were under too much scrutiny to be done away with by the time the Volturi were in a position to deal with the problem. Dr. Valenti gave no indication that he even knew about the other nine, and none of the files I read mentioned them. They would, I supposed, have fallen insensate into some location where they were unlikely to be noticed; or "recognized themselves" promptly and wandered off lucidly enough not to be picked up; or crashed their cars and been assumed to have head trauma instead of an inexplicable psychological disorder. At any rate, the six that were there were the six left alive, so I scanned their files and discussed them with Dr. Valenti.

Paola was twenty years old - two years older than Didyme had been when Aro thought she was old enough to turn - and she had living parents, two brothers, and a handful of nieces and nephews, but she wasn't married and had no kids. Benito, thirty-six, was divorced with a young son, and he had a sister and his father was alive. I tried, and failed, to think of a good way to handle those families, and the others, if it turned out that the original people were unrecoverable.

John/Benito and Didyme/Paola waited impatiently, but calmly, while I did all of this, the significance of the files and the modern Italian completely wasted on minds more than a thousand years out of their times. I was actually somewhat impressed with them for not being completely terrified or bowled over by things like Dr. Valenti's digital watch, or the computer that they could just see from the dayroom, or the linoleum. I didn't know whether to interpret it as leftover from Benito and Paola's comfort with the twenty-first century, or leftover from John and Didyme's vampiric confidence that anything not actively on fire wouldn't hurt them much.

"You've been giving them all this?" I asked, pointing at a list of medications.

"Trying, anyway. Benito and Paola don't cooperate with the regimen. Benito actually bit an orderly, and drew blood," said Dr. Valenti. "Normally we don't need to restrain them; it's only when we administer the drugs that they've ever become violent. You see we're keeping the dosages low -"

"Because you don't actually know what's wrong with them, and know you're guessing," I said, allowing my tone to become slightly clipped. "I must recommend as strongly as possible that the medications be discontinued as quickly as is safe, assuming they remain at this facility for any length of time. It's not going to help; they'll only get side effects."

"Benito and Paola did respond to -"

"Benito and Paola's improved condition relative to the other four patients is unrelated to the drug regimen," I interrupted confidently. (The other four did bear assorted degrees of resemblance to people whose memories I had stored in my head, but it was perhaps not close enough, or they hadn't looked in a mirror, or there was something about John and Didyme in particular that had allowed their memories to surface where others hadn't.) "At any rate, every person I've seen with this disorder has made a complete recovery without any pharmaceutical intervention at all."

"All right," he said, only slightly dubious under the force of my honesty.

I looked at the wall clock; I'd been gone from the compound for nearly half an hour and it was time to check in with my mother. "I need to contact my colleagues," I said. "Excuse me."

"Of... course," said Dr. Valenti.

Taking a guess that nobody in the hospital would know what I was saying, I greeted my mother in Norwegian when she answered the phone. "Hi, Mama," I said, speaking rapidly enough that I'd be tricky to understand even if someone who knew the language *was* in

earshot. "Four of the blast victims are comatose - babbling about all sorts of things from all sorts of people. Two of them, though, got a look in the mirror, "recognized themselves" as being dead vampires who looked similar, and are basically acting like they were magically turned into humans and time-traveled. I think the best thing to do would be to get Addy in here wearing Aro's power, while she can, and have her check them out and see what's going on. But the really crazy thing is who the patient named Paola thinks she is... Um, who's in the room with you?" I would be able to whisper quietly enough that my voice shouldn't carry any farther than that, but it would be too big a hint to ask directly if Marcus was there.

"A lot of disassembled Volturi - we're keeping Renata, by the way, she doesn't seem too upset about the regime change except for the new dietary requirements - and Alec, our *friend* the Imperial Factotum, and your daddy," she said. "Why?"

"Because Paola thinks she's Didyme," I said.

There was a silence. "Oh my," my mother said.

"That's about what I was thinking," I said.

I finished conveying the details of the situation to my mother, and she arranged for Addy to come bearing Aro's power just after sunset. Since Paola-or-Didyme wasn't currently a witch, Addy's copying wouldn't interfere with the read, and Addy would be able to figure out what was there in her head. Likewise with Benito-or-John.

If there was any Paola left, we'd see about getting her to surface, if that was possible.

If there wasn't... if Paola was somehow gone altogether and there was only Didyme...

Then I wasn't sure.

First things first. My mother got Carlisle's help in creating an identity for our "specialist facility" in case we wound up needing or wanting to move the blast victims. I was instructed to describe Paola and Benito as having "mnemic displacement" and the other four as having "mnemic overload", which were accurate enough terms (given what we knew) that I expected to be able to deliver them without a blip in my "honesty voice".

I told Dr. Valenti that my "colleague" (Addy) would be on her way shortly to make a more detailed examination of the six patients, and assured him that she was "at least my equal" in the field of mnemic disorders. It wasn't lost on me that Addy was responsible for the patients' condition in the first place. Still, she hadn't gone out of her way to hurt them; it had been an accident, albeit a predictable one. She probably didn't really care about what she'd done but she didn't have any reason to do worse, either.

Addy showed up at the hospital shortly after sunset. She was dressed up a little more formally than was usual for her, although she hadn't turned up in a labcoat or anything like it, and she introduced herself cordially to Dr. Valenti and went to where the six patients were. Under the guise of peering into their eyes like she was checking for dilated pupils, she

touched the chins of each of the six while I discreetly showed her the files I'd read. John and Didyme (or Benito and Paola - I couldn't decide how to think of them, I kept attaching both names to each one) knew immediately that Addy was a vampire, although I had to explain to them why her eyes were gold. (John was disgusted, Didyme vaguely curious.) Addy herself didn't talk directly to them; she was busy mulling over the memories she'd picked up.

"Well?" I asked her in Norwegian, to prevent inopportune eavesdropping from the staff or awkward listening in from either "mnemic displacement" sufferer.

"The four folks we're saying have mnemic overload are weirder to read than anyone else Aro or I ever pulled memory from before," Addy said. "They're full of fragments from everybody in the payload - me, you, Aro, your father, everyone - but it's *all* wispy and hard to get at, like a vampire's human memories are after the vampire turns. The human memories like from, say, Gianna, dramatically more so than yours or the vampire memories. As far as I can tell, everything I put in the blast is there, but not *attached* to what it should be. For instance, they know, or their heads contain information about, where I was on the fourth of July in 1857, and where I was on the fifth of July in 1857, but those things don't flow together in sequence. They'd have to connect them up manually, so to speak, and they don't have enough of a train of thought to manage anything of the kind."

"And the mnemic displacement cases?" I asked.

"Contain less," Addy said. "Just the memories from John and Didyme respectively. Mostly the vampire ones, and to a sharply lesser extent, the human ones. They're losing bits of the vampire ones too as time wears on, though. For instance, Paola couldn't tell you how many windows were in the room where Didyme woke up when she finished turning." Didyme - Paola - the female mnemic displacement case was evincing interest in our conversation, hearing "her" name, but Addy ignored her and I didn't pause to translate. "Whereas you and I, with brains designed to hold arbitrary amounts of information, have no trouble holding onto that data."

"What about Paola, or Benito?" I asked. "Are... they *there*?"

"The one thing that's *not* there, in any of the six, is the memories *these* humans used to have. Those are *gone*. I couldn't have told you their names were Paola and Benito and so on if you hadn't sent me what you remember of the files, let alone anything else about them," said Addy.

"Completely gone?" I asked faintly.

"Unless something about the mnemic disorder, if that's what we're calling it, interacts strangely with Aro's power and I just can't read those memories? Yes. Completely gone. Not hidden, not repressed, not temporarily forgotten, not of lesser importance, *absent*."

"Um," I said.

"For all practical purposes," Addy said, "sitting over there are Didyme and John, vampires from centuries ago who have been turned into humans and may have some genetic differences beyond that. And four irretrievable nutcases who might be salvageable if we get

them to look into reflective surfaces, although they all look at least as much like *somebody* as the displacement pair look like who they think they are, so I'm not sure how they've managed to avoid "displacing" for this long. There are mirrors in this room."

I looked at the four slack, blank-eyed faces, and ran through mental lists of all the people they looked sort of like. "Everybody they could have recognized themselves as was a lot older than John and Didyme were," I observed after a moment's thought. "Or was human."

"True," she mused. "You think that's related?"

"Maybe," I said. "The vampire memories are sharper and stand out more... and the more of them there are for any given person the harder it would be for the human brain to handle them..."

"That would explain why Benito would look in the mirror and think he was John instead of the other fellow, or why Paola would think she was Didyme and not, oh, that woman who led the newborn army near New Mexico," Addy agreed.

I blinked, tipping my head to the side. "There is really a lot less variation in vampire appearance than in human appearance."

"That's what you get when you make us all so pretty," Addy said cheerfully, as though I were personally responsible for vampire aesthetics. "Tends to even out the distinctive features. Anyway. So we've got Didyme and John and four people who don't look much like any young vampires. Near as I can tell, there's no way to get anything else out of this situation. The question is how Marcus will react. And, I suppose, whether we turn John, and what we tell the biological families."

"I guess he'll be able to tell by looking if she's... real *enough*," I said.

"Presumably. And I doubt she'll object. Look at her, shiny-eyed waiting for us to take her to her mate, insofar as he can retain that distinction to a human-brained person. Her family might complain, of course, and the strategy "kill them if they become inconvenient" is probably off the table with our favorite Empress Regnant in charge. John, on the other hand..."

"I don't know how to tell him about Anne," I said. "He didn't have anybody else."

Addy shrugged. "He has *biological* family, and I could go discreetly read them all and then we'd be able to catch him up on how to pretend to be Benito-with-some-amnesia. He could keep the life the body comes with. I suppose Didyme could do that too, but she's less likely to want to."

"Is there a way to fix the other four, do you suppose?" I asked.

"Find face matches, blast them with the first year or six of those lives again and stop there?" suggested Addy. "See if that knocks everything loose? Turn them and hope their

new, improved brains can sort out the information in some less comatose way? But getting back who they used to be, nope, don't think so. They weren't backed up ahead of time."

"You know," said Dr. Valenti, "I would really appreciate it if you would speak Italian. I know you're both fluent."

"Our apologies, doctor," said Addy sweetly, turning and batting her eyes at him. "The other language has a number of specialized technical expressions we use to discuss mnemonic disorders, but you're correct, it's unkind to leave you out of the loop. Do you have a background in mnemonic disorders - a rotation with them during school, perhaps? - or does your specialty lie *elsewhere*? Help me understand where I need to begin explaining."

"You're being awfully helpful," I remarked to her, not in Norwegian, just at a high pitch.

"Daddy's listening," she sang back to me in a similar register. Right - this was within my father's range from the compound. He was probably telling my mother everything, so Addy had to behave. She ushered Dr. Valenti away, engaging him in deftly patronizing conversation about his inability to handle the memory blasted patients.

I sat back down near... Didyme and John.

"I understand that there's something dreadfully complicated going on," Didyme keened gently, "but if you know where Marcus is I don't understand why I can't go to him now. Am I a prisoner? Or if I can't leave, perhaps he could come here? Does he know what's happened to me?"

"I want to know what happened to Anne," demanded John. "Did the Volturi bastards do something to her?"

"Hoo boy," I said, and then I steeled myself to do what I did best.

I told the truth.

I started with John. He was just a little easier to confront. "The last time you saw Anne was in 1007," I said.

"Sounds right," he said. "How do you know -"

"This year is 2011," I told him.

He gaped at me.

"I'm going to explain the rest of it without using the pronoun 'you' because otherwise it's going to be very confusing," I said, fighting to keep my voice even. "In 1007, John was executed for -"

"I was *what*?"

"Let me finish," I pleaded. "John was executed for creating an immortal child, Anne. Most immortal children were killed with their creators but not her. She was one of a handful that Aro brought to Volterra to watch and learn about, in case they could be controlled. She lived with the Volturi until 1754, and then Aro gave up on the project and murdered her and the others."

John was too enraged to let me go on uninterrupted. "That evil bastard - my *daughter* -"

"Aro's dead," I cut in. He calmed down enough to shut his mouth, although there was still anger burning in his eyes. "In 2005, a witch joined the Volturi who had the power to copy other witches' powers by touching them. She copied Aro, and read all of the memories he had ever absorbed, including John's up shortly before his death in 1007. Thirteen days ago, she borrowed *my* power, which is complicated but includes the ability to *send* memories. And she sent them *all*, to everybody within range, including a human man named Benito Bianchi, and me and most of the Volturi."

He blinked several times, very rapidly, and opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it. I continued. "The vampires and me - I'm a half-vampire, don't ask, it's a story for later maybe - were able to recover from the blast. The humans that the blast hit weren't equipped to handle so much information, though. Their original memories were erased completely. But... Benito looks a lot like John did. Enough that when Benito saw his reflection after being hit with all of the memories, he *recognized himself as* John, and all of the memories except John's faded."

"But I'm," began John, and he looked down at his hands. "I'm..."

"You're John," I said, albeit with less confidence than I'd had in the rest of the story. "But you're in Benito's body. And Benito had a son, and a sister, and a father, who all think you're Benito. Benito with something wrong with him, but still him."

"Anne..."

"Anne lived to be seven hundred and thirty seven years old," I soothed. "She was... well-fed... and she had some other immortal children to play with and she was generally happy." There was a two-year period in the fourteenth century where they tried having Jane administer punishments to misbehaving children as a means of controlling their tantrums and other unwanted tendencies, but that was eventually discontinued, mostly because Jane didn't have a sufficiently constrained definition of "misbehaving." I decided not to tell John that, and just suffered through the itch from Magic.

John nodded, slowly, eyes slightly glazed over. "So... now what?"

I shrugged helplessly. "You could potentially live Benito's life. We don't have a way to get his memories, but the copying witch has a piece of Aro leftover that she could use to read Benito's family and friends, and then I could tell you what you would need to know to fill the role passably. We can probably get you out of this hospital even without doing that, although it might be tricky, and then... well, if you want to be a vampire, you'll have to take it up with

the Empress Regnant. If you don't, she'd probably consider setting you up wherever with enough money to get started doing whatever as reparations or something."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know. I need to think."

"Okay," I said, and then I turned to Didyme, who looked anxiously hopeful.

I took a deep breath, and said to her, "I'm going to tell this story without using the pronoun "you", because otherwise it will be too confusing."

Didyme looked confused, but she nodded.

I had to start with a brief aside about how we'd started numbering years since Didyme's time, which in combination with the present number in use stunned her enough that she remained completely silent through the rest of my explanation, even when I revealed that her brother had murdered her and tricked Marcus into working for him anyway for the next couple thousand years. Even when I told her that her brother was dead at her husband's hands as part of a revolution against a government that she'd never seen take power. Even when I explained that Marcus was just shy of a mile away, but didn't know she was "alive again", and if he saw her, might or might not find her to be Didyme according to the capricious magic of the mate bond. Even when I made it clear that the knees she was looking at when she fixed her gaze downward had belonged to someone named Paola Greco.

When I was done with my explanation, she looked up from her knees to me and said, "I am sorry about Paola. But I want to be Didyme. If Marcus looks at me and says I'm not his wife... then I suppose I can't be. Then perhaps I'll be Paola instead if you and the other witch can do that, to help her family. But if I can, I want to be Didyme. Marcus has already spent far longer with his loss than Paola's relatives have."

"He's different than you remember," I cautioned, thinking not only of the cosmetic changes but of the toll of centuries upon centuries of grief.

"Whatever has happened," Didyme said securely, "he is Marcus, and that is who I need him to be."

Healer

Shortly after, my mother called me and told me to come back to the compound. I *was* getting tired, so I excused myself to Didyme and John and Dr. Valenti. Addy avoided touching me - probably thought she'd find lying and mindreading useful, reasonably enough - and stayed behind to wrangle the mnemically disordered and their caretakers.

I stopped in the throne room to see what was going on. All of the fragments of Volturi were gone from the floor, either turned to ash or reconstructed as participants in the new order; Alec was gone too. My mother was arguing, although not particularly heatedly, with Siobhan. Their respective mates were there, but not participating in the conversation; my father had his hand linked with my mother's but appeared distracted, and occasionally muttered something about the goings-on he was listening to.

"- acknowledge that you were indispensable," my mother said. "I acknowledge that you didn't have to let me step up, that you could have done so yourself, and that you probably still could if you decided to. And that's why I'm offering the compromise *conditional on* you trying *one* meal of animal blood. You have the blast memories; you're in a better position than *I* am, even, to guess that it has beneficial cognitive effects."

"To guess, sure," said Siobhan. "It's not exactly conclusive."

"It's a small sample size," allowed my mother, "but I don't think I'm asking much. One meal. Enough to turn your eyes gold. See if you think it's worth the tradeoff. If you don't, I'm prepared to consider you sufficiently self-controlled even on a human blood diet that I'll give you dispensation to get it in a less sentient package. Ransack whatever the Irish equivalent of the Red Cross is, if you decide that you'd prefer to go on living in Ireland after all regardless of where I set up. But I think it was *fairly predictable* that I wouldn't be allowing murder."

"And Liam?" Siobhan inquired, arching an eyebrow.

"Same deal. I remand him to your custody, so to speak," my mother said with a dry sigh. "I suppose there's no reason in principle you couldn't have different diets, but - yeah. Same deal."

"And if I don't like this deal?" Siobhan asked. She didn't sound challenging, exactly - she was just going through her options, all of them.

"Then I guess you can try to take me and my fledgeling empire down, and I get to see how my new bodyguard is going to work out in practice," my mother said, staring up unblinking into Siobhan's eyes.

"Your who? You don't mean Edward, do you?" Siobhan asked.

"No. Elsie, would you come here?" my mother called over to me. "And it's not Elspeth, either, if that's what you're thinking," she added. "I know Elspeth can't take you down now that you're already blasted." I went over to the group, and my mother put her hand on my shoulder.

I noticed that Allirea was standing there.

I blinked at Allirea, who realized that I'd gone under my mother's shield. "Oh, hello," she said. "Yes, I have this job now. Don't look at me," she added, moving around to stand behind her new employer.

I boggled for a moment, then turned to Siobhan and said, "It would be a bad idea to attack her. You wouldn't win. If I tried to explain why it wouldn't make sense to you, but it's true."

Siobhan took in this information with puzzlement, but nodded, slowly. "One meal," she said, holding up her index finger.

My mother nodded and, to her credit, didn't even look especially smug as Siobhan and Liam left the room.

"Mama, how did you get her to take the job?" I asked.

"Asked nicely, and promised not to acknowledge her existence when it isn't necessary," my mother said. "There will be a gap in coverage, so to speak, when she catches up with her family. I can fill in with Renata if it seems necessary then. But she's agreed to stick around while I handle... things like that, early on. I might call on you to vouch for her existence a few more times in the coming days."

"Okay," I said, and I looked at the clean floor, free of ash-pile hints. "Who lived and who died?"

"Alec, Renata, Santiago, Dwi, Emel, Zafrina Benjamin and Tia, and Vasanti and Mehul were all willing to take jobs in the Empire; I'll figure out exactly what they all do when I draw up an org chart. Corin's dead, Heidi's dead, Felix and the other non-witch miscellaneous guards are dead, Charles and Emere and Li-qing and Pyotr are dead, Taamusi and Valdis are dead. Abdelmajid, Hao and Kazuo, and Sukutai and Okey don't want Empire employment but convinced us they wouldn't stir up anything untoward if let to go free, so we did."

"What about the people we brought with us?" I asked.

"Wait for the org chart," my mother advised.

"Okay," I yawned. "I think I'll go to bed now."

My mother stroked my hair. "Sleep well."

I found Jake in our room, in wolf form but asleep in the living area. I went around him, tucked myself in, and nodded off.

When I woke up the next morning, Jake was awake too, and not wolf-shaped anymore. "Morning, Elsie," he said when I sat up in bed. "We've got a wolf-related verdict."

"Yeah?" I asked, hopping up and going to sit at our table. "What is it?"

"I'm going to head up the pack that works for your mom," he said. "I think you could've called that one in advance, right? Becky's going to lead the group that wants to go to La Push like she does. And Rachel and the ones who wanted to travel to random places finally backed off, and Rachel's going to stay here."

"Who's going where, among the non-alphas?" I asked.

"It's not set in stone," Jake said. "But it looks like the wolves with Quileute or Makah imprints, plus Darren since Thea came from Forks, are mostly going back to La Push, and the wolves with Italian imprints are staying here, and the ones without imprints are mostly defaulting to working for your mom unless they follow a brother or similar elsewhere - like, Paul and Harriet might stay here because Miles is staying here because of Esta."

"What about the orphan puppies?" I asked slowly.

"Well, before, they were just raised communally, because of the whole "we are all friends here" enforced vibe of togetherness," said Jake. "So it's not clear who they belong to if not all of the wolves and imprints as a group. I think some people might semi-formally adopt one or two apiece and take them along wherever. Or Rachel's pack might just raise them together, here, so they don't have to get uprooted again. Or some combination. For that matter some of the younger wolves are still *really* young, thirteen and fourteen and fifteen, but I guess they'll just fold into the packs and go where they want like everyone else... there was already a fair amount of mentoring going on, really."

"Where's Cody going?"

"With his brother and sister," Jake replied. "Last I heard they were leaning towards going back to La Push, but they might change their minds, I'm not sure."

"I'll probably visit Forks sooner or later," I said, leaning my chin on my wrists on the table. "To meet my grandfather."

"I remember him," remarked Jake. "He's a good guy."

"I just hope that, you know, everything that happened back then didn't wreck him," I said. "His best friends died and he thought my mom died too, and he knew Carlisle and Esme and Rosalie and Emmett were taking care of me, but then as far as he knew I disappeared and might be dead too. My grandma Renée doesn't even know I was ever born. She thinks my mom died while pregnant with me."

"Your mom was never pregnant," Jake said.

"Yeah, but she said she was, to grandma Renée, since she didn't know about vampires and stuff. When I was a newborn I got dozens of pictures taken of me every day, so they

could send them to her later when they would make sense according to the timeline they gave her. I think now we're probably going to tell her everything. Probably her husband Phil, too."

"Do you have any idea where your mom is going to rule from?" he asked.

"Not sure," I said. "I don't think it'll be here, but I don't know where else it would be."

"What do you suppose the odds are on a volcano fortress?" he laughed.

"Better than you might think, with Benjamin on the team," I giggled. "I think me and you and your pack will probably live in a village-like extension of the volcano fortress or other center of the empire, though, since I'd bet anything Alice will be helping."

"Aw. The mere suburbs of the volcano fortress. Oh well." He grinned at me. "Hey, Your Imperial Highness, do you think I get a fancy title too?"

"If you want one?" I guessed. "I think those are mostly just for fun. Or at least they are now. They might accumulate some gravitas in the next fifty or a hundred years."

"Hmm," he said, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Oh well, I'll think on that. You want breakfast?"

"Very much," I said, and we went to the comfortable, familiar, now-with-100%-less-brainwashing village cafeteria.

After breakfast, which was dinner for Jake as he'd been up all night again, I spent the morning standing near my mother as she made it clear, through my honesty voice, to various people that they really didn't want to try to attack her. Soon after, she fetched Renata and was only seen in her company for the rest of the day.

Noonish, the wolves with local imprints went out into the world to find the imprints' families. They were, by and large, still affected by Chelsea's lingering work, telling them that those families weren't interesting enough to be worth contacting, but they were able to appreciate the idea that it would be good to let their children meet their grandparents and aunts and uncles and so on.

My mother had given them all permission to tell the immediate relatives of the imprints *everything*. She'd given a whole general address about the subject of what she called "peeling back the Masquerade". Everybody already "informed of things" (Jake snickered almost interminably at this for some reason) could get permission to disclose said things to people they knew, and although they were still expected to be "reasonably discreet" under other circumstances, hiding from *individuals* was to be deemphasized in favor of hiding from *mobs*.

My mother planned to set up something suitably bureaucratic to turn people at a manageable rate once the knowledge was freely available ("we can't just go around turning

everyone," she said, "or even everyone who asks, as appealing as that is; we'll give priority to witches, people who are imminently dying, and people with a personal "in", and relax the requirements as we develop the infrastructure to handle it"). I overheard Alice muttering to herself about how she should call Genevieve and tell her that it was safe to go home.

"We're going to tell Grandpa Charlie and Grandma Renée everything, right?" I asked my mother after her speech was over and the wolves with Italian imprints - their small puppies in tow - had departed. "At some point?"

"Yes," she said. "I want to do that in person - I think we'll accompany Becky's pack to La Push, stop by Charlie's house from there, and then fly to Jacksonville, before settling in to do our new jobs in earnest. I'd really like to turn them both, but Charlie already turned me down once... not sure about Renée. Or Phil."

"Where *are* we going to settle in?" I asked.

"I haven't decided yet," my mother said. "I'm considering having multiple capitals, so we can move around readily, but where exactly they should be I'm unsure."

"Can one of them be a volcano fortress?" I asked.

My mother appeared to give this idea serious consideration, then said, "No, I don't think so. A volcanic eruption is on the short list of things that can kill a vampire, so it seems like a bad idea. Someone from a volcano observatory might also notice us. As soon as keeping a supply line going is feasible, though, I'll put a capital on the moon; how's that?"

"Sounds good," I said, giggling, although I believed her to be entirely sincere.

That afternoon, Addy called in to say that the hospital had gotten ahold of all of the blast victims' families, and convinced all of them to permit the transfer to our "specialist facility".

"We don't actually *have* a specialist facility," I pointed out. "The patients' families might notice the next time they want to visit."

"I think we need to induct all the victims' families into the mysteries, so to speak," my mother said. "It doesn't sit right to leave them unaware of what's going on. I think we should re-paint Heidi's bus to transfer the patients in a visibly legitimate manner, and then contact the families and invite them to visiting hours or something, and explain then."

"Addy is on her way here now," my father said.

"We'll have her do the pickup," my mother replied. "Elspeth, if you'd go along, I think it would be useful to have you there."

It made me a little queasy to think of Heidi's bus, historically used to transport the Volturi's meals, carrying people ever again. But it was a perfectly good bus, and there were

paint and stencils intended for the exact purpose of making it look like it belonged to various organizations to deflect suspicion. I waited in the garage with Addy, while Rosalie re-lettered the side of the vehicle. Rosalie had been parked in the garage like she was a car herself since we'd taken over, oohing and aahing over all the vehicles. There weren't that many of them, considering, but there were more than the average garage in a Cullen house contained.

When the repainting job was complete, Addy drove me to the hospital, and we collected our patients via elaborate rigmarole necessary to conceal our strength. Didyme and John were convinced to walk in under their own power.

"Are you taking me to Marcus?" Didyme asked me when Addy started up the bus again.

"...Yes, we're going to where he lives," I said. "I don't *think* you'll be able to see him immediately. We probably need to talk to Paola's family first."

"I will talk to them if I need to - although I will need translation, at least until I'm turned again and can easily learn the language here - but why must I wait before I can see Marcus?" she asked.

"Well, I'm not sure if you do," I said. "You'll need to talk to the Empress. She'll be the one deciding that." Didyme sighed and gazed out the window at passing buildings.

"I want a chance to take Edward's power before Marcus lays eyes on her," Addy said. "I want to watch that happen, if it happens, through his eyes. That's not something you see every day."

"I'll want a copy," I agreed.

"Sure thing. Incidentally, if your mother chooses to disclose to their relatives who's responsible for their condition, you might want to warn them that they'll only break their hands if they punch me in the face," Addy said.

"Um, right," I said. "...Did you tell Didyme and John about that?"

"No, it didn't seem prudent. Although I was sort of surprised that *you* didn't," Addy said.

"I didn't want them making scenes in the hospital," I said. "I guess I'll tell them when we get there if my mom doesn't say I shouldn't."

"Well," she said, pulling into the compound garage, "here we are."

We escorted the mnemonic disorder patients into the first floor rooms my mother had set aside for their use (they were equipped for the humans the Volturi had occasionally employed, like Gianna). "The Empress should be here any minute," I told Didyme and then John. "We'll stick around to translate."

Sure enough, my parents were both there a couple of seconds later. By unspoken agreement, I translated for Didyme and Addy did the same for John.

"I want to see Marcus," Didyme said immediately.

"You will," my mother said. "However, there's a few things I want to cover first. One, now that I'm in charge, it is not acceptable for vampires to eat humans. I understand Addy already explained that to you."

"She said you eat animals," John said. "It sounds repulsive."

"Be that as it may," she said, "if you want to drink blood *at all* ever "again", you'll reconcile yourself to the situation. This is my mate. He reads minds." She pointed at my father with her thumb. "For future reference."

"I didn't know it was possible for us to live that way," marveled Didyme. She paused, and said, "I mean, you."

"It is," my mother said. "Side effects include pretty eyes and less of an impulse to murder people. Second thing. Didyme?"

"Yes?" said Didyme.

"I will also require your mindreading-verified word that you will not in any way, shape, or form encourage Marcus to try to upset the new power structure," my mother went on, "in the event that you are... sufficiently yourself to render him more functional than he presently is. Since he was one of the ruling order the last time around, I'm more than a little concerned about the possibility. He's not a threat without you. He might be with you."

Didyme blinked rapidly. "I never *wanted* to rule the world," she said. "I wanted to leave with Marcus..."

"Well, Marcus might require a layer of spackle before he can go out, even at night," my mother murmured, glancing at my father. He nodded once, confirming that Didyme did not appear to have any aspirations for world domination. "But, understood." I was obliged to translate this oddly due to the lack of spackle in ancient Greece, which I thought was just as well; I'd already warned Didyme about Marcus's cosmetic alterations.

"Can I see him now, *please*?" said Didyme.

My mother regarded her, then finally said, "Elspeth, would you go tell him to put his eyes in and come down here?"

I nodded and went looking for him. He was up in his room in one of the towers, too far away to have heard our conversation (or I would have expected him to turn up as soon as Didyme's name was uttered). "Marcus?" I said, leaning into the room; the door was open.

"Yes?" he asked, not turning around; there was no reason for him to, without his eyes located in his head.

"You should put your eyes in and come downstairs," I said. "There's something you're going to want to see."

Later, Addy showed me what she had read from Marcus:

The girl - the princess - approaches my room. She's the first person to disturb me all day. I've been left alone, and the solitude is welcome, and I don't have to stare at it. I know it's there. I know her absence. But I don't have to see it.

I see nothing.

The little princess comes in. "Marcus?" she says.

"Yes?"

"You should put your eyes in and come downstairs," she says (damnation!). "There's something you're going to want to see."

I don't want to believe her, but she does know me, doesn't she? With everything she received by way of Addy, by way of Aro? And she sounds truthful in that way she has.

It's an old agony, anyway, and another minute or two will be little enough compared to the millenia behind me.

I fetch my eyes from the box I put them in. As soon as the box is open I can see the ribbon. The wretched, mutilated ribbon, mocking in its color that ought to belong only to whole and undamaged connections...

The one who did it is dead. I can hold my sanity if I remember that.

I believed that before, too... but I think I know better, now.

I put my eyes where they grew, and hold them there while they heal in place, and follow the little princess down the stairs. As we descend, approaching others, new relationships become visible emanating from her in bright twists of light. I read them, to take my mind off the shredded ribbon as best I can.

I can't see her connection to her mother - I can't see anything attached to her mother - but I can see benign drab disinterest from her leading to her father, and the blocky, obviously artificial, but robust red-gold paternal affection (almost their shared hair color) from him to her. Addy's work, voluntarily carried out with Chelsea's power, and perhaps it doesn't matter to anyone that it didn't grow that way. And between the princess and Addy herself, sea-green shot through with cobalt wrapped in a milky sheen: mutual acknowledgement of usefulness, they enjoy each other's company, but there's mistrust. On both sides. I might not have guessed that without looking.

My white symbol of pain flutters in an imaginary wind.

"There are humans down there," the little princess warns. "Don't... don't hurt them. Be careful." I am already aware of this new law, and more than old enough to have mastered my instincts. I don't know why she mentioned it.

And we get closer, and round the corner, and from the little princess there's an anxious, uncertain swirl of fuchsia towards -

!?

Didyme?

She resembles her - but subtle differences - and human, with a heartbeat, with brown eyes, with flushed skin, but -

Didyme.

Disbelief melts away when the ribbon repairs itself before my eyes and wraps around her like a cloak.

It's not complete. It's not symmetrical, she doesn't have a ribbon of her own. Somehow she's human - somehow reborn - and humans don't produce those ribbons. I've seen the wrapping phenomenon before. I saw it from the new Emperor, for one - towards his mate when she was human, and hadn't begun to screen me out yet.

I've seen it in myself before, when I went to look at Aro's sister as she turned, and I waited for her to wake.

Didyme.

Every moment of pain, every fraction of a second that crawled by in despair as I stared at the flailing ribbon, is redeemed.

The ribbon is not complete - not yet - but it is healed.

She's smiling at me, smiling in that exact way, but as I look at her she seems uncertain - did she think I wouldn't recognize her? - what has happened?

"Didyme," I say, aloud, and she beams and steps into my arms...

After Marcus said her name aloud, Didyme abandoned the tentative, wait-and-see attitude she'd adopted and pitched forward. Marcus held her, but like she was made of tissue paper, careful not to do damage. "How?" he breathed after a silence.

I sent him a summary, not wanting to ruin the moment with further words.

Marcus and Didyme stood together, swaying faintly, and for the first time in more than two thousand years, Marcus smiled.

Restorer

We left Marcus and Didyme alone, or relatively so - we didn't go far, just went to talk about the other five blast victims in a separate room. "Don't turn her, at least not yet," my mother warned Marcus before departing, and he nodded once.

"We should probably bring in the families one at a time," my mother said, starting to pace. Renata followed her around, a blank, distant look on her face. "Addy, there's no way to get back the people they originally were?" Since Addy was more actively involved in the conversation, I took over translating for John.

"Not really, no," Addy said. "They don't contain those memories anymore, or not accessibly. If I'd read them ahead of time, maybe it could be done. As is, the best I can imagine doing would be to read their social circles and give them an idea of who they're *supposed* to be from outside perspectives. And I'm not sure if that would hold."

"Can we 'turn them into' other dead people?" my mother wanted to know. "Or are they stuck like this?"

"It would be worth a try, if that were a desirable outcome," Addy said. "I think Didyme and John were ressurected, as it were, because they were very young at the time they were read. It's probably just a coincidence that they actually died shortly afterwards. Well, most very young vampires Aro read only when they were young did die shortly thereafter, but that's not *why* those two instead of someone older. There's no obvious reason that, say, this gentleman couldn't turn into the 400 BCE edition of Stefan... I just don't think we can turn him into the 500 CE version." She pointed at one of the mnemonic overload victims who did indeed vaguely resemble Stefan.

"Stefan?" my mother asked.

"I'm not saying we need another Stefan. One is probably enough, and think of how confused Vladimir would be. I'm just pointing out that this guy looks sort of like him, only taller," Addy said. "Depending on how flexible the recognizing-oneself-in-the-mirror thing is, there's at least a dozen vampires we've got backed up that he could be convinced he is, and similar options for the others. If Sukutai hadn't left already, maybe she or I could mess with their coloring and get more variety. I suppose that much could be accomplished with ordinary hair dye and makeup."

"I see," my mother said, scrutinizing the patients with a frown. "...We need to bring in the families. Everybody in the immediate family of each patient, one at a time. Paola's first, since I imagine Didyme and Marcus want her turned promptly and I think they should know what's going on first. Addy, will you handle that? Call them and set up appointments with one family per day for the next six or seven? Tell them to come in through the office building entrance, and we can have you meet them there."

"Sure thing," said Addy, and she slipped out into the hallway.

"Elspeth, if you don't mind, I'll want you at those meetings to help the information be met with something other than inconvenient disbelief," my mother went on.

"Okay."

"And now that Jacob is no longer up at bizarre hours negotiating the long-term plans of the wolves," she added, "and is heading up the pack that works for me, tell him he needs to get his sleep schedule under control and have at least two wolves following you around as bodyguards. He should probably take at least one of those slots himself when he's awake. I don't think you're *overwhelmingly* likely to be attacked or I'd want you to stick with me and your daddy and Renata twenty-four hours a day, but it would be good to have you visibly guarded anyway."

I nodded, waited a moment for further instructions, and ducked out when there were none.

Jake was disgruntled about being awoken after only six hours of sleep, but grudgingly acknowledged that if we were going to be in town for another week dealing with blast victims, it was probably worth his time to become vaguely diurnal again. I told him what my mother had said about keeping a guard detail on me, and he summoned Grace to join him in flanking me everywhere I went for the rest of the day, and tagged Embry and Gwyn to take the first night shift.

"Is it pretty definite who's in your pack to stay, now?" I asked.

"Uh, let's see if I remember everybody," he said sheepishly. "Grace and Embry and Gwyn. Zach. ...Paul? No, not Paul. I have it written down somewhere," he added, fumbling around in one of the drawers in his room. Eventually he came up with a wad of euros and an untidily-scrawled chart of which wolves were going where, which I scanned and memorized. Jake's pack was the largest, Becky's the second even if one didn't count Cody, but none of the wolves under Jake were likely to bring children with them. "Hey," Jake said, "is Maggie still around or did she go home already? I owe her money." He brandished the bills.

"She's around," I said, "but might not be for that much longer. Her witchcraft doesn't totally overlap with my dad's, but it's close enough that I think she's just going to head back to Wexford and live her life like before with Gianna and Molly. I'm not sure what Ilario and Cath are planning to do."

"I don't owe Ilario or Cath money. Do you have anything pressing going on or can we find Maggie and pay her back?"

"I'm free until Paola's relatives show up, I think," I said, and I led him and Grace into the compound and along halls until we found the lie-detector's temporary room - she'd taken over Jane's, and I repressed a shiver as I leaned into the open doorway. "Maggie?"

Maggie looked up from Jane's jewelry box, which she was apparently looting; a string of pearls dangled from her hands and she'd already sorted the top tray into four piles. "Hi, Elspeth. What's up?" she asked.

"I believe I owe you a hundred euros," said Jake, handing over the money he'd counted out. Maggie plucked it from his hand, re-counted it, and put it in her pocket.

"Thanks," she said.

"Are you going home soon?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have a flight up tonight," Maggie said. "Would've gone yesterday when the bulk of the other nonessential personnel cleared out, but Cath and Ilario can't make up their minds about whether they're going to live with me and Gianna or in Swindon yet, and I'm trying to balance going home to my family pronto with being able to tell Molly when she should expect to see her Unclario again."

"Are you stealing Jane's jewelry?" asked Grace, peering at the pearls that Maggie was still holding.

"Jane *is* dead," Maggie pointed out innocently. "I asked Alec - you know, her only surviving relative and therefore totally the executor of her estate - if he cared what happened to her stuff, and he said no, so I'm looking through it. Why, do you want some of it? She had ridiculous amounts. I think Aro might have given her something expensive and shiny every time she had a birthday." That was actually true, although she'd worn out or lost or sold a fair fraction of the pieces over the years to avoid being buried under them. "This is box two of six."

Grace blinked, then glanced at Jake for permission, got a shrug, and started rummaging through what Maggie hadn't already claimed. "Isn't looting fun?" Maggie asked, humming to herself.

"I guess my dad probably knows what's going on and would tell my mom," I said dubiously, "and my mom would have said something if she objected, but..."

"Pfft," said Maggie. "She rules the world now. Why bother with how a dead evil girl's stuff is disposed of? I guess some of the stuff in the treasury would be worth her hanging onto - the historically significant antiques and whatnot - but she's not going to stop me from taking this bee-yoo-tee-ful hair clip, I think." Maggie tucked an enameled pin into her curls. "Or giving my mate a pretty bracelet. Other people are going through the other rooms. You could take some stuff, Elspeth, I bet you know where everything you'd like is."

Gwyn retreated from the heap of jewelry to stand at my shoulder again, newly ornamented, but I didn't want anything of Jane's. "I'll think about it," I said, idly contemplating the other deceased owners of nice things and what they'd have left behind. I didn't think I'd wind up taking any of it. I wasn't much for jewelry anyway, and somehow didn't think it was going to be a limited resource in my future if I changed my mind. My mom was having enough fun with being the Empress of the Golden Empire that I wouldn't

be astounded if she had a crown made for me and insisted that I wear it to official functions, with such functions to be concocted out of thin air later.

Gwyn wanted to alert everyone else in the village to the looting opportunity, and I didn't have any reason to direct her elsewhere, so back we went.

Paola's relatives arrived that afternoon - just her parents and both of her brothers. Her sisters-in-law and her nieces and nephews were home; I suspected that it would be up to her more immediate family what, if anything, to tell them. Jake and Gwyn and I waited with Addy for them to arrive at their appointment. "This doesn't look like a hospital," said Giotto, the elder of the brothers, as they walked into the office building that contained one of several entrances to the Volterra compound.

It was in fact not even slightly a mental hospital - the offices in the building were mostly financial and legal - but we didn't stay in the building long. "This way, please," I addressed the Grecos, catching their eye.

"Who are you?" asked Rino, the middle Greco child.

"My name is Elspeth Cullen," I said, glancing at Addy.

"Dr. Cullen and I - I'm Dr. Bauer - are the world's leading experts on mnemonic disorders," Addy inserted smoothly. Until we were in the compound itself, we weren't going to start telling the truth. "The facility where Miss Greco is staying is not here; this is just the most convenient entrance. Please, follow us."

Using the key that allowed the building's elevator to drop as far as the basement level, we accessed the tunnel that led to the compound. "What kind of hospital has a tunnel entrance?" Giotto wanted to know.

"It's not *exactly* a hospital," I said, incapable of keeping quiet about it anymore.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mrs. Greco. Jake tensed up beside me at the hostility in her voice.

"Paola's not really *ill*," I continued. "It's extremely complicated, and you're going to need to bear with me for -"

"Are you really a doctor?" demanded Mr. Greco.

"Sort of?" I allowed. I did have memories of medical school several times over. "I -"

"What do you mean, *sort of*?" insisted Paola's father. "What kind of answer is that?"

Rino actually stopped in his tracks, and his brother and then their parents followed suit. "What in the *world* is going on?"

"We're taking you to Paola," I promised. "Please just follow us and we'll explain everything."

"Humans *can* tolerate *summaries*, can't they?" Addy asked me.

"...Yes," I acknowledged, still a little wary of using my power on humans at all given the harm Addy had been able to wreak with it, "but -"

"If you don't want to do it, I can," Addy offered, holding out her hand.

"No," I said. Addy was borrowing Aro's power so she could read the Grecos when it was convenient; I didn't want to displace it. I sighed, turned back to the unsettled family, and created the most minimal, unintrusive summary I could compose to send to all of them.

"Bullshit," said Rino, uncertainly, and I sighed, half-wishing that I could compel belief outright.

"How did you do that?" shrieked Mrs. Greco, pressing the heels of her hands to her temples and breathing irregularly.

And Giotto stood stock-still, processing the information, and then lurched angrily at Addy, who ducked his attempt at an attack neatly and then seized his wrists so he wouldn't fall over. "I didn't realize you were going to include that tidbit," Addy told me dryly.

Mr. Greco grabbed his wife's elbow and turned to bolt, wheezing something about monsters; I sprinted around them to block the way, my wolf and his packmate at my heels. "Please," I said, "your daughter is -"

"Incurable!" shouted Mr. Greco. "If I'm to believe you, incurable! And going to be turned into a monster like - like you! If my daughter is gone -"

"The Paola you *knew* is gone but Didyme is still your biological daughter!" I cried. "Her *genes* didn't change, she's still *related* to *you*, not the family the original Didyme had thousands of years ago -"

"My daughter is dead!" roared Mr. Greco, and I ground my teeth.

"Your Imperial *Highness*," sang Addy, who was now holding both of the brothers immobile and looking exasperated with me, "perhaps we'd best escort our guests to the throne room whether they like it or not so their propensity to make nuisances of themselves can be evaluated by the Emperor? Somehow I don't think we want to "peel back the Masquerade" quite this *fast*."

"The who?" asked Giotto, as Mrs. Greco squeaked, "*Imperial Highness? Emperor?*"

"*That's right*," I snapped in frustration, taking a step forward and startling Mr. and Mrs. Greco into stumbling backwards, "I am the *princess* of the *Golden Empire*. I can erase a human personality with my *thoughts*. I remember more centuries of experiences than you can even count. *I can resurrect the dead*. And you are going to *calm down and listen to me*."

The four Grecos all went rather quiet at that, and Addy said, "Well then," and began marching Rino and Giotto down the hall briskly. I made an expansive gesture, inviting Mr. and Mrs. Greco to go under their own power ahead of me and the two wolves instead of needing to be hauled as their sons were. Mr. Greco's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, but finally he put his hand on his wife's shoulder and they turned and continued towards the compound.

"Resurrect the dead?" asked Rino in a small voice, halfway to the compound.

"Select eligible dead individuals," I muttered under my breath, "subject to terms and conditions, side effects include human sacrifice, void where prohibited -"

"What?" he asked.

"Not Paola, I can't bring her back," I said a little louder. "She wasn't... backed up."

"Backed up? Like a computer?" asked Giotto, sounding queasy about applying digital terminology to his sister.

"Something like that. Paola was overwritten with the memories of a woman who *was* backed up right before she died," I said.

"And even if Paola had records kept, she was a human, and our theorizing suggests that being human would make her un-ressurrectable anyway," said Addy.

"And now she's... Didyme," murmured Mrs. Greco, scrunching her eyebrows together as she processed the summary.

"Yes," I said, keeping it simple. I didn't think it would make them feel any better to describe how happy Marcus was to have her. In fact, it seemed likely to be a bad idea to require the Grecos to interact with Marcus... possibly ever. Anyone that happy about what was, to them, a tragedy would probably be painful to be around.

For her part, Didyme was very gracious to the Grecos. She clasped their hands warmly and greeted her brothers by name - having been coached ahead of time on what they were called - and her parents as "Mamma" and "Papà", which words she'd learned for the occasion in spite of knowing no other Italian. She endured their mistrustful, uncomfortable stares with an apologetic smile, and assured them through my translation that she was very sorry to have "arrived" at the expense of their Paola, but eager to be a part of their family anyway on the grounds of blood relation if they'd have her. Or willing to bow out quietly if they didn't want to deal with the stranger who had taken over their daughter's body.

Rino did most of the talking once the family was actually in the room with Didyme. He wanted to know about her, in her original incarnation - where she'd come from, what her life had been like, how she'd died - and she obliged them with enough details that one would think she was speaking to intimates and not approximate strangers. She even described how

Aro had killed her - which she still didn't remember, and had only been told about - and this seemed to rouse some fraternal protectiveness in Rino.

"You're planning to be turned into a... 'vampire'?" Mrs. Greco interrupted abruptly when Rino was halfway through asking Didyme about the fragments of her childhood she recalled. (I was actually better able to answer such questions than she was, since Aro had read his sister before he turned her and the new Didyme held almost exclusively vampire memories, but I knew Rino didn't want to talk to *me*.)

"Yes," said Didyme levelly, dipping her head and looking up at Mrs. Greco.

"But isn't that something that... this Aro person *did* to you, long ago? And then he killed you. I don't understand why you're going back to something like that," said Mrs. Greco peevishly.

"It is true that Aro turned me, the first time," acknowledged Didyme, "and that he did not turn out to be a loyal brother to me. But there are advantages to being a vampire."

"To being a *monster*," said Mrs. Greco, snappish, with a quick glare at me.

Didyme didn't take the bait. She said, "I am sorry if you do not approve. This matter is between me and my husband, with the kind permission of Her Imperial Highness." (Didyme seemed to be adjusting very well to my mom being the ruler of the vampires; it might have been helpful that she'd lived during the Romanians' reign and they'd never impinged on her life while she fell under their technical jurisdiction.)

"Your husband," said Giotto faintly.

Didyme nodded and her smile got a bit wider at the thought of Marcus. "He is not here because it was thought that he would be intruding on our meeting, but yes, my husband. I suppose we have been married for more than two thousand years, now."

"You're not married," sputtered Mr. Greco.

Didyme tilted her head thoughtfully. "I suppose you are right," she said after a pause. "In a way. Legally I suppose I am Paola Greco, and Paola Greco is not legally married. But in the ways that matter, he is my husband and I am his wife."

"I want to meet this... person," said Rino suddenly.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"No, but take me to him anyway," said Rino with a resigned sigh.

Marcus was standing in the next room over, unwilling to get too far from Didyme and having compromised only that far because of the delicacy of the situation with her family. Since Rino seemed to be the only one interested in being introduced, I got up and led him next door, leaving Addy in the room with Didyme and the other three Grecos as backup translator.

Rino visibly recoiled when he first got a look at Marcus and his shattered face, but controlled himself; Marcus gazed back impassively with a slightly unfocused look in his eyes, and I suspected he was examining the relationships emanating from Rino more than Rino's person.

"Do *you* speak Italian?" Rino asked after a silence.

"Fluently," Marcus replied.

Rino chewed on the inside of his cheek a bit, and then said, "You're a vampire, right?" Marcus didn't even distinguish this question with a nod, let alone a verbal reply, and Rino moved on after an awkward lull. "How many people have you killed?" he asked boldly.

"I didn't count them," said Marcus, a low edge of menace in the sentence.

I laughed nervously and added, "Rino, um, killing people is illegal now, so however many it was, the number's not going to go up."

"I just want to know if... my sister... is safe with this weirdo," said Rino. He paused. "And what do you mean, illegal *now*?"

"I mean, illegal for vampires, as declared by an authority that could conceivably enforce it," I said. "For all practical purposes vampires have never been subject to human authority..."

Marcus, meanwhile, did not exactly draw himself up to his full height, because he hadn't been slouching, but he did adjust his shoulders and peer down at Rino in a way that Rino obviously found intimidating. "Suggest that I would mistreat Didyme again," he invited in a soft growl.

"I'm just *concerned*!" shrieked Rino, shuffling backwards almost into the hall. "Calm down! Last month my sister's name was Paola, and the most challenge I had to deal with in a given day was my daughter's colic, and *you* were dermatologically impossible!"

Marcus stared Rino down, in stony silence, and I piped up, "She's the *last* person Marcus would ever hurt, Rino."

Rino backed up a few more steps, looking warily at Marcus from narrowed eyes, and went back to the room with his parents and brother and sister.

The rest of the visit passed stiffly, although Didyme's sweetness was unfailing and her brothers, at least, were doing their best to adjust to the situation. Her parents were huffy and indignant by turns, casting about for someone more breakable than (unflappable) Addy or more detestable than (kind) Didyme to blame for the situation.

After having agreed to my parents' satisfaction and with various levels of irkedness that it would be a poor choice to go to the newspapers with the secrets they had learned, the Grecos finally took their leave. It was late evening, and they trooped out muttering awkwardly about keeping in touch via various media that Didyme did not know how to use.

Me and Jake and Gwyn escorted them out to the office building exit - it wasn't well-lit, and while there weren't branching corridors to get lost via and going *up* from the basement didn't require a key, it seemed prudent to have them accompanied. When the Grecos were safely out the door, my wolf guards and I all headed back to the village, because I, at least, needed to get to bed.

After I was tucked in with my hand in Jake's, but before I nodded off, I heard from next door Albert and his imprint Amanda having some sort of dispute. It sounded more like Amanda was shouting and Albert was panicking about the fact that she was shouting, actually. Their baby Eve was fussing loudly, unaccustomed to disagreements in her vicinity.

They *never* fought - none of the imprints ever fought with their wolves - it didn't happen because -

Oh, I thought, just before I slipped into unconsciousness, *it's my fault* –

Ruler

When I woke up, the Greenes next door were quiet, although I didn't know if they'd resolved their disagreement or just given up and gone to sleep.

I had *known* - I *had known* and simply not thought twice about it - that the imprints who'd lived in the village all along were not staying with their wolves out of unadulterated affection. Amanda had been a Canadian tourist, basically kidnapped off the street when Albert gaped at her. She'd been brain-scrambled so she'd stay with him regardless of whatever else she'd had in mind for her life, so he'd remain a functional member of the Volturi guard dogs. And then I'd run around heedlessly through the village deprogramming everybody in an indiscriminate wave.

I knew Amanda wouldn't miss her relatives and friends - I couldn't do anything about that half of Chelsea's work - but she might miss *Canada*, or... what had she been doing with herself, before, anyway? Aro had never read Amanda. She might have been in college or had a career or, for all I knew, another family of her own, another child or three back home, another husband. She didn't talk about where she'd come from beyond "Canada"; I didn't even know what province. She'd handled dropping out of her old life on her own once she was warped into wanting to, well enough that no one had made trouble looking for her.

Unless she was from Vancouver, Amanda was going to be the only imprint who wasn't at least somewhat close to home when the packs went their separate ways, too.

I sat in bed and put my chin on my knees. I wondered what would happen if she wanted to leave. Would she want to take the baby? Her daughter was a puppy, not a normal human child. Eve wouldn't start demonstrating any unusual properties until she was twelve or thirteen at least, and might or might not activate even then - I didn't know if vampire presences early in her life would cause automatic floofing later if she didn't meet any more vampires growing up. But it might take longer than that for it to be considered acceptable for wolves to live wherever they wanted. And even if Amanda felt nothing real for *Albert* anymore, at least *some* of her affection for their daughter had to be real... probably...

I left my bedroom and found Embry and Gwyn, still up as my night shift guards, sitting in the suite's front room hushedly playing cards. I'd just about forgotten they were there.

"Morning," whispered Gwyn when she saw I was up. "Want to play?"

If I wanted to go anywhere out of the suite, they'd have to put their game down in the middle (I wondered if my mom had this sort of conundrum with Renata? Probably not; Renata never did anything interesting) so I sat with them and took some cards from the deck and lost to Embry at Go Fish, then went with them to the cafeteria so they could have dinner and I could have breakfast.

"I heard Albert and Amanda fighting last night," I blurted, between finishing my bacon and starting my eggs. The cafeteria was temporarily open all day and night, as people were

keeping irregular hours and attempting to preemptively change time zones for the upcoming move to La Push.

"*Fighting?*" said Gwyn and Embry in unison. They'd both been in Rachel's pack, with Albert, and would know him pretty well, and Amanda through him.

"Well, as much as an imprint can fight with her wolf," I allowed. "I didn't catch the words. I - I think it's my fault because I deprogrammed Amanda with everybody else -"

"Oh, Elspeth, sweetie," said Gwyn, patting my hand. "No, you did a good thing."

"If I'd gone slower, I could have been more careful and only undone the stuff tying you guys to the *Volturi*," I said.

"You didn't take away anything that was really there," said Gwyn. "Like, I'm still glad Santiago gave us dance lessons, aren't you?"

"Yes, but... But I took away what Amanda and Albert had," I said. "And even if it wasn't real, it can hurt them for it to be gone." I suspected Albert was in worse straits, since any discomfort in Amanda would upset him too and he'd also have to deal with the situation itself, but Amanda was probably none too thrilled either.

Gwyn and Embry fell sympathetically silent. I finished my food, and Embry yawned. "About time for the shift change," he said. "Jake and... not Grace again, who was it..."

"Laurel," supplied Gwyn. "I'm not sure if we're supposed to go get her ourselves or what."

"We can go wait for Jake to wake up," I said, and we returned to the suite and the deck of cards and Grace demonstrated to us both that War had a non-trivial skill element until my wolf finally padded out of his bedroom.

"Morning, Elsie," Jake said. "Gwyn, you're relieved; go wake up Laurel if she's not already up and tell her I said to come here and relieve Embry."

"You got it," said Gwyn, hopping to her feet and dashing off to do what she was told. When Gwyn ran it was one of the few times she looked remotely thirteen years old - she pulled off the older look that came with wolf activation in stillness or when she moved slowly or danced, but she ran like a kid.

It weirded me out, just a little, to watch my Jake giving orders. I'd seen him do it a few times, but he'd done most of his interacting with the pack in wolf form where the details were opaque to me and it might as well have been anyone else in charge. And a good chunk of the time we'd spent together hadn't involved any other wolves at all.

Jake plunked down into the chair Gwyn had been using. "What's on the agenda for the day?" he asked me.

"Uh, another blast victim's family is coming in to hear what happened to their relative, so I'm going to that," I said. "That's at three this afternoon. I don't have anything else planned. I guess we could hang out here, or wander around the compound looting, or whatever."

"You didn't seem interested in looting," Jake said.

"I'm not," I said. "I'm not accustomed to having lots of possessions. I spent most of my life constantly running around North America with what my mom could carry in a backpack... she can carry a lot, but was limited by the volume of the backpack... and I don't really feel like loading up on stuff just because there's stuff lying around. If I want some object later I'm pretty sure I'll be able to get it, you know?"

"And behold, consumerism lies gurgling in a ditch somewhere," said Embry, gesturing like he was making a toast.

I shrugged. It wasn't a statement about my values, just about my inclinations. "I don't mind if other people want stuff."

Laurel knocked perfunctorily and let herself into the suite, waving Embry out, and Embry gave Jake a half-serious salute and left to go to bed. Laurel saluted too, more seriously, and sat with us. Her posture was ridiculously good. It made me feel like I was scrunched up in a little ball.

There was a silence, and I said, "We could go see what my mom is doing. She might be drawing up a vampire org chart."

"Will there be vampire cubicles and vampire stock options too?" asked Jake, chuckling.

"Vampire palaces and vampire cornering-the-stock-market-through-leverage-and-psycho-powers, I think is more the idea," I said, getting up. "There's looting and then there's suddenly seizing all the finances of an absurdly rich reigning oligarchy. I think my mom skipped the first thing in favor of the second. So probably not too many vampire cubicles."

"I think I'll angle for a vampire corner office," said Jake. "I'll get my name on a little copper insert on the door in a vampire font and delegate paperwork to my vampire secretary." I giggled, and Jake said, "Hey, this means that conspiracy theorists who think the world is secretly controlled by vampires are *right*, or will be once your mom lays down some more infrastructure, anyway."

"I think those conspiracy theories are mostly about lizard people," I said.

"Oh, I guess you're right." He paused. "Do lizard people exist?"

"Not as far as I know."

We walked to the compound, and found my mom in the throne room talking to Siobhan, whose eyes were a striking rose-gold. I wasn't sure when she'd last eaten a human, but it was apparently recent enough that the one animal meal she'd agreed to eat hadn't displaced her eye color completely.

"...in Ireland?" my mom was saying.

"No, I suppose we don't *have* to live there full time, as long as it's up to me who *does*. Maggie and Gianna are fine. Molly will probably be fine, when she's old enough to turn. I think Cath and Ilario are planning to live in England but I don't mind if they visit my island. Everyone else who can bite through a phone book who wants to set foot on that island, I want them to have to clear it with me."

"I think the governments of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom might have something to say about your territoriality when we let on that we exist," my mom said dryly.

"I'm not trying to regulate *human* immigration," said Siobhan sourly. "I don't care where humans go. Especially now that I'm not even going to *eat* them." She shook her head, a disgusted look on her face. "You gambled smart, but it's a *very* narrow win in favor of animal blood, Bella. It is *rank*."

My mom smiled thinly at that. "It's your choice..."

"Yes, I know, I'm just griping to gripe," sighed Siobhan. "Have you considered that, in addition to having several capitals, you could have several arms of your organization in different places? You could put a base in Ireland somewhere and I could work out of there regardless of where and whether you move. I don't need to be physically present to make plans for people."

"I suppose," my mom mused. "I wanted to get Stefan and Vladimir to handle the physical combat training anyway."

Siobhan nodded. "They're better choices."

"I'm still calling you General, though," my mom said.

"Ugh. Put it on official documents if you must. Don't *call* me that." Siobhan looked up at me and Jake and Laurel. "Call *him* that."

"Jacob comes with a title - "Alpha" - and we can just put an "Imperial" before it to distinguish him from his sisters," said my mom. "But fine, I'll call you Siobhan in casual conversation and reserve "General" for other situations. Elspeth, sweetie, what's up?"

"Just wanted to see what was going on," I said. "Do you have an org chart?"

"About half of one, and not written down," she said. "How do you feel about going into the PRPR department? You don't have to - you're five, and also a princess, and do not have to work if you don't want to - but it's open to you."

"What does PRPR stand for?" I asked.

"Stands for Public Relations, and "Public Relations"," she said, making air quotes around the second instance of the phrase, "where Public Relations means more or less what you've been doing already in helping with the blast victims - telling people who need explanations what's what, answering questions, generally interacting with humans for whatever purposes come up. We'll have pamphlets eventually, no doubt, but I imagine having someone to talk to would help. And "Public Relations" means turning folks into vampires, but that's only part of the same department because the one will funnel into the other."

"That sounds fine to me," I said.

"Does she get an extra title?" Jake asked. "Beyond princess, I mean?"

"Imperial Soothsayer?" my mom suggested. "I suppose it's historically been used to refer to fortune-telling, which is more Alice's job, but it breaks down into "truth teller", so it seems appropriate for you anyway." Jake snickered and patted me on the head.

"I'm glad you're having fun, Bella, but you could be a *little* more restrained about the titles," Siobhan said.

"I already said I wouldn't address you as yours when it's not called for," my mother said, smiling, "so you needn't worry. They're just for fun, and to give us an edge in commanding respect for something other than being able to dismember humans when we need to deal with them."

"You think calling Elspeth the Imperial Soothsayer will do that?" Siobhan asked.

"I think it may if we all pretend to take each other very seriously while we call her that," my mom replied. "If we allow ourselves to act like vampires instead of passing for human, in front of humans, we're going to come across as quite strange. We move differently, talk differently, look different, think differently, live differently. We may as well come across as strange and *grand* instead of strange and *frightening* or strange and *inconsequential*. If I find that, in practice, calling ourselves Imperial Whatever backfires, I will tone it down." She gestured at my dad as she said that, indicating that she did have a very good way to determine if the nomenclature was meeting with a suitable reaction.

"Fair enough," said Siobhan. "Are you going to build a base in Ireland?"

"Perhaps. Or you could just get a house with Liam - or go on being vagrants, I suppose, if you prefer that even now that you've moved to vegetarianism - and telecommute all the time. I was thinking one capital in Europe, *maybe* two since it's so densely populated, and I'm tempted to put one in Norway for personal reasons, and the possible second in Greece for geographical coverage."

"Where else are you going to put capitals?" I asked.

"Well, I considered putting one in China, but it turns out that there are surprisingly few vampires in China," my mom said. "There are some, but it's just not an area that will need that much management. So I think I'll put one in India somewhere, one in Russia, one in Australia, two in Africa above and below the equator exact countries to be determined, one in Brazil, one in Québec, one in Florida, and one in Washington State, although I may adjust those last two if my parents don't have a long-term interest in living where they currently do. I figure that installs me at least vaguely near most of the vampire populations of the world as they currently stand."

"Are you going to staff all these places full time?" Siobhan asked.

"No," my mom said. "I'm going to put "Closed" signs on the ones that I'm not using, with phone numbers to get in touch with various useful people. Razi's on the payroll. He can pop over and deal with emergencies that the sort of staffperson who'd be stationed in such a place would be able to handle anyway. Maybe eventually I'll accumulate more employees and want to treat these places like embassies instead of rotating capitals, but for the time being they will mostly stand empty at any given time."

"Is Esme helping design them?" I asked.

"As we speak," my mom said. "I think she's tickled that I named her Imperial Architect. She can't get too detailed with the plans before we have sites picked out. We don't even know if we'll want anything put aboveground. But she's figuring out what sorts of campuses and layouts will work for our needs without looking too much like... this." She waved a hand at the throne room, at the stony opulence. "Benjamin and Emel together can get a building or set of them this size up, plumbed, and wired for electricity in a day, less if Addy helps them. Villages of a size suited to hold Jacob's pack with room for growth if we get recruits from the next generation will take another day apiece. Benjamin and Emel don't do *carpet* and things like that, but Esme wants to do all those little touches herself. Her specialty isn't building from scratch anyway."

"What's Carlisle doing?" I asked, sure that where Esme went, her husband was sure to follow.

"Imperial Ethicist for Research and Development," my mom said. "On a consulting basis. He'll probably be against various things I'm in favor of, but I'm pretty sure he won't greenlight anything I'd refuse, so as long as we have a sensible appeals system set up he's perfect for the job. He may also go on practicing medicine in the civilization near the capital-of-the-year, but I'm hoping to coax him into full-time R&D work."

"What kind of R&D?" I asked.

"For instance," my mom said, "how nifty would it be if we didn't have to drive the world's megafauna extinct in our attempt to save human lives? I'm going to get Vasanti setting up something more sustainable than hunting near the relevant locations - pig farms, probably - but in the long run, given that I want to turn as many people as want to *be* turned and hope to make minimal use of the screening mechanism? I want synthetic blood. If we can figure out how to make it taste like human blood while retaining the non-crazymaking

properties of animal blood, that would be marvelous, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it also be nice if it could really make the thirst go *away* instead of temporarily dying down a bit?"

"That would be nice," I agreed.

"I'd actually like to gradually supplant the world population with various fractional vampires," said my mom.

"What?" I said.

"Like you," she said, smiling. "There are tradeoffs, of course - but not-entirely-vampires can eat plants, reproduce unaided, and are still immortal and have arbitrary amounts of mental storage space. The only reason I'm hoping to turn more people into vampires at all is that as far as we know, one has to be *born* a hybrid, so this plan won't save any humans who are already alive today. Although that'll be something to set the R&D department on."

"Does this turn into an imperial mandate that I reproduce?" I asked uncomfortably.

"No. In fact, consider it an imperial mandate that you not make me a grandmother before I'm... oh... forty-five. But it means that one of the fast tracks to getting turned, for people who want it, will be volunteering to carry a half-vampire baby for someone who wants one, and that it will be customary to strongly encourage female turning applicants to make use of an egg bank. We'll probably need to set up one of our own, of those." She paused. "I bet Rosalie would do that. She's qualified and has the... however masochistic... interest."

"Egg banks aren't very portable," I observed.

"So we build one everywhere we set up, design them not to need much maintenance when not in active use, and tell Razi to pop in and fix any problems that crop up as informed by our automatic alarm system," my mother said, shrugging. "The things one can do with a clever combination of magic and technology are *really awesome*."

"Are you going to do anything about Joham?" I asked.

My mom chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "Well," she said, "he really needs to stop impregnating people to death, because that is horrifying and wrong, but if he just wants more kids, and he's willing to do it by finding informed volunteers and getting them appropriate care while they're pregnant, that has no *obvious* problems. I'm not thrilled about some of his philosophical viewpoints, but I don't think he's an actual threat and don't plan to forbid him to reproduce outright."

Siobhan asked, "How are you planning to locate him? Alice won't be able to see through Iseul and Noemi and he doesn't have a stable territory, or any incentive to tell you where he is or stay put if you have Dwi call him. I suppose Nathan might have a shot in hell, but..."

"That's taken care of," my mom said, smiling enigmatically. "Joham will be located and informed of the situation in short order, along with the other members of his family."

"...How?" Siobhan said.

"Don't worry about it," my mom said cheerfully.

Siobhan raised an eyebrow, looking skeptically at the smirking Empress, but said, "All right then."

We chatted about who was going to work where, batted sites and names for our capitals back and forth, invented titles to bestow on people with various levels of levity. Addy was in R&D, obviously, developing witch powers that came under imperial purview - with Carlisle's ethical supervision - but in her Factotum capacity, she would be dispatched elsewhere when called for, borrowing anyone's powers when they had excess workload. Esme brought in her preliminary drafts for various possible buildings and we oohed and aahed, claimed rooms, suggested decorative curlicues. Nathan popped into the room, announced that he wanted to be the Imperial Minister of Temporal Affairs, and left, whistling, when my mom said that was fine with her.

At three, my father murmured that Addy had met the next blast victim's family at the office building entrance to the compound and was escorting them in.

I got up and went, wolves trailing behind me, to be ready to meet them when they got to the end of the corridor. I had a job.

The second family was easier to deal with than the first. The pair of brothers they were there to see had something much more easily recognizable as a *disorder*. They weren't walking, talking copies of strangers. I also did not disclose, this time, who was responsible for the disorder in question.

The pair's mother mumbled vaguely about taking them home, after she was able to get over her shock at the whole *witches and werewolves and vamps, oh my* surprise and focus on her sons. The men were *physically* well, and could occasionally respond to their environments - they would sleep in beds, could sluggishly figure out plumbing anew each time they were presented with it, ate food that was put in front of them. Those reflex behaviors had been memorized by a sufficient fraction of the shattered intrusions in their minds that they could be resurrected. So home care wasn't a completely untenable prospect for an untrained caretaker.

One of them was married. His wife did not strike me as being particularly sad to have, effectively, lost her husband. She made the appropriate statements of dismay, but all of her questions were about money. I refrained from commenting on the compassion of this focus, and just named the substantial figure Addy whispered to me at high pitch for what we could offer in reparations. The wife was thereafter non-participatory and distracted; I was silently glad that they didn't have any children.

Their older sister asked me, in a thin, plaintive voice, if there was any hope of treatment.

"Not the way you're hoping," I said. "There are two possible routes to improving their condition, but neither will bring back your brothers the way they were and neither is certain."

"Please tell us what they are anyway," the sister said.

"One," I said, "is that we could use memories taken from all of you, and *attempt* to use them to remind your brothers who they're supposed to be. This won't bring back their own perspectives on any memories you have of them, and it won't recover any information that was private to them, but *if* it worked they'd know who you were again, and might fall into roles similar to the ones they used to occupy. The reason it might not work is that you're all humans, and human memories don't stick as strongly or vividly. They both contain some vampire memories that might be impossible to move out of the way like that."

"And the other possibility?" the sister asked tentatively.

"More likely to work," I said, "but you wouldn't like the results as much. Two of the other people who this happened to looked in mirrors and recognized themselves as being similar-looking vampires. That let them fixate on those vampires' memories and get the extra information out of the way. Effectively, they now *are* those people, in different bodies. Your brothers didn't do that naturally, but it's possible that by making them look physically different with makeup and dye and such, or by re-blasting a smaller period of a specific vampire's lifetime, we could get them to "wake up" - as someone else."

The mother spoke up. "This happened to two people?"

"Can we meet them?" the sister asked.

"Neither of them speak Italian, but sure, I can translate," I said. "Addy, would you get Didyme, please?"

Addy whooshed away in an unnecessary show of speed, and returned with Didyme; I heard Marcus settling into the next room over as before to avoid letting his mate out of his earshot. Didyme politely introduced herself to the family, described how pleased she was to be alive "again" and how she hoped her new biological family would eventually become comfortable enough to give her the "parents she missed and brothers she wished she'd had". The poignancy of the "brothers" part was lost on her audience, whom she did not elect to tell in detail about her murder, but Didyme's charming personality was clearly having its effect on everyone in the family, even the wife. (I uncharitably envisioned the wife asking if she could see a menu of possible people her husband could be turned into. Then I uncharitably imagined that he had been, in some way, a less than model spouse and she was justified in her distance. Then I decided to stop guessing.)

John, when it was his turn, made less of a stunning impression, although he didn't do anything particularly inappropriate. "They were chosen randomly, right?" the wife asked, when he'd gone.

"Not randomly, but according to who they looked like and the length of the stored memory," I said. "But if you mean, did a person decide to turn them into those people, no."

"I want you to try the first option," said the mother, tremulously. "I want my boys back."

"I want the second thing for -" the wife began, but the sister interrupted her, and soon all three women were bickering and shouting.

I watched them natter at each other until it was clear that the argument wouldn't simmer down on its own, then raised my voice and said, "Perhaps you could discuss this issue at your leisure and let us know when you've reached a decision. We'll be happy to look after them both for as long as you need." Santiago - having been dropped into the PRPR Department mostly because my mother had found her presence soothingly professional back in the day and there was nowhere else the dancer was obviously needed - was looking after all of the patients, and didn't seem to mind the job.

The three got up, although they didn't stop arguing, and let me show them out via the office building.

I sighed when they left, and went back to the compound, and went to the village to see if Amanda was home.

Lawmaker

When I listened at the door next to mine, Amanda was home, and had, apparently, kicked out Albert - I didn't think he'd have left her of his own volition, but he might have slunk away if she demanded it. I knocked.

"Go away, Albert," said Amanda's voice, muffled.

"It's Elspeth," I said.

There was a pause, and the door opened. Amanda looked at me Jake and Laurel wearily, and said, "I don't want to talk to all of you right now. Becky's already -"

"They're just acting as my bodyguards, they don't have to say anything," I coaxed. "Will you talk to just me?"

Amanda hesitated, and her mouth twisted in inexpressible frustration, but she finally stood aside and let us in. Jake and Laurel hung back, by the door, and I sat with Amanda at her table.

"Becky was here already?" I asked, hoping to get her started talking about everything so I'd have a better picture of what was going on.

Amanda nodded. "After I told Albert I wanted him out. He took Eve and he's in North with her or something, I think. Becky showed up on his behalf. I don't *think* he asked her, I think she just did it on her own, but it amounts to the same thing, right? One day I get *snatched*, literally *off the street*, because my flight home was the next day and they couldn't afford to let him go through the motions of wooing me like the local girls got... and since then my life has been about being *Albert's imprint*. As far as everybody here is concerned that justifies my existence. If I'd got married to a human my husband's boss wouldn't show up to tell me to give him a chance." She looked at me, and sighed. "I guess my next-door neighbor might either way."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

"You didn't kidnap me. You were, what, three years old and looked eleven when I got gotten?" scoffed Amanda.

"I meant - you were happy, weren't you, until - recently?" I said.

"I guess. Once I didn't want to go home to my family anymore I got swept up in the fairytale aspect. Magical werewolf boyfriend cannot help but love me forever and wants to support me while I live in a secret hamlet full of friendly folks that works as an arm of the freaking Illuminati? I think I spent two minutes thinking "wait a minute, I was going to get my master's degree starting this fall and be a social worker" before Chelsea saturated me with Albert-on-the-brain to the point where I didn't care about anything that wasn't compatible with staying here. Because of course *Albert* cannot move to suit *me*, even though

supposedly I'm the center of his universe, right? Albert needs to live with his *pack*. And apparently he still does."

"Do you want to go back to Canada?" I asked tentatively.

"I don't care if it's Canada particularly. I still don't really care about my relatives except that I think Eve should get the chance to know them, but they're scattered far and wide all over Ontario, so it's not like I could live near my mom *and* my dad *and* any of my siblings. But I want to go to school. And I don't want to be limited to the handful of schools that are within spitting distance of Nowhere, Washington, and my Italian's not good enough to go to a university here, and Jake's pack is attached to *your* lot and you're going to be moving all over the place, so... it boils down to leaving Albert, even though he's a decent guy and Eve's daddy who I don't particularly *dislike*, even if he's no longer the end-all and be-all of my life. Or going "whoops, I guess I'm okay with giving up what was stolen from me to suit someone else's needs after all, Nowhere, WA, here I come" and popping out another four or five puppies as seems to be the fashion and doing nothing else with my life."

"I'm... not sure that's *quite* your list of options..." I said.

Amanda rolled her eyes and looked away. "Becky told me about how Rachel went to college in Spokane and it's a reasonable commuting distance from La Push and a good school. But I don't think Becky understands... she got married when she was eighteen to move with, I don't remember what his name was -"

"Caleb," I said.

"With Caleb, to a state she'd never even visited before, and she was perfectly happy with that until the day she floofed for the first time. Becky never went to college, let alone grad school. Rachel went to a college that was about as far away from home as she could get and stay in-state, if I have the geography right."

"I'm sorry," I blurted again.

"Why?" asked Amanda.

"Because I wasn't careful when I was deprogramming everybody..."

"So you're sorry for giving me my brain back because now I'm going to make things inconvenient?" she said snappishly, and I cringed.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry because you're unhappy and I think it's my fault."

Amanda frowned, and sighed. "I still love Albert," she said, sounding uncertain, but then she shook her head to clear it and repeated herself more confidently. "I don't love him more than anything else in the world anymore, that's all."

I bit my lip carefully, then said, "Why *does* each pack have to stay together, anyway?"

"Are you asking *me*?" Amanda wanted to know.

"Jake," I said.

Jake coughed into his hand. "Um," he said. "...It mostly just seems right. I mean, before the massacre we were all in La Push. Now some of us have reason to be elsewhere, but we can still be elsewhere in groups."

"It mostly just seems right," repeated Amanda, putting incredulous pauses between the words.

"Well, that, and we kind of have a culture... and Eve ought to have it too," Jake added. "If you went to school in Boston or something and had Albert and Eve with you, Eve wouldn't grow up like a puppy, really."

"Won't she pick it up quick enough once she's activated? *If* she's activated?" challenged Amanda. "You're telepathic!"

"What is that you'd want to do, *exactly*, if Albert could follow you anywhere?" I asked, my brain working.

"I'd apply to a bunch of grad schools and pray one would take me," said Amanda. "Spin the time I've spent here as a long gap "year" that only incidentally involved getting married and having a baby. Mostly I'd look for schools in Ontario, I guess, but I'd need to do some research, see what places are ranked well for social work programs..."

"My mom is planning to put one of her regional capitals in Québec, but hadn't picked an exact site last I checked," I said. "If you were at school in the part of Ontario that's near it, and the capital weren't too far away, and Albert were in Jake's pack instead of Becky's, Albert could do some job at the capital. Keeping it partly open even when the rest of us are elsewhere, maybe. It sounded to me like my mom's eventual plan was to have them all staffed full time and she just doesn't quite have the numbers to do it yet."

"I could even see asking a few other wolves to stay there full time," Jake volunteered. "Especially a couple of them who sort of wanted to adopt orphans, but haven't because they didn't think it would be good to bounce them around that much and they also wanted to stick with being professional werewolves. Laurel?"

"Maybe," said Laurel, not relaxing her attentive posture, but there was a hint of something in her eyes.

"And maybe Nina and Calvin, too," Jake said. "If this were an option we might even keep some currently planning to go with other packs. Like the Delaneys, and possibly Vivian and Iris, they're mostly staying here in the village because they have kids - but they don't have imprints, so they aren't tied here by anybody's family relationships, the way the guys with Italian wives or the ones who imprinted back in the States are to Volterra or La Push. There really isn't *that* strong a reason to keep the pack all geographically together."

"So Québec can be permanently open and the others can rotate until there's the numbers to keep them all running full time," I said. "If my mom goes for it."

My mom went for it. "We can gradually add permanent populations to capitals one at a time," she said. "And may as well start with Québec if that would be convenient." But not before exasperatedly ranting that the wolves certainly had not behaved as though splitting up packs was an option back when they were staying up all night arguing about where to go.

Jake called in Daphne to take over his bodyguard post for a couple of hours, so he could go alert everyone to the change of circumstance and invite everyone to make new arrangements in response. I whiled away the evening in the company of both wolf girls, telling them about Esme's architectural plans and my job in the PRPR department and similar.

"Would you have wanted someone to adopt you," I asked Daphne, during a lull in the conversation, "if this had all happened three or four years ago?" Daphne was the second-youngest wolf, thirteen to newly-active Ashleigh's twelve, and had spent the early years of the wolves' time in the village as one of the orphans in North. I knew she considered herself an adult upon first phasing, and no one had seriously suggested that the active wolves close to her age needed adopting, but she'd have a perspective on the matter.

"Maybe," she said. She didn't elaborate immediately, but when neither I nor Laurel said anything to move the attention away from her, she went on. "At first there were only the three kids in the village with parents, and they were little and I didn't think much about them, but they got older and I could sort of see how having a family instead of just being another Northie would be nice. And then guys started imprinting and having puppies and that looked nice too. We were taken care of and everything. But it was like we came in clumps to the people who looked after us, because there were so many. I was the middle of the Gwyn-Daphne-Ashleigh clump because we were girls around the same age."

I nodded. I glanced at Laurel, and considered asking who she was thinking of adopting, but decided that she'd probably consider it unprofessional to discuss it on duty.

Evening came, and Laurel and Daphne were replaced by Kelly and Gregory, and I slept.

The next day there was another family. I was beginning to get the hang of explaining things, and managed to keep them all relatively calm while explaining what had happened to their daughter/sister/wife/mother (the woman's children were both grown, thankfully; I wasn't looking forward to talking to Benito's little boy). They unanimously wanted me to try "option one" - pushing their memories of their lost relative at her in the hopes that she'd wake up and behave something like herself.

Addy handled that, since there was some chance that if she composed the requisite summary, it would borrow intensity from her vampire mind that I couldn't offer. She read all the relatives, then borrowed my power, took a couple of minutes to extract the relevant portions of memory, and hit the patient with it all in one go.

Nothing happened. Addy reached into her pocket which contained the dying piece of Aro again, tapped the woman on the forehead, and frowned. "Didn't stick," she reported gravely.

"Try it again?" I said.

She did, and she tried sending the summary to me so we could both blast the patient simultaneously, and we tried it while holding a mirror in front of the patient's eyes, but to no avail. She didn't react, and each time Addy checked, the information had slid out of her mind.

The family were disappointed, and there were tears, but they seemed understanding that we were not (quite) miracle-workers. (It probably helped that, again, they didn't know that Addy was responsible, and seemed to be under the impression that it had been a complete accident. This was close enough - since Addy hadn't set out to hurt the humans - that Magic only itched me a little.)

After much discussion, a little bickering, but no yelling at all, the family determined that their mnemically overloaded member was dead, and their choices boiled down to sustaining her as a confused vegetable or "donating her body to science". It turned out that she'd been intending to do the latter anyway, albeit in a far more conventional fashion.

We wound up with the green light to turn her into whoever we thought best, if we could, and no interest in putting that new person into contact with her new genetic relatives.

"Well," said Addy. "Now all we have to do is decide who, and hope it works."

"I think we also need to call the brothers' family, so they know that one of the choices on the table doesn't work," I said.

"I'll do it," said Addy, snagging my power again and pulling out her phone.

"Thanks," I said, and went (with Jake and Aaron following me) to see what my mom was up to.

My mom was contemplating how to deploy her forces to not only spread the news, but also the enforcement, about the new vegetarian regime to the world. Vampires tended to be at least peripherally aware of other nearby vampires, and so some word of mouth would do some of the work.

Peter and Charlotte had been called and were telling their neighbors, and between them and the Denalis (all of whom had gone home), the whole of North America might be expected to have the information inside of a month. Britain's vampires were well-informed and could communicate with counterparts on the European mainland. Sukutai and her mate had gone home to central Africa, as was Abdelmajid to Morocco; Benjamin and Tia knew a few covens and individuals on the continent too, although they were in more regular contact with the Middle East. Kachiri and Senna (who had not been able to convince their erstwhile

sister to leave with them, and had eventually decided to join the Golden Coven rather than be permanently parted from her), plus Nahuel and Huilen, could cover South America. And so on. We had access to representatives of most regions.

But many vampires lived isolated lives and didn't welcome contact with others, and it wasn't that hard for one willing to accept an undesirable territory to go for centuries without meeting anyone. Nearest neighbors might be unaware of their existence. They would be harder to find. And every week that went by without their being reached and converted or contained meant human deaths. My mother appeared to view her having delayed as long as she had to be a considerable tragedy, but said that there was an unacceptable disadvantage to making decrees before the ability to enforce them caught up.

Nathan was key to her strategy for handling the matter, although she still grudgingly accepted that it could take years or decades before everyone knew about the Golden Coven the way everyone had known about the Volturi. Nathan, in his capacity as the Imperial Minister of Temporal Affairs, or Addy with his power, could coordinate with Razi or Alice - our two ways to figure out what was going on far away. He did so by suggesting the correct moments to look in on a list of locations. (Nathan's power only told him when it was best for *him* to do various things, but saying "now" to an ally to get an outcome he wanted counted as him doing something, so indirectly, he could combine his witchcraft with others.) They were thereby working, bit by bit, through areas of the world that weren't claimed by known vampires who'd hear the news through the grapevine.

Razi and Alice could then both double as messengers, and there was a written summary of the new order hanging on the wall of the throne room that Alice had, so far, shown to four people. Razi had visited only two (one of whom had attempted to kill him, to his amusement). He was going slower than Alice since his mechanism of sharing involved actually having conversations and took longer, but my mother planned to get pamphlets printed up for him to distribute so as to speed up the process. Once those were handy, Alice would switch over to a pure surveillance role to make sure that the new rules were being *followed*.

Alice was the first to admit that she certainly could not keep a constant watch on everybody. However, she could check the few thousand eyes' colors that would need monitoring each once a week (contact lenses were easy enough for vampire-quality vision to notice, and a week wasn't enough time for animal blood to completely cover up a tasty transgression) and then anyone who was misbehaving could receive more personal attention. (Sukutai, the camouflage witch, was the only person who would be able to thwart the eye check, since her color adjustments were much more unobtrusive than contacts when she wanted them to be. But she'd seemed sincere about being willing to go along with the new government when inspected, or she wouldn't have been released in the first place.)

This personal attention would mostly come in the form of Razi, again, who was muttering to himself about how much work he was getting. He could deliver warnings without fearing retribution, and he was also willing to be the executioner when called for (by incorrigible offenders, or anyone who was caught in the very middle of something untoward). Intermediate cases - where someone had just slipped up or broken some more minor rule - were to be punished by assorted sentences of hiding. Pera was grudgingly

willing to temporarily loan a little finger or a toe to Addy, when called for, so that Addy could teleport with Razi's power, hide the offender with Pera's, and then teleport home again (either via Razi coming to pick her up, or via a similar loan from him).

My mother was somewhat concerned that Addy, equipped with pieces of Razi and Pera both, would be able to run rampant should she so choose without my dad being in range to detect the intention, but it was ultimately concluded that the team of Alice, Pera, and Razi would be able to take her down within a few tries if that occurred. Addy didn't seem offended by the suspicion.

Addy couldn't hide witches, so Pera herself would need to travel on the occasions that transgressors were gifted. But the general population of vampires included comparatively few witches and the Volturi had snapped up most of the more powerful, so this wasn't expected to be a frequent occurrence. Alice would spend a little time hiding every week, too, from which vantage point she'd be able to check on the "prisoners" and make sure they weren't causing what trouble they could. Misbehaving significantly, or after a warning, from the hiding place was going to have to carry a death penalty. Everything else one could do to prevent a vampire from misbehavior took too many personnel-hours (especially since my mom wanted Alec working in PRPR, anesthetizing turning vampires) or was also torture. Keeping vampires in bits, while theoretically feasible, had been shown to be impractical over the course of recent events.

What seemed to make my mom even more uncomfortable than the prospect of the rampant use of the death penalty was the fact that she couldn't see a way around punishing mates together. She could leave the innocent mate of an offending vampire alive, but that wasn't particularly *merciful*, and was not likely to encourage the living partner to remain innocent, either. I was pretty sure she was thinking in particular of Irina and Laurent.

"We can take it case by case, on whether they live when their mates are put to death," she said slowly when she'd gotten to this point in her consideration. "I was able to function, and didn't, on reflection, want to die when I thought Edward was gone. I *might* not be unique. But by and large, if one person is hidden, their mate will have to be hidden, and if one person is executed, their mate will have to die too." She sighed. "With any luck it'll encourage more consistent compliance with the law."

My guard changed, and another day came to an end.

"Is she up yet?" was the first thing I heard when I woke the morning of July 20.

"Who, me?" I asked, over Calvin's "I don't think so."

"Oh, I guess she is," said Marilyn. "Morning, Elspeth."

I peered out of my room to see who wanted to know whether I was up. Standing with my night guards was Cody, shifting anxiously from foot to foot. "Hi," he said awkwardly.

"Hi, Cody," I said. "What's up? Besides me?"

"That woman," he said, "up in the compound. I heard her family, um, donated her to science and she's going to be another reincarnated person." I knew what he was going to ask a split second before he asked it: "My *parents*."

I bit my lip and looked down. "It's not up to me."

"You can do it," he said. "If it can be done you can do it. And *you* won't get in trouble. *You* can get away with anything. And if you do it they won't punish *her* -"

"I'll *ask*," I said.

"What if she says *no*?" he demanded. "What if she wants someone who's been dead for a thousand years instead, who nobody misses -"

"What if she wants to dye the patient's hair blonde and bring back Irina, who has three sisters and two brothers and a new brother-in-law she never got the chance to meet?" I asked.

"Irina tried to get all the wolves killed!"

"Because some of them killed her mate - she can *barely* be held responsible for -"

"They killed him because he was hunting people! Even though he'd fallen in with a vegetarian coven and had every chance to stop - and - and Irina was too old anyway and her mate isn't backed up! My parents are perfect for -"

"I don't even - wait, why can you ask this? Didn't Chelsea get you?" I exclaimed, bewildered.

"I don't think she was very *thorough*," Cody said miserably. "Probably because I came of my own free will, before you guys were captured in New York. She let my brother and sister miss *me*. I don't think she did anything about the Blacks missing their mom, since the Volturi didn't kill her, she died when they were kids. And I... was willing to overlook the fact that *my* parents, they did kill. Self-defense and all. Leah and Seth aren't going to ask you this. Chelsea did snip that from them. But *I* want my mom and dad back, and there's a lady in there who could look just enough like her with a false nose and and a haircut and contact lenses, and just barely more than one month of her vampire memories inside your head. And you could get one of the men to look like my dad, too, so they could be together..."

"I'll ask," I repeated quietly. "But there's only one woman victim left alive besides Didyme, so if there's *any* other female vampire we... we need more... then she will say no, and I don't think we'd want to bring back your dad without your mom."

"Right," murmured Cody. "Right."

"Do you want to come with me when I ask her?" I inquired gently.

Cody shook his head, his ponytailed hair dancing behind him. "No. Thank you," he added sheepishly. "Um, I'm sorry I yelled."

"Me too." I sighed. "Um, there's no point to asking *right* now, since we don't know if any of the three men who don't have coherent people in them already are going to be "donated", and won't until the brothers' family gets back to us or the other fellow's relatives come in this afternoon."

"That's fine," he said, subdued.

"Are you looking forward to going to La Push?" I asked.

"I guess," he said. "I kind of want to meet your grandfather. He was friends with my dad."

"I kind of want to meet my grandfather too," I admitted. "And my grandmother. I guess I'll see them soon."

"Couple of days," agreed Cody softly.

"Do you want to get breakfast?" I asked.

"Sure."

I ate with Cody (and Calvin and Marilyn), and my conspecific did make jokes, but with a fraction of his usual cheer. He didn't seem too comfortable around me, but I wasn't sure if it was because of the recent shouting, or because since the last time we'd talked I'd been made a princess, or what. After we finished eating, I waited in the suite for Jake to wake up, underwent a change of guard, and led Jake and Danielle up to the compound to talk to my mom.

She was hammering out rules for how to regulate vampires turning others to make sure it was all consensual, and facing some argument from traditionalists in her employ who thought there was no reason to outlaw kidnapping and forcibly turning a human as long as that human was one's *mate*. "Mates are different!" protested Benjamin as I walked in, holding his Tia tightly by the waist. "Tia would be long dead by now if I hadn't turned her, and then I'd be no use to anyone, and then where would you and your plans for eleven massive capital buildings be?"

"Set back by about a week and a half?" my mother suggested sarcastically, pointing at Addy, where she was assisting Nathan, Razi, and Pera in their ongoing inventory of isolated vampires. "Tia," she said, turning to the midnight-haired woman at the elemental's side, "if Benjamin had tried it, do you think you might have *agreed* to go with him?"

Tia gazed up at her mate, thoughtful. "Perhaps," she murmured. "It's hard to be certain, when I love him so now."

Benjamin pressed a kiss to Tia's forehead. "Bel- Your Majesty, be reasonable," he said. "You have my support in every other measure you've concocted, but forcing innocent people to endure the loss of their mates - to *old age*! - more than cancels out the fact that you've

gotten rid of Jane in terms of ruthlessness... And I'm not even speaking out of self-interest. This is all the more ludicrous because the turned mate is virtually guaranteed to consent in retrospect!"

"If someone is disturbed by the possibility of mating to someone who doesn't want to turn into a vampire, they could simply avoid meeting humans who don't want to turn into vampires," my mother suggested. "That should be easier now that no one is supposed to be eating humans, and so it should be quite simple for concerned parties to avoid them altogether except for the ones who make it through the screening process and *wish* to turn."

"How are you going to punish people who do it?" I asked, recalling the discussion of how mates could only be punished together.

"Ideally," my mother said, "we would catch the perpetrator while the victim was still in the middle of turning, and hide the perp, leaving the victim free. I think the evidence we have available suggests that the victim won't mate to their creator until and unless they *see* them, which hiding prevents. That way the victim wouldn't be punished, and the hidden mate would, quite tidily. If," she sighed, "we *don't* catch them in time, then there's no clever trick up my sleeve, I fear." I looked at her sleeves. She was dressing very casually for an empress, in solid-colored cotton and denim, and only her usual jewelry. "So the sentence will have to be good and *long* to serve as a deterrent, and it will be very important that no one knows when in the week his or her eye-check falls, so they can't guarantee that they'll get around surveillance."

Emmett was hanging around in the throne room, apparently just watching the proceedings from what had been Aro's chair with Rosalie perched on his lap. "Big Sister is watching," he joked, throwing Alice a look.

"I get your reasoning, Bella," said Rosalie, a tightness in her tone, "but what about cases like mine and Emmett's? It was an emergency; he was dying, barely conscious. I couldn't very well have begged his permission."

"You'd have gotten it, lovely," Emmett said, nuzzling her golden hair. She smiled, but went on looking at my mom expectantly.

"In that case," said my mom, speaking slowly, "...if I allow the mate to be turned, then vampires with recalcitrant human mates have incentives to harm them."

"Who would do such a thing?" asked Benjamin.

My mother raised an eyebrow. "If Tia were mortal, and wanted nothing to do with you, and you *could not convince her* no matter how hard you tried that she should become a vampire... and there were this one loophole in the law, such that you could either let her die slowly of humanity, or *almost* die of some careful injuries and then be turned to love you forever, forgive everything you'd done...?"

Benjamin shuddered and turned his face into Tia's hair. "I'm not saying it would be common," my mother said gravely, "but I don't want to create the incentive. It may be possible to make exceptions if we can verify on the spot that the vampire had nothing to do

with the injuries, but as a general policy, no. Emergencies can't be a free ticket to non-consensual turning. I'm sorry, Rosalie," she said, looking up at her sister. "...For what it's worth, in your case, Edward would have been able to confirm that Emmett was all for the notion of being with you forever."

Rosalie nodded solemnly. There was no further protest from Benjamin.

In the lull, I delivered Cody's request.

Resurrector

My mother couldn't give a verdict on Harry and Sue Clearwater's resurrection immediately. "We don't know what the families of the three men are going to do," she said gently, as though it were me she was threatening to disappoint and not Cody. "I'm not *sure* whether resurrecting Sue without Harry would be a terribly cruel thing to do or not, given that she'd show up in a human body without a mate bond like Didyme, but it's not an experiment I'm prepared to authorize," she continued. "However, if - *if* - one of the men is available, I don't have my heart set on any other females who meet the criteria the way Sue does..." Addy raised her hand, rather than interrupting, and my mother glanced in her direction. "Addy?" she inquired.

"May I suggest," said Addy, "that you wait on deciding what to do with donated bodies until Didyme is turned and you learn whether or not she's going to... regain... her witchcraft?"

My mother was silent for a moment, and then asked quietly, "Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Well, Aro wasn't in the habit of letting powerful witches who crossed his path die..." said Addy languidly, "but..."

"Aro himself," my dad muttered, his face close to my mom's ear. "Didyme and Aro both gained powers only after they turned. If she has the same one after she's had her eggs out and changed again, then her brother..." I hadn't been aware that Didyme was having eggs extracted. I supposed Marcus wouldn't like her to take the risk of bearing a half-vampire herself and wanted her turned as soon as possible anyway. They might or might not want children, and could use the extra time to decide.

"We just went to a great deal of trouble to *kill* Aro," my mother pointed out testily.

"To kill Aro at age twenty-three centuries and change," Addy corrected. "If he can be brought back, he can only be brought back at age human-years-plus-one-point-four-seconds, because that's the amount of time he had alive before he first touched someone and got a dose of life history, putting way too much in his head to stay put in a human."

"Still too dangerous," my father murmured. My mother was quiet, waiting for Addy to complete her argument.

"Siobhan said that vampire personalities are fixed..." I recalled. "He wouldn't remember everything else, at least not until he touched someone who'd been blasted, but he'd still be the same person."

"Of course," said Addy, shrugging with an innocent smile. "So you *would* be bringing back a sociopath with an annoying propensity for calling people by endearments, because that is Aro's personality. But Elspeth, Edward, *look* at his early development. You know it as well as I do."

I looked.

Caius had turned Aro, while Athenodora looked on, on what amounted to a whim. They were looking for witches, and, having found no human ones, had taken to turning people nearly at random to see if they developed powers. Some they'd been disappointed by and sent to live on their own, some they'd been disappointed by and killed. They'd found Marcus first and "kept" him when he turned up talented, and then Aro.

Aro as a human, in the misty memories he'd retained from his own perspective and the sharply recorded ones of his covenmates' observations, had been acquisitive and sociopathic and self-interested and had used his uncommon (if nonmagical) insight about people to become too familiar with them and manipulate them as called for.

He had not been particularly interested in politics.

He'd adopted Caius's project of taking over the world for himself, pursuing it with a certain singlemindedness that, in conjunction with the nature of his power, had ultimately led to his taking the central role in the coven. Caius hadn't intended to create his own leader, but didn't have Aro's drive, and let it happen over the first half-century of Aro's vampire life without much fuss.

One point four seconds after he'd turned, before he'd first grabbed and eaten the humans that Caius and Athenodora and Marcus had left for him, Aro had not been unusually inclined to take over the world.

My father was whispering a breakdown of this information into my mother's ear. She was frowning. "Be all that as it may," she said when he'd finished, "I can't think of any clever way to ensure that he never touches someone who was in the blast and catches up, as it were. Especially you, Addy."

"It was just a thought," said Addy, and she turned around, poked Razi in the shoulder, and waited for Nathan to send her on her next errand abroad. Nathan pointed her to a set of coordinates somewhere in the Philippines and she was off.

My mother leaned to the left, crooked her wrist around my neck, and drew me in close. "When I'm not shielding you, can you remember anything Aro read from Allirea?" she asked in an undertone.

I blinked. "No, I never think to, even when it would be relevant. Um, where is she, anyway? Wasn't she guarding you?"

"She agreed to stick around long enough that you could tell everyone honestly that there was an inexplicable reason no one ought to attack me, and now she's visiting her family. She'll join up with us in a couple of weeks. In your opinion," she said, "if you blasted Allirea, and then Aro read her *while she was faded* before reading anyone else in his reincarnation, how would that affect his ability to remember the other contents of the read?"

I blinked rapidly, thinking. "He automatically filtered out redundancies, so he wouldn't copy those same things again if he touched someone else who had them. And if he got them

from Allirea, then he might ignore them the way he'd ignore her own memories no matter where they came from. But Allirea unfades sometimes - like, I'm sure she's not *just* lurking about her kids' houses and watching them, right? She'd unfade to say hi. I often don't think about her even when she's unfaded when she's not around because I don't usually have a reason to. But for a reincarnated Aro, to suddenly be able to access all of those memories would be noticeable, I think." Standing a ways back, Jake and Iris were looking politely confused about what I was talking about.

"Occasionally, she does, yes," my mother acknowledged. "And short of me accompanying her to shield her relatives every time she wants to visit them, there's no obvious way around that." She pulled her lower lip between her teeth, thoughtful. "I may think of something else before we need to make a decision. I'm not sold on the idea to the point where if we wind up with only one male patient to spare I'd refuse to bring back the Clearwaters, at any rate. Especially since we'd be so likely to have to kill Aro *again* even if everything worked as well as could possibly be hoped. And that would not be the happiest ending I could think of to the story of the blast victims."

"So if one of the guys' families says we can reincarnate someone with their relative, I can try to bring back Cody's parents?" I asked.

My mother thought, still worrying her lip between her teeth, and then nodded once.

On impulse, I spun towards her and gave her a hug.

I wouldn't have noticed the hesitation if I hadn't thought to look for it, but after a stunned pause, her arms closed around me and she squeezed me back. It didn't occur to me to be uneasy about it until we'd been standing like that for more than a couple of seconds, at which point I decided that being uneasy about it would be silly.

"Elspeth," she said suddenly, sounding enthralled, like she'd just opened her eyes to see some stunning scenery. "Say something."

"...Something?" I said.

"State something," she revised, a touch of strain in her voice for some reason.

"I will be six in October," I tried, not sure what she was getting at.

She hugged me tighter. "I did it," she murmured in my ear.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I let you in."

"Through your shield?" I asked, and she released me from the hug to put her hands on my shoulders, look me in the eye, and nod. She was grinning.

"Just for a couple of seconds," she said, "and now I've lost it - it takes concentration, even more than shielding another person, but I did it..." She let me go, and leaned back to

tuck her head under my father's chin. She scrunched her eyes shut in focus, obviously clenching her teeth, and after a moment, my father's face lit up in indescribable wonder. Almost too fast for me to follow, he seized her, dipped her low to the floor, and gave her a kiss that prompted some very discomfiting memories to stir up in my head. I looked at the ceiling, until my mother breathlessly laughed, "I can't concentrate enough to relax the shield if you're going to do that, Edward..."

"I *love* you," he enthused, purring at her, and she straightened up and entwined her fingers behind his neck, replying in kind.

"Addy is going to go out of her mind when she finds out," I predicted.

"Addy," my mom said smugly, "is going to have to work very, very hard to make me trust her enough that it becomes even *theoretically possible* for me to let her through my inner shield to have that oh-so-disturbing "taste" she wants."

I laughed, and my mom pulled me in for another hug and my dad's arm went around my shoulders too, and for a few moments I was purely content.

Benito's six-year-old son was surprisingly easy to explain things to. He came in with his grandfather (Benito's dad) and aunt (Benito's sister). Benito's ex-wife was remarried to a fellow from France and had not brought her child with her when she moved abroad.

The little boy's name was Nino, and he overwhelmed his shocked grandpa and skeptical aunt with unreasonable enthusiasm about vampires and werewolves and the fact that I was "a real live *magical princess* for *real*". He didn't seem to understand that his father had been supplanted. I told him, but the concept was over his head and my power didn't fill the gap. Instead, Nino seemed to react to John like he was an act his father was putting on, who used a translator out of a desire to stay in character. Nino cheerfully demanded stories about John's "adventures" from "forever ago" when he was a vampire.

John was not immune to the charms of small children, or he wouldn't have kept a close enough eye on his daughter Anne to know that she was sick, let alone turned her. He related moderately-fictionalized versions of his life a millenium previous, which wound up taking up most of the meeting with the family.

Addy discreetly extracted practical information from the relatives. The grandfather was retired, but able enough for sixty-seven, and could look after Nino indefinitely given financial support. (If Nino's mother didn't take the opportunity to change her mind about wanting to bring the child to France, which possibility the sister openly derided as less likely than the existence of vampires.) John himself was still inclined to be turned into a vampire "again", in spite of the new laws surrounding the consumption of humans as food products. Even if he adjusted immediately to the challenge of being around human-type people he wasn't allowed to eat, he didn't yet have the comprehension of the modern world to get along with and attempt to bring up "his" son in it.

"But you can still write me," Nino said when it was explained that John was probably going to travel the world with the "magical princess" and my "friends" in order to "learn to be a vampire again".

"Yes, I can do that," John said. "In Italian, even, once I'm turned and can easily learn the language, er, again."

"Yes," said Nino with a conspiratorial wink, "you have to learn it again so the magic princess can do magic princess stuff instead of saying what you say!"

I wondered how old Nino would be before it hit him that this wasn't a grand game his dad was playing, but for the time being I was just grateful that he wasn't devastated. The grandfather had been looking after Nino while his father was in the hospital anyway. It would require a little legal maneuvering that we could delegate to Santiago for Benito's disappearance to be officially explained and custody officially transferred, was all.

The subsequent day, the family of the brothers called in with their decision. The married brother's wife remained adamant that she wanted him turned into somebody, and wanted her pick of somebodies - somehow I didn't think Harry Clearwater would suit her, let alone Aro - and the other brother was up to us, as he couldn't be restored in his original form. *He* might be the new Harry. Addy made an appointment for the wife to come in before the last family's appointment to pick her somebody off the limited menu.

She wound up deciding, on Addy's advice, to help herself to a Sicilian vampire who'd been executed in 1986 as part of a newborn army (built foolishly close to Volterra, although there was no *good* place to hide such a project) that the Volturi had put down. Aro had checked everyone there for interesting witchcraft as a matter of routine, using his own power for the process since having been deprived of Eleazar but before the acquisition of Addy. The Sicilian in question had never been enthusiastic about being a vampire, never had a mate, was not a witch, and was innocuous enough of disposition that Addy suspected he'd suit his new vessel's wife adequately. He spoke Italian natively and would only be arriving twenty-five years out of his time, a far easier jump than John's or Didyme's.

Santiago had gone into town previously to stock up on various forms of makeup, on the contingency that we'd need it for exactly this purpose. It took a lot of the stuff, caked on in thick layers, to make the woman's husband resemble his intended self, but eventually we managed a passable job (allowing for the changes that turning had wrought) and fetched a mirror. Addy and I blasted him with a second dose of the Sicilian fellow together, each at touch range in case that did anything to juice up the magic, and she held the reflective surface in front of his face.

"AAAAAAAH!" was his first reaction. This was reasonable enough, since the last thing he remembered was Aro laying his hand across his forehead and then clucking to himself and saying "no", by which he'd meant "kill him". But as we pulled our hands away from his face, he blinked, sat up dizzily, and looked around. He felt at his throat, ran his tongue over his teeth, looked at his arm. "I'm... what..." He stared at Addy, then at me, then at the woman who was, legally, his wife.

He answered to his name, took some calming down from what he recalled as a near-death experience, was rather thrown by but pleased with his change of species, and was bemusedly accepting of the fact that he was now invited to live the life of the human he inhabited. We gave the couple the necessary contact information to get in touch with the Golden Coven if that were necessary, summarized the relevant rules about discretion, and sent them home. As they walked out via the office building, I heard the wife chattering about the pros and cons of the man going by the human's original name or the Sicilian vampire's.

The last family consisted entirely of one grown son, who listened gravely to my explanation of what had happened to his father, and told me politely but firmly that he didn't think any further magical fooling around was likely to be helpful and he'd prefer to just take his father home and take care of him there. He seemed to be operating under the theory that the condition might lift on its own at least to the extent that his father would be able to walk around and do simple tasks, which I thought was unlikely, but couldn't definitively rule out. Addy wrote him a large check out of the Empire checkbook (connected to the old Volturi accounts, appropriated in the coup) as reparations and to help cover the cost of looking after the man, gave him our contact info in case he changed his mind, and sent him on his way. The patient could technically walk, but it wasn't wise to oblige him to do so for long distances, so Addy took the wheelchair that one of Heidi's parcels had left in her handicapped-accessible bus and donated it to the cause.

"That's that, then," she said, after we'd seen them off.

"Except for Harry and Sue," I said, not sure whether I was referring to the stored memories or the bodies that we'd try to fill with them.

"Right," agreed Addy. "Do their kids want to be there or should we just do it now?"

"I should ask," I said.

"All right, you can find me up in the throne room between various instances of teleporting all over creation if you need me again," she said, smiling, and she left.

I went with Jake and Beatrice to the village, and found Leah, Seth, and Cody all together - packing. We were scheduled to head for Washington the next morning, early, so I decided I'd need to pack too after finishing work for the day. "There's one man and the one woman free," I said. "And the resurrection worked on another guy."

"And...?" said Cody and Seth, simultaneously, but Cody was hopeful and Seth didn't follow the significance of what I was saying.

"And my mom said that yes, we could bring back your parents."

Cody beamed and hugged me, but Leah and Seth didn't look thrilled. "Awkward," said Leah after a silence.

"Chelsea's hands are still alive enough that Addy can copy the power, if you want that... fixed," I said.

Leah looked like she was considering it, but Seth shook his head and she imitated him after a pause. "It'd still be awkward," she said. "They've been dead for nearly six years by this point. There is no non-awkward way to handle the situation."

"Do you want to be there when I...?" I made a vague gesture, addressing the question to all three Clearwaters.

"I do," said Cody. "...They won't recognize me, will they?"

"Not right away," I said. "I mean, I'm sure they'll see the resemblance when you tell them who they are."

"Will there be anything to *see*?" asked Seth curiously.

"Me putting enough makeup on them that they look adequately like your parents," I said, "and holding up a mirror with one hand and sending with the other. I might or might not need Addy to send with me. We did it together with the other guy."

"That sounds so unceremonious," observed Seth. "I was thinking, candles everywhere, choosing a date for the ritual based on the moon or something, ominous Latin chanting..."

"I can chant in Latin while I put the makeup on, if you want," I said, feeling that it would probably be a good idea to have all three Clearwater offspring in the room. Seth and Leah looked the same as they had when their parents died, and *would* be recognized immediately; it seemed likely to comfort Harry and Sue even in the face of subsequent awkwardness.

"Can you?" asked Seth interestedly. I nodded, and he shrugged. "Okay, I'll be there."

"Leah?" I asked.

"Sure, why not, I guess if I don't come along they'll wake up and figure I must be dead," she said, shrugging, "and then of course shout at me for making them worry."

"I'm pretty sure we're old enough that we don't need to stay put for parental shouting anymore," Seth remarked as I led four wolves and a half-vampire up to the compound.

"Yeah, I guess," said Leah. "I hope they move around with the Golden Coven instead of settling in La Push with us, La Push is supposed to be wolves and humans, it was *always* supposed to be wolves and humans, the wolves are for the express purpose of keeping vampires away..."

"They might not even want to be vampires again," Seth pointed out. "That was only to save both their lives, first time around."

I took up the makeup kit, complete with bits of putty to smooth and sculpt over their faces, and began work on she-who-would-be-Sue first. I muttered in Latin, attempting to keep a chantlike rhythm, even though I was only talking about the process as I inexpertly added to and painted the face. I had memories from people who'd done various forms of art and makeup, but it didn't translate automatically to body memory or procedural expertise, just vague competence. Seth observed that I didn't sound very ominous, so I deepened my voice as far as it would go, which wasn't far; this caused all three of them to crack up, although Cody laughed distractedly.

I finished a passable Sue face, slowed down by the patient's insistence on delirious murmuring, and decided to make up Harry before resurrecting either so I could do the pair of them in rapid sequence. (I'd have tried simultaneity, but I wasn't sure if I could do even one resurrection completely alone.) He was faster - there was more resemblance to start with - and eventually they both looked like they might be able to see their intended selves in the mirror.

"What do you think?" I asked the assembled children.

"I think it should be close enough," said Cody, twisting his hands together. The wolves offered no opinions. I wondered if Seth and Leah could even remember their parents' faces, with flawed recall and no reason to cling tightly to the images.

"Do you care who I wake first?" I asked.

Cody frowned in thought, looking between them. "Start with Dad?" he said uncertainly.

I nodded and laid my hand against "Harry's" heavily decorated face. "He might scream at first," I warned. "The other guy did."

Cody dipped his head in acknowledgement, his eyes fixed on the man I was about to turn into his father. There were three months and change of vampire memories and the usual fragments of human residue to send, and at the moment when the transfer was finished, I held the mirror in place.

Harry sat bolt upright, and would have smashed his face into the mirror if I hadn't pulled it out of the way. "*Sue*," he gasped, and then he looked at Seth and Leah, boggled at them, failed to choke their names out, and then flopped back onto the bed. "Oh, god. Are you dead? Am I dead? I'm dead," he mumbled. He turned his head to look at his children, although his eyes passed over Cody with no recognition and he didn't acknowledge my presence, or my guards, or the patient in the other bed, at all. "I tried," he said to Leah and Seth, who looked uncomfortable and didn't respond. "We tried - they were too strong -"

"Dad," choked Cody.

Harry sat up again, slowly, looking at Cody with puzzled scrutiny. "*Cody*?" he breathed.

Cody nodded, evidently unable to speak further.

"I completely lost track of time but - but how - you were a baby -" Harry exclaimed. Harry and Sue had both been read after they'd been disassembled, which did have an extremely disorienting effect, although not so bad that Harry could have failed to notice a whole year passing, let alone five and a half.

"You *were* dead," I said in a low voice.

Harry's head swiveled around to point in my direction. "Who are *you* - Jake, is that you? ...and Bea? Bea Hobson?" he said, glancing at the wolves standing behind me and using a nickname that Beatrice hadn't gone by since she was sixteen.

"I'm Elspeth Cullen," I said, and the wolves behind me nodded, acknowledging their names.

"What *year* is this?" asked Harry.

"2011," I said.

"You've been brought back from the dead via a memory backup Aro took, in the body of an Italian dude," said Seth helpfully.

"Elspeth's going to bring back Mom too, in an Italian lady," added Leah, pointing.

"An Italian dude," repeated Harry blankly, picking unconsciously at the putty I'd used to create the illusion of a stronger jaw than his host had.

I moved over to where the last blast victim was lying, and quietly repeated the process for Sue, who woke up much less violently. She stared into the mirror, frowned, looked at me, and said, "Where am I?"

"Volterra, Italy," I replied.

She processed this information, then shot her hand forward and attempted to sock me in the face; Jake intervened and caught her wrist, protecting her hand more than my nose. "What is wrong with you?" he snapped at her.

"Jacob?" she said, puzzled, and tried to pull her hand out of his grip. He let her go, after a moment, and she pushed herself into a sitting position.

"I did just tell her she's in Volterra, and the last thing she remembers is being taken prisoner by the Volturi," I pointed out. "She doesn't know who I am and probably didn't notice right away she's not a vampire any more. If I'd been, say, Noemi, and worked for the bad guys, it would have been reasonable..."

"I'm not a vam- *what*?" Sue said. She looked at her hands and flexed them, then took a deep breath, whether to smell the air or confirm that she really did need air I wasn't sure. "How is this possible?"

"I'm told we're Italian now," said Harry, sounding vaguely manic.

"Italian? Who are *you*?" she asked, frowning at Harry, who had done enough damage to his fictional features to be unrecognizable as Harry Clearwater.

"I'm Harry," he said, looking at a fragment of putty in his palm. "I think. They tell me you're Sue."

"Of course I'm Sue -" She turned her head enough to take in the faces of her three children, on the opposite side of her bed from me and my bodyguards. "Leah? Seth? And..."

"Cody," whispered Cody, his eyes shining with tears that hadn't yet escaped to trail down his face. "I'm Cody, Mom."

Sue stared at him. "Someone had better explain all this to me from the beginning," she said.

I smiled very faintly, and began the story as requested.

Soothsayer

Everyone who needed to fly to Washington (twenty-five wolves in Jake's pack plus a handful of puppies associated with them, thirteen wolves with imprints and puppies in Becky's, and the entire Golden Coven) fit onto the Volturi private airplane we appropriated, but just barely. Most of the puppies sat on laps, and many of the vampires stood in the aisle. We would shed a lot of our passengers in Washington, move on to Québec and drop off more, and then go to Florida with our standard operating crew. "We're going to be doing a lot of traveling for the next few months," my mother told me. "If you don't want to see all the buildings go up, we can drop you off in Québec..."

"No, I'll come along," I said. "It's a historical bunch of days."

I sat between Jake and Ashleigh, my ostensible guards for the day, although Jake had only put the twelve-year-old on duty because he was pretty sure we weren't going to be attacked on an airplane.

I slept on the way, and when I woke up, we had nearly landed.

It was rainy at the tiny Forks airport where we landed, so the vampires didn't need extra daywalking clothes. After we'd all disembarked, Pera hid everyone (including, grudgingly, my mom) so we could travel quickly. We went first to the Cullen family house, but then our primary construction workers (Benjamin, Emel, and Addy) took off with Becky's pack to get started on rebuilding La Push. Later they'd double back and scout out the intended capital site on the plot the Cullen family owned in town. (A lot of it was planned to go underground, so the original house would stay intact, but there was also enough acreage around the house that there could be outbuildings and the like.)

Since the capital wasn't going to unfold before our eyes immediately, a smaller group, consisting of me, my parents, Renata, and Jake split off. A second wolf guard was deemed unnecessary for the day as long as I stayed within range of Renata. The five of us unhid to drive into town in one of my dad's cars from the family garage.

My grandfather had no idea we were coming.

"Do you worry we're going to give him a heart attack?" Jake asked, as we turned onto the street; I'd never been to the neighborhood, but remembered it through my dad's memories among others. I fidgeted as we went up the street.

"Among other concerns," my mother murmured. "I don't think calling ahead would be much of an improvement in that department, though. This way we have a doctor on hand if he does come down with some sudden surprise-related malady." She gestured with her head at my father, in the passenger seat.

"You suppose he'll be home?" I asked. "He probably hasn't retired yet. He's only forty-eight." After a pause, it occurred to me, "Hey, you made your parents grandparents before *they* were forty-five. And you didn't even grow up as fast as me."

"I rule the world and I am allowed to be slightly hypocritical," said my mom loftily, although there was a hint of laughter in her voice. "Anyway, you're familiar with why you were born when you were instead of later, Elspeth. Are you in a *hurry* to have kids?"

"No," I said. "I'm not even sure who I'd have them with." Jake was the obvious candidate, but it wasn't like that with us and I hadn't been brought up in the environment Quil's imprint Claire had, to consider it automatic. I supposed there was plenty of time to figure things out later if and when the type of his affection changed, or mine did.

"Then there's no cause to complain, is there? Anyway, I think he'll be home at this hour, unless he's taken to working much later than he ever used to." She made a thoughtful clicking noise with her tongue. "Which is *possible*, depending on how he coped with, um, my death, and Billy's and Harry's... I wonder if we should have brought Harry along."

"I think he should be a separate surprise after Grandpa Charlie has gotten through the first one without dying of a heart attack," I opined.

"You're probably right." We pulled onto his street.

His police cruiser was in the driveway.

My mom cut speed and crawled up to the house, then finally shut the car off at the curb. "Now the question is who to put front and center when we knock on the door," she said.

"I'll go, if you want," I said. "It's sort of my job."

"Charlie's not exactly a member of the Public with whom we are Relating in a conventional matter," she said. "But sure. You can ring the bell." She opened her door and stepped out; everyone else followed suit. "He doesn't think you're necessarily dead, anyway; Carlisle told him you went missing, back when I found you in 2006, but Charlie hasn't gotten any followup information since."

"He might not recognize me," I said.

"I think he probably will," my mother said.

"For one thing, he knows what year it is," murmured Jake.

We reached the front step, and everyone else clustered behind me as I raised my hand and pushed the doorbell button.

"Just a minute!" called Charlie's voice from inside. He sounded tired. After a short wait, the door swung open.

"Hi," I said, trying to look friendly instead of apprehensive. Charlie appeared to have aged more than five years in five years, but other than gray peppering his temples and worry lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes, he looked like I remembered him through others' eyes. "Can I help y-"

He saw my parents, standing behind me and Jake.

He scrubbed at his eyes with his knuckles, and looked again, and I said, "I'm your granddaughter, Elspeth. Everything is a lot better than you thought it was. Can we come in?"

Charlie blinked at me, and looked at my mom and my dad, and did a double take at Jake. He spluttered something, then backed out of the way to let us by.

We all filed in and sat ourselves around the living room, except for Renata, who stood behind the sofa that held my parents and looked intently at the wallpaper. "Hi, Dad," my mom said softly after an awkward silence.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"All over the place," she said. "I *was* at La Push when it burned. They did *try* to kill me. But it turns out I'm more immortal than I thought."

"Then why...?" Charlie asked, but he couldn't complete the question, and just stared helplessly.

"If you'll let me," I murmured, and I started to tell the whole story, beginning with how my mom had survived and going on with where my dad was during this time, explaining how she found me and why she didn't contact anyone to let them know she was alive, what Jake and his fellow massacre escapees had done, and finally the series of thrillingly earthshaking events beginning the previous May. I mostly used words, but I did tentatively push across summaries of a few complicated background concepts, like mental footnotes, and I showed him images of some relevant faces.

Charlie listened with grave, rapt attention, although he did shoot an annoyed look at my mom when I related that he'd been kept in the dark for his own safety. She muttered, "It worked, didn't it?" under her breath, but I was pretty sure her dad didn't hear.

"So," said Charlie, when I'd gotten to the part that explained why we were in Forks, "to summarize all the things I've been misled about. My best friends' tribe wasn't wiped out, just *mostly* wiped out, with the survivors working for the enemy or going on a secret camping trip across the country with some girls they kidnapped -"

"I don't think the girls would agree with you," protested Jake.

"Claire Casey's a child, it doesn't matter if she *thinks* she was kidnapped," said Charlie, "that's not the law. Thea Singer -"

"Thea Parker," I said. "She married Darren. They have a son."

"Thea," said Charlie, "was also a minor at the time. Do you have any idea how long her parents forced her case to stay open after she disappeared? Refused to believe that she'd been on the rez, had all manner of unkind things to say about young Mr. Parker, thought something else had happened to her, and I guess they were right, weren't they? Emily Young

was an adult, Kim Connweller and Maureen Keller had both squeaked over their sixteenth birthdays when they vanished, but legally speaking -"

"Legally speaking," my mother began, but Charlie cut her off with a sharp one-handed gesture.

"I did hear the part where you declared yourself queen of the world, Bells," he said, "and I suppose I can't stop you doing whatever you like, protecting whoever you want from legal consequences because there's some magic explanation, but I'm saying the Singers and the Caseys and the Youngs and the Kellers - no Connwellers left to complain, now - aren't likely to welcome your lot as heroes."

"Those girls would have died, or been taken to Volterra, if their wolves hadn't saved them," my mother said.

"They could've let their families know they were all right. *You* could've let *your* family know you were all right," Charlie said.

"I had no way to know if you were being watched or not," my mom said. "Would you have wanted me to risk alerting the Volturi to my survival so you could know about it? They had Alice, and there was a six-month period before I found Elspeth where I was easily visible to her - if they'd known I was alive they could have had a more thorough strike team on me in hours. Then I *would* be dead. Same with the girls, except the pack *knew* they were being chased and periodically attacked - giving the Volturi more incentive to use their families as bait would not have been helpful to anyone, because the wolves would not have *let* the imprints endanger themselves for their relatives, so the Volturi would have followed through on any relevant threats!"

"I'm sure you've got paragraphs and paragraphs of justifications," said Charlie, holding up a hand in a calming gesture, "and for all I know you're absolutely right and this was the best anybody could do under the circumstances. I'm not saying anybody *should've* contacted anybody else, necessarily. I guess all told I'm not angry about it, for myself. I'm saying you could've, and they could've, and none of you did, and this will annoy some folks."

"Fair enough," my mother sighed.

"Who's that?" Charlie asked, nodding in Renata's direction. Renata was observing the progress of a housefly along the baseboard.

"My bodyguard, Renata," my mom said. "I swiped her from the previous administration. I'm trying to get in the habit of keeping her around whether I think it's necessary or not. I have a different one too, who's on vacation at the moment."

"You do? Who?" I asked.

My mother looked at me, and sighed, and for a flicker of an instant I realized I knew the answer to the question, and then I decided it didn't matter. Charlie looked at us, appeared to conclude that this was some sort of inside joke, and let it lie. "Moving on in my summary to make sure I got it all," he said. "Bells, you weren't dead, you were just set on fire and they

didn't double-check... Edward, you weren't dead, you were just captured and, er, stored, in Volterra... but Bells, you thought he was dead, and, you wandered around until you stumbled across Elspeth in a park in Michigan... you grabbed her without explaining to your in-laws because you didn't want anyone to know you were alive and you wanted your little girl... you ran around more or less at random bringing her up until you ran afoul of the Volturi's wolves in Iowa... Elspeth got picked up by Jake's pack and got imprinted on... Bells, you weren't recognized but got set on fire *again*..." He shuddered. "...and recovered and met up with Elspeth and Jake's pack in New York, but the hiding witch didn't let Elspeth out and wouldn't let you back in after your *incident*..." He went on with a summary in basically this vein, getting the key points right. He seemed vaguely suspicious of Jake, probably regarding the imprint just like my mom had been, but let it be (probably expecting that she'd have checked it out).

"That's about the size of it, yes," my mom said when he got to the part where we were on a tour of the world to build Golden Coven outposts at strategic locations around the globe and were putting one in Forks.

"Have you told Renée?" he asked.

My mom shook her head. "Florida's our stop right after Québec. We'll visit her then. Then Norway, and so on."

"Did it cross your mind to call ahead instead of turning up in Jacksonville to surprise her?" Charlie asked.

"Crossed my mind, yes, seemed clever, no," my mom said. "Especially since Renée knows even less than you did. She'd think it was a prank call, or maybe an escaped mental patient who sincerely believed some very weird things if Elspeth did the talking. Elsie's good at making herself believed, but doesn't outright force it."

Charlie chewed on his lip, considering this. "You're just all going to show up on her doorstep together?"

"If you have a competing idea, I'm willing to listen," my mom said.

"D'you want me to go along?" he offered.

"If you want to join us on our architecturally contributory tour of the Earth, you are more than welcome," my mom said. "I'm not sure if you should come along to visit Renée, though. It's not exactly customary for you to fly down to see her and might not lessen the impact any."

"You're right, it's not." He paused a moment, then said, "Wait, how did you know we weren't getting together regularly to talk about you, or something, in the last five years?"

"I know the password to Renée's e-mail and have been looking at it occasionally," my mom said.

"Oh." He sighed. "I suppose you'll want me to follow you lot around for safety reasons and will badger me about it until I change my mind if I just want to stay here?"

"The offer to turn you is still good," she said tentatively. "Then it would be *reasonably* safe for you to stay put."

"My answer's still no thank you, Bells. Doesn't appeal."

"I've got a witch working for me who can make sure it doesn't hurt..." she said enticingly.

Charlie shook his head. "I'll just join the world tour to forestall the safety objections rather than... fanging up."

"We don't have *fangs*, and even if you want to come with us, planes are a lot more comfortable as a vampire..." she coaxed.

He shook his head again. "No. But stay a while. I've got a daughter to catch up with and a granddaughter to get to know." He looked at me like he didn't know entirely what to make of me. "Your other grandpa never brought you down to visit. Didn't want to be seen in town looking too young. I was going to come up the end of May that year and meet you, but then... you were gone."

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to apologize for that. I'd been all of six months old when my mother had found me, not an instrumental decision-maker even with accelerated maturation. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you too," I said instead of an awkward "sorry".

We hung out at Dad's house for the rest of the day, making less consequential chitchat. I wound up talking about myself a lot, although my mom chipped in with some stories that I'd borne witness to as well. My dad didn't have much to add, as he'd spent most of the intervening years doing nothing but listen in on the hubbub of Volterra's aggregate consciousness. Jake talked a bit about his time with the nomadic pack.

"I'm not sure how you're planning to present the sudden return of inhabitants to La Push," Charlie said while heating up some microwaveable dinners for himself and Jake, frowning at Bella.

"That's largely up to Becky. I'm not taking a direct managerial role with her pack or Rachel's," my mom said. "That said, after we've got all the capitals built, we're going to live in this one first, so anyone who spots a wolf and questions the sighting with enough persistence to find something more incriminating can be directed to our Public Relations office. Québec's site is a bit more remote, less likely to attract notice."

"I was thinking more of the fact that the arson of the place is an unsolved federal case than the fact that most of the people living there will be wolves..."

"It's an unsolved federal case because the Volturi had a sufficient number of feds in their pockets," my mom said. "One apparently does not operate a secret vampire government for

thousands of years without some remarkably extensive political leverage, which I've conveniently inherited if I need it. I delegated that particular mess to Santiago, who was handling it for my predecessors and is in the correct department already."

Charlie blinked. "I... see."

"You'll get used to me ruling the world eventually, Dad," my mom said, patting his arm and winking.

"I'm not so sure," he muttered. "Most little girls who say they want to take over the world don't actually *do* it, you know."

"Anyway," she said. "We have one more surprise that you... I'm going to say 'might'... like."

"Another? Bells, how many shocks am I going to take today?" Charlie said wearily.

"I'm pretty sure that this is the only other major one," she said. "It's about the Clearwaters."

"Go on," said Charlie, when the sentence didn't, by itself, cause his hair to turn white.

"Well... they're alive. Leah and Seth and Cody are all alive in the usual way - the wolves in Volterra, Cody with Jake's pack till recently. Harry and Sue are a more complicated story."

"I'm listening," said Charlie.

I took over. "Harry and Sue stayed behind when the Volturi attacked La Push. Aro, who used to be one of the people ruling the world, could copy a person's entire memory into himself by touching them. He did that to Harry and Sue, and then had them killed. But, by accident, we found out that when I - or Addy who copies powers - send a lot of vampire memories very quickly to a human, they wipe out the human's original memories. That happened to a bunch of people back in Italy, with *all* the memories Addy had at the time, including all the ones Aro had collected last she checked. Two of the humans it happened to saw themselves in the mirror and thought they were vampires who'd been dead a long time. There were four others who hadn't recognized themselves as anyone in particular. We got their families' permission, and I used them to... bring back Harry and Sue."

Charlie blinked at me. "So... Harry and Sue are alive... but in the bodies of some Italian people who were caught in an accident... who Addy basically killed."

"Right, although while Addy doesn't have anything in particular against killing people, she really didn't mean to kill those ones," I said. "You wouldn't recognize Harry and Sue now if you just saw them. I had to put a lot of makeup on them to make them react to the mirror properly and it's all off now."

"Are they going to get turned into vampires, er, again?" Charlie asked.

"They haven't said, one way or the other, which they want," my mom said. "The two people who were resurrected without help both want to turn, and we picked out the other resurrection on behalf of the body's wife whose criteria didn't include that, so he doesn't. The other survivor of the accident is being cared for at home by his son without being turned into anyone else."

The topic drifted away again, and I fell asleep, flopping onto Jake in the process.

When I woke up, I was in a bed that, after a moment, I recognized as being in my mom's old room in Charlie's house. Most of the distinguishing possessions that she hadn't taken to Norway with her were boxed up, but the furniture was where she'd left it. My mom was sitting on the bed, between me and the wall, and my dad was standing on the bed's other side; each had hold of one of my hands, which they released as I sat up. "Morning," I said, noting that Jake was snoozing in my mom's old chair, slumped over the desk, and Renata was counting the threads in the curtains or something. "What'd I miss?"

"More chat," my mom said, "and Dwi let us know that everything Benjamin and Emel are going to do for La Push is done. They've started on the capital."

"I guess there won't be that much to see as they're doing most of it underground," I remarked.

My mom nodded. "And most of the underground is done now. The outbuildings haven't gone up yet, though, so you can watch those."

"Where's Grandpa?" I asked.

"Still asleep. We're going to take him with us when we go look in on the capital after he and Jacob wake up. The official story among humans will be that he's retiring young on some unexpected family money and going on a long trip around the world - which happens to be exactly true."

We waited around, talking about nothing in particular, for the wolf and the human to get up, and then we all piled into Dad's car (I had to sit on Jake to make room) and drove out to the first capital complex of the Golden Empire.

Watching Benjamin and Emel put up the buildings was sort of eerie. Benjamin pulled stones out of the earth and shaped them so they fit perfectly together without any need for mortar. Whatever Emel was doing, I couldn't really see; it mostly took place inside the walls, although I did get to watch her sending the scrap metal she'd been provided in through the holes Benjamin provided, and each dollop of it moved like a flying mercury snake under her command. Addy had Benjamin's power copied, but wasn't working directly with him, instead constructing separate buildings. I explored in the tunnels, but they weren't lit - Emel could do wiring, but not conjure lightbulbs - and my darkvision wasn't good enough to make out much interesting detail. It was mostly a series of oddly angular caves at this early stage anyway, as Esme hadn't gone through with carpet glue and attractive sconces.

When I climbed up the stairs out of what would later be the entrance to the PRPR department, everything was just about done, and Esme was on the phone with a glazier ordering window glass. We left her behind to do her work, and Carlisle to keep her company since his ethical consulting could be done remotely if there were any call from it this early on, and the rest of us returned to the airport to fly to Québec.

In Québec, we again built on land that came with a preexisting Cullen house, although there was more room and so more of it was above the ground, and the house itself wasn't incorporated into the design. We lingered long enough to make sure the wolf village section was livable for the eight wolves and dozen puppies who would move in. (The poor puppies were so jetlagged that they'd probably have slept on the stone floor, but this was widely deemed a poor idea.) The village was big enough to hold Jake's whole pack, but most of them came with us to Florida.

The site that they'd wound up picking in Florida wasn't particularly close to Jacksonville, so we left the builders to their work while we took a trip to Renée's house in a rental car. Charlie didn't come along; it was just my nuclear family plus Jake and Renata again.

I didn't have anyone's memories of the house in Jacksonville. My mother had been there, one time when they weren't home, that was all. My father had seen a couple of photographs of Renée and her second husband, Phil, and my mom had talked about them some, but that was all the knowledge I had of them.

Timing the trip for when Alice said it would be cloudy, my mom drove again - Jake pointed out that it was typical for bodyguards to do the driving, and my mom pointed out that she was the only person who knew how to get there - and pulled in to the house after about an hour and a half on the road. There were two cars in the driveway, so we parked on the street and, once again, I rang the doorbell.

Phil answered, and obviously had no idea who any of us were: he'd met my mother, but only as a human with hair; he'd probably looked at my parents' wedding pictures but had no reason to have studied them enough that he'd recognize my dad; and he had no way to identify me, Renata, or Jake. Phil himself was only thirty-six, a good deal younger than Renée, and looked like the photographs I remembered secondhand: he was in decent shape, as he still played baseball, and looked out on the world from a boyish blue-eyed face. "What can I do for you?" he asked our odd assembly.

"Hi, Phil," my mom spoke up.

"Do I know you?" he asked, looking at her quizzically.

"We need to talk to you and Renée. It's good news," I said. "Is she home? Can we come in?"

"Honey!" Phil yelled up the stairs. "There's two teenage girls, a teenage boy, and a man and a woman here with what they say is good news and no visible scriptures! They know our names! I'm a bit confused!"

"Coming," Renée called down. My mother twisted her hands together with a rocky scraping noise at the sound of her voice.

"We're not missionaries," I assured Phil hurriedly, wishing I'd used some phrasing other than "good news".

"Oh. You're sure? She tends to like missionary visits," he said.

"I'm sure," I said. "Sorry."

"Well, matter of interpretation," chuckled Jake. "Peddling immortality's usually a hallmark..."

My mother burst into helpless laughter at this suggestion and was still grinning when Renée shuffled down the stairs. She looked like a much older version of my mom, except with lighter, curlier, and more existent hair, and hazel eyes rather than the warm brown I'd inherited from my mother's human self. After joining Phil at the door, she looked at us, appeared to find us as a group vaguely familiar but not enough to comment, and said, "So what's the good news, then?"

"Do I look familiar at all?" my mom asked in a whisper.

Renée blinked at her, a confused look descending over her face, before saying only, "Yes..."

"It's me, Mom," my mother said.

"I... I don't understand," Renée murmured.

"She's your daughter Bella," I said.

"Can we come in?" my mom asked.

Renée's lack of independent recognition of any of us meant that she could get the revelations one at a time: that her daughter was alive and a vampire. That her son-in-law was also alive, and also a vampire. That I had been born, and was a half-vampire, which explained why I was not yet six and looked like a youngish seventeen. That Jake was a werewolf, imprinted on me, and the son of Charlie's (really dead) best friend. By the time that had all been revealed, Renée was looking with great trepidation at Renata, like she might be a long-lost ancestor and also a pagan deity there to grant her three wishes. She seemed an odd mix of disappointed and relieved to find that Renata was only another vampire inherited in the capacity of bodyguard from the deposed prior government.

Renée didn't give my mother any grief about leaving her in the dark. She was too ecstatic that we were alive. She took in the information about the new rulership of the vampire world with very childlike enthusiasm, actually clapping her hands when she heard

that the builder witches were, as we spoke, building us our third capital complex an hour and a half away from her home. "Oh, we have to go see it," she said, turning to Phil.

Phil seemed too thrown by the whole "vampires exist" thing (less so by his step-descendants being alive) to say much, but he did nod mutely when his wife said that in his direction.

"Actually," my mom said sheepishly, "I think it would be best if you came with us... more permanently than just a visit to the Florida complex. I'm concerned that someone might target you to get at me. It turns out that, enforcing a no-murder law among vampires? Not a good re-election strategy. Not that I was elected. Benevolent despot here. My point is that I want you both safe, and I don't have a brilliant way to keep you safe here, unless you want to be turned into vampires, which I would be more than happy to arrange but I don't think it would be any more conducive to living your normal lives. Not in sunny Florida."

"Oh, my," Renée said, clasping her hands and frowning thoughtfully. "We can't just go on as we have? Phil works..." I remembered from my mom's description that Renée had been a kindergarten teacher in Phoenix, but - it was unclear whether from lack of trying - had not found a job in Florida. Apparently that hadn't changed.

"I'm past my peak," demurred Phil. "They've already started talking about retiring me. If you want to go, honey..."

The couple continued to lob the question back and forth, engaging with it like it was a choice instead of a necessity along the lines of the Witness Protection Program. My mother sat silently, rather than point out that she couldn't in good conscience *let* them refuse. There would be a chance to say that if they didn't agree on their own.

Phil seemed to consider traveling with the Golden Coven to be a matter of fairness: Renée had given up her daughter living with her so she could travel with Phil, and it had been some time and Phil's career was imminently no longer a obstacle, so it was only appropriate that Renée now get a chance to travel with my mom instead.

Renée didn't seem to want to make a definitive choice either way. She waffled, and finally my mom took one of her noncommittal remarks as a "yes", and cut in with, "I'm so glad to have you with us, Mom. We're probably going to head out tomorrow, and go to the site in Brazil."

"Brazil, oh my," said Renée.

"You won't have time to do much touristy stuff this time around, but we'll stay longer in the future," my mom said. "Would you like some help packing? I can also ask Esme, my mother-in-law, to stop by here and grab anything you don't take now. She's following behind us at a bit of a lag to make additions to the capital complexes."

"I - oh, all right," said Renée, laughing, and we spent the rest of the day prowling the house for various items she wanted and stuffing them into suitcases and laundry baskets and whatnot. My mom made subtle insinuations that being a vampire was really awesome - and she showed off a little in the course of helping her mom and stepfather pack - but kept it to a

light background thread of conversation. Renée seemed intrigued by the idea but frightened by the permanency, and Phil appeared to be a little shell-shocked yet, too much so to have the conversation.

Renée got on the phone and made excuses to various persons and institutions about cancellations for future plans - lunch get-togethers, yoga class, volunteer work, and a lecture she'd intended to attend at the local community college. Phil had less of a social calendar, but did need to make a few calls about work, as it was the middle of baseball season. He seemed kind of annoyed that no one made a fuss about his sudden desire to go to Brazil.

I fell asleep before we started back for the capital site, and when I woke up, my mom was holding me in her arms, just like she had when I was little.

It was near the end of August when we put up our capital in Australia and finally came full-circle back to Washington.

Esme had outdone herself. I had a cute little office all to myself in the PRPR section, which was close to the tunnel leading to La Push. (The part of Jake's pack that stayed with the Golden Coven instead of living in Québec lived there while we were in the area, rather than the Washington capital having its own village attachment.) Alec, Santiago, and Rosalie, the other permanent employees of the department, also had offices, and there were several spare rooms for later expansion and miscellaneous purposes, and one for Alec to oversee suitably-anesthetized turning in. (Addy had pushed for a control group on Caius's hypothesis about the pain of turning causing improved witchcraft. Everyone had ignored her.)

As soon as we were all set to settle down in one place for a while, Didyme, John, Harry, and Sue all wanted to be turned. Sue had declined the opportunity to have eggs harvested - "Three is enough," she said - and Didyme's surgery had been and gone, using the equipment that was already there leftover from my mother's years previously. Charlie and Renée and Phil were all opting to stay human, for the time being, although I thought Renée in particular might be wending her way to a change of heart.

At any rate, Alec did his job very quietly, standing almost perfectly still for three days straight and holding his power in place while his charges changed, periodically asking me to replenish his stack of books. I did a little entertaining for the future vampires - sending them memories in-real time of random things like movies and attractive scenery - to prevent them from being too dreadfully bored, although every vampire I asked said that being bored was still an overwhelming improvement on the old procedure.

I busied myself by writing up informational pamphlets and, when my mom had approved them, running off stacks of them with our new copy machine. The PRPR office's entrance was the one closest to the street, so anyone who drove up and happened to be curious would see it first. People who *literally* just came in off the street were to be turned away without receiving any pamphlets and told that the complex was an exclusive private spa, but if they arrived with some inkling of what was going on, they might as well get a more complete understanding.

While we'd been gone, all of the imprints with living family in the region - Claire, Emily, Maureen, and Thea - had been reunited with their families, and those were some of the first people I met in my official capacity. The only one who wanted to be turned into a vampire was Emily's younger brother - everyone else just came in to learn more about who and what they were now related to (or, in Claire's case, not exactly related to but inextricably associated with). Or to scream at me for lack of anyone else to rage at. Claire's parents kicked up enough of a fuss that I had to turn them over to Santiago. I'd expected something of the kind from Thea's family as well, but Thea herself was more effectively able to intervene in that matter and I didn't see them at all.

My mom's policies called for Emily's brother to be turned away. He wasn't a witch, wasn't anybody's mate, didn't want to work for the Golden Coven, and Sam - his closest supernatural relation, by virtue of being his brother-in-law - was not interested in vouching for him. And we were already processing applications from a half-a-dozen vampires who'd found human mates since our takeover and didn't want to risk antagonizing us. Alec's services were free, but he could only cover so much area at a time, and Addy could only double our capacity. More problematic still was getting access to an adequate food supply and systematizing the control of newborns who weren't allowed to eat people nor kill them to cover up accidental exposure. I told the brother to reapply in six months, by which time we expected to have a better idea of the rate of application and the difficulties of scaled-up newborn-wrangling, and sent him home.

At the end of my office hours, which lasted from just after breakfast to four in the afternoon, I (and Jake and whoever else was guarding me for the day) usually loitered around what *would* have been a throne room if it had contained any chairs. My mom and dad spent much of their time there, handling the running of things, and I liked listening in and occasionally submitting input. Sometimes I sat with Alice for a while instead, and let her show me the jerky swirl of images she collected in the course of making her eye checks. Once I tagged along with Vasanti as she made arrangements to open a slaughterhouse within commuting distance of the capital, so that the vampires could get access to fresh animal blood on a regular basis without the ecological risks of hunting.

Jake and I had a little house in La Push, and usually, when I was ready to go to sleep, he would watch a few hours of my dreams - and then stand aside when he was ready to go to bed himself, to let my parents see the rest.

I still usually can't remember my dreams, but I'm told, and have every reason to believe, that they are happy ones.

On to Flashes

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.