

## 19. Negotiations

With Santiago leading and Felix following me, we proceeded through a tunnel-like, stone walkway that passed under the castle at street level. Its walls and arched ceiling were built with the same sienna-colored stone used to construct the walls of the ancient city and the castle whose round turret towered above it. Halfway along the passage, Santiago pushed open a heavy, oak-plank door which led through a stone corridor into an empty reception room. It was a pleasantly lit and carpeted area with leather couches, pictures of Tuscany on the walls, and a high reception desk, though no one was there to receive us at this hour.

*This must be where they bring human visitors for tours of the castle,* I thought, remembering that one of the Volturi's number was responsible for traveling as far afield as necessary to acquire sustenance for the entire guard. Humans who took tours of the castle never reemerged from it. *Ugh.* Carlisle told me that he had always taken himself to the countryside to hunt on days when humans were scheduled to be brought into the castle. He could not bear the spectacle of watching thirty or forty excited tourists being herded into the Volturi's "dining room," oblivious to their impending demise.

We passed through some double doors at the back of the room into an opulent chamber with wood-paneled walls, two chandeliers, and at the opposite end, another set of double doors which were fully clad in gold. Instead of exiting through the latter, however, Santiago stopped halfway there and slid aside a section of the paneling to reveal a simple wooden door. He opened it and stepped into a stone chamber. I followed and Felix came in behind me and then reset the paneling and closed the door behind us.

On the far side of this room was a large, arched doorway in which hung an oak door with iron straps and heavy iron hinges. As we approached it, the foot-thick door swung inward for us, opened by a member of the guard who shut and latched it behind us.

The round chamber beyond appeared to be a receiving room in the castle turret meant only for vampires for it had no human comforts about it. Its sienna-colored stone walls were pierced with tall, narrow slits twenty feet above our heads which appeared to be its only source of light. At this time, they were just beginning to turn violet-gray with the dawn. During the day, they would throw sunlight into the cavernous chamber which our eyes didn't require. The stone floor sloped almost imperceptibly downward in the center of the room where a heavy iron grill covered a large drain hole in the floor. A high-pressure water hose hung discretely inside a nearly hidden niche in the wall. Though clean, the room exuded the unmistakable scent of death.

I looked up to see Aro and Caius gazing down at me from an elevated area at the far part of the chamber. They were seated against the walls in heavily carved chairs that looked

like thrones. Aro sat in the center with Caius on his right-hand side; a third, matching chair sat empty to Aro's left. Several large vampires stood at attention nearby and a dark-haired female vampire stood next to Aro with her hand on his shoulder. The personal security team, I assumed.

At a second glance, I saw Marcus leaning against the far stone wall, staring into space. His thoughts were jumbled and inchoate, but inundated with feelings of hopelessness—the depressed brother. Centuries ago, he lost his mate and has never recovered from the devastation. If Marcus could be roused enough to care even a little bit, he at least should be able to comprehend the distress behind my request and perhaps be willing to grant it.

“Welcome, young one!” Aro said, greeting me warmly. *So who is this rogue vampire who visits us without warning?* Aro wondered silently. His face never betrayed a hint of doubt or disapproval of any kind, but remained open and friendly, his wide eyes taking in every detail of my appearance. *American*, he thought. It was beyond me how he could tell. I was wearing Italian designer clothes and hadn't spoken a word yet.

“Felix,” Aro commanded with a nod.

“Yes, Master,” the largest of my two escorts replied, stepping forward and offering his hand to Aro who took it in the two of his.

“Ah, I see,” Aro said with an amused smile on his face. He had seen my fast dash into the city and also that I had put up no resistance to the guard's “capture.”

“Tell me your name, my young friend,” Aro said, maintaining his look of welcome, but wondering why I had let myself get so thirsty and whether they shouldn't find me a human to drink immediately.

“I am Edward Cullen, son of Carlisle.” He would discover the connection soon enough, anyway.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Aro enthused, clapping his hands together. Caius looked at me with mild interest, while Marcus appeared not to know I was there. “Brothers, we must be mindful of our thoughts in the presence of this young one!” Aro said gleefully. “He is Carlisle's first,” he added when neither brother replied. Caius raised his eyebrows, but remained silent.

“How *is* our dear, dear friend, Carlisle? It has been much too long since we have had the pleasure of his company.”

“He is well.”

“Oh, that is very good news, indeed!” Aro said excitedly and then paused for a brief second before changing the subject. “I understand that you have a very special talent, Edward. One that you and I share. Is that true?” Aro asked with a friendly, but patronizing air.

“I don't know,” I answered. It's not why I was there.

“But you do read minds, do you not?” Aro probed.

“Yes...most,” I clarified.

“Not all, then?”

“No.”

Aro watched me as I closed my eyes against the stabbing pain that cut through my chest when I realized belatedly that the one mind I could not read was no more.

*No more.*

Aro waited until I had recovered my tenuous composure and opened my eyes.

“Would you mind very much if I read yours?” Aro asked, shaking his head almost imperceptibly at the woman next to him—*stay here, Renata*—and she dropped her hand from his shoulder. Aro stood and floated down the two steps of the platform and across the room, stopping when he was three feet from me. He held out both of his hands, open-palmed. I knew what he wanted. It was what I wanted too...sort of.

Silently, I placed my right hand into his left palm and he covered it with his other hand. His clouded, black eyes took on a faraway look and his expression changed several times as he sifted through my memories—from concern, to surprise, to delight, and back. I saw the entire contents of my life flash by in his mind, but his scanning was so fast that it took some effort to keep up. Watching as he squeezed every last drop of information out of my head and into his own would have been a devastating experience if I weren't already too devastated to care. It felt like a violation, having my entire being exposed and assessed by Aro's greedy mind.

“I see we have a little problem,” Aro commented, looking into my eyes with apparent concern while his mind grew excited by the possibilities (for him) of my mind-reading capability. He saw me seeing that and immediately dropped my hand, whirled around, and made his way back to his regal chair. Aro was not used to feeling mentally vulnerable himself. At another time, it would have cheered me immensely to give him that experience.

While Aro had been emptying my mind of its contents, two young vampires—barely more than children—had quietly entered the room through the door behind me, holding hands. I recognized Jane and Alec, two of the Volturi's most-valued guard members.

“I deeply regret your loss,” Aro said to me and I could see that he meant it. He'd been able to read the depth of my misery, which set his thoughts toward his brother and the similarity between Marcus and myself. Before his mind traveled too far down that path, though, Aro abruptly redirected his thoughts. Perhaps he did not want to divulge Marcus's private despair out of respect for his brother. Aro had moved on to thinking about something much more interesting to him anyway—Alice.

“Now you know why I have come. I would rather not repeat it,” I told him.

“No, no, of course not. Hmm.” Aro stood and began to pace. Renata held onto a corner of his cape and paced with him. “Such a dilemma. It seems a great misfortune to meet you, only to say goodbye forever.”

Aro stopped pacing and gazed at me with his eyes slightly narrowed. Then he spoke

to Caius and Marcus, though everybody in the room could hear him.

“Brothers, we have here a very unusual situation,” Aro announced.

Caius glanced at him with mild interest. Marcus still hadn’t moved.

Aro continued. “It seems that young Edward has lost his mate and wishes for our assistance in joining her.”

Bored, Caius looked away again. Aro’s eyes twinkled with delight.

“His *human* mate.” The punch line.

Caius’s head whipped around toward his brother and Marcus’s head turned slowly in my direction.

“Human mate?” Caius asked, thinking he had misunderstood.

“Yes,” Aro responded as he tapped the fingertips of one hand animatedly against those of the other. Marcus glided toward his brothers.

“Isabella. *La tua cantante*,” Aro said, finishing with an Italian phrase. The second punch line.

Hearing my love’s name on Aro’s lips suddenly infuriated me, a feeling that quickly burned out and faded to the familiar ache deep in my center.

“*La tua cantante?*” Caius repeated in disbelief.

“Yes, marvelous, isn’t it?” Aro said with a subdued smile. “Our young Cullen has rare qualities.”

Caius’s eyes widened; Marcus showed no response. I thought Aro’s tone sounded gleeful again, but perhaps I was reading him wrong. I restrained a grimace.

“But his Bella has died and he wishes to follow. Is there anything more that you would like to add to my assessment?” Aro inquired, looking at me.

“No. That covers it,” I responded as levelly as I could manage. Aro peered at me like he was trying to read my mind from across the room.

“What does our dear friend, Carlisle, think of your plan?” Aro asked.

“I haven’t told him,” I replied, though Alice probably had by now.

“Hmm,” Aro murmured. He would hesitate to antagonize my father. So softly that I could only hear his thoughts, Aro said to his brothers, *There is more to this which requires careful consideration. Let us confer in private.* The brothers silently agreed. “Dear Edward,” Aro said, turning to me, “we—”

“—would like to confer,” I interrupted, reminding him that he didn’t have to speak aloud to me. He was doing it for his audience as much as anything, though.

“Yes,” Aro said with a quickly suppressed chuckle. “Confer. We would be *terribly* indebted to you if you could return after dark for our response.” He wanted plenty of time to consider his options.

“Likewise, I would be grateful if you would proceed with all haste. I have no desire to linger unnecessarily,” I replied, not bothering to point out, since Aro already knew, that his “debt” was unlikely to be paid if they waited too long to say yes.

“Yes, yes, of course. With all due haste.”

A female vampire entered the room behind me. *Corin, perfetto!* Aro tried not to think of her special gift, but I caught it anyway. She could create a euphoric state in those around her—similar to Jasper, but more so. It didn't matter if she tried to make me feel better for a short while. Perhaps it would lend some relief, but it wouldn't change my decision.

“Corin will show you to a comfortable place where you can wait out of the sun, my dear Edward. You are very thirsty. Can we offer you something to drink while you wait? I'm afraid we don't keep game.”

I shook my head. Thirst was the least of my pains. *How close was my family to catching up to me?* I wondered, though it seemed I would have no choice but to comply with Aro's request to wait.

He motioned to Corin and she beckoned me to follow her. I saw him nod to Felix who trailed us out. *Security again.* Nobody wanted the crazy vampire to run off half-cocked into the sun.

Corin led me out the door I'd come in, but from the antechamber, turned into a partially concealed side tunnel. I followed her through several stone corridors before she stopped and pressed a hidden button, which caused a soft ring on the other side of the wall. To my surprise, a portion of the wall that had appeared solid began to swing inward to reveal a short opening. We ducked and stepped through it, but Felix did not follow. He remained outside the doorway while the vampire who had opened it closed it behind us.

Corin walked a short ways and then turned and led me down a long set of narrow stairs into a hallway that had short wooden doors spaced evenly along both sides. Suddenly, I felt like Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Corin proceeded directly to the fourth door on the right side and pushed it open for me. This doorway was much smaller than others we had used, barely wider than my shoulders and a foot shorter than me.

“Monk's quarters,” said Corin softly. I was familiar with the technique used in some nunneries and monasteries of creating shortened doorways which force entrants to bow to God or hit their heads on the stone as they entered.

*Great,* I thought. *Now I'm a monk.* I felt more like something unrecognizable that had washed up on shore. On second thought, though, monkhood was appropriate. I would wait in a monk's quarters and meditate on my end of days before meeting my end. A holier man than me would have spent his time there on his knees in prayer. I didn't need to do that. I would save my final prayer for the moments before I died... a prayer for Bella.

“No one will bother you while you're here,” Corin said as she gestured for me to enter. “I'll come back for you after dark,” she said and shut the door behind her. There was no window in this room because we were underground, but having no windows was another characteristic of monastic quarters. A room with no distractions kept the monk focused on his prayers. For vampires, these windowless rooms served as perfect refuges from the sun.

With surprise, I realized that the stabbing pain in my chest and the hollow ache at my center both had lessened. The change was subtle, but definitely real. I could almost take a full breath. Corin had a powerful effect!

Aro had sent Corin with me on purpose so that she could raise my spirits and thereby eliminate my desire for death. Anyone with half a heart who had such resources at his disposal surely would have tried the same thing. Except for the delay, I didn't particularly mind. Rather than agonize in a fetal position on the floor, which otherwise I might have done, I paced the room in a sort of meditation. Aro had understood my wish, but not my motivation. I wasn't asking to die because I was depressed and in pain. There was simply no reason for me to continue living without her. My decision was not something that could be soothed away.

Eventually, I stopped pacing and became still, but I maintained enough awareness to notice a periodic elevation in my mood. This coincided with hearing Corin's thoughts in the corridor: *I hope he's feeling better. Maybe I can help him.* It surprised me that she seemed to have a true sense of compassion, not just an ability to alter moods. She didn't stay long, but she came back frequently.

Coherent thoughts eluded me as the day wore on, so to sooth my mind, I recited some of my favorite poetry to myself, including parts of *Romeo and Juliet*. The world of literature suddenly seemed full of tormented lovers. I began to believe that all strong emotions derived from this one thing—the passion of love...gaining it, losing it, missing it, finding it. I could think of much more that had been written about its loss, its impossibility, or its waning than its inherent joy, though.

I was not unique in my travail. Millions had gone before me and millions more would follow in the same steps. I thought of the "Prayer of the Afflicted," Psalms 102:

1Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto thee.

2Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily.

3For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth.

4My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.

5By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin.

6I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.

7I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.

There was only one point at which I would be more alone than I was now and that was in the moment that I should die. As it is said, "We come into the world alone and we die alone." But I was ready. More than ready.

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Time dragged on and on until finally sunset had passed and Corin came and knocked on the door. I could tell it was her both by her thoughts and by the now familiar sensation of ease that dropped over my head like a blanket. I don't think that Corin's gift had entirely the effect it was intended to have, though. It allowed me to breathe and to remain upright, but it could not penetrate beyond a palliative. It did not touch my deep sense of loss or do anything to fill the gaping hole of a particular shape at my center. It had made these last hours endurable, though, and I appreciated Corin's efforts on my behalf.

"Yes, I am ready." I answered her unspoken inquiry as I opened the wooden door.

"Follow me, then," she said, brightly, giving me a warm smile. I could not return it.

We retraced our steps backwards up the long flight of steps, through doorways, down corridors, and around corners, ending where we had begun in the morning. A different vampire than the one who had opened the door to the turret room that morning opened it for us now just before we reached it.

"Hello, Demetri," Corin said politely.

*The famous tracker.* He was built similarly to me, tall and slim, but with dark hair down to his shoulders. He was curious about me and unduly impressed, it seemed.

*Edward Cullen of the famous Cullen coven! My, my, my...aren't you attractive?*

My eyes popped up to his face in surprise. He looked back and gave me the tiniest of smiles, raising one eyebrow.

*Oh, great, just what I need...another Jessica!* My annoyance didn't last, though, as Demetri would have no time at all to pursue the fantasies that were dancing through his head as he scrutinized me. I'd never met a homosexual vampire before—that I knew of, anyway. Or maybe Demetri was trying to provoke me to amuse himself. If he knew my name and origin, then he must know I could read his thoughts. I blocked out the salacious images of myself and him that he was directing at me. Had he no sense of decorum at all? Here I was, having requested to be "put down," more or less, and if I were successful, was within minutes of my demise.

*Oh!* It was obvious then. Aro would deny my request. Fury suddenly gripped me with a force I didn't think I still possessed and I read the truth in the minds all around me. I was the last to know, apparently. I glared at Aro across the room and I saw that he was watching my face carefully, waiting to see the moment when I would know the outcome before he had said it.

"Edward, my friend," he said in what I assume was meant to be a soothing voice. "Do not despair. Please give us a moment to explain our point-of-view on the matter."

"I need no explanations," I growled. "If the answer is no, then that is as much as I require to know. I shall go now." I turned around toward the door and discovered Felix and Santiago blocking my path. I saw a reflection of my face in Santiago's eyes and was a little startled at the fury that looked so much blacker when my eyes were onyx-colored with

deep purple rings beneath them. My fists were clenched in rage as I slowly turned back around.

“I beg you to give us just a wee second, dear Edward.” He considered invoking Carlisle’s name to induce my cooperation, but after looking at my expression, decided against it. Aro was not stupid.

“It would appear that I have no choice,” I hissed.

“Just a moment of your time and you will be entirely free to leave. I...we...,” he gestured toward his brothers, who frankly seemed less than fascinated by the scene Aro would try to set. Marcus stood motionless against the far wall, his mind just...empty. Caius’s eyelids were closed and he looked like he was basking in sunshine. Then I realized that Corin had moved forward and was standing only a short distance behind me. Caius was soaking in her soothing vibrations. I felt them too, but they could not touch my fury.

Aro’s eyes remained keen. It was clear that his brothers were not nearly as interested in me as he was—and that’s what all this was about. I remained silent with my fists clenched and glared at Aro.

“My dear, young friend,” he began, which made my mood even blacker. He was no friend of mine! But I managed to remain still as he continued in a pacifying tone. “We feel that you are much too remarkable a...individual...”—he had almost said “specimen” before catching himself—“to be dispatched so expeditiously in your time of *great* grief.” Aro emphasized the word “great” and paused with a sad expression on his face to be sure that I had registered his sympathy before continuing.

“You still have so much valuable life ahead of you. You have gifts that could be of great service to our community.” He paused again to see if his words had had any effect on me. They had not. He went on anyway. “My brothers and I—and indeed, all of our little family here—invite you to leave your life in America where so many sad memories plague you, and join us here in Volterra. You would be most welcome, and even more than that, you would be cherished.”

Aro smiled gently at me, while his hands unconsciously twisted together. Even without my ability to read his thoughts, which were centered on acquisition and power, I never would have been taken in by his obsequious words. A feeling of pure disgust flooded through me, followed by a warm glow that dropped onto my head and wrapped around me like a blanket. I fought off the sedative.

Aro had asked Corin to pacify me during the hours I was asked to wait and again at this meeting, and he had expected a much greater impact than he was observing. I saw him glance behind me at Corin and I felt the calming effects of her gift soften my anger slightly.

*This must be what it’s like to take Valium*, I thought. But if Aro believed vampire Valium would seduce me into the Volturi, he was badly mistaken.

“I must respectfully decline your invitation,” I said with not much respect evident in my tone.

“But why, *dear* Edward?” Aro asked as he glided toward me. I stepped back in



response and he stopped moving.

Anger welled up again and I felt the effects of the “Valium” recede. I was incensed that these ancient ghouls would take it upon themselves to decide what was right and wrong for me. Carlisle had never done that in my life. I managed to keep my voice calm, but it cut with an icy edge.

“My chosen lifestyle is utterly incompatible with how you live here, for one thing,” I replied. “For another, if I were to choose to continue my life, I would not leave my family to do so. For a third, I have already made my decision and I see no benefit in prolonging my life under circumstances that I would not freely choose.”

“Ah, I see,” said Aro, disappointment clear in his voice. “I was greatly hoping that with a little time to step back from impetuosity, you might see some benefit in living among a select group of gifted individuals like yourself. And, of course, we would not interfere in your choice of diet.” At that statement, Caius opened his eyes and looked meaningfully at Aro.

*Not another Carlisle!* he complained silently.

“I am very much like my father, I’m afraid,” I stated baldly while looking directly at Caius, “in how I view the world and our place in it, but I have neither his patience nor his tolerance to abide a life that in no way suits me. I would be worth nothing to you.”

“That should be for us to say, don’t you agree? And I very much wish for you to give us a chance to discover that for ourselves.”

“It is impossible,” I said abruptly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have some important business to attend to outside of these walls.” Aro knew what I meant.

“What about your dear sister, Alice?” Aro tried. “Perhaps if she joined us as well, you would feel more comfortable?”

I just glared at him.

“Ah, well. I suppose you have set your mind to your decision. Of course, you are free to leave, but I hope that you will choose to stay with us for a time. We will always welcome you with open arms.”

I did not alter my glare.

“I implore you not to be imprudent in your actions, dear Edward,” Aro added, knowing my backup plan was to compel them to kill me.

I turned toward the door and with a gesture from Aro, Felix and Santiago stepped aside and let me pass. Demetri opened the door and smirked at me. Corin reached for my hand to lead me out through the tangled corridors. I yanked it back roughly, but she continued walking beside me.

*If only I could touch him...* she mused.

So her talents worked even better if she made physical contact with the person she was trying to influence.

“So *wasteful*,” Aro lamented to himself as we departed.

Corin did her best to influence my mood as she led me through the castle, but I was

too angry to let her affect me. When we finally reached the human reception area, Corin escorted me to the exit. I glanced at the reception desk and saw a lovely human watching us with a pleasant look on her face.

“Hello, Corin,” she said.

“Hi, Gianna.”

I ignored the questions like a snowstorm in Gianna’s mind. She wanted to know who I was and why I looked like I was dying of thirst. Had they held me in a dungeon? I glowered at her and she looked away quickly.

“The way out is to the right down the corridor. Please be well,” Corin said to me as I reached the doorway. Though I appreciated her efforts, I had no inclination toward civility at the moment. I bolted out of the castle, fuming.

*Now what?* My head was a muddle of tactics to force the hand of the Volturi. As I moved into the central square of the city, a large clock above my head clanged twelve times. Midnight.