

## 20. Indecision

The square in front of me was about fifty feet wide with a large, ornamental fountain in the center. The buildings around the square were so tall that you could see only that part of the sky directly above it—or so it seemed. It was the new moon, the darkest night of the moon’s cycle and the darkest night of my life. The stars, bright as they were, could not in any way make up for it.

As I looked around, I noticed that red flags had been hung at intervals all around the square and a presentation area with a red awning above it was set up along one side for a celebration of some kind. I wondered if the flags had been there when I ran into the city before dawn. Most likely they were, but why?

*Hmm...yesterday’s plane ticket was dated March 18th, so today is... Oh, yes. It is Saint Marcus Day. How appropriate,* I thought with a sneer.

The holiday is Volterra’s most celebrated of the year. It commemorates the day when “Saint Marcus of the Volturi” ended the scourge of the vampires by driving them out of the city, once and for all. It’s a joke among our kind because in a competition of which vampire has drained the most humans of their blood, “Saint Marcus” would rank near the top due to age alone. *And* he’s never left Volterra. His status, his age, and his grief merely keep him indoors most of the time.

The exploits of “Saint” Marcus were a clever ruse by the Volturi to insure their safety at a time when the Romanian vampires had become so flagrant in their activities that citizens of Dacia (ancient Romania) had begun organizing to wipe out our species. When occasionally a vampire slipped up in Volterra or when a visiting nomad fed publicly, the Volturi worried about their personal security in their own adopted city.

The best cure, or so they decided, was to put on a grand performance with garlic, wooden stakes, and (especially) crosses to “eradicate” the vampires in Volterra. After that public success, the Volturi destroyed all but two members of the Romanian coven and then traveled abroad to do the same to other ostentatious covens living elsewhere in the world.

The citizenry of Volterra hasn’t seen vampires in their city for so long—fifteen hundred years—that the modern population no longer believes in our existence. That keeps the Volturi safe in their little kingdom, a region with virtually no crime—the Volturi see to that.

Of all the times I could choose to expose the presence of vampires in Volterra, Saint Marcus Day was ideal. Endangering the safe enclave the Volturi had worked so hard to create would force their hand. A big crowd would be collecting in the square later in the day, providing a perfect audience for my grand gesture, whatever it might be. I had

considered this eventuality before, when the vampire James had tracked and nearly killed my beloved Bel—

*Ohhhhhhhhhhh, owwwwwwww...*

I wrapped my arms tightly around my chest to try squeezing the pain away. It didn't help. I tried to breathe...*in...out...in...out...*but my muscles locked up. The only thing that calmed me slightly was knowing that I wouldn't have to feel this way much longer. So...to get it done.

I had options, all with the theme of exposing the Volturi's secret. I would show as many humans as possible, in the most brazen way I could think of, that we exist. I looked again at the fountain in front of me. It had a ten-foot, tapering obelisk at its center and a twenty-foot round pool at its base, large enough for children or ducks, or the odd swan, to swim in happily.

*What would that watery tower look like with an Alfa Romeo balanced on top of it?* A little pedestrian, perhaps. A Ferrari or Maserati would be much more impressive. Advantages: easy, noisy, could not be ignored or covered up. Disadvantages: It's a lovely fountain.

*What if I attacked one of the Volturi guard?* The bigger, the better. Felix or Santiago would do. Advantages: possible prolonged circus effect, *major* satisfaction. Disadvantages: possibility of being subdued too quickly, might not qualify as a capital offense.

I sighed. Did I have the will to go through with this? I only had to think for a second to know that the answer was yes. Without a doubt. Truly, I did not want to live another day. However, if I handled things badly, then I *could* end up in a dungeon, guarded twenty-four hours a day for...well...forever, which would be much worse than death. Whatever act I chose must be irrevocable, something that couldn't be fixed or explained away. And it had to be egregious enough that the Volturi would kill me immediately.

*What if I took a page from Maria's book and snapped a few necks? No, wait!* Much better to *hunt* some criminals. Advantages: extremely satisfying, certain to provoke a death sentence. Plus, this option would not force me to wait until daylight. Is that why Aro had timed his answer the way he had—to discourage me from going berserk in a crowd when he said no? With the hunting option, I didn't have to perform for an audience. In fact, the more surreptitious I was, the more blood I could drink before getting caught. *Win-win!*

The best way to go about it would be to take a human in private and leave the body in public, move across town, repeat, until the guard caught up with me. That would create terror in the city and draw the attention of authorities from far and wide, anathema for the Volturi.

*And I am very thirsty.*

I had no idea how long it had been since I'd hunted. Not counting Brazilian rats, it must be in the neighborhood of three to four weeks. Why shouldn't I indulge myself on my way out? A last act. Slaughter a few tourists in the bowels of the city where the guard

wouldn't find me immediately. Killing would feel good. Well, not the killing so much as the drinking. *Mmmm*. It was more than a little tempting. I hadn't drunk a human for eighty years. It was by far the best option—no more delays *and* blood.

It was a good time to hunt. Children were in bed, as well as the productive citizens who had jobs to go to in the morning. I took off through the quiet streets in search of a tavern, frequently a good source of criminal prey. Often, you could find one or two nasty drunks who enjoyed beating up on those weaker than themselves, their wives or children. Occasionally, you would find a coldblooded criminal like the murderer who had stalked Port Angeles the previous year. Stalked *Bella*...

*Owwwwwww, ohhhhhh....*

This pain would *never* lessen. I began to run, racing through the streets and alleyways in my impatience to be done with it. I was ready to get to the other side, no matter what I might find there.

Then I heard it—the unmistakable sound of clinking glassware. I stopped running to listen. *Yes*. One street over, a pub was still open. I slowed down to a human pace and began moving in that direction.

There weren't many customers left. A young couple, late teens or early twenties, on their honeymoon. An old drunk at the bar who seemed completely harmless to everyone, except himself, perhaps. The bartender, a handsome Italian in his thirties, was thinking about the affair he was carrying on behind his wife's back. Unkind, perhaps, but not deserving of death.

The owner and his wife, local grandparents, were cleaning up in the back, closing down the kitchen. They were hard-working people who had brought a lot of pleasure to diners in Volterra. None of these seemed to be good choices. Then a man in his fifties exited the washroom and joined a younger man at the bar. They were father and son, visitors...*ah ha*...grifters. They were carefully not talking about the lack of good marks so far, but they were expecting lots of tourists for the Saint Marcus Day Festival.

*Hmm*...con artists. By the matter-of-fact nature of their thoughts, I gathered they had worked the grift for a long time. Possibly, it was the family business. Even so, tricking someone out of the thirty or forty euros in his wallet hardly seemed worthy of a death sentence. Even if they worked real-estate scams or large-scale cons, did property crimes ever warrant a death sentence?

*Oh hell!* What was I thinking? They're just *humans*! The Volturi suck them down like jellybeans in a candy dish. And this was my final act! I had no reason to confine myself to the worst-of-the-worst. I wouldn't have to live with the guilt.

I watched as the father pulled out his wallet and quickly passed bills back and forth to the bartender, pretending to be confused, while tricking the man into returning twice the amount of change he was due, plus a free meal. The criminals walked out of the café laughing at how gullible the locals were and looking forward to the easy pickings at the festival.

I grimaced. Which one should I take first? The father looked stronger, but the son would run faster. Faster wouldn't be a problem. I'd take the father first then, wait until the two were some distance from the café, grab him, and drag him into the shadows and enjoy myself. The son would run off, possibly yelling. He would be easy enough to catch, and by the time someone came to his aid, I would be long gone. Or better, I could avoid the yelling by snapping one neck and drinking from the other, and then moving to a different part of town. *Hmm...* Snapping a neck wouldn't be proof of death-by-vampire. Better to separate them and drink them both.

I stepped out of the shadows, positively parched now, my throat in flames. Somehow, I had managed to push my need to the back of my awareness for a long time. Now that I was preparing to satisfy my thirst with the best kind of relief, venom was pouring into my mouth. I was *dying* of thirst.

I walked silently behind the grifters, waiting for them to turn from the lighted street. After they moved around the corner, I would silently grab the older man and bite through his windpipe so he couldn't cry out. If after so long, the taste of the blood was too delectable to hurry through, I would let the son go and linger over the father. When I was finished, I would abandon the body to be found where it lay. No need to hide it.

The duo was just reaching a narrow pedestrian street. I crept closer as they rounded the corner and then darted forward, giving in to the natural instincts of the predator that I am. Then abruptly, with my arms in motion, stretching forward to grasp the older man's neck, I transformed to a pillar of salt.

My father's face had appeared before my eyes. *What if I'm right?* his voice said in my head. *Why bar yourself from her forever?*

*What if Carlisle was right?* I had made some egregious mistakes since meeting Bel—*her*. Once, I had been so sure of myself, always knowing the right answer in every situation. But I had been so *horribly* wrong about her.

Before my chosen victims turned to see me trapped in a ghoulish zombie pose, I stepped backwards around the corner, fast as a lightning bolt. I leaned with my back against the stones of the corner building and slowly slid down the wall until I was crouched on the ground with my head on my knees and my arms wrapped around my legs. I wanted the blood so much... *so much*... Fire seared my throat, flames raked up and down, drawing it closed. I gasped for breath and tried to rock away the pain. Forward, back, forward, back...

*I can't, can't, can't...*

I could not allow myself to injure my father in that way and certainly not as my last act on earth, leaving him with that memory of me forever. And what had he said? *It is always possible that Bella will be there waiting for you.* I didn't believe it, but Carlisle did. *Stop it!* I yelled at my own, too-active mind. I could not afford to think of my father right now. It would make all of this too hard.

Just then, I felt a soft blanketing sensation and, recognizing it immediately, I looked around. Where was she? I listened for a moment.

*...said to follow him around until his father gets here. But he'll know I'm here. He reads thoughts, for crissakes, and if he doesn't think to do that, he'll feel the effects. There's no other way, though. I can't just let him die because...*

I should chase her off. But no, what was the point? Throwing a car into a public fountain was a useless display of rage if nobody was there to witness it. And what I chose to do had to be done exactly right, be undeniably deserving of death. Let Corin follow me around. I had to wait until daylight to take action, anyway.

I was still furious at the Volturi, primarily Aro. I suspected that neither Marcus nor Caius cared much at all whether I was dead or alive. Aro was the acquisitive one, the one who wanted to own me like a pet.

*Yes, Master?* Felix had said. What was *that* about? The entire guard thought of Aro as *Master*. It was revolting. And they seemed perfectly happy with it too. Why *was* that? Maybe Corin had anesthetized them all.

No, Aro's not dumb. He thinks that if he can keep me calm until Carlisle arrives that my father will talk me out of my decision. I don't know, actually—he might be right. Very rarely have I said no to Carlisle. But even if I did let him take me home this time, it would only postpone the inevitable; it wouldn't solve my problem. I'm even more convinced of that after meeting Marcus in person. He is a walking dead thing.

*Like me, right now.*

Except that I wasn't even walking. I remained crouched in a fetal position on a public street in the middle of the night, paralyzed with pain. Maybe it was Corin's influence that finally stilled my futile rocking, that lifted me to my feet. I began to walk, mindlessly heading for the city gates. Then I began to run. The human guards felt a slight breeze when I passed them at the gates, but thought nothing of it. The Volturi guard, on the other hand, didn't miss my exit. I heard two sets of agitated thoughts.

*There he goes!*

*Leaving the city?*

*What should we do?*

*Do we follow him or let him go?*

They let me go, not having any clear instructions to chase after me outside the city walls. No doubt they would be ready for me if I returned, though.

As I got further from the city, I felt the comfort of Corin's gift fade. I'd thought running would make me feel better and help clear my head, but the pain returned full force until I could no longer breathe.

Here I was, running off half-cocked again. Dawn was approaching and I still hadn't decided what I was going to do. I needed to plan and I had to find a dark place away from the sun to do so until I was ready to show my hand. I would only get one chance to do this right.

Could Alice see how I would end my life? I wondered, wishing I could ask her what would work best. If I threw a minibus into the fountain, would the guards turn me out like a

light switch or would they haul me back to the castle first? I didn't like the second possibility. I would much prefer a speedy death, instantaneous.

Sunlight was starting to crawl up the horizon. There was no more time to waste. I made an about-face and raced toward the city as fast as I had left it. At the moment, the only dark place I knew of near the main square was the castle itself. I definitely didn't want to return there, but the walking tunnel underneath it was a good compromise. It was dark and I had seen at least one side corridor. There might be others. Volterra must have hundreds of dark hiding places where the Volturi guard could disappear at a moment's notice.

I wished I could sneak back into the city undetected, but I had no doubt that the guard was watching for me. I hadn't left myself enough time to find a way over the walls. At least the guard hadn't seemed inclined to interfere with me as long as I wasn't breaking the rules—so far, at least. As I sprinted through the gates, two vampires took up pursuit. I kept running full speed through crooked streets, down dark alleyways, and up one or two walls. I couldn't see the guards I was trying to lose, but their minds sent me snatches of thoughts.

*Which way?*

*I thought he was over here...*

I didn't recognize them, but they were surprisingly easy to lose. I took a roundabout route back to the castle, approaching the street-level tunnel from the opposite side, dashing in just before the sun broke free of the horizon. There appeared to be no risk at the moment. It would take some time before the sun rose high enough to shine into the town square.

As I entered the tunnel from the back side, I noticed something I hadn't seen the last time I'd been there. Along the castle side of the tunnel, the arch of the stone ceiling did not sit directly on top of the side wall. Instead, the ceiling arched beyond the wall, possibly resting on a second, more interior wall. Or perhaps the side wall was several feet thick, allowing the arch to rest only on the far edge of it. Either way, between the top of the wall and the point where the arch rested, there must be a flat space. At eight feet high, the top of the wall wasn't visible, but if it was constructed as it appeared to be, there should be room for me to hide in the gap.

Quickly, before anyone could follow me from behind, I leaped up and grabbed the top of wall, finding it as I expected. I pulled my legs up behind me and rolled onto it. The flat space was like the eaves of a house, a three-foot-wide stone shelf that appeared to run the length of the tunnel. It was a convenient architectural aberration. A vampire could "disappear" at any point in the tunnel to escape from human eyes without giving away the location of hidden doorways or secret passageways that were unquestionably nearby. *Perfetto*. I could lie there comfortably hidden until I decided exactly what I wanted to do.

After a couple hours had passed, I heard the noise of street vendors rolling their carts into the square and tourists beginning to collect inside the city walls. I heard the shrill blast of police whistles and the sound of automobiles climbing the steep hill to the city.

People would come from all over the region, I supposed, for the ceremony, music, maybe feasting. I wasn't sure of the nature of the Saint Marcus Day celebration, but there was bound to be some kind of religious pomp, such as carrying a statue around the square, that would create a perfect opportunity to make myself known.

I was a bit ashamed of myself for almost taking lives. It wasn't necessary. I could get what I wanted easily enough without hurting anyone and with very little effort. All I had to do, really, was walk into the sunshine. In the midst of a religious festival, perhaps the people would think I was the Angel Marcus come down from Heaven to bless them.

It would be best to reveal myself to the largest possible audience, which meant in the town square after the sun had risen above the high walls and tall buildings. When the clock in the tower struck twelve times, the sun would be centered above the square for maximum exposure. It would be dramatic, portentous even, if the "angel" appeared at exactly midday while the clock was chiming. I would only have to wait a few more hours for the biggest effect.

My abortive hunt—getting so close to drinking the blood and then not doing it—had made my thirst so much worse than it was before. I liked to think that I hadn't drunk human blood in eighty years, but that wasn't exactly true. I had swallowed a good bit of blood when I pulled James's venom out of Bella's bloodstream.

*Ahhhhhhh! Owwwwwww!*

The stabbing pain wrenched my body from a prone position into a ball, at least until both my head and my knees smashed into the stone arch that tapered down to less than a foot above my face.

*Ouch! Corin must have taken a coffee break,* I thought, in a part of my brain that was detached from my body. Or...she didn't know where I was. That meant nobody had bothered to ask Demetri to find me, which was good news. Aro must not be *too* worried about what I might do. After reading my mind, including all of my memories, he probably should be.

I hoped I hadn't weakened the masonry above me. Having one of these heavy stones fall on my head wouldn't feel particularly good. However, even if it did, that still would be nothing compared to the other pain I suffered. And now, at the risk of multiplying *that* ten-fold, I let my mind wander back to *her*. These were my final few hours on the lonely planet and she had been my sunshine, my moon, and my stars.

Perhaps because I was still desperately thirsty, my mind flew immediately back to her blood. I remembered the taste of Bella's blood perfectly, every nuance, the high notes, the low notes, the texture, the sweet, sweet flavor...

Mixed in with the sudden crushing pain in my chest and the fierce burning in my throat came a profound sense of guilt. Of all the things to think about when the love of my life has taken her life due to my misguided sense of morality!

*La tua cantante,* indeed. I understood what it meant.

It wasn't only her blood I remembered, though. There were other things...the

lovely arch of her neck where it met her shoulder...the velvety texture of her mahogany hair...the scent of it, musk and strawberry, and the tang of her skin where her carotid artery pulsed beneath the thin membrane.

But I also remembered her soft, rounded lines pressing against the hard planes of mine when I kissed her for the first time...how she melted into me. I shuddered remembering the heavenly sensation of her body and how I had longed to hold her to me forever in that moment until the scent of her blood overwhelmed me and I'd had to push her away.

I recalled how I had tried to decipher the contents of her silent mind by examining her face and how sometimes I'd been right, but more often wrong. I remembered how she always thought of others before herself. She worried about her mother, even in her sleep, and she had arranged our day in the meadow so that nobody would suspect me of the crime if she failed to return.

I thought of her bravery beyond reason that led her to stand up to four attackers on the street and to meet James face-to-face when she thought her mother was in danger. I remember, when I told her that I could read everyone's mind except for hers, how she had bit into her lip worrying that something was wrong with her, not me!

To my surprise, a tiny chuckle broke loose from my throat at the thought. Then I smiled recalling how I'd hidden in her room when Charlie came home one evening and she had performed "nothing's going on" so badly that her father disconnected her truck's battery cables.

I laughed out loud into the stones above my head when I remembered how she had tiptoed noisily across her bedroom to throw open the window and stage whisper my name into the wind. The look on her face when I answered from behind her on her bed was absolutely priceless!

And that night...*ohhh... that night!* I remember the sensation of her soft, soft skin when I brushed my lips along her jaw line and down her neck, pulling back the edge of her t-shirt to stroke her collar bone with my fingers and being startled when she pulled away abruptly.

"You're driving me crazy," she had said, thrilling me no end. She had allowed me the great privilege, the unbelievable pleasure, of touching her with my lips and my fingers, and not only that, but she had been excited by it, her heartbeat accelerating wildly whenever I did so.

And with utter clarity, as if she were with me right now, I thought of her question—whether she and I might one day make love ...

I exhaled in a whoosh, the wind knocked out of me by the force of that memory. *Oh, how I loved her!* I closed my eyes and saw her smiling at me with love returned. In our short time together, I had been blessed far more than I ever deserved.

With a deep sigh, I recognized that though I had lost the most important thing in my life, I had also had it to lose. Having her for those few, too-short months had been a true



miracle. I had been granted something I never expected or could have predicted in a hundred years. We had been alive on the planet in the same place and at the right moment to know each other.