

## 21. Visions

From my hiding place beneath the tower, I felt the vibrations of the tower clock chiming away the hours, and I listened to the *tick-tock, tick-tock* metering out the remaining minutes of my life. When I first arrived in Volterra, I had hoped that my life would be over by now, that wherever I was to go, if only into nothingness, I would already be there. That had not come to pass.

But finally, the time was drawing near for me to bring my contemplations to a close and lay myself down upon the altar. There would be no godly intervention to stay the hand of the Volturi guard and for that, I was grateful. I felt sure it would be Felix who dealt the fatal blow and a cohort who lit the match. I didn't expect painless, but I hoped for quick.

I reached into the back pocket of my trousers for the two slim pieces of card that somehow I had managed to hold on to for my entire journey. I pulled them out to look at them one last time. It was dark at the top of the stone wall, but the images were burned into my retinas so thoroughly that I could still see them.

There she was smiling into the camera, though she had known by then that something was terribly wrong. I looked at the photograph of her bedroom, where we had spent so many glorious hours together and I felt my breath catch in my throat. With my forefinger, I stroked her paper hair and then touched my lips to her image. There had been two other photographs, but not of her, so I'd discarded them somewhere along the way.

In these final, fateful hours, I had moved past wishing to turn the clock back to that time and had made my peace with the past as best I could. The love we shared had made up for the pain of losing her by a thousand-fold. I was grateful for the reckless angel who had set her in my path and let me love her—though admittedly, very badly—for the months I had been given.

It was time. My highly efficient brain had been counting down the seconds of my life since the clock chimed eleven and twelve was nigh. I put the crumpled and worn pictures back into my pocket so that I would have her near me at the end.

The noise of the festival had increased throughout the morning as the crowd gathered. With each sound echoing around the stone walls, the din inside the square must be nearly intolerable, at least to a vampire's ears. No matter. I peeked below me into the corridor and saw no one, though I could hear both Demetri and Felix's thoughts nearby.

Demetri had alerted the guard to my precise location, but he and Felix were keeping their distance, waiting to see what I would do. So far I hadn't shown any signs of misbehaving and they thought that perhaps I was just waiting in the dark for my father to arrive. Aro had told them to intervene only if I tried "some stunt" to force their hand. While

Demetri was approaching the task with amused indulgence, still hoping that I might accept a position with the guard, Felix was looking forward to a fight. He was so frightening that rarely did he get to exercise his skills. His mere physical presence normally convinced everyone to do as they were told. Felix thought fighting a mind reader would be an interesting challenge.

Other guards were in the vicinity, though they weren't focused on me and had no particular interest in my personal drama. Most of them were keeping an eye on the square and the streets where the crowd was heaviest, watching for visiting vampires and for human criminals who were inevitably attracted to public gatherings like this one. Suddenly, I felt rather sorry for the con artist and his son. They were heading for the shock of their lives—likely their last.

Corin had returned and was working on my behalf, and while I had not grown immune to her gift, I disregarded its effects. My decision was not about relieving pain. Even if Corin could eliminate my burden of grief and guilt entirely, I would still follow through with my plan. I could not live with only half a self and the best part of me had departed with *her*.

I said a prayer for my mother and father and hoped that they would not grieve overmuch, but would remember our happy times and how much I loved them. I prayed that Alice and Emmett would never lose their own true loves and suffer this unbearable loss. And I prayed for Rosalie and Jasper, two of the luckiest vampires I knew.

I dropped silently from my hiding place into the dark corridor below and prepared myself to walk into the sunshine beneath the clock tower. When I got close to the opening, I would close my eyes and evoke my heaven of memories from my time with Bella.

*Bella. My beloved Bella.*

I moved slowly forward toward the arch-shaped light. A sharp wind had risen, creating a slight wind-tunnel effect in the covered walkway. I felt it rustle my hair like the hands of angels coming for me. *Closer, closer.* When I was five feet from the rays of the sun, I unbuttoned my shirt and dropped it onto the stones. The darkness in the corridor seemed to lighten slightly. I shut my eyes to focus inward and as I stepped forward once more, the clock above me began to chime.

One...Two...Three...Four...Five...

In these last moments of my life, I heard my sister's silent voice calling, *She's alive! She's alive!* Yes, even in my hallucination, Alice would try to save me from myself. I smiled at the spectral Alice.

...Six...Seven...

Then...a scent...*her* scent! I had not forgotten it. In fact, quite the opposite. As I advanced to my demise, my vampire brain had so heightened the memory of it that I suddenly felt as if *she* were here with me.

*Thank you, God, for easing my passage in the best, possible way!*

...Eight...Nine...

I shuffled forward and as my closed eyelids began to register the heat of the sunlight just ahead, *she* called my name.

*Edward! Edward! Edward!*

If this was dying, I wish I had gone sooner. I turned my palms outward toward my destiny, welcoming it, took another step, and...

*Edward, look at me!*

I smiled at how *real* her voice sounded as I strode to meet my fate.

...Ten...Eleven...

SMACK!

*One chime early, but it's over! And it was nothing! Nothing at all!*

Her phantom body had met mine at the very moment of the blow and my arms wrapped around it automatically, feeling the familiar shape, feeling even the warmth, smelling her scent, the strawberry tang of her hair. I opened my eyes into this miraculous new realm.

"Amazing. Carlisle was right," I murmured. *I have joined my angel... Oh, joy!*

*Edward, you've got to get back into the shadows. You have to move!*

*We'll move together, my darling,* I thought, brushing my hand against her angel's skin, so very like the human.

"I can't believe how quick it was. I didn't feel a thing—they're very good," I marveled, closing my eyes and pressing my lips against her fragrant hair.

"*Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty,*" I quoted. It was the same for me as it had been for Romeo when he found Juliet in the tomb. Bella was even *more* beautiful in death, if that were possible.

...Twelve.

"You smell just exactly the same as always. So maybe this *is* hell. I don't care. I'll take it." *What did it matter where we were if she was here with me? And so real!*

*I'm not dead and neither are you! Please, Edward, we have to move. They can't be far away!*

The angel struggled in my arms. I didn't understand.

"What was that?" I asked.

*Oooh, isn't she a tasty morsel. I'd like to sink my teeth into that!*

*Felix? What was he doing here?* That made no sense at all.

"We're not dead, not yet! But we have to get out of here before the Volturi—"

*The Volturi? What was she saying?*

*I'll grab them both!*

I heard the thought from just a few feet away. *Felix? Felix!* And suddenly, like a missile dropping on the Garden of Eden, the truth hit me with stunning force. I understood the slight pressure I felt against my body. Not angel's wings. The scent, the feel of her...

*This was REAL!*

My eyes snapped into focus and in the lizard depths of my petrified brain, I

comprehended that BELLA WAS IN DANGER! I snatched her by the waist and whirled her into the tunnel, her back against the stones, my back to her, my arms poised to amputate the head of anyone who approached. *They* were real too, and they were here with us.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” I said, conjuring a calmness that I did not feel into my voice. “I don’t think I’ll be requiring your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you would send my thanks to your masters.”

I was wide awake now, my vampire brain working exceedingly fast. I was not dead! And *neither was she!* Before the reality of it could sink in fully, I recognized that both of us were nearer to death’s door than we had ever been.

Felix and Demetri were closing in on us. Aro had told them to bring me in the moment I crossed the (metaphorical) line. They were prepared to do that now. However, the two of them also had homed in on Bella’s scent and Felix was mortally attracted to her. I would NOT allow them near her! I would perish before I let either of them touch her! I stifled the growl I felt rising in my chest.

“Shall we take this conversation to a more appropriate venue?” Felix whispered, threat oozing from his words.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” I replied coldly. “I know your instructions, Felix. I haven’t broken any rules.”

“Felix merely meant to point out the proximity of the sun,” Demetri soothed, trying to keep me calm so near the humans. “Let us seek better cover.”

“I’ll be right behind you. Bella, why don’t you go back to the square and enjoy the festival?” I tried futilely, desperate to get her away from the thirsty guards, but they were determined to include her in their edict.

“No, bring the girl,” Felix commanded, thinking, *Spoils of the victor!*

Fury gripped me. I felt the rumbling in my chest, a sound that marked me as a killer.

“I don’t think so,” I replied with menace. If this was to be a showdown, then *bring it on!*

*No*, Bella mouthed to me.

“Shh,” I breathed as softly as a sigh. What did Emmett always say? *A good offense is your best defense.* Felix probably would agree.

*Ah...he’s much too pretty to destroy*, Demetri lamented. He cautioned his cohort, “Felix, not here,” and then he turned to me.

“Aro would simply like to speak with you again, if you have decided not to force our hand after all.”

“Certainly,” I replied. “But the girl goes free.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he said regretfully. “We do have rules to obey.”

“Then I’m afraid that I’ll be unable to accept Aro’s invitation, Demetri.” I was very much aware that just because Demetri was attracted to me didn’t mean that he wouldn’t tear my head from my shoulders if those were his orders.

“That’s just fine,” Felix retorted, aching for a fight. If only I could get Bella out of

here, I would gladly accommodate him.

“Aro will be disappointed,” Demetri sighed, unused to failure of any kind.

“I’m sure he’ll survive the letdown,” I rejoined.

*Yes, but you won’t!* thought Felix, as he nodded minutely to Demetri. *Let’s do this!*

My goal was to stay near the entrance to the corridor, hoping to find a way to get Bella out, perhaps attach her to the family just outside whose youngest child was looking our way and pulling at her mother’s coat. Creating a stir was my only hope at this point, while not allowing that was the goal of the two guards. Their explicit instructions were to bring me in before I caused a scene. Aro did not want to be forced to destroy me.

Felix’s intention was to herd us further into the darkness away from the public eye so that they could take us both to Aro, forcibly if necessary. The two guards were thirsty...very thirsty. I could almost taste the desire for Bella’s blood in Felix’s mind.

I had not had one second to absorb or celebrate the fact that, for the first time in my life with her, Alice had made a mistake. Bella was not dead! *Not yet*, another part of my mind noted, but if the Volturi guards had their way, she soon would be. *They would have to kill me first.*

*I told you she was alive!* I heard Alice’s half-taunting thought from behind me. Almost involuntarily, I spun my head in that direction and *wonder of wonders*, the second most beautiful sight I had seen today! Alice! She had come through the corridor from the rear to join me. The guards could not bully us now that our numbers were evened up. Both Alice and I were as good as two fighters with our special abilities. The gift of tracking was not worth much in a fight.

My joy was short-lived when I realized that the fight would not remain between the four of us. There were more guards—and more dangerous ones—where these two came from, and Alice was dooming herself by joining me in this alleyway. I hoped to Heaven that she could see something positive emerging from this situation. I could not. My heart grieved momentarily for Jasper. At least Bella and I would die together.

“Let’s behave ourselves, shall we?” Alice said sweetly as she skipped to my side, arms swinging like an exuberant child. “There are ladies present.”

I hadn’t had a moment to consider how Bella had appeared like a miracle in Volterra’s town square just as I was about to surrender my life. *Alice!* My beloved sister had engineered this mission to save me. I hope I lived long enough to show her the proper gratitude. *Where was Carlisle?*

“We’re not alone,” she reminded the guards, glancing to the family that was now looking our way, a look of distress on the mother’s face.

*Does he mean to hurt her?* she wondered, looking at me as I guarded Bella, preventing anyone from getting near her. The woman alerted her husband, who alerted one of the militiamen ceremonially securing the event. A group of his red-coated mates began to collect around the family. That’s what I needed...enough human attention that Felix and Demetri would back down and allow Bella to leave. On the other hand, if the group saw too

much, they would all die along with us.

Demetri was growing impatient, but was still trying to avoid a disaster.

“Please, Edward, let’s be reasonable,” he entreated.

“Let’s,” I agreed quickly. “And we’ll leave quietly now, with no one the wiser.”

I could keep up this back-and-forth all day long. They might as well give in now. Demetri did not want to earn Aro’s displeasure, though.

“At least let us discuss this more privately.”

“No,” I snapped.

*This little game has gone on long enough.* I heard the thought in a silent childlike voice coming from the rear of the corridor, but it was not a child who approached us.

Felix and Demetri dropped back against the walls of the tunnel into the shadows. Felix was gloating. *Our secret weapon!*

I surrendered the fight immediately. Bella was suddenly in far more danger than she’d been before.

“Jane,” I said, acknowledging her presence and letting Alice know who we were dealing with. Even I could hear the defeat in my voice.

*Magic torture rays, right?* Alice asked silently.

I closed my eyes momentarily and then looked up at the ceiling. An affirmative to my sister’s question.

Alice crossed her arms in front of her chest defensively, though her expression remained cheerful, untroubled. There was no need to frighten Bella any more than she must be already.

“Follow me,” Jane commanded with absolute confidence in our compliance. And she would get it. No one crossed Jane.

I could see in Jane’s thoughts that a member of the guard had run to tell Aro about the events happening in the tunnel walkway. He had sent Jane to see what was taking Felix and Demetri so long to resolve the situation. No doubt he would be rubbing his hands together in delight to hear that Alice had joined me. *Two birds, one net.* He could use Bella to coerce us into doing as he wished. And because he’d read my mind, he would know that it would work. I’d do anything to keep Bella alive and unharmed. Perhaps I could trade my servitude in the guard for Bella and Alice’s freedom.

Alice followed Jane promptly. I wrapped my arm around Bella’s waist—*Glory to God! She was alive!*—and half-carried her along with me, hugging her tightly to my body. As we proceeded through the tunnel, I knew that this might be my only chance to find out what had happened.

“Well, Alice,” I began casually, not to alert Demetri and Felix to the fact that the conversation was particularly important to me. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see you here.”

“It was my mistake,” Alice replied cheerfully, like we were having a friendly brother-sister chat. “It was my job to set it right.”

“What happened?” I asked conversationally. Parlor gossip.

“It’s a long story. In summary, she did jump off a cliff, but she wasn’t trying to kill herself. Bella’s all about the extreme sports these days.”

*No...it wasn’t possible for Alice to make that kind of mistake.* I didn’t believe that explanation for a second. Alice didn’t either.

I was distracted by the sudden warmth radiating from Bella’s face. She was blushing! My heart warmed at the miracle of it.

Alice continued the story. *But there’s something worse and I’m so, so sorry, Edward! We lost track of Victoria after she threw away her cellphone, but Jasper and I assumed that she was still in Texas and you said you tracked her to Rio, so we didn’t investigate any further, but she went to Forks, Edward...Forks! Looking for Bella! I mean, I knew you weren’t going to catch Victoria, but...*

Alice knew? What?

*...I never dreamed she’d actually go looking for Bella. If anything, she should have been going after you! Or Jasper!*

If I had been human, I would have had a heart attack in that moment. *Victoria was hunting Bella? How...? Why? Did Alice send me on a wild goose chase?* But there was no time to consider that question, because Alice had more to tell me.

*The Quileute werewolves are not extinct! Bella’s new best friend is a werewolf! They have been “protecting” her from the woman vampire. I should say vampires. Laurent went after Bella too. The wolves killed him. I’m so sorry, Edward!*

But Ephraim and Quil Ateara had died long ago! Uley had to be dead, too. I didn’t understand. Alice had a lot more explaining to do if and when we got out of this mess.

“Hm,” was all I could manage in response, as horror and disapproval and guilt all vied for top position in my confusing jumble of emotions. *All that work tracking Victoria to Rio and she was in Forks?!* It would be laughable if it weren’t so horrifying. And Laurent tried to kill my precious Bella too?! I was utterly useless. Worse than useless!

Well, that was it! I wasn’t leaving her again...*ever!* She couldn’t chase me away. Even if she didn’t want me anymore, I would watch over her secretly for the rest of her life. To keep her safe.

Jane led us from the main corridor into a side tunnel, which slanted slightly downward. And just like the Volturi’s receiving room, the sloping cobblestones led to a large drain, this one set in front of a dead-end wall. An iron grate sat halfway off the drainage hole and Jane was nowhere to be seen. I knew what this was. Carlisle had told me about the ancient sewer system beneath Volterra. The Volturi guard used it as a means to enter and exit the castle secretly. Following Jane’s lead, Alice headed directly for the open hole and dropped into it without hesitation.

*Alice went down the rabbit hole,* I thought, feeling again like we had entered Lewis Carroll’s fantasy.

As I half-carried Bella toward the hole, she began to resist, her feet pedaling

backwards. Taking her into this lion's den was the last thing I wanted to do. How I wished I could tell her to *run for it!* If there had been any hope that the guard would let her go, I would have done so. But there wasn't and the only way I could protect her now was to keep her close to me. Aro thought Bella's unreadable mind was interesting, but he wouldn't be overly distraught if Felix "slipped up."

"It's all right, Bella," I said softly. "Alice will catch you." I wanted to catch her myself, but it was vital to keep her between Alice and me.

*Rosalie! Damn her!* She was the one who had gotten us into this situation in the first place! I'd like to kill her!

*Toss her down!* Alice thought cheerfully. She had a much more positive outlook about this situation than I did. I hoped she knew something I didn't. If so, she wasn't sharing it with me. *It's twelve feet,* she added.

My emotions had never been more complex. I felt extreme joy mixed with helplessness and fear for Bella's life, mixed with a sense of invincibility now that she was beside me again. More than that, though, I felt whole. The hollowness at my center had simply disappeared.

I could see that she was frightened, but Bella bravely crouched and hung her legs into the drainage hole. Twelve feet was a long way for a human to fall. I took my love's wrists in my hands and lowered her carefully into the hole so that her delicate body would not bang against the sides. With her arms over her head and me leaning into the drain, Bella would drop about five feet, but she couldn't see in the dark, so it would feel higher. I hated to do it.

"Ready?" I asked my sister.

"Drop her," Alice said, out loud this time. *I can see perfectly fine,* she reminded me. Alice was looking up into the light, while we were looking down into the dark. I heard Bella's breath stop when I let go and wondered for a fraction of a second if *she* was having a heart attack. *Please God, no!* And then she exhaled forcefully when Alice grabbed her out of the air.

*She's fine!* Alice told me.

I did the minor drop and immediately wrapped my arm around Bella's waist to help her forward. She clung to me with both of her arms. I wished so badly to know what she was thinking, but it couldn't be good. Felix and Demetri were right behind us with Felix leering at her like a baboon. She must be terrified, not to mention furious with me for getting her into this situation.

Bella stumbled forward on the uneven cobble stones, her heart pounding a jackhammer's rhythm, her breath coming much too fast.

Felix sighed behind us, thinking, *Can't we move any faster than this? It's dinnertime and she smells so good!*

I bit back a snarl. If he so much as breathed on Bella, he would lose his head and a couple of arms before he knew what hit him. Suddenly, I was grateful for all those fighting



matches Emmett and Jasper had dragged me into, even though they rarely beat me with my ability to stay one step ahead of them. Felix was taller than Emmett, but built the same way and I knew how to turn his bulk against him. Bigger isn't always better.

While I planned for a fight in one part of my brain, in a wholly different part, I rejoiced.

*Bella is alive! She's alive! Alive!* I couldn't help myself. With one arm around her waist, I reached to touch her face with the other. I cupped her cheek with my palm and brushed my thumb across her soft lips over and over. It was as close to a kiss as I could give her in these dire circumstances. I pressed my lips to her hair. *She is real!* No hallucination could recreate the scent of her hair or her skin, or her blood.

To my great surprise, that was the first time I had thought of Bella's blood. Though my throat tightened and burned fiercely, I knew that I would never harm her with my teeth—knew it with certainty. Losing her had simply burned it out of me...not the desire to drink her blood, but the fear that I would ever act on it. I couldn't even think about it without reliving the agony of losing her. I pressed my lips to her forehead with love, relief, and pure joy. This was a sad excuse for a reunion, but I would take it.

We continued moving through the Roman-built sewers which were now used as a subterranean network into and out of the castle. The walls dripped with moisture and the air was heavy with humidity. Bella's body began to shake against me. She was petrified! No...she was cold. Why was she soaking wet? She would freeze to death! For one short second, I wished I had a Volturi cape to wrap around her. Taking just her hand in mine, I released her to move her away from the chill of my body.

"N-n-no," she protested, her teeth chattering. She must be torn between feeling safer and feeling too cold. I put my arm around her again and rubbed her skin to produce a little friction.

Fortunately, I could feel artificial heat radiating into the tunnel ahead of us. We were nearing one of the reception areas meant for humans, no doubt the only heated rooms in the castle. We came to a huge iron grate that blocked the entire tunnel. When the sewer was used for its original purpose, the grate would have trapped large items—like bodies—to be collected periodically. A door made with metal straps opened in the center of the grate, originally to let through sewer gleaners and slaves. After all of us had moved to the other side, Felix closed and latched it behind us.

The massive oak-plank door ahead of us looked familiar and so did the gray carpet I saw as we approached. Waiting for us at the other end of the room was Jane—little, lethal Jane. Though merely an excruciating torture to a vampire, her gift could be lethal to humans, causing enough stress to bring on a heart attack or stroke. I scowled. Jane waited beside an open elevator. I wished with all my heart that I could keep Bella away from her.

Suddenly, I realized where we were headed...to the Volturi reception room, which doubled as the dining room. That's why the room had smelled so clearly of death and why the high-pressure water system was installed there. They washed any unpleasant remains

from their mass feedings down the drain—perhaps even bodies.

*And I was dragging my beloved into that ghastly death chamber!*