

22. In Harm's Way

The elevator ride was thankfully short. I put my body between the guards and Bella, whom I discreetly blocked into a corner. Demetri was ogling me and Felix was eyeing Bella.

Just try it, Felix, I dared him silently. I was keeping an eye on him as I held Bella around the waist and rubbed her skin to try to warm her. The chill concerned me. The elevator was heated, but I knew that where we were going was not.

It's ridiculous, Jane complained to herself. *A human? Disgusting.*

You're a fine one to judge! I thought. *Talk about arrested development!*

Alice caught my eye and began to tell me how Bella had appeared in the Volterra town square at the moment she did.

When I saw her jump off the cliff, I got on a plane for Forks immediately. You probably didn't know that we were all in Denali for Cornell spring break?

I shook my head infinitesimally without looking her way.

Carlisle and Esme were on a hunting trip when Bella and I left Forks. They're probably back by now. I told everyone else to stay home because I figured if you heard us coming, you would act rashly. Bella was the only one who could—

I nodded my understanding as the elevator door opened and interrupted her train of thought. The three Volturi guards looked moderately less threatening with their hoods down and their capes pushed back. They were wearing nondescript, beige clothing that would blend into any crowd.

I was glad to exit that elevator, though I was not glad to be headed to the banquet room. I didn't know what Aro would decide, but the Volturi had a precedent for doing away with all of us, if for no other reason than that Bella knew about us. I felt sure Aro would hold that over my head, possibly offering to let Bella and Alice go if I agreed to join the guard. If I refused to join...well...we all might die. I didn't know how much wiggling room there would be. Maybe Alice would have to join too, but I would do my best to get them both out of Volterra alive.

How I wished Carlisle were here! Perhaps Aro would be less likely to make demands, though from a distance his purported friendship with Carlisle still might work to our advantage. Bella was by far the one most in danger, though, and she wasn't directly tied to Carlisle except through me.

The elevator opened into the second, more elaborate, human waiting room with thick green carpet, the beige leather couches and high mahogany reception desk. This time, someone was working there and to my surprise, she was human! She welcomed us with a professional greeter's smile.

“Good afternoon, Jane,” she offered. Clearly, she knew the order of precedence in our little company.

Jane nodded without looking at the receptionist. “Gianna.”

Felix was leering at the woman, ostensibly attracted to her. He winked and she responded with a girlish laugh.

Gianna’s thoughts focused primarily on maintaining perfect composure as we walked by—pretending that her life was not in danger every second we remained in that windowless room with her. “Composure” also meant appearing to be jaded that the two escorted strangers were protecting a human girl and that the male obviously was involved with her somehow.

If the human is his sister or girlfriend, then I bet he could change me without losing control. I wonder if he will stick around long enough for me to work him around. I only have three years until I turn thirty and nobody will want to change me after that, she thought with dismay, though her expression remained pleasant and placid. It was too bad for her, but with my peculiar scruples, she would have better luck pursuing Felix or Santiago—or even Alice—than me.

Jane’s twin brother, Alec, stood just inside the double doors that were open to the hallway beyond the waiting room and we walked across the room to meet him. The little manchild in his light gray suit at first saw only his sister. Though they couldn’t have been apart for more than five or ten minutes, he greeted her as if she’d been gone for hours. I was guessing that the two rarely separated.

“Jane,” he said warmly, kissing her on both cheeks. “They send you out for one and you come back with two...and a half,” he commented, the “half” being Bella. “Nice work.”

Jane responded with an animated laugh so different from the profound apathy she had shown us that it was jarring. It was a mixture of childish delight and girlish coquetry.

Alec turned to me. “Welcome back, Edward. You seem in a better mood.”

“Marginally,” I replied, *if one considers wrath to be “better” than despair.*

Alec looked at Bella and chuckled. “And this is the cause of all the trouble?”

I smiled icily. Alec found it hard to believe that I could be attached to a human whose blood smelled so delicious. We were even then, because I found it hard to believe that he could “be involved” with his sister! Though I didn’t say it, of course.

Felix was still licking his chops over Bella’s scent and meant to get to her before Alec did. “Dibs,” he called crassly. *I can’t wait to get a taste of her! Raping and pillaging, that’s what we’re all about! Ha, ha!*

Enraged, I whipped my head around toward Felix and snarled a warning. I’d be happy to rip his throat out whether he was joking or not! The pumped-up hoodlum gestured toward himself with his fingers in the universal sign for “Bring it on!” I was more than tempted.

“Patience,” Alice whispered, catching my arm to steady me. *He’s too afraid of Aro to hurt Bella. He’s just yanking your chain to get you to make the first move. Don’t forget*

that we've got bigger problems than him.

I decided that for a vampire, Felix must be rather stupid. Was he so sure of his position that he would poke a caged bear with a stick? He would get a rude surprise! With effort, I held my temper.

"Aro will be so pleased to see you again," Alec commented to me.

You got that right! Demetri noted in his one-track, tracker's mind. *Everybody loves a talented boy! Look at that naked chest. Positively gorgeous!* I ignored the ogling, which was easier to tolerate than Felix's aggressive taunting.

"Let's not keep him waiting," said Jane.

Let's get this over with, I agreed with a nod. Bella had had several minutes of heat now. She was no longer shaking, but she couldn't be warm wearing wet clothes. If we didn't get out of here soon....

Alec took Jane's hand and led us into the wood-paneled hallway with the golden doors at its end. We ignored the doors again as Alec slid aside the camouflaging wall panel to reveal the simple wooden door opening into the antechamber of the Volturi's grisly dining room. We passed through it into the turret room and I noted that everything was the same as it had been the day before, except that a lot more vampires—including the wives of Caius and Aro, but excluding Caius and Marcus—were milling about, chatting like they were at a cocktail party. *Perhaps they are!* I thought with alarm. *Bloody Bellas!* I scanned the room quickly, but read no menace, only curiosity.

"Jane, dear one, you've returned!" Aro spoke elatedly, as if Jane had been gone half an eternity.

I watched Bella's reaction to Aro's chalk-white, translucent face and his clouded red eyes, both effects of age and a millennium of limited access to the outdoors. Bella's eyes grew wide when he glided toward Jane. Because Aro had stopped pretending to be human eons ago, everything about him was pure, unadulterated vampire. His movements were so fluid that with his long robe hiding his feet, he appeared to float on a cushion of air when he walked. Several body guards moved along with him, including Renata, who kept a hand on his back. He must be feeling more vulnerable with Alice and I together than with me alone.

When Aro reached Jane, he took her face in his hands and kissed her full on the mouth, a gesture I found slightly disturbing.

"Yes, Master. I brought him back alive, just as you wished," Jane responded in an adoring tone that contrasted sharply to the infinite ennui she'd exhibited except when greeting Alec.

"And Alice and Bella, too! This is a happy surprise! Wonderful!" He clapped his hands together several times like a happy child. I suppose there are few things that excite Aro after several millennia of existence. His collections of the rare and valuable are some of those things.

Bella's face registered astonishment when this unnatural creature spoke her name

as if he'd known her for years. And the horrible truth was that he knew her exactly as well as I did.

All of these vampires—but especially Aro—were so different from my family who worked hard at blending into a human environment that Bella must be anxious. If I was reading her face and body language correctly, she was fascinated, but also fearful. I vowed to do everything I could to get her out of here safely.

“Felix, be a dear and tell my brothers about our company,” Aro commanded in the cloyingly sweet tone that belied his continuous scheming. “I'm sure they wouldn't want to miss this.”

“Yes, Master,” Felix replied, hurrying to comply.

Aro turned to me with a patronizing smile. “You see, Edward? What did I tell you? Aren't you glad that I didn't give you what you wanted yesterday?” Aro asked, emphasizing the point like a grammar school teacher.

“Yes, Aro, I am,” I replied and truly I was. But I wasn't too thrilled about his motives.

“I love a happy ending. They are so rare,” Aro said with a sigh. I hoped the comment boded well for today's ending too. It seemed we had a long way to go. Aro continued, “But I want the whole story. How did this happen? Alice? Your brother seemed to think you infallible, but apparently there was some mistake.”

Aro spoke to my sister as if he knew her, which again, he did, though she didn't know him in the slightest. I hoped I wasn't so presumptive around acquaintances because I could read their minds. It seemed rude.

“Oh, I'm far from infallible,” Alice replied, charming Aro with a brilliant smile. “As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.” My sister was wisely trying to counterbalance my confrontational attitude. I could see the strain in her hands, which were clenched into fists, though her face and attitude showed no signs of tension.

“You're too modest,” Aro countered. “I've seen some of your more amazing exploits, and I must admit I've never observed anything like your talent. Wonderful!”

So you spilled my guts to Aro! Alice accused. She knew that Aro could read minds, but she didn't know to what extent. His gift is much different than mine. Though he can't grab thoughts out of the air as I can, he still missed nothing, including that surreptitious exchange.

“I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced properly at all, have we?” he apologized while also hinting to Alice of his power over her. “It's just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother introduced us yesterday, in a peculiar way. You see, I share some of your brother's talent, only I am limited in a way that he is not.” That was how Aro saw our difference, which explained why he coveted my skill in addition to his own. I did not agree with his assessment.

“And also exponentially more powerful,” I pointed out for Alice's benefit and for his. Nothing good could come of Aro's envy. “Aro needs physical contact to hear your

thoughts, but he hears much more than I do. You know I can only hear what's passing through your head in the moment. Aro hears every thought your mind has ever had," I explained.

Alice's eyebrows rose as she inquired silently, *He disk-copied your brain?*

I raised my chin to signal "yes."

Then why does he need you?

Aro, who was nothing if not observant, guessed at the question and answered it himself.

"But to be able to hear from a distance..." he mused, waggling a finger between the two of us to indicate that he knew we were communicating silently. "That would be so convenient," he finished wistfully.

Just then, Felix returned with Caius and Marcus, who looked us over. Uncharacteristically, Marcus perked up when he saw Bella and I together. His mind was still vacant, but projected a fleeting sense of astonishment. I didn't catch exactly what had startled him.

"Marcus, Caius, look! Bella is alive after all, and Alice is here with her! Isn't that wonderful?"

Marcus's brief awareness already had waned and Caius did not share his brother's enthusiasm for collecting. His primary interest was in law and order and meting out Volturi justice, particularly the death penalty. Aro remained undaunted.

"Let us have the story," he prompted.

Marcus suddenly took center stage when he reacted to the request by gliding toward Aro, briefly holding out his hand to touch his brother's palm.

The boy and the human are bonded like mates, tighter even, much tighter than a man should be with his pet. When he kills her, it will destroy him.

Aro raised an eyebrow. "Thank you, Marcus. That's quite interesting."

I was disgusted at Marcus's assessment and snorted dismissively. He took no notice of me as he went to sit on his carved wooden throne beside Caius. The two wives and several body guards arranged themselves nearby.

"Amazing, absolutely amazing," Aro marveled, shaking his head.

Edward, what are they saying?! Alice asked impatiently.

I replied softly. "Marcus sees relationships. He's surprised by the intensity of ours."

Aro smiled. "So convenient," he whispered to himself, referring again to my gift. *He doesn't have to touch her or even be close to her!* Then he spoke aloud. "It takes quite a bit to surprise Marcus, I can assure you."

In my head, I translated that to: *It takes quite a bit to rouse Marcus...* The dark-haired brother reacted to almost nothing, his emptiness and indifference were so vast. Carlisle had told me that Marcus lost his beloved mate hundreds of years ago and has never recovered. I could understand that rather well since I had lost Bella, but I wondered why Marcus continued to exist in his state of nothingness.

Aro's overexcited mind suddenly latched on to the way I was holding Bella.

"It's just so difficult to understand, even now. How can you stand so close to her like that?"

"It's not without effort," I acknowledged.

"But still—*la tua cantante!* What a waste!"

I chuckled sardonically at the enormous difference in our outlooks. Of course a drinker of human blood would value the blood more than the soul.

"I look at it more as a price," I explained.

Aro was bewildered. *What could possibly be worth more than that sweet, sweet blood?* "A very high price," he qualified.

"Opportunity cost," I said a little flippantly. It wasn't possible for Aro to understand so I wanted to waste no more effort explaining myself.

He laughed delightedly, but his thoughts were developing an alarming undercurrent the longer we talked about Bella.

"If I hadn't smelled her through your memories, I wouldn't have believed the call of anyone's blood could be so strong. I've never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade much for such a gift, and yet you..."

"Waste it," I cut in, wanting to disrupt his prolonged obsessing that was veering into desire—for Bella's blood. It exasperated me, but I worked to keep my cool.

"Ah, how I miss my friend Carlisle! You remind me of him—only he was not so angry."

"Carlisle outshines me in many other ways as well," I pointed out. *No, Carlisle is not an angry person. He expects and usually gets the best out of everyone. I am more suspicious and impatient.* And I was getting mighty impatient with this chitchat that wasn't addressing the elephant in the room—*What are you going to do with us?*

"I certainly never thought to see Carlisle bested for self-control of all things, but you put him to shame." Translation, *You are indeed most unusual and therefore, highly desirable to acquire.*

"Hardly." It didn't take much thinking to recognize the miracle of Carlisle's self-control as he worked with humans every day, often covering himself in their blood in his efforts to heal them. Loving Bella as I did was not difficult—it was a simple necessity.

Aro could not stop mulling over each and every memory of Carlisle I'd ever had. *He is much too keen for this to be a good thing,* was my foremost thought.

"I am gratified by his success," Aro declared (meaning *I am disturbed by his success*) after his thoughts lingered over the details of the fulfilling lives Carlisle had built for us in North America.

"Your memories of him are quite a gift for me though they astonish me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it...*pleases* me, his success in this unorthodox path he's chosen. I expected that he would waste, weaken with time. I'd scoffed at his plan to find others who would share his peculiar vision. Yet, somehow, I'm happy to be wrong."

Happy for him, not so much for me, Aro concluded to himself.

I had grown tired of waiting for the ax to fall and wanted to know what I would have to do to resolve our situation, but Aro would not be hurried. I couldn't tell if it was to build tension and fear or if he had so few pleasures in his existence that he wanted to stretch this one out.

"But *your* restraint," he went on. "I did not know such strength was possible. To inure yourself against such a siren call, not just once but again and again—if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed."

The longer Aro talked about Bella, the more dangerous he became to her. We were in the Volturi banquet room at what I guessed was dinnertime and the longer we were there, the more the room filled with Bella's sweet scent. His words were making everybody thirsty, Felix behind me, Alec and Jane beside him, Demetri next to them, and to my great shame, even me. My own vulnerability made me as angry as anything else.

"Just remembering how she appeals to you..." Aro doggedly continued. "It makes me thirsty." The desire in his eyes was unmistakable.

I readied myself for a fight. It would not be with Aro—just like he got thirsty by proxy (through my memory), he would battle me by proxy if he chose to attack Bella. Aro was becoming eager to touch her too, which heightened my trepidation.

"Don't be disturbed," Aro purred when he saw me tense and clench my fists. "I mean her no harm. But I am so curious, about one thing in particular. May I?" he glanced at Bella, but was asking my permission to read her mind. I felt my jaw clamp down.

Chill out, Edward. He's not going to hurt her, Alice informed me.

I looked at him. "Ask her," I directed, the tone of my voice unfriendly, but not confrontational.

He was treating Bella like she was my pet dog. It was insufferable to hear him refer to her as little more than an animal, then as an aromatic appetizer, and then to test her value as a potential acquisition. It was like kicking the tires on a used car or squeezing the breasts of a candidate for house slave. The latter enraged me even more than his wanting to acquire me.

"Of course, how rude of me!" he exclaimed, chuckling.

Yes, worse than rude. Bestial. I was becoming quite tired of our being treated as exhibits in a zoo. I could understand very clearly why Carlisle had fled Italy so long ago.

"Bella," Aro said, turning ceremoniously to her. "I'm fascinated that you are the one exception to Edward's impressive talent—so very interesting that such a thing should occur! And I was wondering, since our talents are similar in many ways, if you would be so kind as to allow me to try—to see if you are an exception for me, as well?"

I could almost feel Bella's body cringe as she looked at me, her deep liquid eyes questioning if he should be allowed to touch her. She didn't really have a choice, but Alice was certain that Aro would not hurt her by reading her mind, so I nodded. I hoped she didn't faint.

Bella raised her hand and Aro floated over to her to press his palm against hers. She didn't flinch, brave as she is, but though he gave her a solicitous smile, her hand was shaking in fright. Aro pinned her in place with his cloudy crimson eyes as he began to peer inside her mind.

His eager smile quickly changed to curiosity and then faded to irritation. He was getting...*nothing*. I had to use my renowned self-control to hold back a smile at what had to be his first failure to probe a mind. *My Bella!*

Aro dropped Bella's hand, irritated but intrigued, and moved away from her. Then he quietly considered the trio in front of him, Alice, Bella, and I, each of us unique. He was struggling to take it all in.

"A first," Aro mused. "I wonder if she is immune to our other talents...Jane, dear?"

"No!" I snarled at Aro, ready to attack if Jane tried to hurt Bella. Alice grabbed my arm to warn me, but I would take the strike gladly before I would let Jane do that to her. It could *kill* her!

"Yes, Master?" Jane answered sweetly.

I snarled menacingly at Aro, visibly challenging his authority. The minds around the room were stunned into silence, or embarrassment, except for Felix who wanted to attack. Clearly, nobody here *ever* challenged Aro's authority. But this was plain cruel, not to mention unnecessary. He could test Bella's mind any number of ways...using Demetri, or even Alec, without hurting her. He had no cause to attack Bella!

Aro ignored me and spoke directly to Jane. "I was wondering, my dear one, if Bella is immune *to you*."

I growled fiercely, keeping my eyes locked on Jane. When she turned toward Bella, happily prepared to inflict pain, I threw myself at her instinctively.

"Don't!" Alice cried out to me. I didn't get as far as Jane, reaping my punishment before I was halfway there.

The torture was far worse than I would have thought possible. The flames instantly filled every vein, artery, and blood vessel in my body. It was the fire of my change at full force in every part of me at once.

Bella can't see me suffer. She'll try to intervene, was my first and only thought. It took every microgram of will in me—then double that—to prevent myself from screaming in agony. Time stretched into an infinity of fire, each second becoming minutes becoming hours becoming days until I would have begged to die if I could have spoken a word. But I could only endure. I squeezed my teeth together with crushing force and felt my body thrash about on the floor.

I heard Bella shriek, "Stop!" but the burning continued, one endless moment after another.

I've got her. My brain vaguely registered the words Alice was speaking silently, as she tried to ease my distress in a small way by keeping Bella safe for me.

"Jane," Aro said dispassionately. I understood then that he was testing the power of

the bond Marcus told him existed between Bella and myself. And though he had just seen visible proof of it, he still couldn't grasp it.

The instant Jane turned her head the pain faded as quickly as it had begun, leaving no residue in my body except for a heightened fear of Jane's power. Knowing that the punishment could come at any time for any reason was nerve-wracking.

At the first moment I regained control of my muscles, I hopped to my feet as casually as possible and looked up. With sudden panic, I saw that Jane was directing her eyes at Bella. I froze in alarm before I realized that Bella hadn't noticed. She was struggling in Alice's restraining arms, still focused on me. I wanted to laugh and cheer, but instead, I sighed in immense relief.

"He's fine," Alice told Bella, though I could hear the tension in her voice. It must be horrible to watch someone go through that and be helpless to stop it.

So Aro couldn't read Bella's mind and Jane couldn't torture her! Probably Demetri couldn't find her or Alec paralyze her either. Yet another miracle in a day of miracles! Jane concentrated even harder on Bella, her confusion and fury rising every second. I took Bella from Alice's arms and pulled her close to me again, wrapping my arm around her protectively.

To my surprise, Aro began to laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! This is wonderful!" He clapped his hands in glee. Jane, violently angry now, crouched to spring at Bella and I tensed to intercept her.

Aro stopped Jane with a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be put out, dear one," he consoled her. "She confounds us all."

Bella had just made an enemy of the worst kind through no fault of her own. Of all the guard members to take up a vendetta against her, Jane was the most dangerous and destructive.

"Ha, ha, ha," Aro chuckled. "You're very brave, Edward, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do that to me once—just out of curiosity." Aro shook his head in disbelief, while I couldn't hide my revulsion at his cruel games.

"So what do we do with you now?" Aro asked himself aloud. After all his toying with us, finally he had gotten to the point.