

## 23. Verdict

Aro began pacing with his chin in his hand. Bella was trembling beside me as both Alice and I prepared ourselves for the worst. We watched and analyzed his every gesture, his every breath, feeling the guillotine poised over our heads.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you’ve changed your mind?” Aro inquired of me. “Your talent would be an excellent addition to our little company.”

The noisy thoughts behind us distracted me for a moment.

*Oh boy, the Boy!* (Demetri)

*He’s a mind reader, so what? You’re a mind reader! We don’t need him. Now the human, on the other hand...* (Felix)

*He’s broken the rules. He must die! His pet human too!* (Jane)

*Where the hell is Heidi? I’m thirsty.* (Alec)

Answering Aro’s question was like walking a tightrope over an alligator pit. One wrong move and you wouldn’t die instantly—but you might wish to. I could not tell what Aro’s reaction would be to our refusals. I wondered if Alice could.

“I’d...rather...not,” I replied in the mildest tone I could manage under the circumstances. From his point of view, he was offering me the greatest honor a vampire could receive. Though I wholeheartedly disagreed, I felt it would be wise to decline politely.

“Alice?” Aro asked, turning to my sister. “Would you perhaps be interested in joining with us?”

She followed my lead. “No, thank you,” Alice replied, keeping her tone pleasant.

Then Aro caught me off guard.

“And you, Bella?” he inquired.

I could not suppress the hiss that issued from my lips. Aro was prepared to change her himself! *I will not allow it!*

Bella was taken aback. Or was her wide expression one of fright?

“What?” Caius interrupted before she could answer, his disapproval clear. *He wants a human? Absolutely not! The law does not allow it.*

“Caius, surely you see the potential,” Aro explained indulgently. “I haven’t seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?”

Caius was mentally dismissive. *Eh, better a human should feed us.*

Jane was instantly furious. *How dare he compare me to that...that...human?*

*I hardly think so,* Alec thought mildly.

I was furious at all of them and felt a growl begin to rumble in my chest. Caius wanted to kill her and Aro wanted to keep her!

Bella glanced at me furtively and then said “No, thank you” to Aro, her voice coming out a tiny squeak.

“That’s unfortunate,” Aro responded regretfully. “Such a waste.”

A “waste.” That was the word he had used when he knew I wanted to die. Was he saying it was a waste that Bella would die? That he would let Caius kill her? I was pretty sure that Aro didn’t want to kill any of us...or let Caius kill us either. Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Join or die, is that it?” I hotly accused Aro. “I suspected as much when we were brought to *this* room. So much for your laws.” My voice was angrier than necessary and I *was* angry. It was, however, a controlled, strategic anger.

“Of course not,” Aro denied, shocked by my accusation. “We were already convened here, Edward, awaiting Heidi’s return. Not for you.”

Thank God, I was right. Indeed, Aro’s thoughts told me that he *distinctly* did not want to kill us.

I didn’t think Marcus would put up any resistance to letting us go—what did he care?—but we would have to get around Caius’s propensity for meting out “justice.” I decided the best approach was to challenge him head-on. I could use his rigid view of the law in our favor...*maybe*.

“Aro,” Caius murmured. “The law claims them.”

*Just as I thought!*

“How so?” I challenged Caius, hoping he would trap himself.

“She knows too much. You have exposed our secrets,” Caius accused.

*Got him!*

*Good one, Edward!* Alice thought, though I hadn’t gotten to the punch line yet, which I did straight away.

“There are a few humans in on your charade here, as well,” I pointed out. There was Gianna, obviously, and I’d seen a human janitor cleaning the “cells” when I left my monk’s quarters the day before. I’d bet a sow’s ear that the Volturi also had a priest on the payroll to keep the citizens’ attention focused away from themselves. A sermon every now and then on the great Saint Marcus would ensure that.

Caius grinned evilly.

“Yes, but when *they* are no longer useful to us, they will serve to sustain us. That is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you prepared to destroy her? I think not,” he taunted, knowing my answer.

Bella tried to speak for herself. “I wouldn’t—,” she began, but Caius looked at her as he would a dog that had just urinated on the Persian carpet.

“Nor do you intend to make her one of us,” he declared to me authoritatively.

*Damn! Aro had told him!*

“Therefore, she is a vulnerability,” Caius continued. “Though it is true, for this, only *her* life is forfeit. You may leave if you wish.”

Bella inhaled sharply and I tightened my arm around her waist. I barely choked back a growl, but my bared teeth made my response clear.

“That’s what I thought,” Caius stated triumphantly.

*Yes! Felix cheered silently behind me. I called it!*

I wanted to turn around and pound his head so hard he’d have to unzip his Italian trousers to drink his dinner. *Later*, I promised myself. Suddenly, I missed Emmett—a lot.

Though Caius had angered me by threatening Bella, his declaration was not all bad news. We’d just been told in front of many witnesses that Alice and I were not subject to death. It was one hurdle behind us. Now I had to find a loophole to pull Bella through. They would have to kill me before I’d let anyone harm her!

*Bella!* I had been focusing so hard on maneuvering us out of our predicament that I hadn’t had a second to appreciate the miracle of her resurrection. I wanted to look into her eyes and hold her and tell her how I loved her and how I had made an unforgivable error and that I was sorry...sorrier than I could ever express...and *please* would she try to forgive me anyway...*please* would she have me back?? I had no choice but to wait, though. We had no future together if either of us had no future.

Aro’s mind was churning after Caius’s pronouncement. *What can I do? How can I keep her? I must keep her alive, at least.*

I had been wrong about Aro when we first arrived. Now that he knew neither he nor Jane—the most powerful of the Volturi and the guard—could get inside Bella’s mind, he would not take Bella’s death lightly.

If Felix were to slip up now, I did not think he would survive the mistake. From what I could read in his limited mind, he had no special gift; the Volturi kept him for his intimidation factor. However, Aro could find size and strength virtually anywhere. It was unlikely that I would get a death sentence if I chose to kill Felix.

Aro had latched onto something Caius had said—“*Nor do you intend to make her one of us...*”—and had an idea, a legal ambiguity that would solve his dilemma.

“Unless...” Aro ventured. “Unless you do intend to give her immortality?”

It was a deal that could save all of us. And *intend* can be construed a number of ways. I might *intend* to today, but change my mind tomorrow, right? *It could work.* I noticed that Alice had unclenched her fists at some point during these last exchanges. She must agree with me.

“And if I do?” I said, testing the waters.

Aro smiled brightly. “Why, then you would be free to go home and give my regards to my friend Carlisle.”

Bella’s heart leaped.

Having read my mind, Aro knew that changing Bella went against every petrified bone in my body, but would he disregard that information in order to keep Bella alive?

*Please let it be so...*

Caius was scowling furiously at Aro, not at all happy with his brother's implied offer that was, essentially, "*Say yes, and we'll let you go.*"

Though Aro was spokesman for the three brothers—the wives were present, but they didn't appear to get a vote—ultimately, he still had to answer to Caius. Aro would not directly contradict or undermine his brother and Marcus's quiet, frozen form implied that he was "abstaining."

With a glance at Caius, Aro amended the offer. "But I'm afraid you would have to mean it," he clarified. He lifted his palm toward me in the handshake position, demonstrating to his brother that he would verify any claim I made. Caius relaxed and lost his scowl.

So there was the deal—promise to change Bella at some time in the future or Bella dies today. She forfeits either her soul or her life. I looked into Bella's eyes and saw the most beautiful, pure soul looking back at me, trusting me.

"Mean it," Bella whispered. "Please."

So she was still willing to join the ranks of the damned. How could I *ever* agree to that? Naturally, I wanted to guarantee Bella's life, but at the expense of her soul? It was selfish. *It was wrong!* And I knew in my heart that I couldn't do it.

*Ahhh!* I wanted to hit something, to cry, to scream, but again, I was helpless. Even running was impossible. If I wouldn't change Bella, Aro would let Caius kill her. This was tacitly agreed between them. Though I cared nothing for my life without her, I couldn't let *her die! This was all my fault!*

From the corner of my eye, I saw Alice step forward and silently offer her hand to Aro. What was she doing? Why would letting him read her mind make any difference to this situation, unless she had decided to trade herself for Bella's release?

*I can't let her do that!* I thought desperately. Aro wanted Alice more than anything—more than me. He might even defy his brother and let Bella go without restrictions if he won the biggest prize of all. *No, Alice, no!*

Aro's body guards leaped to protect him, but he gestured for them to stand down. Renata continued to touch his cloak, but I could feel the field of confusion she generated shrink in size. Aro's eyes glittered with excitement as *precious Alice* offered herself to him.

Aro took her hand and began to concentrate, as did I, trying to follow the information he was speedily absorbing. Alice showed no expression as Aro rifled through the "exploits" he'd read from my memory to check if they were true. He was thrilled to find that they were. After noting the love Alice had for Bella and me, love that had drawn her into this dangerous situation to help us, Aro began watching Alice and Bella's race to my side in Volterra.

Then I saw it and I had to struggle to maintain my composure. I clenched my jaws and fists against the impulse to snatch my sister away from Aro.

*Alice, what have you done? No!*

After what seemed like an eternity, Aro released Alice's hand and began to laugh in delight.

"Ha, ha, ha. That was *fascinating!*" he exclaimed.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Alice replied with a stoic smile.

"To see the things you've seen—especially the ones that haven't happened yet!"

Aro went on excitedly.

"But that will," Alice emphasized in an oddly purposeful way.

Then I realized what was happening. First, Aro saw Alice's fateful vision from last spring when she said that either I would kill Bella or she would become one of us. It was an old vision that easily could have changed by now, but *Aro* didn't know that. He only saw the certainty of that vision when it happened...and Alice had felt very certain about it back then. As Aro watched Alice's memories move forward in time to the present, he saw Alice talking to Bella on the airplane to Volterra. (And now I did too.)

*"Honestly, I think it's all gotten beyond ridiculous. I'm debating whether to just change you myself.... He'll be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?"*

*Alice!* I chided inwardly, the "he" being me, of course. But it was *brilliant!* Aro knew from reading my mind that I was dead set against changing Bella, but now he believed that *Alice* would be the one to do it.

Aro was still going on about it. "Yes, yes, it's quite determined," he said confidently. "Certainly there's no problem."

*Yes!* Aro had interpreted Alice's memories in the way she'd known he would. By seeing all of the times her visions had been exactly right, he was convinced that Alice was omniscient. She wasn't—I would never allow her to change Bella and she knew it! But as long as Aro believed it, the world had turned right again.

"Aro," Caius grumbled his disapproval, which was echoed in Jane's thoughts behind me.

Aro jollied his brother along. "Dear Caius, do not fret. Think of the possibilities! They do not join us today, but we can always hope for the future. Imagine the joy young Alice alone would bring to our little household... Besides, I'm so terribly curious to see how Bella turns out!"

I heard the mental groans from Felix and Jane, but nobody else in the room cared one way or the other (except for Demetri, but I was positive he would recover almost instantly the moment I left Volterra).

Bella's body began to slump against me and I grew concerned about her welfare. Was she going into shock? Would she faint? Was she hypothermic? We had to get out of there immediately!

"Then we are free to go now?" I asked calmly, as if I didn't have a care in the world.

"Yes, yes," Aro granted. "But please visit again. It's been absolutely enthralling!" He was the excited child again. As far as Aro was concerned, the dream was still alive! He had averted the destruction of all his potential new toys.

“And we will visit you as well,” Caius added ominously. “To be sure that you follow through on your side. Were I you, I would not delay too long. We do not offer second chances.”

*Right. Warning noted.* The whole idea of changing Bella set my teeth on edge, but I managed to keep my mouth shut and just nod my agreement. There must be a way around this. I would find one. At the moment, though, Bella’s immediate well-being was my greatest concern.

Pleased with his victory, as he saw it, Caius wandered back to join his brother, Marcus, who had not moved a millimeter during the entire drama. I was right—this little matter of life and death (ours) hadn’t roused his interest in the least. Fortunately, that had been to our advantage in this case.

I heard Felix groan audibly. *I don’t get my prize?* He’d had his heart set on drinking Bella’s blood, which had set my heart on setting him alight. I promised myself a reckoning one day soon.

“Ah, Felix,” Aro smiled indulgently. “Heidi will be here at any moment. Patience.”

I didn’t think Bella knew about Heidi’s role...yet. I very much preferred she never know. Alice caught on right away.

“In that case, perhaps we’d better leave sooner rather than later,” I suggested politely, wishing to depart expeditiously, but with as much goodwill as possible. It was likely that we would need it in the future. Otherwise, I’d have picked up Bella and made a run for it.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Accidents do happen. Please wait below until after dark, though, if you don’t mind,” Aro responded courteously.

*Isn’t this nice?* I thought, heavy sarcasm implied, but I squelched the impulse.

“Of course,” I said agreeably.

Aro looked at me with his head tilted sideways as if he were evaluating me somehow. Then he flicked a finger at Felix to approach, which the obedient guard did without hesitation. I smiled to myself at the unspoken insult to come.

Reaching forward, Aro undid the fastenings of Felix’s hooded cloak and unceremoniously stripped it off him. Then he pitched it to me.

“And here. Take this. You’re a little conspicuous.”

*Yes, he is!* came the predictable thought from behind me.

*Does he never quit?* I wondered.

Felix was seething, which amused me. Aro had literally given me the robe off of the goon’s back. There was no time to gloat, however. I accepted the too-big cloak and slung it around my shoulders. The wool would warm Bella.

“It suits you,” Aro said with regret. He truly hated to let us go, but he enjoyed seeing me wear that cloak.

I chuckled at the joke. “Thank you, Aro,” I responded, feeling oddly grateful. “We’ll wait below.”

Just then I heard a group of voices approaching from the hallway. The strangers' thoughts were mixed—some excited, others confused, but most fawning.

“Goodbye, young friends.” Aro dismissed us and then focused his attention on the sound of Heidi's approach.

“Let's go,” I said urgently. It was vital that we get the hell out of there *now!*

Demetri assigned himself to be our escort to the waiting room, though it wasn't far. Pulling Bella between us, Alice and I rushed for the one door to the turret room that served as both entrance and exit.

“Not fast enough,” Alice warned. Bella looked at her fearfully.

The voices were coming through the waiting room and into the outer hall. We darted through the antechamber but met the crowd already squeezing through the small wooden door. It wasn't wide enough to pass through against the stream. Probably, that was by design. Demetri motioned for us to flatten ourselves against the stone wall to make room for the crowd coming in.

*We have to get out of here!* I thought, near panic. Bella was bound to figure out what was going on any second. I watched for a break in the crowd that would allow me to get her out the door and away from this flock of sheep heading for slaughter.

“Well this is unusual,” spoke a loud, fat man, obviously American.

Alice was on the other side of Bella trying to relieve her stress through fashion analysis.

*Dangerously strained Bermuda shorts, too—short white t-shirt, black dress socks with gi-normous white running shoes, humungous camera around the neck, cheap flip-up sunglasses. Should people get the death penalty for crimes of fashion?* Alice wondered.

“So medieval,” screeched a large woman, the female counterpart to her husband.

*White knit leggings, four inches too short, slightly see-through, big, bunchy granny panties, cheap t-shirt with kittens riding up the belly...*

The forty-two tourists pressed through the undersized door one after another after another, bunching up in the antechamber until the people in the front were nudged into the turret room.

“Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra!” Aro called out to his dinner guests.

A tiny nun was clutching her rosary and looking frightened. She was very close to guessing the truth, that something was terribly amiss. She had signed up for a tour of Catholic churches in Tuscany and she knew something was not right. She repeatedly tugged at the sleeves of the other tourists, asking urgent questions they could not understand in Czech. Everyone else spoke Italian, French, and English.

I held Bella's face to my chest and blocked her view of the crowd, which would soon catch on to the ruse and begin panicking. Already she had observed the nun's obvious distress. Suddenly, Bella's body began to quake against me and I knew that she'd just put two and two together. Alarmed for her, I lurched toward the small door the instant the last tourist cleared it and pushed Bella through in front of me. Horror, shock, or pain ... I didn't

know which emotion was taking precedence, but she wore a stricken expression and water was beginning to pool in her eyes.

Heidi remained in the hallway after herding her charges through the door and I felt her magnetism immediately. She was tall and as beautiful as any vampire woman, with hair a similar color to Bella's and falsely blue eyes, but she had something extra. With her gift, I could see that she was well-suited to her ghastly job.

"Welcome home, Heidi," called Demetri as he followed us through the doorway.

"Demetri," she replied smoothly, but she was looking at me in Felix's too-long cloak with my arm around a human, running *away* from the dining hall. It confounded her.

"Nice fishing," Demetri praised.

"Thanks," Heidi replied with a wide smile. "Aren't you coming?"

"In a minute. Save a few for me," he said with a smirk.

*So...Demetri likes to sample the grass on both sides of the fence.* It was more than I needed to know.

I began to jog toward the double doors into the waiting room to get Bella behind their sound proofing, but it was too late—the feast had already begun. Screams of terror tore through the air, chasing us all the way to our questionable refuge.