

## 24. Flight

“Do not leave until dark,” Demetri told us, echoing Aro’s command. *Or not at all*, he added silently, winking at me. I was in no mood. Fortunately, he was very thirsty and did not want to miss out on the hot, pulsing elixir that was flowing abundantly in the turret room. The thought wiped his face clean of its amusement and he turned to rush back down the hall, pulling the double doors closed as he went.

Behind the reception desk, Gianna was shrewdly eyeing Felix’s gray cloak draped around my shoulders.

*Is he one of us now?* she wondered. *He can’t be too important or he’d be wearing a darker color. But why is he still holding the human? Shouldn’t she be down the hall with the rest of them? How can she leave? Could I leave too if I wanted?* She looked thoughtful for a moment. *No, someone will change me. I just have to play my cards right.*

Gianna wanted to ask me if I would be staying, but she was too well trained to pry.

*Maybe even the little one*, she thought, looking at Alice. *She looks well-controlled too so close to that girl. And their eyes are so black! They must be taking her somewhere else to feed and that’s why she’s shaking like that. Oh well.* She hoped Alice and I would be back.

“Are you all right?” I whispered to Bella, though anyone could see that she was anything but. Her entire body was quaking like a cartoon character with his finger in an electrical outlet; her teeth bounced together like the plastic ones Emmett kept on the coffee table, winding them up to chatter and hop when the Washington Huskies scored a touchdown.

*What should I do?* I fretted, glancing around the room as if the answer were written on the walls. I was starting to panic myself as tears began streaming down Bella’s face. I had never seen her lose it like this before. She was always so brave.

“You’d better make her sit before she falls,” Alice told me. “She’s going to pieces.”

She certainly was. A high, keening sound was vibrating through her vocal chords and her watery eyes looked wild, like an elk’s right before I sank my teeth into its neck.

“Shh, Bella, shh,” I said softly as I tugged her to the leather couch farthest away from Gianna so she couldn’t stare as she clearly wanted to do.

“I think she’s having hysterics. Maybe you should slap her,” Alice advised.

*She was joking, wasn’t she?* I wondered, looking at Alice, a question in my eye. She wasn’t. I was beginning to panic myself. Was my darling harmed for life? Would she ever recover from the horrendous trauma I’d put her through? I sat down and pulled Bella onto my lap, wrapping the huge cloak around her for warmth. Her blue jeans were still wet,

though at least this room was heated.

“It’s all right, you’re safe, it’s all right,” I soothed over and over, holding her close and wishing I had a heartbeat to calm her. I remember from medical school that nurses often put ticking clocks into the cribs of newborn babies to simulate the sound of their mother’s heartbeat and lull them to sleep.

“All...those...people,” Bella stuttered, gulping air after each word. Sobs were shaking her delicate frame.

“I know,” I murmured gently.

“It’s...so...horrible,” she managed to get out on jagged exhalations.

“Yes, it is. I wish you hadn’t had to see that.”

Bella laid her head against my chest in the old, familiar way, and I wanted to cry too...cry away the months of pain, the horror of losing her, the shock and joy of getting her back. It was all so much...too much. I stroked her thick, soft hair, reveling in the smell of her, the feel of her body, the sound of her heartbeat. I had missed her so *dreadfully!*

Gianna, registering a problem, moved quietly to us and leaned over my shoulder from behind, speaking softly next to my ear.

“Is there anything I can get you?” she asked me conspiratorially, as if wanting to assist with the intransigent human.

“No,” I said firmly, wishing her to go away. She was already more vampire than human in her professional lack of compassion for the species of which she was still a part. She nodded her understanding and flashed Bella a smile, though she wasn’t thinking particularly kind thoughts about her.

*What is her problem? He’s gorgeous and he obviously wants her for...something,* she thought as she turned on her heels and went back to her desk. Perhaps Bella *could* use something hot with sugar. I wondered if they kept such things in this unnatural place.

Bella pulled herself together a bit and asked, “Does she know what’s going on here?”

“Yes. She knows everything,” I said.

“Does she know they’re going to kill her someday?”

“She knows it’s a possibility,” I told her truthfully, finding it difficult to empathize with this cold human. “She’s hoping they’ll decide to keep her.”

The color in Bella’s face drained away and her body felt suddenly heavier in my arms.

“How can she want that?” Bella moaned. “How can she watch those people file through to that hideous room and want to be a part of *that?*”

I felt my dead heart twist at her words. *Exactly,* I thought. *And how could you ever want me knowing that I’m a part of that?*

“Oh, Edward,” Bella cried desperately, sobs erupting from her chest again.

“What’s wrong?” I worried, rubbing her back in an attempt at comfort, which I felt incapable of giving. I was no better than the rest of them under the surface. I was not meant

for this beautiful, brave, heroic mortal. Nevertheless, she wrapped both her arms around my neck and I was overwhelmed with the miracle of that.

“Is it really sick for me to be happy right now?” she asked in a broken voice full of emotion.

I pulled her closer, trying to absorb the reality of her presence. I had never felt such joy, despite the disaster we had just experienced and which was not over yet.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I murmured into her ear, thrilled to get this second chance. “But we have lots of reasons to be happy. For one, we’re alive.” That was another miracle. We’d both come within a razor’s width of destruction.

“Yes,” Bella agreed. “That’s a good one.”

“And together,” I sighed into Bella’s hair, luxuriating in the scent I had missed so much for so long. “And, with any luck, we’ll still be alive tomorrow.”

“Hopefully,” Bella said with a moment’s hesitation. She still must be frightened—of course she was! She was the human one here, the one whose life had been most in danger for the last few hours.

“The outlook is quite good,” Alice piped up assuredly. “I’ll see Jasper in less than twenty-four hours.”

I was happy for that. Alice had risked her life to save mine so that Bella and I could be together again. I would owe her until the end of our days. And I was happy for Jasper too, though he would never learn just how close he’d come to losing his beloved Alice forever. I apologized and thanked him in one breath.

Bella was looking at my face and I couldn’t stop gazing at hers...her pale skin, her deep chocolate eyes, and the crease between her eyebrows that seemed a little more set in than it had been when I left. What had happened to her all these long months? I knew only a little—that she had been hounded by two of my kind while I was dashing around, unaware of one of them and convinced I had the other one in my sights. And she’d had to rely on a pack of werewolves—almost as dangerous themselves—to protect her! I was mortified by my ineptitude, stupidity, and lack of foresight. I could never make it up to her.

I was grateful that the wolves had killed Laurent. *Victoria was one dead vampire too*, I vowed. But I didn’t want to think about that now. I only wanted to appreciate the beautiful face in front of me.

I touched the darkened skin beneath Bella’s eyes in concern. “You look so tired,” I whispered.

“And you look thirsty,” Bella whispered back, looking into my ebony eyes and reminding me that my throat should be in flames. The pain was there, of course, it could not be avoided, but it was surprisingly easy to disregard.

“It’s nothing,” I told her and it wasn’t. Not with Bella here, alive.

“Are you sure? I could sit with Alice,” Bella offered, but she couldn’t because I would never let her go again.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I countered. “I’ve never been in better control of *that* side of

my nature than right now.”

I took a deep breath to prove it. Perhaps the ugly scene I’d just witnessed through Bella’s eyes was the cause, but I didn’t think so. It felt more like losing Bella had altered my makeup somehow. I could no more consider drinking Bella’s blood than eating my own flesh. Marcus had been right—hurting her would destroy me.

Bella relaxed into my arms and, amazingly, was able to rest a little despite our environment and my cold, hard body. Again, I was grateful to Aro for the heavy cloak.

“Quite the day,” Alice commented.

“Thank you Alice. I can never repay you for this.”

“Oh, you’ll repay me,” she joked and I saw an image of a yellow Porsche in her mind.

“Really?” I inquired. I never would have guessed.

“Yes, well, I borrowed one down in Florence for a test drive and it was perfect for me, though I almost had to sit on a phone book to see over the steering wheel. The seats sit so low, you know.”

“I imagine we could find a remedy for that,” I said, smiling. She grinned back.

“So you stole a car to get here?”

“I *was* in a slight hurry, you know!”

“Yes, I know. Sorry about that.” I wanted to say I was sorry for so many things, but it seemed better at this juncture to keep things somewhat light. We were not out of the woods yet. “So where is the amazing banana rocket?”

“I left it outside the walls with the keys in it. No doubt someone has reported it stolen, or has re-stolen it. Either way, it will get back to its owner eventually. It’s hard to hide in a banana-colored Porsche,” she said smiling. “I’ll find us something else. We won’t need quite that much power going *down* the hill.

“You’re a marvel, Alice.”

“I know, but thank you.” After a pause, Alice cut the silence with an interesting question. “What was all that talk about *singers*?”

“*La tua cantante*,” I repeated the flowing Italian phrase.

“Yes, that.”

It was a lovely idiom for an ugly phenomenon.

“They have a name for someone who smells the way Bella does to me. They call her my *singer*—because her blood sings for me.”

Alice laughed at me.

Bella was so beautiful there in my arms. Every now and then, I couldn’t help pressing my lips to her hair, her forehead, and even her lovely, pert nose and listening to her heart turn somersaults. It was the sweetest pleasure, though my beloved did not return my affections.

Bella seemed glad to be with me and she let me hold her, but something had changed. She felt guarded, careful. Perhaps I had hurt her too badly and destroyed the love

she once had for me. It wrenched my heart to think of it, but I would have only myself to blame. I had told her I didn't want her, a lie I'd made her believe. Maybe she had moved on, found someone else. These uncertainties chased each other around in my head, but remained unresolved.

When I couldn't bear to think about it anymore, I chatted with Alice. Bella had dozed off and I took advantage of that to ask Alice some pointed questions. We spoke fast and low.

"Alice," I said, interrupting her reverie about her homecoming with Jasper, "you said earlier that you knew I wouldn't catch Victoria. What did you mean by that?"

If Alice could have blushed, I think she would have done so.

"Well, Edward, I'm not going to lie because that would be useless."

"Yes it would. And...?"

"Oh, all right," she answered begrudgingly. "I sent you after Victoria on purpose because you needed something to do. I was worried about you."

"But you saw that I wouldn't catch her?"

"Yes."

"From the very beginning, you knew I would not catch Victoria?" I asked again just to make sure I understood.

"Yes."

"So all that time, you were just pulling strings to keep me running around after a ghost, is that it?"

"No, no! I swear all that cell phone tracing and stuff was legitimate—illegitimately legitimate, I mean. The tracking part was all real—you saw her yourself—I just knew that she would get away eventually, but I couldn't see where she would go. So, I thought maybe I was wrong and you chased her into the ocean or whatever. It wasn't just a useless exercise!"

Perhaps I should have been angry with Alice, letting me hop around on two continents when she knew it would come to nothing, but I didn't feel angry.

"Why did you really do that, Alice?"

"Well..."

"You might as well just tell me, because you know I'll see it anyway."

"You're right. Don't be upset, okay, but I saw what would happen to you unless you had something to distract you and take your mind off of..." Alice pointed a finger at Bella dozing on my lap. "You've heard of vampires going insane, right? And doing crazy things like walking in the sun, or drinking openly, or going on rampages? I saw that happening to you, Edward, and I was afraid for you."

"You think I would have called the Volturi down on myself accidentally?"

"Yes...or maybe subconsciously, but either way you'd be dead. Maybe I was wrong, but it seemed like tracking was helping you. One reason I went to Biloxi when I did was to check up on you—"

I scowled at her.

“I know, I know...I still wanted to go, though. It was just a question of when. I might have waited until Jasper could come too, but you were already down there, so... Please tell me I wasn't wrong to do it!”

I thought about it for only a second before replying.

“You weren't wrong, Alice.”

She nodded at me knowingly.

“Did you see me in Rio?”

Alice nodded again.

“You saw what kind of shape I was in then. It probably would have happened much sooner if I hadn't been chasing Victoria. As it was, I lay in the ground in Texas for weeks.”

“I know. It was bad.”

I nodded at her then. “I was glad to see you in New Orleans. All that stuff you told me about your family, that wasn't fiction, was it?”

“Oh, no! That was all true.”

“What did you find in Biloxi?”

“I do have a niece and you'd be amazed—she looks a little bit like me, small, dark hair, but her wardrobe is hideous!” Alice grinned.

“You didn't step in and fix that for her then?” I asked, only half joking.

“No, I resisted the urge. I still might meet her someday. I don't think I'm ready yet, though.”

I nodded again and we fell into silence until something else occurred to me.

“Did you tell Carlisle?”

Alice suddenly looked guilty.

“You did! That's why he didn't try to keep me in New York! He agreed with you, didn't he? And he wasn't worried about me going after Victoria by myself because he knew I wouldn't catch her. Am I right?”

Alice just crinkled her nose at me.

That explained something I'd found slightly puzzling at the time...why my father hadn't insisted that he or Emmett come with me on such a dangerous mission. Or why Esme hadn't objected more than she did. So my family had ganged up on me in my own best interest. I sighed and shrugged my shoulders at my sister.

“At least I got to see the Alamo,” I said. “And the drag queens in Ipanema.”

She smiled widely. “They were marvelous, weren't they?”

So she'd seen that too. Oh well.

After a while, Bella's eyes opened and she smiled at me, making my silent heart leap. I kissed the top of her lovely head. She wasn't shivering anymore.

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I was surprised by how well the soundproofed doors had blocked the noises of the massacre after Demetri retreated. I was sure that neither Gianna nor Bella had heard the death throes of the hapless tourists. Alice and I did and it wasn't pleasant, but both of us had lived through as much a thousand times before. Had caused as much, though not all at once, perhaps.

The afternoon wore on. One part of me was vigilant and guarded inside the Volturi's lair, while another part of me was living in pure bliss. After Bella "died," I never dreamed of recovering any part of this happiness again. It was a second chance I didn't deserve.

Alice and I heard the footsteps in the hallway at the same time—two sets—and I focused on reading the approaching minds. "Alec and Jane," I mouthed to Alice over Bella's head.

*"Don't trouble yourself, dear sister. I will dispose of the miscreants and that wretched human will never disturb your serenity again. Of course she's no match to you, dearest. No one will ever match your power or your beauty. Let me do this alone. Wait here,"* Alec suggested to Jane as he continued toward the waiting room.

All of us turned to look as he opened the doors and entered with a pacific smile on his face. I saw that he meant us no harm—only that he was sending us on our way according to Aro's orders. Jane remained out of sight down the hallway, fuming, with vengeance firmly rooted in her heart. She would always be a danger to Bella, I feared.

"You're free to leave now," Alec said in a gracious tone of voice that belied the unpleasant thoughts beneath. "We ask that you don't linger in the city."

"That won't be a problem," I rudely rejoined. Alec merely smiled and left the room. Good riddance.

Alec had been a child trained in the social graces and his true feelings would have been difficult to decipher without the benefit of reading his mind. He would always be most loyal to Jane, even before his masters—her wants were his wants, her needs his needs. Jane wished Bella dead, so Alec did too, though he would not act on that alone.

I hoped never to darken the doors of this castle again. I'd had more than my fill of these ruthless and conniving beings. Improbably, Demetri was the only one of them I liked in the slightest. He was not duplicitous. Though a flirt and perhaps a scoundrel, he had the spirit of a scalawag rather than a villain. I sensed that he'd lived his early years as a vampire somewhere other than in this putrid nest. Aro must have found him already changed, unlike Alec and Jane.

Gianna rose to her feet behind her desk. *Ah, so they are leaving after all. I had hoped... Oh well, perhaps Felix will come around. I know he likes me.*

Aloud, she said, "Follow the right hallway around the corner to the first set of elevators. The lobby is two floors down, and exits to the street. Goodbye, now."

I ignored her look of longing in my direction as I settled Bella on her feet and then stood. Alice, however, saw something dark in Gianna's future and an ominous look

crossed her face. I didn't catch what she saw and I didn't care.

In the streets, the crowd was still thick, but music and dancing had replaced ceremony. In honor of Saint Marcus Day, children and adults were dressed as mythical vampires, complete with black-satin capes with red linings and plastic fangs in their mouths. The children enjoyed baring their false fangs at us as we walked by. Some held large wooden crosses or wore garlic braids around their necks.

"Ridiculous," I mumbled to myself. *Fangs, indeed.* Perversely, such caricaturing made me want to reveal myself in all my dubious, blood-sucking glory. It was childish, but a satisfying fantasy, nevertheless.

Twilight had fallen and inside the high city walls with only a sliver of moon, the old-fashioned streetlamps made little headway against the darkness. My heavy cloak drew no special attention among the crowd of vampire wannabes.

"I'm going over the wall to retrieve our bags and find a car. I'll meet you outside the gate," Alice whispered before peeling off.

Bella was exhausted, so I supported her weight as she shuffled alongside me through the narrow, cobblestoned streets toward the city gates. She whipped her head around in a sudden panic.

"Where's Alice?" she whispered in a strained tone.

"She went to retrieve your bags from where she stashed them this morning," I told her and she calmed down. I suppose she thought someone had snatched Alice from under our noses.

"She's stealing a car, too, isn't she?" Bella asked.

"Not till we're outside," I responded with a grin. Alice was good at grand theft auto. She was so small and sweet-looking that nobody ever suspected her of criminal activities.

As promised, Alice was in a nondescript black sedan just to the side of the city gates, hidden in the shadows. The idling car would be warm for Bella, whose jeans were still slightly damp. I opened the rear door for her, helped her in, and slid in beside her. Then I pulled her into my arms and rewrapped her in the gray wool.

"I'm sorry," Alice apologized. "There wasn't much to choose from."

"It's fine, Alice," I assured her, grinning. "They can't all be 911 Turbos."

"I may have to acquire one of those legally. It was fabulous," Alice said wistfully.

"I'll get you one for Christmas," I said. It was the least I could do. And maybe she would let me drive it sometimes too. I'd never gotten around to driving a Porsche, though I had enjoyed the Jaguar she "borrowed" for us once when we were in a hurry to get out of some town, somewhere.

Alice was thrilled with the promise, but felt it necessary to reiterate one vital detail. She turned around to make sure I was paying attention.

"Yellow," she said. Color mattered to Alice.

I grinned again. It was going to be a good year. I could feel it.



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Bella felt incredibly fragile in my arms. She seemed thin and drawn and the circles under her eyes and the crease between them were troubling. She'd been horribly traumatized and I blamed myself for that. I shouldn't have acted without talking to Alice, but after Rosalie called with the news and I called Bella's house to confirm, I'd seen no reason to go through it again.

It was only then that a thought I'd pushed aside on that horrible day came floating to the surface. Charlie hadn't answered his own telephone. It had been a young man with a low, unfriendly voice, as if he knew my father and didn't like him. Everybody liked Carlisle. Who could that have been? Obviously, Bella *wasn't* dead and so the young man must have been visiting her at Charlie's house. He was unlikely to be Charlie's friend, because police chiefs don't befriend teenage boys who might be interested in their daughters.

*Please God, let me not be replaced in her heart*, I prayed, though I knew it would be better for her if I was. Once again, I found myself in that terrible dilemma that had forced me to leave in the first place. The issue had not changed, only me, and maybe...now...her. Doing the "right" thing had had such a horrific outcome, how could the wrong thing be any worse? I rationalized. It didn't matter, though, because I could never leave her again, even if she had found someone else to love.

On the drive from Volterra to Florence, Bella watched my face and I gazed at hers. The dozing hadn't helped much. She was worse than exhausted and yet she didn't close her eyes.

"You can sleep now, Bella," I said gently. "It's over."

"I don't want to sleep. I'm not tired."

That was a blatant falsehood. I could *see* that she was tired. It was obvious. I leaned over and kissed the hollow beneath her ear, wanting to do more, but it didn't seem to be the time.

"Try," I whispered, but Bella shook her head. "You're still just as stubborn," I told her, more in love with her than ever.

I was glad when we reached Florence. Bella would have a chance to change from her damp jeans into something from her bag. Alice parked our stolen automobile in an inconspicuous place in the business district and trotted off in search of something appropriate for me to wear in public. It took no time at all before she returned with the requisite designer clothes.

I pulled on the V-neck cashmere sweater and then escorted Bella and her bag to a café, dropping the useful, but now horrid reminder of our nightmare onto a pile of trash behind the building. Perhaps some needy person would find the warm cloak. Inside, Bella disappeared into the washroom to change and "freshen up," as she put it.

"I don't want her alone," I whispered to Alice. I'd just gotten her back! My sister

took a quick look into Bella's immediate future to alleviate my fear.

"She'll be fine," she confirmed.

Alice and I sat down and ordered some food for Bella who hadn't eaten in who knows how long. When she returned in fresh, dry clothes, her hair and teeth brushed, she protested at the dishes waiting for her, but we insisted that she had to try the pasta in Italy. I excused myself to change my trousers and I borrowed Bella's brush for my hair as well.

When I returned, Bella had eaten half the pasta and half a salad despite her protests of wanting nothing. I hadn't forgotten the promise I'd made to myself on a previous occasion that I would never again forget to feed her.

She finished what she wanted of the food while Alice stepped outside to call for plane tickets and to phone Jasper and tell him that we were all fine and on our way home. I could almost feel my family's sighs of relief from across the ocean.

I wondered what Bella had told her father. I suspected that she would be arriving to an angrier, though no more emotional, environment than I would be. Poor Charlie. What he must have been going through...again. He'd probably ban me from her life forever. Fortunately, though, Bella was almost ready to graduate high school. Old enough legally to be on her own.

I revisited these thoughts on the short flight to Rome and then on the longer one to Atlanta. To my surprise, Bella refused to sleep, ordering Coke to keep herself awake. I chided her again for her stubbornness until she explained her reason.

"I don't want to sleep," she told me solemnly. "If I close my eyes now, I'll see things I don't want to see. I'll have nightmares."

*Poor Bella.* What had I done to her?

I pulled up the armrests between us on our flights so that Bella could lounge in my arms. I couldn't stop marveling at the way the light from nearby reading lamps highlighted the bone structure of her face. I brushed my fingers across her cheekbones, along her eyebrows, and down her jawline. I stroked her hair and traced the edges of her ears. I couldn't stop touching her. It was heaven. She touched my face now and then, but hesitantly, as if she couldn't believe I was real. It was peaceful to be there together in intercontinental limbo with no threats hanging over our heads. I didn't ask her about the young man who had answered Charlie's telephone and she didn't ask me the many questions I could see in her eyes.

No longer was I the hollow man of the last six months. No longer did I feel the urge to bury myself in the earth until my end caught up with me. I was whole again and for this period of time between worlds, I just wanted to enjoy the moment with my beloved.