

52. CONTRIVANCES

Rather than turn his back on us and rejoin the guard, Aro waved the entire guard forward to the fifty-yard-line, so to speak. *Too dangerous!* I thought. It was an aggressive move, designed to intimidate us. I grabbed Bella and Emmett's arms and began backing up immediately. Jacob was still angry and would have stuck his snout in the face of the guard, but Renesmee grabbed his tail and used it like a leash to pull him back with us. Now the Volturi were within striking distance. Any member of the guard could leap fifty yards in an instant. But so could we, of course.

Caius was getting extremely impatient. He had come to take his pound of vampire flesh and had been thwarted at every turn. He was confident in the guard and had faith, despite the unknown quantity of the wolves, that they could reduce us to ash with little difficulty. Caius was so angry at Aro's willingness to "dawdle," that he refused to let Aro read his thoughts. Instead, he began to argue with his ancient brother.

"How can you abide this infamy? Why do we stand here impotently in the face of such an outrageous crime, covered by such a ridiculous deception?" he fairly yelled at Aro.

"Because it's all true," Aro replied evenly. "Every word of it. See how many witnesses stand ready to give evidence that they have seen this miraculous child grow and mature in just the short time they've known her. That they have felt the warmth of the blood that pulses in her veins."

Witnesses...ah, yes, Caius thought. He had become so used to sitting in his stone tower issuing secret edicts that he had forgotten how many witnesses were gathered on both sides. *Right, the plan. The plan prevents revolt. Vladimir and Stefan stand here with our opposition and they forget nothing.*

Aro had just taken stock of his witnesses and saw that their emotions had changed from the bloodthirsty mob that had arrived with the ancients. Now they were becoming confused as to why the Volturi remained to punish when the transgression obviously had been a mistake.

"The werewolves," Caius finally said. He spoke softly, but every vampire in the clearing could hear him. Aro already knew what the werewolves were and that Caius's suggestion wouldn't hold water.

"Ah, brother...", Aro said with great regret. Caius immediately became furious, forgetting the audience again.

"Will you defend that alliance, too, Aro?" Caius blustered. "The Children of the Moon have been our bitter enemies from the dawn of time. We have hunted them to near extinction in Europe and Asia. Yet Carlisle encourages a familiar relationship with this

enormous infestation—no doubt in an attempt to overthrow us. The better to protect his warped lifestyle.”

Jacob growled. *Infestation?! I dare that old fart to come over here and say that!*

I was determined to fend off every one of the Volturi’s false accusations, working through them one by one until...what? I had no idea how this would end. I cleared my throat noisily to catch Caius’s attention. Aro managed to look embarrassed, but Caius was still furious at having to “find an excuse” to do away with the troublemakers. He’d had his heart set on a great purging of miscreants. Destroying “bad seed” every one or two hundred years was good for his soul, apparently.

“Caius, it’s the middle of the day,” I protested. “These are not Children of the Moon, clearly. They bear no relation to your enemies on the other side of the world.”

“You breed mutants here,” Caius said, sounding ridiculous, but it still made me angry that he would insult my daughter and my friend.

Mutants?! I’ll mutate him! Jacob thought. His pack whined and grew restless.

“They aren’t even werewolves,” I said. Aro can tell you all about it if you don’t believe me.” Caius’s tendency was to disbelieve anyone who disagreed with him.

“Dear Caius, I would have warned you not to press this point if you had told me your thoughts,” Aro explained quietly. “Though the creatures think of themselves as werewolves, they are not. The more accurate name for them would be ‘shape-shifters.’ The choice of a wolf form was purely chance. It could have been a bear or a hawk or a panther when the first change was made. These creatures truly have nothing to do with the Children of the Moon. They have merely inherited this skill from their fathers. It’s genetic—they do not continue their species by infecting others the way true werewolves do.”

Oh, thought Caius. His ignorance made him angrier. “They know our secret,” he accused quickly, rushing to the next excuse without adequate forethought. He was throwing allegations scattershot against the wall to see what would stick.

I started to object, but Aro interrupted to prevent me from exposing Caius’s latest mistake and further angering the bad-tempered autocrat.

“They are creatures of our supernatural world, brother. Perhaps even more dependent upon secrecy than we are; they can hardly expose us. Carefully, Caius. Specious allegations get us nowhere.”

On to the next strategy, I thought. Aro had pulled the plug on the immortal-child allegation, the werewolf-alliance allegation, and the exposing-secrets allegation. I don’t know why I didn’t see what was coming. I should have realized. But then, even if I *had* known, could I have stopped it? Probably not. I wonder if Alice had had any idea.

“I want to talk to the informant,” Caius said sharply. Irina wasn’t paying attention to him. She was focused on her sisters whom she feared she had sacrificed.

“Irina,” Caius prodded and snapped his fingers to get her attention. She started shaking in terror.

“So you appear to have been quite mistaken in your allegations,” he accused.

“Dear Caius, could you expect her to have guessed in an instant something so strange and impossible?” Aro reasoned, wishing to appear the kindly ruler. “Any of us would have made the same assumption.”

Caius cut him off with a gesture.

“I’m sorry,” Irina said softly. “I should have made sure of what I was seeing. But I had no idea...”

“We all know you made a mistake. I meant to speak of your motivations.”

“My motivations?”

“Yes, for coming to spy on them in the first place.”

Spy? I never meant to spy, she thought. I was going to apologize...

“You were unhappy with the Cullens, were you not?”

“I was,” she admitted, casting her eyes regretfully at Carlisle.

“Because...?”

“Because the werewolves killed my friend,” she muttered. “And the Cullens wouldn’t stand aside to let me avenge him.”

“The shape-shifters,” Aro corrected.

“So the Cullens sided with the *shape*-shifters against our own kind—against the friend of a friend, even,” Caius interpreted for her.

“That’s how I saw it,” said Irina meekly.

Caius waited for her to go a step further and when she didn’t, he prompted her again, following his invisible script for indicting us. “If you’d like to make a formal complaint against the shape-shifters—and the Cullens for supporting their actions—now would be the time.” Clever manipulation, but Irina wouldn’t take the bait. She had decided to rectify what she could.

“No, I have no complaint against the wolves, or the Cullens. You came here today to destroy an immortal child. No immortal child exists. This was my mistake, and I take full responsibility for it. But the Cullens are innocent, and you have no reason to still be here. I’m so sorry,” she apologized sincerely to us, and then turned to the Volturi’s witness gallery. “There was no crime. There’s no valid reason for you to continue here.”

With that, Caius pronounced and carried out her sentence in one swift action. It was horrifying in its speed and finality. He raised some kind of ornate object, a signal to the killing squad. They attacked Irina swiftly, and to our stunned amazement, tore her apart in front of our eyes. Then Caius sprayed her with fire from the object in his hand and she went up in smoke. That was it. It was over before we quite understood that it had started.

“*Now* she has taken full responsibility for her actions.” He smiled cruelly and glanced at Tanya and Kate to gauge their reaction. Then I saw what Caius had intended.

“Stop them!” I cried, grabbing Tanya’s arm. She flew into a fury that instantly precluded all reason. Carlisle managed to lock his arms around her waist just as she broke my grip.

“It’s too late to help her. Don’t give him what he wants!” Carlisle urged softly, an

appeal to reason, which had abandoned her completely.

Kate also erupted in a violent rage and prepared to launch herself on Caius, a move guaranteed to kill us all. Rosalie grabbed Kate's neck, attempting a head-lock, but Kate shocked her with so much voltage that she went rigid and collapsed. Emmett tried next, seizing Kate's arm and throwing her to the ground before the shock caused him to stagger backward and drop. Kate scrambled to her feet for her third attempt at revenge.

Garrett, who was standing behind Kate, bounded forward in a heroic effort to stop her, knowing full well the power of her sting. Courageously, he threw his arms around Kate, locking his hands to his wrists and caging her body against him. When he fell to the ground, he pulled her down with him while intense voltage flowed through him, causing his body to spasm violently. His eyes rolled back into his head.

"Zafrina," I yelled. Immediately, both Tanya and Kate began staring blindly into space as Zafrina turned their vision to darkness. Kate's skin continued its assault, but a fighter to the end, Garrett did not release her.

"Give me my sight back," Tanya hissed, but she had stopped struggling.

Kate was moaning and thrashing against the insensible Garrett when his eyes inexplicably rolled forward and he regained command of himself. Kate's torture had ceased, but Garrett kept her body trapped beneath him in the snow.

"If I let you up, will you knock me down again, Katie?" he whispered to her. Though still blind, Kate struggled violently against Garrett's restraint.

"Listen to me, Tanya, Kate," Carlisle whispered. "Vengeance doesn't help her now. Irina wouldn't want you to waste your lives this way. Think about what you're doing. If you attack them, we all die."

Both women collapsed in surrender, overwhelmed by pain. Garrett continued murmuring soft words in Kate's ear, both cajoling and comforting, and Carlisle did the same with Tanya. Kate remained so emotionally distressed that I thought she still must be a hot wire, but Garrett no longer showed any signs of being shocked.

I returned my attention to our adversaries and saw that the guard was watching us in expectation, poised to strike at the first sign of aggression from our side. At only fifty yards away, they could be on us in an instant, but they were starting to realize that we were not going to attack first.

The Volturi witnesses were restless after the rending and incineration of Irina. Most could see no justification for her sudden, cruel death. Caius had planned to distract them from his brutal act by provoking our side to attack. His scheme had failed, though, leaving a glaring spotlight focused on the Volturi's unjust and unnecessary judgment. Aro became concerned about the rumbling and cast surreptitious glances at the mob behind him. His insistence on an audience was coming back to haunt him.

With obvious unease, Aro clapped Caius on the shoulder and said, "Irina has been punished for bearing false witness against this child. Perhaps we should return to the matter at hand?"

What a flimsy excuse! As vampires, we bear false witness all the time—it’s practically our job description. It certainly doesn’t warrant execution, especially when the “lie” is obviously unintentional.

Caius reacted to Aro’s words like a reprimanded child, becoming blank-faced and sullen. His excuse of “self-defense” had no basis and his impulsive act had cost them their assumed moral high ground. What would they try next? Would they simply discard Aro’s requirement for keeping up appearances?

Aro took charge again. “Just to be thorough, I’d like to speak with a few of your witnesses. Procedure, you know.”

Yes of course, procedure, certainly, certainly.... My ass! My own fury was rising already when I noticed the beginning of a smile at the corners of Caius’s mouth.

Aro! That deceiving son of a...!! He was going to threaten our witnesses and pressure those who were the least committed to fighting to leave now or be killed—or perhaps to leave now and later be killed. *Of all the foul tactics!*

Aro moved confidently behind our front line with Renata, Felix, and Demetri in tow, and stopped about ten yards from Amun and Kebi, our least-enthusiastic supporters. Marcus had identified the marginally committed witnesses and passed the information to his brother. Besides being unhappy about standing up to the Volturi at all, Amun had an Achilles heel in doing so—Benjamin, whom he’d been trying to conceal from the Volturi for years. Now Aro was fully aware of that.

“Ah, Amun, my southern neighbor!” Aro said with false warmth. “It has been so long since you’ve visited me.” (Translation: *You’re been avoiding me, haven’t you?*)

Amun was motionless with anxiety, Kebi a statue at his side.

“Time means little,” Amun replied stoically. “I never notice its passing.” (Translation: *I never had any intention to visit you.*)

“So true,” Aro pretended to agree. “But maybe you had another reason to stay away? It can be terribly time-consuming to organize newcomers into a coven. I’m glad your new additions have fit in so well. I would have loved to have been introduced. I’m sure you were meaning to come see me soon.” (Translation: *You devious devil. I know that you’ve been hiding your treasure from me.*)

“Of course,” Amun said woodenly. (Translation: *When hell freezes over.*)

“Oh well, we’re all together now! Isn’t it lovely?” (Translation: *You have made one big mistake in coming here.*) “But the reason for your presence here is not as pleasant, unfortunately. Carlisle called on you to witness?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you witness for him?”

“I’ve observed the child in question. It was evident almost immediately that she was not an immortal child—”

“What else did you observe about the child?”

“The same things that you surely saw in Edward’s mind. That the child is his

biologically. That she learns. That she grows...quickly.”

Aro smiled. “And do you believe that she should be allowed to live?”

Where in hell did that come from? I was thinking it and so were many others near me. Aro had subtly threatened Amun and then asked him to recommend a ludicrous solution to a non-existent problem. The pressure on the Egyptian was enormous.

Bella hissed and many of those on our side joined her. Even Aro’s witnesses hissed from behind the guard. Now that they were showing their disapproval, they would be tracked down and killed when this was over. The Volturi could not leave witnesses to a tragedy that they had engineered under false pretenses. If this fiasco continued in the direction it was going, many would die.

I moved quickly to Bella’s side and grabbed her wrist to discourage her from making a hasty move. We had to be patient and wait this out...whatever nastiness they were going to subject us to.

Amun glanced warily at his audience and then said, “I did not come to make judgments.”

Aro laughed. “Just your opinion.”

Amun seemed to stand slightly taller at that moment. “I see no danger in the child. She learns even more swiftly than she grows.”

It was a remarkably brave thing to say and proved his loyalty to Carlisle beyond a doubt. Under a vague, but very real threat, Aro had asked Amun to sanction the killing of our daughter. Aro was trying to start a war and Amun had refused to give him ammunition for the first shot. Aro nodded and turned away, but he was already scheming to destroy Amun’s coven and steal Benjamin.

“Aro?”

“Yes, friend?” Aro turned eagerly back to Amun, assuming that he had reconsidered.

“I gave my witness. I have no more business here. My mate and I would like to take our leave now.” Amun was trying to save himself and Kebi from the battle, but whatever retaliation Aro had planned for him was as good as done and Amun knew it.

Aro gave Amun a syrupy smile. “Of course. I’m so glad we were able to chat for a bit. And I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.” (*Translation: We’ll be coming after you.*)

Carlisle had told Amun that he would never ask him to die on his behalf, but Amun had risked his life anyway and to our tremendous benefit. If Amun had fallen under Aro’s pressure, the ancient could have parlayed Amun’s response into permission to kill. Even better, Aro would have a scapegoat on whom to blame the decision. It hadn’t worked.

Amun and Kebi took off running and quickly disappeared into the trees behind our company. As things stood, they would have to watch their backs forever. We must find a way to thank them—perhaps destroying Demetri would suffice.

Aro, taking his cue from Marcus, would now try to elicit support from the coven

leader with the next weakest commitment to our cause.

“Hello, dear Siobhan. You are as lovely as ever.” Siobhan waited for Aro to make his point. I wondered if the others were as sick of Aro’s pretense and false friendship as I was.

“And you?” Aro asked. “Would you answer my questions the same way Amun has?”

“I would,” Siobhan said, standing tall. “But I would perhaps add a little more. Renesmee understands the limitations. She’s no danger to humans—she blends in better than we do. She poses no threat of exposure.”

“Can you think of none?” Aro coaxed.

The unknown? The UNKNOWN? THAT was to be his next excuse? I growled angrily. Siobhan couldn’t see what Aro was thinking, but Garrett, *bless him*, had gotten the gist of Aro’s leading question and had stepped forward ready to fight. Kate cautioned him with a touch on his arm, but he ignored her.

“I don’t think I follow you,” Siobhan said hesitantly.

“There is no broken law,” Aro intoned. “However, does it follow then that there is no danger? No. That is a separate issue.” He began to pace, moving slightly farther away from us on each pass, inching back toward his guard. He feared that someone would attack him if he stayed in our midst.

Aro went on, “She is unique...utterly, impossibly unique. Such a waste it would be, to destroy something so lovely. Especially when we could learn so much...”

As if that were the point?! Killing a child because of uncertainty? Insane! I was finding my anger difficult to control.

“But there *is* danger, danger that cannot simply be ignored. How ironic it is that as the humans advance, as their faith in science grows and...” *Blah, blah, blah.*

I tuned him out. He was building a case of fancy words and false emotion that would possibly fool the most ignorant among the crowd. The guard, of course, didn’t need convincing, and every vampire on our side of the line (which he had slowly and carefully re-crossed to get back to the safety of his drones) knew what he was doing and would not be convinced by more words. Given that, if this confrontation ended in battle, the Volturi would have to kill us all to leave no loose ends. Many of his witnesses would have to die too, because not even they would fall for this ludicrous ploy.

When Aro gestured toward my daughter as if he would touch her, though he was now forty yards away, I returned my attention to the proceedings.

“This amazing child—if we could but know her potential—know with *absolute* certainty that she could always remain shrouded within the obscurity that protects us. But we know nothing of what she will become!” Aro argued, his tone implying that he regretted it.

Liar! I looked at Maggie and saw the anger in her face as she shook her head slowly back and forth. Maggie was ready to fight, even if Siobhan and Liam weren’t.

Aro went on, using the thoughts he'd stolen from my head as an argument to kill my child. "Her own parents are plagued by fears of her future. We *cannot* know what she will grow to be." Facing his witnesses as if to convince them, he said, "Only the known is safe. Only the known is tolerable. The unknown is... a vulnerability."

Caius was pleased with Aro's cleverness, but my father was not.

"You're reaching, Aro," Carlisle warned, knowing that the situation was degenerating, but not knowing how to stop it.

"Peace, friend," Aro responded. "Let us not be hasty. Let us look at this from every side."

Garrett, whose tolerance for bullshit had just been exceeded, dared to speak up. "May I offer a side to be considered?" he asked politely.

"Nomad," Aro acknowledged.

Garrett's voice rang loud and clear. "I came here at Carlisle's request, as the others, to witness," he said, speaking to the Volturi witnesses who were quickly losing trust in the Italian leadership.

"That is certainly no longer necessary, with regard to the child. We all see what she is. I stayed to witness something else. You." He pointed at the crowd huddling in the distance. "Two of you I know—Makenna, Charles—and I can see that many of you others are also wanderers, roamers like myself. Answering to none. Think carefully on what I tell you now.

"These ancient ones did *not* come here for justice as they told you. We suspected as much, and now it has been proved. They came, misled, but with a valid excuse for their action. Witness now as they seek flimsy excuses to continue their true mission. Witness them struggle to find a justification for their true purpose—to destroy this family here." He gestured toward the coven leaders, Carlisle and Tanya.

"The Volturi come to erase what they perceive as the competition. Perhaps, like me, you look at this clan's golden eyes and marvel. They are difficult to understand, it's true. But the ancient ones look and see something besides their strange choice. They see *power*.

"I have witnessed the bonds within this family—I say *family* and not *coven*. These strange golden-eyed ones deny their very natures. But in return have they found something worth even more, perhaps, than mere gratification of desire? I've made a little study of them in my time here, and it seems to me that intrinsic to this intense family binding—that which makes them possible at all—is the peaceful character of this life of sacrifice. There is no aggression here like we all saw in the large southern clans that grew and diminished so quickly in their wild feuds. There is no thought for domination. And Aro knows this better than I do."

Aro did not respond, just kept smiling his superior, indulgent smile, as if Garrett were a lunatic to be tolerated.

"Carlisle assured us all, when he told us what was coming, that he did not call us

here to fight. These witnesses,” Garrett continued, gesturing toward Siobhan and Liam, “agreed to give evidence, to slow the Volturi advance with their presence so that Carlisle would get the chance to present his case.

He looked at Eleazar. “But some of us wondered if Carlisle having truth on his side would be enough to stop the so-called justice. Are the Volturi here to protect the safety of our secrecy, or to protect their own power? Did they come to destroy an illegal creation, or a way of life? Could they be satisfied when the danger turned out to be no more than a misunderstanding? Or would they push the issue without the excuse of justice?”

“We have the answer to all these questions. We heard it in Aro’s lying words—we have one with a gift of knowing such things for certain—and we see it now in Caius’s eager smile. Their guard is just a mindless weapon, a tool in their masters’ quest for domination.

“So now there are more questions, questions that *you* must answer. Who rules you, nomads? Do you answer to someone’s will besides your own? Are you free to choose your path, or will the Volturi decide how you will live?”

“I came to witness. I stay to fight. The Volturi care nothing for the death of the child. They seek the death of our free will.”

Garrett redirected his gaze from the witnesses to the ancient Volturi. “So come, I say! Let’s hear no more lying rationalizations. Be honest in your intents as we will be honest in ours. We will defend our freedom. You will or will not attack it. Choose now, and let these witnesses see the true issue debated here.” I looked over at them, and saw that Garrett’s impassioned appeal had taken hold among them.

“You might consider joining us. If you think the Volturi will let you live to tell *this* tale, you are mistaken. We may all be destroyed, but then again, maybe not. Perhaps we are on more equal footing than they know. Perhaps the Volturi have finally met their match. I promise you this, though—if we fall, so do you.”

It was like listening to the great orators of the Revolutionary War era. Garrett had met his human end as a revolutionary soldier and had acquired the talent for communication that our forefathers embodied in the Constitution of the United States and later, the Bill of Rights. I was proud, at that moment, to be an American vampire.

Garrett returned to Kate’s side and faced the Volturi guard. He settled into a crouch, prepared to defend us and himself to the death. I was moved beyond words, but apparently, Aro was not.

“A very pretty speech, my revolutionary friend.”

Garrett did not change his fighting stance. “Revolutionary?” he growled. “Who am I revolting against, might I ask? Are you my king? Do you wish me to call you *master*, too, like your sycophantic guard?”

“Peace, Garrett,” Aro soothed. “I meant only to refer to your time of birth. Still a patriot, I see.”

Aro’s dismissiveness made Garrett even more angry. Whatever else Garrett might be, he was a fighter and was willing to die for his principles. I respected that.

“Let us ask our witnesses,” Aro suggested. “Let us hear their thoughts before we make our decision.” Aro turned toward the witnesses, many of whom were cowering as far away as they could, wishing to run into the forest, but not wanting to be tracked down later and punished.

He went on, “Tell us, friends, what do you think of all this? I can assure you the child is not what we feared. Do we take the risk and let the child live? Do we put our world in jeopardy to preserve their family intact? Or does earnest Garrett have the right of it? Will you join them in a fight against our sudden quest for dominion?”

The small, dark woman whom Garrett had called Makenna looked at her mate—Charles, presumably—and then spoke cautiously.

“Are those our only choices? Agree with you, or fight against you?”

“Of course not, most charming Makenna,” Aro said, as if giving anyone an ultimatum was the furthest thing from his mind. “You may go in peace, of course, as Amun did, even if you disagree with the council's decision.”

Pretty words, Aro.

Makenna and Charles conferred silently and then she spoke again. “We did not come here for a fight. We came here to witness. And our witness is that this condemned family is innocent. Everything that Garrett claimed is the truth.”

“Ah,” Aro replied. “I'm sorry you see us in that way. But such is the nature of our work.”

“It is not what I see, but what I feel,” Charles interjected nervously. “Garrett said they have ways of knowing lies. I, too, know when I am hearing the truth, and when I am not.” It was brave of the timid Charles to imply that Aro and Caius were lying.

“Do not fear us, friend Charles. No doubt the patriot truly believes what he says.” Aro chuckled at his own cleverness in deliberately reinterpreting Charles' statement to mean that Garrett was untrustworthy rather than himself and his brothers.

But Charles had resisted as far as his nature would allow. His stronger mate said, “That is our witness. We're leaving now.” Makenna and Charles backed their way into the forest and only when they were hidden from view did they dare to turn and run. Several more witnesses followed suit. The realization that an attack was imminent had started filtering through the crowd along with the assumption that they would lose. Most of the witnesses wanted to escape, but were afraid that they would be tracked down and punished.

Aro recognized that his influence had severely diminished and that it would be hard to save face. But then he dismissed that concern. He knew that the guard could remove witnesses later, if need be.

Aro turned to Caius and Marcus. “Brothers, there is much to consider here.”

“Let us counsel,” Caius said. *Finally, we get to the point!* Caius thought.

“Let us counsel,” Marcus said, and he wasn't thinking anything. I wasn't sure I had ever heard him think much. Marcus was just...empty. That was the only word that captured his state of mind. He was like a seashell whose resident had moved out long ago.

The three “black-cloaks” clasped hands and bowed their heads. Several more witnesses slinked backward into the trees.

Then something happened that caught me completely off-guard and stunned me more than Caius’s attack on Irina. Bella was quietly conversing with our daughter.

“You remember what I told you?”

Renesmee nodded with tears in her eyes. *What was going on?*

“I love you,” Nessie whispered.

“I love you, too,” Bella responded and touched Nessie’s locket. “More than my own life.” Bella kissed our baby’s forehead and then stretched up to speak in Jacob’s ear. “Wait until they’re totally distracted, then run with her. Get as far from this place as you possibly can. When you’ve gone as far as you can on foot, she has what you need to get you in the air.”

Renesmee reached for me and I pulled her to my chest, despite the fact that my mouth was hanging open and my breathing had sped out of control. I hugged her tightly, knowing it would be the last time. I understood now what was happening.

“This is what you kept from me?” I whispered to Bella.

“From Aro,” she murmured.

“Alice?” I confirmed what I already knew.

Alice had told Bella secretly, perhaps from the very beginning, that our best hope for the future was to get Renesmee far away before the battle began. While we fought, distracting the Volturi guard, Jacob had a chance to salvage the most important thing. I had to kill Demetri so they could escape. *More than my own life*. All the pieces fit together. This was goodbye then.

I kissed my miracle child’s forehead and both of her cheeks and then lifted her onto Jacob’s back with anguish in my soul. She clutched his thick fur in her hands and pulled herself forward to settle in the dip between his shoulder blades, obviously a familiar place. Jacob was as anguished as I was, knowing that he carried our phoenix on his back.

“You’re the only one we could ever trust her with,” Bella told him quietly. “If you didn’t love her so much, I could never bear this. I know you can protect her, Jacob.”

Jacob whined in wordless pain. He accepted this responsibility without question, though it was the hardest thing he would ever do.

“I know,” Bella said. “I love you, too, Jake. You’ll always be my best man.”

A tear rolled from his big black eye and settled in the fur at the base of his muzzle. I leaned against his huge shoulder, listening to the metallic ripping sound of my heart being torn in two.

“Goodbye, Jacob, my brother...my son.”

Our family was listening with perfect comprehension, each individual facing his own demons. Everyone was in shock.

“Is there no hope, then?” Carlisle asked softly.

“There is absolutely hope,” Bella answered him. “I only know my own fate.”

And mine too...

Esme moved forward, touching Bella's cheek and mine on her way to Carlisle's side. They held hands and looked into each other's eyes.

"If we live through this," Garrett vowed to Kate, "I'll follow you anywhere, woman."

"Now he tells me," she muttered. I didn't look, but I could almost feel her rolling her eyes.

Mates were sharing their final goodbyes, Rosalie and Emmett with a passionate kiss, Tia and Benjamin wrapped in a tight embrace, Carmen and Eleazar with their foreheads and hands touching. I looked at my wife, Isabella Cullen, with longing, and gratitude, and tremendous love. She was not going down without me.

Suddenly, she said in a whisper meant only for our side, "Get ready. It's starting."

How did she know?