

## **sacrifice play**

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# **sacrifice play**

by [chekovsgunshow](#)

## Summary

an alternate ending to Twilight

“I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night.” - Sylvia Plath

## part one

“I can’t win, Alice. You can’t guard everyone I know forever. Don’t you see what he’s doing? He’s not tracking me at all. He’ll find someone, he’ll hurt someone I love. He’s flushing me out... Alice, I can’t -”

“We’ll catch him, Bella,” said Alice.

“And what if you get hurt, Alice? Do you think that’s okay with me? Do you think it’s only my human family he can hurt me with?”

Alice looked meaningfully at Jasper. A deep lethargy washed through Bella, dragging her eyes closed. It tried to pull her down like a puppet’s strings cut in mid-air. Until it didn’t. Until she cut her own strings and landed on her feet, metaphorically at least.

“Don’t do that,” said Bella, stepping away from Jasper. Anger rapidly replaced the lethargy. “I want to trust you, Jasper. Alice. But I can’t do that if you try to manipulate me like that.”

She stood ramrod straight, for possibly the first time in front of either vampire. Her shoulders back, her chin up. She shifted her weight, settling into herself. This wasn’t the Bella they knew in Forks, lost without the responsibility for her mother. They were in Phoenix. This was home.

This was the Bella who at eight years old, lifted her chin and convinced a teacher to not set up a parent-teacher meeting over her grades because she could take care of herself.

This was the Bella who at thirteen, got into a fight with her mother in an antique store, of all places, over a chair and took over handling the expenses.

The Cullens, they didn’t know any of this. She hadn’t really, in the short-long time she’d known Edward, Bella hadn’t explained that this was what it was like to grow up with her mother.

“I told you, Bella, that I wouldn’t lie to you,” said Alice, sounding genuinely hurt. “We’ll catch him. We catch him in every possible future.”

“But at what cost, Alice?” Bella softened, just slightly.

“I’m doing my best to see everything I can,” Alice reached out and gently clasped Bella’s hand between her own, before seeming to change her mind, and pulled the girl into a hug as well. “A little lost time and money is nothing to us. Not compared to you and your bright potential.”

“I know I’m young,” said Bella, scowling and full of bitterness - briefly. She pulled away from Alice, the woman letting her put that little bit of distance between them. “I can handle this. I will handle this.”

Moving backward until she could sink onto the couch, Bella caught Jasper's eye. He said nothing but nodded in acknowledgement.

"So, he's going to go after my mother," said Bella. She breathed in and breathed out slowly, trying to convince her body to calm down. "What are we doing now?"

"For now, we do nothing," said Jasper, instead of Alice. He crouched down, putting himself on the same level as Bella. "We wait. James isn't in Phoenix yet, and the sun hasn't gone down yet. We're also waiting on the others; they're flying in from Seattle."

Bella frowned, trying to push gratitude towards Jasper. From his smile, it felt like he might have received it. It would be so, so easy to fall into a fugue state, hedging all her bets on Edward and the love they held for each other.

But.

James was threatening her parents.

"There are still decisions to be made," said Alice. She stared at the wall, a statue.

"So we wait," said Bella. She sank into the couch, eyes trained on the TV and her breathing methodic. Vague plans hovered on the edge of her mind. Nothing concrete. Not yet, not if Alice could, somehow, see what Bella decided on.

If there was time later, Bella decided to ask Alice how that worked, exactly.

A hour passed in relative silence. Only Bella and Jasper remained in that main room. At some point, Alice had moved into the bedroom to concentrate.

"Jasper," said Bella, quietly. She banked on Alice being too focused to overhear their conversation. "Can I ask you some questions?"

Jasper cocked his head, looking at her. He moved across the room at a slow pace, even by human standards, and sank down to sit on the coffee table in front of her. He spoke just as softly as Bella had, "with how much you're putting on the line because of us, I think a few answers is the least I can provide."

"What's the endgame for this? Not just James but," Bella paused, frustrated and searching for the words to explain what she meant. Jasper let her. "The whole situation. When Rosalie, when she said that I was putting you all in danger, she didn't just mean because of James, did she?"

"You're far smarter than we give you credit for, aren't you?" asked Jasper, huffing out a tiny laugh. "In short, yes."

"Oh." Bella closed her eyes and tried to brace herself. You can breakdown later.

"How do I put this," said Jasper, leaning his elbows against his thighs. "There's a group that, for lack of a better phrase, rules over vampires - keeping us in line. You've saw the painting in Carlisle's study, correct?"

“Yes, the, uh, vampires in Italy?”

“Good,” said Jasper, smiling again at her. From anyone else but especially from Edward, it would have felt patronizing. “The one law, the main law that we follow is that humans aren’t allowed to know of our existence.”

“And I know,” said Bella. She crossed her hands in her lap, twisting her fingers together. “What happens if they find out?”

“Alice will be upset if I tell you this,” said Jasper. He leaned back a little, tugging at the cuff of his shirt. “But you have the right to know. If they find out that we let you in on our existence and let you live, they would kill us. Carlisle, Alice and Edward are favorites of theirs, so we might get a little leeway. But, eventually the law must be kept.”

“I see,” said Bella, drawing in a deep breath. She clenched her teeth together, fighting the urge to look away. Unbidden, her eyes welled up with tears. “So, either I die or you all do?”

Slowly, a hazy plan began to form for her.

James had to lure her to him for it to work.

Bella was going to make a sacrifice play.

“If the Volturi, the ruling group, find out, chances are yes. Carlisle, Edward and Alice would live. Maybe Esme as well. But,” here Jasper paused to frown. “They wouldn’t let me live. Don’t go planning your death yet. If we lay low and handle this quietly, they might never notice. Then, you will have the choice.”

“Do I really have a choice? Edward loves me and I have to stay with him, love him back, forever.”

Jasper paused before speaking and Alice entered the room again. She was saying something, too low and too fast for Bella to comprehend.

Jasper nodded. He pushed off his thighs to stand in an entirely useless motion, but for Bella it was almost comforting in its familiarity. “I’m sorry, Bella, but it looks like we’ll be moving to the airport soon. I’ll handle that.”

“That’s fine,” said Bella, shakily breathing in. She didn’t know what she was feeling, couldn’t parse through the violence mix. “The less distance between us and the airport the less chance of exposure, right?”

For a moment, Bella felt a foreign sense of pride before it faded. She tried pushing her gratitude back at him again, smiling sheepishly.

Jasper nodded, again. He flashed towards the door but paused before he left, “don’t lock yourself into something you don’t have to do, yet. We’re greedy creatures, Bella. We’ll all care about you, no matter what.”

And with that, he was gone.



## part two

Alice flounced down on the couch, her eyes fixed on the cell phone across the room. “How did you get Jasper to be friendly so quick?”

Bella shrugged, adopting her slouched posture again. At some point during their conversation, she had begun to gravitate towards Jasper. “I just asked him a few questions.”

“Did he give you a lot to think about?” Alice coyly bumped her shoulder into Bella, pushing her maybe a little too hard but Bella pushed back. “Is that why your future won't settle?”

“Something like that,” said Bella. She laid her head on Alice's shoulder. “Will this bother you?”

“No,” said Alice, softly.

They sat in silence for a long time, at least as it seemed to Bella. She picked at the hem of her shirt and thought, going around and around in circles. Eventually, she relaxed even farther into Alice, almost hovering in the area between rest and the waking world.

The sound of the cell phone broke the quiet moment. Alice gently propped Bella upright again, moments before it rang. And then she was just, standing there with her back to Bella and talking on the phone.

“Hello?” A pause. “Oh.”

Alice turned to Bella and mouthed, your mother.

Bella was immediately on her feet, gesturing for the phone. “Mom?”

“Bella? Bella? Where are you?” said Renee, in that voice that could have come straight out of her childhood..

Bella moved away from Alice, standing on the other side of the room,” Mom, I’m sorry I worried you with the message but I’m okay. I just, I need you to trust me, okay?”

“Nice place you have,” said James. “Not the nicest, but homey.”

Bella went silent, forgetting to even breathe.

“I was going to wait for you, you know. But then your father called your mom, all worried, and convinced her to come running home. All for your safety. But it’s working out rather well for me.”

“How.” The question falls flat, more of a statement than anything else. Bella curled into herself, almost trying to wrap her body around the phone.

“Ah, ah, ah, that’s not the correct response. Are your… friends still in the room? Just say yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“I want you to move to a second room, and say yes again when you’ve done so.”

Bella walked over to the bedroom and opened the door. She didn’t have to fake her panic or her need for privacy. It was all in the way her eyes darted around the room and the shifting of her weight onto her toes. Ignoring whatever was Alice’s response to this, Bella shut the door behind her with an audible click and retreated to the far portion of the room. “Yes.”

“Good girl.”

In the background, Bella heard her mother repeating again, “Bella? Bella?”

“Sweet woman, your mother. She cares about you a lot, and I bet you care about her just as much, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Bella quietly and wetly. “I would do anything for her.”

“You’ll have to. If you want your mother to live, you’ll need to do everything I tell you to do,” said James. He barely paused, not enough time for Bella to respond. Tears began to slowly fall down her face again. “You’ll need to get away from your friends, can you do that?”

Bella froze again. “I don’t know if I can.”

“But for your mother,” said James, pressing her further.

Bella breathed in shakily, cleared her throat. Even if she did her best, he still knew that he had her, that she was crying. Clearly and evenly, she finally responded, “I’ll find a way.”

“I bet teachers love you,” said James, almost distracted.

“Where do I meet you?” asked Bella, already thinking but trying not to settle on a decision just yet. Alice couldn’t know, not yet.

“First, I’ll need you to head home, sweetie,” said James, mocking her. “On the board above the phone will be a number. Once you’re there, call it and I’ll tell you where to head next.”

“Alright,” said Bella, quietly. She knew where this would end, where she would end up. But it wouldn’t do to let this monster know, when he clearly had no idea of Alice’s talent. “I’ll do that.”

“Good. And come alone. You know what we’re like, you’re cozy enough with vampires to know that I’ll know if you bring friends. Then, mommy will get hurt.”

“I’ll be alone.”



“Good, now I want you to head back in the other room,” said James. He paused until Bella had done so, the click of the door again audible over the phone. “Now say, “I love you too, Mom.””

“I love you too, Mom,” said Bella, her voice breaking.

“And tell me you’ll see me later.”

“I’ll see you later,” said Bella. She abruptly ended the call, breathing out a sob at last. Letting the phone clatter to the ground, Bella hid her face in her hands. Although she was trying her hardest, each breath ended in a body shaking sob.

“Oh, Bella,” said Alice, across the room already. Alice reached out gently to wrap Bella in another hug, following her to the ground as Bella’s knees gave out. “It’s going to be okay, I know it will.”

“I know,” Bella choked out. “I thought that by leaving here, to let her live with Phil on their own, that I was doing the best thing for her but instead, now... He has her, Alice.”

This close, Bella felt as Alice startled. “I am so sorry for the position we’ve put you in, Bella. We’ll save her.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

Eventually, Alice lifted Bella off the floor and settled her back onto the couch. She dithered for a moment, seeming to not know what to do, before she returned with a blanket and tucked their human in. Bella just smiled gratefully at her, saying nothing.

Her thoughts continued to spiral on their own, making it almost impossible to make a decision.

Good.

Time seemed to stretch out between the two of them, both waiting in silence. At one point, Bella tried to write a letter to Edward, explaining why she was going to do this but she couldn’t write anything past “I’m sorry.” When Jasper returned, both of them had barely moved in the last hour.

“We’re ready to go,” said Jasper, nodding towards the door. “It’s dark enough yet, that we should be able to make it inside without notice.”

Alice nodded. Without saying a word, the two vampires packed up the room rapidly.

Bella didn’t bother offering to help, they moved faster without her. Instead, she stumbled into the bathroom. Turning the faucet on cold, she cupped her hands and drank as deeply as she could.

When she lifted her head to look in the mirror, Bella thought she knew what she was going to see. She had been mostly right as well. The face that stared back at her, maybe a Bella from

another universe in the same situation, was pale and drawn. The steady set of her gaze, however, was a surprise.

“What does mom always say?” Bella asked herself quietly, a lance of sorrow going through her at the thought of her mother. “You never know the strength of a woman until you put her in boiling water.”

And with that, Bella headed out of the bathroom with her jaw set.

Her decision was made, mostly. Everything hinged on her ability to escape two vampires.

Nothing hard, at all.

## part three

Jasper and Alice hustled her out of the hotel and into the car, but once they were inside, they defaulted to her for navigation.

Bella quietly murmured directions from the front seat, pushing them towards the fourth floor of the parking garage. She forgot, entirely, to ask Alice how her powers worked. Instead, she focused on her plan.

Her escape hinged on getting lucky.

There was a way out of the airport and this was, in some small way, her home turf. The rest of the family just had to be landing in the right bay, that was all.

Alice gasped, going rigid in the backseat of the car. Then, she let out a high keening noise.

“Alice.” Jasper didn’t take his hands off the wheel, but his gaze was solely locked on the woman in the backseat. “What did you see?”

“It’s nothing,” said Alice. She ran a hand through her hair. “Everything will be fine.”

Bella said nothing, looking out the window instead. If she were a betting person, and after this she should be one, she would bet that Alice had just saw Bella in the ballet studio.

All that mattered is whether or not Alice knew it was Bella’s decision to be there and not James’ forcing her.

As they parked on the fourth floor of the connected parking garage and headed into the airport, it became more and more likely that Alice thought it was James’ decision.

That was good.

Alice and Jasper preoccupied themselves with discussing where would be a good place to go from here. They were speaking lowly but not so lowly that Bella couldn’t hear. She let most of the conversation flow over her, barely noting that Alice seemed to be defaulting to Jasper in this.

All that mattered was that with every second, the time that Bella had to make her escape became shorter. The others were so on edge, though, that every time she shifted in her chair had the two of them on high alert.

There had to be another way.

It was at that moment that Bella realized that she hadn’t ate in over half a day.

“Guys,” said Bella, clearing her throat. She gestured to her stomach and looked away like she was going to blush. “I need to get something to eat.”

“Oh, I’ll come with you,” said Alice, standing up immediately.

“Oh, no, no,” said Bella. That couldn’t happen. Her plan hinged on Alice being caught at Gate 4. “I was hoping that Jasper could come with me. I still have a few more questions for him.”

The two vampires looked at each other, seeming to in that moment hold a conversation without speaking a word.

“Alright,” said Jasper, a slight drawl to his voice. “I’ll come with you.”

The two of them walked off towards the food court, Bella curling in on herself with the knowledge of what she’d have to do.

“What were your questions?” asked Jasper. He didn’t stand as close to her this time, keeping what looked like a friendly distance.

“Do you trust that I want to do what’s best for my mom,” asked Bella, softly. She didn’t reach out to touch Jasper, just stopped in his path and faced him. “Because, Jasper, I can’t do this alone.”

“Where are you going with this?” He sounded curious, like he would consider what she said.

For a moment, Bella’s traitor brain compared the difference between the two brothers. It took his family to get Edward to even listen to her plan but Jasper was willing to listen from the start.

It wasn’t fair, even if it was true, to compare the two of them though.

“We can’t keep running. We know where he’ll be waiting and,” Bella snuffled, “he has my mom. I can’t leave her.”

Jasper gestured for her to continue.

“Use me as bait. Whatever happens, will happen.”

“That’s not a bad plan,” said Jasper. He turned and began steering Bella back towards the parking garage.

“Can you handle him?”

Jasper laughed low. “Edward hasn’t told you much about me. He probably wanted to spare your innocence.”

Bella shrugged under his arm.

“I was turned to fight vampires, Bella. We can do this.”

The return to the car was mostly silent.

“He told me to go home first. He doesn't know that we know where the final fight will be.”

“Of course he doesn't,” scoffed Jasper. “I'll drop you there and head to the studio.”

Bella nodded. “Will the others be far behind?”

“Depends on how long it takes to find a suitable car, but no, not too far.”

When they pulled up to the house, Bella slid out of the car. She stopped when she heard Jasper call her name, turning towards him.

“Thank you for trusting me,” said Jasper, smiling at her.

“You're putting your life on the line for me,” she hadn't forgot his certainty that he would be killed if her knowledge came out, “so of course I trust you.”

Bella missed Jasper's shocked look as she turned and marched into her former home.

## part four

The less said about the time she spent in the house, the better. It felt wrong, it would always feel wrong. The one thing Bella made sure to do was to delete the voicemail she had left.

She skidded around a corner, almost hitting an older man before steadying herself and shooting forward again. All of the anger, all of the panic, all of the despair Bella was carrying with her, had been carrying with her since arriving in Forks, pushed her to run faster and faster towards the ballet studio.

This was her home. James, this man, this monster - he had ruined it purely because he wanted to, because he could. He took her mother because he could. He threatened the lives of everyone she loved, no matter how new they were in her life, because he could.

And it was wrong.

The door to the studio was unlocked, despite there being no practice because of spring break. It was dark and cool as Bella pushed her way in, letting the door shut behind her. She was here to make noise, after all.

In theory, the ballet studio should have felt smaller to her. The last time Bella had came for lessons, she had been... young. And yet, in the darkness, it felt like a cavern. The only light came from the dimmed lights powered by the generator.

“Bella? Bella?”

For the first time, hearing her mother’s voice struck a chord wrong inside Bella and not for the same reasons as before.

It sounded familiar.

She rounded a corner, entering the main practice space. Towards the back, where the emergency exit and the stereo were, stood a man with his back to her. Bella didn’t hesitate, couldn’t let herself hesitate, as she walked towards what could be her death.

“You made it faster than I thought you would,” said James, turning towards her. There was no surprise, it could only be him. Not that he knew this, he thought she stumbled unknowingly towards her death - all to save her mother but...

“Bella? Bella?”

Her mother was calling her again. It struck that same out of tune chord again, harder this time. James smiled at her, mocking in how sweet he looked. He took two steps to the side, at a normal pace. Behind him sat a small TV, and on it one of her mother’s home videos played.

Five years ago, before her grandmother died, they had gone to visit her for Thanksgiving. Down at the pier, there had been a beautiful fish slicing through the water and Bella had

almost fallen in because she wanted a better view of it.

“Bella, you scared me! Don’t you ever do that to me again!”

The video finished and the TV reverted to a blue screen.

“Sorry for borrowing one of your home videos,” said James. He smiled at her. “It’s better this way, isn’t it? I had to get you to come here somehow and your sweet mother... well, it would have taken too much effort to track her down as well.”

Bella’s knees tried to give out. She gritted her teeth against the rush of calm that fell over her. Renee, her mother, she was safe. She was still in Florida, and if Bella had any say, she would stay in Florida now.

“They do put more effort into guarding adult’s secrets than your little high school puts into hiding your files. All Victoria had to do was break one lock on a door - they even kept the filing cabinets unlocked,” said James.

And then he disappeared from view.

Bella stumbled forward, spinning around to try and find the vampire. Her own image in the mirrors disoriented her.

“Boo,” said James, directly in her left ear.

Bella shrieked, dropping to the ground. Her tailbone hit the floor directly, knocking the wind out of her. “Why are you doing this?”

“You know,” said James. “I was only doing it because I could, at first. Every coven has a weak point and you happen to be the lynch-pin holding together the... who are they.. The Cullen’s weakest link together.”

Bella pushed her way across the floor, away from James. She wheezed, unable to take a full breath.

“Then I saw her.”

In a flash, James was on her again. He lifted Bella off the floor, one hand wrapped around her chest, crushing her ribs.

“I don’t understand the fascination with humans, not really. Even the hunt gets boring, sometimes. But her, I remember. She smelled sweet, sweeter than you do. Little Mary Alice Brandon. A few centuries earlier and they would have burned her like a witch. Instead, they locked her in a room and shocked her - trying to piece together what was broken,” said James, squeezing tighter. Bella felt something in her chest protest, almost groaning, before it snapped. And then, another snap.

“You don’t mean,” gasped Bella. She futilely pushed at the hand wrapped around her chest. “Alice?”

“Oh yes, I knew her. I was going to drain her but one of the caretakers - why any of our kind would stoop to taking care of humans I’ll never know - cottoned on rather quick. He took her from me, changed her, and left her strong enough to fight back.”

James paused, tilting his head and looking over Bella’s shoulder.

“It ruined all the fun. There’s no point in killing a newborn without getting paid for it.”

“Let me go,” said Bella, struggling more to slip out of his grasp. “You’re a monster.”

Her perspective changed in an instant. In less than the blink of an eye, she found herself feet away from James. Then, everything shifted as her head was knocked back and forth by something. Then, the glass shattered around her. Then came the pain.

If anyone ever asked, not that they would, Bella could swear that she saw James shrug his shoulders after that. As if to say, isn’t that what you asked for?

One of the shards from the mirror cut a line across her scalp as Bella collapsed to the side unwillingly.

She had to keep talking. Bait had to be flashy, that’s how you caught the fish. But everything hurt worse than anything had before. Bella wedged her arm under her torso and pushed, sobbing from the pain.

At some point, the wound across her scalp began bleeding. It painted a wet trail down her back. For a moment, all Bella thought of was the time, that same Thanksgiving spent in California before her grandmother’s death, when she had fell and cut her hairline. Her mom had been there, not Renee, holding her and telling her that it was okay, head wounds bleed a lot, and wasn’t her little Bella so grown up and strong, trying to clean the gutters all on her own.

“I want my mommy,” said Bella, tears streaking down her face. A sob wracked her body as all the stress beared down on her and she keened when it hurt.

“What was that, little girl?” asked James, crouching down in front of her.

Bella forced herself to pull everything back together one more time and keep an eye on the vampire in front of her. The more she bled, the more he lost control, and she was bleeding heavily.

Then, there was the sound of a door slamming open and the boom of thunder in the tiny ballet studio. Jasper collided with James, throwing the tracker across the room. Bella couldn’t keep track of the two of them by sight, only by the sound of thunder echoing across the studio as they crashed against each other.

Bella pressed a hand against her side, trying to breathe through her sobbing. It hurt, everything hurt. There wasn’t anything she could do now, so she closed her eyes and thought about her Mom.



Time stretched out, like peeling off a bandaid slowly instead of ripping it off, but at some point, she felt cool hands touching her face - gently.

It was Jasper. Beyond him, hazily, it looked like there was an arm laying clear on the other side of the room. Some part of Bella's brain filed that away, to consider later.

"Bella," said Jasper, kneeling her small pool of blood. "Are you with me?"

Bella made a noise, trying to sound like an affirmative.

"Good," said Jasper, continuing to hold her face. "I need you to focus on me for a little bit. The others are almost here. Some of us will stay behind to handle the clean up but someone, probably Carlisle, will have to take you to the hospital."

"Okay." Bella sounded small, like a child scraping her knee for the first time. Like she was talking to -

Bella keened again as she sucked in a lungful of air. It still hurt so bad. "Don't let them call my parents. They can't know."

"Why?" Jasper encouraged her to keep talking to him, to keep focused.

"I'll have to leave them at some point, won't I? I'll either have to become a vampire or I'll have to disappear, to keep them safe. Better to just let them think that I... take after Renee, that I just ran away with my boyfriend." Bella had to almost spit out the sentences, each word taking a Herculean amount of strength.

A warm sense of pride and love filled her again. It felt almost like it was radiating out from where Jasper held her face. She tried to smile at him, lips trembling as tears welled up again.

"I've got your back, Bella," the sensation shifted to, not lethargy but a sense of calm tinged with pleasure, "The others are almost here. I'll convince them to not contact your parents."

Bella's shoulders finally relaxed, slumping against the wall behind her, and then everything faded to black.

## part 5

It was soft and warm. The details hovered easily around Bella. She shifted further into the bed, or tried to. Turning a little was a kick to the ribs. Bella keened, clenching her eyes closed tighter.

Then, there was a cool hand on her chest that forced her back down on the bed.

“Bella, how are you feeling?” That was.. Dr. Cullen, no, Carlisle.

“It hurts.” The part of her brain that constantly watched and constantly criticized pointed out that Bella sounded like a child doing that.

“Jasper, could you?”

Another cool hand, on her shoulder this time, and the feeling of floating on clouds.

“Thank you.” Bella opened her eyes to the sight of hotel wallpaper, and not a hospital. The pain hovered under the clouds, like a monsoon unleashed. “What happened?”

“Why would you do that, Bella?” That was Edward. He crossed the room in three quick strides, moving to the side of the bed. He knelt and gripped her hand between his two large hands.

“Do what?” Bella had a hard time remembering, out of everything, what she had done that was so abhorrent, so strange.

“Try to face James alone like that. We were doing our best to protect you,” said Edward, some confused and plainative note in his voice. “We would have kept you safe.”

“It wasn’t about that.” Bella pulled her hand out of Edward’s and reached up to touch his cheek instead. He leaned into her hand, expression tortured. “He had my mother. He was willing to hurt Charlie.”

Edward opened his mouth, ready to respond with... something.

“Edward.” That was all Jasper said, but Edward cocked his head to the side - listening to the thoughts that only he could hear. A moment passed, then he looked even more tortured - somehow.

“Of course,” said Edward, his hand coming up to dwarf Bella’s hand on his cheek. He sighed, his cool breath fluttering over Bella’s face for a moment. Her eyelids fluttered; she smiled softly. “I’m just glad that you’re okay.”

“Bella,” said Carlisle, gently getting her attention. “I’m going to give you an injection that will help you. Just one prick and before you can count to ten, you’ll be asleep.”

“Wait,” said Bella, her heart rate picking up. She had to know before they put her under again. “Do my parents know?”

Edward frowned. Whatever went down, he was clearly not happy about it.

“No, they don’t,” said Jasper.

“Thank you,” said Bella, practically breathing out her thanks. She relaxed further into the bed, no more questions.

Everything would be fine.

She would... find a way to stay in their lives without putting them in danger.

Faintly, Bella felt the prick of a needle entering her arm.

It was better this way, they would be safe. They didn’t choose to sign their lives away for a tightly guarded secret.

(The not-so-small, bitter part of her heart whispered, you didn’t choose this either.)

And then, Bella was out again.

## part six

Time passed in bursts. Bella slept, a lot, whether or not it was because of the drugs, while they hopped hotels, slowly moving across the country. The first to separate away were Rosalie, Emmett and Esme. They were heading back to Forks, for appearance's sake. No matter what decision the family came to, someone had to be present there to maintain the illusion.

And, today, it was Carlisle peeling off to head back towards Forks but not without a conversation first.

It was only Bella and Carlisle in the hotel suite. The others were out hunting and would be until Alice knew this conversation was finished.

"I would prefer to have access to a radiology lab," said Carlisle, gently pressing up and down Bella's torso. She clenched her teeth, doing her best to try to not flinch away from the cold and the pain. "It feels as though your ribs are healing well. All things considered."

"Thank you, Carlisle." Bella dropped the hem of her shirt and her gaze.

Carlisle sighed and pulled a chair closer. Just out of the top of her vision, Bella saw him settle down in the chair, crossing one knee over the other. It was such an easy, human movement that it was almost charming.

"I know you don't want to have this conversation, Bella, but what I don't understand is why you're leaving your parents in the dark."

Bella picked at the bedspread under her, trying to gather her thoughts. Every waking moment since the studio had been spent in an almost fugue state; there was no desire to think about her parents or the future. But this man who had risked his whole family for her, he deserved an answer.

"I know I'm living on borrowed time," said Bella, swallowing. She moved from picking at the bedspread to cradling a glass of water in her hands. Her pale face staring back from the smooth mirror of water almost felt like a portent of the future. "Jasper told me, I asked him, why Rosalie said that I was endangering all of you.."

"You know about the Volturi," said Carlisle, considering. He leaned back into the chair, taking a deep breath. "That explains a lot. You know that you could go home, right? We would protect you for as long as we can."

"Yeah." Bella looked at him through her lashes, frowning as well. "I can't ask that of you all, and I can't do that to my parents. They don't know, they didn't choose their fate."

"And neither did you," Carlisle pointed out.

A whipcord of anger lashed through Bella, almost rocking her physically. She closed her eyes, trying to shove it back down wherever it had come from. "That doesn't matter. It'll be... easier this way. I'll find some way to keep in contact, letters or something, and then they don't have to lose their daughter entirely - not right away. This way, they'll still have me in some way."

"You're certain you want to do this," asked Carlisle, gently. "You can still go home."

"Can I?" Bella smiled at him but it was bitter. "The only recent memories I have of Forks includes your family and my home was just invaded by the tracker."

A silence hung between the two.

Bella hadn't intended to say that, or rather, she hadn't intended to say it quite like that. But instead, the sentiment had come out as bitter and loaded as it felt in her heart. She looked away, cradling her elbows in her palms. The first time Bella had tried to bring her knees up to her chest after, after Phoenix hadn't gone well.

"I'm sorry," said Bella, eventually. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I just, I want to do this. If things blow over, if your family loses their interest at some point in the future, then maybe I can... go home to them in some way."

But I don't want them to deal with me leaving them multiple times."

Carlisle looked pained. "Bella, we won't lose interest in you, I promise. You can't know how much your presence has changed this whole family for the better, but you have."

"Yeah." It wasn't that she didn't want to believe Carlisle so much as she couldn't believe him - how could her presence have changed an entire family so quickly?

"The least we can do for you, however, is help you sort out your life from this point onward. What would you like to do now?"

It took a long time for Bella to get the words out but, eventually, she just said: "I don't know."

There was a brief knock on the door and Alice slipped in the room. She settled down on the bed, next to Bella, and spoke, "I'm the first one back, the others are giving us another half hour."

Out of habit, Bella turned in towards Alice and leaned against her shoulder. She murmured a quiet greeting.

"Alice, we were just talking about where we go from here," said Carlisle, shifting in the chair again.

"I've been thinking about that as well." Alice looked down at Bella. She didn't smile but her face softened around the eyes. "Maybe, what we need is a little space."

"That might not be a bad idea," said Carlisle. "What have you saw?"

“It isn’t set in stone, not yet, but I was thinking of the house near Lake Superior.”

“Can you tell me about it,” asked Bella, uncurling slightly.

“It’s a beautiful house,” said Alice, looking off in the distance. “Esme designed it herself, and we all helped build it one summer. Quiet, especially in the winter. But it isn’t cold. It’s on top of a geothermal vent that we use to heat and power the house.”

“I’d like that.”

“It has been a while since we’ve spent time up there,” said Carlisle. “It’d be best if everyone but Edward finishes out the school year, to give at least somewhat of an appearance of normalcy.”

“Jasper and I can stay with them as well,” said Alice. She gently nudged Bella. “Someone’s already shown us that she needs a little extra help to stay safe. The others will be back soon.”

Bella shifted with Alice’s nudge, continuing to lean on her boyfriend’s sister? Her friend. Getting away sounded nice, especially to somewhere quiet. Half-formed plans drifted through her brain as Alice and Carlisle continued their conversation in low tones. Bella would have to figure out some way to explain this to Charlie and Renee, something to keep them from putting her on the missing persons list at least.

“Hello there,” murmured Edward. He gently lifted Bella and settled down where she had been sitting on the bed with her on his lap. “How are you today?”

“I’m feeling a little better,” said Bella. She smiled at him, tilting her head up for a kiss. Edward brushed one against her cheek. “I don’t need those painkillers today. I’ll need them tonight but, not during the day anymore.”

Over Edward’s shoulder, Bella watched Alice and Jasper greet each other feeling as though she should look away. Alice had her hand cupping Jasper’s face, almost leaning on them. Both of them had their eyes closed but they were smiling.

A pang went through Bella.

Edward cocked his head to the side, looking at Carlisle. Then, focusing back on Bella, he said, “are you sure you don’t want to go back to Forks?”

“You heard what I said to Charlie.” Bella pressed her face against his shoulder, not caring if her voice was muffled. They would all hear it, regardless. “Wouldn’t it hurt him more, if I went back now and had to leave him later, with no real explanation again?”

“Why do you think you’ll have to leave them some day?”

Bella didn’t answer. She just tried to press her face harder into his shoulder, arms wrapping around his waist.

Not that she had to. Edward tensed under her, his hands going down to pull the bedspread. He almost growled out his next statement, “Why would you tell her?”

“I had a right to know,” said Bella, quietly answering for Jasper. She slid out of Edward’s lap to kneel on the floor in front of him. Taking a deep breath, Bella continued, “it’s all of your lives on the line and, I bet, my parents’ as well.”

“We would protect you. I would protect you,” said Edward. He leaned forward, ripping the bedspread as he did so. Bella flinched at the noise, her eyes flitting down to his hands and back up. Edward looked aggrieved. “You shouldn’t have to give up your life for us.”

“Life doesn’t always go to plan,” said Bella, feigning indifference. She felt, for a moment, a foreign brush of sorrow. “I just want to keep moving forward.”

“I can’t change your mind?” Edward lifted one of her hands between his and pressed a kiss against it, cool breath rushing against her skin.

“No,” said Bella, smiling sadly. “You can’t. But, I’ll be keeping in touch with them - just, from a distance, Edward.”

“I never wanted to change your life like this.”

“You changed my life when you saved me from being crushed by Tyler’s car,” said Bella. She stood slowly, trying to breathe in as deeply as possible. “The rest is all fallout.”

“Are we agreed on the house at Lake Superior?” asked Alice, breaking the silence that had fallen upon the room.

Bella sent her a grateful smile. She looked back down and shifted her hand so that it was holding Edward’s.

“It’ll be just the four of you for, at least, a few more months while we wrap up everything in Forks,” said Carlisle. During Edward and Bella’s conversation, he had been politely looking away but now he focused on his family again.

“What about finishing high school?” Edward had one last gambit to play.

“I can get my GED, can’t I?” Bella sounded flippant, ignoring the vortex of emotions that lay under the surface. Everything had gone off the rails, or maybe instead, she had just jumped off the train and slammed into the banks below.

“Jasper, will you be fine living with Bella for the next few months?” asked Carlisle, pushing things forward.

Jasper turned to look at Alice, who was staring off into the distance. Eventually, she gave a graceful shrug. “As far as I can see, we’ll be fine. I trust Jasper.”

“But do you trust him with Bella?” asked Edward, beyond the point of being polite.

“I trust him,” said Bella, simply because she truly did. “We can make it work.”

“I give up,” said Edward, cradling his head in a hand. “I’ll come along because clearly I can’t stop this.”





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