11. Campaigns

The next two days proceeded quietly with Carlisle writing letters and making more phone calls, trying to locate friends who would be willing to fight alongside us. Finding his friends quickly was not an easy endeavor. Most were nomads and did not utilize the modern conveniences that our family took for granted, such as cell phones. Even those with relatively stable living arrangements didn’t always use telephones, much less the Internet. The majority of vampires Carlisle knew were centuries older than us and were either baffled by modern technology or eschewed it altogether.

The family had debated whether we should go in search of a few critical friends, such as Peter and Charlotte, though we didn’t know where to start looking for them. They could be contacted by sending letters to post offices in several cities they frequented, but it might be weeks before they received them. We knew other American nomads—Garrett, Mary, and Randall—but we had even less idea of where they might be. Carlisle’s next closest friends lived in the Amazon jungle, a vast area that would take weeks to search. His remaining friends lived in Ireland, England, and Egypt or wandered around Europe. Those were long distances to travel and time was short.

I discussed the situation with Bella that night. We were lying side–by–side in her bed and Charlie was snoring loudly down the hall.

“What’s causing the delay? she asked. “Not that I want to see you leave sooner…I wish you didn’t have to go at all, actually.”

“But you don’t want the Volturi to come here either.”

“No,” she replied glumly. “I’m causing so much trouble. I should leave myself and then everybody could get on with their lives safely.”

“Bella!” I said, taking her face in my hands. “Don’t even think that way. None of this is your fault.”

“But the intruder in my room, the Volturi, Victoria wanting to kill me…it is my fault, Edward! I’m putting all my family and friends in danger! I hate it!”

“Oh, Bella,” I said, pulling her head to my chest and rocking her gently. “Shh…shh… None of these things is insurmountable. It only seems that way because it’s all happening at once. I promise you, it’s going to be fine.”

I smoothed her hair with my fingers and then stroked her cheek, only to discover that my fingers were wet.

“Bella! You’re crying…”

“No, I’m not,” she sniffed, all evidence to the contrary.

Her pain and fear tore at my heart. I wanted to do something—anything—to ease
her distress. I gazed at her face and wiped the tears from her cheeks with my thumbs. Just as I caught one trailing along the side of her mouth, she looked up at me through her wet lashes and suddenly I felt exceedingly human. I touched the soft, pliant flesh of her lips with my damp thumb, sliding it gently back and forth. I noticed for the thousandth time how the extra fullness of her lower lip made it protrude slightly in a pout.

She stretched toward me then, her lips seeking mine, and when we connected, desire hot and sharp whooshed through my body like a backdraft. Her tears had raised the emotional tension between us and everywhere we touched became electric with sensation.

With a new hunger, I held her face in my palms and kissed her feverishly...our lips moving together...feeling...tasting. Her hands stroked my neck, then my chest, then slid around to my side ribs and I heard myself groan. At that moment, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to roll onto her and feel the shape of her beneath me.

Bella’s heart stuttered and raced in excitement and like a beacon, drew me closer. With her breasts pressing into my ribs, I felt the reverberations in my chest cavity—the two of us sharing one heart. She panted her breath sweetly into my mouth and I was far enough gone that I allowed some of my weight to sink strategically until I felt the concave area between her thighs cradle the convex shape of mine. The sensation was shocking in its intensity, but even as I growled with pleasure, I had no difficulty remembering to hold my weight on my arms while I rocked gently against her.

She felt sooo...sooo...good. Unutterably good.

I felt the tip of Bella’s tongue exploring the inside edge of my upper lip and I stroked the bottom of her tongue with mine. She moaned, the sound vibrating through her chest and echoing in mine. She was panting wildly and my breath too was coming fast and hard. Nearly out of my head with desire, I pressed my hips against her and she met me with equal force.

Ahhhh...ahhh...ahhh...

Caught up in the passion of the moment, our bodies moved in synchronization like human lovers, though our clothing and Bella’s quilt still formed a barrier between us. It was only when Bella wiggled her cotton-covered leg free from the covers and wrapped it around the back of my thighs that I stopped short and froze in place above her. I closed my eyes and separated my lips from hers to try to regain control of myself, though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

“No, Edward, pleeease...don’t stop...,” Bella moaned and another wave of desire rolled through me and settled between my legs. I held my breath and remained still until the sensation began to dissipate, then I started breathing again, slowly, to try to calm myself.

“Pleeease,” Bella whispered. “I want to.” I felt her hand on my lower back glide downward to my buttocks and I resisted the overwhelming urge to press into her again.

“No, Bella. I’ll hurt you. We can’t,” I murmured, opening my eyes.

“I trust you.”

“I don’t,” I replied, removing her hand from my backside and rolling off of her. She
immediately slid her body as close to mine as the quilt would allow.

“Bella, my love…”

I pulled her head onto my chest and stroked her hair, breathing in the scent of her. She was luscious and ripe and infinitely alluring and I wanted her badly. It occurred to me then that if I got “my way” and she remained human, I could never make love to her. I was starting to comprehend exactly what that meant and I suddenly realized just how difficult it would be to contain these newly awakened cravings for the rest of her natural life.

Perhaps I was undermining my own stated preference by tempting both of us toward a physical relationship. It was selfish to want her to become one of us so I could keep her forever, but it seemed even worse to change her so that we could share unfettered physical passion. Guilt dislodged desire in me as I wondered to what lengths I might go to possess her in every way. I would sacrifice her human life, it seemed.

“I can’t stand it,” Bella whined. “I want you.”

“I know, Bella. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. That was my fault. I didn’t mean to…to make you unhappy.”

“You’d make me very happy if you’d give in,” she said as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I wish I could, my darling, but it’s just not possible. I’m sorry I did that.”

“I’m not,” she whispered. “Do it again, please.”

“Try to sleep, Bella. Finals are coming up. You need your rest.”

“Ugh! You sure know how to bring a girl down,” she complained.

I chuckled. “Goodnight, my love.”

***

“You can’t be serious,” Bella said to Alice. “You’ve completely lost your mind!”

“Say whatever you like about me,” Alice retorted. “The party is still on.”

We were fake–eating lunch in the school cafeteria with Bella the day before our first finals. Bella’s eyes and mouth were gaping in astonishment that Alice would consider throwing a party in the face of our upcoming battle.

“Oh, calm down, Bella! There’s no reason not to go through with it. Besides, the invitations are already sent.”

“But…the…you…I…insane!” Bella sputtered, too upset to form a sentence.

“You’ve already bought my present,” Alice told her. “You don’t have to do anything but show up.”

Bella inhaled and exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm down. “With everything that is going on right now, a party is hardly appropriate,” she countered primly. Why she bothered to argue with Alice is a mystery to me. She should know by now that it’s a waste of energy.

“Graduation is what’s going on right now, and a party is so appropriate it’s almost
“Alice!” Bella wailed.

My sister explained. “There are a few things we need to get in order now, and that’s going to take a little time. As long as we’re sitting here waiting, we might as well commemorate the good stuff. You’re only going to graduate from high school—for the first time—once. You don’t get to be human again, Bella. This is a once—in—a—lifetime shot.”

I didn’t appreciate how Alice was reinforcing the idea that Bella would be changed soon. I wasn’t ready to concede that. She still might decide to wait. I gave my sister a sharp look of disapproval.

Alice stuck out her tongue.

_Fine—point made, _on both sides.

Bella wouldn’t be distracted. “What few things do we need to get in order?”

I answered quietly. “Jasper thinks we could use some help. Tanya’s family isn’t the only choice we have. Carlisle’s trying to track down a few old friends, and Jasper is looking up Peter and Charlotte. He’s considering talking to Maria…but no one really wants to involve the Southerners.”

Alice shuddered and I shared her sentiment. Maria was dangerous and utterly unpredictable. We didn’t need another Maria—induced tragedy like we’d had in Calgary the last time she visited us. It would be like her to start a battle with the werewolves to amuse herself, or try to recruit the newborns for her own army, or something equally cracked. I certainly wouldn’t trust her anywhere near Bella. And she hated Alice.

“If we can find them, it shouldn’t be too hard to convince them to help,” I continued. “Nobody wants a visit from Italy.”

An expression of alarm crossed Bella’s face. “But these friends—they’re not going to be…vegetarians, right?”

“No.”

“Here? In Forks?”

“They’re friends,” Alice pointed out, which didn’t alter the fact of their diet. She only meant that they were all mature vampires who wouldn’t hunt in our “backyard” if we asked them not to.

“All right, let’s consider that.”

“Everything’s going to be fine. Don’t worry,” Alice said. “And then, Jasper has to teach us a few courses on newborn elimination….”

_That was going to be fun. I couldn’t wait._

“When are you going?” Bella asked in a strained voice.

“A week,” I told her. “That ought to give us enough time.”

Bella went still and silent.

Looking at her from across the table, Alice observed, “You look kind of green, Bella.”

I leaned over to look at Bella’s face and I saw that Alice was right! Could Bella be
so frightened that it would make her ill? I put my arm around her in reassurance and pulled her against me. “It’s going to be fine, Bella. Trust me.”

She remained quiet…too quiet. Eventually, she murmured, “You’re looking for help.”

“Yes.” Alice turned toward her, curious.

“I could help,” she said.

All my muscles contracted simultaneously and I had to smother a hiss.

Let me handle this, Alice thought. I was glad to. I didn’t trust my voice.

“That really wouldn’t be helpful,” she told Bella matter–of–factly.

“Why not?” Bella challenged. “Eight is better than seven. There’s more than enough time.”

“There’s not enough time to make you helpful, Bella. Do you remember how Jasper described the young ones? You’d be no good in a fight. You wouldn’t be able to control your instincts, and that would make you an easy target. And then Edward would get hurt trying to protect you.”

Well done, Alice! Even Bella couldn’t deny the truth in that.

She didn’t and immediately conceded the argument.

“Not because you’re afraid,” I whispered into her ear.

“Oh,” Alice exclaimed suddenly, her eyes losing focus as she directed them toward the future. “I hate last–minute cancellations. So that puts the party attendance list down to sixty–five….”

“Sixty–five!” Bella cried out in shock.

“Who canceled?” I asked as a distraction.

“Renee.”

“What?” Bella interjected.

“She was going to surprise you for your graduation, but something went wrong. You’ll have a message when you get home,” Alice explained.

After school, Bella headed straight for the answering machine to hear the news from her mother. Phil had had a baseball injury—a broken femur—and was incapacitated. Renee couldn’t leave him.

“Well, that’s one,” Bella sighed.

“One what?”

“One person I don’t have to worry about getting killed this week.”

Such drama! I rolled my eyes.

“Why won’t you and Alice take this seriously?” Bella demanded. “This is serious.”

“Confidence,” I said confidently—and grinned.

“Wonderful,” Bella groused.

I stood beside her and fiddled with her hair as she called her mother, who did all the talking. Bella listened patiently to the details of Phil’s bad slide into home plate, his injury, all the personal tasks he couldn’t manage alone—fixing food, washing himself, going to
the toilet—and then profuse apologies and regrets for having to miss Bella’s graduation.

From time to time, Bella glanced up at me and I smiled contentedly as I twined her hair through my fingers, forming big and small ringlets, and braiding and unbraiding individual locks of hair. Eventually, Bella announced that she needed to study for her finals and her mother said goodbye.

After hanging up the phone, Bella turned to me and rose onto her toes for a kiss. To make it easier for her, I lifted her by the waist and set her on the countertop so that our heights were more equal. Immediately, she spread her thighs wide and wrapped her arms around my neck to pull me in close. She seemed oblivious to her own sexiness and to how provocative the invitation was.

After our last physical encounter, I should have known better, but I wanted to feel her thighs around me and so I indulged myself and stepped between them to kiss her. She locked her ankles behind my legs and pulled herself tightly against me—a perpetual temptation. I couldn’t stay there long. It was much too difficult to keep myself in check as my mind instantly spun fantasies of us together, her soft human flesh yielding to my dense marble skin. Mmmm....

Our lips touched and moved together for a few short moments before I backed away and disengaged myself from Bella’s legs and arms. Her face went pouty and I chuckled. Then with a sigh, I leaned against the counter next to her and put my arm around her shoulders. I noticed that she did not close her legs.

“I know you think that I have some kind of perfect, unyielding self-control, but that’s not actually the case,” I confessed.

“I wish.”

I sighed again heavily. I knew what she wanted…I wanted it too, which made restraint all the more difficult. But when I remembered how fragile she was, how easily broken, my yearnings ebbed a little. Not hers though, apparently.

I changed the subject. “After school tomorrow, I’m going hunting with Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie. Just for a few hours—we’ll stay close. Alice, Jasper, and Emmett should be able to keep you safe.”

“Ugh,” Bella complained. “I hate being babysat.”

“It’s temporary.”

“Jasper will be bored. Emmett will make fun of me.”

“They’ll be on their best behavior,” I promised, though Emmett could be rather impulsive and unruly.

“Right,” Bella sulked, looking down at her hands. Then her expression changed.

“You know…I haven’t been to La Push since the bonfire.”

My whole body went taut. I concentrated on keeping my expression smooth.

“I’d be safe enough there,” Bella pointed out.

Inwardly, I balked at the idea of her going to the reservation, which no doubt was the reaction she was expecting from me. She even might have acceded to my preferences if
I’d pushed the issue. However, I had promised that I would try to be objective and, really, there was no legitimate reason for her not to spend the time with Jacob.

“You’re probably right,” I acknowledged.

She looked startled, but then quickly changed the subject.

“Are you thirsty already?” she asked. She brushed her fingers over the slightly darkened area beneath my eyes.

“Not really.”

I didn’t especially want to discuss how we would be preparing for the fight, but Bella kept looking at me, waiting for me to explain why I would go hunting when my eyes were still gold in color. I relented.

“We want to be as strong as possible. We’ll probably hunt again on the way, looking for big game.”

“That makes you stronger?”

At any moment, I expected her to see where this conversation was leading, but she didn’t.

“Yes,” I finally replied. “Human blood makes us the strongest, though only fractionally. Jasper’s been thinking about cheating—adverse as he is to the idea, he’s nothing if not practical—but he won’t suggest it. He knows what Carlisle will say.”

“Would that help?” Bella inquired hesitantly.

As frightened as she was that one of us would be destroyed in the battle, she had to be weighing the relative advantages of sacrificing our principles versus being killed by vampires who had no scruples about drinking human blood. But I knew she would then remember that all of Forks was human, that Charlie was human, and that she was human. The Catch–22 had to be troubling. I put her mind at ease.

“It doesn’t matter. We aren’t going to change who we are,” I said, then moved away from the uncomfortable topic. “That’s why they’re so strong, of course. The newborns are full of human blood—their own blood, reacting to the change. It lingers in the tissues and strengthens them. Their bodies use it up slowly, like Jasper said, the strength starting to wane after about a year.”

“How strong will I be?”

I grinned. “Stronger than I am.”

“Stronger than Emmett?”

Thinking of that really made me smile. “Yes. Do me a favor and challenge him to an arm–wrestling match. It would be a good experience for him.”

After our morning finals the next day, Bella allowed me to drive her to the reservation border before I left on my hunting trip, even though she said being escorted made her feel like a kid. I reminded her that when your foe is supernatural, you need supernatural protection. I don’t know why she found that so difficult to accept. We couldn’t allow any gaps in her security and I was sure that Jacob would agree with me.

I tried to distract her. “So how do you feel you did on your exams?”
“History was easy, but I don’t know about the calculus. It seemed like it was making sense, so that probably means I failed.”

I laughed at her lack of confidence. “I’m sure you did fine. Or, if you’re really worried, I could bribe Mr. Varner to give you an A.”

“Er, thanks, but no thanks.”

I chuckled as we rounded the last bend to the reservation, but stopped abruptly when I saw Jacob standing by his red Volkswagen Rabbit, tapping his foot impatiently. He had a lot on his mind and the content did not at all please me.

*She loves me. I know she does. If the bloodsucker hadn’t come back, she would know it by now. I have to make her see it. I HAVE to. If she lets him turn her into a filthy, stinking leech like him, I’ll never forgive myself. She has to know that she has options.*

I heaved a sigh. So he was going to push the issue today. I wished Bella hadn’t insisted on coming to La Push.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to shake it off, but Jacob was working himself up to a declaration.

*The parasite is gonna hate me for this, especially when she finally comes to her senses and chooses me, but tough titties! I’m SO much better for her. She has to see that. I have to MAKE her see it.*

Jacob was observing us with a defiant stance, his arms crossed over his chest.

*If looks could kill,* I thought, trying to vaporize him with my laser–beam eyes through the windshield.

“You’re not listening to Jacob, are you?” Bella scolded.

“It’s not easy to ignore someone when he’s shouting.”

“Oh. What’s he shouting?”

“I’m absolutely certain he’ll mention it himself,” I told her irritably.

Jacob reached through his car window and honked the horn twice in quick succession.

“That’s impolite,” I growled.

“That’s Jacob,” Bella replied, letting him off the hook as she always did.

Sometimes the boy could be so *childish.* I gritted my teeth and cursed him silently. Just because he was immature, though, didn’t mean Bella wasn’t attracted to him. He was *obviously* attracted to her, as I knew by the inner dialogue he was conducting with his erect penis. Apparently, when he saw *my girl,* he had a tough time keeping it in his pants. And he never wore a shirt, much less *underclothes!*

*Great, just great...* Well, he was right about one thing—Bella would have to make a choice because Jacob was going to force the issue. I gave Bella a quick kiss and touched her cheek with my fingers.

“Be safe.”

She nodded. I watched her walk toward him and, as soon as I saw that she was
safely across the border, hurriedly drove away. I had to escape the contents of Jacob’s head—immediately!

Unfortunately, I was all the way home before I discovered that the cell phone I’d given Bella had fallen from her pocket and wedged in the back of the car’s seat cushion. Darn it! Now I wouldn’t know when to pick her up.

We didn’t go far to hunt—only a few miles into the Olympic National Forest—but the trip felt more like purgatory than an enjoyable romp in the woods. I couldn’t get Jacob’s thoughts and plans for the afternoon out of my head.

As usual, I drove my family crazy—well, Rosalie anyway; Carlisle and Esme were more tolerant—because I was so impatient to find some prey, any prey, and get home. I just hoped that I heard from Bella soon afterwards. If she hadn’t called me by Charlie’s dinnertime, then I would hang out at his house until she returned. Charlie would love that!

At least I knew that I’d be with her overnight, unless…PERISH THE THOUGHT! …Jacob somehow succeeded in stealing her away from me. It troubled me more than a little to know that if she wanted to make love with him, he would leap at the chance. And why wouldn’t she want to? Even I could see that he was astonishingly attractive for a human, plus he ran around half naked all the time. And he was warm and had a heartbeat. And if she wanted children, he could give her that one day. And her father liked him!

Arghh! If I were honest about it, I would admit that Jacob was a much better choice of mate for Bella than myself in every way I could think of. Even though his physical strength and volatility made him nearly as dangerous to her as me, he wouldn’t have my scruples about getting physical with her. And she obviously had physical desires that were difficult for her to contain.

My heart sank lower the longer my mind followed this line of thought. In a short time, I practically had convinced myself that Bella should be with Jacob and that I should exit stage left. I couldn’t give her what she needed.

It only raised my spirits slightly to recall that Bella once said she’d never felt physical desire for a man until she fell in love with me—that love and desire are intertwined for her. Was that still true? I could only hope. But what if she does love the dog? He certainly believes she does! Maybe if he pushes her in the direction of a physical relationship, she will find that she does love him.

Ack!! I HAVE to get control of my thoughts this INSTANT or I will go MAD!

With great effort, I returned my mind to the task at hand. Rosalie and I found the first small herd of deer—she caught two; I caught one. Carlisle and Esme then located a family of elk and each took one. After four hours total, we all had reached our hunting limits for the day. We’d found more elk and I was lucky enough to track a mountain lion, which my family left for me since it’s my favorite. It would be best for all of us to drink lion or bear blood before the battle, so we planned to hunt them on our way to Seattle.

One of the problems with drinking only animal blood is that we get full before our bodies are completely fortified. Since we were once human, our vampire bodies recognize
the antigens present in human blood and our tissues thus absorb its components easily. The further removed an animal’s blood is from the human species, the less able we are to absorb its nutrients. Therefore, we have to drink more of it to get the same effect and unfortunately, our stomachs can only hold so much blood at once.

The only way around the problem is to overfill ourselves repeatedly over a period of time and that’s what we were doing to prepare for our battle with the newborns. We would continue hunting the local fauna until we were ready to leave, and then supplement that with bear and mountain lion blood on the journey, assuming we could find some. The blood of the *Ursus* and *Feline* species have antigens that are similar to human antigens, which is one reason bear and mountain lion blood appeal to us. Though housecats are also appealing, they have only half a pint of blood in them and are hardly worth the effort. Interestingly, the blood of the *Canine* species has many more antigens than human blood and is effectively inedible. We assume that’s why the Quileute wolves smell so bad to our noses (one reason, anyway).

A week of over-drinking elk and deer plus a little lion or bear is nearly equivalent to drinking the blood of two humans. When one considers that the newborns not only have their own blood still in them, but also are drinking human blood—perhaps as often as every day—one must concede that the Seattle newborns will have a distinct advantage over us. That’s not something I wanted Bella to know—she was anxious enough. Our training and expertise should override their advantage, though their much greater numbers were still a bit disquieting.

The afternoon had dragged unrelentingly, though in truth, all four of us had found sufficient prey rather quickly, considering how hunts often go. We had returned from the forest forty–one minutes earlier, but it felt like I’d been driving around Clallam County for hours waiting for Bella to phone. Twice already I’d had to stop myself from dialing Charlie to find out if she was home yet. I was driving around in my car so that I would reach her more quickly when she called, and also because I couldn’t tolerate waiting at home doing nothing.

**Damn!** I wish she hadn’t dropped that cell phone!

The delay might mean nothing, but what it could mean troubled me—a lot. What if Jacob’s impassioned pleading had worked? What if he’d convinced her that she loved him? What if she did love him? What if they were loving each other? *Right now?!* Aaaaah! I wanted to scream.

Then suddenly, **miraculously**, my phone rang. I couldn’t pluck it out of my pocket fast enough.

“Bella?” I asked eagerly. “You left the phone…I’m sorry, did Jacob drive you home?”

“Yes. Will you come and get me, please?” she asked in a shaky voice. Alarm bells clanged loudly in my head.

“I’m on my way. What’s wrong?”
“I want Carlisle to look at my hand. I think it’s broken.”
I inhaled convulsively and clenched my fists before deliberately releasing the steering wheel so it wouldn’t crumble in my hands.
“What happened?”
“I punched Jacob.”
The air rushed out of my lungs and I started to smile, but there was no joy in it. He had done something to Bella and he was going to pay for it!
“Good,” I said evenly. “Though I’m sorry you’re hurt.”
Bella chuckled, then sighed. “I wish I’d hurt him. I didn’t do any damage at all.”
“I can fix that,” I said grimly.
“I was hoping you would say that.”
Really? “That doesn’t sound like you. What did he do?”
“He kissed me.”
I heard the anger in her voice and my foot slammed the gas pedal to the floor. I was shaking with rage. She’d had to fight him off! I would kill him. Kill him!!
I heard Charlie’s voice through the telephone.
“Maybe you ought to take off, Jake.”
“I think I’ll hang out here, if you don’t mind,” he replied nonchalantly.
I kept the anger out of my voice as I verified what I’d heard.
“Is the dog still there?”
“Yes.”
Good! Easier for me...
“I’m around the corner,” I said with a forced calm before snapping the phone shut.
My car strained against gravity as I wrenched the steering wheel clockwise at Charlie’s corner. When I reached his house, I stomped on the brakes and the tires squealed to a stop at the curb. I was out of the car and at the front door in less than a second.
“It’s swelling,” I heard Bella say from inside.
“Maybe you should pick on people your own size,” Charlie suggested. Then having heard my squealing tires thought, Whew! He’s pissed off! What’s he gonna do?
When the door finally opened, there she was and she looked glad to see me.
Bella first, Bella first, I repeated to myself, trying to get my anger under control. It didn’t help that her injury was so obviously painful. I could tell by the unusual delicacy with which she held her immobilized hand against her chest as she stepped outside.
“Let me see,” I uttered softly, peeling the icepack from her knuckles. Then I saw the points of contact. She had belted him solidly with the knuckles of her first two fingers and slightly less solidly with the knuckle of her ring finger. I was glad that that one, in particular, was not broken. The already blackened, swollen skin indicated that the other two probably were. “I think you’re right about the break,” I said catching her eyes. “I’m proud of you. You must have put some force behind this.”
“As much as I have,” Bella sighed. “Not enough, apparently.”
I kissed the back of her hand as gently as possible. “I’ll take care of it,” I assured her. “Jacob,” I called quietly.

“Now, now,” Charlie warned from the living room. Jacob could probably take him with his size ‘n’ all, but there’s something...what?...dangerous, yes...dangerous about Edward. Could he have a gun? Yes...possibly...

Little did Charlie know just how dangerous I could be, no gun required. Jacob rose from the couch and strolled casually to the front door, followed by Bella’s father.

The Chief of Police, I reminded myself.

“I don’t want any fighting, do you understand?” he said to me. “I can go put my badge on if that makes my request more official.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said evenly, the violence of my emotions carefully concealed.

“Why don’t you arrest me, Dad?” Bella offered. “I’m the one throwing punches.”

“Do you want to press charges, Jake?” the police chief asked.

Jacob grinned. “No. I’ll take the trade any day.”

Grrrrrrrrrr. The comment made Bella angry too. “Dad, don’t you have a baseball bat somewhere in your room? I want to borrow it for a minute.”

The lawman replied, “Enough, Bella.”

“Let’s go have Carlisle look at your hand before you wind up in a jail cell,” I suggested. I wrapped my arm around her waist and directed her toward my car.

“Fine,” she said, leaning against me.

Jacob came outside behind us.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?” Charlie whispered, considering the possibility of a gun in my glove compartment. Smith & Wesson classic revolver, he thought, then, No, more high–tech...Glock “safe–action” pistol.

I smiled to myself at Charlie’s assessment of my weapon preferences. Not that I was legally of age to own a gun. That he thought I might have one anyway said something about me, but I wasn’t sure what. Possibly he recognized “man,” despite my youthful exterior. Good cops were sharp and could be hard to fool.

“Give me a minute, Charlie,” Jacob muttered. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.” I heard the front door close and caught Charlie’s nervous thoughts behind it.

...let them work it out?...keep an eye on ‘em...

Charlie’s concerns weren’t too far from the truth. Jacob was ready for a prizefight with Bella as the prize and I was more than willing to take him on...except for Bella. I ignored him while I walked my love to the car and helped her inside. Once the door was shut, I turned around to face the arrogant mutt.

His legs were planted slightly apart and his arms crossed over his chest, the “puffed–up” stance of challenge. Despite his towering height and ridiculously muscled
torso, I knew I could snap his neck before he even realized I’d moved. Perhaps that knowledge is what allowed me to remain calm.

“I’m not going to kill you now, because it would upset Bella.”

“Hmph,” Bella complained behind me.

I flashed her a grin. “It would bother you in the morning,” I averred, touching her cheek through the open window. Then I addressed Jacob again, low enough that Charlie, who was looking through the front window, couldn’t hear.

“But if you ever bring her back damaged again—and I don’t care whose fault it is; I don’t care if she merely trips, or if a meteor falls out of the sky and hits her in the head—if you return her to me in less than the perfect condition that I left her in, you will be running with three legs. Do you understand that, mongrel?”

Jacob rolled his eyes, which did not disturb me in the slightest. I knew that he knew I could do it, even though he was bragging to himself about how he had touched her face and kissed her too. *Even if she did punch me,* he thought.

“Who’s going back?” Bella muttered.

“And if you ever kiss her again, I will break your jaw for her,” I promised, my face expressionless.

“What if she wants me to?” Jacob replied defiantly.

*Just like a stinking puppy urinating on the furniture*....

“Hah!” Bella countered.

“If that’s what she wants, then I won’t object,” I said, shrugging. “You might want to wait for her to say it, rather than trust your interpretation of body language—but it’s your face.”

Jacob grinned wickedly, thinking, *Oh, she’s gonna want it, all right! As much as I do! Soon!*

“You wish,” Bella taunted, answering the look in his eyes.

“Yes, he does,” I confirmed.

Annoyed, Jacob said, “Well, if you’re done rummaging through my head, why don’t you go take care of her hand?”

“One more thing,” I added, responding to what he’d said to her on the reservation—his declaration of love. “I’ll be fighting for her, too. You should know that. I’m not taking anything for granted, and I’ll be fighting twice as hard as you will.”

“Good,” the dog replied. “It’s no fun beating someone who forfeits.” *She will be mine, bloodsucker!*

“She is mine,” I responded, my anger rising to the surface. “I didn’t say I would fight fair.” Not with my new weapon that—to my great relief—Jacob hadn’t discovered today. I was ready to use everything I had.

“Neither did I.”

“Best of luck.”

“Yes, may the best *man* win.”
“That sounds about right…pup.”
That angered him, but he had no further comeback. Instead, he leaned around me to catch Bella’s eye.
“I hope your hand feels better soon. I’m really sorry you’re hurt.”
“How do you feel?” I asked, as we pulled away from the curb.
“Irritated.”
I chuckled. “I meant your hand.
Bella shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”
“True.”

Emmett and Rosalie were working in the garage when we arrived home. Rose was lying beneath the Jeep, changing the oil, while Emmett sat next to her, holding its front end in the air with one hand under the frame. Bored, he noticed Bella’s injured hand as soon as I helped her from the car.
“Fall down again, Bella?” he asked with a grin.
She replied with annoyance. “No, Emmett. I punched a werewolf in the face.”
He looked at her in surprise and then burst out laughing.
As we walked past, Rosalie said, not exactly quietly, “Jasper’s going to win the bet.”

Will he? Emmett wondered and stopped laughing. Maybe I bet too much.
“What bet?” Bella stopped walking and stared at Emmett.
“Let’s get you to Carlisle,” I urged, trying to push her along. I shook my head slightly at Em and gave him a warning look. Bella didn’t need to know about my brothers’ crude form of amusement.
“What bet?” Bella demanded, squaring off with me.
“Thanks, Rosalie,” I grumbled.
Any time, she replied in her head. She loved to cause me trouble.
“Edward…,” Bella threatened, as we headed toward the kitchen door.
“It’s infantile,” I said, shrugging it off. “Emmett and Jasper like to gamble.”
“Emmett will tell me.” Bella tried to pull away, but I tightened my grip around her waist and then gave in with a sigh.
“They’re betting on how many times you…slip up in the first year.”
“Oh.” I felt Bella cringe against my side. “They have a bet about how many people I’ll kill?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Rosalie thinks your temper will turn the odds in Jasper’s favor.”
Bella considered that for a second and concluded, “Jasper’s betting high.”
“It will make him feel better if you have a hard time adjusting. He’s tired of being the weakest link.”
“Sure. Of course it will,” she said sarcastically. “I guess I could throw in a few extra homicides, if it makes Jasper happy. Why not?”
The reality of what she wanted to do hadn’t completely sunk in, I thought. Even
though Jasper had detailed the behavior of newborn vampires—their viciousness, single-mindedness, and intractability—she hadn’t truly faced the obvious conclusion yet…that she probably would at least try to drain some humans. I knew the idea was abhorrent to her.

I hugged her. “You don’t need to worry about it now. In fact, you don’t have to worry about it ever, if you don’t want to.” I meant it…I think.

Bella groaned. She probably needed something for the pain. I hurried her into the house.

Alice had warned Carlisle and he was waiting for us in the kitchen.

“Hi Bella. What seems to be the trouble?” he asked, though he already knew.

“I punched Jacob in the face and I think my hand is broken,” she responded wryly.

“Let’s get you up to my office then and take an X-ray,” he suggested.

It turned out that Bella’s middle knuckle was broken, though fortunately, the bone hadn’t dislocated. The other two knuckles were bruised.

“I need to immobilize your hand, Bella, so the bone doesn’t move around. Plaster would be best.”

“Please, please, please don’t give me a cast,” she begged. “Can’t you just tape it or something?”

“Well, I could put it in a brace, but you’ll have to keep it on or it won’t do any good.”

“I will, I promise!”

Carlisle dug around in his cabinets for a brace of the proper size. When he found one, he bent it into a confining shape around Bella’s hand and tightened it with Velcro straps. Bella zoned out completely as he worked.

“Are you in pain?” I asked. Maybe she was blanking out her expression to hide it. That would be like her.

“No, I’m fine,” she replied, though I saw her flinch once or twice during the procedure.

She wouldn’t admit to pain when I asked her again a little later, but I knew something was bothering her. I didn’t think it was Jacob’s advances, though I couldn’t be sure. Through his eyes I saw Bella first attempt to push him off when he started kissing her, then go completely limp and unresponsive, and then punch him in the face. It appeared to me that what he thought had happened and what had actually happened were wildly different. I don’t think I was misreading Bella’s displeasure…which was a tremendous relief.

Maybe she was troubled by Rosalie’s reminder that she would become a vicious predator like the rest of us if she continued on her chosen course. And soon. It might be good that she was bothered by that. Perhaps it would disturb her enough that she would change her mind and decide to remain human.

That was something I still hoped for…and didn’t.