

The phone in my pocket vibrated again. It was the twenty-fifth time in twenty-four hours. I thought about opening the phone, at least seeing who was trying to contact me. Perhaps it was important. Maybe Carlisle needed me.

I thought about it, but I did not move.

I wasn't precisely sure where I was. Some dark attic crawl space, full of rats and spiders. The spiders ignored me, and the rats gave me a wide berth. The air was thick with the heavy scents of cooking oil, rancid meat, human sweat, and the nearly solid layer of pollution that was actually visible in the humid air, like a black film over everything. Below me, four stories of a rickety ghetto tenement teamed with life. I didn't bother to separate the thoughts from the voices—they made a big, loud Spanish clamor that I didn't listen to. I just let the sounds bounce off me. Meaningless. All of it was meaningless.

My very existence was meaningless.

The whole world was meaningless.

My forehead pressed against my knees, and I wondered how much longer I would be able to stand this. Maybe it was hopeless. Maybe, if my attempt was doomed to failure anyway, I should stop torturing myself and just go back...

The idea was so powerful, so *healing*—like the words contained a strong anesthetic, washing away the mountain of pain I was buried under—that it made me gasp, made me dizzy.

I could leave now, I could go back.

Bella's face, always behind the lids of my eyes, smiled at me.

It was a smile of welcome, of forgiveness, but it did not have the affect my subconscious probably intended it to have.

Of course I could not go back. What was my pain, after all, in comparison to her happiness? She *should* be able to smile, free from fear and danger. Free from a longing for a soulless future. She deserved better than that. She deserved better than me. When she left this world, she would go to a place that was forever barred to me, no matter how I conducted myself here.

The idea of that final separation was so much more intense than the pain I already had. My body shook with it. When Bella went on to the place where she belonged and I never could, I would not linger here behind. There must be oblivion. There must be relief.

That was my hope, but there were no guarantees. *To sleep, perchance to dream.* Ay, *there's the rub*, I quoted to myself. Even when I was ash, would I somehow still feel the torture of her loss?

I shuddered again.

And, damn it, I'd promised. I'd promised her that I wouldn't haunt her life again, bring my black demons into it. I wasn't going back on my word. Couldn't I do anything right by her? Anything at all?

The idea of returning to the cloudy little town that would always be my true home on this planet snaked through my thoughts again.

Just to check. Just to see that she's well and safe and happy. Not to interfere. She would never know I was there...

No. Damn it, no.

The phone vibrated again.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," I growled.

I could use the distraction, I supposed. I flipped the phone open and registered the numbers with the first shock I'd felt in half a year.

Why would Rosalie be calling me? She was the one person who was probably enjoying my absence.

There must be something truly wrong if she needed to talk to me. Suddenly worried for my family, I hit the send button.

"What?" I asked tensely.

"Oh, wow. Edward answered the phone. I feel so honored."

As soon as I heard her tone, I knew my family was fine. She must just be bored. It was hard to guess at her motives without her thoughts as a guide. Rosalie had never made much sense to me. Her impulses were usually founded on the most convoluted kinds of logic.

I snapped the phone shut.

"Leave me alone," I whispered to nobody.

Of course the phone vibrated again at once.

Would she keep calling until she passed along whatever message she was planning to annoy me with? Probably. It would take months for her to grow tired of this game. I toyed with the idea of letting her hit redial for the next half year...and then sighed and answered the phone again.

"Get on with it."

Rosalie rushed through the words. "I thought you would want to know that Alice is in Forks."

I opened my eyes and stared at the rotten wooden beams three inches from my face.

"What?" My voice was flat, emotionless.

"You know how Alice is—thinks she knows everything. Like you." Rosalie chuckled humorlessly. Her voice had a nervous edge, like she was suddenly unsure about what she was doing.

But my rage made it hard to care what Rosalie's problem was.

Alice had sworn to me that she would follow my lead in regards to Bella, though she did not agree with my decision. She'd promised that she would let Bella alone...for as long as I did. Clearly, she'd thought I would eventually fold to the pain. Maybe she was right about that.

But I hadn't. Yet. So what was she doing in Forks? I wanted to wring her skinny neck. Not that Jasper would let me get that close to her, once he caught a whiff of the fury blowing out of me...

"Are you still there, Edward?"

I didn't answer. I pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingertips, wondering if it were possible for a vampire to get a migraine.

On the other hand, if Alice had already gone back...

No. No. No. No.

I'd made a promise. Bella deserved a life. I'd made a promise. Bella deserved a life.

I repeated the words like a mantra, trying to clear my head of the seductive image of Bella's dark window. The doorway to my only sanctuary.

No doubt I would have to grovel, were I to return. I didn't mind that. I could happily spend the next decade on my knees if I were with her.

No, no, no.

"Edward? Don't you even care why Alice is there?"

"Not particularly."

Rosalie's voice turned a trifle smug now, pleased, no doubt, that she'd forced a response from me. "Well, of course, she's not exactly breaking the rules. I mean, you only warned us to stay away from Bella, right? The rest of Forks doesn't matter."

I blinked my eyes slowly. Bella had left? My thoughts circled around the unexpected idea. She hadn't graduated yet, so she must have returned to her mother. That was good. She should live in sunshine. It was good that she'd been able to put the shadows behind her.

I tried to swallow, and couldn't.

Rosalie trilled a nervous laugh. "So you don't need to be angry with Alice."

"Then why did you call me, Rosalie, if not to get Alice in trouble? Why are you bothering me? Ugh!"

"Wait!" she said, sensing, rightly, that I was able to hang up again. "That's not why I called."

"Then why? Tell me quickly, and then *leave me alone*."

"Well..." she hesitated.

"Spit it out, Rosalie. You have ten seconds."

"I think you should come home," Rosalie said in a rush. "I'm tired of Esme grieving and Carlisle never laughing. You should feel ashamed at what you've done to them. Emmett misses you all the time and it's getting on my nerves. You have a family. Grow up and think about something besides yourself."

"Interesting advice, Rosalie. Let me tell you a little story about a pot and a kettle..."

"I *am* thinking about them, unlike you. Don't you care how much you've hurt Esme, if no one else? She loves you more than the rest of us, and you know that. Come home."

I didn't answer.

"I thought once this whole Forks thing was finished, you would get over it."

"Forks was never the problem, Rosalie," I said, trying to be patient. What she'd said about Esme and Carlisle had struck a chord. "Just because Bella"—it was hard to say her name out loud—"has moved to Florida, it doesn't mean that I'm able... Look, Rosalie. I really am sorry, but, trust me, it wouldn't make anyone happier if I were there."

"Um..."

There it was, that nervous hesitation again.

"What is it that you're not telling me, Rosalie? Is Esme all right? Is Carlisle—"

"They're fine. It's just...well, I didn't say that Bella *moved*."

I didn't speak. I ran over our conversation in my head. Yes, Rosalie *had* said that Bella had moved. She'd said: *...you only warned us to stay away from Bella, right? The rest of Forks doesn't matter*. And then: *I thought once this whole Forks thing was finished...* So Bella wasn't in Forks. What did she mean, Bella hadn't moved?

Then Rosalie was rushing through her words again, saying them almost angrily this time.

“They didn’t want to tell you, but I think that’s stupid. The quicker you get over this, the sooner things can go back to normal. Why let you mope around the dark corners of the world when there’s no need for it? You can come home now. We can be a family again. It’s over.”

My mind seemed to be broken. I couldn’t make sense of her words. It was like there was something very, very obvious she was telling me, but I had no idea what it was. My brain played with the information, making strange patterns of it. Nonsensical.

“Edward?”

“I don’t understand what you are saying, Rosalie.”

A long pause, the length of a few human heartbeats.

“She’s dead, Edward.”

A longer pause.

“I’m...sorry. You have a right to know, though, I think. Bella...threw herself off a cliff two days ago. Alice saw it, but it was too late to do anything. I think she would have helped, though, broken her word, if there had been time. She went back to do what she could for Charlie. You know how she’s always cared for him—”

The phone went dead. It took me a few seconds to realize that I’d shut the power off.

I sat in the dusty darkness for a long, frozen space. It was like time had ended. Like the universe had stopped.

Slowly, moving like an old man, I turned my phone back on and dialed the one number I’d promise myself I would never call again.

If it was her, I would hang up. If it was Charlie, I’d get the information I needed through subterfuge. I’d prove Rosalie’s sick little joke wrong, and then go back to my nothingness.

“Swan residence,” answered a voice I’d never heard before. A man’s husky voice, deep, but still youthful.

I didn’t pause to think about the implications of that.

“This is Dr. Carlisle Cullen,” I said, perfectly imitating my father’s voice. “May I please speak to Charlie?”

“He’s not here,” the voice responded, and I was dimly surprised by the anger in it. The words were almost a snarl. But that didn’t matter.

“Well, where is he then?” I demanded, getting impatient.

There was a short pause, as if the stranger wanted to withhold the information from me.

“He’s at the funeral,” the boy finally answered.

I shut the phone again.