

Contest: The Second Season of Our Discontent Anonymous Angst Contest 2012

Pen Name: GothicTemptress

Title: Ctrl Alt Del

Picture Prompt Number: 8 (The Angel Statuary)

Pairing: Edward and Bella

Rating: M

Genre: Angst, Hurt/Comfort

Word Count: 6969

Summary: Beneath the painful emotions & seeping within her festering wounds, reality is pushing through the frayed edges of the radical decision Bella's made. Fragmented and overloaded, her choice is a difficult one, coming from a source she never expected. A system restore can be more complex than anticipated. Commence resolution protocol and prepare to queue those three computer keys ...

**I don't want to start any blasphemous rumors
But I think that God's got a sick sense of humor
And when I die I expect to find him laughing**

Blasphemous Rumors – Sung by Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode

"Tell me in your own words, Isabella."

His eyes beckoned her response, kind orbs of understanding begging for her truth.

"Starting from ... where? Don't you ..."

He nodded, his voice piercing through her hesitation.

"I know a great deal already, but I'd like to hear your story, just the same. You can begin at the very beginning."

Her eyes widened in horror at the need to revisit what had so long remained unspoken.

"The *very* beginning?"

Bella's voice fractured beneath the emotions flooding within her festering wounds. Poisonous remnants of pain pushed through the frayed edges of the framework forming her painful memories. He nodded and she visibly gulped. Considering where she was, she knew she needed to be as truthful and detailed as possible. She tried to maintain a sturdy account as she spoke.

"I've rarely felt true happiness. I've always been plagued by fear, anxiety and I've always felt as though I was wading through the ruins destined to be my life. My parents didn't seem to be emotionally vested in me and so I've also rarely felt loved. Even when I did, it was violently ripped away from me. I think I have been cursed from the moment I was born."

The man's eyebrows sloped towards his forehead, a small smile of understanding on his face.

"So much cynicism from one so young ..."

"It's not cynicism when it's backed up by reality."

He nodded, speaking softly in response.

"I can't really argue with that in your case, but I'd still like to hear your thoughts just the same, if you don't mind. Tell me as much as you can. Perhaps you can begin with some happy childhood memories?"

Bella drew in a deep breath, hoping to add substance behind her reasoning.

"I don't *have* any happy childhood memories. My earliest memories are tainted with the worst possible memories imaginable. No child deserves the situation forced upon me. Even the sunniest days involve the most disturbing of memories. On those sunny days my cousin, Aro, seemed to be happier. The sun would shine and heat up the black pavement of my parent's driveway, and he would hide behind the garage where it was shaded to avoid the blistering rays. On those happy summer days, I would be outside playing hide and seek with my brother Emmett, and yet Aro would always find me instead."

Disgust over the memories drew the corners of her lips downward as she continued.

"The heat rising off the pavement was suffocating. The smell of tar mingled with the humid summer air and the rays of the sun baked the pavement as I sought refuge in my own mind. I attempted blocking away the path Aro's fingers would take on my body while I tried desperately to escape his grip. On sunny days, his fingers would venture lower than normal. He used to tell me that the happy sunshine gave him permission, and because he was so much larger and older than I was, he would threaten me until I remained still and silent. I remember clouds casting their shadows on my cries as I tried to close my legs, tried to keep his out from my ins. What could a five year old do? *Those* were my sunny days. It only got worse from there."

Bella didn't know where to look as she recounted her nightmare. Her eyes strayed uncomfortably to the left, then to the right, but never seeing as she continued to speak.

"My parents thought he was the most responsible teenager they knew, and had him babysit us whenever they needed to leave us at home. My brother Emmett worshiped him, and I would try to hide in my closet, but he was always very good at playing hide and seek. He always found me. His ... his breath always smelled of bazooka chewing gum. His clothing smelled of stale moth balls. His ... his fingers smelled of *me*."

Tears seeped from her eyes as she looked on into the distance, yet she saw nothing except her own painful story reliving itself once again. Her right hand brushed against the robe protecting her modesty ... tender fibers dancing over her fingertips like soft feathers beneath an Angel's breath.

"I used to think that if I could use my superhuman powers I could stop him, or at least make myself invisible. But God gave me no power at *all*. What child knows what to do, or how to stop what they don't understand? They sit quietly, respect the rules of expected silence and chew their treat silently once it's all over, hoping that he'd never do it again."

She shifted on her bare feet as she tried to prepare herself for the strength she would need to reveal what was yet to come. The man before her patiently waited for her to settle.

"I would bathe or shower many times a day. My parents never questioned me because they were happy I was so fastidious about cleanliness. I was to be seen, never heard, and I was always expected to look my very best. I would scrub myself raw and mask my cries with the running water, and yet no matter how hard I tried to wash away the situation being forced on me, I had no way of knowing how I could

put a stop to what Aro was doing to me. No amount of scrubbing could free me of *him*. The water didn't soothe me. Nothing could. *Nothing*. My mother most of all. I never understood why she didn't realize something was wrong with her daughter. How could she not see that I was falling apart? I was a child and not adept yet at masking the truth or my feelings. The fact of the matter was that she wasn't ever prepared to see. She hardly noticed things outside herself anyway. She was always too worried about pleasing my father to ever give me the time of day."

Her shoulders hunched over in defeat. She'd given up trying long ago.

"When it got colder outside, he would haul me away to the second floor storage room in my parent's home while Emmett played with his GI Joe action figures in another part of the house. The wood paneling in that room was rotting and I could sometimes hear the mice within the walls playing in the insulation maze that had become their home. He ... he would slip his finger in and I would try to pretend that I could hide in their maze to escape his panting breaths as they escalated along with his probing fingers - his rising, exerting gasps searing the area near my ear as his wood rosary scraped against my back. It was a gift from his mother after he made his Confirmation, and he used to tell me that he was giving me a gift, too. I would be given the choice between a Bazooka gum or a Tootsie Roll, in exchange for my silence. I would choose the gum because it would last longer, and I felt it was the more prudent choice for suffering what I was."

The man before her closed his eyes for a brief moment while he tried to collect his thoughts. His job was to try to remain impartial. It was a task proving too difficult after hearing her speak. He opened his eyes at the sound of her voice.

"I don't have many recollections because they were too terrible to remember. I never allowed them into my memory that I know of. But I do remember when I was eight. I had to make a chewing gum holder for a grade out of ceramic forms, and my mother punished me when I refused to complete that project. She always expected me to be a perfectionist and I kept delaying it without truly comprehending *why*."

She stared into his sad eyes for a brief moment before continuing.

"No one knew I was being forced to create a vessel for my deepest pain, my most horrifying misery. And yet I had to form it with my own hands, making it pretty, for it to count and to please my mother. I got an A, at least. My parents were very frugal so they made sure that I used it as much as possible, getting upset if I threw a piece of used gum away or they did not see a piece of gum in it at any given time. I ... I started using it to make them happy, placing my gum in it with the intention of using it later. But when I'd lift up the lid I'd ..."

Her sobs escaped despite her most fervent attempts at keeping her numb façade intact.

"... I'd lift the lid of the tray and the wads of gum would be useless and disgusting, just like me."

She cried silently as she tried to gain control over her raw and seething emotions. He sat patiently and waited, nodding to encourage her when she was ready to continue.

"When I was nine, the power of Aro's touch became more aggressive and he began using all his *outs*. It was so painful, so ... disgusting. He had a girlfriend in high school and he said he used to practice with me so that he could be good for *her*. And then one day, he disappeared. He did something to upset his parents and they sent him away to military school. After that he joined the Army. I ..."

Bella rubbed the forearms clenched closely around her ribs, trying desperately to comfort herself with a smoothing action. It wasn't working. Nothing ever did.

"... No one could touch me, no one ever got close enough to me to try. My parents were too caught up in their own lives to notice, and Emmett was not interested in the life of his older sister. There was only

one person that ever cared enough to listen to me, who I believed loved me in the way that I truly needed. He ..."

"Are you talking about Edward?"

She smiled at the fact that he knew Edward's name, and nodded readily in reply to his question as she tried masking the sadness in her heart. Her voice immediately brimmed with the happier memories that began flooding her mind.

"Edward moved into the house across the street from ours when I was nine. From the first moment I met him, he became my best friend. He was my champion when others ignored me because my shyness was so off-putting. He stood up to those that bullied or teased me, and his steadfast protection allowed me to trust in someone for the first time in my life. He and I spent hours every summer exploring the nature preserve around our house, building forts and catching butterflies."

The man's kind smile broadened further.

"Those sound like happy memories, Isabella."

She nodded and returned his smile briefly, only to allow it to fall once again.

"Edward *was* my happiness. And when the weather turned, we would build a pillow fort near the fireplace in his living room and he would read happy stories to me to try to lift my spirits. He'd have his mother make me rice crispy treats, or we'd bake brownies together, even though he knew I would only have a bite. I always controlled the amount of calories I would consume because it was the only area of my life that I felt I had control over. That pleased my image-conscious mother, too. But she didn't know why I was making those decisions. Aro had taken what he wanted and my parents demanded everything else. Edward seemed to be so in tune with what I needed, and he made me feel lighter, even when my home life wasn't great. He knew that too, he ... he was the first to notice my avoidance of touch and the first to ask me about it. Ensnared in our fort of safety, surrounded by comfy blankets and the warmth of the fire, I told him everything."

Bella closed her eyes, trying to conjure the warm feeling she had grown accustomed to in Edward's company. Her voice was burdened with the knowledge that it had been so long since she felt it.

"I told him everything, and he held me as I wept. He was my angel. He never abandoned me despite how broken I was or the baggage I carried. I often wonder how I'd become so lucky to have Edward in my life when the rest of my life had been so terrible. He was my best friend. He was always there for me. He was my everything. And when I was sixteen, he was my first kiss. He ..."

Her eyes began to fill with tears as she opened them again.

"... He was the most gentle and loving human being I've ever known. The hope I felt about my future was because I knew Edward was in it. We continued to be inseparable through high school. Those were the first summers in my entire life that I began to enjoy the sunny days. I began to welcome the sunshine despite my previous associations with it, and I began allowing it to warm my skin, warming me within, too. I'd never felt so much happiness."

Bella's smile fell in the silence that stretched between thoughts.

"Edward went away to college when I was a Junior in high school, but we were still very much in love. Despite the distance, I never doubted his feelings or his friendship. While I struggled without him during the school years, the summers were still ours. After I graduated, I joined him at college and that's when I allowed my love for Edward to manifest physically. It was finally offered, not stolen or taken brutally. It was *beautiful*, and from *that* came our little, unexpected surprise, Nessie. We planned on getting married, but that's when he ..."

Her throat constricted as she tried to speak, the wounds of the memories pushing outward despite their lack of room for escape.

"... was killed in that shooting on campus. I'd been in the dorms studying for an astronomy test, and I can still hear the sound of sirens that filled the Quad after it happened. I actually felt the moment he was no longer with me, the moment he passed on. He had so much promise, was such a loving, giving man, and I lost my sunshine. It was fitting that it rained on the day his casket was lowered into the ground. My angel was dead, and I was only left with the stone memorial of what he was, looming over me in a mockery of fate. I wished it was me in his place."

She winced at the admission, and brought her hand to touch the side of her head.

"After his funeral, my only will for living remained for what was growing inside of me. The baby was all that was left of him. My angel was gone, and I yet I kept on going for *her*. I felt I owed Edward at least that much."

The man nodded his head silently in response. She paused for a few moments before continuing.

"I moved home, and after Nessie came into the world, my parents were surprisingly supportive, offering to watch her so I could continue with my education. A few months after I gave birth to Nessie, I returned to the local community college for night classes. I wanted to give my daughter everything I could in life, including the kind of life I never felt I would have myself. Edward believed in me, and I knew that I had to try to believe in me, too."

She watched as the man scribbled something down in the book in front of him and when he stopped writing and looked up at her, she continued.

"When I came home from my lecture this evening, I walked into the front room to discover Aro holding my daughter. He'd just returned from his tour of duty and it was the first time I'd seen him in years. He was ..."

Her voice began to rise with the anxiety that never seemed to leave her, no matter how hard she tried.

"... He was smiling down at her, and it looked like he was toying with the sides of her diaper with his disgusting hands as she sat on his lap. He wasn't aware that I was home yet and my mom was cooking in the kitchen. I knew, in that moment, that he was capable of ruining her life too! The way he was looking at her, he'd looked at me!"

The man sighed and nodded in understanding. His voice grew firmer in response.

"So you went to your father's room to get his gun, shooting Aro while he laid your daughter down on the couch cushion to undo her diaper."

She nodded adamantly, never removing her entreating gaze from his.

"She was no longer in his arms, and he got lead between the eyes before he could touch her like he did me. He never had a chance."

A pregnant silence hovered between the unanswered questions. He observed her carefully before he spoke.

"And you justify your actions based on what was done to you? Even though you are here standing before me now?"

His tone was harsher than she had been accustomed to earlier in their conversation. Her frustration with his method grew with every second, her negative emotions threatening to collapse along with her physical being downward. She was ready to curl up into the fetal position and rock back and forth like she used to do when she was a child. Who was she kidding? She still did it when she had too, regularly,

if necessary. She decided to speak up instead, before she lost her will to fight for her reasoning.

"I was already dead when I was five because my life had been buried in a grave the moment my cousin decided to take away my will! My innocence! My dignity! He destroyed my life!"

Her plea for understanding was met with his sharper words.

"And that gave you right to destroy his?"

She shook her head as she looked down towards her feet.

"I know I probably shouldn't have killed him."

His tone grew softer.

"And yet?"

"I ... snapped. I thought I needed revenge, complete annihilation of the lifelong suffering I continued to feel at the memory of his actions. As long as he was alive and able to abuse or even *touch* my daughter, or any victim the way he did *me* ... I ..."

She hung her head and closed her eyes, her chin bearing into her chest as her shoulders slumped forward in regret. She reached up to touch her right temple, rubbing a circular pattern, knowing damn well that there should be nothing left to meet her fingertips.

"... when my rage filled mind registered my blood covered mother picking up my screaming daughter, I realized that I needed to pull that trigger one more time. I already painted the living room red, I might as well do it thoroughly. I would never be able to provide Nessie with a normal life after what I'd just done. There was no rectifying *that* situation. I can't be a decent mother in jail, and no matter how good it felt to kill that sick fucker, I didn't think I could live with the knowledge of my actions."

Saint Peter slammed his book shut in frustration and leaned forward, sighing into his clenched fist as he looked silently into her pleading eyes.

"Isabella Marie Swan, I'm rarely torn as to what to do with someone who stands at this gate of entry, and yet *you* have become a gray area that I'm unaccustomed to dealing with. Come. I need to stretch my legs and a change of scenery in order to think."

She panicked for a moment, turning around to see if Aro had joined her in the line that had formed behind her at Heaven's door. He hadn't, that she could tell, but she was surprised with what she *did* see. She could barely fathom how different Heaven was compared to what she assumed it would be like.

The long line of spiritual beings now guarding their specific gates reminded Bella of an Airport Departure terminal, only a more civilized version that went on for as long as the eye could see, with all faiths represented.

She collected her thoughts quickly and followed behind Saint Peter's billowing robes.

They first passed a revolving door being entered slowly. Animals and humans, one by one, made their way through. Saint Peter pointed at it as he spoke.

"For the Palingenesists, as they reincarnate into their new cycle of rebirth."

Bella nodded in understanding and paused as they neared an area cordoned off with red velvet rope.

Saint Peter chuckled, pointing at the bouncer wearing a tuxedo.

"For the Atheists, Agnostics, and non-religious philosophies. Imagine how surprised they look when they arrive to see that Heaven exists. We trump the exclusivity of Studio 54, and here everyone flies. No drugs required. These happen to be some of my favorite arrivals, from the mere shock value alone."

Bella didn't know what to think. She never imagined Heaven to be this inclusive or user friendly.

She tried to calm her racing mind and didn't inquire as to where they were headed. They floated towards a large cloud far off in the distance. She'd spent her life over thinking situations, trying desperately to avoid physical contact or more emotional wounds – trying to decipher the meaning of the current situation was something she was incapable of assimilating. She just floated on the air behind him, diaphanous pillows of white calming her as she digested the fact that she wasn't dreaming in her human form.

She'd finally ended her useless, depressing life. And Aro wasn't anywhere to be seen.

That was something, at least.

"You were never useless, Bella. And your cousin was delivered by the ferryman Charon to Hades."

She spun around, a scream of disbelief escaping her mouth as her body lunged forward to embrace Edward with the hug she never thought she'd be able to give again. He held her as she wept, speaking softly into her hair.

"I can hear what you're thinking, my love. Despite what you experienced in your life, you still gave me purpose and brought me so much joy. Our daughter is beautiful. Nessie was blessed to have you while she did. You were so careful at the end of your pregnancy, despite my leaving in the way I did. You nurtured her while you could, and you did the best for yourself too. I think you had so much more to offer our daughter and the world, had you not done what you did ..."

Saint Peter sighed, frustration clearly weighing the exertion of his breath as he interrupted the young man.

"She did, Edward, which is part of my dilemma. *I* know and *you* know but now Bella's gone and shaken things up in the most inconvenient of ways. Come, children. Join me at the pools. There's a storm brewing over Idaho and since we're nearby, I'll find some reflection there. You may not find water soothing, Isabella, but I need the sound of the water to compose my own rushing thoughts. Edward ..."

Saint Peter turned to look at the man before him, pointing at the couple's joined hands.

"... this is not a common occurrence. You are usually allowed to join with your loved ones once a decision has been made. I've decided nothing yet and yet here *you* are. Appreciate and make the most of this unprecedented opportunity. I'm not certain how long you will be allowed to remain here with her."

Edward squeezed her hand tightly as he answered the wise man in front of him.

"I've always treasured every moment with Bella."

Saint Peter smiled his knowing smile. He'd made many errors in his human life, and knew that those missteps were important in the grand scheme of things - but big decisions needed to be free from the burdens emotions often wrought. He needed a clear head.

"True, young man. Yet her purpose ..."

Bella bristled at Saint Peter's words, interrupting him despite the fact she knew she probably shouldn't.

"Excuse me if I'm being obtuse, but is there even a question as to whether I have a human form left to return to? Am I not missing half my head at the very least?"

She rubbed the right side of her forehead, wincing again at the memory. Saint Peter's irritation was palpable when he answered her.

"You will not speak again until I address you, Isabella Marie Swan. You did not do quite the damage you intended to inflict on yourself. They're trying to revive you now, and I've got to decide before they call a time of death. Don't test my generosity in letting him stay with you. I've spent a millennium doing this. I'm crotchety. Don't. Push. It."

Edward smiled even though he knew he probably shouldn't. Bella rarely spoke up when she was alive, and it was nice to see a change of pace.

"Remember I can read *your* thoughts, Mr. Cullen. I happen to agree with you, which also shows growth on her part. If I sent her back, it would be because her purpose was still intact. She was going to be such a positive force in so many lives prior to her actions ..."

He stopped speaking and closed his eyes when they arrived at the glistening pools, the couple standing quietly as they basked in the silent presence of the other, for as long as it was granted. Bella leaned into Edward's chest to hug him as tightly as she could, knowing that this might be her last opportunity.

She loved him so deeply, and dreaded the thought of him leaving her again. She would be happy to remain with him for the rest of eternity in this tranquil place.

Mr. Crotchety nodded at her silent admission.

"I know, child, but your path was important in the grander scheme of life. You were going to alter and benefit so many lives. It's ... It's just gotten more complicated, they ..."

Bella felt Edward pulling away before she had time to open her eyes, her wails disturbing the tranquil setting surrounding them as she tried holding onto any part of him that she could maintain a grip on.

She reluctantly opened her eyes and watched Edward being pulled backwards into the unknown abyss beyond their spot at the pools, his arms outstretched towards her, his loving eyes tearing as he levitated out of her line of sight.

She felt Saint Peter's arm encompass her shoulder before she allowed herself to accept his comforting gesture, turning into his chest and burying his face into his billowing robes. He smelled as old as time, and of something more tangible. It resembled the incense she used to smell when her parents forced her to go to church for a funeral.

"Frankincense. It's all the rage around here."

He chuckled at his own attempt to lighten her mood, but then his voice grew serious.

"I need you to try to settle yourself, Isabella. They just got your breathing tube in and my decision has become a little more sketchy. I want to talk more with you while I have the chance to do so. Come and sit with me. There's a place just there."

Bella accepted his hand and followed behind him silently, sitting down slowly beside him on a cloud hovering nearby. Yet she was unable to calm her thoughts the way he hoped she could.

"You give yourself so little credit, Isabella. You don't realize your own strength, do you? You have faced and surmounted so much in your life. Your resilience is inspiring and yet you've never realized it."

Her eyebrows knit in confusion, the lines on her forehead deepening with every second, her doubtful expression pressing him to continue.

"Despite your abuse, you learned to hope. Despite the assaults and intrusion on your body and mind, you were able to calm your doubts about humanity to open your heart to love. Despite Edward's death, you were able to find the strength to stand alone, to think about the needs of those beyond yourself. Your daughter is a testament to that. I know you wanted to join Edward in that grave, and you

considered suicide many times when you were a teen. Yet it took the sight of Aro's hands on your daughter to trigger your drastic decision."

She shook her head because that decision was supposed to be final. Irreversible. There wasn't supposed to be an opportunity for a system restore. She was only capable of handling so much and she'd long considered herself at the philosophical level of Game Over.

Bricked.

Caput.

Fifuckingnise.

She winced when she remembered that he could read her thoughts and she just swore in the presence of a Saint.

"I may be crotchety, but I've learned to roll with the times. We've got our hands on the pulse up here, despite the questionable taste of your adopted vernaculars. You'll find, in *your* real time of dying, that we are very understanding in these parts. Consider what you know about me, as an example. I'm the ultimate sinner who's been forgiven, and I was stupid enough to deny Christ not once, not twice, but three times. Insert your F-word between Saint and Peter and you'd be pretty accurate, in many respects. And yet here I am, in charge of the Christians' entry to this joint. Every gatekeeper you saw on the panel guarding entry into Heaven has a story like mine. We were all fallible and made many unwise choices throughout our lives, but that earned us our jobs because you have to be relatable in our line of work, right? As they say, it takes one to know one. There's hope for everyone. *Everyone*. Remember that."

She nodded nervously before halting her reaction suddenly. Thoughts of Aro resurfaced, and then her mind began cataloging all of the sick people she could think of throughout history. Faces and facts about their evil actions flowed from her mind, and Saint Peter shook his head in response.

"Some had extenuating circumstances, just like there is leeway given in your case. Don't ask me to explain it because there's no rhyme or reason. It just *is*. When the final decision is made and you make it back to this spot, we'll talk about the others. That's a conversation for another day. It will take a while because *that* was quite a list, some tinted grayer than others."

Bella actually liked Saint Peter a lot. She'd never been religious and rarely considered the existence of God or believed in anything beyond what she saw with her own eyes, studied in college, or when she found herself praying to the unknown. Edward was the one with faith. She figured that influence determined why Saint Peter was the one making the decision now, and why she didn't get the bouncer and red velvet rope instead. Now that he promised her a future discussion, she looked forward to when that happened.

Yet she was more on edge about the *now* and she couldn't help but think he was stalling.

"Your intuition is in perfect working order. Listen to it the next time you make any decisions and you'll find that you are your own best guide. Now, not to overwhelm you or anything, but we have a guest just behind us that I doubt we'll want to keep waiting any longer ..."

"... Shush, Simon Peter. I *am* patient."

The seraphic woman's voice stunned Bella into turning quickly, curious who their guest was. It didn't sound like her grandmother or any of her deceased aunts, but they'd died so long ago that she figured she was a little rusty in the recognition department. It was none of her relatives as far as she could tell.

Hovering behind her was a presence so sublime, so stunningly overwhelming that her mind was unable to define a word that would be aptly descriptive. Just looking at the being before her made her heart

swell with a bidding of all-encompassing love. It was impossible to tell her hair color or any identifiable features because she was diffused with light, radial blurs of other-worldly scintillation emanating from her chest.

"... Says the God who flooded humanity and all living things nearly to extinction over a hissy fit. I have yet to understand how Noah managed, or Gilgamesh two thousand years before that."

Simon Peter's snark was surprising to Bella, despite the taste of his humor she'd had already, yet the sound of her laughter reverberated over the space they inhabited from the presence before them. It filled Bella with such joy that she stood from the cloud and sank to her knees, overwhelmed with the sense of exuberance flooding through her entire body. Her soul even rejoiced at the sound of the laughter, wanting to somehow participate in the happiness. Bella wished she could bottle the joy she felt, after the life she had.

She was God? Could this be?

The laughter infused with the efficacy of a million bursts of light suddenly calmed.

"I know this doubt, my Child. I've known you. I've heard you. Even when you didn't believe, I was listening."

Bella was shocked by this response, because what God would allow a child to be emotionally tortured and raped? What God allowed a child to face the pain of the knowledge and experiences of those atrocities alone, to grow up feeling unloved and invisible - only finding solace in a perfect, loving man that God ripped away from her too? Bella couldn't help thinking about the lyrics of a certain song she'd heard in her childhood about God having a sick sense of humor.

God's lucent chuckle returned, but it was also filled with something different - a nervousness that Bella wasn't expecting.

"I'm aware of that song. Let's just say that Dave Gahan had many near misses with discovering that answer for himself firsthand, especially when heroin was his best friend, back in the ninety's. I'm imperfect, just as our friend Saint Peter here has just pointed out. And yet *I am*. We are given what we can handle, yet even I have failed many times, by those very standards."

The more Bella tried concentrating on what God was saying, the more she detected underlining reverberations in God's voice. The subtle carillon beneath the torrent of joy reminded her of a harmony of other voices joining the glorious presence before her, as though a monistic energy and a symphony of many deities were fusing into a beautiful aggregation of the *One* before her now.

Despite her inability to decipher the physical attributes on the face of the being before her, Bella perceived the nod easily, and her eyes widened with the heaviness of that silent admission.

That certainly was *something*.

Before this moment, Bella was convinced that there was no God. Looking at the presence before her now, she still didn't know what to think about omni-benevolence. Rational thought and visual confirmation were now engaged in a battle Royal, the Id, Ego and Super-Ego duking it out as the magnificent being looked upon her. Bella wondered if Freud was available for a consultation.

"When you return, I can make that meeting happen. But despite your reservations to believe, that doesn't mean that I've *forgotten* you, Isabella Maria Swan, daughter of Renee and Charles Swan, daughter who is precious to me, and who will be so important in the world, if she chooses to return."

Woah. Chooses? Bella closed her eyes to try to calm her thoughts before she lost it emotionally. Rocking back and forth was back to being appealing. She didn't understand where or how the gunshot to her head wasn't a definitive enough answer, but that's when images began flooding Bella's mind –

Esme Cullen telling Bella's parents and police all she knew about what she overheard Bella admit to her son so long ago.

Other victims of Aro's abuse stepping forward and meeting with authorities.

The trials of waking up and adjusting to the medically induced coma.

Painful healing from surgeries to reconstruct her face and skull.

Nessie holding her hand as she tried to stand from a wheel chair.

Standing, using a cane, in front of a large room of people as her Governor granted her a pardon.

Cutting a large red ribbon at the front door at the grand opening of the Isabella Swan Woman's Center for Abuse Survivors.

Being interviewed by CNN and signing books at a convention bearing her name.

Peacefully passing away in her sleep while she was still fairly young.

Doublefuckingwoah.

"And you can add a non-text equivalent of OMFG in there too. But *there* it is."

Bella chuckled at the fact that God really *did* have a sense of humor, but she forced her eyes to remain closed despite the fact that the flooding images had ceased. All she ever wanted was to be with Edward again, and to finally have some peace from the emotional and physical pain and suffering she'd experienced her whole life. *Edward*. It always came back to her Edward.

God's voice was nearer now, a whisper of truth tugging at the tenuously frayed strings of her heart.

"Is it not enough to know that he will be here waiting for you when your true time comes, Isabella? Your brain injury won't delay you from him for long."

Bella continued to keep her eyes closed, upper lashes in a vise like grip with her lower ones. The tears started to escape despite her attempts at controlling them. She could sense another presence nearing them and she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was Edward.

She began weeping so hard that she needed to lean forward on her knees to brace herself from what she felt would be an emotional collapse, the cloud beneath her absorbing her movement, tilting her forward and then backward, rectifying her place in the air as she righted her balance and tried to compose herself. The mere *idea* of having to face the horrific facts of her life was almost too overwhelming, and yet the idea of remaining here, in this happier place, began seeming like a selfish choice, as was her sudden realization over the use of that second bullet.

But she wasn't going to lament over her firing the first one if present company didn't seem to mind.

She felt the chuckling surround her again and then she relished in hearing Edward's familiar laughter join in. She knew that if she were to open her eyes and look upon his beautiful face, she would never choose the more treacherous and emotionally demanding route. Looking at him would mean staying.

Edward spoke before she could dwell too long at what may lie ahead.

"You *are* capable, and will help so many. You were the best part of my life and I know you will have that same effect on so many others, especially Nessie. Just believe in your strength and resilience. I'll be here waiting, Bella."

So many thoughts began to flood her panicked mind -

Memories of Edward's soft kisses.

Sunshine warming them in her happy summers.

The menacing sunshine of the caged existence of her early life.

The pain of Aro's outs assaulting her ins.

Her desolation, pain and loss of control of her own body.

Scorching baths and frigid responses.

Her loneliness.

The feeling of Edward's skin worshiping hers.

Her despair as she stood over his lifeless body in the hospital.

The feeling of their baby kick inside her belly as the casket was lowered down.

Her pain at pushing their daughter out of her body during the delivery.

The tiny sparks of happiness she felt at witnessing Nessie's first smile.

Learning to get out of bed and face a bleak day.

Surmounting new kinds of pain and learning to accept and to welcome small bits of happiness that will temper her pain and smiling and laughing at little things and standing again and cutting ribbons and comforting strangers and and andandandandand...

Rushing thoughts merged with Bella's resigned sigh and she felt lighter as her breath passed her lips. She refused to open her eyes to look at Edward one last time, fearing that seeing him would teeter her new resolve to embrace what she thought was impossible without him. She began to feel weightless as she allowed herself to accept the flooding images of her future - of accepting the fact that her chalice was only half full, with wine sweeter than anticipated.

A gentle touch above her heart was her last memory of him, a gentle nudge into hope, his final words to her quiet and reassuring.

"That's my brave Bella."

Reboot.