

43. DISCOVERED

Irina came to reconcile with our family, but the visit had gone wrong in the worst possible way and now we were in a very precarious situation indeed. Irina had disappeared and she was carrying with her the misapprehension that we had created an immortal child, a vampire crime punishable by immediate death.

Bella and Jacob had taken Renesmee on a close-in hunting trip the day the drama began. Jacob could entice Renesmee to compete with him for prey, which made her more willing to hunt. She much preferred to drink her donated blood, but now that we had limited her to four pints per day, she either had to hunt or eat human food to supplement it. She did eat regularly, but she still didn't like human food. It was a toss-up which she disliked less—human food or animal blood. I thought she was tending toward a preference for animal blood, but Bella wasn't sure.

I had decided to stay home that day and finalize our traveling plans with Carlisle so that we could purchase airline tickets to Brazil. The family would split into two groups (my brothers and sisters in one, and Bella and I with Carlisle and Esme) and divide up the geography. We would search different areas looking for clues, and meet periodically at Isle Esme to regroup. The island was far from the Amazon where we intended to be, so we were preparing to “go wild” for an indeterminate amount of time.

Jacob didn't like the uncertainty of being separated from Renesmee and had been arguing to come with us. I'd explained to Bella my reasons for not wanting Jacob along. First off, I knew that he would oppose changing Renesmee and I thought the probability was high that we would have no choice in the end. Then I discovered that Bella didn't view it as an option either because she thought it was too risky. It was possible that I could convince her later if I had to, but that would be harder with Jacob around. Second, I just wanted to feel like my family was my own before ceding Renesmee to another man. I felt protective of my little nuclear family.

Carlisle and I were planning different routes through the jungle when my cell phone rang—Bella. I wasn't expecting a call. That was mildly alarming. I grabbed it on the first ring.

“Come, bring Carlisle,” Bella said in a rush. “I saw Irina, and she saw me, but then she saw Jacob and she got mad and ran away, I *think*. She hasn't shown up here—yet, anyway—but she looked pretty upset so maybe she will. If she doesn't, you and Carlisle have to go after her and talk to her. I feel so bad.”

As soon as I heard her first three words, I was on my feet, had signaled to Carlisle, and we were out the door. I began to track Bella and Renesmee's scents, running at top speed. Carlisle wasn't far behind.

“We’ll be there in half a minute,” I promised Bella into the cell phone.

As Carlisle and I raced through the woods, I heard Seth and Leah striding behind us. Jacob must have summoned them to help protect Renesmee. I felt that my father and I could handle it ourselves, but I didn’t say anything. Backup wouldn’t hurt.

Before long, I was beside my wife. My eyes scanned the horizon continuously, searching for danger, though I couldn’t be sure in what form it might come.

“She was up on that ridge,” Bella explained, pointing. “Maybe you should call Emmett and Jasper and have them come with you. She looked...really upset. She growled at me.”

“What?” I exclaimed, though I’d heard what she said. Irina growled at my wife? Anger coursed through me. That was totally unacceptable!

“She’s grieving. I’ll go after her,” Carlisle said, trying to assuage me, but I wouldn’t be turned away from a threat on Bella.

“I’m coming with you,” I insisted. My father looked at me, trying to ascertain whether he should object.

If you do, you must follow my lead and hold your temper.

I made no promises, but he saw that I would not be deterred. Laurent had gotten what was coming to him! He was going to drink Bella’s blood when he knew that she was under our protection. I felt a stab of pain remembering that I had abandoned her to Laurent and his ilk. Jacob and the other wolves had stepped in to save her. Perhaps I would have to reconsider my stand on taking Jacob to Brazil. He had saved Bella’s life so many times. Without him, I would not have her.

Carlisle and I tracked Irina’s scent east to the shores of Puget Sound.

Swim? Carlisle asked. I nodded and dove into the cold water. We thought Seattle was a likely destination, so we swam in that direction, but when we reached the opposite shore, Irina’s scent was nowhere nearby. We split up, Carlisle going north and I running south, but after twenty minutes and hundreds of miles, I realized that Irina must not have gone to Seattle. I had no second guess, unless she’d headed straight north to Denali. It was a long run to Alaska, though if Irina was particularly upset, which it sounded like she was, she might choose to run. I turned around and sprinted along the shoreline until Carlisle and I met again. He’d had no luck either. We retraced our route home in defeat.

When Carlisle called Tanya to report the situation, she told him that Irina had left Denali when her family decided to attend the wedding and they hadn’t seen her since. Irina was bereft and angry that the wolf pack had killed Laurent, whom she had begun to think of as a potential mate. Tanya’s family had been suffering over the absence of their sister, so Tanya was hurt that Irina had been in the area but hadn’t come home even to visit. Alice verified that Irina was wandering around in the snowy wilderness somewhere up north—she couldn’t tell where exactly. The frozen north looks pretty much the same everywhere.

Bella felt badly about upsetting Irina and typically blamed herself for the accident

of their meeting in the woods when Jacob was present instead of me. If I had been there, I could have caught up to her and straightened things out, perhaps. Except that it hurt Bella, I didn't much care if Irina stayed away from us over a grudge, though. Bella shouldn't have to feel guilty simply for being alive!

When we got to our cottage that night, Bella broached the subject of Jacob and Brazil.

"Renesmee's future affects Jacob's entire life," she maintained, "just as it does yours and mine." I thought about that for a moment. Did that make us responsible for Jacob's future too? I wasn't certain about that.

"What about his pack? Doesn't the alpha need to be here to boss them around?" I asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"He says not. He says that they have things to do in La Push. I suppose they'll be patrolling regularly and such. Leah will be in charge."

"She'll like *that*, I bet. I'm glad we won't be here to be 'protected' by Leah's pack." I smiled wryly.

"So it sounds like you're willing to let Jacob come with us. I think it's the right thing to do. Besides, any tribal people we find might be more willing to talk to Jacob than to us, since he's Native American and *not* a vampire. I wouldn't be surprised if people who believe in vampires avoid us like the plague."

"You have a point there."

"I really think he should come with us, Edward. The reasons for him not coming aren't as strong as those for him coming along."

"I suppose I can agree to that, but if we have no choice but to change Renesmee, Jacob cannot interfere."

"You'll have to get that by me first. I think it's too risky."

"If the choice is between her dying of old age at fifteen or us attempting to change her, I think the choice is obvious."

"I'm not convinced, but let's just move forward for now and assume that we won't have to make that decision."

"All right. We can do that for now. I'll run the Jacob thing by Carlisle too."

"Thank you," Bella said, moving toward me to put her arms around my neck. I leaned over to kiss her and pulled her close with one arm on her waist and the other at the back of her neck. I loved kissing Bella. Her lips were no longer delicate and vulnerable to my non-yielding flesh, so I could kiss her with all the passion that I felt. It was wonderfully freeing. I ran my fingers down the curves of her spine, all the way to her tailbone and back up. Bella began breathing faster.

"You still get aroused when I touch you, just as you used to," I observed, my lips close to hers.

"I do," Bella admitted.

"I love that," I murmured, trailing my fingers over her hip bone. Bella began to

unbutton my shirt and stroke my chest, following its low curves to the sides, down my ribs, and into the small of my back. I reached inside her shirt to feel the sweep of her back beneath my palms. The texture of her skin was perfect, like the finest Carrera marble, with no bumps or rough spots.

Grasping the hem of Bella's shirt, I lifted it over her head and peeled it from her upraised arms. My hands explored the front of her body, caressing her belly and breasts, her throat and shoulders. When I tickled Bella's lower belly with curved fingers, she began panting into my mouth. I felt her fingers unbutton my khakis and reach inside. It still shocked me how intense it was to feel Bella's hand wrap around my penis...and then she reached further downward.

Ahhh! I dropped my forehead against hers to absorb that sensation. It was wonderfully strange when Bella touched me in places no one had ever touched me, except perhaps as an infant or in a doctor's office in my human days. It was so new, and though mildly disconcerting, far too pleasant for me ever to raise an objection.

Bella's stroking and fondling only made me want more. I scooped her into my arms and whisked her down the hallway to our bedroom, kicking the door shut behind me. Holding her to my chest with one arm, I tugged at the ankles of her blue jeans until she was freed and then tossed them aside. I tickled my fingers through the triangle of hair between her thighs and then laid her on her back. I hurriedly removed my trousers and lowered myself over her.

"I need you," I whispered. She knew already and had spread her legs widely in welcome, her breath coming rough and jagged.

Later that night, I was on my back with my head propped on a pillow. Bella was fooling around as she lay near the bottom of the bed with her head resting on my stomach. She got a kick out of the fact that my penis was always erect. With two fingers at its base, she angled it away from my body and used it like a foam bat to bonk herself on the forehead. Then she pretended to poke it up her nose and then in her ear. I wasn't sure what had started this frivolity at the expense of my dignity, but hers was in tatters too. Plus, the touching was nice.

"It's like a lollipop the way it sticks up and with that bell-shaped part on the top. It makes me want to..." She positioned her lips just above my penis and opened her mouth slightly. She paused. "Oh...I guess not." She laid her head back down on my belly and stroked me with her fingertips. "Or, I could play it like a recorder." She settled her fingers on imaginary finger holes, raised her head, and positioned her pursed lips at the top. Another pause. "But I don't really know how, I guess." She laid her head down with my "manhood" beside her nose.

I faked snarling at her. "You're the worst tease I've ever had the pleasure of

thinking might be about to suck my...well, you know.” I grinned.

“Why is it called a ‘blow job’ when you’re doing the opposite?” she asked innocently.

“Maybe because if you do it properly it explodes.”

Bella giggled. “That makes sense. You know, the more I play with it, the bigger it gets.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It seems to. It’s bigger around now. Look! It’s longer too.”

“I think you’re confusing me with a human.”

“How could I? I’ve never seen a naked one.”

“No?”

“No. I’ve seen pictures of them soft and pictures of them hard, but never seen one grow.”

“Quite different than us, I believe.”

“But you still expand some. I’m sure of it.” She measured the girth by making a ring with her thumb and index finger. Then, after all the teasing and titillation, suddenly her lips were on me and my penis was disappearing into her mouth. I groaned in ecstasy as I watched her take me all the way in. I felt the back of her throat and wondered how she didn’t choke.

I moaned softly. “Ahhhh...Bella...that feels...”

I lost my words when she employed her newly discovered trick—tickling and stroking my scrotum. I felt my testicles tighten toward my body. And just as suddenly as she’d taken me into her mouth, she pulled away.

“Look, see? You’re that much bigger around!” She showed me a slightly larger circle of thumb and forefinger. Then she put the base of her palm at the base of my penis and stretched her fingers upward. “And look! You’re more than an inch longer than my hand now. When I started, you were about half an inch longer!”

“Is that right?” I queried, slightly frustrated. “Perhaps you’d like to exploit my immense size before it shrinks back to its previously puny proportions?”

“There’s nothing puny about you. Trust me on that. I swear if you were any larger, it would be painful to make love.”

“It’s not, is it?” I was instantly anxious. “Do I hurt you? You have to tell me!” It would be like her not to tell me—just as she’d hidden her horrific experience with the morphine. I inhaled sharply, remembering my conversation with Carlisle.

“No, no, no. Don’t get all freaked out. I’m just saying. You’ve *never* hurt me, okay? Except maybe a little the first time—”

“I hurt you the first time?! More than the bruising?” I sat up in alarm.

“Well, yes, it hurt a little—”

“Bella, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...” I dropped my head into my hands. “I never should have—”

Bella sat up and put her arm around my waist.

“No, Edward! No! I will not let you get upset about this after all this time! Of course it hurt a little bit. It’s supposed to the first time. But then it didn’t hurt at all, or at least you were thrilling me so much that I didn’t notice it. It was fine. It was wonderful. You were...just wonderful.”

As Bella spoke, she crawled onto my body and pushed my shoulders down to the mattress. “Now you’re going to lie there while I make you feel good and you’re not going to get all weird about me losing my virginity. I’d do it with you again in a second.”

I knew I was upsetting her, so I made an effort to put my distress aside. She’d implied at the time that it hurt, but she was making such exciting sounds and moving so provocatively that I hadn’t absorbed it. Probably she had minimized the pain because she knew I would stop.

Bella kissed the bottom of my throat and then slithered her way down my body touching and kissing. My thoughts grew incoherent and my worries faded as quickly as they’d come.

When she reached her former position, she stopped and looked at my face. Every nerve in my groin was vibrating in anticipation. Then as I watched, she tongued the head of my penis, the most sensitive part of my body. I pressed my head into the mattress, paralyzed by pleasure. Before I could recover, she closed her mouth around me and slid her lips all the way down. As she slid back up, she closed her fingers in a circle and dragged them along. With her free hand she cupped my scrotum, tickling and stroking. I buried my fingers in her hair as she gave me more pleasure than anyone had a right to receive.

“Bella...,” I murmured. I felt some compunction about ejaculating into her mouth, but what she was doing felt so good that I didn’t want her to stop either.

“I want to,” she whispered after the next upward stroke. “It tastes like you...like honey and lilacs and sunshine and the sea...”

Her lips moved down on me again and after the brief pause, felt all the more intense.

“Grrrrrr...!” The growl rumbled deeply in my chest. Her hand gently massaged my scrotum and I felt one eruption after another shoot into her wet, warm mouth. Ecstasy. Bella was humming and I felt the added vibration of the notes against my skin. I’d become so sensitive that just her breath made me shudder.

“Darling...,” I started but lost the thought between my mind and my mouth. I lay there like a sack of potatoes, reliving and recovering, my eyes closed.

“Edward, could you go again right now?” Her question startled me.

“Yeessss, probably, but it certainly isn’t necessary.”

“What if I want to?”

“Why don’t you come up here? I want to hold you and touch you.”

“But I’m having so much fun down here.”

“Me too, actually, but I still want to feel your body next to me.” In a flash, Bella’s

belly was on my chest and her vulva was staring me in the face. Not exactly what I'd had in mind, but lovely all the same.

"This is new," I commented.

"Don't feel obligated or anything. I'm just responding to your request."

"Nothing I ever do with you is an obligation. It's all a distinct pleasure."

She dragged her fingers around various private parts of my body and I mimicked her actions, touching where she touched, stroking where she stroked, kissing where she kissed. Eventually, we directed our attention to one set of analogous organs using our mouths and our tongues to excite each other. It was slow, gentle, and sensual. Lovemaking with my wife was the best part of my life, the part I most looked forward to, the part I grudgingly relinquished each morning.

It was only two weeks later that our idyllic world collapsed, smashed to smithereens like the vase Alice had just dropped onto the marble tiles. In a breath, I saw what she saw and gasped. My throat closed, my body froze, and I was lost in Alice's nightmare vision of our truncated future.

Jasper was at Alice's side instantaneously, shaking her, trying to bring her back. Her eyes were so wide that her face seemed shrunken around them.

"What *is* it?" he cried, frightened by her obvious terror.

Emmett looked out the windows toward the river, scanning for the threat, but everyone else had frozen into statues, including Bella.

"They're coming for us. All of them." Alice and I had whispered the words in unison. The image she had seen was of the Volturi moving ghost-like across the broad clearing we had most recently used as a battleground against Victoria's newborn army. This time it wasn't just the guard that was coming, as she had seen before. It was Aro, Caius, and Marcus, the full guard, and all of the wives. The entire vampire population of Volterra was coming to Forks.

"The Volturi," Alice whimpered at the same time that I said, "All of them."

Everyone began asking questions at once.

"Why?"

"How?"

"When?"

"Not long," Alice and I replied, again in unison. I was receiving the answers at the same time Alice was envisioning them.

"There's snow on the forest, snow on the town. Little more than a month," Alice clarified in a hollow voice. Just after Christmas then, our happy life would be destroyed. Despair dropped over me like a fog.

Everyone began talking at once, trying to make sense of Alice's vision. Why would

the Volturi come here? I thought I knew.

“The wives never leave the tower,” Jasper was saying. Besides Carlisle, who had lived with them, Jasper had encountered the Volturi more than any of us. “Never,” he continued. “Not during the southern rebellion. Not when the Romanians tried to overthrow them. Not even when they were hunting the immortal children. Never.”

“They’re coming now,” I whispered. It was absolutely clear in Alice’s mind.

“But *why*?” Carlisle repeated. “We’ve done nothing! And if we had, what could we possibly do that would bring *this* down on us?”

“There are so many of us,” I started to explain, all emotion drained from my voice. “They must want to make sure that...” I interrupted myself when I saw Bella’s eyes grow large and her face change from alabaster to ice.

The Volturi were afraid that Carlisle’s coven was becoming too strong and that we might threaten their sovereignty with our cohesiveness and our different way of life. To alleviate the perceived threat, they were coming for Alice...and for me. Based on our visit to Volterra the year before, I could see it as clear as day. Aro had wanted us then. He also knew that neither Alice nor I would leave our family to join the guard, so the guard would have to destroy the family. They would find some excuse to justify it.

Then Alice saw the missing piece—Irina. Irina was on her way to Volterra and would provide the justification. Perhaps it was our alliance with the werewolves. We’d successfully hidden the wolves from the Volturi guard after our battle with the newborns. However, Irina knew Laurent had been killed by werewolves and now that she’d seen Jacob with Bella, she knew that we were “in cahoots” with them. That would be enough of an excuse for Aro, I knew.

“Can we stop her?” Jasper wanted to know.

“There’s no way. She’s almost there,” Alice replied, despair radiating from her.

I was watching Bella, trying to gauge how much she understood. Of course, her trip to Italy was off now. That wasn’t going to keep the Volturi away because they weren’t coming to check on Bella. It was something else. I saw a look of fierce protectiveness cross Bella’s face before she darted to the couch where Renesmee had fallen asleep. Bella wrapped her body around our child as if to shield her from sniper fire and buried her face in Nessie’s hair. Then she spoke in a muffled voice.

“Think of what she saw that afternoon. To someone who’d lost a mother because of the immortal children, what would Renesmee look like?”

Heaven help us, that was it! The justification. The Volturi would destroy us without question. There would be no reason whatsoever to hesitate.

“An immortal child,” Carlisle whispered, confirming my thoughts.

I was already at Bella’s side, kneeling over her, my arms wrapped around my wife and daughter in a useless attempt to shield them from danger.

“But she’s wrong,” Bella reasoned. “Renesmee isn’t like those other children. They were frozen, but she grows so much every day. They were out of control, but she never

hurts Charlie or Sue or even shows them things that would upset them. She *can* control herself. She's already smarter than most adults. There would be no reason..."

Everybody else in the room knew something that Bella did not. We knew that even though she was correct, it would not matter. I steeled myself to explain.

"It's not the kind of crime they hold a trial for, love," I told her, whispering into her hair with my gentlest voice, as if it would soften the truth. "Aro's seen Irina's proof in her thoughts. They come to destroy, not to be reasoned with."

"But they're wrong," Bella repeated.

"They won't wait for us to show them that."

"What can we do?" Bella asked, ready to put up whatever fight or resistance would save our child and us.

The hard kernel of determination in her voice nearly broke my granite heart. There was no hope. None at all.