

## 44. DEFECTION

It was the most horrific nightmare imaginable, knowing that we would be wiped off the face of the earth. I wouldn't have minded quite so much for myself if it had happened before I met Bella. But now...now...it was phenomenally cruel.

Emmett had wanted to fight, of course. Jasper tried to convince him that we couldn't win, but Emmett would not run under any circumstances. He would go down swinging, preferably taking as many of his adversaries with him as possible. He was all for garnering an opposing force, the Quileutes, the Denalis, and anyone else we could think of, but Bella was adamant that we not invite our wolf allies to die alongside us. Carlisle was just as resolute that we not ask the Denalis to put themselves in danger.

Perhaps because Emmett is incapable of surrender—and therefore, of despair—that he, among all of us, thought of a way to move forward. He reasoned that if we could catch the Volturi's attention long enough to tell our story and let them observe its truth for themselves, then they would be forced to recognize Renesmee for what she is—not a threat to our species, but a unique gift.

It was a reasonable plan. In fact, it was the only plan we had, our only chance. The likelihood of success was minute. If the Volturi wanted to destroy our coven because of an unforgivable infraction of the rules, they could do so without disrupting the entire Volturi coven. Aro must have something else in mind if he was dragging Caius and (especially) Marcus halfway around the world along with the entire guard and the wives.

I knew Aro well enough to believe that Renesmee was a convenient excuse to ignite the bomb he'd wanted to drop on our family for a long time. In Aro's deluded mind, we posed a threat to the Volturi's power because of our numbers and our loyalty to Carlisle. He had always wanted Alice and myself to join the Volturi guard, so perhaps he hoped to take us as "booty" along the way. I could guarantee that neither of us ever would go willingly and he had read my mind, so either he must be prepared to take us by force or he planned to destroy us all.

Grasping at the thin straws of hope Emmett presented, we quickly developed his idea into a concrete plan. We would locate as many vampire friends as we could find in the short time available and ask them to stand with us when the Volturi arrived, not as combatants, but as witnesses to the fact that we had not violated the law against immortal children. The bigger the crowd facing them upon their arrival, the more likely it was that they would postpone their destruction long enough to listen. That might not stop their action, but at least it would reveal the injustice of it to those remaining, if anyone remained.

Alice searched the future as we solidified our plans. Every decision we made rippled through time and altered subsequent decisions, and every action we took had the

potential for changing the future. Her eyes went blank as she sorted through an exponential number of pathways to locate the decision points that could affect the outcome. Making the right choices along the way would be vital to producing the most favorable outcome.

Renesmee's presence both in the room and at the heart of future events made it hard for Alice to see the future clearly. A hybrid creature like the wolves, Nessie interfered with Alice's vision.

Alice was getting glimpses of our gathered numbers and named those whose help we should seek. "Tanya's family, Siobhan's coven, Amun's. Some of the nomads—Garrett and Mary for certain. Maybe Alistair." The *maybe* for Alistair meant that he could also pose trouble, though Alice (and therefore I) couldn't see exactly what that trouble might be.

"What about Peter and Charlotte?" Jasper asked, though he was loathe to ask his former brother to risk his and his mate's lives in a venture that he saw as unlikely to succeed.

"Maybe," Alice replied. Again the *maybe*. Alice could see that Peter would be willing, but that Charlotte was a complication for some reason.

"The Amazons?" Carlisle suggested. "Kachiri, Zafrina, and Senna?"

At that suggestion, Alice saw images of the three women, natives of Brazil, in their jungle environment. Then I thought I caught an image of Zafrina and Senna among the group in our living room, Senna attached to Zafrina's side in the unfamiliar environment, but Kachiri was not in evidence. Before I could see where she was Alice yanked her mind abruptly back to the present, blocking the vision before I saw it all.

She glanced at Carlisle before looking at her feet and then blurting out, "I can't see," in response to his question.

"What was that?" I whispered to prevent waking Renesmee. "That part in the jungle. Are we going to look for them?"

"I can't see," Alice repeated, and her mind immediately began flipping through an atlas of maps, from Europe, to Africa, to Australia, Mauritius, the Cayman Islands... I didn't understand. Was she looking for other covens elsewhere in the world? Before I could ask, she started barking directions.

"We'll have to split up and hurry—before the snow sticks to the ground. We have to round up whomever we can and get them here to show them." She went back to considering the Volturi. "Ask Eleazar. There is more to this than just an immortal child."

What did she mean? Eleazar was a former member of the Volturi guard. Maybe he had some knowledge that would help us to succeed in our fated mission. Before I could ask, Alice resumed shuffling future scenarios, looking for some concrete answers. The last thing I saw was another glimpse of a jungle before she blanked out, her mind suddenly foggy and indistinct. I couldn't make any sense of the pictures or of her strong emotional reaction to them. Her mind seemed frantic.

"There is so much. We have to hurry," she whispered.

“Alice? That was too fast—I didn’t understand. What was—?” I was going to ask her what connection there was between the Volturi and the jungle, but she interrupted me with an emotional outburst.

“I can’t see! Jacob’s almost here!” Frustration at her partial blindness was the only reason I could think of for Alice’s harsh tone.

“I’ll deal with—” Rosalie was about to say “Jacob” when Alice interrupted.

“No, let him come,” Alice screeched, her voice high and tight. She took Jasper’s hand and dragged him toward the kitchen door. “I’ll see better away from Nessie, too. I need to go. I need to really concentrate. I need to see everything I can. I have to go. Come on, Jasper, there’s no time to waste!”

I could see that Jasper was confused and disturbed by Alice’s behavior, but he did not question her when she was predicting the future. He had too much experience with her—as well as love and respect—to question her judgment. Jacob was on the porch heading for the front door.

“Hurry!” Alice threw over her shoulder. “You have to find them all!” We couldn’t know that in only a few hours’ time, we would all be looking back on that moment with utter devastation.

Sunrise found us frozen in exactly the same positions we had adopted after Jacob burst through the front door the night before. Reacting to the strained atmosphere in the room, he had demanded to know what was going on. Was Renesmee okay?

“Nothing’s wrong with Renesmee,” Bella had managed to reply.

“Then who?”

“All of us, Jacob,” she had whispered, so softly that human ears would not have heard her. “It’s over. We have all been sentenced to die.”

Responding to Jacob’s stunned silence, Carlisle explained—with minimal animation, moving only his lips—that the Volturi were coming to destroy us. The whole family metamorphosed into silent statues as his words transformed our situation from surreal into all-too-immediate reality.

Bella was crouched beside the couch, her arms spread across Renesmee’s slumbering form, but her eyes were locked on mine. Unmoving, we gazed at one another all night, acknowledging that our lives now were measured by an hourglass whose grains of sand were numbered and falling fast. We’d had only a few months together since Bella’s near demise to celebrate our endless future, so the shock was profound.

Morning came sooner than expected. We’d been waiting for Alice to return and tell us what to do. Our family was dependent on Alice in so many ways, but especially now that we needed a reason to hope. When the sun began to peek through the glass wall and throw sparkles of light from our bodies, I was startled enough to realize that we had a problem.

“Alice,” I said softly when my face started to soften. The word released the spell that hung over the room and each of the sculptures began coming back to life.

“She’s been gone a long time,” Rosalie remarked with surprise.

“Where could she be?” Emmett continued, moving toward the door.

“We don’t want to disturb—,” Esme began to say.

“She’s never taken so long before,” I cut in, a new, more pressing fear creeping over me like a fog. Might the Volturi guard already be in place to grab any of us who tried to escape? Could they have been waiting to separate Alice from the rest of us so that they could steal her away? Was Jasper already dead? “Carlisle, you don’t think—something preemptive? Would Alice have had time to see if they sent someone for her?”

“Goddammit!” Emmett swore loudly, causing the russet-colored wolf sleeping in the corner to leap up and growl. His pack joined in chorus from outside.

I was already out the door with Carlisle on my heels, tracking Alice and Jasper’s scents over the river and through the forest. I heard the family following us and Bella yell, “Stay with Renesmee!” I assumed she was talking to Jacob. Bella was still strong enough to bound past everyone and catch up to Carlisle and me.

“Would they have been able to surprise her?” Carlisle threw my question back at me as we ran.

“I don’t see how,” I replied. “But Aro knows her better than anyone else. Better than I do.”

“Is this a trap?” Emmett hollered.

“Maybe,” I answered. “There’s no scent but Alice and Jasper. Where were they going?”

After making a big loop through the woods—ignoring a side trail of Alice’s scent—we found ourselves at the boundary of the Quileute reservation where Sam met us and told Carlisle the bad news. I saw it in his mind before Sam had finished speaking and before he’d handed Alice’s note to Carlisle—the one that revealed she and Jasper had left and asked that we not follow them.

“Alice has decided to leave us,” Carlisle whispered, in shock. He held up the note for everyone to see.

*Don’t look for us. There isn’t time to waste. Remember: Tanya, Siobhan, Amun, Alistair, all the nomads you can find. We’ll seek out Peter and Charlotte on our way. We’re so sorry that we have to leave you this way, with no goodbyes or explanations. It’s the only way for us. We love you.*

They had escaped across Quileute land with Sam’s permission, he not knowing that they were running away. Sam was thinking loudly. *Surely the situation can’t be that dangerous!*

He had no clue. “Yes, things are that dangerous,” I told him brusquely.

“Enough that you would abandon your family?” Sam’s critical tone irked me. Alice wouldn’t have left us without vital reasons for doing so.

“We don’t know what she saw. Alice is neither unfeeling nor a coward. She just has more information than we do.”

“*We* would not—,” Sam began.

“You are bound differently than we are,” I cut in, unwilling to hear him say the words he was thinking. “*We* each still have our free will.” That ticked him off. “But you should heed the warning,” I said in a more conciliatory tone. “This is not something you want to involve yourselves in. You can still avoid what Alice saw.”

“We don’t run away.”

“Don’t get your family slaughtered for pride,” Carlisle said softly to Sam.

“As Edward pointed out, we don’t have the same kind of freedom that you have. Renesmee is as much a part of our family now as she is yours. Jacob cannot abandon her, and we cannot abandon him.” As much as I appreciated Sam’s sentiment for my daughter’s sake, I was still angry at the condemnation he was heaping upon Alice in his mind.

“You don’t know her,” I stated, trying to keep my emotions in check. I heard Esme’s breath catch behind me. She was crying.

“Do you?” Sam asked pointedly. I wanted to crush his arrogant face. How dare he judge my sister?!

Carlisle stepped in just in time, putting a hand on my shoulder. “We have much to do, Son. Whatever Alice’s decision, we would be foolish not to follow her advice now. Let’s go home and get to work.” I let him direct me away. Why waste the energy?

“Thank you, Sam,” Carlisle added.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said with a hint of humility. “We shouldn’t have let her through.”

“You did the right thing,” Carlisle countered. “Alice is free to do what she will. I wouldn’t deny her that liberty.”

There was nothing more to say or do but accept that Alice and Jasper had chosen to run. They would try to escape the Volturi, leaving us to face them without their help. Maybe they *could* run and stay one step ahead of Demetri’s tracking if Alice kept watch on the guard’s intentions. If they were on their own, perhaps they could survive for some period of time and I couldn’t begrudge them that.

The rest of us couldn’t escape, though. Emmett would never run away and Rosalie wouldn’t leave without him. Carlisle would stay as the leader of the coven and I would stay to protect Bella and Renesmee as best I could. That I couldn’t succeed weighed heavily on my soul.

The evidence was there, but I still felt a nagging doubt that Alice would abandon us to our fate. She had been trying to block her thoughts from me just before her departure. Maybe she hadn’t wanted me to see that she was preparing to run, but maybe...just maybe...she had another plan. But if so, why didn’t she want any of us to know?

*Ah, yes...* She didn’t want Aro to read our minds and discover where she was going.

So, there was no plan. She was flitting through maps in her mind to keep me—and thus, the Volturi—from locating them. Unfortunately, Aro had read Alice’s mind when she came to Italy to save me and so he knew her mind as thoroughly as she did herself. He might be able to figure out where she would go even without Demetri. I hoped not.

“I’m not going down without a fight,” Emmett growled, interrupting my thoughts. “Alice told us what to do. Let’s get it done.”

Without Emmett’s determination to resist our dark future, I don’t know that I would have been able to go on at that moment. My first impulse was to take Bella to our cottage and spend every remaining second there with her until death came. But Bella had suffered to bring Renesmee into the world and if I didn’t fight for our child’s future with everything I had, then I wasn’t worthy of the precious gifts I’d been given.

Besides, Alice had *something* in mind when she told us to bring together all of our friends. She had even said that they would send Peter and Charlotte to us “on their way.” Jasper would never allow Peter and Charlotte to come if he were running away himself. So Alice must have *some* hope for us. Otherwise, her behavior made no sense at all.

Soon after we discovered Alice’s defection, Bella began to behave oddly. On the way home, she decided to follow the solitary trail of Alice’s scent that we had passed. It couldn’t be relevant since she and Jasper were together when they left, but when Bella turned away from us, a new pain tore at me.

“I’ll come with you,” I murmured. “We’ll meet you at home, Carlisle.” Bella looked at me in surprise. After the rest of the family had run on, I said, “I couldn’t let you walk away from me. It hurt just to imagine it.” Bella reached for my hand. “Let’s hurry. Renesmee will be awake.”

Strangely, Alice’s scent trail led to our cottage. Bella asked me to wait outside for thirty seconds, but I couldn’t stand not having her next to me, so I followed her after only half that time. I found her burning one of her beloved Shakespeare books in the fireplace.

“What’s going on, Bella?”

“She was here. She ripped a page out of my book to write her note on.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why.”

“Why are you burning it?” I asked. The look of pain that crossed her face stabbed into me.

“I— I— ” she stuttered. It seemed appropriate.” Bella was trying to purge her mind of Alice, I thought. Maybe she didn’t want to be reminded of this desolate moment ever again.

“We don’t know what she’s doing,” I said quietly in Alice’s defense.

Bella spoke then in an equally quiet voice, confiding a secret. “When we were on the plane to Italy, on our way to rescue you...she lied to Jasper so that he wouldn’t come after us. She knew that if he faced the Volturi, he would die. She was willing to die herself rather than put him in danger. Willing for me to die, too. Willing for you to die. She has her

priorities.”

That gave me pause. Alice’s love for Jasper probably did exceed everything else in her life...even her attachment to our family. And in any confrontation with the Volturi, Jasper would be one of their first targets. No doubt Aro and Caius knew him to be a victor in the southern wars, but even if they didn’t, any vampire who met him would immediately recognize his scarred face as an emblem of his successful fighting career. It made sense that Alice would try to save Jasper’s life, possibly even without his consent. That would explain her behavior. Still, it was hard to accept that she would sacrifice the rest of her family to a doomed plan.

“I don’t believe it,” I said. “Maybe it was just Jasper in danger. Her plan would work for the rest of us, but he’d be lost if he stayed. Maybe...”

“She could have told us that. Sent him away,” Bella countered.

“But would Jasper have gone? Maybe she’s lying to him again.”

“Maybe,” Bella conceded. “We should go home. There’s no time.”

Whatever the truth might be, we had to carry on as if we would never see Alice and Jasper again. That was one thing Alice had made clear in her departure. Perhaps we never *would* see them again, but even if they planned to return, Alice wanted us to think that they wouldn’t.

After our strange side trip to the cottage, Bella and I returned to the family home to find everyone ready to depart. Their thoughts were more positive than they had been. Strategizing on routes and goals made everyone feel that we were doing something potentially productive rather than just accepting defeat.

*...so they seem more willing to help this time. Edward can handle Tanya, I think, after all this time...*

“We’re to stay here?” I asked Carlisle, responding to his thoughts. He’d clearly contacted Tanya already.

“Alice said that we would have to show people Renesmee, and we would have to be careful about it,” Carlisle responded. “We’ll send whomever we can find back here to you—Edward, you’ll be the best at fielding that particular minefield.”

Perhaps he was right. Their eyes will tell them that Renesmee is an illegal abomination and I will have to convince them otherwise. It would be difficult. I nodded in assent, though I would much rather have been on the move, maybe even listening for Alice’s mind everywhere I went.

“There’s a lot of ground to cover,” I commented, not knowing how the family would do it with only four of them. I couldn’t bear to let Bella go, though. No...that was impossible.

“We’re splitting up,” Emmett replied in answer to my implied question. “Rose and I are hunting for nomads.” I felt the impossible pressure of needing to be everywhere. How were they going to locate nomads without my help...or Alice’s?

“You’ll have your hands full here,” Carlisle inadvertently answered me. “Tanya’s

family will be here in the morning, and they have no idea why. First, you have to persuade them not to react the way Irina did. Second, you've got to find out what Alice meant about Eleazar. Then, after all that, will they stay to witness for us? It will start again as the others come—if we can persuade anyone to come in the first place. Your job may well be the hardest. We'll be back to help as soon as we can.”

Carlisle put his hand on my shoulder. *I know how much you're hurting right now, but I'm not convinced that Alice doesn't have something up her sleeve. We can hope. But right now, we need you to do this...for all of us, but for Bella and Renesmee, especially.*

I nodded minutely. I would do my best, however difficult it might prove to be.

“Good luck,” I said after we all had said and hugged our goodbyes.

“And to you,” my father responded. “We'll all need it.” With that, they were gone.

Bella continued to act oddly, finding moments to separate herself from me when all I wanted to do was hold onto her and never let her go. She must be worrying about Renesmee now that we had this great ax hanging over our heads. I had enormous love for my daughter, second only to that which I felt for Bella, but I had not carried our child in my body. I had not faced certain death in order to bring her into the world. Bella had. There was more than the normal bond of a mother and child between them—Renesmee was a part of Bella. Though it was difficult to imagine, I realized that Bella had even more pain to cope with than I did. I also realized that she would sacrifice herself to protect our daughter. She had done it before under the most brutal of circumstances. I must prepare myself for that possibility as far as I could.

Bella wanted to give Renesmee some sense of normalcy amidst all the turmoil, so we took her to the cottage to sleep overnight as usual. While Bella put her down, I stared into the fireplace, wondering how I could even begin to think of letting Bella go. The forever future I had envisioned for us would be gone in less than a month. I still had so much to say, so much to give her, so much...*so much...*

She entered the room behind me. “Edward, I—”

There was too much emotion spilling out of me to be contained. I rushed to wrap my body around hers and feel her solidity against me. I could not walk this valley alone. I could not face this Garden of Gethsemane. Bella was stronger than me...braver too.

My feelings were beyond words when I crushed my lips to hers. The time for lightheartedness and joy had passed. Making love was an act of survival now. We united with a ferocity that we hadn't known before, loving one another as if there were no tomorrow, because in all likelihood there soon wouldn't be.

Overnight, I worked through much of my fierce emotion, expressing it in every touch, every kiss, and every thrust into my beloved's body. Shortly before dawn, as Bella and I lay together joined in every possible way, I reflected on all that I had been given in these last years of my extended life. I couldn't be too bitter about losing everything when I had received so much more than I'd ever dreamed possible.

As the pendulum dropped, I knew there was no more time for despair. *I would not*



go down without a fight either. I would tilt against this windmill with everything I had. When the sun rose, I kissed Bella's forehead and stroked her hair, and made ready for this fateful day.