

## A CULLEN CHRISTMAS

*Daddy, can we invite Fred? Renesmee asked as I lifted her so she could hang a crystal angel near the top of the family Christmas tree.*

*Alice had purchased the designer decorations and was carefully observing our installation, making clucking noises with her tongue whenever we started to hang an ornament in a spot she didn't like. After ten minutes of such scrutiny, I quietly asked her to leave us alone so that Renesmee could have fun decorating the tree. I promised her that she could redo everything after Nessie went to bed if she felt it was necessary. She "humph'd" her way up the staircase to her room.*

*Nessie was one-and-a-half and this was her first real Christmas. The year before, the family had been living under a cloud of doom waiting for the Volturi to come and destroy us. So this year, we were going all out and had invited our friends and family—human, werewolf, and vampire—to a joint Christmas celebration. Sue—with help from Esme, Bella, and myself—would be cooking Christmas dinner for the humans.*

*"Yes, Fred is invited if we see him before Christmas Day."*

*Can we go look for him? I asked Jacob to take me, but he didn't want to, Nessie continued silently.*

*"He didn't? Why not?" I asked disingenuously, a smile tickling the corners of my mouth.*

*I don't know, Daddy. He never wants to.*

*It was clear to everyone else—and especially to the mind reader—that Jacob felt no affection for Fred and it was also clear why. Nessie had unexpectedly developed a crush on the vampire Fred.*

*At first, Bella and I found this exceedingly odd. Fred is somber and silent in company and is also extraordinarily literal. He doesn't respond*

to sarcasm, or grasp metaphor, and he seems incapable of recognizing when someone else is making a joke. (After Emmett figured that out, Fred became his new favorite target. Em doesn't enjoy teasing Bella as much as he used to since he still can't beat her in an arm wrestling match.)

Nessie seems to like Fred specifically **because** he is so literal and humorless—she interprets his lack of humor as humor. Much like a child in some ways, Fred takes everything Renesmee says seriously and he is willing to engage with her on any topic of conversation from the earthy (farting) to the sublime (whether computers have souls).

Since he found us, Fred has come around every few weeks for a visit. He has spent hours in Carlisle's office talking with my father and me, seemingly starved for intellectual stimulation. His favorite subjects of conversation are computers, electronics, and software, but he is happy to discuss any science or mathematics topic—the more obscure, the better. As the scientists in the family, he has singled out the two of us.

We hadn't seen Fred for over three weeks, so he could have appeared at any time, but we weren't thinking about him as we all bustled about on Christmas Day. Jasper was helping Alice freshen the bouquets of hothouse flowers she'd special-ordered by the dozens from Costa Rica. In the kitchen, Sue was making gravy and Esme was taking bread out of the oven, while Bella and I arranged platters and bowls of food on the dining room table (which never before had been used for that purpose).

Because most of us didn't eat food, we were serving dinner buffet-style and had set up cocktail tables and TV trays around the living room where the humans could set their plates to eat. Emmett had suggested that we purchase several cases of donated human blood as a treat for the non-humans, but nobody laughed because his comment set all of us on edge thinking about the taste of human blood just before nearly a dozen humans were set to arrive. So **clever**, Emmett.

As usual, I heard Fred before I saw him. It had become his habit to lurk outside until I noticed his thoughts and alerted someone to invite

him in. On this occasion, he was particularly wary, having spied us through the window and noted the large, mixed gathering inside.

*Look at 'em! thought Fred. Kinda reminds me of Riley's mob except this bunch seems like they're having fun. One human woman in the kitchen, two in the living room, six human men, one in a wheelchair, a gangly boy. I dunno...*

It was a large crowd, especially for Fred. Charlie and Sue, and Billy and Lily had joined us, as well as Jacob's pack (with Leah patrolling outside), and Sam and Emily.

"Fred's here," I whispered in Bella's ear. "Let's go get him before he runs off. It'll make Nessie happy." Though I could hear his thoughts clearly, I would have a hard time physically locating Fred by myself unless he wanted me to find him.

With Bella's shield up, we exited together through the kitchen door and saw him right away. He was looking into the living room through the window wall at the corner farthest from us.

"Hey, Fred," I said.

He instantly shrunk into a defensive crouch, reacting to being seen. Though he knew that Bella could make him visible, he wasn't used to it yet.

"Oh...hi," he said, returning to his full height and dropping his arms.

"We're glad you came. Renesmee is asking about you," I told him.

"She is?"

"Yes. She likes you."

"She does?"

"Sure, Fred, we all do," Bella reassured him. "Will you join us?"

“Umm...you have a lot of humans here,” Fred said hesitantly. “And a bunch of them stink.”

Bella and I chuckled. He was absolutely right, but we all put up with each other’s stench when we had to.

“Is it Fred? Is it Fred?” Renesmee came charging out the back door. “Momma, you’re talking to Fred, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Fred’s right here,” Bella replied, as Nessie rushed over into her mother’s shield where she could see him. She grabbed Fred’s hand and began pulling him toward the house.

“Come see my presents! I got a MacBook and a Kindle and my own pack!”

Fred didn’t reply, but neither did he resist Nessie’s coaxing as she pulled him across the yard and through the kitchen door. However, when she then tried to pull him into the living room where everyone was gathered, he stopped short in the doorway and froze. Nessie couldn’t budge him as he stood gaping at the crowd of humans and vampires.

“Come on!” Nessie urged, alerting everyone to his presence.

The whole family turned toward them and called “Hi Fred!” in unison. The greeting had begun spontaneously on Fred’s second or third visit and was now a tradition—or a habit.

The humans, who had much slower reflexes, turned to look a fraction of a second later by which time Fred had disappeared. Renesmee was left standing there holding the hand of her imaginary friend, as the humans in the room surmised. They were pleasantly indulgent with Nessie’s “little quirk” before turning away to continue their conversations.

Charlie was in a lounge chair with Billy’s wheelchair nearby and they were arguing about whether the Seattle Seahawks would make it to the 2007 Super Bowl. Sam and Emily sat on the far side of the room talking to Quil, who was lounging on a floor pillow. Embry stood near the kitchen

door picking bits of food from the trays his mother, Lily, carried to the dining table, and Seth and Jacob had just left to check on Leah. Emmett had his sixty-four-inch plasma television tuned in to ESPN to catch the day's late-season games and Rosalie sat on his lap painting her nails. Jasper was under the staircase planning his playoffs' betting pool and drawing a block chart for the Super Bowl.

Bella, who sympathized with Fred's discomfort at the center of a crowd, said, "Come over here by the Christmas tree to see Renesmee's presents."

Standing behind him within Bella's shield, I watched Fred unfreeze and side-step—his back against the window wall—until he was fully obscured by the decorated tree. Bella stood nearby to keep Fred visible to Nessie and as I moved out of her shield, I saw Fred disappear. He was more comfortable that way.

"Lookie...," Renesmee said, spinning the numbered dials on a briefcase lock. "See how it opens?" Then in a whisper, said, "My number is 1-1-2-3. That's the beginning of—"

"—the Fibonacci sequence," Fred finished for her.

"You know the Fibonacci sequence?" Renesmee asked in surprise. "Then what's the next—"

"Five," Fred interrupted again.

"Wow! What's the—"

"Eight."

"Next?"

"Thirteen!" Nessie shouted the number in unison with Fred, excited that he knew what she was talking about. I saw her raise her hand in a triumphant "high-five" and assumed that Fred slapped her hand, though knowing Fred, he might not have. The humans in the room didn't know what to make of this and so they ignored it politely.

"See, it's my new chess set from Uncle Jasper." Renesmee opened the case and pulled up a hard flap that hid the chess pieces, each of which was tucked in its own private slot. "Will you play with me?"

"Yes, but not today." Fred said under his breath. "What else did you say you got?"

"I got a Kindle from Nana and a MacBook from Momma and Daddy."

"Awesome. The Tiger operating system has cool widgets. Sometime I can show you how to use them."

"That would be awesome," Nessie responded, borrowing Fred's word. "Look what else, Fred. See my wolf pack?"

Renesmee pointed to an elaborate shadowbox constructed with six separate compartments and a plexiglass door. Each compartment held a two- to three-inch wolf figurine intricately carved from a piece of wood that matched the fur colors of Jacob's pack—russet red for Jacob, gray for Leah, gray with dark patches for Embry, sandy brown representing Seth, and chocolate brown for Quil. The final compartment held a bronze-colored wolf with a child's face just visible through its open jaws. It was Renesmee in her wolf costume.

Billy and Jacob had carved the pack of wolves and constructed the shadowbox to display them. Jacob had carved himself, of course, and the russet wolf matched the smaller figure that Bella wore on her charm bracelet. The detail was exquisite, with each wolf revealing something about his personality. Seth had big paws he was still growing into; Leah had an impatient tail; and Quil was looking away toward something, probably his Claire. When Renesmee held out Jacob's stately Alpha figurine, Fred didn't take it from her hand.

The front door slammed. "Nesss-ieee," Jacob called as he strode in with Seth trailing behind. "Oh, there you are." Jacob began moving rapidly across the room toward the Christmas tree.

I waited with bated breath to see what Jacob would do when he realized Renesmee was playing with Fred. Bella expanded her shield so that Jacob would see Fred before he got too close and I could watch too.

"Renesmee's showing Fred her Christmas presents," Bella said, probably concerned that Jacob's temper might flare up.

When Jacob reached Bella's shield, he saw Fred. "Oh...him," he grumbled, making no effort to hide his disdain.

"Fred knows the Fibonacci numbers!" Renesmee cried, oblivious to the look of irritation on Jacob's face and his animosity toward the blonde vampire. "You know...", she explained when Jacob didn't reply, "like the primary numbers only different."

Jacob wouldn't recognize a Fibonacci number if it bit his big toe, but he faked it. "Sure, sure. Do you like your wolf pack?" he asked, trying to draw Nessie's attention away from the visitor behind the Christmas tree. He already knew the answer to his question since he'd watched her open the present and scream in delight.

"Yes, I do!" she reiterated.

Fred remained frozen, not moving or responding in any way to Jacob's presence except to note that the huge guy smelled repulsive. Fred could respect that.

Suddenly, Jacob thought of something that would pull Nessie out of the room and away from Fred.

"Do you want to go outside and try out your new bike?"

"Yes!" Nessie answered excitedly.

"Renesmee, let's wait until after Grandpa Charlie has eaten his dinner so he can help too," Bella directed, making Jacob scowl. "He gave her the bike," she added. Bella didn't have my insight into Jacob's immediate motives.

*"Umm...I gotta go," Fred mumbled.*

*"Come back tomorrow," Renesmee directed.*

*"Umm..."*

*I heard his unspoken question and answered it. "It'll just be the family tomorrow."*

*He nodded once, and without saying goodbye, dashed out the kitchen door into the darkening twilight. Nessie leaped up and started running after him, but I netted her in my arms.*

*He didn't say goodbye or when he was coming back, Nessie complained with her hand to my cheek.*

*"No, that was a bit rude," I told her, "but Fred can't help it sometimes. All the people here made him nervous."*

*He's going to help me with my MacBook and play chess, she added, smiling widely.*

*I nodded while I smoothed her beautiful ringlets. "Maybe he'll be a good friend for you."*

*"Nessie, let's play with your wolf pack," Jacob invited, trying to return Renesmee's attention to himself. I chuckled quietly.*

*"Food's on!" Sue called, bringing the last dish from the kitchen. Seth rushed to the dining table, prompting Sam to issue a soft growl. Though Sam was no longer Seth's Alpha wolf, he retained his authority over the younger wolves as their elder. Seth stepped away from the table to let Charlie push Billy's chair to the front of the line. Sam escorted Lily and Emily into the line behind them.*

*"You want to try some chow?" Jacob asked Nessie, encouraging her, as we all did, to eat human food as often as possible. It would make her life easier when she had to assimilate with humans.*

*“Desserts last,” Bella reminded her, knowing that Nessie would rocket toward the cookies and sweets, ignoring the healthful food groups. “I’ll make you a plate,” she added. Of the choices available, Nessie would eat a little turkey and some green beans if pushed.*

*I eased my way to the opposite end of the living room where my grand piano sat on its raised platform. Esme had requested Christmas music during the meal and I’d agreed. Alice joined me from upstairs and together we played highly personalized versions of “Deck the Halls,” “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas,” and “Jingle Bells,” and then slowed things down with “Silent Night” and “Little Drummer Boy” (with Alice using her fingers as drumsticks on the bottom of the piano).*

*“He’s really good,” I heard Charlie comment to Bella as he dug into seconds of the meat and mashed potatoes. “You never told me.”*

*“You never asked, did you?” she reminded him, referring to our high school courting days when Charlie had slighted and ignored me assiduously.*

*Charlie grunted and then paused before remarking, “You did all right, Bells. You did all right.”*

*For the first time since 1918, my fingers stumbled over the keys for two full beats.*

*Edward*

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