

OUR NEW FRIEND

For Renesmee's first birthday, Alice threw another of her legendary fetes. She finally had decided that it was too much agony to try to give Bella a birthday party, but unlike her mother, Nessie wasn't resistant. She loved parties and being the center of attention. So Alice went with the flow and made the party for Renesmee, whose birthday is only three days before Bella's, and then secondarily for Bella. The attention was focused on Renesmee, but everybody gave Bella gifts too. Though Bella was no longer aging, it was her first vampire birthday (or her twentieth human, though nobody with any sense mentioned that, meaning everyone except Alice).

Alice designed and sewed another special costume for Renesmee on the occasion. I don't know how she did it—it was remarkable in its detail. Alice orchestrated Renesmee's entrance to the well-known symphony from "Little Red Riding Hood." Renesmee padded into the living room on all fours—her rear end raised slightly in the air—as a beautiful, reddish-colored (bronze) wolf. The outfit was made from some kind of fake fur, though it was surprisingly realistic and quite hair-like in its color variations. The wolf costume had striking details such as a white, star-shaped patch on Nessie's chest, white paws, and another white patch on the end of her tail.

The wolf's head, which almost rivaled taxidermy in its realism, had been pulled on like a furry hood over Nessie's own head. Her face was partially visible through the wolf's open jaws, though Alice had painted Renesmee's face to match the fur so that her skin was well-camouflaged. On all fours, she looked remarkably similar to Jacob's pack members, except that she was tiny in comparison. Nessie was thrilled with the costume and was looking forward to running around in the woods pretending to be one of the pack.

Alice had invited Sam's pack too, so the house was swarming with wolves, most of whom remained in human form during the party, except for Leah and a few others who preferred to remain in the woods and keep watch.

Somehow, he got past all of them. I don't even know how long he'd been watching us before I realized he was there. His thoughts had been jumbled in with everyone else's for quite a while before I picked them out and concluded

that there was a mind in the crowd that I didn't know. Trying not to alarm anyone, I took Carlisle and my brothers aside to inform them that we had an uninvited guest. As far as I could tell, he was unaccompanied and he seemed more curious than dangerous, but given the threats we'd had from the Volturi less than six months before, it wasn't worth taking any chances.

Jasper and Emmett approached Sam who quietly took his leave from the party and joined them outside to search for the uninvited guest. They came up with absolutely nothing, no scent at all. With the help of the wolves outside, they ran patrols around the property, working their way inward in circles to be sure that the intruder couldn't escape their search. After half an hour, Sam came back to report to Carlisle and me that they didn't find a thing.

Jasper was deeply concerned. The situation had never arisen where I could hear someone's mind nearby, but nobody could see, hear, or smell him. As I listened to his thoughts, I determined that he was a vampire because he was particularly focused on Charlie, Sue, Billy, and Lily. The other humans present didn't smell like food to him, but those four did. My sense was that he was more distracted by the humans than he was intending to hurt them, though. He seemed to be watching and listening carefully to the group as a whole and puzzling over its odd composition.

Then I had an idea. I pulled Bella from the party discreetly to tell her what was going on. She had noticed certain people sneaking out of the party while Alice distracted the others with loud music and silly party games such as "pin the tail on the wolf," (or "pin the nose on the human") and "hot potato." When Alice hung up the wolf-shaped piñata, Nessie got very excited and was distracted by the prospect of whacking cookies out of the beast. She didn't notice that both her mother and father had wandered outside.

Bella projected her shield around us both and we walked together around the property until we found him—a vampire peeping Tom with talent for making himself invisible. With Bella's shield to block his illusion, we saw him easily, looking into the house through the kitchen window. He was rather tall and large, blonde-haired, and young, probably late teens when he was changed, but a relatively new vampire. We motioned to Emmett, Jasper, and Carlisle who were waiting nearby and Bella shielded all of us while we approached him. He was so caught up in watching the fun inside the house that he didn't realize we were

behind him until I spoke directly to him. Apparently, he was so used to being invisible that he had tuned out our presence, knowing that we couldn't see or smell him.

Suddenly, it occurred to me who this fellow might be. Jasper, Emmett, Carlisle, and Bella were crouched and ready to grab him at my signal, but I smiled and waved them off instead. They ignored that and remained crouched.

"Hello there," I ventured and got no reply. He didn't turn around to look at us because he knew we couldn't be communicating with an invisible vampire. So I tried again. "Are you Fred, by any chance?" I asked. He answered my question by whipping around to face us and then cowering in fear.

They can see me? he thought, terrified. Surely not! He started creeping sideways to try to sneak away from the house. We moved as a group to block his path and form a semi-circle around him, trapping him against the house's exterior.

"There's no need to be afraid, Son," Carlisle said to him. "We have no desire to hurt you. But if I may ask, why are you spying on my family?"

"You can s...see me?" the tall vampire finally asked.

"As clear as day," I replied.

"I'm Carlisle Cullen and this is my son Edward, his wife Bella, and my sons Jasper and Emmett," Carlisle went on in introduction.

"B...b...but I don't understand," Fred replied. "Usually nobody can see me."

"We know that you have a special talent," I explained. "We met your friend, Bree Tanner, and we learned a little bit about you from her. You are curious about us, am I right?" Fred didn't reply so I went on. "Please know that you are safe. You can drop your shield now, since it does you no good here." Fred was astonished out of his fear and took my advice. "Bella, you can drop your shield as well," I said to my wife and she did.

"Would you like to come in and meet the rest of our family?" Carlisle offered. "You are welcome."

"Um...yes, I guess so. Where is Bree?" he asked, finally processing that I'd said her name.

"Come on in and we'll tell you all about it," Carlisle said to Fred. The six of us escorted the tall, blonde vampire through the kitchen door into the living room, all of us ready to grab him if he should make for one of the humans present. He seemed rather well-controlled, though.

I looked meaningfully at Alice, rolled my eyes toward Fred, and raised my eyebrows. She and I were good at silent conversation.

Yes, he's safe, Alice replied in her mind. Then she called out cheerfully from behind the stereo, "Hi Fred! Come pin a tail or a nose on somebody." Fred looked bewildered.

"Everyone," Carlisle called out. "This is our new friend, Fred."

"Hi Fred." "Hello Fred." "Nice to meet you Fred." The room filled with casual greetings. Fred raised his hand slightly from where it hung at his side to respond to this unexpected and most startling welcome.

"Would you like to come to my office for a talk?" Carlisle asked and Fred nodded. They turned and headed for the stairway and I followed. Bella made as if to come along.

"I think it would be better if one of us remained present at our daughter's party," I whispered, careful not to say, "your party." Bella nodded in agreement. Jasper and Emmett also began to follow us, but I gave them a quick shake of my head. There was no reason to take attention away from Renesmee, who was being blindfolded by Rosalie while Jacob handed her half a broomstick.

"Everybody move away!" Jacob called before aiming Nessie at the wolf piñata, stick in hand.

You sure? Jasper asked me silently. I nodded and hurried to Carlisle's office.

"You are the yellow-eyes?" Fred inquired cautiously.

"Yes, you could call us that, I suppose. Actually, our family name is Cullen," I repeated.

"Where's Bree? Did you do something to Bree?" he asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"We would never hurt your friend, just as we will not hurt you, if you do not behave aggressively," Carlisle assured him. "We wish to be your friends. But we do have some difficult news. When Riley brought your coven to attack us, Bree did not fight and so we offered her a chance to surrender without violence. Unfortunately, we were overruled when the Volturi arrived. They destroyed her," Carlisle told him in his capable manner. Reporting deaths to friends and relatives was something he'd had much experience with.

"She...she's dead?"

"I'm afraid so. I am very sorry," Carlisle said. Fred looked at the floor.

"I asked her to leave the battle and come to Vancouver. I thought she would come."

"Riley had killed Diego days before," I said cutting to the chase. I had heard the anger and disappointment in Bree's mind when she realized the truth. "Riley tricked her."

"Damn!" Fred exclaimed, still looking down. "But Riley didn't kill her?"

"No, it was the Volturi," I repeated.

"Who is the Volturi? Are they the ones who kill covens?"

"They destroy covens that do not keep our secrets," Carlisle said. "They were coming to destroy Victoria's coven...your coven...but Riley attacked us first and we were forced to fight."

"I don't understand. Riley told us that you were going to attack us, that you wanted our hunting ground. You were supposed to be vicious and... Ah, hell, Riley was such a liar. Is he dead?" he asked, finally looking up at us.

"Yes," I responded. "They are all dead. Victoria too."

"Good."

"What are you doing here at our home, Fred?" Carlisle asked gently.

"I was curious. I was passing through the area and recognized the scent of vampires, and followed it to this house. I've never known vampires to have such a nice home. Do you live here all the time?"

"Yes."

"Wow. How do you—"

"I'm sure you have many questions for us, Fred. But I have one for you too," I said. "How is it that we couldn't see you standing at our window?"

"I was going to ask you how you could see me. I was trying to make that difficult."

"Like you, some of our family members have special talents," was my simple reply.

"I used to keep Riley and the other vampires away from me when we were crammed into a house or basement. They were always wild and violent and sometimes they would hurt or kill each other. Bree used to hide near me to keep them away from her too. She was a nice girl," Fred said sadly.

"Do you mind telling us a little more about your talent?" I asked after a few moments.

"Well, I was always kind of a loner, but after I became 'this,'" Fred looked down and gestured at his body, "I discovered I could make a stinky cloud around me by concentrating. When anyone got close enough to smell it, they couldn't get away from me fast enough.

"When I figured out that Riley was lying to us and it seemed like he was dragging us into a fight that didn't make sense, I decided to try to run away. Some others disappeared over the weeks and Riley told us that they burned up in the sun by coming back too late, but Bree thought that they had run away. Riley only let us out at night and only a few of us at a time. We were always thirsty. Then one day Riley told us there were certain days that were safe to go outside and he dragged us out. It was all a crock. He was just trying to keep us under his thumb." Carlisle and I looked at each other. I was no longer sorry that I had killed him.

“Anyway,” Fred went on, “Riley figured out that I could make people avoid me and he seemed to think that was worth something. The more I practiced, the more I figured out that I didn’t need the smell anymore. I could make people feel uncomfortable when they looked at me and they would look away. Eventually, I learned to make people forget they had seen me. They would forget that I was there, essentially making me invisible for a period of time.”

“In the world of vampires, you are what is called a ‘shield,’” I told him. “You have a talent for protecting yourself and others. My wife, Bella, is also a shield and she can block talents like yours. That’s how we were able to find you. I could hear your thoughts, but I couldn’t see you until Bella shielded me from your gift.”

“You must be the mind reader Riley told us about. That’s cool. He said that the ‘yellow-eyes’—that’s what he called you—had special skills and that’s why you were so dangerous. If you don’t mind me asking, why aren’t your eyes red like other vampires?”

“Riley was correct that we have some talented members among us, but we are not aggressive. We don’t attack others unless we are attacked first. We try to live a nonviolent existence,” Carlisle told Fred. “That is why our eyes are yellow. We do not drink the blood of humans. We hunt animals instead.”

Fred’s red eyes grew wide. “I didn’t know that was an option! There’s a lot Riley didn’t tell us, though. I still don’t understand what he was trying to do. He kept showing us this red shirt that we were supposed to smell. It was a human’s scent—a very potent scent—and he kept saying that whoever got to the prey first could have her.”

I growled involuntarily, though I more or less knew what Riley had been up to at the time. Fred glanced at me, but Carlisle encouraged him to continue.

“It was confusing because he said you all would protect her, but that you were also going to attack us and not let us feed. When he sent us to kill you, the last thing he did was pass that shirt around again. I couldn’t figure out what the real goal was...to get to the human or to kill you all.”

I answered this time. “Victoria, Riley’s creator, wanted my wife, Bella, dead, to get revenge on me for killing her mate. She also would have been happy to see

our whole family destroyed, but she didn't want to get her hands dirty. That's why she created all of you...to attack us and kill Bella."

"Wait! Your wife is human?" Fred asked, incredulously.

"She was at that time," I answered simply.

"I'm sorry I was ever a part of that. I didn't want to be there. I knew Riley was lying to us and you seem like good people...vampires, I mean." It was the first time Fred had smiled.

"Well, Fred, you don't have to hide from us. You are welcome in our home. Would you like to join us today? We are having a birthday party for Edward's daughter, my granddaughter."

Daughter? Fred thought. Human wife? That can't be right. I must have misheard.

I didn't bother to explain. If he became a friend to us, he would learn about Renesmee soon enough.

"Um, well, I can smell humans here. I don't understand," he said. "You aren't drinking them?"

"No, they are friends of ours. Can you resist if you are in the same room with them?"

"I think so, but it would hurt."

"Perhaps we should wait until there are no humans here before we invite you over again, then. You're not used to being around them."

"No, I had no idea that a vampire could choose not to drink humans. Riley always acted like they were animals there for the taking."

"It sounds like there were a lot of things that Riley didn't teach you. Probably because he didn't expect you to live very long. That is not the normal way for a creator to behave. It is his duty to teach you how we must live in the world in order to escape detection. If you like, we would be happy to teach you everything you would like to know."

"Yes," I added. "There are some things you should know for your own safety. Vampires who are talented like you can be targets for the Volturi. Would you like to visit tomorrow so we can talk further?"

"I would really appreciate that. I roam around alone most of the time, but it would be nice to meet some others of our kind who aren't... well, you know."

Assholes, was the word he was thinking. I would have to agree that Victoria and Riley were true assholes. James too. And even Laurent, as it turned out.

We led Fred downstairs and through the living room quickly. I motioned Jasper and Emmett to follow us out, just in case. Fred was no longer a newborn, but Charlie and Sue, Emily, Billy and Lily would be causing him pain that he was not accustomed to ignoring as we were.

When we got outside, Carlisle said, "Fred, we would appreciate it if you would not hunt around here. At least three hundred miles away would be our preference if you can manage it. We have to keep a low profile, since we live here year 'round."

"I can do that," Fred agreed.

"Tomorrow, then," Carlisle said.

"Tomorrow," he repeated. And then he was gone.

Edward

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