

FRED GOES NORTH

"I'm going north," Fred told us in Carlisle's office. He had returned to visit the day after Christmas because we'd had too many guests in the house that day for him to feel comfortable. "I want to find out more about these Volturi."

"That's a wise decision, Fred," my father told him. "You should become acquainted with Eleazar especially. He can tell you everything you need to know."

Fred was optimizing Carlisle's computer for him, cleaning the registry, installing new accelerators, updating his device drivers, and other esoteric maintenance tasks. Carlisle hadn't asked him to do it, Fred just was drawn to the screen and keyboard like an ant to a picnic and couldn't stand it when he noticed that Carlisle wasn't doing daily updates.

"Yeah, I don't want to accidentally become a Volturi slave if they come back to town," Fred said, then reflected, I wonder if I should reinstitute my stink shield.

"I don't think it will repel them," I responded to his thought, "but it couldn't hurt, of course. It's likely that Demetri could find you even with your shield up." And he's likely to like you a lot, I thought.

"So how many are in the northern coven?" Fred asked, concerned about crowds as always.

"Tanya is the leader of the Denali coven and she has a sister named Katerina who goes by Kate. Their third sister recently died," Carlisle told him.

Fred turned away from the computer to look at us, his eyes wide.

“Yes, destroyed by the Volturi,” I confirmed. “For making a false accusation.”

“It was a simple mistake,” Carlisle added. “Irina thought she was telling the truth. It’s a sad story. Perhaps they will tell it to you if you get to know them.” Carlisle and I both sighed. It had been another terrible blow to the Denalis after losing their mother, not to mention a little brother they hadn’t known about.

“And Eleazar, right?” Fred queried.

“And his mate, Carmen,” I added.

“I understand from Tanya that Garrett is still there as well. He and Kate have taken to one another,” Carlisle noted.

I wasn’t too surprised. The nomad, Garrett, had clearly become attracted to Kate when they met at our last showdown with the Volturi. He cared enough for her that he had endured massive electrical shocks throughout his body in order to restrain her and prevent her from attacking the Volturi. And I knew personally how much voltage Kate could shoot at you when she wasn’t mad, let alone when she was.

“That must have changed the family dynamic quite a bit,” I commented to Carlisle. “It used to be all women in the Denali clan,” I explained to Fred.

“It sure has,” Carlisle gave me a private wink. “When were you thinking of going, Fred?”

“Tomorrow, I guess. I don’t have anything I have to do here right now.”

"Would you like me to phone Tanya and tell her that you're coming? That way, you will be welcomed as a friend. I wouldn't want Kate to shock you, thinking that you are an intruder."

"You definitely don't want Kate to shock you," I agreed with a smile. "She packs a punch."

"Uh, yeah, that would be good, I guess."

"Tanya's coven is also vegetarian, if you recall," Carlisle reminded Fred.

He nodded. "I can do that. I've been practicing. Sometimes I really don't want to be that close to humans anyway and I can bite game in the neck, which is easier than under the arm," he said solemnly, seeing nothing at all unusual in his idiosyncratic feeding habits.

I wondered what Tanya would make of him. Physically, I thought she would like him a great deal. Fred is tall, blonde, and quite beautiful, though most of our family has never gotten a good look at him. He was no longer guarded with Carlisle and me, so I was familiar with his appearance. Once she saw him, I didn't think Tanya would miss out on a chance to "make friends" with Fred.

Like me before I met Bella, Fred is a virgin. Obviously, Tanya is not. Should I warn him? I wondered. I decided not to. If I was wrong and Tanya didn't make a play for him, then he would either think I was cracked or that she didn't like him. And if she did make a play for him, with any luck he would like her too.

I smiled to myself. I had my suspicions about Tanya and virginal men. Her feelings for me, while still intact at Bella's and my wedding, evaporated shortly thereafter, according to Alice. I attribute it to the loss of my sexual innocence. I do believe the woman enjoys the conquest of the unlikely and inexperienced. (I am

far from innocent now. Bella and I love our sex life. We don't rival Emmett and Rosalie for house and furniture destruction, but we definitely rival them in other ways.)

"I hope you'll stay to see Renesmee before you go. She'll want to say goodbye, I'm sure," I told Fred.

"Yeah. We're going to play chess and fool around with some widgets today."

That would have sounded very strange, except that I knew he was talking about helping her with her MacBook. It didn't matter what Fred did with Renesmee. She just liked his company, so I was glad that he planned to keep his promises to her. I should have known he would. Being very literal, Fred always did what he said he was going to do.

I'd talked with Carlisle recently about my theory that Fred was autistic as a human. Carlisle had decided the same thing, though he identified the disorder as Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism that doesn't affect cognitive functioning. Some humans with Asperger's have exceptional intellectual gifts, but struggle with emotional and social skills. Fred certainly fit that category. He was a talented mathematician and computer scientist, but an odd duck. Since odd was normal in our family, he fit right in.

"FRED! Momma, is Fred here?" Renesmee called, having returned from hunting with Jacob. Though Fred no longer used his "stink shield," Renesmee recognized his scent.

"Yes, darling, he's upstairs in Popop's office with Daddy," Bella replied from the living room where she was helping Alice with some AliceRoï children's-wear designs.

What's that freak of nature doing here? I heard Jacob's annoyance before he "about-faced" at our front door and left.

I felt a little sorry for Jacob. Renesmee was always excited to see Fred, partly because she didn't see him very often, so each time was a treat. She no longer expressed such excitement when Jacob showed up, because she was used to him being part of our family and she saw him every day. I wasn't sure whether Jacob realized that there was no competition in Fred's mind. Renesmee was like a playmate to him. They got along and were interested in some of the same things. Plus, Fred's social skills were at about the same level of development as Renesmee's. In spite of that, I was sure that Jacob would be pleased to hear that Fred was leaving.

"Fred!" Renesmee hollered when she found us upstairs.

"Hey."

"Will you play chess with me today?"

"Yeah, if you want."

"Good, let's go!"

"Hold on a second, Nessie. Fred has some news that you'll want to hear," I said and then waited for Fred to tell her. Fred remained silent, however, and I realized that my comment was a social cue of the sort that Fred usually didn't recognize. So I told her myself.

"Fred's going to visit Cousins Tanya and Kate, and Aunt Carmen."

"I love Aunt Carmen," Renesmee reminded me. "Can I go too?"

"Not this time, but we will visit sometime soon."

"How long will you be gone?" she asked Fred.

"Uh, don't know."

"Oh." Renesmee was clearly disappointed, but Fred didn't notice. "Are you going to show me some widgets?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Go on then," Carlisle said. "I'll give Tanya a call and let her know you'll be visiting," he added to Fred.

Renesmee took Fred's hand and led him out of the room. Bella or I probably would have to break up their games when it was time for Renesmee to go to bed. The passage of time had no meaning to Fred when he was working on a computer.

"When are you going to teach me derivatives?" Renesmee asked Fred as they left the office. "You promised."

I looked at Carlisle and we both chuckled. I remembered how Bella had struggled with Calculus in high school and now her five-year-old-equivalent daughter was begging a mathematician to teach it to her. She had her Popop's love of learning, certainly.

Fred did go north. Eleazar called Carlisle a month or two later and I listened in.

"Your Fred is an interesting character. Quite a talent he has."

"Yes, we were concerned that the Volturi would want to recruit him if and when they discover his existence," Carlisle told him.

"I can assure you that they will. He is learning to stretch his shield to selectively hide others along with himself. Think what Aro could do with that! Plus, with his 'stink shield,' as he calls it, he makes Renata redundant. He can do everything she does and more besides. Of course, they'll have a hard time finding him if he doesn't want to be found." Eleazar chuckled.

"We thought he would benefit from your knowledge. He wasn't taught anything as a newborn and knows very little of our history—only what I've given him in bits and pieces. As far as his survival goes, and his talent, he's completely self-taught."

“Quite remarkable. He’s an unusual individual, isn’t he? Reminds me very much of Alistair.”

“Yes, in some ways, I suppose. He’s not particularly comfortable around others, but one-on-one, he’s more personable than Alistair. He sought us out and he’s been a wonderful friend to our Renesmee. He’s not living with you, is he?”

Eleazar laughed. “No, I wouldn’t say so. He comes around nearly every day, though. Tanya has developed quite an interest in him.”

“Oh?” Carlisle prompted. My ears perked up.

“Yes, I think she finds him to be rather mysterious. She seems to enjoy the challenge.” Eleazar laughed again. “If you understand my meaning.”

Carlisle chuckled. “Yes, I certainly do.” He glanced at me and I smiled. “Has he made any mention of when he might return south?”

“No, but I wouldn’t leave a light on for him. I can see a bond developing here, fledgling as of yet, but it has all the signs...” Eleazar abandoned the sentence. With his expertise in reading the connections between individuals, it wasn’t difficult to take his meaning.

He went on, “As far as I can tell, Fred is utterly bewildered by Tanya and her intentions, but he remains drawn to her. Perhaps your Alice could tell you more.” He chuckled. “Our household certainly has changed in the past year. Having two new friends has helped the sisters cope a little better with the loss of Irina. The men are distracting them, to say the least.”

“I’m glad to hear things are working out. Keep us informed if and when any of you choose to visit and we’ll do the same.” Carlisle closed his cell phone and smiled at me.

Quite the unexpected development, he thought.

“Yes. It would certainly make my family reunions more comfortable!”

Carlisle laughed.

I was anxious to share the news with Bella. Jacob too. I was sure they would both breathe easier, each for their own reasons.

Edward

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