15. Compromise

It was late afternoon before Bella awoke. She’d had a bad “night”—one of the worst I’d witnessed. She tossed and rolled, getting hopelessly tangled in the covers before shoving them off altogether; she kicked the wall; her arms jerked; she chattered ceaselessly.

We’d made it back to Charlie’s house less than an hour before Bella’s father usually got up to go to work. Bella had begun nodding off as we walked from the clearing so, rather than carry her on my back, I picked her up and held her to my chest as I ran through the forest. She was less protected from the cool air racing by us when she was in front of my body, but Bella rarely complained of feeling cold.

After vaulting through her window, I’d laid Bella on the bed and removed her shoes, then tucked her quilt around her. She rolled onto her side, but didn’t seem to awaken. I assumed that Charlie, still snoring down the hall, would check on her when he got up, since he’d fallen asleep before she returned from the party and she’d had to herd him upstairs into his bed. He probably wouldn’t even remember that or know for certain whether she’d made it home.

Rather than hide in Bella’s closet to avoid Charlie’s bed–check, I decided to go outside and make a phone call. I needed to talk to Alice and I could keep an eye on the house from the nearby woods until Bella’s father left for work.

Alice fired questions at me as soon as I dialed her number.
“Edward, what are we going to do about Charlie? Have you thought about that?”
“Do you mean on Saturday? Jacob said Billy would invite him to the reservation.”
“No, I mean, how are we getting Bella out of the house on Friday and Saturday?”
“Oh. Well, Bella and I often spend Saturdays out somewhere, but Friday night might be a problem. I’ll think of something.”
“Don’t bother. I’ve already figured out everything.”
“What have you figured out, Alice?”
“That you two need some time together before the battle.”
“And why would that be?”
“Because you want to give her a special graduation present.”
“Well…” Even if Alice knew my plan, I didn’t want to talk about it. It was meant to be private.
“And she wants to give you one too, so here’s my proposal…”
That couldn’t be right. Bella had already bought Alice and I concert tickets, but since they were for Saturday and we couldn’t go that day, she said she would give them away. I didn’t have a chance to consider it further, since Alice was still talking.
“The family is taking our annual ‘backpacking’ trip to celebrate the end of the school year. I want to go shopping instead and I’m very upset that I have to be home alone, so Bella’s going to stay with me while you’re all away—Thursday night through Saturday.”

“But you’re going hunting to get ready for the battle, aren’t you?”

“Yes, you and I both are. I’ll leave with the family on Thursday while you stay with Bella at our house, and you’ll hunt Friday while I stay with Bella. You can give her your graduation present. Or do whatever else you want to do with her on Thursday night,” Alice added. I could almost hear her wink.

I ignored the insinuation, but I liked the plan.

“None of my business, but it’s a good idea, right?”

“Yes, Alice, it’s a good idea.” I changed the subject. “How did Jasper feel about the training session?”

“Good, actually. Even Esme will do fine with the newborns, he thinks. They’re predictable, according to him, so you only need a couple of techniques to out–maneuver them.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Thanks, Alice,” I said, shutting my cell phone.

I was…immensely. To destroy the creatures with my own hands! The anger and frustration I felt toward Bella’s tormenters had been building for too long. Victoria’s “feint and run” tactics; the intrusion into Bella’s bedroom by someone unknown; the amassing of an army…these threats had been intangible and elusive, nothing that I could challenge directly. It was too much for a killer to bear for long.

With Bella safely hidden away and Seth there to guard her, I would be free to let loose the demon without Bella’s having to witness the least human part of me. I did not want my love to see her would–be mate tearing the heads off his enemies or ripping them limb–from–limb with his bare hands.

Upon returning to Bella’s room, I settled into her rocking chair and watched her agitated slumber as the sun made its way across a cloudless sky. Bella was so exhausted that neither her nightmares nor her talking nudged her into consciousness. I listened to her mumblings and tried to decipher the words she spoke.

“…toria come too…aahh…don’t hurt him, no…can’t stand…no…”

Bella’s voice rose in pitch to a squeak, the words filled with emotion and distress. I began humming in hopes that the sound would divert her mind from its disturbing rut. I didn’t wish to wake her, just to raise her sentience above the level where the frightening dream resided.

As I hummed her lullaby, Bella smiled vaguely and quieted as I’d hoped she would. The effect lasted for about fifteen minutes before her right arm began to twitch, rising off the mattress. I could almost see in its movement the intention to hit, or punch, or perhaps just to defend from such. She rolled over restlessly and whacked her foot against the wall, but it didn’t wake her.
“…be there too…help…find me…this way…where is he? Where are you? Edward! Edward!”

It was easy to see that Bella was anxious about the battle and I wished I could ease her mind somehow. She didn’t understand how elementary it was going to be for us. With the wolves taking on half the newborns, well…there would barely be a fight.

“…no Jacob…don’t…no! Stay…you can’t…not you too… Alice!”

Would it ease her mind if I held her instead? I wondered. I approached the bed and lay on my side behind her, wrapping an arm around her lower ribs, cradling her against my body.

“Edward…,” she said softly and began whispering unintelligibly. She knew I was there. I hoped my presence would comfort her. I kissed her hair and breathed in her delicious scent.

I felt such a yearning for her, an indefinable craving for something I didn’t have. She loved me, though she could never return my love to the degree I offered it. I knew that. It made me long for some sort of reassurance that she was truly mine. I hadn’t talked to her about it recently, but it still troubled me that the idea of marriage set her teeth on edge. Though she claimed it was about the institution itself, how could I not suspect that it was actually about me—that she didn’t want to marry me? Did she have doubts about me? Was she holding out for other possibilities? One possibility in particular? The thought made me want to secure her, to make her mine. If she would agree to marry me, I would give her anything she desired…anything at all. But then again, she wouldn’t take anything I offered. It was a constant thorn in my side.

Bella had begun talking again, interrupting my obsessive thoughts.

“…third wife saved… she was human…brave human…to give her life…Esme…Carlisle…Edward!”

“Shh, darling, I’m here,” I whispered, rocking slowly forward and back, trying to calm her troubled mind.

As I moved with her, gently swaying, the rhythmic motion pacified and quieted her. It had an altogether different effect on me, however. In spite of her clothing and mine between us—the quilt having been kicked into a lump at the foot of the bed—I could feel my love’s shoulders and back rounded into my chest, her slim waist nestled against my stomach, the backs of her thighs pressed against the fronts of mine, and her firm, round bottom snuggled into my lower torso. The gentle rocking I’d intended as comfort for her begat a craving in me.

I’d become hyper–aware of every square inch of my skin where her warmth pressed against me, a tingling electricity. How would it feel to touch her bare, hot skin with my cold from shoulders to knees? A pleasurable, pulsing ache began deep in my center and grew stronger. My hips began to move without thought or decision, acting from a base instinct I didn’t wish to quell. Pressing into her, I gasped at the molten liquid heat flowing through my groin—most intense there—spreading up through my abdomen and down into my legs.
“Aahh,” I groaned, and my arm gripped her tighter around the ribs. I pressed into her again, feeling a surge of pleasure between my legs so powerful that it caught my breath and held it hostage. Ignoble and dishonorable though my actions were, I found myself unwilling to stop. Barely aware of what I was doing, I swept her hair from her neck and bent my lips to her carotid artery. I pushed my hips against her soft behind. This time I thrilled to the pressure of her pushing back. Her heartbeat stuttered.

“Mmm...” Bella moaned in her sleep. If I’d had a beating heart, I swear it would have stopped at that moment. A potent wave of desire rolled through me and I knew I must leave her bed now or be rendered incapable. I fought with myself to go when what I wanted to do was rip away the obstructing fabric and crush myself against her heated skin.

By sheer force of will, I rolled off Bella’s bed and landed in the rocking chair across the room in one quick motion. Groaning, I pressed the palm of my hand between my legs to ease the pressure that had built there. I flopped my head back over the top of the chair and closed my eyes, still feeling her body flush to mine, my front side perfectly dovetailed to her back side. I sighed heavily. Physical desire could be so powerful! It caught me by surprise. Slowly, my panting breaths elongated and the aching in my groin eased. I would have chastised myself for getting so carried away, but I had enjoyed it too much.

Out of nowhere, Bella began to speak.

“…where are you…ow…slow down…wait…Edward....”

She just couldn’t settle and take her ease. She had calmed most effectively when I lay with her, but I didn’t dare return in my present state.

“…to the clearing...have to get there...help Carlisle...They see me! They’re coming! Where is Edward...Edward...?!”

Had she awakened? Did she need me? I leaped to her bedside and touched her shoulder. No, still asleep. After making sure, I returned to the rocking chair only to be summoned again to find her still asleep. It was a long day for her with her agitated mind and for me, too, with my indecent desire.

_How I wish..._ But no. It was impossible.

Back in the rocking chair, I decided to focus on something else—my graduation gift for Bella, though I couldn’t call it that or (more than likely) she wouldn’t accept it. In my mind, I reviewed the contents of the fire safe built into my closet at home. I perused the items one by one and considered this piece and that, and imagined how it would be to give Bella what I _really_ wanted to give her. I smiled to myself.

“Edward?”

This time my name came as a solitary word from across the room. I rushed to Bella’s bedside where she yawned and stretched. I sat carefully on the edge of the bed and twined my fingers through hers. Her eyes remained closed.

“Are you really awake this time?” I murmured.

“Mmm,” Bella nodded sleepily. “Have there been a lot of false alarms?”

“You’ve been very restless—talking all day.”
“All day?” Bella repeated in surprise, her eyes popping open. She looked toward the window.

“You had a long night,” I reminded her. “You’d earned a day in bed.”

Bella sat up and stared outside. The sun was slipping toward the western horizon.

“Wow.”

“Hungry?” I asked, standing up. “Do you want breakfast in bed?”

“I’ll get it,” Bella responded. “I need to get up and move around.”

No, of course she wouldn’t want me to wait on her, though I was anxious to show off my fledgling cooking skills. I’d been watching the Food Network so I could learn how to feed her. It was very much like chemistry class. Less exacting, actually.

Bella swiveled and stretched her legs over the side of the bed, then stood up and I reached out to catch her when she swooned. She looked down at herself, still wearing her flannel shirt and blue jeans from the night before.

I escorted her to the kitchen and watched as she put some foul-looking packaged tarts into the toaster.

“Ugh, I’m a mess,” she groaned, bending down for a glimpse of herself in the shiny toaster.

“It was a long night,” I said. “You should have stayed here and slept.” Especially considering how restless she’d been and how insensible she looked even now.

“Right! And missed everything. You know, you need to start accepting the fact that I’m part of the family now.”

I smiled, reminded of the conversations I’d had with myself while she slept. Perhaps she had read my mind.

“I could probably get used to that idea.”

Bella sat at the table with her breakfast and as she raised one of the offensive, toasted rectangles to her mouth, I saw something that must have been hidden under her cuff before—a silver charm bracelet with a single charm on it. I felt iron stays tighten around my heart, but I kept my face smooth.

“May I?” I asked, reaching for the miniscule object.

“Um, sure.”

I placed my palm beneath the tiny carved wolf where it balanced on four legs, an exquisite replication of the thing itself—Jacob Black in his alternate form. The workmanship was superb and I marveled that a shovel-handed non-vampire could have produced this miniature work of art.

It was a lovely graduation gift—romantic—and because I knew how Jacob thought, I also interpreted it as a challenge to me. He was putting his mark on Bella, something that irked me, particularly because Bella had never allowed me to give her jewelry.

_This doesn’t have to be a bad thing_, I told myself. Maybe I could use it to counter her resistance. It definitely made me want to push forward with my plan.

“Jacob Black can give you presents,” I said carefully.
“You’ve given me presents,” Bella said after a brief pause. “You know I like the homemade kind.” She once did accept a compact disk of my piano compositions, something that did not require me to spend a dime. It wasn’t an ideal criterion, but I could work with it.


“What do you mean?”

“This bracelet,” I said, drawing a line around her wrist with my finger. “You’ll be wearing this a lot?”

Bella shrugged noncommittally. She probably didn’t want to say so to me.

“Because you wouldn’t want to hurt his feelings,” I suggested, giving her an out.

“Sure, I guess so.”

“Don’t you think it’s fair, then,” I said, rotating her wrist and tracing her lovely pulsing veins with my fingertip, “…if I have a little representation?”

“Representation?”

“A charm—something to keep me on your mind.”

“You’re in every thought I have. I don’t need reminders.”

“If I gave you something, would you wear it?” I pushed. It was clear she intended to wear Jacob’s gift.

“A hand–me–down?” Bella clarified.

“Yes, something I’ve had for a while.” I smiled, waiting for her concession.

“Whatever makes you happy.”

It did make me happy…very. Might as well take advantage of the moment.

“Have you noticed the inequality?” I asked, feigning great offense. “Because I certainly have.”

“What inequality?”

“Everyone else is able to get away with giving you things. Everyone but me. I would have loved to get you a graduation present, but I didn’t. I knew it would have upset you more than if anyone else did. That’s utterly unfair. How do you explain yourself?” I demanded.

“Easy.” Bella shrugged blithely. “You’re more important than everyone else. And you’ve given me you. That’s already more than I deserve, and anything else you give me just throws us more out of balance.”

Huh? Me—a vampire, no less. I’d altered her human existence beyond recognition, stolen her future, and endangered her life, and that’s what she thinks about it? I rolled my eyes.

“The way you regard me is ludicrous.”

Bella did not respond, just kept chewing that awful thing.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out to check the number.

“What is it, Alice?”

“Hi Edward. Guess what? The newborns are down to nineteen, nine for them, ten
for us, or ten for them, nine for us, whatever…easy.”

That was good news, but not why she had called. I waited for my sister to get to the point.

“You have to do something about Bella. She’s making plans to come to the clearing in the middle of the battle. You might have to tie her to a tree or something. She’s not really in danger, because she can’t find her way out of the woods.” Alice laughed. “Actually I take that back. She is in danger—of falling down and hurting herself.”

I sighed. “I sort of guessed as much.” I gave Bella an accusatory stare. “She was talking in her sleep.”

Bella’s face went red.

“I’ll take care of it,” I told Alice, returning the phone to my pocket.

Looking reproachfully at Bella, I asked, “Is there something you’d like to talk to me about?”

I didn’t bother to repeat what Alice had said. Bella already knew. She studied her hands guiltily before speaking.

“I like Jasper’s idea.”


“It wouldn’t help to have you in danger.”

“Jasper thinks it would. This is his area of expertise.”

I gave her a dark look of disapproval.

“You can’t keep me away. I’m not going to hide out in the forest while you all take risks for me.”

She might, actually, even if I didn’t tie her to a tree. I tried to keep the corners of my mouth from twitching.

“Alice doesn’t see you in the clearing, Bella. She sees you stumbling around lost in the woods. You won’t be able to find us; you’ll just make it more time consuming for me to find you afterward.”

I had her. Or so I thought…

“That’s because Alice didn’t factor in Seth Clearwater. If she had, of course, she wouldn’t have been able to see anything at all. But it sounds like Seth wants to be there as much as I do. It shouldn’t be too hard to persuade him to show me the way.”

Arrgh! She was impossible! Okay then, two could play that game.

“That might have worked…if you hadn’t told me. Now I’ll just ask Sam to give Seth certain orders. Much as he might want to, Seth won’t be able to ignore that kind of injunction.”

Bella was undaunted. “But why would Sam give those orders? If I tell him how it would help for me to be there? I’ll bet Sam would rather do me a favor than you.”

She was so stubborn! I still had a trick up my sleeve, though.

“Maybe you’re right. But I’m sure Jacob would be only too eager to give those
same orders.”
Bella scowled. “Jacob?”
“Jacob is second in command. Did he never tell you that? His orders have to be followed, too.” And I was sure Jacob would agree with me, so she could be mad at both of us.

Bella was surprised by the news. I tried to cement my victory by changing the subject before she found some new argument.

“I got a fascinating look into the pack’s mind last night. It was better than a soap opera. I had no idea how complex the dynamic is with such a large pack. The pull of the individual against the plural psyche... Absolutely fascinating.”

Bella glowered.

“Jacob’s been keeping a lot of secrets,” I said, smiling. “For instance, did you note the smaller gray wolf there last night?”

Bella nodded unhappily.
I laughed, thinking of how shocked the pack had been at her arrival.

“They take all of their legends so seriously. It turns out there are things that none of their stories prepared them for.”

Bella gave in. It was good gossip. “Okay, I’ll bite. What are you talking about?”

“They always accepted without question that it was only the direct grandsons of the original wolf who had the power to transform.”

“So someone changed who wasn’t a direct descendant?”

“No. She’s a direct descendant, all right.”

Bella’s face opened in surprise. “She?”

I nodded. “She knows you. Her name is Leah Clearwater.”

“Leah’s a werewolf!” Bella squealed. “What? For how long? Why didn’t Jacob tell me?”

“There are things he wasn’t allowed to share—their numbers, for instance. Like I said before, when Sam gives an order, the pack simply isn’t able to ignore it. Jacob was very careful to think of other things when he was near me. Of course, after last night that’s all out the window.”

“I can’t believe it. Leah Clearwater!” Bella’s eyes stared into the distance as her mind processed the bombshell.

I’d gotten to her!

“Poor Leah,” Bella whispered.

“She’s making life exceedingly unpleasant for the rest of them. I’m not sure she deserves your sympathy.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard enough for them, having to share all their thoughts. Most of them try to cooperate, make it easier. When even one member is deliberately malicious, it’s painful for everyone.”
“She has reason enough,” Bella muttered.

“Oh, I know,” I agreed, going on. “The imprinting compulsion is one of the strangest things I’ve ever witnessed in my life, and I’ve seen some strange things. The way Sam is tied to his Emily is impossible to describe—or I should say her Sam. Sam really had no choice. It reminds me of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with all the chaos caused by the fairies’ love spells…like magic.” I smiled. “It’s very nearly as strong as the way I feel about you.”

Bella ignored my declaration of love.

“Oh, I know,” I agreed, going on.

“The imprinting compulsion is one of the strangest things I’ve ever witnessed in my life, and I’ve seen some strange things. The way Sam is tied to his Emily is impossible to describe—or I should say her Sam. Sam really had no choice. It reminds me of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with all the chaos caused by the fairies’ love spells…like magic.” I smiled. “It’s very nearly as strong as the way I feel about you.”

Bella ignored my declaration of love.

“Poor Leah,” she repeated. “Jake said she’s still in love with Sam. But what do you mean, malicious?”

“She’s constantly bringing up things they’d rather not think of. For example, Embry.”

“What’s with Embry?” Bella asked, getting as caught up in the drama as I had listening to them.

“His mother moved down from the Makah reservation seventeen years ago, when she was pregnant with him. She’s not Quileute. Everyone assumed she’d left his father behind with the Makahs. But then he joined the pack.” I was reminded of an old Makah fisherman Carlisle and I had met the previous year. He’d had a tale to tell.

“So?”

“So the prime candidates for his father are Quil Ateara Sr., Joshua Uley, or Billy Black, all of them married at that point, of course.”

“No!” Bella gasped.

“Now Sam, Jacob, and Quil all wonder which of them has a half–brother. They’d all like to think it’s Sam, since his father was never much of a father. But the doubt is always there. Jacob’s never been able to ask Billy about that.” I’d seen that in Jacob’s mind before, wondering about Embry’s origins, but I hadn’t realized the significance of it—and maybe Jacob hadn’t either—until Embry joined the pack.

“Wow. How did you get so much in one night?”

“The pack mind is mesmerizing. All thinking together and then separately at the same time. There’s so much to read!” I hoped to get another chance at it.

“The pack is fascinating,” Bella concurred. “Almost as fascinating as you are when you’re trying to distract me.”

Darn! I pretended not to know what she meant, keeping my expression neutral.

Bella wasn’t giving up, though. “I have to be in that clearing, Edward.”

“No.” That was my last word on the subject. I would tie her to a tree if I had to. She would forgive me eventually.

Bella stared at the table, no longer meeting my eyes. Was she scheming?

“Okay, look, Edward,” Bella said quietly. “Here’s the thing… I’ve already gone crazy once. I know what my limits are. And I can’t stand it if you leave me again.”

Leave her? I inhaled sharply as the memory of Bella curled up in a puddle in the
forest stabbed my heart. I never wanted to cause her that kind of pain again. I was horrified.

I pulled her into my arms desperately and caressed her face, her arms, rubbed her back, and held her to my chest. Her heart was beating erratically in her distress.

“You know it’s not like that, Bella,” I tried to reassure her. “I won’t be far, and it will be over quickly.”

“I can’t stand it,” she declared. “Not knowing whether or not you’ll come back. How do I live through that, no matter how quickly it’s over?”

I sighed. “It’s going to be easy, Bella. There’s no reason for your fears.”

“None at all?”

“None.”

“And everybody will be fine?”

“Everyone.” There was no question.

“So there’s no way at all that I need to be in the clearing?”

“Of course not. Alice just told me that they’re down to nineteen. We’ll be able to handle it easily.”

“That’s right—you said it was so easy that someone could sit out. Did you really mean that?”

“Yes.”

“So easy that you could sit out?”

I was stunned into silence. Was she asking me not to fight for her?! It seemed so unlike Bella. She never asked for anything—how could she ask for something like this? I kept my face a smooth mask as Bella tried to read my reaction. It’s not that she didn’t have a right to ask; it’s just that I didn’t want to do it…not at all.

Bella inhaled deeply and continued. “So it’s one way or the other. Either there is more danger than you want me to know about, in which case it would be right for me to be there, to do what I can to help. Or…it’s going to be so easy that they’ll get by without you. Which way is it?”

Had I misled her? Was it true that my family would be fine without me? I would never allow her in the midst of the battle, so there was no question which way I would go—consequently, I realized, the cost didn’t matter. I would keep her safe at any cost, my family included. I couldn’t believe she would ask me for this, but I had hurt her before…hurt her badly. There had to be scars.

“You ask me to let them fight without my help?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she replied. “Or to let me be there. Either way, so long as we’re together.”

I’d been focused on protecting her from those who would hurt her, but she was asking me to protect her in another way—from her terror. Taking her face between my hands, I looked carefully into her eyes. What I saw there was fear…and guilt. Asking had been hard for her. I reached for my cell phone.

“Alice,” I said, hearing resignation in my voice. “Could you come babysit Bella for a bit?” I looked for her objection to my choice of words. She made none. “I need to speak
with Jasper.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” Alice answered. I shut the phone.

“What are you going to say to Jasper?” Bella whispered, looking away from me.

“I’m going to discuss…me sitting out.” Yes, I would follow through. Bella never asked for anything, which indicated how important this was to her.

“I’m sorry,” she said dully.

“Don’t apologize. Never be afraid to tell me how you feel, Bella. If this is what you need…” I shrugged. “You are my first priority.”

“I didn’t mean it that way—like you have to choose me over your family.”

“I know that. Besides, that’s not what you asked. You gave me two alternatives that you could live with, and I chose the one that I could live with. That’s how compromise is supposed to work.”

Bella leaned her forehead into my chest and I felt her relief in the softening of her body, a lessening of her rigidity.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Anytime,” I murmured and kissed the top of her head. “Anything.” Anything at all. I held Bella against me for a time before I remembered something I’d wanted to ask her.

“Who’s the third wife?”

“Huh?”

“You were mumbling something about ‘the third wife’ last night. The rest made a little sense, but you lost me there.”

“Oh. Um, yeah. That was just one of the stories that I heard at the bonfire the other night. I guess it stuck with me.”

Bella shrugged it off as if it meant nothing, a gesture that was also a habit of mine. I did it when I was trying to minimize something. I deduced that “the third wife” was more significant to her than she was letting on. What was she hiding? I leaned away to peer at her face, but she gave me no clues.

Just then, I glanced up and saw Alice standing in Charlie’s kitchen doorway. Apparently, knocking didn’t suit her.

“You’re going to miss all the fun,” she complained. That was true, but it was what Bella needed.

“Hello, Alice,” I greeted my sister.

I lifted Bella’s chin with one finger and leaned in to kiss her goodbye. She responded warmly, which I took as a good sign.

“I’ll be back later tonight. I’ll go work this out with the others, rearrange things.”

“Okay.”

“There’s not much to arrange,” Alice said. “I already told them. Emmett is pleased.”

I sighed. “Of course he is.” More newborns for him to rip apart.
“You’re gonna miss out, little bro!” Emmett shouted at me from upstairs when I entered the house.

I made my way to Jasper’s office and found Emmett, Jasper, and Rosalie gathered around Jasper’s desk.

“You’re letting her keep you away from the fight?” Rosalie asked in sharp-edged disbelief. I didn’t bother to dignify that.

“Jasper, what happens if I sit out with Bella?”

“Nothing, really. We were going to attempt this with half as many fighters. We should be okay. You can still help by listening for anything unexpected. It’s imprudent to underestimate any threat, but I don’t foresee any problems.”

“I wasn’t troubled by the numbers before,” I told Jasper. “I’m more concerned about them now, with everyone but me facing the army. I still think there’s likely to be at least one more fighter than Alice is counting. She’s seeing only newborns, right? But we know their creator isn’t a newborn.”

“Right. I’ll take that into consideration. Still, nine or ten unskilled newborns, plus one skilled fighter shouldn’t be much to worry about with the six of us.”

I knew that if Jasper believed there was any real danger, he would not let Alice fight, so clearly, I had no cause for alarm.

“Are you coming tonight?” he asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. We need to do some two–on–one, three–on–one drills. I could use your help.”

“It’s gonna be awesome!” Emmett interjected. “Right Rose?”

Rosalie didn’t respond.

I nodded at Jasper. “What time tonight?”

“Earlier…midnight. Is that okay?”

“Should be. See you all then.”

I left to find Carlisle and Esme, whom I found downstairs in the kitchen…canoodling—before I entered anyway. I ignored the knowledge and they ignored that I was ignoring it. Business as usual at the Cullens.

“I’m glad you’re staying with Bella for the fight,” Esme said, straightening her skirt as she approached me to take my hand. “It’s noble of you to give up what you want to do.”

“She can’t bear to be separated,” I told my mother. “So I sit out or she sits in, which is not an option.”

“It’s fine, son,” Carlisle told me. “We’ll manage. Where will you and Bella be during the fight?”

“I’m planning to have Jacob carry Bella to the north ridge of Little Tahoma where
we can’t be approached from behind, should we be approached at all, which I don’t expect. Jacob’s stench will mask Bella’s scent. I’ll go up a different route to meet them. Sam is assigning Seth to be our two-way radio so we can follow the battle.”

“It’s good of Jacob to help us in this way—Seth too.”

“Oh, believe me, it’s no sacrifice,” I grunted in irritation.

Esme looked at me curiously. “Jacob has an ulterior motive?”

“Does he ever!” I replied sarcastically, before softening my tone. “He wants Bella to be safe, though, as I do.”

Carlisle and Esme passed a look between them which contained the words “competition” and “jealousy.” I ignored it.

“We’ll see you tonight then?” Carlisle asked.

“Yes, midnight.”