Though it felt like time stood still and that waiting had become an entire lifetime of its own, the hours *did* pass... slowly. It wasn’t as if there weren’t distractions everywhere—my family came and went steadily—but I had difficulty attending.

One thing I couldn’t miss, however, was the sound of the near-constant quarrelling between Rosalie and Jacob that floated up the staircase. It was loud, incessant, and sometimes bordering on physical violence. I hated their exposing Renesmee to that. I would have to have a talk with Jacob, at least, since he was marginally the more reasonable of the two of them.

Near twilight, Alice came back to the office. She carried in her hands a sheath of light blue silk on a padded hanger and an improbable-looking pair of four-inch stiletto heels. Bella would hate the whole package, I knew, but I couldn’t help imagining how her legs would look—long and slender—in the sexy stilettos and how the shiny silk fabric would ride the beautiful curves of her pre-pregnancy form.

*Would she regain that form?* I wondered, much as new fathers must have wondered since time immemorial. How does the venom know what to keep and what to burn away? Would she look the same?

Of course, I had seen Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett all go through this transformation and they had changed little, just losing the defects of human skin, gaining a faintly sharper bone structure, perhaps, and fading to our natural white color. I was much more familiar with Bella’s physical idiosyncrasies, though, so I would expect her to seem more altered. Her coloring wouldn’t change much, though she would lose the scarlet blush of embarrassment and the beautiful pink “love blush.” I would miss those.

“That’s quite an outfit you’ve selected for Bella’s ‘coming out,’” I commented.

“Yes, well, I wanted to highlight her new beauty and form as much as possible for her first look at herself. She will be stunned, I’m sure.”

“You might lessen her shock a bit by dressing her in blue jeans and a t-shirt, you know,” I said, secretely glad for the blue silk. “No underclothes?” I queried, seeing nothing but the dress and the silver shoes.

“Nah,” Alice replied. “What’s the point?”

“True.”

Alice picked up the sheet covering Bella and looked at her belly. It had indeed shrunk a great deal. It wasn’t quite flat, but it certainly looked like a non-pregnant belly in size and shape. Miraculously, the long surgical incision had knit back together, though the whole area was still highly colored. The stitches marred the surface of her skin like graffiti on marble.
“I’m going to ask Carlisle what will happen to those stitches, whether we need to remove them.” Before I’d finished speaking the words, Carlisle was at the door. It was his office, after all, though he’d moved his necessities to Esme’s office for the time being.

“I heard, Edward. My best guess is that as Bella’s skin transforms, the stitches will either lose purchase and fall off, or the foreign material will simply burn away.”

I nodded.

“If you could wait with that for a moment, Alice, I want to speak to Edward about Renesmee,” Carlisle added as Alice removed Bella’s dress from the hanger.

“Is something wrong?” His words had startled me into asking the question, though already I saw what concerned him.

“No, not necessarily, it’s just becoming clear that Renesmee is growing at an incredible rate. I think it would be a good idea if we started keeping tabs on it so that we can try to predict her development.”

“Yes, yes, good idea.”

“I’ll start measuring her height and weight and the circumference of her head four times each day at regular intervals.”

“I’m sure Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee down there will help you with that.”

Carlisle smiled and then gathered a scale and measuring tape before turning to leave.

“Oh, yes, and I want to take a sample of her DNA and compare it to yours and Bella’s,” he said, pausing at the door. “I’ll try a mouth swab first and if that doesn’t work, perhaps I can get hair from her hairbrush.”

I nodded my assent.

Alice manipulated while I lifted, and between us, we maneuvered the beautiful silk dress onto Bella’s body without wrinkling it too badly. Alice strapped on the stilettos, then we stepped back to survey our handiwork.

“I think I’ll brush her hair now,” Alice said. “Since she’s lying so still, she probably won’t mess it up.”

She was lying still. It concerned me, but I could smell both blood and morphine in her system, so she must be unconscious. Carlisle said it would pass.

Edward, you should come see the cottage, Alice said silently. Emmett and Esme are out there now, hanging the doors and finishing the garden. Then we’re going to decorate the interior so it will be ready for Bella on her birthday.

“That’s right! Her birthday is day after tomorrow. Maybe she’ll wake up on the day. That would be appropriate. I’m glad I ordered her car before the wedding.”

So, come to the cottage with me?

“I’d rather be here right now, Alice. Why don’t you show it to me?”

Oh, all right. She obliged me by taking a mental walk up to, then through, the carved front door, the wood and stone living room, and down the hall to the two bedrooms, one unfinished.
That can be Nessie’s room. Esme didn’t plan for a child, so we haven’t finished it yet. We weren’t able to work on it while the wolves were on their high horse, so now we’re behind. She grinned at her own clever word play and I grinned back.

Alice walked me through the master bedroom, its bed tented with swaths of mosquito netting. The design and decoration were very reminiscent of the cottage on Isle Esme. That was a lovely idea.

And here’s my favorite part, the master closet! I saw the image in her mind of what I knew would be a nightmare of epic proportions to Bella. I could already hear her objections. And here’s the garden. Alice visualized the double French doors leading outside from the bedroom. It was absolutely brilliant—a miniature, beach-like environment with stones instead of sand and a pond instead of the ocean, and beautiful scented flowers planted all around. Bella would love this!

“No kitchen?” I inquired.

There’s an area for it off the living room, but we made it into more of a study. I guess we’ll have to put in a refrigerator and a microwave at least, so you can feed Renesmee. Not that she’s eating food. Carlisle keeps putting baby formula in her cup and attempting to talk her into trying it, but the first time he did it, she put her nose to it, scrunched up her face, and refused to drink. Alice laughed.

“She can’t keep drinking human blood for long, partly for Bella’s sake—it will drive her mad—and partly because, well, you know… Is she verbalizing at all?”

Not a peep. She uses her hands to show us things. It is so amazing, Edward, how smart she is, and how advanced. She learns new things at an incredible rate. She already knows us all by name.

“Yes, I’ll come down and spend some time with her in a little while. Carlisle says she’s changing fast.”

Her hair has grown more than an inch since I first saw her and she’s much heavier. I don’t know how I’m going to keep up with her wardrobe. She keeps asking for you and Bella, by the way.

“How?”

Pictures.

“She’s an amazing little thing.” I smiled, thinking of her delightful, magical personality. Carlisle had told me she reminded him of the illegal vampire children from long ago. He’d always said that they were so appealing, so attractive, that nobody could resist falling in love with them. It was hard to believe that this little miracle was mine—or rather, ours. It could not be denied, though, that she resembled me a great deal, with a similar face shape and the same hair, but with Charlie’s curls. And she had Bella’s eyes and the beautiful shape of Bella’s lips, the lower one slightly oversized, just like her mother’s.

Alice left for the cottage and, shortly thereafter, Rosalie came into the room to fetch more blood.

“So it’s ‘Nessie,’ now, is it?” It’s what I’d been hearing in everyone’s thoughts for the
last day or so.
“The mongrel started it, but it is catching on.”
“Are you ready to feed Nessie/Renesmee?”
“Yes, she’s been so thirsty,” she replied. “I guess this is the fuel for her fast growth. Carlisle just weighed and measured her. She’s already several pounds heavier and more than an inch taller—after one day!”
“I’ll come down and feed her.”
“We’ve got it covered, Edward, if you want to stay with Bella. I have to take turns with the mutt! How is Bella doing, anyway?” They were the first words of concern I’d heard from my sister.
“She’s changing, but progress is slow. You remember how long it took to see anything with Emmett? It seems a little faster for Bella. Her fingernails have changed color and her surgery wound is healing.”
“Edward…I’m sorry about Bella…what happened, you know. I should have gone hunting with Emmett. I turned out to be no help at all.” The rest of her words came out in a rush.
“And I cut her, you know…but she wanted me to. She said not to wait…”
“It’s okay, Rose. We haven’t been on the same side of things through most of this and, though I never would have chosen for Bella to go through it, I am happy that Renesmee is here. I just want Bella back too. This waiting is killing me.”
“I remember how I felt when Emmett changed. It was torture listening to him suffer through it. Isn’t it easier that Bella is so quiet?”
“You’d think so, but since this is so different from every other time, it makes me wonder if she’s still in there…if she’s going to come back.” I heard my voice quaver.
Rosalie touched my arm. “She will come back, Edward. She has too much to live for not to. Come on, come see Renesmee. She’ll cheer you up.”
“You’re probably right about that.”
“Let me show you how we feed her. I heat the blood in the microwave for forty-five seconds and then pour it into this metal cup. The metal is a little harder for her to bite through. Carlisle wants her to drink formula too, but she…” Rosalie chuckled. “You just have to see her face. It’s very funny.”
“Shall we mix some up?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Okay,” she said, smiling. “But let’s take both.”
It was hilarious and heart-tugging at the same time. I took Renesmee from Jacob and, after she happily showed me highlights of her day, I offered her the formula. She squinted her eyes, pursed her lips and pressed her face into my chest. I felt her overwhelming dismay before she pressed her hand onto my neck. She showed me a picture of her cup with blood in it and looked at my face with such intense longing that I could not resist her request. But first…
“Can you try the formula, just a small drink? You might like it better than you think.”
Renesmee removed her hand and placed it against my neck again forcefully, while staring at my eyes. “Not one little drink for your daddy?” She smacked her palm against my neck again,
showing me the cup of blood like I was deaf…or rather, blind. “Okay, maybe we can mix it with something more appetizing or try a different brand.”

“She really doesn’t like this particular formula,” I told Rosalie, handing it back.

“We’ve already tried three different kinds,” Jacob said. “Why don’t you just give her her blood?! That’s what she wants. Don’t you, Nessie?” Jacob had certainly changed his anti-bloodsucker tune—and in baby talk, no less!

Renesmee reached for Jacob’s neck and answered by showing him the cup of blood.

“Rose?” She passed me the cup with the warmed blood in it. “Let’s give it some thought. Maybe we can find a more palatable way to present the formula.”

“I know, Nessie, you’re thirsty, aren’t you?” I sat down on the couch and Renesmee showed me how to hold her—like a breastfeeding infant, but more upright. When she was settled in my arms with her dinner, she put her palm on my neck and showed me Bella first, followed by Emmett, and Alice, and Jasper, and Rosalie, and Carlisle, and Esme, and Jacob…her extended family. She seemed to have a particular affection for Jacob.

When the cup was nearly empty, her eyelids closed slowly.

“Jacob, let’s take a walk.” I stood up, cradling Renesmee and felt Jacob follow me out the front door. It reminded me of a similar walk we’d taken together just two weeks ago. This time, though, he felt no residual hate or anger toward me that I could read. If I’d needed him to kill me now, he would be useless for the task. I was glad that the need was gone…at least I hoped it was.

“Where are you taking Nessie?” he asked anxiously. She’s going to get cold with you holding her.”

I ignored his concern. “So, Jacob, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” he replied petulantly.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy about this state of affairs.”

“Don’t tell Bella. Let me tell her myself.”

“Why shouldn’t I tell her?”

“You owe me this! And I don’t want to steal her from you anymore. You have to be happy about that.”

“I’m not certain that exchanging my daughter for my wife is exactly a satisfying outcome.”

“I can’t help it. You know that.”

“What do the wolves think of this turn of events?”

“Well, none of them will ever hurt her now. We have a law that no one ever causes harm to the object of an imprinting. The pack would never survive it. I need to talk to Sam. The feud will end now and Seth and Leah can go home, but I don’t want to leave Nessie.”

“She will be fine with her family, I’m sure, Jacob,” I said, irritated.

“Maybe Carlisle will go with me to reaffirm the treaty?”

“I don’t want my father or any of my family exposed to danger until you’ve explained to them what’s going on and gotten things settled.”

“Okay, I’ll go alone, but I’ll be back as quick as I can.”
“You do that. I’ll tell Carlisle your plans.” I stopped walking and turned around to face him.

“Jacob, I want to thank you formally for all you did to save Bella’s life. She wouldn’t have made it without you. If Rosalie had…”

“Sure, sure. That part was my pleasure. I’d be happy to do it again if you want.”

“Well, it certainly was a well-timed action, but I think the need has passed.”

“I don’t. Blondie thinks she’s Nessie’s mother, for crissakes. I have just as much a claim on her as Rosalie does. More.”

“In my judgment, neither of you has a claim on Bella’s and my daughter.”

“Come on, Edward. You know how it is. Didn’t you tell Bella about imprinting being magical and all that? I couldn’t make it happen. Believe me, I tried. But I can’t make it unhappen, either. I can’t ever leave her. Leah thinks it’s something to do with the fertility of the pack, that imprinting happens to best advantage for the group. She thinks that’s why Sam didn’t imprint on her.”

“Carlisle will be interested in that theory. I might be too as a scientist, but perhaps not as a father, at the moment, when my daughter is less than two days old.”

“It happens that way sometimes. Like with Quil and Claire. Just swear that you’ll let me tell Bella. I have to prepare her right.”

“Because of everything you’ve done for my wife and my family, I promise I will leave it to you. But I would advise you to tell her before she figures it out for herself. And also, Jacob, I would ask that, in the interests of Nessie…Renesmee, you and Rosalie work out some arrangement with one another and stop the constant bickering near my child. I don’t wish for her to be exposed to that.”

“You know how the Beauty Queen is…”

“I simply will not have it. I will speak to her also.”

“I’ll try, but she’d better back off too.”

“What do Seth and Leah think about the imprinting?”

“Seth’s cool with it. Leah, she’s never gonna like Bella, no matter what, and probably not Renesmee either, but that’s just Leah. She’s pretty bitter. You never know, though. Maybe she’ll imprint on somebody.”

“So when are you going to talk to Sam? Sooner is better than later—for everybody.”

“I’ll go right now if Nessie’s gonna sleep. She’ll sleep for six or seven hours if tonight’s the same as last night.”

“Okay then.”

“See ya later.”

I marveled at how Jacob’s formerly obsessive connection to Bella was just…gone. His mind was filled completely with thoughts of “Nessie.” It was a mixed blessing. If Jacob’s change allowed Bella to move on, too—though I seriously doubted she was going to like where we’d all be moving to—then I would have my true love all to myself…finally. No longer would I have to share her—except with Nessie, of course. The thought made me hopeful.
Jacob phased and ran into the woods in search of his pack. There was another positive side to Jacob’s imprinting—our daughter would be forever safe from the wolves. With Jacob’s agreement that we had not broken the treaty by changing Bella, we would soon be able to move about freely without worrying about danger from either wolf pack.

When Nessie and I got close to the house, Esme came outside to meet me. She’d been missing for much of the day, as had Emmett and Alice. The three of them were working hard to finish the cottage for Bella.

“How are you feeling, Edward?”

“I must admit that I would choose today over any other day in the last two weeks, but this wait is driving me mad. Nobody else was ever still like this! I’m so worried that maybe we only saved her body, that perhaps Bella’s spirit is already gone.” My last few words faded to a whisper.

“What does Carlisle say?”

“He’s not worried. He thinks it’s altogether possible that she is still unconscious with all the morphine I gave her. If that’s true, then it is a better way by far to get through this than any of us had. There’s just no way to know. And we still have maybe two more days to wait!”

You must be thrilled to have Nessie, though! My mother was trying to distract me, which was fine.

“I am. I truly am. I would certainly be enjoying these first days with her a great deal more if Bella were here to share them. She and I need to figure out how to be parents together.”

You know that we’re all here for you. I’m also anxious to have our new daughter back. She’s such a wonderful addition to our family! Have I told you that, Edward? We adore Bella. You made a brilliant choice. And now she’s given us Nessie too. She was holding Renesmee’s tiny foot in her hand. When Bella wakes up, our family will be complete.

“It would seem that we’ve got another addition as well.”

Jacob?

I nodded.

It will be interesting to see how all that works out. Have you talked to him? What are we going to do about Sam’s pack? Will we have to move as soon as Bella is ready?

“It turns out that there’s a pack ‘law,’ I guess you’d call it, that prohibits any member of the pack from harming the object of another member’s imprinting. Though Jacob’s not officially part of Sam’s pack anymore, he still seems to think that the law applies. He’s gone to talk to Sam and explain the situation. He wants Carlisle to come later to discuss the treaty.”

I’ll tell him to talk to Jacob when I see him.

“Thanks.”

Can I hold my granddaughter?

“Of course. I’m going to check on Bella,” I said handing Renesmee to her ‘Nana.’

Nessie is astonishing, Edward! I can’t tell you how thrilled I am that she is here. And so is everybody else, by the way. You should see “Uncle Emmett” with her! I smiled at the image in her head of Emmett dancing around making silly faces to encourage Renesmee to grin.
Returning to Bella, I could see no change. I stroked her lovely face and noted that her skin had cooled somewhat. So things were progressing, just inordinately slowly. I settled in to wait. Thus passed the second night of my wife’s imprisonment…and mine.

In the morning, Carlisle brought Renesmee to see me. When they entered the doorway, she immediately reached out. I took her in my arms and waited for her to tell me her latest news. She had awakened to Esme holding her and then Jacob fed her two cups of blood. Alice had given her a silver brush and mirror set and Rose had brushed out her hair, which she’d liked. I noticed that her hair already had grown halfway to her shoulders. She was taller too.

“She’s growing incredibly fast,” I said.

Yes, she is. I’ve started charting it.

“Carlisle, what does this mean for her? Is she going to age four times faster than a human, as she did in gestation? Does this mean that she will grow old right before our eyes?” I spoke with vampire speed and I tried not to let my concern alter the calm, low tone of my voice. Renesmee didn’t seem to be disturbed by my words, which was the point.

That thought is beginning to occur to all of us. If she continues at the rate she is growing, she should reach maturity in just a few years. We can only hope that the growth slows or that it reaches a plateau at some point and stops. As for aging, we’re not going to know what aging means for Renesmee for some time yet.

“We don’t know how long she will live either, do we?”

No. Jasper has done an incredible amount of research and still the only potential leads he’s found are in the Amazon. Depending on your plans for the next year, we might want to travel there and dig around.

“I guess we have some options to consider when Bella awakens, but I’d like to know as much as possible as soon as we can. I’ll have to talk to her and see what she wants to do.”

Carlisle nodded.

Renesmee demanded my attention then by smacking my neck with the palm of her hand. She showed me Bella again right after her birth and then showed me the way Bella currently looked, wearing her beautiful new dress and shoes.

“Yes, she is your mommy, but she is still sleeping. We think she will wake up after the next time you wake up. Not much longer. Then you can show her everything.”

There was no way to know exactly how much Renesmee understood, but I’d already decided to speak to her as if she could understand and eventually she would. This time, it felt like her question about her mother had been answered. Her intensity eased.

She touched my face and began to replay the song I had hummed to her the day before. I smiled, listening to it in her head. When she finished, I hummed it to her again out loud. She settled into my arms and watched my throat and lips move. I sat down with her near Bella, so she
could look at her mother and touch her skin. Our child seemed to understand that Bella wasn’t with us right now and she made no demands to show her pictures.

We sat together for a short time before Renesmee became curious about objects in the room and began pointing at things she wanted to look at. I carried her around and allowed her to touch the items that intrigued her. As she did, I told her the name for each object: book, bookend, box, pen, carving. She saw a framed photo of Esme on Carlisle’s desk and after pointing to it, showed me the image of Esme holding her earlier.

“Yes, Renesmee, that is a picture of your Nana.” Renesmee smiled brightly. After half an hour of this activity, she wanted to touch her mother again. She touched Bella’s hair, her face, her mouth, and her pretty dress, but had no questions or comments for me. She just sighed impatiently.

Shortly thereafter, Renesmee showed me her cup with blood in it and I called for Rosalie to come and get her. Rose had been wanting to for most of the past hour, but was holding back, thoughtfully giving us some time alone. When I called for her, she appeared immediately and Renesmee reached to show her the cup of blood.

“I’ll feed you right away, Nessie,” Rosalie promised, grabbing a bag of blood from the fridge and flashing me a friendly smile as she left the room.

It was remarkable, the change in Rosalie. No longer did she spend every moment thinking about herself. Whenever she held Renesmee or entered the room where she was, Rose’s thoughts were consumed with the baby.

Rosalie had always known what she’d wanted out of life and being robbed of that chance had made her bitter. The softening of my sister was one of the most welcome changes that Renesmee had already brought about in the Cullen family; the alteration in Jacob was the most confusing. But everyone had been altered in the short time since Nessie was born. She was so beautiful, so clever, and so charming that each of us catered to her automatically.

Her ability to communicate was astonishing. It reminded me of babies whose parents had taught them American Sign Language. I’d seen videos of those pre-verbal children asking for milk or for help reaching an object, and a number of other amazing exchanges. It would seem that a baby’s ability to communicate was hampered more by the delay of verbal skills than by any intrinsic inability to let his needs be known. Renesmee was an extreme example of what was possible.

Emmett stopped by the office to see Bella later that morning and gave me an update on the cottage. He’d been doing Esme’s bidding to finish things up, but they still had a considerable amount of work to do. Everything had been put on hold while the wolves were set against us.

“I hope it’s big enough for Bella. Esme insisted that we keep it a one-story cottage to maintain its ‘character,’ whatever that is, even though she let Alice add a huge addition just for clothes. I wanted to add a second story and maybe even a swimming pool for Nessie, but I lost the vote.”

“From what I’ve seen through Alice, I think Bella will be thrilled, as I am, Em. I truly appreciate all the work you’ve done.”
“Ah…it’s no biggie. You two obviously need somewhere to be alone, judging by the fact that you knocked her up on your first run out of the gate.” Emmett chortled. “I guess you figured it all out, huh?”

“We did, indeed,” I replied, smiling at the memories his comment brought back. “Easy as falling off a log, I’d say…except for the not killing her part.”

Emmett laughed. “Hey, whadya think Bella’s gonna say when she finds out about Jacob? I bet you fifty bucks that she attacks him.”

“It’s hard for me to think that far ahead right now,” I admitted. “Ask me after her change.”

“Sure. When does Carlisle think it’ll be over?”
“No way to tell, apparently.”
“I’ve never seen one before.”
“No, I guess not. You were Carlisle’s last.”
“Last and best, you mean!”
“Yes, that’s understood, Emmett.”
“Rose sure loves the kid.”
“I’ve noticed that. I’m grateful to her for looking after her so well while Bella’s…here,” I said, not sure how to finish the sentence.

“Ya know, I’m real sorry about that business with Rose guarding Bella and all that. It was a nightmare to see her suffer so much.”

“Yes…a nightmare. It is what Bella wanted, so I can’t hold it against Rose, especially now that things are turning out as they are. I did want to kill her there for a while, though.”

“I know, bro. I’m glad you didn’t.” He grinned and I grinned back in spite of myself.

“Esme needs some supplies, so I gotta hit the hardware store. Wanna come?”

“Thanks, Em, but no. I want to be here in case Bella wakes up.”

“Okay then, see ya later!”

“So long.”