

## 4. SWIMMING

I felt the warm water of the South Atlantic slap against my skin as I stood in the gentle surf and gazed at the scenery by the light of the nearly full moon. It was the first hour of my honeymoon, an occasion that, had I followed the typical path for a man of my era, I'd have experienced eighty-five or ninety years earlier. Now, as a married man, one hundred seven years old, give or take, I had to laugh at my status as the planet's oldest, "living" virgin, which, very likely, I was. Though the reality of it was absurd, I was no different than any man in this situation—I felt my inexperience keenly.

The new Mrs. Edward Cullen (I couldn't hear it enough!) and I had landed on Isle Esme after one long, drawn-out day. First came the wedding ceremony and the never-ending reception line, the dinner and dancing, Jacob's surprise visit and the ensuing near-brawl, two continent-hopping flights, a taxi ride through Rio de Janeiro, and the final boat trip to this idyllic, tropical island off the southern coast of Brazil.

The island was Carlisle's gift to Esme on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. That next year, Esme had traveled frequently between Calgary, Alberta—where we were living at the time—to Brazil to oversee the construction of the cottage before inviting the whole family to visit upon its completion. I'd become acquainted with its shoreline, its jungle and wildlife, the nearby reef, and some of the neighboring islands then, and had always wanted to come back. Esme was loaning it to Bella and myself as a wedding gift, and it was the perfect place for us to celebrate our nuptials privately in the sunshine.

Bella was in the cottage taking some time to herself before joining me for a late-night swim. Thirty-five minutes after leaving her there, I was still waiting... nervously...eagerly...it was hard to tell. I'd decided to give her ten more minutes before going back to check on her. Perhaps she had fallen asleep.

After forty-two minutes, seventeen seconds, I was relieved to hear Bella's soft footsteps in the sand as she approached the water. Facing out to sea, I had taken a vampire's stance—statue still—while I waited for her to join me. As she drew near, I wanted to turn around and watch her make her way down the beach and into the ocean, but I did not, as she might feel self-conscious when my nakedness was hidden by the water and hers was not, assuming that she *was* naked, of course.

"Beautiful," Bella declared, referring to the bright, almost-round moon as she took my hand.

I turned to face her then, my fingers twining through hers, my eyes drinking her in. My wife was lovely in the moonlight...dazzling. And yes, she was naked.

“It’s okay,” I told her, “But I wouldn’t use the word *beautiful*. Not with you standing here in comparison.” A low wave rolled into us, splashing tiny drops of water that glistened on her bare skin.

She placed her soft hand over my heart and an electric pulse shivered through my body. Desire welled up in me.

“I promised we would *try*,” I said, suddenly anxious. “If...if I do something wrong, if I hurt you, you must tell me at once.”

Bella stepped forward and dropped her head onto my chest.

“Don’t be afraid,” she murmured. “We belong together.”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. Her calm assurance soothed me and I felt the tension of fear yield to a different kind of tension. I drew in my breath and, before desire sidetracked me completely, grasped her hands and pulled her deeper into the warm sea until neither of us could touch the bottom. When she began treading water, I released her and ducked beneath the water’s surface.

Until now, I had seen Bella’s curves only to the edges of her clothing...sinuous collarbones disappearing behind necklines, gentle angles that nipped in at her waist, the beginnings of softly rounded hips that filled her jeans. Except for a few teasing glimpses through Alice’s eyes, this was the first time I could see how all the curves fit together. My beloved was absolutely exquisite.

The moonlight shining on the water turned Bella’s skin to alabaster, the same color as mine. I could make out the blush of contrasting pigmentation at the apex of her breasts. The flesh of her nipples looked even softer and more tender than her lips. I wanted to touch them. I wanted to skim my hands along the in-curves and out-curves of her topography. I wanted to touch her in all of her soft, tender places.

These desires, powerful as they were, did not completely quell my anxiety. I was nervous about becoming more physically intimate with my luscious bride. It still seemed far too dangerous to risk losing control with her so close to me. There were dozens of ways I could hurt her accidentally. Even now, it was enough to make me consider breaking my promise and refusing to make love until she was changed. But I didn’t want to push her into a transformation for the wrong reasons either.

I understood her need to bring our “practice sessions” to fruition, but it was easier for me to postpone—we immortals tend to take a longer view of things. I didn’t know, though, how much longer Bella could tolerate our current level of intimacy without fulfillment.

Being with her and sharing what physical contact I’d allowed these past months had been *wondrous*—beyond any physical pleasure I had known. It was right up there with drinking human blood.

It had also been trying and difficult. It was like swinging a golf club halfway to the ball, or even right down next to the ball, then stopping cold, mid-swing. It took a great deal of effort and self-discipline, and was always uncomfortable. But I’d known there was a line

beyond which I could not guarantee I wouldn't hurt Bella, and I'd been meticulous about not crossing it. She had struggled and schemed against the limits, but fortunately, I was a lot stronger than she.

Recalling Bella's impromptu, "full-body press" and "south-sliding hand" contests over the past couple of months, I had to laugh. She had given me plenty of practice at intercepting her roaming hands and peeling her body off mine. It would be so satisfying just to go with it...to complete the swing, as it were. If I were human, that is precisely what I would do with my beautiful new wife—ride our momentum through the arc and see where things led, see how it all ended.

And right there was the problem, of course. How would it end? Every time I let myself fantasize about making love with Bella, the dream ended abruptly when I sank my teeth into her throat, or her wrist, or—*God help me*—her femoral artery. That last image had become a particular obsession in my never-ending "Why you, Edward the vampire, should not make love with your human wife" arguments with myself.

Almost worse than that was the other awful ending—worse, because it had no pleasure at all associated with it. I was haunted by distressing images like squeezing my beloved's arm until it broke, like reaching to stroke her hair and cracking her skull, like entering that warm, soft place between her thighs and shattering her pelvis.

As in golf, though, the "drive" moves one around the course. (The "bases," I could hear Emmett say, correcting my lingo.) Bella had awakened my dormant human feelings, and like the others, my desire for physical intimacy was all the more powerful because it was new. Even the frightful endings I'd imagined hadn't lessened my desire. I *wanted* her.

Despite that, I'd been holding my ground pretty well until the night before our battle with the newborns, the night Bella negotiated—"extracted" is probably more accurate—our agreement that "we would try." Once I'd said those words aloud, there was no retreating, not only because I couldn't let her down, but also because my body wouldn't let me forget them. My animal-like need for Bella had been unrelenting since that day. I couldn't let on—she already had far too many weapons in her campaign to make love with me while she was still human. *Ahh!* Even now, just thinking about it sent an electrical jolt to my groin. Such an amazing sensation...powerful.

Now, after all we'd been through...all the danger and all the desire...here we were, Bella and I, swimming naked together in the sea. Part of my motivation for the swim was to warm the temperature of my skin at least to the mid-seventies. Even at seventy-five degrees, or eighty, my skin would feel cool to her, but that should prove beneficial in this hot climate.

I grasped Bella's hands and floated her toward me as I maneuvered my body beneath hers. I tucked my back against her front, elevating her slightly out of the water. I would swim and she could lie atop me and relax. It had been a tremendously eventful day for her.

The sensation was astounding...an entire five feet, four inches of Bella's bare skin molding itself to the back of my body. She wrapped her arms around my neck and laid her cheek against my right shoulder blade as I swam, an animated pool lounge. I felt her petite, round breasts pressing against my ribcage. My buttocks arched perfectly into the concave nest where her legs met her torso. The springy texture of her pubic hair tickled my skin.

I guessed that Bella had shut her eyes, as I could feel her muscles soften into me. That was good. I didn't want her to feel anxious like I did. Fleeting, I wondered whether I would be this uneasy if I were human. Perhaps so, as a virgin. Still, with the danger of injuring Bella—or worse—looming over me, I decided that our circumstances were much more difficult than the norm.

At least I escaped one worry that plagued human men when nervous...impotence. Male vampires didn't have to rely on fickle, blood-fueled erections to make love, as our petrified flesh made us naturally solid. That was more or less of an inconvenience, depending on men's fashion of the times.

I felt Bella's hips undulating slightly against me. The movement seemed entirely unconscious, possibly signaling arousal. She dipped her face into the water to kiss the back of my neck, and then let her hands wander to my shoulders and down my arms, stopping at the curve of my biceps to explore. I let my arms drift to my sides and kept us afloat by kicking my legs.

Bella continued skimming the inner curves of my elbows and down my forearms to my hands, then she laced her fingers through mine. We swam like that for a time, the warm water flowing over my body and around hers, before she continued her exploration. She released my hands and smoothed hers up the sides of my hips to my waist, then to the front of my torso, tracing the lines of muscle and rib. Her hands followed the contours of my chest—side to side, up and down—and stroked my rigid nipples, lingering there a moment. Wherever she touched me, electricity leaped from her hands, shot through my torso and settled between my legs, creating a strong pulsing sensation. I ached for her to touch me there.

And then she did...slowly, a bit uncertainly, perhaps half expecting me to pull her hands away, as I had done time after time. Not this time. I'd promised us both that I would allow this as far as was safely possible.

Bella slid down my back, eager to touch me intimately now that she had my tacit consent. I felt the slight friction of her soft breasts and stiff nipples as they dragged along my skin. I wasn't swimming now, so much as animating my limbs just enough to keep us afloat and off the sand.

Bella's hands felt warm and yielding against my cooler, marble-hard skin. Her fingers fluttered down my hips and along the outside of my thighs, then circled to the front on their upward path. The intense pleasure of that stroke, though I had imagined it often,

was utterly shocking. I gasped, gulping down saltwater I'd have to cough up later. I did not care. At all.

*Oh, my gawd!* Emmett and Jasper weren't kidding!

"A great pleasure," Jasper had said, describing the gratifications of physical love. Emmett had put it more bluntly. Now I knew this was something that could not be appreciated fully through words, or even mind reading. When she touched me there, the rest of my body—and my mind, for that matter—became completely irrelevant.

Bella passed her hands over my belly and down the sides of my hips and thighs, stroking, exploring. The anticipation of her fingers moving between my legs again became almost unbearable. She traced the inside curves of my thighs, then stroked from the base of me upward, one hand trailing the other.

"Ahh!" I groaned, feeling the deep rumble in my chest. I could no longer concentrate sufficiently to keep Bella's head above water. I kicked us toward shore and, when I could touch bottom, swung her to the front of my body and stood.

She wrapped her legs tightly around my waist. *Ah! The scent of her!* My lips sought hers and she leaned toward me eagerly. In a rush of desire, I locked her body against mine, pulling all of her into me, my lips to hers, my chest to her breasts, my waist to her inner thighs.

I wanted her *now*. My body craved to be closer, and yet closer. I walked us to the beach, our lips moving together hungrily. I tasted her scent on my tongue and remembered the ecstasy it had been to suck her dangerously delicious blood into my mouth, to feel it slide down my burning throat, so very satisfying...

It was too much. I pulled her away from my perilous teeth, clamped down my jaw, and pressed her head onto my shoulder. With an unrestrained swiftness, I snatched the towel she had hung in the tree and laid it on the soft white sand, then lowered her onto it.

I lay on my side next to her, my head propped in my hand. Her eyes swept the length of my body before returning to gaze lustfully into mine. She reached to cup her hand against my cheek, her mouth moving toward me. As our lips touched, I levered myself on top of her, hovering, but connecting each inch of her skin to an inch of mine. As excited as I was by her, she also seemed to be by me. She was panting wildly, her heart racing as fast as I'd ever heard it. It was almost more than I could manage not to bury myself in her—but I had another plan.

I had done my research on human female anatomy and sexuality. Of course, I'd studied it in medical school, but had never been much interested before I met Bella. Now I most assuredly was!

"You are so beautiful, my love," I said softly into her ear as I smoothed her hair from her face.

"So...are...you," Bella stuttered with ragged breath. She stroked my chest, caressing my shallow curves, and then raised her head, seeking my mouth. As our lips

touched, I pressed my hips against her and felt her respond in kind. *Ahh!* I pushed again, as did she. *Ahh...!*

*Wait!* I thought, one brief second before I completely lost myself.

“I love you, my darling...my wife,” I murmured, looking into Bella’s deep, liquid eyes and stroking her cheek. “Can you trust me?” *Can I trust myself?*

“Oh...Edward...yes, I...t...trust you...of...c...course...” Bella stuttered, breathless.

“I want this first time to be as easy for you as it can be, Bella. Promise me again that you will tell me *at once* if I hurt you.” Bella nodded her head dreamily.

“I have to modulate my strength to your delicious, delicate body.” I brushed my lips along her jaw line and onto her throat, an emphasis to the last three words. Then I dragged the sensitive skin of my lips along her left collar bone. “Do you promise?”

“Yes...I promise...” Bella gasped the words through panting breaths.

“Try not to hyperventilate, my love,” I chuckled.

“Mmmmm...,” was all she could manage.

For the first time, I allowed my lips to trail downward from Bella’s collarbone onto the gentle rise of her breast. I moved my lips along this smooth, silky skin that had never seen the eyes of a lover.

I laid my right ear over her pounding heart and caressed her right breast with my fingers. Such a sensuous shape and so, so soft. I traced its curve all the way around and then cupped my hand around it, a perfect fit. Her pink areola had contracted with my touch, causing her nipple to stand above it. I stroked across it with my index finger and felt Bella’s body shudder. The electrical current zinged through me and I shuddered too.

“How are you, my darling?” I asked, as I stroked her nipple again.

“F...f...fine,” she stammered. Bella seemed to be losing her power of speech. I chuckled.

I raised my head from her heart and reached over to kiss that beautiful pink petal, ever so lightly. I brushed my lips across it, back and forth. Bella moaned and rocked her pelvis against me. Not wanting to play favorites, I stroked her left breast with my fingertips, dragging my middle finger across the areola. It, too, had contracted, pushing her nipple upward. I squeezed it gently between my thumb and forefinger.

Bella gasped and then stopped breathing altogether.

“Are you all right? Did I hurt you?” I exclaimed, freezing instantly in place.

After a moment, she put her hand over mine and guided my fingers back to the place that had arrested her breath. Experimentally, I stroked her nipple again and listened to her catch her breath. I squeezed, very gently, and she gasped again. I smiled, understanding without a doubt, that she was *not* in pain. I cupped her milky-white breast in my hand and sucked on her nipple.

Bella closed her eyes and groaned throatily. It was the most exciting sound I had ever heard. I raised my fingers to her mouth and skimmed along the outside edges of her

lips. They were slightly swollen, full of blood. She raised her head and kissed me with a thrilling urgency. Pressing my lips to hers slowed down her panting. I did not want her to faint tonight.

Without permission, my hips began to move, pressing into her rhythmically. She pushed against me in the same rhythm. I knew at that moment that it would be very easy to lose my head. I did not want to hurt her.

I rolled off her onto my side.

“No... Edward...come back...please...come back...” Bella moaned, reaching for me.

*No, that was the most exciting sound I'd ever heard!*

“I'm still here, my darling,” I assured her, my voice sounding thick in my throat. Could she hear the trepidation as well?

It was easier to maintain control of myself when I was touching her than when she was touching me. It was a safer way to start. I rolled Bella onto her side facing me, drew her close, and laid my left arm beneath her head. With my free hand, I stroked her spine, moving slowly down each vertebra from the top, for once not making myself stop at her waist. At the bottom, I cradled her round buttocks in the palm of my hand, as I had longed to do many times. I became intrigued with the crease where her buttocks met her thighs and dragged a finger through it on each side.

The scent of her was indescribable. Along with the floral sweetness of her blood, swirling just under the surface of her skin, the musky aroma of human pheromones permeated the air around us. I slid my hand to her knee, cupped the back of it, and pulled her left leg toward me. She recognized my intention and wrapped her leg over my waist. A wave of her luscious scent washed over me.

When my fingers touched the inside of her right thigh, stretched out along my left leg, she shuddered deliciously, and her hands, which had been caressing my back, chest, and stomach in wonderfully distracting ways, gripped convulsively. I dragged my fingertips upwards, across her divide, and down the satiny skin of her left inner thigh. She shuddered again and moaned. When I stroked the wet V between her legs, my fingers came away drenched. Nothing in my long, long life had ever been so exciting.

Bella's lips lurched toward mine in a frenzy of desire, her hands clutching my hair. I stroked her again gently. She shuddered and rocked into me, her movements becoming more fevered. Her body latched onto mine, her left leg tightening around my waist, her arms pulling at my neck.

I remembered a lesson I had learned recently from Carlisle—the desire for blood becomes less pressing when you are focused intently on something else. I could still feel and hear Bella's blood rushing beneath her skin, especially in the erogenous areas of her body, and her heart was pumping frantically, yet my attention was so drawn to her thrilling sexual response that I thought about her blood only in passing.

I dragged a finger through her swollen labia ever so gently, stroking forward until I made contact with the most sensitive part of her body, according to my anatomy texts. I was rewarded with a deep, guttural moan. Her clitoris was easy to locate, not only because it was engorged with blood, hot and hard against my fingertip, but because of the ecstatic sounds she made when I touched her there.

She'd warned me once that if we continued kissing and touching as we had been recently, she would spontaneously combust. I remembered her comment with wry amusement. This was my attempt to give her some relief from the extraordinary sexual tension we had built over the last several months, no matter what else happened—or didn't happen—tonight.

I must have chuckled out loud, because Bella stiffened and said, "What's funny?" her voice husky in a way that made my innermost muscles contract.

"I was thinking about the night you warned me that you might spontaneously combust," I murmured, my voice gravelly.

"Ohhh..." she whispered, closing her eyes. "Touch me...again...Edward... please..."

I could not have foreseen the extreme excitement I would feel at hearing the one I love beg me to touch her. It was beyond thrilling. It was beyond beyond—and fortunately, distracting enough to help me postpone my own pressing desires.

I gently stroked her clitoris again, feeling her body tremble and heave against me. The tip of my finger established an easy rhythm, back and forth, and she began to rock her pelvis against me to the same beat, moaning softly. Her pleasure was so exciting, so captivating, that I almost forgot the other part of my plan.

From my studies, I knew most women were born with a hymen, a flap of tissue stretched fully or partially across the inside of the vagina. To me, it seemed an odd quirk of creation to "shrink-wrap" a woman in that way. Since time immemorial, it had been used to enforce the tenet that a woman must remain a virgin until marriage. It was a convention not without merit, to my mind, though it was no longer in vogue. What did seem wrong, unfair even, was that a man had no corresponding gift to give. There was no physical alteration to a man's body when he lost his virginity. Also, my reading indicated that breaking through the "shrink-wrap" could hurt rather a lot.

It was my fervent wish to cause Bella no pain. As I continued gently stroking—her moans indicating I was on the right track—I whispered softly in her ear, "Bella, my love, may I touch you inside?"

She groaned deeply, the whites of her eyes gleaming beneath her partially closed lids, and panted, "...yes...yes...please..." I exchanged my right thumb for my stroking finger and continued the motion. She panted slightly faster and I kissed her slackened lips.

It had become truly difficult to contain my excitement. I felt a growl rumble through my chest. To my surprise, the inadvertent sound did not frighten Bella. Rather, her throat made a sound akin to my growl when I slowly pressed my middle finger into the

center of her delicate folds. Her vulva was so slick that my finger slid into her readily and I felt a slight sucking sensation as her interior muscles pulled it along. The tremendous thrill of her heat, her moisture, and the sounds she made distracted me, and my thumb slowed its motion, nearly stopping altogether.

She moaned a protest and I quickly resumed the gentle rhythm, stroking the most sensitive spot on her body. I could not feel any constriction inside her, my finger moved easily, and deeply. At the deepest point, I pressed my finger toward the front side of her vagina and she tried to raise herself up to push against it.

*Ah, the G-spot.* Not at all difficult to locate, really, especially with that kind of clear response. I chuckled to myself at her exuberance. Then I spent a second worrying that my marble-like finger might bruise her if she kept up such a vigorous motion. I decided to let her be my guide. If it hurt, she would flinch, I would stop. Easy enough. More or less.

Stopping seemed to be the last thing on Bella's mind. I'd kept the cadence of my thumb's motion deliberately slow. Nothing could go wrong with slow. It gave me time to focus on her and also to keep myself in check. So far, so good.

She was open enough inside for the width of one finger. I would try two. The idea was to stretch her gently with my fingers before trying full-on intercourse. I would have more control with my hand, and one, or even two, fingers were substantially less bulky than a penis.

It was a wonder to me, hard to believe, that I was touching the inside of my beloved's body. My ice inside her fire, coexisting. It was true that the warm climate had increased my body temperature over what it was in Forks and the warm water swim had raised it even higher, though that effect was slowly wearing off. Bella seemed altogether oblivious to my temperature. Either that or my coolness felt good to her against her own heat and the heat of the night.

It was evident by the increasing pitch of Bella's moans that her excitement level was very high. I deliberately slowed the motion of my thumb to postpone her release. She compensated by moving her hips faster against me. I was sure she was operating entirely on instinct at this point, her mind completely out of the process. As it should be. I retracted my finger from inside her and she moaned a protest. It was amazing how easily one could translate grunts and moans to a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" signal.

I pressed my fourth finger and little finger together, forming a tall triangular shape, and gently slid the two back inside her.

"Ahh!" We moaned in harmony as my fingers re-entered her body. The inside heat of her was more than exciting; it was magnetic. I wanted to crawl in.

Instead, I brushed my lips along the outside contour of her right breast. Her nipples were scarlet now, hard and tight. I dragged my tongue from the base of her breast to her nipple and licked it impulsively.

"Ohhh..." Bella cried, so I did it again, then latched on with my lips and began to suckle like a child. A low, humming sound resonated in her chest.

The deeper my two fingers moved inside my beloved, the tighter the space became. I could feel the constricting ring of her hymen now. I pressed only until I felt significant resistance, then pulled back, then pressed in again. Bella didn't express any discomfort in her heightened state of arousal, as she thrust herself onto my fingers. I let her determine the speed and the depth by the movement of her hips. My thumb stopped sliding against her clitoris, as I sensed she was close to climax. She groaned quietly, but didn't slow her thrusting motions. After perhaps half a minute, I felt my fingers slide deeper into her and their increasing girth became tightly bound. Bella's motion didn't pause even slightly. She kept pressing herself onto my fingers until I felt the tightness inside her suddenly give way. She had torn, I was certain.

"Oh!" she exclaimed sharply, but her hips kept moving. I slipped my thumb back into its now familiar nook and resumed my gentle stroking. Bella didn't seem to be experiencing any pain—or perhaps she didn't care about it. Her concentration was focused now on only one thing. Even I, who had never had an experience such as this before, recognized her impending release.

I removed my fingers from inside her and replaced them with my index and third fingers together, the middle finger slightly crossed over the first. This triangle was both taller and wider than the last and I pressed again between her drenched inner lips. She gasped as my fingers slid into her, as did I.

It was a magnificent moment to be a vampire. My self-control was intact. It was easier than I had expected, because I was so caught up in the thrill of Bella's sexual arousal. That balanced the animalistic part of me that wanted to take her, devour her, and to hell with the consequences.

It was also a benefit to be able to follow several trains of thought and perform these extremely sensitive physical manipulations all at once. My brain still had time to perceive every nuance of Bella's changing scent, to feel each minute muscle contraction inside her, to appreciate every inch of her enticing body, and still to anticipate how it would feel to have the most sensitive part of my body surrounded and hugged by her velvet recesses.

As my largest fingers moved inside Bella, slightly stretching the space, and my thumb maintained its steady rhythm across her clitoris, her entire body suddenly became rigid. She gulped air, then stopped breathing altogether. I froze. *Had I hurt her?* Then I felt the first tremors of an interior muscle spasm shake her from the inside out.

"Oh, oh, oh..." she cried, as her vagina constricted around my fingers in spasms, her orgasm sucking my fingers deeper inside of her. I pressed against her G-spot and was rewarded with another low, guttural moan.

Time stood still while I took in every subtle movement of her body, her muscles twitching involuntarily, the changes in her heart rate, each alteration in her breath. Gradually, her spasms slowed and then Bella relaxed altogether, her body sagging against me as her heart rate dropped. I hugged her close to my chest and kissed her forehead. Her eyes were closed.

“I love you, Isabella Swan Cullen,” I murmured, marveling at the profound connection I felt with this fearless, responsive woman, my beloved wife. How happy I was that I had won her, that she was mine!

My fingers were still inside her as I stroked the back of her head and buried my nose in her hair, inhaling her scent deeply. Once or twice she moved her pelvis on my fingers and moaned softly. I pressed against her G-spot experimentally and she pushed back forcefully. That must be a highly pleasurable sensation. I smiled.

Eventually, all her movements stopped and she lay limply against me. I slowly retracted my fingers. She grunted with displeasure, but seemed otherwise to have dozed off in my arms. I began singing her lullaby softly, rocking back and forth. This was the closest thing to heaven that my mind could conceive, holding my love close as she recovered from what was, by all indications, a satisfying experience. She deserved it. I knew the sexual tension had been frustratingly difficult for her these last few weeks. Several times, I’d considered touching her in this way to offer her some relief. But a deeply ingrained, old-fashioned propriety, along with self-doubt, and a modicum of fear, held me back. I noticed now that all my anxiety was gone.

Now that the waiting was behind us, I was glad we hadn’t gotten more physical before our wedding. It was a glorious gift to be holding my *wife* in my arms after our first sexual experience. Neither of us had been through anything like this before. It was a magnificent way to begin our life together, with so much more to be explored. I couldn’t wait.

It was then that I first detected the scent of Bella’s blood. Surely my mind had registered it immediately, but I was so powerfully distracted that the information hadn’t risen to a conscious level. With her dozing in my arms and my being loathe to disturb her, I lifted my hand and examined my fingers. Under the bright moon, I could easily detect traces of blood.

That might have distressed me in a number of ways, but instead, I was intrigued. The scent was as tempting as ever, more so—if that were possible—mixed with the musky scent of her sexual arousal. Impulsively, I wrapped my lips around my index finger and sucked it clean.

*Ohhhhhh...!* Stunning. Rapturous.

I recognized immediately the recklessness of my action. I wanted more! My throat burned and my stomach ached for it. Venom streamed into my mouth and my muscles coiled in anticipation. What an abomination I was!

Despite her exhaustion and the balmy atmosphere of the night air, Bella felt my body tense and her eyes popped open.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, instantly alert.

Her voice brought me back to myself. I exhaled heavily.

“It’s nothing, my darling.” I *wasn’t* going to let my monstrous cravings ruin this moment for her. “Just relax. Sleep if you wish.”

“No, no, what is it?” she demanded, suddenly wide awake and distraught. “Tell me, Edward! Did I do something wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Bella. Relax, please. It’s just a bit of blood.”

“Oh!” she cried, removing her leg from my waist and rolling away from me into the sand.

“It’s okay, darling, it’s okay. Everything’s fine,” I tried to reassure her. Perhaps she knew better.

She jumped up and hurried through the sand back to the cottage. A few moments later, I heard the sound of water splashing in the shower.

I’d been exposed to Bella’s blood a number of times and had discovered that I could resist the cravings for it more easily now than in the past. Bella’s blood *was* Bella and I could no more drink her blood than I could eat her flesh. That did not mean I didn’t still thirst for her blood—I did!—or that her flavor no longer tempted me. Of course it did! With Bella at a safe distance, I put my middle finger to my mouth and licked it clean.

*Ahh!* Just as potent, as intoxicating! It was glorious. I could not stop myself from licking my fourth and fifth fingers and then my thumb. Her flavor was sweetly floral, but more complex now with that musky lavender overtone. Interesting. No, better than interesting. Far better, actually.

My vampire mind inevitably latched onto the idea that somehow I might enjoy the taste of Bella’s blood in a limited way without harming her. That would be miraculous. I filed the thought away for future examination. I was changing. I *had* changed tremendously. Who knew what, ultimately, I might be capable of?

It was an intriguing thought. I stood up, shook the sand from the towel, wrapped it around my waist, and collected my clothes hanging from the palm tree. My love awaited.