50. FINAL DAYS

The days were rolling by faster, or so it seemed. On Christmas morning, we gave Renesmee her gifts, the locket from Bella with a tiny picture of the three of us together inside, and a miniature MP3 player that I’d been filling with music for a few weeks—everything I loved from my CD collection.

We spent the morning and part of the afternoon at Charlie’s house, where Sue had cooked a huge spread of food and the house was stuffed to overflowing with Jacob and his pack, plus Sam and Emily. It seemed like Billy should be there, but the wolves had spent Christmas Eve Day at his house along with Embry’s mother—there was some nice gossip—and Jacob’s twin sisters. Apparently, Billy and Charlie hadn’t patched up their friendship quite enough to make a shared family event comfortable—and neither of them had a big enough house anyway. Maybe next year we could host the whole crowd at our house. It was certainly big enough.

Where’s Billy? Renesmee asked after we arrived.

“He has guests at his own house,” I told her. “Do you want to visit him tomorrow?” She nodded and I hugged her, trying to ignore the “promise” bracelet Jacob had made for her. It was soft, stranded leather, crafted into a wide braid. When I saw it, I had to make an effort to keep my mouth shut. It hardly felt appropriate to be promising my three-and-a-half-month-old daughter to a grown man. Renesmee loved the bracelet, though, and Bella was fine with it, so I kept my thoughts to myself…for the time being.

Charlie was excited about the sonar system I ordered for his fishing boat. He was happy all morning reading the manuals and interacting with Renesmee, who was in hog heaven herself with Jacob’s pack giving her lots of attention. She kept holding up one of the ear buds to her music player for one or another of them to listen to a song with her. She also had developed a fondness for “Aunt Emily,” who brought her a small plate of miniature sugar cookies to take home. Renesmee had climbed into Emily’s lap and kissed her on the cheek. If she was going to eat cookies, Bella insisted that she eat a little Christmas dinner too…baked salmon, which surprisingly, Renesmee liked, some green beans, and sweet potatoes. There wasn’t room for everybody at Charlie’s kitchen table, so we scattered ourselves around on the living room couch and the floor, which made the day an informal event. Charlie didn’t seem to notice that Bella and I didn’t eat, or perhaps he did notice and just decided not to mention it. It was our norm, after all.

Christmas Day was short in the Pacific Northwest, with dawn occurring just before 8:00 a.m. and sunset just before 5:00 p.m., though with the low-hanging clouds and mist, the light remained dusky gray all day. Bella, Renesmee, Jacob, and I left Charlie’s at two o’clock so that we’d have time to hunt before dark.
Before we arrived home, I caught some angry thoughts originating from inside the house and as we grew closer, I realized that a heated argument was taking place. Bella and I looked at each other and hurried toward the back door with Jacob following behind, his eyes and ears on high alert. Something was wrong.

“Alistair is gone,” I told Bella as I listened to Eleazar’s thoughts. He was considering how much of the discord was caused by Renesmee’s absence.

...the Irish and the nomads disappear all day, the Englishman sneak off, and now this. She is gifted, that child.

Amun was clearly in a rage when we entered. As I had predicted, he was trying to convince Benjamin and Tia to leave before the Volturi arrived. Benjamin had refused.

“Amun, if you want to go, no one is forcing you to stay,” my father said quietly.

“You’re stealing half my coven, Carlisle!” Amun was angry and overwrought. “Is that why you called me here? To steal from me?”

Benjamin was annoyed at Amun’s presumption of control over him. “Yes, Carlisle picked a fight with the Volturi, endangered his whole family, just to lure me here to my death,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Be reasonable, Amun. I’m committed to do the right thing here—I’m not joining any other coven. You can do whatever you want, of course, as Carlisle has pointed out.”

Amun was rigid with fury. “This won’t end well. Alistair was the only sane one here. We should all be running.”

“Think of who you’re calling sane,” Tia said quietly.

“We’re all going to be slaughtered!” screeched Amun. Everyone in the room looked at each other, wondering whether it was true and what they should do about it.

“It’s not going to come to a fight,” Carlisle asserted.

“You say!”

“If it does, you can always switch sides, Amun. I’m sure the Volturi will appreciate your help.”

Amun looked at Carlisle with scorn. “Perhaps that is the answer.”

Carlisle spoke softly. “I wouldn’t hold that against you, Amun. We have been friends for a long time, but I would never ask you to die for me.”

Amun calmed down a little. “But you’re taking my Benjamin down with you.”

Carlisle touched Amun’s shoulder, but the latter shook it off, still angry.

“I’ll stay, Carlisle, but it might be to your detriment. I will join them if that’s the road to survival. You’re all fools to think that you can defy the Volturi.”

Amun looked at Bella and Renesmee. We had taken a position next to Carlisle in the center of the group. Finally, he calmed down enough to consider his audience and then said irritably, “I will witness that the child has grown. That’s nothing but the truth. Anyone would see that.” Renesmee was looking directly at Amun, seeming puzzled. I couldn’t get a lock on her thoughts, though.

“That’s all we’ve ever asked,” replied Carlisle.
“But not all that you are getting, it seems,” Amun continued to complain. Turning to Benjamin, he said bitterly, “I gave you life. You’re wasting it.”

Benjamin looked coldly at his vampire creator, angrier than he’d ever been, I’d wager. “It’s a pity you couldn’t replace my will with your own in the process; perhaps then you would have been satisfied with me.”

Amun turned away sharply and left the house, Kebi following a few steps behind. “He’s not leaving,” I told Bella quietly, “but he’ll be keeping his distance even more from now on. He wasn’t bluffing when he spoke of joining the Volturi.”

“Why did Alistair go?” Bella murmured. “No one can be positive; he didn’t leave a note. From his mutterings, it’s been clear that he thinks a fight is inevitable. Despite his demeanor, he actually does care too much for Carlisle to stand with the Volturi. I suppose he decided the danger was too much.” I couldn’t know for sure since we’d been gone when Alistair decamped.

Everybody had been listening to our conversation, so Eleazar corrected me loud enough for everyone to hear. “From the sound of his mumblings, it was a bit more than that. We haven’t spoken much of the Volturi agenda, but Alistair worried that no matter how decisively we can prove your innocence, the Volturi will not listen. He thinks they will find an excuse to achieve their goals here.”

No one, except for the Romanians, wanted to believe that the Volturi’s purpose was less than noble. We had relied on them for so long to be the arbiters of justice for our kind. Most of those present assumed that if we explained to the Volturi about Renesmee, they would leave peaceably. But each coven started conversing spontaneously in low tones about what they would do in case a battle broke out.

“I’m thinking the time has come to fight,” I heard Vladimir say to Stefan. “How can you imagine we’ll ever find a better force to stand with? Another chance this good?”

“Nothing is impossible. Maybe someday—”

“We’ve been waiting for fifteen hundred years, Stefan. And they’ve only gotten stronger with the years. If the Volturi win this conflict, they will leave with more power than they came with. With every conquest they add to their strengths.” Vladimir was openly staring at Bella now. “Think of what that newborn alone could give them,”—he raised his chin toward her—“and she is barely discovering her gifts. And the earth-mover.” Vladimir gestured toward Benjamin, who instantly tensed. “With their witch twins, they have no need of the illusionist or the fire touch.” He looked openly at Zafrina and Kate.

Stefan took up the analysis by looking directly at me. “Nor is the mind reader exactly necessary. But I see your point. Indeed, they will gain much if they win.”

“More than we can afford to have them gain, wouldn’t you agree?” Stefan sighed. “I think I must agree. And that means…”

“That we must stand against them while there is still hope,” Vladimir finished. The two-headed puppet was speaking from both its mouths.

“So we fight,” Stefan concluded.
“We fight,” Vladimir concurred.

Nearly everyone in the room suddenly felt compelled to declare their loyalties now that Amun and the Romanians had done so and made the possibility of battle seem more real than it had been before.

“We will fight, too,” Tia promised. “We believe the Volturi will overstep their authority. We have no wish to belong to them.” They will never get my Benjamin if I have anything to do with it, she thought fiercely.

Benjamin was amused by everyone talking about him like he wasn’t there. He grinned and tilted his head in the direction of the Romanians. “Apparently, I’m a hot commodity. It appears I have to win the right to be free.”

Garrett, who was fighting against the British in the American Revolutionary War when he was changed, seemed pleased with the turn the discussion had taken. He slapped Benjamin on the back and said heartily, “This won’t be the first time I’ve fought to keep myself from a king’s rule. Here’s to freedom from oppression.”

“We stand with Carlisle,” Tanya announced. “And we fight with him.”

“We have not decided,” said Peter looking down at his mate, but I could see that Charlotte had. She wanted to leave—the sooner the better. Peter felt torn between her wishes and his loyalty to the family of his brother, Jasper. So that’s why Alice felt uneasy about Charlotte, I thought.

The remaining nomads, Mary and Randall, each declared themselves to be undecided too.

“The packs will fight with the Cullens,” Jacob announced, having conferred earlier with Sam. Jacob could do nothing else and Sam would stand by Jacob. “We’re not afraid of vampires,” he added smugly.

“Children,” Peter muttered, though in our world, Peter wasn’t all that old himself.

“Infants,” Randall amended.

Maggie stepped boldly forward. “Well, I’m in, too. I know truth is on Carlisle’s side. I can’t ignore that,” she said in spite of Siobhan’s obvious disapproval. The coven leader was not prepared to lose her newest member.

“I don’t want this to come to a fight,” Siobhan told Carlisle, worry marking her smooth face.

“Nor do I, Siobhan. You know that’s the last thing I want.” I heard the unspoken exchange between them. Then Carlisle smiled at her. “Perhaps you should concentrate on keeping it peaceful.”

“You know that won’t help,” Siobhan countered.

“It couldn’t hurt.”

Siobhan rolled her eyes. “Shall I visualize the outcome I desire?” she asked with heavy sarcasm.

Carlisle grinned widely. “If you don’t mind.”

Siobhan pulled Maggie back to her side. “Then there is no need for my coven to
declare itself, is there? Since there is no possibility of a fight.” She didn’t believe it, but I could see that she would put in her order to the universe, nevertheless.

Only the Amazons remained silent. They would fight, of course; it was understood. That’s who they were.

It was still Christmas Day and so far, it had been a typical American holiday. We’d had our reunion with Charlie, watched a gang of overgrown boys stuff themselves full of Christmas dinner, and returned home to a family feud in our living room. Practically Norman Rockwell.

In keeping with tradition, Bella and I decided to stuff ourselves too—we would hunt. Renesmee wasn’t thirsty after eating her salmon and cookies, but she wanted to come along and Jacob decided to join us.

“Stupid leeches,” he complained when we got to the river. “Think they’re so superior.”

“They’ll be shocked when the infants save their superior lives, won’t they?” I asked. The wolves had certainly “saved our bacon” on more than one occasion.

Jacob gave me a friendly punch on the shoulder. “Hell yeah, they will.” We smiled knowingly at each other.

Jacob and Renesmee wandered off a little ways, while Bella and I took down some elk. She was drinking from a large cow’s neck when, suddenly, she went rigid and dropped the half-drained beast to the ground. It landed with a dull thump. Bella stood staring dumbly at her hands. I leaped to her side instantly, scanning the forest for danger.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly.

“Renesmee.”

“She’s just through those trees. I can hear both her thoughts and Jacob’s. She’s fine.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Bella said. “I was thinking about my shield—you really think it’s worth something, that it will help somehow. I know the others are hoping that I’ll be able to shield Zafrina and Benjamin, even if I can only keep it up for a few seconds at a time. What if that’s a mistake? What if your trust in me is the reason that we fail?” Bella’s voice was flying into higher and higher registers in her agitation.

“Bella, what brought this on? Of course, it’s wonderful that you can protect yourself, but you’re not responsible for saving anyone. Don’t distress yourself needlessly.”

“But what if I can’t protect anything?” Bella agonized. “This thing I do, it’s faulty, it’s erratic! There’s no rhyme or reason to it. Maybe it will do nothing against Alec at all.”

“Shh,” I soothed. “Don’t panic. And don’t worry about Alec. What he does is no different than what Jane or Zafrina does. It’s just an illusion—he can’t get inside your head any more than I can.”

“But Renesmee does!” Bella cried. “It seemed so natural, I never questioned it before. It’s always been just part of who she is. But she puts her thoughts right into my head just like she does with everyone else. My shield has holes, Edward!” Bella was shaking
with emotion and fear.
I bit my lip and thought for a moment about how to say what I was thinking. I wasn’t disturbed at all by her concerns. Bella stared at me.
“You thought of this a long time ago, didn’t you?” she accused. I held back my smile. Bella was upset and I didn’t want her to feel that I was taking her worries lightly.
“The first time she touched you,” I admitted.
“And this doesn’t bother you? You don’t see it as a problem?”
“I have two theories, one more likely than the other.”
“Give me the least likely first.”
“Well, she’s your daughter,” I told her. “Genetically half you. I used to tease you about how your mind was on a different frequency than the rest of ours. Perhaps she runs on the same.”
Bella shook her head slowly. This didn’t gibe with her sense of things. “But you hear her mind just fine. Everyone hears her mind. And what if Alec runs on a different frequency? What if—?”
I silenced her mounting panic with a finger to her lips. “I’ve considered that. Which is why I think this next theory is much more likely.”
Bella remained tense, waiting.
“Do you remember what Carlisle said to me about her, right after she showed you that first memory?”
She did. “He said, ‘It’s an interesting twist. Like she’s doing the exact opposite of what you can.’”
“Yes. And so I wondered. Maybe she took your talent and flipped it, too.”
She thought about that.
“You keep everyone out,” I started to say.
“And no one keeps her out?” Bella finished with a question.
“That’s my theory. And if she can get into your head, I doubt there’s a shield on the planet who could keep her at bay. That will help. From what we’ve seen, no one can doubt the truth of her thoughts once they’ve allowed her to show them. And I think no one can keep her from showing them, if she gets close enough. If Aro allows her to explain…”
I saw Bella shudder at the thought.
“Well, at least there’s nothing that can stop him from seeing the truth,” I said as I stepped around her and began massaging her shoulders.
“But is the truth enough to stop him?”
I still had faith that Aro cared about the Volturi’s reputation for justice. And I thought that with so many witnesses present to observe our interaction with them that they would back down—surely. But I couldn’t say for certain, so I said nothing, just bent down and kissed Bella on the back of her neck.
Two days later, Bella asked if she could borrow my Volvo.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said smiling. “Are you?”
“I need to run some errands today.”
“This morning?”
“No, after lunch. Can you look after Renesmee?”
“Of course,” I replied, bending down to kiss her so I wouldn’t be tempted to ask questions.

Bella went about her usual morning routine, practicing her fighting skills, though she seemed to be making a lot of mistakes that I hadn’t seen since she started. Her concentration must be off with the deadline approaching. We didn’t know when exactly the Volturi were coming. Alice had said it was the day the first snow sticks to the ground. I was guessing we had two more days. Carlisle and I planned to camp out in the meadow to draw the Volturi to our baseball field, far away from Forks and La Push. We assumed that Demetri would be tracking either Carlisle’s scent or mine, both of which he knew.

While Nessie was drinking her lunch, Bella came through the kitchen wearing a long trench coat and boots, tres chic. I could envision her with a Jacqueline Kennedy backcombed flip from the early 1960s, wearing large, round sunglasses and holding driving gloves in her hand. I had seen the fashion stars of four generations and the styles varied over time, but chic was chic.

“Headed out?” I asked as casually as I could manage.
“Yes, a few last-minute things…,” she said breezily.
I gave her a crooked smile. “Hurry back to me.”
“Always,” she replied and then turned to go.

I pulled Renesmee closer to my chest more for my own comfort than for hers. I knew Bella was hiding something from me, but I’d decided not to ask questions because she obviously didn’t want me to know. I had no clear idea of what it might be, but I’d noticed that during the past week she seemed less hopeful than she had before that. Perhaps she was just worried that she wasn’t learning to control her shield quickly enough. Whatever it was, I could tell that she was frightened. In truth, I was frightened too.

The week before when Bella had taken off in the car, she stayed away so long and came back so sad that I thought about checking the odometer on the Volvo to get an idea of where she might have driven. But I didn’t.

She had bought Renesmee an antique locket that day, but there are no antique stores in Forks. She must have gone to Port Angeles or possibly all the way to Seattle. I did my best not to think about it. If I put two and two together, then perhaps I would figure out something that I was not supposed to know. And maybe I wasn’t supposed to know because Aro could read my mind, but not Bella’s. Did it have something to do with Alice? Maybe Alice needed Bella to handle some task for her, like ship something she had left behind to her secret address. I didn’t want to know. Bella would tell me when she was
ready—or when it was safe.

“What would you like to do this afternoon, my little darling?” I asked my daughter.

_Daddy, what’s wrong with Momma?_

“What do you mean?”

_Momma seems excited but not a happy way._ Nessie showed me a picture of the expression Bella had had on her face when she left.

What do you say to a child about a vendetta against her family that could get her parents killed? Or even she herself? I decided to focus on a smaller issue.

“Momma is worried that everybody is counting on her too much and that she might not be able to do what we want her to do.”

_Do what?_

“Use her shield when the Italian vampires visit.”

_You mean like keep Kate from buzzing you?_

Such a pleasant way to refer to electrocution! I was glad that I’d been able to hide my reactions as much as I had. I smiled at my remarkable child.

“Yes, just like that. They have somebody who can make us see pictures like Zafrina does and we don’t want to see their pictures.”

_Oh._

“It’s not for you to worry about, though. Momma and Daddy won’t let anything bad happen to you. No buzzing and no scary pictures for Renesmee. Agreed?”

_Okay._

“Okay.”

_Daddy?_

“Yes, Nessie?”

_Is Aunt Alice coming back to make my party? And Uncle Jasper to run the pool?_

“I hope so, darling. Let’s both hope for that together, okay?”

“Oh,” she replied, but I felt her sadness when she wrapped her arms around my neck and laid her head on my shoulder.

I rubbed her back and hummed her song. When it was finished, I said to her, “Nana and Popop would love to hear your story, the one you told Carmen and Zafrina and everyone so they would know you. Would you like to tell your story to them?”

_Yes, okay._ She nodded.

“Let’s go find them.”

They were enchanted, of course, like everyone, and smiled and chuckled at all the right spots. When she finished, one hand on each of their faces, Renesmee looked at them for their reactions.

“That was wonderful, Nessie!” Esme exclaimed, winking at me. She was thinking about the picture of me “wearing” a pillow.

“You did a good job, Renesmee,” Carlisle said. “And you know, my dear, that nothing was your fault. Nothing at all. In fact, you are the one who convinced everybody to
stay and help us, so I think that you are the hero of the story.”

Renesmee looked at him with big eyes. Hero!

To me, Carlisle thought, I’m so sorry that you had to go through that birth alone. I hadn’t comprehended the scope of Bella’s injuries. But I’m more proud of you than I can say.

I gave him half a smile, bowed my head, and pulled Renesmee closer. We had survived that threat and were facing a new one now.

To change the subject, I asked, “Renesmee, what did you think about Vladimir and Stefan, the old men with the papery skin? Emmett said you talked to them.”

She put her hand on my cheek and showed me a picture of the Romanians. They didn’t seem frightening to her. Rather more fascinating.

_They have good stories_, Renesmee thought, showing me a picture of a face with an eyeball dangling from its socket. Nice.

“You like their stories,” I repeated for my parents’ benefit.

She nodded. _And I like their witch’s costumes._

“You like their witch’s costumes.”

She nodded again and her grandparents smiled.

It was a treat to have a whole afternoon alone with Renesmee. It would be one of my last chances to spend time with her. Together, we walked down to the river, which was a salmon spawning route. Though most of the Chinook salmon had already made their run up the river for this season, there were still a few hanging around. They swam upstream slowly, often staying in one place for long periods of time to re-acclimate to fresh water.

“Do you want to see how a bear catches its dinner?” I asked Renesmee.

_Yes, yes!_ She clapped her hands excitedly. Renesmee had learned that unless she had a specific picture she wanted to show me that she didn’t have to touch my face to communicate. It was our special shortcut.

I plunged my arm into the frigid water and pulled out a thirty-pound salmon kicking and flipping in my hand. She got very excited as she watched it whipping powerfully back and forth. I put it back in the water so she could try. Though she was fast enough to catch a salmon, her hands were too small to get a good grip on it without hurting it. I caught another one and let her hold it with me. They’re beautiful creatures, really, and grow amazingly large. This one was just over thirty-inches long. I explained to her how salmon are born in streams and then swim to the ocean.

“When they are old enough to have their own babies, they remember where they were born and swim backwards up the rivers and streams to get there.”

_Like you and Momma came here to have me?_”

“Just like that except that we didn’t have to swim backwards up the river.”

We both laughed.

Bella was gone all afternoon and into the evening. She must have driven to Seattle, but I tried not to think about it. Renesmee grew tired, so I decided to take her to the cottage.
and put her to bed, rather than wait for Bella at the main house. By the time she got home, Nessie was well asleep.

I was standing in the living room of the cottage when I heard the air whooshing around Bella at her approach. I turned toward the front door as she let herself in. Renesmee would have said that she looked “excited but not a happy way.” *Agitated* was probably the correct word, overlaid with sadness.

“I missed you, my darling!” I exclaimed, meeting her at the door with an embrace. She laid her head against my chest. “I missed you too,” she replied, not looking up.

“Terribly.” A few minutes passed in silence and then she said, “I want to check on Renesmee and say goodnight.”

“She’s been down for a couple of hours.”

“I’ll be quiet.”

I put my arm around my wife and escorted her to Nessie’s room. I couldn’t bear to let go of her, so I followed her in and we looked down at our baby’s puckered lips and the drops of sweat at her hairline. Bella folded the comforter halfway down and whispered, “She runs so hot.” Then she blew Nessie a kiss and I led her to our room. “I’ll just go hang up my coat,” she said when we reached the bedroom. She darted into her closet. When she emerged, she was once again wearing lacy undergarments, a pink bra and panties set, and nothing else.

“Beautiful…” I murmured, eyeing her up and down. “Come lie down with me.” I reached for her hand and pulled her toward the bed. Quick as lightening, her fingers flicked open the buttons of my shirt and pushed it off my shoulders onto the floor. Then she lay down and I curled myself around her back, my knees tucked into the backs of her knees, my arm around her waist. I sang softly until her tension eased and her body relaxed into mine.

“Sometimes I think it would be nice to fall asleep together. To escape from reality and meet up in our dreams,” I mused.

“I had that same thought recently,” Bella replied. “I was feeling envious that Renesmee was sleeping with her head on my shoulder.”

“I spent many a night with you like this, listening to you breathe, smelling your sweet scent, and hearing you talk.”

“And now, you can’t get inside my head when I sleeptalk, since I don’t do it anymore.”

“I do rather miss that,” I admitted, brushing her hair aside and kissing the back of her neck. “It was always interesting. And I liked it when you said my name.”

“Edward, I can’t stand the thought of losing you,” she burst out.

“You won’t lose me, love. I’ll be with you always.”

I kissed the side of her neck and smoothed my lips slowly down to her shoulder, and she said no more about it.