When Bella said those fateful words, I immediately returned my attention to the opposite side of the clearing and heard Chelsea’s frustration.

*What is this? Something’s wrong, I don’t…OOPH…nothing…OOOOPH…still nothing. What do I do?*

“Chelsea is trying to break our bindings, but she can’t find them,” I told my family. “She can’t feel us here…” *Could it be? “Are you doing that?”* I asked Bella in surprise. She smiled tightly. “I am all over this.”

*If Bella can do that, then we can…*

PHFFT…

*Oh no! I reached reflexively for my father, but he was…oblivious. What?*

“Carlisle? Are you all right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Jane,” I told him. Jane had aimed her torturous talent directly at Carlisle. Someone had given her the go-ahead. But the three ancients were still huddled together holding hands. It didn’t look like anything had changed, but the guard was starting their attack.

PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…PHFT…

*Twelve more shots from Jane! I looked around at our fighters. Nothing? Nobody hurt? “Incredible,” I said. It was the only word I could get out of my mouth. Talk about shock and awe! How long can Bella keep this up?*

“Why aren’t they waiting for the decision?” Tanya asked angrily.

“Normal procedure,” I told her. Eleazar had given me the Volturi’s whole game book. “They usually incapacitate those on trial so they can’t escape.”

I glanced at Bella and saw her staring down an irate Jane. And then my wife…smiled! Bella was taunting Jane! I wanted to mimic Emmett by punching the air and yelling *Whoo hoo!* I wanted to throw my arms around her and tell her how phenomenal she was! I wanted to… *Head in the game, Edward,* I chided myself.

*PFFT!*

I flinched again when Jane shot her evil ray at my wife, even though I knew she couldn’t hurt Bella and with Bella’s shield working so well, she couldn’t hurt the rest of us either. Bella was grinning a wide, open-mouthed grin. Jane shrieked in frustration, which caused the whole guard to flinch. Baby Jane was throwing a tantrum! She crouched to spring at Bella, but Alec grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

*Let me take care of this, sister,* Alec thought smugly.

The Romanians began to gloat. “I told you this was our time,” Vladimir said.
“Just look at the witch’s face,” Stefan laughed.

SSSSSS...

Alec took over, sending his disabling mist across the gap toward us. I realized now why Aro had brought his guard forward fifty yards. Several of his star talents couldn’t project much further than that—including Jane and Alec. They had to be within striking distance to be effective. Something to remember for the future, perhaps. That knowledge wouldn’t help us today.

“Are you okay?” Bella asked desperately, clutching my hand.

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Is Alec trying?”

I nodded. “His gift is slower than Jane’s. It creeps. It will touch us in a few seconds.”

We stood silently watching a faint haze move across the snow. Benjamin decided to experiment. He stirred the air in the clearing in an attempt to blow it away. Snow flurries showed us where the wind was moving, but the haze remained unaffected. It continued moving toward us with no hesitation, though whirlwinds of snow filled the air.

Benjamin tried something else. The earth beneath our feet began to tremble and as we watched, a great, long crack tore across the clearing, separating us from our foes by a narrow, but deep gorge. The ancients were startled from their huddle and turned to watch Benjamin’s magic. Aro and Caius, like the rest of us, were wide-eyed in wonderment, though Marcus remained unmoved, like the empty shell that he was.

As the haze approached the gap, everyone stood transfixed waiting to see what would happen. Benjamin hoped that gravity might suck it into the earth. He increased the wind’s speed, throwing more snow into the air, but neither the wind nor the crack in the earth affected the haze. It moved relentlessly forward.

Jane smiled at Benjamin’s vain efforts to counteract Alec’s gift and waited for the anesthesia to take hold of us. But when the haze reached a line three feet in front of Carlisle and me, it suddenly altered its course and floated up the outside of Bella’s shield. The shield was a dome arcing over our heads and hugging the ground along its bottom edge. As the haze climbed upward and outward, the vast size of the dome became outlined in the air and everyone—on both sides of the crack in the earth—gaped in shock.

“Well done, Bella!” Benjamin cheered, and then other voices rose in exultation. I had no idea that Bella had achieved this level of control! It was nothing short of phenomenal, though truly, Bella had been nothing but phenomenal in every aspect of vampire life. She was a natural.

Bella grinned with glee and her confidence cheered us all immensely. We did have a chance! With Bella’s astonishing talent, we had more than a chance. Maybe this was what Garrett meant when he said we had abilities on our side that the Volturi didn’t know of. Could Bella have been shielding Garrett from Kate’s powerful sting? It seemed impossible.
Then I realized with a start that this is why Bella believed she would die today. Now that the guard had seen what she could do, Bella would be their number one target. She had disabled all of their advantages. They would have to destroy her first to have any hope of defeating us.

“I’m going to have to concentrate,” Bella whispered to me. “When it comes to hand to hand, it’s going to be harder to keep the shield around the right people.” *Can she do that?*
I was thrilled and amazed at her new confidence.

“I’ll keep them off you,” I promised.

“No,” she replied firmly. “You *have* to get to Demetri. Zafrina will keep them away from me.”

She was right. The mind reader *must* destroy the tracker. Not only would it be my gift to Alice, but now it also meant survival for Jacob and Renesmee. Our legacy.

Zafrina nodded her agreement. “No one will touch this young one.” I could trust Zafrina to keep her word.

“I’d go after Jane and Alec myself, but I can do more good here,” Bella added. Absolutely true. Bella’s fighting skills were still primitive compared to her talent as a shield.

“Jane’s mine,” Kate snarled. “She needs a taste of her own medicine.”

“And Alec owes me many lives, but I will settle for his,” Vladimir growled from the back. “He’s mine.” No doubt Stefan would assist him.

*Can the Romanians still fight?* I wondered. No matter. Without his power, Alec wouldn’t be much of a challenge for the ancients.

“I just want Caius,” Tanya declared, her rage now channeled productively.

“I’m taking Felix,” Emmett announced and Rosalie followed with “I’ve got Chelsea.”

“I’ll put Marcus out of his misery,” Garrett volunteered. “Somebody’s got to.” I agreed. Though Marcus would be harmless without his brothers, it was clear that Aro had forced him to hang around for far too long.

“I can handle Corin,” Esme said. Though Esme was not much of a fighter—more because it went against her nature than because she had no skill—Corin would have had even less fighting experience. She had avoided fights for her entire vampire life by shining her “happiness rays” on any potential combatant.

Carlisle was wondering whether he could get to Aro directly or if he would have to attack Renata first. Then he wondered if attacking Renata was even possible with her ability to divert one’s intention.

*I know!* If Bella put her shield between Aro and Renata, letting Aro inside and keeping Renata out, then Carlisle could battle Aro on equal footing. He was likely to win, since Aro hadn’t had to fight for centuries—not since the battle with the Romanians. No doubt Eleazar would be happy to assist in Aro’s destruction.
Before I could tell Carlisle or Bella my idea, our plans and declarations were interrupted by Aro, who watched as the haze Alec had sent our way floated harmlessly over Bella’s shield and dissipated. He was frightened!

“Before we vote,” Aro began, and I saw Bella shake her head in anger and impatience. “Let me remind you, whatever the council’s decision, there need be no violence here.” He was truly frightened.

I snarled a low, hateful laugh. Right. As if attacking our child would have no effect on my wife and me or our family and friends.

“It will be a regrettable waste to our kind to lose any of you. But you especially, young Edward, and your newborn mate.”

I wondered momentarily what I would have said if Renesmee hadn’t been there to hear me. I imagined myself bellowing, No, you don’t want to lose us, you just want to murder our child! Did Aro not even listen to what he was saying? His tunnel vision was beyond bizarre.

Aro reiterated his bid for talent. “The Volturi would be glad to welcome many of you into our ranks. Bella, Benjamin, Zafrina, Kate. There are many choices before you. Consider them.” With Chelsea’s power to influence us disabled, I doubted whether any of those individuals would want to join the Volturi after today’s revelations.

“Let us vote, then,” Aro said, looking warily at our determined faces and angry eyes.

Caius couldn’t wait to render his judgment. “The child is an unknown quantity. There is no reason to allow such a risk to exist. It must be destroyed, along with all who protect it.”

That’s a “summary execution,” if I ever heard one.

Marcus spoke as if he weren’t there, his wispy voice carrying not a hint of weight or emotion. “I see no immediate danger. The child is safe enough for now. We can always reevaluate later. Let us leave in peace.” No one on their side reacted to Marcus’s vote. They behaved—predictably—as if he weren’t there. The guard remained crouched and ready to attack. Caius’s evil little smile did not waver.

I assumed that this outcome was typical for Volturi councils—Caius and Marcus’s votes canceled each other out, leaving Aro with all the power.

“I must make the deciding vote, it seems,” Aro mused, as if he hadn’t already known it would turn out that way.

EDWARD! EDWARD! IT’S ME!

What? Alice? ALICE!! “Yes!” I hissed joyfully. Alice was here! Alice was back!

We’re coming! Stall him! Stop the vote! Ask him whether...

From Alice’s head directly to my mouth, the words sailed.

“Aro?” I hollered, trying to subdue my elation with limited success. The guard stirred restlessly at my sudden shift in mood, though they did not alter their attack positions. Aro’s first instinct was to ignore me, but curiosity got the better of him. After all,
I might have changed my mind about joining the guard—not!

“Yes, Edward? You have something further…?”

“Perhaps,” I replied in a friendly manner, trying to calm down. I didn’t want him to get suspicious and rush forward with his judgment.

Make him say that it’s Nessie’s uniqueness that is dangerous, and not knowing how she will turn out…, Alice thought.

Got it! Here goes…“First, if I could clarify one point?”

“Certainly,” he replied, as if nothing would please him more than to delay the proceedings and cater to my request. Aro was equivocating now that he’d seen Bella’s shield. Her unfamiliar “superpower” put his game plan in serious jeopardy.

“The danger you foresee from my daughter—this stems entirely from our inability to guess how she will develop? That is the crux of the matter?” I inquired.

“Yes, friend Edward,” Aro replied, as if his considering whether to kill my child would have no effect whatsoever upon our “friendship.”

What a tool! (As Emmett would say.)

Aro continued without prodding, much to my delight.

“If we could but be positive…be sure that, as she grows, she will be able to stay concealed from the human world—not endanger the safety of our obscurity…” Aro shrugged as if it were too bad we could not. He was absolutely sure that we couldn’t, which was the only reason he specified the exception, giving us an out.

I had to get my next words right—exactly right—because his agreement would constitute a verbal contract which Aro could not back out of easily, especially not in front of witnesses. Alice fed me the lines.

“So, if we could only know for sure exactly what she will become…,” I reiterated, “then there would be no need for a council at all?”

“If there was some way to be absolutely sure,” Aro agreed cautiously, “then, yes, there would be no question to debate.”

“And we would part in peace, good friends once again?” I asked with heavy irony. Aro’s feathery voice had risen in pitch on each successive reply. He sensed that I was leading him somewhere, but he’d read my mind, so he knew I had no surprises up my sleeve. He continued with his “nice-guy” performance.

“Of course, my young friend. Nothing would please me more.”

Nothing would please him more, I thought, and laughed. That lie would come back to haunt him.

“Then I do have something more to offer.”

Aro stared at me suspiciously. “She is absolutely unique. Her future can only be guessed at,” Aro asserted.

“Not absolutely unique,” I said, contradicting him. “Rare, certainly, but not one of a kind.”

Jane’s fury got the better of her and she took another shot at Bella. PHFFT!
Nothing happened.

“Aro, would you ask Jane to stop attacking my wife?” I asked politely. “We are still discussing evidence.”

Aro raised a hand to the guard. “Peace, dear ones. Let us hear him out.” In truth, Aro needed a way out of this predicament. He was no longer certain that the Volturi would come out of this confrontation unscathed.

I was euphoric, absolutely thrilled to deliver the coup de grâce. “Why don’t you join us, Alice?” I called out.

“Alice,” my mother murmured, stunned.

Alice’s name instantly rose in a chorus of questions and exclamations both audible and inaudible from our side of the clearing. “Alice?” Alice? Alice! “Alice!” Alice! “Alice!”

“Alice,” Aro muttered, thinking, We could have Alice after all!

Alice and Jasper and their unknown companions raced through the woods, no longer caring about stealth.

We found him! We found him! We found him! Alice was singing in her head for my benefit. They had found another Renesmee. And he was here!

I was trying to keep my sense of triumph dampened until the threat was completely defused, but it was difficult. How I loved my sister! I knew she wouldn’t let us down! Maybe we could avoid any more killing today.

They emerged from the forest behind us. I dared not turn around to look, but I could hear three individual minds in addition to Alice and Jasper. They all thought in native tongues I did not recognize, though one sounded like the language Zafrina and Senna used between themselves—that had to be Kachiri. The man trailing the two women had a heartbeat! Pounding loud and fast in his chest, his living heart was easily identified by everyone in the clearing. I could smell his blood too, but like Renesmee, the combination of human and vampire scent mixed together did not seem edible.

Then suddenly, here she was at my side! My beloved Alice. I stole a glance at her angel’s face and touched her marble arm.

My attention was pulled back to our opponents across the way. Renewed confidence swept through the guard when they realized that Bella’s shield did not prevent physical invasion. The largest fighters focused immediately on Bella. As soon as they received the signal, they would attack her. She didn’t have to fight to be killed. With the remarkable development of her shield, she had become the most valuable target in our group. I shook with fury at their sudden determination to kill my wife. They were prepared to tear both her and Renesmee apart.

Oh gawd, if Renesmee got hurt, would our venom heal her or kill her? We still didn’t know the answer to that question. I just prayed that Jacob got her clear of danger in time. It was good to have Jasper back. We would need him when the large fighters attacked. Santiago, I mouthed to him. The big one at the back.

He nodded. Santiago would come with the second wave, after the wives had run,
and I was sure that Jasper could take down two or three other combatants before the skilled fighter reached us. Santiago had no special gifts except, like Emmett, he was huge and strong…and experienced. The rest of the experienced fighters we would take as they came. We should be able to pick them off when Zafrina blinded them or when Benjamin wreaked enough havoc to slow them down.

But first things first. We must exhaust all avenues of negotiation—my job—and Aro was the key. He would make the final decision. Aro’s eyes were focused greedily on Alice, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He was more willing to fight now that the real prize had come home.

I spoke to him. “Alice has been searching for her own witnesses these last weeks and she does not come back empty-handed. Alice, why don’t you introduce the witnesses you’ve brought?”

Caius was exasperated. “The time for witnesses is past! Cast your vote, Aro!”

Aro didn’t take his eyes off Alice. He wanted to touch her hand and see how she had managed to keep her journey and her return a secret from me. He understood that Alice was responsible for our extensive preparation that had slowed the Volturi’s assault. She had seen them coming before she left us. He held up a finger to hush Caius.

Alice stepped forward cheerfully and introduced her companions. Her high, chiming voice was music to my ears.

“Huilen and her nephew, Nahuel.”

A slight rumble of whispers and hisses came from the remaining Volturi witnesses, the word “nephew” its cause. Like “daughter,” it was not a word ever used literally among vampires. Human relationships were irrelevant to the immortal.

“Speak, Huilen,” Aro commanded. “Give us the witness you were brought to bear.”

With Aro holding the guard back, I took a second to look at the newcomers, who now stood slightly in front of me. I’d seen Kachiri in Carlisle’s mind and so her unusual appearance didn’t surprise me. She was clearly a close relative of Zafrina and Senna with even longer limbs and facial features.

Huilen was tiny in comparison to the Amazons and had a long, black braid that touched the back of her thighs. Her skin was the olive-toned color of a formerly brown-skinned human. The nephew, in contrast, retained his dark brown, human coloration, but with highly refined skin much like Renesmee’s. He also had a black braid hanging down his back.

Alice and Kachiri encouraged Huilen to tell the story they had practiced with her. I was surprised to hear that she spoke English, but I supposed that even the most remote tribes had been exposed to the nearly universal language by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

“I am Huilen,” the small woman began in her beautiful, lyric voice. “A century-and-a-half ago, I lived with my people, the Mapuche. My sister was Pire. Our parents named her after the snow on the mountains because of her fair skin. And she was
very beautiful—too beautiful. She came to me one day in secret and told me of the angel that found her in the woods, that visited her by night. I warned her.” Huilen shook her head mournfully. “As if the bruises on her skin were not warning enough. I knew it was the Libishomen of our legends, but she would not listen. She was bewitched.

“She told me when she was sure her dark angel’s child was growing inside her. I didn’t try to discourage her from her plan to run away—I knew even our father and mother would agree that the child must be destroyed, Pire with it. I went with her into the deepest parts of the forest. She searched for her demon angel but found nothing. I cared for her, hunted for her when her strength failed. She ate the animals raw, drinking their blood. I needed no more confirmation of what she carried in her womb. I hoped to save her life before I killed the monster.

“But she loved the child inside her. She called him Nahuel, after the jungle cat, when he grew strong and broke her bones—and loved him still.

“I could not save her. The child ripped his way free of her, and she died quickly, begging all the while that I would care for her Nahuel. Her dying wish—and I agreed.

“He bit me, though, when I tried to lift him from her body. I crawled away into the jungle to die. I didn’t get far—the pain was too much. But he found me; the newborn child struggled through the underbrush to my side and waited for me. When the pain ended, he was curled against my side, sleeping.

“I cared for him until he was able to hunt for himself. We hunted the villages around our forest, staying to ourselves. We have never come so far from our home, but Nahuel wished to see the child here.”

Huilen finished her tale and dropped her head shyly. She stepped back and hid herself partly behind Kachiri’s much larger form.

Aro stared at the half-vampire, Nahuel, deep in thought. Then he began his interrogation of the unusual visitor. “Nahuel, you are one hundred and fifty years old?”

“Give or take a decade,” the young man answered in his nearly unaccented English. It made me wonder if he had access to a television or radio out in the jungle. “We don’t keep track.”

“And you reached maturity at what age?”

“About seven years after my birth, more or less, I was full grown.”

My heart soared at the news! Not only would Renesmee be fully grown in seven years—not four as we had predicted—but she would live indefinitely! The relief was immense, almost knocking me off my feet. Alice had taken our trip to Brazil and brought back the very best kind of information. Not verbal histories, not dimly remembered legends, but an actual hybrid vampire, one of Renesmee’s kind.

“You have not changed since then?” continued Aro.

“Not that I’ve noticed,” Nahuel responded indifferently. He’d always taken his life for granted, never considering that it should be any other way, unlike us, who’d had so many fears and worries concerning Renesmee.
Thank you, thank you! Jacob was shaking with relief at the news that Nessie would not grow old and die by the age of fifteen. They could conceivably share their lifespans. Nessie patted Jacob’s shoulder to calm him.

“And your diet?” Aro wanted to know, his curiosity piqued. That was the best possible reaction we could get from Aro. Curiosity could save the cat.

“Mostly blood, but some human food, too. I can survive on either.” Just like Renesmee! It was so wonderful to know there was another like her, that our terror over our daughter’s future was now irrelevant.

“You were able to create an immortal?” This question was key. If a half-vampire could create a vampire, then Aro might work that into a reason to do away with Renesmee—with them both, actually.

“Yes, but none of the rest can.”

The rest??? I saw it before he said it. Beautiful, blonde-haired sisters!

Shock rippled through the crowd. Aro asked the question for everyone.

“The rest?”

“My sisters,” Nahuel responded casually.

A colony? Aro’s fatherly façade slipped for a moment in surprise before he recovered.

“Perhaps you would tell us the rest of your story, for there seems to be more.”

Nahuel didn’t like to think about his father, was, in fact, ashamed of him, and wished he hadn’t brought it up. He continued reluctantly, distaste clearly written on his face.

“My father came looking for me a few years after my mother’s death. He was pleased to find me,” he said dismissively. “He had two daughters, but no sons. He expected me to join him, as my sisters had.

“He was surprised I was not alone. My sisters are not venomous, but whether that’s due to gender or a random chance…who knows? I already had my family with Huilen, and I was not interested in making a change. I see him from time to time. I have a new sister; she reached maturity about ten years back.”

“Your father’s name?” Caius growled, disgusted by such a vampire.

“Joham,” Nahuel replied. “He considers himself a scientist. He thinks he’s creating a new super-race.” He wrinkled his face in revulsion.

Caius turned his head sharply toward Bella. “Your daughter, is she venomous?” he barked.

“No,” she replied. Nahuel’s head whipped around and he stared open-mouthed at Bella.

Mother? No! Not possible! The young man could not comprehend that Bella was Renesmee’s mother, that she possibly could be alive.

Aro had been astonished into silence and was considering what to do. He weighed the pros and cons carefully as his eyes scanned Carlisle’s face, then mine, then Bella’s.
Caius interrupted impatiently. “We take care of the aberration here, and then follow it south,” he concluded, not at all concerned with the reaction of those of us waiting for the ax to fall.

Aro ignored Caius and stared into Bella’s eyes. What he wrestled with in that moment was his great desire to accomplish his original goal—to acquire the talented, especially Alice and Bella, and destroy the rest—against the fact that Bella had leveled the fighting field. The Volturi had never fought a fair fight and it was likely in this case that when push came to shove, we would prevail. They had no way to disable Bella, Zafrina, and Benjamin except by killing them, and all of our fighters would be at full capacity to defend our assets, while their fighters would be blind and hobbled.

Fighting was too big a risk and the “justice” on which such an attack would be waged had been proven baseless. There was no winning—at least not in the Volturi’s usual way. Aro was unwilling to proceed at such a huge disadvantage. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Brother,” Aro said to the battle-hungry Caius. “There appears to be no danger. This is an unusual development, but I see no threat. These half-vampire children are much like us, it appears.”

“Is that your vote?” Caius demanded.

“It is.”

Caius did not hide his disappointment, but even he could see that the odds had changed. “And this Joham? This immortal so fond of experimentation?”

“Perhaps we should speak with him,” Aro said.

I doubted that even Carlisle would feel too badly if the Volturi eliminated Joham, though perhaps Aro would recruit him into the guard as the official impregnator of humans should the half-vampires pique his own scientific interest. After all, Aro had changed the immature twins, Alec and Jane, partly as an experiment. They were not infants when he changed them, but they were still children.

“Stop Joham if you will,” Nahuel said. “But leave my sisters be. They are innocent.”

To my surprise, Aro nodded, seeming to make a promise, insofar as Aro was able to make promises. Then he abruptly turned his back on us and faced the guard, pretending to be happy that the crisis had been resolved, though I knew that he wasn’t.

“Dear ones,” he called out to them. “We do not fight today.”

OOPH…OOPH…Chelsea directed all her energy toward reuniting the guard and turning them in a new direction.

MMMM…MMMM…Corin beamed feelings of contentment upon those who remained wound up and ready to kill, but now must relinquish that goal.

The Volturi witnesses disappeared into the trees at increasing speed as fewer remained. Nobody wanted to be left alone with the Volturi. Members of the guard rotated simultaneously and marched away in formation.
Aro remained to have a final word with Carlisle, attended by Renata, Felix and Demetri, his personal bodyguards. He knew that we could take him out now if we chose to. But he also knew that Carlisle would never allow such a thing in his presence. What a vast difference in leadership!

Aro held his arms out, palms up, just as Carlisle had done when he had been in the vulnerable position, begging Aro for reasoned consideration. The tide had turned.

“I’m so glad this could be resolved without violence,” he said as if he truly were. “My friend, Carlisle—how pleased I am to call you friend again! I hope there are no hard feelings. I know you understand the strict burden that our duty places on our shoulders.”

He knew, we knew, and he knew we knew that the ancients had come to kill and steal, not to render any kind of justice. It was hard to understand how anyone could continue pretending otherwise in this situation. But Aro did. He was the mother of all hypocrites. The Italian ancients didn’t deserve to police our species, but the Romanians would be worse, and though Carlisle would be perfect, that was not what his life was about.

Things would go on as they had for twenty-five hundred years.

“Leave in peace, Aro,” Carlisle said graciously, but not warmly. “Please remember that we still have our anonymity to protect here, and keep your guard from hunting in this region.”

“Of course, Carlisle,” Aro agreed. “I am sorry to earn your disapproval, my dear friend. Perhaps, in time, you will forgive me.”

“Perhaps, in time, if you prove a friend to us again.” What a diplomat! I doubt if I could have been so well-controlled as my father was at that moment.

Aro bowed his head to Carlisle, as if he were sorry. I couldn’t tell whether he was or not. He probably even lied in his own mind. I knew that Aro was not pure evil. He had shown me mercy when he’d had every right to destroy me the previous year. Still…today had been hard to take. And I would never forget.

After the final four Volturi had left the clearing, silence reigned for a few seconds. Everybody remained with their eyes and ears on the alert, not quite ready to trust that we were safe.

“Is it really over?” Bella finally asked in a whisper.

I didn’t hide my great relief. “Yes. They’ve given up. Like all bullies, they’re cowards underneath the swagger.” I chuckled and Alice joined in. Nobody else made a sound.

“Seriously, people. They’re not coming back. Everybody can relax now,” Alice called out loudly. Bella released a long breath. I could only assume that she had been keeping up her shield, just in case.

Silence fell again until it was broken by a wispy voice at the back of the crowd.

“Of all the rotten luck,” Stefan grumbled.