

BREAKING DAWN

through Edward's Eyes

A Fanfiction by **P.A. Lassiter**

from

Twilight: The Missing Pieces

See more at: [//palassiter.wordpress.com](http://palassiter.wordpress.com)

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

If you've read the Author's Notes for *Midnight Sun: Part II*, then you know how these writings came to be. As I penned the missing half of *Midnight Sun*, I was fully aware of another missing part of Bella and Edward Cullen's story: the sex scenes.

Reading the *Twilight Saga*, I felt let down after having plowed through three books building to the consummation of the lovers' relationship, only to reach the honeymoon and find that the story faded to black, taking up again at a point after the adult scenes. Of course, such is required for fiction intended for young adults, but judging by the popularity of the *Twilight Saga*, its readership extends far beyond teens and preteens. Also, the explicit details of Bella's pregnancy and the baby's birth seem already to have broken the "mature" boundary—in gore if not in sexual content.

Considering Edward's nature, I thought it plausible that he would write about making love to his wife (assuming the details would remain "private"). After all, managing to do so without hurting or killing Bella was a great triumph for him and he was utterly pleased with his success. Plus, he has a prodigious knowledge of, and interest in, human biology, but no direct experience of it. His sexual encounters with Bella provide his first non-nutritional contact with a human female's body.

After I wrote Bella and Edward's missing honeymoon scenes, one reader request led to another until I eventually finished writing all of *Breaking Dawn* from Edward's point of view. Though the entire book is written through Edward's eyes, I divided the chapters into mini-books along the lines of the original *Breaking Dawn* to provide signposts amidst the large number of chapters.

You will find more *Twilight* material, including the *Private Diary of Edward Anthony Cullen* and his *Vampire's Guide to the Care and Maintenance of a Human Being*, plus photographs, news updates, and anything else I might be up to by visiting my website, "Twilight: The Missing Pieces" at:

[//palassiter.wordpress.com](http://palassiter.wordpress.com)

P.A. Lassiter
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N.B. This fan fiction is based on characters created by Stephenie Meyer in her Twilight Saga. Some of the chapter titles and all the non-interior dialogue between Edward and Bella are copyright Stephenie Meyer.

1. FAMILY MATTERS

The engagement was back on! Not that it had been off, exactly, but I had prepared myself to let go of the idea of marriage.

The “Jacob Factor” was not a problem that could be solved, I decided, but at least Bella had made her decision and the process of acceptance—on all of our parts—had begun. I don’t know that it will ever be finished. I’d told Bella, when she tried to remove her charm bracelet with Jacob’s wolf carving, to keep it on. It is part of who she is. Jacob is part of who I am now too, though he’s presumably far away.

After Bella told Jacob that she and I were to be married and that she would be changed to a vampire afterward, Jacob had stuck around only until Carlisle gave him a clean bill of health. Having healed from his battle wounds acquired fighting the newborn vampire army, Jacob wasted no time in phasing to his wolf self and running away. I didn’t know where he was, but the wolf pack and Billy probably did. Maybe Bella did too.

Bella and I have reestablished our original agreement, the one where she will accept college tuition and a new car from me, and I will make love with her after we’re married and before she becomes a vampire. It occurs to me that of non-homosexual men in America, I might be the most difficult for a woman to bed in all of history. Probably not, but I’m sure Bella thinks so. It still frightens me that I’ve promised her, but I’ve decided to worry about that later. For now, I’m just thrilled that she’s wearing her engagement ring!

So far, nobody has walked up to her on the street and exclaimed at how valuable it is; likewise for the “crystal” hanging from her charm bracelet. I think modern folks don’t always recognize the value of antique things unless they are in the business. It’s just as well. Bella is so averse to my giving her anything of value that she’d probably try to give it all back. Like the car....

Things were just fine—well, relatively fine, given Bella’s distaste for nice cars—until a couple of auto aficionados approached her on the street and asked if they could take a picture of themselves with her “before” car. That’s the car I provided for her to drive until she is changed. It doesn’t look so much different than Carlisle’s Mercedes sedan and Bella had no knowledge of its pedigree.

Carlisle has given us—well, me, actually, since I never intended for Bella to know—the most amazing engagement present by calling in a big favor from his past. In the 1990s, we were living outside of Washington, D.C., in Maryland, where Carlisle was working night shift at the

Bethesda Naval Hospital and teaching medical students. Late one night, he received a phone call from his friend, Dr. Connie Mariano, Rear Admiral in the U.S. Navy. She had been appointed Physician to the President—yes, the President of the United States.

She was calling to request a consultation with Carlisle at the White House. A limousine arrived at our house to pick him up and convey him there, complete with Secret Service agents who grilled him the entire journey and then searched his person before letting him enter the famous abode.

The President's son was visiting for the weekend with a business partner from Texas and the latter had become ill. Dr. Connie (as her friends call her), was stumped by his symptoms and, being entirely new to the President's service, was concerned that she might lose the job before she'd even had time to establish herself in it.

When Carlisle arrived at the White House, the Secret Service officers escorted him to Dr. Connie's office and they walked together to the guest quarters, where the hapless businessman awaited. From three rooms away, Carlisle knew what was wrong with the man, but he kept the information to himself until after his interview with the patient. Following a cursory examination, he conferred with Dr. Connie outside.

"What do you make of it?" she inquired.

"Test his liver. I believe that you'll discover the source of the problem."

The next morning, Dr. Connie called Carlisle with the news.

"The patient's liver is hepatic. How did you know, Carlisle?"

"It was the smell. I'm sure you must have noticed it."

"Well...yes, he did smell rather offensive, but he wouldn't be the first ill patient I've seen who had body odor."

"What did he smell like to you?" Carlisle asked.

"Hmm...it reminded me of rotting garbage, or maybe fish that has gone bad."

"Exactly," Carlisle replied. "The condition is called *Trimethylaminuria*, commonly known as 'Fish Odor Syndrome.' Ask him how long he's had trouble with body odor. Or rather, ask him whether other people have mentioned it to him and when. The afflicted person usually can't smell it, and neither can his familiars, since they become inured to the odor."

"But isn't that a rare genetic disorder? He's a middle-aged man."

“Yes it is, but the syndrome also can be acquired later in life by severe liver damage, in his case, by hepatitis. I take it he didn’t know he had hepatitis.”

“He says not, but he’s had it a long time, I think. His liver is seriously compromised. I’m just surprised he hasn’t had major symptoms before. He says that he stopped drinking alcohol years ago because it gave him such severe hangovers.”

“Probably, they weren’t hangovers at all, but a result of extra stress on the unsound organ.”

“Yes, that makes sense. He’s an international businessman, so I presume he got the disease while traveling overseas somewhere,” Dr. Connie commented.

“Hepatitis vaccines are sure a good idea for travelers like him.”

“Yup...too late for that now. Anyway, I don’t know how to thank you, Carlisle. You’ve certainly saved my ego, if not my job! I’m too new here to fail at diagnosing a White House guest. This is the time for building confidence in my skills, not doubt. So...you know...if you ever need a favor, you only have to call and I’ll do whatever I can. I owe you.”

“You’re more than welcome. I’m glad I could be of use to you,” he said, before hanging up the phone.

Twelve years later, Carlisle returned that phone call. After nine years at the White House, Dr. Connie had left and opened a concierge physician service in Scottsdale, Arizona (Bella’s old stomping ground). She provides presidential-quality care to rich, important, or famous people for a price. She had asked Carlisle to join her team, but working on-call hours in sunny Arizona just wasn’t possible for someone with sparkling skin. He wasn’t crazy about treating famous people for minor illnesses anyway, preferring to work in an emergency room or hospital where the cases were likely to be more challenging and he could do a greater overall service (and keep a lower profile).

One of the perquisites that Dr. Connie provides her clients is armored car transportation, to and from her clinic or the hospital. People like Henry Kissinger or the Sultan of Brunei, for instance, appreciate that sort of thing, as well as hip-hop musicians and Hollywood stars. She keeps a fleet of four armored vehicles for just such purposes.

When Carlisle asked if he could rent one of her vehicles for three months, she immediately consented without asking probing questions, and wouldn’t take money for it. (Carlisle is paying for the delivery, maintenance, and insurance while we have it. Just that will cost him nearly as much as he paid for Isle Esme, which, incidentally, Esme is loaning us for our honeymoon—another amazing gift.) When the vehicle arrived in Forks, I discovered it was a

Mercedes Guardian, a four-door sedan with all the luxuries and gadgets you can think of, and lots of things you'd never know were there at all...like the two tons of armor plating and the rocket-proof glass. It has a V12 engine with 517 horsepower.

Jasper and Emmett are getting a huge kick out of Bella's driving a missile-proof car. They have several bets between them about whether she'll discover what she's driving, and whether she'll wreck it in the three months it's here. Actually, Jasper might not realize that Bella is an excellent driver...not by our standards, of course, but for a human, she's extremely cautious and sensible.

I took a lot of heat when Bella discovered the nature of her "before" car. She thought I was making fun of her, but that never crossed my mind. I've just come so close to losing her several times that I will do anything I can think of to help keep her safe until she is changed. When I explained that to her, she seemed slightly less offended.

Of course, I'm excited about her "after" car too. I already picked it up and put it in the garage under a tarp. Probably, she hasn't been curious enough to see what it is (a Ferrari F430...red), but I trust that after she is changed, she will appreciate it a great deal more. I'm expecting her finally to understand the Cullens' penchant for fast, powerful cars once she is a vampire. There's something about our ability to run many dozen times faster than a human that makes us impatient when driving around at 55 miles per hour. None of us can tolerate it, not even Esme.

Bella thinks that I sabotaged her truck so that I could buy her a new car. As part of our extended, more detailed bargain, Bella agreed to accept a new car "if and when" the old red demon breathed its last breath. The word "sabotage" is a little strong, I'd say. Not telling her that she shouldn't drive it all the way home after the engine overheats is benign neglect at worst. A blown-out head gasket was the result of that particular "miscommunication," but it could have happened just as easily by a faulty installation. I'm not going to mention that right now because I'm pretty sure that Jacob installed it.

Of course Rosalie, or even I, could fix it, assuming we could find the old Chevy parts, but Rosalie wasn't exactly amenable to helping Bella out and Emmett thinks the truck is an insult to modern automotive technology. I happen to know that the engine mounts are rusting out and I'd rather she didn't drive it for safety's sake anyway, so I'm unlikely to volunteer my knowledge. Besides, with the Mercedes Guardian waiting in the wings, what would be the point, really?

Thinking of Jacob sent my mind rushing back to that dreadful night when Bella broke up with the broken Jacob. It was an extremely rough night for both of us (and for Jacob too, no doubt). Somehow, we got through it.

The following morning, I expressed my misgivings about proceeding with our plans. If Jacob was so important to her that she could suffer that much at letting him go, how could I possibly marry her? Bella remained adamant that she knew what she wanted and eventually, I let her convince me to trust her words.

We'd gone to my house to find Alice then and let her in on our news. She was waiting for us on the porch, channeling a pogo stick in her excitement.

"Thank you, Bella!" she called out, thrilled at the prospect of planning our wedding.

Bella hurried to set a few limits on Alice, though I assumed my sister would disregard them if she felt it necessary. Alice revealed that she'd already ordered Bella's designer gown, probably months before. I began to worry that Alice's pushy enthusiasm would change Bella's mind and send her running for the door. But much to my surprise, it didn't. I couldn't understand why she was going along with Alice's plans so calmly.

Alice had specified a 1920s-style designer dress. It was as if she were planning *my* perfect, early-century wedding. I could hope that it would make Bella happy too, but I knew she wasn't accepting all this because she wanted it. Her acceptance was a gift to Alice and maybe to me, and I wasn't altogether sure that I should go along with it. This was supposed to be *her* day, not Alice's, and really, not mine either.

Alice had banned me from the dress viewing, so I took a moment to listen in on her thoughts. I was surprised to read that Alice had not been sure Bella would agree to the marriage and her relief was now palpable. Normally, she would have been smug about knowing Bella's mind practically before Bella did. Then, between Alice's explanation of why Bella's wedding dress was already in Forks all the way from Paris—"just in case," Alice claimed—and showing off her Maid of Honor dress, I read that Alice had ordered her own dress not knowing for sure that she would be asked to attend Bella. Why hadn't Alice known?

The reason, of course, was the same one as always...the decision had only just been made. My chest tightened sharply and I drew in my breath as I realized with clarity that Bella's decision truly had been in question. Alice was still feeling some sadness over Bella's struggle to choose "between two good things."

Being able to read others' thoughts isn't always a comfortable thing. In the back of my mind, I'd hoped that there was no competition between Jacob and me, that in the final analysis, I was "the one" and had always been so. It appeared that that wasn't the case, though. Bella said it had always been me, but she had struggled with her choice. Being with Jacob would have been easier for Bella in so many ways, and more natural, certainly, than what I could offer her.

It hurt imagining Bella's future with Jacob...their living on the reservation raising dark-haired children, half Bella, half Jacob; Bella loving Jacob, becoming part of the tribe, keeping Charlie and Renee in her life; Bella becoming older with him, watching their children raise their grandchildren.

This had been Bella's dream before she let it go and her future morphed into something with a much different outcome. Her compromise saddened me. I wanted to give her children, to age with her, to live to see our grandchildren grow, and then to expire...together. It could never be. There was no way back to that life for me, and it pained me that Bella would be barred from it too. But I loved her with every fiber of my being—I could not exist without her. Selfishly, I would let her choose me and a future that was not as good for her as her potential future with Jacob. How could I live with myself knowing that?

Alice interrupted my thoughts when she dashed out of the room, yelling, "Esme!" Bella trailed slowly behind.

"That was very, very nice of you," I said, looking into her eyes.

"She seems happy," Bella said.

It was one of those moments when I wished with all my heart that I could read her thoughts. I kept searching her face, trying to know her mind. Why was she suddenly okay with all of this? I felt more separate from her just then than I had before she'd agreed to marry me. What if she was going along with all of this for the wrong reasons? I needed some time alone with her.

"Let's get out of here. Let's go to our meadow," I suggested impulsively.

"I guess I don't have to hide out anymore, do I?"

"No. The danger is behind us."

I carried her on my back in the usual way. The storm had passed, but the ground was wet and the sky was low and dark with clouds. At least the days were long at this time of the year.

Bella lay on the damp grass and gazed up at the sky. I lay next to her and took her hand in mine. I needed to know what was going on in her head. I didn't trust this new, "accepting" Bella.

"August thirteenth?" I inquired, referring to the first of three conditions Bella had stipulated for Alice's wedding plans.

“That gives me a month until my birthday. I didn't want to cut it too close.”

That again, I sighed to myself. Bella was hurrying to be changed before she added another human year to her age, as if it mattered.

“Esme is three years older than Carlisle—technically. Did you know that?”

Bella shook her head.

“It hasn't made any difference to them.”

“My age is not really that important, Edward. I'm ready. I've chosen my life—now I want to start living it.”

That response was somewhat comforting. It was the most reasonable answer Bella had ever given to the question, “What's your hurry?” Regardless of my body's appearance, I was still almost a hundred years older than her. I stroked her beautiful, 18-year-old, mahogany-colored locks.

“The guest list veto?” The second of Bella's conditions. Who did she want to exclude?

“I don't care really, but I...” Bella's reluctance to answer was obvious. “I'm not sure if Alice would feel the need to invite...a few werewolves. I don't know if...Jake would feel like...like he should come. Like that's the right thing to do, or that I'd get my feelings hurt if he didn't. He shouldn't have to go through that.”

I thought that over for a second, considering what I would want if I were in Jacob's shoes. Then I put the thought aside.

I still didn't understand what was going on in Bella's mind. She seemed to have collapsed under Alice's pressure, and mine, showing no signs of resistance to the marriage or to Alice's elaborate wedding plans. One thing I *did* know was that Alice wasn't giving Bella her dream wedding. Bella didn't even like weddings.

I had to know what was going on. This wasn't right. This wasn't my Bella. I rolled toward her abruptly, grabbed her around the waist, and rolled back, pulling her onto my chest with her face close to mine.

“Tell me why you're doing this, Bella,” I demanded. “Why did you decide now to give Alice free reign?”

After a brief pause to collect her thoughts, Bella described a conversation she'd had with Charlie the night before, something that was troubling her immensely. Charlie told her he

felt like she was going to disappear. Then he more or less begged Bella not to leave him without saying goodbye.

“Will you tell me before you do anything major? Before you run off with him or something?” he’d implored.

Charlie’s sixth sense surrounding his beloved daughter astonished me. It wasn’t the first time he’d known what he couldn’t have known. He was sensing Bella’s decision to leave the nest, and perhaps he even recognized the finality of the change that was coming.

Bella went on. “It wouldn’t be fair to keep Charlie out of this, and that means Renee and Phil. I might as well let Alice have her fun, too. Maybe it will make the whole thing easier for Charlie if he gets his proper goodbye. Even if he thinks it’s much too early, I wouldn’t want to cheat him out of the chance to walk me down the aisle.” Bella wrinkled her brow at the traditional words, and then continued. “At least my mom and dad and my friends will know the best part of my choice, the most I’m allowed to tell them. They’ll know I chose you, and they’ll know we’re together. They’ll know I’m happy, wherever I am. I think that’s the best I can do for them.”

I took Bella’s face in my hands and looked into the deep wells of her eyes. This was a part of my dear, beloved Bella I knew *very* well—the Bella who took care of everyone else without considering herself. This I could *not* allow.

“Deal’s off,” I told her firmly. I would brook no dissent now that I saw how Bella was cheating herself.

She stared at me in shock.

“What? You’re backing out? No!”

“I’m not backing out, Bella. I’ll still keep my side of the bargain. But you’re off the hook. Whatever you want, no strings attached.”

“Why?”

“Bella, I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to make everyone else happy. And I don’t care about anyone else’s feelings. I only need you to be happy. Don’t worry about breaking the news to Alice. I’ll take care of it. I promise she won’t make you feel guilty.”

“But I—”

“No. We’re doing this your way. Because my way doesn’t work. I call you stubborn, but look at what I’ve done. I’ve clung with such idiotic obstinacy to my idea of what’s best for you,

though it's only hurt you. Hurt you so deeply, time and time again. I don't trust myself anymore. You can have happiness your way. My way is always wrong. So. We're doing it your way, Bella. Tonight. Today. The sooner the better. I'll speak to Carlisle. I was thinking that maybe if we gave you enough morphine, it wouldn't be so bad. It's worth a try."

I clenched my teeth trying not to think about that part of what I was agreeing to. I struggled to remember that this was what Bella wanted. It was going to be so very hard to watch her suffer through the change.

"Edward, no—"

I pressed my finger to her lips to block her objections. She must be concerned that I was rescinding my part of the deal.

"Don't worry, Bella, love. I haven't forgotten the rest of your demands."

The final word emerged low and guttural in tone, the sound of my body reacting to the decision I'd just made. She was lying across my chest, her sweet breath washing over my face. I stretched my head upward until my lips touched hers and I laced my fingers through her hair. *Mmm...* I was anxious to loosen the iron control I had practiced for so long. My love's lips yielded softly and began moving in synchrony with mine. Her hands clutched my arms and I could feel her heart pounding against my chest. She gasped, sucking the air from my lungs and releasing her breath back into me.

Her response was thrilling. I held her tightly and rolled over onto her, my body pressing her into the grass, my lips searching hungrily for hers. When Bella needed air, I dragged my lips down her jawline and onto the smooth skin of her neck. She inhaled jaggedly.

"Stop, Edward. Wait."

"Why?" I whispered, my lips moving against her throat. She was still trying to give me what I'd demanded before. I meant to convince her that I'd rescinded all of my demands and only wished to satisfy hers.

"I don't want to do this now," she protested, her voice slightly more forceful.

"Don't you?" I teased, moving my lips back to hers to quiet her protests.

I could tell that my beloved Bella was struggling against her own desire and trying to dampen mine too. Perhaps she didn't trust my change of heart, but I was serious about giving her what she'd wanted for so long—*every* part of me that she desired.

I felt Bella's hands unbind themselves from my hair and then push against my chest with a feeble human effort. She intended for it to be a strong move, so I relented and pulled back a few inches to look into her eyes. Could mine be dazzling? I hoped so.

"Why?" I murmured. "I love you. I want you. Right now." The low vibrato in my voice was redolent with desire. Had I finally said that aloud? My body knew that I had.

My need for her flooded through me like never before, sending an ache into parts of myself that I habitually reined in. I kissed her with renewed love...and lust...and desire. The power of this feeling was almost overwhelming. I realized with sudden certainty that I *could* overcome the fear and make love to my Bella, the woman I wanted forever. It would be easy...easy to fall into her and never return...*Mmmm*...loving her and making love with her went hand in glove.

Bella was still responding to my kisses, though I felt a change in her, a hesitancy that she'd never shown before.

"Wait, wait," she mumbled against my lips.

"Not for me," I murmured, reiterating my resolve to give her everything she wanted.

"Please?" she insisted.

Oh, crap! She really was serious! With a groan and a reluctant burst of will, I rolled off of Bella and onto my back, separating my now aching body from hers. I lay there, struggling to regain control of both my desire and an unjustified flare of temper.

"Tell me why not, Bella," I said irritably. "This had better not be about me."

"Edward, this is very important to me. I am going to do this right." *Arrgh!* I had poisoned her mind with my moralistic demands.

"Whose definition of right?" I challenged.

"Mine."

I turned to face her and propped my head in my hand.

"How are you going to do this right?"

Bella took a deep breath before attempting to explain.

"Responsibly. Everything in the right order. I will not leave Charlie and Renee without the best resolution I can give them. I won't deny Alice her fun, if I'm having a wedding anyway.

And I will tie myself to you in every human way, before I ask you to make me immortal. I'm following all the rules, Edward. Your soul is far, far too important to me to take chances with. You're not going to budge me on this."

"I'll bet I could." I heard the desire reverberating in my voice. I wished I could take back all the times I had denied *her* desire, stayed her hands, or pushed her away.

"But you wouldn't," Bella admonished, her resolve hardening. "Not knowing that this is what I really need."

"You don't fight fair," I complained.

She grinned. "Never said I did."

Yes, I remembered the line and smiled at my own words. Still, a man could wish.

"If you change your mind..."

"You'll be the first to know," Bella cut in with a grin.

How I wished she would relent just then, but even the skies conspired against me now. Rain started to fall in the meadow, cold and wet. The two things Bella liked least about Forks. She scowled at the flat, gray sky hovering close to the ground. Her face was collecting raindrops.

"I'll get you home," I said, wiping the drops off her cheeks.

"Rain's not the problem," Bella clarified. "It just means that it's time to go do something that will be very unpleasant and possibly even highly dangerous."

What?

"It's a good thing you're bulletproof," she said, inexplicably. Then she went on, "I'm going to need that ring. It's time to tell Charlie."

I laughed at her joke, but more happily at her request for my mother's ring.

"Highly dangerous," I agreed, then laughed again and dug into my pocket where the ring had resided since she'd returned it on the night of my proposal. "But at least there's no need for a side trip." I'd told her that I would be ready to slide the ring onto her finger at the first sign of weakness, and I was.

The drive to Charlie's house was a happy occasion for me, though Bella was tense almost to the point of terror. I tried to soothe her nerves, but I was so filled with joy that it was difficult to relate to her worry over his disapproval.

Bella's anxiety spiked when we heard Charlie pull into the driveway.

"Stop fidgeting, Bella. Please try to remember that you're not confessing to a murder here."

"Easy for you to say," she retorted. Charlie exited his police car and approached the front door. Bella practically jumped out of her skin when his key clicked in the lock.

"Calm down, Bella," I whispered, worried she might have a stroke. With Bella so nervous, Charlie would sense something was up immediately. I attempted to set a light tone.

"Hey, Charlie," I greeted him.

"No!" Bella urged, *sotto voce*.

"What?" I whispered, startled by her alarm.

"Wait till he hangs his gun up!"

I laughed at her excess of concern.

"Hey, kids. What's up?" Charlie asked pleasantly, as he came into the living room where we were seated.

"We'd like to talk to you," I told him. "We have some good news."

Charlie stared right through me with the suspicious eyes of an interrogator. I couldn't hide my joy and beamed back at him.

"Good news?" He directed his X-ray vision onto his daughter, whose be-ringed hand shook uncontrollably in mine.

"Have a seat, Dad," Bella urged, clearly wanting him to stop looming over us.

He retreated to the edge of the recliner, his face a giant question mark.

"Don't get worked up, Dad," Bella warned, ensuring that he would. "Everything's okay."

Just 'okay'? This was the most wonderful news of my life! I was practically bursting with it. But I had to let Bella tell him in her own way. The Mexican standoff continued.

“Sure it is, Bella, sure it is. If everything is so great, then why are you sweating bullets?”

“I’m not sweating,” she denied, reality notwithstanding.

It felt like Bella was trying to disappear into my side as she wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand.

“You’re pregnant! You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” Charlie bellowed, his face turning red. Bella had told me it would be everyone’s first thought, but they would be proved wrong soon enough. I wouldn’t have minded if they were right, for that matter.

“No! Of course I’m not!” she objected, transforming his wrath into embarrassment. I was pleased. It would make the truth less of a shock by comparison. My father’s trick.

“Apology accepted,” Bella said stiffly and then went completely silent, as did Charlie. It was left to me to share the news, but I didn’t mind. I turned to face Charlie, man-to-man.

“Charlie,” I began. “I realize that I’ve gone about this out of order. Traditionally, I should have asked you first. I mean no disrespect, but since Bella has already said yes and I don’t want to diminish her choice in the matter, instead of asking you for her hand, I’m asking you for your blessing. We’re getting married, Charlie. I love her more than anything in the world, more than my own life, and—by some miracle—she loves me that way, too. Will you give us your blessing?”

Charlie’s eyes homed in on Bella’s engagement ring and my words began to sink in. Though I’d always found Charlie hard to read, his thoughts went something along these lines: *Ring...married? Why that sneaking SOB...! I ought to take him to the woodshed and... But Bella’s not pregnant?! What? So young...little girl...much too young. No! He can’t...!*

Bella was ready to leap up in panic when she saw his face change color, but I squeezed her hand and said under my breath, “Give him a minute.” We watched as his blood pressure shot up, stayed there for a little while, and then slowly, slowly began to fall as his heartbeat settled back into a normal rhythm. Bella held her seat nervously while Charlie completed his emotional circuit.

“Guess I’m not that surprised,” he finally admitted. “Knew I’d have to deal with something like this soon enough.” Yes, Charlie had sensed it only...yesterday, was it? It was pretty hard to surprise Charlie, despite his emotionality.

“You sure about this?” Charlie asked Bella, his gaze intense on her face.

“I’m one hundred percent sure about Edward,” Bella replied. I smiled, recognizing the diplomacy in that loaded sentence.

“Getting married, though? What’s the rush?”

Charlie couldn’t imagine why we’d want to do such a thing when his youthful marriage had devastated him so thoroughly. I suppose parents always see their children through the filter of their own experience, no matter how different the child might be from themselves. I thought I could make it a little easier for him by presenting it another way.

“We’re going away to Dartmouth together in the fall, Charlie. I’d like to do that, well, the right way. It’s how I was raised.” That was true enough, except for the Dartmouth part, depending....

Charlie might not be thrilled with our decision, but he wouldn’t have been thrilled to have us live together unmarried, either, so it wasn’t *really* the marriage part that bothered him, I thought. It was the *Edward* part, plus the irrevocable nature of the commitment... and the sex, of course...that was understood.

“Knew this was coming,” he finally mumbled, seeming to search for a different outcome to the conversation.

Offering a simple “Congratulations” hadn’t entered his mind. I was a little disappointed for Bella. Then suddenly, Charlie relented, fully and completely. I smiled at his roundabout way of looking at the situation and tried to keep a straight face.

“Ha!” Charlie shouted, startling Bella. “Ha, ha, ha!” he exclaimed, and then broke down into semi-hysterical laughter, his arms wrapped around his stomach, as if figuratively trying to hold himself together. “Okay, fine. Get married. But...” Charlie’s laughter took hold of him again.

“But what?” Bella wanted to know.

“But *you* have to tell your mom! I’m not saying one word to Renee! That’s all yours!”

Bella’s face went white as Charlie totally lost control, doubling over with laughter until tears built up in his eyes. I pulled Bella off the couch and rushed her out of the house with a quick, “Thank you, Charlie! See you later!”

After that experience, Bella wanted to wait to call her mother with our news, so we drove back to my house to tell my parents.

“Mom, Dad,” I announced formally after I’d summoned Carlisle and Esme to Carlisle’s office. Putting my arm around Bella’s waist and holding her hand, I continued, “I would like to introduce to you my bride-to-be, Isabella Marie Swan!”

Alice had already spread the word, of course, but I wanted Bella to have the experience of being welcomed into our family, and of our announcement being treated as the glorious news that it was.

I was not disappointed. Esme burst into “vampire tears” and leaped from her chair, throwing her arms around both Bella and me. Though no actual tears flowed, I knew her eyes were burning, and the hitch in her breath verified it. When she’d gotten control of her breath, she exclaimed, “Welcome to our family, dear, dear Bella!”

Carlisle had risen a bit more sedately, but with a huge smile on his face. He stepped up behind Esme and wrapped his arms around all of us, while Esme broke down again, holding Bella and stroking her hair. Carlisle leaned over Esme to kiss Bella on the cheek and said, “We’re thrilled, Bella. Edward has made a wise and wonderful choice. Thank you for accepting him and us.” Tears welled up in Bella’s eyes and I saw Carlisle’s eyelids flutter against the burning in his eyes too. We stood there for a moment in our loving scrum until Emmett broke the mood by bounding through the door.

“I heard the news! Congratulations, little sis’!” he said, picking her up from behind and swinging her around. “No, wait, I meant ‘Congratulations, Edward!’” he corrected. “He’s the lucky one!” Rosalie made only a slight face at Emmett’s words as she entered the office. She leaned over and kissed Bella on the cheek without speaking, then turned as Alice danced into the room pulling Jasper behind her.

“Jasper says ‘Congratulations’!” Alice sang out.

“I do!” Jasper reiterated, offering his hand first to Bella and then to me. “Please forgive me if I don’t kiss you just now,” he joked, smiling at Bella.

“That’s all right, Jasper. Save it for later,” she replied, grinning back.

“This calls for a toast,” Emmett declared. “Carlisle, do you have any of the good donated stuff in your refrigerator?” he said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Ew!” Bella exclaimed and everybody laughed.

Bella procrastinated a full two hours before she summoned enough courage to call Renee with our news. I gave her my cell phone so she could go outside and have the sensation of privacy, if not the actual thing.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I asked, worried that her mother’s response might be upsetting to her.

“No, I won’t put you through that again,” Bella answered. “I’ll handle this one myself.”

I nodded and sat down at the piano, picking out her lullaby as she walked slowly through the front door and onto the porch. I kept playing, but still had no trouble hearing Bella's conversation.

"Mom, I'm marrying Edward," was the bald way Bella broke the news to her mother.

In spite of that, Renee took the announcement in stride to Bella's great surprise. She'd been expecting it, Renee had said, and she was a little annoyed that Bella had waited so long to tell her.

That comment surprised Bella, who just barely had decided for herself. After we'd visited Renee in Florida, she assumed we were getting engaged and had been waiting for the official announcement. I don't think Bella could have been more astonished.

I said a silent *thank you* to Renee. At least Bella had gotten one parent's blessing.

2. PRENUPTIALS

So far, Bella had been keeping her word by complaining only minimally when I gave her gifts as my wife-to-be.

“What’s mine is yours now,” I’d said and she couldn’t find a good argument to counter that. The next item I wanted to give her was a cell phone. Then she could call her mother whenever she wanted, or her school friends, or me, without worrying about Charlie listening in on her conversations.

Bella had been enjoying her recent talks with Carlisle at our house. Since we’d announced our engagement, Carlisle had become like a vampire rabbi, an elder of the tribe of vampire, sharing our history, our laws, and our stories with her. She was eager to learn as much as she could about her new life before she “converted.” With a cell phone, she could call Carlisle whenever she liked, or she could call Esme or Alice to get updates on the wedding arrangements (though that seemed unlikely, since she practically covered her ears and chanted “La la la la la...” whenever the topic came up).

Mostly, I wanted her to have a cell phone in case she needed to call me—if she got in a jam or had a flat tire (ignoring the fact that she could drive the Mercedes Guardian on four flat tires, if necessary). She didn’t need me to pick her up at the Quileute reservation boundary now that Jacob was gone and the other wolves, except for Seth, weren’t interested in talking to her, but if she had a phone, she could call Billy or Seth if she wanted to.

Bella would accept a cell phone if I presented it to her as a safety precaution. Once she had it, then perhaps she’d use it at other times too. I’d tell her that we had a great “Friends and Family” plan and now that she was family-to-be, she was eligible to join—something along those lines, so she wouldn’t be concerned about the cost.

Life was easier now that Bella had relaxed about the whole gift-giving thing. She viewed marrying me as such a huge concession on her part that she’d stopped worrying so much about “having nothing” to give me in return.

Bella was also accepting gifts more readily because I had finally agreed that we would try making love on our honeymoon. I was regretting that decision more as the wedding date grew closer, but she was determined to hold me to my word. Her attitude about our wedding night was “Practice makes perfect.” Mine was “No foul, no harm.”

Since that afternoon in the meadow when I had been more than prepared to make love with her—and *she* had refused *me*—I’d reverted to my earlier state of caution. Bella was

continually pushing the limits of my control and I was forever putting on the brakes. The powerful sexual need that had made itself known to me that day had not disappeared, though. Lying with her at night had become an exquisite melding of pleasure and pain—an intense arousal to the limits of my control, followed by the denial of gratification.

I'm not human, so my body doesn't work like a human man's...I don't have great surges of testosterone that render me desperately needful of sexual release or full of aggressive energy as Emmett has described his human experience. For vampires, sexual energy—once set in motion—is more constant, with less dramatic peaks and valleys. With that constancy comes a certain tolerance for the need. I'm always aroused when I'm near Bella, always available, but never outright desperate (at least so far). It isn't as difficult to manage as blood-lust is, in most ways.

My father recently told me that one hundred percent of human males masturbate. No, that's not right. What he actually said was “ninety-nine percent of men masturbate and one percent lie.” It's a joke among physicians, apparently.

My memories of being human during puberty are vague. Except for the slow suffocation one experiences with the Spanish Influenza—a trauma never to be forgotten—bodily sensations one had as a human quickly fade from memory after becoming a vampire. So while I dimly recall the act of masturbation, I don't remember the sensation of it.

Masturbation is possible for male vampires—I don't know whether that's true for females—but it doesn't provide the great sense of release that it apparently does for humans. I don't fully understand why, unless it has something to do with our inability to procreate, as I assume that the continuation of the human species is what fuels the irrational sex drives of humans. Since we can perpetuate our species through nonsexual means, requiring only mouth contact with a victim's blood, our most maddening drive is to drink human blood. But I don't really know all the facts. I intend to have a “birds and bees” talk with Carlisle soon and learn everything that I don't know about vampire sexuality.

I presume that human women are much the same as human men. If I'm driving Bella half as crazy as she's driving me, then I'll bet she finds private moments to give herself some relief. I'm sure that she does, actually. The signs aren't so hard to identify... her scent, for example, undergoes subtle changes.

I have become an expert in Bella's scent. Being with her as much and as closely as I am has taught me how Bella's scent changes at various points during her menstrual cycle. Two weeks before her flow, she becomes very, very sweet-smelling. Looking back, I suspect that that was the point in her cycle when I first met her, she was so profoundly, mouthwateringly aromatic. Reviewing fertility charts tells me that the sweet scent corresponds to her ovulation.

It makes sense biologically...or it would if I were human. I'd be most attracted to her during her period of fertility. As a vampire, I'm still attracted, though I can't impregnate her.

In contrast, just before her period, Bella has a lush, ripe scent, an extra layer over her normal, freesia-like sweetness. The lavender flavor rises during that time and she takes on a muskier aroma. The musk, combined with the scent of blood on her person is also extremely attractive to me. Unfortunately, that phase produces an increased burning sensation in my throat, which the presence of blood always activates. (Incidentally, I wonder if vampires are more likely to choose female victims who are having their menstrual periods. I bet so.)

Bella's lavender musk scent also rises when she is particularly aroused. I can make it out beneath the fragrance of the soaps and shampoos she uses in the shower. I'd wager that Bella makes time to masturbate in the bath, unaware that the artificial perfumes in bath products have no effect on the subtler natural scents of her body. I wouldn't ask her, though, not right now, at least. It would probably embarrass her, for one thing, and for another, if I begin talking about Bella's sexual release with Bella, I can see that conversation ending in only one way...and that's not a path I want to walk down just yet. I've reverted to my earlier position on pre-marital sex...with Bella's soul in the balance, I'd just as soon wait. I'm not immovable on the subject, as I proved to myself in the meadow, but it remains my preference. My fear gives me another good reason to avoid "going all the way" just now.

Still, Bella does push me mighty close on a regular basis. We "practice" a lot. One thing that helps keep us chaste in spite of our nightly practice is the chattering of Bella's teeth. Once Bella strips me to the waist, something she insists upon now that we're engaged, and she presses her t-shirt-clad torso against me, it doesn't take long before she begins to shiver. We've taken to wrapping her in a heavy afghan to keep her warm. She reaches out from her cocoon to stroke my body, which I allow to the extent that I am able.

I never imagined in all my years as a vampire that I could respond so powerfully to the touch of a human hand...*her* human hand. Her hands are conductors for the electricity that flows into me wherever they contact my skin. Her light touch makes me shudder; her firm grip makes me moan. My lips feel like fire against hers, with all of the heat, none of the burn. I long to touch her everywhere with my lips. Just thinking about it...*ahhhh...*

"Edward!"

Alice had been calling silently for a couple of minutes, but I was ignoring her, because I knew she'd just prod me to make more decisions about the wedding. I was standing in for the bride for the purposes of wedding planning. It is my understanding that the bride-to-be is ordinarily the one running around making thousands of decisions, going to appointments,

writing invitations, choosing colors, and everything else that goes along with hosting a traditional wedding celebration.

Of course, Alice was doing most of the work with lots of help and advice from Esme and Renee, the latter two seemingly on the phone with one another every day. Bella said that Renee adores Esme. I'm both unsurprised and delighted, partly because Bella will feel that her family is involved and supportive of her decision, and partly because our mothers' friendship might be a way for Bella to remain connected to Renee, maybe even after she is changed. Though she won't be able to talk to or see Renee in person, Bella could use Esme as a link over the phone, perhaps.

Since I hadn't replied to Alice, she appeared in my bedroom doorway, irritated.

"Edward, why didn't you answer me?"

"Sorry, Alice, I've been daydreaming."

"Well, Bella will be back soon from the printer's. She was going into town for groceries, so I asked her to pick up the invitations. I will give each of you a small stack to hand address. Esme and Rosalie will do most of them, but there will be several you should write yourself...like Billy's, and Seth's, and Tanya's. And I want Bella to hand-address the ones to our high school friends, because they will recognize her handwriting. I hate getting personal invitations written by somebody's mother or cousin. It always feels like your supposed loved one just put your name into the invitation hopper instead of giving you personal consideration."

"Okay, Alice, that's fine."

I'd been thinking about invitations myself. Despite the guest-list veto Bella had demanded from Alice, she hadn't said anything about vetoing my choices. Bella was planning not to invite Jacob because she didn't want to force him into thinking about our wedding and having to decide whether he should attend or not.

I realized, though, that if I were Jacob, I'd want to decide for myself whether to come, and I thought Jacob should have that choice. I decided that I would send him an invitation without Bella's knowledge, and write a note leaving it up to him. If he came, it would be because he wanted to and not because he felt obligated. He could easily ignore an invitation from me without worrying about hurting my feelings.

It would be a treat for Bella if Jacob showed up and surprised her with his presence. I knew that she wanted him to be her best man, but she felt it was unreasonable to ask him...and it was, probably.

“And Edward, I want to see the tuxedo you said you were wearing. I have to update it, or at least approve it.”

“Alice, it’s a fantastic tux and I’ve only worn it a couple of times.”

“You said you bought it for Carlisle and Esme’s wedding?”

“Yes, I was his best man. I love that suit and it’s of my era, you know, in line with the rest of the wedding you’ve planned.”

“I know, Edward, but I still want to see it. Have you even tried it on? Maybe you’ve gotten fatter since then,” Alice added, laughing at her own joke.

“Come with me now, if you want to. The suit’s in the attic,” I replied, as I hauled myself off the couch and led the way. “I have a top hat too.”

After Alice examined every inch of my old-fashioned tuxedo and vetoed the top hat (as I would have done if she hadn’t), she declared that it would work fine if I let her update the lapels and perhaps the fit here and there. I allowed the first suggestion, but not the second, as I wasn’t keen on standing still for Alice while she endlessly poked pins into my clothing.

“Feel free to modify it, Alice, but not in such a way that I’ll have to be fitted. I think the fit is perfect as it is.”

I was rather partial to it. It was the classic black coat with modified tails (not cutaway) and soft wool trousers, gray with subtle stripes. That was a popular alternative to the men’s traditional black tuxedo in the 1920s.

“I’ll put Charlie and Carlisle in gray suits that match the gray of your trousers, with black pocket handkerchiefs, and I’ll insist that you wear a gray bowtie or gray pocket handkerchief. That combination will go beautifully with Rosalie’s and my silver gowns. Perfect.”

Carlisle had agreed immediately to be my best man and Charlie would be giving Bella away in the traditional fashion. There was a point to such rituals, I thought. They helped humans to face and accept new realities. Funerals, for example, gave mourners a way to process the fact that a loved one was gone; bar- and bat mitzvahs announced that a child had transitioned into responsible adulthood.

Alice was still talking, but I was saved from being assigned further duties by the sound of Bella’s “before” car coming up the drive. She’d dropped off her groceries at Charlie’s house and was delivering the invitations to Alice.

“Hold on a second, Edward,” Alice added as I turned to leave. “Do you want Rosalie to play Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus” for Bella’s entrance? I would suggest Pachelbel’s Canon for seating the parents and guests.”

“Yes, definitely, and Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” for the recessional, please. No other music symbolizes those iconic moments in the same way. It’s like “Pomp and Circumstance” for graduation—you have to have it... Rosalie’s agreed to play piano?” I interrupted myself.

“Of course. You’re her brother. She wants to be involved. She’s the best pianist of all of us besides you, anyway.”

“Yes, well, tell her I said ‘Thank you.’”

“Tell her yourself.”

I rushed downstairs and just had time to lift my betrothed off her feet and give her a proper hello before Alice took Bella by the hand and dragged her off for a dress fitting. Bella was locked away for an hour with Alice and then she went home to make supper for Charlie.

I took a short stack of invitations from Alice to address the envelopes for my personal guests. I opened the first invitation and lifted the two overlapping layers of transparent tissue embossed with roses. My stone heart leapt in my chest as I read the words written in elegant script beneath:

*Mrs. Renee Dwyer and Mr. Charlie Swan
request the pleasure of your company
at the nuptial ceremony of their cherished daughter,*

Isabella Marie Swan

to

Edward Anthony Masen Cullen,

beloved son of

Mr. & Mrs. Carlisle Cullen

on the thirteenth of August, 2006, 4:00 p.m.

at the Cullen home, Forks, Washington.

It was truly happening! It said so right there on the expensive linen paper. Bella would hate the invitations, I realized. They were embossed with what appeared to be gold leaf. The extravagant embossing was of the style popular in the late 1800s, which, not coincidentally, was called "The Gilded Age." Persons of the higher social classes carried gold-embossed calling cards when they performed their ritual afternoon visits, leaving them on silver trays in entrance halls to announce their presence. Alice was giving us quite a few early-century touches, it seemed. These invitations weren't exactly inconspicuous, though.

I took a sheet of notepaper from one of the boxes and thought for a moment before putting pen to fancy linen paper.

Jacob,

I'm breaking the rules by sending you this. She was afraid of hurting you, and she didn't want to make you feel obligated in any way. But I know that, if things had

gone the other way, I would have wanted the choice. I promise I will take care of her, Jacob. Thank you—for her—for everything.

Edward

I folded the page in half and wrote *Jacob Black* on the back. I tucked the note inside one of the invitations, closed it, and addressed the outside of the envelope to *Mr. Billy Black*. That way, Billy would see the note first and if he thought it was better for Jacob not to read it, he could destroy it—though I hoped he wouldn't.

I put another invitation in an envelope and addressed it to *Mrs. Sue Clearwater & Seth*. A third, I addressed to Tanya and her family in Denali. That pretty much covered my obligations.

I retreated to my room and turned on my MacBook. I'd taken to working on plans for our honeymoon during Bella's dinner time with Charlie. In addition to my mother's loan of Esme's Island for the honeymoon, Alice and Jasper had given Bella and me first-class, round-trip tickets to Rio de Janeiro, the launching point for the island. Emmett and Rosalie were having the island's cottage stocked with food and drink for Bella, and had rented a boat for our use while we were there. Alice was packing Bella's bags for the trip so that I could surprise her with our destination. That pretty much took care of everything we would need while we were there. I was planning for Bella's entertainment in case the consummation scenario didn't work out.

Esme's Island is a small piece of land jutting from the South Atlantic about thirty minutes by boat from Rio. It has a yellow-sand beach leading from the master bedroom to the water, and the boat dock is a short walk from the front door. One end of the island retains a bit of indigenous jungle behind which is a cliff that drops fifty feet to the water below. No jumping allowed! There are many small islands in the area that we could motor to and explore, and a coral reef where we could snorkel. Dolphins live in the area, and whales migrate through there too.

Esme's Island is one of the places we Cullens and our friends can go for reunions or vacations, or as an escape from other places that we might need to leave in a hurry. Carlisle owns a few such bolt holes, both for enjoyment and for safe haven, as do the Denali clan.

After checking on the seasonal temperatures in Rio, memorizing a couple of nautical maps of the area islands, and creating a list of the supplies we'd need, I shut down the computer and hurried to my car. Bella and I had found one excuse or another for going out in

the evenings after her dinner, because Charlie had turned curmudgeonly since our betrothal. Bella said he was moping around and was angry at her mother for not opposing the wedding.

“Do you think there’s anything I can do for him?” I asked her, as we drove away from the house following Charlie’s usual unenthusiastic and taciturn interaction with me.

“You? Not likely. He knows we’ve got him over a barrel. There’s nothing he can say about our engagement.”

“He’s that unhappy about it, is he?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who reads minds.”

“Charlie’s mind is pretty quiet, Bella.”

“What do you mean? You can’t read his mind? Like me?”

“Not exactly like you. I get some things, but there’s a lot of silence, and then sometimes I get strong feelings, but I’ve never gotten many words. It’s a less complete silence than yours, perhaps one or two steps up the ladder from you.”

“You never told me about Charlie before!”

“No, it’s never really come up and it took me some time to figure it out.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. He has quite strong feelings, but their meaning isn’t always clear. For a while, I assumed that he didn’t have a lot of thoughts.”

“So what feelings do you read in him lately?”

“Hmm...that’s a good question. Concern, mostly, and some loneliness, I’d say.”

“I guess I’m a lot like my Dad. Renee said that commitment was never my problem, like it was for her. And it’s been obvious since living with Charlie that he’s still in love with Mom. After fifteen years apart. I wonder if he’ll ever find someone else.”

“Alice might know.”

“Alice is doing a good job of worming her way into Charlie’s heart. She’s got him wrapped around her little finger.”

“Good. Maybe that will soothe his ruffled feathers before the wedding date arrives.

“Wedding! Ewww...let’s not talk about that!”

I parked the car at the bluff road overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It’s a place we liked to come lately in the evenings. Tonight the skies were clear and there was a full moon casting trails of light across the water. What a lot of people don’t realize about Washington State is that it’s far enough north that days became quite long during the summer months. The sun doesn’t set until after 9:00 p.m., so twilight is extended for several hours. It doesn’t rain much either, because summer is also the dry season. Summer evenings in western Washington are one of the great pleasures of living there.

“As you wish, m’lady,” I said, using the electric seat controls to lean halfway back and to give myself some leg room. Then I pulled Bella onto my lap, her legs stretched across the center console, her feet on the passenger’s seat. I used the master controls to lower the windows and let the balmy 70-degree evening air drift through the car. I wondered if Dr. Mariano—or her drivers, anyway—would notice the salty scent of the sea when the automobile returned to the landlocked desert town of Phoenix. Bella hardly could have moved to a more divergent environment than where she came from—the desert to the rainforest.

Bella laid her head on my shoulder and I began stroking the long locks that hung down her back.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“It’s not so bad, really. Alice and the moms have handled almost everything. They hardly even ask me to participate, so that’s working out really well. I’ll bet when all this is over that Renee will invite Esme to visit her in Florida. They’ve become such good friends—at least Esme has become Mom’s friend. She doesn’t know many people in Jacksonville, but she sure has hit it off with your mom.”

“Esme has that effect on people. The only place my mother could go to spend time with your mother would be here, though, where the sun never shines, and your mother won’t visit here, will she?”

“She probably would if you and I ‘settled down’ in the area. Though she hates Forks, she does love me.” Then Bella added, “It’s too hard to be around Renee, though. She’s much too perceptive and I’m much too bad a liar to fool her about anything. She’d guess something was up if she hung around here.”

“So, she and Phil aren’t staying after the w...ceremony, then?”

“They’ll just stay overnight in Port Angeles, and then they’ll take a pond-hopper to Seattle to catch a flight to Florida in the morning. Phil’s gotta be back for a game.”

“I thought he broke his leg?”

“Yes, but he’s still required to sit on the bench and support the team. Anyway, Mom’s hoping he’ll have his cast off by then.”

“Bella...,” I began, as I raised her chin with my index finger so I could look into her eyes.

“Yes, Edward?” she responded, raising her eyebrows as I leaned in to smell her sweet breath and touch my lips to hers. I blew my breath across her face, something that seemed to intoxicate her. Often, she’d lose her train of thought and her eyes would go glassy. Then I’d lean in for a passionate kiss. I would not always have this effect on my beloved. It was fun to exercise the power while I still had it.

Bella kissed me back, twining her left hand through my hair while she used her right hand to unfasten the bottom button of my shirt. Then she unbuttoned the next, and the next, then slipped her hand beneath the woven cotton and traced a line along my waistband with her fingers.

Mmm... her fingers felt so warm against my skin, so electric, the charge shooting from her fingertips and traveling downward from the places where she touched me. Bella trailed her fingers upward to my chest, tracing the curves of my pectoral muscles, running her fingers through the light hair at the center of my chest. I shuddered in the most delicious way.

“*Mmm...Bella...I love your hands on my skin,*” I whispered to her. “But go easy, please. You make me lose my wits so quickly.”

“Shhh...just kiss me,” Bella whispered back, running her left thumb across the hard, smooth surface of my bottom lip and back across my top lip. I took her thumb into my mouth, followed by her index finger, and on down the line. After releasing her pinkie, I grasped her by the waist, picked her up, and rotated her until she was kneeling over me on the seat. I moved my hips toward the steering wheel slightly and pulled her buttocks high up my legs. Bella gasped a jagged breath as she settled onto my lap and started rocking her hips. I groaned and pulled her face to mine. There was so much energy flowing between us. I found some release for the excess by moving my lips with hers and pressing into her. My breath accelerated and I longed to grasp her buttocks and rub her back and forth against me. I caught myself in time, though, and lifted her a few inches above my lap, holding her aloft while we continued to kiss.

“Edward,” she moaned, “I want you.”

“And I, you, my darling,” I replied softly, as I balanced her weight on one hand and opened the car door with the other. I rotated in the seat, and then held her head against my

chest as I rose from the car. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I stood up. I inhaled the musky scent that rose from her. Bella was highly aroused.

“You smell so good to me...I want to eat you.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Bella quipped and I laughed.

“All the vampires I know do...absolutely! And then there’s Tyler, and Mike, and Eric, and that Shawn kid from the Junior class, and the bagger at the grocery store....”

“What do you know about him?” Bella demanded, pulling her face back a few inches. I’d successfully distracted her.

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he’s packing your Apple Jacks and frozen peas.”

“You have not! You’re making that up!”

“Would I lie to you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I think you would, *Mr. Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!*” she sing-songed.

“My pants are on fire about as much as yours are,” I teased.

“That’s got to be pretty hot then,” she muttered, as she put one arm around my neck and the other under my chin and guided my mouth to hers.

I had Bella home before 11:00. Charlie was imposing no curfew now that Bella was eighteen and engaged, but he did wait up for her on the couch, so I made sure to get her home before his bedtime to keep him from losing sleep. Nobody needed the Chief of Police to be groggy on the job. I didn’t mind bringing her home early, for I simply took a walk around the block or more often, a run through the forest behind Bella’s house and when I returned, Charlie usually had retired to his bedroom. That’s when I leaped to Bella’s second story window and slipped through.

“Bella, do you have any musical preferences or requests for the ceremony? Alice asked me today and I told her to have Rosalie play the traditional pieces.”

“Rosalie’s playing the piano for us?”

“That was exactly my response, but yes, she is. Alice said Rose wanted to as a gift to us.”

“I haven’t heard her play.”

“She’s very good, of course.”

“But not as good as you, I bet.”

“She’s extremely gifted.”

“So not as good as you.”

“You don’t have any other preferences for music?”

“No, whatever you choose is fine with me. At least if we have the standard ‘Here Comes the Bride,’ I’ll know when I’m supposed to start walking in.”

“I’m sure Alice will not let you miss your entrance,” I said, slipping under the covers and wrapping my arm around Bella’s waist.

“Are you having a bachelor party?” Bella asked out of nowhere.

“Oh, Emmett’s been having thoughts about it. He doesn’t want me spending my last single night in your bed, though / can’t think of a better place, actually,” I said, tracing my fingers along Bella’s right collarbone where it extended from beneath the scooped neckline of her t-shirt. I touched it with my lips and then brushed my way up to her shoulder, up her neck and then down her jawline, then back up her jawline. I kissed her in the hollow beneath her ear. Bella’s heart sped to its usual frantic pace.

Bella hadn’t attempted to remove any of my clothes yet, but I felt her left hand take my right and place it on the side of her rib cage. I gladly ran my fingers along each rib in turn, memories of both Bella’s and Jacob’s broken bones distracting me for a second.

In that brief moment, Bella had pulled my hand onto her left breast and my fingers automatically cupped around the soft sphere. Her t-shirt had been washed so many times that the cotton knit fabric was tissue thin, leaving very little to the imagination. Bella had shut her eyes and placed her hand over mine, encouraging exploration. I squeezed her breast gently through her shirt and stroked my thumb across the rise of her erect nipple. I felt my desire surge and I stopped moving to let it wash over me and away. I heard myself groan.

“If you keep this up, Bella, I’m going to have to go home,” I muttered, my voice deep and raspy. I moved my hand reluctantly onto her neck.

“If you don’t keep this up, we’ll be very ill-prepared for our wedding night,” Bella said, inhaling a jagged breath. I could see her impish grin in the dark.

“You seem quite prepared to me,” I replied, as I rolled over her. I balanced on my forearms and toes, and gently touched the length of her body with mine. Bella gasped, then threw her arms around my neck and tried to pull me down onto her with no effect. I kissed her

lightly on the neck and under her jaw, and then moved to her lips. Her heart was racing like a filly at Churchill Downs. I focused on her heartbeats to distract me from the aching in my groin. Bella was starting to hyperventilate, so I flexed my arms and knees and sprang upward, maintaining the flat plane of my body. While in the air above her, I rolled Bella onto her side, and then landed on my side behind her. I pulled myself against her back, buttocks, and thighs and wrapped my arm around her waist.

“You should get some sleep,” I suggested.

“Sleep might be beyond my abilities right now,” she replied.

“Try. I’ll sing to you. You’ve been getting very little sleep lately. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“I won’t get sick. I’m too happy for that. Where are we going on our honeymoon, Edward?” Bella liked to throw out that question at random moments, hoping futilely that she would catch me off-guard and I’d blurt out our destination.

“It’s a surprise,” I reminded her.

“North, South, East, or West?”

“Yes. Now go to sleep.”

“You’re impossible,” Bella sighed, but I could hear the fatigue in her words. I began to hum her lullaby and within five minutes, she had dropped off.

Well before dawn, I crept out the window and ran home to check in with Esme and to change clothes. I planned to be back before Bella awoke, so she wouldn’t be startled by my absence. Esme was in her office, happily piecing together some lengths of bridal netting and satin on her sewing machine. I couldn’t tell exactly what she was working on.

“Hello, Mom,” I greeted her. How are things going with the preparations?”

“Oh, Edward, it’s going to be a beautiful wedding. Alice has considered everything. And while I’m thinking about it, let me give you the keys to the honeymoon cottage.” She darted to her closet where a small safe was tucked behind rods and racks of clothing. She had it open in an instant and placed the keys in my outstretched hand.

“Thank you so much for this. Bella will love it! Plus, the heat will be more comfortable for her. I’m really looking forward to seeing the place again.”

“Well, it’s just sitting there empty right now, and I thought it would be nice privacy for you two in the sunshine. Gustavo will come once a week to look after things and get you anything you need that isn’t already there.”

“It will be magnificent!” I exclaimed, leaning forward to kiss her on the cheek. Then I went in search of Carlisle. It was time for that talk.

“Carlisle,” I called, once I’d located him outside heading toward the river.

“Edward! I’m surprised to see you without Bella.”

“Just giving Charlie a break,” I said, smiling.

Not too keen on giving away his daughter is he? Carlisle asked silently.

“No, I don’t think he’s buying into the old adage, “You’re not losing a daughter; you’re gaining a son,” I said ruefully.

Hard to blame him, I guess. Bella’s been with him for only a couple of years.

“I’m starting to think that Charlie has a talent for precognition. He’s been sensing that Bella is going to ‘disappear.’ That’s what he told her.”

It will be hard on both Charlie and Bella to be apart, won’t it?

“Yes, it’s one of the things that worries me about her choice. I don’t know if she can really predict what it will feel like being separated from her parents.”

I think you have to trust Bella with the decisions she’s making. She knows who and what you are, so she has all the information you can give her. You can’t protect her from yourself, son.

“I suppose not, which brings me to why I came looking for you.”

I was just heading into the forest for a quick hunt. Would you like to come along?

“Yes, I’ll come with you for a ways, but I want to head back to Bella’s within an hour or so.”

“Let’s go, then.” We took off running for several miles before catching the scent of Wapiti about fifty yards away.

I dipped my head in that direction, indicating that Carlisle should take the prey. He nodded once, then dropped into a hunting crouch and dashed off. In a few minutes, he rejoined me.

So what did you want to discuss, Edward?

I stared at my hands for a moment before meeting his eyes. "Can you guess? The traditional topic for a groom-to-be, I suppose...the wedding night."

Carlisle just smiled and waited attentively for me to continue.

"Bella and I have made a series of bargains regarding our nuptials. She's been raised with a healthy mistrust for the institution of marriage and if she had her way, we wouldn't marry at all for another ten years, if then. I, on the other hand, still believe in the traditional values surrounding marriage." I paused, thinking how to present my questions. "What Bella does want is something I never intended to give her, but it became part of our bargain...." Another pause while I stared at my hands, still uncomfortable with our agreement. "Bella wants to have a 'real' honeymoon, as she puts it—as a human. She wants to make love with me before she changes." I looked up to see Carlisle's reaction, but he just nodded at me to continue.

"Heaven knows we've been pushing the boundaries in that direction anyway, but I'm terribly afraid that I'll hurt her. I'd prefer to wait until after she's changed, but she argues that she won't have the same feelings then as she does now without all those hormones flowing through her system."

She has a point, though to the best of my knowledge, she'll be happily surprised.

"Will she? Will she be as passionate later as she is now?"

Well, I can't say how Bella will feel, but Esme was extremely happy with our sex life after we married.

"Her former husband was not kind."

That's true, though that wasn't the only difference. We are capable of feeling everything that humans feel and with our heightened senses, a lot more besides. But that is neither here nor there if she doesn't want to wait.

"I am glad to hear that. It seems that way for me. My desire for her is extremely powerful."

We only become more of what we already are when we change, so if Bella is passionate now, then she is likely to be even more so as one of us.

“I don’t think I’ll share that information with her. She’s already in much too much of a hurry to give up her life.”

But I haven’t answered your original question, have I?

“No, not exactly. I guess there are several things I need to know. My real problem is that I’m terrified I will hurt Bella. I can already tell that it’s next to impossible to concentrate on being gentle with her in the heat of the moment. I could even kill her! I thought that if I knew a little more of what to expect with intercourse, it might help me figure out a way to keep myself in check.” I knew I hadn’t really asked a question, but I looked at Carlisle’s face, with a question in my eyes.

Well, you’re right that coupling with you will be dangerous for Bella, but with your level of sensitivity and control, not impossible, I should think.

“What will happen? How can I keep from hurting her?”

It’s primarily an issue of strength and weight. I think your challenge will be to become as still as you can when your release approaches—you will know when. The less you move, the less you flex your muscles, the less likely you will be to hurt her. It won’t be your first instinct—as sexual tension builds in your body, your natural reaction will be to grip and push and contract your muscles. Instead, you should try to relax and be passive. If Bella is as anxious to go through with this as you say, then she won’t mind taking the lead. That’s the best advice I can give you. It is a risk, certainly.

I nodded, digesting what he had said and considering whether it would be possible to become still at the right moment. Carlisle surprised me by continuing.

If you were anyone but who you are, I would almost be more worried about what physical intimacy might do to you. It’s not something to be taken lightly. As vampires, we rarely undergo dramatic changes in our beings, but experiences that are as profound and emotional as sexual love can permanently alter us. In your case, though, Bella has already changed you to such a degree that I’m not so concerned about the impact of the physical act itself. She has been so good for you, Edward. I can’t imagine that you won’t be good together, in whatever way you choose to be with her.

Carlisle had given me much to consider. I carried his words in my head all the way back to Bella’s house.

3. BIG DAY

“I miss you already.”

“I don’t need to leave. I can stay...”

“Mmm.”

It was the eve of our wedding and Bella and I were lying in her narrow bed together, as was our habit. Though it was August, she was wrapped in her usual swaddling blanket, a protection against the chill of my skin.

The bulky afghan did not prevent Bella’s hands from wandering about, exploring the unclothed parts of my body. If she had her way, both of us would be even less clothed. I found shirtless to be challenge enough. With Bella’s fingers probing the outlines of each muscle and bone above my waistband, her lips on mine, I was both awash in pleasure and sinking into concern. Some might call it performance anxiety and I could not deny it. When one’s performance was a matter of life and death, there was no shame in that.

Bella dragged her tongue across my top lip and a surge of desire shot through me. It was all I could do to remain still and let the sensation fade. If she were a vampire, I would have rolled on top of her, stripped off the bulky afghan and pressed my entire body into hers. I would have kissed her passionately, tasting her lips, her tongue, and pulling her as close to me as the laws of physics would allow. *Ahhh...* I groaned and retreated from her caressing hands and her delicious, warm tongue.

“Wait,” Bella murmured, clutching my arms. I watched as she kicked her right leg free from the blanket and wrapped it around my waist. “Practice makes perfect.”

I chuckled. I’d heard *that* one before. Numerous times.

“Well, we should be fairly close to perfection by this point, then, shouldn’t we? Have you slept at all in the last month?”

“But this is the dress rehearsal,” she protested, “and we’ve only practiced certain scenes. It’s no time for playing safe.”

Playing safe. My body froze as I considered how easy it would be to break Bella’s arm, or tear out a handful of her beautiful hair, or snap her spine, or...

“Bella...”

“Don’t start this again. A deal’s a deal.”

“I don’t know. It’s too hard to concentrate when you’re with me like this. I—I can’t think straight. I won’t be able to control myself. You’ll get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Bella...”

“Shhh!”

Bella put her hands on either side of my face and pressed her lips against mine. I would like to have been distracted by that, but it was too late. My mind was already elsewhere, drifting from the thousand-and-one ways I could harm Bella to enumerating all she was giving up for me...her family, her friends...her chance to be a mother, to grow old, to become something more than what she was right now. It was too much to sacrifice just to be with me. In my mounting distress, I revisited an argument that Bella and I had had repeatedly. I’d never convinced her before; I don’t know why I thought she might change her mind now.

“It’s not *right*! I don’t want you to have to make sacrifices for me. I want to give you things, not take things away from you. I don’t want to steal your future. If I were human—”

Bella stifled my objections by putting her hand over my mouth.

“*You* are my future. Now stop. No moping, or I’m calling your brothers to come and get you. Maybe you *need* a bachelor party.”

My brothers must have agreed with her, for Emmett’s thoughts suddenly interrupted my own. *Maybe we’ll catch them with their clothes off! Hope so. Ha, ha!*

“Oh, for the love of all that’s holy!”

“What’s wrong?”

“You don’t have to call my brothers. Apparently Emmett and Jasper are not going to let me bow out tonight.”

Bella tightened her grip for a moment before releasing me. “Have fun,” she said.

Perhaps it *would* be better for Bella if I left. Then I wouldn’t upset her with the “cold feet” I’d told her I didn’t have. I had no second thoughts about marrying Bella—I could hardly wait to do that! My second thoughts were all about the wedding night. Yes, I should leave. Maybe she would get some sleep if I did.

“If you don’t send Edward out,” Emmett threatened in his best, creepy-monster voice, “we’re coming in after him!”

Bella laughed. “Go! Before they break my house.”

Kissing her forehead, I advised, “Get to sleep. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Thanks! That’s sure to help me wind down.”

“I’ll meet you at the altar.” I gave her a sly smile, reaching for my shirt.

“I’ll be the one in white,” Bella announced nonchalantly, as if we were planning a rendezvous at the mall.

I chuckled at that, considering the anxiety attacks that overcame her every time I mentioned the wedding. “Very convincing,” I tossed over my shoulder as I leaped out the window. My feet landed squarely on Emmett’s head, knocking him to the ground.

“Dammit, that hurt!” Emmett stage whispered, as he jumped up and took a swing at me. I dodged the punch easily. His thoughts always gave him away.

“You’d better not make him late,” I heard Bella warn my brothers.

Jasper leaped up and grabbed the eaves outside Bella’s window. He turned on his soothing vibes.

“Don’t worry, Bella. We’ll get him home in plenty of time.”

“Jasper? What do vampires do for bachelor parties? You’re not taking him to a strip club, are you?” she whispered and I had to smile. As if *that* would be fun for me! No woman had ever affected me like Bella did. Women could dip themselves in blood and parade around naked all day and it wouldn’t do a thing for me. I should know—Tanya had tried such tricks many times to get me into her bed.

“Don’t tell her anything!” Emmett hissed at Jasper, earning himself a friendly forearm shove that knocked him to the ground...again. I could never beat Emmett if we fought strength to strength, but with my mind-reading skill, he rarely got in a good punch. I laughed at his expression as he stood up and brushed the grass off his jeans. He tried to look casual as he readied himself for a “surprise” counterattack. Just as he launched himself at me, I took off running, knowing he couldn’t catch me at full speed.

“Relax,” I heard Jasper reply to Bella. “We Cullens have our own version. Just a few mountain lions, a couple of grizzly bears. Pretty much an ordinary night out.”

Jasper had told Bella the truth. We would be celebrating our boys' night out with a hunt. I didn't need the blood at the moment, but it was still a good idea. If I fed now, then I wouldn't have to leave Bella to hunt for the first two weeks of our honeymoon. Besides, I only had one more day to remain chaste until Bella and I were married. I did not want to slip-up at this late date—getting out of Bella's bed would make that a whole lot easier.

Running gave me time to think about the last couple of months. As my fiancé, Bella had accepted the black credit card with her name on it attached to my account. Like the cell phone, I'd presented it as a "safety precaution," but she'd started to use it for other things too, and that had been the point.

Bella had quit her job at Newton's Olympic Outfitters, so she didn't have any pocket money to speak of. I was glad that she'd quit. I preferred not giving Mike Newton the opportunity to gape at, and entertain salacious thoughts about, my bride-to-be as was his habit. Also, I was happy that we could spend more time together. I didn't have to part with her company for the three or four days a week she would have worked for what I considered to be spare change. Unless she really liked the job—and I knew that she didn't—I saw no point in sacrificing our time together.

It had been a great summer. The only slight comedown was the "father-in-law talk" Charlie had initiated with me. I haven't encountered many people who could surprise me in the last eighty years, but Charlie was one who could. His mind was so quiet—in the sense of relatively impenetrable to me—that while I could perceive his feelings, I often couldn't hear the inner dialogue that went with them. I didn't like the sense of insecurity it gave me not knowing what he was thinking. I was used to having more time to consider how to react to people than I ever had with Charlie.

One evening five weeks earlier, Charlie had grabbed my arm as Bella and I were leaving his house for the evening. We'd found a number of private parking spots around the area and we liked to visit them as often as possible. Because he'd surprised me, I reflexively yanked my arm out of his grip at my natural strength.

Immediately, he'd put both palms up as if he was surrendering. He'd mistaken my quick reflex as a sign of anger. The interaction reminded me of the television show "Cops," in which hooligans whirl around and punch an arresting police officer just on principle. Charlie must get that a lot. I quickly raised my palms to indicate a mutual surrender. I would have smiled if I hadn't thought Charlie would interpret it as a taunt. Bella had missed our interaction and was continuing toward the car.

"What can I do for you, Charlie?" I inquired politely.

“I was just wondering what your folks think about you proposing to my daughter.”

“Oh, they love her, they really do.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant.”

“No?” I wasn’t going to help him interrogate me.

“No...uh...I meant what do they think of you getting married right out of high school?”

“Oh! Well, you know they got married quite young themselves. Esme already had Jasper and Rosalie to look after when she met Carlisle. They fell in love and Carlisle wanted to help support the kids, so he proposed when Esme was younger than he might have otherwise. They’ve been extremely happy, so they don’t have any prejudice against getting married young.”

“Do you think you’re old enough to handle this kind of responsibility? That’s my daughter you’re promising to support for the rest of your life. Are you one hundred percent sure that you’re ready for that?”

“I will be there for Bella always. I can assure you of that.”

“What if you screw it up and things fall apart?” Charlie pressed.

I thought about that for a moment before answering. I knew what he was referring to without having to read his thoughts.

“There are many ways I could mess things up,” I admitted. “I’ve already made mistakes with Bella. I know that. I wasn’t here for her when she needed me. I swear to you, Charlie, I left because I wanted Bella to have a chance to find somebody better than me. But I found that I couldn’t live without her and so I came back. Jacob might be a better choice for her, but she still wants me and as long as she does, I won’t leave her. I don’t make the same mistakes twice.”

Charlie just gave me his dark-eyed, policeman’s stare. I didn’t blame him. He’d watched Bella suffer daily after I abandoned her. Jacob had impressed upon me all the painful details he could summon about that time.

“Jacob’s a good young man,” Charlie finally responded, “but I wouldn’t want him marrying her at his age, either.”

I took another moment to consider my response, and then sighed, knowing I’d never convince him with words.

“The only way to know whether I’ll be good for Bella is with time. I can’t offer you proof, but I love her more than my own life and I *will* take care of her, Charlie. I just hope that I can make her as happy as she makes me, though I hardly think it’s possible.”

Charlie’s stare didn’t change, so I continued.

“If it makes you feel any better, my family is behind us, and you know Carlisle well enough to know that he would never let Bella down...even if I did. My family would step in for me. That’s just the way my parents are. They’re great people.”

“I know they are...Edward. I trust Carlisle and that’s why I’m not making more of a fuss about this.”

I acknowledged his statement with a nod. “Just so you know, Charlie...Bella and I discussed eloping to Las Vegas and marrying without telling anyone. But Bella didn’t want to cut you out of her decision in that way, so we decided to make it a family event.”

“I *knew* there was something going on!” Charlie exclaimed. “I had a feeling you two were going to take off together!”

“Bella wants you there to walk her down the aisle, or the stairs, rather. I hope you can see your way clear to do that for her on her day.”

Charlie nodded stiffly and I turned to follow Bella to the car. “That’s a fancy car you got my daughter.”

“Yes, it’s a loaner. Carlisle called in a favor for me. It’s a very safe car.”

“Well, that’s good. You can hardly get a car that’s safe enough to share the roads with all the bad drivers and drunk drivers out there.”

“I agree. Goodnight, Charlie.”

“Night.”

Charlie shut the front door and I saw that Bella was coming back to get me. I hurried toward her.

“What was all that about?”

“Charlie wanted to have a little ‘man-to-man’ talk about his precious daughter, but I told him I agreed with everything he said, so he loves me now.” I grinned and winked at Bella. She didn’t buy it.

“No, what did he really want?” she demanded. “Tell me, or I’ll march right back and ask him!”

I sighed. “Charlie just wanted to warn me about the dangers of marrying too young and make sure I knew what I was doing.”

“What did you say?”

“I said that I was old for my age,” I replied, giving her a crooked smile.

“You did not!”

“Sure, why not? I am, aren’t I?” I teased.

“Ancient. I should be grossed out being with someone as old as you.”

“Fortunately, I still look good and that’s what really counts.” We both laughed and, to my relief, Bella dropped the subject.

Bella’s mother, Renee, had flown in two days earlier and Bella was sticking close to her except when our mothers worked on the wedding. It was odd behavior for a bride-to-be, but I wasn’t marrying Bella because she was like everyone else. Quite the opposite.

When I’d come home two evenings previous, Renee was visiting Esme. In an attempt to demonstrate her acceptance of me as her almost son-in-law, Renee had dashed across the living room and thrown her arms around my neck.

“Welcome to our family, Edward!” she’d said. I thought perhaps she was overexcited by the trip or by meeting my family. I hadn’t expected such an exuberant greeting, though she had no particular misgivings about Bella marrying me. Renee ended the hug abruptly when her arms encountered my cold, hard self.

“Hmm,” she mumbled as she broke off contact. *Hard body!* was her thought, and I almost laughed out loud. The picture in her mind was complimentary, not literal. She was imagining what my upper body looked like without a shirt. I’d already gotten acquainted enough with Renee when Bella and I went to Florida that I knew she didn’t mean anything by it. A cougar...just like Bella, I thought, and smiled to myself.

It was a little sad to meet Renee again, knowing that this was the last time Bella would see her, or possibly even talk to her on the phone. As I watched Bella over the course of the two days, I sensed that she was saying her goodbyes. If I'd had to give up Carlisle and Esme to be with Bella, I could have done it. I had given them up once before. But it was hard to accept that I could make Bella happy enough to give up seeing her parents. I'd asked her again last night whether she was prepared to do that and her response had been, "Are you trying to ditch me?" Then we'd started laughing and the question had gotten lost.

My brothers and I didn't get back from hunting until a couple of hours before the wedding. Esme collared us immediately and sent us to the back garden to hang flower garlands for Alice. It had to be done at the last minute or the August day would wilt them.

Alice had prohibited me from going anywhere near where she was preparing Bella, so I headed to my third-floor room to make myself presentable. Alice had changed my old-fashioned tux just enough to convert it from "vintage" to "vintage chic," as she put it. It did look good, I had to admit.

I tried to neaten my normally unruly hair. I put some hair gel on it and convinced it to lie down in a semi-orderly fashion. After a time, Jasper came upstairs to tell me that the first guests were arriving. He and Emmett would be ushering them to their seats. Of course, Jasper could have told me that from downstairs, but Alice had specifically asked him to come get me, so that I wouldn't be parading down the bride's decorated stairway in full view of the guests. I walked outside through the kitchen door, telling Carlisle that I'd be waiting out back. He and Esme were standing by the front door to greet everyone as they arrived.

This was the most important day of my life, but I hoped to have infinitely more wonderful days to enjoy with my Bella. I felt exceedingly fortunate that she wanted me as I wanted her. I could have lost her so easily.

I heard the Denali clan arrive and recognized Tanya's mental voice: *Where's Edward? It will be good to see that man again...mmm hmm! Who is this human girl? I can't imagine Edward with a woman, not even a vampire woman. This will be interesting...*

I smiled, glad to be escaping Tanya's clutches for good. She'd given me a hard time when we were living in Alaska. She wasn't used to being told "no thank you." Neither vampires nor humans ever turned down Tanya's advances. She was beautiful and charming, everything a man could want. She just wasn't for me and she never could accept that. It was one of the reasons Carlisle decided to move our family farther south. He told everyone that we were too conspicuous and perhaps we were, all there together, but I'd had the chance to hear another reason in his mind—that *Tanya can't leave Edward alone.*

My father empathized when Tanya set her sights on me. Carlisle had had plenty of pushy admirers in his life. During his first few weeks at any new hospital, nurses would line up three deep to ogle him. He had to temper that initial interest by telling some number of them that he was happily married, thank you. Of course, he wore a wedding ring, but that didn't discourage everyone. Once people met Esme, though, they usually stopped chasing Carlisle. She was simply too beautiful, inside and out, to compete with.

I know Esme had always worried that I wasn't fully mature as a man when Carlisle changed me and that I might never find, or even wish for, a mate. It was true that I wasn't interested in any of the Denali ladies. And after the trouble I'd had with Rosalie when she joined our family, I didn't expect anything good could come of such interest anyway. When the Denalis met the only bachelor vampire they'd seen in years, each of them had set about seeking my affection. I didn't blame them, particularly. Perhaps they'd gotten tired of human men and wanted someone more durable to partner with for a change. I could understand that to a certain degree.

I didn't go inside to greet the Denalis or any of the other arrivals. I couldn't focus on anyone but Bella—it seemed like such a long time since I'd seen her. I was trying to reason myself out of an irrational fear that she wasn't really there in our house, that she had changed her mind and would leave me standing alone at the altar. If I listened, I could hear her voice now and then, but I couldn't hear her thoughts and that had never bothered me so much as it did at that moment.

To distract myself, I listened at random to our guests' thoughts and found that everyone was astonished by the decorations. Alice had put her all into planning this wedding and it showed. The flowers alone were beyond imagining. Exquisitely fragrant arrangements covered every surface of our living room and the reception area outside. Alice was particularly fond of flowers. I thought perhaps it was because she'd been deprived of beauty for so many years at the asylum. Whatever the reason, it was a boon for us all.

Rosalie had started playing my grand piano, making the one instrument sound like several. I knew that Pachelbel's *Canon in D* was my cue to enter the living room with Carlisle and stand in front of the flower-covered archway. He would come looking for me in the kitchen when the time came, so I walked back into the house.

In due course, Carlisle came to retrieve me and after a final, heartfelt hug, we took our assigned places in front of the assembled crowd. I stood, frozen with emotion, and watched anxiously for my beloved to appear at the top of the stairs on her father's arm. I had waited a lifetime to stand in front of these witnesses and declare my undying devotion to the one and only woman I would ever love.

Time had stopped making sense when I finally heard the familiar C-F-F-F notes of “Here Comes the Bride.” I *could not* believe my eyes when an angel from heaven began to descend the stairs, one by one, her eyes lowered to watch her feet. It was only when I heard her whisper “Don’t let me fall, Dad,” that I knew for sure it was Bella...*my Bella*.

I fretted for a second that my angel might fall and I readied myself to dash across the room to catch her. Seeing the groom disappear and reappear somewhere else would not go over well with anybody, though I reasoned that all of the guests would be looking at Bella, not at me. Still, perhaps we should have served champagne before the ceremony, just in case something like that did happen...but then, Bella was descending the final step. She lifted her face, searching for me.

When our eyes finally met, a look of such utter joy crossed her face that I broke into an ecstatic smile. Bella’s feelings often were written on her face, but today her expression was utterly transparent. The adoration in her eyes was unmistakable and I was jubilant enough to break out in song...almost.

Our eyes remained glued to each other while Bella carefully traversed the fifteen-foot aisle that Alice had kept short to give Bella a fair chance of remaining upright. With the way she looked in that dress, with that makeup, with everything...the glow, the scarlet blush, the prisms of tears in her eyes...I wanted to rush down the aisle to meet her and carry her back to the altar. But I remained patient, stretching out my palm so that Charlie could place Bella’s hand in mine. He regarded me seriously as he did so and I nodded my thank you to him for his great sacrifice.

Charlie seated himself beside Renee, with Phil on her other side, and Bella and I turned to face the minister. I loved the traditional wedding ceremony with its promises and pronouncements, but on this occasion, each word resonated with newly unveiled meaning. When I declared “I do” to my beloved, I’d never been happier in my life. I wanted to repeat the words in every language I knew.

My lovely new wife was overcome with emotion. When I leaned over to kiss her for the first time as her husband, Bella’s arms encircled my neck and she held on as if she would never let me go. The audience had disappeared—she only had eyes for me. I kissed her with a swell of love and tenderness that made my eyes burn with the tears that didn’t come, and she met my passion with her own. Emotion poured from her as she clung to me, melding her lips with mine as if we were utterly alone in that moment. I did not mind in the least. Bella was *happy* to be married to me—I could feel it in my bones.

When the guests began to titter, I eased my love’s face gently away from mine and looked into her tear-filled eyes. I felt my happiness radiate from me like the heat of a coal fire

and I wondered briefly if my skin was sparkling in its glow. When Emmett cleared his throat unobtrusively, I turned us both to face the loved ones who had gathered there and everyone broke into smiles and quiet laughter.

I could not let go of Bella for a second. I wrapped my arm around her waist and practically carried her down the aisle when she forgot to move her feet. Fortunately, they were hidden by the length of her dress. Another detail that Alice had not overlooked.

Bella was so *stunningly* beautiful that I wasn't surprised to hear a number of inappropriate thoughts as the reception line shuffled slowly past us and on to the buffet. Alice had timed things well, so that the vampires would not have to step outside until twilight, just in case the sun came out. It was good that she did, because we had a beautiful wedding day with plenty of sunshine filtering through the ancient cedars.

I was extraordinarily pleased that Billy Black and Sue and Seth Clearwater had come to the wedding. Despite the Cullens' official status as "mortal enemies" of their tribe, the three of them were there in support of Bella and Charlie, and perhaps as a gesture of gratitude to Carlisle as well. Seth was there for me, too. Our friendship had not faded since we'd joined forces to battle Victoria and Riley.

"Congrats, guys," Seth said, coming toward me with his arms out. I hugged him with one arm while I held Bella tightly with the other. "It's good to see things work out for you, man. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Seth. That means a lot to me." Releasing Seth, I faced Billy and Sue with honest gratitude. I knew they were not there for me.

"Thank you, as well. For letting Seth come. For supporting Bella today."

"You're welcome," Billy replied cordially and I hoped his attitude boded well for the change that was coming.

I didn't know how I was going to approach the Quileute wolf pack about Bella's upcoming transformation. It was possible that if we left the area to avoid their ancient vendetta, that Jacob still would come to hunt us down. He had no motivation to let me change Bella, but I hoped that he and all the wolves would agree to the one exception to our treaty. Billy wasn't giving anything away with his thoughts, but Sue's mind was full of concern about being in a house with so many vampires.

As the receiving line moved along, the only slightly awkward moment was introducing Tanya to Bella.

“Ah, Edward, I’ve missed you,” Tanya said, pulling herself close to me in an intimate embrace. She lingered a bit too long in my one-armed hug—on purpose. I chuckled at her audacity as I employed one of Carlisle’s tricks for dealing with forward women...to press her shoulder away as if to admire the full length of her.

“It’s been too long, Tanya. You look well.” Though Bella would never believe it, her beauty outshone Tanya’s many times over in my eyes.

“So do you,” Tanya replied, a familiar note of longing in her voice.

With a great swelling of pride, I interjected, “Let me introduce you to my *wife*.” Kate and Carmen giggled at the emphasis. My joy at using that word for the first time sang in my words. “Tanya, this is my Bella.”

Bella had been uncertain about inviting Tanya and her coven, but I’d convinced her that as extended family—orphans, to boot—they must be included. I also wanted Tanya there specifically to underscore the point that I was officially and permanently unavailable.

“Welcome to the family, Bella,” Tanya responded appropriately, if not altogether enthusiastically. “We consider ourselves Carlisle’s extended family, and I am sorry about the, er, recent incident when we did not behave as such. We should have met you sooner. Can you forgive us?”

“Of course. It’s so nice to meet you,” Bella replied, blushing. I noted the brief flare of excitement among my cousins at the rush of blood before each of them contained it.

“The Cullens are all evened up in numbers now. Perhaps it will be our turn next, eh, Kate?” Tanya grinned.

Kate’s sarcastic sense of humor kicked in. “Keep the dream alive,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Welcome, Bella.” Kate took Bella’s hand and Carmen stepped up to add hers.

“I’m Carmen, this is Eleazar. We’re all so very pleased to finally meet you.”

“M-me, too,” Bella stuttered. I thought she was holding up well considering she was meeting my “relatives” for the first time.

“We’ll get to know each other later. We’ll have *eons* of time for that!” Tanya remarked, laughing.

I enjoyed performing the rituals of the wedding celebration. Alice had ordered a gorgeous, artfully decorated cake, its beauty being the only aspect of it I could truly appreciate. I did not relish swallowing the chunky blob Bella pushed toward my face, but that could not be

avoided with such an attentive audience. Flashbulbs popped, capturing the uncomfortable moment for all time. Bella tossed her bouquet to Angela, who blushed puce and carefully avoided the eyes of her escort, Ben, which are six inches lower than her own.

When it came time to lift Bella's skirt and remove her garter with my teeth, she blushed hotly while Jasper and Emmett guffawed at her embarrassment. I wasn't allowed to venture *too* far up her dress, since she slid the garter below her knee before I got the chance. Still, it was a fun moment, biting the elastic band and dragging it slowly down her calf. After detaching it from her leg, I stretched the elastic into a slingshot, aiming for Mike Newton's head. The garter snapped him in the forehead and his mouth dropped open.

Ha! I win! I thought triumphantly, as the blood rushed to Mike's face. Cameras flashed simultaneously. That would teach him to ogle my bride!

Soon thereafter, the dancing music began and I gladly swept Bella onto the dance floor, proud of her for not hanging back in fear. I held her slightly off the ground so she wouldn't stumble and whirled her around to a waltz.

"Enjoying the party, Mrs. Cullen?" I murmured in her ear.

"That will take a while to get used to," Bella replied, chuckling.

"We have a while," I said, thrilled at the truth in that. In high spirits, I leaned over to kiss my wife and once again, the cameras flashed in our direction.

When the song ended, Charlie approached me from behind and tapped my shoulder. I returned his daughter to him as graciously as I could now that she was mine and went to find Esme for the exhibition dance. Esme had taught me how to dance, so our efforts were well-rehearsed and we moved together flawlessly.

I couldn't take my eyes off Bella as I danced gingerly with Renee—*My goodness, he moves well! Lucky Bella!*—and then with my sisters. While all the men jostled for a dance with my wife, no human women (except for Bella's mother) stepped up to claim a dance with me. Though I was happier and more genial than I'd ever been, my vampire nature still frightened them away to a degree. It didn't bother the Denalis, though, and I danced with Carmen, Tanya, and Kate.

When Mike Newton finally got his chance to dance with Bella, I didn't wait long before cutting in, much to his annoyance.

"Still not that fond of Mike, eh?" Bella asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not when I have to listen to his thoughts,” I snarled. “He’s lucky I didn’t kick him out. Or worse.”

Mike was still Mike, and his mental pictures were nearly as vivid as Jacob’s, though less respectful. (*If that freak Cullen hadn’t been around, Bella would have done it with me last year! We’d still be doing it! I’d sure like a taste of...*)

Bella didn’t believe that Mike lusted after her.

“Yeah, right,” she challenged.

“Have you had a chance to look at yourself?”

“Uh, no, I guess not. Why?”

“Then I suppose you don’t realize how utterly, heart-breakingly beautiful you are tonight. I’m not surprised Mike’s having difficulty with improper thoughts about a married woman. I *am* disappointed that Alice didn’t make sure you were forced to look in a mirror.”

I couldn’t believe she hadn’t, in fact. Bella could not see herself as others saw her and tonight of all nights, she ought to. Perhaps then she would believe me when I told her she was beautiful.

“You are very biased, you know.”

I sighed. She would never get it.

“Biased, am I?”

I gestured toward the reflective glass windows of our living room. I sensed her initial confusion and then, finally, saw her eyes grow large in recognition that the stunning princess in the glass was her. Bella’s mouth dropped open and I smiled.

Then out of nowhere, I heard my name being called in someone’s thoughts. I directed my attention to the wooded area behind the dance floor. *Mind reader! Bloodsucker!* That was familiar enough. For a moment, I thought that we were in for trouble, but then the thought continued. *I’ve come to see Bella.*

“Oh!” *Jacob Black!* We hadn’t heard from him for weeks. Billy’s gracious calm in the receiving line might have had something to do with his son’s return home. I grinned happily, grateful for the gift Jacob was giving Bella.

“What is it?”

“A surprise wedding gift,” I told her. This one was from Jacob *and* me.

“Huh?”

I twirled Bella to the rear of the dance floor beyond the twinkling lights and into the shadows of one of the ancient cedar trees that stood sentry over our home.

“Thank you.” I spoke with heartfelt appreciation into the darkness of the forest. “This is very...kind of you.”

“Kind is my middle name. Can I cut in?”

Bella gasped at the sound of the familiar voice. I felt her body slump against my arm momentarily as her legs faltered beneath her.

“Jacob!” Bella sputtered breathlessly. “Jacob!”

“Hey there, Bells.”

I guided Bella to Jacob’s huge, hot hand, and he engulfed her in his arms, throwing me a curt nod.

“Rosalie won’t forgive me if she doesn’t get her official turn on the dance floor,” I said, excusing myself so that Bella could have some private time with her best friend.

Jacob’s thoughts were a mixture of joy at seeing Bella and sadness at seeing her in her wedding dress, but only because it *was* a wedding dress and he was not the groom. Bella was too beautiful not to inspire his awe.

As I danced easily with Rosalie—Esme had perfected her skills—I listened for any sounds of trouble. Then I realized that Sam and Quil—in their wolf forms—were waiting in the woods nearby as a precaution. They were there mainly to protect Jacob and Seth, but also to protect their secrets in case Jacob lost control of himself. I breathed a little easier, grateful for their protective presence, although feeling that way rather surprised me.

Rosalie and I took a few more turns around the floor before I heard Bella’s angry voice behind the music and the chattering of the guests. The humans probably could not hear it, but to me it sounded like Big Ben chiming midnight.

“...and *yes I can* have a real honeymoon! I can do anything I want! Butt out!”

I stiffened, all my senses directed toward the rising emotion of the conversation amongst the trees.

“What? What did you say?” Jacob’s voice rang with alarm, which confused Bella.

“About what...? Jake? What's wrong?”

“What do you mean? Have a real honeymoon? While you're still human? Are you kidding? That’s a sick joke, Bella!” Jacob’s stress was mounting. I was riveted to the conversation, preparing to dart to Bella’s side in an instant. Alice turned up the music.

“I said butt out, Jake. This is so not your business. I shouldn’t have...we shouldn’t even be talking about this. It’s private—Ow, Jake! Let go!”

“Bella! Have you lost your mind? You can’t be that stupid! Tell me you’re joking!”

I knew that Rosalie and the rest of my family could hear the altercation, even if the humans couldn’t over the sound of the music.

Do you have this? I looked around for Emmett so I could nod yes, and that gave Jacob a half second more than he should have had.

“Jake—stop!” Bella’s voice rang out in pain.

Rage burned through me and I shot to Bella’s side.

“Take your hands off her!” I commanded Jacob in what Bella calls my “razor-blade” voice. I could have struck him down in that moment without a second thought, but his hands still gripped Bella’s arms. I struggled to contain my fury. The wolves were becoming restless in the woods. With Jacob still in human form, he was ignoring Sam’s commands to let go and move away. He seemed frozen in shock. Suddenly Seth was there too.

“Jake, bro, back away. You’re losing it. You’ll hurt her,” Seth begged in a whisper. “Let her go.”

“Now!” I snarled. It would be my last warning. My brothers were hovering nearby and would join me instantly if I signaled them.

Within the same quarter-second that Jacob released Bella’s arms, I whisked her to safety behind me and swung around to face him. Instantaneously, Sam and Quil had positioned themselves as a barrier between us, facing Jacob. I was startled out of my anger by the trust that their stance signified—turning their backs on a vampire.

Seth had moved close to Jacob, his arms wrapped around the big man’s waist, and was trying to pull him backwards. His effort was like a mouse tugging at an elephant and just as dangerous for him.

“C’mon, Jake. Let’s go,” Seth implored, but Jacob didn’t budge.

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you myself! I’ll do it now!”

Jacob’s fury had risen to a peak and I could see the desire to attack me in his mind, but his muscles were frozen. I suddenly realized that he *couldn’t* phase to his wolf form. I stood ready to assist in removing Jacob from our property, but Sam’s thoughts told me that he would take care of it. Sam pressed his huge skull into Jacob’s chest and put his enormous power to work shoving Jacob backward into the forest.

“I’m sorry,” Bella whispered.

“It’s all right now, Bella,” I replied, before I saw that she wasn’t talking to me. One wolf remained, staring me down. Quil warned that he and Embry would back up Jacob if a fight started. I nodded tersely and he launched himself into the forest.

“All right,” I said, steadying myself. The problem was under control. Time to put the supernatural back into its box and rejoin the party, pretend that nothing had happened. “Let’s get back,” I said to Bella.

“But Jake—” Bella was worried about Jacob? Really? I was concerned *only* for her. Jacob had crossed the line.

“Sam has him in hand. He’s gone.”

“Edward, I’m so sorry. I was stupid—”

Of course, Bella would blame herself. I was the guilty one for having invited Jacob Black to our wedding and he was guilty for losing his temper on Bella’s special day.

“You did nothing wrong—”

Bella interrupted me to berate herself.

“I have such a big mouth! Why would I...I shouldn’t have let him get to me like that. What was I thinking?”

“Don’t worry. We need to get back to the reception before someone notices our absence.” Bella looked at me as if I were asking the impossible before she suddenly took charge of herself.

“Give me two seconds,” she gulped, seeming to remember who and where she was. It was not always comfortable to be a Cullen, but we had responsibilities.

“My dress?” Bella asked, as she smoothed the skirt with her hands.

“You look fine. Not a hair out of place.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

I wrapped my arms around my wife protectively and escorted her back to the dance floor. We twirled into the crowd as if we’d never left.

“Are you—” I began, before Bella cut off my inquiry.

“I’m fine. I can’t believe I did that. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with *you*,” I said, barely controlling the anger in my voice. I wasn’t angry just at Jacob, though. I was furious and disgusted with *myself* for having agreed to endanger my bride’s life.

“It’s over. Let’s not think of it again tonight,” Bella advised, but my thoughts were already focused on the folly of the promise I had made.

“Edward?”

I shut my eyes against my dismay and leaned my forehead against Bella’s.

“Jacob is right. What *am* I thinking?”

“He is not. Jacob is way too prejudiced to see anything clearly.” Bella’s words didn’t quell my misery.

“I should let him kill me for even thinking...” I began under my breath.

“Stop it.” I knew Bella was talking to me, but I couldn’t attend to her words in my sudden, acute wretchedness. Then I felt her hands cup my face and realized that she had stopped speaking. I opened my eyes and found her gazing into them.

“You and me. That’s the only thing that matters. The only thing you’re allowed to think about now. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” I replied, sighing.

“Forget Jacob came. For me. Promise that you’ll let this go.” How could I disregard the pleas of my beloved Bella? I decided that I would try to do as she asked and put the issue aside for the moment. This was Bella’s day and I had to make it a happy one for her.

“I promise.”

"Thank you, Edward. I'm not afraid," she added.

"I am," I muttered.

"Don't be." Bella smiled. "By the way, I love you."

"That's why we're here," I said and tried to give her a genuine smile in return. Just then Emmett saved me from myself by cutting in.

"You're monopolizing the bride. Let me dance with my little sister. This could be my last chance to make her blush." Emmett let loose with a raucous laugh.

That was a great idea. I bowed out and went to find Esme. Maybe she could help me calm down and let go of my worries. I tapped my father on the shoulder.

"May I?"

"Of course." *Are you okay?*

I nodded, though he knew me well enough to know that that wasn't entirely true. He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment and then exited the dance floor. It wasn't a minute before Tanya had her arm around his waist, pulling him back out.

"Is everything all right, Edward?" Esme inquired.

"Yes. I'm just concerned about Bella.

"Why? Did Jacob hurt her?" She pulled back abruptly to look at my face.

"Slightly, but that's not why."

She raised her eyebrows and waited for my explanation.

"Did Carlisle tell you of our agreement regarding our honeymoon?"

She nodded. "Is that what Jacob was upset about?"

"Yes, he knows the danger. So do I...that's the problem. I'm concerned for her welfare."

"You talked to Carlisle about it?"

"Yes, he advised me that it was dangerous, but he doesn't seem as worried as I am."

"Edward, all you have to do is remember that you love her. If this is what she wants and she understands the ramifications, can you try to give that to her?"

“I have promised exactly that...to try. I just can’t be sure she’ll be safe.”

“No, I suppose not, but the fact that you are so worried about it makes me think that she will be.”

“I can’t know.”

“Not until you try. And that brings us back to where we started. I think you’ve made a promise that you can keep.”

I thought over what she had said and saw that she was right. If things didn’t work out, Bella had already agreed that we wouldn’t go through with it. I kept that thought in my mind as Carlisle returned and swung my vampire mother away.

I watched from the sidelines as one man after another lined up to dance with my gorgeous wife. The first man I saw who tried for a second dance would be disappointed, though, because I would step in and reclaim her.

Alice approached and pulled me onto the dance floor. She was a skilled dancer, but with almost eighteen inches difference in our heights, our dancing together was somewhat amusing. Jasper was an inch taller than me, though, so Alice was used to it. I gripped her waist and lifted her to a more comfortable height so I wouldn’t have to bend over.

“Edward! Put me down! You’ll wrinkle my dress!”

I just laughed and twirled faster until my tiny sister threatened to bite me on the neck. I knew she would do it.

“All right, all right,” I said, chuckling. I flipped her laterally around my waist in an extreme country-swing maneuver before releasing her to the floor. She stomped on my foot without losing a beat and then adopted a superior expression. I grinned at her and she pursed her lips, trying not to smile. Alice could always cheer me up.

I continued my duties by dancing again with each of the Denali sisters. I stepped up to ask Carmen for a dance and saw that Eleazar was approaching Rosalie. Tanya had been relatively well behaved, so I danced with her next. It seemed she was prepared to accept my new status, though I knew she didn’t always respect marital boundaries. With me, she would have no choice.

“Bella is lovely, Edward.”

“Yes, she is,” I said, smiling down at her.

“So someone finally stole your heart...I’m surprised, I must say.”

I smiled again, but made no comment.

“I suppose it was just a matter of time. A *lot* of time,” she added a bit spitefully.

“Bella is very special.”

“She must be, being human and all,” Tanya said in a low voice. “Are you going to change her?”

“When the time is right.”

“So, your honeymoon...?”

“Is our private concern,” I said firmly, cutting her off. I’d already learned my lesson about sharing such information and I knew Tanya. Give her an inch and she’d take a mile.

“Really, Edward, I wish you all the best. I’m glad you’ve finally found her.”

“Thank you Tanya, that means a lot to me. I’m sure you all will love her too once you get to know her.” I rewarded my cousin with a dramatic dip at the end of the dance. She laughed.

Just then, I glanced over Tanya’s shoulder and saw Mike Newton heading toward Bella with scheming thoughts in his head. Under the guise of their “close friendship” and the festive setting, he was planning to steal a kiss.

“Can you excuse me, please? I need to rescue my wife,” I said, moving away.

“By all means,” she replied, watching to see what I meant.

I subtly cut off Mike’s progress toward Bella and took her hands from Eleazar.

“May I?” I said, stepping in. I swung Bella away from Mike, leaving him stranded on the dance floor looking surprised and a little forlorn. This was not his night. Ha! I should have sic’d Tanya on him.

Bella seemed relaxed now as I pulled her to me. “I could get used to this,” she murmured.

“Don’t tell me you’ve gotten over your dancing issues?”

“Dancing isn’t so bad—with you. But I was thinking more of this,” Bella said, hugging herself tightly to my chest, “of never having to let you go.”

“Never.” I bent my lips to hers. As we kissed, I felt the heat rise in my body and I clutched Bella closer to me. *Mmm*. Perhaps my talk with Esme had settled my nerves. I was becoming more engrossed in the kiss the longer it continued.

“Bella! It’s time!” Alice called, but I had no intention of letting Bella go. My sister’s attempt to separate us only made me want to clutch her more tightly.

“Do you want to miss your plane?” Alice was standing next to us now. “I’m sure you’ll have a lovely honeymoon camped out in the airport waiting for another flight.”

“Go away, Alice,” I murmured, moving my lips intently against Bella’s.

“Bella, do you want to wear that dress on the airplane?” Alice warned menacingly. Bella paid no more heed than I had. We were only with each other now, joined at the lips.

Alice hissed, “I’ll tell her where you’re taking her, Edward. So help me, I will.”

Arrrgh! Damn Alice’s pesky, persevering personality! But I could not ignore her threat after all the effort I’d expended to keep the honeymoon destination a surprise.

“You’re awfully small to be so hugely irritating.”

“I didn’t pick out the perfect going-away dress to have it wasted,” Alice barked.

“Come with me, Bella,” she said imperiously, taking Bella’s hand to lead her off. I released her reluctantly, but she clung to me and stretched her lips toward mine one more time. Her heart was racing in a highly exciting way. Alice yanked on Bella’s arm, pulling her along and I heard snickers throughout the assembly. We were making a spectacle of ourselves, but I could not care less.

Ahhh...! I was beginning to wonder how I could wait eighteen more hours before Bella and I were alone. Then the realization struck me—Bella and I were married! Nothing stood between us now. All the rules had been satisfied and we were free to love each other as we wished, without hesitation or encumbrance. Suddenly, I knew that despite my fear, I *could* make love to Bella and I would do so to the best of my ability.

I had over-prepared actually, studying Carlisle’s anatomy and physiology texts to review the mechanics of human female sexuality. I had read every guide to marital union that I could acquire, including the classic, *The Joy of Sex*, which was particularly informative. Emmett had teased me mercilessly when he found me reading it.

“Now you can tell everyone that you learned about sex the hard way—by reading *books!*” He roared with laughter.

Emmett, of all people, should have recognized that he was standing a little too close to me to make such a comment. I was surprised he'd overlooked it. Not moving my eyes from the sexual positions for women's pleasure that I was studying, I smacked his nose with my fist.

"Ow!!" he bellowed and I leaned six inches to my left to avoid his return punch, then ducked six inches down to avoid his second...all without looking up from my book. Frustrated, he stomped away.

I had to admit that his joke was a *little* funny...by reading books! That was *so* like me! I chuckled.

I heard the women approach the top of the staircase and took a position at the bottom, waiting to take my new wife's hand. She looked absolutely stunning...again. She was dressed in a knee-length, linen sheath in the deep blue color that was so beautiful against her skin tone. Her cheeks were flushed in gorgeous contrast to the rest of her ivory skin and long, dark hair. While I gazed at her descending the stairs, she looked past me.

"Dad?" she called.

"Over here," I said, directing her toward Charlie who was standing against the farthest wall, shielding his emotional state from probing eyes.

Bella hugged her father, tears flowing down her face.

"There, now. You don't want to miss your plane," he comforted her awkwardly.

"I love you forever, Dad. Don't forget that." Bella was saying goodbye for the last time. No wonder she was crying. I could assume that she'd just had the same scene with her mother upstairs.

"You too, Bells. Always have, always will."

They kissed each other's cheeks.

"Call me," Charlie added.

"Soon," Bella replied.

"Go on, then. Don't want to be late." Though Charlie was always awkward in situations such as this, the emotion I felt rushing out of him ran deep.

"Are you ready?" I asked Bella quietly, wanting to know whether she was resolved to leave her parents. She could still change her mind about that by deciding not to change.

"I am," Bella replied firmly.

I nodded and we drove away to the sound of a lone wolf howling in the distance.

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...pleeease..." 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.

5. TRYING

Bella emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a fresh bath towel and squeezing her hair dry with a hand towel. She looked radiant, her cheeks and lips rosy pink. This was not her usual blush, the one that flowed upward from her chest and neck and flooded her face when she was embarrassed. This was more specific, the luscious pink color in precisely the places where girls are trained to apply lipstick and rouge. It occurred to me then that cosmetics were meant to give the wearer a “love blush”—the beautifully colored glow of post-sexual fulfillment.

I remembered an issue of *Playboy* magazine Emmett had shown me in the 1970s featuring erotica by the masters. One picture was a little-known, mostly black-and-white drawing—Dali? Picasso?—of a nude woman sitting on the floor, recovering from orgasm. The only color in the picture was a deep rose hue striped across her lips and cheekbones, and coloring her nipples and exposed labia. A cat sat nearby, looking on with disdain. The woman’s coloring precisely matched Bella’s right now. Though I couldn’t see under her towel for the moment, I’d bet that her hidden parts matched the artwork as well. (Emmett would get a laugh out of that bet, but of course I would never tell him.)

I was standing in the doorway gazing at my love when she glanced up and saw me watching her. She dropped her eyes and blushed. When I held out my arms, she moved toward me and I folded them around her. She laid her cheek on my chest and I rubbed her back, and then bent forward to kiss the top of her head.

“How are you feeling, my darling?”

“Oh, Edward...” she gulped, and her throat muscles jumped as she tried to swallow.

“You’re crying! What’s wrong, Bella? Are you hurt?” Alarmed, I grasped her shoulders and leaned back so that I could see her face. Would she even tell me if she were?

“N...n...no. I’m j...just happy,” she croaked.

I raised her chin with my index finger and looked into her tear-filled eyes. She *was* happy. I moved my lips toward hers slowly. She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me, gently at first, then more ardently. My chest felt full, swollen, with joy. Our lips moved in tandem, her sweet scent filling my mouth. She was tantalizing, delicious. I remembered then, with a jolt, her blood on my fingers, her taste on my tongue. My throat burned. I shuddered and pulled back.

“Bella, you were bleeding. Are you all right? Are you in pain?” There could be more than one reason for tears.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Please tell me,” I implored, knowing she would try to minimize any pain.

“No, really, I feel wonderful, Edward.”

“Let me get you some Tylenol.”

“Really, I’m not hurting. And Tylenol isn’t what I want.”

She rose on her tiptoes and stretched up toward me. She was irresistible—and I’d promised her that I wouldn’t resist. I felt my anxiety level rise. It was one thing to touch her and thrill to her response—somehow, I had managed that safely—quite another to be carried away myself. She must have recognized my sudden tension, because she leaned back and looked into my face, her eyes a question mark.

“Edward...?”

I felt myself start to freeze up under her sharp gaze. She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment.

“I love you, Edward Cullen,” she murmured.

Though I felt one or two words of protest rise to my lips, I stifled them and took a deep breath. We *would* try. I scooped her up with one arm behind her back and the other behind her knees. Her thick towel came untucked and gaped open.

“My beautiful Bella...,” I marveled. “Mmmm...”

I located an opening through the mosquito netting, which was raised like a tent above Esme’s large, white bed. Bella kept her arms wrapped tightly around my neck and as I lowered her to the bed, she tried to pull me down on top of her. My habitual caution melted as I fixed my eyes on her tantalizing form, the love blush still evident. I would have won my bet! My desire surged.

She reached for my towel, yanking it away and tossing it to the floor. I felt her eyes on me as I lowered myself over her, hungry for her mouth. Our lips met, setting my body aflame. I felt her tongue trace a line along my bottom lip and I opened my mouth slightly, taking in the taste of her hot breath and the wet tip of her tongue as it entered me. It reminded me of my fingers inside of her and I gasped at the sharp rush of electricity that flowed to my groin.

Bella's hands were traveling down my back. My skin felt almost scorched by the heat of her palms. As they moved lower, I kissed her passionately, my self-control losing ground. Finally, she cupped her hands around my buttocks and pulled me fiercely to her. I let myself rub against her; my body knew what motion it craved.

She was panting now. My eyes had closed and my mouth had gone slack as I was overcome by sensation. I was stunned by the intense pleasure of simply pressing my nakedness against hers. My penis had a mind of its own, though, trying to find its way inside her without any help from me. I wondered idly if it was even possible to stop at this point.

"Bella," I managed to whisper. "I don't want to hurt you. Are you sure this is the right time? You're not feeling sore?"

"No, Edward," she gasped. "I'm only feeling one thing right now. I want you inside me. Please..."

When she reached down and stroked me with her right hand, I groaned and clutched the bedding. She raised her knees, letting them drop outward, and my penis settled onto a silken nest of tender flesh and copious wetness. I stretched my head back, eyes closed, in response to this electrifying sensation—her wet heat against my dry chill. Without intent, I slid back and forth against her. If I were human, I would have fainted with pleasure. Bella cried out—perhaps I did too. I raised my hips slightly then, my penis searching impatiently for entry. She guided me there; I knew immediately when I was in the right place.

Each of us, human or vampire, possesses a set of instincts and reflexes with which we were born. I became acquainted with one of mine at that moment: to thrust myself into my lover as deeply as possible as quickly as possible. To "nail her to the mattress," as it were. Where had I heard that vulgar slang? Emmett? It had to be Emmett. I had a feeling that some of his tactless, very male jokes would have more meaning to me tomorrow than they had yesterday.

It was concern for Bella that gave me the self-control I needed. I thought of what she had already been through tonight and resolutely resisted the urge. Instead, I pressed gently and waited for her body to accept me. My penis was definitely thicker than two fingers. Bella gripped my buttocks and I let her pull me toward her at her own pace, while I tried to remain alert to any pain I might cause her. That was the plan, anyway.

It was a good approach, in theory, and that's what I set out to do, but when her wet heat began to engulf me, the plan disintegrated. The feeling was just...unbelievable. Singular. Shocking. Mind-altering. I heard a deep rumble erupt from my chest. Whether it was a growl or

a groan or some combination of the two, I don't know. All I know is that at that moment my mind went utterly blank. I was nothing, more or less, than this all-consuming sensation.

With my left arm supporting my weight, I instinctively reached to lift Bella's buttocks so I could thrust into her more forcefully. She reacted by pulling me a little deeper into her. Another rumble in my chest. The sound brought me back to myself and I remained still for a moment, trying to recapture my wits.

She felt tight around me. I started to pull back, not wanting to tear into her.

I should stay shallow and give her tissue—and perhaps her mind—time to stretch to accommodate me. Bella resisted.

“No, Edward, come back...” she moaned. Her hips rose from the bed with mine. She still felt constricted inside.

“Bella, does this hurt? Am I hurting you?”

“You feel...just...amazing,” she murmured huskily. “It feels good way more than it hurts.”

I probably should have questioned her more diligently, should have been leery of her words, but suddenly, it was just beyond me. I felt my self-control collapse after months of rigid enforcement. I grabbed her buttocks and pushed. I slid further into her heat and felt her walls give way to me. Bella gasped audibly. Still further, and I felt the back of her vagina cradle me. She gasped again.

“S okay, 's okay, 's good...” she exhaled before I could collect myself sufficiently to ask. “Mmm...mmm...mmm,” she hummed in a low, throaty tone, rocking her hips rhythmically.

I *had* to move inside her, to feel her walls close behind me as I pulled back, then yield again as I pressed forward. There would be no question of stopping now. It was...just...too...good.

I balanced on my left forearm, and with one hand still beneath her, I pulled back, then pushed forward, back, forward again. My lips found hers and we kissed open-mouthed, devouring each other. My tongue kept hers from straying too close to my sharp, venomous teeth. I strove to pull her ever closer to me.

Bella's panting had risen to a new, higher tone. It started on the A above middle C and then slid in a glissando up the scale on successive breaths. Then she stopped breathing altogether. I puffed air into her lungs, reminding her to breathe, while I watched and listened to the thrilling escalation of her excitement. Mine rose along with hers.

Abruptly, I realized that the last threads of my self-control were tearing away. The intensity of the feelings in my body was taking me beyond any threshold of restraint. I knew intuitively that I was becoming dangerous to Bella. What if I jerked my hand or thrust too hard or...?

In a quick motion, I rolled onto my side, holding Bella tightly to me. She began to groan with dismay until I rolled onto my back, still inside of her. One of Emmett's helpful, nonverbal suggestions had been to keep Bella on top of me. If she was driving the cart, so to speak, I would be less likely to injure her. I was self-aware enough to know that, barring an act of God (or a cry of pain from Bella), I could not stop now. My legendary self-control had utterly crumbled. Fortunately, ceding responsibility was something Bella had been begging me to do for weeks. Carlisle had also suggested letting Bella take charge to avoid injuring her. My conscience was relatively clear as long as I didn't hurt her.

Bella easily accepted the new position, laying her cheek on my chest, her hands gripping my shoulders. She was on her knees, straddling me, and I remained still, telegraphing my intention to yield the reins. With both hands free, I stroked her arms, her sides, her back, her hair, her beautiful buttocks, her lovely breasts, everything I could reach, as she lifted her hips slowly up, experimentally, then slowly down. My hips rose naturally to meet her on the down stroke. She gasped when the gap closed and I felt her internal muscles clench. The feeling took my breath away. I was deep inside her now, pressing against a different part of her internal geography than before.

She repeated the motion, finding it to her liking, then balanced on her elbows and leaned down to kiss me. I could tell she liked being in control, something I'd been unable to give her until now. She was still at risk, I knew, but I was too far gone to worry, and for me, that was saying a lot.

It became difficult to kiss. One or the other of us would lose concentration to a more pressing touch and stop moving our lips. Soon we surrendered, letting our mouths be still together, each breathing the other's breath.

I was completely lost to the sensations in my groin. Everything else drifted away, bit by bit, as more of my faculties surrendered to that singular location. At some point, I noticed that each time Bella eased away from me, I unconsciously grabbed her and pulled her back, as if afraid she would suddenly leap out of bed and run away. I also noticed, fleetingly, the red stripes on her arm where my fingers had just been.

I could feel Bella subtly position herself so that, on each downward cycle, my penis rubbed against what I thought might be her G-spot. (Really, what a silly term!) She had shut her eyes and was stroking her insides repeatedly with me, much like a cat marking a doorway, or

the edge of a couch, or a human's leg by swiping its face over and over on the same spot. I liked the idea that she was marking me, or I her.

Just then, Bella laid her head on my chest, raised her hips, and reached to touch herself between her legs. Our position wasn't giving her sufficient stimulation, I guessed, and she craved release. I was startled by her boldness, but wildly aroused. Ecstatically lost in pleasure, I half-watched her and half-disappeared into the powerful sensations in my own body as she began moving her fingers in a rhythmic motion slightly faster than I'd done earlier. Her hips were traveling more quickly and more forcefully. I could feel her vaginal muscles contract each time I touched the back of her. It made me want to push into her faster and harder to feel that squeeze.

Tension was building in my groin rather frighteningly as Bella's movements picked up speed. My scrotum had pulled upward, tightening itself against my body. My penis felt like it was swelling and lengthening, though I was pretty sure that was impossible. And I felt more swallowed up by her, more hugged, more squeezed.

Oh gawd, let this be safe for her, I thought anxiously, knowing there was nothing I could—or would—do now to stop whatever was going to happen. Bella dropped her head to rest her forehead on mine, but bumped her cheekbone rather sharply against my nose instead. That was going to leave a bruise, I thought ruefully, before losing that brain wave when Bella's high-pitched gasping rose half an octave, then stopped altogether as she held her breath.

I felt a rolling sensation begin at the back of her vagina. It reminded me of the hand motion farmers use to milk a cow, a successive gripping from the index finger to the little finger, repeated over and over. Her insides were milking me. It was too, too much and I felt something inside me give way. Muscles I didn't know I possessed began to spasm. A strange, but extremely pleasurable, exploding sensation rolled upward from my scrotum to the tip of my penis. I cried out in surprise—half groan, half growl—then again in pleasure as a second explosion began. In that moment, I completely lost track of who, where, and what I was. There was no vampire, no human, no Edward, no Bella. Everything that I was melted into her and all that she was permeated me. We were one and the same.

When I returned to myself, I found that my teeth were clamped down on one of Esme's feather pillows. *Better the pillow than Bella,* I thought, mildly alarmed. The torture hadn't done it any good, I could see. I tossed it away and a huge poof of feathers flew into the air, like confetti at a ticker-tape parade. How appropriate.

Bella's eyes remained closed as she lay flopped forward on my chest, her hair against my neck. Our bodies were sated, but we continued to rock against each other in a gentle

rhythm from our shared fulcrum. She'd wrapped her arms around my neck and mine circled her waist. After a few minutes like this, I swept her hair out of her eyes and off of her face. I could see that her left cheek was slightly bruised. I kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair.

I couldn't get over how we were connected in this very real, powerful way, with the most private part of my body inside the most private part of hers. "And the two shall become one..." from the wedding ceremony was making more sense to me now—as a reality, certainly—but also symbolically. I would like to talk to Carlisle about it sometime.

Bella made no move to lift herself off of me and I certainly didn't mind remaining there connected to her for as long as she liked. I noticed that her dark hair was covered with a heavy dusting of goose down.

Oops! I thought, amused.

Bella seemed to have drifted off in one of the primary relaxation poses of Hatha Yoga, called child's pose—knees tucked under (straddling me in this case), face and buttocks planted on the floor (or on me, in this case). I simply felt honored to be there, and supremely fortunate, and eternally in love.

Truly, I could stay like this forever.

Less than one hour after the most significant experience of my existence, I was in misery...utter misery.

After making love, Bella had dozed off for fifteen or twenty minutes. *I'm starting to see a pattern here*, I'd thought, chuckling to myself at the role reversals we sometimes enacted. She hadn't moved from the Child's Pose she'd taken and wonderfully, remarkably, she was still holding me inside of her. I sang softly to her and stroked her hair, and marveled at this transcendent—and most pleasurable—experience.

With perfect recall, I replayed the entire evening in my mind. I was happy that Bella had pushed me into making our deal. Though I could have played checkers with her, or chess, or any number of other games, and been glad just to be married to my true love, I'd hate to have missed out on making love with Bella on our honeymoon. I was also happy that the memories would be with me forever and never fade.

Though the rest of my body was cool, one part of me was exactly the same temperature as Bella. I wondered if my being inside her for so long would make her more tender than she would be otherwise. I didn't want to wake her.

I also wondered what she would say when I told her that male vampires have no "down" time. Though I had experienced a tremendous release—not something I would have imagined in a million years—I could start over immediately. Not only did we remain erect, essentially, we had no need for recovery time, no need for sleep, or food, or human body maintenance, no tired muscles or chafing, no impediments at all to making love twenty-four hours a day. As long as there was desire, there was the means to satisfy it. If Bella were a vampire, we would be matched in that way, though it seemed best not to tell her that in advance. She didn't need any extra incentives to hurry through her transformation.

Bella also had no idea of the extent of my sex drive were it unfettered! She felt exactly as enticing, as exciting, and as enthralling to me right after making love as she had before we'd started several hours earlier. As far as I knew, that would never change. It was still true for Emmett and Rosalie, and for Carlisle and Esme. Alice and Jasper, too, I thought, though they were more reserved and private about their love.

Never in my vampire's existence had I found being still a challenge—stillness was our most natural state. However, Bella was giving me the ultimate challenge now. It would be wrong, surely, to grasp her buttocks and rock her body forward and back repeatedly. Yes, that would be wrong. Probably, it would be wrong, as well, to rock myself forward and back beneath her. I came up with twenty-seven more things that would be wrong to do while Bella was straddling me, asleep, before Bella came to and removed the reason for the game.

She woke herself when saliva from her open mouth began pooling on my chest and turning cool. Nothing like a cold bath to open one's eyes! She lifted her head, still groggy, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then promptly returned her face to the puddle. That woke her up...sort of. I reached for the hand towel she'd used to dry her hair, now that my reaching wouldn't disturb her, and wiped her face and my chest. I was happy to be her drool catcher, but I knew that if she were more awake, she would be embarrassed.

"Oh...sorry!" she croaked, sitting up. Then, predictably, she exclaimed "Oh!" again when she realized we were still connected. I smiled, amused...and aroused, of course.

"Bella, darling, it's okay," I said. She flopped back down onto my chest and closed her eyes.

"Edward..." she started, then got lost somewhere and didn't finish the thought. I rubbed her back, and stroked her hair, and hummed softly.

A few minutes later, she lifted herself onto her elbows and said, “I have to go to the bathroom,” as if she had just made an important discovery. I chuckled.

She began to extend her legs to get up and then exclaimed “Oh!” having forgotten our connection—again. She was completely discombobulated. I put it down to exhaustion.

“Darling, you need to ease off of me slowly. Your insides are likely to be a little tender.” I reached for her waist to support her weight and she flinched at my touch. It was only then that I fell to earth from my joyful heights and recognized the developing shadows on her body for what they were...bruises. Great, big, nasty bruises. I gasped, shocked. She seemed to notice neither the bruises nor my reaction.

She was lifting herself slowly off of me, and it was impossible not to direct every speck of my attention to that process. I wasn’t sure whether her sharp inhalations were due to pain or pleasure, but she was taking my breath *away*, and I, literally, could not speak to ask her. Also, that moment required every ounce of focus and willpower I had to keep my hands to my sides, rather than grab her bottom and yank her back down onto me.

When she raised herself that last quarter of an inch and released me from her velvet clutches, I groaned. It was almost painful to separate from her. She groaned too, held her position on her hands and knees for a moment, her head hanging down, then seemed to rally and crawled backwards off the end of the bed, still without raising her head.

“I’ll be right back,” she mumbled, feeling her way unsteadily across the room.

When she had shut the bathroom door, I released the breath I’d been holding. *Oh, my gawd!* She was black and blue from head to foot—well, red and blue, but the red would be blue and the blue would be black by morning. *What had I done?* She must be in *agony*. How could she hide it so well? How could she not be screaming in fright or in pain? I was a monster! There was no denying that now. Jacob had been right. We *should* have been playing checkers, not trying to make interspecies love. *What had I been thinking?* I had injured my new wife. I despised myself and my alienness. I cursed my utter existence.

Bella returned from the bathroom and I turned my head away. I couldn’t bear to look at the damage I’d done. She seemed completely unfazed, though. Or maybe she was sleep-walking...I couldn’t tell for sure. She climbed onto the bed, wrapped her arms around my neck, and promptly began to snore...and drool. She slept like a corpse, not moving, not talking, nothing like her normal pattern. We’d have to assess her condition in the morning and probably go to Rio to see a doctor.

Did she have internal injuries too? She could have. *Oh, gawd! No!* But surely she'd have indicated that she felt pain at some point. She hadn't, not even when I lost control and pushed all the way into her. She'd gasped, but hadn't shown any inclination to stop. If she had been injured, surely she wouldn't have been able to...

I hated myself. I had damaged what was most important to me in the world. Well, that was the end of that. We'd tried and failed. Rather, *I'd* tried and failed. I would *not* make that mistake again. It was going to be a long night.

When the sun rose the next morning, full daylight revealed my worst fears to be true—nearly everywhere that I could see, Bella's body was battered black and blue. It was worse, even, than I had realized. My handprints marred her entire torso, her arms, her shoulders, and even her legs. Finger-shaped bruises stretched toward the back of her body and palm-shaped bruises toward the front. Her perfect bottom was striped with two sets of four, precisely aligned contusions—my fingers—and separate bruises angled to the side—my thumbs. Her hips and ribs were blackened with overlapping handprints. It appeared that wherever I had touched—except for her breasts, thankfully—I'd squeezed the *bejesus* out of her. Her face was relatively unscathed with only the one bruise on her cheekbone from bumping into my nose.

"How badly are you hurt, Bella?" I asked when she finally awoke. She was lying across my chest and I was staring at the ceiling, avoiding the evidence of my atrocity. "The truth—don't try to downplay it."

"Hurt?" Bella sounded surprised, like she didn't know what I'd done. "Why would you jump to that conclusion? I've never been better than I am now."

I closed my eyes in frustration. "Stop that."

"Stop *what?*"

"Stop acting like I'm not a monster for having agreed to this."

"Edward! Don't ever say that."

I kept my eyes closed. "Look at yourself, Bella. Then tell me I'm not a monster."

Bella gasped. I flinched, but still couldn't open my eyes.

“Why am I covered in feathers?” she inquired, puzzled.

Like *that* was relevant! I huffed with irritation. “I bit a pillow. Or two. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“You...bit a pillow? *Why?*”

“Look, Bella!” I hissed, taking her hand gently and stretching her arm out to display the horrific mottling down her entire limb. “Look at *that*.”

“Oh,” she said, finally understanding.

I matched my fingers to first one hand-shaped bruise and then another to drive home the horror. “I’m...so sorry, Bella,” I whispered. “I knew better than this. I should not have—” I choked back my self-disgust. “I am more sorry than I can tell you.” I covered my eyes with my arm and fell into stillness. My eyes began to burn.

“Edward.”

I couldn’t respond.

“Edward!”

Pain gripped me. Bella would try to let me off the hook, pretend that I had done nothing to her, which is what I should have insisted upon in the first place—doing *nothing*. I couldn’t face it...or her.

“*I’m* not sorry, Edward. I’m...I can’t even tell you. I’m *so* happy. That doesn’t cover it. Don’t be angry. Don’t. I’m really f—”

“Do not say the word fine,” I cut her off. I couldn’t bear her underplaying what I had done. “If you value my sanity, do not say that you are fine.” She was *not* fine. She was nowhere *near* fine—a blind man could see that.

“But I *am*.”

“Bella...don’t,” I begged. She should be yelling at me, calling me a monster, refusing to be in the same room as me! But she did the opposite. Just like Bella...always backwards.

“No. *You* don’t, Edward.”

I moved my arm and looked at her. *Angry?* She should be.

“Don’t ruin this,” she demanded. “I. Am. Happy.”

"I've already ruined this," I whispered.

"Cut it out," she snapped.

I tightened my jaw and clenched my fists.

"Ugh! Why can't you just read my mind already? It's so *inconvenient* to be a mental mute!"

What? "That's a new one. You love that I can't read your mind."

"Not today."

Really? "Why?" Clearly, I was missing something.

Bella threw up her hands, then smacked them down on my chest. "Because all this angst would be completely unnecessary if you could see how I feel right now! Or five minutes ago, anyway. I *was* perfectly happy. Totally and completely blissed out. Now—well, I'm sort of pissed, actually."

"You *should* be angry with me."

"Well, I am. Does that make you feel better?"

I sighed in defeat. "No. I don't think anything could make me feel better now."

"*That!* That right there is why I'm angry. You are *killing my buzz*, Edward!"

Oh, for the love of God. Killing her buzz? I could have killed her!

Bella made a visible effort to calm herself, then said, "We knew this was going to be tricky. I thought that was assumed. And then—well, it was a lot easier than I thought it would be. And this is really nothing." She brushed her fingers up her arm, indicating the damage I had done. "I think for a first time, not knowing what to expect, we did amazing. With a little practice—"

Was she insane? She wanted to risk her life again?! I could barely control my anger. "Assumed? Did you *expect* this, Bella? Were you anticipating that I would hurt you? Were you thinking it would be worse? Do you consider the experiment a success because you can walk away from it? No broken bones—that equals a victory?" Revulsion twisted in my stomach. I loathed myself.

Bella grew quiet. I couldn't look at her. When the emotion had spent itself, despair settled over me.

Then she spoke. "I didn't know what to expect—but I definitely did not expect how...how...just wonderful and perfect it was." Bella dropped her eyes and stared at her hands. "I mean, I don't know how it was for you, but it was like that for me."

How it was for me? Did she not understand at all? I lifted her chin with my index finger so I could see her eyes. "Is that what you're worried about?" I asked tightly. "That I didn't *enjoy* myself?" Like that even mattered.

Bella kept her eyes lowered. "I know it's not the same. You're not human. I just was trying to explain that, for a human, well, I can't imagine that life gets any better than that."

Doesn't get any better than that? Was it possible that in spite of everything—the damage, the pain—that she could feel even a fraction of what I had felt? And now she believed that I was incapable of feeling the power of our union. She had *no* idea. Making love with her had been tremendous, beyond glorious, life-changing! How could I begin to set things straight? I frowned.

"It seems that I have more to apologize for. I didn't dream that you would construe the way I feel about what I did to you to mean that last night wasn't...well, the best night of my existence. But I don't want to think of it that way, not when you were..."

"Really? The best ever?" Bella asked timidly.

How could she not know? I took her face in my hands. I had to set the record straight. "I spoke to Carlisle after you and I made our bargain, hoping he could help me. Of course he warned me that this would be very dangerous for you. He had faith in me, though—faith I didn't deserve."

Bella drew in a breath to argue, but I put two fingers to her lips.

"I also asked him what I should expect. I didn't know what it would be for me...what with my being a vampire." I smiled. Like Bella, *I'd* had no idea, either. "Carlisle told me it was a very powerful thing, like nothing else." I smiled again. Now I understood what he had meant by that.

"I spoke to my brothers, too. They told me it was a very great pleasure. Second only to drinking human blood. But I've tasted your blood, and there could be no blood more potent than *that*... I don't think they were wrong, really. Just that it was different for us. Something more." I looked into Bella's eyes.

"It *was* more. It was everything," she agreed.

“That doesn’t change the fact that it was wrong. Even if it were possible that you really did feel that way.”

“What does *that* mean? Do you think I’m making this up? Why?”

“To ease my guilt. I can’t ignore the evidence, Bella. Or your history of trying to let me off the hook when I make mistakes.”

She grabbed my chin and approached me until we were nose-to-nose. “You listen to me, Edward Cullen,” she said firmly. “I am not pretending anything for your sake, okay? I didn’t even know there was a reason to make you feel better until you started being all miserable. *I’ve* never been so happy in all my life—I wasn’t this happy when you decided that you loved me more than you wanted to kill me, or the first morning I woke up and you were there waiting for me.... Not when I heard your voice in the ballet studio”—I flinched at the memory—“or when you said ‘I do’ and I realized that, somehow, I get to keep you forever. Those are the happiest memories I have, and this is better than any of it. So just deal with it.”

Her face had taken on a scowl. I smoothed over the indentations between her eyebrows with my fingers. “I’m making you unhappy now. I don’t want to do that.”

“Then don’t *you* be unhappy. That’s the only thing that’s wrong here.”

It wasn’t the only thing by any means, but she was alive and she loved me still, though it was difficult to imagine why. “You’re right. The past is the past and I can’t do anything to change it. There’s no sense in letting my mood sour this time for you. I’ll do whatever I can to make you happy now.” With an effort, I smoothed my expression, then smiled at her, resolved.

“Whatever makes me happy?”

I knew where her thoughts were headed and I couldn’t let myself be tempted. Just then, her stomach growled and I took advantage of the diversion.

“You’re hungry,” I said, and jumped out of bed, yanking on some baggy khakis before *she* could be tempted. A cloud of feathers puffed into the air and Bella shook her hair as they floated onto her head.

“So, why exactly did you decide to ruin Esme’s pillows?”

“I don’t know if I *decided* to do anything last night,” I mumbled. “We’re just lucky it was the pillows and not you.” I sighed heavily before remembering my vow to let go of the past. I flashed her a crooked smile.

Bella's body was drawing me back to her like bread to a starving man. She sat there draped in the bed sheets—nude—magnificently beautiful. This was not going to be easy. Then she untangled herself and stood up.

I gasped and turned my face away.

“Do I look that hideous?”

I didn't dare speak. After she headed to the bathroom, I escaped to the kitchen to make breakfast, grateful for the excuse. Then she groaned. *Oh no!* I dashed to the bathroom.

“Bella?”

She was standing, still unclothed, in front of the full-length mirror. “I'll never get this all out of my hair!” she complained, picking at bits of down.

I sighed in relief. “You *would* be worried about your hair,” I grumbled as I moved behind her to help pull feathers from her long locks.

“How did you keep from laughing at this? I look ridiculous.”

There was nothing at all ridiculous about how she looked. She was as magnificent in the mirror's reflection as first-hand...her pert white breasts with their pink nipples, her tiny waist, her...

Bella saw my eyes on her and suddenly turned around, wrapping her arms around me and pressing her body into mine.

“I'm going to have to try to wash it out. Do you want to help me?” she asked with a coquettish smile.

How I wished I could! How I wished things could be different! But they weren't. “I'd better find some food for you,” I murmured as I unwound her arms from my waist—the *last* thing I wanted to do—and rushed into the kitchen before my body could get the jump on my brain.

Bella cleaned up and dressed before joining me. She'd succeeded in getting most of the feathers out of her hair. Just a few were left to remind me of my dangerous teeth. Though she had pulled on a white cotton frock, enough purple handprints remained on her bare arms to remind me of my dangerous hands...my dangerous desires.

I cooked bacon and a cheese omelet and plated the food just as Bella sat down at the kitchen table. “Here,” I said with a deliberate smile.

She attacked the eggs like a wild dog, shoveling them into her mouth continuously until the plate was empty. She'd just consumed five eggs, several ounces of cheese, and six pieces of bacon. I watched her in amazement and mild distress.

"I'm not feeding you often enough."

"I was asleep," she pointed out. "This is really good, by the way. Impressive for someone who doesn't eat."

"Food Network," I divulged with a smile.

"Where did the eggs come from?"

"I asked the cleaning crew to stock the kitchen. A first, for this place. I'll have to ask them to deal with the feathers...." I was reminded of the violence I'd inflicted on my bride's gorgeous body and I couldn't continue.

"Thank you," Bella said, pushing her plate away. She leaned over the table to kiss me.

I responded instantly, before the picture of her battered body behind my eyelids jerked me to my senses and I pulled away.

Bella tensed. "You aren't going to touch me again while we're here, are you?"

Of course I would. I reached up and stroked her unbruised cheek with my fingers.

"You know that's not what I meant," she accused, her jaw tense.

I sighed heavily and returned my hand to my lap. "I know. And you're right." I took a moment to gather my willpower so my words would be convincing. "I will not make love with you until you've been changed. I will never hurt you again."

Let it be so.

6. DREAMS

It had been a long week. Bella was absolutely determined to try making love again. She thought that practice, rather than abstaining, was the cure for our disastrous night. But I could see no other possible outcome than what had already happened. What would make it turn out differently? I was clearly incapable of controlling my strength.

So...I'd tried to distract her with other activities to take her mind off of making love...a very difficult endeavor when it was practically all I could think about myself. I wanted her no less for having harmed her. In fact, having experienced her body in such a profound way, I now knew what I'd been missing, and I desired her all the more. I couldn't let down my guard for a second or she'd cotton on to that.

Alice had not helped matters. What women wore as swimming costumes in the twenty-first century would have been taken for handkerchiefs in the early twentieth. Despite the bruises, Bella looked scandalously appealing in the skimpy bikinis Alice had packed for her. She also had stuffed Bella's suitcase with fancy French lingerie. Bella had gotten bolder over the course of the week and her nightwear had become increasingly provocative.

I was sure she had no idea how alluring she was, how attracted I was to her, or how close I had come to ravishing her several times. I was a good dissembler, as I had to be. If I showed any hint of faltering resolve, I knew she would take full advantage and I would hurt her again, perhaps even more seriously.

So, whenever I felt my jaw go slack or my breath catch as Bella paraded around in one sexy costume after another, day after day, night after night, I focused on the purple and black continents adorning her body to cement my resolve.

The night of the injuries—sadly, the first night of our honeymoon—I was so upset that I couldn't stay in bed with Bella. I was too restless, too distraught, and frankly, too aroused. I was afraid I might lose my head in the night, despite her terrible injuries. I disgusted myself.

Shortly after Bella fell asleep the second time, I'd carefully disentangled myself from her arms—though the “carefully” part had been unnecessary, since she was sleeping like a brick—and located my cell phone. Alice must have known I would call because my father picked up on the first ring.

“Edward?” he inquired, sounding worried.

“I've hurt her, Carlisle, I've hurt Bella,” I lamented, my voice breaking.

“Stay calm, Edward. Is Bella there with you? Tell me what happened.”

“She’s sleeping now, but she’s sleeping like the dead, almost like she’s comatose...”

“Did you check her eyes?”

“No, it’s not a concussion or anything...”

“Edward, tell me how Bella is injured.” He spoke firmly in the particular tone he used when a patient was panicking. I realized I *was* panicking and made an effort to calm myself.

“Well, we made love and everything seemed to be fine, but she got up a little bit ago and her body is...” The words wouldn’t come out.

“Son, tell me *immediately* what is going on,” Carlisle spoke sternly, like one would to an out-of-control child...or a crazy person. It sobered me up.

“She’s bruised, Dad, black and blue, her whole body, my handprints are all over her body.” The words finally came out in a rush.

Carlisle went silent for a moment. That frightened me.

“Is she in pain, Edward?”

“Well, she flinched away when I touched her, but she seemed to be sleep-walking or something and I couldn’t talk...”

“So, there is no head injury.”

“No.”

“Does she have severe abdominal pain or cramping?”

“I don’t think so. She was walking around.”

“Blood?”

Oh! I scanned my body quickly and saw that there were traces of blood where I might have expected them to be.

“A small amount.”

“Bella was a virgin, is that right, Edward? So that would be normal unless she’s bleeding heavily.”

“Um, yes...um, no... I mean, she bled a little when she tore. “

“Okay, then. No unusual bleeding.”

“No.”

“As for the bruising, you said the bruises were in the shape of your hands?”

“Yes, I think I squeezed her too hard.”

“Edward, it sounds like the bruising is on the surface and not due to internal injuries, is that right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay, and there are no other injuries? Broken bones?”

I panicked for a moment, wondering if I had broken any of her precious bones. Then I recalled that when the fiend, James, had broken her bones, she couldn't move without crying out in pain. I cringed at the memory.

“No, I don't think so.”

“It sounds like Bella is going to be fine, Edward. If she has no head injury and she's been moving around without waking up, then I would assume she's having no significant pain that would indicate bone damage or internal injuries.”

“But she looks horrid and I don't even remember doing it!”

“There is one thing to consider. If Bella is even slightly anemic, she would bruise easily and that's a very common condition for women in their child-bearing years. She would also feel excessively tired and her hands and feet might be slightly cold, though that might not happen in the warm climate you're in.”

“What can I do?”

“Feed her. Anything animal-based. Seafood and red meat are especially good—and chicken liver—but any animal-based protein has iron. Hold on a second...”

“What?”

“Alice says that she packed vitamins with iron, so have her take those. She'll be fine, Edward.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just ask her about any pain she has when she wakes up. If she has abdominal pain, then take her to Rio. I can give you the name of a doctor there. Alice doesn’t think you’ll need to go, but if you do, call me back in the morning...your morning.”

I waited anxiously as that first day passed. Then the second day passed and I began to breathe a little easier. Bella would admit only to a little soreness, but not to being in pain. She showed no other signs of injury besides the bruises from our one blissful night together. I reminded myself that it couldn’t have been “blissful” when one of the participants came away from it so damaged. Still...for me...

But I could not think about that.

After a week, Bella’s bruises had improved dramatically, the purple ones fading to yellowish stains and the black ones turning light gray. The fading of Bella’s bruises seemed to be inversely proportional to the strengthening of her will in her campaign to “try again.” Her extreme exhaustion, probably due to iron deficiency, as Carlisle had suggested, helped along by a constant flurry of outdoor activities, had been the only thing that had saved me from Bella’s machinations and her from my desire. With all of the exercise I pressed on her each day—swimming, walking, climbing—and the heavy meals I cooked for her afterwards, Bella had fallen into a heavy sleep almost as soon as we lay down every night.

This had been the most difficult night so far. I could not *believe* what she was wearing. I had very nearly leaped across the room and taken her when she appeared ready for bed. The garment, if you could call such a concoction a garment, was a mere collection of threads tied together in artful patterns. The black silk lace was as sheer as a window, though more stimulating to peer through, and—draped from the shoulders of my Bella, with peek-a-boo views of her perfect, round breasts and the cute, reddish, triangle of hair between her legs, and a full-on view of her nearly bare buttocks—absolutely impossible for a red-blooded man to resist. The fact that I was not red-blooded seemed to make little difference. I was bewitched.

Of course, I affected to be unaffected, though when she entered the bedroom in that black negligee, my lust for her surely had registered for a moment or two. It was a little disturbing to think that Alice, possibly having foreseen the outcome of our first night together and our subsequent dispute, was conspiring to undermine my resolve—and coming very close to success.

“What do you think?” Bella inquired, turning in a slow circle to give me a view of *every* part of her.

I almost choked on the gush of venom that flowed into my mouth and had to cover by clearing my throat. “You look beautiful,” I answered truthfully in the understatement of the century. “You always do.”

“Thanks,” Bella responded with an equal lack of zest, though hers was genuine rather than forced.

We had moved to the second bedroom in the cottage to avoid the white down scattered copiously all over the other one. Gustavo was coming to clean the following day and I would ask him to take care of the mess for us. Bella seemed to like the guest room though it looked less like a bridal suite with its blue silk bed coverings and drapes and though the bed was a queen-size, rather than the double-queen in the master bedroom.

I pulled Bella’s scantily clad body across my chest where she liked to sleep to stay cool overnight. In Brazil, we didn’t require a heavy blanket between us.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Bella said with a yawn.

I didn’t have to ask what she meant. “I will not make any deals with you,” I told her firmly.

“You haven’t even heard what I’m offering.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Bella huffed in disappointment. “Dang it. And I really wanted...” Her voice trailed off without finishing the thought. “Oh well.”

I rolled my eyes. This had to be a trick to make me curious, since she never asked for *anything*. Bella yawned and closed her eyes. Judging by previous nights, I knew she would be asleep in a matter of minutes. The little vixen.

“All right,” I caved with a sigh. “What is it you want?”

“Well, I was thinking... I know that the whole Dartmouth thing was just supposed to be a cover story, but honestly, one semester of college probably wouldn’t kill me.” She was repeating the words I’d said to her when I originally tried to convince her to put off becoming what I was. “Charlie would get a thrill out of Dartmouth stories, I bet.” Another point I’d made to her. “Sure, it might be embarrassing if I can’t keep up with all the brainiacs. Still...eighteen,

nineteen. It's really not such a big difference. It's not like I'm going to get crow's feet in the next year."

I. Could. Not. Believe. My. Ears.

"You would wait," I said in disbelief. "You would stay human."

Bella didn't answer.

"Why are you *doing* this to me?" I cried in frustration. "Isn't it hard enough without all of this?" I clutched a handful of sheer black lace adorning her upper thigh and crumpled it in my hand. I had to concentrate not to rip it off of her in anger. *That* would only make things worse. I tried to calm my voice. "It doesn't matter. I won't make any deals with you."

"I want to go to college," Bella argued.

"No, you don't. And there is nothing that is worth risking your life again. That's worth hurting you."

"But I *do* want to go. Well, it's not college as much as it's that I want—I want to be human a little while longer."

I shut my eyes and snorted like an angry bull...one of Maria's most dangerous.

"You are making me insane, Bella. Haven't we had this argument a million times, you always begging to be a vampire without delay?"

"Yes, but...well, I have a reason to be human that I didn't have before."

"What's that?"

"Guess," she teased and slithered up my body to steal a kiss. I wouldn't wound her by rejecting the kiss, but I would *not* let her seduce me with it either. I kept it light and pulled her away when she tried to make more of it. I snuggled her into the crook of my arm, amused in spite of myself.

"You are *so* human, Bella. Ruled by your hormones." I chuckled, realizing how easy it would be for *me* to be ruled by her hormones too. Thrilling even. But no...

"That's the whole point, Edward. I *like* this part of being human. I don't want to give it up yet. I don't want to wait through years of being a blood-crazed newborn for some part of this to come back to me."

Bella was fighting a losing battle in more ways than one. She yawned and I smiled, knowing she would pass out any minute.

“You’re tired. Sleep, love.” I began to hum Bella’s lullaby for her. It usually had the desired effect.

“I wonder why I’m so tired,” Bella complained. “That couldn’t be part of your scheme or anything.”

I chuckled once and resumed humming. Of course it was. Exercise and food. Food and exercise. Sunshine. Repeat to exhaustion. It was much easier to control my physical desire for her when she was asleep, especially since she’d been snoring and drooling a lot lately.

“For as tired as I’ve been, you’d think I’d sleep better,” Bella remarked.

What? “You’ve been sleeping like the dead, Bella. You haven’t said a word in your sleep since we got here. If it weren’t for the snoring, I’d worry you were slipping into a coma.”

“I haven’t been tossing? That’s weird. Usually I’m all over the bed when I’m having nightmares. And shouting.” She didn’t mention the snoring, though it was something new for her.

“You’ve been having nightmares?”

“Vivid ones. They make me so tired.” Bella yawned again. “I can’t believe I haven’t been babbling about them all night.”

“What are they about?”

“Different things—but the same, you know, because of the colors.”

“Colors?”

“It’s all so bright and real. Usually, when I’m dreaming, I know that I am. With these, I don’t know I’m asleep. It makes them scarier.”

Scarier? “What is frightening you?” I asked softly.

Bella shuddered. “Mostly...” She didn’t finish the thought.

“Mostly?” I prodded.

“The Volturi,” she whispered in an anxious voice.

I held her more tightly. "They aren't going to bother us anymore. You'll be immortal soon, and they'll have no reason."

Bella's face illustrated her fear as she played out some frightening scenario in her mind. She would be scarred forever by that trip to Italy! Not to mention the return visit of the Volturi guard, who casually tortured and burned a helpless newborn to death right in front of her.

"What can I do to help?" I asked softly, holding her close. It was my fault that she had such nightmares.

"They're just dreams, Edward," she said, minimizing her distress, as usual.

"Do you want me to sing to you? I'll sing all night if it will keep the bad dreams away."

"They're not all bad. Some are nice. So...colorful. Underwater, with the fish and the coral. It all seems like it's really happening—I don't know that I'm dreaming. Maybe this island is the problem. It's really *bright* here."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No. No, not yet. Can't we stay awhile longer?"

"We can stay as long as you want, Bella," I promised.

"When does the semester start? I wasn't paying attention before."

I ignored that insincere question, sighed heavily at her capriciousness, and began to hum. Very soon, she started snoring.

It was after two or three hours of stone-still slumber that Bella began to shake and moan. I assumed she was having one of the frightening dreams she'd described to me.

"Bella?" I whispered, rocking her in my arms to awaken her. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

She gasped and opened her eyes. "Oh." She gasped again. Tears came washing down her face in a torrent.

"Bella!" I cried. "What's wrong?" I brushed at the tears with my fingers to no avail. They kept coming.

"It was only a dream," Bella explained, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"It's okay, love, you're fine. I'm here." I rocked her in my arms anxiously. *What could I do?* "Did you have another nightmare? It wasn't real, it wasn't real," I said, trying to soothe her, but she didn't stop crying.

"Not a nightmare," she moaned. "It was a *good* dream."

"Then why are you crying?" I couldn't make sense of her anguish.

"Because I woke up," Bella bawled, clinging to me desperately.

I chuckled, but the sound was choked off. "Everything's all right, Bella. Take deep breaths."

"It was so real. I *wanted* it to be real."

"Tell me about it," I pressed. "Maybe that will help."

"We were on the beach..." Bella's thought hung in the air, unfinished, as she leaned back and gazed into my face.

"And?" I prompted when she didn't continue.

Bella had started to contain the tears when she moaned again. "Oh, Edward..."

Her voice both pained and worried me. *What could I do?* "Tell me, Bella," I begged.

She hesitated for a moment, then raised her eyes to my face, wrapped her arms around my neck, and kissed me with so much passion—desperation, really—that I faltered. I responded immediately to her intense desire with my own before I caught myself.

"No, Bella," I cautioned, pushing her away gently as I *had* to do.

Her sorrow turned into absolute desolation. She dropped her arms helplessly and began sobbing anew. The sound ripped through my heart.

"I'm s-s-s-orry," she stuttered through her tears.

I pulled her close again and held her, torn between her pain and her safety. It was *torture* to deny her.

"I can't, Bella, I can't!" I moaned.

"Please," she begged. "Please, Edward?"

She raised her tear-stained face to me, her eyes imploring. In that moment, I simply could not bear to witness that kind of pain on my beloved's face and not give her what she wanted—especially since I wanted it as badly as she did.

I groaned with my own pain—of desire, of self-denial, and finally, of failure, as my bulwark of determination cracked wide open. I returned her kiss and all of my pent-up need burst through the breach. I wanted her. *I wanted her.*

Frighteningly, I had no control over the torrent of passion that flooded from me. I needed to feel her skin on mine and I didn't even try to be civilized about it. I seized the silk lace and pulled, desperate to get at what was underneath. The fabric gave no resistance and I found what I wanted. I latched onto her left breast with my lips and tongue, licking, sucking. I burrowed one hand under her buttocks and began to knead handfuls of her soft flesh. Frenzied, I moved my mouth to her right breast. Bella's nipples, already erect, became flushed with blood, swelled, and turned a deep rose color. I stroked one while I sucked the other and, like an infant, I calmed down and became safer for her.

I kissed my way to her mouth and found her tongue. It was soft and sensuous, hot and wet, like another part of her I remembered so vividly. I'd regained a measure of control, but I was no less in need. I tore off my flannel pajama bottoms with one hand and rolled onto her, holding my weight on my arms. She raised her knees, one on either side of me, and her delicious scent floated into the air.

She took me in her hand and conveyed me to that heaven I'd ached for since our wedding night. She was ready for me...more than ready.

I managed to whisper, "Bella, are you sure? You're not sore inside?"

"Yes and no in that order..." she murmured.

I had no will to belabor the point. I groaned as I slipped inside of her, the memory I'd relived all week paling next to the reality. Extreme pleasure and profound relief washed over me...body *and* soul. All the pain of denying us both—my anguish, her need—healed with every glide. Bella responded with a flood of pent-up desire seeking release. Within a couple minutes of burying myself between her thighs, a cry rose from her throat and she began to orgasm powerfully around me. I threw back my head and moaned as her velvet grip tugged at me, urging all of me into her. It went on and on, stealing my breath, my wits, and all vestiges of resistance to her pleasure. I climaxed hard then, shuddering on top of her as her hands moved softly up and down my back, my sides, my front.

It was an hour, a minute, or maybe a day before I regained myself, lifted my head, and saw Bella's soft brown eyes on my face. Joy surged through me. I let go of the hardwood headboard my hands were gripping and watched two handfuls of sawdust float to the floor. I cradled Bella's head between my forearms and kissed her softly. We had made love and she was safe! It was going to be okay. It was all going to be okay. By the time I had disengaged myself and settled at her side, she was asleep.

Bella was so worried that I would be angry with her for shattering my tenuous willpower that she woke up apologizing. Feeling guilty for being utterly irresistible—it was cute.

"How much trouble am I in?" she asked meekly, propping herself on her elbows to look at my face. I was lying with my arms beneath my head, looking at the ceiling.

"Heaps," I warned before looking at her from the corners of my eyes and lifting one side of my mouth.

Bella looked relieved. "I am sorry. I didn't mean... Well, I don't know exactly what that was last night." Bella shook her head in confusion.

"You never did tell me what your dream was about."

"I guess I didn't—" She looked away and laughed uncomfortably. "But I sort of *showed* you what it was about."

"Oh. Interesting." I'd had *no* idea. I just thought she was frightened.

"It was a very good dream." Bella paused. "Am I forgiven?"

"I'm thinking about it." I was annoyed that I'd lost control of myself, but I'd have been extremely angry if I had hurt her again. I noticed she was checking herself surreptitiously for bruises, which I'd already done as she lay sleeping.

"Is the inventory complete?"

She nodded. "The pillows all appear to have survived."

"Unfortunately, I can't say the same for your, er, nightgown." The filmy garment lay in tatters at the foot of the bed.

"That's too bad," Bella said. "I liked that one."

"I did too." *Too* much, it would seem.

"Were there any other casualties?"

"I'll have to buy Esme a new bed frame."

Bella's eyes followed my gaze. Her mouth dropped open in surprise when she saw the gouges and perforations in the headboard.

"Hmmm." She frowned. "You'd think I would have heard that."

"You seem to be extraordinarily unobservant when your attention is otherwise involved."

"I was a bit absorbed," she admitted, blushing profusely.

Like a moth to a flame, I was drawn to the blood. Her face was hot and alive beneath my palm.

"I'm really going to miss that."

"How are *you* feeling?" she asked tentatively.

I laughed at her expression.

"What?"

"You look so guilty—like you've committed a crime."

"I *feel* guilty," she muttered.

"So you seduced your all-too-willing husband. That's not a capital offense." *It could have been, though*, I thought ruefully.

"The word *seduced* implies a certain amount of premeditation." Bella's face blushed beautifully, humanly red.

"Maybe that was the wrong word."

"You're not angry?"

I smiled ruefully. "I'm not angry."

"Why not?"

“Well...I didn’t hurt you, for one thing. It was easier this time, to control myself, to channel the excesses.” I glanced at the damaged headboard. “Maybe because I had a better idea of what to expect.”

A triumphant smile lit up Bella’s face. “I *told* you that it was all about practice.”

I rolled my eyes, but I could see she was ecstatic at my change of attitude and hopeful that I might no longer insist on abstinence. Even *I* had hope now that, despite my disproportionate strength and Bella’s unfortunate status as my natural prey, we might share a full marital relationship while she remained human.

“I like it here,” Bella commented after eating her usual breakfast of eggs. She had cooked them herself and they were underdone to my eye. “We’ll probably have to leave soon, though, won’t we, to make it to Dartmouth in time?”

Yeah, right. “You can give up the college pretense now—you’ve gotten what you wanted. And we didn’t agree to a deal, so there are no strings attached.”

“It wasn’t a pretense, Edward,” Bella rebutted. “I don’t spend *my* free time plotting like some people do. *What can we do to wear Bella out today?*” she said, mimicking my voice. I chuckled. It was funny when she put it like that. “I really do want a little more time being human.” Bella leaned across the table and stroked my bare chest with her hand. “I have not had enough.”

“For *this?*” I questioned doubtfully as Bella’s hand continued down my stomach to the top of my trousers where I halted its progress. “Sex was the key all along? Why didn’t *I* think of that?” I rolled my eyes. “I could have saved myself a lot of arguments.”

Bella laughed. “Yeah, probably.”

“You are *so* human.”

“I know.”

But I *was* excited about the other part of the deal. “We’re going to Dartmouth? Really?”

“I’ll probably fail out in one semester.”

“I’ll tutor you.” I promised, grinning. “You’re going to love college. I’ll have to see if we can keep your ‘before’ car for a little longer....”

“Yes, heaven forbid I not be protected from tanks.”

I grinned happily.

After discussing our new plans for the months following our honeymoon, Bella brought the subject back around to where we'd started...being human.

"So I was thinking..." she began, a wheedling sound in her voice. "You know what I was saying about practice before?"

I laughed. I had known she would try to take advantage! Maybe I'd even been counting on it.

"Can you hold on to that thought?" I asked. "I hear a boat. The cleaning crew must be here."

7. PREMEDITATING

Bella and I snuggled on the couch, pretending to watch the 1950s video *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* while waiting for Gustavo and his wife, Kaure, to clean the cottage. Well, *I* was waiting—Bella kept forgetting they were there and tried to start a game of “keep-away,” as in, I had to keep her hands away from the waistband of my trousers. After our successful experience of the previous night, I was happy to parry Bella’s advances. I had plans for a few advances of my own after our visitors were gone.

I explained to Gustavo in Portuguese that my bride and I had had a “pillow fight” in the bedroom and with apologies, asked if he could remove the feathers for us. He raised his eyebrows knowingly, but made no comment, except to direct Kaure to the task.

“Will we move back into the white room now?” Bella asked.

“I don’t know.... I’ve already mangled the headboard in the other room beyond repair—maybe if we limit the destruction to one area of the house, Esme might invite us back someday.”

She grinned like the Cheshire cat. “So there will be more destruction?”

I laughed. “I think it might be safer if it’s premeditated, rather than if I wait for you to assault me again.”

“It would only be a matter of time,” Bella said, feigning disinterest, but her racing pulse gave her away.

“Is there something the matter with your heart?” I asked, amused.

“Nope. Healthy as a horse,” she declared. “Did you want to go survey the demolition zone now?”

I chuckled. “Maybe it would be more polite to wait until we’re alone. *You* may not notice me tearing the furniture apart, but it would probably scare them.”

“Right. Drat.”

Bella’s springing her desire on me in the middle of the night *had* been dangerous, as evidenced by my subsequent carnal frenzy. Since everything had worked out fine in the end and Bella wasn’t hurt, I didn’t entirely regret what had happened, though. The experience had

opened up new possibilities for me and my human wife which I never would have allowed otherwise—too great a risk.

Our lovemaking had been at the expense of Esme's bed, though. The headboard now boasted two gaping voids in the shape of my clenched fingers where I had gripped it along the top. I was sure Esme would forgive me and, of course, I would replace the bedframe. We'd talked about Bella's request for a "real" honeymoon, so presumably she was somewhat prepared for destruction.

Come to think of it, I wonder whether Carlisle and Esme had been worried about Bella's welfare. I know that Carlisle trusted me not to hurt her, but he, more than anyone else, knew the extreme danger she was risking by making love with me. He knew the worst now, since I had called him the first night of our honeymoon.

Carlisle had been amazingly accepting of Bella and me from the very beginning. It made me wonder if he had talked to the Denalis about their experiences with human men when he learned I was in love with her. As a natural scientist, it was his habit to research every topic of inquiry, medical or otherwise, that might affect his family. He'd never mentioned it or thought about it in my presence, but Carlisle was good at keeping things from me. He'd had almost a century of practice.

So when he originally told me that he trusted me with Bella, maybe he'd had some actual information to bolster that trust. I would ask him one day. At the moment, I couldn't think about the possibility that he might have spoken about Bella and me to Tanya leader. The way she'd behaved at our wedding—wrapping herself around me in the receiving line and implying that we'd been intimate in front of Bella—made me wonder if she'd not gotten over my rejection of her altogether. I would be deeply regretful if Carlisle accidentally added salt to her wounds. All I needed was another Rosalie in my family.

I suppose if it weren't for the Denali ladies' practice of seducing human men, I never would have agreed to make love with Bella while she was human. The women had been doing it for ages without killing their lovers, although previously, they had killed them all, either for food or for fun. Unlike me, they'd had plenty of opportunities to learn what not to do. I'd had only one chance to get it right and I had no idea if my being a man made Bella's risk level better or worse.

Thinking about it, I realized Alice must have foreseen that Bella would survive our honeymoon or she would have warned me. Would she have mentioned Bella's first night's injuries to Carlisle? Out of respect for my privacy, she probably wouldn't unless he asked her, but of course, after our conversation about the "deal" and his warnings to me, he surely *would*

have asked her. So Carlisle's faith in me had been strengthened by reassurances from Alice that Bella would be safe. It was too bad that nobody had bothered to share that information with me! Probably, I wouldn't have believed it, though, and if I had known how badly I would injure Bella the first night, I wouldn't have tried at all.

Oh! Alice was helping Bella to get what she wanted by *not* telling me! Carlisle never would have let me seriously hurt Bella if Alice had warned him I would, so he must have agreed that a body covered in bruises was an acceptable trade for giving Bella the honeymoon she wanted—his wedding gift to her. I wondered whether I should confront my family when we got home, or if it was better just to accept the gift. They'd had our best interests at heart, no doubt.

Kaure—who was part Ticuna Indian—suffered a shock when she entered the TV room unexpectedly and saw me holding Bella off the ground, kissing her throat. The tiny woman gasped and stared, frozen in terror, until I set an embarrassed and blushing Bella back on her feet. Kaure hastily apologized for intruding, but she was frightened and wary of me.

"What's with her?" Bella asked.

"She was raised to be more superstitious—or you could call it more aware—than those who live in the modern world. She suspects what I am, or close enough. They have their own legends here. The *Libishomen*—a blood-drinking demon who preys exclusively on beautiful women." I leered at my wife.

To Kaure, the kiss was evidence that I'd brought Bella to this isolated place to have my way with her and then kill her. That would be the expected outcome in her tribe's understanding of vampire behavior. I introduced Bella as my new wife, but there was no precedent for our kind of relationship in Kaure's version of the mythology. Her version was mostly correct anyway, so I decided there was no point in trying to explain myself. Perhaps we would be back one day and she'd meet Bella again. Would Bella be changed by then or would my amazing sexual prowess have convinced her to remain human forever?

Ha!

Though she had slept twelve hours overnight and had only been awake for three so far that day, Bella dozed off in my arms while the musical comedy played and we waited for Gustavo and Kaure to finish cleaning. When the couple left, Bella awoke ready to return immediately to the bedroom with me. I suppose that spending all night and much of the day in bed was acceptable honeymoon behavior—expected even.

When I suggested she might want lunch before going back to bed, I saw the vacillation in Bella's eyes. Despite her eagerness to make love, she couldn't deny her hunger. With a smile,

I pulled her into the kitchen and cooked another batch of eggs, which she gobbled down in record time. On the phone, Carlisle had told me to feed her and I was trying to be diligent in that husbandly duty.

Marriage seemed to agree with Bella, for I had never seen her eat with such an appetite. She'd gone through dozens of eggs in a week. I'd gotten good at cooking eggs for her in every conceivable way eggs could be cooked. She wasn't interested in eating much else, actually. It was rather odd. Didn't humans require a variety of foods to stay healthy? Human nutrition was something I would look into when we got back to the States.

It seemed possible now that I would have lots of time to learn human husbandry skills, given Bella's new inclination to remain human. (On second thought, "husbandry" implies breeding, so the word doesn't apply in our case. If attempted procreation counts, though, I intended to become an expert in human husbandry in the days, weeks, and months ahead!)

"This is getting out of hand," Bella remarked after finishing her second plate of eggs.

"Do you want to swim with the dolphins this afternoon—burn off the calories?"

"Maybe later," she replied. "I had another idea for burning calories."

"And what was that?" I asked with a smile.

"Well, there's an awful lot of headboard left—"

I didn't let my wife finish her sentence before whisking her into my arms and carting her to my lair, with much premeditation, of course, since I was *all about* the safety now. The silk-draped bed with the curiously carved headboard awaited. Bella was determined to see it completely destroyed before we left Isle Esme and I thought that was a delightful idea. I suspected we'd be doing less hiking, climbing, and swimming this week than we had the week before. I just had to remember to feed the human and let her sleep once in a while.

No rending of garments this time. Sadly, I wouldn't see Bella in the black lace again. I laid my wife on her back and untied her short, satin dressing gown, pulling the cloth aside to gaze at her. *Gorgeous*. As I laid myself down beside her, I brushed my hand from the top of her left foot, up the side of her calf, over her knee, and up her beautiful, soft thigh. She watched, shivering deliciously. I ruffled my fingers through her startlingly red pubic hair and stroked up her belly, over her left breast, up her throat and then cupped her cheek in my hand. She pulled my body toward her as our lips met and I shifted myself on top of her, resting my legs between hers.

This was the first time we would make love with forethought and without fear (on my part). The buildup to that delight gave the moment a sweet tension that held no anxiety. My confidence in my ability not to hurt Bella had been bolstered with more experience.

We kissed deeply, lingering, as our hands stroked each other's skin and explored the lines and curves that were still so new. Bella reached for the zipper on my khakis, but I intercepted her hand and held it in mine. I had something else in mind first.

"I want—" Bella started before I interrupted her words with another kiss. She reached for my waistband with her free hand and I pinned it to the mattress with mine. She began to protest, but stopped when I skimmed my lips across her jaw and down her throat. Her heart pounded out a jungle rhythm that I felt as her blood pulsed through her veins. I put the tip of my tongue on her jugular and felt the pumping sensation all the way back to my throat. It sizzled, scorched, and burned, but I was beyond caring about that.

On our wedding night, I had been thrilled and honored to touch my love in her most private places, but I had not seen her there—and I wanted to. When she raised her knees on either side of me, opening herself, I accepted the invitation.

I brushed my lips over each of Bella's breasts, licked each nipple, and felt the electric rush in my groin when she pressed her head into the mattress and moaned. I kissed my way down to her stomach and then lower while dragging my fingertips up the insides of her thighs. She was beyond arousal, as was I. Her inner lips were glistening and swollen, spread apart, the sensuous opening into her body laid bare. I touched her there with my tongue and she cried out.

"You are *so* beautiful, my love," I exclaimed softly, before running my tongue along her labia, licking the wetness from the brightest pink parts of her.

Musky...sweet...salty... My need for her stabbed through my lower regions, but I could wait—there was something I wanted to try. I stroked her labia upward with my thumb until I felt that special place I'd known by touch a week before...her clitoris. It was partially hidden, so I gently unveiled it with my fingers. Bright red, absolutely engorged with blood. *Mmm...* I reached out with my tongue and licked.

Bella cried out in a high-pitched note. That sound! I had to hear it again! This time I started licking at the base of her swollen lips and upward over her clitoris. Bella cried out a second time and buried her hands in my hair. I remembered the finger motion she had used to touch herself and I flicked my tongue across her at that speed, back and forth. She was extremely sensitive to this kind of touch. Her cry became more of a continuous hum, a vibration that entered me through my tongue and traveled throughout my body. I shuddered in pleasure.

Her excitement rose to a fever pitch, her knees splaying outward, everything that she was open to me. I craved feeling the inside of her again. As I continued moving my tongue, taking cues from the sounds she made and the finger motions she traced in my hair, I pressed my middle finger against her opening and her blood-swollen tissues welcomed me inside. I felt a sucking sensation on my finger as I continued to lick her.

“You must remember to breathe, my darling.” I’d raised my lips away from her just enough to make the words audible.

She pressed her hips forward against my mouth and I obliged her with concentration now, feeling her need to let go. My index finger joined my third finger and I felt no constriction. I began massaging the internal spot that she’d liked before and licked faster. Her excitement was electric. She was swimmingly wet and my fingers moved easily in her. Her clitoris was hard like a pebble and had become extremely sensitive, as I could tell by her pulling slightly away from my tongue. I lightened my touch and slowed my speed. Suddenly, she issued another high-pitched wail and I felt the rolling waves begin inside her, squeezing my fingers. She stopped moving and let her internal muscles take over as they spasmed in orgasm. I’d never imagined such joy as I felt at that moment!

I slowed my caresses as the storm eventually calmed, then kissed her once more and slid up next to her. Her breaths slowed and began to even out. I bounced my fingers forward and felt her heart stutter.

“I love being inside of you, Bella. It makes me happy.”

Her eyes opened slowly, the look in them smoldering, lazy, provocative. Her cheeks were flushed in what had become my new favorite color—post-orgasm pink. She smiled and her eyelids dropped shut again. Basking, I thought.

I brought my lips to hers and kissed her lightly, as I pulled my fingers away. Her vagina made a very soft kissing sound in goodbye.

I lifted myself onto Bella while she relaxed and kissed the hollow beneath her left ear. I brushed my lips slowly down the side of her neck, across one collarbone and then the other, and up the other side of her neck to the hollow beneath her right ear. Bella’s heart rate started to increase again. I aligned my center with hers and began pressing against her in a slow rhythm, my eyes shut, feeling her hips rise to meet me.

“Mmm, Bella...”

Her fingers tangled through my hair when she stretched up to kiss me. Her breath was coming faster now; her lips were more demanding. She reached for the front of my khakis and

this time I allowed it. It took her no time to conquer the one button and zipper and to ease the waistband over my hips.

“Edward, I need you,” Bella whispered against my mouth. I opened my eyes and saw the intensity of that need.

“I’m here, my darling,” I replied, helping her remove my extraneous garment.

She reached between my legs then, and stroked me with her palm. *Ahh...* I could not stop myself from grinding into her hand. She pressed back, wrapping her fingers around me. The heat of her hand...and holding me like that...the sensation was extraordinary. She touched me with more purpose now, directing me to her wet entry, placing the tip of my penis exactly where it wanted to be.

I pushed into her slowly, groaning a bass note at the stupefying pleasure of her heat and moisture. This time, she felt slightly tight inside. I pulled back and pushed forward again, gently, and she opened more to me. I pulled back, pushed in, and sank deeper into her with another groan. This gradual approach seemed productive and was intensely exciting. On the fifth stroke, Bella opened fully and I slid to the very back of her. She gasped and pressed her hips toward me. The sound spurred me on and I moved with more focus, more urgency.

At some point, I realized I was losing my head and I rolled us over, bringing her on top of me. I reached for her face, cupped my hands around her cheeks and looked into her deep chocolate eyes. She returned my gaze and we were still for several moments, more than our bodies embracing.

“Bella, I love you. For always.”

“I love you, Edward,” she replied. “Forever.” And to my surprise, a tear rolled down her cheek. She smiled. “Happy tears,” she said.

I smiled back, then took her chin in my hand and pulled her face toward mine. I licked the tear from her cheek and reached for her lips. She kissed me gently, sweetly. I felt a rush of love and tenderness for this woman, my wife, and then another kind of rush...desire...strong desire.

I pressed my hips toward her and she understood. With her knees on either side of me, she planted her palms on my chest and raised her pelvis away. Just when I thought she would separate from me, she pressed down—all the way down—until her buttocks touched the tops of my legs.

Oh, my gawd... I wasn't sure whether the words were audible, but Bella increased her intensity, raising, teasing, lowering. I reached for the headboard behind me and gripped the top of it in a new, unsullied location. As long as my hands were in contact with this piece of wood, I reasoned, they cannot hurt Bella. It had worked before. When she next pushed herself onto me, three of my fingers stabbed through, pulverizing the hardwood. It was better than the alternative.

My urgency increased as tension built between my legs. I wanted to speed up the motion; I wanted to thrust into her as deeply as I could; I wanted to grab her buttocks and pull her down on me hard. It was almost painful, the slow build, but I hung onto that headboard like a lifeline.

Bella grabbed for it too, using it to steady herself with one hand and reaching downward with the other. Just the thought of her touching herself gave me a thrill of pleasure. I felt small tremors inside her and on each of her downward strokes felt a powerful clenching. It was...so good...*so good*. I commanded my hands to stay where they were, not to reach for her.

Soon enough, my love began moving with more fervor and single-mindedness, her walls sliding apart to allow me into her furthest recesses. When I pushed to the back of her, she cried out and the wave began ...the gripping, the squeezing, the milking. I lay in suspended animation as relentless pressure built deep in my loins. Bella held her breath, then stopped moving.

"Ahhh..." I groaned in desperation, rising off the mattress to continue the vital motion. Bella made a soft "mm, mm, mm..." noise at the back of her throat and when a final huge spasm rolled through her, I joined her in bliss.

With a final moan, she leaned forward and laid her head against my shoulder. My hands were, blessedly, still gripping the headboard—or what was left of it.

The newlyweds behaved very much like newlyweds on that seventh day of our honeymoon, one or both of us remaining in bed for most of it. After making love, Bella fell asleep on top of me just as she had the first time. For two hours, I let her embrace my body in sleep before I decided I should get up and take care of some business.

But first, I had to extract myself from beneath my wife. I stroked her hair and spoke softly until she stirred. She awoke as she had that first day, unsteady and extremely

groggy...with a need to use the bathroom. Having remained in her personal version of the child's pose for two hours, she was stiff and sore and found her knees locked when she tried to lift herself off me.

"I can't straighten my legs," she mumbled, "And my foot's asleep."

"I'm going to lift you, darling. Just relax."

She mumbled something unintelligible. Though her eyes were open, she seemed dazed.

I grasped her about the waist and slid her upward toward my head until our bodies detached from one another, then gently rolled her onto her side.

"Ow...," she moaned, reaching for her numb foot. I massaged her feet and legs to get the blood flowing and eventually, she straightened her legs.

"I don't think I'll let you fall asleep like that again."

"You don't like it?" she mumbled.

"I *do* like it, actually. But it seems a little hard on your legs." I chuckled.

Bella sat up and I hurried to help her to her feet. She swayed, so I held her up and walked her to the bathroom.

"Do you need help?"

"No, no, go away," she said groggily, grabbing for the door knob. I didn't want to let go of her. She seemed almost to be sleep-walking.

I waited outside the door and when she opened it again, I walked her back to the bedroom and sat her on the bed. She lay down and I sat beside her.

"Kiss me," she said, reaching for me. I leaned over and touched my lips to hers and then she promptly fell asleep again. I stayed with her for a while before leaving the room to make some phone calls.

I had been caught completely off guard by Bella's announcement that she wanted to go to Dartmouth after all. I smiled, remembering how I had tried everything I could think of to convince her to remain human for a year or two longer. I had felt pretty confident that she would agree to go to Dartmouth once she saw her acceptance letter—confident enough that I'd hired an agent to find us a house in Hanover, New Hampshire, where we would live. I knew I could rent it out if she refused to go.

Now she had decided all on her own that she wanted to stay human and attend Dartmouth together. It was utterly absurd to me that sex should be the magical experience that changed her entire perspective. I chuckled as I considered what a long road we had taken to get to that point. How different everything might have been if I had let Bella seduce me when she first tried! If she had survived, that is.

I dialed the RE/MAX agent and arranged for her to hire whomever was needed to get the house ready for us within a few weeks. I wanted Bella to be comfortable when we arrived. The agent would rent furniture, make sure the utilities were engaged, and handle any repairs that needed to be made, all while Bella and I frolicked in the sun on a private island. Money was certainly a useful commodity.

When I finished organizing some of the details of our move to the east coast, I went back to check on Bella and found that she was sweating profusely. I laid down beside her to cool her off.

“Mmm...Edward,” she murmured, putting her arms around my neck. She promptly fell back to sleep and didn’t wake up for another hour.

“Good morning, darling,” I chuckled when she woke again. It was five in the afternoon and the sun already was starting to move toward the horizon.

“Is it morning already?” Bella asked as I leaned over to kiss her.

“Only for you,” I replied. Bella’s stomach grumbled. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Gustavo brought us some fresh fish. Shall I cook it for you?”

“I’d rather have some eggs, I think.”

While I played chef, Bella headed to the bathroom to take a shower and came back to the kitchen combing her wet hair.

“I slept the whole day, I guess,” she commented as I cut a large piece from the spinach and cheese frittata I’d cooked. “Wow, that looks yummy!” She flashed me a smile. “You’re too good to me. I’m getting spoiled.”

Bella attacked the plate of food while I watched and then requested more. She consumed five eggs before she was finished. Counting the two meals she’d eaten earlier that day, her total came to an even dozen.

After we washed the dishes together, Bella put her arms around my waist. “Would it be wrong to go back to bed?” She waggled her eyebrows at me.

“Still tired?” I asked with a straight face.

She smiled. “Not exactly.”

“You sure you don’t want to go outside, maybe take a walk on the beach?”

“Beach, schmeach.”

She took my hand and I let her lead me to the blue bedroom. She clambered onto the bed and pulled me to her by grabbing the waistband of the shorts I’d slipped on. She disengaged the four buttons one by one.

As I stepped out of my canvas shorts, it occurred to me how little hesitation Bella had shown—none at all, really—to be physical with me. For such a shy person to be utterly fearless about kissing, touching, and lying with (let alone making love to) anyone was rather surprising and with me even more so. She had never been shy with me—she had never feared me either. She’d been recklessly trusting of me since the beginning.

I stood by the bed, nude, with Bella sitting on her heels in front of me. The image was inevitable, I suppose, almost a cliché. Though I hated the idea of being a cliché in the bedroom, I decided to make that great sacrifice and not fight it. Ha!

A joke Emmett had once told me about somebody’s girlfriend donning her kneepads flickered through my mind. I smiled ruefully to realize I had suddenly become eligible for membership in the locker room fraternity, the men who gathered to share vulgar sexual tales as a way to bond with other men. I could already hear Emmett pressing me for honeymoon details. How fortunate it was that he wasn’t the one in the family who could read minds!

How did they tolerate me? I suddenly wondered. It was bad enough to know that Alice had foreseen Bella’s need for seductive French lingerie—the nighttime garb that had tortured me all week. I briefly wondered what all my sister had seen that she would never mention to me. Discretion came with the territory.

Bella rose onto her knees and, placing one hand behind my neck and knotting the other through my hair, pulled my mouth to hers. Her hands cupped my face before wandering downward to my shoulders and onto my chest. She followed her hands with her lips, kissing and caressing my marble skin. I threw my head back, my eyes shut, my hands in her hair, as she slowly worked her way down to my ribs and my stomach before sliding her hand downwards. She had wanted to touch me like this for so long and I’d been compelled to stop her every time,

which, despite what she may have thought, wasn't my first preference. With our physical horizons expanding, she seemed eager to proceed with "being human" together in some of its variations. Not that I minded. Not at all.

How incredible it was to feel someone else—an alluring, seductive, someone else, whom I loved—touch me all over with her two hands. Bella had always loved touching my skin before we were married and as time went on and I gained experience in self-control, I'd allowed her more latitude to touch my back, chest, and stomach. It had never gone this far, despite Bella's frequent efforts in this direction.

She dropped onto her heels and began stroking me with her fingers, seeming highly curious about the details of my anatomy. I grasped the heavy overhead rail on the four-poster bed and held onto it for safety's sake. Judging by the thrill of this kind of touching, who knew what my hands might do? I shuddered in delight.

Bella explored me thoroughly, like a sculptor memorizing a model's form. Perhaps she had ever seen a naked man, at least not in three dimensions. She'd never dated and had no brothers, she'd grown up with her mother, and Charlie seemed a modest sort. No wonder she was curious. I'm not the standard model, but close enough, I suppose.

She tried touching me in different ways, with her fingertips, with her whole hand...and with her lips. I was stunned into stillness when she began to kiss me intimately, unable to think, move, or feel anything but the shocking sensations in that one part of my body. *My gawd! The pleasure!*

Then I was glad I'd frozen into a statue, because I don't know how I might otherwise have reacted to what she did next. She opened her mouth and took me in. The heat and wetness of her mouth, the softness of her lips and tongue...

I inhaled jaggedly, and exhaled a long, deep moan of ecstasy. This was a singular feeling—isolated and intense—unlike anything I had ever experienced. In terms of self-control—the control necessary to keep Bella safe—receiving pleasure was so much more difficult than giving it. I wanted to press into her mouth, back out, and press in again, fast and hard. The desire was fierce, but safety required that I remain frozen and so I could do nothing to alter or speed the motion. It was a torturous exercise in living the moment. All extraneous brain activity ceased. The extreme pleasure of this touching simply left no room for anything else.

As heavenly as the experience was, I wished to be closer to my love, to kiss and explore her while she explored me. I didn't know how to tell her, though. I couldn't breathe, much less speak, and of course, I didn't want her to stop either. I moaned when she traded her hand for

her mouth and growled when she traded back. Her free hand caressed the curves of my buttocks. That alone was more stimulating than anything I'd allowed before our wedding.

With great, great effort, before Bella could stroke me beyond the point of no return, I gently pressed her shoulders back. When she released me and looked up, I lifted her from her knees and laid her on the bed, then lay down beside her.

"Did I do something wrong?" Bella worried.

"Oh no, my darling, not at all," I murmured. "I just wanted to be closer to you before..."

I pulled her to me and sought her lips, kissing her hungrily, then opened her dressing gown to press my nakedness against hers. Her gasp sent a dangerous surge of desire through me and with a growl, I rolled her on top of me to let her lead. She began to move, stroking herself against me in a sensuous dance and moaning to the back and forth rhythm. It felt like being rubbed in warm honey. Inevitably, I sought to dip into the honey pot, to be swallowed and immersed.

"I need to be inside you," I rasped in Bella's ear.

She kissed my neck and raised her hips.

"Ahh!" I gasped as she settled onto me and I slid slowly, inexorably, into her. Halfway down, she paused and pulled back. I grabbed at her buttocks to prevent her lifting away, but she was already lowering herself again, this time all...the...way...down...

"Ahh!" I cried, overcome.

She reached to touch herself, which stopped her motion, and in desperation, I seized her hips and lifted and lowered her swiftly, once, twice, again. Too swiftly—recklessly—I suddenly realized. I was too far gone. My hands had become dangerous. Instantly, I flipped us and hovered with my weight on my hands to keep them from grabbing. Still, I ached to push, to pull, to plunge into her and it was all I could do to constrain myself to a human-safe speed. Bella's fingers again strayed downward between us, her touch sparking a bolt of current up my spine.

"Ahh...." I gave myself over to it. Bella pressed against me and the milkmaid action began in her deepest recesses. We cried out together.

When the lightning ceased, I lifted my head and found tears spilling from my love's eyes, running down into her ears.

"Happy tears?"

She could manage only a nod. I stroked her cheek and touched my lips to hers tenderly.

“My beloved.”

8-A. FOREBODING

Bella had fallen asleep again in the early evening and hadn't reawakened. I didn't understand how she could sleep so much. I'd never seen her this weary back home. There were many possible reasons...lingering anemia, the hot climate, jet lag, the swimming and walking, the newness of everything, perhaps even our lovemaking. Come to think of it, she wasn't just sleeping a lot more than usual. Something else had changed—since coming to Isle Esme, she had not talked in her sleep as she'd always done before. Even on the plane flight from Houston to Rio, she was a virtual chatterbox after falling asleep in my arms.

Normally, I stayed in bed with Bella when she slept. I loved to hold her, to feel her heartbeat, and listen to her talk (when she talked.) But I was oddly restless tonight. Something at the back of my mind was troubling me and I thought if I went for a run or swim it might shake loose. I carefully unwound myself from Bella, though I needn't have troubled, since she slept like a stone these days. My movements wouldn't wake her.

We were so isolated that I didn't bother to dress, just slipped through the French doors and took off running. My top speed wasn't feasible, as the island was too small to get far before running into water. Indeed, it was only four minutes until I entered the small jungle at the southern end of the island. I ran through it until I reached a rocky outcropping that dropped down to a strip of white, sandy beach. It brought back a bad memory—when Alice saw Bella jump off the cliff outside of La Push.

I had called to verify the truth of her vision and Jacob Black had answered Charlie's phone. When he said that Charlie was at "the funeral," I'd assumed the obvious. That was the worst day of my existence. Not only had I thought Bella was gone, but it was my patronizing belief that I knew what was best for her that had caused her death...and would have caused mine without her dangerous, heroic effort to save me.

I hoped I had changed in the last year. I was trying to trust Bella's instincts more, since the choices she made that sometimes seemed less safe, less ideal than the ones I insisted upon, almost invariably worked out better for her in the end. It was a hard lesson. I couldn't blame myself too much for wanting to protect what mattered most to me in the world, but relinquishing control was difficult. I had to remember that my motive for keeping Bella safe was still a selfish one.

On the night of our wedding, I'd promised that I would let go of the dust-up with Jacob that had threatened to ruin our wedding celebration, but the memory hadn't faded. Jacob was furious that I would risk Bella's life by making love with her, and his anger was not misplaced. It

had been a *huge* risk. If Bella had chosen the werewolf over me, I would have reacted the same way—I'd have wanted to kill him. In my opinion, he was even more dangerous to her than I was.

Though the topic of Jacob hadn't arisen on our honeymoon, I suspected that he crossed Bella's mind from time to time. If he did, she didn't let on. I was certain she was trying to protect me from her feelings for him. I would never forget that painful night when I held her as she cried and cried, anguished over having to let Jacob go. I had caused her so much pain when I left Forks and him so much pain when I returned. In some kind of karmic justice, I felt that I would never be free of that legacy, that Jacob's presence would loom over our lives always.

Being painfully honest with myself, I knew Jacob would have been a better choice for Bella than me. Still, I was selfishly glad that she'd picked me, whatever it cost. If she became immortal, her suffering over Jacob would fade along with her human memories and if she remained human, as she now claimed to want, we would soon move to New Hampshire. The distance might help Jacob move on with his life—though, admittedly, that strategy hadn't worked for Bella and me.

What I wouldn't give for Jacob to imprint on someone! It would solve all our problems. He would no longer be attached to Bella in the same way, and his bitterness would no longer poison our life together.

What effect would it have on the Quileute if the Cullens left the area for good? Maybe the pack would peter out and its members resume normal aging. That was another good reason to go to New Hampshire—Jacob and his generation would eventually die. But then, if Bella were going to remain human, she would age and die too. Our choices would never be easy.

Partially hidden by the trees, I looked out over the still water and saw an Atlantic spotted dolphin fly through the air. Since dolphins jump and splash to signal danger, I assumed that the leaper was the pod's lookout. If so, it had undoubtedly recognized that I was here. Dolphins were uncanny in their ability to avoid vampires, though they were perfectly willing to play with Bella as long as I stayed a good distance away. I didn't want to alarm the pod for no reason, so I retreated through the jungle to continue my run and my meditations.

I was happier than I had ever been and the future looked brighter than ever. Bella and I were husband and wife; miraculously, we were able to make love, something I never thought would be possible; Bella had decided to remain human for now; and we were going back to college. I couldn't want for more. And yet, as content as I was, I had an odd sense of foreboding. Maybe I'd gotten so used to trial and tribulation that I was needlessly expecting some new obstacle to drop into our path.

In a few days, I would have to return to the mainland and hunt. I wondered briefly if I could tolerate shark's blood. Though they were marine animals, not our usual fare, they *were* meat eaters. The thought was not at all appetizing, but it might be an interesting experiment. I thought I *could* drink dolphin or whale blood. As mammals, I somehow knew their blood would fit into the realm of my regular diet. I had no doubt that would upset Bella, though, and if it worked for me, I couldn't avoid telling her.

No, I would have to leave her one night soon to find some game. She'd been sleeping so soundly lately that she wouldn't even have to know I was gone. Ten or twelve hours gave me more than enough time to feed and return.

Twelve hours...that's what was troubling me. Bella continued to sleep for such long stretches of time. Something about it just didn't seem right. I couldn't be wearing her out that badly, could I? And in the last day or two, I'd also begun to notice that Bella's balance seemed crazily out of whack—not that her balance was ever very good, but it seemed worse than usual.

I chuckled, remembering the toilet-bowl incident, as I'd taken to calling it (only to myself, of course). It was two days ago after we'd returned from a snorkeling trip to the coral reef. We took the boat and stayed out for about four hours, chasing fish around the reef. Bella only got to see them if I stayed at a distance, but I couldn't stand being far from her, so the fish kept coaxing her into athletic games of tag.

Bella picnicked on the boat afterwards—egg sandwiches and milk, no less—while I steered us around to various empty islands in the area. Then she wanted to drive the boat, so I showed her how to turn on the engines, how to increase and decrease the speed, and gave her some pointers on steering—how to avoid over-steering, and how to address large waves. For a human, Bella was a good driver, careful and confident, and maneuvering the boat posed no problem for her. Finally, we'd returned to shore so she could take a nap.

I was checking the television news when I heard a loud bang from the bathroom. I raced to her.

"Bella, are you okay? Is everything all right?" I could hear her heart pounding through the door as she swore under her breath. "What's wrong? Do you need help? Can I come in?"

"I'm fine. I just fell down. Don't come in."

I stood outside the door, anxious, until she reappeared.

"What happened, love?" She was clutching her right elbow and I noticed a large scrape on her arm. "You're hurt!"

“I just hit my arm on the vanity. I’m okay.”

“But Bella, how did you fall? Did you trip on the bathmat, run into the tub?” I couldn’t visualize any way to fall down in that small space. She looked at her feet and blushed, then tried to brush past me, but I grabbed her around the waist and reeled her in.

“Well, if you must know,” she said, her face turning crimson, “I fell off the toilet.”

“What?” I looked at her, puzzled.

“I FELL OFF THE TOILET!” she hollered, much louder than necessary. “I reached for the toilet paper and lost my balance.”

I held my neutral expression with difficulty and didn’t say a word, just waited for her to go on.

She looked at me sheepishly, her face still red. “Yes, that’s right, Edward, I lost my balance on the toilet.” She pursed her lips, trying not to smile and I began to snicker. “Yes, yes, laugh as much as you want,” she said, as I tried and failed to contain myself. “I’m sure I looked hilarious.”

“I love you.” I took her face between my hands and tried to contain my amusement. “Once I get the safety belt installed, we won’t mention it again.”

She tried to frown at my joke, but couldn’t manage it, then we both started heehawing like a pair of donkeys (or maybe jackasses). I lifted her in the air and twirled her around.

“You probably haven’t gotten your land legs back after the boat ride, darling. It happens to everyone.”

She gave me a mock scowl, knowing I’d just invented the excuse for her.

But the incident did concern me. I watched her more closely for the rest of the day and saw her sway nearly every time she stood up. She tumbled backward into my lap when she rose from the couch and almost ran into the kitchen door frame when she went for a drink of water. Something was not right about that—it went beyond her usual awkwardness. I made it my job to start monitoring her standing-ups and sitting-downs so I could catch her if she started to fall. Maybe I *should* put a safety belt on the toilet!

Three-quarters of the way around the island, I dove into the water and swam away from the shore as fast as I could go. The sea, warm and calm, felt good on my skin. It might be nice for Bella if I came back to the house with a raised body temperature. She liked me to keep her cool at night, but I also noticed that she would drag a blanket over herself sometimes after

midnight. Thinking about her in bed, I decided to cut my swim short and head back to be with her.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when I returned and Bella was still asleep. Ten hours so far. That was a lot, given that she'd slept twelve hours the day before. I moved quietly into the blue bedroom and slipped into bed beside her. She wrapped her arms around my neck without waking and lay her head on my chest.

Shortly before sunrise, Bella opened her eyes. I leaned over to kiss her awake, but she put her hand over her mouth.

"Morning breath." As far as I was concerned, there was no such thing, but I let her roll out of bed and stumble toward the bathroom.

"Don't fall in."

"I won't. I never fall *into* the toilet, only *off* the toilet," she called back. I chuckled.

As I made my way to the kitchen, I shuffled through my brain for a new way to prepare eggs. Bella was hardly awake enough to consume sufficient calories. (I'd checked the numbers.) Then I remembered a recipe for eggnog that Esme kept around the house. If obliged to bring something to a human gathering, she offered punch or cocktail mixes or other types of drinks. The ingredients were a little easier for us to tolerate than solid food, both in the making and in the swallowing, should that be required.

Splashing sounds from the bathroom caught my attention and an image of warm water sluicing over Bella's body instantly distracted me. Aside from Alice's teasing peeks of my wife while she recovered from her broken leg, I had never seen her bathe.

I rinsed myself off as needed, which wasn't often, but Bella showered nearly every day. I'd grown familiar with the sounds of this human experience, the click of the shampoo bottle, the swishing of soap on skin, the varying splash patterns of water against tile. Thinking now about her standing naked, her hands skimming her wet skin while torrents of water rushed down her delicate breasts, I suddenly longed to join her.

Hastily returning the perishables to the fridge, I went to the bathroom door and heard Bella ruffle her hair under the cascade of water. I slipped in silently and was hit with a memory—the first time I'd scented her in the rain and how it intensified her mouthwatering aroma. It was the same now, though this time my rising hunger wasn't for her blood. I slipped off my boxer-briefs and tossed them away, then slid the shower curtain aside.

The slight draft alerted her to my presence and she looked up, eyes wide, the color rising in her face. So alluring. Without a word, I stepped in and turned her toward me with my hands on her waist. Rivulets of water coursed over her shoulders and snaked down her breasts, winding along the landscape of her stomach, hips, and thighs. Could anything be more erotic? Desire flashed through me like wildfire, bright and hot.

Though I'd come to bathe her, I didn't resist when she nestled her hips against me and wrapped a leg around to caress my calf with her foot. I swept her sodden hair over her shoulder and trailed kisses up her neck to the hollow under her ear. She shuddered in my arms.

In such close confines with hard surfaces on all sides, it would be easy to lose my wits, so for safety's sake, I turned her around. In defiance, she pressed her bottom against me, nestling my erect penis into the swoop of her lower back. I gasped in pleasure. *Vixen!*

I longed to pleasure her, but made considerable effort to force my thoughts in another direction. With one hand on her hip for balance, I put a bit of distance between us, then reached for the shampoo.

"Mmm, that feels nice," she whispered as I worked the lather through her hair.

"Yes, it does." More husbanding—I reveled in it. Caring for my Bella gave me sincere pleasure.

I turned her again and she tilted her head back as I raked my fingers through her long locks to rinse them. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around my waist and we kissed under the gushing faucet. I kept some distance between my body and hers to focus on this act of godliness, vowing to focus on other acts later when we were in safer surroundings.

I covered her neck with tender kisses and between each two whispered, "I need...to fix...you something to eat...and you...might want...some human minutes."

She laughed and lifted my face to meet hers. "I love you. You're much too good to me."

"As you are to me." I gave her one last, long kiss and caressed her cheek, dazzling her with my eyes and, likewise, being dazzled by hers. *Such joy!*

I stepped from the shower and pulled on my Calvins, leaving her to finish bathing while I returned to another husbandly duty, nourishing the human. Back in the kitchen, I beat together raw eggs, sugar, and milk, then sprinkled nutmeg on top. Bella was just exiting the bathroom in a towel and pulling a comb through her hair when I brought her the drink.

"Eggnog, my dear?" I offered, holding out the glass. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"I've never really liked eggnog. It sounds so gross." She accepted it anyway and gave it a sniff. "Hmm...it actually smells pretty good." She took a tentative sip. "Wow! I didn't think I liked this stuff!" She drained the glass in three giant swallows.

"Would you like more?"

"Um...yes, please."

It took no time to whip up another batch. I made a full pitcher and stored it for later, then handed her another glassful. She put down her comb and gulped about half of it.

"Thanks, this is great!"

I stepped close to her and wiped the milk moustache from around her mouth with my fingers.

"You know what I think is great?" I asked, raising one eyebrow.

"What?" She gave me a suspicious look.

"You!" I snatched her up and tossed her over my shoulder to haul her back to bed.

She slapped my butt through the thin cotton. "Ow!"

Chuckling, I flopped her backward onto the bed and yanked off her towel in one swift motion.

"Eek! The monster's got me! Help! Help!"

"No one can hear you, my pretty...," I cackled in my best ghoulish voice. I growled, then lunged for her throat.

"Eeeeeeeek!" Bella screeched as I grabbed the skin of her throat with my lips and growled again. She reached for the waistband of my Calvin's and I obligingly whisked them off.

I nipped and growled my way down to her bellybutton, then sealed my lips to her skin and blew. She giggled at the rude sound and grabbed my hair, trying to pull my head away. I blew again and she giggled harder. I looked up. "Nice view from down here."

"Nice view from up here, too," she replied.

I swiped her bellybutton with my tongue to hear her laugh again. The scent of her arousal rose from between her thighs, my new favorite perfume.

“Mmm, Bella, you smell good...may I?” I stroked her inner thigh and her heart did a double-take.

“Mmm hmm.”

“You sure?” I teased, trailing my fingers up, up, up, but not...quite...getting... there.

“*Mmm hmm*,” she repeated, beginning to pant. I pressed her thighs apart and she raised her knees. Her scent intensified.

I slithered down her like a lizard, then lowered my mouth to her, stopping just before touching her flesh. I rolled my eyes upward to see her expression. “Are you ab...so...*lute*...ly certain?”

She watched me with her eyes partly closed and her mouth partly open.

“Yes, Edward...*yes*...” She moaned the last word, trembling now.

I spread her glistening flesh with my thumbs. The bud of her clitoris, tucked in at the top, was bright red and, engorged with blood. I flicked it with my tongue and her leg muscles twitched.

“*Oooh...*,” she moaned.

I licked a long stroke through her center and then another. She felt scorching hot against my tongue.

What must that feel like?

When she reached downward, I caught her hands and pinned them to her sides. In response, she spread her thighs further apart and groaned, raising herself toward me. I tucked her hands beneath her buttocks, trapping them.

“Touch me, Edward...,” she begged, her voice rough and pleading.

I stroked her with the tip of my tongue.

“Like that?” I teased

“*Yes, yesss...*,” her moan trailed off. “*More, pleeeese...*”

“Or more like this?” I wiggled my tongue. Her eyes were shut, but her mouth gaped open.

“*Ohhhhhh...*” She rocked her hips. I wiggled my tongue. “*Ohhhhhh...*”

I couldn't tease her any longer. She was simply too exciting.

"Ahh..." I moaned, slipping a finger inside her heat.

She rose off the mattress, frantic, and I pressed my hips into it to relieve some of the pressure of my own arousal. Again her hand escaped and I waylaid it, tucking it firmly beneath her. I licked her again and glanced up. She was positively writhing.

"More..."

I growled and began stroking her in earnest, my tongue moving quickly over her most tender spot. A high-pitched cry broke from her, a single note, repeated over and over in time to my stroking. Suddenly, her body went rigid and her interior muscles began to undulate. I gasped with her, riding the wave of her pleasure.

When it was over, her body went limp. I looked up and saw she had dozed off again. Chuckling, I crawled up beside her and nestled my front to her back, spoon-style. An hour passed before Bella awoke.

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"Sorry I fell asleep. I'm just so tired."

"You have been sleeping a lot."

"I know! Is this what happens to married ladies? Do we turn into big, fat slugs, just eating and sleeping constantly?"

"And making love," I added with a smile.

"It must be really boring for you, being married."

"Nope, not a bit!"

Bella rolled over to face me.

"I love you, Edward..." She reached to kiss me and I happily responded.

When we finally broke apart, I remembered to ask, "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I kind of am."

"What would you like? Cereal, toast, yogurt, fruit?"

“Eggs, please.”

“Do you want some bacon?”

“No thanks, just eggs.”

“Whatever you say. Scrambled?”

“Sure. Do you have any more of that eggnog?”

“I do indeed.”

Dutifully, I retrieved a fresh glass and when I returned, found Bella had dozed off. I set it on the bedside table and returned to the kitchen. When I came back carrying a plate of eggs, I saw she had drunk the eggnog and fallen asleep again.

“Here’s your breakfast,” I said softly as I sat beside her. She opened her eyes and, sitting up, wolfed down the plate of five scrambled eggs in less than two minutes.

“Mmm. Thank you, husband.”

“You’re welcome, wife.” I grinned.

“But I’m still hungry,” she whispered.

As I began to rise, Bella threw one leg over my lap and both her arms around my neck.

“Not that kind of hungry. This kind of hungry.” She leaned in for a kiss.

I gave her a peck, then asked, “You don’t want to go swimming?”

“No.”

“Boating?”

“No.”

“Sunning?”

“No.”

“Fishing?”

“No.”

“Hiking?”

“No.”

“Video?”

“Uh...no.”

“Chess?”

“No.”

“You want to make a baby?” I raised one eyebrow.

“No, Edward,” she replied firmly. “I want to *try* to make a baby!” She grinned.

“At your service, my darling—I’ll service you any time you like!”

We both started giggling, then Bella began to stroke my chest and we giggled no more.

Scooting close, she wrapped her legs around my waist. *Ahhhh!* I rotated us and set my feet on the floor, then lifted her over me with my hands under her bottom. She guided me to her and I lowered her slowly.

“Oh...Bella,” I groaned, as her body settled over mine in a thrilling caress. “I love you, my darling.”

“I love you.”

Our eyes locked and we touched our lips together feeling and celebrating this powerful new bond between us. I lifted her and let gravity pull her down again. She clutched at my hair and gasped.

“Are you all right?” I murmured against her lips.

“Yes...do it again,” she whispered, throwing her head back.

I lifted her and let her sink slowly, then again, then again as her fingers twined tightly through my hair and her voice rose in pitch. After several minutes, she pushed at my chest and, catching on to what she desired, I lay back and let her take over. She crouched over me and pushed my hand down between us. I was happy to touch her there, thrilled even, and focusing on her pleasure kept me from the brink. When my fingers hit their mark, Bella groaned deep and low. She dropped her head and her soft hair draped over my face engulfing me with its sweet strawberry scent.

What did this feel like to her? It was impossible to know, but her facial expression implied it was extraordinarily good. I had to concentrate so I wouldn't accidentally hurt her with my touch. Delicacy was required, even for a vampire.

When I felt her climax nearing, as an experiment, I stopped moving my finger. She groaned with impatience. I counted to seven before starting again, whereupon she moaned in relief. As her climax approached, again I stopped touching her. She cried out in frustration, but the sound vibrated with passion, deep and guttural. I nearly lost control of myself. My lap and the bedclothes beneath me were drenched with her arousal. Her heart pounded wildly and in my excitement, I nipped at her neck, allowing my tongue to stroke her carotid artery to feel her pulsating blood.

Ahhh...I wanted...needed...

When I halted my touch again, she went still, joining me in this game of arousal and deferral, build up and delay. Seven seconds, slow as minutes, ticked by, the strain of her denial turning to the thrill of anticipation for us both. When my finger touched her sweet spot, she instantly exploded—there was no other word for it. Her body quaked with the power of her release. I propped her upright to watch. *My gawd*, she was beautiful!

How did I get so lucky?

I could no longer resist her pull. *"Ahhhh...Bella...!"* I cried, clutching her to me. My body shuddered and shook as I joined her in ecstasy.

As Bella lay asleep beside me, I gazed at her and marveled at my good fortune at having won her love. I never could have imagined how my immortal existence would be altered by this chocolate-eyed beauty who stumbled into the Forks High School cafeteria on a dreary winter day, a day no different than the thousand before it. She was mine. Heaven did exist.

The sensuous lines of her body, the curve of her buttocks, and the gentle swelling of her breasts enchanted me. I couldn't get enough of her silky skin against mine. I stroked her gently from the back of her knee up the length of her thigh, over her hip and around her waist. I caressed her ribcage and dragged my fingers over her breasts to her rosy pink nipples, soft and relaxed as she slept.

Did my eyes deceive me or had her breasts changed? I cupped the left one, measuring its girth, then let its weight settle in my palm. It was fuller and heavier than the week before. I switched sides. The right one too—swollen.

I smiled, reminded of a joke Emmett had told me as a newborn.

“Human girls’ ‘tits’ get bigger the more you play with them,” he’d said and roared with laughter while Rosalie threw daggers with her eyes.

I hadn’t known how to respond, given that I’d never played with any and couldn’t imagine why one would want to particularly. *Gads*, had I ever changed!

It must be hormones. Bella’s body changed continuously during her monthly cycle. I thought I’d tracked all its nuances over the previous three months, but maybe not. Or perhaps Bella’s hormones had been altered by our sexual activity. I’d read that human men’s beards grew faster and thicker during active sexual periods, stimulated by extra testosterone. And I’d been in high school long enough to observe the phenomenon of boys with little facial or body hair suddenly turning into Sasquatch at the loss of their virginity. That, in turn, made them appear more masculine, which attracted more females. It made sense, biologically speaking.

In Bella’s case, the extra softness wasn’t unwelcome. I sighed and, for the thousandth time that week, marveled at my great good fortune.

8-B. EXPLORING

Bella had gained weight. There was no doubt about it. She'd been wearing fewer clothes lately, but just by looking at her, I could tell her traveling outfit would fit her tightly now. Her breasts were getting larger and seemed to be more sensitive, as well. She liked my mouth on them. Twice recently, she'd slid up my body until one or the other breast was in the vicinity of my lips and wordlessly asked for favors. I was more than willing.

As far as clothes went, Bella had given up her shoes the day after we arrived on Isle Esme. She kept a pair of flip-flops by the back door and a pair of deck shoes on the boat and that's pretty much where they stayed. Next she abandoned her brassieres. Soon after our arrival, it seemed, she began spilling over the top of them and they'd grown uncomfortable, digging ridges in her skin.

I looked forward to seeing what clothing she would discard next and I wasn't disappointed. Despite being naturally modest, Bella gave up her t-shirts ("too hot") in favor of bikini tops. During the second week of our stay, she began discarding even those in the afternoons ("too tight"). I loved Bella topless, but suspected an ulterior motive.

My wife's body enthralled me. I loved to try new things, to touch her in different ways and watch her facial expressions transform from amused to interested to absorbed—and if I did things right—to ecstatic. It was *thrilling* how responsive Bella was to me, stimulating in the extreme.

Going topless meant we had to be careful she didn't burn all that tender, pale skin. Bella didn't tan, just scorched red in the sun. Though a pretty color, apparently it was quite painful. One of our first days in the sun, she turned pink after only fifteen minutes and since then, I had made it my job to slather her with sun-blocking lotion. (Note to self: another item for the guide to caring for a human.)

The more clothes Bella gave up, the more sun lotion I got to apply—nifty, how that worked. She did her face, but let me do the rest. At first, I lotioned only her arms, upper chest and throat, upper back, legs, and feet. When she started wearing bikinis, I got to add her stomach and mid-back. The ritual made our first week better, because though I couldn't make love to her, at least I had an excuse to touch her. I always had to stop too soon, though, before she got excessively wound up, and then frustrated and mad when I stopped. I was frustrated too, but even more frightened of hurting her again.

After our headboard-gouging “leap forward” in the bedroom, Bella often abandoned tops altogether and I got to rub her breasts with lotion several times a day. It made me want to drag her outside at every possible turn. (Then back inside...or not.)

Two days prior, I’d brought a wet cloth to bed to wash the foul-tasting lotion off her breasts. The instant I touched her, her nipples grew erect and she began humming in pleasure, so I took the left one in my mouth and sucked vigorously. Bella squealed, then moaned. I was trusting myself more to correctly interpret her sounds and I was pretty sure the former had been a squeal of delight. To test the theory, I leaned over and pulled her right nipple into my mouth. Another squeal. Her nipples were extraordinarily sensitive.

Bella’s hand moved south down her body and I intercepted it, twining my fingers through hers. *Could she climax if I touched only her breasts?* My reading on the subject indicated it was possible.

When I released her hand, it strayed down again and I stopped touching her. She wriggled to encourage me to continue, but I didn’t respond until her hand touched my face, checking whether I was still animate. I licked her right nipple and rolled the left between my fingers. Her head flopped into the mattress and she closed her eyes, moaning in pleasure.

I kept on and as her sexual tension increased, she grew more restless. Her hips rolled insistently in an alluring rhythm. Aching for her, I surrendered to my desire and shifted on top of her, aligning my hips with hers. She raised her knees in welcome and as we kissed, I found my way into her slick, heated center. She was enormously swollen inside, her tissues engorged with blood.

Ahhh....

I’d intended to pleasure her, but my body insisted I gratify myself, to thrust and plunge, hard and fast. I fought the urge and pushed deeply into her, pinning her hips to the mattress so she couldn’t move, couldn’t tempt me. When I sucked hard on her nipple, she did so anyway by clamping down around me, sending me into paroxysms of pleasure. It took several moments for me to regain control of myself.

Proceeding with the experiment, I held my hips still and focused on her breasts, mouthing, squeezing, and stroking. Soon I felt her hand burrow between our bodies as she sought more direct stimulation. I stopped moving altogether.

“Edward, what’s wrong?” When her hand came back to touch my face, I resumed my attentions.

She left her hand on my waist, the other buried in my hair, and I redoubled my efforts, sucking hard on her left nipple and rolling the right one between my thumb and forefinger. She moaned and clenched and tried to rock her hips to entice me to move inside her, which nearly drove me to distraction, but I continued my stroking, sucking, and massaging. Five minutes passed, then ten. Her excitement continued to rise along with the pitch of her cries. Then after fifteen minutes of this stimulation, she went rigid, and it seemed she would tip over the edge. Her fingers pushed between us and I stopped touching her.

With a groan of frustration, Bella grabbed my hair to pull me back, and with her hands away from her crotch, I complied. But when she reached between us again, I stopped again. The experiment was too engaging to abandon this late in the game.

Though I couldn't read her mind, maybe she was beginning to read mine. She returned her free hand to my waist and I bent to her nipples. She moved her hand to her crotch and I pulled back.

To my waist.

Start.

Between her legs.

Stop.

She raised her hand above her head.

Start.

Toward her nether regions.

Stop.

Then she reached up and reached down quickly to see how fast I could respond to her hand signals. I easily kept up and she burst out laughing.

"Edwarrrrrd...", she whined. Her hand was high, so I toyed with her breasts. "What are you doooing?" Her voice rose an octave.

I didn't stop. She reached down and I did.

"I'm trying something."

"What are you trying? You must think this is very funny."

“Well, it is amusing to see how quickly you figured out the pattern. What I was actually doing, though, was seeing if I could make you come without you using your hands.”

“Do you *mind* me using my hands?”

“No, not at all. It’s hot, actually.” I cringed to hear myself using Emmett slang. “I mean, it excites me.”

“Well, then why are you discouraging me?”

“I was curious. It seems like you respond strongly to this...” I kneaded her breast and sucked her nipple.

“*Ahhh*,” she groaned. She threw her arms over her head in a dramatic gesture that I couldn’t miss.

I grinned. Such a saucy lady! *Thank you, God!*

I returned my focus to my wife’s body, giving her breasts my full attention. Eight minutes passed and Bella’s excitement rose again slowly, a deep, smoldering fire. She panted and her scent swirled around me in a delicious, confounding cloud. Her scarlet nipples were hard as pebbles. I sucked harder until suddenly a wave began inside her, a series of long, slow muscle contractions that gently massaged me. She hummed a single note—middle F—or more accurately, a vibration poised around middle F. She was climaxing, but it felt different this time. I kept sucking at her nipples, feeling her pleasure that went on and on.

How I’d kept myself in check till then, I had no idea, but suddenly, my body gave over, fast and hard, catching me by surprise. My hips thrust into her and my lips clamped down on her nipple. She jumped and I let go, but kept thrusting in her slowly, savoring my release.

Why had no one told me making love would be like this? Maybe I’d have taken Tanya up on offers of sex long ago! But no. It wouldn’t have been the same with Tanya. I’d never felt one iota of the physical attraction I felt toward Bella, though Tanya was absolutely desirable.

The difference was *love*.

“Sorry...,” I whispered after we’d both stopped moving.

“For what?”

“For biting your nipple like that.”

“You didn’t actually bite, did you?”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Then you have nothing to apologize for.”

“Didn’t it hurt? It seemed like it hurt.”

“It did a little, I guess, but I didn’t care. Everything felt too good.”

I lifted her chin with my finger and covered her lips with mine, kissing her tenderly.

“Does it hurt now?” I murmured, touching it with the tip of my finger.

“A little. Mostly, it’s just very sensitive. When you suck on my nipples...” —I watched the blood flood up her neck to her face—“...this electric charge shoots from there to between my legs. It’s almost overwhelming.” She turned her face and lowered her eyes while her cheeks turned a blazed crimson.

“Mmm, that sounds very, very nice,” I said, drawing my finger over the heat of her blushing cheeks.

“Yes, it is. Thank you, Edward.”

“Anytime.” I smiled.

“Any time?” She raised her eyebrows.

I put my mouth back on the non-bruised nipple and sucked it gently.

“It feels so good!” Bella rasped.

“I must say I’m a little envious,” I said, my lips moving against her breast. “I don’t think that works on me.”

“Maybe I’m just not strong enough yet.”

“Maybe not.” She could be right.

Whether due to “being played with,” I didn’t know, but Bella’s breasts had grown larger since the beginning of our honeymoon by two or three inches. Her waist had thickened too and her behind was more rounded. She looked beautiful with her new curves and her skin glowed with the effects of the subtropical sunlight.

Still, it puzzled me how she could gain weight on eggs and milk and the occasional energy bar. She'd accepted the latter from me one day when we were caught in a tropical rainstorm in the boat. I pulled us into a cove of one of the little islands and we waited it out beneath some tall shoreline brush. The downpour lasted a long while and it had been at least four hours since Bella last ate. She took the energy bar from me begrudgingly, but after eating one, asked for another, then another. They were high in calories, which I thought she needed, since eggs are a low-calorie food and she ate little else. I stuffed her omelets with meat and vegetables when she let me and I'd switched her to drinking whole milk, which Gustavo brought over every few days.

What a nice man, incidentally. He'd married Kaure over forty years before and they were still happy together. He apologized for his wife's superstitious ways. That first cleaning day, he translated some of what she said in Ticuna to Portuguese, but I spoke Ticuna and Gustavo's translations were kind at best. He left things out, like "blood drinker" and "devil." I knew exactly what Kaure thought of me. She was frightened for Bella and felt the need to check up on her. It was a kind impulse, actually, since she would never accept that Bella was truly my wife, not my plaything or my dinner.

I might eat her later, though. The raunchy thought popped into my head and I grinned guiltily. It was appalling how "male" I'd become since my initiation to the pleasures of sex. I used to be above all that. Emmett had always thought I was prudish, but it wasn't that exactly. I had more of an inclination toward gentlemanliness than Emmett, but that wasn't it either. I just wasn't interested in his male sense of humor before. Now I found Emmett's jokes popping into my head constantly, and not just his, but my own base puns and innuendo as well.

I'd kept these thoughts to myself until yesterday, when out of nowhere Bella asked, "Do you know what those little bumps are around a lady's nipples?" I stared at her in surprise.

She didn't wait for my reply. "They're Braille for 'Suck Here'." She cackled in mirth, making me laugh.

"Did you get a choice of messages at birth?"

"No, I missed that."

"Maybe I should check yours then. They might say something else."

I materialized in front of her, untied her bikini top, and began to decipher her nipples, which reacted instantly to my touch. I can read Braille, but the closest I got was "B-R-A" if I read one letter on the right nipple and the other two on the left and ignored random bumps in between.

“I’m getting ‘B-R-A,’” I said, “and I’m thinking it stands for ‘Brava!’ What do you think?”

“‘Brava,’ huh? It could be short for ‘brazen.’”

“Could be,” I said. “I think it needs closer inspection.”

I picked her up and hauled her to the bedroom. Yup, she’d gained 7.48 pounds on our honeymoon, which I regarded as a good sign. Maybe I was doing okay with her care and maintenance, though we *had* been spending a lot of time in bed lately. With Bella wearing so little around the house—sometimes a pair of shorts, sometimes a bikini, sometimes only half a bikini—we hadn’t been outside much for a couple of days. Soon we must add some vertical activity to our horizontal exploits. Bella needed to stretch her muscles, get some exercise and fresh air. But one more day wouldn’t hurt.

I laid her on the bed and leaped on top of her, landing with my arms and feet extended just enough to create a tight cage around her body. She gasped and started laughing. We giggled and kissed, kissed and giggled, and Bella reached for the waistband of my boxer-briefs and gave them a yank. I whipped them off for her and she began to stroke me.

Ahhh! I would never grow accustomed to that feeling.

Bella was creative with her hands and good at divining what I liked by my response to her touch. I rolled off her and began to reciprocate before discovering anew that though I could maintain the motion of my fingers while she was distracting me in provocative ways, she could not. When Bella was being erotically engaged, she lost herself to sensation and her hands ceased to function.

As I touched her, she began to melt, becoming W-E-T, wet, her vulva so engorged that I could smell the swirling blood distinctly and separately from her arousal. Her hands stopped moving on me, not that I minded. I enjoyed stretching things out and making them last.

I vibrated my thumb against her sweet spot and Bella gasped, then wrapped her leg around my waist, giving me greater access. I sank my middle finger into her and curved it forward to rub against her front wall. She loved that. Every time I touched her there, she turned feline, completely absorbed in massaging herself against my finger...starting, stopping, rotating slightly in one direction or the other. She’d stay focused on it until reaching some plateau of satisfaction, then she’d come back to me.

How would it feel to her if I touched her through a different wall? I dipped my little finger in her wetness and slid it into the crack of her behind. I continued stroking her while letting my little finger press against the folds of skin that marked the other entrance to her body. She froze momentarily at my touch, then relaxed and let it be.

“Are you okay, my love?” I asked, hearing the gravel in my voice.

“I’m...good...”

“Darling, you must tell me *at once* if I hurt you in any way.”

She dutifully nodded.

“I’m bound to try things you won’t like and you must say so, okay? I only want to make you feel good.”

“Mmmm...” she replied, sort of.

I took her at her non-word and pressed against her back opening. She tightened down.

“Try pushing out when I press in,” I murmured. “It’s a trick they teach in medical school.”

“Mmm hmm,” Bella hummed as I continued to stroke her.

Alice had put together a packet of sexual aids along with Bella’s toiletries kit, and a medicine kit, a makeup kit, and a feminine products kit. There was even a manicure kit complete with different colors of nail polish. Alice thought of everything. How sexy it would be to paint Bella’s toenails. *Later.*

Alice’s sex kit was in a clear zippered bag and contained condoms (though I didn’t see us needing those and they’d never stick to my marble skin, anyway), lubricant, scented candles in tiny tins, some vibrating gadgets that looked like fun, and some natural plant oils. I reached for the almond oil and dribbled some on my fingers. Bella moaned when I slid them across her tender, private skin. She liked it. Me too.

This time when my little finger stroked her, I felt her push outward. “That’s right. That’s how it works, love. May I touch you inside there?” It was *always* good to ask.

Bella nodded and hummed another “mmm hmm.” I pressed my oiled finger against her and when she relaxed, slid it inside her.

“Ahhhh,” she gasped.

“I love you,” I groaned. My tongue sought her lips and pressed between them into her mouth. I was shockingly aroused. That she would allow me to penetrate all of these portals to her body was miraculous. It felt almost like I was sharing her warm human body, so different than mine.

How she could be stirred by my chilly solidity? I wondered fleetingly.

“Edward, I love you,” she murmured, “with my heart and with my body. My body is your body, like the wedding vows say, though more eloquently.”

“With my body I thee worship...” I quoted.

I stroked her inside, front and back and she shivered and moaned. My thumb kept up a gentle rhythmic stroke across her clitoris until I could no longer resist her excitement.

“Bella, I need you now...,” I croaked.

“Yesss...”

I withdrew my fingers gently and she guided me to her wet, swollen tissues. I slid inside with one long, slow stroke and a throaty growl emerged from my throat.

“I...will never...get used to...that feeling...my love,” I said between panting breaths.

She moaned in reply.

I wrapped my arm around her and pressed my finger again to her back entry. She allowed me inside her with a sharp inhalation and then relaxed as I stroked her in tandem front and back. Bella undulated, her eyes shut, and moaned a low, feral tone. I shuddered, wildly excited.

She reached down to touch herself and when her fingers met their mark, her internal muscles clamped down hard.

“Do it,” I whispered. “I want to feel you come.”

I moved my hips, in, out, slowly, slowly, and pressed another finger into her. Twisting them left and right, I found myself stroking my own penis through her internal wall. I pressed deeply into her, front and back, and she cried out.

“Okay, love?”

She just groaned and thrust herself forcefully onto my fingers.

“Bella, darling,” I whispered in her ear, “I can’t reach any deeper.”

“You could, though,” she muttered. I felt the heat of her blood as it rushed to her face.

“You want me inside you here?” I wiggled my fingers and she gasped.

"It's extraordinary, Edward, absolutely extraordinary," she murmured. "Let's try it."

"Really, Bella, are you sure?" I gazed into her eyes trying to read her, not at all sure this was a good idea.

"Yes, I want to try it."

"Why?" I asked, dubious.

"I want to try...*everything*...with you."

I hung there immobilized at the power of her words. The depth of Bella's trust stunned me. That she should want me in such a way was inconceivable, considering how dangerous it was for her to be intimate with me in any fashion. I wanted to give her everything she wanted, of course, but...

As I hesitated, uncertainty claiming me, she blew her sweet breath across my face. My mouth didn't water as hers might have done, but at that moment, the act had a visceral effect on me.

"We can try. No promises."

"That's all I ask," she said in my ear.

I took a deep breath and withdrew from her, then let her guide me to her back entrance. Slowly, gently, I pressed the tip of my marble-hard penis against her tight muscle. She was a lot more relaxed than before, but she wasn't *that* relaxed. I reached for Alice's sex kit on the nightstand and felt for a small metal disk with a twist-off lid. In it was a topical anesthetic that could ease the way. I was curious what it would feel like to be inside her other passage, but mostly, her desire aroused me...*fiercely*. I flicked off the lid on the container and smelled mint.

"Do you like this scent?" I asked. It was laced with lemon.

"Yes, a lot," she breathed.

"It's an anesthetic, so it won't hurt you when I enter."

"Alice thinks of everything, doesn't she?"

"Yes, it's scary. Even scarier that we're finding a use for all of it."

Bella giggled.

I applied the salve to my third finger and massaged it into her tight flesh. After several moments, her sphincter muscle relaxed and I slipped my finger inside her.

“Ahh...” she groaned, the sound vibrating in her chest.

I pulled back and added another finger. As she relaxed, both slid in easily, the oils in the anesthetic making her slippery. She lay beneath me, panting heavily, with her mouth half open, her eyes half shut.

“What is your preference?”

She widened her eyes and gave me a perplexed look.

“Above? Below?”

She didn’t speak, but curled into a ball with her knees raised to her chest.

“Ready, darling?”

She nodded.

“I love you,” I breathed, wild with desire. I tried to remain calm as she took me in her hands and pulled me to her tender tissue.

With more experience behind me, I was able to control my movements in both pressure and speed. At first, she was simply too tight to enter, but then she remembered to push outward and her narrow opening widened. I slid inside her. She bore down and I slid in further.

“Okay, love?” I rasped.

“Yes,” she mouthed. “Go on.”

Slowly, I eased forward until our bodies were nearly flush. Then she wailed and I froze.

“S’good, s’good,” she slurred in reassurance.

I pushed in to the hilt and she shrieked. It was the sound of raw desire, no filter, no restraint. *Electrifying*. I pushed again and her muscles contracted powerfully around me, tight and strong.

“Keep doing...yes...,” she gasped. I continued the dance and she cried a steady, high-pitched note.

“I want to come, I want..., I need...”

I growled, beside myself with excitement.

She seemed to have lost her fine motor coordination and so I took over, touching her through the hood of her clitoris, a gentle circular motion.

"Faster..." she breathed.

She glistened with moisture. Her arousal flowed from her onto me, a little river between her buttocks, soaking us both and the bed sheets beneath us.

"Mmmmm..." I moaned, and then growled when her muscles clamped down. I pulled back, nearly exiting her body before pressing in again with a single, slow stroke. I bumped her back wall and she shrieked.

"Again, do it again, do it..." she chanted softly. Her clitoris swelled under my fingers.

My woman was driving me mad! I hung on the edge, nearly as desperate as her. She gripped me rhythmically. I couldn't breathe. I could only melt into her as her muscles massaged me in their tight, overheated chamber. Then she tightened down sharply.

Bella's orgasm came hard and fast. The spasms were much stronger in her back passage. Much. She shrieked, but her face registered jubilation, pure joy. I felt my own release approaching and thrust into her. She squeezed down and, with my eyes screwed shut and my jaw gaping open, I yielded to the explosion that rolled from the base of me through my aching shaft.

"Grrrrrrr..." The sound tore from my chest as a second eruption followed the first. *What I wouldn't give for her carotid!* It wasn't a thought so much as the memory of a feeling turning to instinctive motion. I pushed her knees wide and leaned between them, moving my lips toward her throat and the vein I could see jumping just beneath her skin. *I wanted the blood...wanted it...wanted it now!*

Bella shrieked once more and her muscles clenched powerfully, startling me from my murderous trance. I snapped my head back. To my surprise, tears were pouring from my love's eyes. Blinking rapidly, I altered the course of my lips from her neck to her cheek where I kissed the tears away. She smiled and I looked into her eyes. She was *happy*.

So was I. I stroked her hair and rocked us both. Her throat muscles jumped invitingly when she tried to swallow, but the perilous moment had passed.

After a time, she stilled, and as I gently withdrew from her, I saw she'd drifted to sleep. I rolled her onto her side and buried my nose in her hair, inhaling her delicious scent. Then I tucked myself against her back and wrapped my arm around her. If there were any way, any way at all, that I could have slept, I would have liked to then.

To dream of my Bella. My forever love.

9. TRUTH

We had been on Isle Esme for nearly two weeks and it was time for me to hunt. I could have put it off, but after the powerful craving I'd had for my wife's blood the night before, it seemed wiser not to wait. Bella had decided she wanted to stay a few more weeks, so I might as well go sooner than later.

We had spent an active day outside. We walked through the jungle to see the colorful birds, then I carried her down the cliff on my back and we swam in the waves off the white sand beach below. We lounged in the sunshine until Bella's supertime, when we returned to the cottage and I offered to cook something for her. All that time I'd spent learning to cook chicken Marsala and sole Florentine and other gourmet dishes from "Emeril!" was completely wasted because Bella wanted only eggs. She ate a large omelet, into which I'd stuffed some meat and vegetables. She wasn't crazy about the additions, but she was so hungry that she ate it anyway and drank two glasses of eggnog. She was full and sleepy then and when I held her in my arms on the couch with a video playing, she quickly dozed off.

After an hour's nap, Bella woke up feeling frisky. She turned around in my arms and pulled the cushions from beneath my back to lay me down flat. Then she stretched on top of me and began to kiss my chest and throat, working her way up to my lips. With experience, I had learned how not to destroy either Bella or the furniture by grabbing and squeezing the soft upholstery to keep my hands safe. With new confidence, I let Bella have her way with me right there on the couch. She wanted to kiss me—*all* of me—and I happily sacrificed myself to her pleasure.

Once again, Bella had gone comatose after making love. I carried her into the bedroom and tucked her into bed. If the last week was any indication, she wouldn't wake for at least ten hours. I wanted to hunt and get back before she awoke so that she wouldn't have time to worry or even to miss me. I wrote a note explaining where I was and left it on the pillow beside her before heading out.

To make the trip as efficient as possible, I phoned Carlisle to ask where to find the nearest game. He did some quick research and discovered much to his dismay, that since the 1970s when the whole family had stayed for an extended time, the number of game species anywhere near Rio had dwindled to essentially none. There was still game to be found in the Amazon rainforest and in the western marsh region of Brazil, the Pantanal, but Brazil is a huge country, and both of those areas were at least 2000 miles from Rio.

Rio de Janeiro resides in what is called the Atlantic Rainforest zone, but 90% of the trees had been cut down. There simply wasn't room left for large game to survive. What larger species did remain in the region were endangered or nearly endangered—the jaguar, the spectacled bear, the woolly spider monkey and the lion tamarind. I didn't think I could manage feeding on the latter two even if they weren't nearly extinct. Hunting primates was just not a good idea for a vegetarian vampire.

There are lots of islands in the Atlantic, but they are volcanic, on the barren side, and support only small mammal species. I couldn't see myself draining fifty rats; marine mammals were not an option; and, according to Carlisle, even the largest sharks didn't have enough blood in them to make the effort worthwhile. It seemed that along with the animal species, vegetarian vampires soon would be extinct in the region too. Human prey was more than abundant and Rio de Janeiro had loads of criminal gang members who truly deserved untimely deaths, but that part of my life—hunting criminals—was long past.

Fortunately, through the internet, Carlisle found one place that still had some game. A Brazilian island called Trindade, northeast of Rio, had a small population of wild goats, descendants of herds that had been brought to the island in the 1700s. The Brazilians had been trying to eradicate them because they decimated the flora of the island and caused serious erosion. In the 21st century, it would seem that the Cullens were their only natural predator. This hunt would require a very long swim, which would still be much faster than taking the boat.

After uttering a prayer for Bella's comfort and safety while I was gone, I ran into the ocean.

The swim to Trindade, finding the goats, and swimming back took much longer than I had hoped. Trindade is twice as far from the Brazilian coast as Vancouver Island is long. It wasn't an impossible distance, but it wasn't quick to traverse, either.

It was close to noon by the time I returned to Isle Esme and, entering the cottage, I came upon a disturbing scene—Bella was lying asleep on the couch with the television spitting static. The windows were open, though very little breeze was in evidence, and an odd scent of fried fat hung in the air. She must have been lying there since before dawn, because all the lights were on in the house. She had donned a blue silk sleeping outfit that was completely

soaked in sweat. As I sat down behind her and pulled her overheated body into my lap, she opened her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I wiped her forehead. “So much for thoroughness. I didn’t think about how hot you would be with me gone. I’ll have an air conditioner installed before I leave again.”

Bella’s eyes had gone glassy and a look of panic crossed her face.

“Excuse me!” she said sharply as she lurched out of my arms and launched herself across the room toward the bathroom. I followed on her heels.

“Bella?”

She crouched over the toilet and began regurgitating the contents of her stomach. I gathered her hair in one hand and supported her weight in the other. This was something I had never witnessed. I went rigid with anxiety.

“Bella? What’s wrong?” I asked, the tension shrill in my voice.

She gasped for breath, her eyes shut, her head hanging down.

“Damn rancid chicken,” she groaned a moment later after spitting into the toilet.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Bella replied, still trying to catch her breath. “It’s just food poisoning. You don’t need to see this. Go away.”

“Not likely, Bella.” Clearly, she was anything *but* fine. She tried to push me off, but there was no way I was leaving her alone, vomiting in the bathroom, especially not after the toilet-bowl incident. Falling and hitting one’s head on bathroom porcelain was not an uncommon way for humans to die.

I lifted her carefully to the sink and kept her balanced while she bent over to clean her mouth, then I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. I set her down on the bed, pulling her back against my chest and wrapping my cool arms around her.

“Food poisoning?” My voice was tight.

“Yeah, I made some chicken last night. It tasted off, so I threw it out. But I ate a few bites first.”

So she'd craved something besides eggs...that was news. Now that she had been sick on the chicken, though, I doubted whether she'd try eating it again. I'd have to speak to Gustavo about the spoiled meat.

I felt Bella's forehead for a temperature, but with my skin against hers, it was impossible for me to tell exactly how warm she was.

"How do you feel now?" I inquired again after a few moments.

"Pretty normal. A little hungry, actually."

I didn't see how that was possible considering how sick she had just been.

"Does anything sound good to you?"

"Eggs sound good."

"You're bound to be dehydrated. Let me get you some water and we'll see whether that stays down first."

After bringing the glass, I held her in my arms and rocked her gently. *I'm not going to panic. It was just a stomach upset. It happens to humans all the time.*

She dozed in my arms and when she awoke twenty minutes later, she did seem fine. I got up to boil her some eggs. She followed me to the kitchen to watch, then I turned on the news while she wolfed down her breakfast. When she finished, I took the plate from her and pulled her back into my arms. We had a good excuse to sit around and snuggle on the couch.

But I had relaxed too soon. Bella twisted around for a kiss, when suddenly she covered her mouth with her hand and rushed headlong for the kitchen sink where she noisily lost her breakfast. I began to panic.

"Maybe we should go back to Rio and see a doctor," I suggested.

Bella wouldn't have it and instead decided to dig through Alice's medicine kit for something to settle her stomach. Off to the bedroom she went while I washed dishes and compiled arguments for why she should see a doctor. If she got sick again, I would at least call my father and run through her symptoms with him.

Had I not been so distraught, I might have found it amusing that I was considering calling my father for the *third* time while on my honeymoon. That couldn't be normal practice for new grooms. I was anything but an ordinary groom.

I was going to *try* trusting Bella with this. She had more experience with human maladies than I did, but I knew that even if she was truly ill, she would do her best to hide it from me.

With that thought, I tensed, suddenly aware that she had been out of the room for much longer than finding medicine should have required. Listening, I heard absolutely no sound from the bedroom. *Had she passed out?*

“Are you well? Did you get sick again?” I called through the closed door.

“Yes and no,” Bella said in a strained voice.

What was going on? Panic gripped me and I struggled to keep my voice even. “Bella, can I please come in?”

“O...kay?” She sounded more confused than ill.

I opened the door and joined her where she sat on the floor, staring into space. I touched her forehead. She must be feverish.

“What’s wrong?”

“How many days has it been since the wedding?” she asked, her voice so quiet that without my acute hearing, I wouldn’t have heard her.

Though the question was entirely a non sequitur, relating neither to her health nor anything else that had gone on this morning, the answer was straightforward.

“Seventeen. Bella, what is it?”

She motioned for me to wait while she began mouthing numbers to herself. I was becoming absolutely frantic.

“Bella!” I hissed. “I’m losing my mind over here.” *Answer me!* I wanted to shout. Was she in danger?

Still, Bella made no reply and instead, shuffled interminably through the open suitcase on the floor. Finally, she held up a package containing menstrual products and looked at me in a meaningful way.

My mind felt slow and thick, a river of mud. Why didn’t she speak? “What? Are you trying to pass this illness off as PMS?”

Then she spoke, but it was a tongue I did not know. The words she said made no sense, did not parse. They landed in the mud flowing between my ears and were sucked under.

Somewhere beneath the oozing, gloppy mud, I could hear Bella's voice. The strange sounds she made became lower and grew softer like a train whistle fading into the distance. The Doppler Effect—the phenomenon whereby sound waves made by an object moving toward the listener “bunch up,” creating a higher frequency tone, and sound waves made by an object moving away from the listener spread out, creating a lower frequency tone.

I heard the whistle blowing ...starting...stopping...starting again. It was so far away. It had nothing to do with Bella and me. We were on an island. There were no trains here. I could still hear it, though. Perhaps a ship was passing. That must be it. It was blowing its horn, over and over. It must be moving very slowly through the water. A heavy swishing sound floated on the air like old-fashioned static on a television...like a radio tuned between stations.

Then through the disturbing white noise, a voice rang through, high and clear. “...I swear something *moved* inside me just now.”

Moved inside...her? Living...inside her?

Slowly, I absorbed the words and the shock jolted me back to that room, on that island, on my honeymoon...with my wife. Bella was speaking, telling Carlisle her symptoms. I hadn't called him, but I could hear his voice clearly through the phone line. I reached out and felt the phone pressed into my hand.

I raised the phone to my ear robotically, not yet ready to hear our idyll fracture into a million pieces.

“Edward? Edward? Are you there?” My father's voice.

“Is it possible?” I let the words move from my throat to my tongue and through my lips without absorbing them into my brain. I could hear them being uttered from a distance. My father was speaking again, rushing through his words. I tried to attend, to focus on what he was telling me.

“Edward, I am more sorry than I can say. I never thought this was possible. Humans have twenty-three chromosomal pairs and we have twenty-five. There are legends of the vampire incubus, but I've never known it to happen in real life. I don't know what it means for the offspring, either. It might die *in utero*. It might be...” He hesitated on the words before he could bring himself to say them to me. “Might be...not...*right*.” I knew what he meant. Visions of a hundred deformities flashed through my mind in an instant.

“And Bella?” Saying her name abruptly cleared my head and I reached out for her. Her cheeks were wet. I hugged her close as if I could ward off the danger threatening her from the inside.

“I don’t know, son. With chromosomal anomalies like this, there’s truly no telling what is growing in her. It does seem evident, though, that it is developing at an impossible rate. A rate that, were it to continue, could pose a serious threat. It could be like a cancer that pulls all the resources from her body until she has nothing left. Or it could simply tear her apart from the inside. We need to assess her condition and act quickly. You must bring Bella home, Edward, as soon as you possibly can. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I will.” I cut the connection. If I could have carried Bella back to Forks on my back, I would have picked her up at that moment and started running. Unfortunately, we had to get home by conventional means. I set to the task immediately. Every minute could mean the difference between...

But I could not afford to let my thoughts go in that direction. We could fix this! Everything was going to be okay. Bella would be safe. I would not let anything happen to my Bella. Not now.

Not ever.

10. DIVIDED

Pregnant? Pregnant??? What the hell???

I'd looked at Bella's round little bump after hanging up the phone and it was just...obvious. Of course she was gaining weight! Of course she was eating strange food! Of course she cried every time we made love! *Jesus Christos...!!* Why hadn't I seen it? I'd *studied* this stuff.

My gawd! I was going to be the father of a...*thing!*

But no, I wouldn't. Carlisle would take care of it. It would be okay. Everything was going to be fine. Bella would be fine. It would all be fine, just fine. Right now, that outcome was on my shoulders. Time was vital. With the rate the thing was growing, she could practically be in her second trimester before we got home.

The Brazilian travel agent was infuriating. "No, there aren't any other flights... No, you couldn't possibly... I could never... Let me ask my boss. No, my boss agrees with me..." Blah, blah, blah...

Who do you have to fuck in this useless party town to get a yes??

I was glad that I'd troubled myself to learn Portuguese when we were here thirty years ago. It wasn't just useful for talking to Gustavo. If I were speaking English on the phone, instead of patrician Portuguese, I certainly would have been told to call back tomorrow. That was just the way things operated in Rio. Nobody was in a hurry; nobody could be bothered. One could offer money, though, and that's what I finally resorted to—bribes, kickbacks, whatever you called them, two thousand *reias* for an agent to find us tickets out of the country—TODAY! I didn't care what it cost. We had to get on a plane as quickly as possible and I'd have paid anything.

After what seemed like dozens of phone calls...with agents, with agents' bosses, with the airlines, with the airport authorities, with more agents...eventually, an independent "tour guide" with connections agreed to help get us out of the country immediately. He'd meet us at the airport and grease the skids, buying the tickets off other passengers if need be. We'd get two first-class seats, maybe to Houston, maybe to Atlanta, or if we were unlucky, to Mexico City. That airport was an entirely different *Carnival*. It didn't matter. I was responsible for this disaster and I had to get my wife home. I cursed my ignorance...my helplessness...my fear.

I found Bella in the kitchen, talking to herself and eating pretzels. (*Pretzels? That was new.*) She was crying, obviously terrified.

“Bella!” The frenetic, robotic daze that had taken over me cleared at once. I rushed to her side and held her face in my hands. “Are you in pain?”

“No, no—”

I pulled her close to me. “Don’t be afraid. We’ll be home in sixteen hours. You’ll be fine. Carlisle will be ready when we get there. We’ll take care of this, and you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.”

“Take care of this? What do you mean?” She didn’t understand! Of course not! I hadn’t shared my conversation with Carlisle. What was I *thinking??*

I looked into her eyes and stated with confidence, “We’re going to get that thing out before it can hurt any part of you. Don’t be scared. I *won’t* let it hurt you.”

Just then, I heard footsteps approaching the house. “Dammit! I forgot Gustavo was due today. I’ll get rid of him and be right back.”

Gustavo and Kaure stood at the door, a covered dish in Kaure’s hands. Gustavo explained that she had made us dinner and wanted to give it to Bella personally. I knew what was going on. Kaure was worried about Bella, afraid that I had hurt her. Well, yes I *had*, and that fact made me *angry*. I told him it was all unnecessary, that Bella wasn’t feeling well, we needed to leave immediately, could they please come back later to clean?

“Shall I prepare your boat for departure?” he asked, concerned. I nodded gratefully and he quickly retraced his steps to the dock to check our fuel tank and oil reservoir and to test the engines.

But Kaure would not be deterred. She insisted on seeing Bella and presenting her gift. Exasperated, I marched to the kitchen to explain the situation to Bella. The woman could see her and then I would demand that she leave.

Kaure entered timidly, holding out the disgusting covered dish. *Ugh...human food!* She gazed at Bella’s face, then looked at me, and then back at Bella, trying to determine if Bella was afraid of me. Then she set the dish on the counter.

“Are you satisfied?” I barked at her in Portuguese. “Please leave us now!”

Kaure turned to go and as she did, Bella’s face suddenly turned green. My wife lurched toward the sink and vomited loudly. At least I knew why now, but it didn’t ease my distress. I

grabbed the dish of food and hurriedly deposited it in the refrigerator, slamming the door shut to rid the room of the nauseating scent. I returned to Bella, holding her head in my hands while she heaved up the pretzels. After she finished rinsing her mouth, I pulled my suffering wife into my arms. To my surprise, I saw that Kaure was still there.

Bella had donned linen traveling pants with a drawstring waist to accommodate her bump. When she encircled her stomach with her hands and forearms in the way that pregnant women seem to do instinctively, Kaure stared, her eyes growing wide. Then I heard what she was thinking.

She is with child! A monster! It must be destroyed!

I whirled toward her in shock, stretching my arm out to protect Bella from assault. Kaure began screaming at me in her native Ticuna, shaking her fist, vilifying me for what I had done.

“You have seeded her womb?” she accused. “It is not allowed! It is demon! It must die!”

Kaure knew something about what Bella was carrying! She almost certainly knew more than we did. I tried to calm her then so I could ask her some questions.

“What? What is it?” I asked in her native tongue. Kaure seemed too frightened to reply and I didn’t blame her, since I’d been harsh with her before.

“Please, Kaure, please tell us what you know! My wife is afraid,” I begged her in a gentler tone.

She mustered her courage and asked somberly, “She carries your seed?” She made the universal sign of the pregnant woman, two hands forming a bulge at the belly. I nodded sadly. Kaure stepped away from me and crossed herself, uttering frantic prayers to “vanquish the demon,” as best I could tell.

I placed my hand on Bella’s pale cheek and spoke softly in Ticuna. “We didn’t know. We had no idea this could happen.”

“You have brought her here to die!” she accused.

Humbly, I looked Kaure in the eye and said, “Bella is my wife. I love her more than anything else in the world, more than myself. I do not wish to harm her. Everything that has happened is due to ignorance, but please, you can help us now. Tell me, what will become of her? Have you seen such things before?”

Kaure's stricken expression told me all I needed to know. I saw in her mind's eye fragments of the stories she knew that had been passed down for generations. She glanced at Bella's frightened face, then back at me.

"You do not drink her blood?"

"I drink only the blood of animals." Kaure seemed taken aback, but continued.

"She has conceived with you." It was more a statement of resignation than a question.

"We think so."

A look of sadness crossed Kaure's face.

"Will my Bella survive?"

Kaure dropped her head and slowly shook it side to side. A stab of pain pierced my chest.

"Is there no hope?"

Kaure stepped toward Bella then and placed one hand over Bella's, their two hands addressing the bump.

"*Morte*," she said in Portuguese, her body sagging with regret. She shuffled slowly out of the room, head bowed, her hands cupped together in prayer.

I knew that Bella would recognize the word "death." She turned away and I reached for her shoulder, afraid of her reaction.

"Where are you going?" I whispered.

"To brush my teeth again."

Oh. "Don't worry about what she said. It's nothing but legends, old lies for the sake of entertainment."

"I didn't understand anything," Bella replied, but I didn't believe her. The sadness in her eyes convinced me otherwise.

Bella went to brush her teeth. When she finished, I repacked her toothbrush and prepared to load the bags onto the boat.

"Edward—"

“Yes?”

“Could you...pack some of the food? You know, in case I get hungry again.”

“Of course.” It was a good sign that she was thinking about food, but I could see the tension in her face.

“Don’t worry about anything,” I said, trying to comfort her. “We’ll get to Carlisle in just a few hours, really. This will all be over soon.”

Bella seemed to sink inside of herself. Her eyes went flat, she became silent, and a wall went up around her. I focused all the more intently on getting us out of there.

It was a nightmare. I was living a nightmare written by Stephen King. How I wished I dreamed so I could wake up now!

Bella was dying. She was going to die and there wasn’t a blessed thing I could do about it, except plan for my own demise.

We’d been home two weeks and Bella declined every day, every hour. The thing was growing like a cancer inside of her, kicking her, battering her body. The bruises I’d inflicted on my wife on our wedding night were nothing to what the thing was doing to her now. If it hadn’t been so tremendously painful to see the damage, it would have sickened me, frightened me, I don’t know what. I just wanted to *kill* something—preferably my sister. I wanted to rip off her stubborn, blond head with my teeth, tear her apart bit by bit, set her on fire. But even that fantasy couldn’t console me.

Aside from a brief physical exam, Bella wouldn’t let Carlisle touch her. I wanted to drug her and get her on the surgery table, but Rosalie...ROSALIE!...was playing bodyguard.

Once Bella had made her wishes known—that she would *die* for the thing!—the women in my family stood by her decision (except for Alice, who remained neutral). Rosalie growled at me whenever I got too close to Bella. Emmett was protecting Rosalie from my wrath and Carlisle reluctantly refused to support me when Esme took Bella’s side. Not that there were “sides” here, really. There was life and there was death. But it didn’t make any difference. There was nothing I could do. Bella *loved* the thing!

My wife had hardly spoken the entire way home from Brazil and I thought she was sick, or frightened, or angry at me, but it was none of those things. She was scheming, trying to hide her intentions. When we arrived at SeaTac airport, Bella flew into Rosalie's waiting arms. She'd engaged my sister's help to keep Carlisle and me away from "the baby." She didn't get it that the thing inside her was a blob, a creature from the deep, a killer. It probably had two heads!

I didn't care what it did or didn't have. It was visibly draining the life from my Bella day by day and I detested it with a passion I rarely felt. I would do anything, say anything, sacrifice *anything* to convince Bella to give it up. But Rose kept egging her on, talking about "the baby" this, "the baby" that, like that's what it was. It was a genetic mutation, an anomaly, something for the garbage can. But Bella wouldn't see it.

And she'd gotten *so* much worse in the last few days. She looked like a Tinker Toy figure, her joints the knobby connectors, her limbs the sticks. Her eyes were hollow and all her roundness was gone. She had no curves at all anymore except for the bloated bump. It was the main mass of her body now—the bump that ate Manhattan, the bump that was murdering my beloved wife. Why couldn't I talk her out of this? Why wouldn't she listen to me?

I sat on the floor by the couch, my head against Bella's knees, my face hidden from her. She grew sicker if she was made too aware of my pain. I could feel her bony skeleton through her skin wherever I touched her. She simply couldn't keep her food down. Carlisle said she was starving and we were helpless to stop it. It was a matter of days now, or maybe only hours.

I had done this to her. It was *my fault*, my responsibility, and there was nothing I could do now but see it through to the bitter end. I wanted to take off running, to get away and leave this slow-burning agony behind. I would, as soon as she was gone. I would return to Italy and face the Volturi. I had no interest in existing without her.

How I longed to turn back the clock! The words of an old poem kept rattling through my head:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.

For want of the shoe, the horse was lost

For want of the horse, the rider was lost.

For want of the rider, the battle was lost.

For want of the battle, the kingdom was lost

All for the want of a horseshoe nail.

If only we had known! If ever we'd imagined!

Alice had packed condoms for Bella, even though I told her they were useless, not to mention unnecessary. As it turned out, attaching the damn things with rubber bands, super glue, or even nails, would have been a better solution than using nothing at all. For want of contraception, Paradise was lost.

After we'd arrived home and Rosalie began treating me like a convicted wife beater for wanting Bella to abort the "thing," I'd stepped back a few paces and tried to reconsider my view of the situation. First off, I had been shocked to realize that Bella was diametrically opposed to terminating the fetus, when I had assumed it was indisputably the right thing to do. She was so opposed that she chose not to tell me of her decision, afraid that I would pressure her to change her mind. (I would have, of course.)

All those long hours of silence on the trip home, she had been worrying about how to hold her own against what she perceived to be my stronger will. My will stronger than Bella's? I don't see it. Reuniting with our family at the airport, Bella had run into Rosalie's arms and it was only then that I read my sister's thoughts and realized what was going on. Rosalie was there to back up Bella's choice and threaten anybody who ventured a different point of view. After that, there was no hope of changing Bella's mind.

How could a person fall in love with a tiny mass of cells, anyway? It was incomprehensible. She claimed that she could feel it moving around inside of her. Something about that experience was so profound that Bella would risk her life and our future to hang onto it. Perhaps it was beyond a man's understanding. It was beyond mine.

After overcoming the shock of Bella's decision, and after recognizing that Rosalie had become Bella's personal bodyguard, I tried to look at things from Bella's point of view. I had assumed that the thing was either dead or deadly, deformed or a killer. Perhaps I was wrong.

I retreated to Carlisle's office to discuss it with him. He conceded that he didn't know *for sure* that the fetus would be a monster, or brain-dead, or a lump of stone with indeterminate parts. After all, certain other species had interbred and produced viable offspring—mating horses with donkeys yields mules, for example. It was possible. I still had no desire to experiment on my beautiful wife with such a fundamental phenomenon as genetics. And if it was possible, why had we never heard of such creatures?

Carlisle shared with me everything he had unearthed since I'd told him of our predicament. His brief research had reminded him of the horse/donkey compatibility and also that different species of *canis* (wild dogs) and *panthera* (big cats) could interbreed. He even showed me a story about a geneticist who claimed to have impregnated a chimpanzee with his own sperm, before aborting the fetus in a bout of ethical remorse. Vampires were at least as genetically compatible with humans as orangutans and chimpanzees...more so, probably. There was no obvious reason why humans couldn't reproduce with vampires.

Okay, so what if Bella and I did create a child? If I knew that Bella would survive its gestation and birth intact, and that the baby would not be an atrocity of nature, I would be thrilled! I would be ecstatic to father a child with my true love! And that is precisely how Bella felt. She had faith that the fetus in her womb was as legitimate a child as any other. She also seemed to believe that since her body had conceived it, she could bear it to term.

What did I know that she didn't? Nothing, really. It was possible that she was right, though seeing how quickly the thing was growing made me highly suspicious. It frightened me to the core to risk her welfare, but given her certainty and determination, I decided to trust her instincts at least for a short while. Maybe it would become obvious to all of us that this was the wrong choice and I would not need to convince Bella of anything. Or perhaps the fetus wouldn't survive the week if it was defective, or if its biology wasn't compatible with Bella's. Carlisle agreed that a few days "just to see" probably wouldn't make a great deal of difference in the outcome. Bella agreed to a sonogram so that we could get a look at what was in there. If I saw one head and one body, I might be convinced.

Bella continued to have morning sickness (at any time of the day or night), but she found that, for the most part, she got sick when her stomach was empty, so she kept a bag of pretzels nearby and nibbled on them all day. It probably helped that we didn't cook in the house, except for whatever she might crave, which was mostly eggs—lots and lots of eggs. She also drank milk and Carlisle insisted that she take prenatal vitamins. It was always possible that the fetus was more human than not, in which case, it only made sense to give it all the benefits of proper prenatal care.

Once I'd resolved to go along with Bella for the short term, Rosalie backed off and Bella began talking excitedly about being a mother. "Our child this..." and "our child that..." became the nature of all her conversation. I hated to see her get so attached to the idea in case she had to terminate the fetus, but it seemed I had no real say in the matter.

Though it had hurt a great deal knowing that Bella hadn't trusted me with her plan, I knew that I would have reacted exactly as she had feared. I would have done everything in my rhetorical power to convince her to change her mind. I couldn't be too angry with her for knowing me well enough to predict me.

And everything was fine at first. I was still the doting husband—even more so—concerned about every little stomach upset, every trip to the bathroom, every time she lost her balance. I cooked for her, we went for walks, and we often retired to our (!) bedroom, where I gave Bella massages and she tried to do "something similar" for me. I resisted. Of course, I wanted her as much as ever—more really, since the honeymoon—but I couldn't forget that it was my fault we were in this mess and I was a little frightened that something else might happen. What if, for example, I impregnated her twice, like a canine? No, it made no biological sense, but I didn't want to be surprised again. Things were already bad enough.

She tried to wear me down, of course, but I refused to take my clothes off—not all of them anyway—and she hadn't mastered the art of removing my boxer-briefs without my assistance. I did pamper her, though. I rubbed her back and front with lotion; I brushed her hair; I even convinced her to let me paint her toenails with a bronze-colored nail polish—the color of my hair—her favorite, she said.

I was beginning to "get over myself" (as Rosalie would say) by our fourth night back when Bella decided I needed some enticement to make love with her. She'd loaded our CD player with Marvin Gaye, Al Green, and Isaac Hayes, turned the lights low, and lit the candles Alice had given us. After talking to Carlisle Thursday evening, I went looking for her and found her lying on our bed in the center of this sexy setting. She'd broken out the honeymoon lingerie too. *My-oh-my!*

She rose to greet me and I let her drag me toward the bed and unbutton my shirt. She was stunningly beautiful in a shell pink, full-length nightgown. It was sleeveless, with a low-cut, scooped neckline, perfectly tailored to highlight her more curvaceous form. There were eight panels to the gown, each one swirling to the left around her body and flaring out at the bottom. Four of the panels—every other one—were semi-sheer lace, while the alternating panels were sheer, pink silk. All the panels gave provocative glimpses of the views beneath, including the tiniest lace panties that I had ever seen, my wife's pregnant belly pooching out above them.

Bella twirled around to show me “how the skirt flared out” and I didn’t even bother to mask my desire.

Prone on the bed, Bella’s hands were all over me in an instant, stroking my chest and back, pulling my shirt off of my shoulders. As I kissed her, she directed my right hand to a long row of tiny pearl buttons that held together two panels at the front of her gown. An obstacle course for a human, but for me, it was a simple matter to undo them one at a time. She began to pant as I slipped my fingers behind the fabric to stroke her sensitive skin.

We hadn’t made love for five days and Bella had become increasingly wound up. The hormones running through her system seemed to be driving her to distraction. She smelled different too, I’d noticed, even sweeter than usual. Her breasts were larger since we’d gotten home—her belly too, of course. It had become a bulge the size of half a soccer ball, sloping downward to her pubic hair, which was so much redder than the mahogany hair on her head. How many people knew the color of that hair? *Not many.*

How I longed to be inside of her, to feel her heat surround me. But when she reached for my waistband, I pulled my hips away. I was spooked by my own fertility, not at all used to the idea that I could create a life—whatever that life might look like. It was a shocking revelation and felt like a huge burden, an enormous responsibility.

With my hands and my mouth, I gave my pregnant wife what she needed, pressing my body tightly against her as she shuddered and shook. After a time, she shut her eyes and lay quietly, breathing softly through her mouth. I thought she had dropped off to sleep when I felt her hand moving between my legs, caressing me through my canvas trousers. Caught off-guard, I pressed into her hand, but when she tried to undo the metal buttons, I pulled away.

“I want to...,” Bella murmured, but I stopped her words with a kiss. Already her belly was round enough that intercourse would be awkward, front to front. My mind took off in a hundred directions, imagining making love to her side-by-side, from behind, standing up. I groaned inwardly, my desire gaining ground on the fear.

“I want you inside me...please, Edward.” Bella’s voice rang with longing.

Resistance to her was futile. I needed her too—badly. Without further thought, I frantically tore off what remained of both my clothing and hers and covered her body with mine, making myself concave where her belly was convex. My mouth sought hers and I kissed her hard...too hard, I think. I hoped that her lips weren’t bruised in the morning. Then I shifted off of her.

“Roll onto your side, Bella,” I murmured, pressing my hand against her hips to indicate the direction I meant. She turned away from me onto her right side and I pushed her left knee forward, making a space for myself between her legs. With my left leg between hers, I pressed into her tender, wet folds and she guided me inside.

“Ahhh!” I groaned as her interior walls slid apart in welcome. I’d missed her body these last few days, more than I’d realized. I rocked gently into her.

Then without warning, a spate of ignoble emotions that I’d been suppressing—frustration, anger, resentment—surged through me, fierce and intense. I pushed into Bella harder than, banging against her, knocking her body forward. I knew that I was being rougher than I ought to be, but at that moment, I had frighteningly little control over myself. Each time I hammered into her, I heard myself grunt like a pro tennis player slamming a serve. I was moving faster and faster—too fast, considering that Bella was soft flesh and I was hard stone, but I could not stop. I pounded away until my orgasm exploded from me with great force. Bella’s body had gone rigid. She gripped the bed sheets with white hands.

As suddenly as they’d come on, the powerful emotions dissipated and I collapsed against Bella’s back. My breath was jerky and I felt raw, out of control, but lighter too, somehow.

“I’m so sorry, my darling, so sorry.”

“What for?” Bella asked quietly, having become passive and overtly tolerant at my show of aggression. Though she appeared to be unhurt, I was chastened.

“For putting you in this situation, for endangering your life, for being so frightened. I can’t lose you, Bella, I can’t,” I cried out, my voice breaking at the end. My eyes stung.

“Shh, shh, Edward,” she said, reaching over her shoulder to stroke my face. “Everything is going to be fine. It’s all going to work out.”

“I don’t think so, Bella,” I replied, surprised by the certainty of my own words. “I don’t think this is going to work out well at all. I’m frightened for you...and for me.”

She didn’t answer, but kept stroking my face and hair. I pressed my forehead against her shoulder and tried to calm my breathing.

“I love you, Bella. I can’t stand the thought that I might lose you again.”

“You’re not going to lose me, darling. I won’t let that happen.”

I wrapped my arm around her swollen stomach and felt a sudden shaking movement inside of her. I jerked my hand away, startled and unnerved.

“That was him, Edward. That was our child doing a little somersault.” I carefully put my hand back on her swollen bulge, but the movement had stopped. “I love him. I have to protect our baby.”

“But Bella, what if he, or she, isn’t...right?” I asked hesitantly. “What if it’s a vegetable or a creature with two heads? What then? We don’t know what it could be. It’s just too risky to take this chance. Can’t you see that?”

“No, Edward, I can’t. This is our baby. However he turns out, I will love him.”

I knew that it was time to stop speaking. If I didn’t, I might say things I wished I could take back. I disengaged from Bella and pulled her onto her back so that I could see her face.

“Bella, I love you. You are more important to me than all the babies in the world. If there’s even a slight chance that you will be hurt by this *thing* inside you, I don’t want to take that risk,” I said, my eyes stinging again.

“I know, Edward, I know. And I’m sorry, too. But you see, it’s not a choice for me. There is no choice. I already love him.”

She searched my eyes as she spoke these words, looking for understanding, but I could only look away.

Suddenly, Bella jolted to a sitting position.

“Edward!” she cried, louder than we had been speaking. Emmett & Rosalie had gone hunting with Carlisle and Esme, but Alice and Jasper were still around somewhere and we’d been trying to maintain the illusion of privacy. Of course, with vampire ears in the house, there really was no such thing. Her tone shook me to attention and I looked at her face, but she was staring at her breasts. Then I saw what had startled her. A small amount of fluid was running from her nipples.

“Bella, you’re lactating! It’s impossible! You can’t even be three weeks pregnant yet!”

Bella just stared at her breasts like they were alien creatures. Several minutes ticked by before she looked up at me again. Tears were running down her face.

“Oh, Bella!” I exclaimed and took her in my arms, holding her head against my shoulder. “Are you frightened?”

“N...n...oo, not frightened, just surprised, and emotional, I guess. I’m fine, really.”

I should have been used to Bella’s crying by now, but it still tore me up every time. I leaned down and licked the fluid from her left breast and then her right.

“It tastes like you,” I said, then leaned in to kiss her. I touched her lips with my tongue.
“See?”

“Very bland,” Bella replied drolly.

11. SONOGRAM

After my emotional breakdown of the previous night and Bella's shock at seeing herself lactate, we'd spent a long night trying to talk through what was happening. I was roundly ashamed of myself for losing control the way I had, but Bella assured me that I hadn't hurt her. She said that I was so used to treating her like a porcelain doll that what I considered to be "handling her roughly" was completely within the realm of normal human-to-human contact. I wasn't sure I believed her, but it didn't matter. Even if I hadn't hurt her, I'd been way too out-of-control to have been "handling" her at all. I didn't know what had come over me.

Bella thought she did, though. With her head on my chest, she'd spoken softly as if soothing the proverbial irritated grizzly.

"Edward, you're furious that I won't end this pregnancy. You think I'm risking my life and it's hurting you that you have no say. Of course, you're angry. Of course, you want to hurt me back."

I buried my face in her hair. "No, Bella, no...no, I *swear* I don't want to hurt you. I'd rather ..."

"I know, darling," Bella interrupted, stroking my hand. "It's just a part of you that you weren't aware of, I think. I don't blame you ...it's natural, in a way."

"Stop making excuses for me, *please*," I begged. "I lost control of myself and that is unacceptable and I can't tell you enough how sorry I am. I think I just lost my mind a little bit thinking of losing you..." My voice trailed off into that unhappy place I remembered so well.

"It's completely understandable, Edward. And besides, you didn't hurt me. You needed to get it out of your system and I know you'll make it up to me later." Bella smirked.

She was saying that she'd forgiven me, though I didn't know if I could forgive myself...or trust myself with her while that "thing" was inside her. I just knew in my heart that it was not good, that at the rate it was growing, it could not be good in any way for Bella. It was then that I understood that I hadn't been trying to hurt Bella...I'd been trying to destroy the "thing." In an utterly irrational way, I'd declared war on it.

Understanding why I'd lost control with my precious wife didn't make me feel any better about it, but it did ensure that I wouldn't do it again. If I really wanted to get rid of the cancerous thing, that was no way to accomplish it.

After we talked about our predicament until neither of us could talk about it anymore, I *had* made it up to Bella, giving her everything she wanted from me precisely as she wanted it for as long as she wanted it. It wasn't exactly a hardship. She'd finally passed out in the same manner as she had the first night of our honeymoon. That was not a hardship either. Altogether, it almost made me forget how upset I'd been earlier.

It was a good thing that Emmett had been out hunting. At least Alice and Jasper would be discrete about anything they might have heard. Alice had been practicing her English to Korean translations so that I wouldn't be bothered by her thoughts while making love with my wife. It was extremely considerate of her. Jasper, knowing how stressed out Bella and I were, had been promoting a calm, serene environment. That was kind too, though it didn't solve anything. I wondered whether Bella and I would ever get to move into the private cottage that was Bella's wedding present from the family. Work had slowed down on it since we'd returned home earlier than expected.

The following morning, Carlisle asked Bella and me to come to his office. Rosalie tagged along suspiciously. While we were flying home from Brazil, Carlisle not only had started researching Bella's condition, but also had arranged for the delivery of extra medical equipment. During the night, he had reorganized his office to make room for an exam table and a portable sonogram machine—a great idea.

Bella had agreed to the sonogram. Like all of us, she wanted to see what was inside her, though she was happily excited about it, while I was filled with trepidation. At Bella's invitation, Rosalie stood impatiently by her side, waiting for "the baby" to appear on the video screen.

First, Carlisle tried the standard exterior approach, moving the sonic transducer along Bella's abdomen which had been smeared with copious amounts of conducting gel. The image was odd. Where one normally would see a fan-shaped hollow with shadows moving through it as the probe was repositioned, we could see only a semicircular band of white...nothing. I was not experienced at reading sonogram images, but even an amateur could tell that this wasn't the expected outcome.

Carlisle asked Bella if he could try a transvaginal approach and she (blushing) agreed, still hoping to catch a glimpse of "the baby." He and Rosalie left the room after he handed Bella a sheet for covering herself and showed her the probe that she was to insert before calling him back. Bella followed them out to visit the bathroom first.

When she returned, Bella removed her sweatpants and panties, then picked up the probe and handed it to me before arranging herself under the sheet. I visited the covered end of her and ducked my head beneath the cloth. She laughed at my theatrics. The view was lovely...my voluptuous wife naked below the waist with her knees up and spread apart,

Carlisle's rolling stool providing a close-up view. I couldn't help myself...I leaned forward and kissed her on her sensitive spot.

"Mmm...mmm," she moaned softly. If my family hadn't been waiting, I would have enjoyed lingering under the sheet for a time. Instead, I placed the lubricated probe at the pink entrance to Bella's vagina and pushed it gently inside of her. Being pregnant had made her so erotically charged that she reached to touch herself, despite our nearby audience. The thrill of watching her was almost more than I could stand without leaping onto the table with her. She spasmed hard, though quietly, and when I emerged from beneath the sheet, I saw that blood had rushed into her cheeks and lips, turning them a luscious pink as well. Beautiful.

After Bella took a moment to compose herself and let her heart rate settle, I called for Carlisle. Wisely, he and Rosalie had retreated downstairs. Giving newlyweds plenty of space was just considered good manners in our house...having lived with Emmett and Rosalie for so long had trained all of us. After seventy-plus years, they still behaved like newlyweds.

Carlisle reached under the sheet and rotated the probe this way and that inside of Bella, looking for recognizable images to appear on the screen, but it was obvious to all of us that there was some kind of shield blocking the fetus from view. Carlisle asked Bella if he could examine her internally and she agreed. While I held my wife's hand and Rosalie stood nearby, he reached beneath the sheet with one hand and placed the other on Bella's bulge. A look of puzzlement crossed my father's face when he pressed down on Bella's abdomen to palpate her internal organs.

"What is it?" Bella asked anxiously when she saw his perplexity. He pressed and concentrated for a few more seconds before withdrawing his hand from beneath the sheet and peeling off his latex gloves.

"Well, nothing like I've ever seen before, that's for certain," Carlisle replied, "but probably nothing to worry about. It seems that there is a hard shell around the fetus that is impervious to sonogram imaging...it's too dense to allow sound waves through.

"What does that mean?" Rosalie asked, before Bella could ask the question herself. I scowled at her for being intrusive.

"It appears that the membrane surrounding the fetus is made of a harder material than usual. I can only assume that it is a protective shield of vampire-like skin."

Bella gasped and put her hand over her mouth, then recovered quickly.

"I guess that makes sense," she said thoughtfully, glancing at me. "The baby *is* half vampire, after all."

“That’s true,” my father replied. “It’s just inconvenient because we can’t get any kind of image through the barrier. Would you consent to an amniocentesis?”

“Is that where you stick a needle into the sac around the baby and pull out fluid?” Bella asked.

“Essentially, yes.”

“Absolutely not,” Rosalie replied for Bella. “What difference would that make, anyway?” I scowled at my sister again. Bella was interested in Carlisle’s answer.

“It might not make any difference. If the membrane is dense enough to prevent sound waves bouncing through it, it might also be too hard for a needle to pass through.”

“And even if you did,” Rosalie cut in, “how would that help you know that the baby is okay?”

“It would let me analyze the fetus’s DNA and perhaps discover something of its nature. Or maybe not. It’s not a certainty.”

“But medically, it wouldn’t really do anything for Bella, right?” Rosalie pressed.

“Nothing directly, but in nonstandard pregnancies, it’s often useful to simply gather as much information as possible. Sometimes different pieces fit together to reveal more about the whole. I would compare its DNA to both yours and Edward’s, Bella, and look for any obvious genetic anomalies.”

“Well, I definitely fit into the nonstandard pregnancy category,” Bella joked. I squeezed her hand.

“I say ‘no,’ Bella. It might hurt the baby, for no good reason,” Rosalie asserted. In her mind, I could also see she was worried that Carlisle would find something seriously wrong with it and then Bella might agree to an abortion.

“Carlisle,” Bella said, “do you think a needle would penetrate the membrane?”

“That’s a good question. It would have to be a somewhat large needle, most likely heavy steel.”

“If you think it would really help, I can do it,” Bella said, “but it does sound rather painful for not much benefit.”

“We’d use a local anesthetic, but it can be uncomfortable,” Carlisle replied. “It’s up to you.”

“Don’t do it,” Rosalie commanded. “What if it hurts the baby? You know he’s alive and growing, because you can feel him move. What else is there to know?”

I hissed a warning at Rosalie. She was behaving as if this were her decision, not Bella’s and, peripherally, mine.

Bella looked at me uncertainly and said, “I do agree with Rose, Edward. I’m not anxious to take any more risks than necessary.”

“But what if it’s a risk not to know something we could find out from the procedure?”

“I guess it’s a risk either way, but it just frightens me to think of having a needle poke around near the baby. I don’t want to chance it.”

I stroked Bella’s forehead and nodded, then glanced at Carlisle.

“Okay, you can let me know later if you change your mind,” he said, as he prepared to leave the room.

“Rose, let’s leave these two alone.” Carlisle motioned for Rosalie to lead the way out of the room. With reluctance and a quick look at Bella, she did so.

Before I could move to help Bella sit up, she propped herself on her elbows and caught my eyes with hers. Peripherally, I could see that she was easing the sheet up her calves and over her knees slowly, higher and higher. I couldn’t help but look as she teased me with another brief, but fine, view of what lay beneath. When I tore my eyes back to her face, she grinned and waggled her eyebrows at me, her silly expression making me smile. Despite all the tension and anxiety, we *were* still newlyweds. Leaning over to kiss her, I reached under the sheet and heard the suddenly frantic racing of her heartbeat. She wrapped her arms tightly around my neck and I picked her up then, sheet and all, and dashed her up to our third-floor bedroom.

I had profoundly mixed feelings about Bella’s pregnancy and was suspicious that no matter what happened to her or what we discovered about the fetus, she was not going to give it up. I had to come to terms with what that would mean for her, for me, and for our future together, but one thing was certain right now—Bella was extremely lusty since this pregnancy had taken hold. If she had her way, she would make love with me continually, maybe taking time out now and then to eat and sleep. It was the only aspect of this situation that I could be happy about.

I appreciated our family’s giving us space to be alone together. If this fetus survived to be born, then we would have much less time to enjoy each other privately, and if it didn’t,

well...Bella's health might be at issue. It might be at issue anyway. It was a huge worry, but I set it aside for the moment.

When I laid her on the bed, Bella took the lead. She pulled me down and kissed me, unbuttoning my shirt as she did so. Her hands didn't hesitate at the bottom, but continued with the buttons of my trousers. I tried to stop thinking about the fetus, the pregnancy, and our future, and just allow her to use me as she would. But that wasn't what she had in mind.

When I pulled up her sweatshirt, she raised her arms over her head so I could remove it, but when I ducked down to kiss her breasts, she put her hands on my cheeks and pulled my head back up. She kissed me again, and then started moving her lips down my body. She wanted to do something for me. I wondered if she was, in part, trying to make up for the pain she knew she was causing me by clinging to her potentially life-threatening pregnancy.

I touched the long dark locks that flowed down her bare back as she stroked my chest and tried sucking on my nipples. Her lips almost tickled, they were so soft against my skin, but the tickling was nice. Her hands smoothed their way across my belly, into the small of my back, and downward onto my buttocks, and then between them, running her fingers across a place I'd never been touched. It aroused me and I reached to pull her onto me, but she resisted. She kissed her way farther down, watching my face as she slowly took me to her mouth. I pressed my head back into the mattress and moaned in pleasure.

Her fingers were touching me everywhere, stroking and tickling as her lips moved around me, over and over. Slowly, inexorably, the tension mounted until I ached to let go. I held back when it occurred to me that I didn't know if this was safe for Bella. Was semen venomous? Then I remembered an image of Rosalie (ugh!) in Emmett's mind, stroking him this way. It must be okay...but then, Rosalie wasn't human. Bella was obviously not concerned.

Then all of a sudden, neither was I.

Ahhh! My body surrendered to her coaxing in a whoosh of intense pleasure. I lay there stunned and immobilized, overcome by the extremity of the sensation. In all the moments of a man's life, this must be his most vulnerable time, I thought. Delilah didn't have to wait for Samson to fall asleep. I could hardly have been more helpless if I were unconscious.

Well, at least this wouldn't impregnate her, I thought wryly when I had partially recovered my senses.

Bella was slowly working her way back up my body with her hands and lips, already accustomed to one benefit of my species—no recovery time required. Crouching above me, she

guided me into her and slowly lowered herself. Her heat was almost searing. I rose impatiently, too aroused to remain passive. I had to move, to take some control. I had so little, it seemed.

I slid us down to the bottom of the bed. Bella looked into my eyes, wondering, and I stroked her cheek and then her lips with my fingers. She took my first two fingers into her mouth and sucked on them like a lollipop, watching my expression.

After a moment, I lifted my voluptuous wife off me and back onto the bed, then stood up and wrapped my arm around her waist, hoisting her onto her hands and knees. I pressed between her thighs from behind, then reached around and guided myself to her center, slowly pushing into her. She moaned a deep, guttural sound that mirrored my own.

My gawd! Entering her rearward was an entirely new experience...so deep, so tight, so good. Bella rocked back and moaned loudly.

As I moved inside her, her beauty presented at a new angle, I abruptly hit the hard wall of the fetus's shell and aggression surged through me. I froze. Sensing something was seriously wrong, Bella froze too, and then tried to scramble away. Instantly, I grabbed her waist and pulled her back. Though I might have done anything at that moment, I just held her there, her softness softening me, until the wave of anger and frustration subsided. My eyes stung with emotion.

Frightened at myself, but chastened, I curled around Bella's back and pulled her tightly against me, cradling the protruding soccer ball in my hands. I stroked it, held it, and tried to love it as best I could. I felt a gentle movement beneath my hands and had the distinct impression the fetus was making itself known. I marveled at this terrifying miracle.

When the movements stopped, I ran my hands up the front of Bella's fecund body, cupping her heavy breasts and squeezing her nipples simultaneously between my thumbs and forefingers. Bella squealed softly and began pushing back onto me, repeatedly stroking a particular spot inside her body. Something about the tightness of her deep inside, the way her pubic bone rubbed against me, or just the angle of the penetration took my breath away. I gulped air and tried to remain still to let Bella ride me from her hands and knees. I massaged her breasts and squeezed her nipples, feeling her deep muscles clench when I did. I pressed into her as far as I could when she orgasmed hard around me.

My hands were wet. I took my fingers to my mouth and licked them—mother's milk. Something about that was highly erotic. I suppose it gave me a powerful feeling to have caused her body to change in such a profound way. I pressed deeply into her and massaged her breasts until I felt the last spasms inside her. Then I withdrew, easing her down onto her left side so I could lie facing her with our legs intertwined. Her cheeks, lips, and nipples were bright pink, the

color I loved. She looked so ripe, so lush and beautiful. I was simply awed by the changes in her. The stomach bulge had pushed her belly button outward and the blue veins beneath her skin pulsed full of blood. The miracle of conception. It was mind-blowing. Not your everyday experience for a vampire.

I leaned down and sucked on her right nipple and felt the warm fluid flow into my mouth. She moaned, seeming to take great pleasure in this. Nature's way of encouraging a mother to feed her newborn child, I supposed. I ran my fingers through the crack between her buttocks and felt her moan vibrate through her chest. Wetting my fingers in her abundant fluid, I pressed my little finger against her sphincter muscle and felt her relax to let me in. I found her clitoris with my thumb and pulled at her nipples with my lips and tongue. Bella squeezed down on my finger and I pushed it deeper inside her. She moaned. I wanted to make her come again. My thumb moved at vampire speed, causing her to become paralyzed with pleasure. She started to spasm and I pushed into her feeling her muscles squeezing around me.

"Come, Bella," I urged. Her body jerked roughly as her orgasm shook her inside and out, then I lost control as my body followed suit. I clamped my lips down on her right nipple and pulled at it. She cried out and I felt her shudder and shake inside.

"Bella, I love you," I said softly, releasing her nipple for a short second, then resuming on the other side. She writhed in pleasure.

How could I have known this would be the last time?

12. STARVING

The first bruise appeared six days after we'd gotten home, by which time Bella's bulge had ballooned to three-quarters the size of a basketball. My concern was mounting day by day. What kind of *thing* could grow at this rate inside my tiny wife? Just a few days ago, Bella had been round and voluptuous, but now her breasts and hips were shrinking as the belly bulge grew. Her face was thinning and she was beginning to look like a straw with a pea stuck in it.

I was with her in the bath, washing her body as she relaxed in a tub of scented bubbles, the latter courtesy of Alice. I had made it my job to settle her into the bath once a day and gently sponge her down. The hot water and the private time together calmed and soothed us both.

Despite the truce I'd tried to make with it two days earlier, the bulge was starting to feel like the enemy. I could see that it was pulling the flesh from Bella's bones to support its ridiculous, monstrous growth. I'd been right, of course—the longer the thing grew in Bella, the more attached to it she became.

It's not as if we could have forced, or even pressured, her to abort the fetus earlier, though. Rosalie never strayed far from Bella and any such suggestion brought on a fierce, growling, volley of threats. If I menaced Rosalie in any way, Emmett appeared instantly by her side to prevent me from attacking. Though he did it with a half-smile of regret and sympathy, he protected her faithfully. Rosalie was his mate. He would never allow me to hurt her.

Conflicts between my sister and me drove Bella wild with anxiety. When distressed, she would begin vomiting, which instantly dissolved my temper (though not Rosalie's). I was learning to bite my tongue and swallow my fury for Bella's sake.

The vomiting hadn't stopped since we'd been home, but early on, it had been infrequent and not particularly violent. Bella would rush to the bathroom and spit up into the toilet a couple of times a day. I'd be at her heels, ready to catch her if she stumbled, and to support her as she knelt at the porcelain altar.

Carlisle had said that vomiting was to be expected, and at first, I let his words convince me that it was normal, more or less, despite her discomfort. But it had gotten worse. She kept nibbling on pretzels and saltine crackers, but they were becoming less effective. By the end of the week, she couldn't handle solid food. Anything that wasn't mostly liquid or boiled into mush came up right away. She drank eggnog, heavy on the eggs, but she couldn't live on that alone, so we used a blender to emulsify soups with noodles and vegetables and to make

protein shakes from yogurt and fruit. That strategy worked for a while before anything with fiber, no matter how mushy it was, started coming back up.

I felt horribly guilty for having let her use her mouth on me two days before. About an hour after that, she had begun vomiting violently. Though she tried to deny that my semen had had anything to do with it, I felt sure it had. Who knows how acidic, or caustic, or even poisonous it might be to her? Especially in her condition. Emmett used to say that when he was a human teenager, his “brain lived in his dick.” Sadly, I now knew from firsthand experience what he’d meant.

But that was just one of the troubling things that had happened. I’d asked Bella again to consider letting the fetus go, to allow Carlisle to take it out of her. Just saying the words at that point sent a look of fear and then fierce protectiveness across her face. We were less likely to convince her to give it up the larger her stomach became, and no doubt the process was getting more dangerous too. The amount of blood supply to her uterus had to be enormous to keep the thing growing at such a rate. Trying to detach the parasite from her body would undoubtedly result in blood loss, perhaps dangerous blood loss. I was now caught between a rock and a hard place. Even if I could have convinced her to give up the thing, it might kill her to do so.

It was becoming abundantly clear that not doing so might kill her as well. After I’d frightened Bella by pleading with her vociferously to abort, sort of half-heartedly implying that we could do it against her will, she’d called on Rosalie to protect “the baby” from me. Even now, Rose was just outside the bathroom door, listening for a cry for help from Bella in case I accosted her. Which I *never* would do—of course not!!

As soon as Esme learned of Bella’s and my dispute, she—quite out of character—ordered me to her office.

“Edward, you must leave Bella alone,” she’d said.

“What do you mean?”

“You cannot try to take this baby away from her.”

“But she will die trying to keep this thing alive! She’s not strong enough. Have you seen how thin she’s becoming? And she’s less than three weeks along! We have to do something while there’s still time!” I argued and implored, but she stood firm.

“You *cannot* force Bella to give up her child. It’s unconscionable!”

“But what if it kills her?” I nearly yelled at my loving, gentle mother, who just stared at me with her unblinking vampire eyes until I had to look away.

Once Carlisle learned of Esme’s stance on the issue, he had backed out of his offer to remove the fetus against Bella’s will, if necessary. He would not defy Esme’s wishes on the matter.

“Son, I agree with you,” he’d told me. “It’s much too dangerous for Bella to continue on this course, trying to support a fetus that her body never was meant to carry. If Bella would give her permission, I’d do the surgery immediately. But Esme feels very strongly that it must be Bella’s decision—I know, I know, you’re the father—but it seems that in these matters, the woman rules. I cannot act against Esme’s wishes—losing her baby is what killed her.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. I understood Carlisle’s point, but I didn’t want to accept it. Anyone could see that this situation was only going to degenerate further. Would Bella see reason before it was too late?

“If Bella changes her mind, Edward, I will do everything in my power to remove the fetus from her body safely. But you must understand that, given how well-protected it is, the procedure is likely to be dangerous. She might not make it.”

My heart sank at his words and my anxiety rose. I was quickly becoming trapped in a scenario I couldn’t allow, couldn’t bear!

“But if Bella changes her mind, you still would try?” I verified.

“Yes, Son, I would do my best.”

I nodded once, and abruptly turned and left his office.

And now, here I was, washing my darling’s distorted body, when I saw the outline of the thing’s heel move across her bulge like a shark’s fin rising above the water line. Bella doubled over, holding her stomach, a grunt of air escaping from her lungs.

“Bella! You’re hurt!” I cried, frightened by the violence of the kick I had just witnessed.

“No, no, Edward, I’m fine,” Bella gasped, trying to persuade me even as she sat in the bathtub bent double in shock and pain. Then I saw the blood spreading beneath the surface of her skin, the red patch that moved outward from the site of the kick and began turning blue. I knew from bitter experience that the injury would be black within a few hours.

“Oh, Bella, you’re not! It’s hurt you! Look at this bruise you’re going to have!”

Bella looked at her own stomach and rubbed small circles over the hemorrhaged area.

“It’s nothing, Edward, please don’t worry,” Bella tried to soothe me, to calm me.

“I can’t take it, Bella! I can’t watch it hurting you and just do nothing!”

Bella smiled sadly at me and I could read the determination on her face. She wouldn’t argue with me—she just wouldn’t agree. Passive resistance. It seemed we would follow this course no matter the cost.

“Bella,” Rosalie called from outside the door, “do you need me?”

I snarled in Rosalie’s direction as Bella replied, “No, Rose, it’s okay.” If Bella had said “yes,” I knew Rosalie would have crashed right through the door and tackled me. My marriage had turned into an uncomfortable threesome.

Every day Bella grew worse. By the eighth day home, her eyes had become hollow as her body rejected more and more of her food. She felt hungry, but two out of three times she ate something, it came back up. She kept drinking eggnog, which mostly stayed down, but otherwise, she could tolerate only broth, powdered white rice, apple sauce, and sometimes yogurt. We tried other things...bananas, pureed carrots, baby food in jars, soft-serve ice cream. She gamely tried all of it, though some things, like the pureed vegetables, made her throw up before she could even get the food in her mouth.

As Bella grew weaker, the bump kept growing. It grew so rapidly that the skin on her stomach was tearing. I kept rubbing cocoa butter into her belly, having read that it was good for preventing stretch marks, but she was beyond worrying about stretch marks at this point. Little red fissures opened in her skin overnight as she slept—the time when the thing seemed to develop most rapidly. I cradled her in my arms at night and sometimes I cupped my hands around her belly. The thing was getting so active. It would twist and roll and more and more often, it would kick or punch her from inside. She often grunted in her sleep and sometimes the blows woke her up. It became clear to me that she was suppressing any expressions of pain when she was awake. The sounds she made in her sleep could not lie.

Each day she awoke with more bruises—bruises over bruises over bruises. Her stomach had become a mottled mountain of purple and black.

“Bella,” I begged, as she sat on the couch and I crouched at her feet on our tenth day home, “Please, please, please don’t do this. Please stop now. It’s stronger than you. It’s going to tear your body apart! For all we know, it could be strong enough now to live outside your body. Please let us take it out. We can get an incubator, set up a neonatal intensive care unit,

whatever it needs. We'll take care of it, no expenses spared to save it, but you *have* to get it out of your body. Please, don't die. Please, please don't die..."

I bent my head onto her lap and shook with emotion. Rosalie stood ready to knock me away if she thought Bella was in danger. It wasn't me who was a danger to her! Couldn't she see that?

Two days later, it was obvious to everybody—except Bella. She had wasted away to skin and bones, her eyes were hollow and dark, her legs like sticks. She could no longer rise from the couch without help.

Alice, who in our first week back had been present as a counterbalance to Rosalie's psychotic focus on "saving the baby," had moved away from Bella where she sat on the couch. At first, Alice had stood near Bella or sat on the floor beside her. Then gradually, she moved herself across the room, first to a chair at the conference table, and then further across the room to sit at the bottom of the staircase. After eight days, Alice had moved to the top of the first-floor staircase, far away from Bella, ceding her influence by default to Rosalie, who now never left Bella's side.

Rosalie had taken over caring for my wife, holding the bowl under her mouth when she vomited, lifting her to go to the bathroom, and preventing anyone else from approaching her. I no longer had the strength to fight Rosalie.

Periodically, Jasper joined Alice at the top of the stairs before retreating to assist Carlisle and Emmett with research on Bella's condition. They were scouring online libraries and websites all over the world to find any information pertaining to vampire myths and legends. Carlisle also spent a lot of time on the telephone tracking down old friends and acquaintances, grilling them for any knowledge they might have of a human who had become pregnant by one of us.

The best leads were still from Brazil, it seemed. Carlisle had made contact with an old acquaintance living near the Amazon rainforest where Kaure's tribe originated. The elder Ticuna natives had a rich oral history that included stories of the *libishoman* and human women who bore their children. As far as Carlisle could determine, all the stories ended in the mother's death, either while carrying the child or during its birth. It seemed we would have to travel back to Brazil to find the old storytellers, since nothing was written down. We couldn't afford to do that now, though. Time was running out.

Bella no longer trusted me. She knew how desperate I had become to save her life. Though I told her that Carlisle would not perform any procedure on her without Esme's approval (and Esme did not approve of flouting Bella's wishes), and she knew that I didn't have

the expertise to do it myself, she still didn't trust me not to try something that might hurt the thing.

Rosalie stood as her guardian with Emmett reluctantly backing her up. I was alone in my desperation and despair. At times I felt resigned to Bella's decision and to our mutual fate—death—and at other times, I found the energy to struggle against it again. I wracked my brain for ideas or ways to negotiate with her, but she was firm in her resolve. She seemed to think, delusively, that she would survive this ordeal, that our baby would have a mother and a father and that we would be a happy family. Where she got that idea I didn't know. It seemed painfully obvious, at least to me, that that would never happen. Bella was weakening by the day, if not the hour.

"Carlisle, what's happening?" I'd asked in desperation on the tenth day. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"I'm afraid that Bella is starving, Son, and the fetus too, for that matter. I don't understand why, but her body is rejecting sustenance of any kind. At some point, we'll need to start feeding her intravenously. It makes no sense at all, biologically, that a mother would be capable of conceiving a child and yet not be able to nourish it while it gestates."

"She's starving..." I repeated in disbelief, though the fact was blatantly obvious when you looked at her. Maybe the IV would save her from that horrendous outcome, but so far, she had refused it. She didn't like needles and she claimed that some of her food was still staying down. I would have to take Rosalie aside and convince her that without the IV, the "baby" would die. With pressure from me *and* Rosalie, maybe Bella would agree to it.

At day ten, I was still "allowed" to bathe Bella, but Rosalie insisted upon carrying her to the bathtub herself, then she would sit on the toilet seat until Bella told her it was okay for her to leave. Rosalie always answered that she would be right outside the door if Bella needed her, and then she would step into the hallway, leaving the door ajar. She was letting me know in her transparent way that she was right there to protect Bella from me should I "try anything."

I wanted to rip Rosalie's hair from its blonde roots. I wanted to light her on fire. I wanted to wrench her apart joint by joint. Whenever I growled or otherwise threatened her, though, Emmett appeared out of nowhere to hold me back. Rosalie took advantage of his protection to say whatever cruel or spiteful thing that came into her pretty little head. Bella was *my wife* and Rosalie should have no voice in the matter! But as long as Bella wanted her, she was there every moment.

Alice, on the other hand, could no longer be found in the same room as Bella. When I asked her why she was leaving me to deal with Rosalie alone, she said that the thing was hurting her. Hurting her?

“Yes. Bella’s body is wrapped around the...fetus...and her future is completely bound up in its future.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, the reason I haven’t told you what is going to happen is that the fetus is blocking my vision. It’s like the wolves, a half-breed—that must be why.”

Consequently, Bella’s future had become cloudy and fuzzy to Alice. Trying to see her way through the fog gave Alice severe headaches. I’d looked at her mind and she wasn’t kidding. Whenever she approached Bella, or even entered the room where Bella sat, an overwhelming pressure began building in her head. My heart sank with dismay. If Alice couldn’t predict Bella’s future, perhaps she didn’t have one. I tried unsuccessfully to put the thought aside.

Alice felt almost as badly as I did about how things were going, but she was just as helpless as I was. And that was not something that Alice was accustomed to. It made her cranky and difficult, and she was no use to me in halting Bella’s death march.

As I cast about desperately for any possible solution to the nightmare, I’d begun to think about Jacob Black. Bella no longer trusted what I said about her health or that of the fetus. She knew that I would do or say anything to try to save her life. But Jacob...she might listen to Jacob. Maybe he could convince her to change her mind. The problem was that the last I knew of Jacob, he had run off the night of our wedding and we had no idea where he was. I could track him, certainly, but I didn’t know how long it would take.

By the twelfth day, I was afraid to leave Bella, anyway. She was so fragile that I didn’t know how much time I had left with her at the rate she was deteriorating. And still, the little monster kicked and punched her from the inside, bowing her over in pain. Her entire abdomen was a single continent of black and blue. Bella stubbornly refused to acknowledge the pain.

“He’s strong,” she would say, “and I’m just a weak human. He can’t help it. It’s too crowded in there.”

I dropped my face into her lap to prevent her from seeing my reaction. I wanted to rip the thing out of her with my bare hands. Bella would stroke my hair, whispering that everything was going to turn out fine. I couldn’t bear it. I just couldn’t.

Fortunately, on the thirteenth day, Jacob came to kill me.

13. JACOB

I heard his thoughts before I heard the motorcycle zooming up our driveway. He was enraged enough to storm the vampires' den and take us all out singlehandedly.

The fiasco of Jacob's appearance occurred because Charlie called Carlisle after Bella and I had been honeymooning for almost two weeks to find out when we would be back. Carlisle told him that we were enjoying our trip and planned to stay two more weeks in Brazil, then would return before heading off to Dartmouth.

It was right about then that we realized Bella was pregnant, that we raced back to Forks, and that I discovered my wife had resolved to keep the monstrous fetus. She understood that she could not see Charlie on our return. There would be no way to explain the expanding bulge. Even if we let him assume that Bella had been pregnant before the wedding—a conclusion he jumped to immediately when we announced our engagement and which Bella had vehemently denied—the fetus's growth was advanced far beyond what was normal for the two weeks, now three, since then.

Charlie called again about a week later—still one week before Carlisle told him we would return—and, excited and not thinking clearly, Bella hollered, "Carlisle, is that my dad?"

Charlie heard her voice through the phone and Carlisle was forced to tell him "the kids" had returned early from South America and Bella was ill. He would call Charlie back within the hour after assessing her condition. It was a spur-of-the-moment solution to keep Charlie from showing up at our door.

After we all powwowed over the crisis, Carlisle called Charlie and told him Bella had contracted a communicable disease in South America and that after conferring with the Center for Disease Control, he had agreed to quarantine her at our house. I only bothered listening to Carlisle's side of the conversation.

"Our family has already been exposed, Charlie, so there's no point now in moving Bella someplace else where she can expose others."

"No, Edward seems fine, but we don't know what it is yet, so he may be a carrier too. I'm taking blood samples and overnighting them to Atlanta."

"No, Charlie, don't come. I can't be responsible for infecting the Forks' Chief of Police with an unknown agent...not after the scares we've had in the U.S. with SARS, H1N1, the West Nile virus, and dengue fever, to name a few. We just have no idea at this point what it might be.

Also, I'm sure you can appreciate that it's absolutely illegal for a doctor to allow a known pathogen to be released into a community when we've already identified its existence."

"No, she doesn't seem that sick right now, but she is having trouble keeping her food down, and she has some swelling in her body. She's experiencing dizziness and fever and chills as well."

"She's sleeping now, but I will have her call you as soon as she feels well enough. Please try not to worry, Charlie. We'll stay on top of this and do everything that we can. It isn't necessarily a serious disease; we just have to be cautious under these circumstances where someone's returned from a foreign country. I will keep you informed."

When Bella found out that Charlie had called again the next day, she insisted on talking to him.

"But Bella, what will you say? He can't see you like this and we know it's only going to get wor—...more obvious."

"I don't know what I'll say, but I have to talk to him. I can't let him sit at home all alone and worry about me when I'm right here in town."

Charlie *should* have been worried about Bella. We all were. But with her unable to stand up or walk on her own, and with her condition worsening every day, I didn't have the heart to deny her anything. Just getting *slightly* upset made her turn all shades of green and lose whatever she might have put in her stomach that day. And if her heart should fail... I handed her Carlisle's phone and lifted her legs onto my lap while she called her father.

"Hi Dad," Bella croaked in what was now her everyday voice, weak and hoarse. I heard Charlie's alarmed exclamation in the background at the sound of it. He was instantly agitated. Bella tried to calm him down.

"No, Dad, I feel fine," she said, and I rolled my eyes facing away from her so she wouldn't see my reaction to her words. Rosalie gave me a nasty look.

"No, I don't think it's anything serious. I'm not particularly worried. I just sleep a lot and my food doesn't stay down too well."

"No, so far Edward is fine, though I know my illness is wearing him out. Rosalie's been nurse-maiding me a lot too."

"No, she can't. Alice doesn't feel well." Bella stroked her fingers through my hair, as I shut my eyes and concentrated on keeping my mouth shut.

“Yeah, everybody else pretty much keeps away from me. There’s no point in exposing the whole family if we can avoid it.”

“I love you, Dad,” Bella rasped. “I’ll see you soon, I promise.” I squinted my eyes and clamped my lips shut, knowing that she would not.

Now that Charlie knew we were back, it was only a matter of time before word got around. As it happened, he called Sue Clearwater, Seth and Leah’s mom, looking for Billy. Of course, Charlie was full of the distressing news about Bella and shared the information with Sue. Seth found out from his mother and hastened to tell the Quileute wolf pack that we were home and that Bella was quarantined under Carlisle’s care.

Contrary to my belief, Jacob wasn’t on the run, but had come back to La Push before Bella and I returned from Brazil. Thus, almost immediately after Charlie’s phone call to Carlisle, Jacob knew that we were back and that my family was not allowing anyone to see Bella. Naturally, he interpreted that to mean that I had changed my wife. Under a thin guise of my breaking our treaty with the Quileute, Jacob was coming to kill me.

It was the thirteenth day of the crisis and our whole family—including Alice, headache notwithstanding—had joined Bella in the living room. Emmett, Jasper, and Carlisle had put their frenetic research into Bella’s condition on hold because it was becoming apparent that very soon research would not matter.

Bella must have realized she was approaching the top step of the gallows, for everyone had gathered spontaneously to await the final scene, each saying goodbye in his or her own way. Emmett cracked half-hearted jokes about making babies that moved no one to laugh. Alice spoke quietly to Bella about wardrobe ideas for the new little one, while Jasper stood beside her, silent and stoic, remembering his human days when childbirth was often fatal. Carlisle hovered anxiously at the back of the group, wracking his brain for some kind of solution, while Esme told Bella gentle stories about her short time as the mother of a newborn.

Bella’s presence in our family was a new experience for the Cullens. All of us—except Carlisle in his role as a doctor—had long ago stopped concerning ourselves with mortality. Humans came and went. We weren’t used to lingering over their deaths, let alone actually suffering. But everyone was struggling now.

When my family heard Jacob’s motorcycle approaching, they looked to me for an explanation. I told them under Bella’s hearing range that it was Jacob Black, coming to check on Bella. I shared his true intention only with Carlisle, who went to divert him or try to calm him down for both Bella’s sake and mine. It didn’t work.

“Is that Jacob?” Bella called when she became aware of his loud presence outside the front door.

“Yes. I asked Carlisle to send him away. I didn’t think he should see you in your current condition.”

“Why not? Are we keeping secrets from Jacob now too? What’s the point?”

I had no will to argue with her. As far as I was concerned, Bella could have whatever she wanted. She was clearly not long for the world and I didn’t want to waste even a minute of my remaining time with her by refusing her anything. I would face whatever consequences I had to face after she was gone.

When Bella called out to him, Jacob barged into the house ready to kill. He would see the evidence that Bella was no longer human—a small concession to the pack—and then he planned to lash out at me first, followed by as many of my family members as he could get to before Emmett or Jasper or Rosalie took him out.

Jacob was unprepared for the scene in our living room on that fateful thirteenth day. Nothing about it matched his expectations. I felt slightly smug that his reason for racing over in a fury was proven sadly wrong. It knocked the wind out of his sails.

I didn’t bother to look up when the wolf stormed in. Let him witness everything in its ugly truth—let him recognize Bella’s impending death; let him know the reason for it; let him see my utter helplessness and despair.

“I’m glad you came to see me today, Jacob,” Bella rasped. I knew—and she knew that I knew—that *tomorrow* might have been too late. I couldn’t stop the moan that broke from me. Esme touched my shoulder. Then Bella welcomed Jacob by vomiting for the fifth or sixth time that day, and suddenly, my legs could no longer bear my own weight. I fell to my knees and let my head drop into my dying wife’s lap.

Is that human enough for you, Jacob Black? Is it better that Bella should turn green and vomit up her insides than that she be lily white and impervious to illness? I didn’t say it aloud, so I got no answer.

Jacob blurted out the obvious questions... “Are you all right? What’s wrong?”

When Rosalie lifted Bella from the couch so that Bella could display her frightening condition rather than try to explain it, I just let my head flop forward into the pillows where she had been sitting and inhaled her scent there. After she was gone, her scent would fade from

the house and from her things within a few weeks, and I would have lost her forever. Before that happened, I hoped to be dead too.

Jacob was dumbfounded by Bella's alarming appearance and by the watermelon-sized bulge that was incongruously tacked on to her stick-like figure. She looked completely absurd in a walking corpse sort of way.

I left my eyes buried in the couch. I didn't care about Jacob's reaction. I didn't care what he thought. I only cared about one thing, and for that, I needed his help. A seed of an idea that had planted itself in my head earlier began to sprout. I turned it over in my mind, swallowing the pain it caused me, until I could tolerate the words in my head. Yes, I would ask him.

Just then, I heard Jacob's corrosive thought: *I always knew he'd kill her!* His fury energized me enough to get me on my feet.

"Outside, Jacob," I barked at him. He misunderstood my tone and thought I was ready to fight. Far from it.

"Let's do this," he replied. Jasper and Emmett hurried to my side, ready to rumble.

"No," Bella gasped, and she reached for my arm, stumbling over her feet to try and hold me back.

Damn you, Jacob Black, for making things worse! I cursed silently.

"I just need to talk to him, Bella," I assured her, stroking her cheek softly. "Don't strain yourself. Please rest. We'll both be back in just a few minutes." She was suspicious, but let Rosalie settle her back onto the couch.

"Behave," she ordered Jacob weakly. "And then come back."

Bella was afraid that Jacob would attack me and that I would fight back and hurt him. She'd said as much to me more than once in the past. He would be offended if he knew, though I doubted I could do much damage to him in my present condition, even if I wanted to. I had promised Bella just now that we would both return, not because I cared whether Jacob tried to kill me...I didn't. I just wanted to negotiate the timing of my death.

Jacob followed me—the whole while debating in his head whether to attack me from behind—until we were out of my family's earshot. I didn't want them to hear our conversation, because they would interfere with my plan.

I would make Jacob a proposition: If he would offer to give Bella a baby that wouldn't kill her and she agreed to give up the killer fetus in exchange, I would not stand in his way. If he

couldn't convince Bella to give it up and she died, he could kill me immediately. I would not resist. For me, it was a win-win deal—either she lived or I died.

It was a one-in-a-million shot that Bella would accept. But maybe, just maybe, if she knew she could try again with a human she loved, she *would* give up the thing, allow Carlisle to get it out of her. If she hesitated for even a moment at the suggestion, had one second of weakened resolve, I had a chance to convince her.

In return, she could have Jacob as well as me if that's what she wanted. She could have *just* Jacob, if she preferred that. She must hate me now for what I was putting her through anyway. She might hate me even more if I convinced her to abort the evil creature she was carrying.

Jacob was sure to go for it. If he succeeded, he would get what he'd always wanted—Bella. And she would live! She could keep her human life and have a chance at happiness with him if she wanted to. If Jacob failed to convince her, he would still get to kill me when she was gone. It was a win-win for him too.

But before we could get to the negotiation, I had to relive the entire gothic drama as he fired questions and accusations at me in his head. I doggedly persevered—a man confessing his sins while burning at the stake—through painful truth after painful truth:

Yes, the “monster spawn” was killing her... *No*, we couldn't force her to give it up. She had a bodyguard...*Yes*, it *was* all my fault...*Yes*, I should have left her to him in the first place...*Yes*, I regretted that I had not... It brought me to my knees.

“I don't care about anything but keeping her alive,” I said desperately. “If it's a child she wants, she can have it. She can have half a dozen babies. Anything she wants.” I paused to read his face. He didn't understand. “She can have puppies, if that's what it takes.” Jacob's mouth opened in shock. I rushed on. “But not this way! Not this thing that's sucking the life from her while I stand there helpless! Watching her sicken and waste away. Seeing it hurting her.” I gasped for breath. “You have to make her see reason, Jacob. She won't listen to me anymore.”

Jacob's thoughts ran over one another in a jumble. *What is he saying? That Bella should, what? Have a baby? With me? What? How? Is he giving her up? Or does he think she wouldn't mind being shared?*

“Whichever. Whatever keeps her alive,” I said.

“That's the craziest thing you've said yet,” Jacob muttered.

“She loves you.”

“Not enough.”

“She’s ready to die to have a child. Maybe she’d accept something less extreme.”

“Don’t you know her at all?”

“I know, I know. It’s going to take a lot of convincing. That’s why I need you. You know how she thinks. Make her see sense.”

Impossible. Wrong. Sick. Borrowing Bella for the weekends and then returning her Monday morning like a rental movie? So messed up...so tempting. Bella in my arms, Bella sighing my name.... Bella, healthy and glowing, so different than now, but something the same: her body, not distorted, changed in a more natural way. Round with my child.

Once I’d put the picture in Jacob’s mind of Bella and him together...making love, having a litter of brown-skinned babies, building a life...he couldn’t resist the vision. It would be torture to give her up to him, but that didn’t matter. Whatever it did to me was irrelevant. If Bella would choose to live, I would choose banishment, solitude, or even death. I no longer mattered at all in the equation.

I shouldn’t let him talk to me, mess with my head, Jacob thought. I should just kill him now.

“Not now,” I whispered. “Not yet. Right or wrong, it would destroy her, and you know it. No need to be hasty. If she won’t listen to you, you’ll get your chance. The moment Bella’s heart stops beating, I will be begging for you to kill me.”

“You won’t have to beg long.”

That almost—but not quite—made me smile. “I’m very much counting on that.”

“Then we have a deal.”

I held out my hand. Jacob grimaced, but shook it anyway.

“We have a deal,” I agreed.

Walking back to the house, I thought about what Jacob saw when he looked at my face—“the burning man.” That was a good description of what I felt, burning, but not being consumed, tied to a stake in an eternal flame. I took some small comfort in knowing that if Bella died, I would follow her quickly.

When we got there, I shuffled my family into the kitchen to give Jacob and Bella some sense of privacy. Carlisle and Esme said brief farewells, both being overdue for a hunt. I agreed

that they should take the opportunity to go before Bella deteriorated any further. I would need Carlisle with me very soon.

Jacob did his best to try to convince Bella of what I couldn't—that she would not survive this insanity and that she had other choices. The pain of it all ripped through me anew as I recognized suddenly that we were already in the end game. If Bella continued on her present course, she wouldn't live much longer. I darted out the back door of the kitchen to hide the burning man's face as my thin veneer of control tore away.

I had heard every word that passed between Jacob and my beloved wife, but the phrases that stuck in my head afterwards were, "I'm *not* going to die. I can do this. I *can* do this." Bella thought she could survive until the baby was born and after it was out of her body, she would keep her heart going long enough for me to change her. What a lot of faith she had in me! The problem with her plan was that her heart was unlikely to survive the starvation that was killing her.

The first couple of weeks after becoming pregnant, Bella had gained weight as a pregnant woman should. But after we'd been home for about a week, she had already lost the curves she'd gained—with the exception of her Frankenstein belly bulge.

I had researched the effects of starvation on the human body. It is commonly known that humans who diet too aggressively lose muscle mass. It takes a careful diet and exercise plan to maintain a good percentage of muscle mass while losing weight. The key is to lose weight *slowly*. Even before a crash dieter becomes as thin as Bella was now, he or she had already lost a vast amount of muscle. And the most important muscle, the critical one—the *heart*—loses mass *faster* than any other muscle. Anorexics die from heart failure.

So that was the problem with Bella's plan for "emergency vampirization," as Jacob put it. The one thing that Bella would need to become a vampire was a heartbeat and her heart would soon fail if we could not get her body to accept nutrition. Bella was having a hard time catching her breath now. Her blood pressure was too low and so her heart beat faster to try to pump more blood, which stressed the organ further. Her heart was beginning to fail.

What did it want?! The thing! What did it want?! Why would a creature consume its mother's body before being born? Feeding Bella through a tube wouldn't help, Carlisle had conjectured, because her digestive system was rejecting nutrition altogether. We had to try feeding her intravenously. That was my next campaign...to convince her to let us try it.

In spite of the dire circumstances, having Jacob nearby relaxed Bella. I'd heard her laughing and telling jokes with him in the living room. He brought out a whole different side to my wife...a more youthful, lighthearted person. And he also understood her better than I did.

When he found out she was pregnant, he had known immediately what Bella would choose to do—“die for the monster spawn,” as he so aptly put it, and place no value on her own life. I hadn’t even guessed her intention until I read it in Rosalie’s mind.

Bella hadn’t seriously considered Jacob’s offer to give her a child in place of the killer fetus. I’d thought she might decline, but I’d run out of ideas and it had been worth a try. In a sad, perverse way, my heart was touched when Bella insisted that it was only my baby she wanted, even if it did kill her.

Jacob had left after his unsuccessful attempt to change Bella’s course. I didn’t think he would see her alive again. He was determined to avoid more pain, and even if he changed his mind, he wouldn’t have enough time to adjust to the reality of the situation and return to visit before she was gone.

I was wrong, though. Only a few hours later, I heard Jacob and Seth—Seth?— running toward us through the woods in their wolf forms. Seth was attempting to talk to me in his head.

Edward? Edward, you there? Okay, now I feel kinda stupid. I might have laughed at his awkwardness under other circumstances, but I was so far from laughter these days.

Shortly after Seth’s tentative call to me, I heard Jacob’s mental warning: *Hey, Edward. If you can hear me—circle the wagons, bloodsucker, you’ve got a problem.*

We’ve got a problem, Seth rephrased.

“Emmett! Jasper! Trouble!” I said the last word under my breath so I wouldn’t alarm Bella. They appeared in an instant. “Jacob and Seth are coming. Jacob’s warning us to prepare.”

“Alice!” I called again softly. “Security!” She darted to the back wall and lowered the protective metal over the glass, darkening the room.

The noise woke Bella. “What’s wrong?” she croaked weakly. Too weakly.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Bella, darling. A windstorm, that’s all.”

“Oh,” she breathed, dropping her head back onto a cushion.

My brothers and I stepped onto the porch in a line, a triumvirate of menace. Actually, Jasper and Emmett formed a duo of menace. I was a wasted shell of a vampire who almost didn’t care what the threat was. It was going to be hard to get excited about danger to me or my family, except as it might affect Bella.

The two wolves charged into the clearing at full speed, but stopped short when our vampire scent struck their noses like a hammer. Humans loved how we smelled, but the wolves...not so much. The feeling was mutual.

“Jacob? Seth? What’s going on?”

Between them, the wolves showed me the story in their minds. I felt my strength return with force when I heard what the pack intended to do. I leaped off the porch in anger and disbelief.

“They want to kill Bella?”

Jasper and Emmett misunderstood my words as a statement instead of a question, and they leaped the porch rail in unison and began moving on Jacob and Seth. I was startled into clarity.

“Em, Jaz—not *them*! The others. The pack is coming.”

My brothers stopped in their tracks and Emmett turned to me. “What’s *their* problem?”

“The same one as mine,” I replied. “But they have their own plan to handle it. Get the others. Call Carlisle! He and Esme have to get back here now.”

“They aren’t far,” I answered Jacob’s silent concern about my parents being on their own. There was a danger that the pack would find and overcome the two of them if they found them alone. Seth volunteered to run along the perimeter of our property and warn us when the rest of the pack showed up.

“Will you be in danger, Seth?” I inquired anxiously. Neither he nor Jacob thought so. Seth hightailed it away and Jasper watched him go, suspicious of a trap.

I was greatly touched, in spite of myself, that Jacob had returned not to kill me, but to save my wife from his own pack brothers. For a werewolf, this was a serious move, indeed. Disobeying Sam, the Alpha wolf, meant that Jacob had given up everything he had to protect Bella: his home, his family, his possessions, his pack. Though I knew he hated me with a passion, he was truly a brother to me.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve owed you my gratitude, Jacob.” I spoke softly to avoid embarrassing him. “I would never have asked for this from you.”

As soon as I said it, I realized that Jacob already knew the opposite to be true, especially since I had so recently asked him to offer his “stud services” to my wife—his words. I would have smiled at my own self-delusion if I had had any smile left in me.

Yeah, you would, Jacob thought, though there was no rancor in it. He understood my desperation. After all, he loved Bella too.

"I suppose you're right about that," I admitted.

The big wolf sighed. *Well, this isn't the first time that I didn't do it for you.*

"Right."

Sorry I didn't do any good today. Told you she wouldn't listen to me.

"I know," I said responding to Jacob's thought. "I never really believed she would. But..."

You had to try. I get it. She any better?

"Worse," I whispered.

Alice joined us. "Would you be so kind as to tell me what's happening?" With Jacob so near, Alice couldn't see what was coming.

"The pack thinks Bella's become a problem. They foresee potential danger from the...from what she's carrying. They feel it's their duty to remove that danger. Jacob and Seth disbanded from the pack to warn us. The rest are planning to attack tonight."

Alice hissed.

"Carlisle and Esme are on their way," Emmett reported. "Twenty minutes, tops."

"We should take up a defensive position," Jasper advised.

Right. "Let's get inside."

14. BLOOD

When Carlisle and Esme returned home, having called off their hunting trip, I explained to them Sam's decision to come after Bella, and Jacob's having formed a new pack to protect her. But truly, I was more worried that Bella would die before the wolves had a chance to kill her.

"Carlisle, please, you must check on Bella right away. She's failing so fast. She's held down nothing today and her heartbeat is erratic."

"It's time to start feeding her intravenously. It's our only option."

"I'll talk to Bella. She hates needles, but it's time to pull out all the stops. She must see that."

When I explained to Bella that we needed to start feeding her intravenously, Rosalie—the ubiquitous Rosalie—objected.

"It might be a trick, Bella. They could put something in it to knock you out."

I clenched my fists in readiness to knock Rosalie through the wall. Esme darted between us.

"You won't do that will you, Carlisle?" Esme asked him while keeping her eyes on my face.

"No, I won't, Bella. You have reached a critical stage and this is our last option to prevent starvation. If you don't make it through this, neither will the fetus."

Bella croaked weakly, "That's true, Rosalie. It's worth a try."

Rosalie looked at Bella for a few moments and then said, "Okay, we will allow it."

I took Bella's hand and knelt beside her. "Bella, darling, I know that you want to keep everything as normal as possible around here, but it would be safer to care for you at this point if we set up a bed near the medical equipment. Let me move you upstairs."

"No...Edward...I don't want to be tucked away in a hospital room. I want to be down here with the family."

"Okay, love, but I want to bring the bed down for you. It will make things easier." There was no point in arguing that it would be safer and more comfortable for her to be in a hospital

bed with side rails and controls for repositioning the mattress. I knew she wouldn't agree to special equipment unless I implied that it was for her caretakers' benefit, rather than her own.

"If you think it would help, then I don't mind that."

Carlisle and Esme retreated immediately to the second floor where they'd set up Carlisle's office as a surgery for removing the creature when the time came. Nobody believed that Bella could deliver the huge thing naturally—not with that dense membrane protecting it and not with her so weakened. It would have to be delivered by Cesarean section. I only hoped that Bella would get that far.

My parents descended the staircase with the hospital bed, its legs folded underneath. We set it up and I gently lifted my wife onto it while Carlisle readied the IV and Rosalie hovered over us both. Carlisle also set up an oxygen tank with a tube under Bella's nose, and a heart monitor to warn us if Bella's heart should stutter or falter or if her blood pressure started to drop. Bella had deteriorated rapidly in the course of the day. She was so weak now that she could no longer stand up.

"Is there any way to know how close to term she is?" I asked my father while stroking Bella's bony hand. I noticed that her wedding ring was spinning loosely on her finger. "Do you think days, a week?"

"We consider a pregnant woman ready to deliver when her belly reaches forty centimeters. With her rate of growth, I'm guessing Bella has just under a week to go."

She'll never make it, I thought, despairing. *There's no way she can survive another week in her condition*. I looked away so that Bella couldn't see my facial expression, which was not under my control.

"She needs to sleep now," Rosalie barked at us. "Everybody move away so Bella can rest."

Again, I clenched my fists in fury. Rosalie was behaving as if everything were going to be all right. She assumed that even if Bella died, we'd still have time to get the "baby" out and that was her first priority. Bella would be gone and she'd have just what she'd always wanted—to play Mommy—and without Bella around to get in the way. I hated her with a venom I didn't know I had. If it weren't for Emmett, I'd have taken a serious run at her days ago.

Jacob and Seth patrolled the property for the rest of the day and overnight, while Jasper and Emmett remained on high alert. The night passed with no attack from the wolf pack, but when morning came, a solitary werewolf crossed onto Cullen property.

I heard Jacob's thought. *What do you think you're doing, Leah?*

It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm joining your crappy little renegade pack. The vampires' guard dogs. Leah barked a laugh.

Seth, go let the Cullens know that it's just your stupid sister. I'll deal with this.

Leah's motivation for coming was purely selfish. She wanted to escape the pain of watching Sam and Emily together every day. But Jacob didn't want her in his pack either—her pain was too reminiscent of his own. I decided that if Jacob let her stay, I wouldn't tell Bella. She was frightened of Leah, who detested our family for what we were and openly disliked Bella for hurting Jacob.

What Jacob was putting himself through for Bella! It was both noble and masochistic. Bella made it hard for him to let go of her, because she had never fully let him go. It pained me to see the joy that lit up her face whenever he walked into the room. I knew I should be gracious as Bella lay dying, and share with Jacob what little time she had left, but it was hard...very hard. One more searing pain atop all the others. It would be a relief to die. I knew I could trust Jacob to keep his promise and that gave me a small measure of peace.

Without knowing it, Jacob gave me other things too. Over time, listening to Jacob's mind had become habitual. At first, I'd listened because he was my rival and I was fighting for Bella with every advantage I had. When he came to see Bella at our wedding, I listened to know how he was doing, and then to protect Bella and potentially myself from him. I listened to him now for his wisdom. He could see things that I, even with my mind-reading skills, could not. Moreover, he was amusing. He had such a gift of expression. I knew why Bella loved him. In spite of myself, I loved him too.

So, listening to his conversation with Carlisle on the porch regarding Bella's condition, I caught it...something Jacob had said...no...*thought*. My father had explained that Bella was starving, that the fetus wouldn't let her body absorb nutrition. Carlisle asked, rhetorically, the same question I'd been asking myself for days: "What does it want?"

I caught Jacob's silent reply: *Probably just looking for something to sink its teeth into—a throat to suck dry. Since it isn't big enough to kill anyone else yet, it settles for sucking Bella's life from her. I can tell them exactly what it wants: death and blood, blood and death.*

In his snide, but highly accurate fashion, Jacob had hit the nail on the head. Except for Bella, we were all blood drinkers in this household and not one of us had recognized the truth. It was THIRSTY! It wanted BLOOD! Of course! What else? The thing was half-vampire! I didn't want to hope, but a tiny spark flared deep inside my dried-up, desiccated heart.

Carlisle had a stash of donated human blood in his refrigerator in case Bella required a transfusion during surgery. Would a transfusion help her now? I had my doubts. Being *thirsty* meant that the need was for *ingested* blood.

Rosalie took to the idea immediately, convinced that if Bella was told it would be good for “the *baby*” then she would agree to it. It was revolting how she pressured Bella without an iota of concern for Bella’s human sensibilities. After all, the act could be seen as a form of cannibalism, instinctively repellent to a human. But Rosalie was right. When told “the baby” might be craving blood, Bella’s response was hesitant, but willing.

“So who’s going to catch me a grizzly bear?” she asked.

All of us were uncomfortable at having to clarify that the blood would be human, but Bella even agreed to try that.

Maybe it was because I had so recently asked Jacob to donate his semen, essentially, that she looked at him with wide eyes and asked, “Who?” If all of this weren’t in the interests of trying to save Bella’s life, I would have been ashamed of myself. What would we ask of Jacob next? A kidney? A lung? But I knew that if Bella needed it, I wouldn’t hesitate to ask him for anything and probably, he would agree to it. I didn’t know whether he or I was the sicker individual.

When Rosalie went to the kitchen to get a cup for Bella’s libation, she chose one made of clear, see-through plastic. She had no empathy for Bella at all. She was just circling my wife’s poor, failing body like a vulture waiting for a feast. If it weren’t for Emmett...

To my great surprise (and Bella’s) she *liked* the donated human blood, *loved* it even. She shut her eyes and moaned when she took her first sip, knowing instinctively that it was what her body needed. She drank one cup and reluctantly asked for another, embarrassed by her craving.

“Does this screw my total?” she whispered to me. “Or do we start counting *after* I’m a vampire?”

I smiled at her reference to the bet between Jasper and Emmett on how many humans she would kill as a newborn. “No one is counting, Bella. In any case, no one died for this. Your record is still clean.” I cupped my hand around her sunken cheek.

Halfway through the second cup, Bella’s heartbeat strengthened noticeably and her waxy-looking skin took on a pink blush. She raised herself into a sitting position without assistance, though half an hour earlier she hadn’t been able to lift her head. Incredible!

“How do you feel now?” Carlisle asked cautiously.

“Not sick. Sort of hungry...only I’m not sure if I’m hungry or *thirsty*, you know?”

“Does anything sound particularly good to you, Bella?” he inquired.

“Eggs,” she responded and looked at me with a smile.

The smile that crossed my face in reply almost startled me, it was so unexpected. Bella was *hungry!* Hope welled up before I had a chance to tamp it down. Was it *possible* that Bella could survive to birth this...baby?

We didn’t have long to appreciate our victory over Bella’s imminent death. Just when things were starting to look up, two warning howls from Seth sent Jacob racing out of the house. He leapt off the porch and phased to his wolf form in midair, ripping his last pair of sweatpants to shreds. Sam’s pack was coming. Jacob’s pack responded, dashing to get themselves in place to defend us.

Fortunately, Sam’s pack members had come to talk, not fight. I listened in on the wolves’ distant conversation as my family convened in the living room to hear the news. I gave them the play-by-play as Jared, in human form, asked Jacob to come back to Sam’s pack and bring Seth and Leah with him. Jared was accompanied by three of his pack brothers, not including Embry, I noticed. Leah had caught on immediately that Sam hadn’t sent him as part of the diplomacy mission because he was worried that Embry would defect to Jacob’s pack. The pull for Embry must be immense, given what I had learned of his probable heritage. The bonds of blood were strong.

That was true for me too, I realized. Despite all the contention and all the times I’d wanted to rip his head from his body, Jacob was my blood—metaphorically speaking, of course. He loved Bella and I loved Bella and through her, we were brothers. Cain and Abel, maybe, but brothers...kin...blood. Jacob cemented that feeling when he told Jared his intentions.

I quoted his words to my family: *“But I’m not coming back, not now. We’re going to wait and see how it plays out, too. And we’re going to watch out for the Cullens for as long as that seems necessary. Because, despite what you think, this isn’t just about Bella. We’re protecting those who should be protected. And that applies to the Cullens, too.”*

I didn’t repeat his next thought: *Most of them, anyway.* I smiled to myself. Jacob and I were in agreement on many things lately and one of them was how we felt about Rosalie. He wouldn’t fight too hard to protect her, I was sure. He also figured that Emmett and Jasper and I, at least, could take care of ourselves.

Was it only a few days ago that Jacob had come to kill me? And now he was practically part of my family. He had taken steps toward accepting that Bella would likely become one of us—vampire—if it would keep her alive. Though being a vampire was only relatively alive, the distinction was critical. Should she die, I knew from his thoughts that he would likely regain his anger and hatred toward me long enough to keep our bargain, which is what I wanted. Once again, I was glad that I was the only one in my family who could read minds. And I was glad, suddenly, that Alice couldn't see into Jacob's head.

After telling my family what Jacob had said about protecting all of us and not just Bella, silence passed through the group. We shared a moment of contemplation and thanksgiving for our new allies—except for Rosalie, naturally.

Carlisle explained to Esme what it meant for Jacob, Seth, and Leah to break away from Sam's pack to protect us. They had each given up everything, including their homes and their families. Tender-hearted Esme broke into vampire tears, something I'd been experiencing rather often myself lately. Her face crumpled, her shoulders hunched forward, and she covered her face with her hands. Her body shook with emotion, though no actual tears came. Carlisle held her and when the moment passed, Esme became very determined.

"It's tragic that they have no homes to go to, no beds, no clothes, no food, nothing. I can't have them here doing all this for us, making such great sacrifices, without trying to make it better for them. Edward, please tell Jacob that we're offering them all beds to sleep in, showers, meals, rides, any personal possessions they need, and anything else any of us can think of to try to ease their circumstances. I know that they can't tolerate the way we smell, but they must need clothing. I'll wash some things that I think will fit them and cook them some food to take away."

"Leah doesn't like eating in her wolf form, so that would be a welcome gesture, I'm sure," I told my mother. "And when Jacob left here just now, he ripped through the last of his clothes. When he phases back to his human form, he'll have nothing to put on."

"I'll find something of Emmett's for him to wear, and set it on the porch where he can find it when he returns. Edward, how big is Leah? Could she wear any of our clothes?"

"She's about your size."

"Okay, then I'll put together some things for her too. I don't want them to suffer on our account." Esme left the room to see to it.

"Carlisle," Bella croaked.

"Yes, Bella?" Carlisle swept to the side of the hospital bed.

"I'm feeling much better. Do you think that I could lose some of these tubes now?"

"Yes, I think so. We can stop the nutrient mix, since you're eating. I think you're also breathing fine now without the oxygen. Let's keep the fluid drip for a while longer."

"Do I need to be in bed?"

"No, we can hang the fluids on a rolling stand. It's very important, Bella, that you tell us of any discomfort you are having and not minimize anything. If you're cold, for example, you need to tell us. If you're thirsty, hungry, whatever, we need to know."

"Okay."

It took us four minutes to remove the hospital bed, put the furniture back in place and settle Bella down on the couch with her remaining IV drip bag set up behind her. We wrapped her in blankets on Jacob's advice.

It was a different scene that Jacob returned to when he strolled through the front door in Emmett's borrowed clothes. He had come to report what we already knew about— Jared's plea for him and his pack to return home. I felt enormously grateful to Jacob for his show of loyalty to my family and for his contribution to Bella's much-improved condition.

But my heart sank immediately when Bella spied Jacob coming through the door. She was elated to see him, almost ecstatic, like he'd been missing for years. I *couldn't* understand it. Of course she loved Jacob, but what was so thrilling about his mere presence? And even if she was overjoyed to be near him, why was she so open about showing that to me? She must realize how it hurt us both that she clung to him so tenaciously. It seemed to be a bizarre blind spot, bordering on mental illness.

"Where's the flood, mutt?" Rosalie asked, referring to Emmett's too-short trousers.

"You know how you drown a blonde, Rosalie?" Jacob responded without looking at her. "Glue a mirror to the bottom of a pool."

"I've already heard that one," Rosalie hollered after him as he left the house.

Just then, I remembered Esme's request and followed Jacob outside. I wasn't doing it just for Esme—I wanted to repay him in some small way for everything he had done for Bella and everything he was doing for my family...and me. I knew he wouldn't want to acknowledge his kindness to vampires, so I simply presented Esme's offers of food, clothing, showers, and whatever else he and his pack needed. I thought Leah would refuse anything we offered, but I hoped Jacob could change her mind. These three wolves were defying their very DNA to help us, their mortal enemies by definition.

Our conversation was cut short when I heard Bella's low, pained cry from inside the house. I dashed back to find her bent over, holding her belly, with my family gathered closely around her.

"Bella! What's wrong?" I cried before I'd reached her side. She grimaced, unable to speak. Rosalie was holding her from behind the couch, while Esme and Carlisle hovered in front of her, my father reaching to pull Bella's arms away from her belly.

"Give me a second, Carlisle," Bella gasped.

"Bella, I heard something crack. I need to take a look."

"Pretty sure...it was a rib. Ow. Yep. Right here." She pointed to her left side, second rib from the bottom. It must have kicked her. The thing was shockingly strong.

"I need to take an X-ray. There might be splinters. We don't want it to puncture anything." Carlisle took Bella's left arm and removed the IV needle, handing the apparatus to Esme.

"Okay." Bella was struggling for breath. Inhaling was obviously painful.

I bent forward to pick her up, but Rosalie dashed around the couch to beat me to it. I gave her a silent stare and she growled, "I've already got her."

Rosalie carried Bella swiftly up the stairs, moving as smoothly as she could, with me on her heels. We arranged Bella on the examining table in Carlisle's surgery (nee office) while Carlisle pulled over his portable X-ray machine. A few moments later, we were looking at the films, which showed that one of her left-side floating ribs was broken, a greenstick fracture. The bone had split lengthwise, rather than crosswise, and the pieces had snapped back into place.

"It kicked her, didn't it, Carlisle?"

"Yes, that would be my guess. The foot, or possibly a hand, maybe even an elbow, hit the rib at an angle. With this kind of break, the natural tension created when the splinters are pushed outward causes them to pop back into place, but the fractures are long and can take quite a while to heal. At least there is no displacement, nothing poking out. How is your breathing, Bella?" my father asked.

"Fine," she replied in her usual manner. All of us raised our eyebrows and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly.

"It hurts some if I inhale too deeply," Bella amended.

“Can one of you hand me some bandaging tape? Top drawer.”

I shuffled through the medical supplies in a nearby rolling cart and located the tape, handing it to Carlisle. Bella was gripping my hand hard enough that hers had turned white from the pressure and beads of sweat were running down her forehead. She was in more pain than she was admitting to. Carlisle noticed it and caught my eye.

It's bad, isn't it?

I grimaced and nodded minutely.

“Rosalie, can you please help Bella sit up with her legs over the side of the table?”

Bella held her body rigid and winced when Rosalie touched her. I lifted her thighs, while my sister lifted her back and we spun her into place. Her breathing was a shallow pant.

“Please gather Bella’s shirt above her lower ribcage. Or you can take it off if you prefer, Bella, but lifting your arms might be painful.”

“Rose, could you hold it up for me, please?” Bella asked, giving Rosalie an apologetic half smile.

As my sister folded and rolled the big sweatshirt above Bella’s stomach, I stifled a gasp. I’d seen the mottled black and blue before, but since the last time I’d looked at my wife’s stomach, her entire left side had become one big bruise. There was no ivory-colored flesh left. I turned my face away to hide my anguish.

“Now, Bella,” Dr. Cullen admonished, “it’s extremely important, and becoming more so, that you let us know about the slightest change, pain, or discomfort. The fetus is growing so quickly that you could have any number of symptoms or injuries. If you are stoic and don’t tell us, then it’s very hard for me to help.”

“Okay, Carlisle.”

“Edward, help me wrap this tape around Bella’s back.” I did as he asked and together we mummified Bella’s upper belly.

“How does that feel?” Carlisle inquired.

“Much better,” Bella replied.

“Unfortunately, that’s about all we can do for a broken rib, but it should keep the bone from moving around and re-breaking or hurting quite so much.”

“Thank you, Carlisle.” Bella was breathing a little easier.

“Bella, it’s nearly nighttime. Let’s settle you into bed, okay?” I suggested. “It might be best if we didn’t move you around too much more today.” Bella nodded in reply.

Again, Rosalie gathered Bella carefully in her arms and transported her up another flight of stairs to our bedroom. Together, we arranged Bella on the big bed with pillows supporting her from every side. Then, purposefully, Rosalie marched to the nearby couch and took up a sentry position.

“I think I can manage my own wife for the night, Rosalie,” I said, bitterness seeping through my words.

“I’m not leaving unless Bella asks me to,” Rosalie replied haughtily.

“It’s okay, Rose. Edward can carry me to the bathroom and I don’t think I’ll be throwing up anymore, thank goodness. The baby’s thirsty, though. Would you mind refilling my cup?” Rosalie nodded and left the room.

“Edward, I feel a little cold. Could I have a blanket, please?”

“Of course, darling.” Finally, she had asked for *something*. I wrapped a thick quilt around her, and then moved very carefully onto the bed. I held my beloved, battered wife in my arms, careful not to touch her skin. “How is that? Are you okay?”

But there was no reply. Bella had already dropped off to sleep. The pain and the lightning-fast growth of the thing was taking every ounce of strength she had. When Rosalie returned with the cup of blood, I shook my head and nodded at Bella’s misshapen form. Rosalie retreated without a word. Thank goodness for small favors.

15. BROKEN

Several hours after Bella fell asleep, I disentangled myself from around her and went in search of Carlisle. As I headed down to the second floor, I heard Emmett and Rosalie whooping it up in their bedroom. Rosalie needed some time with her mate too...thank goodness!

I stopped by Carlisle's office where he was busily reading up on birthing techniques. Of course, my father had delivered many babies in his three hundred fifty years, particularly when we moved to smaller communities like Forks, but he liked to be up on the latest medical news and Bella's birth promised to be the most interesting and unusual delivery of his long career. I was pleased. It was just what I wanted to talk to him about.

He invited me in. "What's on your mind, Edward?"

"What do you think of Bella's prognosis?"

"Well, the idea to administer blood was brilliant and is making a great difference, as you've seen. Her strength is far better than it was yesterday. Her heart rate is closer to normal, stronger."

"How much longer before we can take that thing out of her?"

"You know, son, there's always a chance that Bella is carrying a very special child. If you and Bella can conceive together, it's possible that what nature produces is wonderful, even extraordinary."

"I don't see how I can think about it that way when it's killing the love of my life." I bowed my head, so Carlisle couldn't see my face. No doubt I'd just turned into Jacob's burning man.

My father remained silent to allow me to compose myself. I continued. "Today was much better than yesterday. I do feel that Bella has been given more time, but the fetus is stronger in direct proportion to Bella's increased strength. It seems to be kicking her apart from the inside."

"Yes, the broken rib is indicative. With Bella getting more appropriate nutrition for it, the child might mature faster. With maturity, comes size, but it also brings the delivery date closer. Let's measure her belly in the morning and see how close it is to the standard forty centimeters. We can write a mathematical equation to predict her due date based on the

baby's growth rate. By comparing it to the human gestational period, we should get a good estimate. She seems to be at the equivalent of seven-and-a-half months right now. "

"How will we know when it can survive outside the womb?"

"The baby itself should tell us. I'll need to deliver it by Cesarean section, though. The hardness of the membrane around the fetus is likely to tear her apart if she delivers in the standard way."

"How will we cut through the membrane?" Rosalie asked, having heard our conversation and entered the room.

"I will use my teeth," I said without looking at her. "If the little monster is supposed to chew its way out, then my teeth should break through as well as...it can."

Carlisle agreed. "It might be safer for you to do it, Edward, than to wait for the child. We've seen the baby's appetite for blood. Who knows how much damage it might do if we let nature take its course? I trust that with all your experience with Bella's blood, you can manage this safely." It was half comment, half question.

"I believe that I can, but I hope that you would back me up if need be."

"Yes," both Carlisle and Rosalie said in unison.

"Not you!" I growled at my sister.

"I think I could manage as well as you, Edward," she sneered. "You know *my* total's perfect."

I had to concentrate not to clench my fists. "I didn't say you *couldn't* do it, I just don't *wish* for you to," I said without looking at her.

Carlisle cut in before the fight escalated.

"We'll assume that Edward can manage the task. I can use both of you for the delivery, though. Rosalie, I'll have you monitor the anesthesia for surgery. We'll keep it as short-term as possible, so as not to stress Bella's heart. Once you pull the baby, Edward, I'll stitch Bella back up. Rosalie can take the child, clear his airway he or she is breathing, and clean him up. At that point, I'll assess Bella's condition and we can go from there. You can help with the anesthesia, transfusions, or whatever else might be required...or you can change her."

"I'm fine with that," Rosalie interjected, then immediately left the room. I shook my head at the floor in irritation. No thought for Bella at all.

"I'll likely have to change her," I said morosely.

"In all honesty, that is the most likely outcome, but anything could happen and we need to prepare for all contingencies. I'm assuming that, if possible, we'll try to keep her human?"

"Yes," I responded. "Bella doesn't expect it at this point, but I know that she'd like the chance to be a human mother. Before...this happened, we'd even talked about postponing for as much as a year, or more."

"Has Bella changed her mind?" Carlisle asked in surprise.

The corner of my mouth rose slightly in spite of myself. "Let's just say that she recently found a reason to put it off."

Carlisle raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment.

The sound of Jacob's loud snoring from the living room punctuated the otherwise quiet night. He'd fallen asleep on the floor and not stopped snoring all night. When I carried Bella to the living room in the morning, he was still there where he dropped. He'd been awake, patrolling, for at least a couple of days, so it was no wonder he collapsed.

"Are you hungry, my love?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Would you like an omelet?" I guessed, though there were few other selections in Bella's recent diet besides eggs—scrambled, fried, boiled, soufflé—I'd learned them all. She still liked the eggnog I'd made her on our honeymoon, so I kept a pitcher of it in the refrigerator.

Rosalie, who was watching television in the living room, got up to check on Bella as I moved into the kitchen.

"More blood?" I heard her ask and saw Bella nod through Rosalie's eyes.

Carlisle brought his measuring tape downstairs. He'd measured Bella several times before, but not in the last few days since she'd been so sick.

"Thirty centimeters," he announced.

"It was twenty-three, three days go," I reminded Bella.

"So that's a little more than two centimeters a day," she said. "How many centimeters before the baby's 'cooked'?"

"Normally, it's forty. I have no reason to suspect that you're different in that regard."

"So, five more days to go."

"Four or five, I'd say," Carlisle corrected.

"We're almost there, Edward!" Bella said happily and beamed at me. Unable to return her smile, I gave her a light kiss.

We were interrupted then by a timid knock on the front door. Carlisle looked at me. *Is it safe?*

I nodded.

He hurried to the door and opened it for Seth in his human form.

"Welcome, Seth!" Carlisle greeted him warmly. "Come on in. What can we do for you?"

As he entered the front door, Seth looked at the pile on the floor that was Jacob and pointed. "Leah was worried when Jacob didn't phase back last night. I told her that he probably fell asleep human, but she wanted me to come check on him. Looks like he passed out here."

"He's been sleeping like a stone—one with a loud motor," I added.

"Hi, Edward! Hi, Bella!" Seth greeted us.

Esme came out of the kitchen.

"Hello, Seth. Can we offer you some breakfast? We've got rolls, eggs, juice, and probably cereal and I don't know what all. We'd really like you to stay for a while and eat."

"Uh, well..."

"I won't take no for an answer." Esme smiled her determined mother's smile.

"Actually, Seth," I interjected. "Bella seems to be a little chilled. Would you mind sitting beside her here to warm her up?"

"Oh, sure," he replied.

"I'll go make some breakfast then." Esme headed off to the kitchen.

"I better give her a hand. Be right back, love," I murmured, bending over to kiss Bella on the forehead. She smiled brightly. Was she *glowing*? Despite the injuries and the starvation? I hated to admit that she seemed to be.

When I reached the kitchen, Esme was fumbling with various pots and pans, looking a little confused.

"You know, Edward, it's been so long since I cooked human food, it's hard to remember how."

"Let me take over, Mom. I'm used to it by now."

She touched my hand softly as she left the room. "I'll just go find some fresh clothes for Seth then. Do you think he's about your size?" she asked, without waiting for an answer.

I flicked on the small television in the kitchen and tuned in The Food Network. This morning's talk with Carlisle had lent me a miniscule degree of hope. If Bella somehow *did* survive this nightmare and stayed human, I would be cooking a lot more in the future. I tried not to think of the worst-case-scenario—that we'd both be dead—and focused on the eggs. I called softly to Seth from the kitchen, knowing he could hear me.

"Seth, if I cook Leah something, would you take it to her?"

"Yes, no problem, Edward!"

When I returned to the living room with a plate for Leah, Alice was sitting at Seth's feet. She was both happy and distressed to be near Bella. The wolves blanked out her visions and relieved her headache, unlike the...thing...which caused it. Alice had spent much of the night sitting near Jacob and had even gotten a pillow and put it under his head on the floor...a gesture that he did not appreciate when the burning in his nose woke him up.

"Here, Seth. For Leah," I said, handing him the plate.

"Wow, Edward, that smells good!" he said, beaming.

"I'll make one for you while you deliver this one."

Esme re-entered the room and added, "And I've found a fresh set of clothes that I think will fit you." Seth smiled at her and took off with the plate. I was pretty sure that Leah would refuse the food, but perhaps Seth could convince her to eat.

"I'll be right back with yours, darling," I said to Bella, touching her hand.

Seth returned with Leah's plate emptied and looked at me with regret. I nodded once and headed back to the kitchen. Leah had dumped the plate of food on the ground.

"I'd rather eat rats," she had said to Seth.

Bella was eating with a little less enthusiasm than I had expected.

"Are you all right, love?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied automatically. I kept looking at her until she finally added, "Well, I'm feeling a little nauseous, I guess, and cold again."

"You must have a fever. Carlisle?" I called softly. He appeared in the living room almost instantaneously. "Bella's chilled and nauseated."

"Hmm," he said, moving to feel her forehead. Unlike me, he had learned to gauge a human's temperature based on his own. "I think you have a bit of a fever." He pressed his fingers beneath her jaw line to check for swelling. "No infection," he said to himself. "It might just be a virus." He glanced at Seth, thinking that the wolves could be carriers. *Nothing to do for it now*, he thought. Out loud, he said, "We'll just keep an eye on it, Bella. Please tell us if it gets any worse."

She nodded and laid her head on the back of the couch. I went to the kitchen to make a plate of food for Seth and Esme returned to the living room. "Here, try these on," I heard her say.

When I returned, Seth was freshly dressed and sitting with his arm around Bella.

"Seth is a great portable heater," she said softly, offering me a weak smile.

I went to sit on her other side, careful to put the blanket between us. "Are you still cold?"

"Yes, a little." I saw that she'd eaten only half her meal, but was making good progress on a cup of blood.

Just then, Jacob jerked upright from the floor, rubbing the sides of his nose vigorously. He surveyed the three of us on the couch.

"He came to find you," I said, answering Jacob's unspoken question. "And Esme convinced him to stay for breakfast." Seth hurried to explain that Leah was concerned about him. Jacob kept his gaze on Seth's arm around Bella's shoulder.

“Bella got cold,” I explained, seeing the rising anger in Jacob’s mind. Seth noted Jacob’s expression and removed his arm. He developed a sudden, overriding interest in his plate.

“How’s the rib?” Jacob asked Bella.

“Taped up nice and tight. I don’t even feel it.”

Grrr....

Jacob rolled his eyes. Of course it hurt her. I’d seen her flinch when she inhaled too deeply.

“What’s for breakfast?” Jacob asked. “O-negative or AB-positive?”

Bella stuck her tongue out at him. He was so good for her.

As Jacob turned to leave, refusing breakfast on Leah’s account, Carlisle entered the room. “Jacob, a word?”

I listened while the two powwowed on the best way for our family to organize a hunting trip. Everyone was overdue. Jasper was suffering and had to stay away from Bella and even from the wolves who were not appetizing to us in any way. Emmett was thirsty too. Rosalie was overdue, but she wouldn’t leave unless I did and I wasn’t going anywhere with Bella in her condition. I’d let them work it out. I had other things on my mind.

Despite what Carlisle had said about planning for all contingencies, I knew in my heart that Bella was not strong enough to survive the child’s birth. I wondered what would happen to the fetus if I injected Bella with my venom before it was completely out of her. Surely, there would be time to start Bella’s change and still get the thing out. Once her heart stopped, the venom could not save her.

Looking at the grimaces she tried to hide and hearing her heart pound when the pain hit her, I knew she was suffering much more than she would let on. Four more days of this...I had my doubts whether either of us would make it.

Carlisle was telling Jacob that we were almost out of blood for Bella and that he needed to buy some when he went hunting. Jacob suggested a plan for addressing the family’s hunting needs, focusing on when to go and how many should go at a time, just in case Sam’s pack tried to divide and conquer.

Before Jacob could get away, Esme returned with a big casserole and offered it to him. The hospitality was making him uncomfortable and he didn’t like the idea of eating food made by a vampire, either. He was thinking that he would dump it under a tree. Then he remembered

that I could hear his thoughts. With the volume of Jacob's inner voice, it seemed I couldn't *not* hear his thoughts.

Don't you say anything to her! Let her think I ate it! He yelled the thought in my direction, but I didn't look up. I would never hurt my mother's feelings by telling her.

"Will you come back later, Jake?" Bella asked in an almost childlike voice. I felt the stabbing pain in his mind as the same pain coursed through me.

Why? Why did she need him so much? Why couldn't I be enough for her? I thought that she had let go of him, especially since our honeymoon, but she seemed to be reattaching to him in a way that she never had before. It was almost as if he was her *hope*, or something. I couldn't put my finger on it. I just knew it hurt. It hurt Jacob too, but there was nothing to do for it. I was not going to chastise Bella when soon I could lose her forever.

Bella was almost begging. "Please? I might get cold."

Poor Jacob. Before he could escape, Esme reappeared with a basket of clothes for Leah and pushed them into his hand. I could feel his relief—and mine—when he finally shut the door behind him. Bella threw off her blanket.

"Are you hot, my love?"

"Yes, I am suddenly."

"Seth, could you move a little further away now?"

"Yeah, sure, Edward. It's time for me to go, anyway. Thanks for the great breakfast!"

"You're welcome."

As Seth stood up, I heard a cracking sound. Bella gasped and turned vampire white. Rosalie was on top of us in a second.

"What is it, Bella?" she asked before I could recover from my surprise. Bella was doubled over, gasping for breath.

"Rib..." Bella whispered. She pointed to her lower right side this time.

"Bella!" I cried, feeling helpless.

Carlisle was already there. *X-ray*, he thought and I nodded.

"Bella, I'm going to carry you upstairs for an X-ray. Okay, darling?"

She held up her hand to stop me, while her other hand circled her belly. I waited until she relaxed her clenched teeth and took my hand.

“Okay,” she said softly. Careful not to jar her any more than necessary, I lifted her, maintaining her body in the bent-over position she had adopted. She breathed in sharply. I hurried upstairs with Carlisle ahead of us and Rosalie trailing.

It was much the same as before, except the cracked rib was on the other side. The terrible bruising covered her entire belly. Blood seeped under her skin where the thing had kicked her. You could see in her face that she was in terrible pain. How I wanted to deliver her from this misery! Or rather to deliver the fetus and *remove* the misery.

“Seth, when you see Jacob, could you ask him to stop by later?” Bella asked as I returned her to the couch. He’d stuck around to make sure she was all right.

“Yes, for me too,” chimed in Alice. It’s good to have one of you here at least. I’m tired of hanging out in the attic like the vampire bat in the belfry.”

Seth laughed.

“It’s nice for Bella to have the space heater to trade off with the air conditioners. Thanks for helping out, Seth,” I added.

“Sure thing! I’ll tell Jacob to come by. I’m sure he will.”

Seth took his dishes to the kitchen and was preparing to leave when Carlisle’s phone rang. He checked the caller ID and then said, “It’s your father, Bella.”

“Let me talk to him! He’ll be glad to hear how much better I am today! He’s been so worried.”

Carlisle handed her the phone with a look in my direction. *I’m not sure this is the wisest course of action*, he thought.

I shook my head while looking down at my feet. I agreed with him, but if Bella was dying, there was no way I was going to deny her the time she had left to talk to her family. Though she believed she would pull through this mess, albeit as a vampire, I had my doubts that she would pull through at all. Her heart was simply too fragile. Even if the thing didn’t kill her in the next four days, the delivery would be extremely dangerous.

Unexpectedly, an idea came to me. *Hmm, perhaps that would work...* I’d discuss it with Carlisle when Bella next fell asleep. Maybe there *was* a way to keep her heart beating until she was changed.

Seth slipped out while Bella was on the phone. Talking to Charlie drained her. Trying to soothe his worries took a lot of energy Bella didn't have to spare. After hanging up the phone, she slept off and on for the rest of the day. She ate some food and drank a steady supply of blood, but the virus, if that's what it was, exhausted her.

Bella couldn't move without terrible pain from the broken ribs and Carlisle couldn't give her anything for the pain. Anything she took would be bad either for the fetus (which she wouldn't do) or her heart (which I advised her against). Of course, severe pain could stop one's heart too. I watched her face carefully. I was sure that she hurt a lot more than she let on.

Late in the evening, tears ran out of Bella's eyes when Rosalie lifted her to go to the bathroom.

"Bella!" I cried, reaching to touch her face.

"I...I'm...f...fine, Edward. He just surprised me, that's all."

"A kick?"

"An elbow, I think."

Rosalie scowled at me and I moved away, collapsing backward onto the couch, my head in my hands. Esme came and sat down beside me, putting her arm around my shoulders. My body was shaking and my hands trembling. It tormented me to watch her being tortured by the thing.

Jacob walked through the front door at that moment and saw my distress. His thoughts went frantic when he didn't see Bella.

"She's all right," I muttered. "Or, the same, I should say."

Rosalie carried Bella back into the room and when she saw Jacob, it was as if the Messiah himself had blessed her with his presence. All the tiredness fell from her face and she beamed a huge smile at him.

Rosalie bent to lay Bella on the couch and pain distorted her face as she tried not to cry out. I forced myself to stay calm, as I leaned over to stroke her cheek. "Are you cold?"

Bella nodded.

Jacob came to sit beside her, seeming unable to find a place to touch that wouldn't hurt her. He settled his arm beside hers and held her hand. As they talked, I tried to bury myself in my own thoughts, not wanting to feel Jacob's pain as well as my own. Jacob was suffering over

the likelihood that Bella would be human for only a short time longer if she survived. It also hurt him that she kept drawing him to her as she was failing. In fact, the sicker she got, the more she seemed to cling to him. We were both suffering... again.

Soon, Bella fell asleep in the middle of a sentence and I laid a blanket over her.

"She's exhausted," I told Jacob. "It's been a long day. A hard day. I think she would have gone to sleep earlier, but she was waiting for you."

"Seth said it broke another of her ribs."

"Yes. It's making it hard for her to breathe."

"Great."

The heaviness of this death watch was relieved only by the creativity of Rosalie and Jacob's bickering. I appreciated his willingness to take her on, as I no longer had the strength. Their noisy altercations eventually woke Bella and she began to chastise Jacob before a stab of pain interrupted her. I leaped to my feet and pulled off her blanket to see her back arch upward as if a puppeteer were pulling her strings. She went ghostly pale and scrunched her face into a tight knot. Before any of us had time to react, she said, "He's just...stretching." She was panting for air. I held her face in my hands and willed it to stop hurting her.

"Carlisle," I called. He was right there, but Bella waved him off.

"Okay," Bella said, gasping. "Think it's over. Poor kid doesn't have enough room, that's all. He's getting so big."

I hated that "poor kid" with every fiber of my being. It was tearing her—my beautiful, self-sacrificing soul mate—to pieces.

16. MAGIC

Bella fell asleep on the couch and we left her there. Moving her had become so difficult. I could tell by her facial expressions that the pain was intense.

Jacob fell asleep shortly after Bella did, but not before telling me that he was concerned about her phone conversations with Charlie. Bella had told her father that she was “on the mend,” a falsehood that could only end in grief for him. I was concerned too, but I wasn’t going to deny Bella something that she wanted. Not now.

She was fantasizing that she could see Charlie after she was changed too (if she survived to *be* changed). She probably imagined that we would attend family reunions and go to the kid’s school functions, throw birthday parties with “Grandpa Charlie,” and visit Florida too. That was fine with me. Let her have her dreams now. There wasn’t much time left, given the turn things had taken.

Drinking human blood had pulled Bella back from the brink of starvation, which is what she must have been referring to when she’d described herself as “on the mend” to Charlie. The problem was that the thing grew stronger even faster than Bella did now that it was getting what it wanted. It was literally tearing her apart from the inside. How much longer could this go on?

Rosalie kept watch while Jacob leaned against the couch, asleep, his arm against Bella to warm her. It reminded me of our night in the tent when Jacob snuggled with Bella in a sleeping bag to save her from freezing, while I sat helplessly nearby. I saw Bella shiver in her sleep and moved my chilly body further away from her. Jacob dropped his head onto the cushion beside Bella’s without waking up. Yes, they would have been good together. It was a tragedy that I hadn’t stayed away. Because of me, now she would die trying to bear my offspring. Was there anything more I could do? I went in search of Carlisle to run my latest idea by him. I found him, as usual, studying in his office.

“Carlisle?” He looked up.

“Yes, Edward?”

“In the research you’ve done, have you found anything about why the mothers died?” I spoke softly, so as not to share the conversation with anyone else in the house.

Not explicitly, no. My first guess would be hemorrhaging and blood loss, followed by heart failure.

“We know that if any of these children have actually been born, as the Ticunas seem to believe, that the mothers had to have survived until the birth, assuming the babies need blood circulation and oxygen in the womb, right?”

Yes. We don't know that they necessarily breathe air, but we do know that they are dependent upon the mother's body for survival because the fetus stopped growing as fast, and didn't move around as much, when Bella herself was starving.

“Right, my thought exactly. So we know that if such a child was ever born, that the mother survived up until the birth. I mean, the child had time to chew its way out before the mother was dead for very long.

Yes... Carlisle responded hesitantly, not sure where I was going with all this.

“So, if we have blood available for transfusions, and we deliver the baby, rather than let it deliver itself, then it's likely that we could keep Bella alive long enough to get the thing out and change her.”

As long as her heart keeps beating. That's the critical point.

“That's what I'm getting at. If Bella's heart were to fail during the surgery, could venom repair it, do you think? If the venom were injected directly into her heart?”

That's an interesting question, Edward. In every case I have witnessed, the heart was still beating, even if only faintly, such as Esme's.

“But Esme's heart was beating just enough to push the venom through her system, right? And as more venom circulated, her heartbeat got stronger?”

Yes, that's true. Are you thinking of injecting Bella's heart directly with venom?

“That was my thought. If Bella's heart should fail, we could start her change by injecting her heart muscle immediately. If the venom repaired it then the entire transformation could continue.”

I don't know if venom can restart a still heart, but it's a very interesting idea to change the heart first, Edward. Injecting venom directly into the organ shouldn't hurt anything, except for the pain, of course, but Bella will either be unconscious from the anesthesia or on morphine to prepare for her change.

“Yes.

It would be best to deliver the child first, before using morphine, of course. We know the baby has a heartbeat, and an adult dosage of morphine might stop its heart.

“Of course.” Truly, I wasn’t thinking about whether the *thing* survived or not.

It sounds like a good idea. If you’re forced to change her to save her life, then it might speed up the process even.

I nodded. “That’s what I was hoping. If I were to store up venom for that purpose, how long do you think it would stay viable?”

That I couldn’t tell you. Human sperm has a refrigerated shelf-life of two day, but I wouldn’t trust five-year-old venom not to harm a human. Fresh is probably best in any case. To be certain, you could store it fresh every day or every other day and it would be there to use. We are getting close.

“And you’re going to get blood while you’re out?”

Yes.

“We’ve got to get Jasper out of here to hunt. I’m afraid Bella could be in danger soon. Rosalie should go too if she’s going to help with the surgery.”

We’ll leave as soon as Jacob gives the go-ahead. I don’t think I can convince Rosalie to go unless you do, though. Are you sure you shouldn’t hunt before the birth?

I shook my head no. I just couldn’t take the chance that she might be gone when I returned. I wouldn’t leave her now.

Jacob departed before dawn. I awakened him when I saw that Bella’s face had turned red. She was overheating next to his body. I sat down where he had been and held my arm around the top of her head to cool her down. He said silently that he was going to gather the pack and then the wolves would “run some spokes” to see if the way was clear for the family to go hunting.

“Thank you,” I said after seeing his plans. “If the route is clear, they’ll go today.”

“I’ll let you know.”

I nodded. When he had gone, I peeled the blanket off Bella and gently rolled her sweatshirt up her belly. Rosalie gave me the evil eye, but I didn’t acknowledge her.

The damage inside Bella was horrendous. I remembered how torn up I was on our honeymoon when I accidentally bruised Bella’s body while making love. That was nothing to

this. There was literally no ivory-colored skin on the front of her body between her breasts and pubis colored. When we taped her ribs, I'd seen that the bruising was the same on her back.

The bruise had the depth and quality of a life form. You could see slight variations in its color where some part of the creature's body had whacked her. The point of impact was purple, close to charcoal-colored. It faded by color...violet, red, green, yellow...as you looked outward from the point of impact. Most of what had been yellow was overlaid at least once with a newer contusion. As I watched, I saw a shark fin bulge appear and move a few inches across her lower belly before disappearing, an elbow, maybe. It might be kicking Bella to death, but it was certainly alive and well—whatever it was.

I jerked my head up. Rosalie must have said something, but it was garbled in my head.

"What did you say?" I asked, looking in her direction.

"I didn't say anything."

"What were you thinking about, then?"

"None of your beeswax. If you didn't hear, then I'm not telling you!"

I turned away, confused. By asking her the question, I caused Rosalie to reconsider her last thought, which was about holding the baby and feeding it with a bottle. A bottle of blood, no doubt! That's not what I heard, though. It must have been coming from somewhere else in the house. Or maybe Jacob was right that I was going crazy—now I was hearing voices and nonexistent thoughts. It didn't matter since—despite my optimism after talking with Carlisle—I didn't honestly expect to be around much longer. Let Rosalie have the creature! I couldn't love it if it killed my Bella.

How dramatic it all was. Shakespearean, almost.

The red heat was gone from Bella's face and I felt a little shiver run through her. Cold, again. I gently rolled the cotton fleece down over her abused body, trembling with anger and pain. I wrapped the blanket around her and went upstairs to our room. I should start stockpiling venom. It was something positive I could do, though I feared it wouldn't make any difference to the outcome.

How to proceed? Hmm. Coming upon a delicious-smelling Bella in a dark alley would stimulate the venom flow!

That thought bred the next—venom clinics, where vampires could donate for cash. Humans would peruse vampire biographies and choose the venom they wanted to purchase for that special occasion when they just *had* to make a vampire. Or they could inject themselves

with venom, thus creating the rare phenomenon of a vampire changing himself! I imagined what the magazines would look like in the donation cubicles. That did make me smile—grimly—but it was still an upward movement of the lips. I think it counted.

Ah, well. Contemplating “a delicious-smelling Bella” did actually make my mouth water. Crazy, that after all this time and everything we’d been through together I *still* craved her blood. I darted down to Carlisle’s office and rummaged through his medical equipment cart, since he’d stepped out somewhere. Then I heard his and Esme’s thoughts...they were sharing a “private walk” together somewhere outside. Not so private now, though....

I found what I was looking for—a sterile specimen jar. I unscrewed the lid and spit into it. That reminded me of a time some decades ago when Carlisle and I had examined his venom under a microscope. You could see activity in the cells. It was like they were all jammed in together, but still buzzing around at full speed, bumping into each other continuously. Venom was alive. We looked at mine for a comparison and it was the same, though with slightly more color. Maybe venom was like vampire skin, losing its tint as its owner grew older.

I worked up a few more drops, and then popped the jar into Carlisle’s mini-fridge. Refrigerating it seemed like the right thing to do. Perhaps freezing it with nitrogen would be better. Although Carlisle had collected a good stash of equipment for Bella, he hadn’t gone quite that far. He was like me, though—thorough.

Carlisle and I had had a very interesting conversation the previous evening about genetics. He was hoping, I think, that since this baby was coming, that I might develop a more positive attitude toward it. Or maybe he was a little excited about being a grandfather. If it turned out to be a two-headed monster, Dr. and Mrs. Cullen would be the perfect parents for it. And if it outlived Bella, I knew he and Esme (and maybe even Rosalie) would love it like I never could. But he’d been thinking about science.

Bella had made a comment after the creature nearly broke her back stretching that it reminded her of Jacob. Naturally, Jacob got bent-out-of-shape being compared to *it*, but Bella was referring to Jacob’s growth spurt a couple of years previously and how she’d watched him shoot up right before her eyes. I’d been away during that time, and when Bella and I came back to Forks from Italy, I hadn’t recognized Jacob right away. He’d grown a good seven or eight inches and resembled a bodybuilder, though when I first met him, he’d looked like a regular teenager.

Carlisle had been considering other similarities between Jacob and the fetus. Not only did they both grow at accelerated rates, Alice couldn’t see the futures of either of them. Being inside of Bella, the fetus even blocked Alice’s view of Bella’s future.

Then there was the chromosomal issue. Humans have twenty-three pairs of chromosomes and we have twenty-five. What if the combination of Bella and myself produced offspring with twenty-four chromosomes? Was that possible? Carlisle seemed to think so. He cited an example from his most recent spate of research.

	Chromosomes
Donkey	62
Horse	64
Hybrid	63

Vampires and humans have an analogous relationship with regard to their number of chromosomes.

	Chromosomes
Human (Bella)	23
Vampire (Me)	25
Shape shifter (Jacob)	24

Was it possible that our offspring would have the same number of chromosomes as the wolves? If so, would it be a werewolf? A shape shifter? Another type of creature with 24 chromosomes? A male donkey and a female horse produce a *mule*. A female donkey and a male horse produce a *hinny*, which has the same number of chromosomes as the mule and looks similar, but is a different animal with different traits. That means that Bella and I could produce something that looks like a “Jacob,” but isn’t the same.

Could a child of ours grow up to be a shape shifter of some kind? *My gawd, wouldn't that be amazing?* If so, I hoped that it wouldn't be a wolf—way too much drama involved in the whole pack phenomenon. And frankly, imprinting was a little frightening, though I could easily see how imprinting would be a blessing for Jacob. There was no point in both of us going down with the mother ship. (That might have been an amusing metaphor under different circumstances.) If he could just meet the right “someone,” he would heal.

It no longer seemed coincidental that, other than vampire teeth, wolf teeth were the only known means of tearing vampire skin. That meant Jacob or any other wolf would be physically able to extract the offspring of a vampire and human, which might be a genetic match to itself. Some mules were fertile. Likewise, the “mutant spawn” could be reproductively compatible with the wolf.

Well before dawn, I was seated at Bella's feet when she woke with a shriek, which she instantly throttled by clenching her jaw. I started—a rare occurrence since only my wife is truly able to surprise me. Bella sat rigid, gripping her muscles to avoid movement. I hollered for Carlisle, but he was there already.

“I heard a bone break, Carlisle! My darling, where are you hurt?”

She couldn't breathe yet for fear of moving a muscle and repeating the horrible, stabbing pain. Her eyes stared at me, wide and frightened.

“Bella, I'm going to pick you up and carry you upstairs, okay?”

She nodded in a tiny motion. I could tell as I lifted and carried her that she was struggling not to scream.

Rosalie followed us up the stairs. “I didn't hear any bones break. Where are you hurting, Bella?”

Bella moved one index finger and pointed in the general area of her lower groin.

“Pelvis, Carlisle?”

“Yes, that's my guess.”

I bent over with the greatest care to lay her down on the examining table without jostling any of her previously broken bones. Her face turned white and her jaw was clenched tightly closed.

“Bella, are you still feeling a stabbing pain or a more generalized pain?”

“First stab...then...” she moved her finger in a circle, indicating “general.”

“If it’s broken, we’ll make sure it’s not perforating anything.”

“Ba...by?” she panted.

“I don’t think one of your bones could hurt the baby inside its protective membrane.”

She nodded and closed her eyes while I positioned her and Carlisle positioned the X-ray scanner. When we examined the films, we couldn’t find the break.

“See, I *told* you I didn’t hear a crack. You need your ears checked, Edward.”

I did not look at Rosalie. What she thought meant nothing to me. Bella was all that I cared about. But I did hear the conversation downstairs between Alice and Jacob, who had just returned. Rosalie either didn’t hear or chose to ignore it.

“Edward’s going to end up ripping Rose into small pieces, I think. I’m surprised she doesn’t see that. Or maybe she thinks Emmett will be able to stop him,” Alice said.

“I’ll take Emmett. You can help Edward with the ripping part,” Jacob replied.

I appreciated the support. But nobody, with the possible exception of Emmett, could alter Rosalie’s direction or behavior.

I took Bella back to the couch and laid her down as gently as I possibly could.

“Jake,” Bella whispered, when she saw him.

Jacob was wondering why we didn’t leave her upstairs near the medical equipment. He guessed correctly that Bella didn’t want that. She was absolutely determined to pretend she was “fine.” Whatever she wanted at this point she would get—whatever made her happy. I would deal with any fallout later.

Doc’s looking bad.

I glanced at my father. Jacob was right. Carlisle was showing the strain. Though battling a serious thirst, his primary concern was for Bella. The blood supply had dwindled and the wolves were preventing him from acquiring more. Bella gulped it down even now. If the kicker survived, who knew how much it would require?

“Carlisle,” Jacob said, “we went halfway to Seattle. There’s no sign of the pack. You’re good to go.” My father’s shoulders dropped in relief.

“If you think so. Alice, Esme, Jasper, and I will go. Then Alice can take Emmett and Rosa—”

“Not a chance,” Rosalie snarled. “Emmett can go with you now.”

“You should hunt,” Carlisle advised.

“I’ll hunt when *he* does,” she snarled, referring to me.

I wasn’t sure what she thought I would do in her absence. It’s not like I could flush the little killer down the toilet.

She’s going as insane as me. At least she was invested in Bella’s welfare—for now. If she weren’t, I might have already killed her.

“Thank you,” Carlisle said to Jacob. He summoned the family and they all rushed out to hunt, except for myself and Rosalie. Everyone was hurting.

Jacob probably would have left too except that the perfect opportunity for harassing Rosalie had presented itself and he couldn’t resist. He sat in the lounge chair next to her and dangled his smelly human feet in the area where she was sitting.

“Ew. Someone put the dog out,” Rosalie complained, wrinkling her nose.

“Have you heard this one, Psycho? How do a blonde’s brain cells die?”

Rosalie ignored him.

“Has she heard it?” he asked me and I shook my head.

“Awesome. So you’ll enjoy this, bloodsucker—a blonde’s brain cells die *alone*.”

I was too absorbed in worrying about Bella’s breaking bones to get caught up in Jacob and Rosalie’s ongoing feud. I was sure that I’d heard something snap inside of her even though the X-rays didn’t confirm it. I watched her face for signs of the pain that she was trying to conceal and listened carefully for a repeat of whatever it was I’d heard before.

Rosalie spoke without looking at Jacob. “I have killed a hundred times more often than you have, you disgusting beast. Don’t forget that.”

“Someday, Beauty Queen, you’re going to get tired of just threatening me. I’m really looking forward to that.”

“Enough, Jacob,” Bella reproved him, scowling.

“You want me to take off?” Jacob offered.

Bella blinked in surprise. “No! Of course not.” Her expression was filled with so much shock and dismay that both Jacob and I felt stabs of pain.

Rosalie went upstairs to get Bella more blood and the room became quiet. In that silence, measured only by our breaths, I heard something—an expression of contentment, or even bliss—with no words associated with it.

“Did you say something?” I asked Bella, though I knew she hadn’t.

Bella looked at me oddly. “Me? I didn’t say anything.”

There was something there, for certain. Was I finally—at long last—hearing my wife’s thoughts?? Was I beginning to penetrate the mental barrier that existed between us? I rose to my knees and looked directly into her face.

“What are you thinking about right now?” She looked at me like she didn’t recognize me.

“Nothing. What’s going on?”

“What were you thinking about a minute ago?” I asked, excited.

“Just...Esme’s Island. And feathers.” Bella blushed the beautiful pink of our courtship days.

Ah, yes, something blissful indeed. And there it was again, following right *behind* Bella’s words. If it were her thoughts I was hearing, wouldn’t they be identifiable at precisely the *moment* she spoke, not afterwards? Something else was happening, something...magnificent?

“Say something else,” I whispered to my wife. I listened, anticipating...

“Like what? Edward, what’s going on?”

There it was...bliss...joy! I placed my hands on Bella’s huge belly and then... I knew. Jacob and the returning Rosalie gasped as I leaned in close and listened intently to the silent air. It was still there.

“The fe—...it...the *baby* likes the sound of your voice,” I said to Bella, grinning in sudden understanding. There was *humanity* in there, inside the destruction of my beloved wife’s body. Carlisle had been right. This was something special, something *magical*. Shocked silence reigned for a second, then...

"Holy crow, you can hear him!" Bella yelped.

The thi—...baby jumped in surprise, kicking his mother and Bella winced. I massaged the area to calm both him and her.

"Shh," I warned Bella quietly. "You startled it...him." I was stunned, fascinated, and enthralled all at once. The baby's "voice" was unique, undeveloped, but clear in its intense...what? Love. That was it. Love and adoration.

"Sorry, baby," Bella crooned, patting the side of her bulge.

"What's he thinking now?" she asked excitedly.

"It...he or she, is..." I looked into Bella's eyes, marveling at this stunning, precious moment we were sharing.

"He's *happy*," I said in disbelief. I could see the joy and relief in Bella's eyes as tears spilled down her cheeks and over her lips. My amazing wife who had faith, who always had had faith, in what I did not.

"Of course you're happy, pretty baby, of course you are," Bella soothed as she massaged the child through her skin. "How could you not be, all safe and warm and loved? I love you so much, little EJ, of course you're happy."

"What did you call him?"

Bella blushed again.

"I sort of named him. I didn't think you would want...well, you know," she said shyly.

"EJ?" I asked.

"Your father's name was Edward, too."

"Yes, it was. What—?" The baby had reacted when I spoke, responding with bursts of emotion. A little like Charlie, actually, though the emotion was joyful. "Hmm..."

"What?"

"He likes my voice, too."

"Of course he does. You have the most beautiful voice in the universe. Who wouldn't love it?"

This was *my child* inside Bella. Part of me. Part of her. He already knew both of us and Bella knew him, but I did not. I was mesmerized. I wanted to learn more.

While I was listening to EJ—“Edward Jacob,” a true family name—Rosalie and Bella talked about girls’ names. Bella had thought all of this through, of course. I had not been there for her to talk to about it. I had not shared her anticipation, her joy, over carrying this living testament to our love. It was beating her up, draining her of life, but not in a malicious way. Bella was right—he was just too strong for her human body and he could not stay in there much longer. It was cramped and tight...suffocating almost. I sensed that strongly.

Every time Bella spoke, the baby’s mind hummed. I listened more carefully, trying to translate the feelings into words.

“What?” Bella asked eagerly. “What’s he thinking now?” Emotion glowed from him at the question.

I laid my ear close and felt him respond happily to my touch through Bella’s skin. Finally, I found the words.

“He loves you,” I murmured, surprised by the intensity of it. “He absolutely *adores* you.”

I was lost in this new world, the world where I could be the father of Bella’s child, a child who could communicate with me from inside her womb. It was a miracle, not something I had dreamed in my wildest imaginings. I remembered a day—it seemed like forever ago—when I was wishing to Bella that Charlie’s assumption about our abrupt marriage announcement had been true. I’d wished that she had been pregnant, that we had that kind of potential, that I wouldn’t be taking the chance of motherhood away from Bella by marrying her. My wish, which had been just a fantasy to me, was granted, and I hadn’t understood the miracle. I hadn’t seen it for what it was: my most implausible dreams come true. I was filled with wonder and thanksgiving at this gift my wife was giving me...suffering so very much...to give me. And I had treated it like a curse. Suddenly, I wanted them *both* to live. I wanted us all to be together.

Just then, Jacob, whom I’d forgotten was there, leaped to his feet and my attention was drawn to his silent voice.

“Ahh...,” I moaned, when the force of his pain hit me—the overwhelming, irredeemable love of my wife. It struck like a lash, whipping and tearing through my joy.

Jacob had to get away, to run, to escape this rending of his soul. And I owed him. Inspired by Carlisle, who’d once rescued me from similar pain, I seized the keys to my Aston Martin from a drawer and tossed them to Jacob. He snatched them out of the air.

“Go, Jacob. Get away from here.” He needed a distraction, some kind of release, or better yet, a miracle.

He went looking for magic.

17. UNDIVIDED

Rosalie and Bella stared at Jacob's fleeing back and then at me as the kitchen door slammed. Inside Bella, the baby started at the loud noise.

"Ow." Bella grimaced.

"Well...?" *What was that about?* Rosalie wondered, regarding Jacob's sudden departure.

"He needed a drive," I answered simply. No point in giving Rose personal ammunition to fire at Jacob later.

My attention was riveted here. I had heard the baby early that morning, I realized. The snap I thought was Bella's bone breaking had been audible, but only in my head. It was the sound of the baby kicking his mother from the *inside*—the thump of the blow as he heard it inside his watery echo chamber.

So within the time span of a very few minutes, I had gone from not hearing the child to hearing it. I wondered what had changed in it or in me that finally made that possible. Was it the beginning of language acquisition on the baby's part or a change in my awareness?

"Tell me again the girl's name you chose for the baby?" I asked Bella.

"Reesmee, a combination of Renee and Esme," Bella replied. "What do you think?"

I considered for a moment. "It's a fine name. Like Rosalie said, a unique name for a unique child. And Edward Jacob for a boy. Would you call him EJ officially?"

"Yes, I think so, to distinguish his name from yours," Bella said. "Is that all right?"

"Seems rather appropriate. Do you really believe it's a boy?"

"You know, I've had dreams about this child since our honeymoon and he's always been a boy."

"You must have conceived on our wedding night, Bella," I said, ignoring Rosalie who turned on the television and turned away.

"Yes," Bella whispered, "remember I fell asleep on top of you?"

I smiled. "Twice, as I recall. I remember perfectly—child's pose."

“No wonder I conceived,” she whispered again, a blush coloring her cheeks. This conversation ought to make Rosalie leave us alone. I should have thought of the tactic two weeks ago!

“Bella, I think the child is ready to be born. I can feel his mind. He’s learned to associate kicking and sharp movements with your expressions of pain.” Rosalie’s ears perked up immediately. “He’s trying not to do those things, but he’s just too big for your body. I think he would be fine if we delivered him. His brain seems highly developed and he’s definitely getting cramped. Our baby’s gestational period must be shorter than the human, nine-month equivalent.”

“You think the baby is ready?”

“Yes, I do. We don’t know what the baby’s signal for ‘ready’ would be if left to nature, but if it’s developed enough, which I think it is, we could deliver him or her safely now through a C-section. What do you think about delivering the baby sooner than forty centimeters?”

“You’re sure?” Rosalie interrupted.

I knelt down beside Bella again and put my ear to her belly. I could hear the baby better when I was very close. That was different. Maybe I was just learning its voice.

“I’m about as sure as I can be,” I replied. “As soon as I grow familiar with his voice, I’ll be able to keep tabs on him during the delivery, like a baby monitor.”

“I feel it too,” Bella said. “There’s no room for him to stretch or move in there. I’m so tight already, I don’t think he can grow much more inside of me. What do you think, Rose?”

“I think you should trust your instincts. Do we know when Carlisle will be back?” Rosalie asked.

“Before the four days that Carlisle predicted Bella would need, but hunting should take only one day.”

We’re back. The thought had been directed at me.

“Alice and Jasper are near. They’ll tell us,” I told Rosalie. I put my ear to my wife’s belly as if it were a telephone receiver. She was absolutely beaming.

I’d been feeling so helpless since we found out Bella was pregnant, but that was starting to change. If we delivered the baby soon, we could stop waiting for its growth to kill her. And we should be able to get the baby out safely. Carlisle had done a lot of C-sections. Tearing

through the protective membrane was an added complication, but it seemed straightforward, and it shouldn't tax Bella's heart any more than the incisions.

"Hey, everybody," Alice greeted us, coming in the kitchen door with Jasper close behind. "How's Trix?"

"Trix is fine," Bella croaked. "Edward can hear the baby!"

"You can?" Alice was skeptical.

"Yes, I started hearing him early this morning. He's further advanced than we thought. When are Carlisle and Esme getting back?"

"Tomorrow around noon," replied Alice. "We brought some blood back with us, but Carlisle wanted to find more, so he and Esme went to Seattle. Emmett's still hunting, Rose. He wanted to find a bear, but he should be back tonight."

"Good."

"Bella, shall I call Carlisle and tell him we want him to deliver the baby early?"

"I think so, Edward," Bella said. Rosalie nodded in agreement as she took the insulated bag of blood from Alice and headed upstairs with it.

"You're going to deliver when Carlisle gets back?" Alice asked hopefully.

"Yes," Bella responded.

"That's great! I'll be happier when I can see your future again, Bella. I suppose the baby's future will be blank like Jacob's, though. Okay, I have to get out of here now. Come on, Jaz." Alice tugged on Jasper's arm.

"So, I'm going to be an uncle," Jasper said as he started to follow Alice before turning back toward us. "I used to be an uncle, a long time ago. I always thought I would be a father someday. Looks like this is as close as I'll get. Congratulations, both of you!"

I felt myself smile at the prospect. This was the first time that becoming a father had seemed like an actual possibility—a good one, at any rate.

Leah's wolf mind suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

"Bella, darling, Leah is here. I'm going to go talk to her, okay? Here's Rose to stay with you for a few minutes." Bella smiled and nodded and I headed to the front door. Leah, the wolf, was standing near the trees at the edge of the clearing.

“Hello, Leah, what’s going on?”

Where’s Jacob? Was that him burning rubber in that fancy car?

“Yes, He went for a drive.”

Why?

“We were having a family moment in the house and it upset him.”

The wolf’s hackles rose. *Hold on. I’ll be right back.* Leah moved backwards into the woods, keeping her eyes on me. In a moment, she returned to the clearing in her human form, dressed, but barefoot. She began walking toward me at a quick pace. When she was close, she said, “I want to speak to Bella.”

“Speak to Bella?” I questioned. Leah continued right past me into the house. I followed, uncertain.

“Bella,” she called when she entered the living room. Bella was propped up on the couch with Rosalie behind her.

“Hello, Leah—” Bella began.

“It’s time for you to take your claws out of Jacob. You’re killing him with all this ‘Jacob, you’re my family,’ and ‘Jacob, come back soon,’ and so on and so forth. You’re married and hugely pregnant, no less, and you still expect him to be at your beck and call. He can’t have you, so why do you keep torturing him? Stick with your husband and leave him alone!”

I stepped in, took Leah by the elbow, and marched her to the front door. How *dare* she upset Bella when she was so fragile? I wanted to smack her back to the forest, but I held my temper—with effort.

Leah clenched her hands and pressed her lips on our way outside. When we reached the porch, I shut the door behind me and said in a low, controlled voice, “We appreciate everything you are doing for our family. We are extremely grateful for your help, but you are not allowed to speak to my wife like that, ever. In fact, I would appreciate it if you didn’t speak to her at all at this time.”

Leah jerked her arm away and headed into the forest.

“Jacob will be back soon, I’m sure,” I muttered. Leah didn’t acknowledge me.

Furious, I rushed into the house to find Rosalie sitting on the arm of the couch holding Bella. Tears flooded my wife’s cheeks.

"I'm s...sorry, Edward," she began when I entered the room. "I know I'm..."

I dropped at her knees and wrapped my hands around her calves, one place that she was not bruised.

"Shhh...shh...darling, it's okay, there's nothing for you to worry about. I am *fine*. Do you hear me? Fine. And Jacob is fine, too."

"I j...just feel that he's p...part of our family. He *is* my family," Bella sniffled, her tears still flowing swiftly. Wisely, for once, Rosalie kept her mouth shut.

"Of course he is, Bella. He always will be. Leah had no right."

"Rose, help me lie down?" I lifted her feet and legs and Rosalie supported her back while we pivoted her to a prone position. Rosalie tucked a cushion under her head. I put a quilt over her and held her hand. I could hear the child inside of Bella wonder at the new sounds coming from its *her*. Bella shut her eyes and soon was breathing evenly, her heart rate returning to normal...slightly fast.

"Those damn wolves," Rosalie muttered under her breath.

"Better be careful, Rose," Alice called softly from upstairs. "The baby might be closely related to 'those damn wolves...'"

"What is she talking about?" Rosalie demanded.

"Alice could be right. Carlisle and I are conjecturing that the baby will have twenty-four chromosomes, splitting the difference between human and vampire. We know that Jacob has twenty-four chromosomes and we assume that the other wolves do too. Or rather, the other shape-shifters, which is a more accurate description of what they are."

"The *baby* might be a wolf??" Rosalie was mortified.

"Not necessarily. It might be genetically related to the wolf without having the wolf-gene 'trigger.'"

"Well, I hope he doesn't want to tear his father apart!"

"Me too," I said ruefully. *I'd certainly wanted to do away with him.*

I went to call Carlisle and then to store more venom.

The day dragged on. Bella was both ecstatically happy and in a great deal of pain. It was nerve-racking waiting for the delivery, but I was glad that Bella and I were on the same side again as far as the baby was concerned. She'd believed in him all along and now I did too.

After Bella ate a little dinner and fell asleep again, I went to Carlisle's office to make sure it was ready for the baby's delivery. I covered everything in white sheets, set up the bright lights, the heart monitor, laid out syringes—large for the venom and smaller for morphine—scalpel, clamps, scissors, gauze, and linens, and covered all of that in sterile plastic sheeting. We had six pints of blood left in the mini-fridge. It should be enough for two days.

I would have preferred that Carlisle come home tonight. Our window of opportunity for the delivery was narrow. If we waited too long, Bella was sure to be injured again. If she was injured badly enough, she could hemorrhage and.... I rejected the thought.

On the phone, I'd asked Carlisle to come back right away, telling him our news and that we'd all agreed it was time to deliver. He had a couple of stops he wanted to make in Seattle before coming home, though. His point was that Bella would soon finish off the blood supply and we wouldn't have any left in case she needed transfusions to keep her going during surgery. And after the baby was born, he was likely to drink blood at an accelerated rate as he grew. We needed to be prepared to feed him donated blood until we could wean him onto animal blood or mother's milk, or human food.

Carlisle didn't want to leave home again to acquire more blood after the baby was born. He thought it would be safer if he remained available for an extended period of time after the birth to monitor both mother and child. There wasn't a doctor anywhere more qualified than Carlisle to do that and we couldn't take the baby to a hospital if something went wrong. So Carlisle and Esme would stay to get more blood. He might have to go as far south as Tacoma if he couldn't buy enough in Seattle.

I heard Jacob's voice from the main road. He was bringing the car back... good...he hadn't rammed it into a tree...also good. I hadn't been sure what he would do, but as a lover of fine automobiles it might actually have hurt him to crash an Aston Martin Vanquish. It was a classic beauty not often seen on the road.

Jacob had not found what he was half-heartedly looking for—a magical way out of his pain. I wished I could do something for him, but I didn't know what. And now I had to make even more demands of him and ask for more favors. I did not relish the prospect.

I checked to see that Bella was asleep under Rosalie's watchful eye. When she woke up, she preferred having Rose take her to the bathroom over me, something about "maintaining the romance." I loved my wife—beyond all measure did I love my wife—and the romance was

not dead for me, only postponed. I was starting to see the possibility for a new life beyond this day, this week. It would be unpredictable (except for Alice, perhaps), but as long as Bella was there, it would be wonderful.

I made my way out the kitchen door and back to the family garage to wait for Jacob. Unlike me, he was in despair of things ever getting better. He was imagining a desolate future for himself, but even so, was starting to make his peace with it. Possibly he and Leah would form a pack of two. They did have some deep feelings in common, so perhaps she could be a friend to him. I was still furious at her for endangering Bella's peace of mind and her health as well, but someone who would risk what she did—walking into the vampire's den and defending Jacob's happiness so fiercely—must be a good friend to him, must care about him.

As soon as he killed the engine, I spoke. "A few things, Jacob." He unfolded himself from the car slowly; Jacob was one big man. He tossed me the keys.

"Thanks for the loan," he said begrudgingly. What he thought was: *What do you want now?*

He was right. I *would* ask for the favor to be repaid—two- or threefold, probably. First things first, though.

"I won't let Bella be upset like that again. I don't care how justified Leah thinks she is! I didn't hurt her—of course I wouldn't—but I'll throw her out of the house if it happens again. I'll launch her right across the river—"

"Hold on. What did she say?"

I breathed in once, trying to get control of my fury. I forced my voice to be calm.

"Leah was unnecessarily harsh. I'm not going to pretend that I understand why Bella is unable to let go of you, but I do know that she does not behave this way to hurt you. She suffers a great deal over the pain she's inflicting on you, and on me, by asking you to stay. What Leah said was uncalled for. Bella's been crying—"

He cut me off in disbelief.

"Wait—Leah was yelling at Bella about *me*?"

"You were quite vehemently championed," I assured him.

"I didn't ask her to do that." Jacob was surprised.

"I know."

"I can't promise to control Leah. I won't do that. But I'll talk to her, okay? And I don't think there'll be a repeat. Leah's not one to hold back, so she probably got it all off her chest today."

"I would say so."

"Anyway, I'll talk to Bella about it, too. She doesn't need to feel bad. This one's on me," he promised. "Is she okay?"

"She's...better in some ways. Aside from Leah's tirade and the resulting guilt."

Better. Because you're hearing the monster and everything is all love-dovey now. Fantastic, Jacob thought.

"It's a bit more than that," I told him. "Now that I can make out the child's thoughts, it's apparent that he or she has remarkably developed mental faculties. He can understand us, to an extent."

Jacob's jaw dropped. "Are you *serious*?"

"Yes. He seems to have a vague sense of what hurts her now. He's trying to avoid that, as much as possible. He...*loves* her. Already. The progress, I believe is more than we'd judged. When Carlisle returns—"

"They're not back?" Jacob interrupted, concerned that Sam's pack might be planning something.

"Alice and Jasper are. Carlisle sent all the blood he was able to acquire, but it wasn't as much as he was hoping for—Bella will use up this supply in another day the way her appetite has grown. Carlisle stayed to try another source. I don't think that's necessary now, but he wants to be covered for any eventuality."

"Why isn't it necessary? If she needs more?"

I addressed the next item. Jacob wasn't going to take this one well.

"I'm trying to persuade Carlisle to deliver the baby as soon as he is back."

"What?"

"The child seems to be attempting to avoid rough movements, but it's difficult. He's become too big. It's madness to wait, when he's clearly developed beyond what Carlisle had guessed. Bella's too fragile to delay."

I saw the words hit him like a physical blow. He believed, as I had previously, that Bella would die during the delivery. He stared at me, gaping. Then I saw a light in his eyes as he recognized the implication I was making.

“You think she’s going to make it,” he whispered.

“Yes. That was the other thing I wanted to talk to you about.” I waited for Jacob to respond, but he remained silent, stunned.

I went on. “Yes. Waiting as we have been, for the child to be ready, that was insanely dangerous. At any moment it could have been too late. But if we’re proactive about this, if we act quickly, I see no reason why it should not go well. Knowing the child’s mind is unbelievably helpful. Thankfully, Bella and Rose agree with me. Now that I’ve convinced them it’s safe for the child if we proceed, there’s nothing to keep this from working.”

“When will Carlisle be back?” he asked apprehensively.

“By noon tomorrow.”

I felt his grief rise like a tidal wave, threatening to overtake him. He had been depending on those extra days with Bella and now I was telling him that his beloved *human* Bella would be gone in less than a day. To him, she soon would be dead. He was staggered...and heartbroken.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I am truly sorry for the pain this causes you, Jacob. Though you hate me, I must admit that I don’t feel the same about you. I think of you as a...a brother in many ways. A comrade in arms, at the very least. I regret your suffering more than you realize. But Bella *is* going to survive,” I said fiercely, willing it to be so, “and I know that’s what really matters to you.”

All of this honesty was preparatory to asking him for another favor. I was willing to beg. I had no pride when it came to my Bella. Whatever she needed, I would sacrifice whatever I had, whatever I was, to get it for her. And she needed this. *We* needed this. Indeed, my whole family needed it.

“So I hate to do this now, while you’re already dealing with too much, but, clearly, there is little time. I have to ask you for something—to beg, if I must.”

“I don’t have anything left.” The words barely made it past the grief that was choking him. I hurt for him. I reached out to support him, but thought better of it. He wouldn’t want that. Not from me.

“I know how much you have given,” I acknowledged. “But this is something you *do* have, and only you. I’m asking this of the true Alpha, Jacob. I’m asking this of Ephraim’s heir.”

He didn't know what I was asking. I continued when he didn't respond.

"I want your permission to deviate from what we agreed to in our treaty with Ephraim. I want you to grant us an exception. I want your permission to save her life. You know I'll do it anyway, but I don't want to break faith with you if there is any way to avoid it. We never intended to go back on our word, and we don't do it lightly now. I want your understanding, Jacob, because you know exactly why we do this. I want the alliance between our families to survive when this is over."

Jacob reacted immediately by deferring to Sam, as leader of the Quileute pack. But not only did I believe Sam wouldn't grant us the exception, I thought Jacob would. And Jacob was the true heir to the treaty—not the son of Joshua Uley.

It's not my decision, he thought, scrambling for a way to refute his authority.

"It is, Jacob, and you know it. Your word on this will condemn us or absolve us. Only you can give this to me."

Jacob was fraught. He didn't see how he could grant permission to change Bella into something he loathed, into one of the "enemies." It went against everything in him. He could not answer me.

"We don't have much time," I pressed. Now that Rose and Bella had agreed, I knew that if Bella took a turn for the worse, I would move to deliver the child immediately, with or without Carlisle. Both Rosalie and I had studied medicine—I out of intellectual curiosity and esteem for Carlisle's calling, and she to help Carlisle keep up with advancements—and I thought she would be a good surgical assistant in a pinch, as long as she was willing...and now I believed that she was.

Jacob was trying to absorb the last blow and he needed time to close the wound. He began walking toward the house and I followed. He was surprised at himself, how little it bothered him now to walk side-by-side with me, his sworn enemy. We might be on opposite sides of an ancient feud, but in this particular case, we both wanted the same thing—Bella's survival. I thought I knew Jacob well enough by now to believe that he would grant me his dispensation. But not just yet.

I heard the rattling sound of a straw sucking at empty air and dashed into the house ahead of Jacob.

"Bella, love, I thought you were sleeping. I'm sorry, I wouldn't have left."

“Don’t worry. I just got so thirsty—it woke me up. It’s a good thing Carlisle is bringing more. This kid is going to need it when he gets out of me.”

“True. That’s a good point.” It was, actually. Who knew how much the kid would drink as he got larger *outside* of his mother? Carlisle needed to get more blood. It mattered to me suddenly, because I now had an interest in saving the child too.

“I wonder if he’ll want anything else.”

“I suppose we’ll find out.”

Then Jacob stepped into the room and my wife beamed at him, thrilled to see him again. I felt the familiar stabbing pain in my heart. Bella’s look lasted for only a second, though, before her face collapsed into an uncontrolled mass of twitching muscles as she tried to hold back her tears.

“Hey, Bells,” Jacob interjected. “How ya doing?”

“I’m fine,” she murmured.

“Big day today, huh? Lots of new stuff.”

“You don’t have to do that, Jacob.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, coming over to sit near us on the arm of the couch.

Bella didn’t believe him. “I’m so s—”

Jacob halted her words by holding her lips together with two fingers, making her look silly.

“Jake,” she tried to say between his fingers.

“You can talk when you stop being stupid,” he said.

“Fine,” she mumbled, “ah wa sa ah...,” which meant, I think, “I won’t say it.”

Jacob let go.

“Sorry,” she blurted out, then grinned. Jacob rolled his eyes and grinned back, and their equilibrium was restored.

Jacob was thinking about how Bella was not only the love of his life, but also his best friend. Someone who knew him better than anyone else did. Someone who loved him and

whom he loved. He could not find it in his heart to give that up for a principle that seemed increasingly irrelevant in the present time. Our clans had begun to mix. Seth was like a son to me, Jacob like a brother, and I would always be grateful to Sam for having saved Bella when I left her crumpled in the woods a year ago. Billy Black was a good man. The wolves were our allies.

Jacob sighed heavily as he weighed all of this.

Fine! Go ahead. Save her, he barked at me silently in his mind. As Ephraim's heir, you have my permission, my word, that this will not violate the treaty. The others will just have to blame me. You were right—they can't deny that it's my right to agree to this.

"Thank you," I whispered softly so Bella couldn't hear me. But my gratitude was utterly sincere, utterly heartfelt. There wasn't anything I could think of at that moment that I wouldn't do for Jacob, if he let me, but I knew he wouldn't accept anything from me. Except Bella, obviously.

18. BIRTH AND DEATH

When Jacob granted his permission, through his birthright, for me to change Bella, I was moved beyond words. It was the *last* thing he ever would have wanted for her...except, as it turned out, that she die altogether. He knew that I would never let her die if I had any power to prevent it, so Jacob's choice was to not declare war on the tribe's hereditary enemies. We would be aligned with the Quileute even more closely than before, with Bella as our point of connection. Rosalie and Alice, who'd joined us when Jacob came in, stared at me, sensing the depth of my emotion. They didn't know what it meant and at that moment, I couldn't tell them.

Bella and Jacob were shooting the breeze, engaging in small talk to smooth things over between them after Leah's outburst...a drive...the park...good, good. All pleasant and ordinary things.

And then...and then...I can't say exactly what happened. No, that's not true. I could say, but I never want to relive the horror that I witnessed in those next seconds...blood spilling...the scream, the horrifying scream...the ripping, cleaving, rending inside her...blood gushing, flowing, spewing into the air.

That's when the terror tore through me...I couldn't breathe...I was going to die! I must get out...claw, kick, bite...!

Then I shook myself as I saw my wife's body jumping, jerking, and flopping around in Rosalie's arms. But there was no Bella...she was unconscious. It was the baby! The baby couldn't breathe! He was suffocating...and Bella would die! Her bones snapped like twigs, I could hear them one after another as the baby struggled to fight its way out.

Rosalie raced up the stairs with the two of them in her arms, blood flowing behind her on the staircase, dripping down, red on white, crimson on beige, the furniture, our clothing, nothing mattered now...nothing, but getting him out and keeping her heart beating.

Rosalie was yelling instructions. "She's convulsing! The baby's going to die! We have to get him out!"

"Anesthesia first!" I shouted, horrified by the idea of cutting into Bella's sensible flesh, not to mention all the bones that continued to snap.

"No! She's unconscious. There's no time!"

"Morphine!" I hollered at Rosalie.

“Alice—get Carlisle on the phone!” she screamed in reply.

Rosalie laid Bella on the table and tore her clothes out of the way to reveal the black and blue mountain. The bulge was jumping and jerking, tossing Bella’s body around as Rose tried to hold her down. I grabbed the smaller syringe filled with morphine that I had set up earlier. Thank God in Heaven, I had prepared!

I stabbed the syringe into Bella’s arm. It would take at least thirty seconds for the morphine to spread enough to make even the tiniest bit of difference. It wouldn’t keep Bella from suffering. She’d feel the scalpel.

“What’s *happening*, Edward?”

Rosalie wanted me to focus on the baby while my wife was dying in her arms. “He’s suffocating!”

“The placenta must have detached!” she screamed.

Bella snapped awake at these words, like their meaning had retrieved her from another world. Her strength of will was impossible...impossible.

“Get him OUT!” Bella screamed. “He can’t BREATHE! Do it NOW!” Blood vessels in her eyes popped one after another under the force of her straining.

“The morphine—,” I growled at Rosalie. She must wait with the scalpel...wait a little longer.

“NO! NOW—!” Bella screamed again before a river of blood spewed out through her mouth and silenced her.

The baby was battering her insides, causing massive hemorrhaging. It was a vampire’s dream, this scent...*heavenly scent...to drink...drink...flowing...drink ...*

Bella’s choking snapped me back. The blood in her throat was blocking her airway, suffocating her. I turned her head to the side and drained the blood onto the floor.

Alice darted into the room and attached the telephone headset to Rosalie’s ear before darting back out away from the gore. Rose started explaining the situation to Carlisle in short, frantic hisses. Then she picked up a scalpel and held it aloft near the bottom of Bella’s bulge.

“Let the morphine spread!” I yelled at her.

“There’s no time,” she hissed. “He’s dying!”

She jammed the scalpel into Bella's abdomen and opened the floodgates. The blood poured out like Niagara Falls. The blood supply between mother and baby had torn away and all that vital life force was running into the cavity of her body. It was bright, glowing red, full of oxygen. It was a red, flooding, Mississippi River, spreading wide across the table, and pouring onto the floor in a dozen separate rivulets. I fought to keep my concentration on helping Bella to breathe. I held her head up to prevent gravity from draining the flood through her throat. It wouldn't clear...it *wouldn't* clear!

Then I saw Rosalie's eyes change from clear black to glassy. Her lips pulled away from her teeth. She was losing control!

"No, Rose!" I cried in desperation, still trying to clear the blood. Until that moment, I'd been unaware of Jacob's presence in the room. He had followed us in and was watching the horror from behind the table on the far side of the room.

Before I could kick Rose away from Bella, Jacob soared across the table like a seven-foot Superman, aiming directly for Rosalie. She stabbed him in the arm as he gripped her face with his gigantic right hand and swung her off the ground. As her feet flew out from under her, he planted his foot in her stomach like he was kicking a field goal. She flew across the room and smashed into the doorway. Alice's hands appeared from around the corner and latched onto Rosalie's throat.

"Alice, get her out of here!" I yelled. "Take her to Jasper and *keep* her there!"

Bella needed air! Her throat hadn't cleared fully, and as her body continued to flop around on the table, her face was turning blue, her eyes wide and staring. She must be terrified—and in agony! The baby had to come out before it pulverized her insides.

"Jacob, I need you!" I yelled. I saw him pull the scalpel from his arm. "CPR?" *Please let him know CPR!*

He nodded.

*Please, God, keep her alive. Please keep her alive long enough...*The silent prayers ran through my head in a continuous loop, begging God yet again for one more miracle on our behalf. No, two more. I wanted them *both* to live!

"Get her breathing! I've got to get him out before—" A loud CRACK shocked both of us into paralysis. Bella's legs flopped unnaturally to the side, but she made no sound. She had passed out from lack of oxygen.

“Her spine!” I choked on the word, horrified. *Oh, why isn't Carlisle here? How can I do this? Please God, give me the strength!*

Jacob gave me the strength.

“Get it *out* of her!” he growled, jerking me from my stupor. The scalpel that he'd pulled from his arm was flying through the air toward me. I snatched it reflexively.

“She won't feel anything now!”

He was right. She would be dead soon. It didn't matter if I cut major nerves or major arteries. I had to get the child out and my venom in her before her heart gave out. It was now a certainty that Bella would not survive this day as a human.

I sliced into my beloved's midsection, lengthening the incision that Rosalie had started until it was about six inches long. The first cut went through skin and muscle; another cut was needed to widen the gash Rose had made in the uterus. Wiping the blood away so I could see, I carefully sliced into my wife's womb. I saw the pale membrane inside and touched its surface with my finger. Yes, hard as stone, just like us. Despite that, I could see the baby's feet and elbows smashing into it, distorting the shape like a gigantic soap bubble, its surface moving and rolling.

I lost no time in thinking, but merely sank my teeth into it and tore. It felt just like tearing a vampire's head from its neck and the familiar, metallic, ripping sound pierced the air. I made a point of not looking at Bella's face. I knew if I did that I would be compelled to do something more for her, but this had to happen first. I had to trust my wife's heart and lungs to Jacob's hands.

To my shock and wonder, through the gap I had created in the membrane, a tiny, pearl-colored hand reached out and grabbed my nose. It was hot, almost burning hot against my skin. The fingers clung tenaciously, as if trying to pull the rest of the infant's body behind them. The baby was strong!

I swiftly tore at the hole again, doubling and then tripling its size. An arm followed the hand and then a shoulder poked through. Gently, I grasped the baby's arm and pushed it back inside, my fingers following to find its head and free its face. It was a narrow opening. I would have had to tear Bella to bits to pull the baby out sideways. He needed to be birthed in the standard fashion...head first, then shoulders, arms, torso, and legs.

I found the wet sphere and to my amazement, it was covered in thick, plastered-down hair. I eased my fingers around it, holding the neck for support, and out popped his head! Bronze hair, just like mine. Wide, blinking eyes looked directly into mine—wasn't that

unusual?—and then squinted under the bright lights. Melted chocolate, like his mother’s. I felt his sense of relief when he took his first gasp of air and his stunned surprise at the rush of sensory input in this strange new world. I gently pulled again, one hand holding his neck and the fingers from my other hand curling underneath his armpit. Much to my surprise, the baby’s head didn’t bob around at all—he was holding it up on his own. I knew then that we could have delivered him two or three days ago if we’d known, if only I had heard him sooner.

Then a wet, drawn-out slurping sound sang through the air as his torso, legs, and feet slid out of Bella’s womb with a single pull. A little metallic *ping* sounded as the edges of the torn membrane snapped back together.

Oh my, oh my, oh...oh...

There were simply no words for the awe-inspiring miracle of this experience. I looked at her chubby little thighs hanging in the air and realized that I *was* looking at a “her,” very clearly a “her.”

“Renesmee,” I murmured, moved beyond thinking as I gazed down upon my daughter. *Our daughter*. The surge of love that flowed through me was vast, encompassing my wife, my family, Jacob, and the rest of humanity...or whatever. I marveled and exulted that I was here to see this day. A second had passed since Renesmee had come into the world. I checked the clock and noted the time, then quickly tied off the umbilical cord and bit through it. The whole procedure had taken fifty seconds.

I looked to my wife’s face and saw the glimmer of life still in her. *Thank you, God!*

“Let me...” she whispered, her voice nothing but a scratching sound. “Give her to me.”

Renesmee yearned to meet her mother. I could feel her desire and joy well up at Bella’s voice. I carried the wet, bloody baby to Bella and laid her against her mother’s chest, not releasing her, just letting she and her mother officially meet. Bella’s eyes struggled to focus on the hot, wiggling creature.

“Renes...mee. So... beautiful,” Bella rasped softly, her voice weak, unrecognizable. Then much to my chagrin, Bella gasped in renewed pain as the baby sank her fully functional, little teeth into her mother’s breast. I snatched her away immediately.

“No, Renesmee,” I murmured softly, looking directly into her wide, brown eyes, eyes that were fully aware, alert, and cognizant. She had recognized her mother’s gasp of pain and with my “No,” she understood the relationship. She wouldn’t do it again.

Renesmee's heartbeat was strong, but rapid like a bird's. Against its rhythmic fluttering, I heard the hollow *thump-THUMP* and knew instinctively it was Bella's final heartbeat. Jacob was on her instantly, forcing blood through the organ and out into her body.

"What are you waiting for?" he barked, coming up for air after blowing into Bella's mouth.

I stood there, frozen, the newborn child hanging limply from my two hands. There was nowhere to set her down. I couldn't just put her on the floor. I'd never thought about what we would do with a newborn baby. It never seemed entirely real that a little creature with an actual body would be present in the birthing room. All I'd really thought about was how to minister to Bella's needs. *Could Alice handle this? Emmett? Damn! Emmett wasn't back yet.*

"Take the baby," I finally commanded Jacob. If I could get the venom into her heart quickly enough, she could miss a few compressions before I restarted them. We had no defibrillator. It was another piece of equipment Carlisle had been hoping to find, but had not.

"Throw it out the window," he retorted. Of course he didn't care about Renesmee, of course not.

"Give her to me," Rosalie's voice rang low and calm from the doorway. Jacob and I both snarled viciously at her.

"I've got it under control," Rosalie promised. "Give me the baby, Edward. I'll take care of her until Bella..." I passed Renesmee into her hands. There was no choice, but I could see that Rose's heart was filled with a mother's love for this newborn baby. Renesmee *would* be safe with Rosalie.

I opened the little refrigerator and grabbed for the large, steel syringe with the five-inch needle. The last time I had collected venom, I had filled the syringe in readiness for Bella's possible transformation. Thank goodness I had! There was no time to waste.

"Move your hands, Jacob," I ordered him.

"What's that?" he asked, reluctant to stop the CPR. Without waiting for him to comply with my order, I knocked his hands away from Bella and heard a tiny snapping sound. I'd broken one of Jacob's fingers, but he didn't flinch. I aimed the needle straight toward Bella's heart and plunged it in.

"My venom," I answered, pushing the magical, deadly fluid into her. I felt her heart react convulsively to the assault almost as if it had been shocked.

“Keep it moving,” I commanded Jacob. I was utterly focused now on saving Bella’s life. Nothing else mattered. I followed the procedure I had planned in preparation for this day. I had expected Carlisle would create a safety net beneath me as we delivered the baby and changed Bella, but that plan was dead now. I was all alone with this burden—it was *do or Bella dies*. I refused to let my terror break through and paralyze me again. I imagined myself as a robot, working step-by-step, determination driving me forward.

I moved from artery to artery, biting through Bella’s skin and then sealing each wound with my tongue...from neck to armpit to wrist...repeated on the other side...to groin...repeated on the other side. How I’d imagined biting my true love here in a different way in a time that seemed long ago. Bella’s lovely body was unrecognizable... purple, blue, covered in blood, distended and distorted. Her heart no longer beat and the only air moving into her body was directly from Jacob’s lungs. He remembered bringing Bella back to life with CPR once before on a beach beneath a cliff. Surely, he could do it again!

I heard his thoughts as he continued to pump my beloved’s heart. In his mind, she was already dead. The compulsive pull she held for him had simply disappeared, like a light switch shutting off. The love of his life was no longer in this room. He ached to escape the gore, the death, and the helplessness he felt.

But he was wrong. I *knew* he was wrong. He *had* to be wrong! *Please, God, let him be wrong...!*

“Go, then,” I barked, smacking his hands out of my way. I started compressing Bella’s heart muscle, swiftly, fiercely, like it was my own life I was trying to save, because it was. Her life *was* my life.

“She’s not dead,” I insisted. “She’s going to be fine.” *She’ll be fine!! She’ll be fine!! She’ll be fine!!* I screamed the words over and over in my head, negating Jacob’s thoughts, willing it to be so.

19. SURPRISES

The seconds were endless, each one stretching into the future, elongating as it passed by. I'd heard Jacob's discouraging thoughts as he plodded out the door and down the stairs before I blocked his mind from my perception. I wouldn't let his despair overtake me!

I pumped Bella's heart frenetically, trying to push the sluggish venom through her bloodstream. As soon as the fire took hold of her body, part by part, it wouldn't let go until the job was finished. That was a certainty. The big question in my mind, though, was whether Bella was still living inside that ravaged shell lying on the surgery table. Her body had gone still...so still.

When does a soul vacate its body? I'd read that if a human body is weighed just before death and again just after, its weight drops by twenty-one grams, about three-quarters of an ounce. Is such the weight of the soul? What was the weight of Bella's soul? Riding on my shoulders as it now was, it felt like twenty-one tons. I would carry it for as long as necessary, though, if it meant she would come back to me.

Did Bella know I was here pumping her heart, expanding her lungs, trying to keep her human flesh alive until it could be transformed into something dead and yet, paradoxically, never to die?

There it was!! A heartbeat? Or not. I stopped compressions to listen for it. Yes!! Bella's heart was reviving!! The beat was slow and irregular, but it was there. The venom was working! Frightened, hopeful, impatient, I stood beside Bella in that bloody abattoir, clasping and unclasping my hands, waiting for assurance that the process would work again as it had countless times before. To my tremendous, but wary, relief, it seemed to be. Bella's heart picked up speed, the beating strengthened, and I knew that my work was done. Whatever happened now was out of my hands and in those of a higher agency. *Please, God, let her still be in there...*

Rosalie's shrill cry downstairs broke the silence, "Ew! Get away from us!"

I listened for a moment and saw through her eyes that Jacob had dropped to his knees beside the sofa. He was gazing at Renesmee's face and she gazed back.

"I mean it! Back off, dog!"

Reluctantly, and still keeping his eyes glued to Renesmee, Jacob backed up on his knees, stopping about three feet away.

“Farther! Get away! Get away!” Rosalie hissed, but Jacob was transfixed. I dimly recorded a change coming over Jacob’s mind. From despair and fury, his thoughts and emotions were swinging in another direction altogether.

Oh! Oh, my word! My daughter?! Nah...can't be.

I shrugged the thought aside and turned back to Bella. Her legs sprawled awkwardly to the side, a result of her broken spine. Pain tugged at my heart. There was no way to know if it would heal, if the venom could repair something so severely damaged. Did the broken parts of her body need to be re-placed into their correct positions? If so, how close was close enough? I hadn’t observed Esme’s change that carefully, or examined her injuries, which were the most like Bella’s, so I didn’t know.

I also didn’t know how much pain Bella could feel. The burning had started, so I would expect her to be writhing and screaming. I’d given her a hefty dose of morphine, though, trying to speed the numbness before doing the C-section. Quite possibly, it was the morphine that ultimately had stopped her heart.

Regardless, I didn’t want to take any chances that I would cause her more pain, so I didn’t touch any of her injuries above the waist. I knew for certain that she could feel nothing below it. I reached under Bella’s hips and applied slight traction to her spine, hoping that by doing so, any severely displaced vertebrae would realign themselves and perhaps promote a better repair. The bones cracked and moved much as they would have in a chiropractor’s office. I ran my fingers down her spine to feel if any bones or fragments were protruding. The line was smooth.

Then, partly for Bella’s modesty, partly for promoting the repair, but mostly out of reverence, I took my wife’s legs, one at a time, and stretched them long and straight. Having them lie in a more natural position made the sickening damage of her spine less evident. The gaping surgical wound on her lower belly looked much as it had, implying that the venom hadn’t moved below the spinal break. What if the spinal injury couldn’t be bridged? Would the change continue anyway?

Please, God, let her live! And if I could ask for yet another favor beyond that, please give her back the use of her legs! Let her walk again!

It was time to attend to her belly. The birth was as yet incomplete. From studying C-sections, I knew that the surgeon had to deliver the placenta and stitch the uterus back together. Bella also had the stone-like membrane still inside of her body. It seemed unlikely that the fire could burn that away. The safest thing to do would be to remove everything

created during gestation and sew her up. And I'd better do it fast in case her spine healed and she regained sensation below her waist.

How many men throughout history had done such as this to the bodies of their wives? I couldn't be the first. Sometimes, necessity requires us to perform actions we'd have thought impossible before being compelled to do them. That was the case here. I avoided dwelling on the reality of the work and just finished as quickly as I could. Though it was probably unnecessary, I used surgical thread to sew both incisions closed. I wanted to make Bella whole again. Afterwards, I dropped my arms to my sides and drifted, letting time take me.

I don't know how long I stood there in complete stillness before the slamming of the kitchen door brought me around. I heard the stage whisper of Rosalie's irritated response. "Shhh! You'll wake the baby!"

So Renesmee sleeps! Interesting. If it weren't for the overwhelming anxiety I was enduring—waiting to know whether Bella was "in there," worried that she was suffering, and not knowing if the transformation would work—I would have liked to be in the living room with Rosalie, marveling at the new life Bella and I had created, cataloging her nature, listening to her mind. I wanted to know her.

Emmett was back from his hunting trip. His prolonged thirst made him desperate for bear blood, so he'd traveled further than Alice and Jasper. I was glad he was home. He had a tremendous calming influence, not just on Rosalie, but on all of us. The family felt more stable with him around. It was partly due to his physical size and strength—a good, heavy ballast to hold the ship upright—but it was also his easygoing nature and sense of humor. It was hard for anyone to get too worked up with Emmett around. I listened in on Rosalie's thoughts to check on the baby, but barely recognized them. She didn't sound like Rosalie at all!

...sweet little baby, so beautiful, so precious...such tiny fingers, tiny toes...soft and perfect...look at that hair!...Carlisle had better get back soon...we're running out of blood...she is a thirsty little thing...

That was it, on and on, her mind consumed with Renesmee. Not a thought for herself.

"Emmett, come here! Come see Renesmee!" Rosalie whispered impatiently to her mate as he entered from the kitchen. Emmett's eyes widened in surprise. Seeing his wife with an infant child in her arms was a complete shock to his system. Then excitement took over.

"Is that...Bella and Edward's...baby?" Through Rosalie's eyes, I saw his eyebrows lift to his hairline and his smile widen to its limits.

"Yes, isn't she beautiful?"

“Very. Hey Jacob,” Emmett appended.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Rosalie hissed.

“Lemme hold her,” Jacob replied. “I want to hold Renesmee.”

“Are you crazy? No! Get away from us!”

“Come on, Rosalie, share with the rest of us. I’d like to hold her too,” Emmett said. Rosalie gave Emmett a disapproving look.

“Are you sure you can handle it? She has human blood.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem. I’m an uncle! Uncle Emmett! Sounds pretty good! Hey wait, how’s Bella, is she all right?”

“I don’t know. Edward’s with her,” Rosalie replied, a sudden stab of concern crossing her mind. So it wasn’t *entirely* about the baby.

“She died,” Jacob said flatly. “Her heart stopped during the birth. Edward thought he could save her, but I have my doubts.”

At that moment, another truth became crystal clear. Werewolf magic had caught up with Jacob. There was absolutely no way that the Jacob I knew ever could have uttered those words about his Bella, without ranting and raving and probably starting a fight. He didn’t seem indifferent now, just sad in a more controlled, more rational way. His thoughts didn’t linger on Bella, but immediately switched back to her child. I heard Emmett’s confusion. This wasn’t the Jacob any of us knew.

“I’m gonna check on Edward,” Emmett tossed out as he ran up the stairs.

“Edward, you okay, bro?”

“In here, Em.”

Emmett’s large body filled Carlisle’s doorway. A look of stunned horror distorted his face before he quickly covered his mouth and nose with his hands. I looked around then, reawakening to my surroundings. I’d been so lost in my mind that I’d become insensible to the bloody scene in which I stood.

Emmett took two steps backward. “Edward, is Bella...?”

“Her heart is beating.”

“Jacob said she...died.” Emmett disappeared from the doorway and moved ten feet down the hallway. “Sorry, bro, I’m gonna talk to you from out here.” Not that that would help him much.

I looked down to see that my shoes were soaked in blood up to the laces. My trousers were stained dark to the ankles, and the rest of me was covered in drips and splatters of my wife’s blood. I covered my face with my bloody hands and felt the horror, the terror, and the desolation wash over me. In my frenzy to save Bella’s life, I’d locked my feelings away. Now, when there was nothing more that I could do but wait and hope, they hit me with triple force.

My knees gave out and I landed on the floor with a thud. “Edward, are you all right? Maybe you should come out of there.”

“I can’t leave her,” I heard myself croak.

“Alice, where are you?” Emmett called.

“I’m back here,” Alice answered softly from her room, where she and Jasper had holed up to get away from Bella’s sweet-smelling blood. Though he’d just returned from hunting, Jasper was suffering.

“Can’t you come? Edward needs help.”

There was a short pause. “Um...yes...okay.”

“Edward?” Alice spoke softly from the doorway.

“Mmm?” I answered, not looking up.

“Edward, how is Bella doing?”

“Her heart is beating,” I muttered.

“Then what’s the matter?”

“Give her to me! She wants to see me!” We all popped our heads up at Jacob’s voice from downstairs.

“Emmett, would you mind refereeing the drama in the living room?” I asked, glad to give him a job that he would be relieved to take. Though he wanted to stay here for me, hanging out in a blood-drenched room was beyond his capability.

What’s with Rosalie and Jacob? Alice asked.

I dragged myself to my feet and whispered a reply. "From what I gather, it would seem that Jacob has imprinted on Renesmee." Saying the words out loud made it more real—and more troubling.

No!

"I think so. I can hardly believe it myself. I can't say I'm happy about it, though it seems to be a great relief to Jacob."

That's just weird!

"You're telling me," I said, moving to Bella's side, stroking her beautiful, still face. "Alice, is she going to be okay?" Alice approached slowly.

Well...Edward...honestly...ummm...I don't know. I can't see her now.

"But the baby's out! Why can't you see her?" I asked, alarmed.

I don't know, I don't know... Alice moaned silently. Then I noticed her great distress.

"What is it, Alice? You're frightening me!"

I'm sorry, Edward. Right now, I'm just seeing a lot of "nothing." Almost like looking at the wolves, but not. There are blank spots everywhere.

"Oh!" The images in Alice's mind were disturbing. Unrecognizable forms flashed in and out of white space and fuzz. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know!" she cried sharply, then paused, thinking it over. *That's why I've been staying away! I can't help and I didn't want to scare you.*

"But you're not still having the headaches?"

No, they stopped when Rosalie took the baby...Renesmee...away.

"Good. Have you seen her?"

"No, not yet. I've been too w...worried about Bella," she said, her voice breaking.

I reached for Alice's hand and realized that I wasn't alone. We stood there together, gazing at Bella's face, all signs of her earlier torment gone.

"She seems peaceful at least," Alice commented.

"I gave her enough morphine to down an elephant. I hope she's feeling no pain."

“That’s all you can do. Now we wait.”

“Yes.”

We stood there a few more minutes, hand in hand, thinking of our mutual love for this woman...our brave, foolhardy wife and sister.

Eventually, Alice broke the silence. “She’s going to make it, Edward—she’s got to—and it’s all because of you.”

“Getting Rosalie under control was vital. She would have killed Bella. It’s surprising Rose lasted as long as she did, really. She hasn’t been hunting for...hmmm...as long as me.” I ignored the sudden blaze in my throat.

And she’s taking care of the baby!

“Yes, just my thought. Perhaps you could put a bug in Emmett’s ear about getting her out for a hunt. Check with the wolves to make sure it’s clear. If what I think happened did happen, then we should be able to trust Jacob with the baby, unless you want to take a turn.”

She’s safe for now, anyway. Emmett and Jacob together can control Rosalie, if it comes to that. But I’ll go talk to Emmett in a while. First, I’m going to help you clean up this room. It’s awful!

“You’re right. Emmett couldn’t even come in.”

Jasper can’t even come out of our bedroom!

Alice flitted away to collect the necessary supplies...scrub brushes, buckets, bleach, ammonia, trash bags, furniture polish, paper towels, and lots of rags.

“This used to be a nice office,” she commented wryly.

It took about forty-five minutes to stuff all the dirty plastic and linens into garbage bags, get the medical instruments clean and soaking in bleach, scrub the floor, and wipe everything down. Fortunately, the room had a wooden floor and not a white carpet. We’d have to tear out the living room carpet and replace the couch. The scent of blood was hard to obliterate, and with the newborn Bella living here, it was especially important to do our best.

Bella the Newborn. I'd have to get used to the idea. Life would be easier, though I regretted that we'd not been able to save her humanity. The detached placenta ended that dream. Bella must have realized that herself, with all the blood loss and the severe beating she took from the inside. Broken ribs were the least of the worries. Ruptured organs, punctured lungs... things had gotten out-of-hand fast.

"Do you want some help with Bella?" Alice asked when we'd cleaned Carlisle's office/surgery and eliminated the remnants of blood we could get to. We'd have to get a protein-eating enzyme and wash it into the cracks between the floorboards where blood had collected—or replace the floor. Esme could decide.

"I'd like to wash her myself, but you can pick out some clothes and dress her."

Oh, goody. You know I've assembled an entire wardrobe for her.

"Yes, I know," I smiled, having seen images of Bella's new closet in Alice's mind. "Bella's not a big shopper. I'm sure she'll appreciate that. Would you mind bringing some clean clothes for me? I don't dare walk through the house like this."

Happy to. Are you okay here, then?

"Yes. I'd like some privacy with Bella."

Okay, I'll get your clothes and then check on the situation, Alice pointed down with her index finger and turned to leave.

"See if you can get Rose to hunt," I whispered.

I will.

"Alice?"

"Yes, Edward?"

"Thank you, Alice."

"You're welcome, Edward." We both smiled at this habitual exchange. She shut the door behind her.

I took one more look at my beloved Bella and kissed her forehead, then went to wash my hands and get some supplies. I'd give my wife her daily bath. When the bathroom mirror revealed that I looked at least as ghoulish as Bella did, I removed my clothes, including my shoes, and stuffed them into a garbage bag. Not only were the clothes ruined, but I never wanted to see any of them again.

In general, our smooth, hard bodies don't collect dirt as it has nothing to stick to and we don't perspire or shed skin cells. A light dusting now and then, a good brushing to shake the dust out of the hair, and perhaps a spray down once in a while—if, for example, you are covered in blood—is all we ever need. I stepped into the shower, suddenly anxious to have the blood and gore off me. I wanted no more reminders of this horrific day.

Wrapped in a towel, I walked back to Carlisle's office, which was once again an office, but with lots of shiny stainless steel filling the space. I saw that Alice had not only brought some fresh clothes for me, but also had thought to bring a basin and pitcher from the kitchen, a bathing sponge, and a short stack of towels. The basin was filled with soapy, warm water.

God bless Alice! Apparently, she could still see *my* future—short term, anyway—although perhaps this collection of supplies was a result of her detail-oriented nature, rather than her vision. I suddenly wondered if my future was also blank when Alice looked. She hadn't mentioned it, but it seemed likely that it would be, given how completely tied to Bella I was. My future was entirely dependent on what happened to my wife.

I started with Bella's forehead and worked my way down. Her eyelids were dotted with blood and two lines of blood had run from her mouth into her ears with splatters all around. Fortunately, I had good eyes and a good nose for finding it. I was in no hurry. It was the last time I would be tormented by the elixir that made me a continual danger to my love.

Even with the wound sewn up, my wife's abdomen looked grotesque, not human. Her flesh was stretched and distorted—now gone slack—and was still black and blue from top to bottom and from side to side. It pained me to remember her suffering, everything she had endured to save our daughter. How I loved her for her heroism, though I fervently wished that she had not been pushed to such a dire, destructive end!

After washing the front of her, I rolled her onto one side with a pillow under her head and cleaned her back. After I was sure I'd soaped, sponged, and rinsed every part of her, I dried her off with several towels, then emptied the last basin of water into the bathtub and refilled the pitcher with warm water.

Returning, I gently pulled Bella's limp body to the end of the table until her mahogany hair hung over the end and poured water over it. I shampooed her long locks, and then used two full pitchers to rinse out the soap. When I finished, I towel-dried her hair and covered her body with a clean, white sheet.

Performing these intimate acts for my beloved, though she was by all appearances insensible to it, gave me great comfort. And much to my surprise, it brought back a very dim and distant memory of my human mother washing her deceased mother's body. I had never

recalled this image before, and I could retrieve no further details, except that I had emptied the basin and carried in fresh pitchers of water. The event must have made a huge impression on me as a boy; otherwise, there was no way it would have worked its way to the surface after all this time. Very few human memories did.

My grandmother had been laid out in our home in the tradition of the time before funeral homes took over the task and removed all reality from death. I was reenacting an old tradition in this final act of love for my human wife.

But this isn't death, I reminded myself. This is rebirth.

Wrapped up in my task, I hadn't been paying attention to what was happening downstairs, but I noticed now that Rosalie and Emmett's mental voices were gone. Jacob was still there, utterly absorbed in Renesmee. Rose had given the baby to Alice before going with Emmett to hunt.

"Let me hold her," Jacob demanded.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, look! She wants me!" I saw Renesmee from Alice's vantage point. The baby was leaning toward Jacob with her arms outstretched. When she touched his neck, he said, "Are you hungry, little Nessie?"

Nessie? I smiled. It almost hurt, so unused to the expression had I become.

"Okay, she's all yours," Alice said, handing her over. "Jasper?" she called out. I heard my brother speed downstairs.

"You called?" he answered formally.

"I'm going to grab some blood for her and check on Edward. I want you two to keep an eye on each other and the baby." Jasper nodded in assent, a broad smile lighting up his face as he took his first look at Renesmee.

"Come on in, Alice," I said softly when I heard her outside the door.

Oh, Edward, she looks beautiful!

"She always looks beautiful, Alice," I corrected. "She can be dressed any time, though maybe we should wait until the surgical wound heals more completely."

Fine. I'll come back in a few hours and see how she's progressing.

My anxiety level suddenly rose. “Do you think she’s going to be okay, Alice? Can you see anything? It seems like something should be happening. She hasn’t moved at all! It’s been hours!”

I’m sorry, Edward. I believe so; I hope so; but I just don’t know. She looked down at her shoes and then bent to the mini-fridge. “Renesmee is hungry. I came for another pint. Only four left.”

“Carlisle should be back with more in just a few hours. I wish he were here now.”

Can’t we call him?

“No, Rosalie’s unfortunate...um...fall smashed the one mobile phone we had left.

Emmett accidentally squeezed the third one too hard a couple of weeks ago. We could go pick up another one, but no stores will be open for hours yet. Carlisle might be back by then. Or one of us could drive to town and call from there.

“Oh, it’s not really necessary. I’m just anxious to talk to him, have him check on Bella, make sure things are okay. None of us was ever this still or this quiet, except maybe Carlisle himself.”

He knows that you had to deliver the baby and why, right?

“Yes, I think Rosalie got that much out before...”

He must be rushing back now, don’t you think? He must be frantic!

“Perhaps. Or else he knows that we’re still likely to need the blood and there’s nothing he can do to help Bella now, anyway.”

Wait, wait. Let me check... Oh! Alice smiled. Carlisle and Esme were no more than five minutes away. I’d stopped listening for them in my distraction.

“Oh, good,” I sighed.

I’m sure he’ll be right up when he gets here. I’d better deliver this to the little one.

“Yes. You’d better hurry.” I heard the confusion in the baby’s mind and felt her thirst. Jacob was holding her against his body as she repeatedly kicked him in the stomach with her heels...*hard*. She was getting angry. Jacob didn’t try to contain Renesmee’s legs as I would have, just baby-talked to her, trying to calm her down.

There's something I never thought I'd hear! I smiled again. That made twice in ten minutes.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed.

Hmmm....

I took Bella's hand and brought it to my lips. It was no longer human-warm, but it was still warmer than me. Her fingernails were changing color. When she was being suffocated by the blood in her throat, her fingernails had turned blue. When Jacob performed CPR and artificial respiration, her fingernails returned to their normal light pink color. Now the pink was fading to pearl white—one of the first signs of the change.

Just then, I heard Carlisle rush through the kitchen door with Esme on his heels. They raced into the living room and both stopped short when they saw the tableau assembled there. I heard two sharp gasps one after the other.

"Oh! The baby!" Esme cried.

"Where's Edward? How's Bella?" Carlisle inquired, though he was already up the stairs and outside the office door before anyone had a chance to answer him.

Alice delivered the answer to Esme instead.

"Bella's changing, but she's completely silent and unmoving. Edward's worried that something is wrong."

"You can't see?"

"Unfortunately, no," Alice replied sourly. "This is Renesmee, by the way."

"She is beautiful! She doesn't look like a newborn baby, does she?"

"Edward!" Carlisle knocked on the door. "Can I come in? Are you all right?" I opened the door and he rushed to Bella's side. "A good, strong heartbeat! It looks like you've done very, very well!"

I could not reply. I was paralyzed—by relief this time. Carlisle turned to me, his eyebrows raised. When he saw my expression, he grasped my shoulders, looked closely at my face and then pulled me into his arms. My head fell limply to his shoulder and my arms gripped him with a strength that would have crushed a human.

"I'm sorry, Son. I'm so sorry that you had to cope with this on your own." I could neither move nor speak, only cling, so Carlisle kept talking. "From what I see here and what I saw

downstairs, though, it looks like you've done a remarkable job. You have a *beautiful* new daughter—she's a girl, right?—and Bella's well on her way."

I lifted my head and whispered, "She hasn't moved a muscle or made one sound. It's been hours."

"You gave her the morphine, didn't you? That would knock her out for a good long time, I should think."

"Yes," I replied, releasing my grip on him.

"Tell me what happened," Carlisle said as he turned to check Bella's pulse. "You rescued her heart?"

I began to relate the distressing story to him in hushed tones, reliving the torment all over again.

"Shall I check her injuries?"

"Yes, especially her spine. I don't know if it can heal. Also, her surgical wound. Will that heal okay?"

Carlisle reached beneath Bella's body and felt the spinal vertebrae as I had.

"There seems to be no displacement."

"I realigned the vertebrae. The spinal cord injury seemed to be around T9 or T10."

Ah, yes. I can feel it. Must be a broken vertebra pressing against the spine.

"The spine isn't torn all the way through?"

I can't be sure, but that is actually a rare occurrence. Usually, injuries occur from pressure on the spine or loss of blood flow to it.

"When Rosalie made the first cut..."

Rosalie?

"Yes. Bella was choking and I was trying to clear her airway. When Rosalie cut into her, buckets of blood poured out." The memory made my hands shake.

Internal hemorrhaging, of course. I can smell the remnants.

"We might have to replace the floor."

So Rosalie delivered the baby?

“Uh, no. There was just *so much* blood. Rosalie lost her focus and Jacob had to boot her out of the room.”

Jacob?

I nodded. “Jacob kept Bella’s heart and lungs going, while I delivered the baby and injected the venom into her heart.”

We owe him a great deal for that. Had Bella’s heart completely stopped?

I drew a sharp breath, remembering the scene, and nodded.

And the venom restarted it?

“Yes. It was like a jolt from a defibrillator, but it didn’t start beating on its own right away. Then I bit into all her major arteries as well.”

With any luck, that will speed the process.

“So you think she’s going to be fine?”

I don’t see any reason why she shouldn’t be. Hand me that towel there.

I pulled a towel from the stack Alice had left and handed it to him. Carlisle shook the folds from it and laid it over Bella’s upper body before lowering the sheet down to her surgical wound.

It looks good, Edward! You removed the placenta and the membrane?

I nodded.

Under these conditions, I would worry about infection in a human mother, but the venom will burn all that out, so I see no reason why Bella won’t be perfect.

“I hope you’re right.”

A knock on the door interrupted our conversation.

“Can I come in? How is Bella?” Esme entered carrying the baby, who had laid her head on Esme’s shoulder.

“Yes, please come in,” I responded. “How does it feel to be a grandmother?”

At the sound of my voice, Renesmee raised her head and looked at me intently, then leaned toward me eagerly with her arms outstretched. I reached for her and pulled her into my chest. She was hot, hotter than a human, and beneath the stench of wolf, she smelled wonderful... absolutely wonderful. She had a touch of Bella's human scent, but it was watered down by vampire scent. She didn't smell like prey to me.

"Hello, little Renesmee..." I said softly.

Joy welled up in her at the sound of my voice and my heart melted. I stroked her soft curls and looked into her alert eyes. They were the eyes of her mother, beautiful, wide, and deep, that milk chocolate color. I knew that she recognized me when she grabbed my nose. I laughed in spite of myself.

"That's right, little one. That's me. I'm your father."

"For the record, I'm much too young to be a grandmother," Esme interjected.

I smiled at her. "You certainly are."

"I'd like to examine Renesmee," Carlisle said. "She's been here how long now?"

"Twelve hours, twelve-and-a-half minutes," I said, glancing at the wall clock. "I'd just as soon stay with Bella. Can we do it here?"

"Certainly." Carlisle dug around in the rolling supply cabinet and selected some instruments. I wandered toward Bella. When Renesmee saw her lying there, she reached toward her mother.

"Yes, Renesmee, that's your mother, Bella." I leaned down so that the baby could look at her and touch her face. "She can't hold you right now because she is sleeping," I told her, looking into her eyes. She seemed to accept that and leaned back into my chest. She put her hand against my neck and looked at my eyes. I saw in her mind another image of Bella, the first one Renesmee had seen. Bella's face splattered with blood, deep wrinkles of pain gouging her forehead, her hair matted and bloody.

"Yes, that's her," I said, nodding. Renesmee had recognized her mother and put the two images together. Amazing! Esme joined us, gazing at Bella's expressionless face, and stroked her forehead.

Renesmee grasped my nose again. It seemed that our first touch was how she would remember me. She had reached for me as her lifeline from the womb and that moment had bonded us forever.

She touched my lips curiously and I grabbed her little fingers between them in a pretend bite. Her face opened into a wide smile, showing two rows of perfect, miniature teeth. Then she grabbed my nose again, as if reminding me of our previous connection. She seemed to understand a great deal of what was going on around her and had memories from the moment of birth. She was astonishing!

I began humming a tune for her and her hands became still. She laid her palm on my face and stared into my eyes with a look of wonder. A collage of moving color swept through my mind and I realized that I was reading hers. The colors must be her first impressions of her environment. How remarkable to see inside a child's mind!

Carlisle pulled up a chair for me and a facing one for himself.

"Carlisle, Renesmee understands a great deal more than one would expect from a newborn. Even in the womb, she understood some things, like how to avoid hurting Bella. She has memories of both her mother and myself from the moment of her birth!"

Carlisle stared and raised his eyebrows. "You can see this in her mind?"

I nodded. "Renesmee," I said. "This is my father and your grandfather, Carlisle. He would like to examine you."

Carlisle began explaining to her what he wanted to do and she watched his face with fascination. He showed her the stethoscope around his neck, put the earpieces in his ears and held the diaphragm to his own chest before placing it on hers. She stared at him for a moment, and then reached to pull an earpiece from his right ear. He removed both and placed them in her ears. Her eyes widened at the "thu-thump, thu-thump, thu-thump" sound. When Carlisle removed the stethoscope from her ears, she twisted around and placed her palm on my cheek. The sound of her heartbeat became louder and once again, I saw the flowing colors in her mind. When she pulled her hand away, the images stopped suddenly.

"Hmm, that's interesting..."

"What's that, Edward?"

"I'm not sure."

"Renesmee's heartbeat is quite strong and much faster than I would have expected. Like a bird's."

"I suppose there's no way to know whether that is normal for her." When I spoke, Renesmee put her hand against my mouth and I kissed it. She laughed.

Carlisle held out an otoscope and let the baby touch it before using it to look in her ears and her nose. Renesmee twisted around to me again, placing her hand on my throat. Immediately, I saw an image of Carlisle's face, one eye squinted shut, the other looking into the scope. I tried to clear my head of the image, but couldn't. Carlisle reached forward and tickled Renesmee on the stomach with one finger and she removed her hand and turned to face him again. The image was gone.

"Umm...Carlisle...something unusual is happening here, I think."

He looked at me in surprise, his eyebrows lifted. "What is it, son?"

"Renesmee," I said, turning her sideways on my knee so she could see my face more easily. "Can you show Grandpa Carlisle what you showed me?" She placed her palm against my cheek.

"Yes," I said directing her hand toward Carlisle. With a question in his eye, he leaned forward so that she could touch his face. She looked at me again, and then reached to touch Carlisle's cheek.

"What do you see?" I asked quietly.

My father's eyes grew wide with surprise and his mouth dropped open. He stared at me.

"Did you see something?" I asked. He nodded slowly.

Renesmee withdrew her hand and turned again to me. I smiled and said "That's right, Renesmee. You showed Grandpa." She reached for my face with both hands.

Did she do that? I saw a close-up image of my own face squinting into the otoscope.

"That's what I saw too, but I couldn't tell if I was getting it directly from her mind or whether she controlled it. It stopped when she removed her hand from my face. You too?"

Carlisle nodded slowly.

"Renesmee, can you show Grandma Esme?" Renesmee reached a hand toward Esme who had been watching in fascination.

"Come in close," I encouraged.

Esme knelt beside us and Renesmee reached to touch her face. I watched my mother's eyes grow wide. Then Renesmee withdrew her hand and Esme looked at us in wonder.

"Did she do that?"

"We think so. What did you see?" I asked her.

"First, I saw a close image of your face, Edward, with the baby's fingers in your mouth and then I saw an image of Carlisle looking through an instrument."

"My word, Edward! In an infant!" my father exclaimed.

I smiled at Esme. "We think Renesmee can put pictures in another's head through touch. She was showing you what had just happened to her."

"Baby Renesmee," Esme cooed, "you are a marvel!" Renesmee smiled widely at her.

"It would seem to be a variation on your gift, Edward," Carlisle said. "You pull thoughts out of others' minds and Renesmee puts pictures into them." We all stared at one another in silent amazement and disbelief.

"I wonder if it works on everyone or just close relatives or just vampires or what," Esme mused.

"Jacob's still here. Perhaps you could take her down to him and see what he says, since he's not related," suggested Carlisle. "We can finish the exam later."

"Would you like to go with Grandma Esme now and see Jacob and Alice?" I asked Renesmee. Esme held out her arms and Renesmee looked at me. "Yes, Grandma Esme." Renesmee turned back to Esme and reached out to be taken from me. "I'll see you later," I said to her, kissing her tiny hand. She smiled at me, showing her teeth.

"We're going to have to work on that title, Edward. Something a little less ancient-sounding perhaps? How about Nana?"

"Nana it is," I said, grinning.

Esme turned toward me, her face beaming, and said, "Isn't this wonderful, Edward? A baby in the family! Imagine!"

Yes, it was unprecedented, as far as I knew. Not only did we have a new half-vampire, half-human child, but she carried with her some absolutely stunning surprises. I couldn't wait for Bella to awaken so I could share it with her. Renesmee was wonderful and beautiful and miraculous, but without Bella there, having Renesmee felt incomplete, somehow, and a little unreal.

Renesmee was half Bella. I needed her with me.

20. FAMILY

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, secretly 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 un-happen, 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 Nes... 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.”

21. REBIRTH

Another long day slowly passed. By evening, Bella was definitely a vampire, or more vampire than human, at least. Her heart pounded like a freight train, but the wet sound of blood moving through her veins was gone. What blood was left was thicker, more viscous, requiring her heart to work hard to move it along. Bella's formerly ivory skin had changed to a pearly white, not yet as white as mine, but well on its way. Oddly enough, the sparkling elements never appeared until the very end. It was one way to tell when the transformation was almost over. I searched for them studiously, waiting and hoping, hoping and waiting.

I put my fingers to my wife's beautiful lips and found that there was no human softness left to them. They were hard as marble, like mine. Beyond a doubt, it was happening. Bella would be unbreakable...I was looking forward to that! I let myself imagine what it would be like to kiss her with all my passion, to make love without constantly holding back, to be in love with her without ever worrying that I might kill her. It was hard to conceive.

I leaned in close to see if I could detect the scent of blood. It was still there, but far overshadowed by her new scent, the same freesia and lavender, but now with the added complexity of rain in the desert. Quite different, but as enticing as ever.

It was midnight before I realized that every bit of morphine was out of Bella's system. The smell of it was entirely dissipated. Didn't that mean that she should be able to move, even to speak? Shouldn't she be opening her eyes? I knew the transformation was not over and that being sensible would only be torture to her, but I so longed for reassurance that she was still there. I called for Carlisle. He walked in after a brief delay.

"Sorry, I was trying to coax some formula into Nessie."

"I tried that earlier...no go. What do you think is going on with Bella, Carlisle?"

"There's no scent of the morphine left."

"I know." I took her still hand in mine.

"Bella? Can you hear me?" Carlisle tried.

"Bella? Bella, love? Can you open your eyes? Can you squeeze my hand?" There was no response at all. Nothing. She should be able to hear me. If she were alive, she should be able to respond. There was no explanation for her stillness or her silence.

"Maybe...Carlisle, maybe I was too late." My voice quaked.

"Listen to her heart, Edward. It's stronger than even Emmett's was. I've never heard anything so *vital*. She'll be perfect."

“And her—her spine?”

“Her injuries weren’t so much worse than Esme’s. The venom will heal her as it did Esme.”

“But she’s so still. I *must* have done something wrong.”

“Or something right, Edward. Son, you did everything I could have and more. I’m not sure I would have had the persistence, the faith it took to save her. Stop berating yourself. Bella is going to be fine.”

“She must be in agony.” My voice came out a shaky whisper.

“We don’t know that. She had so much morphine in her system. We don’t know the effect that will have on her experience.”

I touched her arm and murmured, “Bella, I love you. Bella, I’m sorry.”

The low-level bickering that had been going on all day suddenly escalated.

“Give her to me, dog, before I rip off your arms and shove them…”

“I said it isn’t time yet. Let us finish our game!”

Do you want to go down and set them both straight? Carlisle asked.

“No, I’m staying right here,” I answered quietly. “They’ll sort it out.”

“An interesting situation,” Carlisle commented. “And I thought I’d seen just about everything.”

“I’ll deal with it later,” I told him, not wanting to leave Bella in case she came around. I looked at her face. “*We’ll* deal with it,” I amended, touching Bella’s hand where it lay beside her.

“I’m sure, between the five of us, we can keep it from turning into bloodshed,” Carlisle answered.

I had no interest in dealing with Jacob and Rosalie right now. “I don’t know which side to take. I’d love to flog them both. Well, later.”

“I wonder what Bella will think—whose side she’ll take,” Carlisle mused.

Anticipating it made me chuckle. “I’m sure she’ll surprise me. She always does.”

I’ll go down and try to contain the situation before it gets too far out of hand.

I waited, vigilant, praying through the night. Was this my Garden of Gethsemane? I did not want to pass another night without my Bella. *Please let it be over soon. Please let her not be suffering.*

The sun rose again and Bella still had not moved a single muscle or made a solitary sound. I did hear another sound, though. Alice was on her way up.

Hi, Brother. Still sitting here, are you?

“How much longer?”

“It won’t be long now. See how clear she’s becoming? I can see her so much better.” She sighed, happy that the blank spots in Bella’s future were fading away. That Bella had a future was comforting, even though Carlisle had already tried to reassure me.

“Still feeling a little bitter?” I asked Alice, who had been obliged to stay in her room for nearly two weeks to avoid Renesmee’s blinding and headache-inducing presence inside of Bella.

“Yes, thanks so much for bringing it up,” she said sarcastically. “You would be mortified too, if you realized that you were handcuffed by your own nature. I see vampires best, because I am one; I see humans okay, because I was one. But I can’t see these odd half-breeds at all because they’re nothing I’ve experienced. Bah!”

“Focus, Alice.”

“Right. Bella’s almost too easy to see now.” The picture in Alice’s mind was of me carrying my new, sturdier Bella across the threshold of our cottage.

“She’s really going to be fine.” Profound relief washed over me, followed by immense joy. I felt light as air.

“Of course she is.”

“You weren’t so sanguine two days ago.”

“I couldn’t see right two days ago. But now that she’s free of all the blind spots, it’s a piece of cake.”

“Could you concentrate for me? On the clock—give me an estimate.”

Alice sighed. “So impatient. Fine. Give me a sec—”

I saw it...six more hours! Only six more hours!

“Thank you, Alice.”

“She’s going to be dazzling.”

I growled at the implication. “She always has been.”

“You know what I mean. *Look* at her.” I couldn’t look anywhere else. Bella was sparkling.

My mind was less consumed now that I knew the waiting was nearly over, and I began to notice my surroundings again. I could hear Esme in her office talking on the phone to Charlie—except he didn’t know it was Esme. He thought he was calling the CDC in Atlanta, Georgia.

“Yessir, I understand, sir, but this isn’t the CDD, this is *Action Unlimited*. We specialize in the highest quality sports equipment you...”

“There’s no need to raise your voice, sir,” Esme said sweetly. “There is no CCD here...”

Poor Charlie. He must be frantic with worry. Every time he called the phone number Carlisle had given him, he had to talk to this lovely “southern woman” with her broad Georgia accent. Though she was utterly pleasant and more than happy to chat all day, Charlie could never get anywhere with her. It was a wonder he had re-tried the phone number so many times. What were we ever going to do about Charlie?

Bella had thought during the latter days of her pregnancy that she would continue to see Charlie after she was changed. She had the delusional idea that when he witnessed her altered condition, he would settle on his own theory of what had happened to her, and she would just go along with whatever he came up with. It was a crazy idea, especially now that she would have bright red eyes and an apparent toddler.

We would have to have a rational talk about Charlie when she awoke. Probably, we’d have to stage a funeral—Bella having “died” from her South American disease—and then move away. We couldn’t do as we often did and just leave one night, because if Bella were to disappear altogether, Charlie would never stop looking for her. He would enlist all the resources at his disposal, which as Chief of Police would be considerable, to find her.

Maybe it would be easier on Bella if our chartered plane were to “crash” flying back from Atlanta. That way, Carlisle or I could give Charlie some ashes and Bella wouldn’t have to lie in a coffin while her mother and father broke her heart crying over her oddly non-pigmented body. Bella and I would have a number of such dilemmas to face together when she was with me again.

The last six hours passed less painfully than the previous hours had. Now that I was finally convinced Bella would come back to me, I could wait for her in peace. I wasn’t aware of time passing after that. I was caught up in anticipation, thinking of all the things I wanted to tell her and all I wanted to do with her—re-introduce her to Renesmee, teach her to hunt, explore her new body...there was so much.

Near midmorning, my reverie was disturbed by a change in Bella. Her heart had inexplicably sped up, the heartbeats so frenzied that they blurred together in a continuous wave of sound.

“Carlisle,” I called nervously. Carlisle entered the room with Alice trailing behind.

“Listen,” I said. I looked at him for an explanation.

“Ah, it’s almost over,” he said. So this was a good sign. I guess I hadn’t paid such close attention when the others in my family were changed. Perhaps back then, I hadn’t wanted to be reminded of my own horrific burning.

Alice was looking at the immediate future. “Soon,” she said. “I’ll get the others. Should I have Rosalie...” *stay with the baby?* She finished the sentence silently.

“Yes—keep the baby away.”

Edward, look! Alice pointed. Bella’s fingers had twitched. All three of us stopped breathing and went silent. The furious pounding of Bella’s heart was the only sound in the room.

Oh, thank God! She could move! I wondered if she could move her legs too. I still didn’t feel confident that the venom would heal her paralysis. I reached for Bella’s hand and squeezed it in mine, pretty certain that if she could move, she could feel my touch.

“Bella? Bella, love?”

There was no response to my touch or my words.

“I’ll bring them right up,” Alice said, as she darted downstairs to summon the family. We’d need everyone here to make sure that Bella didn’t hurt herself or anyone else. She would be too strong for me to handle alone if she panicked at the shock of her change. It was a disorienting experience, which I recalled with perfect clarity.

Impossibly, Bella’s heart thudded even faster and louder. It was the sound of an engine winding up beyond the stress limits of its physical form, threatening to explode. Faster and faster, tighter and tighter. Without warning, Bella’s chest arched from the table, as if a puppet master were pulling a central string. Then she fell back with a light thud and made no further movement. Her heart couldn’t possibly sustain this tympanic pounding for long.

Suddenly, with a loud “buh-BUMP, buh-BUMP,” Bella’s heart ceased to function for the second time. The sound that had sung of Bella’s humanity, her fragility, that identified her in a crowd, and made her easy to find was gone now. Without it, and without the ability to hear her thoughts, she was utterly silent to me. Fortunately, I would still be able to detect her delightful scent in a room full of scents.

The entire family, except for Rosalie, had gathered in the room in a defensive formation, Jasper and Emmett at the point positions, with Carlisle and Esme covering their flanks. Alice peaked out from beneath Jasper’s arm. I maintained my presence next to Bella at the table.

And then...JOY OF JOYS!...Bella opened her crimson eyes. She stared into space, motionless, no doubt taking in her environment, altered into strangeness by her acute vampire senses. Her face held no expression in its flawless, marble form. She remained frozen, not even moving her eyes. I squeezed her hand, which I’d been holding for the last several minutes.

Without warning, Bella's body stiffened and curled, and a non-human sound burst from her lips...a vampire's growl. She instinctively moved away from the threat—my hand, apparently—as she flipped from the table, landing with her back against the far wall of the room. Everyone but Alice responded by raising their arms as if to hold her in check. She didn't charge, but crouched in a defensive posture. Her spine had healed!

I had imagined Bella as a vampire, of course, but the reality was still a shock. It was obvious that her physical awkwardness had burned away with her human skin and blood. She was as graceful as a lioness, lithe as a doe, sinuous as a python in water. Though my beloved was wholly different, her new form seemed natural and, somehow, predictable. It was like I had known her as a vampire always. Everything that I loved was still there, but in a highly refined form. She was as stunning to me now as she'd ever she'd been.

In the back of my mind, I knew there were some things that I would miss...her heat, her softness (though not her fragility), and the wet sound of her beating heart. The sound only, though. I would not miss the pain and hard work of ignoring her delicious scent. My senses would be free to enjoy her without the constant iron control that had been required before. In fact, she was undoubtedly more of a danger to me at the moment than I was to her. That would be a new experience, one I welcomed wholeheartedly.

Alas, there was one thing that had not changed. I'd been hoping that with her transformation, our minds would be similar enough that I would be able to read her thoughts. Sadly, they were as much a mystery to me as they ever were. She was even harder to read now that her skin had transformed her face into a more consistently composed, less malleable form. I could not interpret her expressions as I had learned to do, and her new crimson eyes were inscrutable.

Alice had been right, though. She was stunningly beautiful! I wanted to touch her, to hold her, to take her in my arms. It was not possible while she was in her disoriented state. Her vampire instincts could be triggered and she might injure me. I wouldn't risk upsetting her by letting that happen.

With a pang of fear, I wondered whether she would remember me, love me. What if her feelings were lost with her human memories? Could she learn to love me again? What if she didn't?

Biting back my panic at these unwelcome new thoughts, I leaned across the metal table with my hand extended, inviting her back, willing her not to be frightened. Incredibly, Bella recovered immediately from the touch that had startled her and she abandoned her defensive crouch. She straightened her body into a standing position while her eyes surveyed me and appeared to evaluate the potential danger of the room and the gathered company. Alice was the only one amongst us who was not wary of the newborn and offered an infectious grin.

Bella's eyes fixed on me. No doubt I did look startlingly different to her new eyes. I hoped that the changes she perceived were pleasing to her, that I was still as appealing to her as she was to me.

Her eyes followed me as I moved around the table cautiously, my hand still outstretched. If she

allowed me to touch her—assuming she knew me as her love—she might feel more grounded, more stable. I was something she could hold onto while she adjusted to the profound alteration of her senses. I remembered how overwhelming that was at first.

“Bella?” I ventured, trying to mask my concern. Was her mind unable to grasp what was happening? Could it be too much for her to take in? There was no visible change in her stance or expression, nor did she speak. I tried again.

“Bella, love? I’m sorry, I know it’s disorienting. But you’re all right. Everything is fine.”

I reached out to her again, eager to release her from her frozen wariness. She remained still as I moved close to her.

Tension crackled in the air. I heard the fear in my mother’s mind. *What if she hurts him?*

Very slowly, I reached out to stroke her cheekbone with my fingers, a touch she surely remembered as safe and pleasant. She remained frozen, her eyes fixed on my face, but perhaps unseeing. I shaped my palm around her cheek and looked into her eyes, altered as they were. Already, I missed their melted chocolate depths. At least her eyes had been preserved in Renesmee.

I saw something change subtly in her expression, but I could not tell what it meant. I raised one eyebrow in a question. Instantaneously, I was wrapped in a stone embrace so powerful that I thought my marble skin might crack. Bella pressed her face against my chest. This was tremendous progress, but a bit too exuberant. I strained to loosen her uncomfortable grip. Confusion and pain marred her expression. Another vampire overreaction. I quickly clarified my actions with words.

“Um...carefully, Bella. Ow.”

She whipped her arms away and tucked them behind her back.

“Oops,” she mouthed silently.

That word brought forth a memory that made me smile. The first time I had kissed her, she’d responded so enthusiastically that she had unwittingly endangered her life by stirring my bloodlust. That word, “oops,” had become our watchword for Bella’s eagerness beyond the constraints of safety. I smiled to know that this time it was *my* safety we had to be concerned with.

Bella was mortified. Her mouth hung open in shock as she became aware that she had hurt me. Another overreaction.

“Don’t panic, love,” I reassured her, touching her lips. They were as smooth as glass and extremely alluring. “You’re just a bit stronger than I am for the moment.”

She remained frozen and I stroked her cheek, attempting to sooth away her distress. I sensed an intense effort coming from her, though for what, I wasn’t sure. Very slowly, her left arm began to move forward from behind her back. She was trying to be careful with her strength. That meant that she could

hear me and understand what was going on in the room. She reached out with her fingers to touch my cheek as I touched hers. Her eyes focused on mine and her voice rang out like the tinkling of a bell as she spoke her first words as a vampire.

“I love you.”

I broke into a huge smile, profoundly relieved. *My Bella was back!*

“As I love you,” I answered, my heart brimming with happiness.

I held her face in my hands and leaned down to touch my lips to hers lightly. She responded with the heat I remembered and I could not contain myself. All of my dammed-up feelings, everything that had been torturing me for the last two weeks, flowed away as I was overcome with passion for my wife. I took her in my arms and kissed her as I had never kissed her before, for the first time with true abandon, channeling my love and desire through my lips to hers. She responded in kind.

The freedom was miraculous.

22. AWAKENING

Alright already! Are they gonna do it right here??

Emmett's thoughts interrupted my self-indulgent moments of pleasure. My wife was back! How long had it been since I'd touched her like this? She felt so different...and yet...very familiar too. Bella had interlaced her silk-covered thighs with mine and was pressing herself into me. She had all but wrapped her leg around my waist.

Would it be impolite if we retreated to our bedroom right now? Jasper definitely wouldn't like it.

"Ahem!" Emmett cleared his throat loudly.

At Emmett's obvious chiding, Bella abruptly backed up half a step, but I moved simultaneously, unwilling to separate from her. I chuckled. She'd obviously forgotten where we were and that we were not alone. I glanced down to watch the red flush of embarrassment invade her cheeks, but they were smooth, white, and unrevealing. I wondered how long it would take me to stop anticipating her blushes. Already, I missed them. It was one of the few ways I could tell what she was feeling. She looked elegant and composed, though her breath was not yet even.

Bella looked up in accusation. "You've been holding out on me."

I laughed, almost giddy at the thrill of our undimmed sexual attraction. It wasn't what I had predicted for this moment. I'd assumed that she would smell the blood in the house...her own, Jacob's, Renesmee's...and immediately become obsessed with her thirst. But it seemed that at the moment, her thirst was taking a backseat to her "hunger." So was mine, though I hadn't hunted for over two weeks.

"It was sort of necessary at the time. Now it's your turn to not break me," I reminded Bella with a laugh.

Her brow creased like she was trying to take that in and the whole family chuckled. I noticed Carlisle's impatience. His mind was firing off a hundred questions he wanted to ask Bella about her transformation experience. When he couldn't contain himself any longer, he stepped around the bodyguards and closer to us. Jasper was at his heels, ready to grab Bella if she became emotional and physically dangerous.

"How do you feel, Bella?" asked my father.

"Overwhelmed. There's so *much*..." Bella's thought was interrupted, no doubt by a deluge of other thoughts and too much sensory input. Her voice sounded like the loveliest wind chimes I'd ever heard. I would have recognized her voice, but only because I was used to the changes that occur in human vocal chords when we are transformed. I'd witnessed it before. To human ears, the difference in sound would be comparable to a chord played on a piano (human) versus the same chord played on a

harpichord (vampire). Sometimes the change was even more profound—the difference between Smurfette singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star and Leontyne Price singing The Star-Spangled Banner.

As Carlisle began his questions, I kept my arms wrapped around Bella's waist and put my cheek near hers to smell her hair and feel her breath. Her new skin was soft to the touch, not squishy-soft, like a human's, but firm-soft, like mine. When I pressed our cheeks together, hers yielded to the pressure of mine and mine to hers. I'd never felt that before, the give and take of touch. Though her hands had always felt incredible when she touched me—the heat and the softness—my flesh had never yielded to hers in this way. It had always been a one-way interaction. In fact, I'd had to be extremely careful not to press too much or her yielding flesh would bruise. I'd had to handle her like fine china. Now I could squeeze her with virtually all my strength and not harm her at all. The reverse was not true, however.

Bella's body felt different in another way. Her skin emitted a strong electrical charge wherever I touched her. The galvanic response reminded me of a long ago biology class when we'd had to fight our magnetic pull for one another. The sensation was even stronger now. Touching her was all new again.

"Tell me, what do you remember of the transformation process?" Carlisle was asking. Bella hesitated before answering as if trying to remember, though every other vampire I'd ever known remembered the event with painful clarity.

"Everything was...very dim before. I remember the baby couldn't breathe..." Bella pulled back sharply and looked at me with widened eyes.

I answered her unasked question. "Renesmee is healthy and well." I was eager for Bella to see Renesmee. She didn't seem to remember their first meeting when Nessie bit her breast.

"What do you remember after that?" I fished.

She looked down. I had the sense that if she were still human she would have been shuffling her feet and looking uncomfortable. I don't know why I thought that. There wasn't anything obvious about her demeanor that made her seem fidgety.

"It's hard to remember," she said. "It was so dark before. And then...I opened my eyes and I could see *everything*."

"Amazing." Carlisle was excited. "I want you to think—to tell me everything you remember."

A brief look of distress crossed Bella's smooth complexion. What did it mean? Did she remember something horrible?

Carlisle had second thoughts. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Bella. Of course, your thirst must be very uncomfortable. This conversation can wait."

Bella clutched her throat. I let go of her waist and took her free hand.

"Let's hunt, Bella," I suggested. Immediately, she looked startled, as if she couldn't believe I was

speaking to her. A faint look of panic widened her eyes and I hurried to reassure her.

"It's quite easy, love. Instinctual. Don't worry, I'll show you." Bella had become still as a statue. I teased her by recalling one of our earliest conversations. "I was under the impression that you'd always *wanted to see me hunt.*" I smiled and raised my eyebrows. "Shall we?" I stroked the silky smoothness of her throat as I pulled her hand away. "I don't want you to be hurting," I whispered into her ear. Then I began to direct her toward the window.

"I'm fine," she said, not budging in the slightest. "Wait. First—" It seemed that if Bella didn't want to be moved, Bella would not be moved. That was my second glimpse of her new strength. It was going to be hard to make the adjustment.

"Yes?" Carlisle responded.

"I want to see her. Renesmee."

Bella's hands fluttered to her now flat stomach, which seemed to confuse or upset her. Of course she wanted to see Renesmee! Any new mother would. If she didn't remember Renesmee biting her, then she didn't remember her as a living being outside of her body. She must be feeling discombobulated.

She can't see the baby now, Edward. It's much too dangerous, Carlisle warned. He was right.

"What?" Bella had seen our glance.

"Bella, that's not really a good idea," I told her gently. "She's half human, love. Her heart beats, and blood runs in her veins. Until your thirst is positively under control.... You don't want to put her in danger, do you?"

Bella frowned, as if considering this.

"Where is she?" she asked. "Is Rosalie with her?"

"Yes," I acknowledged, still annoyed at her and Jacob, though they were listening so intently to us that they were not fighting at the moment. I tried again to pull Bella toward the window, taking her hands from her stomach where they were glued. She was obsessing about Renesmee and there was no way to remedy that until after she'd hunted.

"Wait," Bella objected again. "What about Jacob? And Charlie? Tell me everything I missed. How long was I...unconscious?"

How can she not be writhing in pain? How can she possibly think about anything but her thirst? Carlisle was at once impressed and concerned. Bella saw our silent exchange...again. She was much more alert to such things than she used to be.

"What's wrong?" she asked under her breath. We were frightening her.

Carlisle didn't want to insult Bella by expressing too much amazement at her self-control. "Nothing is *wrong*," he told her, pausing briefly before he continued. "Nothing has changed much, actually—you were unaware for just over two days. It was very fast, as these things go. Edward did an excellent job. Quite innovative—the venom injection straight to your heart was his idea."

Carlisle was going to give me a big head with his repetitive praise. I was just happy that my idea had worked. He beamed at me and then thought a bit before returning to Bella's difficult question. I'd promised Jacob that I would let him tell Bella of his new attachment to Renesmee. Carlisle was trying to avoid talking about Jacob for that reason.

"Jacob is still here," he said, "and Charlie still believes that you are sick. He thinks you're in Atlanta right now, undergoing tests at the CDC. We gave him a bad number, and he's frustrated. He's been speaking to Esme."

"I should call him....," Bella worried aloud, but her mental wheels were still turning.... "Hold on—Jacob is *still here*?"

Perhaps we shouldn't get into this until after she's hunted... Carlisle advised. I jumped in before her mind could wander too much further or she heard something from downstairs that upset her. New vampires were highly emotional creatures whose moods could turn on a dime. And they were hard to control, especially when they'd caught the scent of human blood.

"Bella, there's much to discuss," I told her, "but we should take care of you first. You have to be in pain..."

Her throat muscles gripped involuntarily. She *was* hurting. "But Jacob—"

"We have all the time in the world for explanations, love." Much to my surprise, Bella conceded.

"Okay."

Just as we were turning to go, another interruption...Alice, of course.

"Wait, wait, wait. You promised I could be there the first time! What if you two run past something reflective?"

Alice wanted to see Bella's face when my wife saw her new self for the first time, but Bella hated mirrors. There had never been anyone more beautiful than she was right now, but I didn't think she would appreciate this kind of attention.

"Alice—," I objected superfluously.

"It will only take a second!" There was no deterring Alice. She hurried away.

"What is she talking about?" Bella wanted to know, her voice slightly agitated.

Alice returned carrying a gigantic mirror that made her look like an ant transporting a brick.

Jasper moved to hover protectively over Alice as she walked toward Bella, ready to pounce at the first sign of aggression. Suddenly, Bella's eyes were as riveted on him as his were on her.

Oh yes. Bella had never seen Jasper with clear, vampire vision. I remembered the first time I saw Jasper. He was frightful, his skin brocaded with scars from the thousands of vampires who had unsuccessfully tried to do him in. I saw Jasper's ironic smile. He was used to this sort of attention from other vampires. Most reacted defensively, much more so than Bella was reacting to him. She was *remarkably* controlled for a newborn—almost preternaturally so. Alice interrupted their mutual stare-fest.

"Edward gave me grief for not getting you to a mirror before the wedding. I'm not going to be chewed out again," she said self-righteously. That seemed a bit strongly worded to me.

"Chewed out?" I questioned.

"Maybe I'm overstating things," she replied lightly, turning the mirror toward Bella.

"And maybe this has solely to do with your own voyeuristic gratification," I retorted.

Alice winked at me.

It was difficult to read Bella's reaction to herself. Her eyes were frozen to the mirror. I tried listening to Jasper's mind to interpret her mood through him. She seemed to move from pleasure to distress in the blink of an eye, a typical newborn mood swing.

"The eyes?" she murmured. "How long?" Jasper was feeling tension from Bella.

I spoke soothingly to her. "They'll darken up in a few months. Animal blood dilutes the color more quickly than a diet of human blood. They'll turn amber first, then gold."

"Months?" Bella's voice rose in pitch and Jasper and Emmett braced themselves to contain her. She saw all of us react to the stress in her voice and Jasper sensed her calm returning immediately.

"No, I'm fine," Bella said after inhaling and exhaling slowly. "It's just...a lot to take in."

Jasper was suspicious and then troubled. *How does she do that?*

"I don't know," I responded to his silent question.

"What question did I miss?" Bella queried.

"Jasper wonders how you're doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Controlling your emotions, Bella," Jasper replied. "I've never seen a newborn do that—stop an emotion in its tracks that way. You were upset, but when you saw our concern, you reined it in, regained power over yourself. I was prepared to help, but you didn't need it."

Bella froze. "Is that wrong?"

"No..." Jasper's tone was unsure. He was still prepared for Bella to snap at any moment.

I ran my hand down Bella's arm, trying to stroke away her anxiety. "It's very impressive, Bella, but we don't understand it. We don't know how long it can hold."

"But what do you think?" Alice brought us back to the more important issue (to her)—Bella's response to her new appearance.

"I'm not sure," Bella replied hesitantly. Her eyes returned to the mirror.

It was so disturbing not to know what she was thinking. I could see that it would be even more frustrating now that her face was nearly as unreadable as her mind. It seemed I would have to rely on Jasper and Alice to get any kind of reading on her. I sighed. I'd had high hopes for one particular change in my wife.

"Disappointed?" Bella asked rhetorically, as she saw me watching her.

She'd caught me thinking about being disappointed and I laughed.

"Yes."

Bella's reaction was immediate. Her face widened in surprise and then collapsed in dismay. Alice snarled at me. Jasper prepared to intervene. I knew she would forgive me after I explained, though. I put my arms around my statue of a wife and whispered against her cheek.

"I was rather hoping that I'd be able to hear your mind, now that it is more similar to my own. And here I am, as frustrated as ever, wondering what could possibly be going on inside your head."

Bella's body relaxed against me and I pulled her closer.

"Oh well," she said dismissively. "I guess my brain will never work right. At least I'm pretty." I growled in Bella's ear, an expression of my disagreement...and my returning lust.

"Bella, you have never been merely pretty." I moved to kiss her neck.

Edward! This cannot last! Don't get so close! Jasper interrupted me.

"All right, all right," I conceded, though I wasn't in the least worried. I had a pretty good idea how to instantly capture Bella's focus. It would be better to test my theory after we were in the forest, though.

"What?" Bella wanted to know.

"You're making Jasper more edgy by the second. He may relax a little after you've hunted. Bella nodded at Jasper, deferring to his greater experience.

“Okay. Let’s hunt.”

23. HUNTING

Mrs. Edward Cullen was a remarkable creature. I was more in love with her than ever. She had taken to hunting naturally, like all newborns do, but beyond that, she was nothing like a newborn. Jasper was deeply disturbed by her. In his millennia of experience with newborn vampires, Bella was singular. She was unique in my experience too.

In her blue silk dress, tight in all the right places, and her silver stilettos, Bella was indisputably dressed to kill. When I demonstrated the first step—jumping out the second-story window (to avoid Jacob and Renesmee downstairs)—she was doubtful. But she leaped from the sill anyway with her near-waist-length, mahogany tresses fanning out above her and she looked like an angel descending to earth. Her balance was perfect; she judged the drop exactly; and she landed precisely. She appeared as weightless as a snowflake when her toes met the earth. I marveled at her beauty and grace. She seemed surprised too.

“Bella?”

“Yes?”

“That was quite graceful—even for a vampire.”

“Thank you.” Bella beamed at her success.

Through the glass-paned wall, I could see the surprise on the faces of Bella’s audience, excepting Alice, who merely looked smug. I was grateful to her that I would have that image of the new Bella forever in my mind—the angel Gabriela descending from Heaven, her hair a beautiful halo. And not to be vulgar, but *no underpants*. Alice saw my expression and smirked. Bella hadn’t realized it yet.

My Edward, she is glorious! Esme thought.

I nodded at her in agreement. The smile on my face seemed to be a new permanent fixture. *So this is what complete, unmitigated happiness feels like!*

Then true to form, Bella pulled off her high heels, one after the other, and threw them back through the window with enough force to blow holes through Carlisle’s paneled walls. Emmett snatched them out of the air before they hit, looking surprised.

“Her fashion sense hasn’t improved as much as her balance,” Alice complained.

When we reached the river running hand-in-hand—Bella’s no longer scorching hot to the touch—she asked, “Are we swimming?”

“And ruin your pretty dress? No. We’re jumping.” Bella eyed the river as if it were an obstacle.

“You first,” she ordered. I stroked her cheek in farewell for this short separation and leaped

across, embellishing slightly with a pre-landing somersault.

“Show-off,” she accused and I laughed from behind the trees. I wanted to watch Bella, but not make her feel self-conscious. While she was unlikely to land in the water, she *could* do actual damage to the forest on the other side. My family was watching in anticipation, their thoughts focused on her:

Edward, be ready to catch her! (Esme)

She’ll probably bowl a strike! (Emmett, laughing)

Look out, forest, here comes Bulldozer Bella! (Jacob)

She knows to lift a pencil skirt above the knees, surely. (Alice)

She’s showing no signs of it. (Carlisle, relieved)

“It” *what?* What was my father referring to? I’d have to ask him later as I could no longer speak quickly enough or softly enough that Bella wouldn’t hear me. I could see how that might be inconvenient sometimes.

Bella stepped back a few paces and took one stride forward, stopping instantly when she heard the sound of fabric ripping.

Ack!! Above the knees!! Alice cringed.

One of the side seams on the dress had torn a good distance up Bella’s thigh. She looked down at it in irritation and then shrugged as she pulled the seam apart on the other side of the dress so that the tears matched. Now she could extend her stride to run and leap. I grinned lecherously to myself. She still hadn’t noticed her missing undergarment.

“Bella?” I called when she continued to hesitate. “Do you want to watch again?”

Instead of answering, she took one lead-in step and then leaped. It was fifty feet across the river and she soared over it like an eagle, graceful and strong. I watched anxiously when I realized that her powerful legs had sent her vaulting twice as far as necessary and that she would be landing amongst the trees. I started running to catch up and prevent her from hurting herself when she came down, before realizing, of course, that it was the trees and not Bella that were in danger.

When I reached her, she was balancing on a tree branch fifteen feet above the ground and laughing like a fiend. I was dumbfounded by her strength and skill. I’d been expecting her to fumble and miscalculate once or twice before getting the hang of that jump, but she dropped lightly from her branch and landed next to me.

“Was that good?”

“Very good.” I smiled at the gross understatement. She was an absolute natural. It appeared she was to have *no* “ugly duckling” phase at all. Bella had hatched fully grown as an elegant, powerful Swan

(Cullen) with balletic grace.

“Can we do it again?” she asked excitedly.

“Focus, Bella—we’re on a hunting trip.”

“Oh, right. Hunting.”

“Follow me...if you can,” I challenged, curious to see how far her skill went. I took off running near my top speed and Bella stuck right beside me. She was giggling riotously at the thrill of her new speed and agility...and perhaps because she saw that I wasn’t outpacing her. I glanced down at her legs and saw that she was using her strength to thrust herself forward on each stride so that her feet touched the ground only a third the number of times mine did. She pulled further and further ahead of me and became so focused on the run that she seemed to have no idea how far we had actually traveled.

“Bella.” I stopped running abruptly and spoke her name as softly as if she were lying in bed beside me, but she heard me clearly from one hundred yards ahead. She whipped around and came back before the sound had faded from the air. I raised one eyebrow in amusement.

“Did you want to stay in the country? Or were you planning to continue on to Canada this afternoon?”

“This is fine,” she answered drolly, as if my words weren’t a surprise. When she raised her eyes to me, she stared at my face like she’d never seen it before. I gazed back in awe of hers. She was so beautiful that she took my breath away.

“What are we hunting?”

“Elk. I thought something easy for your first time...” I could see she doubted my assertion that elk were easy. I already knew she would be brilliant, though.

“Where?”

“Hold still for a minute,” I said, calming her anxiety by placing my hands on her shoulders.

“Now close your eyes,” I said softly. Her face was so refined by the burning that I wanted to touch it to make sure she was real. When my fingers stroked her cheekbones, her breathing sped up.

“Listen. What do you hear?” Bella became still and I knew she must be sorting through the cacophony of sounds in the forest.

“By the creek, to the northeast?” she asked, her voice now tense and tight.

“Yes. Now...wait for the breeze again and...what do you smell?” She set her focus and before long, I saw her nose wrinkle in distaste. I chuckled at her reaction to the elk’s scent.

“I know—it takes some getting used to.”

“Three?”

“Five. There are two more in the trees behind them.”

“What do I do now?”

“What do you feel like doing?” She focused for another moment before her eyes popped open.

“Don’t think about it,” I encouraged. “Just follow your instincts.”

I trailed her as she moved smoothly through the woods toward the nearby stream. When she spied the elk, her body crouched automatically and she tightened her muscles in preparation to spring. Then suddenly, the wind changed. The scent of *human* blood floated through the air.

No, oh no!! What have I done?

Bella sprang forward in an entirely new direction, heading toward the irresistible scent. I realized with dismay that she would attack instinctively since she was in hunting mode. It would be impossible for her to stop and it was extremely doubtful that I could physically restrain her. She was far too powerful. I chased after her in deep consternation and self-loathing. I should have scouted the area before setting her loose, but we were so far out in the wilderness that I hadn’t thought it necessary. Rarely did humans wander this far afield. We would have to kill all three of them once they saw her. I regretted it for her sake—she would be horrified at herself afterwards. The guilt would be tremendous. Also, she would get a taste of human blood, which would forever make its pull more powerful than if she never had.

Edward, you idiot!! I thought. Carlisle would be deeply unhappy about this. He’d trusted me to protect her from herself.

Bella moved so fast through the forest that I quickly lost sight of her. I sped up to catch her, though I was pretty sure there was nothing I could do to prevent her attack, except maybe provoke her to attack me instead. That would be equally distressing to her, I suspected.

Damn, damn, damn!

I began closing in on her, still not sure what I should do. If Emmett or Jasper were here, two of us possibly could control her, but it was too late for that now. I’d just have to do my best. It would be a hindrance, certainly, that I still could not read her mind and predict her movements, but if she hurt me, then perhaps that would distract her enough to stop hunting.

When I was ten yards away, I approached her cautiously. Hearing me, she swung around and growled fiercely. I raised my arms to fend her off, but she pulled up short and jerked herself upright out of her attack position. Shock was written across her face as I’m sure it was frozen onto mine, though for a different reason. I stepped toward her, still cautious, but willing to try touching her to see if I could

distract her from the blood scent. It was unlikely to work.

Before I could act, Bella clenched her jaws shut and hissed, "I have to get away from here."

"Can you leave?" I inquired, incredulous that the idea had even crossed her mind.

Without replying, Bella jolted into a full-out sprint in the direction from which we'd come. Surprise paralyzed me momentarily, which gave her a good headstart, but I tracked her easily enough and caught up to her within the minute. She abruptly came to a stop and I raced past before quickly spinning around to return to where she stood.

"How did you do that?" I heard the disbelief in my tone as I placed my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. Bella was already thinking about something else.

"You let me beat you before, didn't you?" she accused. Sure, but that wasn't important right now.

"Bella, how did you do it?"

"Run away? I held my breath."

"But how did you stop hunting?"

"When you came up behind me...I'm so sorry about that."

I was stunned. This was not possible. A newborn could never be deterred once she'd committed to a hunt...but Bella had. Unbelievable!

"Why are you apologizing to me? I'm the one who was horribly careless. I assumed no one would be so far from the trails, but I should have checked first. Such a stupid mistake! *You* have nothing to apologize for."

"But I growled at you!"

"Of course you did. That's only natural. But I can't understand how you ran away."

"What else could I do?" she cried, as if a vampire in the midst of a hunt could willfully *do* anything but follow through with it. "It might have been someone I know!"

She was extraordinary! Like no newborn I had ever seen. She wasn't a newborn at all! Since her change only an hour or two before, she had cut short a defensive attack twice and aborted an active hunt for human blood. It was simply impossible! I began to laugh, a bit hysterically. She was making fools of all of us who expected her to be like other newborn vampires. Of course Bella would be unique.

"Why are you laughing at me?" A hint of temper rang in her voice—a danger sign. I halted the laughter instantly and prepared to defend myself. When she saw my reaction, she immediately shook off the anger and smoothed out her expression. I straightened too and moved toward her slowly.

“I’m not laughing at you, Bella. I’m laughing because I am in shock. And I am in shock because I am completely amazed.”

“Why?”

It seemed she had no idea of how she was *supposed* to act as a newborn. She was just being herself, and “herself” was contrary to everything I and my family knew about the volatility and combativeness of newborns. Bella had seen only one newborn and that one had been quite typical in her almost rabid focus on Bella’s blood. Bella was the opposite. I don’t know why I was so surprised. Nothing about Bella had ever been typical.

“You shouldn’t be able to do any of this. You shouldn’t be so...so rational. You shouldn’t be able to stand here discussing this with me calmly and coolly. And, much more than any of that, you should *not* have been able to break off mid-hunt with the scent of human blood in the air. Even mature vampires have difficulty with that—we’re always very careful of where we hunt so as not to put ourselves in the path of temptation. Bella, you’re behaving like you’re decades rather than hours old.”

“Oh.”

I took her face in my hands. “What wouldn’t I give to be able to see into your mind for just this one moment?”

She was utterly baffling. Miraculously confounding. How I loved her! I sensed an abrupt change in her mood...again. Bella reached up to stroke my face and then ran her fingers across my lips.

“I thought I wouldn’t feel this way for a long time? But I still *want* you.”

Stunning me again. It was simply *not possible* for a newborn to be distracted from her first hunt by sensuous contact.

“How can you even concentrate on that? Aren’t you unbearably thirsty?”

Bella gave me an irritated look and then closed her eyes. I removed my hands from her body to help her concentrate because, apparently, I *could* distract her from hunting by touching her. How wonderful...how implausible! As far as thirst went, the first day was always overwhelming and miserable for a newborn—at least until now. It seemed that Bella would skip her first day, her first year, and her first decade as a vampire. She was far more mature than I ever would have imagined. Jasper was never going to believe this.

Bella’s eyes popped open, the hunt once again her focus. She’d located a scent.

Uh oh. A mountain lion. A mountain lion for her first prey! Well...it was unlikely to hurt her, so I’d best just let her go. I followed a short distance behind, watching her move across the ground and into the trees seamlessly, choosing the path of least resistance. She located him in a tree and leaped silently above him, prepared to attack.

My gawd! It was huge—easily the biggest mountain lion I had seen in years! It was three times Bella’s size. I could hardly bear to watch, but I forced myself to remain still and not intervene. It went against my every instinct.

Suddenly, Bella leaped down to the giant cat on a branch that was still a good ten feet in the air. The startled lion turned to defend itself when Bella sprang, knocking them both to the ground. The fierce cat snarled and snapped and raked its claws across her, but she appeared not to notice as she sunk her teeth into its neck, hitting her mark perfectly. She drained the mountain lion eagerly and when she had finished, pushed it away and sprang upright.

Bellissima Bella! Brava!

The cat had done a number on her new dress, slicing four parallel lines through it, but without marking Bella’s glistening new skin. The tears were strategically located so that they gave one the sense of being revealing, without actually being so. One shoulder was hanging loose, the shoulder seam torn partway through. Bella was fussing with the fabric, checking her coverage and uselessly trying to pull the torn edges together.

“No bra,” I heard her mutter under her breath. Alice had been right about the undergarments. Not only did Bella look wonderfully enticing without them, but they would have been ruined on their first outing too.

“Hmm,” I murmured, leaning against a nearby tree to watch her. She looked a bit wild with her tangled hair and blood and dirt staining what remained of the silk dress.

“I guess I could have done that better,” Bella concluded, taking my studiousness for criticism.

“You did perfectly fine. It’s just that...it was much more difficult for me to watch than it should have been.” She looked at me with a question mark on her face.

“It goes against the grain letting you wrestle with lions. I was having an anxiety attack the whole time.”

“Silly,” she chided.

“I know. Old habits die hard. I like the improvements to your dress, though.” Bella didn’t seem to appreciate the admiration at the moment. Probably embarrassed.

“Why am I still thirsty?”

“Because you’re young.”

She sighed heavily. “And I don’t suppose there are any other mountain lions nearby.”

I shook my head. “Plenty of deer, though.”

She wrinkled her nose. “They don’t smell as good.”

“Herbivores. The meat-eaters smell more like humans.”

“Not that much like humans,” she argued petulantly.

“We could go back,” I suggested, teasing. “Whoever it was out there, if they were men, they probably wouldn’t even mind death if you were the one delivering it. In fact, they would think they were already dead and gone to heaven the moment they saw you.”

Bella wasn’t buying it. “Let’s go hunt some stinking herbivores.” I smiled at her disgruntlement.

We came upon a herd of mule deer along our route toward home and Bella took a large buck, while I took two smaller deer. I ran after my third with Bella right behind me, but as I was feeding, I noticed that she was not. Instead, her eyes were glued to me, watching my every move. Did I detect a note of...what? Appreciation? Triumph? Or perhaps she was just watching to learn.

“No longer thirsty?” I inquired when I’d finished drinking.

“You distracted me. You’re much better at it than I am.”

“Centuries of practice,” I joked.

“Just one,” she corrected, her eyes never leaving my face.

I laughed. “Are you done for today? Or did you want to continue?”

“Done, I think. I want to see Renesmee.” A look of longing crossed Bella’s face.

I reached for her hand and she moved in close. Instead of leading me toward home, though, she touched my face, stroking my cheekbones, my eyebrows, along my jaw. I kissed her palm and when she drew her lips toward mine, I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her eagerly to me. I kissed her again with all the passion I’d been forced to restrain until today.

Bella responded, her body trembling with my touch, though her arms remained loosely draped around my neck. *Probably trying not to hurt me*, I thought. She removed one arm and began to stroke my chest between the buttons of my shirt as I kissed her hungrily. *Mmm...* Not having to be so careful with her was highly arousing. Self-control had always been my watchword...something I’d had to concentrate on continuously while I was with her. Now I didn’t. I ran my hands down her curvaceous sides, feeling the shape of each rib, the way her waist curved inward below the last one and her hips curved outward again. I let my hands wander down to her buttocks, bare beneath her dress.

“Edward, I don’t have on any underwear!” Bella exclaimed.

I was surprised that she’d just now noticed. “No, Alice didn’t see the point.”

“Of course I want to wear underwear! With all this flipping around, anybody could see right up...”

"I know, darling. I apologize. I was indulging myself a little by not objecting." I flashed her her favorite crooked smile.

"Edward!" she chastised, but then started to laugh.

"You see, my love, it makes it so much easier to do this." I reached through the torn side seams of her skirt and cupped my hands around her firm little buttocks.

"Oh, Edward..." Bella gasped and pressed into me as our lips met, hard and demanding on both sides. By her ardent response, I assumed that I was forgiven.

As I gloried in the taste of her mouth, the firmness of her lips, the smoothness of her bare skin in my hands, Bella became equally enthralled with me, pulling my shirttail out of my trousers and running her hands up my bare back. I kissed her all the more fervently and she responded, pushing against me until her strength overcame my normally impeccable balance. I tipped over backwards, pulling Bella down on top of me. She squeezed me so hard on the way down that I felt my back ribs flex slightly before we hit the ground. It hurt, but it was absolutely worth it!

"Oops," Bella muttered as I laughed beneath her, enjoying being horizontal with my brand-new wife for the first time. "I didn't mean to tackle you like that. Are you okay?"

"Slightly better than *okay*," I responded, tremendously stimulated and eager to rip through what remained of her dress and make love right there on the soft ground. *Mmm...* But a little voice in my head reminded me that before this started she'd said she wanted to see our daughter. Reluctantly, I prompted her.

"Renesmee?"

Bella appeared to seriously consider remaining sprawled on top of me rather than returning home and I was all for that, but she needed to decide. I knew that Renesmee was impatient to see Bella too.

"Renesmee," Bella resolved, reluctantly standing up and yanking me up behind her. This powerful new Bella was going to be fun to play with, I could tell.

24. BET

As we ran toward home holding hands, Bella wanted to know more about our remarkable daughter. Like mother, like daughter. They were both remarkable.

“Tell me about her.”

“She’s like nothing else in the world...” I couldn’t even begin to describe Renesmee with mere words. She was more of an *experience*.

“She sleeps.”

“Really?”

“Quite well for a newborn. The only parents in the world who don’t need sleep, and our child already sleeps through the night. She has exactly your color eyes—so that didn’t get lost, after all. They’re so beautiful.” I smiled thinking of that wonderful gift. Bella’s eyes...deep wells of melted chocolate.

“And the vampire parts?” Bella inquired.

“Her skin seems about as impenetrable as ours. Not that anyone would dream of testing that.” Bella’s eyes got large as if I were suggesting it. “Of course no one would,” I reassured her.

“Her diet...well, she prefers to drink blood. Carlisle continues to try to persuade her to drink some baby formula, too, but she doesn’t have much patience with it. Can’t say that I blame her—nasty-smelling stuff, even for human food.”

“Persuade her?” Bella’s mouth dropped open in surprise. Already I was so accustomed to Renesmee’s extraordinary qualities that I’d forgotten how strange that must sound. I tried to clarify, but it was difficult.

“She’s intelligent, shockingly so, and progressing at an immense pace. Though she doesn’t speak—yet—she communicates quite effectively.”

“Doesn’t. Speak. *Yet.*”

Bella’s confusion was understandable, given that our daughter was still less than three days old. I slowed my stride to give her a little more thinking time.

“What do you mean, she communicates effectively?” Bella’s voice was becoming strained.

“I think it will be easier for you to...see for yourself. It’s rather difficult to describe.” Bella dropped the subject and took a moment to calm herself, though the next subject wasn’t exactly stress-free.

“Why is Jacob still here? How can he stand it? Why should he? Why should he have to suffer more?” I might have laughed at the absurdity of Bella’s last question if I were able to laugh about the whole Jacob development.

“Jacob isn’t suffering, though I might be willing to change his condition,” I hissed.

“Edward!” she chided, yanking me to a stop by pulling on my arm. I wouldn’t have imagined *that* possibility a few days ago! “How can you say that? Jacob has given up *everything* to protect us! What I’ve put him through—!”

Bella’s regret and remorse was so palpable it was almost its own entity. Her tone of voice implied that she couldn’t believe she’d behaved as she had. What did that mean? Had her feelings changed?

“You’ll see exactly how I can say that. I promised him that I would let him explain, but I doubt you’ll see it much differently than I do. Of course, I’m often wrong about your thoughts, aren’t I?” Obviously, I’d been wrong a lot today!

“Explain what?”

“I promised,” I said, shaking my head. “Though I don’t know if I really owe him anything at all anymore...” *Grrrr*.

“Edward, I don’t understand.” Bella was starting to get upset at my mysterious words and the reality certainly wasn’t worth that!

I tried to soothe her by stroking her cheek and I saw her angst fade away at my touch, though I thought she must be putting forth a lot of effort. “It’s harder than you make it look, I know. I remember.”

“I don’t like feeling confused,” she explained.

“I know. And so let’s get you home, so that you can see it all for yourself. Hmm.” I looked appreciatively at the dress that Bella was partially wearing. Though I enjoyed it, it wouldn’t protect her modesty in its current condition, so I unbuttoned my shirt and encouraged Bella to slip her arms through the sleeves.

“That bad?” Bella inquired, her eyebrows raised. I smiled and raised my eyebrows in reply when I noticed that she was surveying my half-naked self too. I was feeling less patient

about going home than I'd let on. I would much rather pull Bella onto the soft forest duff and spend some time getting reacquainted alone. I didn't know how long it would be before we could escape to our cottage...Bella's surprise birthday present. Perhaps she read my intention.

"I'll race you," she said suddenly. "No throwing the game this time!"

Okay, okay, I sighed.

"On your mark..."

I had no trouble staying ahead of her the whole way home, but when we reached the river, she took an early leap and flew past me through the air. When she came down, though, I realized we had a big problem. Jacob was waiting for us on the lawn, too close to Bella...much too close. I grabbed the tops of Bella's arms to hold her in place.

"Don't breathe," I warned. She froze, her eyes the only animated part of her body. "Carefully, Jacob. Maybe this isn't the best way—"

"You think it would be better to let her near the baby first? It's safer to see how Bella does with me. I heal fast."

Crazy mutt! He had no clue how dangerous this was, especially if Bella figured out why he was so intent on protecting Renesmee from her. That couldn't be making a lot of sense to Bella. The last time she'd seen Jacob, he'd had more antipathy for the baby than I did. On second thought...if he wanted to be so pushy, who was I to stand in his way?

"It's your neck, I guess." I was Pontius Pilate. I washed my hands of it. Besides, I shouldn't skew the outcome by helping Bella too much or Emmett wouldn't pay up.

Near the end of Bella's transformation, my brother had come to see me, knowing that I was feeling a lot better after Alice got her vision back and Bella's future was in it.

You up for that bet now?

By that time, Carlisle's office had taken on the atmosphere of a sanctuary. I *had* done a lot of praying in that room. Perhaps that was why everybody who came by either whispered or communicated silently with me. I just nodded at Emmett when he raised his eyebrows and held up a one hundred-dollar bill. He punched the air. *Woo-hoo!*

Emmett was betting that Bella would snap and I was betting that she wouldn't. I thought that Jacob's imprinting on Renesmee would upset Bella, but I couldn't see her attacking him...especially with the guilt she'd been expressing. I wondered if Jasper or Rose had entered

the pool. Jasper would definitely have bet on Bella ripping Jacob's face off; Rosalie would hope she did, but probably wouldn't bet on it.

Bella looked nervous and uncertain. I was too, but only for her sake.

"I gotta say it, Bells. You're a freak show."

I growled. "Watch yourself, mongrel." My patience with Jacob had worn pretty thin lately and insulting my wife wasn't going to win him any favors from me. Bella didn't seem to mind the insult, though probably she would allow him too much leeway due to guilt.

Jacob spoke again. "You still look like you—sort of. Maybe it's not the look so much as...you *are* Bella. I didn't think it would feel like you were still here. Anyway, I guess I'll get used to the eyes soon enough."

"You will?" Bella must have been wondering how that would happen when she knew we'd have to leave the area soon.

"Thanks," Jacob said to me. "I didn't know if you'd be able to keep it from her, promise or not. Usually, you just give her everything she wants."

"Maybe I'm hoping she'll get irritated and rip your head off," I replied.

Jacob was not as worried about that as he should be. I knew he would gladly sacrifice body parts for Renesmee, but I wasn't sure he realized that that's pretty much what he was risking by taunting Bella.

It was such a confusing situation! I couldn't be too angry at Jacob when he was devoted enough to risk his life for my daughter...and yet I could. On the one hand, what he could give her was not harmful, but actually might enhance her life. On the other hand, it was disturbing to have my wife's former lover be in love with my daughter.

At least I could see in his mind that the way Jacob loved Renesmee was pure...like an indulgent older brother. With Bella, he'd always been strong-headed and combative. I saw where it might be a lot of fun to watch Jacob dance to Renesmee's tune. Already, she was a fine fiddler. That made me smile.

"What's going on? Are you two keeping secrets from me?" Bella wanted to know.

Jacob rushed to brush off her question. "I'll explain later. First, let's get this show on the road."

I'd explicitly warned Jacob not to let Bella figure out what was going on before he told her his secret. I knew that that would not go well for him, but still, he was procrastinating the inevitable. And Bella's mind was already working on the mystery. It wouldn't take long before she put two-and-two together and came up with the truth.

Jacob stepped closer to Bella, encouraging her to move closer to him, but she remained frozen, my hands gripping her upper arms.

"C'mon, Bells. Do your worst." Bella didn't move.

"I'm getting older here, Bella. Okay, not technically, but you get the idea. Go on, take a whiff."

"Hold on to me," Bella implored. I could feel her anxiety in the stillness of her body. She took a tiny breath and a curious expression crossed her face. She sniffed again and I felt her relax under my fingers. And then she surprised us all.

"Huh. I can see what everyone's been going on about. You stink, Jacob."

In my astonishment and delight, I began hooting with laughter. Everyone was standing at the windows watching the unfolding drama, and from inside the house, Emmett's howling laughter rang out along with mine. Snickers and titters swept through the group. I exchanged my restraining grip on Bella for an embrace.

"I love you," I whispered in my darling's ear, still laughing. Bella was watching Jacob's reaction carefully. She must be a little bewildered by his change in attitude. He was being jocular without a hint of the animosity he'd always displayed toward me (and I toward him, to be honest). Bella didn't know that the rivalry part of our relationship had ended when Renesmee exited her body.

"Okay, so I passed, right?" Bella asked. "Now are you going to tell me what this big secret is?" Jacob began backpedaling faster and faster. I felt my amusement increase with his discomfort.

"It's nothing you need to worry about this second..." he stalled.

Emmett was getting excited anticipating Bella's strike. *Here it comes, Edward... This is it...any second now....* It would almost be worth losing a hundred dollars just to enjoy Emmett's reaction to Jacob's takedown. If Bella did it, it would be fast and furious.

Bella was staring at the reflective windows of the house, all ears.

“Renesmee,” she whispered, becoming still again. Either she’d caught the baby’s scent or she could hear Renesmee’s blood rushing in her veins, her heart pumping. I felt no particular concern, though. After our experiences today in the forest, I had every confidence that Bella would be fine with Renesmee.

“Come and see,” I encouraged her. “I know you can handle this.”

“You’ll help me?” she whispered nervously.

“Of course I will.”

“And Emmett and Jasper—just in case?”

“We’ll take care of you, Bella. Don’t worry, we’ll be ready. None of us would risk Renesmee. I think you’ll be surprised at how entirely she’s already wrapped us all around her little fingers. She’ll be perfectly safe, no matter what.”

Jacob’s tension rose astronomically. “Are you *sure*, bloodsucker? I don’t like this. Maybe she should wait—”

“You had your test, Jacob.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Bella needs to see *our* daughter. Get out of her way.”

I was losing my temper. The most annoying thing about Jacob’s new patronage of Renesmee was captured by that old saw: “You’re not losing a daughter. You’re gaining a son.” In my case, the “son” was a possessive, overprotective man-child and nervous ninny when it came to Renesmee. Not only that, but he had inserted himself into every decision that was, by all rights, Bella’s and mine to make. So far, I hadn’t been able to decide anything with regard to my daughter’s welfare without debating or defending it to Jacob. And I hadn’t yet figured out a way to get him to leave our home. I was feeling more sympathy with Charlie now than I ever had when I was courting his daughter.

With regard to Bella’s meeting Renesmee, Jacob had no authority over that, so in his fear and apprehension, he dashed into the house ahead of us to insert himself bodily between the two of them. I growled after him and briefly considered going for his throat myself. I might lose my self-control even if Bella did not. I turned to Bella and nudged her gently in the direction of the kitchen door.

“Shall we?”

She nodded, her eyes wide. I took her arm in mine and together we walked through the kitchen and into the living room. The family, though smiling warmly at Bella, was standing in a protective line in front of Rosalie, who held Renesmee. Jacob was positioning himself behind the family and in front of the baby.

When Bella caught her first glimpse of our daughter, she gasped in shock. “I was out just two days?”

Renesmee *had* changed a great deal in that time. She was almost twice as long and her entire body was able to support itself while hanging out of Rosalie’s arms stretching toward her mother. Her hair had grown to her shoulders and she looked into Bella’s eyes with a maturity that belied both her age and her size. Bella knew that Renesmee was conscious and aware even inside her womb, but I’m sure her physical presence was still quite a shock to her mother.

Nessie was showing Rosalie the ravaged, bloody image of the Bella she’d seen right after her birth.

“Yes, that’s her,” Rosalie responded. Renesmee reacted by looking straight at Bella and giving her a big, toothy smile in greeting. She was *thrilled* to see Bella...finally. She wanted to go to her immediately.

Bella automatically moved toward Renesmee and the whole family jumped into action. Emmett and Jasper formed a physical wall in front of Bella. I was holding her from behind. Carlisle and Esme guarded my brothers’ flanks to prevent Bella from doing an end run. Rosalie backed toward the front door, the nearest exit, and Jacob repositioned himself in front of her and the baby. Alice alone remained still and unruffled.

“Oh, give her some credit. She wasn’t going to do anything. You’d want a closer look, too.”

“I’m okay,” Bella told me, patting my restraining hand. “Keep close, though, just in case.”

I completely trusted her judgment at this point. If she said she was fine, then I was sure that she was fine. I checked in with Jasper’s thoughts and he was registering Bella’s emotion as calm. That was enough for me.

“Jaz, Em, let us through. Bella’s got this,” I told them.

“Edward, the risk—” Jasper was still nervous.

“Minimal,” I told him. “Listen, Jasper—on the hunt she caught the scent of some hikers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time...” Everyone but Alice reacted in astonishment.

“Edward! How could you be so irresponsible?” Carlisle was rigid with distress at this news.

“I know, Carlisle, I know. I was just plain stupid. I should have taken the time to make sure we were in a safe zone before I set her loose.”

Everyone else’s opinions on the subject registered in my head.

Well, that’s to be expected. Newborns are all the same. (Jasper)

So, what’s the big whoop? Everybody slips up sometimes. (Emmett)

Oh, poor Bella! She must be devastated at her mistake. (Esme)

Gross! That’s just disgusting. I knew she shouldn’t be near Nessie! (Jacob)

“Edward...” Bella protested. I was enjoying their reactions, knowing that the truth would be even more shocking to them. I grinned in expectation.

“He’s absolutely right to rebuke me, Bella. I made a huge mistake. The fact that you are stronger than anyone I’ve ever known doesn’t change that.”

“Tasteful joke, Edward,” Alice said, rolling her eyes. I’d meant that Bella was strong enough *not* to partake, while everybody thought I meant that she was too strong for me to control. I clarified.

“I wasn’t making a joke. I was explaining to Jasper why I know Bella can handle this. It’s not my fault everyone jumped to conclusions.”

“Wait. She didn’t hunt the humans?” Jasper was incredulous.

“She started to,” I said smiling in amusement. “She was entirely focused on the hunt.”

“What happened?” Carlisle asked eagerly.

“She heard me behind her and reacted defensively. As soon as my pursuit broke into her concentration, she snapped right out of it. I’ve never seen anything to equal her. She realized at once what was happening, and then...*she held her breath and ran away!*”

“Whoa,” Emmett murmured. “Seriously?”

“He’s not telling it right,” Bella objected. “He left out the part where I growled at him.”

That pleased Emmett. “Did ya get in a couple of good swipes?”

Bella was mortified. “No! Of course not.”

“Aw, what a waste,” Emmett complained. “And here you’re probably the one person who could take him—since he can’t get in your head to cheat—and you had a perfect excuse, too. I’ve been *dying* to see how he’d do without that advantage.”

Bella was actually offended. “I would never.”

I chuckled to myself.

“You see what I mean?” I said to Jasper, grinning from ear-to-ear.

“It’s not natural,” Jasper spoke unhappily under his breath. Bella’s behavior went against everything he knew about newborn vampires. I fist-bumped him on the shoulder, trying to get him to lighten up, but it didn’t work.

“She could have turned on you—she’s only hours old!” Esme fretted, worried both for Bella’s welfare and mine. “Oh, we should have gone with you.”

“Edward, please?” Bella was done with the postponements. She’d waited long enough to meet her daughter. Jasper was still blocking her way, though. As I’d told Bella, nobody wanted to risk Renesmee’s welfare.

Finally, Alice intervened. “Jaz, this isn’t anything you’ve seen before,” she murmured, her eyes meeting his. “Trust me.”

With Alice’s reassurance, Jasper moved to the side, but put one hand on Bella’s shoulder, just in case. Bella began to move toward Renesmee at a snail’s pace with Jasper keeping track of her mood and promoting calm as they went. Renesmee was getting more and more agitated with our slowness. She’d been waiting a lifetime to be held by her momma and the delays completely baffled her. She was leaning so far out of Rosalie’s arms toward Bella that her body was horizontal in space. When that didn’t get her there, she finally got fed up and just yowled, long and loud.

Everyone was startled into action at once, releasing Bella and darting to Renesmee’s side. We all patted and soothed and spoke reassuringly to her. Our shock was understandable. Until that moment, Renesmee had been completely silent. None of us had heard so much as a squeak out of her.

Jacob was distraught. “What’s the matter? Is she hurt? What happened?” He stepped in and reached for her and Rosalie passed her through the group to Jacob.

“No, she’s fine,” Rosalie assured him. Since Rose wouldn’t give her what she wanted, she demanded the same thing from Jacob. She pressed her palm against his face and then leaned toward her mother again. “See? She just wants Bella.”

If Bella were truly dangerous to Renesmee, she easily could have crushed her way through the group and snatched the baby away, since nobody was preventing her at that moment. But of course she didn’t. She was completely in control of herself. I looked up and saw that she was struggling with vampire tears.

“She wants me?” Bella whispered, as if she couldn’t believe it. I hurried to her and encouraged her forward.

“She’s been waiting for you for almost three days.”

Jacob stood clutching Renesmee in his big hands while she tried and tried to stretch her way to her mother, her little fingers grasping at thin air. Bella stared at our daughter, looking into her eyes as if trying to recognize her. Even though her face was less malleable and expressive than before her change, I saw a glimmer of light come into Bella’s eyes. Then her entire body relaxed as she stepped forward and took Renesmee in her arms...or tried to, anyway. She pulled the baby to her, but Jacob kept his hands on her too.

I felt a huge sense of relief on Renesmee’s part when finally she was in her mother’s arms. She had one thing on her mind as she placed her hand deliberately on Bella’s face. Everybody tensed at the same time, knowing what was coming. I merely watched Bella’s face to witness the moment when she would understand the phenomenon that was our daughter.

Bella began breathing in short gasps when Renesmee projected a single image into her mind. It was a picture of her mother’s face at the most extreme moment of her life—when she met her daughter for the first time just before her heart expired. Involuntarily, I clenched my muscles, remembering perfectly the mixed terror of Bella’s bleed-out, our suffocating baby, Rosalie’s out-of-control thirst, and cutting into my wife with a scalpel. The pain of those memories would never dim for me.

Jasper had braced to contain Bella, but she was maintaining her composure remarkably well. When Renesmee pulled her hand away, she smiled at Bella—showing all of her teeth—and waited for her mother’s response.

“What...was...*that*?” Bella gasped.

“What did you see?” Rosalie asked eagerly. “What did she show you?”

“She showed me that?” Bella whispered in shock.

I leaned into her ear and spoke softly, "I told you it was hard to explain, but effective as a means of communication."

"What was it?" Jacob repeated.

"Um. Me. I think. But I looked terrible."

"It was the only memory she had of you. She's letting you know that she's made the connection, that she knows who you are."

"But how did she do that?"

Renesmee was watching her mother's face and pulling on her mother's hair, waiting for the surprise to be over. Renesmee was used to the long pause that always followed when she first showed someone a picture. It was a pattern she recognized.

I ventured to answer Bella. "How do I hear thoughts? How does Alice see the future? She's gifted."

"It's an interesting twist," Carlisle pointed out to me. "Like she's doing the exact opposite of what you can."

"Interesting...I wonder if she inherited the trait from me, but it was turned 'inside-out' by being combined with Bella's genes. And what about the fact that she can put pictures *into* Bella's head, though I can't see Bella's thoughts."

"That sounds like the inside-out of what Bella does too. I never thought about Bella's 'silence' to your mind-reading as being a gift, but it seems to be manifesting that way in Renesmee."

This was an engrossing conversation, the genetics of the three of us. As far as we knew, our marriage was unique in the world, so what we had created together was a complete mystery to us all. Carlisle and I were also keeping up our conversation to take some of the attention away from Bella so that she could have some semblance of privacy in this most non-private of family scrums. We were all packed in together like turnips in a larder, even touching, but we could give Bella a little emotional space. This was a monumental event for her.

"I remember you, too," she whispered to Renesmee.

Jasper began to panic when Bella leaned in and kissed Renesmee on the forehead and smelled her scent, but the emotion he felt coming from Bella was calm and soft and he didn't move to take action.

“She’s fine,” Alice confirmed.

Jacob, though, was starting to unravel. “Haven't we experimented enough for one day? Okay, Bella’s doing great, but let’s not push it.”

“What is your *problem*, Jacob?” Bella’s voice revealed her stress. She tried to pull Renesmee out of Jacob’s hands, but he wouldn’t release her. He just stepped in closer until Renesmee was touching both Bella’s chest and his own.

Here it comes! Here it comes, bro! Emmett was getting geared up again, eagerly waiting for Bella to attack Jacob.

This was the kind of behavior that got under my skin. I had no authority over my own child without pushing the dog out of the way first. Bella didn’t seem to like it any more than I did. Her irritation showed, but Jacob was too frightened for Renesmee’s sake to back off. It didn’t seem to be entirely within his control. Still, it was uncalled-for.

“Just because I understand, it doesn’t mean I won’t throw you out, Jacob. Bella’s doing extraordinarily well. Don’t ruin this moment for her.”

“I’ll help him toss you, dog. I owe you a good kick in the gut.” Rosalie had taken a brutal kick from Jacob during Renesmee’s birth. That was yet another thing I owed Jacob for—Rose would agree, actually, except it annoyed her that Jacob had done the kicking—but he was using up his credit with me at an accelerating rate.

Bella stared at Jacob, observing him with her eyes slightly narrowed... thinking, analyzing the picture, and suddenly, the pieces all clicked together.

“No!” Bella’s mouth gaped open and her fists balled up. I recognized the imminent danger and threw my arms around her chest. Jacob snatched Renesmee out of Bella’s hands and whisked her to the back of the group, and Jasper stepped fully in front of Bella where Jacob had been. I was sure that Bella was furious, but furious looked a lot different on the vampire Bella than it had on the human Bella. It didn’t look as dramatic, but perhaps it was all the more dangerous for that.

“Rose,” Bella hissed softly. “Take Renesmee.” Her voice was deliberately controlled, but the anger was still obvious in her expression. Rose did as Bella asked—immediately.

Ho, ho, ho...she’s gonna lose it! Emmett was already starting to gloat.

Rosalie thought, *Don’t do it, Bella. Let me!* She did have a grudge to settle, sort of, but now I also knew that she had bet in the pool along with me. If Jasper was in too, I knew how he

had bet. Not that the bet was important. I shouldn't have put into it, but Emmett dared to doubt Bella and I couldn't let that ride, especially if I'd been sure he was wrong...which I wasn't.

At that moment, with my arms still around her chest, Bella addressed me.

"Edward, I don't want to hurt you, so please let go of me." Her voice was like a rubberband stretched taut. I wasn't at all sure I should release her, for her sake as much as anything else.

"Go stand in front of Renesmee," she advised. That made sense to me. I really wasn't worried about her attacking Jacob. I wouldn't mind that. I only cared about my wife and daughter and Bella was her own woman, so I stepped away. I didn't need to protect Renesmee from her mother, of that I was sure.

"You didn't." Bella snarled at Jacob, crouched and stepped toward him.

Jacob took a step back and held up his hands in surrender. "You know it's not something I can control."

Bella did not relent. "You *stupid* mutt! How *could* you? *My baby!*"

"It wasn't my idea, Bella!" Jacob was skipping backward away from Bella and out the front door as she followed him, step-by-step, maintaining her hunting crouch.

"I've held her all of *one* time, and already you think you have some moronic wolfy claim to her? She's *mine!*" I felt the corners of my mouth rise, though I worked to hide it.

"I can share," Jacob whined, backing across the lawn toward the trees. Like *that* was what Bella had in mind. He was digging himself deeper and deeper and my amazing, powerful wife was running him off. It's more than I'd been able to do.

"Pay up," Emmett said to Rosalie, smirking. I thought he was being premature. She hadn't actually attacked yet.

"How dare you *imprint* on *my* baby? Have you lost your mind?"

"It was involuntary!" Jacob had reached the tree line and was still backing up. Seth and Leah padded up beside him and Leah snapped in Bella's direction.

"Bella, would you try to listen for just a second? Please?" Jacob begged. "Leah, back off."

"Why should I listen?" Bella had not let up at all.

“Because you’re the one who told me this. Do you remember? You said we belonged in each other’s lives, right? That we were family. You said that was how you and I were supposed to be. So...now we are. It’s what you wanted.”

“You think you’ll be part of my family as my *son-in-law!*” Bella shrieked. Emmett was having too much fun with all of this. And to be honest, I was too.

“Stop her, Edward,” Esme murmured. “She’ll be unhappy if she hurts him.” I moved forward a few steps to be closer to Bella, but I felt this had to be her battle. Carlisle came up beside me.

“No! How can you even look at it that way? She’s just a baby, for crying out loud!”

“That’s my *point!*”

“You know I don’t think of her that way! Do you think Edward would have let me live this long if I did? All I want is for her to be safe and happy—is that so bad? So different from what you want?”

Bella growled fiercely at him and still, she did not attack. Her self-control was unbelievable. This instant maturity was unheard of.

“Amazing, isn’t she?” I said quietly to Carlisle.

“She hasn’t gone for his throat even once,” he replied in admiration. *She’s gifted, too, Edward.*

“I’m sure of it,” I replied in a low voice.

“Fine, you win this one,” Emmett conceded, grumbling.

“You’re going to stay away from her,” Bella ordered the cowering dog.

“I can’t do that!”

“Try. Starting *now!*”

“It’s not possible. Do you remember how much you wanted me around three days ago? How hard it was to be apart from each other? That’s gone for you now, isn’t it?”

Bella just gave him a hard look, not granting Jacob anything.

“That was her. From the very beginning. We had to be together, even then.”

I had not seen that coming. It explained everything! Bella hadn't been in love with Jacob when she was pregnant! *It was Renes—oh my word! Renesmee was pulling toward him too?! If Renesmee had the same number of chromosomes as Jacob...! Could Renesmee imprint on Jacob?* I was flabbergasted by the thought, which diverted my attention at the crucial moment.

"C'mon, Bells! Nessie likes me, too."

"What...did you *call* her?"

"Well, that name you came up with is kind of a mouthful and—"

"You nicknamed my daughter after the Loch Ness Monster?" Bella's voice slid upward out of human hearing range.

I saw Seth leap forward a fraction of a second before I could react. To my horror, Bella was already in the air going directly for Jacob's throat. I threw my arms around her, but not before we all heard the sickening *crunch* of breaking bones.

25. MERRY MEET

Bella was distressed. Everything had been fine until Jacob made the huge blunder of letting Renesmee's nickname slip out of his mouth. It was just one irritant too many in the emotional first day of a new vampire. Poor Seth was in pain, but Carlisle examined his broken bones—shoulder and collarbone—and taped them up. They would heal within the hour with no lasting damage.

The phone was ringing again...Charlie's special ring. Esme had talked to him earlier in the day, but he hadn't stopped calling the useless phone number. Carlisle and I looked at one another, but just let the phone ring since Esme wasn't available to answer it. We should probably have Alice answer it the next time it rang and let him think he'd finally reached the CDC. If she confirmed that Bella was there and alive, then maybe he would stop calling.

We have to figure out what to do about Charlie very soon. A policeman isn't going to stop trying to make contact with his daughter, Carlisle noted.

I grimaced remembering Bella's wacky idea for handling Charlie. She thought she would go see Charlie and let him contrive his own explanation for her changed condition. Then she would just go along with whatever he came up with. I hadn't vetoed the idea because at the time she was deathly ill and I didn't want to stress her.

I would suggest the Alice idea to Carlisle when he and I had a chance to talk. If we changed the scenario—"...the phone company reassigned our number to someone else by mistake..."—that would buy us more time before we'd absolutely have to make a decision. Bella needed a little time to adjust to the idea of staging her death. That was the safest thing to do for everybody involved, though I knew it would be extraordinarily hard on Bella.

None of the rest of the Cullens had had this problem. Rosalie had wanted her life back, but not because she missed her parents. Their greed had set her up for her gruesome near-death. Esme had no problem abandoning her life since she'd already done that by committing suicide. My family had died before me and Alice didn't remember hers. Jasper had been separated from his family for years before he was changed. Carlisle knew that his father would kill him if he returned and Emmett was happy to move forward with Rosalie.

Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!

Speak of the devil...Emmett was literally whooping it up—silently, to avoid setting Bella off again—as he collected his hundred dollars from Rosalie upstairs. Despite losing my bet, I felt

vindicated. My annoyance at Jacob's constant presence wasn't just residual competitiveness. If only I had an excuse to snap at him myself.

"I'm so sorry, Seth. I should have been closer."

I hadn't been holding Bella back as she vented her anger at Jacob. I really didn't think she would attack, but wasn't particularly concerned if she did, so I was further away from her than I should have been when she lost it. If I hadn't been so distracted at the crucial moment, I'd have realized that Seth or Leah would jump in to protect Jacob. He didn't phase to protect himself because he hadn't wanted to get into a real battle with Bella. Nobody would win in such a scenario.

"Seth, I—" Bella was still trying to apologize. It was so unnecessary for her to feel badly. It was much more my fault than hers (and Jacob's too, for being so extraordinarily irritating).

"Don't worry about it, Bella, I'm totally fine." Seth was being gracious. In truth, it was good that he had protected Jacob from real injury. Quileute legend holds that vampire venom is deadly to the wolves. I don't doubt it, considering that all the other legends about "the cold ones" are true.

Seth winced as Carlisle finished his temporary splinting job and Bella apologized again. Esme was right. Bella was feeling much worse than she ought to about attacking Jacob.

"Bella, love, no one is judging you. You're doing so well."

"I'm a bad person," she moaned, her head in her hands.

"Of course you aren't. I should have—"

"Stop that," Bella interrupted.

"Lucky thing Ness—Renesmee's not venomous," Seth said, trying to defuse Bella's distress. "'Cause she bites Jake all the time."

"She does?" Bella was startled.

"Sure. Whenever he and Rose don't get dinner in her mouth fast enough. Rose thinks it's pretty hilarious."

I did too, actually.

I was getting more and more impatient. I just wanted to take my bride away to celebrate our reunion and our one-month anniversary in private. Bella and I needed time alone to get to know one another again. Bella was still Bella, of course, but she'd undergone such tremendous changes so quickly that we both had some adjustments to make. It would be nice if we could get some decompression time to ourselves...soon!

It's not like we could leave the homestead, not with a newborn baby to look after and Bella a newborn vampire. That's why the family's birthday gift to Bella (and me) was so perfect. Esme, Emmett, and Alice were finishing up the cottage renovation so that Bella and I could move in. What a tremendous relief that would be! I wasn't sure how much longer it would take as I hadn't seen any of them for the last few hours.

I expected Bella to be a bit unsteady for a while, though not in the way she used to be—quite the opposite, in fact. She was as graceful and physically capable as any vampire. I was sure she could play a good game of badminton. I chuckled to myself at the image of her playing Mike Newton now.

Bella was also feeling disoriented for having missed more than two days of her life to unconsciousness. A number of important things had happened during that time. Seth and I brought her up-to-date with pack news, which, fortunately, was all good. The treaty was still in effect due to Jacob's intervention as Ephraim's heir, and Renesmee was safe from the pack because Jacob had imprinted on her.

Along with everything else she was going through, Bella had been brooding about her family since she'd awakened. The reality of never seeing them again was starting to sink in and she was not resolved to it. Jasper had told Bella when she asked that, *yes, we would have to move away*. It was the only way to protect Charlie from the Volturi.

There was one thing that I hadn't yet told Bella. While we were on our honeymoon, Alice had had a vision that the Volturi guard was coming to check whether she had been changed to a vampire. Alice then sent Aro a wedding invitation just to confuse the issue a bit and perhaps get them to postpone their visit. It would be better for us to travel to Italy to keep the Volturi far away from Renesmee. She would be a prime candidate for Aro's collection of exceptional vampires.

Besides that worry and the planning we needed to do for it, Bella had just become acquainted with another concerning issue. Carlisle had set up a schedule for Renesmee to be measured so that we could gauge how fast she was growing and perhaps predict when she would reach maturity. Bella had caught on quickly when Carlisle came to the living room with

his tape measure and scale. Renesmee changed by the hour. If her current rate of growth continued, she could become old and die right before our eyes. It terrified us all.

Jacob and Rose had brought Renesmee inside to be measured at 6:00—we all congregated at the designated times—and she submitted to the now ritual procedure. When Carlisle was finished, Renesmee insisted that Rose turn her over to her mother. The two “nannies” were worried about Bella’s self-control after her attack on Jacob, but I knew that that anger had been very specific. It had nothing to do with Renesmee’s safety.

With trepidation, Rose handed Renesmee to Bella and she happily settled into her mother’s arms. Jasper and I stayed close, just in case, and Jacob wisely kept his distance, though he was practically shaking with anxiety.

Nessie was anxious to share her recent experiences with her mother and began showing them to her in reverse order, beginning with Bella’s attack on Jacob. Bella and I both found it amusing until she got to the *crunch* part. The replay was disturbing for another reason too. It was obvious that Renesmee’s eyes never left Jacob during the scene. She was expressing a particular possessiveness toward Jacob as if he belonged to her.

“Oh, wonderful,” Bella groused. “Perfect.”

“It’s just because he tastes better than the rest of us,” I told her, though I was at least as annoyed as she was. My theory about Renesmee’s ability to imprint on someone was slightly strengthened, much to my dismay.

“I told you she likes me, too,” Jacob felt obliged to point out. He was right. She certainly did.

Renesmee continued showing Bella other activities of her day...getting her hair brushed, being measured, drinking her cup of bloo....

Instantly, I snatched Renesmee out of Bella’s arms and stepped away with her. Jasper pinned Bella’s arms behind her back, though he didn’t know what had caused my reaction. It hadn’t occurred to me beforehand that Renesmee might do that.

“What did I do?” Bella asked, wholly calm and lucid. She was submitting to Jasper’s restraining hold, though she was strong enough to break away from him if she chose to. Bella’s behavior was so unexpected that her lack of aggression didn’t register for a moment...then it did.

“But she was remembering being thirsty,” I argued in my own defense. “She was remembering the taste of human blood.” Even if nothing else did, that memory should have provoked Bella! I’d even felt the burn in my throat.

“Yes, and...?” Bella queried.

It was utterly impossible, but there it was.

“And nothing at all, it seems. The overreaction is mine this time. Jazz, let her go,” I said.

Jasper was even more freaked out than I was after he realized what had happened.

“I can’t understand. I can’t bear this,” he groaned. Then he marched swiftly to the back door and started running toward the river, knowing he would find Alice at the cottage. She would help him get beyond his too firmly established ideas of how newborns behaved. He was quite rigid in his beliefs on that score...not that he didn’t have a lot of experience backing up his assumptions.

Bella was just unique. She was marvelous! Once again, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude that she had survived having me in her life and that she was mine forever. It was hard to take in. And we had Renesmee too! My cup runneth over.

I placed Renesmee back in Bella’s arms. Right away, she replayed Jasper’s exit to Bella in the form of a question.

“He’ll be back,” I told her gently. “He just needs a moment alone to readjust his perspective on life.” Bella was confounding us all. I smiled to myself. She had always confounded me.

“Is he mad at me?” Bella inquired softly.

“No. Why would he be?” I was startled that the idea had even occurred to her.

“What’s the matter with him, then?”

“He’s upset with himself, not you, Bella. He’s worrying about...self-fulfilling prophecy, I suppose you could say.”

“How so?” Carlisle cut in, having observed Jasper’s exit with curiosity.

“He’s wondering if the newborn madness is really as difficult as we’ve always thought, or if, with the right focus and attitude, anyone could do as well as Bella. Even now—perhaps he only has such difficulty because he believes it’s natural and unavoidable. Maybe if he expected

more of himself, he would rise to those expectations. You're making him question a lot of deep-rooted assumptions, Bella."

"But that's unfair," Carlisle said. "Everyone is different; everyone has their own challenges. Perhaps what Bella is doing goes beyond the natural. Maybe this is her gift, so to speak."

"That's an interesting theory, and quite plausible," I agreed.

Carlisle and I had talked about this earlier. It was obvious that Bella was remarkable in her self-control, but I thought her gift might go much further. I had a strong sense that there was more to it than we'd yet seen. Still, it was possible that having chosen this life instead of being forced into it like the rest of us were had a great impact on the outcome.

"Have you ever seen an equivalent to self-control as a talent?" I asked my father. "Do you really think that's a gift, or just a product of all her preparation?"

"It's slightly similar to what Siobhan has always been able to do, though she wouldn't call it a gift."

Carlisle explained that Siobhan, his friend from the Irish coven, seems able to decide what outcome she wants in a particular situation and then make it come about. She considered her gift to be simple "good planning," but Carlisle was pretty sure it was more than that.

While we continued our discussion of vampire gifts in that coven and others, Bella wandered off toward the glass wall cradling Renesmee in her arms. Renesmee continued showing her mother her experiences of the day and then of the days before when Bella was unconscious.

To my surprise, Jacob had sat down on the couch and was nodding off next to Seth. It seemed we had all made a tacit agreement to give Bella some time and space with her daughter. It was more trouble to block out their interaction than not, so I got the gist of it. Renesmee was still so new to me too that I was as curious about her as Bella was.

Renesmee wanted to share everything about herself with her momma. Since she was still so young, that was possible to do in a relatively short time. She showed Bella how the sparrows hopped toward her when she was in the woods with Jacob. He was the only adult in her life that living creatures did not run away from in terror. Then Renesmee showed Bella the baby formula that she hated and the song I sang to her when we sat with Bella during her transformation. That was a happy day in Renesmee's mind because it was the first time she got to be with both her mother and her father, even though Bella couldn't respond to her.

Carlisle, Rosalie, and I sat down to talk about genetics. Carlisle hadn't gotten Nessie's DNA results back yet. We were speculating that Renesmee might have the same number of chromosomes as Jacob based on other hybrid species like mules, and tigers and ligers. There was the interesting side question of whether she would be fertile and if so, with what kind of creature? Human? Wolf? Vampire? Her own kind (if any existed)? Such matches in other species sometimes were able to produce offspring and sometimes not. I could tell that Carlisle was a little excited about the possibility of the Cullens producing a family tree, even if it was more of a bush than a tree.

After nearly an hour, Renesmee began to fall asleep and her stories faded into the colorful dreams that Bella said she'd experienced on Isle Esme. It was interesting to realize that Bella had been dreaming Renesmee's dreams before she even knew that our daughter was growing inside of her. Bella found she could watch Renesmee's dreams now by holding the baby's hand to her cheek. I could tell she enjoyed watching her daughter dream, just as I had always enjoyed listening to Bella talk in her sleep.

I'll take the baby for you tonight so you and Bella can have a private reunion, Rosalie offered, grinning at me in the fashion of her husband, eyebrows twitching. Even so, I couldn't help grinning myself. I nodded my thanks. We'd all been careful about not alerting Bella to her birthday surprise.

Carlisle noticed our exchange and commented on the absence of the rest of our family. *They should be almost finished out there, I should think.*

I sighed. It had been an amazing day...one of the best of my life. My Bella had come back to me and I wanted never to be separated from her again. I'd even declined to go outside with Carlisle to translate for Sam. Jacob had gone to the reservation to explain his new attachment to Renesmee, and he brought Sam back with him to reaffirm the treaty with Carlisle. I didn't particularly want my father out there with Sam in his wolf form anyway, even though I believed Jacob would protect him. Without a translator, Sam would just have to talk to Carlisle man-to-vampire. He had no reason to fear Carlisle anyway. He should know that by now.

All I wanted now was to be alone with Bella. We had been through so much in the last two-plus weeks and we'd only had two weeks prior to that to be together before the drama started. I loved her beyond all restraint and my relief at having her back was profound. I just wanted to hold her, touch her, kiss her, and revel in her new self. The means of expression would be different, but beneath the newness of her was my Bella.

We're coming! We're coming!

Hilarious joke, Alice. “Finally,” I said aloud and began watching for our missing family members through the window. Jasper had joined them as I’d expected he would, and they were all smiling and laughing when they entered the house. They’d made their deadline with a few hours to spare. Alice skipped gleefully ahead of the group.

“Happy birthday!” she hollered at Bella.

Bella had completely forgotten the date and Alice knew that the surprise was still a surprise. My tiny sister held out the beribboned house key and dropped it into Bella’s hand, which Bella had had to free from beneath Renesmee. Our Nessie was such a good sleeper!

Bella still didn’t get it.

“No one starts counting on the actual day of birth. Your first birthday is at the year mark, Alice,” Bella argued. Several of us smiled at that comment.

“We’re not celebrating your vampire birthday. Yet. It’s September thirteenth, Bella. Happy nineteenth birthday!”

Indeed, Bella had been reborn on the day she was born.

26. REUNITED

“No. No way!” Bella objected vehemently to Alice’s announcement. “No, this doesn’t count. I stopped aging three days ago. I am eighteen forever.”

My wife had always had this odd obsession with being older than me in human years. The fact that I almost lapped her by a century never seemed to quite sink in.

Alice was breaking the news. “Whatever. We’re celebrating anyway, so suck it up.” That wasn’t entirely true. Bella and I were the only ones who would be celebrating, which was the whole point.

“Are you ready to open your present?” There was only one right answer to Alice’s question.

“Presents,” I amended, as I pulled the key to Bella’s Ferrari from my pocket and smoothed out the blue ribbon attached to it.

“Mine first.”

How could such a tiny person be so pushy?

“Mine is closer,” I pushed back.

Alice stuck her tongue out at me. “But look at how she’s *dressed*. It’s been killing me all day. That is clearly the priority.”

Bella hadn’t changed from her shredded silk dress and my white oxford shirt. I had located a shirt to put on once I realized that Bella’s eyes were glued to my half-naked body. She was also twining her fingers together, trying not to touch me, I guessed. The electricity between us had been intense all day. Probably, she wanted to avoid giving everyone a repeat of our “R-rated” performance from earlier. Once my thoughts headed in that direction, I almost forgot that I was still arguing with Alice. I didn’t much care about the outcome, actually, only about being alone with Bella.

“I know—I’ll play you for it. Rock, paper, scissors,” Alice was saying.

I sighed. That game could go on all night between Alice and me, so I quickly gave in. It would get us to the cottage faster anyway.

“Why don’t you just tell me who wins?” I suggested.

Alice grinned happily. "I do. Excellent."

"It's probably better that I wait for morning, anyway. I think it might be more fun if Jacob was awake for the big reveal, don't you agree?" I smiled crookedly at Bella. "So that someone there is able to express the right level of enthusiasm?"

Bella grinned in reply. We both knew that she would have a hard time appreciating what was waiting in the garage for her. Jacob, though, would know exactly what he was looking at when he saw the Ferrari F430 under the tarp. He'd probably wet himself, which would be an appropriate response to that rocket-on-wheels.

"Yea," Alice cheered. "Bella, give Ness—Renesmee to Rosalie."

"Where does she usually sleep?" Bella wondered.

"In Rose's arms. Or Jacob's. Or Esme's. You get the picture. She has never been set down in her entire life. She's going to be the most spoiled half-vampire in existence."

I laughed at the potential truth in that, though I didn't think it would do Nessie any harm. She would outgrow it too soon. I hadn't taken a turn because I'd been at Bella's side every night since delivering the baby. Perhaps it was for the best.

Rosalie smiled companionably at Bella as she took Renesmee into her capable arms. "She is also the most *unspoiled* half-vampire in existence. The beauty of being one of a kind," Rose pointed out.

"Let's go, let's go," Alice barked impatiently, directing Bella toward the kitchen door.

"Is it outside?"

"Sort of," Alice waffled.

"Enjoy your gift," Rosalie called to Bella as we left the house. "It's from all of us. Esme especially."

Maybe Rose and Bella really would be sisterly now that Renesmee had arrived. I was starting to think that my child was magical in many different ways. She seemed to be healing Rosalie's deep-seated wounds to an extent.

"Aren't you coming, too?" Bella turned around as she suddenly realized that nobody else was following us out.

"We'll give you a chance to appreciate it alone." Rosalie smiled at her own eyebrow-raising thoughts, which I would not repeat. "You can tell us about it...later."

Emmett hooted with laughter. More eyebrow-wagging thoughts. Those two were having just a bit too much fun at our expense. Too bad I'd played the gentleman by ignoring their newlywed antics all those years ago. It would be less effective to reciprocate in kind now.

After jumping over the river, Bella and I followed Alice through the woods at high speed for five minutes until she stopped short. Then, in a feat of bravery, Alice leaped onto Bella's back with just a brief warning. Bella was amazing—any other new vampire would have defended herself instantly, but Bella stayed calm. Alice's intent was to make herself tall enough to hold her hands over Bella's eyes before unveiling the secret.

I sighed. Sometimes when Alice was making up for her lost youth, I felt like we had another child in the family. We'd gotten so used to indulging her, though, that I didn't expect it ever to change. I interlaced my fingers with Bella's to lead her forward. Despite her objections, we did things Alice's way...as usual.

"Just a few seconds more, Bella," I whispered, "Then she'll go annoy someone else."

"You might be a little more appreciative," Alice scolded me. "This is as much for you as it is for her."

"True. Thank you again, Alice."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay."

Alice switched to a film director's voice for the big reveal.

"Stop there. Turn her just a little to the right. Yes, like that. Okay. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Bella replied.

Alice removed her hands from Bella's eyes. When Bella saw the stone cottage, she froze into stillness.

"What do you think?" Alice demanded. Bella's mouth opened but no words came out. She was literally speechless.

"Esme thought we might like a place of our own for a while, but she didn't want us too far away," I explained softly in Bella's ear. "And she loves any excuse to renovate. This little place has been crumbling away out here for at least a hundred years."

Bella still could not speak. Alice, worried that Bella's silence meant she didn't like her gift, started peppering her with questions and proposing solutions for problems that didn't exist

until Bella told her to “be quiet.” The birthday girl continued to gaze at the cottage, taking it all in, before verifying what she saw.

“You’re giving me a house for my birthday?”

“Us,” I interjected. “And it’s no more than a cottage. I think the word *house* implies more legroom.”

“No knocking my house,” Bella chided.

“You like it,” Alice ventured. Bella shook her head no.

“Love it?” Alice guessed. Bella nodded.

“I can’t wait to tell Esme!”

“Why didn’t she come?”

Alice fumbled around for an answer.

“Oh, you know...they all remember how you are about presents. They didn’t want to put you under too much pressure to like it.”

“But of course I love it. How could I not?”

“They’ll like that.” Alice patted Bella’s arm and then tried to find a delicate way to escape. “Anyhoo, your closet is stocked. Use it wisely. And...I guess that’s everything.”

“Aren’t you going to come inside?”

Alice eased her way backwards. “Edward knows his way around. I’ll stop by...later. Call me if you can’t match your clothes right. Jaz wants to hunt. See you.”

“That was weird,” Bella commented after Alice had disappeared into the woods. “Am I really that bad? They didn’t have to stay away. Now I feel guilty. I didn’t even thank her right. We should go back, tell Esme—”

“Bella, don’t be silly. No one thinks you’re that unreasonable.”

“Then what—”

“Alone time is their other gift. Alice was trying to be subtle about it.” In the time-honored Cullen tradition.

“Oh.”

I saw a look cross Bella's face and I thought I knew what it meant. What it meant for me was that I'd better get my wife inside immediately.

"Let me show you what they've done," I said quickly, taking Bella's hand. She didn't move, but instead laughed quietly.

"Do I get to hear the joke?" I inquired.

"It's not a very good one. I was just thinking—today is the first and last day of forever. It's kind of hard to wrap my head around it. Even with all this extra room for wrapping." We chuckled together.

I gestured toward the arched cottage door, encouraging Bella to unlock it. She put the key with the pink ribbon into the lock and turned it.

"You're such a natural at this, Bella; I forget how very strange this all must be for you. I wish I could *hear* it."

Bella's mental silence had never bothered me more than it did now. She had given up her human life because of me, and though she'd always said that that was what she wanted, I couldn't know for sure. Now that it was done and there was no going back, her feelings were more of a mystery than ever, since her face was harder to read too.

Her body, on the other hand, was speaking loudly to me. *Mmm....* My impatience finally got the better of me and I whisked Bella into my arms.

"Hey!"

"Thresholds are part of my job description," I explained. "But I'm curious. Tell me what you're thinking about right now." I was hoping she felt as exhilarated as I did, but I didn't think it was possible. I pushed the door open and carried Bella through.

"Everything," she answered. "All at the same time, you know. Good things and things to worry about and things that are new. How I keep using too many superlatives in my head. Right now, I'm thinking that Esme is an artist. It's so perfect!"

I was seeing the finished renovation for the first time and it was more beautiful than Alice had shown me...absolutely stunning. Furnished and decorated, it had a timeless quality that made it feel like it had been there forever. Esme was gifted at creating inventive and atmospheric interiors. And this one, with its stone floors and walls, and kiva fireplace in the corner was the coziest I'd seen her do.

“We’re lucky Esme thought to add an extra room. No one was planning for Ness—Renesmee.” *Oops.*

“Not you, too,” Bella groaned.

“Sorry, love. I hear it in their thoughts all the time, you know. It’s rubbing off on me.” Time to change the subject. “I’m sure you’re dying to see the closet. Or, at least I’ll *tell* Alice that you were, to make her feel good.”

“Should I be afraid?”

“Terrified.”

I carried Bella into the hallway with its succession of small arches that made it feel like a medieval stone castle in miniature.

“That will be Renesmee’s room. They didn’t have time to do much with it, what with the angry werewolves...”

Bella laughed in a relieved sort of way.

The room was empty and white with a pale wood floor. The first thing we’d need was a crib. If she stayed nights with us at the cottage—which is what I expected, most nights, anyway—she definitely would be in a bed at night.

“Here’s our room. Esme tried to bring some of her island back here for us. She guessed that we would get attached.”

Now that it was decorated, the room was remarkably similar to the master bedroom on Isle Esme. Esme had put in a king-size bed and dressed it in white with mosquito netting encasing it in a white cloud. The pale wood floor was the color of beach sand and the walls the color of the sky on a sunny day. The garden beyond the double French doors was fully landscaped with roses climbing the walls and hyacinths, small evergreen shrubs, and ferns planted around the pond. It was gorgeous and wonderfully scented.

“Oh.” Bella was speechless again.

“I know,” I whispered. Memories of our honeymoon flooded over me as we both gazed silently around the space. When I saw Alice’s masterpiece, I laughed.

“The closet is through those double doors. I should warn you—it’s bigger than this room.”

Bella's eyes were regarding me in a way that fueled the slow-burning fire I'd been too aware of all day. It was hard to take in how beautiful she was with her glorious new body. More than anything, I just wanted to gaze upon her naked body and touch her and be joined to her.

"We're going to tell Alice that I ran right to the clothes," Bella murmured, bringing her lips close to mine. Her sweet breath washed over my face and her fingers worked their way into my hair. "We're going to tell her I spent hours in there playing dress-up. We're going to *lie*."

Bella's words released the restraint that had kept my desire in check all day, and raw desire surged through my body. A deep moan rumbled in my chest as my lips found hers. All the love and hunger and need I felt for her came pouring out and, for the first time, I held back nothing. Bella responded as never before, her excitement urging me on. With our lips locked together, I set her on her feet to free my hands for urgent necessities. I lost patience immediately with the buttons on her shirt and sent them flying when I tore it apart. Bella's hands grasped the hem of my shirt and ripped it decisively from bottom to top, and then yanked it off my shoulders. When her silky hands caressed my chest, I shredded what remained of the bodice of her dress and it fell softly to her waist. *My beautiful, beautiful Bella...*

The last time I'd seen Bella without her clothes, she was lying on Carlisle's surgical table, still half-human, the scars and bruises from her pregnancy ordeal not yet faded. I'd loved her body then too, but desire was tempered by anxiety and sadness. All I felt now was joy and lust...powerful lust.

I simply could not wait any longer. I wrenched Bella's skirt into two pieces and the thin fabric hiding the rest of her from me puddled onto the floor. She yanked the front of my trousers apart, bursting the zipper. Her hands were all over me in an instant, skimming, caressing...*ahhh...* Bella pressed herself against me forcefully as my hands explored her naked skin. Then with an unexpected swell of strength, she upended me and we toppled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Neither of us paid any heed in our frenzy of passion.

Bella was even more physically stunning as a vampire than as a human, though I would have thought it impossible. Her smooth white skin glowed in the low bedroom light, which highlighted every elegant angle and provocative curve. Rather than collapse at my slightest touch, her flesh now held firm in my hands. I could squeeze her and stroke her without concern.

I slid one hand between her legs and felt her open for me. Though the surface texture of her was different, the soft red hair and the profound wetness that met my fingers were the same.

"Bella, I need you now..." I moaned, rolling my body on top of hers.

“Yes, yes, yes...,” she whispered as her hand stroked my rigid penis. *Ahhh!* The sensation was even more intense than I had remembered. Bella raised her knees and guided me to her center. As I entered her slowly, savoring the feeling, I threw back my head and shut my eyes in pleasure. A growl escaped from my throat.

“Edward, I love you...” Bella gasped as she raised her hips to meet me. She was firm and silky smooth inside, and her flesh yielded to me as I pushed into her. The shocking contrast of ice in fire was gone. She felt naturally warm inside, slightly hotter than me.

“I love you too, my darling,” I whispered as her slick walls slid back and then clung to me. I bent to kiss her neck but in the excitement of the moment, I pressed my teeth into the side of her throat instead. The taboo had been lifted. She moaned and the titillating sound drove me hard into her depths. I pulled away, pushed into her, and pulled away again with no restraint. Bella was panting as she grasped my buttocks in her hands and pulled me back with force, burying me inside her. I growled loudly and began moving faster and with more purpose. Bella shrieked.

Before I knew what had happened, I was on my back beneath her, her lips pressing against mine almost to the point of pain. This was an altogether new experience. I was used to guarding Bella’s vulnerability from my density and strength, but I was *not* used to being vulnerable to hers. Never before had she had the power to physically hurt me, as she did now. I sensed that she was trying not to squeeze me too tightly or press against me too forcefully, but she lost her focus periodically and my ribs creaked in complaint. That discomfort was quickly lost, though, in the overwhelming pleasure she was giving me.

Her breaths became more frenzied as she sat upright and rubbed me against the front side of her, over and over. Then she leaned forward so that her long hair tented my face and kissed me long and deep. As my hands stroked the softer recesses of her anatomy, her movements became smaller and smaller, her attention focused on one spot only until suddenly, her scream tore through the air. I could only imagine that the responsiveness of her new body was more intense than she was used to. As for me, the power of her interior muscles was so enhanced that for a nanosecond I feared my flesh would not withstand the force. But then...

“Oh!! Bella...,” I cried as a wave of ecstasy broke over me, followed by another, and another. I was completely paralyzed. If I’d still had a beating heart, I swear it would have stopped.

Bella collapsed on top of me, her hands gripping my back, her head resting on my shoulder, her lips against my neck. I felt small tremors inside her as her movements slowed and eventually stilled. My eyes burned as I stroked her hair and held my cheek to hers...vampire tears. I was profoundly grateful to have her back. I would never let her go.

The floor was plenty soft to lie on and in less danger of damage once we'd stopped moving, but I thought perhaps we might transfer ourselves to the bed. It was probably good to demonstrate a little decorum now that we were parents and all. I smiled to myself. It was fortunate that Nessie was such a sound sleeper if she would be spending nights at the cottage.

I stroked Bella's cheek with my fingers and she raised herself up to look at my face.

"You okay?" I asked quietly.

"Never better," she whispered. "You?"

"Only slightly dented in a couple of places. Entirely worth it." I grinned and she leaned forward to touch her lips lightly to mine. I traced the smooth line of her jaw with my fingertips and then dragged them across her sculpted lips. She drew in her breath sharply and then took two of my fingers into her mouth, smoothing her lips down their length and back. Her eyes watched mine as she repeated the stroke slowly. Her mouth felt warm and sensuous around my sensitive fingers, but the power of suggestion made the action highly erotic. I pulled my fingers slowly from her mouth and pressed my lips to hers, replacing fingers with tongue. She stroked the length of it with her own tongue and our breathing sped in tandem.

I wanted more. In a flash, our lips still connected, I sat up, holding myself inside of Bella by grasping her buttocks with my hands. I leaped to my feet and felt her legs wrap around my waist as I found a gap in the mosquito netting and slipped through it. I tipped us prone onto the bed with Bella beneath me. Still connected, our legs intertwined, I began moving inside of her again. *Ahhh...* She caressed my back and buttocks as I dove into her depths. It was liberating not to worry about how my hands might hurt her, or to be afraid I would crush her, or to fear I might lose control and open an artery. For the first time, I could simply move with her, fast or slow, shallow or deep, and savor her response.

Bella began panting into my mouth, her hands tracing a path from my chest to my belly and below, where she reached between her legs to hold me in her hand as I slid into her, out of her, and into her again. *Ahhh!!* When she transferred her fingers to herself, finding a habitual rhythm, a low moan vibrated through her body.

I didn't know I could experience greater pleasure than I already had with my wife, but something had changed in her along with her physical changes. Though not shy before, Bella

now showed no hesitation to take the lead. Perhaps the release of my fear released something in her, but we were equals in every way. She had a new confidence.

I'd been disappointed that I could not hear Bella's thoughts after her change, but as we made love, I almost felt that I *could* hear them because her body spoke so eloquently. I understood that she loved me...every part of me. I could feel it in the brush of her lips, in every touch of her hands, and in each moan that escaped her as our bodies joined together. My love for her increased, though that was hardly possible.

At some point during that timeless night, my bride and I lay side-by-side, stroking each other's bodies, skin on skin. I let the palms of my hands move from her shoulders to her breasts, to her stomach, between her legs, and along the insides of her thighs, remembering each of her curves, which were now more solid, less vulnerable. I caressed the roundness of her buttocks and the smooth crevice between them. I stroked along the backs of her thighs, over her hipbones, and into the small of her back. I felt the curves of her ribs and the ridges of her spine. My fingers combed through her long hair again and again. I wanted to touch every inch of her, every rise and every fall, inside and out.

I don't know how many times we made love—it was more continuous than anything—but between more intense periods, we lay together touching and marveling and appreciating one other. Late in the night, I curled around my wife, a seashell within a seashell, and sang her lullaby, and then Renesmee's song. We didn't talk much, preferring to reconnect physically and spiritually.

A human would not have survived such a night as we had. And thankfully, I never had to think of that again. Bella was much more powerful than me and would remain so for nearly a year, if the average vampire was any indication. Of course, Bella was far from average in any way.

Eventually, the sky began to lighten through the forest and birds started singing their early morning songs. Bella cocked her head to the side, listening. I lay with my head propped on my elbow, running my fingers lightly up and down her stomach. I imagined that I could feel a minute ridge on her lower belly where I had cut her with the scalpel and later sewn her up, though I could see nothing there.

Bella's question cut into my thoughts.

"Do you miss it?"

I was immediately confused, wondering whether she was asking about the scar or her big belly or...

“Miss what?” I finally inquired when I realized that I wasn’t following her train of thought (of course not).

“All of it—the warmth, the soft skin, the tasty smell...I’m not losing anything at all, and I just wondered if it was a little bit sad for you that you were.”

I laughed softly at the absurdity of the question. “It would be hard to find someone *less* sad than I am now. Impossible, I’d venture. Not many people get every single thing they want, plus all the things they didn’t think to ask for, in the same day.”

“Are you avoiding the question?”

“You *are* warm,” I said, cupping my hand to Bella’s face. She did feel warm to me, perhaps one degree above my own temperature, but I knew what she meant. She no longer felt hot against my skin, except deep inside. She felt comfortable...right. It was a relief not to feel Bella’s body shivering on top of me and not to have to wrap her in padding to protect her from my chill.

I ran my fingers down her cheek and jaw, down her throat, and then dragged them across her breasts to her waist before telling her, “You *are* soft. And as for the scent, well, I couldn’t say I missed that. Do you remember the scent of those hikers on our hunt?”

“I’ve been trying very hard not to,” Bella replied.

“Imagine kissing that.” I watched as Bella’s jaw clenched and her hand flew to her throat.

“Oh.”

“Precisely. So the answer is no. I am purely full of joy, because I am missing *nothing*. No one has more than I do now.”

I leaned over to touch my lips to hers and, again, it felt like the very first time, but without the flame in my throat urging me to sink my teeth into her neck. It was gentle and soft, but quickly changed to intense and passionate. Then her hands were all over me and mine all over her and we began making the *click-clack* noises of two boulders bumping together. That was a change. Vigorous lovemaking between vampires sounds very different than between a human and a vampire...noisier, rougher...and though perhaps it sounded like we were beating each other up, there would be no bruises or lacerations or broken bones...ever. It was pure pleasure.

As the sun rose, Bella asked me another question.

“How long does this go on? I mean, Carlisle and Esme, Em and Rose, Alice and Jasper—they don’t spend all day locked in their rooms. They’re out in public, fully clothed, all the time. Does this...*craving* ever let up?”

Bella moved her left leg slightly and pressed even closer to me. I took a moment to enjoy the feeling of her body plastered against mine.

“That’s difficult to say,” I replied eventually. “Everyone is different and, well, so far you’re the very most different of all. The average young vampire is too obsessed with thirst to notice much else for a while. That doesn’t seem to apply to you. With the average vampire, though, after that first year, other needs make themselves known. Neither thirst nor any other desire really ever *fades*. It’s simply a matter of learning to balance them, learning to prioritize and manage...”

“How long?”

Maybe I *was* trying to avoid the question as she suspected. I hated to put the idea into her head that there was any limit on the power of our love. For all I knew, it might never fade. Right now, that seemed very possible. But I knew she would continue to press for an answer.

“Rosalie and Emmett were the worst. It took a solid decade before I could stand to be within a five-mile radius of them. Even Carlisle and Esme had a difficult time stomaching it. They kicked the happy couple out eventually. Esme built them a house, too. It was grander than this one, but then, Esme knows what Rose likes, and she knows what you like.”

“So, after ten years, then?” Bella repeated. “Everybody is normal again? Like they are now?”

I smiled at her innocence. “Well, I’m not sure what you mean by normal. You’ve seen my family going about life in a fairly human way, but you’ve been sleeping nights.” I gave her a wicked wink. “There’s a tremendous amount of time left over when you don’t have to sleep. It makes balancing your...interests quite easy. There’s a reason why I’m the best musician in the family, why—besides Carlisle—I’ve read the most books, studied the most sciences, become fluent in the most languages....Emmett would have you believe that I’m such a know-it-all because of the mind reading, but the truth is that I’ve just had a *lot* of free time.”

We began laughing heartily then, which caused our closely connected parts to rub together. Humor and conversation quickly faded then as my groans, Bella’s panting, and a gentle *click-click* were the only sounds that could be heard.

27. REVELATION

“Renesmee,” I reminded my wife.

Bella went stiff beside me. Something about our daughter’s name had made her anxious. The only worry that any of us had about Nessie was her frightening growth rate. That must be it.

“It’s all right, love. Get dressed, and we’ll be back to the house in two seconds.”

The space beside me in the bed was instantly empty. That wasn’t exactly the reaction I was hoping for, but I knew that I should help Bella balance her priorities. It wasn’t easy in the beginning, and with both of us enthralled with our new sex life, it would be all the more difficult.

She turned back toward the bed and her eyes scanned the long length of me. I could almost feel her desire as she considered returning to bed. Then she looked in the direction of the big house and Renesmee, then back at me, then back toward the house, then back at me...all in the space of a millisecond. She resembled the Road Runner on the lookout for Wile E. Coyote. It was the silliest performance I’d ever seen, especially since I wasn’t completely adjusted to Bella’s new status as a vampire. It took a fair amount of effort to contain my amusement in a smile.

“It’s all about balance, love. You’re so good at all of this, I don’t imagine it will take too long to put everything in perspective.”

“And we have all night, right?”

Mmmm...

“Do you think I could bear to let you get dressed now if that weren’t the case?” Images of the previous night rolled through my head and the desire that fueled them through my body, but Bella was already gone. She had zipped through the double doors that led to Alice’s warehouse of a closet. I followed on her heels.

“Which ones are mine?” she wanted to know.

“To the best of my knowledge, everything but this rack here is yours.” I placed my hand on a short rack next to the door.

“All of this?” Bella wailed. I shrugged.

“Alice,” we said simultaneously, she more harshly than me.

“Fine.” Bella was disgusted—or discouraged—by the sheer number of mysterious white garment bags filling racks on all four walls and in the middle of the room. The closet was almost the size of the rest of the cottage put together. Bella and I could turn it into a banquet hall, or a ballroom, or house several more children in that space. Typical Alice.

Bella reached out randomly for a garment bag, which turned out to contain a ball gown. Pink silk, long and lovely. It would be stunning on her, but she was not impressed. I could see her impatience spike.

“Let me help,” I volunteered, before Bella got too frustrated. I showed her how to locate different kinds of fabrics by scent. It didn’t take long to find a pair of blue jeans and a low-cut, v-necked t-shirt. That item was for me. I smiled to myself.

I found something to wear without any trouble, then Bella and I dashed out through the garden, over the wall, and into the forest. I didn’t let Bella beat me on the run back this time, though she kept up pretty well.

When we entered the house, Renesmee was sitting on the floor entertaining the family by bending silver spoons (and knives and forks). Our little Uri Geller had been waiting impatiently for her mother—she still had a lot of catching up to do. But first things first...she touched Bella’s cheek to show her “thirsty.” Bella visibly cringed and I hurried to the kitchen to get our child some breakfast. She was already getting cranky. *Where’s Jacob?* I wouldn’t mind seeing my daughter bite him again.

“How long has she been up?” Bella asked Rosalie as I left the room.

“Just a few minutes. We would have called you soon. She’s been asking for you—*demanding* might be a better description. Esme sacrificed her second-best silver service to keep the little monster entertained.” Rosalie’s words were affectionate. She was more indulgent than any of us.

“We didn’t want to...er, bother you.” Rosalie barely contained her snickering as she remembered the sounds of our night together.

Emmett was less successful at trying not to snort like a hog. His thoughts and visuals were both loud. *They really did figure it all out! Ha, ha!* He had us hanging from the rafters and getting stuck in the kitchen sink. It hadn’t occurred to us to inaugurate the entire cottage, nor did we walk around or stand up a lot. (I just a bit more than Bella since she’s shorter.) We didn’t get fancy our first night back together, but Emmett wasn’t too far off the mark in a couple of cases. I chuckled to myself.

Bella was obviously mortified by Emmett's amusement. Fortunately, she couldn't read his thoughts! Of course, they weren't hard to read, probably not even for my wife. Bella did her best to ignore Emmett by focusing on Renesmee.

"We'll get your room set up right away," she told Nessie. "You'll like the cottage. It's magic." The family had told her about the little house in the woods, but Renesmee didn't have an image for it. She understood that she would be with her parents, though, and that made her happy.

"Thank you, Esme. So much. It's absolutely perfect," Bella said.

Emmett couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "So it's still standing?" he cackled. "I would've thought you two had knocked it to rubble by now. What were you doing last night? Discussing the national debt?"

Bella wisely ignored him. "Where're the wolves today?" she asked the room in general.

"Jacob took off this morning pretty early," answered Rosalie. "Seth followed him out." The image in Rose's mind was of a panicked Jacob racing out of the house and into the woods.

"What was he so upset about?" I asked, returning to the living room. She took Renesmee from Bella's arms and I handed over the metal cup. Bella was doing marvelously. I didn't see any particular expression of pain or distress, though she was within a few feet of the human blood. I kept an eye on her, though. Blood warmed in the microwave didn't have quite the same appeal as the elixir pumping through a human's veins, but it was certainly close enough to set off a newborn.

"I don't know—or care," Rose replied petulantly. "He was watching Nessie sleep, his mouth hanging open like the moron he is, and then he just jumped to his feet without any kind of trigger—that I noticed, anyway—and stormed out. I was glad to be rid of him," she declared. "The more time he spends here, the less chance there is that we'll ever get the smell out."

"Rose," Esme chastised. Though our mother would never say so out loud, she was a little worried about the smell herself. It really was hard to tolerate.

"I suppose it doesn't matter. We won't be here that much longer," Rose said disdainfully.

Emmett agreed. "I still say we should go straight to New Hampshire and get things set up. Bella's already registered at Dartmouth. Doesn't look like it will take her all that long to be able to handle school."

No Emmett...don't say it...don't say it...

"I'm sure you'll ace your classes...apparently there's nothing interesting for you to do at night besides study."

He said it...must have a death wish.

Rosalie snickered. My mind had already moved on because I could hear Jacob's thoughts as he drove his motorcycle down the highway toward us.

I growled in fury. *No!!!* Jacob had taken things into his own hands! He couldn't leave La Push and he didn't want to be separated from Renesmee. He was *desperate* not to be separated from Renesmee. *What had he done??* Alice couldn't see what was going on, but she knew that something significant was happening.

"What is he *doing*? What is that *dog* doing that has erased my schedule for the entire day? I can't see *anything*. No!" Alice complained. "Look at you! You need me to show you how to use your closet." That last was directed at Bella. Alice was displeased with her attire, but more than that, she wanted an excuse to play dress-up all day with my wife—something Bella would hate.

"He talked to Charlie," I snarled. "He thinks Charlie is following after him. Coming here. Today."

"*Shit!*" Alice was off like a bullet out the kitchen door. Fortunately, she had made contingency plans for managing Bella's appearance during her first year. She was caught off-guard by the emergency nature of the current situation, though, and had raced off to the cottage.

Bella was starting to panic. "He told Charlie? But—doesn't he understand? How could he do that? No!" Jacob hadn't told Charlie what we were. What he *had* said was bad enough, though. Charlie knew that Bella was in Forks and not in Atlanta.

"Jacob's on his way in now," I hissed.

"Hey, guys." He breezed in looking very satisfied with himself. The combination of his arrogance and glee was infuriating enough that I could have taken his head off. Instead, I focused on remaining completely still, as did my entire family.

Seth and Leah came in behind Jacob in their human forms, but the stress in the air kept them both on edge. Either one could lose control and phase at any time. We had a potential fight brewing in the room.

Since Charlie was Bella's father, I thought she should get the first shot.

“Rose,” Bella said carefully, holding her arms out for the baby. Renesmee felt the tension and saw that Jacob was the only one in the room who was happy. She knew intuitively that *her* Jacob was in trouble, but she didn’t understand why.

“Charlie’ll be here soon,” Jacob announced. “Just a heads-up. I assume Alice is getting you sunglasses or something?” His superior air and overconfidence was beyond belief. Could anybody be more infuriating?

“You assume *way* too much,” Bella snapped. “What. Have. You. *Done?*”

“Blondie and Emmett woke me up this morning going on and on about you all moving cross-country. Like I could let you leave. Charlie was the biggest issue there, right? Well, problem solved.”

Bella was livid. “Do you even *realize* what you’ve done? The danger you’ve put him in?”

“I didn’t put him in danger. Except from you. But you’ve got some kind of supernatural self-control, right? Not as good as mind reading, if you ask me. Much less exciting.”

I lost my cool. Insulting Bella on top of everything else? He was forgetting that *we* were in charge of Renesmee’s future and *he* was threatening it! My fury was almost visible as I leaned in toward him. Jacob was intimidated, if I wasn’t mistaken. *Good.*

“That’s just a *theory*, mongrel. You think we should test it out on *Charlie*? Did you consider the physical pain you’re putting Bella through, even if she can resist? Or the emotional pain if she doesn’t? I suppose what happens to Bella no longer concerns you!” That was the true source of my anger. He’d given no more thought to Bella than he would have to a random stranger. I wanted to knock some sense into him.

“Bella will be in pain?” Jacob replied, abashed.

“Like you’ve shoved a white-hot branding iron down her throat!”

“I didn’t know that.” He was finally coming down to earth, all the cockiness draining away.

“Then perhaps you should have asked first,” I snarled at him.

“You would have stopped me.”

Idiot! “You *should* have been stopped—”

"This isn't about me," Bella broke in. She clutched Renesmee to her chest like a life-ring. "This is about Charlie, Jacob. How could you put him in danger this way? Do you realize it's death or vampire life for him now, too?"

"Relax, Bella. I didn't tell him anything you weren't planning to tell him."

"But he's coming here!"

"Yeah, that's the idea. Wasn't the whole 'let-him-make-the-wrong-assumptions- thing' your plan? I think I provided a very nice red herring, if I do say so myself."

"Say it straight, Jacob. I don't have the patience for this."

"I didn't tell him anything about you, Bella. Not really. I told him about me. Well, *show* is probably a better verb."

I saw the whole thing in his head...He was so proud of himself.

"He phased in front of Charlie," I told Bella, equal parts bile and threat in my voice.

"You *what?*" Bella was incredulous.

"He's brave. Brave as you are. Didn't pass out or throw up or anything. I gotta say, I was impressed. You should've seen his face when I started taking my clothes off, though. Priceless."

Well, I'd give him that one. Judging by Charlie's expression in Jacob's mind, Bella's father would never recover...ever. I wish I'd been there to read his thoughts! I can guess, though.

What? Jacob wants to fight? He doesn't seem angry, though. Wait!! He's taking off his goddam pants!! Is he trying to tell me he's a homo? Uh...sexual? Surely not! Didn't he nearly get his butt kicked for kissing Bella! Holy Shiite! Does he think I'm a...gay...too?! Billy's been alone nearly as long as me, and nobody thinks he's a homosexual!

"CHRIST! WHAT THE F...? JACOB! JACOB!" The final sentence was the only one he said out loud. I admit that the corners of my mouth twitched the tiniest bit at Charlie's stunned expression.

"You absolute *moron!* You could have given him a heart attack!" Bella was in a surprisingly well-controlled rage. If she went for him, I wouldn't stop her. I'd just grab Renesmee and get out of the way...

"Charlie's fine. He's tough. If you'd give this just a minute, you'll see that I did you a favor here." Jacob was doing his best to convince her.

“You have half of that, Jacob. You have thirty seconds to tell me every single word before I give Renesmee to Rosalie and rip your miserable head off. Seth won’t be able to stop me this time.” Bella was getting dangerous, which put Seth and Leah on edge.

“Jeez, Bells. You didn’t used to be so melodramatic. Is that a vampire thing?”

“Twenty-six seconds.” Bella was counting down, her voice barely controlled.

Jacob reluctantly gave in, dropping into a chair and rolling his eyes.

“So I knocked on Charlie’s door this morning and asked him to come for a walk with me. He was confused, but when I told him it was about you and that you were back in town, he followed me out to the woods. I told him you weren’t sick anymore, and that things were a little weird, but good. He was about to take off to see you, but I told him I had to show him something first. And then I phased.”

Bella was not going to let him off that easily.

“I want every word, you monster.”

“Well, you said I only had thirty seconds—” Jacob finally paid heed to Bella’s threatening stare. “Okay, okay. Lemme see... I phased back and got dressed, and then after he started breathing again, I said something like, ‘Charlie, you don’t live in the world you thought you lived in. The good news is, nothing has changed—except that now you know. Life’ll go on the same way it always has. You can go right back to pretending that you don’t believe any of this.’”

Jacob continued. “It took him a minute to get his head together, and then he wanted to know what was really going on with you, with the whole rare-disease thing. I told him that you *had* been sick, but you were fine now—it was just that you’d had to change a little bit in the process of getting better. He wanted to know what I meant by ‘change,’ and I told him that you looked a lot more like Esme now than you looked like Renee.”

I snarled at him. He was endangering my family!

“After a few minutes, he asked, real quietly, if you turned into an animal, too. And I said, ‘She wishes she was that cool!’” Jacob was the only one in the room who thought that was funny. No...Seth and Leah did too. Rosalie was highly annoyed.

“I started to tell him more about werewolves, but I didn’t even get the whole word out— Charlie cut me off and said he’d ‘rather not know the specifics.’ Then he asked if you’d known what you were getting yourself into when you married Edward, and I said, ‘Sure, she’s known all about this for years, since she first came to Forks.’ He didn’t like *that* very much. I let

him rant 'til he got it out of his system. After he got calmed down, he just wanted two things. He wanted to see you, and I said it would be better if he gave me a head start to explain."

"What was the other thing he wanted?" Bella wanted to know.

"You'll like this. His main request is that he be told as little as possible about *all* of this. If it's not absolutely essential for him to know something, then keep it to yourself. Need to know, only."

"I can handle that part," Bella said.

"Other than that, he'd just like to pretend things are normal."

"What did you tell him about Renesmee?" Bella's anger was slowly subsiding, faster than mine was, actually. I could not forgive Jacob for recklessly endangering Bella as he had, but having Charlie in her life *would* make her happy. Maybe this could work out somehow...

"Oh yeah. So I told him that you and Edward had inherited a new little mouth to feed." He looked at me for my reaction. I wasn't giving him a thing.

"She's your orphaned ward—like Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson." *Superhero stuff again? Oh well. If it worked...*

Jacob snorted. "I didn't think you'd mind me lying. That's all part of the game, right?"

What an arrogant prick! A clever arrogant prick.

"Charlie was way past being shocked at this point, but he did ask if you were adopting her. 'Like a daughter? Like I'm sort of a grandfather?' were his exact words. I told him yes. 'Congrats, Gramps,' and all of that. He even smiled a little."

"But she's changing so fast," Bella objected, emotion marring her clear, bell-like voice.

"I told him that she was more special than all of us put together." A tone of reverence replaced the arrogance when he said those words. He loved Renesmee as I loved Bella. Could I hold his actions against him when I would have done the same thing—or something similar—to stay with Bella? *Yes, I could.*

Renesmee reached out to Jacob as he approached Bella, but she clung more tightly to our baby.

"I told him, 'Trust me, you don't want to know about this. But if you can ignore all the strange parts, you're going to be amazed. She's the most wonderful person in the whole world.' And then I told him that if he could deal with that, you all would stick around for a while and he

would have a chance to get to know her. But that if it was too much for him, you would leave. He said as long as no one forced too much information on him, he'd deal."

Jacob could see that Bella was feeling greatly relieved, perhaps even a little bit grateful for what he'd done, but that didn't make it okay in my book. There was still the issue of Bella's self-control and whether both she and Charlie would survive the afternoon intact.

"I'm not going to say thank you," she said. "You're still putting Charlie at a huge risk."

"I *am* sorry about it hurting you. I didn't know it was like that. Bella, things are different with us now, but you'll always be my best friend, and I'll always love you. But I'll love you the right way now. There's finally a balance. We *both* have people we can't live without. Still friends?"

Bella gave him a miniscule smile and Jacob offered his hand to her to shake on it.

"If I don't kill Charlie tonight, I'll consider forgiving you for this," was as far as she would go.

"*When* you don't kill Charlie tonight, you'll owe me huge." He gave Bella a smug smile.

"Can I?" Jacob gestured toward Renesmee.

"I'm actually holding her so that my hands aren't free to kill you, Jacob. Maybe later."

All we could do was sit down and hold on tight. Carlisle had considered rounding all of us up and fleeing before Charlie got there, for everybody's safety, but he had reconsidered.

Edward? I looked in his direction. *Should we stay or go?*

I discreetly pointed toward the floor. Carlisle nodded. In the best-case scenario, Charlie would cope with Bella's altered state and she would be able to keep him in her life for several more years. In the worst-case scenario, Charlie would lose his mind and we would all disappear. It seemed worth a shot to try to stay if possible.

At that moment, Alice burst into the living room carrying a collection of small boxes.

"You, you, and you," she ordered the wolves, "If you must stay, get over in the corner and commit to being there for a while. I need to see. Bella, you'd better give him the baby, too. You'll need your arms free, anyway."

Jacob smirked and held his arms out for Renesmee.

“Take her.” Bella passed the baby to him and then he retreated to the far corner of the room with Seth. Leah opted to leave the house altogether.

Bella was becoming frightened. I could see it in her face and I’d just heard it in her voice. I moved to her side and smoothed my hand over her cheek.

“You can do this. I know you can. I’ll help you; we all will.” I waited for a nod or a confirmation that she was willing to try, but she was still breathing rapidly. “If I didn’t believe you could handle it, we’d disappear today. This very minute. But you can. And you’ll be happier if you can have Charlie in your life.”

Alice tossed one of the boxes into the air and Bella caught it easily.

“These will irritate your eyes,” she told Bella. “They won’t hurt, but they’ll cloud your vision. It’s annoying. They also won’t match your old color, but it’s still better than bright red, right?”

“When did you—” Bella began.

“Before you left on the honeymoon. I was prepared for several possible futures.”

I smiled to myself. My sister was a phenomenon. Bella inserted the brown-colored contacts into her eyes and then blinked and squinted. She turned to me.

“I see what you mean,” Bella said. “How do I look?”

“Gorgeous. Of course—”

Alice finished my sentence impatiently. She’d heard it before.

“Yes, yes, she always looks gorgeous. It’s better than red, but that’s the highest commendation I can give. Muddy brown. Your brown was much prettier. Keep in mind that those won’t last forever—the venom in your eyes will dissolve them in a few hours. So if Charlie stays longer than that, you’ll have to excuse yourself to replace them. Which is a good idea anyway, because humans need bathroom breaks. Esme, give her a few pointers on acting human while I stock the powder room with contacts.”

“How long do I have?” Esme asked.

“Charlie will be here in five minutes. Keep it simple.”

Esme took Bella’s hand. “The main thing is not to sit too still or move too fast.”

Emmett added his advice. “Sit down if he does. Humans don’t like to just stand there.”

“Let your eyes wander every thirty seconds or so,” Jasper instructed. “Humans don’t stare at one thing for too long.”

Rosalie chimed in too. “Cross your legs for about five minutes, then switch to crossing your ankles for the next five.” Bella listened to everyone and nodded tentatively. The suggestions continued...

“And blink at least three times a minute.” Emmett said, and then his mind latched onto an idea. *Sports! Charlie likes football. That will give him something else to do besides stare at us and freak out.* He looked over at me and I nodded my agreement. Emmett clicked on the flat-screen and located the college football channel. Watching the day’s games was something he would have done anyway. He probably had money riding on them, if I knew Emmett.

“Move your hands, too. Brush your hair back or pretend to scratch something,” Jasper added.

“I said *Esme*,” Alice protested. “You’ll overwhelm her.”

“No, I think I got it all,” Bella said. “Sit, look around, blink, fidget.”

“Right,” Esme confirmed, hugging Bella’s shoulders.

Jasper had even more advice. “You’ll be holding your breath as much as possible, but you need to move your shoulders a little to make it *look* like you’re breathing.”

Bella nodded again.

“You can do this,” I encouraged, wrapping my arm around her waist.

“Two minutes,” announced Alice. “Maybe you should start out already on the couch. You’ve been sick, after all. That way he won’t have to see you move right at first.” Bella headed toward the couch, trying to imitate the slow, clunky movements of a human, but she looked pretty silly. Alice rolled her eyes.

“Jacob, I need Renesmee,” declared Bella. Jacob didn’t respond and Alice objected.

“Bella, that doesn’t help me see.”

“But I *need* her. She keeps me calm!”

Alice gave in. “Fine. Hold her as still as you can and I’ll *try* to see around her.” She spoke like she was incredibly put out. Jacob reluctantly passed the baby to Bella and then retreated back to the corner at Alice’s glare.

I sat down, encircling both Bella and our daughter in my arms. I spoke in a low, serious voice. “Renesmee, someone special is coming to see you and your mother, but he’s not like us, or even like Jacob. We have to be very careful with him. You shouldn’t tell him things the way you tell us.”

Renesmee touched my face, though I could already see that she understood my instructions. She’d always been able to take instruction and learn, even from the womb.

“Exactly,” I told her, confirming her pictures. “And he’s going to make you thirsty. But you mustn’t bite him. He won’t heal like Jacob.”

“Can she understand you?” Bella whispered, surprised.

“She understands. You’ll be careful, won’t you, Renesmee? You’ll help us?”

Renesmee reached for my face again and showed me biting Jacob.

“No, I don’t care if you bite Jacob. That’s fine.” It was the least he deserved for the risks he’d taken today. Jacob chuckled.

“Maybe you should leave, Jacob,” I suggested. I was still angry with him and was also concerned about his unpredictability. I didn’t completely trust him. He would do anything to keep Renesmee in Forks.

“I told Charlie I’d be here,” Jacob reminded me. “He needs the moral support.”

“Moral support,” I sneered. “As far as Charlie knows, you’re the most repulsive monster of us all.” None of the Cullens turned into filthy mongrels!

“Repulsive?” Jacob brushed off my comment with a laugh. He couldn’t conceive of himself that way. He was actually *proud* of what he was. I already knew that, but I was still surprised that he didn’t see how Charlie might find him disgusting. I could!

“Well done, Bella,” Jasper said. In his mind, I saw that she’d managed to calm herself out of her panic. I turned my attention to her immediately, squeezing her a little tighter.

“You’re sure?” Bella asked me.

“Positive. You can do *anything*.” I kissed her for reassurance and to help her stop thinking of Charlie. It quickly got out of hand. Bella was right. The craving never really went away—mine didn’t, anyway. Her breaths were coming fast and ragged. *Nice! Mmm...*

“Er, Edward, you might not want to distract her like that right now. She needs to be able to focus,” warned Jasper.

“Oops.” I grinned. She’d said the same to me after getting carried away with kisses during our courtship. The memories were still fresh and desire hit me with force. Talk about prioritizing! It wasn’t always as easy as I’d implied to Bella.

“Later,” Bella murmured and smiled.

“Focus, Bella,” Jasper warned again.

“Right,” she replied. Three seconds passed.

“Bella.”

“Sorry, Jasper.”

I chuckled and Emmett laughed out loud.

Just then, we heard Charlie’s patrol car approaching the house and all laughter ceased. The vampires became as still as statues.

28. DANGEROUS

Poor Charlie—what a shock for a father! He was a brave man, as Jacob had said. He'd barely hesitated before knocking on our front door. He *was* a police chief, though, and having brass *cojones* probably was a job requirement.

As usual, I could read only some of what was going on in his head—he was eager to see Bella, disconcerted about Jacob, and very suspicious of the Cullens in general, and me in particular. I didn't blame him for that.

Right off the bat, Charlie had to face Carlisle at the door, knowing that my father had been misrepresenting Bella's whereabouts. He'd always respected Carlisle, but if there was one thing Charlie couldn't abide, it was lying. Another police chief trait, I presumed. Suspects—and even regular people—must lie to him all the time. I know I did, but not for the usual reasons, of course.

Carlisle was embarrassed at being caught out in this uncomfortable moment, but he was brave too, and would do whatever was necessary to protect his family. That was something Charlie would understand and forgive, I was certain.

"Hello, Charlie," Carlisle said in a welcoming, if self-conscious, tone.

"Carlisle," Charlie returned succinctly. "Where's Bella?"

"Right here, Dad," Bella called from the couch beside me. Charlie didn't recognize her voice and his first thought was that someone—probably Alice—was playing a trick on him. Then his eyes followed the voice and when they found Bella, his mind went completely blank. He stared, dumbfounded, until a wall of emotion slammed into him and his face contorted with shock and suspicion, followed by anger and pain.

After he'd collected himself enough to speak, Charlie whispered, "Is that you, Bella?" His mind was trying to reconcile what he was seeing and what he had heard with the daughter he knew, but they simply didn't mesh. Her hair was the same, but everything else about her was different.

"Yep," Bella replied casually. "Hi, Dad." Her voice sounded like a piccolo. Charlie was visibly shaken.

"Hey, Charlie," Jacob cut in, trying unsuccessfully to inject a dose of normality into this *Twilight Zone* episode. "How're things?"

Charlie scowled and moved further away from Jacob before his gaze returned to Bella. He walked forward robotically until he was a few feet from the couch. He glared at me for a second and then turned back to Bella, taking in the changes, or perhaps searching for similarities between the “before” and the “after.”

“Bella?”

“It’s really me,” Bella responded, her voice lowered to the timbre of a flute. “I’m sorry, Dad,” she said then, reacting to something in Charlie’s expression. Loss, maybe.

“Are you okay?” he asked roughly.

“Really and truly great. Healthy as a horse.”

“Jake told me this was...necessary. That you were dying.” Charlie was doubtful, but where reality should have been was something entirely different. He was struggling to find some story or explanation for all this strangeness. And though he didn’t understand what he was seeing, he reckoned it was my fault.

Bella had no oxygen left for responding to Charlie and he was standing too close for comfort. She leaned into me and clutched Renesmee for support while she inhaled the necessary air. She shuddered and then gasped in pain. Her blood craving had to be fierce. I squeezed her shoulders, hoping and believing that her enormous strength of will would get her through this. Bella paused to steady herself.

“Jacob was telling you the truth,” she confirmed.

“That makes one of you,” Charlie said bitterly.

Then our child—our magical Renesmee—changed everything. She’d been hiding behind Bella’s hair as she took in Charlie. He seemed a lot like Jacob, but since I’d warned her not to show him her thoughts or bite him, she was evaluating his differences. She’d just gotten a good whiff of him and she liked his smell. He smelled like her cup only better...and better than Jacob too.

Renesmee had been so still and Charlie so distracted by Bella that he didn’t notice her at first. When he finally glanced down and saw her little body sticking out of Bella’s hair, his face altered completely, suddenly becoming gentle and soft.

“Oh,” he exclaimed. “This is her. The orphan Jacob said you’re adopting.”

I already had our story worked out. There was no denying that Nessie looked like me. It was so obvious that I'd decided just to go with it. My explanation also would allow Charlie to overlook Nessie's resemblance to Bella if he were so inclined.

"My niece," I explained.

Charlie was immediately suspicious. I'd lost his trust a long time ago...that first spring when Bella left home under false pretenses and turned up in Phoenix seriously injured.

"I thought you'd lost your family," Charlie accused. Having recognized an inconsistency in my "facts," his policeman's instincts automatically kicked in, but I was nothing if not a gifted "storyteller." I wondered suddenly what Renesmee would make of my tale. Bella and I would have to teach her the difference between truth and fiction and the reasons for choosing one over the other.

"I lost my parents," I clarified. "My older brother was adopted, like me. I never saw him after that. But the courts located me when he and his wife died in a car accident, leaving their only child without any other family." I rattled off the explanation without emotion. Charlie would guess it was just a story, but that was fine.

Renesmee had grown more curious about this person with the deep voice and delicious scent. She peeked out around Bella's hair and then hid her face again. Charlie was startled.

"She's...she's, well, she's a beauty," he stuttered.

"Yes," I agreed.

"Kind of a big responsibility, though. You two are just getting started." With Charlie talking about her, Renesmee was even more intrigued—thirstier too.

"What else could we do? Would you have refused her?" Though Renesmee had come into our lives as unexpectedly as if her parents *had* died suddenly, and we were utterly unprepared for her, we would never have given her up. Of course not. I touched my daughter's cheek to get her attention, which was now riveted on Charlie, and then her lips to remind her not to bite if he came any closer.

"Hmph. Well. Jake says you call her Nessie?" *Oops...*

"No, we don't," Bella cut in sharply, her voice rising. "Her name is Renesmee." It was a losing battle, but Bella would persevere. Charlie turned back to her.

"How do you feel about this? Maybe Carlisle and Esme could—"

Bella cut him off. "She's mine. I *want* her."

Mama lion, Charlie thought. He knew his daughter well enough to know that the subject was closed.

"You gonna make me a grandpa so young?"

I smiled at him. "Carlisle is a grandfather, too."

He glanced at Carlisle who hadn't moved after shutting the front door. My father was twenty-three in human years and looked it, though we'd been in Forks long enough that he was trying to pass for thirty-three.

Charlie snorted. "I guess that does sort of make me feel better." His eyes were drawn back to Renesmee. "She sure is something to look at." She thought *he* was something to look at too and peeked out from behind Bella's hair again. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, flirting. When her chocolate-colored eyes met his, Charlie's heart began pounding in his chest.

Holy Christ! She's...she's... But that can't be! September, August, July... Impossible! But...the EYES! Charlie was gasping for air and the blood had drained from his face. Fainting was a possibility and a heart attack was not out of the question.

Jacob got up from his corner and came over to stand beside Charlie. He whispered in Charlie's ear, though everyone could hear him perfectly.

"Need to know, Charlie. It's okay. I promise."

Charlie nodded jerkily and made a visible effort to calm himself. But as his shock lessened, his anger grew and he moved closer to me with his fists clenched. Charlie was exerting a lot of effort not to take a swing at me and only years of practicing his profession made it at all possible. It was obvious to Charlie that Renesmee was not my niece. She was clearly Bella's daughter...my daughter. He knew, but he also knew it was not possible.

"I don't want to know everything, but I'm done with the lies!" he bellowed, trying to stare me down. I understood his reaction, but this was part of the deal he had made. He had agreed to accept the unacceptable, to swallow the ludicrous and pretend that it wasn't.

"I'm sorry," I responded evenly, "but you need to know the public story more than you need to know the truth. If you're going to be part of this secret, the public story is the one that counts. It's to protect Bella and Renesmee as well as the rest of us. Can you go along with the lies for them?"

Everyone stood frozen in the silence, waiting for Charlie's verdict. His mind was reeling. *Carlisle...? Alice...? Edward...? What are they? Is it a disease? Is Bella infected now? A baby in a month? How? What did Jacob say?* I don't live in the world I thought I did. *Right.* Charlie exhaled forcefully, a prelude to acceptance. He looked at Bella without answering my question.

"You might've given me some warning, kid."

"Would it really have made this any easier?" Bella asked rhetorically.

No, he thought. *It's impossible and yet...* Charlie dropped to his knees in front of Bella and the baby. *Grandchild? It's some kind of miracle.*

Renesmee recognized that there was something special about Charlie too. She flashed him a rare, wide-mouthed smile and stretched her miniature hand toward him. Bella pulled it back. Charlie's heart might stop for real if Renesmee showed him her thoughts right now. She directed them to her mother instead. *Good smell, exciting noises inside him...* She remembered that he was not for biting, though she wanted to. Charlie stared at her mouthful of teeth and gasped.

"Whoa... How old is she?"

Bella started to reply, but didn't know what to say, so I took over.

"Three months," I said, acknowledging the magic he could see with his own eyes. "Rather, she's the size of a three-month-old, more or less. She's younger in some ways, more mature in others." It was another way of saying that she wasn't an ordinary human... and neither were we.

Renesmee proved the point by catching Charlie's eye and deliberately waving at him—not the behavior of a three-month-old. Charlie's left eye developed a tic and he blinked furiously trying to make it stop. Jacob sought to lighten the atmosphere by elbowing Charlie.

"Told you she was special, didn't I?"

Ew! Charlie did not want Jacob to touch him and he leaned away. Jacob's familiar, though now utterly alien, presence gave him the creeps.

"Oh, c'mon, Charlie," Jacob protested. "I'm the same person I've always been. Just pretend this afternoon didn't happen." Charlie paled at the comment, but nodded. He was trying hard to accept now and cogitate later. He didn't know when our family, including Bella, might disappear.

"Just what *is* your part in all this, Jake? How much does Billy know? Why are you here?"

“Well, I could tell you all about it—Billy knows absolutely everything—but it involves a lot of stuff about werewo—”

“Ugh! Never mind,” he said, covering his ears.

“Everything’s going to be great, Charlie. Just try to not believe anything you see.”

“That’ll be easy,” Charlie mumbled.

Emmett decided it was time for an intervention. The atmosphere had gotten too heavy and dramatic.

“Woo! Go Gators!” he boomed. The humans jumped and the vampires froze.

Charlie was blessedly relieved. *Something familiar...*

“Florida winning?”

“Just scored the first touchdown.” Emmett turned to look at Bella and raised his eyebrows.

Don’t say it, Emmett! Don’t...

“‘Bout time somebody scored around here.”

He said it. My brother was going to get himself in trouble.

Emmett’s grin stretched from ear to ear. Fortunately, Charlie didn’t notice, but Bella had gone rigid beside me. I tightened my arm around her as a precaution.

Emmett wasn’t just another pretty face. He understood more about Charlie than the rest of us did combined, based on the shared camaraderie of the sports fan. He knew Charlie would be comforted by the familiar cacophony of television sports announcers. Bella’s father dropped into a lounge chair and sighed in relief. At that moment, Emmett probably seemed like the least freaky person in the room to Charlie. His frightening musculature and size weren’t out of place in the world of sports and most men could relate to him as a “good ol’ boy” sports fanatic.

“Well,” Charlie commented, “I guess we should see if they can hold on to the lead.”

Bella had always said that Charlie wasn’t much of a talker and that she’d inherited that from him. Today, that trait was a gift from God. Besides fishing, Charlie’s most common form of relaxation was stretching out in a lounge chair watching sports and not talking—except for one-

word exclamations like “Whooh!,” or “YEAH!,” or “Ahhh...!”—a language common to sports fans everywhere. He could engage in this diversion for hours at a time. And that’s how the afternoon passed, peppered with suggestive comments that Emmett directed at Bella.

“He’s taking it up the middle again!” *Wink, wink.*

“I never saw *anybody* up-ended so much!” *Nod, nod.*

“He sure likes it in that pocket.” *Say no more, say no more.*

Bella was fuming, but that didn’t slow Emmett down. He was *begging* for a fight and I could see that he got one later. That would be fun! When he ran out of football puns, he began to make increasingly blatant sexual references.

“Did anybody else hear all that banging in the woods last night? I thought I heard praying too.” *Oh God, oh God!*

Charlie didn’t process anything Emmett said. He was too absorbed in his own troubled thoughts, with one exception. When Emmett asked, “Did I hear you screaming last night, Bella?” Charlie turned to look at her. He had witnessed Bella’s screaming nightmares during the six months that I was away and had suffered along with her. Bella met his unspoken question with a disgusted shake of the head, indicating that the nightmares hadn’t returned, that Emmett was just talking.

Once the family figured out that Charlie was staying, everyone began going about their business. Alice sat down to work on her computer and Esme went to the kitchen to put together some snacks and drinks, which only Seth dipped into before taking a nap in the corner. Carlisle finally left the foyer where he’d remained after welcoming Charlie. Much was going through his mind. He was not at all sure that this was the right course, but after what Jacob had done, he did not see any other. He went up to his office for a time and I heard him call his friend, Dr. Connie Mariano, and make arrangements to return her armored car to Arizona. Bella was indestructible now...thank God!

Esme got out her books and sketchpad and sat at the dining room table, reading and drawing some designs for the cottage nursery. Jasper remained nearby in case Bella needed help. Rosalie watched the first football game and then went to the garage to work on her car. Bella and I amused Renesmee and then I read her a book. When I finished, she showed Bella the book, page by page with her palm, and then Jacob took her to the kitchen to feed her. By the time the evening news was over, she had fallen asleep in Bella’s arms and I’d wandered off to play the piano.

As the resident mind-reader, it was my job to listen to Charlie in order to catch any thoughts he might have of acting against us, and also to try to determine how much he knew. Charlie's mind was quiet to me—not to the degree that Bella's was, but enough that reading his thoughts took some effort. Insofar as I could hear him, I determined that Charlie had absorbed a lot of details about us. Seeing us all together for an afternoon had made him aware of how fluidly we moved, how musical our voices were, and how abnormally pale our skin was. I was pretty sure he understood that the Cullens were not human—and that now neither was Bella.

Oddly enough, his first explanation of what we were ran along the lines of Bella's superhero theory—that we were some kind of mutated humans. He dismissed it quickly and moved on to the idea of aliens before dismissing that. He considered whether we were animals like Jacob, imagining Alice as a cat before rejecting that idea too. Then he just let go of his questions, realizing that he didn't really want to know the answers.

Instead, Charlie began enumerating what was different about Bella. He could see the changes in her, but they didn't add up to anything he recognized, so he turned his thoughts to Renesmee. He had believed my orphaned niece story until he got a good look at Nessie's eyes. Then he knew—well, was 90% sure—that the baby was also a Swan and his biological granddaughter. Finally, Charlie gave up thinking about the unknowns as far as he was able. He was just glad to have Bella back and he was smitten with Renesmee. He'd decided that that was enough.

Sue Clearwater had invited Billy and Charlie to dinner, but Charlie hung around as the appointed time came and went, obviously reluctant to leave. Our family had long had a tenet that when we were at home, we didn't have to hide or pretend. For special occasions, like the wedding or Alice's graduation party, we made exceptions, but this wasn't one of those times. We kept our speech and movements slow, but we didn't pretend to eat or drink. We sat down more than we might have if Charlie weren't there, but we didn't bother to pretend to make dinner. Jacob raided the refrigerator when he got hungry as had become his habit. Seth was hungry too, but he was supposed to bring Charlie home with him and Charlie showed no signs of wanting to leave. Finally, Seth reminded him of the time.

"You gonna stand Billy and my mom up, Charlie? C'mon. Bella and Nessie'll be here tomorrow. Let's get some grub, eh?"

Charlie pushed himself up from his chair hesitantly and began walking toward the front door with Seth. Bella followed with a sleeping Renesmee in her arms.

"I don't know how much we should tell Renee about this," Charlie muttered, turning to address Bella on his way out the door.

"I know, I don't want to freak her out. Better to protect her. This stuff isn't for the fainthearted," she replied.

"I would have tried to protect you, too, if I'd known how," Charlie said mournfully. "But I guess you've never fit into the fainthearted category, have you?" Bella smiled in reply.

Neither Charlie nor Bella believed that Renee could handle a day like Charlie had had. For one thing, she wasn't one to keep things to herself. For another, they considered her rather fragile, though I disagreed with that. She was more flighty than delicate. She was also more open-minded and willing to travel outside the mainstream than Charlie was, but what to do about Renee was not my decision.

"I'll think of something," Charlie said. "We've got time to discuss this, right?"

"Right," Bella replied. Charlie was still worried that he wouldn't get another chance.

"Jake says you guys were going to take off on me," he said softly.

"I didn't want to do that if there was any way at all around it. That's why we're still here."

"He said you could stay for a while, but only if I'm tough enough, and if I can keep my mouth shut."

"Yes...but I can't promise that we'll never leave, Dad. It's pretty complicated..."

"Need to know," he reiterated.

"Right."

"You'll visit, though, if you have to go?"

"I promise, Dad. Now that you know just enough, I think this can work. I'll keep as close as you want."

Charlie reached out awkwardly for a hug, which Bella gave him with one arm while holding Renesmee with the other.

"Keep real close, Bells," Charlie murmured. "Real close." Charlie had expressed more emotion in one afternoon than he probably had for the previous six months. A big day.

"Love you, Dad," Bella said. She was visibly stiff and controlled. Charlie shivered and dropped the embrace. Like everything else, he noticed the chill of Bella's skin, but kept it to himself.

“Love you too, kid. Whatever else has changed, that hasn’t.” He touched Renesmee’s cheek and was startled at how hot she was, particularly in contrast to Bella. “She sure looks a lot like you.” Charlie was telling Bella he knew that somehow, though seemingly impossible, Renesmee was blood.

Bella paused slightly before replying. “More like Edward, I think.” She paused again before offering an acknowledgement of the truth. “She has your curls.”

The admission caught Charlie off guard, but he accepted it.

“Huh. Guess she does. Huh. Grandpa. Do I ever get to hold her?”

Bella’s surprise was evident and I saw her think about it briefly before deciding it would be okay with Renesmee asleep.

“Here,” Bella offered, as she placed the baby in Charlie’s arms. Sitting at my piano, I was a mere three feet away and was watching out of the corner of my eye in case Bella needed me, but she seemed to have herself completely under control.

Charlie rocked Renesmee gently. “She’s...sturdy.” Bella’s expression caused him to amend the statement. “Sturdy is good. She’ll need to be tough, surrounded by all this craziness.” He rocked her for a few more moments. “Prettiest baby I ever saw, including you, kid. Sorry, but it’s true.”

“I know it is,” she agreed.

“Pretty baby,” Charlie crooned. I smiled to myself, knowing that everything was going to work out fine. Renesmee was magical that way.

“Can I come back tomorrow?” Charlie asked suddenly.

“Sure, Dad. Of course. We’ll be here.”

“You’d better be,” he said sternly, but his face was soft, still focused on Renesmee. “See you tomorrow, Nessie.”

“Not you, too!”

“Huh?”

“Her name is *Renesmee*. Like Renee and Esme, put together. No variations.” I saw Bella stiffen. Temper. I readied myself. “Do you want to hear her middle name?” she finally said.

“Sure.”

“*Carlie*. With a C. Like Carlisle and Charlie put together.”

“Thanks, Bells.” Charlie’s eyes became a little misty.

“Thank *you*, Dad. So much has changed so quickly. My head hasn’t stopped spinning. If I didn’t have you now, I don’t know how I’d keep my grip on—on reality.”

Charlie looked around the room, feeling that something was odd about this apparently ordinary family tableau, but he couldn’t put his finger on exactly what it was. He shook his head in puzzlement.

“Go eat, Dad,” Bella suggested. “We *will* be here.”

“See you tomorrow, Bella.” He seemed to want to sum up the day and what it meant and what he intended to do about it, but as usual, didn’t have the words. “I mean, it’s not like you don’t look...good. I’ll get used to it.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I caught fragmentary thoughts. *Died...angel. Carlisle, Esme Alice....*

So Charlie *had* drawn his own conclusion. He wasn’t far wrong about his daughter, really. Or my parents. Or Alice. Surely, he’d reject the notion when my name came to mind, though.

After he was gone, Bella stood frozen in the doorway while his car wound its way out to the highway. “Wow,” she whispered.

I darted over and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder.

“You took the word right out of my mouth.”

“Edward, I did it!”

“You did. You were unbelievable. All that worrying over being a newborn, and then you skip it altogether.” I chuckled in delight.

“I’m not even sure she’s really a vampire, let alone a newborn. She’s too *tame*,” Emmett cut in. Bella snarled at him—not in jest.

“Oooo, scary,” Emmett taunted. He was asking for it...begging for it.

Bella hissed and the sound woke Renesmee. She sniffed the air and noticed that Charlie’s special scent was gone. She reached up to touch Bella’s face.

“Charlie will be back tomorrow,” Bella explained.

“Excellent,” Emmett gloated.

“Not brilliant, Emmett,” I warned.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a little dense, don’t you think, to antagonize the strongest vampire in the house?”

Emmett snorted. “Please!”

“Bella,” I said to my wife, “Do you remember a few months ago, I asked you to do me a favor once you were immortal?” Emmett’s ears perked up and Alice started laughing, already foreseeing the outcome.

“What?” Emmett wanted to know.

“Really?” Bella wondered, looking at me.

“Trust me,” I told her, winking, and held out my arms for Renesmee, who reached toward me.

Bella handed the baby over and then turned to our brother. “Emmett, how do you feel about a little bet?”

“Awesome. Bring it,” he said eagerly, jumping to his feet. Bella immediately started having second thoughts. She still had no idea how powerful she was.

“Unless you’re too afraid...?” Emmett goaded her, firming up Bella’s resolve.

“You. Me. Arm-wrestling. Dining room table. Now,” she ordered. Emmett never turned down a fight or a bet.

“Er, Bella,” Alice intervened, “I think Esme is fairly fond of that table. It’s an antique.”

“Thanks,” our mother mouthed.

“No problem,” Emmett said, grinning. “Right this way, Bella.” He led us out the back door toward the river where a flat granite boulder protruded from the ground. He set himself up with his elbow on the rock and motioned for Bella to join him.

“Okay, Emmett. I win, and you cannot say one more word about my sex life to anyone, not even Rose. No allusions, no innuendos—no nothing.”

“Deal. I win, and it’s going to get a *lot* worse,” Emmett promised. Bella suddenly showed reluctance.

“You gonna back down so easy, little sister? Not much wild about *you*, is there? I bet that cottage doesn’t have a scratch.” He laughed. “Did Edward tell you how many houses Rose and I smashed?”

The two had been working their way through the Kama Sutra during the period when they destroyed the interiors of several homes. They even collapsed a roof or two by crashing through too many load-bearing walls. I’d never heard vampire laughter as loud as theirs then and I never have since.

Bella’s face took on a look of determination as she placed her elbow on the rock and her palm in Emmett’s.

“One, two—”

“Three,” Emmett finished and pressed his hand into Bella’s. He got a big surprise. He’d expected his first push to do the job, but Bella’s arm hadn’t budged and she wasn’t straining at all. Emmett redoubled his effort. His biceps bulged, his wrist strained and his jaws clenched together. Bella decided to push back a bit and Emmett instantly lost an inch. She laughed at him and he snarled back. She didn’t seem to be working very hard. She was letting Emmett struggle and strain for fun. Finally, she decided to finish him off.

“Just keep your mouth shut,” she commanded, ending the match abruptly by jamming the back of Emmett’s hand into the rock. A big chunk of it cracked and split away, landing on Emmett’s foot. *Double whammy!* He was getting his just deserts— finally! Everybody laughed at him and he destroyed a couple of trees in irritation.

“Rematch. Tomorrow,” he barked.

“It’s not going to wear off that fast,” Bella countered. “Maybe you ought to give it a month.” What she said was precisely correct, but if one were feeling a bit sensitive, her words could be interpreted as a gibe.

“Tomorrow,” Emmett grunted, stalking off.

“Hey, whatever makes you happy, big brother.”

Bella had been so well-controlled despite Emmett’s best efforts throughout the day that she deserved to celebrate. Elated, she placed her hand, fingers outstretched, on the rock and began to press into the granite. Her fingers sank in, creating a perfect handprint in the stone. She released a handful of gravel to the ground.

“Cool,” she commented and smiled widely. Then she whipped around and karate-chopped the boulder with the side of her hand. It split like a melon, the two halves falling away. Bella started cackling and the family joined in. Then my wife engaged the boulder in a kickboxing match, punching and kicking it until it was nothing but a pile of sand.

In my arms, Renesmee grew excited as she watched Bella’s antics. Suddenly, a high-pitched squeal sang through the air. Bella whipped around again, but this time to look at the baby in surprise.

“Did she just laugh?” Everybody stared at Renesmee, jaws gaping. It was only the second sound she had ever made, an expression of glee.

“Yes,” I told her.

“Who *wasn’t* laughing?” Jacob carped. *Whoopy doo.*

“Tell me you didn’t let go a bit on your first run, dog,” I challenged.

“That’s different,” Jacob said, giving my shoulder a fake punch. “Bella’s supposed to be a grown-up. Married and a mom and all that. Shouldn’t there be more dignity?”

Renesmee reached to touch my face, though I already knew what was bugging her.

“What does she want?” Bella wanted to know.

“Less dignity,” I told her, smiling. Renesmee wanted to know why Bella had stopped entertaining us. “She was having almost as much fun watching you enjoy yourself as I was.”

“Am I funny?” Bella asked the baby, dashing over and pulling her out of my arms. She handed Nessie a small piece of the rock. “You want to try?”

Renesmee took the rock in both of her tiny hands and squeezed it. A little dust dropped away. She screwed up her eyes, wrinkled her forehead and squeezed as hard as she could to little effect. She frowned and offered the rock to her mother.

“I’ll get it,” Bella said, pinching the stone into sand.

Renesmee delighted all of us by laughing again and clapping her hands excitedly. Bella laughed with her until a ray of sunshine poured into the clearing making the Cullen family sparkle. Bella gawked at her glittering skin. It was the first time she’d seen herself in the sunlight and she seemed dazed. She was absolutely beautiful...stunning.

Renesmee noticed the change in Bella’s appearance and held up her arm to compare. Our daughter had lovely pearlescent skin that glowed in the sun, but did not sparkle. She would

not have to hide from daylight as her family did, but Renesmee was troubled by the great difference between her mother's skin and her own. Like children in mixed-race families everywhere, Nessie would eventually want to know why her skin was different than her parents' and we'd have to explain it to her.

"You're the prettiest," Bella confided.

"I'm not sure I can agree to that." Bella turned to respond and our eyes met.

"Freaky Bella," Jacob commented.

"What an amazing creature she is." I marveled at her splendor. We could not take our eyes off each another. Would nighttime never come?

29. HEAVEN

Nighttime did come eventually. Renesmee had fallen asleep at her usual time, between seven and eight o'clock. She'd been sleeping twelve hours at night, which seemed like a lot for a relative newborn until you considered how fast she was growing. Though she'd had a nap late in the afternoon, it had also been a busy and exciting day for her.

The nursery wasn't yet in place. With Charlie's visit, we hadn't had time to work on it, though Esme had drawn some sketches of Nessie's room with different color schemes and furniture layouts. Renesmee could choose the colors she wanted and Esme would bring in the furniture. As long as she had a crib, her parents would be happy—though our baby was growing so fast that she probably wouldn't need it for long.

We'd decided to maintain the status quo for one more night (or until the nursery was ready). After Renesmee fell asleep, we handed her to her grandmother before retiring to our cottage. Bella was feeling elated about her wrestling victory over Emmett and was hopeful that he would honor his side of the bet. I thought he would as far as he could help himself, but I also thought that he would try to alter the bargain by winning a rematch.

Despite Bella's victory, it was hard for her to forget that Emmett and the rest of the family could hear our more vigorous activities from the main house. I was used to that inconvenience and, heaven knows, I'd intruded on everyone's privacy every day of my vampire life, but Bella hadn't adjusted to it yet. If Emmett were more of a gentleman, he would keep his eavesdropping to himself, like everybody else did. The one saving grace, as Bella would soon learn, was that she could hear him as easily as he could hear her, so over time, such things balanced out.

We left the house and walked hand-in-hand to the river. I was hoping to distract my wife from her self-consciousness once we got to our cottage.

"My darling, you were simply miraculous with Charlie! You made being near him seem like nothing when it must have been terribly difficult."

"Could you read his mind? Is he okay? Did you talk to Alice? Can she see whether he'll do anything?" Bella fired questions at me in quick succession.

"Alice thought that Charlie would be fine. She didn't see any red flags, not that I caught, anyway. Charlie is almost as remarkable as you are in his own way. He's tough... and practical. And he loves you. Ready?" I asked, indicating the river. Bella nodded. I dropped her hand, knowing that her stronger legs would carry her farther than me and if I held onto her, I'd either

drag her down or she would yank me uncomfortably through the air behind her. Neither outcome would be graceful.

I was right. She sailed into the trees well beyond where I landed. I made up the distance by hitting the ground running, arriving just in time to snatch her out of the air as she descended. I hooked her legs under my right arm and took off at full speed. I longed to kiss her, but I didn't, because judging by the previous night, we wouldn't get home if I did.

Bella wasn't as restrained—she slipped her hands inside my sweater, stroking my chest and kissing the base of my neck. I growled involuntarily as her smooth palms traced the curves of my muscles. Her lips brushed up my throat and across my jaw as her hands moved lower onto my stomach. I growled a deeper note, the sound rumbling in my chest.

My legs were moving as fast as they could go, but I was in such a hurry to get there that the cottage seemed fifteen or twenty miles further away than it had been when we left it. Though sorely tempted, I refrained from crashing through the solid oak door when we finally arrived. I used the door handle like a civilized person and carried my bride over the threshold. After all, it was our second honeymoon...or the second half of our first honeymoon. Either way you looked at it, it was my heaven on earth.

It took a fraction of a second to get from the front door to our bedroom. The mosquito netting had been swept to the side, so I held Bella to my chest and leaped for the bed from the doorway. Esme had made a good choice of bedframe. When we hit the mattress, the heavy bed did not collapse, but moved on slides across the room and came to a stop against the house's outside wall. Before we'd stopped moving, Bella had ripped my sweater apart with her hands and her teeth. She was one garment ahead of me—while she shredded my khakis, I tore off her t-shirt and wrenched her blue jeans apart. Maybe this was one reason Alice had supplied us with so many clothes. She must have foreseen that we would go through them quickly. Destroying clothing was preferable to collapsing cottages, though. Bella and I were extremely fond of Esme's handiwork.

We tumbled across the huge bed and back, our lips locking together and the shreds of our garments winding around us. I pressed the length of my body against my love while she twined her legs around mine and rolled on top of me. Bella was desperate with desire. She aligned her body with mine, then spread her thighs and began stroking herself against my rigid penis as her mouth moved hungrily down my neck and onto my chest. Her long moan vibrated through my skin.

Bella's pregnancy had left her lovely breasts slightly swollen and that change had remained through her transition, rounding her out a bit more than before. Her nipples were distended for breast-feeding, pale pink on alabaster.

I took her nipples into my mouth, each in turn, sucking and pulling as she stimulated herself against me. With my strength commensurate to her solidity, I was free now...free to simply let loose and love her.

Bella panted raggedly as she sped up her movements. Her eyes were shut and her lips were slightly parted. I stroked her nipples and watched her facial expressions change as she became increasingly excited. When her muscles suddenly went taut, I lifted her hips, positioned myself beneath her and lowered her onto my penis. As I entered her slowly, I felt her orgasm begin. She cried out, as did I, and I lifted and lowered her again and then again. *Ahh!*

She felt so different around me than before her change, comfortably warm, firmer, with more friction between us than before. When she came, her muscles squeezed me more powerfully than they had when she was human. Her pleasure was so thrilling and her body so stimulating that I let go and I climaxed just after her.

“Ahhhhh!” The bed shook from the vibration of my groan. Bella tucked her lips into the side of my throat and kissed me there as I trembled beneath her.

“Bella, my love,” I whispered in her ear when I had recovered sufficiently to speak. I smoothed her hair from her face with both hands.

“I love you,” she murmured and pressed her lips to mine.

Such joy there was here in Heaven! I held her close and gently rolled until she lay on her back beneath me. I chuckled when I suddenly realized two things. Firstly, I hadn’t needed to be so careful. She was no longer fragile. Secondly, if she hadn’t wanted me on top, then I wouldn’t have been able to budge her. For the present, I was completely subject to her strength. I would be helpless to resist her if she wanted this or that. It was a novel thought given how much resisting I’d done before we were married.

“What’s funny?” Bella inquired, but I distracted her with a kiss. I didn’t want to give her any ideas. She would think of it sooner or later, anyway. She seemed to be getting a feel for her strength. Despite her excitement, she hadn’t squeezed me too tightly with her arms, nor pushed against me too hard. She’d kept her power within comfortable bounds.

Before long, I began to move slowly inside of her and Bella responded by lifting her hips to meet mine. After a time, I became aware that the sounds we were making were certain to be audible across the river, where Emmett’s vampire ears undoubtedly were perked up. With any luck, our lust had inspired his, and he and Rose had retired to their room.

Apropos of nothing, I wondered how Jacob coped with his teenage lust. He certainly had been lustful for Bella before he met Renesmee. Since then, I hadn’t detected any behavior

toward my daughter that strayed from simple love, concern, and caretaking. And even more surprisingly, he seemed to have no inappropriate thoughts directed toward either my wife or my daughter. It was such a drastic change in Jacob that I was again amazed at how transformative the process of imprinting was.

As I slid gently forward and back, Bella's hands were everywhere, making long sweeps down my back, cupping my buttocks and stroking between them. I felt myself becoming frenzied as our lips locked together. She wrapped her legs around my back and moaned. *That sound! How I loved that sound!* I leaned over and took her left breast into my mouth and sucked hard. Bella shrieked in pleasure and clamped down around me. *Oh gawd...*

In one swift motion, I was on my feet and Bella's back was against the stone wall, her legs clasped around my waist—better leverage. I pressed into her and rocked, hearing her hum in my ear, one continuous note, high-pitched, a song of love. I moaned into her; she hummed into me. My lips sought hers—click-clack—warmth to warmth. *Mmm... mmm... mmm...* (When I checked later, none of the stones was dislodged, though the mortar between them was cracked.)

The night passed as rapidly as the previous one. Certain things stood out...the intensely arousing sounds my lover made when I sucked on her nipples, being helpless beneath her when she decided to take control, the expression on her face as I dragged my tongue across her clitoris.

The latter case was a study in pleasure. Her eyes rolled back, her jaw slackened and her lips parted, her breath became frantic. Her cries grew higher in pitch as her excitement built, and she froze for one pregnant moment before she climaxed. Such are the stirring details of making love with Bella that no one but myself will ever know. It's a miracle to me how she allows me so close when she's at her most vulnerable. That kind of intimacy binds you together as nothing else can.

How I loved her! She was my life.

It was past sunrise when we came up for air.

"Edward, is it time?"

"Yes, my darling."

“I don’t want to move.”

“Mmm...” I brushed my lips down the length of Bella’s throat.

“You’re not helping...” she whispered.

“No....” I dragged the tip of my tongue across her collarbone, inhaling her sweet scent.

“Somebody’s got to be good. Renesmee is probably awake.”

“She’s awake,” I murmured.

“How do you know?”

“Rosalie’s thoughts...”

“Edward, you have to help.”

I groaned. Bella’s fingers were wound through my hair and she pulled my face away from her chest. “Okay, you’re right,” I conceded.

Still inside her, I rolled us to the edge of the bed. With her legs around my waist and my hands under her buttocks, I stood and carried her to our closet from hell. I didn’t try not to bounce her as I walked, and Bella didn’t try not to either, so we were delayed another ten minutes on the closet floor before guilt got the better of us and I lifted Bella off of me slowly. When we separated, her vagina made a soft *pop* like a rubber stopper being pulled from a drain and we both chuckled. I repeated the sound with my lips against her neck and we laughed again.

“I hope Emmett didn’t hear that,” I teased.

“Even if he did, he’s not allowed to say a word about it!”

“Under threat of injury?”

“That’s right!”

Bella rose and made her way to the back of the closet where her “real” clothes were located. I jumped up and followed, palming her round bottom. She pulled a fresh pair of blue jeans from the same drawer as yesterday and I noticed that there were only two more pairs stacked there. We’d have to stop ripping each other’s clothes off. Bella found a beige, long-sleeved t-shirt—sadly, not low-cut—and I located some blue jeans and a sweater for myself. In three seconds we were dressed and with one last kiss, we clasped hands and darted out the back door of the cottage.

When we arrived at the house, Renesmee squealed—*squealed?*—and leaned out of Rosalie’s arms, stretching toward Bella.

“Thanks, Rose,” Bella said, reaching for the baby. “We’ll have to get Renesmee’s bedroom set up today.”

“I don’t mind holding her. Neither does anyone else.”

“It’s not your responsibility, though,” Bella said with a grateful smile.

“Are you sure you want her out there with you at night?” Rose inquired, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Bella scowled at her. “Of course. Hey, baby,” she said, turning her attention to Nessie.

I headed to the kitchen to get Renesmee some breakfast while she showed Bella her feelings about us not being there when she woke up and where did we go?

“I’ll take you out to the cottage today. You can pick the colors for your room.”

Esme piped up. “Her furniture is scheduled to arrive from Seattle today. We’ll paint the walls this morning and Alice will probably want to work on Nessie’s closet. Is it okay with you if we take the keys and do that?”

“Yes, of course. That would be wonderful. Thank you. And thank you again for such a wonderful gift. We love the cottage!”

Esme gave Bella a quick hug. “You’re very welcome, dear. We’re so happy that you and Renesmee are part of our family.”

I returned with Nessie’s cup. “Are you thirsty, little one?” I took Renesmee from her mother and she snuggled down in my arms to drink. Bella disappeared into the kitchen. Renesmee touched my throat, wondering why her momma didn’t feed her like everybody else did.

“It makes your momma too thirsty to be near your cup. She might not be able to feed you for a while, but when you’re a little bigger, we’ll take you hunting with us.”

Renesmee seemed to understand my explanation, or at least to accept it. I sang to her while she drank her breakfast and when she was finished, she showed me a picture of Charlie, wanting to know when he was coming.

“He will probably visit in the afternoon, after your next measuring. Do you remember his scent?” I asked, though I already knew it was his most distinguishing feature in her mind. He

made her thirsty. “And you remember that you’re not to bite and not to tell him things with your hand?” She did. We didn’t know whether Renesmee had perfect recall as her parents did, but I was beginning to think so.

Having Renesmee was a huge adventure. I wondered what would be the next surprise she’d present to us. Maybe she would walk or start talking. She found it so natural to communicate with her hand that I didn’t expect the latter to happen for some time. In fact, I wasn’t sure what might compel her to switch from her primary mode of communication. Perhaps she’d want to talk to someone from across a room one day.

Carlisle had measured Renesmee at seven o’clock before her mother and I had come to the house. It couldn’t be called a trend yet, but it looked like her growth rate might be slowing slightly. That would be a great relief.

I took Nessie to the kitchen and found Bella talking to Jacob, who had his head in the refrigerator as usual. It was good that someone was eating our food. Otherwise, it just sat in the kitchen until it got old and had to be thrown out. I moved to the sink to wash Nessie’s cup and Bella took the baby from my arms. Smelling the remains in the cup, she clamped her jaws together and turned to leave the room. I sneaked a quick pat on her behind. *Mmm...* I could not keep my hands off of her today.

“Hey!” Jacob said with his mouth full of roasted chicken. “Your brother said you got Bella a car for her birthday. What’d you get her?”

“Yes, it’s been under a tarp in the garage, but with Charlie showing up yesterday, I didn’t get a chance to give it to her officially. I wanted to wait until you and Seth were here anyway, because Bella is unlikely to appreciate it to the degree that it should be appreciated.” I smiled at him.

“I’m up for it! Let’s go take a look!”

“Where’s Seth? Is he coming by?”

“Yeah, he’s going to escort Charlie over after Sue makes Sunday dinner. She feels sorry for him not having a cook anymore.” He paused to take another bite. “Billy said they had an interesting evening. Charlie’s suspicious about the whole tribe now, wondering what’s what. He didn’t want to know anything about Bella’s deal, but we might have to let him in on who’s a wolf and who’s not. He seems freaked out that anybody could phase at any time. I get the feeling that Sue’s a little sweet on Charlie, so maybe he’ll become an honorary tribe member. *That’ll* be interesting.” Jacob chuckled, imagining Charlie’s discomfort with the Quileute magic.

“So Charlie will get a good dose of the supernatural whether he wants to or not,” I ventured.

“It depends on how close he gets to Sue. She won’t tell him anything unless they get serious or if Seth or Leah accidentally phases around him. It could happen!” Jacob laughed, remembering the look on Charlie’s face the day before. “You know,” he continued, “I think Charlie thought I was making a pass at him when I took him into the woods and pulled down my sweatpants. It was priceless!” He laughed raucously. It *was* rather hilarious.

I’d already seen the image in Jacob’s head, but his thoughts were giving me a little more detail. Charlie had turned white, his jaw had dropped, and he’d started sidling away from Jacob. Probably, he couldn’t comprehend how Bella’s “illness” had anything to do with Jacob’s being gay. I laughed too. Poor Charlie! But he was one tough cop!

“He asked my dad last night whether he was an animal or if Sue was an animal and he was relieved when they both smiled and said no. I guess he didn’t think to ask about Sue’s kids.” Jacob chuckled again. “He absolutely *loves* Nessie, though. I knew he would. He figured out that she looks like Bella, but he’s trying not to think about it. He did ask Billy if he knew whether Renesmee was an animal and Billy told him no, though with what Carlisle says, she could be, right?”

“He and I have talked quite a bit about her genetics. She does have the same number of chromosomes as you, but we don’t know what that will mean. It could be that the first werewolves were created by the mating of a vampire and a human—”

“NO! NO WAY!” Jacob exploded.

It was such an ingrained thing for him to hate vampires that despite our altered circumstances, he couldn’t help himself. I just shrugged. We’d have to wait and see. I left the room to let him recompose himself. In about half a second, he’d realize (again) that Renesmee was half vampire and so he couldn’t exactly detest vampires in the same way as he used to. Change was hard. I smiled to myself.

I found Bella and Renesmee looking at some color swatches Esme had fanned out on the conference table.

“Which color do you like best?” Bella asked the baby.

Nessie pointed to yellow with one hand and lavender with the other.

“You want two colors?”

Nessie put her hand to Bella’s cheek.

“Okay, then. Does that work for you, Esme?”

“Perfectly,” she responded and kissed the baby’s cheek. “You will have a very happy room,” she told Nessie. Esme gathered the swatches and prepared to go into town for the paint.

“Bella, darling?” I interjected. She turned to me and raised her eyebrows. “Are you ready to see your other birthday present?”

“Oh!” She looked surprised for a moment, having forgotten the car. “Ummm...yes, I guess so.”

Alice came dancing down the stairs, pulling Jasper by the hand.

“Let’s go, then!” Alice trilled. “I want to see what Bella thinks!”

I put my arm around my wife’s waist and directed her and Nessie toward the kitchen and the back door. Jacob followed Alice and Jasper. When we entered the garage, I saw Emmett holding up his jeep by its undercarriage. Rosalie was lying on a dolly with her legs sticking out from beneath it. She rolled out, her hands and blue jeans dotted with oil. Emmett set the vehicle down and leaped up.

“Shall I pull off the tarp?” he asked excitedly.

“Sure, Em. Are you ready, Bella?”

Bella sighed. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Okay, here goes! Three, two, one...” With a sweep of his hand, Emmett whipped off the canvas tarp like a matador taunting a bull.

“An F430?” Jacob gasped, looking in my direction. “Are you kidding me?!”

I nodded.

“What do you think, Bella?” Alice demanded.

“Umm, wow! It’s really pretty. It looks fast too.” I smiled at her underwhelming, non-comprehending comment. I leaned over and gave her a big smack on the lips. “Happy birthday, my darling!”

“Okay, but this is my *zero* vampire birthday, not my nineteenth human birthday. I am eighteen forever.”

“You are eighteen forever,” I repeated solemnly.

Alice laughed. "Bella, do you even know what this car is?"

"Is it a Porsche?"

Alice smiled. "No..."

"Jaguar?"

"No."

"Um, Mercedes?"

"No!" Emmett and Rosalie chimed in along with Alice.

"BMW?"

"You're hopeless, Bells!" Jacob interrupted. "It's a Ferrari!"

"Oh, wow... Isn't that a race car?"

"Some people race them, but they're not just for racing," I told her.

"Edward, it's beautiful. Thank you. Jacob?" He was beside her instantly to take the baby. Then she threw her arms around my neck and pressed her lips to mine. What started as a thank you kiss quickly turned into something else. Bella pushed against me with such force that I ended up with my back pancaked against the garage wall. The gypsum board cracked in the shape of my back. Emmett guffawed at my helplessness, his amusement fed by the memory of his humiliating defeat in the arm-wrestling match. I didn't mind at all. I just gave her everything I had.

"Ahem," Jacob uttered censoriously. "There are children in the room."

Bella separated herself from me abruptly.

"Oops," she whispered, smiling. "You okay?"

"Much better than okay. Do you want to drive your new car?"

"Sure, but you know, it's not exactly a family car. It only has two seats."

"Yes, I had no idea there would be three of us when I chose it," I responded. "I guess we won't be using it for family outings. We'll put a car seat in the Volvo."

"I'll look after Nessie while you're gone," Jacob announced. "Ness? You wanna go feed some squirrels in the woods?" Renesmee smacked her palm against his neck. Yes, she did. She

really enjoyed getting close to the wildlife with Jacob. It was not something she could do with any of the rest of us and he knew it. I wondered briefly how we were going to transition her to hunting and “eating” the wildlife. As soon as she could walk, we’d need to take her hunting with us unless she developed a taste for human food in the meantime. So far, she hadn’t shown any signs of it.

I took Bella’s hand, pulled her to the driver’s side of the car, and opened the door for her.

“Holy crow!” she gasped, looking into the car’s beige interior. She stroked the soft leather seat. “Is it an automatic?”

“No, it has shift paddles here.” I indicated the high-end gear shifts on the steering column. “It’s semi-automatic. There is no clutch and you don’t have to take your hands off the wheel to change gears.”

“Well, that’s pretty cool. It has a ‘Start’ button?” she asked as she sat down in the low seat and put her hands on the wheel.

“Yes, you put your foot on the brake, make sure you’re in ‘Park,’ and press the button. The car recognizes its own key. You don’t even need to use it as long as the key fob is in your pocket.”

“Awesome!” Jacob interjected.

“You know, Edward, I can’t really drive it anywhere. Everybody will stare.”

“That’s what the tinted windows are for,” I replied, smiling.

“I’ll still have to take your car to the store and stuff. I don’t want to have another one of those incidents like I had with the last car. Hey! Where *is* the tank-proof wonder, anyway?”

“The Mercedes Guardian? Carlisle hired a driver to return it to its owner. Why? Do you miss it?”

“Ugh, no! I think this one might be worse, though. It’s bright red!”

I chuckled. “Don’t you like the color?”

“No, I mean, yes, it’s really pretty, but it’s so...loud.”

“I thought you might appreciate having a new car in the same color as your old one. And you know, everybody stared at that truck too because it was vintage and...well... loud.” I tried to keep my smile restrained. She stuck out her tongue. “So, shall we go?”

“Okay, but you’ll have to teach me how to drive this thing.”

“I’m not worried. Once you know what all the buttons are for, you won’t have any problem handling a Ferrari. You and Alice could even do some street racing if you wanted to.”

“Oh yes, let’s!” Alice exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Bella rolled her eyes. I winked at my sister and shut the car door.

Bella mastered the controls easily and we drove south past Tacoma, then Olympia, and then Portland, Oregon, after which the population density decreased. She didn’t max out the engine, but she did hit 150 miles per hour, which was pretty good for a first run. I was gratified by her grin. She seemed to enjoy the speed as I thought she might, post-change.

Eventually, I reminded Bella that Charlie was coming to see her and we turned around to head back north. I hadn’t wanted Charlie around for the unveiling because the car would distract Bella when she needed to concentrate on handling her father’s presence.

No doubt everybody would be waiting to test drive the Ferrari when we returned. We had a lot of nice cars on the Cullen estate, but new specimens were always ogled and fawned over.

Somewhere on our way back up the Olympic Peninsula, Bella found an abandoned logging road and turned onto it. The car wasn’t designed for bumpy dirt tracks, but it held the road well, even at 110 miles per hour. Pretty impressive.

When she reached the end of the marginal roadway, she stopped the car and turned off the engine. Before I knew what was happening, she had ejected herself from her seat and landed in my lap facing me. It was a lovely idea, but there’s one thing a Ferrari is not and that’s a love-mobile. The car was designed for speed, not for assignments of any sort.

My wife and I ended up in the forest with certain items of clothing folded neatly over a tree branch. After all, we couldn’t come home with shredded clothes. It would be unseemly.

30. CHARLIE

It was so difficult...I did *not* want to leave! Bella had me beneath her, her lips devouring mine. The little vixen had abducted me into the woods where there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that anyone would come along to rescue me. Thank God!

"Renesmee," I said in barely a whisper. She would be missing us. As much as I adored her, it was a little difficult to remember that we were parents. Of course I didn't forget. I'm physically unable to forget, but I *am* physically able to be distracted by my lovely, luscious wife.

"Oops. We cheated." Bella sighed. "It's my fault. I haven't mastered this balancing thing yet. We better get back." But before she made any move to "get back," she leaned forward and slowly, deliciously, smoothed her lips against mine. In a surge of passion, I tried to roll on top of her, but she pressed her legs firmly against the ground and thwarted me. I growled at her. She growled back and kissed me again.

This was such a turnabout from our courting days. Back then, I could move or rearrange her whenever the urge struck. Not anymore. Now I was a slave to Bella's impulses, but I wasn't complaining. It was a *helluva* lot of fun. It would be interesting to see how things changed when we were once again equal in strength. For now, Bella was enjoying herself. She chuckled and leaped to her feet, grabbing her clothes in the same motion. She dropped mine onto me and, despite my pressing sense of irresponsibility, I followed her lead and got myself dressed.

"May I take a turn behind the wheel?" I inquired. I'd driven the car a bit, but hadn't wanted to put too many miles on it before presenting it to my wife. It was a gift, after all.

"Sure, if tonight you take up with me where we just left off."

"Gladly," I promised. "Just try and stop me!"

"You know I could," Bella teased, grinning.

"It would appear so...for now. Don't forget that the tables will turn when your mutant strength subsides and my natural masculinity overwhelms your feminine delicacy."

"Ow!" I complained when she punched me in the arm, my protest only a slight exaggeration.

"Did I hurt you?" Bella reached up to touch my face, concerned.

“Yes!” I said and tossed her over my shoulder, laughing. She could have taken me down in a nanosecond, but she threw me a bone by not struggling very hard. I wrapped one arm around her thighs and rubbed her bottoms-up bottom with the opposite hand while I walked slowly to the car.

“Edward, you’re not helping,” Bella sing-songed.

“I know,” I replied, chuckling. I knew one sure way to drive her crazy. *Ha, ha, ha.*

We returned to the homestead, despite Bella’s numerous attempts to distract me as I drove. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to get back to our child. She just wanted to get back at me for getting back at her. She succeeded. It had been over a month since I’d felt the need to stop her hands from sliding south on me. I considered myself to be a mostly law-abiding citizen, but I admit that allowing my lover to stroke and kiss my chest and otherwise touch me while I was driving was an exception to the rule. Hell, I was a vampire. I could manage.

It was close to noon when I decelerated the Ferrari from 60 to 0 mph in three seconds and skidded to a stop in front of our garage, spewing gravel. Fun car. Alice, Emmett, and Rosalie were waiting for us, haggling over who would drive it next.

“Who wins?” I asked Alice, already seeing the answer.

I tossed the key fob to her at the same time she answered, “I do, of course.”

I took Bella’s hand, kissed her palm, and pulled her into the house. Esme met us at the door holding Renesmee who leaned horizontally toward Bella, then toward me, then back toward Bella. She was as decisive as her cartoonish mother had been the day before. I took her from her Nana, and kissed her forehead and cheek while she touched my throat, wanting to know where we’d been.

Bella reached for Nessie and the child repeated her question to her mother.

“We drove Momma’s new car to Oregon,” Bella explained.

“I’m glad you two are back,” Esme said. “The furniture for Renesmee’s room is here. Carlisle and Jasper are putting it on the front porch. Why don’t you take a look and see which pieces you want? I got extra things so you could pick.

“Crib?” I asked. “We’d like to start weaning her off the handheld thing.”

“I ordered two. A wrought iron one that rocks and a wooden one that converts to a child’s bed when Nessie outgrows the baby bed.” *She doesn’t like waking up without you and Bella,* Esme informed me silently.

"I know," I answered. "We don't like it either, but we need her in her own bed as soon as possible."

"Of course you do," Esme responded. She was entirely sincere, but I might have blushed if I'd had that capability. Renesmee asked Bella what I was talking about.

"We're going to fix up your bedroom at the cottage so you can stay with us tonight. Shall we go pick out your furniture?" Nessie nodded her head gravely. I stroked the baby's curly hair, then put my arm around Bella's waist and we headed toward the porch.

"We might want to keep both cribs," Bella mused. "Renesmee will need the iron until she learns how to control her strength enough not to break the wooden bed. But, she'll probably outgrow the crib quickly. Do you like this one, baby?" Bella asked, pointing to the wrought iron crib.

Renesmee asked what it was for.

"It's for you to sleep in at the cottage with Momma and Daddy." Given the final caveat, Renesmee liked it very much indeed.

"Did Alice say when Charlie would be coming today?" Bella inquired.

"At 1:15 with Seth. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. I asked Emmett to turn on the TV so Charlie could watch pro football. He said the first game is the Seahawks and the Giants."

"Does Charlie like the Seahawks or Giants?"

"No idea," Bella laughed. "But if there's a ball flying around, he probably does."

Grandpa? Renesmee asked by slapping her palm down excitedly on Bella's neck.

"Yes, Grandpa is coming to see you pretty soon." Renesmee glowed.

Our second afternoon with Charlie was less tense than the first. I met him and Seth at the front door and invited them in. Charlie's eyes never met mine.

"Hi, Edward," Seth greeted me warmly. "What's all this stuff out here?"

“It’s furniture for Renesmee’s room. Esme is decorating it.”

“Where’s the baby?” Charlie wanted to know.

“With Bella on the couch.”

Charlie sidestepped around me and headed to the living room.

“Jake said you got Bella a new car! Can I see it?” Seth asked.

“Of course, as soon as my sisters bring it back. You can take a ride with Emmett if you want to. Head out to the garage and you should catch him.”

“Cool!” Seth held up his fist for a knuckle bump. I laughed and bumped his fist.

“Bella. How are you feeling today?”

“Hi, Dad. Just great. You don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“How’s the baby?” Charlie stepped to where Bella was sitting on the couch.

“Good. She’s been waiting for you.”

Renesmee hadn’t been awake when she was close to Charlie the day before and she was hiding behind Bella’s hair, trying to be careful. Charlie dropped to one knee and offered an index finger to the baby. She reached out and gripped it in her little fist, peeking out with one eye.

“Hi, baby!” he cooed. “Goodness, you’re a hot little thing. Bella, you should dress her in something lighter. She’s very hot.”

“Okay,” Bella agreed. I walked over and reached for Renesmee. Charlie was a little too close for only her second day near him and he was making her thirsty. Bella shook her head no, and I realized she needed to hold the baby to keep herself in check around her father. Her throat must be burning. Emmett wasn’t back yet, so I reached for the remote control and flipped on the big-screen television, finding the Seahawks/Giants game on FOX Network. Charlie immediately turned toward the TV and away from my dangerous wife and child.

“Have a seat, Charlie,” I suggested. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Uh, no thanks,” he mumbled, backing away from me and dropping into a lounge chair. “Is your brother here?”

“Yes, he should be back shortly. He’s gone for a drive, but I think he wants to watch the game.”

“Dad, Edward got me a new car for my birthday. It’s a Ferrari.”

Charlie’s eyes grew wide. “You’re kidding!” he said looking at me.

“No, it’s red with tan interior,” Bella said.

“Emmett should bring it back soon,” I added. I heard Rose and Alice coming in from the garage.

“Hi, Charlie!” Alice sang out. “How’s Trix?”

“Oh, hi, Alice.” Charlie was fond of my sister, though after yesterday’s visit, he was confused about whether he should be or not. She was a great icebreaker, though, and she’d come back to help out with our visitor. She was capable of putting Charlie at ease as far as that was possible.

“Didn’t Edward get you some refreshments? How about a soda? I’ll get it,” she trilled and left the room before he could answer. I sat down next to Bella and put my arm around her shoulders for moral support. Charlie’s chair sat about five feet away. Renesmee leaned out of Bella’s arms toward him.

“No, Renesmee,” Bella told her softly.

“I’d like to hold her. Come to your grandpa,” he encouraged our carnivorous child.

I touched my finger to her lips and took her hand in mine briefly, looking into her eyes. She understood. I nodded at Bella to allow it. It was a chance, but even if Nessie surprised me and bit Charlie, she wasn’t venomous and I could get to her and pull her off quickly. If she showed him her thoughts...well...Charlie would have to cope. He’d handled everything so well the day before that I thought it wasn’t much of a danger.

Charlie took Renesmee awkwardly, but she snuggled into his arms and put her head on his chest. Charlie’s entire face lit up in a smile.

“Aren’t you the prettiest little thing?” he clucked. He offered her his finger again and she took it. She looked directly in his eyes and gave him a big, toothy smile. He was still shocked by her teeth and by her cognizance, but he found her as irresistible as everyone else did.

“She likes you,” Alice told Charlie as she came back into the room carrying a glass of cola. “She doesn’t go to just anyone, you know,” Alice added, though so far, Nessie hadn’t rejected anybody.

“You said she was hot, Charlie?” Alice continued. “Maybe you could take her sweater off.”

Charlie looked at Alice in surprise. It had been a long time since he’d cared for a baby girl. Bella was watching her father, fascinated. I smiled. I’d wager that she had never seen him in this role before.

Jacob had wandered back into the living room from the garage.

“Hey, Charlie! I see you’re making friends there.”

Charlie glanced up and grunted in reply. He held Renesmee in a sitting position on his lap and began removing her knitted cardigan from her little arms one at a time. Alice set down the soda for Charlie and pulled out a pocket camera.

“Nessie...Grandpa...smile!” she called out and flashed a picture of the two of them and then another. Much to Bella’s surprise, Charlie obeyed and smiled broadly into the camera.

“Bella! You get in there too. Let’s have a picture of three generations together. Though I sure wish you’d worn your nice clothes today,” Alice grumbled. Bella reluctantly complied, knowing that there was no point in arguing with Alice. I saw Bella hold her breath as she rose from the couch and kneeled beside Charlie’s chair. Alice flashed a couple more photos.

“Now Edward!” I didn’t mind joining the group for a family photo. I could hear Alice’s idea, which was a good one. Our child was maturing so fast that she and Rosalie planned to take pictures of her every day in different outfits and at different locations. By doing so, they would create a history for our daughter, evidence of a normal childhood.

Renesmee was captivated by Charlie. She had her ear against his chest, listening to the wet *tha-thump, tha-thump* of his heart. She recognized that—like Jacob—Charlie was the same as her in a way that her mother and father were not. I also sensed Renesmee understood that he and she were connected. Perhaps it was his scent...maybe there was an element of familiarity to it, or perhaps it was something more subtle, an intangible feeling of relationship, of kin.

With her sweater removed, Renesmee held up her arm next to Charlie’s as if to compare and looked into his face. At first, he just stared at her, shocked that she would do something so deliberate at her age. Her big eyes kept looking at his, though, until he recovered and responded to her implicit question.

“Your skin is prettier than mine,” he said softly. “Smooth and shiny.” He stroked her forearm with one finger. She copied him by stroking his forearm with her tiny index finger. “Yes,

my skin is rough and hairy,” he laughed. Renesmee smiled widely and he began to chuckle at her delight. Everyone in the room was riveted on their exchange, but the two of them were aware of no one but each other.

I could read that Charlie had many questions about the baby, recognizing full well that she was no three-month-old child. Her awareness and communication skills were clearly that of a much older child, even without her speaking or showing him her thoughts. I sat beside Bella watching the two of them together and enjoying Bella’s fascination with her father as a granddad.

As Charlie sat holding our daughter, a football game blaring in the background, he talked to her softly, at first admiring her fingers and toes and bronze-colored curls, and then just babbling to her about the football game, about her mother when she was a baby, about anything and everything that came into his head. The silent, taciturn Charlie had suddenly become gregarious as our child watched and listened to everything he said, rapt. I knew, though he couldn’t, that she was processing and filing it all away. I expected that she would shock him again by recalling what he was telling her now and referring to it sometime in the future.

After a spellbinding hour together, Nessie stretched her hand toward Jacob, who was sitting in the lounge chair next to Charlie.

“What is it, Nessie? What do you need?” He leaned forward toward Charlie until the baby could touch his throat.

“You’re thirsty? Okay,” Jacob responded to her request for her cup.

Renesmee nodded, much to Charlie’s surprise. We hadn’t told her not to show others her thoughts in Charlie’s presence.

“Here, Charlie,” Jacob said. “Give her to me and I’ll take care of it.” Renesmee reached for Jacob and Charlie handed her over, his face frozen in stunned disbelief.

“How did you know what she wanted?” he demanded.

“Oh...Nessie is a good communicator,” Jacob replied, smiling, before leaving the room for the kitchen. I let them go. Better I should stay with Bella and make sure she was holding up okay.

“That is one remarkable child,” Charlie commented, his eyes wide.

“Yes, she is,” I answered, smiling.

“She’s really something…”

“She likes you, Dad,” Bella said. “She knows you’re her grandpa.” Charlie beamed and turned toward the television, going silent in his more familiar way.

“Hi, Charlie!” Emmett called as he strode into the room from the kitchen. “Who’s ahead?”

Charlie looked startled when he realized how much of the game had passed. He’d been too enthralled with Renesmee to fall back on his crutch of the day before.

“Uh, let’s see. Looks like the Giants are up by ten.”

“They’re bound to stomp the Seahawks, but I’m rooting for the underdog,” Emmett replied, dropping into the chair Jacob had vacated.

The rest of the afternoon passed easily, the family going about its business. Alice was at her computer downloading pictures, every now and then getting up to snap a few more of Renesmee with whomever was holding her. Rosalie stood beside her, commenting on this and that and pointing at the screen. The two of them decided to go shopping for Nessie in Seattle the next day.

Esme came in from the kitchen.

“Hello, Charlie,” she said warmly.

“Uh, hello,” he replied hesitantly. “Where’s Carlisle?”

“He and Jasper are moving furniture for me.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Bella added. “Esme and the rest of the family remodeled an old cottage in the woods for Edward and me. Now that we have Renesmee, she’s creating a nursery too. It’s really beautiful.”

“Uh…maybe I’ll see it sometime,” Charlie replied, not at all intending to wander into the woods with a Cullen any time soon.

“Score!” Emmett interjected and Charlie turned to the television with relief. There were so many of us about that it made him nervous—but not nervous enough to leave, apparently.

Charlie stayed and stayed. Because we’d let him into our home and our private lives, the family had decided spontaneously not to pretend around him. Everyone avoided blatant displays of supernatural motion or strength, but that was the extent of it. We stood more than we might have with other humans and we all abandoned the fake fidgeting and blinking after a

couple of hours. Bella adhered to the rules more carefully than the rest of us, since her changes were the most noticeable and the most disturbing to Charlie. Still, he seemed determined not to see anything that didn't seem quite right, including the fact that our three-month-old baby never needed a diaper change.

At 6:30, Seth asked, "Do you wanna come have dinner at my house, Charlie? If you do, maybe you could take me home?"

I don't know whether it was hunger, kindness toward Seth, or wanting to see Sue—maybe all three—but Charlie stood up and silently questioned Bella.

"It's okay, Dad," Bella said. "We have to put Renesmee to bed pretty soon anyway. You can come see her after work tomorrow if you want to. Jacob will be here."

Charlie glanced around the room to verify the invitation with anyone else who was paying attention. Esme and I nodded. Jacob was back in the kitchen raiding the refrigerator.

"I'll do that, Bells," he responded and joined Seth at the front door. Bella and I followed with the baby.

"Bye, Nessie," he said softly, putting out his finger, which she took in her fist. Nessie gave him her big smile again and waved with her other hand. Charlie chuckled a little nervously.

"She's really something," he repeated.

"She is, Dad. She's something special," Bella replied.

"If you need a babysitter sometime, I could...you know...if you told me what to do, though it seems like you've got enough people here to help out."

"That's true, but you can visit whenever you want to." Charlie hesitated in the doorway, staring at his shoes.

"Um...would it be all right if Sue came with me? She'd like to meet Renesmee too."

Bella nodded and then looked at me.

"Sure, Charlie," I concurred. "Sue is welcome. Seth and Leah are often here with Jacob anyway." Charlie already had noticed that, but hadn't known what to make of it.

After Charlie left, Carlisle retrieved his kit and set about measuring Renesmee. Her growth rate was the tiniest bit slower than the day before, but not enough for us to draw any conclusions. I went to the kitchen to warm Nessie's dinner and brought it back to the living

room. Bella passed the baby to me and left. Both of my girls had gotten thirsty with Charlie there all afternoon.

“You did well today, Nessie,” I told her as she gulped down the blood.

She touched my throat to tell me that she liked her grandpa.

“He loves you too, darling child. He’s going to visit you as often as he can.” Renesmee went back to drinking. Her eyelids gradually grew heavy until they closed and stayed closed. She hadn’t been able to stay awake to finish the entire cup.

Esme and Rosalie had returned from the cottage, knowing that it was almost Renesmee’s bedtime.

“We’ve got the bedroom set up for the baby if you want to take her with you tonight,” Esme told us.

“We do,” Bella called from the kitchen where she’d escaped while I fed Renesmee.

“She’s gone to sleep,” I called back. Rosalie took the baby’s cup from me and Bella reentered the room.

“Alice hasn’t done her closet yet, but we left some pajamas and a couple of outfits for her,” Rosalie told Bella.

“Thanks, Rose,” Bella responded.

“Thank you,” I said to Esme.

“You’re very welcome, dear,” she replied, stroking Nessie’s curls. “She’s our precious treasure.” I kissed my mother on the cheek.

“Shall we go, then?” I asked Bella.

“Yes, let’s,” she replied, smiling. I noted a look of relief on her face. It had been a tough afternoon for my wife.

We jumped the river and ran through the woods, hand-in-hand, my opposite arm cradling the baby. I was careful to run smoothly and not jostle her, though once Renesmee was out, she stayed out. When we reached the front door, Bella used the key Esme had handed her, although we’d been leaving the back sliding door unlocked. We looked at each other and smiled, remembering our previous rushed entries into the house. Now we had to be responsible parents. Closing the door behind us, Bella took my hand and led me down the hallway.

When we reached Renesmee's room, Bella gasped. I followed her to the doorway and stared in astonishment. Not only were the walls painted, but Esme, perhaps with Alice or Rose's help, had overlaid the pale yellow paint with a light lavender Victorian lace pattern. It looked like very expensive wallpaper. Humans never could have done this intricate work in such a short time. It was stunning. The head of the crib with its elaborate, wrought-iron arch was set into the far corner with the shorter iron foot extending into the room. A fluffy, lavender rug softened the floor.

Though western Washington isn't troubled much by mosquitoes, the crib had a mosquito-net tent matching the one in the master bedroom. To the right of the bed stood a Victorian-era highboy with a carved arch on the top. A closet spanned the entire wall to the right of the doorway and its accordion doors had small, leaded glass inserts that matched the leaded glass window on the far side of the room.

Against the left wall sat a cozy rocking chair and on it hung a collection of original Beatrix Potter prints including Peter Rabbit and all his friends...mice, badgers, ducks, and foxes. There was even a poster of the alphabet in which each letter was intricately drawn next to, or intertwined with, a woodland creature. Our daughter was enthralled with small animals and these elaborate pictures would absolutely delight her.

On the far wall hung floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with books, Beatrix Potter's as well as those of other classic children's authors, ranging from Hans Christian Andersen, to Frank Baum, to Lewis Carroll, to Judy Blume, to J.K. Rowling. There were books about the Northwest indigenous peoples, including a book of Quileute legends, books of the physical geography of the Northwest, and its native plants and animals. Esme had selected some books of classic poetry and, on the highest shelves, a selection of modern North American authors including Mark Twain, Ralph Ellison, Theodore Dreiser, Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joyce Carol Oates, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and even Anne Rice. Two bins on the lowest shelf held a variety of toys and games, puzzles, and stuffed animals. There were Tinker Toys, an erector set, a chemistry kit, and art supplies.

"It's perfect," Bella murmured, gazing around the room and rubbing her eyes. I put my arm around her shoulders and kissed her hair as she wept vampire tears.

We changed Nessie into comfortable nightclothes, a t-shirt and cotton shorts, and laid her in her crib, covering her with what looked like a hand-knitted lavender and yellow afghan. It seemed unlikely that any noise we made would bother our daughter, but just in case, we turned on the sleep machine Esme had set on a shelf next to the crib. It played a variety of natural sounds such as tropical birdsong, waves crashing against Hawaiian shores, and whale

songs—a nice touch. We closed the bedroom door behind us and I turned to my wife, wrapping her in my arms.

“Oh, Edward, I’m so happy!” Bella cried against my chest, her shoulders shaking a little. I pressed my cheek against the top of her head and stroked her hair.

“Happy tears?”

“Happy tears,” she repeated, smiling up at me as we remembered Bella’s happy crying jags on our first honeymoon.

After a few moments, I put one finger under Bella’s chin and lifted her face upward, then leaned down and touched my lips to hers gently. I pulled back a few inches and gazed into her eyes. I touched my lips to hers again and stroked her jaw and neck with my fingers. I looked into her eyes once more and saw that she was becoming distracted from her tears. I pressed my lips to hers as I grasped the hem of her t-shirt and slid it slowly up her body. She raised her arms as I pulled it over her head and dropped it to the floor. She pushed her hands under my sweater and I yanked it off and tossed it onto the pile. My open mouth met hers then, and I stroked her tongue with mine while I unfastened the two brass buttons at the waistband of her jeans. I pinched the zipper tab and slid it down slowly, dragging my fingers along the way.

Bella undid the buttons of my jeans and reached inside to release me from my clothing. Inhaling sharply, I lifted my wife off the floor and waltzed her down the hallway, spinning us into our bedroom. Laying her at the base of the bed, I pulled her jeans all the way off as she wiggled her assistance. After stepping out of my own, I kneeled, slipped my hands beneath her buttocks and raised her hips. I stroked her with my tongue, bottom to top and she gasped, lacing her fingers through my hair. Her flesh was shiny and slick with moisture. I spread her apart with my thumbs, poised my tongue above her clitoris and glanced up.

When I raised my eyes, my lovely wife was looking into them, her eyelids half closed. There was something highly erotic about that...her watching me touch her. I kept my eyes locked on hers and stroked her slowly. Bella gasped and her mouth gaped open, but her eyes continued to watch. I stroked her again and she drew in her breath, her eyes closed slowly, then opened halfway, as she rocked toward me.

Between the legs of my vampire wife lay a gorgeous display, much different than before her change. I wondered if Bella had looked at herself there since she’d become a vampire. I thought not. In a flash, I snatched a small decorative mirror from the wall and held it between her spread thighs.

“Look, my darling. See how beautiful you are...” She opened her eyes and caught the image in the mirror. Though embarrassed, Bella could not look away. Nestled beneath her dark red hair, her outer labia were white as snow and smooth as ice, but between them, her inner labia lay swollen and glistening, a stripe of brilliant red color, as shocking as the inside of a blood orange.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Exactly. You are stunningly beautiful. You look entirely edible.” I proved the point by setting the mirror aside and tasting her with my tongue.

“Edward...” she moaned. “Ooohhh...” The sound made my muscles tighten with desire. I groaned and licked and touched her opening with the tip of my finger. As her excitement heightened, her hips rose higher off the bed.

“Touch me...inside...” Bella whispered between jagged breaths. I did as she asked, one finger, then two, stroking her inside and licking her outside. Bella began to grip my hair painfully, so I clasped her fingers in my free hand and she released them immediately.

“Sssorry...” she muttered and transferred her hands to the bedding, grasping the linens in the same manner as I had done on our honeymoon to avoid hurting *her*. How things had changed.

Bella’s excitement rose inexorably, her cries ranging higher and higher until her deepest muscles began to spasm around my fingers.

“Ahhhh...,” I groaned, reliving a muscle memory in my groin. When Bella eventually wound down and collapsed onto the mattress, I murmured, “Can you roll over, my love?” My breath had become rough and the tone of my voice deep. She lazily complied.

I wanted to watch myself enter her. I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her onto her knees. I was beyond desire and well into need as I found her opening and saw my marble penis slowly disappear into her lovely flesh. Extreme arousal had changed its color from pearl white to light rose, something I’d never noticed before.

I pushed in deeply and Bella released a sharp cry, her muscles clamping powerfully around me. She made the same thrilling sound on the next stroke and the next. Anatomy lessons told me that I was rubbing against her G-spot and judging by her reaction, it was as intensely pleasurable to her as her response was to me. From this position, I could reach more deeply inside her than ever before. There was no holding back.

“Arrrrrr...,” I growled, freezing as the now familiar ecstasy of orgasm began to take hold.

“Don’t stop...yet...,” Bella panted urgently.

Her wish was my command. I reached to touch her clitoris with a finger and, after two deep breaths, resumed moving inside her until she climaxed again. I arched over her back and felt her gasping breaths against my chest. When they finally subsided, I dropped us sideways onto the mattress, curled together as one, as close to one another as it was possible to be. I smoothed Bella’s hair off her face and then ran my fingers up and down the front of her torso, tickling her skin lightly.

“That was...mmm...,” she murmured.

“For me as well.”

“Edward, I love you so much. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you. I want you again and we haven’t even separated.”

“I know, my darling, I feel the same way.”

I kissed the back of her neck, then the base of her neck, and down to her shoulder. If we were human, we would have fallen asleep curled together like that. But since we are not, we talked, and touched, and made love several more times in several different ways as the night passed.

31. CHILD REARING

MOMMA! DA! MOMMA! JAK UH! DA! NANA! RO! EMMA! POPPO!

I heard her panic in the silence shortly after dawn. I grabbed a pillow and leaped from the bed at the same moment.

“Renesmee!” I called her name, both in reassurance to her and in warning to her mother. Bella was right behind me, dragging a sheet from the mattress. I held the pillow over my groin and in an instant was through her door and at her bedside. She was sitting up, gripping the iron bars of her crib.

Renesmee didn’t speak or cry, but when I lifted her as calmly as possible from her bed, she slapped her palm to my cheek and showed me her empty room through the bars of her crib. She had never been alone, not for a single second since she was born, and it frightened her. We should have foreseen this. *Damn!*

“Everything is fine, Nessie. Momma and Daddy were right here the whole time.”

“Poor baby, were you afraid?” Bella smiled and reached for Nessie with one hand, while gripping the sheet above her breasts with the other. I set her in her mother’s arms and went to pull on some pants. I didn’t have a problem with the idea that nudity is natural and one can raise children in a naturist family without negative repercussions. However, Bella and I hadn’t discussed it and I wasn’t going to pretend that I knew exactly how to go about such a thing, having never studied the theory of it or known any naturists. (Though they are reputedly abundant in the Pacific Northwest where natural hot springs abound in the volcanic mountain ranges.)

When I came back, Bella was sitting in the rocking chair, letting Nessie vent her feelings with vigorous smacks of her palm. I noted to myself that we’d have to teach her to touch “soft,” as she might actually hurt her human friends. It was nothing to us, though.

“Renesmee, are you thirsty?” I asked to distract her from her distress.

She was. Alice had mentioned that the cottage originally had a kitchen off the living room. Esme had turned it into a den area, but after Nessie was born, Alice said they planned to outfit it as a kitchenette for Renesmee. Sure enough, when I looked around the main room of the cottage, I noticed that a small area to the left side of the hallway had been redone since the day before. A mini-refrigerator stood on the floor with a short countertop above it on which sat

a small microwave oven. A sink was installed in the original sink's location with the useful addition of running water.

Checking the fridge, I found several pints of blood, and on a nearby shelf I located some glassware and two metal cups. Rosalie's doing, no doubt. She and Carlisle had originally figured out how to feed Renesmee and she'd been doing it longer than anyone else, including me. She had made it possible for the baby's parents to have a leisurely "breakfast" with their child before joining the rest of the family. It was extremely thoughtful of her.

I heated a cup's worth of blood, transferred it to Nessie's cup, and walked back to her bedroom. I held it up to show Bella and she immediately stood up.

"Daddy's going to feed you now while I get dressed," she explained to Nessie. I sat down and rocked the baby gently while she drank and retold her troubles to me with her hand.

We'd have to figure out a better way to handle mornings. She needed to learn that she was not abandoned just because she was alone for a few minutes. It might take a bit of time now that we'd traumatized her. *Crap!* This parenting stuff was not as easy as whistling Dixie. With a flash of intuition, I glanced at the bookshelves to my left and saw a section on the top shelf that was undoubtedly meant for me.

The Baby Owner's Manual

The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know from Birth to Age Two

Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care: 8th Edition

What to Expect: the First Year

What to Expect: the Toddler Years

Toddler Psychology

Parenting for Dummies

I smiled to myself. Esme knew that when I wanted to learn about something I was just like my father—I'd reach for a book and then reach for ten more. I guess she thought this collection would get me started.

When Nessie finished her breakfast, I walked with her down the hallway to the kitchenette, rinsed the cup in the sink, and headed back to her room to dress her. She was inquiring about the day ahead by showing me pictures of everyone with a "Where are they?" question mark.

“We’ll go to the big house in a few minutes and you can see Auntie Rose, Jacob, Nana, and Popop.” The latter was Carlisle’s name for himself to distinguish him from Grandpa Charlie. Was it a British nickname for grandfather? No, it was probably Italian or Greek. “Grandpa” sounded ridiculous when applied to Carlisle, anyway.

I responded to her next picture, too. “Yes, Grandpa Charlie will visit you in the evening and he’ll be bringing a friend named Sue who also wants to meet you. Sue is Leah and Seth’s mother.”

Renesmee showed me an image of Jacob in his wolf form as a question. It took me a moment to realize that she wanted to know if Seth and Leah’s mother was a wolf-person, like Jacob! We hadn’t told Renesmee about the wolves yet, but judging by the image in her mind, Jacob had phased in front of her!

I seethed. Once again, Jacob had taken it upon himself to make decisions for our family that were not his to make. I would be giving him a piece of my mind later or, better yet, maybe I’d let *Bella* handle it. She had that great newborn excuse for attacking him.

On second thought...Seth and Leah had been hanging around the property as wolves since the first day and Nessie had seen Seth change to human form after Bella hurt him. Jacob must have explained it to her and showed her how he could phase. I was rather surprised that I hadn’t read that episode in Jacob’s thoughts. Perhaps he hadn’t thought about it when he was around me.

“We’re finished with the drinking part,” I called to Bella and she joined us in Nessie’s room.

“Let’s wrap Renesmee in her afghan and take her to the main house to wash and dress her. I wouldn’t mind having a shower myself, actually.”

“What? Got a bit of a sticky wicket?” I asked her in my best British accent.

She tried to chastise me with a scowl and a sideways glance at Renesmee, but her reluctant grin won out.

“Ah, you’re right,” I teased. “I’m the one with the wicket.” She rolled her eyes. “Esme put in a little kitchen for us with a sink and running water. We could bathe Nessie here if you want to.”

“Hmm...I wonder if they added a hot water heater too,” she replied.

“Good point.” We were impervious to cold water, but our daughter was not. Though she seemed to tolerate our cold body temperatures, she was still a warm-blooded creature. *Huh.*

Maybe that's why the vampire/human hybrid has such a high temperature—to counteract the chill of her vampire parents' skin. Interesting thought.

“Why don't you get a shirt and we can go then?”

“Okay. Renesmee's already wondering where the family is. She was asleep when we left last night.”

I grabbed *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care* book before leaving the room and flicked to the Table of Contents. A couple of chapters caught my eye: “Parents' Sexual Relations After Delivery,” and “Crying and Comforting.” The first two issues we'd run into. Then there was “Trust Yourself,” a chapter that sounded comforting to *me* and “The Diversity of Families.” Our family had to be the all-time winner in that category. I tucked the paperback book into the waistband of my khakis.

Back at the “big house,” Carlisle was ready with his measuring tape—we were late. Everyone rushed over and hovered when we entered, greeting Renesmee like she'd been gone for days. The family was used to having her there around the clock, so all of us were adjusting.

“Oh, Esme!” Bella cried. “The nursery is...unbelievable. It's perfect. Thank you so much! And thanks to everyone else who worked on it...Rose... Jasper... Carlisle...”

“I knitted the baby blanket,” Alice interrupted.

“You did? When?” Bella asked, surprised.

“While you and Edward were off doing your thing in the car.” Her mental image of us was a little too close for comfort, but at least Alice was discreet.

“But the colors!”

“I already knew what colors Nessie would pick. Simple.”

“Thank you, Alice. It's beautiful. And the walls and Peter Rabbit and all the books and toys.... It's just....” Bella started to choke up.

“We were bowled over,” I finished for her. “And thanks for the instruction manuals, Esme. They definitely will be useful. Already I'm making mistakes!”

"All parents make mistakes, Edward," she said in her kindly way. "It comes with the territory. Come here little one! We missed you!" she added, reaching for the baby. Renesmee immediately put her hand on Esme's cheek and showed her the empty bedroom looking through the iron bars.

"Renesmee was a little frightened this morning when she woke up alone," I explained.

"Ah...," Carlisle nodded his head. He was wondering what Esme's confused expression meant.

"Has she drunk this morning?" Rosalie inquired.

"Yes," I replied. "Thanks for the kitchen. That came in handy." Rose and Esme looked at each other and smiled. In their thoughts, I could hear that Esme had equipped it and Rosalie had done the plumbing and stocked the fridge. Rose had gotten squirted in the face when she first tested the faucet. I chuckled, but shook my head when Bella looked at me inquiringly. I'd tell her about it later.

Jasper's thoughts were churning. He was standing behind Alice, a look of concern on his face.

Oh! He's right! I realized.

"Bella," Jasper remarked, "You'll want to go hunting today." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, you must be thirsty! I wasn't thinking!" My thoughtlessness irritated me, but Bella just shrugged.

"Yes, it's probably a good idea since Charlie and Sue are coming over tonight. I don't want to slip up." She grimaced. "Rose, can you look after Renesmee this afternoon while we go?"

"Sure. Alice and I were going to Seattle, but we can go tomorrow. Right Alice?"

"I don't want Renesmee to look like a street urchin in her photographs," Alice complained. "I think we should go as soon as possible."

"Where's Jacob?" Bella asked, suddenly realizing that there was a Jacob-sized empty space in the room.

"The *dogs* went hunting this morning. The girl mutt needed to eat and she doesn't like our hospitality. She should just go home." Rosalie was being ungracious, as usual, though Leah

was pretty hard to take. I suddenly wondered why Leah *didn't* go home. The trouble between the Quileute and the Cullens was over.

"Two more guys came over this morning to hunt with them," Emmett told me and he was rather happy about it. He was thinking about asking one or both of them to fight him just for fun. I would have to warn Carlisle. Emmett wasn't known for his restraint and Carlisle didn't need any more broken wolves on his hands, even if they did heal quickly.

"Who?" Bella asked.

"His best friends, what're their names? Quil and Ember?" Rosalie snickered at Emmett's name butchery.

"Embry," Carlisle corrected. "The two of them seem to be missing Jacob. I wouldn't be surprised if we saw a couple more defections from Sam's pack."

"More dogs hanging around? *Ew!!*"

"Well, Rosalie, it would seem that our baby girl..." —Carlisle tickled Nessie under the chin, making her smile— "...is bridging the gap between us and them. When Sam and I discussed the treaty, he pointed out that we are essentially extended family now. Jacob can't leave Renesmee and they won't leave him, so—"

"*Ew!* I am *not* related to any stinking mongrels."

"Rose, please!" Esme gave her a sharp look and cast her eyes meaningfully at the baby. Rose grunted, but said no more.

"Rose?" Bella asked. "Would you help me bathe Renesmee?"

"And I'll get her an outfit to wear!" Alice turned and headed up the stairs. Rosalie took the baby from Esme and followed Alice. Bella looked at me and stroked my hand once.

"No, Edward, you can't come!" Alice warbled. "You and Bella can shower together later!" She laughed loudly.

Alice! She must have seen my decision earlier. I'd been looking forward to soaping down my wife in the shower. But we were parents now. We had to be good.

Actually, we were extremely lucky parents in many ways. We had unlimited, safe and free childcare; our child slept twelve hours a night, though we didn't sleep at all; Renesmee didn't need diapers or potty training as long as her sole diet was blood (or so we guessed); our child didn't scream or cry or throw tantrums (she didn't need to, since her needs were attended

to instantly); she was infinitely lovable, it seemed, extremely bright, and had an extraordinary gift for communication.

There were a few downsides to our parenthood experience too, though. Our child drank human blood, which was awkward (to say the least) and not as easy to acquire in quantity as one might wish; our child was unique and exceptionally gifted, which made her a perfect target of acquisition for the Volturi; our baby might only have the lifespan of a small dog. That last thought was so disturbing that I aborted the list-making immediately. It was our terror, our grief, our dreaded nightmare, though none of us talked about it.

The whole family was trying to avoid thinking about it, but with our vampire's skill for numbers, we all knew that at her current rate of growth, Renesmee would be full-grown by age four and elderly by age fifteen. Fifteen years! It was too small a number to contemplate, especially for those of us who could live forever. As such, we suffered loss all the time...loss of human acquaintances or friends, loss of community every few years, and loss of our entire way of life every forty or fifty years. Times changed, but we did not—at least not without great effort or pain. But the loss of a child after only fifteen years! It was too painful to consider.

I needed to pick up the research that Jasper, Emmett, and Carlisle had done during Bella's pregnancy. We now needed to research human/vampire hybrids. I remembered clearly the conversation I'd had with Kaure on Esme's Island. She knew about Renesmee...or at least knew legends of children such as Renesmee. She had been terribly distressed when she realized Bella was pregnant by me. She had called our unborn child "Death." It turned out that carrying Renesmee *had* caused Bella's human death.

Emmett interrupted my worries when he hollered up the stairs after Bella: "Hey, little sister! You owe me a wrestling rematch. You can't worm out of it just because your dad is visiting. Don't forget!"

I could hear Bella sigh all the way from the second floor. He wasn't going to let go of it. He would insist on wrestling her every day until her newborn strength had waned and he could win. That was probably how we would all know when Bella had reverted to a mere immortal like the rest of us. I chuckled to myself, remembering her physical superiority. At least with Emmett, I could predict his moves and beat him to the punch, or rather, dodge his punch. I had no such advantage with Bella.

"I understand that things went well with Charlie yesterday," Carlisle commented.

"Extremely so," I replied. "Bella was remarkable! She exhibited barely any distress at all."

“She still needs to hunt,” Jasper reminded me.

“Of course! But she’s so well-controlled and atypical that it’s hard to remember she’s a newborn,” I responded.

“Except when she pins you down to the mattress, eh?” Emmett hadn’t promised not to harass *me* about *my* sex life. Fortunately, I didn’t mind. I made no reply to his remark, but I couldn’t stop the half-smile that crept over my face.

“He likes it!” Emmett accused merrily. Jasper snickered and Esme wisely found something to do in the kitchen. “I bet you kept that baby awake all night, didn’t you? You sure kept me and Rose awake.” Emmett chortled and Jasper snickered again.

“So, as I was saying before I was so *rudely* interrupted...”—I gave Emmett a pointed stare—“...Renesee was great with Charlie too. He’s completely in love with her.”

“That was the impression I got from upstairs,” Carlisle replied. “I decided not to impose my company on Bella’s father for the moment, as he must be annoyed with me for withholding the truth of Bella’s whereabouts.”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “But Charlie’s nothing if not pragmatic. He’s still angry with me too, but I believe that Renesee will heal all of that over if she hasn’t already. He’d forgive us most anything just to have her in his life...and Bella too, of course.”

“That’s good. It doesn’t mean that we still won’t have to leave the area, though.”

“He knows that, but Bella has promised to visit him regardless. Eventually he’ll recognize that none of us is growing older, but he seems so determined to avoid knowing too much that it might work out anyway.”

“Hmm.” Emmett and Jasper had wandered off as Carlisle and I continued talking.

“Did you hear that Charlie wants to bring Sue over with him tonight?” I asked.

“Yes, I caught something about that.”

“I’m getting a sense there might be something brewing there between she and Charlie,” I said. “If that amounts to something, then he will undoubtedly be initiated into the tribe’s secrets...especially if he should become a stepfather to Seth and Leah.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Carlisle smiled. “Werewolves and vampires sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner together...well, metaphorically, anyway.”

I grinned. “It will be harder for them than for us, I’d wager.”

“Yes, perhaps. I’m still intrigued with the possibility of Jacob and Renesmee conceiving children.”

“Argh! I don’t even want to think about that!” I growled.

“No, of course not. Renesmee is much too young to even consider such a thing. But taking the long view, it’s a possibility...remote perhaps, but.... How little we really know!”

“Yes. I was just considering your research. I think we should proceed with it and see what we can uncover about hybrid children. Now that Bella’s pregnancy is over, we need not worry so much about that, but Renesmee’s growth cycle...well, it’s another matter.”

“Yes,” Carlisle replied. “I’ve not stopped researching. I would have mentioned it to you, but I’ve not made much progress.”

“Perhaps I can help.”

“Yes, there will be a lot of internet time and we may need to make phone calls to librarians and researchers around the country...the world actually. You know languages that I don’t, so that would be a help. I’m starting to think that Brazil is our best hope.”

Carlisle and I retreated to his office where he shared with me what he and my brothers had already done and what information he had gleaned since Renesmee’s birth. It was precious little.

From Carlisle’s office, I heard the girls laughing in the bathroom and then in Alice and Rose’s bedrooms. They were washing Nessie’s hair and bathing her, and Alice was taking fun-in-the-bath photographs while Renesmee splashed water out of the sink. They were the standard photographs that one’s parents might show one’s prospective fiancé to have a good laugh—Renesmee in the sink, Renesmee lying on her tummy on a blanket with her naked bum in the air, Renesmee wearing poochy diapers and nothing else. (Though Renesmee didn’t need diapers, Alice thought it was a good idea to have some pictures of her in them and to keep some on hand in case things changed. For my part, I was certain Renesmee would conquer toilet training the first time we explained it to her should it ever prove necessary.)

Her aunts had dressed Renesmee in a selection of outfits and rearranged her hair in different ways for each photo— parted different ways, in Pippi Longstocking pigtails, and in a short ponytail. Alice was in heaven. She even painted the baby’s fingernails and toenails and put glitter on them. It was after noon before they stopped to feed Nessie, and Carlisle went to measure her. I put away my computer when Bella entered the office.

“Ready for a hunt?”

“Sure. Guess I better.”

“Hold on a second.” I listened for a moment. “Jasper wants to go with us. Is that okay with you?”

“Why?”

“Um...”—I listened a bit more—“...just to help out. I think he’s also curious about you and your shocking newborn abilities,” I teased, though it was true. “Maybe Alice will come too and we can make it a double date.” I smiled at her, though she seemed a little disgruntled.

“Alice and Rose are going to Nordstrom’s—and who knows where else in Seattle—to buy Renesmee a wardrobe. I don’t know how they’re going to manage that since she’s growing so fast. Alice will probably buy ten outfits in every size.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Oh...no...I guess not. That’s just Alice. And honestly, I don’t want to do all that shopping. If it were left to me, our daughter would wear baby jeans and t-shirts every day and sweats at night. I’m sure we’ll get lots of great photos for the baby album. Alice and Rose want to take pictures every day so we have enough in four years to cover her whole childhood.” Bella looked down at the floor and in an instant I knew what the problem was. I jumped up and wrapped my arms around her.

“Oh, Bella, it’s going to be okay,” I soothed, rubbing her back, though I was at least as frightened as she was. Her shoulders were shaking and she’d hidden her face in my shirt.

“I’m scared, Edward.”

“I know, darling. We’re going to do everything we can. Carlisle and I are already working on it.”

“We just got her...I don’t want to lose her.”

There was nothing I could say that would be both comforting and true. We really *didn’t* know how long Renesmee might live. I had hope that if her genetics were the same as the wolves, her growth might slow down or stop when she reached her teens. We knew that the Quileute with the wolf gene stopped aging during that period in their lives as long as vampires were present. But we also knew that when the wolves stopped phasing, they returned to natural aging and died. The elder Quil Ateara had aged into an old man and Ephraim Black was long dead. But really, we didn’t know if any of that information applied to Renesmee. The Quileute shape-shifters might have no genetic connection to vampire/human hybrids at all. I

simply stood there holding Bella, rubbing her back and stroking her hair until her vampire tears subsided.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Bella finally said.

She had been “not fine” for quite a long time for her. Normally, she tried to suppress any evidence of her own pain as quickly as possible. The only other time I’d seen her this distressed was after she officially ended her relationship with Jacob. That had been truly horrendous, but this was bad enough.

I vowed to do everything in my power to take this pain away, though I knew that Renesmee’s future was far beyond my control. I felt a momentary sense of despair, but crushed it before it could get ahead of me. Bella needed me to be strong. We would do whatever we had to do...whatever we *could* do. And if...*God forbid!*...there was nothing we could do, we would love our daughter to the best of our abilities for as long as God granted her to us. That we’d gotten her at all was a true miracle.

Standing there, I couldn’t help but recall what Bella and I and Renesmee had been through in that room. Images of blood filled my mind...pooled on the floor, splattered on the walls, puddled on the overflowing table...covering Bella, Jacob, Rosalie, and me. Other memories came too...cutting into my wife with a scalpel, releasing our miracle baby, the panic of Bella’s heart stopping, the joy of its restarting, the fear in waiting, the solemn ritual of washing her dead body. I squeezed her harder as my love for her threatened to overwhelm me.

I took Bella’s face in my hands and kissed her gently on the forehead. Then she raised her lips to mine. Sadness to passion, just like that! There was something to the idea that all emotions were essentially the same...arousal was arousal, emotional or otherwise. We took a few minutes there in the office to remember what our lives were all about...each other.

Bella ran her hands over my shoulders and down my arms, then up my hips to my stomach and on to my chest. She slipped her fingers between the buttons of my oxford shirt and dragged them across the light hair on my chest. *Mmm...* Though I was sorely tempted to lock the door and pull my wife onto the floor or haul her upstairs to our bedroom, I knew I should help her with balancing her priorities.

“Hunting?” I whispered, but my wife, her arms around my neck, had suddenly hopped up and wrapped her legs around my waist. *Mmm...so tempting!* I spun in a circle a couple of times, just feeling the joy of love and lust for my wife. Then Bella separated her lips from mine and looked toward the door, then back at me.

“Later, my darling?” I murmured.

“Yes, you’re right.” Bella groaned and released her legs, landing gracefully on her feet. It put me in mind of another time, seemingly long ago, when she had tried to jump off my back and fell on her butt in the mud.

“Okay,” I said, suppressing a laugh. I took her hand and we proceeded down the stairs. “Jasper,” I called. “We’re going hunting if you want to come.” He appeared next to us.

“Is that all right with you, Bella?” he asked my wife politely.

“Sure, sure,” Bella said. It was the generic “whatever” reply I’d heard Jacob use when he wanted to get Bella off his back about something. Jasper didn’t realize it was not as enthusiastic as it sounded. Just as well.

32. SUE

We returned from the Olympic National Forest with Bella feeling full if not entirely satisfied. She had taken an elk and a black-tailed deer, neither of which she enjoyed, but afterwards, she said she felt “sloshy,” and didn’t want to keep looking for a cougar or bear. I hoped the herbivores would hold her as well as the cougar had two days before. When I pressed her, she said she felt pretty much the same as she had after her first hunt, still thirsty, but not in a way that she couldn’t tolerate.

It was a familiar feeling to all of us who had been vegetarians for decades—that sense of being full, but not sated. It was irritating, but bearable. Bella was shockingly like a seasoned veteran after only three days. She was impulsive and emotional like a newborn, but bizarrely controlled.

When I asked her how she’d felt being around Charlie, she said the burn was bad when she breathed and that she longed to soothe it with what she knew would soothe it, but then she would remember he was her dad. Thinking about drinking her dad’s blood was like thinking of her parents having sex. It was “icky” and turned off the urge instantly. As far as the wolves went, they smelled “gamey” and unappetizing as they did to us all. She said that Renesmee had a tasty scent but that it was cut with the sweet smell of vampire and affected her like pouring perfume on food. Sue was coming for a visit in a short while. She would be the first non-wolf, non-relative, non-hybrid human Bella would be near—her first real test.

“Are you concerned about Sue?” I asked while we waited for Charlie and Sue to arrive. Seth told us that they were picking up a quick bite before coming over. Though Charlie knew we had food in the house, he’d noticed that we never seemed to cook when he was there and nobody ever sat down to eat. Though Alice, Esme, or Jacob might offer him a snack, he and Jacob or Seth would be the only ones eating in the Cullen house and it made him uncomfortable.

Bella said, “I don’t know how Sue will smell to me. Charlie smells good, but I can handle that. I don’t know Sue all that well, so I hope that doesn’t make it worse. No way to know but to try. So far, I’ve been okay, except when Jacob made me mad. I don’t think Sue will make me mad, so...” That was more words than Bella customarily spoke in one go. I interpreted that to mean she was nervous.

“How much have you been around Sue? Will you look a great deal different to her?”

“Well...she was at the tribal council meeting after Harry died and you came back. We were all there for three or four hours. I didn’t talk to her as far as I can remember. She probably also saw me when I visited Jacob once in a while.”

“She knows what we are, though, and what you are now, so she shouldn’t be too surprised, I expect. She won’t be shocked or sad like Charlie was and she’ll probably be focused on Renesmee, so...”

“Just stay with me, okay?”

“Of course, love. I won’t leave your side.” I held her around the waist and she laid her cheek on my chest. In just ten seconds, we both perked up our ears. Charlie’s patrol car was turning into the driveway.

“Here we go!” Bella said nervously. “Where’s Renesmee?”

Carlisle appeared on the staircase carrying the baby. She was expressing her delight with her hand on his neck. *Momma and Da are back!*

“Yes, and Grandpa Charlie is coming to see you,” Carlisle told her. Renesmee showed him a picture of Charlie. “Yes, that’s right.” Renesmee was elated.

“Come to Momma,” Bella said, stretching out her arms. Renesmee had things to tell her mother...Carlisle had shown her his computer, Jacob had taken her into the forest in the afternoon, and Nana had let her play with her colored pencils and paper until she bit one of the pencils in half and gouged it all the way through the pad.

“Was Nana angry with you?” Bella inquired. Renesmee shook her head no. Nana had just taken the things away and replaced them with the sterling silver flatware the baby had already destroyed.

“Well, we have paper and pencils for you at the cottage,” Bella said. “When you learn how to hold them gently, then you can draw like Nana.”

I took Nessie’s hand. “Grandpa Charlie and Sue will be here very soon,” I told her. “Sue will smell like Grandpa, but you mustn’t bite her.” Nessie wanted to know again whether she could bite Jacob.

“Yes, but he’s the only human you’re allowed to bite.” Our six-day-old baby nodded solemnly and I smirked to myself.

When the doorbell rang, Carlisle went to greet our guests and Bella and I sat on the sofa with Renesmee. Already I could hear Sue’s nervous thoughts.

Vampires! Charlie's daughter is a vampire. Ugh! Gives me the creeps. I can't believe I agreed to visit here with him. But Charlie can't help it...and I should talk...my kids are werewolves! Maybe we were meant for each other. Who else would want us? Our lives are too weird. And heaven knows there's a shortage of men on the rez—any rez...Makah, Hoh, Salish—you name it. What 'Nam didn't take, the drink has. Now Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf. At least the Quileute have a larger purpose that keeps us going... killing the killers...What am I doing here at—

"Charlie, Sue, welcome!"

"Carlisle. The kids said it was okay to come." Charlie's voice was gruff.

"Certainly, you are welcome. Come in, come in. They're waiting for you. Sue, have you met Esme, my wife?"

"Welcome, Sue! It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." *I guess. Wow, these are some handsome people, though, or... whatever.*

"There she is! Little Nessie!"

GAMPA! Renesmee reached toward Charlie, but then saw Sue, pulled her arms back, and retreated behind Bella's hair. She peeked out cautiously.

"Dad, hi! Hi, Sue! Thanks for coming."

"Charlie," I greeted him. "Renesmee has been waiting for you. Sue, this is our daughter, Renesmee. Nessie, this is Sue. She's come to meet you."

Renesmee peeked out again. Sue seemed a little scary to her. She wasn't reacting the way Nessie was used to. Sue didn't smile and she stood partially hidden behind Charlie.

"How are you, pretty baby?" Charlie bent down on one knee to speak to Nessie. She came out from behind Bella's hair, looked suspiciously at Sue, and then threw her arms out to Charlie. Bella let her go as Charlie scooped her into his arms. He was noticeably less awkward than the day before. "What's the news?" he asked Nessie casually.

Before we could react—though, really, what could we do?—our child looked in Charlie's eyes and touched his cheek. She'd taken his question literally and wanted to tell him her news. She showed him her room through the bars of the crib. A look of shock crossed Charlie's face and his mouth dropped open. *WHAT THE HELL?* He jerked his head away from Nessie's palm and stared at her, the color draining from his face.

“Calm down, Dad, it’s okay,” Bella said.

“But...but...” His heart was racing and he started gulping air.

“Remember, Dad, when Jacob told you that Renesmee was a good communicator?”

Charlie stared at Nessie, his eyes wide. She was holding up her hand, waiting for “Gampa” to catch up with the program. She was used to this reaction, but it made her impatient.

“Renesmee is telling you her news,” I told him calmly. “She slept in her own crib in her own room for the first time last night.” Charlie gaped at the baby, but she simply batted her hand toward his face as he leaned away. She had more to say.

“It’s really okay, Dad,” Bella tried. “Jacob told you she was special, right?”

Need to know, need to know... Though Charlie hadn’t recovered, the look of stoic impatience on Nessie’s face nearly made him laugh in spite of himself. He moved his face slowly back toward her hand.

Renesmee showed him the highlights of her day...sitting in the bathroom sink with Alice, Rose, and Bella laughing at her as she splashed water; the silly faces Alice made to get her to smile for the camera; and last, but certainly not least—to me anyway—an image of me standing over her holding a pillow over my private parts. Charlie let out a loud snort and cast his eyes my way, but was immediately pulled back to Nessie’s pictures by a pat of her hand on his cheek.

Oh, great! So much for the whole naturist family idea. It was just as well that Bella couldn’t read Nessie’s communications with others. I would have to monitor them and teach our daughter the difference between private and public information. *Is that in the book?*

Nessie’s sharing continued. She showed Charlie the yellow and lavender walls of her room, the pictures of Peter Rabbit and his friends on the wall, and Momma wearing a bed sheet, rocking her. When Nessie was finished, she looked at her grandpa expectantly. The force of her gaze was too much for Charlie, who had no choice but to respond like a grandfather.

“Well, Nessie, that’s really something!” he said and was rewarded with the rare toothy smile. That sealed the deal. Charlie’s heart melted.

“Have a seat, Charlie...Sue.” I motioned to the two lounge chairs. If Charlie fainted, I didn’t want him dropping my child.

Charlie looked at Sue, as if to say, *You okay with this?* Sue raised her eyebrows, not understanding what was going on. She sat down in the seat farthest from the couch and I

noticed that the rest of my family had made themselves scarce. The look on Sue's face as she stepped into the vampire's den had been obvious enough for anyone to read.

Where was Jacob, anyway? And Seth? I hadn't seen them since we returned from our hunt. Just then, I heard the Ferrari whipping up the long drive. It was going fast, but not vampire fast—the missing wolves! *Good*. It took just a couple minutes for Jacob and Seth to walk through the kitchen.

JAK UH! Nessie leaned toward Jacob and he scooped her out of Charlie's arms.

"Didya miss me, Ness?" he asked in the high-toned voice he used to talk to the baby. Charlie's eyebrows rose in a sideways glance toward Sue. This time Sue was not puzzled. This was a part of her world that she knew only too well, having suffered along with Leah when Sam imprinted on Emily. She was wondering whether she could or should explain it to Charlie or whether he would misunderstand like everyone did and go after Jacob. *Better leave that one to somebody else*, she decided. *Too risky*.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Charlie." Seth came in, his face flushed and a jittery excitement in his body. "We took a ride in Bella's Ferrari! Wow! It's amazing! You gotta come see it!" Nobody was bothering to ask Bella's permission to drive it anymore, so it probably was a good thing that she didn't feel especially proprietary about it.

"Yeah, come on, Charlie. Let's go look at the car," Jacob encouraged.

"Would you like to?" Charlie asked Sue. She nodded. *Anything to get out of here...*, she thought, though she'd started breathing easier when Seth came in behaving as if it were the most natural thing in the world to hang out with vampires. The four of them with Renesmee tromped out to the garage.

"Nice diversion," Bella said, taking some much-needed breaths.

"There were more humans in the room than vampires. How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm fine."

"Seriously, how are you doing?" I repeated, ignoring her dismissive response.

"Well, Charlie's scent is by far the most appealing one in the room, but since he's my dad, that's okay. Sue bothers me too, but more for her 'deer-in-the-headlights' look than anything else."

"Really?"

“Yes. My throat is burning, but I don’t want to drink people I *know*. It takes away the appeal.”

I marveled at her, half in shock at her uncanny composure. If Jasper were here, he would be completely dumbfounded. I realized then that he was just outside the front door, standing inconspicuously nearby in case he was needed. Yup, he was dumbfounded all right!

“I love you!” I burst out, wrapping my arms around my miraculous wife and hugging her tightly. “You’re brilliant!”

Bella hugged me back and her breathing began to accelerate. Sometimes I did miss the sound of that pumping heart, a vivid indicator of my wife’s “romantic” excitement, though I was reading the signals of her new body better all the time.

“Oh, Edward...I’m so happy!”

Her words startled me, given the challenges this evening had to be posing for Bella. But they also made me happy. I felt a rush of joy and “clacked” my lips against hers enthusiastically. She responded with equal enthusiasm. By the time the back door opened, we were into full “snogging” mode. I jerked away from Bella like a teenager caught making out with her on the couch by her father—*oh wait, that’s what I was!*—and began to laugh. Bella started giggling too and by the time Jacob and Charlie led the way into the room we were nearly helpless with unconcealed mirth. I made a feint at her lips with mine. She dodged me and we burst into renewed laughter.

“Okay, you kids, what’s going on in here?” boomed Charlie. He’d reverted instantly to his role of the previous two years—keeping an eye on us every evening at his house while we were courting.

Bella was overcome by another laugh attack, her bell-like voice ringing through the air. It bordered on hysteria. The surprising sound jolted Charlie back to the present and to the reality of his much-changed daughter. His face turned pale. Sue took his hand and looked at him with a concerned expression. Bella was grasping her throat. Gulping air with all these humans around couldn’t be pleasant for her. I tightened my arm around her shoulders.

Renesmee, seeing her mother nearly doubled over with laughter, let out an odd squeal followed by another. The unusual noise coming from our normally silent child startled everyone. We all came to attention and stared at her. Her open-mouthed smile was as wide as it would go, making her cheeks rise and turning her eyes into slits. Suddenly, everyone in the room was chortling along with her. The more we laughed, the more she squawked, which made us laugh even more.

Carlisle and Esme appeared at the top of the stairs, coming to see what all the commotion was about. When they saw Renesmee's face, they both started chuckling. It was too bad Alice and Rose weren't back from Seattle. Alice would have loved snapping photographs right and left at this happy family scene.

After several minutes, Renesmee put her hand to Jacob's cheek. She was thirsty.

"Nessie's ready for her dinner," Jacob told us. "I'll take care of it," he said, turning toward the kitchen.

"Why don't you hand her to us first," said Carlisle, holding up his measuring tape. Jacob passed the baby to Esme and left. Renesmee dutifully stretched out tall in Esme's arms and waited for Carlisle to finish. He measured her length followed by the circumference of her head before Esme carried her to the kitchen for her dinner.

"You do that regularly?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, Renesmee is a fast grower. We're keeping a close eye on it," Carlisle replied.

"Is she...okay?" ventured Charlie, suddenly disturbed. Sue took Charlie's hand again, a move that did not go unnoticed by Bella. She looked at me and raised her eyebrows. I grinned surreptitiously.

"It's outside the norm," Carlisle said, choosing his words carefully. "But that doesn't mean it's abnormal for her. She's a remarkable child."

"Yes, she is," Charlie agreed. The room grew quiet, and an awkward silence fell over the group. Then, with perfect timing, Emmett saved us all by striding into the room and flicking on the television—the pregame show for Monday night football had begun.

"That is some car you've got, Bella!" he exclaimed. "Have you looked under the hood?" That was an ignorant question, even for Emmett. I smiled.

"It must have cost a bundle," Charlie commented. Both he and Sue had been wondering to themselves where the money came from. Time for the public story.

"Nothing too good for Bella, though I'm not sure she fully appreciates it." I grinned at her and she wrinkled her nose at me. "My parents left me an inheritance and a Ferrari is an investment."

"Well, as long as you're not wasting it," Charlie said to me brusquely. "You've got a family to support now. And what about Dartmouth? Are you still going to college?"

“Bella and I are revisiting our plans now that we have Renesmee,” I replied. “Dartmouth will take us when we’re ready. I may start correspondence courses.”

“Hard to find good work around here,” Charlie went on.

“That’s true. We’re not too far from Seattle, though. Maybe we can go to the University of Washington and work in the city.” I was winging it now. “But you don’t have to worry about Bella and Renesmee. They’re my first priorities,” I promised. He grunted in reply.

“What did I hear about you moving to Seattle?” Jacob asked anxiously, walking into the room with the baby. Renesmee had fallen asleep with her mouth open, her tiny pink lips forming a soft “O” shape.

“Oh, isn’t that cute!” Sue whispered to Charlie.

“Sure is. Guess we’d better get going. It’s the baby’s bedtime.” Bella and I stood up. I was ignoring Jacob’s question.

“Thanks for coming by Sue, Charlie,” I said. “Renesmee looks forward to seeing you.”

“I like seeing her. Maybe I’ll come by after work tomorrow?” It was half-question, half statement.

“That would be great, Dad,” Bella told him, taking Renesmee into her arms. Charlie stroked the baby’s smooth forearm with his fingers.

“She’s really something,” Charlie muttered as he gestured for Sue to lead the way. Carlisle held the door for them as they left. Bella breathed a sigh of relief.

33. HORSING AROUND

“Let’s get out of here,” I suggested.

“Yes, let’s. Goodnight, Emmett.”

“Goodnight, Bella.”

“Goodnight, Carlisle.”

“Goodnight, Edward.”

“Goodnight, Esme.”

“Goodnight, Bella.”

“Goodnight, Jasper.”

“Goodnight, Edward.”

Bella and I looked at each other.

“Goodnight, John Boy!” we called in unison. Bella broke into a fit of giggles. The end of the evening had been a little tense and it felt good to laugh.

One thing I’ve learned after being married for almost five weeks is that if you pay attention—which I do—you learn something new about your spouse every day. After a laugh and a brief conversation, I learned that as a kid, Bella used to watch *The Waltons* on Nickelodeon. It gave her a melancholy, but cozy feeling to observe a family that was so unlike her own, one with a mom and a dad living together, plus grandparents and gads of siblings.

I could understand her feelings. Both Bella and I grew up as only children in households where our fathers were absent and our mothers were not fully capable of coping with the world. We were both close to our mothers, but also acted as their caretakers in some ways. So Bella liked to watch *The Waltons* and imagine living in a family where the parents took care of their children rather than the reverse and whatever responsibility fell to the children was shared by many, not borne by one. We had that life now in a perverse sort of way. God has a sense of humor.

When we reached the cottage, we removed the undoubtedly expensive, designer outfit Alice had put on Renesmee that morning, dressed her in pajamas, and laid her in her crib. Nessie had told Alice about her scary wake-up that morning, so Alice enlarged and cropped

some photographs from our wedding to produce 8- by 10-inch prints of Bella and I from the neck up. We attached the photos to Nessie's headboard and around her room so that she would see us when she awoke. Later, we would add pictures of the rest of the Cullens and Charlie, so she would be surrounded by her family.

I learned in the first child-rearing book I read that babies develop a series of capabilities along a timeline that corresponds to the physical development of their brains. One such concept is called "object permanence," which is the knowledge that an object (or person) still exists even though it is not visible. If you hold a handkerchief in front of your face, a six-month-old baby will think that you no longer exist. No wonder Renesmee was so frightened when she awoke. *Everybody* had disappeared.

"I think that's all we can do for her," I said.

"We could make sure we're in her room before she wakes up."

"True, not a bad idea. Maybe we could do that for a couple of days and then delay coming in, so she learns to tolerate being alone for short periods."

"That sounds about right."

"Did you realize that Renesmee sat up by herself in her crib today? Do you know rolling over and sitting up are six- to nine-month milestones?" I asked Bella.

"No, but if you sing a few bars..."

I chuckled. Bella was still in a giggling mood. I set the sleep machine to "Hawaiian waves," turned on a dim light in the closet, and left the door ajar. When I took Bella's hand to pull her toward our room, she leaped onto my back with her arms around my neck. She hadn't done that since her human days when she rode on my back as I ran. With my arms under her thighs, I giddy-upped down the hallway, turned around at the bedroom door and headed back to the living room and then galloped around the room in circles. Bella hollered "Yee-haw!" and slapped my right hip in mimicry of whipping a horse. When she tried to smother her laughter, she ended up snorting loudly instead.

After a few circuits, I galloped back to our bedroom. Just before reaching the bed, I balked like an ornery stallion, stopping short and dropping my hands to the floor. Caught off-guard, Bella flew over my head, but recovered with a double-flip and landed gracefully on the other side of the room. She whirled around, gave me a look of mock-ferocity, and dove at my chest. I let her knock me down and we hit the floor with a loud "crack!"

"Shhh! Nessie!" she whispered holding an index finger to her lips.

“You said it, you said it...!” I teased in a whisper.

“I did not!”

“Did!”

“Did not!”

I started laughing and Bella got another attack of the giggles, so I took advantage and rolled on top of her.

“Shhh!” I hissed.

“Shhh, yourself!” she retorted in a whisper.

Bella stopped and listened for Renesmee’s slow, steady breathing. Amazingly, our shenanigans hadn’t awakened her, but Bella couldn’t stop giggling. I knew a cure for that. I centered my body and pressed my hips forward, rocking rhythmically against one particular pressure point. I put my lips beneath her jawline and kissed her as I used to do...slowly down her jaw to the hollow beneath her ear, then down her neck and across her left collarbone. By the time I’d crossed over to her right collarbone, the giggling had changed to panting. She was aroused... *mmm...*

Bella’s hands began to wander around my back, through my hair and over my shoulders. She was wearing her habitual t-shirt, not a button-down blouse, but I wanted to unbutton her top slowly, so I tore the neckline down two inches and kissed her sternum, tore it another two inches and kissed her a little lower. Bella was undulating her hips against me as I tore another couple inches, enough to peel the two sides apart and reveal her gorgeous, round breasts with their stiff nipples. I wandered to her left side with my lips and flicked her nipple with my tongue. Bella gasped. I kissed my way to the other side and licked her right nipple.

Bella’s panting was frenzied as she reached down to undo the buttons on my trousers and unbutton and unzip her own blue jeans. I ripped her shirt again, kissed her belly, and finally ripped it all the way open, moving my lips lower and lower following a line through her center. She’d worked her jeans down her hips a ways, so I kissed her through her red pubic hair and dragged my fingers behind. I yanked her jeans to her ankles and she kicked them off, raising her knees and spreading her thighs for my visual pleasure.

I *loved* looking at her. Not counting her newborn’s eyes, this was the only part of her body that retained the red blush color that used to flow up her neck into her face. All that color had faded from the top of her body and concentrated itself there between her legs. It was like

spreading apart the petals of a beautiful white rose and finding a brilliant red one inside.
Gorgeous!

Bella was dripping wet. When I licked her, she tasted like herself—the sweetness of freesia, the muskiness of lavender, and the fresh scent of rain in the desert. Her fluid was more viscous than before her change, thicker and slicker. I'd been wondering how her body kept us so well lubricated, a stone piston moving in a stone cylinder. Whatever the chemistry or fluid dynamics, it worked. Though our skin was rugged and injuries healed instantly, neither of us had gotten any cuts or abrasions and we'd been going at it like rabbits every night—all night—for a week.

Biologically, vampire sex makes no sense. Since vampire women cannot bear children, there is no genetic reason for them to have all the right hardware and software, so to speak, to do so. And because we don't procreate, we don't evolve, which means that vampires will remain the same forever, changing only insofar as humans themselves change. However, since male vampires *can* procreate with humans, vampires could change the evolution of humans over eons of time if enough human women survived long enough to birth their children. I wasn't advocating, of course not. It was just theoretically interesting—and obviously, a mental distraction.

Inside the red rose inside the white rose, Bella's clitoris had the deepest red color of all. It swelled slightly when I licked it, not as much as when she was human, but noticeably so. Bella was careful not to tear out my hair as I played with her using my tongue and my fingers, prolonging her pleasure for fun. When she grew close to orgasm, I stopped stroking until her excitement subsided and then started again, once, twice, three times.

"Make me come...now," she finally begged in a raspy voice.

I did as she asked, touching and licking her, and as she neared her climax, I pressed three moistened fingers into her, two front and one back. Bella shrieked—a sound that resembled the ringing of a very small brass bell, the tone higher than a human's ears could hear. She climaxed then, long and hard, my fingers filling her up. I kept my tongue moving slightly until the sensation became too much for her and she abruptly clapped her knees together, boxing my ears with her thighs.

"Ow!" I complained. Bella pulled away from me and sat up, taking my head in her hands as I lay on my stomach.

"Oh, Edward, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

I raised my head suddenly and gave her a peck on the lips.

“Fooled you!”

“Oh, you....”

In a fraction of time that could not be measured, I was on my back—trapped— Bella’s powerful hands holding my arms spread-eagled and her feet restraining my ankles. I was truly helpless. I watched her inspect me in my not unpleasant predicament and her eyes held a gleam of mischief tempered with desire.

She slapped my wrists together and held them in one hand at the front of my body. I remembered holding her arms above her head on one occasion before her change to prevent her from removing her blouse. This might be payback. She nestled her free hand inside my unbuttoned trousers and stroked me. *Ahhh!* Already at the height of arousal, I was paralyzed by the intensity of the sensation.

“You like that?”

“Mmm...yes.”

“Shall I do it again?”

“Yes, do....” My voice had dropped half an octave.

She stroked me again. I closed my eyes and groaned.

“Again?”

I just nodded.

“Please?”

“*Pleeease...*” I pleaded.

Before I knew what was happening, she slid down my trousers and I felt not her hand, but her lips on me. She took my penis into her mouth, stroking with her lips and tongue.

“*Grrrrrrrrrrr...!*” My growl was loud and deep. Bella had released my wrists and was crouched perpendicularly to me, focusing her attention on that most sensitive part of my body. My hands itched to touch her and I reached for her legs, rotating and lifting her until she was atop me. She sustained the motion of her lips and tongue and added her hands to the mix. The stroking, the weight of her, and an exceedingly erotic view of her body converged, raising my arousal to higher heights. As I caressed her legs from toe to tail, my growl became a continuous low rumble and I felt my muscles grow taut. When I could hold out no longer, I tried to warn Bella. I had never confirmed whether vampire semen was altogether safe when ingested.

“Bella, stop....” The words weren’t convincing. “Bella, don’t... *Ahhhhh...!*” Too late. There was nothing to do but give in to the extreme pleasure of release.

In spite of my distraction, it was not difficult to maintain the movements of my hands and fingers on Bella’s lower half, focusing attention on gradually more restricted areas of her body...stroking... stroking. Bella released me from her mouth and laid her head between my legs as her body responded to my touch. She began to hum a single note which rose higher and higher until the air whooshed out of her lungs and her body began to shake. Eventually, she fell limp and melted into me. Lazily, she ran one hand down my left leg and onto my foot.

“I like that,” I murmured as she tickled her fingers through the hair on my calves. She interlaced her fingers with my toes and squeezed the ball of my foot. I felt a surge of energy flow up my leg and land in my groin. She did it on the other side, sending energy flowing up that leg. It was not so much sexual as simply pleasant and relaxing.

“How are you?” I inquired, tickling up and down her legs and on the bottoms of her feet with my fingers.

“Mmmm...happy.”

“Come up here with me.” Bella put her hands and toes against the wooden floor, flexed her knees and elbows and popped into the air, simultaneously spinning one hundred eighty degrees. She landed with her mouth directly above mine.

“10!” I cheered.

“Damn, the Russian judge only gave me an 7.5,” Bella said. “I’ll never make the Olympic team.” We both started laughing.

“You get three tries,” I reminded her. Bella repeated the impressive maneuver twice, ending once more face-to-face with me.

“Brava! 10 and 10!” I enthused.

Bella adopted the voice of a sports announcer, “And the Russian judge says...wait for it...9 and 9.5!”

I flipped her onto her back and sprawled on top of her. I kissed her deeply, then leaned back to look in her eyes.

“Madam, may I dip in your steaming love tunnel with my stiff, throbbing manhood?”

Bella burst into giggles. “How romantic.”

I stared into her eyes. “The arching bow of your rosy lips sets my loins afire. I long to nestle my countenance in the peerless orbs of your heaving bosom and go...” —I pressed her breasts together, stuck my face in her cleavage and flapped my face back and forth—“...booga booga booga!” Bella shrieked with laughter.

“I want to suckle the pert buds atop your succulent hillocks and make you moan like a rutting moose.”

She was giggling uncontrollably when I flicked her left nipple with my tongue and watched the pale pink areola tighten slightly. Then I took it between my lips and sucked on it, massaging her breast with my hand. The giggling was fading into jerky breaths when I switched sides.

I moved a finger into the crevice at the top of her thighs and touched her wet flesh. She raised her knees, reached between my legs and guided me to her center. I suckled her breasts as I slowly eased into her, feeling her interior muscles grip and release and grip again. Her hands grabbed my buttocks and her hips followed mine as I pulled back and slid forward, backward and forward.

When I was inside her, we two were one...one heart, one mind, one body. I needed her like a human needs oxygen. She was my first and last, my alpha and my omega.

34. WORDS

When dawn broke, my wife and I reluctantly released one another and hauled ourselves out of bed, which we'd finally climbed into at three o'clock in the morning. We didn't need a bed, actually, but using it made life a little easier on the walls and floors of the cottage. We'd cracked one wall already and put two big dents in the maple flooring—one in the shape of my hips and the other in the shape of my shoulders, the two points of impact from Bella's diving leap across the bed. Now *there's* a story for the grandkids—NOT. I grinned to myself.

We donned bathrobes and Bella settled herself into the rocking chair in Renesmee's room, while I stood nearby and scanned several of the child-rearing books Esme had selected. When Renesmee's dreams changed to semi-conscious, then conscious thought, I motioned to Bella. We would let her discover we were there rather than make ourselves known immediately.

Nessie awoke without incident, lay still for a minute or two, yawned, and then started kicking her legs. She was on her back experimenting with that, when her foot caught the floor of the crib. By pushing with her foot and wiggling in a particular way, she flopped over onto her stomach. She was then face-to-face with the photographs of her parents.

Momma! Da! she thought happily. Momma and Daddy remained still and watched her do her next trick.

On her stomach, Renesmee adopted the Superman position, arms in front of her, legs kicking behind, until she caught her foot on the floor. By pushing with her hands and her foot at the same time, she gained enough leverage to pull her knees beneath her into a crawling position. Bella and I glanced at each other, smiling. Renesmee couldn't go far in the crib, but she coordinated enough to crawl forward a bit before she pushed the floor with her hands, rolled sideways, and plopped onto her bottom. One foot got caught beneath her, but she rocked until it popped out. Once she was sitting upright, she bounced her arms in front of her a few times as if to celebrate her success, then she leaned toward the side of the crib and grabbed the iron bars before gazing into the room.

MOMMA! Renesmee started bouncing her arms in excitement and then she saw me. *DA!* We moved to the crib and Nessie lifted her arms toward Bella.

Up! she thought, and I raised my eyebrows. Renesmee knew at least one word in addition to the names of family members. I wondered how many other words she knew, but there was no way to know until I heard her think them. Bella picked up the baby, reinforcing

her request. *So that word works for that.* I imagined her brain making that connection, though she didn't have the words yet to think it.

"Renesmee knows the word 'up,'" I told Bella. "She thought it as she raised her arms to be picked up."

"That's my brilliant baby," Bella cooed.

With her hand, Nessie showed Bella the pictures of her momma and daddy that hung in her crib. Then she began to notice the other photos of us around the room. She pointed to each one in turn thinking *Momma* or *Da*. It was fun listening to her think. Yesterday morning was the first time I'd heard her thinking in words as well as pictures. Learning about symbols—the idea that an object can be represented by a word—is another milestone that normally doesn't show up until a child's toddler stage.

Bella pulled a Peter Rabbit book from the shelf and rocked Renesmee while she read to her. I stood, listening to Nessie think. I couldn't tell how much of the story she understood, but pictures of rabbits and other animals as drawn by Beatrix Potter danced around in her mind.

When Bella had finished the book, Nessie showed her mother her cup, so I went to the kitchenette to prepare her breakfast. Bella dressed while I fed the baby and I pulled on clothes as Bella dressed Nessie in another of the outfits Alice had left at the cottage. No doubt, there would be fifty more when we reached the main house.

I was right. When we entered through the kitchen, Alice bounded down the staircase with Jasper following closely behind.

"Finally!" she exclaimed. "Bella, after Carlisle measures Renesmee, bring her to my room."

AWA! Renesmee pointed to Alice.

"Yes, Aunt Alice," I confirmed. Renesmee knew she hadn't touched my neck. She turned around and looked at me curiously. Then she pointed to Jasper.

YAPPA!

"Yes, that's Uncle Jasper."

Renesmee stared at me again for a moment. She was processing how I knew what she was "saying" when she hadn't touched me. She pointed to Alice's afghan which we'd wrapped her in before carrying her to the house.

Banka.

“Yes, blanket.”

She grabbed her right foot and pulled it toward her mouth. *Oof.*

“Yes, foot.” She smiled brightly. She’d discovered a new game.

Cow, she thought, pointing to the couch and looking at Bella expectantly.

“What is it, baby? What do you need?” Bella asked. Renesmee pointed again in the general direction of the couch.

Cow, she thought, and waited for Bella to reply.

“She’s testing you,” I said.

“Testing what?”

“Whether you can read her mind without her touching your face.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, I think she’s just figured out that I know what she’s thinking from across the room.”

“Wow! What a brilliant baby you are,” Bella said.

Cow. This time Renesmee didn’t point, but just looked at Bella. No reply. One by one, Renesmee looked around the room, testing every adult to see who would respond to her thought. Not Bella, not Alice, not Jasper, not Carlisle, who appeared at the top of the stairs, and not Esme, who came in from the kitchen. Then she looked at me again.

Cow.

“Yes, couch,” I affirmed and smiled at her.

Renesmee let out a single, excited “Hah!” She’d figured it out and was very pleased with herself. It *was* impressive. It had taken Carlisle ten days to realize that I could read minds after he changed me. Renesmee had also figured out that nobody else could read her thoughts.

Yanno.

“Piano.”

Wah.

“Wall.”

Renesmee kept up the game for a few more minutes. It was interesting to see how many words she knew and how she had connected them to their correct objects. When she was finished, she let loose with a loud squeak that might have been a giggle. Everyone looked at each other and then burst into laughter, responding both to her joy and to the silly noise she’d made.

I heard Carlisle wonder whether Nessie had a deformity in her vocal chords that made her laughs sound like squawks and squeaks. He was also concerned whether Renesmee would be able to speak normally when the time came. I could see that he wanted to examine her throat. I wasn’t especially concerned about it, but it was Carlisle’s nature to consider such things.

The “girls” spent the morning dressing up Renesmee and taking pictures. After the third wardrobe change, Bella carried the baby downstairs for a break and set her on the floor in front of Esme’s full-length, antique mirror. Renesmee reached toward her reflection and found that the mirror baby did the same thing. She tried it a couple of times and then touched her own nose. Then she sat quietly for a moment.

Neffie.

I smiled in delight. “Yes, Nessie.”

The baby snapped her head around to look at me and I grinned back. She pointed to herself in the mirror.

Neffie.

“Nessie,” I repeated. Renesmee squawked and set everybody laughing again.

Emmett, who had just returned from an unnecessary quick hunt, strode in through the kitchen and said accusingly, “Bella. You weaseled out of our wrestling match yesterday.” So *that* was the reason for the hunt—to make sure he was operating at full strength.

“Ah, Emmett,” Bella complained.

“You chicken?”

“No, not really.”

“You just got lucky on that first one.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I definitely think.”

“Oh, all right.” Bella passed the baby to Rosalie and my sister and I followed the combatants outside.

The arm wrestling match went exactly as it had two days before. Bella sat with her palm against Emmett’s and when Emmett said “three” slightly before he should have, Bella’s palm shifted backward half-an-inch before she recovered and returned their hands to upright center. Emmett’s strain was obvious. His mouth was tightened into a thin line, the veins in his arm were visible, and his biceps muscle bulged frightfully. In contrast, Bella didn’t seem to be working at all. As an exclamation point to her lack of effort, Bella began whistling “Yankee Doodle” while holding steady against Emmett’s arm. When she reached the last note of the song, Bella slammed the back of Emmett’s hand into the granite boulder with a loud “crack!”

“Satisfied?” she asked.

“Again!”

Bella sighed. “How about tomorrow?”

Emmett grunted and stomped off, slapping a large boulder into the river as he passed it. With a smug smile, Rosalie turned toward the house and carried Renesmee inside. She’d just won a bet.

“Edward?”

“Yes, love?”

“Our daughter reached a milestone this morning. Actually, two milestones—at least.”

“What were they?”

“When we were upstairs playing dress up, she touched Rosalie’s neck and Rosalie answered, ‘I don’t know.’ Then Renesmee looked at me from across the room and clear as a bell said, ‘Momma, where’s Grandpa?’”

“Did she really?” I asked, surprised. Carlisle would be both pleased and fascinated.

“You understand what this means, don’t you?”

“What is that, darling?”

“Our phenomenon of a child said both her first word, ‘Momma,’ and her first sentence, ‘Where’s Grandpa?’”

“You’re right! That’s not normal, is it?”

“No, not at all. Babies usually gurgle and make noises for quite a while before anything sounds like a real word. Then they build a vocabulary of single words over months. They don’t usually speak in sentences until much later.”

“Well, you know, she was building her vocabulary with me this morning. She was naming all the people and all the objects in the living room and thinking them at me. I confirmed each one.”

“Oh! That’s what you were doing!”

“Yes, so she went from building her vocabulary to speaking in one day. She also figured out that nobody but me could read her thoughts from across the room. That’s probably why she spoke her question to you.”

“Wow. It’s exciting in a way, but so scary at the same time...”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her. This fear would not go away any time soon, for any of us. I vowed to redouble my efforts at the research.

“We’ll keep looking, love. We know that Kaure knew something about our child—or at least had heard legends or stories—and she won’t be the only one in her tribe to have heard them. If we find nothing else, we’ll go to Brazil and locate the native people when Renesmee is old enough to travel.”

Bella nodded silently into my chest.

Charlie’s visit went smoothly that evening. He arrived a little after five o’clock and stayed until seven, when Nessie predictably went to sleep. There was one interesting development, however.

“Dad?” Bella said after Charlie had Renesmee in his lap and everybody else had abandoned us.

“Yeah?” he replied, looking up.

“Are you and Sue an item?”

Charlie looked nonplussed. "Well, now...uh...," Charlie started before going silent.

"Are you two going out?"

"Oh...no...I wouldn't say we're going out."

"What would you say?" Bella pressed.

"Well...you know...she feeds me dinner and I pay her back by taking her out to eat sometimes."

"Do you like her?"

"Oh, sure..."

This conversation reminded me of one you might hear in a high school girls' bathroom. I was waiting to hear the words, "But do you *like her* like her?"

"Nessie, you've sure got pretty hair," Charlie noted, changing the subject. Nessie grabbed his nose in a way that was very familiar to me.

"Was Billy seeing Sue too? Is that why you're not hanging out with him anymore? Is he mad?"

Charlie hesitated, but couldn't escape Bella's prying eyes.

"Oh, no, he's not mad."

"But he used to hang out at Sue's quite a bit, didn't he?"

"Once in a while. He understands that Sue's helping me with all these...you know...changes. The tribe has been living with strange stuff for a long time."

It seemed like a good time to give Charlie a break.

"You won't believe what Renesmee did today, Charlie," I said, earning a dirty look from Bella.

"Oh, yeah? What did our little girl do?" He tickled the baby's tummy with two fingers and she smiled.

"You tell him, Bella. You were there."

"She said her first word."

"You did, Nessie? What did you say?" Charlie asked.

“She said ‘Momma,’” Bella replied.

“Well, that’s really something.”

“And then she said, “Where’s Grandpa?” His eyes grew larger.

“Well...isn’t that great!”

“I just about fainted, actually.”

“That’s awfully advanced, isn’t it?”

“Yes, she’s several months early according to the books. But she’s very intelligent.”

“Yes, she is...that’s for sure.”

“We watched her roll over and sit up today too,” Bella continued.

“Well, my goodness.”

Nessie reached up to touch Charlie’s cheek and he glanced over at us. Bella nodded in encouragement. He leaned forward slowly until the baby’s hand touched his skin.

Whah Sue? Charlie saw the image of Sue, but I also heard her think the words— another sentence.

“Oh!” Charlie looked taken aback. Nessie had only met Sue once the night before. “Sue is at home,” he told our one-week-old baby.

Sue not wif? Another sentence. The image was Charlie and Sue together in our living room.

“Sue’s making dinner.”

Cuh? She showed him a picture of her metal cup. Charlie didn’t know what to make of it.

“Metal cup?” Charlie asked.

“Renesmee drinks from a cup. She’s verifying that Sue’s making ‘cup,’ meaning dinner,” I translated.

“You are really something, aren’t you?”

Renesmee started bouncing on Charlie’s lap by flapping her arms up and down enthusiastically. *Gampa* was different than everybody else in the family. He smelled good and made her excited. Just when I thought I ought to snatch her away from him, she put three

fingers in her mouth and closed her teeth on them, remembering that she wasn't supposed to bite. Then she snuggled against Charlie's chest, her ear next to his heart, listening. Charlie's thumping was slower and more relaxing than Jacob's.

"I'd like to come to the house tomorrow and pick up some things from my room if that's okay with you...clothes and stuff," Bella told her father.

"Sure. I could bring them over if you want."

"Thanks, but I want to choose some of my books, get Mom's letters and stuff. Maybe I can bring something for your dinner."

"Oh no, don't bother with that. You've got Renesmee. I'll eat at Sue's."

"Okay. Thanks, Dad."

"Maybe I'll skip a day before I visit again. Give you a night off."

"It's up to you. You're welcome to come. Renesmee loves to see you."

"Can Sue come with me?" he asked, looking uncomfortable.

"Sure, Charlie," I interjected. "She's always welcome."

"Okay, then. I guess I'll go now. Sue's waiting for me." He stood up, still cradling the baby. She was getting sleepy.

"I'll take her, Charlie. She needs to eat before bedtime." I turned to Bella. "Is that okay?" I glanced toward Charlie. I wanted to give them a couple of minutes alone, but not if it would be too hard for her.

"Thanks," she nodded. Jasper was just outside the front door, so Bella wouldn't be alone if instinct got the better of her. He could feel how she was feeling and make sure she didn't lose control.

I took Nessie to the kitchen to fix her cup for her.

"How are you doing with all this, Dad?" Bella wanted to know.

"Well, it's different, I guess."

"I'm glad you have somebody to talk to."

"Oh...yeah...well...." Charlie went silent.

“I’m doing good, Dad. I’m really happy. I just want you to know that.”

“I love you, Bells. And that little girl of yours, too.”

“Love you too, Dad. We’ll see you here in a couple of days then.”

“Sure thing, kiddo. We need to figure out what we’re going to say to Renee. She’s really worried.”

“Okay, let’s both give it some thought and we’ll talk about it then.”

“Goodnight, then. Oh, and Bella?”

“Yes, Dad?”

“That husband of yours isn’t so bad. He seems like a good father.”

“He is. You can trust me on that.”

I heard the front door close and shortly afterward, Charlie’s patrol car headed down the drive toward the highway.

I wouldn’t tell Bella that he’d begun thinking about initiating his first kiss with Sue and worrying because it had been so long since he’d kissed a woman, he wasn’t sure he could remember how. I chuckled to myself.

35. EXTENDED FAMILY

Over the next couple of weeks, the Cullen household became Grand Central Station for a growing collection of motley characters. It seemed, for instance, that we had acquired an entire wolf pack of our own. Carlisle had been right about Embry and Quil—they missed Jacob. Because there was no longer any animosity between the two packs, Embry and Quil could choose which Alpha they wanted to follow and they joined Jacob’s pack. Sam’s pack had grown to seven wolves with the addition of Colin and Brady, so the defections evened up the numbers.

The two wolf packs informally divided their territory, with Sam’s pack retaining responsibility for reservation land and Jacob’s pack watching over Forks and the surrounding area up to the reservation border. There were no hard rules—all of the wolves were free to cross the lines—but if any trouble arose, the packs would adopt the lines for patrolling purposes.

Taking charge of Forks and the surrounding area kept Jacob near the center of his territory when he was on Cullen property. Therefore, he and his pack had become semi-permanent residents of our home. They came and went, but when they didn’t return to their family homes at night, they slept outside our house in their wolf forms. Jacob kept two wolves—usually himself and one other member of his pack—always on the property, or if we took Renesmee somewhere, he would go along with her and leave two other wolves at the Cullen house. He wanted to sleep outside the cottage at night, but he received an emphatic “No!” to that idea. Bella and I needed at least some semblance of privacy.

Jacob had made Leah his second-in-command and she kept up a running communication between him and the rest of the pack. Since Jacob spent a lot of time in his human form with Renesmee, Leah came into the house quite often, but didn’t stay for long. She had never gotten comfortable with the werewolf /vampire alliance, though she was less vocal with her opinions than in the past. As Sam had said, Jacob couldn’t leave Renesmee and the pack couldn’t abandon him, so everybody had to adjust to the changes. None of the other wolves had a problem with it, mostly because Renesmee was so lovable that she overcame their natural discomfort around vampires.

Seth had made the Cullen house his second home. It was natural given that Charlie and Sue spent a majority of their weekend afternoons and weekday evenings at our house. We had invited Billy to visit, since Jacob was with us so much of the time, but the triangle between

Charlie and Billy and Sue had not completely resolved itself. Billy had been harboring more serious intentions towards Sue than he would admit to.

Emmett had struck up a friendship with Quil and Embry. I'd warned Carlisle about Emmett's intentions to fight them, worried that my brother would hurt one of them. I thought he might have something to prove because he was losing so often to Bella in their almost daily arm-wrestling matches. Bella told him that she hadn't noticed a lessening of her newborn strength, but Emmett kept insisting that it was a fluke, or that he just needed to perfect his technique, or that he hadn't hunted enough recently. It seemed impossible for him to accept that he was not the strongest vampire in the family.

Carlisle spoke with Emmett about not fighting the wolves. Though they healed fast, they were not as rugged as vampires and could die from organic causes when injured. Since our battle with the newborn army, Carlisle had been studying veterinary science and the *Canis lupis* species in particular. He had acquired some veterinary medical equipment on the chance that one of the wolves became injured and couldn't phase to human form. Still, there was no guarantee that Carlisle could help a severely injured wolf and none of the wolves could go to the local hospital in human form because of their physical anomalies—body temperature, for instance. Emmett promised that if the wolves would fight with him, he'd take precautions to make sure they didn't get hurt. Carlisle was not pleased, but he wasn't the kind of father who issued ultimatums.

Quil and Embry were as excited about fighting as Emmett was and the three of them sneaked off to the woods to have a go at each other. The wolves were nearly as cocky as Emmett, so they didn't think twice about fighting him one-on-one. When they discovered how trivial it was for Emmett to roll a wolf with his supernatural strength, speed, and reflexes, they agreed that two-on-one would be more fair. The fights instantly became more interesting when the wolves attacked Emmett from two different directions.

Jacob never participated in the fights. He wouldn't risk getting injured and frightening Renesmee, but Rosalie and Alice went to watch and put down money. Jasper and Seth served as umpires, running the fights like boxing matches, with timed rounds and points, to keep things as safe as possible. They conferred at the end of each match and called the win.

At home, our days had taken on a family routine. Bella and I spent an hour with Renesmee in the mornings at our cottage, feeding her and then reading books or playing with her toys before we joined the family at the big house. Then we handed her over to Carlisle to be measured and weighed.

In addition to monitoring Renesmee's growth, my father performed medical exams that he thought were necessary, or if they were nonintrusive, to gather information. He took her

temperature periodically, looked into her ears and nose, checked her blood pressure and reflexes, and listened to her heart and lungs.

On one such occasion he looked into her throat—after examining mine first to show her what he was going to do—and found that her vocal chords resembled mine, which are unlike those of a human. Vampire vocal cords are taller and wider, which allows us to make a wider range of sounds, both higher and lower, than humans. Apparently, Renesmee’s squeaks and squawks were just artifacts of her learning to use them.

After measuring Nessie and finishing any exams, Carlisle usually spent time letting his granddaughter play with his computer or choose books from his shelves. Then he passed her off to her aunts for the daily fashion show.

Renesmee outgrew her clothes at an astonishing rate, so she rarely wore the same thing twice. Before she had cycled through all the clothes Alice had purchased for her in a particular size, she had grown to a larger size. That was the reason for the thousands of photographs the aunts took. Their goal was to create an entire childhood history for Renesmee in what would be only four years if her growth rate continued at its present rate.

Alice and Rose got more and more creative with their photography. They set up a green screen like those used to film movies and snapped photos of Renesmee in front of it wearing clothes for different climates with a variety of hair arrangements, props, and accessories. Alice used her computer to add background scenery.

We had photos of Renesmee at a California beach with her parents and a beach ball, at the Oregon Coast in rubber boots and a raincoat, and wearing a baby skiing outfit in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Renesmee went boating at Lake Chelan, swung on schoolyard swing-sets, and played with photoshopped children in a sandbox. Frequently, family members were called to participate in group photos in front of the green screen. Renesmee’s childhood albums became a family project with each of us proposing ideas for photos. Emmett took Renesmee fishing and Carlisle and Esme took her to the zoo. Some of these activities we’d no doubt be enacting in real life, as they prompted many curiosities in our child’s mind.

After her near-daily photo shoots, which ended as soon as Renesmee got bored or tired, one of the adults would feed her lunch and then Bella and I would take her to the cottage for quiet time for a couple of hours, allowing Jacob to keep watch outside. Though Renesmee didn’t nap, sometimes she would lie down in her crib or with one of her parents on our bed for a rest, or more often, she would choose half a dozen books for us to read or she would choose games or art supplies and we would draw, or play with her plastic animals, or Tinker Toys, or her erector set.

Jacob usually took Renesmee to play in the woods after quiet time, either searching for wildlife or identifying trees and plants, and often he told her tales of the Quileute and other Northwest coastal tribes. As I suspected, Jacob had phased in front of Renesmee during one of these afternoon outings.

“What were you thinking, Jacob?” Bella asked aggressively. “Don’t you think her parents ought to have a say about whether she sees her best friend change into a wolf?”

“*You* handled it just fine.”

“I wasn’t a BABY!” Bella yelled. I put my arm around her waist, remembering another time recently that Jacob had riled her.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Jacob Black?” I demanded.

“Ah, don’t get all bent outta shape,” he complained. “Nessie asked me how Seth came out of the wolf when Bella attacked. She wasn’t upset, just curious. I didn’t think it would hurt to explain with a demonstration.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make. Please try to remember that Bella and I are her parents and we can limit your access to her if you disrespect our wishes.”

“I wasn’t dissing anybody! I just answered her question!”

“Nevertheless, that was our decision to make,” I told him firmly.

“All right, all right! Don’t do anything hasty! I’ll talk to you first next time.”

“Does she know who the other wolves in the pack are?” Bella wanted to know, slightly calmer.

“She’s not dumb, Bells. I think she had it figured out before she even asked, if you wanna know the truth.”

“What’s done is done, but in future—” I began.

“I know, I know.”

I decided to drop the subject and lead Bella away.

“Jacob gives her whatever she wants, whenever she wants it, or in this case, whenever she asks about it. I’m not sure that our baby needs to know all this secret, confusing stuff when she’s just a few weeks old,” Bella said. I didn’t often see her this disgusted with Jacob, but I was just as irritated.

Bella and I decided to tell Renesmee what we wanted her to know about the wolves and the vampires, and of the days when the wolf-people and the vampires were enemies. We would also tell her about the humans and how her human Momma and her vampire Daddy fell in love, even though Daddy used to drink human blood like Renesmee. We wanted to have some control over how she interpreted the information and we wanted to pass along to her our family's moral stand on hunting humans. It wasn't at all clear that Renesmee would understand the stories until she was older, but we assumed that she would absorb whatever she could for her age.

Renesmee liked to tell her parents the events of her day, so if Jacob did anything too far out of line, we usually knew pretty quickly. Mostly, we found that Jacob just catered to Renesmee's wishes, which was ironic, since he had always accused me indulging Bella by giving her whatever she wanted when I was courting her.

After Renesmee's play time with Jacob, the wolves either went hunting or went home to eat, though Jacob, and sometimes Seth, ate at our house. Renesmee liked to watch them eat human food, but never seemed particularly tempted to try any of it. She got a bath after playing with Jacob, if not for the mud and moss that stuck to her due to the constant rain in the forest, then to remove the wet dog smell that clung to her like a second skin.

I got pulled into the bath-time ritual one day when Rosalie removed Nessie's jacket and sweater, both of which were damp, and prepared to take her upstairs. Renesmee reached for Rose's face and showed her a picture of me crouched beside the bathtub.

Edward? Rose asked silently. *Do you want to bathe the baby?*

"That would be fine. I haven't done it since she outgrew the sink, but I'm sure she will tell me if I do something wrong."

Rose smiled in agreement. *Bella is outside arm-wrestling my incorrigible husband, so I'll come with you. Nessie probably wants to show you her boats.*

"Boats?"

Yes, Esme bought her some floating bath toys, including a collection of boats. You'll see.

Renesmee reached for me and I pulled her into my arms, and then we filed upstairs to the bathroom. Rose had it right. Nessie wanted to show me her new toys and splash around in the bubbles with her *Da*. I was glad for the chance because I assumed my daughter would become gender-sensitive at some point and no longer want me there.

I found that bathing Nessie as a toddler had little to do with soaping and rinsing. It was more about zoom-zooming plastic boats and smacking foamy bubbles with a flat hand to send them flying through the air to land on both her face and mine. She also got a kick out of touching my nose and making bubbles stick to it. Before the water got cold, I put some soap on a cloth and rubbed the dirt off her face, neck, back, front, and all the way down to her feet. Then we played “This Little Piggy” with her ten toes. Renesmee squealed like a piglet herself when I wiggled her toes.

We had great fun that afternoon and it became Nessie’s habit to ask for *Da* at bath time. But I was right that it wouldn’t last. Our child eventually developed girlish modesty and after that she only wanted Mommy or Auntie Rose to bathe her. She was growing up all too quickly.

After bath time, Carlisle always measured Renesmee again and then she drank her dinner, and if it was a weekday, Charlie and Sue usually came to visit. After they left, my lovely wife and I retired to our cottage, put the baby to bed, and enjoyed each other’s company for the rest of the night.

Renesmee started crawling as soon as she discovered how to maneuver her body into the appropriate position and she became proficient at it immediately. She liked to zip around the house at supernatural speeds and sneak up on one or another of us. She especially loved it when her “victim” made a big fuss about being surprised or terrified. We enjoyed her amusement so much that we all did our best to put on a convincing performance.

Esme was the best. She got such a kick out of making Renesmee giggle that she would jump into the air and then collapse in a heap on the floor, ending up at Renesmee’s eye level. She would put a hand to her heart, breathe heavily and say, “Oh my *word*, child, you *frightened* me!”

Renesmee unfailingly burst into her kind of laughter—a series of squawks and squeaks—and Nana laughed along with her. Then Renesmee would show Nana her next victim and scurry off to find that person.

Emmett also enjoyed playing this game with Renesmee. When she “sneaked up” on him and head-butted his leg, he would fall to the floor without a word and pretend to be dead.

Renesmee would use Emmett's collapsed body to push herself into a sitting position and I'd hear her call *EMMA, EMMA, EMMA* in her mind as she patted him with her palm. Without warning, Emmett would open his eyes and growl or say "Boo!" and Renesmee would respond with a delighted "Aehk!" Then Emmett would pick her up and hang her upside down by her legs or hold her under the arms and swing her in circles. Sometimes he would toss her into the air and catch her upside down by her ankles. Once we figured out that it did Renesmee no harm, we let him rough-house with her. She absolutely loved it.

Carlisle was in charge of supplying his granddaughter with the beverage of her choice. His continuing efforts to convince her to drink baby formula were fruitless. None of us was willing to press her too hard, so that strategy failed. It wasn't always easy for Carlisle to get human blood, though. The paperwork that tracked blood donations was surprisingly thorough. Ever since the HIV virus first contaminated the U.S. blood supply in 1982, control of those pints became iron-fisted.

In order to gain access to donated blood, Carlisle volunteered at the Puget Sound Blood Center and on the Bloodmobile, which was not something very many doctors did. With close proximity to the blood, Carlisle could secrete pints and carry them out in an insulated lunch box to help them stay fresh until he got home. He would not take blood that might be needed to save a human's life, but fortunately for us, donated blood has a short shelf life and pints past their expiration date cannot be transfused. Often, Carlisle was able to divert them before they were sent to a disposal facility.

When expired pints were scarce, Carlisle tried to acquire blood that tested positive for hepatitis or HIV or other blood-borne pathogens. Blood contaminated with viruses was not dangerous to vampires and we thought it wouldn't be to Renesmee either, both because she ingested it and because her body temperature was too high for the viruses to survive and reproduce.

Nevertheless, we heated the blood in the microwave to kill any remaining virus as a safety precaution. Also, no human other than Jacob was allowed to prepare Renesmee's meals and Carlisle only allowed him to do so because he would not be deterred. Even if a virus got into his bloodstream, though, it would not survive long in that high-temperature environment. Still, viruses were known for mutating, so Carlisle insisted that Jacob wear gloves, a mask, and eye protection when he handled pre-sterilized blood.

Once or twice when our blood supply got very low, Jacob and his pack (except for Leah) gallantly volunteered to donate human blood for her. It was a magnanimous gesture and we were exceedingly grateful, but we declined their generosity because we weren't sure that we

could get Nessie to drink it. She didn't like the smell of the wolves' blood—it didn't smell like food to her, though we did not tell them so.

So far, Carlisle had come through every time and we hadn't had any emergency shortages. However, Renesmee continued to drink more as she grew and it was sure to become a problem if we couldn't get her to supplement her diet with human food. We intended to teach her how to hunt as soon as she learned to walk and run. If worse came to worst, we would hunt for her, drain an animal and put the blood in her cup. If our tastes were any indication, she was not going to like animal blood much after a steady diet of human, but we decided to cross that bridge when we came to it.

One thing I've discovered about having a child is that they are like sponges—they absorb everything that goes on around them. When Renesmee was almost three weeks old, Bella noticed an odd behavior. The baby crawled through the living room, no doubt enroute to “scare” someone, but on her way, she stopped in front of the couch and swung out her left leg before crawling away.

“What the heck was that?” Bella asked, startled. I hated to tell her that the baby's thought while she performed the maneuver was *shhhhh*. It was funny in a disturbing sort of way.

“Um...well...I think she was marking her territory,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Oh, nooo!” Bella groaned. “That's what we get for letting her hang around with dogs!”

“Yes. There was a reason I was disturbed by the wolves' phasing in front of her. As it turns out, she's taken all that in stride—it even seems normal to her. Unfortunately, some of the normal behaviors of a canine are more offensive for a hybrid-human girl to act out than the abnormal ones are.”

“What are we going to do?” Bella moaned.

“What we always do, I suppose. Explain to her what it means and teach her that it's something wolves do, but not little girls.”

“Do you think that will work?”

“It's worked so far. Social mores are difficult to explain, though, because many of them don't make logical sense. They're just 'accepted modes of behavior,' which is a little tough to make convincing.”

“Have you seen her do anything else like that?” Bella asked. I was afraid she would ask that question.

“Yes....” I hesitated. “I’ve seen her squat like a girl dog too.”

“You’re kidding me! Really?”

“Yes, though it looked less like the real thing, so I wasn’t sure what she was doing. I’m sure now, though. I think she wants to squirt water out of her hind end like the dogs do, but can’t figure out how to do it.” I tried to bite back my smile, but didn’t quite succeed.

“Oh, my gawd!” Bella put her head in her hands.

“Darling, all babies do embarrassing things until they’re taught not to. In *Parenting for Dummies*, it says that many babies think poo floating in the toilet is a great treat.”

“Ew! Gross!”

“Exactly. At least this isn’t as bad as that.”

“You’re right. We could get her a baby potty, I guess, and teach her species-appropriate toilet behavior. Anyway, it looks like we’ll be having a talk about the human digestive system tomorrow during rest time.”

“I’ll bet the ‘birds and the bees’ talk won’t be far behind.”

“What do you mean? What would make her even think of that?” Bella asked in astonishment.

“Well, she does spend a lot of time seeking out wildlife in the woods. I’ve seen the image in her mind of two rabbits ‘playing piggyback.’”

“You’re kidding me! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was trying to find the right way to break it to you,” I said, chuckling.

“Did she ask Jacob about it?”

“I think so. She was thinking the word ‘piggyback,’ though it took me a while to figure that out from *icky-pak*.”

“Did you ask Jacob?”

“Uh...no. I thought I’d leave that one to you.” I laughed and Bella gave me a light punch on the arm.

It had also occurred to me that one of these days—if Jacob weren't careful, or if he had to phase quickly for some reason—Renesee was going to get an eyeful of body parts she hadn't seen before and there would be a lot of questions to answer.

Perhaps I should have a preemptive chat with Jacob about that. Maybe he could find out how Quil handled it with Claire, since Claire was only two years old when they met and they'd been glued to each other ever since.

Thinking about Jacob and Renesee, I suddenly realized how Nessie had learned the word *piggyback*—by playing one of her favorite games with him. While they were in the woods, Nessie liked to climb around on Jacob the Wolf. After phasing, he'd lie down on the forest duff and Renesee would crawl up his nose onto his back and then sit or lie down and play with his fur. Sometimes, she would pull his ears or his tail or poke her fingers up his nose. It always surprised me how extremely tolerant Jacob was with our daughter. Renesee could do no wrong.

In fact, since his imprinting, Jacob was an altogether altered person. As our daughter's caretaker, he was much softer than he'd ever been before. Everything about him was gentle, attentive, indulgent, entertaining, and loving. There was no longer any sign of the angry Jacob I used to know so well. Even when I chastised him for one thing or another, he might disagree, but he didn't become resentful like he used to. The boiling kettle inside him seemed to have cooled.

Lately, everything I saw between Jacob and Nessie, I saw through Nessie's eyes. I was beginning to suspect that Jacob was developing some skill at shielding his thoughts from me. When we first met, he was a completely open book. I saw virtually everything he thought whether I wanted to or not. Now, though, if I wanted to read something in Jacob's head, I had to make an effort and occasionally, I would still get nothing.

I hadn't run into anything like that before where someone's once-open mind became opaque. I could either read them or I could not and the "could nots" were few and far between. Perhaps the change in Jacob had something to do with his imprinting on Renesee. Imprinting was such a profound alteration that it made sense that his mind might be altered in other ways as well. It was just as well. If Jacob was going to be attached to my daughter for the rest of his life, it would be better for everybody if his mind *were* opaque to me.

My relationship with Jacob had settled into a comfortable pattern, more or less. He had to respect my wishes as Nessie's father. Otherwise, I could restrict his access to her, which was something he couldn't tolerate. Until my daughter was at least four years old, Bella and I would make the rules and we would require him to comply. By that age, if her current progression continued, she would be the equivalent of a young adult and able to make her own decisions. I

hoped that she had a close enough relationship with her parents that she would seek our guidance on her choices, but I had no control over that. At least Carlisle and Esme had provided me with admirable examples of how to parent grown children.

Bella's mother was another story. Bella loved her mother and for that reason, I was willing to handle Renee in whatever way Bella wanted. However, I agreed with Charlie that Renee should not know about Bella's new life. She was extremely intuitive and if she spent any time near us, she would see us for what we were sooner or later. And Renee wouldn't be able to let it go, unlike Charlie, who could see, adjust, and move on without having to fully understand everything.

I was surprised that Renee hadn't insisted on seeing Bella when Carlisle told her the CDC story. Apparently, she hammered Charlie with questions and called frequently in semi-hysterics wondering how her daughter was doing. At least now Charlie could tell her that Bella was in recovery. Perhaps we would say that Bella was well enough to carry on a phone conversation once a week, but that her immune system was compromised, so she couldn't see visitors. I was a little concerned that she would drive to Atlanta one of these days and make a nuisance of herself at the CDC. We'd have to invent a special clinic in northern Switzerland or Germany where Bella was being cared for under strict environmental controls. Whatever we told her, it was going to be a complicated fiction.

It was good that Renee had attended our wedding, met Bella's in-laws, and befriended Esme. It gave her some peace of mind to talk to Esme about Bella's illness and to know that Carlisle was looking after her. It seemed to be easier for her to let Bella go, knowing that she was in good hands and with a family who loved her. It was also helpful that her husband, Phil, was back on the road with his baseball career. The traveling might keep Renee occupied enough that Bella could satisfy her with telephone conversations. Bella was practicing making her voice sound coarse for that purpose.

We had a more pressing concern intruding on our happy life. Bella had received a wedding gift from Aro. A personal note tucked into it said, "I so look forward to meeting the new Mrs. Cullen in person." It felt like a veiled threat. Alice had foreseen Caius's intention to send a contingent of the Volturi guard to verify Bella's condition. The last thing we wanted were the Volturi showing up on our side of the water.

The gift itself was extravagant in the extreme. It was a golden rope necklace with a diamond the size of a golf ball dangling from it. Carlisle recognized it immediately as part of the crown jewels that John of England had lost in the thirteenth century. Did Aro value the jewel so little that he would send it to a woman whom he had only barely met, or did he value Bella so much that he would give her such a priceless ornament?

If the latter, did he value her so much that he would steal her from her family, along with Alice and me? If so, Aro knew that he would have to take us by force, because I would never comply with any request to join the Volturi guard.

And then there was Renesmee—beautiful, unique, gifted Renesmee—so far, a secret from the outside world. She was the rarest and, therefore, the most valuable of all of us in Aro's eyes. It would be best if he never learned of her existence.

Would the Volturi dare to take us by force? If so, what would happen to the rest of the Cullen clan? Would they simply be destroyed? One thing was certain—Aro was a jealous governor and Carlisle Cullen's family gave him much to be jealous of.

36. WALKING

When Renesmee was twenty-six days old, she stood up and walked. Just like that. She looked like she'd been doing it for years. If you hadn't known it was her first time, you wouldn't have been able to tell. Jasper, Jacob, Bella and I, and Rose were in the living room, either sitting on the floor playing with Renesmee or standing nearby watching.

Alice was arranging flowers in several vases around the room, dancing between them in her signature way. She'd attracted Nessie's attention and the baby watched Alice carefully. After ten seconds of studying her aunt, Renesmee placed her feet on the floor and pushed off with her hands until she was standing upright. Without swaying or stumbling, she walked eight steps across the room to Alice. Then she turned around and waited for our reaction.

Jacob began clapping enthusiastically, but when I looked over at him, he and Bella were exchanging looks of alarm. Bella plastered a strained smile on her face and joined in with the clapping, as did I. Renesmee was obviously proud of herself. Her face lit up in a big smile and she began clapping along with us.

"Carlisle, Esme..." I called. They appeared holding hands at the top of the staircase.

"Renesmee has something she would like to show you."

They floated together to the base of the stairs.

"What is it, dear?" Esme asked. Everybody watched to see what she would do.

"ook, Nana!"

Renesmee began walking smoothly toward Esme and Carlisle. Halfway across the room, she performed a simple pirouette, mimicking Alice, and then closed the distance between herself and her grandparents. She wrapped her arms around Esme's legs and planted her face in her grandmother's crotch. Esme, always gracious and composed, simply bent over her granddaughter, put her arms around her, and gave her a hug.

"My goodness, Nessie, did you learn that today?"

Renesmee twisted around with her fist full of Esme's skirt and peaked out at Jacob from behind the fabric, flashing him a shy smile. We gave her another round of applause and she hid her face. I wasn't sure whether it was true shyness or false modesty, but she knew she had done something remarkable. Jacob held out his arms from his sitting position on the floor and Renesmee walked to him confidently before falling into his arms.

“That was great, Ness! Pretty soon you’ll be able to run with me!” Renesmee smacked her hand to Jacob’s face and showed him a picture of them running in the woods together. “Sure, we can practice later.”

This is extraordinary, Edward, Carlisle thought.

I nodded. I was pulled in two directions by Renesmee’s shocking precocity. Children normally didn’t walk until they were nine months old at the earliest. My daughter was just under a month old by the calendar and had not only walked, but also spun in a circle. She hadn’t even bothered with the intermediary step of pulling herself up to a standing position and learning how to balance. Physiologically, how old was Renesmee?

It’s fine, Edward. It’s okay, I thought, trying to calm myself. *She’s advanced. We knew that. We’re going to find out everything we can and then we’ll decide what to do. We have options.* Carlisle was watching me when I looked up.

Are you all right?

I nodded infinitesimally.

We will figure this out, son. Let’s discuss it later.

I nodded again. Then it occurred to me that Renesmee had also spoken aloud. The walking had startled me so much that the speaking slipped by without my notice. If Esme had not been across the room from her, I was quite sure that Nessie wouldn’t have spoken. We knew that she was physically able to speak, but most of the time she preferred not to. I couldn’t tell why for sure. It just seemed to be more natural for her to talk with her hand than with her mouth.

Renesmee’s voice, though not fully developed, was beautiful. It was higher than Alice’s voice and sounded a lot like Bella’s when Bella got excited—a piccolo, clear and sweet. She couldn’t pronounce all the consonants yet, but she was so far ahead of her age that I didn’t think it would be long before she could. Nessie had said her first words when she was one week old, but had only spoken out loud four or five times since then. I knew by listening to her mind that her vocabulary was large for a child and that she was thinking in terms of words and sentences in addition to pictures. She just preferred not to vocalize her thoughts.

“It won’t be long before we’ll be teaching our child to hunt,” I said under my breath.

Bella turned to look at me, a stricken expression on her face. I pulled her close and held her tightly against me. Renesmee put her hand to Jacob’s face and showed him the forest and thought the word *hunting* as a question.

“Yes, we’ll go hunting together,” he responded to her. I wasn’t so sure about that.

Everybody perked up their ears when Charlie’s patrol car turned into our long driveway. Bella kneeled and held out her arms for Renesmee and the baby kicked her legs so that Jacob would set her on her feet. Then she walked confidently to her mother who took Nessie in her arms and clung to her as if she were trying to steady herself before Charlie’s entrance.

I kneeled down to Renesmee’s level and touched her hand. “Let’s not talk to Charlie and Sue about hunting. They are humans and do not hunt like we do. It would upset them to know about that. Do you understand?”

Renesmee nodded solemnly. She carried a list of such topics in her head. At one month old, she already understood the difference between humans, vampires, and werewolves and that she was special because she was part human and part vampire.

Our evenings with Charlie had become routine. If Emmett was around, he came in and turned on the television, which gave all of us some distraction from the burden of conversation. Neither Charlie nor Sue was any kind of conversationalist. If they did speak, they mostly spoke to Nessie and the rest of us spoke amongst ourselves. We always offered them food and drink, but they rarely accepted.

Jacob made sure that either he or Seth was around when Sue and Charlie visited to help bridge the gap between the humans and the vampires. As time went on, though, the polymorphous collection of beings in our house began to feel like family and we Cullens lowered our guard to a degree.

I could read in Sue’s thoughts that she had talked to Charlie about her children. Charlie had been sympathetic. He’d seen Jacob phase to a wolf, so he knew that Sue wasn’t crazy. She reassured him that he wasn’t crazy either and the two of them had become closer. (“As long as *you* don’t turn into a wolf too,” Charlie had said before risking that first kiss.)

Jacob told us that Billy was beginning to make peace with the situation. It would have been hard not to, given his close proximity to Sue as a tribal elder. It also didn’t hurt that two sisters—cousins of Embry—were visiting from the Makah tribe. Billy had his eye on one of the women, though I wasn’t sure how Embry’s mother would feel about that, much less her father, Albert. I chuckled remembering the old Makah fisherman.

Carlisle opened the door for our evening’s guests.

“Welcome Sue, Charlie. Come in,” he greeted them warmly.

Gampa! Sue! Renesmee thought. She pressed her hand to Bella's face. Nessie wanted to show them her new skill. Bella released her and we all watched again as she walked gracefully across the room. Charlie's eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open. He put his hand over his racing heart and looked at Sue, who raised her eyebrows knowingly.

Renesmee stopped in front of Charlie and reached toward him to be picked up.

"Nessie!" he exclaimed, his voice slightly shaky. "Come to Grandpa. How are you today? You've learned something new, I see."

Nessie showed Charlie with her hand how she had imitated Alice.

"Well, that's really something!" Charlie glanced at Sue again before carrying Renesmee into the room.

I looked at Bella and saw that she was clasping her hands together tightly. This was the first time that she hadn't held Renesmee to steady herself around the human visitors.

"You okay?" I asked her under my breath.

"I'm okay," she replied. Jasper was standing near us behind the couch as he did most evenings.

While we sat with our guests, my mind wandered off, thinking and planning for a trip to Brazil. We could locate Gustavo and through him, Kaure, but I already knew that Kaure believed all children such as Renesmee should be destroyed before they could kill. If we could talk to the elders of her tribe, though, maybe they would share their tribal legends of our kind.

How would we get them to talk to us? If they believed in vampires, it seemed unlikely that they would let us get near them. Speaking their language would be of no help if I couldn't get close enough to talk.

Brazil was home to lots of native tribes, though, some of whose members were vampires themselves. Carlisle had some old friends in the Amazon who might be able to help us. As natives, they would have access to information that we didn't have, though as vampire women, none of them were likely to have borne half-breed children themselves. I would talk to Carlisle in the morning and we'd start making plans. I didn't know how long it would take to find out what we needed to know, so I wanted to start as soon as possible.

Carlisle and I had hope that with the same number of genes as the wolves, Renesmee might stop aging when she reached maturity. But there was no way to know unless we could find others of her kind. Even tribal tales of others would be helpful.

There was one other option that none of us had spoken of, but all of us had thought about—changing Renesmee, turning her into a vampire at an appropriate age. It would be extremely risky. With her genetics, we had no certainty what the outcome of changing her would be. The tribal wisdom of the Quileute was that vampire venom was deadly to wolves. Would the human half of her become vampirized and immortal or would her combined genes make vampire venom deadly to her?

“Sheesh!” Bella exclaimed when we arrived at the cottage that night. “If I haven’t killed Charlie or Sue yet, it’s probably not going to happen. I wish Jasper would stop hovering all the time!”

“No one doubts you, Bella, not in the slightest,” I reassured her as I put Renesmee in her crib and tucked her blanket around her. “You know how Jasper is—he can’t resist a good emotional climate. You’re so happy all the time, love, he gravitates toward you without thinking.”

I pulled my wife to me and wrapped my arms around her. It was true. Despite the shock we both received every time Renesmee performed another impossible feat, Bella took great pleasure in every aspect of her new life. Her disdain for the institution of marriage had fallen away; she seemed happy to be tied to me. She doted on our daughter, though she’d never intended to be a mother. Hunting exhilarated her. She could run, leap, and overpower animals much bigger than herself without an iota of awkwardness. She even seemed to enjoy the way she looked as she never had when she was human. She no longer shied away from mirrors as she used to do, but might gaze thoughtfully when she caught a glimpse of herself. At night, she was eager to be with me. She gave her whole self without hesitation, holding back nothing.

As for me, I was unutterably happy. I had more than I’d ever imagined wanting, things I’d never dreamed of. I had found my true love and our love had produced a miracle child who was half Bella, half me, and all herself. Most importantly, my wife did not seem to regret giving up her human life. That had been my greatest fear—that Bella would regret changing and that she might even turn cold and bitter like Rosalie. If Bella had lamented her choice for one moment, I would have cursed myself forever.

However, I couldn’t read her mind and it was possible that she did have regrets. She was good at hiding things—her face was less expressive as a vampire and she didn’t blush anymore. But my sense was that she was happy.

If only I could read her mind...if I could be sure! But I couldn't. My gawd, she is beautiful!

Her exquisite form astonished and overwhelmed me again and again. And she was mine! I led her to our bedroom, shut the door, and pressed first my lips and then my whole body to hers, her back against the wall. She opened her mouth slightly and ran the tip of her tongue across my top lip. I eased her tongue into my mouth as I pushed my hands up her cotton shirt and cupped her breasts in my palms. I squeezed and felt the smooth marble give slightly to the pressure. She wound her fingers into my hair as I sucked at her nipples, pulling each one into my mouth and flicking it with my tongue. Bella moaned softly and then slipped her t-shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. My mouth stayed on her while my hands skimmed her back and stroked her lower stomach. She hurriedly unzipped and kicked off her blue jeans.

"Yours too..." she panted, pulling at my shirt. I dutifully unbuttoned it and let Bella push it off my shoulders. She then grasped the zipper on my trousers and dropped into a crouch, pulling the pant legs down and off my feet. As she rose, she stroked the length of my naked penis with her tongue...up, down, then back up, three times. I growled and dug my fingers into her hair as she kissed her way up my abdomen, my stomach, and onto my chest, licking across each nipple before rising and pressing her lips to mine. I was fraught with desire, my breath hard and uneven. I kissed my wife forcefully and pressed my nakedness impatiently against her. Bella wrapped her arms around my neck and with a ballerina's grace, lifted her legs to my waist and closed them around me. Her scent rose. I loved the smell of her even more than I had before her change. And now, I needed to be inside of her.

Our mouths clicked together as I took her weight in my left arm and used my free hand to position my rigid penis beneath her. Slowly, ever so slowly, I lowered her onto me and felt her acquiescence as she relaxed and allowed me to stretch her walls apart.

Ahhh! I groaned into her hair. Nothing compared to the sensation of entering my Bella's body and knowing that her craving for me matched mine for her. I reached deeply into her, letting her weight drop onto me, and then I held her there, savoring the powerful connection we shared. When her breath and body became insistent, I withdrew from her and entered her again, raising and then lowering her body with my hand under her buttocks. Feeling her open up to me was so pleasurable that I lifted her away and then reentered her, and then again, and again. Bella was gasping.

Mmm...she likes that. Me too. When the stimulation grew too intense, I lowered her all the way onto me and held her still. She pressed her tongue between my lips and I allowed her to penetrate me there as I had her below. Asserting and yielding—opposite sides of the same coin.

Bella then took my free hand and sucked on my fingers before placing them on her left breast. With wet fingers, I stroked her nipple and felt it tighten, the wetness having increased its sensitivity. Bella groaned and massaged her clitoris as I resumed raising and lowering her. I remoistened my fingers between her legs and squeezed her other nipple. She began to melt in my hands, moaning as if she were in pain, though I knew that she wasn't.

Since Bella's change, my self-control was no longer a pressing necessity, but I exercised it now, straining to postpone my climax as Bella's pleasure built. Control became more difficult as her muscles tightened around me. I breathed in slowly, struggling to wait for her as she panted breathlessly. Then, as I stroked and pulled at her nipples and pressed into her, that moment of indefinable imminence took hold. She held her breath briefly and then I felt her let go, her muscles coaxing me to come with her.

"Ahhh..." I groaned, emptying into her as she squeezed me to orgasm. Bella held my head to her breast as her body and mine slowly unwound into calm. If we were human, such a coupling surely would result in the creation of life. It seemed to contain the power of a universe.

She pointed to the bed and I carried her there and sat down, the heat of our friction making her warm inside. She took my face in her hands and brought her lips near to mine.

"I love you...so much...I will never get enough of you," she murmured. I wrapped my arms around her waist.

"Is that right?" I kissed the smooth arc beneath her jaw and up to the hollow below her ear.

"Yes." Bella bent her head back, inviting me to continue, which I did. I set my teeth against her stone-still carotid artery and lingered a moment, remembering how it had felt to pierce her skin over and over and feel her rich blood ooze into my mouth as I poisoned her with my venom. Though I couldn't have admitted it then, when I didn't know if Bella would survive, I could admit it now—the act had been intensely pleasurable for me, even as she lay dying. It was the unchangeable part of my nature that had urged me to drain her as I was desperately trying to save her life.

Perhaps that memory of pleasure would have been strafed out of me if my bites had triggered torturous screams from Bella as they should have. But Bella was silent as my venom took hold and remained silent to the very end. Many times I had wondered about that, whether her miraculous self-control had enabled her to hide her pain from me. I wanted to know...but then again, I didn't. My bites should have caused her as great an agony as they had given me pleasure. One day, perhaps, I would be brave enough to ask about her experience.

I kissed the front of my wife's neck as my fingers stroked their way down to her breasts. I took them in my palms and massaged gently until Bella began humming a single note. I squeezed her nipples between my fingers and the note rose a few half steps. She began to gasp as she slipped her hands between us. I caressed her breasts and sucked her nipples while she brought herself to orgasm again. I bit her neck as she came, not hard enough to break the skin, but passionately enough to recall the forbidden moments when I took her life's blood into my body. It was a relief to know that I could no longer kill her.

37. INTERLUDE

With my index finger, I traced a line down Bella's breastbone to her belly button and then in a circle around it. With two fingers, I touched along her bikini line, a line I remembered well from our honeymoon. I dragged my fingers over her left hipbone, up her side to the bottom ridge of her breasts and stroked across the line where they attached to her torso. Her barely pink nipples tightened as she watched my fingers move to her other side, down her hipbone, along the outside of her thigh, across her knee and up the inside. I dragged a finger up and down along the inside crease where a bikini's elastic would grip her leg, back and across the mounds of her buttocks and up along the crease at the top of her other thigh.

She was lying on her back amid the hopelessly tousled linens of our bed. I was on my side next to her, my head propped in my hand. Bella raised her knees, inviting me to touch at her center. I could see her arousal. She was glistening wet, her juices flowing and running into the crack between her buttocks. When I didn't touch her where she wanted, she moved her heels farther apart and let her knees fall outward, displaying herself to me. She was incredibly enticing. In response to my hesitation, she reached down to touch herself, but I grabbed her wrists and held her arms to her sides, pinning them to the mattress as I placed myself between her legs with my mouth at her belly button. I licked it and Bella giggled.

"You're making me crazy," my wife whispered.

"Good," I whispered back, moving my lips up her body. I licked along the bottom seam of her breasts and up the outside swell of her right breast, over the top and across to the other side. I tongued around the outside of her left breast and then dragged my tongue to the peak of her nipple, licked and then blew air across it. It tightened further.

"Do you ever wish that you could have breastfed Renesmee?"

"Yeeesss...", she hissed softly.

"Do you remember when you started lactating?"

"Yeeesss..."

"When I sucked on your nipples, it made the milk run, didn't it?"

"Yeeesss..."

"What did that feel like?"

I saw Bella struggle to remember as I distracted her by pulling her left nipple into my mouth. She wrapped her legs around my back and tried to rub her sensitive bits against my front and then growled when she couldn't.

"It's hard to think."

"Try."

"Um...well, my breasts felt heavy and tender like before a menstrual period...and tight and kind of pressurized."

"Could you feel the milk coming in?"

"I don't remember that part, but maybe it was because you weren't really breastfeeding, just farting around, like you are now!" Bella exclaimed impatiently.

"Vampires don't fart, darling. In fact that part of our bodies..."—I released one of her wrists so I could poke my finger in that part to illustrate, which made her jump—"...is altogether useless. Vestigial, even."

Bella groaned in frustration. "Don't make me take you by force," she threatened. I sucked hard on her right nipple and pulled as much of her breast into my mouth as I could, then released it.

"You will never get that chance, because I would never resist. How could I?"

Before she could do what I knew she was about to do—use her strength to roll me onto my back and pin me down—I slithered up her body until my mouth was on hers and my penis was relatively close to where she wanted it to be. She moaned then, and jimmied her hips in a way she thought might force me into her. Easier said than done. *Ha!*

Before she got wholly irritated and threw me onto my back, I slid my penis between her labia and stroked her from the outside. I quickly became as wet and slippery as she was, which made the gliding highly agreeable. Bella was so aroused that she pressed her head into the mattress, exposing her throat like an invitation. Even without the blood, it was a symbolically potent pose.

Every muscle in Bella's body was taut as she strained against me trying to make me slide faster.

"Come, my darling," I whispered in her ear. The sound of my quiet words affected her more than I expected. She moaned throatily as I glided against her.

“More, more...faster...like that...yes, yes...,” she breathed.

“Come with me...that’s it...let it go...,” I murmured softly.

“Mmmm, Edward...ah...ah...ah...”

Suddenly her thighs clamped together tightly—too tightly—and I heard my bones creak. I clenched my jaw to keep from crying out as pain shot through my pelvis.

But Bella was at her climax. I would not ruin it for her. I reached for her knee and pressed it gently outward as her muscles began to spasm hard in time with my stroking. She pressed her heels into the mattress and let her other knee fall outward. *Relief.*

“Oh, oh, oh...gawd!”

I slowed down, drawing out the moment for her. I felt a surge of joy throughout my body, despite the injury in my pelvis. It would heal quickly.

“I love you, my darling,” I whispered, kissing her neck. Bella had gone limp beneath me. With her knees still spread, it was easy for my penis to find her opening. I pressed gently. “May I?” I whispered in her ear.

“Yes, yes...”

I slid into her easily and could feel the remnants of her muscle spasms. It was a popular belief that a woman could orgasm many times in succession, or even continually for long periods of time if touched appropriately. I didn’t know if it was true, but it would be fun to find out.

As I moved inside of her, I could still feel a rhythmic pressure, a grasping and releasing that brought me quickly to the height of pleasure.

“You come,” Bella whispered. “Come into me...give me everything...let go.”

Her soft words had a highly erotic effect on me and my body responded immediately, doing as she bid. My mouth latched onto hers and I reached beneath her buttocks and lifted her up to meet my thrusts.

“Bellaaa...,” I groaned as all the tension in my groin coalesced into a single point and I felt the explosion begin. “Ahhhhh!!”

I was paralyzed by the intensity of the sensation and hung there, floating in the space above her. I felt her squeeze the last of the semen from my body into hers. Then I collapsed on

top of her, unable to move, unable to speak. She rubbed my back and played with my hair. I had never been more content in my long existence.

Eventually, Bella rolled sideways so that we were facing each other. I opened my eyes and gazed into hers. She grabbed my hips to detach herself from me.

“Gently, darling.”

“Did I hurt you?” Bella asked, alarm in her voice.

“It’s all right. I mend quickly.”

“What did I do? Tell me!”

“It’s okay, I’m fine. It’s just your powerful thighs at work,” I said, chuckling. “I can feel the bones mending already.”

“No! I didn’t! Ohmigod!”

“Shhh, love. When you respond to me that way, my pleasure is greater than any possible pain you could cause.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You were so good with me when I was human. You were so careful and never hurt me and now I hurt you all the time.”

“You’re forgetting our first time when I bruised your entire body. That was much worse.”

“No, no, I didn’t even know I was bruised until you told me. I was hurt much more by your reaction than by the bruises themselves.”

“Ack! Don’t remind me. It was not one of my better moments.”

“No, your better moments were in the hours before that.” Bella laughed. “You had some great moments then.”

I laughed too. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“You are so beautiful. I love every inch of your body. I always have. It was so hard not to attack you while we were going out. Or staying in,” she corrected.

“Good thing I was stronger than you.”

“I suppose, but I didn’t think so at the time.”

“No, you were a little vixen, trying to undermine my self-control.”

“I never desired touching a man before I met you and since then I’ve wanted to do little else.”

“You know, love, I always felt the same way about you...from the very beginning. From the moment I held your body against me when Tyler tried to run us over.”

“You sure didn’t show it. You seemed like you could resist me forever.”

“Probably not much longer, actually. Why do you think I was so anxious to marry you?”

“So Jacob wouldn’t steal me away from you,” Bella teased. “He would have slept with me in a minute if I’d asked.”

“That’s the other reason I wanted to marry you as soon as possible. He had no scruples.”

“You didn’t either when it came to competing with him, did you?”

“Well, I will admit this—as long as I had life in me, I was not going to let him steal you away.”

“I was always yours. That never changed.”

“Even though you loved him too?”

“Even though I loved him too. I could exist without Jacob. I could not exist without you.”

I thought about that for a moment and knew that the reverse was also true.

“I’ll never forgive myself for hurting you as I did.”

“You were trying to save me from myself.”

“It was unforgivable.”

“Not true. There was nothing to forgive.”

I took her face in my hands, looked into her eyes, and pressed my lips to hers. *What a generous soul!*

And just when I least expected it, Bella flipped me onto my back and landed on top of me. I knew she would not allow me up until she’d had me exactly as she wanted me...and I was right.

38. HUNTING REVISITED

At two months old, Renesmee's gleaming bronze (Bella's word) curls coiled halfway down her back. She was twenty-nine inches tall and weighed twenty-four pounds. She had the proportions of a tiny adult rather than those of a baby. Renesmee had mastered running after a couple days of practice with Jacob. She could even jump and grab a tree branch above her head. Jacob was showing her how to flip her body around it and hoist herself up, but that trick needed a little more work. Actually, "work" is a misnomer because not only were such lessons simple for Renesmee, but she found acrobatics enormously enjoyable.

Alice had taught Renesmee how to dance, hop, skip, and turn somersaults. Emmett had taught her to stand stiff-legged in the palms of his hands. Then he would toss her upward; she would somersault in mid-air; and he would re-catch her in his palms. If we collected a few fleas and gave Emmett a clown suit, we'd have a circus. Renesmee would certainly attract a crowd.

The day had come for our precious baby girl to learn a new skill: how to hunt. She had to start earning her keep, so to speak, given the large amount of human blood she was consuming—four pints a day, more than twice the amount she'd drunk a month earlier. She was growing very fast and she seemed to need that much blood to support her body's development. Carlisle was struggling to keep enough supply on hand. Twice he'd had to accept blood donations from people known to have hepatitis, though normally such volunteers were tested and then dismissed without being allowed to donate. We reasoned that if we could take Renesmee hunting periodically, perhaps she would need less human blood on the days in between.

Jacob wanted to come along with us, but we insisted on taking her alone, at least for her first trip. She needed to see how her own kind found and captured prey. She was not a wolf and should not try to hunt like one. Plus, Bella and I relished our private family time and as much as Jacob might wish he were a member of our family, he wasn't—yet.

Renesmee was looking forward to the adventure. Any day that she got to spend with both her parents was a happy one for her. Of course, she wanted Jacob to come along, but when we told her it was our special day, she didn't fuss about it. Unlike her mother and I, Renesmee would get tired, so I carried her on my back as we ran into the forest.

Bella and I had discussed the type of prey we should try for. We thought it unlikely that Renesmee would like any game at all, but we behaved otherwise and hoped our expectations would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The decision of what to track was made for us when a

family of black-tailed deer crossed our path. They would be the least dangerous of our choices, so it was a good place to start.

“Watch Momma,” Bella said, and began stalking the buck.

I followed closely enough that Renesmee could observe from my back as Bella leaped at the animal, threw her arms around its neck, and twisted it to the ground. Before it could put up a fight, Bella bent its neck to the side, exposing its carotid artery, and bit into it. The buck fought for only a short time before going limp. When she was finished, Bella discarded the carcass and rejoined us.

Renesmee’s hand was slapping my neck excitedly as she replayed images of her mother and asked questions. She was not frightened, which pleased me, but was anxious to try hunting for herself. We ran further to locate our next prey, since the rest of the deer had scampered away.

When I scented elk, I touched Renesmee’s nose and mimed sniffing the air. She sniffed eagerly and then smacked my neck, asking what it was. With Renesmee’s arms circling my neck and my arms curled under her legs, I began running and Bella followed silently behind. When I spotted the elk, I raced up behind a six-point buck and downed it with one arm around its neck. Bella restrained its kicking rear legs while Renesmee climbed off my back and I exposed the artery on its neck. She recognized the blood source instinctively by the pulsing beneath the animal’s fur. The scent of its blood both attracted and repelled her—it smelled nothing like the human blood she was used to, but the hot throbbing of the artery was inviting. I nodded at her to bite it.

When Renesmee noticed the elk’s frantic, bulging eyes, she put her hand to its neck, showed it an image of its family grazing, and thought, *Don’t be fwaid, Mistuh Deah.*

It was my imagination, probably, but the beast did seem to calm down. Then our little girl put her mouth to its neck and bit through fur, hide, and sinew, down to the artery. She caught the first squirt of blood in her mouth, but immediately turned away and screwed up her face while she pushed her tongue out of her mouth over and over, trying to get the taste off of it. The elk’s heart continued pumping blood out of its neck like a drinking fountain gone haywire...high, low, high, low. Bella urged Renesmee to take another drink. Minding her Momma, she did, swallowing it this time, but then she stopped drinking. I finished the elk for her—we tried never to waste a creature’s life.

That’s icky! Renesmee told her mother with her hand.

“Animal blood doesn’t taste like human, but it will make you grow strong and healthy,” Bella told her.

Why can’t I hab my cup?

“That was fine when you were a baby,” I replied, “but you’re starting to grow up now and grownups in our family drink animal blood. Popop is having a hard time finding enough donated blood and you know that we never take human blood directly.” Renesmee was not completely satisfied with my explanation. She continued directing her questions to her mother’s neck because she knew that we would both hear her.

But what if humans gib me theah blood? Can I dwink that?

“We say ‘May I drink that?’ when asking for permission,” I told our two-month-old child who, despite her age, would remember the grammatical rule. Then Bella took a shot at her question, the image of which was Sue and Charlie offering Renesmee their blood.

“It seems like a good idea, darling, but humans are not allowed to know that we drink blood. Only the wolf-people like Jacob and tribal elders like Sue and Billy know. Even Grandpa Charlie doesn’t know.”

Why not? Renesmee’s questions were not always easy to answer.

Bella continued, “It is against the law for vampires to tell humans what we are. It would terrify the humans to know that we live among them and they might try to destroy all of us. That’s why we pretend to be human and act like humans—so we fit in. You are half-human, so that will be easier for you than it is for your Momma and Daddy. Do you understand?” Bella asked. Renesmee nodded solemnly. I could almost hear her next question before she thought it.

Can I dwink Jacob?

Bella looked shocked, but I had to suppress a smile. Smart kid.

“You should talk to Jacob about that,” I told her.

“You don’t like Jacob’s blood, do you?” Bella inquired. We knew that she had tasted it because she’d bitten him rather severely on several occasions.

Renesmee scrunched up her face and shook her head. *No, but he smells bettah than Mistuh Deah.*

“Nessie, your Momma drank a black-tailed deer. You and Daddy drank a Roosevelt elk. Did you notice the difference?” I asked and Renesmee nodded.

Since Esme had been a former child educator, Bella and I followed her lead and nearly always corrected Nessie’s mistakes and misapprehensions as they arose—even minor ones—because direct experience is more relevant to children than abstract examples. Also, it made her feel badly if the pack laughed at her for getting her facts wrong. *Silly mutts*, I grumbled to myself.

We’d determined that Renesmee had perfect recall like her parents, so our efforts were never wasted. She remembered every fact the first time she was told. We struggled to keep up with her ever-growing hunger for knowledge. She had no patience for repetition, but always wanted to learn *new* things. We couldn’t read books to her twice because she memorized them after one reading and became bored the second time. Her desire for knowledge reminded me of a movie from the 1980s called “Short Circuit” in which a military computer with a soul constantly begged for “more data.”

“Let’s look for carnivores,” Bella suggested. I knew she meant that Renesmee might like them better than deer or elk. We all preferred carnivores to herbivores, but they were harder to locate and less plentiful nearby.

What is a cahnivoh? Renesmee wanted to know.

“An animal that eats meat,” Bella told her.

I loaded Nessie onto my back and we began to run leisurely through the trees, keeping our noses attuned for carnivores...particularly a cougar or a bear. Though wild pigs and foxes had been introduced into parts of the Olympic National Park, their numbers were not yet large enough for us to hunt them. There were also coyotes that we *could* hunt, but Bella found the idea of hunting any of the *Canis* species distasteful.

Unfortunately, we found no appropriate carnivores for Renesmee, so Bella and I each finished our hunts by tracking down more elk, offering their blood to Renesmee first. She gamely took a single drink from each for comparison, but refused second drinks. I considered her first outing a success. It was perhaps just as well that she adjusted to drinking deer and elk before trying the carnivores. Though she would undoubtedly prefer the latter, they were often unavailable.

When we returned home, Jacob was pacing a small circle in the yard as if someone had locked him in a cage. He smelled Renesmee’s scent when we were still half-a-mile away and called to her. She patted my neck impatiently, thinking *down, down, down* until I pulled her off

my back and set her on her feet. She ran toward home and Jacob crossed the river to meet her. She headed straight for him and, just before reaching him, leaped into the air where he caught her in his arms and spun her in a circle. Bella and I were extremely impressed by her balance and coordination, but she wasn't showing off, she was just anxious to touch Jacob's face and tell him about her day.

The worry and dread that Jacob's mind had been spewing into the ether disappeared immediately and was replaced by a veil of calm when he saw Renesmee. Being separated from her for the six hours we were gone had been torture. I almost felt sorry for him. Perhaps I would consider letting him join us on the next hunt, though I did value our private time without Jacob's ever-vigilant presence. It was sometimes hard to feel like a family with another adult always laying claim to our child.

I dwank elk and Momma dwank deah! Renesmee showed Jacob proudly.

"No, you did not!" Jacob exclaimed, giving Nessie the opportunity to reiterate her news.

Yeth I did! I dwank elk!

"You did?? Really??" Jacob said with convincingly feigned surprise, thrilling Renesmee.

Yeth, and we hunted cahnivohs, but couldn't find them.

"No way! You did not!"

Yeth!

"That is amazing!" Jacob took a running leap across the river with Renesmee gripped to his chest. I heard Bella's sharp intake of breath, though we had both seen Jacob jump the river before. He was a huge man-child and even in his human form was extremely powerful, graceful even. "Let's go clean you up and change your clothes. You have blood on your dress, see?"

Okay.

I knew that Rosalie would take over that project as soon as they got in the house. She wouldn't let Jacob anywhere near Renesmee at bath time, even if I hadn't given her those orders. I didn't believe that Jacob's imprinting would allow him to do anything harmful or even inappropriate with Renesmee, but just the idea of a full-grown man intimately caring for my baby girl made me deeply uncomfortable. It was probably politically incorrect of me in the twenty-first century, but I was still her father.

"I think I'll go talk to Carlisle, love. We might have found a lead at the University of Sao Paulo—a master's thesis on legends of Amazonian tribes. Carlisle's got a librarian trying to track it down. I'd like to know what he found, if anything."

"So would I! That sounds really hopeful, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't get too excited until we see proof. We've found sources before that have turned into nothing."

"You can skip the family visit this evening if you want to. I can hang with Charlie and Sue."

"Are you sure? I don't mind being there."

"No, I'd rather that you find out what you can if you've got a lead."

"It might be nothing, but we'll follow every lead to its end, of course."

We'd reached the back door to the kitchen and took a moment to say goodbye to each other for our separation of the next hour or two. If Bella got agitated around Charlie for any reason—which I didn't expect, given her perfect record so far—Jasper would be available to calm her down. Emmett would probably be there too for Monday night football.

Bella wrapped her arms around my neck. I wrapped mine around her waist and lifted her onto the bottom step. Then I touched my lips to hers, without having to lean over for a change. I avoided kissing her too seriously or squeezing her too tightly because I knew that I would be immediately more inclined to escape to our cottage than to go in the house and do research or visit with guests. My desire for my wife had only increased since our marriage. We walked into the house together and then headed upstairs, she to check on the baby's bath and me to talk to Carlisle.

"How did the hunting go?" Carlisle asked. I knew he was hopeful that Renesmee had taken to it.

"It went well, I think, for her first time. Of course, she thought that elk's blood was 'icky,'" I told my father.

Carlisle laughed. *Don't we all?*

I laughed too, but with surprise. I'd never heard my father admit that he didn't like animal blood. As far as I knew, he'd only tasted human blood on the four occasions when he had changed his family members. Even so, he'd had enough to know that animal blood wasn't exactly "right."

“Renesmee enjoyed the hunting part, just not the drinking part, though we did get her to drink a little bit from several animals. I think she will hunt if we insist, but she’d rather have humans choose to *give* her their blood. That way, she wouldn’t be *taking* it from them.” I smiled at her logic. “She also asked if she could drink Jacob,” I said under my breath, laughing.

Carlisle laughed too. *He’s so tolerant of her that he’d probably allow it.*

“Yes. It’s a good thing she doesn’t really like his flavor.”

If she’s too resistant to drinking animal blood, we can offer her human food again and see if she would prefer that.

“Yes. It’s worth a try. She’ll still need blood, though, won’t she?”

I’m almost certain that she will. She seems to be more vampire than human physiologically.

“What makes you think that?”

Well, it’s more of a guess than anything, but her overwhelming preference for human blood even in the womb is the main thing. When she was getting only human food, she “failed to thrive,” as we doctors say. She would have died and taken Bella with her.

The memory of Bella’s gaunt face coupled with her huge belly came clearly to mind and I winced.

Sorry, son. That’s a tough memory.

I nodded and we stood in silence for a long moment before I shook it off.

“So what’s happening with Sao Paulo? Any news?”

Nothing yet. Masters’ theses are not as carefully catalogued as research done by actual doctors and doctoral candidates, so they’re having a hard time locating the document.

“Perhaps we can locate the author and interview him. Or is it a ‘her’?”

A “him”. The problem is that he disappeared while doing field work and has never resurfaced, Carlisle informed me.

“Oh, no...,” I moaned. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

I’m guessing that he got a little too close to his sources, yes, and found that legends are not always just legends.

“So some rat-bastard vampire had him for lunch, pardon my French.”

I presume so. After all, a human who gets too close to the truth is bound to die by the laws of our kind.

“So we’re unlikely to find any researchers who actually learned anything.”

Not if a vampire found out about him. There are nomads who make it their business to track down such curious humans and do away with them. Protection of our species, you know.

“Crap! It makes perfect sense, though.”

Yes, well we might still find some extant documents left behind.

“But the ones who learned anything of real value probably didn’t live to write that final paper that would actually help us.”

Possibly not.

“Ack!” I hollered in frustration, before remembering to lower my voice. “Carlisle, what are we going to do? I can’t bear to watch my child grow up and die before my eyes in only a few short years!”

Don’t lose hope, son. There’s still a possibility, a good one, I think, that she will stop aging. If I could only find the gene in the wolves’ DNA that is responsible for their extended youth, we could see if Renesmee’s is the same.

“But it’s only a temporary halt in their aging, and it has to be triggered by the presence of vampires!”

Well, Renesmee will certainly be exposed to vampires if that’s what triggers it.

“Hmm...” So will Jacob. I followed that train of thought. Since Jacob has imprinted on a half-vampire child and he will presumably be tied to her for life, will her vampire genes prevent him from resuming the aging process? Biologically, it would make sense that a being that prevents him from aging should also live an infinitely long life. Or maybe it just means that genetically she could carry a werewolf’s offspring and then die...like a human bearing a vampire child. Ack!!

What is it, Edward? What are you thinking about?

I explained my thoughts to Carlisle, though the thread seemed to go nowhere. He was a learned man. Perhaps his mind would take the idea somewhere that mine couldn’t. He took on a thoughtful expression and set his chin in his hand.

“Charlie’s coming,” I told him after a time. “I don’t think Sue’s with him tonight.”

Ah, yes, I hear the car. Does Charlie know about us?

“Not that I can tell, but he’s very hard to read. After that first visit, he seemed to settle on the idea that Bella *had* died after he felt her cold, hard skin. That led him to think about whether we were angels...Bella, you, and Esme, anyway. I suppose he gave up on that idea when he considered me, Em, and Jaz.”

I laughed and my father joined in. I continued, “He has a kind of curtain that he lowers over parts of his mind and I can’t see behind it very well. I think that’s where he files things he doesn’t want to know about—behind the curtain—then they no longer trouble him. That’s the sense I get, anyway. It’s very hard to tell what he knows exactly, because he’s not sure himself.”

Interesting. So even if he knows, he doesn’t really know. So we don’t need to worry about him being a target of the Volturi?

“I don’t think so. If Aro read his mind, which is unlikely, I don’t think he’d be able to see behind the curtain either. I don’t think he’d find that Charlie knows anything, even though we know that he does...sort of.”

That’s very...well...confusing. I guess that’s the best word for it. Carlisle smiled.

“He’s a mystery to me, much like Bella. Though I *can* see that he’s become quite fond of Sue. He doesn’t guard his thoughts about Sue. I suppose it’s because he’s happy and excited about that part of his life. It’s a good thing. He’s been holding a torch for Renee all these years. I don’t think he’s dated at all since his marriage.”

No? He sounds like me, except my dry period lasted for centuries. Carlisle chuckled again.

Though normally I make it a rule not to share the kind of thing that I was about to share, Carlisle *was* my father. He could be trusted and I felt like talking about this for some reason. Maybe I still harbored a bit of resentment for the (deserved) slights Charlie gave me before Bella and I married. I gave in to the urge.

“I wouldn’t say he’s like you unless you had some *extremely* awkward non-dates that I don’t know about,” I hinted, grinning with evil glee.

What do you mean?

I suspected that my eyes were sparkling with mirth. “Well, *Charlie* hasn’t been on any dates in twenty-two years or so, but there have been any number of women who *thought* they

were on a date with him. Let me put it this way...he's had a lot of uncomfortable moments walking female friends to their cars or front doors at night."

Carlisle indulged himself in a smile at another person's expense, not something he did very often. *Do you mean women lunging at him and the like?*

"Precisely. Since he's been dating Sue, he seems to be pulling more of those half-forgotten episodes out of the vault, so to speak, where I can read them." I chuckled.

Carlisle smiled. *I've had a number of those incidents myself, as you probably already know.*

"Yes. Finding Esme simplified your working life, didn't it?"

Most definitely, though there are still plenty of nurses around who don't seem to heed a wedding band. It's a never-ending problem. But back to Charlie...you don't normally pry into people's memories and poke fun. That doesn't seem like you.

I knew my father was gently chiding me for my lack of moral sensibility with regard to Charlie's privacy.

"No, I'm usually reserved about such things, but Charlie gave me a pretty hard time when I was courting Bella—I don't know if I ever told you—and it's a petty revenge for me to have a little laugh at his expense."

You haven't shared these stories with Bella, have you?

"No. I don't know that she would find them as funny as I do." I grinned widely.

Carlisle allowed himself a tiny smile. *Probably not.* We could hear Jacob downstairs unsuccessfully trying to engage Charlie in conversation.

"Renesmee, would you like Grandpa to read you a book?" Bella asked.

Yes! Renesmee thought. I assume she was either in Bella's or Charlie's lap and had told them so.

"We don't have any of your books here. Dad, I'll take her upstairs to choose a book from Carlisle's library. I'll be right back."

"Okay, kiddo. Don't be long."

"I won't."

I imagined Charlie sitting in his usual lounge chair staring at his feet, trying not to look at Jacob. He'd never gotten over his double shock, first thinking that Jacob was making a pass at him and then having his preferred son-in-law transform into an enormous beast.

Bella was on her way up the stairs with Nessie. Carlisle and I continued listening to the awkwardness downstairs.

"So, how're things goin' with Sue?" Jacob asked. Charlie just grunted.

"Billy says she's pretty hot for your trousers," Jacob said, perhaps unwisely, and laughed. Through Jacob's eyes, I could see Charlie's face turn beet red.

"Hello, my darlings!" I said as my wife and child entered the office. My eyes caught Bella's and we both became romantically goggle-eyed for a moment.

"Jacob's giving Charlie a hard time," she said at a volume below human hearing. I nodded and laughed and Carlisle smiled demurely.

"So, Nessie, which will it be?" Carlisle asked her. She reached for him.

Popop!

Carlisle carried her to the wall of books and she studied them like she was reading the spines. During their morning time together, the two of them often examined and talked about Carlisle's collections of books and art and mementos. Finally, she pointed to an ancient-looking, leather-bound volume, well-used, and Carlisle pulled it out for her. It was *The Book of Common Prayer*, a compilation of the prayers and liturgies of the Church of England.

"That's an old book, Carlisle!" Bella exclaimed.

"Yes, 1662, the version that the Anglican Church adopted after England's break with the Church of Rome. It was my father's."

Once again, I marveled at Carlisle's vast experience. He was born near the time of the Protestant Reformation. As old as I was, I was still taken aback when I remembered how much older he was and that he was English, to boot. I usually thought of him as American like the rest of our family, or Italian like the Volturi, but I hardly ever considered his true origins. His human life began during a rich time in England's history.

"Maybe you should choose a different book, Renesmee," Bella suggested.

“Oh no, it’s fine!” Carlisle replied. “Books are meant to be read. Besides, I never thought I’d see the day when I might have descendants who would be interested in my old family heirlooms. And now I have a granddaughter!” Carlisle beamed.

I luff you, Popop, Renesmee thought as she touched Carlisle’s face, showing him a picture of herself snuggled against his chest.

“She says, ‘I love you Popop,’” I told him, not sure whether the image conveyed the thought precisely enough in this case.

“I love you too, precious child,” Carlisle told her and kissed her forehead.

“Okay, then, we’d better go rescue Grandpa from Jacob,” Bella said to Nessie. Carlisle handed her over and Nessie wiggled to be set down. “You want to walk?”

Nessie nodded. Carlisle passed the book to Bella and mother and daughter walked to the staircase.

“You’re going to try stairs?” Bella queried, a tinge of doubt in her voice.

Yeth.

Carlisle and I stepped out of the office to watch.

“Hello, Charlie,” Carlisle called. “Edward and I are working on a research project or we would join you.”

“Oh, that’s all right. You don’t have to entertain me. The kid does fine on her own.”

We all turned our attention to Nessie as she held the handrail in one hand and her mother’s hand in the other and took one step after another, placing both feet on each step before continuing to the next one. They were simply too high for her to take them one after another with opposite legs. Still, the performance was impressive. When she reached the bottom, she looked around expectantly. Jacob started to clap and we all joined in. Nessie’s face lit up in a toothy smile.

Renesmee pulled the leather book from Bella’s hand and walked to her Grandpa Charlie. She held it out and he looked at it, noting its age and probable value.

“You sure this is all right, Carlisle?” he inquired.

“Certainly. Nessie won’t hurt it.”

“Enjoy, Charlie,” I added, smiling.

I was pretty sure he wouldn't enjoy reading church liturgies in old-style English, but Renesmee would. She was democratic in her tastes, interested in anything new. And since she didn't like to hear any book more than once, we constantly had to find new material. She had moved beyond *Peter Rabbit* and was well into *Nancy Drew* and Agatha Christie mysteries, but she liked nonfiction and adult books equally well. I thought it might be worthwhile to read the *New Testament Bible* to her. I'd found quoting scripture to be a useful skill on many occasions.

"My word, Carlisle, this book is from the 1600s and it's signed 'John P. Cullen.' Is that an ancestor of yours?" Charlie inquired.

"Yes, John Paul Cullen. He was a parson. The book was passed down from father to son," Carlisle replied carefully.

"It must be worth a fortune! Shouldn't it be in a museum somewhere under glass?"

"Anglican prayer books aren't as rare as you might think," answered my father. "Many were printed. That was part of the tenet of the Church of England—that worshipers should be able to read the liturgy themselves in their own language rather than only hear it read by priests in Latin. All families of means owned one."

"Well, I'll be..." Renesmee patted Charlie's cheek impatiently. "Okay, then, Nessie, where would you like to start?"

Renesmee's tiny fingers picked through the book until she found a place that she liked and pointed to it. Charlie looked up at us as if to say, *anything for my granddaughter*, and sighed. Then he started reading aloud:

The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants,

To be Used in the Church.

Due notice, normally of at least a week, shall be given before a child is brought to the church to be baptized.

For every child to be baptized there shall be not fewer than three godparents, of whom at least two shall be of the same sex as the child and of whom at least one shall be of the opposite sex; save that, when three cannot be conveniently had, one godfather and one godmother shall suffice. Parents may be godparents for their own children provided that the child shall have at least one other godparent. The godparents shall be persons who have been baptized and confirmed and will faithfully fulfil their responsibilities both by their care for the child committed to their charge and by the example of their own godly living. Nevertheless the Minister shall have power to dispense with the requirement of confirmation in any case in which in his judgement need so requires.

Alice appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and snapped a picture of Renesmee cuddled into Charlie's chest, three fingers in her mouth, held there between her teeth. Bella looked up at me and smiled, and Carlisle and I chuckled softly. Then he and I turned to face our project.

39. EDUCATION

Just three-and-a-half weeks later, Renesmee could read *The Book of Common Prayer* all by herself, or any other book, for that matter. She rarely stumbled over words, even adult words. Of course, we had read books to her every day since she was small, but nobody expected her to read by herself before she was at *least* a year old.

Bella got a tremendous shock one evening after Charlie and Sue had visited for a couple of hours. At nearly three months old, Renesmee stayed awake until 8:30 p.m., but we continued to leave for our cottage at 7:00. It gave us some time alone to play with our daughter, or talk, or read to her.

Bella was having trouble finding reading material for Renesmee because of her distaste for reading books more than once. Between us and her grandparents, we had read her all the non-sexually-explicit, non-graphically-violent books Esme had originally bought for Nessie, including young adult books by Judy Blume and the entire Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. We'd even read her many sections of the parenting books Esme had bought for my edification. Bella had dipped into her collection of novels and poetry by her favorite classic authors—Jane Austen, the Bronte Sisters, Emily Dickinson—and had even started making a dent in her collected works of Shakespeare.

This evening, Bella was continuing to read from her collection of Victorian poets. She was rocking the baby in her room, slowing things down before bedtime. I was risking death by snapped neck because I had decided to reorganize Bella's warehouse of a closet.

Every morning for weeks, Bella had suffered through the same irritation, over and over. Her closet was so large with so many garments—ninety percent of which Bella probably would never wear—that she had to rummage through countless indistinguishable white bags to find something suitable. Recently, she had devolved into rotating through three pairs of jeans and four knit tops, numbers that decreased each time I ripped an article of clothing from her body at night. Bella didn't care if she only had three or four things to wear. She just washed them when they got dirty and wore them again. She'd created a little squirrel's nest in the back of the closet where she stored her few items of usable clothing and simply ignored all the rest.

Alice had not been suffering the slight in silence. She had chastised Bella multiple times with no effect at all, so had turned to me to adjudicate Bella's offense of ignoring her new wardrobe. After much wrangling back and forth, I told Alice that I would do what I could to encourage the offender to make peace with her closet, but I couldn't promise anything.

What I could do was look at the clothes and decide which pieces, if any, Bella would regard as comfortable or usable and separate those items from the perhaps beautiful or stylish, but ridiculous (for Bella) garments. I'd started by weeding out the extra-long bags, as they invariably contained formal gowns, which, if Bella ever required one, could easily be located by bag length. I collected those and placed them on the rack furthest from the door. Amidst that collection, I unzipped one particularly poofy bag and discovered that it contained Bella's wedding gown.

With a glow of memory, I removed the white gown from the bag and hung it in a prominent place so that I could look at it and reminisce about the second happiest day of my life (the first being the day that Bella rose from the dead). Bella's wedding dress was an exquisite designer gown, custom-made for our particular circumstances and in it, Bella had looked like the angel Charlie now suspected her to be. She'd been literally stunning, causing jaws to drop and sentences to falter when she passed.

As I continued sorting, I discovered that the three-quarter-length bags contained fancy jacket-and-pants combos that Bella might wear on occasion if she ever needed to "dress for success."

I was making a chart and color-coding garment groupings when, to my great surprise, I noticed that Nessie was silently reading along with Bella, almost in unison. Shortly thereafter, she asked her mother—with an ambiguous picture—if she could read the book. Bella handed it to her, no doubt assuming that Nessie wanted to hold the book and turn the pages. Then our baby's clear piccolo voice rang through the air, quoting Lord Alfred Tennyson:

"There is sweet music here that softer falls than petals from blown roses on the grass, or night-dews on still waters between walls of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass—"

I decided not to race down the hallway to catch a glimpse of Bella's facial expression. Such impulsive behavior might alarm Renesmee when she thought nothing was amiss. After all, she may have been reading to herself for some time without our noticing.

I heard a slight trembling in Bella's voice when she responded to Nessie's startling performance. "If you read, how will you fall asleep?" she said.

Nessie took that at face value and let Bella take back the book and continue reading to her. I noticed that I'd been holding my breath and released it in a whoosh.

Our not-yet three-month-old child can read the words "shadowy," "granite," and "gleaming!" I couldn't tell whether she fully understood what she was reading, but I wouldn't have been too surprised if she did. Abruptly, I realized that her diction was perfect too! I'd

heard her speak once or twice in the previous couple of weeks and had not noticed the change. She could now pronounce trailing Ss and Rs. In fact, her words were so crisp, she almost sounded as if she'd had elocution lessons. I wondered if perhaps Carlisle or Esme had been practicing her speech with her. If so, I wasn't aware of it.

With Bella reading, Renesmee began to nod off before long, her lucid thoughts fading into ragged scraps of words, pictures, and colors. I finished my bit of organizing and walked to Nessie's room, slipping up behind Bella as she stood at the baby's soon-to-be-outgrown crib. She was steadying herself by holding onto the wrought-iron top rail while she stared at our one-of-a-kind child. Since Carlisle and I were finding it so difficult to locate information of any kind about other such children, we were beginning to think it likely that they had either existed and died, as we were worried that Renesmee might, or had never existed at all. I wrapped my arms around my wife from behind and swayed slightly from side to side, taking comfort in feeling her solidity next to me.

That night, we made love slowly and gently, sharing few words. Words weren't necessary for either of us to know what the other felt and what we were each worried about. We'd been over it many times. Carlisle and I had reached the end of all the leads we'd been investigating and at the trail's end was...nothing. We could not find any other clues to chase over the phone or through the internet. We had to go to Brazil. I was ready to leave in the morning if Bella would agree, but she seemed to be dragging her feet. I didn't understand it. I knew that she was as anxious to find out what we could about Renesmee as I was.

It was time for us to have a serious talk. I knew that Jacob was demanding to go with us to Brazil and I was against it. We needed to be free to make the decisions we had to make without Jacob's interference. In particular, Carlisle and I had discussed the possibility of changing Renesmee when she reached maturity. We were discouraged with our research into hybrid children. Nothing had panned out. We were ready to take the next step and days like this one only spurred me on.

Though Renesmee's rate of growth had slowed a tiny bit, we would have only a few years at most before adulthood turned into elder adulthood and I wanted to be ready with a plan. If we couldn't find any hybrid children, then I still had hope that we might be able to determine whether changing a half-vampire would work. Bella was terrified of the idea—she felt it was too dangerous even to consider. I was pretty sure that Jacob would agree with that if he got wind of our discussions on the subject and I didn't need another voice to struggle against if it turned out to be our only choice.

As Bella and I lay with our legs tangled together, looking into each other's eyes, I knew that as long as I had my Bella, I could survive any other trauma or hardship or disaster. Deep in

my cold heart, I knew I could even survive if my child were cursed with a tragically short life. But I couldn't survive without Bella and I didn't know if she could survive without Renesmee. I didn't want to have to find out.

I pulled my love onto my chest and stroked her hair and began to sing to her—her lullaby—which no longer put her to sleep, but calmed me and seemed to calm her too.

Before dawn, Renesmee was up and at our door before I realized that her dreams had become conscious.

"Momma?" she said from the doorway. Bella and I were intertwined, lying on our sides with Bella's back to Renesmee. I casually pulled the sheet above both our waists.

"Yes, darling?" Bella answered, recovering quickly from her surprise. She sat up and tucked the edge of the sheet under her arms.

"I can't sleep."

"I'm sorry that you can't sleep. Why don't you come and lie down with Momma and Daddy for a little while?"

Renesmee took two steps and hopped the last five feet, landing precisely between us and dropping onto her bottom. Her skills increased every day, it seemed. Our daughter started giggling.

"Momma, I saw your boobies!" Renesmee whispered into Bella's ear.

"Did you, darling?"

Renesmee nodded and showed her mother an image of her just before the sheet was in place. I worked to keep the grin off my face.

"Where did you learn that word? Do you remember?"

Renesmee showed Bella a picture of Jacob in the woods and thought the words, *boobies, titties, knockers, ta-tas, jugs,...* and on and on in a long litany. I sighed to myself. Bella and I exchanged glances and I rolled my eyes. Time for another "little talk" with Jacob.

"Do you know that the real word is 'breasts'?" Bella asked her.

Yes.

“Sometimes people like to use joke words that make other people laugh, but they’re not words for a little girl to say. It’s bad manners.”

Does my Jacob have bad manners? she asked silently, showing Bella a picture of Jacob which Bella didn’t understand.

“Yes, Renesmee,” I answered. “Jacob does have bad manners sometimes. It’s not always a good idea to repeat things that Jacob says. If you have questions about something he tells you, then you can ask your mother or me.”

Daddy, do you have a penis? she asked me with a hand to my cheek. The image was from a medical illustration in one of Carlisle’s books. Renesmee had been reading on her own, it seemed.

I didn’t dare look at Bella’s face. Whatever expression appeared after I answered the silent question was bound to set me laughing.

“Yes, all daddies have penises,” I replied, taking the advice of the childrearing books and answering only the specific question my child had asked.

Does Mommy have a penis too? The image was a diagram of a woman’s anatomy including breasts, but the groin region was a little fuzzy.

“No, mommies don’t have penises.” I answered before I realized that some mommies *might* have penises in our day and age, but that was way too much information for a three-month-old child. I kept a straight face with effort.

“Oh.”

“If you have any other questions about breasts and penises or other parts of the body, please ask Mommy or Daddy. Those are good questions for us to answer. Or you can ask Nana or Popop. Okay?”

Renesmee nodded and snuggled down between us on top of the sheets, her immediate curiosity satisfied. I pulled a blanket over her. Our child was used to her cold family, but we tried to protect her from getting too chilled. We kept plenty of blankets and afghans around for the purpose.

I began to sing Renesmee’s song softly and she closed her eyes. Before long, she had drifted off to sleep.

“Are you going to beat Jacob or am I?” Bella asked quietly, with obvious effort.

“Let’s both do it,” I suggested, not bothering to reveal that Renesmee had acquired, not just one, but a long list of synonyms for “breasts.”

“And the penis thing?” Bella’s voice rose in spite of her efforts to contain her temper. “I’m going to break Jacob’s face!”

“That would be fine with me, darling, but I’m afraid we can’t blame him for that one. Nessie’s bound to get an eyeful one of these days, though, hanging around with the wolves.”

Bella stared at me, her eyebrows raised.

“Carlisle’s library,” I explained, chuckling. “Just diagrams. I’ll ask him to put the more graphic medical books on the top shelf now that we know she’s reading on her own. Those things will put her off humans.”

“Can you *believe* it?”

“No choice,” I replied dolefully.

“Looks like it’s time to trade out the crib. She must have climbed out.”

“With that perfect hop into the bed, climbing out of her crib must be trivial for her now.”

“I guess we also need to talk to her about knocking on doors,” Bella said.

“And we should lock ours from now on,” I added, winking.

Renesmee only got more beautiful. She was a stunning child in so many ways. Her hair hung nearly to her waist in long curls. Her eyes were Bella’s former milk chocolate color. Her skin was a luminescent pearl that would pass for delicate Irish. Despite her age, talking to her resembled talking to an adult most of the time. She had questions and she absorbed answers. She had never cried or thrown a tantrum or even fussed much. She minded and was careful about all the things the Cullens had to be careful about.

The only area where Renesmee had been a little difficult was with her diet. We'd taken her on several more hunting trips since her first one—all without Jacob—and her enthusiasm hadn't increased, though she complied with our insistence that she drink some.

She liked the running and the chasing and had already begun to catch her own prey. If we located them quietly enough, she could get to a deer or elk before it became alarmed and ran. She wasn't quite fast enough yet to catch a deer or elk that was fleeing at full speed, but she was perfectly capable of catching a stalking cougar or a lumbering bear. She was remarkably strong and her skin, as we suspected, was impervious even to cougar or bear claws. She was so small that she could leap at a bear's neck without disturbing it much and cling there, drawing blood until it dropped. She hadn't tried to knock one to the ground yet. It was hard to visualize a day when she would be able to do that, but it would come, no doubt.

Bella was anxious the day I let Nessie try to land her first carnivore, a cougar. I'd suffered through the strain of watching Bella take her first cougar without giving in to my fear and it was worth it. She had been gorgeous, creative, graceful, and deadly. I suspected Renesmee would be the same. She wasn't as strong as her mother and myself—not yet, at least—but she had compensating qualities, such as her appearance, which read more like prey than predator. It should give her an advantage.

We tracked a cougar to the top of a stack of enormous granite boulders and I convinced Bella to let Nessie try nabbing it for herself. I was sure she would prefer the taste to elk and deer if she could catch one. With great reluctance, Bella agreed, probably remembering her own first time, but we both tensed in readiness to rescue our child if a cougar proved too much for her to handle. She was very confident, though. As her mother and I stood stone still, trying to blend in to the scenery, Nessie wandered into the open where the animal could see her.

Nice kitty, she thought.

When the cat heard her movements, he stiffened and prepared to flee, but then caught sight of the little girl, changed his mind, and began to stalk her. I almost had to restrain Bella to keep her from charging to Nessie's defense. She barely contained her panic. But our daughter knew instinctively what to do. She turned sideways to the cat as if she didn't know he was there, emboldening the predator, which crept forward in a low crouch. Just when the cougar sprang to attack, Renesmee hopped to the side in a move reminiscent of her tiny aunt, and the beast hit the ground, grasping at nothing. In a split second, our child had vaulted onto its back and bit into its neck. It kicked and fought and tried to claw her off, but she hung on, drinking as quickly as she could until the cat began to weaken. Nessie had learned that if she was hunting her own prey, she had to drink to disable it, because she wasn't big enough to overpower it otherwise. No longer did she tentatively sample her catch.

Renesmee often tired after the excitement of stalking a creature and so far, one small-to-medium animal satisfied her, but sometimes she also wanted to drink with one of her parents. She was maturing so quickly that already she felt some nostalgia for her babyhood. I let her take the first drink of my prey when we hunted together to satisfy her desire to be taken care of. Even though she was capable of actions far beyond her years and her intellect was even further advanced, Bella felt—and I agreed—that we should allow her to remain babyish about most things as long as it suited her. We felt sure that Renesmee would tell us through actions or pictures when she'd outgrown this or that childish need.

There was one exception, however. After that first hunting trip when Renesmee was utterly disenchanted with drinking animal blood, we'd given her a choice between human food and animal blood, one or the other, to supplement her diet. We'd decided that we wouldn't increase her human blood intake any further. We would allow her a maximum of four pints a day and anything more she needed would have to come from other sources. Over time, we would decrease the human blood component of her diet.

Esme began to prepare small meals for Renesmee. At first, she presented one item from each of three categories of food and Renesmee could choose which to eat. She had to try at least two items and eat at least half of one. A meal might consist of a small glass of milk, an apple, and a piece of fish. Whichever item she refused to try (and she always refused one of them) would be removed from the list. The next time, she might get a small bowl of oatmeal, half a cooked hamburger patty and a dish of green beans. After we'd done this every few days for several weeks, we had a list of human foods that Renesmee would eat if pressed. She was not fond of grains or dairy products, but she would eat cooked meat and several types of steamed vegetables. She also liked peanut butter. Everything that she decided to try was compatible with her system. We thought the foods that repelled her might not be, so we never pushed, just gave her additional choices.

Carlisle's life immediately became easier when Renesmee began drinking animal blood and eating human food, but she didn't like either alternative much. Renesmee understood the moral issues of drinking human blood. She would never want to see anybody hurt Sue or Grandpa or Jacob or any of the wolves, so that made sense to her. What she didn't understand was why she couldn't solicit blood donations. She thought it would be fine if Carlisle asked people to donate blood for his granddaughter without telling them that she drank it. I thought it was an extremely clever idea, actually. Carlisle could let it be known that we needed continual blood donations for our hemophiliac daughter and his colleagues and their families would gladly line up to donate blood for the child.

"That's a very clever idea, Renesmee," I told her, impressed.

Can we do it?

“I’m sorry, but no. The problem is that if people donate blood for you, then that blood can’t be used for a sick human who needs it. Blood donations are for humans who will die if they don’t receive them. We don’t want to hurt any humans by using up donated blood.”

But what if they give the blood to Renesmee, nobody else?

“Do you want everybody your Popop works with and any people you meet to think that you are deathly ill? You would have to pretend to be sick whenever any humans are around, even Grandpa Charlie. You couldn’t play outside or show yourself in public. You couldn’t go to school or anywhere there are human children. Could you live like that?”

Renesmee stuck out her lower lip in a pout.

I don’t like you, Daddy, she thought, knowing I could hear her.

“I know you don’t like me right now, Nessie, and that’s okay. You can be mad at me if you want to, but I still love my girl.” I kneeled down and gave her a hug while she stood stiffly, arms by her side.

Only later did it occur to me that when Renesmee became an adult, she could implement her scheme if she still wanted to, in secret if she chose. Her eyes didn’t become scarlet red when she drank human blood so most of us would never know that she was feeding her addiction. Except for me, of course. I decided to put that thought away in *my* vault and try never to think of it again.

40. ALTERATIONS

Blood is a pure source of energy for vampires—drinking blood for fuel creates no byproducts, no waste. Possibly that is one reason why we smell so good to humans. Waste products—the “garbage” that is left when organic fuel is burned or decomposes—don’t smell nice by their nature and, unlike humans, we carry no waste products in our bodies.

Altering Renesmee’s diet had repercussions. She is like a hybrid vehicle with both electrical power stored in a battery and a fuel system that burns gasoline. Depending on which energy source she uses, different bodily systems are activated. While Renesmee drank only human blood, she was like a vampire and her body produced no waste. Once she began to eat human food, though, her digestive system was activated and she had to start using the toilet like any human.

When Renesmee originally began copying the wolves’ marking behavior, Bella had suggested getting her a child’s potty stool and we had done so as part of a lesson on the human gastro-intestinal tract. She had sat on it from time to time and now and then wadded up some toilet paper and put it in there for Mom and Dad to empty, but since it was pretend, she lost interest in it quickly. At this point in her life, though, her practical experience became relevant and her mother helped her become proficient in her new responsibilities.

Renesmee’s reaction to bodily waste was “Yucky!” and I didn’t doubt that most humans would agree with her. For a short time, she got a kick out of holding and then releasing water out of her “rear end” like the wolves, but since she wasn’t allowed to run around bottomless and raise her leg on tree trunks and bushes, her fun was short-lived.

Even if Renesmee decided to give up human food eventually, Bella and I thought the experience would be helpful to her, both in learning to blend in with humans and in coping with menstruation if her reproductive system became active. My personal experience with human bodily functions was so remote and so dimly remembered as to seem mythical. Bella was newer, though, and says that the pain and hassle of menstrual periods are hard to forget. All the better for Renesmee. With her accelerated growing schedule, she could reach puberty within her first two years and she would need a woman mentor.

Leah wouldn’t be of any help to her, not only because being a wolf stopped her female cycle (I heard it “through the grapevine”), but because she didn’t like to associate with even a tiny *half*-vampire. Depending on how things went with Charlie, Sue might become a human “auntie” to Renesmee should she need one, or possibly Sam’s Emily, who was kind to our daughter when Bella and Jacob took her to visit Billy on the reservation. Since no other human

women could know personal details about our daughter without learning of her unique biology, there were no other options.

After her initial questions about male and female anatomy, Renesmee remained curious about those topics. Bella and I borrowed some of Carlisle's anatomy books and looked at the drawings with her, explaining anything that she was curious about. She was becoming aware of the differences between boys and girls and along with that, developing her own sense of girlish modesty. Bubbles and boat races with *Da* had gone the way of crawling and picture books.

Unexpectedly, Renesmee's charm and intellectual advances had drawn Uncle Jasper into her circle. It was Jasper's way to remain aloof from all but his closest compatriots, as had been required in his former lives as the leader of soldiers. Though a charismatic leader, he had never grown completely comfortable as part of a family unit like ours. Renesmee was beginning to change that.

Jasper had expressed his pleasure about being an uncle when Renesmee was born, but he was showing more interest in her as she grew and changed. Whereas for the first five or six weeks of her life, Renesmee had enjoyed playing and roughhousing with Jacob and Uncle Emmett, as she matured she was becoming more interested in cerebral activities. We didn't know exactly when she had started reading on her own but her interest in Jasper began to grow during that period of time. Her curiosity may have been piqued when Renesmee observed her aunts and uncles playing poker, which they did often, usually for cash. The cards intrigued her with their regular patterns of numbers and shapes and images of royalty. She liked to walk around the group of players and examine everyone's cards, images of which I could see in her mind.

It occurred to me later that Renesmee's interest might have had been spurred on by Alice's guile. Alice was not above engaging Renesmee as a co-conspirator in cheating at cards. Nobody would suspect Renesmee, which made her the perfect spy. Possibly Renesmee was passing information to Alice through her hand as she wandered seemingly at random around the table. If so, Alice had hidden her thoughts about it. I smiled to myself. That was just like my sister. She didn't particularly care whether she won or lost money, she just liked to win, period.

Jasper was a master at cards and virtually all games of chance. Most of his income came from gambling. He'd noticed Renesmee's interest in the poker games and one Sunday morning when she was watching him shuffle cards, he encouraged her to give it a try. Her hands were not large enough to master the technique, so the next day he presented her with her own miniature deck proportioned to her small hands. She was soon shuffling her cards, though not quite with her uncle's flair.

Jasper then taught Nessie to play the child's game Old Maid. After two rounds, Renesmee grew bored, so Jasper taught her the game Go Fish. It amused Renesmee a great deal when her Uncle Jasper requested a card that she didn't have. She shook her head hard enough to make her hair swirl around her head and silently screamed *GO FISH!!*, which of course, only I could hear. In fact, I couldn't *avoid* hearing it and I wondered whether it was unreasonable to chastise a child for screaming her thoughts. Probably it was, since I was the only one in the world who would be disturbed by it. Though annoying to me, she thought it was hilarious to silently scream *GO FISH!!* at her Uncle Jasper and she frequently broke into giggles. It was much to my relief when she tired of the game (too easy) and they moved on to playing gin rummy, blackjack, and finally poker.

Some of the games required more than two players, so Bella and Alice often joined in. Since her transformation, Jasper had acquired a particular fondness for Bella. Sensitive to the emotions of others, he got relief from his depressive tendencies when he was surrounded by others who were positive and happy. It's one of the reasons he fell so hard for Alice. It was the same thing with Bella, whose obvious joy in her new life attracted Jasper to her like a magnet. As he took Renesmee under his wing and they began spending more time together, Bella grew quite fond of him too.

It was time for Bella and I to get serious about going to Brazil. As I watched our daughter grow physically and mentally, I saw the sands of her life falling through the hourglass at great speed and I knew that when the last grains fell, our time would be up. We needed to take the next steps in preparing for Renesmee's future. I wanted to set a date for our departure.

I brought up the subject with Bella that night after we tucked Renesmee into her new youth bed. She'd outgrown her crib and she also needed a bed that she could get out of easily in the night if she had to get up and use the toilet. The second bed Esme had bought her was the perfect size, wooden this time, because Renesmee could control her strength and wasn't as likely to break the furniture accidentally as when she was younger.

We shut Nessie's door behind us and I led Bella to the living room to talk to her about our trip to South America. It wasn't long before I discovered the reason for her delaying tactics.

"Edward, we have to deal with the Volturi first. Alice saw them. They're going to send the guard to check on me."

"Alice put them off with our wedding invitation."

"That doesn't matter. We can't give them a reason to come here ever, not now and not in the future. They can't know about Renesmee."

I didn't want to waste time dealing with the Volturi, but she had a good point. "Okay, you're right. Let's go there. We can leave right away."

"Actually, I was thinking about going after Christmas so Charlie won't be alone for the holiday."

"We could leave now and be back in plenty of time for the holidays and then go on to Brazil," I amended.

"We coould," Bella hesitated.

"But..."

"But I'm not sure I'm ready to interrupt our life here with Renesmee still so young."

I saw what she was getting at and it was a frightening thought. If anything went wrong, Renesmee would be left alone. It was an unlikely scenario, I thought, but one could never be entirely sure with the Volturi. Christmas was only a few weeks away. We could afford to wait until then.

"All right. How about if we stay here for Christmas and then leave a day or two afterward? We could be back by New Year's Day. Do you think we should send a letter before we go to Italy or just show up? Wait, we'll ask Alice."

"No, Edward," Bella replied with hesitation. "I've been thinking about this a lot. If you go, Aro will see Renesmee in your mind...or in anyone else's. I'm the only one who can hide my thoughts."

I was stunned. How clearly I remembered our last visit with the Volturi. We had very nearly lost our lives...Bella, Alice, and I. Aro had been clear, as he had in the past, that he was interested in Alice's and my gifts. He wanted us to join the Volturi guard as additions to his collection of gifted vampires. I'd gotten the feeling that he was biding his time so he could get his hooks into Alice, at least. And now that he had met Bella, who could inexplicably thwart his mind-reading gift, he wanted to know how she had turned out as a vampire. Even if her ability to block his mental probing and Jane's mental attacks did not convince him to want Bella for herself, he could use her to get to me. All he would have to do was threaten my love and I would come to him. She could not be sent into that lion's den by herself. It was quite likely that she would never come back or that we would both be trapped.

"No. Impossible. I won't allow it." My voice was instantly harsh. The fear that overcame me when I thought of Bella standing alone in the presence of the Volturi was too much to bear. With effort, I moderated my tone. "You're not going alone," I repeated definitively, trying not

to lose my temper. How could Bella *possibly* imagine I would let her approach the Volturi by herself?

“They won’t hurt me,” she said calmly. “They have no reason to. I’m a vampire. Case closed.”

“No. Absolutely no.” I trusted the Volturi about as far as I could piss into a river and though they had implied that they would let Bella live if I changed her, I was too familiar with Aro’s particular kind of lust to rely on anything he said.

“Edward, it’s the only way to protect her.”

So I am allowed to protect only *one*, my wife *or* my child?! It was unacceptable! A *Solomon’s choice!* I struggled to calm myself. I knew that I must not pressure Bella to choose between our child and me, either. *The more you have, the more you have to lose...* It seemed almost malicious to allow me so much only to snatch it away. Could God be so cruel?

“We’ll talk to Alice,” I finally replied, turning toward the front door. “I need to run. I’ll be back soon.” I had to think through this problem and I needed to regain control of myself, especially my fear. The only way to cope was to make a plan. I started running, and as the wind whipped past my ears, I set my mind to the task. Thinking, strategizing, I felt my terror slip into the night.

By the time I returned to the cottage, I was calm again. Try as I might, I could not see a way around Bella’s plan. We had to protect Renesmee and she was right—the Volturi could not come to Forks.

Bella was standing next to the Kiva fireplace glowing in the corner of the living room. Blue and green sparks shot upward from it. She had an open book in her hands.

“Hi,” she said quietly, looking up.

Without speaking, I approached and took her in my arms. She tossed her book and wrapped her arms around my neck. Then I began to hum a waltz and led Bella through the three-quarter-time steps. At the end of the tune, I put my lips to Bella’s ear and whispered, “I love you, my darling. I cannot lose you.”

“You won’t. I promise,” she replied softly. I had no confidence in her statement, but I had no alternative to offer either.

We danced another waltz from my youth. Bella and I had danced before, both at prom and at our wedding. She’d done fine with a little help from me. But since her change, she

moved with perfect, independent ease. She followed my lead without stumbling or stepping on my feet and she remained in sync with me even when I improvised some steps. Smooth as ice.

As we twirled slowly, Bella unbuttoned my shirt from the bottom to the top and slipped it off my shoulders. She laid her hands on my chest and my feet slowed to a stop. I leaned over to kiss her and as we connected, her fingers trailed down my stomach in a way I remembered from our courting days. I no longer prevented her from touching me as she liked as I had back then. Bella's dexterous fingers unlatched my trousers and moved lower, pushing the fabric aside. I drew in my breath as she stroked my front with the back of her hand and then smoothed her hands down my backside, exploring my nooks and crannies. I reached for the hem of her cotton top and pulled it over her head. Then I unzipped her blue jeans and flattened my hands inside them.

"Darling, I found your honeymoon lingerie."

"You did? Where?"

"In a drawer in the 'warehouse.'"

"I haven't seen that stuff since we came back."

"I fancied seeing you wear some of it again."

"But they're so *embarrassing*."

"From where I was lying, I didn't find them embarrassing at all, except as they might cause me to lose control of myself."

"I put them on out of desperation. I was trying to entice you to make love with me again."

"You drove me out of my mind, you know."

"Did I? I couldn't tell that I had any effect on you at all, except once...that night when I put on the black thingie."

"*Ahh*...that one was a man-killer. I almost had a heart-attack when I saw you."

"When I came out of the bathroom, your face looked a little shocked for a second."

"Only a second?"

"Yes, you were extremely well-controlled."

“Not the whole night as I recall.” I bent and kissed her neck as I cupped my palms around her buttocks inside her jeans. “That night was revelatory.”

“Whatever that means,” she murmured, massaging my lower regions in a most agreeable way.

“It means that I learned a lot, I suppose,” I said, kissing my way along her jaw line until I found her lips. We swayed together, our mouths touching gently.

“It’s hard for me to remember all the details from back then, but I recall being very emotional...needy, embarrassed, but also thrilled, and happy.”

“I was terrified that I would hurt you if we made love, but I couldn’t deny you either, so I licked you between your legs that night. My first time. I remember it well.”

“That’s right! My first time too.”

“You seemed to like it,” I said and flashed her a crooked grin.

“Still do. But it’s almost too intense to handle these days.”

“You just need more practice,” I whispered in her ear.

“Mmm...sounds nice,” she murmured and began kissing me with urgent intensity, pressing her breasts against my chest.

“Renesmee,” I said softly when we came up for air.

“Yes, let’s take this to the other room,” she replied, holding my face to hers as she backed her way down the hall.

I shut the door behind us and turned the skeleton key, leaving it in the lock. “Little pitchers have big eyes.”

“Our little pitcher does, that’s for sure,” Bella said, leaning her face away from mine. “Yesterday, she wanted me to get in the bathtub instead of her.”

“What did you say?”

“I asked her why and she said because she wanted to see what I looked like naked.”

I chuckled. “Precocious child.”

“I was a little embarrassed, I guess, but it seems like a fair request. Who else if not her mother?”

“Public baths have been a cultural tradition for centuries. They’re still frequented by virtually everyone in Arab countries and many Asian countries too.”

“I heard about a Korean spa outside of Seattle where women can go to bathe in hot tubs and pools and there’s a steam room.”

“Maybe you could take Renesmee.”

“Don’t you think my skin would attract a bit of attention?”

“It attracts my attention, certainly,” I replied, caressing her breasts.

“I don’t think I could get naked in front of strangers anyway, but maybe we could visit some remote hotsprings one of these days. I bet Renesmee would like that.”

“That would be fun for me too,” I said, waggling my eyebrows.

Bella smiled.

“Did I tell you I briefly considered the possibility that we might raise Nessie in the naturist family tradition?”

“No, you didn’t happen to mention that to me.”

“I gave up the idea that day I ran into Nessie’s room with a pillow covering my private parts and saw her show that image to Charlie later on. I realized that a child who communicates with pictures might not be the best candidate for a naturist lifestyle.”

Bella giggled. “What did Charlie do?”

“He gave me an odd look and tried not to laugh. It was quite funny, actually.”

“You have a good point, though. I’m not sure I want to let my daughter see me naked if she can show my image to anyone whenever she wants to. I mean, she’s cooperative now, but what about when she’s a teenager and she wants to spite me for some reason or another? I especially wouldn’t want her to show Jacob!”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. Jacob has already seen you naked many, many times and the last time put him off you a bit.”

“What?! What are you talking about?”

Oops! Hit a nerve.

“Don’t be alarmed, love. I’m just remembering that during our competitive phase he wanted to tear your clothes off every time he saw you.”

“He did? Really?”

“Oh yes. He did it too, slowly and in great detail that night on the mountain. It was very disturbing.”

“Gosh, I should have known. Did he get it right?”

“Only in the broad outline. Too bad for him that he never got to know the particulars.”
As I spoke, I led Bella to the bed and maneuvered her onto her back. I lay on top of her and let my lips wander down her neck and between her breasts.

“Wait a minute...just a minute!” Bella said, grabbing a handful of hair and lifting my head up so she could see my face. “What did you mean by ‘it put him off’ me?”

“Oh...that. I haven’t told you much about Renesmee’s delivery, have I?”

“No, not really. I assume it was pretty gory.”

“Yes.” I flinched at the memory. “Carlisle was gone, so Rose and I were left to deliver you and Rose hadn’t hunted because she didn’t want to leave you alone with me,” I said, remembering my helplessness. “She lost control of herself when she made the first cut into your abdomen and Jacob saved you from her.”

“He did? Ugh! Not again!”

“Yes, he dove across the room and knocked her down. She stabbed his hand with the scalpel and he smashed her head into the doorway. Alice held her breath and sneaked around the corner to drag her away. Rose didn’t fight back. She didn’t want to hurt you.”

“So Jacob saw the baby come out of me?”

“I’m afraid so, love, and you were buck naked, black with bruises, and covered in blood. Rose had cut off your clothing to clear the way for the surgery.”

“I must have looked revolting!”

“Your heart stopped and Jacob gave you CPR while I delivered Renesmee. If he hadn’t been there, I couldn’t have saved you...not on my own.”

“Oh, Edward...I had no idea! I guess I didn’t really want to know what happened or I would have asked before. I just remember blackness...trying to push it away.”

To my surprise, I felt my eyes begin to burn and my breaths become jerky; my shoulders shook.

“Oh, I’m sorry...I’m so sorry...I’ve upset you. It must be horrible for you to remember,” she said, holding my head to her chest and stroking my hair.

“It was the worst day of my life,” I muttered and then added, “except that we saved Renesmee.”

“I never would have been able to do what you did!”

“I had no choice. I was not prepared to let you die.” I wrapped my arms tightly around Bella’s body and felt the stinging of my invisible vampire tears.

“Shhh, shhh. It’s okay now. It’s all over. You’ll never have to go through that again,” Bella said. “Make love to me, Edward. Remind yourself of what we have, not of what we might have lost.”

She took my hand and raised my fingers to her lips, brushing them across the smooth surface. Then she kissed my palm and I looked into her eyes. The brilliant scarlet had begun to fade. They no longer glowed with the fluorescence of a newborn. I rid myself of my khakis, then quickly removed Bella’s jeans and shimmied up her body to press my lips to hers. I ran my hands underneath her, feeling the smooth curve of her back and I let gravity pull me down against her, my skin touching as much of hers as possible...chest to chest, belly to belly, groin to groin, legs to legs, lips to lips. She was immortal and she was here and she was mine.

I pressed her inner thighs apart making space for myself between her legs. She began to breath faster. I entered her then, pushing in slowly, and felt her flesh welcome and engulf me in a comforting embrace. I rolled onto my side, pulling her along and with our thighs intertwined and our intimate parts joined we pushed and pulled against one another as we caressed each other’s skin. I stroked her lips with my fingers and she pulled two of them into her mouth. She slid her lips down to the top of my palm making my fingers disappear. She did it again and then again and as I watched her, I moved my penis in and out of her at the same speed, a gentle wave. It was highly erotic, though I couldn’t say why exactly. Perhaps it was about being joined to her, being *inside* her in more than one way. I pulled my fingers from her mouth and replaced them with the other hand while I reached around her thigh to find a third place to enter her. I pressed one finger against her sphincter muscle and felt it tighten in response.

“Push outward,” I reminded her in a whisper and felt her relax. My slippery index finger slid into her before the muscle tightened again. I wiggled it inside of her and saw her eyes roll back into her head and her lids drop halfway.

“You liked this on our honeymoon. I don’t know if you remember.”

Bella pulled my fingers from her mouth slowly, her eyelids drooping closed.

“Yes, I *do* remember. I remember something more than your finger, actually. *Mmmm...*,” she moaned as she pulled my fingers back into her mouth. I became even more aroused, jolts of electricity shooting through my groin. It was true. Just being inside her body however I could was so intimate, so *private*, and so powerful. She truly *was* mine for as long as Fate allowed me to have her.

“Do you want to try that now?”

“Mmm hmm...,” she mumbled around the fingers in her mouth.

“We might need Alice’s kit.”

She pulled my fingers from her mouth with a little sucking noise. “Bedside table.”

“I need my hands back,” I chuckled and reached over to open the drawer and remove the little zippered bag containing Alice’s gift collection of sexual aids and handed it to Bella.

She took out a small plastic bottle. “Almond,” she murmured. I held out my fingers and she drizzled oil on them. I eased the first one inside her and then pulled it out, in again, out, until her sphincter relaxed. Then I pressed two fingers against her.

“Press outward. That’s it.” I repeated the process and felt her relax further. I wiggled my fingers and Bella began to hum. “I want to enter you there now.” I heard a rumble in my voice.

“*Mmm hmm...*” was her reply.

I withdrew from her vagina, slick and slippery and realized that her natural lubrication was far better than oil. I freed my fingers and pushed her onto her back. My breathing had gone ragged and I ached to be back inside of her. She brought her knees to her chest and I let my penis drop farther back between her buttocks and found the tight, wet spot I sought. “Press outward,” I said again. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I pressed against her until I felt her entryway relax and then slipped into her quickly. Bella growled and the sound vibrated through her body. I growled in return, her excitement raising mine higher.

She was as tight inside as I remembered, but the compression felt intensely pleasurable. I slid slightly forward and back, keeping the movement small, waiting to feel a loosening in her, a letting go that would tell me she was beyond discomfort and feeling something else,

something I had not experienced. I pushed farther into her and then again, as far as I could reach. She cried out before clamping her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. I pushed again and felt an undulating squeeze roll through the tight space. She cried out again which spurred me on. I felt Bella's fingers moving between her legs and the tension in my groin increased in time with the primitive, guttural sounds of my wife's snarls and growls. I had never heard her sound so bestial before.

With one more snarl, she squeezed until I lost all control and felt the rush of semen exiting my body. She wrung me out like a dishrag, but kept squeezing. Helpless, I surrendered completely, letting her take whatever she wanted from me. She started to scream, but muffled the sound by stuffing her fist into her mouth. Her eyes were closed and her head was forced so far into the mattress that I thought it might tear through the other side. I took her head in my hands, removed her fist, and devoured her. She grabbed my head in turn and we grappled, mouth to mouth, clattering like two stones knocking together. I pushed my penis into her as far as I could reach and felt her clamp down one last time, her teeth clamping down too, but missing my flesh.

I set my forehead against my wife's and remained still while she calmed. She was gulping air, her shoulders were shaking, and her eyes were blinking quickly—she was crying!

"Bella, Bella, are you okay?" I asked anxiously.

She nodded without speaking and shut her eyes again. I didn't move, not sure what to do. Finally, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I think you split open my locked box of emotions," she said vaguely. "Everything is spilling out."

"How do you feel?"

"Good, actually. Emptier. Less pent-up."

"I'm glad."

"That was just...overwhelming."

"I love you, my beautiful darling. I love you far more than I've ever loved anything. It's a bit frightening sometimes."

"That's what it is, Edward. It's overwhelming to be so incredibly close to someone else. It breaks down all your defenses."

"I understand," I replied, touching my lips to hers. After a time, I inquired, "Ready?"

“For what?”

“For this.” I pulled my penis back slightly and felt her grip tighten.

“Oh!”

“Yes, I think pulling out can be as tricky as going in. When you’re ready, bear down.” Bella shut her eyes and I felt her constricted compartment loosen and her sphincter muscle relax. I pulled out all at once and she gasped.

“Now relax your legs. Come here beside me.” I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her, rubbing the small of her back.

“That was extremely intense,” Bella commented.

“In a good way, I hope?”

“Very. I don’t think my dead heart can take it too often, though. We might have to save it for special occasions.”

I laughed. “No lingering discomfort?”

“No, not at all. It just tears into my soul somehow, hits some emotional buttons.”

“It was exceedingly pleasurable for me,” I told her.

“Me too. I love you.”

“And I you.”

41. MAKING PLANS

In the morning we turned Renesmee over to Carlisle and Esme in his office. Carlisle had cut back to twice-daily measurements, because four times each day at the same hour had become hard to maintain as Renesmee's schedule got busier. The longer we collected data, though, the more accurate became the mathematical function to predict her eventual adulthood. Her growth rate was gradually slowing down and current estimates indicated that she would be an adult at five years old and would live to approximately age seventeen—still a frighteningly short lifespan.

We needed to talk to Alice and found her bustling about in her bedroom. It was immediately obvious that she was extremely displeased with her brother. She twirled around the room like a dust devil, moving this, arranging that, slamming everything about. Though I didn't require her actually to verbalize the entire speech, she did so for Bella's benefit and her own. Alice felt that Bella was an accessory to the crime just for not intervening.

"Edward! What are you *doing* to Bella's closet? I arranged everything specifically so that Bella could find exactly what she needs by plugging in the answers to four questions: Where are you going? What season is it? What color scheme would you like? What else goes with this item? Now that you've moved everything around, how will she *ever* find the right clothes to wear, not to mention coordinate them by style and color?! Just because she hasn't let me teach her my system yet doesn't mean that you should go and *change* it!"

"Well, I, uh—," Bella started to explain, wanting to calm Alice.

"Don't you make even *one* excuse to me, missy. I know you're in on this too," she interrupted Bella crossly.

"Alice," I coaxed, "I know that you're angry, but we need to talk to you about the Volturi and at the moment, I think it's the more pressing issue. Can you put your anger aside just for a little while?"

"I don't know," she sniffed. "Can you put everything back *exactly* as it was?"

"I seriously doubt it," I said. Though it was possible, I couldn't see getting motivated to do it. I didn't think Bella would adopt Alice's system whether I put things back or not.

"Well, I *seriously doubt* if I can help you then," she returned crisply. She was milking her annoyance for all it was worth.

“Please, Alice,” Bella begged. “For Renesmee?”

“So you’re going to use the baby to coerce me, I see.”

“No, not at all. We would never use Renesmee as a weapon against anyone, just as you would never use her to cheat at poker, would you? Of course you wouldn’t,” I responded to my falsely hypothetical question.

Bella opened her mouth, but before she could demand to know what I meant by that, Alice had a sudden change of heart.

“Oh, all right. But only because I don’t want Bella to worry. Give me a second.” Alice’s face became blank as she shuffled through her visions of the future. She already knew our question. “Hmmm...that’s interesting.”

“What do you see, Alice?” Bella asked anxiously.

“Oh, oil and gas stocks are rising for the next few months. You should buy up, Edward, but get out before the end of May. There’s going to be another oil spill.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Bella complained. “What did you see about me going to Italy?” Alice stared into space a while longer.

“Well, I don’t see any *particular* problems with you going to Italy, but the picture is pretty hazy. Oh! Irina might be visiting us...hmm, that’s a little hazy too.”

“What does it *mean*, Alice?” Bella pressed, getting irritated.

“I can’t tell for sure. Sometimes a picture is hazy when the outcome depends on a decision that hasn’t been made yet. That’s all I can tell you for sure. Oh yes, and your mother is going to call in three days. That’s it.”

“Are you sure you can’t see more, Alice? I don’t want Bella going anywhere if it’s the slightest bit risky.”

“I’m sorry, Edward. I can’t see things more clearly until any outside conflicts are resolved. I will keep watching, though.”

“Can you please tell us immediately about anything—anything at all—that pertains to Bella’s safety?” I knew Alice would—she loved Bella too—but I couldn’t help pressing the point. This was our life...our happiness...at stake.

“Yes, yes, of course I will. Now can you please fetch Renesmee? I’ve got a spectacular sunflower costume for her. She’s going trick-or-treating!” Alice laughed her high, tinkling laughter and did a perfect pirouette, her mood suddenly improved.

We stepped into Carlisle’s office and Bella forced enthusiasm into her voice. “Renesmee, Alice wants to dress you like a sunflower. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Nessie hadn’t tired of Alice’s “dress-up games,” as she thought of them. She was willing to try on anything and, unlike her mother, was fond of ruffles, lace, ribbons, and other overtly feminine flourishes. She loved to wear fingernail polish and costume jewelry and have her hair done up. I wondered whether it was a personality trait or merely evidence of the “gender-identity” phase that toddlers go through when they learn the difference between boys and girls and begin acting out gender roles. If the former, perhaps we would have to convert Bella’s closet into Renesmee’s closet someday. Bella would be relieved if Alice directed her attentions to someone else’s style and fashion sense.

Nessie followed Bella back to Alice’s room where she took two quick steps, hopped onto the bed, and began jumping up and down as if it were a trampoline. Alice indulged her. I led Bella out of the room and upstairs to the third floor—our other bedroom—and shut the door. Not that everybody wouldn’t hear our conversation, but if we behaved as if it were private, they would pretend that they hadn’t.

“I don’t like that Alice’s vision for Italy is so uncertain,” I said, getting to the point. “It’s too risky, Bella. I *cannot* let you go alone.”

Bella looked at me with regretful eyes. “You know I have to, Edward. There isn’t any other way to keep Renesmee hidden from Aro.”

I sighed. “Okay, maybe I don’t go to Italy, but at least I can fly as far as London with you. That way, I’ll be much closer if you need me,” I suggested as a compromise. It would ease my anxiety somewhat.

“Renesmee needs you here,” Bella countered. “I don’t want to leave her without both of her parents. One of us has to stay with her.”

“But what if something happens to you?” I objected, unable to control the apprehension in my voice.

“All the more reason for you to be safe with her. She can’t be without both her parents.” Just the thought turned my cold heart to ice. *If something should happen to Bella in Italy, she wants me safe to look after Renesmee.* God help me if that should ever come to pass. I don’t know that I could do it.

I began to pace back and forth. “What if I asked Carlisle to go with you as far as London, or maybe even into Italy, but not as far as Volterra?” I could foresee no objection to that.

“I *think* that would be okay, but only if Carlisle wants to do it. He would be the one in the hot seat if I needed help and I don’t want him to take any risks on my account.”

“I thought you said they wouldn’t hurt you!”

“They won’t, but maybe I’ll fall off the clock tower or something and need Carlisle to set my bones.” Bella tried a smile, but we both knew it was forced.

I wanted to bellow and roar and forbid Bella to go, but she was right—we had to let the Volturi see that she was a vampire and leave them with no reason whatsoever to come to America. I pulled Bella to our bed with the wrought-iron roses and sat her down next to me. I kept my mouth shut and just held her then. No words I could say would make this situation any better. I just had to bear it. I felt slightly better knowing that Carlisle would be on the same continent as Bella and that he could escort her home. It was something, at least.

We bought tickets for the Italy trip a few days later. Bella and Carlisle would leave right after Christmas. In my mind, I created a plan for every contingency I could think of, while outwardly I started making arrangements to leave for Brazil upon their return. We told Renesmee about her mother’s trip to Italy when we retired to our cottage that evening. In response, Nessie reached for Bella’s cheek and showed her the selection from *The Book of Common Prayer* that Charlie had read to her a couple of weeks previously.

“Are you asking to be baptized, Renesmee?” Bella asked, puzzled.

Yes, and I want godparents.

“Do you understand what godparents are for?” I asked our daughter.

Are they extra parents?

“Yes, they are very much like extra parents,” I repeated for Bella’s benefit. “Godparents are people who take care of you if something should happen to your parents. They would become your new parents,” I explained. Bella was looking at me with wide eyes. “Do you understand?”

Yes. Can I have whoever I want? Renesmee asked me solemnly.

“Who would you want?” I ignored the minor grammar lesson, not wanting to detract from the seriousness of our conversation.

My Jacob and Aunt Rose and Nana and Popop, Nessie thought while also showing her mother the picture. Bella and I looked at one another and she nodded slightly.

“Those are very good choices, Nessie. You can ask them tomorrow if they would like to be your godparents.”

Later, when we were alone, Bella asked, “Do you think that Renesmee is worried about me going to Italy?”

“Yes. She probably picked up my anxiety, but asking for godparents is a reasonable reaction and a good idea anyway, don’t you think? Not that the law will matter to us much...but it would be official within the family.”

“If it makes Renesmee feel more comfortable about me going away, then we should do it. Do you think she read that section of *The Book of Common Prayer* before and picked it for Charlie to read because she wanted us to know her wishes?”

“As shocking as that seems for a three-month-old child, it almost wouldn’t surprise me,” I responded.

“Do you think Emmett would baptize her? Didn’t he get that Universal Life minister’s certificate when we thought he might marry us?”

“Yes, he did. He liked the idea of being a ‘Reverend.’” I laughed and Bella joined in. “He’d love to do it, I’m sure. We’ll just have to limit the acrobatic portion of the ceremony to one flip only.” Bella laughed again.

“Alice and Jasper won’t mind not being picked will they?”

“I don’t think so. Rose and Jacob are obvious choices and I’m not sure that Alice is the mommy type anyway. We could trust Carlisle and Esme with her forever.”

“Yes,” Bella agreed. “Not that I think she will need them. Nothing is going to happen to either of us. It’s still a nice tradition, even though we aren’t particularly religious.”

“I don’t have anything against baptizing babies. It’s an official naming ceremony too and it establishes a tradition of carrying on our parents’ names. Carlisle will love it.”

“Oh, I know!” Bella exclaimed unexpectedly. “Let’s let Alice plan the ceremony, decorations, whatever she wants. That will get her involved. She’ll love that. And Renesmee can help her so she gets to have things her way too. And we’ll invite Charlie and Sue, and Sam and Emily, and Billy, and the wolves.”

“Maybe Jasper can run the betting pool on whether Emmett will screw up or not,” I said, giving her the crooked smile she liked. Bella chuckled.

Charlie had been holding Renee off, trying to postpone the day when she and Bella first talked on the phone. Charlie knew better than anyone how much of a shock it was going to be for Renee to hear Bella’s voice. Even though Bella had been practicing to lower its tone and make it sound rougher, it was still a vampire’s voice—pure and beautiful with a thousand micro-tones mingled in, making it sound like a high-pitched, hand-bell choir. To humans who hadn’t known her before, she merely sounded like everyone else in her family with her lovely lilting voice, but to Renee, she would sound like an alien. There was no real cure for it.

But Renee would not be put off any longer. She knew that Charlie was trying to discourage her and she didn’t know why. He’d never tried to prevent Bella from seeing or talking to her mother as much as she wanted. Why now? Renee knew that Bella had been very sick and that she had been quarantined first at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and then at a hospital in Switzerland, but the time had come when she would no longer take no for an answer. She called Esme, whom she knew she could trust, to find out what was happening with Bella and demand that she be allowed to talk to her on the phone. Esme was utterly sympathetic.

“Yes, yes, it must be terrible for you to be separated from Bella and not be able to speak to her. Yes, I understand. Carlisle tells me that she is finally responding to an experimental treatment they’ve been trying, something about ‘gene-spliced’ anti-virus, not that I could understand it.”

(Pause)

“Yes, Edward’s been with her the whole time and Carlisle travels over there regularly. No, no, it’s not a problem for him at all. Bella is family and nothing could be more important to him.”

(Pause)

“She’s doing much better now. It’s all been complicated by the staph infection. You’re right—it’s not safe to go to the hospital with all the drug-resistant infections out there now. The

infection let the virus get a better foothold, but it's all much better now. She's going to fully recover, Carlisle tells me."

(Pause)

"Well, there is a little bad news there...no, I'm afraid Bella will not be able to have children. It would be too dangerous. These retro-viruses are hard to kill entirely, as I understand, and it's possible that a fetus could either reactivate it or weaken Bella so that it could attack her again. She'll have to be on medication for a long time, maybe the rest of her life."

(Pause)

"Carlisle tells me that she's very pale, but she was always rather pale, wasn't she? And one other side effect of the virus is a change in her voice. You might not recognize her on the phone. I haven't talked to her myself, so I don't know what to tell you exactly, but Carlisle says it infected her vocal chords somehow, of all things. No, no, she doesn't sound like a monster or anything. They've been working with her to strengthen it. Actually, he says her voice sounds pretty, just different."

(Pause)

"They're learning a lot from her and all of it will help other people, so that's another reason they want to keep her for a few more months at least. I'm sure she misses being home, but Edward doesn't leave her alone at all. He was exposed and never got the virus, so they think he's got a natural immunity. One of the treatments has been transfusions of Edward's blood and that's made a tremendous difference. It gives her a boost of virus-fighting compounds. I don't understand it exactly."

(Pause)

"Oh, yes! That's the good news. Her voice is healed enough to let her talk on the phone. They don't like for her to get too excited and she still has to rest a great deal, but she's gotten permission to talk half-an-hour a week or so. Yes, I'll get you the number as soon as I talk to Carlisle. Unfortunately, no, we don't know when she'll be able to come home, but Edward is taking good care of her. They're so in love, you know."

(Pause)

"Okay, we'll talk soon. Take care."

Esme was wonderful with Renee, but I wasn't sure that Renee wouldn't get on a plane to Europe. So far, she hadn't shown any sign of that, though. Maybe she was truly getting on with her own life.

If Renee became too difficult in future months or years, we could always tell her that Bella had passed and that her ashes would be flown back from Europe. We hoped it didn't come to that. The ruse was hard on Charlie, as it was on Bella and everyone. Still, it was necessary. Even Charlie didn't think that Renee ever should be allowed to see Bella. It wouldn't be safe for anyone.

A few days later, Bella talked to her mother, who took the change in her voice much easier than anyone expected. She accepted the situation and seemed resigned to not seeing Bella any time soon. I promised to forward Renee's emails on to Bella. For now, it was enough.

Bella was surprisingly sanguine about Renee, as she was about virtually everything in her new life. Even with the trip to Italy looming, she was remarkably upbeat. The only thing that really seemed to trouble her was Renesmee's future. And now that we'd decided what to do about the Volturi, I was thinking ahead to Brazil.

It was true that we had reached a dead end in our research. We had reached nothing *but* dead ends, which suggested to me that we were not going to find another Renesmee. My theory was that if hybrid humans had ever existed, they may have been destroyed as infants or left no substantial history due to their short lifespans. As to the latter case, nearly every culture we studied had stories of children who aged at highly accelerated rates. They died in their early teens in elderly bodies that were the equivalent of seventy or eighty years old. Some humans are born with a rare genetic defect that produces this result—the syndrome is called progeria. I thought it was possible that half-vampire children might have been hidden behind this diagnosis after it was identified in the 1800s. Whatever the answer, there seemed to be no hybrid beings other than Renesmee currently in existence. Or perhaps, just perhaps, any that existed had been changed to vampires.

I was becoming more convinced that changing Renesmee would be the ultimate answer, but every time I brought up this subject with Bella, she grew oddly silent. I assumed it was based on her fear that vampire venom would kill Renesmee.

The more I looked into it, though, the less I was convinced that it was necessarily true. When we followed the Quileute legends to their oldest sources, the native language was ambiguous. Usually it was translated to "vampire venom is deadly to wolves," but the words could also translate to "when wolves are bitten, they often die." That was something different. It implied that even if venom *was* poisonous, it wasn't necessarily deadly. Not that "possibly less than deadly" was an adequate criteria for trying it out on our beloved daughter. However,

if the only other possibility was *certain* death, would we risk it? It was difficult even to think about such a thing, but I didn't know what we might do with our backs against a wall.

This topic also brought up the issue of using morphine to kill the pain, as we had with Bella and as Carlisle had tried to do with Emmett. If—*big* if—we ever decided to change Renesmee, what would her body do with morphine? Would it prevent her from feeling the pain of the change or would it have no effect at all? I was hopeful it would help because her human half is what would change—the same half that could be numbed with morphine.

Had Carlisle ever followed up with Bella about her experience with the morphine? All she'd said after her change was that everything went black and when she woke up, the process was over. Carlisle wouldn't consider that a sufficient debriefing. Had he not discussed it with her since then or had he just not mentioned it to me? I needed to ask him about it.

Jacob found out we were planning a trip to Brazil and had been insisting that he must go with us. I remained firmly against it and Carlisle and I made sure to discuss our plans when Jacob was away from the house. If we ever had to face our last option—changing our daughter—Jacob was bound to be set against it. I wasn't sure what would happen to the imprinting bond when the object of the imprinting was no longer (even potentially) fertile. Most likely the bond would be broken. I didn't see how an imprinted wolf could allow an action that would break his bond. Still, it was a decision we might have to face to save her life.

The morning after we told Renesmee about Bella's upcoming trip, we asked Carlisle and Esme to join us in Carlisle's office so that Nessie could "have a word" with them. I'd suggested that she might ask her question in words, both because she was making a formal request to her grandparents, but also because I doubted they would understand what she meant by a picture of the baptism page from *The Book of Common Prayer*. If she used words, then they would fully understand without my having to translate.

"Renesmee would like to ask you both something," Bella explained after we had gathered.

"Go ahead, honey," Esme encouraged.

In her high child's voice, Nessie made her request. "Nana and Popop, will you please be my godparents?" Both of them looked startled, but made a point of not showing it. "With my Jacob and Aunt Rose."

Esme glanced at Carlisle who smiled back widely. "Of course we will, dear!" Esme replied enthusiastically, then kneeled down and held out her arms. Renesmee wiggled to be put down. I set her on the floor and she ran to Esme. Carlisle kneeled down too and they put their arms around her and each other all at the same time.

"We would be honored, child," Carlisle said.

"We'll ask Alice to plan a christening and baptism ceremony for Renesmee," Bella explained.

Baptism, Edward? My father raised his eyebrows in my direction.

"Nessie read about the Anglican ceremony and asked our permission. Bella and I think it will be a wonderful way to celebrate Nessie's arrival with our extended families."

"I'm sure Alice will be thrilled to do it. I don't suppose we could ask Reverend Weber to preside this time, though," Esme said.

"Uncle Emmett!" Renesmee yelled and began clapping her hands. This idea obviously delighted her.

"Emmett will perform the service?" Carlisle asked with a smile.

"That way the whole family plays a part," I replied. "Shall we take measurements? Then we need to go ask the other proposed participants before Alice breaks the news first." I smiled as Alice stepped into the room, her eyes sparkling.

"Yes! I accept! I've already got an idea for music." Alice nimbly moved toward Renesmee and gave her a hug. "Thank you. I'll make it wonderful," she told her niece. Nessie gave her aunt a kiss on the cheek and Alice danced away. "Rose! Emmett! Nessie needs to talk to you in Carlisle's office," she hollered once she was in the hallway.

Bella and I looked at each other and spoke simultaneously in our tone of mock disgust—"Alice!" We laughed at our private joke.

Both Rose and Emmett were pleased to be asked and pleased to accept Renesmee's verbal requests for them to be godmother and minister, respectively. Emmett snatched Renesmee off the floor and tossed her into the air where she performed a perfect flip, landing on his hands.

“Just so you know, Em,” Bella commented, “Edward and I are restricting the acrobatic portion of the ceremony to one flip.” Emmett laughed raucously.

“We should practice, Ness. It must be perfect.” He gave her another toss into the air. After landing, she straightened her knees, arched her back, and threw her arms into the air like Nadia Comaneci, the first gymnast to score a perfect 10 in the Olympics. Nessie began cackling noisily in a high-pitched tone. Everyone laughed at her laughter. We weren’t used to hearing Renesmee talk or laugh out loud. It was always a treat.

Just then Jacob walked through the front door, back from hunting with Leah. Though she didn’t like to eat while in wolf form, Jacob insisted that Leah make it a habit at least once a week so that she could sustain herself if she suddenly needed to do an extended patrol. Eating raw game was more difficult if you strayed from it for too long, Jacob had told her.

“Nessie!” Jacob called when he didn’t see anyone about.

“Jacob!” Nessie squealed. Emmett set her down and she took off running for the staircase. Bella hurried after her. Because Renesmee’s legs were too short to descend using one foot per stair and stepping down twice for each stair was frustratingly slow, she considered gliding down the stairs on her belly, but instead hopped onto the banister and slid down to the bottom. Coming to a stop at the newel post, she leaped off and ran toward Jacob, jumping toward his chest at exactly the moment he reached to catch her. It was almost like another acrobatic stunt, they were so synchronized. She smacked her hand to his face and told him her news and asked him to be her godfather all in one blur of pictures. Again, the idea of “godfather” didn’t translate well, so Bella added the words.

“Renesmee would like you to be her godfather along with Carlisle.”

“Godfather? As in second-string dad?”

“Yes, shared with Carlisle, and Rosalie and Esme as godmothers.”

“Sure I will, Nessie, if that’s what you want,” Jacob responded to our daughter.

Yes! Renesmee reiterated.

Jacob was surprised, but more than willing to oblige, though I had seen him cringe when Nessie mentioned Rosalie’s name.

“It’s mostly ceremonial,” Bella explained, “since we will always be here, but it’s something Renesmee wants and we agree that it’s a nice idea. We’re asking Alice to plan a ceremony and reception.”

“That’s a great idea, Ness,” Jacob told her. “Where did you come up with that?”

Renesmee showed him a picture of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

“Maybe we can hold a ceremony officially welcoming Nessie into the tribe, too,” Jacob mused. “We do a similar thing where the tribe accepts responsibility for orphans and primary caretakers are decided. There are no orphans in the Quileute tribe.”

“We should talk more about that,” Bella told him, probably sensing that I might not approve.

It wasn’t that I thought Nessie shouldn’t be a part of the tribe exactly. It was more that I didn’t particularly want to start thinking of Renesmee and Jacob as “promised” to each other. We were a long way from declaring that and I, for one, was in no hurry. We had no idea how things might change in the next few months, let alone in the next five years.

42. A DAY APART (A Night Together)

Bella felt badly that Renesmee had not met Billy Black, whom she thought of as family. She wanted Renesmee to know him, especially since he was one of the few people in our lives who really *could* know her. And naturally, Jacob wanted his father to know the most important person in his world.

Though Jake proposed taking Renesmee to visit Billy on his own, neither Bella nor I was comfortable with the idea. Not that we were concerned she wouldn't be safe with Jacob, but she was still little more than a toddler, despite her advanced intellectual capabilities. Bella decided the time had come for her first trip away from home, post-change.

When Bella was new, we wouldn't have dared send her into the world where she would be exposed to any number of humans, but she had proven over and over with Charlie and Sue that she was controlled enough to venture further from home. Jasper had his doubts, but decided not to intervene.

After Jacob left with Bella and Nessie, I took the opportunity to talk to Carlisle about going to Brazil and we began mapping out our strategy. We would locate the Ticunas first and see what we could learn. Then, based on what they could tell us, follow our noses around the region, locating other relevant tribes. We also planned to visit Carlisle's Amazonian friends—Zafrina, Senna, and Kachiri—introduce them to Renesmee, and glean whatever information we could from them. They could provide assistance locating and perhaps communicating with additional tribes. They might even have stories or legends of their own.

After reviewing our plans, we did some research on the current availability of game in different regions of the country. Brazil is huge and varies widely in terrain and animal life, but many native species are endangered. I did not want to be caught again as I had been on my honeymoon with no hunting to be had for hundreds of miles. There was little danger that we would go thirsty in the Amazon jungle or in the Pantanal, the marshy region of western Brazil, where wildlife includes the largest jaguar population on earth and exotic species like the giant anteater. If we had to visit Rio de Janeiro or other urban areas, however, game could be scarce—especially if our entire family went, which is what we planned.

With Jacob away, I could speak freely with Carlisle about my recent theories on the existence of half-vampire children.

"I'm beginning to think that we will have to consider changing Renesmee when she reaches adulthood. If we find no trace of other hybrid children, then that says to me that either they never existed or they died young."

"It is a scenario that you and Bella should talk about. It might come down to that, though I sincerely hope not."

"There are many implications. For instance if we change Renesmee will Jacob's bond with her hold, and if not, will we be in violation of the treaty with the Quileute?"

"Even though Nessie's only half human, they could interpret that as a breach of the treaty and declare war. That is a bridge I would prefer not to cross," Carlisle replied.

"Carlisle, did you ever discuss Bella's transformation with her after her first day? You've never mentioned it." I had caught my father off guard and I could already see at least part of the answer to that question in his mind.

"No!!" I responded to his thoughts, aghast.

"I'm sorry son, but I'm afraid so. Bella wished for it to be a private matter between her and me. She wanted to shield you from the pain she knew it would cause you."

"My gawd! So she had the full measure of pain we all had, but she was paralyzed by the morphine, unable to move or speak?!" I already knew the horrendous answer to my question. Carlisle was good at hiding his thoughts from me, but virtually no one could block their instantaneous mental response to a direct question, except for Alice...and Bella, of course.

"So all those hours after the morphine burned off, she did not allow herself to move or speak, even though she could, because she didn't want me to suffer?? *Bella...*," I wailed, horrified.

"Perhaps it would be useful to think of it this way, Edward. It hurts Bella to see you suffer. She chose to remain silent in order not to suffer twice, first from the pain itself and then from seeing your pain."

"But the agony! How did she do it?" I asked, overcome with misery.

"With immense self-control," Carlisle replied calmly.

I got the point. "Yes. You would know."

“It was her gift to you and she got through it somehow. The more relevant issue now is that we should not use morphine on Renesmee. Paralyzing rather than pain-suppressing is not what we were hoping for.”

I had tried to get the morphine into Bella’s body before her caesarean section, but it could not have taken effect before Rosalie cut into her. Then her back broke, removing all sensation below the waist, so she didn’t need it for the surgery after all. So not only were my efforts wholly useless, but they caused Bella even more suffering than she would have experienced if I had never acted. How would I ever live with myself?

I knew in my heart that it would only hurt Bella more to know that I had discovered her secret. So like her, I vowed to keep my knowledge to myself, though I feared it would haunt me to the end of my days.

When Bella, Nessie, and Jacob returned, I met them at the door.

“Hello, loves.” Renesmee came dashing in and I dropped to one knee to greet her.

Daddy! she thought as she reached for my cheek.

I picked her up and wrapped my free arm around Bella’s waist. Our eyes met and we gazed at one another for a few moments. I leaned over to kiss her and our lips touched with a spark of electricity. Our welcome-home greeting was interrupted by our little girl, who was eager to share her day.

Daddy, Billy rides around in a chair! He never has to stand up! He gave me a ride with Jacob pushing us around. Daddy, can I have a wheelie chair like Billy?

Jacob headed for the kitchen and the refrigerator, apparently not having eaten enough at Billy’s house.

“Did you know that Billy uses a wheelchair because he can’t walk? His legs don’t work anymore,” I told her.

Oh. That’s not good, is it?

“No, that’s a challenging way to live. He can’t run, or climb trees, or do flips like you can. What else did you do today?”

With Renesmee's attention successfully redirected, she told me about Billy's red house and the big, gray waves and the beach and how she got to throw stones into the water with Jacob.

Jacob made them bounce three times before they disappeared!

"Did you like the ocean?"

Oh yes! It goes in and out and chases you. I got to see Emily and Sam. Emily has two faces and she's really nice and he's her Sam. Like Jacob and me. Renesmee beamed after spilling this information in a rush. Emily's "two faces" were the scarred side and the unscarred side, which looked and moved differently, but which Renesmee took in stride. *Daddy, Sam smells like Jacob, but Emily and Billy smell like Grandpa Charlie and Sue. They make me thirsty.*

"That's right, darling. Emily and Billy are humans like Charlie and Sue. Sam is one of the wolf-people like Jacob."

I know because I can tell by their smell. Sam is like Jacob's pack.

"Sam has his own pack. Did he tell you?" I asked.

No, he's not supposed to tell anybody, but I still knew. Renesmee whispered these thoughts in her mind, as if she were telling a secret. I smiled. It was too bad that Bella couldn't get some of these nuances by Renesmee's usual way of communicating. I found the subtleties in her inner voice to be amusing. It was easy to forget that she wasn't speaking aloud.

"It sounds like you had a wonderful day." I squeezed Bella's waist.

Oh yes, and look what Billy gave me! He has lots and he let me pick.

Renesmee reached into a blousy pocket on the front of her dress and pulled out a small object. It was a carved wolf howling into the sky. It was small enough to fit in Renesmee's hand, but carved in great detail with a textured coat and fluffy tail. The carving exuded personality. It was remarkable work for a human hand and eye.

"Maybe Billy will teach you how to make one when you're a little older." Renesmee's eyes got big. She liked that idea.

Where's Aunt Rose? I want to show my godmother. Renesmee liked that new word.

"Rose and Emmett are upstairs. You can go find her, but be sure to knock on the door and ask permission before you go in. Okay?"

Okay. I kissed Renesmee on the forehead and set her down. She took off for the stairs in a rush.

“She’s excited about her day,” I commented to Bella as I wrapped both arms around her waist.

“Yes, she enjoyed Billy. He made her laugh by holding her on his lap and spinning around in his wheelchair. He made me and Jacob laugh by telling her ‘secrets’ that she didn’t realize Jacob and I could hear. He also told her funny stories about Jacob when he was young. They got a kick out of each other.”

“They are both quite charming,” I said, smiling.

“Emily offered her a cookie and she actually ate it. I was so surprised. She put it in her pocket and tried little bites of it all afternoon. I think it’s all gone.”

“Nothing like sugar and fat to excite the human taste buds.”

Bella smiled and reached up for a kiss. I gladly indulged. It was the first time we had been separated since her new birth. Our kissing became more focused and intense and I longed to run off to the cottage with her.

“I missed you terribly,” I told her, trying not to think about the conversation Carlisle and I had had. It had become a constant stabbing ache in my side.

“I missed you too. It was the first time I left the house *and* you.”

“Never leave me again please,” I whispered, kissing her neck and jaw.

“Never.” Bella smiled. I held her against me and stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

“Charlie will probably be here shortly,” Bella said a few minutes later.

“Yes, now that you mention it, I can hear Sue thinking about how handsome he is.”

“You cannot!” she accused, thinking I was teasing her. I just smiled mysteriously. “As much as I detest the idea of being apart from you a minute longer, I was thinking I might go to the cottage and finish working on your closet. By the time you and Nessie come home, it should be finished. That way you won’t have to look at it or think about it at all.”

“I like that last part *very* much, but I’m not fond at all of the first part. I missed you today.”

"I can postpone if you like, but I think your stress level will go down if you don't have to fuss so much with finding something to wear."

"That's true. Renesmee got chocolate chip stains on this shirt. Now I'm down to three."

I chuckled. "No wife of mine will walk about naked in public if I can help it! Though it would certainly be easier."

"I wouldn't want to attract attention," Bella said.

"Everyone would think you were an angel."

"That's what I thought you were back in the beginning," Bella replied.

"I'm much too devilish for that," I said, hoisting her up to my waist. She wrapped her legs around me.

"Mmm...yes, you are..."

I kissed the base of her throat and worked my way up to her smooth, silky lips. She responded instantly and though I knew we'd have to separate very shortly, I tried to make the most of the moment.

"Ugh...that's Charlie's car isn't it?"

"Yes, he's turning in from the highway," I replied, cupping her chin in my hand and pulling her face back to mine. "Would it be rude if we didn't answer the door?" I said, my lips moving against the skin of her jaw.

"I don't think it would stop Charlie from coming in, unfortunately. He hates not seeing Renesmee every day. She changes so quickly."

"I know how he feels," I said as Bella released her legs and landed lightly on the floor.

"You'd better get out of here before they arrive. That way you won't have to explain yourself to Renesmee."

"You're right. Bye, my love. Parting is such sweet sorrow."

"But I'll see you afore the morrow," she replied, chuckling. I released her reluctantly and headed for the kitchen door. Charlie's car was just pulling to a stop as I left.

Our closet was in a monstrous state of disarray and begged to be put aright. Despite Alice's meltdown, I thought I knew what would work for Bella. If Alice ever succeeded at turning

her into a fashion maven, then perhaps they would redo the organization again. I thought it was highly unlikely.

Once I got my rhythm going, the reorganization took less than two hours. I separated the casual clothes that I thought Bella would wear or might work up to, from the pie-in-the-sky fashion visions Alice dreamed for her. I removed everything wearable or potentially wearable from its white garment bag, making a stack of the bags in a corner. On the bottom rack of the long right-hand wall, I hung trousers organized by fabric—denim, khakis, colored cotton, linen, silk. On the corresponding top racks, I hung blouses—cotton knit, woven cotton, linen, rayon, silk—and within each category, I grouped the items by color. Along the far wall I repeated the scheme with skirts on the bottom and jackets on top.

Occupying two free-standing racks running the length of the room were dresses ranging from casual to elegant, and organized by color within their groupings. One free-standing rack contained sportswear, including sweatpants and exercise tops, which Bella would wear. Beyond that were ski clothes, tennis dresses, riding pants and jackets, and other specialty outfits that Bella would probably wear only for picture-taking, if at all. The next rack contained overcoats, raingear, and parkas, and the final rack on the left held party dresses in silk and velvet with sequins, ruffles, and lace. Like the full-length, formal gowns against the left-hand wall, the cocktail and fancy dresses remained stored in their garment bags. Bella's socks, nightclothes and lingerie, along with my socks, underclothes, and nightwear were tucked into a tall dresser at the back of the closet.

I reserved the upper rack on the short wall beside the door for my pants, shirts, and suits. Beneath that were two long shelves for all of our sweaters and Bella's handbags, and beneath that were three wall-length shoe racks. Our bathrobes hung on hooks on the back of the door.

I stood in the doorway and surveyed the result. Everything looked tidy, even attractive, with the varying blocks of color moving about the room and a sea of white on the far left side. The clothing arrangement seemed intuitive (to me, at least) and I thought Bella would be able to find what she needed more easily. No doubt Alice had already seen my efforts and was frothing at the mouth, but I knew it would help Bella cope better with mornings. It was even harder for her to drag herself away from our bed when she had to face the warehouse first thing.

"Speaking" of my angel, I heard her moving through the trees toward the cottage and I opened the front door just as she reached the doorstep. Renesmee was asleep in her arms. Our child had had an exciting day on the reservation and had entertained evening guests as well. I relieved my wife of the burden that was no burden and pulled her close with my free arm.

“Hello, love, I missed you,” I told Bella, touching my lips to hers.

She pressed her palms to my face and held me there, mouthing me lustily. I responded by putting my hand on the small of her back beneath the cloth of her shirt and pulling her against my body. She made me *hungry*. I recalled the first time I’d ever had that feeling on the day that Tyler nearly ran over Bella—twice. I didn’t recognize the sensation when I held her warm body against mine in our little cage between the vehicles. The powerful, new hunger in my body had distracted me for a moment from the flames and desire of my thirst. It was the beginning of my sexual awakening and here we were now at its apex. I was a whole, complete man. I marveled at my good fortune.

“I’ll just put Renesmee down. Go check out your closet,” I suggested. “See if it makes sense to you.” Bella smiled, but I knew that anything having to do with her closet was a burden. We walked down the hall together and I patted her behind as she continued to our room.

Usually, one of us read Nessie a book and rocked her until she grew drowsy, but that wasn’t going to happen on this night. She was exhausted. I removed my child’s knit dress with a ruffled skirt and noticed that the label said “Dolce and Gabbana.” I had been looking at designer clothing for the last two hours and by now was familiar with all the various labels. I wondered how many hundred this designer dress had cost. Renesmee probably wouldn’t get a chance to wear it again before it was too small. I removed her shiny patent leather shoes (by Roberto Cavalli) and peeled off her white tights, which sported a Nordstrom tag. Alice had dressed her up to visit the reservation, though I didn’t doubt that her more casual outfits were just as expensive. Her pink pajamas had the D&G logo printed all over them.

I tucked a blanket around Renesmee, kissed her hot forehead, smoothed her hair away from her face, and left the room, shutting the door behind me. Her automatic nightlight clicked on.

When I reached the closet in our room, Bella was standing frozen in the doorway staring at the racks of clothes in front of her.

“What do you think?” I asked, rubbing her upper arms vigorously to unfreeze her. In a second, she reanimated and turned her head to look at me.

“Well, I was hoping that you took three-quarters of the clothes and threw them out the window, but it looks like there’s just as much here as there was before.” I heard the dismay in her voice.

“You’re right. I’m willing to anger Alice, but not to enrage her. Try to visually disregard everything that is in a white garment bag. Those are special occasion items that you will rarely,

if ever, wear. Likewise, you can disregard the farthest rack with the specialized sportswear. The main focus is here to your right along the wall. The bottom rack contains pants, starting with jeans and getting fancier as you go along. Same with the blouses. Most days all you'll do is reach in the doorway and grab one item from the top rack and one from the bottom. If you need a coat, you can venture to the rack toward the left side of the room or choose a jacket from the far wall. Everything is organized by color within its category. Skirts are below the jackets and dresses here in the center. Sweaters and shoes to the left of the door. Undergarments, pajamas, and lingerie in the dresser at the back. At least now you can see what you have. If you want to cover up entire racks again, we'll find some bed sheets."

Bella turned to face me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

"I think I can cope with this. Thank you for all your effort. At least it feels less like there's an anchor around my neck when I walk in here. And now maybe I'll have a bit more variety in my selection. Can you give me a few minutes here?"

She reached up and pecked me on the lips. I ran my fingers through her hair, enjoying the scent that rose from it.

"Is that all I get?" I smiled a crooked smile.

"For the moment."

"Okay, then, but don't take *too* long, Mrs. Cullen," I said, winking as I unbuttoned my shirt and dropped it to the floor on the way out the door, reenacting a scene from our wedding night.

I had an inkling of what might be coming. During my youth, it was a common pastime for men to collect three-dimensional images of women in or out of their lingerie, often performing sexual acts. The stereopticon viewer was a Victorian contraption, a cross between *Playboy* magazine and the 1960s Viewmaster. Edward, my father, had a stereopticon, but I had no interest in looking at lingerie-clad ladies at that time. I knew one lady, however, in whose lingerie I was quite interested—with her in it, of course. I lay back on the bed with a clear view of the closet door and clasped my hands behind my head, waiting to be amazed and aroused (not that I wasn't already).

"You might want to put on some mood music," Bella called from inside the closet. I located a mix CD of sexy R&B I knew Bella liked, with Marvin Gaye, John Legend, Robert Cray, and others. I popped it into the CD player, turned the lights low, and was back on the bed in two seconds. Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get it On* began its slow seduction.

"Ready?" Bella asked.

“I am, indeed,” I replied in a low voice.

The carved door opened slowly outward and one foot with scarlet-painted toenails appeared a short distance off the floor and started rotating. An ankle appeared, a shapely calf, a sexy knee and then...the unexpected. A down-padded thigh in light yellow, definitely more puffy than shapely. The leg retreated and a yellow-padded behind poked out a couple of feet higher. I started to chuckle.

“I see you chose the ravishing ‘Winter in Antarctica’ ensemble.”

Bella did not reply, but an arm encased in matching quilted down made an arc outward until her hand settled on her poochy rear end. How she kept a straight face I don’t know, but eventually her entire body appeared from behind the door. She looked like the Michelin man’s uptown girlfriend.

On the final notes of the song, she closed the zipper that ran from her knee to her ankle (usually used to make room for ski boots) and then bent over backwards until her hands were on the floor in a backbend. She slowly raised her left leg until it pointed straight up. Her goggles and earmuffs would have made the move particularly sexy...if they had been back in the closet along with the ski pants and jacket. I was highly impressed with her flexibility and grace, though.

Bella slowly raised herself from her backbend into an upright position. She lifted the goggles from her eyes and settled them on top of her head.

“What do you think?”

“I’ve never seen you look more alluring,” I replied in a low, seductive voice. I kept my smile suppressed with effort. “I’d be happy to help you with your zippers.”

She merely smiled, and as the next song began, she started moving again, shimmying, gyrating, and performing impressive feats of flexibility, all while flinging away the earmuffs and goggles, slowly unzipping her jacket, and sliding out of her puffy pants. Beneath the full-coverage costume, she was wearing lace, boy-cut panties that started three inches below her belly button and were no more than three inches high. When she turned around, I saw the lower half of her buttocks rounding out beneath the fabric in a highly titillating fashion. The beige lace contrasted just enough with her skin to highlight the parts of her that were barely covered.

As she flashed open the jacket, I caught a glimpse of a beige lace corset— tight-fitting around her breasts and ribs, laced up the front—before she closed the jacket and resumed dancing. When she opened it again and then tossed it to the floor, I saw that the lacy garment

covered her to an inch above her belly button. That stripe between it and her panties became infinitely interesting as Bella moved her hips in time to Boyz II Men's *I'll Make Love to You* with her arms above her head, her wrists rotating in one direction and then the other.

I was no longer chuckling. My jaw hung open and my eyes were wide. If I were human, I would have been drooling. Bella seemed to enjoy my response as she watched me watch her. She was simply...mouthwatering.

When the third song began, Barry White's *You're the First, the Last, My Everything*, I couldn't take it any longer. I skittered to the end of the bed, put my feet on the floor and held out my arms.

"Come to me, my gorgeous darling. Let me touch you. Let me peel away that lace." My words came out in a low growl.

Bella couldn't have danced like this when she was human without hurting herself or someone else. But there was no hint of awkwardness in her sinuous limbs and swaying hips now. She did a slow, 360-degree turn, giving me a clear view of every angle of her tantalizing anatomy. When her back was to me again, she bent over and put her hands on the floor and then twisted her head around to look at me.

I reached for her, wrapped my fingers around her hipbones and pulled her backwards onto my lap. Her scent was calling to me. I ran my hand from her waist to her knee and back up the inside of her thigh to the top, slipping two fingers beneath the thin strip of lace covering her. It was as wet as she was. A growl rose from deep in my chest and escaped as a low vibrating purr.

I began untying the laces at the front of her top and slid the fabric down beneath her nipples. Pressing my bare chest to her back, I offered her two fingers to suck on and then used those fingers to stroke her nipples while I kissed the back of her neck. She was leaning into me and moaning. With my free hand, I stretched her thighs widely apart with my knees and again slipped my fingers beneath the wet fabric at her crotch. I could feel her moisture soaking through my trousers. When I dragged a finger through her most tender flesh, she cried out and laid her head on my shoulder, turning to find my lips. Her hips were undulating, pressing into me. I ripped open the front of my trousers and freed my penis, laying it in the crack of her buttocks, only a thin layer of lace between us. I ached to be inside her, but her arousal was so thrilling that I put it off. Instead, I rubbed myself against her backside as she pressed into me.

I touched her clitoris with the tip of my index finger and she growled, her tongue seeking mine. As they touched, I lifted her left thigh toward her chest, opening her widely, and then slipped two fingers into her as deeply as they would go.

Ahhhh! My breathing was as heavy as hers as I stroked her with my thumb and she writhed like a snake.

“Faster...,” she murmured roughly. I sped up the motion and felt her begin to vibrate. Her vagina constricted around my fingers. “I want you inside me now,” she panted, tearing off her lace panties.

“Whatever you like,” I replied, sliding us backwards until I could prop myself on some pillows, while Bella crouched over me facing away. I held my penis upright for her and with a growl, she pressed herself onto me.

“Ahhhh!” We groaned at the same time. The angle into her was unusual and the hard surface of her pubic bone rubbed against the head of my penis on every stroke. I was touching a sensitive place inside her too, it seemed, as she used me to rub herself over and over on the same spot. It was too much, too fast. I reached between Bella’s legs and wiggled my finger on her most sensitive spot to catch her up. In seven seconds, she came fast and hard, her powerful muscles throwing me over my edge. I growled and she made small, high-toned cries that excited me, prompting more growls. We must have sounded like predator and prey locked in mortal struggle.

When she was satisfied, Bella separated herself from me and lay back on my chest. I stroked her hair and kissed the side of her throat. The corset was riding beneath her breasts, covering her midriff. I unlaced it and when it fell away, caressed the skin beneath. Then I let my fingers wander downward to ruffle her red-brown pubic hair. We lay like that for a long while, not talking, just happy to be together again. The only part I liked about being separated from Bella was un-separating.

“I hope you will favor me with another dance sometime. I want to put hundred-dollar bills in your panties with my teeth,” I informed my wife, speaking into her ear.

“Shouldn’t that be one- or five-dollar bills?”

“Not for you. One hundred dollars per peek I’d say is about right.”

“Big spender! Actually, for you only, I’ll do it for free.”

“Mmm, maybe the jodhpurs with the funny hat and the riding crop next time?” I teased.

“You like the kinky stuff, do you?”

“I have no idea,” I said, chuckling. “I’m sure I’d enjoy anything you liked, though.”

“No whips, or chains, or ball-gags for me.”

“What’s a ball-gag?”

“It’s a gag with a ball at the center that goes in your mouth. I saw it in the movie *Pulp Fiction* with my mom.”

“What’s the ball for?”

“I’m not sure, but it looks really funny.”

“So not *too* sexy, then.” We both laughed.

“You’re just a treasure trove of naughty sex tricks, aren’t you?” I accused, trying to tickle her stomach with no success.

“No, I just read a lot...and watch movies.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed your dancing. You look ravishing in ten pounds of down padding.”

“I thought you’d like that, especially the earmuffs.”

“Yes, maybe you could wear those sometime while we make love. And the goggles too.” Bella started giggling which made her naked bottom bounce intriguingly against my private parts.

“For somebody who’s so old-fashioned about marriage, you’re not at all old-fashioned in the bedroom,” Bella observed.

“Aren’t I? Well, I read a lot of books too. I’m hoping to be a metrosexual one day.”

Bella began giggling again. “Not a retrosexual, old man?”

“You tell me,” I whispered, kissing her neck just below her ear, while combing through her pubic hair with my fingers.

“Not so far,” she whispered back. Pressing myself against her bottom, I was losing interest in conversation.

“I want you, love,” I breathed into her ear.

“Mmmm...”

I rolled us over until Bella was on her stomach and then kneeled behind her. I liked the feeling of pressing against her buttocks. I pulled her onto her knees and stroked myself through her lips, making us both wet and slippery. Impatient, Bella reached between her legs to redirect

me and I pushed into her slowly. From this angle, entering her was a tight, pleasurable squeeze followed by a deep plunge. Bella gasped as I rubbed against her internal sweet spot.

I pulled out and watched my penis disappear into her again, and then again, mesmerized by the sensuality of that image. Then without warning, I felt her hand on my scrotum cupping and stroking. The unexpected stimulation drove me mad with excitement. I slapped my groin against her buttocks—her beautiful, curvy buttocks—over and over. She was growling fiercely as we greedily slammed into each other, the noise becoming thunderously loud. A stray thought streaked through my head that Emmett might be listening and laughing, but it did not distract me.

We soon were moving so fast that we might have been a blur to human eyes. As I stabbed into her with the force of a jackhammer, I suddenly remembered getting carried away another time in this position when Bella was pregnant. Something about it made me a little crazy, aggressive, but Bella didn't seem to mind. She kept stroking me with her hand until I could hold back no longer. When I orgasmed, the release was more forceful than I expected and my thighs collapsed, separating me from Bella.

She was not done with *me*, though. In a blur of movement, she turned her body around to face me, and then pushed me onto my back. She took my penis in her hand and lowered herself onto me and then pulled back and did it again, closing her eyes and moaning. I stroked her with my finger and she began thrusting wildly. I took her left nipple in my mouth, sucking and tugging, and as she continued to ride, my libido rose again. She was unbelievably sexy. I could not resist her motion and the squeezing of her vagina and I knew I was going to climax again.

“No, wait, wait for me...” she murmured, and I clamped my jaws together to hold myself in check as she continued stroking her internal recesses. Then, with a shiver and a cry, Bella imploded, milking away my resistance until I exploded into her yet again. Miraculous. We were like Eveready bunnies. We just kept going and going and going.

43. DISCOVERED

Irina Denali came to reconcile with our family, but the visit had gone wrong in the worst possible way and now we were in a very precarious situation indeed. She had appeared then disappeared, carrying with her the misapprehension that we had created an immortal child, a vampire crime punishable by death.

Bella and Jacob had taken Renesmee on a close-in hunting trip the day the drama began. Jacob could entice Renesmee to compete with him for prey, which made her more willing to hunt. She much preferred to drink donated blood, but now that we had limited her to four pints per day, she either had to hunt or eat human food to supplement it. She did eat regularly, but it was a toss-up which she disliked more—human food or animal blood. I thought she was tending toward a preference for animal blood, but Bella wasn't sure.

I had decided to stay home that day and finalize our traveling plans with Carlisle so that we could purchase airline tickets to Brazil. The family would split into two groups—my brothers and sisters in one, Bella and I with Carlisle and Esme—and search for clues, meeting periodically at Isle Esme to regroup. The island was far from the Amazon where we intended to be, so we were preparing to “go wild” for an indeterminate amount of time.

Jacob didn't like the uncertainty of being separated from Renesmee and had been arguing to come with us. I'd explained to Bella my reasons for not wanting him along. First off, I knew that he would oppose changing Renesmee and I thought the probability was high that we would have no choice in the end. Bella thought it was too risky and I might have had to convince her otherwise, which would be harder with Jacob around. Second, I just wanted to feel like my family was my own for a while before ceding Renesmee to another man.

Carlisle and I were tracing routes through the jungle when my cell phone rang—Bella. I wasn't expecting a call. I grabbed it on the first ring.

“Come, bring Carlisle,” she said in a rush. “I saw Irina, and she saw me, but then she saw Jacob and she got mad and ran away, I *think*. She hasn't shown up here—yet, anyway—but she looked pretty upset so maybe she will. If she doesn't, you and Carlisle have to go after her and talk to her. I feel so bad.”

As soon as I heard her first three words, I was on my feet, had signaled to Carlisle, and we were out the door. I began to track Bella and Renesmee's scents, running at top speed. Carlisle wasn't far behind.

“We'll be there in half a minute,” I promised.

As Carlisle and I raced through the woods, I heard Seth and Leah striding behind us. Jacob must have summoned them to help protect Renesmee. I felt that my father and I could handle it ourselves, but I didn't say anything. Backup wouldn't hurt.

Before long, I was beside my wife. My eyes scanned the horizon continuously, searching for danger, though I couldn't be sure in what form it might come.

"She was up on that ridge," Bella explained, pointing. "Maybe you should call Emmett and Jasper and have them come with you. She looked...really upset. She growled at me."

"What?" I exclaimed, though I'd heard what she said. Irina growled at my wife? Anger coursed through me. That was totally unacceptable!

"She's grieving. I'll go after her," Carlisle said, trying to assuage me, but I wouldn't be turned away from a threat on Bella.

"I'm coming with you," I insisted. My father looked at me, trying to ascertain whether he should object.

If you do, you must follow my lead and hold your temper.

I made no promises, but he saw that I would not be deterred. Laurent had gotten what was coming to him! He was going to drink Bella's blood when he knew that she was under our protection. I felt a stab of pain remembering that I had abandoned her to Laurent and his ilk. Jacob and the other wolves had stepped in to save her. Perhaps I would have to reconsider my stand on taking Jacob to Brazil. He had saved Bella's life so many times. Without him, I would not have her.

Carlisle and I tracked Irina's scent east to the shores of Puget Sound.

Swim? Carlisle asked. I nodded and dove into the cold water. We thought Seattle was a likely destination, so we swam in that direction, but when we reached the opposite shore, Irina's scent was nowhere nearby. We split up, Carlisle going north and I running south, but after twenty minutes and hundreds of miles, I realized that Irina must not have gone to Seattle. I had no second guess, unless she'd headed straight north to Denali. It was a long run to Alaska, though if Irina was particularly upset, which it sounded like she was, she might choose to run. I turned around and sprinted along the shoreline until Carlisle and I met again. He'd had no luck either. We retraced our route home in defeat.

When Carlisle called Tanya to report the situation, she told him that Irina had left Denali when her family decided to attend the wedding and they hadn't seen her since. Irina was bereft and angry that the wolf pack had killed Laurent, whom she had begun to think of as a potential

mate. Tanya's family had been suffering over the absence of their sister, so Tanya was hurt that Irina had been in the area but hadn't come home even to visit. Alice verified that Irina was wandering around in the snowy wilderness somewhere up north—she couldn't tell where exactly. The frozen north looks pretty much the same everywhere.

Bella felt badly about upsetting Irina and typically blamed herself for the accident of their meeting in the woods when Jacob was present instead of me. If I had been there, I could have caught up to her and straightened things out, perhaps. Except that it hurt Bella, I didn't much care if Irina stayed away from us over a grudge, though. Bella shouldn't have to feel guilty simply for being alive!

When we got to our cottage that night, Bella broached the subject of Jacob and Brazil.

"Renesee's future affects Jacob's entire life," she maintained, "just as it does yours and mine." I thought about that for a moment. Did that make us responsible for Jacob's future too? I wasn't certain about that.

"What about his pack? Doesn't the alpha need to be here to boss them around?" I asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"He says not. He says that they have things to do in La Push. I suppose they'll be patrolling regularly and such. Leah will be in charge."

"She'll like *that*, I bet. I'm glad we won't be here to be 'protected' by Leah's pack." I smiled wryly.

"So it sounds like you're willing to let Jacob come with us. I think it's the right thing to do. Besides, any tribal people we find might be more willing to talk to Jacob than to us, since he's Native American and *not* a vampire. I wouldn't be surprised if people who believe in vampires avoid us like the plague."

"You have a point there."

"I really think he should come with us, Edward. The reasons for him not coming aren't as strong as those for him coming along."

"I suppose I can agree to that, but if we have no choice but to change Renesee, Jacob cannot interfere."

"You'll have to get that by me first. I think it's too risky."

"If the choice is between her dying of old age at fifteen or us attempting to change her, I think the choice is obvious."

"I'm not convinced, but let's just move forward for now and assume that we won't have to make that decision."

"All right. We can do that for now. I'll run the Jacob thing by Carlisle too."

"Thank you," Bella said, moving toward me to put her arms around my neck. I leaned over to kiss her and pulled her close with one arm on her waist and the other at the back of her neck. I loved kissing Bella. Her lips were no longer delicate and vulnerable to my non-yielding flesh, so I could kiss her with all the passion that I felt. It was wonderfully freeing. I ran my fingers down the curves of her spine, all the way to her tailbone and back up. Bella began breathing faster.

"You still get aroused when I touch you, just as you used to," I observed, my lips close to hers.

"I do," Bella admitted.

"I love that," I murmured, trailing my fingers over her hip bone. Bella began to unbutton my shirt and stroke my chest, following its low curves to the sides, down my ribs, and into the small of my back. I reached inside her shirt to feel the sweep of her back beneath my palms. The texture of her skin was perfect, like the finest Carrera marble.

Grasping the hem of Bella's shirt, I lifted it over her head and peeled it from her upraised arms. My hands explored the front of her body, caressing her belly and breasts, her throat and shoulders. When I tickled Bella's lower belly with curved fingers, she began panting into my mouth. I felt her fingers unbutton my khakis and reach inside. It still shocked me how intense it was to feel Bella's hand wrap around my penis...and then she reached further downward.

Ahhh! I dropped my forehead against hers to absorb that sensation. It was wonderfully strange when Bella touched me in places no one had ever touched me, except perhaps as an infant or in a doctor's office in my human days. It was so new, and though mildly disconcerting, far too pleasant for me to raise an objection.

Bella's stroking and fondling only made me want more. I scooped her into my arms and whisked her down the hallway to our bedroom, kicking the door shut behind me. Holding her to my chest with one arm, I tugged at the ankles of her blue jeans until she was freed. I tickled my fingers through the triangle of hair between her thighs and then laid her on her back. I hurriedly removed my trousers and lowered myself over her.

"I need you," I whispered. She knew already and had spread her legs widely in welcome, her breath coming rough and jagged.

Later that night, I was on my back with my head propped on a pillow. Bella was fooling around as she lay near the bottom of the bed with her head resting on my stomach. She got a kick out of the fact that my penis was always erect. With two fingers at its base, she angled it away from my body and used it like a foam bat to bonk herself on the forehead. Then she pretended to poke it up her nose and then in her ear. I wasn't sure what had started this frivolity at the expense of my dignity, but hers was in tatters too. Plus, the touching was nice.

"It's like a lollipop the way it sticks up and with that bell-shaped part on the top. It makes me want to..." She positioned her lips just above my penis and opened her mouth slightly. She paused. "Oh...I guess not." She laid her head back down on my belly and stroked me with her fingertips. "Or, I could play it like a recorder." She settled her fingers on imaginary finger holes, raised her head, and positioned her pursed lips at the top. Another pause. "But I don't really know how, I guess." She laid her head down with my "manhood" beside her nose.

I faked snarling at her. "You're the worst tease I've ever had the pleasure of thinking might be about to suck my...well, you know." I grinned.

"Why is it called a 'blow job' when you're doing the opposite?" she asked innocently.

"Maybe because if you do it properly it explodes."

Bella giggled. "That makes sense. You know, the more I play with it, the bigger it gets."

"I don't think so."

"It seems to. It's bigger around now. Look! It's longer too."

"I think you're confusing me with a human."

"How could I? I've never seen a naked one."

"No?"

"No. I've seen pictures of them soft and pictures of them hard, but never seen one grow."

"Quite different than us, I believe."

“But you still expand some. I’m sure of it.” She measured the girth by making a ring with her thumb and index finger. Then, after all the teasing and titillation, suddenly her lips were on me and my penis was disappearing into her mouth. I groaned in ecstasy as I watched her take me all the way in. I felt the back of her throat and wondered how she didn’t choke.

I moaned softly. “Ahhhh...Bella...that feels...”

I lost my words when she employed her newly discovered trick—tickling and stroking my scrotum. I felt my testicles tighten toward my body. And just as suddenly as she’d taken me into her mouth, she pulled away.

“Look, see? You’re that much bigger around!” She showed me a larger circle of thumb and forefinger. Then she put the base of her palm at the base of my penis and stretched her fingers upward. “And look! You’re more than an inch longer than my hand now. When I started, you were about half an inch longer!”

“Is that right?” I queried, slightly frustrated. “Perhaps you’d like to exploit my immense size before it shrinks back to its previously puny proportions?”

“There’s nothing puny about you. Trust me on that. I swear if you were any larger, it would be painful to make love.”

“It’s not, is it?” I flipped onto my side and gazed down at her face. “Do I hurt you? You have to tell me!” It would be like her not to tell me—just as she’d hidden her horrific experience with the morphine. I inhaled sharply, remembering my conversation with Carlisle.

“No, no, no. Don’t get all freaked out. I’m just saying. You’ve *never* hurt me, okay? Except maybe a little the first time—”

“I hurt you the first time?! More than the bruising?” I sat up in alarm.

“Well, yes, it hurt a little—”

“Bella, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...” I dropped my head into my hands. “I never should have—”

Bella sat up and put her arm around my waist.

“No, Edward! No! I will not let you get upset about this after all this time! Of course it hurt a little bit. It’s supposed to the first time. But then it didn’t hurt at all, or at least you were thrilling me so much that I didn’t notice it. It was fine. It was wonderful. You were...just wonderful.”

As Bella spoke, she crawled onto my body and pushed my shoulders down to the mattress. "Now you're going to lie there while I make you feel good and you're not going to get all weird about me losing my virginity. I'd do it with you again in a second."

I knew I was upsetting her, so I made an effort to put my distress aside. She'd implied at the time that it hurt, but she was making such exciting sounds and moving so provocatively that I hadn't absorbed it. Probably she had minimized the pain because she knew I would stop.

Bella kissed the bottom of my throat and then slithered her way down my body touching and kissing. My thoughts grew incoherent and my worries faded as quickly as they'd come.

When she reached her former position, she stopped and looked at my face. Every nerve in my groin was vibrating in anticipation. Then as I watched, she tongued the head of my penis, the most sensitive part of my body. I pressed my head into the mattress, paralyzed by pleasure. Before I could recover, she closed her mouth around me and slid her lips all the way down. As she slid back up, she closed her fingers in a circle and dragged them along. With her free hand she cupped my scrotum, tickling and stroking. I buried my fingers in her hair as she gave me more pleasure than anyone had a right to receive.

"Bella..." I murmured. I felt some compunction about ejaculating into her mouth, but what she was doing felt so good that I didn't want her to stop either.

"I want to," she whispered after the next upward stroke. "It tastes like you...like honey and lilacs and sunshine and the sea..."

Her lips moved down on me again and after the brief pause, felt all the more intense.

"Grrrrrr...!" The growl rumbled deeply in my chest.

Her hand gently massaged my scrotum and I felt one eruption after another shoot into her wet, warm mouth. Ecstasy. Bella was humming and I felt the added vibration of the notes against my skin. I'd become so sensitive that just her breath made me shudder.

"Darling..." I started but lost the thought between my mind and my mouth. I lay there like a lump of wet cement, reliving and recovering, my eyes closed.

"Edward, could you go again right now?" Her question startled me.

"Yeessss, probably, but it certainly isn't necessary."

"What if I want to?"

“Why don’t you come up here? I want to hold you and touch you.”

“But I’m having so much fun down here.”

“Me too, actually, but I still want to feel your body next to me.” In a flash, Bella’s belly was on my chest and her vulva was staring me in the face. Not exactly what I’d had in mind, but lovely all the same.

“This is new,” I commented.

“Don’t feel obligated or anything. I’m just responding to your request.”

“Nothing I ever do with you is an obligation. It’s all a distinct pleasure.”

She dragged her fingers around various private parts of my body and I mimicked her actions, touching where she touched, stroking where she stroked, kissing where she kissed. Eventually, we directed our attention to one set of analogous organs using our mouths and our tongues to excite each other. It was slow, gentle, and sensual. Lovemaking with my wife was the best part of my life, the part I most looked forward to, the part I grudgingly relinquished each morning.

It was only two weeks later that our idyllic world collapsed, smashed to smithereens like the vase Alice had just dropped onto the marble tiles. In a breath, I saw what she saw and gasped. My throat closed, my body froze, and I was lost in Alice’s nightmare vision of our truncated future.

Jasper was at Alice’s side instantaneously, shaking her, trying to bring her back. Her eyes were so wide that her face seemed shrunken around them.

“What *is* it?” he cried, frightened by her obvious terror.

Emmett looked out the windows toward the river, scanning for the threat, but everyone else had frozen into statues, including Bella.

“They’re coming for us. All of them.” Alice and I had whispered the words in unison. The image she had seen was of the Volturi moving ghost-like across the broad clearing we had most recently used as a battleground against Victoria’s newborn army. This time it wasn’t just the

guard that was coming, as she had seen before. It was Aro, Caius, and Marcus, the full guard, and all of the wives. The entire vampire population of Volterra was coming to Forks.

“The Volturi,” Alice whimpered at the same time that I said, “All of them.”

Everyone began asking questions at once.

“Why?”

“How?”

“When?”

“Not long,” Alice and I replied, again in unison. I was receiving the answers at the same time Alice was envisioning them.

“There’s snow on the forest, snow on the town. Little more than a month,” Alice clarified in a hollow voice. Just after Christmas then, our happy life would be destroyed. Despair dropped over me like a fog.

Everyone began talking at once, trying to make sense of Alice’s vision. Why would the Volturi come here? I thought I knew.

“The wives never leave the tower,” Jasper was saying. Besides Carlisle, who had lived with them, Jasper had encountered the Volturi more than any of us. “Never,” he continued. “Not during the southern rebellion. Not when the Romanians tried to overthrow them. Not even when they were hunting the immortal children. Never.”

“They’re coming now,” I whispered. It was absolutely clear in Alice’s mind.

“But *why*?” Carlisle repeated. “We’ve done nothing! And if we had, what could we possibly do that would bring *this* down on us?”

“There are so many of us,” I started to explain, all emotion drained from my voice. “They must want to make sure that...” I interrupted myself when I saw Bella’s eyes grow large and her face change from alabaster to ice.

The Volturi were afraid that Carlisle’s coven was becoming too strong and that we might threaten their sovereignty with our cohesiveness and our different way of life. To alleviate the perceived threat, they were coming for Alice...and for me. Based on our visit to Volterra the year before, I could see it as clear as day. Aro had wanted us then. He also knew that neither Alice nor I would leave our family to join the guard, so the guard would have to destroy the family. They would find some excuse to justify it.

Then Alice saw the missing piece—Irina. Irina was on her way to Volterra and would provide the justification. Perhaps it was our alliance with the werewolves. We'd successfully hidden the wolves from the Volturi guard after our battle with the newborns. However, Irina knew Laurent had been killed by werewolves and now that she'd seen Jacob with Bella, she knew that we were "in cahoots" with them. That would be enough of an excuse for Aro, I knew.

"Can we stop her?" Jasper wanted to know.

"There's no way. She's almost there," Alice replied, despair radiating from her.

I was watching Bella, trying to gauge how much she understood. Of course, her trip to Italy was off now. That wasn't going to keep the Volturi away because they weren't coming to check on Bella. It was something else. I saw a look of fierce protectiveness cross Bella's face before she darted to the couch where Renesmee had fallen asleep. Bella wrapped her body around our child as if to shield her from sniper fire and buried her face in Nessie's hair. Then she spoke in a muffled voice.

"Think of what she saw that afternoon. To someone who'd lost a mother because of the immortal children, what would Renesmee look like?"

Heaven help us, that was it! The justification. The Volturi would destroy us without question. There would be no reason whatsoever to hesitate.

"An immortal child," Carlisle whispered, confirming my thoughts.

I was already at Bella's side, kneeling over her, my arms wrapped around my wife and daughter in a useless attempt to shield them from danger.

"But she's wrong," Bella reasoned. "Renesmee isn't like those other children. They were frozen, but she grows so much every day. They were out of control, but she never hurts Charlie or Sue or even shows them things that would upset them. She *can* control herself. She's already smarter than most adults. There would be no reason..."

Everybody else in the room knew something that Bella did not. We knew that even though she was correct, it would not matter. I steeled myself to explain.

"It's not the kind of crime they hold a trial for, love," I told her, whispering into her hair with my gentlest voice, as if it would soften the truth. "Aro's seen Irina's proof in her thoughts. They come to destroy, not to be reasoned with."

"But they're wrong," Bella repeated.

"They won't wait for us to show them that."

“What can we do?” Bella asked, ready to put up whatever fight or resistance would save our child and us. The hard kernel of determination in her voice nearly broke my granite heart. There was no hope. None at all.

44. DEFECTION

It was the most horrific nightmare imaginable, knowing that we would be wiped off the face of the earth. I wouldn't have minded quite so much for myself if it had happened before I met Bella. But now...now...it was phenomenally cruel.

Emmett wanted to fight, of course. Jasper tried to convince him that we couldn't win, but Emmett would not run under any circumstances. He would go down swinging, preferably taking as many of his adversaries with him as possible. He was all for garnering an opposing force, the Quileute, the Denalis, and anyone else we could think of, but Bella was adamant that we not invite our wolf allies to die alongside us. Carlisle was just as resolute that we not ask the Denalis to put themselves in danger.

Perhaps because Emmett is incapable of surrender—and therefore, of despair—that he, among all of us, thought of a way to move forward. He reasoned that if we could catch the Volturi's attention long enough to tell our story and let them observe its truth for themselves, then they would be forced to recognize Renesmee for what she is—not a threat to our species, but a unique gift.

It was a reasonable plan. In fact, it was the only plan we had, our only chance. The likelihood of success was minute. If the Volturi wanted to destroy our coven because of an unforgivable infraction of the rules, they could do so without disrupting the entire Volturi coven. Aro must have something else in mind if he was dragging Caius and (especially) Marcus halfway around the world along with the entire guard and the wives.

I knew Aro well enough to believe that Renesmee was a convenient excuse to ignite the bomb he'd wanted to drop on our family for a long time. In Aro's deluded mind, we posed a threat to the Volturi's power because of our numbers and our loyalty to Carlisle. He had always wanted Alice and myself to join the Volturi guard, so perhaps he hoped to take us as "booty" along the way. I could guarantee that neither of us ever would go willingly and he had read my mind, so either he must be prepared to take us by force or he planned to destroy us all.

Grasping at the thin straws of hope Emmett presented, we quickly developed his idea into a concrete plan. We would locate as many vampire friends as we could find in the short time available and ask them to stand with us when the Volturi arrived, not as combatants, but as witnesses to the fact that we had not violated the law against immortal children. The bigger the crowd facing them upon their arrival, the more likely it was that they would postpone their destruction long enough to listen. That might not stop their action, but at least it would reveal the injustice of it to those remaining, if anyone remained.

Alice searched the future as we solidified our plans. Every decision we made rippled through time and altered subsequent decisions, and every action we took had the potential for changing the future. Her eyes went blank as she sorted through an exponential number of pathways to locate the decision points that could affect the end point. Making the right choices along the way would be vital to producing the most favorable outcome.

Renesmee's presence both in the room and at the heart of future events made it hard for Alice to see the future clearly, but she was getting glimpses of our gathered numbers and named those whose help we should seek. "Tanya's family, Siobhan's coven, Amun's. Some of the nomads—Garrett and Mary for certain. Maybe Alistair." The *maybe* for Alistair meant that he could also pose trouble, though Alice (and therefore I) couldn't see exactly what that trouble might be.

"What about Peter and Charlotte?" Jasper asked, though he was loathe to ask his former brother to risk his and his mate's lives in a venture that he saw as unlikely to succeed.

"Maybe," Alice replied. Again the *maybe*. Alice could see that Peter would be willing, but that Charlotte was a complication for some reason.

"The Amazons?" Carlisle suggested. "Kachiri, Zafrina, and Senna?"

At that suggestion, Alice saw images of the three women, natives of Brazil, in their jungle environment. Then I thought I caught an image of Zafrina and Senna among the group in our living room, Senna attached to Zafrina's side in the unfamiliar environment, but Kachiri was not in evidence. Before I could see where she was Alice yanked her mind abruptly back to the present, erasing the vision.

She glanced at Carlisle before looking at her feet and then blurting out, "I can't see," in response to his question.

"What was that?" I whispered to prevent waking Renesmee. "That part in the jungle. Are we going to look for them?"

"I can't see," Alice repeated, and her mind immediately began flipping through an atlas of maps, from Europe, to Africa, to Australia, Mauritius, the Cayman Islands... I didn't understand. Was she looking for other covens elsewhere in the world? Before I could ask, she started barking directions.

"We'll have to split up and hurry—before the snow sticks to the ground. We have to round up whomever we can and get them here to show them." She went back to considering the Volturi. "Ask Eleazar. There is more to this than just an immortal child."

Eleazar was a former member of the Volturi guard. Maybe he had some knowledge that would help us to succeed in our fated mission? Before I could ask, Alice resumed shuffling future scenarios, looking for some concrete answers. The last thing I saw was another glimpse of a jungle before she blanked out, her mind suddenly foggy and indistinct. I couldn't make any sense of the pictures or of her strong emotional reaction to them. Her mind seemed frantic.

"There is so much. We have to hurry," she whispered.

"Alice? That was too fast—I didn't understand. What was—?" I was going to ask her what connection there was between the Volturi and the jungle, but she interrupted me with an emotional outburst.

"I can't see! Jacob's almost here!" Frustration at her partial blindness was the only reason I could think of for Alice's harsh tone.

"I'll deal with—" Rosalie was about to say "Jacob" when Alice interrupted.

"No, let him come," Alice screeched, her voice high and tight. She took Jasper's hand and dragged him toward the kitchen door. "I'll see better away from Nessie, too. I need to go. I need to really concentrate. I need to see everything I can. I have to go. Come on, Jasper, there's no time to waste!"

I could see that Jasper was confused and disturbed by Alice's behavior, but he had too much experience with her—as well as love and respect—to question her judgment when she was predicting the future. The couple passed Jacob on the front porch.

"Hurry!" Alice threw over her shoulder. "You have to find them all!" We couldn't know that in only a few hours' time, we would all be looking back on that moment with utter devastation.

Sunrise found us frozen in exactly the same positions we had adopted after Jacob burst through the front door the night before. Reacting to the strained atmosphere in the room, he had demanded to know what was going on. Was Renesmee okay?

"Nothing's wrong with Renesmee," Bella had managed to reply.

"Then who?"

“All of us, Jacob,” she had whispered, so softly that human ears would not have heard her. “It’s over. We have all been sentenced to die.”

Responding to Jacob’s stunned silence, Carlisle explained—with minimal animation, moving only his lips—that the Volturi were coming to destroy us. The whole family metamorphosed into silent statues as his words transformed our situation from surreal into all-too-immediate reality.

Bella was crouched beside the couch, her arms spread across Renesmee’s slumbering form, but her eyes were locked on mine. Unmoving, we gazed at one another all night, acknowledging that our lives now were measured by an hourglass whose grains of sand were numbered and falling fast. We’d had only a few months together since Bella’s near demise to celebrate our endless future, so the shock was profound.

Morning came sooner than expected. We’d been waiting for Alice to return and tell us what to do. Our family was dependent on Alice in so many ways, but especially now that we needed a reason to hope. When the sun began to peek through the glass wall and throw sparkles of light from our bodies, I was startled enough to realize that we had a problem.

“Alice,” I said softly when my face started to soften. The word released the spell that hung over the room and each of the sculptures began coming back to life.

“She’s been gone a long time,” Rosalie remarked with surprise.

“Where could she be?” Emmett continued, moving toward the door.

“We don’t want to disturb—,” Esme began to say.

“She’s never taken so long before,” I cut in, a new, more pressing fear creeping over me like a fog. Might the Volturi guard already be in place to grab any of us who tried to escape? Could they have been waiting to separate Alice from the rest of us so that they could steal her away? Was Jasper already dead? “Carlisle, you don’t think—something preemptive? Would Alice have had time to see if they sent someone for her?”

“Goddammit!” Emmett swore loudly, causing the russet-colored wolf sleeping in the corner to leap up and growl. His pack joined in chorus from outside.

I was already out the door with Carlisle on my heels, tracking Alice and Jasper’s scents over the river and through the forest. I heard the family following us and Bella yell, “Stay with Renesmee!” I assumed she was talking to Jacob. Bella was still strong enough to bound past everyone and catch up to Carlisle and me.

“Would they have been able to surprise her?” Carlisle threw my question back at me as we ran.

“I don’t see how,” I replied. “But Aro knows her better than anyone else. Better than I do.”

“Is this a trap?” Emmett hollered.

“Maybe,” I answered. “There’s no scent but Alice and Jasper. Where were they going?”

After making a big loop through the woods—ignoring a side trail of Alice’s scent—we found ourselves at the boundary of the Quileute reservation where Sam met us and told Carlisle the bad news. I saw it in his mind before Sam had finished speaking and before he’d handed Alice’s note to Carlisle—the one that revealed she and Jasper had left and asked that we not follow them.

“Alice has decided to leave us,” Carlisle whispered, in shock. He held up the note for everyone to see.

Don’t look for us. There isn’t time to waste. Remember: Tanya, Siobhan, Amun, Alistair, all the nomads you can find. We’ll seek out Peter and Charlotte on our way. We’re so sorry that we have to leave you this way, with no goodbyes or explanations. It’s the only way for us. We love you.

They had escaped across Quileute land with Sam’s permission, he not knowing that they were running away. Sam was thinking loudly. *Surely the situation can’t be that dangerous!*

“Yes, things are that dangerous,” I told him brusquely.

“Enough that you would abandon your family?” Sam’s critical tone irked me. Alice wouldn’t have left us without vital reasons for doing so.

“We don’t know what she saw. Alice is neither unfeeling nor a coward. She just has more information than we do.”

“We would not—,”

“You are bound differently than we are,” I cut in, unwilling to hear him say the words he was thinking. “We each still have our free will.” That ticked him off. “But you should heed the

warning," I said in a more conciliatory tone. "This is not something you want to involve yourselves in. You can still avoid what Alice saw."

"We don't run away."

"Don't get your family slaughtered for pride," Carlisle said softly to Sam.

"As Edward pointed out, we don't have the same kind of freedom that you have. Renesmee is as much a part of our family now as she is yours. Jacob cannot abandon her, and we cannot abandon him."

As much as I appreciated Sam's sentiment for my daughter's sake, I was still angry at the condemnation he was heaping upon Alice in his mind. "You don't know her," I said, trying to keep my emotions in check. I heard Esme's breath catch behind me. She was crying.

"Do you?" Sam asked pointedly. I wanted to crush his arrogant face. How *dare* he judge my sister?

Carlisle stepped in just in time, putting a hand on my shoulder. "We have much to do, son. Whatever Alice's decision, we would be foolish not to follow her advice now. Let's go home and get to work." I let him direct me away. Why waste the energy?

"Thank you, Sam," Carlisle added.

"I'm sorry," Sam said with a hint of humility. "We shouldn't have let her through."

"You did the right thing," Carlisle countered. "Alice is free to do what she will. I wouldn't deny her that liberty."

There was nothing more to say or do but accept that Alice and Jasper had chosen to run. They would try to escape the Volturi, leaving us to face them without their help. Maybe they *could* run and stay one step ahead of Demetri's tracking if Alice kept watch on the guard's intentions. If they were on their own, perhaps they could survive for some period of time and I couldn't begrudge them that.

The rest of us couldn't escape, though. Emmett would never run away and Rosalie wouldn't leave without him. Carlisle would stay as the leader of the coven and I would stay to protect Bella and Renesmee as best I could. That I couldn't succeed weighed heavily on my soul.

The evidence was there, but I still felt a nagging doubt that Alice would abandon us to our fate. She had been trying to block her thoughts from me just before her departure. Maybe she hadn't wanted me to see that she was preparing to run, but maybe...just maybe...she had another plan. But if so, why didn't she want any of us to know?

Ah, yes... She didn't want Aro to read our minds and discover where she was going. So, there was no plan. She was flitting through maps in her mind to keep me—and thus, the Volturi—from locating them. Unfortunately, Aro had read Alice's mind when she came to Italy to save me and so he knew her mind as thoroughly as she did herself. He might be able to figure out where she would go even without Demetri. I hoped not.

"I'm not going down without a fight," Emmett growled, interrupting my thoughts. "Alice told us what to do. Let's get it done."

Without Emmett's determination to resist our dark future, I don't know that I would have been able to go on at that moment. My first impulse was to take Bella to our cottage and spend every remaining second there with her until death came. But Bella had suffered to bring Renesmee into the world and if I didn't fight for our child's future with everything I had, then I wasn't worthy of the precious gifts I'd been given.

Besides, Alice had *something* in mind when she told us to bring together all of our friends. She had even said that they would send Peter and Charlotte to us "on their way." Jasper would never allow Peter and Charlotte to come if he were running away himself. So Alice must have *some* hope for us. Otherwise, her behavior made no sense at all.

Soon after we discovered Alice's defection, Bella began to behave oddly. On the way home, she decided to follow the solitary trail of Alice's scent that we had passed. It couldn't be relevant since she and Jasper were together when they left, but when Bella turned away from us, a new pain tore at me.

"I'll come with you," I murmured. "We'll meet you at home, Carlisle." Bella looked at me in surprise. After the rest of the family had run on, I said, "I couldn't let you walk away from me. It hurt just to imagine it." Bella reached for my hand. "Let's hurry. Renesmee will be awake."

Strangely, Alice's scent trail led to our cottage. Bella asked me to wait outside for thirty seconds, but I couldn't stand not having her next to me, so I followed her after only half that time. I found her burning one of her beloved Shakespeare books in the fireplace.

"What's going on, Bella?"

"She was here. She ripped a page out of my book to write her note on."

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

"Why are you burning it?" I asked. The look of pain that crossed her face stabbed into me.

"I—I—" she stuttered. "It seemed appropriate." Bella was trying to purge her mind of Alice, I thought. Maybe she didn't want to be reminded of this desolate moment ever again.

"We don't know what she's doing," I said quietly in Alice's defense.

Bella spoke then in an equally quiet voice, confiding a secret. "When we were on the plane to Italy, on our way to rescue you...she lied to Jasper so that he wouldn't come after us. She knew that if he faced the Volturi, he would die. She was willing to die herself rather than put him in danger. Willing for me to die, too. Willing for you to die. She has her priorities."

That gave me pause. Alice's love for Jasper probably did exceed everything else in her life, including her attachment to our family. And in any confrontation with the Volturi, Jasper would be one of their first targets. No doubt Aro and Caius knew him to be a victor in the southern wars, but even if they didn't, any vampire who met him would immediately recognize his scarred face as an emblem of his successful fighting career. It made sense that Alice would try to save Jasper's life, possibly without his consent and that would explain her behavior. Still, it was hard to accept that she would sacrifice the rest of her family to a doomed plan.

"I don't believe it," I said. "Maybe it was just Jasper in danger. Her plan would work for the rest of us, but he'd be lost if he stayed. Maybe..."

"She could have told us that. Sent him away," Bella countered.

"But would Jasper have gone? Maybe she's lying to him again."

"Maybe," Bella conceded. "We should go home. There's no time."

Whatever the truth might be, we had to carry on as if we would never see Alice and Jasper again. That was one thing Alice had made clear in her departure. Perhaps we never *would* see them again, but even if they planned to return, Alice wanted us to think that they wouldn't.

After our strange side trip to the cottage, Bella and I returned to the family home to find everyone ready to depart. Their thoughts were more positive than they had been. Strategizing on routes and goals made everyone feel that we were doing something potentially productive rather than just accepting defeat.

...so they seem more willing to help this time. Edward can handle Tanya, I think, after all this time...

"We're to stay here?" I asked Carlisle, responding to his thoughts. He'd clearly contacted Tanya already.

“Alice said that we would have to show people Renesmee, and we would have to be careful about it,” Carlisle responded. “We’ll send whomever we can find back here to you—Edward, you’ll be the best at fielding that particular minefield.”

Perhaps he was right. Their eyes will tell them that Renesmee is an illegal abomination and I will have to convince them otherwise. It would be difficult. I nodded in assent, though I would much rather have been on the move, maybe even listening for Alice’s mind everywhere I went.

“There’s a lot of ground to cover,” I commented, not knowing how the family would do it with only four of them. I couldn’t bear to let Bella go, though. No...that was impossible.

“We’re splitting up,” Emmett replied in answer to my implied question. “Rose and I are hunting for nomads.”

I felt the impossible pressure of needing to be everywhere. How were they going to locate nomads without my help...or Alice’s?

“You’ll have your hands full here,” Carlisle said, inadvertently answering me. “Tanya’s family will be here in the morning, and they have no idea why. First, you have to persuade them not to react the way Irina did. Second, you’ve got to find out what Alice meant about Eleazar. Then, after all that, will they stay to witness for us? It will start again as the others come—if we can persuade anyone to come in the first place. Your job may well be the hardest. We’ll be back to help as soon as we can.”

Carlisle put his hand on my shoulder. *I know how much you’re hurting right now, but I’m not convinced that Alice doesn’t have something up her sleeve. We can hope. But right now, we need you to do this...for all of us, but for Bella and Renesmee, especially.*

I nodded minutely. I would do my best, however difficult it might prove to be.

“Good luck,” I said after we all had said and hugged our goodbyes.

“And to you,” my father responded. “We’ll all need it.” With that, they were gone.

Bella continued to act oddly, finding moments to separate herself from me when all I wanted to do was hold onto her and never let her go. She must be worrying about Renesmee now that we had this great ax hanging over our heads. I had enormous love for my daughter, second only to that which I felt for Bella, but I had not carried our child in my body. I had not faced certain death in order to bring her into the world. Bella had. There was more than the normal bond of a mother and child between them—Renesmee was a part of Bella. Though it was difficult to imagine, I realized that Bella had even more pain to cope with than I did. I also

realized that she would sacrifice herself to protect our daughter. She had done it before under the most brutal of circumstances. I must prepare myself for that possibility as far as I could.

Bella wanted to give Renesmee some sense of normalcy amidst all the turmoil, so we took her to the cottage to sleep overnight as usual. While Bella put her down, I stared into the fireplace, wondering how I could even begin to think of letting Bella go. The forever future I had envisioned for us would be gone in less than a month. I still had so much to say, so much to give her, so much...*so much*...

She entered the room behind me. "Edward, I—"

There was too much emotion spilling out of me to be contained. I rushed to wrap my body around hers and feel her solidity against me. I could not walk this valley alone. I could not face this Garden of Gethsemane. Bella was stronger than me...braver too.

My feelings were beyond words when I crushed my lips to hers. The time for lightheartedness and joy had passed. Making love was an act of survival now. We united with a ferocity that we hadn't known before, loving one another as if there were no tomorrow, because in all likelihood there soon wouldn't be.

Overnight, I worked through much of my fierce emotion, expressing it in every touch, every kiss, and every thrust into my beloved's body. Shortly before dawn, as Bella and I lay together joined in every possible way, I reflected on all that I had been given in these last years of my extended life. I couldn't be too bitter about losing everything when I had received so much more than I'd ever dreamed possible.

As the pendulum hung poised to drop, I knew there was no more time for despair. I would not go gently into the good night. Now that I had something truly worth living for, I would rage against the dying of the light with everything I had. When the sun rose, I kissed Bella's forehead and stroked her hair, and made ready for this fateful day.

45. RENESMEE'S STORY

Bella was scheming. On our unhurried walk to the house—Reneseemee still asleep in Bella's arms—she asked me to teach her to fight, but I simply could not think about Bella that way. When she argued that I couldn't leave her undefended and helpless in a battle, I saw her point. Still, it hurt even to *think* of Bella as a target for the purposes of training.

My wife was planning her personal strategy for battling the Volturi. She thought that since Jane couldn't hurt her, she could help our side by attacking Jane and preventing her from torturing the rest of us into submission. That was well and good, but despite her brutal gift, Jane wasn't the real threat. Her brother Alec was the one who would guarantee the Volturi an unmitigated victory. He would ensure that we didn't fight at all.

While Jane could disable only one fighter at a time, Alec could disable all opponents at once by emitting a kind of anesthetic fog. Once it touched you, you became trapped in your body like a coffin, unable to see or hear anything around you. It ensured the Volturi's power to eliminate all adversaries, because by the time they realized they were in danger, it was already too late to run or fight.

Bella surmised—probably correctly—that she would be unaffected by Alec's "anesthesia" and, therefore, was the logical person to attack him. She reasoned that neither Alec nor Jane was likely to be a good fighter because they never would have needed to fight. I tried to discourage her even from thinking about such a move, which was unlikely to succeed and would guarantee that she was destroyed immediately. The horrifying image made me cringe. So Bella changed the subject and asked about Demetri instead.

"Demetri is mine," I snarled. In those words, I heard a cruelty in my voice that I hadn't felt often in the last seventy years since I stopped feeding on humans. The last time I felt it was the night that thugs in Port Angeles set out to rape and murder Bella. If she hadn't been sitting right there in the car and then in the restaurant with me, I would have killed them all in the blink of an eye.

"Why?" Bella whispered, bringing me back.

"For Alice," I replied after taking a moment to get my emotions under control. "It's the only thanks I can give her now for the last fifty years." If I could destroy Demetri—assuming I got the chance—at least she could run without being tracked. Even if we all died, Alice and Jasper would be safe...maybe. Bella nodded in silent understanding.

We reached the house and prepared ourselves to introduce Tanya, Kate, Eleazar, and Carmen to Renesmee. They would be the first subjects in our attempt to garner support for our standoff with the Volturi.

As we waited for their arrival, Renesmee awakened and Bella straightened her clothes and brushed her hair. Jacob had explained the situation to Nessie the evening before, perhaps in more detail than was warranted, so she knew what was happening. She knew that we needed the help of our friends to prevent us from “getting in trouble” with the Volturi. Wisely, Jacob had not told her our odds of survival.

Renesmee pressed her hands to Bella’s face anxiously, but she had no pictures for her feelings. What I saw in her mind was painful to know, though. Renesmee believed it was her fault that we were “in trouble” because she was different, and she felt it was on her shoulders to convince everyone that she was no danger. Poor child. Except for being at fault—that was on me—she was close enough to the truth that I couldn’t tell her otherwise. When she spoke aloud, her words nearly broke my heart.

“What if they don’t like me?” she whispered bleakly to her mother.

I clenched my fists. My child was being victimized by ignorance and an ancient prejudice that had nothing to do with her! But I had to remain calm and composed.

When the Denalis came, I faced Tanya and pressed for her word that they would not react to what they saw until they had heard our full explanation. I asked them to listen for the sound of Renesmee’s heart (“some kind of a bird?”) and to smell her scent (“is there a human here?”).

With that introduction, Bella brought Renesmee into the room. Nessie steeled herself for rejection and then bravely peeked out from behind Bella’s hair. *She is her mother’s daughter*, I thought proudly. Though the four cousins didn’t speak, their reactions were what we had feared.

Tanya involuntarily scuffled backwards. *No, no, no...!*

AAAAACK!!! Kate leaped away and flattened herself against the wall, hissing.

Eleazar threw himself in front of Carmen protectively. *What the bloody...?*

Oh, isn’t she cute! Carmen alone was not pained or frightened by seeing a vampire-like child in Bella’s arms. She was the only one who had no history with immortal children, though she knew what they were, of course. Even young vampires knew that part of our history. Judging by her reaction, she could be my way in to convincing the others.

“Oh *please*,” Jacob scoffed quietly from where he waited, ready to phase at the first sign of trouble.

I put my arm around my wife and child. “You promised to listen,” I said, looking straight into each set of panicked eyes.

“Some things cannot be heard!” Tanya exclaimed. “How could you, Edward? Do you not know what this means?”

I did. When her mother created an immortal child, Tanya and her sisters had been saved from destruction only because Aro found them to be ignorant of its existence. Now that we had shown them Renesmee, she was thinking that her coven, along with ours, was as good as dead. Anger blazed in her eyes.

“We have to get out of here,” Kate cried, ready to make her escape through the front door. She wanted to report us immediately to the authorities.

Eleazar was shaken and deeply saddened for Carlisle, his old friend. “Edward...”

“Wait,” I cut in. They were all reacting emotionally rather than thinking things through. I needed them to calm down enough to consider the facts. “Remember what you hear, what you smell. Renesmee is not what you think she is.”

“There are no exceptions to this rule, Edward,” Tanya retorted in her fury. For the briefest moment I thought I read something else too—jealousy. I disregarded it.

“Tanya,” I returned, “you can hear her heartbeat! Stop and think about what that means.” The runaway trains of emotion both Tanya and Kate were riding began to slow. The two vampire women went silent.

“Her heartbeat?” Carmen murmured, leaning out from behind Eleazar. Curiosity was much preferable to fear or anger.

“She’s not a full vampire child,” I explained while I had their attention. “She is half human.” The words were so foreign to them that I got no reaction at all.

“Hear me,” I tried again. “Renesmee is one of a kind. I am her father. Not her creator—her biological father.” They didn’t believe it. Vampires do not father children. It was absurd.

“Edward, you can’t expect us to—,” Eleazar began.

“Tell me another explanation that fits, Eleazar. You can feel the warmth of her body in the air. Blood runs in her veins. You can smell it.”

“How?” Kate whispered, incredulous.

“Bella is her biological mother,” I explained. “She conceived, carried, and gave birth to Renesmee while she was still human. It nearly killed her. I was hard-pressed to get enough venom into her heart to save her.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Eleazar stated as if that were the final word on the subject. I had to convince him. We needed to get the information Alice said he had.

“Physical relationships between vampires and humans are not common. Human survivors of such trysts are even less common. Wouldn’t you agree, cousins?”

Three thousand, two hundred, and three, mused Tanya, before realizing I could hear her thought. Kate recalled a particularly memorable liaison that had ended in the usual way. Both women frowned at me, annoyed. Better annoyance than fear and disbelief, I thought.

Eleazar was still giving me a chilly look. “Come now, Eleazar. Surely you can see the resemblance,” I coaxed.

Only Carmen dared to investigate further. She came close and leaned down to peer at Renesmee. “You seem to have your mother’s eyes, but your father’s face.” One look into that face was all it took for the magic to begin and Carmen smiled. Renesmee responded with her brilliant, toothy smile, the one that made everyone fall at her feet.

Momma, can I show? Renesmee thought while showing a picture of her hand on Carmen’s face. Already Renesmee was drawn to this woman with her exotic accent and warm brown skin.

“Do you mind if Renesmee tells you about it herself?” Bella asked quietly, her voice filled with tension. “She has a gift for explaining things.”

“Do you speak, little one?” Carmen asked, encouraging Nessie to vocalize her reply, something she still did sparingly.

“Yes, but I can show you more than tell.” The child’s thin, vampire soprano chimed through the room and Tanya, Kate, and Eleazar flinched at the forbidden sound.

When Renesmee’s tiny hand met Carmen’s cheek, the woman went rigid with shock, though her eyes never left Nessie’s face. Eleazar saw his mate’s reaction and leaped to Carmen’s side.

“Wait,” Carmen said, holding up a palm as Renesmee began to share her short autobiography.

RENESMEE'S STORY

I am Renesmee Carlie Cullen. *(Image: Renesmee clad as a sunflower with a big golden headdress. In later "showings," she often switches to a picture of herself in a pink ruffled swimming suit holding a huge beach ball. These are her favorite self-portraits.)*

Don't be scared. I show you my days. *(Image: A slit of light appearing in a field of darkness. Everyone reacts with fright when Renesmee first shows a picture. She thinks "don't be scared," though nobody hears that but me. She continues her story after the person calms down.)*

Something is wrong. I have to get out! I reach for the light and feel a hard and cold thing. I grab my Daddy's nose. He pulls me out and says "Renesmee." I know his sound. I am okay. *(Image: My face, shocking in its tight intensity, smeared in blood, but with a tiny glimmer of...what? Wonder. Hope?)*

I see Momma. She says, "Give her to me." I know her sound. She smells good so I bite. She tastes good. *(Image: Bella's bloody face wearing an impossible expression of joy, followed by shock.)*

Daddy says, "No Renesmee." I must not bite Momma. Aunt Rose washes me and makes me warm. I am thirsty. She gives me my cup. I drink and show her Momma, but she is scared. Jacob comes. He is for me. I show him Momma and he is scared, but then he's not. *(Images: My face speaking; Rosalie holding the cup, her dress stained with water; Renesmee's hand on Rosalie's neck and then on Jacob's cheek and their respective startled expressions; Jacob laughing.)*

Momma sleeps for a long time. *(Image: Bella laid out on the surgical table, clean and beautiful, white and still.)*

Popop measures and Aunt Rose brushes my hair. Daddy sings to me. Momma wakes up, but I can't see her. I wait and wait and then she comes! *(Images: Carlisle with his tape measure; Rosalie with the sterling silver baby brush; my face, singing; Bella and I entering the clearing as seen through the glass wall with Jacob blocking our path.)*

Reaching and reaching, but Momma doesn't come. Then reaching and reaching and *saying* and then...MOMMA! I show Momma my days and she is scared, but then she's not. *(Image: Bella in the living room as glimpsed between six bodies; concerned faces crowding in when Renesmee cries out in impatience; Bella stepping forward, her arms outstretched; Nessie's hand on Bella's face and Bella's startled reaction.)*

Everyone holds me and feeds me my cup, but Momma doesn't. My cup makes Momma thirsty. *(Images: Family members' faces from beneath; metal cup in Nessie's hand.)*

Momma gets mad at Jacob and tries to bite. Seth blocks and gets hurt. My Jacob is okay. *(Image: Bella attacking Jacob; Seth as a wolf crumpled on the ground, Carlisle kneeling over him.)*

Everyone is gone and I am in my room and I am scared. Daddy hears when I say in my head. He comes and Momma comes and I am okay. *(Images: The doorway of Nessie's room as seen through iron bars; me running in with my pillow—Oh, great!—Bella in her sheet.)*

Grandpa Charlie and Sue come and they smell good. Daddy says I must not bite them, so I don't. *(Images: Charlie's face from below; Sue sitting in a chair nearby.)*

I see Billy and he is Jacob's daddy. He has a wheelie chair and lets me ride. Jacob takes me in the woods and shows me animals. Animals like me and I like animals. *(Images: Billy in his chair; Billy's face from below, spinning circles on his porch; feeding squirrels in the Olympic Forest.)*

Momma and Daddy and Popop and Nana and Grandpa Charlie read me books and I read books too, but I don't say. I can say, but I like better to show. *(Image: Nessie holding a book in Bella's lap; Bella's face with Nessie's hand on her cheek.)*

Aunt Alice plays dress-up and takes my pictures. Every day I get new clothes because my yesterday's are too small. Everyone is scared because I grow fast. They don't say, but I know. I like new clothes so it is okay. *(Images: Alice's bedroom with clothes everywhere.)*

Nana and Popop give me human food. It is yucky and I have to use the potty. Momma and Daddy take me hunting. I have to drink animals because it is bad to

drink humans. Grandpa Charlie is human and Sue and Billy and I am one-half human, but they like food and I don't except for cookies. *(Images: Esme presenting half a chicken breast, green beans, and fig cookies; me drinking a deer; Billy and Jacob eating spaghetti at Billy's house; cookies hidden in Nessie's pocket.)*

I catch Roosevelt deer and elk and sometimes Daddy helps me catch a cougar. Animals get scared, but I show pictures and they aren't scared anymore. *(Image: Chasing and catching an elk; me holding down a cougar with Renesmee's hand on its throat.)*

I choose my Jacob and Aunt Rose and Nana and Popop for my godparents. Jacob says they are the "second strings." Aunt Alice is planning a party and Uncle Emmett is going to minister. Uncle Jasper is running the pool. *(Images: The godparents' faces as they accept Renesmee's requests; two shoestrings; Alice holding up an invitation; Emmett wearing a harlequin outfit with tights and blowing a wooden flute; Jasper filling the baby pool.)*

Now everyone is gone. I don't know where. Aunt Alice and Uncle Jasper are lost and we are sad. I love my family and my wolf people and my human people and I want us all together and I don't want it to be my fault. *(Images: Everyone leaving home; Renesmee with Bella and me and the wolves standing alone outside.)*

Please like me and be my friend. *(Image: a closeup of Carmen's face with Nessie's hand on it; Carmen's big smile. In retellings, Nessie always shows an image of the "listener's" face with a huge smile, which makes almost everyone smile. Smart child.)*

When Renesmee pulled her hand away, Carmen stood frozen in enchantment for a moment before speaking. "She really is your daughter, isn't she? Such a vivid gift! It could only have come from a very gifted father."

"Do you believe what she showed you?" I asked. That was the crucial question and might foreshadow the reactions of every other vampire Nessie touched.

"Without a doubt."

Thank God! Please let it catch on.

“Carmen!” Eleazar was dumbfounded and disapproving, a true non-believer.

“Impossible as it seems, Edward has told you nothing but truth. Let the child show you,” Carmen urged her mate, grasping his hands in hers and directing him closer to Renesmee. “Show him, *mi querida*.” Nessie smiled in delight, both at Carmen’s enthusiasm and at her exotic-sounding words.

When Renesmee touched Eleazar’s forehead, he jerked away with eyes as wide as a lemur’s. “*Ay caray!*” he hissed.

Tanya and Kate’s curiosity got the better of them and they moved in closer to watch. “What did she do to you?” Tanya asked suspiciously.

“She’s just trying to show you her side of the story,” Carmen explained.

Renesmee grew impatient and frowned. This reaction had already gotten tiresome for her. I wanted to cheer at what she did next.

“Watch, please,” she ordered Eleazar, the former Volturi soldier, someone who probably would frighten most young children. She held out her hand, waiting for the big vampire to comply. I could imagine her tapping her foot. Carmen prodded him until he reluctantly leaned into Renesmee’s hand and shut his eyes. He winced at the first image, but then gradually relaxed.

“Ahh, I see,” he said when Renesmee finished. His face had softened completely. He even allowed himself a little smile at the grinning child.

Two down, I thought.

“Eleazar?” Tanya queried.

“It’s all true, Tanya. This is no immortal child. She’s half-human. Come. See for yourself.”

Both Tanya and Kate took their turns “listening” to Renesmee’s story and though each was initially wary, Nessie had swayed them both by the time she finished.

“Thank you for listening,” I murmured to Tanya’s coven, grateful beyond belief.

46. ELEAZAR

“But there is the *grave danger* you warned us of,” Tanya said. “Not directly from this child, I see, but surely from the Volturi, then.” Tanya recognized that Renesmee was no threat to anyone, so she correctly surmised that the threat had to be coming from the Volturi.

“How did they find out about her? When are they coming?” she asked.

“When Bella saw Irina that day in the mountains she had Renesmee with her,” I replied.

“*Irina* did this? To you? To Carlisle? *Irina*?” Kate hissed, despite her own first impulse to seek the authorities.

“No. Someone else...” Tanya murmured in dismay.

“Alice saw her go to them,” I said.

“How could she do this thing?” Eleazar wondered bleakly.

“Imagine if you had seen Renesmee only from a distance. If you had not waited for our explanation.”

“No matter what she thought...you are our family.” Tanya’s face was grim.

“There’s nothing we can do about Irina’s choice now. It’s too late. Alice gave us a month.”

“So long?” Eleazar was confused.

“They are all coming. That must take some preparation,” I concluded.

“The entire guard?” Eleazar questioned in disbelief.

“Not just the guard. Aro, Caius, Marcus. Even the wives.” I heard the strain in my voice.

“Impossible.”

“I would have said the same two days ago,” I acknowledged.

“But that doesn’t make any sense. Why would they put themselves and the wives in danger?”

“It doesn’t make sense from that angle. Alice said there was more to this than just punishment for what they think we’ve done. She thought you could help us.”

“More than punishment? But what else is there?”

Eleazar submerged himself in thought and began pacing the room while he recalled similar events in the long history of the Volturi.

“Where are the others, Edward? Carlisle and Alice and the rest?” Tanya wanted to know.

“Looking for friends who might help us.”

Tanya held up her arms in a gesture of helplessness. “Edward, no matter how many friends you gather, we can't help you *win*. We can only die with you. You must know that. Of course, perhaps the four of us deserve that after what Irina has done now, after how we've failed you in the past—for her sake that time as well.”

“We're not asking you to fight and die with us, Tanya,” I clarified quickly. “You know Carlisle would never ask for that.”

“Then what, Edward?”

“We're just looking for witnesses. If we can make them pause, just for a moment. If they would let us explain... It's difficult to doubt our story when you see it for yourself.” I touched my daughter's soft cheek and looked into her eyes...Bella's eyes.

I love you, Daddy, she thought.

Me too, I mouthed to her. She laid her hand on top of mine, holding it to her face.

Tanya nodded slowly. “Do you think her past will matter to them so much?”

“Only as it foreshadows her future. The point of the restriction was to protect us from exposure, from the excesses of children who could not be tamed.”

“I'm not dangerous at all,” Renesmee piped up. “I never hurt Grandpa or Sue or Billy. I love humans. And wolf-people like my Jacob.” She reached back to pat Jacob's arm.

Kate and Tanya both noticed the “*my Jacob*” and Renesmee's affectionate touch.

What does that mean? they each wondered privately.

Is he like a pet to her? Tanya speculated. *How odd!*

I smiled a little to myself. It *was* odd, but I was not prepared to explain imprinting to them. They would figure it out for themselves soon enough.

"If Irina had not come so soon we could have avoided all of this. Renesmee grows at an unprecedented rate. By the time the month is past, she'll have gained another half year of development."

"Well, that is something we can certainly witness," Carmen declared. "We'll be able to promise that we've seen her mature ourselves. How could the Volturi ignore such evidence?"

"How indeed?" intoned Eleazar.

"Yes, we can witness for you," Tanya declared. "Certainly that much. We will consider what more we might do." *Edward's biological daughter! They cannot hurt this child!* Tanya felt quite adamant considering she had just met Renesmee.

"Tanya, we don't expect you to fight with us," I said responding to her thought, but she had already decided.

"If the Volturi won't pause to listen to our witness, we cannot simply stand by." Then she went silent for a second or two. "Of course, I should only speak for myself," she added.

"Do you really doubt me so much, sister?" Kate spluttered.

Tanya's face lit up in a smile. "It is a suicide mission, after all."

"I'm in," Kate said with a shrug and a grin.

"I, too, will do what I can to protect the child," Carmen added. Then in a soft, adoring tone, she asked Renesmee, "May I hold you, *bebe linda*?"

Renesmee reached eagerly for her new friend, thrilled not to be rejected as she was expecting. Carmen began speaking Spanish baby talk, telling Nessie what a sweet baby she was, how beautiful, how rare. Renesmee took it all in, enjoying the musical quality of Carmen's words. It wouldn't surprise me if Renesmee were able to speak Spanish after Carmen left.

No! I thought. *I refuse to consider that next thought.*

"She is special, that little one," Tanya said softly. "Hard to resist." For the first time, she looked directly into Bella's eyes, acknowledging her, and then looked away.

The normally sarcastic, irreverent Kate was hovering near Carmen and Renesmee thinking thoughts that sounded very much like baby gibberish. Remarkable.

"A very talented family," Eleazar commented to no one in particular as his pacing accelerated and grew more agitated. "A mind reader for a father, a shield for a mother, and then whatever magic this extraordinary child has bewitched us with. I wonder if there is a name

for what she does, or if it is the norm for a vampire hybrid. As if such a thing could ever be considered normal! A vampire hybrid, indeed!”

A what? “Excuse me,” I addressed Eleazar, grabbing his shoulder as he moved past me. “What did you just call my wife?”

Eleazar looked up in surprise, thinking my words were a prelude to a fight. Then he realized I intended the question literally and responded.

“A shield, I *think*. She’s blocking me now, so I can’t be sure.” I saw the puzzled look on Bella’s face.

“A shield?” I queried.

“Come now, Edward! If I can’t get a read on her, I doubt you can, either. Can you hear her thoughts right now?”

“No, but I’ve never been able to do that. Even when she was human.”

“Never? Interesting. That would indicate a rather powerful latent talent, if it was manifesting so clearly even before the transformation. I can’t feel a way through her shield to get a sense of it at all. Yet she must be raw still—she’s only a few months old.”

My word! Why didn’t I see it? Shielding herself from external invasion is a gift! Bella’s gift!!

“And apparently completely unaware of what she’s doing,” Eleazar went on. “Totally unconscious. Ironic. Aro sent me all over the world searching for such anomalies, and you simply stumble across it by accident and don’t even realize what you have.”

“What are you talking about? How can I be a *shield*? What does that even mean?” Bella probed. She had never heard the term before, but I knew what it meant. Alice had been right. Eleazar was a wealth of insight. Bella was such a good shield that he couldn’t even penetrate her mind enough to analyze her talent.

“I suppose we were overly formal about it in the guard. In truth, categorizing talents is a subjective, haphazard business; every talent is unique, never exactly the same thing twice. But you, Bella, are fairly easy to classify. Talents that are purely defensive, that protect some aspect of the bearer, are always called *shields*. Have you ever tested your abilities? Blocked anyone besides me and your mate?”

Bella tried to explain that she didn't do anything on purpose and hadn't known about it until I told her I couldn't read her thoughts. Just as Carlisle had informed me that I was a mind reader, I had informed Bella that she had a silent mind.

"Aro couldn't hear her, though she was human when they met." Eleazar raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Jane tried to hurt me, but she couldn't," Bella added. "Edward thinks Demetri can't find me, and that Alec can't bother me, either. Is that good?"

"Quite." *'Good' is an understatement*, he thought.

"A shield! I never thought of it that way," I marveled. "The only one I've ever met before was Renata, and what she did was so different."

"Yes, no talent ever manifests in precisely the same way, because no one ever *thinks* in exactly the same way," Eleazar said.

"Who's Renata? What does she do?" inquired Bella.

While he explained Renata's ability to divert an potential attacker away from Aro, whom she protected, I mulled over what Eleazar had said about Bella. If Bella was a shield, then maybe she could broaden the scope of her talent over time. Her shield had been in place so firmly before her change that it never occurred to any of us in the family that it was a gift, which as a vampire she might be able to manipulate.

"Can you project?" Kate asked Bella.

Exactly my thought.

"Project?" Bella repeated.

"Push it out from yourself. Shield someone besides yourself."

"I don't know. I've never tried. I didn't know I should do that."

"Oh, you might not be able to," Kate clarified. "Heaven knows I've been working on it for centuries and the best I can do is run a current over my skin."

Bella had no idea what Kate was talking about.

"Kate's got an offensive skill," I told her. "Sort of like Jane."

Bella cringed and Kate laughed.

“I’m not sadistic about it,” Kate claimed, perhaps falsely. “It’s just something that comes in handy during a fight.”

“You have to teach me what to do!” Bella cried, grabbing Kate’s arm in her excitement. Kate ran current through her skin to “encourage” Bella to release her, but Bella didn’t notice. “You have to show me how!” Bella continued almost frantically.

I thought that Bella must be thinking what I’d just been considering myself—that maybe she could learn to protect Renesmee too.

“Maybe—if you stop trying to crush my radius,” Kate complained, trying to extract her arm from Bella’s powerful grip.

“Oops! Sorry!”

“You’re shielding, all right. That move should have about shocked your arm off. You didn’t feel anything just now?” Kate asked suspiciously.

“That wasn’t really necessary, Kate,” I chided her. “She didn’t mean any harm.” Both she and Bella ignored me. Even if Bella wasn’t hurt, I didn’t appreciate Kate trying to electrocute my wife any more than I appreciated Jane trying to torture her.

“No, I didn’t feel anything,” Bella confirmed. “Were you doing your electric current thing?”

“I was. Hmm. I’ve never met anyone who couldn’t feel it, immortal or otherwise.”

“You said you project it? On your skin?”

Kate nodded. “It used to be just in my palms. Kind of like Aro.”

“Or Renesmee,” I pointed out.

“But after a lot of practice, I can radiate the current all over my body. It’s a good defense. Anyone who tries to touch me drops like a human that’s been tasered. It only downs him for a second, but that’s long enough.” Long enough for Kate to drink his blood if he was human or to pin him down if he was a vampire. She’d done both many times in years past.

If Kate could extend her power beyond the palms of her hands—project it—I wondered if Renesmee might one day be able to show her thoughts to someone without touching him. Maybe she would be able to show her thoughts to more than one person at a time even. Carlisle had a friend in the Amazon who could do that—entrance a crowd of people all at once.

When she projected an image, it created an environment inside the recipient's head—like wearing a virtual reality headset— blinding him to what was actually in front of him.

If Renesmee were able to do that, she could essentially blind the Volturi. Of course, Jane and Alec would do everything they could to stop her, but if Bella learned to shield Nessie, we could disable the Volturi...potentially. I sighed. It was a nice fantasy.

I moved closer to Eleazar when I heard his thoughts begin to coalesce. He had been reviewing, one by one, the incidents of punishment he had witnessed over the centuries when a coven had done something wrong. Normally, it took only a small contingent of the guard— Alec, Jane, Demetri, and Felix were the usual nominees—to take care of any problem. However, once in a great while Aro, Caius, and Marcus joined them along with a larger number of the Volturi guard, including Chelsea and Renata. On those occasions, Aro was able to read the thoughts of individual coven members and prevent the destruction of innocents or pardon those individuals whom he determined were repentant. Eleazar had seen this as evidence of the Volturi's mercy.

As he considered it, though, it began to occur to him that those declared innocent and those Aro chose to pardon were always vampires whom Eleazar had identified some time earlier as having a special talent. When their covens were found to have done something unpardonable, Aro and the others would travel with the guard to observe the coven's destruction.

No, the Volturi can't be destroying covens just to acquire talented individuals! It's inconceivable! Eleazar concluded.

"Can you think of even one exception, though?" I asked him aloud.

"I don't want to think of them that way," Eleazar hissed, his body rigid. "If you're right—"

"The thought was yours, not mine," I hurried to clarify.

"If I'm right—I can't even grasp what that would mean. It would change everything about the world we've created. It would change the meaning of my life. What I have been a part of."

"Your intentions were always the best, Eleazar," I reminded him.

"Would that even matter? What have I done? How many lives—?"

In his distress, Eleazar began pacing even faster than before, whipping back and forth across the room. Eventually, he slowed down and then stopped moving altogether to explain

how Chelsea would break the “pardoned” individual’s allegiance to his coven and bond him to the Volturi guard. The selected vampire would feel honored to have been chosen by the Volturi and relieved to have been spared, and because of Chelsea’s influence, never rebel or find fault with the Volturi.

With all this in his mind, Eleazar returned to considering why so many of the Volturi were coming to punish Carlisle’s coven—our coven.

“I could only think that the reason Aro had decided to come himself, to bring so many with him, is because his goal is not punishment but acquisition. He needs to be there to control the situation. But he needs the entire guard for protection from such a large, gifted coven. On the other hand, that leaves the other ancients unprotected in Volterra. Too risky—someone might try to take advantage. So they all come together. How else could he be sure to preserve the gifts that he wants? He must want them very badly.”

“From what I saw of his thoughts last spring, Aro’s never wanted anything more than he wants Alice,” I said, almost to myself. It was all making sense. Irina’s revelation about Renesmee was an excuse for Aro to press Alice into the Volturi’s service because she would never go voluntarily.

“Is that why Alice left?” Bella asked, her voice cracking.

Alice left? Tanya wondered, surprised.

“Alice is gone?” Kate asked Tanya in a whisper.

I touched Bella’s cheek. “I think it must be. To keep Aro from gaining the thing he wants most of all. To keep her power out of his hands.”

“He wants you, too,” Bella pointed out in a frightened whisper. I decided to downplay that angle.

“Not nearly as much. I can’t really give him anything more than he already has. And of course that’s dependent on his finding a way to force me to do his will. He knows me, and he knows how unlikely that is.” I raised an eyebrow to highlight the utter absurdity of anyone getting me to do what they wanted. Bella didn’t smile.

“He also knows your weaknesses,” Eleazar emphasized, looking at Bella.

“It’s nothing we need to discuss now,” I told him. I didn’t want Bella to worry about Aro taking me, though if he threatened Bella, I *would* be forced to do whatever he wanted. Even then, I would find some way to negotiate, though. Nothing but death would ever take me away from Bella.

Eleazar ignored my hint. “He probably wants your mate, too, regardless. He must have been intrigued by a talent that could defy him in its human incarnation.”

Now that I was beginning to understand the nature of Bella’s gift, I knew Eleazar was right. He would want Bella *and* Renesmee. And he could control us by threatening any one of us. I could not think about that frightening prospect. We simply had to succeed in our effort to dissuade the Volturi from attacking us. We *had* to.

I reverted to the previous discussion. “I think the Volturi were waiting for this—for some pretext. They couldn’t know what form their excuse would come in, but the plan was already in place for when it did come. That’s why Alice saw their decision before Irina triggered it. The decision was already made, just waiting for the pretense of a justification.”

“If the Volturi are abusing the trust all immortals have placed in them...,” Carmen worried aloud, but didn’t state her horrendous conclusion.

“Does it matter?” Eleazar challenged. “Who would believe it? And even if others could be convinced that the Volturi are exploiting their power, how would it make any difference? No one can stand against them.”

Eleazar had spent centuries identifying talented vampires all around the world and passing that information privately to Aro. Because of that, none of the other guard members could have made the connection that Eleazar had made and we had no proof anyway. Aro probably had planned it that way so that Eleazar could never expose his treachery.

“Though some of us are apparently insane enough to try,” Kate commented wryly.

“You’re only here to witness, Kate. Whatever Aro’s goal, I don’t think he’s ready to tarnish the Volturi’s reputation for it,” I declared. “If we can take away his argument against us, he’ll be forced to leave us in peace.”

Perhaps that was stating it a little strongly—more strongly than I felt, anyway. But even if there was no hope of emerging from this situation intact—as a coven or as individuals—hopelessness did us no good at all.

“Of course,” Tanya agreed hurriedly—too hurriedly. She was no more confident than I was, judging by her thoughts, and yet she was willing to put herself on the line to defend us. I *did* love her for that. Perhaps I would tell her one day.

Just then, outside thoughts broke into my consciousness.

I wonder why Alice and Jasper asked us to come.

Well, this should be interesting...

“Oh crap, Charlie,” Bella said when she heard a car turn into our drive. “Maybe the Denalis could hang out upstairs until—”

“No,” I told her, still listening for anything more about Alice. “It’s not your father. Alice sent Peter and Charlotte, after all. Time to get ready for the next round.”

47. WITNESSES

In spite of the initial hesitation Alice had shown toward inviting them, Peter and Charlotte immediately decided to stand by us. We presented Renesmee to them in much the same way as we had to the Denalis, but they had no particular fear of immortal children and found Renesmee fascinating. Once she shared her story, they were quick to offer their support.

I was becoming convinced that Renesmee had at least one quality of an immortal child—a special magnetism that made adults love her and want to protect her, even at risk to their own lives. I understood what Carlisle meant when he'd told us that the immortal children were endearing and enchanting and that you only had to be near them to love them, even though they behaved as the immature creatures they would always be. If Renesmee was any indication of their irresistibility, I could see why so many covens had defended them to the death.

After Peter and Charlotte, the next vampires to arrive were the Irish and Egyptian covens, all old friends of Carlisle's. They came to Forks merely because he had approached them and asked—he rightfully commanded that much respect among those who knew him.

The leader of the Irish coven, a large, graceful woman named Siobhan, was a particularly close friend. Carlisle averred that she had a talent for making any situation turn out the way she wished it to, but Siobhan denied it, claiming she was merely "a good planner." I was curious what Eleazar thought. Since his talent was identifying talents, he should be able to tell.

Eleazar sent out his feelers in Siobhan's direction at my request, though perhaps he did that as a matter of course whenever he met a vampire—probably so. His examination of her seemed to confirm Carlisle's belief.

Siobhan's gift was an offensive one, Eleazar thought. It was related to Jasper's gift in the sense that both were able to influence others. Siobhan's ability, though a bit more powerful, was also less certain to work every time. While Jasper could alter others' moods, Siobhan could also sway their actions. She influenced events by uniting the actions of unrelated individuals toward a single purpose. Siobhan, Jasper, and Chelsea fell into the category of "influencers" in the Volturi guard's parlance. All in all, it seemed a very good thing that Siobhan had come and was on our side.

Along with Siobhan came her mate, Liam—another large, imposing vampire—and their third coven member, Maggie, who looked like a tiny sprite, almost a child, beside the other two. Maggie had the ability to identify when someone was lying—a natural polygraph machine—and

her coven trusted her absolutely. So when Maggie told them I was telling the truth about Renesmee, they accepted my word even before listening to our child's story.

The Egyptian coven was another matter entirely. Amun, the coven's creator, was of an old-fashioned school of leadership that stressed hierarchy, patriarchy, and control. His mate, Kebi, was a traditional Arab woman of her time and always deferred to Amun, going so far as to walk several steps behind him. She never spoke unless asked a direct question and then gave only the briefest of replies.

The other two members of the coven, Benjamin and Tia, were young and independent in stark contrast to their elders. Amun had created the former when he discovered that Benjamin had a natural telekinetic ability. Benjamin could bend spoons and move small objects across a surface when he was human. Amun hoped that his latent talent would become fully formed as a vampire and indeed, it had. As a vampire concerned with personal power, Amun had hoped to use Benjamin's skills for his own purposes, but unfortunately for him, Benjamin was his own vampire and impossible to manipulate.

When we retired to our cottage that night to put Renesmee to bed, Bella asked whether Benjamin had some ability to draw people to him because, though Amun was the leader, the coven seemed to revolve around Benjamin.

"It's not that," I said. "His gift is so singular that Amun is terrified of losing him. Much like we had planned to keep Renesmee from Aro's knowledge, Amun has been keeping Benjamin from Aro's attention. Amun created Benjamin, knowing he would be special."

"What can he do?"

"Something Eleazar's never seen before. Something I've never heard of. Something that even your shield would do nothing against," I teased. I *loved* knowing the secret behind Bella's mental silence. It explained everything. "He can actually influence the elements—earth, wind, water, and fire. True physical manipulation, no illusion of the mind. Benjamin's still experimenting with it, and Amun tries to mold him into a weapon. But you see how independent Benjamin is. He won't be used."

"You like him."

"He has a very clear sense of right and wrong. I like his attitude."

Benjamin and I had certain traits of independence in common. Just as I would never (willingly) allow Aro to use me, Benjamin refused to be controlled by Amun. It was humorous in a way to see Amun's desire for power thwarted by such an impish, fun-loving fellow as Benjamin. So while Amun appeared to be in charge of his coven, Benjamin, in his understated, casual way,

actually ran the show. If Amun pushed him too hard, he might mention that he and Tia were thinking of traveling overseas or something similar to subtly warn Amun to back off.

While Benjamin and Tia were charmed by Renesmee and immediately agreed to help us, Amun would not let her touch him or Kebi, though I could see that Kebi was curious. (Amun didn't want to be fouled by the uncleanness of a girl child, not to mention a half-human.) Despite his distaste, Amun stayed with us because Benjamin wanted to stay, though he and Kebi kept to themselves. I wasn't certain why Tia and Benjamin remained with Amun, actually. He seemed to me to be a bit more trouble than he was worth in the younger coven members' lives.

This night with Bella felt less calamitous than the previous one. The loyalty of our extended family and Carlisle's friends had given me hope that I had not had previously. I was still devastated by losing Alice, but at least I had some understanding after talking to Eleazar. I just hoped that her vision of being under Aro's thumb was altered by her running away. To make sure of it, I would have to destroy Demetri. If fighting became necessary—which seemed more than possible given Aro's secret excuse for coming—and if I could get to Demetri, I should have an advantage. His tracking talent would do him no good against my mind-reading ability and fortunately, Aro didn't have an Alice to warn Demetri of my plan (not yet, anyway). I only wished that Alice were here now so I could ask her what else I could do to make things go our way. If we survived this misadventure, perhaps one day she would come back to us.

I made love with Bella slowly that night, savoring each kiss and every touch. Desperation did not govern us as it had the night before, but neither did we feel particularly experimental as we often did. Making love now, during this time of danger, was about connection, comfort, and gratitude more than exploration. She wanted to lie beneath me and let me take the lead because with all the stress, her concentration was shattered and she thought she would be less likely to hurt me if she were more passive.

I was happy to give her whatever she wanted. I even helped her relax by pinning her arms above her head as we made love. Though she could easily break my grip if she wished, being "immobilized" made her feel safe—she wouldn't accidentally injure me while she had the reminder of my restraining hands.

Once I realized that the restriction comforted her during this stressful time, I gripped both of her wrists in one hand and took advantage by touching her wherever I liked. Not that she ever interfered with my touching her, but the idea that she was "unable" to do so added a sexual tension that we both felt. During sex, she often seemed torn between the desire to reciprocate and the wish just to wallow in her own pleasure. With the choice taken away, she could simply lie back and enjoy herself. I had never understood the draw of sado-masochistic practices at all, but on this night, I comprehended why one lover might restrain another. In an ironic way, Bella

was freed by being bound. I could also see where it might have the effect of deepening the trust between two people.

Bella opened her legs to me willingly and I found my way into her body. As I moved slowly inside her, listening to the sounds of her pleasure, I felt her high emotion of the last two days focus between her thighs, the stress and strain channeled into a desire for release. I felt it in myself too—the sense that a physical release would carry away some of the overwhelming fear, anxiety, and sadness that I'd been carrying in my body.

The sexual tension between us was extremely high and kept building but perversely, I refused to quicken my movements. I stroked Bella's insides as I kissed her cheekbones, her eyelids, her jawline and her neck and watched the expressions on her face move and change. Bella's legs were wrapped around my waist and though her hands were confined, her desire made itself known in the way she drew me back when I pulled too far away. I found myself thrusting with more force as her legs yanked me into her on every stroke. She became more and more frenzied and I found it difficult to contain my own excitement and hold out for her.

"Edward...touch me with your hand. I need you to touch me...now...," she moaned softly.

With my free hand, I caressed her throat and then slid my fingers downward over her breasts and across each nipple, stroking them gently. Bella moaned as if she were in pain.

Ahhhh... That sound urged me to let go, the need more pressing every moment. As my fingers trailed down her stomach and then lower, I latched onto her left nipple and drew it into my mouth. She gasped.

"Please...Edward...*please*...touch me there...*please now*...," she whispered, a sound no louder than a breath.

"I will, my darling, I will. I want to make you come," I breathed in her ear.

I dragged my fingers lower and felt the wetness all around where we were joined together. Then gently—oh so gently—I stroked her clitoris once with my index finger. Her vagina clamped down on me and I knew I could hold out no longer as she muffled a scream. My finger stroked her one more time and her body shuddered. Her thighs pulled me deeply into her and held me there, immobile, while her interior muscles undulated powerfully around me.

"Oh, oh, oh...," she gasped as she finally let go, released by those two soft touches in her private place. Her powerful response brought me to orgasm hard and I became immobilized by the violent contractions in my body, which were rivaled only by the concurrent release of emotions. I heard my breath catch in my throat and felt my eyes begin to sting. As I wrapped

my arms around her, I noticed the quavering in her chest too. I pulled her close and we cried together in our vampire way.

We lay like that for a long time, not speaking, until everything we'd both been holding in had drained away. Then I raised my head and looked into Bella's eyes as she unwound her legs from my back and rested them on the bed beneath mine. She grinned at me and I grinned back. It seemed impossible that one could feel joy during such a catastrophic time as we were in, but joy flooded through me nevertheless. I kissed her then, in happiness, in exultation, and in relief. We were still here and we still had each other.

Emmett and Rosalie had been busy, as we discovered when the nomad Garrett showed up the following morning. I'd met him before and was glad to welcome him, since he was an easygoing fellow who enjoyed any kind of adventure or challenge. Meeting Renesmee was one of the biggest adventures he'd run into recently and he was more than willing to stand by her.

When Garrett saw Tanya and Kate, he began to think quite loudly. It had been more than a year since he'd seen any vampire women and he was exceedingly glad to meet so many beautiful women in one place. And *three* of them (so far) were single. Garrett probably wouldn't go anywhere unless we kicked him out. He was another vampire male who had attempted sexual intercourse with human females and, though he had had a large number of mates (nowhere near as many as Tanya, however!), none had ever survived the experience and he found that the repeated loss of sexual partners weighed heavily on him.

Garrett took to the Denalis immediately. As soon as he met Kate, I could tell he was intrigued. She was feisty enough to pose a challenge to him. Noticing that the attraction was mutual, I remembered something Kate had said at our wedding and laughed out loud....

When Tanya was meeting Bella in the receiving line, she commented on my long bachelorhood by saying, "The Cullens are all evened up in numbers now. Perhaps it will be our turn next, eh, Kate?"

"Keep the dream alive," Kate had responded sardonically. It was the last thing Kate would be dreaming about. Perhaps something would happen with Garrett, though, if we surv—but *no*, I wouldn't let my mind go there.

Mary and Randall showed up separately, having been located by Rosalie and Emmett outside Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Buffalo, New York, respectively. They arrived so closely together in time that Bella was able to present Renesmee once to the both of them. They were delighted with our little girl. Of course they would stand as witnesses! Renesmee's magic was in full force. What an amazing creature she was, though how could she not be with the mother she had? If she'd been given any other mother in the universe, she wouldn't exist. I marveled at the thought.

Though they hadn't said so outright, I got the impression that the nomads and maybe Benjamin and Tia would stand with us if our encounter with the Volturi degenerated into a fight. If Benjamin stayed, our odds would be greatly improved. Of course, his participation, as well as that of the others, would have to be strictly voluntary. I found myself hoping that he would stay to the end. Amun probably would try everything he could think of to get Benjamin to leave before the Volturi came, because he did not want Aro to know of Benjamin's existence. The point was already moot, though, because Aro would make that discovery as soon as he read my mind, which I knew he would do. Reading my mind was a shortcut to reading everyone's minds since I'd seen inside everybody's heads (except Bella's). A vampire so greedy for intelligence would never miss such an opportunity to spy.

As the number of vampires in the house increased, I found myself once again impressed by Jacob. He stuck close to Renesmee even though she usually had a swarm of vampires around her, her natural charm attracting them like bees. Being near so many "bloodsuckers" was hard on Jacob and made him exceedingly grumpy, but it seemed he would suffer anything for our daughter. It was remarkable.

Not all the vampires knew that Jacob was a werewolf, but they ignored him for the most part. To a vampire, he smelled somewhat "gamey" for a human and that put them off. Jacob was in no danger—the vampires behaved as if he were Renesmee's pet, which in a way, I guess he was.

Bella and I spent our days entertaining and seeing to the needs of our guests, sixteen in number. Actually, Renesmee did most of the entertaining. Everyone was drawn to her with the exception of Amun and Kebi, the latter only because Amun insisted that she keep her distance. There was more to Kebi than might appear, actually. She accepted her role as secondary to her husband. It was their custom for the woman to take a back seat in the social sphere. She even saw herself as Amun's property, more or less, but from her thoughts I could see that she was not at all powerless in her relationship. Inwardly, she was critical of Amun's response to Renesmee and was secretly fascinated with our child. She was an ally, even if her mate wasn't enthusiastic about helping us. When she and Amun returned home, I thought he would be getting an earful from his wife.

Though she enjoyed interacting with our guests, Renesmee was exceedingly tired by the end of the day, so Bella and I continued to retire to our cottage each evening at 7:00 p.m. Though none of the guests had ever raised children as far as we knew, they seemed to understand how important it was to maintain her routine as much as possible. It surprised everyone that she slept, though Renesmee was surprising in every way, so that was just one more novelty for them to take in.

Bella and I relished our nights alone. I didn't know whether our carefree newlywed days were gone for good, but for now, we made love with a certain gravity and less fun-loving exuberance. Perhaps if we survived this calamity, we would regain our pre-crisis spirit, but it was hard to imagine that now. Everything we did felt like it could be the last time, which made each moment seem both more precious and more tragic. Struggling through it all was pulling us even closer together, if that was possible.

As we held each other through the nights, sometimes we heard other couples sneak into the forest to spend time alone. Benjamin and Tia were together there every night, the lively sounds of their relations cutting into the quiet. Surprisingly, Amun and Kebi went off alone at night and engaged in marital congress. I was right about Kebi—she was not retiring when she and her husband were together in private. I heard her chastise Amun for not hiding his distaste for Renesmee and demanded that he be kind. As far as I could tell from their thoughts, they had a healthy relationship. It was nice to know, though I didn't mention it to anyone, not even Bella.

Except for Eleazar, none of the vampire guests had gathered with such a large number of our kind before and everyone had to figure out how to behave as we went along. Some of the guests had not hunted recently, so that was an issue we had to address. I sent them away to hunt—loaning my cars (and Carlisle's and Alice's) whenever necessary—making a general announcement that we wished for everyone to go beyond a perimeter of three hundred miles to feed. Keeping the deaths some distance away from Forks and La Push was the best we could do in the circumstances. Nobody but the Denalis took us up on our invitation to hunt wildlife in the forest. Oh...and Garrett gave it a try too. It was a new challenge for him—a big one, judging by the disgusted noises he was making when he returned with Kate.

To our great relief, Carlisle and Esme returned after seven days away. Their presence helped to remove some of the pressure I felt to keep everyone accommodated, entertained if possible, and busy when required. It was unusual for this many non-vegetarian vampires to be together in one place without a single fight erupting, as we were naturally contentious and territorial creatures. I spoke privately to Eleazar about the anomaly and he attributed it to Renesmee's influence. Why did that not surprise me?

Because she was only half vampire, Renesmee was something of a mystery to Eleazar. He could not measure the full breadth and depth of her gifts, much like Alice could not read her future. In addition to her obvious talent for expression, though, he believed she had another offensive gift. She was an influencer, somewhat like Jasper and Chelsea. While they were near Renesmee, everyone maintained a camaraderie and cohesiveness. But at night when she slept, Eleazar noticed a distinct change in the group. The nomads Mary and Randall reverted to their usual isolation and insularity, each going off on their own at night. The Irish coven and Peter and Charlotte also separated from everyone else and didn't engage in conversation or interact at night. Garrett was an exception. He hung with the Denalis as much as possible the entire first week. Kate didn't seem to mind and neither did Tanya.

I felt a little badly for Tanya. The day the Denalis arrived, I realized that she had not fully resolved her feelings for me. Her initial spike of jealousy when she saw Bella and Renesmee gave her away, though I pretended not to notice it. The impulse toward motherhood was not dead in Tanya and to see another vampire woman with a growing and maturing child was a little hard for her to take—especially since the child was mine, I thought. Once Tanya had listened to Renesmee's story, though, she was as in love with her as everyone else was.

Tanya continued to feel the occasional pang of sadness or loss—it was hard to know exactly what it was—throughout the week. Perhaps her feelings for me were more sincere than I had believed when we lived with them in Alaska. At the time, I thought her continual attempts to “get into my pants” were just an amusing diversion for her, while they grew extremely tiresome to me. Her distress wasn't only about me, of course. Our news about Irina had been very painful to the whole coven.

Carlisle and Esme had brought a fourth singleton nomad home with them. Alistair was the most neurotic vampire I'd ever met (except perhaps for Marcus, who suffered from chronic depression). Alistair had a strong dislike for everyone, a misanthrope by nature. Carlisle was his one and only friend and judging by the level of their interactions, perhaps “friend” was a bit of a stretch by normal standards. He spent most of his time brooding, complaining about everyone, and hiding in our attic. Carlisle told Bella and me that he only stayed because he was more afraid not to know what happened with the Volturi than he was to be caught with us.

“Of course, now they'll know I was here,” we heard him grumble in the attic. “No way to keep it from Aro at this point. Centuries on the run, that's what this will mean. Everyone Carlisle's talked to in the last decade will be on their list. I can't believe I got myself sucked into this mess. What a fine way to treat your friends.” Even if he was neurotic, it wasn't an altogether idle concern.

Alistair wouldn't let Renesmee touch him. He said he would take Carlisle's word for her origins without being touched by *anyone*. He was an odd character indeed.

Emmett and Rosalie returned a few days after Carlisle and Esme. They had searched a broad geographical area throughout North and South America and the three single nomads were the only vampires they had found. They were unsuccessful at locating the Amazon coven, as were Carlisle and Esme.

It was much to our surprise, then, when Zafrina and Senna showed up dressed in their usual animal-skin attire. Neither would have looked out of place with a spear in her hand. I had never met the Amazons, though Carlisle and I had been talking about them for weeks. They were our primary hope for finding hybrid vampires in Brazil. Though Kaure, our part-Ticuna housekeeper at Isle Esme, had seemed like a native Brazilian to me, she was a Wall Street banker compared to Zafrina and Senna, who were bona fide aboriginals.

The Amazonian tribes hadn't changed much for thousands of years and Zafrina and Senna still looked like their ancestors and lived in the old way, though they were vampires now. They had long bodies and limbs like the Maasai and Mandingo tribes in Africa, but as vampires, their dark brown skin had lightened to a tanned-looking version of white-skinned vampires. They were beautiful and elegant in a non-domesticated way and moved like felines, silent and stealthy. No wonder our family couldn't find them. I'd bet that nobody ever saw them unless they chose to be seen.

"Zafrina and Senna!" Carlisle exclaimed when he found them at our front door. "But where's Kachiri? I've never seen you three apart."

"Alice told us we needed to separate," Zafrina replied in her deep, sonorous voice.

Alice sent them? That was news! It meant that Alice was either in South America or had been there. I wondered if she went there to find the Amazons or if she had another reason. And where *was* Kachiri? Alice told them to split up? How odd.

Zafrina continued answering Carlisle's question. "It's uncomfortable to be away from each other, but Alice assured us that you needed us here, while she very much needed Kachiri somewhere else. That's all she would tell us, except that there was a great hurry...?"

So Alice did care! She was still looking out for us in some way, while keeping herself hidden from the Volturi. Of course, now that I knew she had been in South America, Aro could find that out by reading my mind. I hoped she had already fled from there to somewhere else by then.

In their way, the Amazons were as charmed by Renesmee as she was captivated by them. Of course they would stand by her, they told Carlisle. Anyone could see that she was special. Bella

seemed worried to have Zafrina and Senna near Renesmee. They looked more like predators than any of the other predators who were visiting. The way they spoke and moved and worked in sync with each other gave one the unmistakable impression that they were hunters. They were still women, though, and enthralled with our daughter and with the idea that two vampire parents had created a child together.

We were enormously fortunate to have Zafrina with us. Like Benjamin, she had an extraordinary talent. (How did Carlisle come to know so many talented vampires? The percentage in this gathering seemed to be much higher than I thought was the norm for the vampire population at large. I would have to discuss it with Eleazar.)

Zafrina and Renesmee were similar in that they could put pictures into the minds of others, but Zafrina did not have to touch to do it. She projected the images directly into the minds of those she selected and they became immersed in whatever environment she chose to show them. Her skill resembled Alec's by making the subjects blind to the reality around them, though not deaf and not disconnected from everyone else. Still, if Zafrina held you in her thrall, you'd be unable to fight effectively. She would be a huge asset to our side if we had to fight. Perhaps she could even prevent a fight. Between her and Benjamin and Siobhan, the contest was becoming more even, though Alec's talent still could trump us. Maybe I was being small-minded about Bella's desire to attack Alec.

Bella could not see Zafrina's illusions. Wouldn't it be amazing one day if Bella could figure out how to "unshield" herself to let in other vampire's talents if she wanted to? Though I couldn't read her mind, Renesmee could show her images. *Why was that?* I wondered again as I had from the beginning. Because they are mother and daughter? Or was it because Renesmee's talent was so powerful that no shield could block her?

I described the scene that Zafrina was projecting into my head for Bella's benefit.

"Right now I would appear to be alone in the middle of a rain forest. It's so clear I might possibly believe it, except for the fact that I can still feel you in my arms."

I opened my eyes and saw Zafrina's amused face.

I gave her a smile. "Impressive."

Renesmee stretched her arms out toward Zafrina. "Can I see?"

"What would you like to see?" Zafrina asked in her low, rough voice.

"What you showed Daddy."

Zafrina projected the rain forest and Renesmee became very excited. This was the first person who could do something similar to what she could do and not only did Nessie love the image, she was happy not to feel so different from everyone else. When the image disappeared, Renesmee smiled joyfully, revealing her two little rows of sharp teeth.

“More,” she ordered.

My daughter had found a new friend. Except for their similar skill, I wouldn't necessarily have picked Zafrina as the woman with whom my daughter would bond. Or, on second thought, perhaps I would. As close to nature as the Amazons lived, they reminded me of animals in a way. They dressed in animal skins, moved like huntresses, had long, willowy arms and legs, and wore exotic-looking braids that hung down their backs. I had seen sculptures of human bodies stretched to look like out-of-scale, long-limbed ballet dancers, but that was the natural scale of these women.

Bella seemed mildly frightened of the Amazons, or perhaps she was just concerned for Renesmee's safety, but she couldn't read Zafrina's mind like I could. Zafrina was as protectively loving as a tigress would be with her cub. Renesmee was strongly attracted to Zafrina and her *pretty pictures* and kept following her around, asking to be held. Bella worried that Renesmee might make a nuisance of herself, because even for a vampire, Zafrina was hard to read. She was exceptionally non-emotive and sparing with words. However, it was natural for her to take a tribal sort of responsibility for a child and she thought nothing of it.

It was easy to forget that Senna was there sometimes, because she deferred to Zafrina in almost everything, but the truth was that Zafrina knew her sisters so well that they rarely had to confer about anything. They passed quite a lot of information between them through looks and gestures, much like the members of a wolf pack.

Bella and I both breathed easier now that our family was with us again. It was also relieving to have heard from Alice in a roundabout way. I was still curious why Alice had told the Amazons they needed to split up and why she had taken Kachiri with her. She was working some angle, but I didn't know what it was or why.

Carlisle was extraordinarily glad to see how many friends we had enlisted to stand with us as witnesses. It also seemed that most of them would be willing to fight if we had to—due to Renesmee's influence—though we would do all we could to avoid that. He was also happy to see his old friends, especially the Irish coven and the Amazons, whom he'd not seen for at least fifty years.

We were both anxious to talk to the Amazons about half-vampire children who may have been born in that area and whether they knew any lore or had other tribal connections. The way

Zafrina behaved toward Renesmee—completely at ease with the child at her side—somehow made me feel that other hybrid vampires must exist.

A scenario began to develop in my mind. What if male vampires had historically accosted or seduced human women in that geographical region? Choosing such a remote area would enable their activities to remain hidden from the world at large and result only in lingering tales of the incubus.

If such assignations were ongoing, then once in a while (at least) some unfortunate woman would become pregnant. Assuming that she wasn't destroyed by the vampire or by her own people, she would be looked after by other women from her tribe, women like Zafrina and Senna (before their transformations). If she survived long enough for the child to fight its way from her womb, what would happen to the baby? If Renesmee was indicative, the woman's caretakers or any other adult who found the child would fall in love and automatically assume responsibility for raising it. The child's magnetism was a survival mechanism of a sort, which would be required for a fetus that destroyed its mother during birth.

Though there were a lot of "what ifs" that would have to line up, it seemed to me at least possible that such a sequence of events might have occurred once or twice in a millennium, leaving behind the fragments of tales that we had discovered in our research. Certainly the possibility was worth some private, late-night conversations. I would broach the subject with Carlisle.

Though I was at least as interested, if not more so, than my father in such conversations, I couldn't bear not to spend my nights—however many or few might remain—with my beloved wife, who was, of all things, a natural shield against personal invasion. What a perfect human to have borne such a perfect daughter! I am the most fortunate vampire I know.

48. TRAINING

Bella had extracted a promise from me to teach her to fight and she wasn't going to let me renege. So...after we'd convinced a houseful of new and old vampire friends to help us and Carlisle and Esme were back to host them, Bella insisted I keep my word. Renesmee was happily following Zafrina around, which gave Bella two free hands for the purpose.

Bella and I found a meadow in the woods and squared off. On a nod from her, we would begin circling and approaching one another, but we didn't get that far. When she signaled, I fainted then ducked. Bella whiffed her arms through the empty air above my head, while I whipped her feet from beneath her. She fell to the ground and I pinned her in a classic wrestling hold. It was not so different from how I had pinned her to the bed the night before. The thought propelled me to my feet. That had been about love, but this had an entirely different air to it.

"I'm sorry, Bella," I said, looking away as I tried to erase this new and terrible recognition of Bella's vulnerability.

"No, I'm fine," she answered. "Let's go again."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? We just started. Look, I know I'm no good at this, but I can't get better if you don't help me."

Bella was getting impatient, but I couldn't move. She crouched and lunged. Still motionless, I took the hit and we crashed to the ground. Her teeth were at my throat instantly.

"I win."

Nobody wins.

"Edward? What's wrong? Why won't you teach me?"

"I just can't...bear it. Emmett and Rosalie know as much as I do. Tanya and Eleazar probably know more. Ask someone else."

"That's not fair! You're *good* at this. You helped Jasper before—you fought with him and all the others, too. Why not me? What did I do wrong?"

Even explaining hurt. "Looking at you that way, analyzing you as a target. Seeing all the ways I can kill you..." I cringed. "It just makes it too real for me. We don't have so much time

that it will really make a difference who your teacher is. Anyone can teach you the fundamentals. Besides, it's unnecessary. The Volturi will stop. They will be made to understand."

"But if they don't! I *need* to learn this."

If they don't, Bella will die...absolutely. I knew that now. "Find another teacher."

She did. Bella began practicing with Emmett and he was working off his irritation with her for the last three months of arm-wrestling matches he'd lost. He had not won a single match against her and he never took losing lightly.

Others agreed to help—Rosalie, who was a good fighter in her own right, and Tanya and Eleazar, the two best fighters in the Denali coven. Bella enjoyed practicing with the easygoing Garrett, who was a good teacher, though it couldn't have been much of a challenge for him. Zafrina was willing and gave Bella a good round, but then she returned to entertaining Renesmee.

I couldn't watch any of this, but I caught parts of it in the participants' and spectators' minds, most of which I tried to ignore. I asked Rosalie to keep an eye on Emmett and not let him get too carried away because I didn't want Renesmee upset by her mother getting hurt. She agreed and when she thought Emmett was going at Bella too hard, she traded in for him. Nessie was the easiest route to Rosalie's heart. I spoke to Eleazar too and asked him to watch out for Bella if she fought Tanya. It appeared that Tanya was becoming genuinely fond of Bella, but I didn't want to take any chances.

Since it was impossible for Bella to become an effective fighter against the Volturi in less than three weeks, I was much more interested in helping her learn to manipulate her shield. Kate said that she had worked several centuries before she learned to spread her electrical current over all her skin and she had never learned to project it away from her own body. It seemed unlikely to me that Bella would learn to project her shield away from her body in the short time she had available to train. But she was seeking some way to be useful if we had to fight the Volturi and we already had plenty of good fighters, but she was the only one of us with a defensive talent.

Bella developed a daily routine over the next week. She spent most of the morning with whomever she could get to practice fighting with her and then she would spend time with Renesmee after our daughter ate or drank her lunch. In the afternoons, Nessie liked to go into the woods with Jacob and the wolves or, lately, track down Zafrina and trade pictures with her. Bella spent the afternoons trying to manipulate her shield.

Kate and Bella and I went outside to practice. My job was to let Bella hold me and attempt to protect me with her shield while Kate shocked me. Kate believed it was necessary for Bella to see or hear evidence of actual pain in order to be motivated enough to gain control of her shield. Once they saw us practicing, nobody else would volunteer to be Bella's rhesus monkey.

I had to do a balancing act—show enough pain that Bella would be sufficiently motivated, but not so much that Bella would be too disturbed to continue. Mostly, I tried to control my expression and outcries, but when I did, Kate turned up the heat. Still, I would do whatever was necessary to help Bella feel that she was making progress. It was better than knowing she was literally getting beaten by practicing combat skills.

Amazingly, near the end of the first day, Bella was able to periodically shield me (or part of me) for brief moments. I hadn't expected her to have any success so quickly. We came back the next day...and the next.

"Hey, that one barely stung. Good job, Bella," I told her when I thought I felt a difference.

"Again, Kate," Bella said through clenched teeth. She seemed to be exerting a great deal of effort. Kate touched my shoulder.

"Nothing that time," I announced. Bella was doing something right.

Kate looked surprised. "That wasn't low, either."

"Good," Bella mumbled.

"Get ready," Kate said and reached for me.

Crap! That hurt! I hissed, but didn't make any other sound. Kate had turned the heat way up. At least it felt like it.

"Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!" Bella cried.

"You're doing an amazing job, Bella," I encouraged with an embrace. "You've really only been working at this for a few days and you're already projecting sporadically. Kate, tell her how well she's doing."

Kate was a hard taskmaster, though. "I don't know. She's obviously got tremendous ability, and we're only beginning to touch it. She can do better, I'm sure. She's just lacking incentive."

Bella's teeth curled away from her teeth, but she didn't growl.

She'd learn a lot faster if I threatened her daughter, I bet, Kate thought and looked around for Renesmee.

"Kate...", I started to discourage her, but she had run toward the river where Renesmee was walking with her hand in Zafrina's and Jacob was keeping a close eye on them both.

"Nessie, would you like to come help your mother?" Kate called innocently.

"No," Bella warned. I gave her a hug, seeing that Kate was only planning to make it *look* real. She wouldn't actually shock Renesmee. Our daughter and her circle of friends came darting across the grass to join the growing crowd of spectators who had gathered around the practice area. Renesmee reached out and Bella scooped her up and pulled her close. Nessie snuggled against her mother.

"Absolutely not, Kate," Bella hissed.

"But Momma, I *want* to help."

"No," Bella responded, backing away from Kate. Kate began stalking toward her with her arm outstretched and an evil look on her face.

"Stay away from us, Kate."

"No." Kate began circling around, coming closer and closer. Bella shifted Renesmee onto her back to free her hands, and placed her body between Kate and the baby.

Kate's approach toward our child was angering Bella, but Kate kept coming with her hand outstretched. Bella's eyes narrowed, her lips pulled away from her teeth and when Kate took another step, Bella snarled at her furiously. I had never seen her look so fierce.

"Be careful, Kate," I warned.

Bella dropped into a crouch, her muscles coiled to spring.

"Can you hear anything from Nessie?" Kate turned to ask me. I couldn't believe she didn't recognize how much danger she was in. Perhaps she had become complacent because of her talent, but shocking Bella would have absolutely no effect.

I rushed to put myself between the two women and then replied, "No, nothing at all. Now give Bella some space to calm down, Kate. You shouldn't goad her like that. I know she doesn't seem her age, but she's only a few months old."

“We don’t have time to do this gently, Edward,” Kate argued. “We’re going to have to push her. We only have a few weeks, and she’s got the potential to—”

“Back off for a minute, Kate,” I interrupted. She was going to say that Bella had the potential to protect all of us from Alec and Jane. Though that was possibly true, I doubted that there was any hope of her achieving that goal in the short time we had and I didn’t want her to feel like a failure if she couldn’t do it. She *shouldn’t* be able to do it that quickly. She was still a newborn and most talented vampires had little control of their gifts until they had worked with them for years.

I had to admit, though, that Bella’s self-control was remarkable and had been from the day she was born. Already she was calming herself down sufficiently to avoid attacking Kate. I’d never seen anything like it. I would expect her to exercise that kind of emotional control in ten years, maybe, but certainly not in three months.

“Kate,” she hissed. “Again. Edward only.” She placed her hand on my back and I could feel the strain of her effort.

Kate touched my shoulder. “Nothing,” I declared, extremely impressed.

“And now?” Kate had turned up the heat.

“Still nothing.”

“And now?” Kate was straining to shock me at electrocution levels, trying to break through Bella’s shield.

“Nothing at all.” Kate backed off and inhaled deeply.

“Can you see this?” Zafrina asked me.

“I don’t see anything I shouldn’t,” I replied.

“And you, Renesmee?” she asked.

Nessie smiled and shook her head no.

“No one panic,” Zafrina called out to everyone who had gathered to watch the spectacle. “I want to see how far she can extend.”

Everyone gasped as Zafrina sent the nine other vampires who were there into blackness. Bella’s shield still protected Renesmee and me.

“Raise your hand when you get your sight back,” Zafrina called out. “Now, Bella. See how many you can shield.”

I watched the disoriented crowd, each individual standing in his or her private darkness, and listened to the sound of Bella panting and grinding her teeth as she exerted a huge effort to push the blackness away with her shield. Besides Renesmee on her back and me standing in front of her, Kate, at ten feet away, was the next closest vampire. Soon, Kate’s blank, staring eyes began to focus and she raised her hand. Bella groaned with the effort.

“Fascinating!” I said to myself. I could still read the anxious thoughts in each person’s mind outside of the shield. That was fortunate for our future interaction with the Volturi. Eleazar was concentrating as he tried to get a reading on Renesmee and me through Bella’s shield, but he couldn’t.

“It’s like one-way glass,” I murmured. “I can read everything they’re thinking, but they can’t reach me behind it. And I can hear Renesmee, though I couldn’t when I was on the outside. I’ll bet Kate could shock me now, because she’s underneath the umbrella. I still can’t hear you...hmmm. How does that work?” Now that I was inside Bella’s shield, I would expect to be able to hear her thoughts, but I couldn’t. “It seems like your shield continues to protect your mind while it travels outward to shield others. I don’t understand that.”

Bella was not listening to me. Her jaw was clenched as she struggled to push the shield further away. Garrett, who was standing nearest to Kate, raised his hand. Wow, Bella was doing amazingly well. She exhaled strongly and Zafrina’s virtual darkness engulfed me. “Can I have a minute?” she panted.

“Of course,” Zafrina replied and the darkness lifted. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief. It was frightening to be blind, but it would be much worse to be blinded and deafened by Alec and stand waiting to be destroyed.

“Kate,” said Garrett. He was fascinated by Kate’s gift and wanted to see how strong it was.

“I wouldn’t, Garrett,” I cautioned. He ignored my warning.

“They say you can put a vampire flat on his back,” he ventured.

“Yes...curious?” Kate held up one hand and wiggled her fingers at him.

Garrett shrugged, acting as if he didn’t believe it. “That’s something I’ve never seen. Seems like it might be a bit of an exaggeration.”

Kate played along. "Maybe," she conjectured with a serious face. "Maybe it only works on the weak or the young. I'm not sure. Perhaps you could withstand my gift." Kate extended her hand, inviting him to touch her palm. She found his curiosity amusing and was prepared to satisfy it with a few hundred volts.

Garrett reached out and touched Kate's palm with the tip of his index finger. He cried out and his knees collapsed, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head on a rock. A loud "crack" rang through the air.

"I told you so," I gloated.

Garrett recovered quickly and refocused his eyes on Kate, half expecting her to give him another jolt. Then he smiled.

"Wow," was all he could say.

"Did you enjoy that?" Kate inquired.

"I'm not crazy, but that was sure something," he said, laughing as he got back on his feet.

"That's what I hear," replied Kate smugly. I rolled my eyes at their flirtation.

From inside the house came Carlisle's startled voice. "Did Alice send you?" *Vladimir and Stefan?!*

So, the Romanians had come. I had never met them, but I sensed Carlisle was feeling threatened. I dashed into the house and took a protective stance beside him. Just outside the front door stood the ancients. They were the only survivors of the coven that had challenged the Volturi fifteen hundred years before and lost. They looked similar to the Volturi ancients, but with slightly less transparent skin and no white film over their ruby-red eyes. They exuded an aura of evil intent, though I couldn't say why I thought that.

"No one sent us," said Stefan, looking over our shoulders into the front room where everyone stood in formation behind us.

"Then what brings you here now?" Carlisle asked warily.

"Word travels," responded Vladimir. "We heard hints that Volturi were moving against you. There were whispers that you would not stand alone. Obviously, the whispers were true. This is an impressive gathering."

“We are not challenging the Volturi,” Carlisle corrected with deep discomfort. *How could they know and who else in Europe knows? The Volturi?* Carlisle wondered.

I couldn’t answer his question, though I could make a good guess. No doubt the crafty Romanians had spies watching the Volturi as a matter of course and their preparations for overseas travel must have been obvious. Gossip spread.

“There has been a misunderstanding; that is all. A very serious misunderstanding, to be sure, but one we’re hoping to clear up,” Carlisle continued to explain. What you see are witnesses. We just need the Volturi to listen. We didn’t—”

“We don’t care what they say you did,” Vladimir interrupted. “And we don’t care if you broke the law.”

“No matter how egregiously,” Stefan added.

“We’ve been waiting a millennium and a half for the Italian scum to be challenged. If there is any chance they will fall, we will be here to see it,” Vladimir went on.

“Or even to help defeat them, if we think you have a chance of success,” Stefan added.

I didn’t trust the Romanians any more than I trusted the Volturi—Carlisle didn’t either.

“Bella?” I called. I could hear Renesmee’s curious thoughts in the kitchen. “Bring Renesmee here, please. Maybe we should test our Romanian visitors’ claims.” One couldn’t call them “guests” exactly, since no one had invited them to come and apparently, they didn’t require an invitation to stay.

When I turned to watch Bella enter the room, I saw that the crowd was set for a confrontation, each vampire adopting an offensive or defensive stance, according to his nature. There wasn’t much love in the room for the Romanians. They were known to have been brutal and corrupt masters, unhindered by any pesky sense of justice or mercy.

Tanya, Carmen, Zafrina, and Senna positioned themselves as guards for Renesmee.

“Well, well, Carlisle. You *have* been naughty, haven’t you?”

“She’s not what you think, Stefan.”

“And we don’t care either way,” replied Vladimir. “As we said before.”

“Then you’re welcome to observe, Vladimir, but it is definitely not our plan to challenge the Volturi, as we said before.”

“Then we’ll just cross our fingers...” Vladimir began.

“...and hope we get lucky,” finished Stefan. They had been together for so long that they could have been one organism—like a two-headed snake or the plague. They were as devious and power-hungry as the Volturi...maybe more so.

Once he felt they understood each other, Carlisle asked them in, but they chose to remain outside. They had no interest in mixing with the other guests and they did not wish to be touched by Renesmee, but they also didn’t seem troubled by her.

By the time two weeks had passed, the entire assembly had seen Jacob and his pack return from the woods with Renesmee and word had spread about the werewolves being part of our alliance. We didn’t bother to tell anyone how many more werewolves were waiting in the wings. Truth be told, we couldn’t be sure ourselves.

Most of the vampires were wary of the wolves in their *Canus* form and indifferent to them in their human form...except for the Romanians. They were delighted that the wolves were on our side. With the hopes they had of overthrowing the Volturi, every advantage we could claim was a boon to them.

I had to admit that the eleven family members—Tanya’s coven having made it clear that they were our family, for better or for worse—plus the seventeen other vampires gathered in Forks formed an impressive group. Even without the benefit of Alice and Jasper—I felt a stabbing pain in my chest every time I thought about them—we had pulled together a fine array of talents.

The Romanians, who moved about the property analyzing our collective with an eye to battle, measured our chances of conquering the Volturi as better now than at any other time in the last fifteen hundred years. When I viewed us through their eyes, I could see that they were right. My mind-reading ability would be more effective than Aro’s because I could read their intentions from a distance. Bella was making progress in extending her shield. If we protected her from attack, then she could neutralize Alec and Jane’s power for at least part of the time, allowing us to fight. Demetri’s tracking ability gave them no advantage in a standoff and Chelsea’s power to separate us from each other would not penetrate Bella’s shield. Felix was a good fighter, along with many others of the Volturi guard, I was sure, but with Zafrina able to blind the fighters or make them see images of doom and destruction, they would be made useless. And after all of that, we had insurance in the wolves, in Siobhan, whom Eleazar was certain had some influence over outcomes, and in Benjamin, whom everybody marveled at as he practiced his skills near the river.

Like Bella, Benjamin was too new to have perfect control, but what he could do was impressive. Bella and I (and the Romanians, of course) watched and gaped at his ability to shoot a geyser of water out of the river high into the air purely with his mind. He could send air whirling in a circle like a tornado, raising dust and debris along with it. I didn't know how much he had experimented with fire. If he could control fire, that would be the greatest defense of all. For instance, perhaps he could set a fire blazing between the two sides of the field. Carlisle would like that—it would preclude fighting and I thought it might send the Volturi running in terror. Unfortunately, Benjamin's thoughts told me that he did not feel confident enough with his skills to risk starting fires. Too bad.

Once they'd seen us in action, though, if the Volturi left without resolving anything, then Benjamin and Bella and the other talented vampires would be in danger for the rest of their existence. We would have to eliminate Demetri to ensure that nobody could be tracked easily.

Alistair had talent as a tracker, but I doubted that he could be persuaded to work with us for any concerted effort. When outside, I would look up and see him peering through the attic window watching the proceedings. Like Alice, who'd been forced to remain upstairs away from Bella for most of her pregnancy, he was a "vampire bat in the belfry."

I still hoped that Alice had some plan to help us. I couldn't think of a reason why she would need Kachiri, unless she intended to hide out in the Amazon. But we already knew she'd been there, so the Volturi would know to look there too. It didn't make sense.

We had one other ace in the hole I'd forgotten to consider—Renesmee. I should not underestimate her ability to win friends and influence vampires. She would have to touch Aro to do it, but with the remarkable forces we had gathered, I thought the Volturi would take pause before rushing in to paralyze and slaughter us in their usual manner. Even if Bella didn't have full control of her shield, Jane's talent was unlikely to work on the werewolves. Her gift for torture relied on a vampire's memory of his burning time and the wolves didn't have that history. I couldn't be sure about Alec's "anesthesia," but if Bella could shield just one wolf long enough to distract the "witch twins," as the Romanians referred to Jane and Alec, we would all be freed to fight. In a fair fight, I thought our chances were good.

There *was* hope.

49. DECEPTION

Two weeks before Christmas, Bella decided to take Renesmee to see Charlie. He'd been calling to complain that he hadn't seen his granddaughter for over a week. Bella was concerned that he might show up at the house if she put him off much longer.

Once Charlie had satisfied himself that Bella was not going to disappear without warning, he no longer dropped by every evening and weekend afternoon. He still visited frequently, but perhaps due to Sue's influence, he now called first to ask whether it was okay. Maybe Sue was afraid they would pop in one day and catch us at the dining room table sucking the blood out of a bear or something...like vampire Thanksgiving.

Since our guests arrived, Bella had been telling Charlie that it was an inconvenient time for him to visit and that she would let him know when he could come again. After Carlisle and Esme returned home, she decided to take a day to satisfy Charlie's wishes.

I was fine with that if Jacob went with her. Not that Bella couldn't protect herself and Renesmee, I just felt more comfortable when she had the backup. I knew Jacob would protect my daughter at all costs—with his life, if necessary— and though I thought the need unlikely, his presence was still comforting. It had occurred to me that the Volturi might send an advance team—with Alice gone, we had no way to know.

"You look *beautiful*," I enthused when Bella came out of her closet that morning. She had ventured into the dress section of the "warehouse" and selected a cashmere sweater-dress that fit her like a second skin, clinging enticingly to her curves. She also wore heels, which made her legs look even sexier than they were already. "Are you sure we have to go out today? I'd much rather stay here with you and help wrinkle your dress."

"I promised Charlie. You know how he is—if I don't show up, he'll get suspicious that we're leaving without telling him."

"All right. But darling, please take your cell phone and if you need *anything* at all, call and I'll be there lickety split."

"I've got it right here in my purse," Bella replied.

She seemed a little tense. Perhaps I hadn't done my full duty by her overnight? *Nah, that couldn't be it.* I chuckled. I was starting to think like the old Jacob.

Bella didn't like to go out in public. She always worried that she would run into people she knew and she couldn't let them see how much she had changed. I told her to just smile and wave and keep on moving. Her good friends had gone off to college anyway, though I supposed they might return for the holidays.

Then I realized that Bella said she had the cell phone "in her purse." That was new for her. Along with the dress and heels, in her hand Bella carried a fashionable-looking leather clutch, small and chic. She seemed rather fancily dressed just to visit Charlie, but now that I thought about it, I realized that her style of dress had changed over the last couple of weeks. Perhaps having guests had inspired her, or missing Alice, or maybe it was the convenience of her new closet organization, but she had strayed from wearing jeans and t-shirts every day. Today she looked like an elegant model going out on the town. I was utterly charmed, but I didn't want to make too big a deal of it or she might become self-conscious.

Bella had been working very hard recently and I thought it would be good for her to take a day off and relax. She still spent mornings practicing her fighting skills in the meadow—I didn't ask her about that, though I could see most of what was happening through Emmett's eyes. He was enjoying his position as tutor, both because he was no longer the least experienced fighter in the family and because he got to beat Bella every day, though not without taking some damage himself. Emmett's policy of "no mercy" was actually improving Bella's skills rather quickly from what I could tell. Incentive at work, I supposed.

As for shield practice, Bella had projected ten feet or so and maintained it for short periods of time. She described her shield as like a thin skin that she could push away from herself in the manner of inflating a balloon. She said that it resisted stretching away from her and snapped back when she lost concentration.

Bella was working with Zafrina now rather than Kate, who had been disappearing into the woods with Garrett quite often. Bella no longer needed Kate's incentive to find her shield as she had at the beginning. If she required an emotional boost to help her project—for emotion seemed to be the key—she had plenty of reasons to get angry. Since Bella didn't need my services as a sacrificial lamb anymore, I was free to watch or to go about other business, much to my relief.

On this day when Bella was out, I invited my family to Carlisle's office to talk about what happened while they were gone. Carlisle had spoken some with Eleazar, but all the guests had been anxious to catch up with Carlisle, so it was hard to get time alone with him.

"The Denalis were shocked when they first saw Renesmee, but she charmed them one by one, telling her life's story. Or 'her days,' as she calls it." I chuckled. "You each should ask

Nessie to tell you her story as she told it to our guests. It's quite special, revelatory in some ways. Everyone in the family makes an appearance. Emmett's wearing tights."

"What?" Em scowled and everyone laughed.

"Ask her yourself," I said with a grin. Nessie had confused the words *minstrel* and *minister*, so had visualized Emmett dressed as the Pied Piper of Hamelin for her christening. Jasper filling the plastic baby pool was funny too. Though he played poker with Nessie often, apparently Jasper hadn't taught his niece the second definition of the word *pool*.

I only hoped that we survived to attend Renesmee's christening. If any of us remained standing at the end of the confrontation, at least we knew whom she wanted as her "second-" and "third-string" parents.

The most important information my family needed to know, though, was the frightening pattern Eleazar had identified in the history of Volturi punishments—that Aro's desire to acquire talented vampires was his ulterior motive for destroying covens. I reminded them how Alice had foreseen the Volturi's decision to come to Forks before Irina had reported us, so it was clear that they were waiting for a pretext to "punish" us. I also shared the theory that Alice must have run to avoid putting her gift into Aro's hands.

"Our situation seems rather better than it did before we left," Carlisle observed. "Even if Alice and Jasper did have to leave, they've aided our cause a great deal by sending the Amazons, and Peter and Charlotte, of course."

"I'm moderately hopeful that if we make it safe for Alice to return, then she might come back someday," I said. "If we can negotiate with the Volturi to stop their scheming to acquire her, then we might live in peace—though I almost want to challenge them just for the dozens, if not hundreds, of vampires they've destroyed under false pretenses."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Emmett.

"I hope we never have to take things that far," Carlisle said.

"The destruction I saw through Eleazar's thoughts was horrifying. None of the covens was as large as ours, but the Volturi have done it over and over."

"Surely not every coven was destroyed just to acquire one or two individuals," Esme protested.

"I'm afraid so—at least those expeditions where the ancients went along. They claimed to be monitoring how the guard was performing their duties. After the guard had destroyed most of a coven, Aro would pardon just the one or two vampires he wanted to take for his

'collection' and invite them to join the guard. With Chelsea's help to break their former emotional ties and bind them to the Volturi, nobody ever declined. That's how he got Heidi, Corin, and Arturo," I told them.

"Who's Arturo?" Emmett asked.

"He was a vampire from the region where Spain is now," explained Carlisle, "twenty or thirty years older than any of us when he was changed. He could elevate the mood of individuals near him much like Jasper can, except that the effects lasted for several days. Aro wanted him to join the guard for Marcus's sake. Marcus lost his mate eons ago, but has never recovered from the severe depression that caused."

"Eleazar indicated that Arturo was destroyed after Aro acquired Corin," I told Carlisle. "Did you know?"

Carlisle shook his head. "Arturo just disappeared one day and never came back. I thought he left the guard."

"Who's Corin?" Emmett asked.

"Corin is a member of the guard who can make you feel euphoric when you're around her," Carlisle replied. "Her gift is more powerful than Arturo's was. Addictive too."

"But Marcus won't have anything to do with her?" I asked, having seen that in Eleazar's thoughts.

"No. He doesn't appreciate having his feelings manipulated. Chelsea keeps Marcus alive by binding his loyalty to Aro. I think if he were left alone, he would find some way to die."

"But Aro needs Marcus because he can identify the relationships between members of a coven and determine how strong or weak they are," I went on. "Then he tells Aro which relationships Chelsea can break apart so that a coven can be dismantled more easily. Marcus also keeps Aro informed when a guard member's loyalty is slipping, according to Eleazar."

"That's all quite interesting information, Edward. How certain are you of it?"

"As certain as Eleazar, which is to say seven or eight on a scale of ten."

"Edward, does Aro want you too?" Esme asked, fear evident in her voice.

"Yes," I answered reluctantly. "When Alice and I were in Volterra, he was clear on that. After I went there to ask the Volturi to...destroy me..."—I glanced at Esme and saw the pain on her face at my mention of it— "...well, Aro had Corin shadow me around the city, though I

didn't realize why she was doing it at the time. Her influence is probably why Bella was able to get there in time. Corin weakened my intentions for a few hours. Eleazar says vampire gifts for influencing others aren't as strong as the bond between mates, so my...um...feelings overrode Corin's influence after a while."

"Alice never told us," Esme said. My mother was covering her mouth with her hand and looking at the floor. Carlisle put his arm around her shoulders.

"I never told her...or Bella. It seemed irrelevant at the time, I guess, and I didn't recognize what Corin was doing right away." Everyone went silent, not wanting to bring up that horrible time. "I'm sorry, Esme. I didn't mean to remind you."

"It's fine, dear heart. You're here and that's all that matters now."

I went back to the previous subject. "Eleazar thinks that Aro will want Bella too, once he realizes that she's a shield. Her skills are complementary to Renata's. Bella prevents mental attacks and Renata deflects physical attacks. In time, Bella will be more powerful than Renata, though, I'm sure of it. She's already projecting ten feet. She's amazing!" I crowed. Everyone who had watched her work was chattering about Bella, so the family had heard, but I couldn't help bragging about her anyway.

"She is that. In many ways," Carlisle said thoughtfully.

"How did the Denalis take it when you told them about Irina?" Rosalie asked, changing the subject.

"They couldn't believe it, that she would betray her family like that."

"Not even after they saw Renesmee?"

"Kate was terrified when Bella brought her out," I said. "Well, they all were, actually. But like Irina, Kate's first thought was to tell the authorities before they were destroyed along with us."

"That's understandable," Carlisle said softly, "given what they've lost."

"Yes. But once they calmed down and realized that Renesmee's heart was pumping and that they could smell her blood, they became intrigued. Carmen took to her immediately and made Eleazar listen to her story. He convinced Tanya and Kate to listen then and they were all converted. Renesmee was magical. You would have been amazed."

"If the Romanians are any indication—" Emmett began.

“They’re not!” I interrupted.

“Well, I saw her approach the Draculas,” he said and Rosalie started to giggle. “That’s what Jacob calls them. I think it suits.”

“In more ways than one!” Rosalie added.

Emmett continued his story. “Renesmee asked the lighter one why their skin looked like toilet tissue.” Emmett laughed. “I think she meant ‘tissue paper,’ but I like her version better.”

“How did I miss that?” I wondered aloud.

“It was in the meadow when we were practice fighting. The ‘Dracs’ came to see what kind of fighting skills we had, I guess.”

“What did Vladimir say?” Carlisle asked with a smile on his face. I saw what he was thinking and laughed.

Emmett adopted a low, scratchy voice like the Romanians and repeated the speech.

“We sat still for a very long time, child, contemplating our own divinity,” droned Emmett, mimicking Vladimir. “It was a sign of our power that everything came to us. Prey, diplomats, those seeking our favor. We sat on our thrones and thought ourselves gods. We didn’t notice for a long time that we were changing—almost petrifying. I suppose the Volturi did us one favor when they burned our castles. Stefan and I, at least, did not continue to petrify. Now the Volturi’s eyes are filmed with dusty scum, but ours are bright. I imagine that will give us an advantage when we gouge theirs from their sockets.” Emmett laughed raucously.

“Bella wasn’t too pleased,” he said, still laughing. I saw Bella’s shocked expression as Emmett had seen it. She’d snatched Nessie into her arms and backed away. I was sorry I had missed that interaction. I would ask Renesmee later what she thought of the Romanians.

“That’s horrid!” exclaimed Esme.

“Oh, it’s no worse than some of those fairy tales I’ve seen her read. The wicked witches eating little children and the like,” Rosalie countered.

“Do you think the Draculas will start something with the Volturi?” Emmett wanted to know, still hoping that he’d get to do battle with Felix at least, the biggest and best of the Volturi fighters.

“I hope not,” answered Carlisle. “If they do, they’re on their own. I hope Caius doesn’t think that we invited them here. He might view it as a provocation.” Once again, everyone became quiet, considering the dangerous situation that would play out in only two weeks.

“I saw Bella drive off with Jacob and Renesmee,” Esme said, changing the subject.

“Yes, Charlie was getting impatient that he hasn’t seen Nessie for more than a week, so Bella agreed to take her to visit for the day. She seemed a little secretive about it. I think she’s probably doing some Christmas shopping too.”

“I miss Alice,” Esme said sorrowfully. “It won’t feel like Christmas without her here insisting that we all sing Christmas carols.”

“I’ll help you decorate, Mom,” Rosalie said in an attempt to cheer up Esme. “I hate all this waiting around knowing that the guillotine is getting ready to drop on our heads.”

“Ah, don’t think like that, Rose,” Emmett objected. “It doesn’t look like we’re even gonna get a chance to fight and if we do, we’ll whip ‘em for sure. The wolves alone will send them running away with their tails between their legs. Remember how impressive they looked all lined up at our training session before the newborn battle? They were awesome! Of course, they’re not as good at fighting as we are, but they’re scary as hell. I do wish Jasper was here, though. We could use him.”

“We could indeed,” Carlisle commented. “He would be very helpful at keeping everyone’s emotions under control.” That wasn’t exactly what Emmett meant.

I was listening for the Volvo and had been for a couple of hours. Bella had been gone longer than I’d expected. When the car finally slowed to turn into our driveway, I was a little surprised that I hadn’t heard Jacob’s or Renesmee’s thoughts beforehand. Then Bella parked the car and carried the baby into the house and I saw why. Nessie was knocked out, snoring softly with her Cupid’s-bow lips slightly open and puckered against her mother’s shoulder. Jacob hadn’t returned with her; his thoughts were nowhere in the vicinity.

I was playing my piano, something I hadn’t done for some time. It was a good diversion to soothe my impatience while I waited for Bella to return. I didn’t want to call and make her feel I was checking up on her—I just missed her and of course, I worried whenever she wasn’t nearby. The music segued into Bella’s lullaby when she entered the living room. I had been too

sad to play since Alice left, but after sizing up our advantages with Carlisle, I was feeling better about our chances.

“Welcome home,” I said, smiling. There were a dozen others in the living room, but Bella was the only one there for me. I kept playing the lullaby. It seemed appropriate for the one sleeper we still had in the family. “Did you have a good time with Charlie today?”

“Yes. Sorry I was gone so long. I stepped out to do a little Christmas shopping for Renesmee. I know it won’t be much of an event, but...” Bella didn’t finish her sentence, just shrugged. The sadness in her voice unnerved me. I didn’t know that Christmas meant so much to her. I stopped playing and turned around on the piano bench to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her closer.

“I hadn’t thought much about it. If you *want* to make an event of it—”

“No,” Bella cut in, rather more firmly than I expected. “I just didn’t want to let it pass without giving her something.”

“Do I get to see?”

“If you want. It’s only a little thing.” Bella dug in her clutch and pulled out a velvet jewelry bag. “It caught my eye from the window of an antique store while I was driving by.”

Bella dropped a little round locket into my hand. It was 24-carat gold, with an inscription in French inside:

Plus que ma propre vie...

I sobered immediately. “Do you know what this says?” I asked Bella, though given the meaning, I was sure that she must. She might even have had it engraved herself.

“The shopkeeper told me it said something along the lines of ‘more than my own life.’ Is that right?”

“Yes, he had it right.”

I looked into Bella’s eyes to try to read what was going on in her head, but she looked away. It was important then.

When times had been dangerous in the past and Bella and I hadn’t known whether one or the other of us would survive, this had been our pledge to one another. Either of us would give our life for the other. Was she saying that she would give her life for Renesmee? I knew

that she would, but why had this come up now, when our situation looked brighter? And why did she look so sad? All the lightness had gone out of her eyes since this morning.

Something had happened today—something grave—and she didn't want me to know about it. She must have a good reason. The only thing I could think of was that she knew Aro could read my mind, but not hers. She was hiding something from me that Aro must not find out...something that made her very sad. Were we going to lose then? How did she know?

"I hope she likes it," mumbled Bella, not meeting my eyes.

"Of course she will," I affirmed, trying to make my voice sound light. If it needed to be a secret then I wasn't going to pry. Still, I wanted to touch her, to be reunited physically at least, to be reassured.

"Let's take her home," I said, nodding toward Renesmee. I stood and put my arm around Bella, but she didn't move.

"What?" I asked. Didn't she want to go home with me? What did *that* mean? I felt uneasy.

"I wanted to practice with Emmett a little...," she said with hesitation.

Seriously? Bella would give up our private time together to practice fighting? It was absurd.

Emmett piped up from in front of the television where he sat with Rose. "Excellent. The forest needs thinning."

I gave him a harsh look.

"There's plenty of time for that tomorrow," I said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bella argued. "There's no such thing as *plenty of time* anymore. That concept does not exist. I have a lot to learn and—"

"Tomorrow," I said flatly. Bella might know something I didn't, but I knew something too—if we had to battle the Volturi, her fight training for a few hours more would not make one iota of difference to the outcome. And *I* needed her now.

We held hands and walked silently toward the cottage, jumping the river together. When we got there, I could barely wait for Bella to put Renesmee down before I carried her to our bedroom and tore off her clothes. Actually, the cashmere dress was too lovely on her for me to tear it, but I set her on her feet and had it over her head in the same instant. She was

wearing undergarments—that was new too. A half-height, padded bra and matching lace panties, slightly less revealing than her honeymoon lingerie. I guessed that she wanted to follow the conventions of modesty when she was in public. The brassiere was sexy, cutting across the top of her breasts just above her nipples. Then I realized what the padding was for—not for augmentation, but to prevent her erect nipples from poking through the soft knit dress in an unseemly way. There was nothing like stiff nipples to encourage men to stare at a woman’s breasts...or so I’d heard. My wife’s breasts were the only ones that interested me.

Though Bella was distracted when we entered the room, she didn’t stay that way long. I leaned over to kiss her, pulling her toward me with a hand in the small of her back, and she melted into me, returning my kiss eagerly. I remembered the days when I couldn’t allow her to press her body against mine in this way and I was glad that those days were past.

There was something very sexy about having the most erogenous of Bella’s erogenous zones—and nothing else—hidden behind expensive silk fabric. It made me want to scoop my hands inside, but I didn’t. Bella was disturbed and, though I could see she was trying to hide it, I couldn’t ignore that.

I disrobed and then took her hand and pulled her to the bed. I lay beside her with my head propped on my hand and lightly stroked her exposed skin with my fingertips. Before long, Bella put her palm to my cheek and lifted her lips to mine. Then she looked into my eyes and I into hers. Their color was changing. Her eyes were amber-red now, a huge contrast to the glowing red that they were when she was new.

“I love you,” she said simply.

“More than my own life,” I finished.

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 sneaks 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?"

"Okay," 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.

51. CONFRONTATION

When we felt the time was near, Carlisle and I moved to the baseball field, our intent being to draw the Volturi to an appropriate meeting ground away from town and the reservation. Bella and I stayed together—always together—from that moment on. We would not be separated again until the end came, if it did.

We set up a tent in the woods at the edge of the clearing to keep Renesmee close to us. She and Jacob slept there for two nights while we waited for the weather that signaled our impending doom. The morning of New Year's Eve Day, the sun rose on a blanket of light snow that had turned the clearing into a pristine plain of crystals—a perfect foil to the large collection of sparkling vampires who would soon gather there. The sun was short-lived, though, disappearing behind cloud cover soon after sunrise, leaving dim gray light to punctuate our mood.

Our friends began to gather, having seen the omen of the accumulating snow. As they came, Carlisle and I directed them either to the center of the clearing or off to the sides, according to their professed attachment to our cause. The wolves were collecting in the woods and Jacob exited the tent to take charge of his pack.

When Bella stepped from the trees carrying Renesmee, I saw that she had hung a baby-sized leather backpack over Nessie's shoulders. Bella was wearing the enormous, gaudy jewel that Aro had sent her for our wedding. I raised an eyebrow, but refused to ask questions or even consider these details.

I couldn't avoid hearing the thought in Renesmee's head, though.

Leave Momma? (And a picture of Jacob.) So Renesmee knows that we might be separated.

Not if I can help it, we won't! I threw my arms around the two of them and held on tightly for a moment. Then with a heavy sigh, I let go and prepared to face the inevitable.

Carlisle and I organized our group into lines on the south end of the clearing, the front line comprising the strongest fighters. My father and I took the central positions, with Emmett and Rosalie next to me and Tanya, Kate, and Eleazar next to Carlisle. Bella stood behind me with Renesmee on her back. Next to them stood Benjamin on one side and Zafrina on the other. Bella's priority would be to shield Renesmee and then extend protection to Zafrina and Benjamin to whatever degree she was able. Even intermittent shielding of our two best

weapons would help our cause. Garrett stood next to Benjamin and Senna next to Zafrina. Tia, Carmen, and Esme completed the line.

The third line was composed of the remaining witnesses, the nearer vampires being the most likely to fight with us if everything went south. Maggie, Liam, and Siobhan stood at one end of the line and Amun and Kebi at the other. In between were the four remaining nomads Peter and Charlotte, Mary, and Randall. The Romanians stood at the back.

Siobhan was concentrating on how she wanted the confrontation to be resolved, humoring Carlisle who believed she had a gift. The rest of the group's thoughts ran along one of two lines: *We must stand strong, or I hope we can get away safely.*

I watched the cloud formations move and change until they nearly matched Alice's original vision of the day, and then I reached behind me for Bella's hand. I remained facing forward, watching and waiting, but I heard Jacob pad across the snow and insert himself between Bella and Benjamin. *Good luck to us,* he thought, knowing that both I and his pack would hear. I felt better having him next to my wife and daughter and he felt better being closer to Renesmee too.

Then I heard them and it was worse than I had imagined. Caius was marching the guard forward with no intention to pause at all. They knew we were here and they had come to destroy. Not only that, but in addition to the full guard and the wives, the ancients had brought their own penny gallery to observe the destruction. The crowd of vampires, whose numbers I couldn't count, had been stirred into a froth of revenge for our creation of a forbidden, immortal child.

They think they can do whatever they want in North America!

They must die. They all must die!

The Volturi have long arms. Nobody's above the law!

Yellow-eyed traitors!

I was so furious that I was hissing. The crowd of spectators was intended to go home at the end of the day and spread the word about how just and correct the Volturi's punishment had been.

Then they came, swarming toward us in a cloud of gray and black. Like a marching band, the sound of their feet created a synchronized percussion, their long robes making them appear to float slightly above the ground. Dark cowls covered their white faces, not an arm or a leg moving out of formation. The center of the group was solid black with rings of increasingly

lighter gray toward the outer edges. The swarm unfolded into a theater stage with wings, and then the center of the stage marched forward in the blackest of the cloaks.

This was well-choreographed showboating, an exhibition of “shock and awe” and it was effective. The Volturi guard was majestic and fearsome, thirty soldiers total, excluding the two wives, who were protected at the back by Santiago and another large fighter I did not know. Following the regimented mass, a horde of several dozen vampires clustered around the sides.

I saw Irina standing behind the guard, staring wildly at her coven members, who formed the front row of our defenses along with my family—those slated for annihilation. Irina’s mind was reeling. She was horrified and terrified and wanted desperately to take it all back. It had never occurred to her that Tanya and the rest of the coven would take a stand to protect an *immortal child!*

Behind me, Garrett was reliving the grandest moments of his life. “The redcoats are coming, the redcoats are coming,” he murmured, chuckling sardonically.

I snarled. “Alistair was right,” I whispered to my father.

Which part? he thought.

“Alistair was right?” Tanya asked under her breath.

“They—Caius and Aro—come to destroy and acquire,” I went on, almost silently. “They have many layers of strategy already in place. If Irina’s accusation had somehow proven to be false, they were committed to find another reason to take offense. But they can see Renesmee now, so they are perfectly sanguine about their course. We could still attempt to defend against their other contrived charges, but first they have to stop, to hear the truth about Renesmee.” I added, even more quietly, “Which they have no intention of doing.”

We’ll take care of that, came a thought from behind me. Jacob signaled to the wolves and they exited the forest from two sides, single-file, and covered our flanks...sixteen of them! Eight on each side, plus Jacob. It seemed that our increase in numbers had spurred an increase in theirs.

At one hundred yards away to an invisible signal, the Volturi halted abruptly in their tracks. I smiled in spite of myself. The *infants* were saving lives...again. Behind me, Bella began to snarl and Zafrina and Senna joined in. I squeezed the hand that I still held behind my back to calm Bella. It was too early to threaten.

The ancients were communicating, or rather, Aro was reading Caius’s and Marcus’s thoughts by holding one of each of their hands as they considered what to do. Aro had seen the

russet wolf in Irina's memory, but watching seventeen wolves operate as a unit with their eyes glued to the Volturi guard gave them pause.

Aro scoured the faces in our company, looking for the prize, the one thing that would make all the risk and subterfuge worth the potential repercussions. After all, this operation had been predicated on acquiring the one who could see the future. I saw a flash of anger and disappointment cross his otherwise smooth face. He kept raking his eyes over our lines, wondering if he had overlooked her. My breathing sped up as anger seized me.

"Edward?" *What's happening?* My father wanted to know.

"They're not sure how to proceed. They're weighing options, choosing key targets—me, of course, you, Eleazar, Tanya. Marcus is reading the strength of our ties to each other, looking for weak points. The Romanians' presence irritates them. They're worried about the faces they don't recognize—Zafrina and Senna in particular—and the wolves, naturally. They've never been outnumbered before. That's what stopped them."

"Outnumbered?" Tanya repeated.

"They don't count their witnesses," I murmured. "They are nonentities, meaningless to the guard. Aro just enjoys an audience."

"Should I speak?" Carlisle asked.

I listened for a moment. The Volturi could see Renesmee on Bella's back and that fact alone would force them to proceed despite our enhanced numbers and the presence of the wolves.

"This is the only chance you'll get." I knew it was true as soon as I said it.

Bravely, Carlisle stepped forward, practically inviting Jane to shoot him down. He held out his arms, palms up, as if offering a hug.

"Aro, my old friend. It's been centuries."

What is he up to? Aro was thinking. I have never known Carlisle for a liar and yet, he is behaving as if he has nothing to hide! Ah well, a few words won't hurt anything. I am curious how he will try to justify this!

Aro stepped forward. "Peace," he said to the restless guard, which had been wound up tightly and made ready for the slaughter, and now were being told to wait. The noise quieted.

“Fair words, Carlisle. They seem out of place, considering the army you’ve assembled to kill me, and to kill my dear ones.”

Carlisle offered his hand, though Aro and the guard were still one hundred yards away. It was the gesture that mattered.

“You have but to touch my hand to know that was never my intent.”

“But how can your intent possibly matter, dear Carlisle, in the face of what you have done?”

The sickly sweet falseness that Aro favored as his public face was revolting...and frustrating. How could one negotiate with someone so obviously deceitful? Next to Carlisle’s honesty and purity, it was almost blasphemous. *Maggie must be going crazy*, I thought.

“I have not committed the crime you are here to punish me for.”

“Then step aside and let us punish those responsible. Truly, Carlisle, nothing would please me more than to preserve your life today.”

“No one has broken the law, Aro. Let me explain.” Carlisle offered his hand again.

Caius moved swiftly forward to join his brother.

“We see the child, Carlisle,” Caius snarled. “Do not treat us as fools.”

“She is *not* an immortal. She is not a vampire. I can easily prove this with just a few moments—

“If she is not one of the forbidden, then why have you massed a battalion to protect her?”

“Witnesses, Caius, just as you have brought.” Carlisle gestured toward the angry mob, a few of whom growled back at him.

“Any one of these friends can tell you the truth about the child. Or you could just look at her, Caius. See the flush of human blood in her cheeks.”

“Artifice!” Caius barked. “Where is the informer? Let her come forward!” He looked around for Irina who was half-hidden by the crowd. “You! Come!”

Poor Irina. She was terrified and still couldn’t believe what she had gotten herself and everyone else into. One of the guards prodded her forward, but as she moved, she remained dazed, gaping at her sisters.

When she approached him, Caius raised his arm and slapped her hard across the face. Tanya and Kate hissed. I wanted to growl at him in spite of what Irina had done. He pointed at Renesmee and Jacob growled instead.

“This is the child you saw? The one that was obviously more than human?”

Irina’s eyes darted to Renesmee and a puzzled look crossed her face.

“Well?” Caius prodded.

“I...I’m not sure,” Irina stuttered, confused. “She’s not the same, but I think it’s the same child. What I mean is, she’s changed. This child is bigger than the one I saw, but—”

Caius’s fury was escalating. Aro saw the explosion coming and stepped between his brother and the subject of his disapproval. Aro did not want his brother to act impulsively and risk losing the good will of the audience.

“Be composed, brother. We have time to sort this out. No need to be hasty.”

Caius grunted and turned away.

“Now, sweetling, show me what you’re trying to say,” Aro said, his voice like syrup. He took Irina’s hand and held it briefly. Then, with a sideways glance to check the gallery’s reaction, he said, “You see, Caius? It’s a simple matter to get what we need.” He returned his attention to Carlisle. “And so we have a mystery on our hands, it seems. It would appear the child has grown. Yet Irina’s first memory was clearly that of an immortal child. Curious.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to explain,” Carlisle responded, holding out his hand again. But Aro had no interest in reading Carlisle’s memories when he could read mine. Through me, he could know my thoughts *and* those of everyone else except Bella. He could discover who the dark-skinned warrior vampires were since he’d never seen them before. He also wanted to find out the nature and strength of the wolves’ abilities. And where Alice had gone. I was more than thankful that I had no answer to that last question.

“I would rather have the explanation from someone more central to the story, my friend,” Aro lied. “Am I wrong to assume that this breach was not of your making?”

“There was no breach.” Aro kept trying to accuse, but Carlisle negated his every attempt.

“Be that as it may, I *will* have every facet of the truth.” In his irritation at being contradicted, Aro’s façade cracked just a little and his true nature shone through in his hard voice. “And the best way to get that is to have the evidence directly from your talented son.”

He turned his eyes to me. "As the child clings to his newborn mate, I'm assuming Edward is involved."

Finally, Aro will be made to see the truth, I thought. Though it would not change the Volturi's intent, it would make them rethink their strategy. I turned around to kiss Bella and Renesmee's foreheads, refusing to consider that it could be the last time I ever did so.

There was nothing to do but let him have his wish. I had faced Aro before and I knew that I could match wits with him at least. It was a mixed blessing for him to read my mind. Though he would get all the information he wanted, I would also be able to read his reaction to it. It gave us a strategic advantage, I thought. I walked toward Aro, passing Carlisle several yards ahead of our front line and patting him on the shoulder as I went by.

"Leave it to me," I muttered under my breath. I heard my mother's muffled cry of fear from behind.

Jane smiled. She was happy to have such a clear shot at me as I moved closer to their front line. I had survived her torture before; I could do it again. I heard Bella release a nervous laugh. She was surely beside herself with fear. Jane had traumatized Bella by torturing me in front of her in Volterra. It partially explained Bella's special loathing for Jane. I just hoped that she was resolved to fight Jane with her mind and not with her body.

I walked forward until I was close enough to Aro to show compliance, but not so close that he didn't have to walk toward me as well. He responded as if he were delighted by my aloofness—all part of his act. I could tell that he was trying to think only the thoughts he wanted me to hear and not others, but that skill is difficult to master and I saw through his attempt.

I offered my hand to Aro, but not in submission. He would never see me submit to tyranny...I hoped. Standing this close to Aro and the guard made me feel more vulnerable than I had ever felt except with Bella. But that was for love and Aro and I had no love for one another. He was even beginning to wonder if I would be worth the trouble I'd cause him in the Volturi guard. If he asked, I could assure him that I wouldn't be worth it, not in the least. I only wished now that I could hide Bella's talent from him. When this was all over, she would be as vulnerable as Alice was to Aro's desire.

Aro took my hand with another false smile and bowed his head. My memories began flowing into his mind so fast that I had to concentrate to catch his reactions to them. He would have the benefit of reviewing my memories later, but I had to read his thoughts as they went by.

Aro was awed by the miracle of Renesmee; overjoyed to learn that Bella had a promising, though undeveloped talent; disappointed that Alice had run away; envious of Carlisle's close-knit and loyal family; and thrilled to discover the gifts of Zafrina and Benjamin. He learned that the wolves were genetic shape-shifters and our friends. He also accepted with relative grace that I had a profound distaste for his scheming and that I was fully aware of his goals, as were the majority of the crowd behind me. We would not go down quietly. Draining my mind of its contents was a lengthy process and the rabble began to stir impatiently. I heard Bella hiss.

On with the killing, already! Jane was thinking.

Felix reflected silently, *Such a shame. Bella is so attractive.* The big lug had a crush on my wife! He was also looking forward to taking me down, but I was confident that Emmett could handle him.

Caius wanted to get on with business and leave. He didn't care about his reputation and had little interest in Aro's collecting. He would not grieve over the demise of Carlisle's coven, talented or not. We were a strange lot to him, not understandable.

When Aro finally finished, I could see that he was already considering the possibility of producing more hybrid vampires like Renesmee for study. He was unsettled that we knew he had destroyed covens to acquire rare individuals. He was enraged by Eleazar and was sorry that they had let him leave the guard alive. I would have to warn our friend and brother.

"You see?" I asked Aro when he ceased raping my mind. That's more or less what it felt like to be touched by Aro. He did not release my hand, though, because he wanted to know immediately if I or anyone else on our side was becoming a threat. I longed to yank it away.

"Yes, I see, indeed," Aro responded. "I doubt whether any two among gods or mortals have ever seen quite so clearly." Aro's excitement was showing, which shocked everyone on his side of the standoff. Curiosity and the discovery of something new overrode almost everything for Aro. Boredom was the bane of the ancients. "You have given me much to ponder, young friend," Aro continued. "Much more than I expected. May I meet her?" he asked eagerly. "I never dreamed of the existence of such a thing in all my centuries. What an addition to our histories!"

After some minor negotiation, Aro walked to the center of the battleground with Renata behind him, and Felix and Demetri on either side. Bella met us in the middle with Renesmee on her back, and Jacob and Emmett flanking her. I ducked away from Aro's arm, which he had draped over my shoulder, and took a position at my wife's side much to my relief.

"I hear her strange heart. I smell her strange scent," Aro said with wonder. For the first time since this farce began, Aro examined Bella in detail too. "In truth, young Bella, immortality does become you most extraordinarily. It is as if you were designed for this life."

Bella nodded once.

"You liked my gift?" Aro asked, referring to the ancient necklace around her neck.

"It's beautiful, and very, very generous of you. Thank you," Bella said. "I probably should have sent a note." The enormous diamond gleamed in spite of the gray sky.

Aro laughed. "It's just a little something I had lying around. I thought it might complement your new face, and so it does."

Jane hissed her displeasure from the formation behind Aro. He had never given *her* such a prize. I wondered in passing if vampires ever had affairs.

Aro cleared his throat. "May I greet your daughter, lovely Bella?" he inquired, sugary sweetness oozing from his words.

Bella was holding Renesmee to her chest when she boldly stepped forward. I was sure it must go against every instinct in her to approach a dangerous schemer like Aro with our precious child. But his fascination with all things rare was a saving grace. He gazed at our daughter, from her lovely brown eyes, to her waist-length curls, to her tiny hands and feet. He spoke quietly, almost to himself, "But she's exquisite. So like you and Edward." And then, "Hello, Renesmee."

Nessie looked at her mother and Bella nodded.

"Hello, Aro." She spoke in her ringing soprano. Aro was delighted. He met few children in his never-ending vampire's life, except for those he drained, of course.

"What is it?" Caius asked gruffly from behind Aro.

"Half mortal, half immortal," Aro declared to Caius and the guard. "Conceived so, and carried by this newborn while she was still human."

"Impossible," Caius said dismissively.

"Do you think they've fooled me, then, brother?" Aro subtly chastised. "Is the heartbeat you hear a trickery as well?"

Caius scowled.

“Calmly and carefully, brother,” Aro coaxed. “I know well how you love your justice, but there is no justice in acting against this unique little one for her parentage. And so much to learn, so much to learn! I know you don’t have my enthusiasm for collecting histories, but be tolerant with me, brother, as I add a chapter that stuns me with its improbability. We came expecting only justice and the sadness of false friends, but look what we have gained instead! A new, bright knowledge of ourselves, our possibilities.”

If Aro were worthy of our trust, this speech could have sent my heart soaring. *We have succeeded! All will be well!* But Aro was not to be trusted. He held out his hand for Renesmee’s, but she wanted to show *him* instead. She leaned out of Bella’s arms and touched Aro’s face with just her fingertips.

Mr. Aro, she thought, showing him a picture of our family. Please will you not hurt my Momma and Daddy and Nana and Popop and Uncle Emmett and Aunt Rosalie? The picture changed to one of herself surrounded by Jacob and his pack. And Jacob and my wolf-people? And everybody here, please? An image of all her new friends. I promise we did not do anything bad. Renesmee removed her hand.

“Brilliant,” Aro whispered in delight. Nessie settled back in her mother’s arms, her expression full of the knowledge of the gravity of her diplomatic mission. We hadn’t told her what to say, but she knew that we were in danger.

“Please?” she reiterated.

Aro’s face looked like the gentlest of grandfather’s when he replied. “Of course I have no desire to harm your loved ones, precious Renesmee.”

Nessie wasn’t sure whether to believe him, but he looked so kindly. I had to make an effort to control *my* reaction to his bald-faced lie, though, and his equally deceitful thoughts. *It is only justice we seek.* As far as I was concerned, Aro could tell himself that until pigs flew by and it still wouldn’t be true. Maggie hissed in the background, offended as I was by his lying to a trusting child.

Aro was in full acquisitional mode now. He was making his selections from amongst our company. He still wanted me, despite the trouble he knew I would be, and he wanted Renesmee, though he was willing to consider making his own hybrid vampires. (*Surely somebody in the guard can impregnate a human without killing her,* he thought.) Nessie was more interesting to him for her gift than for herself, and though Bella’s gift was undeveloped, he wanted her too, and Benjamin and Zafrina, and...and...

"I wonder..." mused Aro. *Could we take home some of those large animals? They would make magnificent pets and would frighten our enemies to their boots. They could protect each entrance to our compound! We could surely break their ties to the Cullens and re-bond them to ourselves. Could they be trained for our purposes?*

"It doesn't work that way," I cut in, my voice harsh with anger and disgust.

"Just an errant thought," Aro said lightly, though he continued to examine the wolves, considering them to be legitimate spoils of war. The Volturi could seize any assets of a coven that had broken the rules.

"They don't *belong* to us, Aro. They don't follow our commands that way. They're here because they want to be," I told him. Jacob growled a warning.

"They seem quite attached to you, though. And your young mate and your...family." (The "F" word got stuck in his mouth. It was not a word he had ever applied to our kind.) "*Loyal.*" He said the final word like a mantra. It was something he coerced using tricks and talents, never waiting for it to be freely given. He wondered if Jacob would be susceptible to his form of coercion.

"They're committed to protecting human life, Aro. That makes them able to coexist with us, but hardly with you. Unless you're rethinking your lifestyle."

Aro laughed. "Just an errant thought."

What does the Leader of the Leeches want? Jacob thought with disgust.

"He's intrigued with the idea of...guard dogs," I told him, my repugnance as comprehensive as Jacob's. Word of Aro's intentions spread through the pack mind and their growls and snarls rose in a chorus of ill will.

Sam barked a command for quiet and the sound ceased.

"I suppose that answers that question," Aro commented, laughing. "This lot has picked its side." *The losing side. Such a shame that we have to destroy them too...*

I crouched automatically for attack. *That we would not allow!*

Aro turned suddenly businesslike. "So much to discuss," he said to himself. "So much to decide. If you and your furry protector will excuse me, my dear Cullens, I must confer with my brothers."

52. CONTRIVANCES

Rather than turn his back on us and rejoin the guard, Aro waved the entire guard forward to the fifty-yard-line, so to speak. *Too dangerous!* I thought. It was an aggressive move, designed to intimidate us. I grabbed Bella and Emmett's arms and began backing up immediately. Jacob was still angry and would have stuck his snout in the face of the guard, but Renesmee grabbed his tail and used it like a leash to pull him back with us. Now the Volturi were within striking distance. Any member of the guard could leap fifty yards in an instant. But so could we, of course.

Caius was getting extremely impatient. He had come to take his pound of vampire flesh and had been thwarted at every turn. He was confident in the guard and had faith, despite the unknown quantity of the wolves, that they could reduce us to ash with little difficulty. Caius was so angry at Aro's willingness to "dawdle," that he refused to let Aro read his thoughts. Instead, he began to argue with his ancient brother.

"How can you abide this infamy? Why do we stand here impotently in the face of such an outrageous crime, covered by such a ridiculous deception?" he fairly yelled at Aro.

"Because it's all true," Aro replied evenly. "Every word of it. See how many witnesses stand ready to give evidence that they have seen this miraculous child grow and mature in just the short time they've known her. That they have felt the warmth of the blood that pulses in her veins."

Witnesses...ah, yes, Caius thought. He had become so used to sitting in his stone tower issuing secret edicts that he had forgotten how many witnesses were gathered on both sides. *Right, the plan. The plan prevents revolt. Vladimir and Stefan stand here with our opposition and they forget nothing.*

Aro had just taken stock of his witnesses and saw that their emotions had changed from the bloodthirsty mob that had arrived with the ancients. Now they were becoming confused as to why the Volturi remained to punish when the transgression obviously had been a mistake.

"The werewolves," Caius finally said. He spoke softly, but every vampire in the clearing could hear him. Aro already knew what the werewolves were and that Caius's suggestion wouldn't hold water.

"Ah, brother...," Aro said with great regret. Caius immediately became furious, forgetting the audience again.

“Will you defend that alliance, too, Aro?” Caius blustered. “The Children of the Moon have been our bitter enemies from the dawn of time. We have hunted them to near extinction in Europe and Asia. Yet Carlisle encourages a familiar relationship with this enormous infestation—no doubt in an attempt to overthrow us. The better to protect his warped lifestyle.”

Jacob growled. *Infestation?! I dare that old fart to come over here and say that!*

I was determined to fend off every one of the Volturi’s false accusations, working through them one by one until...what? I had no idea how this would end. I cleared my throat noisily to catch Caius’s attention. Aro managed to look embarrassed, but Caius was still furious at having to “find an excuse” to do away with the troublemakers. He’d had his heart set on a great purging of miscreants. Destroying “bad seed” every one or two hundred years was good for his soul, apparently.

“Caius, it’s the middle of the day,” I protested. “These are not Children of the Moon, clearly. They bear no relation to your enemies on the other side of the world.”

“You breed mutants here,” Caius said, sounding ridiculous, but it still made me angry that he would insult my daughter and my friend.

Mutants?! I’ll mutate him! Jacob thought. His pack whined and grew restless.

“They aren’t even werewolves,” I said. Aro can tell you all about it if you don’t believe me.” Caius’s tendency was to disbelieve anyone who disagreed with him.

“Dear Caius, I would have warned you not to press this point if you had told me your thoughts,” Aro explained quietly. “Though the creatures think of themselves as werewolves, they are not. The more accurate name for them would be ‘shape-shifters.’ The choice of a wolf form was purely chance. It could have been a bear or a hawk or a panther when the first change was made. These creatures truly have nothing to do with the Children of the Moon. They have merely inherited this skill from their fathers. It’s genetic—they do not continue their species by infecting others the way true werewolves do.”

Oh, thought Caius. His ignorance made him angrier. “They know our secret,” he accused quickly, rushing to the next excuse without adequate forethought. He was throwing allegations scattershot against the wall to see what would stick.

I started to object, but Aro interrupted to prevent me from exposing Caius’s latest mistake and further angering the bad-tempered autocrat.

“They are creatures of our supernatural world, brother. Perhaps even more dependent upon secrecy than we are; they can hardly expose us. Carefully, Caius. Specious allegations get us nowhere.”

On to the next strategy, I thought. Aro had pulled the plug on the immortal-child allegation, the werewolf-alliance allegation, and the exposing-secrets allegation. I don't know why I didn't see what was coming. I should have realized. But then, even if I *had* known, could I have stopped it? Probably not. I wonder if Alice had had any idea.

“I want to talk to the informant,” Caius said sharply. Irina wasn't paying attention to him. She was focused on her sisters whom she feared she had sacrificed.

“Irina,” Caius prodded and snapped his fingers to get her attention. She started shaking in terror.

“So you appear to have been quite mistaken in your allegations,” he accused.

“Dear Caius, could you expect her to have guessed in an instant something so strange and impossible?” Aro reasoned, wishing to appear the kindly ruler. “Any of us would have made the same assumption.”

Caius cut him off with a gesture.

“I'm sorry,” Irina said softly. “I should have made sure of what I was seeing. But I had no idea...”

“We all know you made a mistake. I meant to speak of your motivations.”

“My motivations?”

“Yes, for coming to spy on them in the first place.”

Spy? I never meant to spy, she thought. *I was going to apolog...*

“You were unhappy with the Cullens, were you not?”

“I was,” she admitted, casting her eyes regretfully at Carlisle.

“Because...?”

“Because the werewolves killed my friend,” she muttered. “And the Cullens wouldn't stand aside to let me avenge him.”

“The shape-shifters,” Aro corrected.

“So the Cullens sided with the *shape*-shifters against our own kind—against the friend of a friend, even,” Caius interpreted for her.

“That’s how I saw it,” said Irina meekly.

Caius waited for her to go a step further and when she didn’t, he prompted her again, following his invisible script for indicting us. “If you’d like to make a formal complaint against the shape-shifters—and the Cullens for supporting their actions—now would be the time.” Clever manipulation, but Irina wouldn’t take the bait. She had decided to rectify what she could.

“No, I have no complaint against the wolves, or the Cullens. You came here today to destroy an immortal child. No immortal child exists. This was my mistake, and I take full responsibility for it. But the Cullens are innocent, and you have no reason to still be here. I’m so sorry,” she apologized sincerely to us, and then turned to the Volturi’s witness gallery. “There was no crime. There’s no valid reason for you to continue here.”

With that, Caius pronounced and carried out her sentence in one swift action. It was horrifying in its speed and finality. He raised some kind of ornate object, a signal to the killing squad. They attacked Irina swiftly, and to our stunned amazement, tore her apart in front of our eyes. Then Caius sprayed her with fire from the object in his hand and she went up in smoke. That was it. It was over before we quite understood that it had started.

“Now she has taken full responsibility for her actions.” He smiled cruelly and glanced at Tanya and Kate to gauge their reaction. Then I saw what Caius had intended.

“Stop them!” I cried, grabbing Tanya’s arm. She flew into a fury that instantly precluded all reason. Carlisle managed to lock his arms around her waist just as she broke my grip.

“It’s too late to help her. Don’t give him what he wants!” Carlisle urged softly, an appeal to reason, which had abandoned her completely.

Kate also erupted in a violent rage and prepared to launch herself on Caius, a move guaranteed to kill us all. Rosalie grabbed Kate’s neck, attempting a head-lock, but Kate shocked her with so much voltage that she went rigid and collapsed. Emmett tried next, seizing Kate’s arm and throwing her to the ground before the shock caused him to stagger backward and drop. Kate scrambled to her feet for her third attempt at revenge.

Garrett, who was standing behind Kate, bounded forward in a heroic effort to stop her, knowing full well the power of her sting. Courageously, he threw his arms around Kate, locking his hands to his wrists and caging her body against him. When he fell to the ground, he pulled

her down with him while intense voltage flowed through him, causing his body to spasm violently. His eyes rolled back into his head.

“Zafrina,” I yelled. Immediately, both Tanya and Kate began staring blindly into space as Zafrina turned their vision to darkness. Kate’s skin continued its assault, but a fighter to the end, Garrett did not release her.

“Give me my sight back,” Tanya hissed, but she had stopped struggling.

Kate was moaning and thrashing against the insensible Garrett when his eyes inexplicably rolled forward and he regained command of himself. Kate’s torture had ceased, but Garrett kept her body trapped beneath him in the snow.

“If I let you up, will you knock me down again, Katie?” he whispered to her. Though still blind, Kate struggled violently against Garrett’s restraint.

“Listen to me, Tanya, Kate,” Carlisle whispered. “Vengeance doesn’t help her now. Irina wouldn’t want you to waste your lives this way. Think about what you’re doing. If you attack them, we all die.”

Both women collapsed in surrender, overwhelmed by pain. Garrett continued murmuring soft words in Kate’s ear, both cajoling and comforting, and Carlisle did the same with Tanya. Kate remained so emotionally distressed that I thought she still must be a hot wire, but Garrett no longer showed any signs of being shocked.

I returned my attention to our adversaries and saw that the guard was watching us in expectation, poised to strike at the first sign of aggression from our side. At only fifty yards away, they could be on us in an instant, but they were starting to realize that we were not going to attack first.

The Volturi witnesses were restless after the rending and incineration of Irina. Most could see no justification for her sudden, cruel death. Caius had planned to distract them from his brutal act by provoking our side to attack. His scheme had failed, though, leaving a glaring spotlight focused on the Volturi’s unjust and unnecessary judgment. Aro became concerned about the rumbling and cast surreptitious glances at the mob behind him. His insistence on an audience was coming back to haunt him.

With obvious unease, Aro clapped Caius on the shoulder and said, “Irina has been punished for bearing false witness against this child. Perhaps we should return to the matter at hand?”

What a flimsy excuse! As vampires, we bear false witness all the time—it's practically our job description. It certainly doesn't warrant execution, especially when the "lie" is obviously unintentional.

Caius reacted to Aro's words like a reprimanded child, becoming blank-faced and sullen. His excuse of "self-defense" had no basis and his impulsive act had cost them their assumed moral high ground. What would they try next? Would they simply discard Aro's requirement for keeping up appearances?

Aro took charge again. "Just to be thorough, I'd like to speak with a few of your witnesses. Procedure, you know."

Yes of course, procedure, certainly, certainly.... My ass! My own fury was rising already when I noticed the beginning of a smile at the corners of Caius's mouth.

Aro! That deceiving son of a...!! He was going to threaten our witnesses and pressure those who were the least committed to fighting to leave now or be killed—or perhaps to leave now and later be killed. *Of all the foul tactics!*

Aro moved confidently behind our front line with Renata, Felix, and Demetri in tow, and stopped about ten yards from Amun and Kebi, our least-enthusiastic supporters. Marcus had identified the marginally committed witnesses and passed the information to his brother. Besides being unhappy about standing up to the Volturi at all, Amun had an Achilles heel in doing so—Benjamin, whom he'd been trying to conceal from the Volturi for years. Now Aro was fully aware of that.

"Ah, Amun, my southern neighbor!" Aro said with false warmth. "It has been so long since you've visited me." (Translation: *You're been avoiding me, haven't you?*)

Amun was motionless with anxiety, Kebi a statue at his side.

"Time means little," Amun replied stoically. "I never notice its passing." (Translation: *I never had any intention to visit you.*)

"So true," Aro pretended to agree. "But maybe you had another reason to stay away? It can be terribly time-consuming to organize newcomers into a coven. I'm glad your new additions have fit in so well. I would have loved to have been introduced. I'm sure you were meaning to come see me soon." (Translation: *You devious devil. I know that you've been hiding your treasure from me.*)

"Of course," Amun said woodenly. (Translation: *When hell freezes over.*)

“Oh well, we’re all together now! Isn’t it lovely?” (Translation: *You have made one big mistake in coming here.*) “But the reason for your presence here is not as pleasant, unfortunately. Carlisle called on you to witness?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you witness for him?”

“I’ve observed the child in question. It was evident almost immediately that she was not an immortal child—”

“What else did you observe about the child?”

“The same things that you surely saw in Edward’s mind. That the child is his biologically. That she learns. That she grows...quickly.”

Aro smiled. “And do you believe that she should be allowed to live?”

Where in hell did that come from? I was thinking it and so were many others near me. Aro had subtly threatened Amun and then asked him to recommend a ludicrous solution to a non-existent problem. The pressure on the Egyptian was enormous.

Bella hissed and many of those on our side joined her. Even Aro’s witnesses hissed from behind the guard. Now that they were showing their disapproval, they would be tracked down and killed when this was over. The Volturi could not leave witnesses to a tragedy that they had engineered under false pretenses. If this fiasco continued in the direction it was going, many would die.

I moved quickly to Bella’s side and grabbed her wrist to discourage her from making a hasty move. We had to be patient and wait this out...whatever nastiness they were going to subject us to.

Amun glanced warily at his audience and then said, “I did not come to make judgments.”

Aro laughed. “Just your opinion.”

Amun seemed to stand slightly taller at that moment. “I see no danger in the child. She learns even more swiftly than she grows.”

It was a remarkably brave thing to say and proved his loyalty to Carlisle beyond a doubt. Under a vague, but very real threat, Aro had asked Amun to sanction the killing of our daughter. Aro was trying to start a war and Amun had refused to give him ammunition for the first shot.

Aro nodded and turned away, but he was already scheming to destroy Amun's coven and steal Benjamin.

"Aro?"

"Yes, friend?" Aro turned eagerly back to Amun, assuming that he had reconsidered.

"I gave my witness. I have no more business here. My mate and I would like to take our leave now." Amun was trying to save himself and Kebi from the battle, but whatever retaliation Aro had planned for him was as good as done and Amun knew it.

Aro gave Amun a syrupy smile. "Of course. I'm so glad we were able to chat for a bit. And I'm sure we'll see each other again soon." (Translation: *We'll be coming after you.*)

Carlisle had told Amun that he would never ask him to die on his behalf, but Amun had risked his life anyway and to our tremendous benefit. If Amun had fallen under Aro's pressure, the ancient could have parlayed Amun's response into permission to kill. Even better, Aro would have a scapegoat on whom to blame the decision. It hadn't worked.

Amun and Kebi took off running and quickly disappeared into the trees behind our company. As things stood, they would have to watch their backs forever. We must find a way to thank them—perhaps destroying Demetri would suffice.

Aro, taking his cue from Marcus, would now try to elicit support from the coven leader with the next weakest commitment to our cause.

"Hello, dear Siobhan. You are as lovely as ever." Siobhan waited for Aro to make his point. I wondered if the others were as sick of Aro's pretense and false friendship as I was.

"And you?" Aro asked. "Would you answer my questions the same way Amun has?"

"I would," Siobhan said, standing tall. "But I would perhaps add a little more. Renesmee understands the limitations. She's no danger to humans—she blends in better than we do. She poses no threat of exposure."

"Can you think of none?" Aro coaxed.

The unknown? The UNKNOWN? THAT was to be his next excuse? I growled angrily. Siobhan couldn't see what Aro was thinking, but Garrett, *bless him*, had gotten the gist of Aro's leading question and had stepped forward ready to fight. Kate cautioned him with a touch on his arm, but he ignored her.

"I don't think I follow you," Siobhan said hesitantly.

“There is no broken law,” Aro intoned. “However, does it follow then that there is no danger? No. That is a separate issue.” He began to pace, moving slightly farther away from us on each pass, inching back toward his guard. He feared that someone would attack him if he stayed in our midst.

Aro went on, “She is unique...utterly, impossibly unique. Such a waste it would be, to destroy something so lovely. Especially when we could learn so much...”

As if that were the point?! Killing a child because of uncertainty? Insane! I was finding my anger difficult to control.

“But there *is* danger, danger that cannot simply be ignored. How ironic it is that as the humans advance, as their faith in science grows and...” *Blah, blah, blah.*

I tuned him out. He was building a case of fancy words and false emotion that would possibly fool the most ignorant among the crowd. The guard, of course, didn’t need convincing, and every vampire on our side of the line (which he had slowly and carefully re-crossed to get back to the safety of his drones) knew what he was doing and would not be convinced by more words. Given that, if this confrontation ended in battle, the Volturi would have to kill us all to leave no loose ends. Many of his witnesses would have to die too, because not even they would fall for this ludicrous ploy.

When Aro gestured toward my daughter as if he would touch her, though he was now forty yards away, I returned my attention to the proceedings.

“This amazing child—if we could but know her potential—know with *absolute* certainty that she could always remain shrouded within the obscurity that protects us. But we know nothing of what she will become!” Aro argued, his tone implying that he regretted it.

Liar! I looked at Maggie and saw the anger in her face as she shook her head slowly back and forth. Maggie was ready to fight, even if Siobhan and Liam weren’t.

Aro went on, using the thoughts he’d stolen from my head as an argument to kill my child. “Her own parents are plagued by fears of her future. We *cannot* know what she will grow to be.” Facing his witnesses as if to convince them, he said, “Only the known is safe. Only the known is tolerable. The unknown is...a vulnerability.”

Caius was pleased with Aro’s cleverness, but my father was not.

“You’re reaching, Aro,” Carlisle warned, knowing that the situation was degenerating, but not knowing how to stop it.

“Peace, friend,” Aro responded. “Let us not be hasty. Let us look at this from every side.”

Garrett, whose tolerance for bullshit had just been exceeded, dared to speak up. “May I offer a side to be considered?” he asked politely.

“Nomad,” Aro acknowledged.

Garrett’s voice rang loud and clear. “I came here at Carlisle’s request, as the others, to witness,” he said, speaking to the Volturi witnesses who were quickly losing trust in the Italian leadership.

“That is certainly no longer necessary, with regard to the child. We all see what she is. I stayed to witness something else. You.” He pointed at the crowd huddling in the distance. “Two of you I know—Makenna, Charles—and I can see that many of you others are also wanderers, roamers like myself. Answering to none. Think carefully on what I tell you now.

“These ancient ones did *not* come here for justice as they told you. We suspected as much, and now it has been proved. They came, misled, but with a valid excuse for their action. Witness now as they seek flimsy excuses to continue their true mission. Witness them struggle to find a justification for their true purpose—to destroy this family here.” He gestured toward the coven leaders, Carlisle and Tanya.

“The Volturi come to erase what they perceive as the competition. Perhaps, like me, you look at this clan’s golden eyes and marvel. They are difficult to understand, it’s true. But the ancient ones look and see something besides their strange choice. They see *power*.

“I have witnessed the bonds within this family—I say *family* and not *coven*. These strange golden-eyed ones deny their very natures. But in return have they found something worth even more, perhaps, than mere gratification of desire? I’ve made a little study of them in my time here, and it seems to me that intrinsic to this intense family binding—that which makes them possible at all—is the peaceful character of this life of sacrifice. There is no aggression here like we all saw in the large southern clans that grew and diminished so quickly in their wild feuds. There is no thought for domination. And Aro knows this better than I do.”

Aro did not respond, just kept smiling his superior, indulgent smile, as if Garrett were a lunatic to be tolerated.

“Carlisle assured us all, when he told us what was coming, that he did not call us here to fight. These witnesses,” Garrett continued, gesturing toward Siobhan and Liam, “agreed to give evidence, to slow the Volturi advance with their presence so that Carlisle would get the chance to present his case.

He looked at Eleazar. “But some of us wondered if Carlisle having truth on his side would be enough to stop the so-called justice. Are the Volturi here to protect the safety of our secrecy, or to protect their own power? Did they come to destroy an illegal creation, or a way of life? Could they be satisfied when the danger turned out to be no more than a misunderstanding? Or would they push the issue without the excuse of justice?”

“We have the answer to all these questions. We heard it in Aro’s lying words—we have one with a gift of knowing such things for certain—and we see it now in Caius’s eager smile. Their guard is just a mindless weapon, a tool in their masters’ quest for domination.

“So now there are more questions, questions that *you* must answer. Who rules you, nomads? Do you answer to someone’s will besides your own? Are you free to choose your path, or will the Volturi decide how you will live?”

“I came to witness. I stay to fight. The Volturi care nothing for the death of the child. They seek the death of our free will.”

Garrett redirected his gaze from the witnesses to the ancient Volturi. “So come, I say! Let’s hear no more lying rationalizations. Be honest in your intents as we will be honest in ours. We will defend our freedom. You will or will not attack it. Choose now, and let these witnesses see the true issue debated here.” I looked over at them, and saw that Garrett’s impassioned appeal had taken hold among them.

“You might consider joining us. If you think the Volturi will let you live to tell *this* tale, you are mistaken. We may all be destroyed, but then again, maybe not. Perhaps we are on more equal footing than they know. Perhaps the Volturi have finally met their match. I promise you this, though—if we fall, so do you.”

It was like listening to the great orators of the Revolutionary War era. Garrett had met his human end as a revolutionary soldier and had acquired the talent for communication that our forefathers embodied in the Constitution of the United States and later, the Bill of Rights. I was proud, at that moment, to be an American vampire.

Garrett returned to Kate’s side and faced the Volturi guard. He settled into a crouch, prepared to defend us and himself to the death. I was moved beyond words, but apparently, Aro was not.

“A very pretty speech, my revolutionary friend.”

Garrett did not change his fighting stance. “Revolutionary?” he growled. “Who am I revolting against, might I ask? Are you my king? Do you wish me to call you *master*, too, like your sycophantic guard?”

“Peace, Garrett,” Aro soothed. “I meant only to refer to your time of birth. Still a patriot, I see.”

Aro’s dismissiveness made Garrett even more angry. Whatever else Garrett might be, he was a fighter and was willing to die for his principles. I respected that.

“Let us ask our witnesses,” Aro suggested. “Let us hear their thoughts before we make our decision.” Aro turned toward the witnesses, many of whom were cowering as far away as they could, wishing to run into the forest, but not wanting to be tracked down later and punished.

He went on, “Tell us, friends, what do you think of all this? I can assure you the child is not what we feared. Do we take the risk and let the child live? Do we put our world in jeopardy to preserve their family intact? Or does earnest Garrett have the right of it? Will you join them in a fight against our sudden quest for dominion?”

The small, dark woman whom Garrett had called Makenna looked at her mate— Charles, presumably—and then spoke cautiously.

“Are those our only choices? Agree with you, or fight against you?”

“Of course not, most charming Makenna,” Aro said, as if giving anyone an ultimatum was the furthest thing from his mind. “You may go in peace, of course, as Amun did, even if you disagree with the council’s decision.”

Pretty words, Aro.

Makenna and Charles conferred silently and then she spoke again. “We did not come here for a fight. We came here to witness. And our witness is that this condemned family is innocent. Everything that Garrett claimed is the truth.”

“Ah,” Aro replied. “I’m sorry you see us in that way. But such is the nature of our work.”

“It is not what I see, but what I feel,” Charles interjected nervously. “Garrett said they have ways of knowing lies. I, too, know when I am hearing the truth, and when I am not.” It was brave of the timid Charles to imply that Aro and Caius were lying.

“Do not fear us, friend Charles. No doubt the patriot truly believes what he says.” Aro chuckled at his own cleverness in deliberately reinterpreting Charles’ statement to mean that Garrett was untrustworthy rather than himself and his brothers.

But Charles had resisted as far as his nature would allow. His stronger mate said, “That is our witness. We’re leaving now.” Makenna and Charles backed their way into the forest and

only when they were hidden from view did they dare to turn and run. Several more witnesses followed suit. The realization that an attack was imminent had started filtering through the crowd along with the assumption that we would lose. Most of the witnesses wanted to escape, but were afraid that they would be tracked down and punished.

Aro recognized that his influence had severely diminished and that it would be hard to save face. But then he dismissed that concern. He knew that the guard could remove witnesses later, if need be.

Aro turned to Caius and Marcus. "Brothers, there is much to consider here."

"Let us counsel," Caius said. *Finally, we get to the point!* Caius thought.

"Let us counsel," Marcus said, and he wasn't thinking anything. I wasn't sure I had ever heard him think much. Marcus was just...empty. That was the only word that captured his state of mind. He was like a seashell whose resident had moved out long ago.

The three "black-cloaks" clasped hands and bowed their heads. Several more witnesses slinked backward into the trees.

Then something happened that caught me completely off-guard and stunned me more than Caius's attack on Irina. Bella was quietly conversing with our daughter.

"You remember what I told you?"

Renesmee nodded with tears in her eyes. *What was going on?*

"I love you," Nessie whispered.

"I love you, too," Bella responded and touched Nessie's locket. "More than my own life." Bella kissed our baby's forehead and then stretched up to speak in Jacob's ear. "Wait until they're totally distracted, then run with her. Get as far from this place as you possibly can. When you've gone as far as you can on foot, she has what you need to get you in the air."

Renesmee reached for me and I pulled her to my chest, despite the fact that my mouth was hanging open and my breathing had sped out of control. I hugged her tightly, knowing it would be the last time. I understood now what was happening.

"This is what you kept from me?" I whispered to Bella.

"From Aro," she murmured.

"Alice?" I confirmed what I already knew.

Alice had told Bella secretly, perhaps from the very beginning, that our best hope for the future was to get Renesmee far away before the battle began. While we fought, distracting the Volturi guard, Jacob had a chance to salvage the most important thing. I had to kill Demetri so they could escape. *More than my own life*. All the pieces fit together. This was goodbye then.

I kissed my miracle child's forehead and both of her cheeks and then lifted her onto Jacob's back with anguish in my soul. She clutched his thick fur in her hands and pulled herself forward to settle in the dip between his shoulder blades, obviously a familiar place. Jacob was as anguished as I was, knowing that he carried our phoenix on his back.

"You're the only one we could ever trust her with," Bella told him quietly. "If you didn't love her so much, I could never bear this. I know you can protect her, Jacob."

Jacob whined in wordless pain. He accepted this responsibility without question, though it was the hardest thing he would ever do.

"I know," Bella said. "I love you, too, Jake. You'll always be my best man."

A tear rolled from his big black eye and settled in the fur at the base of his muzzle. I leaned against his huge shoulder, listening to the metallic ripping sound of my heart being torn in two.

"Goodbye, Jacob, my brother...my son."

Our family was listening with perfect comprehension, each individual facing his own demons. Everyone was in shock.

"Is there no hope, then?" Carlisle asked softly.

"There is absolutely hope," Bella answered him. "I only know my own fate."

And mine too...

Esme moved forward, touching Bella's cheek and mine on her way to Carlisle's side. They held hands and looked into each other's eyes.

"If we live through this," Garrett vowed to Kate, "I'll follow you anywhere, woman."

"Now he tells me," she muttered. I didn't look, but I could almost feel her rolling her eyes.

Mates were sharing their final goodbyes, Rosalie and Emmett with a passionate kiss, Tia and Benjamin wrapped in a tight embrace, Carmen and Eleazar with their foreheads and hands

touching. I looked at my wife, Isabella Cullen, with longing, and gratitude, and tremendous love. She was not going down without me.

Suddenly, she said in a whisper meant only for our side, "Get ready. It's starting."

How did she know?

53. SUPERPOWER

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... 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—gasped 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. *PHFFFT!* 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.

"This is 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.

54. DENOUEMENT

First came the howling, all seventeen wolves singing in a layered chord of notes, the youngest pups at the highest pitch. Then the vampire voices joined the chorus, the deepest tones from Liam and Emmett, the highest from Renesmee, Alice, and Maggie. I heard plenty of “Yeas!” a couple of “Whoo hoos!” and a lone “Yee-haw!” that last from Jasper, hearkening back to his cattle-wrangling days before the Civil War.

Everyone was hugging and cheering and patting each other on the back, but I only had eyes for Bella, who was climbing Mount Jacob to reach Renesmee and pull her down from his shoulders. I threw my arms around them when they descended and bowed my head to theirs.

“Nessie, Nessie, Nessie,” Bella chanted. Jacob barked a laugh and nudged Bella in the shoulder for having lost her battle with the nickname.

“Shut up,” she groused.

I had one hand in Nessie’s bronze hair and the other in Bella’s mahogany hair, rustling their scents into the air. They smelled like themselves, sweet and musky, scents I could find in the thickest forest or the deepest wilderness. They were my loves and my life.

“I get to stay with you?” Nessie whispered to her mother with unintentional pathos.

“Forever,” Bella promised.

“Forever,” I repeated in my wife’s ear.

Bella placed a hand on my cheek and looked into my eyes. We kissed with the heat of newlywed passion and the exuberance of victory. I couldn’t hold her closely enough or kiss her deeply enough to express the fullness of my heart. I lost track of the forest, the snow, the crowd, and myself until I felt Carlisle’s hand on my shoulder. Bella and I separated reluctantly to acknowledge that we were not alone.

Carlisle’s other hand was on Bella’s shoulder. Looking at her, he said in his understated English way, “Thank you, daughter, for saving your family some real unpleasantness.”

“She was magnificent wasn’t she?” I boasted.

“She certainly was,” Carlisle agreed.

Bella smiled and looked down at her feet as she dug a hole in the snow with the toe of her shoe. Carlisle moved on. Esme had her arms around Jasper and Alice, holding them close.

Emmett and Rosalie were making a spectacle of themselves, kissing a bit too ardently in celebration. Garrett was swinging Kate's feet off the ground.

Elsewhere in the clearing, vampires began to depart in quick succession. Vladimir and Stefan were already gone by the time I looked up. They had put themselves on the line in hopes of ousting the Volturi, so they'd been understandably disappointed by the way things had turned out. Still, they'd enjoyed watching Aro tap dance around each ill-considered proposal Caius had made. They also got a kick out of Nahuel's appearance just after Aro had proclaimed Renesmee to be unique. And watching the Volturi retreat with their tails between their legs would give them something to laugh about for the next millennium, so they didn't go home empty-handed.

The nomads Mary and Randall left shortly after the Romanians. It went against a nomad's nature to gather in large groups or to stay in one place for long. They were anxious to return to their comfortable surroundings and hunting habits. So were Peter and Charlotte, who stayed just long enough to exchange a few words with Jasper before departing.

Benjamin and Tia continued the exodus, anxious to reunite with Amun and Kebi and share the outcome of the day's events. The couple promised to return for a visit and Carlisle asked them to thank Amun for his witness in the face of Aro's threats.

Sam offered me a silent goodbye from the side of the clearing. I turned in his direction and thanked him with a solemn bow of my head before he led his pack into the woods single file. Jacob gave an invisible signal for his pack to join the queue and then followed the last wolf, Seth, into the woods. He returned to us shortly afterwards having phased to his human form.

The remaining vampires in the clearing followed Carlisle home. Bella put Nessie on Jacob's human back this time and he ran with her arms around his neck. Bella and I clasped hands and ran with the sheer joy of being alive.

A number of things had changed for the better since Irina set the Volturi on us. We knew now that Nessie would live forever—or at least for a very long time—and she would stop aging in six-and-a-half years. It was the most glorious news. The only reason to travel to Brazil now was to visit our new friends from the Amazon.

Alice and Jasper were back! Our family was reunited and we were no longer in danger of being attacked—at least not for the immediate future. That was a huge relief.

Bella told me that the newest wolves—six had changed since our vampire witnesses began gathering—were just children, barely teenagers, and only marginally related to the three original wolf ancestors. Whether more wolf transformations was a good thing or a bad thing

wasn't for me to say, but the number of new wolves should stop increasing now that the extra vampires were leaving the area.

Back at the house, everyone filed in through the kitchen. The Amazons didn't stay long after that. They never separated from one another under ordinary circumstances and they never left their beloved jungle, so coming to North America to help us had been a great sacrifice. They were anxious to get home. Still, Zafrina found it hard to leave Nessie.

"You must bring the child to see me," Zafrina commanded Bella. Nessie reached to be picked up and then planted her palm on her mother's neck.

Yes, Momma, Zaffy and I are bird feathers so she will teach me to show without my hand. Please may I go? Please? Nessie was showing a picture of herself in the jungle with the Amazons, wearing her sunflower outfit. Where fabric flower petals normally framed her face, Nessie had substituted a circle of colorful feathers. The Amazons were dressed the same way.

I turned my face to the side so that our delightful child would not see my amusement. She'd meant "birds of a feather." She wanted to "flock together" with Zafrina, Senna, and Kachiri. I wondered what Bella had made of *that* picture.

"Promise me, young one," Zafrina pressed Bella.

"Of course, Zafrina," she agreed. I knew Carlisle would want to visit the Amazons too, so it could be a fun family trip.

"We shall be great friends, my Nessie," Zafrina vowed before she and her sisters left, running toward the river and leaping in perfect synchronization, their fingers interlaced. They were a sight to behold.

"Well done, Siobhan," Carlisle said as he escorted our Irish friends to the front door. Bella and I trailed after them.

"Ah, the power of wishful thinking," Siobhan said, rolling her eyes. But then she grew serious. "Of course, this isn't over. The Volturi won't forgive what happened here."

I offered my take on the Volturi's current state of mind. "They've been seriously shaken; their confidence is shattered. But, yes, I'm sure they'll recover from the blow someday. And then...I imagine they'll try to pick us off separately." *Stealing some and killing others.* I didn't look forward to that day, but I judged it would be far in the future, given the humiliation they had just suffered.

"Alice will warn us when they intend to strike," Siobhan declared. "And we'll gather again. Perhaps the time will come when our world is ready to be free of the Volturi altogether."

“That time may come,” Carlisle concurred. “If it does, we’ll stand together.”

“Yes, my friend, we will,” Siobhan vowed. “And how can we fail, when I will it otherwise?” She laughed at herself.

“Exactly,” Carlisle agreed, though he was not laughing. After hugging and shaking hands, Carlisle had a request. “Try to find Alistair and tell him what happened. I’d hate to think of him hiding under a rock for the next decade.”

The Denalis stayed until everyone but Huilen and Nahuel had left. Under happier circumstances, perhaps they would have stayed an extra day or two, but Tanya and Kate were suffering over the loss of Irina and needed some time to grieve. It was no surprise to me that Garrett had decided to hang up his nomad’s hat and join the Denali clan for the foreseeable future. His strong presence and sense of humor would help Kate—and perhaps Tanya as well—to get through this sad time.

I was relieved to see that facing death together had cemented our bonds to the Denalis. We would always be there for each other in the future. Through our shared ordeal, Tanya had gained some affection for Bella and Nessie and I was sure that soon she would resolve any lingering feelings she had toward me.

Finally, only Huilen and Nahuel remained. Though both were timid so far from home, they were thrilled to have found another family who shared their experiences. Nahuel was stunned into silence as he sat in our living room, staring at Bella, Nessie, and me. Seeing us there together with our child was something outside of his experience or imagination.

Carlisle was taking advantage of having Huilen in our home to find out as much about her life and experiences in raising Nahuel as he could coax from her. She was just as eager to hear about Nessie’s origins and wanted to know...how had the gods preserved Bella’s life? They compared notes about what food their half-humans ate—Nahuel preferred his meat raw—and in what quantities. Huilen was curious about our vegetarian lifestyle.

Carlisle was interested in whether Huilen had the same characteristics as other vampires, given that she was created by a hybrid. She seemed to as far as he could tell. He was relieved to discover that Nahuel had never been sick and when he was injured, he healed quickly like the wolves. Huilen had even used her venom on Nahuel’s wounds and they had healed without scarring. That was extremely useful information.

Did Huilen know if Nahuel’s sisters were fertile? Carlisle got more than he’d bargained for with that question. Huilen lowered her eyes in shame, but she answered the question. Joham mated not only with human women, but also with the half-human—his own daughters.

That had continued for many years without producing children, though the daughters had two to four menstrual cycles per year. I didn't know *what* to make of that information.

I listened with one ear to their fascinating conversation while sharing the details of the aborted battle with the rest of the group. Alice and Jasper had missed most of the confrontation and negotiations with the Volturi.

"Alice gave Aro the excuse he needed to get out of the fight. If he hadn't been so terrified of Bella, he probably would have gone ahead with their original plan."

"Terrified? Of me?" Bella repeated in disbelief. I looked at my wife with equal disbelief. She was so cute when she was being thick.

"When will you ever see yourself clearly?" I murmured to her and then continued with the story. "The Volturi haven't fought a fair fight in about twenty-five hundred years. And they've never fought one where they were at a disadvantage. Especially since they gained Jane and Alec, they've only been involved with unopposed slaughterings." I glanced at Nahuel who was listening intently to my story.

"You should have seen how we looked to them! Usually, Alec cuts off all sense and feeling from their victims while they go through the charade of a council. That way, no one can run when the verdict is given. But there we stood, ready, waiting, outnumbering them, with gifts of our own while their gifts were rendered useless by Bella. Aro knew that with Zafrina on our side, they would be the blind ones when the battle commenced. I'm sure our numbers would have been pretty severely decimated, but *they* were sure that theirs would be, too. There was even a good possibility that they would lose. They've never dealt with that possibility before. They didn't deal with it well today."

"Hard to feel confident when you're surrounded by horse-sized wolves," Emmett said, jabbing Jacob in the arm with his elbow. Jacob grinned widely in response.

"It was the wolves that stopped them in the first place," Bella said.

"Sure was," Jacob agreed proudly.

"Absolutely," I added. "That was another sight they've never seen. The true Children of the Moon rarely move in packs, and they are never much in control of themselves. Sixteen enormous regimented wolves was a surprise they weren't prepared for. Caius is actually terrified of werewolves. He almost lost a fight with one a few thousand years ago and never got over it."

“So there are *real* werewolves?” Bella asked uncertainly. “With the full moon and silver bullets and all that?”

Jacob snorted at her. “Real. Does that make me imaginary?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Full moon, yes,” I replied. “Silver bullets, no—that was just another one of those myths to make humans feel like they had a sporting chance. There aren’t very many of them left. Caius has had them hunted into near extinction.”

“And you never mentioned this because...?” I hadn’t realized that I hadn’t, actually.

“It never came up.”

Bella rolled her eyes at me from under my left arm, and Alice, who was tucked under my right arm, leaned forward and winked. Bella gave Alice a dirty look and Alice sighed.

“Just get it off your chest, Bella,” she said.

“How could you do that to me, Alice?”

“It was necessary.”

“Necessary!” Bella snapped. “You had me totally convinced that we were all going to die! I’ve been a wreck for weeks.”

“It might have gone that way,” Alice informed us placidly. “In which case you needed to be prepared to save Nessie.”

Bella looked at our daughter’s sleeping face on her shoulder.

Bella hadn’t had a chance to tell me what she’d done to prepare for Renesmee’s escape. There seemed to be more to it than simply hanging a backpack on the child’s shoulders. Nessie had known something about it. She’d felt a deep sense of responsibility all day and when we convinced her that the threat was past, she had collapsed in exhaustion.

I hated that the Volturi had put my baby girl through something so frightening and stressful at her tender age. How dare they?! My temper flared momentarily. I knew I would be dealing with bouts of rage and a desire for vengeance for a while. Revenge was a powerful motivator in our kind, even among us vegetarians.

Bella was still arguing with Alice. “But you knew there were other ways, too.”

Whatever Alice had said or done had really gotten under Bella's skin. She seemed on the verge of a newborn temper tantrum, though it was exceedingly understated by normal newborn standards. "You knew there was hope!" she accused Alice. "Did it ever occur to you that you could have told me everything? I know Edward had to think we were at a dead end for Aro's sake, but you could have told me."

Alice examined Bella thoughtfully before speaking. "I don't think so," she concluded. "You're just not that good an actress."

Bella's temper *really* flared then. "This was about my *acting* skills?"

I tightened my grip around her shoulders and exchanged looks with Jacob as we both wondered whether he should take Renesmee away from her.

Alice took care of it. "Oh, take it down an octave, Bella. Do you have any idea how *complicated* this was to set up? I couldn't even be sure that someone like Nahuel existed—all I knew was that I would be looking for something I couldn't see! Try to imagine searching for a blind spot—not the easiest thing I've ever done. Plus we had to send back the key witnesses, like we weren't in enough of a hurry. And then keeping my eyes open all the time in case you decided to throw me any more instructions. At some point you're going to have to tell me what exactly is in Rio." I looked at Bella with curiosity. It appeared I had missed a lot more than I thought. I was interested to hear the full story.

Alice was still explaining herself. "Before any of *that*, I had to try to see every trick the Volturi might come in with and give you what few clues I could so you would be ready for their strategy, and I only had just a few hours to trace out all the possibilities. Most of all, I had to make sure you'd all believe that I was ditching out on you, because Aro had to be positive that you had nothing left up your sleeves or he never would have committed to an out the way he did. And if you think I didn't feel like a schmuck—"Alice was working herself into a fit of her own.

"Okay, okay!" Bella conceded. "Sorry! I know it was rough for you, too. It's just that...well, I missed you like crazy, Alice. Don't do that to me again."

Alice's laugh chimed through the room. How I had missed that sound, not knowing if I'd ever hear it again! I felt so blessed. My wife and child were still safe and the rest of my family too. We had lost *no one*. Miraculous.

"I missed you, too, Bella," Alice said. "So forgive me, and try to be satisfied with being the superhero of the day."

My wife, the superhero! I was still in awe of what she had done. When everyone laughed, Bella hid her face in Nessie's hair. Being a superhero would be tough for Bella—she couldn't stand the attention. She would have preferred being Clark Kent with his secret identity, a superhero who could show up, save the day, and then melt into the background.

The family still had a lot of questions, especially Jasper, who wanted to hear all the details of the standoff—every thrust, parry, feint, and retreat.

"You should have seen Chelsea's face when she couldn't locate any connections between us—she couldn't even locate us as individuals," I told Jasper. "I felt a little sorry for her, actually. She didn't know what to do and was scared she would be punished for not doing her job."

"Jane sure had a fit!" Rosalie added, laughing. "I thought she was going to stomp her feet and scream 'Wah, wah, wah.' She turned into a big baby when she discovered she couldn't hurt anybody."

"Yeah, that was hilarious!" Emmett said. "She was PO'd!"

Pissed off, I translated silently. She was indeed!

"Alec stayed pretty calm, though," I told them. "He was more amazed than anything to see his death haze float harmlessly over our heads. I think he viewed Bella as a kindred soul, as much as anything, the antidote to himself."

"Caius was an oaf," Rose said. "He looked like an idiot, grabbing at every stupid excuse that came into his head, especially when Aro slapped him down over and over."

"Yes," I agreed, "Aro was worried about what the witnesses thought. He was trying to hide his true intentions for coming here, while Caius kept blatantly exposing them. Aro was embarrassed, but he still had the gall, or *cojones*, or whatever, to pretend they were delivering justice."

"That revolutionary bloodsucker was a big hero, grabbing the electric girl and holding her down," Jacob added in his usual colorful manner.

That reminded me. "Bella did you have something to do with that?" I asked my superhero wife who was still hiding her face. "One minute Garrett was being shocked senseless and the next minute he was fine, though he was still holding Kate down."

Bella nodded minutely.

“You got your shield between the two of them?” I repeated, already suspecting the truth, but still not believing it was possible.

Bella didn't look up, just nodded again. I knew she was blushing on the inside.

“That's awesome, little sis!” Emmett exclaimed.

Bella didn't reply.

I was distracted for a moment by Nahuel's thoughts. Hearing so much English being spoken, he had switched from thinking in his native tongue to thinking in ours. He'd been staring at Bella ever since he heard her speak at the clearing and now I understood why. Nahuel had never seen the mother of a half-vampire before. He assumed that his kind always killed their mothers. It was a burden he had carried since his first memories of ripping and tearing his way out of his mother's body. He was also bewildered by my behavior...that I was an everyday part of Renesmee's life. He had never known his father to behave anything like that.

“So you all did pretty well without me,” Jasper teased. “Seems like you had your battle strategy figured out.”

“We had no choice,” Emmett declared, “since you couldn't be bothered to show up until it was practically over.”

Jasper chuckled. “That was Alice's doing.” He looked fondly at his tiny wife.

“We were very glad you showed up before the fight started. We would have been lost without your ‘mad skills,’” I assured him, smiling.

“You noticed how their offense collapsed when they got a look at my battle scars,” Jasper joked.

“Yeah, you're one scary-looking dude,” Emmett said, laughing and holding his hand up for a high-five. Jasper slapped his palm with a chuckle.

“Glad to be of use,” he said.

Though Esme had been sticking close to Carlisle since the Volturi departed, she wandered over and put her arm around Jasper. “I'm just so happy to have you both back,” she said. “Don't ever leave us again. We missed you horribly.”

“Here, here,” I added, squeezing Alice's shoulders. “Nessie was worried that you wouldn't be here for her christening party.” Then I told Jasper about Renesmee's misunderstanding of the word “pool.”

He laughed heartily. "Maybe I can fill the pool with money," he said, lifting an eyebrow at Alice. I saw a gambling trip in his near future.

Bella raised her head. "About that," she said. "You'll find your personal stash a bit diminished. I had to raid your cash to pay—"

"Oh, we know, Bella. Just don't ever do it again." She winked at my wife and laughed.

"Ask Nessie to show you her autobiography tomorrow," Rosalie said to Alice. "It's hilarious and heartbreaking at the same time."

"Autobiography?"

"Yes, the story she told each of our guests as they arrived," I clarified. "She convinced them to stay by showing her story."

"How anyone could even *think* of hurting someone so precious is *completely* beyond my understanding," Esme declared, stroking Nessie's sleeping head. "She's our greatest treasure." I saw Nahuel watching us and read both envy and relief in his eyes.

Emmett began chatting with Jasper about the Volturi's lineup of fighters. He figured they would go home and start practicing after having faced a real fight for a change rather than the usual barrel shoot.

"Felix and Santiago are the only two who looked like they'd be any fun at all," Emmett said.

Rosalie and Alice began catching up on their weeks apart and sharing details about their respective travels. Esme threw in tidbits about her and Carlisle's adventures.

Bella and I sat quietly for a few moments and then she said, "Should we take Nessie..."

Exactly what I was thinking! "That's probably a good idea," I agreed quickly. "I'm sure she didn't sleep soundly last night, what with all the snoring."

I smiled at Jacob and he rolled his eyes. Speaking of sleep made Jacob yawn. "It's been a while since I slept in a bed. I bet my dad would get a kick out of having me under his roof again."

Bella reached over to where Jacob was sitting on the floor and touched his face. "Thank you, Jacob."

"Anytime, Bella. But you already know that."

Jacob stood up and stretched his long limbs as Bella and I rose from the couch. He kissed the top of Nessie's head and then Bella's. They were his two favorite females also, I supposed. He gave me a friendly punch on the shoulder.

"See you guys tomorrow. I guess things are going to be kind of boring now, aren't they?"

"I fervently hope so," I replied.

As we followed Jacob toward the door, Bella stopped and turned back.

"Oh, Jasper?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"I'm curious—why is J. Jenks scared stiff by just the sound of your name?"

Jasper laughed. I knew who Jay Jenks was, but I'd never met him. In Jasper's mind, he always looked like a nervous, sweaty person. Jasper chuckled. "It's just been my experience that some kinds of working relationships are better motivated by fear than by monetary gain."

Bella frowned and I knew there was a story to ask about later. It seemed that Bella had met the long-term supplier of Cullen documents. She must have gotten identification papers for Renesmee and Jacob to leave the country because Alice predicted they would be needed.

No wonder Bella had been so sad and disheartened! Even when I thought we had a good chance of surviving the Volturi invasion, she was thinking we were all going to die! Our only hope in her mind was to put our child in Jacob's custody and give him a chance to escape with her. Bella must have directed Alice and Jacob to look for each other in Rio after the rest of us were dead. It made my heart ache to realize what she had been going through while I'd had the luxury of ignorance.

Bella and I left the house after a round of heartfelt hugs and kisses and walked toward the river holding hands. We were in no hurry to get anywhere. We had all the time in the world to enjoy each other and our new freedom from fear.

"I have to say, I'm thoroughly impressed with Jacob right now," I said to Bella.

"The wolves make quite an impact, don't they?"

"That's not what I mean. Not once today did he think about the fact that, according to Nahuel, Nessie will be fully matured in just six-and-a-half years."

Bella thought about it for a second. "He doesn't see her that way. He's not in a hurry for her to grow up. He just wants her to be happy."

"I know. Like I said, impressive. It goes against the grain to say so, but she could do worse." I had just faced the necessity of giving my daughter to Jacob and was a little surprised that I hadn't hesitated to do so.

"I'm not going to think about that for approximately six-and-a-half more years," Bella replied stubbornly.

I laughed and then sighed. "Of course, it looks like he'll have some competition to worry about when the time comes." Nahuel had been more than a little interested.

Bella looked even less happy at that idea. "I noticed. I'm grateful to Nahuel for today, but all the staring was a little weird. I don't care if she is the only half-vampire he's not related to."

"Oh, he wasn't staring at her—he was staring at you."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because you're alive," I said gently.

"You lost me." Bella looked confused.

"All his life—and he's fifty years older than I am—"

"Decrepit," Bella interrupted.

I ignored that. "He's always thought of himself as an evil creation, a murderer by nature. His sisters all killed their mothers as well, but they thought nothing of it. Joham raised them to think of the humans as animals, while they were gods. But Nahuel was taught by Huilen, and Huilen loved her sister more than anyone else. It shaped his whole perspective. And, in some ways, he truly hated himself."

"That's so sad," Bella said.

"And then he saw the three of us—and realized for the first time that just because he is half immortal, it doesn't mean he is inherently evil. He looks at me and sees..."—I considered Nahuel's envy—"...what his father should have been." That is, someone who loves and looks after his progeny.

"You *are* fairly ideal in every way," Bella joked.

I made a dismissive sound before returning to the thought. "He looks at you and sees the life his mother should have had."

“Poor Nahuel.”

“Don’t be sad for him. He’s happy now. Today, he’s finally begun to forgive himself.”

We had reached the cottage, our haven from the madness of the last few weeks. There was not a thing on God’s earth that I lacked. I had everything.

55. THE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

After tucking Nessie into her bed, Bella and I walked down the arched hallway swinging our arms between us. After we reached our bedroom and I shut the door behind us, I turned to my superhero wife.

“A night for celebrations,” I said softly as I cupped her chin in my hand and lifted her lips toward mine.

“Wait,” Bella said abruptly and pulled away.

Wait? She’d never said that before. She’d never pulled away from me before either. I felt confused and momentarily dejected. Usually, she was all over me the instant we were alone. I dropped my hand to my side and waited with no idea what I was waiting for.

“I want to try something,” Bella said mysteriously. She placed her hands on either side of my face and closed her eyes. A look of deep concentration settled on her face and she traveled somewhere else for a moment, like a fortune-teller waiting for a revelation from the future.

It was some kind of miracle. I saw myself sitting in the Forks High School cafeteria at a perspective from the opposite end of the room. I was scowling in anger or frustration and, truth be told, I looked a little intimidating, but the feeling associated with the scene was one of fascination and attraction. The setting changed to our flower-filled meadow in the late afternoon and I felt a sharply cold sensation against my cheek. Feelings of joy and tranquility filled me as I rested my face on Edward’s...*Edward’s?*...bare chest.

“Bella!” I whispered, stunned. I was seeing *her memories!* These first two were dim and muddy, badly lit perhaps, but I recognized them. I remained frozen in wonder as Bella continued her mental slide show. One by one, her memories floated into my mind and I recalled each event, though this time they were all happening not from my perspective, but from hers.

I felt a thrill of happiness when a shadowy Edward asked me to sit beside him on the end of my bed. I discovered the rightness, the perfect fit of him, when I laid my head on his chest and wrapped my arms around his neck in my...Bella’s...bed.

Intense joy and relief flooded over me when I heard Edward’s voice through a fog of fear and pain in a mirrored room, knowing I was saved. I was rapturous when I saw Edward’s beaming face beneath an arbor of flowers at the altar. He was mine and I loved him far more

than I had ever loved anyone or anything before. I knew that I could never be separated from him. He made me whole.

The scene switched to Isle Esme and I saw Edward's naked back gleaming in the moonlight as he stood in the ocean waiting for me. All shyness and fear fell away as I moved to him, knowing that he loved and wanted me too.

I was stunned by the longing in my heart and tremendous desire in my body as I lay on Edward's back in the ocean. There was no fear, only anticipation, trust, and overwhelming need. I felt the thrill of anticipation as Edward lay naked beside me in the sand, all of my nerve endings on fire, waiting to feel his hands on my bare skin.

Bella's astonishing memories kept coming, one after another. When I touched her nakedness for the first time, her excitement was beyond my imagining. When my hands brought her to orgasm, she was embraced by a sense of happiness and fulfillment. Our first experience with sexual intercourse, though she remembered one or two moments of pain, was a miracle of love mixed with ecstatic sensations, muffled though they were by faulty human perception. Welcoming me into her body was a miraculous experience for her—as it was for me—one that cemented our bond of love and gave new expression to the connection of our souls.

I knew that as a vampire my love for Bella was similar to imprinting. It would never dim or recede. I was hers for the remainder of my existence. That is the nature of the bond between vampire mates. What I hadn't realized before now was that even as a human, Bella felt the same way toward me. She was as sure and as in love as I ever was.

For so long, I had worried about the consequences of loving Bella, afraid that I was stealing her life from her. If only I could have understood what she had tried to tell me from the beginning—that my presence in her life had given her far more than it had taken away. She felt that she was losing nothing. In fact she believed quite the opposite—that with me and my family, she'd finally found her true place in the world, the place where she belonged. How much suffering I had inflicted on both of us by clinging to principles that were mostly irrelevant in the end!

Bella showed me her memories of making love on our honeymoon and shared the exhilaration she'd felt when she finally possessed all of me. I thrilled to the intensity of Bella's desire and her sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. Even that first morning when she woke up covered with bruises, she had been in complete and perfect bliss. The bruises that had so horrified me meant nothing to her; she barely felt them.

Bella skipped ahead to the day when I first heard Nessie's thoughts inside her womb. I felt the sensation of my cold hand on her black and blue belly and experienced her great joy when she realized that I could communicate with our daughter.

Then the memories changed. Bella showed me her first few minutes after being reborn as a vampire, every sight, sound, and sensation experienced with perfect clarity. Then she remembered our first kiss in all its passion and intensity. She showed me the urgent need she'd had to press her body against mine, every surface touching as our lips met and she felt a desperate desire to make love with me.

I could no longer contain my excitement. I put one hand behind her neck and the other in the small of her back and pulled her to me, kissing her passionately in a fit of love and desire. In a flash, the memory disappeared and the abrupt blankness of Bella's mind startled me into opening my eyes.

"Oops, lost it," Bella sighed.

"I *heard* you," I whispered in amazement. "How? How did you do that?"

"Zafrina's idea. We practiced with it a few times."

I was confounded by the love Bella felt for me. It was so much bigger than I had imagined...so much greater than I merited. But it was there and it was real.

"Now you know," Bella shrugged as if her revelation were nothing much. "No one's ever loved anyone as much as I love you."

I looked into her eyes. "You're almost right," I murmured. "I know of just one exception."

"Liar," she accused, but I ignored that. I lifted her chin and met her lips with another passionate kiss. *Mmmm....* Then I pulled away.

"Can you do it again?" I asked eagerly. I wanted to hear more. I was *hungry* for more. I had been deprived of knowing my wife—and *only* my wife—in a way that was fundamental to my nature. I had been shut out...until now.

Bella scowled. "It's very difficult," she said, partly in truth and partly to tease me.

I could be patient. I was good at patient. I waited expectantly. It was just too marvelous, too thrilling, not to want more. She had learned how to lift her shield away from herself and allow me inside her mind. She was letting me enter her in another way, a way that was every bit as intimate as our sexual connection.

"I can't keep it up if I'm even the slightest bit distracted," Bella warned.

"I'll be good," I said. I would *try*, but depending on what she showed me...

Bella opened with the punch line—the first night of our second honeymoon in the cottage. She showed me the passion I stirred in her, how she felt when I tore off her clothes and touched her new skin for the first time, the intensity of the sensations in her vampire body compared to her human one. The overwhelming excitement of my fingers touching her between her thighs until she couldn't bear it.

She played back her memory of flipping me onto my back and having her way with me. I felt how difficult it was for her to reign in her strength and avoid injuring me. I never knew how much pleasure she got from touching my skin, how much beauty she saw there. I never understood how profoundly meaningful it was to allow another person inside your body, the amount of trust it required or the joy it created.

My body began reliving its own memories when she showed me how she felt as I moved inside of her.

Ahhh!! I couldn't resist any longer. Overwhelming desire took hold of me and I kissed her with all the heat she had raised in my body. She laughed lightly at my enthusiasm, though she too was becoming breathless.

"Damn it," I growled, when the door to her mind slammed shut. I kissed hungrily down the edge of Bella's jaw.

"We have plenty of time to work on it," Bella noted.

"Forever and forever and forever," I murmured into her skin.

"That sounds exactly right to me."

"Forever starts now," I whispered. With that, I scooped her up with an arm behind her knees and carried her to our big white bed.

56. AFTER THAT

This is the part of the story that one never gets to hear—the part *after* the “happily ever after.” How does the story end? In this case, it doesn’t. Barring unforeseen circumstances, Bella and I, Renesmee, my mother and father, brothers and sisters just go on. However, we’re hoping that our stories become dull and boring at least for a while. We deserve a little boring. I do want to tie up a few loose ends, though. Any interesting developments after that, I’ll consign to my diary.

Some things have changed since that fateful day three months ago when we met the Volturi on our battleground. Renesmee continues to grow three or four times faster than a fully human child, but we no longer worry about it, and we discovered that she never had. We expect her to be the equivalent of a twenty-one-year-old human when she’s been alive for six-and-a-half or seven years. She grows more beautiful as she gets older, at least to her father’s eyes.

The only downside to Renesmee’s swift growth—except for continually needing new clothes, which neither she nor Alice considers a negative—is the physical pain she suffers, especially in her legs, when she hits a growth spurt. These “growing pains” occur in human children too, but Carlisle believes that she suffers more than the average child. The pain, which comes on late in the day, affects her knee and ankle joints as well as her calf and thigh muscles. Bella and I massage her legs and wrap them with towels heated at the fireplace and she is usually fine by morning. Another artifact of Renesmee’s accelerated growth is the amount of sleep she requires—eleven hours a night, down from the twelve she required as an infant.

Jacob is as attached to our daughter as he ever was and I’ve still never heard him think about Renesmee in any way other than as a loving caregiver. He doesn’t think of her as his future mate as far as I can tell. I found this curious and so one day, I asked Jacob about his feelings for our daughter and found his answer quite interesting. He said that after Quil imprinted on Claire, a toddler, he’d watched his friend playing nanny one day at the beach and offered him some friendly advice. Quil spent *all* his free time with the baby, though he was a teenager presumably at just the right age to start dating. Jacob suggested to Quil that he might ask some girls out, go on dates, and have some fun. He told Quil that Claire wouldn’t hold it against him when she was older, because he had so many years to wait before she would be grown.

Quil reacted as if the suggestion made no sense to him. He *liked* spending all his time with Claire. She was the only person he was interested in being with and so whatever stage

Claire was at *was* his life. He was in no hurry for her to grow up. Jacob didn't understand Quil's response back then, but he does now.

Renesmee is Jacob's life, so while she's a child, he will be like a nanny or a favorite uncle. When she's the human equivalent of a pre-teen, he will be the best buddy she ever had. When she's a teenager, he will be like a brother to her. He will always be whatever she needs. Since she's a child now, the idea of "boyfriend" never crosses his mind. It remains to be seen what will happen if Renesmee decides to date other boys when she's older.

Alice put on a grand christening ceremony and party for Renesmee. She reenlisted the strings of twinkling lights to decorate our driveway and the ancient cedars in our yard, though she exchanged the white bulbs for yellow and lavender. Nessie loved the lights and insisted that Alice leave them up afterwards, so they remain in the trees. Alice designed a special outfit for Renesmee, a flouncy white dress made of silk and tulle with delicate, transparent, angel wings attached to the back. Nessie wore a tiara for a halo, and glittering ruby slippers. The slippers were Alice's homage to Dorothy and punctuated the fact that we are "not in Kansas anymore." The outfit became Renesmee's new favorite. She had already outgrown her sunflower costume anyway.

Emmett did a fine job of officiating the christening ceremony and though he didn't wear tights, he did don a pointy paper hat for the party. Jasper filled the inflatable pool with money to start Renesmee's savings account, college fund, dowry, trust fund—or all of the above, judging by the pile of "Benjamins" in the baby pool. Everyone else tried to compete and the result was a blue plastic kiddie pool overflowing with greenbacks. Alice found a petticoat in her closet and attached its bottom edge to the top of the pool. Then she attached ribbons around the waistband and tied them to the ceiling. All of the Cullens started wadding up their hundreds and tossing them into the petticoat like basketballs through a hoop. At the end of the week, Jasper ran a betting pool for everyone to guess how much money was in the "petticoat pool." Alice won, of course. She said she will dedicate her betting pool winnings to keeping Renesmee fashionably dressed until she's fully grown. I'll invest the petticoat pool for her future.

We kept Renesmee's christening a family affair, the celebrants consisting of the nine Cullens, Jacob and his pack (in human form), Charlie and Sue, Billy and Lily (Embry's mother), and Sam and Emily, plus their little bun in the oven, the beginning of the next generation of Quileute werewolves.

That was the first we knew that Sam had lead his pack into battle to protect our family while his first child was on the way. Neither he nor Emily had told us, though the wolf packs knew. Bella became extremely distraught when Jacob let the information slip. She had never approved of Quileute children as young as twelve risking their lives for us and she was angry

that Sam had risked his life after Emily became pregnant. I had to get Bella away from Sam and hang onto her, with Jasper and Emmett standing by, until she calmed down.

I think much of her emotion came from reliving her own traumatic pregnancy. She said she wouldn't have survived if I had risked my life and was killed while she was pregnant. But our situation had been much different than theirs and once she recovered from her unreasonable reaction, we congratulated the happy couple on their good news.

We've been weaning Renesmee off human blood by adding raw meat to her diet. It has always seemed wasteful to drain our prey of blood and leave the meat, even though other forest creatures make use of it. We leave a little less meat now—game freezes well. We still encourage Renesmee to eat human food regularly because otherwise she has to hunt every couple of days to fuel her growth. She still loves cookies and her Aunt Emily indulges her with a plateful to take home every time she visits the reservation to see Chief Billy.

Billy is Chief Black now because Jacob has his hands full with his pack and for the present has no desire to take over the position. Billy has agreed, with Sam's blessing, to remain the de facto chief until Renesmee is grown and Jacob has more time to devote to tribal business.

Grandpa Charlie comments rather frequently on Renesmee's growth rate, saying things such as, "She gets bigger every time I see her." But just as he (and everyone else) accepted the accelerated growth of the Quileute boys when they reached their teens, Charlie treats Renesmee's growth as normal, though clearly it is not.

The Forks' Chief of Police still doesn't know what we are and by treaty, Sue cannot tell him. With Charlie, though, you never can tell. While Bella was at home, he got very good at "not knowing" what was going on with her when it had to do with me and my family. If things continue as they have been, Charlie may one day attend a tribal meeting where Billy tells the story of Chief Taha'aki and Charlie discovers that vampires exist. From there, he probably will be able to put the rest of it together. It should make an interesting diary entry for me one day.

Charlie and Sue finally made it to Charlie's bedroom together a short time after Christmas. It was obvious even to those who couldn't read minds that their relationship had risen to a new level because they frequently had to leave early on "urgent business" when they visited Renesmee. I swear I even heard Charlie *giggle* once or twice at private jokes shared only by the two of them. But far be it from me to judge the lovebirds for their romantic excesses.

With Seth and Leah still at home, Sue and Charlie are maintaining separate residences, though Bella says that they rarely spend their nights alone anymore. I've heard the odd thought here and there in Sue's mind about maybe having another child. It almost wouldn't surprise me

if they decided to have a baby, given how much Charlie adores Renesmee. And maybe he'd get a son this time. Now *that* would be an interesting development—Charlie and Sue having a werewolf child!

Benjamin wrote us to say that Amun was taking him and Tia to visit the Volturi in Italy. Amun decided that if he showed his respect formally by introducing his coven, Aro would be less likely to target him than if he continued hiding. Personally, I don't think Aro will be a problem for Amun because Benjamin is so much his own person. Now that he knows what the Volturi have been up to, Benjamin will be able to avoid their tricks and pressures as I have.

We are planning a trip to the Amazon next winter. We can't put it off much longer because Renesmee grows so quickly. Nessie really wants Zafrina to help her learn to project her gift. We haven't heard whether the Volturi pursued Joham, but all of us are interested in meeting his three daughters if we can locate them when we go to Brazil. Renesmee is especially curious to meet a few others like herself, though it sounds like Joham's girls haven't been taught respect for human life.

When it comes time to update Renesmee's passport for the trip, Bella will be taking on that responsibility. She was so worried that Jasper was going to give Jay Jenks a heart attack and she had begun rather to like the man. I would go with her, but Jasper thinks it's safer all around if our document procurer doesn't know what we look like. Jenks has noticed that Jasper hasn't aged for several decades so it's past time for us to switch liaisons. With Bella going in Jasper's place, we'll gain another couple of decades before we need to switch again. Jasper insists that Bella continue to warn Jenks about the dire consequences to himself should he fail to maintain our privacy. I assume that she follows Jasper's orders, though presumably, with a softer touch than Jasper himself.

Bella still shows me her thoughts. I like it when she shares her fantasies or memories of making love. I especially like it when she opens her mind *while* we make love. Not only is it a powerful new way to communicate with my wife, but it is also damn sexy! Usually, she loses control of her shield when she gets to the stage of grunts and moans, but it's fun to practice. It's nice for her that she can choose when to be open and when not to be. She still likes her mental privacy. I regard being "let in" as a special treat.

Sometimes Bella catches me off-guard for fun. For instance, she gets a kick out of thinking sexy thoughts when I'm doing something else, like wrestling with Emmett, or having a serious conversation about genetics with my father. My family thinks I'm losing my mind, the way my words go all "gaga" in the middle of a conversation.

Bella and I make love every night, often all night. She asked me once how long it would be before her craving for me would lessen. When pressed, I told her ten years, maybe, but I don't know if it will ever change for either of us. We are so much in love.

We Cullens go on much as we always have, never changing, never aging, while those around us get older and expire. Charlie, Billy, Sue, and Emily one day will be gone, their lives shut off like a faucet. Where do they go? Though immortal and seemingly plugged into some magical element of the universe, I have no more idea than anyone else. I'm convinced, always have been, that those who "know" don't really know. Carlisle and I differ on this and I speak only for myself, of course.

Still, sometimes I hedge my bets, like when I insisted on marriage before sex. I didn't want to risk Bella's soul by breaking any rules I didn't have to break, because I could be wrong. Heaven knows I've been wrong many times before.

I'm only human, after all.

THE END