

Nessie's Pictures

Back in 2007 after our dramatic showdown with the Volturí, Zafrina made Bella promise that we would bring Renesmee to South America for a visit. Our daughter had bonded so thoroughly with the Amazon native that Nessie considered her an auntie, or rather, a “bird feather,” her charming misinterpretation of the idiom “birds of a feather.”

From birth, Renesmee could put an image in our minds with a touch of her hand, but at three months old, she met Zafrina and discovered that Aunt Zaffie could do the same thing without touching. Once Renesmee recognized this potential in herself, she desperately wanted to master “showing” from a distance. Her goal was mostly practical since she often wished to communicate with someone who was out of reach. However, I also saw in her child’s mind that Nessie believed learning to project would grant her access to Zafrina’s magnificent library of jungle pictures. By taking our daughter to the Amazon, we could give her direct memories of the images she loved, even if she never learned to project them.

With the Volturí threat behind us, Bella and I enjoyed a year of blissful family life before Renesmee reminded us of our promise. She was right to prod us, for by the time our family left for South America with Jacob in tow, Nessie had developed to the physical equivalent of a ten-year-old human. She was barely recognizable as the toddler the Amazons had met the previous year.

Finding our friends was not easy. Frankly, I have no idea how Alice managed it the first time with only her inner sight to guide her. The effort had proved so overwhelming, in fact, that she couldn’t bear to attempt it again so soon, even under

happier circumstances. While the rest of us traveled to Brazil, Alice and Jasper stayed behind, making the most of their month alone. (How they did so was something I discovered later, much to my chagrin.)

The Amazon rainforest comprises over two million square miles, an expanse literally beyond imagining. Unless you're a native, or maybe Demetri or Alistair who can track without a scent trail, locating someone who roams the jungle is a fool's mission. Zafrina provided a starting point by giving us a telepathic tour of the sisters' home region before she left Forks. I also supplied Kachiri with a GPS device so we could track her by satellite, but that proved ineffective since the rainforest canopy blocked the signal more often than not.

As it turned out, after we wandered around southwestern Brazil and northern Bolivia for a few days, the sisters found us, since very little happens there without their knowledge. I had begun to read the women's thoughts in their idiosyncratic tongue and knew they were near, but we couldn't see them or hear their movements amid the cacophony of birds, insects, rustling branches, and bushwhacking wildlife that assaulted our ears. They, however, heard us coming miles away.

"Child, how you've grown!" Zafrina exclaimed as she leaped from an eighty foot teak tree to land silently at our feet.

Bella started beside me and in a flash, had whisked Renesmee behind her back and adopted a defensive stance.

Later, she told me, "They're so silent and stalking. When they just appear like that, I expect daggers and spears to start flying." But, of course, she well knew by then that we vampires are our own weapons.

"Zaffie!" Renesmee shrieked, sidestepping her mother and hurling herself at the long-limbed, wild woman. Zafrina

caught Nessie in midair and laughed, a sound so unusual to her sisters' ears that they both turned to stare, mouths agape.

For the rest of our trip, the "bird feathers" were rarely apart during the day. At night, Renesmee slept in the tent Bella and I set up for her, with Jacob on guard outside.

Given the Amazon women's warrior heritage and the fact that our kind change so little over the millennia, my family was taken aback to discover that the sisters had begun supplementing their diet with animal blood.

Kachiri explained, "The natives know us for what we are. We must tread lightly. Outsiders come rarely and are missed when they do not return."

To ensure they can remain in their homeland indefinitely, the Amazons go to great lengths to protect their resources and avoid attracting attention. Hunting humans requires them to trek to the edges of civilization, and once there, they must exercise great caution since their manner and appearance prevent them from blending in.

In contrast to human prey, game is most plentiful in the remotest areas of the jungle. Inspired by our family, Senna and Kachiri began to sample animal blood soon after they returned from their trip to Forks. After testing capybara, tapir, anteater, and sloth, all of which they found unpalatable, the two sisters settled into hunting ocelot and jaguar when humans were unavailable.

Zafrina was the last to try animal blood, finding the idea repellent. However, she couldn't deny the convenience of the practice and eventually began to hunt howler and spider monkeys.

"They taste human," she told us matter-of-factly.



Bella cringed and Carlisle threw me a look of dismay. We'd had a difficult time weaning Renesmee off human blood and she was clearly excited by this new information. That night in the tent, I told her that our family didn't hunt primates.

"Why not?" she demanded, already devising arguments in favor of it.

"It would be too great a temptation, darling," Bella explained, "especially when we go home where there aren't any monkeys."

Rebellious thoughts filled Nessie's head and I had to wonder if one day she would follow in her father's footsteps and leave us to hunt humans.

The next afternoon, Esme told us that Rosalie had borrowed the keys to the Isle Esme cottage and she and Emmett had already left.

"They wanted some time alone and I thought it was a splendid idea!" Esme enthused.

The next time I saw him, Emmett confided that after Zafrina's pronouncement, he'd chased down a tufted capuchin for his dinner, figuring that what Carlisle didn't know wouldn't hurt him. To Em's surprise, he discovered that the primate's blood—which he found much too delicious for his own good—had turned his eyes noticeably scarlet! He and Rose dashed off to Isle Esme hoping that in a week or two the color

would have faded enough to escape our father's notice. He lucked out in that regard, for our parents decided to visit Esme's cottage themselves and by the time they returned, Emmett was in the clear.

Though Carlisle had warned us against drinking primate blood, he would have forgiven Emmett his indiscretion, of course. He'd forgiven him much worse things. But my brother, like any of us, would do almost anything to avoid disappointing our father.

Carlisle's concerns were valid. For two years afterwards, Emmett struggled mightily with his cravings for human blood.

Renesmee loves animals of all sorts, but she was never more thrilled than when flocks of tropical birds swept through the



trees in great waves, hollering and squawking their displeasure at our presence. Though they kept their distance, Nessie delighted in stalking them and snatching them out of the air. We scolded her the first

time she captured one.

"But look," she said, grasping the parrot's feet as she stroked its back. "She doesn't mind."

The large bird, which had been flapping its wings furiously to escape, immediately quieted and perched calmly on her finger. Only when she nudged it into the air did it lift its wings and fly off, settling on a nearby branch to observe us as we continued through the forest.

Bella and I were aware that wild creatures responded differently to our half-human child than to the rest of us, but since animals flee in terror when her mother or I are present, we hadn't realized until then that Nessie could tame virtually any creature with a simple touch. It's another of her many gifts.

Taking a cue from the Amazons, we didn't bother to hide during the day. The rainforest canopy is so thick that the sun doesn't reach the ground. Humans rarely venture so far into the jungle, anyway, and when they do, they are easily scented and avoided. Still, I took care to police a wide area each time before Bella hunted since the memory of her first hunting trip inexplicably shames her.

Emmett took to the jungle like he was born there. Whenever we encountered any substantially sized creature, he felt compelled to test its mettle as a wrestling partner. None challenged him to any degree, though one particularly aggressive jaguar entertained him for a short time prior to its demise.

Despite his initial misstep, Emmett enjoyed chasing shrieking monkeys through the trees, easily keeping up with them. He drew their curiosity by mimicking their movements, then tossed fruit and nuts which they athletically snatched from the air, never missing. During our third week, he adopted an orphaned caiman that followed him around like a puppy, nipping at his ankles.



One afternoon, Bella and I crossed a small tributary of the Amazon River, and moving into the jungle, we heard a loud hissing noise behind us. I whipped around and saw what looked like the Loch Ness Monster slithering toward my sister. I recognized it as an anaconda, though it was an enormous specimen, nearly twenty feet long.

Rosalie stood frozen in shock as it coiled around her, quickly trapping her arms against her body. We leaped to her aid, but Emmett got there first and waved us off. This colossal creature, one solid rope of muscle as big around as both Em's thighs, looked like a wrestling partner to him.

Guarding its blond-haired prey (who wasn't truly in danger), the snake lunged at my brother, its sharp fangs bared. Emmett met the attack by grabbing the creature's lower jaw and jerking it toward himself. Catching Rosalie in one arm, he twirled the snake's heavy body like a lasso to uncoil it and release her.

I saw the fight rise in the great beast as it addressed its new prey. With frightening speed, it wound its lower body around Emmett's legs, plunging him backward into the river. Still inert, Rosalie stared as the snake dragged her mate underwater, thrashing and splashing.

When Emmett's head popped above the waterline, he tried to call to us, but with most of the air squeezed from his lungs, all we heard was "...gluh, buh, buh."

Keep away! He's mine! My brother's thoughts came through clear enough. Rosalie had recovered her wits and I grabbed her wrist to prevent her from diving in and ripping the creature to shreds.

"He's having fun, Rose," I said. "He might not get this chance again."

My sister yanked her arm away, looking put out, but she refrained from attacking either the snake or me.



"Let's watch," Bella said, leading the way to a rotting log. We sat down to spectate while Rosalie paced anxiously along the water's edge.

The snake was three times longer and several times heavier than Emmett, but as

wrestling partners, the two seemed well matched and my brother dragged out the tussle as long as he could. Though

anacondas normally suffocate or drown their prey before ingesting it, after an hour and a half of wrangling, the fed-up beast unhinged its jaws to swallow my brother's head. I had to grip Rose's arm to prevent her from interfering until Emmett caught a breath and his raucous laughter reassured her.

At long last, the combatants emerged flailing on the riverbank. Emmett grasped the exhausted snake's head with one hand and its tail with the other and unwound it from his body. Then out of respect for a worthy adversary, he tossed the creature into the river, letting it live to fight another day. Once freed, it slithered swiftly away through the murky water, seeming eager to escape this baffling foe.

During our month in the jungle, Renesmee exercised her independence by spending her days at Zafrina's side. Jacob played watchdog and when they were away from us, kept her parents informed by sending me thoughts of their activities. Zafrina practiced endlessly with Renesmee as she struggled to project images into everyone's heads. The wild woman, though the furthest thing from a mother figure one could imagine, took to our child as if Nessie were her own.

Allowing our daughter to spread her wings after having her in our lives for such a short time was painful for Bella—and indeed, for me—but constant change was the challenge Renesmee brought to us from the beginning. Our child's development marched forward relentlessly, and we could only try to adapt to the changes day by day. As a newborn, Bella did so more readily and more gracefully than I.

By the time we left South America and returned to our version of civilization, Renesmee had developed her gift considerably. With concerted focus, she could put an image in Bella's head or mine from across the room for a few seconds at a time. It only worked on her parents at first, and Carlisle

speculated that a genetic factor might be at play, our shared DNA creating a receptivity in Bella and myself.

Renesmee found my reaction to her efforts frustrating. If I wasn't paying sufficient attention, I'd miss her projections.

"Daddy, didn't you see?" she said irritably on several occasions.

"Yes, darling, of course I did," I would reply, not altogether honestly. As soon as she pointed out that she was projecting an image, I did recognize it. But seeing something she actively planted in my head wasn't much different from reading an image in her mind, which I did all the time when I wasn't consciously blocking her thoughts.

Her gift worked well on her mother, though. In the weeks following our trip, Bella would periodically declare out of nowhere, "Senna swimming the river" or "Four parrots in a tree," at which Nessie would laugh and clap her hands.

As time went on, Renesmee became more skilled at projecting her gift. One evening several months after we returned home, Alice piped up from behind her computer, "I am not amused, Renesmee Carlisle Cullen. If you don't stop, I won't finish your Halloween costume this year."

Glancing at Alice's thoughts, I was thunderstruck to see an image of my sister handcuffed and suspended half nude from chains attached to an apparatus in the ceiling.

"Jasper, a word!" I barked.

Curious, my brother followed me across the river and into the forest. When we'd gone several hundred yards, outside the range of vampire ears, I turned on him, barely containing my fury.

“How in the hell did my daughter get hold of your studio photographs?”

Though surprised, Jasper considered the question and I plucked the answer out of his head. He'd left his digital camera on a tripod in the attic where anyone who cared to could peruse the images in it. No doubt Nessie had crept up there, curious about what her aunt and uncle were spending so much time at.

“We have a child in this house!” I roared, expending great effort not to punch him in the nose. “You damn well better make sure this doesn't happen again!”

Jasper remained stoic, not bothering to argue or defend himself, and the next time I checked, I found a padlock affixed to the attic door.

That night at our cottage, Nessie confided to her mother, “Aunt Alice is mad at me. Her tricks were supposed to be secret.”

I raised my eyebrows from across the living room. Secrets had a short shelf life in our family and it was inevitable that Renesmee would share them all eventually. I felt a renewed sense of sympathy for my father.

“I'm sure she's not really mad, honey. But what do you mean about her tricks?” Bella asked.

“You know, like Chris Angel,” Nessie said. “On TV!” she added impatiently when her mother didn't appear to catch on.

Responding to my unspoken question, Bella said, "Chris Angel is a magician who performs impossible feats. Like David Copperfield." But with tattoos and piercings, she thought, raising her shield for the clarification. And guyliner.

I suppressed a groan. Nessie hadn't understood the sexual intent of Jasper's photos, but she did perceive their "alternative" essence.

"I asked Aunt Alice to teach me to escape from handcuffs, but she said I have to wait till I'm older."



Bella chuckled, but I was not amused. I knew full well what those handcuffs were for and it had nothing to do with magic or public entertainment. My sister's sex life was her own, but if I'd ever discovered that my daughter followed in her footsteps...

Slave as I am to my gift (or my handicap, however you view it), I've been caught unawares by images in Jacob's head often enough to believe that his idiosyncrasies do not run along the same lines as my brother's. If they did, my son-in-law would not have survived to the present day.

Edward

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