

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 grouched.

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.