

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 “Whoa!,” 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. *Whopty 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?