

14. Finding Maria

Victoria led me on a fast cross-country chase, followed by a lively tour around San Antonio, Texas, which is where she headed after evading me in Houston. Though I tracked her as fast as I could, somehow she kept ahead of me all the way to her destination. It was true that I had let my mind wander a couple of times and had had to backtrack when I lost her scent, but she didn't seem to be eluding me deliberately.

That changed once we reached San Antonio. Victoria dragged me all over the city and try as I might, I couldn't catch up to her. Whenever I got close enough to detect her thoughts—which weren't particularly coherent—she pulled something from her bag of tricks and escaped before I could get my hands on her. I decided that she must have a gift for evasion. Drawing that conclusion was easier on my ego, anyway, than admitting what an abysmal tracker I was. I had been blessed with a number of abilities beyond the norm for a vampire, but clearly tracking was not one of them.

As I pursued Victoria around San Antonio, I was introduced to a number of sights for which it is known. Outside Sak's Fifth Avenue at a north-end shopping center, I blinked in surprise at a pair of incongruously placed cowboy boots, four stories tall. They seemed to be the long-lost cousins of a similar pair located in South Seattle. I followed Victoria beneath the Tower of the Americas which, like Seattle's Space Needle, is a 460-foot observation tower built for a 1960s World's Fair.

Why does everything I see have to remind me of my true home?

Even as far away as Texas, I could not forget for one moment where I would prefer to be! My desire to return there sapped my strength and weakened my commitment to the task at hand, but I forced myself to persevere.

During one of her sorties through the city, Victoria led me to a place synonymous with America's conquering of the "Wild West." The Battle of the Alamo represents the beginnings of the State of Texas. It was there that fifteen hundred Mexican troops overcame one hundred eighty to two hundred fifty Republic of Texas defenders in 1836, brutally slaughtering all but two survivors. Mass outrage inspired volunteers from around North America to join the Texian army and push the Mexicans back across the Rio Grande, the border between Mexico and Texas that remains today. A few years later, the Republic of Texas became the State of Texas, the 28th state to join the union of American States.

Vampires who care about accuracy in historical accounts take exception to the story of the Alamo, which made men such as James Bowie and Davy Crockett legendary American folk heroes. James Bowie led the grossly outnumbered Texian defenders at the Alamo and Davy Crockett, a former Tennessee senator, fought valiantly, of course, but

tales of how they and their men killed two or three Mexican soldiers for every one of their own who died is sheer myth.

The truth is that southern Texas was a major battleground of the Southern Vampire Wars. The back-and-forth fighting between the Texians and Mexicans proved a rich feeding ground for vampires who could easily mingle among the soldiers and hide their killings amidst the war dead. Though modern-day Texans are taught that their brave forefathers possessed superhuman fighting skills, they merely had superhuman assistance. Most of the Mexican soldiers who died were taken by vampires after the battle was over. Humans who knew this fact never lived to tell the tale, though you will find that northern Mexicans, by and large, have a deeply rooted belief in Satan and his demons, a category that includes my kind. The devout Catholics among them offer prayers for our souls stuck in Purgatory, which is a kindly gesture considering how many of them vampires have fed upon over the centuries.

The Alamo, which was a Spanish mission before it became a military fort, stands in the center of San Antonio and is one of the oldest buildings in the country. It has four sister missions and all together they compose the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. One can take a tour and hear the story of the doomed soldiers who defended the Alamo or attend a Catholic mass in one of the missions.

I received an idiosyncratic tour of the Alamo and its sisters one dark night, courtesy of Victoria. The crumbling stone facades, which are in various states of disrepair, are interesting as such relics go, but I found no pleasure in playing hide-and-seek among them. Victoria kept just enough distance between us to frustrate me completely while compelling me to continue the chase. My frustration was as much a reflex as anything, because I was finding it difficult to care. Nevertheless, I dutifully tracked my prey despite my diminishing interest in whether I ever caught her.

We were into February, the month of the famous San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo, which is one of the largest such events in the country, attracting a million visitors over three weeks. On another night of playing cat-and-mouse, I pursued Victoria onto the rodeo grounds during an evening competition, but the crowd was so thick that I couldn't keep track of her, much less confront her. She took the opportunity to taunt me once again.

I was stunned into stillness when an enormous Brahman bull bolted from the chute where he was being held and charged into the arena bucking and twisting, desperately trying to dislodge the red-headed female on his back. Wearing a white suede cowgirl hat, Victoria clutched the rope handle in one hand and raised her opposite arm in the air, effortlessly riding the dangerous creature for the regulation eight seconds, plus an additional twenty, before casually hopping off his back.

It is practically unheard of for a woman to ride a professional rodeo bull and the audience in the arena went crazy to see Victoria not only compete, but far exceed the efforts of the cowboys. They didn't know that she was not a registered contestant and likely would disappear before anyone could identify her.

Victoria's audacity hadn't shocked only me—this time, she had attracted the attention of another vampire too. I heard her thoughts before I saw her. I knew it was Maria by her instant fury in response to Victoria's presence in San Antonio. Maria's first instinct was to track down the foolhardy female and destroy her immediately. She couldn't abide the intrusion of competitors who might "poach" in the city she called home.

After another moment's consideration, though, Maria grew curious about the brazen creature who dared to put on such a public display. She decided she wanted to meet Victoria and since Maria nearly always got what she wanted, I was certain that she would. Perhaps the territorial matriarch would tear Victoria apart and set her on fire, relieving me of my duty to do so.

Though I suspected that Victoria wanted to cross paths with Maria, I did not, so when I realized she was nearby, I made myself scarce. Maria was bound to recognize my scent when she came upon it, but I had no intention of letting her find me. After her "performance" in Calgary, I remained deeply suspicious of her. She was far too unpredictable to let her touch my life or my family's lives in any way if I could prevent it. I was also concerned that she might be holding a long-term vendetta against Jasper since he had abandoned her so long ago. And now that he had Alice, Maria knew he would never align with her again. Jasper could not replace her mate—who had been destroyed by the Volturi during the Southern Wars—but he was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had. It was natural that she would want him back the next time she decided she needed a companion.

Despite my apprehension about Maria, I did want to know what she would do when she caught up with Victoria so, rather than flee, I retreated several miles from the rodeo grounds. I ran far enough that it would take Maria some time to track me if she wanted to, but stayed close enough that I could hear her thoughts, which were abundant when Victoria flew into the arena atop the massive bull.

Red-headed puta! Who does she think she is? This is my city! How dare she come here and broadcast her presence to humans! What does she want? I should send Volturi after her! Ah no, I don't want los pendejos here. She will dishearten Butch—no me equivoqué—our best bull.

"Get her off! She'll ruin him!" Maria called out uselessly, her voice lost amidst the screams of the crowd. She was yelling at the rodeo clowns, both of whom wore exaggerated, painted smiles, highly arched eyebrows, ludicrous wigs, and puffy white blouses with red polka dots. On the functional side, they also wore rugged blue jeans, leather chaps, gloves, and cowboy boots, and one carried a wooden barrel around his neck into which he could duck if a bull charged him. He was meant to distract the angry beast while his partner helped a thrown rider escape the arena. Without these entertaining, but brave and highly skilled professionals to do their jobs, the rider was likely to get kicked or gored. Bull-riding is deadly sport.

Through Maria's eyes, I saw Victoria retrieve her fallen hat, blithely brush some

dirt off of it, and skip a jagged line to the arena fence as the raging Butch charged. The rodeo clowns jumped into his path, endangering their lives to entice the bull away from Victoria. It was unfortunate that they didn't know she did not require their help. She gracefully vaulted over the arena fence with one hand on the top rail.

Arrrgh! I'll kill her myself!

I watched through Maria's eyes as she began following Victoria. I saw her slip through the crowd to the end of the arena where the cowhands were managing the contestants and the bulls. At the opposite end of the arena, the clowns were herding Butch toward the livestock exit. Choosing to remove himself to a quieter place, the bull ambled toward the exit gate after issuing a vicious two-legged kick into the air behind him. The clowns leaped back reflexively, even though they were out of range of his hooves. The black Brahman must have weighed nearly a ton—one of his kicks could liquefy a human's innards. Irritated as Butch was by Victoria's triumph, he rammed the wooden fence with his head before finally allowing himself to be marshaled through the gate.

Maria followed Victoria across the rodeo grounds, losing sight of her, but tracking her scent trail. I moved in the same direction so that I wouldn't lose Maria's thoughts to distance. She had not detected my scent, which was a relief. I kept pace with the two females and watched as Victoria lured Maria through the city of San Antonio just as she had done to me, using this trick and that trick to stay one step ahead. Finally, amidst a colorful outburst of expletives both in English and Spanish, Maria finally gave up trying to track Victoria. I understood how she felt, though I had to gloat just a little.

I didn't try to locate Victoria after she shook off Maria. Instead, I decided to follow Maria under some vague sense that she hadn't seen the last of Victoria. I could let Maria do the tracking and if I was lucky, perhaps she would end the pesky vampire.

Maria was much easier to track than Victoria had been. I stayed a good distance away as I trailed her to an isolated homestead well outside the city. She disappeared into a large red barn, an old structure with a sagging roof that sat on a quarter-section of land. Nearby stood a rundown farmhouse, several other outbuildings, and a corral with half-a-dozen enormous bulls milling about in separate pens.

Now I understood why Maria had been so concerned about Butch. She raised rodeo bulls and Butch was probably one of hers! Renting the services—both athletic and stud—of a champion bull was a lucrative business. The best would be worth \$100,000 or more if sold outright. As a native Chicagoan, I learned all about the cattle industry as a kid. Chicago had the country's largest stockyards and biggest trading market for beef in the early 20th century. Perhaps it still does. I've lost touch with all of that as a vampire, though I have traded quite a bit in the Chicago commodities market. Maria probably has a substantial interest in that market too.

Maria needed a good daytime lair, since San Antonio normally has three hundred days of sunshine a year. Now that I knew where she holed up—seemingly alone—and since we had both lost track of Victoria, I decided to seek my own daytime hiding place.

South of the city, I located a good-sized stand of oak and pine trees. With the brown leaves of the oaks clinging to their branches, the small patch of woods provided decent cover. I found a huge live oak whose roots bulged from the ground, creating a nest where I dug into the dirt a little, lay down, and covered myself with duff as I had done before.

Being in the southern U.S. was a huge inconvenience compared to living in the north, but it also removed my obligation to shadow Victoria around the clock. I had the sunny days free to brood and pine for Bella, as I now did from my new burrow. At this juncture, I found it much too easy to let go of the world and just drift. That hadn't been my plan when I found these woods, but letting time pass was easier than making an effort to live with my unrelenting pain.

Eventually, thirst drove me from the ground again. I had been suffering from it for what seemed like a long time without rousing myself to do anything about it. Then one night, a group of unsuspecting, white-tailed deer wandered among the trees, drawing me from my grave before I knew what I was doing. I chased down the family of deer one by one until I had drunk the buck, the doe and two juveniles. Usually, I tried not to take young animals or females of reproductive age, but these periods of semi-starvation taxed my self-control.

Once disturbed, I endeavored to keep moving and not give in to the pull of inertness. As long as I was "up," I figured I might as well see what Maria was doing. Maybe she had caught up to Victoria and eliminated her. I might reconsider my negative attitude toward her if she had done so.

I had no idea how long I had been out of commission this time. My cell phone, which was my only means for determining that, was dead, of course. I didn't particularly care, but if I'd been *incommunicado* for months, Esme would be worried. I was fairly confident that it hadn't been that long.

Maria's farmhouse and barn were only a few miles away, so at twilight I ran without enthusiasm in that direction. She was not home, judging by the lack of readable thoughts in the area. Rather than try to track her based on her freshest trail, I decided to wait her out.

I had all the time in the world to complete my self-appointed task and I still wasn't ready to face my family. In my deep despondency, I knew I would be no company for anyone, whether they wished for me to return or not. Were my days as part of a family over? I hoped not, for I truly loved my mother and father, my brothers and sisters. It was just so hard to try and pretend to be the man I once was. I seriously doubted whether I could be him ever again.

I hid myself among tree roots closer to Maria's home base and returned to my state of inertia. My mind didn't shut down during these periods—not at all—but I gave up all attempts to direct it. Invariably, it wandered of its own accord back to the one subject I

cared about. As much as I knew brooding would do me no good, it took more effort to prevent it than I was capable of. My reason for being was so far from my grasp that I didn't particularly care to *be* at all.

What are you doing now, my love? Do you ever think of your hapless lover? Do you pity me in my pain or am I merely a wisp of a memory wafting into the ether like the smoke from a dwindling cigarette? I miss you, my darling. I am nothing without you...no thing at all...or perhaps just a lost thing, floating. Will you remember my soulless self when you reach Heaven? May God grant me the mercy of insensibility when that day comes and the wherewithal to release myself from this endless night.

Thoughts drifted in and out, both mine and those of the creatures who passed within my hearing. I took no note of them until a familiar mental voice broke into my awareness.

The colonias...she feeds there upon the wretched. It is no care of mine. She cannot reduce their numbers...they are a self-renewing resource. I have other concerns in my city. Still, she is interesting. I will keep my eyes on her. Perhaps it is time to take a companion. If she cannot trust me, then perhaps I can trust her. She is heartless, like me, more interested in the battle even than in the win. Always there is encroachment. Si, maybe it is time.

Colonias? I knew the word translated as “colonies,” but I didn't know what colonies Maria referred to. Whatever they were, it would seem that Victoria had fled there. Where are the *colonias*? I had no clue. Back to civilization for the likes of me. I needed to do some research.

It was simple enough to find a local library and sit down at a public computer terminal without attracting too much attention. I still had a change of clothes and a brush to my name and late-winter (early spring?) sunset came rather early. Originally, I'd thought I would bring my laptop along on this journey, but I hadn't done so. Anything vital could be retrieved from the internet via my cell phone—except that it was dead again. Batteries are the weak link in the marvelous inventions of the present century. To store power is a difficult endeavor, both technologically and philosophically, I decided. At least I could rejuvenate my cell phone at an electrical outlet while I did my research.

Through my internet link to the universe of information, I discovered that the word *colonias* refers to primitive settlements along the Texas border with Mexico, and increasingly, on the outskirts of Texas cities. Immigrants trying to make new lives for themselves in the state of Texas purchase small plots of land with loans from unscrupulous developers who sell them divided, subdivided, and further subdivided lots, often located on top of pipelines or oil waste pits, without providing the basic necessities of civilized life, such as roads, water, drainage, and sewer lines.

The new landowners locate an ancient motor home, trailer, tent, or whatever they can find and set it on their property. They live in their makeshift housing while they begin to provide services for themselves, their first priorities being a source of water and some kind of rudimentary septic system.

As more and more people move into the cramped spaces, problems mount. The

little shantytowns become flooded with sewage every time it rains as undiverted water fills the poorly-fashioned or old and crumbling sewage tanks. Children play in the dirt tracks that pass for roads, while plastic tarps are strung up against the weather. For those who cannot find or afford a beat-up, 1970s-era trailer home, pieces of plywood, tin, fiberglass, and even cardboard serve as walls for crude shacks.

According to internet sources, at least two thousand *colonias* exist along the border between Texas and Mexico and dozens, perhaps hundreds, more have developed outside southern-Texas cities. Laws for creating civilized communities have been bypassed so that real-estate developers can make a buck, but in their way, the *colonias* provide some kind of opportunity for the very poor. By all accounts, through their own hard work, the citizens of these slums have worked together to improve them so that the oldest *colonias* have become poor, but functional villages.

I could see how such shantytowns would be ripe hunting grounds for a nomad like Victoria. She could move from one to another with no interference and no risk of discovery. Due to fears of harassment or deportation, whether real or unfounded, the residents of *colonias* are notoriously uncooperative with authorities. They do not report crimes. If the Texas Rangers show up to investigate a murder or missing person, many flee across the border until they feel safe enough to return to their homes. Missing persons are impossible to verify.

Due to their general distrust of the government, the residents of *colonias* are difficult to count, but different sources estimate that 100,000 to 400,000 people live in shantytowns along the border. How would I find Victoria among such a huge population? I decided to head toward the border to find out, still having no understanding of Victoria's motivation for the games she played.

I prowled the *colonias* like a cat on a midnight hunt, scouring one after another during the dark hours and on the odd cloudy day, but I met with no success. I was only slightly aware of time passing—it had become an endless chain of agonizing links, one day curving into the next. At every twilight, I had to renew my resolve to continue the hunt when I longed to escape the pain and return to my Bella. (*No! Not mine!*) Only for one look at her, I told myself, before fighting back the urge.

Each dawn gave me a reprieve from my struggle since the sunlight prevented me from pursuing my true desires. It had become my habit to bury myself between the roots of trees during the daytime and continue the search for Victoria's trail at night. If I were being completely honest, I would admit that very often one daytime turned into two, turned into several, before I could coax myself from another temporary grave and move on.

The battle to stay away from Bella—to relieve the pain—had become constant. The agony of my loss had not diminished in the least. It seemed only to intensify, though

perhaps my tolerance for it was simply lessening.

The ache had become the crux of my existence. It was a living, breathing entity, bent on devouring me from the inside out. I endured every chomp and each nibble as tender parts of me I never knew existed were gnawed into my awareness.

The wind whistled through my hollow center as if I were an outline, a stick figure. Whatever it was that made me me was disappearing bit by bit, but the diminishment didn't relieve the pain. I began to understand the torment of amputees whose missing limbs torture them long after they have been removed. I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them to ease the anguish, but nothing helped. There can be no relief from phantom pain.

I made vows one after another. *You can stand it for two weeks*, I told myself, *just two weeks*. I redoubled my tracking efforts. When two weeks had passed and I had not fled toward what I knew would give me relief, I set myself a new goal. *Hang on for another week, just one more week*. Then that date passed with no sign of Victoria and my ability to care dwindled with each escalation in suffering. *One more week*, I chanted, *just one more week*. In this way, time passed slowly, every night a tortuous battle with myself, each day a relieving restraint on impulsivity. Bella deserved a life!

With each night so mind-numbingly like the last, I no longer knew what time was, but that didn't prevent its passing. Spring was making itself known in the subtropical climate when I finally found Victoria's trail. The night was no different than any other. I ran along the dirt pathways that constituted the streets of a shantytown, this one only a short distance along the border from the last. I dodged the endless stream of raw sewage that flowed from cracked or flooded septic tanks.

Each home was carefully arranged on its allotted sliver of land. A cinderblock cube with black holes for windows neighbored a junker travel trailer with rusting sides and a partially collapsed roof, which neighbored a rustic shelter of old tin and ragged plastic tarps. In other times, the squalor of these proudly owned pieces of property would have elicited an empathic response, but inside the wretchedness of my present existence, I barely noticed the suffering of others. It registered as an external manifestation of my own misery and little more.

As I passed through the provisional streets in the middle of the night, I saw people wandering about or lounging in the open air, no doubt to escape the stifling heat of their dwellings, but no one spoke to me. I was much too white-skinned to be good news to them, though nobody bothered me either.

I was approaching the edge of the shabby community, preparing to move on to the next when her familiar scent drifted up from the packed dirt of a footpath. *Victoria!* The scent was faint, perhaps days old, but unmistakable—a combination of mown grass, coriander, and lime, not to my liking, but as alluring to humans as any of our scents are, I supposed.

Immediately, I began to run, following Victoria's trail from the path I was on to the

fresher openness of empty prairie that led to the next slum. It took two full nights of running from one *colonia* to the next to finally locate Victoria. I had reached a particularly crowded, filthy slum where a long, narrow pit served as a community toilet for the newer residents. The untreated sewage was intolerably foul after another hot and sunny day in southern Texas. Unfortunately, I couldn't both hold my breath and track Victoria.

As usual, I heard her before I saw her, a faint whispering of non-human thoughts regarding the ferocity of her thirst and whether she might steal a child from a nearby hammock or grant it mercy and select an adult in its place. My eyes darted in every direction trying to find her position. Then as I took a few tentative steps along her fresh trail, I heard her high, musical voice floating on the air. She was speaking so softly that a human could not have detected the sound.

"...enough of this place. I need time away from here, though I haven't accomplished what I came to do."

A pause.

"No, not yet. It is inevitable, though. I must look over my shoulder constantly. I need a break."

Pause.

"Rio, I think, through Mexico and Central America, or maybe as a stowaway on a boat."

I perked up my ears. Was Brazil Victoria's ultimate destination? What about Maria? Was she not trying to lure Maria from the shadows? Perhaps not. It had been only a theory, after all.

I had no delusions about the difficulty of finding Victoria once she immersed herself among the 6,000,000 residents of Rio de Janeiro. I had to find and destroy her before she left Texas...this miserable hellhole in Texas. I steeled myself for a confrontation, and tried to pluck up enough strong feeling to fight my enemy successfully. I had promised Alice and myself that this was not going to be a suicide mission.

When I felt ready to face her, I began to hurry along Victoria's fresh trail, intending to overtake her unawares and tear off her head before she knew what had hit her. I was confident that she did not know I was near because she continued to talk on her cell phone, whispering her plans to some unknown friend. Could it be Laurent?

I grew closer, though I still hadn't spotted her, when her conversation abruptly stopped and her thoughts became garbled. I felt her fleeing from me, but I could no longer decipher her intentions. She was leaving behind a mental blur of sorts, not a void of thoughts, but rather a mixture of primal emotions: fear, excitement, and an overwhelming urge to escape.

Victoria knew I had found her! She was racing to get away. I gave up on stealth and ran full-bore in pursuit of her. Every so often, I got a glimpse of her brightly colored hair, but always she stayed just a few seconds ahead of me, dodging between shacks and decrepit automobiles and around waste piles. How did she do it? I doubted whether she had

my speed, but there was no other explanation.

And then she was gone. Just... gone. Her scent trail ended abruptly near the edge of the *colonia*, leaving no trace of itself or of her.

“Come out and fight!” I demanded of empty air. “Coward!”

No reply. Nothing.

“This is not over!” I bellowed uselessly into the silent night.