

18. Dead Man Walking

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,
uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, owwwwwwwwww, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

Vowels. They escaped from me like the air from a punctured tire. I don’t know for how long. I wasn’t even sure if I’d made audible noise. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered now—nothing but the excruciating pain rolling through my body in ripples, waves, tsunamis, and the syncopated pounding of the bass drum in my head...*she’s gone, she’s gone, she’s gone...*

God knows I had been suffering for months, suffering worse than ever before in my long life. But this was an excruciating new level of torture that I hadn’t known existed. How could I still be alive?

I felt like I was drowning and I gasped for air like a suffocating human, but air gave no relief. I felt my fists pounding the sides of my head, the physical pain of it having no impact at all on the searing agony in my...what? Heart? How could a dead organ produce so much anguish?

She jumped!? But she promised, promised not to harm herself! What have I done? Oh...what have I done...?Owwwwwww, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, nooooooooooooo....

I’d thought that my previous, self-imposed sentence—never to see her again—was an unbearable torture. But knowing that she was no longer there to see...I never could have imagined this agony, how bad it would be. This pain was far, far worse.

Bella...dead...gone...forever....

My body bent into itself as I struggled to defend against the brutal battering of this truth.

Never again would I see her eyes peering into mine, warm chocolate melting at my gaze; never would she surprise me with the workings of her strange, silent mind; never again would she challenge my deceptions, break down my defenses; no more would I touch her soft, soft, skin...silk over glass...so fragile, so beautiful; never again would my lips meet hers.

No, no, no! It isn’t true! It isn’t! It can’t be true!

I wanted to deny it, to scream the contrary—but it *was* true. I knew it was. I had been wrong...*so, so* wrong...wrong in the worst possible way. Bella didn’t go on as I knew she could, perhaps to grieve for a time at my treachery, learn to hate my memory, but to *continue*, to find a happy life. In the end, I had accomplished exactly what I had torn myself away from her to avoid—I had *murdered* my one true love.

How could I not have foreseen this? The very night when the end began, Bella had

tried to avoid her birthday party by claiming she *must* watch *Romeo and Juliet*—a play she knew almost by heart. It was such a cliché. Bella was much too practical and level-headed to choose a dramatic, irrevocable end. Or so I had thought.

Now I was in the same position and I saw very clearly how it was *not* a cliché, not at all. Going on was simply too much. Needless torture. Though I had thought Bella would get over me, would let go of her love given time, I had never had such delusions about myself. I always knew that I would not—could not—live if Bella did not.

Isabella Marie Swan...my love...gone forever. Ohhhhhhhhh....

It hit me again like a hammer to the head...the *pain*. Just then, I heard the clanging of a church bell. It was dark outside my attic, so it must be calling Catholics to evening mass. Seeking comfort, distraction, anything to relieve even the smallest part of my torment, I began quoting the Reverend John Donne:

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that....

As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness....

The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God.

Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? But who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were:

Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

I didn't realize at first that I was speaking aloud. My voice slid over the words—barely touching them at all—in a whispered rush.

More than any bell that had ever rung before or should ever ring again, this one tolled for me. I only wished—wished with all my heart and with the soul I no longer possessed—that I could do as Donne promised and go to God with my beloved. I knew it was not possible, wretched thing that I am, but still, may God grant me the mercy of

insensibility, of an ending to my anguish. If there is a God, may He be kind enough for that.

My time was nigh and I needed to move with all haste to meet it. I had to act before Alice saw my decision and my family could intervene. They would not want my end. But my choice was not for them—it was only, selfishly, for me. If I was barred from being with my Bella forevermore, I did not want to be. I could not be.

I turned on my cell phone and quickly opened the line to block Rose or Alice, either of whom might be speed-dialing me. I called for airline information and booked a flight that left in a little over two hours. It was the earliest I could leave Rio. I didn't know how I would tolerate the torment for as long as it would take me to get to Volterra. There was no question that I *would* survive it, though, and that was the whole problem.

In agony and motivated by ending it, I uncurled myself from the fetal position I had unconsciously adopted. Moving more like a human than a vampire, slowly and clumsily, I crept to the end of the roof and pushed aside the vent cover. I clambered down story by story, until I was three stories from the ground and then dropped. I didn't want anyone in this crowded place to see me drop from too high a height and come looking for a body they wouldn't find.

In my distress, I had tuned out everyone around me, but now that I had begun to move, I automatically scanned the minds around me to catch anything unusual. The thoughts were all in Portuguese, of course...

Put your sister down and come...

...out of rice. Maybe feijoad, or açorda, no money for meat...

"Yes, I'm sure! In the attic..."

I perked up my ears. That last comment was spoken aloud and precipitated a tense conversation between a boy and a man, I thought. It seemed to be coming from inside and near the top of the building.

"No such thing!"

"But I heard it! 'Owwwww, oooooohh...' I heard it, Papa! I did."

"It's probably an animal. But if you're sure, we will see. Come."

So, the father and son would go to the attic and look for ghosts. That was fine. I wouldn't trouble them any longer with my noisy grief. They would find nothing.

The international airport was farther north than the domestic one I had flown into some weeks before. I ran down the snaking stairs and pathways of Rocinha, not bothering to move slowly. Anyone who saw me would be unable to make sense of the nearly invisible flurry of motion that sped by and I would never come back, so what did it matter?

When I reached the city's South Zone, I hailed a taxi to the airport. At the end of the trip, I donated all my *reias* to the driver, who looked at me in shock. I hadn't bothered to count it. Perhaps he would feed his children a little better in the next few days.

"Muito Obrigado! Thank you, sir!" he called as I began to walk away.

I simply nodded.

Strange one! Looks like an albino. Must color his hair. Ay yi yi! Minha esposa will

be happy. Sexo oral tonight!

I hoped his wife gave him what he wanted. If only money could give me what I wanted! What I needed... But it wouldn't matter much longer. I wouldn't need anything soon.

On the long overseas flights, I had plenty of time to ponder how to approach my end. I would ask the Volturi for help and perhaps Aro would take pity on me. That would make things easy and leave no mess for Carlisle to clean up. A different kind of pain stabbed me in the chest.

Carlisle...my creator and father. I so hated to hurt him. He was the best father a vampire could have had, or a human, for that matter. I regretted seeming ungrateful, but I knew he would understand. Still, it would hurt him for a long time, probably forever.

But he has Esme, I quickly justified. And his work. And the family. The same goes for Esme and the rest of them. Let them lose their partners and then they would understand!

I hoped they didn't, of course. Nobody should have to suffer the torment I was going through. It was *inhuman*. In any case, I couldn't worry about my family. I couldn't even take their feelings into account. This was the only way for me.

A sudden calm descended over me suddenly. A feeling of peace amidst the agony. The pain wouldn't lessen, I knew, but I took a small bit of comfort in my decision. I had thought about this eventuality before—when James nearly killed Bella the previous year—so I knew what to do without thinking about it overmuch now.

What would be my last thoughts on this earth? I wondered idly. The answer was too obvious even to consider. They would be for my love. A prayer.

I had abandoned my duffle of dirty clothes some time before and never bothered to replace anything. In order to remain inconspicuous on my journey, I had purchased a small carry-on bag, a brush, a shirt, and a pair of trousers at the airport duty-free Gucci shop and changed out of the rumpled and filthy clothing I'd been wearing for...*hmmm...* I couldn't say how long. While tidying up my appearance in the men's room, I noticed my onyx-black eyes—*one of Bella's favorite colors...ohh, owwww...I mustn't think of it...*—and the purplish circles beneath them. I hadn't bothered to go hunting while I was in Rio. Not really. I'd gotten too thirsty a couple of times and snatched a rat...or two, maybe three...when they came too close in my attic hovels.

Lately, I'd been staying in my daytime hiding places for days (and more tellingly, nights) at a time. Rats were less than appealing, and the flavor was foul, but a rat or two did take the edge off the thirst just enough that I could postpone hunting for a short while. I'd been stringing myself along like that for too long, though...especially now that I was stuck on an airplane full of hot, pulsing, human blood.

Oh well, what was the worst that could happen? Did it even matter now? Only for my father, I reminded myself.

When leaving Rocinha, I had dropped my cell phone in a trashcan by a bus stop. I'd finished talking to everyone. Though I didn't care to hurt my family, I couldn't cope with their input either. It was over. I didn't even have the strength to feel bitter about how Rosalie had broken the news to me because she was feeling sorry for herself. That was just Rosalie. I sent her and the rest of them a soundless prayer of goodbye and vowed to try not to think of my family again.

The plane would land in Pisa an hour before dawn, local time. Yet another sunny city in another sunny country. I'd grown weary of the sun and the machinations required to avoid it. It wasn't far to Volterra, though. I could run the distance in less than ten minutes. Worrying about the sun at this late stage of my life seemed a little redundant, but if Aro had to send his guard to destroy me because I was careless, Carlisle could be held accountable as my creator. So I would be a good vampire and take cover before dawn.

Volterra was a beautiful tourist destination. I knew pretty much everything there was to know about the city through decades of stories Carlisle had told me and the pictures in his mind as he did so. I knew of the ancient wall surrounding it and how its visitors were monitored from a good distance away by the duty guard—the Volturi guard, not the human one, though there would be plenty of human guards around too, no doubt.

The humans wouldn't trouble me, and the Volturi guard probably wouldn't grab me as long as I got out of sight before the sun came up. Once in the city, I would go directly to the castle and seek an "audience" with the Volturi.

Honestly, I hated to have to ask them for any favors. My impression was that the three "rulers," for lack of a better word—Caius, Marcus, and Aro—were schemers who sought some advantage for themselves in every interaction. Aro could read minds—not in exactly the same way as I did; he had to touch his subject—but he could also glean memories without requiring the subject to actively think about them. He could read the entire contents of a vampire's mind in a few minutes. One could hide nothing from Aro.

The Volturi also were concerned about appearances to a great degree, not only among the humans, but among the vampires. They had had their authority challenged once many centuries ago and didn't care to invite challenge again, so they were careful to behave according to their own elaborate rules of decorum that were mostly for show. Aro would be able to see my entire history and know what I wanted, as well as how far I was willing to go to get it, but that also meant I shouldn't have to explain myself.

In meeting the Volturi, I would have a great advantage over most others who came to "court." I would be able to read the minds of the three principles and detect any subterfuge or ill intent toward me or my family. I wasn't sure whether Aro knew about my special ability—probably he did. According to Carlisle, one of Aro's hobbies is to seek out vampires with special talents and try to recruit them to the Volturi guard. He had wanted Carlisle to remain with them longer than he had chosen to several centuries ago, but

Carlisle had always felt slightly under threat there, and his intentional lifestyle was not at all compatible with that of the Volturi. Besides, compassion—Carlisle’s great gift—was not particularly valuable to them, so they let him go with limited resistance.

It was possible that the Volturi would rather I join them than die at their hands. I was pretty sure they would make me welcome, at any rate, but being a member of the Volturi guard was not an option for me. Not ever. Even if I weren’t in the situation I was in. I knew too much about them from Carlisle’s experience and it was clear that Volterra was no place for the likes of me. I was much too independent and opinionated to be a follower unless I absolutely believed in the leadership.

The airplane flights were uncomfortable to say the least. As far as I knew, flight attendants did not keep live rats as part of the safety equipment of an airplane. They should. As brokenhearted as I was and as indifferent to feeding as I possibly could be, my aching body still was tempted by the sound, the heat, and the scent of human blood in that airless tin tube. Though I had a mighty thirst, it ranked lower down my list of torments than my insurmountable loss, so I had been ignoring it. I only fully realized my vulnerability once I was on the plane. To prevent a slipup, I locked myself in the toilet for a large part of the long overseas flight, pretending to be ill.

Considering everything, my life had certainly taken an ignominious turn since I left Be—*Forks*. I had been reduced to wallowing in my own misery in filthy hovels and airplane toilets and drinking the blood of rats to get by. I could have been one of the wretched sewer wraiths that Carlisle “flushed out” in London in the seventeenth century.

It was a great relief when the third plane finally touched down in Pisa. I raced off it almost as fast as I had done when I flew into Phoenix to save Be—*her*.

Owwwww!

How was I still alive, so utterly consumed with pain? Rats tearing the flesh from my bones could be no worse. Having my joints pulled apart on the rack would hurt less. I couldn’t think of a torture I wouldn’t rather suffer than the one I now had to suffer.

Running across the Italian countryside, even for the short time that it took me to reach Volterra, was the most relief I’d had in weeks. Feeling the wind race by my ears in the familiar way soothed me the tiniest bit.

When I reached the gates of Volterra—iron arches with spikes, which could be lowered in front of, or on top of, unwanted visitors—I raced through them at a speed that made me undetectable to human eyes. Instantly, I had two vampire pursuers on my flanks and I slowed down so as not to antagonize them. They were doing their job, monitoring visitors and making sure we didn’t break the rules in their city. Running at full speed was borderline bad behavior, but the sun was starting to lighten the sky.

“Come with us,” boomed a deep voice. It came from an exceptionally tall vampire on my left side who was dressed in a gray cape with a large hood that could be pulled up against the sun, I presumed. The vampire on my right side was only slightly shorter, and dressed in the same way. Their size was no doubt intended to be menacing since they were

members of the Volturi guard responsible for physical coercion, or so I supposed.

I obliged them wordlessly, hearing in both their minds that they would take me to the Volturi castle in the center of the city, which is what I wished anyway. I did not speak, as I saw no reason to tell them anything. Aro could read my memory and spare me the agony even of thinking the words. Dying would be a relief, but until then, I would avoid adding to the mountain of pain I carried.

When we reached the castle—an imposing stone edifice with a round tower and turrets—we walked swiftly down a dark, stone corridor, making two turns before stopping. The smaller of my companions—I read *Santiago* in the mind of the other vampire—lifted a beam of wood that would have taken a dozen or more humans to budge from a specially designed iron cradle attached to the stone wall. The ends of the long beam settled into dugout niches in the stone and looked built in to the wall. No one taking a casual look at the construction would assume that the beam could be moved.

I won't let Felix take credit for this one, thought Santiago. With the former at least six feet, seven inches tall, “the smaller vampire” was still taller than me and much more powerful, built like Emmett.

I mustn't think of my brother. I knew how sad Emmett would be at my decision and that he would do everything in his power to stop me as soon as he discovered my intentions. Considering that, I realized that the family probably knew by now that I was in Italy and why. Maybe. It was possible that Alice had missed it, since she had gone to Forks. She would be sad and trying to do what she could for Charlie and that would distract her from thinking about me.

If I knew Alice, once she saw a vision of me in Italy, though, she would try to stop me from following through on my decision. She would understand my torment, but I didn't think she would let me go easily and when she told the rest of the family, Jasper wouldn't let her intervene on her own. Emmett would insist on joining she and Jasper, and Rosalie wouldn't want Em to go without her, so they would all come here to “save me from myself.” That's how they would see it, anyway.

Even if Alice was on the West coast and Jasper had joined her there, the others would only have to fly from Ithaca, New York. With jet travel, New York State wasn't that far from Europe. I must try to expedite the process I was initiating.

Felix and Santiago took me on an unintentional tour of the labyrinth beneath Volterra Castle. It had many winding hallways, hidden passages that weren't entirely hidden from a vampire's eyes, and a variety of security mechanisms that humans would be unable to breach. I paid little attention. I kept my head and eyes down and tried not to think—or to listen either. The best thing to do was simply to follow one step with another, plod along to my demise, a dead man walking.