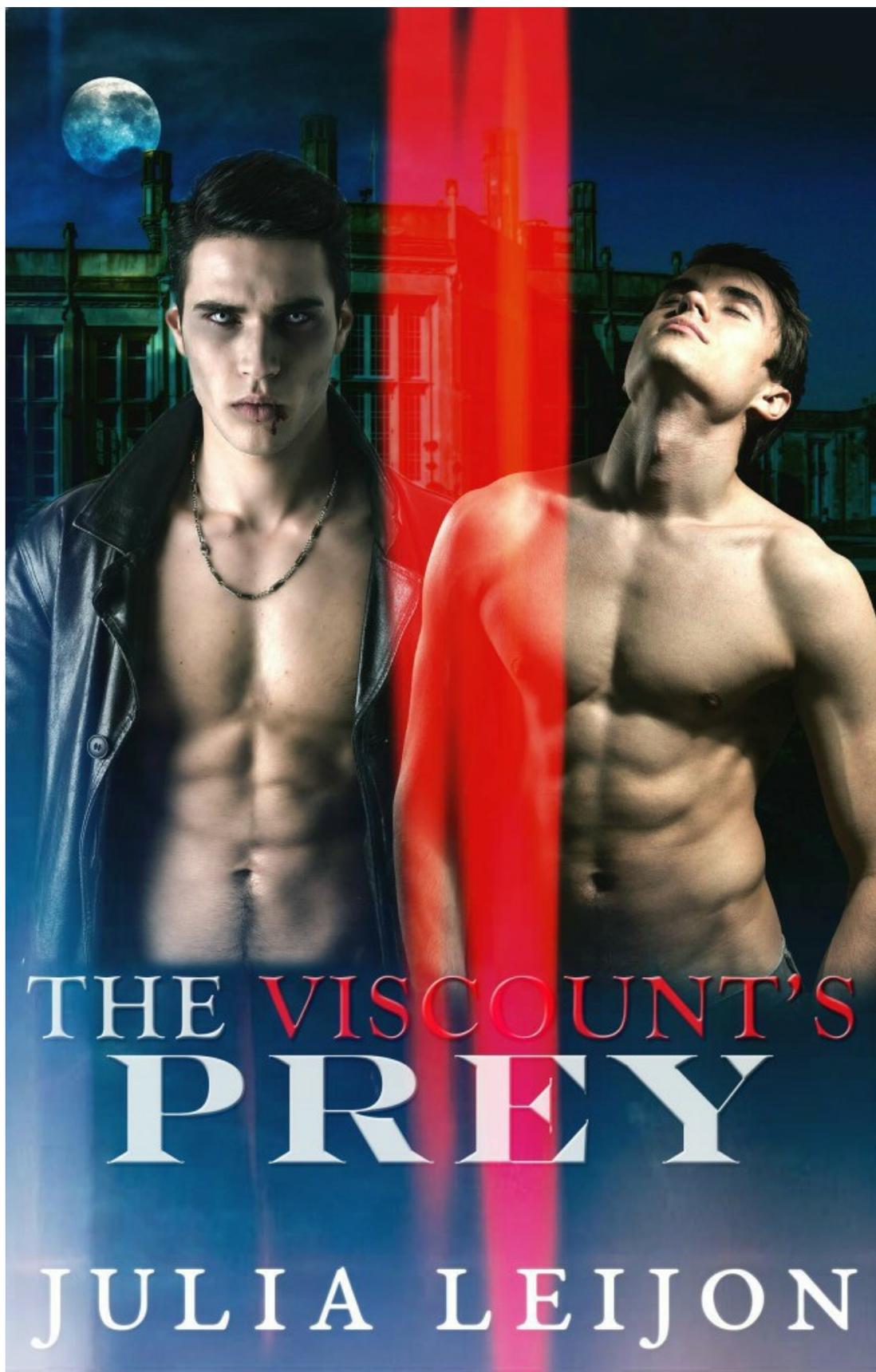




THE VISCOUNT'S  
PREY

JULIA LEIJON



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## **THE VISCOUNT'S PREY**

**By Julia Leijon**

### **Delivered by fate into a dark destiny ...**

Benjamin, a new lawyer in Victorian London, aspires to nothing more than a quiet, unremarkable life. When he is sent to Transylvania on business, he looks forward to demonstrating his steadfast and reliable nature.

Nothing prepares him for Vlad. The handsome, forceful viscount seems to cast a dark spell over his young guest. And then the dreams begin. Vivid, frightening, but strangely alluring, they are full of forbidden desires ... and sharp white teeth at his neck.

Slowly seduced by the castle and its master, Ben must decide if escape is what he really wants. But if he stays, can he ever be more to Vlad than prey?

This 12,500 dark erotic romance features features submission, captivity, and scorching sex scenes, and is a perfectly wicked treat for a night's reading.

This journal is a going-away present from Elizabeth. I asked her if she wouldn't rather I write letters to her. She replied that I should think of writing in this book as composing letters to myself, and sweetly demanded that I at least try. She had that look in her eyes, the one my aunt says she inherited from our grandmother. The look at will not be argued with, and will make life rather miserable for anyone who attempts it.

So I shall try my hand at journal keeping during my trip, though I confess I cannot see a point to it.

The farewell dinner with Elizabeth's family was pleasant. My uncle said he was proud of me for having gained such a warm and solid reputation within the firm in such a comparatively brief amount of time working there, then gave the expected warnings concerning pride going before a fall. He mixed in a few illusions to Icarus and the wax wings, which he referenced with such gravity that I couldn't help but wonder if the man has it in his head that this parable comes from the Bible. I should have thought to ask Elizabeth if that's the case.

My aunt offered similar careful praise, in her case couching the compliments in arch hints that a wife can be a tremendous comfort and support to a man as he begins his career in earnest. I assured her that I was working at my hardest towards the point where I would be ready professionally, socially, and economically to be worthy of Elizabeth's hand.

The two women exchanged a look at that, which was indecipherable to anyone on the exterior of that silent telepathy between mother and daughter.

Still, aside from the gentle advice from my aunt and uncle, it was a very satisfactory evening. It made the whole impending journey seem much more real than it had to me before then. I know it is a grave and awful thing to take personal joy in the tragedy of another, but poor old Weber's illness and death was what left the Tepes account (Jackson tells me it is said *Tep-esh* ) without a man assigned to it, and what was a piece of dark luck for poor old Weber may yet be the making of my early years. It is a very queer position to be in.

It is late, and I have the first of many trains to catch in the morning. I hope these inconsequential and rambling thoughts are close enough to what Elizabeth hoped I might do with the blank and creamy pages of this book, though I fear I will have less and less to say as my assignment begins in earnest. Spending time in a tiny European principality going through real estate contracts with the noble of that region hardly sounds like the stuff of riveting prose, and one can only describe so much scenery before over-use of

the word 'green' becomes tedious.

'Transylvania' bodes to be very green indeed, judging by name alone. If my Latin serves me, it means 'beyond the trees'.

The name conjures images of fairy-story forests in my head. Elizabeth would be glad to hear that I'd written something as whimsical as that last sentence; I think my dogged lack of sentimentality frustrates her. For her sake, I will do my best to hunt down some gingerbread houses in this land beyond the woods!

Perhaps the Viscount I will be acting as the agent for will know some of the local folklore that I can recount to Elizabeth in letters. That would please her, I think.

The weather outside the window of my train carriage is too misty with rain for any scenery to be visible, so I thought I should take the opportunity to fill in a few more pages of Elizabeth's gift.

I am enjoying the forests of this region very much, though I can't tell if it is a genuine love or merely the sheer novelty value of them. I haven't lived anywhere but London; any countryside is a brand new experience for me. I feel as if I've entered some alien world, one in which I do not entirely belong.

Elizabeth would be pleased to see me expressing such a sentimental fantasy. I am sure that presenting me with this book was her latest attempt at awakening the latent poet within me that she persists on insisting is there.

We are rather similar looking; one of the arch remarks my aunt has been known to make as a hint towards her desire that Elizabeth and I should marry is to note that our children would be uniformly handsome.

Both Elizabeth and I have dark, wavy hair of a reddish hue, hazel eyes, and a tendency to freckle if the sun catches us for too long.

I am not especially tall or imposing in stature, but in the warmer months I make a point to join a rowing crew for regular exercise. This keeps me trim and healthy – I know too many senior partners plagued by gout to take my chances with a sedentary life, given the amount of rich food served at business lunches – but the time on the river does, I fear, provide the freckles with ample opportunity to appear.

On my next birthday I will be 24. My name, Benjamin, is an inheritance from my paternal grandfather. My parents died when I was a child; my aunt and uncle saved me from who knows what grim fate by taking me in. I made a point of working hard enough at my studies to be awarded scholarships, in order to save my aunt and uncle from the expense of paying for my schooling.

It is for their sake that I am utterly determined to be a success. I will repay their kindnesses to me by providing their daughter with a secure, comfortable and happy life.

Elizabeth thinks me too logical, lacking in passion. She says lives cannot be planned out on a spreadsheet. The gift of this journal is the most recent, but hardly the first, example of her attempts to help me find my more authentic heart. I fail to see how prose is somehow more authentic than a balance ledger, but for her sake I will make an effort. I am genuinely fond of her, and do not think that being married to her will make for an unhappy life.

The inns I am lodging in as I make my way to my destination are quaint, rustic little establishments, with locals who are more than ready with a local superstition or two to while away the chilly evenings. Their wide-eyed horror upon hearing that my final destination is the Tepes castle is a flawless piece of play-acting; I haven't caught any of them breaking character even once.

The evenings in this region are crisply cold, perfect weather for staying indoors by the fire and staring out the windows at the vast swathes of moonlit forest in the valleys below.

Considering how cloudy the days often are, it can seem at times as if the moon holds more power over the sky than the sun itself. Somehow the clouds always clear by the time the moon makes its entrance for the night, bathing the world in chill silver light.

A disquieting day. Tonight was my fourth and final occasion of stopping at a local establishment for the night. The inn itself had few differences from those I stayed in previously, and likewise the locals were of a familiar set.

What was different was the laying-out of a young man who had died the night before. He had been of a similar age to myself, and looked to have been in sturdy health.

Why he was laying in state in the anteroom of the local inn, rather than in the church, I am not entirely certain. A language barrier prevented me from asking questions with much depth or complexity to them.

The deceased's traveling companion was the source of what little information I was able to gain. He, too, was about my age, though the misfortune of losing his friend had given him a haggard, weary cast that added years to his face. He had the pale blond beauty that is, while not common, a frequent enough occurrence that it is a feature of the population in this part of the world. He knew a smattering of English, and so the two of us were able to converse, after a fashion.

Their story was this: they were from Russia, adventuring across Europe and doing small odd jobs along the way to earn money. To make these hard-earned funds stretch as far as they would go, the pair slept outdoors in almost any weather – so long as it wasn't snowing, the two of them managed, relying on their bedrolls and the warmth of one another.

Despite the tragedy that lay at the story's end, the surviving member of the duo – his name, he told me, was Mikhail – looked so filled with fond contentment as he spoke of their life together that I could not help feeling a little envious.

Mikhail's devastated grief at having lost his friend seemed to me, for one petty jealous moment, a tiny price to pay for the fact that he had enjoyed such friendship in the first place.

Then I remembered myself, and stopped such uncharitable thoughts towards a man so obviously in pain. Am I really so lonely? I have friends of my own, at the firm and through my rowing hobby. My friendship with Elizabeth is sufficiently close that I intend to marry her.

And yet, compared to the timbre of Mikhail's voice as he spoke of his lost friend, it seemed to me as if I'd never experienced friendship at all. What on earth can be wrong with me?

To return to Mikhail's story of what occurred: the pair slept out in the

woods last night, as they had on other nights, but in the early hours Mikhail had been woken by a sharp cry from his friend. There had been an animal of some kind – I could not understand his explanation of what it was, because his best attempt at conveying its species was to call it a “bat monster” – which had attacked and killed his friend before Mikhail had been able to do anything.

His cries of distress had caught the hearing of nearby locals, who had found him and the body shortly after dawn and brought them both back to the inn.

The room’s air was pungent with the scent of garlic, which came from numerous hanging ropes of it that had been placed around the table where the body lay, presumably to disguise any even less pleasant smells which might begin to waft from a corpse.

I thought this to be a kind little consideration for Mikhail’s grief on the part of the locals, but the man himself was of a harsher opinion of them.

“They hear. They hear my yelling for help in the night, but they wait for daybreak until they come because they are afraid. Yevgeny, he maybe not be dead if they come sooner.” His face was cold with fury. I felt sorry for him. I can still remember how desperately I wished there was somebody I could blame, somebody I could hate, for the loss of my parents. Anger is a far more bearable emotion than helpless loss. I could not blame Mikhail for wanting to find someone at fault, rather than accept that the culprit was pure bad luck.

“Now they want to bury him at crossroads, with his back to sky so he cannot find his way out of grave. I will not let them. If they are so afraid of dead man’s vengeance, they should have made effort to keep him alive in first place.”

For the first time during my travels, the strange superstitions of these people filled me not with amusement, but rather with a deep unease.

I shall be glad to go on to the castle tomorrow. The Viscount is, judging by his correspondence with the firm, an educated and rational man. That will be a relief, after this rather sad episode.

I have arrived at the Viscount's castle. Evening was fading to night by the time I arrived, the scant warmth of the day cooling rapidly as I alighted from the carriage. The rocky heights the coach had made its way through on the last leg of the journey had been quite an ordeal – I'm sure that if I tried to retrace the path down the mountain on foot, I would get hopelessly lost, fall, and dash my brains out on the jagged points below.

It was difficult not to think of Mikhail, and his friend's unfortunate death, when I was out in the near-dark. I hastened to get inside as quickly as I could.

The main doors of the looming stonework building seemed so ancient and forbidding, their dark wood appearing just as solid as their iron hinges and stone stairs, and I felt quite nervous as I approached them and rapped my knuckles against them in a knock.

There was no answer, so after what I felt was a sufficient wait so as to appear polite, I sought out whatever way the servants had of getting in and out.

To be entirely honest, I was relieved to do so. The front doors were simply too imposing for comfort for someone like me.

There had been rainfall earlier in the day, a bright and clear downfall compared to the smog-stained torrents that I am used to enduring in London. I had enjoyed watching the enchanting sight of the mist on the mountains through the droplet-streaked window of the carriage, but the enchantment was wearing off now that I had to content with the downpour's aftermath.

The mud that sucked and slipped at my shoes was ordinary mud, nothing but dirt and water. In London it would have been filth, mess from horses and coal scuttles and chamber-pots and a thousand other awful things, all churned together under the endless tramping feet of crowds. Against that, this mud wasn't so bad, but on the other hand London had streets of cobblestones and packed-down earth, regular and even and flat underfoot. This mud was uneven, and contained the hidden twisting roots of trees.

I made it halfway around the side of the castle, towards the kitchen entrance, before I lost my footing and fell. I soaked my traveling coat and trousers, and the mud was so wet and cold that I confess I yelled aloud in surprise and dismay.

The kitchen door opened and a man looked out, obviously interrupted in whatever he had been doing by the sounds of my accident. I knew instantly that he was the Viscount, and felt myself flush with shame at making such a

horrendous first impression.

From Weber's letters back to the firm I had somehow gotten the idea that the Viscount was rather old, though in good health, but this man before me couldn't have been more than forty or forty-five at the outset. Despite this dissonance, I had no doubt that this tall figure was the Viscount. Nobility have a particular bearing and aura to them, and he possessed it in considerable amounts. His charisma was impossible to ignore.

He was clad in black from head to foot, with no other colors present. The lights of the room behind him – I paused in surprise, wondering what would bring the lord of the house to be in its kitchens – threw him into silhouette-like relief, making him more shadow than form.

“The ground is prone to shifting in this part of the yard. My sincerest apologies.”

His voice had the same lilting, forest-dark accent as the other locals I had met, yet the timbre of his voice made it seem utterly different. I was reminded all at once that a forest grows in thick warm dirt built of its own dead self.

“I promise to you that I don't usually look as if I've just rolled out of a ditch,” I managed to tell him, hoping that I could at least joke away the worst of the faux-pas.

It seemed to work. He laughed.

“Don't think another moment on it. Come sit by the fire to warm up, and change your clothes.”

“Thank you. I'm in your debt,” I replied.

“You can repay the debt by telling me your name. Come on, this way. Step carefully now.”

We made our way into the kitchen. It looked to be as ancient as the exterior of the castle, and large enough to host an army of staff. The imposing loom of stones and shadows was mitigated a little by the fire crackling in the main fireplace, with a sleek black tomcat twice the size of the townhouse kitchen-cats of London purring on the hearth.

It blinked at me with yellow, pitiless eyes, as if appraising whether I would be good to eat. Then it glanced at the Viscount for a few moments, and thereafter proceeded to ignore us both.

“Benjamin,” I said, finally remembering to answer the question put to me. “Please call me Benjamin.”

I know this was wildly informal of me, but after such an undignified

beginning I felt that it would be absurd to stand on ceremony. Better to make do with how things had turned out, than try to salvage what was irreparable.

“Then, in return, I insist that you call me Vlad.”

Now that we were inside the kitchen I was able to see him more clearly. He has eyes of such a dark brown that they appeared black, with a curious sheen to them that catches the light as a cat’s do, making them seem quite pale and eerie at unexpected moments. His hair is black as well, and his skin is as white and china-fine as that of some charming prince in a fairy tale.

“Take your clothes off, so the mud can be boiled away before it sets,” Vlad demanded, walking over to the water-pump in the corner and beginning to fill a small brass cauldron.

I felt terribly shy at the thought of doing so, and yet something within me felt compelled to follow the directive put to me. Still, when it was done I felt very awkward and more than a little silly, standing before my esteemed employer in nothing but my shirt and underclothes.

Vlad, perhaps sensing my discomfort, handed me a blanket to wear around myself. I took it gratefully, only just beginning to realize how chilly this little misadventure had left me.

Full night had fallen while all this took place, and so after providing me with a meal of lamb broth and bread, Vlad led me to my room.

I have met no-one else, save for the master of the castle. All in all this has been a very strange beginning to my time here.

A description of my room: There is a merry fire burning, which I hope will soon take off the last of the deep chill still seeping in from the walls and floor. It is no worse than London can sometimes become, but will make sleeping a little difficult if it lingers. There are enough lamps to keep most of the dark at bay.

The furnishings – desk, chair, bed, and so on – are wood, the varnish gone dark and smooth as amber gems over time. The bedding is of an age, as well, but carefully mended and patched. It carries a faint scent of dried flowers. There is no window, and the only lock on the door is a latch out the outside, and a place to drop a wooden bar across for extra security. The fact that the lock closes on the outside, rather than in here, makes me think the room must have been a nursery, once upon a time, with children who needed to be kept from wandering.

My overall first impression is that the Viscount does not often have guests to stay, and so conserves the money that might otherwise have been spent on the room's upkeep, but that the best effort has nonetheless been made to welcome those rare visitors and make them feel comfortable.

I left my room and tried to backtrack the route that Vlad had led me on to get there, in order that I might find the kitchens again. I must have taken a wrong turn at some point – a very easy thing to do, because the hallways are dark and turn corners at strange angles.

I was relieved to come to an open space, but rather than the recently familiar sight of the kitchen, I found myself in the high-ceilinged foyer that held the other side of the imposing front doors within it.

The doors were open now, the cold wind of the high Carpathian night sending a blast of freezing air at me with such ferocity that I felt as if it chilled me down to the marrow of my bones.

Lamps were lit in sconces along the walls, but the shadows thrown by their scant light seemed to make the darkness bigger, not smaller.

Three young women stood by the open door, speaking quietly together. Their clothes were beautifully tailored and embellished with exquisite jewels, but there was an air of age and wear to the fine dresses, like that which surrounds carefully kept heirloom locketts and the inevitable patina that discolors them, even as the frozen beauties within stay perfect and unchanged.

The three fell silent as they became aware of my presence, and stepped forward to greet me.

“You must be the new solicitor, from London. We’ve been waiting for you,” one of them said, extending her hand to me in greeting.

As they moved closer, I had the chance to see them more clearly in the low light. The one offering her hand was blonde, and seemed to be the oldest of the three, though I still wouldn’t have placed her as any older than myself. The next oldest in appearance of the sisters – if, indeed, they were sisters – had hair of deep, deep auburn, the shade of the last embers of coal in a fire, flashes of flame and color against darkness.

It was a shade close to Elizabeth’s, but there couldn’t be any comparison made between the two – it would be like comparing dogs to cats, oranges to apples.

I offered them all a smile, and said I was charmed to meet them. The auburn-haired one laughed quietly, and the sound reminded me of wind chimes, or the sound of a fingertip pulling a high note from the edge of a wine glass, silvery and high and more like wind and air than a human voice.

The smallest and slightest of them had a long, thick braid of dark hair down her back, darker even in shade than Vlad’s. She was perhaps eighteen, I would guess, and as beautiful as the others, with a dark pink pouting mouth and dark eyes.

As she looked at me, she gave me a look that seemed almost like fear. Perhaps she feared that I would fall ill, as Weber had, and she would have to go through the difficulties of being so close to death once again.

Remembering how uncomfortable I had felt in proximity to Mikhail’s grief, I couldn’t fault the girl for being worried about the possibility of going through something similar on my account.

“Don’t worry, Tatyana,” the blonde one of the three said, her voice as clear and musical as a bell. “It becomes much easier with time. Soon enough, you won’t care at all!”

With a laugh, the eldest sister ran off, out of the huge front door and down the stone staircase. I assume there was a carriage waiting just beyond where I could see, as there was no possibility of a girl in dancing clothes navigating that twisting mountain road.

The auburn-haired girl followed after, laughing as well, and the small dark-haired one brought up the rear. She gave me a final glance, filled with worry, and then followed the elder pair.

“Don’t mind them,” Vlad told me, coming to stand at my side with such quiet steps that it was all I could do to stop myself from giving a start of

surprise. “They’re often restless and silly in the evenings.”

I could not help but feel concern for the three of them – in part, because I am so used to worrying about Elizabeth’s wellbeing and safety, and also because of what had befallen Mikhail’s companion. I consoled myself with the thought that the girls were practically safer than a man such as myself would have been, as they have doubtlessly spent their whole lives riding up and down these hills.

“*Denn die Todten reiten schnell*,” Vlad murmured to himself. The particular cast of low light in the room made his smile gleam. I recognize the line, it’s from Burger’s “Lenore” – “For the dead travel fast.” Doubtlessly some small private joke between the Viscount and the girls.

Are they his sisters? Cousins? I hope to find out more about him and his family; they are somehow a deeply intriguing group.

I fear I won't be able to maintain as regular a writing schedule in this journal as I did during my journey here. Then, I had more spare time than I knew what to do with, but now my work is in full swing and consumes almost all my waking hours. There are times when it almost seems like the deep complexity of the legal necessities is specifically designed to confound and slow me!

Vlad is very accommodating of the slow pace that everything is taking, which is a relief. He is truly an excellent host. For instance, shortly after I arrived, he suggested I send word back to London to let them know I was all right.

"You should write to your firm," he said. "Informing them of your safe arrival here. Letters often take some time in their journeys from here, and I wouldn't want them to worry any longer than necessary. Do you have family?"

I replied that I had an aunt and uncle, and a cousin. I wonder how it will feel in the future, when I shall be referring to Elizabeth as my fiancé, and then later as my wife? It seems unreal somehow, even though it has been my goal for many years now. I suppose I will grow used to it, when it happens.

Vlad told me that I should write to my family as well, assuring them of my safety. I thought this a very considerate gesture, especially considering poor Weber's passing. It is true, my family will be glad to hear of my good health. I shall be certain to mention to Elizabeth that I am utilizing her gift!

I must report one small fly in the ointment, alas: it looks as if it will take at least another month to properly get Vlad's business affairs in order. I had not intended to stay so long, and am doing my best to stave off frustration at the prospect.

I will endeavor to enjoy the time as fully as possible; soon enough it will be over, and the comfortable predictability of my usual life will resume.

Last night I had a terrible, and terribly strange, nightmare, one so vivid and unsettling that I am going to set it down in writing. Perhaps doing so will purge it from my mind, and leave me free of its lingering tendrils.

I dreamed that I woke in the night. A cold hand was slipping down past the collar of my nightshirt, pushing it aside to expose more of my shoulder beside my throat.

I opened my eyes and tried to see who was there, only to discover it was the Viscount himself. He smiled when he saw that I was looking at him. He buried his face in the crook of my shoulder, inhaling deeply.

I tried to speak, to ask him what all this strangeness meant, but he covered my mouth with his cold hand before I could. Then he tugged on my arms, pulling me up from the bed to stand before him, and I complied without protest. He gripped my wrists, making it impossible for me to move without him allowing it.

His eyes seemed to fill the universe. I could not have looked away even if I had wanted to, and I did not want to.

Then he moved too close for me to focus on him any longer, and I closed my eyes. He spoke one word.

“Mine.”

His voice was a rough whisper close to my ear, and I was too dream-addled, too shocked, too confused to struggle before I felt his teeth bite down and break the skin over the pulse in my neck.

The hold his hands had around my wrists was as implacable as the embrace of a statue might be, and at first I took his skin to be as cold as marble, as it had been earlier in the dream. As time passed, however, I realized I had been mistaken in this observation – his hands on my wrists and lips at my throat were warm, and rapidly growing warmer still. They felt like heated brands against my skin, while my own body was chilled and weak.

Dimly I realized I had fallen into something like a swoon, and that all that was keeping me from falling to the carpet in a heap was one of Vlad's broad palms cradling the back of my head, holding me in place as he continued his curious suckling at my neck. My body felt loose and heavy, like a rag that has been used and wrung out and plunged back into water.

My thoughts were thick and slow, but I still had enough of my wits about me to realize that, if one of Vlad's hands was supporting my head (the other, I realized a few moments later, was splayed against my back) then that meant my arms were no longer captive.

Clumsy in my hazed state, I tried to shove at Vlad's shoulder, but my push did nothing to dislodge his hold on me. It did, however, serve to alert him to my continued semi-conscious state.

The fact that I was aware at all was enough of a surprise that he took his mouth off the cut on my throat. A sound somewhat like a moan spilled out of me, quite without my knowing the noise was going to occur.

Vlad gave my face a glance of quick appraisal, his eyes as bright and darting as a sharp-clawed animal weighing up the best moment for pouncing.

His mouth, lips full and wet and crimson-red, curled up into a smile that seemed motivated by cruelty as much as by amusement.

He held my head more firmly, tightening his fingers in my hair and tugging hard enough to sting. This new sharp pain made me gasp aloud, and in the moment that my lips were parted with that sharp breath, Vlad invaded my mouth with the slick, heavy weight of his tongue.

He kissed me like that, like a claim, until I fainted.

It was a deeply unsettling dream, and I have woken feeling groggy and uncomfortable.

Vlad noticed my unwell state when we sat down to the evening's work together in the library, and asked if I was all right. I explained that the cause was nothing serious, merely bad dreams that had likely been brought on by the succession of unfamiliar beds I have found my rest in recently.

Remembering the particular nature and events of the nightmare, I felt my cheeks heat with a flush as I spoke to him. I hope Vlad assumed that this redness in my face was caused by simple embarrassment at being the kind of traveler who loses sleep in new places.

Whatever caused the dream to manifest in the form that it took, the result was that I now cannot stop noticing those features that my unconscious mind chose to highlight and warp in its imaginary version of Vlad. His teeth truly do have a terrible, beautiful sharpness to them, the white canines long and pointed compared to those surrounding. His eyes, when he is concentrating on me in conversation, are almost hypnotic in their intensity.

Under his impeccable manner as a host, there is a cold commanding nobility to Vlad's personality. Perhaps due to the years I have spent trying to please my aunt and uncle, or maybe simply innate in my character, I find myself responding on a visceral level to his demands. It gives me a full-body sense of profound satisfaction, of *rightness*, to obey him.

That must be the truth which the dream sought to reveal to me. Why it

did so via such a lascivious and outlandish sequence of metaphors, however, is a mystery for which the answer continues to elude me.

We had been working for a few hours when the wolves began to howl. I have been a city-dweller all my life, and so was so startled by the sound when it first occurred that I almost jumped out of my chair.

“It’s nothing to fear,” Vlad assured me. “This castle has never been breached by an uninvited visitor, neither human nor wolf. You’re quite safe. And they aren’t dangerous if they’re left alone – not like some other creatures that one might be unlucky enough to meet in the dark.”

His words made me think of Mikhail’s companion, life ended by some mysterious monster of the woods. I shivered.

Another howl joined the first. Vlad grinned, pushing the heavy leaded windows of the library open with a screech of ancient hinges, letting a blast of cold into the room along with the cacophony of howls.

“Listen! They’re singing in harmony!” he exclaimed, the delight and happiness in his expression so simple and sincere that I couldn’t help but be swept along with it.

Another dream. If these continue, I will see a doctor upon my return to London – perhaps there is a sleep tonic available to help with the suppression of these unwanted hallucinations.

I woke feeling deeply exhausted, far more so than I did yesterday afternoon. It was as if I had hardly slept at all, and as if the dream-phantom figure of the nightmare had somehow truly manifested in my room to drink my blood away.

This is what I dreamed on this occasion: That I woke in the night, as I had before, and went to the door of my bedroom. Beyond it, Vlad was waiting for me. His eyes burned into me, capturing my being like a helpless moth trapped in a spider's web.

“Kiss me,” Vlad said, and without a moment's thought I obeyed.

Once again his mouth had a sweet, thick taste to it, hot and strange. The press of his lips was eager on mine, and despite myself I found myself opening to it, inviting him in. It was as if I was bewitched, or in a dream. Kissing another man, with such lewd desire no less, somehow seemed like a perfectly logical course of action under the circumstances.

My hands, as if working of their own accord, cupped his fine-boned face with both palms. Every inch of my skin yearned to touch him, and I was no longer the moth in the spider's web but rather that same poor insect under the thrall of a candle's flame. He was that flame, and I wanted to burn to nothing, to be consumed entirely within him.

He pushed me back a few steps, until my shoulder blades hit the solidity of the wall behind us, and then pressed in closer. His mouth found the junction of my shoulder and neck and he sucked there, jolting a noise of surprise and pleasure from my mouth. Vlad nipped at this newly sensitive piece of skin with his teeth, making me gasp a second time.

Then, with a quiet growl in his own throat, Vlad opened his mouth wide, and sank his sharp-pointed fangs into my flesh.

The pain woke me from my strange pleasure-daze. It felt as if I was being pulled out of myself, all my strength draining away and into him. I struggled against him, trying to push myself away from the wall and out of his grasp.

Vlad's hand came up to cover my eyes and he pushed me back, keeping my head at such an angle as to allow him better access to my throat.

There is a particular lurid quality to these bites in the dreams, which renders them not entirely unlike the kissing. They hurt terribly, certainly, but

along with the intensity and intimacy of the act there is something else as well, something which leaves my heart hammering and skin clammy upon awakening.

I must leave off writing now; I hope this is the last I have to say on the topic going forward.

It is still the same night as my last entry, though several hours and a complete change in circumstances have taken place since then.

I am now locked in my room, unable to leave of my own accord. Even if bolt and bar did not hold me captive, I am not at all certain that escape would be possible for me. I have been deeply weakened, stripped of energy to the point where I shall have to return to the bed and rest as soon as I have completed the task of setting down this record of all that has happened.

It's reasonable to assume that Vlad will confiscate and destroy this journal soon enough, especially once it contains the things I am about to set down. Nevertheless, I feel I *must* write them, or else I will go mad. Perhaps I have gone mad already.

My dreams were not dreams. The inhabitants of this castle are monsters.

I was taking some air on the enormous stone steps at the front of the castle, watching how the last light of the day made for the most brilliant, jewel-hued silhouettes of sky and hill and tree together over the landscape.

The auburn-haired girl, the one I primarily think of by the paradoxical attribute of how unlike Elizabeth she is, came into view from around the side of the house. She wore another beautiful dancing dress. I remember wondering to myself how far she would have to travel, in order to attend a function in need of such attire.

“You must be far sweeter than Weber. He's treating you so kindly.”

Naturally my first assumption was that she was referring to my disposition, though if that had been the case it would have been an odd enough remark in itself – I am so used to Elizabeth's worries over my coldness, after all. ‘Sweet’ is the last word I would think of to describe myself.

Her expression made me hesitate in accepting this first impression of her meaning, however. It was a devilish, knowing look, one that suggested a dark secret behind the innocuous words. Her red mouth was slightly open, and I could see the very tip of her tongue lick at the wicked little point of her eye tooth, which was overlong and sharp in the same manner as Vlad's own.

As would be the case with anyone in possession of their faculties, I immediately decided that I was being completely absurd. Perhaps I was coming down with a bad illness, just as Weber had, and this was affecting my health and my dreams. It was making the impossible seem, if only for the most fleeting of seconds, rational.

I could not shake off the state it left me in, not completely, however. I was still rattled a half-hour later when Vlad emerged for the evening, ready for us to continue our work.

It did not take him long to notice the distracted state I was in, but at first his response was one of amused indulgence.

“More bad dreams?” he asked me, with a smile that was meant to be kindly. All I could see of it was its sharp, sharp teeth, though.

Rather than answering his question, I asked one of my own.

“Why do you prefer so strongly that we keep night hours?”

The confusion and fear in my tone, coupled with the fact that I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his mouth, would have made anything I said sound suspicious. So it was not the idiotic question alone that condemned me, but rather my whole demeanor.

Vlad’s expression took on a fixed, false cast for a brief moment. Then his genial smile slowly curled into the kind I had, before then, only seen him wear in dreams. “Follow me.”

I did. Heaven help me, I did.

Once we were inside this room again, he had me lie upon the bed. He climbed atop me, sitting across my legs and pinning me in place. Then, from a sheath on his belt, he drew out a little knife. It felt as sharp as my own shaving razor, as he ran it teasingly against the skin of my neck.

I expected to be killed at that moment, but the cut Vlad made – on my shoulder, in the end, after having ordered me to remove my shirt – was a long and shallow one, the bleeding messy but not serious.

He lapped at it like a cat with spilled milk, running that hot, clever tongue of his over my chest and shoulder in broad strokes. I was more afraid than I had ever been before in my life, and yet even despite this I couldn’t help but cling to him, arch into that strange licking touch, and tremble and shudder and sob when at last he fixed his mouth against the cut and began to suck.

I lost myself for a time after that, so cannot say for certain how long it was until he left. Now I am alone, and terrified.

Two entries in one night, and then a break of... I am not sure how long. Perhaps weeks. Maybe even longer. Time is difficult to keep track of: I wake and sleep as my energy ebbs and flows, as my captors deem fit to rouse or abandon me. I am outside the rhythms of the ordinary world. Sometimes it is difficult to remember it exists, that there is anything but the dark of this room and the strange, erotic pain of Vlad's mouth on my flesh, my blood gushing into him.

To remind myself that a sane and solid world exists beyond these castle walls, I re-read the earliest pages of this journal. My stupid prattle about my uncle and aunt's advice to me makes me want to weep. How sensible their wisdom would have been, if the journey I was to undertake had proved to be likewise rational!

But what good is the metaphor of Icarus and the sun, when the light of the moon or the flicker of candle-flames has replaced that golden orb of day so utterly?

I have no wax wings to flee the monster's maze. I cannot fly, but only fall.

My first thoughts on Transylvania were naïve and idiotic enough to fill my current self with bitterness. Writing of everything being so green all around! Oh, Benjamin of the past, take heed: this place is not green, it is red and red and red, as red as lips and beating hearts and the pomegranate seeds Persephone was fool enough to swallow.

One of the girls visited earlier, with my own straight razor in her hand. I watched, helpless, as she honed the blade with a sharpener. I doubt it has ever been so sharp. My skin would have parted like butter touched by a hot knife, had she progressed in her torments far enough to cut me.

Before she could, Vlad arrived and intervened, yelling curses at her and forcing her from the room before coming to the bed himself and cradling me in his arms.

I know it's all a sham, no realer than a pantomime acted out for crowds at Christmas. It's by Vlad's designs that the girls torture me so, whether in pairs or alone or all three together. They terrify and hurt me, and even though I know it's his game, his plans, I cannot stop the rush of relief and gratitude that floods me when my 'savior' arrives. He holds me, soothes me as I tremble. I cling to him and sob, unable to resist this brief illusion of safety in the dark.

When this most recent occasion occurred, the helpless dependence he

has been training into me deepened to the point where his 'rescue'... which is false, I know it to be false, he is the conductor of the whole symphony from beginning to end, and there is no threat that he saves me from save for his own more overt cruelties...

His rescue, with all its kind touches, began to arouse me. The gentle petting made my blood run faster, brought a flush to my cheeks. The sensation of Vlad's hand stroking my shoulder and chest, rather than calming me, began to feel exciting.

The whispers of hot pleasure plunged to cold fear when Vlad's hand stilled and he sat back, a gloating grin widening on his face as he looked at me.

His hand drifted downward, fingertips walking their way across my skin in a playful dance. As they moved over my belly I gave a sharp inhale, drawing my body away from his administrations as much as I could. It did no good, as I had already known would happen.

Vlad is like a cat with a new mouse; he intends to draw out the poor creature's murder for as long as he still finds enjoyment in the game.

"My presence alone is an aphrodisiac for you? How flattering," he said to me, wicked smile never wavering as his fingers reached my hip. I have grown so thin and weak that the curve of bone can be discerned through my skin there, and he raked his nails along it. His nails are pointed now, like the claws of a vicious carnivore's might be.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he demanded of me then, and I answered him without hesitation and in total honesty. Sometimes this is the case, and it fills me with dread: how deeply in his thrall have I become? Could he command me to end my life by my own hand, if the whim took him, and leave me with no option to follow the order?

I doubt he would use the power for such a banal end, not when he can instead corrode my sanity away in slow despair.

"Your nails are like a predator's," I said.

He hummed, a noise of quiet, thoughtful agreement. He raked his nails over my hipbone a second time. The sting was bright and abrupt, and I knew he'd drawn blood.

My breath had grown quick and fevered. My member was so hard it ached, throbbing with the same heartbeat that made the cuts on my hip well up with red. Vlad's hand was so close to it, his hand that is capable of such gentle touch and such cruel pains.

The lust and fear was making my already addled head dizzy and dim; the whole world had narrowed down to his looming presence over me.

He bent his head to my hip and sucked at the cuts there, tongue lapping over the thin lines where his nails had scratched. I sobbed, my body shuddering with sensations that are beyond pain or pleasure, in some other realm which combines the two.

He hadn't touched my length at all, and I was beginning to wonder if it was possible to die of need. If Vlad had not been holding me down by my hips, I would have writhed where I lay, arching towards him in desperation.

He looked up at me, his eyes glittering and his mouth smeared red with my blood.

“Speak.” His voice was quiet and pleasant – he knew he had no need to make it cold and commanding in order to get a reply.

Even when commanded, I lacked the vocabulary to voice my pleas. “I need you,” I managed. “I need you, I don't... I don't know, I... please, just...”

There were tears in my eyes. I was trembling. I had no pride left, and almost nothing else of myself besides. He has broken me down into my composite parts, and has begun building me up into the toy – the *prey* – he wishes to make of me.

He turned me over to lie on my stomach, raising my hips with one of the pillows. I should have felt ashamed and afraid at the impending violation, but my moral center has long passed the point of overwhelm. I felt as if I had been mounted and claimed already, and no longer had the wherewithal to fight what was inevitable.

No, that is a lie. After all I have recorded before now, it would be stupid to begin obscuring the truth. The real reason I felt no shame or fear as Vlad prepared me with his fingers is that I desired him. I was losing my mind with the want of him inside me.

A moan fell from my mouth, deep and wanton. Vlad gave a laugh.

“You're this far gone, from only fingers? What a brazen little slut you've proved to be, underneath that nervousness.”

I wanted to call him a liar, but all I could do was moan again as he pulled his fingers free.

When he slid into me, *fucked* into me, a shout tore from my throat. I was so full up with him that I felt I would split apart. The vulnerability of it was equal to how I'd felt when he'd first taken blood from me. I had no

defenses left.

Another broken cry sobbed past my mouth, and then another. I was making so many sounds, animalistic grunts and keens of need, babbled nonsense words and shouts. I tried to cover my mouth with my hand, desperate for some semblance of self-control, but Vlad simply grasped my wrist and pulled my hand away, at the same moment as he gave a particularly strong thrust, a wicked laugh on his breath beside my ear.

He shoved into me over and over again, until my whole body was shaking and I could see nothing but black and white sparks before my eyes.

“Do you see now,” Vlad murmured in my ear, teeth grazing the shell of it. “Why the French call this ‘the little death’?”

His mouth moved to my throat and he bit down, teeth driving into me in concert with another thrust. It was too much. It was more than anyone could stand. I was obliterated by pleasure, reduced to nothing but a body designed for fucking and biting and using.

He was still drinking from me when I fainted, and my final conscious thought was given over to wondering if this was the end, if Vlad would take more than he intended and accidentally end my life.

The fact that I am writing this entry in my journal serves as proof that, once again, my wishes did not come true. I remain alive, if this can be called living.

The bitter irony is that, in some strange profound way, I feel more alive than I ever have before.

More hours, nights, days, who knows how long it has been? Perhaps I have been here a thousand years.

There seems no limit to the variety of carnalities Vlad wishes to engage in with me, now that he has awakened this new thirst of mine.

I hate him and I want him; I often feel as if I shall die from the want of him. And whenever I feel that, it comes hand in hand with the knowledge that the bringer of that death is almost certain to be him, as well.

Occasionally, if the caprice seizes him, Vlad allows me to spend time in the library. Reading reminds me that the ordinary world is not some desperate dream I conjured for myself. These writers saw it! They described it!

I would not call it a comfort, exactly, but it's a kind of necessity. Without it I would lose myself entirely.

On my latest trip to the library, Vlad came along as well. It was impossible for me to concentrate on any of the words on the page in front of me when I knew he was present in the room. I have become attuned to the minutest of movements and changes in him, and am always on alert when he is near.

He noticed my lack of concentration, of course, and declared that if I didn't really care about reading then I didn't need any future trips to the library.

I pleaded with him to let me keep the privilege, and swore that it was merely the distraction of having him so near that broke my focus. The smile he gave me at those words made my blood run chill and hot at once.

He grabbed one of my hands, pulling me over to one of the long low couches before pushing me down again. He straddled me, one knee on either side of my legs, with his arms on my shoulders. Then he leaned forward, and licked at my mouth.

Somewhere far off down the mountain, I could hear the howl of wolves. I felt half-wild myself, my hands clutching at Vlad's sides and pulling him closer, demanding deeper and longer kisses from that hot willing mouth. Vlad sucked at my tongue, bit at my lips, tangled his hands in my hair and pulled hard enough to make me cry out in pain.

He opened the buttons of my shirt – I am sure he only allows me to dress in the first place so that he can strip me of my garments, make me vulnerable and exposed time and time again – and slipped a hand inside to stroke at my chest. He gave my nipples vicious pinches, licking deep kisses into my mouth as my eyes watered from the pain and my desire grew and

grew.

Vlad stood, leaving me panting and exposed as he reached into the pocket of his trousers, drawing forth the small tub of oil that he sometimes uses on me. He shed his pants quickly, gesturing for me to do the same, then climbed back onto my lap in the same straddling position.

“No touching now. Just watch,” he ordered me, as he dipped two of his fingertips into the pot and reached behind himself. I remained still as a statue, as if my hands were tied in place at my sides. (Sometimes Vlad likes to bind me, with rope or chain, but this is more for aesthetic reasons than any necessity. I am so deeply enthralled to him that to go against a command is unthinkable to me.)

Vlad’s face stilled in concentration for a few moments, lower lip between his teeth. His eyelids dropped to half-closed, lashes fluttering, and a hectic blush began to rise on his cheeks.

The sight of that stolen blood giving color to his face slammed me with desire, and I ached to touch him. I wanted to kiss that sex-drunk expression all over, to lick along the elegant line of his jaw and suck at skin I would never dare to breach.

“Stay still,” Vlad warned me again, and I made a noise that I’d intended to be dismissive of the need for the reminder, but which came out as a needy whine. He took my cock in hand, moving his hand up and down the length a few times to check the hardness and earning another noise of desperation with the movement.

Then he sat up, balancing his weight on his knees as he changed the angle of how he was positioned over me and then slowly, wrenchingly slowly, sat down to sheathe himself on me.

It should have felt less of a violation than the reversal of positions had, but somehow the specific mechanics of the act were irrelevant. He was still the one with all the power, the one guiding our actions and setting the pace, the one who disregarded my guilt and dismay over the acts we did together. Physiology means nothing at all when compared to those truths. He was still the taker, and I the taken.

Vlad raised himself up on his knees again, not so high this time, and rocked forward and down slowly. He was tight around me, his body eager and greedy as it drew me in deep.

“You look perfect like this,” Vlad told me, between harsh huffs of breath. “You should always look like this. Let’s stay here, just here, forever.

Do nothing but this. Feel nothing but this, until the end of time.”

“Yes, yes,” I chanted in reply, gulping at air, overwhelmed. The sensations of where our bodies joined, where they were moving and rocking together, felt profound and sublime.

I thought in that moment that nothing could possibly be better than this. Surely it was the height of all experience, the intimacy of being locked together in absolute bliss.

Then Vlad opened his palm, revealing the little knife he always keeps nearby. Usually it is to be found in the holder on his belt, but he’d clearly collected it at the same time as the oil.

I tipped my head back, bearing my throat to him. As time goes by I have less and less fight left within me, and I could see no point in prolonging what I knew would be the inevitable outcome no matter what I did.

But it was his own neck that he marked, the cut welling up with blood that looked as fresh and red as any that flowed through my own living veins.

At the scent of it I went dizzy with a desire I’d never felt before. Not lust, not thirst, it had elements of each, and it punched me with such force that I could feel myself shake with it.

“Just a little,” Vlad cautioned me. “Or it will make you sick.”

Every time I think there is nothing of my soul left to tarnish, I am proved wrong. I thought there was no depths remaining that I was yet to sink to but oh, I was so terribly wrong. I put my mouth to the cut on Vlad’s skin and sucked.

It didn’t taste like blood, any more than the sensations I feel when he drinks from me are like the experience of sex – which is to say that these are simply the closest analogies I know to describe the truth with, even if they are vastly inadequate. It tasted like blood, it did not taste like blood. I have nothing more articulate or useful to say on the matter.

When we climaxed, it came like a crescendo. It was a consummation of the pact our bodies had made with one another.

I stopped tasting the blood when Vlad told me to; my throat and stomach burned with the strength of it anyway. I felt gluttoned and strange.

Vlad slumped forward onto me, easing himself off my cock and then curling against my chest with a sound like a happy purring rumble, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

“I love you,” he murmured drowsily.

The worst part is that I think he truly meant it.

I have received a letter from Elizabeth. How curious that Vlad, whilst depriving me of so many simple human essentials – sunlight, sufficient food, my liberty – should so easily offer others, such as this book I continue to write in and which he has no interest in confiscating.

The letters from the firm, he doesn't bother to pass on, as that correspondence is just as easily handled by him as it would be by myself. I wish I could recall whether it was Weber's hand or Vlad's behind the last few months of letters, before we were told that Weber had died. I am absolutely certain that he met this same fate that now holds me captive.

This was no business message, however. Her handwriting is just as it has always been, neater and smaller than my own.

I shall keep the original folded between the pages of this journal, but in case time or accident sees it lost I shall transcribe it here as well:

*Dearest Benjamin*

*This is a difficult letter to begin, perhaps because it is so full of endings. It is full of beginnings, too, but the new cannot begin until the old is done away with.*

*I have fallen in love. He is... well, he is poor, and has been married before. I shall be a step-mother! Though not a wicked one, like in the fairy tales, I hope.*

*Mother and father are absolutely furious, of course. I know you wanted to live up to their expectations for us, as a repayment for their kindness. I know you planned to marry me as a part of that, and at times I even wanted that myself – you are my dear cousin, and so I will always love you.*

*But we were never in love, the two of us. Now that I am in love myself, I know it with even more certainty than before. I had hoped that I could lead you to this difficult truth yourself, through giving you journals for your thoughts and other such schemes.*

*We must live lives that are our own. You cannot live for the sake of Mother and Father's ambitions for you, or out of some obligation you feel you owe to me. I am choosing to follow my heart, no matter what danger and heartbreak such a decision may prove to have in store for me.*

*I hope with all my heart that you will find a life that is your own, too. It is the only kind worth living.*

*With much love,  
Your cousin,  
Elizabeth*

There are places where the ink has run a little from her tears. It must have been a difficult piece for her to write. I hope she will be happy.

But who am I to be, if those plans I made so carefully are gone? I have resigned myself to my likely death within these castle walls – that is nothing new. But I had expected to die as the man I had lived as, as the man I had intended to become if none of this had happened.

Now even that comforting lie has been taken away from me, the imaginary Benjamin who could have found some measure of contentment and happiness in an unremarkable life.

Who is left in his place? I am an indulged hedonist and chained pet, all at once. When I try to puzzle out what Vlad's true feelings towards me might be, all I am left with at the end is a headache and even more confusion than I had when I began.

Nobody has come for days. The door remains locked. I have no food. I wonder if this is how it ends: they are tired of me, or have forgotten me, and so I am abandoned. Perhaps there are other rooms about the castle, ones I never saw in wings long given over to cobwebs and dust.

Perhaps in those other rooms, other skeletons wait for jailers who simply failed to appear one evening, and left them to a lonely starving death. If I do not write again, at least my end will not be a complete mystery.

Vlad has appeared again. By the time he did so, I had fallen into a deep fever, my body unable to stave off illness and survive starvation simultaneously.

My first awareness of Vlad's return was the light, gentle touch of a cool damp cloth to my face, wiping away the worst of my fever sweat. For one blessed moment I thought myself back in London, with Elizabeth or my aunt tending to me as I fought against some terrible malady that had trapped me in nightmares.

But I know his smell, just as I know all of him, with the deep obsessive learning that only a slave studying his owner can ever achieve. And so I knew, after that one moment of delusion, exactly who it was who tended me as I suffered.

"You're awake," he noted. He has an uncanny knack of picking out the exact moment I rouse from sleeping or a swoon. "I didn't mean to wake you."

The words were practically an apology. He held a cup of water to my lips and I sipped at it, coughing as my dry mouth tried to take in too much too fast.

"I did not mean to be away so long," Vlad went on. Another almost-apology. He finished wiping my face, and set the cloth aside. "One of the girls vanished."

"Vanished?" I echoed stupidly. "Left, you mean?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps. I think that's the likeliest explanation. Sometimes whimsies catch our attention. But the others disagreed. They were afraid that something had happened to her, that someone had harmed her. Even if that wasn't the case, they were convinced that the best course of action was still to leave in search of her."

"That doesn't sound logical to me," I offered. "Wouldn't it be better to remain where you were, in case the missing person returned there?"

Vlad laughed a little. It wasn't his cruel, dark laugh. "You and your logic. Even after everything, it's your immediate touchstone."

"Especially after everything," I countered.

I slipped back into a fever-sleep after that, but when I next woke I felt much better. My illness has broken, and so now begins the long slow climb back towards... whatever it is that constitutes 'healthy' for me, these days.

I can hear footsteps in the corridor outside, so I shall stop writing for the time being.

The footsteps were not Vlad's.

Immediately after I finished writing my last entry, the blotting paper still soaking excess ink from the page before I closed the covers, the door opened wide and there, framed in the center of the doorway, fair hair catching the dim light enough to gleam, stood Mikhail.

If he recognized and remembered me, he gave no indication. Perhaps I am so changed from who I was before all this began that only those who knew me well would still know me now.

"He killed my friend, and so now I shall kill his," Mikhail muttered to himself. He was almost as altered from his past self as I am from mine. There was a fatalistic wildness in his eyes, a desperation that had long ago overridden sanity.

I remember once hearing a saying about vengeance, suggesting that if one wishes to pursue it they shall have to dig two graves. Looking at Mikhail, I saw the truth in that. This man had given up his own life in the quest to destroy another's, and now he came to his moment of vindication.

I stood up from where I sat, despite the fact that logic told me that I had no hope of staving off an attack from him. After everything I had endured and survived, I think my mind simply could not accept dying without a struggle.

It made no difference, of course. But I am still glad of it. It is nice to know that, when face with certain demise, I am someone who wishes to die fighting.

The knife slid between my ribs and into my heart, breaching the wall of it and unleashing a gush of red out of the wound when Mikhail withdrew the weapon.

I staggered, more with pain than with injury at first, and then enough seconds went by that my body began to catch up to the fact that it was no longer in anything even approaching working order.

Perhaps another man, in other circumstances, could have survived such a blow. A hardy enough heart, a firm enough constitution. But I was withered and weak from my captivity and illness, and crumpled to the ground.

I missed the events that followed, as crucial as they were, for it seemed no time at all before I felt arms touching me, pulling at my now soaked shirt. Vlad tore the fabric away as easily as a child removing tissue-paper wrappings from a gift, and fastened his mouth to the wound.

If I had possessed the energy to do so I would have laughed, for it

seemed to amusing to me that he would take this last fading chance to drink my blood, to pull what little was left of me from my veins.

Then it ended, and I was still alive, although barely. I realized that Vlad had lifted us both to standing position, though I was a deadweight in his arms. I was suddenly sharply aware of how cold and clumsy and half-drunk I felt, and then realized a moment later how literally true that was – I had been half drunk away. It made me want to laugh, but any movement caused more pain, so I didn't.

I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and rest.

“No, no. One last thing. You can do it. Drink from me.”

Vlad was bearing his throat to me. My mouth watered of its own accord, roused by the memory of that curious taste. I fumbled to find the small dagger in its sheath on his hip, but Vlad gently stopped me with a touch.

His hand was so hot against mine, hot with new and borrowed blood. I wondered how much of that blood was Mikhail's, and how much of it was mine. It made me shiver with desire.

“Use your teeth.”

I was hard. I'd been hard since regaining a sense of myself in his arms. Even when there was no blood left in the rest of me, I felt certain that I'd still be hard.

Tentatively, I grazed my teeth against Vlad's throat, terrified of getting something wrong. He had commanded me to do this, and as always that particular tone of his voice had sidestepped my reason and gone straight into the simplest and most primitive part of me. I wanted to serve him. I wanted to do as he asked, well enough that he would be pleased with me.

He palmed my cock through my clothes. The unexpected spike of lust in me made me bite down sharply. The taste of blood bloomed heady and huge and too-sweet and too-rich and so, so, so good in my mouth. It blotted out the world.

I couldn't tell if the sound in the back of my throat was groaning or growling as I clung to Vlad. He held me in place as I sucked, cradling me, keeping my head in place and stroking the hair at the nape of my neck with small, soothing touches.

Once again, I lost my sense of time passing. When Vlad pushed me away, all I knew was that I was still far from complete satisfaction. I wanted to drink forever.

We were on our knees on the floor. I hadn't been aware of us moving. We remained there, forehead to forehead, for the longest time.

I found myself thinking of that moment in the library, when Vlad had paused to listen to the wolves. The simple sincerity of his joy at the beauty of them.

I thought of the careful, gentle touch of the cloth against my skin when he'd washed my feverish face, and hadn't meant to wake me.

And the cruelty. Oh, the cruelty. He had stretched my soul as thin and taut as wire with his tortures. He'd broken me for no reason but his own whim to do so.

I had been his plaything, his victim. I had been reduced, body and mind, to nothing but his possession. And I had been glad of it. He had made me into someone who was glad of it.

That much was still true, beyond my death: I was his.

And he was mine. Otherwise, he would have let me truly die, there on the floor, and found some other plaything. I was real enough to him that he would rather keep me than lose me. That was a power I had over him.

Neither of us could exist without the other. We both understood that now.

"I want more," I said.

"I know. Come with me."

He led me down the hallway, to a part of the castle I hadn't been to before. My thoughts flashed to the nightmares of my starvation days – the thought that there might be other rooms, holding the sad forgotten remnants of other captives.

When Vlad opened one of the doors along the corridor we walked, I saw to my surprise that my nightmare had not been completely wrong.

Mikhail still lived. One of his legs was clearly broken, and had been splinted with rags and wood. His arms were chained to a post of his bed, and the post had the worn, iron-strong look of the castle doors. He would not be escaping any time soon. He was bruised and bloodied, his skin pale beneath the marks.

The hate in his eyes as he glared at us was a wrathful, murderous thing. It was so beautiful that the breath caught in my throat.

"I don't know yet whether he was the culprit behind Tatyana's disappearance," Vlad explained to me. With my newly-keen eyesight, I could appreciate for the first time just how perfect Vlad was. Like a well-forged

blade, every aspect of him was designed to make violence elegant.

“He’ll tell us eventually,” I replied, certain of the truth in my words. “A person can be made to give up everything, if they’re provided with a compelling enough reason to do so.”

I smiled. The expression felt sharp on my mouth.

With a gleaming grin of his own, Vlad took my hand and led me forward.

And that, my little journal, is the end of this story, for it is the beginning of another.

~

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