

Chapter I: Unexpected Intimacy

Count Dracula's Journal
May 4th and 5th

By way of introduction, my English solicitor stumbled headlong into my arms. To be fair, the young man could not be faulted. He had just been shoved out of the still swaying diligence into lamplit darkness. Fortunately, I stood ready to catch him, having arrived early to thwart any attempt by the coachman to forestall our rendezvous. Unfortunately, my guest's plight caught me off guard, and I unthinkingly stepped forward, reached out, and scooped him up in my arms. Only after my hands had slid up his sides and back and my fingers had strayed up his neck to comb through his hair and cradle his head did I realize my mistake. But by then, the unexpected intimacy had overwhelmed me, and I could not resist the urge to drink him in.

In a moment suspended in time, I inhaled the scent of his hair deep into my nostrils, grazed his ear with my lips, and peered down to spy the quickening pulse of his throbbing carotid. When he leaned back in my embrace to look me full in the face, I gave into impulse even more and gazed into his wide eyes, focusing beyond them to touch, penetrate, and probe his mind. Still hooked by the crooks of my elbows, he shuddered and gasped and then relaxed and sighed as he relented, opened to me, and began to share himself. And by the gathering gloom, mere feet from the coach, I would have had the handsome Englishman right then and there. But to my utter consternation, I broke off. *No, not him*, I thought. *Anyone else, yes; but not him—and certainly not here, not now, not like this*. For I had sensed his involuntary reaction—the rush of blood and tumescence of flesh—that he doubtless would deny, and rather than take what I wanted, I desired he reveal himself of his own volition—well, perhaps with some prodding on my part. Thus resolved, I awoke from reverie to reality, shaking off lust to take up longing and seeing in the anxious, bewildered eyes darting over my face that I did not suffer my forbearance alone.

I cursed myself over our awkward predicament until my recollection of the young man's recent memories turned my inward ire outward. Reliving his past hours while looking past him, I associated the shadowy faces in the coach with the indignities he had suffered over the last leg of his long journey. His fellow passengers' suspicion of and disdain for him—mainly due to their fear and loathing of me—rankled. My resentment flared into anger when I spotted the driver atop the carriage about to hurl down the boy's luggage to strike him from behind. To the brute's dismay and displeasure, I interposed myself, snatched the heavy bag out of the air as if nothing, and confronted him. "Whatever you think of me, do not mistreat my guest!"

"Why not?" the bull-necked driver snapped. "He couldn't wait. He wouldn't listen. He should have agreed to go on to Bukovina and then return home like a sensible person, but no! Whether greedy, stupid, or worse, he says he must meet with you today of all days. I'd have given him no choice in the matter if your calèche weren't blocking the pass. Curse your already damned soul for arriving early!"

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I set the luggage down and stepped into the lamplights' beams to better warn off the coachman with my glower. The steaming labored breaths and lathered bodies of the sorely tasked team before me clouded the chill air. Stroking the bridge of the nose of the nearest horse, I asked, "Did you whip these poor beasts half to death in a futile attempt to evade me or because you enjoyed it?"

Standing atop the driver's box, the coachman scowled and brandished his horsewhip. "You have what you came for. Shut up, back off, and be gone before I whip you too."

I stepped closer. "Brave words coming from a scared bully." Then beckoning, I taunted, "How about you shut up and show me how much of a bully you think you are?"

"I'll show you I don't care who—or what—you are!"

With a jerk of the man's arm, his long-handled whip lashed out, but my hand being quicker, I snagged it before its tip could bite and, yanking and twisting, wrenched it from his grip, almost toppling him from his perch. Then seeing the shocked lout fumble for and pull out a pistol, I turned his whip against him. To the sounds of a satisfying crack and an answering yelp, the firearm clattered over the side of the coach and fell to the ground—thankfully without discharging. Picking it up, I admonished the coachman. "Only a soldier, constable, or gentleman should wield such a weapon. Certainly, not the craven likes of you."

The driver held his tongue as he beheld both the gun and horsewhip in my hands. Nevertheless, I took no chances. "Your knife now. I know you have one. Toss it down and be slow and careful about it, or I will fire every last shot into you and then garrote you with your own whip before you can bleed to death."

My aim, being true, ensured his was not. After retrieving his hunting knife from the dirt, I turned my back on the unmanned boor and returned to my guest.

How out of place, anxious, and forlorn the Englishman appeared! To see him so miserable upon his arrival in my ancestral land made me despise his fellow travelers even more. Of the suspicious, superstitious lot, whose discourtesies I now remembered as well as he, only the biddy in black, who had sat in self-righteous judgment of the outlander and filled her husband's ear with none-too-silent slanders about us, dared offer affront. Thrusting a shaking arm out of the open coach door, she dangled a crudely carved rosary in my direction. Its ungainly, ugly crucifix sanctimoniously profane compared to the slight, silvery one glinting beneath my solicitor's neck, I could not help but spite the pharisaical woman wielding it by reaching for the young man's, taking it in hand, leaning in close, and kissing it before his gasping lips. To my delight, the biddy bellowed in indignation as the boy looked on agape. I had to tear my eyes from him to face her and ask, "At Mass, have you never heard the priest speak of 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'?"

"Jesus loved no man!" she shrieked.

The biddy's heresy shocked even herself. As if struck speechless by her heartless god, she could only wipe the spittle from her quivering lips before she slunk back into the shadows.

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Breaking the silence, I spoke in my heavily accented English to a native speaker of the language for the first time. "Mr. Jonathan Harker, I presume?"

For a long moment, the young man, clearly taken aback by all the commotion of his arrival, gazed at me dumbly and then nodded quickly.

"I am Count Dracula."

Recovering somewhat and remembering himself, Mr. Harker straightened up and nodded again—this time, formally—pausing with his eyes downcast to say, "I am at your service, Count."

In turn taken aback by the sight of the handsome Englishman bowing before me—his features on display to be appreciated unobserved—I paused before replying, "I have been eagerly anticipating your arrival. All my plans rest upon you."

His long-lashed eyes rose up to meet mine. "Please forgive the wait. I came as quickly as I could."

"For which I commend you and doubtless need to thank you, for I know my countrymen can be unkind to foreigners and probably did you no favors along the way."

In response, the young man only side-eyed the coach, accusing his abusers in silence.

To bring his attention back to me, I asked, "Do you have everything?"

After looking about and seeing his luggage on the ground and his cap in the dirt, he answered, "Yes."

"Then let me get rid of these wretches, so we can pack you up and be off."

Mr. Harker nodded a third and final time and set about collecting his possessions.

For my part, I made for the calèche, skirting the coach while scowling at its occupants and driver on my guest's behalf. After inspecting the team and harnesses, I clambered aboard, laid the weapons I had collected below the driver's seat, and released the brake. Then, with two clicks of my tongue, I had the four coal-black horses come alert and pull up alongside Mr. Harker, who stood waiting like a waif with his bag and cap in hand. My wrath on his account finally getting the better of me, I pointed at him and began chiding everyone on and in the coach. "Inhospitable churls, you are a disgrace! This man came to our beautiful land at my bidding, and you showed him such ugliness! Have you no pride or shame?"

The only argument arose from the disgraced biddy's disapproving husband, who had cast the boy out of the coach and tossed his cap after him. He poked his bald-pated, dour-faced head out of the open carriage door and dared to say, "Cruelty is a kindness in the service of our Lord. But despite our best efforts on His behalf, some wayward souls refuse to be saved and are lost. The stranger is yours now. Take him, do what you will, and leave us God-fearing folk in peace."

I replied, "Rest assured, 'Good Samaritan,' he will fare better in my hands than he did at yours."

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Suddenly, the door slammed shut as the coach lurched forward. Over the cacophony of the hollering driver, slapping reins, neighing horses, and creaking carriage, I shouted, "I would bid you 'God-fearing folk' Godspeed, but then you know the dead travel fast."

Her beady eyes fixing on mine in alarm, the pious biddy sitting in her shadowy corner made the sign of the cross and the ward against the evil eye before disappearing into the night. I smiled after her and the rest, entertaining the uses to which I would put the knife, pistol, and whip lying at my feet.

My hapless guest looked from the departing coach up to me. I did not need to peer through his eyes a second time to sense his confusion and wariness. To put him at ease, I said, "Your worries are over. You are under my protection now and safe." Then I qualified in thought, *At least, safe from others, if not from me.*

Pushing that demon aside, I stepped down from the driver's box to stand next to the young man and held out my hand to take his bag. A moment's hesitation on his part afforded me the opportunity to appraise him. Spare in frame and flesh under his unbuttoned overcoat and with an open face, he exemplified a youth becoming a man. His fingers, long and thin, felt smooth and supple when they touched mine. His eyes, not yet blind to the harshness of the world, reflected the apprehension they saw in mine at the thought of him subject to it. At their glance, I turned away and stowed his belongings.

Then pushing this second demon aside, I set about settling the ill-prepared Englishman inside the calèche. After tugging down his flimsy flat cap, buttoning up his open overcoat, turning up its furless collar, laying a rug over his thin-trousered lap, and having him don his impractical gloves, I gave my bundled-up passenger another appraisal. Satisfied he would be spared the worst of the cold—for I kept the canopy collapsed for the sake of the view—I jumped down, remounted the driver's box, and gave the team the quietest clicks of the tongue and the slackest slaps of the reins to urge them homeward.

The road home evinced Jesus's teaching that "narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." At its widest, for a short stretch from the pass, it just accommodated two carriages. However, beyond, it tapered to a trail that, though lonely and rough, had the benefit of presenting a picturesque scene.

The season and hour being what they were, the calèche's headlamps illuminated an austere beautiful nightscape rendered in dusky grays, darkest blues, and black. On either side, deepening shadow made murky mazes of stands of still barren trees. Overhead arched a spindly tracery of intertwined branches silhouetted against backlit smudges of billowing clouds shrouding the rising moon. And over everything, an otherworldly aura shone as the steam rising from the horses' nostrils and backs washed over the carriage, softening the lamplight—save for its reflections glinting in the manifold pairs of eyes peering out of the gloom from vantages high and low along the forest's edge. That is, until, one by one, they began blinking out as the faint, interwoven rhythms of bounding footfalls and raspy panting rose to mingle with those of beating hooves and heaving breaths.

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For the first time, Mr. Harker called out to me. “Count, we’re being pursued!”

“Your honor guard has arrived!” I shouted over my shoulder, teasing the anxious outlander.

After a pause, he said, “I don’t understand!”

I thought to reply, *There is much you do not as of yet*. Instead, I reassured him, “Be at peace! You are with me! They will not harm you!”

The rocking calèche swayed as my passenger turned about to search our murky wake for a sign of our pursuers. “Who are ‘they’?” he asked.

“My children!”

Moments later, the young man’s gasp carried over the wind. “They’re wolves!”

As if on cue, the pack, split into two ranks, tore out of the darkness to flank the carriage, its leader outstripping the rest to overtake and escort the horses.

More movement behind me brought Mr. Harker's lips to my ear. Evidently afraid the quaver in his voice might embolden the wolves, he whispered, “We’re surrounded!”

I turned my face into his vaporous breath and said, “Yes, my charge, we are surrounded...and protected. These wolves are loyal to me—much more so than any dogs or, worse yet, men—and will defend me and mine—which now includes you—to the death.”

At that, Mr. Harker regained some composure. Nevertheless, he stayed close, perched on the front seat, looking over my shoulder, avoiding the sight of three wolves running along each side. All I could do was show him he had nothing to fear and drive on.

As the hour lengthened, the trail narrowed, and the trees encroached, the arising of a preternatural blue glow in spots along the edge of the forest prompted me to ask, “Do you know what today is?”

“Of course. May the fourth.”

“Nothing else? In Bistritz, did no one warn you of the eve of the Feast of Saint George?”

“The wife of the landlord of the Golden Krone did mention it.”

“And she told you evil will have dominion over the earth between midnight tonight and daybreak?”

“Well...yes.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the Englishman fingering his buttoned overcoat where the crucifix—most likely, the landlady’s—hung underneath. Too tactful to ask what the meddling crone may have told him about me, I inquired, “Why did you not heed her warning? You could have delayed your arrival a day.”

“With all due respect to the customs of your country, I have a duty to you as your solicitor. I had informed you I would arrive today and did as I said.”

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“Very admirable of you, Mr. Harker. But not to diminish your conscientiousness, I sense you are a man unto yourself: one who does not necessarily see things as others would have him. Otherwise, you would not be with me here and now.”

Instead of accepting the compliment, the young man replied, “You give me too much credit, Count.”

A pall of silence fell over us, loudening the horse's and wolves' exertions. I began slowing our pace to not overtax the beasts, who would sooner burst their hearts than fail me. But then Mr. Harker's heart began to race.

“Count—!”

“We are only halfway home and can all do with some respite,” I interjected. “Besides, fate has brought you here on this night of all nights for a reason. So, let us stop and see. If not for yourself, then as a favor to me. All right?”

Abashed, the young man assented with a nod.

After reining in the horses and setting the brake, I descended into the swarming wolf pack, the seven members of which demanded vigorous rubs, pats, and scratches. Mr. Harker meanwhile looked on incredulously. By way of encouragement, I said, “If you come down and help out, you will make friends for life.”

To my surprise, he did, cautiously stepping down into the milling mass of sniffing, nuzzling, pawing, whining wolves with their bold gazes, panting maws, and lolling tongues.

“Have you ever had a dog?” I asked.

“No. My mother forbade it, and my career precludes it.”

“A shame....”

I watched as he hesitantly reached out to pet the wolves circling his legs. “Very good!” I encouraged him. He looked at me and smiled like the happy boy he should have been.

Although Mr. Harker's ministrations were too gentle for the thick-furred beasts, they did not go unappreciated—especially by the younger members of the pack, who, like seeking out like, gravitated to him. In due time, after the pack had made his acquaintance and my relationships with its members had been affirmed, I gave the wolves the word and gesture that sent all but their leader to encircle and guard the carriage and its team. Berserker, their patriarch, remained at my side as was his right and duty.

“Come,” I requested of Mr. Harker, holding out one hand; and then pointing the way with the other, I commanded of Berserker, “Take us to the pond, boy.”

The great gray wolf led the way into the forest, nimbly and quietly treading the hardened ground's soft carpet of dried leaves and brittle pine needles. His big head swaying from side to side and nose, ears, and eyes alert, he cut a circuitous path through the thickening underbrush and tree

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trunks. Occasionally, he glanced back to check on us as well as reproach us for our leaf-rustling, twig-snapping, root-catching footsteps. I, in turn, kept an eye on Mr. Harker as he braved the tightening gaps between snaring brambles and clawing branches. When the darkness of the dense wood threatened to blind us, our dilated pupils registered a deep-blue glow in the distance. From then on, with each minute's progress, the radiance intensified until we emerged into a clearing bathed in a rich-sapphirine phosphorescence emanating from the pond at its center.

When Mr. Harker stepped out from behind me and beheld the ethereal glade, he exclaimed, "It's beautiful! But how can this be?"

Taking in the scene, I answered, "Local lore says hidden treasures are revealed by an eerie luminescence in the form of cold blue flames on the night—that is, tonight—when evil holds sway." Then turning to see his reaction, I found myself taken aback, for his face seemed to radiate, rather than reflect, the unearthly cool glow. So befuddled was I that I only caught myself staring and reaching out to touch his cheek when his eyes widened in surprise. By way of apology, I said, "Forgive me. I thought I saw something...a trick of the light."

A discomforting silence settled over us as did the late evening's deepening chill. Suddenly, a prickling sensation, for which the cold could not be blamed, made me glance around until I spotted Berserker at the pond's edge. At my calls and claps, he looked up and loped over. I bent at the knees, grabbed his big furry head, and shaking it, scolded, "You know better than that, boy. Stay away from the pond."

I noticed Mr. Harker regarding the placid pool. Straightening up, I explained, "It is alluring, but its allure is deadly." Though unspoken, the man's next question nevertheless necessitated an answer: "Its surface is a mirror, its depths an abyss, and the two a trap."

"More 'local lore,' Count?"

"No."

"But it glows. Surely, finding hidden treasure is a good thing."

"Not when it is cursed," I replied, squatting again to pick up and toss a stone into the still waters to prove they did not so much as splash and ripple. Then looking up at him, I elaborated, "Though the pond tempts with its treasure only on this day, it casts a reflection revealing one's true nature every day—in either case, to lure the unsuspecting to drown themselves—the former from greed and the latter by mesmerism or mortification."

"And you brought me here...?"

"To accept or refuse what fate is offering you: that is, the opportunity to know yourself." Standing up, I said, "The choice is yours."

Mr. Harker looked from me to the pond. Though uncertainty clouded his countenance, curiosity sharpened his gaze. Glancing at me, he asked, "How do you propose I do this safely?"

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“You walk up to the water’s edge, and I watch over you from behind.”

“And if you fall victim to the trap as well?”

I glowered at the watery grave of who knows how many lost souls, the loss of one of whom I will neither forget nor forgive. “You might say that I, having avenged Narcissus, am disenthralled from my reflection.”

The young man frowned in perplexity at my cryptic words before saying, “I must be mad to even consider it.”

A smile forming on my lips, I replied, “Most must already think you mad for traversing civilized Europe to come to the wilds of Transylvania. How much madder can you be?”

His outstretched arm sweeping the clearing, he protested, “This is all too much!”

“Then we shall go. If nothing else, you have a tale of an eccentric nobleman, his tame wolves, and a mysterious phenomenon with which to regale family and friends back home.”

“No, wait!” Harker blurted out before sighing and saying, “Forgive my indecision, Count. If indeed real, this would seem the chance of a lifetime, but...”

“Yes?”

“This ‘phenomenon’ Does it show one’s true nature for anyone to see?”

“No, Mr. Harker,” I reassured him. “For better or worse, only you can know yourself. That is what makes the revelation so profound...and dangerous.”

The man’s quiet contemplation raised up the voices of the wind sighing overhead and a brook babbling nearby. After a moment, he muttered to himself, “Were I not to try, I’d be a fool for thinking the impossible possible, and a coward for not facing myself if it is.”

I looked the earnest young man full in the face. “Let me tell you about cowards and fools. Cowards hide away in the towns of their birth. About everything without, they ridicule and rant as they are taught by their parents, priests, and politicians. Then, after a lifetime’s wallowing in willful, prideful ignorance, they die, miserable and hateful, their lives un-lived, having been nothing more than others’ fools.

“Out of duty,” I continued, “you have come so far as to stretch to breaking the bonds of those who would keep you a coward and make you their fool. The question is, will you, of your own volition, break those bonds and free yourself?”

As before with the wolves, Mr. Harker surprised me by starting towards the pond’s moonlit-lustered, sapphirine-hued waters. I followed, a step behind, until he stopped at the crust of ice glazing the gently sloping bank. When I placed my hands on the sides of his overcoated waist, I felt him inhale deeply and saw him bow his head. And thus, while he gazed at his reflection and it stared back at him, I watched, waited, and wondered.

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Of what followed—his reaction and our return—I will not write. Instead, I relegate it to memory as such moments between men should be.

PREVIEW