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Ruins and Echoes

It is almost dawn, but the burning rays of the sun have not yet pierced the wild gloom of the forests I fly over as I return to my castle. Circling around the ruined battlements, I recall when it was a truly glorious fortress. When it was *my* glorious fortress. As I fly through the window into my chambers, piled high with gold that will never see the light of day again, I return to human form. This fortress may not be what it was, but then neither am I. It has changed with me, and it reflects me. Perhaps these changes are tragic, but what is tragedy when you have lived centuries, watching loves and sorrows alike fade with time?

Sheltered in the cool gloom of my crypt, I tear the lid off the coffin and make ready for another day's rest. As I lay down on the cool earth and feel strength from my fluid repast already flooding my frame, renewing my power, I feel an urge to smile but do not. A few drops of blood run down my cheek, like remorseless tears. As I slide into the grey half-sleep, my only wish is for nothing to interrupt this trance, this almost-rest that is the only rest I know. And indeed, who can? I am Dracula.

But even so, I still dream. I hate my dreams—my memories.

I was a proud young count, returning with my warriors from a field of victory. It had been a hard-won victory, and of the hundred-odd men who mustered to the banner of House Dracula not even a dozen remained. But it was victory. I am the only one amongst us who still has a horse, and I hold the reins with one mail-gloved hand as I grip my bloody sword in the other. The mail has been tarnished by the rain and snow, but it is still strong. The men straggle behind me in an exhausted single file, one carrying the banner of House Dracula, some still carrying weapons. Others have discarded them; it has been a long journey.

As I was the only one truly alert amongst my file of sleeping-walking soldiers, I was the first to see movement amongst the trees. I looked into the brush, but only saw some hunched thing sliding away from my gaze. A wolf, perhaps, though it will find no meal from my men. Not while I live.

It is only when I hear my men crying in alarm and agony that I look back. They are ranged in a horrified semi-circle, brandishing weapons and signs of the Cross at a thing *hunched over the torn body of the bannerman. I wheel my horse around, screaming orders for my men to attack as it laps the blood from Wulfric's broken body. My God, what is this?*

The men obey, but it is quicker. Launching its gaunt, emaciated frame at the swiftest of them, it leaps above his spear and thrusts its arms through his shield, hands rigid like knives. It rips through his mail armor, tearing great gushing rents as though it were paper. It only stops long enough to lap from the flow then attacks again. As it tears through my men, blood and broken metal flying like a hellish rain, I charge. My horse tramples one of the dead, and I make ready with sword and shield. As I approach, it stares at the horse with red eyes and says something. My horse rears. I fall.

The horse is fled now, and my men are dead. I brace myself as it approaches. It is—by

God, it could have been a man! The frame is stick-thin, and the body clothed in rags, but the malice that glares from reddened eyes can only belong to one of Adam's race. It charges, and I bash it back with my shield. It flies at me again, mouth open to show demonic fangs in a snarl, and tears my shield from me. We are trampling the fallen banner in this fight, but it hardly matters. I ward off the slashing arms with my sword, and as the thing lunges at me to bite I deal the face a bone-crushing blow with my gauntleted left hand. There is no blood. It recoils but bares fangs from a ruined face and charges, somehow unaffected by my attack. It snaps my sword in a two-handed grip, then proceeds in a flurry of blows to punch through my mail armor.

My Lord this agony of torn-gasping-burning-bleeding-falling pain!

Fainting from blood loss, I collapse on the fallen banner of my house. I am a Dracula, I do not fear. Yet my last blurry memory is of blood-freezing terror--it bends over me, the mouth a rictus grin. Oh God.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

As I awaken from my sleep, I look around my crypt. The grave-soil is churned and scattered, almost like I was trying to dig into it. Or dig out. Thirsting, I try to shake off the memories. Stones fall from the ceiling in a shower of dust—I realize that this place is older now than it was. I slept the sleep of the dead for a long time, but I am no more rested now than before. If I hunt, perhaps that will bring solace. Hunting is better than thinking. Hunting while thinking is the worst of all.

As I launch myself from the window in search of prey, I wonder what has changed. Stalking through the shadows of a small village, I see that the year is now 1834. But it is all the same. The same superstitious peasants, blindly making gestures to ward against me. They remember that there are things to stop a vampire, but they have only a dim memory of what those things are. The same scattered buildings, the same pools of shadow. It is only too easy find my meal, and after I am sated on the blood of the mother I take her child. Putting it into a bag, I vanish back into the night.

At my castle, I leave the bag in the hall before returning to my crypt. They will find it soon enough. I once would have felt sorrow for the child, and loathing at myself for this deed, but no longer. I am sparing it a lifetime of suffering.

I cannot remember the last time I felt full. Ever since I dragged myself from the carnage to my castle, all I've known is this terrible hunger, yet food and drink are ashes to me. Bright lights are painful, and the servants leave my chamber shrouded in shadow by my own orders. The rest of the family is already gossiping about my strange illness, my deathly pallor. Now, as I sit alone through the night, running my tongue over strangely sharp-feeling teeth, I thirst. The only time I have felt my thirst even slacken was when the cook accidentally served a bloody, rare steak. He has repeated that meal for the past three weeks, but I remain empty.

I remain thirsty.

It's morning. I had the strangest dream last night...I dreamt I was flying out over the countryside, that I landed behind a hovel, that I silently entered and, bending over the sleeping farmer, put my mouth on his neck and began to suck. I dreamed I felt full, and surprisingly I still feel full today. Indeed, I feel well enough to dine with the rest of my family, after I have cleaned

myself up. Apparently, some sores in my mouth were bleeding last night and the blood went all over my face. Despite this, a disturbing dream is a small price to pay for recovery.

At table, my father casually mentions that the peasants are in a superstitious uproar. Something about one of them being found almost dead, nearly drained of his blood.

Regret is an emotion alien to me now, but if I regret one thing it is those who now inhabit this ruined fortress with me. These are my companions now, though the word sounds strange to me. Three women, like myself in all our horror and glory. What is a companion? What is a friend? I know they are not truly either. It has been too long for me to really remember. All I know is that we are united by our thirst for blood and our hatred. They, at least, have a reason to hate me now. They have a right.

I must be mad. My family has fled, and well they should. I get these...cravings...these urges to suck, to feed, and I give in to them. I'm horrified and appalled but I cannot stop. The peasants are terrified. It's not a dream, it never was a dream. My Go-

Lor-

I can't even say His name anymore. I tried to receive the Bread and Wine the other day—night—and they burned my lips. I cannot move in the daytime, and when I sleep the only place I can sleep is in the crypt. I tried to sleep on my bed the other day, but I was driven to the crypt as if by compulsion. I...I think I crawled down the outer wall like a beast. I am a prisoner in my own mind and bound to my own debased urges.

Yet they feel so...good, and I am so thirsty. If I am condemned already, then why fight? How can I fight thirst itself?

No. No. I swear to...no. I'll stop after I feed one more time. It would be easier if I wasn't so alone.

These three women...once I would have called the first of them my lover, if the term even applies to the delirious half-sleep and cold passion she experienced whilst I fed. She had been my mistress while I was still human, and it was with her that I discovered that I could spread this deadly condition. She hates me now, even though I have given her life immortal. After she turned from me, I turned to the others in a fit of...longing, I suppose. They hate me as well. I only wanted companionship, but that was when I was young, still believing I could return to anything like my old life.

Fool.

But I am still Count. They still obey me, and I refuse to let them prey upon the populace. The peasants can sustain the toll of my predations and their sustenance, but if there were four of us loosed on this providence we would soon create a plague of those like us. I keep them in this castle, and I provide them with nourishment. That will be enough for them.

Someday, my meals may satisfy me.

I've given in. I've fallen. If there was ever mercy extended to me, surely it has been revoked. How could anyone take me back? How could anyone ever want a monster, one who sucks blood each night and enjoys it, then hates himself in the morning? How?

How can I call on a...Being...whose very name is anathema to me?

The castle is falling into disrepair, as there are no servants left to maintain it and the winter was a hard one. I have created another like myself, but she is only a further torment to me. She hates me for what she became, and I hate her for what she reminds me of. I hate her

for the guilt. She was my lover, before this. She remained when others fled. I made her like myself, I thought that surely she could understand. I tell myself that the act was intentional, but I do not believe my own comforting lie.

She was waiting for my return. We were...not pledged to be married, but we might as well have been. Before I left we were sitting on the balcony of the tower watching the sunset. I spoke her name and I promised her to return and she spoke mine and she promised to wait. I promised. I failed.

What was that name?

I can't remember.

She saw me in my torment, yet she was willing to stay with me. She was sure that I could be redeemed. She said that we could find ways around this, that we could work on medicines, that we could make this succeed. So one night she was sleeping and I was so thirsty. She was willing to stay then. But she was not willing enough. She hates what she has become, she hates the one who made her that way. Do you understand now? You know what it feels like to thirst, to rage, to be cold. We can still remain together. We are united in our knowledge.

I've damned her to my fate. She will be a reminder of my failure, my fall, through the black eternity that stretches before me.

Can you forgive me?

Fool.

I awaken again. The crypt is shrouded in gloom now, and I remain thirsty. I walk through my chambers, noting the thick layers of dust slowly enveloping everything, rendering the gold only a dim light shining through the darkness. A faded light.

I ascend to the hall and in the moonlight they are waiting for me. My paramours look thin. Perhaps I have slept longer than I intended. There was a day when I would have attended to them, when I would have been torn by the malnourishment evident there. They stare at me with hating, hungering eyes. I stare back, and they lower their gazes. I am still Count. Nevertheless, I will bring them their food.

I feel less guilty every time I feed. It feels more natural each time, and the reasons for revulsion seem farther and farther from this new reality. I must feed, and I am their lord. No...something seems wrong. This feels wrong. But still, I thirst. It is what I was made to do, it is all I can do now. Memories of solid food, good wine, all seem to get more insubstantial. What did wine taste like? What did steak taste like, besides the blood? It gets dimmer every day. But as I glide over the countryside, other matters occupy my reflections. My mistress has sent me on a new mission. Return with a child?

I am soon concealed in the shadows outside a decently prosperous peasant's hovel, looking in through the window. The light from the fire shines forth in a wholesome yellow gleam over the table, filled with simple yet nourishing food. I cannot remember what the dish is called. The father raises his hands in blessing, and his wife and their four children soon feast. Over in the corner, attended to by the wife, is a child that cannot be more than a year old. It smiles happily as she feeds it some porridge, and the daughter lets it play with her finger.

It will do.

What am I saying?

I wait until dark falls, the light is extinguished, and the laughter gives way to silence.

Is this...can I...

Why not? What is one more crime? You're damned already! You're hated and feared and cursed! They want you to burn in hell. You will burn in hell! Why not do this and satisfy her? She may even return to something like her former affections for you. You are immortal already, why must it be an eternity of loneliness? The child can barely think, after all. Why not?

I am through the window and standing over the child before I am consciously aware of it.

I travel back at the castle before I think about it, and I hand it to her.

"So you would do this to win my affections again?"

"Yes."

"Monster." She departs with the child, her face turned from me. I raise a hand, then let it fall.

She is lost to me now.

There is no way back.

They want three children this time, and so I proceed in sequence. There is nothing in this barren country that can challenge me. The peasants leave lights on, somehow thinking this will keep me away. Yet, when considered, more lights only mean more shadows. The priest huddles in his house, afraid to venture out. He makes brave sermons against my evil in the daytime, but at night he is the same as everyone else. Afraid. Still, I do not stray too close to the holy relics within.

It is easy to find the children, and easier to return with them. In my hall, I cast the mewling things at their feet. They stoop to retrieve them, the oldest not even meeting my eyes. She denies me even that. The others still look at me with revulsion. Perhaps it truly is my fault that they are here. But if that is cruel, so is my fate. Why should I suffer alone?

If she is lost now, then there must be others. I am frenzied, abandoned, aching in my loneliness and desperate for human touch. For any touch. I thirst and I drink, and I try to drown my anger with a tide of blood. There are two women, both of whom are beautiful. Before I know it, I have made two more vampires. I desired both of them, I dreamed that after they rose in cold unlife they would love me. I dreamed, I lusted, I longed, I fooled myself.

But they hate me now. They loathe me. I am once again alone, a hated captor in a ruined castle.

I can see now.

I cannot return.

There is no way back.

I awaken from my slumber, thirsting again. I stride slowly through the ruined burial chambers, kicking the occasional yellowed bone to dust beneath my feet. I return to my chamber, and stare out the window at the night. The gold does not gleam anymore, buried under dust. There is no moon in this night, only a clouded blackness that oppresses the land. I launch myself out of the window, and it feels natural. I soar through the black and hear the howling of wolves below me, striking fear into the lonely farmsteads. I glide down onto the roof of a house, slide through the window, and take my nourishment. I drink until the peasant is thin, pale, and drained and feel only satisfaction. I cannot change, and I will not live in torment.

I am Dracula.

Full, I return to the castle. There was a child at the farmstead, but I did not take it. These women—these devils—can wait. They will wait. They glare at me from a solitary, unnatural beam of moonlight, and the light vanishes along with them as I stare back and cast them from my presence, banishing them to the far halls. I walk onwards, through my ruined castle. I proceed through soaring rooms of moth-eaten tapestries, occupied by tarnished armor and scattered pieces of decaying furniture. I proceed through halls lit in daytime only by holes in their walls where the mortar has finally given way to age, ornamented with paintings whose canvases were dust centuries ago and torch brackets which no longer hold the light. Accompanied by the music of wolves, I stride across ruined battlements, stepping over piles of fallen stone.

At the end, I am back in my crypt. I pull the lid off my coffin and sink into it. When I wake again it will be a new century, with new plans, but that is irrelevant now. As I lay there, a slow smile creeps across my blood-stained lips. I slide further into the sleep of the undead, and as the world turns grey and dim I fade farther and farther from it. I am falling into my rest, and as I fade I know that nothing will interrupt it until I rise once again.

There are no more dreams.

Darkness.